

The restitution of human remains and artefacts

Reflecting on Namibian-German experiences¹

From a long-term perspective, one may speak of a sea-change that took place during the last thirty years: Not long ago, German museums successfully thwarted attempts by their African colleagues to reclaim artefacts that had been taken from the continent to Europe (Savoy 2021), mostly during colonial times; about the same time, one institution simply denied any holdings of 'Herero skulls' when questioned about its collection of human remains (Wegmann 2014: 404). As of late 2021, 82 human remains have been repatriated from Germany to Namibia, mostly from holdings of university institutions and museums, and three artefacts were returned. Moreover, claims about human remains are pending by other former German colonies, notably Tanzania, and the debate on artefacts continues unabated in the wake of the opening of the African and East Asian collections at the Humboldt Forum in Berlin in September 2021. For some six years, these developments have been intertwined with negotiations between the Namibian and German government about a reconciliation process dealing with the 1904-1908 genocide. The Joint Declaration initialled late in May 2021 remains – in Namibia at any rate – fiercely controversial. From the standpoint of one Namibian activist, 'complete repatriation', including human remains as well as artefacts, remains an essential prerequisite to reconciliation.²

Some stock-taking and also reflection on the way forward are therefore in order. My review will focus on the constraints that have become evident through the restitution processes, and analyse the conflicts that have ensued, in particular in Namibia. A further concern is with the German responsibility that arises from the incontrovertible fact that the issues and dilemmas surrounding current and future restitutions must be traced by a direct causal chain to the colonisation of Namibia. Without such German conquest, there would not have been a displacement of objects and bodies. This goes back both to direct actions of the German state and to scholarly activities that were fostered by colonial rule.

I shall first take stock of five more recent acts of restitution, setting aside the handover of Witbooi papers by the Übersee-Museum Bremen in 1996³ that took place before the close linkage evolved between restitution and reparation that we observe at present. This linkage is intimately intertwined with the emergence of a sustained movement in Namibia to demand formal recognition of the genocide of 1904-08 from Germany, as well as an apology and reparation. Accordingly, the restitution in 1996 was accompanied by little public notice, both in Namibia and Germany. The same is true of the handover in May 2008 of a digital copy of letters

¹ All translations from German sources or literature are by this author.

² Ida Hoffmann, oral communication, 9.10.2021.

³ <https://archivfuehrer-kolonialzeit.de/index.php/16-24-1-witbooi-hendrik-nachlasssplitter-im-nationalarchiv-namibia-in-windhuk-reproduktionen-bestand> (thanks to Jan Hüsgen for this reference); <https://namibiafocus.com/welterbe-die-schriften-von-nama-kaptein-hendrik-witbooi/>; <http://dna.nust.na/witbooi/findaidA650-findaid.pdf> (3.11.2021)

by Hendrik Witbooi, with the originals still being held by the Museum Natur und Mensch in Freiburg.⁴

The movement for recognition, apology and reparations can be dated from about the mid-1990s and reached its first high point with the filing of the first lawsuit by Ovaherero in New York in 2001 (cf. Kößler 2015: 235-8). In the following, I shall hence refer to the repatriations of human remains in 2011, 2014 and 2018, and the returns of the bible and riding whip of Hendrik Witbooi in February 2019 as well as of the Cape Cross Padrão in August of that year. This stock-taking will already point to certain problematic issues and conflicts, and it may be considered indicative that to date, neither the great majority of human remains, nor the three artefacts have found a conclusive place in Namibia. The conflicts involved then also beg the question of responsibility on the German side.

Repatriation of human remains

The most painful insight in connection with the repatriation of human remains concerns their identity. As anatomist Andreas Winkelmann notes, 'historical collectors and researchers' lacked interest 'in individual fates' and were chiefly concerned with 'examples of race' (2020: 45). In other words, bodies were 'converted into data' (Krüger 2013: 478) and thus consigned to anonymity as elements of massive collections, the outflow of a 'collection mania' that lasted from the mid-19th to the early 20th century. Besides human remains, all kinds of artefacts as well as plant and animal specimens were also collected and brought to Europe (Laukötter 2013: 26). Moreover, in some cases, provenance research revealed that human skulls had been assembled from disparate bones (Stoecker & Teßmann 2013: 314). Furthermore, the deported human remains inevitably shared the fate of the country they had been brought to. This meant further dislocation, including disruptions caused by territorial changes, when important universities such as Strasbourg, Breslau/Wrocław and Königsberg/Kaliningrad respectively came under French sovereignty 1919, and under Polish and Soviet/Russian rule after 1945. To this must be added the direct ravages of war, such as the aerial bombs that hit, in both world wars, the anthropological collection at Freiburg university, destroying much of the documentation and in 1917 significant parts of the collections (cf. Möller 2008: 11, 12-13, 80; 2015: 15, 83; 2013: 111-2). In addition, collections were variously rearranged and amalgamated, again resulting in confusion about documentation (Möller 2008: 77).

On account of this, in most cases, the desired 'funeral "at home"' (Geschiere 2009: 55) will likely remain elusive for the deported ancestors. Provenance research employing an array of scientific as well as historical methods has been able to demonstrate, in the more successful cases, little more than appurtenance to ethnic group or only a likelihood that the persons concerned had lived in certain regions of the world. Failure to accord the repatriated remains a proper burial is therefore related less to disrespect for the concerns of the descendants (cf. Shigwedha 2018: 69), than to constraints resulting directly from the practice of a race science that orchestrated the deportation of body parts in the first place. More importantly, it has to be acknowledged

⁴ Adelhauser Museum, since merged and renamed; "Unsere Vergangenheit wurde uns geraubt. Interview mit Ellen Namhila, Badische Zeitung, 15.5.2008 <https://www.badische-zeitung.de/unsere-vergangenheit-wurde-uns-geraubt--194939869.html> (3.11.2021). These letters were addressed to Kurt Schwabe, officer in the colonial army during the Naukluft campaign, 1893-4; they had been handed over by his descendants; see memory note by the author, 22.2.2007.

that such shortcomings of repatriation 'result in permanent and repeated emotional trauma' (ib.: 72).

Nevertheless, 'rehumanization', where human remains are 'de-accessioned and returned from the patrimony of a European state as those of human beings and not museum objects' (Rassool 2015: 155), as in the exemplary case of Klaas and Trooi Pienaar who were even accorded mortuary passports for their travel home (Weiss-Krejci 2013: 467), remains what may be considered as the gold standard: At least, given favourable circumstances and persistence by activist researchers, a dignified return can be possible. Under less favourable conditions, such rare cases constitute a vanishing point against which persistent deficiencies need to be assessed. In any case, most human remains, even after having been returned to Namibia, still find themselves in limbo. Failure to provide the occasion of appropriate ceremonies to enact closure and to release the dead from the community constitutes, as Nama activist Sima Luipert stated in addressing a recent conference, 'a violation of our human rights'.⁵

Among the 82 human remains that by 2020 had been restituted to Namibia, merely two Damara women could be identified with certainty, while one case remained inconclusive (Winkelmann 2020: 41, 44). For the great majority, their origins remain uncertain, beyond a general categorisation along ethnic clusters – 'Herero', 'Nama,' Damara,' 'San,' Owambo.' This leaves open the concrete group or polity of which the deceased person may have been a member, or their place of residence, their 'home.' The 'reinstatement of the peace of the graveside' (Krüger 2013: 488), or the reunification of bodies lacerated in the name of a deeply questionable 'science,' is therefore sadly unfeasible in all these cases. This basic circumstance is one of the frustrations that have burdened restitutions of human remains. In actual fact, it unites these ancestors with earlier victims of that 'organised attack on the dead of the poor' (Hund 2009: 44) that has marked and enabled the march of Western science since the days of Francis Bacon.

In the actual handovers, the issue of a final resting place has been relegated to the background, but the mere fact that to date, the huge majority of the repatriated ancestors are still housed in the keeps of the National Museum in Windhoek – not so different from their abode in Germany – bespeaks this seemingly intractable problem. One leading Namibian activist sees this situation of the skulls similar to them being still in a mortuary, where the process of repatriation has not been consummated. It could only be achieved by a proper burial.⁶

While a few repatriations of human remains happened before, the 2011 repatriation from Germany to Namibia was the first to draw intense public attention (cf. Förster 2020: 102). During the run-up of this repatriation of 20 human skulls from the Charité hospital in Berlin in 2011 (see Kößler 2015: 284-6), there were animated debates in Namibia about the final resting place of the remains. Significantly, the government's idea to bury them in state at Heroes Acre, the site of veneration for heroes and heroines of the Liberation Struggle on the outskirts of Windhoek, was countered by the demand from victim communities to build a genocide museum where the bones would be on display and testify to the contribution of these communities to anticolonial resistance. As is bemoaned by a number of voices, this dimension of anticolonial struggle tends to be marginalised in official accounts. These exchanges in turn were side-lined

⁵ Sima Luipert, Namibian-German relations from the perspective of the genocide descendants, Conference 'Afrika neu denken,' Stuttgart., 16.10.2021.

⁶ Ida Hoffmann, oral communication, 9.10.2021.

by the main conflict that evolved from the 2011 repatriation, which was mainly related to the off-hand attitude of the German government to the large Namibian delegation of more than 70 people. This resulted in a public debacle at the main handover ceremony when the Minister of State in the Foreign Office, Cornelia Pieper walked out in the face of protesters who were demanding an apology for genocide. Several months of diplomatic entanglements ensued (Köbler 2015: 298-304). Arguably on account of this diplomatic incident, the event elicited an unforeseen response in the German as well as international press,⁷ and predictably extensive coverage in Namibia (Förster 2020: 107). In Namibia, the arrival of the human remains drew tremendous popular response, with thousands thronging the airport and subsequently (Förster 2013), the staging of a multi-sited, 'significant historical moment' (Förster 2020: 108).

Apparently, this experience of repatriation turning into a publicly salient, yet contested event informed the approach of both the Namibian and the German governments to the second occasion in 2014. This time, there was only a very small delegation from Namibia which travelled on very short notice to collect further human remains from the Charité in Berlin and from Freiburg University, altogether 34. Significantly, the delegation did not include ritual specialists deemed essential for ancestors to travel and more generally, for communication with ancestors. The result was immediate protest across the affected communities, including the various Ovaherero factions. Above all, this was the occasion when the deep rift first appeared that has marred relations ever since between the great majority of the Ovaherero and Nama formations on the one hand and the government on the other. Large, most likely majoritarian sections of the victim communities began to campaign vociferously under the watchword 'Not about us, without us.' On that occasion, the Genocide March in Swakopmund held at the last weekend of March was turned into a counter-manifestation that brought together Ovaherero and Nama participants in a ceremonial and commemorative setting, a novelty at the time in Namibian memory practice that has been continued in subsequent years.⁸

In a third repatriation, the German Protestant Church was asked to act as a moderator. Once again, there was a public ceremony at a prominent Berlin venue on the German side, followed by the reception of the human remains in Parliaments Garden in Windhoek, in the presence of the Minister of State in the German Foreign Office, Michelle Müntefering. Again, there was some acrimony, this time around the limited admittance of German civil society groups, in particular those from the Black community, who had been instrumental in the campaigns that provided important pressure towards the repatriations in the first place.

In diverse fashion, these experiences speak quite clearly to the difficulties faced by institutions of the two involved states when treating issues connected with the repatriation of human remains. The hope to achieve complete repatriation, 'burial at home,' remains elusive, and this entails a dilemma which so far has resulted in keeping the returned remains in a museum depot. The alternatives were formulated early on: burial at Heroes Acre and thus canonising the remains not as ancestors of specific groups but as heroes and heroines of the Namibian struggle against colonialism, thus flattening the stark differences that exist in regional experience; or seeing the remains as testimony of the contribution specifically of Ovaherero and Nama

⁷ Cf. Köbler 2015: 297. Not all of the relevant links are reachable any more, but see <https://www.freiburg-postkolonial.de/Seiten/anthropologische-schaedelsammlungen.htm> (23.10.2021).

⁸ Köbler 2015: 306-313; cf. Förster 2020: 115; personal observation in the context of 'Week of Justice' in 2019.

towards the anticolonial struggle, which might be symbolised by exhibiting at least some of these remains in an appropriate museum setting, since 'if the skulls are buried, our history will be buried'.⁹ In a way, the former Namibian Ambassador to Germany, Neville Gertze, expressed similar sentiments, referring to the skulls returned in 2011 as the 'face of the genocide'.¹⁰ His predecessor, Peter Katjavivi (2012), stated in hindsight that 'the repatriation of the skulls gives voice to the dead to tell their own story to the world about how absurd and inhumane German colonialism was towards black communities in Namibia.' Such statements leave open the question of actually displaying human remains to testify for historical struggle, which also elicited strong counterarguments linked to a call for a decent burial (cf. Shigwedha 2018: 79).

On the German side, issues to do with the federal structure of the state, along with the role of municipal authorities which made for intricate decision processes, proved both an impediment for effective action and a pretence for the federal government to shun responsibility and to keep Namibian representatives at arm's length, in particular during the 2011 repatriation. In the end, a measure of centralising responsibility seemed inevitable, as in the 2018 repatriation, when in addition to the bulk of remains returned by the Charité, there was an array of further human remains assembled from a range of institutions and in one case, from a private holder.

Return of artefacts and sacred objects

Where the institutional set-up is concerned, the restitution of material objects poses quite similar problems to that of human remains, although there are also differences. Even though these are artefacts and not dead bodies, in many cases the communities of origin ascribe spiritual properties to them. In such cases, the precise relationship to communities of origin poses a challenge that is largely comparable to tracing the precise origin of human remains, with both aiming at re-establishing the broken communal link. However, the circumstances that artefacts have become tradeable objects through their severance from their contexts of origin,¹¹ means that their path into the institutions which hold them at present as well as the circumstances of acquisition may be more obscured. Consequently, provenance issues concern a wider field here, and this means it is often easier to muster arguments about the legitimacy of ownership than is the case for human remains. There are objects that have been seized more or less openly by violent means, applying sometimes 'mere' pressure, precisely because of their symbolic or political meaning or because of them being exceptional artistic works. There are also claims about such objects having been given in a context of friendship, and again, this may be questioned in a colonial situation. In such cases, the question is not about the identity of the objects, but rather about establishing the circumstances of their acquisition, questioning and cross-checking claims to legal ownership. In the case of the celebrated Benin Bronzes for instance, it is clear that they were pillaged by a British punitive expedition in 1897 and then entered museums and the international art market. However, the evaluation of this process can be quite diverse, and this seems to impact on the issue of restitution. An attempt to justify not the pillage but apparently the retention of the bronzes by pointing to their former use in 'bloody'

⁹ Ida Hoffmann, oral communication 2.12.2009, quoted in Kößler 2015: 285; cf. also Biwa 2012: 240, and *idb.*, pp. 246-249 on the appropriation of dead bodies by the state in the interests of advertising 'national history'; also Ida Hoffmann, oral communication, 9.10.2021.

¹⁰ Förster 2020: quoted in personal communication 26.4.2014.

¹¹ To be sure, in some cases this happened to human remains as well, see Scheps 2013; Weiss-Krejci 2013: 455, 464.

rituals (cf. Hauser-Schäublin 2021a: 73-74, 2021b) must be juxtaposed with the overwhelming evidence of the actual colonial intrigue that led to the destruction and pillage of Benin city. This leaves little doubt about the injustice of the acquisition of the bronzes (cf. Osadolor 2021).

Other, seemingly less conspicuous cases point to the central importance of knowledge about the whereabouts of an important object. In the case of the belt of Kahimemua Ngavauva, the leader of Ovambanderu executed in Okahandja by the German colonial power in 1896 as a result of an intrigue to secure land for colonial settlement (Gewald 1999: 81-109), this involved years of intermittent searching which eventually was helped by a clear change in the policy of the Municipal Museum of the city of Brunswick, and also the accidental find of the non-accessioned object in one of its storages (Habermalz 2020). More than two and a half years later, in late October 2021, a delegation of Ovambanderu, including ritual specialists, travelled to Brunswick to assess the situation. The museum had invited them to come and 'identify what might be the belt they have been looking [for]' (Tjitemisa 2021). As reported, the delegation 'examined the belt diligently' and found it belonged to Kahimemua.¹² In this case, a complicating factor is the ownership claim of descendants of Gustav Voigts, later a wealthy farmer in the region east of Okahandja, who had taken the belt from Kahimemua and sent it to the museum in Brunswick.

The three objects that have been fully repatriated to Namibia from Germany so far¹³ may serve as paradigmatic cases to understand the intricacies and pitfalls that may be incurred in such endeavours. These are (1) the family bible and (2) the riding whip of Namibian national hero Hendrik Witbooi, restituted in February 2019, and (3) the Padrão from Cape Cross which was sent from Berlin to Walvis Bay in August 2019. The first two were handed over in one high-profile public ceremony, while public attention, in particular in Namibia, was negligible in the case of the Padrão.

However, the Padrão was not without its own adherent problems. The Padrão is a monumental stone cross erected in 1486 by Portuguese explorers at what is now the coast of Namibia. The spot north of Swakopmund is known as Cape Cross because of this monument. The intention of the Padrão was obviously to mark the presence and the claims of the Portuguese. In 1893, while German colonial power in the colony of Southwest Africa was in the process of consolidation, the Padrão was taken down and shipped to Berlin. In the German Historical Museum, which had been thoroughly refurbished after the unification of Germany, it formed part of the permanent exhibition¹⁴ and was shown in the section dealing with the Renaissance and European explorations of the 15th-16th centuries, with no explicit reference to colonialism. At its original spot on the Namibian coast, a similar cross was erected, documenting German claims to what was then the colony of German Southwest Africa. When South Africa assumed mandatory power to rule Southwest Africa, another cross was put up, in turn asserting the right to the territory.

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https://www.braunschweig.de/politik_verwaltung/nachrichten/staedtisches_museum_patronengurt.php (6.11.2021)

¹³ I exclude plans to formally loan objects to the National Museum in Windhoek by the Ethnological Museum in Berlin.

¹⁴ The exhibition is being revised and closed for that purpose, from mid 2021, after the parts referring to colonialism had been revised in mid-2020; Lerp & Lewerenz 2021: 155.

For various colonizers, then, Cape Cross was of some importance for laying claim to the country. It remains remarkable that in indigenous languages, the spot in the coastal desert, which seems to have been visited occasionally, is named without any reference to the cross, a salient feature for more than 400 years. The names and further oral traditions speak to claims made to the spot by various groups of people as well as to encounters, some conflictual, with seamen and guano miners who became active on the coast before colonisation. As Namibian historian Dag Henrichsen (2020) stresses, 'the padrão as an object does not feature in any of this.' The meaning of the place to Africans was apparently different and independent of this object, but nevertheless, independent Namibia claimed the return of the Padrão from 1990 onwards (cf. Meyer 2021: 223). From 2018, in a situation of mounting demands for restitution, the German federal government, under whose purview the museum falls, showed willingness to accommodate these claims, and in August 2019, the Padrão was shipped to Walvis Bay where it has been kept in a warehouse ever since. There seem to be contradicting claims in Namibia about what to do with the cross. These include placing it in a maritime museum in the southern port town of Lüderitz, displaying it in the Walvis Bay/Swakopmund area or in a museum in the capital of Windhoek. A decision what should happen with the Padrão has not yet been made public, although there is word it might be installed, in an appropriate setting, at its old spot at Cape Cross. Meanwhile, during a Bundestag debate shortly after the Padrão had departed, the return was advertised as proof that, contrary to criticism by the parliamentary opposition, Germany was 'liv[ing] up to her responsibility.'¹⁵

In the case of the family heirlooms of Hendrik Witbooi, which were returned from the Linden Museum in Stuttgart in early 2019, things were dramatically different.¹⁶ Both the bible and the whip had been captured by German colonial troops on 12 April 1893 in a terrorist surprise attack on the mountain fastness of Hornkranz, in clear breach of international law. At that point, Hendrik Witbooi had not signed a protection treaty or ceded to Germany any other rights. The whole affair was about forcing him to do so. The vagaries of the bible and the whip before entering the Linden Museum seem unclear, but they seem to have formed part of a donation by a military person (cf. Grimme 2018: 25-6). It was thus sufficiently clear that an illegitimate, even illegal position could hardly be in doubt. Nevertheless, the relevant institutions had been less than forthcoming for many years. In the catalogue for an exhibition, the objects were openly referred to as 'booty' from the 1893 raid (Forkl 2007: 89, 111), but the Baden-Württemberg Ministry of Research and Art, then under a Christian Democrat minister, responded mum to a relevant inquiry some three years later.¹⁷ Another four years later, the State Secretary in the Ministry, now under Green Party leadership, declined restitution and suggested instead to purchase the bible to preserve it for research purposes.¹⁸ This happened at a time when the Linden Museum had already embarked on a provenance research project that was to clear the ground for restitutions (cf. Grimme 2018; Heißenbüttel 2016).

¹⁵ Deutscher Bundestag, Stenografischer Bericht, Plenarprotokoll, 19. Wahlperiode, 192. Sitzung, 19.11.2020, p. 24240C (Ansgar Heveling, CDU/CSU).

¹⁶ For the following, see more extensively Kößler 2019.

¹⁷ Landtag von Baden-Württemberg Drucksache 14/6265, 14. Wahlperiode 22.04.2010, Antrag der Abg. Dr. Gisela Splett u. a. GRÜNE, und Stellungnahme des Ministeriums für Wissenschaft, Forschung und Kunst: Rückgabe von Sammlungsgegenständen an Namibia http://www.landtag-bw.de/files/live/sites/LTBW/files/dokumente/WP14/Drucksachen/6000/14_6265_D.pdf (15.10.2021)

¹⁸ <https://www.stimme.de/suedwesten/kultur/ku/SWR-Namibia-fordert-Rueckgabe-von-Raubkunst-aus-Stuttgart;art19072.3507028> (15.10.2021).

In any case, the restitution of the bible and the whip charted new avenues and also demonstrated pitfalls that had not been clear to all the actors beforehand. After a seemingly amicable run-up to the restitution between the Baden-Württemberg ministry and the Namibian Ministry of Education and Culture, a serious conflict surfaced a bare fortnight before the date set for the event. The Witbooi family, in the persons of the three surviving great-granddaughters of the legendary Hendrik Witbooi, objected vigorously against the planned handover to the President of Namibia, i.e., the Namibian state. Instead, they argued that the heirlooms were family items of their ancestor and must accrue to them. The counterargument of the Namibian Minister of Education and Culture, herself closely associated with the Witbooi group and embroiled in a still unresolved succession dispute, claimed that the recovered possessions of the national hero must accrue to the state. The situation was exacerbated when it was realised that the heirlooms had, for hygienic and preservation purposes, been treated with doses of arsenic by museum conservators in earlier decades. Being therefore highly toxic for humans, they could not be kept outside an appropriate venue, most likely a museum. Such facilities do not exist in Gibeon, the Witbooi traditional capital. It therefore emerged that at least provisionally, the heirlooms would come under the care of state institutions, the National Museum and the National Archives. The Witbooi family envisaged this to change once a museum had been constructed in Gibeon, but for the time being it was clear that the heirlooms could not stay in Gibeon and there was no alternative to entrusting them to the museum and the archives. However, the symbolic side appeared vital: Should the bible and the whip be handed over first to the descendants of Hendrik Witbooi and then passed on to the President, and thereafter the museum, for safekeeping? Or should they be handed to the President who would then somehow acknowledge the descendants? A further issue emerged when the Baden-Württemberg delegation, along with the heirlooms, were already on their way to Gibeon: This concerned proper reception of the heirlooms on the eve of the actual handover. As members of the Witbooi Royal House explained, they considered it a prerequisite that the objects would have to pass ceremoniously by the emblematic fountain which represents the founding of Gibeon in 1863. The rationale behind this ritual was that this was usually done with any coffin of a community member who had died abroad, and that the heirlooms represented the victims of the Hornkranz raid of 1893. In the event, this ceremony was made impossible due to the countervailing schedule set by state officials.

One important dimension of this conflict was the reference the Witbooi group placed on temporal precedence during the handover ceremony, in order to underline their claim to ownership of the heirlooms. They recalled the case of the Ombalantu Sacred Stone which had been restituted in 2014 from Finland directly to the traditional authorities, as had been the case with other sacred stones from Owambo kingdoms (cf. Silvester & Shiweda 2020: 31, 34). Immediately prior to the return of the bible and the whip, the //Khowese Royal House demanded to be accorded 'its legitimate and rightful space like it was done to Ombalantu people during the repatriation of the Ombalantu Ritual Stones in 2014.'¹⁹

¹⁹ Press Statement for Immediate Release, Office of the Witbooi Royal House, Gibeon, 19.2.2019, communicated by email.

Conclusions

The experiences rehearsed above point to a number of persistent challenges. In general terms they illustrate that the colonial relationship is not a thing of the past, even though transformed into a postcolonial one. This is true not only since processes of restitution would never have become necessary without the perpetration of various forms of colonial injustice, but also on account of the structural asymmetries that shape the postcolonial situation. Conceptually, this situation pertains both to former colonies and metropolitan countries (Kößler 2020). Such historically grounded power imbalances also translate into unequal challenges and obligations when it comes to remembrance and redress. Basically, the successors or heirs of former colonisers are under less pressure by their living conditions to remember and confront the heritage of colonialism than the descendants of the colonised. Conversely, a special responsibility accrues to the erstwhile side of the colonisers within the postcolonial relationship. When it comes to issues of restitution or the prerequisite perusal of the holdings and collections of scholarly institutions and museums, such obligations have, in the past, been more honoured in the breach than the observance.

As noted above, outright denial and refusal prevailed a mere 30 years ago. Against this background, the 2004 precautionary decision by the Rectorate of the University of Freiburg to open the way to restitution in principle, should they be approached in this matter (cf. Wegmann 2009,) was a pioneering step. It certainly was not the kind of pro-active action that is called for. Calls for transparency about holdings – and indeed for proper assessment and cataloguing in many cases – demonstrate to this date the difficulties for communities of origin to even know about human remains or cherished objects to be held by concrete institutions. In this respect, the responsibilities are clearly distributed, and some steps towards meeting them have been made during the last few years.

Much more problematic than even responsibilities honoured only reluctantly, is the institutional structure which concerns in particular the effects and deficiencies of state action. As noted in connection with the repatriation of human remains, the interplay between different levels of governance has contributed to a lack of transparency, on the German side and therefore engendered suspicions (at least for those not privy to the German political system) – while even a minimum of trust generated by an appropriate public approach would contribute to genuine reconciliation. These problems aggravated the impression of reluctance on the side of German institutions who were slow and halting in acknowledging their holdings, or indeed address uncertainties which they have not (yet) been able to resolve.

Again, both the Namibian and the German state have, for various reasons, shown a proclivity towards dealing above all with each other. While the German federal government has at times played with the intricate institutional set-up to marginalise the issue, particularly in 2011, it dealt at the same time with the Namibian state, not the communities of origin. In this way, the controversial structure of the Namibian-German negotiations of 2015-2021 (cf. Kößler 2021) only replicated and threw into relief a more general approach.

As commented variously by now, the overarching consideration on the side of the Namibian government concerns national unity, which in their view is to be guarded against tribalist fragmentation. The concern about a related narrative was visibly in the foreground during the 2014 repatriation of human remains which coincided, not by accident, with the opening of the Independence Memorial Museum in Windhoek and the 25th anniversary of independence. The

museum advances a view of anticolonial resistance focused on the liberation struggle of the 1960s-80s and brandishes a unitary version of a Namibian nation that was not formed in the process of anticolonial struggle but somehow existed all along. This underwrites the marginalisation felt in particular by Ovaherero and Nama victim communities (cf. Kößler 2015: 313-6; Förster 2020: 115). This conflict was thrown in stark relief in an exchange between Ovaherero activists and then minister of culture Jerry Ekandjo on the meaning of the Genocide Memorial which was placed next to the museum and has since become another emblem of the genocide. Shortly after its institution, Ekandjo rejected the idea of a special plaque to commemorate Ovaherero sacrifice, claiming the memorial referred to the entire period of colonial rule in Namibia which was thereby equated with the genocide instead of the period of 1904-8 during the Namibian War.²⁰ Apart from more coincidental intrigues, such a narrative also informed the government's approach to the restitution of Hendrik Witbooi's bible and riding whip, when the government's claim to the national hero – and thereby his possessions – stood against the claims of the family and large parts of the Witbooi community.

The serious possibility of open conflict in this last-mentioned case underscores the potential difficulties inherent in an approach that prioritises return of objects over all other considerations, such as conflicts that may be (re)kindled by such action. In particular the concerns of non-state stakeholders can easily be side-lined, if governments, as potential recipients of objects looted well before states came into existence, are treated as unquestioned solid entities, while internal contradictions and power relations are disregarded. A similar case can be made in the case of human remains as intimated above, for instance when these are viewed by communities of origin as testimonials to their historic sacrifice in anticolonial resistance.

At the same time, communities of origin need assistance in tracing any exiled objects. This hinges on a pro-active and transparent stance of holding institutions but can also be enhanced considerably by post-colonial states, such as by 'proclaim(ing) objects that are in exile in overseas museums' and drawing up appropriate lists (Silvester & Shiweda 2020: 39). Again, such lists will inevitably be informed by historical narratives that will equally inevitably be contested and in many cases, be expressions of dominant or hegemonic views.

Both regarding repatriated remains and restituted artefacts, closure remains elusive between the constraints of historical practices to do with race science and anthropology of the 19th and early 20th centuries, and the approaches of states that have little regard for the needs and anguish of affected communities. Again, postcolonial states that owe their existence to the colonial intrusion cannot be negated but will in any case play decisive roles. This speaks to historical processes, such as those couched in terms of colonialism, that cannot be undone but need to be confronted in their consequences with realism, respect and responsibility.

²⁰ *Republikein* (Windhoek), 27.6.2014; *Allgemeine Zeitung* (Windhoek), 27.6.2014 quoted in Kößler 2015: 315.

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