

FROM RITUAL TO CENTER PIECE

it is described in a tradi-
 Berlin»,
 tionally western visual analysis of
 (African) art focused on shapes, col-
 ours, aesthetics and symbols, care-
 fully selected to avoid the many social
 and political issues the project deals
 with as mentioned in the opening
 speech by professor Yerima. The muse-
 um incorporates the mask into their col-
 lections and appropriates and recontex-
 tualises the *Ijele*. The discourse around
 the project becomes part of the collections,
 determining for a large part how a visitor
 can view and interpret the object.

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colonial masters.» This speech is a powerful and explicit *counternarrative* to African colonial history as written from the perspective of the coloniser. Significant here is what happens when the museum incorporates the mask into its collections and puts it on display.

The aesthetic and sensory qualities of the colourful, large-size mask are impressive.

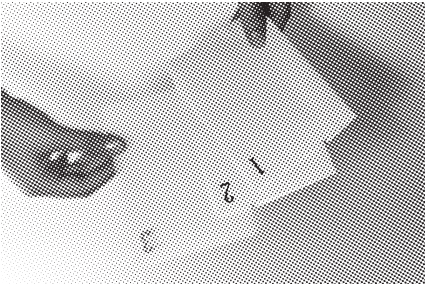
However, viewing is also a negotiation with the self and with history, and the *Ijele* speaks to me because of the isolation from its ritual context and what the object appears to represent now. The museum display provides for a new context and meaning

for the *Ijele*: with the caption *Ijele. An Insight into Igbo Culture in Berlin*, the object is transformed from an active connector between cultures into cultural heritage on display in a European ethnographic museum.

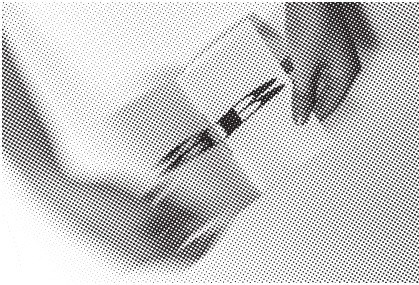
What does it mean that the museum is now telling its story? Since the object and stories around it are part of «Africa in

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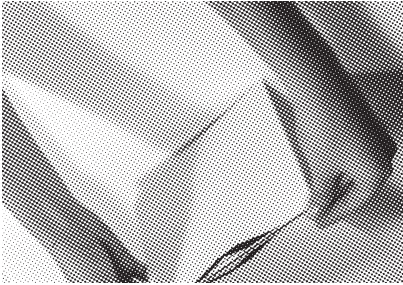
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reciprocal turn



issue #2

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On my first encounter with the *Ijele* mask I feel puzzled. I recognise the

object as part of a ritual, only here in the Ethnological Museum Berlin, it is isolated from all the other elements: a masquerade in the open air, with (Igbo) people from Nigeria, music, a special occasion, and dance. The physical distance to the object – fenced off for security reasons – is in sharp contrast with my immediate association with ritual and community.

Six years ago, artist Chief Anayo Nwobodo made the *Ijele* mask in Nigeria for a collaborative project with Ikuku Berlin, an association whose aim is to promote Nigerian culture and cultural cooperation between Nigerians and Germans. When the mask was made and the masquerade was held, the museum was not yet involved. A year later, the mask became the center piece of the permanent «Africa in Berlin» display.

In an idealistic opening speech, Ahmet Yerima, Professor in Theatre and Culture Studies at the Redeemer's University in Nigeria, explains the essence of the project as overcoming cultural boundaries and reconsidering (postcolonial) identities.¹ He also emphasises that the project is significantly situated in Germany: «the country where the scramble for Africa took place ... where Africa was carved up into small states by the

¹ Ahmed Yerima: «Finding New Dance Steps for the Ijele as Symbol of the Ikuku Dream: An Intercultural Approach.» YAAM. Berlin, 2 May 2008.