

A Critical Analysis of the Proposed Sale of the Africa Collection at the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam

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The Africa collection of the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam has been a subject of recent discussion in the Netherlands and internationally, since the museum announced that it intends to sell the collection to private collectors.¹ The Wereldmuseum has thousands of African objects representing Angola, Cameroon, Ghana, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, Nigeria and Benin.² Museum representatives argue that shifting its focus to Asia would make it less dependent on government funding. These developments evoke some fundamental questions about the idea and meaning of Dutch heritage, African art collections and their contested history.

The future of ethnology museums in Europe and specifically the Netherlands is not exempt from the effects of the economic crisis and heavy budget cuts. As the Netherlands is drastically reducing and, in many cases, eliminating state subsidies for the arts and culture, many museums are looking to new sources and partners in order to generate income. Over the last two years, conversations about the possible sale of the Africa collection has focused strongly and been framed as a debate about declining arts and culture budgets and alternative avenues and methods of fundraising. However, there are various underlying issues at play that need to be questioned and explored. For instance, other Dutch ethnological museums, with African, Asian, Oceanian, Middle and South American and North American collections, are concerned that the collection will disappear into the hands of private collectors.³ Indeed, they argue, that selling off part of Dutch cultural heritage would be disconcerting. Here the idea of 'cultural heritage' is used as a framework that protects art objects so that they cannot be sold. Linked to notions of citizenship and belonging, it is important to interrogate what Dutch cultural heritage means, as well as its function.

This protective framework has resulted in a postponement of the potential sale until the municipality, which owns the collection, has discussed how to handle the advice from the Dutch Cultural Council. For its part, the council published recommendations in January 2013, advising all ethnology museums, including the Wereldmuseum, to identify a core Dutch collection consisting of artworks that will be protected under the new heritage law. According

¹ Prior to publication the national government and the City of Rotterdam decided that the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam will not be able to sell the top art objects and collectors items without the permission of the City Council and external professionals. All correspondence of the permanent Commission of Education, Culture and Science can be found here: <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/kst-32820-91.html>. Minister Bussemaker of Education, Culture and Science has had the following exchanges with the Commission: 32 820 Nieuwe visie cultuurbeleid. Nr. 91. Verslag van een Algemeen Overleg. 07 Augustus 2013.

² See <http://www.wereldmuseum.nl/nl/decollectie/zoeken.html>.

³ Amongst others: Tropenmuseum, Museum Volkenkunde and Boijmans Van Beuningen

to these guidelines, if the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam's Africa collection is selected to fall under this purview, it will not be sold to private individuals.

The director of the Wereldmuseum, Stanley Bremer, has called the proposed sale a 'moderne manier van museummanagement' (new form of museum management)⁴ in the Dutch media, suggesting that a sale is inevitable, a result of the economic crisis. However, every economic crisis cannot be resolved with the sale of entire art collections. Indeed, the monetisation of heritage should be treated with great caution. For instance, in the case of the Wereldmuseum, the history and meaning of the Africa collection remains contested. Its proposed sale should not be understood as a unique event. Rather, it is an example of the contested situatedness of European ethnological art institutions. Collections of former colonies, including human remains, do not sit easily with European ethnological art institutions, and there is a strong urge to deal, in some way or another, with these objects from the past. However, what exactly needs to be done remains nebulous. Analysing the proposed sale of the Africa collection provides insight into what such it might mean in terms of the history of the art objects, the representation of Africa in the Dutch ethnological museum and the meaning of cultural heritage to the Netherlands.

Exploring the underlying issues that inform and relate to the proposed sale, I turn to the long, contested history of collecting African art in the Netherlands, problematising Dutch heritage in order to understand the function and history of ethnology inside and outside of the ethnological museum, as well as its relationship with heritage discourse today. Does heritage discourse in the Netherlands only recognise the material or does it also relate to the intangible nature of art collections? Examining the notion of heritage as a cultural process, I engage with concepts such as citizenship, and identity, as well as local and global histories, which lack uniform or inclusive meanings in a so-called multicultural society such as the Netherlands. I suggest that knowledge systems that inform the construction of Dutch cultural heritage should be deconstructed in order to understand the meaning of the proposed sale. Finally, I delve into the politics of representation that have influenced the manner in which the collections have been exhibited, revealing shifts in the representation of Africa. Does the ethnological museum have a transformative role in terms of taking historic responsibility? I argue that the ethnological museum should and could function as a primarily site for critical engagement within and outside of the museum space.

COLLECTING AFRICAN ART IN THE NETHERLANDS

The term 'collecting' is used loosely in discussions around the proposed sale, but it is important to understand the nature of 'collecting.' Ethnographic exhibitions fall into the 'wider context of collecting, measuring, classifying, picturing, filing, and narrating colonial others during the heyday of colonialism.'⁵ The coloniality of anthropology and ethnology discourses is key to our conversation. Art objects were brought to the West as a consequence

⁴ Author's translation. See, for instance, 'En waar laten we de Afrikaanse kunst?', NRC, 12 January 2013, <http://www.nrc.nl/handelsblad/van/2013/januari/12/en-waar-laten-we-de-afrikaanse-kunst-1196220>, Accessed 01 November 2013.

⁵ Alison Griffiths, *Wondrous Difference: Cinema, anthropology and turn-of-the-century visual culture*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2002, p 48 and *Human Zoos: Science and Spectacle in the Age of Colonial Empires*, Eds. Pascal Blanchard, Nicolas Bancel, Eric Deroo and Sandrine Lemaire, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 2008, p 95.

of colonialism but in order to support imperialist exploitations of people in Africa.⁶ Much has been written about the colonial discourse of anthropology. In particular, the work of Bernard (Ben) Magubane proves especially relevant to discussions about ownership and belonging within this context. Anthropology produced knowledge that was used to validate and indeed, inscribe racist and imperialist ideas onto the 'Other.' Mugubane's work questions the very nature of the discipline, arguing that the 'othered' in anthropology often is exoticised.

In this regard, the power relationship that determines the idea and difference between the West and 'Others' is extremely important. In *The Invention of Africa* (1988), Valentin Mudimbe explores the order of knowledge constituted in the socio-historical context of colonialism, which, he demonstrates, produced dichotomies between Europe and Africa. According to Mudimbe, the process of deciding what is recognised and defined as 'African' art is founded upon certain categories that exist within a constructed grid, one that holds the power to classify what is art and what is not. This matrix also determines how a collection is viewed as a whole.⁷ Mudimbe defines the process as 'epistemological ethnocentrism,' which entails 'the belief that scientifically there is nothing to be learned from "them" unless it is already "ours" or comes from "us."⁸ These distinctions are important because they have influenced the production of knowledge around the Africa collection and have influenced how the collection has been represented.

The task of the traditional anthropological museum is to provide information about distant peoples. These spaces exhibit objects that, within the museum category, are described as 'material culture.' Frequently, they create exhibitions on the basis of functionalist anthropology, a school of thought that emerged in the early twentieth century. Hence, we often see displays with a geographical or thematic focus that are largely ahistorical. The Dutch ethnological museums also adhered to this practice and had several African themed showcases. For instance, in 1951, the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam presented Congolese ethnographic objects in combination with paintings of Floris Jaspers under the title: 'The Congolese in Western and His Own Art.'⁹ Indeed, when it comes to the representation of African art and cultures in the ethnological museum, there are various ideas as to who has ownership to do so.

Collecting in 'other' cultures outside of Europe cannot be seen as an activity that is detached from global and local political developments.¹⁰ These political developments include global and local histories that inform the meanings of art objects. The ethnological collections in Dutch ethnographic museums are not representative of the cultures from which they have been purchased, borrowed or appropriated; instead, we see a process of stereotyping at play that reduces the art objects to one singular culture. At the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam, for instance, naming the entire collection 'African' reduces the continent's national and ethnic cultures to a monolith. While these collections may not represent the cultures they claim, they do tell us something about the contact that European collectors had

⁶ Bernard Magubane and James C Faris, 'On the Political Relevance of Anthropology,' *Dialectical Anthropology*, 9:1, 1985, p 91.

⁷ Valentin Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, philosophy and the order of knowledge*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1988.

⁸ Ibid. p 15.

⁹ Paul Faber, *Africa at the Tropenmuseum*, KIT Publishers, Amsterdam, 2011, p 31.

¹⁰ Pieter ter Keurs, 'Theory and Practice of Colonial Collecting,' *Colonial Collections Revisited*, Ed. Pieter ter Keurs, CNWS Publications, Leiden, 2007, p 3.

with these cultures.¹¹ Thinking and understanding ethnographic collections as a two-way exchange is perceived as a major paradigm shift, and it has been argued that this notably changes the way the collections of ethnological museums are interpreted.¹² This revision opens up other ways of seeing, providing a different understanding of art objects and their potential functions in Western museums.

Although the actual content of ethnographic collections does not change, its respective relationships with the museum and society are changing continuously. It is this latter relationship in particular that inspires and advocates representing Africa differently. As I argue later, the historic responsibility of the ethnological museum in the Netherlands in particular, and in Europe in general, should be viewed as an integral part of the way Africa is represented at the ethnology museum.

AFRICAN COLLECTIONS AT THE DUTCH ETHNOLOGY MUSEUM: ETHNOLOGY OR HERITAGE?

Scholars and practitioners have defined and described heritage in multiple ways. Because it relates to the tangible and the intangible, as much as it relates to the present and the past, it is challenging to formulate a definition that encompasses the multifaceted nature of heritage. At the same time, people always have been involved in the production of heritage, as David Harvey argues in 'Heritage Pasts and Heritage Presents.' All societies have a past, although not every society wishes to engage with this past. Through understanding what people convey about their past, in the form of forgetting, remembering or memorialising, heritage studies can engage on a broader level with academic debates.¹³ In *Landscape of Memory* (2010), Sabine Marschall argues that heritage is difficult to define because it is all encompassing; it relates to tangible sites and memorials, as well as landscapes and the intangible aspects of culture, such as traditions and oral memory. These tensions should be taken into account when the Africa collection is labelled as Dutch cultural heritage.¹⁴

As ethnological museums negotiate their respective roles in multicultural societies, such as the Netherlands, they must confront issues of inclusivity. In the case of the Wereldmuseum, it may prove productive to understand and frame the sale of the Africa collection as a process of cultural heritage. In *Uses of Heritage* (2006), Laurajane Smith explores the meaning of the idea of heritage as a cultural and social process, offering an alternative to Western views that privilege a physical type of heritage.¹⁵ However, as a cultural process, heritage is far less governed and difficult to define; it is not limited to nations and the histories of these nations. By labelling and protecting the Africa collection as Dutch heritage, it is suggested that the collection should be understood within the borders of the Netherlands within a certain period of time. However, heritage as a cultural process confronts these assumptions, serving as a

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ David C Harvey, 'Heritage Pasts and Heritage Presents: Temporality, meaning and the scope of heritage studies', *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 7:4, 2001, pp 319-338.

¹⁴ Sabine Marschall, *Landscape of Memory: Commemorative monuments, memorials and public statuary in post-apartheid South-Africa*, Brill, Leiden, 2010.

¹⁵ Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage*, Routledge, Oxon, 2006, p 3.

form of border thinking. For Walter Mignolo, the ‘basic condition of border thinking’¹⁶ and one of the main theses of *Local Histories/Global Designs* (2012): ‘there is no modernity without coloniality and that coloniality is constitutive, and not derivative, of modernity.’¹⁷ Thus, thinking about the Africa collection from the border has the potential to lead us to a decolonial understanding in which the knowledge systems and the history that informs the collection are deconstructed. Mignolo argues that non-Western local histories are always in some way or another entangled with Western local history.¹⁸ The history of the Africa collection is a prime example of the Netherlands’ entanglement with the African continent.

According to Mignolo, border thinking becomes the necessary epistemology to delink and decolonise knowledge. Incorporating this view as key to the concept of heritage as a cultural process offers a deeper understanding of the relationship between heritage and culture. Through this lens, all heritage also is intangible.¹⁹ Viewing heritage as intangible takes account that it can have a meaning for individuals or for a community that is not laid down in rules or regulations. Objects and sites can have multiple meanings and functions for communities that cannot be regulated. This ‘type’ of heritage relates to our own relationship with history and to questions of culture, identity and citizenship. Here, the idea of local specificity is essential in a so-called multiracial society, where ideas around culture, identity and citizenship are neither uniform nor inclusive.

The concept of culturalisation that is at play here relates to a certain idea of Dutch cultural heritage and is intertwined with ideas of loyalty and belonging. The conditions required to access citizenship are not equal. Thus, when speaking of Dutch cultural heritage, we should ask: exactly whose heritage are we referring to?

Unpacking the concept of Dutch cultural heritage should be done within the European context. It should be noted, that when we speak of ‘Europe,’ we should be critical of which and whose Europe we are speaking of. Heritage in Europe is often seen as a way to define one’s identity and recognise others.²⁰ Both ‘Europe’ and ‘heritage’ are constructed in multiple ways in the European public’s mind(s), often depending on which part of Europe they come from and live. There are different levels and conceptions of ‘European culture’ and ‘cultures of Europe.’²¹ Furthermore, in *White on Black* (1995), Jan Nederveen Pieterse argues that ideas about ‘European culture’ are strongly dependent on the Enlightenment image of development, where culture is regarded as something to be protected and cultivated. Enlightenment views have a strong influence on the ethnological museum and the representation of Africa in Europe.

As I mentioned earlier, the ethnological museum in the Netherlands has experienced several shifts in its perceived role in constructing the ‘Other,’ Africa in particular, resulting in attempts at revision. When these shifts take place, there is a possibility to engage differently with the past and the history of specific collections. Several European countries have worked actively with the notion of heritage, because they are faced with increasingly globalised

¹⁶ Walter Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, subaltern knowledges and border thinking*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2012, p ix

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage*, Routledge, Oxon, 2006, p 3.

²⁰ Ferdinand de Jong and Michael Rowlands, ‘Introduction: Postconflict heritage,’ *Journal of Material Culture*, 13:2, 2008, p 131.

²¹ Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *White on Black: Images of Africa and blacks in western popular culture*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1995, p 156.

contexts and phenomena such as multicultural societies. We can therefore read heritage as a mode of cultural production, popular interest and state discourse. In 'Heritage in Southern Africa,' JoAnn McGregor and Lyn Schumaker argue that the use of heritage has promoted nostalgic, consumerist and 'closed' understandings of the past, but also a 'wealth of constructive critical engagement.'²² It is indeed this constructive engagement that is of interest, for it enables us to move beyond narrow understandings of the past and the relationship between Dutch colonial history and the ethnology museum. It must be stressed that this trend is not exclusive to the ethnology museum but should be seen in a broader context of Dutch resistance to giving slavery and colonialism a prominent position in its historic canon and to researching and exploring critically the meaning of the legacy of slavery and colonialism in the Netherlands today. In addition, it fits the country's dominant historical discourse that seems to struggle with the representation of suppressed histories. For instance, the history of slavery has only recently been added to the national historical canon. The only research institute dedicated to slavery and its history, the National Institute for the Study of Dutch Slavery and its Legacy, was forced to close its door because of budget cuts. Furthermore, the commemoration of the abolishment of slavery is not a national commemoration but only takes place in a couple of cities, such as Amsterdam and Rotterdam.²³

Therefore, it is important to examine in which ways discourses such as ethnology have influenced this process. In her 2004 Société Internationale d'Ethnologie et de Folklore Keynote Address, 'From Ethnology to Heritage,' Barbara Kirstenblatt-Gimblett argues that ethnology is implicated in the production of heritage, even though it has a complicated relationship with its own past.²⁴ Therefore, it would be problematic if the latter were viewed as a discipline that was non-existent at the moment that ethnology was existent. Moreover, this would suggest that until heritage discourse came into existence and was recognised widely by academics, the art objects that belong to ethnological museums were not part of a certain heritage. Linking this discourse to a restrictive understanding of time is problematic, because it would suggest that the so-called value or importance of objects is dependent on a dominant discourse that determines this value or importance. Heritage did not suddenly 'come into existence;' rather, art objects were seen as possessing a certain 'heritage' before they were so labelled through heritage discourse. Museums of ethnology became museums of ethnology's own 'heritage.'²⁵

The public presentation of the collections shows how ethnology museums wish to deal with their own heritage. Neil Parsons' 'Unravelling History and Cultural Heritage in Botswana,' asserts that we should remind ourselves that 'images inherited from the past, no less than artefacts and sites, have been through many states of construction, cleaning and polishing before they reach public presentation.'²⁶ In complement, Harry Garuba's 'A Second

²² JoAnn McGregor and Lyn Schumaker, 'Heritage in Southern Africa: Imagining and marketing public culture and history,' *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 32:4, 2006, p 649.

²³ For a more extensive overview, see Chandra Frank, 'The Trouble with the Official Dutch Commemoration of the Abolition of Slavery,' *Africa is a Country*, 28 March 2013, <http://africasacountry.com/the-trouble-with-the-dutch-commemoration-of-the-abolition-of-slavery/>, Accessed 01 November 2013.

²⁴ Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *White on Black: Images of Africa and blacks in western popular culture*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1995, p 156.

²⁵ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 'From Ethnology to Heritage: The role of the museum,' SIEF Keynote, Marseilles, France, 28 April 2004.

²⁶ Neil Parsons, 'Unravelling History and Cultural Heritage in Botswana,' *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 32:4, 2006, p 669.

Life,' explains how 'the objects on display and the site itself acquire a second life, functioning as representations of themselves and their previous lives.' Both Parsons' and Garuba's observations indicate that the concept of performativity plays a major role within the ethnological museum.²⁷ We also notice that within the ethnological museum, performativity has multiple layers. For instance, at the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam, the objects of the Africa collection are displayed according to areas and cultures that often do not resemble present day social realities. Similarly, the omission of a deeper, layered context and background of the art objects in conversation with global and local histories reifies a particular performance of Africa.

HISTORIC RESPONSIBILITY AND QUESTIONS OF BELONGING AT THE DUTCH ETHNOLOGICAL MUSEUM

The Africa collection often was not seen as art because the classification model or grid that determined the status of the 'objects' was based on colonial ethnography. Over the years, ethnology museums have engaged in initiatives to understand their role in terms of historic responsibility for collections. Some of these projects involved modern art exhibitions that differed from the traditional ethnologic way of exhibiting.

For instance, some museums have organised shows with African modern art. The Tropenmuseum's 1989-1990 'White on Black' used a collection on 'Negrophilia' – popular representations of Africa and people of colour in the West – to demonstrate, depict and explore how racial stereotypes had been created and perpetuated in the West through slavery and colonialism.²⁸ The Tropenmuseum was conscious of the traditional ethnological ways in which Africa was represented and broke with those conventions in 'White on Black.' During this time, the Netherlands also was becoming more multicultural. The museum responded, adopting its exhibitions to its changing audience.

Ethnological museums in the Netherlands adhere to different policies when it comes to confronting and engaging with their problematic inheritance and responsibilities to a changing society. The legacy of the ethnological museum informs the nature and meaning of the Africa collection, retaining a disproportionate influence on ideas of heritage. The ethnological museum has not yet become a place where we can learn and educate following generations about imperial and colonial histories. The ways in which we teach and discuss these histories are equally important. Racist ideologies and power dimensions that decided who was the 'exhibiter' and who s/he should look like in contrast to the 'exhibited' should be stated explicitly. Such changes are necessary in a so-called multicultural society where racism continues to marginalise and threaten people, institutionally and in the form of what Philomena Essed refers to as 'everyday racism.'²⁹ In this view, structural forces of racism are connected to routine, day-to-day situations.

The ethnology museum should and can function as an educational space. At the same time, there is a need for critical engagement and a knowledge transaction within the ethnology

²⁷ Harry Garuba, 'A Second Life: Museums, Mimesis, and the Narratives of the Tour Guides of Robben Island,' *Desire Lines: Space, memory and identity in the post-apartheid city*, Eds. Noëleen Murray, Nick Shepherd, Martin Hall, Routledge, London, 2007, p 133.

²⁸ See Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *White on Black: Images of Africa and blacks in western popular culture*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1995, p 15.

²⁹ Philomena Essed, *Alledaags racism*, Sara, Amsterdam, 1984.

museum and within the discipline of history itself. Scholars, such as Ciraj Rassool, have examined ways in which historical knowledge can be negotiated through direct relationships with communities and other stakeholders as a means of critical engagement.³⁰ Some of the ethnology museums in the Netherlands, such as the Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden, have demonstrated that they are conscious of their position in society and aware of their history in the exhibition of ethnologic objects. These institutions need to legitimise, in one way or another, why they own certain kinds of art objects and collections. Through this process, the value of the art objects is now measured in different ways. Heritage discourse allows multiple values while enabling collections to be part of different ‘types’ or ‘forms’ of heritage. Unquestionably, ‘Africa’ collections are part of different heritages – the museums heritage, the cultural heritage of the Netherlands and Africa’s cultural heritage – meaning that the ethnologic history of the collections is part of the nature of the collections.

By analysing the politics of representation that have influenced the way the collections have been exhibited at the museum, one can identify a couple of changes in representation. Countries, such as South Africa, are often perceived as multicultural societies and are used as a link to Dutch multicultural society. Ethnological museums, such as the Tropenmuseum, avoid displaying and portraying the ‘Other’ but invite the previous (historical) ‘Other’ to come to the museum space, making it easier for ethnological museums to legitimise their existence and connect to the changing audience. It is challenging to gauge the effectiveness of this method. Generally speaking, one could argue that most ethnological museums in the Netherlands do promote cultural diversity but are not frequented by a multicultural audience. However, as explained, the previous ‘Other’ that is now being invited to the museum often does not enjoy the same access to citizenship and cultural heritage. The ethnological museum will not be able to engage critically with the history of the collection if it does not decolonise its own history first as this is entangled with the collection’s history. Through the proposed sale, the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam demonstrated that it does not find monetising this heritage problematic, because it privileges a particular capitalist value system. African museums barely are heard in this discussion and debates between both stakeholders have been virtually inexistent. It is important to question why African museums and organisations have not been consulted or involved in the recent discussions. Through seeing and framing the proposed sale as a process of cultural heritage, there would have been space for border thinking and for an exchange between the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam and African museums that have expressed their concern.

The Netherlands knows a long tradition of collecting and exhibiting African art objects. At the Dutch ethnological museums, these art objects have been represented in various ways. There has been a clear shift from labelling and seeing the collections, first as ethnologic objects and later as part of Dutch heritage. As explained, the idea of Dutch heritage is problematic, as the concept has been introduced in the Netherlands in order to engage with a changing globalising and multicultural society. Protecting the collection because it is part of Dutch cultural heritage is not taking into account the local and global histories of the Africa collection and how they have informed each other. Decolonising the history of the Africa collection would open up the debate around process of culturalisation, belonging and citizenship. It is this intersection that informs the idea of locality within the ethnological museum.

³⁰ See, for instance, Ciraj Rassool, ‘Power, Knowledge and the Politics of Public Pasts,’ *African Studies*, 69:1, 2010, p 80.