
Museum object here, archival record there. Museological-archival dis:connections in the 2019 restitution of the Witbooi family Bible

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What happens when a museum object becomes an archival record through restitution? This is the question that inspired this contribution. I refer to the family Bible of Nama anti-colonial resistance fighter Captain Hendrik Witbooi (Auta !Nanseb, c. 1830-1905), which the state of Baden-Württemberg restituted to Namibia in February 2019. In Germany, the Bible had been part of the Linden Museum's collection in Stuttgart. Following its restitution, the Bible was transferred to the Namibian National Archives, transforming it from a museum object into an archival record. This transformation, along with the overlaps between museological and archival restitution, are what I examine here.

While the displacement of objects and records is rooted in the same system of colonial extraction,¹ their restitution is often negotiated in separate professional and scholarly domains. However, a categorical distinction between museological objects and archival records can reproduce colonial epistemologies that obscure the structures of colonial violence behind institutional procedures.² In this paper, I reflect on the Bible's cross-institutional restitution to rethink archival-museological distinctions and key questions of agency, authority and voice beyond institutional frontiers. This, in turn, connects to a more structural understanding of restitution that is not only defined by looting and return but by ongoing dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. After all, restitution

1 Bénédicte Savoy and Felwine Sarr, *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethic* (Paris: Philippe Rey/Seuil, 2018), 8.

2 Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019), 41.



processes constitute narratives that amplify some voices while silencing others.

Hendrik Witbooi and the Witbooi family Bible

From 1888, Hendrik Witbooi was captain of the Witbooi (/Khowese) nation. A fierce opponent of German colonialism, Witbooi mobilised other Nama leaders for a united local resistance: ‘Come, brothers, let us together oppose this danger which threatens to invade our Africa, for we are one in colour and custom, and this Africa is ours’.³ After breaking a protection treaty with the

Fig. 01
Captain Hendrik Witbooi, 1898
 (Photo: ©National Archives
 of Namibia, photo 14101)

3 Brigitte Lau, *The Hendrik Witbooi Papers* (Windhoek: National Archives of Namibia, 1996), 86.

German Empire in 1904, he joined the Ovaherero resistance,⁴ which the German Empire brutally oppressed and which culminated in genocide. Hendrik Witbooi was shot in October 1905. His writings partially survived and are now housed in the National Archives of Namibia.⁵ Expressing early Pan-Africanist ideas and challenging the colonial marginalisation of indigenous knowledge, the Witbooi journals are uniquely important and recognised as a UNESCO Memory of the World.⁶

Witbooi presents himself as a pious man.⁷ The Witbooi family owned an 1866 Nama translation of the New Testament. In 1893, during the massacre of Hornkranz, German soldiers looted the Bible, along with Witbooi's journal and herding whip.⁸ In 1902, the Bible and whip resurfaced as part of a donation by financial administrator Paul Wassmannsdorf to the Linden Museum.⁹

Archives, museums, and restitution

Colonial museums and archives have both been beneficiaries and drivers of colonial extraction.¹⁰ The need to address the colonial origins of these institutions and collections has become increasingly urgent in both fields.¹¹ Nevertheless, museums and archives treat restitution differently. For example, a 2020 Dutch report on restitution policy excludes archives, claiming they require a distinct approach because, unlike museums, 'archives are significant for the documents they contain, for the information therein and specific access rights'.¹²

4 Lau, *The Hendrik Witbooi Papers*, xxiv-xxv.

5 National Archives of Namibia, A.0002, A.0650, AACRLS.117.

6 Memory Biwa, "'Weaving the past with threads of memory": Narratives and commemorations of the colonial war in southern Namibia' (PhD Dissertation, University of the Western Cape, 2012).

7 Tilman Dederling, 'Southern Namibia c. 1780 – c. 1840: Khoikhoi, Missionaries and the Advancing Frontiers' (PhD dissertation, University of Cape Town, 1993), 54.

8 Ellen Ndeshi Namhila, 'Von kolonialer Kriegsbeute zum Weltdokumentenerbe: Hendrik Witboois Tagebücher', *Historische Urteilskraft* 1 (2019): 36; Lau, *The Hendrik Witbooi Papers*, 126-27.

9 Gesa Grimme, *Provenienzforschung im Projekt Schwieriges Erbe: Zum Umgang mit kolonialzeitlichen Objekten in ethnologischen Museen – Abschlussbericht*, Linden-Museum (Stuttgart, 2018), 25.

10 Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*, 19; Paul Basu, 'Towards the pluriversal museum. From epistemic violence to ecologies of knowledges', *Museums & Social Issues* 18, no. 1-2 (2024): 9-11 <https://doi.org/10.1080/15596893.2024.2333658>; Savoy and Sarr, *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage*, 33.

11 See, for example, Felwinne Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, 'A Long Duration of Losses', in *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics* (Paris: Ministère de la Culture, 2018); Forget Chaterera-Zambuko and James Lowry, 'Lost Unities: An Exhibition for Archival Repatriation', *The Museum of British Colonialism*, 9 March 2023, <https://museumofbritishcolonialism.org/lost-unities/>, last accessed: 6 December 2025. See also the 2024 restitution of sound recordings from the University of Amsterdam to the Indonesian Province of East Nusa Tenggara.

12 Advisory Committee on the National Policy Framework for Colonial Collections, *Colonial Collections: A Recognition of Injustice*, *The Council for Culture* (The Hague, 2022), 15. In 2024, a separate report for archival collections was published.

While differences between museums and archives matter,¹³ categorical separations risk reproducing colonial epistemologies that reduce material objects to forms of cultural representation and archival documents to mere carriers of information. As Azoulay states, ‘The undisputed existence of these two institutions – archive and museum – is predicated on the destruction of existing worlds, which could not have been pursued if the separation between people and their objects, and between people and their world, had not already been institutionalized’.¹⁴

In short, the colonial archive *shapes* rather than simply *documents* the world, much like the colonial museum, which not only *exhibits* but *appropriates* social environments. To unlearn this ‘imperial disciplinary grammar’;¹⁵ Azoulay questions the categorical distinction between archives and museums that obscures the systematic nature of colonial violence, echoing ongoing calls to address colonialism as a structural and continuing injustice.¹⁶ Ciraj Rassool and Victoria E. Gibbon, for example, advocate ‘restitutionary work’¹⁷ as a process that goes beyond property paradigms to restore power, authority and voice. This requires questioning colonial epistemic frameworks, including archival-museological distinctions and their corresponding productions of historical knowledge and narratives. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot has famously shown, the process and condition of producing historical narratives reveal power structures that make some histories visible while silencing others.¹⁸ Studying the Witbooi Bible’s restitution through its archival and museological narratives traces these dis:connections of history and voice.

The Witbooi Bible in the museum and archive

Between 1902 and 2019, the Bible and whip were part of the Linden Museum’s collection. The museum included them in two exhibitions: first, in the 2007 exhibition *From Kapstadt to Windhoek: ‘Hottentots’ or Khoisan. The rehabilitation of a people*,¹⁹ and then in 2018/19 in *The Family Bible and Whip by Hendrik*

13 For example, many colonial archives concern documents that were produced by colonial administrations, while museums often contain belongings created by colonised people.

14 Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*, 174-75.

15 Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*, 196.

16 See, for example, Jamila Mascot, ‘What Is to Be Repaired? Scattered Speculations on Postcolonial Justice, Reparations, and Anti-Capitalism’, *Democratic Theory* 11, no. 12 (2024): 123, <https://doi.org/10.3167/dt.2024.110208>.

17 Ciraj Rassool and Victoria E. Gibbon, ‘Restitution versus repatriation. Terminology and concepts matter’, *American Journal of Biological Anthropology* 184, no. 1 (2023): 1-4, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajpa.24889>.

18 Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), 25.

19 Hermann Forkl, ed., *Von Kapstadt bis Windhuk: ‘Hottentotten’ oder Khoekhoen?* (Stuttgart: Linden-Museum, 2007). While the whip was on display in the physical exhibition, the Bible was only included in the catalogue.



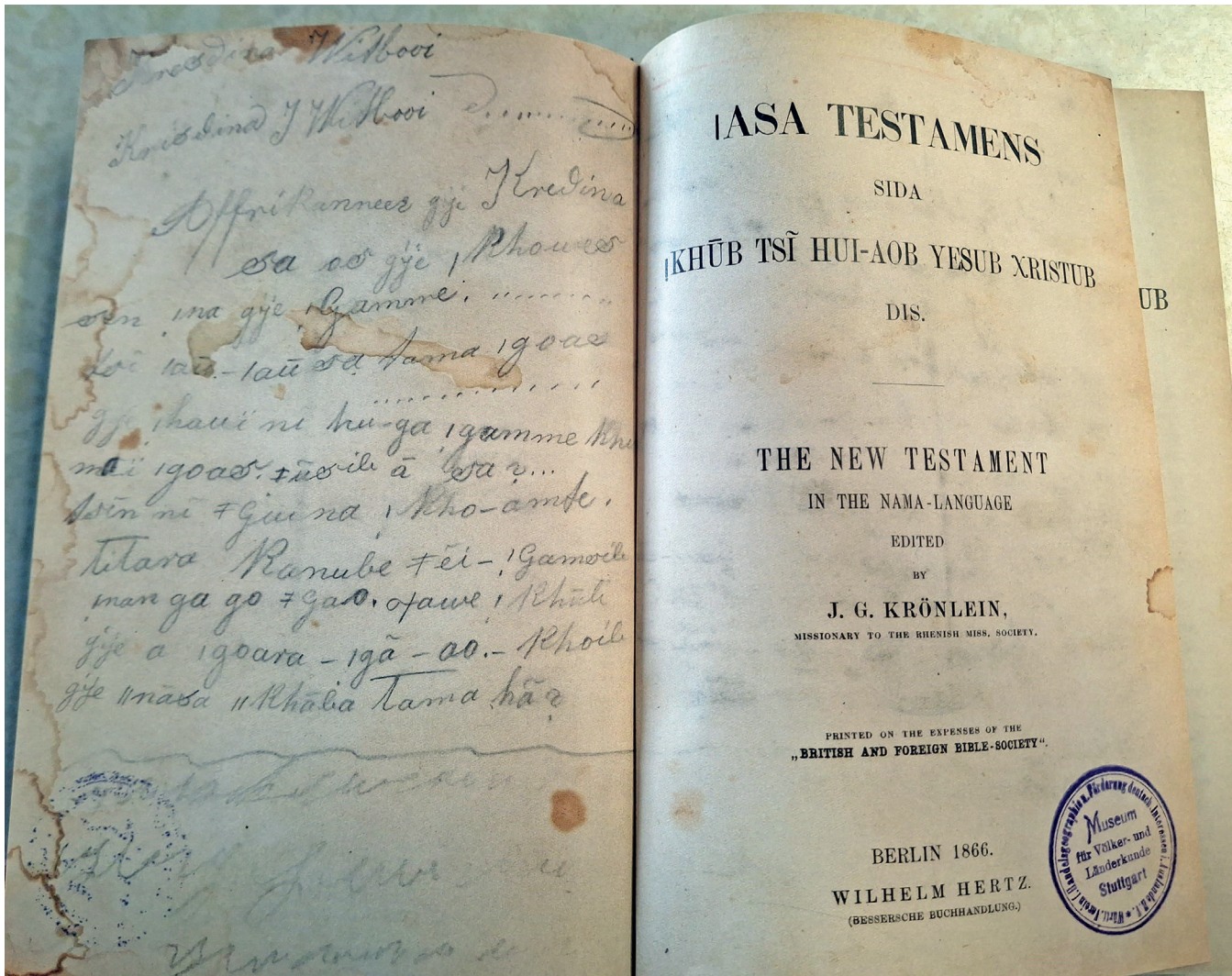
Witbooi.²⁰ The 2007 exhibition separated the objects, placing them in different ethnographic categories to present Nama culture to non-Nama visitors. The use of derogatory terms and the absence of Nama voices reinforced this impression. The museum defined both objects through their putative roles in Nama culture and in relation to their donator, Paul Wassmannsdorf. By contrast, the 2018/19 exhibition displayed the Bible and whip together, framed by Witbooi's biography as an anti-colonial and Pan-African leader, the violence of their looting and the political significance of their return. By emphasising Witbooi's importance beyond Nama communities, the exhibition legitimised national heritage status and, therefore, their restitution to the nation-state as an act of 'historical responsibility'.²¹ At the same time, a large background image of the inventory book visually reinforced the museum's collection- and collector-centred perspective. Object labels, while criticising derogatory language, relied on passive constructions such as 'colonial collector mentality',²² supporting the impression that the museum exhibited rather than questioned itself in a political discourse on historical (in)justice.

20 'The Family Bible and Whip by Hendrik Witbooi, 11 December - 17 February 2019', Linden-Museum, accessed 6 December 2025, <https://lindenmuseum.de/the-family-bible-and-whip-by-hendrik-witbooi-2/?lang=en>.

21 Exhibition texts.

22 Exhibition texts.

Fig. 02
Exhibition *The Family Bible and Whip* by Hendrik Witbooi (Photo: Domanik Drasow, ©Linden-Museum Stuttgart)



Following its restitution, the Witbooi Bible was transferred to the Namibian National Archives. A facsimile is available for research. The archival database mentions neither Paul Wassmannsdorf nor the whip. Instead, it lists the Bible's material, language and other user-focused information, including a mention of the restitution, stating that the Bible was 'repatriated to Namibia on 28 February 2019 and is held by the National Archives until a safe repository has been established at Gibeon'.²³ Moreover, the Bible appears in the *Guide to Hendrik Witbooi's Archival Legacy*,²⁴ which narrates Witbooi's life, archiving practices, resistance, looting and restitution, positioning the Bible with the journals as indigenous and national heritage. Unlike the museum, which linked the Bible to other ethnographic belongings and the whip, the archives connect it to the journals, shifting focus from collection to history writing. The journals are crucial to the National Archives, which, inheriting the epistemic legacy of a colonial state, continue to grapple with archival gaps and the silencing of indigenous

Fig. 03
Facsimile of the Witbooi Bible,
National Archives of Namibia A.1065
(Photo: Leah Niederhausen)

²³ A. 1065.

²⁴ *Hendrik Witbooi's Archival Legacy: National Archives of Namibia Documentary Heritage. A Companion Brochure to the 2020 Heritage Week Exhibition*, (Windhoek: National Archives of Namibia, 2020).

voices.²⁵ Therefore, the archives have launched initiatives aiming for archival restitution, recontextualisation and recording oral histories.²⁶

While the Linden-Museum narrates the Bible largely through the story of its acquisition, the National Archives frame it in relation to Hendrik Witbooi's historical writings. How do these narratives become visible in the Bible's restitution?

The restitution ceremony

The large-scale ceremony took place in Hendrik Witbooi's hometown, Gibeon.²⁷ Baden-Württemberg's Minister of Culture, Theresia Bauer, handed the belongings to Namibian President Hage Geingob, who then gave them to three of Witbooi's great-granddaughters: Ana Jacobs, Christina Fredericks and Elizabeth Kock, to acknowledge the Witbooi Royal House. Finally, Bible and whip were placed in a glass box next to a Nama and an Ovaherero ancestral skull, resembling a museum glass box.

The ceremony was embedded in an overarching narrative of Hendrik Witbooi as a 'national hero'²⁸ and predecessor to Namibian independence, a theme amplified by both Geingob and Bauer. Presenting the belongings as 'national cultural heritage'²⁹ and 'treasures of our nation's history'³⁰ framed the restitution as a matter between the (federal) nation states. Importantly, while Bauer spoke of 'a path to a shared future',³¹ Geingob specifically referred to the difficult 'State-to-State negotiations on the issue of genocide',³² a reference emphasised by the inclusion of the Nama and Herero ancestral skulls. The skulls had been returned from German medical collections in 2018. Their inclusion in the restitution by the Namibian Ministry of Culture created a political connection to the then ongoing bilateral reparation negotiations. In this sense, the ceremony itself acts as an institutionalising

25 Ellen Ndeshi Namhila, *'Little Research Value': African Estate Records and Colonial Gaps in a Post-Colonial National Archive* (Basel: Basel Afrika Bibliographien, 2017).

26 See, for example, Archives of Anti-Colonial Resistance and Liberation Struggle 2001-2009, Exhibition Remembering Hendrik Witbooi 2020.

27 For more information on the political developments leading up to the restitution, see Reinhart Köbler, *The Bible and the Whip-Entanglements surrounding the restitution of looted heirlooms*, Arnold Bergstraesser Institute (Freiburg, 2019); Katrine Hoandi Vigne, 'Hendrik Witbooi (ǀGābemab !Nanseb) Bible and Whip Repatriation Case', Open Restitution Africa, 2025, accessed 6 December 2025, <https://openrestitution.africa/case-study/hendrik-witbooi-gabemab-nanseb-bible-and-whip-repatriation-case/>.

28 Hage Geingob, *Keynote Address by His Excellency Dr Hage G. Geingob, President of the Republic of Namibia, on the Occasion of the Return of the Hendrik Witbooi Bible and Whip from the Federal Republic of Germany to the Republic of Namibia*, (Windhoek: Republic of Namibia, 2019).

29 *Witbooi-Bibel und Peitsche an Namibia übergeben*, (Stuttgart: Ministerium für Wissenschaft, Forschung und Kunst Baden-Württemberg, 2019).

30 Geingob, *Keynote Address*.

31 *Witbooi-Bibel und Peitsche an Namibia übergeben*.

32 Geingob, *Keynote Address*.

frame that embeds the Bible in a narrative of genocide and (inter) national politics. Memory Biwa has convincingly tied together the longer histories, tensions and relations between national and local narratives in commemorating the colonial war and genocide.³³

The national framing of the restitution caused conflicting feelings in Gibeon. During the commemoration of the 120th anniversary of Captain Witbooi's death 2025, I spoke with community members people about him, his legacy and their experiences with the 2019 restitution. Our conversations revealed the pride felt in Witbooi's national recognition: 'He was the leader of the Nama tribe but through this also fought for the freedom of this country. He did not only fight for the Namas but the whole country'.³⁴ However, at the same time, the restitution was also experienced as 'a sad moment' that highlighted a disconnection between the festive celebrations organised by the ministry and the local realities of intergenerational dispossession, trauma and exclusion from decision-making processes:³⁵ 'It [the restitution] did not dignify our emotions because it belongs to us, but in a way it was a show-off for a one- or two-hour ceremony for the elites'.³⁶ While Geingob and Bauer spoke with great pathos about the relationship between Namibia and Baden-Württemberg, for most of my conversation partners, the meaning of the restitution is in the material reconnection with their ancestor: 'It is proof that our stories are true'.³⁷

Therefore, while archival and museological narratives are present in the restitution ceremony in terms of (national) history writing, cultural representation and procedural hierarchies, the museum and the archive played only minimal roles in the experiences my conversation partners shared with me. Only when I asked specifically about the belongings' current location, did some say they are 'in Windhoek', 'with the government', 'in the museum' or 'in the archive'. The result is the same: they are 'not here'. At the same time, there is a strong desire to have a community-steered archive or museum that generates the political momentum to obtain and store the Bible and whip: 'we hope in the future we will also get an archive in Gibeon or a museum that way we can get back all our stuff',³⁸ and the Captain Hendrik Witbooi Auta !Nanseb Foundation is trying to establish a Hendrik Witbooi Museum in Gibeon. The claim to reconnect with ancestral belongings goes beyond institutional distinctions. Thus, returning to my initial question, 'What happens when a museum object becomes an archival record through restitution?', the answer thus seems simple: not much, at least not to the people concerned.

33 Biwa, "Weaving the past with threads of memory".

34 Conversation with Katrina Rooi, Gibeon, 1 November 2025.

35 Conversation with Hä-eb !Khuxamab, Windhoek, 16 November 2025.

36 Conversation with Katrina Rooi, Gibeon, 1 November 2025.

37 Conversation with Elizabeth Kock and Maria Alcock, Mariental, 13 November 2025.

38 Conversation with Katrina Rooi, Gibeon, 1 November 2025.



Conclusion

Why should we nevertheless consider archival-museological dis:connections in restitution? Doing so enhances our understanding in three ways, all pointing towards the same notion: far from being a reproducible process with a predetermined outcome of return, restitution is a social process in constant struggle with itself.

First, differences between institutional narratives reveal how ostensibly neutral procedures of collecting, categorising and preserving obscure the violent separation of people, belongings and worlds. These procedures directly inform restitution processes, as seen in the Bible's curated connection to the skulls, its placement in a glass box and the decision to prioritise it as a symbol for political reparation rather than for its social functions in the community. Institutions choose how to narrate belongings; studying the differences between these narratives prompts us

Fig. 04
**Hendrik Witbooi Monument
in Gibeon, October 2025**
(Photo: Leah Niederhausen)

to reflect on the circumstances that eliminated or necessitated certain possible choices.

Second, acknowledging these dis:connections between institutions enables recognition of how institutions dis:connect from people. In Gibeon, institutions were secondary to Hendrik Witbooi, those who fought with him and those who preserve his legacy. It was not museum objects and archival records that were looted, but ancestors and belongings. Their classification as museum objects and archival records is as much a part of their looting as the colonial origin of the institutions that defined them. Uncritically accepting these classifications disregards the people behind them as well as their demands for participation and self-representation.

Third, discussing archival-museological dis:connections generates different discourses; understanding that none of these discourses truly represents reality in Gibeon demands our action. If we are to take seriously the epistemological violence that enables the categorisation of museum objects and archival records, we must question how an object- and institution-centred discourse can shift toward people-oriented needs and actions, thus shifting also from national to community-steered organisations, like the Hendrik Witbooi Museum planned in Gibeon.

In conclusion, questioning the distinction between archival and museological restitution is less about their differences and more about their systemic similarities. Can we reimagine restitution in ways that do not begin with the precondition of distinctly categorised institutions, but rather with human experiences and needs? How would this change the process and conditions of restitution? And, in the context of this special issue, how can archival practices help reimagine this? These are key questions that – returning to the workshop that inspired this special issue – challenge us to rethink the foundations of our own archival knowledge.

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