HOW THINGS CONNECT PEOPLE: DEBATING ACCESS TO ETHNOGRAPHIC COLLECTIONS

Thomas Widlok, Elena Kerdikoshvili, and Arden Thuis

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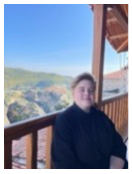

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Acknowledgements

This report was compiled by the three authors on the basis of extensive audio- and video recordings covering the proceedings of a workshop held at Tsumeb, Namibia on 8th and 9th March 2024. We gratefully acknowledge the support of the Municipality of Tsumeb and of the Helvi Mpingana Kondombolo Cultural Village which hosted the workshop locally . The workshop participants (listed below) all agreed to their input and comments being used for this report. They were all provided with a draft version of the report and encouraged to bring this report to a form that would reflect the discussions during the workshop and the conclusions reached. This process of consultation has taken a while and we are thankful to all participants for their contributions and their patience which has allowed us to generate this final report as a result. We therefore consider this report a shared output from our workshop to which everyone present at the meeting contributed. But since our role as authors in this process was that of writing and composing the piece we also take on any responsibility for remaining shortcomings. We initially had hoped, in vain, that an established academic journal in our field would be able to accommodate a contribution with this rather unusual collaborative history. Therefore, we are particularly greatful to the editors of the series Cologne Working Papers in Cultural and Social Anthropology who provide us the opportunity to make the paper public and accessible. Internet connectivity in Namibia is advancing fast so that we are confident that this report will not only be accessible to all participants but also to the wider interested community in Namibia and beyond.

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We would like to highlight that the workshop and its outcome was only possible because of the enthusiastic and reflective input provided by contributors from across Namibia and abroad. We consider it a great privilege that participants with very different backgrounds exchanged ideas and suggestions and allowed for new insights and knowledge to emerge. The material items that we engaged with in the meeting not only allowed us to converse indirectly with their original makers and previous holders but they very concretely connected people who would have otherwise not have met in this forum. We therefore gratefully acknowledge the input and co-authorship of all the workshop participants, here listed in alphabetical order: John /Aib (Outjo), Martha Akawa (UNAM), Loide Ashivudhi (UNAM), Gertrud Boden (U. of Frankfurt), Appolia Dobe (Gobabis), Milika Dineinge (UNAM); Patricia Dinyando (Bwabwata), Kileni Fernando (ǁAna Djeh San Trust), Jens Frautschy (Tsumeb Museum), Olga Gases (Haiǁom San Trad. Authority), Sonner Geria (Khwe Custodian Committee), Tuuda Haitula (MAN), Vido Hausiku (ǁAna Djeh San Trust), Stella Imalwa (Tsumeb Municipalitiy), Sylvanus Job (UNAM), Clio Markou (U. of Cologne), Fenny Nakanyete (UNAM), Erastus Naoxab (Ondera), Phillemon Namwiha (MAN), Katrina Nakwa (Ombili), Ann-Kathrin Neff (U. of Tübingen and MAN), Romie Ngitevelekwa (UNAM), Svenja Ollenburg (U. of Colgone and UNAM), Festus Soroab (Ju/'Hoansi Development Fund), Wilma Shilamba (Tsumeb Municipality), Masiliso Stephanus (Khoe Custodian Committee).

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CRC	Collaborative Research Center
MAN	Museums Association of Namibia
TRR	Transregio
UNAM	University of Namibia

Abstract

Debates concerning the restitution of stolen museum objects tend to overshadow questions about the future role of artefacts currently held in collections acquired through gift-giving or purchase by ethnographers in the course of their research. This contribution originates from a participatory workshop held in Namibia in which community members, custodians, museum staff, and academics tackled such questions. While colonial collections in the region frequently served to divide groups along ethnic lines, the central theme here has been how artefacts connect people. These connections include links established through the materials associated with particular environments and places but they also touch upon questions of access, property rights, a sense of belonging, and connected to issues with regard to digital and generational divides. Based on this case study we formulate more general lessons for scholars and their research counterparts seeking to reflect and improve on the role of the material culture that connects them.

Keywords: access, property regimes, museums, ethnographic collections

German abstract

Debatten zur Restitution von gestohlenen Museumsobjekten überschatten Fragen zur zukünftigen Rolle von Artefakten, die als Geschenke oder durch Ankauf ihren Weg von ethnographischer Forschung in heutige Sammlungen gefunden haben. Dieser Beitrag beruht auf einem partizipativen Workshop, der in Namibia gehalten wurde und in dem Mitglieder von lokalen Gemeinschaften, Kustoden, sowie Mitarbeitende aus Museen und Universitäten sich mit solchen Fragen beschäftigt haben. Während koloniale Sammlungen häufig dazu dienten, die Trennung der Bevölkerung in einzelne ethnische Gruppen zu unterstreichen, war das zentrale Thema hier, wie Artefakte Menschen miteinander verbinden. Zu diesen Verbindungen gehören solche, die schon über die Materialien aus bestimmten Umwelten und von bestimmten Plätzen hergestellt werden. Es werden aber auch Themen angesprochen wie Fragen von Zugang, Eigentumsrechten, Zugehörigkeiten und zu digitalen sowie generationalen Trennlinien. Basierend auf diesem Fallbeispiel formulieren wir darüber hinausreichende Einsichten für Forschende und ihre lokalen Partner in der Forschung, die versuchen, die Rolle der materiellen Kultur, die sie miteinander verbindet, zu erkennen und zu verbessern.

1. Introduction

Compare the knife and the whip shown in Figures 1 and 2. Both are handmade artefacts used by Namibians in the 19th and 20th centuries, and both have become museum items. As such they may appear to be fairly similar artefacts in terms of materials or function. Both may be considered comparatively simple weapons or tools, and both were removed from their original uses and contexts when they were placed in museums during the colonial period. Both have a story to tell, but the biographies of the two items could hardly be more different.

The hippopotamus whip in Figure 1 was recently ceremoniously repatriated from a museum in Stuttgart, Germany. Details on the history of the object and its repatriation have been published extensively (Grewe 2021, see also https://lindenmuseum.de/the-family-bible-and-whip-by-hendrik-witbooi-2/?lang=en). As the whip belonged to the late Hendrik Witbooi, leader of the Nama resistance against the German colonists and celebrated national hero in independent Namibia, it has gained meanings and importance far beyond its function as a whip that may be used to handle domesticated animals. For a long time, the whip that was taken by the German colonial forces signified the colonial domination over the Nama and the submission of other indigenous Namibians. Correspondingly, the return of the whip was of great significance to Namibians seeking to take control over the narratives that inform their history and to emancipate themselves from colonial rule. In the photo many hands reach out for this item, many people take pictures of it with their smartphones, and its transfer triggered international media attention. As a celebrated item of repatriation, it brought together many Namibians when it returned to the country, and it also continues to connect Namibia and Germany through its history.

By contrast, the knife in Figure 2 probably never left Namibia, but it is now tucked away in a glass showcase with many different tools, utensils and adornments that form part of the general local history museum in the former colonial fort in Grootfontein, northern Namibia. This museum is maintained largely by members of the settler community and is popular stopover with tourists on their safaris through Namibia. The knife is originally part of a private collection of ethnographica which has found its way into the museum. The Grootfontein collection has similarities with other collections in the country, for instance in neighbouring Tsumeb, but also in Swakopmund or the capital Windhoek. In these museum collections specific items represent specific ethnic groups in Namibia and are found

Figure 1: Knife ("dagger") displayed at the Grootfontein Museum (Namibia). Photo: Th. Widlok

Figure 2: Witbooi hippopotamus whip during its repatriation process to the "Witbooi Royal Family". Photo: Copyright Ministerium für Wissenschaft, Forschung und Kunst Baden-Württemberg / Shawn van Eeden

together with regalia, vestments and everyday items from the colonial period. Just as in many colonial museums of colonial origin internationally, items are here classified as belonging to separate ethnic groups. However, although in the logic of the exhibition the knife is included to represent one group of the pre-colonial patchwork divided into different cultures, it is an item that in fact also connects people as we can learn from its label. It shows the name of a European collector, hence at some stage it embodied the contact between a local European resident or traveller and the craftsman or knife-user who gave the item up to be removed from its original purpose so that it could become an item of a museum collection. There is no indication that there was any foul play in this process, no hint of a forceful colonial appropriation even though the terms of the transaction we do not know. Interestingly, at some point museum staff changed the name of the ethnic group to which they thought this item belonged. As we can see on the label, the museum staff were not sure as to which ethnic label to give to the knife. The hand-written label was changed from "Owambo" (the regional majority group of agropastoralists) to "Bushmann" (the colonial label for the minority group of San foragers). And this uncertainty is no surprise since the knife resembles many of its kind that were until recently very common among the iron-tool using agropastoralist Ovawambo people in the central north of Namibia. The knife's design clearly resembles knives that the ethnographic literature usually attributes to the Ovawambo agropastoralists (Rodin [1985: 31] lists a similar knife under Ovawambo "Kwanyama weapons"). At the same time, it has been a long-standing arrangement in the region that San people are doing the blacksmithing work for their neighbouring groups (right into the present). Therefore, there is a good likelihood that the knife, like many others of its kind, was made and used by many neighbouring San who were labelled "Bushmen" in the 19th and 20th centuries. As such, this knife could be said to belong to more than one group, and - in a sense - it illustrates the futility of the colonial project of using material culture to distinguish and separate people, when in fact the items connected people. In this case it connects San, Ovawambo, and European settlers across ethnic boundaries but it also connects blacksmiths, pastoralists, farmers, traders and local historians across boundaries of professional skills.

In a double sense, therefore, the knife is a perfect example of the main theme of this article. Firstly, it shows „how things connect people", in this case across ethnic boundaries. Secondly, it can stand for a large number of items that make up ethnographic collections that have not been - and probably never will be - subject to the kind of international attention, to formalized restitution processes, and elaborate provenance research that items such as the Witbooi whip have attracted. As far as we know, no one makes any restitution claims on the knife in the Grootfontein museum. While much attention is paid to the Witbooi whip - and a few other "prominent" items, for example, the so-called Witbooi bible (see Grawe 2021) - the depots and collections are full of items which, on the face of it, look very similar, but which otherwise seem to be of a very different kind. In anthropological parlance, the Witbooi whip and bible would be considered "singularized" in their biography, i.e. they are considered to be so special that they are at this stage outside the realm and rules of commodification, very much like crown jewels elsewhere (see Kopytoff 1986). By contrast, there are numerous items that researchers (both lay and professional) have accumulated in the course of their work, which are either in the country of origin or elsewhere, but in any case, removed from the original community of practice that produced them - but without necessarily being singularized in this way. They are "common", could readily receive a price tag, and their biography is still open since they may in the future be sold, gifted, used or stored for various purposes. In this article and in the workshop on which it is based, we focused on these kinds of objects. What role could these items play in the process of social change, in terms of intergenerational relationships, but also in terms

of future endeavours by local communities to present their way of life to others?

Countless researchers and other visitors to African countries have collected local material culture. Many of these items are not held by museums or other institutions. In settler colonies, such as Namibia, the owners are often local laypeople with an interest in local history and culture. The questions raised by these material items are very different from the Witbooi-whip-type of objects. They invite us to think much more broadly about the role of material culture in the making of social relations. While items such as the Witbooi-whip have a fairly distinct role to play in shaping postcolonial relations, in this case between Germany and Namibia, more "mundane" artefacts such as the knife have potentially many more functions and meanings. We shall ask what roles these artefacts could play in processes of cultural innovation, of skill formation and consolidation, in heritage construction and possibly for revitalization.

To pursue these questions, the Collaborative Research Center 228 of the University of Cologne[1] organized a workshop entitled "How things connect people" at the Helvi Mpingana Kondombolo Cultural Village in Tsumeb, Oshikoto Region, northern Namibia (see Figures 3 and 4).

The Workshop took place on 8./9. March 2024. It brought together researchers from German and Namibian academic institutions, as well as members of the communities that produced and used many of the items now found in such collections (see acknowledgements for details).To make these discussions less abstract, the participants invited to the meeting were not only humans, but also various items that we had brought with us from Germany - either in their original materiality or represented by short film clips that portrayed the items and served as a point of departure for group discussions. The items had been given to researchers in the course of several decades of research, mostly with Haillom-speaking San in northern Namibia.

Figure 3: At the Tsumeb workshop. Photo: CRC-TRR 228, University of Cologne

Figure 4: Small-group interaction at workshop. Photo: CRC-TRR 228, University of Cologne

All of the artefacts, used as stimuli for discussion, were much more like the knife shown above (in fact, there were similar knives in the collection, too), and none were of the same prominence as the Witbooi whip. By shifting the attention to the "mundane" everyday items of common people, we also seek a new perspective on the underlying political processes. The whip and the bible and many other now famous repatriated items were and are part of what used to be criticized as "big man history", with powerful leaders and institutions on both sides of the colonial divide laying claim to them, using them as "crown jewels" in power struggles. But what about the people "under the whip"? What about those who produced knives to eke out a precarious life under harsh colonial and postcolonial conditions and possibly to counter the violence they experienced in their everyday lives? Could everyday objects help to give voice to those who are otherwise

[1] For more information on the Collaborative Research Center 228, see https://crc-trr228.de. The workshop was organized by the project C05 Framing Futures.

typically erased from the accounts of history and the present? Could turning attention away from the "crown jewels" to everyday items provide a more democratic way of looking at history and social relations today? Invited to the workshop were not representatives of governments or "royal families" but people who interact with cultural objects in their everyday lives, either by making such items, researching them, or by working in settings where cultural knowledge is held and transferred and where custodianship is an issue.

The items that we included in our deliberations were musical instruments, tools, weapons, ceremonial or fashion items, all produced locally, often originally in large numbers and from local materials, and traded, gifted or shared by a diversity of people. Many have moved into and out of commodification, some multiple times and were subject to shifting ownerships. The future of these items could be as diverse as their past. They could be sold or given away (again), they could potentially be used for displaying a culture, a place, a profession, a skill. Alternatively, they could also be used (again) for their original purposes, such as cutting things, cooking meals, making music, being worn during ceremonies and so forth.

This openness makes the "everyday" items we are dealing with here, in a sense, much more interesting than the "crown jewels" of major power holders. Although the media and politics focus on the "Witbooi whip" type of items, the destiny of these artefacts is, in fact, fairly predictable in their function of expressing and implementing political power. By contrast, the "knife-type" items are not only much more numerous, they also deserve much more attention, given that their destiny is much more open - including more open to debate. This is due to the fact that we - as ordinary persons - are much more likely to have access to them in our lives. Moreover, these items touch upon many more domains of social life than the "crown jewels" which have a rather monothematically relationship to political power and national symbolism.

In this contribution, we delve into some selected domains that are potentially implicated in the handling of everyday items found in everyday collections. Based on the outcomes of our workshop, we focus on connections in terms of environmental issues, access and ownership, and the transgenerational transfer of knowledge and culture. As we shall see, these items evoke landscapes and certain aspects of the environments from which they were taken or in which they were used. They implicate institutions, such as schools and cultural centres, and with them, belongings to different social groups are negotiated along the lines of generation, gender, and class. Among the other connections that we also make, some relate to questions of justice, the market, skills, innovation, and resilience. There are, therefore, many good reasons to pay more attention to such everyday material items that we find in many of these collections.

In fact, it would be appropriate to talk of inventories rather than collections because often these items were not systematically integrated into collections by collectors, but they were bought by researchers, or given as gifts in exchange for favours, borrowed for various purposes, and temporarily held by custodians. The transfer of the items has been, and continues to be, part and parcel of the relationship between researchers and members of the communities in which research has been conducted. One motivation for including material items in socio-cultural research is that they very often constitute materialized culture; they tell us something about a way of life, about social relations and social change. They can provide a factual corrective to what people say they do and what they say should be done. They potentially also contain and represent knowledge and embodied skills that people find difficult to express in words. Thus, unlike the colonial collections, the inventories that we are concerned with here are likely to grow and continue to be (re)filled for as long as researchers are interested in culture and social relations.

Therefore, what we will discuss in particular in this contribution is the question of how material items

can influence the course of the relationship between researcher and researched, and how they can continue to connect people more generally. As more collaborative research designs are being called for, there may also be new roles for material artefacts. At the same time, the debates about restitution have also left many people uncertain about how to treat material culture. These uncertainties affect both those who currently hold such items and those who may legitimately claim rights to them. In many restitution processes, this creates conflicts and disagreements not only between givers and takers but also amongst different groups who feel some entitlement to demand items back (the Witbooi bible and whip are a case in point [2]). As the items that we are discussing here are less symbolically and politically charged than Witbooi whips, chances are that the dialogue about them need not lead to conflict, but could instead lead to enhanced connections between people of different walks of life. ■

[2] https://www.dw.com/de/namibia-streit-um-r%C3%BCckgabe-der-witbooi-bibel/a-47697628

2. Connecting to environment and place

One of the defining features of the artefacts that were on the table at our meeting, or otherwise under consideration here, is that they are movable and mobile. They easily move hands, they have travelled locally before being transported overseas and back again. Despite this defining affordance of being mobile, early on in our meeting, the participating scholars from the University of Namibia suggested that we might be better off to talk about these artefacts not as "objects" but as "belongings". This would highlight the fact that these items had relations and should be distinguished from commercial goods, which move freely across markets as detached objects. With the knives and the other hand-made tools, instruments and ornaments, there was a vague sense that they belonged to "somebody", for instance, to people who had used them habitually in the past. But even more strongly, participants suggested that these items belonged "somewhere". This may seem puzzling initially, as being inherently mobile seems to clash with a sense of belonging to a place. However, a more careful listening to the recorded discussions at our workshop revealed that there seem to be inherent links of belonging to place, due to the fact that these artefacts - with very few exceptions - were made from natural resources found in certain places and landscapes, and often not found elsewhere. With regard to many items made of wood or plant leaves, roots, etc., there were regular comments about which tree or plant had been used. In a sense, these items still *were* the environment and place. A commercial or industrial perspective on artefacts tends to separate the "object" rather rigidly from the "raw materials" that were extracted somewhere, often far away and often of unknown origin. In contrast, the dominant view at our meeting was that what distinguished the artefacts on the table from products bought in a China shop anywhere was that they retained a sense of place. There was continuity between the necklace of beads from bits of Tamboti tree roots (Figure 5) and the Tamboti tree that grew in a specific place.

Figure 5: Necklace worn for illustration by /Abaros Horetsus in 1991 (Photo: Th. Widlok)

This connection is relevant in a number of ways: Some properties of the plant (or animal), its smell, colour or assumed benevolent properties are shared with the artefact and continue to be part of the artefact. By being connected to plants and animals from a specific habitat, these items could be said to belong to those landscapes and their specific places. Moreover, given their localized origins, items also connected people who lived in that area, to some degree overshadowing ethnic or other distinctions. Items could thus evoke places and could be said to have the power to connect people to places. Consequently, much attention was paid to identifying the living organism and the place from which a particular item was taken, including being able to name the tree or plant that was used. Even in cases where participants pointed out differences to items they knew from their home community, they often phrased this in terms of "where we are, we do not find this kind of stone and therefore use something else instead". Thus, differences in items were directly linked to environmental conditions, and they allowed people to reflect on places they had been, landscapes they knew and shared with others.

Figure 6: Friction bow with plastic (played by the late Xareb ǁGamǁgaeb in 1991 (Photo: Th. Widlok)

At our meeting, this perspective was even extended to those parts of the artefacts that were not clearly derived from identifiable local plants or animals. For instance, the various sources of glass beads (of "China shop" origin) were commented on, but also the ingenuity of producers to find substitute materials when necessary. Several items on the table illustrated this: The friction bow (seen in Figures 3 and 6), previously made from wood and grass, was also made from plastic strips used in the packaging industry. The wooden resonating bodies of musical instruments (pluriarchs, etc.) were replaced by oil cans and other tins. Animal sinews, previously used for bows, were replaced by cords. And in a particular striking example, dance rattle makers replaced the cocoons of local moths with beer-bottle tops (see Figures 7 and 8). There are indications that this process of material substitution was underway before the introduction of industrial products. Examples include the plant and insect ingredients used to make arrow poison. In some places, the poison was derived from plants, and where these were not available, insects were used instead (see Nadler 2004). Similarly, skin from game animals was replaced by skin from domesticate animals (e.g. in drums), and the choice between wood or horn in the construction of bellows was adapted according to the ability to extract these materials from particular environments. In other words, the materials used to make artefacts made them belong not only to a particular natural environment in which certain resources were found, but also to a particular place in time with its specific availability of resources.[3] Moreover, this process did not stop, as old "natural" materials became unavailable and new "industrial" ones were found useful. For instance, the slingshots in our collection were made from various types of rubber, presumably from bicycles or machine belts (see Figure 9). One workshop participant commented that this kind of rubber is now scarce in many semi-urban areas, so that producers have shifted to using condoms instead.

Figure 7: Dance rattle made from cocoons of local moths (Photo: CRC 228, University of Cologne)

Figure 8: Dance rattle made from beer-bottle tops (Photo: CRC 228, University of Cologne)

Figure 9: Participant showing a slingshot (Photo: CRC 228, University of Cologne)

[3] This parallels a demand made by Ingold (2012), namely to reconnect finished artefacts with the materials - and organisms they are made of - in our analysis.

What do all these observations tell us about how we might think about material culture collections and their role for local communities? Firstly, they emphasize the connections between items and places - and also to people via the places in which they live and use local materials. Secondly, the notion of "belonging" needs to be broadened to include not only "being owned by" but also "having continuity with" and "having a connection to". Artefacts are not only discursively or sentimentally linked to certain places; they have that link due to their materiality. Thirdly, several overlapping relations of belonging are possible at the same time, in particular for items that are composed of several raw materials, but also for those for which producers and users have found different substances in time and space. Even in cases where an artefact belongs to a single person in the legal sense of property and ownership, and even if the person has never been near the environment from which the artefact was generated, it could nevertheless be said that the artefact belongs to that landscape and by implication to a much wider circle of people associated with that landscape. And finally, there was also a sense that it was ultimately the environment, together with local skill and knowledge, that made such artefacts possible in the first place - and that they could be made again in this environment, if they got lost or broken. This was emphasized by workshop participants who still live in rural areas where certain materials are readily available and others have become scarce. To them, the idea that all items from collections had to be returned to their place of origin seemed ridiculous when local people could easily replace such items by making them again.

However, it was also noted in this context that in order for people to be able to (re)produce such items, their basic subsistence needs had to be satisfied, a condition that was often not met. As one participant remarked:

"I have all the equipment, I have all the materials needed, but still, if I want to operate, I must have money. Where do I get money?"

The message to collectors here seems clear: Do not send back the bows and arrows or other tools that were made for you in the past, but consider sending money or other support that will enable the artisans to reproduce existing items and to create new and innovative artefacts.

There are also other messages that can be picked up from this discussion. One message is to those who - in contrast to most agents of colonialism - may have acquired items legally and fairly: Even in such cases, ownership does not overrule all other belongings. Artefacts can still be said to belong, in a rather substantive way, to a certain environment and place that has enabled their making. This seems important to emphasize, especially in view of the dominant trend - at least in the older museums in southern Africa - to identify items primarily in terms of their "ethnic belonging". This is a consequence of a colonial set-up with an ethnic divide and rule policy, but also of a historicist ideology that sees items as belonging to clear-cut eras ("traditional", "pre-modern", "pre-industrial", etc.). It also needs to be emphasized in the light of restitution debates, which tend to reduce notions of belonging to property relations. Often, the emphasis is on who owned the item rather than on who (or what) contributed to it, or in what situations such items played a role. A more appropriate description and exhibition practice would seek to include the belongings to place as alluded to above.

There is a final twist to this connection between artefacts and the environments to which they "belong", and that is that artefacts can also create a sense of belonging by implication, just as the absence of items can be detrimental to our sense of belonging. This is quite clear when - in the workshop but also in other contexts - people speak very warmly about some of the artefacts and the ways in which they make them feel at home. It also explains the sense of loss and the emotional demand for the return of some items. It may also explain the repeated call for artefacts to be used to create a sense of belonging by being able to see and touch them, especially for children who have fewer opportunities to experience and

handle local products in their everyday lives when they are expected to attend school, live in a hostel or move away for work. This aspect of the use of artefacts in school education and youth work is a point to which we shall return below. At this point, we would like to emphasize another result of the workshop debates, namely that encountering items "from home" in other parts of the country, or the world at large, can also create a sense of belonging when you are a stranger arriving in these countries. In the words of one San participant:

"My concern is, one day people go, people one day will want to go to Europe and do something [there]. You just want to be familiar with something, with your own, you want to go and see something [familiar]".

The idea of material culture items abroad as "ambassadors" has also been raised in restitution debates, but typically in terms of the function of national heritage abroad as representing the country in question. Here the perspective is slightly different: After all, it is not only items that are mobile but also people. And people may follow the items - and of course, they bring more items with them. The presence of items from Namibia in Germany and other parts of Europe and the world at large may be said to benefit not only the country's international standing but also, very concretely, the lives of those Namibians who move abroad and who seek to establish their own "standing" in a new terrain. The belonging of items to certain places does not necessarily mean that they all need to return to those places, but that they can also provide a sense of connectedness when encountered elsewhere.

3. Ownership and access

The everyday items present at the workshop, and many other similar ones, may resist an easy classification into clear-cut property types. Instead, they are materialized social relations with which diverse ownership and usership practices may be associated. The items differ in terms of the materials they are made from, the relations they have been part of and most likely also with regard to their future trajectories. Two of the artefacts that we included as workshop participants may illustrate this diversity: Bellows for blacksmithing and beadwork for ceremonies. The bellows (see Figures 10 and 11), blacksmithing tools made from oryx horn, game skin and wood, were widely shared among those who were part of the communities of practice that formed around iron processing in northern Namibia (see Widlok 2017: 106, see also Widlok 1999). The beadwork is from the same region, but unlike the bellows, it is to be worn only by specific participants in particular ritual occasions, such as the initiation ceremonies of female San and healing rituals performed by their traditional healers. At the same time, the item was made and given as a gift so that workshop participants (in line with anthropological theory on the gift) underlined that returning that gift could be problematic as it could damage or end a gift-relationship. As such, the two items represent very different property regimes, modes of circulation and social practices. In turn, they raised different questions about appropriate future uses: Is it appropriate to hand over objects that used to be freely shared within a particular group to an individual or an institution that then has privileged access to them? Is it appropriate to return to a larger group what was previously restricted? Is it appropriate to return items that were given as personal gifts when the people involved are no longer alive? Is it appropriate to take out of circulation items that used to be handed on? What could a re-entry of items mean for the social relationships involved, under changed property and access conditions?

Figure 10: Bellows in action in northern Namibia 1991 (Photo: Th. Widlok)

Figure 11: The late Abakub ǁGamǁgaeb making bellows in 1991 (Photo: Th. Widlok)

The beadwork headpiece also provides a good example of how particular items are associated with certain ownership arrangements. As one participant explains, beadwork headpieces similar to the one we had on the table can be held by traditional leaders and may be borrowed by others when needed, but they should not circulate freely between households or communities. In contrast, the guidelines are less rigorous for other items, such as the bellows or ironwork materials mentioned, which do not command comparable delicate handling and caution.[4] Both types of items draw attention to diversely configured, possibly overlapping and differently distributed

[4] However, do note that in other contexts blacksmith items are considered to be special and need to be handled with utmost care by knowledgeable specialists only (for other parts of Africa see Rowlands and Warnier 1993, for ǂAkhoe Haillom blacksmithing Widlok 1999:120-2).

rights: a beadwork headdress that cannot be held and accessed by everyone, and even holding such an item does not mean one can freely sell, gift or otherwise alienate it. That being so, possessing a valued object does not necessarily imply holding the entire bundle of rights for this item including the right to sell or transfer (see Benda-Beckmann et al. 2006, Widlok 2001). One participant in our workshop used a computer office analogy to make this point: Computers (and other heavy office artifacts) often remain in one place but are taken possession of by different groups of users who visit the office. Different people can walk into that office and they can make use of the artefact according to their respective purposes without the item changing its formal status in terms of property. In fact, in English this distinction is marked lexically by calling the temporary use right "possession" and the more long-term and more fundamental rights of use, alienation and disposal "ownership". We also readily distinguish the rights of ownership held by individuals as natural persons and as office holders (neither secretaries, office clerks, nor supervisors are supposed to take computers home with them when they quit their jobs). The example of office equipment with multiple users was included to suggest that artefacts of cultural significance could be handled in a similar way: Owned by an institution but possessed and used by various agents with an interest in the objects. This would prioritise not the static, exclusive and exhaustive power of owners but the dynamic participation in relations that enable the use of an item by multiple people when needed.

More generally, this suggests a dynamic and processual view of property that can connect different parties to one another (things, people, institutions) in open-ended and shifting ways, similar to what anthropologists have found in other parts of the world (see contributions to Strang and Busse 2012). To return to the computer office comparison: Even when objects are woven into the fabric of the institutional everyday - for example, when they are formally owned by educational programs at schools or museums - there may still be a legitimate expectation that they will remain responsive to diverging needs.

This responsiveness is being called for with regard to the specific needs and uses of a particular item and with regard to the specific needs and desires of those who may claim access. In addition, access rules rather than exclusive ownership decisions may be of importance here. Access rules could meet a number of situational needs by allowing someone or a group of users to benefit from a valuable item without facing ownership burdens such as security, storage, and maintenance. Although this adds complexity to property relations, this also opens up new options for hard-to-find but sought-after items, such as the beaded skin apron, which one participant commented on:

"Actually, they need it, because of the cultural groups which are dancing. The problem with our San people - Haillom people, the community members we are working with - the problem is that we cannot access the leather skins. We cannot manage to get them".

The skin apron could become part of a museum collection while continuing to participate in activities outside the museum walls. Institutions like museums would need to make a special effort to balance accessibility and preservation imperatives and may need to define the terms of temporary loan and handling requirements. Even though many curators are rather reluctant in this regard, the loan of artworks from museums takes place in many places around the world.

Accessibility may mean more than having open doors or charging no fees. If potential users are restricted in their ability to move around, the items and the institutions that hold them may need to become more mobile. In contrast to the anchoredness of objects in conventional museums that are usually found in urban centres, "a museum in a container" that moves around could form an alternative. This was suggested and practiced by workshop attendees from the Khwe community in and around Bwabwata National Park - the area where the Khwe Living Museum is

located. This living museum[5] is a part of the Museums Association of Namibia (MAN). MAN includes mobile exhibitions and it offers practical information for schools, museums or other institutions wishing to temporary travelling exhibitions.[6] Such initiatives, together with the above-mentioned "museum in a container", could connect places, people, property, and institutions in a variety of ways and seek to avoid new exclusionary effects. Many workshop participants expressed concern that a transfer of items from one country (Germany) to another (Namibia) might not solve the underlying access problems, as potential users would still face an institution, possibly far away in the capital, that they could not easily reach. If brought back to the African continent, the items would be closer in terms of spatial distance but still out of reach for many community members due to the social distance between individuals and informal groups. This underlines the point that access issues not only exist between continents or nation states, but are often an issue within nation states, between people with a legitimate interest in the items and institutional rules that make access difficult. Mobile museums, ideally run by custodian committees, could become crucial in shifting the focus from ownership to custodianship and access could be critically facilitated.

The emergence of mobile museums also highlights another dimension of accessibility: Although such museums are still curated to varying degrees, they achieve a relative openness of encounter. In this regard, they depart from what could be called the "predictability" or "scriptedness" of traditional museums. In conventional museum settings, everyday items are typically transformed into pieces of heritage intended for preservation rather than for use. Consequently, the objects are protected from the hands of visitors and most curators find it both impracticable or simply unthinkable to allow a museum item to leave the collection, even temporarily. There are exceptions, as we found out when we visited the newly established Museum of Namibian Music in Omuthya, where the local curator would consider lending out items - under certain conditions - to musicians who had an interest in incorporating old music instruments for new music projects.

In sum, questions about accessing items of value concern both the forms of access and their appropriateness and desirability. The ways in which property relations are constituted affect many interconnected social and material aspects of items as they influence questions of what is considered "ownable", by whom, and under what conditions. Human and object biographies are often so intertwined that it is difficult to draw a line between a subject and an object of property relations. This appears to be relevant in the case of traditional healers mentioned above: In some cases, belongings were expected to also cease participating in social life, when the person died ("We're supposed to bury the things together with the owner."). If this is not done, as the participant adds, "the spiritual movement of the thing" could pose a danger to others. There are situations in which objects assume aspects of personality, turn dangerous or become powerful in other ways. In connection with this topic, the discussion at our workshop also touched on the issue of recent religious developments in Namibia. Participants observed that there was an increasing distance from items associated with pre-Christian beliefs and practices:

"Because of the [new Christian] belief, people don't want […] to go together with these things anymore. […] They are avoiding the culture they

[5] See https://www.lcfn.info/khwe. It should be noted though that there are many living museums in Namibia and that they are diverse in terms of their activities, organization and objectives. Correspondingly, the views and experiences of workshop participants regarding living museums also vary considerably. Some expressed dissatisfaction that some living museums placed financial success through tourism above educational goals for the local population. As one San participant put it: "The museums, the living museums, they don't have that love, to offer to schools, even to go to school principals or teachers to offer them that: please, have a time to bring your learners to our living museum."

[6] Information about the mobile exhibition program: https://www.museums.com.na/mobile-exhibitions

have, the materials they have, the things they were using in the past".[7]

The debates around these issues underline that many of the "local communities" (as they are often referred to) are in fact highly diverse and riddled by internal conflict. Not surprisingly, this internal diversity and fragmentation also affect attitudes towards what is considered "appropriate" treatment of items. Outsiders who seek to follow "local attitudes" and recommendations regarding the return of items find themselves confronted with a diversity of views instead of a single unanimous position, a point to which we shall return below when considering the generational divide. ■

[7] After a first wave of Christianization during the colonial period, mainly by missionaries from the established Lutheran, Anglican and Catholic churches, there has recently been an upsurge of more fundamentalist Christian groups.

4. Digital and generational divides

In the workshop, items were presented not only in their material form, but also in a variety of representations (photos and videos). Moreover, many items showed changes in techniques. For instance, fire-making utensils were present not only in the form of fire-making sticks but also as matches, fire-striking tools, industrial lighters, etc. All these fire-making devices were used in parallel in the 1990s. The variety of fire-making devices triggered discussions about innovation, about knowledge and the embodiment of skills and familiarity with one's own surroundings. One participant asked: "What should we be teaching our kids in the coming digitalization times?" The question also drew attention to the relationship between material items, knowledge and digitalization and the role of such items in education. What can be learned and taught with and through material items in the face of ongoing changes? Similar arguments were also voiced with regard to musical instruments, including pluriarchs and musical bows, which were represented in the workshop. Regarding the possible future of such instruments, it was pointed out that "if you take it to the museum, it's there, but they are not using it". It was argued that schools might be a better destination for such items, as they can keep these instruments in use, that is, they can enable more than only visual engagement with the item. Others suggested that a school library could be a suitable place to hold such items because "knowledge is not just about books, it's also about these kinds of belongings". Knowledge and skill here are about the making of items, but also their skilful use, and ideally, the item should be accompanied by audio-visual documentation of the making and playing of the instrument.The value and importance of the intangible aspects of physical items were repeatedly emphasized during the workshop. It was argued that: "Information is the key aspect". Potential recipients, custodians and holders of objects would have to find people who had the relevant information if they did not have it themselves. Another item that attracted attention during the discussion was an animal trap made of wire. The accompanying information provided pointed out that the trap was used by both men and women to catch small animals. As one participant explained, it was precisely this information that made the wire trap interesting and rendered it important, as it undermined stereotypes about the gendered division of hunting and gathering activities. In other words, the value of items returned or made available to communities depends largely on "written background about that thing" and images showing how an item was being used.

This perspective is increasingly being implemented in newer museums, such as the Museum of Namibian Fashion in Otjiwarongo and the Museum of Namibian Music in Omuthiya. In both museums, physical items increasingly share space and interact with digital representations and with background information (sometimes only indirectly presented in the form of QR codes that visitors can scan). There is a growing awareness that it is not only, or primarily, access to physical items that is needed, but also to the intangible forms of knowledge attached to them. In the words of a researcher from the University of Namibia:

"Sometimes we really want to research about a certain practice here in Namibia, but there are collections in Finland, big collections that are just about that [practice]".

In such instances, digitized information can facilitate the flow of virtual items through space and increase the opportunities for connecting people through items, and more generally, for enriching the practices in question.

It was also noted that the physical proximity to artefacts does not automatically mean that they are easy to engage with. One participant suggested that augmenting the material presence of items with multimodal media could make a crucial difference, also in terms of access and

keeping skills and knowledge alive. At the workshop, this was exemplified with regard to musical instruments, but the point applies more generally. Audio-visual recordings of instruments "in action" are now freely accessible online through a depository for endangered languages and cultures.[8]

At the same time, it is important not to disregard the existence and consequences of the digital divide that still exists. While there is increasingly good internet connectivity in many countries of the Global South, including Namibia, access to the internet is by no means evenly distributed within these countries. And even where the technology and money to get access are available, actually finding relevant data about items requires knowledge that is not easily accessible. A necessary first step is always the creation of metadata about collections and archives. As representatives of the Namibia Museums Association pointed out, this metadata is crucial. Access to information about what exists in depositories outside one's own country is a prerequisite before demands for repatriation can be meaningfully made.

It was also underlined that after a period in which many activists demanded the wholesale return of objects, this has given way to a more nuanced response in which Namibian institutions and communities are likely to make very selective demands after being given the opportunity to see what is kept in various places and where there may be local gaps. In these contexts, metadata acts like a signpost in large digital data worlds. It makes items traceable and therefore accessible and potentially claimable. It puts potential recipients in the driver's seat of the process, without overburdening them by unsolicited and unwanted returns initiated by current owners seeking to return objects.[9]

The belongings presented in our workshop, whether in material or digital form, made many of our participants remember their personal interactions with these or similar items. In a very basic sense, the mere presence of the items connected people through shared memories and stories. The items stimulated them to tell where they had seen them, what they were called in their various home communities, how they were used and for what purpose. For instance, the *'xaraxaras'* (friction bow, see Figure 6) triggered such a discussion: One participant pointed out that he knew a similar instrument under a different name, which was used when there was a lot of food as a result of a successful hunt and the group was well taken care of. Another participant reported that in his group, people used the *'xaraxaras'* when major life events happened, such as the birth of a child. However, both noted that the use of this instrument has become rare nowadays.

The loss of this musical tradition was not the only example of a much larger issue discussed during the workshop: the lost significance of traditions for the younger generation and the inevitable loss of knowledge in exchange for the "European" way, as one participant put it. This "European" way mainly included the reliance on industrial technologies and the dependence on imported goods from other countries, which had often replaced the reliance on ancestral knowledge and on regional production. The ensuing debate on

[8] See https://dobes.mpi.nl/projects/akhoe/; Access to this data repository is free to all users who agree to a code of conduct (against piracy or misuse of contents). While the technical accessibility is becoming easier with improved internet infrastructure and the proliferation of mobile phones and other internet-ready gadgets, there are still issues to be resolved. In the past, many archives required a lengthy clearance process, often because archivists (or researchers and communities) feared that materials would be misused. This danger still exists, but it needs to be balanced with easy accessibility. As a consequence, many digital archives in the humanities have shifted from a restricted access default to an open access default. In other words, access should only be restricted when there are good reasons to protect particular audio or video files. If no individual or community seeks such special protection, the audio-visual material - in this case the music of the Haillom San - becomes freely accessible. It is hoped that this default accessibility will not only make it easier to re-connect people with objects, but also to connect people through objects.

[9] Another important implication of digitizing collections is the preservation of items over time: With material objects there is often a default assumption that these objects will deteriorate in the course of being used, so that only placing them in closed collections can prevent this. With digital access to objects, however, this "problem" is no longer a major issue. Multiple and prolonged use of digital items does not cause them to deteriorate. On the contrary, making these items known by using them in multiple contexts can pool and increase knowledge and interest, and can lead to the activation of objects in multiple contexts and for many new and unprecedented encounters.

this point was especially productive, as it raised a number of concerns about current transformations and crises, including climate change, pandemics and other changes that could have a major impact on local lives. The recent COVID-19 pandemic was still fresh in people's minds. However, it was not only global crises that played a role in this discussion. There was also a sense of loss that was not necessarily imposed from the outside. The sense of the young generation of being cut off from their roots and from the knowledge of previous generations was also mentioned. Many young people feel caught between their traditional ways and the "modern" ways. For instance, many San people feel pressured by their peers at school not to wear beanies (see Figure 12), which were worn by most San adults only a few decades ago. Whatever their origins (probably missionary efforts to introduce what they considered appropriate standards of clothing), the beanie had become an ethnic marker for the San. As a result, many young San people today no longer want to wear it, as others may exclude and stigmatize them in school and in other social spaces. This opens up a whole new sphere of discrimination into which belongings and traditions enter. On the one hand, there is the importance of local knowledge and practices for feeling "rooted", and, on the other hand, there are many post-colonial opportunities that young people want to enjoy and explore. How could the influences and stigmata that make certain practices and relations to objects problematic be broken down in favour of keeping these items in the active repertoire?

Figure 12: Beanie worn by the late !Gamekhas !Nabaris in 1991 (Photo: Th. Widlok)

One idea proposed at the workshop was the creation of games or sports to reintroduce the items (and the knowledge connected to them) to new generations in a playful way. Introducing items into new contexts, allowing a certain distance - while not erasing them from memory and use - could allow the knowledge to endure over time without being confined to a limiting set of "traditional uses". The conversations around these questions were not just about the practical issues of connecting generations through material items. They also raised some fundamental issues, including the question: "What is actually traditional?" This discussion was sparked by an example that one of our workshop participants brought up in the plenary. She talked about the traditional necklace she wanted for the *efundula* initiation ritual, which is currently being revived. Yet, when she commissioned her necklace, she was told that - contrary to her expectations - the necklace was not exclusively locally made but was a typical example of an item of regional trade that stood for the interaction across groups, not only within Namibia but also across the border in Angola.

Another aspect of the problematic notion of "traditional" has already been alluded to above: Frequently, we find the use of new materials to replace earlier ones that are today harder to access. For example, the dance rattles mentioned above, which used to be made with cocoons but are now usually found to be made with beer-bottle tops, are still part of the "traditional" practice of healing dances. New materials, therefore, do not necessarily imply a loss of knowledge and tradition, but may simply be an adaptation to the current world. Instead of clinging to the well-known materials, which could in fact make it more difficult to uphold a practice today, the practice is allowed to be continued through change and alteration. Of course, this way of adaptation does not work in all cases of belongings we talked about, but it indicates that a quick and ready distinction between "traditional" and "non-traditional" may be tempting but also very much misleading.

In sum, many of the debates about the use of objects from collections were linked to much wider debates about the relation between generations, but also about attitudes to processes of change and of social inclusion and exclusion.

The loss of knowledge and traditions was a concern not only for the older participants of the workshop but also for the younger ones. And for everyone dealing with these objects, it also epitomized the problems and dilemmas that come with large-scale transformation and with attempts to maintain knowledge by the younger generation in the face of ongoing change. ■

5. Conclusions

The initial impetus for developing a new perspective on material culture by holding a joint workshop in Namibia was that it might be possible to generate recommendations. In light of the prominent restitution debate, recommendations may be needed to help research partners from Europe and from the Global South to deal with the collections of items currently held by researchers or academic institutions. As pointed out at the onset of this article, the items we are dealing with are in many ways very different from the stolen artworks or the highly symbolic items that are at the focus of repatriation debates and provenance research. This difference opens up new spaces for interaction, but it also poses new questions. The hundreds of knives from northern Namibia that we find in collections inside and outside the country are not the subject of repatriation claims and - as our discussions at the workshop underline - it is highly unlikely that there will be a call for a wholesale return of these items. Nevertheless, these items connect people across continents, but also potentially across generations and many group boundaries. They can therefore serve many possible functions as they continue their social lives as things. Many of them are held by academics in an attempt to preserve knowledge and to transfer it to students, but also to the public at large. At the same time, not only the items but also the contexts in which the items were made and subsequently changed hands are highly diverse. We conclude, therefore, that it would be somewhat presumptuous to formulate recommendations that could be applied across diverse contexts. Nevertheless, we think that the sample of items presented here allows us to propose some cautious conclusions that may be applicable to other situations, countries and contexts. Far from being prescriptions, we think that the material items can help us to get a conversation going, or - where this conversation has already started - to fruitfully develop it further.

The first lesson we have learned may not be altogether new, but it is still worthwhile emphasizing: The expectation that every item we may come across in a collection should correspond to one clearly demarcated group, defined as an ethnic group or otherwise, is misleading. The knife with which this article began is a particularly striking example, but in fact, it is in the very nature of material and mobile objects that they connect people. Passed on from one person to another, they typically create bridges between ethnic and generational groups, between those who have certain skills and resources and those who do not, but would like to benefit from them. It is true that in this process, certain items may become closely associated as belongings, as belonging to a particular place or group of people. But this process of making them belong is itself a social practice of inclusion and exclusion. We may experience items as belonging somewhere or to someone in particular, but items also have the power to create belonging, to create a sense of belonging together, and of belonging to a certain place. In this sense, we are not dealing with the distribution of things on a patchwork carpet of pre-existing groups, but rather we see processes of group formation and of material culture transmission as tightly intertwined. We therefore encourage researchers and their counterparts not to shy away from material culture as a problematic issue that is likely to stir conflicts and create headaches, but rather to see those items as vehicles that allow us to maintain, forge, and understand our social relationships.

The second lesson to be learned is that, despite the typical presentation of items as isolated and inventoried, these items do carry connections with them. They connect to each other and to people indirectly through their intrinsic connections to particular landscapes and environments. This is primarily because they are items made from natural materials that are found or grow in certain places. Wooden items are a case in point, in that they are, in a sense, not only taken from the environment, but materially constitute a part of that environment and of particular places. They share the texture, smell, haptic and other properties of raw materials

characterized by certain affordances (see Ingold 2000: 166-8 for further explanations). They "invite" humans to use them in particular ways, and disinvite certain other uses. Often, they have been part of a living organism. But even as "inanimate" things (e.g. stones), they do form part of a living ecological system, and life would be different without them. While transfers and transactions may alter "belongings" in the sense of property rights, they do not eradicate these material "belongings" to place and to the more-than-human to which they remain connected. This connection to landscape and place deserves attention even when legal property issues have been sorted out or seem unproblematic.

The third lesson, linked to what has just been sketched as the connections between items and place, emphasizes the human ingenuity of transforming items - again and again. This transformation achieved not only by working on these items (cutting, grinding, colouring, connecting them, etc.), but also by transferring these items. Even when items continue to belong to a certain place materially, they are often made to move and not to return to their place of origin. Many participants in our workshop were very clear about this: If researchers in Europe value these items and the culture they represent, they argued, there is no reason why appreciated items should automatically be returned. Rather, the collected items could serve as cultural ambassadors elsewhere. When being sold, they could also have economic value in enabling the communities that originally made them to continue to develop their skills and to remain part of extended networks of exchange. Practically, this may even translate into selling items on the market and returning the funds to entice further engagements. By "singularizing" items into museum objects, we sometimes forget that they were part and parcel of economic exchanges of various kinds, and that the rigid divide between an exchange realm and a singularized realm of objects that remain in collections forever needs to be questioned. Returning gifted items can be insulting and sever a relationship. For continuing a living tradition and for developing an existing relation, a return of the objects may be less desirable than other (including financial) returns to those with whom we are connected through exchange items.

This brings us to a fourth lesson, which is very much about the underlying property regimes. It is important not only to distinguish possession (holding things) from property (owning things), but also to understand the particular bundle of rights that constitute "property" at any given moment (see Benda-Beckmann et al. 2006). People and institutions may have rights to enjoy and use items, but not necessarily the right to alienate (sell) or destroy them. We know that there are limitations to property rights when it comes to national treasures, which may neither be sold nor taken out of the country, or when it comes to living beings (owning an animal does not give you the right to do whatever you like with it). But we still need to realize that even everyday items, such as those discussed in this article, may be constituted by rights that can and are bundled in various ways over time.

One of the important consequences of the notion of "bundle of rights" is that we take it to be the normal state of affairs that there are overlapping or complementary rights held by several agents with regard to a single item. And, again, the message is that items can connect people - as well as institutions - due to the very basic fact that each one of them may hold a specific right but no-one may own all of these rights. Here we are misled by the current consumer culture in which we, as market agents, typically consider ourselves as purchasing all rights in an item that we may consume as we see fit. However, comparatively speaking and as soon as we leave the confines of an idealized market space, the opposite is the rule: All of the items discussed in this article can potentially have a link to many more than just one person or institution. This is also due to the fact that we are not only dealing with materialized items, but that each item also exists as a media representation, at least as a photo or constituted by other media, such as audio and video files. Moreover, each item comes with a multiplicity of stories attached - some known, others yet to be discovered, and stories in

the making. Often, our collections in museums and other institutions only insufficiently recognize this plurality. New forms of dealing with this plurality of rights are being called for. The emergence of "custodian committees" among San in Namibia is pointing in that direction. It is clear from our discussions that it is much more likely that potential owners will make very selective claims to some of the property rights attached to items, rather than asking for a wholesale return of these items. Negotiating and synchronizing these demands may still be an intricate issue, but potentially this awareness of multiple ownership and property rights also shifts our attention and resources in a more productive direction.

The fifth lesson we would like to highlight brings us back to the distinction between the repatriation of celebrated artefacts at the national level and the everyday items that have featured in our discussions. It is not that these everyday items could never become important in certain contexts, but rather that the international diplomatic repatriation initiatives are exactly that, they deal with relations between nations or between continents, in our case Europe and Africa. By contrast, the main function that many people see in the more mundane material culture is its potential to build bridges between generations, or more generally between young and old, but also between people of different parts within one country, between the urban and the rural, and between those with digital access and those without. Social change becomes visible in the change of material culture. We have many examples of items that stand for successful transformations, bringing in new industrial materials that enable the continuity of making certain items (new rattles using bottle tops, etc.). But in many cases, the items are no longer being made so that the reintroduction of artefacts that were in the care of researchers is seen as an opportunity to reinvigorate certain practices and help the younger generation to connect to what is glossed as "cultural heritage". Many young participants felt cut off from this heritage, but also did not want to be confined to it. Responses to the questions of where things should be kept were often discussed as a balancing act between allowing local access while tapping into wider networks. National museums and associations in Namibia (just as in many countries in southern Africa) can serve as entry points for local initiatives, but they can also be experienced as blocking the flow. Indigenous minorities, such as the San groups in particular, are known for their bottom-up social organization and concern with local issues, but they are also increasingly recognizing the importance of national and international links. The collections of material culture that many researchers have compiled over time could play a double role. They could be of relevance for local groups connected to the original producers, but they could potentially also go a long way by connecting these groups with institutions abroad and overseas - through their material culture. ■

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