

Colonial Complicity, Exceptionalism, and Decoloniality: An Examination of  
Scandinavian National Museums' Displays

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## **Abstract**

Scandinavian countries have long been perceived as havens of untouched nature, simplicity, Protestant values, social egalitarianism, and a deep-rooted democratic culture (Aronsson, 2012, p. 172). This has historically led to exceptionalist identities that view their colonial actions as relatively small and insignificant (Fur & Ipsen, 2009). However, this perspective has recently been challenged to some extent by the growing influence of the decolonial turn, resulting in a wide range of research in this area (Naum & Nordin, 2013).

This thesis focuses on the colonial connections of Scandinavian countries (Denmark, Sweden, and Norway), exploring how this colonial complicity is portrayed in museum representations, specifically in displays. The study scrutinises national museums, assessing their influence on shaping exceptionalist identities and their engagement with decolonial discourses, evaluating how these institutions have initiated and incorporated decoloniality into their representations. To achieve this, the research encompasses three case studies: the National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen, the Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg, and the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo. The research takes into consideration the size of the museums and respectively scrutinises one exhibition from each to determine the nature of knowledge constructed through displays. Interviews with museum curators complement this analysis.

Building on literature that demonstrates the Scandinavian countries' colonial relations, the thesis argues that museum displays sometimes challenge exceptionalist narratives but often fall short of being genuinely decolonial. At other times, displays demonstrate a decolonial approach yet simultaneously contribute to the reinforcement of exceptionalist ideas. In this regard, Norway's case study aligns with the first approach, while Denmark's resembles the second. On the other hand, Sweden's case study stands out from Denmark and Norway by achieving a comparatively more impactful representation in both exceptionalism and decolonial approaches. This comparison shows how Scandinavian countries, which are not usually seen as colonial powers, deal with these legacies while maintaining exceptionalist narratives about their colonial involvement.

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*EX PRÆTE/RITO // PRÆSENS PRVDEN/TER AGIT // NI FVTVRA / ACTIONĒ DE/TVRPET*

*'From the experience of the past, the present acts prudently, lest it spoil future actions.'*

**Inscription from Titian's *The Allegory of Prudence*, 1550-65, oil on canvas,  
the National Gallery, London**

# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

## 1.1. Chapter Introduction

This research is about colonial histories and their representations in a selection of key Scandinavian (Denmark, Sweden, and Norway) museums while also exploring the potential impacts of decolonisation efforts. In recent years, there has been a significant push for change in museum exhibitions, driven by the increasing intensity of the demand for a decolonial turn by activists outside of and within the museum sector. While scholars have been discussing ongoing colonial issues since the 1980s in the context of postcolonial studies, and since the 1990s with the Latin America-centric decolonial turn, recent social movements such as Rhodes Must Fall in 2015 and Black Lives Matter in 2020 have played a crucial role in amplifying these calls by bringing these issues both to a more global consciousness and to the forefront of Western thought. These movements have not only led to a critical re-examination of mighty Western former colonial powers such as Great Britain, France, and the Netherlands but have also encouraged other important countries/regions which may not have previously recognised that they have a colonial past to consider and confront their history and ongoing legacy. This research is one such endeavour. It seeks to unravel the colonial history of Scandinavia in terms of the role of museums in conveying this history and scrutinise their narrative through the decoloniality lens. Within this framework, the primary focus of the research is to address the following question:

- Do the key Scandinavian national museums – National Museum of Denmark, Gothenburg Museum of World Culture, and Oslo Museum of Cultural History – acknowledge their different and shared colonial histories and to what extent do decolonising practices affect their permanent displays?

The thesis has three primary aims as it seeks to address this question.

Aim 1: Understand the position of three Scandinavian countries' (Denmark, Sweden, and Norway) colonial histories in the Western colonial context:

Objective 1: Define the key characteristics and historical processes of Western colonialism;

Objective 2: Summarise the colonial history of each country, respectively;

Objective 3: Establish similarities and differences between their histories.

Aim 2: Examine the current approaches to representing Scandinavian colonial histories in the case study museums' permanent displays, and how that relates to other forms of museum representation:

Objective 1: Explore the history of national museum development of Scandinavian countries and how that relates to broader developments of Northern/Western European national museums;

Objective 2: Position the case study museums within this development by considering a detailed account of their histories, collections, funding, visitor numbers, display and collections layout, programme, digital presence, work with communities, etcetera;

Objective 3: Critically investigate the permanent exhibition displays to identify epistemic colonial mindset, if there are any;

Objective 4: Identify the emphasises and silences in the representation of colonial histories, and if these are associated with the international perception of Scandinavia;

Objective 5: Critically review the concept of 'Nordic exceptionalism' and assess whether it is evident or challenged in case-study museums.

Aim 3: Investigate to what extent decolonisation movements have had an impact on the case study museums' permanent displays:

Objective 1: Define what decolonisation means by considering both postcolonial and decolonial thinkers.

Objective 2: Identify what decolonisation means for museums (Western European context), indicate key themes, and investigate the challenges in its application in the museum sector.

Objective 3: Identify the political and social influences that affected decolonisation policies in case study museums' political and social influences. If there is not, why?

Objective 4: Critically discuss the different and shared responses to decolonisation in the case study museums' permanent displays.

## **1.2. Research Significance and Justification**

As mentioned, this research focuses on the Scandinavian countries. It is important to clarify what I mean by Scandinavia in order to define the scope. The word *Scandinavia* first appears in the *Naturalis Historia*, written by Pliny the Elder (ad. 79), and he used the term to describe the large area in the Baltic region (Helle, 2017). This plateau is located in Northern Europe and originally only covers Norway and Sweden. However, because of the intricate history of both countries with Denmark, the term is used to define these three countries today. Often, *Scandinavia* is inaccurately used synonymously with *Norden* or the *Nordic* region (Eidsvik, 2016, p. 14), a group of countries that share similarities such as national identity, political models, and welfare systems, distinguishing them from continental Europe but linking them closely together. In present-day usage, the Nordic countries comprise Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Iceland, and autonomous regions such as the Faroe Islands, Greenland, and Åland Islands (Loftsdóttir and Jensen, 2016, p. 3). It is worth noting, though, that Finland is sometimes included in the Scandinavian classification due to its geography and almost 700 years of Swedish rule. On the other hand, some argue that Finland should be considered separately due to its unique linguistic and ethnic attributes (Helle, 2017). Considering the purposes of this research and in order to narrow its scope, I exempt

Finland from Scandinavia. As such, this research will focus on three historically prominent countries - Denmark, Sweden, and Norway.

The Scandinavian countries offer an interesting case study in colonial history. Similar to other European countries, the colonial movements of Scandinavian countries were motivated by economic gain (Naum and Nordin, 2013b). During the 17th and 18th centuries, both Sweden and the Kingdom of Denmark-Norway tried to colonise territories in the West Indies, Africa, Asia and the North Atlantic. In this regard, Denmark was the seventh-largest slave trader, with 111,000 enslaved people on 450 ships between the 1660s and the abolition in the early 1800s (Blaagard, 2010, Gøbel, 2016, p. 10), and Norway led in the number of missionaries sent relative to its population (Engh, 2009, p. 65). However, despite playing significant roles in colonisation, Scandinavian countries in the shadow of more powerful empires and did not develop a sense of being colonisers both globally and within their own countries' populations. This could be attributed to two factors. The first is the consideration that Scandinavian colonisation was 'small and insignificant' compared to other European empires (Ipsen and Fur, 2009). The second is rooted in a phenomenon known as Nordic exceptionalism. This term defines the Nordic countries' peripheral position in European colonial history, as well as how both themselves and others perceived these regions as different from the rest of Europe (Jensen, 2010; Loftsdóttir and Jensen, 2016). This exceptionalism is further underscored by their strong institutions, reliable welfare benefits, low corruption, and effective democracy. For example, these countries consistently rank among the top 10 in the world for happiness (Martela *et al.*, 2020). In population-level surveys, Nordic citizens also report that they experience a high level of autonomy, freedom, and social trust, which significantly contributes to their overall life satisfaction (Martela *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, such an exceptionalist idea makes it relatively unusual for 'Scandinavia' and 'colonialism' to be used in the same context, in so far as it contradicts the ideal imagery of the Nordic lands that is characterised by an 'unspoiled nature, simplicity, social egalitarianism, Protestant ethics, and a democratic culture with ancient roots' (Aronsson, 2012, p. 172). However, this does not change the facts about the participation of these countries mentioned above. On the contrary, Nordic exceptionalism negatively impacts awareness of such historical facts. As such, this study is specifically centred on museums from

*Scandinavia* due to the disparity between the modern perception of these countries and their historical actuality.

The focus of this research is on museums because they serve as knowledge-constructing institutions rather than mere reflections of reality. As noted by anthropologist and museologist Sharon Macdonald, (1996, p. 14):

Any museum or exhibition is, in effect, a statement of position. It is a theory: a suggested way of seeing the world. And, like any theory, it may offer insight and illumination. At the same time, it contains certain assumptions, speaks to some matters and ignores others, and is intimately bound up with - and capable of affecting - broader social and cultural relations. For this reason, museums and exhibitions, like social and cultural theorizing, deserve careful and critical scrutiny.

The components of the exhibition - such as the selection and placement of objects, accompanying text and labels, spatial arrangements, pamphlets, catalogues, brochures, and others - can consciously or unconsciously reinforce or challenge exceptionalist ideas within the narratives they convey. Although this narrative may not be fully comprehended or misunderstood by the visitor, as museum scholar Christopher Whitehead suggests (2016a, p. 3):

if we assume ... that museum representations have some kind of effect on the hearts and minds of visitors who tend to trust in their singular truth and authority, then the ability to decode, deconstruct and denaturalize museum communication becomes paramount. This analytical imperative suggests that museums' truth claims function at worst as mendacious covers for some kind of social control, or as blithe knowledge propositions that model and reinforce existing orders, possibly against the interests of the many, or those of already subjugated groups.

In this regard, although the collections and interpretations of the museums in these countries have been analysed in various individual case study research in the context of colonialism (Muñoz, 2011; Arneborg *et al.*, 2018; Lien and Nielssen, 2019; Parby, 2020; Harding, 2021; Rasmussen and Viestad, 2021), there has not been a comprehensive overview which takes a comparative approach across national borders. This research aims to fill this gap.

### **1.2.1. Bringing a decolonial perspective to museums**

The value of this thesis lies in its approach to studying these countries from a decolonial perspective. It does so by placing decoloniality at the centre of its theoretical and analytical framework, a concept developed by Latin American thinkers, while also considering postcolonial studies. This concept builds on coloniality, which Anibal Quijano (2007) defines as the persistent power dynamics that resulted from colonialism and shaped social, political, and economic systems long after official colonial governments ceased. Coloniality emphasises the close ties between colonialism and modernity. It sustains hierarchies of race, knowledge, and labour on a global scale. While coloniality focuses on the systems and structures that continue to shape global relations and knowledge production systems borne out of colonialism, decoloniality highlights the importance of examining and dismantling them. According to the Argentinian philosopher and semiotician Walter D. Mignolo, this can only be achieved through 'delinking from epistemic and aesthetic hegemony' (2021: 43). Mignolo, however, goes one step further and advocates not so much for the aesthetic but rather *aestheSis*; that is, an ontological reconfiguration of senses and perception that is shaped by coloniality (Mignolo and Vázquez, 2013, p. 4).

[D]ecolonizing knowledge and being (entity) to liberate knowing and becoming what coloniality of knowledge and being prevents to know and become, is at this point the fundamental task of decoloniality ... You cannot decolonize knowledge if you do not question the very foundation of Western epistemology. And you cannot decolonize being if you do not question the very foundation of Western ontology (Mignolo, 2018, p. 136).

From this viewpoint, museums stand as one of the key institutions to be examined for both epistemological and ontological aspects. Identifying the epistemological dimension of museums is relatively straightforward, as mentioned above, they are places where knowledge is constructed. However, considering museums from an ontological perspective involves contemplating the elements that define them as such or the systems that allow them to create knowledge, such as serving as spaces for preserving, displaying, and interpreting cultural, historical, and artistic artefacts. It also includes understanding the role of museum staff, regardless of their position, in shaping and supporting the museum's mission, as well as their practical contributions. As a result, this research investigates selected Scandinavian museums, taking into account the exceptionalist ideas prevalent in these countries, which could present a challenge to the full implementation of decolonial approaches.

Yet, while Mignolo's vision offers a compelling theoretical framework, its implementation within institutional settings remains fraught with tension and complexity. As will be discussed later, museums are far from neutral spaces; rather, they are deeply embedded within legal, political, and societal frameworks that significantly constrain the potential for radical transformation. In this context, it is difficult to say that Scandinavian countries have different approaches from other countries. In Denmark, for instance, the National Museum and related institutions remain bound by national heritage laws that define cultural artefacts as state property, making repatriation or reinterpretation legally complex and politically sensitive (Consolidated Act on Museums, 2006). Even when institutions express a willingness to engage in decolonial practice, such efforts are often confined within the safe parameters of existing institutional norms, thereby avoiding any substantive structural shift.

Accordingly, this research recognises that the limitations to enacting Mignolo's decolonial vision are not solely attributable to a lack of theoretical insight or epistemic resistance. Rather, they are symptomatic of broader institutional, legal, and cultural mechanisms that safeguard the status quo. Such legal frameworks tend to preserve museum collections as inflexible components of national heritage; political systems often favour incremental change over radical critique; and societies shaped by narratives of Nordic exceptionalism frequently exhibit limited appetite for confronting historical

entanglements with colonialism. Within such conditions, decoloniality must be understood not as a fully realisable institutional model, but as an aspirational and critical horizon — one that exposes the boundaries of current museum practice while offering a conceptual toolkit for challenging entrenched power structures. In this respect, the present research does not treat decoloniality as a fixed or prescriptive method, but as a strategic lens through which to interrogate the specific historical, cultural, and institutional configurations of Scandinavian museology.

### **1.3. Case Study Museums**

Three museums, each representing their respective countries, have been chosen to answer the research question effectively. These museums exhibit national characteristics in terms of coverage, representation, or statutorily for Denmark and Sweden, and they are widespread in accessibility and influence, providing valuable insight into Scandinavia's exceptionalist thinking. Additionally, their possession of ethnographic collections allows for the exploration of decolonial approaches. This careful selection process is essential in determining the suitable samples for the research, considering the large number of museums in these countries. As such, the National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen, the Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg, and the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo have been chosen for the purpose of this research. In the following sections, a brief introduction to each case study institution will be provided. This will help to establish the background and direction for the rest of the thesis.

#### **1.3.1. National Museum of Denmark**

The National Museum of Denmark (NMD) traces its origins to 1807. During this year, Rasmus Nyerup, a member of the museum's founding committee, stressed the need for a national museum in Denmark (Aronsson, 2012) – such that he is considered as one of the museum's 'founding fathers' (NMD, no date). Following his efforts, the Danish King Christian VII established The Royal Commission for Ancient Collections Preservation (*Den kongelige Kommission til Oldsagers Opbevaring*) to oversee the kingdom's cultural heritage. There were six members on the committee. Their joint efforts led to the opening

of the Museum of Nordic Antiquities in 1819. Initially, Christiansborg Castle was used as the venue. Following the 1849 Danish constitution, which distinguished between royal and public collections, the public artefacts were permanently housed in the Palace of the Prince (*Prindsens Palais*), which was built between 1743 and 1744 for the use of the royal family (Zipsane, 2011: 216).

The museum was renamed the National Museum of Denmark (Nationalmuseet) in 1892 as it absorbed additional collections, including archaeological, ethnographic, ethnology, natural science, history, numismatic, and metalware belonging to nobles and citizens (Zipsane, 2011). There are two factors that contributed to the name change. In the 19th century, Denmark lost two important regions (Norway and Schleswig-Holstein), and consequently, the idea of 'Danishness' within the country strengthened. In light of these incidents, museums and historiography have become a tool to bolster this idea of 'Danishness' (Zipsane, 2011, p. 215). Thomsen's systematic approach to archaeology, particularly his creation of the archaeological three-period system, became influential in both Nordic and international archaeology and significantly contributed to the rise of Danish nationalism by providing a narrative of Denmark's ancient roots (Zipsane, 2011). Aronsson notes that museums have been effective in creating a sense of nationalism among citizens and in concealing the fact that the Danish state was formed relatively late in history (2012: 172). This has been observed in early examples of museum institutions in Denmark, including the NMD. The museum currently operates at the Palace of the Prince, which is situated a short distance from Christiansborg Palace, where the Danish Parliament is situated.



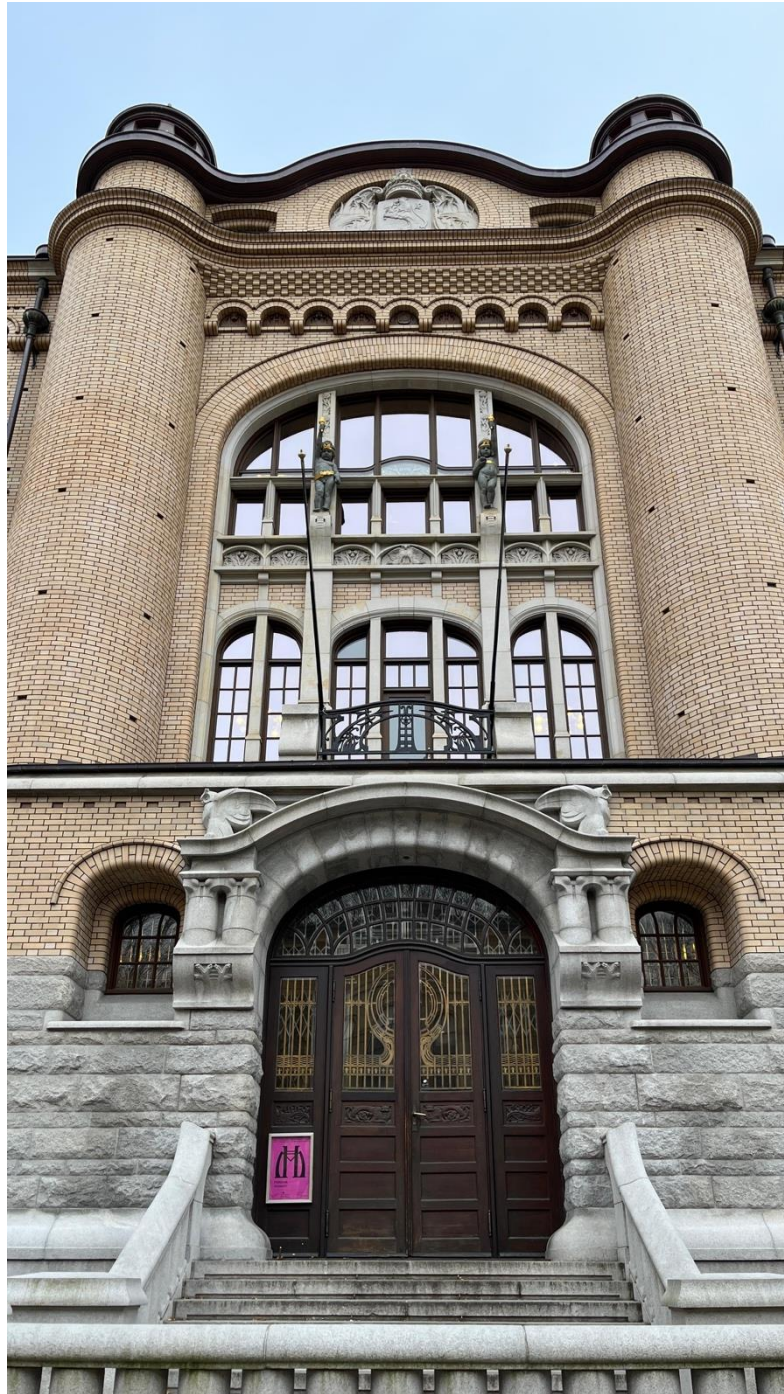
*Figure 1: National Museum of Denmark, Source: Author*

### **1.3.2. Museum of Cultural History**

Following its constitutional independence in 1814, Norway initiated several efforts to foster a sense of national identity within its cultural framework (Amundsen, 2011; Aronsson and Elgenius, 2011a; Ebert, 2018). This was especially realised through the use of the collections that the University of Oslo, which opened in 1811, owned or built up in time. One notable effort in preserving Norwegian history was spearheaded by the Royal Society for the Benefit of Norway (Det Kongelige Selskab for Norges Vel) and the Commission of Antiquities (Antikvitetscommissionen), the former which was founded in

1809 and the latter alongside the University of Oslo in 1811. These institutions initiated a collaborative project for the collection of historical artefacts with the aim of conducting a comprehensive study of Norwegian history. In 1823, the items gathered in this undertaking were handed over to the university's collection, laying the foundation for what would become known as the University's Collection of National Antiquities (Universitetets Oldsaksamling) (Amundsen, 2011: 658).

During his tenure as the inaugural manager, Rudolf Keyser espoused a philosophy that opposed Scandinavianism, instead placing greater emphasis on Norwegianness rooted in the rich history of Norse sagas and Viking lore. To this end, he focused on augmenting the museum's collection and also worked towards forging an effective interaction with the public through the organisation of various temporary exhibitions (Ebert, 2018). At this time, the collection was already home to the University's Coin and Medal Collection (Universitetets Myntkabinett), which opened in 1817. It was further expanded in 1854 with the opening of the ethnographic collection (Universitetets Ethnografiske Samling), and in the late 1800s with the opening of the Runic Archive. The ever-expanding collection created the need for new space, and on the eve of Norway's complete independence, the parliament allocated funding to move these collections to a new building. The construction of this building, adhering to the 'Norwegian style' that incorporated Art Nouveau and Viking influences, was completed in 1902 and opened to the public as the Historical Museum in 1904 (Bergstøl, Perminow and Eek, 2004, cited in Amundsen, 2011). Until 1999, these four collections were considered separately within the building. However, in 2004, they were officially recognised as a unified establishment, known as the Museum of Cultural History. Presently, this museum boasts the most extensive archaeological and ethnographic collection in Norway (Museum of Cultural History, no date).



*Figure 2: Museum of Cultural History, Source: Author*

### **1.3.3. Museum of World Culture**

Unlike the other two museums, the National Museum of World Culture (NMWC) followed a distinct development trajectory. The Swedish government first conceptualised the National Museum of World Culture (NMWC) in 1996, implemented it in 1999, and opened

its doors to visitors in 2004. As its name implies, this organisation aims to exhibit collections from outside Europe in Sweden.

A series of historical events led to the creation of the MWC. Its predecessor, the Ethnographic Museum of Gothenburg (*Ethnografiska Museet i Göteborg*), which opened in 1891, was by 1995 in danger of closure due to financial difficulties. Most of the proposals for a solution involved closing the museum and transferring the collections to the Gothenburg Natural History Museum. This was because the focus at the time was on art museums. According to Bo Jonsson, the museum director of the provincial museums, in the Swedish authorities, art museums were viewed as more effective at raising awareness of social issues than other institutions (Sahlberg, 1995, cited in Muñoz, 2011: 30). The Swedish Government realised that their immigration and multiculturalism policies were not effective. They were influenced by the *Our Creative Diversity* report from the World Commission for Culture and Development, which was created by UNESCO and the United Nations. This prompted them to make changes to address the situation (Harding, 2021). The insufficiency of Swedish heritage policies in addressing some of the issues, such as antisemitism and xenophobia, coupled with the importance that anthropologists place on ethnographic museums in understanding foreign cultures, prompted the government to create the National Museum for World Culture in 1996 (*Statens museer för världskultur*, MWC) (Muñoz, 2011; Harding, 2021). According to this, 'museums with wholly or partially ethnographical direction must, now even more than ever, have an important mission in promoting contacts between Swedish and non-Swedish cultures' (Sveriges Regering, 1996, p. 142, cited in Muñoz, 2011: 31). Consequently, at the workshop *Past and Present in Andean History*, held at the Ethnografiska Museum in Gothenburg in 1996, museum director Sven-Erik Isacson stated that the museum had been saved from closure by government assistance and had been granted national status (Muñoz, 2011).

Four museums were announced as part of this administration: three in Stockholm, *the Museum of Ethnography (Etnografiska Museet)*, *the Museum of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Antiquities (Medelhavs Museet)*, *the Far East Antiquities Museum (Östasiatiska Museet)*, and one in Gothenburg, *the Museum of World Culture (Världskulturmuseet)*. Although a new museum was planned for Gothenburg out of all of these four, the transfer

of the three museums never took place as a result of protests at the Museum of Ethnography and the Museum of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Antiquities. The arguments were primarily about the budget, the fragility of collections, and potential problems associated with the transfer of the objects as well as the economic strength of Stockholm as a cultural capital (Lagerkvist, 2008; Pagani, 2013c; Harding, 2021).

On 1 January 1999, the administration of NMWC took over these three museums' control and began construction on a new museum in Gothenburg. The construction of the building for the museum started at its current location in Korsvägen, but due to budgetary constraints, a smaller building than planned was built. Consequently, the MWC now operates in two different locations. The first serves as a storage area, archive, and conservation workshop, and the second serves as an exhibition area (Muñoz, 2011).



Figure 3: Museum of World Culture, Source: Author

#### **1.4. Thesis Synopsis**

This thesis comprises nine comprehensive chapters, each building upon the other to explore the intricate relationship between Scandinavian museums, colonial history, and decolonial practices. Chapter 1 set the stage by outlining the research aims and objectives, emphasising the significance of studying museums within the context of decoloniality. This chapter introduced the case study museums, providing a brief rationale for their selection and framing their role within the broader research question.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 provide the foundational context necessary for understanding the subsequent analysis. By dividing the literature into two separate chapters, the thesis aims for a coherent narrative flow, ensuring that the connections between colonial history, decolonial theory, and museum practices are clearly articulated. As such, Chapter 2 inspects the key theoretical concepts underpinning this research, including definitions of colonialism and decolonisation. This chapter also explores the critical role of museums as institutions of knowledge production, examining how they have historically contributed to colonial narratives and how they might act within a decolonial context.

Chapter 3 offers a detailed overview of the colonial history of the Scandinavian countries, analysing both the unique and shared aspects of these nations' pasts. This chapter interrogates whether these countries can be considered empires in the traditional sense and how their colonial legacies have shaped national identities. It also examines the economic constraints of the case study museums and the concept of exceptionalism in the Scandinavian context, questioning how colonial histories are perceived and integrated — or marginalised — within contemporary national narratives.

Chapter 4 outlines the methodological framework that guides this research. It provides a detailed justification for the selected research methods, including display analysis and interviews, and explains how these methods are applied to the study of museums. This chapter also addresses potential limitations of the research, including the challenges inherent in analysing museum displays and conducting interviews, as well as reflecting on the researcher's positionality and its influence on the research process.

Chapters 5 through 8 constitute the analytical core of the thesis, presenting detailed case studies of museums in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. Each chapter focuses on a specific country, beginning with Denmark in Chapter 5, followed by Norway in Chapter 6, and Sweden in Chapter 7. These chapters critically examine the narratives presented in museum exhibitions, with a focus on how colonial histories are portrayed and the extent to which decolonial practices have been integrated into their narratives. The analysis also considers how these museum narratives engage with, or challenge, exceptionalist ideals within each national context. In this context, a case study from Denmark has made various efforts to integrate the decolonial narrative, yet the influence of the exceptionalist narrative remains evident. Norway's case study presents a compelling blend of both exceptionalist and epistemic decoloniality. However, certain approaches conflict with decoloniality in terms of aesthetics. In contrast to the other two countries, Sweden's case study has effectively crafted a narrative that implements decolonial thinking while challenging exceptionalist thinking.

Chapter 8 takes a comparative approach, synthesising the findings from the case study chapters. It situates the museums' practices within broader decolonial and exceptionalist frameworks, analysing both the epistemic and aesthetic dimensions of decoloniality. This chapter highlights the significance of aesthetic choices in museum displays and their impact on visitors' perceptions and understanding of colonial history. Additionally, it considers the internal and external factors — such as funding, and repatriation requests — that shape the museums' approaches to decoloniality.

Finally, Chapter 9 draws together the analyses and discussions from the preceding chapters to present the thesis's conclusions. It synthesises the key findings, reflecting on the research's implications for museum practices and decolonial theory. This chapter also acknowledges the research's limitations and proposes directions for future studies, suggesting how this work might contribute to ongoing debates in the fields of museum studies, postcolonial theory, and Scandinavian history. Ultimately, the thesis emphasises that although the case study museums have started to address their colonial legacies, their initiatives are still hindered by structural inequalities and, in certain instances, exceptionalist narratives. To overcome these challenges, a fundamental transformation in how these institutions engage with marginalised voices is

essential, along with the dismantling of epistemological hierarchies and a critical examination of their own role in perpetuating colonial frameworks.

## **CHAPTER 2: COLONIALISM, DECOLONIALITY, and MUSEUMS: A CONTEXTUAL FRAMEWORK**

### **2.1. Chapter Introduction**

As part of this study's objective to determine the role of museums in Scandinavia within the framework of decolonisation, this chapter will present key concepts and relevant literature. As previously indicated, the literature will be explored in two separate chapters. The current chapter aims to establish the fundamental concepts and determine the settings in which museums operate. The analysis is structured into three main sections.

The first section will explore the concept of colonialism, presenting various perspectives that have emerged in the literature. Understanding the intricate and multifaceted nature of the concept and distinguishing it from imperialism or early forms of domination is crucial in clarifying its intended meaning.

The second section will scrutinise the central concept of this research: decolonisation. Specifically, within the context of this research, the perspective on decolonisation will align with the concept of decoloniality, as proposed by Walter D. Mignolo (2018). This is because the idea of decoloniality emerged in response to the limitations of postcolonial studies' Eurocentric nature; advocates for a challenge to Western domination in knowledge production. Given museums' role in the production of knowledge, I believe such a reconfiguration would be more effective in the context of decolonisation. Despite Mignolo receiving some criticism for creating an intellectual hierarchy as part of the Western system of knowledge production, which will be detailed later (Cusicanqui, 2012), it is undeniable that this system within Western epistemology has helped spread these ideas, making them more accessible and thus facilitating the integration of the concept into this research context. The section will explore the emergence and evolution of the concept with its various interpretations. To fully grasp this process, it is essential to define the postcolonial theory as well. This allows the interconnectedness between postcolonial and decolonial ideas to be understood more effectively.

The final section will present an analysis of museums, focusing on their function in producing knowledge for particular objectives rather than mirroring the world. Within this

framework, the connection between museums and decolonisation will be detailed, providing an overview of the practices described in the literature.

## **2.2. Colonialism**

Defining colonialism is a complex task, as noted by political theorist Daniel Butt (2013), because its definition is contingent on various historical and contemporary factors, which can significantly alter the overall comprehension of the term, either by narrowing it down too much or broadening it too far. Yet, in essence, it involves political, ideological, cultural, and economic control, the creation of beliefs about race and differences, and the right to conquer and subjugate, taking and using another group's material culture, as well as dominating, imposing upon, and exploiting other groups by a more dominant group (Horvath, 1972; Osterhammel, 2005; Loomba, 2007; Reinhard, 2011; Naum and Nordin, 2013b; Murrey, 2020; Longley, 2021; Blakemore, 2023; Kohn and Reddy, 2023). The biggest challenge in describing colonialism is to settle on a specific time range because human history is filled with similar examples of domination and subjugation from Ancient Greece to Romans, Mongols to Aztecs, and Chinese to Ottomans (Young, 2001; Loomba, 2007; Kohn and Reddy, 2023). While colonialism has been a longstanding feature of human history, contemporary interpretations of the concept have been significantly influenced by the events that unfolded in Europe from the early 16th century onward. This period is often referred to as European or Western colonialism. However, how do we differentiate between domination before the 16th century and events that occurred after?

Historian Wolfgang Reinhard emphasises, 'European colonialism as a process was seldom planned and mostly improvised' (Reinhard, 2011, p. 9). It was a result of a series of interrelated incidents: the 'mercantile revolution', which aimed at accessing eastern trade; technological innovations in ship designs; the Fall of Granada; and the Discovery of America (Young, 2001; Loomba, 2007; Reinhard, 2011). As a result of these historical events, European countries, 'Belgium, Britain, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Norway, Portugal, Russia, Scotland, Spain, Sweden, and the Netherlands, started to settle and colonise the lands from Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe, Oceania, the Middle East, and the Arctic' (Murrey, 2020, pp. 315–316). According to Margaret Kohn and Kavita Reddy,

technological improvements in navigation and ship design helped to establish a connection with distant parts of the world (2023). For instance, the Portuguese used their advanced caravels to establish trading posts along the coast of Africa (Newitt, 2005), while the Spanish used their galleons to transport vast amounts of silver from the Americas (Flynn and Giráldez, 2002). Thus, countries managed to control not only areas adjacent to their national border but also overseas, distant territories. Even though there is a geographical dispersion, sustainability of the political sovereignty of the centre becomes possible due to the connection between settlers and the centre, and that makes European colonialism distinct from an earlier version (Kohn and Reddy, 2023).

Another distinction of Western colonialism from earlier domination is built on Marxist thinking. According to literary scholar Ania Loomba, early colonialism is considered 'pre-capitalist,' while Western colonialism 'was established alongside capitalism' (Loomba, 2007, p. 3). This suggests that colonialism was both the cause and the effect of the development of capitalism, providing new market locations and raw materials and playing a role in the emergence of the bourgeoisie that controls capital (Young, 2001, p. 102). The perspective posits that Western colonialism not only exploits resources and territories but also reforms the region's economy through a reciprocal exchange of people and resources between the coloniser and the colonised. The essential assertion is that regardless of the direction in which 'human beings and materials travelled, the profits always flowed back into the so-called "mother country"', which denotes the colonising nation (Loomba, 2007, p. 34). Essentially, the colonised individuals became labourers while the wealthy and powerful individuals in the colonising countries assumed the roles of executives in vast corporations, resulting in an economic imbalance from which only European countries and the bourgeoisie benefited. Meanwhile, the poor and disadvantaged people in the colonising countries continued to be exploited.

Lastly, political geographer Amber Murrey underscores the Eurocentric logic of Western colonialism, a stark departure from pre-16th-century dominations. Eurocentrism, a mindset that asserts the superiority of Europe in all spheres, including culture, philosophy, politics, and economy, justifies the imposition of Europeanisation on the rest of the world (Howitt, 2020; Willis and Satish Kumar, 2020): 'Europe in this case is more of a conceptual category than a geographical one' (Sircar, 2020, p. 111). Especially in the

18th and 19th centuries, with the rise of colonial movements, Europeanisation was imposed on the colonised territories, leaving a profound impact (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 2013). Consequently, the rise of ideological contention, racial imbalance, 'centering of appropriation by dispossession, and structural and cultural persistency within post-colonial epochs' became an inescapable reality of Western colonialism (Murrey, 2020, p. 315).

By bearing this in mind, this research, with a specific focus on Western colonialism, examines how museum representations convey this history, of which Scandinavia has been a part since the 16th century. Therefore, the early Viking raids, their colonies, and exploitation of the Nordic region and beyond between the 8th and 11th centuries will not be the primary focus of this study. However, there are some exceptions. Certain areas conquered by the Viking raids, especially in the North Atlantic territories, remained connected to the mainland(s) for an extended period and were influenced by certain attitudes that will be explored in the context of Western colonialism. These regions will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

### **2.2.1. Colonialism and Imperialism**

Other than specifying a time range, another challenge of explaining colonialism is the conceptual confusion with the term 'imperialism', as both concepts imply the subjugation and domination of one group by another. While this research focuses specifically on colonial history, understanding its connection to imperial structures is essential, as imperial ambitions often laid the groundwork for colonial expansion. To address this confusion, researchers have sought to differentiate between the two concepts. One commonly accepted approach is to explore the etymology of both terms and chronologically analyse the changes in their meanings (Young, 2001; Loomba, 2007; Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 2013; Kohn and Reddy, 2017). Colonialism originates in the Roman word 'colon', meaning 'farmer, tiller, or planter', while 'imperialism' originates from the Roman 'imperium', which signifies 'absolute power or dominion' (OED, 2019). While these definitions initially suggest that imperialism is broader than colonialism, defining imperialism in detail becomes problematic due to the term's changing meaning between 1840 and 1960 (Koebner and Schmidt, 1964, cited from Young, 2001, p. 24). In its earlier

stages, imperialism conveyed the idea of 'European expansion whereby colonies *accrued* rather than *were acquired*' (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 2013, p. 139, original emphasis). It was later used to indicate Napoleon's 'despotic' rule (Kumar, 2021) and, from the 1880s, described dominant and aggressive European policies.

According to historian Robert C. Young, imperialism has had two prominent meanings in English: intrinsically, it is a political system of genuine conquest and occupation, but after the twentieth century, the definition evolved with the Marxist thought, and it constituted a meaning of 'economic domination with direct political domination being a possible but not necessary adjunct' (2001, p. 26). From this perspective, Young explains that imperialism involves governing and controlling territories from the central metropolitan, while colonialism denotes a system of peripheral rule and economic benefits, with oversight from the home country. He emphasises that imperialism is both an ideological state policy and a pursuit of financial gain, whereas colonialism is more commercial and typically associated with the activities of individual communities or trading companies. As a result, Young suggests that 'while imperialism is susceptible to analysis as a concept, colonialism needs to be analysed primarily as a practice' (Young, 2001, pp. 16–17).

Apart from Young's characterisation, there are various other interpretations of the distinctions between colonialism and imperialism. Geographer Ronald J. Horvath distinguishes colonialism and imperialism by examining the presence of settlers (1972). Edward W. Said defines imperialism as 'the practice, theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory', and colonialism as 'the implanting of settlements on a distant territory' (Said, 1993, cited from Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 2013, p. 139). Russian politician and political theorist Vladimir Lenin suggests that imperialism is inevitable, which is the highest form of capitalism and elevated after colonialism. Thus, he describes imperialism as a foundation for capitalism rather than mere political and military domination (Gilmartin, 2009; Kohn and Reddy, 2017). Historian Jürgen Osterhammel (2005) indicates that imperialism embodies the ambitions of the imperial centre and their efforts to legitimise them in the international system. In this sense, it cannot be limited to only colonies. According to Osterhammel, the imperialist concept encompasses the use of colonies to maintain balance in Europe. On

the other hand, the colonialist perspective stresses a permanent and legal acquisition and

considers colonial subjects as 'entrusted' to the care of the colonisers. [While] imperialism is planned and carried out [by] chanceries, foreign ministries, and ministries of war, colonialism [is carried out] by special colonial authorities and men on the spot (Osterhammel, 2005, p. 22).

The central concern in Osterhammel's analysis revolves around imperialism within the global system. This viewpoint presupposes the existence of a worldwide order built on nation-states, a paradigm that has only held sway for a relatively brief period in human history. As a result, it does not provide a sufficient explanation for the dominance of earlier cultures.

Loomba proposes differentiating these concepts based on 'spatial terms' rather than 'temporal' (2007). She explains imperialism as a metropolis phenomenon of domination, and its consequences in the colonial territories constitute colonialism. Hence, the imperial metropole is the place from which power flows, and 'the colony is the place which it penetrates and controls' (Loomba, 2007, p. 28). While Osterhammel suggests the presence of 'colonial empires without imperialism', as seen in the Netherlands during the 19th and 20th centuries, Loomba contends that colonialism cannot exist without imperialism (Osterhammel, 2005, p. 22; Loomba, 2007, p. 28).

In this research, I will adopt Young's definition of imperialism, but I will also incorporate Loomba's perspective. Imperialism is an umbrella term indicating an ideology controlled, strengthened, and expanded by the metropolis. It has multiple tools or ways to do it, and colonialism is one of them. Both terms are interrelated and adjunct to each other, but the absence of one is not an obstacle to the occurrence of the other on specific occasions, as demonstrated by examples such as the colonialism of the Netherlands without imperialism or the imperialism of the USA without colonies. Furthermore, Loomba's approach offers the benefit of shedding light on historical situations similar to Western

colonialism, where certain societies perceive themselves as exempt from the colonialist perspective, as this study attempts to demonstrate in the Scandinavian context because her approach does not entail disregarding temporal aspects altogether but rather involves integrating spatial factors. Colonialism, with its origins in territorial claims, evolves and adapts, much like a virus, in order to persist and expand, resembling the impact of capitalism.

Therefore, instead of constraining colonialism within a specific frame, I view colonialism in a broader context that encompasses not only territorial control but also the imposition of norms, economic structures, power dynamics, and the unequal distribution of agency through power structures. Only this comprehensive approach can help comprehend the ongoing debates globally concerning rising nationalism, islamophobia, race-gender-class disparities, and attitudes towards immigrants. It is only through this lens that we can begin to unravel the colonial endeavours of countries like Sweden, Denmark, and Norway, which were relatively underrepresented compared to other colonial powers.

### **2.3. Postcolonialism/Decolonisation/Decoloniality**

Given the definition of colonialism, as one can imagine, the definition and understanding of decolonisation is also highly complicated. The philosophical positioning of those who advocate decolonisation determines how it is understood and practised. Although the term was first coined in 1932 by German economist Moritz Julius Bonn (Wesseling, 1987), the increase in its usage corresponds to the post Second World War (1945~) period (Jansen, Osterhammel and Riemer, 2017). However, this is not to say that there has been no decolonial thinking before World Wars. The early examples of decolonial thinking, such as American activist Anna Julia Cooper's book titled *A Voice from the South: By a Black Woman of the South* [first published in 1892] (2017) and American sociologist William Edward Burghardt Du Bois's book titled *The Souls of Black Folk* [first published in 1903] (2021), are powerful in their focus on the intellectual, cultural, and social emancipation of colonised peoples. In the post-World War period, the Martinican poet, politician, and intellectual Aimé Fernand David Césaire's book titled *Discourse on Colonialism* [first published in 1950] (Césaire and Pinkham, 2000), and the Martinican psychiatrist, philosopher, and revolutionary Frantz Fanon's books titled *Black Skin, White*

*Mask* [first published in 1951] (Wallace and Whale, 2005) and *The Wretched of the Earth* [first published in 1961] (2001) are particularly important for their emphasis on the necessity of dismantling oppressive structures in the context of decolonisation.

The ideas behind these works have been further developed with the influence of Edward Said's seminal work, *Orientalism* (1979), which discussed the West's construction of the Orient as Other through exaggerations of difference and exoticisation that implied inferiority, becoming one of the main sources of postcolonial theory and studies. The term 'postcolonial' first appeared from the Marxist perspective to indicate the countries that gained their independence at the end of the colonial process (Young, 2001). This situation, when understood simplistically, causes the prefix 'post' to denote the period after colonialism. However, influential pieces of literature and ideas have deepened its meaning: Philosopher Michel Foucault's early work on governmentality and the biopolitical sources of modern power' provided an initial grounding for understanding how colonial structures persist in modern governance (Bayly, 2016, p. 3). His analysis is beneficial in understanding how signification processes delegitimise colonised knowledge systems and establish colonial narratives of superior rationality and the 'civilising mission' as authoritative truths. Said's critique of Western domination by highlighting the unilateral historiography that neglects the Orientalist perspective also supports this grounding (1979). Literary theorist Gayatri C. Spivak introduced the notion of the 'subaltern,' focusing on the silenced voices of oppressed subjects and their marginalisation within the power dynamics of imperialism (Gandhi, 1998; 2010). In her previous writings, she examined the lack of representation of the 'third-world woman' in literature, which focused on the development of the 'female subject in Europe and Anglo-America' (Spivak, 1985, p. 243). Critical theorist Homi K. Bhabha explored 'social ethics and subject formation,' focusing on how contemporary inequalities stem from colonial legacies (1994; Bhabra, 2014). Similarly, historian Achille Mbembe's research examined the political dynamics of post-independence African states, tracing the enduring influence of neo-colonialism in shaping modern governance (2001; Hiddleston, 2009).

As such, the concept of 'postcolonialism' has developed into a multidisciplinary field aiming to uncover the lasting effects of colonialism on material, socio-economic, and

cultural aspects through the collective memories of former colonies. It scrutinises the experiences of slavery, oppression, migration, race, and gender, as well as the influence of European imperial disciplines such as anthropology, history, philosophy, and linguistics. By critically revisiting and probing the colonial past and its enduring impact, it reveals and scrutinises the complex relationship between the coloniser and the colonised.

In this way, the word 'postcolonialism' does not just indicate a given chronological period. Today, to indicate the difference, the hyphenated version, 'post-colonialism,' is used to point out the historical epoch after colonialism, whereas the unhyphenated version, 'postcolonialism,' is utilised for the theoretical framework (Gandhi, 1998; Young, 2001; Loomba, 2007; McLeod, 2010; Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 2013; Bhabra, 2014; Bayly, 2016).

However, if postcolonial theory and studies explore the ongoing effects of historical colonialism, why is decolonial theory necessary? To answer this question, it is necessary to understand the decolonial turn and define decoloniality. Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2016), a scholar in decolonial theory, delineates the decolonial process (turn) into three distinct phases. According to him, the first phase includes the independence movements in the United States, Haiti, and Latin America at the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century, while the second phase includes the movements that emerged after the World Wars as a result of the questioning of Europe's legitimacy and Eurocentrism in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean. This second phase also involves the appearance and critical examination of concepts such as dependency theory, neocolonialism, internal colonialism, and postcolonialism. This phase led to a reflection on the concept of decolonisation as the dispersion of empires and the self-determination 'transition' of Indigenous groups that were under the rule of colonial empires (Kohn and McBride, 2011, pp. 15–16). This 'transition' is conceived as a 'self-rule', 'revolution' or 'independence' movement, which has been *historically* completed (Wesseling, 1987; Mignolo and Walsh, 2018, pp. 122–123, emphasis added). However, Mignolo states that such a definition of decolonisation represents colonialism as merely a territorial domination of one people over another and brings with it certain uncertainties: 'It does

not specify what kind of nations, which territories, when and where' (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018, pp. 121–122).

Accordingly, it would be inaccurate to consider decolonisation solely as the end of colonialism. As mentioned, colonialism encompasses not only territorial domination but also racial ideologies, resource allocation, economic shaping, language and customs suppression, and the imposition of Western epistemologies on colonised people (Giblin, Ramos and Grout, 2019; Ariese and Wróblewska, 2022). The historical use of the term 'decolonisation' may signify the independence of Indigenous groups, but it does not entail the complete undoing of colonialism; this process requires a more comprehensive overhaul. As the historian Patrick Wolfe points out (2006, p. 388), it would be correct to understand colonialism not as an event but as a structure, leading to the formation of a colonial society.

This brings us to Maldonado Torres's last phase (2016). The modernity/coloniality/decoloniality network, established in the 1990s reflecting on Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano's concept of coloniality, played a pivotal role in shaping this phase. Comprising numerous Latin American academics, including Arturo Escobar, Walter D. Mignolo, Freya Schiwy, Catherine Walsh, María Lugones, Linda Martín-Alcoff, Santiago Castro-Gómez, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Eduardo Mendieta, Ramón Grosfoguel, Agustín Lao-Montes, and others, this network has had a significant impact to the discourse. Their work challenged North-Atlantic postcolonial theory because they claimed that it ignores Spanish and Portuguese colonisation in Latin America (15th century onwards) and focuses on post-Enlightenment British and French colonial history from a Eurocentric perspective (Salvatore, 2010, p. 335).

In outline, Quijano (2007) points out that the colonial structure established a global power dynamic that persists even after the formal end of political colonialism. He names this as 'coloniality of power', which refers to a framework created through colonialism that not only generates but also perpetuates social discrimination. These discriminations were/are ingrained into 'racial', 'ethnic', 'anthropological' or 'national' intersubjective constructions, and according to him, they were 'even assumed to be "objective", "scientific", categories, then of a historical significance' (Quijano, 2007, p. 168). Additionally, the process of subjugation has significantly influenced the intellectual and

cultural spheres. Quijano provides examples such as the imposition of European modes of thought and the repression of Indigenous knowledge systems. He explains how this cultural imposition led to the colonisation of the imagination of the subjugated populations, deeply embedding European cultural norms within their social framework. Consequently, European culture was presented as the model of rationality and knowledge, while other cultural and intellectual traditions were pushed to the sidelines and undervalued. As such, the coloniality of power continues to influence global power dynamics, perpetuating the dominance of European descendants and reinforcing the inferiority of the colonised, thereby sustaining a system of exploitation and domination.

Maldonado-Torres (2007) builds on Quijano's concept to underscore the distinction between colonialism and coloniality. While colonialism pertains to the political and economic subjugation in which the autonomy of a nation or people is predicated on the dominance of another nation, leading to the establishment of an empire, coloniality represents a power structure that arises as a result of colonialism (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 243). Coloniality operates by exploiting the culture, labour, interpersonal relations, and knowledge production far beyond the confines of colonial governance.

Thus, coloniality survives colonialism. It is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects we breath coloniality all the time and everyday (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 243).

Building on Quijano's coloniality definition, Mignolo asserted that such a term (coloniality) is a decolonial concept produced outside Europe, illustrating the dark side of modernity (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018, pp. 111–112).

The conceptualization and analytic of coloniality — a decolonial way of thinking and therefore of living, doing, sensing — came into being as such at

the same moment in which decolonization mutated into decoloniality (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018, p. 120).

Mignolo interprets Quijano's concept of the *coloniality of power* (CMP) as the 'technics' of colonial domination and views the *colonial matrix of power*, again originally introduced by Quijano as the 'patrón colonial de poder' (pattern of colonial power), as the 'instrument' of colonial domination (Mignolo, 2021, p. 7). The CMP defines systems and structures in four interconnected domains that arose during colonial eras and continue to influence global relations and knowledge production. These domains are 'control of the economy, of authority, of gender and sexuality, and of knowledge and subjectivity' (Mignolo, 2011b, p. 8). Control of the economy refers to the domination that was established by mercantilism between 1500 and 1750, then turned towards capitalism with the Industrial Revolution and restructured with technology after the Second World War. Authority, on the other hand, refers to the control established between 1500-1800, mainly through theological and monarchical rule and its transition to bourgeois rule and the nation-state model after the French Revolution. Gender and sexuality describe the legitimisation of domination and exploitation through concepts such as racism and sexism, civilisation and progress, development and modernisation. And finally, knowledge and subjectivity describe the control operated through the theological frame from 1500 to 1800 and the secular science after 1800 (Mignolo, 2021, pp. 36–37).

As such, Mignolo proposes 'decoloniality' to thoroughly examine and break down the longstanding power structures established during colonialism and continue to influence current global relationships, knowledge production, and social hierarchies. Through the framework of decoloniality, he seeks to confront the lasting effects of colonialism on knowledge, power, and existence – endeavours that the first two phases of decolonisation efforts have not fully addressed (Mignolo, 2011b, 2017a, 2017b, 2021; Mignolo and Walsh, 2018). He suggests that this can be attained through epistemic and ontological (sense, being) undoing and delinking. According to them (2018, p. 120), 'undoing is doing something; delinking presupposes relinking to something else.' In essence, decoloniality involves breaking away from the epistemic framework imposed by modernity — including ways of thinking, language, lifestyle, and being — and

subsequently reviving or reconfiguring marginalised knowledge practices subjugated by coloniality (Mignolo, 2017b). Such forms of knowledge are mainly depicted as having been externalised by modernity, signifying that they ultimately (re)form themselves as activities that offer options to modernity, as opposed to different interpretations or paths of modernity (Temin, 2024, p. 4).

The significance placed on the epistemic aspects of decoloniality in the process of delinking is apparent in many of the fundamental concepts developed by Mignolo:

- 'Geopolitics of knowledge' (2002): the relationship between knowledge production and its acceptance and geopolitical power structures;
- 'Loci of enunciation' (1999): rather than a universal, generally accepted Western epistemology, the influence of factors such as the speaker's location, context, and identity in the production of knowledge, namely considering things from a different perspective;
- 'Epistemic disobedience' (2009): rejecting and resisting the dominance of Western ways of knowing and interacting with, valuing, namely delinking;
- 'Epistemic reconstitution' (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018): restructuring existing knowledge systems to incorporate and appreciate diverse ways of knowing, particularly those that have been excluded due to colonial and imperial legacies.
- Lastly, together with Tlostanova, Mignolo developed the notion of 'border thinking' (Mignolo and Tlostanova, 2006): the experiences and knowledge of those residing at the margins or borders of prevailing power structures.

In short, Mignolo introduces several interconnected concepts, each reliant on the others. Without epistemic disobedience, the loci of enunciation would lose its power, or, without addressing the geopolitics of knowledge, discussions of epistemic reconstitution would be incomplete. His central argument is a call to resist the singular modes of knowledge production characteristic of Western modernity. He advocates for the recognition of diverse methodologies and their integration into mainstream Western epistemological practices.

Although Mignolo's proposal has been extensively used in this research outline, it is important to note that it has faced various criticisms. One of these was made by

Bolivian/Aymara sociologist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (2012). She contends that Mignolo, despite his Latin American roots and background, created an intellectual hierarchy through his affiliations with North American universities, namely 'building an empire within an empire'.

Yet, without altering anything of the relations of force in the “palaces” of empire, the cultural studies departments of North American universities have adopted the ideas of subaltern studies and launched debates in Latin America, thus creating a jargon, a conceptual apparatus, and forms of reference and counter reference that have isolated academic treatises from any obligation to or dialogue with insurgent social forces (Cusicanqui, 2012, p. 98).

Cusicanqui's critique suggests that Mignolo's concept of decoloniality lacks a real-world counterpart, making it difficult to integrate into the existing system and achieve the intended impact. However, museums hold a unique position in this regard. Often likened to imperial 'palaces', these institutions can play a role in challenging the imperial/colonial narrative through various means. For instance, the spaces created to contest the colonial narrative through artistic initiatives demonstrate the feasibility of actualising decoloniality. I will elaborate on how decoloniality is practised in museum practice in detail later in this chapter.

Another criticism of Mignolo's work was made by English literature scholars Scott Michaelsen and Scott Cuttler Shershow (2007) for its internal contradictions and theoretical inconsistencies. They scrutinise how Mignolo perceives Amerindian meaning-making practices and European ones. Mignolo depicts the former as complementary and the latter as hierarchical and binary. As such, Michaelsen and Shershow contend that Mignolo's critique falls into the trap of romanticising cultural purity, thereby undermining its coherence and effectiveness. Consequently, they argue that while Mignolo aims to deconstruct Eurocentrism and elevate Indigenous epistemologies, his approach inadvertently reinforces the same binary oppositions he

seeks to dismantle. While I understand their concern about romanticising Indigenous epistemologies, I think this critique oversimplifies Mignolo's intention. Mignolo's focus on complementary logic is not meant to present Indigenous practices as purely ideal, but rather to challenge and disrupt the dominance of Eurocentric frameworks. As decolonial theorist Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni articulates, 'the only way to overcome 'epistemological dependency' is through 'epistemological rebellion' (2013, pp. 49–52). I believe this is what Mignolo aimed to achieve. However, I recognise that by highlighting such stark contrasts between Amerindian and European epistemologies, Mignolo sometimes risks falling into a binary opposition, which complicates his overall decolonial objective.

Other than epistemic and ontological delinking proposed by Mignolo, some scholars argue that achieving decolonisation requires a more resolute, hard-line approach. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012), scholars in Indigenous studies, emphasise the transformative potential of repatriating settler lands for the process of decolonisation. They argue that decolonisation is often superficially discussed and equated with social justice and human rights, which diminishes its true significance. If this narrow understanding becomes widespread, 'it [would help to] recenter whiteness, resettle theory, extend innocence to the settler, and entertain a settler's future' (Tuck and Yang, 2012, p. 3). This metaphorical interpretation would fail to address the complex social, philosophical, and cosmological impacts of colonialism. Consequently, Tuck and Yang assert that genuine decolonisation can only be achieved through the restitution of land, a process that holds the potential to transform our societies for the better. As will be detailed later, this is an important issue in terms of repatriation calls in museums.

Returning to the question then, there are two main differences between postcolonialism and decoloniality. According to Bhabra (2014, p. 115), the first difference is the origins of the proponents of the ideas; the second is the fact that postcolonialism mainly focuses on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, while decoloniality investigates the timeframe from the fifteenth century to today. In his analysis, Mignolo (2017b) tends to compare postcolonialism and decoloniality using the hyphenated version of the first concept. He argues that post-colonialism originated from the Indian and Palestinian contexts, both of which have roots in the 18th-century European Enlightenment. In contrast, he notes that

decoloniality is focused on America and the European Renaissance. Although he analyses the hyphenated use of the concept, he identifies the second different aspect described by Bhabra. However, he also states that the prefix 'post-' limits the concept in a 'singular, Western time' whereas 'de-' opens up to the multiple times of cultures and civilisations upon which Western Civilisations impose their conceptualisation of time. He further elaborates the prefix 'de-' as indicating 'above all the need and the goal of the re-: epistemic reconstitutions, re-emergence, resurgence, re-existence. That is, neither new nor post' (Mignolo, 2017b, p. 3). Such a view ignores the ongoing debates about the hyphenated and unhyphenated usage of postcolonialism and scrutinises the word only in a temporal meaning. However, Mignolo mentions that postcolonialism was constructed based on the ideas of Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault. It progressed through the works of Said, Bhabha, and Spivak. On the other hand, decoloniality is influenced by Cesaire, Fanon, Cabral, Gandhi, DuBois, and other Indigenous intellectual movements. This could be considered one of the differences between these two fields offered by him. Lastly, Anne Ring Petersen suggests (2014) that the distinction between the two fields is just rhetoric. She references the work of Janet Wilson, Cristina Şandru, and Sarah Lawson Welsh (2009), who have explored the shifts in postcolonial studies following the rise of globalisation. Petersen contends that decolonial thought represents 'a specific method of critiquing... an interventionist approach', which is a subset of the broader discipline of postcolonial studies (2014, pp. 129–130).

Building upon these understandings, postcolonialism seeks to identify the remnants of colonialism by addressing the cultural, political, and economic impacts of colonial rule after formal decolonisation. Decoloniality, on the other hand, focuses on ongoing colonial dynamics as the dark side of modernity, emphasising the need to epistemically and ontologically de-link from colonial frameworks. Both perspectives interrogate modernity and its impact on non-European cultures, yet decoloniality actively works to dismantle various aspects of colonialism. This is observable through actions such as toppling statues of colonial figures, revising educational curricula, curatorial attempts to reveal forgotten, embedded colonial relations, the growing calls for the repatriation of culturally significant objects with questionable provenance and so on. With decoloniality in mind, decolonisation implicates more in-depth changes that cover not only

'philosophical, moral, social, [and] spiritual' progress but also activist calls indicating 'the fact that we are still subject to the ideology of colonialism' (ICCRUM, 2019). It is an act that demonstrates the connection between Western 'modernity' and colonialism (Tsang, 2021), critically questioning every aspect of colonialism that has penetrated states, households, and individuals, and aiming to expunge its influence. It reshapes society through the 're-enfranchisement' of Others (Tolia-Kelly and Raymond, 2020, p. 4), although such a transformation is undoubtedly a slow process. In this research, I will carefully consider the nuanced distinctions between postcolonialism and decoloniality without implying the superiority of one over the other, as both offer valuable insights. Although Mignolo's decolonial approach has greatly influenced this thesis, I will also integrate insights from postcolonial theory in my deconstruction and analysis of my case studies.

### **2.3.1. Aesthetic/Aesthesis. What does the decolonial thinking say about the understanding of presentation?**

The imparting of knowledge is just as crucial as its production. Museums serve as institutions that disseminate knowledge to the masses while also keeping aesthetic principles in mind. Psychologists Andreas Garton and Helmut Leder identify the following aspects that shape the perception of aesthetics: '(a) basic visual characteristics of the processed artwork, including style contrast, symmetry, and complexity; (b) individual characteristics of the viewer, such as personality, current affective state, attitudes, interests, and knowledge; (c) contextual factors and social processes, like viewing situation, reclassification, and prejudices' (2014, p. 311). Through careful spatial arrangement, museum representations can highlight the contrast and symmetry of the showcased objects, and also re-classify them within a certain context (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992; Lindauer, 2006; Moser, 2010; Lidchi, 2013). While it may not directly impact the individual characteristics of the visitor, each museum curates its exhibits with an imagined visitor profile in mind – though this act of imagining may contain traces of a deeply rooted colonial perspective. Museum staff often rely on assumptions, which may or may not be backed up by evidence, to determine their target audience. This can sometimes lead to a preference for certain types of visitors and predetermined

expectations about their level of knowledge (Whitehead, 2009; 2012). Consequently, the exhibition space can inadvertently perpetuate a colonial perspective that resists change. This demonstrates that museums can contribute to both aesthetic comprehension as well as knowledge production. According to Mignolo, 'decolonization required delinking (to extricate oneself) from the colonial matrix of power (the CMP) and engaging in the labor of epistemic and aesthetic reconstitutions' (2021, p. 16). In light of this perspective, it is important to examine the decolonial aesthetic advocated by decolonial thinkers and situate the case study museums' approaches. In this section, I aim to outline the aesthetics that exhibitions employ. My intention is not to provide an aesthetic interpretation of each object that was removed from its original cultural context and placed in European museums where its aesthetics and essence were redefined. Instead, I aim to examine whether the aesthetics of each case study representation, in general terms and in relation to the analysis made above, are suitable for decolonisation.

The concept of the decolonial aesthetic emerged through a collaborative effort, first introduced by Colombian intellectual, artist, and activist Adolfo Albán Achinte in 2003 (Mignolo and Vázquez, 2013; Diallo, 2023). While gaining momentum over the years, it was not until 2009 that it truly took centre stage, resulting in the publication of *Arte y estética en la encrucijada decolonial* (Art and Aesthetics at the Decolonial Crossroads) under the editorship of Argentinian academic Zulma Palermo. Similarly, *Calle 14: Revista de Investigación en el Campo del Arte* (Street 14: Journal of Investigation in the Field of Art), published by the leadership of Colombian academic Pedro Pablo Gómez in 2010, took decolonial aesthetics as the main focus (especially Vol 3 to 5). Gómez also organised exhibitions and workshops in Bogotá to explore the decolonial aesthetic further (Diallo, 2023). In a similar vein, Duke University hosted exhibitions and workshops featuring notable thinkers such as Pedro Pablo Gómez, Pedro Lasch, Tanja Ostojić, Walter Mignolo, Dalida María Benfield, Raúl Moarquench Ferrera-Balanquet, Miguel Rojas-Sotelo, and Rolando Vázquez in 2011. The same year, the Transnational Decolonial Institute was founded and published a manifesto that defined the concept of decolonial aesthetics (Transnational Decolonial Institute, 2013).

To properly define the concept, it is important to acknowledge the varying interpretations related to the terms. In discussions surrounding decolonial aesthetics, there is a

preference for using the term *AestheSis* instead of *AestheTic*. Scholars like Mignolo and Maldonado-Torres suggest that not only the content, but also the language used must be transformed in the discourse of decoloniality (Mignolo, 2000a; Maldonado-Torres, 2024). To explain this shift, Mignolo and Vázquez delve into the etymology of both words. They reveal that *aestheTic* refers to 'the philosophy or theories of aesthetics,' while *aestheSis* denotes 'an unelaborated elementary awareness of stimulation; "a sensation of touch"' (Mignolo and Vázquez, 2013, p. 7). Using this distinction, Mignolo and Vázquez outline the difference between the two terms as follows (2013, p. 8):

The first [aestheTic] is a concept that now belongs to the sphere of philosophy; the second [aestheSis] to language in general, in any language. Thus, if aestheTics is indeed modern/colonial aestheTics and a normativity that colonized the senses, decolonial aestheSis has become the critique and artistic practices that aim to decolonize the senses, that is, to liberate them from the regulations of modern, postmodern, and altermodern aestheTics.

In this regard, decolonial aestheSis critically examines the domination of Western aesthetic principles on the way we discuss and evaluate art and its value, beauty, and representation and 'seeks to recognize and open options for liberating the senses' (Transnational Decolonial Institute, 2011). While acknowledging the influence of modernity/coloniality projects on the economy, politics, and knowledge, the decolonial aestheSis' primary concern is the control over 'senses and perception' because the modern aesthetic canon often leads to the disregard and dismissal of the aesthetic perceptions of Others (Mignolo and Vázquez, 2013, p. 4). In other words, the West has created a hegemony in aesthetic perception. For example, the establishment and legitimisation of the notion of African art was done by Europeans, not Africans, making it a Western invention (Ott and Diop, 2023, p. 3). To address this domination/canonisation, decolonial theorists suggest strategies like bringing to light decolonial subjectivities through a blend of 'popular practices of re-existence, artistic installations, theatrical and musical performances, literature and poetry, sculpture, and other visual arts' (Mignolo

and Vázquez, 2013, p. 5). Works like Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum: Metalwork 1793-1800*, Patrice Naiambana's *Tribal Soul*, Jeannette Ehlers's *Invisible Empires*, and Alanna Lockward's *Be.Bop: Black Europe-Body Politics* could be considered as carefully approaching the decolonial aestheSis.

Decolonial aestheSis starts from the consciousness that the modern/colonial project has implied not only control of the economy, the political, and knowledge, but also control over the senses and perception. Modern aestheTics have played a key role in configuring a canon, a normativity that enabled the disdain and the rejection of other forms of aesthetic practices, or, more precisely, other forms of aestheSis, of sensing and perceiving. Decolonial aestheSis is an option that delivers a radical critique to modern, postmodern, and altermodern aestheTics and, simultaneously, contributes to making visible decolonial subjectivities at the confluence of popular practices of re-existence, artistic installations, theatrical and musical performances, literature and poetry, sculpture and other visual arts (Mignolo and Vázquez, 2013, pp. 4–5).

The next section will examine the literature on museums' role in producing knowledge and how decolonisation is manifested in museums.

#### **2.4. Museums, Decolonisation, and Literature on Case Study Venues**

Colonialism has played a significant role both in shaping the collections in museums and in shaping the audiences that might potentially use them. It is this colonial legacy that museums must deal with today (Simpson, 2001, p. 2).

This research investigates how the colonial history of the Scandinavian countries is depicted in their national museums and the extent to which decolonial approaches have been implemented. The deep-rooted connection of museums to colonialism through their collections and their role in knowledge production necessitate the adoption and implementation of decoloniality. My aim is not to suggest that every museum was/is established with a colonial agenda but to highlight the profound connection of early collections, particularly ethnographic ones (Cabinet of Curiosities, British Museum, etc.). To that end, this section will provide an overview of museums' options in a decolonial context. Firstly, I will examine the role of museums in knowledge production, as decoloniality emphasises the need for a reconfiguration of knowledge systems. Then, the literature on decolonisation and museums will provide general practices. Lastly, I will present the literature on selected museums' case studies, although it is limited.

#### **2.4.1. Museums and Constructing Knowledge**

The definition of a museum by the International Council of Museums (ICOM), updated in 2022, is as follows:

A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing (ICOM, 2022).

This definition offers a fundamental understanding of museums. Focusing on the phrases 'researches' and 'interprets' within the text gives us an idea of the role of museums in knowledge production. This is significant because this role of museums has been critically examined and questioned by much academic research developed over the past

forty years. As such, the notion that museums are static institutions or mere reflections of the world has been proven as a fallacy (Vergo, 1989; Hooper-Greenhill, 1992, 2000; Bennett, 1995; Lidchi, 1997; Macdonald, 1998; Ferguson, 2005; Whitehead, 2009, 2016b; Whitehead, Eckersley and Mason, 2012; Mason, Robinson and Coffield, 2017). This understanding has been achieved by shifting away from object-oriented museum methods and instead prioritising an examination of the socio-political context and a deeper investigation into museums' political and cultural significance in power dynamics from a social-constructivist perspective (New Museologists). Notably, cultural theorist Bruce W. Ferguson (2005), in his article on the relationship between art, museums, and 'the politics of representivity', reveals the various dimensions involved in this process, sometimes consciously and sometimes not, other than the process of selection or exclusion of objects by museum staff (Ferguson, 2005, p. 128):

... [E]xhibition is — a strategic system of representations. The system of an exhibition organizes its representations to best utilize everything, from its architecture which is always political, to its wall colorings which are always psychologically meaningful, to its labels which are always didactic (even, or especially, in their silences), to its artistic exclusions which are always powerfully ideological and structural in their limited admissions, to its lighting which is always dramatic (and ther[e]fore an important aspect of narrativity and the staging of desire), to its security systems which are always a form of social collateral (the choice between guards and video surveillance, for example), to its curatorial premises which are always professionally dogmatic, to its brochures and catalogues and videos which are always literacy-specific and pedagogically directional, to its aesthetics which are always historically specific to that site of presentation rather than to individual artwork's moments of production. In other words, there is a plan to all exhibitions, a will, or teleological hierarchy of significances, which is its dynamic undercurrent.

Adding to this conceptualisation of the representational power of museums, recent research conducted in the UK and the US among selected populations indicate that museums still obtain a high level of public trust, even surpassing scientific research (Adams, 2020; American Alliance of Museums, 2021)). Given this blend of representational power and public trust, museums as highly influential institutions are not simply defining facts but rather constructing ideas and disciplines (Whitehead, 2009, p. 19). As such, I view museums in line with the definition put forth by museum scholars Christopher Whitehead, Susannah Eckersley, and Rhiannon Mason: ‘a technology for constructing knowledge and for theorizing about the world or aspects of the world’ (2012, p. 48). Museums connect decision-makers and curators through tangible objects within the political and social context of the venue. Further, ‘political, public production of propositional knowledge [is] intended to influence audiences and to create durable social effects’ (Whitehead, 2016b, p. 2). The choices result from strategic negotiations but are not absolute. They can change after being made available (Macdonald, 2002). Therefore, these ‘particular ways of knowing and valuing objects ... can never be neutral’ (Mason, Robinson and Coffield, 2017, p. 167).

If we return to the definition provided by ICOM, the term ‘exhibits’ emphasises the role of disseminating this constructed knowledge. This dissemination requires receivers/visitors and involves envisioning them in a specific manner: Such an imagined visitor is, as Whitehead describes (2009, p. 32),

the moving, seeing, reading, learning, intellectualising, behaving and feeling element in curators’ visions of display spaces’, a visitor whose imagined social milieu and cultural capital inform the curatorial stories told through display and how they are told.

Such a concept is related to O’Doherty’s idea of the ‘spectator’ (1986, pp. 35–64) and Margaret Lindauer’s discussion of types of visitors (2006). Museums conceptualise visitors in various ways based on their collections, purpose, and affiliations, or the museum can be an instrument for shaping them in a specific way. This brings us to the

issue of the power dynamics that non-neutral knowledge-constructing institutions are entangled in.

In his seminal work *The Birth of the Museums*, sociologist Tony Bennett highlights how museums hegemonically construct knowledge to create 'civilised' subjects that shape the national identity (1995). Bennett focuses on the formation of public museums in 18th and 19th-century Europe and develops his concept of 'the exhibitionary complex' proposed earlier (1988). Accordingly, museums and world exhibitions are not just repositories of artefacts but powerful educational institutions. They are employed as tools to internalise bourgeois behaviour, education, and politics in public and empower them to develop habits of self-improvement and self-regulation. As such, museums are in a key position to implement the idea of national citizenship and being part of society.

Bennett's arguments are influenced by French philosopher Michel Foucault's concept of 'governmentality' that describes the new disciplinary regimes that emerged in European states during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (Foucault, 1991). These regimes were developed to accustom populations to desirable self-regulation systems and make them accept being controlled by the ruling classes (Mason, 2023). Bennett combines this theoretical framework with Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci's concepts of hegemony to analyse how what he calls 'the exhibitionary complex' came to be developed alongside bourgeois rule in many European countries from the late eighteenth and throughout the nineteenth centuries. This development enables public museums to be seen as one of the main elements in the creation of the 'imagined community' of the nation first mentioned by political scientist Benedict Anderson (1983):

Museums, galleries, and, more intermittently, exhibitions played a pivotal role in the formation of the modern state and are fundamental to its conception as, among other things, a set of educative and civilizing agencies. Since the late nineteenth century, they have been ranked highly in the funding priorities of all developed nation-states and have proved remarkably influential cultural technologies in the degree to which they have recruited the interest and participation of their citizenries (Bennett, 1995, p. 66).

Bennett's contribution, given the focus of this research, is vital to consolidate Simpson's quotation given at the beginning of this section. Historically, as Simpson highlights, cultural materials from Indigenous communities were looted through colonial actions and brought to the colonisers' mainland. Initially presented to a select aristocracy, these materials were later made accessible to the public and, as Bennett notes, used to cultivate more 'civilised' subjects within museums, at least in intention, if not always in practice. This underscores these early museums' active role as enablers and perpetrators of the colonial mindset. However, the effects may extend beyond the historical context, as Foucault suggests that we live in an era of governmentality, an ongoing process rather than a definitive endpoint (1991, p. 103). Therefore, Bennett's argument can encompass not only 18th and 19th-century public museums but also contemporary ones because they may have fragments of colonialism, namely coloniality. Where this is the case – that is, in museums whose collections have not been displayed through the lens of Mignolo's notion of decoloniality, thereby creating new knowledge – their very existence thus serves Bennett's point. By examining museums in Scandinavia from a decolonial perspective, this research aims to question the validity of knowledge constructed by museums and challenge the exceptionalist perception of these countries, as elaborated in Chapter 3.

#### **2.4.2. Decolonisation and Museums**

As an institution with a strong influence and high levels of public trust – and considering its knowledge production aspect – it is reasonable to argue that public museums ought to be able to lead in implementing decoloniality. The decolonial process for museums can include almost any aspect of work: 'from recruitment to representation, audience engagement to repatriation, acquisition to architecture, design to labelling, conservation to the storage, and so on' (Giblin, Ramos and Grout, 2019, p. 472). As shown when referencing Bennett's work above, this change is necessary not just early museums but also contemporary ones (Ariese and Wróblewska, 2022).

Although modernity/coloniality/decoloniality have been calling and conducting research for a decolonial turn since the 1990s, the questioning and analysing of the institutional bonds of museums with colonialism intensified in some countries with histories of colonialism after the campaigns of Black Lives Matter (2013) and Rhodes Must Fall (2015). While this does not mean there has been no previous questioning (it is a concept that has been discussed since the 1980s (Bodenstein and Pagani, 2014)), decolonisation is currently an area increasingly examined in museum literature. In museum literature, much theoretical attention to decolonisation has focused on the diverse approaches of specific case studies, such as temporary or permanent exhibitions in mostly settler societies or former colonial empires (Lonetree, 2009; Wintle, 2013; Bodenstein and Pagani, 2014; Onciul, 2015; Anila, 2017; Minott, 2019; Van Bockhaven, 2019; Hicks, 2020; Turunen, 2020; Chen and Khoury, 2021); or communication practices (Vergo, 1989; Hooper-Greenhill, 1991; Clifford, 1997; Brown and Peers, 2003; Simon, 2010); or, more recently, a thematic approach (Ariese and Wróblewska, 2022). Although studies focusing on communication practices do not emerge for decolonial purposes, their theoretical approaches are essential as they form the basis of museums' decoloniality.

While this growing scholarly attention marks a significant shift in the museological field, the ways in which museums engage with decolonial discourse remain uneven across different national contexts. In the Scandinavian region, despite long-standing narratives of humanism and egalitarianism, the calls to decolonise have gained traction largely in response to external pressures and global movements rather than from within institutional cultures themselves. These movements prompted a wave of critical engagement in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway, though the responses varied significantly in depth and sustainability.

In Denmark, the centenary of the 1917 sale of the Danish West Indies (now the U.S. Virgin Islands) to the United States served as a moment of reckoning but also exposed the state's reluctance to fully confront its colonial legacy. The unveiling of *I Am Queen Mary*, a monument created by artists Jeannette Ehlers and La Vaughn Belle, stood as a symbolic act of resistance (I am Queen Mary, no date). Erected in front of the West Indian Warehouse in Copenhagen, the statue commemorates Mary Thomas, a leader of the 1878 Fireburn uprising, and is widely regarded as Denmark's first public monument to a

Black woman. While it sparked critical dialogue, its emergence from outside official institutions – and not as part of a national initiative – reflected the limitations of state-driven narratives, which largely framed the centenary through diplomatic and cultural commemoration rather than structural critique (Danbolt & Wilson, 2018; I Am Queen Mary, no date).

A similar tension was evident in Sweden's response to the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests. Although numerous cultural institutions expressed solidarity and released public statements, their actions were criticised for lacking depth and tangible institutional reform. A group of anonymous cultural workers published an open letter in *Kunstkritikk*, denouncing what they saw as tokenistic responses and calling attention to the absence of concrete anti-racist policies or significant structural change (Stasinski, 2020). This performative tendency is not unique to cultural workers' accounts. Recent scholarship analysing the Swedish debates during the BLM summer of 2020 highlights how public discourse often centred around individual figures — such as Carl von Linné — rather than addressing systemic issues. Hübinette, Wikström, and Samuelsson (2022) argue that Swedish institutions demonstrated a pattern of 'racialized memory war,' in which critiques of racism were deflected or dismissed through appeals to national pride, scientific legacy, or historical neutrality. These responses indicate a reluctance to confront deeply rooted racial inequalities within cultural and public institutions, reinforcing a broader tendency in Sweden to view racism as external to its national self-image.

In Norway, the BLM protests culminated in one of the country's largest demonstrations against racism, with over 15,000 people gathering in Oslo on 5 June 2020. This mobilisation led to temporary cultural responses, such as the exhibition *Your Breath, Your Voice* at Oslo City Museum, which commemorated the protest and engaged with local anti-racist voices (Ritos, 2022). However, as Bangstad (2020) notes, such efforts often remain confined to event-based programming and rarely result in institutional transformation. Together, these moments underscore the unevenness of decolonial engagement in Scandinavian museum spaces, shaped not only by institutional inertia but also by deeply embedded narratives of innocence, progressivism, and neutrality.

These national contexts, while distinct, collectively reveal the tension between institutional self-perception and external demands for change. Across the region, museums operate within societies that often imagine themselves as post-racial, progressive, or peripheral to colonial violence. This has created a reluctance — or in some cases, an outright resistance — to acknowledge the structural legacies of colonialism within their own collections, narratives, and governance models. While international movements have opened critical discursive space, the responses have largely remained reactive, fragmented, or limited in scope. This uneven landscape suggests that although the idea of decolonisation has entered the cultural vocabulary, its translation into sustained institutional practice is far from guaranteed. It is within this complex terrain — marked by historical amnesia, exceptionalist rhetoric, and selective engagement — that Scandinavian museums must now confront what decolonisation might actually entail.

The inadequacy in setting out the comprehensive perception of decoloniality is visible in the literature as well, although case study research provides examples of how decolonising practices have been processed in specific museums. The key issue here is that the concept of decoloniality proposed by Mignolo has not been extensively discussed in the museum literature. For instance, although Ariese and Wróblewska's book claims to be an exploration of decoloniality, as the title suggests – *Practicing Decoloniality in Museums: A Guide with Global Examples* –, there is no reference to Mignolo or any other Latin American thinkers. This raises the question of the extent to which thinkers of modernity/coloniality/decoloniality have been integrated into research on museum decolonisation in the Global North. One reason for this omission could be the difficulty of identifying Mignolo's ideas in practical terms, especially given his emphasis on non-Western epistemologies, which are often marginalised in Western institutions. Or, the overreliance on non-decolonial scholars may contribute to the continued dominance of Western-centred knowledge production in the literature on museum decolonisation. In the context of this research, it is impossible to find the answer to this question. However, one might think that given the subtle differences between postcolonialism and decoloniality explored above, one of the primary criticisms

of postcolonialism – the critique of association with Western-centred knowledge production – is present in the literature on museum decolonisation as well.

Nevertheless, a limited number of studies explore decoloniality within the literature of cultural heritage and museums (Mignolo, 2011a; Petersen, 2014; Bouwhuis, 2019; Vawda, 2019; Carrasco, Wolff and Niell, 2021; Brulon Soares and Witcomb, 2022; de Sousa *et al.*, 2022; Mataga, Thondhlana and Munjeri, 2022; Engman, 2023; Gullickson, 2023; Harvey, 2023; Sanni, 2024). The literature stands out in its relatively limited analysis of Global North museums from this perspective. Decoloniality is predominantly applied in research on Africa and the Caribbean Islands, indicating a gap in the literature. A noteworthy contribution, though, is Walter D. Mignolo's analysis of the exhibition *Mining the Museum*, curated by artist Fred Wilson at the Maryland Historical Society. Mignolo commends Wilson's approach in the exhibition for incorporating decolonial elements that challenge the foundational principles of knowledge and belief upon which modernity is constructed. He refers to this as a *Pachakuti* – a sudden and violent shift in space and time (2011a, p. 85). However, Mignolo also highlights Wilson's post-exhibition recognition by the McArthur Foundation in 1999 and his invitation to the 2003 Venice Biennale as examples of how the decolonial rupture he represents was eventually integrated into the imperial, mainstream art world. Mignolo's point is critical: despite Wilson's decolonial intentions, his work became accommodated by high-status, Western art institutions, reflecting how decolonial efforts can be absorbed into the very structures they aim to challenge.

For Mignolo, the initial step for establishing a decolonial space involves uncovering the underlying logic of coloniality and thereby disrupting the rhetoric of modernity (2011a, p. 81). Thus, shedding light on the institutional entanglement with colonialism contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of both institutional and broader historical colonial contexts. Furthermore, integrating the perspectives of marginalised groups into museum knowledge production is viewed as a decolonial strategy. Nevertheless, he acknowledges that these institutions may struggle to fully embrace decolonial approaches due to government policies and financial dependencies on external donors:

Since museums are tied to government and donors (that is, to capital), it may prove difficult if not impossible to have museums devoted to decolonial investigations, accompanied by exhibits and installations ... I see two roads into the future: one continues to make decolonial interventions in existing museums and scholarship, as illustrated in the examples of Fred Wilson ... The other links with decolonial projects in the sphere of museums with similar projects going on in other areas of the socioeconomic spectrum and in the decoloniality of being and subjectivity (e.g., education) (Mignolo, 2011a, p. 88).

Mignolo is making a critical distinction about the limits of decolonising traditional museums, which are heavily influenced by governmental policies and donor-driven funding, often tied to capitalist structures. This reliance restricts how far museums can truly engage with decoloniality, making full decolonisation within these spaces seem a challenging task. His point raises important questions: Can museums that rely on capitalist or state interests ever fully disrupt colonial legacies, or will they only ever manage partial decolonial interventions? Additionally, Mignolo's vision of linking museum decoloniality with broader societal change (in education, as he indicated) opens up possibilities for thinking beyond traditional institutions. It suggests that creating new, autonomous spaces — outside of entrenched systems — may be essential for genuine decolonial transformation. In this sense, Mignolo urges us to rethink museums as part of a broader socio-political struggle rather than isolated institutions. His vision pushes for a more systemic approach that connects museum practices with larger movements of decoloniality in everyday life and subject formation.

In addition to the limited amount of academic research, museums arranged specifically around decolonial themes examine and communicate overlooked narratives of specific colonial histories, such as the Liverpool International Slavery Museum, in Tervuren the Royal Museum for Central Africa, in Washington DC both the National Museum of the American Indian, the National Museum of African American History & Culture, in Alabama both the Legacy Museum, and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice. Internationally, groups and movements like *MuseumDetox* (2019), *MuseumHue* (2015),

*Decolonise this Place* (2016), and *#MuseumsAreNotNeutral* (2017) have drawn attention to decolonial turn and, from outside perspectives, have brought about specific changes, such as hiring or laying off museum staff in leadership positions (Ariese and Wróblewska, 2022, p. 12). Individuals have also played a significant role in the decolonisation endeavours. For instance, author Alice Proctor has initiated 'uncomfortable art tours' at six different venues: the National Gallery, National Portrait Gallery, British Museum, Victoria and Albert Museum, Tate Britain and the Queen's House (National Maritime Museum). By doing this, she created related podcasts to both identify colonial legacies in museums and raise awareness (Minamore, 2018). This format has been a model that other museums and galleries have begun to replicate. For example, Miranda Lowe led a series of walks in the Natural History Museum that looked at the hidden colonial histories in their collections (Davis, 2022).

In the following section, I will outline three essential practices for the decolonisation of museums. Given that decolonisation is a dynamic and emerging process, these practices may evolve and vary over time. To establish a tangible and enduring decolonised museum, it is necessary to implement not just one of these practices but to coordinate the applications.

#### **2.4.2.1. Identification of Colonial Traces**

Archaeologist Claire Smith (2005, pp. 424–425) details how colonialism shapes museum exhibitions through the concepts of the boundary, the label, and the meta-narrative:

The 'boundary' is important because it allows the classification of collections according to time and space as well as the dichotomies essential to colonialism such as that of 'self' and 'other'. The 'label' is important because it demonstrates that the unknown is known, and that the world can be ordered. The 'metanarrative' is important because it establishes the authority of the institution as well as the positional superiority of the colonisers.

It is evident that colonial influence has left a significant mark on the institutional history, collecting practices, collections, architecture, classification systems, curatorial approaches, staff profiles, and sources of funding within museums. Smith's approach is beneficial as it provides a guideline on where to look to dismantle colonial influence. In this context, the following practices compile the decolonial practices of the three concepts mentioned by Smith in light of the literature. These practices are not definitive, as each institution may require different approaches based on its own context. These actions may enable museums to understand their position in power structures, gain awareness of the 'fourth wall'<sup>1</sup>, and move beyond it. As noted by Mignolo (2011a), this initial step reveals the hidden narratives of coloniality within a broader context.

### Collecting Practices

Collecting practices, for instance, emerge in the context of the 'boundary' mentioned by Smith. Museums gather both tangible and intangible materials from past and present events to construct them into narratives. In this regard, decolonisation could contribute to consolidating solidarity in multicultural societies by encouraging museums to question and identify their colonial acquisition practices and categorisation. This aspiration aligns with the broader goal of creating more inclusive narratives that reflect diverse histories and perspectives. Determining objects' provenance reveals not only the complicated stories of acquisitions but also conveys those stories more accurately. This in-depth, retrospective research can be time-consuming and rigorous and necessitates dedication, particularly in the case of large museums with vast collections.

Many museums adhere to the object acquisition policy set forth by the International Council of Museums (ICOM, 2004, 2.1-2.2-2.3). According to this policy, museums bear responsibility for the objects they acquire and must adhere to legal regulations in the acquisition process, whether through purchase, gift, loan, bequest, or exchange. The policy also underscores the museum's obligation to thoroughly investigate the complete history of each item. Despite the policy's clear guidelines for examining the legitimacy of

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<sup>1</sup> 'An imaginary wall (as at the opening of a modern stage proscenium) that keeps performers from recognizing or directly addressing their audience' (Merriam-Webster, 2022). This term is used to describe fictional characters who realise they are part of the game, or cinema, comics etc.

acquisition methods for artefacts currently in a museum's possession, verifying an object's provenance remains a challenge. For instance, in 2005, the J. Paul Getty Museum reportedly acquired looted antiquities from Italy, with certain staff members allegedly aware that the items had been stolen (Gumbel, 2005). When institutions fail to meet the standards for new acquisitions, can we rely on them to conduct comprehensive analyses of the provenance of each object in its collection? In this context, transparency is the key aspect for both previous and future acquisitions. Such a practice also helps to reinforce public trust. For this reason, many major museums have recently been working intensively to establish the provenance of their collections, such as the institutions under the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.

### Repatriation

The act of repatriation addresses one aspect of colonial collecting practices. It is estimated that 80% of cultural objects are still separated from their origins, highlighting the moral and ethical imperative of repatriation (Adams, 2019). While it is crucial to seek the return of items that symbolise colonial relationships in their acquisition, repatriation should not be equated with decolonisation. Repatriation is tangible and vital; however, it only scratches the surface of the issue. This complexity stems from the power dynamics involved, as sociologist Peggy Levitt (2015, p. 6) explains: '[D]isplaying artifacts from other lands, countries demonstrate [the] ability to collect and control the world beyond their borders,' making repatriation not just an ethical act but a politically charged one.

Even though these objects have been displaced and have somewhat lost their original context, repatriation plays a crucial role in creating the epistemic and ontological delinking advocated by Mignolo by restoring cultural ownership and challenging Western dominance over knowledge production and heritage control. While he emphasises the inclusion of marginalised voices in knowledge creation, reevaluating these objects upon their return fulfils this objective. As Levitt points out, repatriation signifies the end of modernity's privilege to control and possess cultures and their artefacts (2015).

In practical terms, repatriation faces several limitations. Firstly, museum policies may take a demand-driven approach to repatriation instead of actively working to decolonise

their collections (see Chapter 8). In this demand-driven model, communities or countries are required to identify the object and explain its significance to them. The museum then conducts research and determines whether to return the object, although museums have a responsibility to investigate the history of the objects in their possession as indicated by ICOM's acquisition policy. Ideally, museums should conduct thorough research on their objects irrespective of repatriation requests. However, one cannot expect museums to have made a detailed analysis of every artefact they have, given constraints such as limited funding or lack of staff.

Indeed, it would also be wrong to consider that all museums approach repatriation in a demand-oriented manner. For example, The Great North Museum (GNM) proactively analysed its collections, resulting in the repatriation of a Benin Bronze stave to Nigeria in 2022 (TWAM, 2022). Despite being a relatively small municipal museum, the GNM's action demonstrates that repatriation is not just a concern for well-known, grand museums but also for smaller ones. However, Hicks indicates that this object was on the museum's collection list for some time (2020). The delayed repatriation decision, though seemingly well-intentioned, reveals the inherently political nature of such actions.

That adds another layer of complexity to the process, even when a museum is open to participating in repatriation. For instance, in the UK, 'the collections of national museums have a specific legal status. They are held in trust for the nation and the museums are accountable to the UK parliaments for their collections ... Permissions for [repatriation] can only be granted by application to Parliament' (Mason, 2007, p. 68). This illustrates the political dynamics between countries in returning cultural artefacts. Embracing decolonisation can facilitate ethical and political progress, enabling museum staff to recognise and address their institutions' ties to colonialism. However, political restrictions or the fear of increased repatriation demands potentially emptying museum collections might prevent many from proactively handling objects.

Despite concerns that repatriation may deplete museum collections and diminish their value, visual culture theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff argues that this is largely hypothetical (2017). Referring to the repatriation of Native American objects, he points out:

Significant sacred objects and human remains have been repatriated but there is no shortage of native cultural work in non-native museums. This pragmatic approach misses the point, however. The real question is: without a colonial aesthetic, however disavowed and displaced it may (or may not) be, what is the logic of display? To whom are objects being shown? To what end? (2017, p. 16).

Mirzoeff's point is indeed significant. While the return of objects may diminish the abundance of museum collections to some extent, many objects will ultimately remain in their current locations. Repatriation is a vital step in decolonisation, as it directly confronts the legacies of colonial theft and the denial of cultural sovereignty. However, Mirzoeff underscores that repatriation alone is insufficient; even when objects remain in their current locations, museums must address the 'colonial aesthetic' embedded in their displays, which often marginalises non-Western artefacts and reinforces Eurocentric hierarchies. This critique aligns with Bennett's 'exhibitionary complex' concept (1988), highlighting how museums educate and discipline audiences by embedding ideologies of control into public consciousness. Therefore, it is essential not only to pursue the physical restitution of objects but also to rethink exhibition methods and narratives that perpetuate colonial legacies. Mirzoeff calls for curatorial practices that challenge the frameworks underpinning the museum's role in society, ensuring that decolonisation is both material and ideological by asking whose stories are being told and to what end. This call emphasises the importance of re-evaluating current exhibition methods and narratives within a decolonial framework. Such an approach is more crucial in the sense of Mignolo's decoloniality.

#### **2.4.2.2. Collaboration with Communities**

What Smith calls 'labels' as the impact of colonialism on knowing and regulating the unknown (2005, pp. 424–425) is a point often emphasised by Mignolo. In this context, community involvement in the creation of the museum narrative is not a new phenomenon. In light of Vergo's observation that 'what is wrong with the 'old' museology

is that it is too much about museum methods, and too little about the purposes of museums' (1989, p. 3), new museology has shifted. Accordingly, the narratives of museums, which were predominantly based on the objects they hold, have developed and diversified into communication-oriented narratives in which social and political roles are taken into account. As such, many museums began to embark on the 'process of negotiation between two parties in which information (and meaning) is created' (Silverman, 1995, p. 161), rather than 'a one-way message to the recipient who is supposed to receive it' (Mason, 2005, p. 223).

One of the key sources that have been useful for interrogating colonial relations in a postcolonial/decolonial context is James Clifford's *Museums as Contact Zone* (1997). He adopts the concept of 'contact zones', originally articulated by Mary Louise Pratt (1992), to describe spaces where geographically and historically separated peoples come into contact and establish ongoing relations, often characterised by conditions of coercion and radical inequality. In this context, instead of the traditional role of museums as cultural repositories, he sees them as contributing to 'particular histories of dominance, hierarchy, resistance, and mobilization' (Clifford, 1997, p. 213).

However, both Tony Bennett and museum scholar Robin Boast highlight the unequal nature of community participation in museums in reference to Clifford. Bennett indicates that this inequality is due to the fact that museums serve as practitioners of civic and educational programs, namely supplementary of governmentality and, as a result, do not engage with the communities on an equal footing (1998, p. 211):

The perspective of museums-as-contact zones is at odds with these earlier understandings of the museum's function in virtually all respects. The view that museums might have an educative role and responsibility in relation to a public or a citizenry is seen as one that needs to be displaced in favour of museums involving themselves in relations of reciprocal interaction with the different communities which comprise their cultural hinterlands. In place of the language of education, instruction and civic reform, Clifford envisages the museum as a place in which diverse communities might enter into exchange

with one another, with the museum playing the role of mediator, a facilitator of multiple dialogic exchanges governed by relations of uneven reciprocity, rather than acting as an agent in its own right in pursuit of its own civic or educational programs.

Boast (2011), on the other hand, explores the concept of autoethnography in the context of the contact zone, where marginalised groups establish their identity in relation to dominant representations. According to him, many researchers have overlooked this perspective, leading to a limited understanding of the contact zone. As such, he characterises the contact zone as neocolonial, 'a clinical *collaboration*, a *consultation* that is designed from the outset to appropriate the resources necessary for the academy and to be silent about those that were not *necessary*' (2011, p. 66, original emphasis). Such a museum, according to him, 'is and continues to be used instrumentally as a means of masking far more fundamental asymmetries, appropriations, and biases' (Boast, 2011, p. 67). It is impossible for such an institution to be a contact zone without redefining itself, without giving up its resources, including its objects, 'for the benefit and use of communities and agendas far beyond its knowledge and control' (Boast, 2011). In relation to Clifford, Bennett, and Boast's ideas, museum scholar Briony Onciul (2015) introduces the concept of 'engagement zones' in her book on Blackfoot communities' interaction with museums and heritage sites in Canada, drawing from Sherry Arnstein's *Ladder of Participation* (1969) and Amareswar Galla's modes of participation (1997). The initial model follows, as its name suggests, a ladder approach, wherein manipulation and citizen control are arranged in a hierarchy from weak to strong, with intermediate levels (Figure 2).

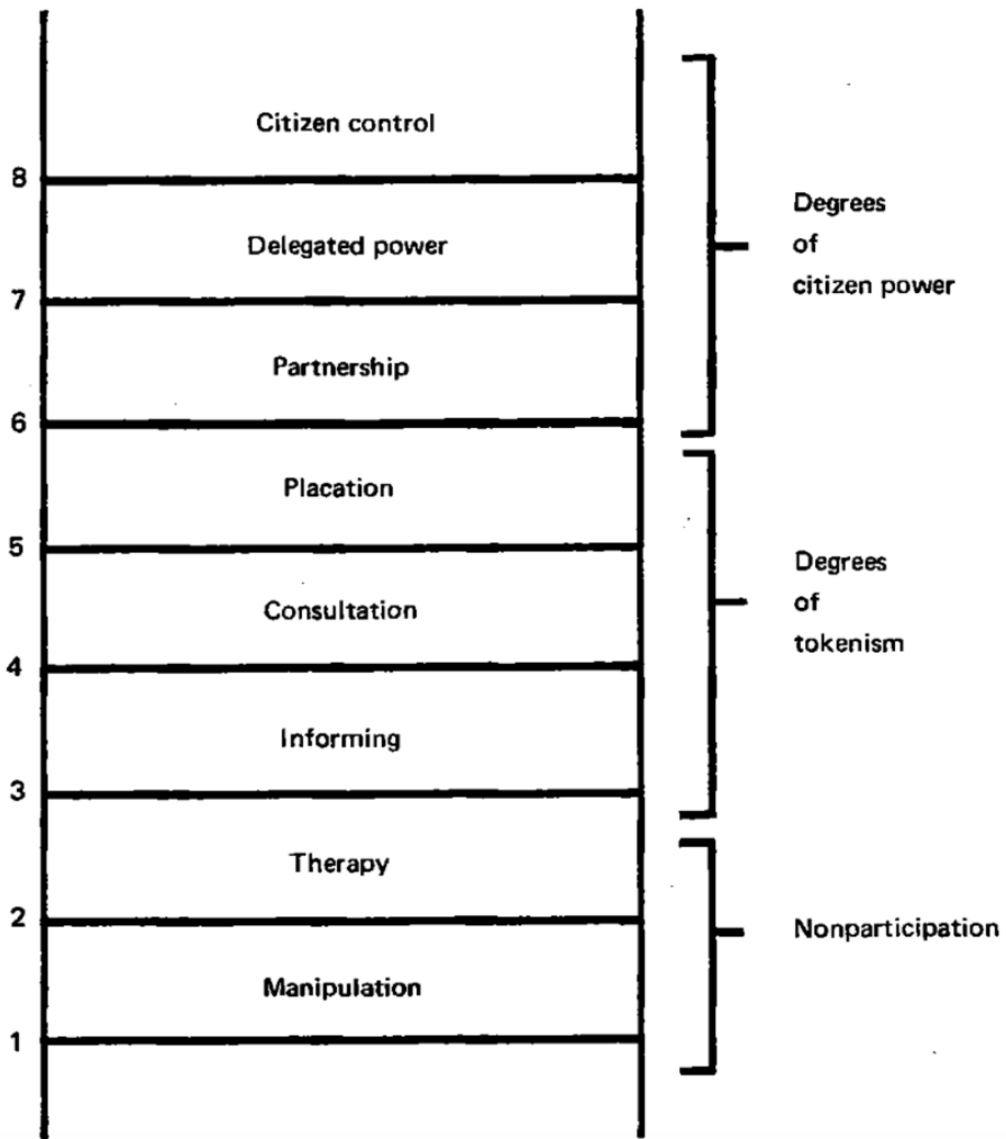


Figure 4: Ladder of Citizen Participation, Source: Arnstein, 1969, p. 217

Based on this model, Onciul states that Boast's 'consultation' would be seen as tokenistic by Arnstein, while community control, which he sees as a solution, points to the top of the ladder. Building on this, her proposal of 'engagement zones' (Figure 3) includes,

the spectrum of engagement approaches from tokenism to community control and emphasises the agency of participants and potential for power

fluctuations, despite common inequalities of power relations. It allows for consideration and exploration of culture and heritage prior to and beyond the experience of colonialism. The term enables internal community engagement and indigenisation of the process, distinct from contact work: thus the concept is different to, but compatible with contact zones. Contact zones can occur within engagement zones, and engagement zones produce outputs such as exhibits that often become public contact zones; but engagement zones can also occur without being contact zones, for example within inter-community engagements (Onciul, 2015, p. 82).

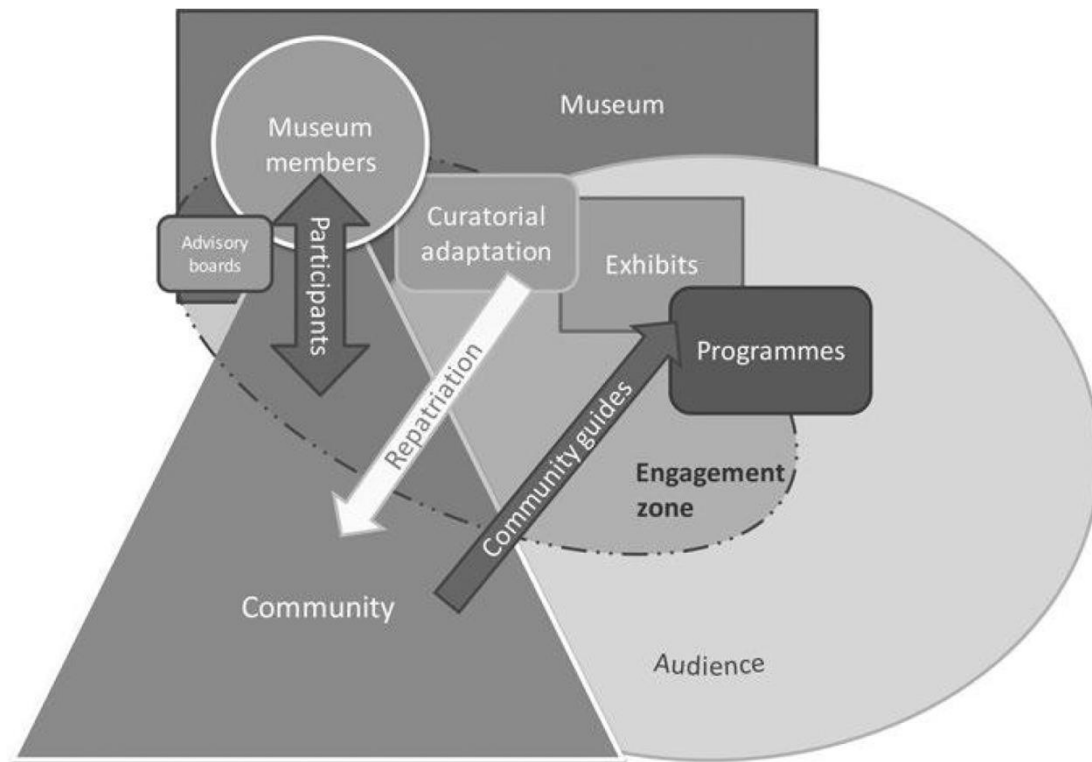


Figure 5: Engagement zone for non-community museums, Source: Onciul, 2015, p. 84

According to her, such engagement between source communities and museums can result in the creation of conceptual and physical spaces, either intentionally or unintentionally. These spaces represent a site of power dynamics and negotiations, and consequently, exhibitions, programs, and knowledge that contribute to a tangible exchange of power can be developed (Onciul, 2015, p. 83).

Indeed, both Boast's emphasis on the future of museums and Onciul's conceptualisation of the 'engagement zone' correspond to what Mignolo wants to convey with decoloniality. Mignolo's argument is that epistemological delinking can be achieved through the participation of the marginalised in knowledge production and the integration of their worldview not through tokenistic approaches but by sharing authority. Knowledge constructed in this way can be infused into and change modernity's ways of knowing. Museums are a perfectly suitable place for this task:

The decolonial option is not proposed as a totalitarian one that shall replace at once everything that is being done. The decolonial option is an option and, as such, it makes evident that there is no right or natural way to define what museums shall do. Museums should offer spaces for many kinds of interpretative activity (dialoguing or contesting each other). The decolonial option displaces the "spectacle" and "performance" of museum exhibits and installations and brings to the foreground what "spectacle" and "performance" hide: coloniality, that is, the darker side of modernity of which museums are a paramount institution (Mignolo, 2011a, p. 84).

His perspective does not advocate for an immediate overhaul. Rather, it sees museums as places where various stories come together to build a common ground that emphasises colonialism without giving in to it. Practically speaking, this strategy can be seen in the change that occurred in many ethnographic institutions as they rebranded themselves as 'world culture' museums. This brand-new genre contextualises colonial-era artefacts not to celebrate but to critique their colonial frameworks. Such a shift invites a participatory ethos, allowing marginalised voices to shape the museum's narrative actively. In this way, museums fulfil the decolonial imperative by preserving, rather than replacing, content while sharing interpretive authority with historically excluded communities. This will be further detailed in Chapter 7.

### 2.4.2.3. Artist Initiatives

Mignolo points out that decolonial change must take place not only in the content but also in the logic of the conversation (2011a, p. 82). In this regard, the involvement and contribution of artists to narrative can challenge what Smith refers to as the 'metanarrative' impact of colonialism. A standout example is the *Mining the Museum* exhibition curated by Fred Wilson in 1992. Instead of showcasing his own artworks, Wilson incorporated items from the museum's collection that were being overlooked, focusing on Maryland's African American and Native American narratives. His juxtaposition of objects, considering their relation to each other and broadly colonial context, challenges the rhetoric of exhibition. One of the well-known examples from this exhibition is that with varying heights, 3 out of 6 columns featured the busts of Napoleon, Henry Clay, and Stonewall Jackson, while the remaining three were left empty and dedicated to Harriet Tubman, Benjamin Banneker, and Frederick Douglass. The presence of busts of the first three, despite their lack of association with Maryland, but the absence of the following three in this context subtly criticises the selectivity of museums in narrative construction and object acquisition. It emphasises the silence of marginalised histories in the presentations and enables visitors to question the authority and practices of the museum critically.

Recognizing that many museums have historically been structured around the fact of colonial and imperial relations, Wilson decided to take seriously the notion that one might produce a different vision of museum discourse, a view from the "Other" side (González, 2008, p. 68).

Wilson is not the only artist in this context. In fact, this approach, in which Wilson is involved, is essentially a part of an art movement and methodology known as *Institutional Critique*. By challenging the control over representation, financing, and access to art, as well as the organisational structure of art institutions, including galleries, museums, and art markets, this methodology seeks to investigate power dynamics in the art world (Porter *et al.*, 2000; Alberro, 2009). The 'first wave' of artists, which included Michael

Asher, Robert Smithson, Daniel Buren, Hans Haacke, and Marcel Broodthaers, started this movement in the late 1960s and continued throughout the 1970s (Raunig, 2009). They questioned the ideological frameworks of art institutions, examining the connection between cultural creation and larger power structures, particularly emphasising the impact of the capitalist marketplace on the worth of art.

By the late 1980s, a new generation of artists had begun to expand on the political and economic debates explored in the 'first wave' (Corrin, 1994). The emphasis shifted to the intersections of race, gender, and identity within institutional frameworks with the introduction of new issues pertaining to 'the forms of subjectivity and the modes of its formation' (Raunig, 2009, p. xv). Renee Green, Andrea Fraser, Christian Philip Müller, and Fred Wilson are notable artists. Through intervention in the exhibition narrative, or through curatorship, or through their works, these artists reveal how cultural institutions perpetuate systems of exclusion, commodification and colonial legacy.

By the early 2000s, institutional critique entered a new phase, which built upon the foundations laid by the first two waves. This 'third wave' did not merely challenge or reject institutions, but rather sought to transform them from within, focusing on a continuous process of institutional reconfiguration. As such, this wave of artists emphasises the necessity of not only resisting oppressive structures but also actively reshaping them (Raunig, 2009). Artists such as Tania Bruguera, Forensic Architecture, and *Decolonize This Place* emerged as key figures, interrogating the entanglement of cultural institutions with global capitalism, environmental destruction, and colonial legacies.

However, there are also other artists who do not necessarily work with the institutional critique genres or waves but have been effective in other ways in both post- and decolonial critiques to reshape the metanarrative of museums, such as *Decolonising Appearance*, curated by Nicholas Mirzoeff at the Trampoline House in Copenhagen (Nielsen and Harrison, 2018). This exhibition brings together a diverse range of artists and thinkers to explore nationalism, racism, and xenophobia. Another example is visual artist Jeanette Ehlers' exhibition, *The Invisible Empire*, at Rohde Contemporary in Copenhagen (Ehlers, 2010). In this exhibition, she presents the situation of individuals facing the white gaze and oppression based on her own Danish-Caribbean background. Of course, artists working in decolonial contexts can be further expanded: Rasheed Araeen, Lubaina

Himid, Yinka Shonibare, Hew Locke, Leeroy New, and many others. This underscores that critiques of museums' colonial nature are carried out by multiple actors across diverse media, including artists, whose work engages with and influences curatorial and academic developments in decolonial discourse. However, a detailed study of these is not possible within the scope of this research.

The next section will briefly give an overview of what is written about the case study museums in relation to colonialism and decolonisation.

### **2.4.3. Literature on Case Study Museums**

The ethnographic collections of all three museums have facilitated comprehensive analysis within the framework of various research efforts. These studies have focused, at times, on specific exhibitions and, at other times, on the presence of specific collections within these institutions. However, in the context of colonialism and decolonisation, the literature on these museums, particularly in English, remains somewhat limited. Few studies take a decolonial approach in which the museums are individually analysed, sometimes with other institutions combined/compared. However, the absence of academic research that offers a broader Scandinavian perspective by scrutinising these case studies is one of the gaps that this research aims to fill.

The National Museum of Denmark (NMD) in Copenhagen boasts a more extensive literature collection than other museums. Of particular note is the literature that directly analyses the *Voices from the Colonies* exhibition, which is the focus of this research. One such piece is *Stemmer fra kolonierne* (Voices from the Colonies), authored by the exhibition curators and featured in the museum's annual publication (Arneborg *et al.*, 2018). This work provides valuable insights into the thoughts and intentions of the curators and museum staff behind the creation of the exhibition. Additionally, *Stemmer fra kolonierne: Et Kritisk Blik Pa Nationalmuseets Nye Permanente Koloniudstilling* (Voices from the Colonies: A Critical Look at the National Museum's New Permanent Colonies Exhibition) by curator Jakob Ingemann Parby (2020) is another essential publication related to the exhibition. The article provides a detailed overview of the exhibition, capturing important elements such as the museum's treatment of regions like

the Faroe Islands and Iceland, where Danish colonial relations are contentious. However, its examination of the exhibition from a decolonial standpoint seems relatively weaker than what this research aims to do. These two studies were written in Danish and, therefore, could not be used effectively in this research context (see Chapter 4). Another piece of research on this exhibition was conducted by Ariese and Wróblewska. Accordingly, this exhibition has the potential to evoke 'compassion and empathy' in visitors by presenting the perspectives of both the coloniser and the colonised through historical records and by humanising historical figures (2022, p. 108). Lastly, Mille Gabriel (2016) analyses the NMD's ethnographic collection and emphasises the exhibition's reinterpretation in the context of a globalised world through the contributions of artists and communities.

The Museum of World Culture (MWC) in Gothenburg has also been the subject of several scholarly works. Cajsa Lagerkvist's study analyses the MWC's role as a 'glocal' museum, thinking globally but acting locally (2008, p. 91). Similarly, Tobias Harding focuses on the concept of 'world culture' and examines the *Crossroads* exhibition, which is the focus of this research, arguing that the 'museums can become both, institutionalisations of national self-identity, and foci for discussion of its renegotiation' (2021, p. 341). Adriana Muñoz, in her book *From Curiosa to World Culture* (2011), explores the MWC's steps in constructing a decolonial narrative through its Latin American collection, drawing on Walter Mignolo's idea of decoloniality. It is worth noting that Muñoz is currently one of the curators at the museum.

The liminality of Norway in colonial history, as will be detailed in Chapter 3, has led to a lack of extensive literature examining the country's colonial relationships within museum representations. However, there has been a growing examination of the colonial aspects of Norway's missionary activities, particularly concerning the Sámi community and other regions, raising questions about the relevance of existing museum collections. The Museum of Cultural History (MCH) in Oslo has come under scrutiny in this regard. Bettina Ebert's article (2018), despite its focus on the medieval collection, is noteworthy for highlighting the museum's historical role in shaping the Norwegian nation. Moreover, Sigrid Lien and Hilde Wallem Nielssen's (2019) article provides a comparison between MCH's *America. Present. Past. Identity.* exhibition and Lillehammer Museum's *Slowly the*

*country became our own* exhibition to explore the connection between epistemology and presentation techniques. According to the authors, '[t]he exhibitions materialise ruptures and continuities, as well as different and oppositional agendas and views of what a museum is and should be, and what exhibitions should do' (Lien and Nielssen, 2019, p. 453). Lastly, Josephine Munch Rasmussen and Vibeke Maria Viestad's analysis compared the MCH's *Congo Gaze* exhibition with the repatriation efforts of the Norwegian Kon-Tiki Museum to examine object acquisition methods and the museums' approaches to addressing ongoing colonial legacies (2021). Critical reading of these last two articles offers a particularly effective comparison of how the decolonisation perspective manifests in two different exhibitions of MCH.

The catalogue of the exhibition *Control: Attempting to Tame the World*, authored by Gro B. Ween and Michael Lundblad (2022), holds particular significance in this research as it elucidates the exhibition's intent and offers detailed insights into the displayed objects. Moreover, the forthcoming article by Gro B. Ween, Silje Opdahl Mathisen, and Åsmund Steinsholm (to whom I am indebted for their generosity in sharing it with me), which provides a curatorial analysis of the exhibition, has been extensively referenced in this research.

As can be seen, much of the literature around these case studies is authored by practitioners or practitioner researchers embedded within these museums. This reveals a gap in broader academic museological engagement with these exhibitions, underscoring one of the originalities of this research, which aims to bridge that gap and enrich the academic discussion on these curatorial practices.

## **2.5. Conclusion**

This chapter has analysed the literature and defined essential terms for the research. First, I have defined colonialism as a complex phenomenon that has had a substantial impact on the cultural, political, and economic fields globally. Distinguishing between colonialism and imperialism and delving into the Eurocentric rationale that underlies Western colonialism has laid the groundwork necessary for understanding the concept of decolonisation and its relevance to museums. The concept of decoloniality, as

advocated by Mignolo, entails epistemic and ontological reconfiguration and has been the focal point of this research. This is because, as Quijano has argued, the colonial structure known as coloniality is a global power dynamic that persists even after the official end of colonialism (2007). Therefore, it is not possible to conclude this dynamic through decolonisation as defined in a historical sense. In this regard, the critical assessment given of postcolonial and decolonial theories has elucidated the ongoing and urgent relevance of such approaches in contemporary museum practices. This involves not only addressing historical injustices but also actively reconfiguring the ways in which knowledge is produced and represented within these cultural institutions. The role of museums in producing and disseminating knowledge is a central theme in this sense, highlighting their significant influence in shaping public perceptions and cultural narratives. Undoubtedly, the practices outlined here are not definitive, as decolonisation efforts in the museum sector are still ongoing and relevant. Each institution has different factors, from the objects they host to the staff profile, from the budget to the political situation of the country they are in, and these are active factors in forming decolonial spaces. Proactively scrutinising colonial connections, creating strategic plans that reflect diversity, challenging inherited supremacy, giving authority to those previously defined as 'Others' in colonial forms of knowledge construction, and forming transparent management structures will contribute to the museum's creation of a decolonial environment. This research hopes to contribute to the growing body of literature on decolonisation in museums and provides a comprehensive analysis that can inform future scholarly work and practical applications in the field.

The next chapter will present the complicity of the Scandinavian countries with colonialism and explore the exceptionalist idea that is seen to *exempt* them from this history.

# CHAPTER 3 COLONIAL COMPLICITY AND NORDIC EXCEPTIONALISM

## 3.1. Chapter Introduction

This chapter will explore the colonial history of Scandinavian geographies, drawing on the literature. The colonial histories of these countries form a complex tapestry of interactions, conquests, and assimilation. Each country's colonial past intertwines with its regional dynamics, global ambitions, and internal power struggles, creating a nuanced narrative that challenges traditional perceptions of colonialism. The chapter will explore the colonial trajectories of each nation, examining their roles as colonisers, colonies, or somewhere in between, shedding light on the multifaceted nature of Scandinavian colonialism. Then, it will explore the present-day position of these countries in light of this historical reality and examine the concept of *Nordic Exceptionalism*, which has partially emerged due to a lack of awareness of this history. Understanding this historical reality is crucial for comprehending the present-day position of the Nordic countries and their unique place in the world. Lastly, the chapter will provide information about the funding models and legal contexts for the case study museums.

## 3.2. Scandinavian Colonial History

As mentioned, like other European nations, the colonial expansion of Scandinavian countries in the 17th and 18th centuries was driven by economic interests (Naum and Nordin, 2013b). Sweden and the Kingdom of Denmark-Norway both made attempts to establish colonies in the West Indies, Africa, Asia, and the North Atlantic during this period. Throughout history, these countries have had sometimes different, sometimes interconnected relations: As historian Peter Aronsson states, 'Sweden and Denmark have had a continuous existence since medieval times, Norway is a medieval nation that has experienced an interrupted state history' (2012: 173).

Two different approaches stand out regarding whether Denmark and Sweden became an empire during this period. The first is the approach that considers Sweden as an 'unhyphenated state' and Denmark as a composite/conglomerate state after the 1970s (Neumann, 2014, p. 120). The *conglomerate state* idea is proposed by historian Harald

Gustafsson (1998) who argues that the traditional understanding of state formation in early modern Europe is incomplete. Therefore, such a definition is necessary to bridge the historiographical gap between medieval feudal systems and modern nation-states. As such, a conglomerate state is validated by the historical context of early modern Europe, where states were not the unitary, centralised entities we see today but rather mosaics of territories with varying degrees of autonomy and different relationships to central authorities (Gustafsson, 1998, p. 195):

[A conglomerate state] was a state area consisting of several territories, usually brought together by a ruling house but kept together by a few other factors. Each territory - or rather the social elite of each territory - had its distinctive relation to the ruler, its privileges, its own law code, its administrative system staffed by that same local elite, and often its own estate assembly. In questions of taxation or conscription, the ruler had to negotiate with each territory separately. I claim that this was not only one alternative state form, coexisting with emerging "national" or unitary states, but that it was the state form of early modern Europe.

In this context, Gustafsson emphasises that Denmark can be viewed as a conglomerate in various ways. To begin with, it comprised multiple constituent parts: Denmark-Norway existed as a conglomerate state, containing several regions with their own distinct administrative systems, judicial practices, privileges, and constitutional arrangements. These included Denmark, Norway, the Duchies of Schleswig and Holstein, Iceland, the Faeroe Islands, and more. Additionally, it exhibited decentralised governance. Despite the formal establishment of absolutism in 1660, each part of the monarchy maintained considerable local autonomy. For instance, separate estate assemblies in Norway and the central *ting* assemblies in Iceland and the Faeroes affirmed absolutism locally, while the Duchies retained a degree of autonomy where ducal absolutism was never officially declared. Lastly, the conglomerate state was characterised by significant social, cultural, and linguistic diversity, diverging from the model of a national or unitary state.

Consequently, Denmark-Norway was a state where the different parts became more integrated and centralised over time, yet still preserved their distinct characteristics.

On the other hand, recent research highlighted the similarities between Denmark's and Sweden's policies with those of other European empires. This idea was first proposed by historians Michael Brengsbo and Kurt Villads Jensen in 2004 (Ellenberger, 2009). Political scientists Rebecca Adler-Nissen and Ulrik Pram Gad from Norway, and social scientist and international relations scholar Iver B. Neumann further expanded on this topic and argued that both Denmark and Sweden exhibit similar characteristics in this context, with the main focus on Denmark (Adler-Nissen and Gad, 2013, 2014; Neumann, 2014). Both publications accomplish this by presenting a conceptual history of 'empire,' detailing its development from a political entity free from external control to a term filled with ideological and moral implications in the 19th and 20th centuries. Neumann traces the semantic changes in the term 'empire' across different historical periods, illustrating its use in political disputes and ideological conflicts, particularly in the context of nationalism and imperialism. Accordingly, in the 16th and 17th centuries, empires denoted sovereign states without external subordination. As European powers expanded overseas, the empire began to represent unequal political entities with European centres and colonial outskirts. This dual interpretation persisted, influencing political and moral discussions surrounding empires. By the 18th century, the term also encompassed ideas of civilisational hierarchy and progress, where European empires were viewed as promoters of historical advancement for 'less civilised' regions.

Additionally, the political structure during this period included non-uniform power bargains between the central authority and various middlemen with territorial bases. This structure is typical of empires, where the central power exerts control through intermediaries and negotiated arrangements rather than direct, uniform governance across all territories. Neumann asserts that Denmark's imperial activities, such as the establishment of the East Indian Company in 1616, align with those of other European empires (Neumann, 2014). He maintains that Denmark's involvement in overseas trade and administration not only reinforces but demands the classification of the country as an empire by providing examples from Tranquebar, Serampore, Nicobar Islands, and the Danish West Indies. In a similar vein, Sweden also engaged in practices of territorial

expansion and control. For example, the incorporation of Finland into the Swedish realm can be seen as an imperial action, similar to how other empires incorporated distant territories into their control. As such, Neumann concludes that these approaches and endeavours – active participation in colonial and imperial ventures, a decentralised governance structure, and a significant influence on the national identities of its former territories – unequivocally support the view that these two countries should be treated as empires rather than as simple states.

With this in mind, the following sections will delve into the colonial territories of these nations.

### **3.2.1. Denmark**

When discussing Denmark's history, it is impossible to think of it in isolation from the other Scandinavian countries. In this context, Denmark's relations with Norway stand out in a different way. Their relationship dates back to the Kalmar Union, established in 1397. In this union, all three countries (Norway, Denmark, and Sweden) were under a single sovereign, which was the second-largest aggregated power in Europe at that time (Derry, 1979). The union lasted till 1523 and dissolved upon Sweden's departure. Three years later, in 1526, the monarchs of Denmark and Norway decided to continue their union. 'With the establishment of absolutism in 1661, Denmark-Norway had become 'Twin Kingdoms', in which every citizen was an equal subject of the nominally all-powerful sovereign (Derry, 1973, p. 1). The Napoleonic Wars was a final blow for the Kingdom, and in 1814, with the Treaty of Kiel, Norway seceded from Denmark. With the loss of Schleswig-Holstein in 1864, Denmark had become a weak and small state and in order to survive they had to rely on non-military means (Bregnsbo, 2008, p. 77).

The Kingdom of Denmark-Norway was not one of the most prominent colonial powers. However, in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, national governments attempted multiple times to colonise territories from Asia, Africa, the West Indies and the North Atlantic. The main purpose of colonial movements was economic, like that of other colonial powers. Even though the Kingdom of Denmark-Norway ruled relatively small territories (except Greenland), especially in the second half of the eighteenth century, they made

considerable profit from the slave trade (Jensen, 2008). Based on geographical dispersion, it is possible to analyse Danish/Norwegian colonial movements in two areas: The North Atlantic and Tropical Colonies and Danish/Norwegian North Atlantic colonies.

### **3.2.1.1. North Atlantic Colonies**

#### **3.2.1.1.1. The Faroe Islands**

Around 400 AD, the Celtic people settled the Faroe Islands (Mitchinson, 2012), followed by Norse settlers around 800 AD (Petersen, 2010, p. 29). The settlers maintained their independence until 1035 when they fell under the control and taxation of the Kingdom of Norway. Along with Iceland, the region became part of the Kalmar Union. With the declaration of absolutism in 1661, Denmark solidified its control over the region. By 1709, Denmark had monopolised the region's trade and economy, regulating prices and controlling the number and locations of traders (Mehler and Gardiner, 2013; Adler-Nissen, 2014, p. 58). For the Faroe Islands:

Colonialism is as much about the attitudes of the colonized to the traded goods they received, as it is about economic power. If the introduced artefacts and practices are associated with superior power, then the native peoples place themselves in an inferior, colonized position (Mehler and Gardiner, 2013, p. 10).

After the secession of Norway in 1814, the control of both the Faroe Islands and Iceland remained under Denmark even though they became part of the union as a part of the Kingdom of Norway. This situation may prove the lasting Danish colonial appetite for these territories. However, the Faroe Islands began to express a stronger desire for independence during this period. In 1856, they broke away from Denmark's trade monopoly, and during World War II, the Faroe Islands and Denmark severed ties as the Faroe Islands were occupied by British forces while Denmark was occupied by Germans. In the aftermath of the war, a referendum on September 14, 1946, revealed that the

majority of Faroese residents sought independence due to increased nationalist sentiments. However, Denmark opposed this decision, dissolved the Faroese parliament, and called for new elections (Adler-Nissen, 2014). Realising that this approach would not lead to a permanent solution, Denmark engaged in negotiations and granted home rule to the Faroe Islands in 1948. Home rule denotes the autonomy achieved by colonies, typically in the process of gaining independence from a former imperial power (Jensen, 2008). Today, even though the Faroe Islands got their self-government in 2005, it is one of the territories that is part of the Danish Commonwealth or Kingdom of Denmark, which is used to indicate the relationship between Denmark, Greenland and the Faroe Islands. In this sense, both the Faroe Islands and Greenland are considered nations that are separate but within the Danish realm (Ackrén, 2017). Both are autonomous but work together within the Commonwealth.

#### **3.2.1.1.2. Iceland**

Much like the Faroe Islands, Iceland's historical background is a tale of transformation and contestation. It was a desolate land until 874, when Vikings arrived, kickstarting a process of colonisation. The 13<sup>th</sup> century witnessed Norwegians gaining prominence, and eventually, Denmark took control with the establishment of absolutism. The first settlers were primarily Vikings, but there were also men and women of Irish and Celtic origin, brought to Iceland as slaves or servants (Karlsson, 2020). They maintained a degree of independence until they were recognised as subjects by the king of Norway in 1262 (Lucas and Parigoris, 2013). The union of Denmark and Norway in 1397 marked a significant shift, making Iceland a part of Denmark. A trade monopoly was established at the start of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, restricting trade to Danish citizens, mostly from Copenhagen, and minimising competition between merchants as much as possible (Karlsson, 2020, p. 168). Despite Norway's secession in 1814, Iceland remained under Danish rule until 1918, when it was granted home rule. With growing nationalist sentiment in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Iceland seized the opportunity presented by German occupation in 1944 and declared its independence (Jensen, 2008).

Is it possible to categorise the period of Danish control in Iceland as colonialism? This question has sparked intense debate among Danish and Icelandic researchers/historians,

yet a definitive answer remains elusive. Some argue that Iceland was not a colony, but a unique part of Danish territory with distinct characteristics (Gustafsson, 1998; Agnarsdóttir, 2008). Conversely, others contend that Iceland exhibited colonial traits. Those who support the latter view acknowledge that while certain elements of colonialism were present in Iceland, others were not. Historian Íris Ellenberger's research is instrumental in identifying these aspects (2009) - 'political, economic, and ideological'. According to archaeologists Gavin Lucas and Angelos Parigoris, Iceland's colonial status can be likened to anthropologist Michael Herzfeld's concept of 'crypto colonialism' (2013, p. 91). Herzfeld (2002) uses this term to describe Greece and Thailand, focusing more on Greece. This concept refers to a unique situation where certain countries, acting as intermediaries between colonised territories and uncontrolled regions, were compelled to gain political independence while becoming economically dependent. A manifestation of this dynamic is the development of a national culture that has been forcefully adapted to meet the expectations of colonisers, often accompanied by an aggressive nationalism intended to assert identity despite underlying dependence. These countries may have nominal independence, but it comes at the price of a practical dependence that could be degrading. He discusses two significant absences in the theoretical framework of anthropology by exemplifying Greece. The first is the limited representation of modern Greece, which can be attributed to its historical political marginalisation and its relationship with the Western world. Even though recent ethnographic studies have begun to address this issue, introductory social and cultural anthropology textbooks often fail to mention Greece. The second relates to classical Greek culture, which remains absent despite its acknowledged influence on the origins of anthropology. One reason for these absences is the emphasis on ancient Greece, which has influenced how we talk about modern Greece. It was intertwined with the agenda of European global dominance to portray Greece primarily as an ancient civilisation with little emphasis on its modern state (Herzfeld, 2002, pp. 900–901). In this regard, Lucas and Parigoris argue that similar characteristics of crypto colonialism can be observable in Iceland (2013, p. 100):

... one might suggest that for a country like Iceland, the need to establish a nation equal to those of others and the creation of a stable national identity involved a sacrifice. Not so much of economic dependence as Herzfeld argues, but of cultural dependence. Just as nineteenth- and early twentieth-century archaeologists often portrayed Icelandic material remains in terms of a pan-Scandinavian heritage, so a common contemporary refrain in academic discourse is the situating of Iceland within a broader, supra-entity—of yet another imagined community to which Iceland belongs. If not Scandinavia, then the North Atlantic or the Arctic. The parade of invented terms such as “Scandinavian orientalism” (Jóhannsson 2000), “arcticality” (Pálsson 2002) and “borealism” (Schram 2011) even though constructed to counteract the modern essentialist discourses that pervade Icelandic society through tourism, nationalism and discourses of globalisation, only succeed to connote the anxiety to be included within some larger cultural entity or a wider community of the “North” that accepts Iceland as an equal partner and contributor.

Jensen delves into the distinct perceptions of Icelanders, Faroese, and Greenlanders, attributing them to 'the nexus between colonialism and racism' (2018, p. 134). He argues that the racialisation of the Inuit of Greenland establishes their legitimacy as colonial subjects due to their non-white and non-European racial characteristics. This allows the Danes to assert their superiority over them. However, the situation differs for the Faroese and Icelanders. A 'questionable whiteness' has led to them being regarded as 'lost white tribes' (Jensen, 2018). This characterises Icelandic and Faroese people as 'pure' and isolated, which fosters cultural relations with Danes while simultaneously portraying/othering them as insufficiently modernised within the 'European metropolitan culture' framework (Jensen, 2018, p. 135).

On the other hand, Harald Gustaffson (1998) indicates that Iceland's status cannot be considered colonial because Denmark is not an empire but a conglomerate state, which acknowledges the role of decentralised institutions, networks, and alliances in constructing and maintaining state power. For him, both Iceland and the Faroe Islands

had territory-specific privileges, laws, and an administration and council managed by territorial social elites who were connected to the ruler.

To scrutinise this more in detail, Ellenberger's approach (2009) offers a valuable approach because it demonstrates colonialism's impact not only on territorial control but also on governance and culture.

### Politics

Iceland's political position within the Danish realm was distinct due to several factors. Icelandic officials had representation in the Danish administration from the eighteenth century, and Danish authority in Iceland was relatively weak, partly because of the geographical distance between the two regions. The highest Danish authority, the *stiftamtmaður*, resided in Iceland only from 1770 to 1873. During this period, Icelandic officials enjoyed considerable autonomy in internal affairs, a testament to the unique political dynamics of the time (Ellenberger, 2009; Lucas and Parigoris, 2013).

In the nineteenth century, Iceland's path diverged from other Danish colonies like Greenland and the West Indies, a significant development in its political journey. The reinstatement of the *Alþingi*, Iceland's ancient legislative assembly, in 1845 as a consultative body for the king was a crucial step. The 1874 constitution gained limited legislative power, a milestone distinguishing Iceland from colonies and marked its gradual, yet steady, progression towards independence (Ellenberger, 2009).

As Hálfðanarson puts it, Icelanders' pursuit of independence was influenced by German nationalism, particularly the ideas of Gottfried von Herder and Johann Gottlieb Fichte, who stressed the significance of language and culture in shaping nationhood (Hálfðánarson, 2001b). Icelanders asserted their use of the original Nordic language as a reinforcement of their cultural uniqueness and political ambitions. The Danes, recognising a shared heritage, viewed Icelanders as guardians of this heritage, contributing to their exceptional status. Compared to other regions, all these factors indicate that Iceland was not a colony from a political perspective.

## Economics

The economic situation, however, differs significantly from the political context. According to the Icelandic historian Sigfús Haukur Andr sson (1997, 2001), Denmark enforced constraints on Iceland and established a trade monopoly from 1787 to 1855. This aligns with the argument of Halld r Bjarnason, an Icelandic economic historian (2001), who asserts that Denmark's economic exploitation persisted until the mid-20th century due to the strong connection between mercantilism and colonialism. Additionally, Anna Agnarsd ttir's study (2008) suggests that Denmark acted as an empire with diverse populations and extensive territories, including Iceland. Therefore, in economic terms, Iceland could be seen as a colony during certain periods, notwithstanding its political distinctions. However, as Gunnar Karlsson (1995) suggests, whether Iceland can be considered a form of internal colonialism adds a layer of complexity to this understanding. The absence of a consensus leads me to refrain from asserting the presence of internal colonialism in Iceland. This nuanced perspective indicates that although Iceland might not fit the definition of a colony in strictly political terms, it did undergo a form of colonial-like economic exploitation.

## Culture

To many Danes, the Icelandic people were regarded as guardians of Danish heritage, granting them certain cultural freedoms and language privileges (H lfd naron, 2001). A captivating example of this is Denmark's representation at the 1900 Paris Exhibition, where they chose to exhibit objects from Greenland, the Faroe Islands, and Iceland rather than their own cultural artefacts ( rnad ttir, 2011). However, it is crucial to understand that this does not erase the presence of colonial traces in Iceland and the Faroe Islands. Jensen (2018) explores this, emphasising the relationship between colonialism and racism. He underscores that the construction of cultural identities based on racialised concepts and systems of exploitation is inherent to colonialism. This is evident in Greenland, the West Indies, Africa, and India. Yet, Iceland and the Faroe Islands offer a unique case, as similar differentiations have led to the notion of their 'questionable whiteness', implying a perceived staticness within their communities. In

this context, both Icelanders and the Faroese have been positioned as representing 'organic Scandinavianness' while simultaneously marginalised as non-modern in European modernity and development (Jensen, 2018, pp. 134–135).

As can be seen, Iceland's history with colonialism has been complicated to define. However, despite political favouritism towards Iceland, it is evident that Denmark has exerted colonial attitudes both economically and culturally.

### **3.2.1.1.3. Greenland**

The earliest connection to Greenland can be traced back to the Norse settlement in the tenth century by Vikings (Hansen, 2008; Wolfgård, 2008). However, tangible colonial efforts began with the arrival of Norwegian missionary Hans Egede in 1721. He was tasked by the King to explore, trade, and convert the local Inuit people (Sebro, 2008). While the primary objective was not colonisation (it was to locate Norse settlers who had previously travelled to Greenland), from 1721 to 1832, a period of 111 years, the local population was subjected to the process of Christianisation (Hansen, 2008). After 1832, Danish interests in Greenland waned in all aspects except for the Royal Greenlandic Trade Company, which continued its trade activities until the end of World War II (Rønsager, 2008). Several significant events, such as the Napoleonic Wars, the dissolution of the union with Norway in 1814, and the loss of Schleswig-Holstein in 1864, contributed to this decline. Under pressure from the United Nations, Greenland gained representation in the Danish Parliament in 1953, achieved home rule in 1979, and attained self-government in 2009 (Jensen, 2018). Although advocates of Greenlandic independence would have hoped to gain sovereignty in 2021, the 300th anniversary of its colonisation (McSmith, 2008), this will apparently take some more time. Currently, Greenland is still part of the Danish Commonwealth.

### **3.2.1.2. Tropical Colonies**

During the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Denmark was actively involved in colonial expansion, not only establishing territories in the North Atlantic but also in tropical regions. These included three islands in the West Indies (St. Thomas in 1625, St. John in 1648, and St. Croix in

1733), forts and settlements on the Golden Coast of Africa in 1658, and small territories in India such as Tranquebar (1620-1840), Serampore (1755-1840), and the Nicobar Islands (1756-1868) (Fihl, 2008). Denmark profited significantly from these colonies through trade in enslaved people, as well as commodities like silver, lead, guns, mirrors, spirits, watches, iron bars, textiles, sugar, and tobacco. The uninhabited Caribbean islands were used as a source of labour, with enslaved individuals brought from Africa to work in the West Indies, creating a triangular trade route between Copenhagen, Africa, and the West Indies (Fihl, 2008, p. 97). Even during times of weakness, Denmark sought to derive economic gains from its colonial possessions by selling them, eventually parting with the West Indies Islands to the USA and selling its Indian factories to Britain.

### **3.2.2. Norway**

Norway and Denmark share intertwined histories, evident in their shared past, including the Kalmar Union from 1397 to 1523 and the Twin Kingdom from 1526 to 1814. As colonial prosperity and industrialisation took hold in Norway in the 18th century, a group of elites emerged, seeking separation from Denmark due to excessive demands from the union. At the same time, Sweden was also eyeing the annexation of Norway, waiting for the opportune moment, which came during the Napoleonic Wars. The conflict saw British naval strikes on Copenhagen in 1807, leading Denmark/Norway to enter the war on the side of the French while Sweden joined forces with the British. Sweden's subsequent attack on Norway in 1808-10 was ineffective due to Russian pressure on the east front and the loss of Finland. With support from the British fleet, Russia's expansion was halted, but Sweden sought compensation for the lost territory. Consequently, at the end of the Napoleonic Wars, the king of Denmark/Norway was pressured to cede Norway to Sweden. As a result, 'Sweden established another dual monarchy in which Norway enjoyed separate institutions and significant autonomy but was subordinate to royal authority in Stockholm' (Greaves, 2018, p. 102). Despite constitutional independence and home rule, Norway remained in union with Sweden from 1814 to 1905 (Eidsvik, 2016). During this time, a renewed sense of national identity sparked, leading to the peaceful dissolution of the union in 1905. In essence, it took several more centuries for the 18th-century desire for independence in Norway to finally come to fruition.

Norway's collaborative/submissive or 'quasi-colonial' or 'limited autonomy' history from the 14th century till the 20th century makes it difficult to locate the colonial position (Greaves, 2018). The historical relationship can be viewed as quasi-colonial in nature because Copenhagen, described as the heart of the state, significantly influenced the culture and governance of Norway, even though the union with Denmark was called the Twin Kingdom. This influence extended to the established residents in Norwegian towns and the bureaucratic leadership, largely comprised of families of Danish origin, who held power in the Norwegian countryside, as noted by Derry (1973, pp. 1–2). In a similar vein, Sweden perceived Norway as a potential compensation for the loss of Finland to Russia. From this perspective, Norway seems to be the subjugated one: Approximately four hundred years under the rule of Denmark and then ninety-one years in Sweden. Historian Ruth Hemstad (2014) emphasises that different perspectives were presented, suggesting that the nation was a Danish colony or on the verge of becoming a Swedish colony. Since achieving independence in 1905, the viewpoint of being subjugated and having no connection with colonialism has become a significant facet of historical interpretation and has been emphasised in education in Norway, and this continued until the 1960s. 'Most Norwegians still maintain a national identity not as perpetrators of imperialism, which they were in historical and analytical terms, but as imperialism's victims' (Neumann, 2014, p. 126).

However, it is fundamentally inconsistent with historical realities that Norway is not acknowledged as a coloniser. Norway played a significant role in Danish colonisation and seafaring prior to being annexed by Sweden in 1814. Norwegians served as colonial personnel in Tranquebar, Danish West Indies, and Greenland, including missionaries, soldiers, labourers, doctors, and others. For example, the leading figure in the colonisation of Greenland, Hans Egede, also known as Greenland's Apostle, was originally from Norway. As Sunniva Engh indicates, '[Norway] has had the world's highest proportion of missionaries in relation to its own population' (Engh, 2009, p. 65). The missionaries were responsible not only for spreading the Christian faith but also for initiating educational and healthcare initiatives. Their work had a significant impact on local politics at the grassroots level. Furthermore, they focused on educating women in the region. However, Helen Sweet notes that the missionaries primarily trained young

women for domestic service and housekeeping, as the education provided in the schools reflected colonial values and traditional gender roles (Sweet, 2004, p. 179). It is worth noting that these missionaries not only worked in territories controlled by the Kingdom of Denmark-Norway but also in other colonies, such as Congo, under the rule of King Leopold II. Norway continued its colonialist endeavours even after 1814 by trying to participate in the slavery trade (Neumann, 2014, p. 126) and even attempted to claim Greenland as its own territory in 1920, though it was rejected by the International Court in the Hague (Jensen, 2010, p. 19; Neumann, 2014).

As Edward Said indicated, colonisation is not only an event that happened in distant territories but at the 'heart of European culture' as well (1993, p. 221). Despite being in such a liminal situation when compared with the other two countries, Norway could not hold back from applying a similar attitude towards Sápmi (the land of Sámi/ "the northern part of today's Scandinavia and Kola peninsula" (Greaves, 2018, p. 101)) against Sámi (the only recognised Europe's indigenous society (Fur, 2006, p. 42)) and Kven ("[the] people that emigrated from the northern parts of Finland and Sweden to northern Norway in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries" (Hansen *et al.*, 2008, p. 101)) societies. From 1850 till 1959, Norway was associated with colonial actions and Norwegianization against these societies through educational programs, taxation and Christianisation (Greaves, 2018). In the last three decades, cultural, linguistic, and political revitalisation has happened in Norway for Sámi society. However, there are still a couple of hazardous decisions that affect both Sami's livelihood and Sápmi. For example, there has been a recent conversion from non-renewable energy sources to clean energy or green energy. As Norway wants to be part of the European electricity market and also support domestic consumption, it has begun to build windmills (Normann, 2021). However, the location of these windmills lifts the lid on a bigger argument. Aili Keskitalo, former president of Norway's Sámi Parliament, points out how it affects the Sápmi and the reindeer herders in this situation and complains about Norway's government's attitude about not soliciting their opinion about it. She explains Norway's attitude as 'green colonialism', which is a metropole-based (in this sense, South) customary decision-making mechanism that determines the appropriation of lands for the greater good of the colonial centre without consulting the indigenes of the area (*Arctic-Global Indigenous Dialogue on Indigenous*

*Guardianship and Self-Governance* [Video], 2020). Undoubtedly, renewable energy is obligatory for the sake of our world, however, utilising it without respecting the rights of societies indicates Norway's unequal distribution of power structures. This reflects how colonialism has changed its guise and how it is applicable in different forms and proves the ongoing presence of colonial oppression on Sámi.

So, it is evident that there was a strong desire for and participation in colonial activities. Meanwhile, Norway was treated as a commodity in a subordinate position between Denmark and Sweden. In this regard, Morten Skumsrud Andersen and Iver B Neumann (2014; 2015) identify Norway as neither a coloniser nor a colony. According to them, Norway should be considered as 'semi-core'. Accordingly, certain peripheral areas may have a closer proximity to the centre than others. This proximity is typically determined by a mix of shared historical connections, identities, language, and geographical nearness. The semi-core represents a unique element with strong connections to the centre, akin to elite groups, intermarriages, shared educational and cultural programmes, as well as reciprocal historical alliances or hostilities. Nonetheless, despite this proximity, they retain fundamental distinctions. The semi-core is not considered as the core and is governed differently and through several constraints and forms of indirect rule implied to ensure the perpetuation of the imperial hierarchy.

### **3.2.3. Sweden**

Like the other two Scandinavian countries, the colonial history of Sweden is a multifaceted subject. From the early 16th century to 1809, Sweden's focus was on participating in the Atlantic trade, with its actions largely influenced by its rivalry with Denmark. During the peak of its imperial era, from the early 17<sup>th</sup> to early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Swedish Crown was on a path of expansion in the northern regions of Scandinavia and gained control over Finland, Estonia, Latvia, as well as parts of Russia and Germany around the Baltic Sea (Ghose, 2008). It is worth noting that during this period, Sweden also made brief and unsuccessful attempts to hold non-European territories, including the Caribbean, North America, and Africa.

Historian Gunlög Fur points out that introductory history textbooks used in Swedish universities frequently fail to address the connection between Sweden's seventeenth-century dominance and expansion in the Baltic region, its activities in northern Scandinavia, and its explorations, trade, and travels in the eighteenth century with the concept of colonialism (2013, p. 23). The rationale behind this is the short-term nature and seemingly ineffectiveness of Sweden's colonial activities. While, to a certain degree, this is true, significant attempts were made, not only by the royal family but also by private companies, to exploit colonial trade connections and access natural resources. Including private companies' role provides a more comprehensive view of Sweden's colonial actions. Additionally, during the 18th century, Gothenburg and Stockholm housed factories that processed raw materials from the colonies. Gothenburg, in particular, played a crucial role as a trade centre for all of Scandinavia. In this historical context, Sweden's stance of neutrality and its industrial capacity were instrumental in supporting the colonisation efforts of other countries and reaping economic benefits from these ventures. It is challenging to separate these endeavours from the broader impact of colonialism.

### Sápmi (Lapland)

The northern part of today's Sweden is also part of Sápmi – the geographical region spans across today's Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia and is inhabited by the Sámi people. With the discovery of silver ore in this territory, the Swedish Crown released a regulation about Sápmi in 1673. This regulation can be considered as the beginning of colonial movements against Sámi community. The main idea of it was to increase the population of the territory and manage the efficient use of natural resources (Lindmark, 2013). Also, shamanistic beliefs and ways of living in Sámi society were worrying to the Swedish government. As a result, Sámi society was exposed to Christianisation and strict education policies. However, according to historian Daniel Lindmark, 'in the Swedish historiography and popular thinking, these Swedish encroachments in Sámi are rarely considered to be a case of imperial colonialism. These efforts are understood in much milder terms of agricultural expansion, or internal colonisation' (2013, p. 132). Fur supports Lindmark's statements by referencing a government report dated back to 1986

to exonerate the Swedish government of the colonisation of Sápmi (2013, pp. 26–27). According to this report, Sweden denies the claims of colonisation by identifying three reasons: the blue water thesis, the radicality of the process, and the consideration of these lands as a part of theirs since the 16th century. Fur's analysis presents a more complicated scenario, focusing on the report's first reasoning. In this context, Fur outlines colonialism, by aligning with Osterhammel's definition, as a sustained effort to control a new political organisation established through invasion or settlement from a geographically distant location, linking this definition to the report's emphasis on the 'saltwater test' as a criterion for distinguishing colonial situations. She points out the problem of such a limited perception of the term (Fur, 2013, p. 26):

Describing Swedish expansion as an inner colonisation makes it possible to view Sámi country as an inherently Swedish territory. If one decides to define Sámi land as a part of the Swedish kingdom, then one simultaneously opts out of the possibility of placing the Swedish policy in a colonial context. Then the development in the Swedish Lappmarks becomes something inherently different from the colonialism other European colonial powers practised on other continents.

While Fur addresses an important issue, she hesitates to explicitly label the Swedish attitude toward the Sámi people as a form of colonialism.

Political scientist Rauna Kuokkanen describes the treatment of the Sámi communities in the Nordic countries as settler colonialism. Kuokkanen draws on historian Lorenzo Veracini's perspective that settler colonialism and colonialism are distinct but coexist in dialogue with each other. Veracini (2010, pp. 16–17) asserts that in settler colonialism, Indigenous people gradually vanish through methods such as extermination, expulsion, confinement, and assimilation, or a combination thereof. While colonialism involves exploitation, settler colonialism operates as a system of substitution driven by a strategy of elimination aimed at Indigenous populations (Kuokkanen, 2020, p. 512).

Archaeologist Bryan C. Hood associates Sámi encroachments with Canadian examples, and thus he calls it 'creeper colonialism', which is 'as the regional states gradually extended their reach into their northern margins' (2015, p. 38). While this point of view is logically plausible enough, considering the last reason for Sweden's report on the region, it would be helpful to define these encroachments as one of the internal colonialism subheadings: imperial-internal colonialism. Imperial-internal colonialism is distinct from the nation-state in one specific feature. As political scientist Peter Calvert points out, a physical conquest of an 'unoccupied' region within political borders is considered as 'development' by the coloniser, not as an occupation or suppression (2001). This alleged 'development' utilises religion and the education system to assimilate indigenes and make them as much as possible similar to the coloniser. In this type, colonisers were not settlers but rather imperial hegemony. By all accounts, it is possible to say that Sámi society was colonised by Swedish authorities.

The colonial movements against the Sámi people persisted until the Swedish parliament officially recognised them in 1970. Subsequently, in 1993, the Sámi people established their own parliament. Then, in 2000, the Sámi language, along with Finnish, Meänkieli, Yiddish, and Romani, was designated as one of the official languages of Sweden (Ghose, 2008). Apart from Sápmi, Sweden engaged in colonialism in three other regions: North America, Africa, and the Caribbean Islands. In 1638, Sweden established the New Sweden colony and Fort Christina in the present-day areas of Delaware, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. Sweden's neutrality played a significant role in this territory, facilitating trade not only with other European countries but also with local Americans. However, due to regional instability, the colonisation efforts were short-lived, and the Dutch took control of the area in 1655.

### Sweden's Attempts in Other Regions

Sweden's African colony, Fort Carolusborg, represented another brief colonial venture. From 1649 to 1658, Sweden exploited the territory's natural resources, including gold and ivory, and became involved in the slave trade. The fort was eventually lost to Denmark.

Lastly, the Caribbean Island colony was the result of Sweden's persistent ambition. After numerous attempts, Sweden purchased St. Barthélemy Island from France in 1748. However, the island was challenging to sustain and was not suitable for sugar or tobacco production, leading to its primary use as a slave-trading port. This possession represented Sweden's longest-standing overseas territory and was returned to France in 1878.

As can be observed, the three Scandinavian countries were, to some extent, involved in the colonisation movements during this period, although this was not widely recognised. The upcoming section will explore the concept of Nordic Exceptionalism, which examines the unique position of the Scandinavian nations in relation to colonialism.

### **3.3. Postcolonial Scandinavia and Nordic Exceptionalism**

Let us consider a thought-provoking question. The Kingdom of Denmark-Norway and its arch-rival Sweden, once active participants in the colonial race, are now associated with 'unspoiled nature, simplicity, social egalitarianism, protestant ethics, and a democratic culture with ancient roots' (Aronsson, 2012, p. 172), and as peacekeepers and cultural influencers. If this is true, how and why have these countries come to this self-perception notwithstanding their colonial histories?

Various emerging projects, academic institutions, and a growing body of literature are currently exploring the nature of Scandinavian involvement in colonial expansion, their adaptation and contribution to a Eurocentric worldview, and the development of racial ideologies. While English departments have been engaging in this work since their inception in the 1960s in Nordic universities, other departments have only begun to analyse it extensively in the last decade (Maurer et al., 2010). Notable highlights of this shift include the 2009 issue of *Itinerario* on Nordic colonialism and the 2010 special issue of *KULT* on the Nordic colonial mind project. In a similar vein, Kristín Loftsdóttir and Lars Jensen's 2012 edited volume, *Whiteness and Postcolonialism in the Nordic Region: Exceptionalism, Migrant Others and National Identities*, delves into the intricacies of national identity formation in the Nordic countries. It sheds light on the treatment of

migrant communities, the persisting impacts of colonialism, and the Nordic countries' self-perception of being less connected to their colonial past compared to other European nations. This book also explores the contemporary social and political consequences of these perceptions.

In 2013, archaeologists Magdalena Naum and Jonas M. Nordin edited another significant publication, *Scandinavian Colonialism and the Rise of Modernity: Small Time Agents in a Global Arena*. This work underscores the fundamental similarities between the colonial histories of these countries and those of others around the world. Interest in Scandinavia's colonial past is growing, but understanding remains inconsistent. Public awareness oscillates between ignorance, denial of colonial atrocities, and reluctant acknowledgement of economic motivations. Public perception varies between national pride in past political influence and contemplation of the human tragedy caused by the pursuit of wealth and power (Jørgensen, 2013; Naum and Nordin, 2013b).

The historians Gunlög Fur and Pernille Ipsen attribute this understanding to the lack of research about these countries' colonial participation, resulting in the transition 'from no colonialism to post-colonialism' in historical discourses (2009: 10). This is because, it is generally accepted that the impacts of Scandinavian colonial history on the globe were small and insignificant compared to other European countries and this situation nominally allows them to avoid the colonial content and its detrimental effects. Furthermore, the fact that most of their colonial endeavours were conducted in partnership with other European empires rather than national ones could also play a role in this perception.

Adler-Nissen and Gad provide further reasons for this unique colonial perception (2014). Firstly, they note that, similar to Fur and Ipsen's point, Scandinavian colonial history is short and weak in impact. They argue that the Scandinavian countries ended the era of imperialism with the independence of Norway, Finland and Iceland. As such, these countries have transitioned to being major contributors to global peace and development. Secondly, this peace-loving and contributor role has contributed to high domestic stability, homogeneity, and equality, which support their advanced welfare systems. Lastly, the strong EU scepticism (especially in Norway) is driven by a 'strong national identity and attachment to national sovereignty' (2014, p. 4). These traits –

peacefulness, homogeneity, and EU scepticism – are interrelated and contribute to the unique Nordic model. However, the authors go beyond these reasons, analysing the foreign policies and regional dynamics of these countries through the Faroe Islands, Iceland, Åland and Greenland to show that, in fact, there are still imperial traces. For example, the Faroe Islands link their autonomy from Denmark with European integration. Despite facing challenges from the EU's common fisheries policy, Europe is seen as a means for the Faroese to develop a more independent identity. As such, Tórshavn (capital of the Faroe Islands) increasingly views the EU as a way to establish a global presence, though complete independence may not be imminent. In the meantime, Denmark takes a paternalistic protective attitude when international and European anti-whaling initiatives pose a threat to Faroese Indigenous customs (Adler-Nissen and Gad, 2014, p. 22). In this context, what differentiates the Scandinavian countries from others is not their peaceful and homogeneous outlook but the lack of public and academic discussion of the imperial legacy. This 'challenges the idea that Norden is a model security community and points out the flaws in a theory overlooking the imperial legacy of the Nordic region' (Adler-Nissen and Gad, 2014, p. 24).

Communication scholar Bolette B. Blaagaard presents an intriguing idea, placing Said's argument that Europe cannot be defined without Others at the centre. She suggests that the lack of human influx from Scandinavian colonies to the mainland has led to a 'cultural amnesia' (2010, pp. 101–102). This, combined with the strong attachment to national identity, helps explain the contemporary strict immigration policies of Nordic countries. Blaagaard also underscores the role of presentation and media in this context, pointing out that Denmark, the 7<sup>th</sup> largest country in the slave trade during the colonial period, has no monuments commemorating this history (Blaagaard, 2010).

Naum and Nordin (2013a) argue that the commonly held belief about Scandinavian colonial involvement is limited, as it tends to focus solely on territorial possession in distant lands. They highlight the fact that colonialism also involved economic tactics, such as participation in the transatlantic trade and the exploitation of the North. Additionally, colonialism encompassed ideologies surrounding racial differences and the perceived right to conquer. Scandinavian colonialism led to the creation of new social categories shaped by colonial dynamics and the appropriation of material culture.

Interactions with non-Europeans and non-Christians sparked missions to reform, educate, and civilise the 'other.'

The sociologist Paul Gilroy (2006) examines the situation of the Scandinavian countries by highlighting the ideas he proposed in his book *Postcolonial Melancholia*. Referring to the idea of melancholia in this context, Gilroy suggests that the inability to reconcile the loss of global supremacy and colonial power is evident in former colonial societies, particularly in interactions with immigrants, minorities, and descendants of colonised peoples. He argues that without addressing the cultural and psychological barriers that hinder access to the past, these countries will struggle to define their current position and democratic future. Despite the celebrated embodiment of social democratic principles, Nordic countries face a unique form of racism that emphasises cultural issues, such as nationalism and covert racialisation, which is defined as 'the new racism' (Gilroy, 2006, p. 1). Additionally, there is a notable denial of their colonial past, requiring the concepts of 'agno-politics or agnotology' – ... terms that describe the patterned forms of ignorance' (Gilroy, 2006, p. 2) – to understand this systematic ignorance. According to him, recognising and addressing this hidden history is vital for a comprehensive understanding of these countries' role in European colonialism, such as the transatlantic slave trade, and the subjugation of Greenland.

As a result, the emergence of what is known as *Nordic Exceptionalism* in academia is attributed to the presence of such a global perception and self-perception. Essentially, this concept is generally employed in legal literature to characterise the Nordic countries as having compassionate and lenient penal systems that prioritise social integration over punitive measures (Green, 2008; Lappi-Seppälä, 2008; Pratt and Eriksson, 2012; Barker, 2013). Within this framework, the Nordic societies' emphasis on equality, promotion of strong cultural values, cultivation of social solidarity, trust in social planning, government proficiency, and adoption of consensual policies collectively work towards mitigating the root causes of crime and minimising the harshness of punishment.

Nordic exceptionalism, however, in social sciences literature, according to anthropologist Kristín Loftsdóttir and cultural studies scholar Lars Jensen, has two meanings (2016, p. 2):

It can express an idea about the Nordic countries' peripheral status in relation to the broader European colonialism and to the more contemporary processes of globalisation. Or it can represent the idea that Nordic self-perception is rooted intrinsically differently from the rest of the Europe and that this self-perception generates different kinds of encounters from experiences elsewhere.

It is important to first grasp the peripheral status of the Nordic region. This concept is based on Jensen's (2010) identification of the Nordic colonial mind. Jensen draws on historian Dipesh Chakrabarty's argument in *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (2000), which challenges Eurocentric perspectives in historiography by advocating for the consideration of non-European experiences and histories as central to understanding global modernity. Jensen contends that Scandinavia's geopolitical marginalisation, especially after the Napoleonic Wars, has shaped its modern identity. This marginalisation stems from Scandinavia's relatively minor role in global colonial and imperial activities compared to major European powers like Britain, France, and Spain. While these countries established vast overseas empires and wielded significant influence worldwide, Scandinavians had much smaller and far less influential colonial holdings. This limited involvement in global colonialism led to Scandinavia holding a marginal position in the broader European imperial narrative and global geopolitics. Despite some Scandinavian thinkers like Carl von Linné or Christian Jürgensen Thomsen engaging with Enlightenment and colonial thought, Jensen argues that these countries were often on the periphery of central European intellectual discourse. Even though they are considered peripheral, Jensen also points out the internalisation of colonial ideologies within Scandinavian thought systems and cultural practices. Jensen demonstrates this by bringing up the Danish Cartoon Crisis, which was first published in September 2005 by Jyllands-Posten when a series of cartoons featuring disparaging images of Muslims provoked broad international protests. While many Danes defended the cartoons as a manifestation of freedom of speech, he argues that these

cartoons are rooted in a long history of racist stereotypes, highlighting how colonial attitudes continue to persist within Danish society.

On the other hand, the second version of the definition places Nordic countries in a superior position that indicates both the similarities and differences with European or Western countries. In other words, a Nordic country where the colonialist and imperialist ideas of Europe are rejected and anti-racist, but at the same time, the 'value system' that emerged with the Enlightenment (such as freedom of thought) is heavily defended (Keskinen, Tuori and Mulinari, 2009, p. 1). However, this exceptionalism or superior position cannot explain the ongoing appetite for keeping colonial territories such as Greenland or the Faroe Islands, or the dismissive attitudes towards Indigenous societies living in the region (Sámi or Inuit), or the imbalance and intolerance against immigrants. In this context, the colonial history of Scandinavia must be reassessed and rewritten by considering all aspects – hegemony and state polity, trade companies and their actions, economic relations both internally and with other colonial and non-colonial peripheries, the transformation and development of emigration policy, and the paternalistic attitude towards ongoing colonies and Indigenous societies –, and, as Jensen emphasises, integrated into national narratives. This would challenge the notion of an isolated Scandinavian modernity and underscore the region's role in the broader colonial project. Such a process of rediscovery would also challenge ideas of Nordic exceptionalism.

As such, the notion of Nordic exceptionalism is increasingly being challenged in the social sciences to elucidate the postcolonial understanding of the Nordic region (Ipsen and Fur, 2009; Keskinen, Tuori and Mulinari, 2009; Blaagaard, 2010; Maurer, Loftsdóttir and Jensen, 2010; Eidsvik, 2016; Loftsdóttir and Jensen, 2016). In this context, this research seeks to understand how museums contribute to or challenge this Nordic exceptionalism through analysing selected Scandinavian museums. As Maurer, Loftsdóttir, and Jensen explain (2010, p. 3), referring to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's idea that decolonisation is a mental process (1987), such an exceptionalist perspective is an obstacle to realising decolonial approaches since decolonisation requires both the coloniser and the colonised to engage in this mental process. Isolating oneself from colonial relations prevents the first step of decolonial practices, acknowledgement, from taking place.

### **3.4. Economic Constraints and Decolonial Challenges**

Understanding the institutional, financial, and legal structures that shape the operation of case study museums is essential for assessing their capacity to engage in decolonial practice. Museums do not operate in isolation; they are embedded within national policy environments that define their mandates, fund their activities, and delimit their autonomy. This section examines the frameworks governing the three case study institutions. In doing so, it draws attention to the ways state policy, legal mandates, and fiscal strategies simultaneously enable and constrain decolonial work.

The Nordic welfare state model provides a critical foundation for understanding the socio-political environments in which Scandinavian museums operate. The Nordic welfare model has been in place since the early 1900s, but it is important to recognise that there is no fixed definition as it is a concept that has changed and evolved to some extent over time (Sokka and Johannison, 2022). Generally speaking, this model is based on a stable democracy, individual freedom, economic development, and comprehensive social security (Koivunen, Ojala and Holmén, 2021, p. 2). The approach is state-oriented, and 'through extensive state interventions, a high level of employment and social redistribution is achieved' (Sokka and Johannison, 2022, p. 9). This model is reflected in cultural policies, with an emphasis on social citizenship and equal access to arts and cultural content for all citizens. Public resources generated through taxes are channelled towards these areas. For example, since 2006, state-subsidised museums in Denmark have offered free admission to those under 18. Out of all the museums examined in this research, only the MWC used to offer free admission for all visitors when I visited the venue in 2022. While this approach enhances accessibility for all, it is only one aspect of a broader decolonial framework that seeks to dismantle barriers to cultural engagement. Unfortunately, it appears that this policy has recently changed. Currently, only visitors under 19 years of age can access the museum for free.

In Denmark, the Ministry of Culture and the affiliated Agency for Culture and Palaces oversee cultural policy and fund allocation through the Finance Act. Twenty-four state institutions, including artistic educational institutions/academies, national museums, theatres, libraries, and archives, are directly funded through the Finance Act (Bille, 2022). The NMD is one such institution, supported by state cultural policies and the Finance Act.

It is governed by the Consolidated Act on Museums (Executive Order No. 1505), which outlines the museum's responsibility to preserve, research, and communicate Danish cultural heritage (Danish Ministry of Culture, 2006). Although the Act mandates public engagement and critical reflection, it contains no obligation for museums to interrogate Denmark's colonial past or pursue repatriation initiatives. In practice, this means that decolonial work — when undertaken — is a curatorial choice rather than a legal imperative.

However, as many museums face, the financial difficulties still managed to impact this venue as well, especially at the launch of the *Voices from the Colonies* exhibition. The government's 2% cut to cultural institutions every year affected the exhibition's content and diversity. One of the exhibition's curator Louise Sebro (2023) provides further context related to this:

... What can consume money is, of course, a lot of development and design and, you know, that often makes exhibitions expensive ... And then, of course, [another] thing that is very money consuming is if you incorporate into your museum, a lot of work with communities or communities elsewhere in the world, then where you are based. That is also something that costs a lot of money because there is a lot of work hours going to that and travel costs and so on.

The Museum of Cultural History (MCH) in Oslo housed under the University of Oslo (UiO). Unlike many 'national' museums that fall under the remit of cultural ministries, MCH operates within the domain of the Ministry of Education and Research, aligning it more closely with academic structures than with conventional cultural governance models. This institutional affiliation provides the museum with a relatively stable operational base, characterised by an annual budget of approximately €30 million — around 52% of which is externally sourced through competitive research grants, archaeological contracts, and collaborative projects (University of Oslo, 2023). Legally, however, MCH

remains bound by the Cultural Heritage Act of 1978, which mandates the preservation of archaeological objects and historic sites, particularly those dated prior to 1537, with enforcement delegated to the Directorate for Cultural Heritage (Riksantikvaren, 2025; Ministry of Climate and Environment, 2020). Within this framework, the museum is both a subject of academic autonomy and an actor within national heritage policy, its authority derived as much from epistemic capital as from state legislation. In this configuration, the university museum emerges not merely as a space of curation and preservation but as a site where the politics of knowledge and memory converge.

During my conversation with a curator from MCH, Ween (2024) explained that although MCH's affiliation with the Ministry of Education provides a relatively better financial position than other museums, it still faces financial challenges at times.

... in terms of Control, when and how to talk about colonisation is more about introducing this Sámi into the exhibition, and [there are things] that were left behind because of lack of money ...

Lastly, a similar legal and funding mechanism can be observed at the Gothenburg MWC. The MWC operates under the umbrella of the National Museums of World Culture – a government agency overseen by the Swedish Ministry of Culture. This institution operates under the Swedish Museums Act (SFS 2017:563), which provides statutory guidelines for state museums concerning governance, public accessibility, and professional standards in the management of collections. The Act stipulates that decisions concerning the deaccessioning or restitution of objects from state collections require governmental approval if they involve transfer to parties outside the public museum system, thereby safeguarding national interests and ensuring legal compliance (Museum of World Culture, 2020). Furthermore, the museum adheres to international legal instruments ratified by Sweden, such as the UNESCO 1970 Convention and the UNIDROIT 1995 Convention, which govern the ethical acquisition, protection, and restitution of cultural property (Museum of World Culture, 2023). While the majority of the funding is derived

from government grants, it also generates revenue from admission fees (though it is a new practice), gift shops, and other sources similar to other museums. Additionally, the museum actively pursues external funding opportunities to support its ongoing research and development initiatives. One of the MWC curators Helen Arfviddson indicates (2024):

We often apply for external funding for research project[s], that may be turned into exhibitions. One common funder is the Swedish National Heritage Board. As far as I know, Crossroads [exhibition] was developed with existing funds.

### **3.5. Conclusion**

This chapter has demonstrated the connection between the Scandinavian countries and colonialism. It has done this by giving an overview of the concept of colonialism and emphasising the difference between Western colonialism and early dominance in this specific context. This is particularly significant as it clarifies why the Viking history and invasions of these countries are not within the scope of this research. As such, the territories that the Scandinavian nations sought to control within the framework of Western colonisation have been outlined.

Furthermore, this chapter has delved into the concept of Nordic exceptionalism and aimed to comprehend how the Nordic countries are perceived, both internally and externally. The emphasis was on the fact that this concept is closely tied to the colonial history and present-day identity of Scandinavian nations. Despite their significant involvement in colonial activities, these countries have often been viewed as having minimal involvement, which has influenced their modern identities and policies. The limited public and academic discourse on this imperial legacy has contributed to a distorted self-perception, positioning the Nordic countries as peripheral to broader European colonialism. However, recent scholarly research has begun to challenge these narratives, highlighting the lasting effects of colonial ideologies and practices. In this context, museums emerge as key players, as they can question established narratives and foster a critical understanding of the colonial past.

The following chapter will outline the methodology of this research, including my positionality, data collection methods, and limitations.

## CHAPTER 4 METHODOLOGY

### 4.1. Chapter Introduction

This chapter presents the methodological framework of the research, the methods used and their rationale while conducting research. As described in Chapter 1, the main aim of this research is to determine the extent to which Scandinavian museums acknowledge and convey the countries' different and shared colonial histories through permanent exhibitions and to assess how ongoing decolonial calls impact these exhibitions. In doing so, the research seeks to identify how museums contribute to or challenge the concept of Nordic exceptionalism, which has played a significant role in shaping how these countries are perceived. In this context, I utilised qualitative methods within a comparative case studies framework. The data is collected through display analysis and semi-structured interviews with museum staff. Qualitative research methods are chosen because, as Bryman describes, such an approach is 'a research strategy that usually emphasises words rather than quantification in the collection and analysis of data ... [and] views social reality as the constantly shifting creation of individual social actors' (Bryman, 2021, p. 31). Therefore, it generally 'focuses on unfolding events over time and the interconnections between the actions of participants in social settings' (Bryman, 2021: 373). This is particularly useful for my research as the unfolding events pertain to coloniality, while the actions within social settings correspond to decolonisation movements. Thus, qualitative methods facilitate a more in-depth exploration of how decolonial practices emerge and adapt within the museum context. Like other qualitative methods, 'gathering and analysing data are conducted concurrently in descriptive qualitative approaches, thus adding to the depth and quality of data analysis' (Vaismoradi, Turunen and Bondas, 2013, p. 401).

The first section discusses the case study structure of the research. I will describe the rationale behind choosing the case study approach and the specific museums selected for this research. Then, I will outline two data collection methods: display analysis and semi-structured interviews. In the reflexivity section, I will discuss my own influence as a researcher on the data collected and their interpretation, and in the limitation, I will detail the challenges encountered during this process and the actions employed to address them. The chapter concludes with ethics and conclusions.

## **4.2. Data Collection Methods**

### **4.2.1. Case Study Museums**

In museum studies, the case study approach is one of the most common approaches (Mason, 2020, p. 16). This is because such a research design, incorporating other supporting methods, allows for a comparative and detailed consideration (Silverman, 2022). As Punch simply explains the case study (Punch, 1998, p. 150, cited in Silverman, 2022, p. 296):

The basic idea is that one case (or perhaps a small number of cases) will be studied in detail, using whatever methods seem appropriate. While there may be a variety of specific purposes and research questions, the general objective is to develop as full an understanding of that case as possible.

This approach is effective, especially when, as Yin defines, the research's 'questions seek to explain some contemporary circumstance (e.g., "how" or "why" some social phenomenon works)' (2018, p. 4). Some of the aims and objectives stated in Chapter 1 provide the basis for asking such questions: How does the museum's narrative depict the colonial relations of the society attached? How and to what extent are exceptionalist ideas manifested in these narratives? How does the decolonial turn challenge the narrative within this sphere?

Since this research investigates a geography consisting of several countries, the collective case study approach proposed by Stake is adopted, where 'a number of cases are studied in order to investigate some general phenomenon' (2000, pp. 437–438, cited in Silverman, 2022, p. 297). One of the advantages of this approach is its ability to narrow the context within a specific venue, thereby increasing feasibility. In the case of national museums, multiple institutions within a single country may contribute to representing the nation, yet each reflects distinct aspects of national identity shaped by its unique focus, history, and collection. This diversity enriches the study but also complicates the

drawing of 'generalizable conclusions' across cases (Mason, 2020, p. 16). To address this issue, a comparative approach is preferred as it 'directly tackles the question of generalisability by demonstrating the similarities and difference across a number of settings' (Peräkylä, 2004, p. 294). This approach allows the research to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of Scandinavia rather than just each country. Additionally, I utilise purposive sampling, more specifically theoretical sampling, for choosing my specific case studies. Purposive sampling enables me to select 'groups, categories or units to study on the basis of their relevance to' (Mason, 2018, p. 59), thereby enhancing the study's robustness and addressing concerns about the generalizability of case study design. Theoretical sampling, as Glaser and Strauss define it 'is the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyses his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them in order to develop his theory as it emerges. [Therefore], ... it is an ongoing process rather than one that is fixed from the start' (1967, p. 45, cited in Bryman *et al.*, 2021, p. 380). This is in line with the comparative case study in its tendency to use comparisons to detect variations.

#### **4.2.1.1. Rationale for Case Study Museums**

When choosing case studies, it was crucial to find institutions that possess historical continuity, institutional credibility, and a rich collection, all of which are important for engaging meaningfully with the themes of this research. A shared characteristic among the selected museums is their identity as long-established cultural history institutions with extensive ethnographic collections — collections largely put together during the peak of colonial expansion and closely linked to the formation of national identity. These traits make them particularly relevant to a study focused on epistemic authority, colonial entanglements, and the obstacles of applying decolonial strategies within national memory institutions.

In the context of Scandinavia, cultural history museums have historically served a stabilising function in nation-building efforts, often upholding established curatorial practices that emphasise continuity rather than disruption (Aronsson and Elgenius, 2015; Berger, 2015). As such, these institutions are typically characterised by a conservative museological culture — one that tends to resist rapid change, especially in

relation to politically or ethically challenging reinterpretations of the past. Their enduring role in shaping national narratives, along with the disciplinary influences of anthropology, archaeology, and ethnography that have historically informed their collections and displays, positions them at the heart of public historical awareness. Accordingly, their significance lies not only in their symbolic role as national or semi-national institutions but also in their epistemic authority to mediate public understandings of both the past and the present.

In this context, the two main factors influencing the choice of these case studies — specifically their function in expressing Nordic exceptionalism and their ability to address decolonial critiques — should be viewed as connected to these broader institutional circumstances. It is not merely their prominence or ease of access that qualifies them as suitable cases, but instead the unique histories and knowledge frameworks inherent in them. As such, and following Yin's view that case selection should be guided by the potential for comparative insight (2018), this study strategically selects three case study museums that share these institutional characteristics while differing in national contexts and approaches.

Scandinavian countries have a wide range of museums. With Denmark being home to 367 museums (Statistics Denmark, 2023), Sweden approximately 300 (Sandvik *et al.*, 2024), and Norway 102 (Statistiks sentralbyrå, 2023), it has been crucial to accurately pinpoint the structures to be examined within the scope of the research. As such, considering the plenitude of museums and the research goals, I have felt it necessary to narrow down the research to focus on a specific type of museum, particularly those with national features, which I will outline below.

There are two key reasons for this: to explore how museums contribute to Nordic exceptionalism and to examine how institutions that preserve national narratives and foster citizenship respond to calls for decolonisation.

In terms of identifying museums' role in contributing to Nordic exceptionalism, the main factor in this choice was the influence of these museums in shaping national identity and citizenship. According to Sharon Macdonald (2003), museums play a significant role in shaping individuals' sense of belonging to the community of which they are part.

Similarly, as discussed in Chapter 2, Bennett's idea (1995), which builds on Foucault's concept of governmentality, effectively demonstrates that museums are active participants in shaping 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 1983).

However, it is a conceptual inquiry to determine what requirements a museum needs to have this kind of impact and be recognised as national. As Mason highlights (2007, p. 31):

how and where does one locate 'the nation' in 'the museum' or vice versa? Is it to be found in governmental policy, internal museum policy, organizational structures, collecting policies, collections themselves, specific displays in specific galleries, the architecture of buildings or individual galleries, display techniques, floor-plans, brochures, marketing materials, audio guides, individual objects or labels? Or can it be found in what politicians, the press, museum professionals and ultimately visitors make of it?

Designating a museum as 'national' does not require this phrase in its name or obtaining state approval to validate this role. Likewise, it is not a prerequisite for a museum to be funded and directed by the national government, as it can operate independently of it (Watson, 2021).

Museums can attain significance through the prominence of their collections, driven by internal factors such as curatorial preferences or external factors like funding and sponsors. In national museums, however, a nation's origin stories, processes of independence, cultural characteristics, myths, and legends are portrayed through tangible materials, making these elements accessible to the public (Aronsson, Knell and the Eunamus consortium, 2012, p. 10). To reinforce and legitimise their narrative, these institutions draw on scientific evidence from various disciplines, including anthropology, archaeology, art history, geology, and geography, which constitute the 'exhibitionary disciplines' Bennett mentions – instruments used to glorify European nations and marginalise others in order to place the citizen in a key role for so-called civilising (1988, p. 87). This provides flexibility for these institutions so they can be in many forms:

‘technology, science, natural history, folk, art, anthropology, archaeology, geology, geography, climate, design, war, photography, industry’ (Watson, 2021, p. 22).

In relation to the second reason, it is beneficial to examine such institutions that preserve the national narrative and cultivate a sense of citizenship in the framework of this research, which aims to assess their response to the call for decolonisation. If museums serve as custodians of the nation's history, they could not only convey its triumphs but also defeats, mistakes, and remorse. However, this may often not be the case, especially considering the objectives these museums serve. As Bennett points out (1995), the narrative presented in museums necessitates the portrayal of various 'Others' to uphold the perception of Europe's superiority. This portrayal strengthens individuals to see themselves as agents of progress and civilisation, thereby fostering a sense of citizenship. In this regard, the ethnographic collections brought to the mainland during the era of colonisation contribute to the construction of the 'Other' and also promote an exceptionalist mindset. However, rather than creating this 'Other,' decolonial thought advocates for the inclusion of the 'Other' in the narrative, with increasing access and involvement as stakeholders. As discussed in Chapter 2, this has prompted museums to take steps towards decolonisation by acknowledging and recognising colonial connections. This is especially crucial for Scandinavia, where limited awareness of the colonial past due to exceptionalist perspectives could be addressed through such institutions, offering an excellent opportunity to confront colonial histories.

The establishment of national museums in Denmark and Sweden during the 19th century mirrored the trend in the rest of Europe. In contrast, Norway did not institute a museum recognised by the state, parliament, or government on a national scale during this period. Despite this, the museums established during this period still exhibited national characteristics, even if they were not formally named as such (Amundsen, 2011). Therefore, I consider national features in museums other than those simply named 'national', like those described above. As a result, I managed to identify several museums across the three countries that exhibit similar characteristics: in Norway - the Museum of Cultural History, The National Gallery, and the Norwegian Folk Museum (Amundsen, 2011); in Denmark - the National Museum of Denmark, the National Gallery of Denmark,

the Museum of National History, and the Danish Folk Museum (Zipsane, 2011); and in Sweden - the National Portrait Gallery, National Gallery, Museum of National Antiquities, Skansen Open Air Museum, the National Museums of World Culture, and the Museum of Modern Art (Widén, 2011). As there are many museums with a national character, I have decided to concentrate on a single museum from each country to streamline the research and ensure its relevance and quality. I have prioritised museums with collections pertaining to colonialism, specifically those dominated by ethnography, by considering their accessibility and impact within the country. As such, I decided on: the National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen (NMD), the Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg, Sweden (MWC), and the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo, Norway (MCH). Given each museum's extensive size, I decided to analyse a single exhibition from each museum.

For Denmark, I had the National Museum of Denmark in mind even before beginning my research due to its outstanding reputation. However, upon further investigation, I discovered that the museum holds a significant position in the country's archaeology field and is described by Zipsane as 'the ammunition for Danish nationalism' (2011, p. 215). Furthermore, its extensive ethnographic collection increased my interest. What truly distinguished it from other museums was its exhibition focusing on the colonial history of the country. This exhibition, *Voices from the Colonies*, will be the subject of analysis in this research.

For Sweden, on the other hand, I believed it would be fitting to centre my attention on the city of Gothenburg due to its significant role in the country's colonial history, particularly in industrial and commercial relations. Additionally, akin to the NMD, this city is also home to a museum of increasing renown. The National Museums of World Culture, comprising four museums, inaugurated a new institution here in 2004: the Museum of World Culture (Världskulturmuseet). The museum's vision to present its ethnographic collection in a multifaceted way rather than a linear arrangement was a key factor in choosing it as a case study (Museum of World Culture, 2020, p. 7):

Our vision is a bigger, more humane and more inclusive world. Our museums are places where everyone feels welcome and included. We engage in active dialogue with our visitors and users – they are our foremost ambassadors ... By showing the world from different perspectives, we give people the opportunity to challenge patterns of thought, values and behaviors ... We develop innovative museums for the world of tomorrow by being collection anchored, knowledge based and audience focused.

Considering this research context, a museum that approaches ethnographic collections from this perspective could be helpful for conceiving possibilities in the sense of decolonisation and comparing them with other museums. During my visit, the museum had two 'permanent' exhibitions, but only the exhibition titled *Crossroads* was analysed.

Lastly, Given Norway's unique historical position in the context of colonisation, it has been challenging to find suitable museums for research compared to other countries. The nearly five hundred years of history under the dominance of the other two Scandinavian nations has greatly influenced the development of museums in Norway. Consequently, Norway did not establish a nationally recognised museum by the state, parliament, or government during this time. However, this does not mean that there are no museums of national character. In this context, focusing on museums with close ties to universities and academic staff played a key role in defining such nature. During this period, the universities and academics placed a strong emphasis on archaeological and ethnographic collections to scientifically identify and support Norwegian national characteristics (Amundsen, 2011). This will be detailed in Chapter 6. In this regard, I chose the Museum of Cultural History due to its significant role in preserving Norwegian national identity, as evidenced by its strong ties to the esteemed University of Oslo and its ownership of the largest archaeological and ethnographic collection in the country (Museum of Cultural History, no date). Here, the focus will be on the exhibition titled *Control – Attempting to Tame the World*.

#### 4.2.2. Display Analysis

Museum and exhibition curators have grown in expertise over time, and thus, analysis at the academic level has become increasingly crucial. An analysis of displays is particularly important because they invite visitors to engage both with individual objects and with general interpretations of past, present or future. As mentioned, displays are more than a glimpse of the world, though it can be fallaciously conceived as reflective (Whitehead, 2016a). They serve as a connection point between decision-makers, curators, tangible objects, and the political and social context of the venue. It is important to recognise that these institutions, which construct knowledge and have a lasting impact on audiences, cannot be neutral. Examining them allows one to uncover the social and political influences that shape their operations.

Anthropologist and museum curator Henrietta Lidchi's discussion of the topic of poetics and politics of exhibiting other cultures (1997) describes the factors that influence the knowledge production of these highly adaptive organisations in her work. Lidchi presents two comprehensive assessments to identify the factors behind these practices. The first employs semiotics to explore how language and exhibitions construct meaning, named the 'poetics of exhibiting: the practice of producing meaning through the internal ordering and conjugation of the separate but related components of an exhibition' (Lidchi, 1997, p. 168). The components are texts, images, and objects that form representations. The 'poetics' here refers to the aesthetic and semiotic processes that show how these components enable museums to narrate and exhibit the cultures of others. The second critique focuses on discourse and power, called the 'politics of exhibiting – the role of exhibitions/museums in the production of *social knowledge*' (Lidchi, 1997, p. 187, original emphasis). According to Lidchi, museums are not neutral places but rather are a part of the power structures that reflect and perpetuate colonial histories and imperial ideologies. The politics of exhibiting involve the ways in which museums wield power over the representation of other cultures, often framing them through a Western lens that reinforces hierarchical relationships between the coloniser and the colonised.

In a similar vein, Moser indicates that displaying involves more than simply using detailed techniques or arranging materials in a specific order, an analysis needs to be considerate not only of 'visual and textual' awareness but also the 'spatial analysis, design history,

and the history of collections' (Moser, 2010, p. 23). Such a method requires a visitor who, as Lindauer describes, questions critically the ways in which objects are represented, tries to conceive a museum's purposes for those selections, specifies who benefits or suffers the most, and determines the impact of an exhibition on visitors (Lindauer, 2006, p. 204). This method is heavily influenced by the constructionist perspective which argues there is no absolute truth. Accordingly, museum exhibitions may/may not offer a singular truth or lie, and thus, display analysis helps to grasp the epistemological rationale of the techniques operated (Whitehead, 2016a). As this research investigates the discrepancy between the Scandinavian countries' approaches to their colonial times and their positionality today and does this by considering Mignolo's decoloniality, it is important to identify such epistemic rationale in museum's narratives. For example, Widén observes that Swedish museums did not exhibit their 17th-century imperial ambitions. Rather, these museums have been heavily focused on today's issues with the current geographical scope (2011, p. 888). Further, some researchers were bold enough to consider Sweden a 'good coloniser' (Ahnlund, 1937, cited in Fur, 2013, p. 18). In this sense, Whitehead's argument that the propositional knowledge created and presented in the museum actively shapes society highlights the importance of display analysis. This method allows me to interrogate specific details in great depth and to understand how they represent, or indeed silence, aspects of colonial history. It is also useful to consider the historiographical politics of Scandinavian nations and museum roles within that context: what stories do the museums tell about these nations? Are these affected by colonialism in any way, and if so, in what ways?

Various analysis methods are considered in display analysis. Many researchers agree that all aspects of the exhibition have an impact on meaning creation: the architecture, the location, the lighting, the colours of the walls, the furniture, the arrangement of rooms, and the facilities (Lindauer, 2006; Moser, 2010; Whitehead, Eckersley and Mason, 2012; Whitehead, 2016a, 2016b; Thurston, 2017). As part of her analysis, cultural theorist Mieke Bal asserts that museum exhibitions possess narratological components, similar to those found in film and photography (2007). Alternatively, exhibit and evaluation consultant Beverly Serrell advocates a framework that takes into account the process of museum formation, in her evaluation and analysis (2016). These considerations are

crucial, particularly in the case of the museum in Norway. The exhibition being scrutinised offers a catalogue that is available for an additional fee. While this catalogue is highly valuable for providing more comprehensive information about the exhibition and elucidating certain aspects that are not covered in the presentation, its sale for an extra fee restricts access to it for some visitors. Nonetheless, it is integrated into this study and is regarded as part of the exhibition.

More commonly, Lindauer (2006), Mason (2008, unpublished), Moser (2010), Whitehead (2002, 2016a, 2016b), and Whitehead, Eckersley, and Mason (2012) focus on analysing museums in a more critical framework that considers power relations. This research has taken these analysis frameworks into account and adopts mainly Lindauer's approach. Though her framework heavily influences the analysis, additional questions on decolonisation are incorporated to align data collection with the primary objective and enhance the research's authenticity. A sample of the framework is provided in Appendix A and B.

Museums were not notified prior to data collection for two key reasons. First, it allowed me to experience and comprehend the exhibitions from the perspective of a regular visitor. Second, it helped minimise the risk of last-minute alterations to the exhibitions, which might have been prompted by heightened sensitivities around decolonisation movements.

In the course of the research, I initially planned to visit each museum once. However, Norway's historically liminal position led me to some sort of in-betweenness to identify the most appropriate case study. As a result, the country was visited on two occasions to select the most suitable case study. The specific dates for the visits were as follows: Denmark on the 11th to the 18th of July 2022, Sweden on the 18th to the 25th of July 2022, Norway on the 14th to the 26th of October 2022 and the 14th to 19th of November 2023. As such, this research is primarily centred around the dates of these visits, with a focus on the most recent visit to Norway. During these visits, the analysis framework is filled out according to first impressions and all of the exhibitions at each museum were thoroughly documented through photography, video recording, and audio-visual recording for later inspection.

### **4.2.3. Semi-structured Interviews**

To support the data gathered from display analysis, I also conducted semi-structured interviews with museum staff. A semi-structured interview is a qualitative data collection technique in which the researcher asks an informant a series of open-ended questions (Given, 2008; Silverman, 2014; Adams, 2015; O'Reilly and Kiyimba, 2015; Bryman *et al.*, 2021). It is a valuable method for providing interpretations, not facts (Warren, 2001, p. 83) and in this method, the participants are considered as meaning-makers (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995, p. 81). This is particularly important because such a method allows me to gain a deeper understanding of their perceptions (Halperin and Heath, 2017) related to their decisions in exhibition production. I preferred to use this method over the structured interviews because, as Yin indicates (2016, p. 142), it gives freedom to both the researcher and interviewee: This flexibility enables the conversation to unfold more organically, adapting to the directions in which participants' responses steer the discussion. This adaptability also proves advantageous to me by allowing for a more in-depth exploration of topics and areas that I may not have initially considered. Additionally, this freedom allows the researcher to not 'adopt any uniform behaviour or demeanour for every interview' which can help in building rapport with the interviewee. Lastly, by asking open-ended questions, I can gain a deeper understanding of the interviewee's opinions, motivations, and experiences. This allows me to collect rich, comprehensive data that can yield significant insights into the topic.

An essential component of such interviews is the necessity for intensive listening and a systematic effort to fully comprehend what individuals are expressing (Rubin and Rubin, 1995, p. 17, cited in Yin, 2016, p. 142). This requires active participation from the researcher in the discussion, utilising techniques like probing and follow-up inquiries to elucidate and elaborate on the interviewee's statements. Intensive listening also entails paying attention to non-verbal cues and the broader context of the interviewee's comments, which can offer additional layers of insight. However, the fact that the interviews were conducted on Zoom made it difficult to identify these non-verbal cues.

I initially believed that interviewing the museum director would be beneficial, as they are the highest authority involved in managing and approving the final version of exhibitions.

I also thought it would be effective to have these participants provide detailed insights into the extent to which the museum was impacted by external factors. Furthermore, I recognised the importance of interviewing the curator(s) to gain a deeper understanding of the decision-making process and the curation of an exhibition, including what is included, considered, or excluded. In this regard, I employed a theoretical sampling again, similar to a case study, to identify participants who could provide the most valuable insights in the research context. It was essential that the participants had an active involvement in the organisation of the selected exhibitions. Nevertheless, I was also mindful of practical considerations and could not afford to be overly selective. This balance was crucial in the selection process. Ultimately, I only managed to conduct interviews with some of the curators from selected museums due to their availability. The individuals interviewed for the research, their affiliated organisations, and the interview dates are as follows:

<b>Institution</b>	<b>Interviewee and Position</b>	<b>Date of Interview</b>
National Museum of Denmark	Mette Boritz/ Chief Curator	14/05/2023
	Louise Sebro/ Former Curator	11/08/2023
Museum of World Culture	Helen Arfvidsson/ Curator	13/12/2023
	Michael Barrett/ Curator	13/12/2023
	Johan Rödström/ Exhibition Producer	15/12/2023
Museum of Cultural History	Gro Birgit Ween	28/02/2024

It would be accurate to categorise these interviews as elite interviews, defined as 'the use of interviews to study those at the "top" of any stratification system' (Moyser, 2006, p. 86). Elite interviews are helpful in gathering insights from individuals in influential positions or with specialised knowledge relevant to the research topic. These individuals can offer

unique perspectives and in-depth information that may not be attainable through other methods.

It is important to note that while I sought consent from all participants, one individual did not grant this. As a result, the data obtained from this participant was excluded from the research. Additionally, given that the focus of the study is colonialism, a sensitive topic for both Indigenous communities and museums, it was possible that museum staff were hesitant to engage in certain discussions. Participants were assured that they could remain anonymous if they chose to do so; however, given the specific context of interviewing curators from three different museums, complete anonymity is challenging, as others within the organisation or by external parties may easily infer their identities. Luckily, they expressed no concerns about this. Moreover, the advantageous feature of the semi-structured interview approach, which is its ability to facilitate a conversational atmosphere during interviews, was beneficial (Yin, 2016).

#### **4.2.4. Pilot Study**

Prior to conducting fieldwork in Scandinavia, a pilot study was carried out at the Museum of Anatolian Civilizations in Ankara to improve the applicability and effectiveness of the display analysis method. Being able to study display analysis at a museum in my own country was motivating and made it more convenient to practice. Nevertheless, even in a familiar environment, this practice underscored the challenges and significance of efficiently documenting data. Furthermore, this experience emphasised not only the collection of data but also the importance of securely storing it.

#### **4.3. Reflexivity**

According to Longhurst (2009), reflexivity involves critically analysing one's own viewpoints to gain fresh perspectives in research. In essence, this involves considering how my methods, values, biases, and decisions impact the knowledge I produce. This viewpoint emphasises that knowledge always mirrors a researcher's position within a particular time and social context (Bryman *et al.*, 2021).

Throughout my research, I frequently encountered a common question: Why, as a Turkish person, was I studying Scandinavian geography? I have often found it challenging to provide a completely satisfying answer to this question. The history, welfare, unique natural landscapes, and myths of Scandinavian geography have cultivated a utopian ideal place to live in my mind, drawing me towards this region. However, this perspective began to shift during my master's degree studies when I became aware of the colonial history of these countries. This realisation sparked a growing sense of curiosity, prompting me to delve further into my research with a newfound intention.

Of course, my not-so-convincing justification leaves unanswered the question of why a Turkish citizen analyses this geographic area from a decolonial perspective. Or, what makes a Turkish citizen's analysis valid/special on this geographic area from a decolonial perspective? Historically, Scandinavian countries and the Republic of Türkiye have had almost no significant relationship with each other or have not colonised each other – with the exception of the union between Denmark and the Ottoman Empire, to some predecessor of the Republic of Türkiye, against the Holy Roman Empire from 1618 to 1648 and King Charles XII of Sweden asylum in the Ottoman Empire in 1709.

To clarify my stance and rationalise an analysis of these countries from a decolonial standpoint, a brief historical overview of the Republic of Türkiye would be beneficial. After the defeat in the First World War, the Entente Powers divided the Ottoman Empire and sought to establish control in line with their colonialist ideals. Territories such as Cyprus and Northern Iraq fell under British rule, while Northern Syria and parts of modern-day Türkiye came under French control, and they were planning to establish mandates to sustain control. However, Mustafa Kemal and his comrades' successful military resistance from 1919 to 1923 prevented these goals. From this perspective, the emergence of Türkiye as a nation-state can be considered an example of decolonisation in the historical sense against the colonial powers, although this independence has not understood within Turkish social consciousness as 'decolonisation'.

The movement for change, which began during the late Ottoman period, gained momentum during the establishment of the new nation by integrating Türkiye into the capitalist world, 'modernising' the state and society and strengthening relations with

Europe. This process of westernisation persisted for many years. However, over the last two decades, there has been a shift in attitude, fluctuating between de-westernisation and re-westernisation. I do not want to stray from the subject and get into Turkish politics here. Nevertheless, this fluctuation period aligns with the period during which I was trying to find my own identity. On the one hand, there is a belief in the unconditional truth and competence of the West and everything it produces. On the other, there is an awareness of the hypocrisy of the West, its foundation on blood, and violence, and its self-interested nature. These conflicting perspectives have coexisted within me. Due to this in-betweenness, I find myself ambivalent towards both viewpoints. In his work, Mignolo discusses decoloniality as a distinct approach separate from re-westernisation and de-westernisation (2021, p. 6).

... the near future seems to hang on three trajectories. One is offered by re-Westernization — a counterrevolution that many like myself believe is getting out of hand — to retain the privileges of unipolarity. The second is offered by de-Westernization's confrontation of unipolarity, opening up a world order that is multipolar and already here. Both are state-led politics. The third trajectory is decolonization/decoloniality led by the emerging global and diverse political society, taking their/our destinies in their/our own hands (Mignolo, 2021, p. 6).

As a researcher caught between different trajectories, Mignolo's decoloniality approach resonates with me, offering an alternative path. In this context, unfortunately it is not possible for me to call myself a completely decolonised subject as of now, but I can say that I am trying to move in that direction. This state of in-betweenness is evident in the tension between my integration of Mignolo's and other postcolonial thinkers' ideas and the traditional methods I have employed. This, once again, underscores the challenges inherent in achieving true decolonisation. In this regard, this perspective, coupled with

my lack of direct involvement in the Scandinavian region, will enable me to develop unique and impartial but hopefully more balanced opinions.

#### **4.4. Limitation**

This research has encountered many limitations along the way. Some have had a major impact, while others have had more superficial effects on the content of the research.

The language problem is one of the main ones. I am a Turkish citizen, and English is my second language, and I do not know any Scandinavian/Nordic languages. As such, in this research that focuses on the Scandinavian region, comprehending the related literature from these countries has been a significant challenge. For instance, I encountered difficulty understanding two publications related to the National Museum of Denmark's *Voices from the Colonies* exhibition mentioned in the literature review. Despite financial constraints preventing me from seeking professional assistance, my Danish/American friend Maddy Pedersen generously translated these articles for me. Additionally, to understand some of the displays in Sweden, I used translation programmes such as Google Translate, ChatGPT, and Deepl simultaneously and comparatively. However, it is possible to say that there are other works that I may have missed or could not get translated, underscoring the significant impact of language barriers on my research.

Language barrier has continued to be a concern in my research, extending beyond academic literature. This time, the issue was with understanding the texts and labels in the museums. While each museum provides an English option for its exhibits, the rhetoric and differences in meaning between the original and translated versions of texts and labels are not fully comprehended. This issue is particularly pronounced in the Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg, where certain voice recordings lack an English option. English versions of these texts were requested from the staff; however, this effort was unsuccessful.

Importantly, this experience aligns not only with that of international visitors who do not speak Scandinavian languages, but also with visitors from former colonies, many of whom are unlikely to have proficiency in Danish, Swedish, or Norwegian. This linguistic distance can further entrench marginalisation within the museum space, subtly

reinforcing hierarchies of access and interpretation. In this sense, my own positionality as a non-Scandinavian, non-Western researcher placed me in a comparable position to those visitors, revealing how language policy can act as a gatekeeping mechanism. This shared experience exposed how exhibitions often assume a local or Western audience as the default, even while professing inclusivity. As such, the language barrier became a productive lens for interrogating how museums construct narratives of belonging, exclusion, and audience address.

On the other hand, the inability to speak the native tongue of these nations can also offer special perspectives. Such limitation made me more focused on how the museum frames national narratives for international visitors, allowing for a focused analysis of how exhibitions are designed for global audiences. In this way, identifying museums' tendency to simplify or prioritise certain narratives for non-local audiences and reveal the institution's intended portrayal of concepts became more apparent. The language barrier also created a critical distance that enabled me to obtain a more detached perspective on the exhibitions. This led to a deeper engagement with the non-verbal elements of the display, such as visual components, spatial designs, sounds, and feelings, which play a crucial role in shaping visitor interpretation in addition to the written text.

Last but not least, language also posed a challenge during the interviews. Although the fact that all the museum staff being interviewed speak English as a second language has helped to mitigate this barrier, it has led to some issues with understanding their pronunciation and accents. To address this, I used the paid AI service called Otter.ai to transcribe the interview recordings. Once the transcription was complete, the recordings were promptly deleted from the Otter.ai system to address potential security concerns. Further, when encountering pronunciation difficulties, I enlisted the help of my partner, Cait Williams, who is a native English speaker.

It is also necessary to recognise that being a Turkish citizen doing a PhD in the UK has its limitations. This limitation is unavoidable due to the nature of this research. As articulated in Chapter 2, the focus of this research has been heavily influenced by decoloniality, as proposed by Walter D. Mignolo, but also incorporates relevant ideas presented by postcolonial thinkers. As outlined again in Chapter 2, a fundamental critique of postcolonialism by decoloniality is its emphasis on the post-enlightenment

era, particularly the British and French empires, and its critique from within the Western context, which contributes to perpetuating the Eurocentric perspective of knowledge rooted in Western modernity (Salvatore, 2010, p. 335). This can be associated with the argument put forth by Theodor Adorno in his *Aesthetic Theory* (Adorno and Hullo-Kentor, 1997). Adorno posits that critiquing the existing social and political order cannot be fully achieved using the epistemological tools that are a product of this order. Indeed, it is a challenge to envision anything beyond the conventional ideas, language, and ways of experiencing the world that have been established. Although this study does not examine the more prominent empires like the British or French, nor does it focus solely on the post-Enlightenment period, it remains in the middle because it produces knowledge within the West by conducting it at a western university, particularly in a city that played a significant role in the industrialisation period of colonialism. Consequently, this somewhat inhibits my capacity to critically examine coloniality due to the influence of my location, society, and thought processes. For instance, such influence is evident in the dilemmas I encountered while seeking my own writing style: the Western academic preference for using the active voice in writing versus my persistent inclination to use the passive voice. A Blackfoot researcher Leroy Little Bear discusses the use of language in Western expression in the following way (2012, p. 518):

Western knowledge operates from a linear, singular view; it views the world from order beneath chaos; it is very noun oriented; knowledge is about oneself in relation to everything else in a relativistic sense.

I made an effort to mitigate the use of passive voice in this thesis and tried to use a more active voice. However, there may still be instances of passive voice in the analyses and critiques throughout the research.

Perhaps even more importantly, Cusicanqui's criticism of Mignolo for establishing an intellectual hierarchy (see p. 29) can also be directed at me (2012). As a PhD researcher, I do not consider myself influential enough to create an intellectual hierarchy within this institution; however, it is more likely to be part of an existing hierarchy. Understanding this

hierarchy requires exploring Newcastle University's connection to colonialism. As a material example, the university acknowledges the fact that King Leopold II of Belgium financially contributed to the construction of the Armstrong Building, the place where I have spent nearly every working day and, at times, weekends for the past four years. Archive data indicates that the university actively tried to build a conversation and relationship with King Leopold. It is worth noting that Newcastle University was founded in 1963, having previously been part of Durham University. Therefore, these attempts to build conversation and relationships can be diverted to Durham. Although it is an assumption, I hardly believe that Newcastle University has completely abandoned the ethical frameworks, attitudes, and insights inherited from Durham University immediately after its inauguration. These kinds of relationships are not easily forgotten or erased.

This institution's complex interplay in colonial relations can be seen in a contemporary context in the diverse reactions to two significant wars that have escalated during my PhD — namely, the war in Ukraine and the genocide in Gaza. On the one hand, the university has notably expressed support for Ukraine through actions such as banning certain engineering programs like Agisoft Metashape, which is developed by Russian companies. On the other hand, the protests on campus decrying the genocide in Gaza highlight the concerns about the university's ties to companies that supply arms to the Israeli military. In this latter case, Newcastle University still continues its relationship with these companies. Of course, these observations are my perspective as a student; the university may likely dispute these connections. Nevertheless, this situation raises critical questions about the extent to which my research can genuinely be considered decolonial in such an environment, especially when being mindful of them. This, I believe, has affected me both materially and in terms of my sense/being — sometimes constraining me while at other times encouraging a more critical perspective.

Given these, I acknowledge that there are substantial limitations, including my unfamiliarity with understanding the Scandinavian context due to my Turkish identity, my potential to miss various nuances due to language, and the possibility of contributing to the perpetuation of the existing Eurocentric intellectual hierarchy due to the fact that the research is conducted within a Western country and institution, as in the decolonial

criticism of postcolonialism or in Cusicanqui's criticism of Mignolo (2012). However, as mentioned above, drawing from my identity shaped by Türkiye's fluctuation between re-westernisation and de-westernisation, using a trajectory produced outside the West, decoloniality, may help overcome these limitations. One might think of these as what Adorno demonstrates in relation to art and aesthetics as 'nonidentical' in the cracks and gaps of the existing socio-cultural order (Adorno and Hultot-Kentor, 1997, p. 176). Furthermore, my supervisors' guidance, with their expertise in mainly a postcolonial but also decolonial context and their familiarity and close relation with this geography, was also beneficial to overcome these limitations.

In addition to the major limitations, several relatively smaller constraints have been encountered during the course of this research. These included the rising cost of living due to Brexit, inflation, as well as the increasing prevalence of far-right movements in Europe and racist protests in the UK. Dealing with these challenges took a toll on me mentally during this journey. The Covid-19 pandemic was perhaps the most effective among these. Although I commenced my PhD in January 2021, thereby avoiding the peak of the pandemic, the UK lockdown that coincided with the beginning of my studies had a detrimental effect on the initial phase of my PhD journey. Despite this relatively 'manageable' disruption, the genuine concern posed by the pandemic was its impact on planned fieldwork in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway. Initially, I had scheduled to visit these countries at 6-month intervals, beginning first in Denmark in January 2022, Sweden in July 2022, Norway in January 2023 and, if necessary, the last fieldwork in July 2023. However, I had to revise my plans due to extended visa applications, limited flight options, and each country's specific post-pandemic requirements. To prevent possibly counterproductive situations, I combined trips to Denmark and Sweden in July 2022 to address these challenges.

Additionally, some interview participants requested to view the finished product where their interview data was utilised in order to provide full consent. Although this research presents data in compliance with their consent, this requirement may diminish the impact of the meanings conveyed by the answers given during the interview. This enables participants to control their portrayal by requesting changes or omissions to safeguard

their interests when evaluating the final product. Consequently, this undermines the authenticity of the original responses.

#### **4.5. Ethics**

At Newcastle University, students are expected to obtain ethical approval for their research from their respective schools. The research involved data collected from museum exhibitions and interviews with museum staff, all of whom provided individual consent. As part of this process, I completed the necessary forms and obtained ethical approval from the HaSS Ethics Committee on 30 March 2021. Accordingly, I conducted the research by considering these standards, and I did not encounter any problems.

#### **4.6. Conclusion**

This chapter has presented the methodological approach employed for this research, focusing on three case study institutions. The combination of qualitative methods within each case study provided complementary data, resulting in a more comprehensive understanding of how Scandinavian colonial history is acknowledged and current interpretations and shifts in practices in the context of the decolonial turn. A comprehensive display analysis approach has produced valuable data intended to reveal the overarching narratives, knowledge, and discourse embedded in the displays. These are enriched by the analysis of organisational documentation and secondary sources and in-depth semi-structured interviews. In this way, the data is triangulated in order to increase the 'field of vision and to cross-validate findings' (Bryman *et al.*, 2021, p. 364). Museum research is a complex task, especially when conducted by someone unfamiliar with the geography in question. Nevertheless, the chosen methods for this study have yielded valuable insights, providing a detailed perspective on the Scandinavian view of colonial complicity and uncovering decolonial possibilities.

## CHAPTER 5 DENMARK, NATIONAL MUSEUM OF DENMARK

### 5.1. Chapter Introduction

This chapter analyses the National Museum of Denmark (NMD) and presents how Denmark's colonial history and decolonisation are implemented in this museum's narrative. The chapter focuses on the *Voices from the Colonies* exhibition, taking into consideration the size and scope of the NMD. The exhibition was opened in 2017 and I visited in July 2022. The chapter will start with the museum's layout, followed by a layout of the exhibition area and analysis. The analysis will be presented taking into account the route I took to visit the exhibition. As described in the methodology, Margaret Lindauer's 'critical museum visitor' framework was used.

### 5.2. Museum Layout

As mentioned in Chapter 4, display data was collected in July 2022. During that time, the museum was hosting eight exhibitions. There was only one temporary exhibition:

- *'Join the Vikings - On the Raid'*.

The permanent exhibitions include:

- *Danish Prehistory,*
- *Danish Middle Ages and Renaissance,*
- *Stories of Denmark (1660 - 2000),*
- *Voices from the Colonies,*
- *Classical, Egyptian and Near Eastern Antiquities,*
- *Ethnographic Treasures, and*
- *Cosplayers! Manga Youth.*



Figure 6: Entrance Hall, Source, Author

The museum building was constructed in a southeast-northwest direction. At the main entrance, visitors enter a large glass-enclosed entrance hall that houses the museum's reception area, shop, and amenities (Figure 6). The exhibition spaces are located on three floors in the east and west wings of the hall. The eastern part of the building additionally has a central courtyard and rooms surrounding it. The east wing of the ground floor is devoted to the exhibition *Danish Prehistory*, while to the west is *the Children's Museum*, which was closed at the time of my visit. The first floor

includes the *Danish Middle Ages and Renaissance* and *Voices from the Colonies* exhibition in the east wing, *Join the Vikings - on Raid* and *Ethnographic Treasures* in the west. The second floor comprises *Stories of Denmark (1660-2000)* exhibition in the east and the continuation of the *Ethnographic Treasures* and *Cosplayers! Manga Youth* exhibition is located in the west. The last floor of the building includes *Classical, Egyptian, and Near Eastern Antiquities* exhibition (Figure 7).

As the name of these exhibitions suggests, NMD includes representations that cover a broad span of Danish history, from the prehistoric period to contemporary history. Additionally, the last three exhibitions highlight Denmark's engagement with global narratives. *The Classical, Egyptian, and Near Eastern Antiquities* exhibition reflects Denmark's European intellectual traditions and the Western history of exploration, while the *Ethnographic Treasures* underscore the extent of colonial practices and Denmark's participation. Meanwhile, the *Cosplayers! Manga Youth* exhibition highlights how contemporary Danish culture is shaped by modern global interactions, positioning

Denmark within current international cultural exchanges. Collectively, these exhibits convey a narrative of Denmark as both a European and global actor, shaped by a diverse array of complex historical forces.

Due to the museum's large size and the variety of objects it houses, the exhibitions demonstrate diverse approaches in terms of representation. Objects in display cases, audio recordings and footage to support narratives, video testimonies, interactives, and contextual sounds and decorative elements were used in the exhibitions. During the visit, I could easily observe the differences between the characteristics of the exhibitions and the period during which they were built. For example, a more recent temporary exhibition, *Join the Vikings – on Raid*, which opened in 2021, features more narrative elements, modern technology tools, and interactivity. In contrast, *Ethnographic Treasures*, opened over twenty years ago, is more monotonous, less explanatory, and follows a traditional 'ethnographic' style representation due to its long-term presence at the museum.

In this context, it seems possible to examine some of the exhibitions in the museum within the scope of this project, one of which is *the Ethnographic Treasures*. This exhibition is particularly significant due to its long-standing presence in the museum and the diverse ethnographic objects it showcases, specifically chosen from regions that were central to Denmark's colonial activities. Thus, it represents a meaningful focus for the project.

Another exhibition, *Stories of Denmark (1660-2000)*, offers a chronological overview of Denmark's historical development, examined through a socio-cultural lens. In this regard, it shares overlapping themes with Denmark's colonial endeavours within the broader historical context. As such, this exhibition can be considered relevant to the research.

However, both exhibitions were ultimately excluded from the research for several reasons. Although *the Stories of Denmark (1660-2000)* is the museum's most comprehensive exhibition, featuring thirty-seven rooms, it only addresses colonial activities in a single room, primarily focusing on their commercial aspects. Consequently, its deficiency in offering visitors a holistic and in-depth understanding of Danish colonialism was the primary reason for its exclusion from the study.

*The Ethnographic Treasures* exhibition, due to its long lifespan, enables a comparison between past museological practices and contemporary approaches. This creates an opportunity to analyse the evolution of colonial mentality over time, if such a transformation exists. However, the exhibition's extensive and comprehensive collection presented significant challenges concerning the depth and duration of the research. Consequently, both these structural obstacles, which could threaten the feasibility of the study, and the presence of *Voices from the Colonies* — an exhibition that examines Denmark's colonial history from a more modern and critical standpoint — prompted a shift in focus toward the latter exhibition.



**Udvalgte  
højdepunkter**  
Selected highlights

-  **31** Ægyptisk mumie  
Egyptian Mummy
-  **240** Dukkehuse  
Doll's Houses
-  **237** Besøg 1970'erne  
Visit the 1970s
-  **223** Bedlens økse  
The Executioner's Axe
-  **273** Arktisk skattekammer  
Arctic Treasures
-  **102** Dagmarkorset  
The Dagmar Cross
-  **128** Stemmer fra kolonierne  
Voices from the Colonies
-  **121** Kongens Kunstammer  
The King's Curiosities
-  **171** Arktisk folk  
People of the Arctic
-  **22** Guldhornene  
The Golden Horns
-  **12** Solvognen  
The Sun Chariot
-  **9** Egtvedpigen  
The Egved Girl
-  **51** Børnenes museum  
The Children's Museum

- 0**

  -  Børnenes Museum  
The Children's Museum
  -  Danmarks Oldtid  
Danish Prehistory
- 1**

  -  Jordens Folk  
Peoples of the Earth
  -  Danmarks Middelalder og Renaissance  
Danish Middle Ages and Renaissance
- 2**

  -  Etnografiske Skatkamre  
Ethnographical Treasures
  -  Legetøj  
Toys
  -  Danmarks historier 1660-2000  
Stories of Denmark 1660-2000
- 3**

  -  Antiksamlingen  
Classical, Egyptian and Near Eastern Antiquities

Figure 7: Layout, Source: National Museum of Denmark Pamphlet

### 5.3. Voices from the Colonies Exhibition and its Layout

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the history of the museum's establishment coincides with the country's colonial era, and as a result, it has been necessary to confront its legacy. This was exacerbated in 2017 by the 100th anniversary of the sale of Denmark's last colonial territory, the West Indies, to the United States, which resulted in many new exhibitions on Denmark's colonial complicity (Clopot, Andersen and Oldfield, 2022). Various events and discussions took place across the country and the NMD planned to open a large-scale temporary exhibition devoted solely to the West Indies. Both interviewees explained that this plan was cancelled due to insufficient financial support and the existence of several temporary exhibitions related to the same territory around the country. Instead, as one of the curators of the exhibition, Louise Sebro, indicated at the 2017 Annual RCMC conference, the NMD has chosen to launch an exhibition that offers a broader view of Danish colonial history beginning from the 16th century (*Reckoning with History - Louise Sebro, 2017*). *Voices from the Colonies* exhibition is one of them, and it was opened on 13 October 2017 between rooms 126 and 131 on the 1<sup>st</sup> floor. Although the exhibition begins in room 126, the positioning of the entrance label suggests that the previous room, 125, is also part of this exhibition. This confusion and the relationship of that room to *Voices from the Colonies* will be elaborated below. The exhibition consists of five rooms and one hallway/corridor (Figure 8), including objects and representations from the Danish colonial territories in Africa, the Golden Coast and several forts (1660-1850); small territories and islands from India, Tranquebar (1620-1840) and Serampore (1755-1840); and Greenland (1721~) (Fihl, 2008; Hansen, 2008; Nielsen, 2020). Thirty-four personal stories belonging to communities in colonised regions and Danish personnel have consolidated the narrative (*Reckoning with History - Louise Sebro, 2017*). Exhibition curator Mette Boritz says that these stories are a reflection of Denmark's archiving proficiency in general:

... we were choosing [these stories] to get different perspectives on being the colony and being colonised. And we were looking for different personal stories. And, of course, we are looking into archives [to see] what is possible?

... And the problem is that there are many that do not have a voice in the archives. [But] for storytelling, the good thing is that Denmark is a *very excellent* country when it comes to archives. [T]here has been a huge tradition [of] describing everything and preserving it. So, we have very, very good archives here (Boritz, 2023, emphasis added).

Interestingly, the exhibition presents a very limited presentation of Iceland and the Faroe Islands, the latter of which remain part of the Commonwealth. This will also be discussed in more detail later.

*Voices from the Colonies* takes a thematic approach, and the themes are determined by the geographical location of the colonies. A report published in Danish in 2017 by the exhibition curators indicates that the exhibition is based on the five-series book *Danmark og Kolonierne* (Denmark and Colonies) (Arneborg *et al.*, 2018, p. 85). The narratives here are predominantly text-based, along with audio recordings, footage, video testimonies, and contextual sounds and decorative elements, which makes the material more accessible.

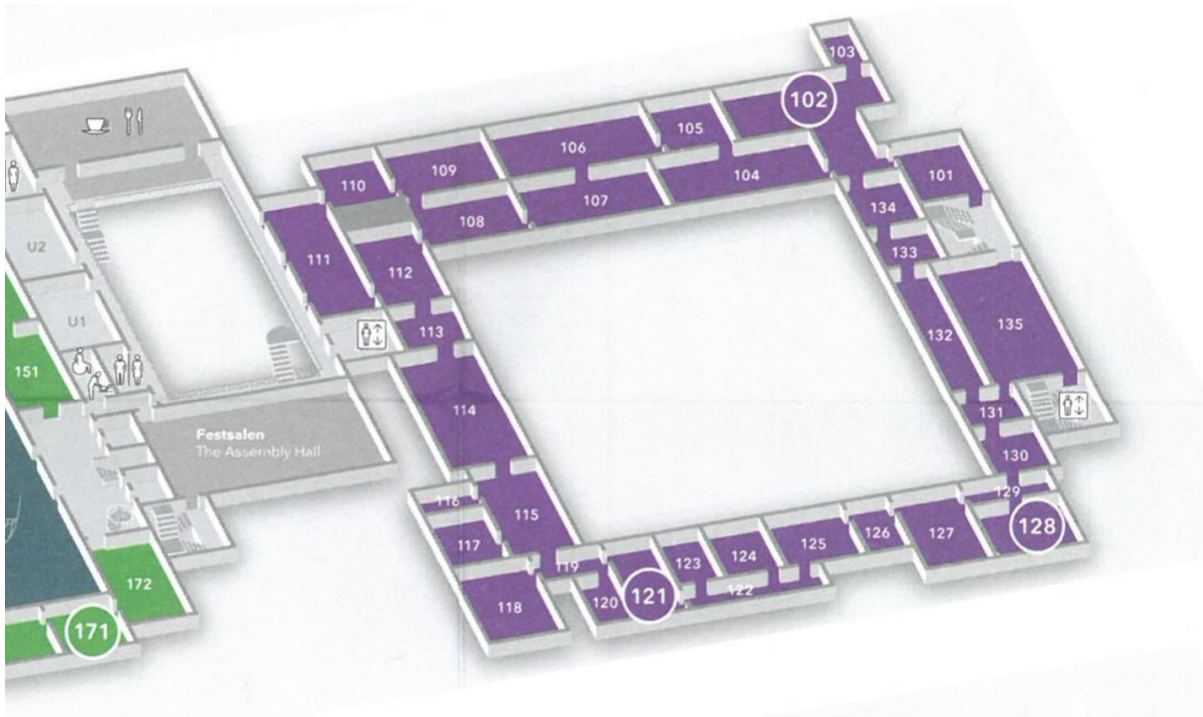


Figure 8: The map of the 2nd floor East Wing, *Voices from the Colonies* (125-131), Source: National Museum of Denmark Pamphlet

The location of the exhibition within the museum is important. There is a large amount to see at the NMD, so it is quite possible to get lost or confused about where you should be heading. Observations I made during my visit led me to notice that the *Voices from the Colonies* is located in a remote part of the museum. I refer to it as remote because visitors wishing to attend this exhibition must purchase their tickets at the Assembly Hall, proceed upstairs, and navigate through 10 rooms on one side or 11 on the other. This is the number of rooms you will encounter if you skip some and head directly to the exhibition. An alternative route is available via the stairs in room 135. While this option offers relatively quick access, it is unlikely to be favoured by first-time visitors to the museum, and it was observed during the visit that this route is rarely used. I find it interesting that the exhibition, which Denmark launched in an effort to shed light on and confront its own dark history, is located in an area that is somewhat time-consuming to access. In my experience, it took me approximately twenty minutes to locate the exhibition. I had intended to see it before anything else, but I lost my way. As I tried to find the correct path, I was sidetracked by a few previous rooms.

It is possible to access the exhibition from both sides, depending on the visitor route (Rooms 125 and 131). Given that the introductory label to the exhibition and the initial footage are located in corridor 122, it is reasonable to assume that the curators' intended the entrance to the exhibition is room 125, where Serampore materials are located. I was, unfortunately, unable to view the video in corridor 122 at the time of my visit. The other entrance to the exhibition, however, starts from room 131. The label, which can be found in corridor 122, is also located just before entering room 131. The footage is located within the room on the wall that divides the room into two sections. According to curators, this video is identical to the one in 122 (Arneborg *et al.*, 2018). This approximately five-minute-long video is dedicated to the general definition of Western colonialism and its relationship to Denmark. Having provided a general overview in this room, the museum then goes on to explain in detail the Danish relationship with its colonies in the next room.

Consequently, the visitor experience differs drastically at both entrances. A visitor entering the exhibition from room 131 receives a more solid overview of colonialism and Denmark's relationship with it, which is then supported by regional examples. Conversely, a visitor entering the exhibition from the opposite direction, room 125, first receives a superficial overview of colonialism, followed by direct access to displays from specific regions. At the end of the exhibition, all these displays come together. In other words, on the one hand, there is a deductive narrative, on the other hand, an inductive narrative. I personally think that starting with room 131 would provide more concrete semantic integrity. Therefore, I will use this route when analysing.

### **5.3.1. Shadows of Colonialism: Illuminating the Dark History**

As noted in Chapter 1, the museum venue, Prince's Palace, was constructed in the 18th century, and the walls are divided into panel paintings that demonstrate the leading art movements of the time. The building thus bears the traces of the economic power brought to Denmark by the trade networks established during the colonial period (Nielsen, 2020). Nevertheless, minor but effective changes to the interior design have partially concealed this. Lighting is, for example, one of the most prominent interior design preferences in this sense. Upon entering the exhibition, one can observe that the

natural light that had been used in previous rooms is replaced with artificial light, and there is a darker atmosphere due to the red curtains on the windows (Figure 9). This shift in lighting has a profound emotional effect (Moser, 2010; Whitehead, 2016b), drawing visitors into a more serious, reflective space that emphasises the gravity of Denmark's colonial complicity. The dim light and closed-off feeling can suggest that this part of history has been hidden or ignored.



Figure 9: From Room 131 (the first room of the exhibition) to Room 132, and from room 132 to the first room/131 Source: Author

The stark visual contrast between rooms also serves as an effective narrative device. The two cabinets filled with fossils, shells, worm tubes, corals, and other specimens in the brightly lit previous room (Room 132, part of the *Danish Middle Ages and Renaissance* exhibition) represent a more 'enlightened' period of history with the help of the design of the room. The text states that the taxonomic organisation of the shells in the cabin was arranged using Carl von Linné's classification system. His system is itself a colonial

legacy, as it was tied to European efforts to categorise and control the natural world, often through colonial exploitation (Calisher, 2007; Charmantier, 2020). This bright and orderly presentation contrasts sharply with the darkened, more sombre environment of the *Voices from the Colonies* exhibition, which forces the visitor to confront the complex and often concealed aspects of colonial history. The shift in atmosphere also helps to slow down visitor movement, compelling them to linger and consider the moral implications of Denmark's colonial past.

This relatively dark lighting preference may also have been made in order to create an environment conducive to the objects' conservation needs. Nevertheless, some contradictions within the exhibition prove that the lighting was not only arranged in favour of the objects. First, the room contains only video presentations, portable seating, a bird cage and murals. Although this lighting is thought to have been intended to protect murals that are related to the history of the building, this idea is challenged by the presence of other, brighter rooms within the same exhibition. There is also the possibility that the 'black-box' approach was chosen so that the video presentation would enhance the cinematic experience (Mandelli, 2019). In spite of this, this claim appears to apply occasionally when considering the video with a luminous environment in room 129. Hence, it is reasonable to assume that lighting primarily serves as an atmospheric element.



Figure 10: Room 131, Source: Author

On the left of the entrance is a fake wall that divides the room in half (Figure 10). The TV on it loops a five-minute-long informational video explaining colonialism in general. The decorative elements of the room — murals — correlate with the building's history: orientalist figures, presumably from China, the Indian subcontinent, and the Ottoman Empire, are shown, which are meaningful in the exhibition since they represent 'Other' cultures. In front of one of the windows, there is a model of a parrot inside a hanging cage. The other window has a general label explaining colonialism as a European system. There are three barrel-shaped seats of varying sizes below the parrot. In combination with the sound system, the parrot provides, in a way, an 'exotic' entrance to the environment. However, it is unclear whether these displays are a deliberate attempt to exoticise or an exercise in irony, as captured by Louise Sebro, one of the museum's former curators who worked on this exhibition and who drew my attention to the existence of a mannequin that had been removed before my visit. According to Sebro, this mannequin was dressed in a t-shirt from St. Croix at the entrance to this room:

I do not know if it is there yet, actually, so it might not be ... we had put a doll with the t-shirt that was purchased in St. Croix in the present day, which is a map of St. Croix with a Danish flag on it. And then it says in Danish, 'We should never have sold it', which is something that is sold to Danish tourists in St Croix. We think [the t-shirt] really depicts how romanticising sort of the tourism industry is towards the colonial heritage, but I think they might have moved it because this sort of irony might not be understood by everybody ... It is a very Danish thing to have this very ironic and sort of sarcastic approach and assuming that people think themselves how crazy this is. Of course, there was text, but still, people do not necessarily read the texts in a museum.

The presence of both the parrot and the mannequin's T-shirt suggests tension within the exhibition: while Sebro indicates that the T-shirt served as an ironic commentary on colonialism, the parrot's exoticisation may inadvertently reinforce a lingering colonial

mindset within the museum. The parrot does this by positioning non-European symbols as objects of spectacle, subtly re-inscribing the historical European fascination with the 'exotic other' rather than challenging it. Such exotic othering historically treated non-European cultures as objects for European interest and enjoyment (Kølvraa, 2018). Meanwhile, the so-called 'irony' of the T-shirt, aimed at a Danish audience familiar with local cultural nuances, exemplifies a selective engagement with colonial critique that privileges an insider's perspective, potentially alienating visitors less attuned to this cultural context.

Here, Linda Hutcheon's (1994) concept of irony as a 'discursive strategy' can provide a helpful lens for interpreting this approach. Hutcheon argues that irony does not operate in isolation but depends on shared cultural knowledge to generate meaning by constructing boundaries between those who understand its references (insiders) and those who do not (outsiders). In this case, the T-shirt's ironic critique of colonialism relies on specific cultural and historical knowledge about Denmark's colonial history and its present-day attitudes. For those outside this context, such as me, the irony risks being misinterpreted or lost entirely, creating an exclusionary discourse that undermines the universality of the critique. This selectivity not only limits the accessibility of the exhibition's message but also gives the display a tone that risks being perceived as something flippant and jocular.

When paired with the exoticisation of the parrot, this selective irony weakens the exhibition's critique of colonialism, reducing it to a performative gesture that entertains a narrow audience rather than challenging systemic colonial legacies. Although this exhibition aims to provoke reflection on Denmark's colonial past, this duality and these objects' reliance on stereotypical imagery and insider-focused critique offers a beginning that suggests a surface-level decoloniality, where colonial tropes remain consumable rather than dismantled.

### **5.3.2. Colonial Commodities: Unveiling Denmark's Complicity**

Compared to the previous room, the next room, Room 130, is larger and brighter, but it is still artificially illuminated. The world map to the left of the entrance displays Denmark's

colonial territories. Additionally, there are six display cases in the room, along with barrel-shaped seating, red curtains and a general information label in front of the windows.



Figure 11: World Map on the left wall, Room 130, Source: Author

Out of the display cases, all but the first represent regions colonised by the Kingdom of Denmark-Norway. They are labeled as follows in order: *Colonial Produce*, *West Indies*, *West Coast of Africa*, *Greenland*, *India*, and *Iceland/the Faroe Islands*. Four cases lean against the wall behind, while two are positioned in the middle. A full-length world atlas covering the wall to the left of the entrance displays Danish colonies with red dots and explanations (Figure 11). On the opposite wall, in a niche, stands a decorated stove that appears to be an integral part of the building. The engravings of the Danish Coats of Arms and the date 1721 on both sides prove its historical significance. However, the exhibition does not provide any explanation (Figure 12: In the background of the first picture).



Figure 12: Colonial Produce Display, Room 130, Source: Author

Upon entering the room, my attention was immediately drawn to the *Colonial Produce* display, with its abundance of objects (Figure 12). Unlike the other five displays, this one provides a comprehensive overview of colonialism and is connected to the map on the wall. The display features two texts: one offering a general description and the other providing specific information about the objects. When viewed from the front, the objects are arranged in a two-tiered, or two level formation, giving the impression of a staircase when viewed from the sides. The upper level showcases various spices, cotton and Indian textiles, sugar, tobacco, sealskin, blubber, narwhal tusk, and presumably a ledger. Meanwhile, the lower layer features clay figures symbolising handcuffed slaves, created in 2017 by Marcelline Hounhouenoue and Agatha Yaovi in Benin. Some of the objects on the lower layer are partially obscured from view by those on the top layer.

The display highlights the impact of colonialism on Danish society, focusing on the introduction of new commodities. The upper section of the display illustrates the

improved standard of living resulting from access to these goods, while the lower section exposes the dark history of slavery and persecution during that era. While some items may be unfamiliar, visitors can quickly identify porcelain wares, sugar, and tobacco. By presenting them together in a unified manner, the display encourages visitors to contemplate the relationship between modern life and colonialism, which may be challenging to reconcile. In many ways, the display encourages us to acknowledge how colonialism continues to shape our lives today. The display text underscores this point as well.

They do not always think about the fact that these new goods leave a trail of death and destruction in their wake. Enslaved people are brought from Africa to be sold to plantations in the West Indies (*Colonial Produce*, display text).

The presentation can be interpreted in various ways. For instance, it can be viewed as the tip of an iceberg, seen and unseen; the visible part symbolising the surface, while the hidden part representing a dark and buried history. Another perspective is that a ladder-like presentation style could convey the idea of production and access to certain riches through enslavement.

During the late 18th century, there was a notable demand for luxury goods. Many of these commodities, such as tea, coffee, sugar, tobacco, and cotton clothing, were produced through the labour of enslaved individuals in the Americas. This increasing demand contributed to the thriving transatlantic slave trade. Undoubtedly, the Brookes Ship schematic has been the most widely metaphorized concept in this sense. In 1787, the Brookes schematic was created to draw attention to the abolition movement of the slave trade by Thomas Clark, showcasing the inhumane treatment and transportation of enslaved people in tightly packed hulls to maximise profit (British Library, 2023). This schematic embodies the colonial perspective of viewing slave transportation as a systematic and efficient process for the colonisers (Figure 13). This point is emphasised by Louise Sebro in her interview with Sigurd Klint:

You may be familiar with the plan of the slave ship *The Brookes*. It is a plan of a ship shape with small people crammed together in long rows. The publication was made by the English abolitionist movement to show the terrible conditions in which the enslaved were transported. It is not that the drawing is unrealistic. The problem is that it becomes schematic. You do not sense that these are individuals lying at the bottom of the ship. They become a faceless group. How do you take that and come in and say that each one of these little black lines represents a person with a history, a family, a language, a culture, and an individuality (Sebro cited in Klint, 2019).

As Sebro emphasises, this approach dehumanises the individual. Viewing the display from this angle makes the commodification more evident. At first glance, the seemingly disorganised objects on the upper layer resemble an artfully arranged shop window, showcasing items that could be acquired in exchange for enslaved people, along with the ledger used for recording transactions (Figure 14).

# DESCRIPTION OF A SLAVE SHIP.

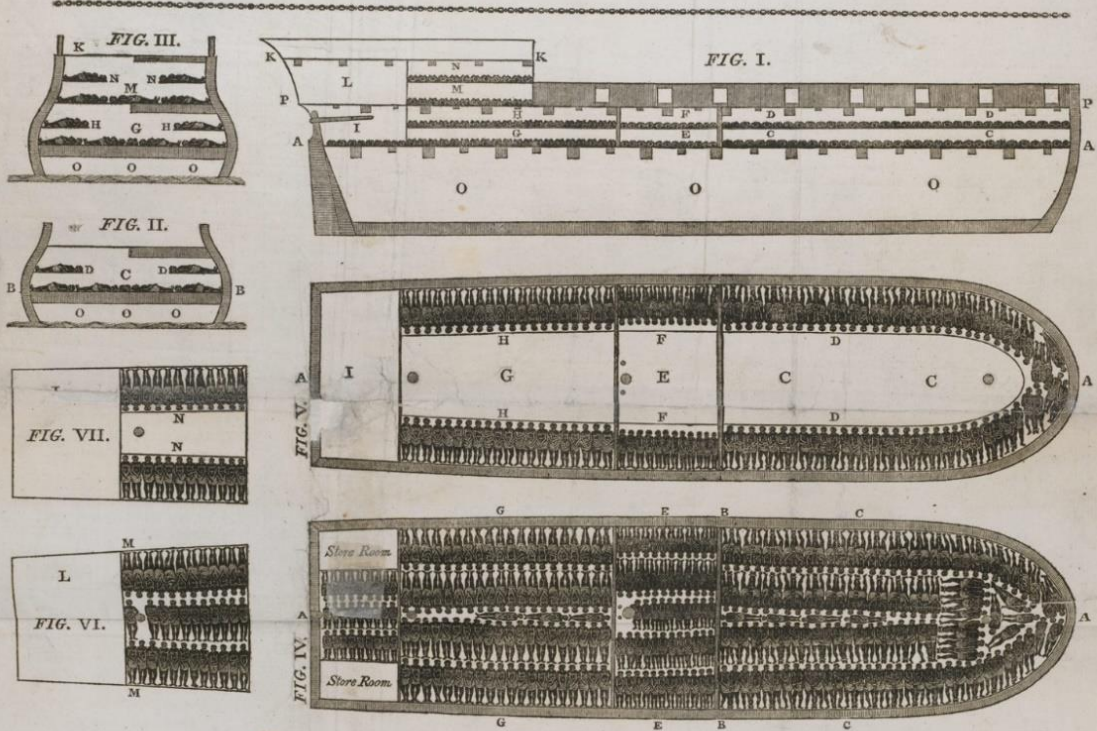


Figure 13: Brookes Ship Schematic, Source: (British Library, 2023), Available at: <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/diagram-of-the-brookes-slave-ship>

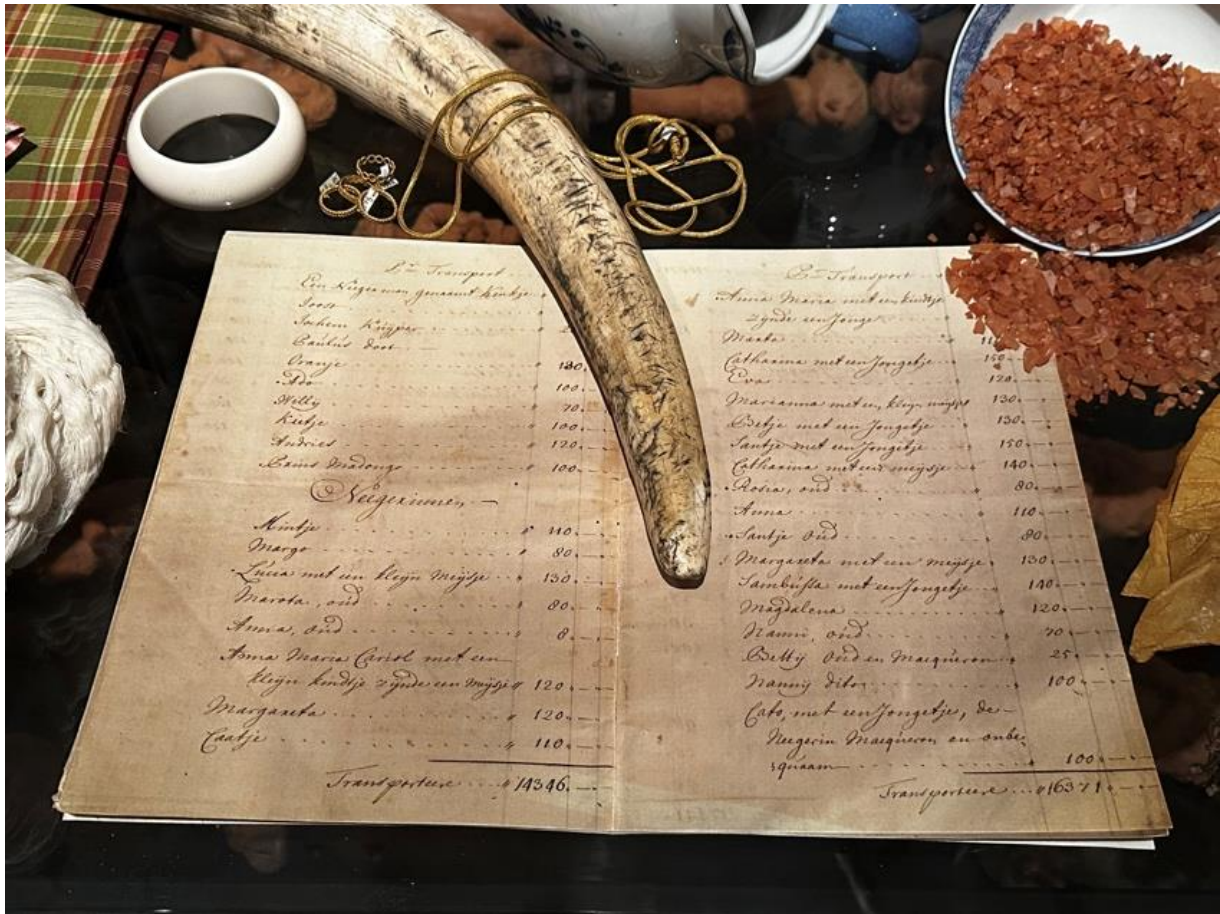


Figure 14: Ledger, Colonial Produce Display, Source: Author

Although this display case demonstrates a very compelling and thought-provoking approach, it also misses the opportunity to create an effective decolonial representation. This shortcoming stems from the limited influence of the artists involved with the museum. The artist's name and their origin were mentioned, but we know nothing about them or their contribution other than producing the figures. Sebros clarified the rationale behind the inclusion of these objects in the exhibition as follows:

That was actually just sort of a coincidence. Because when you make historical exhibitions on the transatlantic slave trade, the big question is always how to represent the fact that people are made into goods. Of course, there are so many different ways of working with that, from sort of the very artistic expression to, something like the film at the museum in Liverpool, which is just a horror [laughs], and using the plan from the slave ship, and so on. And one of the problems is always that often you end up either just

showing objects or showing people. It is difficult to show this absurdity that is incorporated in[to] that system. And then because I have been working very much with different people in Benin around my research, and there is a small Beninese Finnish Cultural Institute in the town of Grand-Popo, where they opened an exhibition on the Transatlantic Slave Trade and where they used some of my research because I wrote a lot about one special woman from that area. So, there was an artist from Benin who made a sort of a graphic novel about her life. And then they made this exhibition. Then they had made this sort of mock-up of a slave ship, and they had these little figurines inside. I was just very touched by that approach because every little figurine had its own personality and a little sort of detail. But at the same time, there was this massive amount of them, so I just thought, maybe we [can] borrow that approach because I have never seen something like that before. There is a village not far from Grand-Popo that is just clay makers, and they make bowls, but at the same time, they make some of these little figurines, which [are] not religious. So, that little museum actually just made the connection for us, and we visited them and then ordered.

Accordingly, it appears that the way the figurines are represented in the display case does not adequately recognise their significance or function, reducing them to purely decorative components rather than profoundly meaningful relics of personal identity or cultural resistance. A lack of deliberate, detailed preparation is also suggested by the figurines' 'coincidental' inclusion. Rather than an intentional curatorial choice rooted in decolonial commitment, the figurines appear as an afterthought, incorporated because they fit within a pre-existing, visually compelling aesthetic. The circumstances in the country at the time of the exhibition's opening, coupled with the somewhat hurried organisation process, were significant factors in this context. As previously noted, the opening of the exhibition coincided with the 100th anniversary of the sale of the US Virgin Islands. This reactive approach reveals a problematic continuity with colonial-era practices, where artefacts and ideas were often appropriated and redeployed for the purposes of a central, dominating institution without significant regard for origin or

contextual depth. This uncritical ‘borrowing’ reveals an ironic, if troubling, continuity with colonial methods of collecting and displaying artefacts for the benefit of the institution.

While the display succeeds in creating a visually compelling and engaging entrance into Denmark’s complex colonial past by presenting familiar objects from daily life, the figurines’ presentation suggests a less critical engagement with decolonial ideals. On the one hand, these familiar items encourage viewers to reflect on how such commodities, central to their lives, were produced at a devastating human cost. Moreover, in doing so, it emphasises the fact that Denmark is a part of this history: its complicity in colonial project. On the other hand, the representation of figurines without context reduces them to aesthetic materials rather than representations of cultural identity. This approach, seemingly coincidental and aesthetically motivated, reflects colonial-era practices where artefacts were often stolen and displayed without consideration for their origins or cultural significance.

#### **5.3.2.1. Iceland and the Faroe Islands**

Iceland and the Faroe Islands is another independent display case in room 130 that highlights the colonial complicity of Denmark. Inside, there are four different objects and a group of small objects (Figure 15). It is, however, difficult to fully view the display due to its close proximity to the adjacent display, *Colonial Produce*. This is a result of the orientation of the display case and the objects in it towards the colonial produce, as well as the narrow distance between the two display cases. Thus, an accurate observation requires a diagonal perspective. In contrast to *Colonial Produce*, there is no general label on the display. Only object-specific text is provided. Visitors can find general information about the display on the map to the left of the entrance.



Figure 15: Iceland and the Faroe Islands, Room 130, Source: Author

The display features the stories of two historical figures through the videos on the tablet and is complemented by tangible objects: Danish merchant Georg Andreas Kyhn (1751-1829) and Icelander Jon Olafsson (1596-1679). Olafsson lodged a complaint with the king against Danish merchants for selling substandard goods in the Icelandic market, while Kyhn, a fish trader, faced difficulties with Icelandic landowners and eventually lost everything. An ornate target from Kyhn's shooting society represents him, while a 1792 painting by Theodor Skógalis titled 'Prosperous Icelandic Farmer and His Son' symbolises Olafsson. The display also showcases clothes worn by 'prosperous farmers', a woollen

glove, a needle, a pipe, buttons, a knife, and a small box. Notably, despite the exhibit's focus on Iceland and the Faroe Islands, no items represent the Faroe Islands.

The everyday clothing and artwork portraying father-son relationships immediately attracted my attention because the display was referring to these items as belonging to 'prosperous farmers'. This can be seen as a reflection of the supposed prosperity during Danish rule. Additional accompanying text strengthens this perspective by emphasizing the advantages of Danish trade connections during that time:

Merchant ships arrived in Iceland in the summer to provide Icelanders with necessities they could not produce themselves: fishing tackle, flour, bread and sugar goods, timber and tar, as well as cloth, buttons, needles and needle cases. There were also items like combs and clasp knives, and luxuries like spirits, tobacco and pipes. Items from the 1600s excavated in Copenhagen (*Iceland and Faroe Islands*, display text).

When examining the exhibition's depiction of these regions, it is useful to remember the map on the left side of the entrance since it provides detailed information about Iceland and the Faroe Islands (Figure 8):

Iceland and the Faroe Islands never have the status of colonies. But they are part of the kingdom of Denmark-Norway. The language and population are Nordic. But they are still treated differently. Since the Middle Ages the king of Denmark has exerted stringent control over trade through monopolies. Danish merchants pay fixed duties to do business on Iceland. Dubious ethics and a talent for business put money in their pockets, but also create mutual hostility between the Danes and Icelanders. Both the Icelanders and Danish merchants complain about each other's goods (*World Map*, display text).

As the text indicates, the NMD offers a distinctive viewpoint, contending that the territories in question were not legally recognised as colonies under the Kingdom of Denmark-Norway. This perspective is based on a book series called *Danmark og Kolonierne*, which classifies that despite similarities in trade and other interactions with the colonies, there were subtle distinctions. These nuances, often overlooked in the context of European colonialism, are supported by the source material's emphasis on the minimal ethnic and cultural disparities between the region and the mainland (Arneborg *et al.*, 2018, p. 85). Nevertheless, as discussed in Chapter 3, Denmark's paternalistic approach to these territories, exerting cultural influence by depicting them as culturally immutable and imposing economic constraints through the Danish trade monopoly, challenges this perspective.

Iceland and the Faroe Islands have never been officially designated as colonies, but they have been regarded as having a colonial status in the Danish perception. This can be seen in the planning of the 1905 *Danish Colonial Exhibition Greenland and the Danish West Indies and in exhibitions showcasing Iceland and the Faroe Islands* at Tivoli, Copenhagen. Initially, the intention was for it to be solely a *Colonial Exhibition*. Danish newspaper '*Berlingske Tidende*' published an article about the contents of this exhibition a year before it opened (Loftsdóttir, 2019). Accordingly, the exhibition's main focus was to showcase Iceland's farm life, as well as the Faroe Islands' natural landscape and stuffed animals. The idea of representing Iceland and the Faroe Islands alongside other colonised territories was not well received by Icelandic intellectuals living in Copenhagen at the time, which led to protests. The Icelanders perceived themselves as similar to the Danish and felt insulted by the idea of representing themselves with Greenlanders and other Danish colonies, proving the validity of Lucas and Parigoris's notion of crypto colonialism (2013) or similar to Norway's semi-core status. In the end, due to the severity of the protests, the exhibition was segregated (Loftsdóttir, 2019). Yet, this example illustrates that the exhibition organisers' perspective did not distinguish between the colony and Iceland, as well as the Faroe Islands until these protests occurred.

Moreover, although this passage primarily discusses the Kingdom of Denmark-Norway, it fails to address the situation of these areas after the kingdom dissolved following the separation of Norway in 1814. Despite this disintegration, Iceland and the Faroe Islands

remained under Danish rule. In fact, this 'union' with the Faroe Islands still exists under the Danish Commonwealth. As noted in Chapter 3, Ellenberger highlights Bjarnason's observation that Denmark's economic influence over these territories endured into the 20th century, indicating that the separation did not lead to significant changes in Denmark's colonial policies toward these regions (2009).

The text's grammar is also crucial. Even though the above text itself talks about the past incidents, it has been narrated in the present tense. Linguistically, this is called *historical present tense*: describing a past event using the present tense (Wolfson, 1979; Thoma, 2011; Nordquist, 2019; Dzurillová, 2021). Most commonly, this technique is used to enhance the narrative's vividness (Thoma, 2011): 'by describing past events in the present tense, the narrator relives these events, or causes his audience to relive' (Wolfson, 1979, p. 169). Alternatively, a sense of immediacy is also conveyed through this usage (Nordquist, 2019). Or one may claim that this museum tries to reflect the historical understanding of time. However, I personally believe that such a use blurs the narrative rather than making it vivid. In other words, in an exhibition that was created to confront Denmark's colonial history by narrating stories under its rule, the narrative creates ambiguity rather than simply reflecting a historical fact.

Although the first sentence of the museum label states that these areas do not have a colony status within the Kingdom of Denmark-Norway, the rest of the same text is evidence of colonial treatment. It clearly indicates the economic control that is taking place in these regions and the mutual tension between Danes and Icelandic and Faroese traders.

... Since the Middle Ages the king of Denmark has exerted stringent control over trade through monopolies. Danish merchants pay fixed duties to do business on Iceland. Dubious ethics and a talent for business put money in their pockets, but also create mutual hostility between the Danes and Icelanders. Both the Icelanders and Danish merchants complain about each other's goods (*World Map*, display text).

In this sense, one who is not from the Danish context or not proficient in the English language may be confused about the discrepancy between the first sentence and the rest. In order to fully comprehend the relationship between these territories, the visitor should have sufficient knowledge of the territories and their history to make the text more logical. The exhibition, however, appears to fall short in providing this essential information. In this way, the narrative minimises Denmark's colonial practices in these regions, while simultaneously reinforcing a Nordic exceptionalist framework, which posits Nordic countries as 'exceptions' to colonial history or fundamentally different. As a result, this ambiguity could lead visitors to form a distorted perspective, subtly supporting the notion that Denmark's actions in these territories do not require the same scrutiny as overtly colonial relationships. Given that the Faroe Islands are still part of the Danish Commonwealth, starting the narrative from the status quo might be a tactical approach because such a narrative leads to a differentiation of the situation from colonialism. This is reinforced by the fact that this is the only showcase attributed to these regions.

Ultimately, as mentioned above, the curation of the exhibition theme was based on the geographical approach outlined in the *Danmark og Kolonierne* book series. This approach mirrors the positions taken in the book series, which views Denmark as a conglomerate state. Jensen demonstrates that the authors express caution in attempting to distance themselves from an existing Eurocentric colonial history, yet they fail to conclusively identify whether the relationships explored are colonial (2018, p. 135). The exhibition follows a similar pattern. It would have been more beneficial to offer a comprehensive explanation of the intricate and complex circumstances in these regions, creating a proactive and holistic representation that is decolonised. In particular, NMD could recognise the power imbalances and cultural hierarchies ingrained in these historical relationships instead of 'minimising' them with vague language. This would require a clear understanding of colonialism beyond merely the territorial claims and Denmark's involvement in these regions not as a part of a 'conglomerate state' but as a power structure that enforced economic, cultural, and political dominance. Furthermore, incorporating narratives from the Icelandic and Faroese viewpoints could challenge the approach of limiting the perspective to one book series only. This could

have enabled these communities to express their own understanding of Denmark's attitudes.

### **5.3.3. Colonial Legacies: Personal Testimonies in Room 129**

After receiving an introduction to the Danish colonial territories in room 130, the visitor finds themselves in a corridor that provides access to two different rooms. This hall is relatively empty compared to the previous one and is distinct due to its interior decoration in red paint in a Far Eastern, perhaps Chinese style. It is, therefore, the décor itself which captures more attention than the elements on display in this section. Positioned to the left of the entrance, a TV mounted in a wooden frame above the fireplace features three different videos, each running for about three minutes. The video

titles are: *The Greenlander in the King's own country*; *The boy who is exhibited*; *Victim of an experiment*. At the other end of the corridor, two paintings are exhibited (Figure 16).



Figure 16: Room 129, Source: Author

As suggested by the titles of the videos, they offer insights into the impact of colonialism through personal experiences. Two of the videos centre on the colonisation of Greenland, while the other highlights a narrative from the Caribbean region. *The Boy Who Exhibited* is a poignant recollection by Victor Cornelins (1898-1985), while the *Victim of an Experiment* recounts the personal story of Helene Thiesen (b. 1944). The final video, which complements the paintings in the room, chronicles the journey of Poq and Quiperoq, who received assistance from Norwegian-origin Danish missionary Hans Egede to travel to Denmark in 1724.

The first two videos, which are more recent, challenge the traditional perception of Denmark's involvement in colonialism. They shed light on the harsh realities of colonialism and Denmark's role in it. According to the narrative, Victor Cornelins was taken from St. Croix to Copenhagen at the age of seven. He was exhibited to familiarise the Danes with their colonised territories in a 1905 exhibition in Tivoli.

We were used to seeing white people on St. Croix, who saw us and treated us as human beings. But here in Copenhagen people looked at us as if we [were] strange animals that had escaped from the zoo (*The Boy Who Exhibited*, video testimony).

Helene Thiesen, as noted in video testimony, was brought to Denmark from Nuuk in Greenland at the age of seven to learn the Danish language and customs as part of an experiment aimed at modernising Greenland. After eighteen months, she was sent back to Greenland:

We got closer and closer and I grabbed my suitcase and that's when I saw my mother and siblings. And when the gangway was attached I ran down to my mother, into her arms. I hugged her then started to tell her about everything I'd experienced. But she doesn't answer. I look up at her. Why doesn't she answer? Then she said something to me, and I looked up at her I didn't understand what she was saying. We didn't speak the same language anymore (*Victim of an experiment*, video testimony).

With such testimonies, this room showcases the devastating impact of colonialism and Denmark's role, using personal stories to create a profound effect. By weaving together personal stories with historical narratives, it evokes a profound emotional response, bridging the gap between past and present. For example, this emotional response manifested as a sense of anger in me. As I noted in Chapter 4, my feelings toward

Scandinavian countries had previously been limited to admiration. However, during the first three days of my visit to Copenhagen for data collection, I encountered various racist comments and disapproving looks while walking the streets or sitting in cafés. These exposures inevitably led to disappointment in this country, as I had arrived with some expectations and a sense of curiosity about it. Therefore, the testimonies here played a provocative role in realising the stark contrast between Denmark's imagery and reality. Of course, this is a deeply personal reaction and is likely to differ among individuals. Indeed, a visitor who took the time to watch the videos I observed — which appeared to be a rare occurrence — might have experienced feelings of pity and sadness instead. The key thing here is that the inclusion of recent interviews serves to underscore the ongoing relevance of this message by highlighting how the legacies of colonialism continue to shape contemporary society. This approach not only amplifies the voices of marginalised individuals but also challenges visitors to confront uncomfortable truths. In doing so, this room functions as a vital platform for fostering critical awareness and dialogue within a decolonial context, urging us to reconsider and recontextualise the histories we have inherited. As such, it is possible to say that this display is more serious and effective than the previous ones.

#### **5.3.4. Voices of the Enslaved**

The decolonial approach established in the previous corridor partially carries through into room 128. At the front of this room's focus, as highlighted by the entrance label, are the Caribbean Islands, Africa, and the historical context of enslavement. The first notable change is the shift from a gloomy atmosphere to a more illuminated environment, thanks to white curtains that allow for greater natural light. The narrative unfolds across eight display cases, accompanied by paintings and photographs adorning the walls on either side of the room. The display cases contain objects of everyday use, toys, silverware, clothes, chairs, bowls, musical instruments, shackles, and clay figures. Two portable seating units are available, one of which features an intriguing design — a replica of the throne of the Gold Coast king from 1892; the original one is located in the display case regarding Africa in room 130. Given the multitude of individual stories and the number of display cases, this room is one of the overwhelming spaces in the

exhibition (Figure 17). Differently from the previous room, the narratives are drawn from the recollections of both historical figures — those who colonised as well as those who were colonised — reflecting the ‘excellence’ of Danish archives. This approach enhances the visitors' understanding of the power dynamics at play between the two sides.

Paradise for the few, a life of enslavement for others. Denmark colonises the three Caribbean islands of St Thomas, St John and St Croix. The tropical climate is ideal for growing sugar and cotton. But the plantations need workers. They are brought from Africa, resulting in 90% of the population on the islands having African roots. The vast majority are enslaved. A few manage to buy or earn their freedom ... Slavery is abolished in 1848, but a life of hard labour in the sugar fields continues for most (*The Danish West Indies*, display text).



Figure 17: Looking from Room 129 to Room 129, the West Indies and Africa, Source: Author

Several interesting examples are chosen to construct the narrative: a 'master' Lucas de Bretton, for instance, shows contempt for his subjects, while Anne Catherine, a slave,

boldly sues her 'master' for justice. Or Nanny and Neky, caregivers for the young children of families, illustrate how enslaved people often become invisible within society. Or Oly, who serves as a powerful representation of the nature of slavery, encompassing not just adults but also children. These stories are presented in the arrangement of objects that avoid overcrowding. This allows viewers to engage with the displays without feeling overwhelmed. In addition, each display is accompanied by a tablet that offers audiovisual presentations, and some of the displays feature dressed mannequins. In this last display, Oly's narrative is presented through the voice of a boy to enhance its impact.

... one night they came, the men, they attacked us, there was a lot of confusion. We tried to get away, but suddenly, I could not find my father and brother. I ran, but they caught me, chained me, and led me out to the coast with a lot of other people from the village. We were taken out to a large ship in small boats, put below deck, 220 people. Packed together. Women, men, and children. I remember that journey as the worst thing I have ever experienced. The stench, the hunger, sickness, crying, and fear. I knew nobody. I cried all the way across the big ocean ... (Oly, audio).



Figure 18: Oly's Display, Room 128, Source: Author

His testimony is linked to the design of the *Colonial Produce* display imitating Brooks Ship Schematics located back in Room 130, and the accompanying display case features clay figurines again by the same artists (Figure 18). These figures rest in prone positions at ground level, while those positioned at the top of the display case stand upright. This arrangement powerfully symbolises a stand against enslavement. The accompanying text in this regard acknowledges Denmark's complicity and highlights its significant role in the Transatlantic Slave Trade:

Danish slave ships from Africa, are banned in 1792, but the ban is not to be imposed until 1803. The period before 1803 is to be exploited, and the number of ships increases dramatically, transporting an unprecedented number of enslaved Africans. A race against time to secure supplies. Approximately 110,000 Africans' lives are destroyed by the Danish slave ships (*Oly, display text*).

While the narrative in this room makes significant strides toward a decolonial approach by highlighting Denmark's complicity in the Transatlantic Slave Trade and centring enslaved voices, it also raises questions about the limitations of representation. The reliance on Danish archival material, for instance, risks decentralising colonial perspectives, potentially undermining the exhibition's decolonial intent. In this context, a more effective narrative could have been created by incorporating contemporary testimonies from colonised regions, similar to the approach taken in the previous corridor. Additionally, there is an issue of this room arising from its location. As far as I observe, visitors arriving from either direction often wish to move on to the next area; however, due to the lack of connections to other rooms, many choose to observe the contents from outside the door before continuing on their way (Figure 8). As a result, the accessibility of this room's content is significantly reduced. Nevertheless, the room provides an effective acknowledgement of Danish colonial complicity in both the West Indies and Africa.

### **5.3.5. Unveiling Identities: Colonial Legacy and National Narratives**

Room 126 (Figure 19) is the smallest room of the exhibition, and it contains three displays, two on the front and one on the back wall, in addition to a TV showing a video loop. The displays at the front are titled *American Territory* and *Self-Gover[n]ment*, and one on the back is *The Last Flag*. The room's lack of windows creates a rather gloomy atmosphere, making it almost impossible to notice the ornate ceiling decoration, likely a relic of the building's history. On the left display cases, a variety of items representing the Danish colonies in the West Indies (*American Territory*) are presented, while on the right,

objects from Greenland (*Self-Gover[n]ment*) are on display. I will refer to the West Indies as the US Virgin Islands moving forward, which includes the islands of St. Croix, St. Thomas, and St. John.

The display at the front are dominated by traditional clothing. On the *American Territory* display, six objects are shown. Other than traditional clothes, there is a stone human head, a solid rock on which an engraved figure, and a DNA test. On the *Self-Gover[n]ment*, five objects are on display, including three items of clothing, a poster, and a bone *tupilak*. The poster is intended to demonstrate support for the separation of Greenland from the European Community (EC). The text provides information related to *tupilak*, which is a symbol for the spirits or souls of the ancestors. Lastly, on the back wall of the room, a Danish Flag – *Dannebrog* – can be seen from floor to ceiling. This is the flag that was lowered when the Virgin Islands were handed over on March 31<sup>st</sup>, 1917.



*Figure 19: Room 126, The Dannebrog Room, Source: Author*

The identity issue of the people of these regions constructs the main narrative of the room. This can be seen in the text of the displays at the front:

The descendants of the enslaved population are in search of their identity. Some celebrate their African roots through dancing and music at the carnival. Some turn to archives to trace their ancestors to specific plantations or areas in Africa. Others have their DNA tested, revealing that they are the descendants of the Indigenous population of the islands that was thought to have been eradicated (*Text of the American Territory, display text*).

The colonial period officially ended in 1953. From being a colony, Greenland becomes a region of Denmark. As part of Denmark, Greenland becomes a member of the European Community in 1973. But Greenland puts its foot down. Quotas and bureaucracy are not to control the country's natural resources, and after the introduction of home rule in 1979 Greenland leaves the EC. In 2009 the country becomes self-governing (*Self-Gover[n]ment*, display text).

The objects shown in this context are also key elements of the narrative that is being constructed: on the one hand, there is an object such as the *tupilak*, which emphasises the individual's ancestral relationship, and on the other hand, more modern elements such as a poster symbolising separation from the EC or a DNA test. While the *American Territory* display explicitly addresses this theme, *Self-Gover[n]ment* does so more subtly. It is worth considering the rationale behind presenting these two distinct regions together, considering that one is a North Atlantic colony and the other is a Tropical colony, each exemplifying different forms of colonial oppression. The text on the *American Territory* display might shed light on this context:

In 1917 the Danish flag is lowered for the last time in the Danish colony in the West Indies and the Stars and Stripes is raised above the US Virgin Islands. American territory, but where the people have no representatives in congress and no right to vote in presidential elections.

The text focuses on the lack of representation for the US Virgin Islands in the United States Congress despite its extended period under American control. This is an important point to raise, especially when considering Greenland's ongoing status within the Danish Commonwealth and its right to representation in the Danish parliament since 1953. The text does not include this fact; however, the preference to present these two regions together subtly implies a glorification of Danish values in contrast to the territories under

American control. On the one hand, this framing depicts Denmark as a state willing to grant representational rights to those under its rule. On the other, it makes the lack of such rights for the US Virgin Islands appear anachronistic, while indirectly suggesting that, had the US Virgin Islands remained under Danish control, they might have obtained similar rights as Greenland — though the islands were, ultimately, sold following Denmark's decision. This subtle comparison contributes to a sense of Danish superiority and excellence over the United States.

It is true that Greenland is currently in a 'relatively' better position in the sense of constitutional rights than the US Virgin Islands, although this has been a recent development. This 'better position' related to self-government (home rule) was achieved through a 1979 referendum, with 70% of the Greenlandic population in favour (Kočí and Baar, 2021). Such juxtaposition of these two display cases next to each other tend to portray Denmark as voluntarily granting this right to Greenland without acknowledging the significant demand from the Greenlandic population. This perspective aligns with the arguments made by Karen Fog Olwig (2003) in her article on the exhibition *The Danes in the West Indies*, which opened at the Nikolaj Gallery on the 75th anniversary of the West Indies' transfer. Olwig emphasised a nostalgic sentiment within Danish society toward the West Indies, exemplified by newspaper references to the exhibition from that period, such as 'Golden Memory' and 'A Puff of West Indian Fairy Tale,' and by mentions of the benevolence of Danish colonialism within the exhibition narrative. In this regard, this nuanced comparison with the Dannebrog's display sustains this nostalgic sentiment, albeit in a subtler form than at the Nikolaj Gallery, but deeply ingrained nonetheless.



Figure 20: Danish Flag in the background, Room 126, Source: Author

The videos on a loop, on the other hand, depict four different Danish colonies: the US Virgin Islands, India-Tranquebar, Ghana, and Greenland. In each video, contemporary issues are examined along with historical information. Each video contains some similar elements that encompass a timeline of Denmark's colonialism in the region, along with a brief yet substantial focus on other factors contributing to colonial history. Furthermore, each highlights the difficulties faced by the regions due to economic, natural disasters, and climate change, and Denmark's 'actions' to address these

challenges. The videos are in Danish with English subtitles. Jakob Ingemann Parby, curator of the Copenhagen Museum, points out that the videos are narrated by a woman who is presumably ethnically Danish (2020).

All films are narrated by an ethnic Dane and have English subtitles, but there are no interviews with the people who actually live in the former colonies today. There may be practical and economic reasons for this, but the impression is that, in classic imperialist fashion, it is the white man (or woman in this case) who transmits the attitudes and feelings of the present-day population of Greenland, Ghana, the Virgin Islands or India to a European audience and passes judgement on what is good and bad about present-day development and the legacy of colonialism. It is done in a sober and neutral way, but it does not harmonise very well with the title of the exhibition (Parby, 2020, p. 239, translated by Maddy Pedersen).

Indeed, collaboration and diversification of voice in relation to the video content with the colonised communities might be effective as a way to decolonise. While Parby's assumption raises critical questions about how he determines the narrator's ethnicity, exploring this is not the focus of this research.

There is a strong focus on identity in the videos, particularly in Ghana, Greenland, and the US Virgin Islands. The Ghana video, for example, highlights the fact that, following the declaration of the Republic of Ghana, the identity emphasis is placed on the liberation of all Africans through the acceptance of individuals of African descent into the country. Similarly, but in a more effective way, videos related to Greenland and the US Virgin Islands convey this identity focus by communicating between the display cases. The videos and the content of display cases are largely similar, though Greenland's video and display are distinguishable from the other. Here, a reference to Greenlandic identity is made in the display case with the poster on Greenland's withdrawal from the European Community (EC) and the sealskin waistcoat of the Greenlandic writer and politician Finn Lynge, who played an important role in this secession process (Figure 21). Through these

objects, the narrative subtly conveys Greenland's identity-forming process, while the video emphasises this in greater detail and explicitly with some other examples: the Greenlandic people's demand for home rule, the full rights claim to their own waters, high regard for the Greenlandic language, cultural rituals that play a major role in everyday life, e. g. a drum dance at the annual opening of the parliament, and the importance of sealing to the region, which is even exempt from the EU ban.



Figure 21: Objects from Greenland, room 126, Source: Author

Additionally, for the places where Denmark was a strong actor, such as Greenland or, to a certain degree, the US Virgin Islands, the narrative on Danish colonial involvement is intensified in an open and critical manner. For example, the videos explicitly state the fact that after World War II, Danish 'experts' implemented education and modernisation strategies in Greenland without obtaining the input or approval of the local people. Similarly, in the video about the Virgin Islands, the Danes are represented as having decided to sell the Virgin Islands to the US following a referendum in Denmark but without consulting the locals. The willingness to critically examine Denmark's colonial history and the decisions made in specific territories demonstrates a commitment to fostering a decolonial environment by acknowledging and addressing the impact of colonialism.

Nevertheless, it is just as important to consider what is not said as what is said. It is beneficial to take into account a passage referenced by Michel Foucault in his book *Discipline & Punish* when scrutinising the videos (1995, p. 187):

Traditionally, power was what was seen, what was shown and what was manifested and, paradoxically, found the principle of its force in the movement by which it deployed that force. Those on whom it was exercised could remain in the shade; they received light only from that portion of power that was conceded to them, or from the reflection of it that for a moment they carried.

From this point of view, what is not stated in the videos is also 'the source of power' (Fivush, 2010, p. 91, cited in Mason and Sayner, 2019, p. 10). As such, in some instances, this results in the focus being shifted away from the Danish context. For example, the focus on the US's acquisition of the Virgin Islands has resulted in the neglect of certain facts, such as the significant reliance of the region on the annual continuation of the slave trade by Danes to manage the adverse effects of a high mortality rate and maintain sugar production (Gøbel, 2016). Additionally, the region was sold to the US because, following the abolition of slavery, it caused more economic damage than benefit to Denmark. There is a similar situation in the video about India as well. While it is acknowledged that the

Danish were present with the consent of the local prince, there is no explicit mention of their involvement in the slave trade in this territory (Gøbel, 2016). As for Ghana, although it is stated that Denmark was a participant in the Transatlantic Slave Trade and had some fortresses in the region, the focus is on the region's current difficulties in terms of economic or educational development. This is presented as a consequence of the immense amount of enslavement to which it was subjected, but the link to Denmark's role in this is minimised.

#### **5.3.5.1. Decolonisation and National Symbols: The Case of Dannebrog**

What makes both the video and display case narrative even more interesting is the Danish flag – *Dannebrog, the cloth of the Danes* - displayed floor to ceiling in the background. According to legend, during a battle in what is now Estonia in 1219, the Danish flag descended from the heavens, enabling the Danish army to achieve an unforeseen triumph. It is, therefore, regarded as the oldest flag in Europe. Because of its sanctity, its use by ordinary citizens was prohibited for a long period of time. In the 19th century, following the war with Germany over Schleswig, the use shifted and it is now widely used everywhere. As per the official website of the Danish government, Denmark's citizens tend to display their national flag with greater frequency compared to any other nation (*Dannebrog: The flag that fell from the sky, no date*).

On a wide range of occasions, such as international events, diplomatic missions, and sporting events, the flag is often the most recognisable and visible symbol of a country. It represents the values, traditions, and culture of a nation, as well as the history and people of that nation. It not only serves as a memorial to those who fought for the freedom and independence of their countries but is also reminder of the struggles and hardships that a nation has overcome to reach where it is today. As a symbol of the nation's ideals and aspirations, the flag stands as an inspiration and motivation for its citizens. Raising it signifies its presence and sends a message of strength, unity, and pride. This boosts a sense of patriotism and national unity, since it binds people from different racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds together. In a way, as Susanne Reichl points out with reference to Benedict Anderson, it has an important role in the creation of 'imagined communities'

(Anderson, 1983; Reichl, 2004, p. 207). Nationhood and national identity play a crucial role in this creation process.

In his book, *Banal Nationalism*, Michael Billig thoroughly analyses how the idea of nationhood and national identity is normalised through everyday expressions. His concept of banal nationalism refers to the everyday ideological practices that sustain the existence of established Western nations (1995). According to Billig, national identity is built through the integration of several 'embedded routines of life', customs and traditions, serving as constant reminders of their shared sense of nationhood (1995, p. 38). In this sense, the flag is an excellent example. Although the historical founding of Denmark goes back a long way, the loss of two important territories in the 19th century, Norway and Schleswig-Holstein, led to the formation of a smaller, non-military-orientated nation-state (Bregnsbo, 2008, p. 77). This transformation may be an example of the collective forgetting. However, as an embedded routine of life, the flag, with its easily accessible and omnipresent nature, serves as a prominent symbol, and it is highly visible in Denmark. As mentioned on Denmark's official government website: 'The flag is practically everywhere' (*Dannebrog: The flag that fell from the sky*, no date). Billig states, 'the metonymic image of banal nationalism is not a flag which is being consciously waved with fervent passion; it is the flag hanging unnoticed on the public building' or in this sense, inside of this exhibition room where the colonial history is the main subject (1995, p. 8).

Given the flag and the role it plays in national values, combined with the national character of the museum, *Dannebrog* is further associated with this room and serves as a source of power. It is undoubtedly a complex decision to present an object with such a national signature in an exhibition that seeks to confront the history of a nation. *Dannebrog's* presentation serves as a crucial element that enables the connection between the last colonial territory divested and a controversial territory that still remains part of the union. It serves as a symbolic representation that bridges the gap between the historical past and the present circumstances. Additionally, when considering Denmark's sensitivity and efforts taken against natural disasters in some regions, which are shown in the videos, the flag ignites national attributes and pride. For example, both Danish and Indian authorities' collaboration to rebuild the territory after the destruction

resulting from the 2004 tsunami in India, or with thought-provoking reflection on whether Denmark should have been responsible for helping after the hurricanes Irma and Maria in the US Virgin Islands in 2007 boost this Danish nationalism. Visitors may perceive this as Denmark taking a responsible attitude toward its history. It may evoke the idea that Denmark is valiantly facing its past and actively working to correct any injustices that were committed, when these videos are accompanied by the substantial Danish flag right next to you.

In a historical sense, decolonisation and nationalism worked hand in hand for some countries because nationalist ideas have been the unifying force for anti-colonialism in the independence of formerly colonised communities. This is clearly visible in Africa, for example in Guinea, during the Cold War era (Schmidt, 2007). However, as mentioned before, decolonisation in the context of this research is a delicate matter that is hard to align together with nationalism. As Mason points out, certain objects in museums had taken their place in the collections before the nationalism movement, and as such they have 'global, postnational, cosmopolitan stories' as much as they contribute to the national narrative' (2013, p. 42). Whether objects in this room or in the entire exhibition may have been obtained before or after nationalistic movements of Denmark, displaying the flag of the coloniser nation in the room restricts the transnational nature of objects and emphasises a national framing. Because when viewed in context, it serves as a stimulus, evoking the very essence of the location in which it is situated. This might be either negative connotations of nationalism, such as ethnic conflicts, exclusionary tendencies, and oppression of minorities or 'positive' connotations for related communities, such as the sense of pride, loyalty, and attachment to the nation or country. As a result, this restricts the realisation of the core ideas related to decolonisation such as inclusivity, recognition of multiple knowledge systems, and identifying and challenging colonial power structures within the institutions. In this way, the *Dannebrog* disrupts the creation of fully decolonial representation by ensuring that an implicit connection is established between the regions and the idea of Danishness. It is worth noting that although in recent years, there has been a dispute over the semiotics of national flags, and anti-racist/anti-colonial activists have highlighted them as a symbol of oppression for various communities, particularly in England and Canada (Skey, 2008;

Coulthard and Hern, 2022), this is not the case for Denmark. At least, not yet. This can be inferred from its excessive daily usage (*Dannebrog: The flag that fell from the sky*, no date). Academics have only recently begun to study the colonial history of Scandinavian countries in depth. As a result, there is likely little public awareness of the flag's semiotic meaning in this context. The widespread use of the flag suggests that, if negative connotations exist, they are either not well known or not widely acknowledged. Over time, this may change.

An alternative argument can be made regarding Danish visitors: such representation might be a profoundly uncomfortable display because it places a widely revered national symbol at the centre of an embarrassing history. The tension between pride and discomfort underscores the complexities of employing national symbols in decolonial contexts. However, as I am not Danish, it is challenging for me to articulate this perspective with great depth.

With all this considered, it becomes clear that the elements of the room revolve around the theme of identity through videos and objects that address contemporary issues. A clear and critical description of Denmark's attitude towards some regions is very important in the context of acknowledgement, which is an essential element emphasised by the decolonial thinkers. As such, this approach appears to apply the elements of a critique of coloniality highlighted by decolonisation intellectuals such as Mignolo, Quijano, and Maldonado-Torres. This involves recognising the existence of persistent colonial structures, systems, and reasoning. In the case of the US Virgin Islands, for instance, the focus on historical changes over time raises awareness about the underlying colonial logic. Furthermore, by raising questions regarding Denmark's responsibilities, the room attempts to create awareness among visitors.

Nevertheless, as has been noted, the presence of the flag and its interaction with other objects hinders the development of a cohesive decolonial narrative. Both the transparency of the front two displays with the Dannebrog in the background (Figure 20) and the video presentation communicate and emphasise Denmark's significant role in the development of these regions. It is implied through the presentation style that Danishness and a sense of pride and joy related to the flag are part of who you are, regardless of whether you identify as Greenlandic or West Indian. The impression is given

that Danishness is an integral part of these regions' identity. In such a situation, *Dannebrog's* position for source communities is not completely clear in the representation. Consequently, constructing a connection between the flag and the communities' perspective becomes more difficult. It is evident from the lack of reference to how the people of the Virgin Islands received the lowering of the flag event. This has been described in the text panel mentioned above with one sentence: 'for the people of the three islands a transfer from one colonial power to another'. This commodification of people from regions and the lack of understanding of how this event affected them have prevented the writing of history with reference to the experiences of colonised or marginalised communities. As such, it is incompatible with the decolonial idea of epistemic plurality which advocates pluralistic ways of knowing and knowledge systems.

#### **5.3.6. A Dissonant Ending: The Problematic Framing of Colonial Histories in the Serampore Room**

The last room, according to this route, is designed with a street diorama of Serampore – the south-eastern corner of India, by its local name, Tharangambadi, the town of the singing waves. Three different building designs occupy four walls of the room, each of which contains a small screen displaying information about the venue (Figure 22).



Figure 22: Serampore Room, Room 125, Source: Author

As already mentioned, this room is not actually part of the *Voices from the Colonies* exhibition. Both Boritz and Sebro emphasised this in interviews:

Actually, the Serampore room is not a part of the *Voices from the Colonies* [exhibition]. And of course, as a normal audience, you will not recognise that, but it is [itself] a [separate] exhibition. It was made [for] another project ... The National Museum has been involved in several restoration projects ... of the former Danish buildings ... in old colonial areas, ... in Ghana, in India, in the Tranquebar, in Serampore. There has been a lot of money from private Danish foundations to fulfil these projects, working together with local Indian authorities and architects etc. So, Serampore [room] is a whole another

project. It is about that project of restoring and documenting Danish buildings (Boritz, 2022).

That one opened maybe the year after. Actually, it must have been 2018. There was this big project, [a] collaboration project in Serampore about restoring buildings, colonial buildings and ... as part of the project [an] exhibition. I think, it was not the people who had been working on voices from the colonisers that were part of that. So it is difficult as a visitor to [understand] how come [this exhibition here] because it is more based on interviews. I think [curators] thought maybe that at least there [are] still, you know, voices. [Those were] actually people, present people (Sebro, 2022).

As Boritz notes, visitors may struggle to recognise that this room is distinct from the *Voices from the Colonies* exhibition. I did not know, for example. This confusion arises primarily because the entrance signs and labelling for the exhibition are positioned just before the Serampore room (Figure 23). Furthermore, the text and testimonies within the room do not clearly indicate that it is a separate project. The only visible information for visitors is the mention of the funding partner, Realdania, which may lead them to mistakenly believe that the entire exhibition is funded by this partner. There is a lack of clear indication in this regard.



Figure 23: Serampore room from Room 122, Source: Author

In this case, why is this room included in the analysis? Firstly, as Boritz points out, 'normal audiences' may view this room as part of the *Voices from the Colonies* exhibition. Additionally, the region that this room represents was one of Denmark's former colonies. A further reason is that this room was inaugurated not in another section of the museum, but as an extension of an exhibition focused on Danish colonialism, opening a year after the main exhibition's inauguration, as Sebro noted. Clearly, the curators of both exhibitions considered the relationship between them.

The architectural elements within the room represent the buildings constructed by Denmark in the region. The narrative aims to illustrate the impact these structures have had on the lives of the local population. To achieve this, video testimonies from community members have been included. There are four videos titled *St. Olav's Church*, *Serampore College*, *The Demolished Home*, and *The Goswami Palace*. The first two highlight the 'contributions' that Denmark has made through its constructions, while the

latter two underscore the deep emotional connection that local residents have with these sites:

... The church also provided free medical care to those in need. Women used to come here for tailoring and painting classes. There was something here for everyone. Once the church closed down all the activities stopped ... (Muhammed Azharuddin, *St. Olav's Church*).

We have this main building which was started in 1818 and completed in 1822. It is the first university in India. Serampore College was the institution for higher education in this country. Denmark at that time had two universities so Serampore College became the third university of Denmark. *It is a great legacy the founders have left.* The King of Denmark gave the charter to confer degrees. Our degrees are accepted all over the world. We have students here from all over the country. Of different languages and cultures. It is like a mini India. The students are aware of the Danish charter which gave us the authority to confer degrees. And so we have continued that legacy for 200 years (Subhro Sircar, *Serampore College*, emphasis added).

... This church to me is something that I inherited. My first reaction was "this is beautiful" ... (Manish Chakraborti, *St. Olav's Church audio*).

... I love the grounds of Serampore College. Everything is special in this college. The main Steps, this is the best place to spend time with friends and family ... (Bidisa Chakraborty, *Serampore College audio*).

... Although we moved here, our hearts still belong to the old house ... (Supta Sengupta, *the Demolished House audio*)

While these testimonies reveal the strong ties the local population has to these sites, their use in the exhibition hinders the creation of a decolonial narrative. Nostalgia, as academic Silke Arnold-de Simine puts it (2013, p. 54):

is predominantly seen as a means of either ideological indoctrination or escapism or both, a distortion that allows people to shirk harsh realities or simplify difficult social issues as well as to ignore past crimes

In this context, the exhibition's reliance on selectively nostalgic testimonies risks diminishing Denmark's colonial complicity. By emphasising architectural 'contributions' and contemporary local attachments, the narrative reframes colonialism as a shared legacy rather than a system of exploitation. Such framing implies that Denmark's colonial practices, while harmful, were at times benevolent — a notion reinforced by the suggestion that this benevolence persists in contemporary contexts. This perspective overlooks Denmark's involvement in the slave trade in this region, although it is not as extensive as in the West Indies and Africa (Gøbel, 2016, pp. 4, 57).

The earlier rooms of the exhibition foreground Denmark's role in slavery and its devastating effects through both historical and contemporary testimonies, establishing a critical engagement with colonial violence. This room, however, is undermined by the stark narrative shift, where colonialism is framed through a lens of architectural legacy and nostalgic testimonials. This shift becomes particularly problematic when considering the room's location: as either the concluding or introductory space of the *Voices from the Colonies* exhibition, it risks shaping visitors' overarching perceptions. For visitors concluding here, the takeaway may be that Danish colonialism, despite its harms, ultimately contributed positively to some regions. Conversely, for those beginning here, the narrative risks isolating Denmark from broader colonial structures in the following rooms, portraying colonialism as a general phenomenon rather than a systemic exploitation in which Denmark was complicit. This dual effect reinforces the 'good coloniser' idea of the Scandinavian region (Ahnlund, 1937, cited in Fur, 2013, p. 18) and perpetuates the exceptionalist narrative.

#### **5.4. Confusion or Balance, Analysis of Aesthetics of Exhibition**

The National Museum of Denmark's aesthetic approach is closely aligned with the exhibition's narrative approach. As mentioned, the exhibition's narrative centres around thirty-four unique stories, gathered from the perspectives of both colonisers and the colonised. This approach has had a significant impact on the exhibition's aesthetic, blending Western aesthetics with elements from the colonised cultures to create an interior space that embodies both worlds.

The overall presentation aesthetic of the exhibition is reminiscent of early ethnographic exhibition approaches such as Pitt Rivers or the Imperial and Commonwealth Institutes, where many display cases are packed in space, each displaying objects relating to a particular theme/geography (Lidchi, 2013; Hicks, 2020). However, objects are placed outside display cases in certain rooms to bring to life the experiences of the Indigenous and/or colonised people, creating a dynamic and engaging atmosphere and enhancing the experience of learning about the Indigenous cultures. This creates an immersive atmosphere that captivates visitors. For example, Room 127 features objects from Greenland and India that are placed along the walking path. Everyday items hung up outside the cases, along with a continuous loop of an Inuit shaman ritual audio-visual that demonstrates cultural motifs in the background, help to bring the Inuit tent to life for visitors. While some of these elements serve a decorative purpose, others offer interactive options, such as seating inspired by various colonised regions. Additionally, collaboration with artists also contributed to the exhibition's creation of decolonial aestheSis. For example, rooms 130 and 128 feature artworks by Beninese artists Marcelline Hounhouenoue and Agatha Yaovi, respectively, which depict shackled slaves and emphasise the slave trade and colonial relations. The presentation of these artworks, imitating the Brooks Ship Schematic, has created a nuanced and critical narrative with multiple implications.

However, it is important to note that certain aspects of the exhibition's aesthetic approach may not fully align with decolonial aestheSis. In this regard, the building's historicity plays the most prominent role. Danish cultural policy states that 'a site or monument must be at least 100 years old to be protected' (Kulturministriet, 2023). In this

sense, the former purpose of the NMD's building, which was the Prince's Palace (Prindsens Palais), imposes limitations on any significant modifications that could potentially affect the building's delicacy. Furthermore, the building's intended use significantly impacts the aesthetic direction of its exhibitions. The building was utilised during Christian VI and Frederick V's princely times (Zipsane, 2011). The building's interior exemplifies the Rococo art movement in Denmark, which emerged from 18th-century France. This artistic style is characterised by natural motifs created with asymmetrical lines, and it prominently features themes of pleasure, play, and eroticism (Milam, 2011). It is a style that is heavily utilised in luxury items such as silverware and porcelain, which were acquired through commercial connections established by colonialism and were accessible primarily to the wealthy and aristocratic class (Milam, 2011). As a result, visitors can immediately discern the regal atmosphere and elevated social standing that the building exudes. In other words, not only is the building under protection due to its historical character and cannot be altered, but the building's relationship with hegemony/royal status is also an obstacle to the formation of a decolonial aestheSis. This serves as a reminder to visitors that the space is imbued with Western aesthetics throughout the exhibition. For example, in room 129, where the impact of colonialism on individuals is most powerfully represented through the testimonies, dense decorations on the bright red wall reduce this emotion transfer because the decorations demonstrate a specific understanding of delicacy (Figure 24). As such, the decolonial narrative clashes with the Western aesthetic.



Figure 24: *Voices from the Colonies Exhibition, Room 129, The contrast between the aesthetic and the context,*  
Source: Author

It is not my intention to make a sweeping judgment that all historical buildings cannot be decolonised within the context of decolonial aesthesis. Rather, I try to emphasise the difficulty in completely detaching the narratives created within the given building and exhibition. As Nirmal Puwar demonstrated in her book titled *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies Out of Place*, space is a flexible phenomenon and '[t]he homogenisation of space is thus contradictory as space carries properties which are simultaneously open to transformation' (2004, p. 2). Museums, in this sense, can effectively use innovative designs to subvert visitor perception and create spaces that challenge the norm. The *AfricaMuseum* in Tervuren, Belgium serves as a compelling example in this regard. Initially used by King Leopold II to showcase Congolese ethnographic objects for propaganda purposes, the museum is significant in highlighting the barriers posed by historical structures to the development of both decolonial narrative and aestheSis. Following its renovation in 2018, the museum now features

newly designed sections that powerfully underscore this complex historical relationship. Similarly, NMD already uses space and lighting to create a gloomy atmosphere that prevents some of these decorative elements from being recognisable at first glance. Additionally, Mette Boritz (2023) stated that NMD recognises the building's limitations due to its historicity and has had a plan to reconstruct certain parts of the building. Although the *Voices from the Colonies* exhibition area is not included in this renovation, the museum plans to use this area to showcase the palace's history. According to her, a more detailed exhibition on the Danish colonies will be implemented in the renovated area.

Although the exhibition attempts to use spatial illumination as a means to mitigate the aesthetic conflict arising from the historicity of the building, a sense of decolonial aesthetic is still in conflict because some of the objects presented in exhibition rooms contribute to this clash. For example, room 131, which may serve as the entrance depending on the visitor's route, offers valuable insight. As mentioned, initially, the environment is bright, showcasing the royal features of the building. However, upon entering this dark, gloomy room, visitors are met with a TV screen displaying a video on colonialism in a general sense, two barrels acting as seating, and heavily decorated walls. The royal character of the building is evident, but not explicitly, in the walls, while the cage, a parrot, and barrels appear to be aesthetic expressions of an embedded exotic perspective towards colonised regions. In a similar vein, as detailed more in-depth in Chapter 5, the presence of the Dannebrog – the Danish Flag, has a similar connotation. The presentation of such a sacred object – literally for Danes – in a national museum, both its monumentality and the meaning it carries, works together with the aesthetics of the presentation. As such, the banal nationalism that the flag creates overrides the other objects in the same room and any aesthetic preferences.

## **5.5. Conclusion**

This chapter examined the *Voices from the Colonies* exhibition at the National Museum of Denmark. The exhibition encompasses crucial elements in shaping its narrative, effectively addressing Denmark's colonial past. It acknowledges Denmark's role in Western Colonialism, highlights its involvement in the slave trade, and effectively

portrays the impact of oppression on individuals. By doing so, it adeptly weaves together historical and contemporary individual stories, underscoring its meticulous curation. It is noteworthy that the narrative encompasses perspectives from both the coloniser and the colonised, illustrating different viewpoints and offering insights into the modern-day relationship between Denmark and exploitation. Furthermore, the exhibit's engagement with the artists and amplification of their voices have enabled the creation of a thought-provoking critique.

However, visitors may not fully realise Denmark's colonial attitudes in certain respects. The situation of Iceland and the Faroe Islands serves as a prominent example. While the museum attributes this preference to the published book *Danmark og Kolonierne*, the exhibition does not delve into the detailed reasons provided in the book. These areas have been subjected to a colonialist approach in certain respects, as previously mentioned. Instead of presenting and elaborating on the different approaches, the exhibition refers to a single source and integrates these two territories in a very limited way, failing to address the ongoing relations with the Faroe Islands in particular.

The exhibition's opening in response to the 100th anniversary of Denmark's sale of its last colonial territories, the attempt to open in a short period of one year, and the subsequent decision to significantly alter its content due to financial difficulties are intriguing aspects within the decolonial framework. Although the use of testimonials and the inclusion of Beninese artists have successfully created decolonial spaces challenging the colonial narrative, it is evident that a more practical and proactive approach is necessary for a comprehensive endeavour. The portrayal of the 'good coloniser' in the Serampore room, the nationalist sentiment evoked by the presence of the Danish Flag – Dannebrog, and the impact on identity, as well as the unique circumstances of Iceland and the Faroe Islands, all contribute to the reinforcement of exceptionalist notions. In this context, while the exhibition integrates decolonial ideas to some extent in a tokenistic way, it also appears to support an exceptionalist mindset in many aspects.

## **CHAPTER 6 NORWAY, MUSEUM of CULTURAL HISTORY**

### **6.1. Chapter Introduction**

This chapter analyses the Museum of Cultural History (MCH) and presents how Norway's colonial history and decolonisation are implemented in this museum's narrative. As mentioned earlier, Norway's liminality during colonial times has not completely insulated it from following colonial activities, and this illustrates the constitution of the fragments of the colonial mindset. These activities can be observed, for example, in Norway's activities in Africa in the 19<sup>th</sup> century or the contemporary practices toward the Sámi people. To explore these connections, this chapter will focus on the Control exhibition, taking into consideration the size and scope of the Museum of Cultural History. The museum was visited in October 2022 and November 2023. The upcoming chapter will maintain a structure similar to the previous one. It will start by establishing whether the museum embodies national characteristics, followed by an exploration of the venue layout and the exhibition. Finally, it will aim to capture a general perception of Norway through the displays. In terms of analysis, I will employ Lindauer's 'critical museum visitor' framework.

### **6.2. Forging National Identity: The Museum of Cultural History's Efforts**

To gain a deeper understanding of whether the Museum of Cultural History (MCH) is a national museum or not, it is beneficial to remember some information related to the historical and cultural context of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Norway. This concise historical segment will provide valuable insights into the underlying causes that have hindered the establishment of an official national museum in Norway, a phenomenon that sets it apart from other European nations. Norway gained constitutional independence in 1814, but the country's process of becoming a nation-state differed from other nations. After being on the losing side in the Napoleonic Wars, Denmark was forced to cede Norway to Sweden in 1814. According to Jørgensen (2022), this partial independence was not the result of a political strategy or liberation, but rather a consequence of international political situations that did not involve violence. As a result, 'the process of nation-building took place after the political upheavals' (Jørgensen, 2022:228). The drafting of

the constitution was a direct response to external stimuli, which brought about a host of political issues within the nation. This was primarily due to the fact that the country was not yet equipped to handle a democratic constitution. These problems, as Jørgensen points out, were to legitimate the political independence of Norway vis-à-vis the international community and to explain to the Norwegian people that it was natural that Norway should be an independent state. Furthermore, during the initial ten years following 1814, there was almost no animosity towards Denmark amongst Norwegians (Jørgensen, 2022: 231). This can be observed by the actions of Danish crown prince Christian Frederick, who not only played a part in drafting the Norwegian constitution but also successfully campaigned for himself to be crowned king of Norway by the Norwegian Constituent Assembly. However, this sentiment shifted as nationalist ideologies began to take hold in the mid-century, aided by figures such as Rudolf Keyser and Peter Andreas Munch. A greater emphasis was placed on historical awareness as a means of shaping nationalistic perspectives (Neumann, 2001 cited in Simonsen, 2010; Ebert, 2018; Jørgensen, 2022).

Nevertheless, there are various reasons why a national museum was not established at this time, as in other European countries. According to Amundsen, the management of various collections within university institutions lacked coordination, which in turn hindered the ability to raise public and governmental awareness of the importance of a unified cultural heritage. Furthermore, rather than promoting a unified national narrative, the disciplinary specialisation within these institutions caused fragmentation. This specialisation reinforced distinctions between fields and institutions and limited the potential for a common national identity within a single museum framework (2011, p. 659).

On the other hand, Aronsson (2011b: 122) indicates that the presence of strong regional identities in the country has hindered the development of a unified narrative and a cohesive national museum. In his view, this 'deficiency' can be attributed to the challenges posed by the diverse local cultures and their distinct historical narratives. In response to the need for regional representation, museums were established in areas where local universities were present, such as Bergen Museum and Trondheim Vitenskapsmuseet (Ebert, 2018).

Given Norway's complex history, it is not difficult to comprehend the extent to which the situation Amundsen mentioned impacted the establishment of the national museum. In a society that had a significant reliance on its former government, the Danish Royal Family, and was not acquainted with the concept of independence, it took time to internalise the nationalist ideas. Similarly, strong regional identities can pose a challenge to creating a cohesive national narrative. Additionally, Norway's lack of complete autonomy during that period, despite being constitutionally independent, could be a significant factor that had an impact on the situation. Such an action could have had a potential negative impact on the relationship with Sweden. Therefore, the need for institutions with a national identity was not immediately recognised and, consequently, not realised in the 19th century (2011). While the MCH may not have an explicitly and officially defined national role, the process of the formation of its collections, the temporary exhibitions produced during the period, and its reputation and societal role as a part of one of the prominent universities of the state collectively contribute to its national significance. As such, it is deemed suitable within the research scope.

### **6.3. The Layout**

According to Lindauer (2006), a museum's architectural design plays a significant role in shaping its narrative and the exhibited objects. This encompasses not only the physical structure of the building but also the entire visitor experience, such as security measures, clear directions, and equal access to all services provided. Accordingly, the building's architecture captivates visitors with its artistic features both inside and out. Despite the 'Norwegian style' of the architecture, which may lead visitors to expect only Norwegian cultural objects inside, the MCH actually houses a diverse range of objects from around the globe, boasting the largest ethnographic collection in Norway. The extensive assortment of artefacts can be attributed to the aforementioned ethnographic collection, which has been amassed over time. Contributions from 'Norwegian explorers, adventurers, missionaries, anthropologists, and seamen' have been instrumental in building this collection (Amundsen, 2011: 660). Additionally, nationally renowned figures, such as Roald Amundsen and Carl Lumholtz, have made contributions to the collection (Amundsen, 2011: 660). Having such a diverse collection, in some cases,

creates a contrast between visitors' expectations through what the architecture presents and the content within it. Similarly, Lindauer makes points about this kind of contrast in her analysis of the Heard Museum in Phoenix – that building styles associated with the coloniser used to house colonial appropriations work as a sign of ownership and domination (2006, p. 222):

... the Heard Museum generally celebrates the fact that Native Americans have sustained cultural traditions that historically were targeted for extinction *within* a building whose architectural style recalls the history of European colonisation followed by US federal policies of eradication and assimilation.

The building has a longitudinal architecture and is entered through a central doorway positioned along its elongated side. Upon arrival, visitors will find themselves in the central inner staircase area of the building. This space extends on both sides, with exhibition areas occupying the wings split in two. Though visitors may feel disoriented in this initial space, the ticket office on the right-hand side of the entrance provides a helpful clue as to the direction. Nevertheless, even after the ticket procedures, the museum does not dictate a specific route for visitors to follow but instead allows them to choose their own path.

During Rane Willerslev's tenure as the museum director between 2011 and 2013, a new strategy was implemented for the distribution of exhibitions. Rather than displaying the exhibitions of each of the four collections independently – the University's Collection of National Antiquities and the Coin and Medal Collection, the ethnographic collection, and the Runic Archive – a more interdisciplinary approach was taken to the ground-floor exhibitions. The second and third floors featured thematic exhibitions that centred on objects and collections. Lastly, the fourth floor was reserved for temporary exhibitions (Ween, Mathisen, and Steinsholm, unpublished: 7).

During the first visit in October 2022, the museum had eight exhibitions across three floors:

- Good as Gold – Coins are History,
- VÍKINGR – Viking Age Exhibition,
- Emotions in Antiquity and Ancient Egypt,
- Egypt in Europe,
- Control – Attempting to Tame the World,
- Collapse – Human Being in an Unpredictable World,
- Arctic,
- America, Present. Past. Identity.

During the visit in November 2023, *Arctic*; and *America, Present. Past. Identity* exhibitions were closed, *Samurai; Heritage – Our Place in History*; and *Transformation – Faith and Sacred Objects in the Middle Ages* exhibitions were opened.

The *America, Present. Past. Identity* and *Heritage - Our Place in History* exhibitions serve as significant cases within the context of this research. The first exhibition focuses on the social lives and identity constructions of Indigenous communities in the Americas, while the second delves into how societies conceptualise heritage and legacy, raising questions about the ownership of cultural heritage. Both exhibitions were considered valuable for this project due to the narratives they present and the objects they feature. However, during my second visit to the museum, the *America, Present. Past. Identity* exhibition was closed, and the data I collected during my initial visit was insufficient for my study. Therefore, I decided not to include this exhibition in my analysis. Similarly, while the *Heritage* exhibition covered compelling topics, I ultimately excluded it due to its limited contribution to the research scope.

While purchasing my ticket, I was informed by the museum staff that their approach to exhibitions is not strictly temporary or permanent, much like Museum of World Culture. However, the opening of the *Arctic* exhibition in 1993, or the *America. Present. Past. Identity* in 2008, indicates that this may be a recent development in their approach. The museum's willingness to embrace change is evident through this curatorial practice. Such change challenges the traditional colonial narratives perpetuated by static exhibitions. By fostering flexibility and adaptability in exhibition themes and content, the museum can more effectively engage with contemporary issues and respond proactively.

In this way, the museum disrupts the exhibitionary complex's tendency towards static, didactic displays that reinforce state narratives (Bennett, 1988), instead fostering a more open-ended engagement with history that allows for multiple interpretations and voices. This adaptability influences the production of knowledge, allowing the museum to actively participate in the evolving discourse around decolonisation and respond more meaningfully to diverse, contemporary perspectives.

#### **6.4. Control – Attempting to Tame the World**

The *Control* exhibition, situated on the ground floor of the museum, opened in 2022. Its location on the far side of the museum entrance may make it challenging to find, as access to the exhibition is through either the *Heritage* or *Collapse – Human Being in an Unpredictable World* or *Transformation – Faith and Sacred Objects in the Middle Ages* exhibitions, depending on the chosen route. During my initial visit in October 2022, both the *Heritage – Our Place in History* and the *Transformation - Faith and Sacred Objects in the Middle Ages* exhibitions were closed, resulting in the *Collapse – Human Being in an Unpredictable World* exhibition being the only access point to the *Control* exhibition. However, during my visit in November 2023, with the opening of new exhibitions, access to the space has become more varied. As Lindauer (2006) notes, it is beneficial to gain insight into how the museum guides visitors through the exhibition. I previously mentioned the uncertainty surrounding the visitor's path once inside the museum, and a similar situation arose during my visit to the *Control* exhibition in November 2023. There are three different routes that visitors can take to access the exhibition, and only entrances No. 1 and 2 (see Figure 25) have labels that highlight the main themes and provide a general understanding of the exhibition. Due to entrance No. 3's proximity to entrance No. 1 and its placement within the space created by the *Forms of Use and Interaction* section, which I will discuss below, it may have been decided that adding a general label at this entrance could disrupt the exhibition's narrative. Nevertheless, the exhibition's lack of a designated route and the freedom it gives to visitors, along with the themes forming distinct sections and multiple entry points, all contribute to visitors crafting their own unique narratives. This approach bears similarities to that will be seen in Gothenburg.

I will describe the exhibition using the same route (from the No. 1 entrance) as my first visit in October 2022. I chose to take this particular route because it was the only access point available during my first visit to the exhibition, as previously mentioned. Furthermore, since I visited the exhibition in the opening year, I believe that the curators were aware of the accessibility issue and arranged this route to convey the intended narratives of the exhibition. However, upon revisiting the exhibit in November 2023, I discovered that taking a different route did not detract from the exhibition's overarching narrative. The exhibit presents its themes in a well-structured, section-by-section format, which ensures a cohesive narrative regardless of the chosen path. Nevertheless, it is worth considering that by taking different routes to connect the sections, the exhibition could potentially evoke various interpretations. For this reason, I preferred this route because my overall impression of the exhibition was formed during my first visit.

The exhibition hall is a longitudinally rectangular space featuring two entrance points housing general labels (Figure 25). Accordingly, the overarching goal is to explore humanity's attempts to control the world, dating back to early civilisation. Although the general narrative focuses on human and animal relations, this control extends beyond nature and food production to encompass human dominance over other humans, facilitated through land ownership, social structures, language, legal systems, and science. By interweaving narratives of 'slavery' and 'colonisation', the exhibition encourages visitors to confront Norway's complex colonial history, challenging prevailing notions of national identity and historical innocence. It invites reflection on the enduring impacts of colonialism and emphasises the importance of confronting uncomfortable truths to build a more inclusive and equitable future. To offer visitors a glimpse of what they can expect, the label poses a series of questions that hint at the exhibition's desired impact (Control, display text):

- What are the consequences of seeing the world as under human control?
- Is a civilisation dependent on control and oppression?
- Are there other stories about how we relate to our environment?
- Is there a connection between what we idealize as civilization, and the greatest challenges we now face?

It deals with these questions through five different sub-themes: *Domestication, Forms of Use and Interaction, Belief, Order, and Futures*.

As noted by Lindauer, grasping the display style can greatly enhance one's understanding of the exhibition. Within this framework, it is contended that the exhibited objects prioritise showcasing their technical, social, and religious attributes. In this regard, the overall approach of the exhibition is similar to the 'in context' approach defined by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998: 21-22).

Objects are set in context by means of long labels, charts, diagrams, commentary delivered via earphones, explanatory audiovisual programs, docents conducting tours, booklets and catalogs, educational programs, lectures and performances. Objects are also set in context by means of other objects, often in relation to a classification or schematic arrangement of some kind, based on typologies of form or proposed historical relationships ... In-context approaches exert strong cognitive control over the objects, asserting the power of classification and arrangement to order large numbers of artifacts from diverse cultural and historical settings and to position them in relation to one another.

While there may not be many excessively long labels, visitors interact with a variety of narratives conveyed through audio guides and informative visual displays. In certain themes, the exhibit's design is focused on the classification and relationships between objects. To complement the exhibition, a book/catalogue edited by Gro Birgit Ween and Michael Lundblad is also available. This latter purchasable publication offers an in-depth analysis of the themes explored in the exhibition, with a focus on the specific artworks.

It is also important to recognise that the placement, design and colour of the display cases imbue the exhibition with an art exhibition ambience. Despite the absence of white walls of the cube, the display cases compensate for this deficiency. Consequently, the

historical essence of the building is concealed, as will be expanded upon in greater detail in the discussion chapter.



Figure 25: Control – Attempting to Tame the World, Source: Author

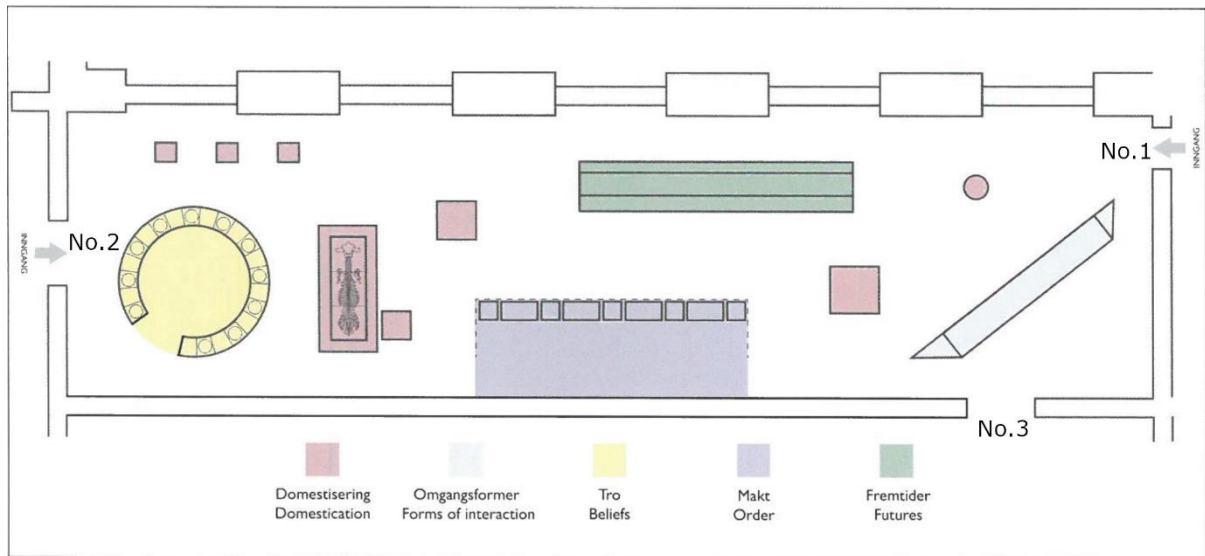


Figure 26: Floor Plan, Source: Entrance Label

#### **6.4.1. Domestication and Forms of Use and Interaction**

The installations of the first theme, *Domestication*, are scattered throughout the exhibition. These include animal skeletons, iron collars for animals, contemporary art sculpture, models of historical and contemporary animal husbandry, and voice installations. This theme includes a small number of carefully placed objects between other themes to reinforce and remind visitors of the main narrative. In this regard, an installation of two animal husbandry models, although not directly, serves as a powerful commentary on the impact of colonialism on society. The first model depicts the traditional relationship between humans and animals during the Iron Age, when they lived together in the same dwelling.

Sharing a house meant the animals and people lived closer together (*Iron Age House*, display text).

The second model, however, shows a more contemporary approach to animal husbandry, with a curved route to the slaughterhouse to prevent the animals from seeing each other. Even though the narrative does not indicate, this stark contrast suggests to me how colonialist consumer society has commodified everything as a source to extract and devalue life. However, the other installations within this theme are of little importance in the context of research either because of their early dates or because the nature of the material (animal skeletons, contemporary art sculpture) limits their relevance to the history of colonialism.

The second theme, the *Forms of Use and Interaction*, features a display case and accompanying video that are positioned diagonally in the corner. This section may easily go unnoticed due to the low lighting and the fact that objects are only shown on one side of the screen, which is positioned facing the corner of the room and accessed through a narrow passage. As such, it may cause one to mistake it for an unfinished area (Figure 26). This display is the most densely populated in the collection, featuring 135 distinct objects or groups of objects. It presents an extensive range of agricultural tools from

across the globe, including countries such as Argentina, Algeria, Congo, Kenya, Madagascar, Somalia, Russia, Greece, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Nepal, Mongolia, and Greenland. The arrangement of the display has been designed to allow objects with both similar uses/object groupings and aesthetic features to complement each other, resulting in a harmonious and cohesive but relatively overwhelming display. This presentation style is in line with the conventional ethnographic approach, which prioritises the functionality and timelessness of the objects (Lien and Nielssen, 2019: 447) while obscuring their unique characteristics. This is intensified by the presence of object labels that only list their type and year of purchase.

In an upcoming article, the curators of the exhibition have justified their chosen display approach (Ween, Mathisen and Steinsholm, unpublished: 15):

At first glance, the vitrine appears similar to the early 20th century exhibitions, but in this 2021 version there is no chronology or other traditional categorization. Rather, our ambition was introducing a heterogenous mass of objects that encouraged thinking, as Thomas (2022) has noted, juxtaposition, considering similarities and differences in technologies from all over the world of human engagement with animals. By grouping objects in simple, but open and undifferentiated categories, this display encourages audiences to make comparisons, to note similarities, and become aware of details. Artefacts on display are remarkably similar. They are a testament to the common heritage of mankind, a reminder of that our engagement with, and use of domesticated animals, are a shared and ongoing human enterprise.



*Figure 27: Forms of Use and Interaction, Source: Author.*

Indeed, the abundance of items on display makes it difficult to explain each object to visitors. To avoid overwhelming the visitors, the exhibit has opted to forego written descriptions and instead provides a catalogue/pamphlet at the entrance, offered in both English and Norwegian. The catalogue provides information about agricultural life, particularly around Oslo, Madagascar, of the Santal people in India, Bangladesh, and Nepal, and lastly, of the Sámi society. Additionally, the pamphlet contains two QR codes that lead to further documents with detailed information on Indigenous communities' practices. It is worth noting that the authors of these documents are academics, specifically from the University of Oslo.

During an interview with lead curator Gro Birgit Ween, the presence of source communities in the exhibition was discussed. Ween highlighted the previous *NewArctic* exhibition as a crucial foundation for the *Control* exhibition. For the *NewArctic* exhibition, Ween and her team reached out to a diverse range of people, including the Sámi community. Additionally, the research project, jointly executed by Sámi and non-Sámi researchers and hosted by the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters, contributed towards shaping the *NewArctic* framework. The exhibition travelled to various Sámi regions in Norway, which enabled a co-curation effort with local communities. All this experience influenced how Ween and her team approached the construction of the *Control* exhibition. Accordingly, the curatorial team engaged with university staff focused on human-animal relations, NGOs, individuals from the Center for Studies of Holocaust and Religious Minorities, those working with refugees, green activists, farmers and biologists. Although Ween indicated the experiences she obtained from the first exhibition affected her approach to the *Control*, upon closer examination of the communities involved, it is apparent that the Sámi people are the prominent community they interacted with. Ween also noted that they visited Santalistan, North India, to ensure proper representation of Santal objects and also conducted interviews with the family of Jørgen Ruud, a member of a missionary family in Madagascar. He collected a group of objects shown in the *Forms of Use and Interaction* display, made of zebu horn, of immense religious importance in Madagascar. However, without knowing the full list of employees at any of the above organisations, one could argue that other Indigenous

communities featured in this and other displays, such as those from Bangladesh, Nepal, and, to a certain degree, Madagascar, have not actively contributed to the exhibition.

Another topic discussed was the extent to which the contribution of those whose ideas are taken on board is implemented within the exhibition. In this regard, Ween stated:

I think we are more interested in including their opinions in the background for the exhibition. It was more about making sure that their opinions were reflected in the exhibition. Sometimes, it was also very practical, like in that installation about 'Futures' where, for example, we have people we have spoken to, like activist organisations or scientists of different kinds that were actually included into the vitrine. Other times, it was based upon a mapping exercise, like in terms of the Order. Part of them [was] interventions in the exhibition. I was more concerned [about] reflecting the opinions of my Sámi collaborators in the exhibition, but it was my choice [in the end], basically. But of course, because the objects were on loan from Sámi museums, [I had] their blessing.

Returning to the objects displayed in the *Forms of Use and Interaction* and the curatorial choices about how they are represented, it is helpful to consider Elisabeth Wood and Kiersten F. Latham's (2014) perspective on the accurate understanding of the nature of objects. They suggest that the *essence* of an object extends beyond simply describing its features and is influenced by the beliefs, experiences, and perceptions of the individuals or groups who possess it. As they defined (Wood and Latham, 2014: 11),

[t]he meaning is derived from [peoples'] attachments, memories, and experiences - its essence. The essence of an object, then, is incomplete without a self — an individual — and the time to draw out the sometimes hidden reality of the object and what it means. There are countless ways in

which a person encounters objects in the world. In each instance the intersection between self and object is mediated by all manner of information that a person brings with them as well as all the potential meanings that objects can have.

This perspective is particularly relevant to this display since the conventional ethnographic approach focuses on quantity and visual impact, but these risk overshadowing the specific cultural origins or significance of the objects. Mignolo suggests that epistemic reconfiguration can be facilitated through practices of delinking from Eurocentric epistemologies and engaging with diverse knowledges from marginalised perspectives, fostering pluriversality in understanding and knowledge production (2018: 246-247; 2021: 223-224). In this regard, the curatorial team's approach to identifying object attributes is, to a certain degree and for certain communities, effective, though it may fall short in fully encapsulating objects' essence. This latter point can be seen in the instance of two cheese pots originating from the Nuristan region of Pakistan. While the pamphlet mentions that these items were employed for religious sacrifices in honour of the goddess Disari, the specifics of who used these objects, their cultural significance, and how and when they entered the museum's collection remain elements that cannot be fully expanded upon within the scope of this presentation style. Source communities who are consulted offer a significant 'background' by which it can be inferred that Ween means identifying the purpose of objects but are often not directly involved in the decision-making process.

After completing this section, visitors have the option to navigate to either the *Orders* or *Futures* sections. The *Futures* section is somewhat out of the context of this research as it explores how agricultural practices are evolving in response to technological advancements and showcases some of the cutting-edge technologies currently being used in the field.

#### 6.4.2. Order

On the other hand, it is worth noting that the theme called *Order*, also referred to as *Power* in the accompanying pamphlet, holds significant importance as it delves into colonialism and Norway's involvement in this complex history. The section space is visually separated from the outside world by a white curtain, creating a sense of privacy (Figure 20). Within this area, there are a total of nine display cases in a combination of rectangular and square shapes lined up in a single row. These cases house a diverse collection of thirty-eight objects and object groups, ranging from intricate jewellery to a map, to human figurines to tools of oppression, such as handcuffs and shackles. In addition to the objects, there is a projector reflection on the wall positioned next to the general label of the section. As with the preceding theme, this section also contains a large number of objects. However, the contrast lies in the emotional resonance that these particular objects possess, such as handcuffs or whips. Here, I take an approach that follows Stephen Greenblatt's definition of resonance: According to him, resonance (1991: 42)

mean[s] the power of the displayed object to reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged and for which it may be taken by a viewer to stand.

In recognition of this potential, these objects have been strategically placed by being singled out within their respective display cases to establish a dominant presence over the other items on display. This could possibly be attributed to their perceived potential or significance compared to the rest of the objects in the collection.

While colonialism in a general context is emphasised in the middle display cases, the outer displays feature objects related to Norway's colonial practices. Thus, this section will be scrutinised under two headings. I will first focus on displays that examine

colonialism from a general perspective, then those that examine Norway's relationship with this history.

Before entering the section area, it is worth mentioning the connotations created by its design. The strategic placement of this section in the heart of the exhibition space provides ample opportunity for semiotic analysis. Unlike the other sections, which are demarcated by a stark and inflexible material, this area is framed by a sheer white curtain. This transparent, see-through feature makes it possible to see the silhouettes of certain objects and form an idea of what might be inside without entering the exhibition space, with the help of effectively placed lighting systems (Figure 27). The objects seen in this context are the shackle, the whip and the comb. According to the museum pamphlet, this last item demonstrates that the carrier is a free person. These are signifiers of subjugation and power, and the presence of these silhouettes symbolises colonialism. The section's centrality enables it to establish a dialogue with the neighbouring sections in this regard. For instance, its connection with the *Futures* section prompts reflection on the influence of colonialism on shaping tomorrow's world, while its proximity to *Belief* invites contemplation on the effects of colonialism on religious practices and freedoms and lastly, its interaction with *Forms of Use and Interaction* compels us to consider the exploitation of land and the role of sovereignty. Thus, the positioning of the section and the material serve as a significant nexus for the many intricate themes that weave throughout the exhibition.

One way to think about the effect produced by the white curtain is that it might encourage visitors to think about this area as a clinical site impression. Hospitals typically use white cloth because it makes it easier to use bleach to eliminate bacteria and viruses, while also making it possible to spot any stains. From this vantage point, the white curtain texture covering the entire space symbolises colonialism, which needs to be 'hospitalised,' while the objects casting shadows signify stains. This suggests that colonialism and the tools that are instrumental in its implementation are an ailment that requires treatment.



*Figure 28: Order and Reflections on Curtain, Source: Author*

#### 6.4.2.1. A Tool of Colonialism: Scientific Legitimacy

The *Order* theme begins by highlighting the systematic mapping and categorisation that increasingly gained attention post-Enlightenment. This constitutes the main theme, and the displays exemplify colonialism's practices of dominating and controlling the masses. Colonial projects frequently utilised racial hierarchies as a means of rationalising their dominance (Said, 1979; Bhabha, 1994; Wekker, 2016; Mignolo, 2021). As a result, these imposed racial beliefs have had a profound impact on perpetuating systemic prejudice, shaping a narrow view of humanity through Western modernity's discourse (Mignolo, 2021, p. 37), and continuing the legacy of colonial histories on marginalised populations. In this context, Scandinavian countries, despite their relatively limited colonial capabilities, have played an active role in the creation of the so-called scientific underpinnings of such classifications. For instance, Christian Jürgensen Thomsen – mentioned in chapter 4 as someone who played a crucial role in establishing the national museum – invented a triadic categorisation of historical ages – Stone, Bronze, Iron Ages – which is still relevant today. Similarly, Carl Linnaeus, also known as Carl Von Linné post-ennoblement, made significant contributions to the classification of plants and animals and one of his books is included in this display.

In this regard, the section welcomes visitors by projecting the cover of *Flora Lapponica* (Figure 28), one of Carl von Linné's famous books, and providing context to his way of thinking. Linné, originally from Sweden, was a physicist, botanist, zoologist, and taxonomist and is widely regarded as the 'father of modern taxonomy' (Calisher, 2007: 268). In his 1735 *Systema Naturae*, he classified animals and plants and even included human beings under the animal kingdom. Throughout his lifetime, he revamped his classification system twelve times. In the first nine editions, he segregated humans into four categories based on their skin colour: 'European white', 'American reddish', 'Asian tawny', and 'African black' (Charmantier, 2020). With the 10th edition (1758), he even added new classifications for humans by introducing the 'wild children and youngsters (Ferus)' (Charmantier, 2020) and 'monstruous' variety (Müller-Wille, 2014: 203) that he considered Sámi people in this category (Naum and Nordin, 2013: 12).

Here, the cover portrays Linné, who is presented as the catalyst of this system, donning a traditional Sámi dress, *gákti*, and holding a Sámi shaman's drum while standing beside

a Sámi tent (Ween, Mathisen and Steinsholm, unpublished). With a presentation of his book cover, the section questions Western colonial ideas through the accompanying text:

... Linné included humankind as a species in his system, and divided humans into six sub-species. The cover of *Flora Lapponica* (1737) illustrates this way of thinking, with Linné at the centre, a relaxed and *competent* explorer, surrounded by Lapland's flora and fauna, including the Sámi [emphasis added] ... According to a typical "Western" worldview, humans, animals and plants can be ranked within a hierarchy of value, placing certain humans at the top. Such orders justify and naturalise forms of subordination, domination and exploitation (*Order*, display text).

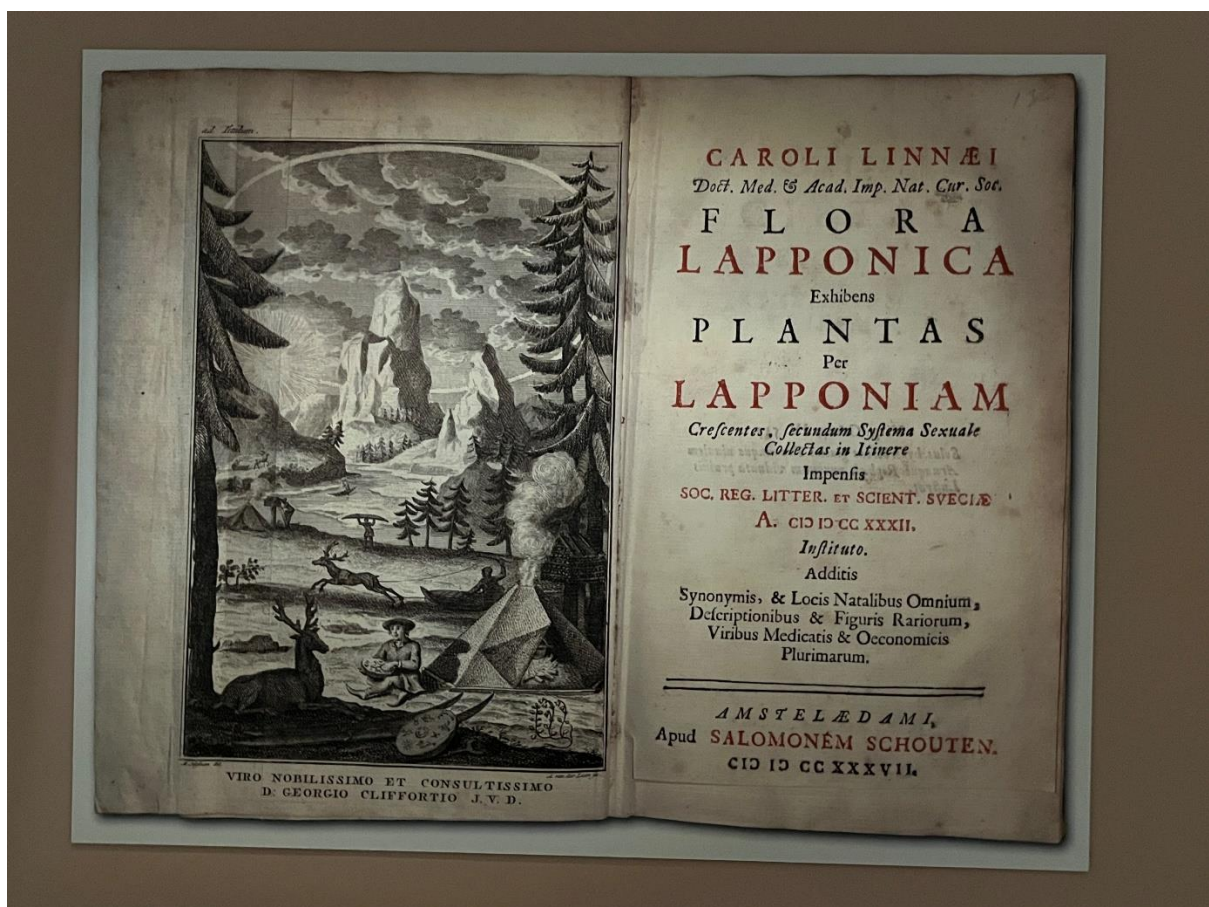


Figure 29: The cover of *Flora Lapponica*, Source: Author

The idea of competence, as mentioned in the text, is rooted in the Western society's belief in supremacy and legitimacy, which originated from colonialism. These beliefs, combined with racist notions, have led to the misconception that only Westerners are capable of competence while marginalising and Othering the rest (Said, 1979; Bhabha, 1994). Similarly, we can observe this marginalisation not only in the book's cover but also in the book's title. The term Lapland, also mentioned in the text, has a problematic history. According to the Online Etymology Dictionary, Lapland is defined as (2017):

[N]orthernmost part of the Scandinavian peninsula, 1570s, from Lapp, the Swedish name for this Finnic people (their name for themselves was Sabme), which probably originally was an insulting coinage (compare Middle High German lappe "simpleton").

In a similar vein Oxford English Dictionary defines the term as (2023):

The region which forms the most northerly portion of the Scandinavian peninsula, now divided politically between Finland, Norway, Sweden, and Russia. Formerly, the fabled home of witches and magicians, who had power to send winds and tempests. Frequently attributive, as Lapland witch, Lapland giant, etc.

As can be seen, the word's origin is from the Swedish word Lapp, though the Etymology Dictionary also suggests the possibility of the word's German connotation. In any case, the word was a derogatory way to describe members of the Sámi community (Anderson, 1983; Östlund and Norstedt, 2021: 2). Therefore, the Sámi parliament has expressed the preference to use the term Sápmi to refer to their lands. Nevertheless, some members are comfortable with either term (Rapp, 2008). Although the use of a word with colonial

connotations in the book's title may not be surprising, the use of the term Lapland in the label may be, notwithstanding the museum's previous work with the Sámi community and the curatorial team's sensitivity in reflecting their opinions, conceived as a lack of sensitivity towards colonial place-naming politics.

The text's reference to the privileging of certain humans over other living beings or even gender is detailed in more depth within other display cases positioned directly opposite the projection. These displays are titled *Agriculture as a Tool of Colonization* and *Gender and Oppression*. The former showcases stuffed extinct bird specimens from the Amazons and feathered adornments from the Gran-Chaco region of Bolivia (Figure 29), and the latter showcases a handcuffs and women figurines with children (Figure 30). After science gained recognition as a means of producing knowledge instead of religious means, it became a tool for establishing power (Lea, 2020). In this regard, Linné's taxonomy served as the foundation for scientific racism in order to justify colonialism and slavery. Scientific racism involves using scientific theories and methods to promote racial discrimination, prejudice, or hierarchy (Lea, 2020: 586). This involved categorising humans and animals based on perceived similarities to human racial categories, such as intelligence, behaviour, or physical characteristics. According to Das and Lowe (2018: 5), museums had a role in reinforcing scientifically racist beliefs by serving as repositories for items and specimens collected during scientific/colonial expeditions around the world. The first display emphasises this role with the narrative it creates through the birds and accompanying text:

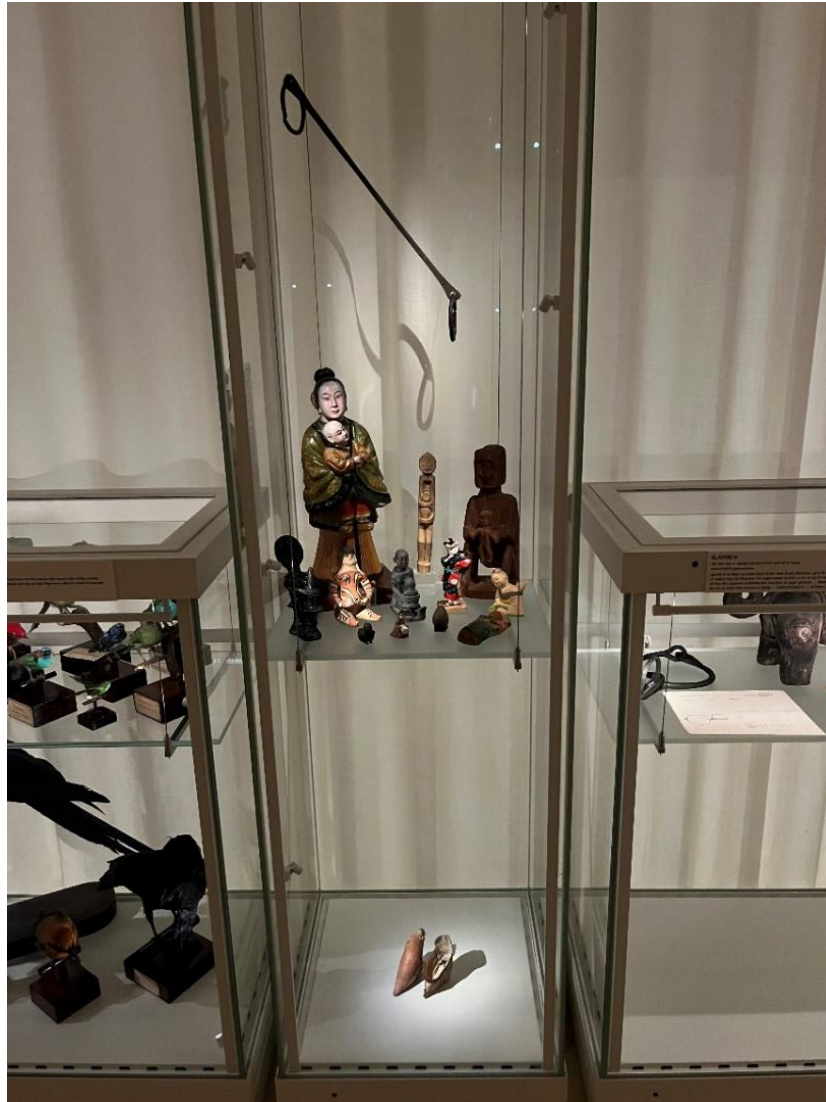
Commercial monocultures deplete the soil and displaces biodiversity ...  
People's knowledge about nature is deeply connected to traditional use and  
cooperation with plants and animals. When natural diversity becomes extinct,  
knowledge of it becomes endangered ... Some of the birds exhibited here ...  
were killed in order to become museum objects (*Agriculture as a Tool of  
Colonization I*, display text).

Additionally, in the pamphlet, these birds are described in a way that brings attention to an often-overlooked aspect, linking it to the concept of slavery. In this way, the narrative implies that slavery not only pertains to the maltreatment and subjugation of fellow human beings but extends to all kinds of creatures, from those captured for scientific study to those presently confined in zoos against their will.

The narrative in *Gender and Oppression*, on the other hand, highlights the role of Enlightenment philosophies' tendency to categorise the world as binary, civilised and primitive or, such as in this display, male and female. The patriarchal structures imposed by Western colonial powers in colonised regions not only mirrored the gender norms prevalent in the colonisers' societies but also served as mechanisms of control and domination. The figurines portraying women with children from diverse cultures serve as reminders of women's subordinate status, largely attributed to their reproductive roles within societal frameworks. Symbolic of the coercive grip of control, accompanying handcuffs further illustrate the oppressive mechanisms at play. Along with the deliberate juxtaposition of this display with the adjacent *Slavery* display case, which will be elaborated on later, establishes a thematic linkage, facilitating a deeper understanding of the interconnected systems of oppression. This strategic narrative construction not only underscores the plight of women but also elucidates similar patterns of systemic injustice and subjugation.



Figure 30: Agriculture as a Tool of Colonization display, Source: Author



*Figure 31: Gender and Oppression Display, Source: Author*

Overall, these three displays illuminate the enduring influence of colonial perspectives, tracing their roots in Scandinavian contributions to taxonomy and classifications. The exploration of figures like Carl von Linné and the critical examination of the colonialist categorisation contribute to a nuanced understanding of both historical and contemporary contexts and the Scandinavian countries' role in this process. On the one hand, the displays present an example of the colonial mindset's knowledge production, which was/is influential in making sense of things in the contemporary Western sense, and on the other hand, it refers to the destruction that occurred during this knowledge production process. This reveals the tendency of Western-centric knowledge production to obliterate other ways of understanding. By doing so, it brings to the attention of visitors

that the knowledge produced cannot be impartial and may serve specific purposes. Additionally, displays highlight the hard truth that the colonialist production of knowledge can lead to harm not only to humans but also to plants and animals. The sentence stating that the birds were killed in order to be exhibited in the museum once proves that these institutions (museums) could/can be implicated in the colonial project.

#### **6.4.2.2. Unthinkable Connections**

As mentioned, while the displays above may showcase the impact of colonial categorisation and knowledge production to justify domination and control, they appear to fall short in accurately portraying Norway's role in this history. Although the Sápmi, which is partly Norway's today, is depicted on the book cover, the central figure is actually Swedish. To fully understand Norway's colonial relationship with this region and others, visitors need to explore display cases on both edges. In this regard, two display cases labelled as *Internal Colonisation* first attract my attention. The name of the display acknowledges Norway's colonial approach to the region in a transparent and forthright way, which is praiseworthy. Yet, while the exhibition catalogue and other components duly offer insights into Sámi traditions, culture and living, it is crucial to note that this is the sole section of the exhibit that addresses the colonial connection with Sámi communities. The story in the displays focuses on one of the historical events that occurred in the Sápmi: the Kautokeino Uprising. In 1852, a group of approximately 35 Sámi people dissented in the village of Kautokeino in present-day Norway. Although some attribute the uprising to 'religious delusions, fanaticism and spiritual arrogance' (Graff, 2009, cited in Christensen, 2012: 59) related to Læstadianism – a movement that emerged within the Lutheran church and gained prominence in Sápmi (Granquist, 2015) – it is widely accepted that the leading cause was the socio-economic impact of colonial conditions on the local population (Christensen, 2012). The uprising resulted in the deaths of Carl Johan Ruth and local police chief Lars Johan Bucht, as well as numerous beatings and whippings. Other local Sámi ultimately put an end to the revolt, resulting in the death of two of the dissenter Sámi. Aslak Jacobsen Hætta and Mons Aslaksen Somby, believed to be leaders of the uprising, received death sentences while others involved were sentenced to prison by Norwegian authorities.

To narrate the story, display cases include a hammer – *vietjere* – used to play the drum by Sámi shamans in rituals (Mathisen, 2022), an iron cuff for the neck and feet used for the captured Sámi people in the Kautokeino rebellion and lastly, objects from Sámi daily life made by one of the captives, Lars Jacobsen Hætta, during the time of his imprisonment. At the heart of the narrative lies *vietjere*. It is suspended alone, independent of the others (Figure 31). Additionally, special attention is paid to this object in both the exhibition's pamphlet and catalogue. As per the museum catalogue, the *vietjere* was initially acquired with little knowledge of its identity, leading to its entry being labelled as the 'shaft of a meat knife' (Mathisen, 2022: 147). Then, this entry was changed and 'the meat knife became a "runebomme" (a Sámi shamanic drum)' (Mathisen, 2022: 147). Eventually, upon closer inspection, the true significance of the object was uncovered as a hammer that is 'used to play the drum' (Mathisen, 2022, p. 147). Another aspect emphasised in the catalogue was the artistic elements of the object. Accordingly, *vietjere* has Sámi motifs on one side and Ringerike style on the other – an ornamental technique that emerged during Norway's early Christian period. The Sámi religion's reliance on practices rather than a written theology allowed flexibility and adaptability, creating a more tolerant relationship with Christianity. In this regard, *vietjere* symbolises the idea of possible co-existence between different cultures (Mathisen, 2022: 150). By elucidating the symbiotic relationship between Sámi traditions and early Christian influences, the pamphlet and catalogue disrupt Eurocentric narratives of cultural superiority and highlight the interconnectedness of diverse cultures.

In addition to this emphasis on *vietjere*, the positioning of other objects in relation to it also creates an element that strengthens the narrative. *Vietjere's* singular and suspended arrangement, in the adjacent display case, accompanies an iron cuff that is positioned lower to the ground and Hætta's Sámi daily life pieces above (Figure 32). This presentation method serves a dual purpose: it contributes to the significance of the *vietjere* and Sámi culture, while also conveying the deep-seated shame associated with the history of the iron cuff. In this way, the presentation challenges viewers to interrogate dominant narratives of colonial supremacy and acknowledge Indigenous peoples' agency and autonomy.

Mignolo and Tlostanova's theory of 'border thinking' (2006) offers valuable insights into the section at hand. In essence, border thinking refers to the process of redefining the discourse of modernity, away from the dominant Eurocentric perspective, towards acknowledging and valuing the cosmologies and knowledge systems of historically marginalised groups by colonialism. It emphasises the importance of recognising and celebrating the differences between people and cultures. The primary aim of border epistemologies is to facilitate the struggle for decolonial liberation, which seeks to transcend the limitations of Eurocentric modernity. Border thinking generates a reinterpretation or incorporation of concepts such as citizenship, democracy, human rights, humanity, and economic relations, expanding beyond the limited definitions imposed by European modernity (Grosfoguel, 2006: 179): 'Border thinking is the epistemology of the exteriority; that is, of the outside created from the inside; and as such, it is always a decolonial project' (Mignolo and Tlostanova, 2006: 206). In other words, it is the idea of incorporating the way of thinking of the marginalised, those who were affected by colonialism but not considered part of it. In line with Grosfoguel's reference (2006: 179) to the Zapatista movement in Mexico, the Sámi people also acknowledge the concept of democracy while maintaining their unique Indigenous practices. They do not hold an antimodern fundamentalist perspective and instead have their own distinct conceptualisation. In this regard, through research and collaboration with Sámi communities, the museum managed to figure out the true purpose of the *vietjere*, which demonstrates the epistemology of exteriority implemented in the museum narrative. The presentation effectively showcases border thinking by highlighting an object *vietjere*, which exists at a cultural crossroads and signifies the possibility of co-existence, while also referencing a rebellion that emerged as a response to the violence of colonialism.

The text of the display, however, gives us important clues about how this approach remains superficial in some cases:

Christian missions became an important part of the project of *civilization*, both in the colonies and in Norway. Thomas von Westen (1682-1727) began

missionary work amongst the Sámi in 1716. The missionaries confiscated and destroyed drums and other ritual objects which the Sámi used.

The Kautokeino Uprising in 1852 was a revolt against *local non-Sámi authorities*: the merchant, the priest, and the sheriff ... (*Internal Colonisation II*, display text, emphasis added).

Although the title of the label is *Internal Colonisation*, the concept of Christianisation is presented as a project of *civilisation*. There is a complex relationship between Christianisation and colonialism. Christianisation played a role in controlling and managing customs, knowledge and understanding of the colonised territories, which can be viewed under Mignolo's colonial matrix of power (CMP). '[CMP] is a structure of control and management that operates in four domains ... Knowledge and Understanding, Governance, Economy, and the idea of the Human or Humanity' (Mignolo, 2023: 43). Missionaries' enforcing and assimilating approach resulted in a tangled web of cultural imposition, resistance, and, in some cases, syncretism, such as Læstadianism mentioned above. The text here, though, by presenting Christianisation as a so-called project of civilisation, decontextualises the role of the missionaries from any colonial relations because it serves the idea of the superiority of Christianity over other religions. Furthermore, the narrative is also hesitant to specify against whom the Kautokeino Uprising occurred. The local non-Sámi authorities mentioned here essentially refer to Norwegian authorities. In this regard, the narrative has created an obscurity or, as Mason and Sayner put it, silence (2019). The only example in the text that could be considered to align with the title 'Internal Colonisation' is the destructive attitudes of missionaries towards the Sámi people.



Figure 32: Vietjere, Source: Author

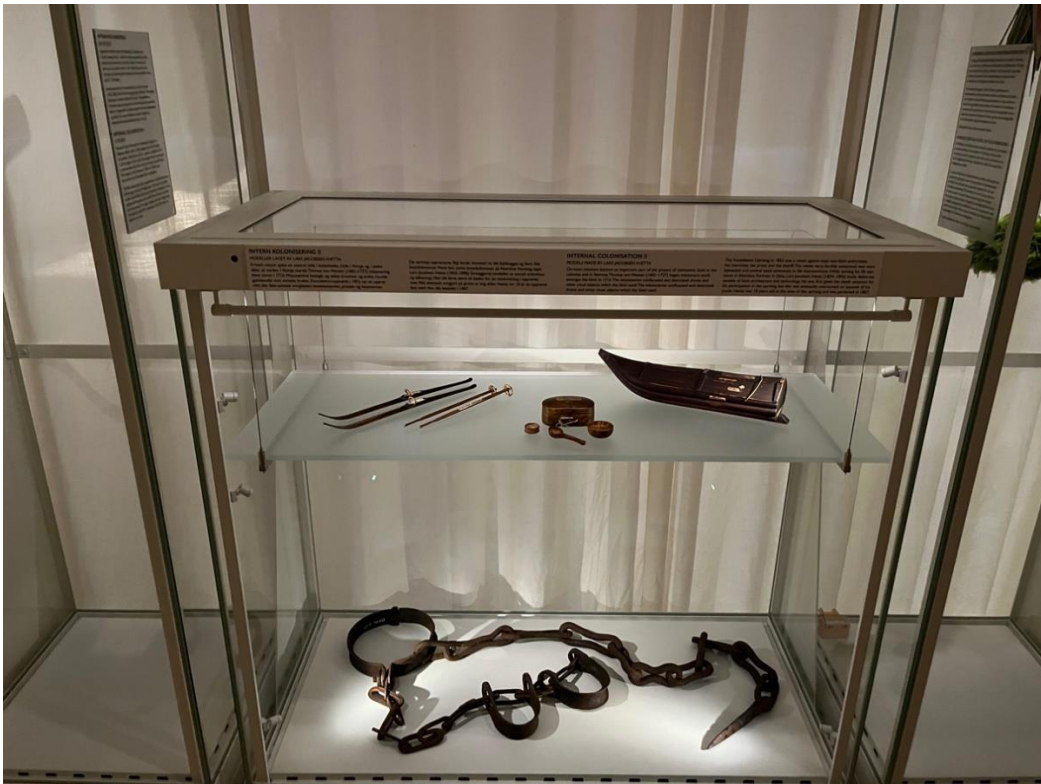


Figure 33: Internal Colonisation Display, Source: Author

On the other frontier of the same section, the exhibition delves into Norway's colonial activities beyond Sápmi, presenting two distinctive displays. These engagements involved a variety of individuals, such as missionaries, soldiers, labourers, doctors, and others, making it difficult to trace their impact on Norway's history. Nevertheless, the exhibition sheds light on Norway's participation in exploitative colonial practices through two significant examples. The first display focuses on *Slavery*, which the Kingdom of Denmark-Norway maintained in Ghana from 1649 until its abolition in 1792 (not fully enforced until 1803). The presentation features the story of Danish-Norwegian sea captains Chr. Martini and Chr. Schønberg, who arrived in the Congo which was under the control of King Leopold II of Belgium from 1885 to 1908. This narrative highlights that involvement in the transatlantic slave trade was once considered a valid option by the Norwegians. Similarly, the second display, titled *Colonisation I-II*, showcases artefacts that belonged to the Norwegian governor-general, Peter Anker, during his tenure in Tranquebar under the Kingdom of Denmark-Norway's auspices.

Through an object, the map of Tranquebar, the exhibition refers to the categorisation discussed in the previous chapter:

During colonial times, conquest and mapping were closely linked ... Maps represented an important tool for the management of colonies. Peter Anker's map over the Danish-Norwegian colonies illustrate how for the Europeans, the colonies were the land of resources available for exploitation. Local meaning, history and life were erased (*Colonisation I*, display text).

Although the presentation emphasises how Europeans conceive of the land as a resource through Peter Anker's map, it takes a superficial approach in describing the objects in the display case next to it (Figure 33). This display case includes locally made

items such as human figurines and a decorated coconut that the locals gifted to Peter Anker. The label merely quotes from the catalogue, providing little insight:

<<... decorated coconut received by Peter Anker as a gift from the people at Trankebar>>

<<Models representing different peoples and professions in India>>  
(*Colonisation II*, display text).

Along with his governor-general role, Peter Anker is also an artist and has painted Indian landscapes featuring the ruins and temples of ancient civilisations (Arnesen, 2009, cited in Halvorsen, 2022). The research conducted by Jon-Emil Halvorsen (2022) in the exhibition catalogue indicates that he depicted the people of this region as confined, static, and ancient civilisations that do not necessarily adhere to Western values in his artworks. Additionally, in his letters, Anker expressed his opinions on the peoples of the region (Halvorsen, 2022: 125):

The Character of the blacks is not the best. They fall prey to all kinds of Evil. The lower Classes are thieves, drunkards and frauds. The higher classes continuously seek to confuse the Europeans by engaging in Lies and Manipulation.

... nothing but fear of power makes a good subject of a black ...

The visitors discovers the genuine character of Peter Anker through the catalogue, while the exhibition's narrative fails to communicate this fact. The narrative appears to criticise the European approach in a broad manner via Peter Anker's map but simultaneously portrays Peter Anker as someone who could receive 'gifts' from the locals as if he were a

good person. This selective portrayal poses a significant hindrance to the establishment of a decolonial narrative. Again, taking into account the views expressed by Mason and Sayner (2019), it is possible that silence may also play a role in this scenario. They identify nine different ways of silencing happening in museums, and what MCH is doing here can be classified as 'museums using silence obliquely: uncertainty and ambivalence'. In this approach, 'a museum may speak about a topic obliquely rather than head-on and use tactics of non-naming and alternative terminologies to explicitly make a point (2019, p. 10). Some of these tactics are 'strategic use of linguistic silences, avoidances, and ambivalences' (2019, p. 10). Accordingly, while the *Control* exhibition provides a colonial critique by highlighting the categorisation practices of colonial empires through maps, it isolates itself from these colonial relations through the 'strategic use of linguistic silences' by not including any information about Peter Anker's activities in display text but providing them in the catalogue.



Figure 34: Sea Coconut and Human Figures, Source: Author

Overall, the *Order* section delves into the persistent impact of colonial perspectives on our present-day comprehension of the world, specifically focusing on Scandinavian contributions to taxonomy and classification. Through this examination, the colonialist tendency to categorise and rank individuals, animals and plants, as evidenced by figures like Carl von Linné, is brought to light. The exhibition layout deliberately highlights the interconnectedness of colonial systems and provides insights into the practicalities of categorisation by revealing the intersections of gender, environment and race.

Additionally, by engaging with the narratives and objects presented, visitors are compelled to confront difficult truths about Norway's involvement in colonial history and its ongoing implications for contemporary society. In this context, the Kautokeino

Uprising brings to light Norway's position within the internal context of colonialism, revealing practices that reflect a colonial mentality. These practices include marginalising the Sámi people and devaluing their faith. Although Denmark was dominant within the Kingdom of Denmark-Norway, this uprising shows that Norway's so-called innocence in the context of colonialism, even after separation, is not accurate when it comes to the Sámi community. Moreover, Norway's individual involvement in activities within colonised territories, both in the kingdom times and after, reinforces this situation. The display of these items and narrative reflect Wayne Modest's emphasis on 'learning from being uncomfortable' (Modest, 2018, cited in Giblin, Ramos, and Grout, 2019: 473); in a way, they challenge Norway's perceived innocence. However, while Norway's role in historical oppression is exemplified in this exhibit, the use of colonially objectionable language, as can be seen in the *Internal Colonisation* label, detracts from its effectiveness as a decolonial presentation. Mignolo refers to the imperial nature of language, pointing out that the language used in disciplines and even in everyday life was defined in the 16th and 17th centuries in Europe (2016, cited in Flores, Martín and Black, 2024). Lastly, the exhibit's dependence on a pamphlet and catalogue rather than a cohesive narrative gives the impression that the presentation lacks depth. On one hand, having access to these materials offers a broader scope of detailed scrutiny for the exhibition, allowing for a richer and more comprehensive narrative. On the other hand, without the catalogue, which is purchasable for an additional fee, the exhibition conveys a weak and, at times, problematic narrative regarding the decolonial perspective, particularly in the presentation of the gifts given to Peter Anker. As such, this approach limits the intended impact, as it prevents a deeper understanding of the material.

#### **6.4.3. Belief**

The final section of the exhibition, *Belief*, boasts a striking cylindrical structure with a narrow and low entrance leading to the interior. Eleven unique objects are on display, each independently arranged within the structure (Figure 34). The chosen objects and groups of objects highlight the relationship between animals and human beliefs, with a focus on bovines as a representative type of animal. This showcases the diversity of a similar element across various cultures and beliefs. Of the objects presented, five

originated from Norway, while the others were from Madagascar, India, and Egypt. The narrative is constructed by placing each object in its own display, highlighting its unique qualities. The ceiling of the structure is illuminated by a red light on 'a fabric with the texture of animal intestine' (Ween, Mathisen and Steinsholm, unpublished: 16). This approach is a departure from the more traditional ethnographic display technique used in the *Forms of Use and Interaction*. In this way, the section presents the cultures on display in a nuanced way that avoids generalisations. However, the structure of the space limits visitors' access to these narratives. The entrance faces the corner of the exhibition area, which means a visitor needs to walk around the cylinder to find the entrance. The inside area consists of a narrow circular space and is illuminated by a dim red light. Not only is standing still in the space uncomfortable because of the low ceiling, but it can also be difficult for more than one person to observe narratives at the same time because of this narrow and small interior design. Additionally, the seating in the centre is designed in an uncomfortable manner, positioning the listener in a squat position rather than sitting. When combining the fact that each audio guide is about two and a half minutes long, this section requires approximately thirty minutes to listen to/to understand/to engage with fully. Therefore, according to my observation, this was the cold spot of the exhibition.

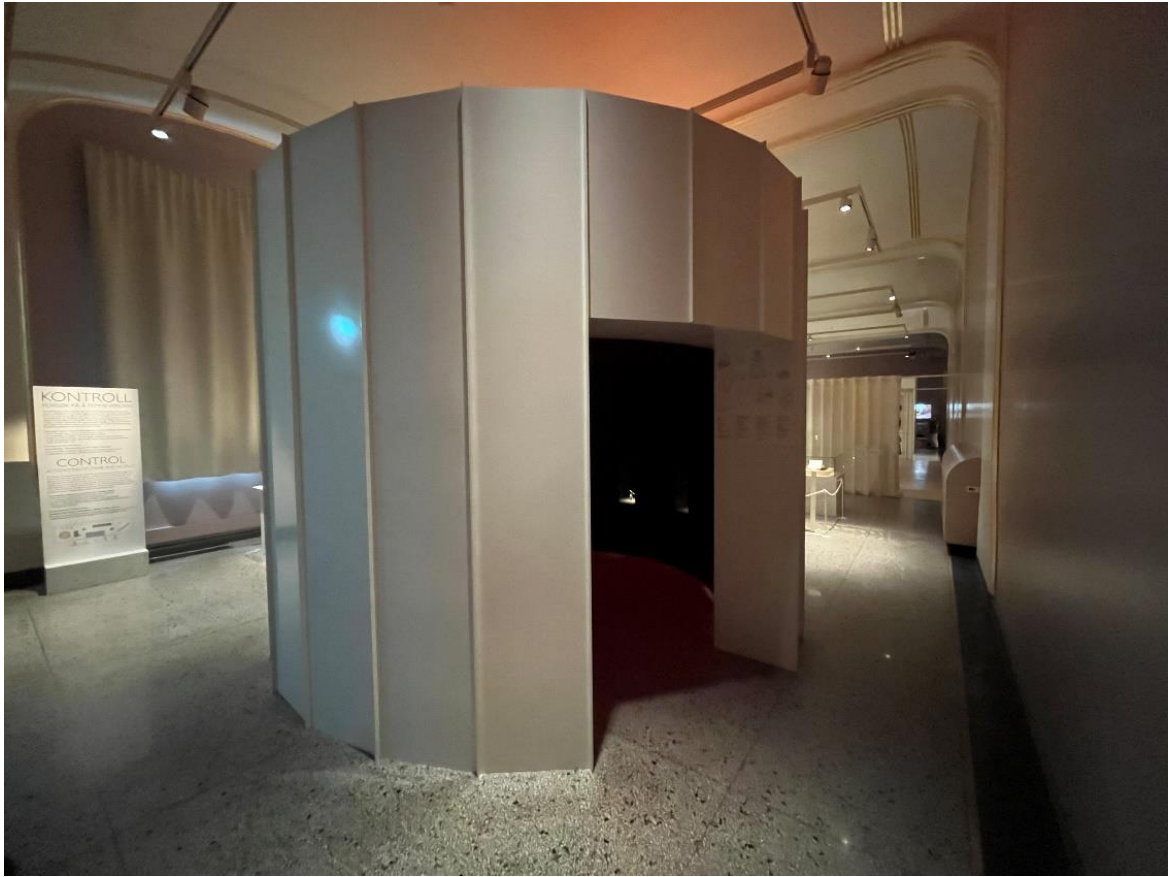


Figure 35: Belief, Source: Author

The audio guides provide concise information about the objects on display, including their historical significance and cultural significance. Notably, two objects stand out in the context of colonialism due to their early acquisition dates and association with missionaries. The first object, known as the 'Skull Cap,' was collected for the museum in 1908 by a missionary named Bjørn Elle. The second object, the Yoni and Lingam, symbolising the principle of male and female in Hinduism, was brought by Per Olaf Bodding. While the audio guides do not provide information about these individuals or their missionary work, a link accessible through the QR code in the pamphlet's written version offers insight into Bodding's background. He was a member of the Santal Mission and served in India between 1890 and 1934. Interestingly, a temporary exhibition of the Santal collection was planned but cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic: 'The Santal collection of the Museum of Cultural History is the most comprehensive of its kind anywhere in the world and comprises around 1000 ethnographic and more than 4700 archaeological objects' (Museum of Cultural History, 2020).

While the section hints at further information about the second missionary, it does not thoroughly detail the aims, motives, and perspectives of either missionary. The objects and narratives presented in museums are selectively chosen (Bennett, 1995; Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). It is a consequence of this selectivity that instead of focusing on the process of how the missionaries acquired the objects, the section aims to convey the message that the objects hold. However, it is ironic that the exhibit is presented under the theme of *Belief* but showcases objects collected by missionaries who were attempting to convert colonised people to other beliefs. Although the general narrative focuses on human and animal relations, the ethnographic nature of the objects makes it necessary to examine them repeatedly in the context of colonialism and should clarify and enlighten the visitors in this regard.

### **6.5. Art Gallery Aesthetic in Ethnographic Context**

The *Control – Attempting to Tame the World* exhibition has a design that somewhat obscures the historical essence of the venue. The exhibition heavily utilises a white colour scheme, reminiscent of a refined art gallery, but not entirely resembling a white

cube. To fully understand the exhibition's aesthetic, it is beneficial to detail the white cube of contemporary art galleries. The term white cube refers to the distinct architectural and aesthetic characteristics of modern art galleries, which are known for their minimalist design, white walls, wooden floors, and controlled ceiling lighting. These features are intentionally utilised to create a neutral, unbiased, and 'pure' environment that emphasises the display of artworks (O'Doherty, 1986; Filipovic, 2014).

While the white cube ostensibly embodies creating a neutral, unbiased environment, this approach is seen as problematic in some respects. The origin of this issue can be traced back to the ideological clash that stems from the initial implementation of this approach by Alfred Barr Jr. at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in 1929, and subsequently, with the approval of Hitler, at the Haus der Kunst in Munich in 1937 - the first architectural endeavour was undertaken by the Nazi regime following their ascent to power (Maak, Klonk and Demand, 2011; Filipovic, 2014). Director and chief curator of Kunsthalle Basel Elena Filipovic describes this situation as follows (2014, p. 46):

If the white cube managed to be both the ideal display format for the MoMA's and the Third Reich's respective visions of modern art, despite their extremely different ideological and aesthetic positions, it is because the display conceit embodied qualities that were meaningful to both, including neutrality, order, rationalism, progress, extraction from a larger context, and, not least of all, universality and (Western) modernity.

From this perspective, the white cube represents a demonstration of power dynamics at play within the art world. It perpetuates the notion that artwork must adhere to a certain standard, specifically that of modernity, in order to be displayed in such a manner. This reinforces exclusive and restrictive norms that favour a select few within a hierarchy. Such an approach is at odds with the idea of creating a neutral space for art. As art critic, Zarina Muhammad puts it in the White Pube blog (2015):

White as an abstract just means the privilege of being 'raceless': not having a hyphenated identity like black-British or Asian-American, or the baggage of being attached to visible signifiers of Otherness. And this is what makes people feel uncomfortable and out of place in the white cube: a space specifically designed to be neutral and free of context.

Given these considerations, the *Control* exhibition employs display cases that resemble the impact of the white walls of the white cube. These display cases are characterised by their unique, inflexible, monumental, and white design, and they assist in abstracting the space. The exhibition further adopts a ceiling lighting system and utilises white curtains to impede natural light from entering the space. Lastly, despite not being made of wood, the floor contributes to the white colour palette of the exhibition and makes up for the lack of white walls.

This aesthetic approach has certain connotations. The first one is related to the historicity of the museum building. According to Norway's Cultural Heritage Act, 'monuments and sites and cultural environments which are valuable architecturally or from the point of view of cultural history may be protected under the present Act [concerning the cultural heritage]' (Ministry of Climate and Environment, 2018). This means comprehensive changes cannot be done in the buildings that have historical value. While the museum's architectural elements may capture the visitor's attention in other exhibitions, *Control's* aesthetic design abstracts the features of a historical building and makes the visitor forget where they are.

However, despite the spatial abstraction created by the display cases with the aforementioned features, the interior of some of the display cases has dark backgrounds with overhead lighting within display cases. As Elsbeth Court puts it (1999, p. 152), modernism's concept of autonomous, universal art necessitates proper spacing and lighting for viewers to focus on the artwork's formal qualities. Conversely, the ethnographic approach contextualises a broad range of artefacts within their cultural milieu. Ethnographic museums display objects alongside others with similar purposes or organise them based on ethnic or regional origin. *Control*, in this regard, showcases

examples where both approaches are used together. This brings us to the inquiry of how we differentiate between art and artefacts, and how their presentation techniques impact this distinction. The Art/Artifact exhibit at the Center for African Art, curated by Susan Vogel, is a notable example of this critical examination (Danto, 1988; Farr, 1988; Vogel, 1988). This exhibit offers a glimpse into the Western interpretation of African art and artefacts, through five distinct exhibition styles that shape the narrative. The way in which the objects are presented in the exhibit determines their status as either art or artefact. This approach can be similarly observed in *Control*. The *Vietjere* in the *Order* section or the individually placed eleven objects in the *Belief* section are based on the first approach as Court puts it (though it is difficult to say that the individual features of the objects in the *Belief* section are emphasised due to the restrictive and dimly lightened space), while the *Forms of Use and Interaction* section demonstrates the latter, more ethnographic museum representation style. The connotation of the white cube acknowledges every object as artwork rather than ethnographic in the space. However, this varied approach contradicts it. This contrast/diversity hinders the intention to showcase artworks/objects' unique traits. Therefore, one may wonder why the *Vietjere* is considered art while the two cheese pots used in rituals in the name of *Disari* are not. While I cannot provide a definitive response, it is probable that the formation of the Nordic Sámi Council in 1956, coupled with the successful implementation of multiple initiatives centred on Tromsø, has contributed to greater awareness of colonial perspectives towards the Sámi community. Additionally, the recognition of the Sámi as the sole indigenous group in Europe acknowledged by the European Union (Minority Rights Group, 2023) and the responsibility that comes with their direct relationship to Norway compared to other source communities have further cemented this unique approach (Lopenen, 2023). As museum curator Ween puts it (2024): 'I was more concerned [about] reflecting the opinions of my Sámi collaborators in the exhibition'.

Such aesthetical preferences, by considering the points made by Filipovic (2014) and Zarina (2015), raise critical questions about power dynamics, exclusivity, and decoloniality within museum spaces. It is important to recognise that the exhibition's use of a white cube-esque aesthetic in a venue like the MCH may unintentionally reinforce hierarchical norms and limit the representation of diverse cultures and their

perspectives. As someone who is aware of the arguments of 'museums as temples' and the various norms/rules imposed on visitors within them (Duncan and Wallach, 1980; Duncan, 1994, Cameron, 2004), I cannot say that I generally feel comfortable in art museums. In this regard, the *Control* exhibition, with its aesthetic approach that can be connotated with the art museum/gallery atmosphere, brought pressure of the elitist atmosphere commonly associated with high culture. As mentioned, considering that the use of white colour is often employed as a means of standardisation and extraction from a larger context – a practice commonly associated with a hierarchical system where power relations dominate within Western modernity – its use from a decolonial perspective could be considered precarious, since decoloniality views modernity/coloniality as two sides of the same coin (Mignolo, 2021; Greenberg and Hamilakis, 2022; Bhambra, 2023). It is worth remembering, though, that one could make the argument that the implications of the White Cube approach hold relevance for contemporary art museums but do not necessarily translate to a museum with an ethnographic focus like the MCH, and what is given in the *Control* exhibition is not fully a 'white cube'. Nonetheless, this aesthetic approach reminds me of O'Doherty's argument (1986, p. 76):

Esthetics are turned into a kind of social elitism – the gallery space is *exclusive*. Isolated in plots of space, what is on display looks a bit like valuable scarce goods, jewelry, or silver: esthetics are turned into commerce – the gallery space is *expensive*. What it contains is, without initiation, well-nigh incomprehensible – art is *difficult*. Exclusive audience, rare objects difficult to comprehend – here we have a social, financial, and intellectual snobbery which models (and at its worst parodies) our system of limited production, our modes of assigning value, our social habits at large. Never was a space, designed to accommodate the prejudices and enhance the self-image of the upper middle classes, so efficiently codified.

## 6.6. Conclusion

The *Control* exhibition manages to create a compelling narrative by focusing on human and animal interactions while emphasising the involvement of Norway and other Scandinavian nations in their history of colonialism. Given the museum's contribution to the formation of national identity, this second focus challenges the conventional myth of Norwegian exceptionalism. However, even though these approaches signal a decolonial turn, there are several problematic elements in their implementation, causing the effectiveness of the narrative to remain superficial.

First, the museum has enhanced the exhibition's narrative through a variety of mediums, including brochures, documents accessed through QR codes, and its website. These resources are readily available to all visitors. However, the catalogue, which is the most intricate component and often has a significant impact on the displays' narrative, is not as accessible to everyone due to its cost. This leads us to an important consideration: should evaluation be made solely based on exhibition display, including the pamphlet given to visitors upon entry, or should one take into account both the display and the catalogue as a cohesive unit? While it is clear that the labels in the exhibition cannot provide the same level of detail as the catalogue because such an implementation could potentially overwhelm visitors, the absence of the catalogue may make it challenging for visitors to fully comprehend the overarching narrative and connect the objects on display. This is particularly noticeable in the *Forms of Use and Interaction* and *Order* sections, where the sheer volume of objects presented makes it impossible to convey detailed information about each individual or group of objects in exhibition texts, let alone with the aid of a catalogue. In addition, as seen in the case of Peter Anker's map and objects that were gifted to him, the curatorial preferences resulted in narrative differences between visiting the exhibition with a catalogue and without it.

Second, while the exhibition effectively explores the historical relationship between humans and animals, including colonial connections, contemporary issues related to colonality, such as extractivism, are not addressed. One such area is the lack of comprehensive coverage of one of the current issues in Norway: green colonialism. This topic is worth mentioning since it aligns well with the overall narrative of the exhibition. Green colonialism refers to the exploitation and domination of Indigenous lands and

resources under the guise of environmental conservation or sustainability initiatives, perpetuating historical patterns of colonial control and dispossession in the name of ecological preservation (Ramirez, Vélez-Zapata and Maher, 2023). Norway's current economic prosperity is, largely, reliant on finite oil resources that are harmful to the environment and thus frequently a matter of public protest. This underscores the imperative for a shift towards clean, renewable energy sources (Otte, Rønningen, & Moe, 2018; Normann, 2021; Kårtveit, 2021). Yet, embedded colonial ideologies persist in decision-making processes, as evidenced by the contentious Fosen and Davvi wind farm projects, though the transition to renewable energy may seem like a positive step forward. These initiatives have faced criticism and protests for jeopardising the traditions and livelihoods of Sámi reindeer herders in the surrounding regions. Although the concept of green colonialism has been recognised since the late 1980s, it gained significant attention in Norway when former Sámi parliament president Aili Keskitalo raised it at the Arctic Circle assembly in 2018. Keskitalo criticises this metropole-based (in this sense, South) customary decision-making mechanism that determines the appropriation of lands for the greater good of the colonial centre without consulting the indigenes of the area (The Arctic Circle, 2020). Unfortunately, despite coinciding with the exhibition's opening, green colonialism was not addressed, exemplifying the neglect of the voices and rights of those most affected by such initiatives.

Finally, to achieve decoloniality, it is imperative to subject modernity to a process known as 'delinking', as described by Mignolo. This process entails separating claims, concepts, and epistemologies that stem from the agenda of modernity and the politics of colonialism (Mignolo, 2018; 2021). As outlined in the book co-authored by Mignolo and Catherine Walsh, delinking is a critical step towards realising decoloniality:

I am referring to a thinking-doing that delinks, that undoes the unified — and universalizing — centrality of the West as the world and that begins to push other questions, other reflections, other considerations, and other understandings (Walsh, 2018: 21).

This concept, as I adhere to in this research, essentially examines the possibility of decolonisation within two main principles: 'The basic tasks of decoloniality are to delink from the CMP and to engage in epistemic (knowing) and aesthetic (sensing, being) reconstitutions' (Mignolo, 2021, p. 17). In this regard, it is crucial for epistemic reconstitutions that the original owners of objects to have a say in the narratives that are created, and to be part of the decision-making process. While the *Control* exhibition consulted with various groups to some extent, they were ultimately not included in the decision-making process, as mentioned above, although the power of this kind of approach can be seen most simply in the case of *vietjere*. The semantics attributed to *vietjere* when it was originally added to the museum inventory have undergone a transformation owing to the growing involvement and attention of the Sámi community. This highlights the crucial role of diverse viewpoints in the production of knowledge. The fact that the exhibition only interacts with the Sámi community raises questions about the stories left behind by other objects. To facilitate genuine delinking from colonial narratives, it is essential to broaden this perspective, as doing so would provide an effective decolonial representation.

## **CHAPTER 7 SWEDEN, MUSEUM of WORLD CULTURE**

### **7.1. Chapter Introduction**

This chapter analyses the Museum of World Culture (MWC) in Gothenburg, Sweden. Within the research context, the focus is placed on the analysis of the *Crossroads* exhibition. The *Crossroads* exhibition was opened in 2016, and I visited in July 2022. The chapter will have a structure similar to the previous ones. It will start by elaborating on the concept of World Culture and then present the layout of the museum and the exhibition. Subsequently, there will be a comprehensive analysis of the exhibition using Lindauer's (2006) 'critical museum visitor' approach. While the exhibition has already been separated into several themes, I will also outline the themes I have observed to enhance the presentation of the museum's thematic organisation. However, this will not be a detailed thematic analysis. The goal is to facilitate a better understanding of Lindauer's analysis. The sections are named as per the museum: *Crossroads, Pachakuti, Democracy, Dikenga, Mecca, Silk Road and Border/Line*.

### **7.2. What does World Culture mean?**

The Museum of World Culture is part of a collective organisation, and the purpose behind its establishment is described in Chapter 1. However, in order to fully comprehend the process of the MWC's creation, it is advantageous to have a grasp on the current trend of reconceptualization in ethnographic museums. This matter is relevant not only to Sweden but also to other European countries during that particular period. Museums in countries involved in colonisation served as a means of justifying the expansion of territories and the manipulation of both the environment and people to align with colonial goals (Bennett, 1995). They are not passive entities that operate in isolation from historical events. Instead, they have been actively involved in these events and continue to play a role in shaping them (Rogan, 2004). As Mackenzie states, museums played a dual role as a means of assessing humanity's perceived achievements and shortcomings, while also functioning as a crucial repository, commonly known as an 'imperial archive', that contained both physical and documentary evidence (2009: 8). In

this way, they aided in the continuous improvement of the natural and anthropological benchmarks that served as the foundation for colonial administration.

Ethnographic museums stand out in this context because of their primary focus on showcasing the artefacts and cultures of Indigenous and marginalised communities, often approaching this within a colonial framework that resulted in objectification and misrepresentation of these cultures. According to Whitehead, Eckersley, and Mason, some of these establishments have functioned as a display for 'colonial spoils and as an advertisement for the benefits both economic (for the colonizer) and civilizing (for the colonized) of colonial practices' (2012: 96-97). The scholarly research conducted from the 1980s onwards has gradually accentuated these interconnections and produced a more fundamental comprehension (Pagani, 2013a). Furthermore, with the effect of globalisation and decoloniality, the changing attitudes towards cultural representations and the recognition of divergent narratives have augmented the emphasis and importance attributed to the idea that ethnographic museums are subject to change (Pagani, 2013a). These factors have contributed to the reconceptualization of ethnographic museums and one of the transformations in this context is the integration of the *World Culture* approach as seen in the MWC. To explain the use of the term world culture in place of ethnography, Lagerkvist considers this term as 'a political construct, following the same tradition as the concepts of "World Music" and "World Art"' (2008: 91). He highlights the museum's success in effectively conveying global concerns through a localised lens, employing a 'glocal' approach. On the other hand, Pagani highlights the Swedish origin of the word – *Världskultur* to explain this new concept. According to her, this word presents multiple interpretations when it comes to singular and plural cultures:

In the English translation, the singular has been chosen, in order to show contrast with the tradition of ethnographic museums, which aims to study and exhibit "cultures." By choosing the singular form instead, cultures are no more referred to as defined and closed entities (2013a: 245).

In this way, she further comments that the museum goes beyond simply cataloguing artefacts and aims to convey the world culture with 'diversity, plurality, hybridity, multitude of voices and approaches' (Pagani, 2013a: 245; Lagerkvist, 2008). This perspective is applied to the MWC's vision published in 2020: 'By showing the world from different perspectives, we give people the opportunity to challenge patterns of thought, values and behaviors' ... 'Our strength is diversity through different voices and perspectives' (Our Vision, 2020).

This Världskultur status can be observed in the way in which the MWC approaches the exhibitions and their planning. Although the museum opened its doors to the public in 2004, it did not have a permanent exhibition at that time. Instead, the museum's primary focus was on temporary exhibitions, aligning with the government's vision for the museum to contribute to the ongoing revitalisation of the Swedish museum industry (Harding, 2021). Founding director of the museum, Jette Sandahl explains this decision (2006: 32):

Worried that the static and unified world-view and language of permanent exhibitions would allow the museum to slip back into the comforts of the meta-narratives and myths of evolution and nation-states, the museum chose instead a course of concurrent, changing thematic exhibitions. These are based on an acceptance that knowledge and interpretation are fluid and negotiable and tend to reflect the particular perspectives of the subject. They vary significantly in content and points of view, in the language of form and design, and in target audiences.

Mark O'Neill (2006: 256-257), the museum scholar and practitioner, argues that this style of MWC exhibitions is medium-term. According to him, the term 'permanent' in museums refers to the 'ideal' of uncovering so-called 'objective' and reliable truth. Temporary exhibitions, on the other hand, suggest that reality is constantly developing and is influenced by a variety of perspectives. Besides their relatively short duration giving a sense of an event, temporary exhibitions are popular due to their ability to provide more

engaging and interactive experiences than permanent displays. By contrast, permanent displays tend to present conclusions that have been reached rather than questions or even the ongoing process of seeking answers. Since The MWC utilises the ethnographic and antiquities collections of Sweden to fulfil its objective of interpreting the world in a 'dynamic and open-ended way', it explicitly opposes the 'positivist concept of a 'permanent' display' (2006). This medium-term approach allows for a more flexible and evolving presentation of the collections and themes. Although this approach was initially adopted, it can be argued that the current exhibitions, *Together* (opened in 2015) and *Crossroads* (opened in 2016), have a more permanent character. The longevity and lasting impact of these exhibitions have been given more consideration in their design, potentially due to financial constraints, time investment, or staffing limitations. This shift indicates a move away from the previously prevalent temporary exhibition format.

### **7.3. Museum Layout**

At the time of data collection in July 2022, there were four exhibitions in the museum – *Together*, *Mind the Gap*, *Crossroads* and *!Viva Mexico!*. Additionally, a large artwork entitled *Matrix* is displayed on the floor of the area prior to entering the building. The artwork was created by Valeria Montti Colque, Ea ten Kate, and Jonathan Josefsson and consists of a total of twenty-two figures which are inspired by the *Crossroads* exhibition. The label outside of the venue particularly emphasises the collaboration between three artists from different backgrounds and with different artistic identities (Figure 35 and 36) (MWC, 2020).



Figure 36: Matrix, Source: Author



consists of an assemblage of 12,000 figures, which are categorised into eight distinct shapes and presented in an array of 18 different colours. In this way, the artwork delves into the themes of ‘individuality, collectivity, identity, and belonging’, offering a thought-provoking experience for viewers.

Visitors can access the exhibition area through a corridor located behind a glass window. One end of the corridor leads to the *Together* exhibition, while the other end leads to the *Mind the Gap*. Just before reaching the exhibition area, there is a second staircase that leads to the upper floor (3rd). On this upper floor, visitors find the *Crossroads* and *!Viva Mexico!* exhibitions.

The *Together* exhibition in the museum stands out as one of the exhibitions that has the potential to be analysed in the context of the research. This exhibition, designed to resemble a playground with its innovative layout, caters specifically to children aged 0-12, though offers limited content for adult visitors. Yet, the exhibition's focus on this age group, along with its more abstract or simplified approach to colonial narratives, does not align with the critical analysis objectives of the research. In contrast, the *Crossroads* exhibition provides a much more comprehensive account of colonial narratives, thereby establishing a stronger connection to the thematic concerns of the study. Consequently, the *Together* exhibition has been excluded from the scope of this research.

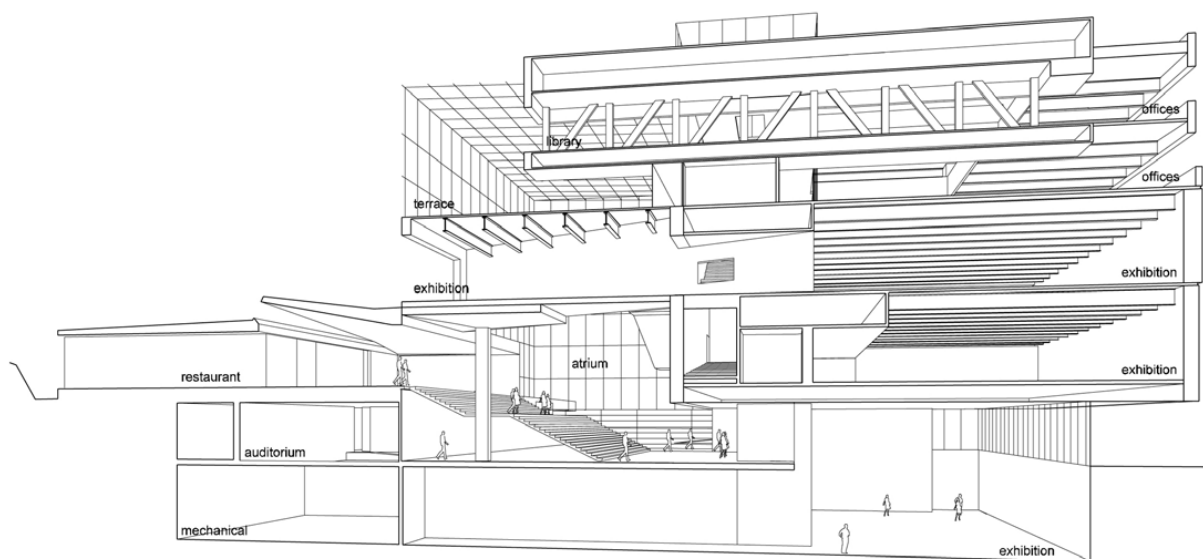


Figure 38: Cross-section Drawing, Source: (Pagani, 2013b, p. 246)

#### 7.4. Exhibition's Layout

As mentioned earlier, the *Crossroads* exhibition was opened in 2016 as one of the first two permanent exhibitions of the venue. The primary focus centres around the intersections of cultures and peoples by emphasising the historical significance of trade routes, pilgrimages, and metaphorical crossroads in history that shed light on pivotal moments of encounter and exchange between different societies and civilisations (Harding, 2021). The exhibition's title provides insight into its subject matter, and the museum's website and pamphlet detail it. Accordingly, across the globe, many cultures possess folklore and spiritual customs that centre around the concept of crossroads and their mystical significance. When two paths intersect at a perpendicular angle, a crossroads is established, resulting in a fork in the road. Consequently, it is customary to consider the crossroads as an unclaimed territory beyond the limits of any community without any specific ownership by any individual or group. The exhibition space is divided into six distinct themes, as mentioned earlier: *Crossroads*, *Pachakuti*, *Democracies*, *Dikenga*, *Mecca*, *the Silk Roads*, and *Border/Line*. Each theme is characterised by a distinct set of colours which is also applied to the decoration.

The exhibition encompasses a wide-open space that is further complemented by additional rooms located on the north, south, and east sides. The rooms on the north and east sides are part of the *!Viva Mexico!* exhibition, while the main area and the area on the south side belong to the *Crossroads* exhibition. Visitors enter the exhibition through a dimly lit room. Lighting is intentionally directed at a few prominently displayed objects in order to highlight their significance. There are further groups of display cases that contain smaller items that are also illuminated. Each display has both electronic screen and text panels that provide information. Electronic screens provide more detailed information about each object and visitors may also access them through the museum's website. Additionally, the archive entries of the objects are listed in a manner that enables visitors to comprehend the provenance and acquisition methods of the objects. Opposite the entrance, there are seats in the form of a triangle/cross for visitors to rest. On either side of these are two labels in two different colours with a crossroad sign which provides introductory information about the exhibition.

The museum adopts an open space design for the exhibition, purposely avoiding the imposition of a predetermined route on visitors. Instead, the design allows visitors the freedom to create their own paths and navigate through the exhibition according to their interests. This approach encourages a more personalised and interactive experience, empowering visitors to engage with the displays and themes in a way that resonates with them individually. In this way, instead of following a pre-set route that was in a way forced by the knowledge producer, each individual can create their own understanding.

Overall, the layout of the museum and the exhibition accompanies and reinforces the ideas expressed inside. To explain this, Duncan F. Cameron's *The Museum, a Temple or the Forum* book might be beneficial since it explores the ongoing identity crisis museums face. Although the book was written over 50 years ago, to a certain degree, the debate still has an effect today. Cameron suggests that museums are perceived in two ways: as 'the temple of the muses' and as museums of ideas/forum (2004: 68). The former portrays museums as institutions that mainly collect, preserve, research, and exhibit objects, while the latter sees museums as places where social, political, and ethical issues are addressed, much like a forum. In this regard, the MWC's modern plan, which includes not only the exhibition areas but also a cafe, gallery spaces, and offices goes beyond merely preserving and exhibiting objects and reflects the forum approach more fully. Such an approach creates a sense of space where visitors can interact with each other and challenges customary understandings of museums as static repositories of historical artefacts, encouraging instead dynamic interaction, critical engagement with contemporary issues, and the democratisation of knowledge.

#### **7.5. Mapping Decolonial Narratives: Interconnected Themes Identified**

In order to better comprehend the themes and their interconnectivity presented by the museum, I constructed a knowledge map that adheres to the exhibition's sections (Figure 38). Through the analysis, I have identified several themes: *Control, the beginning/ruin, adaptation, transformation/mindset, and orientation*. I took into account how these themes are manifested in the museum through space interaction, object juxtapositions, textual explanations, and how they evoked emotions. Undoubtedly, this is not something

that can be done by analysing every single detail or all the objects in the exhibition. Therefore, the elements related to colonialism are in focus.

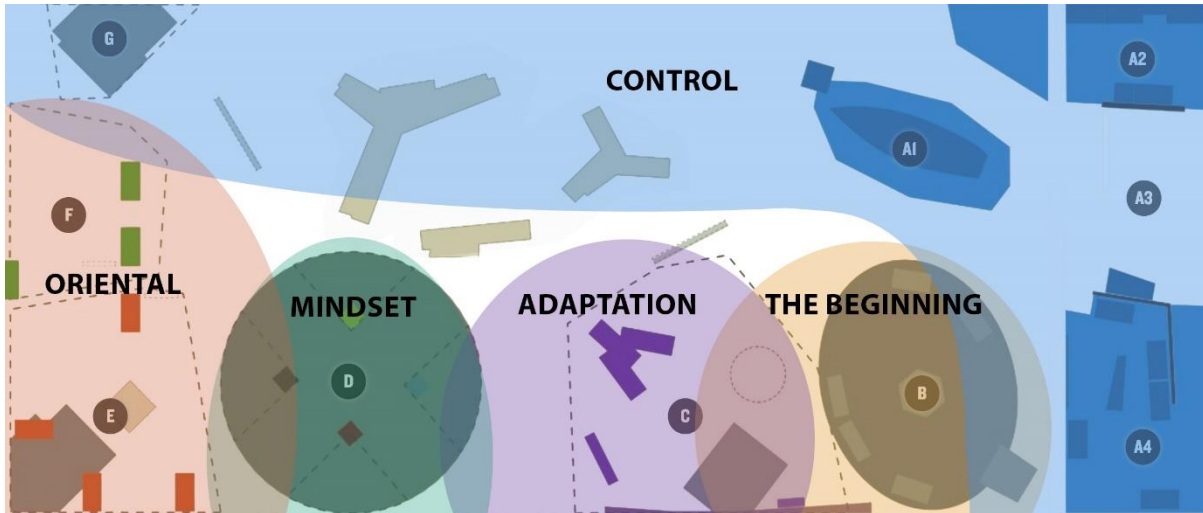


Figure 39: Identified Themes and Exhibition Layout, Source: MWC website (adopted by the author)

The first theme, *Control*, is prominently featured in the *Crossroads* (A) and *Border/Line* (G) sections located on both sides of the entrance to the exhibition. Accordingly, these sections highlight the colonial roots of various elements in contemporary societies and how they are used to manipulate and control the masses. On the one hand, the *Crossroads* section delves into the progressive and methodical degradation of our environment caused by the mishandling and abuse of natural resources since the colonial era. The specific resource in focus is water, which is a vital component for the sustenance of all living organisms. This destruction leads to significant challenges for human beings, such as climate change. However, it also creates opportunities for those in power to establish a system of control over the masses. On the other hand, the video presented in the *Border/Line* section, although in Swedish and therefore not understandable to me, sheds light on how control is exerted over individuals and society through the phenomenon of being on the borders – the accompanying pamphlet provided these details. The narrative highlights examples from Mexico/the US, Cyprus (clash between Greece and Türkiye), Brazil/Uruguay, and Baltimore (USA). Both sections present two clashing perspectives to visitors: Western modernity is something desired by

the marginalised, and Western modernity does not provide a legal path for the marginalised to acquire what they have. This is illustrated through examples of refugees and migrants who risk their lives to obtain this ideal or the idea of borderline, being eligible to enter specific locations/countries and visa requirements.

The Pachakuti section (B) takes visitors back to *the beginning* of colonialism that fuelled Western modernity and shows the destructive side of it. In connection with the previous section, the Pachakuti demonstrates not only the impact of colonialism on human lives and endangered species, but also how it affects cultural elements such as customs, practices, and values. In order to convey that, the narrative introduces visitors to cultural concepts that have disappeared by focusing on one of the earliest colonial sites. In this way, the exhibition allows visitors to understand the beginning and what remains/does not remain from the colonial era.

The Democracy section (C) represents the concept through the examples of multicultural societies, Sweden included. Democracy, as a concept of what is originally indigenous, has been taken and reshaped by the colonisers and promoted as an indispensable element for all societies. However, this promotion also becomes a control mechanism that is only acceptable if it is approved in the Western context. In other words, while the West continues to marginalise those it does not view as democratic, it is attempting to entice them with its notion of democracy. The concept is significant because it represents an *adaptation* or a midway point between the Western world and other cultures. This *adaptation* not only involves communities that have been historically oppressed under Western colonialism but also refers to internal colonialism, which actively perpetuates the mindset of the coloniser, as demonstrated by the given example from Sweden. The placement of this section in a central location within the exhibition space, flanked by closed structures on both sides, reinforces the message that democracy should be accessible to all.

The Dikenga section (D) critically demonstrates the intersection between the European and African cultures through Congo. It does not only focus on Congolese culture, but also emphasises the missionary work in the region, in which Sweden played a part. The theme identified in the representation is 'mindset' because the section highlights the attempts made by Western empires to assimilate elements that did not align with their colonial

habitus. The audio guides demonstrate to visitors how the Western empires used categorisation in colonial times to justify their actions in a so-called 'scientific' way. This categorisation divides people according to their religion, colour, race, education and many more, and perceives Others (in this case, Congolese and other African nations/Indigenous communities) as lower than themselves.

The Mecca and Silk Road sections (E and F) offer a critical analysis that is presented regarding certain biases that stem from Western Orientalist concepts. The content sheds light on the extensive cultural, artistic, and commercial exchanges that have occurred throughout this expansive geographical region, highlighting how the reality is distinct from some of the ways of thinking influenced by the colonial mindset, such as Islamophobia.

#### **7.5.1. Decolonial Currents: Water, Migration, and the Anthropocene**

The first section begins at the exhibition's entrance and extends throughout the additional area to the south. The theme has a blue colour scheme. It serves as the predominant section in the exhibition, occupying a significant portion and is divided into four distinct sub-sections: the *Mediterranean Sea*, *Shortage of Water*, *Anthropocene*, and the *Water* (Figure 38: A).

*The Mediterranean Sea* sub-section emphasises the intersection between continents and brings attention to pressing concerns such as climate change and migration. The visual representation of the concept involves the utilisation of authentic items that were employed for crossing the Mediterranean Sea, including life jackets and a boat (Figure 39). It is further symbolised by the installation of ladders created by the artist Fernando Clavería. Whitehead (2018) notes that the practice of museums focusing on migration and acquiring relevant objects has intensified recently. The authentic objects evoke notions of security, sustenance, and the challenges endured throughout the process of migration. Additionally, such a representation also contains elements that mobilise emotions since it provokes the visitors to think about how difficult decisions are taken by immigrants in order to achieve the privileges that they have. Clavería employs the use of stairs as a symbolic representation of the challenges and aspirations experienced by

individuals attempting to navigate through geographical and cultural borders in their pursuit to reach Europe. Museums utilise these artefacts to emphasise that the crisis is not limited to global politics but also encompasses the dire conditions endured by people fleeing, affecting their lives significantly (Whitehead, 2018).

Italian judge and philosopher Luigi Ferrajoli (2023) has mentioned that the concept of emigration originated as a human right granted in the 16th century by Francisco de Vitoria to facilitate the colonisation of the 'New World'. He underscores the evolution of this right from its historical context, where it was used to enable the exploitation of the planet by colonial empires, to the present day, where it is perceived as a crime when individuals from societies that have been exploited and subjected to poverty and war due to the colonial system migrate as a result of having no other viable options. In this regard, as the Transnational Decolonial Institute Manifesto puts it (2011):

Massive migration from the former Eastern Europe and the global south to former-Western Europe (today European Union) and to the United States have transformed the subjects of coloniality into active agents of decolonial delinking. “We are here because you were there” is the reversal of the rhetoric of modernity; transnational identities-in-politics are a consequence of this reversal, it challenges the self-proclaimed imperial right to name and create (constructed and artificial) identities by means either of silencing or trivialization.

As such, the exhibition not only raises awareness of the human tragedy occurring in the Mediterranean but also contributes to the formation of decolonial delinking by becoming a voice for immigrants. Additionally, the position of the representation in relation to the adjacent section, Pachakuti, creates an interaction based on the meanings conveyed rather than the communication between the objects. The Pachakuti is an early example of the Spanish colonial conquest in the first half of the 16th century. In presenting the issue of emigration, as mentioned by Ferrajoli,

the exhibition juxtaposes the beginning and the end/result, providing visitors with a comparison.



*Figure 40: Life Jackets and Boat in Mediterranean Sea sub-section, Source: Author*

*Shortage of Water* underscores the growing significance of water, and the challenges faced in accessing it, stemming from factors like global warming and other causes. Water containers from different civilisations and time periods are displayed in seven display cases. Additionally, there is a particular emphasis on the USA-Mexico border to raise

awareness about the water-related issues between nations. Here, the concept of migration is highlighted through various cloth objects. Displays also consist of contemporary examples such as the Fuji water bottle, which illustrates the evolution of objects that serve a similar purpose across different times and cultures. This approach allows visitors to easily connect with the objects and concepts presented in the exhibition, fostering a deeper understanding and engagement.

*The water* section comprises six display cases and a wall-mounted setting, highlighting humanity's relationship with water and the evolving dynamics influenced by climate change (Figure 40). Various objects within this section serve to represent this theme, including wooden sculptures, floats, fishing nets, swords made of shark teeth, headdresses, outfits made of fish skins, and photographs. The objects are from various parts of the world and cultures: India, Panama, Greenland, Kiribati, the Brazilian Amazon, Russia and Sweden.



Figure 41: The Water Section, Source: Author

*The Anthropocene* sub-section refers to the concept that presents a geological epoch where human activity has emerged as the primary force shaping climate change and environmental changes. It symbolises the period when human actions have had notable and enduring impacts on the Earth's ecosystems, landscapes, and climate patterns. The sub-section raises awareness about the significant water usage through the cotton bale and its production, prompting visitors to question the detrimental impacts of overconsumption. The setting not only emphasises direct water usage but also brings attention to other unnecessary consumption habits that we may be unaware of in our daily lives.

One could use many grave words to describe how a small percentage of the world's richest population have exploited the world around them in the past hundred years: irresponsibility, arrogance, greed and egoism (*The Anthropocene* display text).

During the colonial era, empires prioritised resource extraction and exploitation in their colonies, often without considering the environmental impact. This pursuit of natural resources, such as minerals, timber, and agricultural products, combined with industrialisation, has had long-lasting effects on ecosystems. For instance, the extensive deforestation undertaken to compete with the demands of European colonial powers caused substantial changes to landscapes and contributed to climate change by releasing carbon dioxide stored in forests (Whyte, 2017). From Sweden's context, mining operations in the Sápmi territory to access silver also had similar destructive consequences for the ecosystem. As an additional example, the environmental damages caused at Vidsel Test Range — a Swedish military base located in Sápmi, originally built for the first Swedish atomic bomb (Mikaelsson, 2014) — are currently a topic of debate (Mikaelsson, 2014). Even if this is a relatively contemporary example – I do not intend to

imply colonialism is only a historical phenomenon – it is valuable for demonstrating power imbalances and decision-making mechanisms.

These kinds of colonial actions led to environmental degradation that had a greater impact on Indigenous and marginalised communities. For example, today, according to Daniel Wildcat, the director of the Haskell Environmental Research Studies Centre, the relocation of Indigenous communities due to climate change is one of three displacements caused by the expansion of the United States through colonialism, capitalism, and industrialisation (2009). Thus, from a decolonial perspective, it is evident that the effects of the colonial exploitation system still affect Indigenous communities whose lands have been plundered, confiscated and marginalised. What the museum is effectively doing in this section is addressing the ongoing crisis that is affecting every individual's life with increasing intensity through both historical and contemporary means. By presenting an issue such as climate change, which is intrinsically linked to colonialism but where this link is not so overt to the average visitor, the museum is able to effectively present the colonial mindset and the desire for control which is embedded therein. This is intensified/ameliorated through the integration of the marginalisation represented through immigration cases, where the colonial connection is likewise evident.

### **7.5.2. Pachakuti – The Reverser of the World, Earth-Shaker**

*Pachakuti* section has a sand grey colour scheme and is located in an oval-shaped construction in the southwest corner of the exhibition area (Figure 41). The structure is easily noticeable, and according to the text, it was built to cater to the needs of the objects, particularly in arranging the light levels. Room lights are automatically turned off if there are no visitors inside this structure. Inside, there are six display cases along the surrounding walls, and the presentation is complemented by a central display case containing a single object. The objects showcased in this section include headdresses, wigs, sculptures, knives, spoons, sequins, staves, paddles, clay pots, fabrics and *kipu*. Notably, this is the first section of the museum that addresses colonialism explicitly, suggesting that a chronological approach was adopted to deal with early Spanish colonialism rather than Swedish. The term *pachakuti* has been historically employed to

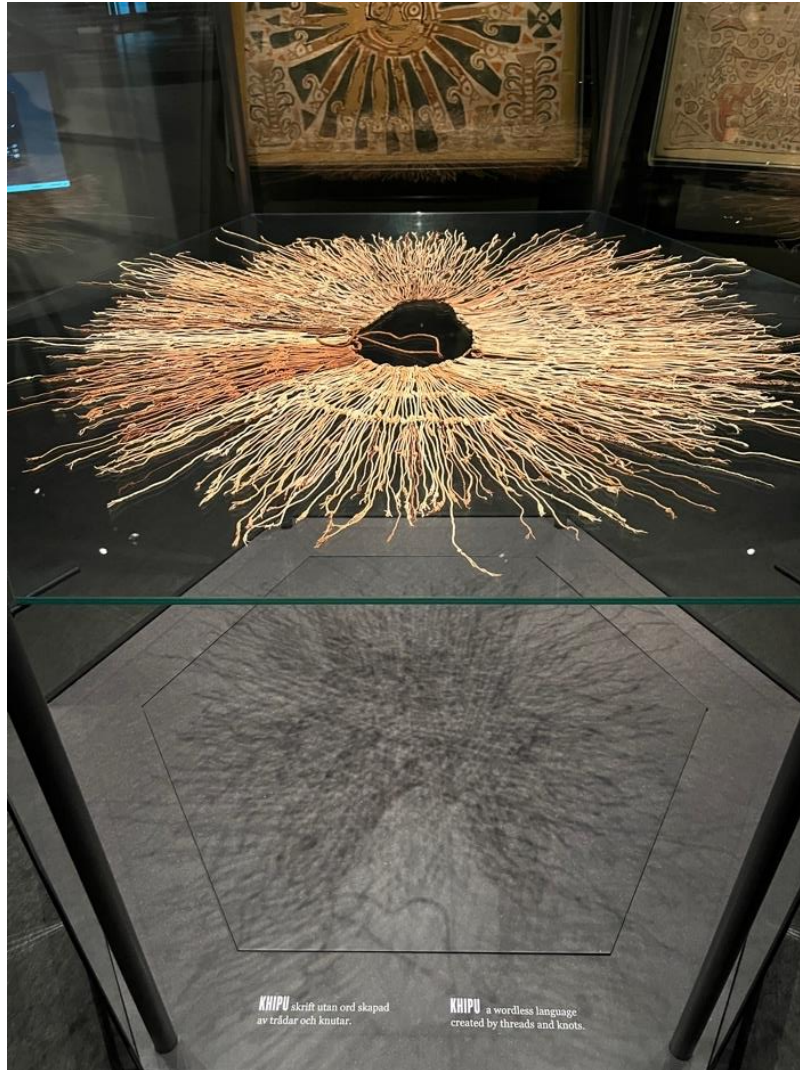
describe the turmoil and upheaval resulting from the Spanish invasion and the collapse of the Inca Empire. Additionally, it has also been utilised to depict instances of rebellion during the colonial and postcolonial history of the Andes region (Swinehart, 2019: 97):

CERTAIN CROSSING PATHS can lead to a total collision. The turbulence and tragedy that was caused by the Spanish conquest of the Inca Empire in the 16th century can be described by the Andean concept of pachakuti. Worldviews, traditions and communities were shattered. The colonization was a turning point not only for the Andean population but indeed in human history, marking the beginning of the modern era (*Pachakuti*, display text).



Figure 42: Pachakuti, Source: Author

This section of the exhibition showcases the profound and devastating impact of Spanish colonialism on the region. The focus centres on the region's customs that vanished during the colonial period, highlighting the violence endured by the population of the Inca empire after the Spanish conquest. For example, the complete disappearance of significant cultural elements, such as the wig culture associated with people of high status, traditional and ceremonial farm tools, clay pots and vessels and their production or maybe more importantly, the eradication of the ability to understand *kipu* (Figure 42). *Kipu* are ancient records created using threads and knots arranged in different patterns utilised by the Incas. It serves multiple purposes: a calculation tool, a writing system, and record-keepers of the past (Brokaw, 2010). Reading a *kipu* involved both visual and tactile elements, relying on the direction of threads, the choice of materials (cotton, alpaca or wool), colours, and various knots to convey diverse information. The topics covered by *kipu* were diverse, including economics, administration, taxes, history, and poetry. The knowledge of interpreting *kipu* was limited to specific individuals known as *Quipucamayoc* (MWC, 2022). Unfortunately, during the Spanish conquest, many *kipu* were burned and the ability to understand them has now disappeared even though they catalogued some of the *kipu* interpretations. By giving an attention to this and through the objects, the museum encourages visitors to contemplate various knowledge systems and distinct methods of comprehending objects. In this way, the destructiveness of colonial practices towards knowledge production systems is emphasised.



*Figure 43: Khipu, Source: Author*

Furthermore, the exhibition emphasises the changing meanings of particular objects and practices. Notably, this transformation is evident in the shift of metal objects into commodities, driven by the exploitative and capitalist ideas that emerged in the region during and after the colonial period. This evolution in the significance of objects reflects the complex interplay between colonial influence and local cultures, as well as the broader economic and social changes that occurred during this historical period:

Gold, silver and other metals were perceived as living spirits that belonged to the underworld. The extraction, melting and transformation of the metals;

their color, sound, smell and shine could be compared with the human lifecycle.

With Spanish colonization, gold and silver were to take on an entirely different meaning, distinct from the worldview expressed in these metal objects (*Gold and Silver*, display text).

In her article on decolonial theories, feminist theorist Breny Mendoza (2020) highlights that research on coloniality has often prioritised certain regions over others, leading to a Eurocentric focus. She argues that this bias may stem from the fact that much of the research has been conducted in European universities by members of the colony, resulting in a disproportionate emphasis on European colonial expansion. As a result, Mendoza emphasises the need to examine European colonial activities in regions where European involvement was partial or non-existent, such as Taiwan, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Iberian colonialism.

... postcolonial studies that study the colonial experience of India and the Middle East take little or nothing into account about Iberian colonialism in their analysis of the historical course of colonialism. Nor do we find adequate attention to Iberian colonialism in the Indigenous studies of Canada, USA, and Oceania (2020: 45).

In this context, the exhibition's decision to commence its narrative of the conquest with a section on Iberian colonialism is noteworthy. By doing so, it challenges the traditional focus on British and French colonialism, which has dominated much of the discourse in postcolonial studies. This approach not only broadens the scope of colonial studies but also highlights the unique characteristics and impacts of Iberian colonial practices in regions such as Latin America. Through this inclusion, the exhibition brings to light lesser-studied colonial histories, offering visitors a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the global colonial enterprise.

It also prompts critical reflections on how the narratives of colonisation have been selectively constructed and maintained, thereby questioning the completeness of traditional colonial histories.

### **7.5.3. Democracy: Uncovering Layers from Haudenosaunee to Sápmi**

Unlike the enclosed area dedicated to the *Pachakuti* section, the *Democracy* section is open. There are five display cases and two artworks in this section. Two displays and one artwork can be found on the display wall attached to the museum wall on the west side, while the other three displays and the other artwork are located independently in the centre of the area (Figure 38: C).

The colourful and large composition of the artwork in the centre grabs attention. It is an interactive and constantly evolving artwork based on visitors' input. It involves eight differently coloured straps, each representing distinct concepts – *freedom, egalitarianism, fair elections, participation, majority rule, consensus, liberalism, and the freedom to be different*. Visitors are encouraged to select and hang these straps based on their answer to the question, 'What do you think is the most important thing in a democracy?' (Figure 43). Accompanying this interactive display, an electronic screen illustrates the evolution of certain concepts such as fair elections, freedom, participation by all, transparency, and equality on a world map from 1900 to 2019. The narrative is further enriched with video testimonies. They are taken from various political science students.



Figure 44: Democracy Artwork, Source: Author

### 7.5.3.1. Can the Subaltern Speak?

Next to the artwork, in the independent display cases, there are crocodile-shaped canoe stems and sculptures from Papua New Guinea (PNG).

The crocodile's body was a kind of metaphor that dictated how dialogue and decisions would take place. To get anywhere, the tail and the head have to move in the same direction and groups who are opposed to one another have to agree (*Along the Sepik River*, display text).

While the text elaborates on the provenance of some of these objects that came into the possession of the museum – Birger Mörner, a Swedish count and diplomat with good connections in German-speaking regions – and recounts the colonial history of the

region, it also delves into the current issues Papua New Guinea (PNG) faced. These include corruption, unemployment, crime, climate change and environmental degradation caused by the overexploitation of natural resources – without specifying the leading actor, making it unclear whether PNG or the colonisers are responsible. However, by not specifying a leading actor in these issues, the museum leaves the question of responsibility ambiguous, potentially conflating the roles of colonial powers and local governance. This lack of clarity could be problematic, as it risks oversimplifying the complex interplay between historical colonial exploitation and contemporary governance failures.

In addition, the museum also highlights the problematic attitudes towards women's rights in the country:

[PNG] is one of the countries with the smallest number of women in parliament, and it is often claimed that it is the worst country in the world with respect to violence against women. Despite the country's many challenges and failings, there is inspiration to be found in local traditions and there are democratic principles to build on (*Crocodile Democracy*, website text).

Upon initial observation, it may appear that the MWC's method tends to lean towards cultural imperialism – a phenomenon that denotes the hegemony of one culture over others that is often accomplished through the dissemination of cultural artefacts, beliefs, and standards (Tobin, 2020) – rather than steering clear of it since we cannot access the opinions/thoughts of the women of the PNG. This absence reflects the fact that the societal roles and community structures shaping women's lives in PNG differ substantially from those assumed by the MWC, which may overlook the nuances of women's agency, autonomy, and value as understood within PNG's cultural and social systems. In this sense, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's renowned article *Can the Subaltern Speak?* could offer valuable insight. In this essay, Spivak raises a fundamental query regarding the inability of the subaltern to communicate and articulate their thoughts within the dominant discourse. She questions whether power structures perpetually

filter and suppress Subaltern voices. The argument is that the efforts and perspectives of the subaltern cannot be fully grasped or communicated within the limitations imposed by colonial systems of power (2010). Spivak explains this through a critical analysis of Western theorists, particularly Foucault and Deleuze, and their attempts to articulate and advocate for the subaltern. According to her, such initiatives frequently perpetuate the very hierarchies of power they aim to challenge, as illustrated in her critique of their conversation on *Intellectuals and Power* (2010).

However, the perspective of the museum's current position is expressed in an article by Klas Grinell, the museum's curator of globalisation, on the production aspects of Jerusalem, one of the museum's previous exhibitions:

[T]he acknowledgement of our own situatedness, our own entrapment within a specific framework, would hopefully also make us more humble in our wishes to be the hosts of a neutral arena, thinking of ourselves as transparent brokers of other communities' interests ... All these arguments for the need of a more equal distribution of power and sensibilities are stated on the shoulders of thinkers and theories formulated in the academic power centers of the West, coming from only one side of the border (Grinell, 2011: 236).

The concept of situatedness denotes the interdependence between meaning and the contextual factors of our sociocultural, historical, and/or geographical surroundings. Put succinctly, situatedness emphasises the divergent perspectives and lifestyles that arise as a result of our unique historical backgrounds and comprehends the societal frameworks in which we live (Overend, 2022). Grinell continues by acknowledging Spivak's ideas (2011: 236):

It is the same classical intellectual superiority complex at play. I know what is best for you, even if I have no contact with your living conditions or your intellectual tradition. I can represent you. This is, of course, a telling image of

the complete dominance of the Western intellectual tradition in international institutions and discourse. It is still very difficult to be heard with an argument building on non-Western resources and traditions.

In addition, Grinell highlights that the museum's decision-making process incorporates several other factors, including but not limited to intersectionality, Western aesthetics, universal rights and neutral areas, dialogue, and additionally partial perspectives (2011). The concept of partial perspectives, first introduced by feminist theorist Donna Haraway (1991), signifies the notion that all knowledge is shaped and restricted by the individual's particular contexts, experiences, and viewpoints. Accordingly, recognising partial perspectives enables more sincere and conscientious knowledge creation, challenging assertions of objective, universally applicable truths and embracing the variety of lived experiences. While both Spivak and Grinell's sombre tone implies that making progress may be challenging due to the museum's situatedness, it is important to note that effort can still be made. As Grinell points out, being heard may be difficult, but that does not negate the importance of trying. In this regard, the museum is already making strides for PNG's women to be heard in Sweden, even if there may not be immediate interest. Although it is commendable, this effort is still limited because this awareness was developed without direct collaboration with women from PNG. In relation to collaboration and polyvocality in knowledge production, one of the curators, Michael Barrett, indicates:

I would say that [in] 2016, when we did th[e] exhibition, I think that was not as much on the agenda for us, unfortunately. At least, I would say ... the thinking was there. A lot of us had those ideas, but there was no time [and] resources to engage in that kind of thing. The timeline was very limited. I am an anthropologist by training, so I have worked in Africa for many years etc. I do have an understanding that those kinds of collaborations require a lot of time invested [and] a lot of respect for the people that you work with. And they should not be started, you know, light-heartedly. There has to be [a] kind of

seriousness ... Otherwise, it is just, you know, facade. So, there was no such time for making an exhibition. And that is one of the things, I feel that if I could change something in the Congo part right now, that would definitely be top on the list. And we are kind of working, we are cultivating such relationships right now, for the other exhibitions that we are working on. So, both artists in the Congo, for instance, and artists of Congolese descent in Sweden, and also different indigenous groups, so definitely, that would be top of the list in a way.

Therefore, while the MWC actively aims to highlight diverse perspectives and draw attention to non-Western modes of understanding, this initiative remains constrained due to limited resources and time constraints. As Barrett reflects, although the museum staff shared the intention of building meaningful collaborations, these relationships require considerable time, respect, and dedication — resources unavailable when constructing the current exhibition. Nevertheless, the museum is making gradual steps, notably through its current collaboration with Indigenous communities for future exhibitions. This effort suggests a shift towards a more polyvocal approach, where marginalised voices may eventually participate more substantially in shaping exhibitions. In the next section, this gradual yet promising commitment to collaborative and diverse knowledge production will be further examined in relation to Indigenous epistemologies.

#### **7.5.3.2. Indigenous Contributions: The Haudenosaunee Confederacy's Influence of Western Political Structures**

Behind the display cases that contain crocodile-shaped objects, on the display wall, *the flag of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy* and a belt, *wampum*, are presented. Immediately, one can see that the objects are influential in determining the colour scheme of this section (Figure 44). The Haudenosaunee Confederacy, also referred to as the "People of the Longhouse," is recognised by different names by various colonial powers. The British call it *the Six Nations*, while the French refer to it as *the Iroquois Confederacy* (Lightfoot, 2021). The confederacy encompasses the region of present-day upstate New York, southern Ontario, and south-eastern Quebec (Lightfoot, 2021), and it

consists of six different Indigenous nations: the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and Tuscarora' (Flag, website text). The Confederacy was one of the first examples of representative democracy in the North American region, with the establishment of the Great Law of Peace to end the war between the nations and consolidate governmental relations. The museum, here, emphasises the influence of the Great Law of Peace on the formation of the American Constitution by indicating similarities and differences.





*Figure 45: The flag of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy and Wampum, Source: Author*

... The Great Law of Peace was an inspiration for the American Constitution. The Confederacy is governed by a council (corresponding to Congress in the US Constitution) consisting of 50 chiefs who are divided into younger brothers (corresponding to the House of Representatives) and older brothers (corresponding to the Senate). Members of the council are selected for their qualities and their concern for the well-being of the Confederacy. Membership in the council is unpaid and granted for life, which promotes responsibility and long-term approach.

This is a difference between the two constitutions: only members of the Supreme Court are appointed for life. Members of the council are all men, but are appointed by the women's council (corresponding to the Supreme Court).

The women's council "owns" the offices of the council, and has the right to appoint and remove chiefs (*Six Nations*, display text).

The assertion that the political concepts and ideologies of the Iroquois Confederacy had a significant impact on the US Constitution is supported by two key sources with substantial evidence. These are *Iroquois and the Founding of the American Nation* by Donald A. Grinde (1977), Native American history scholar, and *Forgotten Founders* by Bruce E. Johansen (1982), American academic and author. Then, both scholars published a book called *Exemplar of Liberty*, which consolidated their arguments in 1991. However, the extent of this influence on the founding of the U.S. Constitution varies among historians, and some have raised questions and critiques. Historian and anthropologist Elizabeth Tooker considered Johansen's argument as 'scholarly misapprehension' (1988, p. 327) by indicating misquotes made by Johansen when quoting historian and writer William Brandon. Historians such as Samuel Payne (1996), William Starna, George Hamell (1996), and historian and archaeologist Philip Levy (1996) contest their evidence as coincidence and unfounded. Levy even called their argument a 'crazy quilt of inaccurate assessments, free-floating speculations, incorrect or disembodied quotations, and thesis-driven conclusions' (1996, pp. 603–604). Lastly, historian Richard White contends that the argument is made of baseless insinuations, fabricated inventions, and misinterpretations, with a weak factual foundation (1998). This debate among historians underscores the complexity and differing perspectives surrounding the impact of Iroquois ideas on the formation of the U.S. Constitution. Today, both the White House and US Senate official websites' pertinent pages do not feature any information regarding this contribution (The Constitution; Constitution of the United States), despite the official recognition of the Iroquois Confederacy of Nations' contribution to the development of the United States Constitution by the US Congress in 1988 (Concurrent Resolution, 1988).

Here, the presentation effectively challenges the colonial mindset ingrained in Western societies by revealing that a fundamental aspect of the Western world is rooted in cultures traditionally dismissed within this mindset as so-called primitive and barbaric. The significance of utilising the USA as the example – which considers itself supposedly

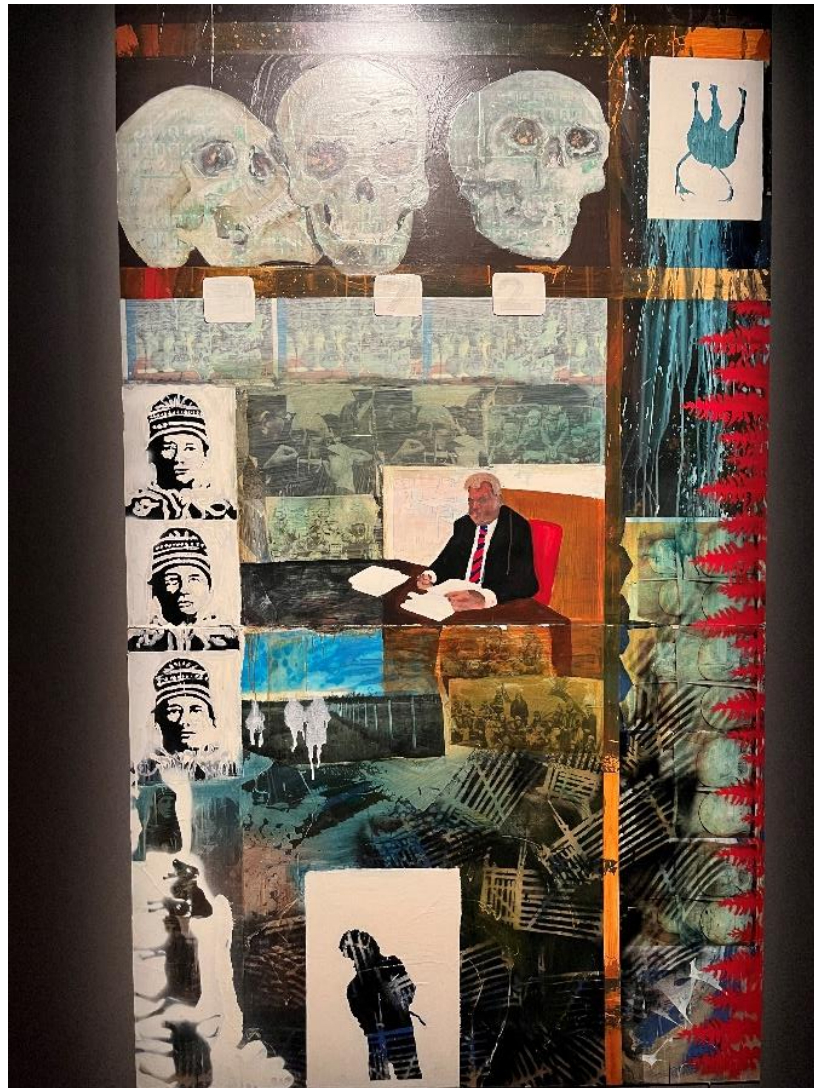
in charge of disseminating democracy to Others – lies in its ability to demonstrate the ways in which colonial mindset appropriates concepts and objects – in this case, democracy – that have been borrowed from Othered marginal groups, namely Iroquois Confederacy. Not only does the display highlight aspects of colonised cultures that have been lost or damaged due to colonial actions, but it also makes it possible for visitors – particularly Western [Swedish] imagined visitors – to understand the role of knowledge production in the colonial mindset. Specifically, it demonstrates how colonial power was exercised by controlling ways of seeing and understanding through the production of knowledge. The museum's emphasis on challenging knowledge production underscores the significance of 'provincializing Europe,' a concept introduced by Chakrabarty that highlights the need to acknowledge Europe's historical experiences and intellectual developments as only a fraction of the broader global fabric of human history (2000). This enables the visitors to reassess 'Other' societies and effectively challenge visitors' established colonial system of thought.

#### **7.5.3.3. Proactive Art, Enduring Struggle**

Lastly, the artwork 'New Methods but the same injustice' – *Nya metoder men samma övergrepp* – made by Anders Sunna, is presented next to the flag and belt (Figure 45). Anders Sunna is a Sámi artist born in Kieksiäisvaara in 1985 and currently working in Jokkmokk. He earned his degree in fine arts from Konstfack in 2009, and since then, he has displayed his work at the Biennale di Venezia in 2022, the National Gallery of Canada in 2019, the Moderna Museum Stockholm in 2018, the Southbank Centre London in 2017, and many more (Sunna, 2023). Although his work is predominantly painting, his repertoire also includes sculptures, murals and street art. In the early 2010s, Sunna gained recognition for his substantial assortment of paintings characterised by provocative symbolic imagery, notably incorporating skulls and allusions to fascism, which have emerged as distinctive elements defining his artistic style (Sandström, 2020). His artworks serve as a means of expressing his anger, with a particular focus on Swedish state representatives. Moreover, his creations frequently encompass a thematic exploration of a profound and longstanding conflict within Sámi communities,

specifically one involving his own family's involvement in reindeer herding (Sandström, 2020).

Sunna's artwork is dedicated to shedding light on the profound historical tensions between the Sámi people and the major society and its ongoing relevance in modern-day conflicts. He focuses on the Racial Biology Institute since its foundation was critical for Sweden's treatment of the Indigenous peoples, the Sámi. Despite its closure in 1958, the institute's influence on the community remains significant, and the artwork endeavours to convey the lasting impact of oppression on contemporary politics (Kollonialism 2, display text). He states that this is evidenced by the rejection of the United Nations Declaration ILO 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples' Rights, which highlights the enduring impact of the institute's work and the continuing relevance of its findings (Sunna, 2023).



*Figure 46: New methods but the same injustice, Source: Author*

In order to convey the narrative in this artwork and the previous two objects, the museum decides to utilise QR codes. The use of a QR code to access the audio guide has advantages and disadvantages. The museum provides free internet access so that visitors can use their phones to access the audio guide. This allows for a more democratic approach, as opposed to waiting in queues for headphones. The limitation is that the audio guide is only available in Swedish and is only accessible if you have a smartphone. This means that the current accessibility of the narrative is somewhat limited, catering only to a specific audience. This stands in opposition to the museum's stated name and overarching mission. Helen Arfvidsson, one of the museum's curators, agrees:

In terms of an audio guide, that was kind of a project during the pandemic. So, like an afterthought, trying to do something to the pandemic, [we] want to do a little bit more interaction. It rarely works in the space because the reception [of] the Wi-Fi is so bad in that exhibition. So, it is not accessible to [those who] understand Swedish either. But definitely, I will take that with me in terms of rethinking; it obviously needs to be in English as well. That is usually our bottom line.

Audios associated with these objects are labelled as: 'Colonialism 1 and 2' – *Kollonialism 1 and 2*. Colonialism 1 highlights the flag to illustrate the richness and diversity of the cultures of these societies before colonialism. It shows how this was destroyed by the Triangle Trade created by the European colonial actions to access various commodities. The focus here is on slavery, and the role of Sweden in the Triangle Trade is clearly indicated. 'Sweden was the dominant supplier of steel, an important commodity in this trade, which brought Sweden considerable profits' (Kollonialism 1, ChatGPT translation).

*Colonialism 2* gives a more detailed history of Swedish colonialism through Sunna's artwork. In addition to discussing Sweden's overseas colonies and the fact that it was part of the slave trade, there is also an emphasis on the oppression of the Sámi community after the discovery of the silver reserves within their territories, Sápmi. In the late 18th and 19th centuries, there was approval by the state of the racial theory concept, which led to a worsening of the situation. Against a backdrop of the Industrial Revolution and urbanisation, many societal predicaments tied to impoverishment, alcoholism, and psychological disorders emerged. In an endeavour to ameliorate these concerns, the field of race biology was invoked, and The Swedish parliament established the State Institute for Race Biology (SIRB) in 1921. Interestingly, the institution's initial endeavours showed minimal inclination towards these socio-ethical dilemmas, opting instead for initiatives encompassing the systematic monitoring of racial attributes within the Swedish populace and the meticulous quantification and photographic documentation of human physiques (Ericsson, 2021). Of notable interest was in the early years of the institution's attention to the Sámi minority residing in northern Sweden, involving

comprehensive measurements of both adult and juvenile members of the community (Ericsson, 2021).

Through the QR code and artwork, the installation prompts a dialogue between the museum and the visitor. According to Arrigoni and Galani (2020, p. 39), these dialogic practices can effectively rectify the power imbalance between institutions and audiences that arises from deeply ingrained collecting and exhibiting practices based on colonial ideals. Consequently, the visitor can transition from a passive observer to an active participant in the process of creating meaning.

Moreover, the significance of Sunna's work lies not only in its capacity to examine Sweden's colonial past, but also in its ability to establish a connection with the artefacts it is presented alongside, based on the informational content available in the audio guide. This particular artwork is the sole instance in the entire exhibition where a contemporary aspect of Sweden's colonial involvement is illustrated in such a direct manner. In this context, the museum, while describing the relationship between the Indigenous community and democracy from the US example, through Sunna's artwork, makes criticism that Sweden should also focus on the issues within itself and, in a way, come to terms with its own history. According to political science literature, the Nordic countries are considered consensual democracies, wherein consensus-building is favoured over adversarial politics and majority rule. These countries are deemed to have a high degree of legitimacy and institutional mechanisms to support this type of governance (Jónsson, 2014). Despite the reputation of Sweden and other Scandinavian countries for their highly functional democratic systems (<https://ourworldindata.org/democracy>), this artwork serves as a reminder to visitors that certain colonial mindsets are still deeply ingrained in society. For example, as indicated above, Sweden still refuses to sign the United Nations Declaration ILO 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples' Rights. However, the issue with this installation lies in the fact that the exhibition's pamphlet provides the only information regarding the artwork that is accessible to international visitors. It should be noted that this pamphlet is unable to offer a comprehensive information transfer since it only includes condensed information. Moreover, the absence of an English language alternative for the audio guide hinders the accessibility of explicit criticism made by the museum. Despite the possibility of more effective measures, it is

still commendable to witness the museum address this matter openly and delicately, at least for Swedish visitors.

In conclusion, the *Democracy* section has been effective in highlighting the role Indigenous knowledge systems, customs, and traditions have played in shaping a concept that is considered to be vital for today's society. This is important to develop a decolonial environment. The museum here challenges the USA and its association with democracy in a subtle, perhaps cynical way. On the one hand, it emphasises the formation of the American constitution, which was influenced by a 'different' kind of wealth/resource possessed by the Native Americans, while on the other, through the audio guide, it reminds us of the destruction caused by colonialism. I use the term 'different' to refer to the appropriation of a phenomenon from the 'Others' and its attribution to the coloniser, deviating from the conventional understanding of colonialism associated with material extraction. In other words, the display demonstrates that the excluded/marginalised 'Others' have possessed essential phenomena crucial in contemporary society, often considered to be exclusively belonging to 'Westerners.'

In addition, the scope of the storytelling is not restricted to the commonly recognised colonial empires but rather encompasses the participation and ambitions of Sweden in the 'Triangular Trade' rivalry. It was also effective in drawing attention to the internal colonialism of Sweden on the Sámi lands in order to challenge the perceptions formed by colonialism. In this context, collaboration with Sunna is highly valuable. The existence of minority groups within a nation that lack or have limited access to democratic processes raises significant concerns regarding the nature of the democracy being practised. It is crucial to examine the ways in which these marginalised groups are being excluded and to work towards creating a more inclusive and equitable democratic system. And the museum effectively creates awareness in this sense.

#### **7.5.4. Dikenga: Navigating Congolese Cosmology and Colonial Legacies**

The fourth section of the exhibit, *Dikenga*, delves into the complex interplay between European colonisers and African culture (Figure 46). Highlighting the Congo River as a

symbolic meeting point, the section examines the intricate ways in which these cultures have historically interacted. The section's title, *Dikenga*, is a cross, more specifically, an incised X in a circle symbol in *kikongo*, the language of the Kingdom of Congo (Watson, 2016). This cross has been part of Congo culture since ancient times (Hauerstein 1967:30, cited in Watson, 2016), and it is crucial for Congo's cosmology. Of course, it should be noted that this is entirely different from the symbolism of the Christian cross. The *Dikenga* symbolises the Congo spiritual ideology that reflects the interconnection between the living and the dead. As per Watson, it is the most basic and significant representation of the Congo worldview (2016: 32). The circle around represents the unity and cyclical nature of the world. The upper section of the circle depicts the living, whereas the lower section symbolises the spirits.



Figure 47: *Dikenga*, Source: Author

The section is separated by a domed structure and contains four display cases inside. Upon entering the dome, the reflective coating applied to the floor enables the visitor to experience the spiritual realm symbolically. In a similar vein, the display cases assist the visitor in immersing themselves in Congolese cosmology, where visitors become intertwined with the symbolism of the material world. Four display cases recreate the *Dikenga* shape, each representing the four cardinal points of the cross, namely East, West, North, and South. The cases are distinguished by distinct hues that accentuate their respective connotations. According to the exhibition texts, these are: East/Black represents the human world, the first period in life when a person was born; North/Red represents the period of life when a person has matured and has attained a position in society; West/White represents the spirits and the world of the dead; and South/Yellow represents a remote and mystical dimension of the land of the dead (Figure 47). As in the previous sections, there are two audio guides on display cases accessed by QR code. Furthermore, the presentation consists of video testimonies called Voices from Congo featuring the life stories of five different individuals from Swedish missionaries and Congolese individuals. Regrettably, during my visit, only four of these testimonies were available for viewing due to technical issues.

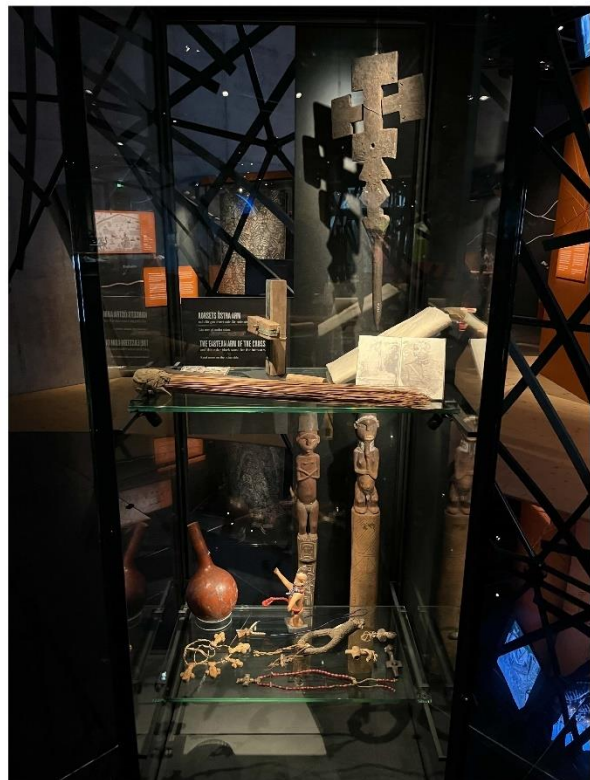
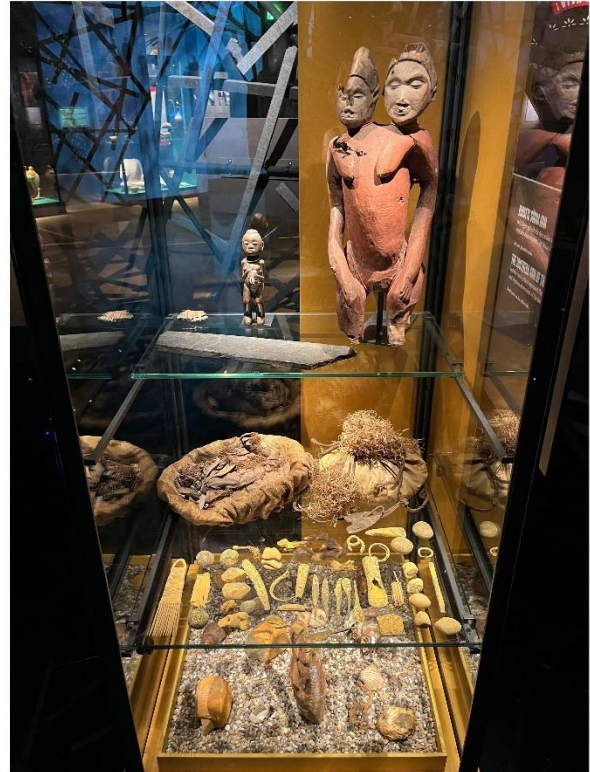


Figure 48: Cardinal Points of the Cross; West/White (upper left), South/Yellow (upper right), East/Black (lower left), North/Red (lower right), Source: Author

Each display case contains figure sculptures, bottles and pots, jewellery, clothes, and weapons from Congo. Within both red and black display cases, since their focus is on the material world, the colonial brutality that the territory experienced is detailed through the specific objects. For example, a necklace within the North/Red display case demonstrates the pressure that locals had been through:

In 1895, this necklace was handed in for destruction at the Swedish missionary station at Kibunzi, following the conversion to Christianity of several political leaders. Three distinguished chiefs turned over a large number of ritual objects to the missionaries, who burned most of them. Prior to this there had been rumors that the colonial state were about to send a punitive expedition to the area. By becoming Christians the leaders wanted to protect their subjects from the violence of the colonizers (*Red*, display text).

Additionally, the impact of missionary activities on the religious transformation of various groups through the new prophets highlighted:

... two portraits of the Prophet André Matswa. A Matswa adherent gave them to Pastor Ndongou Daniel at the Swedish Ngouedi mission station in the 1940s ... On the one hand, the prophetic movements were quite modern, making political demands on issues such as self-government and economic development. André Matswa had lived in Europe and was inspired by anticolonial thinkers such as Leopold Senghor and Marcus Garvey. On the other hand, the movements were deeply religious: members believed that dead prophets would be reborn and create an eternal kingdom. *The colonial administration's* reaction was hard-nosed and brutal: Matswa was imprisoned and tortured to death in Brazzaville in 1942 (Black, display text, emphasis added).

The missionaries were extremely ambivalent about the prophetic movements, which were believed to encourage sin and which recruited members away from the missions. Yet the Ngunza movement led to a revival in the Protestant churches in both Kongo states. Eventually this affected the Swedish mission congregations too, which for the first time began permitting "African elements" such as drums and ecstatic expressions in their services (*Black: short staff*, display text).

In addition to these four displays, there are video testimonies that play a crucial role in highlighting the varied interpretations of this intersection. The testimonies were gathered from both Sweden and local communities in Congo. These five individuals who reportedly lived during the 1900s includes: Selma Masuki, a missionary worker; Ndibu Yosefi, a mission teacher (unavailable); Peter Möller, a captain; Rut Walfridsson, a missionary; and Babutidi Timotio, a mission teacher. Masuki and Timotio's testimonies shed light on the difficulties of life in the region and the local customs, while Möller and Walfridsson's accounts offer valuable insights into the Swedish perspective on the area:

'... the *savages* more and more suspicious ... we, who had come in the name of peace and civilization (my emphasis)... One of them, tauntingly, stood straight up and made challenging gestures. My bullet passed over his head and he crouched down, only to jump up again waving his arms in the air to show how unscathed he was. He presumably wore a sort of charm, that gave him a belief in his own invincibility. It didn't protect him for long. As soon as I'd adjusted the aim, a new shot dropped him to the ground (Möller, emphasis added).'

'... within these walls, beneath all the sweat, a lot of hard work was also being done in order to teach the astonished children of this black land about some

of the hidden treasures of the world's wisdom. And light began to shine onto things that had hitherto been unimaginable for them (Walfridsson).'

Captain Peter Möller's testimony offers a precise observation to the visitors of a potential violent situation and the corresponding actions of the missionaries. In a similar vein, Walfridsson's statement showcases how the colonial perspective can create an "us vs them" mentality, which ultimately leads to the Othering of local individuals. Here, this mindset perpetuates the idea that the colonisers are superior and the colonised are inferior through knowledge.

At this point it is beneficial to outline the relationship between missionary activities and colonialism. Almost every coloniser empire conducted missionary activities globally, particularly in Congo. The Swedish Missionary Society (SMS) was one such organisation that started its missionary work in the Congo in 1881. Pia Lundqvist, a historian, has conducted thorough research on Swedish missionary work in this territory, which is based on written sources, diaries, and missionary reports from the Swedish and Congolese Indigenous communities (2015, 2018). Accordingly, SMS sent 124 missionaries to establish their presence in the Lower Congo. This led to SMS becoming the second-largest missionary society in the region until 1907 (Lundqvist, 2015). Their active involvement played a crucial role in the region's colonisation, significantly impacting the socio-political and religious landscape of the area. Other than missionaries, Sweden had a number of professionals working in Congo, including military officials who were directly employed by the state. The group of people primarily involved in navigation on the Congo River included naval officers, seamen, and machinists. According to the author Per Erik Tell, they were the largest group of Swedes in the territory, numbering 522 people (2005, cited in Lundqvist, 2018: 264).

Lundqvist's findings demonstrate that the Swedish missionary work resulted in low violence and high harmony in some areas, while other regions witnessed the opposite. When the tension was high, missionaries were requesting help from the officials of the colonial system. From this idea, it can be argued that the fundamental reason for all violent events can be traced back to the primary coloniser of the territory. However, the

museum's representation omits this connection, preventing visitors from fully understanding the role of the primary coloniser in shaping these violent events. During the colonial period, Congo was King Leopold II of Belgium's private possession, which is considered the world's only private colony (Hochschild, 2023), and this is not mentioned in the entire display. Instead, the focus is on Sweden's specific interaction with the region through missionaries and officers. It is essential to consider that the actions of the missionaries in the region, despite their so-called 'benevolence', were part of a more extensive system that facilitated the colonisation of the area. This can be seen in the first text/necklace example provided in the section. The local population had no other option but to accept this 'forced' Christianity in order to free themselves from the oppression of the colonisers. To ignore this fact would be a flawed interpretation of the missionaries' role. On the one hand, the museum's approach has created an opportunity for a more honest and open presentation by putting Sweden into the focus to take responsibility for its actions rather than deflecting blame onto others. On the other hand, by not indicating the main actor – King Leopold II of Belgium – the interpretation generalises and obscures the colonial atrocity.

The term hybridisation might also be beneficial in scrutinising the museum's approach in the *Dikenga* section. Hybridisation in the field of biology refers to mating two genetically distinct organisms to create a unique offspring with a different genetic makeup. However, when applied to the context of transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonisation, it takes on a deeper meaning. According to Ashcroft, this concept represents the meeting of cultures and their resulting fusion, which produces new and vibrant cultural expressions (2007, p. 108). Ashcroft highlights the example of Creole languages to illustrate the significance of language, which is, maybe coincidentally maybe not, emphasised in the very first text at the entrance to this section:

Through the transatlantic slave trade, Kongo speakers influenced Creole languages in America. Words such as *zombie* and *funk* derive from them (*Dikenga*, display text).

Bhabha's definition of hybridity might help to explain the emergence of prophetic movements mentioned above. This can be attributed to the re-evaluation of religious values that have been introduced by missionaries and adapted to the local context, even though this was not welcomed by colonisers. According to Bhabha, hybridisation of non-Western encounters with imperialism highlights their complexity and ambiguity, as they are often both authentic and ambivalent (2012, p. 56). In this sense, hybridisation serves as a powerful metaphor for the ways in which cultural exchange can generate new forms of expression, while also acknowledging the complexities and challenges that arise from such encounters. In fact, the museum, as an institution, enables the formation of the 'Third Space' mentioned by Bhabha (2012, p. 54), where hybridisation encourages new cultural meanings and identities to emerge. This concept signifies a space of negotiation and transformation beyond the binary of coloniser and colonised, providing a way to explore the interplay of different cultural narratives. By incorporating voices from both Sweden and Congo, the exhibition aspires to create this kind of dialogic space, suggesting a pathway for reinterpreting cultural identity and history. However, the extent to which it achieves this broader cultural impact remains open to interpretation and would require further analysis of its reception among visitors and its influence on Sweden's collective understanding of its own identity. As museum's curator Barrett indicates, this is still an ongoing process.

Overall, the *Dikenga* section conveys the colonial history of Sweden sometimes effectively but sometimes not. As mentioned earlier, despite its brief and relatively minor impact throughout the colonial era, Sweden engaged in trade relations with the dominant empires of the time, pursued missionary work, and exploited the Indigenous populations to access valuable resources within its borders. In contrast to the previous section's (Democracy) focus on internal colonialism, *Dikenga* provides insight into Sweden's colonial mindset in its missionary work in Congo. This continuation of self-reflection and criticism demonstrates the utmost seriousness of the museum in depicting Sweden's colonial past. On the other hand, by concealing the primary coloniser's role in the region, it hinders visitors' ability to assess the territory critically.

### 7.5.5. Mapping Connectivity: Islamic Civilisation and the Silk Road

This section highlights the idea of the crossroads of different cultures under the Islamic civilisation, much like Congo. It features four display cases and a display wall design with a map that interacts with the adjacent Silk Road section. The map illustrates the network of communication and transportation, which facilitated the exchange of goods and ideas along the Silk Road. It highlights the connectivity between significant trade hubs such as Constantinople, Baghdad, Chang'an and many more, which were linked to Mecca through various routes. Lastly, the section has five voice-overs from members of the Swedish Muslim community. These narratives provide insights into the experiences of Muslim pilgrims during the Hajj pilgrimage.

Each display showcases different themes, including *art, souvenirs, hajj, and language*. They feature clothing, carpets, pillows, ceramics, books, and contemporary objects used during the hajj pilgrimage. The narrative of the section emphasises both the diverse cultural influences that have contributed to the development of Islamic civilisation and the contribution of Islamic civilisation to the world. This idea is highlighted through the display wall, which effectively allows visitors to envision the interplay between various geographical regions (Figure 48). While defining objects, the section demonstrates a scrupulous effort in comprehending the Islamic motifs on the objects, elucidating their origins through specific examples:

... In the pattern [of the carpet], peacocks, wings of the Garuda bird (a mythical bird in Hinduism and Buddhism) and Nagas (a mythical snake/dragon) can be seen (Loin Cloth, *website text*).



Figure 49: Mecca, Source: Author

Additionally, the section critiques the Orientalist view of other European museums towards Islamic civilisation. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1979) analyses the Western academic and cultural framework and its influence on the portrayal, comprehension, and examination of the East, focusing on the Middle East. Over the course of centuries, scholars, writers, and institutions of Western civilisations have developed a vast array of knowledge, attitudes, and representations. These collective bodies of information have become integral components of the Western intellectual tradition. In this sense, he scrutinises how the West has constructed knowledge about the East and how this knowledge has been used to maintain power imbalances between the two regions (Said, 1979). Here, the section criticises and raises visitors' awareness about the museums' tendency to oversimplify the interpretation of Others:

Often, European museums have seen a contradiction between these pre-Islamic symbols and the clearly Muslim environment they are worn in, without having asked those who crafted them, how they interpret their cultural heritage.

The text is further enhanced through the critical examination of the validity of diverse Islamophobic notions presented within the hajj display case – describes the hatred, prejudice, misunderstanding and fear towards Muslims, which, although it was introduced by the French Orientalist painter Alphonse-Étienne Dinet in 1922, has been expressed more frequently since the 1990s and has been increasing in the Western world, especially after the events of 9/11 (Cesari, 2011) –, and a demonstration of the contribution of Islamic civilisations to science through the linguistic context. This has been achieved by, for the former, referencing quotes from the Quran and Prophet Mohammed, and for the latter, showcasing miniatures that depict the various types of machinery crafted by Badi' az-Zaman Abu l-'Izz ibn Ismā'il ibn ar-Razāz al-Jazarī, who is commonly known as al Jazarī. In this way, the validity of Orientalist ideas is effectively being questioned compared with reality. Overall, like previous sections, the narrative utilises an effective alternative/indigenous approach to knowledge generation and scrutinises entrenched frameworks of ideas in the backdrop of epistemic multiplicity.

## **7.6. Decolonial Space and Sensory Liberation**

The approach to aesthetics at the Gothenburg Museum of World Culture sets it apart from the previous two museums. The museum building was constructed more recently, with the specific purpose of becoming a museum, and this has allowed for greater flexibility in meeting contemporary needs. Firstly, this allows the museum to boast an open space design for its exhibitions, intentionally steering clear of a predetermined path for visitors (see Bitgood, 2006 for a discussion of display layouts). Instead, the layout affords visitors the freedom to chart their own course and explore the exhibition based on their unique interests. This method fosters a more customised and engaging experience, empowering guests to interact with displays and themes in a way that speaks

to them individually. As a result, rather than being confined to a prescribed route dictated by the exhibit's creators, each person is free to construct their own interpretation. Of course, visitors' backgrounds and dispositions also shape their interpretations.

Additionally, each theme of MWC's *Crossroads* exhibition is designed with a distinct aesthetic approach. The simplest way of observing this is through the colours used in the theme. The choice of colour is influenced by a particular object within the section or the connotation of the theme – for example, Water-Blue and Democracy-Purple (in reference to the flag of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy). By allowing each theme to have its own aesthetic approach, the museum has avoided creating a single design that dominates the entire space, which would create ‘a normativity that colonized the senses’ by the aesthetics of modernity/coloniality as described by Mignolo and Vázquez (2013, p. 8).

To provide a better understanding, let us explore some examples. Starting with the *Water* theme; the *Shortage of Water* sub-section showcases objects in a manner that resembles traditional ethnographic museum displays from the 20th century. Some display cases in this section exhibit up to 50 objects (Figure 50). As mentioned in Chapter 6, this presentation technique emphasises the objects' functionality (Lien and Nielssen, 2019, p. 447) while making it challenging to convey each item's specific details to visitors. However, the difference lies in the placement of modern examples alongside ethnographic ones. This is especially noticeable in the water vessels' display case, where vessels from different eras are placed aesthetically, seemingly scattered, but with more contemporary Fiji water bottles strategically placed for easy recognition. Alternatively, they attract attention because of the familiarity they evoke due to their modern relevance. In any case, such aesthetic preference conveys subtle meaning: the inclusion of an exhibit showcasing an item from one of the high-end, present-day water brands within a section focused on the issue of water scarcity. The museum text states:

Water from Fiji, in the Pacific Ocean, is marketed as the finest water on earth by an American company with a 99-year lease on rights to the water from a groundwater aquifer.

Such narrative subtly highlights how water, a fundamental human necessity, has become a commodity accessible only to certain groups while others suffer from its scarcity due to capitalist/colonialist domination. As such, it emphasises that all objects in the display are the result of a similar thought practice regardless of time and culture. It is also possible to perceive this preference of juxtaposition as an attempt to posit the equivalence between vessels for water across cultures, to normalise objects that look unfamiliar to the museums 'imagined visitors' and to facilitate their connection to more recognisable ones, thereby breaking down barriers of otherness. In this manner, the objects serve as reminders of our shared human heritage and our connection to it. As Mignolo and Vázquez note (2013, p. 8), 'decolonial aestheSis has become the critique and artistic practices that aim to decolonise the senses, that is, to liberate them from the regulations of modern, postmodern, and altermodern aestheTics'.



Figure 50: Shortage of Water, Source: Author

A similar approach can be observed in both the *Democracy* and *Dikenga* sections. In *Democracy*, two different artworks challenge the modernity/coloniality aesthetic. Anders Sunna's work is described in Chapter 7, while the other artwork involves visitors since they become part of the artwork according to their preferences. Each visitor/contributor places a ribbon on the platform representing the element they consider most important for democracy based on their personal understanding (Figure 51). Depending on the visitor profile, this artwork can represent a modern/colonial pattern or align with a

decolonial orientation. Nevertheless, it is a participatory approach since it creates a platform that makes it possible to share opinions and aesthetic preferences.



Figure 51: Democracy, Source: Author

The *Dikenga* section accomplishes this through the design of its structure. The dome-shaped structure and shining floor (Figure 46 in Chapter 7) play with the visitor's perception of the area with its effective lighting. The area is an embodiment of the *Dikenga* symbol, which represents the four cardinal points (through display cases) and the circle (the structure of the dome) that surrounds them in three dimensions. As previously mentioned, the circle symbolises the unity and cyclical nature of the world, with the upper portion representing the world of the living and the lower portion representing the spiritual realm. By entering the space, visitors become living elements, part of the world of the living in unity, while the shimmering shades of the floor represent

the spiritual world. This is the invitation offered by the display to visitors to become part of the Congolese cosmology, transformed by their experience into active participants in this culture.

### **7.7. Conclusion**

This chapter has detailed the themes and methods of the transmission of MWC's *Crossroads* exhibition, scrutinising them from both the museum's standpoint and my position as a researcher, all within the context of decoloniality. Upon entering the museum, the architecture of the space immediately challenges conventional norms, paving the way for a communal space that welcomes diverse ideas and perspectives. This notion is further reinforced by the exhibition space, which is intentionally devoid of a prescribed path or presentation style, allowing visitors to freely interact with the objects and imbue their own meanings. The exhibition effectively demonstrates how current and historical events, systems of thought, and ways of seeing are linked to colonialism, sometimes implicitly and sometimes explicitly. This connection is demonstrated in a smooth but indirect way, such as with climate change, or in a more direct way, such as with eradicated traditions during the Spanish conquest of *Pachakuti*. In doing so, the emphasis placed on Sweden's role is instrumental in strengthening the narrative. In this respect, it is possible to claim that the exhibition's curation process has been collective and elaborate, demonstrating the MWC's understanding of postcolonial and decolonial literature and its effective application. While other museums may also do or attempt to do this, it is clear that the MWC strongly adheres to this approach. Therefore, such a presentation effectively critiques the epistemic coloniality to which ethnographic museums contribute and enhances the possibility of a plurinational and intercultural production of knowledge in which Indigenous and other historically excluded cultures, peoples and knowledge are constitutive. Here, *intercultural* refers to an engaged, dialogical exchange between cultures rather than merely the coexistence implied by *multicultural*, thus supporting active participation and mutual influence across cultural boundaries.

I would like to conclude this chapter by quoting the definition of museums presented by a group of museum practitioners led by Jette Sandahl, who was previously the MWC's

director at the 2019 ICOM conference in Kyoto, although the definition was not accepted at that time and was subsequently amended. Nevertheless, the definition as it was proposed in 2019 effectively represents the understanding of the MWC:

Museums are democratizing, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artifacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people.

The next chapter will identify and examine key barriers that the museums in this study encounter in approaching decolonisation, considering factors beyond displays, such as aesthetic presentation, venue limitations, financial constraints, and repatriation.

## CHAPTER 8 DISCUSSION: DECOLONIAL PERSPECTIVES on AESTHETICS, FINANCE, and REPATRIATION

### 8.1. Chapter Introduction

The preceding chapters analysed Denmark, Norway, and Sweden respectively, in terms of epistemic decolonisation, particularly the knowledge and narratives constructed and presented in displays. The findings indicate that while some attempts at decolonial approaches have been made, certain aspects remain controversial (Chapter 5); that while drawing attention to the widespread misconception of colonial 'innocence', the narrative reveals the fragments of Western-centred knowledge production practice by neglecting the contribution of Indigenous communities' involvement in decision-making (Chapter 6); and finally while institutional efforts have been present to create a more effective decolonial perspective, contributions from source communities and Indigenous groups in knowledge production have not yet reached their desired level (Chapter 7).

As previously discussed, although the concept of decolonisation has been a significant topic in academic discourse since the 1990s (see Chapter 2), the events of 2020, such as the tragic deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, have reignited discussions around this issue through the Black Lives Matter movement. This has brought a renewed focus and urgency to the examination of museums that have, from the late 1980s, been seen through a postcolonial lens (Coombes, 1994; Barringer and Flynn, 1997; Aldrich, 2009; Thomas, 2010; Chambers *et al.*, 2014). As a result, decolonial debates have become more prevalent in museum practice in the Western context. Museums have taken and continue to take various actions, but their ability to act has been hindered by factors such as slow cultural change, space restrictions, lack of appropriate knowledge, and funding, as highlighted briefly in the previous chapters and will be discussed in this one. *Voices from the Colonies*, *Control – Attempting to Tame the World*, and *Crossroads* are three exhibitions that all opened in recent years amidst ongoing decolonial discussions. While *Control - Attempting to Tame the World* opened during a time of particularly heightened demand for decolonisation with the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, it is important to note that both of the other exhibitions were still aware of these debates. *Voices from the Colonies*, for example, was launched

to coincide with the 100th anniversary of Denmark's sale of its last colonised territory, the US Virgin Islands, which attests to its relevance within this context. As such, it is clear that each of these exhibitions was aware of decolonial approaches and sought to incorporate them into their respective openings.

This chapter aims to identify and discuss some of the barriers that museums scrutinised in the context of this research face in approaching decolonisation, taking into account elements the knowledge produced by the display, aesthetic understandings of exhibitions, the limitations of the venues, finance, and repatriation. Display analysis is the main method for identifying the aesthetic approach of case study museums, while interviews and policies are for other elements.

## **8.2. Unlearning Authority: Museums Between Epistemic Power and Structural Constraint**

As indicated in Chapter 2, museums have long served as institutions of epistemic regulation, reinforcing systems of knowledge production that are deeply entangled with the legacies of colonial modernity. They not only display objects but authorise narratives about the past, frame historical agency, and delineate whose knowledge counts. Drawing on Quijano's (2007) theory of coloniality as a persisting logic of modern power and Lindauer's (2006) concept of the 'critical museum visitor', this section compares how the case study museums position themselves in relation to colonial histories. The focus here is not only on what is exhibited, but on how institutional structures, financial constraints, spatial arrangements, and interpretive logics shape what can be seen, known, and questioned.

The National Museum of Denmark (NMD) operates from a position of centralised authority, both legally and financially. Governed by the Consolidated Act on Museums and funded through the Finance Act, it is formally responsible for safeguarding and communicating Danish cultural heritage. Its architectural form, housed in the 18th-century Prince's Palace, reinforces the museum's national significance and institutional legitimacy. In this regard, it represents a paradigmatic example of a heritage institution that operates from a centralised position of epistemic authority. The inclusion of the

*Voices from the Colonies* exhibition, however, signals a notable shift within the museum's programming that scrutinises not only the triumph moments but also historical wrongs. It provides personal narratives from the Danish West Indies, Tranquebar, Serampore, and the Gold Coast, offering glimpses into the lives of local communities shaped by Danish colonial rule. These narratives, however, are mediated almost entirely through Danish archival sources, as curator Mette Boritz acknowledges: 'many [colonised peoples] do not have a voice in the archives' (Boritz, 2023). While the exhibition claims to present multiple perspectives, its epistemological foundation remains embedded in colonial systems of documentation and classification. Rather than unsettling the authority of the institution, this approach allows to reaffirm its role as a 'benevolent' knowledge broker. The lack of incorporation of colonial subjects, seen through the lens of Danish record-keeping, functions less as a transfer of interpretive power and more as a continuation of the institutional voice — one that permits critique only on terms it controls.

In this example, the financial situation significantly influences the institution's structural framework. As mentioned, the government's 2% cut to cultural institutions every year affected the exhibition's content and diversity. Additionally, the historical significance of the exhibition's opening date, which aligns with Denmark's loss of colonial territories in the West Indies, has resulted in a temporal limitation in the exhibition's creation:

... due to time limitations, the number of elements the exhibition intended to achieve has progressively increased. '[W]e only had about 10 months to make it, which is [a] very short time' (Sebro, 2023).

The museum's ability to engage in deeper participatory practices or to construct counter-hegemonic narratives is shaped not only by curatorial will but by what is financially and institutionally permitted. Nonetheless, it is important to address the issues related to curatorial intentions in this context. This is visible in the framing of the Danish presence in Serampore as a 'peaceful' and 'unproblematic' colonial experience. Such narrative reintroduces tropes of exceptionalism, obscuring the violence and asymmetries inherent in such relationships. Similarly, visual elements such as a mural of an 'exotic' figure with

a parrot in a cage evoke orientalist tropes without clear critical framing, leaving room for misinterpretation or aestheticisation. These moments of representational ambiguity expose the limitations of the museum's critical ambitions. As Lindauer (2006, p. 206) suggests, even exhibitions that position themselves as self-reflexive can reproduce dominant knowledge systems if they fail to interrogate how coherence is achieved and what interpretive gaps remain. In this regard, the exhibition exists in a space of partial contestation — unsettling the national narrative on one hand, while reintroducing familiar hierarchies and silences on the other. The visitor is prompted not only to engage with what is shown but to scrutinise the tonal, visual, and rhetorical devices that frame these representations.

While the NMD's engagement with colonial history reveals tensions between curatorial intent and representational coherence, the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo approaches this task from a fundamentally different institutional and conceptual position. It is not an official national museum, but it functions in part as one, through its custodianship of major collections and its affiliation with the University of Oslo. As a university-affiliated museum governed by the Ministry of Education and Research, MCH enjoys academic legitimacy and a relatively stable financial foundation. Its funding derives in part from the University of Oslo's central budget, but also from external grants. This dual identity — at once academic and public-facing — derives from Norway's distinctive museological development. As Amundsen (2011) indicates, 19th-century Norwegian heritage institutions emerged in the absence of a centralised cultural policy, producing a decentralised and regionally inflected museum landscape.

The exhibition *Control – Attempting to Tame the World* is a result of this institutional approach. Organised around themes such as domestication, belief, exploitation, and technology, the exhibition explores how humans have sought to impose order on both the natural world and on each other. Colonialism and slavery are included within this broader matrix of control, not as isolated historical moments, but as systemic expressions of epistemic and material domination. This framework enables the exhibition to situate colonialism alongside other techniques of social organisation and ideological governance. The presentation does not separate colonial violence from other issues.

Instead, it connects it to a long history of human efforts to control differences and assert power.

While the exhibition allows for flexible pathways, its non-linear layout should not be interpreted as a lack of curatorial intention. Visitors are encouraged to trace connections across thematic zones, drawing their own interpretive lines between slavery, religious orthodoxy, scientific rationalism, and capitalist extractivism. This mode of engagement is structurally different from the compartmentalised narrative observed at the NMD. It also avoids the trap of relativising colonialism by framing it as one phenomenon among many. Instead, it foregrounds the structural logics that underpin different regimes of control. Lindauer's concept of the critical visitor remains relevant here: such a visitor is not merely guided through a prescribed narrative, but is prompted to recognise the absences, contradictions, and structural continuities embedded in exhibition design (Lindauer, 2006: 214). In this way, *Control* offers a form of critical pedagogy that balances reflexivity with curatorial commitment.

This commitment is also evident in how the exhibition integrates historical and contemporary references. Norway's colonial entanglements, including its missionary projects in Africa or its internal colonisation of the Sámi people, are not treated as aberrations but as part of a broader genealogy of domination. Rather than displacing responsibility or disaggregating historical violence, the museum offers a framework for understanding colonialism as a continuing structure. This aligns the MCH more closely with the critical aspirations associated with decolonial museum practice, even if it does so through a distinct conceptual idiom rooted in thematic synthesis and academic interdisciplinarity.

The Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg represents the most explicit institutional attempt to break with the colonial legacy of ethnographic museums. Operating under the National Museums of World Culture agency, the MWC receives baseline state support but supplements this with active pursuit of external project-based funding. The MWC was established not as a successor to older museum traditions, but as a radical departure from them. Its exhibition, the *Crossroads*, is organised thematically rather than geographically or temporally, and they privilege global entanglement, cultural hybridity, and transnational flows over essentialised categories of identity. Pagani (2013a)

describes the museum's curatorial philosophy as one committed to 'pluralism, hybridity, and a multitude of voices' (p. 245), and this orientation is evident in both its narrative structure and spatial design.

Institutionally, the MWC functions less as a transmitter of authoritative knowledge and more as a forum for dialogic engagement. The exhibition does not present resolved narratives but invite visitors to dwell in ambiguity, navigate multiple interpretive threads, and encounter perspectives that are deliberately juxtaposed rather than synthesised. This curatorial approach aligns with Lindauer's emphasis on reflexivity and her call for museum spaces that provoke critical awareness rather than deliver ideological closure (Lindauer, 2006: 210). The MWC does not merely accommodate difference; it uses difference as a critical tool for unsettling dominant frameworks. While it remains a national institution subject to the structural limitations of state policy and public funding, its operational logic reflects a sustained effort to resist museological fixity and to foreground epistemological plurality.

Rather than presenting colonialism as a self-contained object of critique, the MWC embeds it within broader examinations of inequality, displacement, and cultural violence. This strategy avoids both the overexposure and the erasure of colonial histories, situating them instead within a dynamic matrix of global processes. Here, the visitor is not only invited to reflect on what is displayed, but on how categories such as 'culture', 'migration', or 'border' are themselves contested and contingent. The museum's open-ended structure is not a refusal of responsibility but an enactment of ethical uncertainty — a space in which decolonial thinking is practiced through curatorial form.

Taken together, these three case study museums reveal distinct but interrelated strategies for confronting the colonality of knowledge. While shaped by different national contexts, their institutional mandates, financial infrastructures, and curatorial approaches interact in ways that both enable and constrain decolonial possibility. The NMD demonstrates a significant institutional shift by integrating colonial narratives into its permanent structure; yet this gesture is complicated by tonal inconsistencies and representational ambiguities that risk reproducing the very hierarchies it aims to challenge. The MCH, operating within a hybrid academic and public framework, adopts a conceptual model that embeds colonialism within broader structures of control,

presenting a form of critique that privileges thematic resonance over linear storytelling. The MWC, meanwhile, offers the most deliberate epistemic repositioning by rejecting fixed curatorial authority and constructing a space where multiplicity, contradiction, and uncertainty are not only allowed but actively encouraged. These museums do not follow a singular decolonial path, but each reconfigures institutional authority in ways that reflect their respective contexts, constraints, and ambitions.

These epistemic orientations are inseparable from the economic conditions in which they unfold. Claudia Augustat, a curator at the Weltmuseum Wien (Worldmuseum Vienna), highlights in her work (2019) a concern that, although specific to another country and context, is relevant to Western museums broadly. She argues that the decolonisation of collections and practice in museums also requires the decolonisation of budgets. The three museums analysed in this research rely mainly on state-centric financial sources, which presents a challenge for implementing decolonial actions to a certain extent. Denmark adapted its exhibition planning to align with budget constraints, while in Norway, Ween (2024) mentioned that the institution saved funds for renovations of the first floor before the exhibition opened and rarely seeks additional funding for exhibitions. Based on this, decolonisation in institutions that have state-centric financial sources emphasises the need for the decolonial approach to become state policy at some level.

The MWC, however, differs from the other two museums in its approach of seeking project-centred funding in addition to state-centric funding. This approach mitigates the requirements of such a state-level, comprehensive policy changes. According to Augustat (2019), project-based financing may provide a critical thinking environment in the short term, but it may not lead to sustainable long-term change. This is because once the project is complete and funding is stopped, making necessary changes and developments becomes difficult. However, critical thinking becomes an ongoing and developing process for an institution like MWC, where project-based financing is a common and plentiful practice. MWC's ongoing projects and content, such as *Democracy Doesn't Exist – We Make It!*, *The Yaqui Case*, and *Digital Repatriation of Cultural Heritage in the Global South: A Model for Open Access to Museum Collections Empowering Indigenous Communities in the Brazilian Amazon*, demonstrate this flexibility and ability to catch changing trends. As Mignolo (2021, p. 6, original emphasis)

notes, 'decolonization as decoloniality ... having epistemic and ontological reconstitution as its main goal, offers a conceptual apparatus of knowing and understanding and a visionary *utopia of sustainable economies* (not sustainable development) to live in harmony and plenitude.' Achieving such change is not something that can happen overnight. In this regard, I believe one potential approach to furthering decolonial goals within museums could be to explore the implementation of a project-based funding scheme. However, it is important to recognise that the state and museums have historically financially benefited from colonialism, which raises the question of whether these funds should instead be allocated directly to decolonial work rather than relying on competitive, short-term funding pots. In the UK, museum staff often critique this over-reliance on project-based funding, as it tends to focus on immediate, short-term outcomes rather than enabling sustained, long-term change (Naidoo, 2016).

Rather than reproducing a binary between conservative and radical institutions, these cases illustrate the layered and uneven terrain of decolonial engagement within the museum sector. Each museum navigates a distinct tension between institutional legitimacy and critical reflexivity, shaped by its architecture, audience, funding, and historical positioning. Across the Scandinavian context — where colonial histories have long been marginalised or disavowed — these museums mark varying degrees of commitment to redress. Their divergences do not signal failure or success, but expose the complexity of unlearning institutional authority in spaces built to sustain it.

### **8.3. Decolonial Aesthetics and the Politics of Museum Display**

Whereas the previous section addressed the institutional structures and epistemic logics through which case study museums negotiate their colonial legacies, this section turns to their aesthetic dimensions. If institutional frameworks define the parameters of what can be said, aesthetic strategies shape how narratives are felt, embodied, and received. Decolonial aestheSis, as conceptualised by Mignolo and Vázquez (2013), calls for the reconstitution of perception, an unlearning of the colonial matrix of the senses. Rather than merely critiquing representational content, it interrogates the very aesthetic forms through which histories and subjects are rendered visible. The aesthetic strategies deployed by the case study museums reveal differing levels of alignment with decolonial

sensibilities — and starkly differing approaches to what it means to disrupt the aesthetic legacies of modernity.

The National Museum of Denmark is situated within the Rococo style ornamented Prince's Palace, a space whose visual language communicates elite European cultural refinement and reinforces historical hierarchies of aesthetic value (Boritz, 2023). The choice to stage the permanent exhibition *Voices from the Colonies* in this setting is politically and symbolically charged. While the exhibition seeks to centre the lived experiences of colonised individuals, the architectural surroundings assert a continuity with Enlightenment-era rationalism and Eurocentric prestige. This association is further reinforced through the curatorial emphasis on Denmark's archival wealth. As Boritz (2023) notes, the exhibition draws heavily on the Danish tradition of bureaucratic documentation: 'Denmark is a very excellent country when it comes to archives... [we have] a huge tradition [of] describing everything and preserving it'. These archival materials form the backbone of the exhibition, allowing it to evoke a sense of historical depth and legitimacy. However, their presence also ties the aesthetic of the exhibition to the very systems of order, classification, and control that underpinned colonial governance. In this sense, the exhibition's material and architectural choices remain tethered to the visual and epistemic traditions of European colonial modernity.

While the exhibition does attempt to disrupt these traditions through immersive design features — such as low lighting, curtain-separated rooms, and ambient soundscapes — these interventions often collide with the palace's ornamental Rococo interiors. In Room 129, testimonies of colonial violence are displayed against deep red wall panels and elaborate architectural details. The aesthetic tension here is not generative but disorienting: the formal beauty of the setting risks stylising the violence it seeks to expose. In Room 125, this contradiction becomes more pronounced in the Serampore section, where the narrative shifts toward a nostalgic tone. Danish missionary and educational projects are framed as benign or even progressive, subtly reinforcing a 'civilising mission' trope. This affective turn is undercut neither by visual critique nor curatorial commentary. While the inclusion of contemporary Beninese figurines, referencing the *Brookes* slave ship diagram, offers a counter-visual vocabulary, such interventions remain framed within a dominant aesthetic that privileges restraint,

elegance, and composure over rupture (Boritz, 2023). The museum thus accommodates critique but resists aesthetic reconfiguration, maintaining institutional control over how discomfort is rendered visible.

The Museum of Cultural History in Oslo presents a more internally conflicted aesthetic strategy. The aesthetic design supports this by drawing on elements from both art institutions and ethnographic displays. Certain zones adopt minimal lighting, enclosed spaces, and stylised object presentation more commonly associated with fine art contexts. Elsewhere, objects are grouped thematically in a manner reminiscent of older museological categorisations. This mix does not reflect aesthetic hybridity as much as it signals an unresolved curatorial vision. The result is a disjointed spatial logic in which the affective register varies significantly from one section to another, offering neither coherence nor friction as a stable curatorial tactic.

The exhibition's use of light, materials, and object arrangement fosters an atmosphere of subdued contemplation, but this subdued tone functions less as a critical provocation and more as a distancing device. The lighting design in particular recalls the subdued, reverent ambience of elite art galleries, invoking authority through aesthetic restraint. While such choices may be intended to cultivate critical reflection, they also risk elevating the display of artefacts to an aesthetic register that decontextualises their histories. Objects sourced from Africa or Asia are often decontextualised visually, separated from their violent acquisition histories, and aestheticised through sparse, clean display techniques. In contrast, European or Sámi materials are at times presented with more curatorial contextualisation or even relational framing. This imbalance risks reinforcing hierarchies of cultural legibility and affective resonance.

Rather than unsettling dominant aesthetic frameworks, the exhibition appears to reabsorb colonial critique into a framework of visual neutrality. The violence of colonial control is referenced in the narrative structure but not consistently materialised in the aesthetic logic. The aesthetics remain visually composed and atmospherically disciplined, sustaining the museum's alignment with an institutional model of knowledge grounded in order, rationality, and distance. The lack of aesthetic friction reflects a broader hesitation to challenge the museum's formal authority through its sensory regime. While the inclusion of Indigenous voices in curatorial processes may signal

procedural progress, this has not translated into a reconfiguration of the sensory or spatial language of the exhibition itself.

The Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg offers the most coherent and sustained application of decolonial aestheSis among the case studies. Its architectural layout, refusal of permanent exhibitions, and participatory curatorial model collectively work to disrupt the aesthetic hierarchies of traditional museology. The fact that the exhibition areas are structured thematically and designed with a distinct spatial and sensory rhythm has facilitated their perception by visitors. The juxtaposition of traditional water vessels with branded plastic bottles in the *Water* section, for example, draws attention to the aesthetic violence of commodification and environmental extraction. Rather than presenting objects as fixed representations of cultural identity, the museum stages material encounters that highlight global entanglements and contemporary relevance.

In the *Dikenga* section, a cosmogram inspired by Kongo cosmology structures visitor movement through space. This is not a symbolic gesture but a spatial and aesthetic reorientation that displaces the linear visual logic of Western exhibitionary order. Similarly, in the *Democracy* section, visitors participate in shaping the exhibition's visual field by contributing responses with coloured ribbons. Here, aesthetics function not as a backdrop to narrative but as an active process of knowledge production. The museum's approach demonstrates a commitment to decolonial aestheSis as a lived practice.

Only after tracing the specific aesthetic strategies of each institution does a comparative frame clarify the stakes of decolonial aesthetics. Among the three, the Museum of World Culture offers the most consistent and effective challenge to Western aesthetic norms. Through spatial openness, participatory exhibition design, and a refusal of curatorial fixity, it constructs a sensorial environment that not only accommodates multiplicity but structurally embraces contradiction, co-presence, and embodied interpretation. Its curatorial language avoids aesthetic neutrality in favour of deliberate dissonance, enabling a reflexive encounter that reconfigures the terms of visual engagement. The National Museum of Denmark occupies a more ambivalent position. Despite its setting in the Rococo style building, it introduces intentional, if uneven, aesthetic interventions aimed at unsettling the dominant visual order. These include immersive soundscapes, open object displays, and contemporary counter-visuals. Yet these efforts are mediated

by spatial and symbolic constraints that limit their critical reach. The aesthetic logic in Denmark is therefore context-dependent: at times decolonially generative, at others compromised by representational slippages or affective stylisation. The Museum of Cultural History, by contrast, demonstrates the least alignment between its critical narrative content and its aesthetic form. The exhibition *Control* foregrounds colonial structures of domination but frames its material through a visual language of composure, abstraction, and aesthetic hierarchy. Rather than unsettling the coloniality of the senses, it re-inscribes a Western-centric understanding of beauty, where objects from the Global South are visually neutralised, and embodied engagement is largely absent.

All in all, examining museum aesthetics through a decolonial lens uncovers a multifaceted relationship between power dynamics, historical contexts, and contemporary apprehensions. Decolonisation requires not only breaking free from colonial power structures but also reconstructing epistemic and aesthetic frameworks, according to a different decolonial logic. The idea of decolonial aesthesis, which questions Western aesthetic norms and promotes the liberation of sensory perceptions, challenges the domination of Western aesthetic principles in museum discourse. It calls for a reconsideration of how art and artefacts and their representation are presented to foster a more inclusive and diverse approach that recognises and respects different cultural perspectives. In his paper *Museums in Late Democracies*, Chakrabarty (2002, pp. 10–11) demonstrates the inseparable connection between memory and the senses, emphasising that memory always involves embodied elements. He underscores the idea that only individuals within a specific group possess the requisite experiences to truly understand and represent that group. In this regard, through an analysis of exhibitions' aesthetics, I aimed to uncover the deeper implications surrounding the presentation and interpretation of cultural artefacts within museum environments. By examining case study museums from Norway, Denmark, and Sweden, the complexities of implementing decolonial aesthetics within existing institutional frameworks became clear. While MCH struggles to reconcile historical contexts with decolonial imperatives, NMD adeptly blends Western aesthetics with elements from colonised cultures. Among all case studies, on the other hand, MWC emerges as the most effective in terms of the application of decolonial aesthetics. Decolonising museum aesthetics is a challenging

and contradictory practice that requires a nuanced understanding of power dynamics, historical legacies, and the multiplicity of voices and narratives represented within museum spaces.

#### **8.4. Repatriation**

Museums should be prepared to initiate dialogue for the return of cultural property to a country or people of origin. This should be undertaken in an impartial manner, based on scientific, professional and humanitarian principles as well as applicable local, national and international legislation, in preference to action at a governmental or political level (ICOM, 2004).

This section examines how the case study museums approach repatriation and restitution of objects, with a particular focus on the influential paper by Tuck and Yang (2012), *Decolonization is not Metaphor*. The authors caution against reducing decolonisation to a mere figure of speech and separating it from its original meaning. They note that decolonisation is often metaphorised as a catch-all term for concepts such as tolerance, justice, and civil rights. This narrow interpretation, which prioritises the perspectives of settlers, runs counter to the decolonisation movement's emphasis on valuing the voices of marginalised communities. As such, it ignores the contributions of Indigenous intellectuals and activists to the theory and framework of decolonisation and fails to acknowledge the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples. As such, the term 'recenters whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to the settler, it entertains a settler future' (Tuck and Yang, 2012, p. 3). Authors believe that true decolonisation can only be achieved by returning Indigenous lands and lives to their rightful owners, Indigenous communities. This echoes the the criticism levelled against Mignolo that the decolonial project was effectively located in elite Western universities.

Tuck and Yang's perspective can mean the repatriation and restitution of objects that were taken out of their original context in the context of museums. As Tony Bennett (1995)

describes, museums function as vessels of the colonial project by shaping narratives of power and domination through their collections and displays. Therefore, such repatriation includes not only tangible objects but also intangible elements like research-based knowledge, recordings, and photographic materials – data of negatives (Svensson, 2015, p. 324). In this sense, the issue of the physical and epistemological location of museum collections parallels the colonial dispossession of land and cultural heritage. This underscores the need for decolonial museology to move beyond token gestures and address systemic inequities by including the retention of both physical objects and the knowledge derived from them.

The National Museum of Denmark (NMD) has a long-standing commitment to returning artefacts, as evidenced by the repatriation of the Codex Regius of the Poetic Edda (Konungsbók Eddukvæða) and the Codex Flateyensis (Flateyjarbók) manuscripts to Iceland in 1971, as well as the return of approximately 35,000 objects to the National Museum of Greenland between 1982 and 2001 (Grønnow and Jensen, 2008). While there may be discrepancies in the exact number of objects returned, since curator Mette Boritz indicated 17,000 objects for this project, this affirms the museum's dedication to the repatriation project. However, despite these efforts, Denmark still holds around 100,000 objects from Greenland (Grønnow and Jensen, 2008). The repatriation to these two regions illustrates Denmark's ongoing communication with North Atlantic colonies, while Boritz acknowledged that there is more work to be done in the case of tropical colonies:

We have not been repatriating anything to India, and we did not have any claims [about repatriation]. There has been a little discussion about two objects to Ghana. And I do not think they have been in discussion with [the] US Virgin Islands. But you also have to look into the objects. What kind of options do you have here? Are they of interest? In India, they are not interested [in] at all objects here [at the National Museum of Denmark]. They have much better objects themselves. And I guess in India, they are not interested that much in the Danish, small, small colonial history. They are much more into the English colonial history, I guess. But we, of course, have repatriation occasions, like you in Britain have something from Greece, from Parthenon.

We also have bronzes from Benin. Like the one in Germany, they are giving back at the moment. ... we will give back some objects here [in] a couple of weeks or month, not [to] just former colonies, but to other countries that have an interest in our collections.

We do not have human material here from colonies; we did have something from New Zealand, that ha[s] been repatriated. But so, there are no claims on objects from the colonies. And we treat them like all other claims, and we are treated with under the ICOM rules. We have to repatriate it; they have to come back to a place where everything is safe.

From Boritz's comment, it is possible to infer that the repatriation is being addressed based on demand. However, the crucial point she raised is the perspective on whether the objects are valued enough to want to be repatriated by the source communities. If they are not, it can be inferred that the provenance of the objects, their acquisition, and ethical significance are of little importance to NMD. It is known that some source communities do not seek the return of all stolen objects. Egypt's antiquities chief, for example, expressed a desire to return only 'iconic pieces' while the legitimacy of universal museum ideas is being debated (Fiskesjö, 2010, p. 10). This leads to the question of determining which objects are considered *iconic* and by whom, or in what context they are recognised as such. Similarly, the reference in Boritz's statement to the intensity and duration of colonial histories in the case of India and the concentration of repatriation requests from the UK should not delay or excuse the proactive repatriation initiatives of objects in the NMD inventory. The duration or intensity of colonial actions should not be an excuse to superficially handle repatriation matters. The return of objects should be based on ethical considerations of appropriateness, rather than on community demand or the attributed importance of the objects. However, if no institutions or communities are willing to accept these objects, repatriating them may risk leaving them without proper care, which raises significant ethical concerns. In such cases, the

museum must balance its responsibility to repatriate objects with its duty to ensure their preservation and care.

The Museum of Cultural History (MCH) takes repatriation requests seriously as well as the NMD. In this context, the museum emphasises active communication with source communities. As Ween notes (2024):

When I was head of [the] department, we started a sort of Global Social Responsibility plan for how we want to take our responsibility for world cultures [and] living cultures seriously. And we have had the kind of efforts to repatriate for a long time based on when approached by source communities. We also are very active when it comes to ensuring we have policies to secure that we do not have [any] trafficked objects or illegally trafficked objects. We are in [the] practice of repatriating human remains [of] ancestors. And we do speak a lot with Danish and the Swedish and the Finnish museums [which are] similar kinds of museums. We have had projects with the Danish National Museum about digital repatriations, which I think is incredibly complicated. We have sort of small-scale kind of initiatives where we share digital collections with particular communities in different places such as Nunavut [in Canada] or Santal [in India] and [the] Congo. We are working on the human remains collection to figure out at the moment how we will actively [be] in contact with different communities where these bones come from. I have conversations about repatriations for the collections that I am the keeper of, from Australia, from Wixarika in Mexico, from Hopi in the US, [from] Blackfoot in Canada, and [from] Gjoa Haven in Nunavut. We also have conversations with our Greenlandic new museum in Greenland on both human remains and some other objects. We also have projects experimenting with digital showings because it is hard for elders to travel, and we consider 3D copies.

The article by Tom G. Svensson (2015) gives insight into MCH's approach to repatriation requests, particularly in relation to its relationship with the Netsilik, Sámi, and Hopi

communities. For example, the article indicates the fact that MCH possesses the largest collection of Netsilik culture from the Gjoa Haven region of Northern Canada, with roughly 1200 objects, a quarter of which have been exchanged with other museums, while the rest still reside at MCH. In 2011, the museum returned 16 objects to Gjoa Haven in response to their informal repatriation requests, as 'a symbolic and appropriate gesture' on the occasion of the university's bicentennial, and also opened up their collection database to the community (2015, p. 326). Svensson also highlights how the research conducted by the museum has led to the academic preservation of the customs and knowledge of the Sámi culture and its contribution to the continuity of the culture by passing it on to the next generation. Indeed, this MCH collaboration, although not explored in the context of research, was possible to see in the Arctic exhibition that was open during my first visit to the museum.

The Museum of World Culture (MWC) stands out as the most sensitive museum in terms of repatriation compared to the other museums under analysis. What sets it apart is its dedicated website section featuring multiple documents that elucidate the museum's stance. Essentially, their repatriation policy aligns with the 2016/17:116 Policy on Cultural Heritage, which asserts that the Swedish practice should set an example in 'identifying and repatriating or restituting objects in museum collections where there may be special ethical considerations for return'. Furthermore, the policy takes into consideration various national and international legal and ethical frameworks. The policy also acknowledges the museum's shortfall in conducting adequate research on the provenance of objects in its collections. Within this context, the responsible authority emphasises approaches rooted in dialogue and cooperation:

The Authority works continuously to manage claims for refund and, based on available resources, proactively identify objects in the collection where the history is incompatible with international conventions, due to acquisition or other circumstances (Museum of World Culture, 2021).

They emphasise the principle of transparency as the pivotal factor in this entire process. For instance, the museum is set to return twenty-four ceremonial objects to the Yaqui Nation in north-western Mexico in 2022 (Museum of World Culture, 2023), illustrating their commitment to transparency.

To summarise, there is no doubt that all three museums take repatriation requests seriously. In this context, they are doing very effective work as far as they can. However, if one were to take a decolonisation approach in a strict way through the lens of Tuck and Yang in the introduction, it would be possible to argue that the work done so far is not entirely adequate. Although it is valuable to repatriate the 17,000 or 35,000 objects, 100,000 more Greenlandic objects still remain in Denmark, or the repatriation of 16 out of 1200 objects from the Gjoa Haven region in Norway – I am not aware whether any other repatriations have been made since 2001 –, while valuable, they remain, as Tuck and Yang put it (2012), *metaphors* for the realisation of full decolonisation. Another important aspect that needs to be emphasised here is how the museums have handled the repatriation approach. Adherence to ICOM rules, as Boritz mentions, is undoubtedly a valid concern for these three museums. However, ICOM policy states that museums 'should be prepared to initiate' repatriation. This suggests that museums are the institutions that should take the first step. After analysing the three museums, I discovered that both NMD and MCH have a repatriation process based on demand, as determined by the interviews I conducted. The MWC stands out from the other museums in its proactive approach, as stated in its policy. It conducts comprehensive research into the origins of the objects and reaches out to the relevant communities to initiate repatriation efforts. This differentiation serves as the foundation for the epistemic reconfiguration advocated by decolonial thinkers.

## CHAPTER 9 CONCLUSION

### 9.1. Chapter Introduction

This thesis aimed to answer this question: Do the key Scandinavian national museums – National Museum of Denmark, Gothenburg Museum of World Culture, and Oslo Museum of Cultural History – acknowledge their different and shared colonial histories and to what extent do decolonising practices affect their permanent displays? In order to answer this question, three aims were identified:

- Understand the position of three Scandinavian countries' (Denmark, Sweden, and Norway) colonial histories in the Western colonial context.
- Examine the current approaches to representing Scandinavian colonial histories in the case study museums' permanent displays, and how these relate to other forms of museum representation.
- Investigate whether decolonisation movements have had an impact on the case study museums' permanent displays.

The research employed a qualitative methodology, combining display analysis with insights from semi-structured interviews conducted with museum professionals. Then, I synthesised this empirical data with a review of contemporary literature on decolonisation and museology to provide a foundation for addressing these research questions.

In this way, this research contributes to addressing two important gaps in the existing literature. First, although museum collections and exhibitions from Denmark, Sweden, and Norway have been explored in various individual case studies within the context of colonialism (Muñoz, 2011; Arneborg *et al.*, 2018; Lien and Nielssen, 2019; Parby, 2020; Harding, 2021; Rasmussen and Viestad, 2021), there has been no comprehensive, comparative analysis. Although these individual case studies are important, the connection of these countries with colonial histories is often overshadowed by Nordic exceptionalism — the self-image of Nordic countries as progressive, egalitarian, and non-imperial nations (Loftsdóttir and Jensen, 2016a, 2016b). This exceptionalist

narrative allows for the marginalisation of their colonial entanglements in larger discussions of Western colonialism. This thesis addresses this gap by analysing how the case study museums acknowledge colonial history through their representational approaches, ultimately assessing the current state of the exceptionalist narrative.

Second, although the concept of decoloniality advocated by Mignolo and other Latin American thinkers is increasingly apparent in cultural heritage and museum studies (Mignolo, 2011a; Petersen, 2014; Bouwhuis, 2019; Vawda, 2019; Carrasco, Wolff and Niell, 2021; Brulon Soares and Witcomb, 2022; de Sousa *et al.*, 2022; Mataga, Thondhlana and Munjeri, 2022; Gullickson, 2023; Harvey, 2023; Sanni, 2024), it has rarely been applied to museums in the Global North. In this sense, the existing literature includes case studies largely from Africa and the Caribbean and leaves Scandinavia and other Western museums underexamined. As such, by adopting a comparative and decolonial approach, this research offers an understanding of colonial histories and decolonial practices in Scandinavian museums.

This final chapter consolidates the findings, reflecting on how the thesis fulfils its aims and contributes to the broader discourse on museum decolonisation and Scandinavian colonial histories.

## **9.2. Summary of Key Findings**

The findings of this study were presented in chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8. In view of the aims of this research, these have been identified as follows:

### **9.2.1. Acknowledging Colonial Histories in a Western Context**

The first aim of this research was to situate the colonial histories of Denmark, Sweden, and Norway within the broader framework of Western colonialism. The current literature already demonstrates the connection of these nations' distinctive roles in colonial history. Denmark, as a prominent colonial power, maintained extensive activities in proximate territories, such as Iceland, Greenland, the Faroe Islands and, to a certain degree, Norway and overseas regions, including the West Indies, India, and Africa. In

these territories, Denmark actively participated in the transatlantic slave trade as well as more extensive networks of resource extraction and cultural hegemony.

Sweden had a variety of roles in Western colonialism despite its inability to maintain a long-term colonial empire. While its overseas colonies, such as St. Barthélemy, were relatively short-lived, its participation in the colonial system extended through indirect means. Sweden participated in the colonial trade networks by providing resources and goods to the other dominant colonial powers. Additionally, the missionary works in the Sápmi region involved taking control over the Sámi people, who faced resource extraction and strategies aimed at cultural and religious assimilation (Lindmark, 2013, p. 132). This dual involvement underscores the complexity of Sweden's colonial footprint.

Norway has a unique position, described as 'semi-core' by Andersen and Neumann (2014; 2015). This means Norway both participates in and is affected by imperial systems. When Norway was under Danish rule, it was governed by Copenhagen, with Danish leaders controlling its administration and culture. Despite this, Norwegians took part in Danish colonial efforts, and they worked as missionaries, labourers, and administrators in places like Greenland, Tranquebar, and the Danish West Indies. Even after 1814, Norway sought to expand its own colonial influence, including attempts to claim Greenland and involvement in the transatlantic slave trade. Norway also engaged in colonial actions internally against the Sámi and Kven communities. The Norwegianization policies promoted assimilation through Christianisation, taxation, and the suppression of Sámi and Kven languages and cultures from 1850 to 1959. While there have been revitalisation efforts in Sámi culture and language in the last three decades, there are still contemporary issues such as 'green colonialism' (Kårtveit, 2021; Normann, 2021). Norway's push for renewable energy, particularly through wind farms in Sámi territories, continues to indicate colonial approaches and power imbalances by marginalising Indigenous voices.

### 9.2.2. Representation of Colonial Histories in Permanent Displays

The second aim examined the museums' current approaches to representing colonial histories in their permanent displays. Across all three case studies, the research identifies efforts to incorporate critical narratives, yet significant challenges remain in achieving a truly decolonial representation.

As indicated in Chapter 5, NMD's *Voices from the Colonies* exhibition acknowledges Denmark's role in the transatlantic slave trade and the oppressive structures of colonialism. It does this by weaving a narrative around the life stories of thirty-four historical figures, reflecting the Danish tradition of 'careful' archiving, as interviewee Mette Boritz indicated. However, the framing of Iceland and the Faroe Islands as marginal cases, coupled with the exhibition's limited interrogation of Denmark's ongoing relationships with Faroe Islands, highlights gaps in its narrative. As discussed in Chapter 3, these regions are subject to varied interpretations of the colonial approach. In this context, some analyse the Danish attitude towards these areas through the lens of a conglomerate state (Gustafsson, 1998), while others explore the issue by considering diverse parameters such as cultural, political, and economic factors (Ellenberger, 2009). It is evident that Denmark's economic and cultural strategy for Iceland and the Faroe Islands is intertwined with its colonial practices. However, the reliance on a specific academic source for the *Voices from the Colonies* exhibition has hindered a comprehensive and nuanced exploration of this topic. The exhibition could have been more effective by incorporating a range of perspectives and integrating the voices of local communities into the narrative. By doing so, it would have allowed visitors to form their own conclusions rather than presenting a singular interpretation of the region.

Similarly, MCH's *Control — Attempting to Tame the World* exhibition only somewhat successfully presents the colonial practices of the country involved. This exhibition explores humanity's quest to control the world, delving into human-animal relationships and addressing facets such as human dominance over other humans through land ownership, social structures, language, legal systems, and science. As mentioned in Chapter 3, Norway's involvement in colonial movements was intertwined with Denmark's in the Kingdom's territories, where colonial personnel such as soldiers, labourers, doctors, and others were present. Additionally, '[Norway] has had the world's highest

proportion of missionaries in relation to its own population' (Engh, 2009, p. 65), and these missionaries are not only situated in the Kingdom's territory but also in other colonial empires' colonies. The exhibition effectively presents these connections and complicity to the visitor by providing specific individuals' life stories in detail. However, the exhibition, at times, does not completely encompass the viewpoints of these key historical figures involved in colonial actions and might suggest alternate interpretations through its language. Additionally, the narrative remains somewhat lacking in addressing contemporary issues. In this regard, the exhibition misses the opportunity to present an even more effective representation by addressing the contemporary issue with the Sámi community, green colonialism.

Lastly, MWC's *Crossroads* offers a thorough acknowledgement of the country's colonial complicity. The exhibition shows how different cultures and people have come together throughout history. It focuses on the importance of trade routes, pilgrimages, and meeting points as places where societies and civilisations have interacted and communicated. In this narrative, the exhibition not only addresses colonialism as a historical phenomenon but also highlights its contemporary repercussions. Historically, it traces the origins of this phenomenon by providing early colonial actions, such as *Pachakuti*, while situating Sweden's missionary activities within this context in the *Dikenga* section. In the contemporary context, the exhibition not only demonstrates the ongoing effects of colonialism, such as immigration or scarcity of resources that are highlighted in the *Water* section but also provides the voice of a Sámi artist in the narrative in order to present their perspectives in relation to Sweden. In this regard, it can be distinguished from the other two case studies by addressing colonialism as both a historical reality and a contemporary issue, in line with Quijano's concept of coloniality (2007).

The narratives constructed through these exhibitions are highly effective in challenging the notion of Nordic exceptionalism by explicitly acknowledging the involvement of these countries in colonialism. Their approaches enable a critical rethinking of the 'superior' image traditionally associated with these nations. Within this framework, all the case

study museums successfully provide, to varying extents, detailed and informative accounts of the colonial complicity of the countries in which they are located, making such recognition particularly valuable. In this regard, the case studies from Norway and Sweden indicate an effective approach to challenge the exceptionalist narrative by acknowledging countries' colonial complicity. The case study from Denmark does the same, however, it is equally possible to identify various instances where the exceptionalist narrative is subtly reinforced. For example, the *Voices from the Colonies* exhibition's approach to Greenland – still part of the Danish Commonwealth – challenges the concept of Nordic exceptionalism by illustrating to visitors that the perception of the region as a more compassionate and pragmatic coloniser in the media, popular culture (Thisted, 2008, cited in Petterson, 2016), and academia (Petterson, 2016) is unrealistic. On the other hand, it asserts that the approach to Iceland and the Faroe Islands, by considering Denmark as a conglomerate state, does not hold true for these regions. Since a state cannot simultaneously be viewed as a conglomerate in relation to certain regions and an empire concerning others, the exhibition in this context reinforces Nordic exceptionalism by downplaying and obscuring the understanding of the existence of colonial relations.

The portrayal of specific displays in NMD as contributing to the concept of the benevolent coloniser is also contentious. This portrayal occurs by highlighting the Danish influence in shaping the identity of colonised territories, as with the *Dannebrog* – the Danish flag. Drawing on Michael Billig's concept of banal nationalism (1995), the omnipresent nature of the *Dannebrog* within the country serves as a constant reminder of a shared sense of nationhood. Its presence in the exhibition space functions as more than a historical reference. Instead, it operates as an embedded routine of life that underscores Denmark's identity as a cohesive and civilising force. Such juxtaposition with objects from colonised territories risks presenting Denmark's colonial role as a positive and formative influence. This approach aligns with Billig's argument that national identity is often sustained through the normalisation of selective historical narratives.

This dynamic is also evident in the *Serampore* room, which emphasises Denmark's so-called 'contributions' to colonised territories while ignoring the exploitative nature of these relationships. The room highlights Denmark's involvement in the development of

Serampore's educational and religious institutions. Such a presentation overlooks the fundamental structures of colonial exploitation that enabled these interventions. In this way, it emphasises Denmark's role in shaping the cultural and intellectual landscape of Serampore, reflecting a selective interpretation of history, one that privileges narratives of Danish influence over those of local agency or resistance.

### **9.2.3. The Impact of Decolonisation Movements**

The third aim investigated whether and how decolonisation movements have influenced the case study museums' permanent displays. The findings show that these efforts have had a visible, though uneven, impact.

NMD's *Voices from the Colonies* exhibition integrates decolonial practices by amplifying marginalised voices and critiquing colonial power structures, but financial constraints and tight timelines appear to have constrained its potential. The integration of the personal testimonies of both the coloniser and the colonised into the narrative through historical and contemporary examples made it possible to widen mainstream methods of knowledge production. This is maintained not only through testimonies but also through the integration of works produced by source community artists. Such an approach is beneficial in applying epistemological reconfiguration, as Mignolo mentions (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018; Mignolo, 2021). However, in this context, the fact that the authority remained under the control of the museum was a limiting factor.

On the other hand, the exhibition's aesthetic selections highlight a conflict between innovation and tradition. Engaging elements like the use of indigenous daily life objects outside display cases, interactive features in certain rooms, and sound effects encourage dynamic interaction. Nonetheless, in certain instances, the design approach still retains elements of early museum practices, such as the dense arrangement of objects in some displays. Moreover, this case study underscores a fundamental challenge in decolonial museology: how to balance narratives of critique with the material and symbolic constraints of historical spaces. While the museum's attempts to address these conflicts through lighting and spatial design demonstrate a growing self-awareness, they ultimately reveal the limitations of aesthetic interventions in achieving

true decoloniality. Innovative redesigns can subvert prevailing aesthetics and promote critical engagement, as exemplified by the AfricaMuseum in Tervuren. Such modifications, however, frequently need significant structural adjustments, which are not always possible in historically protected areas. Interviewee Mette Boritz mentioned that talks are in progress about rebuilding the museum entirely, implying that such significant alterations will be part of this project.

Overall, this exhibition illustrates the challenges and possibilities of incorporating decolonisation. It reveals that while some changes in epistemological reconfiguration are possible, truly achieving a decolonial aesthetic necessitates a more profound examination of the approaches and space. However, the exhibition's launch, which occurred within a year after the controversies surrounding the centennial of the sale of the US Virgin Islands, limited the effectiveness of the preparatory process. Consequently, the implementation of decolonial approaches remained somewhat superficial. This circumstance highlights the continued necessity of reflexivity as museums deal with the lingering effects of colonialism that are present in their holdings, environments, and practices.

Similarly, MCH's *Control – Attempting to Tame the World* exhibition seeks to adopt a decolonial approach by integrating the voices of those Othered within the exhibition, focusing particularly on the Sámi community. As outlined in Chapter 6, this approach enhances the understanding of the primary roles of the various objects in the museum's collection, reflecting Mignolo and Tlostanova's concept of border thinking (2006) by incorporating perspectives that challenge dominant knowledge production. The emphasis on the Sámi underscores the significance of their voices and reflects Norway's commitment to Sámi advocacy. However, while the opinions of the Sámi community were considered, they were not directly involved as active participants in the decision-making process. Additionally, this selective engagement marginalises other colonised communities, raising questions about the inclusivity of the museum's capacity to implement decolonial approaches.

This disparity extends to the exhibition's aesthetic approach. By employing a similar aesthetic approach to the white cube, the exhibition attempts to abstract space and

focus attention on displayed objects through white display cases, muted lighting, and controlled spatial arrangements. While intended to convey neutrality and universality (O'Doherty, 1986), such an approach risks obscuring cultural contexts, and perpetuating colonial legacies associated with modernity, and strengthening Western hierarchical standards (Filipovic, 2014; Muhammad, 2015). In particular, the juxtaposition of art-focused displays elevating Sámi artefacts with ethnographic presentations of other objects creates inconsistencies that prioritise certain narratives over others. These hierarchies reflect broader sociopolitical dynamics, complicating the exhibition's alignment with decolonial aims.

Ultimately, the exhibition reveals the challenges of reconciling decolonial goals with the entrenched constraints of institutional and architectural frameworks. While *Control* demonstrates a significant effort to foreground Sámi perspectives, its selective focus and aesthetic choices underscore the enduring entanglements of modernity and coloniality, limiting its ability to fully embrace a decolonial praxis.

Lastly, Sweden's MWC manages to implement the decolonial narrative relatively more effectively than the other two. This is due to several factors: the flexible design of the exhibition's architecture encourages visitors to interpret the exhibition through the lens of their own backgrounds and experiences. Additionally, as seen in the *Democracy* section, the space allows visitors to become active participants in meaning-making by engaging with the artworks.

This visitor-centred approach is further strengthened by the varied use of aesthetic preferences across different exhibition themes. In the *Water* section, for example, the thoughtful combination of vibrant colours and juxtaposing objects allows visitors to connect unfamiliar artefacts with more recognisable ones, subtly challenging colonial assumptions of 'Otherness.' Likewise, the *Dikenga* section immerses visitors in an environment shaped by non-Western cosmological concepts, offering a sensory experience that reimagines traditional norms. These efforts demonstrate a critical engagement with decolonial aesthetics, providing sensory liberation from colonial norms, as discussed by Mignolo and Vázquez (2013).

However, the museum's focus on collective curation and intercultural dialogue raises questions about the depth of community involvement in the decision-making process. As the curator, Michael Barrett, indicated, the exhibition did not manage to utilise the source community's involvement effectively, especially in the *Dikenga* section. Therefore, the MWC's efforts are still limited, even as it effectively uses its architectural flexibility and aesthetic preferences to subvert colonial hierarchies and promote intercultural discourse. To a certain degree, the inclusion of historically excluded voices is evident, but the emphasis on curatorial expertise suggests that full epistemic reconstitution remains incomplete. This underscores the inherent difficulties in decolonising museum practices, highlighting the need for deeper systemic changes to address these limitations effectively.

As evidenced by the observations, the three museums have made attempts to acknowledge their respective countries' colonial histories and integrate Indigenous perspectives as part of an epistemological reconfiguration. According to Mignolo, epistemological reconfiguration entails challenging and deconstructing colonial systems of knowledge while privileging Indigenous and subaltern epistemologies (2018, 2021). However, these communities were not given opportunities to participate actively as decision-makers, which limits the depth and authenticity of this reconfiguration. The absence of such collaboration with Indigenous voices suggests that the process remains incomplete and requires further efforts to align with Mignolo's vision of decoloniality.

From the decolonial aesthetic perspective, the case study museums' approaches vary as well. Decolonial aesthetic, as indicated in Chapter 8, critically examines the domination of Western aesthetic principles on the way we discuss and evaluate art and its value, beauty, and representation and 'seeks to recognize and open options for liberating the senses' (Transnational Decolonial Institute, 2011). In this regard, the historicity of the NMD and MCH buildings has presented significant barriers to its full realisation. NMD has made various attempts to tackle this, though these efforts are overshadowed by its highly visible exceptionalist narrative. Meanwhile, MCH demonstrates an embedded colonial perspective by adopting an approach that

resembles a contentious form of representation. MWC, in contrast, has effectively navigated this challenge partially because of its relatively recent and more flexible building. This highlights the significance of the physical spaces in shaping the capacity of museums to engage with decolonial aesthetic practices.

Reflecting on these findings, while decoloniality's epistemological reconfiguration and aesthetic remain central, the challenges encountered in practice suggest that achieving decoloniality requires more nuanced, comprehensive and context-sensitive strategies. To begin, it is crucial for museums to grasp what decolonisation means. Such a grasp not only requires postcolonial thinkers' perspectives but, more importantly, as indicated in this thesis, it necessitates an understanding of the Latin American thinkers' perspective, namely decoloniality. Decolonial initiatives that lack a complete understanding of the concept can weaken its true meaning, as noted by Tuck and Yang (2012). As they argue, this reduction simplifies the concept to interpretations like social justice and human rights, which ultimately detaches it from its core purposes. Such understanding can give rise to misconceptions like the idea that simply consulting with Indigenous communities qualifies as a decolonial approach. Although it is important and decolonial, museums must move beyond consultation to actively relinquish their own authority, embracing Indigenous perspectives as fundamental to the reconfiguration of knowledge. Such collaboration with Indigenous groups can also provide an opportunity for museums to rethink their physical spaces to disrupt colonial aesthetics as well. This is the key aspect because knowledge obtained only through consultation loses its authenticity and its decolonially reconfigurative power when it is rendered by individuals who are part of Western modernity. As such, so-called decolonial strategies risk reinforcing the very hierarchies they aim to dismantle. This emphasises both the necessity and the difficulty of implementing the concept in a practical context.

While Mignolo's notion of decoloniality as a 'conceptual apparatus of knowing and understanding and a visionary utopia of sustainable economies (not sustainable development)' (2021, p. 6) offers an inspiring framework, the transference of such ideas from philosophy and literature into museology possesses challenges. Museums, as physical and cultural institutions, operate within complex systems of public

accountability, funding constraints, and tangible materiality. For instance, efforts to foreground Indigenous perspectives may face resistance from stakeholders who are accustomed to traditional narratives or from audiences expecting a more familiar museum experience. This reveals the tension between the theoretical ideal of decoloniality and the operational realities of museums. Another example would be small-scale, local museums and their approaches. For example, initiatives like the Sámi-led museums in the northern part of Sweden, the Ájtte Museum or The Sámi Museum in Karasjok, Norway, align with Mignolo's emphasis on centring Indigenous knowledge systems. However, such implementations are often limited to smaller, regionally focused institutions, while national museums struggle to replicate these efforts at scale due to bureaucracy and their role as representatives of state identity. These examples suggest that while epistemic reconstitution is theoretically valuable, its practical application often demands a more incremental, context-specific approach – such as *vietjere* example as shown in MCH – than Mignolo's abstract framework allows. In this regard, such transformative reconstitution remains, for now, a 'visionary utopia' for the case study museums of this research, though the findings reveal promising signs of gradual progress.

### **9.3. Avenues for Further Research**

While this study provides valuable insights into the role of Scandinavian museums in acknowledging and representing colonial histories, there are several areas that require further exploration. These potential avenues can enrich our understanding of how decolonisation processes intersect with cultural institutions and contribute to the broader discourse on decolonial, postcolonial, and museum studies.

One promising area for future research is an analysis of each country through its various museums by itself rather than comparing them against one another. As noted in the limitations of this study, examining a single case study from each country poses challenges in reaching generalisable conclusions. A more detailed, multi-institutional study within each country could overcome this limitation, offering a more comprehensive view of how different museums within the same country approach colonial histories and

decolonial practices. Such an approach would also allow for an exploration of regional and institutional variations, shedding light on how local perspectives, funding structures, and community relationships shape curatorial strategies. Additionally, this could help identify specific national trends or shared obstacles that might not be visible through cross-national comparisons. This would enable more targeted recommendations for fostering decoloniality across institutions within a single country.

This research primarily focused on exhibition displays and interviews with museum staff, leaving the visitor's perspective relatively unexplored. Future studies could investigate how visitors engage with and interpret these displays, both at the individual country level and from a broader Scandinavian perspective. Understanding the extent to which visitors absorb and respond to these narratives is crucial for assessing whether these countries have effectively confronted their colonial histories, challenged exceptionalist thinking, and embraced decolonial efforts. Surveys, interviews, and observational studies could provide valuable insights into the public's reception of these museum narratives.

Lastly, while this study concentrated on permanent displays, there is significant scope for research into how decolonisation is addressed in other aspects of museum operations. This includes temporary exhibitions, educational programs, community outreach initiatives, and even the internal policies and practices of museums. Investigating these areas would allow for a more holistic understanding of how deeply colonial principles are embedded within the entire institutional framework of museums. Moreover, such research could reveal whether these institutions' decolonial efforts extend beyond their public-facing displays to influence broader organisational practices and strategies.

#### **9.4. Concluding Remarks**

This thesis demonstrates that the pursuit of decoloniality in Scandinavian museums is characterised by considerable tension. On one hand, there is a growing recognition of the need to confront colonial legacies and engage with diverse voices. On the other, the persistence of exceptionalist narratives and structural inequalities in relation to epistemological hierarchies undermine these efforts. To address these obstacles, not

only Scandinavian museums but also other European institutions must implement more comprehensive and proactive methods. Such approaches should involve collaborating closely with marginalised communities, providing authority to indigenous voices in decision-making processes, and committing to confronting both historical and current colonial practices. As Mignolo argues (2018, 2021), decoloniality demands not only a critique of colonial systems but also the establishment of alternative frameworks that prioritise local, indigenous, and subaltern epistemologies. Therefore, museums must engage in both epistemic and aesthetic reconstitutions, as exemplified by the transformation of the Sámi *vičjere* narrative in MCH. By increasing the number of these examples, Scandinavian museums can play a pivotal role in fostering more inclusive, equitable, and decolonial representations of their history.

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# APPENDIX

## APPENDIX A – DISPLAY ANALYSIS GUIDE

The 'Critical Museum Visitor' framework, from Lindauer, M. (2006) 'The Critical Museum Visitor', in *New Museum Theory and Practice*, pp. 201–225. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470776230.ch8>.

### I. Before Entering/Entering

- **Prior to entry:** what does the museum say about who belongs inside?
- What messages does it give the visitor who stands on the sidewalk outside thinking about coming in?
  
- **Entry:** What kind of space are you entering?
- How is the visitor made to feel?
- Will all visitors feel equally welcome?
- Will all visitors be able to use the museum in the same way?
- Is the expectation that the visitor will know what to do in this space?
- Is there an admission fee?
- How much?
- To what extent is your next step inside the museum obvious?
- What is the presence of security?
- What seems to be going on in the entryway?

### II. The Museum Experience

- **Passages through the museum:** What is the overall narrative structure to the museum?
- Is this structure quite evident to you or does it only with repeated visits or as you spend time in it?
- What is the basic form of organization of the museum's collections (e.g. how is its permanent collection organized)?
- Will the casual visitor notice it, or only the museum critic?
- Is your path through the museum relatively predetermined or do you make your own way?
- In larger museums, are there any messages given (or received) about which galleries are more important, which less?

- **Basic museum design:** Give some thought to basic design decisions about the museum's interior architecture and how collections work with that architecture. Lighting. Spaces for seating, conversation, etc., inside galleries.
- **Museum collections:** What percentage of the museum space is destined to the museum's permanent collection?
  - Are the visiting/changing exhibits located in a way to encourage a visit to the entire museum or just to that exhibit?
  - Does the casual visitor have any idea that what is being shown is only a portion of the total collection?
  - Would that change one's perspective on the museum visit? If so, how?
- **The overall museum space:** What is the museum space used for besides the display of its collection? Shops? Food? Entertainment? Public spaces? Where are shops located? Where are restaurants or cafes/cafeterias located?
  - Are the food areas set up to encourage school or group visits?
  - What do the portions of the museum that are NOT designed for the display of collections tell you about who the museum expects as visitors?
  - Are artifacts (**see the end of the sheet for definition of "artifacts"**) limited to formal gallery space or are they found other places (passageways, halls, bathrooms, etc.)?
  - Does this change how you view the artifact? What provisions are made for different types of groups (schools groups, elderly, disabled)?
  - Can you easily find your way to these spaces? Will the visitors feel comfortable asking for information?
- **Museum aids and technology:** What kind of aids does the museum provide to help you understand its collection: narratives on the entry to the museum or galleries? Listening guides (audio sticks, digital recorders, podcasts, etc.)? Technology (iPads, interactive)? Docents? Guide books (free/pay/how much)? Other devices (e.g. heavy plastic sheets of information, maps, large-type handouts, etc.).
  - If you use one of the guides (oral, visual, or written), what do you learn about who put the guide together? How is the authority of the museum transferred via the guide to the visitor?
  - Take some time to look around and observe the people who are using various devices designed to increase their understanding or interactions with the collection. Are there any forms of aid that you find particularly useful?
  - To what extent is technology used to help the visitor experience and to what extent does it seem to get in the way?

### III. The Gallery or Specific Exhibition

- **The gallery and exhibition morphology:** What is the narrative structure of any particular gallery/exhibition (as opposed to the overall museum)?

- Is there an obvious way to move through the gallery? If so, what is its basic organizing principle?
- Can you approach the gallery from a different perspective, i.e., take a different path?
- What does the flow of the museum visitors do to someone who wants to move in a different direction? Are the visitors in that gallery basically observing the sense of direction in the gallery?
- Does the gallery provide its own entryway information (text/visual)? To what extent does that information pre-determine how you will “read” that gallery?
- Think about what Pearce calls depth, rings, and entropy vis-à-vis exhibition morphology.
- **Galleries and the public:** How is the gallery visitor expected to interact with the exhibits? Visually? Hands-on? Via sound? Via the written word? In some other way?
- Which exhibits are more likely to encourage hands-on participation? Which least likely?
- **The exhibit space:** Think about some individual exhibit cases and how they are set up. What are the organizing principles?
  - What are the *assumptions* the exhibit organizer is making about the people who will be viewing the exhibit? Labels: placement; content; information provided.
  - What do the labels assume about the museum visitor? Too much, too little text?
  - Can a case be understood in isolation or do you need to see its surrounding cases?
  - What choices do the curators make by placing items in context/juxtaposition/proximity?
  - Can you find any particular narrative within the case itself?
  - Is the case crowded or spare? If crowded, does it appear that way because of poor museum technique or because the curators are saying something about the artifacts exhibited?
  - To what extent does the number of items in a case lead you to value or ignore the items inside?
  - To what extent does the exhibit tell you that it is about the “canon”?
  - 
  - **The artifact:** Individual label or case label? Information provided? Is the artifact unique? “Authentic”? Real? Reproducible? A replica?
  - Why is the artifact there? Aesthetic reasons? Educational reasons? Memory reasons? Emotive reasons?
  - To what extent does its placement in the case answer these questions for you? How is the artifact sited, lighted, hung?

#### IV. The Visitor Experience

- **Education and the museum:** Is the educational purpose of the gallery, case, or museum evident to you?

- What does it say about how people learn?
- What are the basic educational techniques used to insure that learning will occur?
- **The visitors:** What are the museum visitors doing?
- Get a sense of the demographics of the visiting population – who is there? Are people most often alone or in groups? Age, gender, race; can you tell anything about class?
- Are most visitors approaching the exhibits and/or the museum in the same way?
- Are they talking (about what?)?
- Do they adopt the “proper” museum-gaze in front of an artifact?
- Are there people there who seem to be using the museum in a different way? What are they doing?
- What are young children doing?
- Can you tell anything at all from observing the visitors about their purposes in coming to the museum?
- Do the visitors speak to the guards? The docents?
- Does the museum make any effort to segregate the visitors by age?
- What are the security guards doing? Who are they looking at?
- **Feedback:** What, if any, are the opportunities by which visitors can provide feedback to the museum: comment cards, computers, postcards, etc. Are these located: at the exit to the museum? In every gallery? In some galleries? By exhibits?
- Do you have any feeling that the museum directors/curators actually care what the visitor thinks about the exhibits? Is there any indication at all by which you can see that visitor input has had an impact on the museum?

#### V. After the Visit

- **Outside again:** What is your *immediate* feeling on leaving the museum?
- **Response & reflection:**  
If you could sit down with the museum director or the curator of a specific exhibit, (a) what would you ask her/him? (b) what would you recommend should be changed? (c) what do you think worked the best explain)?
- **What did you use this museum for?** Did you try to get a sense of the overall museum?
- Did you only visit a few exhibitions or artifacts?
- What was your purpose in coming? How do you feel the museum is using its space?
- Who do you think is the intended audience of this museum?
- Do you think the museum should be attracting different audiences?
- **What is being performed in this museum** (in Bennett’s sense of the term)? What are the basic narrative lines that the museum is adopting?
- How is time spatialized in this museum?

- How is space temporalized?
- How are cultural differences made visible?
- To what extent are gender differences suggested by the museum display?
  
- **Final thoughts:** What was the overall *purpose* of the *museum* you just visited?
- What does the museum director want you to come away with?
- Who (*really*) is this museum for? Will you return? Who would you bring with you? Do you have any sense of the outreach activities of this museum? Do you know of any other way to get information about this museum?

## **APPENDIX B – DISPLAY ANALYSIS GUIDE**

The author prepared this guide by considering Margaret Lindauer, Stephanie Moser, Rhiannon Mason, and Christopher Whitehead's display analysis guides:

Lindauer, M. 'The Critical Museum Visitor,' in Marstine, J. ed., *New Museum Theory and Practice: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 203-225.

Mason, R. (2008) *Museum Exhibition Analysis Model & Evaluation Tool (Unpublished)*

Moser, S. (2010) the Devil is in the Detail: Museum Displays and the Creation of Knowledge, *Museum Anthropology*, 33, 1, pp. 22-32.

Whitehead, C. (2002) *Art Display Analysis Model*.

### **Prior to entry:**

- What does the museum say about who belongs inside?

### **Entry:**

- What kind of space are you entering?
- How is the visitor made to feel? Will all visitors feel equally welcome?

### **Architecture and Layout:**

- How does the architecture relate culturally and historically to the display?
- Does the style of the building emphasise a cultural contrast between the “host” or custodian of the collection and the objects on display?
- Does the architecture assign an integrity or authority to the display, or indeed undermine it?
- Is your path through the museum relatively predetermined or do you make your own way? Is the exhibition well-paced?
- Is the space inviting and does it encourage exploration?
- Is there a good ergonomic fit: can exhibition elements be read, viewed, and used with ease by visitors with different needs?
- What type of lighting arrangement was provided for the collection? Is there any particular display that singled out by lighting?
- Are there sufficient places to rest?

- Are there any obvious ‘cold spots’ in the exhibition space?

### **Interpretation and design:**

- How is the material organised (Chronological, Geographical, Thematical, Typological, Formal) in which approach? (Decorative, Aesthetical, Didactical, Emotive)
- Are themes clearly indicated?
- Are the objects aligned or associated with each other via a particular formation (e.g., are they in rows or clusters)?
- What types of media does the exhibition use? (objects, labels, text panels, leaflets, photographs, voice-over, oral history, digital media)
- What are the interactives in the displays? Do the interactives enhance the interpretation and exhibition overall?
- Have supplementary leaflets, floor plans and visitor guides been used and, if so, how do they advance the message of the exhibition?

### **Text and Messages**

- What are the main messages the exhibition intends to convey? How have you identified them?
- Are there any messages given (or received) about which galleries are more important, which less? How are they reinforced throughout the exhibition?
- What kind of language does it employ? (specialist, generalist, formal, colloquial etc.)
- Whose point of view (voice) comes across mostly strongly in the exhibition? (curators, artists, community representatives etc.)
- What is the positionality of the exhibition taken as a whole?
- Is the representation of colonised territories separated from the representation of ‘mainstream society’ or integrated within it?
- Do the singled-out objects (by lighting or by display method) disrupt the narrative or strengthen it?
- If the exhibition contains material of a sensitive or controversial nature, how is this handled?
- Is the text informative and descriptive or does it offer interpretations and opinions?
- How comprehensible is the interpretation? (Badly designed or worded / Malfunctioning / Over-complex language (reading age) / Accessible / Over-specialised language)
- What kind of titles and subtitles are used – descriptive, catchy, or questioning?

- Does the museum provide any hints on why these objects are selected to represent the narrative?
- Can you identify any unintended messages?

### **Visitor Perspective**

- What is the relationship of the audience to the material and to the discourse? Who are the potential audiences for this exhibition?
- Who does it exclude?
- Does this exhibition hold your attention throughout? If not, why?
- How would you describe this exhibition? (Provocative, stimulating, exciting, controversial, informative, fascinating, bland, dull, overwhelming, too difficult)

### **Decolonisation**

- What is the location of the exhibition within the museum? Is it highly visible or in the cold spot?
- What are the key themes in relation to colonial history of the country?
- What approaches have been used to diversify the display? How have you identified them? What ideas do these methods provide to address museum's approach to colonial history and decolonisation?
- Is the interpretation polyvocal? Does it include multiple perspectives? To whom do they belong?
- Does the museum indicate the objects' provenance?

## **APPENDIX C – INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF DENMARK**

### **Exhibition Specific Questions**

1. My research focus is on Voices from the Colonies Exhibition. The opening process of the exhibition is interesting. It was the centennial of the US purchase of the Virgin Islands. Hence, Danish colonialism is the focus. At the 2017 Annual RCMC conference, former curator of the NMD, Louise Sebro indicated that initial plan of the museum was to open an exhibition that only focused on the West Indies.
  - A) Can you tell me what happened at that time? Would you mind explaining the process of changing the focus in more detail? What were the most challenging aspects of developing this exhibition?
  - B) How did the museum decide to expand its exhibition to include every territory instead of focusing solely on the West Indies?
  - C) Were there any plans you had but couldn't manage to fulfil? If so, what is it?
  
2. Throughout the exhibition, 37 different individuals' stories are presented, and the narrative is shaped according to those.
  - A) How were these stories selected?
  - B) What are the museum's strategies for engaging Indigenous communities and incorporating their perspectives into its exhibits and programming?
  - C) Were there any particular themes? -- Have you communicated with the communities from these regions during this process?
  
3. Clay figures made by Marcelline Hounhouenoue and Agatha Yaovi can be found in rooms 131 and 128. How did the museum establish communication with these artists? Who are they? What makes them special? What is the exhibition trying to convey with these figures?
4. There is a ledger in room 131, in the colonial produce display. Could you tell me more about that object?
5. The exhibition focuses on each colonial region of the Kingdom of Denmark-Norway. How can you explain the very limited representation of Iceland and the Faroe Islands? This is interesting, especially when considering the ongoing union of the

- Faroe Islands. Can you talk about the choices involved in focusing less on Iceland and the Faroe Islands? To what extent was an interaction/communication taken with these regions (Iceland and the Faroe Islands)?
6. There is no object presentation in the Serampore room, instead, there is a mock-up street design. The stories given on the screens refer to the importance and memory of the buildings built in the Danish period for the societies living today. On the one hand, this can be interpreted as Denmark doing good things for the region. On the other hand, there is also academic research on the fact that there was a small amount of slave trade in this region. and Depending on the visitor's route, this room might be the first room to visit. What were the aims and reasonings of this kind of representation?
  7. Can you provide information about the Danish flag in the room before Serampore? Can you provide some insight into the decision-making process behind adding the flag, given its strong symbolic significance? Why did the museum feel the need to put it there?
  8. The exhibition employed various seating options, which was addressed in an article written by the curators (NATIONALMUSEETS Arbejdsmark 2018). Is there a significance to the fact that this kind of seating? What was the aim? For instance, the use of straw-made seating. Because this might conjure a certain 'primitivist' aesthetic which was intentionally or unintentionally obtained or boosted by the museum.
  9. To what extent do you think that the exhibition effectively represents Danish colonialism in the context of Western colonialism?
  10. Does NMD have particular plans and aspirations in relation to decolonisation for future?

### **General Questions**

11. Can you tell me how the various objects in the exhibition came to be in the museum? How important is it to you/the museum to be transparent about the museum's colonial history?

12. Those who write about decolonisation practices in museums suggest that it is really important to think about diversity and staffing. Can you tell me about your perspective on this and what your organisation's position is on this point? Have you prepared a policy or guidelines in this area?
13. In terms of thinking about decolonisation, where does the museum – as an institution - look to help it think through these issues? Have there been made any academic symposia, conferences, or publications that centre around decolonial practices in the museum?
14. Does your organisation offer any professional development training for staff in the area of decolonisation or anti-racism? Does the staff have the opportunity to engage in critical dialogues and reflections?
15. Has the museum undertaken any repatriation initiatives to return cultural objects, artefacts, or human remains to their countries of origin or Indigenous communities? How are these processes navigated, and what protocols are followed to ensure ethical repatriation?

## **APPENDIX D – INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR THE MUSEUM OF CULTURAL HISTORY**

1. When did the Control exhibition open? Can you tell me a bit about your approach to planning the exhibition and its layout? Was the exhibition accessed through three entrances when it was first opened or only through Collapse?
2. How did the museum communicate with community members about the objects in the exhibit? Did they contribute to the exhibit's preparation? If so, could you provide some information about the practices they were part of? What role did the Sámi community play in curatorial decision-making?
3. A question about the label in the Order section: The term Lapland, also mentioned in the text, has a problematic history as it originates from the Swedish word Lapp, which is a derogatory manner to describe members of the Sámi community. As a result, it is now preferred to use the term Sápmi to refer to their lands. Obviously, given that the exhibition is dealing with the colonial past in some areas, this involves presenting histories and ideas that we may not agree with now and which visitors might find challenging/distasteful. How did you deal with this when it came to interpreting some of the objects on display?
4. The exhibition provides an informative presentation that examines both the past and potential future. You spend a lot of time thinking about past and potential futures in relation to ideas of control and the Anthropocene. Could you tell me a bit more about why you decided to focus on the specific themes that you did? (whether you considered doing something around green colonialism)
5. To what extent do you think that the exhibition effectively represents Norway's colonial interactions? What could have been done differently?
6. Can you tell me how the ethnographic collection objects in the exhibition came to be in the museum? How important is it to you/the museum to be transparent about these objects' stories?
7. How do you think the Museum of Cultural History fits into the ongoing debate about what to do with collections that were obtained through colonialism and are now being exhibited to the public?
8. In terms of decolonisation, where does the museum – as an institution - look to help it think through these issues? Can you tell me about your perspective on this and what your organisation's position is on this point? Have you prepared a policy or

guidelines in this area? Have there been made any academic symposia, conferences, or publications that centre around decolonial practices in the museum? Or Does MCH have particular plans and aspirations in relation to decolonisation for future?

9. One last thing that I'm curious about the funding of the museum. Where the museum get the majority of their funding from? Where the budget for the Control exhibition also came from?

## **APPENDIX E – INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR THE MUSEUM OF WORLD CULTURE**

1. How do you think the Museum of World Culture fits into the ongoing debate about what to do with collections that were obtained through colonialism and are now being exhibited to the public?
2. There are three sub-sections of the exhibition related to colonialism: Pachakuti, Democracy, and Dikenga. What factors were considered in selecting them and what are their intended relationships?
3. The museum has a unique exhibition style that is neither permanent nor temporary. It is somewhere in between. However, the "Crossroads" was opened in 2016, which has a somewhat permanent character in terms of time frame. Do you consider the museum still obtains this in-between exhibition style?
4. Could you provide further explanation on how the museum manages to achieve polyvocality in knowledge production?
5. The museum has had several changes in its director over the years. Has this affected the museum's policies? For instance, is the semi-permanent exhibition approach still being used? If it is, then wouldn't exhibitions like the Crossroads or the Together demonstrate the change in this approach? Additionally, why does the museum experience a constant change of directors? Is there any underlying issue?
6. Some of the objects in the exhibition are narrated through a QR code application. Is there a particular reason for this? Do you think the level of interactivity is at the desired level? I'm specifically asking about Anders Sunna's work, which is a section that clearly highlights Sweden's colonial relations. However, the narration is only available through 1 QR code, and 2 only in Swedish. As a result, it gives the impression that the critical approach expected to be seen is not consciously or unconsciously realised.
7. Based on the information provided on the website and the label of the artwork, it appears that there is a link between the Matrix artwork and the Crossroads exhibition. Can you detail this connection between The Matrix and Crossroads for me?
8. Do you believe that this connection can be effectively presented? Do you think visitors are able to perceive this clearly? What type of communication, connection, or interaction is being referred to here?



## **APPENDIX F – INFORMATION SHEET**

### **Title of Study: Decolonisation in Scandinavian Museums**

#### **Invitation and Brief Summary**

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not you wish to take part it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please read this information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. If you do decide to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form. However, you are free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason and without any penalty or loss of benefits.

#### **What is the purpose of the research?**

The research examines how the Scandinavian colonial past has been represented in museums through the decolonial perspective.

#### **What does taking part involve?**

It is requested that you participate in a 1-1.5-hour semi-structured interview. It will be a one-time interview, but if appropriate and necessary, I would like to be contacted by e-mail.

#### **What information will be collected and who will have access to the information collected?**

A participant's affiliation with the institution, name, position, the general approach of the museum, and in particular the Voices from the Colonies exhibition will be discussed. Participants will receive the questions before the interview. If not desired, question(s) may not be answered. The data collected will be accessible to myself, my supervisors (Prof. Rhiannon Mason, Prof. Chris Whitehead, Dr Katie Markham). The data collected will be stored both online via an Office account contracted by the University and offline on an external hard drive. Anonymity can be provided if desired.

We will use your name and contact details to contact you about the research study. Individuals at Newcastle University may look at your research data to check the accuracy of the research study. The only individuals/supervisors from Newcastle

University (Prof. Rhiannon Mason, Prof. Chris Whitehead, Dr Katie Markham) who will have access to information that identifies you will be individuals who need to contact you to audit the data collection process.

**Why have I been invited to take part?**

Participants were selected based on their affiliation with the case study venues.

**What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

It is usually not possible to promise any direct benefits of taking part. The most likely benefits may be experienced by others, in the future, as a consequence of discovery through research.

**What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

The disadvantages are not anticipated.

**(For research involving high risk) What procedures are in place if injury were to occur?**

The research is low risk and this is approved by the Newcastle University committee on 30/03/2021.

**(If applicable) Who is funding this research?**

The Republic of Türkiye Ministry of National Education

**Has this study received ethical approval?**

This study has received ethical approval from Newcastle University Committee on 30/03/2021.

**Who should I contact for further information relating to the research?**

Research Study: Muhammed Topdas, [m.topdas2@newcastle.ac.uk](mailto:m.topdas2@newcastle.ac.uk), 00 44 775 395 8595

**Who should I contact in order to file a complaint?**

Prof. Rhiannon Mason, Email: [rhiannon.mason@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:rhiannon.mason@ncl.ac.uk), Telephone: 00 44 191 208 5579

If you wish to raise a complaint on how your personal data is handled, you can contact the Data Protection Officer who will investigate the matter: DPO Name, Contact Details

If you are not satisfied with their response you can complain to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO): <https://ico.org.uk/>

## APPENDIX G – CONSENT FORM

### Title of Study: Decolonisation in Scandinavian Museum

Thank you for your interest in taking part in this research. Please complete this form after you have read the Information Sheet and/or listened to an explanation about the research study. You will be given a copy of this Consent Form.

Please initial box to confirm consent	
1.	I confirm that I have read the information sheet dated [07/06/2023] (version 1)) for the above study, I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and I have had any questions answered satisfactorily.
2.	I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason. I understand that if I decide to withdraw, any data that I have provided up to that point will be omitted.
3.	I consent to the processing of my personal information, name, occupancy, and its relation to case study institution, for the purposes of this research study, as described in the information sheet dated 07/06/2023] (version 1).
4.	I consent to my pseudonymised research data being stored and used by others for future research.
5.	I understand that my research data may be published as a report.
6.	(If appropriate) I understand that my research data may be looked at by supervisors (Prof. Rhiannon Mason, Prof. Chris Whitehead, Dr. Katie Markham) from Newcastle University, where it is relevant to my taking part in this research.

