“Stolen from Africa?”: Statement by the Basel Workshop on Namibian Cultural Heritage in Switzerland

by the Basel Workshop „Stolen from Africa? Restitution of Namibian Cultural Heritage in Switzerland“, 8 May 2019, *organised by the Centre of African Studies of the University of Basel and the Basler Afrika Bibliographien in collaboration with the Swiss Society of African Studies and the Swiss Academy of Humanities and Social Sciences*

Colonial heritage and, in particular, colonial heritage collections, underpin many Swiss cultural institutions, notably ethnographic museums but also art museums and (university) research institutions and their archives. Similar to European colonial powers, Switzerland´s history has been shaped by multiple and complex political, economic and cultural entanglements with colonialism in the global South and within particular former colonies.

The Basel workshop “*Stolen from Africa*”? with international participation from Namibia and Germany focused on one limited area, namely Namibian Cultural Heritage collections in various Swiss institutions in Basel, Berne and Zurich. In particular, we addressed questions concerning the nature and state of provenance research for such collections and Swiss institutional practices in dealing with its colonial legacies. The lively, so-called restitution debate, which has gained prominence since the 2018 Restitution Report by the Senegalese economist Felwine Sarr and the French art historian Bénédicte Savoy, has major significance and repercussions for any institution with collections of colonial heritage, both in Europe and elsewhere.

Colonialism as a historical process and phenomenon implied an exploitative, violent

and racist system of rule and authority over colonised people whose cultural productions (and even human remains) were removed and integrated into European collections for research and knowledge production purposes. The manner in which material culture and the remains of dead people were removed from Africa means that it can clearly be said that many objects in these collections were stolen from Africa and remain out of reach for communities, families and countries of origin.

Today, not only general questions relating to the provenance of these collections need to be urgently addressed, but also questions relating to the politics of provenance research. Why, in our case, have no Namibian researchers been involved in provenance research? How can we guarantee that future joint research benefits Namibia, and not only the Swiss institutions involved? Swiss museums also need to address questions concerning the space and place of colonial heritage collections in their public educational politics of "cultural knowledge sharing" ("*kulturelle Teilhabe*" as the official Swiss educational policy is termed). We call on all stakeholders to develop policies and practices, jointly and multilaterally, that generate sustainable (transnational partnerships and exchanges as well as guidelines for restitution processes for artefacts and collections.

The participants of the workshop, therefore, call on Swiss and Namibian institutions to establish the following framework of action:

1. Swiss institutions have to accept their historical complicity in the colonial project. This should not be seen as a threat but as an opportunity to enter into a new productive and equal dialogue with Namibian partners.

2. We principally support restitution claims on cultural heritage by communities, families and countries of provenance.

3. Originating countries and local institutions must be integrated in all aspects of decision-making about returns.

4. In order to ensure that originating countries, like Namibia, are fully integrated into the dialogue, archives and museums storage must be open and transparent about the Namibian material in their collections to provide a strong foundation for potential joint research and professional and cultural exchanges.

5. It is the responsibility of Swiss institutions to provide the financial means to support such a dialogue and decision-making process, as well as all costs evolving from the decisions made within such a framework.

6. Swiss/Cantonal Governments need to establish a legal framework that allows and encourages restitution and the free exchange of information and data between involved institutions.

7. The precondition for dialogue is full and open access to all information regarding all collections and objects in a language easily accessible in the country or region of the provenance of the objects.

8. High quality photographs of every object must be provided to involved institutions and as long as it does not interfere with personal rights, no copyrights should be applied to them.

9. If the information on collections/objects is not sufficient, the Swiss heritage institutions must finance provenance research.

10. Provenance research should not replicate the colonial bias that has often structured collections and research (e.g. a focus on the collector), but should concentrate on the historical context and significance to the country/community of origin.

11. Provenance research has to be done jointly with Namibian researchers and institutions, and for the benefit of Namibian institutions and people.

12. Swiss institutions should provide a list to relevant stakeholders of any human remains from Namibia that are held in their collections as well as all available information about their provenance.

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