Colonial archival silences and dis:connected African heritages: search for the evidence of acquisition and ownership of colonial ethnographic collections

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This paper explores the 'colonial archival silences' and the complexities of acquiring and owning African ethnographic collections.[1] The study uncovers significant gaps in documentation of object acquisition during the colonial period by focussing on ethnographic items and human remains, highlighting the lack of detailed provenance records. This absence underscores how colonial acquisition often involved exploitative practices, unclear ownership and a lack of consent.

Using archival materials, object descriptions and historical documents, I reconstruct hidden histories of ethnographic collections. By addressing these historical gaps, we can foster transparency, accountability and justice in the effort to repatriate African cultural heritage.

Background and context

Archives are not merely repositories of documents; they are dynamic sites of historical memory and contested narratives. As the Society of American Archivists notes, 'archival silences' reflect the absence of marginalised voices, shaped by institutional and political forces.[2] Colonial archives – curated collections of

1 The Gerda Henkel Foundation supported this research under the 4 Museums-4Opportunities Program. I sincerely appreciate the Linden Museum for hosting me and for the use of its facilities.

2 'archival silence', in *Dictionary of Archives Terminology* (Society of American Archivists). https://dictionary.archivists.org/entry/archival-silence.html.

records created during colonial rule – have emerged as important tools in the restitution and reparation process. The concept of *archival silence* challenges the assumption that archives are neutral. Instead, it reveals how power dynamics influence what is preserved and forgotten, making archives both a source of memory and a reflection of systemic exclusion.[3]

Colonial archives are not just passive containers of history, but active sites where memory is shaped, contested and sometimes erased. This muteness raises concerns about tracing what is missing when colonial archives shattered memory, broke cultural lineages and severed communities from their heritage.[4] While archives are often celebrated as custodians of collective memory, they also embody profound silences. These silences distort historical understanding, particularly when the voices of oppressed communities are absent or underrepresented. [5]

The relationship between colonial archives, human remains and ethnographic items from colonial contexts is complex due to their intertwined documentation. Investigating these materials requires considering both indigenous evidence and colonial motives for documentation. Addressing historical injustice, particularly relating to colonialism, one has to confront past actions that contribute to present injustices, especially regarding the rights of colonised peoples. Scholars and museum professionals have increasingly focused on the origins of colonial collections, critically reassessing how objects were initially named, described and catalogued in institutional archives and exhibition spaces. Yet, the evidentiary value of these classificatory practices – often shaped by colonial ideologies – has seldom been rigorously examined.[6]

In the following, I address several related questions. Where do we go after uncovering acquisition records? Does comparing the evidential value of the archive that names cultural goods with the presence of ancestral remains make sense? By respecting the embodied meaning of these documents, it becomes difficult to avoid a conclusion that connects them to the urgent issues of contemporary restitution and reparation. Although I touch on some archival issues related to repatriation, I largely avoid answering those questions directly. Instead, I opt to navigate the complex narratives surrounding ownership of ancestral remains and cultural belongings caught between the knowledge that challenges all narratives of sentience and the objectifying unconsciousness of the archive, which is often respected but unaware.

3 Michael Moss and David Thomas, eds., *Archival Silences: Missing, Lost, and Uncreated Archives* (London: Routledge, 2021).
4 Ann Laura Stoler, 'Archivos coloniales y el arte de gobernar', *Revista colombiana de antropología* 46, no. 2 (2010).
5 Kaitlin Smith, 'The Problem of Archival Silences', Facing History & Ourselves, updated 25 October 2021, 2021, accessed 4 December 2025, https://www.facinghistory.org/ideas-week/problem-archival-silences.
6 Gabriella P. Reyes, 'Cataloguing the Empire: Classification as Colonial Project', *Catalogue & Index*, no. 210 (17 May 2025).

The systematic removal of human remains and cultural artifacts during the expansion of colonial powers was deeply embedded in imperial ideologies and scientific rationales. Colonial agents commodified bodies and cultural objects as trophies and specimens, reinforcing racial hierarchies and legitimising conquest through evolutionary science and museum display.[7] This practice followed structured patterns across colonies, as Müller demonstrates in his mapping of claims for the return of cultural property and human remains, revealing how institutions acquired these items under the guise of research and national prestige.[8] Descendants of those affected by colonial theft of human remains and cultural items seek restitution and reparation as acts of healing, spiritual reconnection and cultural affirmation. Repatriation occurs through religious rituals or legal and ethical frameworks safeguarding heritage. Such ceremonies restore dignity and foster decolonial engagement. These efforts confront persistent resistance from modern states reluctant to address colonial histories, underscoring the return's symbolic and political significance.

Colonial archives, often expected to clarify the provenance of looted cultural items, were systematically constructed to legitimise their removal, framing theft as lawful acquisition. These archives functioned as instruments of imperial power, suppressing indigenous agency and shaping narratives that complicate contemporary repatriation efforts. Reconciling these archival distortions with rightful claims requires confronting ethical legacies and institutional responsibility. The repatriation of cultural property demands legal redress and moral reckoning, especially when archives obscure justice and perpetuate colonial authority.

Documentation and creation of colonial archives

Colonial archives encompass written, visual and aural records produced in imperial contexts, often serving as tools of surveillance, control and cultural extraction (Fig. 1 & 2). These archives include correspondence between colonial agents, missionaries, institutions, journals, inventories and financial accounts. Such documentation functioned as a mechanism of colonial authority, legitimising the acquisition of cultural knowledge and material goods. Archives were not neutral repositories but technologies of governance and epistemic control.[9] Müller highlights how archival records facilitated

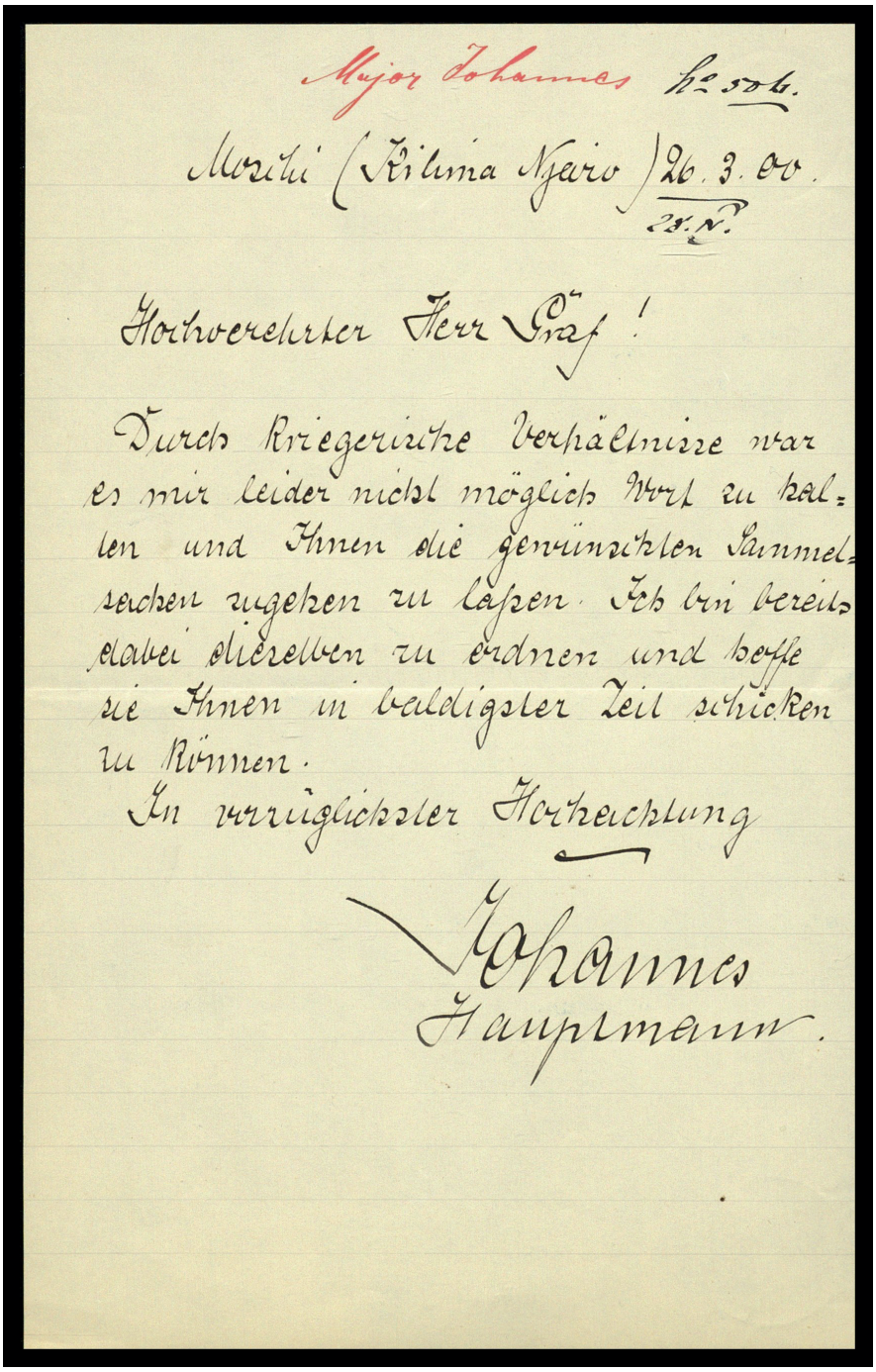
7 Carsten Stahn, 'Collecting Humanity: Commodification, Trophy Hunting, and Bio-colonialism', in *Confronting Colonial Objects: Histories, Legalities, and Access to Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).
8 Lars Müller, *Returns of Cultural Artefacts and Human Remains in a (Post) colonial Context: Mapping Claims between the Mid-19th Century and the 1970s*, Deutsches Zentrum Kulturgutverluste (Magdeburg, 2021).
9 Stoler, 'Archivos coloniales'.

dispossession by embedding colonial logic into everyday transactions.[10] These layered records reflect the broader pattern of domination, where knowledge itself was appropriated and institutionalised. Understanding colonial archives as active agents of extraction reframes them as contested sites of memory, power and restitution.

Colonial archives, comprising reports, correspondence, maps and photographs, were created by imperial powers to document governance and interactions with colonised populations. These records often served colonial interests, legitimising dispossession and masking violence, thus complicating historical research due to their biased narratives. Scholars increasingly view these archives as instruments of Western power and political projects rather than neutral repositories. Contemporary calls for inclusive interpretations and access aim to recover suppressed indigenous perspectives.[11] Meanwhile, repatriation of ancestral remains and cultural artifacts raises ethical questions about archival evidence and colonial legacies. Institutions now consult these same archives to assess restitution claims, prompting debates over their reliability and moral authority. Restitution efforts must confront the colonial frameworks embedded in archival systems and the enduring power dynamics they sustain.[12]

Colonial records do not constitute impartial scientific archives nor serve as comprehensive, objective repositories of valuable knowledge. At best, they provide fragmented and distorted representations of historical events, incorporating a combination of records, subjective opinions, judgments and limited perspectives from those documented within them.[13] At worst, such records are irrelevant to their descendants' concerns and historical narratives. Colonial documentation maintained practices of exclusion, racial discrimination, appropriation and omission. Colonial officials and their agents created archives to modify traditional African leadership systems and establish colonial rule, and they altered the perspectives of the colonised and obscured their historical memories.[14] Hence, many call for a critical re-evaluation of the use of such documents.

10 Müller, *Returns of Cultural Artefacts*.
11 Fabienne Chamelot, Vincent Hiribarren and Marie Rodet, 'Archives, the digital turn, and governance in Africa', *History in Africa* 47 (2020).
12 Reinhart Kößler, 'The restitution of human remains and artefacts: Reflecting on Namibian-German experiences', *Deutsches Zentrum Kulturgutverluste*, 21 December 2021, https://kulturgutverluste.de/sites/default/files/2023-04/2021-12-21_HK_Blogbeitrag_Reinhart_Kossler.pdf; Müller, *Returns of Cultural Artefacts*.
13 Harri Siiskonen, Anssi Taskinen and Veijo Notkola, 'Parish registers: a challenge for African historical demography', *History in Africa* 32 (2005).
14 Njabulo Bruce Khumalo, 'From oral traditions to written records: The loss of African entitlement to self-rule and wealth', *Oral History Journal of South Africa* 7, no. 1 (2019); Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Something Torn and New: An African Renaissance* (New York: Basic Books, 2009).



Major Johannes No 506.

Moschi (Kilima Njaro) 26. 3. 00.

25. N.

Hochverehrter Herr Graf!

Durch kriegerische Verhältnisse war es mir leider nicht möglich Wort zu halten und Ihnen die gewünschten Sammelsachen zugehen zu lassen. Ich bin bereits dabei dieselben zu ordnen und hoffe sie Ihnen in baldigster Zeit schicken zu können.

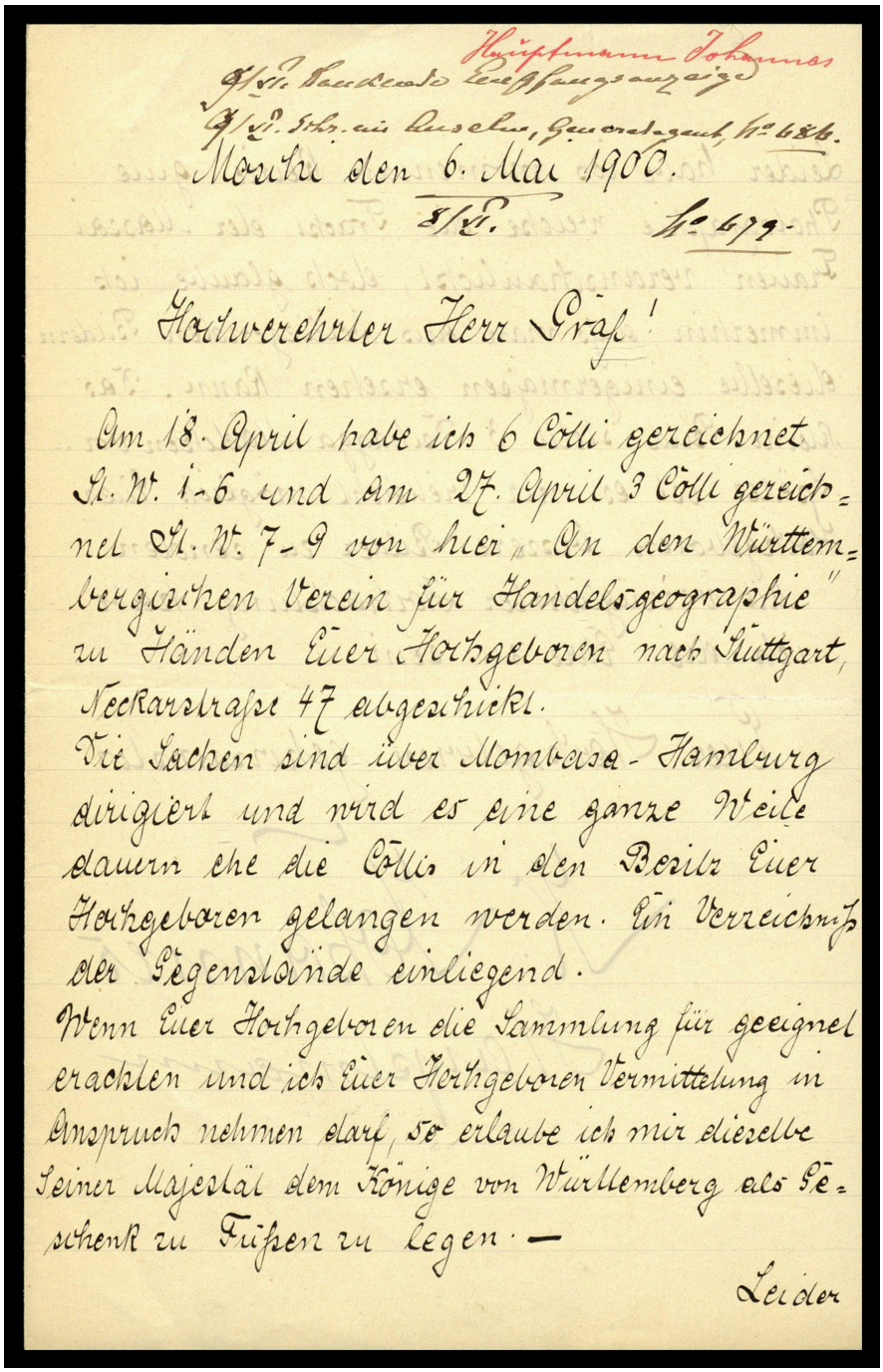
In vorzüglichster Hochachtung

Johannes
Hauptmann.

Although the colonial actors may not be the original owners of the artefacts they describe, the records detailing their acquisitions treated as evidence of continued possession; the principle that possession is nine-tenths of the law allows them to be invoked as proof of current ownership.[15] Despite the current emphasis on the return of human remains and cultural goods, along with the many more looted or exported pieces in art museums, restitution claims are not limited to artefacts belonging exclusively to the museums'

Fig. 01
Linden Museum Stuttgart: Correspondence folder Johannes, Kurt Johannes to Karl Count of Linden, 26 March 1900. In which he describes '... Due to the recent circumstances of war, I was unfortunately unable to keep my word and send you the requested collectibles. .....' In this letter, Kurt Johannes was referring to the war and the mass execution of the Chagga and Meru leaders at Old Moshi, Kilimanjaro on 2 March 1900.

15 This argument is widely upheld by most institutions in Europe and America that hold human remains and associated artifacts, serving as a justification for their continued possession and claims of ownership. See Camille Labadie, 'Decolonizing Collections: A Legal Perspective on the Restitution of Cultural Artifacts', *Temporalités* 49, no. 2 (2021).



Hauptmann Johannes
K. Württ. Landwehr Infanterie-Regiment
K. Württ. Schutztruppe, Gouvernement, No 686.
Moschi den 6. Mai 1900.
A/K. No 679.

Hochverehrter Herr Graf!

Am 18. April habe ich 6 Colli gezeichnet St. N. 1-6 und am 27. April 3 Colli gezeichnet St. N. 7-9 von hier „An den Württembergischen Verein für Handelsgeographie" zu Händen Euer Hochgeboren nach Stuttgart, Neckarstraße 47 abgeschickt.
Die Sachen sind über Mombasa-Hamburg dirigiert und wird es eine ganze Weile dauern ehe die Colli in den Bezirk Euer Hochgeboren gelangen werden. Ein Verzeichniß der Gegenstände einliegend.
Wenn Euer Hochgeboren die Sammlung für geeignet erachten und ich Euer Hochgeboren Vermittelung in Anspruch nehmen darf, so erlaube ich mir dieselbe Seiner Majestät dem Könige von Württemberg als Geschenk zu Füßen zu legen. —

Leider

Fig. 02
Linden Museum Stuttgart: Correspondence folder Johannes, Kurt Johannes to Karl Count of Linden, 6 May 1900. In this correspondence, Captain Johannes writes, 'On April 18, I dispatched 6 packages, St. N. 1-6, and on April 27, 3 packages, St. N. 7-9, from here to the Wurttemberg Association for Commercial Geography'. He further writes '...if your excellency deems the collection suitable...' This is perhaps a response to the content in Fig 1.

ethnographic and anthropological holdings; private collections and intangible heritage are also subject to claims. Thus, regardless of their impartiality, colonial archives recording removed material will continue to gain importance. They are valuable to ongoing discussions about accountability and actions for justice.

Any evidence from deceased human bodies, particularly in parts such as skulls, bones and teeth, is considered ancestral remains. Cultural goods are crafted from various materials, including stone axes, necklaces, spears, traditional woven cloths, ceremonial fabrics and wood carvings. These items are linked to traditions and daily life and hold significant cultural value. Cultural goods embody local values, including symbols, norms

and habits. Therefore, many cultural elements, which may include the remains of the deceased, tools, jewellery and clothing are recognised as ancestral remains or cultural goods. The portioning and commodification of the body and spirituality of the ancestors occurred incrementally. The colonisers also appropriated the ancestors' creations,[16] seizing the ancestors' historical, cultural and spiritual rights.

Colonial powers justified the acquisition of cultural artifacts and human remains through what they called a 'civilising' or 'humanising' mission, portraying these acts as benevolent efforts to uplift colonised societies. This narrative masked the exploitation and erasure experienced by indigenous communities. Colonial archives played a central role in documenting these acquisitions, often reflecting Eurocentric biases and serving as tools of control. Such archives remain vital in contemporary repatriation debates despite their partiality, offering evidence of provenance and ownership. These records help source communities advocate for restitution, even as they navigate the tension of relying on colonial documentation to pursue justice, and they are being reinterpreted to support restorative efforts, revealing the legacy of colonial extraction and the potential for archival reclamation in decolonial practice.

Conclusion

Colonial powers have long framed colonial archives as evidence of civilising missions, sovereign progress and cultural preservation. This framing has marginalised indigenous heritage and elevated colonial documents as authoritative historical sources, often shaped by environmental determinism and Eurocentric narratives. Yet, these archives also contain indigenous perspectives and emotional significance, making them vital in contemporary restitution debates.

I argue that, for archives to support rightful claims to ancestral remains and cultural goods, they must be made more publicly accessible, including yet-uncatalogued collections. Multidisciplinary approaches like genealogy, ethnography, oral history, anthropology and archaeology can help challenge colonial acquisition narratives and strengthen community-led claims. Researchers play a crucial role as restitution catalysts in analysing acquisition records, often underpinning restitution efforts. Archival evidence is central to confronting colonial legacies and supporting ethical repatriation.

16 Sarah Van Beurden, 'Culture, Artifacts, and Independent Africa: The Cultural Politics of Museums and Heritage', in *The Palgrave Handbook of African Colonial and Postcolonial History*, ed. Martin Shanguhyia and Toyin Falola (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018).

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