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Heritage and interculturality in EU science diplomacy

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In recent years, culture and heritage have explicitly entered into science diplomacy debates and initiatives within the EU system and in EU's foreign policy. For EU's external relations heritage offers opportunities for developing partnerships based on shared, entangled histories but also challenges posed by dealing with difficult pasts of domination and colonialism. The paper, therefore, presents a new conceptual model for European science diplomacy that can enable more equitable ways of dealing with colonial heritage in relations between EU countries and partners outside Europe. It does so by combining recent literature on science diplomacy, heritage diplomacy, decolonial thinking, and on the concepts of interculturality. We argue that to engage successfully with colonial legacies and heritage, the concept of science diplomacy needs to be developed from a traditional "diffusionist" understanding towards a dialogical approach, which is epistemologically open and acknowledges the inequalities in global knowledge production. In the second part of the paper, the practical implications of the theoretical framework are fleshed out in a discussion of three cases involving colonial heritage: The Tendaguru Fossil Collection, the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Brussels, and the work of Canadian indigenous artist Sonny Assu.

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European science diplomacy (SD) has developed significantly in recent years. In particular, *The European Science Diplomacy Cluster* formed by the three complementary H2020 funded projects, EL-CSID, InSciDE, and S4D4C, have expanded academic research in European SD empirically, theoretically and conceptually. As Krasnyak points out, SD is by now “an important strategy of foreign affairs of the European Union” (Krasnyak, 2018: p. 12).

Within this invigorated SD agenda, issues concerning heritage have explicitly entered into debates and initiatives at the European level. There is a growing recognition that connections between science and heritage are both complex and close. The management of natural and cultural heritage, for example, often requires extensive use of scientific expertise. Scientific research has also created collections of different sorts within European institutions and museums that today presents a range of pressing heritage challenges. In less tangible—but no less consequential—ways, the history and politics of research constitutes an epistemological heritage that European SD needs to address, particularly in relations with nations and regions, which have been under European colonial domination. Indeed, colonial heritage and SD became explicitly linked in the Horizon 2020 research framework, resulting in the funding of the project European Colonial Heritage Modalities in Entangled Cities (ECHOES), a project that the authors of this paper are also part of. ECHOES (2020) engages with colonial heritage using decolonial theory and critical heritage studies, which rejects narrow object-based definitions of heritage (Smith, 2006). From the standpoint of critical heritage studies, heritage emerges through a complex interplay between the qualities of objects or phenomena and social and historical processes of representation and recognition, as well as forms of power linked to notions of nationhood, community, tradition, religion, and identity. This understanding of heritage has important implications for European SD. Indeed, dealing with heritage in European SD is no easy task because these issues are bound up with the historicity of Europe’s external relations, which includes the long history of European colonialism with its close links to science and knowledge production.

The purpose of this article is to analyze and discuss the challenges posed by colonial heritage within European SD. We argue that in order to tackle heritage issues European SD must move away from a diffusionist approach and towards an entanglement model informed by interculturality, which takes into account the consequences of entanglements formed by the colonial past. To move in this direction, we draw on decolonial theory and practice that urges former colonizers to reexamine their own imperial histories and the legacies of colonialism in the present. In the second part of the article, we flesh out the practical implications of the theoretical framework in three short case studies concerning contemporary heritage relations between Europe and the former colonized parts of the world. The first case study is the dinosaur fossil collection originating from the Tendaguru expeditions (1907–1913) carried out by German scientists in the German colony Tanganyika (present day Tanzania). The second case analyses the remake of the Royal Museum of Central Africa in Brussels while the third case engages with the work of the Canadian ingenious artist Sonny Assu to discuss the role artistic forms of knowledge in SD contexts relating to colonial heritage. These cases allow us to show the diversity of colonial heritage issues in SD. Moreover, we have selected these examples because they concern the relation between scientific knowledge and other forms of knowledge which—as we will argue—constitutes the fundamental challenge for SD within this heritage field. We conclude with some analytical reflections on the potentials and pitfalls of decolonial

heritage diplomacy and a call to include more agents and epistemologies in European SD initiatives.

The colonial legacies of science diplomacy

The Cold War has rightly been emphasized as a key structuring factor in the historical development of SD in Europe (Turekian, 2018). However, the impact of post-WW2 decolonization on Europe’s global diplomatic relations in the sciences has been downplayed. A vast historiography demonstrates that the links between science, knowledge and European colonialism have been complex and enduring. In the 19th century, railways, guns and medical technologies served as indispensable “tools of empire” that enabled the expansion and consolidation of European colonial rule (Headrick, 1981). Colonies functioned as “living laboratories” where animal specimen and human subjects were utilized in medicine and the life sciences in ways that were not possible in the metropole (MacLeod, 2000; Tilley, 2011). Moreover, science and technology constituted core elements in the civilizing mission ideology. In colonial contexts, “machines became the measure of men”, as technological and scientific prowess was equated with cultural superiority and the right and duty to rule by force over those deemed backwards (Adas, 1990). Empire also struck back into the science scene in Europe. Colonialism, in its many different forms, influenced core elements of scientific culture and practices, including the establishment of specific disciplines and institutions, educational patterns, and professional identities among researchers, field and lab practices, and the ways in which scientific findings were communicated across Europe (Andersen, 2011; Schiebinger, 2005).

These asymmetrical relationships in science did not end with formal decolonization, but persist as a central part of what decolonial thinkers refer to as “coloniality” to name “various colonial-like power relations existing today in those zones that experienced direct colonialism” (Ndlovu-Gatscheni, 2015: p. 487). Certainly, with the intimate and long-standing connections between the sciences and colonialism, it is not surprising that colonial legacies lingered in the ways in which international science relations were conceptualized after WW2 and during the era of formal decolonization that followed. In this late-colonial setting, SD was conceptualized from a diffusionist understanding where science was diffused from what was regarded as the scientifically advanced north to existing colonies and new independent nations. This diffusionist understanding was dominant in the post-war institutions established to promote international collaboration in science. UNESCO is a case in point, which has been studied in detail (Sluga, 2013; Meskell, 2018). For example, the first director of UNESCO’s science sector, the British biochemist and historian of science in China, Joseph Needham, adopted what he termed “the periphery principle” as the structuring principle of Post-WWII international science diplomacy. According to Needham’s periphery principle, science diplomacy should focus on supporting science and technology in the periphery of what he labeled the “bright zone” constituted by Western Europe and North America (Needham, 1945). This has proved remarkably enduring in international science and, in fact, also characterized the (ostensibly) anti-colonial modernization theory that increasingly came to dominate science diplomacy discourses from the 1960s to the 1980s and beyond (Basalla, 1967; Gillman, 2003).

Even if today international relations in science are not framed in crude asymmetries, it is still important to acknowledge and confront the underlying colonial legacies that are built into diffusionist understandings of how and why knowledge travels and indeed into what counts as scientific and authorized knowledge in the first place. This is particularly pressing if we are to effectively

address colonial heritage contestations in a situation where the close connection between European colonial expansion and modern science remains a key concern for many researchers and governments in the former colonized world (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012; Roy, 2018).

The point here is that the colonial legacy, with its lasting and conceptual heritage in science, should not be ignored but rather be tackled and made explicit in contemporary SD. A key problem with diffusionism as a conceptual model, is that it risks depicting the world outside the Global North as a passive recipient of knowledge and thus relegates the former colonial world to a never-ending effort of catching up with the Global North. To paraphrase Michael Gibbon's astute observation, in the diffusionist mode of science diplomacy, Europe is by definition on "transmission mode"—never on "receive mode" (Gibbons, 2000). However, an important point made in post- and decolonial thought is that Europe needs also to be on "receive mode" in order to understand the nature of contemporary contestations concerning science. This may seem obvious but it does in fact run counter to entrenched geographical imaginations that have underpinned SD with the flow of information going (almost) exclusively from Europe and out.

Central to any SD engagement with heritage are thus concerns about the direction and flow of knowledge, as well as attitudes towards listening to agents outside "Northern" academic science and bringing them into the SD discussion—issues that require engagements with the notion of interculturality. First, however, we must clarify our understanding of heritage and its place in diplomacy.

Heritage and heritage diplomacy

Oftentimes, especially in relation to heritage diplomatic efforts of the previous century, heritage was represented by the monumental legacies of the past that needed saving or protection (Logan et al., 2015). There was a marked tendency to engage in projects based on the diffusionist model to save particular building and monuments that were in danger of being destroyed to natural causes or man-made interventions. Experts (e.g., archaeologists, engineers, heritage NGOs) from mainly Western countries would lend their expertise and/or financial resources to salvage these heritage sites. The creation of the Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention of 2003, the more recent discussions of rights-based approaches (e.g., Logan, 2012; Hill, Nic Craith and Clopot, 2018), as well as approaches of "heritage from below" (Robertson, 2008), has broadened the concept of heritage, which influence governance strategies at local and international level. However, heritage still depends on a normative assessment (Smith, 2006), and it is often called on in nation-building or national promotion efforts (Harvey, 2015).

Heritage has formed the base for diplomacy for centuries through gift exchanges, travels and artefacts collections, as well as through interactions of state emissaries. The heritage diplomacy that we draw on here, however, has only been firmly placed on the international agenda post-WW2. The notion of heritage adopted in the international arena is often driven by the universalist ideals and international policies of UNESCO, the dedicated agency for culture within the United Nations (Meskell, 2018). The early international campaigns to support the preservation of threatened sites followed the dominant diffusionist approach. One of the most famous of these campaigns is the Nubian Egyptian campaign of the 60s to save the Abu Simbel temples in Egypt and Sudan threatened by the creation of the Aswan High Dam. This style of operation proved an enduring model of international cooperation that purportedly followed an idea of universal civilization. This outlines a key aspect of heritage

diplomacy, namely that it often favors and sometimes is called upon to support strategies of international relations. This is also true for the recent efforts of the international community to protect heritage in conflict zones such as Iraq, Syria or Afghanistan. Such efforts, propelled by a discourse on the "shared heritage" of humanity occlude any discussions of former colonial entanglements or current geopolitical interests. Heritage items are treated almost clinically and disregards local contexts.

Heritage diplomacy can take various forms, although it most often includes exchanges (e.g., traveling exhibition), technical assistance and financial support for conservation or training of professionals). Winter (2015) usefully proposes to differentiate between "heritage *in* diplomacy" where heritage serves as a platform for addressing other diplomatic efforts and "heritage *as* diplomacy" (Winter, 2015). This conceptualization aligns with the widely used model of science *in* diplomacy and science *for* diplomacy (see for instance Royal Society, 2010). Both Clarke (2018) and Winter (2015) suggest that although meeting points can be identified, one should clearly dissociate heritage diplomacy from a cultural diplomacy, where relations are couched in self-promoting one-sided actions of a soft power nature. Heritage diplomacy is closer to a relational perspective of cultural flows and exchanges (Winter, 2015: p. 1007).

Heritage diplomacy is, however, still embedded in the power imbalances of colonial legacies and the power imbalances of the diffusionist approach. Because of these unacknowledged asymmetries, we are critical of references to "shared heritage"—usually presented in a celebratory, benign way. This notion can be used strategically to repress former colonial dissension and continuous entanglements (Scott, 2014; Yapp, 2016).

However, heritage professionals are beginning to opt for a more expansive interpretation of what heritage, which goes hand in hand with a more expansive interpretation of who can act as agents of heritage diplomacy. Expanding the notion of agents of heritage diplomacy makes room for new approaches to heritage diplomacy to include both various state and non-state actors and networks, with both official and unofficial roles (Tal, 2017). Non-state actors and networks are often less circumspect diplomats. With their relative autonomy, their actions are not led by missions to soft powers (e.g., Gienow-Hecht and Donfried, 2010; Clarke, 2018). This can enable more truly intercultural encounters.

Interculturality

The recent EU commissioner for Research, Science and Innovation, Carlos Moedas did not mince his words when he endorsed EU SD with the aim "of ensuring that European values lead global scientific endeavor" (Moedas, 2016). This approach hardly avoids being stuck within a hierarchical Eurocentric perspective. While the concept of SD tends to be more open to ideas of "cross-fertilization" and "co-production" (Kaltfofen and Acuto, 2018: p. 11), it still risks to be trapped in the state-centrism of diplomacy. To avoid this trap, we propose to rethink SD within a perspective of interculturality. This shift in perspective involves three steps. Firstly, instead of simply departing from the actors that interact, we want to see interaction itself as dynamic. It is a well-known claim that identities emerge, stabilize or change within networks of relations or social systems. The establishment of boundaries is part of making relations (Barth, 1969). We propose to view the dynamics of interaction as framed through existing frameworks of entanglement.

The second step is to see interaction as always based on a complex play of differences—categorized in various ways. At the highest level, we can speak of cultural differences. Whether relations are scientific, political or economic, they derive their meaning

from culture. That is why we insist on viewing the different kinds of diplomacy as intercultural. This is certainly acknowledged by scholars of SD who highlight its “predominantly multicultural international playing field” (Kaltofen and Acuto, 2018: p. 12). In intercultural relations, the distinctive feature of difference is culture; it is what disturbs communication and produces inference or simply noise (Samovar et al., 2010: p. 12).

Our third step is to relate culture to practice. Whereas culture in, for instance, cultural diplomacy tends to become objectified and turned into something that can be exported wholesale like the European values the EU commissioner hailed, we prefer to view it as a toolbox from where actors orient their practice. Here we draw inspiration from the well-established field of intercultural communication to analyze challenges stemming from significant, cultural differences. In communication that is intercultural, we typically experience an increase in uncertainties, misunderstandings and conflicts. To be interculturally competent, is to give up a comfortable and often hegemonic ethnocentrism enforced by stereotypical discourses of the “other”. Intercultural competence has been a prominent concept for UNESCO to imagine peaceful co-existence (UNESCO, intercultural competence). Dialog seems to be the preferred term for the outcome, but in our perspective, we prefer to speak of contact and contact zones (Pratt, 1991).

Following Boaventura de Sousa Santos, interculturality entails a normative approach, which criticizes both robust ideas of universalism and of absolute cultural relativism (Santos and de, 2016). When entering the contact zone, you are accepting—or even hoping—that something new might emerge from the contact. It is, however, not easy to move into this zone. You will have to relativize certainties and deconstruct secure positions. In de Sousa Santos’ (2016: p. 342) words, these zones are characterized “by rival normative ideas, knowledges, power forms, symbolic universes, and agencies [that] meet in usually unequal conditions and resist, reject, assimilate, imitate, translate, and subvert each other”. History is rich in examples of lost contacts. Novelty only emerges if translation takes place and hybridity takes shape. To move into the contact zone demands a moral disposition to listening, sharing and learning. If you enter into the contact zone from a position of political, economic and ideological dominance, the risks of converting others are preponderant. When entering the zone from the Global North, you come armed with centuries of epistemological dominance. Without a critical disposition to past dominance and violence, interculturality becomes an empty signifier. This critique must begin with deconstructing or “deprovincialising” such grand discourse as “science”, “enlightenment”, and “progress”. (Chakrabarty, 2000).

Making SD intercultural first of all means that the infrastructures through which it operates have to be understood and analyzed as contact zones. In these zones, understandings of knowledge institutions are not simply compatible. Much translation is demanded, and something gets lost, as we say. Since Western science itself is but one institutional armature of knowledge, and since there is a diversity of knowledge beyond this armature, we need to advocate a new infrastructure or perhaps a new ecology of knowledge, which opens up for previously marginalized forms of knowledge (Santos and de, 2016).

We will now flesh out the implications of our theoretical approach to colonial heritage issues in SD through selected case studies in order to illustrate why a non-diffusionist, dialogical and intercultural approach is required, and to point to how practices of heritage need to be pushed in order create new forms of SD.

SD and colonial collections—the case of Tendaguru

The close historical connections between colonialism and science have left their mark in scientific collections in European research

institutions and research museums. Whether collections consist of artifacts, human skeleton remains or animal fossils such collections are often essential resources for research (Delisle, 2007; Harrison, 2015; Hauser-Schäublin and Prott, 2017). Collections originating from the colonial era particularly constitute a challenge for contemporary European SD and offer analytical windows to the problems and contestations around heritage diplomacy. The collecting of cultural and natural objects has been part of European scientific practices for centuries (Jardine et al., 1996). One example is the collection of dinosaur fossils stemming from the Tendaguru Expedition carried out by German scientists between 1907–1913 in what was then the German colony of Tanganyika (Maier, 2003). The collection consists of more than 22 tons of fossil remains dating primarily from the Upper-Jurassic period and is housed in the *Museum für Naturkunde* in Berlin (Heinrich et al., 2001). The collection is testament to a shared colonial past during which German scientists collected fossils in their colonial laboratories and brought them to Berlin where they were used by scientists and put on display to the public. For more than a hundred years the collection has been an important resource for generating scientific knowledge, for tourism, for obtaining international prestige and provided material to train future generations of German paleoanthropologists. Tanzanian researchers and institutions have benefitted much less from the fossil collection stored thousands of kilometers from where the remains were found. As such, it is a shared heritage, but also a situation of coloniality which perpetuates research hierarchies established during the colonial era.

This asymmetry has come under increased criticism in Europe and in East Africa especially during the last two decades (Tarli, 2016). Highly diverse groups are involved in the contestations around the Tendaguru collection: members of parliament in Tanzania, state agents, governments, citizen groups, global and local news media among others play important roles as SD agents.

Arguments from individual parliament members in Tanzania for the restitution of the collection to Tanzania have been under discussion since the 1980s (Heumann et al., 2018, pp. 271–272). For many activists and artists involved, the objective is to repatriate the fossils to what they regard as their rightful home in Tanzania. For Berlin-based citizen groups engaged in the debate such as the association *Berlin Postkolonial*, the main argument for restitution is to rectify the wrongs of colonialism and the coloniality that persists in displaying the fossils in Berlin (Berlin PostKolonial, 2019). Other groups emphasize the important roles that the fossils have played in religious traditions in the Tendaguru area. In preparation for the exhibition “Not a Single Bone in Berlin”, the artists Nicolai Nelles og Nora Al-Badri visited the Tendaguru beds in South-Eastern Tanzania and found evidence that the fossils that were visible above the ground had been used in religious practices in the region before they were taken to Germany (Søndergaard, 2018). The scientific basis for this conclusion has been criticized by academic heritage experts, which illustrates how questions knowledge formation and disciplinary entanglements are at the core of colonial heritage discussions (Baumgärtel, 2017).

The arguments for repatriation were given impetus following Macron’s 2017 statement that the repatriation of African heritage should be a top priority (Sar and Savoy, 2018). The contestation is about correcting the wrongs of the past. Yet, another set of voices emphasize the potential that the fossils have for future research, for nation-building and for tourism in Tanzania. As a New York based Pan-Africanist new media bluntly puts it, the scandal remains that, “Germany continues to cash in on fossils a century after German colonial occupation ended” (Msemu, 2018).

There are many starting points for dealing with the collection including positions that maintain that the fossils are simply

prehistoric natural phenomenon (Savoy, 2018). However, the arguments that the fossils are simply there as fixed, neutral objects belonging to “science” clearly fail to recognize the role of the coloniality in this and other scientific collections amassed during colonial times. Ignoring this coloniality is bound to backfire as an SD strategy. It is vital to establish a contact zone where a broad range of stakeholders including citizen groups and researchers from outside Europe, most obviously Tanzania, are invited to partake in defining the questions and issues that are to be researched. Moreover, measures must be taken to ensure that the political mandate of the research group is sufficiently strong to ensure that recommendations and findings will in fact have consequences for the future management of the collection.

It is equally important to note that restitution is not always the exclusive demand with respect to collections such as this. In 2018, the government of Tanzania officially announced that it would give up the demand for repatriation of the fossils, preferring instead to emphasize the future-oriented forms of collaboration (Schmälzle, 2018). The government requested that the museum in Berlin should assist in capacity development of Tanzanian paleoanthropologists and curators. An agreement was reached that two Tanzanian scientists will join as guest researchers at the museum with access to previous and ongoing research (Nielsen, 2019). The idea is thus that the fossils can service “to build bridges between two nations” as a unifying scientific resource (Xuequan, 2018). Given the highly unequal financial and infrastructural resources available in the two countries this partnership is bound to leave a lot of challenges. The outcome risks to be an institutional arrangement that ends further discussions. However, for now we may positively note that acknowledging the connected histories of colonialism and scientific research is a first imperative step for interculturally informed SD practices to engage with colonial heritage.

SD and ethnographic museums: the case of the Royal Museum for Central Africa

Traditionally, museums have played a central role in collecting, archiving and presenting knowledge within typically national framings. Through networks and associations, they also engage actively in exchanging knowledge across borders, even if these activities are rarely related to SD, but sometimes to cultural diplomacy (Grincheva, 2013; David and Castellanos, 2019). With their close connection to political representation, museums can easily be aligned to diplomatic missions (Bennett, 1995). Their knowledge performance is special in the sense that it is closely linked to the display of artefacts. Ethnographic museums, for instance, are responsible for heritage knowledge of others in the world and are, therefore, directly engaged in intercultural relations.

Most ethnographic museums in Europe date back to colonialism. This is also the case with the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA) in Brussels. The RMCA was inaugurated in 1910 and funded originally by Leopold II, the brutal owner of the Congo Free State. As with other ethnographic museums, the purpose of the museum was to display knowledge about *Belgian* Africa. The name changed and objects were added, but for more than a hundred years most of the colonial framing was left untouched, and in later years, the museum was known as the last colonial museum in Europe (de Block, 2019: p. 272). Despite increasing critique from public opinion and official efforts to alleviate the manifest colonial setting (including many statues of Leopold and memorial plaques for Belgians fallen in the so-called civilizing mission), it stayed among the most popular museums in Belgium. It finally closed in 2013 to reopen in December 2018 in what was to be a much more decolonial framing.

From the beginning, the museum combined political representation of the colonial empire and the display of the civilizing mission with science. Not only ethnographic knowledge, but also science was thus solidly embedded in a colonial ideology. It was science of what “we” could do with “our” Africa. The re-opened museum inherited the existing buildings, most of the objects and the scientific mission (Van Bockhaven, 2019; de Block, 2019; Van Beurden, 2019). The aim was now, however, to open up for a discussion of the terrible colonial legacy and provide a “balanced discourse” (Hassett, 2020: p. 4).

A new section was added to reframe the colonial history. The role of the museum in this history marked a shift in perspective from a colonial museum to a museum of colonialism. Some of the most controversial objects, such as the bronze sculpture of the notorious “Leopard Man”, the symbol of African savagery, were relocated to a secluded area with other sculptures of African wild men, and a painting by Congolese artist Chéri Samba was added portraying the dispute between curators and African descendants around the sculpture. Opposite the plaque commemorating the fallen “civilizers”, the museum now has an art work by another Congolese artist projecting the names of deceased Congolese women and men onto the plaque (de Block, 2019; van Beurden, 2019). In the new room, Afropea, the African diaspora to Belgium is given—critical—voice. In a room on languages, visitors can listen to a number of Bantu languages. The new underground entrance prepares visitors for the former, controversial framing. In the preparation phase for the museum, curators—in line with a more general movement in Europe—collaborated with representatives of the diaspora community, and experts of Congolese origin were invited in as commentators.

Despite considerable efforts to decolonize the new version of the museum, the challenges were huge, as the criticism amply demonstrated. Some of the points raised are highly relevant for SD. Many critics argued that adding information on the particularly brutal, Belgian colonialism and giving voices to the formerly colonized was not enough to eliminate the dominant perspective that Africa was mainly viewed and constructed from a white, European position (Mpoma, 2017). Even if emphasis is placed on present collaboration between European and African scholars, the framing is still on displaying (Central) Africa for European visitors. The cut between the barbaric past and a presence of collaboration still runs the risk of erasing the responsibility of the European visitors for the postcolonial consequences of colonialism—a risk we also see in the new science collaboration on the Tedanguru fossils discussed above. In the case of the RMCA, the risk is furthermore made stronger by the lack of information on the contemporary situation in present day Central African countries (Van Beurden, 2019). It is also quite remarkable that the focus on environment and biodiversity introduced in the new museum is not linked to the environmental consequences of colonialism (Hassett, 2020). This leads to one of the major missing links in the museum, namely that the scientific discourse through which topics and object are being authorized is delinked from the history of colonialism. There is no reflection on whether the role of science in colonialism has something to do with the European, scientific discourse itself. We also find no space for other forms of knowledge when Africa is presented scientifically. When knowledge is located outside Europe, it is typically related to rituals and ceremonies in the ethnographic section. The result is that the museum stays captured in a logic that minimizes the existence and validity of knowledge from Central Africa. The division between science and ethnography in the museum upholds the idea that there is no dialog between different forms of expertise. The epistemological hegemony is not questioned the least. Certainly, this is the case with the artefacts supporting the scientific gaze. We get some information about how they were

brought to the museum by Belgian colonialists. Yet, they are presented as objects without creators (Ceuppens, 2014). When knowledge travels as here through objects, it goes through the processes of de- and re-contextualization. The objects were forcefully removed from their context and transformed into knowledge about the former owners, who were deprived of any role in the transfer of knowledge. The violence related to the knowledge travel is left untold. With their re-contextualization in a science discourse, original knowledge about the objects, is being excluded.

Bringing other forms of knowledge into the museum requires an openness to the knowledge contexts that the objects were once embedded in, and to voices that can transmit and translate this context. If they are solely framed by a European, scientific gaze, there is literally no room for a contact zone. The result is that they rest the orphans that the colonizers stole from the lands they exploited.

SD and artists: the case of Sonny Assu

Although artists are rarely given a prominent role as diplomats of heritage and science, they contribute to the creation and circulation of knowledge through their works. If we are to accept the plurality of knowledge systems, the neat delineations between science and art would not hold, particularly in relations to projects that involve indigenous people. In such instances, art-based methodologies are becoming more and more common as researchers discover the limits of Western sciences. Art thus represents a better medium to enter the contact zone. As the moving embodied knowledge producer, the artist often combine art work with activism and becomes an agent of diplomacy. The idea of artists as agents of diplomacy is not new; it has been considered in diplomacy studies before, sometimes described as diplomacy “from below” (Mokre, 2017). As other non-state agents, artists have more flexibility to pursue decolonial objectives in their activities than have institutions.

The type of artistic practices considered here, similar to the ones considered in research included in the ECHOES project (see ECHOES (2020) for work in progress analyses), aim to reframe narratives, question power relations and foster new imaginations of possible futures unburdened by colonial legacies. Artists are not passive recipients of a knowledge body shaped and dominated by the former colonial masters. Their art, open to dialog and interpretation, invites audiences into the contact zone and is, in fact intercultural from the start. The work of artists can be read directly as SD, where engagement in activities within and outside one’s country supports the international circulation of knowledge. An example to consider in this light is the work of the Canadian indigenous artist Sonny Assu. Assu is Ligwilda’xw (We Wai Kai) of the Kwakwaka’wakw nations in British Columbia (Canada), and the artist’s indigenous heritage fuels the art, which questions identity, coloniality and power relations in the past and the present. Assu’s works combine indigenous heritage symbols, patterns and materials with pop culture, creating a mixed aesthetics. Living and working in the unceded Ligwilda’xw territory of Campbell River, British Columbia, the artist defines the art as interventionist, “to bring to light the dark, hidden history of Canada’s actions/inactions against the Indigenous people” (Assu, 2020). Analyzing this body of work based on the process of interculturality discussed in the previous section shows great potential for productive SD encounters. The artist’ subject matter often exposes entanglements that relativize boundaries, as discussed above.

Assu’s works question demands of assimilation related to representations of indigenous art and indigenous groups themselves as belonging to the past. The art also offers

poignant critiques of the experiences of the postcolonial condition, including land ownership, racism or lack of access to education.

This critique is a precondition for creating a contact zone that makes room for practices as other forms of knowledge. A case in point of a moment of intercultural encounter was observed when Assu presented a series of interventions in London (the Baldwin Gallery) and Norwich (Sainsbury Center for Visual Arts) in 2019. The Baldwin Gallery curated an exhibition at the Canada House entitled “A Radical Mixing” with works of art that directly questioned colonialism. The artist also engaged in talks on art and activism during his stay. Assu’s presence in the UK could easily be interpreted as an act of heritage SD, with the High Commission of Canada in the United Kingdom involved in mediating his presence in the country. A wide variety of audiences had an opportunity to engage with the indigenous perspective in this place of colonial power: from the gallery visitors, the participants in the activities he performed, this intervention was from the start designed as a contact zone.

The heritage SD dimension is further underscored through examples of Assu’s art. One of the works presented in the UK exhibition is *Ellipsis*, a simple installation comprises 136 copper LPs set on a wall. The number is not arbitrary, it represents the number of years from the passing of “the Indian Act”—still in force today—that frames interactions of the Canadian state with First Nations people. The installation reflects a personal memory of the artists, that of Assu’s great grandfather Chief Billy Assu’s involvement in an anthropological project. At a time when the performance of ceremonial music in public spaces was prohibited by the Indian Act, the Chief allowed a scholar to record his singing. This work is thus explicitly a commentary on the production of knowledge in colonial settings. As the artist states “my Great-Great-Grandfather was allowed to sing these songs for the sake of anthropological preservation, but he was unable to legally practice the culture outside of these recording sessions” (Assu, 2020).

Through travels inside and outside Canada, Assu contributes to the circulation of knowledge related to the artist’s indigenous group and makes present the hidden history of ongoing coloniality in Canada. Assu is also a member of a group of artists in British Columbia who share “political solidarities, kinship, and land” (Kisin, 2013: p. 143), operating thus within the logic of non-institutionalized networks of actors (Tal, 2017). This shows how the artist can act as an agent of heritage SD, reclaiming indigenous stories, materials, knowledges in his artistic practices. More generally, however, artists often conjure a wide range of affective practices in their works, their messages thus becoming more effective at a communicational level. Engaging the interlocutors’ emotions, artistic practices thus present a fertile ground for establishing contact zones. Artists therefore need to be considered as heritage diplomats. Indeed, artists and artistic practices provides an important way to challenge the implicit and explicit epistemological hegemonies that work to the detriment of European SD engagement with its colonial past and decolonial present.

Conclusion

SD gained prominence in the global modernization projects that determined the relations between developed and less developed states in the period of decolonization after WWII. Together with economic liberalism, hard science became the gateway to modernization. Later social sciences and humanities found their way into SD, but often in the form of cultural diplomacy with the purpose of adding soft power to diplomatic engagements. Inspired by our project on European colonial heritage, ECHOES,

we are looking at heritage diplomacy as a way of rethinking the entanglement between former colonized countries in the Global South and former colonial powers in Europe. While heritage diplomacy often comes close to cultural diplomacy, it also opens questions of what counts as heritage and for whom. Colonial heritage directly links to the difficult entanglement of colonialism and thus paves the way for contact zones that challenge the concept of science. Diplomacy around colonial heritage reveals the intricate role of European science as a tool of colonial empires, and highlights moral responsibilities for colonial destruction. Post-war science diplomacy continued this legacy in its diffusionist understanding of exchange where the new independent states were reduced to passive recipients without a right to voice their understanding of knowledge.

We argue for a decolonial critique of SD, which builds on an understanding of interculturality. To be intercultural is to enter a contact zone where different knowledges meet. For diplomats from the former colonial powers in Europe, this means being aware of the negative consequences of hegemony and accepting the existence of other forms of knowledge. Only if European knowledge is provincialized, can it open up for these other forms. Out of the contact zone might come new forms of knowledge that can question Western monopolies of knowledge.

While there are many examples of heritage diplomacy where Europeans invest in saving “world heritage”, there are a few examples of contact zones. We have discussed three cases of colonial heritage diplomacy. The first case, the Tendaguru dinosaur fossils, directly addresses the colonial problem of objects out of place and the confrontations between a universal prehistory justified by science and knowledge linked to the place. The second case presented the efforts to turn the Royal Museum of Central Africa in Brussels into a scientific museum on Africa by giving voice to peoples from the former colony and adding a section on the brutal, colonial history. It also tried to avoid the question of whether science on Africa can simply be delinked from the past, and whether the artifacts could smoothly be decontextualized in the name of science. Only the final case, where colonial heritage is performed through artistic knowledge by an artist directly speaking to former colonizers in Europe and present colonizers in Canada, is colonial heritage made present in a language informed by indigenous knowledge. This points to the main problem of SD, namely that it cannot really operate in a contact zone as long as European science itself is the only language spoken.

Indeed, if European science and institutions should engage in SD that is truly intercultural, it is vital to rethink the position from where knowledge is produced. The sciences are not innocent lenses through which truths of the globe emerge untainted by colonialism and European modernity. Rather, it is pertinent to conceive of the exchange as a dialog at a meta-level of knowledge. Museums, research institutions and diplomats must assume that there is more to know than what science and colonization brought to Europe. There is an acute necessity of listening to other voices—past and present—about how Europe (including European science) is seen from a non-European perspective and include these voices into the institutions and debates. European science diplomacy will have to be self-critical. It is impossible to think in terms of a contact zone if the transfer of knowledge is based on the colonial appropriation of places, including objects. Non-acknowledged de-contextualization is not dialog, but appropriation and erasure of knowledge, where only one party has its diplomats. No knowledge can be delinked from belonging and identity, and particularly not knowledge of heritage. Objects cannot be made anonymous within a science discourse; they are involved with identity politics and with conflicting demands on belonging and ownership. This is why the question of restitution

is so dominant in debates on Western museums. Instead of thinking only in terms of returning objects, restitution can be a way of adding mobility to dialog. The essence of intercultural knowledge diplomacy could thus be that constant mobility creates a surplus of meaning that is most often denied in strategies of appropriation.

Data availability

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

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The authors declare no competing interests.

Additional information

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