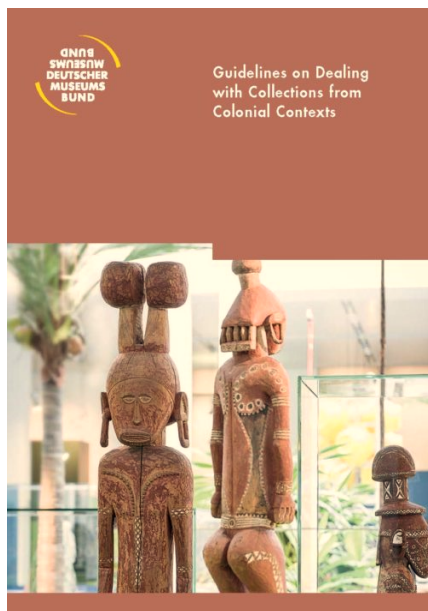


Germany Issues English Version of Guidelines on Dealing with Collections from Colonial Contexts.

'The vicissitudes of history have nevertheless robbed many peoples of a priceless portion of this inheritance in which their enduring identity finds its embodiment...

The peoples who were victims of this plunder, sometimes for hundreds of years, have not only been despoiled of irreplaceable masterpieces but also robbed of a memory which would doubtless have helped them to greater self-knowledge and would certainly have enabled others to understand them better'. Amadou-Moktar M'Bow, former Director-General of UNESCO. (1)



Two ancestor figures, Admiralty Islands, Papua New Guinea

The German Museums Association has issued recently *Guidelines on Dealing with Collections from Colonial Contexts*, an English version of the original German text. (2) We have already expressed our views on the original German text and therefore, will be brief on many issues since both the English and German versions have substantially, the same content. (3)

Readers will recall that the German text is a draft and so is the English text. Both will be submitted for comments and will be discussed at a workshop in October 2018 and thereafter in 2019 there will be another version. Would this be a final version or again another draft text? I wonder why the Germans have

issued in English a draft of a document where the original German text is not yet final. Was there really a great need for this? We wonder how many English-speaking persons there are who are interested in following closely German developments in this area and do not read German. It would have been sufficient to provide an English version after the original German text had been finalized among German specialists. And what happened to the French version which was announced some time ago?

It seems the procedure adopted for producing these non-legally binding draft rules would keep many scholars and critics occupied until sometime in autumn 2019 when the Humboldt-Forum would be opening formally. Is this a simple coincidence or an anticipation of the discussions that would be intensified as we get close to the opening of this highly contested cultural project, especially regarding the looted African artefacts, for example, the Benin artefacts that are intended to form part of the new display? Would those agitating for the restitution of the looted artefacts be satisfied by the non-legally binding guidelines, whether in draft form or final version? I doubt.



Pwo Mask, Chokwe, Angola, now in Humboldt Forum, Berlin, Germany.

By mid-November, 2019 many may feel they have been manipulated by the organizers of the Guidelines, acting in tandem with the Humboldt-Forum. They will feel angry with themselves for not paying a little more attention to the exhibition in the Bode Museum entitled *Unvergleichlich*. (4) A little attention to the catalogue of the exhibition and the flyers distributed would have shown them that the African objects in that display were literally on their way to the Humboldt-Forum and that they have been selected as objects for the future exhibition centre. It would have been clear that the curators of the exhibition were acting entirely independent of the production of the guidelines and that whatever the outcome of the discussions, the decision to keep the selected looted

objects for the Humboldt- Forum had been made and would not be allowed to be modified by any factor before the opening date in 2019. They could also have been understood from images in the book by Marc Metzger, *Das Berliner Schloss- The Berlin Palace* (2018) that the looted Benin artefacts were already envisaged as essential elements in the future exhibition to see the world from Berlin.

Not even the resignation of a leading member Board of the Forum, Bénédicte Savoy, could affect the programme of the Forum. (5) Professor Savoy complained about the lack of provenance research regarding the African and Asian artefacts that were to be transferred from the Ethnology Museum, Dahlem, to the Humboldt-Forum. A group of Ngo's, united under the umbrella of No Humboldt 21 has always drawn attention to the absence of research on the colonial past of the artefacts to be transferred. Not much attention was paid to them but in course of time it became clear that it was only due to their agitation that the German authorities are beginning to pay attention to the German colonial past as demanded on 3 June 2013 by No Humboldt 21. (6) This point has been noted by the mass media. (7)

As we have often stated, restitution is a political act of reconciliation with legal implications for two parties that seek to put their relations on a new and better basis. An instrument that is neither legal nor political is not likely to resolve any of the issues raised by demands for restitution.

As if to balance the negative comments on restitution which the Guidelines prefer to call return, they provide that:

'First of all, it should be examined whether there is an outright legal right to the return of the specific collection item. We recommend that an expert (lawyers at the museum, the body which oversees the museum or a lawyer specialising in this field) be consulted.

If there is a clear legal claim, the objects should, as a rule, be surrendered if the former owner (or his legal successor) so wishes. In this case, the museum or the body which oversees it has no discretion and limitation of statute/forfeiture of possible claims should not be pleaded. More details on such legal claims are provided in the background information (cf. p. 63 et seq.)'. (8)

Did anybody in the Museum Association, the Humboldt-Forum or the Prussian Cultural Legacy Foundation ever recognize that any of the claimants of restitution has an outright legal claim to restitution?

The Guidelines further provide that *'A return of museum items can be considered in particular, if the legal and ethical standards of the time were*

violated when the object was acquired or if the circumstances under which it was acquired contravene today's standards'.

This applies to cases in which the collector was aware that he was acting wrongly when he took the objects, because, for example, they were taken against the will of the owner. Similarly, the return may be appropriate if the object was taken from the original owner unlawfully using direct violence. (9)

Are the drafters of these propositions aware that when these terms are applied to the Benin artefacts in the Humboldt-Forum, the conclusion must be that the looted artefacts should be returned to the Oba of Benin? At the time they were taken, international standards considered the taken of an enemy's cultural artefacts as wrong and in any case, Benin was not even at war with Great Britain. Without any doubt, *the circumstances under which they were acquired contravene today's standards'*. The Benin artefacts were taken by use of excessive violence, involving military invasion and were taken against the will of the owner, the Oba of Benin, who was sent into exile by the British invaders. If any artefacts deserve to be returned because of the use of violence in their acquisition, this must surely be the Benin artefacts which are on par with the Ethiopian artefacts stolen from Magdala and the Chinese artefacts looted from the Summer Palace in Beijing. Also, in this category are the Asante golden objects taken by the British Army from Kumasi in 1874.

The drafters of the Guidelines must be presumed to be aware that it is common knowledge among Germans that most of the objects in the Ethnological Museum, Dahlem, that are now being transferred to the Humboldt Forum were considered by the general public as having been stolen or looted with force or implied force: Cornelia Esser has stated:

“That the acquisition of ethnografica in the colonial time was on the basis of more or less “structural violence” will not be pursued in detail in this context. Some individual contemporaries were perfectly aware of this fact. Thus, one Africa-traveller and resident of the German Empire in Ruanda, Richard Kandt, wrote in 1897 to Felix von Luschan, Deputy Director of the Ethnology Museum, Berlin, as follows: “It is especially difficult to procure an object without at least employing some force. I believe that half of your museum consists of stolen objects.” (10)

Similar view has been expressed by Andreas Lüderwaldt, former director, Übersee-Museum, Bremen:

When I now look at the source and history of individual collections and objects in the Übersee-Museum Bremen which I represent here and try to trace back, then I must say that abysses will be opened up; not that the objects were

appropriated with violence as in Benin. There are other possibilities of illegal acquisition; there is gentle “force”. I therefore appeal to all museum officials to research the history of their collections; we would then show more understanding for the demands for restitution.” (11)

Another remarkable provision in the Guidelines is this:

‘Insofar as a return is considered in principle, the German Federal Foreign Office must clarify whether there are any compelling social, political or factual reasons why a return should not take place either at the current point in time or ever (e.g., unstable states, entities not recognised under international law, war or natural disasters, regimes with which cooperation does not seem wise on political grounds).’ (12)

This clearly opens the door to political arbitrariness and whimsical denials of the human rights of peoples to cultural artefacts that they themselves have produced for their cultural development by authorising or encouraging a foreign ministry, on the basis of natural disasters or other ground, not to return an undoubtedly looted artefact. And this is drafted by scholars from the social sciences whom many of us will consider, a priori, as being sympathetic to societies victimized by Western imperialism.

Among the many interesting statements in the Guidelines is the following, concerning discussions with groups that may be seeking restitution:

‘Sometimes communities of origin are more interested in exchanges of knowledge, capacity building or being provided with digitalised forms of the objects rather than their physical return. Even if they do desire the return of the objects, they may also be interested in further cooperation and exchange at the same time. In this context, the needs and interests of the individual or group the museum is speaking to should be determined on a case-by-case basis, rather than unilaterally offering to return objects. (13)

What does ‘digitalised forms of the objects’ really mean? So, when the Egyptians ask for the restitution of the bust of Nefertiti from the Neue Museum you provide them with a digitalised form that they can see on their computers. In the past, some suggested replica but digitalised form may, in the long run, be cheaper. When the Asante ask for their golden objects, you give them digitalized forms which may even shine better on computers and television screens than the golden originals. And how does one play digitalised drums in ceremonies in the open air? How does one dance with a digitalized sword at celebrations in honour of great queens and kings?

A solution to issues of restitution may well be that the German museums make digitalised forms of objects under their control and keep them whilst they return the original non-digitalised forms to the original owners.

The draft Guidelines seem to regard restitution or as they prefer, return, as a great disaster that must be avoided at all costs:

‘Open-ended efforts to find solutions Alternative solutions to returns (for example, “virtual restitution” (providing objects in digital form), academic exchange, (joint) exhibition or publication of provenance research results, permanent loan, joint ownership, joint research projects, exchange for equivalent objects, etc.) should be considered and addressed openly. In cases which are legally or factually complex, other options for conflict resolution, such as mediation, may also be considered (e.g., via ICOM-WIPO).’ (14)



Byeri, guardian of ancestral relics, Republic of Congo, now in Bode Museum, Berlin on the way to Humboldt-Forum, Berlin.

We do not know whether there has been a conscious decision on the part of the drafters to use ‘return’ rather than ‘restitution’ or whether this was simply the choice of the translators. We prefer to use restitution generally for cases where the aim should be to restore the claimant to the position where he would have been before the damage caused by the defendant. ‘Return’ does not imply any possibility for compensation in addition to return of the physical objects. For us, restitution is more than the simple return of the physical object in question. It leaves open the possibility that the defendant may pay for damages caused in the process of acquisition, there may compensation for loss of use of the object and the diminished value of the object, and loss of earnings.

It is surely not assumed that after more than 100 years of depriving a group of the use of their precious objects by violent seizure and destruction of property and the loss of lives, a simple return will be enough. Europeans cannot simply go to the people of Benin and say, *‘here are your bronzes, and goodbye.’*

Damages must be assessed. They may be ‘symbolic’ but must be ‘substantive’, reflecting the damage caused and length of the period of deprivation. We hope nobody is thinking it is enough to return the object. We are dealing here with justice. Compensation would also reflect the massive transfer of wealth that went from Africa to Europe through plundering and looting of artefacts that are still in Western museums that are spending a lot of money and efforts to prevent their restitution.

There seems to be in the Guidelines no joy in being able to return to a partner an object that it had lost but fortunately can now recover from an institution with which it has good relations. The general attitude displayed by the Guidelines as regards restitution confirms the impression that the greed of the Western museums and other institutions prevents us from finding durable solutions to questions of restitution. Take for instance, the case of the Benin artefacts in the Humboldt Forum. This new institution has inherited from the Ethnological Museums, Dahlem, Berlin, some 500-580 Benin artefacts. Is the new institution ready to share the 500 artefacts with the Oba of Benin, from whose palace the objects were wrenched with great violence by the British Punitive Expedition in 1897, ostensibly in retaliation of the massacre of a British pre-emptive army that had gone to Benin City allegedly to discuss trade with the Oba who had said he could not be able to receive them at the suggested time because he was involved in traditional rituals during which time he was not allowed to be seen by any foreigner. Since when do we visit a King if he says the suggested time is not convenient?

The Humboldt- Forum is not willing to return even one artefact to Benin but will resort to all sorts of untenable arguments to avoid giving back the owners some of their own artefacts. Leaving aside all arguments for and against restitution, is there one valid reason why a German museum that has 500 Benin artefacts could not give, 10, 20 or even 100 objects to the Oba of Benin? Even assuming that the Benin artefacts were made in Berlin, is there any good reason why the Berlin institution should not give some to the people of Benin, seeing that these objects are part of their culture and actually tell Benin history and not German history? Looked at this way, the greed of the German institution appears to be its creed. Looked at in this light, no amount of examination and construction of non-binding guidelines, whether drafted in German or in English would, ensure that the people of Benin, like all the other African peoples whose artefacts in German museums, would ever recover any of the looted artefacts.

The current strategy of the Humboldt-Forum and other German museums is to intone the mantra of Herman Parzinger that we need provenance research and that this requires money and time. A museum that has cost some 600 Million euros in construction does not seem to have enough money to undertake

provenance research on artefacts that have very clear and precise origin that were looted and brought to Europe in 1897, and on which famous German scholars such as Felix von Luschan have written widely acclaimed treatises. (15) The curators of the exhibition, *Beyond Compare* have extended the meaning of provenance research to cover finding out whether the producers of looted artefacts considered themselves as artists or mere hand workers and under what conditions they lived and worked. (16) Of course, provenance research can take longer if the writings and the abundant work of previous generations of scholars are disregarded and we are told that provenance research need not be linked to restitution. Research without clear objectives always takes long. It is clear to all that the lack of political will to solve the issues of restitution of African artefacts does not favour quick research results. Can anybody seriously suggest that despite the enormous amount of information we have about Benin artefacts, German authorities could not, even if they were willing to do so, correctly reconstitute the well-known Benin bronzes, now proudly on show in Berlin? We know that at the moment the most important objective is to present Berlin as the cultural centre of the world. The irony of the fact that the impulse to divide Africa went in 1885 from Berlin and that we are still in 2018 arguing about the restitution of African artefacts looted in the colonial frenzy and brought to the same Berlin, does not seem perceptible to many.

We also know now that if even provenance research showed that artefacts such as Benin artefacts were looted or stolen they would not necessarily be returned to their owners in Africa. This has been dramatically illustrated by the provenance research on the three Benin bronzes in the Kunst and Gewerbe Museum, Hamburg. The looted objects were simply turned over to the Ethnology Museum, Hamburg, on the ground that it had already more of those artefacts, 196 of the 1897 loot and so could present them better. (17)

If provenance research is not to become a mere delaying tactic at the Humboldt-Forum, we will need to know the following:

- a. Which objects under the control of the Forum are at the moment subjects of provenance research?
- b. How many of such objects are also on display in the Bode Museum?
- c. How long will such research last?
- d. Which institutions and persons are doing the above-mentioned provenance research?

The draft Guidelines do not even pretend to attempt in a serious way to address issues of restitution in so far as every museum is left to choose whatever solutions and positions suit its situation. In any case, guidelines that are not legally binding cannot *per se* lead to restitution. Any restitution that occurs after the guidelines have been adopted finally, would not be because of these non-binding

guidelines but in spite of them and in spite of advice that presents restitution as a rare occurrence but does not explain that if restitution is rare, it is because of the determination of the holding institutes not to return looted objects despite frequent demands by the African peoples.



Queen-Mother Idia, Benin, Nigeria, now in Bode Museum, Berlin, Germany, on the way to Humboldt-Forum, Berlin, Germany. How much more do German scholars still need to know about her before she can return to Benin, Nigeria. after an exile dating from 1897?

It seems the attempt to present these guidelines as the German answer to Macron's bold initiative to resolve the century-old dispute between Europe and Africa by restitution of artefacts, will not in the long-run be sustainable. The German Chancellor would have to consider the demand in the open letter of 18 December 2017 to her from Mnyaka Sururu Mboro and Christian Kopp which suggested Germany should adopt a position similar to that of France and return some of the looted artefacts that have been in German museums for more than hundred years. (18)

It should be realized that the attempts to raise discussions on German colonial past and to come to terms with the horrors and violence of that period go beyond the existence or absence of guidelines for museums. It is a gigantic social-political question that cannot be settled within the confines of museum rules; it has to be attempted at the highest political level and hence the urgent need for the German Chancellor and her government to take a clear position on the restitution of looted African artefacts that constitute a small part of colonial exactions and robbery.



Female figure, presumably Goddess Irhevbu or Princess Edeleyo, Benin, Nigeria, now in Bodan Museum on the way to /Humboldt Forum, Berlin, Germany

Our contemporary Westerners cannot pretend to condemn colonialism in all its forms and manifestations, and yet refuse to return even a small part of the African artefacts that were looted/stolen or taken during the colonial regime. They cannot have it both ways. Are contemporary Europeans capable of understanding the anger and suffering of Africans who lost their cultural artefacts to European greed and violence? Bénédicte Savoy has expressed this very well in her Inaugural lecture at the Collège de France:

‘We, Europeans, who have received and transmitted and continue to transmit these objects, are on the side of the conquerors. To a certain extent, this is also a ‘heritage that weighs us down’. But there is no fatality. The good news is that in 2017 the history of Europe being what it is and has also been for centuries, a history of enmity between our nations of bloody wars and discriminations painfully overcome after the Second World War, we have within ourselves the sources and resources to understand the sadness, or the anger or hatred of those who, in other tropics, much further away, poorer, weaker, and have been subjected in the past to the intensive absorbing power of our continent. Or to put it simply: it would be sufficient today to make a very tiny effort of introspection and a slight step aside for us to enter into empathy with the dispossessed peoples.’ (19)

Racism and universalism continue to form the basis of most ideologies in the Western world; they do not facilitate the restitution of African artefacts looted during the colonial regime. Racism prevents the acceptance of the African as an equal human being and universalism supports the pretence of the allegedly superior being to hold cultural artefacts on behalf of mankind. How else can one explain the ease with which Westerners assert, in the face of demands by Africans for restitution, that they are holding their looted artefacts on behalf of mankind? How can the flyer for the exhibition, *Beyond Compare, Unvergleichlich-Kunst aus Africa im Bode-Museum* claim that ‘The exhibition

addresses major themes of human experience, such as power and death, beauty and identity, justice and memory, when the Humboldt Forum refuses to return the looted Benin bronzes and uses them in the same exhibition? What about justice for Benin and their identity? How much cynicism are we supposed to bear in the face of racism which refuses to accept its inherent character and advances other arguments for the detention of artefacts looted with incredible violence and destruction that have not yet been compensated after 100 years, as service to mankind?

“The restitution of those cultural objects which our museums and collections, directly or indirectly, possess thanks to the colonial system and are now being demanded, must also not be postponed with cheap arguments and tricks.

Gert v. Paczensky and Herbert Ganslmayr (20)

Kwame Opoku.



Altar Group with Oba Akenzua I, Benin, Nigeria, now in Bode Museum, Berlin, Germany on the way to Humboldt-Forum, Berlin, Germany. How long must he still stay in exile in democratic Germany?

NOTES

1. A Plea for the Return of an Irreplaceable Cultural Heritage to Those Who Created It', A-M. M'Bow, in Lyndel V. Prott (ed.) *Witnesses to History- Documents and Writings on the return of Cultural Property*, UNESCO

Publishing, 2009, p.30. Pour le retour, a ceux qui l'ont créé, d'un Patrimoine irremplaçable. Appel de M. Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow. [\[PDF\]UNESCO Trafic illicite et restitution des biens culturels](#) www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/.../discours_mbow_retour_fr.pdf

‘Or, de cet héritage où s'inscrit leur identité immémoriale, bien des peuples se sont vu ravir, à travers les péripéties de l'histoire, une part inestimable.

Les peuples victimes de ce pillage parfois séculaire n'ont pas seulement été dépouillés de chefs-d'œuvre irremplaçables : ils ont été dépossédés d'une mémoire qui les aurait, sans doute aidés à mieux se connaître eux-mêmes, certainement à se faire mieux comprendre les autres’.

2. [Guidelines on Dealing with Collections from Colonial Contexts ...](#)
<https://www.museumbund.de/.../guidelines-on-dealing-with-coll...>

3. [Germany's Answer to Macron on Restitution of African Artefacts ...](#)
<https://www.modernghana.com/.../germanys-answer-to-macron-o...>

4. [Unvergleichlich: Kunst aus Afrika im Bode-Museum - Kunst aus Afrika ...](#)
<https://www.smb.museum/.../unvergleichlich-kunst-aus-afrika-im-bode-museum.html>

[Kwame Opoku – HUMBOLDT FORUM AND SELECTIVE AMNESIA ...](#)
<https://www.toncremers.nl/kwame-opoku-humboldt-forum-and-s...>

5. [Is Berlin's Humboldt Forum shying away from colonial history ...](#)
<https://www.dw.com/en/is...humboldt-forum.../a-40082234>

[Newsroom | Center for Art Collection Ethics | Arts, Humanities & Social ...](#)
https://www.du.edu/ahss/art-collection.../repatriation_archive.htm..

[Streit ums Humboldt-Forum: Kunsthistorikerin Savoy: "Da herrscht ...](#)
<https://www.tagesspiegel.de › Kultu>

<https://www.modernghana.com/news/791764/will-germans-remain-oblivious-of-the-claims-and-sensitivitie.html> [Cultural Property Repatriation News and Issues: 2018](#) culturalpropertyrepat.blogspot.com/2018

6. See annex below. Parzinger has admitted that the activists made necessary the discussion of the German colonial rule:

7. *"Dass die Debatte über die Herkunft der Objekte aus aller Welt seit ein, zwei Jahren eine solche Vehemenz einnehmen würde, war lange Zeit so nicht absehbar. Vorangetrieben hat dies eine kleine Gruppe von Aktivisten, welche speziell den Bau des Humboldt Forums und dessen innere Konzeption zum Anlass genommen hat, um den Grundgedanken einer solchen Welt-Sammlung radikal in Frage zu stellen [...]"* <http://www.feuilletonfrankfurt.de/.../gehaeuse-fuer-weltkult.../>

8. *Guidelines*, p. 97.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 95.

10. Cornelia Essner, ‚Berlins Völkerkunde-Museum in der Kolonialära: Anmerkungen zum Verhältnis von Ethnologie und Kolonialismus in Deutschland‘, p.77: *Berlin in Geschichte und Gegenwart – Jahrbuch des Landesarchivs Berlin*, (Ed.) Hans J. Reichhardt, Siedler Verlag, 1986.

“*Dass der Erwerb von Ethnographica in der Kolonialzeit auf der Grundlage mehr oder minder “struktureller Gewalt” erfolgte, soll hier in diesem Rahmen nicht näher verfolgt werden. Einzelnen Zeitgenossen war diese Tatsache im Übrigen durchaus bewußt. So schrieb der Afrikareisende und Resident des Deutschen Reiches in Ruanda, Richard Kandt, 1897 an Felix von Luschan, den stellvertretenden Direktor des Berliner Völkerkunde-Museums: Überhaupt ist es schwer, einen Gegenstand zu erhalten, ohne zum mindesten etwas Gewalt anzuwenden. Ich glaube, daß die Hälfte Ihres Museums gestohlen ist“.*

11. “*Wenn ich mir jetzt die Herkunft und Geschichte einzelner Sammlungen und Objekte im Übersee-Museum Bremen, für das ich hier spreche, ansehe und versuche zurückzuverfolgen, so muß ich sagen, daß sich dabei Abgründe auftun; nicht daß die Dinge mit Gewalt wie im Falle Benin angeeignet wurden. Es gibt auch andere Möglichkeiten der illegalen Beschaffung, es gibt die „sanfte“ Gewalt. Ich möchte daher an alle Museumsmitarbeiter appellieren, der Geschichte ihrer Sammlungen nachzugehen; dann dürfte auch von unserer Seite mehr Verständnis für Rückgabe-Forderungen aufgebracht werden.“.*

Andreas Lüderwaltd, former director, Übersee-Museum, Bremen:
Translation into English by K. Opoku.

Das Museum und die Dritte Welt, Ed. Hermann Auer, K. G. Sauer, München,
New York London, Paris 1981, p.155.

12. *Guidelines*, p. 96.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

15. See Felix von Luschan, *Die Benin Altertümer*, [Die Altertümer von Benin - Felix von Luschan - Google Books](https://books.google.com/books/about/Die_Altertümer_von_Benin.html?id..)
https://books.google.com/books/about/Die_Altertümer_von_Benin.html?id..

Felix von Luschan, *Die Altertümer von Benin* [nigerian treasures | No Humboldt 21 www.no-humboldt21.de/information/nigeria_treasures](http://www.no-humboldt21.de/information/nigeria_treasures)

Glenn Penny has expressed his exasperation about current debates on the artefacts collections in the Humboldt Forum and the frequent calls for provenance research:

‘It is so odd for me, even upsetting for me, as someone who began working with these people decades ago, to read quips in German newspapers about the need for provenance research—written as if as if provenance research is a new idea: as if many German curators have not devoted much their careers to researching their collections. Many did, and many of them helped me with my dissertation research in the 1990s. Many of them have also written extensively about their findings since then. Indeed, many still are currently, quietly, doing what they can with shamefully small budgets and within stunningly opaque bureaucratic structures to work with repatriation claims and reach out to non-European communities’.

<https://blog.uni-koeln.de/gssc-humboldt/exasperation-an-outsiders-take-on-some-of-the-current-debates-surrounding-the-humboldt-forum/>

16. K. Opoku, [Humboldt Forum and Selective Amnesia: Research Instead of ...](https://www.modernghana.com/.../humboldt-forum-and-selective...)

17. K Opoku, [Obviously Looted: Benin Bronzes in Museum of Arts And Crafts, Hamburg ...](https://www.modernghana.com/.../obviously-looted-benin-bronz..)

[https://www.modernghana.com/.../obviously-looted-benin-bronz..](https://www.modernghana.com/.../open-letter-restitution-of-cultu..)

18. [Open Letter: Restitution of cultural objects and human remains from ...](https://www.modernghana.com/.../open-letter-restitution-of-cultu..)

[Offener Brief zur Rückgabe von afrikanischen Kulturobjekten und ...](http://www.no-humboldt21.de/offener-brief-zur-rueckgabe-von-afrikanischen-kulturobjekt)

19. *“Nous, les Européens, qui avons reçu et transmis et continuons de transmettre ces objets, nous sommes du côté des vainqueurs. D’une certaine manière, cela aussi, c’est un « héritage qui nous écrase ». Mais il n’y a pas de fatalité. La bonne nouvelle, c’est qu’en 2017 l’histoire de l’Europe ayant été ce qu’elle a été aussi pendant des siècles, une histoire d’inimitiés entre nos nations, de guerres sanglantes et de discriminations péniblement surmontées après la Seconde Guerre Mondiale, nous avons à l’intérieur de nous-mêmes les sources et les ressources pour comprendre la tristesse, ou la colère, ou la haine de ceux qui, sous d’autres tropiques, plus loin, plus pauvres, plus faibles, ont été soumis par le passé à « l’intense pouvoir absorbant » de notre continent. Ou pour dire les choses simplement : il nous suffit aujourd’hui d’un minuscule effort d’introspection et d’un léger pas de côté pour entrer en empathie avec les dépossédés.’*

Bénédicte Savoy, *Objets du désir. Désir d'objets Histoire culturelle du patrimoine artistique en Europe. XVIIIe–XXe siècles* Leçon inaugurale prononcée au Collège de France le 30 mars 2017 <https://www.college-de-france.fr/site/en-benedicte-savoy/inaugural-lecture-2017-03-30-18h00.htm>

The text can also be found in the publication, Bénédicte Savoy, *Objets du désir, désir d'objets*, Collège de France/Fayard, 2017, p.75.

The official English translation of the brilliant lecture in French by Professor Savoy at the Collège de France is not yet available but I found her ideas so encouraging that I decided to provide an English translation based on the French text and the simultaneous English interpretation for my readers.

20. *“Die Rückgabe jener Kulturschätze, die unsere Museen und Sammlungen direkt oder indirekt dem Kolonialsystemverdanken und die jetzt zurückverlangt werden, sollte ebenfalls nicht mit billigen Argumenten und Tricks hinausgezögert werden“.*

Gert v. Paczensky and Herbert Ganslmayr, *Nofretete will nach Hause*, p.185, C. Bertelsmann, München, 1984

ANNEX -----RESOLUTION-NO HUMBOLDT 21.



NO HUMBOLDT 21 !

Moratorium für das Humboldt-Forum im Berliner Schloss

RESOLUTION

STOP THE PLANNED CONSTRUCTION OF THE HUMBOLDT FORUM IN THE BERLIN PALACE!

By 2018/19 the City of Berlin and the Federal Republic of Germany want the “most important culturally political project in Germany at the beginning of the 21st century” to have been completed: the project “Berlin Palace – Humboldt Forum.” This “project of the century,” will be located in the city centre and will cost 590 million Euros. The City of Berlin wants to contribute 32 million Euros to the project.

The president of the “Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz” (Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation), Hermann Parzinger, first presented the concept in 2011. The concept’s title is “The Humboldt Forum: ‘To be in Touch With as Much of the World as Possible’”. Berlin’s “non-European collections” are to be moved from current remote location of Berlin-Dahlem to the city centre. Moreover, the building of the central state library as well as the Humboldt University is to be

used. The plan is to establish the “Agora”, a “Forum for Science, Culture and Politics” as the “heart of the Humboldt Forum.”

In Parzinger’s concept the project’s plans are being formulated in superlatives. This will not simply be an outstanding “location for the art and culture of Asia, Africa, America, Australia and Oceania.” The Humboldt Forum is also to become a unique “centre for the research of non-European cultures.” A “cultural centre of national and international distinction” is planned, with which Berlin wants to establish itself as “a leading cultural and museum city around the world.”

We demand that the work on the Humboldt Forum in the Berlin Palace be ceased and that a public debate is held: the current concept violates the dignity and property rights of communities in all parts of the world, it is Eurocentric and restorative. The establishment of the Humboldt Forum is a direct contradiction to the aim promoting equality in a migration society.

Explanatory Statement:

The State Museums of Berlin are not the “legitimate owners of their holdings”.

The majority of the over 500,000 valuable items from all over the world ended up in Berlin through colonial conquests. The Europeans often even resorted to physical violence, in order to gain ownership of central objects belonging to the colonised societies – for example thrones, sceptres and cult objects. By taking the credit for these objects, the city of Berlin receives material benefits as well as intangible advantages up until the present day. We demand the disclosure of the ownership history of all the exhibits as well as adherence to the UN Resolution which is unequivocal regarding the “repatriation of cultural artifacts to countries which have been the victims of expropriation.” The dialogue concerning the future homes of the plundered art and the colonial loot must be sought with the descendants of the artists and the legal owners of the exhibits. This is particularly important regarding the stolen human remains, which are currently to be found in the possession of the “Preußischer Kulturbesitz” foundation.

Berlin’s colonial past is redeemed.

It is currently planned that the collections from all over the world will be returned to the palace of the Hohenzollerns, where Berlin’s first overseas treasures have already been presented. As it was then, this is about nothing other than representing power and global relevance. For the descendants of the colonised, both national and abroad, it is particularly disrespectful, that this should take place in the resurrected residence of the Brandenburg-Prussian monarchs. The Hohenzollerns were primarily responsible for the enslavement of thousands of people from Africa as well as genocides and concentration camps in Germany’s former colonies. Therefore, we roundly reject any presentation of objects in the Berlin Palace which were brought to Berlin during colonial times.

The cultures of the world are discriminated against, being marked as “strange” and “other”.

As already was the case during those times when “exotic curiosities” were displayed in the “cabinets of wonders” belonging to the Princes of Brandenburg and the Prussian Kings, the Berlin Palace – Humboldt Forum will apparently serve the purpose of developing a Prussian-German-European identity. This concern is actually directly opposed to the aim of promoting a culture of equality in the migration society and is being pursued to the detriment of others. The supposed “stranger” and “other” will be constructed with the help of the often centuries old objects from all over the world, and the extensive collection of European art on Berlin’s museum island will be put to one side. In this way, Europe will be constructed as the superior norm. We reject this degrading form of presentation. We demand that the “Preußischer Kulturbesitz” foundation makes an effort to ensure that experts from the countries of the global south are involved in presenting their own works in a way that promotes equality of opportunity, has an awareness of power dynamics and focusses on portraying similarities between peoples.

The “research on non-European cultures” is not problematized.

The exploration of the world and its populations by European “researchers” was a colonial project for many years and still affects the regimentation and exploitation of the global south to this day. One of the two people this project is named after, Alexander von Humboldt, was involved in this project to a great extent. The Spanish royalty and its overseas colonial regime, which was based on genocide and slavery, were particularly interested in the results of his expeditions in South and Middle America, and they supported him to the best of their ability. In this way, the Prussian “who really discovered America” who even stole buried corpses and shipped them to Europe, embodies colonial dominance. Humboldt is not an appropriate person to name an intercultural centre after.

The cultural treasures of the world remain exclusively for the good of the people of the north.

In the written concept, the President of the foundation, Hermann Parzinger, invites “visitors from Asia or the descendants of indigenous Indian or African Societies” to the German capital. In an era where people drown daily in the Mediterranean Sea because they have no other means to enter Europe, such an invitation can only be described as cynical. Aminata Traoré, the former Culture and Tourist Minister of Mali, put it in a nutshell: “Our cultural works enjoy civil rights in places, where even our entire community is denied permission to stay.” We demand the “Preußischer Kulturbesitz” foundation to enable access to Berlin’s non-European collections to all people of the world. The looted art must be returned – permanently. Moreover, this should take place through the loan the artworks to the countries without any cost to them in order to realize

international exhibition projects in all regions of the world where the artworks now located here were created.

Berlin, 3rd June 2013