

AFRICAN RESEARCH AND DOCUMENTATION

No. 135

2019

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Special Issue: Archives and Collections for/in Ethiopian Studies

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INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE “ARCHIVES AND COLLECTIONS FOR/IN ETHIOPIAN STUDIES”

by Sophia Thubauville and Sayuri Yoshida

This special issue deals with archives and collections in Ethiopian Studies. It was created out of the panel “1201 Archives and Collections for/in Ethiopian Studies” at the 20th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, which was held at Mekelle University in Ethiopia on 1-5 October 2018. The panel was planned and organised with the understanding that different archives and collections are used for varied research questions by researchers in Ethiopian Studies. The archives and collections that Ethiopian Studies deal with are very diverse. Some of them are renowned and easy to access, while other collections remain mostly hidden and unknown, because of their spatial distance from Ethiopia, language barriers or other reasons. Some of these archives and collections are only known to a few researchers. Others are closed to public access. In recent years, information on the internet and digitisation have increased the accessibility of many archives and collections. The cataloguing and promotion of Ethiopian archives and collections should be a contemporary goal in this period of digitisation, especially as the discipline of Ethiopian Studies is growing due to the recent rapid expansion of higher education in Ethiopia. Therefore, the panel aimed to provide a platform of exchange for researchers working with archives and collections that include various media such as ethnographic objects, photographs, films, and manuscripts. The panel also aimed to provide a platform for the exchange of information between researchers from archives and museum collections. The speakers presented archives and collections, activities and projects related to them and discussed problems in making these collections visible, accessible and secure. The panel had six presentations, which are all covered in this special issue. After the panel and during the preparations for the present publication, we were able to gain two further contributions dealing with valuable collections in the UK (see Jones and Eyob in this issue), the provenance of which is currently highly debated due to the recent 150th anniversary of the Battle of Maqdala.¹

Questions of restitution, and shared heritage with source communities

Many collections and cultural assets from Africa are currently located in Europe and are inextricably linked with ideas of colonialism and imperialism. In the case of Ethiopia, questions of their origin, legitimacy to keep such objects in European collections and restitution arose immediately upon arrival of the objects. For example, directly after valuable objects were brought to England after the Battle of Maqdala, General Napier said that these objects should only be temporarily stored in the British Museum until Ethiopia had a stable government again to which the objects could be returned. The former British Prime Minister Gladstone regretted that the important and sacred

items were stolen from Ethiopia at all.² A second well known case from Ethiopia is the stele from Aksum, which stood in Rome from 1937 to 2005. The stele was brought to Rome as spoils of war by order of Benito Mussolini in 1937 after the Abyssinian War. It was finally returned and re-erected in Aksum in 2008. In both cases there were long and partially successful negotiations about the restitution of cultural assets. Recently, the return of cultural assets to their societies of origin has once more been the subject of much debate. This can be seen, for example, in the much-discussed statements made by French President Emmanuel Macron in 2017. He has a sympathetic attitude towards the restitution of objects taken from African countries without consent during the colonial era and currently owned by French museums. Another example is the discussion about the opening of the Humboldt Forum in Berlin, which will include the holdings of the Ethnological Museum. Since the redesign of the museum, the collections, which include objects captured by German colonial rulers, have been closely scrutinised and hotly debated.

Rather than joining current discussions of the origin and restitution of cultural assets, this special issue aims to debate the contents and current value of archives and collections and how they can be shared and used, especially with scholars and institutions in Ethiopia. Today, digitisation is a meaningful and easy way to share content from collections and archives. Of course, the sense of meaning depends on the type of collection. While digitalisation makes sense for photos (see Semenova and Thubauville this volume), books, manuscripts (see Eyob this volume), and other written material, it does not replace the question of restitution for objects and religious writings.

Foreigners as authorities of the “authentic”

Ethiopia is one of the few African countries where historical texts written by local people exist. However, documents in Amharic and Ge'ez are limited to the north of Ethiopia and the Ethiopian Empire. Areas incorporated into the Ethiopian Empire at the end of the 19th century had no written languages and thus no texts written by the local population.

The articles of Pawłowska, Rubinkowska-Anioł and Yoshida address the fact that the historical texts described by them and written by foreigners are therefore the only historical sources of the respective regions or on the respective topics. The articles examine prejudices and misunderstandings that have arisen due to their production by foreigners and how we can or should discuss them today. The foreign authors established oral traditions, interviews and their own observations that were coloured by their own backgrounds. This gave Western explorers and academics authority, and the practices mentioned in the texts they wrote were considered “authentic”. This power of the author (Clifford and Marcus 1986) and traditions “invented” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) or revived by such is an important theme in social anthropology.

Contributions to this special issue

The articles of this special issue start with discussions of collections of Ethiopian objects in collections and museums outside Ethiopia. Alexandra Jones, curator at the Victoria & Albert Museum, London describes its Ethiopian collection. Many of the Ethiopian objects at the Victoria & Albert Museum can be traced back to the loot British troops took during the battle of Maqdala in 1868. To mark the 150th anniversary of these events, the museum arranged a display of around 20 objects connected to the British Expedition to Ethiopia. The display considers the role of these objects as witnesses to a significant and difficult period in Ethiopian and British history, addresses some of the questions and controversies surrounding objects of this nature in UK museums and aims to encourage a dialogue about objects collected during historic periods of conflict and promote discussion about access to these collections in museums today.

Sayuri Yoshida discusses the collection of Friedrich Julius Bieber (1873-1924), who visited Ethiopia, especially Kafa, at the beginning of the 20th century and is recognised as the foremost authority on ethnological research dealing with Kafa. Friedrich Julius Bieber left many objects and written documents concerning both Ethiopia and his daily life. Today, the collections are held by the World Museum, the District Museum of Hietzing, and the Austrian National Library in Vienna. His collections and archives are becoming known in Kafa. Today, the Kafa people refer to and use foreign researchers' work to revive, reproduce, restore, and perform their traditional Kafa history and culture.

Aneta Pawłowska focuses on Polish collectors of Ethiopian art. The three famous personalities described by her were the forerunners of professional researchers. They focused on the rich and diverse Ethiopian art and culture: Stanisław Chojnacki (1915-2010), Waclaw Korabiewicz (1903-1994) and Stefan Strelcyn (1918-1981). Each of them dedicated his life and passion to the Christian culture of Ethiopia. Thanks to their work, some Polish museums, archives and libraries were enriched by collections of valuable Ethiopian art. Since Polish collections of Ethiopian artefacts are little known in the Ethiopian Studies, the article gives an important first insight.

Hanna Rubinkowska-Anioł presents the Ethiopian cross collection of Waclaw Korabiewicz, which is kept in the National Museum in Warsaw, and its history in the wider context of the Polish collections of Ethiopian artefacts. Korabiewicz not only laid the foundation for one of the largest collections of crosses in the world, but also devoted himself with great passion to researching the symbolism of Ethiopian crosses. His conclusions, especially concerning the classification of Ethiopian crosses and the importance of the symbolism of their elements, are still present in the literature dealing with the subject and are still important points of reference.

The following two articles focus on visual collections in Ethiopian Studies. Valeria Semenova describes the Ethiopian photograph collections of the Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography, St. Petersburg, Russia. The main stock of this Ethiopian collection was augmented by doctors sent to Abyssinia by the Russian Red Cross with a medical mission to support the Ethiopians during the war against Italy in 1895-1896. Her survey tries to classify the most popular subjects in this photograph collection, which has already been made accessible online.

Sophia Thubauville discusses the research activities and the extensive visual documentation of southern Ethiopia by the Frobenius Institute, and shows how the Institute today aims to make its archives accessible and visible. The former institute directors and Ethiopia researchers A.E. Jensen and E. Haberland were strongly influenced by their predecessor and founder Leo Frobenius. Frobenius and, thus also, Jensen and Haberland were intensively engaged in the visual documentation of cultures. Their first research trips to Ethiopia were accompanied by professional painters who drew sketches of landscapes, settlements and people. The researchers themselves supplemented the visual documentation with photographs and film footage, which led to the creation of a unique visual archive on Southern Ethiopia at the Frobenius Institute.

The two final articles deal with a central topic of archives and collections in Ethiopian Studies, namely with manuscript collections. Eyob Derillo, gives an overview of the collection of Ethiopian manuscripts at the British Library, and a recent exhibition dedicated to them. The Ethiopian collection in the library includes over 500 manuscripts most of which are written in Ge'ez and were acquired from the mid-eighteenth century onwards from military expeditions, travellers, and private collectors. Examples from the British Library's collection of the Maqdala manuscripts (dating from 1,400-1,900) strongly reflect the intellectual and artistic achievements of Ethiopian scribes. Marking the 150th anniversary of the Abyssinia expedition, a first exhibition dedicated to the manuscripts was organised. As these collection items had never been exhibited or displayed before, the anniversary presented an ideal opportunity to give the Ethiopian collection the recognition it deserves.

Minako Ishihara presents her ongoing archival research in Muslim Oromo societies in Southwestern Ethiopia. She focuses on 'books', either printed or hand-written, kept by local Muslim intellectuals, especially Sufi Muslims. For local Muslim intellectuals, the books are not only media for preserving and transmitting knowledge, but possession itself is conceived of as a sign of prestige and power. Printed books are not only bought from bookshops, but are obtained through personal transmission. She concludes that as physical collection of books is unrealistic, the task of digitising local creativity (books) and heritage (buildings, photographs), and building databases is undoubtedly an urgent issue. Databases could be built on and interconnected, becoming

not only resources to future researchers, but also invaluable assets to the local society.

This special issue is an attempt to create a platform for the exchange of researchers working with archives and collections of Ethiopian Studies. The cases covered are limited and only a small range of topics is covered. This special issue is therefore only intended as a start, and we hope that future studies will continue and broaden this discussion.

References

Clifford, J. and G. Marcus (eds.) (1986) *Writing Culture: the Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Hobsbawm, E. J. and T. O. Ranger (eds.) (1983) *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Notes

¹ The battle of Maqdala took place on 13 April 1868 when a British military expedition attempted to free British hostages taken by the then Abyssinian emperor Tewodros. After the British victory and suicide of the emperor British troops looted the city and took the treasures back to Britain where they entered collections in different ways.

² See statements on the website of the British association Afromet: http://www.afromet.info/about_us_statements.html