

How museums are still perpetuating colonialist notions today.

Dr. Julia Binter talks about knowledge justice in relation to Namibian cultural assets

Dr. Julia Binter, Assistant Professor:

In Germany we are concerned with historical awareness as part of a critique of colonialism, including especially the atrocities perpetrated in Namibia by Germany in the colonial period. In Namibia, efforts focus on a rewriting of history from Namibian perspectives. A history in which Germany is actually merely a footnote.

Thea Fabian:

Reading the report issued by the Anti-Discrimination Agency of the German federal government, you can tell we are still a long way off from realizing the ideals of a tolerant, free society. Racism, anti-Semitism, anti-Muslim racism, discrimination around gender and disability ... in all areas there remains much to be done. It took more than a century before we Germans as a nation became able to face up to our crimes from the colonial era. Given the political shift to the right seen today, that belatedness is highly problematic. And that is what we want to talk about with Professor Julia Binter, as well as how knowledge creation about the colonial era in and by museums can be structured for greater sustainability, as another of her research concerns. We are interested in her thoughts on discrimination inherent in certain modes of representation employed by museums.

And in talking about the great new projects she is involved in, drawing upon her research. Dr. Binter, it's lovely to have you with us today for a conversation.

Dr. Binter:

Hi there, I'm very pleased to be here.

Thea Fabian:

Dr. Binter, your work concerns reparations and the empowerment of formerly oppressed peoples, including the right to self-determination in how they interpret their own culture. As someone who looks at such issues, what do you think about how exclusion and discrimination are manifesting here at home, in our own country?

Dr. Binter:

Attitudes of exclusion and discrimination have grown throughout history, over centuries, as you noted. We are getting to a point where the discrimination is becoming very obvious, which is exacerbating divisions in society. Of particular importance to me is understanding the actual sources of discrimination and negative stereotyping of "foreigners" and people who are "other". It's not enough to just criticize it, which certainly many people have throughout the past; my interest however is in collaborating with knowledge producers both in and outside the university to outline a vision of a society that is significantly less discriminatory, if not free of discrimination entirely. And museums are one of the principal arenas for effecting change.

Thea Fabian:

What might the lessons of history be for us?

Dr. Binter:

First of all, that it is important to listen to one another rather than monologuing about world history. Views of world history in the past have for the most part been hierarchical in nature, with Europe on top culturally, technologically and economically. Other societies from around the world came next, somewhere lower on the ladder. And this 'Social Darwinism', as it was called, remains anchored in people's minds to this day, with all the attendant stereotypes. And if there is anything we can learn, I believe it is the insight that we need to create knowledge justice by abandoning the historical hierarchy, so that we can encounter each other as equals.

Thea Fabian:

For a bit of context, tell us in a few words precisely what your research project on museums is about and why that work is so important.

Dr. Binter:

I am currently co-directing a project on collections from Namibia at the Ethnological Museum in Berlin, which I have been involved in for the last few years. It is a research, curation and restitution project with partners in Namibia—two years ago we returned 23 objects representing “cultural belongings”, as our partners would call them, to Namibia. There is a now major, multi-faceted strand of research going on in Namibia with university students, communities and knowledge bearers outside the university as well as contemporary artists who incorporate these historical artifacts into new forms of knowledge in their work. My part in all this is to provide support by contributing expertise, as I have been working in various museum contexts for 15 years. And also to reflect on and learn about how such cooperation projects on collections of items from the colonial era can be structured in a way that is more fair and sustainable.

Thea Fabian:

Efforts to amend discrimination from the colonial past have depended on a lively dialogue in which knowledge, cultural assets and art objects are exchanged. Many people have commented on how valuable such dialogue and exchange, facilitated by museums, has been to them. Now let's talk more about cultural assets and the art created out of such assets. You have brought a few examples with you; pictures you have printed out. Would you tell our audience a bit about those and briefly describe what can be seen in each picture?

Dr. Binter:

My pleasure, the first one you have picked out there, interestingly, is by a contemporary Ovaherero artist named Betty Tuaovisiua Katuuu, who is a member of a collective of contemporary artists in Namibia who work with returned artifacts and cultural belongings and their reinterpretation, with funding from the Heinrich Böll Foundation. Here she is sitting at a sewing machine surrounded by all kinds of dolls, as we would call them—figures made by wrapping scraps of fabric together to take on human form. The physicality and the landscape of Namibia are of central importance in the work of many contemporary artists, including in particular the genocide against the Ovaherero and Nama peoples perpetrated by Germany between 1904 and 1908. This genocidal legacy is still felt today as a collective trauma connected with the host of victims and the seizure of territory, passed on by the survivors to their descendants. The art works of Betty Tuaovisiua Katuuu represent a processing of this trauma. Drawing on the knowledge passed down through family

generations, now she is exploring the repositioning of these cultural artifacts and assets within the body of knowledge, igniting renewed meaning.

Thea Fabian:

I see, yes. Could you give us a couple of examples of items that are of particular importance in your view?

Dr. Binter:

Yes, for example these two historical artifacts: one is a cloth doll 20 centimeters tall made at a mission station, by a presumably Ovaherero, Nama or ǀNukhoen girl, whom the missionary Carl Gotthilf Büttner eventually helped go to Berlin. I don't know the girl's name, you might note, so the artist is anonymous, as her name was never documented. And she is but one of the many historical personages who played a role in Namibian history but whose lives remain undocumented in our written colonial archive. I have learned a great deal from the artist named Cynthia Schimming, who drew our attention to this doll and its significance for our research, about the role of women in missionary contact and regarding fashions, as well as the resilience and resistance they demonstrated in the face of colonial violence and genocide, including sexual violence against women. And so a small, rather inconspicuous doll becomes a bearer of incredible knowledge as an item that speaks of the centuries of religious contact and a document of the fashion of that day. The sewing of such a doll was a process in which young girls learned about European clothing, Victorian clothing in specific—not Ovaherero or Nama clothing, and thus new traditions and styles were introduced. And this is not a simple victim-perpetrator story, as Cynthia Schimming has very vigorously argued, for a more complex view is called for. For the young girl at the mission station in the 1870s of course realized her own vision of femininity and beauty in rendering the doll, so there is always a self-affirming, empowered aspect to consider in the re-written story of this item. Another example is a doll, as we would call them, an Okanona from the Ovambo kingdom of what is now northern Namibia—which tells a story of strong, self-confident women. I was unable to reconstruct the story from the written archive alone, so I turned to Nehoa Kautondokwa, another project partner, who pointed out to us how richly the doll was made with pearls, different furs and other materials. Accessing knowledge passed down as oral history and various archived documents, we arrived at the likely conclusion that it was a queen of the Ondonga kingdom—a strong and stately lady. A missionary's daughter received this gift from Queen Ologondo of Ondonga on the occasion of her Christian wedding to a German missionary. The descendants of this missionary sold the item to the Ethnological Museum, which at that time was named the Royal Ethnological Museum in Berlin. Both of these dolls depicting female figures are representative of the highly marginalized stories that we can only discover and make out with effort and cooperation, drawing on diverse bodies and forms of knowledge to connect the existing dots.

Thea Fabian:

Beyond being interesting, the things you have just talked about serve as examples of how museums can be guilty of perpetuating discriminatory attitudes—which is a major point you are making. Many of our audience members, probably, have not thought a lot about this issue. Would you explain a bit more about that?

Dr. Binter:

Museums have always been important sites for the creation of identity, as places where one's own culture and foreign cultures are visually encountered. In the colonial period, items were exhibited in a manner that revealed the currents of racism and sexism in society at that time. Efforts to change this state of affairs are being made today, of course, and have been made for several decades. What hasn't changed is that museums remain powerfully instrumental in the shaping of perceptions of the self and the other. Looking at cultural assets from Namibia, such as the nearly 400 objects from Namibia housed at the Ethnological Museum in Berlin, we find that most have never been exhibited, except a mere handful.

Thea Fabian:

Why is that?

Dr. Binter:

I believe the reason why is that Namibian material culture consists mainly of clothing items, personal accessories and smaller objects rather than the large masks and sculptures which we Europeans have decided is what African art is. It is this Eurocentric view of African art history that has prevented these cultural assets from ever being properly appreciated. Looking at historical art exhibitions, this is one of many examples of how European notions have classified and categorized world art around value judgments of what is more artistic and what less, what is more elevated and less elevated. These classifications, built around stereotypes, need to be reconsidered today, and I think many museums are already engaging with that.

Thea Fabian:

What impact do you see your work regarding museums potentially having, including here in Namibia?

Dr. Binter:

The beauty of doing this project together with our Namibian partners, with funding from the Gerda Henkel Foundation, is that I no longer have much of a role to play once the objects are returned to Namibia—nor do I wish to. Then when I go to Namibia, I am able to listen to and learn from the many knowledge producers there who are lovingly repossessing these artifacts and cultural belongings and re-embedding them in a new context. I hope to make a contribution in how museums approach sensitive collection items, promoting a cooperative process of knowledge sharing to develop restitution arrangements characterized by greater fairness, sustainability and sensitivity to cultural, political and social contexts without having to effect a top-level policy change.

Thea Fabian:

We have talked about dialogue and transfer at and by museums. Before this podcast you were talking about how artists will be working with cultural assets in this project. What do you mean, in other words, what is going on in this regard?

Dr. Binter:

I see great potential in some areas. I have read one research paper already on the doll from the mission station. Cynthia Schimming had this doll Uaṭunua baptized under her own Ovaherero name, which means “touched”. And as part of the exhibition we curated in collaboration with the Humboldt Forum as a German-Namibian project, Schimming pursued the question of whose hands this doll has touched, and whose hands women touched during the period of colonialist war and genocide? By bringing the doll to life in such fashion, Schimming attracted quite a lot of attention from other knowledge producers. Another contemporary artist, Namibian poet Prince Kamaazengi Marenga, wrote a poem in which the doll Uaṭunua speaks. Her voice is heard, raising questions about German-Namibian history, which remains divisive to this day—a history of peoples on separate paths.

Thea Fabian:

Dr. Binter, you bring the German perspective into this dialogue, and so we have likewise invited Golda Ha-Eiros, Senior Curator of the National Museum of Namibia to talk to us about the importance to her of engaging in such dialogue, from a native perspective.

Golda Ha-Eiros:

I believe my blessings come from the old and I generally enjoy working with elders and listening ...

“Reconnecting with my ancestors in some way is also important to me. In meeting my ancestors again I come to a greater appreciation of the life I have today. Working with our cultural assets has given me a personal connection with their stories, so that I could really envision how communities lived back in those years. That was lovely. When we first visited the depots full of cultural objects, some of them were familiar to me because my grandmother had similar objects. So I could really feel the significance of some of the cultural assets kept there and the craftsmanship that went into them. Touching the objects, I could feel how they were crafted, you know. But with lacking background information, the missing link was knowledge about the objects. I felt great appreciation for these cultural assets as antique items. But I also somehow felt a lot of shame as well, bound up with the stories these cultural objects tell about the lives of our ancestors. Many of these cultural objects were made to be used, like cups. The turtle shell, for example, was used as a container for scents and perfumes—herbal scents, you know. There were bags made of the hides of small animals that people used to store coffee and tea in. Some are still in use today. In my site work it became clear to us that looting additionally is a stealing of knowledge that would otherwise be handed down. The possibility of passing on knowledge on handcrafting and the producing of material culture was thus lost. And that motivates me to work even harder to make a difference for coming generations, for younger people today. And for your benefit as well.

Thea Fabian:

From your own German perspective on Namibian history what are your thoughts about the comments we just heard and what things can we learn?

Dr. Binter:

First, that Germany and Namibia have highly different approaches to addressing German-Namibian history. In Germany, we are concerned with historical awareness as part of a critique of colonialism, including especially the atrocities perpetrated in Namibia by Germany

in the colonial period. In Namibia, efforts focus on a rewriting of history from native perspectives. A history in which Germany is but a footnote.

Thea Fabian:

The exchanging of art and cultural assets through museums, what opportunities does that create for us here in Germany?

Dr. Binter:

It allows us to listen, learn and gain respect for other forms of knowledge. And I believe that can make a difference for society as a whole. I believe that gaining an appreciation for poems, stories handed down through oral tradition, cultural assets and other Namibia artistic expressions, rather than restricting our appreciation to the knowledge produced at universities, represents a gain in knowledge justice, and a significant advance toward a more inclusive society. That is the big impact we hope our research will eventually have.

Thea Fabian:

To conclude our talk, what do you see as the next steps you may be taking in the near future?

Dr. Binter:

Metropolitan Bonn and the greater Rhineland region are incredibly rich in cultural treasures, and are globally interconnected. These include university collections, which contain the material embodiments of the history of knowledge, and our global connections extended out to the Americas and beyond to the Pacific. I look forward to working for this cause together with my students. Work that will reveal how exploring the history of knowledge through art object collections is relevant to contemporary issues. And then another major focus, as was mentioned, are the mission stories in the Namibia project. St. Augustin is right on our doorstep, run by the Steyler Missionaries, with whom I have a very enriching relationship. And we hope they too will be examining their own missionary history, integrating an ethnological perspective into their mission work in a new, transdisciplinary approach that will reposition them in a contemporary way.

Thea Fabian:

Thank you very much Dr. Binter for joining us today for the interview.

Dr. Binter:

The pleasure is all mine!

Thea Fabian:

Dr. Binter's research concerns knowledge creation in the colonial period in and through museums. Currently she is working on a project with the involvement of several Namibian museums. It is about returning important parts of their culture to the Namibian people in a process of "recollection", i.e. recalling how these artworks were crafted, how they ended up in Germany in the first place and what their true origins are. Dr. Binter explained how museums can demonstrate a discriminatory attitude in what they do and don't exhibit, and what needs to be done to change these practices, which go back to Germany's colonial era, naturally including Bonn.