Ingrid Kummels

Sleeping Objects

On the future of museum artefacts

Aquí leen la versión en castellano

The news of the devastating fire at the National Museum in Rio de Janeiro calls to mind the following aspect of museums of a similar immense size: In keeping with their claim of representing the nation and the wealth of its cultural heritage, they have amassed large quantities of artefacts that have been collected for them all around the world. Over time, these objects have been predominantly stored in the depots of these prestigious buildings. But this very concentration is what makes this cultural heritage vulnerable to the catastrophe of a fire. Even though the many objects in their storerooms are being conserved and some of them are being investigated – for the depot is "the continually throbbing heart of a museum" [1] – these stored objects lack an "exhibition status", and thus have no public impact. The tedious task of preserving them in the depot lurks in the shadows. The depots contain, in addition, hundreds of thousands, probably millions, of cultural assets that have never been put to *any* scholarly use during their decades and centuries there. In this way, they are withheld from world knowledge.



Diana Guzmán and María Morera viewing the depot of the Ethnological Museum of Berlin in July 2014, screenshot from Sleeping Objects © Ingrid Kummels

At the Ethnological Museum in Berlin, too, the bulk of the half million objects are "asleep". They were systematically collected from all over the world outside the "province of Europe" under the leadership of Adolf Bastian from 1873 onward. "Sleeping" is the word that Diana Guzmán thought of when she saw for the first time, at our invitation, objects in the Berlin depot that are part of the cultural heritage of the Kotiria and Wira poná (ethnic groups of the Amazon region of Colombia, also known as the Wanano and Desana). The artefacts are "sleeping" because their direct heirs, the present-day members of their source communities, where they were once acquired, often have no information about their existence.[2] They also have very limited possibilities for examining this legacy on-site in the museums that are predominantly located in the Global North. For lack of the substantial knowledge that these communities have about these stored artefacts, the "sleeping objects" have become decontextualized from the epistemologies that give them a deeper meaning. In museums, the objects are thus often basically interpreted as important

landmarks of the expeditions of famous explorers or appreciated in aesthetic terms. These are both informative and legitimate approaches to understanding them – but they yield only a partial understanding. The huge significance of many "sleeping objects" as a part of world heritage thus eludes humanity.

But let us start from the beginning: in 2014, Michael Kraus, Ernst Halbmayer and I initiated a collaborative project with representatives of the Kotiria and Wira poná. Two years earlier, Michael Kraus had visited them in Mitú, Colombia, and called their attention to the existence of their material legacy in Berlin. Our point of departure were the 1,298 objects that the German researcher Theodor Koch-Grünberg, at the time an employee of the Royal Museum for Ethnology (as the Ethnological Museum of Berlin was then called), had collected on his journey to the upper Río Negro between 1903 and 1905. His scientific approach in this region and his interactions with its inhabitants are a part of our scholarly history as German ethnologists and anthropologists of the Americas – whether we personally approve of them or not. But fortunately, Koch-Grünberg remains in many ways a role model even from a present-day perspective. His research approach was exemplary for his time, although his conduct in the midst of the rubber boom was certainly not devoid of contradictions.[3] On his three expeditions, he extensively engaged in participant observation of the cultural life of ethnic groups of the Río Negro, a tributary of the Amazon. He admired their humanity and wisdom. Like many ethnologists, he financed his travels by acquiring material cultural assets for the museum in Berlin. He was, however, utterly unenthusiastic about the scope of his collecting activity. At the insistence of the museum, he devoted a great deal of time to the logistics of transporting bulky items. He would have much preferred to learn more about the local intellectual culture and myths, which he postponed until his next journey. But his plan never came true: at the outset of his fourth expedition in South America, Koch-Grünberg died of malaria at the age of 51.[4]



Theodor Koch-Grünberg with inhabitants of the lower Río Apaporis;
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At the end of July 2014, the day arrived when we had the opportunity to welcome Diana Guzmán, Orlando Villegas, María Morera and Gaudencio Moreno to the Ethnological Museum in Berlin, where they had travelled from Mitú for a two-week workshop. In Berlin they would see objects such as office staffs, rattle lances, quartz crystals, feather headdresses, dancing loincloths, shamans' rattles, cigar holders, ornamented clay pots and finely woven colanders for the first time – or, in a certain sense, re-encounter them once again. Many of these artefacts are no longer in use in the communities of the Kotiria and Wira poná. In particular, shamans' utensils such as the vessel for hallucinogenic yagé or ayahuasca, the elaborate dance attire adorned with feathers, and the musical instruments have been deliberately eliminated by the Catholic missions because they were part of a rival system of

knowledge. The Kotiria and Wira poná, like the members of a total of 27 ethnic groups of the Department of Vaupés, also suffered the ruthless exploitation of their labour in the rubber extraction business for decades, which forced them to abandon many aspects of their intellectual and material culture. As I was filming the brief round of introductions on the first day of the workshop, I heard a sentence that made me rather pensive. Suddenly, I saw what I had up to then perceived as "the" objects of the Koch-Grünberg collection – that is, as artefacts whose sustained existence we primarily owed to this researcher – in a different light. In an opening address, our guests first thanked us emphatically for this preservation at the Ethnological Museum of Berlin, which allowed us to examine the objects more than 100 years later. In passing, I would like to note that they would always hold the work and expertise of the museum conservators in the highest esteem. Then came the sentence that struck me: 80-year-old María Morera, whose Kotiria name is Horiphokó (the owner of figures), said plainly: "For us, the objects that are located here are like the centre of the body, the backbone".



Richard Haas, Orlando Villegas, María Morera, Ernesto Belo, Diana Guzmán, German Laserna and

Gaudencio Moreno in between the display cases of the museum depot, screenshot from Sleeping Objects © Ingrid Kummels

I began thinking hard on this, asking myself what we really know about the "sleeping objects" in the museum depots.[5] My perspective shifted from the dominance of this famous researcher and "his" collection, aspects which always seem to be central to the biographies of the museum objects, to what we had just experienced hands-on as part of this intercultural meeting at the museum: an emotionally intense (re-)encounter between our guests from the upper Río Negro and a cultural heritage that they had not counted on (at least in terms of these particular objects) beforehand. I in turn came to understand and appreciate a collection I had thought to be familiar with in a new way thanks to them. In addition, my specific approach of filming came into play: the Volkswagen Foundation had asked us to document in detail the process of the workshop that they were funding, so I took on the task of recording with a camcorder for hours. Filming means more than just documenting processes audio-visually; the camera can intervene as an additional agent and catalyst, prompting those who are being filmed to direct messages to a wider audience of future viewers of this footage. At the same time, the film images reveal more than verbal content: they show spaces, interactions, facial expressions and gestures that are marked by the affectivity which connects us as people with these objects. Emotional access concerns questions such as: how and to what end are we storing the rattle lance? Whose heritage is it? Who is permitted to display it? What role does it play in our future? On the display of my camcorder, I often saw faces that showed tension, hopeful anticipation, curiosity, scepticism or doubt. During this round of introductions, Diana Guzmán, Orlando Villegas, María Morera and Gaudencio Moreno explained that they were grateful that these objects exist and that they have been preserved here with great care (albeit not without severe menaces such as the bombing and looting during the Second World War) for more than a century. However, they also emphasized – or simply showed through their practices – that while they no longer have these objects, they still know them very well. For, despite all the neo-colonial expansion and destruction of the twentieth

century, they have continued to hand down these practices as an unbroken part of their immaterial cultural heritage. This fact lent a historic dimension to the impending re-encounter with their material cultural heritage. This moving moment called for the audio-visual recording of messages and practices for posterity.



Michael Kraus, Gaudencio Moreno and Orlando Villegas discuss the arrangement of the artefacts in the depot, screenshot from Sleeping Objects © Ingrid Kummels

At that, they systematically awakened the objects from their deep slumber. From the first day onward, Diana Guzmán, María Morera, Orlando Villegas and Gaudencio Moreno assumed the leadership of the workshop: after the introductions, they let María Morera, the "owner of figures", carefully paint their faces, without giving us notice of this requirement beforehand. I filmed this. Days later, during the workshop, we asked about this and Diana said, "We paint ourselves to protect ourselves from all the objects in this place, because there are many people – that is, objects – here. They are powerful, very powerful. If we do not paint ourselves, we become ill. In the first night we did not have good dreams precisely because of that. The objects are living beings and they possess different forms of knowledge. For you these are mere

objects, but for us they are people and are alive, they have energy." All four of them have been engaged with the issue of cultural heritage for a long time: as teachers at the ENOSIMAR (Escuela Normal Superior Indígena María Reina) school in Mitú, Diana and Orlando advocate for strengthening indigenous legacies in day-to-day school life. The Colombian government has conferred the title of "Heritage Guardians" on them. Orlando and Gaudencio are currently completing a book about Kotiria mythology.[6]

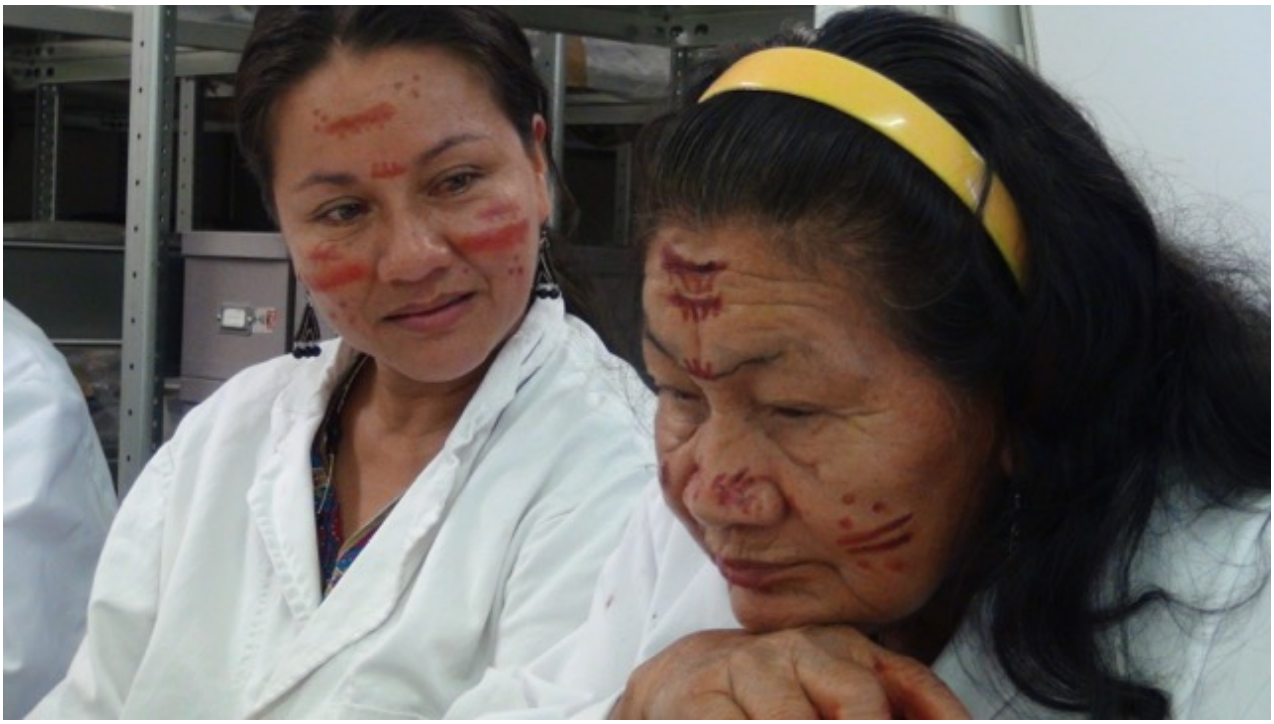
Before the first walk through the depot of the South America department, Richard Haas, the deputy director at the time, informed us that the artefacts were organised by their materials – such as ceramics, baskets and feather ornamentation – based on the conservation measures they require. We had provisionally sorted particular objects so as to arrange them in general thematic groups such as "ritual objects and objects of power", "dance and music", "objects and childhood: objects and sports", "symbols and ornaments" and "objects and everyday life". The indigenous experts decided that in order to exchange knowledge about the artefacts, they had to be brought out of the depot and rearranged. This was the only way to explain them in terms of the Kotiria and Wira poná origin myths, which ascribe to the objects a history that extends much farther back than the time of colonialism. This history tells us of the relationship of complicity which people and objects have with each other.



The rattle lance, the "backbone of our culture", is moved to a side room so Gaudencio Moreno (middle) can explain it as part of the Kotiria origin myth, © photo: Ingrid Kummels

One example of how this learning process helped us to mutually expand our perspective on this cultural heritage over the course of the two weeks is the *caja de plumas*. Without us on the German side being aware of it, the indigenous experts were harbouring hopes that they would find a complete *caja de plumas*, including its

contents, at the museum. Ritual utensils of utmost importance, such as the feather ornamentation for dances, from which the ancestors of today's humans were made, used to be stored in this large, oblong basket-style box. This container, which is also called the "box of knowledge", used to be stored carefully above the hearth, which protected it from humidity. The system of organisation in the depot, which divided objects into groups according to their constituent materials, aroused concerns. Our indigenous interlocutors feared that the elements of this box had been dispersed among different cabinets in the museum or had even been distributed among different museums in former times, when museums were ignorant of the religious meaning of the box with its integral contents. They compared this with the dismembering of a person. Although it had not been part of our plans, at such moments we got close to what Amy Lonetree had demanded when she wrote of the necessity of speaking about the "hard truths" of collaboration in the context of museum projects.[7]





Pondering "hard truths", screenshots from Sleeping Objects © Ingrid Kummels

Those concerned triggered a discussion that went far beyond a mere claim for restitution of cultural assets. Instead, they spoke of overarching aspects of the exchange of knowledge in this world and, in particular, called for the members of different heir societies to continue a regular and systematic dialogue. We also discussed a range of practical issues such as the preservation of the cultural heritage of the Kotiria and Wira poná, the way of conserving the objects, their arrangement in the depot, and their scientific study – for example, the sources of knowledge that should be consulted about particular objects. We especially addressed the issue of the flow of knowledge, since in the case of the "sleeping objects" it had been interrupted for such a long time. As a result, key objects, cultural "backbones" and their epistemologies continue to be ignored; this ignorance is a critical element contributing to the existing tilt and inequality of knowledge in the global landscape. The indigenous experts, then, were by no means seeking a "return to the original state", something proving to be impossible in view of decades of missionary activity, the internal conflict in Colombia, and neoliberal extractivism. Rather, the future of

the objects and of our dialogue occupied centre stage given that the latter could become a building block for a more balanced geopolitics of knowledge. For this reason, our guests advocated for advancing these issues. At our public closing conference, Orlando Villegas was explicitly asked if they had considered demanding restitution of the objects, to which he answered: "We would not like to take them back to Vaupés. Why? Mainly because we have the knowledge. [...] Knowing that they are here, we can visit them and bring them back to life, like we are doing right now."[8]

So far, our mutual desire for continued dialogue has been fulfilled. The expanded knowledge of the cultural heritage of the Kotiria and Wira poná that is stored in Berlin now is disseminated in formats that include the conference proceedings and the recently published trailer for the workshop documentary film; besides this, the publication of a multilingual book on the workshop with large-format illustrations for readers in Mitú is currently in the process of being written. A close cooperation also continues in coordination with Andrea Scholz and her project "Living Things in the Amazon and the Museum – Shared Knowledge in the Humboldt Forum". Diana, Andrea and I met in Salamanca in June 2018. We watched an initial version of the 60-minute film on the workshop that I would like to screen in Mitú too soon: *Sleeping Objects / Objetos dormidos*. It brought back a lot of memories, those that were painful and others that were full of hope – and gave us a new lift. This example, just one among a growing number of collaborative projects,[9] goes to show that the Ethnological Museum of Berlin, especially its depot, is already de facto being used as the "research campus" that the management of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation publically began calling for in 2017.[10] Nevertheless, Hermann Parzinger's announcement points to the fact that along this path that has been forged, there is still much to be desired. "On-site research from the perspective of communication of knowledge" is supposed to take place on the Dahlem research campus, according to the current call for applications for the position of deputy director of the Ethnological Museum and the Asian Art Museum in Berlin. The person

who fills this vacant position is required to develop and implement a strategy for the scientific endeavours at the Dahlem research campus.

So what else is still missing? An enabling structure for current and future collaborative approaches, allowing for a dialogue between members of heir societies who share a history concerning the museum objects in which they can participate on an equal footing. As members of these societies, we have a "shared history"[11], which has been marked by multifarious processes of exchange ranging from commercial transactions to the usurpation of cultural assets; this history is not limited to the era of European colonialism, but is much longer and more richly faceted. Instrumentalising the "knowledge of the Other" one-sidedly cannot be what is meant by collaboration.[12] Rather, it requires new forms of training about how to interact with objects, conserve them, conduct research with them, and exhibit them. Provenance research on museum artefacts is to be thought about in a new light, as Diana Guzmán and Andrea Scholz have called for. The biographies of artefacts must be apprehended from the perspective of the source communities as well. Ethnological museums and universities feel the need to shape their collaboration in a closer and more systematic way. Collaborative approaches should, from the start, be integrated and practiced during professional training, for example within the scope of a research training group on material culture and its sleeping objects.[13]

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Centre "Affective Societies". As a filmmaker, she has produced numerous documentaries for German television.

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[1] Martina Griesser-Stermscheg (2013): Tabu Depot. Das Museumsdepot in Geschichte und Gegenwart. Köln: Böhlau, p. 9.

[2] Despite the fact that the Ethnological Museum of Berlin makes some of its objects and photos publically available in an online database (see http://www.smb-digital.de/eMuseumPlus), the Kotiria and Wira poná had no knowledge of this collection.

[3] Michael Kraus (2018): Testigos de la época del caucho: experiencias de Theodor Koch-Grünberg y Hermann Schmidt en el alto río Negro. In: Michael Kraus, Ernst Halbmayer and Ingrid Kummels (eds.) *Objetos como testigos del contacto cultural. Perspectivas interculturales de la historia y del presente de las poblaciones indígenas del alto río Negro (Brasil/Colombia)*. Estudios Indiana 11: 97-133.

[4] Michael Kraus, Ernst Halbmayer & Kummels Ingrid (2018): The Perspective from Germany: Steps towards a Dialogue on Objects. In: Michael Kraus, Ernst Halbmayer and Ingrid Kummels (eds.) *Objetos como testigos del contacto cultural. Perspectivas interculturales de la historia y del presente de las poblaciones indígenas del alto río Negro (Brasil/Colombia)*. Estudios Indiana 11. Available online: https://www.iai.spk-berlin.de/fileadmin/dokumentenbibliothek/Estudios_Indiana/EI_11_introcuction_EN.pdf

[5] Ingrid Kummels (2018): Trailer of *Sleeping Objects*. https://vimeo.com/292484834.

[6] See also: Mirigõ – Diana Guzmán and Maha-piria – Orlando Villegas (2018): The Perspective from Mitú, Colombia: Museums, Objects, and Narratives. In: Michael

Kraus, Ernst Halbmayer and Ingrid Kummels (eds.) *Objetos como testigos del contacto cultural. Perspectivas interculturales de la historia y del presente de las poblaciones indígenas del alto río Negro (Brasil/Colombia)*. Estudios Indiana 11. Available online: https://www.iai.spk-berlin.de/fileadmin/dokumentenbibliothek/Estudios_Indiana/EI_11_introcuction_EN.pdf

[7] Amy Lonetree (2012): *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, p. 5. Inquiries at the museum later revealed that Koch-Grünberg probably never collected or was able to acquire a complete box. However, the search for the *caja de plumas* remains a powerful metaphor, indicating that our lack of knowledge on "sleeping objects" goes hand in hand with the loss of important epistemologies for this world.

[8] Michael Kraus, Ernst Halbmayer & Kummels Ingrid (2018): The Perspective from Germany: Steps towards a Dialogue on Objects. In: Michael Kraus, Ernst Halbmayer and Ingrid Kummels (eds.) *Objetos como testigos del contacto cultural. Perspectivas interculturales de la historia y del presente de las poblaciones indígenas del alto río Negro (Brasil/Colombia)*. Estudios Indiana 11. Available online: https://www.iai.spk-berlin.de/fileadmin/dokumentenbibliothek/Estudios_Indiana/EI_11_introcuction_EN.pdf

[9] For the Ethnological Museum of Berlin, see Andrea Scholz (2017): Sharing Knowledge as a Step toward an Epistemological Pluralization of the Museum. In: *Museum Worlds: Advances in Research* 5: 133-148. Another example is the project "Mensch-Ding-Verflechtungen indigener Gesellschaften" of the University of Bonn, https://www.iae.uni-bonn.de/forschung/forschungsprojekte/laufende-projekte/medivig/201emensch-ding-verflechtungen-indigener-gesellschaften201c; see also Alexander Brust (2013): Amazonas-Indianer und ihre Blicke auf Museumssammlungen. *Museumskunde* 78(2): 62-68.

[10] Hermann Parzinger (2017): Der Museumskomplex Dahlem wird zum Forschungscampus. Der Tagesspiegel, 17 March 2017 https://www.preussischer-kulturbesitz.de/newsroom/dossiers-und-nachrichten/dossiers/dossier-sammlungswelten/museumskomplex-dahlem-wird-zum-forschungscampus/?L=0&cookie_notice=1ebd.

[11] Nicola Kuhn (2018): „Rückgabe? Wichtiger ist die geteilte Geschichte." Der Tagesspiegel, 23 July 2018 https://www.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/humboldt-forum-rueckgabe-wichtiger-ist-die-geteilte-geschichte/22819922.html

[12] See Andrea Scholz's contribution to this blog: https://boasblogs.org/de/dcntr/das-wissen-der-anderen-in-der-provenienzforschung/.

[13] On the traditional and changing relationship between these two institutions, see Karoline Noack (2015): Museum und Universität. Institutionen der Ethnologie und Authentizität der Objekte. Rückblicke, gegenwärtige Tendenzen und zukünftige Möglichkeiten. In: Michael Kraus and Karoline Noack (eds.): *Quo vadis, Völkerkundemuseum? Aktuelle Debatten zu ethnologischen Sammlungen in Museen und Universitäten*. Bielefeld: transcript, p. 48-61.