Decolonising requires dialogue, expertise and support

The Heidelberg Statement

Statement approved on the occasion of the 2019 Annual Conference of the Directors of Ethnographic Museums in German Speaking Countries, in Heidelberg:

Within the German speaking area, more than twenty public ethnographic and world cultures museums, university museums and collections, as well as the ethnography departments of composite museums, conserve a substantial number of collections comprising cultural artefacts, photographs, film and sound documents, as well as written archives. We safeguard these collections in a fiduciary duty of care. Relations have been established between humans through these objects, which have been – and continue to be – important for those who once created them, for their descendants as well as for all societies in general. These relations stand – similar to diaspora relations – in the foreground of our attention.

We explicitly welcome the high level of current concern for civil society in our establishments, in our work, and in questions and problems about the colonial history of our collections. Equally, we appreciate concerns about whether it is legitimate to preserve sensitive collections such as human remains, burial objects, and sacred objects, or artefacts of potentially key cultural heritage. The new public engagement points to a social development which coincides with an increasing awareness of the knowledge preserved in our museums, and the relevance of the collections for societies of origin, in which society accepts an ethical responsibility in dealing with the objects.

It is a matter of course that objects which were brought into the museums due to

unlawful circumstances at the moment of their creation or of collecting should – if this is desired by representatives of the originator communities – be repatriated. Possibilities for restitution should furthermore be negotiable where objects are of significant value to their communities of origin. Above all, however, our museums preserve cultural heritage from highly differentiated contexts of acquisition and collecting and, therefore, represent much more than colonial heritage. Thus, it is equally evident that the relations which have been entered into during the acquisition of the objects oblige us to much more than merely return objects.

All world cultures and ethnographic museums and collections understand that it is their duty to ensure the maximum transparency when dealing with the history and contents of their collections, with cooperative provenance research as a general standard. Important questions remain to be asked: Which knowledge do we preserve? For whom is the knowledge relevant nowadays, and in what ways? Which interpretations need to be urgently reconsidered, what has been overlooked as yet, and what has been misjudged? Who were the objects' creators and what rights have developed today from their author¬ship? Who are the owners? Which forms of relations, of sharing heritage and collections, which kinds of restitution are necessary, possible, desired? How can cooperation, dialogue and negotiation processes be shaped, into which the knowledge of all participants can be obtained and used, at an equal level? Which new knowledge related to the collections can thereby evolve?

All the signatories below are committed to the following principles:

1. to take care that all those who are related to the collections due to their history and cultural practices will, if at all possible, be informed about the places where collections relating to them are held;

2. to share the knowledge preserved wherever possible with the originators and their descendants, as this is how we will enhance the conditions for mutual trust;

3. to make ongoing research on our collection of materials public.

The world cultures and ethnographic museums and collections comply with their important educational and cultural mandate to explore and transmit knowledge about objects as well as cultural, spiritual and art histories beyond eurocentric world concepts. In doing so we openly and voluntarily address differing points of views and cultural antagonisms, as well as conflicts around objects and their preservation, and together with societies of origin we search for solutions, ways to counter such conflicts ethically, equitably and humanely.

The major question will ultimately be which common future the world community will be able to agree on with its wealth of testimonies from pluricentric, alternative, socio-technical world concepts, particularly during the transition from an analogue to a digital age. We propose that, as a response to this challenge, we adopt the respectful dealing with the material and immaterial knowledge preserved in our collections as a common starting point and reinsurance for the future. Our museums and collections are already creating innovative new forms of dialogue to discover and develop themes and forms of such kinds of common understanding.

As world cultures and ethnographic museums and collections, we expect from the public as well as the political and institutional responsible bodies a clear political and financial commitment to our institutions as the centers of competence and mediation for the urgent tasks to be performed. First steps in this direction have already been taken, first guidelines and fundamental cornerstones have been formulated. There is now a need to consider the delegation of decision-making competences to the museums. With respect to research, we expect universities to develop innovative and also practice-related training formats which take into account the complexity of the collections. Today, self-confident critical young academics in museums and universities around the globe stand ready to face these challenges. They should be enabled to become well informed and well educated, but also financially adequately equipped to do so.

We therefore call on the responsible bodies and funding institutions to meet the needs of these current challenges for world cultures and ethnographic museums and collections. For this, a fairer distribution of resources and access to knowledge and collections is needed, including funding instruments and financial means for documentation, digitisation and cooperation with originator societies; for collaborative provenance research and clarification regarding collection histories; for partnerships with institutions in societies of origin; for repatriation, restitution and other forms of consensual and respectful agreements.

Signatories:

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