

***Museum Cooperation Between Africa and Europe: A New Field for Museum Studies.* Thomas Laely, Marc Meyer, and Raphael Schwere, eds. Bielefeld, Germany and Kampala, Uganda: Transcript Verlag and Fountain Publishers, 2018. 240 pp.\***

Reviewed by Kristin Otto

In their introduction to this edited volume, editors Thomas Laely, Marc Meyer, and Raphael Schwere argue that transcontinental museum cooperation is a necessary and neglected field of museum studies. While several African and Western museums have engaged in cooperative projects—both historically in the loose and power-laden sense during the colonial era and more recently in the context of capacity building—there are relatively few analytical examinations of the nature of such institutional collaboration. Therefore, with this volume, the editors propose examining the motivations of international collaboration, the actors and associated inequalities at issue, and the theoretical rationales informing these projects. The case studies, involving museums mostly located in Western and Eastern Africa, are certainly uniquely informed by the historical relationships of colonizer-colonized that are embedded in the histories and present circumstances of many of the institutions, but the editors also hope to contribute to a larger conversation on the nature of institutional collaboration and its central issues of place, access, and practice. In keeping with the volume title and its overall themes, the contributions in the collection are the result of a cooperative project between the Uganda National Museum in Kampala, the Igongo Cultural Centre in Mbarara, Uganda, and the Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich in Switzerland, as well as a 2016 conference on the topic of museum cooperation between Africa and Europe.

Part One of the volume focuses on the history and context of museum cooperation between Africa and Europe. As George Okello Abungu points out in his chapter, most major museums and their collections in Africa were founded during the colonial period under the influence of colonial powers, although the concept of museums and preserving heritage was not a European invention on the continent. The colonial-era museums were in many ways manifestations of Western colonial and imperial interests in imposing classification and infrastructure, although also informed by local practices of collecting and preservation. After independence, these museums in Africa became new sites for constructing national identities and negotiating positions on the international stage. Germain Loumpet's chapter notes how the heritage awakening of the 1960s and 1970s also impacted the development of policy, making much of museum practice about not only objects, but also relationships between inter- and intra-national ethnic groups and political strategies. In light of the postcolonial focus on decolonization spurred by theoretical developments in the 1990s, new forms of collaboration between Western and African museums have attempted to address the weight of the colonial and postcolonial legacies of these institutions, while also re-negotiating the very nature of the museums themselves.

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Part Two turns to examples of some of these relationships between local communities, national museums, and international networks. These chapters provide good examples of how partnership plays out in a practical way in a variety of projects. For example, Nelson Adebo Abiti's documentation of the *Road to Reconciliation* exhibition project, resulting from a partnership between the Uganda National Museum and the Norwegian Directorate for Cultural Heritage, revealed how incorporating local cultural memory work became important for war memorialization projects. Instead of an exhibition, Jesmael Mataga uses the example of the Mukwati Stick in the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences' ethnography collection to illustrate the necessity of adjusting curatorial practice in light of the spiritual associations of certain materials. While some scholarship has popularized James Clifford's and Mary Louise Pratt's term "contact zone" for characterizing museum collaboration (Clifford 1997; Pratt 1991), Rosalie Hans uses the example of community museums in East Africa to argue that the term privileges museums as the center of the "zone," when many times the "contact" takes place in the communication between local museums and international stakeholders, rather than in a physical space.

Part Three focuses more specifically on projects addressing the accessibility of collections from Africa—a major component and concern of these international collaborations. For example, Kiprop Lagat documents the process of creating the Hazina exhibition as a partnership between the National Museums of Kenya and the British Museum, which (uniquely in terms of accessing European collections) involved a major loan of works from the British Museum to the Nairobi gallery. In their chapter, Cynthia Kros and Anneliese Mehnert describe how dispersed collections benefit from digitization projects. These can help to unite object assemblages and promote cooperation, although such projects are not always fully realized. Part Four moves a step further by offering critical evaluations of museum collaborations, which is particularly useful for those interested in the challenges and unique considerations of these projects. For example, Michaela Oberhofer's chapter focuses on a conservation-based collaboration between the Palace Museum in Fomban, Cameroon and the Museum Rietberg in Zurich. In this case, Western notions of museum conservation were often in conflict with other diverse notions of restoration held by museum professionals, the artists they collaborate with, and the political authorities influencing museum practice. In contrast to the dominant perspectives on African museums, in his chapter Kwame Amoah Labi challenges the colonial legacy hypothesis that the colonial origins are the main source of problems in African museums. Using the examples of Ghanaian museums and evidence of collecting and preservation prior to European contact, Labi shows how the short-term success of international partnerships rarely transferred into long-term sustainability. He instead argues that future collaborations should focus on structural change of museums' legal frameworks, encouraging autonomy, and fostering leadership skills in addition to the technical aspects of museum work.

Overall, one of the most significant contributions of this volume is bringing together discussions of diverse international museum collaborations by Western and African scholars and placing them in conversation with each other. Many of these projects have not been widely published in other sources, and scholars of museums, heritage, and Africa would benefit both from the discussion of practical aspects of particular projects, as well as the wider consideration of the nature of collaboration and museum work. As diverse as the

projects are, not all the contributors agree on how museums in Africa and the West can best collaborate. For example, the efficacy of “contact zone” as a concept is variously interpreted by the authors, a topic of concern for other museum scholars of collaboration as well (Boast 2011). While certain chapters focus on the meeting of cultures and ideas in particular museum spaces, others remind us that contact zones can be located more nebulously in global networks. Although it would be impossible to draw any decisive conclusions about the best methods of collaboration from these projects, Cynthia Kros’ conclusion points out overall themes such as the importance of increasing local agency, locating decision making in a collaborative space, making interventions sustainable in the local environment and community, and remaining open to diverse definitions and constructions of “the museum.” As such collaborative projects become more common in museum practice, this volume will provide an important resource for global professionals and scholars, as well as provoke discussion on how to address issues of accessibility, resource allocation, heritage politics, knowledge exchange, and the nature of collaboration.

## References Cited

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