

Decolonising the Museum

إنهاء الاستعمار في المتحف

Museum dekolonialisieren

By Sina Meschke

The urgency to decolonise museums has gained significant importance in today's world. Museums, as custodians of cultural heritage, face the challenge of ensuring a comprehensive and just representation of history and culture. This essay explores the need for decolonising museums and their alignment with the values of the SAWA Program, a discrimination-free and diversity-oriented educational initiative.

The historical meaning of decolonisation aims to overcome and delegitimise any form of foreign rule. However, there is another meaning: for example, the term defines the process of releasing a former colony from political, economic, and military dependence on the colonisers into independence.¹

It is crucial for rectifying colonial legacies, fostering inclusion, and acknowledging the voices and perspectives that have been marginalised for centuries. Decolonisation is a cooperative endeavour that benefits from diverse perspectives, and it aims to eliminate discriminatory practices within the museum sector. Young museum professionals play an important role in the decolonisation of museums. Their perspectives and energy are vital in reshaping the future of museums to be more inclusive and equitable. The SAWA Program for example can serve as a platform for nurturing these emerging talents and guiding them towards active participation in decolonisation efforts.

¹ (cf. Gouaffo 2017: 131).

At this point, it should be noted that this article was written from the perspective of a white female student and must be read in this context. This positionality does not absolve me of any responsibility. My personal path to understanding the decolonisation of museums, i.e., the emancipation process of former colonies and the demands on European institutions to return cultural assets, began during my bachelor's degree. In my studies of Museum Management and Museum Communication in Berlin, I continue to work on the topic of the invisibility of postcolonial traces in European museums, among other things as part of the SAWA program, in which we worked with "terms" that are important in our personal museum work. Here, too, my main focus was on working on the reappraisal of postcolonial traces in German/European museums.

SAWA Program

The SAWA program focuses on intercultural exchange between museum professionals. This program facilitates a platform for individuals from different regions to come together and engage in meaningful discussions about the practices, challenges, and perspectives related to museums in their respective areas. The Program which takes place in Sharjah and Berlin takes a decisive role in promoting the decolonisation of museums by emphasising the values of cooperation, diversity, and discrimination-free education. It creates a platform for intercultural exchange and fosters a deeper understanding of the importance of decolonising museums in different cultural contexts. The exchange of ideas and experiences among participants encourages a deeper awareness of how museum practices differ in different regions and cultures. *The SAWA program* discussions provide a valuable opportunity for museum professionals to share insights into their unique challenges, successes and approaches to decolonisation and many other museum-related topics such as outreach or intangible heritage. It becomes a forum in which the diverse cultural backgrounds of the participants enrich the discourse on how museums can manage the complexity of responsibilities in a global context.

The collaborative approach ensures that the decolonisation process is not a one-size-fits-all solution but a dynamic, region-specific endeavour that respects and considers the diverse cultural perspectives involved.

In essence, the program becomes a microcosm of the larger global efforts around decolonisation, intercultural learning, and diversity-focused museums. By promoting intercultural dialogue and facilitating discussions on regional museum practices, the program contributes to a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with the decolonisation process. This shared knowledge and exchange of perspectives between museum professionals from different regions strengthens collective efforts to transform museums into spaces that equally value and respect different cultural narratives.

Decolonisation efforts in museums encounter obstacles and resistance, with challenges stemming from resistance by people within influential positions, resource constraints, and the imperative for a fundamental shift in institutional practices. Movements such as *Berlin Postcolonial e.V.*² or the *Initiative Schwarze Menschen in Deutschland e.V.*³, which embody collective efforts by people, also strive to dismantle colonial continuities in the city and as well as in museums.

Two examples: The Humboldt Forum and the Louvre Abu Dhabi

In this context, the debate surrounding the reconstruction of the Berlin Residenzschloss from the Hohenzollern Dynasty becomes relevant. The Humboldt-Forum, which we also visited during the *SAWA Program* in Berlin, housed in the newly reconstructed palace, now showcases the ethnological collection and the collection of the Asian Museum. The collections from all over the world have now returned to the Hohenzollern Palace, where Berlin's first

² See <https://decolonize-berlin.de/de/bundnis-verein/berlin-postkolonial/>

³ See <https://isdonline.de>

overseas treasures were presented. Not unlike back then, this is primarily about the representation of power and global significance.⁴

Initiatives like *No Humboldt 21!* brought this debate into the public sphere, calling for a halt to work on the Humboldt-Forum and advocating for a public discussion on colonial goods in German possession. Critics argue that the forum upholds a colonial perspective on the exhibited objects, maintaining the hegemonies of the colonial era and keeping cultural goods from the non-European world reserved for the privileged West. Against the backdrop of the discussion on (post-)colonial German history and the opening of the Humboldt-Forum, ethnological museums all over Germany are being increasingly critically examined. Colonial collecting and exhibiting cannot be separated from colonial history; they are integral parts of it. Colonialism encompasses not only formal colonial rule, political administration, and economic exploitation but also scientific and cultural engagement.⁵

My visit to the Louvre Abu Dhabi during the SAWA Program in Sharjah serves as an illustrative moment for my personal formation and deep reflection on the necessity of decolonising museums in a globalised world. The display of Benin bronzes without any context, artistic creations of the Edo people in Nigeria between the 13th and 19th centuries, provokes me personally to question their place in the context of these artefacts. Their transfer from Nigeria to Western collections in the late 19th century took place under controversial circumstances that can be attributed to British colonialism. Various museums house Benin bronzes in their collections, each taking different approaches to display - whether to exhibit them and, if so, how to present them. Echoing these different museum practices is the lack of any acknowledgement of the ongoing debate in the

⁴ cf. NoHumboldt21! (2013): RESOLUTION.MORATORIUM FÜR DAS HUMBOLDT-FORUM IM BERLINER SCHLOSS. Verfügbar unter: <https://www.no-humboldt21.de/resolution/>

⁵ cf. Zimmerer, Jürgen (2019): Die größte Identitätsdebatte unserer Zeit. Süddeutsche Zeitung. Online verfügbar unter: <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/kolonialismus-postkolonialismus-humboldt-forum-raubkunst-1.4334846>

presentation at the Louvre Abu Dhabi. The fact that the broader discourse around the Benin Bronzes, including issues of restitution and colonial heritage, is conspicuously absent from this exhibition is a cause for concern and highlights the need to problematise this absence.

Calls for their restitution to Nigeria have gained intensity, urging Western institutions, also in Germany, to confront their colonial past and support communities in reclaiming their cultural heritage. Against the backdrop of the discussion about Germany's post-colonial past and the opening of the Humboldt Forum, ethnological museums in Germany are being increasingly scrutinised. "The emergence of ethnographic collections - and thus also the development of ethnology [...] as a science - is closely linked to the colonial expansion of Europe, in German-speaking countries and beyond".⁶ The decision of the Louvre Abu Dhabi, to exhibit the Benin Bronzes leaves a bitter taste, suggesting a lack of consideration for the ongoing debate on the restitution of colonial loot and, particularly, the European discourse on the return of the Benin Bronzes, in the United Arab Emirates. This continuous debate further fuels in my opinion reflection on colonial history and intercultural dynamics.

If these treasures transcend boundaries and are displayed in global museums, their presence underscores the complex interplay of art, history, and cultural heritage across continents.

In summary, decolonising museums is an essential step towards a more equitable and inclusive representation of cultural heritage. Through the efforts of young museum enthusiasts and collaboration between different regions, we can bring about profound change and celebrate the richness and complexity of cultural heritage.

⁶ Förster, Larissa (2021): Ethnografische Sammlungen. In: Leitfaden. Umgang mit Sammlungsgut aus kolonialen Kontexten. 3. Fassung, Berlin. [Quote translated from German by Sina Meschke]