

16th EASA biennial conference [New anthropological horizons in and beyond Europe](#)

EASA2020 – P030: *Making and Remaking Anthropology Museums: Provenance and Restitution*. Convened by Adam Kuper (London School of Economics) and Han F. Vermeulen (Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology). Between 30 and 50 people were in attendance. <https://easaonline.org/conferences/easa2020/panels#8544>

Friday 24 July, 11:00-12:45 and 14:00-15:45 (Lisbon/London time)

This panel invited “discussions and reviews of current debates concerning ethnographic museums in Europe and beyond ... [that] address questions about the origins and purpose of these museums, their role in imperial or national projects and, more recently, the restitution of cultural treasures.”

The first session was introduced by the two convenors. Han Vermeulen reviewed the trajectory of anthropology museums, “From Kunstkammern to Ethnographic Museums and World Museums,” focusing on the ethnographic museums in St. Petersburg (1836) and Berlin (1831-44). Adam Kuper’s contribution, “Imagining Ethnographic Museums,” reflected on the experiments to found such museums in Paris (Jomard, 1831-39), Leiden (von Siebold, 1835-43), and Copenhagen (Thomsen, 1836-41). In her presentation, “The waltz of the Parisian anthropology museums (1878-2020),” Christine Laurière (CNRS, Paris) described the paradigm changes that regularly transformed the museum landscape of Paris in a sixty-year cycle. In particular, she reflected on the tension between natural history and ethnographic perspectives, and the problematic highlighting of works of “art” in the Quai Branly Museum.

The following papers all dealt with the current hot topics of provenance, “restitution,” and “representation.” In his probing theoretical presentation, “Restituting, reclaiming, sharing: challenges for ethnographic museums,” Benoît de l’Estoile (CNRS, Paris) invoked Marcel Mauss and explored the meaning of ownership in different legal traditions, and the variety of ways in which exchanges and reparations might be envisaged. Vibha Joshi (University of Oxford) described “Historical trajectories and global flows of Naga museum collections.” Her paper reviewed the origins of the major Naga collections, discussed the variety of ways in which they have been exhibited (or neglected) in some of the great ethnographic museums, and sketched recent contributions by Naga artists to new forms of display. João de Castro Maia Figueiredo (CEDIS – Nova University of Lisbon) presented a remarkable case study, under the title “Restitution as imperial propaganda: the strange case of the Benin bronzes ‘restituted’ to Angola (1952).” This historical episode – in which Benin bronzes were transferred from Portugal to Angola, symbolising a myth of a Portuguese African identity – has troubling and unexpected resonances with current post-colonial debates.

The second session was dedicated to German ethnographic collections and in particular to the current project, the Humboldt Forum in Berlin. In his paper, “Failed ambitions: The Humboldt Forum in Berlin, the postcolonial debate and the symbolic politics of restitution,” Karl-Heinz Kohl (J. W. Goethe University Frankfurt) provided a clear, insightful picture of the ambitious, tragi-comical and hugely expensive project of the Federal Government, inspired by Chirac’s Quai Branly Museum in Paris, to renew the landscape of German ethnographic museums. Jonas Bens (Free University Berlin) and

Paola Ivanov (Ethnologisches Museum Berlin) took up one particular, very telling episode in the evolution of this museum. Their paper, “Colonial Alexithymia: Affect and Colonialism in the German Humboldt Forum Debate,” told the story of the relationship between the Humboldt Forum and Tanzanian authorities and the National Museum of Tanzania. Julia Binter (Ethnologisches Museum Berlin) followed another trail, describing her collaboration with colleagues from Namibia, another former German colony. Her paper “The chronotopes of provenance and restitution – What subjectivities does the ‘New Relational Ethics’ afford?” presented vivid examples of the general considerations raised earlier by De l’Estoile. Margarita Valdovinos Alba (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México) presented another fascinating case study of a historical German ethnographic collection, this time from Central America: “On the ‘history of ethnographic collections’ in a repatriation process: an anthropological approach to the Náayeri collection.” It gave further examples of the complexities that may arise in well-meaning but sometimes naïve attempts at collaboration with local experts. Andreas Schlothauer (Research Centre for Material Culture Berlin) presented the final paper, “The Restitution Debate in Germany 2018-2020.” He summarized four cases of the “restitution” of ethnographic objects from museums in Germany and Austria, all of which were driven by European politicians and activists, with little or no input from African stake-holders, and with no reference to anthropological specialists.

To a remarkable degree the papers all contributed to central current debates on museums of anthropology or ethnography. The discussions were lively, informed, and collegial. Participants agreed that it was a stimulating event, which will feed back into their research. Between 30 and 50 people were in attendance. The recording was hosted on NomadIT’s YouTube channel and embedded on EASA’s website on 18 August. It can be accessed here: <https://easaonline.org/conferences/easa2020/panels#8544>. And here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=42&v=FGCa3eUvQkc&feature=emb_logo