Access – Transparency – Cooperation

Guidelines for a "3-road strategy" on the documentation and digital publication of collections from colonial contexts held in Germany

1. Background

On 13 March 2019, the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, the Federal Foreign Office Minister of State for International Cultural Policy, the Cultural Affairs Ministers of the Länder and the municipal umbrella organisations agreed on the "Framework Principles for dealing with collections from colonial contexts" (the "Framework Principles"). With regard to "transparency and documentation", the following is stated in No. 1 of the "Framework Principles": "The precondition for the responsible handling of collections from colonial contexts and the related processing of history is the greatest possible degree of transparency, because transparency facilitates global ownership". In this connection, "the importance of conducting inventories of and digitising collections from colonial contexts" is acknowledged and the intention to examine "ways to support institutions which hold such collections" is stated.

Creating the "greatest possible degree of transparency" in relation to collections from colonial contexts held in Germany, in particular by conducting inventories of, digitising and digitally publishing the holdings in question, largely depends on the following framework conditions:

1. the special practical and political urgency of "transparency and documentation": the greatest possible transparency in relation to collections from colonial contexts is the prerequisite for successful work in all other areas of the "Framework Principles" – in particular for "return". What is more, the countries and societies of origin in question as well as people in Germany are calling for transparency;

2. the large number of relevant cultural objects and human remains in many different institutions with different organisations responsible at federal, Land, municipal and non-governmental level;

3. the current status of the inventories, digitisation and expert analysis of collections from colonial contexts, which can vary from institution to institution and has not yet advanced far in many cases;

4. the digital infrastructure, not yet available throughout Germany or at international level, which could grant countries and societies of origin in particular centralised access to relevant digitised collections based on user needs, as well as

5. the time and resources (financial, personnel, infrastructure) needed to ensure the "greatest possible degree of transparency" in connection with collections from colonial contexts held in Germany.

2. The "3-road strategy": Access, transparency, cooperation

For the development and implementation of a joint strategy on the documentation and digital publication of collections from colonial contexts in Germany, a balance has to be struck between the need for transparency on the one hand and, on the other, the capacities and resources required for the digital publication of the extensive relevant collection holdings. At the same time, the overarching goal of the "greatest possible degree of transparency" must be rigorously pursued with short, medium and long-term measures.

The "3-road strategy" provides for three <u>equivalent approaches launched simultaneously</u> on documenting and digitally publishing the relevant collections, which – in line with the "Framework Principles" – will help reach the long-term goal of the "greatest possible degree of transparency". However, they will do so in different ways and with different time scales. <u>The main advantage of this strategy is that, despite the magnitude and complexity of the challenge, quick and ongoing results can be achieved without losing sight of the medium and long-term tasks.</u> The "3-road strategy" is to be planned and implemented with the help of experts from the countries and societies of origin as well as the diaspora in Germany.

Road 1: "Access" (short-term): Creation of **central access to collections from colonial contexts which have already been published digitally** through tagging or the integration of existing relevant data into the German Digital Library as well as the curated and annotated collection of existing internet addresses (German Digital Library in cooperation with the "German Contact Point for Collections from Colonial Contexts" (Contact Point);

Road 2: "Transparency" (medium, long-term): Basic digitisation and digital publication of still unpublished collections from colonial contexts in a central data repository (e.g. the German Digital Library) in line with **uniform standards** (extended "object ID", LIDO) and employing the **multilingual vocabulary** customarily used internationally by academics;

Road 3 "Cooperation" (long-term): Digitisation and digital publication of collections from colonial contexts based on standards devised in collaboration with countries and societies of origin as well as the diaspora in Germany (correction of Eurocentric perspectives), possibly decentralised data storage.

<u>Human remains and culturally sensitive objects should also be digitally registered with a view to ensuring that the documentation of collections from colonial contexts held in Germany is as complete as possible.</u> In what form such digitisation can be carried out and who should have access to the data, are, however, issues with ethical consequences which should be carefully considered together with the countries and societies of origin. In a next step, it should be examined what form such a discussion process should take and who should participate in it.

3. Prioritisation

The regional prioritisation in processing the collection holdings within the framework of the "3-road strategy", which is required due to the framework conditions mentioned above, will be carried out by the institutions housing the collections and the organisations responsible for them, taking into account to the greatest possible

extent the interests of the countries and societies of origin. For reasons of historical and political relevance, as well as with a view to ensuring a realistic perspective for implementation, it may be useful and practicable to initially apply the strategy to collections from colonial contexts which, in line with the "Guidelines on Dealing with Collections from Colonial Contexts"[1] of the German Museums Association, belong to Category 1: Objects from formal colonial rule contexts. According to the "Framework Principles", it would also seem appropriate within this category to prioritise human remains from colonial contexts as a whole as well as those cultural objects "which were removed from their societies and transported to Germany within the framework of formal colonial rule by the German Empire, as well as cultural objects from other colonial rules for which requests for return have been submitted."

Furthermore, those cultural objects from colonial contexts which are regarded as especially relevant by the countries or societies of origin should be prioritised.

Regardless of these prioritisations, the "3-road strategy" should, in addition to human remains, cover the entire range of relevant cultural objects in cultural heritage and scientific institutions including scientific collections and thus encompass ethnological, natural historical, medical, historical, art historical and cultural historical objects as well as documents.

4. Pilot phase

The "3-road strategy" is initially to be tried out in a pilot phase with selected institutions and including scientific collections. The participating institutions as well as the German Digital Library are to receive financial support. Subsequently, the implementation of the "3-road strategy" is gradually to be extended to include other institutions.

An integral part of the pilot phase will be experts talks, especially with people from countries or societies of origin and in diaspora communities, with representatives of the German Digital Library, the institutions holding collections and scientific institutions, the German Museums Association and the German National Committee of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) as well as with other experts, particularly in the fields of data acquisition, aggregation and storage and provenance research (e.g. the Arbeitskreis Provenienzforschung [Research Association for Provenance Research]). The overriding objective is to define in greater detail the prerequisites and basic conditions for the implementation of the "3-road strategy" and to draw up time and cost plans based on that. The expert talks will be conceived and organised by the Contact Point on behalf of and in close coordination with the "Federation-Länder Working Group on Dealing with Collections from Colonial Contexts" (Federation-Länder Working Group). The Federal Foreign Office, the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, the Länder, as well as municipal umbrella organisations and the German Museums Association and ICOM all belong to the Working Group.

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[1] https://www.museumsbund.de/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/dmb-leitfaden-kolonialismus-2019.pdf

5. Steering and support of the process

The implementation of the "3-road strategy" is to be steered by the Federation-Länder Working Group, whose tasks include defining and further developing the fields of action and goals laid down in the "Framework Principles". In accordance with the "Concept on the establishment and organisation of a German Contact Point for Collections from Colonial Contexts" of October 2019, it will be supported by the Contact Point. Furthermore, funds from the budget of the Contact Point are to make a substantial contribution towards the implementation of road 1 as well as to facilitate preparatory advisory and programming tasks connected to the implementation of road 2.

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