

## **We demand unrestricted access to museum inventories of African objects in Germany!**

### **An open appeal to the Conference of Ministers of Culture.**

The public debate about Germany's colonial past and how to deal with colonial objects in public collections has generated momentum. The discussion which was sparked by the plans for the Humboldt Forum in Berlin intensified with the 2018 publication of the report commissioned by Emmanuel Macron *Rapport sur la restitution du patrimoine culturel africain* and has already brought about concrete steps. The current coalition agreement includes a commitment to a critical evaluation of the colonial period. In addition, State Ministers Monika Grütters and Michelle Müntefering took a stand in an opinion piece, where they urged, among other things, to "enter into a genuine dialogue with source communities and thus work towards the future in cooperation" (FAZ, 15 December 2018). In a unique initiative in Europe, Germany provided two million euros of funding at short notice for research into the provenance of objects from a "colonial context", initially funding mainly smaller projects. However, as researchers and creative industry professionals from many African and European countries, we ask for more: transparency!

It is scandalous that even though this debate has continued for two years now, there is still no unrestricted access to German museum inventories. Precisely which African art is preserved in public museums in Germany today? From which regions? Which type of objects? We want and need to know this, if we want to work together on the colonial past. We need free and unrestricted as well as unchecked access to inventories of African artefacts! Knowledge of the holdings is an essential prerequisite for any dialogue. In addition, an independent assessment of cultural assets from within Africa itself must be enabled, without dependency on a German partner. The objects in question can contribute to a reactivation and new discovery of knowledge and memory in post-colonial societies. This applies to Africa as it does, of course, to other world regions.

A common evaluation of colonialism as well as a fresh investigation of the past which proceeds independently of German institutions can only take place if details of objects and any information held about them in museums finally become public knowledge. At the moment, every single artistic or academic project and each international delegation needs to contact each individual German museum and request access to information. This creates duplication, extra work, lack of transparency, deterrence and quite often results in failure.

Transparency does not require tedious data processing and completed digitalisation projects, as often claimed. Work on the inventories will never be complete and will always remain work in progress. There is no need to wait.

For this reason, we demand that public museums and their supervisory authorities, municipalities, federal states and the federal government make the inventories of African objects in their respective collections available worldwide as quickly as possible, regardless of the degree of completeness or supposed perfection of these inventories. Simple scans and lists are sufficient. We need them now. Only then can the dialogue begin.

## First signatures

- Kader Attia (Artist, Berlin, Germany / Paris, France)
- Souleymane Bachir Diagne (Prof. Columbia University, New York, USA)
- Manuela Bauche (Freie Universität Berlin, Germany)
- Andreas Eckert (Prof. Humboldt Universität, Berlin, Germany)
- Albert Gouaffo (Prof. Université de Dschang, Cameroon)
- Golda Ha-Eiros (Chairperson, Museums Association of Namibia)
- Didier Houénouké (Prof. Université d'Abomey-Calavi, Benin)
- Wolfgang Kaleck (Attorney, European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights, Berlin, Germany)
- Christian Kopp (Historian, Berlin postkolonial e.V., Berlin, Germany)
- Prince Kum'a Ndumbe III (Prof., Founder AfricAvenir, Douala, Cameroon)
- Qanita Lilla (Researcher and independent scholar, South Africa)
- Achille Mbembe (Prof. Witwatersrand-Universität, Johannesburg, South Africa)
- Sharon Dodua Otoo (Author, Berlin, Germany)
- Ciraj Rassool (Prof. University of the Western Cape, South Africa)
- Milo Rau (Author und Director, Zurich, Switzerland)
- Felwine Sarr (Prof. Université Gaston Berger, Saint-Louis, Senegal)
- Bénédicte Savoy (Prof. TU Berlin, Germany / Collège de France Paris, France)
- Romuald Tchibozo (Prof. Université Abomey-Calavi, Benin)
- Jürgen Zimmerer (Prof. Universität Hamburg, Germany)