

HT 2018: Decolonisation of Colonial Collections – A shifting debate in Europe?

Veranstalter: Verband der Historiker und Historikerinnen Deutschlands (VHD); Verband der Geschichtslehrer Deutschlands (VGD)

Datum, Ort: 25.09.2018–28.09.2018, Münster

Bericht von: Jos van Beurden, Faculty of Humanities, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

When in Münster, one easily passes by the 'Friedensaal', where the Peace of Westphalia was signed in 1648. At walking distance is the 'Haus der Niederlande', where the Netherlands and Spain negotiated peace and the independence of the Dutch. The arrival at the Historikertag 2018 with more than three thousand, mostly German historians reminded of the influx of the hundreds of diplomats, negotiators, their assistants and servants in the early 1640s. It made it hard to find fellow-specialists (colonial collections). A week earlier, at a conference about African European relations, organised by the Africa Museum in Tervuren near Brussels, restitution was constantly in the air. In Münster the panel about the decolonisation of colonial collections was one out of many.

At the closure of the conference in Brussels, Belgium's Foreign Minister, Didier Reynders, declared that Belgium is willing to return colonial cultural objects to Africa. This commitment and the imminent reopening of the Africa Museum – once the Congo Museum – in December 2018 have aroused much debate in Belgium. It is comparable with the intensified discussions in France after President Emmanuel Macron's announcement that his government will develop a policy of restitution to Africa and debates in Germany because of the opening of the 'Humboldt Forum' in Berlin with its extensive ethnographic collections at the end of 2019. The German heritage sector and media spend much attention to these discussions. At the Historikertag the debate was almost absent.

An exception was the panel „Decolonisation of Colonial Collections – A shifting debate in Europe?“ In the introduction JOS VAN BEURDEN (Amsterdam) described the above mentioned developments in Germany, France, Belgium, and also in Scandinavia and

the Netherlands. In the last country, the National Museum of World Cultures is developing a repatriation framework for colonial objects. It will be pragmatic and become some sort of a check-list for what to do when a former colony submits a claim. In this sense it differs from the French approach, which is unilateral and more policy-oriented. In turn, the Dutch and French approach differ from the German one, which is expressed in the „Guidelines on Dealing with Collections from Colonial Contexts“, which were recently published by the German Museums Association¹. President Hermann Parzinger of the 'Preußische Kultur Stiftung' has pleaded for a multilateral, European approach and the preparation of „principles for dealing with colonial heritage“ which are comparable with principles for dealing with Nazi-looted art works².

Whereas Van Beurden took a slightly optimistic tone, the other speakers sowed some doubts. SUSAN LEGÈNE (Amsterdam), chair of the KNHG (Royal Netherlands Historical Association) had discovered in the Dutch archives a confidential code-message and other texts, which proved that most member-states of the European Economic Community had firmly opposed the ratification of the „Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property“ of 1970³. The focus of this Convention was to contain the ongoing theft and smuggling of art and antique, and not the relics that had migrated from colonial possession to Europe. Were the member-states driven by national interests or had they identified a

¹<https://www.museumsbund.de/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/dmb-guidelines-colonial-context.pdf>; see also the debate at H-Soz-Kult: Larissa Förster / Sarah Freundt (Hrsg.),

Human Remains in Museums and Collections. A Critical Engagement with the „Recommendations for the Care of Human Remains in Museums and Collections“ of the German Museums Association, Berlin 2017, <https://doi.org/10.18452/19383> (24.10.2018).

²Hermann Parzinger, Bauen wir Museen in Afrika!, in Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 25.01.2018, <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/debatten/kunst-der-kolonialzeit-bauen-wir-museen-in-afrika-15415223.html> (22.10.2018).

³<http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/illicit-trafficking-of-cultural-property/1970-convention/> (11.10.2018).

common European position with abstention as the outcome, did she wonder. She tended to the latter. Only two or three decades after decolonisation, European countries – often with Belgium and Great Britain in the lead – seemed to have erased European imperialism and replaced it by a benevolent development discourse. This discourse substituted the acknowledgement of or an accounting for Europe's colonial past. They had made that Europe's imperial past no longer was a living past. They did not want it to be an issue and enabled them to avoid questions about the restitution of colonial cultural objects. But, as Legêne remarked, due to several factors the development discourse is coming to an end, and, as a result, the colonialism discourse raises its head again. And with this, the question is back what Europe should do with all its dubiously acquired colonial collections.

WAYNE MODEST (Leiden) built on this conclusion. Colonialism is coming back to us and beats back. Groups such as 'Black Lives Matter', 'Rhodes Must Fall', 'Decolonise the Museum', 'Decolonise the Curriculum', 'the University of Colour' - and 'Berlin post-colonial'⁴ could be added – are sharpening this discourse. Museums and academic institutions join it too. But, did he wonder, why all these unprecedented pronouncements from the highest political level in European countries about the return of objects to originating communities? Why so many conferences and exhibitions on colonialism, decolonisation of colonial collections and slave trade? Are we in a competitive battle and is the burst in interest dismissive symbolic politics? His questions recalled Belgium's commitment to open up the option of restitution. Would the Minister's words remain one of the many dead letters? Modest added however another question: Will all these efforts be sustained and developed into a robust and complex enquiry, commensurate with the complexity of colonial histories and their afterlives. And would this enquiry inform our work towards more just futures? According to him, we might be at the right moment to do this. Europe itself as a project is threatened, not by presumed outsiders coming in, the threat comes from inside. Whether this right moment becomes one of danger or of hope, is up to ourselves. But

it may demand new actions from the ethnographic museums, especially the developing of more critical, robust and complex practices to better understand us.

NANETTE SNOEP (Dresden) reflected upon the role of ethnographic museums from her practice as director of three ethnographic museums in Saxony (300.000 objects and human remains). Those in Germany agree more and more that the remains of men, women and children should be returned to the communities of origin. Not only in Namibia, but also elsewhere. In October 2017, the Saxon museums returned, after 26 years of hard negotiations, ancestral remains to Hawaii. She had experienced it as a healing process, which had forced the museums to look anew at their collections. In spite of harsh public resistance against this return, including human chains in front of the museum doors, the museums in Saxony will continue to return ancestral remains, in 2019 to Aboriginal people in Australia and Maori in New Zealand. Snoep argued that it is even harder to return objects. The Saxon museums participate with other European museums in the Benin Dialogue with Nigeria and the Edo Kingdom. In 1897, British soldiers ransacked the palaces of the Edo King and transported between 3.500 and 4.000 royal works of art to Europe. Benin bronzes, so named after the capital of the Edo Kingdom, Benin City, have been dispersed over Europe and North America since, 220 are located in Saxony. Few have remained in Nigeria. Interviews, held by the museums in Benin City in 2017, illustrate how emotional the subject of the Benin bronzes still is for Nigerians today. Progress is slow. So far, the outcome of the Dialogue has been steps for a new museum and a permanent display in Benin City of rotating material from the museums in Europe.

This panel and some of the others have added a dimension to the Friedenssaal. While the Peace of Westphalia of 1648 usually is depicted as a highlight in Europe's history, it had been an all-time low for many colonial areas. Possibly the fighting diminished in Europe after 1648, but outside the continent it increased. The Peace of Westphalia stimulated the further violent expansion of Europe

⁴<http://www.berlin-postkolonial.de/> (11.10. 2018).

and this resulted in the massive one-way flow of cultural and historical treasures from colonial possessions to Europe. One reads nothing about this aspect in the Friedenssaal. It is time to adjust texts and captions.

Panel Overview:

Heads of panel: Jos van Beurden (Amsterdam) / Nanette Snoep (Amsterdam)

Susan Legêne (Amsterdam): Speaking with one voice - How the Western European post-colonial States Parties aligned their stake concerning the UNESCO 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property

Jos van Beurden (Amsterdam): The decolonisation of colonial collections: A European or a national challenge?

Adriana Muñoz (Göteborg): Different layers in repatriation: The case of the Yaqui treasures

Nanette Snoep (Dresden): „Restitution and what next?“ About restitution as the beginning of a new relationship

Wayne Modest (Leiden): (Post)Colonial Conjunctions or What to do with „Colonial Collections“ in Europe today

Tagungsbericht *HT 2018: Decolonisation of Colonial Collections – A shifting debate in Europe?* 25.09.2018–28.09.2018, Münster, in: H-Soz-Kult 03.11.2018.