



Unpacking Missionary Collections

19-21 September 2022, Utrecht University, Sweelinckzaal, Drift 21

Convened by: Ana Rita Amaral, Marleen de Witte, Birgit Meyer, Peter Pels and Amélie Roussillon; supported by Charlotte Tiebosch (c.i.Tiebosch@uu.nl)

Various scholars have studied the collecting activities of missionaries in areas colonized by European powers, but so far the insights gained have barely been synthesized across various disciplines. While colonial collections and issues around the restitution of looted art currently are subject to intense public and scholarly debates, the role of missionaries in assembling objects that found their way, often through crooked trajectories, into ethnological and other museums has received comparatively less attention. This may be due to the fact that a lingering secular bias makes religion appear as marginal and hence easily overlooked by scholars in anthropology, art history, heritage studies and museum studies. And while scholars in the study of religion are moving beyond a mentalistic focus on concepts and meanings, starting to take the material dimension of religion more seriously, they have barely acknowledged the important role of missions in relation to ethnography and collecting (for mission exhibitions and mission museums, for the art market and for state-run ethnological museums). We propose that a focus on items gathered by missionaries or in contexts of missionary work is a productive starting point for a critical analysis of the provenance, conservation and future re-framing of objects in current ethnological and other museums. Conducting object-centered research and material analysis is not only rewarding in an empirical sense, but also opens up exciting debates about the religion-materiality nexus from the angle of “material religion”, “object-oriented ontologies” and “new materialisms”.

Inviting scholars who are currently engaging in unpacking collections in museum depots, mission archives and related sites that consist of items assembled by Catholic and Protestant missionaries in colonial times, this workshop will offer a forum for the exchange of insights about some broader conceptual and methodological issues based on detailed work in research and conservation. We propose to focus on the following sets of themes:

Gathering: Under which conditions and circumstances were items acquired by missionaries? Which kinds of items were assembled, and are there certain preferences? To what extent did missionaries strive to assemble items regarded as sacred among their original users? In what kinds of exchanges (gift-giving, commodity-exchange, dispossession under duress) were these items involved?

Conservation and Display: How were the items shipped and put in circulation? What are their trajectories? How were they stored, preserved and treated? How were they displayed in

different kinds of (secular or Christian) temporary or permanent exhibitions? How do such items relate to the spheres of art and heritage?

Valuation: How were the items valued and classified by their original owners/users and at subsequent stages in their trajectory? Which concepts – e.g. “idol”, “fetish”, “charm” – were employed to invest them with new values and meanings? How and to what extent were the items and concepts summoned into colonial knowledge production? In which ideological and racist frames were they trapped? Which strategies did various custodians employ to assess the re-valuation that occurred across the items’ trajectories into ethnological and other museums?

Re-evaluation: how is the provenance of collections than can be traced to missionary activities evaluated today, by museums, as well as by the successors of missions once active in colonial areas? Which efforts are taken to trace their trajectories? Are they subject to restitution claims? Are communities of origin and diasporas involved? How do the Christian descendants of the people once converted by missionaries see these objects today? Are they re-framed as cultural heritage? How are the spirit forces once connected to (some of) these objects assessed today? Which stories can these items tell about their trajectories, and to what extent can they yield new stories about our highly entangled world?

Programme

Monday 19 September

09.30: coffee/tea

09.50-10.00: Welcome

10.00-10.45: Chris Wingfield

Historical Artefacts and Artefactual Histories: Reopening Cases at the London Missionary Society Museum

Museums make their objects through technologies of inscription, encasement & display. These techniques are shared with a wider carceral archipelago of reforming institutions, but also with older examples of what Foucault called *heterotopia* - the church, temple and mausoleum. In unpacking what Talal Asad has called *Formations of the Secular* in relation to the contemporary ethnographic museum, the nineteenth century Missionary Museum emerges as a key transitional institution. But understanding and accounting for the ways in which the 'missionary exhibitionary complex' gave way to the seemingly secular 'exhibitionary complex', described by Tony Bennet, involves constructing histories that engage with, and to some extent reverse, processes of 'objectification', in the process re-opening seemingly closed and cold cases. But without a judicial framework for the process, care is needed when constructing case histories in order to avoid falling into what Ann Laura Stoler has called 'familiar stories with predictable plots'. This contribution to the workshop will consider my experiments with narrative form and structure in constructing a digital monograph that attempts to develop an artefactual history of the London Missionary Society: <https://argonauts2022.net>

10.45-11.30: Jan Hüsgen

Mapping Missionary Collections in German-speaking Areas

In recent years, more attention has been paid to the collection activities of missionaries. Initial case studies, for example on the collection of the Basel Mission, have highlighted the

connection between mission and colonialism in the acquisition of objects and religious items. Even though the Catholic and Protestant churches are slowly opening to a critical discourse regarding their colonial past, a comprehensive reappraisal of collection activities by mission societies is still in its beginning stages.

The aim of this project is: to collect data on the activities of missionary societies in the German colonial territories; to compile an overview of former or still existing missionary collections; and finally, to identify collections of missionaries in ethnological collections. The results of the project will form the basis for further provenance research and contribute to a critical revision of 'collecting' in the context of missionary societies. The first online publication of missionary collections can also be an important starting point for cooperation with societies of origin.

The lecture will present initial findings on the scope and structure of mission collections and what connections can be drawn from this to "collecting" within a colonial context.

11.30-11.45: break

11.45-12.30: Julia Binter

*Missionary Collections from Namibia at the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin.
Collaboratively Researching and Returning Objects*

This paper discusses the collaborative research, exhibition and repatriation project 'Confronting Colonial Pasts, Envisioning Creative Futures' into the collections from Namibia at the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin. In this project, which Namibian and German scholars, curators and artists have been conducting since 2019, objects from missionary contexts have become a focal point of discussion. While the Berlin-based team, including myself, initially sought to critically analyse the entanglements of the collections with colonial wars and, in particular, the genocide against the Ovaherero and Nama (1904-1908), the Namibian team members highlighted the importance of collections, which German missionaries had acquired before the official colonialization by the German Empire or under conditions of African sovereignty. These collections enabled the Namibian partners to investigate histories beyond colonial aggression and to propose a new reading of the objects as archive of Namibian fashion and design history. This avenue of research not only entailed a discussion of clothing as expression of cultural identity, but also a critical investigation of related forms of body and gender images and their changes due to missionary contact. Moreover, it enabled us to highlight the agency of those people who had been hitherto marginalized in the colonial record: women and children. In this paper, I will reflect on the ways in which we conducted our multimodal research with a particular focus on the entanglements of fashion and missionary contact and translated it into an exhibition at the Humboldt Forum. In addition, I will give an insight into the repatriation of 23 selected objects, many of which from missionary contexts, from Berlin to Namibia in May 2022 and discuss its potential impact on the discussion of Namibian cultural heritage and creative practices in the future.

12.30-13.00: Discussion

13.00-14.00: lunch

14.00-17.00: *The Legba-Dzoka Project*, statements by Sela Adjei, Kokou Azamede, Kodzo Gavua, Angelantonio Grossi, Malika Kraamer, Birgit Meyer, Silke Seybold, Ohiniko Mawussé Toffa, Christopher and Celestino Voncuvovi

The speakers form part of a team which conducts research on a collection of items assembled by the missionary Carl Spiess for the Übersee-Museum Bremen; they will report about their research conducted in Bremen in the week preceding the conference.
(break 15.30-15.45)

Tuesday 20 September

09.30: coffee/tea

10.00-10.45: Karen Jacobs

'Before and After'?: the Legacy of Missionary Collections from French Polynesia and West Papua

Nineteenth-century mission texts, displays and photographs often relish in telling the classic 'before and after' story of Indigenous conversion in the Pacific region by writing about 'idols' that were given up or showing converts in Christian dress. By focusing on the role of local people in missionary collecting and on the legacy of these collections, this paper argues that missionary collections are not necessarily the result of a one-way conversion process. In this regard, two case studies from areas that were colonised by European powers will be discussed: today's French Polynesia and West Papua. In the French Polynesia case, the emphasis will be on collections assembled by the Protestant London Missionary Society (LMS) in the 1820s and their trajectories. For the West Papua example, the focus is on how the Catholic mission commissioned and collected woodcarvings between the 1950s and 1970s and the ongoing Indigenous reaction to these collections.

The act of collecting is a collective process: a plethora of relationships contribute to the making of the collection as well as its documentation, while collections have the ability to continue to be at the centre of social relations. This paper is therefore based on the premise that the material dimension of mission history does not simply have two sides, whereby an indigenous view can be juxtaposed with a mission perspective. Rather, it is considered as an ongoing sequence of complex encounters characterized by a variety of cultural exchanges.

10.45-11.30: Isabella Bozsa

Missionary Collecting in Cameroon under German Colonial Rule: Contexts of Gathering, Missionary Propaganda and Scopes of Practices

Members of the missionary society *Basel Mission* acquired different kinds of things during the German colonial period in Cameroon for the ethnographic collection of the *Basel Mission* in Switzerland. Practices and strategies of gathering objects ranged from violent contexts of colonial rule to diplomatic gifts by Cameroonian kings to missionary members. Attributions of meanings of the objects vary in relation to their contexts: the context of origin, the context of gathering and the context of different exhibitions.

In my paper, I will explore questions about the circumstances of acquisition and appropriation, motives and scopes of practices of local actors in addition to forms of interaction between members of the *Basel Mission* and the Cameroonian population. I will also touch upon the functions of the ethnographic collections and missionary exhibitions in Switzerland as well as the role of the missionary board in their conception. Archival sources of the vast archive in Basel reveal unequal power relations and ambivalent relationships

between Cameroonian actors and missionary members as well as fragile self-images of missionaries. The paper is based on the research by Isabella Bozsa within a fellowship at *Museum der Kulturen Basel* (MKB) from 2016 to 2019.

11.30-11.45: break

11.45-12.30: Theo Weiss

'Being Christian by Faith the Vendor had no Use for Them': Charting Conversionary Collateral in Nigerian Museums

Today, museums across southern Nigeria are filled with artefacts gathered through purchase, donation and forced acquisition. In each case these objects were amassed amid centuries-long religious transformations and mass conversions across the region. As a result, collections include objects confiscated by foreign missionaries but also items acquired much later by secular European late colonial and African postcolonial administrators as a way of salvaging apparently endangered cultures or safeguarding objects no longer wanted by what had become thoroughly Christianised communities. This talk unpacks this latter, lesser-explored category of acquisition and proposes the notion of 'conversionary collateral' to situate it. Using this, it asks what the status of this material is today and explores how subsequent generations of Nigerian Christians have responded to and repurposed it.

12.30-13.00: Discussion

13.00-14.00: lunch

14.00-16.00: *Heritage and the Question of Conversion*
(4 presentations, 20 min, plus 10 min for questions)

14.00-14.30: Marleen de Witte

Converting the Gods: Asante Abosom Figures and their Life-transforming Journeys

My contribution will look at missionary collections through our project's central lens of conversion, considering both the Christian project of conversion at the base of missionary collecting and the conversion of the artefacts thus collected into new kinds of things, or indeed into things. Focusing on a set of Asante god-objects (*abosom*) and other shrine figures in the Afrika Museum, I will consider the transformations they underwent as they moved from their original contexts in Gold Coast/Ghana through the art market into the Afrika Museum. Analogous to the conversion of people, I understand the conversion of things not as a linear progression from one state to another, but as involving back-and-forth moving and multiple, co-existing affiliations. That is: not a change from one sort of thing into another (god-object into mission trophy into museum display into artwork into economic asset into heritage item), but a palimpsestic accumulation of layers (like the layers of offering material on some god-objects), that may be activated or de-activated as a thing moves into new contexts. This raises questions about the *abosom*'s future potentialities, especially in the context of the debate on restitution and the engagement of contemporary Ghanaians.

14.30-15.00: Amélie Roussillon

Collecting as Converting: Unpacking Dutch Protestant Missionary Collections from Northern New Guinea

As part of the 'Heritage and the Question of Conversion' project, I am investigating the itineraries and potentialities of objects acquired by Dutch Protestant and Catholic missionaries in Dutch New Guinea, now held in the National Museum of World Cultures and acquired between 1855 and 1962. This paper will focus on the collecting practices of the Protestant Utrecht Missionary Society, mostly undertaken along the northern coast of Dutch New Guinea, and more specifically on the examples of individual missionaries (such as G.L. Bink and J.A. van Balen) whose collecting activities developed during their evangelisation work at the turn of the 20th century. I wish to unpack the role of these missionaries as collectors, and their relationship with other actors (local or not) and institutions, in particular museums and scientific societies. The itineraries of a few collected artefacts now part of the Wereldmuseum collection in Rotterdam will be highlighted, questioning how they have been converted (spatio-temporally, physically, but also epistemologically) into missionary and museum objects. The importance of photography as a collecting tool will also be addressed. Finally, this contribution will point out the first steps of a possible re-mobilisation of these collections and what relevance they can bear today for various stakeholders.

15.00-15.15: break

15.15-15.45: Ana Rita Amaral

Dutch Spiritan Collections from Colonial Angola: Collecting Practices and Transimperial Circulations

In this presentation, I will share some preliminary notes and questions arising from my ongoing research on the collections assembled by Dutch members of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit in Angola during Portuguese colonialism. I will give a general overview of the activities of the Spiritan Fathers in colonial Angola, focusing on the mobilisation of the Dutch missionaries, in order to contextualise the collections assembled by them and now held in Dutch museums.

One of the broader issues I am interested in exploring is that of the transimperial character of these practices of collection and circulation, along with the idea of a European imperial culture, which the Catholic case allows us to address. This becomes clear not only when we analyse the missionary exhibits organised by the Vatican, but also when we examine the activities of a congregation like the Spiritans and their collections and museums. Another issue relevant to our research concerns the specificity of missionary collections. What kind of differences and similarities can we find between the histories of a basket and gravestone collected by a missionary? In this respect, I will try to systematise the collecting modes behind the trajectories of Angolan objects in Dutch museums, and then zoom in on the case of the gravestones (steles) collected by a Dutch Spiritan in the lower Kongo area.

15.45-16.15: Peter Pels

'I am Black, but Comely': Mission, Modernity and the Power of Objects in the Afrika Museum, Berg en Dal

This presentation is based on a chapter in my forthcoming book on material culture, "The Spirit of Matter". It will not address the book's overall arguments, but highlight three aspects of the materiality of "exhibiting culture" during the early phase of the Afrika Museum as it was set up by the Holy Ghost Fathers' province in the Netherlands: (1) the transition from a mission museum to an 'Afrika Museum', and the problem of the materiality of the "converted

artefact”, expressed by the museum’s founder as “remarkable rubbish”; (2) the contradictions of the “different apostolate” aimed at by this “most modern museum in the Netherlands” (as it was claimed to be in 1958), with a particular focus on the role of ethnography and what I call “the magic of realism”; (3) the “transubstantiation” of amazement at the “remarkable rubbish” of the Museum into a doctrine of admiration for the object “speaking for itself” that took place via the Catholic imperative of Divine Love during the final years of African decolonization.

16.15-16.30: break

16.30-17.30: Roundtable (with Wonu Veys, NN, NN).

Wednesday 21 September (for all speakers, and upon invitation)
‘Driving Seminar’ and excursion (provisional programme; subject to confirmation)

9:00 departure from Hotel Mitland, Utrecht

(during bus ride, a short introduction to the Society of the Divine Word, its Mission Museum Steyl and its past and current holdings; Q&A and discussion)

11:00 reception at Mission Museum Steyl, Limburg, by curators Paul Voogt and Moed de Vries for visit to permanent exhibition (scenography dating from 1934) and to the stored collection of the Africa Centre of the Society of African Missions, formerly at Cadier en Keer.

13:00 Lunch

14:00 departure Steyl

(during bus ride, short additions to what has already been presented about the Holy Ghost Fathers and their Afrika Museum at Berg en Dal, especially on the three parts of its current exhibitions; Q&A and discussion)

15:00 arrival Berg en Dal for visit to Afrika Museum

17:00 departure Berg en Dal, return to Utrecht via Nijmegen Central Station (to drop off passengers)

18:30 arrival Utrecht

This workshop is organized by the research program Religious Matters in an Entangled World and the subproject Heritage and the Question of Conversion which is part of the Pressing Matter research programme.

Pressing Matter is a four-year international research programme about colonial heritage and its legacies, financed by the Dutch National Science Agenda (NWA) and coordinated from the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. It investigates the potentialities of ‘colonial objects’ to support societal reconciliation with the colonial past and its afterlives, and to deal with conflicting claims by different stakeholders for these objects within museums. The project

will develop and test new modes and models of ownership, value and return that may enable more equitable futures. The Heritage and the Question of Conversion project is one of 8 projects, each of which focuses on specific kinds of collections. <https://pressingmatter.nl>

Religious Matters in an Entangled World (2016-2025) is directed by Birgit Meyer at the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Utrecht University. This research program studies religion in plural settings in Europe and Africa from a comparative and transregional perspective. Our guiding idea is that religion becomes concrete and palpable through people, whose ideas and practices imply the use of various materials – including buildings, images, objects, and texts – and whose bodies and senses are shaped through these ideas and practices. Taking a material approach to religion, we look at the acts and material forms through which religions are present, coexist and possibly clash with each other in particular plural settings. The current focus of the research lies on “objects”, with special attention being paid to religious objects kept in ethnological and other museums. <https://religiousmatters.nl>