

[Re:]Entanglements: Colonial Collections in Decolonial Times
 curated by Paul Basu
 Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA), University of Cambridge
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reviewed by Jean Borgatti

[Re:]Entanglements: Colonial Collections in Decolonial Times is an exhibition drawn from the Museum Affordances/[Re:]Entanglements project led by Paul Basu, formerly at SOAS University of London. The exhibition revisits the ethnographic archive assembled by the colonial anthropologist Northcote W. Thomas in Southern Nigeria and Sierra Leone between 1909 and 1915. The title itself plays on the ideas of the entangling of Africa and the West during the colonial period, and with a continued, renewed, and expanded process of reengagement that includes community involvement and works by artists inspired by (and critical of) the collection and its original frame of reference. A central question raised



by the exhibition is whether we can see beyond the violence of the colonial period, especially now, when the Black Lives Matter movement has drawn attention to continued inequities in Western cultures as well as between world populations. The archive itself includes some 3,000 objects; at least 700 sound recordings (now digitized); a large body of photographic material consisting of 5,200 surviving glass negatives, 6,200 loose prints, and three eight-volume album sets; published work and fieldnotes; and botanical specimens.

1 *[Re:]Entanglements: Colonial Collections in Decolonial Times*, installation view of “The Making of a Colonial Anthropological Archive” display, including objects collected by Northcote Thomas in Nigeria and Sierra Leone between 1909 and 1915.

Photo: Paul Basu

2 Installation view of “[Re:]Assemblage” display, featuring objects collected in Agbwu, present-day Anambra State, Nigeria, in 1911.

Photo: Paul Basu





3 Installation view of “Lines, Faces, Fragments” display, featuring Ozioma Onuzulike’s ceramics and a five-minute film directed by Paul Basu and Christopher Thomas Allen (2021).
Photo: Josh Murfitt/MAA

4 Installation view of “Akh’Olokun” display. Reconstructed clay Olokun pot collected by Northcote Thomas in Benin City in 1909, juxtaposed with the cast brass replica made by Mark Ihama, West Osadolo Ihama and Ehigie Ihama in Benin City in 2020, and approximately one hundred pottery sherds.
Photo: Josh Murfitt/MAA

Through extensive fieldwork in West Africa, the project and the exhibition have involved collaboration with members of the communities visited by Northcote Thomas over one hundred years ago. This has included the repatriation of historical photographs, sound recordings and images of objects, as well as the exchange of contextual knowledge. It has also involved collaborations with numerous artists from southern Nigeria and Sierra Leone, many of whose works were included

in the exhibition, and partnerships with the many institutions holding parts of the archive, including the Nigerian National Museum, Lagos; the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology; the British Library Sound Archive; the Royal Anthropological Institute; the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew; and the UK National Archives. The Cambridge show was the most recent in a series of project exhibitions held at various venues: the Royal Anthropological Institute (2018), Lagos (2019), Benin City (2019), and Nsukka (2020). “Pop-up” exhibitions of the historical photographs were staged in many of the towns and villages where they were originally made.

The exhibit itself consisted of a series of installations, each making its own point and raising questions relating both to the colonial context in which the archive was created and the present decolonial moment in which it is recontextualised. One walked into the exhibit between a display of Thomas’s photographs of Nigerian string games, visually setting the theme of entanglement that carried through the exhibit with a graphic motif designed by Alafuro Sikoki-Coleman linking the installations, and a case that included a life-sized photographic image of Thomas himself along with the cameras, phonograph, recorder, and other equipment used in the field to make his collections (Fig. 1).

Centered in the gallery space was a group of



disparate objects—from an *alusi* shrine figure to a humble yam grater—displayed precisely as Thomas photographed them prior to packing and shipping them to England (Fig. 2). Instead of Thomas’s plain photographic background, they were arrayed before a contemporary textile backdrop also designed by Sikoki-Coleman. Adjacent to this was the profoundly moving work of the Nsukka-based ceramicist Ozioma Onuzulike, showing heads sculpted and incised based on photographs of titled men bearing *ichi* scarification marks, and then tumbled into a case, damaged and broken, to reflect the harm done to local cultures through colonial domination. This display was accompanied by a video clip of the artist modelling and incising the faces with *ichi* marks. The curl of clay created by the grooving of the soft material was particularly evocative of the actual scarification process and its pain (Fig. 3).

Another ceramicist whose work was on display, but whose name was not collected by Northcote Thomas, created a dramatic ritual pot for Olokun, deity associated with wealth and childbirth in the Benin kingdom. Its history and display reinforces the central metaphor of the exhibition. According to Basu, one of his reasons for including this work in the exhibition is that it had been broken, clumsily mended, and for the exhibition, disassembled and put together again using modern materials and techniques. In a recent email, in response



5 Installation view of "Beyond the Colonial Gaze?" display. *Faces/Voices* film (2019, directed by Paul Basu and Christopher Thomas Allen) and thirty-six 300 x 400 mm C-Type prints from scans of glass plate negatives held by the Royal Anthropological Institute.
Photo: Josh Murfitt/MAA

6 Installation view of "Colonial Indexicality" display. Mixed media works by Kelani Abass.
Photo: Josh Murfitt/MAA

to a question, he said:

In keeping with the idea of material metaphors which runs through the exhibition, this speaks of the damage of colonialism, the historical cultural reconstruction in the colonial ethnographic museum (the repair meant that the object could no longer hold the water/medicines that is actually its most important cultural function), and then our attempt to deconstruct and repair as a reparatory act in the present (personal communication, Oct. 16, 2021).

It is displayed along with the shards of other pots collected by Thomas but broken (and

not repaired) and a bronze replica of the pot made by Igun Street artists Mark Ihama, West Osadolo Ihama, and Ehigie Ihama, working from measurements and photographs of the original (Fig. 4). (Although most of the historic Benin bronzes are actually made of brass, they are conventionally referred to as bronzes in the literature.)

Although there are women who continue to make Olokun ritual pottery in Benin City, though not many, Basu chose to commission a bronze replica of the pot rather than a contemporary Olokun pot. He did this, we are told in the label, to introduce bronze casting into

the exhibition. Thomas did not collect much in the way of cast bronze work from Igun Street, the quarter inhabited by the bronzecasters, for he was there between 1909 and 1910, during the interregnum (1897–1914) when the casters themselves had no patronage because the Oba was in exile. Much discussion of Benin art today focuses on its bronze-casting tradition, on the looting of the palace and shrines in 1897, and now the restitution or repatriation of these objects. Thomas's collection, objects generally purchased in markets or commissioned from craftspeople, stands in opposition to the focus of this discussion. The cast replica of the





7 Installation view of “Ukhurhe” display. Wooden memorial rattle staffs commissioned by Northcote Thomas in Benin City in 1909, made by Eholo N’Igbesamwan. At the center of the display is the new rattle staff made by Benin carver Felix Ekhatior in 2019. Carvings range from 330mm to 1040mm in height.

Photo: Josh Murfitt/MAA

8 Installation view of “Regarding Northcote Thomas” display. In the foreground is Andrew Omote Edjobehuo’s sculpture *First Contact* (2018–19).

Photo: Paul Basu

Olokun pot further reminds us of the continued excellence of the work done by members of the Bronzecastors Guild (Igun Eronmwom) in Benin City that has operated continuously since the fifteenth century. Several installations made extensive use of photographs and video installations. Taking up almost one entire wall were photographs of individuals drawn from the array of “physical types” documented by Thomas (typical of the anthropological approach of his time) and the interpretative and sometimes contradictory responses of African and African-heritage commentators captured in the film *Faces/Voices* (Fig. 5). A second particularly moving installation, “Unspoken Stories: Five Archival Monologues,” was a series of fictionalized narratives created to provide insight into the lives, colonial experience, and aspirations of these individuals depersonalized by the anthropological

“mugshots.” Among them was the narrative of Onyeso, the son of Eze Nri Ënweleána (the spiritual head of the Igbo Nri Kingdom in the second half of the nineteenth century), based on an actual speech, recorded, though only existing as a transcript today. A quite different use of images from the archive is made by contemporary artist Kelani Abass, whose work was featured in the 2019 Lagos exhibition. His mixed media works combine painting, photography, and letterpress number blocks to comment on anthropological procedures and viewpoints, typical of the time (Fig. 6). Though these and other contemporary works serve as interpretive documents, they, of course, stand as artworks in their own right.

Despite the relatively small number of historical artifacts shown in relation to the total archive, the exhibit provided remarkable insight into early colonial period anthropology. It not only raised difficult questions, but also presented the viewer with information that undermined certain stereotypes about historical collection processes. Thus, the display of carved rattle staffs, commissioned by Thomas in Benin City 110 years ago to provide a contemporary image base for the cults in which they were used, was particularly interesting (Fig. 7). None of these was ever consecrated and the artists were paid for their work (a price in today’s currency of approximately \$100 apiece)—pointing out that not all work from Africa collected by anthropologists was stolen, either literally or figuratively through underpayment, and suggesting an important model for ethical collecting today.

Central to this group was a new memorial rattle staff surmounted by a portrait of the anthropologist himself made by Benin-based carver Felix Ekhatior. This is an intervention—so the label tells us—to disrupt conventional expectations of what an “ethnographic” or “historical” display should be, and provoke



additional questions. Should the colonial-era anthropologist be honored as an ancestor? Should his agency be stressed in this way, by the introduction of his presence among the work? In a foyer behind a wall separating it from the main exhibition space, and easy to miss, was a group of portraits of Northcote Thomas by eight contemporary African artists—all but one focusing on Thomas as a heroic figure (Fig. 8).

The exhibition did not present the collection in a typical art or even ethnographic layout of objects in cases with labels and the occasional context photo incorporated or dispersed at the periphery. Rather it was a dense, richly layered, and innovative presentation of objects, images, and information. It is not easily summarized, and there is not space to discuss all of the installations in this review. Fortunately, QR codes associated with many, if not all, of the individual installations were available to take the viewer to corresponding resources at the website <https://re-entanglements.net>, replete with blog essays, interviews, and coverage of the various participants’ participation in the project. If you didn’t happen to be in Cambridge in time to catch the show, you can still go straight to the website to view it (the tip of the iceberg) as well as the extent of the iceberg itself so far explored.

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