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RESEARCH ARTICLE



# Curators as keepers and exhibition makers: The British Museum's African Galleries

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## ABSTRACT

It is generally assumed that anthropological artefacts are fundamentally different from art works. This article questions aspects of this distinction by exploring the role of curators in anthropological collections, with a focus on the Africa Galleries at the British Museum. It looks at the complexities faced by the curators of a controversial collection, which is contested as 'heritage' and the curatorial practices used to address it in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. It explores questions such as: can curatorial work narrate the Other outside power structures? How might it narrate other cultures? And can there be collaborations across cultures without collapsing into existing power structures?

Johannes Fabian has argued that ethnography has two 'moments': the first involves close exchange and collaboration with other communities during field trips. The second involves the construction of an unchanging temporality through which another culture becomes Other and thus excluded from change. This exclusion applies a power relationship. The article demonstrates how the curators sought to develop exhibitions which critiqued the second moment and built on the first by collaborating with living artists. In so doing the curators also questioned the status of works in anthropological collections.

## KEYWORDS

British museum; curatorial practices; exhibitions; anthropology and art; African art

## 1. The curator as 'keeper' and 'exhibition maker'

This Special Issue responds to a widely acknowledged shift in focus over the role of the curator from that of 'keeper' of collections to that of 'maker' of exhibitions during the twentieth century, most famously articulated by Paul O'Neill.<sup>1</sup> He claimed that the late 1960s 'witnessed a shift from the idea of curating as caring, mediative, administrative activity toward one of a mediating and performative activity akin to artistic practice'.<sup>2</sup> O'Neill's examples are taken from temporary exhibitions of contemporary art in institutions that do not hold permanent collections.<sup>3</sup> The term was used by some curators of temporary exhibitions to highlight their role of 'exhibition maker[s]'.<sup>4</sup> The role of the curator as 'maker' of exhibitions is to invite artists to produce work for the specific

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exhibition, and thus work in collaboration with the curator and other artists. Such works/exhibitions often included critiques of previous methodologies of displays and thus questioning current and past values, rather than merely conserving, preserving and re-enacting existing values. However, in the context of permanent collections, especially in national public museums where historical, anthropological, and today also natural historical and scientific collections are presented as national (even international) heritage, the curator holds responsibilities to the collections under their charge and must also operate as keeper.

In Europe, most historical collections developed in the context of interpretations of Aristotle, which granted a value to some artefacts to be collected, the act of collection, and its display. Aristotle's foundational claim at the opening of his book on ethics proposes that every art (*technē*),<sup>5</sup> inquiry, action, and pursuit 'aims at some good'.<sup>6</sup> His claim can be read as both a critique and development of Plato's position that philosophical life is the aim of all humans, since it focuses on what Plato articulated as the essential difference between humans and animals. For Aristotle, the above serves to establish the human as someone acknowledged to be practicing reason/speech, *logos*, and thus an end in itself. Aristotle's above statement was further developed and adapted, by his interpreters, who used it to distinguish 'art' (mental work) from 'craft' (manual skills). The former was interpreted by the Romans as a leisure activity (*otium*).<sup>7</sup> The latter interpreted as a business (*negotium*).<sup>8</sup> Those recognised as rational beings – granted the conditions to make rational decision – were conferred autonomy. The mental process/product (the process of study and the production of mostly intangible cultural artefacts, such as poetry and its depictions in visual art and music) was conferred value, and given a level of autonomy (relative autonomy). All other activities were interpreted as work, not leisure, as they were performed for the maintenance of physical, social, economic or political survival. The manual skills of craft were only valued in this latter category. Hence, temporary curated exhibitions of contemporary art, in institutions that did not hold historical permanent collections (heritage), were given a level of autonomy and freedoms akin to that of art, not available to curators of historical material culture (heritage).

And yet, as argued below, curators of historical material culture (heritage) looked for creative ways in which they could enact the role of keeper alongside that of exhibition maker and exhibitions maker alongside keeper. The two roles can be seen in a dialectical relationship between conservation and its critique and should thus be viewed as the process of curation. The article explores the above process through the case study of the British Museum, focusing on one display where the difficulties facing the curator are currently the subject of controversy: the Africa Galleries.<sup>9</sup>

The British Museum, and similar museums holding collections that were acquired under colonialism and/or financed by its profits, have been under attack since at least the latter half of the twentieth century.<sup>10</sup> Media representations and social media tend to concentrate on their legitimacy to claim ownership of such collections, with Stuart Frost, the Head of Interpretation at the British Museum suggesting the following Twitter message as typical.<sup>11</sup> It says, 'The British Museum? Where is that? That Museum in London [...]. It has nothing British in it! Stealing someone's history and refusing to give it back ... At least don't call it British!'.<sup>12</sup> There are currently many discussions between museums regarding the repatriation of some objects. The issues of legitimacy, however, are more complex than those represented in the media.

The legitimacy of museums' ownership of historical and especially anthropological objects is questioned not just in the media and the popular imagination but in many academic debates. In the latter the debate is grounded in more fundamental conceptual arguments. In the context of works categorised as art, the legitimacy of ownership amounts to legally acquired.<sup>13</sup> However, the status of material culture excluded from the relative autonomy of art is more complex, as its value does not depend on it being understood as an expression of rational humanity (art) but its usefulness to other societies or communities, prior to becoming a museum object and the added status acquired under a national public museum.<sup>14</sup> From the perspective of anthropology, archaeology, even history, its usefulness in the present (and future) as a museum object is in its potential to facilitate knowledge of other societies and/or other times.<sup>15</sup> Since the rationale for anthropological collections is to produce knowledge of other (geographical) socialites, there is an implication that anthropology as an academic discipline is capable of providing objective and scientific methodologies that would guarantee knowledge of other (geographical) societies and thus justify the collection and its display in the museum. However, does anthropology also construct the past?

During the nineteenth century, when many academic disciplines became professionalised, it became crucial that knowledge could be justified by systematic methodology and could thus be universalised. In the case of anthropology, whose subject is other geographical cultures, the problem of Others proved particularly challenging.<sup>16</sup> By the late twentieth century, the difficulties of anthropology became more acute. Its attempts to narrate the Other (i.e. other cultures) in a systematic and objective way were questioned alongside other questions: Can the Other (i.e. other cultures) be narrated at all? Who may legitimately narrate the Other and for whom? Can there be narratives and communication between cultures that are not governed by power relationships? Does the category of radical Other form a way of circumventing power relationships, or are power relations introduced as a strategy to address the radical Other precisely because no other forms of communications are possible?

Clifford Geertz summarises some of the problems faced by anthropology today. It produces a 'division of humanity into those who know and decide, and those who are known and are decided for'.<sup>17</sup> That is, it constructs a radical Other with whom no collaborations are possible outside power relations. From this perspective, it seems that 'the whole enterprise [of anthropology is] but domination carried on by other means [...] "who are we to speak for them?"'.<sup>18</sup> If anthropology necessarily constructs other cultures as radical Others, power relations are the only possible relations.

Walter Benjamin's famous, and often circulated, articulation of the triumph of the ruler made visible in the act of displaying the defeated's material and intellectual culture, is often alluded to in the media in the context of museum collections, as an example of narratives governed by power relationships. Here, the other is a radical Other because the relationship described is governed by power relationship. According to Benjamin: 'Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present ruler steps over those who are lying prostrate. [...] The spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures'.<sup>19</sup> For Benjamin, the ruler's narrative is always already governed by a power relationship, hence there is 'no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism'.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the ruler's narrative is presented as 'the "eternal" image of the past'.<sup>21</sup> It

is presented as the only narrative, eternally stable narrative of the past as history.<sup>22</sup> Benjamin argues, that any single, dominant (ruler's) narrative is violent, since it forgets the details of lived experience by the defeated. He thus calls for the voice of the defeated (historical materialism) 'to brush history against the grain'.<sup>23</sup> The focus of most interpretations is on the continuing need to critique all narratives of rulers and give voice to the defeated, by looking at the forgotten details of lived experience (often undocumented). This interpretation provides some way to address the asymmetrical structure of power relations. However, it assumes the above structure itself is stable: the status of ruler and that of the defeated/forgotten is stable.<sup>24</sup>

However, Benjamin's above argument was written in Paris in 1940, shortly after Alexandre Kojève delivered his famous and influential Paris lectures on Hegel.<sup>25</sup> Hegel questioned Kant's approach to knowledge, which was based on the subject's encounters with objects, assuming this approach will also be relevant to encounters between persons. Person to person encounters are formed after the recognition of the other as another human being, Hegel insists, someone possessing language/reason, someone who is autonomous like me.<sup>26</sup> This structure is articulated by Hegel in his paradoxical 'master-slave dialectic', on which Kojève's above lectures focused.<sup>27</sup> For the slave is by definition not autonomous and can thus not offer (an autonomous, free) recognition of the master. In order for recognition to take place, the master must recognise the slave as human, but in so doing the master becomes slave. Benjamin's structure of the ruler and the defeated could be read as a paradoxical, unstable and reversible structure. It requires mutual recognition which under power relationships is impossible, hence the other is always interpreted as Other. However, without recognition no legitimacy as ruler can be achieved. For example, the British Museum ownership of its collection requires continuous recognition of its legitimacy if it is to continue displaying it or even if it were to repatriate items or its entire collection. Holding and displaying any collection requires justification and the recognition of others.

In the context of curatorial practice, the role of the curator in the first instance is to justify and preserve the collection. However, in order to do so, they need to read the collection under their charge also 'against the grain' so as to recognise the previously perceived as Other, but now perceived as another. In so doing they are performing the role of 'exhibition maker'. Hence, the two aspects of curatorial practice are in a dialectical relationship.

## 2. The historical context of the British museum

The current display at the British Museum's Africa Galleries is comparatively new. It opened in March 2001 as The Sainsbury's African Galleries. However, between 1970 and 1997, the African collection formed part of the anthropological collection of the British Museum, housed separately at the Burlington Gardens as the Museum of Mankind. Many of the items currently included in the African collection were not initially part of the founding collection, they arrived later, but their justification was partially determined by the museum's founding collection.

The museum was established by an Act of Parliament in 1753 'to function as a public repository of objects and texts that would be maintained in perpetuity by the English government and overseen by a government-appointed board of trustees'.<sup>28</sup> The founding

collections were collections of individuals: the physician and naturalist Hans Sloane (1660–1753) alongside the Cottonian Library collection and the Harleian Collection of manuscripts. The founding collections were not of highly prized Renaissance or Baroque art works, but objects of curiosity and books.<sup>29</sup> The collections were adopted by parliament to declare parliament's state power and state values: the restored monarchy had limited political power. Unlike many European monarchies whose art collections were used to declare power and prestige of the monarchy, the English parliament focused on a different articulation of value in Aristotle, that of empirical research and knowledge as a key element of intellectual and scholarly activity. Jeffrey Abt notes, that Aristotle travelled to the island of Lesbos (mid 340 BCE), in the company of his students, in this context he 'began collecting, studying and classifying botanical specimens; and in so doing formulated an empirical methodology requiring social and physical structures to bring into continuity learned inquiry and the evidence necessary to pursue it'.<sup>30</sup> This interpretation made it possible to see the founding collections of botanical, zoological, geological objects and books, as an intellectual activity of leisure.

Social and economic changes during the nineteenth century led to the professionalisation of study and intellectual pursuits and the emergence of distinct academic disciplines. Sloane was a professional physician (not an aristocrat) and his founding collection comprised predominantly botanical, zoological and geological items from all continents.<sup>31</sup> In 1881, when the Museum of Natural History opened its doors (still under the British Museum), it housed most of Sloane's collection in a dedicated site with the aim of developing knowledge through systematic scientific research, as universal, across time and geography.

The collections left on the British Museum site were composed of over 50,000 books, prints and manuscripts (eventually forming the British Library), over 32,000 coins and medals, as well as weapons and silverware, and at least 1,125 'things relating to the customs of ancient times'.<sup>32</sup> Items relating to 'customs of ancient times' founded the academic discipline of Classics and Archaeology, which covered predominantly the material cultures of Greece and Rome as well as Egypt and the Near East. Since such items permeated aristocratic European culture and tradition they were not perceived as Other. However, they were closely associated with the 'old social order', rather than with the emerging middle class.

The London Great Exhibition of 1851 was visited by a surprising number of middle-class people who flocked to see the designs and skills of craftspeople from the colonies and gain access to the customs of other cultures.<sup>33</sup> It was of interest to the growing middle class both on the grounds that they could be seen to engage in research and study of other cultures (leisure), *and* on more utilitarian grounds, potentially developing new products and new trade contacts.<sup>34</sup> In this context, the artifacts and customs of other cultures, especially from the colonies, became the British Museum's anthropological collection and attracted the growing middle class. Since Imperialism was the dominant ideology by the late nineteenth century, the British Museum, and anthropology as an academic discipline, aligned themselves with it, and even justified the knowledge they provided in support of colonial rule.<sup>35</sup>

However, following the two world wars, social structures, ideologies, world politics and economics changed dramatically. Britain was no longer an empire, most former colonies were calling for independence and self-rule, and colonialism could no longer

be supported ideologically or ethically in internal or international relationships. The British Museum had to re-think its collections and their displays.

### 3. The museum of mankind's African collection

Between 1970 and 1997 the anthropological collection, including the African collection, was moved out of the British Museum's main site and was housed at Burlington Gardens, in what became the Museum of Mankind. There was no suggestion by the British Museum that the anthropological collection was best housed away from the main site, but the timing coincided with the critiques faced by anthropology. For example, Johannes Fabian has argued that 'neither political space, nor political time, are natural resources. They are ideologically construed instruments of power.' Fabian argues that time is not universal but constructed ideologically.<sup>36</sup> Geopolitics, he argues, 'has its ideological foundation in *chronopolitics*'.<sup>37</sup> Time is constructed in the context of politics. The narrative of the ruler seeks to justify itself from its Other through time as well as geographical space.

Walter Mignolo argues that colonialism and the desire to rule over the other led to the construction of time which will subjugate the Other. The category of time, he argues, is 'a category belonging to culture, not nature [...] History as "time" entered into the picture to place societies in an imaginary chronological line going from nature to culture, from barbarism to civilization'.<sup>38</sup> The present was described as modern and civilised, the past as traditional and barbarian.<sup>39</sup> The above critiques and many others meant that the museum had to rethink its collection and its display, and housing the collection on a different site was the option the museum chose to rethink anthropology and the collection.

Away from the main museum site anthropology could be read against the grain and allow for a different justification and recognition to take place. According to John Mack, the then Senior Keeper of the Museum of Mankind, the anthropology department enjoyed a highly productive time.<sup>40</sup> The Museum of Mankind was successful in accessing available funds which funded research field trips to Africa, each adding important research and new material to the museum's anthropological collection.<sup>41</sup> Mack argues that the anthropological research field trips undertaken by many of the museum's curators 'proved a good model of how [...] to] link ethnographic field research with collecting, with a certain elements of diplomacy, and also with a strong collaborative aspect'.<sup>42</sup> For Mack, research field trips made it possible to develop the anthropological collection and its data, but most importantly, it formed the basis for collaborations with other communities and their local museums. Mack notes that it also seemed to facilitate better diplomatic relationships of collaboration with the now independent, former colonies.

Mack's argument chimes with Fabian's recent Preface to his 1983 publication where he suggests that anthropology has two 'moments'. The first rests on 'ethnographic research involving personal, prolonged interaction with the Other'.<sup>43</sup> This aspect he implies, is the justification for anthropology, for the Other actually becomes another in everyday exchanges. It can thus form a model for co-operation. The second 'moment', Fabian argues, is to 'pronounce upon the knowledge gained from such research [in] a discourse which construes the Other in terms of distance, spatial and temporal'.<sup>44</sup> Once the other becomes an Other, separated geographically and through time,



Fabian's implies, power relationship are established. Hence Benjamin's call for reading against the grain needs to be enacted.

Mack hints towards the above without fully articulating it. He mentions that in the context of the Museum of Mankind it was possible to stage many small, but innovative, temporary exhibitions. Anthony Shelton, curator of the Horniman Museum, recalls that they 'used elaborate scenographies to recreate the physical context in which objects from the collection had once been used: examples included *Yoruba Religious Cults* (1974) and *Asante: Kingdom of Gold* (1976)'.<sup>45</sup> Mack claims that on average they were able to mount six specialised exhibitions a year, based on their research field trips, and attracted nearly 400,000 visitors per year.<sup>46</sup>

In 1995 a nation-wide festival *africa95* took place. It was a celebration of the arts of Africa in the UK and covered visual and performing arts, cinema, literature, music to and public debate, and programs on BBC television and radio.<sup>47</sup> Mack was one of the advisors and the Museum of Mankind was one of the many participants. It originated by, and was built around, the Royal Academy's exhibition *Africa: the Art of a Continent*. The Art Academy sought to shed its image of an out of date, conservative, institution which refused to embrace modern art.<sup>48</sup> The proposed exhibition was one of its high-profile temporary exhibitions, meant to change its public image. The exhibition was curated by Tom Philips an artist, academician, and a well-known collector of African art (pre-twentieth century).<sup>49</sup> The exhibition aimed to bring together many of the well-known works spread across museums and private collections, mostly in the USA and Europe. The rationale was that it would allow for a new appreciation of the volume of works from across the continents. It thus meant that the exhibition would not include twentieth-century works. The curator Clementine Deliss, who became the Artistic Director of the festival and also organised the ambitious large exhibition at Whitechapel Gallery, sought to look for venues that would complement the Royal academy and cover the wide range of twentieth-century art alongside academic conferences, workshops, artists' residencies and other events across Britain.

The Royal Academy's exhibition formed the centre piece of the festival; it was 'an exhibition on an epic scale containing over 800 works'.<sup>50</sup> According to Philips, it attracted over 250,000 visitors, including many young people for the first time. However, as Leyden argues, despite its claim 'to be breaking the mould and showing Africa and its art in new light, it served instead in almost every aspect to simply reinforce or reinterpret great many old [...] stereotypes'.<sup>51</sup> Some of the works at the exhibition had recently been exhibited in MoMA's '*Primitivism*' in *twentieth Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (1984–5), which placed African masks and small wood sculptures alongside avant-garde works in an attempt to show affinity in style and suggesting these works acted as inspiration to the avant-garde.

The African works were displayed as intuitive, unconscious works which nevertheless possessed important aesthetic qualities, while the avant-garde works were displayed to emphasise their aesthetic qualities, but here as a result of reason and study, thus consciously produced as art works. While the Royal Academy exhibition did not include any modern avant-garde works, the above approach was implicit in the display of at least some of the works, despite the overall anthropological explanations.

The curator of *africa95* exhibition and editor of its large and superbly coloured illustrated catalogue, insists in his essay that 'the problem of looking at the works in



this exhibition is no different from a visit to the National Gallery where, representing the continent of Europe, a similar variety of styles and reference is on view'.<sup>52</sup> While his narrative does not explicitly mention 'affinity', his overall formalist approach in both the essay and the exhibition, invites such an interpretation.<sup>53</sup> The exhibition catalogue included several academic essays, mostly by anthropologists specialising in specific African regions and thus providing anthropological information on the role each work played in the society in which, and for which, they were produced.

In another catalogue essay 'Why Africa? Why Art?', the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah argues against the 'affinity' and an anthropological reception of the works. In the European imagination, he claims, 'the cultures and societies of sub-Saharan Africa formed a single continuum, reflecting an underlying racial unity, which expressed itself in the "savage rhythms" of African music, the "sensuality" of African dance, the "primitive vigour" of sculpture and masks from what was called the "Dark Continent"'.<sup>54</sup> Appiah's argument is that the works on display are currently displayed as expressions of 'primitive desires'. They are not displayed, he implies, as the works of autonomous beings capable of consciously thought out, informed by reason, study and rational creativity. He argues that the works on show should be interpreted as art, as they do not 'require us to take them as their makers took them [ritual or other social function]'.<sup>55</sup> What is required, he argues, is not anthropological interpretation but recognition of 'Africa as the home of people [...] capable of civilization'.<sup>56</sup>

And yet, the paradox is that once the works on display are perceived as art, they gain a level of relative autonomy, and are framed within the European concept of art. As art works, the context in which they were made and the role they once played in this context, loses much of its relevance. Under anthropology, their value depends entirely on their historical, social, economic and political context in which they were made, and the role they once played (intended to play) in this context. At issue on the one hand is how to open up art historical accounts to include wider geography without establishing a different temporality. And on the other hand, how anthropology can be opened up to narrate other cultures without freezing them in some mythical 'traditional' time. As Olabisi Silva argues, art in Africa did not end at the turn of the century. In fact, it developed and transformed. Persistent misconceptions that for art to be from Africa it had to be traditional is not only naive but also seriously out of sync with contemporary realities on the continent.<sup>57</sup>

The Royal Academy exhibition was at the centre of the festival *africa95* which held over 50 exhibitions, alongside many other relevant events. For example, Whitechapel Art Gallery under Deliss showed *Seven Stories about Modern Art from Africa*, in an attempt to allow the artists to narrate their work and circumvent European stereotypical narratives. It sought to provide 'a series of personal interpretations [...] of specific movements or connections which have significantly qualified twentieth-century modern art in Africa'.<sup>58</sup> It was 'divided into seven sections representing a total of seven countries, with 62 artists and curated by five people, [...] it] was meant to chart the trajectory of artist-led movements within the story of modern African art'.<sup>59</sup> The intention was to construct an art historical narrative that would allow the works of African artists to be recognised as art. However, as many reviews point out, the ambitious intentions did not achieve the radical change hoped for.

The overall aim of the large and varied festival was that of ‘promoting “exchange and collaboration between artists” and creating “long-lasting ties between artists and audiences in Africa and the UK”’.<sup>60</sup> The hope of collaborations may well have been aimed at art museums and galleries acquiring the works exhibited and commissioning further works. However, it was the Museum of Mankind which was perhaps the first to purchase and develop collaborations with some of the artists who showed work at the festival.

The Museum of Mankind participated in the festival with three anthropological exhibitions: *Display and modesty: North African Textiles*; *Secular and Sacred: Ethiopian Textiles*; *Power of the Hand: African Arms and Armour*. The anthropological approach focusing on material and techniques - historically used to construct a distinction between ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’, ‘civilised’ and ‘primitive’ - was used by the curators in order to critique distinctions such as ‘traditional’ and ‘primitive’. The exhibitions and permanent displays were organised with materials such as: textile, forged metal, clay (pottery), woodcarving, and brass casting.

The exhibition *Display and Modesty* focused on textiles from North Africa, concentrating on the tensions between tradition and modernisation, highlighting ‘the rich and flourishing urban tradition’.<sup>61</sup> The rationale was to demonstrate that anthropology itself is a changing and developing academic discipline, and thus to show Africa as ‘a place not simply where traditions are lost but where traditions are constantly invented and reinvented’.<sup>62</sup> They showed how even remote communities engaged in trade, exchanges and conversations with others. For example, the widespread use of silk weaving across the region is a testament to the lively trading routes in operation. Equally, the level of urbanisation, and the growing use of machines to replace labour-intensive practices and the social and traditional changes both trade and urbanisation, introduced.<sup>63</sup> Historically, anthropological displays ignored urbanisation and the use of machinery on the grounds that were both European practices not native to the community. It meant, as Fabian, Geertz and Mignolo have argued, that Otherness was produced through different temporalities. The curators sought to avoid ‘freezing’ the object in traditional temporality.

Another exhibition, *Secular and Sacred: Ethiopian Textiles*, focused on textiles in a different geographical area. It showed the use of silk in the context of constant adaptations and changes experienced by the community, renowned for the quality of its textiles. Again, it pointed to trade, urbanisation and the use of machinery. The exhibition *Power of the Hand: African Arms and Armour* focused on forged metal. The curators sought to focus here not on the nineteenth-century European connotation between African arms and savagery, but on the lively trade which these objects demonstrate with North Africa, even Europe, and that they were the product of ‘societies undergoing dynamic change’.<sup>64</sup>

There were many other examples showing how the curators were reading anthropology against the grain and using their collection to do so in order to circumvent the structure of all-powerful coloniser and passive colonised frozen in primitive time and thus becoming an Other.<sup>65</sup> They complicated the category of Africa as mostly sub-Saharan, and they included some works from European antiquity, such as a Roman bust found in Sudan, and Egyptian, Greek and Roman coins, hinting at lively trade, cultural exchanges and collaborations.<sup>66</sup> The permanent display included two sections, one of

ceramics: *Smashing Pots: Feats of Clay from Africa*, the other of the masquerades: *Play and display*; and *Masquerades of Southern Nigeria*. In the latter they claim they were 'able to feature the very same hippo mask in an ethnographic installation, a contemporary artwork interpretation, and an actual multimedia performance'.<sup>67</sup> While in 1995 they as yet did not fully articulate a strategy of collaborating with artists, they were aware of its potential. The display included the work *Big Masquerade with Boat and Household on His Head* (1995) by the artist Sokari Douglas Camp (1958, Nigeria). They note that the above three media raise questions 'where the "art" of African masquerade lies and how it should be experienced – in the carved wood, in the visual aesthetic, or in the multimedia act of performance'.<sup>68</sup> The curators who are anthropologists by training hint at some of the debates taking place in contemporary art and thus touch on the problematic status of the objects: should they be perceived as historical, anthropological or art? Can they be read as all three simultaneously? What are the implications to their status as heritage and whose heritage it is? In the context of *africa95* these questions began to be articulated by the curators, but were yet to be developed.

To the extent that the curators questioned existing anthropological approaches through materials and techniques, their curatorial practice can be seen as that of exhibition makers. To the extent that their approach was anthropological they also performed the role of the curator as keeper. Through all the above they aimed towards the possibility that the anthropological Other becomes an other with whom potential future exchanges and collaborations are possible.

#### 4. The Sainsbury African galleries

The festival *africa95* reflected the changing environment at the end of the twentieth century, which saw global and local changes in social, demographic, political and economic structures, accompanied by ideological shifts. The concept of 'nation' had to be rethought in its international/global context, internally and externally, and this was reflected in the international policies of many national public museums, as well as those aspiring to equivalent status. For example, in December 1992 the Tate Trustees announced their intention to create a separate gallery for international modern and contemporary art in London.<sup>69</sup> While the established Tate Gallery reverted to its former status as a gallery dedicated to British Art and the rethinking of the concept 'British art', the newly designed Tate Modern, which opened its doors in May 2000, was dedicated to contemporary global art, which was yet to be rethought; its inherited collection was predominantly European and North American.

In this new context, the global nature of the anthropological collection at the Museum of Mankind gained new meaning and new value. The collection returned to the main site of the British Museum, an event that required a re-contextualisation of the anthropological collections in general, including the African collection, within the wider context of the museum's collection. The curators noted that it changed the British Museum 'into something notably less Western focused and more global both in scope and vision'.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, it introduced a shift 'in the way the institution saw itself and its role': the British Museum became a global Museum.<sup>71</sup> The current museum website declares the institution to be the 'first national public museum for the world'.<sup>72</sup> It adds that the museum is 'open to visitors from across the world'.<sup>73</sup> And yet, it is mostly the

anthropological collections, divided by continents that give the museum full justification to claim itself as displaying global works and thus also catering for global interest, on the basis of the display.

Following the gift from the well-known collectors of 'primitive art' Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, the African collection was given a dedicated space in the newly opened Sainsbury African Galleries in 2001. As Appiah noted earlier, Africa as a unified geographic space belongs to the European imagination. As collectors of 'primitive' art (often identified by continent, since no other information is relevant from this perspective), Robert and Lisa Sainsbury approved the title.

However, as Ruth Phillips points out, 'whatever [Africa] is, [it] is everywhere, [...] It's far more than just a continent, it's a global diaspora, an international culture and metaphor'.<sup>74</sup> And yet, the inclusion in the exhibition of works from the African diaspora is not uncontroversial. For some, like Raphael Chikukwa 'the diaspora is the new West'.<sup>75</sup> Only the voice of those living and working in Africa should be taken as authentically African. He quotes Olu Oguibe who insists that 'Africans must narrate themselves and must not be mere stagehand in a ventriloquist show'.<sup>76</sup> Both Chikukwa and Oguibe focus on the radical Other who necessarily falls under power relations. The only solution they imply, is that only Africans living and working in Africa should narrate African culture. It is unclear whether this will be parallel to, or replace, European narratives.

This was not how the curators approached the exhibition at the British Museum. If radical Otherness is a by-product of a certain anthropology which they sought to critique, radical Otherness is not the only possible anthropological approach to other cultures. Hence the curators' inclusion of works from the diaspora, including works from the Caribbean and works by artists of African heritage living and working in Britain. In so doing they also reinterpreted and complicated both the concept of 'Africa' and that of 'British'. Africa was also within Britain and Britain within Africa.

The *africa95* festival's main aim was to raise the profile of artists with African heritage. However, as yet few of the artists exhibiting had works in major collections such as Tate or MoMA New York. The curators embraced the opportunity they saw in purchasing works for their collection and/or collaborating with artists they encountered. The anthropological department of the British Museum could justify such purchases more easily than art galleries who were still rethinking how to interpret global contemporary art in the context of art historical narratives. The curators were working towards a re-reading of anthropology so that the works in their collection could potentially be seen as both anthropological and art works.

By including works by living artists of African heritage in the displays, Spring suggests, the artists and their works could mediate 'the displays and allow [...] the curatorial voice to fade into the background'.<sup>77</sup> The curators sought to question the status of works as anthropological objects and/or art works. Since the opening of the African Galleries, the design of the galleries sought to resemble that of art galleries. The white-washed walls, the spacious display, the use of pedestals and glass cabinets, and the lighting focusing on key works, all recall White Cube approaches, emphasising the formal qualities of the works. The number of living artists whose work is shown in the gallery has progressively increased from four to twenty, so as to allow artists to re-interpret and re-contextualise the 'older works of art surrounding them'.<sup>78</sup>

The collection of African works however, continued to be organised using the category of material and techniques, as it was in the Museum of Mankind in 1995, though small changes in the items on display took place and continue to take place ever since. One of the four artists whose work was commissioned by the curators, having seen her work at the festival *africa95*, was Magdalene Odundo (1950 Kenya). Her burnished ceramic vessel was placed on a pedestal, enclosed in a glass cabinet and was the first work to be encountered on entering the galleries. When first displayed it was interpreted on the one hand as an aesthetic object with affinity to avant-garde works, and thus an art work. At the same time it was justified in the context of materials and techniques in the use of clay and placed in the context of anthropological categories of African traditional practices. By 2020, Spring reinterprets the curatorial rationale in placing Odundo's work in the exhibition to 'show that historical and contemporary works can be viewed as a continuum'.<sup>79</sup> If this narrative could be read as an art historical account, it would be framed in European context and thus, some might argue, will be placed in the context of power relations. However, Spring notes that Odundo's ceramic work is still 'not always associated with art'.<sup>80</sup> At issue is perhaps precisely its genealogical context.

Today (2022), on entering the galleries the visitor is confronted by a large wall hanging by El Anatsui (b.1944 Ghana), entitled *Man's Cloth* (1998–2002).<sup>81</sup> The work is made from recycled metal foil found on alcoholic drink bottle-neck wrappers stitched together with copper wire.<sup>82</sup> The work is clearly made of metal, historically interpreted by anthropology as masculine material. The curators interpret it by focusing on the techniques used rather than the materials. They thus present it under textiles, historically presented as a feminine activity. The curators explain that 'the narrow-strip woven silk *Kente* cloth of Ghana is a source of pride and respect for cultural memories. It is a leitmotif that runs through much of El Anatsui's work'.<sup>83</sup> The work is presented as an art work at the anthropological exhibition. However, this work did gain recognition as art, though it took several more years for El Anatsui's work to be purchased by Tate and for it to be presented at the Venice Biennale (2007) and eventually, by (2015) gaining the coveted Golden Lion award.

To the left of El Anatsui's work is the work of the Mozambique artist Kester (Cristóvão Canhavato) (1966), *The Throne of Weapons* (2002). It is a chair made from decommissioned weapons. It was purchased in order to present a different view of African arms, and it is meant to 'highlight how violence does not need to be the end of the story'.<sup>84</sup> The display of arms within the category of forged metal in the Museum of Mankind was further developed in the new location. Having met Deliss in *africa95*, Spring, claimed to follow her suggestion that 'now fieldwork happens in the museum'.<sup>85</sup> The topic of anthropological investigation moved from interpreting African cultures to European interpretations of Africa and thus to museum practices as such. Deliss' comment references the work of the artist/curator Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum* (1992).<sup>86</sup> Wilson found a pair of iron slave shackles in the museum stores and placed it in the midst of a display of highly ornate silver goblets and pitchers. The display was enclosed in a glass vitrine and titled *Mining the Museum, metalworks 1793–1880*. As its title suggests, the reference was to anthropology's focus on material and techniques and yet presented as a contemporary artwork, precisely

on the basis of its critique of both the methodology of anthropology and curatorial practices in the museum.

The exhibition previously entitled *Power of the Hand: African Arms and Armour* (1995–6) made use of previously neglected African weapons in the museum's store. It was exhibited at the British Museum following its initial exhibition at the Museum of Mankind during *africa95* festival. Spring explains that the exhibition came into being when he encountered some research papers which suggested 'the people who created these extraordinary objects conceived [...] of the weapons] in terms of male human beings, in other words highly stylized metal sculptures'.<sup>87</sup> He thus concluded that they should be presented and interpreted not as weapons but artworks.<sup>88</sup> Spring explains that in 2004 following *africa95* he found a way to communicate this narrative, by collaborating with the Algerian artist Rachid Koraichi (1947) allowing his 'small metal figures to "walk along" below the throwing knives, emphasising both their humanity and artistry'.<sup>89</sup> According to Spring, it was one of his most successful collaborations with an African artist.

## 5. Conclusion

The article sought to highlight the way in which the curators looked for ways to negotiate between their work as keepers of a national public museum, its larger narratives and overall collections, and finding a way to keep relevant to their changing publics and stakeholders. Through collaborations with artists and critiquing aspects of anthropology they also worked as exhibition makers. The two practices, as I showed throughout, depend on each other. The overall structure of their curatorial practice was thus one that did not simply support the triumphant ruler (dominant ideology) but critiqued this very narrative from different perspectives and through different approaches. In so doing, they also critiqued the problematic distinction between anthropological objects and art works. What might be the conditions that allow a work to be seen as either/ both anthropological object and/or artwork? For example, has El Anatsui's work become fully accepted as art because it was connected and could be inserted into global contemporary art while Odundo's work is more clearly connected to the history of what is perceived as African craft, that is useful objects? What is the role and status of recognition of otherness here? Is it an issue of how we interpret otherness: as another or the Other?

For the curators of the anthropological African collection at the British Museum, the aim is to use anthropology productively, and work towards the recognition of the works in the collection as artworks as well as important anthropological objects. Spring quotes Okuwui Enwezor and Chike Okeke-Agulu, arguing that the works of African artists should be acknowledged as that of 'artistic production, research, interpretation, and a repository of rich intellectual discovery'.<sup>90</sup> That is, works of art in the sense that they are produced by humans who are capable of reason and creativity, understood through various interpretations of Plato and Aristotle.

However, as I said earlier, without appropriate theorisation of both anthropology and art history as fully global, any attempt to place works in either category remains problematic and is likely to be seen as forming a power relationship. To achieve exchange and collaborations which seem to circumvent power relationships, recognition from



all sides needs to take place. While the display at the Sainsbury African Galleries at the British Museum remains problematic, I hope to have highlighted the important role it plays towards a rethinking of problematic categories. There is still much more to be done by museums, galleries and curators, towards a better, more considerate, and more equitable society which allows the Other to become another culture, another human being.

## Notes

1. Paul O'Neil is by no means alone in claiming that the late twentieth century saw a shift in the role of the curator. See also R. Greenberg, B. W. Ferguson and S. Nairne, eds, *Thinking About Exhibitions*, (London: Routledge, 1996), and in particular the section titled 'Curators or Caretakers' with five chapters, one of which by N. Heinich and M. Pollack entitled 'From Museum Curator to Exhibition Auteur: Inventing a singular Position', pp. 231–250.
2. Paul O'Neil, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012).
3. By contemporary art, I do not mean living artists, but works (often emphasizing their collaborative nature with other artists and/or curators), works which can be interpreted as critiquing their own institutions: earlier art, art history, dominant ideologies, the art world, art institutions such as museums and galleries, the art market, corporate, economic, social and political institutions.
4. The term was famously coined by Harald Szeemann as *Ausstellungsmacher*, translated as 'exhibition maker'.
5. The Greek term *technē*, covers more than today's articulation of 'art'. It could be generalized as 'a way of doing', often mentioned in the context of what today might be described as the practice of craft, valued for its practical know-how, the technical skills required in its construction. During Plato's time there was no clear distinction between the know-how of a potter and that of a writer. Plato developed the distinction in his *Republic* by distinguishing social groups and their occupations: manual work for some and mental work for others. The highest group was distinguished by their capacity for philosophy and thus 'truth'. Hence, Plato's 'philosophical life' (intellectual life) provides a good in itself and can be read as a human capacity shared with the gods, and distinguishable from animals, which Aristotle later developed. Later interpreters could be seen as working with a mind/body distinction. The former looks towards the gods, the latter is governed by animal desires rather than reason.
6. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094a
7. *Otium*, literally meant vacant time, freedom from business. That is time which is not spent on work providing necessities (such as holding public office and/or trade). It was time in which the human as rational being, could be developed and expressed through cultural productions in the form of reflection, study and creativity. For Plato, it was philosophical life. Aristotle articulates it as the fulfilment of the human; a *good* in itself.
8. *Negotium*, literally meant not at leisure, time is not vacant but 'busy'.
9. Room 25 in the British Museum is currently presented as a dedicated set of galleries with a focus on Africa. When they were first opened in 2001, they were dedicated to their donor and thus named: The Sainsbury's Africa Galleries. At the time, the rationale provided connected the Sainsbury's collection of African artefacts with the anthropological display. However, more recently they have been presented as the Africa Galleries or Africa, The Sainsbury's Galleries. Since I discuss the collection historically, I shall use the term African Galleries. See the recent museum webpage: <<https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/galleries/africa>> [accessed November 2022]
10. Most famously from Greece over its possession and name of the Elgin Marbles, which were part of the Athenian Parthenon, and from Nigeria over the Benin Bronzes.



11. The Twitter comment was made in response to the Museum's Audience Research carried out in social media during 2016-2017. It addressed both those who have visited the museum and those who never did. The above comment could have been made by someone who never visited the museum physically, or even on-line.
12. S. Frost, "'A bastion of Colonialism': Public Perceptions of the British Museum and its Relationship to Empire,' *Third Text*, 33, 4-5 (2019), 487-499.
13. While the phrase 'legally acquired' may at times be contested, it is assumed that exchange and mutual agreement between a legal owner and buyer took place. Disputes end up as legal disputes to be resolved by local courts.
14. Much of the disputes hinges over recognition. Is their value limited to their 'first' use, often undocumented, and/or a later use? What is the relationship between the two? Does the past construct the present or does the present constructs the past? Should the past be prioritized or the present? For example, Dan Hicks argues for the past to be prioritized in his *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution* (London: Pluto Press, 2020); while Nicholas Thomas argues for the present in his *Entangled Objects* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1991).
15. The claim is that they became a museum object because they were once useful to other societies (temporal and/or geographically other). Hence, they are also likely to hold a contested heritage value and status.
16. Following Fabian, Lacan, Levinas, and others, I distinguish between interpretation of the 'other' as another human being (a being like me) and a radical 'Other' who is beyond recognition. The former invites collaborations and exchange. Relationships with the radical Other are limited to power relations.
17. C. Geertz, *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2000), p. 95.
18. Geertz, p. 95.
19. W. Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), pp. 253-264.
20. Benjamin, p. 256.
21. Benjamin, p. 262.
22. The narrative becomes history, by placing the events under a 'universal time'.
23. Benjamin, p. 257.
24. For example, Marxism suggests owners are always rulers; while the working people are always the defeated, until communism is established.
25. Kojève's lectures were translated and published in an edited volume. See A. Bloom, ed., *Introduction to Reading of Hegel* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1969).
26. Hegel's account and Kojève's interpretation are at the level of the need/desire for recognition as human.
27. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807). See *Phenomenology of Spirit*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977), sections 178-230.
28. J. Abt, 'The Origin of the Public Museum,' *A Companion to Museum Studies*, ed. by S. Macdonald (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), p. 126.
29. For a discussion explaining why a public art collection was not supported by the English parliament until 1824, see C. Duncan 'From the Princely Gallery to the Public-Art Museum: The Louvre Museum and the National Gallery, London,' in *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*, ed. by D. Preziosi and C. Farago (Farnham: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 250-277.
30. Abt, p. 116.
31. For detailed information on Sloane's involvement with Jamaica and sugar plantations, see <<https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-story>> [accessed November 2022].
32. See <<https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-story>> [accessed November 2022].

33. Report in the *Illustrated London News* 17th May 1851, reprinted in J. M. Golby, *Culture and Society in Britain 1850–1890* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986).
34. See A. Coombs, 'Museums and the Formation of National and Cultural Identities,' *Oxford Art Journal*, 11, 2 (1988), 57–68.
35. A. Coombs, *Reinventing Africa: Museums, Material Culture and Popular Imagination in Late Victorian and Edwardian England* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 111.
36. J. Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), p. 144.
37. Fabian, p. 144.
38. W. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2011), p. 151.
39. Mignolo, 151–2.
40. John Mack interviewed by S. Kingston, 'Anthropology and the British Museum: A Conversation with John Mack', *Anthropology Today*, 19, 6 (2003), 13.
41. Mack, p. 13.
42. Ibid.
43. Fabian, p. xxxix.
44. Ibid.
45. A. Shelton, 'Museums and Anthropologies: Practices and Narratives,' in *A Companion to Museum Studies*, ed. by S. Macdonald (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), pp. 73–74.
46. Mack, p. 14.
47. See <<https://archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk/search/archives/39aad604-c16d-3a7e-ab01-687e3722b76f>> [accessed November 2022].
48. See for example Alfred Munnings's (RA president) speech in 1949 rejecting Picasso, Matisse and other as artists <<https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/page/a-brief-history-of-the-ra>> [accessed December 2022].
49. J. Picton, Special Issue: africa95, *African Arts*, 29, 3 (Summer, 1996), 22–23.
50. N. van Leyden, 'Africa95. A Critical Assessment of the Exhibition at the Royal Academy', *Cahiers d'études africaines*, 36, 141–142, (1996), 237–241.
51. Leyden, p. 237.
52. T. Philips, ed, *Africa: The Art of a Continent* (Munich: Prestel, 1995), p. 20.
53. For discussions of 'affinity' and MoMA's 1984 exhibition, see the art historian Hal Foster's 'The "Primitive" Unconscious of Modern Art,' in *Art in Modern Culture: An Anthology of Critical Texts*, ed. by F. Francina and J. Harris (Phaidon Press, 1992), pp. 199–209. See also J. Clifford, 'Histories of the Tribal and Modern,' in *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*, ed. by D. Preziosi and C. Farago (Farnham: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 636–652.
54. K. A. Appiah, 'Why Africa? Why Art?,' in *Africa: The Art of a Continent*, T. Philips (Munich: Prestel, 1995), p. 23.
55. Appiah, p. 25.
56. Ibid.
57. S. Olabisi, 'africa95: Cultural Celebration or Colonialism?,' *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, 4, 1 (1996), 32.
58. *Seven stories about Modern Art in Africa*, exhibition catalogue (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1995), p. 13. See also Deliss's other publications where she explains her approach. For example, C. Deliss, *The Metabolic Museum* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz 2020), p. 24.
59. Frieze, Occupied Territory, Issue 26, Sep. 1996. <<https://www.frieze.com/article/occupied-territories>> [accessed November 2022].
60. K. Geers and D. H. Ross, 'africa95: Many Stories about the Art of a Continent,' *African Arts*, 29, 3 (1996), 1.
61. C. Spring, J. Hudson, J. Mack, & N. Barley, 'africa95 at the Museum of Mankind,' *African Arts*, 29, 3 (1996) 48–61.
62. C. Spring, N. Barley, & J. Hudson, 'The Sainsbury African Galleries at the British Museum,' *African Arts*, 34, 3 (2001), 18.
63. Spring, Hudson, Mack, Barley, 1996, p. 49.

64. The authors explain that in the 1890s some of these works were used 'to suggest the primitive savagery from which the Dark Continent was being delivered'. Since then, the works were neglected and largely ignored. Spring, Barley, Hudson, 2001, p. 56.
65. Spring, Barley, Hudson, 2001, p. 56.
66. Evidence of trade and historical exchanges with Europe became controversial by the twentieth century since early discussion of the Benin Bronzes refused to accept these works as produced in Africa. However, the curators imply, it is perfectly possible that while Africa could produce sophisticated bronze castings, they were not 'cut off' from the world around them.
67. Spring, Barley, Hudson, 2001, p. 24.
68. Ibid.
69. <<https://www.tate.org.uk/about-us/history-tate/history-tate-modern>> [accessed November 2022].
70. Spring, Barley, Hudson, 2001, p. 18.
71. Ibid.
72. <<https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-story>> [accessed December 2022].
73. Ibid.
74. R. Phillips, 'Where is "Africa"? Re-Viewing Art and Artifact in the Age of Globalization,' in *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*, ed. by D. Preziosi and C. Farago (Farnham: Ashgate, 2004), p. 758.
75. R. Chikukwa, 'Curating Contemporary African Art: Questions of Mega-Exhibitions and Western influences,' *African Identities*, 9, 2 (2011), 226.
76. Chikukwa, 229.
77. C. Spring, 'Africa, Art, and Knowing Nothing: Some Thoughts on Curating at the British Museum,' in *A Companion to Curation*, ed. by B. Buckley and J. Conomos (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2020), p. 144.
78. Spring, p. 144.
79. Spring, p. 154, quoting Odundo in 1995.
80. Spring, p. 154.
81. El Antsui's work *Man's Cloth* together with *Woman's Cloth* were exhibited at the October Gallery which took part in *africa95*, where the curators could recommend its purchase with help from the Art Fund.
82. The museum information includes a video of the entrance gallery I am discussing below. See: <[https://artsandculture.google.com/streetview/british-museum/AwEp68JO4NECkQ?sv\\_h=237.58168117795367&sv\\_p=-24.56571414100661&sv\\_pid=LN\\_BqwutBWwDTi-6\\_WcvzA&sv\\_lid=3582009757710443819&sv\\_lng=-0.12726479935406587&sv\\_lat=51.51966900302453&sv\\_z=0.6158686808497831](https://artsandculture.google.com/streetview/british-museum/AwEp68JO4NECkQ?sv_h=237.58168117795367&sv_p=-24.56571414100661&sv_pid=LN_BqwutBWwDTi-6_WcvzA&sv_lid=3582009757710443819&sv_lng=-0.12726479935406587&sv_lat=51.51966900302453&sv_z=0.6158686808497831)> [accessed November 2022]
83. Information Display (viewed in 2019).
84. Spring, p. 153.
85. Ibid., p. 146.
86. Spring, p. 150. Fred Wilson's exhibition is interpreted also as an act of contemporary art. The curatorial act is both that of exhibition maker and that of contemporary art as a critique of the institution in which it was performed.
87. Spring, p. 150.
88. Ibid.
89. Ibid.
90. Ibid., p. 149.

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