Portal "Collections from Colonial Contexts" of the German Digital Library: How can the benefits for societies of origin be increased?

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The online portal "Collections from Colonial Contexts (CCC)" of the German Digital Library (DDB) aims to create, in the short term, centralised and transparent access to information already available in digital form from German museums and other institutions with ‚collections'[1] or holdings of cultural artefacts, such as universities, libraries and missionary societies.

Here, data on ethnological, natural history, historical, art and cultural history 'objects'[2] from formal colonial rule and from areas where informal colonial structures prevailed are being made available for the first time on a central platform on the internet (in German, English and French).

This portal contains 'collection items' from all over the world that were brought to German cultural heritage institutions through purchase, exchange, theft and other forms of – sometimes violent – appropriation. Since the prototype went live in 2021, the German Digital Library has further developed the offering in consultation with 25 German cultural and scientific institutions and experts from societies and countries of origin, and published it in July 2024.

The portal is aimed in particular at people, communities and institutions in the contexts of origin, including representatives of diasporic communities. They should be given the opportunity to "encounter their rich material cultural heritage. The portal offers researchers worldwide the opportunity to trace the contexts of acquisitions during the colonial era."[3]

Experience to date suggests that the portal has so far been little used by actors from the contexts of origin and other countries of the so-called Global South and their diasporic communities. To shed more light on this issue, we surveyed both the DDB as the provider and German and international researchers as (potential) users in writing.[4]

Statement from the DDB office

In its comprehensive written response of 12 September 2025 to our enquiry, the German Digital Library confirmed the assumption that usage rates among the target groups have been low to date:

"The use of our websites is not recorded on an individual basis, so that quantitative statements about individual users (e.g. by actors from the diaspora or civil society) are not possible. On the Collections from Colonial Contexts portal, we provide a contact form for each object, which is forwarded directly to our data partners, i.e. museums and collections that preserve the respective objects, so that we have no knowledge of the content and sender of the contact request. The portal is currently visited mainly by users whose IP addresses are registered in Germany, the USA and France, with ***around four per cent coming from the Global South (****emphasis added by authors). However, website visits are not recorded if users set cookies, if browser settings reject cookies, or if data is requested via the open API (Application Programming Interface) of the German Digital Library."*

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[1] We use the term ‚collecting' in quotation marks because it obscures the often violent appropriation of cultural property and *ancestral remains* in colonial and imperial contexts.

[2] The terms ‚objects' and ‚collection items' emphasise the object character of the "things" depicted in the DDB portal. For societies of origin, however, these are often entities filled with life, to which they sometimes have a strong emotional and personal connection, which is why the term ‚*cultural belongings*' is also used as an alternative.

[3] Quote from the website of the Institute for Museum Research (Berlin State Museums/Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation)

[4] We started the survey on 2 August 2025 and finished it on 17 September 2025. We reached out to our personal networks in Germany and in the countries of origin and asked them to share the questionnaire to get it to as many people as possible.

Statements of users from scientific and cultural institutions

We received the following responses to the portal from users:

Researcher from Tanzania:

"I have not used the portal yet. This is the first time I have heard of it and I plan to use it for my ongoing research on our Tanzanian societies before the colonial era."

Researcher from Cameroon:

"I have not yet used the portal. This enquiry has made me aware of its existence."

Researcher from Cameroon:

"Yes, I was already aware of the portal's existence before this enquiry, but I have not actively used it yet. When I first heard about it, I was very excited because I hoped it would give me access to information that could greatly support my doctoral thesis. However, after familiarising myself with the platform, I realised that there are currently no materials on the remains of my ancestors, which are the focus of my work. As my current research focuses more on the remains of my ancestors than on cultural artefacts, I have not seen any immediate need to use the portal intensively, although I have browsed it occasionally. Nevertheless, I see its great potential for researchers in my network, especially those in Cameroon who deal specifically with cultural artefacts."

Researcher from Tanzania:

"I used the portal for research purposes. It was easy to use for scientists, but unsuitable for non-scientists or laypeople. Navigation would be very difficult for ordinary members of local communities. I was not satisfied with my search results. There was very little information about Tanzania; even the few objects listed contained only minimal helpful details. For example, a shield found on Kilimanjaro was attributed to the Maasai. This is incorrect. The Maasai live in Arusha, Manyara and parts of Kenya. It was also stated that the shield was made of wood, which is also incorrect. In almost 95% of cases, shields are made of leather; only about 5% are made of wood. A spear was attributed to the Maasai of Central Africa, but I have never heard of Maasai from Central Africa, and there were many other obvious errors. Digitisation is essential, but it is equally important to obtain the consent of the rightful owners of these materials, especially as some items have religious or royal significance. Some communities may feel offended if their sacred objects are posted online, publicly displayed or exhibited."

Scientist from Cameroon:

I am interested in the online library on colonial literature, the archival materials and the image collection. These help me to organise exhibitions and provide illustrative material for book contributions, conference slides and articles. There is a lot of material on colonial history there. I have received satisfactory answers to my enquiries, although some things are still missing, e.g. some travel reports from former colonisers."

Researcher from the USA:

"I haven't used the portal yet. I didn't know it existed."

Researcher from Germany:

"One problem is that only a fraction of the colonial-era collections are currently searchable on the DDB portal. The pilot phase has been 'somehow' completed with the relaunch. On the one hand, i.e. at the DDB, there is, to my knowledge, only one employee left who maintains the portal. On the other hand, even larger institutions (especially museums) have problems providing appropriately processed data sets for the portal, which are then entered into the portal by an employee. I also find it problematic that it has not been possible to integrate TK (Traditional Knowledge) Notices, let alone TK Labels, into the portal. This was discussed, but the issue was not pursued further. This was partly, but not solely, for cost reasons. In other words, Traditional Knowledge (regardless of how critical one may be of this term) is not structurally integrated.

One reason for this is probably that the portal is (still) hardly known in the regions that were formerly part of the German colonial empire. There was interest from the countries, but especially from those that were already networked. One could also say: the usual suspects. Even in the pilot phase, communication with representatives from the countries of origin proved particularly difficult because there were simply hardly any contact persons. And this despite the fact that many people pulled a lot of strings, i.e. made a lot of contacts. So there is a kind of gap between the people who demand transparency, accessibility, etc., and the people who are searching for the whereabouts of culturally appropriated colonial artefacts. There is hardly

any communication or cross-connections here. Except in cases that have long been discussed in the media, in public, and perhaps also in politics."

Museum director from Germany:

"I was aware of the portal's existence, but I haven't used it yet because the database is still too small to be relevant for research."

Public relations work by the DDB

As awareness of the portal's existence is limited among (potential) users, intensive public relations work is necessary to increase its visibility. The DDB's written statement makes it clear that considerable efforts have already been made to publicise the portal:

"To mark the launch of the portal, our press release was sent out in three languages (accompanied by social media and newsletters) to the DACH region (Germany, Austria, Switzerland) and internationally (to multipliers with contacts to representatives from companies of origin, associations such as ICOM,[5] to experts who discussed the project in advance in workshops, to the Colonial Contexts Network, via the project's pilot institutions and via the Contact Point for Collections from Colonial Contexts, which is responsible, among other things, for connecting individuals and institutions and building networks). In addition, we provide ongoing information about the portal at specialist and international conferences, primarily (but not exclusively) in the museum sector."

The following response indicates that the DDB intends to focus on expanding the range of 'objects' recorded in its database in the future. Possible steps to increase usage by the primary target groups (i.e. individuals and organisations from contexts of origin, representatives of diasporic communities and civil society actors) are not listed:

"Our task was to create the technical infrastructure for the first central overview of collections from colonial contexts in German cultural heritage institutions. This was successfully implemented and the portal was launched in July 2024. Our focus is now on increasing the number of items in the inventory in order to meet the requirement to provide centralised access to collections from colonial contexts in German cultural and knowledge institutions. To this end, we are proactively contacting museums and collections, conducting ongoing project consultations and closely monitoring the data preparation and online publication of the objects and collections."

Recommendations from users for the further development of the portal

The recommendations made by the users we surveyed for increasing awareness and use of the portal focus on the following aspects:

Significance for coming to terms with German colonial history

Fundamentally, Germany should clarify who the portal is primarily intended to benefit: German actors, societies of origin, or both sides. Users in former colonial territories expect Germany to be willing to come to terms with its own colonial history and to credibly acknowledge its historical guilt. The overarching message of the DDB portal should be that it represents part of Germany's commitment to coming to terms with colonialism.

A key factor from the perspective of voices from countries of origin is the creation of trust that Germany is fundamentally willing to make restitutions. Otherwise, individuals and communities would be discouraged from conducting research in German cultural institutions. The further development of the portal should be guided by the understanding and awareness that for many people in the societies of origin, the transfer of their cultural heritage to Germany is associated with trauma and pain. Partly because there have been negative experiences in the past with regard to sensitivity and re-traumatising contexts in dealings with German actors, there is now resistance to establishing relationships with institutions that are identified with historical injustice.

[5] International Council of Museums

Addressing the societies of origin

Societies of origin should be explicitly encouraged to discover their cultural heritage and demand its return. They should be proactively asked to contribute their knowledge and specific expertise to the portal. However, the invitation to participate can only be met with a positive response if the German side has first carried out comprehensive and credible trust-building work that focuses on the interests of the communities of origin.[6] In practical terms, low-threshold access must be guaranteed and explanatory materials made available. Perhaps an app would be more suitable for use by people without a scientific background than the online-based portal.

Not as a contrast, but rather as a supplement, country-specific data portals should be created by the German side, similar to the Atlas of Absence[7] for Cameroonian cultural heritage. A finding aid[8] has been created for Namibia, but so far it has met with little response there.

In order to increase the attractiveness and acceptance of the portal, funds should be made available for joint provenance research and inclusive forms of governance should be created through an advisory board with representatives of the communities of origin and experts from the societies of origin. The contents of the portal should be translated into the languages of the former colonial territories. AI-supported automated translations could be helpful here. It is suggested that links to research institutions and libraries in the societies of origin be included in the portal.

Contributions from the German side

A German museum director believes that museums and other 'collection institutions' themselves are best informed about which cultural belongings from which communities they preserve, and which holdings are sensitive or potentially subject to restitution. He believes that these institutions have a duty to actively inform these communities about the existence of such holdings. Federal funding should not only focus on provenance research and the provision of online databases, but increasingly on active exchange. This means creating instruments to subsidise travel costs and providing assistance in obtaining visas for members of the communities of origin if they wish to view the heritage of their ancestors.

Users from the communities of origin suggest that workshops and mobile exhibitions be organised in the regions of the so-called Global South to present the portal, and that German embassies be further developed as spaces for cultural dialogue. The Goethe Institute, information centres of the German Academic Exchange Service, national archives, institutes of German studies and German clubs at universities could be used for this purpose. Scholars from the respective countries can serve as multipliers in this regard. To this end, information days could be organised at institutes for German studies, departments of history, geography and ethnology or anthropology.

Another comment suggests proactively supporting collaborative research on entangled history with universities in former colonial territories and promoting the portal in the process. Civil society restitution initiatives there should also be familiarised with the portal and dialogue with communities of origin should be expanded. In doing so, Germany should contribute to the creation of structures for the return of human remains and cultural belongings. Several users recommend the broad involvement of ministries, embassies, restitution committees and national and regional museums in the partner countries in promoting the portal.

International organisations

At the international level, UNESCO (UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation), ICOM, the African Union and CARICOM (Caribbean Community and Common Market), as well

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[6] An example of such an approach is the "FAIR and CARE Principles for Databases " developed by the Global Indigenous Data Alliance

[7] Assilkinga, Mikaél et al.: Atlas of Absence: Cameroon's Cultural Heritage in Germany, Heidelberg: arthistoricum.net, 2023

[8] Grimme Gesa; Förster, Larissa: Locating Namibian Cultural Heritage in Museums and Universities in German-Speaking Countries: A Finding Aid for Provenance Research, German Centre for Lost Cultural Property, Working Paper 6/2024

as the Heritage Management Organisation, World Monuments Fund and Open Society Africa are named as suitable partners. Reference is also made to international academic and diaspora communities.

Supply-oriented or demand from local communities?

Our non-representative survey seems to confirm the impression that the DDB portal is still little known among target groups from contexts of origin. Fundamentally, the question arises as to whether the model for the centralised recording of all cultural belongings from colonial contexts held in Germany meets the needs and capabilities of the communities of origin. After all, this is what the attempt to publicise and repatriate colonially appropriated ancestral remains and cultural belongings is all about.

In a recently published paper, Open Restitution Africa (ORA) expresses scepticism about the establishment of comprehensive data portals by national governments on the continent. Instead, the organisation advocates a strategic focus on the priorities and demands of local communities. This is not only a matter of limited resources in former colonial territories and their diasporic connections, but also of respecting the knowledge of the communities concerned about their cultural belongings and their public presentation, as well as strengthening their agency and interpretive authority in restitution proceedings.

With regard to the former colonial powers, however, Open Restitution Africa supports the supply-oriented approach for online portals to create transparency. In addition, ORA calls for greater political and financial support for restitutions and reparations for colonial destruction and its continuing effects to this day.

Experience with the Atlas of Absence on Cameroonian cultural heritage in Germany shows that the creation of comprehensive national data portals can and must be linked to the participation of communities, traditional authorities, civil society and academia in the countries of origin. The second phase of the German-Cameroonian research project funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) is therefore focused on disseminating knowledge in Cameroon. Local actors there (e.g. the Bakoko and Maka communities) are now using the new knowledge about the cultural belongings taken to Germany and the (often violent) circumstances of their appropriation to come to terms with their own history and articulate restitution claims.

Outlook

The (fragmentary) findings from our survey lead us to the following recommendations for action for the further development of the DDB portal:

***Governance structure*:** We see the establishment of a pluralistic governance structure, for example through an international advisory board involving civil society and academia from the countries of origin and Germany, as a decisive factor in increasing the attractiveness and use of the portal by the target groups. The experiences with the "Colonial Contexts" advisory board at the German Foundation for Lost Art could be evaluated for this purpose. Its members include Prof. Kokou Azamede (University of Lomé, Togo), Prof. Albert Gouaffo (University of Dschang, Cameroon) and Tahir Della (Initiative of Black People in Germany).

***Restitution fund*:** In order to strengthen the credibility of Germany's reappraisal of its own colonial history and to support the restitution efforts of local communities and governments, the Federal Government should establish a restitution fund and provide it with adequate financial resources. The government's draft budget for 2026 does not indicate any steps in this direction. On the contrary, the budget item "Global South/Reappraisal of Colonialism" in the budget of the Minister of State for Culture and Media (BKM) is to be reduced from €2 million for 2025 to €500,000 for 2026.

Outreach: As suggested by users from various backgrounds, including Germany itself, the German Digital Library should be provided with additional funds to work with German and international intermediary organisations to formulate and implement a strategy for raising awareness of the portal among target groups. The Goethe Institute's offices abroad could play a central role in the implementation of this strategy. Consideration should also be given to other effective forms of public relations work that would spread awareness of the DDB portal – and the whereabouts of cultural belongings in Germany – among potential users, e.g. via apps, gaming platforms or targeted multiplier workshops.