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VOICES FROM THE CONFERENCE 3 – Visions for the future

An Interview with Wandile Kasibe

[Please find our collected voices from day one here and from day two here.]

A very moving Day Two begged the question of how to conclude the conference. From our perspective, the question of how to move on, how to end a meeting like this, remained open. We do not know how the momentum of the conference will translate into the different contexts of the participants' lives. Are they still thinking about the conference? Will they be able to change the way museums deal with their collections? How can the issues surrounding the collections be translated into political demands?

The last interview is a conversation with Wandile Kasibe, who proposes to look at the anthropological museum as a crime scene. We think that his answers offer some useful insights: on a theoretical as well as on a practical level.

Wandile Kasibe is a PhD Candidate of Sociology at University of Cape Town. His research focuses on "Museums and the Construction of Race Ideologies". He is currently a Public Programmes Coordinator of the Iziko Museums of South Africa.

Can you give us your impression of the past days at this conference?

Wandile Kasibe: Firstly, I must say that it really has been a wonderful experience for myself to be part of this conversation. I said it before: the organizers have done a great job of bringing together minds from different parts of the world, which is immensely important. At such a gathering you are able to interact, to share ideas and

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to learn from other people about what they are doing. It allows you to find out where the direction of global discussions and scholarship is going. But these are museum practitioners, historians, academics, young researchers, scholars that come together. It is through these minds that ideas are shaped, contested, that they are put on the table. For me this is a very important platform.

I had a couple of issues with the first panel. They seemed to create the impression that the induction of colonizing powers and Africans was basically on the exchange of objects, that there was a peaceful exchange. I had a problem with that, because we know that colonization was not a peaceful exchange. As much as we think that there was an element of bartering, it was on an asymmetric basis. As an African chief you could have been giving away something of significant value and in exchange you receive something that has no value at all. In result you are really not bartering at the same level.

I then started raising questions about the darker side of colonization. Why do we seem to be ignoring this side? I could sense that a lot of people didn't want to talk about the past, but rather wanted to move forward. But where are we moving forward to? You will never know where you are going, if you don't know where you are coming from.

In the museological context we must be able to talk about how the museum as an institution got to where it is today. How has the museum been involved in what I think you can call crimes against humanity? How has the museum received human remains that were stolen from graves, human remains that were then used for the scientific construction of racism? Are these questions a taboo here, in this part of the world?

Where I come from, we talk about it all the time. So now I come to the empire, to Germany, a place where in 1884 the Berlin conference was held, where Africa was divided. That discussion took place in Berlin, in this part of the world. Powerful

nations came and participated. We know what happened afterwards from 1904 to 1908 when Lothar von Trotha issued an extermination order where the Nama, the Hereros and other native groups were slaughtered. I came expecting at least some kind of acknowledgment of that aspect of our past. But people here are silent about it. I am asking myself whether there is a conspiracy here. Was there an agreement that I wasn't part of that we shouldn't touch this aspect of the past? Is it a taboo here in Germany to talk abut the genocide that took place in Namibia? Are we bringing discomfort to this conference by putting these topics on the table?

I was excited to see that the majority of the people here acknowledged the fact that we should talk about those things, because this is what conferences are all about. Conferences are about engaging ideas, talking about issues and reflecting about the failures and successes of the museological institution form the time where it was formed up until today. You look at that past to understand where we are today. And when you understand where you are today, you are able to project where you are going in the future.

At the same time you shouldn't use the past to silence current debates. You should use it to make sure that you don't repeat the same mistakes. This is how the institution of the museum should move forward.

Is the past something you can rewrite?

Wandile Kasibe: The past is very much part of the presence. You can't rewrite the past, the past happened. But you can have historical justice. If you wronged me in the past, you acknowledge that you have wronged me, and you apologize. And you listen to what needs to happen now. So if you stole my bicycle, at least give me back the frame. If you can't afford it, let's talk about a compromise.

The question of repatriation and restitution comes right at the heart of that: historical justice. What are the discussions that should take place around the issue of

restitution? What does it take in this context that includes issues of restoring the dignity of the victims of this colonial violence? How do we begin to do that?

This conference started to give us a sense of the different possibilities that we can temper with, different frameworks we could use in shaping the restitution. We moved in the right direction, because in the end people raised questions that were not raised in the first panel. Sometimes things grow gradually.

What is your contribution to the debate? What are we to do with the museum?

Wandile Kasibe: I argue that the museum of natural history and the anthropological museum are *colonial crime scenes* and that they require rigorous decolonial investigation. When the public enter those museums, they should be made aware that this is the place where crimes of the colonial past were committed. When a site has been demarcated as a crime scene, it is not an ordinary site. You are entering into a place now where you have to look for clues. You look more closely at the objects. What are those labels saying? Who wrote them? Who took those photographs? What was the context? You're entering as an investigator. When entering an exhibition that holds human remains that were stolen from the spoils of war or that were brought from the site of genocide in Namibia, you should be looking for those clues. How did this skull arrive here? Who was involved in the process? How much money was made from this exchange? All of those are questions the public should begin asking.

When you enter a crime scene, you identify evidence. Therefore, we also need to look at the objects through a different lens. They are evidence of a crime that was committed.

We need to use intangible heritage, for example performances, when we do this decolonial work. Often when we enter into the museological space, you have static displays. There is no intangible aspect that is attached to it, that will allow people to

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interpret this display in different ways. This is part of a much bigger project of decolonial work we need to do. We need to do this on an intellectual level as well as on a practical level. We need to look how we set up an exhibition so that we don't follow the colonial logic of putting things in a particular way.

When we set up an exhibition in a postcolonial context, communities become a central point. We must work with communities; we must work through communities so that their voices are as important as every other voice that forms part of an exhibition. In the colonial context the curator was the main expert, who knew everything, even when they knew nothing. Some people even curated exhibitions with objects while never having been in their country of origin. They had a very limited knowledge. Only because they were curators, they were regarded as experts. But the experts are the people who produced these objects. Therefore, those communities should have a strong voice in how those objects are being displayed.

I'm talking about visions for the museum of the 21st century. There is a deep paradigm shift that needs to take place in how museums are designed and how they are being re-engineered to meet the needs of the 21st century. We need to go into the structural formation of the museum. The meaning of museums has changed over time. So its meaning today is different to what it meant decades or centuries ago. The role of the museum is changing as we move into the future.