Greeting

The Humboldt Lab Dahlem was a project of the Kulturstiftung des Bundes (German Federal Cultural Foundation) in cooperation with the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz (Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation). It developed new forms of presenting artefacts of the Ethnologisches Museum (Ethnological Museum) and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst (Asian Art Museum) of the Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin (National Museums in Berlin) in Dahlem for the planned Humboldt-Forum in Berlin-Mitte. The experiment began with the question of how objects accommodated in a museum can open up new perspectives on our globalized present. In its search for solutions, the Humboldt Lab Dahlem therefore collaborated with scholars, custodians, curators, and artists. The results were regularly presented in so-called "Probebühnen" during the opening hours of the museum. In this manner, the Humboldt Lab Dahlem provided stimuli for dealing with the current challenges of presentation and mediation that are also posed to other museums in Germany and Europe.

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Object Biographies / Teaser

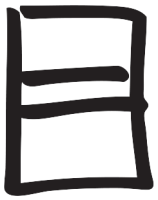
How an ethnographic collection is received depends entirely on the narrative that accompanies the individual objects. Digging into the origins, making the diversity of cultural perspectives visible – this was the goal of "Object Biographies." Taking three objects from the Africa collection as case studies, this collaboration between African and European scholars found new ways to tell the objects' story, travelling back to their origins to bring them closer to Berlin's museum-going public.

Object Biographies / Project Description

Attempted Methods, New Collaborations, and Altered Perspectives

by Verena Rodatus and Margareta von Oswald

Researching the provenance of objects in the Ethnologisches Museum has been a crucial part of the Humboldt Lab's work since the beginning. Uncovering the collection history of individual objects, some of which arrived to Berlin museums through violent appropriation, is also an issue of acute importance to the (scholarly) audience and plays a crucial role in the plans for the Humboldt-Forum. In the "Surinam/Benin" contribution to the "Knight Moves" series and the "Layering Meanings" project, the Humboldt Lab has already presented two possible approaches to these questions. The third such project, "Object Biographies," arose from the idea of going beyond provenance research to take two more aspects into consideration: what attributions were the objects subject to in the local museum context? And what does their absence mean, today, in their societies of origin? Using examples from the 75,000 items in the Africa collection, we wanted to scrutinize the interpretive prerogative taken by museums and the categorizations they make – and in doing so, to cooperate with African scholars and proponents of critical museum studies. The concrete objects we chose to work with were figures (so-called "bocio") from what is today the Republic of Benin, a pair of figures from the historical Kom



Kingdom (in modern-day Cameroon), and a stool made by the so-called "Master of Buli" from the historical Kingdom of Luba (in the modern-day Democratic Republic of Congo).

Searching for Traces and Research

As the narrative element of the exhibition, we employed the approach of 'object biography,' which has drawn increased attention within the academic field and seen increased use in recent decades – that is to say, to trace the checkered lives of the objects: Where do they come from? How did they arrive in Berlin? How did they change owners – through exchange, purchase, plunder, or as gifts? How were they finally received in the Berlin museum, how were they described, handled, and exhibited? This method of research enabled two things: One, to focus on the collection history of the objects, above all within the context of German colonialism. Two, to excavate the changes of meaning that the things have undergone, as the systems used by museums for ordering and categorizing ethnographic objects have changed dramatically over time. Depending on when and where they were exhibited, their status has oscillated between being objects of art and being objects of culture, thus contributing to how symbolic and material value is attributed to them.

The selected pair of figures from the Kom Kingdom in the grassfields of Cameroon and the stool of the so-called "Master of Buli" from the historical Kingdom of Luba are very prominent examples of the collection that arrived at the Berlin Ethnologisches Museum at the highpoint of German colonialism, in the early twentieth century. We were interested in their exhibition history as well as their collection history, and for this reason we didn't only conduct research in collection files, travel reports, and inventory books, but also through documentation of exhibitions, films, and art catalogues that we found in the museum archives and libraries in Dahlem. Our research confirmed that the Kom objects stemmed from violent collection contexts; in addition to this, we learned that the historical facts we researched were not typically mentioned in earlier exhibitions.

Collaborative Curating

We felt it was important to incorporate the positions of our African colleagues. For this reason we invited art historian Mathias Alubafi (Cameroon, currently a specialist at the Human Sciences Research Council, Pretoria, South Africa) and Romuald Tchibozo (Université d'Abomey-Calavi, Benin) to pursue the question of what the absence of the objects meant in their respective lands of origin. In the text he composed for the exhibition, Mathias Alubafi wrote: "As repatriation debates, especially with regard to African and Cameroon art currently being held in Western museums, take center stage in discussions between the social actors involved, opinions are needed to understand whether or not the absence of these objects has an impact on the source community." As part of a joint research trip with Romuald Tchibozo and the filmmaker Anna Lisa Ramella, we traced a bundle from the collection composed of eight objects, so-called bocio that had been stored unnoticed in the warehouse of the Berlin museum since the late 1960s, back to their original site in Benin. Tchibozo has a scholarly interest in bocio, which are difficult to find today in Benin. On location, we interviewed a broad spectrum of actors (artists, museologists, collectors, and art dealers) about the possible reasons for the bocio's absence – their varying answers can be seen on a four-channel video installation within the exhibition, and convey something of the diverse historical, religious, and political reasons for the present-day absence of the objects.

We arranged two internal workshops with curator and scholar Nora Sternfeld and anthropologist Friedrich von Bose in order to discuss the whole project with colleagues while it was still in the development process. Together we discussed how to visualize, through contemporary forms of museum presentation, the innovative academic positions toward the history of collecting and exhibiting ethnographic objects. The discussion resulted in the desire that "Object Biographies" facilitates space for critical confrontation, and alters how visitors perceive the objects in the museum.

Visualization of the Problem

Now the task was to translate these curatorial aspects of the project into an exhibition format and to visualize the scholarly confrontation with the object histories. In close cooperation with the design team ADDITIV and Descloux Engelschall, we developed a design to do so: the exhibition architecture takes the form of an equilateral triangle; an object (group) is presented on each of its exterior sides. The histories of the objects' collection and representation are narrated by presenting the objects together with the collection files, photos, films, and publications. The interior of the triangle symbolically represents the core of the museum, the

storage facility. Cutouts are made into the exhibition walls, creating different sight axes and thereby allowing not only for connections between the three objects and the associated material, but also literalizing the view "behind the curtains" of the museum. We consciously chose the space in front of the entrance to the Ethnologisches Museum's permanent exhibition "Art from Africa" as the site of the Humboldt Lab exhibition: in place of an overview of the historical art of Africa, we aimed at making visible the capacious history of individual objects from Africa.

The Other Museum

"Object Biographies" rotates the gaze, directing it at the museum itself – at its history, practices, and networks. Alongside the problem of provenance, it scrutinizes the museum categorizations that have characterized the limited Western view toward Africa and its artistic and cultural productions. The exhibition aims to encourage an altered way of handling museum objects in the future – for example, by engaging intensively with actors from Africa and seeking out their expertise. In addition to this, from the very beginning, it was important for us not only to convey the content via objects, images, and texts, but also to make the exhibition itself a site of discussion. Therefore, we organized tours at regular intervals and deliberately invited scholars, curators, and students to attend, or they approached us on their own. Depending on the individual emphases of their research, our conversations ranged from critical museum studies, "old art" from Africa, to contemporary debates about the Humboldt-Forum. Many visitors reported coming to view the museum objects in a different light, beginning to question how the objects arrived inside the museum. Our goal – of sensitizing the public to the museum's sometimes problematic collection history – seems to have succeeded.

Dr. Verena Rodatus studied psychology and fine arts at the University of Bremen. Since 2003, she has studied regularly in West Africa (Togo, Benin, Ghana, Ivory Coast, and Senegal). The subject of her doctorate was the representation of contemporary art from the continent of Africa, and was finished in early 2015 under the title "Postkoloniale Positionen? Die Biennale DAK'ART im Kontext des internationalen Kunstbetriebs." After working as academic staff for the special exhibition "Kaboom! Comic in der Kunst" (2012/2013) at the Weserburg Museum of Modern Art (Bremen), she worked at the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin. From September 2015, Rodatus works as research assistant in the department of the Arts of Africa at the Freie Universität Berlin.

Margareta von Oswald has studied social sciences and anthropology in Bordeaux, Stuttgart, and Paris. She is currently working on her dissertation project "Relational Things: Luba Sculptures in European Colonial Collections." As part of her analysis of a specific group of objects from Congo, her work addresses contemporary processes of transformation in ethnographic museums in Europe. After a long research stay at the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin, during which she took an active role in the planning process for the Humboldt-Forum, she will continue her research from July to November 2015 at the Royal Museum for Central Africa (Tervuren, Belgium).

Object Biographies / Positions

Putting the Collection through Its Paces: A Plea for More Object Studies and Collections History

by Larissa Förster

In 1911, Bernhard Ankermann, the director of the African Department at the Berliner Museum für Völkerkunde, had the collection areas of the museum notated on a map of Africa. The darkest shading was reserved for those regions where the museum believed it possessed "complete or nearly comprehensive collections." In the Humboldt Lab exhibition "Object Biographies," the map in question hangs conspicuously beside a map marked with the German colonies in Africa. There you see it: the areas with "complete or nearly comprehensive collections" are almost perfectly coextensive with the German colonies in Africa. For most other regions in Africa, Ankermann only designates "relatively good," "poor/incomplete," or even "no or almost no collections." Seldom has the fanatical colonial utopia of complete reproducibility or "collectability" of the material cultures of non-European societies been more concisely summed up in word or image.

In "Object Biographies," clever juxtapositions like this serve to visualize, in revealing and striking ways, the

history and politics that underlie ethnographic collections. By presenting three very different biographies of objects stretching from the nineteenth century to the 1960s, the Humboldt Lab production opens up an important space for historical reflection – especially through its placement in front of the oft-criticized older section of the Dahlem permanent exhibition "Art from Africa," which immerses the objects in a dark historical abyss. But the Humboldt Lab exhibition also expands the conception of what a museum can be: by presenting the letters, inventory books, and records in which the exhibited objects appear, the exhibition reminds viewers that a museum is not only a collection of artifacts, but also a collection of classifying, interpreting documents and texts about these things which themselves have the character of objects. Only the two in conjunction serve to endow the institution of museum with its power (and interpretive prerogative), to explain this power (and prerogative). Especially considering that Berlin's Ethnologisches Museum has an archive that is comprehensive and of great historical interest.

"Object Biographies" thereby continues an effort to put the Dahlem collections into perspective that was first begun in 2011, when the installation "The King and His Throne" was shown at the Humboldt-Box in connection with the Humboldt-Forum. There too, at center was an object biography – in this case, the circumstances surrounding the 1908 acquisition of the Bamum King Ibrahim Njoya's throne and its journey into the Berlin collection. For your recollection: King Njoya's throne, which in fact boasts a highly interesting and not entirely undisputed biography, occupies a central position in the Dahlem permanent exhibition "Art from Africa" – where, however, only a few explanatory sentences are devoted to it. Even at the programmatic special exhibition "A Different Approach to the World: The Humboldt-Forum in the Berlin Palace" from 2009, fairly general references to the Humboldt brothers and Adolf Bastian sufficed to thematize the history of the Dahlem collections. It is therefore high time that Dahlem makes an effort to investigate its holdings more closely from the perspective of the collection's history – even if, as the curators of the Humboldt Lab exhibition "Object Biographies" rightly concede, many junctures in the acquisition and shipment history can no longer be illuminated. To be sure, since the publication of works like Arjun Appadurai's The Social Life of Things (1988) and Igor Kopytoff's The Cultural Biography of Things (1986), approaches that emphasize object biographies and collections history have become so well-established within academic discourse that some critics have taken to calling for a return to questions of materiality and the construction of meaning. However, these approaches can still be brought to bear on recent debates, whether the subject is the "agency" of things, actor-network theory, or non-Western ontologies. They can thereby also serve as points of departure for theoretical issues that are further afield, as is currently an intensive topic of discussion in anthropology.

Case studies like those in the exhibition "Object Biographies," I believe, should be the starting point for a more broadly conceived study of collections history, which would situate the Dahlem collection (and others like it) within larger historical contexts. Such an approach could serve to highlight connections to other ethnological museums. For example, there is also a (little known) armchair of King Njoya at the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum in Cologne; there are other Bamum thrones at the Palace Museum in Foumban (Cameroon). Such an approach could also forge connections between different "museum genres" – I'm thinking, for instance, of museums of history or natural history, whose holdings gathered around 1900 can often be traced back to the same collector or collecting campaign. Finally, such an approach could more systematically shed light on connections to collections of the same origin in different countries, or even in the land of origin itself (whose national museums themselves often trace back to colonial roots).

One wishes a museum like the Ethnologisches Museum in Dahlem had time to conduct such a fundamental historicization and contextualization of its collections on a broader basis – and at that, to do so before the objects are shipped off to Museum Island to compete with the most beautiful cultural treasures of Berlin and the whole world. Such a process might make the complexly intertwined colonial and postcolonial histories behind the objects more visible – objects that have often been perceived as representatives of a culture, ethnicity, or entire cultural practice – but it would also shed light on the figures and motivations behind their shipment from one place to another, on the appropriation and interpretation, the devaluation and valorization, and finally too on the auratic charge that is assigned to non-European objects. Research projects and studies that are conceived collaboratively, like the collaboration in this case with the Beninese art historian Romuald Tchibozo, can sometimes lead to entirely new appraisals or even "rediscoveries" of objects in the collection that have hitherto received little attention.

This also makes clear that studies of collections history involve a great deal more than thoroughly inventorying and processing the holdings. Likewise, such studies should go beyond simple "provenance research" that seeks to determine the prior owner, clarify the legality of the acquisition, and serve as preliminary work for a possible restitution negotiation. To a greater degree, such studies are of central significance for the process of critically reflecting on the institution "ethnological museum," and for

embedding ethnological holdings within the colonial and postcolonial histories of global entanglement. That such a process of historical embedding also, in the end, yields new connections, networks, and meanings, follows as a matter of course – and can point the way for the collection and exhibition practices of museums in the future.

Dr. Larissa Förster is an anthropologist and academic coordinator at the Morphomata International Center for Advanced Studies at the University of Cologne, as well as spokesperson for the AG Museum of the German Anthropological Association. She is currently studying the history of ethnographic museums and collections as well as transnational restitution and repatriation procedures. She was co-curator of the exhibitions "Namibia – Germany: A Shared/Divided History: Resistance, Violence, Memory" (Cologne and Berlin, 2004/2005) and "Afropolis: City/Media/Art" (Cologne and Bayreuth, 2010/2011).

Absent Objects and Academic Collaboration: The Case of the Bocio

by Romuald Tchibozo

The bocio, a type of figure whose production was once widespread in South and Central Benin, presented an opportunity for the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin and the Université d'Abomey-Calavi to begin a scholarly collaboration. Cooperation of this sort between Germany and Benin is not new, but it continues to be rare. It was truly necessary in this case. In what follows, I will depict how it came to be.

Back when I was researching my dissertation, I had contacted the Ethnologisches Museum in order to round out my data. My project, which dealt with the reception of contemporary African art in Germany, required from the outset that I understand how "traditional" art had been received. I'd hoped to be able to trace this process at the museum. My application to research in the storage facility, however, was denied. Now, I've returned to Germany 15 years later on another research project, and the same museum asks for my involvement in an exhibition project on the biography of objects from Africa – the museum has opened itself up. What are the reasons for this opening? What was the collaboration about? What results have we achieved? How should we evaluate this academic collaboration?

The Problems and Objectives of Collaboration

In 2013 one of my students, David Gnonhouévi, proposed a topic for his doctorate degree. Regrettably, working on this topic ultimately proved impossible for him. The topic was: L'art sculptural Agonlin: essai d'analyse stylistique: Contribution à une meilleure lisibilité de l'histoire à partir de l'étude du Bocio et du masque Guèlèdé (Sculpture from Agonlin: Approach to a Stylistic Analysis: Contribution to a Better Understanding of History on the Basis of an Investigation of Bocio and Gelede Masks). For such an investigation, one would need a body of evidence making it possible to take a long period of time into account, at least 25 to 30 years of continuous production – and such a body of work was not available.

In principle, such a well-founded stylistic investigation would be possible in Agonlin, as the area has a long tradition of sculpture. Considering the region lies close to Abomey, the Royal Palaces there might well have sourced or commissioned pieces from Agonlin. For this reason, I recommended that David factored into his investigation the possibility of the Royal Palaces exerting an influence on the shapes of the figures. But despite multiple trips to the region of Agonlin, he and I could find no more bocio. Rather, again and again we discovered that formerly available figures had gone missing for various reasons: In the course of Christianization, bocio producers and the figures had been demonized and many bocio were destroyed. Many figures disappeared during colonization, or the new rulers exerted direct or indirect influence upon their production – because there was no longer any demand for traditional bocio within the communities that had converted to Christianity, manufacturers aligned their work with the wishes of colonialists and African travellers in order to earn money. Since Benin's independence, the production of bocio has dwindled, especially because of the fact that, under socialism, the official practice of traditional cults was forbidden. There was nowhere with a sufficient body of work from Agonlin, not even the Porto-Novo Museum of Ethnography. While the museum possesses a large number of bocio, they originate from across the entire region where the figures were produced – a region that stretches all the way to Togo. As some of the objects lacked precise data, it was impossible to assemble a sufficiently large body of figures that undoubtedly

originated from Agonlin. David gave up his research topic.

Thus, in Benin, the objects for the research are absent. And they are absent from the museums of ethnography there. What could be done? In fact, a small collection of bocio can be found in Berlin. Thanks to the organization of the exhibition "Object Biographies" and Berlin museums' desire that researchers from Germany and Benin collaborate, it has been possible to advance our studies of the bocio. At the same time, the exhibition served as a chance to reflect upon the cooperation situation itself.

Methodology and Implementation

Carrying out the project demanded that we employ various methods. Of great help were discussions, workshops, mail exchanges, telephone conversations, and a research trip to Benin. We selected a specific methodology or a synthesis of methods for every stage. The first conversations were held with Verena Rodatus, and together we developed the idea of "decolonizing" the research; somewhat later, Margareta von Oswald, the co-curator of the project, joined in. After our first joint visit to the storage facility of the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin, we decided to work on the so-called bocio. We discovered there that the museum owns a number of pieces that were produced in the 1960s, likely for tourists and collectors. These posed the question of their predecessors – and served as a catalyst for us to devote ourselves jointly to the topic of the absent objects on site. In the accompanying workshops, we debated the hypothesis that objects from a variety of time periods are absent on site today. Thus we arrived at the idea of making our topic the story of the student David Gnonhouévi, as well as the question of what the "absence of objects" in Benin means. We decided to take a research trip together to Benin and make a film about it. This should serve as testimony to the problem of the "absent objects" – that is, to the circumstance that, in order to study the objects, one must visit European museums and private collections.

The research trip, from December 5 to 11, 2014, led from Cotonou through Porto-Novo, from Agonlin to Abomey, and back to Cotonou. Before this, we conducted two workshops with our colleagues Verena, Margareta, and Anna Lisa Ramella, the filmmaker. The first workshop was devoted to the concept of the exhibition, clips from the film recordings, and the function of the film in the exhibition. In the second workshop, we discussed the topic, the problem of researching bocio, and the absence thus far of an academic debate in Benin. David introduced the places we would be visiting and gave an overview of the contact people in Agonlin, Abomey, and Porto-Novo. In addition to this, we compiled an interview guideline for the film research in which we asked after the original nature of the bocio, while resolving at the same time to do as much justice as possible to the variety of religions in the region where the investigations were to be carried out. The following questions were also posed: What was the goal of the film? What did we want to express with the film? To whom in Berlin was the film oriented? Could it be shown in Benin?

The results of the conversations during the first stage of the trip already proved to be revealing, and on the whole confirmed the perception that the bocio from Agonlin had mostly disappeared. The stopover in Porto-Novo proved important in multiple respects. First, the interview with the artist Kouas had some surprises in store: he himself owned a few beautiful bocio figures and had incorporated them into his work. We additionally learned that there is a broad typology of bocio. The visit to the Museum of Ethnography confirmed this assessment. Conspicuous was the fact that the museum primarily possesses large bocio figures, which confirms the hypothesis that the smaller, transportable bocio had been taken away.

In Agonlin, we conducted the same interview process with many different subjects. Once again, in our subjects' narratives we stumbled across the afore-mentioned explanations for the disappearance of the pieces: looting, the sale of family property, destruction of the objects by priests, and the systematic suppression of belief in these figures. Here too, we came to the same conclusion: there was not a sufficient body of these specialized types of objects to prepare a stylistic investigation of bocio from the region.

The final stop in Abomey was equally interesting. One of the interviewees, Gimassè Gabin, with his extensive and moving private collection that lent key insights about production in the region, proved to be a valuable source for the investigation. But even here, there were too few bocio from Agonlin to assemble a body for research. Monique, a hotel proprietor in Abomey, also opened up her astonishingly diverse collection to us.

At the end of our trip on December 11, 2014, a symposium took place on the campus of the Université d'Abomey-Calavi. There, we hoped to discuss our thoughts about the bocio as "absent objects" with students of art history. A number of my students reported about their research in various places; this proved to be an interesting follow-up to our journey.

Perspectives on Academic Collaboration

Above all, the collaboration was founded on the question of how to "decolonize" research. My colleagues are young scholars posing this question in the context of Berlin museums. Although the museum seems to be starting to open up, and a generation change may perhaps be taking place there, the call for decolonization seems somewhat utopian. Such a stance from an African scholar toward the subject might sound like pure reproach or simple dismissal. But it's not that. Much more, the impression I've attained is that we must take great care not to talk past one another. One reason for this is the unawareness among many of our colleagues in the north about the reality in Africa. From my perspective, there is a danger here of persisting in old clichés, as if Africa has not long had its own distinct scholarly landscape. Another especially serious reason is the asymmetry of academic structures, whose working methods since colonization, on both sides, have only slowly been adapted to new realities.

Therefore, collaboration still poses difficulties. But the small experience we made together is a major step. What makes this collaboration unique is the joint interest in the topic of a trip to Benin. Now, what is important is to continue the equitable collaboration, so that the results may be profitable for both sides – that is, to precisely evaluate the information that was achieved and to reflect upon it. Only through this can the clichés about the different cultural communities gradually be worn away. Progress must also be made at a greater scale. Research topics must be coordinated, and the scholarly interests and responsibilities of all parties must be taken into account.
For me, it's already a significant step that the problems I stumbled upon ten years ago in Berlin have now become an object of study. Certainly, there are many more such problems to be solved – yet that is not the task of this article.

Dr. Romuald Tchibozo completed his doctorate at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin on the topic "Art and Arbitrary: A Study of the African Contemporary Art Reception in the West; the German Case from 1950 to the Present Day." Today he is Professor of Contemporary Art and International Cultural Relations at the Université d'Abomey-Calavi in Benin. He also teaches introductory courses in art history at the Regional Center for Cultural Action of Lomé. His most recent research has been dedicated to the development of contemporary art in Benin and various issues pertaining to the practice of art history. In 2013/14, Tchibozo was a fellow at the Berlin research program "Art Histories & Aesthetic Practices."

Object Biographies / Credits

A project of the Probebühne 6, March 26 through October 18, 2015

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Installation view “Object Biographies,” photo: Jens Ziehe

Visitors at the opening, photo: Jan Windszus

Installation view “Object Biographies,” photo: Jens Ziehe

Installation view “Object Biographies,” photo: Jens Ziehe

Visitors looking at the bocio, photo: Jan Windszus

Installation view “Object Biographies,” photo: Jens Ziehe

Installation view “Object Biographies,” photo: Jens Ziehe