

Splettstößer, Anne: *Contested Collections: The handling of colonial heritage from Cameroon in ethnological museums. The cases Tange/prow and Ngonnso‘/pan support figure in Germany and Cameroon.* Göttingen Studies in Cultural Property 15, Göttingen University Press, Göttingen, 2019

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Summary

Some of the objects in the collections of the ethnological museums in the Global North, including Germany, were collected in different ways in colonial times. The call for the return of specific items in collections, especially when appropriated through robbery or pillage, is becoming more strident in the course of postcolonial debate.

The things themselves and the handling of them are, in the framework of return claims, negotiated between the descendants of the source communities or succession states and the museums of the Global North. This dissertation, developed in the interdisciplinary environment of the DFG research group on Cultural Property, connects, for the first time, approaches from ethnology, (international) law, (art) history and museology which constitute the multidisciplinary field of “return”.

This study investigates two return claims from Cameroon concerning a prow (“Tange”) and a pan support figure (“Ngonnso”) which are currently in ethnological museums in Munich and Berlin, respectively. Both claims have been negotiated since the end of the 1990s.

The research question is: How is the handling of contested objects from the German colonial era shaped in Cameroon and in ethnological museums in Germany?

Return claims, according to the discussion in the thesis, appear as a magnifying lens which, apart from the things themselves, discloses the complex interaction of handling items with contested ownership in theory and practice in ethnological museums and through various stakeholders outside the museums (e.g. in Cameroon).

Furthermore, the reconstruction of the cultural biographies of the contested items documents their part as points of intersection in complex networks of relationships and stakeholders from the 19th century to the present day.

Precisely because return claims hit a sensitive spot of museums and question their existence, research regarding these claims always includes an investigation into recent museological practice. In addition, these claims raise ethical questions. How, for instance, are the people

who feel connected with the things, for example, descendants of the source communities framed, handled?

At the same time, return claims, especially concerning insignia of power as in both cases researched here, reveal social and political processes and dynamics in these societies.

Through following the biographies of the objects and the people who are bound into networks by the contested items, this monograph concludes that return claims disclose diverging conceptions of things and ontologies.