

Common, shared, contradictory heritage?

A concept and its dimensions

Christiane Dätsch

Introduction

Cultural heritage, as it is widely defined in Europe, is the visible sign of a past that an individual or a collective preserves, transmits and communicates. For this purpose, actors resort to artifacts or customs whose materiality and messages have proven to be adequate and durable for their collective memory. Cultural heritage, in this description, is both an intellectual and social idea that relates to time and space and is realized through objects, people, and knowledge. In this sense, cultural heritage is a factor of public and of educational discourses that engage in identity politics through material culture, but also of economics and global tourism. But can cultural heritage be shared beyond one's own collective?

This essay attempts to address this question by outlining what cultural policy and scholarship are currently discussing as the concept of shared cultural heritage. The concept can be seen as a variant of the cultural policy discourse on heritage, which comes into play in transnational contexts (Labrador 2013) and is based on the realization that the ideas of cultural heritage developed in the 19th century no longer apply. Thus, states find that their national memory can come into conflict with a global public, that they are highly differentiated, and that the old self-image of the nation no longer holds – and that is irritating.

At least four developments can be outlined as causes for this phenomenon in the second modern age:¹ Globalization including digitalization, the emergence of supranational alliances such as the EU, worldwide migration, and postcolonial discourse (Thiemeyer 2016). Both states and institutions try to find answers to these transformation processes and react with searches that preserve the official cultural heritage (Harrison 2013). At the same time, first approaches to solutions are presented: Among them is the concept of shared cultural heritage, which explores the function of heritage at the interfaces, and links national heritage narratives with

1 On the terms of the first and second modernity see: Beck (1996).

global contexts. The fact that the idea of sharing cultural heritage is not always unproblematic, however, becomes apparent where the relationship between heritage and communities of heirs changes and where questions of ownership and interpretation shift. This is the case in Europe, among other places, where non-European cultural heritage in local museums is at stake and where decolonized states demand to reclaim their heritage for the construction of a (national) culture of memory in their own countries.

Based on these observations, the chapter attempts to clarify the preconditions for the concept of shared cultural heritage and to outline possible applications. It then narrows its focus to an example in Germany, for which it refers to a postcolonially transformed culture of memory: the Humboldt Forum in Berlin. Using this inclusive “cultural forum” (Humboldt Forum Foundation 2020, p. 9),² will shed light on the ways two contrasting varieties of the concept of shared heritage can meet in one house, and on the opportunities and limits of the concept.

Definitions and terms: Cultural heritage revisited

In everyday language, cultural heritage is often used as an undefined collective term referring to the recognized artifacts and cultural practices of a community (Harrison 2013). In a narrower definition, cultural heritage is a policy term that seeks to “ensure the protection of cultural heritage for the enjoyment of present and future generations” (Hauser-Schäublin 2021, p. 64). This makes it clear that the term does not primarily refer to ownership issues, but to a social function. To better describe this function, three components of cultural heritage are often used: the inheritance, the community of heirs, and the horizon of values in which the inheritance is inscribed (Schüppel and Welzel 2020). Accordingly, agents in the policy field ascribe meaning to a cultural heritage and refer to religious, national, aesthetic, historical, or anthropological contexts. These also determine the respective accentuation by means of “memory frames” (Halbwachs 1985) that a society gives itself. The selection and application of contexts to heritage thus reflect, on the one hand, the beliefs of the actors who shape the policy field of cultural heritage and, on the other hand, the values of the society that preserves that heritage. The combination of selection, interpretation, discourse, and transmission also gives rise to that culture of memory that, according to Aleida Assmann, is “just another term for a political education” (Assmann 2018, p. 56).

As Michael Falser (2013) and other researchers have shown, the frame of reference against which the understanding of cultural heritage emerged in the first

2 For better readability, quotations from German literature have been translated into English. German sources and literature are marked as such in the bibliography.

modernity is that of the nation. With this historical concept, which was established in the course of the modern reordering of Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries, a description could be found not only for enlarged state territories, but also for a past that was shared by all those who inhabited these territories (Bolten 2007). Thus, connected to the idea of the nation from the very beginning was an essentialist understanding of culture and heritage, which France was the first nation to apply it to the realm of cultural heritage. After a wave of destruction during the French Revolution, the heritage of the old elites was reinterpreted as a symbol of revolutionary thought, to which fell the task of visualizing the “universalization” (Nietzel 2021, p. 149) of the principles of “liberty, equality, fraternity” on the basis of the greatness of the French nation (Thiemeyer 2018).

While France (and in its wake the other European nation-states) initially followed the normative concept of culture of the Enlightenment, and therefore focused primarily on objects of art, the 19th century saw a broadening of the concept of what was worthy enough to be preserved and collected. Now, not only art and objects of antiquity were considered cultural heritage, but also objects that were ascribed a symbolic or exotic function – objects from overseas, for example, which symbolized earlier stages of human development within the framework of an evolutionary understanding of history and served as a counterpoint to Europe’s progress in civilization (Conrad 2008). Even if this understanding was apparently modified in the course of the decolonization of the Global South, and even if at the beginning of the 21st century the intangible cultural heritage of indigenous peoples was given equal status with the material heritage of Western and Arab cultures (UNESCO 2003), the imagined connection between cultural heritage and nation and the method of cultural comparison (with all its implications) have persisted in the political and legal thinking of many actors. The former can still be found in the formulation of a “national culture of memory” (Assmann 2018).

The question of the extent to which the reference point “nation” is also useful as a frame of reference for the discourses of the second modernity is answered differently in view of the increasing interconnectedness of the world (Beck 1996; Thiemeyer 2018). While the nation-state and its understanding of culture is experiencing a boom in some regions, the model is proving increasingly outdated for others. Critical historians are re-examining national historiographies (Houben and Rehbein 2022) and showing that migration and cultural exchange is the real constant in human history (Conrad 2013; 2017). Such findings also have an impact on national memory discourses, as well as on their conventional closure mechanisms such as nation, territory, ethnicity, religion, or language (Geertz 1995; Bolten 2007). Worldwide migratory movements of people and objects explode genealogical notions of identity, just as the simple equation that a cultural heritage and its heritage community must be located in the same (geographical) place no longer holds. It is against this background that the concept of shared cultural heritage emerges.

Components of cultural heritage: (How) can cultural heritage be shared?

As Sigrid Weigel (2016) points out, the concept of shared cultural heritage is often conflated with the controversy over the restitution of cultural property.³ Shared heritage, however, is less about questions of legal ownership than about how a cultural heritage is interpreted by transnationally or culturally positioned communities of heirs. Crucial is the idea that cultural heritage can be interpreted beyond the borders of a nation, that cross-community connections exist, and that they can be made fruitful for remembering in an increasingly interconnected global society. In highlighting these qualities, the concept also reimagines the question of the memory frames to which a collective refers. It emphasizes both the possibility that different heritage communities share a (hitherto nationally contextualized) cultural heritage and that individuals can belong to multiple heritage communities. Shared heritage thus means allowing and actively thinking about multiple meanings and affiliations for cultural heritage. Such a denationalized culture of memory focuses less on the homogenization of national memory and more on what the multiple interconnected past means for the actions of the collective in an equally interconnected present. Such an approach changes the mission of those institutions responsible for preserving cultural heritage. Hence, the concept of shared heritage is referred to in some studies as a “tool for transformative heritage management” (Küver 2022, p. 139). How this transformational idea is realized in the three components of cultural heritage will be outlined briefly.

(1) *Heritage*: The realization that different cultures have been in contact with each other since the dawn of mankind is not new. The consequences of this “cultural exchange” (Burke 2000) are also well known. The transfer of ideas, artifacts, and customs spurred adaptation processes and new contextualizations; these processes are often described as cultural hybridization (Bhabha 2000). Overlapping, culture and context-dependent processes of reception in turn have an effect on the artifacts. Communities into which these artifacts “migrated” endow them with new meanings, and not infrequently they see the artifacts as their (own) cultural heritage after a certain period of time (Hauser-Schäublin 2021).⁴ This leads to the fact that cultural

3 This is the case, for example, when cultural heritage is equated with cultural property and artifacts are understood as property whose (rightful) owner is to be determined. The concept of cultural property is therefore used primarily in legal contexts, where – as the following definition from international law shows – it refers to movable or immovable property that is “of great importance to the cultural heritage of all peoples” (Hague Convention 1954, in Federal Office for Civil Protection 2012, p. 33).

4 For example, in the case of the bust of Nefertiti, which Egypt has been reclaiming since the 1920s and most recently in 2009, as a “central symbol of Egyptian identity” (Tauschek 2013, p. 139), it is argued: The bust, cared for and preserved by the *Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation*, is now also “German” cultural heritage.

heritage, especially migrated heritage, is never one-dimensional, and that different narratives are possible to activate meanings. To be aware of such (cultural) interdependencies, historical knowledge is necessary, including of the appropriation processes of heritage. This is where the concept of shared cultural heritage comes in: it is about enabling “the recovery of submerged knowledge” (Weigel 2016) and initiating a process of shared research that takes into account aspects of meaning, provenance, and appropriation of heritage (Koch 2021).

(2) *The community of heirs*: Cultural exchange not only leads to multiperspectival “object histories” (Mostafawy 2014), but also to the dynamization of communities of heirs that can form beyond the reference size of the nation – as individuals, as sub- or pan-collectives (Hansen 2011). Conversely, this means that people no longer (have to) automatically ascribe to a certain cultural heritage through a national culture or culture of origin, but decide for themselves on a cultural heritage and thereby (can) also belong to several communities of heirs. The right to freely choose one’s cultural heritage is declared as a cultural human right in the Fribourg Declaration (1998/2007). This declaration, commissioned by UNESCO, carries forward the Universal Declaration of Human Rights into the cultural sphere and therefore emphasizes the individual as a central factor in the heritage process. At the same time, the Declaration dissolves the spatial connection of heritage and inheritance and replaces it with a universal, inalienable approach: “Every person has the freedom to identify with one or more cultural communities, even across national boundaries, and to change this choice” (Freiburg Group 2007, Art. 4a). Since in the second modernity many inheritors are no longer located at the place of their (genealogically based) heritage, but form new communities where they live, social heritage communities⁵ emerge which are characterized by a communicative and pragmatic relationship to heritage. What holds these communities together is not a common, geographically or ethnically defined origin, but an attitude that Gabi Dolff-Bonekämper (2013) describes with the expression “shared concern” (2013, p. 113).

(3) *The value horizon*: A heritage community thus deprived of its spatial and ethnic closure mechanisms must orient itself to other coordinates; as a rule, these are social ones. Likewise, it has to take into account different ranges of and perspectives on the heritage, which is why a collective culture of memory that is formed on the shared cultural heritage gives itself a transnational memory framework (Sandkühler, Epple and Zimmerer 2021). For the concept of shared heritage, this means that the value horizon on which the previous (national) memory cultures were based has to be questioned anew, compared, expanded, and de-nationalized. As a rule, this

5 This term is first found in the EU’s Faro Convention, which, like the Fribourg Declaration, strengthens the cultural rights of individuals: “A heritage community consists of people who value specific aspects of cultural heritage which they wish, within the framework of public action, to sustain and transmit to future generations” (Council of Europe 2005, Art. 2b)

means confronting nations with universal issues such as those of human rights. This leads to a different (self-)perception of the remembering collectives, which have to re-locate themselves in international, multi-perspective contexts.⁶ That cultures of memory can be both reconciliatory and irreconcilable in this process is a realization that shapes the discourse on shared cultural heritage, but also the work of heritage agencies.

Varieties of understanding: Common or shared heritage?

With regard to previous theories of heritage, two approaches can be distinguished: the institutionalized heritage discourse as represented by the politics of nation-states and UNESCO, and Critical Heritage Studies, which see themselves as a critique of the former. They expose conceptual distortions and the asymmetrical power relations in the institutionalized heritage discourse. For the concept of shared heritage, both approaches are relevant. However, they accentuate the understanding of sharing differently (Lowenthal 1998; Smith 2006; Harrison 2013; Meskell 2018; Simpson 2018). While institutionalized discourse interprets shared heritage as a common heritage that people share because they have common values and stand on common ground as a community of heirs (Bernecker 2023), critical heritage studies emphasize that this precondition does not exist. They criticize the institutionalized heritage discourse for ignoring, for the sake of the notion of common ground, opposing memory frames (usually of the Global South) as well as hegemonic relations. Critical Heritage Studies base their critique on a discursive concept of culture, as developed by Cultural Studies, which assumes that cultures have always been intertwined but that power asymmetries prevent a consensual reception; this also applies to cultural heritage. They therefore speak of a shared but not a common heritage and also call for a critical revision of the framework of remembering (Harrison 2013). Shared heritage thus emphasizes the hegemonic, which is why the concept is said to have transformational power where an intertwined but contradictorily remembered heritage is up for discussion. Before showing that these two interpretations of shared heritage can clash in one and the same institution, I will first outline four contexts of application in which different parties in the policy field of cultural heritage currently explicitly refer to the concept of common or shared heritage.

(1) *Common heritage as a universal archive*: The notion that a selected cultural heritage can have world validity is represented by the institutionalized heritage discourse. It is based on the conviction that this cultural heritage has a universal value,

6 Examples of programs with this goal include the Polish-Jewish dialogue or the Shared Heritage program of the Netherlands (see Other Sources: No. 1, 2).

i. e. it is an expression of the creative power of the human spirit, and as such acts as a universal archive of humanity. On the basis of this assumption, UNESCO has defined World Heritage Sites of Culture and Nature since 1972 and Intangible Heritage of Humanity since 2003; it lists both (UNESCO 1972; 2003). It justifies the international protection of this heritage by its scope. It must be available to all people, who can thus reflect on their “humanity”.⁷ This notion dissolves the spatial connection of heritage and inheritance in favor of a philosophical principle. By “transforming a recognized local cultural asset into a world-public asset” (Hauser-Schäublin 2021, p. 64), the label “World Heritage” expands local heritage. Locally produced cultural heritage enters into a relationship with the heritage community of humanity, which has neither produced nor transmitted this heritage, but classifies it as relevant to itself in an ideational sense. This can entail a tension between the local community of production and the global community of reception. Sometimes the expansion also goes hand in hand with an arbitrariness of the place of storage, because “global” heritage no longer necessarily has to be stored at the place of production, but can also be found in other places, such as the great museums of the world (Hauser-Schäublin 2021).

(2) *Common heritage as a transnational memory space*: The idea that cultural heritage can create a transnational space of thought and memory beyond the nation also goes back to the institutionalized approach. It is advocated in cultural policy by heritage communities that form along national borders as well as by supranational agents such as the European Union that seek to form a common canon of values. For example, the EU assumes that emphasizing the de-national value of cultural heritage can lead to a supranational heritage community based on a shared culture of memory and a transnational collective identity. Unlike UNESCO, however, the EU pursues this goal primarily with respect to its members and thus within the supranationally defined territory of the EU countries. In the eyes of its critics, this leads to the EU resorting to geographical and genealogical closure mechanisms for the idea of Europe, as already known from the discourse on the nation, and applying them now to an enlarged territory instead of the model of the nation (Vinken 2018). In this variant, the sharing of cultural heritage is once again linked to the criterion of scope. The heritage of member states is to be experienced as a common European heritage, which is why historical lines of connection between regions and cultures are emphasized, national perspectives are modified, and transnational narratives are designed. Such

7 The idea of the universality of cultural heritage also refers to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) of the United Nations, which grants inalienable dignity and rights to all human beings. Although culture and cultural heritage are not yet reflected in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, UNESCO makes up for this in its Fribourg Declaration (1998/2006). Postcolonial approaches criticize this approach to universality as eurocentric (Smith 2006; Harrison 2013).

an understanding is also propagated by the EU's Cultural Heritage Year, proclaimed in 2018 under the motto "Sharing Heritage", which, with the help of civil society players, was intended to convey more knowledge about common heritage and increase Europeans' emotional approval of Europe (German National Committee for Monument Protection 2019). This attempt to use cultural heritage as soft power for political purposes actually replicated in some ways central ideas of nationhood in the 19th century (Al Dajani and Leiner 2022). While the imagined community is enlarged into the supranational, it continues to pursue the goal of homogenization.

(3) *Shared heritage as a discursive practice*: In contrast to the institutionalized approach, critical heritage studies ask what these "new", enlarged heritage communities look like when they are no longer thought of as homogeneous. To do so, they focus on two heritage communities: migrated people and societies of the Global South. People who migrate to other societies often find that as minorities they are exposed to hegemonic thinking in the host country, experiencing exclusion mechanisms that make them or their culture invisible or devalued. Therefore, Critical Heritage Studies first pose the question of the distribution of power and point out that heritage communities in migration societies are hybrids (Simpson 2018) – just as they are in societies of former colonies. Members of these communities of heirs must therefore first negotiate the rules of the game by which their remembering takes place. The first prerequisite for this is that people from different cultures, who bring their knowledge and perspectives to the process of negotiation, are on an equal footing. In this sense, the concept of shared heritage in a hybrid society is realized as a social inclusive idea. Through the process of negotiation based on different cultural knowledge, multi-perspective approaches to heritage emerge, which are interpreted and received at eye level. Thus, important for this understanding of shared heritage as a discursive practice is that heritage and heritage communities are seen as hybrid, but also that access to heritage communities is free and that people can belong to multiple (social) heritage communities. That such a process of negotiating meaning and the collective also entails conflict is obvious. It reveals cultural overlaps, but also conflicting perspectives and untranslatability.

(4) *Shared heritage as a conflict research*: Where there are no preconditions for inclusive narratives, on the other hand, the concept of shared heritage has a difficult time. This is especially true where "difficult heritage" (Grimme 2018) is negotiated, as is the case with cultural artifacts from former colonies and especially from Africa; they can be found in large numbers in European museums today. In terms of the concept of shared cultural heritage, this heritage proves to be the most complex because it is opposed in all three components that make up the social heritage function. Neither have the cultures of memory of the victims and perpetrators involved in colonialism converged – the joint reappraisal of trauma is taking place hesitantly (Assmann 2018) – nor do the communities of heirs have a common understanding of how to deal with the shared heritage. The particular geographical situation of the

mobile and immobile heritage that makes up this cultural heritage as a whole also contributes to this (Küver 2022). While Africans on their continent have to deal with the question of how to relate to a heritage that reminds them (in the form of buildings, sites, or monuments) of the suffering of their ancestors during the colonial period, European states see themselves in the role of owners of mobile heritage that was made by Africans for export or forcibly stolen as elite art by Europeans; they are also confronted with the question of how to deal with this heritage today (Van-Hee 2016). The spatial relationship between inheritance and community of heirs is thus more thoroughly turned upside down in this variant of shared inheritance than in any other. At the same time, the answers to the question of how to deal with inheritance often differ among those involved. While politicians of the decolonized countries see in the restitution of artifacts an (at least partial) correction of historical injustice and its reparation, the successor states of the former colonial powers invoke the fact that not all ethnological objects were acquired illegally, or that many of them would not even exist anymore without European “rescue ethnology” (König 2017; Kohl 2019; Penny 2019). Instead of restitution on a grand scale, they suggest researching provenance and clarifying individual contexts. In the case of “difficult” heritage, two discourses thus intersect that were kept apart at the beginning of this essay: that of ownership and restitution and that of transnational appropriation through joint research, interpretation, and provision of cultural heritage (also digitally). How both discourses are currently merging in the German culture of remembrance and the Humboldt Forum as a highlighted heritage agency will now be shown.

Political framework: Postcolonial memory culture in Germany

In Germany, the concept of shared heritage first appeared in the context of the Humboldt Forum, which was conceived in 2011, and was intended as a proposal on how to deal with non-European cultural heritage in a globalized world. This question, which had already been discussed in expert circles for some time, met with a public mood in the 2010s that was ready for self-questioning with regard to German colonial entanglements. In this way, Germany reacted to a general, postcolonially inspired critique of European memory culture on the one hand, and on the other hand to the fact that the country itself had been a colonial power, a fact that had barely been addressed (Foundation German Historical Museum Berlin 2016). Activists drew attention to the truth that streets were named after military figures in colonial service, that monuments concealed hegemonic contexts (see: Jana Weyer in this volume), and that the history of German colonies was still largely told in a monoperspectival manner (Bechhaus-Gerst and Zeller 2018). More and more agents

entered the discussion, demanding a change in thinking as well as the illumination of global contexts and their reassessment (Sandkühler, Epple and Zimmerer 2021).

In 2018, these demands received political support from a document that took an unequivocal stand on issues of colonialism. In their report on the restitution of African cultural property (2018), the French art historian Bénédicte Savoy and the Senegalese economist Felwine Sarr recommended that African cultural property, which was widely held in French ethnological museums, should be returned to its original owners. On behalf of French President Emmanuel Macron, they had re-examined these holdings and, according to them, had come across a clear set of files (Sarr and Savoy 2018; 2019). Their findings corresponded with the political stance of the president, who had himself initiated a reconciliation process during a visit to Burkina Faso in 2017, which was intended to contribute to the “healing of traumas” (King 2021a, p. 308). In this context, the restitution of circulated cultural property was seen as a prerequisite for a shared culture of remembrance. The approach of placing cultural property in the service of such a “radical” cultural policy earned both approval and criticism (Schüttpelz 2021). Above all, however, the discourses on cultural property and shared cultural heritage have been inextricably intertwined ever since.⁸

In view of such international considerations, the German government also grappled with questions of colonial entanglement and its consequences for the German culture of remembrance. In Germany, moreover, it became increasingly difficult to answer the question of why the Holocaust, as an incomparable crime, had a central place in the all-German culture of remembrance, but not the genocide of the Ovaherero and Nama in Namibia (1904–1908).⁹ Hesitant at first, but then determined, the German government faced up to the task of coming to terms with the past and in 2021 recognized the genocide in Namibia, officially asked for forgiveness, and pledged to pay reparations (see Other Sources: No. 3). However, Germany refused to make sweeping judgments similar to France’s on the subject of cultural property, choosing instead the path of individual provenance research and establishing its own program at the German Center for the Loss of Cultural Property to clarify the contexts of appropriation of colonial cultural property (Grütters and Müntefering 2019). This research soon led to the first returns of objects from clearly

8 As early as 1952, UNESCO had put a stop to the circulation of cultural property through art theft, trafficking, loot, or other forms of relocation of national cultural property outside the country, with its Convention on Measures to Prohibit and Prevent the Illicit Import, Export, and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property. The Convention had been renewed in 1970 (UNESCO 1970).

9 In this regard, Thomas Sandkühler, Angelika Epple, and Jürgen Zimmerer (2021) note: “There are increasing signs that colonialism is regarded as a comparable violation against elementary principles of humanity [to the Holocaust, Ch. D.], so that the principle of intertemporally under civil and international law is legally in question” (2021, p. 22).

documented contexts of injustice, such as from the suppression of the uprising in Namibia (Bernsdorff and Thiemeyer 2019).

Involved in such framework conditions, the directors of the approximately 20 ethnological museums and university collections in Germany also issued a declaration in May 2019. In their Heidelberg Statement, they asked for the differentiation of the debate with regard to acquisition contexts as well as for support in the decolonization task. Not only the readjustment of the culture of remembrance, but also the “delegation of decision-making authority to the museums” (The Directors 2019), as well as the improvement of research and concrete working conditions in the museums, were needed. In July 2019, the German Museums Association reacted and published its revised guideline for dealing with collection items from colonial contexts, in which it clarified terminology, divided case groups for collection items, and recommended an international perspective on German remembrance culture, and a fundamental examination of museum collections for “colonial contexts” (German Museums Association 2019). Accordingly, colonial thinking was not only a problem of ethnological museums, but of all heritage agencies. The central challenge of decolonization, then, was to critically examine the past and modify the culture of memory on this basis.

Despite these statements, ethnological museums were increasingly caught in the crossfire of public criticism and found themselves in the situation of having to justify not only overcrowded depots, but also the way they presented the heritage of the Other (Sternfeld 2009; Kohl 2019). Ethnological exhibitions were deconstructed as exoticizing or eurocentric, and museums were asked to relocate themselves in the face of postcolonial entanglements beyond hegemonic thinking. This was accompanied by the call to reflect on their own actions as heritage institutions and to develop new forms of dialogue. The concept of shared heritage seemed to offer good possibilities for this. It is now to be tested at the Humboldt Forum in Berlin.

An example from Germany: The Humboldt Forum in Berlin

No other museum manager has made the concept of shared cultural heritage as well-known in Germany as the president of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, Hermann Parzinger (Parzinger 2021). Together with four other partners (the *Humboldt Forum Foundation in the Berlin Palace*, the *Humboldt University*, the *City Museum Berlin*, and the *Berlin Society Cultural Projects*), the Foundation runs the Humboldt Forum in the center of Berlin, which has been inviting visitors to engage with Germany, Europe, and the world since 2021. At the same time, the Forum is continuously the focus of media criticism. (Fig. 1) The reasons for this are manifold and do not only concern the holdings that the Foundation has exhibited on two floors since the opening of the Humboldt Forum: the collections of the Asian Museum of Art and the Eth-

nological Museum, which were formerly on display in Berlin-Dahlem. Already the decision to house the Humboldt Forum in the partially reconstructed Berlin Palace of the Hohenzollerns (and thus on the site of the former Palace of the Republic of the GDR) had caused long discussions in the media, but also among activists and the Berlin population (Dorgerloh 2021).

The name of the Forum and the concept intended for the interior of the building were perceived as just as backward-looking as the postmodern, yet nostalgically transfigured architecture of the palace. According to the conception of the founding directors, the Forum was to be a “cosmopolitan place” (Appiah and Thiemeyer 2021, p. 55) in the spirit of its namesakes Wilhelm and Alexander von Humboldt and to follow the principles of the two natural and educational researchers in its programmatic work. Accordingly, the Forum was intended as a place for “linking the self with the world”, for the “realization that everything is interconnected” (Humboldt Forum Foundation 2020, p. 38), for the diversity of views, and for the aspiration to share knowledge from the past and present:

Conceived and designed as an inclusive cultural forum, it is a center for the arts, cultures and sciences that brings together (living) worlds, continents, and regions – an open, inviting place for encounters and equal coexistence, for experiencing and global learning (Humboldt Forum Foundation 2020, p. 5).

Dialogue, encounter, inclusion: these are the terms used by the Humboldt Forum to describe a transnational concept in the sense of a universal archive. Science and museums, architecture and art, nature and culture, the living environment of visitors and the cultures of the world are to be networked on around 44,200 square meters of floor space. Three museums, a library, a laboratory, a terrace, numerous open spaces, and a café invite visitors to engage with the world’s knowledge in one central location – Berlin (Humboldt Forum Foundation 2020). The cultural understanding of this concept is unmistakably essentialist. With its programmatic work, the Forum wants to contribute to discovering the “own” in the “foreign”, to understanding Europe and modernity. In doing so, it does not ignore the dark side of colonialism, but it also uses a homogenizing overall rhetoric that points to an understanding of history that affirms progress and idealizes rather than deconstructs Europe. Against this background, the reference to two humanist scholars, who at the same time symbolize the geographic coordinates of center (Wilhelm) and periphery (Alexander), is another point of criticism. Architecture, program, and name served the dialogue with the world from a European perspective and the “formation of a Prussian-German-European identity” (see Other Sources: No. 4), the accusation goes.

Fig. 1: The Humboldt Forum in the Berlin Palace, east façade (Photo: Christiane Dätsch)



Fig. 2: Joint research: scene from the documentary (Photo: Christiane Dätsch)



In fact, the three founding directors, the prehistorian Hermann Parzinger and the art historians Horst Bredekamp and Neil MacGregor, seemed to orient themselves less on postcolonial discourses than on the cosmological concept of the German history of ideas (König 2021a, p. 307). Thus, the directors did not notice that their decision to bring the ethnological collections into the reconstructed Hohenzollerns palace symbolically reiterated the ambivalence of an epoch that is now seen as Europe's negative legacy: the power of old elites and their colonial expansion. Many of the Ethnological Museum's approximately 500,000 objects that came to Berlin between 1884 and 1918 are also heavily burdened by this past. The collection contains objects that were captured after the suppression of uprisings, as in the former colonies of German East Africa (Tanzania) and German Southwest Africa (Namibia), or after punitive expeditions, as in Papua New Guinea (Aly 2021; Binter 2021; Parzinger 2021), or that were acquired in the international trade, which in turn drew its goods from colonial campaigns, as in the case of the so-called Benin bronzes (König 2021b). Thus, even while preparing the permanent exhibition at the Humboldt Forum, the Foundation was confronted with restitution claims from Nigeria, which stopped the work for a while. Since the 1970s, Nigeria, as the successor state of the Kingdom of Benin, has repeatedly requested the return of the bronzes. In July 2022, the federal government complied with this request and returned all 512 Berlin Benin bronzes.¹⁰ The decision ultimately led to a compromise in the permanent exhibition, which has been fully open since the fall of 2022, and in which around a third of the transferred objects are now on loan for ten years (see Other Sources: No. 5).

Far less noticed by the media, other restitutions also took place during this period (Parzinger 2021). However, Hermann Parzinger does not see the return of objects as the only beatific solution, as many museum objects are not reclaimed at all because they are simple everyday objects or – as is often the case with artifacts from the trade – because their provenance can no longer be fully clarified (König 2017).¹¹ In light of such facts, the migration of many museum objects must be seen as a permanent condition – a realization that puts today's owners under an obligation to deal with collections in situ. To meet this responsibility, Parzinger advocates the concept of shared heritage, which is realized in the ethnological collection in the guise of conflict research. In binational research projects, German and curators from the countries of origin jointly interrogate the objects of the collection, identify contexts, elab-

10 According to its own statements, this is "the largest transfer of ownership of collection objects from a colonial context to date" (see Other Sources: No. 6). The term restitution is not mentioned in the press release.

11 Parzinger receives unexpected, albeit rather ironic, backing for this view from postcolonial quarters. The Cameroonian political scientist Achille Mbembe, for example, argues that the restitution of objects is far too simple a method of righting wrongs suffered and proposes that "Europe should be condemned to [...] live forever with what they have looted – and continue to play their Cain role to the bitter end" (Mbembe in: Habermalz 2018).

orate multi-perspective interpretations, and break down “old hierarchies of interpretation” (Parzinger 2021, p. 108). Such research brings to light shared expertise or “sharing knowledge” (König 2017) and recontextualizes the objects. This knowledge is also made fruitful in the permanent exhibition of the Humboldt Forum, which has radically changed its narrative and adapted it to postcolonial aspects.

When visiting the permanent exhibition on Africa, for example, the visitor learns in a documentary film (Fig. 2) about the research project with the Museums Association of Namibia (MAN), which examined about 1400 objects of the Namibia collection (Parzinger 2021), and about the country’s colonial history and the painful memory of this part of its history. In the display cases, the objects explored are explained by several texts from different dates that reflect different, sometimes conflicting interpretations. They represent the respective knowledge about the objects in the culture of origin and in museum culture, whereby the contexts of everyday life not infrequently conflict with the view of (Western) science on the object. In this way, not only multiperspectivity is generated, but at the same time the hegemonic view of African culture (often practiced in the past) is deconstructed. The exhibition narrative thus makes the curators’ learning and knowledge process visible on the one hand, and a piece of (Western) history of science on the Other. It questions practices and attribution processes as well as Western certainties of perceiving the world. This postcolonially inspired approach is complemented by subjective interpretations that artists from the countries of origin have made of the exhibited heritage and made visible in their own works. They address not only colonial conquests and violence, but also hybridized and migrated identities, ruptures, and traumas in their own culture of memory, and “white spots” in their material cultural heritage, as many objects of everyday life are missing. Through this form of mediation, the visitor also receives new information about the exhibited heritage and experiences artistic conflict research as part of that variant of shared cultural heritage that sees itself as a discursive practice.

As plausible as the implementation of the concept of shared heritage as conflict research is in the collection and in the exhibition’s communication, the approach raises questions when it touches the level of the museum as an institution. Thus, the founding director Parzinger formulates the thesis that “the cultural heritage of the museums is not only preserved, but is considered the property of all mankind” (Parzinger 2021, p. 108). He is referring to the ethnological collections exhibited in the Humboldt Forum, which he elevates to the rank of world cultural heritage with this sentence. By proposing to apply to these collections the idea of universal heritage (developed from the Western concept of art) – not only a different idea of shared heritage as common heritage comes to light, but also an essentialist idea of cultural heritage. It can also be used to justify the current location of these collections. Accordingly, ethnological collections, similar to world heritage, have a universal scope and no longer necessarily have to be presented at their place of

origin (Parzinger 2021). And similarly to how UNESCO perceives itself as merely the manager of this heritage, Parzinger ascribes to (national) cultural institutions the role of a “governor”, a non-partisan administrator in an internationally intertwined culture of memory that neither has to clarify nor automatically refer to questions of (national) ownership. This goes hand in hand with the denationalization of the museum as an institution and as a player in the policy field of cultural heritage, since such a museum does not have to see itself as committed to the self-image of the country that finances it, nor to questions of (national) memory culture; it serves a universal heritage alone. What at first sounds like a visionary way out of that aporia in which the institution of the museum as a 19th-century Western invention finds itself today (Tyradellis 2014), raises questions at a second glance. How can a museum, which also has the task of protecting the heritage it holds, be absolved of questions of (legal) ownership? And which decision-makers does such an institution follow, despite all the “democratization of museums” (Parzinger 2021, p. 108), if not the respective state to which it is subordinate? Even in the case of an institution like the Humboldt Forum, (national) politics does not remain without effects on concrete action. The museum as the “governor” of a common heritage remains a metaphor.

Parzinger’s concept of a shared cultural heritage furthermore shows an epistemic discontinuity. While it follows the understanding of shared heritage as discursive practice and conflict research on the object when researching and mediating the ethnological collections, it returns to shared heritage as a universal archive when describing the institution of the museum. Embedded in the overall narrative of the Humboldt Forum as a place of dialogue with the world, the argument shifts from questions of “sharing” to the transnational idea and finally to the argument of ethnological cultural property as a kind of world heritage. By invoking the universal in the transnational, the idea of cultural heritage as a universal archive overlaps that of shared heritage as a discursive practice. The ethnological collections and their post-colonial approach to research are thus reincorporated into the “master narrative” of the Humboldt Forum. In the end, the European, perhaps even eurocentric self-image of the Forum proves to be stronger than the confrontation with opposing African memories and their traumas. It remains to be seen whether, under these conditions, the Forum will indeed become the “epicenter of a [...] new kind of relationship with the world” (Parzinger 2021, p. 109).

Chances, limits, utopias? A brief outlook

The concept of shared cultural heritage shows that cultural heritage is always located in contexts, with culture and politics not infrequently forming a single entity – especially when it comes to processes of identity politics. In the second modern era,

in which collective identities are increasingly formed beyond national self-understandings (at least in certain constellations), the concept of shared cultural heritage plays an important role. How differently it can be used in this context is shown by the four variants outlined as well as by the case study of the Humboldt Forum. Understanding the concept thus depends both on a critical revision of previous approaches to cultural heritage and on a reflection on one's own concept of culture. With regard to the European understanding of culture, it would have to be asked whether essentialist models can sufficiently respond to a globalized world, and whether they can sufficiently react to the processing of opposing cultures of memory, of trauma, and historical contexts of injustice. Likewise, possibilities of cooperation and encounter with representatives of the cultures of origin would have to be sought in order to research the object together. Thus, the concept of shared heritage on the one hand, offers the chance to respond to blind spots in one's own perspective through dialogue in a globalized and diversely interconnected world, and, on the other hand – and here lies its limit – makes visible the utopian character of a universal heritage that is bound to the borders of the nation-state in its care and mediation, at least in its institutional form. Against this background, the analysis of the contexts of application is an important key not only to critically illuminate political buzzwords, but also to enable civil societies to remember in a contemporary way through their heritage.

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