Katharina Nowak

Dialogues of Display and Dissertation

Reflections on a Doctorate in the Museum

Museums and university institutions have a long shared history of intellectual and institutional entanglement. Social and Cultural Anthropology was largely shaped and represented by museums, before it became an established academic discipline (cf. Edenheiser and Förster 2019, cf. Noack 2015). Knowledge[1] was generated[2] within and through processes of collecting, exhibiting, and curating: theoretical frameworks emerged from engagements with objects; exhibitions and collections informed lectures and academic discourses (Edenheiser and Förster 2019, 11). Over the course of the 20th century, however, this close relationship became fractured (Flitsch and Noack 2019, 168). Members of university staff expressed criticism of the apparent paucity of academic depth in museum exhibitions. In turn, members of the museum staff made remarks regarding the apparent absence of material culture and museum practice within university curricula (Edenheiser and Förster 2019, 13). This critique has led to a framing of museums as spaces of collections and of meaning in contrast to universities as spaces of theory and of critique, disentangling museum and university knowledge production and practices (cf. Sigfusdottir 2021).

But what happens when these two spaces intersect again? And how does anthropological research change when it moves between and across both institutional contexts?

The joint doctoral program *A Doctorate in the Museum: The Local and Global Dimensions of Objects in Anthropological Museums in Baden-Württemberg Today* (DIMA)[3], based at the Eberhard Karls University of Tübingen in cooperation with the Linden-Museum Stuttgart, sets out to explore precisely this interface. In this case, the museum is not directly affiliated with the university therefore its relationship is not explicitly geared towards joint or linked anthropological

knowledge production. While in other examples i.e. the Museum of the University of Tübingen (MUT)[4] is directly implemented in the university system, there have been collaborative projects before to intersect the Linden-Museum in Stuttgart to the University in Tübingen. The collaboration between both institutions through the DIMA project and its doctoral candidates provides an environment for the intersection of anthropological knowledge production.

As doctoral candidates of the DIMA association our—Katharina Nowak's and Sophie Eckhardt's—contribution asks how anthropological knowledge is produced at the intersection of precisely the museum and university—and how such processes unfold within conditions of structural asymmetry. In line with the panel theme "Common Ground and Common Future?", we share our experiences, questions, and reflections from working within and between university and museum spaces, and beyond. Rather than presenting temporary or preliminary results, we offer situated anthropological vignettes of our PhD research reflecting on negotiating the roles of insider, outsider, critic, and collaborator in dialogue of display and dissertation. This pun is referring to the multi-faceted interaction of the PhD research conducted in between museum and university spaces. The terms display and dissertation refer to the visible output of academic work of both institutions and the DIMA project. Nevertheless, this contribution is recognising that anthropological knowledge production is not reduced to the output but expanding beyond uniliteral dimensions of museums as display and universities as dissertation. The vignette then serves to dive in more deeply into the entanglements of museums and universities, theory and practice and the scope of a doctorate in the museum and its reflections.

Vignette: Collaborations with Papua New Guinea

This vignette takes a collection-centered approach in combination with long-term fieldwork to not only challenge conventional museum and exhibition practices but also research methodologies. My PhD research explores how different epistemic practices—historically shaped by asymmetrical power relations—can be brought into

dialogue through decolonizing methodologies and sustained collaboration with partners from Papua New Guinea (PNG). Many anthropological collections entered Western collections under (nowadays) ethically problematic circumstances during the colonial era: traders, missionaries, and colonial officials often acquired objects through theft, grave looting, or exploitative trade (Buschmann 2023, Foŕster and Stoecker 2016, Habermas 2020). Anthropological museum storages are therefore framed as condensed archives of colonial histories, museological traditions, and curatorial interpretations (Knopf et al. 2018). The understanding of museums as colonial archives challenges the idea of museums as neutral spaces. Collections are not just aesthetic or anthropological artifacts but material traces of unequal power relations.[5] This perspective shifts attention from display to provenance, from representation to the conditions of acquisition. It also questions the authority of curators as sole interpreters, calling instead for multiperspectivity and the inclusion of source communities. Exhibitions thus become less about transmitting fixed knowledge and more about creating critical spaces for reflection.

My case study centers on Malagan carvings from New Ireland, which are stored in the collection of the Linden-Museum in Stuttgart. Malagan carvings are intricately crafted wooden sculptures used in funerary rituals that commemorate the dead, reaffirm social bonds, and transfer property or status rights (Küchler 2002, 111ff). These works, rich in cultural and social meaning, offer a lens for reconstructing multi-perspective histories and revealing undocumented dimensions of colonial entanglement.

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Fig. 1 *Malagan mask, artist undocumented in Museum Archive, before 1909., Inv. No. 063002, W18xH46xD44 cm, Lakuramau, New Ireland Province in Papua New Guinea.*

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The research design is characterised by openness and collaboration, with a focus on working in partnership with local stakeholders rather than imposing solutions from above. This approach also involves transcending the limitations imposed by institutional affiliations. In line with recent developments in the discipline of anthropology, the focus thus is no longer on the one-sided collection of data about others, but rather on a trusting, dialogical, and power-critical understanding of research (Smith 1999). In *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) formulates an approach that explicitly calls for research by and for Indigenous communities. In doing so, she lays the foundation for dialogical, reflexive, and ethical forms of research that clearly depart from the colonial paradigm. Building on Smith's critique, research methodologies are increasingly used to deconstruct colonial histories and to address unequal power structures in knowledge production. Collaborative research frameworks seek to include different forms of knowledge and to create shared authority in the research process. In this sense, object-centered research designs in combination with ethnographic fieldwork with participant observation, interviews, and long-term presence in a social field[6] allow for the integration of approaches from both museum and university knowledge production, opening up new possibilities for critical and dialogical anthropology. Institutional partners include the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG), Divine Word University (DWU) in Madang, and the National Museum and Art Gallery of PNG (NMAG). Fieldwork in New Ireland conducted in collaboration with the local population investigates both historical and contemporary functions of collections and the knowledge they embody. A central question concerns how the meanings of carvings—once gifted to or looted by Europeans—are negotiated over time, places, and people. Partnerships are long-term, practice-oriented, and open-ended. Collaboration extends beyond consultation to the shared development of research agendas, responsibilities, and resources. In addition, the benefits are mutual: my

partners from New Ireland want documentation of the current state of their company, and I want to pursue a doctorate. Through the DIMA project, I am able to build new relationships as well as maintain existing ones. These valuable personal and professional connections may extend beyond the project itself. It is important to note, however, that these partnerships are not institutionally guaranteed and depend on ongoing funding and research collaboration. However, this approach shifts museum work from short-term projects toward sustained, reciprocal relationships. When the boundaries between archive and field, between reconstruction and data collection, and between curatorial decisions and emic perspectives become blurred, new opportunities emerge for collaborative knowledge-making. DIMA amplifies this benefit by providing institutional support that allows doctoral research to build on existing community relationships, integrate multiple perspectives, and sustain collaboration over time, creating a foundation for long-term, ethically engaged scholarship.

Preparatory work at the Linden-Museum involved identifying and photographing the Malagan collections. These images were subsequently shared in PNG to enable local selection of carvings for further study. Before our collaboration in New Ireland began, two cavers had already visited the depots at the Linden Museum. In order to identify relevant carvings, I visited New Ireland to work with local experts to select carvings based on photographs and make a final selection based on their relevance to Malagan feasts. Initial networking has established cooperation with Maimais (chiefs), carvers, and further members of Malagan societies. Our shared interest in Malagan traditions and knowledge, as well as love and trust built over repeated visits, forms the basis of our collaboration. However, these relationships are continuously shaped by asymmetries of power like financial resources, colonial shaped historical inequalities, and differing institutional priorities of the museums and universities. The project therefore requires ongoing negotiation, reflexivity, and critical attention to how knowledge, authority, and responsibilities are distributed between researchers and partners. While fostering collaboration strengthens scholarship and

supports Malagan societies in safeguarding cultural heritage, it also demands constant awareness of these dynamics attempting to ensure ethical and equitable engagement.

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Fig. 2 *Malagan feast at Laraibina village, New Ireland Province in Papua New Guinea, dancers from Suduwis Clan (Notsi speaking area) with masks,*

September 2025. © Anthony Lupai and Katharina Nowak.

This moment raised key questions for me: What counts as knowledge and what is treated as surplus or irrelevant? Whose knowledge is stored in museum archives and in whose order? Which role do I play? I see my role as a bridge between the museum's collection and Malagan societies, translating and connecting different bodies of knowledge while navigating responsibilities to both. The work involves understanding, honoring, and making accessible the knowledge embedded in the carvings so that it benefits the museum, supports the societies, and informs my research. It became clear that fieldwork is not only about geographical distance but also an epistemic practice—one that can take place inside the museum—and to respond to this, my partners and I have developed a research approach aimed at bridging these gaps. We have developed an approach to my PhD research which is aiming to identify local priorities, archiving endangered knowledge, and securing future access for societies of origin. In this case, collaborative data collection involves documenting feasts, dances, carvings, and the intergenerational transmission of knowledge within multiple Malagan clans. This contextualization supports the development of strategies for addressing collection conflicts, revealing contradictions, and embedding polyphony in museum narratives. By foregrounding participatory and decolonial approaches, the project engages communities as active co-producers of knowledge, challenging traditional hierarchies in museum interpretation and scholarship. Results will be shared in village gatherings, strengthening local ownership and ensuring cultural relevance.

The execution of collaborative field research has been demonstrated to engender new perspectives; however, it must be noted that this method is concomitantly subject to clear limitations. Despite the professed commitment to egalitarianism, inequitable power and resource dynamics persist. As an individual engaged in research, I possess institutional affiliations, financial resources, and access to academic publication platforms, while my local collaborators lack these

opportunities. In addition to the aforementioned factors, there is a divergence in terms of interests and expectations. On the one hand, the focus is on publications, the formation of theory, and the pursuit of academic careers. On the other hand, local partners are oriented towards practice-oriented goals, such as the documentation of Malagan. Moreover, the undertaking of collaborative research is constrained by time and institutional limitations. The necessity for long-term continuity in order to ensure effective cooperation is well-documented (Jones 2019); however, the funding periods of research projects are generally limited in duration. The extensive involvement of local partners is not always adequately compensated in a sustainable manner (Smith 2021). A further consideration is the tension between local relevance and global connectivity. The findings of research in this field must be meaningful to the respective community and internationally understandable and connectable. This frequently results in translation and adaptation processes that involve simplification or distortion of knowledge. In addition, methodological limitations must be considered. Classic anthropological methods, such as interviews or participant observation, remain characterised by structural asymmetries. Furthermore, not all knowledge is accessible for collaborative research, as certain content is protected as restricted knowledge.

At the same time, the project connects museum practice with academic research: it enriches local higher education by co-teaching at the UPNG, informs museum curation at the NMAG and Linden-Museum, and demonstrates how doctoral research can bridge people, linking the university and museum in sustained, practice-oriented collaborations. The project benefits Malagan societies by preserving endangered traditional knowledge, producing outputs accessible both locally and internationally, and fostering cultural heritage recognition. In this way, the work contributes to the ongoing dialogue between anthropological scholarship and museum practice, providing a foundation for future cooperative research and reflecting on the responsibilities and ethical commitments of researchers in both institutional settings.

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A Doctorate in the Museum: Hybrid Anthropological Epistemologies

What are the implications of pursuing a doctorate in the museum? Doing a PhD ultimately binds us to a university, an institutional and structural framework that determines our positionality. As doctoral candidates at DIMA, we are part of a system with certain rules that must be followed in order to obtain a degree. These structural constraints also influence what we do, how we think, and the knowledge we produce. While our PhD projects are formally based at the University of Tübingen, our research is deeply embedded in the collections, practices, and structures of the Linden-Museum. The opportunity to conceptualise research projects based on the museum and its collections was compulsory, and at the same time has provided significant access to the museum's personnel, procedures and practices. Having the same starting point, all research proposals designed within the DIMA project have taken different approaches to link their research to the collection, the museum and the university. The vignette is located within the collection using anthropological research to link the inner life of museums to an outside world. Working with collections, archives, curators, urban population and societies from the regions where the collections originated, creates a hybrid research position: I am at once anthropologist, institutional insider, and structurally embedded actor, balancing the interests of both institutions, in addition to maintaining institutional reputation and personal integrity of gatekeepers and research partners from within and outside these institutions. How can we critically analyze power relations within the very cooperation projects that we ourselves are part of? How do we navigate loyalty conflicts when museum partners are also supervisors, colleagues, or project collaborators? And how can we engage in research that is not simply about museums, but also with them?

This entanglement of research and institutional collaboration raises methodological, epistemological and ethical questions that are specific and inevitable when pursuing a doctorate in the museum. Approaching museums as contested spaces of

knowledge practices where collections serve as knowledge archives, diverse social actors i.e. museum staff, societies of origin are actively engaged as epistemic practitioners and materialities are considered as knowledge holders in ongoing epistemic transformations, functioning institutions, and contested spaces, places our research in a second complex institutional and structural framework of anthropological knowledge production.

As a doctoral candidate at DIMA, I am part of the system of knowledge production and dissemination within and between universities and museums. This is one of our central concerns. The reinforcement of epistemic asymmetries obscure the reciprocal nature of knowledge-making. To question this dualistic understanding we ask: how can museum-based knowledge be understood as a valid form of anthropological insight? What kinds of theories emerge from curatorial practices, object biographies, or collection management? And conversely, how is university-produced knowledge transformed when translated into museum contexts – for example in exhibitions, outreach programs, or provenance research?

The vignette exemplify how renewed collaborations between museums and universities can serve as laboratories for epistemological innovation. They reveal the persistence of structural hierarchies, yet also point to possibilities for transforming them through reflexive, situated, and collaborative approaches. In this sense, a deeper reconfiguration of anthropology's epistemic foundations is possible: one that recognizes museum-based knowledge not as derivative but as constitutive, and one that positions the university not as an 'ivory tower' but as a dialogical space of co-production—together with curators, collections, and source societies.

The upcoming DGSKA conference panel thus provides an important opportunity to explore these questions collectively: How can doctoral research help transform anthropological museums? What forms of collaboration can genuinely bridge structural asymmetries between universities, museums, and societies of origin? And what does this mean for the future trajectories of our discipline? By pursuing these

conversations, I aim not only to rethink the intersections of theory and practice but also to envision anthropology's role in shaping more collaborative, reflexive, and future-oriented forms of knowledge. Sophie Eckhardt is looking forward to continuing this conversation, and to navigating new paths between the display and the dissertation.

Footnotes

[1] In reference to Donna Haraway's *Situated knowledge* (1988) our understanding of knowledge is plural. When using this term we are referring to different types of knowledge that are negotiated and represented within museums and universities. While museum and university knowledge is considered forms of academic knowledge, the plural understanding of knowledge is relating additional forms of knowledge i.e. societies of origins, collections and artifacts as active knowledge holders that ultimately inform the production of knowledge within these spaces.

[2] Museological discourses have critiqued the notion of museums 'generating' and also transmitting knowledge. New Museology has for example questioned museums as knowledge generators instead framing museums as reproducers of power dynamics and logics (cf. e.g. Bennett 1995; Vergo 1989). Therefore the museum itself becomes the subject of institutional critique and critical reflection. Within this institutional setting knowledge is understood as practice that is shaped by museums and institutional staff as part of epistemic (cf. e.g. Hooper-Greenhill 1992, 2000).

[3]https://uni-tuebingen.de/fakultaeten/philosophische-fakultaet/fachbereiche/asien-orient-wissenschaften/ethnologie/forschung/dima-a-doctorate-in-the-museum/ (19 August 2025)
https://lindenmuseum.de/collections/research-and-collaboration-projects/?lang=en (19 August 2025)

[4] https://www.unimuseum.uni-tuebingen.de/en/ (4 September 2025)

[5] Beyond this, collections serve as active sites of knowledge production, where different disciplines—such as anthropology, history, and museology—intersect and develop through curatorial interpretation and exhibition design. Furthermore, collections act as actors in social relations, mediating complex entanglements between communities, institutional authority, and interpretive frameworks (Thomas 1991). Finally, they offer potential resources for collaborative, dialogical, and reparative practices—enabling the emergence of participatory and decolonial approaches that challenge historic epistemic hierarchies (Peers and Brown 2003; Chipangura and Seabela 2024, Rubinstein and Schmitz 2024).

[6] The application of research methodologies, such as long-term field research, has been demonstrated to contribute significantly to the argument regarding the relationship between museums and universities, as well as to anthropological discourses on knowledge production. The concept of long-term fieldwork can be traced back to the discourse surrounding the collection and production of knowledge, which has been substantiated through research conducted over an extended period. This conception of the generation of valid and presumably true knowledge, which varied according to the factor of time, has since been revisited and deconstructed. This is due to the understanding that time is not necessarily the primary aspect of providing thorough and profound knowledge. Recent approaches have highlighted a range of methodologies that have been employed to ensure the thoroughness of research (Astuti 2017, cf. Kemper and Royce 2002, de Sardan 2015).

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