

Collecting, museums, postcolonial debate and colonial objects in Berlin

In the past ten years there has been a wider debate about Germany's colonial past and an acknowledgement that **museums and collections** have to reassess how they deal with the objects in their collections. Whom do the objects belong to? How should they be stored, cared for, publicly displayed (if at all)? Should they be returned?

One focal point of this debate has been the Humboldt Forum in Berlin, where most of Berlin's ethnological and ethnographic museums / collections are being relocated to. The (virtual) opening of the Humboldt Forum took place in December 2020, and physical openings are planned for autumn 2021. One of the main criticisms lies in the *building* Humboldt Forum itself, as a reconstruction of the "Schloss", the royal palace of the Hohenzollerns. Certain objects, like the Benin bronzes, sparked a particularly controversial discussion regarding the appropriate response to official restitution claims by governments of the states of origin of these objects. On the other side, arguments are being made for the Humboldt Forum as a stage for the discussion of colonial histories and for a "dialogue of cultures", "in the spirit of the enlightenment, cosmopolitanism and tolerance". This is a current, ongoing and often fierce debate. (It is interesting that, at least in wider public opinion, Alexander von Humboldt stands for exploration and science in the spirit of enlightenment, as it is upheld here, and his image seems hardly affected by postcolonial perspectives, whereas with Leichhardt – no doubt because his image is not as historically established – all entanglements in the context of colonial history can be examined with less ideological bias.)

Leichhardt's specimens in Berlin. Regarding Leichhardt, herbarium specimens ("Herbarbelege") as well as wood samples that he collected in Australia can be found in Berlin's Botanical Garden. "In 1842 and 1844 Leichhardt sent about 700 plants to Berlin, including fungi and wood samples, but few specimens survived the bombing of the Berlin herbarium" (Darragh). Other plants from his collection are stored in Paris, while birds that were collected by John Gilbert on his earlier Port Essington expedition and the ones saved from the Leichhardt expedition are to be found in British collections.

Natural history collections. Whereas today the imperative to repatriate human remains is (finally) undisputed, the conservation of plants in botanical collections and animals in natural history museums that come from a colonised country or were collected in a colonial context is seldom questioned. Anja Schwarz (who is conducting research on Australian objects in German collections) points out that natural history objects "constitute the biggest body of artefacts gathered by nineteenth-century collectors", and were often sent to Europe by the same collectors as were controversial specimens like human remains and secret sacred objects. That animal specimens, plants and even geological samples are seen as "seemingly harmless objects" in this context shows a hierarchy and a Western, humancentric view that is in fact questionable.

The ephemeral nature of sound makes these questions even more poignant. Through exhibitions and in debates the collecting institutions themselves, for example the famous Phonogramm Archive (also soon to be housed at Humboldt Forum) more and more pose questions about how to deal with "sound objects" obtained in colonial contexts, especially where song and music with ceremonial or sacred content are concerned. (The revisitation of media collections and the "repatriation" of recordings was one topic in relation to the collections of the Australian American Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land.) Again, dealing with animal calls (for example insect sounds, as in the *Cobourg Nets* composition), natural sounds and field recordings only accentuates the subjects of debate. Digitisation and accessibility – the fact that recordings today can be copied and distributed without loss of data – are of relevance, but the contextualisation of knowledge, the continuous task of renegotiating and reevaluating knowledge, is what is called for most.



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Hartmann, Heike. Australien sammeln, in: *Der Australienforscher Ludwig Leichhardt: Spuren eines Verschollenen*, Heike Hartmann (Ed.), Berlin: Be.bra, 2013. 95–111

Hilden, Irene, Harriet Mellow & Andrei Zavadski. Present Imperfect, Future Intense: The Opening of the Humboldt Forum, 2 February 2021. <http://www.carmah.berlin/reflections/present-imperfect-future-intense/>

Johanson, Mark. Mungo Man: The Story Behind the Bones That Forever Changed Australia's History, International Business Times, 3 April 2014. <https://www.ibtimes.com/mungo-man-story-behind-bones-forever-changed-australias-history-1558234>

Peterson, N. & A. Kenny (Eds.). *German Ethnography in Australia*, Australia: ANU Press 2017.

Schwarz, Anja. Natural History's Colonial Entanglements: Australian Objects in Berlin's Museum für Naturkunde, 2018. <https://criticalhabitations.wordpress.com/2018/06/18/natural-historys-colonial-entanglements-australian-objects-in-berlins-museum-fur-naturkunde/>

Spinnenparadies Australien – Forschung in Hamburg, CeNak, 27 July 2017. <https://www.cenak.uni-hamburg.de/forschung/abteilungen/arachnologie/aktuelles/2017-07-27-news.html>

Worms Australien
Walzensammlung
Ernst Worms (1891-1963), Sammler
Aufnahmejahr: 1937
Aufnahmeort: Broome (Missionstation)
Australien (Kontinent)
NW-Australien (Region)
Yaoru, Nol-Nol, D'aba-D'aba (Ethnie)
Ident.Nr. VII WS 346

Luschan Australien I
Walzensammlung
Felix von Luschan (11.8.1854 - 7.2.1924),
Sammler
Aufnahmejahr: 1906
Aufnahmeort: keine Angaben
Australien (Kontinent)
Australien (Region)
Aranda (Ethnie)
Ident.Nr. VII WS 208

Luschan Australien II
Walzensammlung
Felix von Luschan (11.8.1854 - 7.2.1924),
Sammler
Aufnahmejahr: 1914 (?)
Aufnahmeort: Eingeborenenlager
Corranderr bei Melbourne
Australien (Kontinent)
Australien (Region)
keine Angaben (Ethnie)
Ident.Nr. VII WS 209

Frobenius-Expedition NW Australien
Walzensammlung
Leo Frobenius (29.6.1873 - 9.8.1938), Sammler
Aufnahmejahr: 1938-1939
Aufnahmeort: Kimberley-Division
Australien (Kontinent)
Nordwest-Australien (Region)
Ungariyin (Ethnie)
Ident.Nr. VII WS 94

Beagle-Bay-Mission
Walzensammlung
Beagle-Bay Mission, Sammler
Aufnahmejahr: 1910
Aufnahmeort: Broome
Australien (Kontinent)
Nordwest-Australien (Region)
Aborigines (Ethnie)
Ident.Nr. VII WS 51

Laurell Sunday-Islands
Walzensammlung
Yngve Laurell (1882-1975),
Sammler
Aufnahmejahr: 1911
Australien (Kontinent)
Nordwest-Australien (Region)
Aufnahmeort: Am Kings-Sundfluß
Ident.Nr. VII WS 181

Myers Torres Straits
Walzensammlung
Charles Samuel Myers (1873-1946), Sammler
Aufnahmejahr: 1898
Aufnahmeort: Murray Island
Australien (Kontinent)
Torres Straits (Region)
Aborigines (Ethnie)
Ident.Nr. VII WS 226

Myers Torres Straits
Walzensammlung
Charles Samuel Myers (1873-1946), Sammler
Aufnahmejahr: 1898
Aufnahmeort: Murray Island
Australien (Kontinent)
Torres Straits (Region)
Aborigines (Ethnie)
Ident.Nr. VII WS 226



"Sammeln, Bewahren, Erforschen, Vermitteln"
Selbstverständnis des Ethnologischen Museums (Berlin)
self-conception of the Ethnological Museum

The animals on display are from the Museum's historic collection that began in 1854. **Conservation** is the foremost consideration in the Museum's research and education.

Evolution section (closed for cleaning)



what we can see - what about what we can hear?

Look deep into nature, and then you will understand everything better.
Albert Einstein

Exhibition "Wilhelm and Alexander von Humboldt", Deutsches Historisches Museum, 2019: for the first time I saw "einfache Sprache" - plain language - in the section labels of the exhibition - I was very impressed - to condense and translate knowledge and interpretation into simple language - a challenge, a condensation like in an art work?

reflection and thought processes: working with **costume designer Katharina Gault** - we dismissed this try-out sketch inspired by Namarggon as **"inappropriate appropriation"**



an important "collecting institution" in Australia: op-shops (second hand stores and book shops)

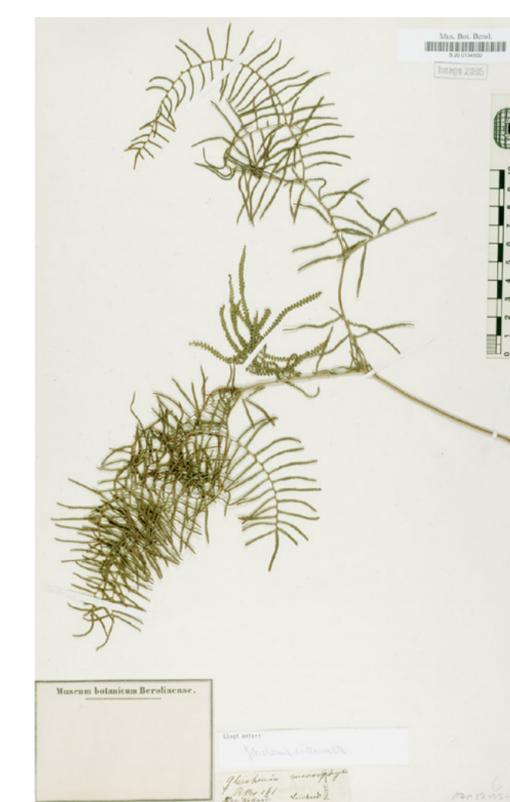
MIDI file of the score:
<https://gather.sl.nsw.gov.au/digital-heritage/great-dividing-range-song-women-menero-tribe-near-australian-alps-1834?page=1>



Music is an important way of exchanging cultural knowledge and learning language. While travelling through the Monaro Region in the 1830s, the European explorer John Lhotsky wrote in his journal that he had "notated a song which he heard at a corroboree". The result was "The Song of the Women of the Menero Tribe", which was favourably reviewed by colonial newspapers when it was published in 1834. Later comparisons have shown that **this musical score bears little similarity with Aboriginal musical traditions.** (seen at an exhibition of the State Library of New South Wales)



Many plants and animals that were collected 150 years ago do not exist anymore due to habitat destruction and other destructive human impact.



<https://digital.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/werkansicht/?PPN=PPN699928575>
William Blandowski's (1822-1878) *Australien in 142 Photographischen Abbildungen*, 1862 - only one known full copy exists, the author's copy; it is kept in Berlin (Staatsbibliothek)

Lake Mungo, NSW, dried up around 14000 years ago and today consists of sand dunes, where wind gusts constantly uncover new exposures.

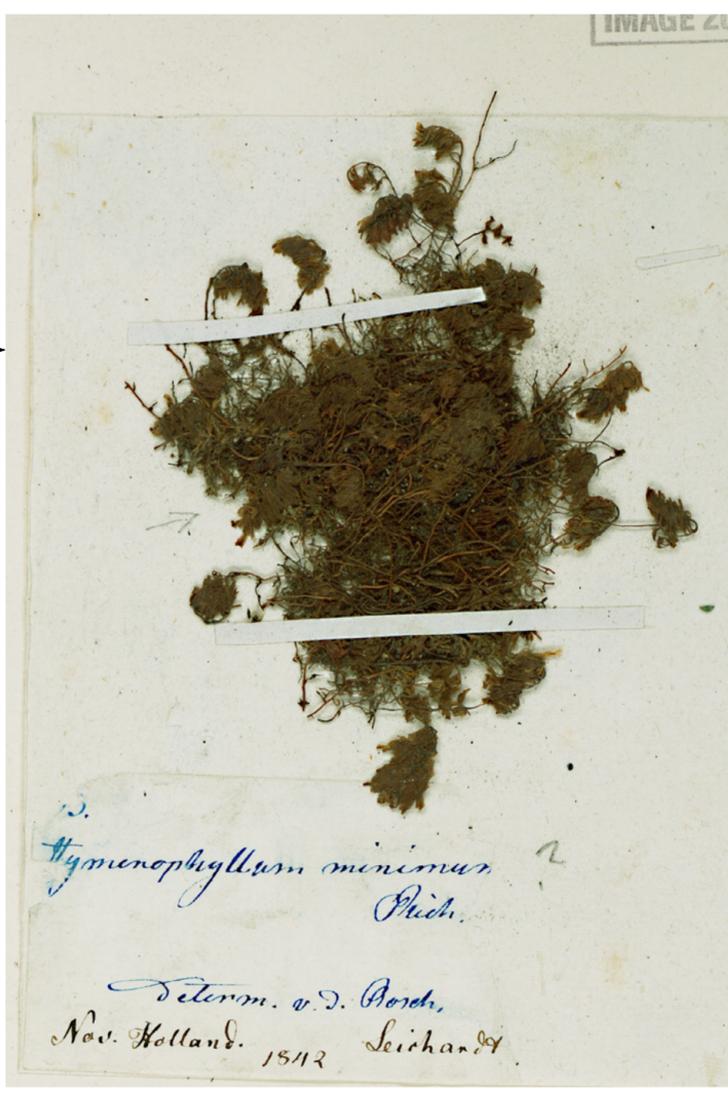
The **Lake Mungo remains** are three prominent sets of human remains, dated to around 40000 years old. Mungo woman (LM1) was discovered in 1969 and is one of the world's oldest known cremations. The traditional owners of the Willandra Lakes formally requested return and repatriation of the remains and in 2015 they were handed back by Australian National University scientists and buried directly in the earth in 2017.

Paakantji Aboriginal guide Graham Clarke visits this land perhaps more than anyone else, yet he says he doesn't tell a soul about new "discoveries." Sometimes he'll leave a marker ... but mostly he just walks on by and **lets the bones return to the sand from which they came.**

"It's never-ending because things are constantly appearing and disappearing and you can never keep up with it."

Botanical Museum Berlin

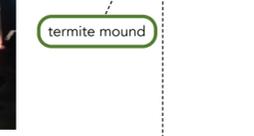
<http://herbarium.bgbm.org/object/B200100153b>
Collection Herb.#
Hymenophyllum cupressiforme Labill.
Family Hymenophyllaceae
V. D. Bosch:
Hymenophyllum minimum;
G. Hieronymus:
Hymenophyllum antarcticum;
B. Zimmer (B) 2006:=
Hymenophyllum cupressiforme
Collector
Leichhardt, F.W.L. s.n.
Date **1842**
Location Australia
Label Nov. Holland



As the natural world is habitually understood as lying outside of the sphere of human influence, natural history collections can easily seem irrelevant to the human-centred history of colonialism. Long treated as taxonomically stable, and hence immutable representations of the non-human world, these objects have only recently begun to be re-articulated within the economic, infrastructural, ideological and epistemological frameworks that brought them to Europe's collecting institutions. (Schwarz)

Leichhardt's grasshopper at MAGNT, impaled like all insect exhibits

visited: **Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory** 6.8.2019



termite mound

image of Namarggon, in a replication at MAGNT, on a rock wall with a collection of rock art images from different Arnhem Land galleries



The Hamburg CeNak (Centrum für Naturkunde) holds the oldest and most prestigious collection of Australian spiders worldwide. The **holotypes** of many Australian spiders are in Hamburg. One of the leading spider taxonomists in Australia, Barbara Baehr (who herself migrated from Germany 20 years ago, and whom I met in Brisbane at the Queensland Museum) visits Hamburg when she needs to study the holotypes of Australia spiders she is researching. - Shouldn't these spiders be "repatriated" to their country of origin?

Many of these spiders were collected by natural scientist Amalie Dietrich (1821-1891), who came to Australia in 1863 and collected plants, insects and other small animals on behalf of the Hamburg shipowner Cesar Godeffroy. After Godeffroy's private museum closed, these were integrated into the collection that is now used for research at CeNak. (Amalie Dietrich, one of the few famous female natural scientists of the 19th century, who came from a very poor background, is a controversial figure because she also sent "human remains" to Europe.)



visited: **Australian Museum** (Sydney, founded in 1827) 14.8.2019

visited: **Queensland Museum** (Brisbane) 15.8.2019

visited: **Melbourne Museum** 18.7.2019

How do bugs hear?



"It is a quirk of human nature to value only what we understand and appreciate only what we can see."

"The Dreaming and The Market are mutually exclusive."
W.E.H. Stanner, *Continuity and change among the Aborigines* (after Stan Grant)

Knowledge, which is power, knows no obstacles: neither in the enslavement of men nor in compliance with the world's rulers. ... Technology is the essence of this knowledge. It does not work by concepts and images, by the fortunate insight, but refers to method, the exploitation of others' work, and capital.
Adorno/Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

sleeping on the ground in Trebatsch, Brandenburg



other world perspectives



these clapsticks were a present by Keith Risk, after our long conversation at Mindell Beach in Darwin - I would never have bought clapsticks myself - too cheesy - percussion instruments come from all over the world, from all cultures - should there be a decolonialisation of instruments?