



Beyond the history of ethnographic collections

A complex approach to the Cora objects gathered by Konrad Theodor Preuss in view of a restitution process

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Abstract

Nowadays, anthropology museums debate between keeping or restituting objects. Through the study of the Cora ethnographic collection obtained by Konrad Theodor Preuss in Mexico (1906), today preserved in the *Ethnologisches Museum* of Berlin, I will show that analyzing how ethnographic objects get to a museum is not enough to take a justified stand on this issue. The socio-cultural dynamics and the contemporary history of ethnographic objects must also be considered to get a better perspective on the future of these collections.

Keywords

ethnographic collections, scientific expeditions, restitution, Mexico, Coras

Resumen

En la actualidad, los museos etnológicos se debaten entre mantener o restituir objetos. A través del estudio de la colección etnográfica Cora que Konrad Theodor Preuss obtuvo en México (1906), actualmente preservada en el Museo Etnográfico de Berlín, demostraré que el análisis de cómo los objetos etnográficos llegan a un museo no es suficiente para justificar una toma de posición. La dinámica socio-cultural y la historia contemporánea de los objetos etnográficos son también indispensables para pensar mejor en el futuro de estas colecciones.

Palabras clave:

colecciones etnográficas, expediciones científicas, restitución, México, Coras

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Introduction¹

In this paper, I present some perspectives that I consider crucial for a deep understanding of ethnographic collections situated in different museums and archives, their future existence, and the relationship they should maintain with their communities of origin. This reflection is based on my observations of the Cora² ethnographic objects gathered by Konrad Theodor Preuss in Jesús María (Nayarit, Mexico) in 1906. This collection is preserved, with the Huichol and Mexicanero objects, in the North American section of the *Ethnologisches Museum* of Berlin.

Between 2012 and 2014, I studied in Berlin different materials related to the expedition that Pruess conducted in Mexico (1905-1907). It was neither my first nor my last research visit to Berlin, but this long stay took place exactly when the new ethnology museum of Germany, the Humboldt Forum, started to take a tangible face. At the time of this long stay, several concrete measures concerning the conceptualization of the Humboldt Forum were being discussed.

Parallel to the dialogs about the concept of the museum, a series of debates emerged around the restitution processes of ethnographic objects to their original communities. At that time, my research was directed towards other goals, and even if the future of the collections was part of my concerns, it was not until 2020 that I was finally able to give more attention to the question of restitution.³

The idea of this paper was to see what would it be my perspective regarding the repatriation of the ethnographic objects I studied in Berlin. It is important to note here that, even if many people I know have talked about restituting some of the objects from the Preuss collection to their original Mexican communities, until now I haven't heard of any formal demand for restitution concerning these Mexican collections.⁴ Therefore, this exploration of the repatriation of Cora objects is so far only hypothetical. It should also be noted that all the initiatives that I know around getting the communities closer to this particular collection have come from people external to the Amerindian communities, situation that can be explained by the scarcity of information that has prevailed around the existence of the Preuss collection in Mexico for a long time.

¹I thank Sophia Huda for attentively proof-reading this paper, that was originally written in Spanish and then translated into English by me. I also thank the secret readers whose observations helped me to precise and complement some aspects of this paper.

² The Cora are around 25,000 people living for the most part in the Western Sierra Madre, in the province of Nayarit (Mexico).

³ A first version of this paper was presented at the symposium *Making and remaking anthropology museums: provenance and restitution* organized by Han F. Vermeulen (Max Planck Institute of Social Anthropology) and Adam Kuper (London School of Economics). Thanks to the comments received in this context, I was able to achieve this new version.

⁴ This situation contrasts with the Colombian collection gathered by Preuss. In this case, the Amerindian communities have, in fact, tried to recuperate several ritual objects.

Commonly, we think about the origins of ethnographic collections as the main source of information to define if any object is a potential candidate for repatriation. Recently, restitution processes have focused on several other innovative perspectives (Bienkowski 2015: 431-453) beyond the study of provenance (Förster, Edenheiser, Fründt and Hartmann 2018; Schorch 2020: 1-5). Here, I want to underline two directions that I find to be very important: pondering the local ideologies and practices around the use of objects (Assmann 2018: 25-35) and considering the social relations with and within the local community (Bell 2017: 241-259; Scholz 2018:119-142). Along with these ideas that put the Amerindian point of view at the center of the phenomenon (Kuprecht 2014) –at least in the case of American collections–, we need to consider also the *Nachleben* of objects: the life they had since their departure from their place of origin and until the present days.

As I will demonstrate, the contextualization of ethnographic objects must incorporate, beyond the origins of the objects, at least the two paths designed by new research perspectives: the dynamics of the original cultural settings where an object was socialized (created and used), and the particular situation through which the object has been kept since its arrival at a museum or archive.

In this paper, I will start by giving a brief introduction to the work of Konrad Theodor Preuss (1896-1938) to situate the history of his Mexican collection and, in particular, its Cora objects. Then, I will present some directions necessary for a better understanding of this collection: the original socio-cultural settings of the objects and the contemporary dynamics in their new setting. I will conclude with a discussion about the importance of a multidisciplinary and complex approach of ethnographic objects in order to find the best path to follow in terms of restitution.

Preuss and his Cora ethnographic collection

Konrad Theodor Preuss (1869-1938) started working as a volunteer at the *Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde* (KMV) in 1895 (Fig 1). He was named Assistant Director in 1900, and Curator in 1908. At the beginnings of the 20th Century Preuss was chosen to conduct an expedition to the Northwestern territories of Mexico. Thanks to the file about Preuss's journey preserved at the Historic Archive of the *Ethnologisches Museum* in Berlin,⁵ I was able to understand in detail some aspects of his expedition, from its conception to its achievements. Here I will focus on some aspects that I revealed through these documents.

⁵ I thank the *Ethnologisches Museum* of Berlin who made it possible for me to access the historical documents and other materials related to Preuss's expedition to Mexico. In particular Anja Zenner, Boris Gliemann and Maike Sommer at the historical archive; Richard Hass, Manuela Fischer and Hellena Tello in the collection's depot; and Jutta Billig, Barbara Hille, Sabine Pöggel and Birgit Wichmann in the museum's library.



Figure 1. Konrad Theodor Preuss (Photograph of the Preuss reserved collection *Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut*, Berlin).

The main goal of the Mexican expedition assigned to Preuss was to gather archaeological and ethnographic samples to complete the collection of the museum (Preuss 1487/1905 [17.08.05]). As soon as Preuss arrived in Mexico, however, he encountered a new Mexican law that prohibited the exportation of archaeological materials from the country. He used this situation to justify a last-minute change to his original plans: instead of an *archaeological* mission to Zacatecas, he directed himself to the Western Sierra Madre for a rather *ethnological* journey. Then, instead of departing from Guadalajara and visiting the already described Huichol culture, Preuss decided to start from Tepic and visit the Cora communities that were a lot less studied by previous expeditions (Preuss 188/1906 [24.12.05]: 1).

There are many elements that point to this decision being motivated by Preuss's interest in the study of religion through linguistic expression. Preuss was a philologist, and

as he openly discussed with Eduard Seler even before his trip, he was aware that all the languages spoken in the region by its Amerindian groups (Cora, Huichol, Southern Tepehuan, Tepecan and Tarahumara) belonged to the Yuto-Aztec linguistic family⁶ –the same family as Nahuatl, the language spoken by the ancient Mexicans. Furthermore, material evidence gathered from these populations by previous explorers of the region (Lumholtz 1900; 1902), showed a continuity in the cultural practices between the ancient Mexicans and the indigenous groups that inhabited the Western Sierra Madre at the time of Preuss (cf. Seler 1908 [1901]: 355-391).

Preuss observed that a philologic perspective was missing in previous explorations of the region. He was convinced that the register of languages and the study of texts in the native languages was essential for a better interpretation of the religious information contained in the ancient Mexican codex (Preuss 1487/1905 [17.08.05]). Indeed, during his expedition in Mexico, Preuss dedicated a considerable amount of his time and effort to the study of the local languages and the documentation of poetic expressions, particularly in the religious domain (Valdovinos 2012a: 67-86).

At the same time, Preuss kept collecting ethnographic objects with intensity to fulfill his obligations towards the museum and to finance the extra expenses of his trip.⁷ Only five months after his arrival to the Sierra Madre, for example, Preuss present his achievements to Seler in a letter: at that point, he had already collected 400 Cora objects that were sent to Germany in two different trips (Preuss 1144/1906 [30.05.06]: 1-2).

Preuss stayed 6 months among the Cora, 9 months with the Huichol, and 3 months with the Mexicanero. After 18 months of fieldwork in the Western Sierra Madre, the results of his expedition were outstanding: 2,300 objects, 1,000 photographs, at least 97 wax cylinders with original texts and chants, and 5,200 pages of transcriptions and translations of texts in the different Native languages he found in his way (Preuss 1774/1907 [21.09.07]).

This brief account of the collecting activity of Preuss cannot be completed without some important details that will impact the way we see the status of these objects. Preuss purchased most of the objects of his collection. Some of them, like textile pieces, were directly bought from the people who possessed them, but other objects were harder to get or it was simply harder to find people willing to sell them. Replicas of these other objects, like practical utensils, were commissioned. But there was a third group of objects that were just impossible to acquire because of their complicated production process, the nature of the materials needed for their fabrication and their cultural status

⁶ Eduard Buschmann had already proved the relationship between these languages in 1859. Because Buschmann was a known figure in the intellectual circles close to the Humboldt brothers, it is probable that at least Eduard Seler knew about his work, and Preuss by extension. Nonetheless, any reference in Preuss about Buschmann's hypothesis has been found (cf. Valdovinos 2019: 161-205).

⁷ It is well known that he sold an important part of the ethnographic objects to the *Ethnologisches Museum* of Hamburg and later, another Mexican collection to the *Kunst Kammer* in Saint Petersburg.

as ritual objects. In this case, Preuss commanded some replicas, but mainly proceeded extracting them without authorization from ritual deposits. As he writes to Selser in one of his letters:

The arrows I sent come from caves. They are the most magnificent specimens I have ever found [...]. The Cora doesn't know that I took something (Preuss 646/1906 [14.03.06]: 1-2).⁸

In another letter, he gives further details about his procedures and the origin of these stolen objects:

The arrows, as well as a big part of the Mitote elements, come from the Jesus Maria's caves, from San Francisco's cave come only some 20 pieces of sticks and arrows, when we visited La Mesa's cave we were watched, so we couldn't take anything. I visited myself each one of the caves. (Preuss 646/1906 [14.03.06]: 3).⁹

The procedure followed by Preuss to obtain some of the Cora ritual paraphernalia thus consisted of stealing them directly from ceremonial deposits without being seen (Fig. 2). Preuss used to sneak into ritual emplacements without permission and, when nobody was watching, take the objects he wasn't able to obtain elsewhere so he could complete his collection and send it to Germany. Taking objects without permission and working on illegal archaeological sites was, apparently, a common practice among German explorers in Mexico at this time; in a letter sent by Selser to Preuss at the time of his expedition, despite the new rules regarding the extraction of archaeological objects, Selser mentions to Preuss his plans for an archaeological excavation in San Andrés Tuxtla and asks him not to say anything about this idea to the Mexican authorities (Selser 1173/06 [30.06.06]: 1).

If extracting archaeological objects from Mexico was clearly forbidden, it is not clear what the exact rules regarding the extraction of ethnographic materials were at this time. In fact, Preuss used the help of Casa Delius, a German-owned business, to gradually send the ethnographic collections he gathered to Germany. In his correspondence he often mentions the need to keep these shipments to Germany as discrete as possible and avoid the Mexican authorities (Preuss 238/1909 [24.02.09]; Delius 238/1909 [26.03.09]).

⁸ From the original: *Die gesandten Pfeile stammen aus Höhlen, es sind die prächtigsten Exemplare, die ich gefunden habe. [...]. Auch wissen die Cora nicht, dass ich irgend etwas genommen habe* (my translation).

⁹ From the original: *Die Pfeile ebenso ein grosser Teil der Mitotegeräte stammen aus den Höhlen von Jesus Maria, aus den Höhlen von S. Francisco stammen nur etwa 20 Stück Stöcke und flechas, beim Besuch der Höhlen der Mesa wurden wir bewacht, so dass wir nichts nehmen konnten. Ich habe selbst jede einzelne der Höhlen besucht* (my translation).

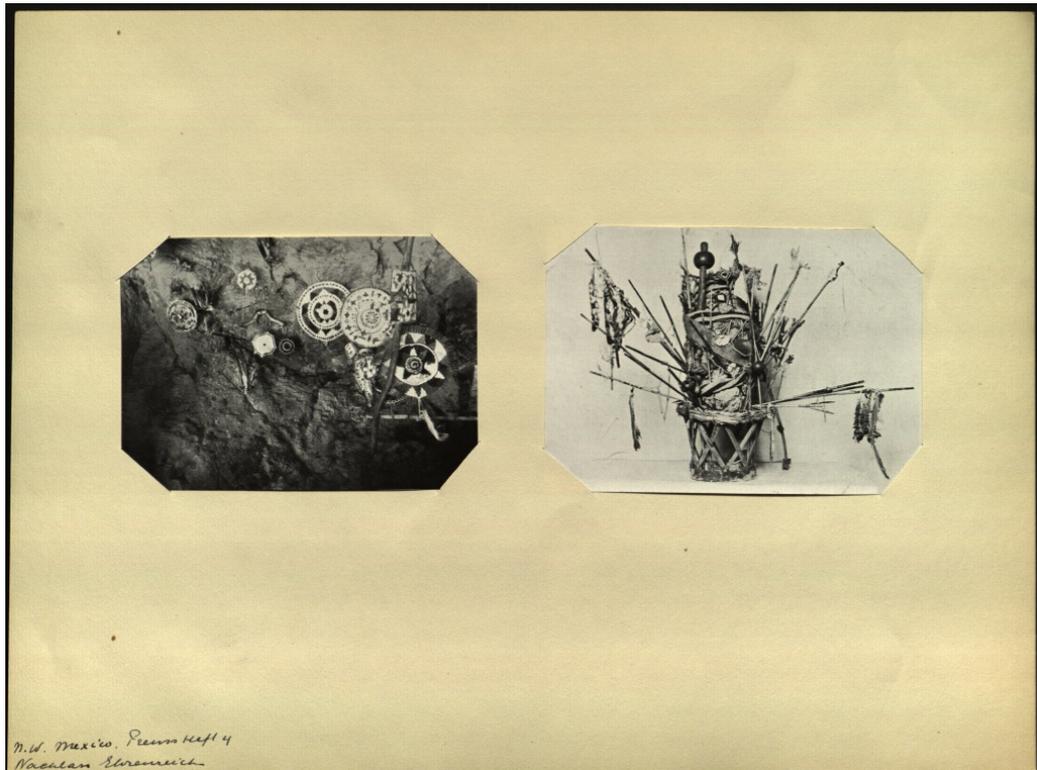


Figure 2. Ritual objects in a sacred cave from La Mesa (Photograph from the Preuss reserved collection *Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut, Berlin*).

The cultural life of objects

The stealthy manner in which Preuss operated would justify the assumption that all the ethnographic objects obtained from the Cora sacred caves and sent to Germany are ideal contenders for any restitution process, as they were not just disrespectfully extracted from sacred spaces, but also taken out of a country in a moment when the extraction of cultural pieces was considered problematic and even forbidden. Viewed through the lens of the life of cultural objects, however, the answer becomes more ambiguous.

The Cora communities are known for their intensive ritual life. In Jesús María, for example, there are religious celebrations taking place at the village more than 200 days every year (Valdovinos 2002). In these circumstances, we have to think of ritual activities not as an extraordinary event, but as an everyday life activity. Therefore, these events should be considered not only as the *mise-en-actes* of religious thinking, but also as a form of practice through which social interactions beyond the domestic groups are organized. Indeed, it is in rituals and through their organization that people meet with other people and social alliances are formed.

The objects that appear in a ritual context play a very important part in these dynamics. They are not reduced to decorative elements, but are considered as part of the ritual itself. By using them in particular ways these objects help to establish social hierarchies (Valdovinos 2008: 231-250), deal with the death of family members (Valdovinos 2017: 379-402), and maintain ritual exchanges with divinities (Valdovinos 2012b: 627-650), among other things.

Most of the Cora ritual objects are elaborated during ceremonies; we can even say that most rituals have as a goal the preparation of certain objects (Fig. 3). Once prepared, ritual objects are deposited in specific places. The actions through which these deposits take place are generally considered the central acts of a ceremony.

Here, I will present the case of a particular Cora ritual object called the *Cháanaka* (Literally, 'World') to show how this kind of object is at the heart of rituals as it undergoes different processes within the ceremonial contexts (Valdovinos 2006: 78-81; 2012b: 627-650). This object is also particularly important in the context of this paper as it corresponds to the objects taken from the Cora's ceremonial caves by Preuss. Figure 4 presents one *Cháanaka* piece from Preuss collection.¹⁰

The *Cháanaka* is a circular piece of around one meter of diameter elaborated with cotton and wool –and recently also with synthetic– threads interlaced in a *carrizo* (reed grass) structure. Visible on both surfaces, the obtained design consists of a series of concentrically organized triangles of different colors that symbolize the different territories of the World. The perimeter and one of the surfaces are covered with a thick layer of native cotton. This element represents the water that surrounds the World as it is explained by the Cora mythology. Between both sides of the object –the woven one and the cotton layer– several feathers of different birds are distributed.

The *Cháanaka* is elaborated, step by step, during the five-day ceremony organized the first days of January, just after the designation of the new *Gobernador* –the religious chief of the village. Each day of the ceremony, a different element of the *Cháanaka* is assembled until the piece is completed (Fig. 5).

The materials employed are delicately prepared and assembled by all the authorities and the elders of the community. The resulting piece is seen as a collective prayer through which the people of Jesús María ask for protection and wellness in all the territories of the World. Each one of its parts –the woven design, the layers of cotton and the feathers– is thought as made of a material capable of absorbing the speech and intention of those who address it. This property and the context in which the object takes form gives the Cora the conviction that it will carry in itself the prayers of the people

¹⁰ A part of this *Cháanaka* is missing: a back and contour cover of local cotton (cf. Figure 5). This is probably due to conservation problems.



Figure 3. Women preparing ritual objects during a Mitote celebration in Peñas Colorado, El Nayar (Photograph from Margarita Valdovinos).

who have created it and the people that they represent. In other words, this ritual object is the materialization of a central collective prayer for the whole world.

The *Cháanaka* is deposited in a cave situated in the mountain of *Tuákamuuta*, in the territory of the neighboring Cora community of Mesa del Nayar. This sacred place is related to *Tayáu* ('Our Father'), the main divinity of the Cora. The *Cháanaka* is ritually deposited the last day of the ceremony with other complementary offerings that are distributed in ritual emplacements all through the Cora territory. All these offerings form links that consolidate the relationships between the Cora and their divinities, constructing a network of offerings as a metaphor for the World.

Once the objects are disposed in the place of offering, they are considered as belonging to the divinities. They are supposed to stay in that place until they are disintegrated by natural decomposition. Only every five years, and in very delimited contexts, are these sacred places cleaned up as part of ritual actions. On these occasions, any material evidence left of ritual objects is treated with great respect as it is still considered to be property of the divinity to whom they were originally given.

This cultural information makes it clear that the content of these ritual caves should not be removed under any circumstance and should not be for sale. It is thus evident that the intervention of Preuss must be considered not only as illegal, but also as to-



Figure 4. The *Cháanaka* (IVCa 34878). Preuss collection *Ethnologisches Museum*, Berlin (Photograph of Margarita Valdovinos).

tally culturally inappropriate. Furthermore, this perspective points to see the return of these ritual objects to their original community as a negative outcome from the Cora perspective at least for two reasons. First, the return of any of these objects to Cora territory would be conceived by the members of the community as evidence of the incorrect extraction of an object conceived as a ritual offering *for* a divinity. Beyond the illegality of the act, this extraction would imply that the object was either not correctly received by the divinity because of external intervention or that it was taken from her in an inappropriate manner. Second, accepting back an object of this nature from an external entity would be like accepting an offering not originally made for people, but for divinities. In both cases, following the principles of exchange that determine Cora ritual dynamics, this behavior would be considered as an offense to the divinities.

Based on ritual principles, both cases will be seen as bad presages for the community and may entail a complicated series of extra prophylactic rituals that will be expensive in terms of time, economic resources and moral strength for all the community. In the case of a restitution process not directly involving the Cora community and pointing instead a Mexican institution (archive or museum) as the recipient, this transaction would



Figure 5. A *Cháanaka* deposited in Tuakamuuta (Photograph from Adriana Guzmán as appeared at the cover of *Apostólicos Afanes*, 1996 [1754]).

be without doubt in prejudice of the relationship between the Cora community and the receptive institution, as it could be seen as a conflict of interests.

This information presents potential negative outcomes of a restitution process involving stolen ritual objects. Such a restitution process would create new issues to be solved, a series of new responsibilities for the local traditional authorities and great expenses for the Cora communities. However, the complex situation that may result does not imply that illegal extractions of ritual pieces shouldn't be openly exposed. On the contrary, the Cora communities must be informed of how these illegal extractions were made, independently of any restitution process.

Amerindian collections in the old continent

The previous section analyzes the conditions of existence of Cora ritual objects and the status they have in local ritual dynamics still present today. This section reviews what happens after their extraction, once they are sent away and become part of ethnographic collections. This fragment of the history of ethnographic collections is normally not even considered when objects or collections are analyzed, but important information concerning the objects is only accessible through this particular viewpoint.

Cora ritual objects emerge from ceremonial activities. At the conclusion of these celebrations, the objects are deposited ritually as offerings for different divinities all across the territory. The pieces surreptitiously taken from sacred caves by Preuss were almost immediately sent to Germany, where they were kept in boxes attending the return of Preuss. Once he came back, he dedicated himself to classify the objects gathered during his expedition and to propose a way to integrate them in the museum's displays (Valdovinos, 2013: 165-196).

The Mexican collection of Preuss is mentioned for the first time in the official guides of the museum in 1908, so only some months after his return to Germany (*Königliches Museum zu Berlin* 1908). Then, the Cora and Huichol objects appear as part of the North American collection belonging to the section of the Pueblo Indians and they were kept in this section until the end of Preuss's next expedition in Colombia (1913-1919).

In 1926, a renovation plan for the whole museum took place and a new permanent exhibition was prepared. In this new project, some of the objects of Preuss's Mexican collection appeared in a new display independently from the Pueblo Indians (*Staatliche Museen zu Berlin* 1926: 62-64). Then, they shared space with the Pima, Papago, Tarahumara and Tepehuan in the showcase named *Völker des nordwestlichen Mexiko - Sonorische Stämme* (People from Northwest Mexico - Sonoran Tribes) (*ibid*: 50).

There is not much information about the dynamics of the *Ethnologisches Museum* of Berlin during the Second World War beyond the fact that some temporary exhibitions were organized using all the collections of the museum (Westphal-Hellbusch 1973: 47-48). In any case, since 1934 the government asked the administration of the museum to establish an evacuation strategy for the museum's collection in case of bombing (Krieger 1973: 125). The collection was then divided into 3 parts for evacuation purposes (irreplaceable objects, valuable objects, and all the rest), but it was not until 1938 that strict measures over the collections started to be applied.

In 1941, some pieces of the museum were transported to the Tiergarten and Friedrichshain (Westphal-Hellbusch 1973). Another part of the collection was sent to the depot of the *Tieftresor der Reichsmünze* (Höpfner 1993: 158), and a section of the American collection was taken to Bleicherode, in Thuringia (Westphal-Hellbusch 1973:

50). At the end of 1943, the rest of the collections was packed at the museum and sent to the mines of Bleicherode, Grasleben and Schönebeck (Hartmann 1973: 239). These evacuations continued until 1945, when 93 more boxes were taken to the mine of Kaiseroda (*Ibid.*).

By the end of the war, the collections of the museum were hidden all around Berlin and its surroundings. Boxes full of objects were progressively found by the ally forces. The American and English collected all the objects they were finding in depots called *Art Collecting Points*. At the same time, the Russians were illegally taking a considerable part of what they found back to Russia (Höpfner 1993: 160; Bolz 1999: 41-42).

The return of the collections to the museum was a long process that took place in two phases. First, the objects reunited at the *Art Collecting Points* were brought back progressively for political reasons, but also because of logistics. To give an idea, between 1945 and 1946, only the *Art Collecting Point* of the Celler Schloß, in the region of Niedersachsen, had 2,915 boxes with objects from the *Ethnologisches Museum* of Berlin (Koch 1973: 377-383). The second phase came after the fall of the Berlin wall, when it was revealed that part of the collection of the museum taken by the Russians was stored in the *Grassi Museum*, in Leipzig (Haas 2003: 43-50): 46,675 objects – of which 9,510 belonged to the American collection (Höpfner 1993: 169) – were hidden there. It was later discovered that all of these objects were first taken to Leningrad (*Ibid.*: 161) and then given to East Germany as a friendship gesture by the Russian government (Bolz 1999:46). The objects in this second group only arrived back to the *Ethnologisches Museum* of Berlin between 1990 and 1993 (Höpfner 1993: 167-169).

Under these conditions, the objects were in contact with different substances at different moments to keep them as protected as possible from natural elements that could affect them. These circumstances bestowed new properties to the objects that remained unknown for a long time, but they are known now and should also be considered in order to understand the actual nature of the ethnographic objects and their future.

We know today for certain that at least two different situations marked the way in which these objects must be handled today. First, most of the collections preserved in the mines around Berlin got contaminated with cyanide, which transformed the innocuous nature of the ethnographic objects into a potentially toxic object. Second, the collections were treated with DDT to protect them from bugs.

Since the discovery of the cyanide and DDT contamination certain rules have been adopted for approaching and manipulating the objects of almost every collection at the *Ethnologisches Museum* of Berlin. This is of course the case with the Cora objects from the Preuss collection. As it is visible in figure 6, when approaching any of its objects, a special suit, gloves and a mask must be worn as part of a more complex sanitary policy.



Figure 6. Getting ready to observe Preuss collection at the *Ethnologisches Museum* of Berlin in Dahlem (Photograph of Gabriel Rossell).

The contaminated condition of the Cora objects must be taken into account when thinking about their future. It seems complicated to think of any restitution process under these conditions as restitution not just encompass returning these objects, but also their current toxic conditions and any associated hazards. This situation would be impossible to handle for any Cora community and even for a museum in the national or local context, because it may demand particular equipment and certain hygienic conditions that could only be respected with significant economic resources and spatial conditions.

Conclusion

The perspectives about the Cora objects presented in this paper give us different ways in which to view their current state and the reasons that would support or contradict their restitution to Cora communities or to other Mexican institutions. First, a careful analysis of archive documents gives us elements to see that Preuss used illegal methods to obtain some of the objects that he sent to Germany. This revision shows us that all the objects of his Mexican collection were extracted from Mexico in opaque conditions and points at them as good candidates for restitution, particularly in the case of ritual objects.

We then analyzed how these ritual objects are conceived by the Cora people: they don't see them as the property of people, but of divinities to whom they were given during the ritual processes in which the objects were created. In this context, the Cora people will feel uncomfortable receiving objects that belong not to them, but to the divinities. They may also feel insecure realizing that these offerings were obnoxiously taken from the caves belonging to the divinities, probably causing an invalid reception of the corresponding offerings. From this other perspective, a restitution process should be seen as unnecessary, inappropriate and even unpolite. This position does not exempt anybody from presenting their apologies to the Cora people, to whom a moral injury has been caused by the illegal extraction of their ritual objects.

Another perspective emerged from the study of the collection since its arrival to Europe. This time we see that the manipulation and transfer of objects resulted in their deep contamination with at least cyanide and DDT. The preservation of the whole collection must follow certain rules under which the objects can be approached and manipulated to avoid contamination. Considering these circumstances, the restitution of these objects to the Cora community would be undesirable.

Three lessons can be obtained from the Cora example. First, the situation of every single collection –and sometimes even every single object– should be considered individually, meaning that general decisions regarding restitution should be avoided. Second, deep historical and ethnological research should be pursued to inform any decision concerning restitution; the history about how an object gets to a museum is just one part of the story. Third, in case of any particular condition –such as the contamination of the Cora collection– this must be openly exposed and considered when thinking about how the objects must be dealt with in the future.

In a more conceptual field, it is essential to try to analyze the situation of any ethnographic collection from as many perspectives as possible. Amerindian communities should be included in these discussions, as they know best the cultural context of their objects, but anthropologists and other researchers should participate in this debate too to maintain a complex viewpoint that can encompass the cultural perspectives of all stakeholders. I witnessed once a Huichol shaman identifying objects from the Preuss collection at the *Ethnologisches Museum* in Berlin. Museographers and artists were present. The shaman was interpreting all the objects that were displayed in front of him. He didn't realize that, by mistake, objects of other collections from the Northwest of Mexico were also being presented to him. He kept interpreting according to his cultural background, and his professional perspective as a shaman. I realized a mistake was being made and mentioned it to the museum's authorities.

In this situation, the shaman was acting accordingly to his role as a shaman, what supposed interpreting, giving meaning to the World; simultaneously, I was acting in accordance to my position as an anthropologist studying the pieces of the collection, what

supposed distinguishing pieces according to their historical origins. We were both acting right by following the principles of our perspective. Cases like this shows us how important it is to consider and distinguish the perspectives of each one of the actors participating of the study of an ethnographic collection.

The different stances described in this paper shows us restitution as a complex process that supposes the intervention of several actors and involves different institutions. Each one of these entities may have a specialized understanding of what should be done with certain objects. But it seems that it is only at the crossroads of these standpoints that we may find the best path. Sometimes giving back objects will be best, but other times giving back objects without understanding the real implications of these transactions may bring chaotic results.

In this network of relations, collections as much as museums are linked to a complex past characterized by the presence of colonial and asymmetric relationships. Giving back objects won't change this social configuration. A rigorous analysis of each situation may help establish new rules around the management of ethnographic objects and allow the emergence of innovative clues for the re-evaluation of intercultural relationships. From this perspective, contemporary ethnologic museums should no longer be about objects, but about new and more symmetric intercultural relationships.

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