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Inconvenient Missionary Legacies in the Contemporary World and Museums: An Inquiry into the Rise and Fall of the Wereldmuseum Berg en Dal

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Abstract

This article addresses the recent conflict in the Netherlands between a national ethnographic museum, the Wereldmuseum Berg en Dal (formerly Afrika Museum), and a Catholic congregation, the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, both of which legally own half of the museum's collection. The case highlights the challenging situations faced by ethnographic museums with missionary legacies in the Netherlands over the past few decades. This article critically examines not only the handling of the conflict between the Wereldmuseum and the Spiritan fathers based on current legal frameworks and museum policies, but also the motives behind their initial collaboration. Finally, it proposes alternative practices for a more ethical approach to African heritage, contributing to debates about museum reconfiguration and ethical restitution.

Keywords: mission museum; African art; decolonisation; ethical restitution

1. Introduction

On 24 April 2024, the fathers of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit sued the Wereldmuseum Berg en Dal, a branch museum of the Stichting Nationaal Museum Wereldculturen (National Museum of World Cultures Foundation, NMVW) in the Netherlands.

Unlike the three other branch museums of the NMVW, the Wereldmuseum Berg en Dal rented its building and land from the former Afrika Museum, which was run by a Catholic missionary order—the Congregation of the Holy Spirit. The Congregation terminated the lease in 2020, leading to the museum's closure in November 2023, However, disagreements between the NMVW and the Spiritan fathers had persisted throughout their collaboration since the 2014 merger. In particular, the fathers condemned the NMVW's lack of maintenance of the historical museum buildings and the renovation of the museum's interior without the congregation's permission, which, as they claimed, demonstrates the NMVW's neglect of the congregation's heritage, as the fathers had built the entire architectural complex (De Jong 2023). The conflict also concerns the ownership of the permanent collection—both the fathers and the NMVW claimed ownership of the collection, which included more than 8000 objects collected by Spiritan missionaries in various regions of Africa since the late nineteenth century. According to the Congregation, while the initial collaboration was based on the condition that the Afrika Museum retains its own distinctive profile with exhibitions curated around its African collection, the museum is now used by the NMVW to recirculate exhibitions from other branch museums that are unrelated to Africa, and the government funding originally belonging to the Afrika Museum is now

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received by the NMVW. These unresolved conflicts eventually led to the lawsuit initiated by the Congregation. In need of funds for pensions and housing, the fathers decided to terminate the lease so they could sell the buildings and land to secure their retirement. They sold two of the most valuable African sculptures in their collection in 2020 to private collectors for a remarkably high price of 8.7 million euros in total (Van Dijk-Kroesbergen 2023; Van Santen 2023). This situation shocked and saddened many people both within and outside the museum world, given the Afrika Museum's prestige and longstanding presence (NOS Nieuws 2023).

While the conflict appears to centre on disputes over funding, collection ownership, and management methods between a public museum and a religious organisation, the incident reflects deeper issues within our current approaches to African cultural objects and restitution-related matters in a Dutch context, which are elaborated in the following sections.

It is first necessary to give a brief clarification of the term "restitution", which has been used interchangeably with "repatriation" in different contexts. In the case of the Netherlands, following the trend of deaccessioning problematic collections in various Western museums, such as French President Emmanuel Macron's promise to return looted African artefacts in 2017, the NMVW published "Return of Cultural objects: Principles and Process" in 2019, in which it refers restitution to "the transfer of stolen material in the strict sense", and repatriation as "the transfer of material ascribed to a particular cultural patrimony". The term "return" is adopted in the guideline to encompass transfers implied by both restitution and repatriation (Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen 2019). The Dutch cultural expert Jos van Beurden, however, used "repatriation" to specifically refer to the return of human remains (Van Beurden 2024). In a 2020 government report presented to the Dutch Minister of Education, Culture and Science (OCW), restitution is more broadly used in cases of "unlawful loss of possession combined with a specific requester", while repatriation refers to "claims by indigenous communities", which suggests that restitution may include repatriation (Raad voor Cultuur 2020). Nevertheless, both terms point to the legal transfer of physical objects. Through the controversy between the NMVW and the Spiritan fathers, the following sections will present how laws may fall short when it comes to non-Western artefacts not subject to the demands for return, as well as those that were collected and are still legally owned by the clergy. An expanded concept of restitution is therefore necessary in order to achieve a more ethical approach toward the African cultural objects featured in this article.

The current call for return in the Netherlands goes hand-in-hand with Dutch museums' agenda of decolonising collections. The 2020 report defines "colonial collection" as those acquired in a colonial context—specifically, between the seventeenth and the late twentieth centuries when the Netherlands had trading posts and colonies in various regions, for the unequal power balance at that time makes it hard to distinguish between "voluntary and involuntary loss of possession" (Raad voor Cultuur 2020, p. 30). To "decolonise" these collections, the report suggests that the first step is to recognise the injustice done to the indigenous population through provenance research, and then to express "a readiness to rectify this historical injustice" (Raad voor Cultuur 2020, p. 9). In other words, the recognition of structural injustice is built into the very definition of "decolonising" collections, according to the Dutch report. This is especially crucial for mission museums in the West, for some of them have not been engaged enough in examining their foundation due to the complex entanglement between paternalism and imperialism in the museums' histories. By analysing the historical developments of the Afrika Museum that was initially established as a mission museum, the following sections will propose how to "decolonise" a museum burdened with missionary legacies, rather than treating decolonisation as a metaphor or synonym for diversity and inclusion (Tuck and Yang 2012, p. 1; Mendoza 2024, p. 3).

This article examines how the current conflict between the NMVW and the Spiritan fathers exemplifies the challenges that some Dutch cultural institutions face today in implementing the call for decolonising their collections. By tracing the historical development of the institutions involved and drawing on extensive information from Dutch news articles, museum websites, lawsuit reports addressing this conflict, and email correspondences with stakeholders, this article aims to investigate the deeper stimuli behind the conflict and suggest alternative modes of engaging with "inconvenient" non-Western cultural heritage collections in contemporary society, especially those that remain legally owned by religious organisations and imbued with missionary legacies.

2. The Afrika Museum Berg en Dal: An Atypical Mission Museum

The Wereldmuseum Berg en Dal was formerly the Afrika Museum. It was established as a mission museum by the fathers of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit in 1954, located in the small village of Berg en Dal near Nijmegen.

The entanglement between mission museums and colonial ethnography is complex and can be dated to their origins. Mission museums and ethnographic museums of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries shared colonial vocabularies when describing the locals, viewing them as "savage", "cruel" and "superstitious" in need of "civilising missions" from the West (Corbey and Weener 2015). The display of non-Western objects usually followed evolutionist hierarchies, organised from "high" to "low" culture. Moreover, it was common for public ethnographic museums at that time to not only acquire objects through missionaries, but also borrow missionary terminologies, referring to indigenous rituals and beliefs as "idolatry". Christian moral frameworks and colonial ideologies thus pervaded museum narratives implicitly, some of which are no longer acceptable in today's context.

The various presentational tools the Afrika Museum adopted throughout its history were thus inevitably influenced by contemporary colonial sentiments and imaginations, especially at its earlier stages. The post-1958 emphasis on African art at the museum explicitly adopted a Catholic spiritual message by incorporating missionary colonial ethnography, a trend that persisted until around 2010 (Pels 2025). This fusion of religious and colonial perspectives is perhaps most evident in the establishment of the highly controversial replica African residences, which formed the "Outdoor Museum" at the Afrika Museum and remain today. This "African village", constructed between 1958 and 1959, features mimetic huts from Cameroon, Congo, and Tanganyika. They were built based on colonial ideas about African people with the intention to convey a sense of primitivity and childish naivete. At the opening of the African village on 6 June 1959, a group of Dutch boys had their faces painted black to mimic African people, which was a common performance in Dutch Catholicism on occasions like the Holy Childhood (Pels 2023, pp. 203–4).

What differentiated the Afrika Museum from the other mission museums in the Netherlands at that time was that, while the Afrika Museum was imbued with missionary narratives at its foundation (e.g., how missionaries struggled against superstition and how traditional African "fetishes" held people in fear), the professionalisation and secularisation of the museum were also slowly taking place, marked by the establishment of the Museum Foundation in 1956, among which only two out of five members of the board were from the Congregation (Pels 2023, p. 192). There were even concerns at that time from some fathers, such as Father Adriaan Hertsig, who worried that they were deviating too far from the traditional missionary narratives and values. While guest curator Azu Nwagbogu praised the Wereldmuseum Berg en Dal for collecting the works of diasporic African artists, it may come as a surprise to many that the practice of collecting modern and contemporary African art already began with the Spiritan missionaries in the early twentieth century. It

was exceptional in the Netherlands, where the majority of postcolonial African art was collected much later.

Unlike other mission museums such as the now closed Afrika Centrum Cadier en Kier, the material agency of the objects played an unprecedented role in the curatorial strategies of the Afrika Museum. In its history, several directors, such as Father Gerard Pubben and Ineke Eisenburger, decided to let the artefacts' inherent artistic qualities and spiritual power attract and amaze visitors, rather than missionary stories about the "fearful" customs and mysteries of people from the so-called "dark" continent (Pels 2023, p. 211). As early as the 1970s, the museum already branded itself as "a museum of African art" with a focus on aesthetics, rather than a traditional ethnographic museum. The former curator, Hans Witte, even went as far as to claim that "African religions" is a "common denominator" of "African art" (Witte 1975, p. 41; Grootaers et al. 2002, p. 175). Indeed, this focus on aesthetics and spirituality persisted through the exhibitions curated in the early 2000s. For instance, the museum advertised its 2009 exhibition *Roots and More* as "a first in both the Netherlands and Europe" that "focused on the spiritual wealth that Africa has offered and continues to offer the Western world" (Afrika Museum 2009). Some museum experts at that time questioned why politically and socially relevant content was not addressed at this museum, or whether the spiritual inclination as highlighted in the exhibitions can be representative of African diaspora art (Faber 2011, p. 89). That was primarily a result of the leadership of Maria van Gaal and Ineke Eisenburger, who insisted on focusing on the religious perspective of the Afrika Museum rather than engaging with the political aspects, except when "mediated by African mentality and modes of thought" (Pels 2023, p. 208). Even before the closure of Wereldmuseum Berg en Dal in 2023, the permanent exhibition on the first floor was still "Religion and Society", which recalled the spiritual approach of the Afrika Museum between 1958 and 2010 (Pels 2025).

3. From Mission Museum to "World Museum": A Strategic Reconfiguration

In 2014, the Afrika Museum merged with two other ethnographic museums in the Netherlands: The Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam and the Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden. The Wereldmuseum Rotterdam joined the coalition in 2017. The three museums were then managed by the newly established National Museum of World Cultures Foundation (NMVW), the coalition of which was joined by the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam in 2017. In October 2023, the four institutions changed their names to "Wereldmuseum" (World Museum) with a shared mission of inspiring global citizenship.

The emergence and renaming of the Wereldmuseum in the Netherlands and its renaming were not isolated phenomena, but rather part of a broader early twenty-first-century trend in Western countries of converting traditional ethnographic museums into world culture museums as a form of institutional reconfiguration. Examples include the Världskulturmuseerna in Stockholm, the Weltmuseum Wien, and the Museu Etnològic i de Cultures del Món in Barcelona (Lagerkvist 2008, p. 61; Harding 2020, p. 330). This concept of "world culture museums" or "world museums" differed from "universal museums", the latter of which first appeared in the 2002 *Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums* signed by several major Western museums, labelling themselves as "universal". Nevertheless, this earlier declaration was criticised for claiming that cultural heritage belongs to all mankind and should be stored in trusted institutions, which sounds to many like a self-validation of the involved Western ethnographic museums for keeping non-Western cultural items (Abungu 2008, p. 130).

As pointed out by anthropologist Peter Pels and the current director of the Dutch Wereldmuseum, Marieke van Bommel, the goal behind the name "world museum" was mainly to "let go" and "unlearn" the previous Eurocentric perspective and the colonial-

ist emphasis on geography-thought-from-Europe (Pels 2025; Wereldmuseum 2023). It is, however, concerning that the adoption of the "world" label for many ethnographic museums in the West seems to be motivated first and foremost by financial constraints, rather than representing an entirely genuine drive towards a de-hierarchised curation of global cultures. As Sharon Macdonald observes, museum multiculturalism in multi-ethnic Europe has become a new survival strategy over the past decade (Macdonald 2016, p. 10). The lack of financial support partially stemmed from the decreasing public interest in museums presenting non-Western cultural heritage, which had more to do with the increasing antagonism towards traditional Eurocentric narratives in such museums, rather than a general decline in interest in foreign artefacts. In addition, without a thorough "rebranding", those traditional ethnographic museums were losing government funding as well, which viewed them as not worthy of investment. As a result, traditional ethnographic museums in Europe could easily fall into a vicious circle of deterioration and eventually collapse. This was precisely the case for the Netherlands, as the initial merger and the reconstitution of the Wereldmuseum were chiefly driven by the financial collapse of the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam, which compelled it to seek partnerships with other ethnographic museums (Caradonna 2022, p. 60). In 2012, a severe budget cut occurred in the museum sector, which was particularly detrimental to small, ethnographic museums. The Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs decided to terminate funding for the KIT Royal Tropical Institute, the owner of the Tropenmuseum. To survive, the Tropenmuseum initiated a merger in 2014 with two other ethnographic museums that were also affected by budget cuts: the Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden and the Afrika Museum in Berg en Dal. The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science approved the merger and granted them new subsidies, primarily since the new cultural policy *Ontgrenzen en Verbinden* published in 2013 encouraged collaboration between museums (Vulkers 2019, p. 3).

When it comes to the mimetic African huts discussed above, beyond the curatorial modalities adopted from colonial ethnography, the construction of these huts also incorporated a secular, capitalist strategy of attracting visitors by creating spectacles. The material presence of these huts was designed to provide an immersive experience of otherness, which aligned with the museum's advertisement at the time: "Africa is not so far as you think—it lies close to Nijmegen (Pels 2023, pp. 124, 203)." Not only were the mimicked African huts built in a form reminiscent of recreational theme parks, but also many artefacts were deliberately exhibited in a way to generate a sense of curiosity and wonder. Moreover, in the process of collecting objects, a secular market relationship was formed between the Spiritan missionaries and the local Africans. A "call-for-objects" list published in the missionary periodical *Ons orgaan 32* (Congregation of the Holy Spirit 1954, p. 17) reveals that five categories of objects were requested to be collected, including stuffed animals, musical instruments, everyday utensils, things that are related to "superstitious customs, sorcery, and fetish worship", and wickerwork and carvings to be sold to museum visitors as souvenirs. The last category is interesting, for the list also mentions that the donors would acquire 60 percent of the sale (Pels 2023, p. 190). It is therefore clear that part of the museum collections was specially commissioned and even served as museum souvenirs to produce revenue. Another important source of exhibits was past missionary exhibitions, such as the 1925 Pontifical Missionary Exposition in Vatican. When these short-termed, travelling exhibitions ended, objects featured in them were no longer in use, which were then brought and stored in the Afrika Museum. This proposal of opening a mission museum turned out to be very successful—three months after the museum's opening on 16 May 1954, it had already attracted a total of 2500 visitors.

4. Differing Visions

Having merged to overcome financial difficulties in 2014, the fathers from the Congregation of the Holy Spirit found themselves and their missionary legacies completely marginalised by the National Museum of World Cultures Foundation (NMVW) (Verdonschot 2024). They could not understand why the Foundation dismissed their original museum staff and did not give them access to the museum building anymore after the merger, especially since it was initially agreed to be a "collaboration". They could not understand why their government subsidies, initially intended for the Afrika Museum, were now being received by the NMVW. The fathers thus requested to maintain a distinctive profile. They were not alone in this—according to Stijn Schoonderwoerd, the first director of the NMVW between 2014 and 2021, the other two branch museums in Amsterdam and Leiden also asked to retain their distinctive contents, to avoid having their subsidies cut by the Dutch Council for Culture as a result of their merger into one organisation (Van Santen 2023). Mirjam Hoijtink, former Head of Research and Collection at the Wereldmuseum, also revealed the current difficulty of securing funding as individual branch museums, since the four institutions now share one name and are often mistaken for a single museum (Hoijtink 2024). Nevertheless, keeping a unique profile means having to organise different exhibitions in each Wereldmuseum, which would cost even more for the NMVW. Faced with this financial constraint, the Foundation decided to recirculate exhibitions in different locations. For instance, one exhibition, titled *Healing Power* and on display between October 2022 and May 2023 at Wereldmuseum Berg en Dal, had already been exhibited in Leiden and Amsterdam in 2019 and 2021, respectively. This vastly irritated the fathers.

Beyond the struggle for funding, another crucial reason that the NMVW excluded the fathers was that they were not museum professionals. In the Dutch museum world, associations with religious congregations in state-owned museums can appear unprofessional to a broad audience and in conflict with contemporary museology. Indeed, the fathers were not pursuing as "aggressively" decolonial an approach as the NMVW—as phrased by Guido Gryseels, former director of the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren. The reason why the fathers clung so tightly to, for instance, those problematic mimetic huts was partly because they equated the historic architecture with the Congregation's Catholic heritage. Nevertheless, heritage is not simply passed down from the past; rather, it is shaped through processes of selection and deselection, often influenced by political or aesthetic agendas—in this case, a spiritual one (Meyer and De Witte 2013, p. 276). It would have been beneficial for both parties during the earlier collaboration if the fathers had realised that many legacies of the former Afrika Museum were not necessarily the congregation's heritage. Instead, they were a popular strategy in display and museum management, influenced by capitalism and colonial ethnography, which inspired, for instance, the construction of the mimetic huts during the mid-1900s as a marketing tactic at the time.

Of course, the Congregation's previous efforts in modernising the museum should not be entirely disregarded (Van Santen 2023). Verdonschot emphasised that the Congregation "has always been, and still is, in favour of bringing in the contemporary context" even before the collaboration with the NMVW (Verdonschot 2024). It is just that, the Wereldmuseum is way more "radical" in comparison. The Wereldmuseum in the Netherlands, just like many other world culture museums that emerged in the twenty-first century, focuses more on the social-political function of exhibitions in bridging contacts between Western and non-Western communities. Ever since its establishment, the Wereldmuseum aims to "become a museum about people, inspire an open view of the world, and contribute to world citizenship" (Wereldmuseum Amsterdam n.d.). By stimulating conversations between Western and non-Western groups through exhibitions and various interactive

programmes, the museum aims to educate Western communities and audiences about other cultures and help non-Western communities feel more at ease in Western society by valuing their heritage. In short, in contrast to the Afrika Museum's focus on the inherent qualities of objects, the Wereldmuseum identifies itself as a "museum about people," using objects to showcase the plurality of human cultures and advocate for the equal treatment of all (Wereldmuseum Amsterdam n.d.). This orientation paralleled the increasing focus on issues of multiculturalism and immigration in Dutch society and the cultural policy discourse in the 2010s, as exemplified by the establishment of the Cultural Diversity Code in 2011 (Caradonna 2022, p. 67).

The cause of the conflict, therefore, extends beyond a simplistic postcolonial-progressive versus religious-conservative dichotomy—it was more a matter of differing visions. The former Afrika Museum was not that "stereotypical" as worded by the NMVW, for the staff also put effort into modernising the museum, as shown above (Van Santen 2023).

5. Conflict Continues

On 18 December 2024, to many people's surprise, the judges decided that the Congregation possessed ownership of the disputed part of the African collection, and the National Museum of World Cultures Foundation should return archives and artefacts it had previously loaned from the Congregation and pay the fees for the lawsuit. Legally speaking, the Spiritan fathers gained the full right to dispose of the collection at their will. They were planning to set up a new "Afrika Museum", yet the exact date and location are unknown. The NMVW, having lost a branch museum in Berg en Dal, has initiated a "WereldLab" in Nijmegen, a conceptual museum without a collection, a fixed location, or permanent displays, serving as a platform for events that foster social connections. While the press has stopped paying attention to the conflict or its aftereffects after the ruling in the lawsuit, the future of the African collection remains concerning, especially since this conflict has reflected that our current approach towards non-Western cultural heritage is still largely law based.

In this conflict between the NMVW and the Spiritan fathers, the commodification and sale of the valuable African sculptures involved are legally permitted, though it does not feel legitimate to many museum professionals. Even staff from the former Afrika Museum had openly opposed the sale of objects from the museum collection. Just as Grootaers et al. point out, disposal should not be used to solve problems regarding collection conservation and management. (Grootaers et al. 2002, p. 150). While the NMVW criticised the fathers for the sale, claiming that "selling objects from Africa on the market is just unthinkable for us", the selling of non-Western museum collections was not unprecedented among smaller Dutch ethnographic museums. When financial problems arise, selling collections has often been the go-to solution. Moreover, financial situations also influenced how these museums rebrand their profiles by reconfiguring the composition of their collections. In 2012, the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam announced that it would get rid of its African collection, which contained around 9494 objects, by selling them on the private market, and shift its focus to Asia. They saw this pivot towards Asia as a way to establish new partnerships and thus reduce their dependence on government funding (Frank 2012, p. 6; Frank 2013, p. 38). Fortunately, the intended sale raised strong public opposition and was terminated, and this incident stimulated the publication of the new heritage law by the Dutch Cultural Council in January 2013. Nevertheless, at the time when the heritage law system was not yet perfected, these artefacts could have been dispersed into the private sector without a trace.

Economic crises cannot be resolved solely through the sale of art collections, and one should be particular cautious when commodifying cultural heritage. By commodifying

them, the meanings of these African artefacts risk reducing to merely exchange or sign-values, which also gives these ethnographic museums a chance to avoid engaging critically with their problematic histories. It is a shame that the sales carried out in 2012 and 2020 to address the financial crisis of the Dutch ethnographic museums targeted historical African collections.

6. Dilemmas of Presentation and Representation

One may have already noticed that Africa is completely absent from this conflict between the NMVW and the fathers. Indeed, this controversial African collection central to the case is, at the moment, not subject to restitution demands. Part of the collection consisted of modern art pieces purchased by the directors of the Afrika Museum on the European market for African art from the late 1950s onwards. The lack of restitution demands is also a result of the largely unclear provenance of these objects, which is a typical characteristic of missionary collections (Hans 2020, p. 11). When the missionaries acquired an object, they seldom made records of its background information. The sale of the two African sculptures to private collectors by the Congregation was even more problematic in this regard, as little is known regarding their provenance, and they could potentially be of great importance to their source communities. It is only known that one of them was a "spiked Yombe power figure", while the other is a "mother-and-child sculpture of the Senufo" (Van Santen 2023). The former refers to a *nkisi* from Kongo, which is typically a carved wooden statue filled with medical substances, with nails or iron blades hammered into its body. *Minkisi* were regarded as containers of magical power that could protect the entire community or an individual against negative forces, yet they could also bring misfortune or death (Hans 2020, p. 20). The latter mother-and-child sculpture may have also been used in traditional ritual events, such as funeral ceremonies or masquerade performances (Gagliardi and Petridis 2015, p. 8). The contention about power or ritual objects in missionary collections is that missionaries often claimed that these items were gifted or sold by the original owners after they converted to Christianity and were no longer needed (Hans 2020, p. 18). However, the extent of the voluntariness of the loss and the giving up of one's original belief remains debatable without detailed historical records.

Aside from ownership rights, another crucial question is: who should have the right to display and speak for these African artefacts, and to what extent? In the politics of representation, marginalised groups often lack control over their own image. As demonstrated above, in this conflict between the NMVW and the Congregation, both parties saw themselves as the rightful institution for hosting, exhibiting and disposing the African collection. It seems that both were so eager to speak for a conceived "African community", deciding for them which display methods are better and can be considered as "decolonial", yet lacking sufficient self-reflexivity over their own approaches. In this conflict, there were even voices supporting the Congregation purely from the perspective of identity politics—"The Congregation is a 'blacker' organisation than the NMVW", which essentialises ethnic identity as entitlement to cultural heritage ownership (George Knight 2023). The former curator of the Afrika Museum, Hans Witte, commented that the primary task of the museum was to "bring the African way of understanding the world closer to a Western public". While this approach appears to be promoting connections between different ethnic and cultural groups, by singling out another "heritage" for display in the context of a Western museum, it ultimately distances a Western "self" from the non-Western "other" (Meyer and De Witte 2013, p. 275).

The singling-out of the heritage of the "other" is a typical feature of museum displays and curatorial strategies in the modern period (Pels 2023, p. 217). The NMVW's emphasis on fostering global citizenship by demonstrating a universal humanity through objects

and organising various workshops to bring people together is perhaps an intentional effort to avoid falling into this trap of representing the "other". Just as the scholar of African languages and culture, Mary Caton Lingold, observed in 2022, the Wereldmuseum is transforming itself into radical "interrogations of colonialism" (Lingold 2024, p. 181). However, an overloaded narrative of how African communities were the victim groups of Western colonisation also risks putting relevant groups in the mere position of victims and oversimplifying a complex history.

While the call for decolonisation has become increasingly omnipresent in various cultural sectors, in the 2020s, some authors began voicing concerns that overly emphasising certain decolonial discourses and provenance research may not achieve the desired effect. Philosopher Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò, in his *Against Decolonisation: Taking African Agency Seriously*, criticised the extended meaning of the term "decolonisation", which goes beyond its original definition of making a colony into a politically and economically self-governing entity, and becomes an all-applicable concept. Although decolonisation discourses have attracted significant attention, the resulting effect is not necessarily ideal, for we may overstate the role of Europe (Táíwò 2022). Following Táíwò's argument, Jos van Beurden questions if the current trend to undo some of the colonial injustice risks exaggerating the scale of the damage Europe caused (Van Beurden 2024, pp. 55–56). When it comes to exhibition curating, by overly associating these objects with colonial histories, such representations risk undermining other historical and cultural aspects of the museum collection. Peter Pels warns that imposing categories such as "cultural imperialism" and "violence" on foreign objects reduces their meanings, so that they become associated solely with "tyrannical subjects" (Pels 2023, p. 137). Leah Niederhausen and Klaas Stutje also contend with the underlying nationalist sentiments behind the current restitution paradigm, fearing that the values and potentials of the material objects will be reduced to "moments of loot and restitution" or merely associated with "bigger national master narratives" (Niederhausen and Stutje 2024, p. 273).

In light of these controversies, it is crucial to dismantle the colonial ethnographic and missionary perspectives that have long promoted the fetishization and decontextualization of African material culture, perpetuated both by the Congregation and by the curatorial paternalism of modern curators. Nevertheless, as for this conflict, how should we engage properly with a collection of African artefacts that is partially owned by a private religious congregation, rather than a public museum, especially when the communities of origin have not requested repatriation and the colonial nature of the objects' acquisition remains unclear due to their unknown provenance?

7. Towards a More Ethical Restitution

Given these complexities, when restitution is not requested by the source community, forced return may bring opposite effects. In the case of the objects owned by the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, since some descendants from the African regions where the missionaries acquired these objects are Pentecostal Christians, they are, in fact, resistant to the traditional "power" objects of their ancestors today. In recent years, more and more museum specialists have expressed concerns regarding physical return as the only means of reforming Western museums and proposed various alternative approaches. Archaeologist Staffan Lundén criticises current restitution debates for their excessive focus on legal ownership and the future location of objects and argues that the focus should shift toward examining how historical representations are constructed within these debates (Lundén 2024, p. 203). Niederhausen and Stutje adopt a more socially oriented approach, examining which socio-political contexts have generated restitution claims from various affected groups and what underlying needs they may have (Niederhausen and Stutje 2024, pp. 272–77). The

most common alternative is to expand the notion of restitution to restituting decision-making power back to the source communities over their own cultural heritage, whether or not they are the legal owners (Plankensteiner and Thaler 2018, p. 133). This represents an ethics-based approach that moves beyond the constraints of legal frameworks, and guides decisions when law is insufficient. Just as Christa Roodt argues, ethics can provide guidance on one's moral duties (Roodt 2025, p. 12). In face of the fact that the notion of restituting decision-making power is inherently ambiguous and that no universal ethical standard can be assumed, it is necessary to propose more precise frameworks rather than remaining at a generalised and indeterminate level. Three key areas require particular attention:

Firstly, the conduct and funding of provenance research should prioritise the needs of the source communities. Colonial structures are often embedded not only in museum collections but also in the organisation and funding mechanisms of collection research; thus, formerly colonised societies need a more decisive role in provenance research (Van Beurden 2024, p. 75). A good example of such is the Open Restitution Africa (ORA), an African-led project that aims to highlight African agency in restitution efforts and reshape the restitution narrative, co-founded by Chao Tayiana Maina and Molemo Moiloa (Open Restitution Africa n.d.). It is currently in the process of launching a digital platform to help its users curate their understanding of restitution.

Moving beyond research, display restrictions should also be reinforced. The restitution of the African collection owned by the Spiritan fathers should also involve dismantling the ethnographic and missionary perspectives that have led to the misrepresentation of these artefacts in the museum context. This could be achieved by empowering relevant source communities with greater agency over whether or how these items should be displayed, and interpreted, even though these source communities may not be the legal owners today. Such involvement could help museums transcend the limits of self-reflexivity, fostering a more ethical restitution thorough examination of their approach.

Last but not least, the copyright of African art and cultural objects needs to be recognised. Calvin Patrick Bandah Panga argues that the Western art market has deprived objects of various meanings to mere movable economic assets that can generate revenue (Panga 2023, p. 140). The aestheticisation and artification of many African objects in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries reduced their meaning to solely material and market values. As mentioned previously, many artefacts were actually commissioned by missionaries to be exhibited or sold as souvenirs at the Afrika Museum Berg en Dal in the twentieth century, which raises the issue of copyright. It is therefore problematic to understand them as solely the properties of the Wereldmuseum or the Congregation—these objects are also the collective properties of the source communities. Panga proposes that as a mend, income gained from the mobility of cultural objects should also flow to Africa through revenue-sharing, rentals, or touring exhibitions, instead of benefiting only holding institutions (Panga 2023, pp. 141–42).

8. Conclusions

The lawsuit between the National Museum of World Cultures Foundation and the Congregation of the Holy Spirit in the Netherlands has come to an end, yet the fight for justice for the African collection should not. The missionary legacies embedded within the collection make it much more difficult to trace the provenance of individual artefacts, for missionary records of acquisition in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were generally incomplete, inaccurate, and imbued with Christian didactics. While one cannot directly equate Christian missions with colonial agendas, in collecting and displaying these foreign objects, missionaries often have deployed theoretical concepts or presentational devices from colonial ethnography prevailing at that time, which is perhaps less of a

conscious act but more as a means to increase public interests, thereby generating revenue for missionary exhibitions. Disentangling the various religious and secular power dynamics that played a role in the formation and presentation of the African collection through in-depth research can dismantle essentialist views that merely target missionary fathers as the conservative ones who obstructed the decolonial agendas of the Wereldmuseum. It can also better facilitate collaborations between a religious congregation and a public ethnographic museum.

The lack of provenance information, and the fact that Dutch institutions legally own this African collection without any restitution demands from the source communities at present, cannot serve as excuses that these objects can be seen as wholly "Dutch heritage" or subject to disposal at will without the involvement or consent of their source communities. In such cases, where the commodification of non-Western artefacts is lawful yet causes harm to the integrity of cultural heritage through curatorial misrepresentation and essentialization, as seen with the African hut replicas, a more ethical approach is needed that can transcend the limitations of the legal frameworks. It should involve not only the restitution of material objects but also the restitution of decision-making power to the source communities. The source communities should have more right in deciding upon not only physical return but also provenance research and means of display, and they should be considered as considered beneficiaries of the profit generated through their own cultural heritage, regardless of their legal ownership. It is also necessary to pay attention to the means of restitution, so that such discourses do not undermine other aspects of the artefacts and portray the source communities as mere victims, ignoring their agency in the complex histories.

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