

Mal D'Archives Revisited or Archive Evils from a Postcolonial Perspective. An Obstructed View

[1] In the current public debate about the restitution of non-European cultural legacy, one gap (among diverse others) is especially conspicuous: the conditions of the search for the *Herkunft* (provenience) and provenience are systematically disregarded. Postcolonial provenience research has been pointing this out for thirty years; accordingly, the various persons who have recently expressed themselves on this topic in public media have regularly pointed out the difficulty of reconstructing *Herkünfte* (proveniences) and that the funding for provenience research must, of course, be increased. But the political debate, in particular, often works with an illusion of transparency based on the impression that it would be possible, “without further ado”, to reconstruct the distant and diverse *Herkünfte* of complicated intercultural transactions and media and to look into the past with an unobstructed view. In short: the means and media that are regularly employed for this view into the past and that are necessary for a successful reconstruction of *Herkünfte* are equally regularly ignored.

A media-theoretical view of the public provenience debate has the task to dissolve this illusion of a direct view into the past – to the degree that postcolonial provenience research has not long since done so. Instead of working with the illusion of a direct representation of the past, the difficulties and obstructions of view that are immediately part of the picture should be displayed. The media-theoretical gaze thereby has the task of showing the conditions that (almost) every provenience research immediately faces. Because the condition of *Herkunft* is simply (at least if one is deriving the concept of *Herkunft* genealogically from Nietzsche and Foucault): the archive.

Provenience research is archive research. One must keep in mind that all provenience research, which is currently being conducted *en masse*, is primarily archive research and not necessarily research in museums.^[2] Most of the information about the diverse *Herkünfte* and accompanying phenomena from the transport of non-European artifacts into European collections and museums is found – solely in archives. It is not, or only in exceptional cases, found in the museums or libraries, and usually not publicly at all. Even when parts of the colonial archives are publicly accessible, these things are often still under seal, presumably for good reasons.

Herkunft in the Archive

The question of *Herkunft* is thus also a question of the archive. Without the archive, no provenience; where does one go when one wants to learn something about one's *Herkünfte*? Into the archive. Archives are less the conditions for the possibility than for the reality of research on *Herkünfte*, its historical *a priori*, so to speak. If, during the historical transactions of cultural artifacts, no one had come up with the idea of recording their evidence and accompanying circumstances, then today no provenience research could be done; and if no one had come up with the idea of establishing special sites for this evidence and these notes, to transport them from the past into the present, then they would presumably be even more scattered and more difficult to locate than they already are.

Herkünfte require archives; without the archive, no research on origins and proveniences. But none of the museum people who, in the context of the public debate, have recently been asked about their provenience research go into the archive, show their archive, or even refer to their archive – or to the chaos of documents and evidence that they cite and for whose organizing they naturally require as much funding as possible. It is true that Bénédicte Savoy and Felwine Sarr, for example, occasionally refer to their “archive” – for example in an interview published on YouTube ^[3] – but a closer look shows that this archive is merely an

inventory of objects (although German federal institutions have more than once reported that not even such lists of the relevant objects exist).

But if many artifacts are not even registered, how can research on their *Herkunft* be conducted? And wouldn't "research" here mean, rather than gathering inventory lists, critically researching how these lists were created, calculated, and encoded? Wouldn't "research" here have to mean resisting the surveillability and clarity of lists and exposing oneself once again to the complexity of the transmission of each individual artifact? [4]

Abysses open up in the archives, abysses of complexity and undecidability – undecidability particularly there, where they are least desirable: in the political debate, which clamors for quick decisions. That's why the archive, the medium of much provenience research, remains underexposed. One doesn't see the archive; as the a priori of provenience research, it remains invisible, transparent, in the background, always already there.

One reason for this notorious ignoring thereby seems more or less immediately plausible: one doesn't want even more problems and querulousness. In the search for the *Herkünfte* of non-European artifacts, so many problems, so many questions, and so many impossibilities stand in the way in the public debate that one probably would not want to estimate their sum as "archive", on top of all the rest. Because as the real precondition, the archive displays more the reality than the ideal of a search – and one would rather not burden the public debate with that, too. We already have enough problems, after all.

And it is understandable: especially when calling for more public monies, it is naturally an interest of all the players in the debate to have provenience research initially seem *possible* rather than to depict it from the beginning as *impossible* (as the complete reconstruction of all the circumstances accompanying the transactions of many researchers appears). Here, the argument of the archival complications and

the resulting impossibilities only gets in the way. After all, archives, like media in general, not only show something; by showing, they also encode something and blank out other things. And one need not long ask what was presumably supposed to be blanked out when transactions involving intercultural artifacts were recorded.

The Politics of the Archive

But why were the *Herkünfte* of non-European cultural artifacts recorded at all (or not recorded); wouldn't it have been more convenient to just engage in the transactions without registration, without recording, without uncomfortable questions? Who comes up with such an idea? First, we must note: registration was probably the exception and lack of registration the rule. Archives always record only fragments of reality – and what they record usually obeys calculations about what should be told and what should not. This true about archives in general, about colonial and museum archives, but very especially: it is easy to imagine what was supposed to be recorded and what was not supposed to be recorded about the complicated procedure of appropriating and seizing colonial artifacts and transferring them to European collections and museums. It is true that negotiations between equal partners was definitely possible, as Fritz Kramer recently showed in the example of Leo Frobenius;^[5] in the example of Tanzania, Michael Pesek has shown that colonial dominance was also certainly shaky.^[6] But bilateral negotiations were hardly the rule. Vice versa: in colonial contexts, there was usually a porous and fissured difference in power and knowledge – differences and abysses that paved the colonial artifacts' way to Europe.

A quick impression of the porous, fissured situation of many colonial archives is provided by a short – the sole – remark from Michel Leiris on the political function of archives. Leiris was hired precisely as archivist from 1931 to 1933 on the famous Dakar-Djibouti expedition. Shortly after his arrival in Dakar, on June 1, 1931, he made the following entry in his diary: “Talk with the Vice Director for Economic Affairs. When Griaules wanted to know whether we could have access to the court archives

in the various colonies, the Vice Director answered that the officials of the colonial administration were under very strict orders, ever since foreign expeditions had used the documents they had been permitted to view in order to attack French colonial policy and to conjure up incidents before the League of Nations.” [7]

Archives are not only part of political negotiations, they are not only part of politics – they *make* politics. Archives encode political processes – in the colonial situation, more than anywhere else. For this reason, in the colonial situation, the suspicion soon arises that archives serve concealment – that archives are created to conceal certain things and to show them only to selected parties; that archives do not document and record actual courses of events and occurrences, but document and record only certain things, in order to conceal other ones. This would turn the colonial archives from sites of neutrality and impartiality into sites of concealment and partisanship: in brief, into accomplices of the power-holders.

But this suspicion, too, which postcolonial provenience research has already widely expressed, may be too general. Additional questions arise immediately: who records with which media, in which language? And who decides in the first place what is to be recorded in accordance with what logic – and in relation to which jurisdiction in which future? Who decides what an archive is and to what purpose one should be established? Who controls who can put something in it and who may not? And how should we deal today with these never-neutral documents full of gaps? How should the various power interests be made visible? Shouldn't these archives of concealment be read against themselves, “against the grain”, and used against themselves in order to find out “how things really are” (Ranke)?[8]

To approach these complex questions of collecting policy, one must point out that in recent decades such disparate research disciplines as archaeology, provenience research, ethnology, and the history of science have developed concepts that touch upon such policy, but unfortunately do not lessen its complexity: concepts like research on the biography or trajectory of objects ask, first, about *traceability*, i.e.,

about what was recorded and what was not (and for what reasons). Second, however, they ask about the discursivation of artifacts, which could change dizzyingly, especially in the transition from the context of *Herkunft* and that of arrival, for example when objects in European museums, of all things, are classified as “culturally authentic”, “aboriginal”, and “untouched” after their violent.[9]

The Site of the Archive

But reading “how it really was” depends not only on the media in which the past was filed away and is now read again. It also depends on *where* it is read and filed away. The site of archivation has consequences, especially in the colonial context. It appears immediately clear that an archiving of the conditions of the transfer of ownership, of the transport, or even of the robbing of the artifacts – and the problems of archiving begin already here, because the designation of the operation in question already archives its nature, its assignment, and its mission: that is, the concepts of transfer, transport, or robbery – at any rate, it appears immediately clear that the site of the archiving contributes to defining the events, and not only conceptually. The nature of the operation of transferring the objects from colonial to European contexts is in part defined by the site where they are archived: thus, archiving and an archive in Berlin (for example) will have entirely different implications, meanings, and effects from documentation within the regions from which the artifacts were transported away – regions in which the institutions of recording and of the archive may not even exist.[10]

The site of recording and of the archive is thus not only interesting; the site of the archive is an integral part of the recording, its message, and its content. The site has *agency*, it inscribes itself in things and has an effect. It may even determine what is in the archive and what is not, what is collected there and what is passed over in silence there. In 1996, Jacques Derrida’s *Mal d’archive* reflected on this site of recording and of the archive, a reflection that Ann Laura Stoler intensified in 2002.[11] Especially in regard to Derrida, from today’s perspective we can ask: has

anything about reading *Mal d'archive* changed in the light of postcolonialism? What are the archival evils – the *Mal d'archive* – of the (post-)colonial archives? What are the archival evils of the restitution debate? And do the museum people feel sick when they look in their archives, so that they understandably want to avoid this look?

Derrida's *Mal d'archive*, very briefly, was written in London – i.e., also in a postcolonial condition, one could say – in the form of a reflection on the Sigmund Freud archive, or better: on Freud's home in London, which at that time was in the process of being turned into a museum. So, here, too, was a certain situation of transferring objects – maybe not from one territory to another, but from one institutional order (a private home) to another (the public museum).^[12] Derrida conceives his archive theory on the occasion of a situation in which the site is important. He, the Algerian-born son of Sephardic Jews, conceives the archive and its dominance from its site, from the site of its dominance.

Philosophically, he does this with the Greek term *arché*: because according to Derrida, the *arché* doesn't mean only dominance, but also the site of dominance, not only power, but also its localization: *arché* is not only dominance, but also the site of dominance, *there where* it is; Derrida is not thinking solely of power, but of power based on its site.^[13] But powers are fragmented, not only in the colonies; there is power and there are those who take it. Power fragments, in the colonial context usually not only between the colonial rulers and the ruled, but within other groups, for example local rulers, who usually were different people from the colonialists.^[14]

In that Derrida's archive theory localizes dominance in the site of the archive, power is always already the power of the archive and archival power; the division between colonial archive and counter-archive appears to be artificial, because the archive was never neutral, but always already the archive of a site and of the rulers over this site. Would a "neutral standpoint" be conceivable at all at this point? How would it be secured and how overseen? How would it be secured for the past, and how for the

future? What would be “neutral” archives of the colonial situation? At this extremely sensitive and painful point, where a radical self-examination could begin, only one thing seems clear: whoever rules over the archive determines not only the recording of the past; he controls the recording of the past only to also determine what from it should someday arrive in the future and what should not.

The Future of the Colonial Archive

We have now arrived precisely in this future. It is the precise site in time where we find ourselves: as recipients of messages preserved (or not) in the past and that we testify to today: so, here we are now, recipients of messages in bottles from the past to the future, to the future that the colonial rulers, the transactors, the world travelers could hardly have imagined – in that future where we conduct research on their machinations, their transactions, and their plundering raids, where we once again turn over every stone in our collections that they brought to us. Could they have ever imagined this situation? In their colonial situation, could they have ever pictured that their remnant, their legacies would indeed be combed through so meticulously, as we are doing today? Could they have ever imagined that we would haul them into court? They would probably be turning in their graves.

To put it in a nutshell: they, the former colonialists, the colonizing states, are now under suspicion; those who no longer live and who can no longer be questioned are put on trial in absentia – which is why we depend on their remnants, their testimonies: an archaeological situation. In this archaeological situation, (not only postcolonial) provenience research seeks among the remnants for the kind of future that has inscribed itself in it; for the future that the colonial masters once imagined, did they simply carefreely preserve documents that twined around the objects? Or did they already begin to select the traces, to falsify them, to adjust them to their own logics, and to make them fit? Did the perpetrators cover their tracks? Did they have a consciousness of their perpetration? Who were the witnesses of their transactions? Was the archive the institution of testimony, or of complicity? As

improbable as our present situation may have seemed 100 or 200 years ago – it is the situation that every archive foresaw and toward which it flies as targeted as an arrow: the archive only finds itself in the future for which it transports its past.

The Absence of the Archives

But there is not only the archive, its content and its gaps, what was said and what was passed over in silence – the colonial situation confronts us with a much more radical situation that we have to conceive today: with the absence of archives, with the situation that in one place, possibly at the site of the events, there are no recordings and no archive at all – which doesn't mean that nothing happened here, but merely that it was not recorded in this way, was not archived, was not institutionalized – that there is no institution of the archive at the scene of the crime? How do we think about the colonial archive when there is no archive at all? Or if there is one only on one side? How do we think about archives that were always the archives of the perpetrators? And how do we think about the total absence of archives – which of course is the question posed by many postcolonial situations? How do we search for archives if they don't even exist? And how can we integrate this absence of the archive in our thoughts, how can we confront the concept of the archive with its own absence?

This situation of the absence of the archive is significant, too – especially, of course, in those contexts in which the past was transmitted primarily orally. The absence of the archive radicalizes the situation of its gaps: suddenly the point is not that recording was selective and full of gaps, but that for long stretches of time and across huge regions nothing was recorded at all! This one-sided absence of the archive and of archiving is, of course, extremely significant – but in no way does it mean there were no witnesses and no testimony (because the traditions of oral history, of course, are above all ways of witnessing and bearing witness).

But in these contexts, can one speak of archives or of archiving at all? Wouldn't we

need here a substantially expanded concept of the archive, a concept of the archive that, for example, would be extended to include the perspective of ethnology?[15] For how does classical or conventional archive theory deal with, for example, oral traditions of transmission? Who back then would have thought of interviewing the witnesses of the removal of the artifacts – much less would have had the media to do so?

There is not always an archive and an archiving; testimony and its institutions often remain one-sided: in the postcolonial situation, it often appears as if only one side had witnesses (the archives of the former colonial states) and the other did not (the absence of archives in many colonized states) – if one could speak only of states, because of course the absence of state and institutional structures plays a role that must not be underestimated. *En quête des archives* thus also means seeking archives that may not exist, seeking archived material, where none may exist, and reading the gaps that were not supposed to be read. In any case, it means seeking the Other of the archive and confronting the archive with its Other.

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[1] This paper was written in the context of the conference organized by Sarah Dornhof and Nadia Sabri, *In Search of Archives/En quête d'Archives*, which was held

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[2] Cf. Patrick Gathara (2019): The path to colonial reckoning is through archives, not museums. In: *Al Jazeera Online*, 15 March 2019. Last accessed 18 March 2019. Thanks to Michi Knecht for drawing my attention to this article.

[3] <https://youtu.be/9YSHpGNp8AY>. Last accessed 18 March 2019.

[4] On the demand to digitalize colonial archives and make them accessible, cf. Larissa Förster/Iris Edenheiser/Sarah Fründt/Heike Hartmann (eds.) 2017: *Provenienzforschung zu ethnografischen Sammlungen der Kolonialzeit. Positionen in der aktuellen Debatte*, <https://edoc.hu-berlin.de/bitstream/handle/18452/19814/00-Einfuehrung.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>. Last accessed 18 March 2019. Thanks to Verena Rodatus for drawing my attention to this article.

[6] Cf. Michael Pesek (2005): *Koloniale Herrschaft in Deutsch-Ostafrika. Expeditionen, Militär und Verwaltung seit 1880*, Frankfurt am Main/New York: Campus. Thanks to Verena Rodatus for drawing my attention to this article.

[7] Michel Leiris (1985): *Phantom Afrika. Tagebuch einer Expedition von Dakar nach Djibouti 1931-1933. Erster Teil*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

[8] Cf. Margit Berner/Anette Hoffmann/Britta Lange (eds.) (2012): *Sensible Sammlungen. Aus dem anthropologischen Depot*, Hamburg: Verlag der Kunst/ Philo Fine Arts; Ann Stoler (2008): *Along the Archival Grain. Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*, Princeton University Press. Thanks to Michi Knecht for drawing my attention to this article.

[9] Thanks to Verena Rodatus for drawing my attention to the research on object

biographies, as well as to their inherent paradoxes.

[10] Cf. Förster et al., *Provenienzforschung*, Note 4.

[12] The distinction between public (state) archives and private archives is central also for the volume edited by Förster et al., cf. Förster et al., *Provenienzforschung*, Note 4.

[13] Cf. Förster et al., *Provenienzforschung*, Note 4.

[14] Cf. Fritz Kramer, *Koloniales Erbe*, Note 5.

[15] Cf. for example Elisabeth Povinelli, *The Woman on the Other Side of the Wall: Archiving the Otherwise in Postcolonial Digital Archives*, in: *differences* (2011) 22 (1): 146-171. Thanks to Michi Knecht for drawing my attention to this article.