Capitalist property as epistemic violence: Ethnographic museums, colonial restitution and the cosmopolitical challenge

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Abstract

Ethnographic museums around the world are embroiled in controversies about how to deal with the coloniality of their collections. The frame of contestation is most often property: Who should "own" ethnographic objects? Should they remain the property of Western museums, or should they (again) become the property of museums in the former colonies? As much as this debate rightly foregrounds the need to address and redress colonial violence, it still has a blind spot: capitalist property itself, one of the most powerful legacies of colonialism, is not questioned. As a result, a central aspect remains undertheorised: the fact that the ethnographic objects originate in indigenous cultural systems whose normative orders are based on sometimes radically different conceptions of what persons are, what things are, and how they relate to each other. This poses a cosmopolitical challenge to ethnographic museums: basic understandings of nature and culture are put up for debate. Therefore, any attempt to decolonise European museums must include a critique of the specific notions of property that underpin modern statehood.

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Key words

Property; colonialism; legal pluralism; cosmopolitics; decolonization

Resumen

Los museos etnográficos de todo el mundo se ven envueltos en polémicas sobre cómo abordar la colonialidad de sus colecciones. El marco de la controversia suele ser la propiedad: ¿A quién deben "pertenecer" los objetos etnográficos? ¿Deben seguir siendo propiedad de los museos occidentales o deben (de nuevo) pasar a ser propiedad de los museos de las antiguas colonias? Por mucho que este debate destaque acertadamente la necesidad de abordar y reparar la violencia colonial, sigue teniendo un punto ciego: no se cuestiona la propia propiedad capitalista, uno de los legados más poderosos del colonialismo. En consecuencia, queda sin teorizar un aspecto central: el hecho de que los objetos etnográficos proceden de sistemas culturales indígenas cuyos órdenes normativos se basan en concepciones a veces radicalmente distintas de lo que son las personas, lo que son las cosas y cómo se relacionan entre sí. Eso plantea un reto cosmopolítico a los museos etnográficos: las concepciones básicas de la naturaleza y la cultura se ponen a debate. Cualquier intento de descolonizar los museos europeos debe incluir una crítica de las nociones específicas de propiedad que sustentan la estatalidad moderna.

Palabras clave

Propiedad; colonialismo; pluralismo jurídico; cosmopolítica; descolonización

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1. Introduction

Ethnographic museums are coming under increasing criticism. Founded mostly in the nineteenth century across Europe and North America, their self-proclaimed mission is to collect, preserve, and exhibit artefacts that represent the diverse cultures and social practices of people from around the world (Kuper 2024). But the ethnographic collections housed in institutions such as the British Museum in London, the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris or the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin were largely acquired from indigenous communities under the violent conditions of colonial rule. A growing number of scholars, practitioners, and activists are demanding that ethnographic museums begin to systematically address these colonial origins of their collections and the various ways in which colonial logics of knowledge production about the world still permeate these institutions.

The main framework in which this discussion on the colonial entanglements of ethnographic museums is conducted today is what one could call "the property question". Because museum collectors acquired ethnographic objects under the violent conditions of colonial rule, critics argue that their acquisition was if not outright illegal, in any case morally reprehensible. In other words: museums are not, or at least should not be, the actual owners of the ethnographic collections. Consequently, critics are mobilizing the language of property crime and have characterized ethnographic museums as repositories of "stolen art", "loot", or "plunder" (Hicks 2020, Robertson 2020, Aly 2021, Philipps 2021, Savoy 2021). Both from a legal and a moral critical perspective, the ethnographic objects stored in the museum depots would still be the property of the communities from which they have been originally taken. As a result, the collections should be returned to them (Sarr and Savoy 2018).

Countering these critiques, defenders of the traditional policies of ethnographic museums argue that ethnographic collections should remain in European museums. They likewise take the property question to be the centre of the discussion, but come to different conclusions about who is the proper owner of the ethnographic objects. Some point out that many of the objects were not stolen but legally purchased (Parzinger, cited in Kuhn 2018), or they take a broader perspective, arguing that the collections are the property not of individual communities, but of humanity as a whole (Brown 2003, Cuno 2008).

Both sides of this debate on the restitution of ethnographic collections approach the public debate on the decolonisation of museums as a property conflict. Most participants in the discussion naturally assume that the pieces in these ethnographic collections are *things* that can be *owned*. Although this notion is fully in line with the global capitalist property regimes that govern Western museums today, the idea that ethnographic collection pieces can be property in a capitalist sense, is not universally shared, and in many cases fully rejected, by the indigenous communities from where these ethnographic collections were taken.

In fact, as ethnographic studies on encounters between museum practitioners and indigenous community activists, some of which I will review in this article, reveal, people sometimes radically disagree about the ontological status of the collection pieces. Are they inanimate things to be owned by individuals, museums, or maybe by indigenous communities? Or are they divine beings, ancestors, family members or

magical entities with agency of their own? Are they persons or are they things? Are they subjects or are they objects? Consequently, actors in these negotiations over ethnographic collections do not only disagree about who "owns these things", but they disagree on a much more fundamental level if they are "things" to be "owned" in the first place.

I therefore argue in this article that, in order to better understand what is at stake in the debates on the colonial entanglement of ethnological museums, we must acknowledge the cosmopolitical nature of these conflicts. In anthropology, the term "cosmopolitics" (De la Cadena 2010) has come to refer to those political conflicts in which fundamental ontologies become the centre of contestation. Modernist cosmologies which also govern capitalist notions of property are based on a strict dichotomy between nature and culture. Human subjects own non-human objects as property. This modernist ontology underlying capitalist property, which has been made globally hegemonic by colonial power relations, potentially clashes with indigenous cosmologies that follow different understandings of nature and culture; in which an "ethnographic object" rather appears as a living subject with a will of their own.

In order to fully appreciate the cosmopolitical dimension of these conflicts over ethnographic collections, it is necessary to highlight how they are situated in a context of plural normative orders – a perspective most thoroughly explored in legal anthropology (Griffiths 1986, Merry 1988, Benda-Beckmann 2002, Benda-Beckmann and Turner 2018, Tamanaha 2021). From this perspective, modern capitalist property regimes are only one of several possible systems for regulating the normative relationship between persons and things, subjects and objects (Hann 1998, Benda-Beckmann *et al.* 2006, Strang and Busse 2011, Busse 2012, Canfield 2020). The fact that capitalist notions of property are globally hegemonic does not indicate that they are universally seen as reasonable but results from the historical and ongoing colonisation of indigenous materialities (Chanock 1991, Klug 1995).

I therefore argue that in order to gain a deeper understanding of how ethnographic museums reproduce colonial logics, we must go beyond a superficial restitution debate which takes capitalist property logics for granted. Capitalist property law is a fundamental institutional principle of the ethnographic museum: the museum owns collections of things, uses them to explore their cultural meanings, and displays them to educate the public. When the colonial notions of property inscribed in its structure dominate indigenous notions of materiality and personhood, cosmopolitical conflict is inevitable in the ethnographic museum. In order to contribute to a project of decolonizing the museum (Sieg 2021, Knudsen *et al.* 2022), it is crucial to take seriously indigenous notions of materiality and personhood from whom the collections originate, and understand how capitalist notions of property have, to a greater or lesser degree, been imposed on indigenous peoples.

As a result, the indigenous interlocutors involved in these encounters experience the naturalisation of capitalist property as a framework for dealing with museum collections as epistemic violence: an indirect form of violence that occurs within the realms of producing, sharing, and acknowledging knowledge. Epistemic violence denies certain people or communities the ability to contribute to the production of knowledge and forcibly imposes a dominant viewpoint that results in subordination and hierarchy. As

Gayatri Spivak (1988) explains: "The clearest available example of such epistemic violence is the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other" (280-281). As such, ethnographic museums have been analysed as sites of epistemic violence through the imposition of specific modernist forms of knowledge (Tolia-Kelly 2016, Moko 2023). I argue in this article that capitalist property, and the specific forms of materiality and personhood that underpin it, can therefore become a form of epistemic violence in the field of colonial restitution. As a first step in thinking through this complex entanglement of colonialism and capitalism manifested in these encounters, it is necessary to pay close attention to the fact that it is not only the ownership of "things" that is disputed between museum institutions and indigenous communities, but that there is also fundamental cosmopolitical disagreement over the ontological status of collection pieces.

2. Indigenous materialities and the cosmopolitical challenge

In the summer of 2014, a group of Kotiria, a Wanano speaking Amazonian indigenous community from the upper Rio Negro region on the border between Brazil and Colombia, visited the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin. The visitors, which included teachers from an indigenous primary school, had come to Berlin as part of a collaborative anthropological research project (Kraus *et al.* 2018, Scholz 2021, Costa Oliveira and Scholz fc.). The aim of the project was to introduce indigenous perspectives into the production of knowledge about the museum's Amazonian collection as part of a workshop. As a first step in this visit, the community members entered the museum's storage to see the ethnographic objects with their own eyes. Upon entering the storage area, some group members found the atmosphere disturbing, they were even shocked.

As we know from the ethnographic literature on Amazonia, there are considerable differences between indigenous understandings of materiality and personhood and capitalist-modern ontological assumptions about the nature and distinction between people and things (Hugh-Jones 2009, Brightman *et al.* 2016). In many Upper Rio Negro societies, the larger kinship groups, clans, are composed both of human as well as non-human members. One of the collection pieces that participants focused on as such a non-human clan ancestor was a feather headdress, traditionally kept in a feather box. The German anthropologist Theodor Koch-Grünberg had collected a number of these at the beginning of the 20th century (Scholz 2020). Such feather headdresses which are used in rituals are not conceptualised as a passive material, but as an entity with its own subject quality and agency. The participants did not see the feather headdress as a thing that is owned by a kinship group, but rather as an independent member of the kinship group, a person rather than a thing. The participants perceived the collection items stored behind the glass walls of the storage area not just as things from the past, but as living beings in captivity (Costa Oliveira and Scholz fc.).

This disagreement on the nature of the feather headdress goes beyond a difference in classification, calling the feather headdress either "ethnographic object" or "ancestor". From a Kotiria perspective, there is no difference in substance between the human bodies of the participants and the collection pieces such as the feather headdress (Hugh-Jones 2009, Costa Oliveira 2017). If a clan misses some of their members, it cannot reproduce in the same way as before and the social equilibrium of the kinship group is severely disturbed. A simple transfer of property title would drastically underestimate what is

necessary to repair the broken social relationships that result from separating the non-human clan members from the kinship group. From the perspective of the indigenous interlocutors, discussing all this in the language of property was in itself felt as an act of epistemic violence.

Between 2021 and 2022, Laibor Kalanga Moko (2023) undertook a long-term ethnographic fieldwork project in a Maasai community in northern Tanzania, taking the Maasai collection at the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin as his starting point. Among the many objects Moko discussed with his interlocutors was a medicine horn from the museum collection. Such medicine horns, which are still in use today, have an important function in healing practices and are used by a medical specialist, an *oloiboni* (Berntsen 1976, Galaty 1982). When Moko showed his interlocutors a photograph of the medicine horn, people were incredulous. It was inconceivable that such a medicine horn could be outside of the Maasai community, not least in a museum in Berlin.

In his study of Maasai concepts of materiality and personhood, Moko describes that items such as the medicine horn are seen as inextricably linked to the human body. The medicine horn becomes ritually entangled with the body of the *oloiboni* in the course of his initiation into the profession. After the *oloiboni* and the medicine horn have become entangled, they cannot be separated without doing permanent damage to both. Such entities which are, in effect, non-human body parts, are called *imasaa*, which Moko translates as "belongings". As such, a medicine horn should never be separated from the person to whom it belongs; in legal terms, it is considered inalienable (Moko 2021).

Moko's interlocutors described the horn itself as not a passive material. Rather, it is seen as having its own life force, which gives the horn the power to act. In order to keep this powerful object under control, the *oloiboni* has to subject it to certain rituals on a regular basis. Because the medicine horn kept in Berlin had not undergone these rituals for many years, some of Moko's interlocutors in Tanzania were convinced that this medicine horn and other similar objects continued to bring misfortune to both the Maasai community and the wider German society (Ivanov *et al.* 2024). Only after a complicated legal process involving both reparations and cleansing rituals would restitution to the Maasai community be secure (Moko 2023, Bens fc.).

These two brief examples from very different ethnographic contexts show that the indigenous materialities that interlocutors bring into the debate over ethnographic collections, present a moment of cosmopolitics. The different groups of actors involved do not only disagree on which "persons" should own which "things" stored in ethnographic museums. The disagreements go much deeper and concern the ontological status of the museum collection itself.

Traditionally, anthropologists have placed great emphasis on the methodological dimension of the fact that in transcultural encounters it cannot simply be assumed that counterparts (in this case museum professionals and indigenous community activists) share the same ontological assumptions about, for example, who is a person and who is a thing, who counts as a subject and what counts as an object. These ontological disagreements have increasingly come to the fore in the last twenty years, as part of what has been called the "ontological turn" in social and cultural anthropology (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017). The study of colonial restitution must also consider what this means for the universalisation of the property framework in the context of this plurality of property

regimes with different understandings of subjectivity, objectivity, materiality, and personhood. The implication is that the question of museum collections is first and foremost a property conflict in which (human) persons struggle for possession of (non-human) things, can silence and render invisible indigenous ontologies, and as such violently impose colonial epistemologies.

3. Capitalist property as a colonial imposition

Property can be broadly defined as the normative concept by which societies organise the relationship between people and things. There is a myriad of ways in which these relationships can be structured, and as anthropological studies have shown, property regimes vary significantly from one cultural context to another (Turner 2017, Canfield 2020).

Property defines the boundary between persons and things by regulating who counts as a subject and what counts as an object of property (Hirsch 2010, Blomley 2016). Who counts as a person and what counts as a thing can therefore only be answered in relation to specific normative orders (Strathern 1999, Pottage 2004, Bens 2018). In capitalist property regimes, the individual human being serves as the prototype of a person. The human individual is not only capable of subjugating all other kinds of entities as property, but also "possesses" itself in this sense (Macpherson 1962, Redecker 2020). As anthropologists have shown, this kind of individualism inherent in property emerges as an "ideology of modernity" (Dumont 1983), but other societies make very different distinctions between persons and things (Strathern 1988, Gell 1998, Viveiros de Castro 1998, Descola 2005). Particularly when it comes to land dispossession as a central aspect of the colonial implementation of capitalist property, anthropologists have shown that indigenous conceptions of land ownership are very different from capitalist understandings, because land itself is not seen as a thing to be possessed, but as a person to be taken seriously as an actor in its own right (Verran 1998, Daes 2001, Bens 2020). Such studies have been taken up in law and legal theory, especially in global environmental law, when it comes to the question of "more than human legalities" (Braverman 2018). Instead of recognising only humans and entities created by humans (such as corporations) as subjects with rights, scholars begin to ask whether entities classified as "things" and "nature", such as mountains, rivers, landmarks, and animals, should also be recognised as legal "persons" with rights to defend themselves against the ecological destruction caused by extractivist economies (De la Cadena 2015, Blaser 2016).

Through the institutionalisation of a global capitalist economy - most notably with the colonial dispossession of indigenous territories and the introduction of the transatlantic slave trade - capitalist property regimes imposed their logic on indigenous property regimes, thereby colonising them (Mattei and Nader 2008). Colonisers implanted capitalist notions of property in indigenous contexts, either simply ignoring indigenous regimes of materiality and personhood or establishing complex structures of recognition of "customary law" designed to ensure that indigenous property systems were accommodated on the colonisers' terms (Chanock 1991, Klug 1995). In this context, the introduction of modern legal forms, especially complex registration procedures, played an important role (Pottage 1995). At the same time, colonial processes of implementing capitalist notions of property were never absolute. Indigenous notions of materiality and

personhood have not been completely eradicated and replaced, and their continued existence creates ongoing "paradoxical conjunctions" with capitalist property (Turner and Wiber 2009).

This colonisation of indigenous property regimes continues. Indigenous communities are increasingly framing many of their practices in terms of "cultural property", mostly to defend them against the encroachments of their nation-states (Brown 2003, Murphy 2004, Simpson 2007, Coombe 2009, Anderson and Geismar 2017). It is telling that the Inter-American Court of Human Rights has dogmatically built its entire jurisprudence on indigenous rights on the human right to property (Bens 2020, 150-160). Paradoxically, the mobilisation of cultural property leads to a reification of cultural identity (Mezey 2007, French 2009), while at the same time opening up space for action (Geismar 2013). In the course of the "dematerialisation" of capitalist property regimes in the late 20th century (Hardt and Negri 2017), the notion of immaterial (or "intangible") cultural property has become common. Under this umbrella term, all kinds of cultural practices have the potential to become a form of protected "property". At the same time, however, some key assumptions inherent in claims to immaterial cultural property, such as the idea of individual authors, represent a specifically Euro-American perspective that is unfamiliar in many Indigenous contexts (Myers 2002).

The colonial enterprise does not simply replace indigenous forms of property with ready-made concepts of capitalist property. The modern legal forms in which capitalist property appears were not developed in Europe and then transplanted to the rest of the world; rather, they took shape in and through the colonial encounter (Hussain 2003, Anghie 2005), with the colonies serving as laboratories of modernity (Rabinow 1989, Stoler 1995, Mitchell 2002). Both colonial and indigenous cultural formations can only be understood as relationally co-constitutive of each other, and they become manifest in the conflicts and disjunctures that come to the fore when different normative orders collide. Modern ideas of property, then, emerged in no small part from the dispossession of indigenous lands and took the form of "racial regimes of property" (Bhandar 2018) that denigrated in racial terms certain forms of land use that deviated from European-style agriculture. Colonialism did not simply dispossess indigenous peoples; the colonial imposition of capitalist property regimes created fundamentally racialised frameworks for deciding what belonged to whom in the first place (Harris 1993, Nichols 2019). As Black Studies scholars have argued, colonialism and capitalism are constitutively linked as "racial capitalism" (Bhattacharyya 2018, Jenkins and Leroy 2021, Murakawa and Gilmore 2022). The transatlantic system of slavery shows how racial capitalism not only arranges persons and things but creates the very categories of who counts as a person and what counts as a thing — for example, turning Black bodies into things in order to accumulate them as capital (Robinson 1983). This means that the specific divisions into persons and things that underpin capitalist notions of property must themselves be interrogated. Studying indigenous forms of materiality and personhood therefore helps us not only to understand these property systems, but also to understand capitalist notions of property and the ontological assumptions underpinning it.

This state of the art in the study of property and colonialism points to three aspects. First, the global implementation of capitalist property is a key element of colonialism and the creation of the modern state and its institutions. Second, capitalist property remains in

constant competition with indigenous notions of materiality and personhood and the alternative notions of nature and culture that underlie them. Third, to understand property in general, it is necessary to understand property in the plural. This means taking stock of the clashes between capitalist and indigenous materialities to understand their co-constitution. When it comes to the current discussion of the coloniality of ethnographic museums, it is important to systematically address how competing notions of materiality and personhood structure the workings of ethnographic museums and the interactions between museum practitioners and indigenous actors from the communities from which the ethnographic objects come. This is only possible through the lens of normative pluralism and by acknowledging the cosmopolitical dimension of these conflicts: that actors differ on normative assumption about the ontological status of the "objects", "subjects", "things", and "persons" in question.

4. Decolonizing European museums and the critique of capitalist property

In the debate on the decolonisation of museums, ethnographic museums have not only been at the centre of critique but have also often been pioneering projects that have helped to address their colonial make-up. Since the expansion of anthropology as a discipline after World War II and the formal political decolonisation of Africa in the 1950s and 1960s, anthropologists have reflected on the constitutive role of colonialism in the formation of the discipline and, in turn, the role of anthropology in the colonial endeavour (Gough 1968, Asad 1973, Wagner 1981, Fabian 1983). This led to a crisis of ethnographic representation as anthropologists questioned the epistemic and colonial violence inherent not only in ethnographic writing about other cultures (Clifford and Marcus 1986), but also in the representation of non-Western material culture in ethnographic museum exhibitions (Price 1989, Karp and Levine 1991). Museums in the post-colonial era can become spaces for reproducing colonial ways of seeing, evaluating, and classifying non-European cultures (Simpson 1996). Increasingly, indigenous communities are critical of museum displays and demand to be involved in decisions about how they are represented in museums (Hendry 2005).

Since the 1990s, the debate on ethnographic representation has included increasingly strong calls for the return of ethnographic collections to indigenous communities. Perhaps the most important precursor to the European restitution debate described in the introduction to this section was the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), which requires anthropological museums in the United States to return human remains of indigenous people to their communities, and the controversies surrounding it (Haas 1996, Fine-Dare 2002, Nash and Colwell-Chanthaphonh 2010, Collison *et al.* 2019). More recently, the debate has broadened to include not only human remains, but also non-human objects in ethnographic collections. But the immediate challenges posed by objects in collections go beyond physical restitution. In the wake of digitisation and the emergence of concepts such as immaterial cultural property, museums have begun to engage in digital restitution projects (Alivizatou 2019, Vapnarski and Nôus 2021, Ogbechie 2022). Museums are digitising their catalogues and providing open access to their databases, sometimes in addition to, and sometimes as a substitute for, physical restitution. This raises many legal issues in regard to capitalist property (Lixinski 2020), as well as related legal conflicts

over different notions of materiality and personhood (Hogsden and Poulter 2012, Scholz and Guzmán Ocampo 2021).

Recent studies have shown that not all such collaborations are success stories. The focus on material objects in collaborations can actually strengthen ethnographic authority, as objects can easily be ascribed specific cultural meanings without being able to talk back to the anthropologist as a human interlocutor would (Fowles 2016). Collaboration can serve as an alibi for an institution, immunising the institution against activist critics (Ivanov and Bens 2021). They can become "neo-colonial collaborations" (Boast 2011) when the institution so strongly defines the framework for collaboration that indigenous voices cannot actually be heard, making it seem impossible to "smash the colonial frameworks" that structure the museum (Weber-Sinn and Ivanov 2020).

It is revealing that when such collaborations fail, it is often precisely because the actors underestimate the extent to which the capitalist notions of property inherent in the institutional structure of Euro-American academia, and the specifically modern notions of materiality and personhood that underlie them, fundamentally structure collaborations of all kinds. The two collaborative research projects I have briefly introduced at the beginning of this article are a case in point.

Lessons can be learned from examples such as the long-term collaborative research project that Andrea Scholz (2021) and others has undertaken with several Amazonian partners of the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin. She began by developing a collaborative online database that included object descriptions that indigenous interlocutors could add in their own languages (Scholz and Guzmán Ocampo 2021). During the project, it became clear that the research design would not be successful. Indigenous interlocutors had such different conceptions of the objects in the Amazonia collection that the structure of the database, which was based on the data architecture of the museum's internal database, made no sense to them. To address this problem, Scholz abandoned her research design. Instead, she engaged in a series of open sessions to explore how knowledge production about the Amazonia collection could be transformed. A major outcome of the project was not a database that the museum could use to refine its object-based knowledge production, but the collaborative construction of a *maloka*, a traditional Amazonian community house, in which traditional cultural practices could be taught to young people in the community (Hugh-Jones 1979, 69-102). This was a form of knowledge production that went far beyond the comfort zone of the museum. At the same time, it stretched the institutional constraints of its funding agency to the limit, as it was very difficult to take funds earmarked for one purpose and use them for another purpose that had not yet been envisaged as an outcome of collaborative research (Scholz 2021).

Moko (2023) has described similar tensions in his ethnographic collaboration between the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin and indigenous Maasai communities in northern Tanzania. In preparation for face-to-face discussions, Moko organised online discussion groups via Facebook and WhatsApp but found that museum copyright restrictions prevented him from sharing the digital photographs of the Maasai objects. This initial problem directly focused to the inherent tensions between the property regime that governed the institutional structure of the museum and the relationships between humans and non-humans in what Moko calls "the Maasai order of things" (2023, 22-23).

During his fieldwork, he observed numerous instances where colonial violence and capitalist property systems intersected. For example, the uneven distribution of electrical outlets made it challenging for people to collaborate remotely, as they had to pause workshops to charge their phones (Moko 2023, 66). Additionally, during the severe drought of 2021/22, rising prices for wheat and rice were aggravated by global food price fluctuations following the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Moko 2023, 221). He also noted increased land grabs in Maasai regions driven by international tourism companies, with support from the Tanzanian government, which sparked protests and police violence (Moko and Bens 2022, Moko 2023, 209-211). These conflicts highlight the broader connections between ongoing colonialism and capitalist exploitation, legitimized within capitalist property systems (Ivanov *et al.* 2024, Bens fc.).

In late 2023, Laibor Kalanga Moko, Paola Ivanov, the East Africa curator of the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, and I attended a workshop with Maasai representatives in northern Tanzania. During this meeting, which was held as a traditional elder's meeting, an *enkiguana*, our conversation partners were very explicit about what is at stake in these negotiations over ethnographic collections. Now that people knew that *imasaa* were held in the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin, it became clear how many of the misfortunes that plagued the Maasai community today— the land grabs, the droughts as a result of climate change, the food prices — were connected to this kind of colonial violence committed by the Germans. The *imasaa* spread misfortune that materializes in these problems. Towards the end of the meeting, a senior elder even brought up the ongoing war in Ukraine and intimated that this might be one of the problems that materialize in Europe because of the unaddressed colonial violence that was at the centre of this meeting.

In these two brief examples that I have focused on in this article, the cosmopolitics inherent in the museum debate becomes evident. Basic understandings of modernity are at stake here: Are the items in ethnographic museum collections passive things or can they enact revenge on those that hurt them with colonial violence? Is this conflict about the restitution of property or the reparation of social relationships? Is colonialism a thing of the past, or of the present, or does it transcend time and space? However one addresses these questions, treating the debate on ethnographic collections mainly as a property dispute, does not only drastically underestimate what is at stake in these debates, but one also endangers reproducing exactly what is perpetuating ongoing colonialism: capitalist property regimes.

Any project that seeks to give space to indigenous materialities must pay close attention to the epistemological positions and ontological assumptions that the participants occupy within their own institutional structures, including their data management and funding systems (Arif 2021), and the power dynamics that this positionality entails. This means, first and foremost, "critically (re)examining naturalised ontologies developed in the global North" (Kaur and Klinkert 2021, 246). Capitalist property and the specific assumptions of materiality and personhood that underpin it are a fundamental aspect of such naturalised ontologies of the global North.

5. Conclusions

So far, the ongoing controversies over the coloniality of collections in ethnographic museums in Europe and North America have remained within the unquestioned framework of a property dispute. In this article, I have proposed an analytical perspective of normative pluralism that takes into account a plurality of regimes of indigenous materialities that entail different conceptions of subject and object, person and thing. As such, the conflict over ethnographic collections becomes visible as a cosmopolitical conflict in which basic divisions of nature and culture become the centre of contestation.

The failure to interrogate the underlying capitalist property paradigm, which is one of the enduring legacies of colonialism, presents significant blind spots. While a focus on questioning colonial power relations within and beyond museum infrastructures is undoubtedly crucial, any meaningful effort to decolonise European museums must include a robust critique of the modern state's specific notions of property, which often serve to reinforce colonial power structures and perpetuate marginalisation.

The perspective on plural normative orders and cosmopolitics proposed in this article demonstrates the need to recognise the complex interplay between colonialism, capitalism and indigenous knowledge systems. Only by challenging the hegemony of capitalist property norms and the ontological assumptions underlying them and by embracing a more inclusive and pluralistic approach to ownership can we truly begin the process of decolonising European museums and promoting meaningful restitution.

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