Postcolonial Provenance Research:

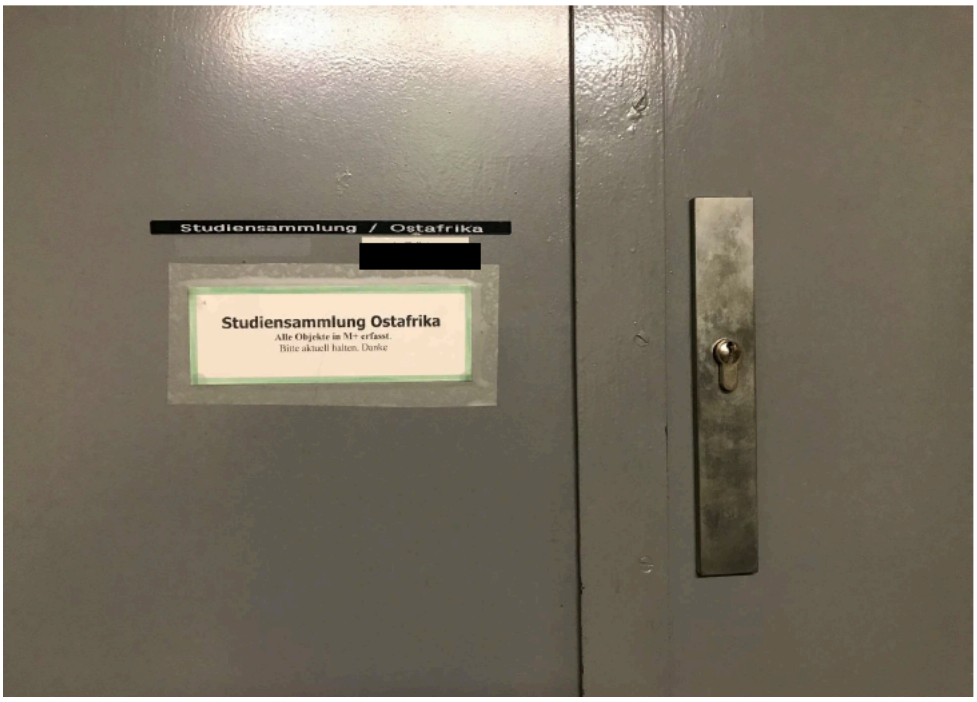
(Re)presentations of knowledge and exhibition practice in the exhibition:
Historia za Tanzania – Geschichte(n) Tansanias – Histories of Tanzania

By Maike Schimanowski and Kristin Weber-Sinn

This paper was presented by Maike Schimanowski at the conference of the Arbeitskreis Provenienzforschung at their annual conference in Bonn on September 10, 2025.

The exhibition project *"Historia za Tanzania - Histories of Tanzania – Geschichte(n) Tansanias"* was opened at the Humboldt Forum in Berlin in November 2024. The curatorial team consisted of colleagues from three institutions : the National Museum of Tanzania (NMT), the Ethnologisches Museum (EM) and Zentralarchiv (ZA) Staatliche Museen zu Berlin and the Stiftung Humboldt Forum (SHF). Our privilege was to work with Paola Ivanov (EM), Achilles Bufure and Flower Manase (NMT), Jocelyne Stahl (SHF), Balthazar Nyamusya of the Maji Maji Memorial Museum in Songea (NMT). We being Kristin Weber-Sinn (ZA) and Maike Schimanowski, at that time working for the Stiftung Humboldt Forum. Maike was employed as coordinating curator and tasked to represent the German institution in all visits to the communities and Kristin has been the backbone of our exhibition project in so far as she has undertaken extensive provenance research on the cultural belongings we have worked with, discussed and subsequently in parts also put on display in the exhibition in the Humboldt Forum in Berlin.

In this text, we'd like to share some insights into how her provenance research became not just an academic tool—but contributed to a communicative, collaborative, and partly transformative process. A process that doesn't only explain fragments of the past, but actively reconfigures how we engage with it—publicly, politically, and across institutions.



Door to the “Ostafrika-Sammlungen” (East Africa-Collections) in the Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin Picture: © Maike Schimanowski / SHF/EM-SPK

The Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin holds around **10,200 Cultural Belongings from present-day Tanzania**—the vast majority appropriated during the period of German and later British colonial rule. By confronting ourselves with this holdings, the curatorial team started off with some simple but pressing questions, that refer to some general and some more specific dilemmata that we faced:

How can “we” re-asses cultural belongings, from which we assume that - to a huge extent - they have been appropriated violently or at least under colonial contexts of injustice without reproducing colonial violence?
How can we research them, hold them in storage and put them on display for a general audience that might lack the knowledge to receive them, or who were never meant to see them?
How can we pay respect and produce a safer space for the presentation of these Cultural Belongings especially in a highly contested space like the Humboldt Forum in Berlin?
How do we deal with the archive that holds data that reproduces racist stereotypes and colonial violence next to problematic omissions?
Who is to decide?
Whose consent should be sought?

Empty showcase in the Exhibition *"Exhibiting.Omissions"* at the Humboldt Forum Berlin, Sept 2022-Jun 2024

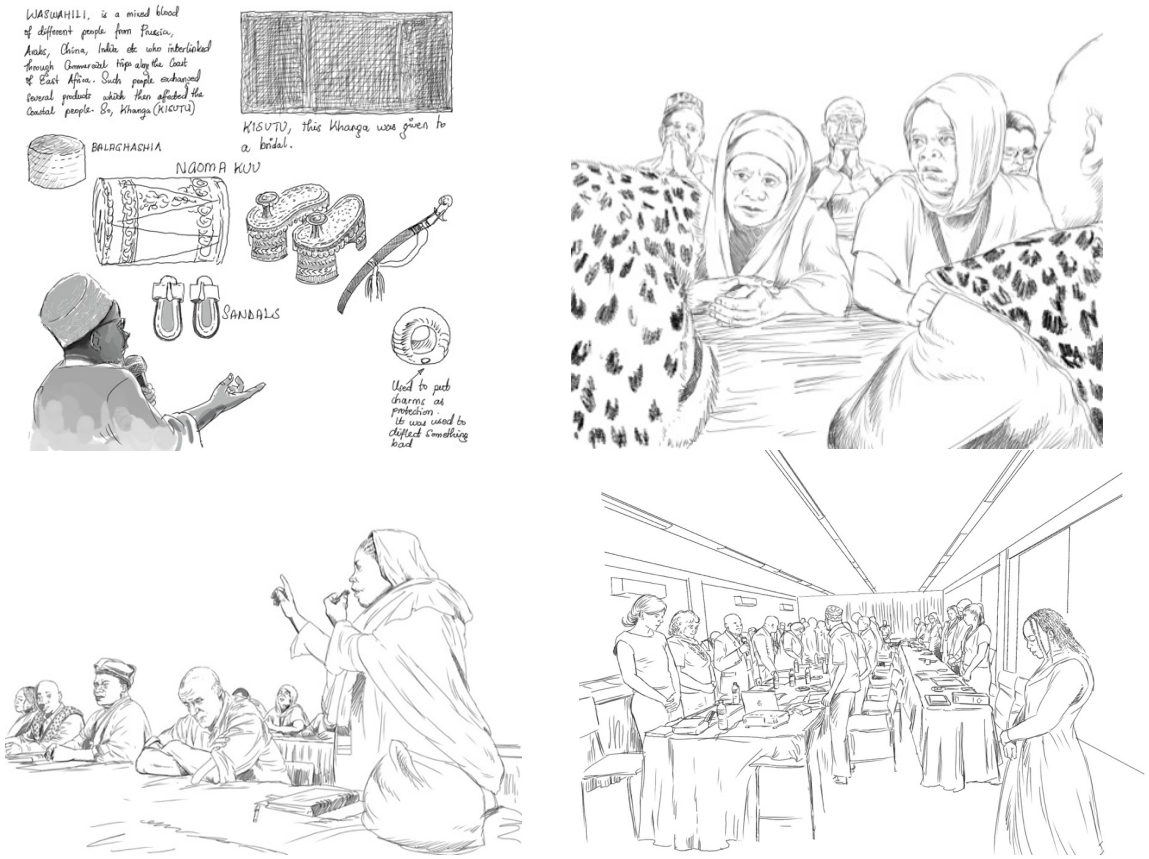
Picture: © Maike Schimanowski / SHF/EM-SPK

For the exhibition *Histories of Tanzania* we decided to not display any cultural belonging without the "informed consent" of the respective descendant of the former owner, producer or custodian or community of origin. Our hope was to provide complete, understandable, and transparent information about the context, place, and duration of a proposed presentation to gain this "Informed consent". We intended to display roughly 180 cultural belongings in the exhibition to represent the rich and diverse histories of the region of present-day Tanzania, while at the same time keeping in mind, that we are relying on a very biased "collection" of belongings, that consists of racist stereotypes and omissions. So the curatorial team decided on the different kinds of approval necessary based on the provenance research done by Kristin Weber-Sinn. The colleagues contacted descendants and community stakeholders in the name of the National Museum of Tanzania, to start a process of exchange and interaction regarding the project. During the two years of the exhibition realisation, an exchange and dialogue took place in various formats, with: **descendants of former owners, producers, or custodians of selected cultural belongings**, **representatives from 15 different communities** across Tanzania.

Participants of the Community Consent Conference, Dar es Salaam 2023 in front of the old building of the National Museum of Tanzania.

Picture: © Nicholas Calvin / SHF/EM-SPK/NMT

Maike Schimanowski was part of the delegation of the curatorial team that travelled to various regions in the first stage of the project to share information, discuss our approach and engage into exchange on the present research findings from Kristin and to listen, document, and learn. This led to a **three-day conference** at the National Museum in Dar es Salaam, where the findings were again critically discussed with appr. 50 representatives from Tanzanian communities, the curatorial team and other museum experts from Tanzania. **Informed consent** for the planned exhibition was sought.



Artistic documentation of the discussion during the conference
Illustrations: © Amani Abeid / SHF/EM-SPK/NMT

During the first day the team presented the curatorial concept and approach, the critical debate in Germany on the Humboldt Forum and the historical collection in the Berlin museum, the intended exhibition design and the representational means possible in order to not show original cultural belongings, if display was not an option. On the second and third day the functions, meanings and provenance of the selected cultural belongings were discussed and finally a demand from the community-stakeholder was articulated: a Memorandum of Understanding was to be written, that stated the extent of the informed consent given, confirmed the support for necessary rituals and the intention for a final restitution, supported by the NMT.

Interviewstill of Sara Mazoya and her father, Urughu August 2024; illustration of the chair
Pictures: © Amani Abeid; Nicholas Calvin / SHF/EM-SPK/NMT

One of the key Cultural Belongings in the exhibition is a high-backed, intricately carved chair of a female dignitary from Urughu in today's Singida Region. The former owner is already mentioned in the museum's early acquisition records. This is noteworthy because female dignitaries are only rarely recorded in colonial archives as "former owners." During a visit of our Tanzanian colleagues to the region, they spoke with the descendants of this dignitary, whose name was Mwana Mgandu. According to their accounts, the German colonial army attacked Urughu and the dignitary's residence, killed her and her family, and looted her belongings, including the impressive throne. In the place where the residence once stood, is still a large fig tree – nowadays called "the palace" with a shrine, to commemorate this seat of power. Since the destruction, rituals have been held there. The throne was regarded as the constitution of the community, the seat of the ancestors, and a protective presence for Mwana Mgandu and the community—its loss brought misfortune and harm to the Kimbu of Urughu. When we talked to the Descendants of Mwana Mgandu they demanded the return of the throne to Urughu, especially for the sake of educating the youth on the pre-colonial history of the Kimbu community there.

Behind the scenes of the interview situation at the residence of Chief Mkwawa in Iringa, August 2024

Picture: © Nicholas Calvin / SHF/EM-SPK/NMT

In the last phase of the exhibition production we visited the stakeholders once more to gather material to **contextualize the cultural belongings from Tanzanian perspectives**. These produced materials form a vital part of the exhibition, not as decorative supplements, but as **co-constructed narratives** to also balance curatorial perspectives.
The curatorial team interviewed more than 30 descendants and community representatives while visiting them in their respective places. During these interviews we intended to provide the opportunity for them to explain the function, meanings and context of the cultural belongings. These explanations would in some cases differ immensely from the results of the provenance research and provide another layer to a possible perception of the cultural belongings. If no informed consent was given for a presentation of the originals, the cultural belonging could be represented with different means in the exhibition, or even not at all.
We realized, exhibition production processes like this - in ideal - involve **trust-building, transparent information exchange, and to also sit in the discomfort of many open ends and uncertainties next to the readiness (timewise and financially etc.) to adjust the processes somewhat spontaneously**.

Display of the representation of *kigiilya* in the exhibition *"Histories of Tanzania"*, November 2024

Picture: © Maria Lukumbuzya

Above you can see one key cultural belonging: *kigiilya*, represented by a drawing of the Tanzanian artist Amani Abeid, for which the community denied a public display, while still supporting a representation of it with artistic means, interviews and further context. You can see the way the exhibition design tries to construct spheres, that provide the opportunity for a more intimate encounter and protected perception of the cultural belongings by paying tribute to their possible sensitivity: i.e. be it that they were not meant for open public display, or being appropriated violently etc.

So, what does this mean for the broader question of how we communicate provenance research?
First: **Participation is not the same as representation**.
Just because communities are partly involved in the process doesn't mean their perspectives are fully or fairly represented in the final exhibition. Museums still filter, frame, and sometimes reduce complexity. Naming these asymmetries is part of responsible communication.
Second: **Provenance research is not just internal museum work.**
It becomes a **public responsibility** when we open up the process—through exhibitions, yes, but also through dialogue formats, educational outreach, and political advocacy.
Third: **Decolonization is not a metaphor.**
It demands concrete institutional changes—resources, time, sustained partnerships etc.

But, having said that, we are aware: The traditional Western museum, as an instrument of colonial exercise of power and power of representation, cannot be structurally decolonised; Museums are based on colonial logics of collecting, exhibiting and knowledge that are

deeply rooted in the Eurocentric system. Kristin and Maike hope that postcolonial provenance research can be a tool and play a vital role in empowering and activating different actors to support decolonial changes.

Stage in Humboldt Forum during the opening ceremony
Picture: © Anthonia Mnkama/ SHF/EM-SPK/NMT

How can postcolonial provenance research become an activating part in exhibitions?
By making its **fragilities and contradictions visible**,
By creating spaces where different forms of knowledge **meet on equal footing**—even if the outcome is unfinished and in process.
And by understanding that **transparency, consent, and accountability are not final goals**, but ongoing commitments and responsibilities.
In our case our exhibition was meant to be a first and final display of the cultural belongings on German grounds, before it would be transferred to Tanzania. We had planned, that it should then be seen at the NMT and finally be split up, for the different cultural belongings to return to their communities of origin. These next stages of the exhibition are still to come.