Nelson Adebo Abiti
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What does the future hold for ethnographic museums?

An interview with Nelson Adebo Abiti

The following Interview with Nelson Adebo Abiti was conducted in Cologne during the conference "*Museum Collections in Motion: Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters*" in July 2019, where artists, curators, experts, young researchers and scholars from around the world came together to speak about the need to decolonize museums and to find new forms of cooperation. It became clear that restitution is not only about giving back the objects. Rather, giving back marks "an initial point in confronting colonial and post-colonial relations between ‚keeping' and ‚giving' societies of colonial objects" (Heidtmann, Röhling, Schäfer on this blog, 2019). Therefore it has become paramount to find new ways to deal with ethnographic collections, and to catch up with the past appropriately in order to not push away the responsibility by just giving back the objects.

Nelson Adebo Abiti is a curator at the National Museum of Uganda. In his conference talk "Repositories and Community Reconciliation" held during the panel "New Museums Practices in an Entangled World" on the second day of the conference, he spoke about ethnographic strategies of dialogue, about new museology and about how the museum as an open space of dialogue can contribute to rebuilding a society after experiences of violence, war or civil war, and about how it can become a place of gathering.

On the third day of the conference, I had the opportunity to interview Nelson Adebo Abiti during the lunch break in the courtyard of the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum and ask him about his thoughts on restitution. What kind of future does he see for ethnographic museums and which colonial structures may still exist in museums, like the National Museum Uganda?

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Question: During the conference "Museum Collections in Motion", (post)colonial provenance and restitution were important topics. What are your thoughts on this?

Answer: My position is very clear. A variety of objects were violently collected, where injustice and cruelty have been done to communities. The generations today may have traumas inherited from this past, from this injustice, and we sometimes blame Africans for their poverty or problems caused by migration. The past violence that has been placed in these communities or the violent interference with their resources, in areas such as land and livelihoods, has been denied. Because of this denial, their effects have continued into the present generation. One finds young generations who do not own land to settle or farm, as colonialists worked with some African agents and chiefs who were involved in attacking other communities. These are some injustices that I think we need to talk about. So, give back the evidence, the objects! Because if the younger generation wants to reclaim their land, there is no evidence at this time to show that they once lived on that land. But if you give back some objects, they are evidence of reparation, of justice and of the resolution of some ongoing conflicts that are taking place in Africa. I believe that this is the question of restitution. So, museums can open up and help to solve some of the problems in Africa.

Q.: *In order to determine the origin of objects and to identify to whom the properties once belonged?*

A.: Yes, I think this is particularly relevant in relation to land. These objects were not created from the air, they were taken from places. So, through the process of collecting these objects, the evidence was destroyed. So, if these objects were returned, new knowledge might be revealed. In my country we have what we call transitional traditional justice mechanisms that are accepted by the judiciary. Conflicts can be resolved through these mechanisms. So, if you refuse to return these cultural objects, you also refuse to implement the transitional traditional justice mechanisms, which are very important to us. We need these objects, the

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originals. We can make copies of these objects for educational reasons, for a kind of multiculturalism and for new ways of sharing knowledge, and we can give them to you. But be humane and give us back the originals, don't hold on to them.

Q.: *Felwine Sarr demanded that all objects that had been forcibly stolen should be returned without exception. Achille Mbembe, on the other hand, declares that these objects should perhaps remain in museums here in Europe to remind us of the atrocities that have taken place. But he also proposes a permanent circulation of objects. What do you think about these two positions?*

A.: I don't support Achille Mbembe's position, because I think there were two types of spheres. In one sphere, the colonial period, objects were collected by force, but there is also a sphere where goods were exchanged as an act of friendship. Of course, the latter can remain here. However, everything that was forcibly stolen must be returned. This sphere is of great importance. As I already said, this is also important evidence for our society, for what has happened. And finally, we do not all have the possibility to travel to Europe and so far, a large part, the majority of the artifacts are in Europe. When will you finally allow repatriation? We have often asked for it, but nothing has happened. That is why we no longer have confidence. Discussions about this started over a hundred years ago, they have not started just now. Some demands for restitution began as early as 1911. I believe, of course, that talks about it make sense, but action must follow. That is my position. I know that some people think that the artfacts should stay in Europe so that new generations can know what happened. But generations have passed, they have learned about history and what has happened? What have they done to solve some of the problems that exist in my country? To give an example: In the Congo, even with the current debates on restitution, such goods continue to be traded. There is a war going on in the Congo and it is still being plundered. People are involved in shootings, murders and the trade in goods. And these objects that are traded do not stay in Africa, they are brought to Europe and people are killed for them. That, I think, is a very serious

problem.

Q.: *Considering this, what do you think the future holds for ethnographic museums?*

A.: This is a practice that is violent. If we wanted to show that we still condone violence, then we can stick to ethnography. But why don't we just rename it? Why do we want war? Ethnography is a practice of violence, of colonial administration. We should look ahead, towards change. Ethnography, let's rather call it cultural heritage, let's reinterpret it. For me, ethnography is a practice that questions people's personal lives and drives someone crazy through the stolen objects crazy. Why don't we accept the heritage instead and appreciate it? As something that is inherent in human beings, that we admire, that we enjoy and that we want to pass on. Do we want to pass it on to an unknown person or to the generation to which it should be legitimately passed on? Of course, I know that we also make objects for sale, for tourists, for commerce, of course there is that. But the objects that have been produced in a process that has served to build a society are, in my opinion, not there to be sold. They were made for the community. So, why do you want to get involved in my business? Why is the ethnographic practice being transformed into otherness, demarcation? Why is there no ethnographic research on your own culture, so that when I am in Europe I can look at it and learn from it? And why is it not simply renamed?

Q.: *The conference we are attending is being held in an ethnographic museum. What would you suggest for the future of an institution like this one?*

A.: My proposal would be to open a center for cultural heritage. I think that would be an appropriate, universal, friendly and humanistic institution that welcomes you with a good heart. If you look at the history of ethnographic practice, it is not right to name a museum after such a practice in today's modern times.

Q.: *You work in a museum in Uganda yourself.*

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A.: Yes, it is a National Museum, but it still has a section with an ethnographic collection, but we are working to change that. Just as Kenya has done. In Kenya there is no longer an ethnographic collection, they now only have cultural heritage.

Q.: *Do colonial structures still exist in African museums and if so, how do they manifest themselves?*

A.: Of course, decolonization is one of the key debates in Uganda. I would say that, in the public arena, this is one of the processes that everyone is talking about. Everything that is associated with colonialism, people want to erase from their memory. But there are structures, colonial structures that are still there. Museums are still part of those structures. The colonial framing of the people has, in my opinion, been partially decolonized, but museums still maintain these structures. What the colonizers thought was wild and exotic, what in their eyes had to die, has been reactivated and is now more present in Uganda than before. It works against the colonial structures. But let's look at the museum or the educational system: we speak English, for example, which is one of the complex things that people fight against, but we can't do without it either.

We have to think back, we are not so backward and satanic, we are people for whom the roots are important in order to build our future. Our roots were partly destroyed, but we have to rebuild them. So the museum is now under pressure, because first of all, all objects that are important for the individual societies, but also land, must be returned to their rightful owners. And our museum is just about to do this. The museum cannot fight alone against the structures of colonialism, but it should work to rebuild the society. We can tell the past stories, not to hurt, but to start a conversation. For me, this is the key to get conversations going, and the museum should set a good example. Create a moment where people talk about the past. This happens, but it should not turn into moaning and complaining. If we listen as a museum, then people will come to enter into dialogue. And if colonialism has produced good things, then of course we don't want to banish them, but we have to

talk about them. Because, of course, colonialism produced both bad and good things. How can we correct this injustice? We must heal the old wounds so that they are not passed on to new generations. Because these wounds, through colonialism, continue into the present generations. So we must open up and the museum must enter the public arena. Sometimes, I think, the museum closes itself off from society. So this is something that I suggest: that the museum opens up and becomes a kind of healing place. I don't know what it looks like here in Germany, the degree to which you involve the public to talk about problems. What do you do besides inviting us experts? How do you involve especially Africans who live here? Maybe they have been living here for a month or two or more, and they take note of the ongoing debates. What are their reactions to this topic?

Naomi Salbert is a student in the Master program "Intercultural Communication and Education" at the Department of Educational and Social Sciences at the University of Cologne. She conducted this interview with Nelson Adebo Abiti during the conference *Museum Collections in Motion: Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters*, which was organized by the University of Cologne, the University of Bremen and the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum, in Cologne, July 15-17, 2019.

Nelson Adebo Abiti is the curator of ethnography at the Uganda National Museum. He holds an MA from the University of East Anglia (2015), received his Bachelor's degree from Makerere University (2003) and studied for a Diploma in Museums and Heritage Studies at the University of Western Cape, South Africa. From 2010 to 2013, Abiti headed a team of Uganda National Museum staff and Norwegian partners, who collaborated with several communities in northern Uganda to preserve and present the regional memory and, thereby, promote peace and reconciliation following a long civil war. The result of this cooperation was an exhibition entitled Road to Reconciliation. Currently, Abiti is working with the committee that revises Uganda's museums and monuments policy and legislation, and has been a core team member of the cooperation project between the Uganda National Museum, Igongo Cultural

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Centre and Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich, which is jointly curating exhibitions in Uganda and Switzerland since 2015.

References

Heidtmann, Jan; Röhrig, Clara; Schäfer, Jana, on this blog: Curating Relationships Collaboratively. From Intertwined Objects to Intertwined Subjects.