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Dynamics of Religious Things in Museums: Introduction to a Research Area and a Cooperative Alliance

Entering a Complex

We are entering an area of public controversy: the field of museums. Our focus is on a topic that is equally the subject of much critical reflection in the academic arena: religious things and how they are handled in museums.

Museums are currently receiving a lot of public attention with regard to the material objects they host, and the historical and contemporary handling of said objects. Museums are both places of memory and education, and places of leisure and tourism. According to TripAdvisor, two of the world's ten most popular sights are museums, one of which is closely intertwined with a religious site and institution: the Vatican Museums, with their papal art collection and the Sistine Chapel (ranked third in 2019).¹ Overlap and fluid attributions of meaning between religious places and tourist sites (in this case, museums) are not uncommon,² and become particularly evident in the case of museums run by religious institutions, such as the Catholic Church in the case of the Vatican Museums.

There are global public debates about the origins, paths, and futures of museum things/objects.³ Since at least 2018, with the report on the restitution of African cultural heritage, which Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy presented to the French president, the legitimacy of objects from colonial contexts in museums and collections in the global north has been widely debated around the globe, both in academia and among the general public.⁴ In Germany, this debate has

1 "Die beliebtesten Sehenswürdigkeiten der Welt," Travelbook, last modified December 17, 2019, <https://www.travelbook.de/attraktionen/beliebteste-sehenswuerdigkeiten-welt>.

2 Michael Stausberg, *Religion and Tourism: Crossroads, Destinations and Encounters* (London: Routledge, 2011), 75–104.

3 For our understanding of the terms *thing* and *object*, see the contribution by Franke and Matter in this volume.

4 Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Towards a New Relational Ethics* (Paris: Philippe Rey/Seuil, 2018); Louise Tythacott and Kostas Arvanitis, eds., *Museums and Restitution: New Practices, New Approaches* (London: Routledge, 2016); Jane Milosch and Nick Pearce, eds., *Collecting and Provenance: A Multidisciplinary Approach* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019) and Jonathan Paquette, "France and the Restitution of Cultural Goods: The Sarr-Savoy Report and its Reception," *CULTURAL TRENDS* 29, no. 4 (2020), 302–16.

mainly been ignited by the repositioning of the ethnological collections in the newly established Humboldt Forum in Berlin.⁵ But of course, such objects are not only located in Berlin, and the problem also affects objects of other geographical provenance.

Furthermore, disciplines within cultural studies, including the study of religions, have taken a *material turn*, and now focus on the material, and thus also on museum things.⁶ This has brought the material dimension of religion and religious things, including museum objects, into the focus of research in the study of religions. If a little exaggeration is to be permitted, it was, for a long time, not at all clear whether there was such a thing as religious material.⁷ The early, Protestant-influenced field of the study of religions conceived of religion as a solely immaterial, spiritual issue; that is to say it was regarded as a concern of belief explored primarily through the philological analysis of written sources. The ritual handling of things, and material expressions of the transcendence that believers and practitioners experience, were seen as distinct from ‘true religion’, and thus devalued as *superstition*, *fetishism*, *magic* or the like.⁸ Such evaluative distinctions have become widespread in academic disciplines beyond the study of religions, and are now sustainably established in society.⁹ Consequently, this view is also reflected in the way things are handled and presented in the museum – as some of the contributions in this volume will show. In turn, this reinforces this distinction in the public perception. To a significant extent, the negotiation of the category of religion as a social category of difference was, and still is, thus

5 Daniel Morat, “Katalysator wider Willen. Das Humboldt Forum in Berlin und die deutsche Kolonialvergangenheit,” *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History* 16 (2019), 140–53 and Moritz Holfelder, *Unser Raubgut: Eine Streitschrift zur kolonialen Debatte* (Berlin: Christoph Links Verlag: Berlin, 2019).

6 Birgit Meyer et al., “The Origin and Mission of *Material Religion*,” *Religion* 40, no. 3 (2011), 207, see also Gretchen Buggeln et al., eds., *Religion in Museums: Global and Multidisciplinary Perspectives* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017); Peter J. Bräunlein, *Religion und Museum* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2004); Susanne Claußen, *Anschauungssache Religion: Zur musealen Repräsentation religiöser Artefakte* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2009); Crispin Paine, *Religious Objects in Museums: Private Lives and Public Duties* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013) and Crispin Paine, ed., *Godly Things: Museums, Objects and Religion* (London: Leicester Univ. Press, 2000).

7 At this point, we leave aside the discussion, influenced by a postcolonial approach, about the legitimacy of the assumption of religion as a universal category.

8 Of course, counter-examples can also be found. For example, Émile Durkheim (who, however, was not Protestant) stated that material objects can also be sacred things: Émile Durkheim, *Die elementaren Formen des religiösen Lebens* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1981), 60.

9 Peter J. Bräunlein, “Interpretation von Zeugnissen materialer Kultur: Ku, ein hawaiianischer Gott in Göttingen,” in *Religionen erforschen: Kulturwissenschaftliche Methoden in der Religionswissenschaft*, ed. Stefan Kurth and Karsten Lehmann (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag, 2011), 47–48.

conducted with a view to the handling of things.¹⁰ The material religion approach emphasises that religions are not just beliefs and ideas, highlighting instead the inseparable connection between religion and material things. In the course of the *material turn*, the concept of religion undergoes a double expansion: on the one hand, what was previously not granted this status, due to its material aspects, is now subsumed under the category of religion. On the other hand, it is recognised that what was, and is, considered religion is always intimately interwoven with material things. Even if the meaning of materiality is denied for religious or other reasons,¹¹ it is nonetheless the case that devotees clothe themselves with specific fabrics, use objects in rituals, or gather in buildings made of various materials; the mere existence of religions leaves material traces, all of which could be musealised and made the subject of analyses. Sometimes material things are even left as the only witnesses to a religion's past existence. This approach, focusing on the materiality of religion, also takes into account the dynamic potential of things that express non-verbal, bodily dimensions of religious experience. Moreover, by making material products co-equal objects of research with canonised texts, the domain of analysis is expanded beyond the religion of institutionally established elites of certain religious traditions (*scriptural religion*), and into *vernacular religion*.¹² Thus, those social groups and religions not based on writings are increasingly perceived and their significance recognised. Directing the gaze of academia towards museum inventories, and their taxonomies and presentation, can raise questions and trigger the critical revision of written documentation. Studying materiality can thus open a pathway for potential critique of established patterns in research, historiography, and society, widening our perspective.

It was against this multifaceted background that the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research on Religion (ZIR) and the Museum of Religions (Religionskundliche Sammlung) of the Philipps-University Marburg, the Museum of the Frankfurt Cathedral, and the GRASSI Museum of Ethnology in Leipzig formed a research network on the topic of *Dynamics of Religious Things in Museums (Dynamiken religiöser Dinge im Museum, REDIM in short)*.

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- 10 Peter J. Bräunlein, "Interpretation von Zeugnissen materialer Kultur," 47–48; see also Dick Houtman and Birgit Meyer, "Introduction: Material Religion – How Things Matter," in *Things. Religion and the Question of Materiality*, ed. Dick Houtman and Birgit Meyer (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 1–23.
- 11 Manuel A. Vásquez, "The Persistence, Ubiquity, and Dynamicity of Materiality: Studying Religion and Materiality Comparatively," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Religion and Materiality*, ed. Vasudha Narayanan (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2020), 5–6.
- 12 Marion Bowman and Ülo Valk, "Introduction: Vernacular Religion, Generic Expressions and the Dynamics of Belief," in *Vernacular Religion in Everyday Life: Expressions of Belief*, ed. Marion Bowman and Ülo Valk (London: Routledge, 2015), 1–20.



Figure 1: Entrance to Dommuseum Frankfurt. Photo: Axel Schneider, © Dommuseum Frankfurt.

This cooperative alliance, under the leadership of the ZIR, is based on the common interest in the relevance of religious materials in museums for social transformation, and in how social processes are reflected by material things. In five individual projects, the international and interdisciplinary team of REDIM has analysed the complex interweaving of the social and the material concerning religious things, in various regions around the globe, for almost four years (2018–2022). In doing so, they focused on the project’s own three museums in Frankfurt am Main, Leipzig, and Marburg, as well as on museums in Iran and Japan. In addition, associated and advisory board members from various disciplines, working in museums and research institutions in England, Germany, Japan, Russia, and Switzerland, contributed to the project and its research aims.¹³ Thus, the alliance provided a suitable framework for international and interdisciplinary comparisons, both in terms of research(ed) objects and academic exchange.



Figure 2: Grassifest in the courtyard of the GRASSI Museum in Leipzig. Photo: Tom Dachs, © GRASSI Museum für Völkerkunde zu Leipzig.

13 “Personen,” REDIM – Dynamiken religiöser Dinge im Museum, accessed October 12, 2021, <https://www.uni-marburg.de/de/zir/redim/personen>.



Figure 3: Discussing religious materials in the Museum of Religions (Religionskundliche Sammlung), Marburg. Photo: Rolf K. Wegst, © Religionskundliche Sammlung Marburg.

Gallery I: Religious Things and Social Contexts – Discovering an Entanglement in the Museum

In this project, and in the contributions to this anthology, museums, their histories, the presentation of their holdings, and the process of musealisation and de-musealisation (e.g. in the context of restitution), are understood and analysed as a reflection of social processes.

On the one hand, museums and (de-)musealisation reflect the historical and global contexts in which things are woven. Susanne Rodemeier's contribution to this volume, for example, shows that tracing the history of an object in the Museum of Religions in Marburg leads to Indonesia. Such histories contain a reminder of the violence of Christian missionaries from Europe in colonial times. The object at the centre of Peter Bräunlein's article was brought to a collection of University of Göttingen from Hawaii via Great Britain, in the contexts of a global expedition at the time of the European Enlightenment, and the global networking of European aristocratic circles and research institutions. Ferdinand Liefert reconstructs the mutual significance of missionary ambitions of the Japanese Tenrikyō religion

in East and Southeast Asia, and material (museum) objects originating from the respective corresponding regions, in the period of Japanese colonialism in the 19th and 20th centuries. Leila Tavangar Ranjbar's analysis of a lighting instrument in the museum of Āstān-e Quds-e Rażavī in Mashhad, Iran, points to relations between Persia and India in the 18th century. Yuriko Yamanaka explains the staging of Islamic objects from around the globe in the National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka, in contemporary Japan, a non-Muslim majority country.

On the other hand, musealised religious things allow us an exemplary insight into the interplay between the material and the social, as well as its effects. Mirko Roth characterises a museum-based communication and interaction with objects as one that inevitably leads to a change in the interpretation and function of religious things, creating an "extraordinary sphere of reality". He argues for adopting a non-anthropocentric viewpoint, and consequently for dissolving the dichotomies of subject-object and nature-culture. Peter Bräunlein takes up a similar argument, using the example of the Hawaiian god Ku to point out the agency and liveliness of religious things, which bring their own biography, agency, and sociality into the museum as "living things". Accordingly, Kerstin Johannsen argues in this anthology that objects' meanings are created by their contexts in space, i.e. the location and relocation of an object, and the interrelations between objects and architecture. Furthermore, Johannsen states that as actors move objects, locations and relocations of objects in space hint at the actors' understanding, valuation and thus categorisation of objects.

All in all, the contributions show that, in museums, religious things are not merely preserved and (re-)presented as what they once were or how they are, *per se*. Rather, it becomes clear that the things' statuses – as religious items, art or looted property; as passive objects, or as subjects possessing agency – and meaning are related to diverse contexts: religious beliefs and practices; academic research and theories; or trade, politics, museums and exhibitions. The entanglements of people, things, and social practice create and reflect the agency, dynamic meanings, and interpretations of religious things.¹⁴ Birgit Meyer speaks of museum things as "nodes" ("Knotenpunkte"), through which complex entanglements and the interaction of different actors can become, or be made, clear.¹⁵ In a comparable way, Tavangar's contribution shows that, following Giorgio Riello and the

14 Herbert Kalthoff et al., "Einleitung: Materialität in Kultur und Gesellschaft," in *Materialität: Herausforderungen für die Sozial- und Kulturwissenschaften*, ed. Herbert Kalthoff et al. (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2016).

15 Birgit Meyer, "Wir und die anderen?" *Rotary Magazin für Deutschland und Österreich*, September 1, 2021, accessed October 13, 2021, <https://rotary.de/wissenschaft/wir-und-die-anderen->

'history of an object' approach, research on an object generates information not only about that object itself, but also about its relationship to other objects, and to the people who produced, owned and endowed it. Finally, such research can also cast a light on the institution that houses and exhibits the object.



Figure 4: Do academia's etic reconstructions of artefacts form projections of reality, just like the shadows of real things? Photo: Georg Dörr, © Religionskundliche Sammlung Marburg.

As different as the contexts of religion, research, and the museum may seem, they are intimately entangled: Academic research claims to reconstruct religious contexts (emic perspectives) from an outsider's position, analyse them, and eventually make them comprehensible to others. In doing so, researchers create a network of terms and concepts, in order to systematically capture emic perspectives, their conditions, and their consequences, in a way that is academically accessible. Research thus creates its own interpretations of reality (etic constructions).¹⁶

In the study of religions, the relationship between emic and etic perspectives is primarily discussed in terms of the distinction between a religious (inside) and

a-18679.html?fbclid=IwARP1ekPNC3LLmYPmdcX5DF3OK9Ret4S0e8MmqT1j-sdEOpA6SYpLB-6xEo.

16 This is how we outlined the issue in the call for presentations for the final REDIM conference "Religious Materials: Emic Perspectives – Etic Constructions – Museum Classifications", held online from 3 to 6 June 2021.

academic (outside) perspective. Researchers seek to detach themselves from a religious or theological perspective, in order to be able to discuss religions in general, from a meta-perspective. In doing so, however, they often overlook the fact that academic meta-language is itself shaped by normative internal perspectives, and is thus inadequate for grasping the diversity of religions, especially given its often Christian-influenced conceptual toolkit. Further, it is often the case that marginalised, non-conformist, or even so-called local religious traditions are excluded by conceptual presuppositions as to what religion is, as is clearly illustrated by the above example of material superstition being held as a counterpoint to immaterial religion.¹⁷

The question of the extent to which a distinction between religious and secular also implies a normative distinction between modern, European, and/or Christian is also debated in the study of religions. In her article, Bärbel Beinhauer-Köhler seeks to answer this question, introducing the issue of differentiation through a museum- and object-related example from Islamic Iran. She illustrates the problematic nature of drawing a sharp distinction between sacred and profane spheres, through a historical example: In a building complex in Ardabil, Iran, which includes the tomb of the Sufi scholar Sheikh Safi ad-Din Ishaq Ardabili (1252–1334), the impressive collection (porcelain and writings) of the court is displayed in the *chini khane*. Beinhauer-Köhler also points out that the social practices of actors in modern, secular museums in Europe can similarly be found in historical collections of the Near and Middle East – both of which likely have ancient roots.

It is a shared concern of research on religions and of museum presentations to achieve a more differentiated perception of religions; one that is also aware of intra-religious diversity. Learning and research about religions not only takes place in the religious field, but also may refer to religious objects in the museum. Indeed, research may be initiated or even challenged by such objects.¹⁸ In turn,

17 Kim Knott, "Insider/Outsider Perspective," in *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, ed. John Hinnels (London: Routledge 2009), 259–73; George D. Chryssides and Stephen E. Gregg, eds., *The Insider/Outsider Debate: New Perspective in the Study of Religion* (Sheffield, Bristol: Equinox, 2019); Morny Joy, "Beyond a God's Eyeview: Alternative Perspectives in the Study of Religion," in *Gender, Bodies, Religions*, ed. Silvia Marcos (Mexico: ALER Publications, 2000), 19–42 and Till Mostowlansky and Andrea Rota, "A Matter of Perspective?: Disentangling the Emic–Étic Debate in the Scientific Study of Religion\,s," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 28, no. 4–5 (2016), 317–36.

18 Edith Franke and Konstanze Runge, eds., *Von Derwisch-Mütze bis Mekka Cola: Vielfalt islamischer Glaubenspraxis* (Marburg: Diagonal-Verlag, 2013) and Jürgen Wasim Frembgen, *The Friends of God-Sufi Saints in Islam: Popular Poster Art from Pakistan* (Karachi: OUP Pakistan, 2012).

museums and exhibitions of religious things make reference to both religious contexts and academic research, as Edith Franke and Anna Matter show in this volume. For example, in determining whether an object is religious and, if so, to which religious tradition it should be assigned (museum classifications), museum staff rely both on observation of everyday religious life, and on analyses and categorisations from research. When reflecting on this, Franke and Matter assert that musealised objects have the potential to question both academic and social perceptions of religion, as they challenge both underlying knowledge systems about the history of religion, and everyday perceptions of religion.

Gallery II: Materialisation of Social Processes – Analysing Musealisation

In her article, Ekaterina Teryukova argues that the inventories of museums of religions not only serve the study of different religions, but can also be a source for reflecting on the history of *the study of religions* as an academic discipline. Using the example of the State Museum of the History of Religion in St Petersburg in Russia, Teryukova demonstrates that the museum's rich collections of books and written documents (including atheistic and anti-religious ones), ritual objects, clothes, and objects from the visual arts reflect the history of academic approaches to religion(s) in Russia across different eras.

Similarly, Kerstin Johannsen draws attention to the fact that a church – which can become a museum-like setting – does not only teach visitors Christian stories and symbolism. Analysing the material of the interior, namely the location of objects in the different areas of a church complex (in this case a painting in Frankfurt Cathedral, by the Flemish painter Oswald Onghers, of St Bartholomew being skinned alive) we discover people's categorisation of things – e.g. as religious or as art.

Also in this volume, Ferdinand Liefert, Peter Bräunlein, Susanne Rodemeier, Pardis Eskandaripour, and Alisha Meininghaus illustrate how museum inventories can become the subject of research, and probe the insights that this research can bring. Both Liefert and Bräunlein emphasise that the mere presence of an object can evoke surprise, or reveal a contradiction, and thus provide an occasion to analyse the relationship a museum, a research institution, or even a religious community has to the understanding of the religious objects on display. Rodemeier shows how the designations of objects change in the process of musealisation, and what conclusions can be thus drawn about the respective understandings of religion. Eskandaripour and Meininghaus deal with the influence that underlying

knowledge systems have on the classification and interpretation of both religious things and religion itself, within the museum. What is considered a relevant, representative object for Islam or Judaism? Eskandaripour deals with the socially and politically influential, as well as widely criticised, label 'Orient', as a generalising category under which things coming from the diverse, Islam-dominated regions of West Asia and North Africa are displayed, though the items may not necessarily be Islamic or even religious. Meininghaus explains the lack of differentiation in the perception of religion using the example of Jewish amulets: in exhibitions and catalogues, they very quickly receive the dazzling label or attribution of 'magic', and are categorised with heterodoxy, although they were also a part of religious practice in Orthodox Jewish cultures as a matter of course. Both Eskandaripour and Meininghaus thus touch on fundamental, self-reflective debates in the discipline of the study of religions, about the concept of religion and categories that stand in a delimiting, complementary, or hierarchical relationship to it.

Things, and the way they are handled – that is, their designation and subsequent categorisation, arrangement, and regional and local localisation – serve here to reconstruct facts that are not otherwise visible or brought to language. They thus present an example of the untapped potential of the focus on museum objects for the study of religions. They allow the reconstruction of emic theories of action of persons, and the effectiveness of social structures. Everyday categorisations, academic insights, political conditions, and even financial possibilities are reflected in the way things are handled and arranged. We therefore understand that neither research nor museums are wholly free of individual and socio-politically motivated premises. Religious materials thus always exist in relation to various actors – to those who use them, who research them, who exhibit and view them – and this relation, in turn, results in its own particular dynamics, depending on the context. Exhibitions, in the words of Franke und Matter “not only bear the signature of the curator, but also express existing orders of knowledge, and follow specific intentions as to what visitors should learn about religion. Museums [...] are thus not only places of preservation and display.”

Gallery III: Social Transformation by Religious Museum Things – Reflecting Museum Mediation and the Social Environment of Religious Things

With their exhibitions and other offerings – such as guided tours, museum educational offers, lecture series, publications, and their use of social media – museums have an impact on society, offering elements of socially interpretative

repertoires.¹⁹ “By exhibiting religious objects,” Franke and Matter point out, “[museums] create spaces for experience and learning that invite reinterpretation and individual reconstruction of religion. Museums and collections are not places of mere illustrations or distanced descriptions of religions – they intervene explicitly, and in a positioning manner, in the field of ‘religion’, although they certainly offer space for an analytically reflective examination of the topic of religion.” The sensitivity to, and awareness of, the interpretive, commentary, and (de-)constructive effect of the presentation of religion in museums makes it clear, in our opinion, that these processes also play a role in the study of religions, and in the description and analysis of religions and the history of religions. Despite the efforts to maintain distance and value neutrality in the study of religions, this research must also develop an awareness of the fact that underlying knowledge systems are shaped by presuppositions, specific perspectives, and positionings that need to be reflected on more carefully. Studies of material religion in the museum can provide impulses for a critical revision of systematisations in the study of religions. Using the analytical concept of *framing*, Yuriko Yamanaka’s analysis reveals conceptualisations and intentions in presenting Islamic material culture to the public, both within and outside the National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka. This presentation is achieved through exhibitions in different galleries, worksheets and guidebooks, as well as learning kits that schools can borrow. In her analysis, Yamanaka shows how the deliberate arrangement of diverse things of Islamic religious practice opens up differentiated access to an everyday religious world that is rather unknown to the public. In their article, Ramona Jelinek-Menke and Maike Sieler deal with external science communication via the social media platform Instagram, and thus shed light on another way of conveying knowledge of religion to the public, starting from work with religious things in a museum. In their discussion of the ideals and intentions behind science communication in general, they introduce how REDIM used Instagram in particular, and reflect on the chances, challenges, risks and limits associated with this undertaking, from the perspective of the study of religions.

Since the objectives of museums are not limited to merely collecting, conservation, and research, but also include communicating with society,²⁰ reflection on the means, content, and manner of artefact-related public relations work is an

19 Peter J. Bräunlein, “Material Turn,” in *Dinge des Wissens. Die Sammlungen, Museen und Gärten der Universität Göttingen*, ed. Georg-August-Universität Göttingen (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2012) 30–44 and Anke te Heesen, *Theorien des Museums zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius, 2012), 174–75.

20 “Missions and Objectives,” About, ICOM, accessed October 12, 2021, <https://icom.museum/en/about-us/missions-and-objectives/>.

important part of the research alliance, and can be found in the contributions of Yamanaka, and of Jelinek-Menke and Sieler. This work seems particularly necessary, given that we are dealing with plural societies, and a diverse group of visitors and users of museum offerings. Moreover, as Yamanaka shows, the members of these groups are not only confronted with, and part of, plurality on-site, but are also involved in global processes in their everyday lives, in which further plurality comes into play. Furthermore, the museum objects themselves also refer to their global historical contexts.

As already indicated in the above quotation from Franke and Matter, the influences emanating from religious things in the museum are neither subject exclusively to the deliberate control of curators and other museum staff, nor do they concern only a non-religious public. Religious individuals and groups, too, consume academic research, and relate to museums and exhibited things. For some, museums become places of identity and community building; this can be considered positive or negative, but in any case, requires critical reflection on museological practices. For others, museums, and the objects stored in them, are “monuments to the injustice of the past”²¹ – or at least not the legitimate or appropriate place for holding certain (religious) things – because of their (religious) significance for a community, or their ritual function, or because they are the human remains of possible ancestors, or simply because of the circumstances under which they came to the museum. Museums, especially ethnological museums, have been confronted with criticism and demands for restitution for decades, as Bénédicte Savoy shows in her book on African art in European museums, published in 2021. Prior to that, in her inaugural lecture at the Collège de France in 2017, she pointed out that there has been criticism of the “translocation of cultural goods based on violence” since the 18th century.²² As is well known, translocation took place on a massive scale. With reference to several African cultural creators such as Aimé Césaire, Paulin Joachim and Nee Kwate Owoo, Savoy notes that this mass looting, and the resulting absence, of material cultural goods has extensively influenced the societies and communities of their former owners. According to these creators, cultural, artistic, and religious traditions in African countries have faced a significant and deliberate campaign of permanent destruction. In the colonising societies that took possession of the looted things, by contrast, these things became a central source of artistic inspiration. Here, one could call to mind Picasso, one of the most important and best-known artists of European classical

21 Niyi Osundare, “Following in 007’s Footsteps,” *West Africa*, November 3, 1980, 2178.

22 Bénédicte Savoy, *Die Provenienz der Kultur: Von der Trauer des Verlusts zum universalen Menschheitserbe* (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2018), 38–40 (translation RJM).

modernism; Emil Nolde, a painter significant for German Expressionism, whose works were inspired by African and Oceanic masks, or Frida Kahlo, who possessed and was inspired by objects from Mexican indigenous groups, which she incorporated into her globally popular art. Furthermore, by displaying and viewing looted objects in museums and World's Expositions in Europe, the colonising societies took possession of, and elevated themselves above, the colonised and looted societies.²³ Additionally, they used these objects to learn about their societies of origin, in order to proselytise and colonise them more effectively.²⁴ Thus, Owoo points out, "The material they collected in Africa [was] used as propaganda material against Africans and people of African descent".²⁵

Comparing the findings presented by Rodemeier and Liefert, the importance of musealised religious things for proselytising in different regions, and by different religions, becomes obvious. These do not seem to have been independent parallel developments, but rather were due to a global influence of European Christian practices. Liefert highlights that Christian mission strategies and museums served as a model for the missionary activities of the Japanese Tenrikyō in the late 19th century.

To conclude, material things and their handling played a decisive role in the hierarchical global social structure that emerged from colonialism in different regions around the globe –the cultural, economic, and ideological effects of which are still painfully relevant today. As Joram Tarusarira puts it: "[...] while colonialism is over, coloniality is not. Coloniality is, rather, all over."²⁶ Concerning museums, Savoy's historical study shows how, after the independence of numerous African states, European and, in particular, German museums purposefully and

23 The colonisers, argues Sylvester Johnson, denied their embodiment, while taking great interest in the bodies and things of the colonised. The ideological decoupling of the colonisers from the material, and the linking of the colonised to it, was at the same time bound to the basic assumption of the colonisers: that the colonised were so attached to the material, that they could not develop universal values based on reasoning themselves: Sylvester A. Johnson, "Colonialism, Orientalism, and the Body," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Religion and Materiality*, ed. Vasudha Narayanan (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2020), 509–29.

24 For the role of theories of religion, and the conceptualisation of African religious artefacts as "fetishes", see e.g. Valentin-Y. Mudimbe, "Discourse of Power and Knowledge of Otherness," in *Perspectives on Africa: A Reader in Culture, History, and Representation*, 2nd ed., ed. Roy R. Grinker, Stephan Lubkemann, and Christopher B. Steiner (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 55–60.

25 Nee Kwate Owoo, *You Hide Me* (Ghana, 1971), s/w, 16mm, 40/20 min, Regie: Nee Kwate Owoo, 08:53–09:03, quoted in Bénédicte Savoy, *Afrikas Kampf um seine Kunst: Geschichte einer postkolonialen Niederlage* (München: C.H. Beck, 2021), 23.

26 Joram Tarusarira, "Religion and Coloniality in Diplomacy," *Transatlantic Policy Network on Religion & Diplomacy* (February 10, 2020): 4.

successfully secured both their ownership of the objects in question, and their interpretive authority over them, maintaining colonial structures in postcolonial times. Research into the historical provenance of museum objects, as well as the analysis of the influence of colonial actors and networks, has evidently become essential in interdisciplinary research on religion and museums, as highlighted in several of the projects carried out in our research network.

While today there are still large gaps in the material cultural heritage in communities and museums in the global south, museums in the global north face the challenge of overflowing and – due to a lack of funding, which would require the political will to solve – partly dilapidated storage facilities, with multiple ownership of the objects they contain. The museums of our research alliance, which deal with religious things from different regions of the world, once arose out of an attitude of wanting to own materially what was desired to be understood intellectually.²⁷ This attitude was partly enforced with violence – or, at least, the violent circumstances of their acquisition was wilfully ignored.²⁸ As such, it is imperative not to close our minds to these historical questions and sociopolitical debates. Indeed, this fact should become a starting point to deal with them persistently, explicitly, and intensively.

As she explains in her interview with Edith Franke and Ramona Jelinek-Menke in this volume, Léontine Meijer-van Mensch meets the challenges emerging from colonialism and coloniality theoretically-conceptually, linguistically, and practically, in museum work that applies the concepts of *communities of implications*, *shared stewardship* and the *liquid museum*. In addition, however, restitution is also a central instrument for handling the material witnesses to a global social structure shaped by colonialism and coloniality. Consequently, the GRASSI Museum of Ethnology in Leipzig, which is a REDIM project partner, has already returned a number of objects. Meijer-van Mensch makes clear that, in her view, restitution requests should always be granted, and that museums evidently do not become empty and meaningless buildings as a result of fulfilling these requests. Firstly,

27 Savoy, *Die Provenienz der Kultur*, 22.

28 This is how the historian Götz Aly, for example, describes the situation in detail, in a popular academic book using the example of the island of Luf in the South Seas and the Ethnological Museum of the State Museums of Berlin, on the basis of a large number of historical documents: Götz Aly, *Das Prachtboot: Wie Deutsche die Kunstschätze der Südsee raubten* (Frankfurt/Main: S. Fischer, 2021). Many years earlier, the journalist Gert von Paczensky had already stated, in a joint book with the then director of the Bremen Überseemuseum, that colonialism was one of the prerequisites for European museums to be able to fill their inventories in the first place: Gert von Paczensky, “Hochmut,” in *Nofretete will nach Hause: Europa – Schatzhaus der “Dritten Welt”*, ed. Gert von Paczensky and Herbert Ganslmayr (München: Bertelsmann Verlag, 1984), 55–56.

it is never the case that communities reclaim the totality of all the objects they produced and/or once owned and used. Rather, restitution claims only concern a small part of the overall collection of objects. One reason for this might be that communities have an interest in having their stories told globally – even by things which were stolen from them. One could argue that these stolen things contain the possibility of telling the story of this very looting, which has, through force, become part of the history of the colonised and the looted; indeed, a history which connects the looters and the looted. In addition, these objects can, for families with a migrant background, become a point of access to the culture of their ancestors. Moreover, in a sense, a global culture has emerged, in which materials and patterns of interpretation from around the world interfere with each other, as a result of global entanglements – in which colonialism plays an integral part.²⁹ Thus, whether we like it or not, no matter how we evaluate it, and no matter if restitutions take place or not, the plundering, the being plundered and the plundered items all form part of our culture(s). Secondly, the collections in museums in the global north are so extensive that, even if a large number of objects were returned, the depots would not be left empty. Thirdly, and this is the crucial point for Meijer-van Mensch, museums should refrain from systematically collecting and owning material objects anyway. She argues that the emphasis should rather be on the relationships of the people and communities that come together in museums as a *third space*, as she puts it, referring to a concept introduced by *Homi Bhabha*. According to her, this is the central role of museums for social transformation processes today



Figure 5: Objects and their perception in museums are often shaped by colonial attitudes and structures. Baule figure from the Ivory Coast (Ag 196) under the pith helmet of the founder of the Museum of Religions (Religionskundliche Sammlung), Marburg, Rudolf Otto (Va 002). Photo: Heike Luu, © Religionskundliche Sammlung Marburg.

29 Savoy, *Die Provenienz der Kultur*.

– and not the seizure or the defence of the possession of material things and the interpretative authority over them.

In her contribution to this volume, Meijer-van Mensch outlines a conceptualisation of an ethnological museum that refers to a fundamental change that has taken place in recent years, in the understanding of the function of museums. While museums in the global north in the 19th and 20th centuries were seen primarily as archivists and preservers of a so-called cultural heritage (*old museology*), to the destruction of which actors from the global north contributed, in *new museology* they are understood as social, fluid spaces that are open to processes of negotiation and encounter.³⁰

Final Remarks at the Beginning – Looking Back and Forward

Religious materials, as well as their collection and exhibition, reflect all these dynamics. Franke and Matter argue that research on collecting, preserving, presenting, and perceiving religious objects and religions in museums should take into account the problems of classification, handling, and the manifold possibilities of interpretation that the musealisation of religious objects entails. Nevertheless, it is important to note that religious materials are not simply points of reflection, and hence passive objects. From a religious perspective, materials can be living and active subjects.³¹ The scope and relevance of emic and religious (inner) perspectives, which is linked to the problematisation of the object-subject dichotomy, is increasingly taken into account in academic research, and is partly integrated into its theoretical approaches (see Bräunlein and Roth in this volume).³² In the museum, the question arises as to how to deal with objects that are, from certain perspectives, alive and effective (see Rodemeier and Meijer-van Mensch in this volume). This is also connected to the question of the changing connotation of a museum as a secular or religious place – for example, with the Museum of Frankfurt Cathedral, where, during a workshop, the project members discussed

30 Fiona Cameron, “The Liquid Museum: New Institutional Ontologies for a Complex, Uncertain World,” in *The International Handbooks of Museum Studies*, Vol. 1: Museum Theory, ed. Andrea Witcomb and Kylie Message (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 354–61 and Juan Gonçalves, “The ‘Liquid Museum’: A Relational Museum that Seeks to Adapt to Today’s Society,” *The Museum Review* 4, no. 1 (2019).

31 For an example see Jennifer S. Hughes, “*Mysterium Materiae*: Vital Matter and the Object as Evidence in the Study of Religion,” *Bulletin for the Study of Religion* 41, no. 4. (November 2012), 16–24.

32 See also Sonia Hazard, “The Material Turn in the Study of Religion,” *Religion and Society* 4 no. 1 (2013): 58–78.

where the cathedral ends and museum begins – or the transformation of a secular museum when religious rituals are performed (see Meijer-van Mensch and Bräunlein in this volume). At the very least, museums that ‘exhibit religion’ face the challenge of appropriately presenting this perspective – the living contexts of the objects, and the dynamics associated with them – in an apparently static, and often secularly framed, place. This means that museums must deal with both emic and etic perspectives and demands, as well as with the critique of their classification or even against their existence.

The REDIM research network has explored these questions in various research projects, and in close cooperation between museums and universities. The present volume provides an insight into research that is still in progress, and stands as a substantial interim conclusion, on the way to a better understanding of the dynamics of religious objects in museums. We see it as an excellent opportunity to draw conclusions from the research results, for a more differentiated understanding of religion in an interdisciplinary study of religions.

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