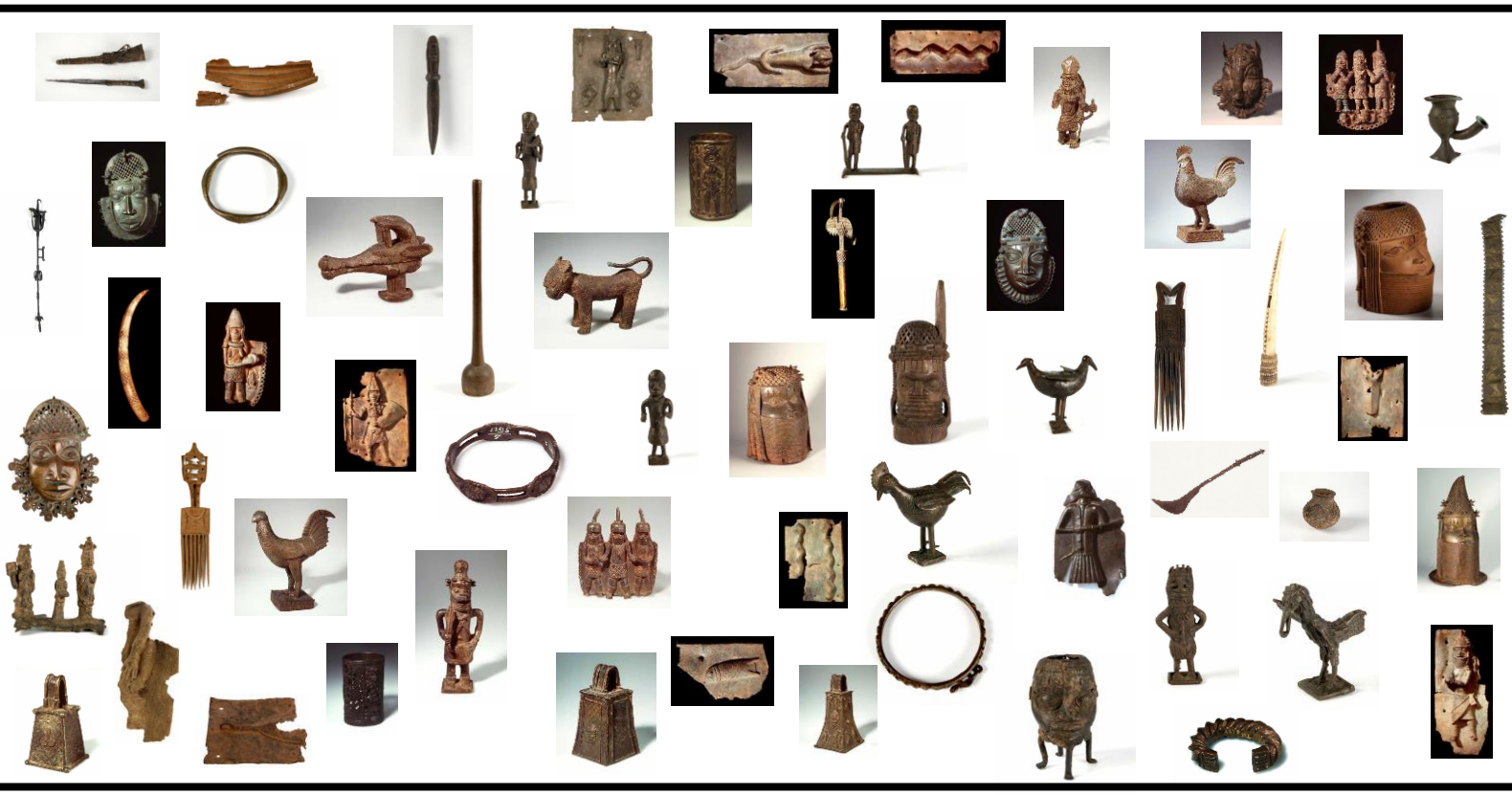
The digitization and decolonization of a museum's collection

The case of the 115 Benin Bronzes in the Dutch National Museum of World Cultures



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INTRODUCTION

At the end of March 2021, the Dutch National Museum of World Cultures (Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen) published a report saying the museum held at least 115 looted objects from the precolonial Kingdom of Benin, which is nowadays situated in Nigeria.[1] The news spread quickly and all major Dutch news outlets covered the story. One question predominated both in the media coverage and in responses to the news: will the objects be returned?

In the following months, this question—along with many others—became a frequently recurring topic of conversation in various European countries. Will Queen Elizabeth II return the sculpture from a Benin king that she possesses? What will restitution of looted Benin objects in Germany look like, and will it still be possible to see these kinds of objects in German museums? And why is restitution by France going so slowly, despite President Macron being the one who gave the discussion about restitution an impetus in 2017?

While there is increasing debate about the restitution of looted Benin objects, the project *Digital Benin: Reconnecting Royal Art Treasures* is taking shape. This project, which is led by the Museum am Rothenbaum in Hamburg, aims to digitally bring together looted Benin objects from all over the world. The digitization of and the online access to museum collections are increasingly being considered as important steps towards restitution. For the last several years, restitution is high on the agenda of Western museums. Questions about the return of cultural heritage from a colonial context are part of a decolonization wave in the museum world. In this thesis, I will examine the relation between digitization and decolonization with regard to the 115 looted objects from the Kingdom of Benin in the Dutch National Museum of World Cultures.

The sacking of Benin City

The destruction of the precolonial Kingdom of Benin and the subsequent looting of its treasures is more than a century later still a much debated event. In February 1897, British soldiers destroyed Benin City, the capital of the Kingdom of Benin. It is estimated that they took 10.000 or more royal and sacred objects, such as bronzes and ivories.[2] These looted items are now collectively referred to as the 'Benin Bronzes', although a large part of the objects is made out of ivory and other materials. The attack had been planned for years, for economic reasons,[3] although the British claimed it to be a 'punitive expedition' in response to the attack of a British military expedition a month earlier. That military expedition, led by Deputy Consul-General of

[1] Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, *Provenance volume 2: The Benin collections at the National Museum of World Cultures*, ed. Fanny Wonu Veys (Leiden: Sidestone Press, 2021), 13; Eric Brassem, "Onderzoek: Zeker 114 objecten in Nederlandse musea zijn geroofd, en die wil Nigeria terug," *Trouw*, 26 March 2021, accessed 29 March 2021, https://www.trouw.nl/cultuur-media/onderzoek-zeker-114-objecten-in-nederlandse-musea-zijn-geroofd-en-die-wil-nigeria-terug~be8d5642/.

[2] Dan Hicks, *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution* (London: Pluto Press, 2020), 8, 137.

[3] Hicks, *The Brutish Museums*, 84; Barnaby Phillips, *Loot: Britain and the Benin Bronzes* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2021), 67–69.

the Niger Coast Protectorate James Phillips, was explicitly warned by the people of Benin not to come to Benin City, but to postpone their visit due to a festival that was taking place. Phillips chose to ignore the warnings and pushed on anyway. On 4 January 1897, as they came close to Benin City, they were attacked. Phillips was killed, among many others. Of the nine British on the expedition, only two managed to escape.[4]

The British retaliation started on 9 February 1897, when the British military force disembarked their Royal Navy ships and boarded a small fleet of steamers to move inland, in the direction of Benin City. The British encountered more resistance than expected, and it took them until February 18th to reach and eventually take the city.[5] On the British side, the attack involved the mobilization of around 5,000 men from both Europe and Africa.[6] Eight of them were killed in the fighting.[7] The losses on the Benin Kingdom's side have not been recorded, but they must have been enormous.[8] In the palace of the Oba—the king—and throughout the entire city the British found an enormous quantity of artworks. They collected, divided, and took the treasures with them. Part of the loot went straight to the Queen of England. The looting and the systematic destruction of Benin City went on for weeks after the fall of the city.[9]

In May 1897, three months after the fall of Benin City, the first auction of Benin Bronzes occurred in London. A few months later, from September 1897 to January 1898, the first exhibition of Benin Bronzes took place in the British Museum.[10] The looted objects from the Kingdom of Benin did not only end up in Great-Britain, but were dispersed all over Europe and indeed the rest of the world. Many of them went to Hamburg, Germany. Already in 1897, the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe in Hamburg acquired the first Benin Bronzes, and 'German collections quickly outpaced British collections'.[11] It is estimated that Benin objects looted in 1897 are currently on display in 161 museums and galleries all over the world.[12]

Since 1936, numerous calls for restitution have been made, and on several occasions objects were returned.[13] However, large-scale restitution never occurred and nowadays the vast majority of Benin Bronzes is still located outside Nigeria. As of recently, various museums have started to consider returning the Benin Bronzes in their collections. In March 2021, for example, the University of Aberdeen announced their decision to repatriate a bust of an Oba,[14] and in April the Horniman Museum in London announced it was considering returning looted

[4] Phillips, *Loot*, 71–75; Hicks, *The Brutish Museums*, 91–92.
[5] Phillips, *Loot*, 93–102.
[6] Hicks, *The Brutish Museums*, 110–11.
[7] Ibid., 115.
[8] Ibid., 115; Phillips, *Loot*, 115.
[9] Hicks, *The Brutish Museums*, 129–34; Phillips, *Loot*, 108–11; Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, *Provenance volume 2*, 22.
[10] Phillips, *Loot*, 9.
[11] Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, *Provenance volume 2*, 23.
[12] Hicks, *The Brutish Museums*, 3, 248–52.
[13] Ibid., 196–99; Phillips, *Loot*, 245.
[14] Lanre Bakare, "Regional museums break ranks with UK government on return of Benin bronzes," *The Guardian*, 26 March 2021, accessed 12 April 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/mar/26/regional-museums-break-ranks-with-uk-government-on-return-of-benin-bronzes.

objects, including some Benin Bronzes.[15] Also in March 2021, the German government announced plans to return all looted objects from Benin City now present in its public collections.[16] The previously mentioned report about the presence of Benin Bronzes in the Dutch National Museum of World Cultures must be considered in light of these developments.

Museums and restitution

The recent developments regarding the (possible) restitution of Benin Bronzes do not stand on their own. Restitution of looted objects from former colonies has been a much debated topic in the last couple of years, both inside the Netherlands and out. Whilst in 2002, 18 European and American museums signed a statement against contemporary calls for restitution, arguing that 'objects acquired in earlier times must be viewed in the light of different sensitivities and values, reflective of the earlier era',[17] 15 years later the tide seemed to have turned definitively. French President Emmanuel Macron's speech on 28 November 2017 at the University of Ouagadougou was exemplary of this turning tide. Arguing that it was no longer acceptable that a large share of Africa's cultural heritage was located in France, he stated: "Within five years I want the conditions to exist for temporary or permanent returns of African heritage to Africa."[18] At Macron's request, the academics Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy wrote a report on what these returns might look like. A year after Macron's speech, their report was published, focusing on objects from sub-Saharan Africa, because: "Whereas many other regions of the world represented in Western Museum collections are still able to hold on to a significant portion of their own cultural and artistic heritage, this is not the case in sub-Saharan Africa which has been able to retain almost nothing."[19] In December 2018, Macron announced that 26 looted objects from the Kingdom of Abomey would return to the Republic of Benin.[20] But at the time of writing, the objects are still in France.

Macron's speech initiated a change in thinking about repatriation of cultural heritage in several European countries, sometimes leading to guidelines being drawn up and objects being returned. In 2018, for example, the German Museums Association published its 'Guidelines on

[15] *BBC*, "Benin Bronzes: Horniman Museum to consider returning looted artefacts," 7 April 2021, accessed 18 April 2021, https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-london-56652357.
[16] Catherine Hickley, "Germany moves towards full restitution of Benin bronzes," *The Art Newspaper*, 22 March 2021, accessed 12 April 2021, https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/germany-moves-towards-full-restitution-of-benin-bronzes.
[17] Directors of The Art Institute of Chicago, et al., "Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums: 'Museums Serve Every Nation,'" in *Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/Global Transformations*, ed. by Ivan Karp, Corinne A. Kratz, Lynn Szwaja, and Tomas Ybarra-Frausto (New York: Duke University Press, 2006), 247–49.
[18] Emmanuel Macron, "Emmanuel Macron's Speech at the University of Ouagadougou," 28 November 2017, accessed 17 April 2021, https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2017/11/28/emmanuel-macrons-speech-at-the-university-of-ouagadougou.
[19] Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics*, trans. by Drew S. Burk, november 2018, accessed 19 February 2021, http://restitutionreport2018.com/sarr_savoy_en.pdf, 3.
[20] Phillips, *Loot*, 286; Farah Nayeri, "France Vowed to Return Looted Treasures. But Few Are Heading Back," *The New York Times*, 22 November 2019, accessed 17 April 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/22/arts/design/restitution-france-africa.html.

Dealing with Collections from Colonial Contexts'.[21] In 2019, British museums repatriated objects to Ethiopia and Australia,[22] and currently the Institute of Art and Law is, commissioned by the Arts Council England, developing guidelines for museums on restitution and repatriation.[23]

The Netherlands has also seen many developments in the area of restitution over the past few years. In March 2019, the Dutch National Museum of World Cultures published a document with criteria for restitution claims.[24] In October 2019, the Dutch Minister of Education, Culture and Science asked the Raad voor Cultuur to establish an advisory committee regarding colonial heritage in state possession.[25] This committee handed its report *Koloniale Collecties en Erkenning van Onrecht* to the Minister on 7 October 2020.[26] In this report, the committee advised the Minister to—among other things—acknowledge the injustice that has been done by taking away cultural heritage from formerly colonized communities, to declare the willingness to restore this injustice if possible, and to formulate a policy with regard to the handling of this cultural heritage.[27] In January 2021, the Minister sent the policy she formulated based on this advice to the Dutch Parliament.[28] Cultural objects from countries where the Netherlands exercised colonial rule for a longer period of time will be returned unconditionally if it can be demonstrated with a reasonable degree of certainty that they were lost involuntarily. Cultural objects of special importance might also be given back if their provenance is unclear, whilst objects from countries that were colonized by other powers than the Netherlands, may be returned also. A special committee will be established to assess requests for restitution.[29]

However, the topic of restitution did not emerge over the past few years. As far back as 1907, 1937, and 1938, the Netherlands returned cultural objects to various societies in present-day Indonesia.[30] Claims for restitution by the young Republic of Indonesia started in 1949, right before independence.[31] Nationalist politics played an important part in these Indonesian claims

[21] German Museums Association, *Guidelines on Dealing with Collections from Colonial Contexts* (Berlin: German Museums Association, 2018).
[22] Phillips, *Loot*, 287; Josh Halliday, "Manchester museum returns stolen sacred artefacts to Indigenous Australians," *The Guardian*, 20 November 2019, accessed 18 April 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/nov/20/manchester-museum-returns-stolen-sacred-artefacts-to-australians; Toyin Owoseje, "British museum agrees to return 'stolen' Ethiopian emperor's hair," *Independent*, 4 March 2019, accessed 18 April 2021, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/british-museum-ethiopian-emperor-s-hair-tewodros-ii-a8806906.html.
[23] Institute of Art and Law, "Arts Council England appoints IAL to develop new guidance on restitution and repatriation," 19 March 2020, accessed 18 April 2021, https://ial.uk.com/arts-council-england-appoints-ial-to-develop-new-guidance-on-restitution-and-repatriation/.
[24] Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, *Provenance volume 2*, 8; Raad voor Cultuur, *Koloniale Collecties en Erkenning van Onrecht* (Den Haag: Raad voor Cultuur, 2020), 13.
[25] Ingrid van Engelshoven, "Commissie Nationaal kader koloniale collecties," 15 October 2019.
[26] Ingrid van Engelshoven, "Aanbieding advies Commissie Nationaal kader koloniale collecties," 7 October 2020; Raad voor Cultuur, *Koloniale Collecties*.
[27] Raad voor Cultuur, *Koloniale Collecties*, 69–71.
[28] Ingrid van Engelshoven, "Beleidsvisie collecties uit een koloniale context," 29 January 2021.
[29] Ibid., 4–6.
[30] Raad voor Cultuur, *Koloniale Collecties*, 43.
[31] Caroline Drieënhuizen, "Mirrors of Time and Agents of Action: Indonesia's Claimed Cultural Objects and Decolonisation, 1947-1978," *BMGN - Low Countries Historical Review* 133, no. 2 (2018): 94.

for restitution.[32] In the 1970s the Netherlands gave back cultural objects to Indonesia on several occasions,[33] and in 2013, the former Museum Nusantara in Delft gave back 1,500 objects to the Republic of Indonesia.[34] Other colonial powers have also been returning cultural objects over the past century. Among them are the United Kingdom, Germany, the United States of America, Franca, Japan, and Norway. Some of the receiving countries are China, Nigeria, Costa Rica, Algeria, Zimbabwe, South-Korea, Myanmar, Ghana, Ethiopia, Malawi, Australia, Namibia, Sri Lanka, Laos, Uganda, and India.[35]

Digitization of collections

Beside questions about restitution, there has been another important development in the museum world over the past two decades: the digitization of museum collections. More and more museums maintain an online catalog that is freely accessible to anyone. A wonderful example is the online collection of the Rijksmuseum in the Netherlands, which offers visitors the opportunity to put together their own online exhibition.[36] A significant part of the online Rijksmuseum collection has also been made available on Wikimedia Commons,[37] a project which aims to make media available to anyone for free.[38] Wikimedia's aims are similar to the aims of the Open GLAM network, which was set up about a decade ago and advocates for open access to cultural heritage.[39] Because of Covid-19, the digitization of museum collections and their online accessibility has only become an even more urgent matter.

Digitization and restitution do not stand on their own, but are often linked with each other. In their *Guidelines on Dealing with Collections from Colonial Contexts*, the German Museums Association states: "Of fundamental importance in dealing with collections from colonial contexts are provenance research and the digitisation of the collections. Both are essential for transparency and international dialogue on equal terms."[40] The academics Sarr and Savoy, who wrote their *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage* at the French President Macron's request, advocate a 'radical practice of sharing' and the 'systematic digitization of documents' when it comes to African cultural heritage present in France. The end goal should be, according to them, '[f]ree access to these materials as well as the free use of the images and documents.'[41] The Dutch advisory committee regarding colonial heritage has also mentioned digital

[32] Ibid., 95–98.
[33] Jos van Beurden, *Treasures in Trusted Hands: Negotiating the future of colonial cultural objects* (Leiden: Sidestone Press, 2017), 123–73; Raad voor Cultuur, *Koloniale Collecties*, 44–45.
[34] Jos van Beurden, *Herplaatsing Collectie voormalig Museum Nusantara Delft: Lering en vragen 2013–2018*, digital publication, 2018, accessed 26 March 2021, https://collectie-nusantara.nl/#/query/7752074f-01bb-4aa5-94f4-9db86f5e1ca5.
[35] Beurden, *Treasures in Trusted*, 24–26, 88.
[36] See https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/nl/rijksstudio.
[37] See https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Collections_of_Rijksmuseum_Amsterdam.
[38] Wikimedia Commons, "Commons:Project scope," accessed 28 April 2021, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Commons:Project_scope; Wikimedia Commons, "Commons:Project scope/Summary," accessed 28 April 2021, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Commons:Project_scope/Summary.
[39] Open Glam, "Open Glam," accessed 28 April 2021, https://openglam.org/.
[40] German Museums Association, *Guidelines on Dealing*, 4.
[41] Sarr and Savoy, *The Restitution*, 67–68.

availability of cultural heritage as a possible outcome in restitution debates.[42] But not everyone is convinced that digitization is a positive factor in these debates. In March 2019, 108 scholars and practitioners working in the fields of intellectual property law and material and digital cultural heritage signed a statement in response to the Sarr-Savoy report, arguing that by digitizing African cultural heritage, European institutions retain control over this digitized heritage. It is for African communities to decide whether or not their heritage should be digitized, they argue.[43]

In the case of the Benin Bronzes present in the Dutch National Museum of World Cultures, digitization is an issue that cannot be ignored. Photographs of all 115 looted objects from the kingdom of Benin can be accessed without restrictions in the digital museum catalog.[44] Moreover, the museum is a member of a project called *Digital Benin: Reconnecting Royal Art Treasures*. This project aims to develop a digital database for the Benin Bronzes that are dispersed all over the world.[45] The project has a funding of €1.2m, and is closely related to the Benin Dialogue Group. Dan Hicks, Professor of Contemporary Archaeology at the University of Oxford and curator at the Pitt Rivers Museum, states that the project 'will undoubtedly serve to increase awareness of the case for full, permanent restitution of the 1897 loot.'[46]

Research question

In this thesis, I will examine the relationship between digitization and decolonization with regard to the 115 Benin Bronzes in the National Museum of World Cultures in the Netherlands. Since the museum desires to decolonize its collection, I want to explore to what extent the digital collection of the museum furthers or impedes the process of decolonization—of which restitution can be an important part—in this particular case.

In the first part of this thesis I will sketch the theoretical framework in which my project fits. I will examine what contemporary decolonization means, what it entails in a museum context, and how restitution fits within the process of decolonizing museums. Furthermore, I will examine how digitization can contribute to the process of decolonization, and what the pitfalls of digitization are. In the second part of this thesis, I will explain what method I will use to analyze the digital catalog of the National Museum of World Cultures. Here, I will also compare my project with a similar project in the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford. In the third part of this thesis I will analyze the online catalog of the National Museum of World Cultures. The question that I will try to answer in this part is: to what extent does the digital catalog of the National Museum of World Cultures further or impede the decolonization of the collection in the case of the 115 Benin Bronzes? I will analyze how the 115 objects are described, and I will look at

[42] Raad voor Cultuur, *Koloniale Collecties*, 55, 60.
[43] Mathilde Pavis and Andrea Wallace, "Response to the 2018 Sarr-Savoy Report: Statement on Intellectual Property Rights and Open Access relevant to the digitization and restitution of African Cultural Heritage and associated materials," *Journal of Intellectual Property, Information Technology and E-Commerce Law* 10, no. 2 (2019): 115.
[44] See https://collectie.wereldculturen.nl.
[45] Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, *Provenance volume 2*, 12.
[46] Catherine Hickley, "Digital Benin: a milestone on the long, slow journey to restitution," *The Art Newspaper*, 8 June 2020, accessed 18 March 2021, https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/digital-benin-a-milestone-on-the-long-slow-journey-to-restitution.

the process of developing the online collection of the museum. The fourth part of this thesis will be a concluding chapter.

PART ONE
Theoretical Framework

In the first part of this thesis I will sketch the theoretical framework in which my project fits. To analyze the extent to which the digital catalog of the National Museum of World Cultures in the Netherlands either furthers or impedes the process of decolonization, I have to first examine what decolonization means in a museum context, and how digitization can contribute to decolonization. In the first paragraph of this part, I will explicate what decolonization means and what it entails in a museum context. Second, I will examine how restitution of cultural heritage relates to decolonization. Third, I will look at the opportunities and pitfalls of digitization of collections in relation to restitution and the decolonization of museums.

1.1 Coloniality and decolonization in a museum context

In order to understand what decolonization means in a contemporary museum context, it is important to first examine what place (the legacy of) colonialism takes in today's society and in today's museum world. Although formal European colonization—the political, cultural, and social dominance of a non-European society by a European power—is almost non-existent anymore, there still exists a global power structure which originated in this formal European colonialism. The people who are exploited, dominated, and discriminated against nowadays, are in large parts descended from the societies that were colonized during formal European colonization.[47] The people who dominate the world stage, on the other hand, are in large parts descended from the societies that colonized other societies. This not only includes Europeans, but also North Americans, Australians and New Zealanders from European descent. The term 'coloniality' describes this ongoing domination rooted in European colonialism. Coloniality is not only inseparable from European modernity,[48] but is also constitutive of European modernity.[49]

Central in the episteme of modernity/coloniality is the idea of development and progress. During European expansion from the fifteenth century onward, European thinking and development became the standard against which other peoples were measured. Europe saw itself as leader, forerunner, and center. The colonies and the colonized peoples, on the other hand, were seen as savage and backward, and were to be put on the path to modernity by Europeans: the white man's burden. Sciences like anthropology, history and ethnology played an important role in the development of the idea that other peoples were inferior to Europeans. The Other—the non-white, non-Western person—became the object of study.[50] Museums, and in particular anthropology and ethnology museums, played an essential role in the construction of the inferior Other, which has been so essential to the colonial project. Dan Hicks, Curator of

[47] Aníbal Quijano, "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2 (2007): 168–69.
[48] Ibid., 171–74.
[49] Walter Mignolo, "Delinking: The rhetoric of modernity, the logic of coloniality and the grammar of de-coloniality," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2: 466, 476.
[50] Quijano, "Coloniality and Modernity," 174.

World Archaeology at the University of Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum, perceives museums as 'weapons' in the colonial project and in the construction of the Other.[51] According to him, 'museums became a key regime of practice through which Africans were dehumanised'.[52] And: "Whereas slavery had been a tool for domination through capture and possession, so too archaeology and anthropology came to be tools for subjugation, through the seizure and display of material culture."[53] He calls the museum a 'warzone', and a vehicle that can make 'a certain worldview seem like it is natural'.[54] The role that European museums played in the project of colonialism should not be underestimated, because 'the acquisition of cultural objects and resources and their transfer to the capitals of Europe were in fact at the heart of—and not at the margins—of the colonial enterprise.'[55] Museums like the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, the British Museum in London, and the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden served as repositories and displays of cultural objects acquired in colonized territories; as cabinets of curiosities.[56]

Museums were not only essential to the colonial project in the past, but they continue to be devices in the project of coloniality in the present.[57] The continued display of looted objects in European and North American museums—like the continued display of the Benin Bronzes—can be seen as part of this ongoing coloniality.[58] By displaying these objects, museums continue to produce and control narratives about and representations of the Other.[59] Furthermore, works of art created by this Other are usually displayed in ethnographic museums, and not in regular art museums.[60] By doing so, the museum world implies that art made by the Other is not equivalent to art made by white Europeans and their descendants.

In general terms, decolonization means to undermine coloniality. Decolonization in a contemporary context, then, entails something different than the decolonization we witnessed in the nineteenth century in the America's, and thereafter in Asia and Africa: the independence of former colonies. Contemporary decolonization means to 'liberate the production of knowledge, reflection, and communication from the pitfalls of European rationality/modernity.'[61] We need to destruct the coloniality of world power, argues Quijano:[62]

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[51] Hicks, *The Brutish Museums*, 127, 165.
[52] Ibid., 180.
[53] Ibid., 181–82.
[54] Villanova University, "Decolonizing Museums Roundtable," 12 March 2021, accessed 7 May 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=shZMIPAV3w0&list=PL_Z9mt0HJeskBM8nPMx5IMz-WulxN7Ypm&index=6.
[55] Sarr and Savoy, *The Restitution*, 13.
[56] Ibid.; Amsterdam Centre for European Studies, "Decolonising Europe 7: Decolonising the museum & art: Collections, colonialism & curators," 21 October 2020, accessed 2 May 2021, https://aces.uva.nl/events/decolonising-europe-lecture-series/decolonising-europe.html#Decolonising-Europe-7--Decolonising-the-museum--art-Collections-colonialism--curators; Elisa Shoenberger, "What does it mean to decolonize a museum?" *Museum Next*, 11 December 2019, accessed 6 May 2021, https://www.museumnext.com/article/what-does-it-mean-to-decolonize-a-museum.
[57] Amsterdam Centre for European Studies, "Decolonising Europe 7."
[58] Hicks, *The Brutish Museums*, 137.
[59] Sarr and Savoy, *The Restitution*, 37–38.
[60] Shoenberger, "What does it"; Amsterdam Centre for European Studies, "Decolonising Europe 7."
[61] Quijano, "Coloniality and Modernity," 177.
[62] Ibid., 177–78.

> First of all, epistemological decolonization, as decoloniality, is needed to clear the way for new intercultural communication, for an interchange of experiences and meanings, as the basis of another rationality which may legitimately pretend to some universality. […] The liberation of intercultural relations from the prison of coloniality also implies the freedom of all peoples to choose, individually or collectively, such relations: a freedom to choose between various cultural orientations, and, above all, the freedom to produce, criticize, change, and exchange culture and society. This liberation is, part of the process of social liberation from all power organized as inequality, discrimination, exploitation, and as domination.[63]

Decolonization in a contemporary context means to provincialize Europe.[64] It means to not regard European (and North American) knowledge and development as universal.

What would decolonization look like in a museum context? Jouwe emphasizes the need for museums to confront their own position in the project of coloniality. According to her, 'to decolonize is to think about how museums have institutionalized representations of modernity/coloniality through controlling narrative, having the power to name and mute, and steering notions of how to relate to the past.'[65] According to *L'internationale Online*, decolonizing the museum 'means both resisting the reproduction of colonial taxonomies, while simultaneously vindicating radical multiplicity.'[66] So on the one hand, it entails confronting the way the Other has been imagined by the museum, and going against this image. On the other hand, it means including perspectives that have always been excluded by the museum.

There is no guideline for decolonizing a museum, and there is no consensus on what decolonizing a museum exactly means in practice. Some, like American curator Chaédria LaBouvier, even doubt if true decolonization of museums is possible. In an online roundtable session organized by the Villanova University, she stated: "Museums are a showcase of imperial plunder, of imperial majesty. […] We're asking museums which are monuments to empire to not be that. And I don't know if we can do that."[67]

Nevertheless, conversations about decolonizing museums often revolve around three recurring aspects: representation, equality, and power. Who, for example, has the power to decide what objects are on display, and what stories are told about these objects? In order to decolonize a museum, the representation of minorities at decision-making positions is important. Curators of color are needed and people of color need to be in positions to make changes.[68] Decolonization also entails sharing authority over the collection with communities of origin, and expanding the perspectives the museum portrays.[69] But it also has to do with the

[63] Ibid., 177–78.
[64] Mignolo, "Delinking: The Rhetoric," 493–94; Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).
[65] Nancy Jouwe, "Sites For Unlearning in the Museum," *Mister Motley*, 29 January 2019, accessed 7 May 2021, https://www.mistermotley.nl/art-everyday-life/sites-unlearning-museum.
[66] Nick Aikens, et al., *Decolonising Museums* (Digital Publication: L'Internationale Online, 2015), 5–6.
[67] Villanova University, "Decolonizing Museums Roundtable."
[68] Ibid.; Hannah McGivern, "Decolonising museums: the new network opening up the diversity debate in the Netherlands," *The Art Newspaper*, 6 July 2020, accessed 7 May 2021; Shoenberger, "What does it."
[69] Shoenberger, "What does it".

accessibility of museums. Who can afford visiting the museum? The museum has to be made accessible for minorities.[70] Furthermore, decolonizing a museum entails reconsidering the texts and languages of exhibitions.[71] Decolonization can mean changing the words used to describe an object or artwork, instead of continuing the usage of racist or otherwise derogatory language that was in use when museum objects were acquired and documented. This is to acknowledge that words which stem from European colonial rule to describe the Other not only shaped how the Other was perceived in past times, but still influence how people are perceived and represented today.[72] Do we say 'slave' or 'enslaved person'? Do we say 'Eskimo' or 'Inuit'?

1.2 Restitution in the process of decolonizing the museum

Restitution quite literally means the act of restoring a thing to its proper owner. It also implies an acknowledgement of the illegitimacy of the previously claimed ownership of the object.[73] But what does restitution entail with regard to cultural objects? How does it relate to the process of decolonizing the museum? And why does restitution matter?

Colonialism denied that African people have a history. Cultural domination and the dispossession of cultural artefacts by colonial powers contributed to this denial. Nowadays, some nations are deprived of so much of their cultural heritage that they cannot adequately tell the story of their history. This is considered problematic particularly for the development of young people.[74] Instead of inspiring and educating the youth of originating communities, this cultural heritage is on display in former colonizing nations. As early as 1969, the Organization of African Unity stipulated the importance of (African) culture to the peoples of Africa: "Culture is the essential cement of every social group, its primary means of intercommunication and of coming to grips with the outside world; it is its soul, its materialization and its capacity for change."[75] Restitution—the handing back of cultural heritage to communities of origin—provides former colonized nations with the possibility to tell their history and to educate their youth.

However, it should be noted that former colonized nations (just like other nations) usually do not consist of a homogeneous group of people. Therefore, the question who exactly should be regarded as the community of origin is regularly raised within restitution procedures. Should it be the postcolonial nation state, or a specific community within this nation state? Are the diaspora also part of this originating community? And what if there are competing claims for restitution (for example, by the government of a nation state, and a specific community within this nation state)? There are no clear-cut answers to these questions. In order to contribute to decolonization, however, it is necessary that the Western museum intervenes as little as possible

[70] Ibid.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Wayne Modest and Robin Lelijveld, ed., *Words Matter: An Unfinished Guide to Word Choices in the Cultural Sector*, 13–14, 21–24.
[73] Sarr and Savoy, *The Restitution*, 29.
[74] Sarr and Savoy, *The Restitution*, 4, 35; Raad voor Cultuur, *Koloniale Collecties*, 54–55.
[75] Organization of African Unity, "Pan-African Cultural Manifesto," *Africa Today* 17, no. 1 (January–February 1970): 25.

in discussions about who belongs and who does not belong to the originating community. Active involvement can lead to a neocolonial way of acting.

Although giving back a cultural object is an important aspect of restitution in a museum context, it entails more than just that. Questions of restitution do not only have a legal component (who can rightfully claim ownership?), but also a political, relational, symbolic and philosophical one.[76] According to Sarr and Savoy, '[r]estitutions open up a profound reflection on history, memories, and the colonial past, concerning the history as well as the formation and development of Western museum collections.'[77] They are ways 'to open a pathway toward establishing new cultural relations based on a newly reflected upon ethical relation.'[78] Sometimes, political and relational aspects like the acknowledgement of the injustice done by the former colonizing power, the exchange of knowledge concerning cultural objects, and scientific cooperation are more important to a former colonized nation than the actual return of a certain cultural object.[79] Furthermore, legal restitution (transferring legal ownership of an object) does not necessarily lead to physical restitution (the physical transfer of an object). The former colonized country might as well decide to lend the object to the (Western) museum. The key here is that the former colonized country should decide, and not the former colonial power.[80] Academics and cultural professionals warn former colonial powers not to fall into a neocolonial manner of acting, by letting their own views and values be leading in discussions about restitution. They stipulate the importance of cooperation and equality.[81] An example of neocolonial behavior would be the development of a restitution policy by a European museum, without consulting the countries to which objects might be returned.[82] Restitution in a museum context is above all about restoring a power imbalance. Therefore, restitution can be an important part of decolonizing a museum, along with researching the provenance of cultural objects, and sharing authority over cultural collections.[83]

Now and then cultural objects are returned to countries of origin under the flag of 'temporary return' or 'long-term loan'. Macron hinted at this possibility in his now famous 2017 speech in Ouagadougou, by stating that he wanted the conditions for 'temporary or permanent returns' to exist within five years' time.[84] In 2019, France indeed 'returned' the sword of Omar Saidou Tall temporarily to Senegal, where it is on loan for five years.[85] And in 2018, the Victoria and Albert museum in London announced it was considering returning looted objects to Ethiopia

[76] Sarr and Savoy, *The Restitution*, 29.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Raad voor Cultuur, *Koloniale Collecties*, 60.
[80] Bambi Ceuppens, in: "Africa and Europe: entangled pasts and presents," lecture Leiden University by Anne-Isabelle Richard, 21 May 2021, accessed 7 June 2021, https://video.leidenuniv.nl/media/t/1_18z1ufdx.
[81] Raad voor Cultuur, *Koloniale Collecties*, 69.
[82] Ceuppens, "Africa and Europe."
[83] Drieënhuizen, "Mirrors of Time," 102–03.
[84] Macron, "Emmanuel Macron's Speech."
[85] BBC, "France returns Omar Tall's sword to Senegal," 18 November 2019, accessed 3 June 2021, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-50458081.

on a long-term loan.[86] Museums have also been talking about loans with regard to the Benin Bronzes. The yet to be built Edo Museum of West African Art in Benin City could display artwork looted in 1897, loaned to Nigeria by various Western museums on a rotating basis.[87]

Some people regard long-term loans as an intermediate step towards permanent restitution. Others emphasize how unjust it is that looted objects return to their originating communities on loan, instead of permanently. Viewed from a decolonization perspective, loans—even those that are long-term—cannot be regarded as a form of restitution by default. Only if the community of origin itself is of the opinion that loans are more convenient than permanent restitution (due to lack of space in museums, for example), loans can be considered as a form of restitution and as contributing to decolonization. In those cases, there is an equal balance of power, and the originating community itself makes decisions about its own heritage. However, when a community of origin desires to recover its cultural heritage permanently, but accepts a long-term loan because the other party does not agree with permanent restitution, the long-term loan should be seen as a result of an unequal power situation, and therefore as reinforcing coloniality instead of contributing to decolonization.

1.3 The possibilities and challenges of digital restitution

Digitization is becoming increasingly important in the museum world. It is also a factor to consider in restitution debates. In their *Guidelines on Dealing with Collections from Colonial Contexts*, the German Museums Association states: "Of fundamental importance in dealing with collections from colonial contexts are provenance research and the digitisation of the collections. Both are essential for transparency and international dialogue on equal terms."[88] Sarr and Savoy advocate a 'radical practice of sharing' and the 'systematic digitization of documents' when it comes to African cultural heritage located in France. The end goal should be, according to them, '[f]ree access to these materials as well as the free use of the images and documents.'[89] The Dutch Raad voor Cultuur also touched upon digital availability of cultural heritage as a possible outcome in restitution debates.[90]

But not everyone is convinced that digitization is a positive factor in restitution debates. In March 2019, 108 scholars and practitioners working in the fields of intellectual property law and material and digital cultural heritage signed a statement in response to the Sarr-Savoy report, arguing that by digitizing African cultural heritage, European institutions retain control over this digitized heritage. They argue that it is for African communities to decide whether or not their heritage should be digitized.[91] From this point of view, it can be said that digitization can stand in the way of restitution, since restitution can be understood as transferring authority over an object. In the case of digitization by a Western museum, the authority over the digitized

[86] Anna Codrea-Rado, "U.K. Museum Offers Ethiopia Long-Term Loan of Looted Treasures," *The New York Times*, 4 April 2018, accessed 3 June 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/04/arts/design/v-and-a-ethiopian-treasure.html.
[87] Phillips, *Loot*, 282–84.
[88] German Museums Association, *Guidelines on Dealing*, 4.
[89] Sarr and Savoy, *The Restitution*, 67–68.
[90] Raad voor Cultuur, *Koloniale Collecties*, 55, 60.
[91] Pavis and Wallace, "Response," 115.

object remains with the former colonial power. The National Museum of the American Indian (Washington D.C., USA), for example, has an enormous digital collection.[92] One may wonder to what extent digitization is a continuation of the unequal (colonial) balance of power in a situation like this. Schroeder describes it as follows:

> However, the digitization of materials that no longer belong to Native American communities by the colonizing powers that were complicit in taking these objects from Native Americans only underscores the native people's lack of control over their own heritage objects. Digitization serves to reinforce the perception that the colonial powers, not the native peoples, control and determine the destiny of these objects.[93]

This ongoing coloniality also manifests itself in digital collections of African and Asian heritage. The Walters Art Museum (Baltimore, USA), for example, possesses an enormous collection of African and Asian manuscripts.[94] In the Netherlands, museums such as the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and the National Museum of World Cultures have digitized (a part of) their collections, including objects from a colonial context.[95] This control over other people's digitized heritage is even more grievous when it concerns culturally sensitive objects, or objects that are considered secret or sacred. Various organizations have argued that institutions should make sure not to provide online access to these kinds of objects.[96]

Some projects that digitize and collect cultural objects from a colonial context have the aim of making this cultural heritage accessible to originating communities. An example of a project with this goal is Coptic SCRIPTORIUM.[97] Digitized Coptic texts from all over the world are collected on its website, with the aim (among others) of ensuring that Coptic Christians can study their history.[98] Since it is very unlikely that this heritage will ever return to Egypt in its entirety, this project is also intended as a form of (digital) restitution. Another example, from the Netherlands, is the digital return to Aruba of the only copy of the oldest Aruban newspaper. The physical copy remains in the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam, but it was digitized and made available to the national library of Aruba. Previously, Aruban researchers had to travel to Amsterdam to see this Aruban newspaper. Now they can conduct research using this newspaper from their own country.[99]

While the benefits for the originating communities are clear in both examples, the question is whether these types of restitution contribute to the decolonization of institutions like museums.

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[92] See https://americanindian.si.edu/explore/collections/search; Michelle Crouch, "Digitization as Repatriation? The National Museum of the American Indian's Fourth Museum Project," *Journal of Information Ethics* 19, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 45–56.
[93] Caroline T. Schroeder, "Shenoute in Code: Digitizing Coptic Cultural Heritage For Collaborative Online Research and Study," *Coptica* 14 (2015): 32.
[94] See https://manuscripts.thewalters.org.
[95] See https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/nl/zoeken and https://collectie.wereldculturen.nl.
[96] German Museums Association, *Guidelines*, 84; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Library Information and Resource Network Inc, "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander protocols for libraries, archives and information services," 2012, accessed 23 May 2021, https://atsilirn.aiatsis.gov.au/protocols.php, article 12.4.
[97] See https://copticscriptorium.org.
[98] Schroeder, "Shenoute in Code."
[99] Conversation with Peter Scholing, 26 October 2020.

As discussed in the first paragraph of this chapter, decolonization is about restoring a power imbalance, about shared authority and equality. But in neither of these two examples the originating community had a voice. Therefore, these projects cannot be perceived as contributing to decolonization.

Is it at all possible to digitally restitute cultural heritage? And if so, what should digital restitution look like in order to contribute to decolonization? To answer this question, I turn to literature about digital return in North America, involving Native Americans and North American museums. A great example of digital return that facilitates decolonization is the project *Inuvialuit Pitqusiit Inuuniarutait: Inuvialuit Living History*, which is a virtual exhibit and community-based digital archive.[100] The project revolves around the Smithsonian's MacFarlane Collection in the National Museum of Natural History in Washington DC. This is a vast collection of Inuvialuit objects purchased in the second half of the nineteenth century by Hudson's Bay Company trader Roderick MacFarlane.[101] The objects were not looted—like the Benin Bronzes—but bought. Nevertheless, the initiators of the project also 'asserted the legitimacy of Inuvialuit control over their knowledge of the use and meaning of the materials examined'.[102] The project sought to bring together the Inuvialuit on the one hand, and the National Museum of Natural History on the other. According to the participants, digital return can be seen as 'a process of creating and maintaining relationships between heritage and cultural institutions, people, and digital data'.[103] These relationships are based on reciprocity, making it possible to share authority over a collection. One of the key accomplishments of the project is the shared authority over the (digital) collection:

> Our second step was to obtain permission from the NMNH to re-contextualize and alter the MacFarlane Collection records for use in our Inuvialuit project (while not changing the original records themselves). This step, in effect, negotiated the digital return and the terms of respect for alternative yet complementary institutional and community perspectives on the collection. Central in this shift of control over the representation of the MacFarlane Collection was the reconciling of Inuvialuit priorities for mobilization and contextualization of the collection with lingering institutional resistance to relinquishing control over curatorial authority. We suggest that our project and similar initiatives are reducing institutional reluctance to open collections to reinterpretation by source communities, and demonstrating the cultural, intellectual, and curatorial benefits of sharing control over representation.[104]

The newly generated information about the collection that is added to the digital project is automatically sent back to the National Museum of Natural History, where the curators can decide whether or not to add this information to the original records. In the words of the project team, this method represents an opportunity 'for originating communities to republish and re-

[100] Kate Hennessy, Natasha Lyons, Stephen Loring, Charles Arnold, Mervin Joe, Albert Elias, and James Pokiak, "The Inuvialuit Living History Project: Digital Return as the Forging of Relationships Between Institutions, People, and Data," *Museum Anthropology Review* 7, no. 1–2 (Spring–Fall 2013): 44–73. The project can be visited at www.inuvialuitlivinghistory.ca.
[101] Ibid., 45–47.
[102] Ibid., 50.
[103] Ibid., 44.
[104] Ibid., 53.

contextualize institutional and colonial archives of their cultural heritage.'[105] Digital return, for the project team, is much more than digitizing objects and making these digitized objects available to originating communities. It is 'a process of forging relationships' and 'a process of re-contextualizing institutional collections data to better represent contemporary interpretations of Inuvialuit tangible and intangible heritage'.[106]

This forging of relations and the reciprocity it triggers is key in the digital return of objects.[107] Museums return information to a community, and the community gives back knowledge about the objects to the museum. Therefore, digital restitution is 'cyclical', while the physical restitution of a specific object usually is not.[108] Digital restitution decenters the authority of the curator/museum, and means that a museum has to cede control over their data to some extent.[109] Digital restitution, as a process of forging reciprocal relations as described in the previous paragraphs, can stimulate 'linguistic or cultural revival, spur contention and disagreement, prompt new cultural forms or popular products, incite new collaborations, and engender new types of performances and artistic creations.'[110]

A special kind of digital restitution is the creation of 3D replicas of cultural objects. This has been done successfully by the Tlingit community of southeast Alaska and the Smithsonian Institution.[111] The Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History handed back a few objects to the Tlingit community, and the community gave permission to the museum to produce 3D replicas of these objects for use by the museum. This collaboration was successful because the community and the museum worked together on equal footing. Shared authority and reciprocity were key.

1.3.1 Issues of copyright and the management of access

Digitization and digital restitution not only pose opportunities, but also challenges. One of the main challenges are issues of copyright. Existing laws of intellectual property offer hardly any opportunities for communities of origin to exercise control over their cultural heritage. Indigenous peoples often are the 'subjects' of works created by others and not the authors of the works (for example, recordings and photographs created by ethnologists). As a result,

[105] Ibid.
[106] Ibid., 62.
[107] Hennessy et al., "The Inuvialuit Living"; Eric R. Hollinger, Edwell John, Jr., Harold Jacobs, Lora Moran-Collins, Carolyn Thome, Jonathan Zastrow, Adam Metallo, Günter Waibel, and Vince Rossi, "Tlingit-Smithsonian Collaborations with 3D Digitization of Cultural Objects," *Museum Anthropology Review* 7, no. 1–2 (Spring–Fall 2013): 201–53.
[108] Joshua A. Bell, Kimberly Christen, and Mark Turin, "Introduction," *Museum Anthropology Review* 7, no. 1–2 (Spring–Fall 2013): 2; Haidy Geismar, "Defining the Digital," *Museum Anthropology Review* 7, no. 1–2 (Spring–Fall 2013): 256; Susan Rowley, "The Reciprocal Research Network: The Development Process," *Museum Anthropology Review* 7, no. 1–2 (Spring–Fall 2013): 33.
[109] Bell, Christen, and Turin, "Introduction," 5; Rowley, "The Reciprocal Research," 31.
[110] Bell, Christen, and Turin, "Introduction," 5–6.
[111] Hollinger et al., "Tlingit-Smithsonian Collaboration."

originating communities do not have the legal means to exercise control over their cultural heritage.[112]

A project that attempts to provide indigenous communities with the possibility to regain some control over their cultural heritage is Mukurtu.[113] This is a content management system managed by the Center for Digital Scholarship and Curation at Washington State University. Various First Nations in North America, such as the Plateau Peoples,[114] have collected and published their cultural heritage online using this content management system. Local Contexts,[115] a project that emerged from the Mukurtu project, has developed a set of Traditional Knowledge Labels (non-legal) and is developing Traditional Knowledge Licenses (legal) for use by indigenous communities to manage the access and use of their cultural heritage by others (who do not belong to the community).[116] The purpose of the labels and licenses is 'to help make institutions and future non-Indigenous users aware of the local values and appropriate uses that remain deeply embedded within these materials, even if they have been outside the communities for generations.'[117] Some traditional knowledge is, for example, gendered: it is meant for women only, or for men only. Some traditional knowledge is secret or sacred. Although traditions can change—and museums definitely do have a role to play in breaking taboos—it is not up to Western museums to take the lead when it comes to objects from a colonial context. Change has to come from the originating community. Also, when discussion exists within the originating community about the appropriate level of access to a certain object, it is not up to the Western museum to intervene, since active involvement can lead to a neocolonial way of acting.

The Traditional Knowledge Labels and Licenses can encourage a user to not only attribute the copyright owner of the work (for example, the white researcher who recorded a song performed by a member of an indigenous community), but also the source community. The labels and licenses might also stimulate reciprocity. When a third party uses material within an educational context, the community of origin can ask for benefits in return, such as access to certain knowledge.[118]

1.4 Conclusion

Decolonization in a museum context is not so much about specific actions that need to be taken, but about a way of acting; an attitude. Three aspects are essential in the decolonization process of museums: representation, shared authority, and equality. Whereas the museum historically functioned as an authority that imagined and represented the Other, the task for the museum in

[112] Jane Anderson and Kim Christen, "'Chuck a Copyright on It': Dilemmas of Digital Return and the Possibilities for Traditional Knowledge Licenses and Labels," *Museum Anthropology Review* 7, no. 1–2 (Spring–Fall 2013): 106–7.
[113] See https://mukurtu.org.
[114] See https://plateauportal.libraries.wsu.edu.
[115] See https://localcontexts.org.
[116] Anderson and Christen, "Chuck a Copyright," 111'; Local Contexts, "TK Labels", accessed 3 June 2021, https://localcontexts.org/labels/traditional-knowledge-labels; Local Contexts, "TK Licenses", accessed 3 June 2021, https://localcontexts.org/licenses/traditional-knowledge-licenses.
[117] Anderson and Christen, "Chuck a Copyright," 113.
[118] Ibid., 114.

a decolonization context is to share that authority with minority groups and allow for multiple and diverse stories to exist within its walls (both online and offline). The restitution of cultural heritage can constitute an important part of this decolonization process. In order to further decolonization, it is fundamental that within restitution processes there exists equality between the participants from former colonized nations and the participants from former colonizing nations. Restitution in a museum context is much more than handing back a cultural object. The forging of new and equal relations between former colonized nations and former colonizing nations is at least as important. If done correctly, the digitization of collections can contribute to forging these relations. Here, again, shared authority is key. Digitized collections provide the opportunity for originating communities to add information and underexposed perspectives to the collections. It is of course necessary that the museum is open to sharing authority over its collections in order to achieve this. Digitization and the maintenance of digital collections should be carried out in close cooperation between the community of origin and the museum.

Digitization can both further and impede the process of decolonization within a museum context. If done unilaterally by the museum—the museum digitizes objects without consulting the originating community—digitization is the result and the continuation of coloniality. But if the construction and the maintenance of a digital database is done in equal collaboration between the community of origin and the museum, digitization in itself can become a form of restitution and a contribution to the decolonization of the museum.

PART TWO
Method

In this second part of my thesis, I will set out the method that I will use to examine the online catalog of the National Museum of World Cultures. The question that I will try to answer in this chapter is: how can one usefully analyze an online catalog in order to determine to what extent the catalog furthers or impedes the process of decolonizing a collection?

As discussed in Part 1, three aspects are essential in the process of decolonizing a museum collection: representation, shared authority, and equality. Digitized collections can contribute to this process by reaching out to communities of origin and including knowledge of these communities in the catalog descriptions. Digitization and maintenance of the digital collection in close cooperation between the community of origin and the museum facilitates shared authority, and therefore contributes to the decolonization of the collection. A related aspect is access to the collection. Decolonization means ensuring that previously excluded people can access the collection – including the digital version. Additionally, access to secret and sacred objects should be regulated in consultation with the community of origin. When determining to what extent an online catalog contributes to the process of decolonizing a collection, it is thus important to look at how the originating community is involved in the digital catalog.

But not only the process behind a digital catalog is important to examine. Analyzing in detail the descriptions of objects in such a catalog is at least equally important. As discussed in Part 1 – Section 1, words that stem from a colonial context, for example, can reinforce coloniality if used in contemporary museum descriptions. This not only holds true for derogatory language, but also for words that put a colonial and / or Eurocentric frame on an object or event. In their 2018 publication *Words Matter*, the National Museum of World Cultures refers to the 1945–1949 war between the Netherlands and Indonesia to illustrate this. Were the fights 'police actions' or was it a 'war of independence'? And were people in Africa and in the Americas who fought for their independence 'rebels' or 'freedom fighters'?[119] The usage of colonial and Eurocentric frames in museum descriptions reinforces coloniality and impedes the process of decolonizing a collection. Furthermore, it is important to examine what sources are used to compose the descriptions in an online catalog. If a digital catalog is to contribute to the decolonization of a museum collection, it is essential that there is a balance between European sources and sources from the originating community. As discussed in Part 1 – Section 2, there is no clear-cut answer to the question who exactly should be considered as belonging to the community of origin. For my analysis, however, it is especially important to see whether the sources used are only produced in a Western context, or whether also sources from a non-Western context are used. Whether these sources were written by, for example, someone from the royal family of Benin, or by an art historian from Nigeria, is of secondary importance. And finally, as discussed in Part 1, decolonization is about forging new and equal relationships. In

[119] Modest and Lelijveld, *Words Matter*, 38.

order to contribute to this, it is necessary that an online catalog provides relevant background information for an object. Where did it come from and how did the object enter the museum collection? And what can be said about the community of origin nowadays? How does this community relate to the object?

2.1 *Labelling Matters*

For my research it is relevant to look at a project called *Labelling Matters* at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford. This project investigates the current descriptions of the museum's objects and aims to develop new—decolonial—labels, both online and offline. An important part of this investigation is assessing the terminology used to describe objects, which is at times derogatory and hurtful.[120] Tracing Eurocentrism in the descriptions of objects is another important part of the project.[121]

Labelling Matters is led by Marenka Thompson-Odlum. In her survey of the physical and digital descriptions of the museum's objects, she analyzes to what extent these descriptions reinforce colonial ideas and ideology. She bases her analysis of the museum's labels on the concept of the Colonial Matrix of Power developed by Aníbal Quijano. This concept states that coloniality works within three broad systems: hierarchies, knowledge and culture. For each description Thompson-Odlum analyses to what extent the description:

- establishes false hierarchies;
- assigns power to and privileges the production of Eurocentric knowledge;
- and imposes White Eurocentric culture.[122]

Hierarchies can be established by using certain (derogatory) words, such as 'coolie'. But the way an object is described can also establish a hierarchy. For example, when a description states that a certain technique used by the Other must have come from Europe originally.[123] Underlying such a statement is the colonial presumption that knowledge originates in Europe and then spreads across the rest of the world.

The prioritizing of Eurocentric knowledge can be seen when an object is described by, for example, a merchant from the seventeenth or eighteenth century instead of a person from the community of origin with practical knowledge about an object. This is not to say that Europeans by definition cannot know anything about African cultures and art, but when museum objects are *only* or *mainly* described by Europeans while an African perspective is missing, this is indeed a signal that European knowledge is being privileged. Also, the literature used to base an object's description on often shows that Eurocentric knowledge is privileged. Usually,

[120] Dictionary Lab, "Labelling Matters", accessed 14 June 2021, https://dictionarylab.web.ox.ac.uk/labelling-matters-0; conversation with Marenka Thompson-Odlum, 18 June 2021; Pitt Rivers Museum, "History of the Museum", accessed 14 June 2021, https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/history-museum.
[121] Conversation with Marenka Thompson-Odlum, 18 June 2021.
[122] Ibid.
[123] Ibid.

bibliographies consist solely of works from white researchers, rather than including references from originating communities.[124]

The imposition of White Eurocentric culture can be seen when a European point of reference is used when explaining the culture of the Other. An example is the labelling of certain spiritual entities or forces as a 'god'. The European point of reference, however, might not at all line up with how the Other thinks about this spiritual entity or force.[125]

An example of Eurocentrism in the Pitt Rivers Museum that Thompson-Odlum encountered, is the way that early colonial missions are described. They are 'consistently referred to as "*voyages*" and "*expeditions*" to emphasize this aspect of newness, endless possibility and scientific discovery that worked well upon the imaginations of Europeans.'[126] Cook's voyages to the Pacific in the second half of the eighteenth century, of which the museum houses a vast number of objects, are an example of this. Although these missions were partly held for scientific purposes, recent studies consider Cook as a person 'who laid the roots for colonialism'.[127] "It could thus be said that positive connotations underlying notions such as 'expedition, explorer, and voyage' are used euphemistically to obscure narratives of coloniality."[128] Moreover, referring to the artefacts in the museum as the 'Cook Voyage collections', indicates a Eurocentric perspective. After all, none of the objects were created by Cook or his crew.[129]

2.2 Source material

Whereas Thompson-Odlum examines the entire collection of the Pitt Rivers Museum, I will only analyze the descriptions of the 115 Benin Bronzes in The National Museum of World Cultures. This museum was one of the first European museums to build an online catalog. The catalog has existed since 2001, and is still being updated once a week. These weekly updates consist of software updates, and if any changes were made to the descriptions in the catalog during that week, those changes are implemented during this weekly update. In addition to this publicly accessible online database, the museum also has an internal digital system: The Museum System. The Museum System contains a photo for each object with all associated documentation. This information forms the basis for the publicly accessible online database. But not all the data in The Museum System is accessible online, for example because it contains privacy-sensitive information. It is possible for visitors to gain access to The Museum System, but this requires an additional authorization from the museum. In response to the *Provenance #2* report on the provenance of the museum's Benin collection, which was published in March 2021, some changes have been made within The Museum System. During the analysis of the

[124] Ibid.
[125] Ibid.
[126] Jip Borm, "Labelling Matters: The Cook Collection: Euphemisms and Omitted Contexts," 4 May 2021, accessed 14 June 2021, https://pittrivers-object.blogspot.com/2021/05/labelling-matters-cook-collection.html.
[127] Ibid.
[128] Ibid.
[129] Conversation with Marenka Thompson-Odlum, 18 June 2021.

publicly accessible online database for this thesis, early June 2021, the descriptions in this online database had not yet been updated.[130]

According to Annette Schmidt, curator Africa for the National Museum of World Cultures, the initial head start the museum had with developing an online database now leads to challenges. When the publicly accessible database was constructed, the museum chose to make available as much information as possible, occasionally publishing the raw data online. This means that some descriptions contain language that is now perceived as inappropriate. If the database were to be set up now, Schmidt says, they would handle this kind of language differently. Therefore, the database remains an ongoing process, with constant adjustments in the fields of, for example, language use and perspectives.[131]

As for the 115 objects from Benin City covered in this thesis, they have all been digitized and can be consulted online. Each of the 115 catalog entries has a title and contains a picture of the object, along with a description. Some descriptions merely contain a few words, while others are multiple paragraphs long. The catalog entries contain various headings, such as 'style period', 'material', 'inventory number', 'origin', 'literature references', and 'publications'. The catalog entries typically provide information in only a couple of sections. For my analysis, the heading 'origin' is the most relevant. In this section, the museum publishes a description and background information of the object; for example, what the object looks like and what it was used for. The headings 'literature references' and 'publications' are also relevant. In these two sections, the museum publishes relevant literature sources.

Looking at how the catalog refers to relevant literature, a clear system seems to be missing. At times, a publication is named under 'publications';[132] whilst on other occasions it is listed under 'literature references'[133] or 'origin'.[134] However, there is no clear difference between the sources listed under these various headings. In addition, some sources are listed under multiple headings. Besides, in most cases it is not indicated precisely which part of a description is based on which source. Although it would be of added value to know exactly which information comes from where, it is less relevant for my analysis. For my research, it is particularly interesting to know what kind of sources the museum mainly relies on. The background of the source is more important than the knowledge of what information was extracted from it, as we will see in Section 5 of Part 3. The background of all the sources used says more about the perspective of the museum—what sources the museum considers to be relevant for the descriptions—than the pieces of information that have been extracted from these sources.

The way I approach the analysis of my sources falls under the method 'critical discourse analysis', as described by Brian David Hodges, Ayelet Kuper, and Scott Reeves. I will use samples of written descriptions of museum's objects, combined with data on the use of these

[130] Conversation with Annette Schmidt, 24 June 2021.
[131] Ibid.
[132] Dutch: 'publicaties.'
[133] Dutch: 'literatuurverwijzingen.'
[134] Dutch: 'herkomst.'

descriptions, and data on the institutions and people that produced these descriptions and the people that are produced by these descriptions.[135] The institution and people that produced these descriptions are the National Museum of World Cultures, its (former) staff, and to some extent Europeans who lived during formal colonialism and contributed to the establishment of the current descriptions used by the museum. The people that are produced by the object descriptions are the historical people from the Kingdom of Benin, and to some extent their contemporary offspring. Critical discourse analysis is often used for the examination of relations of power in society. It is particularly relevant and useful for my thesis because of the colonial context in which the Benin Bronzes were collected.

2.3 Criteria

Based on the previous sections, I have established a list of six criteria that I will use to analyze the descriptions of the 115 Benin Bronzes in the digital catalog of the National Museum of World Cultures:

1. *Cooperation and shared authority*. I analyze to what extent the National Museum of World Cultures works together with people from the Benin Kingdom and other relevant people from Nigeria.
2. *Access and attribution*. I analyze to what extent the collection is accessible for the community of origin, and to what extent the museum regulates access to restricted objects. I also analyze to what extent the creator and / or the originating community is attributed.
3. *Provenance and other background*. I analyze to what extent the catalog entries make clear where an item came from, and how and when it came into the museum's collection. I also will analyze to what extent the catalog entries provide other relevant background data, such as current information about the origin community.[136]
4. *Eurocentric frame: hierarchies*. I will look for hierarchical rankings of cultures,[137] derogatory and offensive words (like 'primitive' and 'savage'), and for instances where various cultures are not described in an equal way (like 'folk' and 'peasant' for Europeans, and 'tribe' for people outside Europe).[138] I will also look for descriptions that signal that Europeans thought of themselves as better.
5. *Eurocentric frame: knowledge*. I will look for language that obscures the truth (like 'to take' instead of 'to loot'),[139] one-sided (Eurocentric) labels,[140] and misrepresentations of the functions of objects,[141] and the use of European sources.

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[135] Brian David Hodges, Ayelet Kuper, and Scott Reeves, "Discourse analysis," *British Medical Journal* 337 (2008): 570–572.
[136] Pitt Rivers Museum, "PittRiversound – PRM Labelling Matters 2020 Marenka Thompson-Odlum," 18 May 2020, accessed 14 june 2021, https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/labelling-matters.
[137] Jip Borm, "Labelling Matters: The Role of Language in the Ethics of Representation," 15 March 2021, accessed 14 June 2021, https://pittrivers-object.blogspot.com/2021/03/labelling-matters-role-of-language-in.html.
[138] Pitt Rivers Museum, "Labelling Matters," accessed 14 June 2021, https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/labelling-matters; Pitt Rivers Museum, "PittRiversound."
[139] Ibid.
[140] Pitt Rivers Museum, "Labelling Matters.
[141] Borm, "Labelling Matters: The Role of Language."

6. *Eurocentric frame: culture*. I will look for the explanation of the culture and customs of the Other using a European framework.

PART THREE
Analysis of the Online Catalog

In this third part of my thesis, I will analyze the descriptions of the 115 Benin Bronzes in the online catalog of the National Museum of World Cultures. For this purpose, I created my own database, containing the information that was available in the online catalog about each of the 115 objects. I created this database in the first week of June 2021, and therefore the data used for this analysis might differ from the current data. Besides analyzing these descriptions, I will examine to what extent the museum interacts with the community of origin. The question that I will try to answer in this chapter is: to what extent does the digital catalog of the National Museum of World Cultures further or impede the decolonization of the collection in the case of the 115 Benin Bronzes?

3.1 Cooperation and shared authority

As discussed in Part 1 – Section 3, the key to the successful decolonization of a museum's digital collection is close cooperation between a community of origin and museum staff, resulting in the shared authority over the digital collection. The participants of the *Inuvialuit Pitqusiit Inuuniarutait: Inuvialuit Living History* defined digital return as 'a process of creating and maintaining relationships between heritage and cultural institutions, people, and digital data'.[142]

Annette Schmidt, who is curator Africa for the National Museum of World Cultures and has been involved in the Benin Dialogue Group since 2011, affirms that cooperation with communities of origin is of great importance in a decolonization process. One of the great advantages of *Digital Benin: Reconnecting Royal Art Treasures*—a project that aims to digitally bring together looted Benin objects from all over the world—is the close involvement of both Nigerians and Western Museums, Schmidt states. The National Museum of World Cultures is involved in the project, and has promised to make the museum's database and documentation available for *Digital Benin*. But although the museum does have connections with people in Nigeria and is a member of the Benin Dialogue Group, its digitized Benin collection was not created in collaboration with the Nigerians and is not jointly maintained. As a result, there is no shared authority over the Benin collection.[143]

The originating community does not appear to be involved in the digitized Benin collection of the National Museum of World Cultures in any other way either. In the entries of the digital catalog, the museum encourages people to make contact, by stating: "If you have any comments about the information in this item, or if you find an error, please contact us at collectie@wereldculturen.nl."[144] Schmidt, for example, occasionally receives emails from

[142] Hennessy et al., "The Inuvialuit Living," 44.
[143] Conversation with Annette Schmidt, 24 June 2021.
[144] Dutch: "Heeft u opmerkingen over de informatie in dit item, of vindt u een fout, neemt u dan contact met ons op via collectie@wereldculturen.nl."

people who explain the function of an object or who want to correct certain information. But these comments almost always come from the Dutch public. Schmidt: "Ideally, we would get these kinds of additions and comments from other places in the world."[145]

3.2 Access and attribution

The lack of comments from Nigerians on the digitized Benin Bronzes in the National Museum of World Cultures can be partly explained by access problems. Although digitization improved the accessibility of the museum's collection to a certain extent, the fact that the descriptions of the objects are in Dutch makes the catalog less accessible for anyone who does not understand Dutch. Schmidt affirms that digitization can accelerate the process of decolonization, because of the increased access to the collection. The museum hopes that this increased access will encourage people to help the museum describe the objects. Decolonization also means polyphony, argues Schmidt, and digitization can contribute to this polyphony because of the increased accessibility of the collection. But she calls the current degree of access 'limited' for people who do not understand Dutch.[146]

In terms of access, it is not only important to look at the accessibility of the collection for minorities, but also to look at the accessibility of objects that are considered secret. All 115 Benin Bronzes are photographed and are accessible for anyone who visits the catalog's website. As to the museum's knowledge, there are no objects among the 115 Benin Bronzes that are secret, that are only meant for people of a specific gender, or that are restricted in another way.[147]

As discussed in Part 1 – Section 3.3, one of the challenges for digital collections are issues of copyright. Existing laws of intellectual property offer hardly any opportunities for communities of origin to exercise control over their cultural heritage. The catalog entries for the Benin Bronzes do mention the Bini (the people of the Kingdom of Benin) as the 'culture'[148] where the objects originated. But that is all in terms of attribution. None of the descriptions mention, for example, the name of the person who created the object. Of course, because of colonialism, this information is most probably unknown. But instead of simply leaving out information about the creator of an object, the museum could explain why the creator is unknown. It would further the decolonization process if the museum acknowledges the information gap, by explaining that the people who looted the objects were not interested in the creators of the objects and did not take the effort of recording any information about them. Furthermore, the descriptions do not provide general information about the Bini as the originating community of these objects.

The pictures and descriptions of the objects are shared by the museum under the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (CC BY-SA 4.0). This means that anyone may use and share the information—including the picture of the object—free of charge

[145] Conversation with Annette Schmidt, 24 June 2021.
[146] Ibid.
[147] Ibid.
[148] Dutch: 'cultuur.'

for any purpose (even commercially), as long as the creator is given appropriate credit.[149] There are no Traditional Knowledge Labels or Licenses used in the catalog entries.

3.3 Provenance and other background

As discussed in Part 1, provenance research is considered important in decolonization processes.[150] The National Museum of World Cultures also attaches great importance to provenance research, and wants 'to make current provenance research on sensitive collections as widely accessible as possible.'[151] The report about the provenance of the Benin collection that was published in March 2021—and that was discussed in the introduction of this thesis—is an example of the museum's efforts.

Although the museum obviously values transparency about the provenance of objects, information regarding the provenance of the Benin collection is scarce in the digital catalog. Only two of the 115 catalog entries (objects RV-1164-6 and RV-1310-4) state that the object in question came from the 'punitive expedition'[152] to Benin City in 1897. The scale of the destruction caused by the British soldiers is not made clear in these entries. One additional description (object RV-1243-13) states that the object possibly came from this event. There are two objects (RV-2668-433 and RV-2668-434) of which the description explicitly states that they did *not* come from the military expedition, while provenance research has shown that they did. The descriptions of three other objects (RV-1243-7, RV-1243-45, and RV-1310-3) do mention the 'punitive expedition', but do not make clear that the objects in question were looted during this event. The remaining 107 descriptions do not mention the attack on Benin City at all.

According to curator Annette Schmidt, the information about the provenance of the Benin objects was updated at the same time the report was published. This updated information, however, is only available in The Museum System (the internal digital system) and not in the publicly accessible online catalog. This has to do with privacy-sensitive information. The provenance-field of The Museum System can contain information about the person the museum acquired an object from. Therefore, the information in this field is not shared with the general public. The museum will look for a way to share information about the provenance of the Benin collection without sharing privacy-sensitive information, says Schmidt.[153]

In addition to providing provenance information, providing other background data can further the decolonization process. Especially when an object's presence in a museum is contested, it is important to provide knowledge about this. In the case of the Benin Bronzes, it would be relevant to provide information about the efforts of Nigeria to retrieve the objects. For almost 15 years, Nigerian stakeholders and Western museums have tried to reach an agreement about

[149] Creative Commons, "Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International," accessed 12 July 2021, https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0.
[150] German Museums Association, *Guidelines on Dealing*, 4; Drieënhuizen, "Mirrors of Time," 102–03.
[151] Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, *Provenance volume 2*, 11.
[152] See for an analysis of this term and its usage Part 3 – Section 5.2.
[153] Conversation Annette Schmidt, 24 June 2021.

the future of the Benin Bronzes through talks in the Benin Dialogue Group. As a result of these talks, the project *Digital Benin: Reconnecting Royal Art Treasures* was set up. None of the object descriptions in the digital catalog of the National Museum of World Cultures, however, provides information about the struggle of Nigeria to retrieve (a part of) the Benin Bronzes. The Benin Dialogue Group is not mentioned, and the museum does not say anything about its own role in these talks or its vision on restitution.

Furthermore, current information about the community of origin is of great value. The Bini culture is still thriving today, and the Royal Family of Benin takes an important place in society. The digital descriptions of the Benin collection, however, do not give any information about contemporary Benin society. A mere two descriptions (objects RV-1243-6 and RV-1243-9) provide insights into the Bini culture after the attack on Benin City in 1897. The description of object RV-1243-6, which is a musical instrument, states:

> "The festival in which these rattles are used, Ugie Oro, was introduced by the fourth Oba, Ewedo, but was expanded by Esigie with the addition of the victory over Igala. In the past, the entire Ugie Oro ceremony took more than three months. During this period, the king and chiefs performed every five days, dancing in procession dressed in their best costumes. In 1985, the ceremony was performed for the first time during the Eweka regime. The limitations of modern life in Benin City reduced the period to less than two weeks."[154]

This relatively recent information about the Bini culture is more than 35 years old. The description of object RV-1243-9, which is a sculpture of a bird used as a musical instrument, also provides some information about *Ugie Oro*:

> "In the past, the entire ceremony lasted more than three months. In 1985 the ceremony was performed again for the first time in a long time but within two weeks. In the last decades of the twentieth century, attention has returned to traditional festivities and ceremonies that had taken place for centuries but were performed less and less often. It is a way of reclaiming and positioning one's own identity."[155]

None of the remaining 113 object descriptions provides current background information about the Bini culture. It remains unknown what *Ugie Oro* looks like nowadays, for example, and if bronze casting still takes such an important place in modern-day Benin City.

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[154] Dutch: "Het feest waarbij deze ratels gebruikt worden, Ugie Oro, was geïntroduceerd door de vierde Oba, Ewedo, maar werd door Esigie uitgebreid door de toevoeging van de overwinning op Igala. Vroeger nam de gehele Ugie Oro ceremonie ruim drie maanden in beslag. Gedurende deze periode traden de koning en chiefs elke vijf dagen op, dansend in processie gekleed in hun beste kostuums. In 1985 werd de ceremonie voor het eerst tijdens het regime van Eweka opgevoerd. De beperkingen van het moderne leven in Benin Stad brachten de periode terug tot minder dan twee weken."

[155] Dutch: "Vroeger duurde de gehele ceremonie ruim drie maanden. In 1985 werd de ceremonie voor het eerst sinds lange tijd weer opgevoerd maar binnen twee weken. De laatste decennia van de twintigste eeuw is er weer aandacht voor traditionele festiviteiten en ceremoniën die eeuwenlang plaats hadden gevonden maar steeds minder vaak werden uitgevoerd. Het is een manier om de eigen identiteit terug te winnen en te positioneren."

3.4 Eurocentric frame: hierarchies

There are different ways an object description can establish false hierarchies between peoples. First of all, a hierarchy can be established through the usage of certain words that originated in a colonial context and were meant to signal that a person or community was seen as backward. Terms like 'coolie' or 'Eskimo' bear with them the negative connotation of inferiority. It is, however, not only derogatory language that can establish false hierarchies. Certain presumptions or statements can also contribute to the establishment of hierarchies among peoples, for example when it is stated that a certain technique used by a society that has been othered must have originated in Europe. As described in Part 2 – Section 1, underlying such a statement is the colonial presumption that knowledge originates in Europe, and then spreads over the rest of the world.

In this section, I will first look at problematic language in the catalog entries of the National Museum of World Cultures. Second, I will analyze a reoccurring statement in this catalog—that seventeenth century Dutchmen were very impressed by what they saw in Benin City—which might look innocent at first glance, but actually contributes to establishing a false hierarchy.

3.4.1 Problematic language

Word usage is an important theme for the National Museum of World Cultures. In 2018, the museum published a document called *Words Matter*, which is 'an unfinished guide to word choices in the cultural sector'.[156] This document is one of the starting points for describing objects in the museum. All exhibition texts are drawn up in accordance with these guidelines, and some online descriptions have been rewritten, but this has not (yet) been done for the entire collection.[157]

Offensive language is difficult to find in the online descriptions of the Benin Bronzes in the National Museum of World Cultures. The only word used that might be considered offensive is 'slaves'.[158] Over the last few years, a discussion about the word 'slave' has emerged in the Netherlands. Some people prefer 'enslaved person',[159] because it would emphasize the humanness of the person, while the word 'slave' would reduce the person to a thing.

Six descriptions in the online catalog use the word 'slaves'. The description of object RV-1243-24 states that the object is a manilla, which was used as a means of payment by Portuguese traders. Furthermore, the description states:

> "European traders mainly bought ***slaves***, gold, ivory and pepper in return."[160]

[156] Modest an Lelijveld, *Words Matter*.
[157] Ciraj Rassool, "Museum Labels and Coloniality," in Wayne Modest and Robin Lelijveld, ed., *Words Matter*, 22; conversation with Annette Schmidt, 24 June 2021.
[158] Dutch: 'slaven.'
[159] Dutch: 'tot slaaf gemaakte persoon.'
[160] Dutch: "Europese handelaars kochten er vooral slaven, goud, ivoor, peper voor terug."

The description of object RV-1164-4 classifies it as a commemorative head of an Oba. About the Oba, the description states:

> "The Oba had a monopoly on trade - especially ivory, ***slaves*** and pepper - but the British government demanded free trade."[161]

The catalog entries for objects RV-1243-34 (a relief plaque), RV-1243-36 (a staff), RV-1243-44 (a staff), and RV-1310-6 (a staff) contain a similar statement. All four descriptions include a variation of the sentence:

> "The Oba had a monopoly on trade - especially in ivory, ***slaves*** and pepper - and that brought him great wealth."[162]

Not only the word 'slaves' in itself might evoke negative feelings, also the way the word is used—in a list of valuable materials—might do so. Although enslaved human beings were considered nothing more than valuable goods to be traded like ivory and pepper during colonial rule, it impedes contemporary decolonization when the humanity of these people is still not acknowledged in the current catalog descriptions. Countering the (colonial) perceptions of centuries ago is an important part of the decolonization process. This includes the perception that enslaved people were things instead of human beings.

3.4.2 Impressed Europeans

Nine of the 115 descriptions state that Dutchmen who visited the palace of the Oba in the seventeenth century were very impressed by what they saw. The descriptions of the objects RV-1164-1, RV-1164-8, RV-1164-9, RV-1170-5, RV-1243-16, RV-1243-17, RV-1243-18, RV-1286-3, and WM-15985 contain a variation of the sentence:

> "Dutch traders who visited the palace in the 17th century were very impressed."[163]

Although this statement might look innocent at first glance, it actually contributes to the establishment of a hierarchy between Dutch traders and the people of the Kingdom of Benin. We know that in the seventeenth century Europeans saw Africans as savages. In the minds of European people, African people were not capable of accomplishing the same things as Europeans. This perspective did not change after the Europeans came into contact with the Bini and learned about their art and architecture. The statement that the Europeans were 'impressed', therefore, signals that they did not expect the people from Benin City to be capable of creating high quality bronze castings and large architectural structures, more than it signals that they were genuinely impressed.[164]

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[161] Dutch: "De Oba bezat het monopolie op de handel - vooral ivoor, slaven en peper - maar de Britse regering eiste vrij handelsverkeer."
[162] Dutch: "De Oba had het monopolie op de handel - vooral in ivoor, slaven en peper - en dat leverde hem grote rijkdom op."
[163] Dutch: "Nederlandse handelaren die in de 17e eeuw het paleis bezochten waren zeer onder de indruk."
[164] Conversation with Marenka Thompson-Odlum, 18 June 2021.

This is not to say that mentioning the fact that Dutch traders were impressed (which they surely were) is wrong. It is actually a very insightful fact. But this statement needs contextualization. The description should provide more background information about the perspective of the seventeenth century Dutch traders, and should contextualize their admiration.

3.5 Eurocentric frame: knowledge

There are many ways the privileging of European knowledge can manifest itself. In this section, I will look at three aspects of the online catalog related to knowledge that contribute to the establishment of Eurocentrism. First, I will examine which sources are referred to in the catalog entries. Second, I will look at the usage of the term 'punitive expedition' and at the effect the usage of this term has. Third, I will reflect on what it means that many catalog entries use terms like 'probably', 'presumably', and 'perhaps'.

3.5.1 Sources and literature references

In total, 22 works are cited in the online catalog. Together they are cited over 200 times. In six cases, a work is cited in the description of the object concerned, under the heading 'origin'.[165] In all the other cases, works are mentioned under the headings 'literature references'[166] and 'publications'.[167] The oldest work cited is the book *Naukeurige Beschrijvinge der Afrikaensche Gewesten* from 1668, and the most recent work cited is the article "Een Westerse worsteling met goede bedoelingen" from 2020.

Table 1. Works cited in the catalog entries of the Benin Bronzes in the National Museum of World Cultures, sorted by the frequency of reference

Source	Number of times referred to
Bedaux, R.M.A. "De geschiedenis van de Leidse Benin-verzameling." In: Armand Duchâteau, *Benin: vroege hofkunst uit Afrika*. Brussel: Gemeentekrediet, 1990.	57
Marquart, Joseph. *Die Benin-Sammlung des Reichsmuseums für Völkerkunde in Leiden: beschrieben und mit ausführlichen Prolegomena zur Geschichte der Handelswege und Völkerbewegungen in Nordafrika*. Leiden: Brill, 1913.	56
Ezra, Kate. *Royal Art of Benin: The Perls Collection in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1992.	46
Webster, William Downing. *Illustrated Catalogue of Ethnographical Specimens, European and Eastern Arms and Armour, Prehistoric and Other Curiosities*. Vol. 4. No. 24 to 27. Bicester: W.D. Webster, 1900.	8

[165] Dutch: 'herkomst.'
[166] Dutch: 'literatuurverwijzingen.'
[167] Dutch: 'publicaties.'

Dongen, Paul van, Matthi Forrer, and Willem van Gulik (editors). *Topstukken uit het Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde*. Leiden: Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, 1987.	6
Dapper, Olfert. *Naukeurige Beschrijvinge der Afrikaensche Gewesten*. Amsterdam: Jacob van Meurs, 1668.	5
Schwarz, A. "Tweeduizend jaar kunst in Nigeria." *Verre naasten naderbij* 3 (1969): 40–47.	5
Webster, William Downing. *Illustrated Catalogue of Ethnographical Specimens, European and Eastern Arms and Armour, Prehistoric and Other Curiosities*. Vol. 3. No. 18 to 23. Bicester: W.D. Webster, 1889-1899.	5
Wijs, Sonja. "Van ruilen komt huilen – een historische overdracht." *Vereniging Vrienden Etnografica* 6 (2018): 100-19.	5
Mathijssen, Niels. "Een Westerse worsteling met goede bedoelingen." *De Goene Amsterdammer* 144, no. 13 (2020).	4
Luschan, Felix von. *Die Altertümer von Benin*. Berlin and Leipzig: Walter de Gruyter & co, 1919.	3
Ben-Amos, Paula and Arnold Rubin. *The Art of Power, the Power of Art: Studies in Benin Iconography*. Museum of Cultural History Monograph Series, no. 19. Los Angeles: Museum of Cultural History, 1983.	2
Ben-Amos, Paula. "Who is the man in the bowler hat? Emblems of identity in Benin royal art." *Baessler-Archiv* 31, no. 1 (1983): 20, 161–83.	2
Plankensteiner, Barbara. *Benin*. Visions of Africa Series. Milan: 5Continents Editions, 2010.	2
Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde. *Afrikaanse Kunst in Nederland: Tentoonstelling Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde Leiden 1 december 1947 – 1 februari 1948*. Leiden: Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde Leiden, 1947.	2
Tardy. *Les Ivoires: Antiquité, Islam, Inde, Chine, Japon, Afrique noire, Régions polaires, Amérique*. Parijs: Tardy, 1977.	2
Elliott, Catherine. "The (Re) Verse of a Benin Bronze Plaque: Tracing the Story Behind a Museum and Collector's Piece." *Tribal Art Magazine* XII: 4/49 (2008): 134-39.	1
Faber, Paul, Daan van Dartel, and Sonja Wijs. *Africa at the Tropenmuseum*. Amsterdam: KIT Publishers, 2011.	1
Freyer, Bryna. *Royal Benin Art in the Collection of the National Museum of African Art*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987.	1
Plankensteiner, Barbara. *Benin. Kings and Rituals: Court Arts from Nigeria*. Ghent: Snoeck Publishers, 2007.	1
Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde. *Gids voor het Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde te Leiden*. Leiden: Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, 1961.	1
Schulze, Sabine and Silke Reuter. *Raubkunst? Die Bronzen aus Benin im Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg*. Hamburg: Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, 2018.	1

What immediately stands out when looking at the list of cited works, is that all 22 works cited were created in a European or North-American context. A substantial part of the publications is associated with Western museums, such as the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde in Leiden, the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe in Hamburg, and the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art in Washington D.C. These publications are, for example, published by the museum and / or written by museum staff. This is also the case for the three most frequently cited works, which together make up about three quarters of the references in total:

1. "De geschiedenis van de Leidse Benin-verzameling" by R.M.A. Bedaux from 1990 (cited in 57 catalog entries);
2. *Die Benin-Sammlung des Reichsmuseums für Völkerkunde in Leiden* by Joseph Marquart from 1913 (cited in 56 catalog entries);
3. *Royal Art of Benin* by Kate Ezra from 1992 (cited in 46 catalog entries).

The works by Bedaux and Marquart were written in a European context, while the work by Ezra was written in a North-American context. Joseph Marquart, who lived from the second half of the nineteenth century to the first half of the twentieth century, was curator Africa and the Americas at the Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden from 1900 to 1910.[168] Rogier Bedaux was curator Africa at the same museum about a century later.[169] Kate Ezra was curator of African art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York when she wrote *Royal Art of Benin*, and is currently curator at Yale University Art Gallery.[170] As shown in Part 1, Western museums—in particular ethnographic museums—and their staff have always been complicit in the colonial project. This of course does not mean that contemporary staff of ethnographic museums cannot have a decolonial perspective. Dan Hicks, for example, is Curator of World Archaeology at the University of Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum, while his recent book *The Brutish Museums* is widely regarded as a decolonial work. Nevertheless, the fact that the three most cited references in the digital catalog of the National Museum of World Cultures—which together make up about three quarters of the references in total—all come from a Western museum context, is harmful for the decolonization process. The decolonization of a collection benefits from polyphony. The polyphony in the museum's use of sources, however, is hard to find. All sources originated in a Western context, and the large majority of sources originated in a Western museum.

One of the few works that was not created in a museum context is *Naukeurige Beschrijvinge der Afrikaensche Gewesten* by Olfert Dapper. This source stands out because it is the oldest (it was published in 1668), and it is the only one that was created before the sacking of Benin City. Dapper was a Dutch physician and writer who lived in the seventeenth century. His book *Naukeurige Beschrijvinge der Afrikaensche Gewesten*, to which the catalog of the National Museum of World Cultures refers five times, contains information about the Kingdom of Benin. He wrote his book relying on descriptions of others, since he never travelled to Africa

[168] Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, *Provenance volume 2*, 71.
[169] Universiteit Leiden Nieuwsarchief, "Prof. dr. Rogier Bedaux benoemd tot Officier in de Orde van Oranje-Nassau," 13 December 2005, accessed 4 July 2021, https://www.leidenuniv.nl/nieuwsarchief2/692.html.
[170] MAVCOR, "Kate Ezra," accessed 4 July 2021, https://mavcor.yale.edu/people/kate-ezra.

himself.[171] Although Dapper did not create his work in a museum context, his book definitely contributed to the European colonial project. He wrote down what other Europeans thought about the African peoples they encountered on their journeys, and thus contributed to the creation of the Other on the African continent. The online catalog of the National Museum of World Cultures uses his description of the Oba's court (which he based on the travelogue of an administrator of the Dutch West India Company), and his statement that the Oba paraded through the city once a year, accompanied by tamed leopards. The catalog entries of objects RV-1243-22 and RV-1243-23 state:

> "Once a year, the Oba walked through the city accompanied by a large number of tamed leopards (***see Dapper***)."[172]

The catalog entry of object RV-1310-4 states the same information about the Oba, but also gives more information about Dapper himself:

> "In his description from 1668, ***Olfert Dapper*** - who wrote travelogues of countries in Africa, Asia and the Mediterranean - says that once a year the Oba paraded through the city with a large number of tamed leopards."[173]

An additional catalog entry (RV-1286-3) names Dapper as a literature reference. This text also states that the Oba paraded through the city once a year with leopards. The catalog entry of object RV-1164-1 does not mention the leopards, but uses Dapper's description of the Oba's court:

> "Historian ***Olfert Dapper*** based himself on the travelogue of Samuel Blommaert - merchant and administrator of the Dutch West India Company - and wrote in 1668: 'The King's court is square […] it is as large as the city of Haerlem, and is surrounded by a special wall, like the one that runs around the city. It is divided into many splendid palaces, houses and chambers of the courtiers, and comprises beautiful and long square galleries, about the size of the Amsterdam exchange, but one larger than the other, which rest on wooden pillars, covered from top to bottom with cast copper, as on the images their war deeds and battles are carved, and are very cleanly maintained.'"[174]

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[171] Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, *Provenance volume 2*, 27.

[172] Dutch: "Eens per jaar liep de Oba vergezeld door een groot aantal getemde luipaarden door de stad (zie Dapper)."

[173] Dutch: "In zijn beschrijving uit 1668 vertelt Olfert Dapper - die reisbeschrijvingen van landen in Afrika, Azië en de Middellandse Zee schreef - dat de Oba eens per jaar met een groot aantal getemde luipaarden door de stad paradeerde."

[174] Dutch: "Geschiedschrijver Olfert Dapper baseerde zich op het reisverslag van Samuel Blommaert - koopman en bewindvoeder van de WestIndische Compagnie - en schreef in 1668: "…Het hof des Konings is vierkant […] is wel zoo groot als de stadt Haerlem, en omringt rontom met een byzondere muur, als om de stadt loopt. Het is verdeelt in veel prachtige paleizen, huizen en vertrekken der hovelingen, en begrijpt schone en lange vierkante galderyen, ontrent zoo groot als de beurs t'Amsterdam, doch d'een groter, als d'ander, die op houte pylaren rusten, van onderen tot bovenen met gegoten koper beslagen, daer op d'afbeeldingen hunner oorloghs-daden en velt-slagen gesneden staen, en worden zeer reindelijk onderhouden…"

Two other works that were not created in a museum context are the *Illustrated Catalogue of Ethnographical Specimens, European and Eastern Arms and Armour, Prehistoric and Other Curiosities* volumes 3 and 4 by William Downing Webster. These two catalogs stand out because they were created by a person who collected and sold looted Benin objects. Webster was a British ethnographic art dealer and collector who lived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. He assembled a large collection of objects originating from the sacking of Benin City in 1897.[175] Webster published multiple catalogs with ethnographic objects from all over the world. He sold many objects to museums. As an ethnographic art dealer he facilitated coloniality by providing ethnographic museums with objects, and by ordering and determining the objects he collected in catalogs. By ordering and determining objects made by the Other, he imposed his Western view on these objects. Of the 115 objects in the National Museum of World Cultures that were definitely looted from Benin City in 1897, 50 objects were purchased from Webster.[176]

One catalog entry (RV-1243-35) refers to Webster and his catalogs in the description of the object:

> "Although descriptions on older object cards classify this as a belt being worn, the description from the catalog of seller and ethnographic dealer ***Webster*** suggests that the band was decoration of a chair: 'Brass band in form of a snake, with hammered ornamentation, taken off a wood seat in the King's house.'"[177]

An additional twelve descriptions refer to Webster and his catalogs as 'literature reference' or 'publication': RV-1243-26, RV-1243-43, RV-1243-33, RV-1243-41, RV-1243-22, RV-1243-32, RV-1243-40, RV-1243-39, RV-1243-25, RV-1243-34, RV-1243-42, and RV-1243-36. It is of course very logical that the National Museum of World Cultures uses Webster's catalogs. My point is not that the usage of these catalogs is 'wrong' or that these two catalogs by themselves infer that the online catalog of the museum prioritizes European knowledge. My point is that the combination of all the sources used shows a clear preference for European knowledge. African sources are completely absent.

The privileging of European knowledge is not only visible in the sources used. The descriptions of objects RV-1243-7, RV-1243-45, and RV-1310-3 also show Eurocentrism in the way the text is written. These three descriptions about bronze or brass roosters that were placed on the altars of deceased queen mothers state:

[175] Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, *Provenance volume 2*, 36–37.
[176] Ibid.
[177] Dutch: "Hoewel beschrijvingen op oudere objectkaarten dit aanmerken als een riem die werd gedragen, suggereert de beschrijving uit de catalogus van verkoper en ethnografische dealer Webster dat de band versiering van een stoel was: 'Brass band in form of a snake, with hammered ornamentation, taken off a wood seat in the King's house.'"

> "Their presence on royal altars ***was first described by Lt. Commander J. Jeans***, who occupied Benin with his troops after the British punitive expedition of 1897."[178]

Since bronze castings had been present in Benin City for centuries, it is very unlikely that Jeans was the first person ever to describe the sculptures of roosters. Jeans might have been the first *European* who described the roosters. Stating that Jeans was the first to describe the sculptures reinforces the colonial idea that nothing happened in Africa before the arrival of the Europeans. It is similar to stating that Columbus 'discovered' the Americas (as if there were no people living there already when he arrived).

It is remarkable that seven catalog entries refer to 'oral tradition' as a source. Oral tradition is potentially a great way to counter Eurocentrism in catalog entries. However, in this case the stories do not seem to come from the people of Benin City directly. None of the catalog entries refers to an interview or a specific person as the source of the story. Some of the entries do refer to one or more of the 22 works mentioned above. This implies that the oral traditions mentioned were transcribed by Westerners. The catalog entry of object RV-1243-6, for example, refers to an oral tradition about Oba Esigie:

> "According to an oral tradition, an ibis-like bird predicted Oba Esigie that he would suffer defeat in his war against the Igala and their leader, the Ata of Idah (early 16th century)."[179]

This catalog entry, however, does not refer to any sources. The catalog entry of object RV-1243-9 states something similar:

> "According to tradition, an ibis-like bird predicted that Oba Esigie - ruler of Benin in the sixteenth century - would lose a war against the neighboring people of Igala."[180]

This catalog entry refers to Marquart and Bedaux under the heading 'publications'. But it is not clarified where this story came from exactly. The catalog entries of objects RV-1243-7, RV-1243-45, and RV-1310-3 mention another oral tradition:

> "According to oral tradition, the Ogisos, kings of the first Benin dynasty, used a magical creature in the form of a rooster as a spy and protector."[181]

[178] Dutch: "Hun aanwezigheid op koninklijke altaren werd het eerst beschreven door Lt. Commander J. Jeans, die met zijn troepen Benin bezette na de Britse strafexpeditie van 1897."
[179] Dutch: "Volgens een orale traditie voorspelde een ibis-achtige vogel Oba Esigie dat hij in zijn oorlog tegen de Igala en hun leider, de Ata van Idah (begin 16e eeuw), een nederlaag zou lijden."
[180] Dutch: "Volgens de overlevering voorspelde een op een ibis lijkende vogel dat Oba Esigie - heerser over Benin in de zestiende eeuw - een oorlog tegen het naburige volk Igala zou verliezen."
[181] Dutch: "Volgens de mondelinge overlevering gebruikten de Ogiso's, koningen van de eerste Benin dynastie, een magisch wezen in de vorm van een haan als spion en beschermer."

RV-1243-7 mentions Ezra under 'literature references', while RV-1243-45, and RV-1310-3 do not refer to any sources at all. Whether this story really comes from Ezra's work is unclear. The catalog entry of object RV-1286-1 also mentions an oral tradition:

> "According to oral tradition, Oba Osemwede (1816-1848) allowed the chiefs to have heads made for their ancestor altars."[182]

This catalog entry refers to Plankensteiner's book *Benin* under 'literature references' and Bedaux under 'publications'. But also in this case, the description does not clarify where this story came from exactly. Finally, RV-1286-7 mentions an oral tradition about Oba Ewuare:

> "According to an oral tradition, Oba Ewuare - who ruled the Benin Empire in the fifteenth century - captured beads of coral from Olokun, the god of the sea. Whoever owned these beads could claim the right to the royal throne."[183]

This catalog entry does not mention any sources. Therefore, the origin of this oral tradition also remains unclear.

An online catalog is ideally suited to allow the public to add stories (including oral history) to the already existing knowledge about an object, and in that way contributes to the decolonization of the museum collection. A great example is the previously mentioned project *Inuvialuit Pitqusiit Inuuniarutait: Inuvialuit Living History*. Members of the originating community add stories to the museum's objects, without interference from others. However, it is necessary to meet a number of preconditions in order to make this possible. First of all, the catalog descriptions need to be in a language that the originating community understands. This is not the case for the National Museum of World Cultures.[184] Furthermore, the catalog must be arranged in such a way that not just anyone can add something to the descriptions. This requires close cooperation with the community of origin, which currently is not the case at the National Museum of World Cultures.

3.5.2 The 'punitive expedition'

Not only the sources used can indicate a preference for European knowledge, also the frames used to tell information about the objects can indicate Eurocentrism. One such frame used in the catalog entries of the Benin Bronzes is the 'punitive expedition' frame. In six catalog entries, the sacking of Benin city is called a 'punitive expedition'[185] (RV-1164-6, RV-1243-7, RV-1243-13, RV-1243-45, RV-1310-3, and RV-1310-4). This term indicates a European (colonial) perspective. The British framed the attack as a 'punitive expedition' in response to the killing

[182] Dutch: "According to oral tradition, Oba Osemwede (1816-1848) allowed the chiefs to have heads made for their ancestor altars."
[183] Dutch: "Volgens een mondelinge overlevering veroverde Oba Ewuare - die in de vijftiende eeuw over het Beninrijk heerste - kralen van koraal op Olokun, de god van de zee. Wie deze kralen in zijn bezit had kon het recht op de koningstroon opeisen."
[184] See Part 3 – Section 2.
[185] Dutch: 'strafexpeditie.'

of a few British merchants. But in reality, the attack had been planned for years, for economic reasons.[186]

In the six catalog entries that use the term 'punitive expedition', the European perspective is reinforced by other euphemistic language. Twice the verb 'to take'[187] is used to describe the transfer of a Benin Bronze from Benin City to Europe (RV-1243-13 and RV-1310-4). The verb 'to loot'[188] is only used once (RV-1164-6). Three descriptions mention the 'punitive expedition' without mentioning that the object in question was looted during this event (RV-1243-7, RV-1243-45, and RV-1310-3). These three objects are all sculptures of roosters. The online description states that bronze or brass roosters were placed on the altars of deceased queen mothers. The description does mention a 'punitive expedition' in 1897, but does not explain what this exactly meant. Neither does the description make clear that these sculptures of roosters were looted during the occupation and destruction of Benin City:

> "Their presence on royal altars was first described by Lt. Commander J. Jeans, who ***occupied*** Benin with his troops after the British ***punitive expedition*** of 1897."[189]

Also notice the word 'occupied'. This word sounds relatively peaceful, while in reality the entire city was destroyed. The catalog entry of object RV-1243-13, which is a sculpture of a court dignitary, is slightly different. In this description the destruction of Benin City is still called a 'punitive expedition' without any additional information, but it is made clear that this sculpture is 'possibly' coming from this expedition. Nevertheless, the full scale of the events does not become clear from this description. The object was 'taken', which is a quite neutral term and therefore does not bring across what really happened:

> "***Possibly*** this sculpture group was ***taken*** from Benin after the British ***punitive expedition*** of 1897 and the sculptures were sold separately."[190]

The description of object RV-1310-4, a sculpture of a leopard, is similar to the previous description. Again, the 'punitive expedition' is not explained and the sculpture was 'taken'. The only difference is that this description does not doubt that the sculpture came from the looting of 1897 and omits the 'possibly':

> "After the British ***punitive expedition*** of 1897 the sculptures were ***taken*** from Benin and sold separately."[191]

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[186] Hicks, *The Brutish Museums*, 84; Phillips, *Loot*, 67–69.
[187] Dutch: 'meenemen.'
[188] Dutch: 'buitmaken.'
[189] Dutch: "Hun aanwezigheid op koninklijke altaren werd het eerst beschreven door Lt. Commander J. Jeans, die met zijn troepen Benin bezette na de Britse strafexpeditie van 1897."
[190] Dutch: "Mogelijk is de beeldengroep na de Britse strafexpeditie van 1897 uit Benin meegenomen en zijn de beelden afzonderlijk verkocht."
[191] Dutch: "Na de Britse strafexpeditie van 1897 zijn de beelden uit Benin meegenomen en afzonderlijk verkocht."

The description that comes closest to describing what actually happened is that of object RV-1164-6; a sculpture of a court dignitary. Instead of using the verb 'to take', this description uses the verb 'to loot'. But even this catalog entry does not bring across the full scale and horror of the events:

> "This object was ***looted*** during the British ***punitive expedition*** in 1897 and then sold."[192]

The term 'punitive expedition' implies that the people of Benin City had to be punished, and that the British were justified in their attack. The euphemistic terms 'to take' and 'to occupy' obscure the violent and colonial nature of the attack and subsequent looting.[193] However, the use of the term 'punitive expedition' is not the real problem. This was a military term used by the British in specific situations all around the world. Therefore, for research purposes the term 'punitive expedition' can be a very useful one. The real problem is that the descriptions do not explain what a 'punitive expedition' meant exactly.[194] The descriptions do not mention colonialism, the large-scale destruction, or the underlying reasons for the attack. The current catalog entries that name the 'punitive expedition' do not contribute to the decolonization of the museum collection. To the contrary, they impede the decolonization process.

3.5.3 Guessing the function of an object

During the heyday of European colonialism, Europeans assumed that Africans had no (useful) knowledge and therefore they were not interested in African knowledge. This former disinterest in African knowledge still seeps through in the current descriptions of the Benin objects in the National Museum of World Cultures. For 33 of the 115 objects it is clear that the museum does not know exactly what the object is or what the object is intended for.

In five cases, the museum seems to have no idea whatsoever about what an object is. Object RV-1243-11, for example, is described as:

> "An elongated bronze or brass object, ***probably*** an architectural feature, decorated with snakes."[195]

Also object RV-1335-4 is described only by its appearance:

> "***It is not clear*** what function this object had. It is a pleated plate, the convex side of which is decorated with geometric patterns. ***Perhaps*** this is a lid or a decorative element."[196]

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[192] Dutch: "Dit voorwerp werd bij de Britse strafexpeditie in 1897 buit gemaakt en daarna verkocht."
[193] Borm, "Labelling Matters: The Role of Language"; Pitt Rivers Museum, "PittRiversound."
[194] Conversation with Marenka Thompson-Odlum, 18 June 2021.
[195] Dutch: "Een langwerpig bronzen of messing voorwerp, waarschijnlijk een architectonisch onderdeel, gedecoreerd met slangen."
[196] Dutch: "Het is niet duidelijk wat voor functie dit voorwerp heeft gehad. Het is een geplooide plaat waarvan de bolle kant is gedecoreerd met geometrische patronen. Misschien is dit een deksel of een decoratief element."

The guesses about what object RV-1243-31 might be, are a little more specific:

> "This band of cowrie shells ***may be*** an arm piece or other ornament to be worn. It ***could be*** an amulet."[197]

The guesses about object RV-1243-40 are also a little more specific:

> "***A pen, pin or statue*** carved in wood with a face with mustache and beard (***perhaps*** a Portuguese person)."[198]

The description of object RV-1164-5 focusses fully on the appearance of the object:

> "A figure with a staff in the left hand and ***a kind of*** shield in the right hand, standing on an elongated surface."[199]

In other cases the museum guesses what an object is. Of object RV-1295-2, for example, the museum states:

> "It is ***probably*** a hair ornament."[200]

Of object RV-1310-7, which is a sculpture of a head, the museum states:

> "***Presumably*** this head was used by higher chiefs for commemorative purposes. […] The frog ***seems to be*** associated with Ofoe, the emissary of the Ogiuwu spirit, who belongs to the realm of death and negative forces. Ofoe, who ***seems to have*** the shape of a frog, has an excessively large head with two arms and legs."[201]

Both object RV-2668-438 and object RV-2668-439 are figures of a man with a bird:

> "***It seems that*** the bird is a so-called 'bird of prophecy' that are depicted on clappers (clappers in English) and fulfill a function as a dignity staff and musical instrument."[202]

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[197] Dutch: "Deze band met cowrieschelpen is misschien een armsieraad of ander ornament dat wordt gedragen. Het zou een amulet kunnen zijn."
[198] Dutch: "Een pen, pin of beeld uit hout gesneden met een gezicht met snor en baard (misschien een Portugees persoon)."
[199] Dutch: "Een figuur met een staf in de linkerhand en een soort schild in de rechterhand, staande op een langwerpige ondergrond."
[200] Dutch: "Het is waarschijnlijk een haarversiering."
[201] Dutch: "Vermoedelijk werd dit hoofd door hogere chiefs gebruikt voor herdenkingsdoeleinden. […] De kikvors schijnt in verband te staan met Ofoe, de gezant van de Ogiuwu-geest, die behoort tot het domein van de dood en negatieve krachten. Ofoe, die de vorm van een kikvors lijkt te hebben, heeft een buitensporig groot hoofd met twee armen en benen."
[202] Dutch: "Het lijkt erop dat de vogel een zogenaamde 'bird of prophecy' is die op klepels (clappers in het Engels) worden afgebeeld en een functie vervullen als waardigheidsstaf en muziekinstrument."

For a number of sculptures, the museum guesses who the sculpture represents. One such sculpture is object RV-1164-7:

> "These figures ***may be*** representations of assistants to a king mother (ibierugha iye oba)."[203]

Another example is object RV-1310-5:

> "This sculpture is ***probably*** a Queen Mother - a Iyoba - with two of her children from the ancient kingdom of Benin and has stood on an ancestral altar of a deceased Oba - king - or Iyoba."[204]

Also for object RV-2975-1 it is not clear who it represents:

> "This anthropomorphic figure - a human figure with fish tails - ***probably*** represents the water god Olokun."[205]

On object RV-1163-3, which is a pendant, three people are depicted. The middle one is the Oba, but the museum has to make a guess about the two others:

> "The two other figures ***probably*** depict his eldest son - the heir to the throne - and his brother, the army commander. The accompanists ***could also be*** the Osa and the Osuan - members of the higher priestly class."[206]

The same is true for object RV-1243-30, which is another pendant:

> "The two figures supporting him are ***probably*** his eldest son - the heir apparent and his brother - the commander of the army. The attendants ***could also be*** the Osa and the Osuan, members of the higher priestly class."[207]

Also the identity of the figure on object RV-1243-39—another pendant—is guessed:

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[203] Dutch: "Mogelijk zijn deze figuren uitbeeldingen van assistenten van een koning-moeder (ibierugha iye oba)."
[204] Dutch: "Dit beeld is waarschijnlijk een koningin-moeder - een Iyoba - met twee van haar kinderen uit het oude koninkrijk Benin en heeft op een voorouderaltaar van een overleden Oba - koning - of Iyoba gestaan."
[205] Dutch: "Deze antropomorfe figuur - een mensengedaante met vissenstaarten - stelt vermoedelijk de watergod Olokun voor."
[206] Dutch: "De twee andere figuren verbeelden waarschijnlijk zijn oudste zoon - de troonopvolger - en diens broer, de legeraanvoerder. De begeleiders zouden ook de Osa en de Osuan - leden van de hogere priesterklasse - kunnen zijn."
[207] Dutch: "De twee figuren die hem ondersteunen zijn waarschijnlijk zijn oudste zoon - de troonopvolger en zijn broer - de aanvoerder van het leger. De begeleiders zouden ook de Osa en de Osuan, leden van de hogere priesterklasse, kunnen zijn."

> "The woman on this pendant ***probably*** represents a Queen Mother. [...] With both hands she holds a disc-shaped object, ***possibly*** a tambourine. [...] The frog ***may be*** related to Ofoe, the emissary of Ogiuwu, the spirit of the dead."[208]

In some cases, it is mainly the function of an object that is not clear. For example of object RV-1295-7:

> "This bracelet ***may*** also ***have had*** a magical function."[209]

Also the function of object RV-2668-436 is guessed:

> "This statue ***may be*** intended as a toy."[210]

Object RV-1243-3 is a jar, of which the museum is not sure what it was meant for:

> "***It is possible*** that the contents of the jar were intended for ritual or magical purposes."[211]

In three cases, the museum seems to have a good idea of the background of an object. About object RV-1148-1 the museum states:

> "***Presumably***, Ezomo Ekeneza had the tooth made as a memorial to the internal power struggle between Oba Akenzua I and the rebellious army commander n'Ode around 1715."[212]

And about object TM-1772-2018:

> "***Possibly*** this plate recalls a similar event, as a token of the newly appointed dignitary's gratitude to his monarch."[213]

Also the description of object RV-1286-7 is quite specific:

> "This finger ring with a large red coral ***belonged to the Oba - the king of Benin - or other members of the royal family or a dignitary***. Only they were allowed to adorn

[208] Dutch: "De vrouw op deze hanger stelt waarschijnlijk een koningin-moeder voor. […] Met beide handen houdt ze een schijfvormig voorwerp vast, mogelijk een tamboerijn. […] De kikker houdt mogelijk verband met Ofoe, de gezant van de dodengeest Ogiuwu."
[209] Dutch: "Deze armband heeft misschien ook een magische functie gehad."
[210] Dutch: "Mogelijk is dit beeld bedoeld als speelgoed."
[211] Dutch: "Het is mogelijk dat de inhoud van de pot voor rituele of magische doeleinden bestemd was."
[212] Dutch: "Vermoedelijk heeft Ezomo Ekeneza de tand laten maken als aandenken aan de interne machtsstrijd tussen Oba Akenzua I en de opstandige legeraanvoerder n'Ode omstreeks 1715."
[213] Dutch: "Mogelijk herinnert deze plaat aan een soortgelijke gebeurtenis, als teken van dankbaarheid van de nieuw benoemde dignitaris aan zijn vorst."

> themselves with jewels of red coral. […] ***It is not known*** whether this ring also belonged to the crown jewels."[214]

One description makes a guess about the provenance of the object (RV-1243-13):

> "The sculpture group ***may have been*** taken from Benin after the British punitive expedition of 1897 and the sculptures were sold separately."[215]

The descriptions of nine objects (RV-1170-5, RV-1243-16, RV-1243-17, RV-1243-18, RV-1295-4, RV-1295-5, RV-1335-1, RV-1335-2, and RV-1335-3) show uncertainty about when the objects were made:

> "The relief plates were ***probably*** cast from bronze between 1550 and 1650, by bronze casters employed by the Oba."[216]

Of one guess we now know—thanks to provenance research conducted by the museum—that it is not true. Objects RV-2668-433 and RV-2668-434 are proven to come from the attack by British soldiers on Benin City in 1897, while their descriptions guess they did not. The description of object RV-2668-433 states:

> "This ***seems to be*** a 'modern' Benin 'bronze' - stylistically it does not belong to the old court style; ***probably*** it was made after the military expedition. ***It is not clear*** why both birds have merged into a whole."[217]

The description of object RV-2668-434 states:

> "This ***seems to be*** a 'modern' Benin: stylistically it does not belong to the old court style; ***probably*** it was produced after the military expedition. ***It is not clear*** why both birds stand back to back."[218]

The reason that the descriptions of the Benin Bronzes contain so many uncertainties, is that the African objects that entered the museum were usually not contextualized. A large part of the Africa collection of the National Museum of World Cultures has not even been described at all. The only available data are when and through whom the object entered the museum collection.

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[214] Dutch: "Deze vingerring met een grote bloedkoraal heeft toebehoord aan de Oba - de koning van Benin - of andere leden van de koninklijke familie of een hoogwaardigheidsbekleder. Alleen zij mochten zich met sieraden van bloedkoraal tooien. […] Het is niet bekend of deze ring ook tot de kroonjuwelen heeft behoord."
[215] Dutch: "Mogelijk is de beeldengroep na de Britse strafexpeditie van 1897 uit Benin meegenomen en zijn de beelden afzonderlijk verkocht."
[216] Dutch: "De reliëfplaten werden vermoedelijk tussen 1550 en 1650 uit brons gegoten, door bronsgieters in dienst van de Oba."
[217] Dutch: "Hier lijkt sprake te zijn van een 'moderne' Benin-'brons' - stylistisch behoort het niet tot de oude hofstijl; waarschijnlijk is het gemaakt na de militaire expeditie. Onduidelijk is waarom beide vogels tot een geheel versmolten zijn."
[218] Dutch: "Hier lijkt sprake te zijn van een 'moderne' Benin: stylistisch behoort het niet tot de oude hofstijl; waarschijnlijk is het geproduceerd na de militaire expeditie. Onduidelijk is waarom beide vogels ruglings staan."

According to Annette Schmidt, this lack of information is the result of colonialism. During formal European colonialism, an object description was considered much less important for objects from Africa than for objects from other parts of the world. Most African objects entered the museum more than 120 years ago. At that time, people were not interested in background information of those objects. About the Benin Bronzes, Schmidt says:[219]

> It was interesting that they came from the expedition, because then they probably came from the palace. But what the objects exactly were, was not that interesting.[220]

Schmidt argues that the decolonization of a collection should start with the contextualization of the objects. Contextualization has a decolonizing effect, Schmidt states. She hopes that collaboration with Nigeria will bring African perspectives to the museum's objects.[221]

Marenka Thompson-Odlum, researcher for the *Labelling Matters* project in the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, recognizes what Schmidt says. The Benin Bronzes were collected by soldiers, who were interested in making money. Looting objects and selling them was a form of compensation for their part in the expedition. They did not care about the purpose, the meaning, and the context of the objects they took. Thompson-Odlum says that the lack of background information is typical for world cultures museums. Descriptions often state a lot about the form of an object and about the technical process of the creation of the object. In the case of the Benin Bronzes, a lot is said about the technique of lost wax casting. But information about the usage and meaning of an object often misses.[222]

There is no simple solution for the problem of missing information. These descriptions are not easy to rewrite, as additional information is simply not there. The only way to solve this, is to conduct research in collaboration with the community of origin. The online catalog can provide a lot of possibilities for such a joint venture.

3.6 Eurocentric frame: culture

When Europeans arrived in Africa, they tried to make sense of the cultures and customs they encountered. Logically, they did this on the basis of their own frame of reference—Europe. The Europeans sought to explain the culture and customs new to them on the basis of European culture. This Eurocentric explanation of African culture can still be found in descriptions of museum objects, and is impairing for the process of decolonizing the collection.

In this section, I will analyze four examples of the usage of a Eurocentric frame of reference to explain African culture that occur in the object descriptions of the National Museum of World Cultures. The first example concerns sculptures of roosters that were placed on Queen Mothers' altars, and revolves around the Eurocentric concept of 'gender'. The second example concerns the role of the Oba in society, which is explained using a Western Christian point of reference.

[219] Conversation with Annette Schmidt, 24 June 2021.
[220] Ibid.
[221] Ibid.
[222] Conversation with Marenka Thompson-Odlum, 18 June 2021.

The third example concerns the recurring use of the term ‘god’ for African spiritual forces and entities. The fourth example concerns the use of the word ‘magic’ in various descriptions.

3.6.1 The rooster

Objects RV-1243-7 and RV-1310-3 are sculptures of roosters. These roosters were placed on the altars of deceased Queen Mothers to honor them. The descriptions of these two objects state:

> “It deserves some explanation why a male animal is placed on a woman’s altar. Although the symbolic meaning of the rooster has not yet been unequivocally clarified, it is suspected that the rooster is a symbol of the Eson, the first wife of the Oba. She teaches the younger women the court etiquette and rituals and is responsible for the women’s quarters of the royal palace. Her honorific is “Eson, Ogoro Madagba”, the rooster that crows at the head of the harem. An analogy for both her dominant position among the king’s wives and her strong, bold character. The Queen Mother holds a unique position among the women of Benin. She has the same authority as all the male city chiefs. She is also depicted on altar plates with the ruler’s jewelry which is normally reserved only for the men of Benin. So because the Queen Mother is different from other women and shares many privileges and power with the men, it is not that surprising that a male symbol like the rooster is used to honor her.”[223]

Objects RV-1163-1 and RV-2668-444 are also sculptures of roosters. The descriptions of these two sculptures are similar to the descriptions of the other two roosters, but they are somewhat less extensive:

> “The rooster is also a symbol of the Eson, the first wife of the Oba. She teaches the younger women court etiquette and court rituals and is responsible for the women’s quarters of the royal palace. She has as much political authority as the male city chiefs. Since she differs from other women and shares many privileges and power with the men, it is not that surprising that a male symbol like the rooster is used to honor her.”[224]

[223] Dutch: “Het verdient toch enige uitleg waarom een mannelijk dier op het altaar van een vrouw geplaatst wordt. Alhoewel de symbolische betekenis van de haan nog niet eenduidig opgehelderd is vermoed men dat de haan een symbool van de Eson, de eerste vrouw van de Oba, is. Zij leert de jongere vrouwen de hofetiquetten en rituelen en is verantwoordelijk voor de vrouwenkwartieren van het koninklijk paleis. Haar eretitel is “Eson, Ogoro Madagba”, de haan die kraait aan het hoofd van de harem. Een analogie voor zowel haar dominante positie onder de vrouwen van de koning als haar sterke, doortastende karakter. De koninginmoeder bekleed namelijk een unieke positie onder de vrouwen van Benin. Ze heeft dezelfde autoriteit als alle mannelijke stadshoofden. Zij wordt ook afgebeeld op altaarplaten met de sieraden van de machthebber die normaal alleen gereserveerd zijn voor de mannen van Benin. Dus omdat de koninginmoeder verschilt van andere vrouwen en vele privileges en macht met de mannen deelt, is het niet zo verwonderlijk dat een mannelijk symbool als de haan gebruikt wordt om haar te eren.”

[224] Dutch: “De haan is bovendien een symbool van de Eson, de eerste vrouw van de Oba. Zij leert de jongere vrouwen de hofetiquette en hofrituelen en is verantwoordelijk voor de vrouwenverblijven van het koninklijk paleis. Ze heeft evenveel politiek gezag als de mannelijke stadschiefs. Omdat ze verschilt van andere vrouwen en veel privileges en macht met de mannen deelt, is het niet zo verwonderlijk dat een mannelijk symbool als de haan gebruikt wordt om haar te eren.”

The descriptions of the roosters are clearly based on a European frame of reference. The only reason why the presence of a male animal on the altar of a woman presumably 'deserves some explanation' is because Europeans find it remarkable. In Europe there are certain ideas about the existence of two genders and a strict separation between them. This European concept about gender, however, is not universal. Furthermore, the prioritization of gender over other characteristics might not at all line up with African ideas. Apparently, for the Bini, other characteristics, which the rooster and the Queen Mother had in common, were more important than gender. The rooster was most likely a very logical symbol for the Bini, and its use needed no explanation at all.

Obviously, the National Museum of World Cultures is a European museum, and will be visited by a large number of Europeans. This European audience might be surprised when they read that a sculpture of a male animal was placed on a woman's altars, since the audience also has a European frame of reference. It is therefore not so much 'wrong' to explain why a rooster was placed on a woman's altar, but it is important to point out that the surprise about his custom is rooted in a European perspective.

3.6.2 The Oba

The descriptions of five objects (RV-1163-2, RV-1164-4, RV-1243-1, RV-1243-42, and RV-2668-445) interpret the Oba as follows:

> "An Oba was a ***living god***, an ***intermediary*** between humans and the supernatural world."[225]

This interpretation of the Oba's role in Benin society is resemblant of the interpretation of Christ's role in Christian tradition. Christ is regarded as an intermediary between God and mankind, while he himself is both divine and human at the same time. The classification 'intermediary' also evokes associations with the role that a priest plays in Christianity. According to Marenka Thompson-Odlum, the interpretation of the Oba's role in Benin society might be more true now than it was at the time the Benin Bronzes were looted, because of interaction with European epistemology.[226]

3.6.3 Gods

In the 115 descriptions, five different 'gods' are mentioned: Olokun (13 times), Osun (three times), the Oba (two times), Ogun (one time), and Osa (one time). Most descriptions that mention a 'god' are about Olokun. Olokun is described as the god of sea, water, rivers, and wealth. The description of a bell with object number RV-1286-5, for example, classifies Olokun as 'the god of water and wealth':

[225] Dutch: "Een Oba was een levende god, een intermediair tussen de mensen en de bovennnatuurlijke wereld."
[226] Conversation with Marenka Thompson-Odlum, 18 June 2021.

> "Catfish symbolize prosperity, peace, well-being and fertility. They are associated with ***the god of water and wealth*** - ***Olokun*** - and are often offered on altars."[227]

Also the catalog entry for object RV-1163-3—a pendant—mentions the catfish:

> "The catfish refer to ***Olokun***, ***god of water and wealth***."[228]

The same is true for the description of object RV-1243-20, which is a hip pendant:

> "Catfish are associated with ***Okolun***, ***the god of water and wealth***."[229]

The description of RV-1295-4, a relief plaque with catfish, states:

> "Catfish are associated with ***Olokun*** - ***the god of water and wealth*** - and symbolize prosperity, peace, well-being and fertility."[230]

Various other descriptions define Olokun as 'water god' or 'sea god'. The description of a relief plaque with object number TM-1772-2018, for example, states:

> "The crocodile is associated with ***the water god Olokun***, who, symbol of wealth, beauty and fertility, represents the perfect untainted world."[231]

Olokun is also mentioned in the descriptions of two relief plaques with a crocodile (objects RV-1295-5 and RV-1335-1:

> "Crocodiles are seen as guardians of the great waters. They are sent by ***Olokun*** - ***the god of water*** - to punish people by knocking over their canoes."[232]

Object RV-2975-1, which is a sculpture of a human with fish tales, is said to represent Olokun:

> "This anthropomorphic figure - a human figure with fish tails - probably represents ***the water god Olokun***. ***Olokun*** is the only god depicted by the Bini. He is ***the god of the sea and rivers,*** who sends rain and answers prayers for wealth and prosperity."[233]

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[227] Dutch: "Meervallen symboliseren welvaart, vrede, welzijn en vruchtbaarheid. Ze worden geassocieerd met de god van water en rijkdom - Olokun - en worden vaak op altaren geofferd."
[228] Dutch: "De meervallen verwijzen naar Olokun, god van water en rijkdom."
[229] Dutch: "Meervallen worden geassocieerd met Okolun, de god van water en rijkdom."
[230] Dutch: "Meervallen worden geassocieerd met Olokun - de god van water en rijkdom - en symboliseren welvaart, vrede, welzijn en vruchtbaarheid."
[231] Dutch: "De krokodil wordt geassocieerd met de watergod Olokun, die, symbool van rijkdom, schoonheid en vruchtbaarheid, staat voor de perfecte onbezoedelde wereld."
[232] Dutch: "Krokodillen worden als bewakers van de grote wateren gezien. Ze worden door Olokun - de god van het water - gezonden om mensen te straffen door hun kano's omver te werpen."
[233] Dutch: "Deze antropomorfe figuur - een mensengedaante met vissenstaarten - stelt vermoedelijk de watergod Olokun voor. Olokun is de enige god die door de Bini wordt afgebeeld. Hij is de god van de zee en de rivieren, die regen zendt en gebeden om rijkdom en voorspoed verhoort."

Also a figure on a decorated elephant tusk (object RV-1148-1), is supposed to represent Olokun:

> "***The sea god Olokun*** is represented as a human with curved catfish instead of legs."[234]

The description of object RV-1295-7, which is a bracelet with figures of catfish and heads, states:

> "Catfish are royal symbols and refer to the bond of the Oba - the king - with ***the sea god Olokun*** and his power and wealth."[235]

About a ring with red coral (object RV-1286-7) the description states:

> "According to an oral tradition, Oba Ewuare - who ruled the Benin empire in the fifteenth century - conquered coral beads from ***Olokun, the god of the sea***."[236]

In two additional descriptions, Olokun is classified as 'the god of water and wealth'. These two descriptions also mention Osun, the 'god of medicine', and the Oba. Although the Oba is classified as a 'living god' and an 'intermediary' in multiple other catalog entries—as described in the previous paragraph—he is classified as 'the god of the land' in the descriptions of the objects RV-1335-2 and RV-1335-3, which are both relief plaques with snakes:

> "The king of snakes - the python - is considered the playmate and messenger of the ***Olokun - the god of water and wealth***. A larger-than-life python was depicted on the roof of the entrance to the royal palace. This indicated the close ties between ***the god of water - Olokun*** - and ***the god of the land*** - the ***Oba***. As king of the water, the python protected the Oba's palace. Venomous snakes are seen as the warriors of ***Osun, god of medicine***."[237]

In an additional catalog entry, however, this same Osun is described as an 'impersonal force'. In this description of object RV-1243-37, which is an iron staff, also Ogun is mentioned. Ogun is categorized as both 'the god of metal and patron god of craftsmen, warriors and hunters' and 'the inherent mystical power in the metal':

> "***Osun*** is ***an impersonal force*** situated in certain leaves and grasses in the woods. […] The Osun medicine man is connected by the use of iron with ***Ogun, the god of metal and patron god of craftsmen, warriors and hunters***, who is symbolized by flames.

[234] Dutch: "De zeegod Olokun wordt voorgesteld als een mens met gekromde meervallen in plaats van benen."
[235] Dutch: "Meervallen zijn koninklijke symbolen en verwijzen naar de band van de Oba - de koning - met de zeegod Olokun en diens macht en rijkdom."
[236] Dutch: "Volgens een mondelinge overlevering veroverde Oba Ewuare - die in de vijftiende eeuw over het Benin rijk heerste - kralen van koraal op Olokun, de god van de zee."
[237] Dutch: "De koning van de slangen - de python - wordt beschouwd als de speelkameraad en boodschapper van de Olokun - de god van water en rijkdom. Op het dak van de ingang van het koninklijk paleis was een meer dan levensgrote python afgebeeld. Dit gaf de nauwe banden aan tussen de god van het water - Olokun - en de god van het land - de Oba. Als koning van het water beschermde de python het paleis van de Oba. Giftige slangen worden gezien als de krijgers van Osun, god van de geneeskunst."

> ***Ogun*** is ***the inherent mystical power in the metal*** and is associated with flames, raging fury and war."[238]

In the description of object RV-1295-3, which is a ceremonial sword, Osa is mentioned. Osa is described as 'the god of creation':

> "This is a ceremonial sword, an ada. Only the Oba - the king -, chiefs belonging to the royal family and priests of ***Osa - the god of creation*** - were allowed to wear an ada."[239]

The catalog entries imagine the 'gods' of the Bini in a traditional European way. Classifications such as 'god of the water', 'god of the land', 'god of metal', and 'god of creation' are resemblant of the gods in, for example, Greek and Norse mythology. This interpretation, however, might not at all line up with how the Bini perceived Olokun, Osun, the Oba, Ogun, and Osa. The description of object RV-1243-37 might come closer to the actual interpretation of the Bini, by defining Osun as an 'impersonal force' and Ogun as 'the inherent mystical power in the metal'.

3.6.4 Magic

Seven catalog entries mention 'magic'. Six of the descriptions are the same, one is a little different. The descriptions of objects RV-1243-26, RV-1295-6, RV-2837-1, RV-1243-29, RV-1286-6, and RV-1243-28 state:

> "Many processed thin bracelets had a magical function. They are processed with herbs or medicinal ingredients so that they can protect and strengthen the wearer. Some copies are worn by the palace servants during the Igue, the annual festival where the Oba's spiritual powers are renewed, as a kind of magical weapon to clear the way for the Oba and to subdue the crowds. These bracelets are considered particularly powerful, they could make a person totally helpless and cause a woman to lose her fertility."[240]

The description of object RV-1295-7 states:

> "This bracelet may also have had a magical function. […] During the Igue - the annual festival at which the spiritual powers of the Oba are renewed - the palace servants wear bracelets as a kind of magical weapon. In doing so, they keep the crowds under control

[238] Dutch: "Osun is een onpersoonlijke kracht die gesitueerd wordt in bepaalde bladeren en grassen in het woud. […] De Osun-medicijnman wordt door het gebruik van ijzer verbonden met Ogun, de god van het metaal en beschermgod van de handswerklieden, krijgers en jagers, die door vlammen wordt gesymboliseerd. Ogun is de inherente mystieke kracht in het metaal en staat in verband met vlammen, oplaaiende woede en oorlog."
[239] Dutch: "Alleen de Oba - de koning -, chiefs die tot de koninklijke familie behoorden en priesters van Osa - de god van de schepping - mochten een ada dragen."
[240] Dutch: "Vele bewerkte dunne armbanden hadden een magische functie. Ze worden met kruiden of medicinale ingredienten bewerkt zodat ze de drager kunnen beschermen en versterken. Sommige exemplaren worden tijdens de Igue, het jaarlijks feest waarop de Oba's spirituele krachten worden vernieuwd, door de paleisbedienden gedragen om als een soort magisch wapen de weg vrij te maken voor de Oba en de mensenmassa te bedwingen. Deze armbanden worden als bijzonder krachtig beschouwd, zo zouden ze iemand totaal hulpeloos kunnen maken en een vrouw haar vruchtbaarheid doen verliezen."

> and clear the way for the Oba. Those bracelets are very powerful. Thus they could make a person totally helpless and make a woman lose her fertility."[241]

Although magic was part of European tradition before the Enlightenment period, it became 'other' from this period on. Magic became something for people who do not understand science; for people who are backward, and crazy. By using the word 'magic' or 'magical', the descriptions contribute to the othering of the people of Benin. The phrase 'they could make a person totally helpless' (Dutch: '*ze zouden iemand totaal hulpeloos kunnen maken*') amplifies this othering. In Dutch, this phrase implies—more than it does in English—that it is doubtful that these bracelets indeed had this power.

An important part of decolonizing a museum's collection is making room for previously ignored perspectives. In the catalog entries of the National Museum of World Cultures that mention magic, only the European perspective is discussed. In order to contribute to the decolonization of the collection, the descriptions should not use the word 'magic', since this word carries all kinds of negative connotations. It would be better to describe what an object did, from the perspective of the people of Benin. So not 'they could make a person totally helpless' (Dutch: '*ze zouden iemand totaal hulpeloos kunnen maken*'), but 'they can make a person totally helpless' (Dutch: '*ze kunnen iemand totaal hulpeloos maken*').[242]

[241] Dutch: "Deze armband heeft misschien ook een magische functie gehad. […] Tijdens de Igue - het jaarlijkse feest waarop de spirituele krachten van de Oba worden vernieuwd - dragen de paleisbedienden armbanden als een soort magisch wapen. Daarmee houden ze de mensenmassa in bedwang en maken ze de weg vrij voor de Oba. Die armbanden zijn bijzonder krachtig. Zo zouden ze iemand totaal hulpeloos kunnen maken en een vrouw haar vruchtbaarheid doen verliezen."

[242] Thanks to Marenka Thompson-Odlum for discussing the implications of the use of the word 'magic' with me.

PART FOUR
Conclusion

In this thesis, I examined the relationship between digitization and decolonization with regard to the 115 Benin Bronzes in the National Museum of World Cultures in the Netherlands. Since the museum desires to decolonize its collection, I wanted to explore to what extent the digital collection of the museum furthers or impedes the process of decolonization in this particular case.

As discussed in Part 1 (the theoretical framework) of this thesis, three aspects are essential in the decolonization process of museums: representation, shared authority, and equality. The digitization of collections may contribute to this decolonization process. It can improve the accessibility of the museum's collection and might provide the opportunity for communities of origin to add knowledge to the collection. Equality and close cooperation between the originating community and the museum is key. The digitization of collections, however, may also impede the process of decolonizing the museum. Especially if digitization is done unilaterally by the museum, it is a sign of the continuation of coloniality.

Based on the theoretical framework, I established a list of six criteria that I used to analyze the descriptions of the 115 Benin Bronzes in the digital catalog of the Dutch National Museum of World Cultures:

1. Cooperation and shared authority;
2. Access and attribution;
3. Provenance and other background;
4. Eurocentric frame: hierarchies;
5. Eurocentric frame: knowledge;
6. Eurocentric frame: culture.

Although the National Museum of World Cultures is clearly paying serious attention to the decolonization of the collection, the museum can still make improvements in all areas examined. In terms of cooperation with the community of origin, the museum is a participant in the Benin Dialogue Group and a partner in the project *Digital Benin: Reconnecting Royal Art Treasures*. Through these partnerships, the museum does have contact with Nigerian stakeholders. However, there is no one-on-one collaboration with Nigerian stakeholders with regard to the museum's own collection of Benin objects. As a result, there is no shared authority over this collection. There is also no other form of involvement of the community of origin. Whereas the museum occasionally receives comments on the collections from the Dutch public, the Nigerian public does not add knowledge to the museum's catalog. This can be partly explained by the fact that the online catalog is in Dutch. Although the museum sees making the collection accessible as an essential part of the decolonization of the collection, there is still a lot of room for improvement in this area. The museum itself sees this too. The digitization of

the collection improved the accessibility of the collection, but the accessibility is still limited for people who do not understand Dutch.

In terms of attribution, it is a loss that the catalog entries do not provide more information about the creator of the object and about the community of origin. It would further the decolonization process if the object descriptions would clarify why the creator of an object is unknown, and if they would give more background information about the Benin Kingdom and the Bini. This includes knowledge about the contemporary society of Benin City.

As for provenance data, the National Museum of World Cultures is taking steps to improve their knowledge about the provenance of their collections. Clarity about the provenance of an object is essential for the decolonization of a museum's collection. For each Benin object, the museum investigated if it came from the British attack on Benin City in 1897 and how it ended up in the museum's collection. This information, however, is not available in the publicly accessible online database. It seems that the relative age of the digital system is (partly) responsible for this. Because of privacy-reasons, the provenance data of objects is not publicly accessible, and it seems quite complicated to make only a part of this information available in the online catalog.

The museum has clearly made an effort to describe objects using words that are not offensive to anyone. In their publication *Words Matter*, the museum explains what words they do use and what words they try to avoid. In none of the catalog entries of the Benin Bronzes a false hierarchy between peoples is established by using derogatory language. Using non-offensive language in catalog descriptions is an important part of the decolonization of a museum's collection. The statement that seventeenth century Dutchmen were impressed when they visited the Oba's palace, however, does contribute to the establishment of a false hierarchy. This statement is used in multiple catalog entries.

In the field of knowledge, the descriptions show Eurocentrism. First of all, the use of literature references is very Eurocentric. The catalog entries of the 115 Benin Bronzes refer to 22 works as 'literature reference' or 'publication'. All 22 works were created in a European or North-American context. A substantial part of them is associated with Western museums, and the authors of multiple sources were complicit in the project of colonialism. Although seven descriptions refer to an oral tradition as source, all of these oral traditions seem to be transcribed by Westerners. Second, the use of the euphemistic term 'punitive expedition' for the British attack on Benin City signals a European colonial perspective on the events. Since it is not explained what a 'punitive expedition' exactly entailed and what the underlying reasons were for the British to attack the kingdom, the usage of this Eurocentric frame impedes the decolonization process. Third, the museum does not know exactly what all the objects in the Benin collection are, and what their purpose is. This lack of knowledge stems from the former disinterest of Europeans for African knowledge. Although the museum recognizes this knowledge gap as impairing for the decolonization of the museum's collection, a solution is not easily found. It takes a lot of time and effort to gather new information about the objects. The online catalog could play an important role in this gathering of knowledge, by encouraging

people to share their knowledge with the museum. To facilitate this, it is necessary that the collection is described in a language that is easily accessible to—in this case—Nigerians.

In the field of culture, the descriptions also show Eurocentrism. The online catalog contains various examples of Eurocentric explanations of African culture. The most frequently occurring example is the use of the term 'god' for African spiritual forces or entities. The way the catalog entries describe these forces or entities is resemblant of how gods in European mythology are imagined, but this might not at all line up with the African interpretation. Since the National Museum of World Cultures is a museum in Europe, the majority of visitors will most probably be of European descent. Relating to European frames of reference is therefore not that illogical. After all, the intention is that visitors can easily understand the information they read. It is, however, important to always point out if a European frame of reference is used, and to try to come as close to the African interpretation as possible when writing a description.

In conclusion, there are still many opportunities for the National Museum of World Cultures to make their online catalog contribute more to the decolonization of the museum's collection. Accessibility seems to be the most prominent bottleneck at the moment. Because the descriptions are in Dutch, it is difficult for Nigerians to access the online catalog. Since they cannot access the catalog, they also cannot contribute to the online catalog by sharing their knowledge about the museum's Benin objects. And because they cannot share their knowledge, the descriptions remain Eurocentric in nature. The only way to counter these prevailing Eurocentric frames, is to seek cooperation with the community of origin.

Further research could focus on another collection within the National Museum of World Cultures. An analysis of, for example, the collection of Australian Aboriginal objects might give completely different results than the analysis of the Benin collection. A comparison between different collections is relevant, because it makes it possible to examine which factors play a role in the successful decolonization of a museum collection. Another relevant direction that further research could take is to examine the project *Digital Benin: Reconnecting Royal Art Treasures*. It would be relevant to analyze to what extent this project succeeds in establishing a truly decolonial digital catalog. Why does this project (not) succeed in setting up such a catalog? And what might world cultures museums—such as the National Museum of World Cultures—learn from this project?

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