

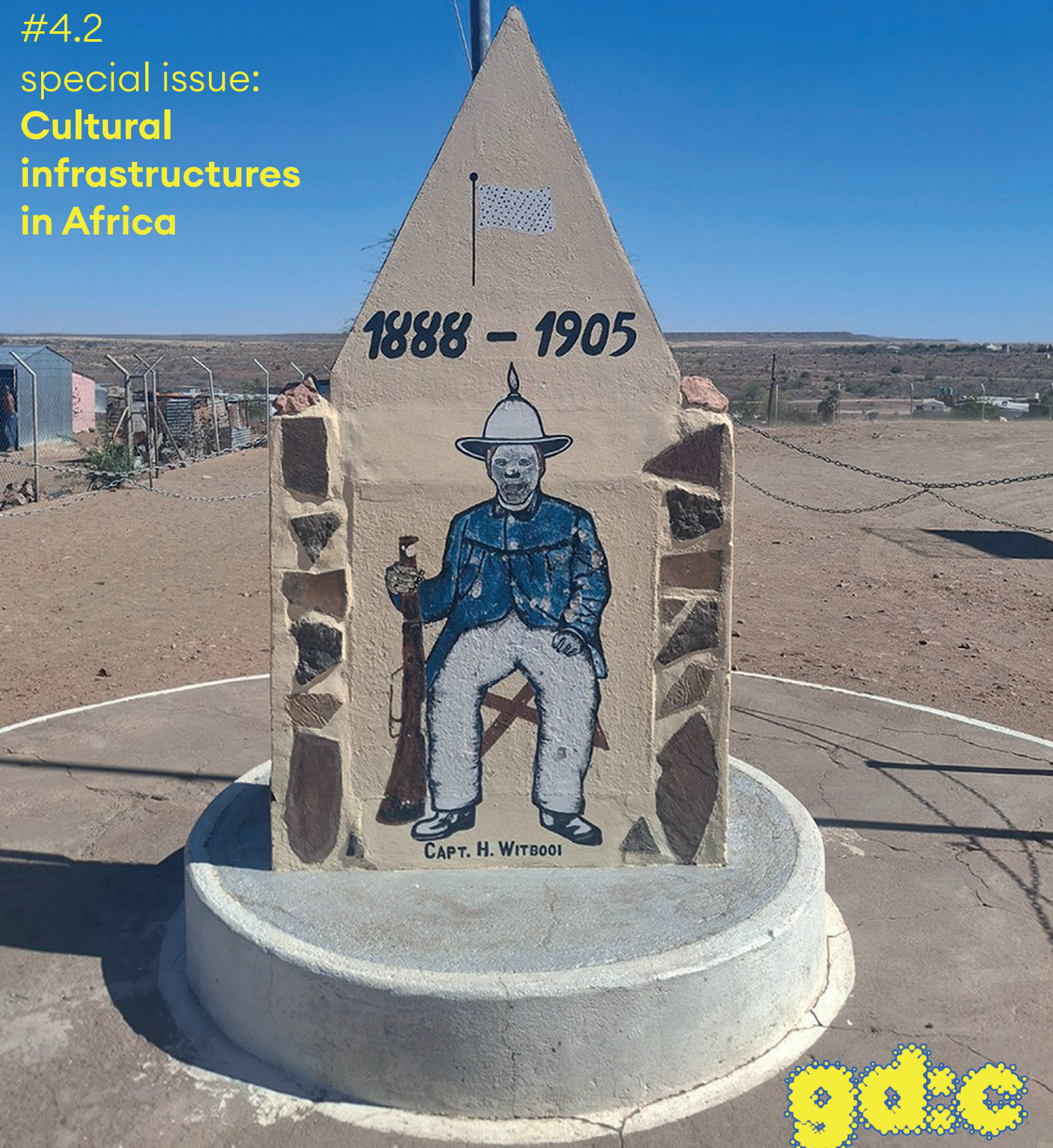
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thoughts and research from global dis:connect

#4.2

special issue:

**Cultural
infrastructures
in Africa**



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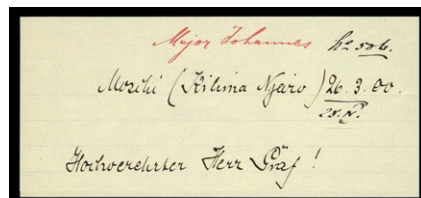
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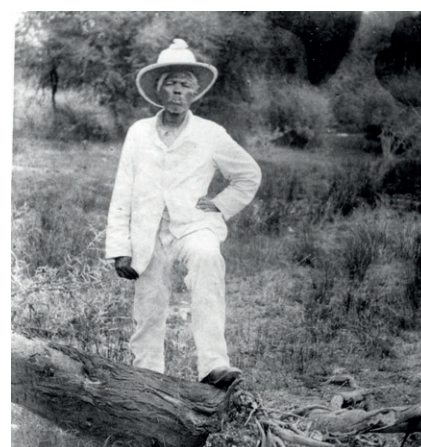
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editorial

Special issue: cultural infrastructures in Africa

Andrea Kifyasi & Gideon Morison

When Donald Trump recently described people of African heritage – Somalis specifically – as ‘garbage’ and the ‘worst set of immigrants’ in America, the sentiment was not a random negative thought.¹ It echoed earlier unflattering remarks in which he declared Africa a ‘shithole’ and broadly reflects not only a deep-seated worldview among his conservative base but also widely held negative perceptions of the African continent across the Global North.²

These perceptions are not new. They have been at the centre of Western narratives about the continent since its encounter with European imperial powers in the 16th century, serving as the launch pad for the institutionalisation of racism, trans-Atlantic slavery, colonialism and the hegemonic structures of today’s post-imperial order.³ In its *longue durée*, the negative portrayal of Africa and its inhabitants, recently summarised in the term ‘Afro-pessimism’, has undergone various transformations over

- 1 See Bianca Flowers et al., ‘Trump ‘garbage’ rhetoric about Somalis draws cheers from administration, silence from Republicans and alarm from critics’, Reuters, 2025, accessed 31 January 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/trump-garbage-rhetoric-about-somalis-draws-cheers-administration-silence-2025-12-04>.
- 2 Unlike Trump, these perceptions are rarely expressed freely and publicly by other Western leaders except in the rare moments when it seeps through the veil of diplomatic niceties via policies and viral hot-mic moments as evidenced in the case of Emmanuel Macron, see for instance, Basillioh Rukanga, ‘Macron accused of ‘contempt’ over Africa remarks’, BBC, 2025, accessed 31 January 2026, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cn4xej8n7wxo>.
- 3 Toyin Falola, *The Power of African Cultures* (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2003).



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the centuries.⁴ From the expansive metaphor of a dark, barbaric and uncivilised continent to one plagued by poverty, disease, wars and underdevelopment, the ‘single story’ of the continent has been couched in the narrative of otherness, where Africa is expected to be one thing and to play only one prescribed role in the global order – a net exporter of resources, labour and talent.⁵ A common denominator across this transgenerational prism is Africa’s place in the hierarchy of nations, cultures and civilisations. Despite its many natural and cultural assets, Africa has remained largely undeveloped, exploited and an epicentre of global crises (such as poverty, disease and perennial conflict) – a complex, contradictory and dis:connected place.

The concept of dis:connections has emerged as a critical theoretical framework in globalisation discourse, offering a perspective on processes of globalisation that goes beyond binaries, such as connection and isolation, across different terrains.⁶ As shown in Wenzlhuemer et al., processes of globalisation foster connectivity and integration just as they produce fractures, asymmetries and erasures. In such processes,

... actors and places of globalisation are themselves always simultaneously embedded in connective and disconnective circumstances, where connections and non-connections converge in particular places and in the lived experiences of historical actors, revealing their significance in their interrelations; often in a state of tension that derives from the simultaneity and mutual constitution of connective and disconnective elements.⁷

The term *dis:connectivity* captures precisely this ‘mutually constitutive tension between global integration, disintegration, and the absence of connections, the relevance of which is revealed not only in the context they form together, but also in their turbulent interplay’.⁸ Viewing Africa as a site of disconnection reveals the contexts and contours that have shaped the histories, identities, narratives, perceptions and (postcolonial) realities of the continent politically, economically, technologically and, most importantly, culturally. The dynamics of dis:connectivity at play in

4 For an in-depth exploration of the concept of Afropessimism, see Frank B. Wilderson et al., *Afro-pessimism: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: Racked & Dispatched, 2017).

5 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *The danger of a single story*, TEDGlobal (TED, 2009). https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story

6 Roland Wenzlhuemer et al., ‘Forum: Global Dis:connections’, *Journal of Modern European History* 21, no. 1 (2023) 10.1177/16118944221148939; Roland Wenzlhuemer, ‘Dis:connectivity in Global History’, in *Globalisation: Past, Present, Future*, ed. Manfred B. Steger et al. (Oakland: University of California Press, 2023).

7 Wenzlhuemer et al., ‘Forum’, 4.

8 Wenzlhuemer, ‘Dis:connectivity in Global History’, 18; Christopher Balme, Burcu Dogramaci and Roland Wenzlhuemer, ‘Introduction’, in *Dis:connectivity and Globalisation: Concepts, Terms, Practices*, ed. Christopher Balme, Burcu Dogramaci, and Roland Wenzlhuemer (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2025).

Africa conjure images of a space not entirely disconnected from global networks but one actively shaped by violent integrations, internal contradictions and strategic bypasses.

Given the above, this special issue, derived from a workshop on *Archiving dis:connected cultural heritage(s) in Africa: prospects, processes and challenges*, held on 24–25 April 2025 at global dis:connect, seeks to examine how these narratives of the continent are connected and how tension is embedded in their archival representations. These articles coalesce around three central themes: prospects, processes and challenges in the history of archiving cultural heritage(s) in (postcolonial) Africa.

The issue fittingly begins with Patrick Ebevo's exploration of the Slave History Museum in Calabar, Nigeria. Patrick acknowledges the creative use of multimedia, visual arts and technology to preserve and enhance the visitors' experience at the museum, describing it as an 'innovative medium for education and communication' of history. However, he argues that the museum's presentation exaggerates the 'role of Europeans while downplaying the contributions of some Africans', particularly African chiefs and their agents, to the perpetuation of slavery and the slave trade. He contends that this represents 'dis:connected archiving', offering a distorted and imbalanced portrait of the slavery experience.

Valence Silayo follows Patrick with an examination of 'colonial archival silences' and the complexities of acquiring and owning African ethnographic collections. Valence explores the contradictions and ironies that stem from the 'imperial ideologies and scientific rationales' that empowered colonial agents not only to 'commodify bodies and cultural objects as trophies and specimens as a way of reinforcing racial hierarchies' but also to legitimise conquest through evolutionary science and museum display. Although colonial archives should declare the provenance of looted cultural items, Valence argues that archives have remained silent to legitimise the removal and continued possession of these items, thus framing theft as lawful acquisition and obscuring reparational justice. Nevertheless, the existence of these archives and their content offers the possibility of tracing their cultural origins, tracking their locations, and provides hope for reparations based on community-led claims. For Valence, a key component of these claims is archival evidence; hence the call for greater accessibility of uncatalogued collections.

Leah Niederhausen critiques what she describes as 'museological-archival dis:connections' in the 2019 repatriation ceremony of Henry Witbooi's family bible in Namibia. According to Leah, the restitution process, which saw the bible transferred from the collection of Stuttgart's Linden Museum to the Namibian National Archives, inadvertently shifted it from a museum object to an archival record. This process straddled separate professional and scholarly domains, where restitutional procedures and

practical differences generated a categorical distinction between museological objects and archival records, which reproduce colonial epistemologies that obscure structures of colonial violence behind institutional procedures. As restitution entails restoring power, authority and voice, procedural differences and distinctions, along with historical knowledge and its narrative, make some histories visible while silencing others – a dis:connection of history and voice. Leah shows that the restitution ceremony framed the bible as ‘national cultural heritage’, positioning the repatriation as a political matter between nation-states and emphasising the narrative of ‘genocide’ reparations, and at the same time silencing and excluding the voices of the Nama people in the process. However, the desire to reconnect and locate ancestral belonging of the Nama people via an archive or museum transcends institutional distinctions. According to Leah, locking cultural objects in museums and archival records remains part of their looting, as do the origins of the institutions that classify them. It perpetuates disregard for the demands for participation and self-representation of their ‘owners’ – the people.

Festivals have always served as significant cultural and archival institutions in Africa that transmit traditions and artistic skills from one generation to the next.⁹ From the 1960s, postcolonial pan-African festivals emerged as alternative archives to colonial discourses on pan-African heritage, offering counter-narratives that showcased African creativity through cultural productions such as dance, drama, music, literature, art and fashion. A crucial aim of these festivities was to chart a course of modernisation for postcolonial pan-African development, thus demonstrating their connection to the concept of the African renaissance. FESTAC ’77 in Lagos was the largest of these, with a focus that marked a new direction from previous events. Gideon examines this festival, focusing on the differences and discontinuities in their organisational processes as well as the disconnections that shaped their presentation and legacies.

As noted by Harney, one of the legacies of postcolonial pan-African festivals, especially those held between 1966 and 1977, was the proliferation of cultural festivals.¹⁰ These major cultural events, largely centred in West and Central Africa, inspired new waves of postcolonial cultural festivals such as Panafest (Ghana) and the MaCuFe festivals (Lesotho) from the 1990s. This is the nucleus of Rethabile’s contribution, which examines contemporary cultural festivals from southern Africa, specifically the Morija Arts and Cultural Festival (MACuFe) and the Maletsunyane Braai Festival (MBF), as platforms for cultural reclamation, creative economies and the reconstruction of national identity in postcolonial Lesotho.

⁹ John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (London: Heinemann Publishers, 1975).

¹⁰ Elizabeth Harney, *In Senghor’s Shadow: Art, Politics, and the Avant-Garde in Senegal 1960-1995* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

Drawing insights from Lesotho, Rethabile identifies funding, infrastructure, archiving and logistics as fundamental limitations to the cultural development and tourism potential of festivals in southern Africa.

Cultural infrastructure in a global context is a vital issue beyond this special section. In fact, gd:c co-director Christopher Balme reports on a forum that took place at gd:c in September 2025. The forum's 13 distinguished participants discussed the place of cultural infrastructure in countries and regions undergoing major transitions, especially Syria. Though cultural infrastructure perches precariously on the margins of public budgets around the world, Syria presents a particular challenge due to years of turbulence in which it was often unclear who was governing a given city in a given year for over a decade. Therefore, it was all the more pressing that experts from that region and ours discussed how to survey and map the facilities and functions of cultural infrastructure in tumultuous times.

In her report, Claire Louise Blaser ventures beyond gd:c's usual geography by describing what transpired at the workshop titled *Empire and (im-)mobility in South and Southeast Asia, 19th and 20th centuries*. Convened by Harald Fischer-Tiné and regular gd:c fixture Siddharth Pandey, this workshop took place in Dehli, 6000 km from gd:c's Munich headquarters. As the participants discussed, empires employ both mobility and immobility for particular purposes. We, however, proved our mobility with this event.

Global dis:connect also ventured beyond the conceptual territory relating to globalisation, where we are most at home, and considered normative dis:connectivity as well. Specifically, a recent workshop considered the fact that the two biological sexes are inextricably connected when it comes to conception, but practically disconnected when it comes to contraception. That is, most modes of contraception relate to women's bodies and are considered women's responsibility, as is the childcare should the contraceptive measures fail, and this is a global regularity, however normatively problematic it remains. The workshop tackled precisely this tension, and we share two reports that engage with these thoughts from two different directions.

Working on this issue, it has become apparent that cultural infrastructure is like dis:connectivity itself in that the more we think about it, the more it starts popping up everywhere. This realisation comes with three further implications. First, we're on to something at gd:c with our research programme. These issues matter. Second, there's still so much to do. The mining hardly stops when one finds gold. On the contrary, that's when the real work begins. And finally, we're very fortunate to be able to research these important questions and help improve everyone's understanding of what they mean and what is to be done.

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Upper photo:
Andrea Kifyasi

Lower photo:
Gideon Morison

**cultural
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Africa**

Dis:connected archiving in the Slave History Museum of Nigeria

Patrick J. Ebewo

Slavery was one of the most horrendous events in African history. The notorious trade in slaves reached the Nigerian shores in the 15th century, with able-bodied Nigerian men and women being sold as slaves and shipped overseas to work on American plantations and in factories. Between 1690 and 1807, the English slave traders shipped 1,069,100 victims from the Bight of Benin and the Bight of Biafra (Nigeria), amounting to 41.4% of the total of 2,579,500 from all of Africa.¹ As a tourism and archiving project commemorating this gruesome trade, the Cross River State government of Nigeria established the Slave History Museum in Calabar in 2007 to creatively recall the experience of the trade.

Here I will guide readers down memory lane using the Slave History Museum in Nigeria as an active repository of memory and experience. The museum's use of multimedia, visual arts and technology in preserving experience are innovative media for education and communication as well as a form of social responsibility. The Slave History Museum is an instrument for preserving a people's history, albeit in a more active form.

Still, the museum is partisan in its presentation of the facts, exaggerating the role of Europeans while downplaying the contributions of some Africans and others to the persistence of the slave trade. The roles played by African chiefs and other agents must be frankly reconstructed. I conclude by recommending

¹ Philip D. Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969).



how the Slave History Museum could better achieve its archival function.

The slave trade in Calabar

The Calabar people, originally known as the Efiks, occupy the basin of the lower Cross River, extending to the Bakassi Peninsula. Most agree that the Efik people are of Igbo or Ibibio origin, though Aye suspects Semitic roots.² Portuguese merchants arrived at the Calabar (Efik) River in 1472, and it is generally assumed that they named the site *Calabar*, derived from the Portuguese words, *Cala Barra* (the river is silent).³ The port of Old Calabar was well known to early European travellers, traders and explorers of the 15th and 16th centuries, and it played a prominent role in the slave trade, as most Nigerian slaves were procured and transported out of Africa hence. The slave trade in Calabar lasted for 201 years (1662 -1863).

Fig. 01
The Slave History Museum in Calabar
(Photo: Madara Effiong)

2 Efiang U. Aye, *The Efik People* (Calabar: Association for the Promotion of the Efik Language, 2000), 58.

3 Aye, *The Efik People*, 58.



The Slave History Museum in Calabar

Among several sites commemorating the slave trade in Nigeria, the Slave History Museum is unique, not least because of its location on the actual site of a 15th-century slave-trading depot on Marina Beach. The Slave History Museum was established in 2007 and officially opened on 17 March 2011.

The museum was conceived to present the history of the slave trade more realistically than in mere historical texts. Beyond just a historical record, it is an artistic and creative repository of information. It dramatises people's experiences during the slave trade by simulating the experience visually. The museum uses multimedia creatively to archive the inhuman act of trading in slaves. It is a museum-in-action that appeals to the imagination as well as the emotions.

The reception

The reception area already imparts anticipation of the drama about to unfold. There are images and artistic impressions of Europeans who participated in the trade. The most striking feature

Fig. 02
The museum depicting slaves as human freight (Photo: Madara Effiong)



is the display of a replica of a large engine boat with a cross-section of slaves arranged so that their heads emerge from the lower deck of the boat while others have their legs juxtaposed. The sight resembles cadavers arranged in an anatomy laboratory.

The interior

From the reception, a door opens into the interior of the museum. It is a dark tunnel, an alley of horror. Unsettling sounds come from unseen speakers. Moving from one gallery to another recalls the Roman Catholic 'Stations of the Cross'; each station depicting a graphic scene of what Jesus Christ endured en route to his crucifixion. Inside the museum are a series of galleries that sequentially narrate the slaves' experiences.

The first gallery on the left reveals two European traders with guns, parading three slaves shackled together, and another European supervising six slaves sitting on the ground. An atmosphere of transaction and bargaining is palpable. The scene displays the slaves for sale, with items of exchange visible on the spot. Recorded sounds of weeping, sobbing, moaning and screaming create a cacophony of suffering.

Fig. 03
The replica slave transport boat in the museum (Photo: Madara Effiong)

Many of the galleries display relics of slavery: the manilla and cowrie shells used as currencies, empty schnapps bottles labelled *AFRICAN*, chains, shackles, ceramic jars, Dane guns, swords and copper wires. Female slaves were bought for 28-37 copper rods, depending on size, age and strength, while men were bought for 38-48 copper rods. While some galleries exhibit slaves at auction, others show slaves working on cotton plantations.

Of particular interest is the display on a large canvas of the Akpabuyo slave route and the Esuk Mba Slave Market, which was a slave trading centre in Old Calabar between the 15th and 19th centuries. Here enslaved individuals from the hinterlands were gathered, sold and transported to coastal ports for export. It was strategically located along the Cross River, allowing for easy transportation of captives by canoe or land routes to major slave depots. Even today, Esuk Mba retains the legacy of trade by barter.

Other galleries displayed Calabar chiefs, who were themselves slave merchants, and King Eyo Honesty II, hardly equalled in the field; the Gagged Man; the display of the Ekpe Masquerade, a symbol of a complicit native authority that was used to intimidate slaves into surrendering to the slave masters; escaping slaves chased by white masters with dogs; and recaptured slaves tortured by flogging, stalking, severing toes, and hanging before other slaves.

The *Resistance and Punishment* gallery paints a graphic picture of the ordeals endured by stubborn slaves. Masters marked their property by branding slaves with hot knives or irons. The most striking gallery displays the breaking of shackles by a female slave with raised fists exclaiming 'Freedom!' The final gallery depicts the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, with images of the abolitionists Granville Sharp, Lord Mansfield, Thomas Clarkson, John Wesley, Olaudah Equiano, Samuel Ajayi Crowther, Manoel Nascimento De Santi Silva and a host of other liberated slaves.

Dis:connected creative archiving

In the Slave History Museum, the roles played by local African chiefs and their agents during the period are understated. The displays highlight only the roles played by the Europeans. If slavery is defined as the condition in which individuals are owned by others who control where they live and how they work,⁴ then slavery existed in Africa before the arrival of the Europeans, who are often regarded as the inventors of the trade. Nwanze advises, 'We must set the records straight: slavery, was not an invention of the West. It predates all written records as some free people were

4 Evelyn Iheoma Osuagwu, 'Gains and Pains of Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: The 'Antecedental' Root of Nigeria's Underdevelopment', *Akwanshi: Journal of National Museum* 2, no. 2 (2019): 4.

engaged as domestic slaves in Nigeria. On the African continent itself, slavery predated the arrival of Europeans by centuries, and it still continues until this day' (ChetaNwanze). Nwanze further explains that Africans, particularly the chiefs, were willing to enslave their fellow Africans. Even some free men would willingly surrender themselves to a rich nobleman to escape famine and for security. Waddell, a prominent missionary in Calabar once reported: 'Free men may become slaves in several ways deemed legitimate. First, by selling themselves, either in times of famine, or for protection, or to better their circumstances; as a rich head-slave may be better off than a poor despised freeman'.⁵

Minor inconveniences such as mosquito bites discouraged Europeans from venturing into the hinterland, so they needed collaborators. These collaborators were local raiders who hunted and kidnapped their fellow Africans and sold them as slaves. Ideally, the museum's narrative should begin when Africans sold and enslaved their own people even before the arrival of the Europeans. In fact, the first gallery in the museum should have displayed domestic slaves in the households of African chiefs to show the chronological development of slavery from the domestic to the international stage. Unfortunately, the absence of this phase creates a disconnect.

One of the galleries, sandwiched between the European slave merchants, displays an Efik Chief, Eyo Willy Honesty II, a prominent slave dealer. The museum is conspicuously silent on other leading Efik slave dealers and the middlemen whose names are recorded in many history books, such as Antera Duke, Eyo Nsa, Edem Effiom, Duke Ephraim, Duke Abashy, Ambo Robin John, Ekpenyong Offiong, Eyamba V, Edem Ekpo and King Ephraim Henshaw, to mention but a few. The museum is filled with images of Europeans who took part in the trade, with a very subdued representation of black people who actively participated. The exhibitions in the museum would be more comprehensive if one or two galleries were dedicated to exposing the Efik chiefs and other middlemen who took part in the trade.

Aye asserts that the slave trade, which is now considered a horrible and illegitimate business, was once a legitimate and lucrative enterprise, approved by European churches, African rulers and global ethics.⁶ Throughout the centuries it operated, many European monarchs and some parliamentarians welcomed it, as it brought wealth to the dealers and benefitted Europe and America. The absence of the two prominent religions involved in the slave trade is another disconnecting feature in the museum. Interestingly, the Old Residency Museum displays the endorsement of slavery by exhibiting some biblical verses – Ephesians 6:5,

5 Quoted in Efiang U. Aye, *King Eyo Honesty II* (Calabar: Glad Tidings Press, 2009), 43.

6 Aye, *King Eyo Honesty II*.

Titus 2:9 and 1 Peter 2:18-20 – that support slavery, emphasising servitude and obedience to masters.

Where are the local slave markets in the narrative of the Slave History Museum? Esuk Mba Slave Market was an important hub of the slave trade, yet it and other markets are absent in the museum.

The archivists should have considered purging the emotions of visitors before they leave the museum. As with a classical Greek tragedy, there should be, at the end of the viewing, an intentional purgation of emotions before visitors exit the labyrinth of horror. Perhaps this explains the sudden display of Nigeria's classical artworks – Nok, monoliths, terracotta, Igbo-Ukwu bronze, Benin bronze and the soapstone art of Esie – immediately following the abolitionist exhibition in the museum. If this was not the intention, then these classical artworks are misplaced or represent another disconnect, as they have no relationship whatsoever with the slave trade.

Conclusion

The Slave History Museum in Calabar is an invaluable national asset, serving as a source of information, presentation and preservation of African perspectives on a tragic historical and cultural experience. The museum's existence, at the very least, addresses the gap created by the removal of history from the school curriculum. Through this museum, African children encounter the realities of slavery in a form that goes beyond textbook accounts.

However, the disconnected areas in the museum's presentations should be addressed. For a more accurate, convincing and balanced portrayal of the slavery experience, visitors should immediately recognise that African chiefs played pivotal roles in the trade. Their involvement should not be downplayed. Finally, the history of the slave trade and slavery, including Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome, should serve as a deterrent to the current generation of Africans against engaging in kidnapping and modern-day slavery.

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

Valence Valerian Silayo

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.

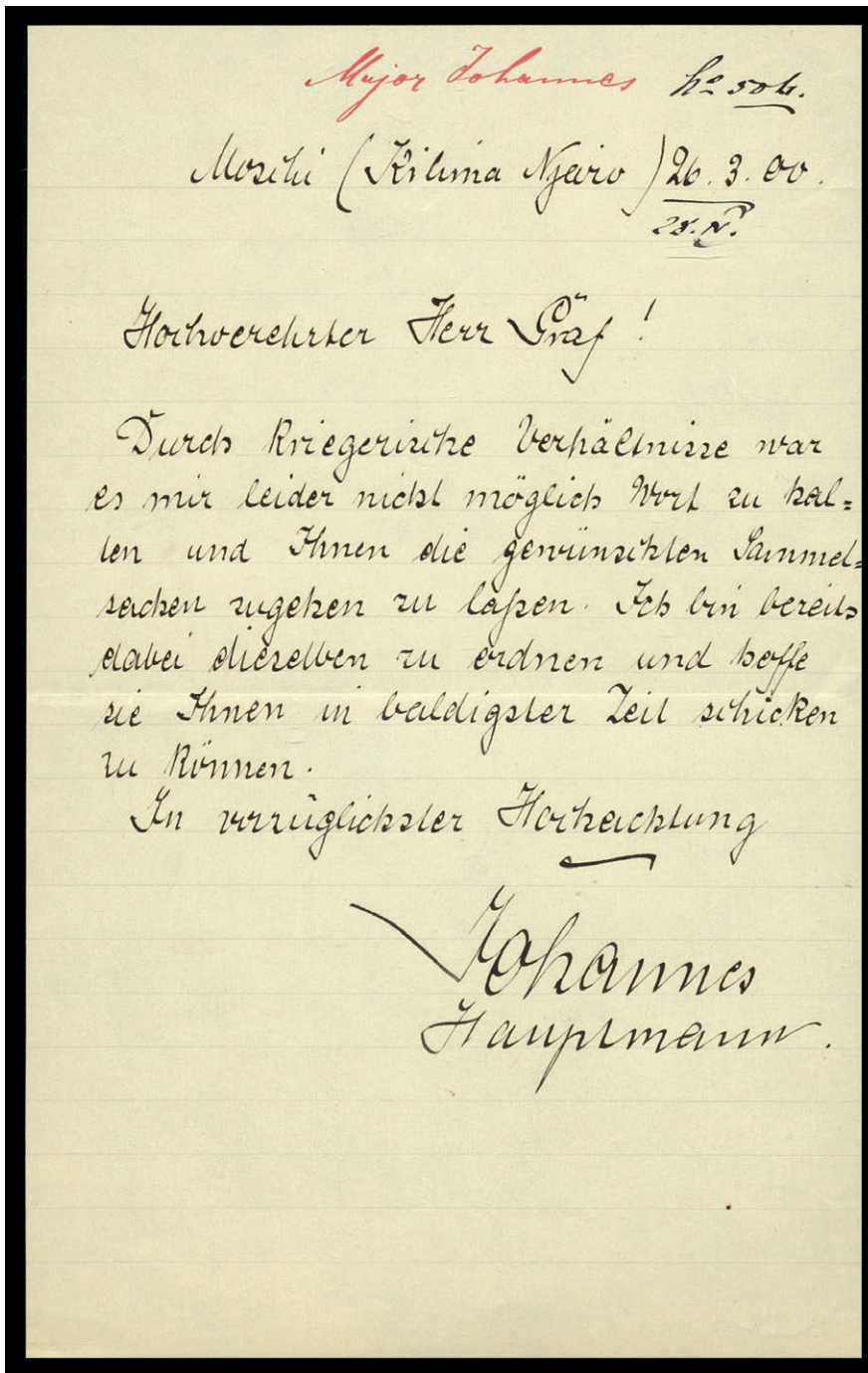
¹⁰ Müller, *Returns of Cultural Artefacts*.

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); Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Something Torn and New: An African Renaissance* (New York: Basic Books, 2009).



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'

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).

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.

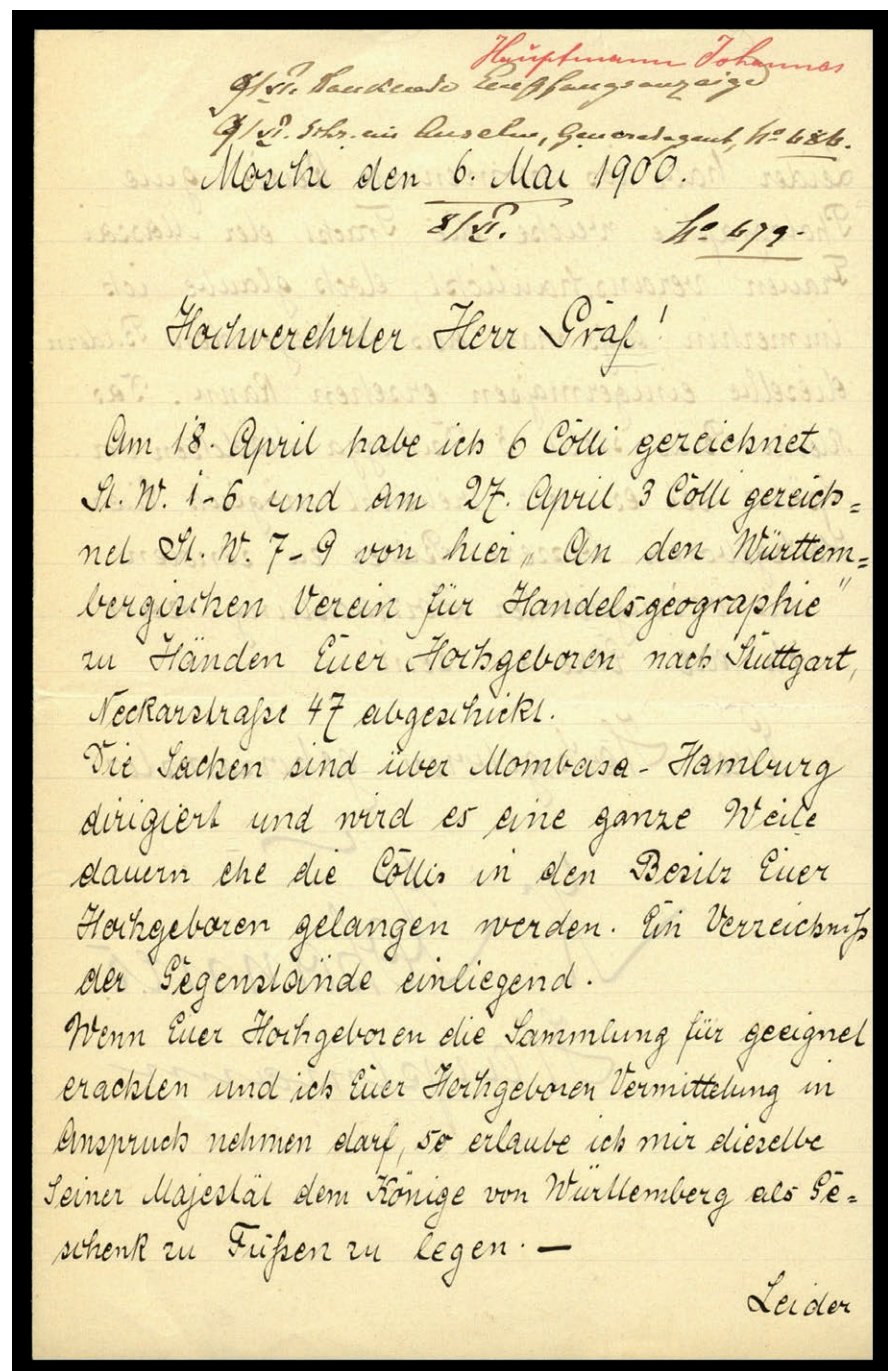


Fig. 02
 Linden Museum Stuttgart:
 Correspondence folder Johannes,
 Kurt Johannes to Karl Count of Linden,
 6 May 1900. In this correspondence,
 Captain Johannes writes, 'On April
 18, I dispatched 6 packages, St. N.
 1-6, and on April 27, 3 packages, St.
 N. 7-9, from here to the Württemberg
 Association 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 Shanguhya and Toyin Falola (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018).

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

Leah Niederhausen

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.



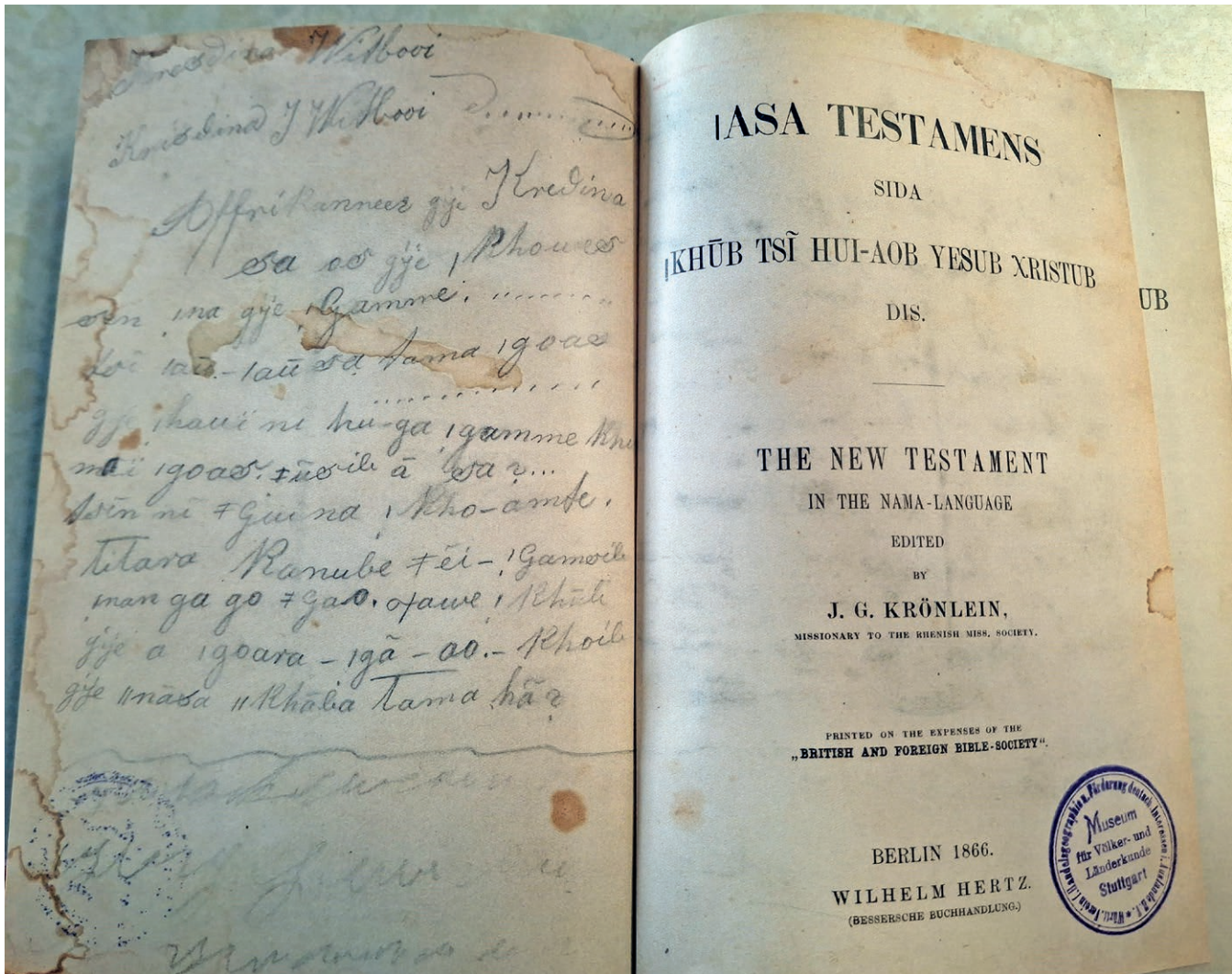
Witbooi.²⁰ The 2007 exhibition separated the objects, placing them in different ethnographic categories to present Nama culture to non-Nama visitors. The use of derogatory terms and the absence of Nama voices reinforced this impression. The museum defined both objects through their putative roles in 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 Kößler, *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 Hā-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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Reclaiming cultural identity: the potential transformative role of postcolonial festivals in Lesotho

Rethabile Malibo

Imagine a country so high in the clouds that its lowest point is higher than the peaks of most other nations. Lesotho, a small, landlocked kingdom surrounded by South Africa, may be limited in area, but what it lacks in square kilometres, it compensates in altitude, beauty and cultural resilience. With rugged mountains covering three-quarters of its terrain, it has earned the nickname *Kingdom in the Sky*. However, behind this picturesque scenery lies a history of cultural disruption shaped by colonialism, missionary intervention and post-independence modernisation. This article examines contemporary cultural festivals – specifically the Morija Arts and Cultural Festival (MACuFe) and the Maletsunyane Braai Festival (MBF) – as platforms for cultural reclamation, creative economies and the reconstruction of national identity in postcolonial Lesotho.

Using postcolonial theory¹ and cultural economy frameworks,² I argue that festivals in Lesotho serve as sites of cultural resistance, economic opportunity and ideological contestation. Comparing MACuFe and MBF, I explore how heritage preservation and contemporary culture are connected in a cultural system that is under-resourced.

1 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1963); Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o, 'Decolonising the Mind', *Diogenes* 46, no. 184 (1998).

2 David Throsby, *Economics and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Christiaan De Beukelaer, 'The UNESCO/UNDP 2013 Creative Economy Report: Perks and Perils of an Evolving Agenda', *Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society* 44, no. 2 (2014).

Postcolonial festivals in Africa

Postcolonial festivals in Africa have evolved alongside shifts in how African history, culture and power are interpreted. Early colonial and mid-20th-century scholarship, influenced by anthropology, treated African festivals as static remnants of tradition, detached from political struggle and historical change.³ This perspective began to change in the 1960s and 1970s, as postcolonial festivals were recognised as sites of cultural resistance and political reawakening. A key reference is FESTAC held in 1977, a symbolic event aimed at restoring African historical consciousness after colonial erasure.⁴ It brought together artists, intellectuals and performers from across Africa and the diaspora. Other festivals included FESMAN (Dakar), FESTAC (Lagos) and PANAFEST. These festivals emerged as cultural platforms that celebrated African identity, artistic production and historical consciousness in the aftermath of colonial rule. The performances provided spaces for emotional, spiritual and historical connection between Africa and its diaspora, enabling participants to engage with shared histories of displacement memory and cultural identity (Schramm, 2000; Holsey, 2008).⁵

At a continental level, the African Union's (AU), Charter for African Cultural Renaissance and other initiatives encourage member states to protect cultural heritage, promote African identity and strengthen creative industries as pillars of sustainable development while also supporting cultural exchange across the continent. In this broader context, post-colonial festivals function not only as cultural or artistic events but also as platforms for cultural diplomacy, tourism and economic development.

Beginning in the 2000s, scholarship on postcolonial festivals began to focus more closely on their economic aspects, influenced by the rise of creative economies and cultural policy studies.⁶ For example, the Eswatini Bushfire Festival shows how contemporary African festivals now operate at the intersection of art, tourism, corporate sponsorship and social activism.⁷ However,

- 3 Terence Ranger, 'The Invention of Tradition Revisited: The Case of Colonial Africa', in *Legitimacy and the State in Twentieth-Century Africa*, ed. Terence Ranger and Olufemi Vaughan (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1993).
- 4 David Murphy, Martin Munro and Tsitsi Jaji, 'The Performance of Pan-African Identities at Black and African Cultural Festivals', *International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 20, no. 7 (2018) <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2018.1476038>; Cheikh Anta Diop and Harold Salemsen, *Precolonial Black Africa* (Chicago: Review Press, 2012).
- 5 Katharina Schramm, *African Homecoming: Pan-African Ideology and Contested Heritage* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Bayo Holsey, *Routes of Remembrance: Refashioning the Slave Trade in Ghana* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).
- 6 Throsby, *Economics and Culture*; Terry Flew, *The Creative Industries: Culture and Policy* (London: SAGE, 2012).
- 7 Paul Nkemngu Acha-Any and Neliswa Nomkhosi Dlamini, 'Festival Tourism as an Instrument of Sustainable Livelihood in Eswatini', *GeoJournal of Tourism and Geosites* 26, no. 3 (2019) <https://doi.org/10.30892/gtg.26314-402>.

while festivals generate income, visibility and employment, they also risk becoming highly commercialised. African postcolonial festivals are thus complex spaces where cultural memory, political meaning and economic ambition coexist.⁸ MACuFe and the MBF reflect this hybridity. MACuFe resonates with FESTAC and PANAFEST, while the MBF aligns with the entrepreneurial creative-economy model exemplified by Bushfire.

The Basotho context

The arrival of missionaries in Lesotho in 1833 marked a cultural shift. While the missionaries introduced formal education and Christianity, they also facilitated the systematic displacement of the Basotho's indigenous knowledge systems, such as initiation schools and performative traditions, which were banned and labelled heathen. Even after Lesotho gained independence in 1966, the impacts of colonialism persisted. As Fanon observed, postcolonial societies often inherit psychological fragmentation alongside political sovereignty.⁹ In Lesotho, this manifested as a decline in the transmission of indigenous cultural knowledge and ambivalent attitudes towards cultural and traditional expressions such as costume and music.

MACuFe was established in 1998 by the Morija Museum and Archives following political instability marked by looting and violence in Lesotho. MACuFe's objective was to unite Basotho across political and religious divisions. The festival takes place in Morija, affectionately known as *Selibeng sa Thuto* (the Well of Knowledge). Morija holds immense cultural significance; it is home to Lesotho's first printing press, teacher training college and church.¹⁰ MACuFe is held annually between late September and early October for five days, featuring performing arts, cultural exhibitions, competitions and capacity-building workshops. The festival's overriding theme, *Kaofele re chabana sa Khomo* (unity in diversity), amplifies a pluralistic understanding of Basotho identity at a time when globalisation intensifies cultural homogenisation.

Beyond cultural preservation, the festival also contributed to the development of the arts by providing a structured performance circuit in the absence of a national theatre or arts council. MACuFe served as the primary national platform for local artists' visibility. However, despite its cultural legitimacy and nation-building role, MACuFe remained structurally vulnerable due to inconsistent funding, inadequate infrastructure and limited long-term government commitment. These challenges contributed to its decline and led to a ten-year hiatus.

8 De Beukelaer, 'The UNESCO/UNDP 2013'.

9 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*.

10 Daniel P. Kunene, 'Leselinyana la Lesotho and Sotho Historiography', *History in Africa* 4 (1977).



By contrast, MBF, established in 2016 by Basotho, represents a new generation of postcolonial festivals motivated by entrepreneurship, tourism and the creative industries. The MBF is held annually in Semonkong at Maletsunyane Falls – the highest single-drop waterfall in Southern Africa. The falls plunge 192 metres into a gorge, making it one of the most beautiful spots in Africa. MBF takes full advantage of this natural wonder, with events spanning three days on the last weekend of November. Activities include camping, braai competitions, music, fashion pop-ups, craft markets, local beer tastings, blanket presentations and family activities such as helicopter rides and horseback riding. Between 2023 and 2024, MBF experienced significant growth: attendance more than doubled, with international guests from Southern Africa, the USA and Brazil, and revenue surpassed \$589,200.00 USD. This growth illustrates how contemporary festivals in Lesotho combine tourism, entertainment and cultural activities to attract local and international visitors. Figure 2 demonstrates the economic potential of festival tourism within Lesotho’s creative economies.

Unlike MACuFe’s heritage preservation mandate, MBF exemplifies the creative-economy model described by Throsby, in which culture is mobilised as both symbolic capital and an economic engine.¹¹ Both festivals are staking Lesotho’s claim in Africa’s cultural renaissance and serve as potent tools for driving economic development.

Fig. 01
Boys performing *Ndlamo* (Image:
Morija Museum and Archives)

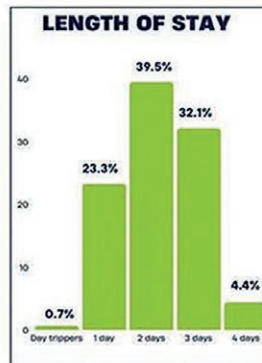
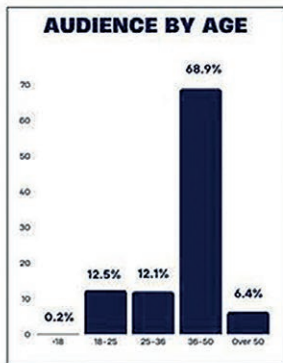
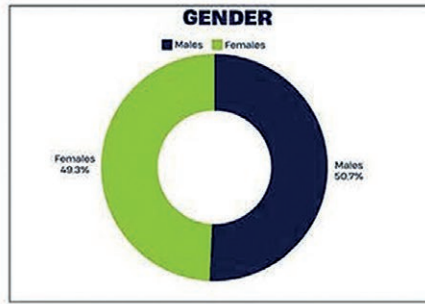
¹¹ Throsby, *Economics and Culture*.



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Challenges and prospects of postcolonial festivals in Lesotho

Despite their ideological differences, MACuFe and MBF face a common set of structural challenges that reflect deeper policy, governance and infrastructural deficits in Lesotho's cultural economy. These challenges are interconnected and affect the sustainability and ideological direction of festival culture.

Funding

Festival sustainability in Lesotho relies heavily on corporate sponsorship, particularly from telecommunications companies.

Fig. 02
Demographics of the Maletsunyane Braai Festival's visitors (Infographic: visitlesotho.org.ls/statistical-reports)



While this support sustains operations, it prioritises market interests over heritage and community participation, marginalising the indigenous traditions the festivals are meant to preserve. For example, in MACuFe, a significant portion of the sponsor's budget was allocated to securing popular acts from South Africa, sidelining grassroots, community-driven elements and local artists. To maintain other cultural activities, MACuFe depended on ticket sales priced as low as \$1 USD, which generated little revenue and starved these activities of resources. The market-driven approach diluted the festivals' educational and heritage mandates.

Conversely, MBF's commercial success demonstrates how corporate-friendly programming can secure financial stability, yet it also raises concerns about the long-term cultural consequences of festival commodification. If not carefully balanced, cultural festivals risk shifting from cultural movements to marketing campaigns.

Festival ownership

A key question is who owns cultural festivals. MACuFe is privately owned, yet it represents national heritage. So, who

Fig. 03
Maletsunywe Falls
(Image: BagelBelt)

truly owns these festivals: the community or the government? Unclear distinctions between government control, community custodianship and private management weaken accountability structures and compromise cultural sustainability. For instance, when the government moved Independence Day celebrations from Morija to Maseru, it reduced MACuFe attendance. The clash of events was not just a change in location but a split in identity, a silent conflict over heritage. Instead of uniting Basotho, the events divided them. This raises the question of the government's role in protecting cultural spaces. True cultural revitalisation requires shared stewardship; without it, cultural festivals risk becoming turf wars rather than platforms for unity.

MBF, while privately owned, receives public-sector support, raising questions about the governance of state support to private cultural enterprises: how much support is appropriate, how should it be provided, and who qualifies? Without formalised frameworks defining stakeholder responsibilities, festivals remain vulnerable to political shifts and private withdrawal.

Event clashing

The absence of a national festival calendar and coordination has led to destructive competition. The emergence of the Mangaung Cultural Festival (MACufe) in Bloemfontein, South Africa concurrent with MACuFe in Lesotho, with a larger budget and a more prominent lineup, drew audiences and performers away from Morija. Other festivals in Lesotho also emerged and were held around the same time as MACuFe. These dynamics affect underfunded festivals differently, disadvantaging them relative to larger ones. To survive, strategic local and regional partnerships are therefore essential for sustainability

Infrastructure

Although the Lesotho National Cultural Policy (2017) and the Extended National Strategic Development Plan II 2023/24-2027/28 recognise the economic potential of creative industries, institutional implementation remains weak. Currently, Lesotho lacks a national theatre, cinematographic infrastructure, professional recording studios and a national arts council. Creative arts associations, such as the Theatre Association of Lesotho (THALE) and the Motion Picture Association of Lesotho (MPALE), exist without offices or funding. In the absence of tax incentives for creative industries, private investment and commitment remain limited. Consequently, cultural labour continues to operate informally, and creative-arts graduates face persistent structural exclusion.

Archiving

Despite its cultural impact, MACuFe lacks a comprehensive institutional digital archive. The absence of documentation undermines cultural historiography, assessment and intergenerational transmission. As Assmann argues, cultural memory without archives is structurally vulnerable to erasure.¹² In Lesotho, this threatens ongoing cultural continuity. The experience is different for MBF, which benefits from informal digital documentation; however, these materials remain commercially oriented. The lack of a national digital-heritage strategy threatens long-term cultural continuity.

Both festivals operate in persistent tension between cultural reverence and commercial exploitation. While commodification generates revenue, it risks transforming sacred traditions into mere entertainment. The challenge is to develop cultural-enterprise models that maintain cultural significance while remaining sustainable.¹³

Culture commodification

There is a fine line between celebrating, honouring and preserving traditions, and the commercialisation of culture, which involves generating income and attracting tourists. However, what happens when sacred traditions become hashtags? Should traditional practices be live-streamed? Should sacred songs be remixed? Should traditional art be diluted for brand appeal? These are questions that cultural festivals should consistently ask, and in contexts where traditions are already suppressed, it becomes a fight for survival.

Lesotho's festivals have demonstrated that culture is not a luxury; it is infrastructure. However, limitations remain that must be addressed to realise the potential of these festivals. Lesotho must:

- Build digital cultural archives by capturing, curating and preserving festival performances, oral histories and art.
- Forge partnerships with the AU, the private sector and the diaspora to fund, promote and expand these festivals.
- Invest in ethical enterprise by providing training, developing fair-trade artisan markets and supporting youth entrepreneurship. Let cultural pride become both an income stream and a museum exhibit.

¹² Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

¹³ De Beukelaer, 'The UNESCO/UNDP 2013'; Joost Dessein et al., eds., *Culture in, for and as Sustainable Development. Conclusions from the COST Action IS1007 Investigating Cultural Sustainability* (Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä, 2015).

- Provide tax rebates for the private sector, especially for businesses that support the creative industries.

Culture is central to Africa's development. The Charter for African Cultural Renaissance and frameworks for creative economies offer guidelines for how festivals can promote Pan-African unity, increase youth employment and safeguard cultural heritage. MBF and MACuFe should follow these guidelines to secure funding and gain visibility and support from the region. Imagine a Pan-African festival circuit where artists can tour across borders, cultural works are widely shared, and nations celebrate their identities together. Lesotho can join this collaboration to unlock funding.

Conclusion

MACuFe and MBF represent two interconnected, yet ideologically distinct, trajectories of postcolonial festival culture in Lesotho. MACuFe emphasises collective memory, intergenerational pedagogy and heritage, while MBF foregrounds youth-driven creative economies, digital branding and tourism. Comparing these two festivals demonstrates that cultural festivals in Lesotho can simultaneously preserve heritage and foster economic activity.

However, without strong cultural leadership, reliable funding, proper archival preservation and national support for the creative industry, festival sustainability remains precarious. Unless these structural deficits are addressed, Lesotho risks losing not only the festivals but also the broader ecosystems of cultural knowledge production and economic empowerment they foster.

Ultimately, reclaiming cultural identity through festivals extends beyond remembering the past. It involves negotiating how cultural heritage can be preserved, interpreted and economically sustained within contemporary creative economies as well as strategic negotiation over the nation's cultural future in a rapidly changing creative economy. Festivals thus emerge as both instruments of resistance against cultural erasure and laboratories for inclusive postcolonial development.

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Festac '77: navigating dis:connections in postcolonial pan-African festivals, legacy, and memory

Gideon Morison

The year is 1977. Lagos, a bustling postcolonial city and the then-capital of Nigeria, was preparing to host one of the biggest cultural events in the history of the Black world: the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture, FESTAC '77. The streets were colourfully decorated with festival flags and banners bearing the iconic mask of Ancient Benin's Queen Idia, adopted as the festival's logo (see figure 1).¹

The city and a few other locations – especially Kaduna and Kano – became massive construction sites, hosting dual-purpose development and modernisation projects in General Yakubu Gowon's post-civil-war infrastructural renaissance plan, the Reconciliation, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction (3Rs) Programme. This led to the construction of new motorways to ease Lagos's notorious traffic congestion, a racecourse in Kaduna, hotels and guest houses, and a festival village. However, a gleaming new National Theatre Complex, equipped with cutting-edge technologies in modern staging, emerged as the hub of the event.²

The scale of the festival and its venues revealed far greater ambitions that went beyond restoring the nation's reputation in the wake of the kwashiorkor crisis in Southeastern Nigeria during the civil war. The goal was to showcase Nigeria's international prestige and newfound oil wealth and to project a welcoming atmosphere



Fig. 01
The festival emblem depicting a mask of Queen Idia (Image: International Festival Committee, CBAAC)

1 International Festival Committee, *Festac '77 Report and Summary of Accounts*, (Lagos: Modern Publication Co. Ltd., n.d.).
2 International Festival Committee, *Festac '77 Report and Summary of Accounts*, 13.

to the over 17,000 Black and African descendants from about 55 countries attending the festival. Nigeria sought to present itself as the de facto leader of the Black world.³

FESTAC '77, FESMAN Dakar 1966, PANAF Algiers 1969 and the Zaire Music Festival Kinshasa 1974 were 'postcolonial pan-African festivals' – a series of cultural festivals organised and held across Africa after independence between 1966 and 1977, mostly planned and financed by states, to demonstrate Pan-African unity and envision a renascent Africa.⁴ Here I explore the ideational and political transformations that shaped the agenda of FESTAC '77, highlighting the dis:connections in its organisational process and the tensions that underpinned these processes.

Dis:connective pathways to pan-African renaissance through festivals

The origins of postcolonial pan-African festivals are often traced to the Congress of Black Writers and Artists held in Paris (1956) and Rome (1959). These congresses generated ideas for organising festivals to demonstrate the objectives of a renascent Africa, and they established an organisational model for the inaugural staging in Dakar. Although postcolonial pan-African festivals emerged as a cultural project promoted by a broad coalition of groups loosely connected by the objective of promoting pan-African unity through socio-political, intellectual and cultural contacts between the continent and its diaspora, their organisation and visions of development were often contradictory and disconnected.

The seeds of these disputes first became visible at the congresses. Though envisioned as a 'Cultural Bandung' for intellectual discourse on postcolonial pan-African culture and political development, the intense intellectual exchange at the congresses pitted the *Négritude* movement against most other Black/African intellectuals, notably Frantz Fanon, James Baldwin and Richard Wright.⁵ While the *Négritude* camp, led by Léopold Senghor, championed a Black/African heritage that sought not only to reclaim the elements of Black identity and culture erased by colonialism, but also to recognise Africa's cultural, social, economic and political contributions that could enrich a future 'civilisation of the universal', Fanon and other artist-scholars criticised Senghor's worldview as politically insufficient,

3 Andrew Apter, *The Pan-African Nation: Oil and the Spectacle of Culture in Nigeria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

4 Gideon Morison, 'From Renaissance to festivalisation: Festival networks and institutional legacies of selected pan-African cultural productions, 1977-2019' (PhD LMU, 2022).

5 Guirlex Masse, 'A Diasporic Encounter: The Politics of Race and Culture at the First International Congress of Black Writers and Artists' (PhD Emory University, 2016), 13-14.

essentialising and elitist.⁶ For these 'radical' artist-scholars, African heritage and culture had the potential to improve the economic and social experiences of the masses, rather than merely celebrating spiritual connections that served the social elites. Thus, the Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, held in April 1966 to demonstrate *Négritude* as a path for Africa's postcolonial development, provoked strong reactions in the African Renaissance movement. Beyond ideological disagreements over the theoretical limits of *Négritude* in postcolonial development, some considered the organisation of FESMAN to be exclusionary, which gave rise to the Pan-African Cultural Festival (PANAF) in Algiers as a counter-festival.⁷

PANAF was one of the most revolutionary and representative Pan-African events of the 20th century.⁸ The organisers of the festival attracted participants from all member countries of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), Black diaspora movements worldwide, national liberation movements in Africa, as well as representatives from the Middle East and Asia.⁹ In contrast to FESMAN, PANAF focused on demonstrating the inextricable link between culture and the ideological struggle for the liberation of the continent from the forces of colonialism, neocolonialism and imperialism.¹⁰ At PANAF, *Négritude* was denounced as 'neocolonial pacifism' and instead a *Pan-African Cultural Manifesto* was published as a guiding principle for Africa's radical cultural practices and revolutionary postcolonial future.¹¹

The next major postcolonial pan-African festival was scheduled to be held in Lagos in 1970 as a continuation of the Dakar event, but due to the Nigeria-Biafra War (1967–70) and organisational shortcomings, the event did not take place until 1977. In the meantime, Zaire '74 in Kinshasa emerged as a stopgap event between Lagos '75 and later FESTAC '77. Since Zaire '74 was mainly focused on music and linked to Mobutu's power and interpretation of the African cultural renaissance – Mobutuism – it has been largely ignored in the literature on postcolonial pan-African festivals.¹²

The Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (Festac) Lagos 1977 was the largest and grandest postcolonial

6 Samuel Anderson, "'Negritude is Dead": Performing the African Revolution at the First Pan-African Cultural Festival (Algiers, 1969)', in *The First World Festival of Negro Arts, Dakar 1966: Contexts and Legacies*, ed. David Murphy (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016).

7 Anthony Ratcliff, 'When *Négritude* Was in Vogue: Critical Reflections of the First World Festival of Negro Arts and Culture in 1966', *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 6, no. 7 (2014).

8 Anderson, "'Negritude is Dead"'.

9 Anderson, "'Negritude is Dead"'.

10 Ratcliff, 'When *Négritude* Was in Vogue', 87.

11 Anderson, "'Negritude is Dead"', 134.

12 For an in-depth exploration of Zaire '74 as a postcolonial pan-African festival, see Dominique Malaquais, 'Rumble in the Jungle: boxe, festival et politique', *Africultures* 2, no. 73 (2008).

Pan-African festival of the era. Following ideological rivalry within the Pan-African renaissance movement, Festac '77 was organised as a compromise event to reconcile extreme ideological positions and paths towards Black/African renaissance. Its organisers drew inspiration from both the cultural heritage of the continent's past civilisations and the contemporary radical spirit to propose a developmental pathway towards a technology-driven Black/African cultural modernity. According to Nigeria's then-military-head-of-state, Olusegun Obasanjo, this pathway led through the adoption of modern technology, industrialisation and technological advancement.¹³

However, Senegal's campaign for the exclusion of the North African Zone (especially Algeria) from parts of the festival not only led to a diplomatic dispute between Senegal, Nigeria and Guinea on one side and the North African countries on the other, but also to organisational crises in the International Festival Committee (IFC). This crisis led to Senegal's withdrawal from the festival and the quiet resignation of Senghor as one of the festival's patrons, as well as the dismissal of Alioune Diop as secretary of the IFC.¹⁴ Although Senegal was readmitted to the festival a year later in a 'spirit of solidarity and unity' after mediation from a panel of prominent artists led by Wole Soyinka, the negative media coverage the crisis triggered, along with other organisational crises such as the 'squandermania' affair, 'dos Nascimento' affair and the 'Fela' affair, dampened interest in the events and played a central role in tarnishing the legacy and memory of the event at the national level.¹⁵

Archiving Festac '77 and its contradictory memory

Following the example of FESMAN in 1966, Festac '77 was hosted with a focus on preserving its memories through archiving.¹⁶ Given that colonial archives were instrumental in propagating negative narratives and perceptions of the continent, it is not surprising that organisers of postcolonial pan-African festivals sought to preserve both the spirit and memories of these festivities by archiving and building institutions. Thus, Festac '77 led to the establishment of various cultural institutions that served as the physical and institutional legacies of the event in Nigeria.

13 Dayo Duyide, 'Obasanjo Opens FESTAC '77: Africans have come of age', in *Festac '77 – A Daily Sketch Souvenir* (Lagos: Sketch Publishing Company, 1977).

14 International Festival Committee, *Festac '77 Report and Summary of Accounts*, 9.

15 Morison, 'From Renaissance to festivalisation', 170-76.

16 David Murphy, 'The Performance of Pan-Africanism: Staging the African Renaissance at the First World Festival of Negro Art', in *The First World Festival of Negro Arts, Dakar 1966: Contexts and Legacies*, ed. David Murphy (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016).



Of these, the Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilisation (CBAAC) stands out for its archiving mandate. CBAAC was founded as a pan-African institution based in Nigeria to function as a research centre to preserve the collective memory of the festival and promote African arts and civilisation in a globalised, yet fragmented cultural space (see figure 2).

The archive holds all the materials used at the festival in trust for the 59 Black and African countries and communities that participated. This includes key materials, documents and minutes of the International Festival Committee (IFC) as well as artistic collections and artefacts. It also seeks, acquires and holds rare cultural objects of Black/African heritage through donation or repatriation from public and private institutions worldwide. Envisioned as a multidimensional agency with a strategic Pan-African mandate to preserve, promote and propagate Black/African cultural and creative heritage, the centre's collection currently comprises approximately 1300 audio-visual materials from Festac '77, 13,579 books and publications, and over 1200 artworks and artefacts, distributed across four archival departments: museum, archives, audio-visual collection and the library (see figure 3).

Considering the 'collective and collaborative' nature of its collections, the Pan-African vision of its mandate and the contested legacy of its commemorative event, CBAAC has attempted to navigate the disconnections of Festac '77 by projecting a more positive and inclusive narrative of the event through programmes, events and initiatives. However, this narrative of the festival offers an overtly national perspective, placing disproportionate emphasis on Nigeria as the host nation at the expense of a pan-African vision, despite the broad range of contributions that made it a unique

Fig. 02
The CBAAC Office in Broad Street,
Lagos (Photo: Gideon Morison)



pan-African experience.¹⁷ The implication is that, just as ‘host-nation omnipotence’ became an institutional practice, generating tensions and discontinuities in postcolonial pan-African festivals, it also accounts for dis:connective archiving and a certain operational dynamic in CBAAC. Central to this dis:connective dynamic is the fact that the archive operates in the administrative and operational structures of the Nigerian government in terms of funding and personnel, and it is almost completely disconnected from the operational agendas of Pan-African institutions like the African Union, apart from occasional contacts for event promotion and commemorative festivities.

Apart from this, the memory of the festival in the country is contested. This contestation is shaped by a combination of negative press about the corruption and waste that characterised the event’s organisation, the derelict physical condition of its legacy projects – Festac Town and the National Theatre – due to ineffective maintenance, negative religious reinterpretation of the festival’s spiritual dimensions in Nigeria’s burgeoning Pentecostal Christian circles, and, until recently, the decline of historical studies in educational curricula. Taken together, these factors weave a unique web of dis:connective narratives around the legacy and memory of Festac ’77, both nationally and transnationally.

Epilogue

I’ve examined dis:connections in the organisational and archival processes of postcolonial pan-African festivals, focussing

Fig. 03
The CBAAC archives
(Photo: Gideon Morison)

17 Étienne Lock, ‘Identité africaine et Catholicisme: problématique de la rencontre de deux notions à travers l’itinéraire d’Alioune Diop (1956-1995)’ (Docteur Université Charles-de-Gaulle, 2014).

particularly on the legacy and memory of Festac '77 in Lagos, Nigeria. Festac '77 embodied Nigeria's global ambitions and visions of postcolonial development, driven largely by its newfound oil wealth in the 1970s. However, its organisational and archival processes were characterised by major operational deficiencies, conceptual discontinuities, political tensions and logistical limitations that made the event the last hallmark festival of the era until the 1990s.

While the archiving of this event has sought to navigate these disconnections through collective and collaborative pan-African initiatives, its embeddedness in the administrative and operational structures of the Nigerian government has produced a dis:connective dynamic that seems to perpetuate a 'host-nation omnipotence' that generated tension in the organisation of postcolonial pan-African festivals. Given the global nature of Black/African heritage and cultures, and the transnational aims of their promotion and remembrance, Festac '77 and the CBAAC collection allow a critical reappraisal of the collaborative and disruptive processes that enabled the conception and organisation of postcolonial pan-African festivals, highlighting the inherent complexity and duality of their organisational and archival framework.

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g:dc

reports

Rethinking cultural infrastructures in post-Assad Syria: a forum

Christopher Balme



From 16 to 17 September 2025, global dis:connect hosted our first forum. The forum is a new format for gd:c to explore how support for the arts can be rethought in countries and regions undergoing major transitions. The arts are subject to the same forces of globalisation as other areas of cultural and social life. They are highly diverse and at the same time often remarkably similar on an institutional level. Art fairs, theatre, film and music festivals, as well as iconic architecture for their presentation can be encountered

Fig. 01
The forum as a new format for gd:c

around the globe. Yet their status and forms of delivery vary in the extreme, especially in countries and regions marked by ‘turbulence’.¹

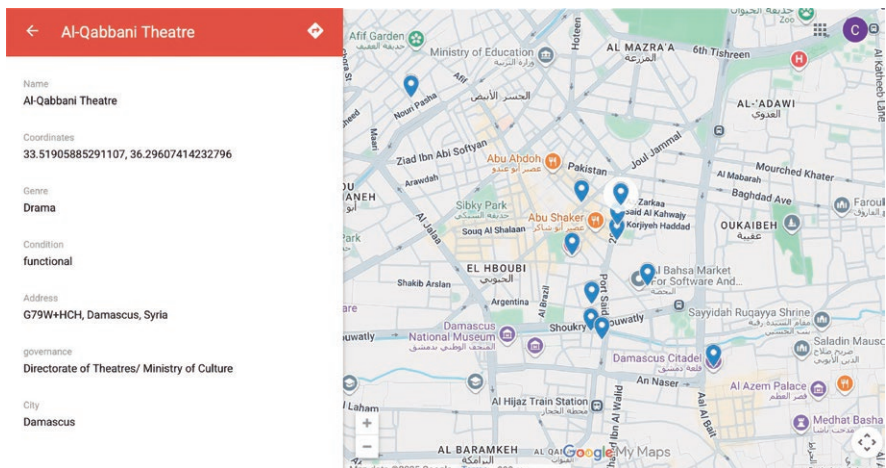
Our forums address a set of recurrent questions. Who do these institutions serve? Do they justify their funding? Do they even receive public funding, or are they dependent on the vagaries of private philanthropy and sponsorship? Are they subject to direct political influence, or do they operate ‘at arms’ length? Are arts institutions required to respond to touristic-heritage demands rather than artistic imperatives? How are local and national activities embedded in wider regional networks?

We devoted the first forum to post-Assad Syria as a reaction to the events of December 2024, which saw the fall of the Assad regime and the takeover by a former jihadist group led by Ahmed Hussein al-Sharaa. Once the most important cultural centre in the region, years of war and mass emigration have left the cultural landscape of Syria in disarray. The workshop gathered artists, directors of funding bodies and curators from Syria and neighbouring countries to rethink how cultural infrastructure might be reconceived going forward. The challenges facing cultural infrastructure globally pose themselves in Syria in extremis, as much material infrastructure has been destroyed and the former structures of a largely state-controlled arts scene no longer function.

The conditions in Syria drove us to pose many questions in the discussion. What remains of existing cultural infrastructure – both material and immaterial – and what new forms can still be imagined and built? What possibilities and promises can emerge from these shifting landscapes? Which networks can be activated or reconfigured, and how might the region’s cultural life position itself within broader regional and global artistic ecologies, particularly in relation to questions of alliances, dependencies and hierarchies in the arts?

Christopher Balme; Sophie Eisenried, gd:c’s curator responsible for our cooperation with the arts; and Dr. Ziad Adwan, a Berlin-based Syrian dramatist, researcher and former lecturer at the Syria’s Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts, organised the event. With Adwan’s help, we assembled a group of largely Syrian participants, all of whom work outside the country: Abdallah Al-Kafri (Syria/Lebanon), Raed Assfour (Jordan), Hala Khayat (Syria/Dubai), Hadeel Abdelhameed (Australia/Iraq), Helena Nassif (Lebanon), Junaid Sareddeen (Lebanon) and Alma Salem (Syria/Canada). Anne Eberhard (Goethe Institute, Beirut) and the Syrian director and dramaturge, Rania Mleghi (Munich), joined us on the second day.

1 Milena Dragičević Šešić and Sanjin Dragičević, *Arts management in turbulent times: Adaptable Quality Management: navigating the arts through the winds of change*, trans. Vladimir Ivir, ed. Esther Banev and Francis Garcia (Amsterdam: European Cultural Foundation & Boekmanstudies, 2005).



Planning began in early 2025 with the circulation of a concept paper outlining the idea of the forum and how we understand the term *cultural infrastructure*. We distinguish between three different forms:

- **material:** buildings, venues, spaces, heritage sites;
- **immaterial** or intangible: the cultural capital of artists and creatives; their networks; sources of funding; and
- **institutional:** mainly cultural organisations, which in post-socialist societies such as Baathist Syria are/were still largely state-funded. In liberal democracies they are augmented by different kinds of commercial and non-profit organisations.

There are many ways to study infrastructure, which has become an expanding area of interdisciplinary research. It is important to remember that infrastructure is not just purely functional but also has a rhetorical use, what the anthropologist Brian Larkin terms the ‘poetics of infrastructure’² and Nikhil Anand, Akhil Gupta and Hannah Appel, have called the ‘promise of infrastructure’.³

A second stage of preparation involved mapping existing infrastructure in Syria using Google Maps. Such maps are commonplace, and many cities develop them as online resources. In the UK, the West Midlands Combined Authority, the Greater London Authority, and even local councils such as Milton Keynes provide them. Further afield, cultural infrastructure plans have also been developed in cities such as Sydney, Vancouver and Amsterdam. While such cities produce such maps for diverse reasons, ranging from self-promotion to a genuine need to inform their citizens, the situation in Syria meant it was a largely remedial and reparative exercise. After ten years of war, the question was: what still existed and in what state of

2 Brian Larkin, ‘The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure’, *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42 (2013).
3 Nikhil Anand, Akhil Gupta and Hannah Appel, ‘Introduction: Temporality, Politics, and the Promise of Infrastructure’, in *The Promise of Infrastructure*, ed. Nikhil Anand, Akhil Gupta, and Hannah Appel (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

Fig. 02
A section of the cultural infrastructure map, which can be accessed at tinyurl.com/bknpp38e.

repair? Our criteria indicated not just name and location but also functionality, genre and governance (figure 2).

The workshop ran over two days and combined plenary sessions and breakout groups. The opening session took the map as a point of departure for an extended discussion of what cultural infrastructure entails in a postwar and post-socialist situation.

The workshop was overshadowed by recent events, namely massacres of civilians: Alawites in Latarkia and Bedouin and Druse minorities in Sweida. These events, plus the continuing war in Gaza, influenced the atmosphere of discussions. The optimism of early 2025 had given way to uncertainty and even pessimism, not only about the political future of the country but also whether the arts, broadly understood, would have a place in a regime controlled by a government with roots in jihadism.

An initial round of discussions opened a set of topics that would recur over the two days. For example, Helena Nassif asked what values can the arts defend, what meta-narratives do we want to construct? Alma Salem wondered how the arts can be embedded in the ongoing political discussions regarding the constitution, elections, and justice, especially when there is already evidence of individual freedoms being denied.

Hadeel Abdelhameed pointed to the example of Iraq, which had undergone similar levels of destruction and internecine violence. Now, however, cultural venues and their spatial memories have gained importance, as evidenced in the renovation of Iraqi buildings in last two years, such as the city of Ur.

Abdallah Al-Kafri emphasised the importance of peer organisations in the region while acknowledging that philanthropy and donations had become more complicated with the welfare state in crisis. Currently, there are huge distractions and divisions amongst NGOs in the field of culture.

For Junaid Sareddeen, director, dramaturge and founding member of the Beirut-based Zoukak Theatre Company, a key aim must be to sustain the region's cultural and religious diversity, which often figures as its weakness because of its potential for dissension. That can/should, however, be used as an advantage. Syria has, as he put it, a 'super local economy', created by over a decade of war. Co-convenor Ziad Adwan argued that this element of locality meant that, in the transition phase at least, one should think in terms of pop-up or recurrent festivals rather than extended seasons. The cultural-infrastructure map could be used to identify venues. Raed Assfour, director of the Jordan-based Al-Balad Theatre, a multi-purpose cultural centre, emphasised the need to support regional movements.

In three breakout sessions, smaller groups focused on specific topics: alternative venues and training models, national

vs. regional curating and models of support beyond state/public institutions. In the latter, for example, the role of NGOs, international funders and philanthropic foundations was discussed. While the traditional supporters, such as the European cultural institutes (British Council, Goethe Institute, Institut français etc.) certainly played a part in supporting local activities by, for example, creating safe spaces for performances and exhibitions outside state control, their financial contribution was relatively modest. Perhaps the most successful example of collaboration between locals and outsiders is in the field of archaeology, which can draw on exceptionally long-lasting partnerships going back decades. Participants emphasised the wide range of non-state and non-public funding. Apart from international philanthropy such as the Ford Foundation and the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), which have a long history of supporting the arts, one should also remember that support can come from numerous sources, corporate as well as private families and their foundations. Oil companies have funded art books, churches have supported choral singing, and amateur traditions such as ancient Syrian chants, a Christian singing tradition going back many centuries with claims to the status of a immaterial cultural heritage.

The Beirut Museum of Art (BeMA), currently under construction, exemplifies the complex networks of support that extend beyond Lebanon and include UNESCO, the Washington-based Middle East Institute and the Getty Foundation. The Arab Theatre Training Centre (ATTC) based in Lebanon (executive director Raed Assfour) has received long-term support from SIDA, as well as other funding organisations such as the Swiss Agency for Development & Co-operation (SDC) in Jordan and the Anna Lindh Foundation. NGO funding is extremely complex, and there is too little research into the wider field of non-state funding.

The second day opened with a plenary paper by Anne Eberhard, current director of the Goethe-Institut (GI) in Beirut and responsible for re-opening the GI in Damascus. The closure of the institute in 2012 due to the war had been countered to some extent by the Damascus in Exile programme, which involved many artists from the Syrian diaspora, especially those based in Berlin. Eberhard outlined current activities and the difficulties in restarting support for artists in Syria, such as a new cultural project fund. Its implementation is still hampered by bureaucratic barriers, such as the difficulties in transferring funds to Syria, which is still not possible. The challenge is to rebuild the networks in Syria. In March 2025, a delegation led by the German Federal Foreign Office that included members from the Goethe-Institut, the German Archaeological Institute, the German Academic Exchange Service and the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation visited the country during a period of optimism. Though the desire to reopen remains, the Goethe Institut is beholden to directives of the Federal Foreign Office.

The plenary sessions on second day were connected by the idea of ‘strengthening networks’ and looked at ‘community-based production’, ‘inter-city connections’, and ‘diasporic perspectives’. Community-based production belongs to the positively connoted terms, sometimes associated with the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) of ‘community-building’, that circulate in the NGO world.⁴ In a wide-ranging discussion participants interrogated both the term itself (‘how to translate the NGO term *community* into Arabic or other languages’) and its application, as for example when the Syrian government began implementing ‘community projects’ under the patronage of the First Lady, Asma Fawaz al-Assad, in the early 2000s. A positive example was the Lebanon-based theatre group Zoukak, which initiated drama therapy workshops in refugee camps during the 2006 war with Israel. A recurrent critique targeted the equation of ‘community’ with ‘village’ or similar traditional forms of organisation. Helena Nassif proposed redefining the term to mean ‘working with groups in a context’, which also include artist collectives and various kinds of humanitarian actions.

The topic of strengthening networks through intercity connections addressed a series of questions including whether artists in the region’s main cities form a shared community and how these ties might be strengthened. Another question revolved around competition vs. collaboration: when do inter-city cultural initiatives risk competing for the same limited funds instead of complementing each other? The importance of hub cities was also discussed, referring in this case Beirut and formerly Damascus. How can the latter regain that function? The current situation sees numerous smaller networks and a productive path might be to form coalitions to encourage them to come together.

The importance of diasporic networks for rebuilding cultural infrastructure in new Syria is unquestioned, but discussion focussed on the extent to which diasporic voices can legitimately speak for a future Syrian context and whether the current conditions even permit a large-scale return of exiled artists. On the other hand, diasporic institutions (festivals, galleries, archives) could serve as ‘extended infrastructure’ for Syria. There was consensus that future planning must include diasporic artists because of the sheer numbers involved. As the participants all belong in one way or another to the diasporic network, although it is not formally organised as such, everyone was ready to contribute to strengthening immaterial infrastructure – such as knowledge transfer, networks and funding models.

The final section of the workshop was an open mic and provided the opportunity for all participants to formulate plans and

4 Hossein Mousazadeh, ‘Unraveling the Nexus between Community Development and Sustainable Development Goals: A Comprehensive Mapping’, *Community Development* 56, no. 2 (2024) doi:10.1080/15575330.2024.2388097.

ideas for the future of the region, under the current or even a new government. Contributions ranged widely over deeply felt expressions of pain and loss over what has happened in the ‘cradle of civilisation’ formulated by Helena Nassif. It will be necessary to create for Syria, she argued, ‘a new sociality’ after the decades of oppression and war. Ziad Adwan asked: ‘what are my extensions today as a theatre maker towards Palestinians, Lebanese, Jordanians?’, thus positioning his artistic activity very much in a regional context. He wondered also how to evaluate the mapping project as well as how to record the deliberations of the forum itself (there is no audio or video recording). Perhaps one could think of a medium-term research project. Alma Salem stressed the need to reframe the region away from purely geopolitical arguments to geocultural ones to create more positive, constructive narratives. The regionalisation discussed in the workshop is not an objective to be achieved but is an already existing organic reality.

The workshop was a short but intensive interaction bringing together theatre directors, curators, actors, cultural policy makers who were either Syrian or had strong ties to the country. Most described themselves either as expatriates or in exile. All were dedicated to re-establishing the once-vibrant arts scene in Syria, particularly Damascus, but also in other cities such as Aleppo. It was clear at the end of the two days that the forum format had initiated intensive discussions, renewed ties and laid the foundation for further initiatives. Much will depend on the stabilisation of an extremely fragile political situation and whether the current ‘transitional’ government can reconcile its Islamist orientation with the freedom of expression necessary for artistic culture to be re-established.

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Everything moves, or does it? Empires and im:mobility

Claire Louise Blaser



In 1937, British India issued a series of postage stamps featuring the newly crowned King George VI. In them, the monarch shares the frame with an unlikely cast: a postman on foot, an ox cart, a horse-drawn carriage, a camel, a train, a steamer, a motorcar and an airplane (figure 1). As David Arnold (Warwick) noted in his keynote for the workshop *Empire and (im-)mobility in South and Southeast Asia, 19th and 20th centuries*, this series depicts an

Fig. 01
British India postage stamps, King
George VI Transport Series, 1937.
(Public domain)



‘imperial ordering of mobilities’ in miniature: a visual narrative of progress from human- to animal- to machine-powered mobility that also reminds us, however, that these varied modes of transportation and communication were all connected.

Held in New Delhi on 6–7 February 2026 and co-organised by Siddharth Pandey (Munich/New Delhi) and Harald Fischer-Tiné (Munich/Zurich), both fellows at gd:c, the workshop invited participants to consider how mobility and immobility have been historically shaped, enabled and enforced in relation to one another. Over two days, scholars traced the movement of bicycles, planes, machines, seamen, writers and criminals across borderlands, oceans and empires. Relating the (post)colonial contexts of South and Southeast Asia to the British and Dutch Empires, the event also sought to open transimperial perspectives on the history of im:mobility.

As Arnold observed in his keynote, historians of these regions have long studied movement through migration, trade, epidemics and the circulation of ideas. The workshop’s contribution therefore lay less in demonstrating that movement has a history than in exploring the analytical utility of im:mobility for historians in terms of what it can reveal about how empires were governed and infrastructures built, how people imagined space, and how bodies experienced the world.

Power: regimes of im:mobility

A central theme that emerged throughout was that im:mobility makes power visible. Several contributions tackled questions like who gets to move, who gets stopped, why and how; they focused on regulation and governance, revealing colonial rule as a project that relied on controlling motion. Yet, as several papers showed, that control was always incomplete. Colonial and postcolonial

Fig. 02

The organisers Siddharth Pandey (left) and Harald Fischer-Tiné (Photo: Siddharth Pandey)



regimes alike had to contend with the fact that their visions of absolute regulation of their constituents' im:mobility were often at odds with the practicalities of implementation.

Michaela Dimmers (New Delhi) demonstrated this tension in her account of British Indian prisons. Convicts, she showed, were simultaneously highly mobile through no will of their own and intensely immobile through their confinement. The penal regime aspired to total control, but the everyday realities of prison show that im:mobility was constantly negotiated and compromised in practice.

Abhimanyu Pandey's (Ahmedabad) paper focused on how im:mobility is tied up with the notion of remoteness, viewing the latter as a governmental category. In Spiti, on the Indo-Tibetan border, colonial and postcolonial regimes alternately restricted and expanded access through mobility infrastructures in the interest of state sovereignty.

Focusing on a different border, Vaibhav Bhardwaj (Delhi) traced how criminal mobility became a test case for fragile state sovereignty after the partition of British India. The movement of criminals between India and Pakistan challenged newly drawn borders, turning criminal mobility into a territorial dispute and a performance of sovereignty.

Similarly invoking the instability and malleability of mobility regimes after partition, Naina Manjrekar (Bombay) showed how the recruitment and movement of seamen between India and Pakistan can be read as a clash between established colonial and newly forming postcolonial regimes of im:mobility.

Shivangi Jaiswal (Venice) also reflected on links between labour and mobility through a case study of Indian workers who were

Fig. 03
Siddharth Pandey (left) and Harald Fischer-Tiné (Photo: Abhimanyu Pandey).

sent to wartime Britain for technical training in the 1940s. Her contribution demonstrated how even a colonial-era regime that explicitly sought to enable both physical and social mobility was tightly controlled and socially stratified.

Knowledge: techno-mobility, infrastructures and im:mobility ideas

A second cross-cutting theme at the workshop concerned the relationship between mobility and knowledge. In the 19th and 20th centuries, mobility and its meanings were bound to new technologies that transformed how people moved in space. Several papers explored the emergence of this modern ‘techno-mobility’: im:mobility mediated by machines, infrastructures and technical expertise.

Philipp Krauer (Zurich) told the story of the ‘Java bogie’, a locomotive component that travelled from Switzerland to the Dutch East Indies and eventually to colonial India. This case study unsettles narratives of direct technological diffusion from colonial metropolises to their peripheries by including lateral transcolonial connections and European countries without colonial possessions.

Andreas Greiner (Washington, DC) traced how interwar imperial aviation forced a renegotiation of airspace sovereignty. Here, inter-imperial technological rivalry ran up against the practicalities of planning intercontinental aerial routes, forcing empires such as the Dutch, British and French into ‘involuntary interdependence’, each reliant on access to the colonial skies of others.

Oishi Dhar (Mānoa) zoomed in on Bengal, where over the 19th and early 20th centuries, Indian entrepreneurs adapted steam navigation technologies and ‘vernacularised’ them, transforming the steamship into a tool of swadeshi economic self-reliance and shipping ideas of anti-colonial assertion to new shores.

Arnab Dutta (Groningen) examined the Greater India Society, whose intellectuals responded to imperial restrictions on Asian mobility by imagining alternative international migration regimes; the resulting visions of, for example, an ‘Asiatic *Lebensraum*’ reframed im:mobility in the anti-liberal logics of biologised civilisational units and population ecology.

Teuku Reza Fadeli (Jakarta) and Harald Fischer-Tiné’s papers both focused on an everyday technology of mobility, the bicycle, and considered how this technology was rendered governable in colonial Indonesia and India, respectively, by restricting and policing its use. At the same time, both contributions also showed how those restrictions, which in



Fischer-Tiné's framing constituted a form of 'mobility inequality', gradually eroded, leading to appropriations of cycling that challenged imperial and class hierarchies.

Experience: embodied, imagined and symbolic im:mobilities

Throughout the workshop, participants repeatedly discussed who moved, how that movement (or its absence) felt and what symbolic value it carried. Several papers attended to mobility as a bodily experience, or how walking, cycling and even standing still leaves traces in muscle and memory.

Fadeli and Fischer-Tiné also focused on such aspects in their papers. In urban colonial Indonesia, for example, police manuals prescribed posture and speed for cyclists: colonial governance there was enforced by regulating the behaviour of bodies in motion. In colonial India, European observers questioned whether 'Oriental' bodies could master the 'steel horse'. Both contributions made clear that im:mobility was not only a question of technology and governance, but also fundamentally of cultural and social symbolism.

Siddharth Pandey explored this symbolism of movement, and how it could transform over time by shining light on a unique mode of mobility: 'mallng', as residents of Shimla describe the act of walking on the town's Mall Road. He explained how an activity that, in the colonial era, was a symbol of racial and social segregation, could become a more democratised leisurely practice in the postcolonial period, though it continued to be seen as a performance of social and political status.

Fig. 04
gd:c goes mobile, discussing
im:mobility 6000 km from
headquarters (Photo: IIC Delhi).

Mihir Jha (Delhi) showed how railway connectivity transformed the imagination of Chhotanagpur in colonial East India. New mobility infrastructure, he argued, brought upper-class travellers from Calcutta to the region, which opened a new way of reading the landscape – one that romanticised its pastoral and picturesque character, all while obscuring the industrialisation that made it accessible.

Gregory Goulding (Philadelphia) traced mobility's symbolic life through the travelogues of Rahul Sankrityayan. The writer once styled himself a free-spirited wanderer challenging imperial restrictions on movement but later deployed the tropes of travel writing to incorporate the Himalayan region of Kinnaur into the imagined space of the new nation.

What else can im:mobility do for historians?

This workshop demonstrated that the mobilities paradigm, while certainly not novel, remains what Arnold called a 'productive provocation' for historians of South and Southeast Asia. Bringing together these diverse papers reinforced the value of thinking about the interconnections between different forms of im:mobility, as opposed to considering each mode or machine as an isolated case study. This perspective recentres marginalised aspects of mobility history. Arnold's call to attend to animal mobility was a particularly salient example, laying out a convincing case for a multispecies history of im:mobility.

Arnold also pointed to a central methodological challenge many papers grappled with implicitly: it is difficult for historians to capture the experience of im:mobility, as they mostly encounter it through mediated forms, like photographs, travelogues or stamps, each of which carries its own conventions and agendas. Several presenters illustrated their papers with striking photographs, making evident that visual technologies have long shaped how mobility is imagined and valued. Such images did not merely document im:mobility, but actively shaped its meanings, infusing it with symbolic values like modernity, authenticity and social status.

The discussions also highlighted questions for future research. Participants pointed to the need to explore the relationship between mobility and immobility more explicitly and to attend to im:mobility's historical stratification in terms of how journeys repeat or reinvent themselves with reference to previously charted paths. Finally, one form of im:mobility remained curiously underexplored: social im:mobility. In the concluding discussion, the concept of 'motility' – the potential for movement as a type of social capital – was suggested as a helpful approach to consider how the (in)ability to move shaped hierarchy, aspiration and identity in colonial and postcolonial societies.

Contraception workshop

Let's talk contraception: two accounts of a single workshop

Ophelia Wach (the convener)

Contraception is neatly structured along the lines of gender. The meteoric rise of the pill in the 1960s has reinforced hormonal methods for those born as women as the heteronormative default for contraception worldwide. Feminist movements question not only the well-known side effects, but also the unequal distribution of contraceptive work. Bridging between autonomy and control, the workshop on contraceptive equity in practice at gd:c asked doctors, counsellors and users how they navigate the deeply gendered practice that is contraception.

Our two authors paint two pictures of the discussions, one from the perspective of a research student (Samara Relkovic) and the other a curious journalist (Romy Hölzel). The dis:connectivity lies in the disparate norms that apply to the two sexes when it comes to the results of relationships that inherently involve both.

A workshop on dis:connection in contraception in two parts

Part I: Negotiating reproductive respon-sibility Samara Relkovic



Contraception is considered a private matter. It is decided between two people, organised as discreetly as possible, and is thus negotiated in seeming silence. Yet it is precisely this apparent privacy that conceals a central tension: while decisions about contraception are made in intimate contexts, their prerequisites, risks and consequences are anything but private. They are unequally distributed, politically framed and shaped by institutional conditions.

In feminist theory, this shift is nothing new: ‘the personal is political!’¹ especially where questions of bodies, sexuality and

1 The slogan is attributed to second-wave radical-feminist Carol Hanisch.

Fig. 01
(Photo: Christoffer Voigt)

reproduction are negotiated. Because contraception often appears as an individual issue related to self-determination, it is simultaneously outsourced to the private sphere, while its societal facets slip out of view. Who bears the risks? Who has access to knowledge? Who has access to methods, counselling, resources, and who does not? These questions concern not only individual bodies, but also interpersonal relationships and political structures, and thus the question of justice and equality.

These very questions were addressed at the workshop on equitable contraception in practice, which took place in November 2025 at the Käte Hamburger Research Centre global dis:connect. It became clear that contraception magnifies gender roles, attributions of responsibility, economic logics and political priorities. Contraception was not discussed as a purely technical issue, but as interwoven processes of negotiation between individuals within societal structures, within political-regulatory institutions and within discourses.

Still no pill for men? Questioning the contraception gap

A central question of the workshop concerned the so-called ‘pill for men’. While the pill for women² has been established as a contraceptive method since the 1960s and has become a standard method alongside the condom, the ‘pill for men’ has remained largely a utopia despite decades of research. At the same time, contraceptive methods such as the IUD and sterilisation for women³ are becoming increasingly popular,³ indicating growing demand for expanded contraceptive options – a trend that scholars associate with falling acceptance of the contraceptive pill. Meanwhile, the contraception gap between genders remains persists, with research and medical options for men⁴ remaining limited.

This gap refers to the structural inequality in contraceptive options, the distribution of responsibility and the medical assessment of risk. While a wide range of medically recognised hormonal and mechanical contraceptive methods exist for women⁴ – from the pill to IUDs to implants and sterilisation – men⁴ are left with only condoms or vasectomies.⁵ This structural

2 This term refers to women and people who can become pregnant, and the associated contraceptives for ovulation suppression.

3 See the recent survey by the Federal Institute for Public Health (BIÖG) on sexual education, contraception and family planning: *Faktenblatt: Sexualaufklärung, Verhütung und Familienplanung*, Bundesinstitut für Öffentliche Aufklärung, 7, <https://shop.bioeg.de/pdf/DL-20251027-1600.pdf>.

4 The term *men*⁴ refers to men and sperm-producing people.

5 Although the condom is the most widely used contraceptive method in Germany and often reflects shared responsibility in practice, its comparatively limited efficacy under typical use means that an additional method is required anyway.

inequality is due not merely to technical feasibility; it's a symptom of the interplay of ethical, institutional and economic factors.

The politics of contraceptive risk evaluation or why responsibility remains gendered

One example of contraception for men is thermal contraception, in which the testicles are heated by external sources or daily elevation into the inguinal canal, significantly reducing sperm production. Smaller studies in France and Switzerland, alongside widespread self-experiments conducted outside official testing modalities, report effective contraception with comparatively minor side effects.⁶ We lack large-scale clinical trials, reliable Pearl Index data and systematic long-term studies. Theoretical risks, such as a potential association between undescended testicles and cancer, are frequently cited as reasons against systematic research, despite the absence of solid evidence. In France, thousands of men* already use thermal contraception, sometimes under medical supervision, without regulatory approval. The discrepancy between actual practice and regulators' caution reveals how the evaluation of contraceptive methods is strongly shaped by institutional priorities and risk perceptions and delimited to what is deemed investigable.

Moreover, by prioritising pregnancy as the central metric of contraceptive risk, biomedical and regulatory systems reinforce structural gender biases, marginalising men's* reproductive role and framing contraception as a predominantly female responsibility. A single-organism risk model prevails in pharmaceutical regulation. Benefits and side effects are assessed solely in relation to the body being treated. For male contraception, this means that hormonal and other body-altering methods are measured against a healthy male body; any deviation from this presumed 'normal state' is automatically regarded as problematic. By contrast, women's* risks are evaluated primarily in light of potential pregnancy: side effects of hormonal methods, for instance, are deemed acceptable when weighed against the medical risks of pregnancy, thereby legitimising their market approval.

A shared-risk model would instead assess benefits and harms relationally, relating male side effects to the health and social risks borne by a partner who could otherwise become pregnant,

⁶ See Samuel Joubert et al., 'Thermal male contraception: A study of users' motivation, experience, and satisfaction', *Andrology* 10, no. 8 (2022) <https://doi.org/10.1111/andr.13264>; Jean-Claude Soufir, 'Hormonal, chemical and thermal inhibition of spermatogenesis: contribution of French teams to international data with the aim of developing male contraception in France', *Basic and Clinical Andrology* 27, no. 3 (2017) <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12610-016-0047-2>.

thus accounting for both individuals' risks. If contraception were holistically understood as a shared responsibility in (hetero)sexual partnerships, men*, too, would be recognised as risk-bearing participants. Scholars advocate this relational model because it exposes how current standards obscure the distribution of risk between partners and thereby reproduce structural inequality.⁷ Since regulators tend to neglect this relational model, health risks continue to be assessed differently depending on whose body is impacted. The result is a biomedical double-standard in which physically invasive interventions for men* appear ethically more problematic than comparable methods for women*.

The contraception gap under the lens of invisible labour, heteronormativity and sexual health

The contraception gap is therefore not merely a technological deficit, but a product of divergent standards in biomedicine and ethics that materialise in everyday negotiations between sexual partners. It involves continuous planning, information management and risk assessment, much of which remains invisible. Coordinating appointments, researching potential side-effects, calculating costs and monitoring adherence all constitute a cognitive and emotional load. While contraception is formally framed as a shared responsibility, in practice this labour is often carried disproportionately by the woman*, reinforcing the contraception gap.

Moreover, when reproductive health is normatively framed around pregnancy prevention, medical risk assessment and public discourse reduce contraception to a heterosexually defined practice. Other dimensions of sexual health are systematically neglected: prevention and testing strategies for sexually transmitted infections are treated as secondary, despite being relevant irrespective of gender, relationship structure and reproductive capacity. Queer lives and sexualities are marginalised, as dominant contraceptive discourses remain organised around heteronormative assumptions of pregnancy risk. This narrow focus matters. While reproductive risks continue to be framed predominantly as pregnancy risks, European public health authorities have reported sustained increases in bacterial STIs such as syphilis and gonorrhoea in recent years.⁸ The shift in attention towards hormonal pregnancy prevention, coupled with the relative neglect of barrier-based protective strategies,

7 Christopher ChoGlueck, 'Still no pill for men? Double standards & demarcating values in biomedical research', *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 91 (2022) <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.shpsa.2021.11.010>.

8 'STI cases continue to rise across Europe', European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, 2025, accessed 19 February 2026, <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/news-events/sti-cases-continue-rise-across-europe>.

therefore constitutes not just a discursive imbalance but an epidemiological concern. A contraceptive policy oriented towards the management of reproduction fails to address central aspects of collective sexual health and simultaneously reproduces a heteronormative constriction of sexual responsibility.

Taken together, these dynamics reveal the contraception gap as a structural phenomenon rather than a mere technological absence. It is sustained by regulatory standards, research priorities and entrenched assumptions about whose body is expected to bear reproductive risk. As long as biomedical evaluation remains individualised, pregnancy prevention dominates sexual-health discourse, and the mental load of contraception is unevenly distributed, responsibility will fall asymmetrically. Closing the contraception gap therefore requires not only new methods, but a shift towards a genuinely relational understanding of reproductive risk and shared responsibility.

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A workshop on dis:connection in contraception in two parts

Part II: Responsibility, trust, contraception

Romy Hölzel

‘Contraception is about far more than just means and methods – it’s about decision-making, responsibility and justice,’ says Samara Relkovic.¹ Murmurs of agreement ripple through the rows. The participants, a diverse mix of experts, students and people from other fields, are busily taking notes, nodding in recognition or simply watching attentively as the two workshop leaders, Samara Relkovic and Ophelia Wach, deliver their opening speech for the workshop *Equal Contraception in Practice*.

The workshop, which took place at the Käte Hamburger Research Centre global dis:connect, focussed on a topic that is often swept under the rug, taboo or dismissed as a ‘women’s issue’: contraception. Over the course of eight hours, participants gained concrete knowledge from experts in various fields from sociology and gynaecology to activist organisations. With these diverse and interdisciplinary insights, participants engaged in discussion rounds on various aspects of contraception, developing both expertise and a better sense for the subject matter – a matter that most people will face sooner or later.

Fabian Hennig provided the first intervention, considering developments and research in contraception, such as hormonal and thermal methods, as part of his dissertation. The mood became more relaxed, and smiles spread across the participants’ faces as Hennig presented his first slide showing current common

¹ The text was originally published in German, and all quotations have been translated.



contraceptive methods for men, which turns out to be rather short: ‘Condom, vasectomy,’ it read. Fortunately, the list of contraceptive methods for men currently in testing is somewhat longer. Hennig explains various methods to the audience, from sperm flow blockage to vasectomy to hormonal and thermal approaches. A ‘pill for men,’ as Hennig put it (though without much enthusiasm for the term), seems to have stagnated in research. ‘Historically speaking, men weren’t really trusted to take the pill daily’ – followed by amused giggling that ran through the rows of participants. But then the atmosphere became more tense, with almost a hint of anger and frustration in the air, as Hennig explained that the side effects that might occur for men, which were identified while testing this pill, were considered ‘unreasonable’. The mood swings, depression and loss of libido were deemed too great a risk. ‘With male contraception, there are unrealistically high expectations – namely zero risk’, Hennig said. Further, the pressure in Germany to advance research in this direction is unfortunately not yet insistent enough. The almost palpable frustration of those present is interrupted – it’s time for the first breakout session.

In the first breakout session, participants with overlapping areas of interest came together. One or two experts also joined the discussion rounds to provide input, though even participants without particular expertise engaged enthusiastically in the exchange. Under the topic of *Where is the progress?*, one of the small groups exchanged opinions and thoughts relating to education: ‘What’s missing is the impetus to question the status quo and the entire system in such a way that you think: “What can we do differently?”’ said Louis Happel, a student and workshop participant. Gynaecologist Cornelia Höß also noted regarding education: ‘The topic of contraception should be part of young people’s upbringing and should be discussed equally’.

Fig. 01
(Photo: Samara Relkovic)

In schools and at home, contraception should not be taboo but actively addressed.

The goal of the group work – getting to know other workshop participants and consciously engaging with the topic of contraception while simultaneously gaining new knowledge – seemed to have been fully achieved in the first session.

The second presentation came from Louisa Lorenz, an education coordinator for sexuality and society. Her short presentation focussed on the topic of responsibility in contraception, which is famously one-sided: ‘Women are the main bearers of responsibility for pregnancy prevention’, Lorenz explained. The audience nodded in agreement. When Lorenz discussed one of her slides showing that men apparently massively overestimate their own engagement and responsibility regarding contraception, the listeners broke into brief, rather irritated laughter, as if the entire room were soberly shaking its head. The weight of responsibility for contraception that women usually shoulder became particularly clear when Lorenz listed the various steps necessary for the contraceptive method one by one or the preferred approach to be used. From going to the gynaecologist to constantly remembering to have the pill, condom or other means along when needed, the list is long. ‘Then you really notice why the burden is so high,’ said Lorenz, and the participants nodded in agreement.

The third breakout session also revolved around the theme of responsibility. In the context of gender-specific differences in contraception, a lively discussion took place in one of the groups, with the focus not only on responsibility, but also on trust: ‘Contraception is very much about trust. Regarding contraceptive methods for men, women are confronted with the question: “Can I trust my partner, even when the most serious consequences rest with me?”’ said Christoffer Voigt from the European Network for Shared Contraception. The group found that trust, along with a certain level of knowledge, education and, as banal as it may sound, money, are the most crucial prerequisites for contraception to proceed as fairly and equitably as possible between genders. But something else is needed too: communicating with each other, as the groups agreed. The negotiation of contraception is also based on compromises.

As diligently as the workshop participants discussed, took notes and thought, their concentration inevitably began to wane after eight hours. And yet everyone gathered for a final breakout session, this time on the topic of research and development. Even after almost eight hours of active participation, the energy was high, which is thanks to what Hennig reported in the ‘Research and Development’ group about ongoing research. Hennig talked about the barriers that are sometimes put in the way of developing male contraceptives. From lacking funds to lacking demand: research faces numerous restrictions. The conversation became



particularly charged when it returned to side effects. ‘For other medical developments and research, the standard regarding side effects is not as high as for contraceptives for men’, Hennig explained. A statement that revived everyone again.

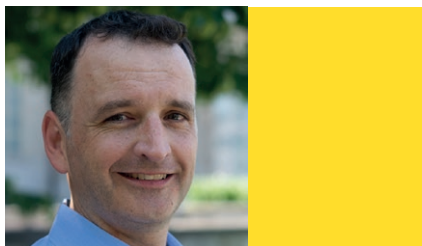
After a day full of new knowledge, exchange, discussions and – as is to be expected with such a topic – anger and frustration, the workshop *Equal Contraception in Practice* came to an end.

Fig. 02
(Photo: Christoffer Voigt)

Despite visible exhaustion, it was obvious that all the education had stirred something in the participants' minds. And even though the issues surrounding contraception can certainly drive one to despair, there remains hope. As workshop leader Ophelia Wach put it, 'There is movement, even if there are always setbacks'.

**Fellow
travellers**

Martin Dusinberre



Martin Dusinberre is a professor of global history at the University of Zurich. He has authored *Mooring the Global Archive: A Japanese Ship and its Migrant Histories* (2023) and *Hard Times in the Hometown: A History of Community Survival in Modern Japan* (2012). His research interests include the histories of migration and empire in the Asia-Pacific region as well as reflections on archival methodologies in a digital and global age. He is also interested in experimental forms of historical writing and performance. Since 2020 he has been a member of the editorial board of *Past & Present*.

His work at global dis:connect reimagines the worlds of Northern Australia across the dividing line of the federated nation-state. Paying particular attention to histories of migrant *bêche-de-mer* fishermen from Southeast Asia and northeast Asia from the mid-18th to the mid-20th centuries and to their continuing material and economic legacies, he brings different conceptions of country into dialogue with each other, engaging with divisions between history, art history, anthropology and archaeology.

Kate Stevens



Kate Stevens is a senior lecturer in history at the University of Waikato, New Zealand. Her research focuses on histories of cultural, environmental and economic exchange in the colonial and postcolonial Pacific. Her first book *Gender, Violence and Criminal Justice in the Colonial Pacific 1880-1920* examines sexual violence across different colonial legal systems. Her other projects explore multispecies and environmental histories of the Pacific, including women's roles in whaling worlds, coconut oil from the Pacific to the global economy and urban histories of Suva.

Her project traces shifting human relationships to the multispecies assemblage of shipworm and wood in the Pacific Ocean, considering their role in making, unmaking and remaking coastlines and sea. Shipworms were emblematic of the tensions between connection and disconnection in the ocean in the colonial and postcolonial era, as they moved with ships at the same time as disrupting shipping infrastructure. She examines indigenous understandings of shipworm, sometimes valued and farmed for food, alongside colonial anxieties over their threats to oceanic connectivity.

Luísa Telles



Luísa Telles is an artist and researcher working with archives and historical collections. Her multidisciplinary practice investigates social memory, overlooked histories and the body as an agent of resistance. She has lived and worked in São Paulo, Lisbon, Hamburg and Berlin. Her work has been presented in renowned institutions throughout Europe. Telles has published, organised debates and lectured at institutions including Kunstsammlung NRW, Kunstverein Hamburg, Kunstverein Lüneburg, the Academy of Arts The Hague and Leuphana University of Lüneburg.

Border bodies investigates the displacement of tropical plants from South America to Europe during colonial expansion. Many survived in Europe thanks to greenhouses such as Munich's Palmenhaus. Their migration is inseparable from histories of imperial power, economic exploitation and biopiracy, which continue to shape inequalities between the Global South and North. Her project combines artistic research and production. She is studying various collections, focussing on species native to the Brazilian rainforest. This project builds on previous research in which she produced installations combining photography, sound, textiles and porcelain.



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Martin Valdés-Stauber



Martin Valdés-Stauber is a dramaturg at the Schaubühne Berlin and an author, director and curator. In 2018, he founded *Erinnerung als Arbeit an der Gegenwart* (*Memory as work on the present*), an international interdisciplinary platform that explores how the performing arts can contribute to remembrance. Martin studied economics and sociology at the LMU Munich, the Zeppelin University in Friedrichshafen as well as at UC Berkeley and Cambridge. His research interests include organisation theory and refugee studies. He has taught global urban studies in Munich, Berlin, Friedrichshafen and elsewhere.

Because of their progressive agenda and avant-garde aesthetics, many theatre-makers were in danger before Hitler seized power in 1933. That's why the subsequent purge of theatres was swifter and more radical than in other milieus. While thousands of artists fled Germany, many more made their way, benefitting from job opportunities and massive Nazi investment in theatres. 1933 therefore marks a profound rupture in the history of German theatrical institutions and aesthetics. It simultaneously meant a disconnection from international communities of practice and, for the refugees, an expansion of global networks.

Erika Zerwes



Erika is a Brazilian lecturer, curator and researcher in photography and visual culture based in London. She has a PhD in history (visual culture) from UNICAMP, with a *séjour* doctoral at EHESS, Paris and a postdoc at the Museum of Contemporary Art of the University of São Paulo. She has taught at Birkbeck College and the University of Bedfordshire and has authored papers on Latin American photography, photography and gender, war photography, as well as three recent books on these topics.

Her project treats the dis:connections between Latin American and European photography between the 1970s and early 1980s. Departing from the Latin American Photography Colloquia (1978, 1981), it analyses archival findings resulting from research carried out in Brazil, Latin America and Europe, which is focused on public European spaces where Latin American photography circulated, such as publications and exhibitions, and how they promoted specific cultural transfers between Latin America and Europe related to the international institutionalisation of photography.



Cover image: The Hendrik Witbooi Monument in Gibeon (Photo: Leah Niederhausen, 2025)
Back cover: The Center for Performing Arts in Iganmu, Nigeria (Photo: dotun55)

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