

MIGRANT HERITAGE: A Dialogue of Objects and Memories in a Barcelona Ethnographic Museum

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ABSTRACT

This article describes the “Dialogues with Africa” project of the Barcelona Museum of World Cultures, which consisted of workshops using personal objects of African guests residing in Catalonia, and objects from the museum’s African collections. The dialogues revealed the existence of both a migrant memory connected with objects chosen for their capacity to evoke origins and a museum memory linked with artifacts that were chosen as representing distant cultures. The main aim is to describe this migrant memory in relation to the objects and analyze how it connects with the museum’s institutional memory in order to contribute to the discussion of the role of ethnographic museums in a plural society. We suggest that incorporating migrant memory will make possible an opening up to new meanings for objects that have been turned into heritage from an exoticizing standpoint, and that this is in keeping with a more inclusive anthropological museology. [heritage, Africa, memory, migration, museums]

INTRODUCTION: A DIALOGUE OF MEMORIES THROUGH OBJECTS

Some objects are alive. They have a history that we know inasmuch as people talk about them. They can account for fragments of the lives of their owners while simultaneously condensing a collective meaning rooted in a cultural tradition and legacy. For example, the Brontë sisters’ sewing boxes make it possible to explore not only the lives of their famous owners and the books they wrote, but also Victorian UK and women’s friendships (Lutz 2016).

In fact, using objects to tell stories has been a popular method in archaeology and anthropology, and one that has acquired new luster since the 1990s thanks to authors such as Appadurai (1988b), Kopytoff (1988), and Miller (1991). Inspired by this approach, as well as by critical anthropology and the

European project SWICH (Sharing a World of Inclusion, Creativity and Heritage)—which, between 2014 and 2018, brought together ten ethnographic museums with the aim of reflecting on their role in a plural European society—we organized three workshops in the Barcelona Museum of Ethnology and World Cultures in February and March 2016. These workshops—part of “Dialogues with Africa,” a joint initiative of the museum and the University of Barcelona under the auspices of SWICH—were structured around objects presented by guest participants who were born in different regions of Africa and are now resident in Catalonia, and other objects from the same regions that are in the museum’s collections. Most of the latter came from ethnological expeditions of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s,¹ as well as from the collections of the original version of the present museum, namely the Ethnological and Colonial Museum. Established in 1949, this early museum mainly contained items acquired in Equatorial Guinea on expeditions of the Institute of African Studies, a government agency responsible for research in Spain’s African colonies (Calvo 1997, 177, cited in García Arnillas and Ramoneda Aigüadé 2019, 168). The final aim of the workshops was to hold a joint exhibition that would reflect the conversations about this set of personal and institutional objects. The exhibition *Dialogues with Africa: The Memory of Objects* was eventually held in the museum from December 2016 to February 2017.

This dialogue between people and objects revealed both the existence of a migrant memory linked with objects that were chosen for their power to evoke places and cultures of origin and an institutional, museum-based memory prompted by the desire to conserve artifacts selected for their condition as representatives of distant cultures. Anthropological museology has deepened the us/others dichotomy. This is the memory of European societies that reaffirmed their global hegemony—if not their colonial power—by highlighting the differences between the modern civilized world and societies that were otherized and exhibited as traditional, wild, or primitive. In keeping with the literature on “remediating” the colonial museum (Deliss 2013; Forni 2017), the aim of the Barcelona project was to break down the barrier and look for a shared space in which this

institutional memory might commune with that of the diasporic communities coming from places where the objects in the collections also originate. Finally, the bond uniting the guest participants and their objects with the museum artifacts was the evocation of a migrant memory that blurred over the here and there, the us and them, thanks to the recognition by some of the guests of several of the museum pieces. This recognition, linking collections and guests, drew attention to the itinerant quality—also inherent to the personal objects—of the objects in the museum. This condition was related not only with the physical displacement of the objects but also with changes in their meaning. Hence, for example, a *darbuka* is not only an early-twentieth-century Moroccan goblet drum acquired in a certain museological expedition, but also an artifact that has undergone changes of meaning, first by its incorporation into the museum as a beautiful exotic piece and then by intermingling with the migrant memories of some of the guests who recalled, for example, a similar *darbuka* they had as children.

The main aim of this article is to describe this migrant memory in relation to the objects and to analyze their links with the institutional memory of the museum, in order to contribute to the critical insights of the SWICH project about the new role of ethnographic museums in a plural European society. This role would consist of giving new sense to the anthropological heritage of museums by transforming a far-away heritage into a shared heritage by incorporating the voices of people coming from the regions that were also home to the objects in the collections. The idea is to create a new “we”² thanks to this joint heritage and these shared memories. Ethnographic museums are thus placed at the center of debates in Europe about heritage, citizenship, and belonging. This refers to belonging in the dual sense of possession (this heritage belongs to me) and feeling part of a community (Modest 2019, 15).

Another aim is to further explore how objects can act as connectors and triggers of recall (Radley 1994, 48) in this dialogue of memories. In this sense, the “Dialogues with Africa” project enables us to think about objects as connectors working at different levels. On the one hand, they link individual memories marked by migration and origin with other related memories which lead to the shaping of a collective migrant memory incorporating cultural

identity as an important aspect. Cooking utensils or musical instruments made from calabash gourds in West Africa are one example. Several people told personal stories about calabashes given to them by their mothers and brought with them to their new homes in Europe. They also recognized these objects as representing the cultural areas they come from. On the other hand, the objects acted as connectors between processes of institutional singularization that had turned them into “heritage of the city of Barcelona” and personal processes of singularization that are strongly marked, in this case, by migration and, evidently, by the context of the workshops. Hence, the connecting capacity of objects in shaping migrant memory and establishing a dialogue between this and the museum’s institutional memory is what made it possible to give new sense to the latter’s patrimony.

In brief, we aim to explore the incipient process of heritage transformation that occurred in the Barcelona Museum of Ethnology and World Cultures thanks to the connecting role of the objects and incorporation of migrant memory. Our core argument is that this incorporation allowed objects that had been turned into heritage from an exoticizing standpoint to be opened up to new meanings that would befit a more inclusive anthropological museology. The project enabled us to explore in greater depth a view of heritage as contingent and changing and, accordingly, to understand artifacts in the framework of “things as events” (Ingold 2007).

We begin by describing the museum-based initiative in which this process of heritage transformation occurred, after which we provide an analytical contextualization of what occurred in Barcelona in the background of studies on material culture, memory, and heritage. We then proceed to analyze the connecting role of the objects in the workshops and the new meanings they acquired. This will be followed by a section of conclusions that aims to contribute to debates about the role of ethnographic museums in shaping a new patrimony that breaks down the colonial barrier by means of incorporating migrant memory into institutional memory.

THE “DIALOGUES WITH AFRICA” PROJECT

Museums are among the preeminent spaces where cultural heritage is conserved and popularized in contemporary societies. Viewed from a semiotic

perspective, they are also spaces of communication and places where objects enter into dialogue with the public through their symbolic power (Hernández Hernández 2003). But the objects (together with images and text, the other two elements of the cultural display) speak not only independently and for themselves alone but also, and especially, as items organized into a discourse that is prepared by the museum, the institution, and those in charge therein. They are thus translated into certain exhibition practices.

Anthropology, as a particularly self-critical discipline because of its relationship with colonialism, has been and must be the science that is most concerned with analyzing the discourse of its museums. In this context of deconstruction, James Clifford (1997, 188–219) explored the postcolonial political reading of the ethnographic museum as an area of contact and as embodying asymmetrical power relations between a metropolitan center that exhibits and “peripheries” that are on display. The process of exhibition, which is also representation of culture, can be based on ethnocentric and colonialist exploitation or on reciprocity, which is to say, democratic negotiation between exhibitors and exhibited with a view to giving more prominence to the voice of the latter.

In the past decade, some of Europe’s leading ethnographic museums have come together in the framework of projects aiming to consider these and other related questions. Those involved are convinced that, if they are to give added value to their cultural patrimony, ethnographic museums should renew their mission in contemporary society and try to experiment with critical discourse from anthropology. To be specific, the European projects RIME (Réseaux International des Musées d’Ethnographie—International Network of Ethnography Museums, 2008–2013), READ-ME I and II (Réseau Européen des Associations de Diasporas & Musées Ethnographiques—Network of Diaspora Associations and Ethnographic Museums, 2007–2012), and, finally, the SWICH project, of which our initiative “Dialogues with Africa” is a part, have been trying to find ways to include diasporic communities presently living in Europe in the projects of ethnographic museums in the main cities. One proposal has been to promote meetings with different diaspora associations and to work with them in creating joint exhibitions.³

In Barcelona, we worked on an exercise that would enable a reappraisal of the collections of the museum with the aim of reconnecting them with the experiences of the contemporary diaspora. It is not that the objects in the museum’s collections had no value (they are patrimony of the city of Barcelona) or that they had no history (to the contrary; one example is their incorporation into the museum). The point is that this value and this history were fruit of a “passive migration”⁴ that had uprooted them from their homelands and given them new meaning in the museum as “exotic” items (Munapé 2012, 15).

Since the museum management aimed to give more visibility to its African collections and thus wanted this focus for the project, we contacted residents of African origin in Catalonia who wished to take part in this experience. We organized three workshops corresponding to three African geographic-cultural areas with a numerically significant presence in Catalonia: Morocco, West Africa (especially Senegal), and Central Africa (especially Equatorial Guinea).

Next, we looked for six participants from each area, choosing them from among members of Afro-Catalan cultural associations and asking around among our acquaintances. All guest participants were born in Africa and have lived in Catalonia for some years. In the selection we respected criteria of gender parity and the appropriateness of each person (availability, personal interest, etc.) for the aims of the project. We also decided that they should be paid a fee for their work with the museum. Although these guests represented a range of professions, many of them would come under the heading of mediators—people who worked in intercultural or immigration management in public and/or private institutions.

With the aim of prompting recall and stimulating the memories of the guest participants, we asked them to bring along two personal objects (e.g., clothing, personal or household ornaments, domestic utensils, foodstuffs, photographs, musical instruments, recorded songs) that brought back memories of their lands of origin. In addition, a team from the museum chose several artifacts from its collections that came from the geographic and cultural areas that were the birthplaces of the guest participants.

The chief aim was to foster discussion between the museum and the guests through the objects that had

been chosen; to achieve this, an effort was made to create a relaxed, friendly, and trusting atmosphere in the four hours of each workshop. After a guided tour of the African section of the museum, we settled into a room where the guests took turns presenting their objects, describing them, explaining how they came to have them, what they were used for, why they had chosen them, and what they evoked. In brief, they told each object's story. Next, the museum team presented the pieces chosen from the African collections. This presentation once again led to a discussion with the guests, who connected the pieces with their own knowledge and personal stories. Their comments not only made it possible to enrich the technical information about each piece but also encouraged a sharing of opinions on the greater or lesser capacity of the museum objects to connect with their personal memories. The intention was to give these objects a "new life" beyond their status as samples of the colonial collector's spirit which had brought them to the museum.

Finally, the experience was presented to the public with the collaborative exhibition *Dialogues with Africa: The Memory of Objects* (Figure 1). It aimed to convey the "life" of the objects and their qualities as connectors of memories by means of photographs of the participants, a selection of the personal items, and pieces from the museum collections that had been part of the experience. The exhibition also included edited videos of the workshops and a booklet including the participants' stories and those of the two sets of objects (Izard and Celigueta 2016).⁵

OBJECTS AS CONNECTORS: MATERIAL CULTURE, MEMORY, AND HERITAGE

The notion of objects as connectors, which became clear in the workshops, has been pondered in works on material culture ever since ideas on the social symbolism of the material world, the social life of things, and the cultural biography of objects were presented by Miller (1991), Appadurai (1988b), and Kopytoff (1988), respectively.

We started out, then, from the notion that objects reveal social relations while also being recipients of cultural meanings. Appadurai (1988a, 5) adds that these meanings must be learned through studying the trajectories of objects. In other words, they are contingent and vary according to their social context



Figure 1. External showcase of the collaborative exhibition with video projection of the summary of the workshop sessions. (Photo by Gemma Celigueta.) [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

(Hicks 2010, 74). In our case, the context is threefold: the original collector's spirit of the museum; the initiative of the workshops, aiming to create a space for meeting and dialogue; and the migratory background of the guest participants. All of this led the guests to choose some objects and not others because of their ability to invoke origins and identity, and it also meant that the museum objects took on new meanings in the workshops.

The choice of certain objects by the guest participants was in keeping with a process of singularization or the fact that "culture ensures that some things remain unambiguously singular" (Kopytoff 1988, 73). This directly connects with the concept of value, which, following Georg Simmel (Appadurai 1988a, 3), is not an inherent property of objects but a judgment passed on them by the subjects. In the migratory context, the value and singularization of some objects are associated with what might be called "migrant memory," which also includes family memory.

Memory is closely linked with migrations and diasporas since it provides continuity in the

dislocation of individual and social identities, which is part of physical displacement (Creed 2014). The close relationship between the individual and social domains in the realm of memory has long been emphasized, beginning with the pioneering works of Bartlett (1932) and Halbwachs (1925). According to the latter, we never remember alone since our memory, which is inscribed in the social frameworks in which we live, is socially oriented.

In relation to this idea, and in the migratory context, it is important to draw attention to the role of memory as a shaper of identity and/or community by creating bonds among those who remember together and, therefore, conserving identifications based on their origins (Rozinska 2014, 39).

Objects, then, become “triggers” of memory, as Marcel Proust showed (with the madeleine) and Frederic C. Bartlett described at length. In fact, the material world, like oral communication (narratives, stories), is also a form of expression of memory: “remembering is something which occurs in a world of things, as well as words” (Radley 1994, 57). And, in this remembering process, some objects become “private mementoes [that] may take the place of interpersonal relations as a depository of sentiment and cultural knowledge” (Parkin 1999, 317).

In the workshops, home—place of origin, town, or city where other family members remained—appeared in narratives of memory inspired by objects. In this process of connecting past and present, the singularized objects became the material support of memory in what Françoise Zonabend called, in relation to the furniture and objects from houses in a village of the Burgundy region of France, “a tangible record of family history” (1980, 37).

This idea of objects as connectors and firing pins of memory links up with the concept of socio-transmitters coined by Candau (2005, 75) to refer to things that allow a causal cognitive chain to be established between people. This is how individual memories come together as collective memory.

The value of the objects singularized by the guest participants through the connection with origin links up, in turn, with the notion of heritage because, as Candau (2005, 119) notes, heritage is created by way of an act of selection based on memory. Another idea that is implicit in the concept of heritage, namely the need for preservation, was also very present among

the workshop guests, who saw their objects as a valuable legacy that had to be conserved and passed on. Some of them even explicitly referred to the idea of heritage: “This cloth is like cultural heritage,” or, “My home is like a museum.”

In the case of museums, collecting artifacts is inscribed in social processes of memory construction based on the idea of institutional conservation. This preservation fixes the memory of whole cultures through representative objects by selecting or, in other words, singularizing what must be conserved and remembered. The museum, then, stores memories in the form of cultural heritage (Crane 2000).

Heritage is not only a remnant of the past but is, in particular, a certain present use of that remnant. “Heritage is not simply the past, but the modern-day use of elements of the past” (Timothy and Boyd 2003, 4, quoted in Hodges, 2009, 77). In this sense, objects (together with places and practices) are adapted, revalued, and resymbolized when they are incorporated into heritage practices (Hodges 2009, 76–77).

Hence, it is appropriate to analyze objects from a diachronic perspective (things as events), to see them as things being formed beyond the value and specific significance they may acquire at any particular moment (Ingold 2007), and to study the variability of their uses according to space–time contexts (Miller 1991).

It follows that we are interested in the biographies of the objects the guest participants brought to the workshops since these life stories connect with those of their owners. How did they come to own them? What meaning do they have to the owner? Why have the owners kept them? Then again, the objects provided by the museum also have biographies that interest us. They were made by somebody and, after a journey we normally do not know about, were acquired by the institution because of their heritage value. And, in the workshops, the museum objects took on new life, acquired new sense because of the recognition accorded to them by the guest participants who were inspired by evocations of the past.

The diachronic dimension inherent to the processes of singularization was thus clearly shown in the workshop experiences. In the case of both guests and the museum staff, “these were objects that were singularized a posteriori” and “only later come to be marked in a way which designates them as special

possessions, as part of the cultural heritage or of one's memorabilia" (Radley 1994, 48). In other words, they were objects singularized as heritage, starting from the notion of institutional preservation of objects representing exotic cultures, or from the idea of preserving something that, in a migratory context, connects with origins. In addition, the truly relevant point that came home to us from the workshops was that this cultural heritage and these memorabilia were linked by being incorporated into a migrant memory so that at least part of the exoticizing heritage changed, acquiring new sense and value, in a more accessible heritage.

NARRATIVES OF RECALL THROUGH OBJECTS

In the workshops, objects triggered memory and stories (Radley 1994) as they became material support for memory, and also heritage, through a process of an a posteriori selection of things that evoke the place of origin. Intrinsic to the concept of heritage, the idea of legacy—an inheritance from the past that we believe must be preserved—was very clear in the perception the guest participants had of their objects.

The stories flowed as the guests spoke of these objects, which functioned as memory connectors at different levels of dialogue: between individual memories and others in shaping a migrant memory, and between migrant memory and the institutional memory associated with the objects of the museum.

CONNECTION WITH THE SHARED PAST

The guests' choice of objects was influenced by a process of singularization associated with the idea of value. The twofold interrelated contextual conditions in which these people came together (their condition as migrants and as participants in a project that invited them to contribute objects related to their origins) meant that, in a process of "past presencing" (MacDonald 2013), the value of the objects derived from their connection with migrant memories and recall of the place of origin. The social framework of migration then molded a connection that arose partly with the more intimate recall linked with families and homes that had been left behind, and partly with memory whose collective character keeps expanding until it reaches the cultural domain (ethnic group, country, or region) of origin. There is no precise boundary between these two kinds of recall, and as we

shall see below, most of the objects were associated with a hazy zone between the two. Then again, in some cases this collective dimension took on a markedly politicized tone with aspects such as colonial destruction or empowerment of women.

From the Memory of Home to Collective Memory

In this area, we found many objects that evoked intimate, nostalgic memories of the home and family of origin. These objects generated reminiscences which, translated into stories, contained elements in common with the accounts of other participants (association with close relatives, their nature as gifts given at significant moments of the migratory process, and so on) and connections with cultural traditions (rituals of different kinds, the Koranic school, the making of cloths, etc.) of the places of origin. The objects consequently became socio-transmitters (Candau 2005), leading their owners to remember together their lands of origin and to experience a collective memory that created a bond of community.

For example, the calabashes brought by several guests from Senegal, which had different names depending on the languages of the ethnic areas from which they came, had all been gifts from a mother or grandmother and, in many cases, at significant moments of the migratory process, such as the start of the journey or the first visit back home. Accordingly, the calabashes condensed the emotions of these instants. For example, the *cordek* brought by Safara reminded her of her grandmother's advice on giving it to her just before she left:⁶ "Don't forget where you come from." Emmanuel's *kahem* reminds him of his mother, and he keeps it hanging in his room so he can always see it. And Nabou's *keul* was a gift from her mother for the granddaughter she had never met, given to Nabou when she went back home twenty-two years after leaving.

In all the stories, moreover, the guests associated the calabashes with ethnic rituals which they drew on to give detailed descriptions of everything from weddings to tattooing of women's gums.

All the guests coincided in drawing attention to the primordial importance of this object. "That's why we all brought the same," they said with big smiles on seeing the table full of beautiful calabashes with different engravings and accessories. Fama and Safara explained that if a calabash breaks, it has to be sewn

together with a porcupine quill and cotton thread. This is hard work, which, as Fama's grandmother told her, is a test of a woman's patience and problem-solving abilities. They all emphasized that the object was something precious that had to be preserved throughout one's life. Hence, Nabou said that her daughter loves her keul, so much so that she had to sneak it out of her home to bring it to the workshop because her daughter did not want to lend it to her.

In the case of Morocco, there was also an object, in this case the *djellaba*, an item of men's clothing, which condensed shared and similar memories of family and home. Ibrahim presented his in memory of his father, who worked sewing djellabas from cloth woven by his grandmother, an ambivalent memory for him since his father made him help with this task, which meant he could not go out and play with his friends. The djellaba also protected him from the blows of strict teachers at the Koranic school his father made him attend. But it also evoked pleasant memories of childhood that he now passes on to his daughter, for example of the times he went to pick olives, which he collected in the garment's hood.

The djellaba Abbas brought was also made by his father, who gave it to him the first time he returned to Morocco after obtaining a residence permit in Spain. He always wears it when he plays traditional Moroccan music with his band.

A father's severity, in clear contrast with the goodness and kindness of the mother, flowed through the story told by Abdul, whose Koran was a gift from his mother when he returned from a pilgrimage to Mecca. "This book is very special because it condenses the two most important things: the love of God and a mother's love." But this beloved copy of the holy book also reminds him of his father, who punished him when he did not go to the Koranic school.

In the case of Esther, from Cameroon, it was her grandfather who was evoked when she presented some ceremonial cloth (*sendja*) he had given her when she returned to her homeland to attend a gathering of all his grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Esther explained that patterns on African clothes constitute a language, and the circular figures on this *sendja*, used for weddings and funerals, symbolize the unity of the generations of a family and, more generally, represent being together, love, and communication. For her, it also signifies her

identity, her connection with her ancestors, so whenever she needs to make an important decision, she speaks with the *sendja*.

In some cases, emotional proximity with the place of origin did not come from inherited objects but, rather, from items purchased on trips back home. This was the case of María José from Equatorial Guinea, who presented several artisanal pieces such as the *epamba*, a basket used for food. This object, like the one that was in her African childhood home, is part of the "true museum" (to use her words) that she has created in her Catalan home with artifacts she bought in her birthplace for her own and her children's pleasure.

All these objects, then, evoked nostalgic recollections of home and family, and in many cases, this value was enhanced for their owners by the fact that they were gifts from close relatives, given at meaningful moments of the migratory process. Many of them also represented a desire to pass on something to sons and daughters. All of them were associated with cultural traditions in such a way as to shape a material dimension of ethnicity (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009; Martínez Mauri et al. 2017). In the Barcelona experience, not one of the guests brought objects that did not fit into a representation of the traditional sphere. As Congolese Tambwe aptly pointed out, nobody showed a cell phone to recall Central Africa (though he would have had a lot to say about coltan mines).

From a Cultural to a More Politicized Migrant Memory

Some participants chose to bring objects that, rather than coming from family memories, were directly related to cultural memory. These included several items of clothing contributed by women. Esther, from Cameroon, brought not only *sendja*, as described above, but other cloths that were also loaded with symbolism, which she talked about in the workshop. She grouped them under the generic name of "wax" (meaning wax print fabrics, in a reference to the material used in their manufacture) and defined them as modern. Some were printed with a particular leaf design to denote wealth, while also representing an invitation to women to come out from the home and go to work. This female dimension took on a more political aspect with the last wax she showed, a cloth made for March 8, International Women's Day, with a bird print symbolizing travel and freedom.

The garment brought by Amina, from Morocco, should also be linked to this more politicized memory, which is not only feminine but feminist. It was a woolen sash worn by women from the Rif Mountains when they go to buy and sell products in the markets of Tangier or Tétouan. As an urban woman, she had never worn one. “I always wanted to wear one, but they are more for country women.” Amina sees these women as having a fighting, independent spirit, and as challenging Western stereotypes of Muslim women. She is so fascinated by them that she was organizing an exhibition about them in the premises of the Moroccan cultural association she heads in the town where she lives (a center that works to foster intercultural coexistence and combat prejudice against the Moroccan-born population). The importance to her of this object as an ethnic reference became clear when she offered to lend it to the museum until she mounted the exhibition.

Moreover, in the case of the calabashes described above, the fact of their belonging to the female world—made and given as gifts by mothers and grandmothers, used in female rituals, and with meanings linked to the world of women—led some women guests to connect them with a more politicized type of memory. For example, Fama defined the calabash as a tool used by women to transform the products grown by men into food. Besides the gourd, she also brought a mortar (another utensil closely associated with women in Africa) from her mother’s village, which “has a very powerful historical memory because women from this place burned themselves alive so the Arabs couldn’t take them as slaves.”

Both Fama, who is president of an association that defends the rights of sub-Saharan women in Catalonia, and Amina wanted to bring out the importance of the gender perspective in a politicized collective memory.

Besides gender issues, some objects brought out culturally affirmative or more politicized memories in other domains. For example, the dates brought by Irat, from Morocco, not only evoked the Amazigh culture of his desert town, where dates are a staple, but also a past that was far removed from material comforts and consumerism. “I didn’t have TV or cuddly toys either.”

Mbaye from Senegal, who brought a *lengue* (memento of Wolof circumcision rites), associated it with

the circumcision rites he himself went through to mark his entry into adulthood, and also with traditional times that are now threatened by modernity. “This is why I brought it. I’m nostalgic because it reminds me of the days of living with my brothers.”

Akin, from Benin, presented a wooden carving of the *babalawo* denoting the diviner priest of the Yoruba Ifá oracle, which also went to the Americas with the slave trade. For Akin, the figure evoked the power of African religions that were not eradicated by Islam or Christianity.

Finally, Eyanga from Equatorial Guinea brought a *byeri* (a religious figure of the Fang people and the physical embodiment of Melan, the ancient ancestor cult). She drew attention to the paradox that an object such as this, which is now absent in her land because of colonial cultural destruction, could be present in the permanent collection of the museum (although the museum team did not choose any *byeri* from its collection as an object to be used in the dialogue). “They [the colonizers] burnt everything. . . My brother’s father-in-law made this one as a memento.”

These last few objects acted as triggers, initiating debates about issues the guests wanted to highlight in their discussion with the museum—for instance, the survival of traditional cultural elements in the face of colonialism, the power of African women breaking with European stereotypes, the irruption of modernity into the rural world, and legitimate cultural property in the case of collections.

The case of the *byeri* (Figure 2) is particularly relevant for the new sense acquired by the museum’s



Figure 2. Interior showcase of the collaborative exhibition with the *byeri*. (Photo by Gemma Celiueta.) [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

patrimony. The numerous byeri in the museum's permanent collection were acquired in the 1920s by the Spanish governor of Equatorial Guinea, who decorated his residence with them and even had some modified to be used as lamps or armchair legs (Museu Etnològic i de Cultures del Mon n.d.a). Eyanga's memory gave these artifacts, which are associated with colonial pillaging and whims, a completely new sense, now taking the form of a lament for the disappearance of her heritage. "We don't have them. There are none left for us. And when I saw them here one Sunday when I was doing tourism, I said, 'God, you keep them here, and I don't have any!'"

Regarding this more politicized memory and, especially, legitimate cultural property of collections,⁷ Mbaye, who belongs to a pan-Africanist association that promotes African cultures, fights racism, and defends the rights of African immigrants, sadly asked, "How come all of this is here?" Understanding his sentiment, the museum director replied that this question was why they were doing the project.

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN MIGRANT MEMORY AND INSTITUTIONAL MEMORY

Furthermore, the participants remarked on the objects presented in the workshops by the museum team. These were also singularized, but, in this case, as representatives of distant cultures. They were, as we have said, objects of institutional memory linked with the wish to conserve artifacts shaping exotic heritages.

The discussion swung between the way the guests, or at least some of them, identified with some of these artifacts, thus enriching the two kinds of memories, and their ignorance of or indifference toward other pieces of the museum that they did not recognize as their own heritage.

Particularly pertinent in the former case, would be the above-mentioned Moroccan *darbuka* made of hide and clay, a small traditional women's percussion instrument linked with the Ashura festivities. This sparked a long conversation among all the participants about their memories of this celebration and about other uses of the *darbuka*.

One of the aspects that deserve attention when shaping a new shared heritage based on the connection of guests' memories with impressions of the museum staff was the fact that the curators now had the chance to improve their information, which is

often scant, about the pieces in the collections. Besides the *darbuka*, another notable piece in this regard is the Moroccan silver *tizerzai*, a clasp in the form of a fibula about which the museum staff knew almost nothing. The participants, especially Amazigh Irat, who had seen his grandmother using this object, provided valuable information about it. It is not only an ornamental piece for holding together pieces of women's clothing worn on important ceremonial occasions such as weddings, but it has recently taken on new meaning as a symbol of the Amazigh ethnic group (since the fact of fastening together pieces of clothing is associated with the idea of ethnic unity).

As for lack of knowledge and indifference, we find, by contrast, the Senegalese *limbal* (a wooden musical instrument), which was not recognized by any of the participants, who said they had never seen anything like it.

In an intermediate terrain between identification with an object and ignorance of it would be items which, although not recognized by participants, were associated with stories they knew about. For example, the gold bracelet from Senegal, made by members of the Jola clan of blacksmiths, elicited many comments on the power and characteristics of these traditional guild lineages, as well as a few personal memories linked to the belief of their mothers in the protective and curative powers of metal bracelets that were slightly different from this one. Again, the wooden carving, also from Senegal, of the head of a Fula woman showing scarification prompted a conversation about this practice of body art that is widely known in West Africa.

In discussions about the museum objects, the staging of and relations with the institutionalized patrimony contrasted with those pertaining to the personal items. The fact that the museum specialists put on the mandatory gloves when touching the objects—"We wear gloves because this is public heritage of the city of Barcelona"—and spoke of them with ceremonious scientific distance was in sharp contrast with the behavior shown by the guest participants with their own objects, which they treated affectionately (with ungloved hands of course), and even kissed at some points. This emotional proximity, connected with the very intimate stories conjured up by the objects, even led to the shedding of heartfelt tears on some occasions. Hence, the "fetishism" of

institutional material, the accumulative collecting for museum purposes, contrasted with the idealism of personal recall. Moreover, the guests preferred to trigger their memories using senses other than sight. Unlike the exclusively visual relationship people tend to have with museum patrimony, the workshop participants touched and smelled their family objects, tasted the “typical” foods they had brought (e.g., dates and Moroccan sweets), and listened to songs that reminded them of home. The combination of all these senses not only boosted collective remembering, giving it qualities of closeness, familiarity, and intimacy, it was also contagious for our way of relating with the museum collections, which were thereby infused with “life.”

Indeed, when the workshops ended, the museum team took off their gloves and suggested employing some of the guest participants as tour guides in the African rooms. The workshops were just the beginning of a series of activities related with the SWICH project that aimed to emphasize the qualities of closeness, familiarity, and intimacy acquired by the objects. Besides the joint exhibition and booklet (Figure 3; Izard and Celigueta 2016), the museum team took part in conferences and publications describing and reflecting upon these experiences. Although the museum has embarked on a line of work related to community participation and critical study of colonial memory,⁸ its team recognizes that “it still has a long way to go” (García Arnillas and Ramoneda Aigüadé 2019, 176). As Silvia Forni (2017, 197) suggests when speaking of the African collections at the Royal Ontario Museum, “the introduction of multiple voices and perspectives may be the only way to disrupt the linear authoritative narratives and promote a more significant and affectively relevant engagement with historical collections.”

CONCLUSIONS: MIGRANT HERITAGES

The experience of “Dialogues with Africa” testified to the presence in Barcelona of changing migrant legacies. For both the guest participants and the museum, these were objects that had travelled from Africa to Catalonia and had acquired new meanings over time. Besides place of origin, both institutional and personal objects had this aspect in common.

The objects of the guests, in their new home and still more in the context of the workshops, evoked



Figure 3. Detail of the video projection in the collaborative exhibition of one of the summaries of the workshop sessions. (Photo by Gemma Celigueta.) [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

origins and cultural traditions that formed migrant memory. The characteristics and processes of this memory were being shaped as the participants remembered together.

First to appear was intimate, nostalgic recall of home and family of origin, which had led them to preserve objects and memories and, frequently, to pass them on to their descendants.

Each person’s memories have elements in common with those of other migrants: for example, the link with mothers and grandmothers—“It is important to remember where you come from”—the centrality of the moment of leaving, and the emotion of visits back home and reuniting with the family of origin.

These memories also tend to be associated with a certain type of objects and not others. They are linked with cultural traditions and the land (and not only family) of origin. This latter point then constitutes a fundamental source of value and stimulates the desire to conserve the object. It is, moreover, one of the key reasons why the person was given the object by relatives.

Hence, the value given to objects is personal, family-based, and ethnic by nature, but it is also a migrant value, which is to say value that derives from distance and nostalgia. Consequently, these important memories and objects are highly significant in the migrant’s biography, and hence the source of powerful emotions.

If the objects passed on by a person’s nearest and dearest tend to be those favored for evoking origin,

the connection is also made on some occasions by means of souvenirs, which is to say objects purchased precisely because of their ability to evoke the place of origin.

Finally, and importantly, this migrant memory is not only expressed in relation to an origin but also—and above all—to current worries and concerns of migrants: for example, about upholding the value of tradition in the face of Western modernity, as well as discussions and confrontations with the host society. These matters would include dealing with stereotypes about the supposed subordination of African women and questioning the existence of collections of colonial origin, as in the case of the byeri from Equatorial Guinea.

In this experience, some of the objects contributed by the museum changed their sense when possible meeting points were being explored and identifications—and contrasts—with the memories of the guest participants were probed. We believe that this simple experience of incorporating new voices into the collections, which is to say adding a migrant memory, would be a point of departure for shaping a shared heritage in ethnographic museums.

In this project, the incorporation of new voices into the institutional patrimony (memories of relatives and friends, stories of festivities . . . but also recalling colonial destruction) made it possible to break down the much-criticized museum decontextualization, while breathing “life” or “spirit”—as all participants both from the museum and the guests called it—into the objects from the collections. They not only came out of their showcases and storerooms but were fondled, remembered, and criticized, and, in the process, were imbued with new meanings that gave them “energy.” The challenge now is how to maintain this “life” and convey it in exhibitions of ethnographic museums.

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NOTES

1. Most of the objects in the collections of the present-day Barcelona Museum of Ethnology and World Cultures were acquired in 22 ethnographical expeditions to Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Oceania between 1952 and 1976.

Funded by the Barcelona City Council, they were planned by the museum and private collectors such as Albert Folch who were prominent members of the Catalan bourgeoisie (Museu Etnològic i de Cultures del Mon n.d.b).

2. This “we” refers to the third interstitial, insurgent space of enunciation, which belongs to the dynamics of negotiation and cultural translation of the postcolonial hybridity discussed by Homi Bhabha (1994).
3. For further information on the European projects READ-ME I and READ-ME II and the joint exhibitions deriving from them, see Munapé 2012. For further information about the SWICH project, see Modest et al. 2019.
4. In their book *[S]oggetti migranti* (Munapé 2012), researchers of the European READ-ME II project consider that objects in ethnographic collections are fruit of a “passive migration” in that they were collected during European explorations, conquests, and colonization, and removed from their lands and contexts. The project sought to restore their subjectivity by reconnecting them with the contemporary diasporas in Europe (active migration).
5. The booklet can also be consulted online at http://www.swich-project.eu/fileadmin/content/swich/CollaborativeExhibitions/ES/booklet_UK_s.pdf.
6. The names used in the text are fictitious in order to protect the privacy of the guest participants in the workshops.
7. For further information on debates about cultural property in art museums and world culture museums, see Geismar 2008.
8. Held between July 2016 and September 2017, the temporary exhibition *Ikunde: Barcelona, Colonial Metropolis* highlighted Barcelona’s role as a colonial metropolis in relation to the African populations of Equatorial Guinea (García Arnillas and Ramoneda Aigüadé 2019: 170). The temporary exhibition *Ifni: Catalan’s Military Service in Africa* was held between January 2018 and September 2019. This exhibition explored the experiences of young Catalan soldiers stationed in Ifni, a small Spanish enclave on the south coast of Morocco, not far from the Saharan colony.

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