

Rethinking the origins of the Vatican Ethnological Museum. Reflections and goals of an ongoing research agenda

Working paper by Sabina Brevaglieri
sabina.brevaglieri@hu-berlin.de

Colonial cultural heritage, decolonisation, and the historians. An introduction

In July 2022, Pope Francis travelled to Canada, where he offered the First Nations people, the Métis and Inuit, the first official apology for the forced assimilation and violence perpetrated by the Catholic residential schools between the late 1800s and 1990s. Some months earlier, restitution of the rare Inuvialuvit kayak kept in the Vatican Ethnological Museum - recently renamed *Anima Mundi* – had been requested by an Inuit delegation, pointing to the persistent power of objects as a communicative resource. In October 2022, a repatriation agreement was signed in the Vatican with Peru's minister of Foreign Affairs concerning three ancient mummies dating from pre-Hispanic civilisations. Further actions followed, and in April 2023, the Pope called for restitutions as “the right gesture” for museums to assume direct responsibility for the colonial past. Unfortunately, the Papal willingness for decolonisation does not seem to have inspired the recent display of the American and African collections in *Anima mundi*, the Vatican Ethnological Museum. Despite such incoherences, the Papal positioning confirms restitutions as the major and long-awaited step toward transitional justice globally, within Europe and, above all, in Italy.

Yet, these governmental cultural policies do not appear immune from risks and limits. As recent scholarship has pointed out, restitutions have often been monopolised by national interests and political agendas superseding the entitlements, needs and requirements of source communities. As a national-bilateral approach, restitutions may risk supporting forms of neo-coloniality and foster removal and oblivion rather than historical awareness. Colonial relationships between people and objects have been grounded in transnational histories and entangled perspectives. Moreover, both dispossession and displacement entail productive and transformative dimensions, suggesting an approach to such complex heritage beyond the logics of cultural property and reversibility. Thus, restitutions appear a welcome starting point rather than a mature end of decolonisation, social justice, and democratic citizenship. To imagine the future of the colonial cultural heritage, increased reflexivity seems urgent, and an entangled approach seems crucial to unravel its complex making through time and space.

Against this background, my project aims to engage with the coloniality of heritage in Europe, both in relation to the controversial paths of colonial artefacts and the very colonial nature of the cultural heritage paradigm. My work calls its Eurocentric dimension into question and aims to explore

entangled biographies of colonial artefacts, addressing their multiple spatial and temporal presence, as well as the plural, though often asymmetric, agencies involved. The thousands of non-European artefacts brought to Rome over time as «gifts» point to multiple histories and complex dynamics of both their displacement and re-sedimentation and profile the Papal city as an «exceptional - normal case» from which to address long-lasting and competing productions of the colonial heritage from an entangled perspective. To investigate the past as an active contribution to a decolonial future and more dynamic forms of return, this project articulates a multi-scaled agenda, which invites interdisciplinary exchange and a closer engagement by historians with the heritage “applied” category. This pre-paper aims to sketch out its configuration by both presenting first recent results and a future program.

On the one hand, the proposed focus on the Vatican ethnological collections allows this project to argue for a long historical perspective, tracing back to the early modern Empires and colonial times. This provides the opportunity to unravel emic understandings of heritage-making triggered by colonial domination and violence, as well as indigenous creative resistance and capacity of transformation, asymmetric communication, and re-uses of the pasts (Brevaglieri 2022). On the other hand, an interdisciplinary research agenda is outlined here under the heading of a tentatively defined *object entangled-right-to-endure*. The implementation of an international working-group aims at designing and developing a new analytical perspective and concrete methodological tool to support decolonial policies and new forms of co-production, and co-participation with source communities.

The early modern origins of the Vatican Ethnological Museum.

As is well known, the Papal ethnological museum was founded in 1926 soon after the largest Catholic missionary exhibition in Europe took place in the Vatican. In addition, the museum integrated the original core of the Propaganda Fide Museum which was established in 1883. Its foundation followed the donation of the exceptional ethnographical collection which has previously belonged to Cardinal Stefano Borgia, himself a member of the Propaganda Fide Congregation. Against this background, I argue for the more complex making of an in/visible Propaganda Fide “collection” which preceded Borgia’s donation. It articulated through a process of accumulation and dispersion, which was neither exclusively driven by curiosity, nor targeted to forms of systematic display. My work investigates the multiple dynamics of artefact monopolisation triggered by the missionary material engagement and the multiple paths of sedimentation and dispersion over time and space. In Rome, objects are not only musealised in public collections but also stored in archives and libraries, and treasured in Catholic churches and sacristies. This research focuses on Propaganda Fide Palace as a site. Since the Baroque

period, it housed oriental printing, a library and the archive, wherein object dynamics developed in close relation with both the congregation activities and the Roman space. The palace, as a place of colonial negotiations, diplomatic interactions, and political and intellectual dynamics is a privileged context of multi-directional forms of object entrapment. In and out of the archive, objects were transformed and changed their value regimes. Their understanding shifted from material conservation to legal protection, interplaying with new antiquarian meanings attached to the material evidence as proof of the past beyond the value of the antiquity. Yet, Propaganda archive is also the space of a continuous re-enactment of agencies. Indigenous looted objects from the colonial worlds did not travel alone. Writings and sketches produced in connection to missionary mobility and action travelled with them and interplayed with their retranslations. My work addresses material artefact collectives in which textual, visual, and material dimensions interplayed. By navigating across the bias of the colonial archive, incoherences, discontinuities, lines of tension, frictions and fractures open up an analytical space to retrace agencies.

On the one hand, my research agenda engaged with the ambiguous missionary mediation across worlds and the role indigenous materiality plays as a resource. While displaying their dangerous nature as embodied idolatrous worship to be destroyed, artefacts also were monopolised as a powerful tool of colonial communication. Destruction and collection appear as a continuum within multiple missionary situations and claims, while indigenous objects acted as tools for missionary legitimation, recognition, and negotiations. Missionary material engagement was articulated through competitions and conflicts with the colonial authorities, as well as interplay with the diocesan church. Materiality triggered interests and visions of the Creole colonial elite, the intermedial Invention of an American past and the commemoration of ancient idolatrous local cultures. On the other hand, my work focuses on analytical resources to unlock indigenous agency. When verbal communication was difficult, the material world occupied the centre stage of asymmetric negotiations between missionaries and indigenous populations. Material transactions reaffirmed ties to communities and ethnical identities, and performed the inalienability of artefacts, making sense of indigenous gifts and hierarchies of values and meanings, and showing creative manipulations of the boundaries between the religious realm and emic notion of preservation and heritage. Thus, I argue for discontinuous, competing, though asymmetric, entangled patrimonializations through time and space. They entail and interconnect indigenous claims, antiquarian work, institutional power dynamics, figures of mediation and missionary agency, continuously re-enacting between the archive and the urban space.

2. An object entangled-right-to-endure agenda

The second and interconnected aim of this project is an interdisciplinary discussion platform which will address the configuration of a tentatively defined *object entangled-right-to-endure* as a future-oriented, co-produced, reflexive tool to foster decolonisation. An *entangled-right to endure* aims to make room for new forms of object return and circulations beyond restitution logics, and value-creation beyond exclusive cultural property. Triggered by my own research and case-studies, and approached from an interdisciplinary and intertemporal perspective, this agenda aims to provide a concrete tool for cultural heritage policy-making, museum cultural planning, social justice and democratic citizenship, while increasing general awareness of the entanglement between Europe, coloniality and heritage. Central issues will be the configurations, variable meanings, and conditions of possibility of the material agencies, the potential of social-relational and communicative approaches, and the ability of connected objects to possess rights. The project will mobilise object ambassador-oriented perspectives to explore the shifting meanings of object negotiation, considering both past and present perspectives. This approach calls for an active social and political role objects may play beyond institutional and governmental action. Cultural heritage fosters a closer interplay between historical education, research, and current social problems. It focuses on how objects may be mobilised in favour of the people and collectives they represent. This agenda is expected to consolidate an interdisciplinary and transnational working group, which will work in presence and hybrid meetings. Participants will meet around talks, readings, problem-oriented project drafts and source analysis. Participation will be open to historians, archaeologists, philosophers, social scientists, lawyers with specific expertise in non-human agencies and/or cultural heritage, museum curators, digital humanists, and social activists. Above all, the active involvement of traditional knowledge experts from indigenous societies and source community representatives is essential. A dedicated website will be created to overcome barriers and encourage participation while promoting critical awareness of knowledge construction. This may be offered in both English and Spanish to bring together interests, gather data, and stimulate critical consciousness on the conditions of knowledge-making.

References

- Bahrani, Z., *The Infinite Image: Art, Time and the Aesthetic Dimension in Antiquity*, London, 2014
- Balzani R., *Fra patrimonializzazione e valorizzazione. Uno sguardo storico*, in: ID. (a cura di), *I territori del patrimonio. Dinamiche della patrimonializzazione e culture locali (secoli XVII-XX)*, Bononia, 2015, pp. 9 – 24.
- Berger, S., Epple, A., Sandkühler, T. eds. *Geschichtskultur durch Restitution? Ein Kunst-historikersstreit*, Köln, 2021.
- Bodenstein, F. Savoy, B., Lagatz M., (eds.), *Translocations. Histories of Dislocated Cultural Assets*, Bielefeld, 2022
- Brevaglieri, S., *Missionary collecting between object eradications and re-sedimentations. An introduction*, in *Missionary collecting*, «Quaderni Storici», 169, (1/2022), ed. by S. Brevaglieri, pp. 3-20.
- Brevaglieri, S., *The origins of the Vatican Ethnological Museum. Francisco Romero, Propaganda Fide and the «Aruacos idols» (16th-18th centuries)*, in *Missionary objects and collecting*, ed by S. Brevaglieri, «Quaderni Storici», 169, 1/2022, pp. 125-159.
- Brevaglieri, S., *Natural desiderio di sapere. Roma barocca fra vecchi e nuovi mondi*, Roma, Viella, La corte dei papi, 2019.
- Brusius M., *What Is Preservation? Diversifying Engagement with the Middle East's Material Past*, «Review of Middle East Studies», 51 2, (2017), pp. 177–182.
- Bynum C., *Are Things 'Indifferent'? How Objects Change Our Understanding of Religious History*, in «German History» vol. 34, n. 1, 2016, pp. 88–112
- Castelnau-l'Estoile, C., Copete M.-L. et alia, *Missions d'évangélisation et circulation des savoirs XVIe-XVIIe siècle: XVIe-XVIIIe siècle* Madrid Collection de la Casa de Velázquez, 2011
- Clifford J., *Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the 21st Century*, Harvard University Press, 2013
- Deschepper, J., «Notion en débat. Le patrimoine», *Géococonfluences*, mars 2021.
URL:<http://geoconfluences.ens-lyon.fr/informations-scientifiques/a-la-une/notion-a-la-une/patrimoine>
- Ditchfield, Simon, *'De-centering the Catholic Reformation: papacy and peoples in the early modern world'*, in «Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte», 101 (2010), pp. 186-208.
- Fechner F. Wilde G., *“Cartas vivas” en la expansión del cristianismo ibérico. Las órdenes religiosas y la organización global de las misiones*, in «Nuevo Mundo Mundos Nuevos», 2020, pp. 1-21.
- Förster, L; Edenheiser, I.; Fründt, S.; Hartmann, H. (eds), *Provenienzforschung zu ethnografischen Sammlungen der Kolonialzeit. Positionen in der aktuellen Debatte* Electronic pub- conference: Museum Fünf Kontinente, Munich, 7–8 April, 2017.
- Fromont, C., *Images on a Mission in Early Modern Kongo and Angola*, Penn State, 2022.
- Germano A. Nocca M.(ed.), *La collezione Borgia: curiosità e tesori da ogni parte del mondo*, Napoli, 2001
- Ginzburg C., *Storia dell'arte, da vicino e da lontano*, in «Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz», 3 (2019), pp. 275-285.
- Ghobrial, G.P, *Christian Materiality between East and West: Notes of a Capuchin among the Christians of the Ottoman Empire*, in S. IVANIČ, M. LAVEN, A. MORRALL (eds.), *Religious materiality cit.*, pp. 103-118;
- Gruzinski, S., *L'histoire pour quoi faire?*, Paris 2015
- Lähdesmäki T. ; Passerini L.; Kaasik-Krogerus S.; Van Huis I. (eds), *Dissonant Heritages and Memories in Contemporary Europe*, 2019
- Losson P. *The Return of Cultural Heritage to Latin America: Nationalism, Policy, and Politics in Colombia, Mexico, and Peru*, London, 2022
- MacDonald S. ed., *Doing Diversity in Museums and Heritage: A Berlin Ethnography*, Bielefeld, 2023
- Marcocci G., *Inventing the Antiquities of New Spain: Motolinía and the Mexican Antiquarian Traditions*, in B. ANDERSON; F. ROJAS (eds.), *Antiquarianisms: Contact, Conflict, Comparison*, Oxford, 2017, pp. 109-133.
- Modest, W., Thomas, N. et alia eds. *Matters Of Belonging. Ethnographic Museums in a Changing Europe*, Leiden, 2019
- Palomo, F., *Production et circulation des savoirs dans une monarchie polycentrique. Goa, la chrétienté éthiopienne et l'empire portugais du XVII^e siècle*, «Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales», vol. 78, no. 3, 2022, pp. 427-461.
- Pennec H. *An Ethiopian Mille-feuille : Unearthing the history of the Jesuit mission to Ethiopia (21th-16th)*, Lisbonne, 2022
- Pizzorusso G., *Propaganda Fide. La Congregazione pontificia e la giurisdizione sulle missioni*, Roma, 2022.
- Pohlig, M. Schlieben B., (eds.), *Grenzen des Sozialen. Kommunikation mit nicht-menschlichen Akteuren in der Vormoderne*, 2022
- Romano, A., Van Damme, S, *Sciences et villes-mondes*, in «Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine», 55 2 (2008), pp. 7-18.
- Rubiés, J.-P., *Ethnography and cultural translation in the early modern missions*, in *Translating christianity. Studies in Church History*, eds. by S. Ditchfield, C. Methuen, A. Spice, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017, pp. 272-310.

- Russo, A., *An Artistic Humanity: New Positions on Art and Freedom in the Context of the Iberian Expansion, 1500–1600*, «Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics», 65–66 (2014–15), pp. 352–363.
- Sarr F., Savoy B., *Restitution of African art from French public collections*, Paris, 2018.
- Sartori, P. eds, *Dismantling colonial archives*, «Quaderni Storici» 167, 2, 2021.
- Stoler, A.L., *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times*, Duke University Press, 2016
- Torre, A., *Production of Locality in the Early Modern and Modern Age. Places*, London, 2020
- Thomas, N., *Entangled Objects. Exchange, Material Culture and Colonialism in the Pacific*. Cambridge/MA, 1991
- L. ZERBINI, *La collecte missionnaire comme forme de disqualification, de mésusage ou d'iconoclasme*, in EAD. (dir.), *L'objet africain. Dépouiller, partager, restituer, L'objet africain dans les expositions et les musées missionnaires XIXème-XXIème siècles*, Paris 2021.