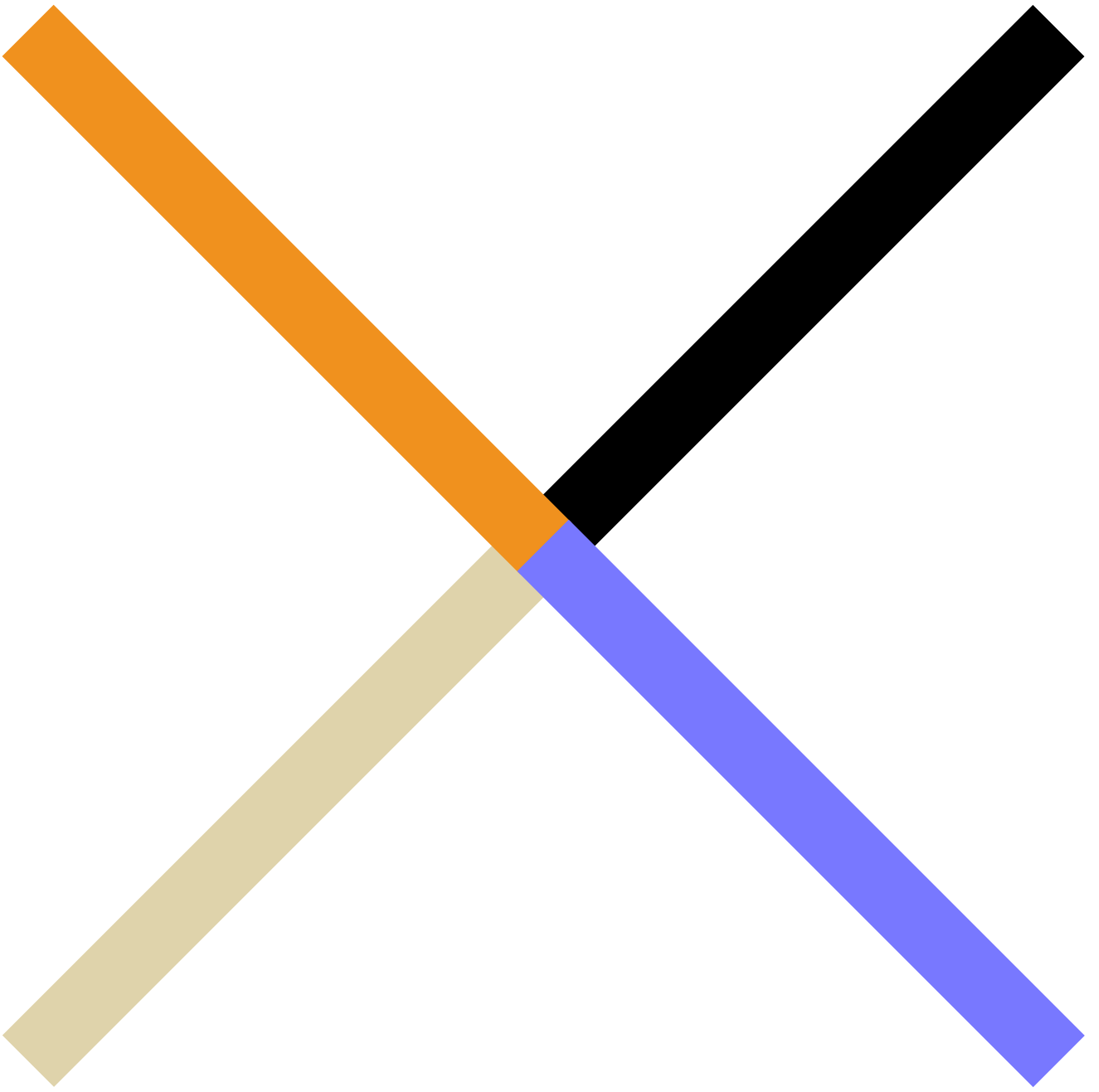
The Polyphonic Object



Amsterdam Museum Journal

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Marian Markelo aka Okomfo Nana Efua

Priestess/Educator

Marian Markelo is a Winti priest and educator committed to preserving Afro-Surinamese heritage. She actively promotes heritage through education, art, and museum collaborations, fostering awareness of historical and spiritual traditions.

Boris van Berkum

Visual Artist

Boris van Berkum is a contemporary visual Neo-artist who fuses styles and forms from various cultures and religions in his art. Through working with ceramics, bronze, and innovative materials, he combines traditional and modern techniques.

Annemarie de Wildt

Historian/Curator

Annemarie de Wildt, historian and Amsterdam Museum curator, has created 50+ exhibitions on topics like sex work and colonialism. She innovates museum collections and serves as vice chair of ICOM City Museums.

Markus Balkenhol

Anthropologist

Markus Balkenhol is a senior researcher at the Meertens Institute. He is a social anthropologist working on colonial heritage and memory in the Netherlands. His recent publications include *The Secular Sacred* and *Tracing Slavery*.

Martje Onikoyi

Heritage Professional

Martje Onikoyi, Reinwardt Academy graduate and Art History (pre-)master's student, explores museums' transformative roles, focusing on spiritual items and their communication to diverse audiences as a young heritage professional.

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The Kabra mask

Amsterdam Museum Journal

In ‘The Polyphonic Object’ five analyses by scholars and artists from different perspectives and (academic) fields show the layers of complexity a single object can hold. Through their (historical, museum studies, anthropological, heritage studies, and artist-perspective) reconstructions, they uncover the different stories behind the Kabra ancestor mask created by Marian Markelo, or Okomfo Nana Efua, in collaboration with Boris van Berkum. As a museum object that still regularly functions in ritual ceremonies, the Kabra ancestor mask raises questions regarding the use and purpose of museum objects.

Issue #3 Winter 2024

Boris van Berkum and Marian Markelo
Kabra ancestor mask, 2013
Amsterdam Museum

The Kabra ancestor mask was created in 2013, as an initiative of Marian Markelo, who was keen to bring images back into Winti culture in this way. That same year, a dancer (Vanessa Felter) wearing the mask accompanied Marian Markelo for the first time at her libation at the annual Keti Koti commemoration in the Oosterpark. The Amsterdam Museum purchased the mask for its collection, but it is also still used at Winti rituals, such as Keti Koti - the annual commemoration of the abolition of slavery.

Marian Markelo aka Okomfo Nana Efua (Winti priestess)

In December 1992, I attended the PANAFEST in Ghana, a pan-African festival of art and theatre. The theme was the re-emergence of African civilizations. PANAFEST celebrates the heritage of the African Diaspora, promotes unity, understanding and pride at the global level. During this visit, I experienced a great lack of African-oriented spirituality and attention to the ancestors. I expressed this dissatisfaction to the then-director John Darkey, and was given the opportunity to organize an ancestors' night during the following edition.

The late Marlene Ceder and I decided to symbolically bring the ancestors back to the continent. For this, we chose Ghana, because the infrastructure was familiar to us. I presented this decision to the ancestors in a question to the oracle. My consultation to the oracle resulted in the ancestors' request, or mission, to bring back the spiritual utensils, images and masks to the Winti. In turn, I asked the foremother who posed that request: 'how should I carry out that order?' She replied: 'The moment you meet the right person, I will give you

Figure 1: *Libation for the ancestors by Marian Markelo during the National Commemoration of the Abolition of Slavery, with performer Vanessa Felter inside the Kabra mask*: 1 July 2013. Photograph by: James van der Ende.

the sign'. I resigned myself to the outcome, and realized that something would happen that would have an important connection to art, spirituality and history!

While supervising a Winti-feast of a family member fourteen years ago in Rotterdam, I met Boris van Berkum. Upon our meeting, I received a sign from my foremother, who told me: 'this is the human artist you should work with to bring the visual tradition into the Winti'. I subsequently commissioned Boris, to start developing Winti art. Boris was not familiar with Winti culture, and spent three years on the road with me to experience the practical experience of Winti and to do research in various places such as Surinam. We then entered into an ancestor-inspired collaboration to carry out the ancestors' mission. Together, we departed on a beautiful spiritual-, historical-, and art-technical journey. In the year 2013, at the 150th commemoration of the abolition of slavery in Surinam and the Dutch Caribbean, we were allowed to present the Kabra mask to the Netherlands (figure 1). In June 2013, we were given the opportunity to experience the first major public performance at the Afrika Museum in Berg en Dal. The audience was impressed by the presentation by the Amsterdam Southeast-based theatre company Untold, and the similarly South-east-based music formation Black Harmony.

The Kabra mask removes millions of

enslaved African people from anonymity. With this mask, these people were given a face; a revision of a part of history, that did not tell the story of the ancestors from their own perspective. As such, the ancestors were invisible in the stories of those in power. Those physical ancestors have now become ancestor spirits for their descendants, and are actively involved in their descendants' present lives. During the Kabra Neti – the traditional night of the ancestors in the Muiderkerk in Amsterdam, organised by the Stichting *Eer en Herstel* [translation: 'Honour and Restoration Foundation'] and the Afro-Caribbean Grassroots – the mask dances with the descendants. Similarly, during Keti Koti Junior, the dancing of the mask with youngsters forms an integral part of the celebration. If, due to circumstances, the situation occurs that the mask does not dance at the Kabra Neti, it is definitely missed! Moreover, the mask is an integral part of the ceremony during the annual commemoration of the abolition of slavery in Amsterdam's Oosterpark.

The Kabra mask has however also had moments, where doubts have been expressed about the functionality or necessity of using a mask as part of Winti culture, as some have argued that 'Winti knows no images'. In response to this, I would argue that the mask is part of rehabilitating Winti culture and religion from the damage it has suffered during four centuries of colonial oppression. The Kabra mask is the product of an ancestral collaboration in which art, spirituality and history have come together. Let this collaboration, that is based on respect for individuality and expertise, have an aura that contributes to the achievement of healing in this painful historical narrative.

Boris van Berkum (visual artist)

In July 2010, I met Winti priestess Marian Markelo during a Winti dance ritual on the Eiland van Brienenoord in Rotterdam, where I had a temporary summer studio. There, Marian asked me if I wanted to make art, such as masks and sculptures, for Winti rituals, Winti spirituality and Winti culture. This commission for a Winti art collection had been appointed to her by her ancestors 20 years before we met. Now, they pointed to me as the artist who would help her with it. I immediately said yes. Our meeting turned out to be the beginning of a fruitful collaboration between a black Winti priestess and a white artist, and an alliance between art and spirituality.

Winti Internship

Having no Winti or Afro Surinamese background myself, I started an intensive 'Winti internship' with Marian. My internship involved in-depth research on Winti, slavery history and West African art collections in museums. I participated in study tours to Ghana, Togo and Benin, and attended numerous Winti

rituals, both in the Netherlands and Suriname. And I talked a lot with Marian, historians, curators, and members of the Winti community.

The main objectives of such a Winti art collection became increasingly clear to me:

① The revival of the West African tradition of art usage within ritual and spiritual contexts. This tradition, lost on the mainly Protestant plantations, includes the use of images and masks, and is now being reintroduced into Winti spirituality and rituals. This provides an opportunity to create a new material heritage that can be actively used within Winti rituals.

② The rehabilitation of Winti.
At the hands of the Christian churches and the colonial Dutch government, Winti was seen in a bad light among various population groups for centuries. People were cut off from their cultural and spiritual African roots; cut off from their power. A new Winti art collection and its presentations at important cultural venues such as Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Theater Rotterdam and the Amsterdam Museum, as well as the national commemoration of the history of slavery, contribute to the restoration of institutional suppression of the spirituality of ancestors and descendants, and to the rehabilitation of Winti itself.

I learnt that the Kabra – the ancestors – have an important place. They are the founding fathers of the world around us, which we in turn build on. The Kabra remain connected to us. This bond is represented as a circle, in which the living of today, those yet to be born in the future and our living dead (the ancestors) are inextricably linked. The essence of Winti is being with others and having time for each other, both with living people on earth and with the deceased ancestors. Winti brings about connection through which you build happiness and well-being, for yourself and others. After three years of study, I was able to create the first real Winti artwork: the Kabra ancestor mask.

Design, Technique, and Choice of Materials
The shape of the Kabra ancestor mask is based on a Yoruba Gelede ancestor mask from the collection of the Afrika Museum. The mask was selected by Marian Markelo in the depot, where it was 3D-scanned by me. The original Yoruba mask is 40 cm high, but I enlarged it to 66 cm, because the ritual ceremonies in the Netherlands are much larger in size than in, say, Benin or Nigeria. The mask should therefore be more visible during ceremonies and rituals such as the National Remembrance of the History of Slavery.
The Kabra mask was made in milled PU foam and finished with a transparent epoxy lacquer. The ears of the mask were painted with a layer of lacquer with brass powder: an intuitive choice that was later interpreted by the audience to mean that the ancestors with their golden ears listen closely to us, the living. The mask is plastered with batik fabric in blue and white, traditional colours associated with the Kabra within Winti culture. The blue thereby represents the royal lineage from West Africa; the white symbolizes death, but also cleanliness and purity – both important concepts in Winti. In another project, 'Kabra Blue', I connect this choice of colour to the Dutch ancestral tradition of Delftware.[1]

The Kabra mask is worn during ceremonies by a regular dancer, Vanessa Felter. It is a helmet mask, meaning it is worn on the dancer's head, with her looking out from underneath the mask through the tulle collar. The Kabra mask is part of a wider Winti art collection, which consists of a growing body of visual art, design, and theatre productions, all related to and now part of Winti.

Afro Renaissance in Winti, a Neo Art Tradition.

In the preface to *Neo* (2003), Sjarel Ex, former director of the Central Museum, underlines the relevance of 'neo art' to the contemporary art world. According to him, neo art is not merely about imitating historical styles, but rather about critically reinterpreting and reconfiguring these styles for the present time. According to Ex, neo art is about creating new meanings by approaching old styles in a 'fresh' way. Even before meeting Marian Markelo, I considered myself a 'neo-artist'. I created work inspired by my fascination with styles and forms from various cultures and eras, and brought them together in contemporary art. Now, I do this in close collaboration with representatives of these cultures, as well as historians and curators, to ensure artistic integrity and accelerate innovation. My work stems from a hybrid art practice, where I believe that each work of art requires a specific execution and technique tailored to its design and intended function. That way, I combine traditional and modern forms within a multidisciplinary and intercultural approach.

For me, the methodology of 3D scanning African art objects from museum collections and creating new contemporary Winti art based on this data, is a way of integrating and contemporizing the work of my predecessors. I consider this a typical neo-method. In the case of the Kabra mask, I transformed a 3D scan of a Yoruba Gelede helmet mask into

Figure 1: *Collage of the creative process of the Kabra mask*. Courtesy of: Boris van Berkum.

a Winti ancestor mask. This makes the authentic and typical Nigerian formal language an essential part of a new Afro-Surinamese Winti art object. I categorize this as an African renaissance within Winti culture, and thus a form of neo art or 'revival art' tradition.

The Afrika Museum Collection, Graveyard or Database?

I got the idea to proceed as such, when I learned that Stanley Bremer, museum director of the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam, was putting the Africa collection up for sale. With the proceeds, Bremer wanted to redevelop parts of the historic museum building (Prince Hendrik's sailing club) into a luxury hotel. The idea was to generate additional income that would make the museum less dependent on state and municipal subsidies. The plans were ultimately not implemented, due to opposition from cultural and social groups. They felt that selling the Africa collection – an early trade collection – was unethical and went against the mission of a museum.

I spoke to Marian about this matter. Did the precious masterpieces of the Africa collection not serve as the Afro-Surinamer's Van Goghs and Rembrandts? She made a remarkable statement: 'When I see an Africa collection, I see a graveyard of ancestral art. In African thought, a spirit or ancestor can take place in an art object, a sculpture or a mask. But that object must continue to be used in a ritual or spiritual context. If this does not happen (as in museums) then the energy vacates the object and an empty shell remains.' In response, I argued that I saw a database of forms and patterns, of artworks, which by 3D scanning African artworks, we can 'liberate', as it were, from the museum showcases and depots; as such, we give them a new life within contemporary rituals and Winti spirituality.

On a spiritual level, this way of working is a form of ancestor worship and cooperation with the ancestors. This is emphasized by the process that precedes creation: as before the objects are 3D-scanned, Marian Markelo performs a libation offering to honour the ancestral makers and acknowledge their spiritual presence. Marian asks for the blessing and spiritual protection of the ancestors who created these original pieces during their lifetime. She also asks their permission for their forms to be used via 3D-scanning for the creation of new Winti artworks. As such, respect and gratitude are shown for the heritage. This ritual highlights the importance of a spiritual dimension when dealing with heritage and museum collections, especially in a postcolonial context.

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Endnotes

1 For more on my project *Kabra Blauw*, see Alexandra van Dongen's essay 'Alles eindeloos in flux' (2022).

Annemarie de Wildt (historian/curator)

For the past ten years the Kabra mask has been a connection between the Amsterdam Museum and society, especially the descendants of the enslaved, but it has also fundamentally challenged our thinking about museum objects in the light of reproduction techniques such as 3D printing.

On July 1st, 2013, the yearly Keti Koti commemoration obtained a new element.[1] The ancestors, enslaved during the colonial Dutch past, joined the gathering of activists, politicians and policymakers around the Dutch National Slavery Monument. I was moved by the Kabra (ancestor) mask and by the way Marian Markelo summoned and addressed the ancestors, while she gave a libation to them by pouring water from a calabash (figure 1).[2] She talked in Dutch and Sranan Tongo (Surinamese), both to the ancestors and to the people present in the park and those who watched the event on television.

Winti-priestess Nana Efua Markelo was one of the people that played a big role in the 'slavery trail' we created in the exhibition

Figure 1: *Marian Markelo and performer Vanessa Felter with the Kabra mask during the commemoration of abolition of slavery*: Amsterdam, 1 July 2017. Photograph by: Annemarie de Wildt.

The Golden Age, that was on display in the Amsterdam Museum in 2013 (Kofi & de Wildt 2019). After experiencing the impact of the Kabra mask at the commemoration, I proposed that the Amsterdam Museum would acquire the mask for the museum collection. Apart from the esthetical value, there were various arguments for the acquisition. The object made its first appearance in Amsterdam in 2013, during the commemoration of 150 years since the abolition of slavery. Journalist Liesbeth Tjon A Meeuw called the collaboration between a white artist and a black Winti-priestess *"one of the most important impetuses to reveal the shared history and the collective responsibility for the process of healing the colonial past"* (Tjon A Meeuw, 2014). Furthermore, the mask represents a new – or rather renewed – element in Winti, a religion that has many followers in Amsterdam. Equally important is the way of production: the 3D scanning technique, that enabled the 're-appropriation' of an object that was, as some people would say, 'stolen from Africa'. The Amsterdam Museum holds many objects and has told many stories of white ancestors (although they usually aren't called ancestors). Through the Kabra mask, the museum could engage with ancestors of the enslaved and their descendants.

Could the mask, as a museum object, continue to dance? Within the museum, the

possible acquisition led to lively discussions about collecting and about how strict the regular rules for loans should be applied. In the midst of the acquisition process, I attended a lecture of anthropologist James Clifford.[3] Clifford argued that art museums must learn from anthropologists to see objects as a process and not just as a product. The use of the object adds value. This is exactly what happens when the Kabra mask dances and gives the ancestors an opportunity to manifest themselves. masks make sounds, Clifford stated; they move, but they lose that ability in museum display cases. The discussion about the acquisition took place in a time during which the Netherlands, as well as other countries that had been involved in slave trade and slavery, were increasingly dealing with their colonial past.

In my conversations with artist Boris van Berkum about the possibility of an acquisition, I mentioned the risks the Kabra mask would face outside the museum. He responded by pointing to the way masks are treated in Africa: when they become old and damaged, they can be replaced with newly made ones that are charged with spirituality before use. The detailed scans of the Egungun mask, could serve to create a new Kabra mask if necessary. I realized that this would naturally spark another debate within the museum about how to handle the 2013 'original' Kabra mask. The debates about the Kabra mask centred not only on the colonial past, but also on questions regarding the authenticity of objects and the possibility of their use, also outside the museum, and on the museum's role in society.

Most of the curatorial staff and the director supported the acquisition. The collection department initially was more hesitant. The sometimes-heated discussions in the museum concerned questions like: 'what if it gets dirty? Does the object need to go into the low oxygen chamber every time it has been out of the museum?[4] Would that diminish its spiritual power?' Eventually, the introduction of a new category of objects called 'useable collection' [original: '*gebruikscollectie*'] would allow other people than curators and conservators to handle the mask. The Kabra mask eventually became an object that links the museum to the descendants of the enslaved and makes the connection with the ancestors tangible. The Amsterdam Museum holds many objects and stories of and about white ancestors (although they usually aren't called ancestors). Including the Kabra mask is a way of making space for enslaved ancestors and engaging with their descendants.

Social life of the Kabra mask

How does a city museum deal with a spiritual object like the Kabra mask? The situation of religious objects in museums is changing, as Crispin Paine analyses in *Religious Objects in Museums* (2013). Not just anthropology museums, that have always taken religion seriously, but also art museums, that previously focussed on aesthetics, have started to pay attention to the sacred character of the exhibits and the religious meaning of objects. History (and city) museum have shifted from a focus on historical religious institutions to an awareness of other faiths in present-day society (Paine 2013). Most religious museum objects have shifted roles once they entered the museum. The Kabra mask is exceptional, because from the beginning it had a dual life as an object inside and outside the museum. It has been part of museum exhibitions, but also of the yearly Keti Koti commemoration, other processions and events, such as the *Memre Waka* [translation: '*Memory Walk*'] procession on the 1st of June past locations related to slavery heritage.[5] The mask has also has danced at the Winti Bal Masque; played a role in 'location theatre'[6] in Amsterdam South-

Figure 2: *Performance during theater project 'Wijksafari Bijlmer edition' directed by Adelheid Roosen and her company Female Economy*: Amsterdam, 2016.
Photograph by: Annemarie de Wildt.

East (*Wijksafari* by Adelheid Roosen, figure 2); featured in documentaries (*Traces of Sugar* by Ida Does, figure 3); as well as in educational programmes at the Wereldmuseum.

Referring to Arjun Appadurai's concept of the social life of objects, anthropologist Rhoda Woets posed a fascinating question on the weblog *Standplaats Wereld*: should the Kabra-mask, travelling between the museum glass cases, storage room and ritual ceremonies, be considered as an object that is dead or an object that is alive? In what ways will the mask be loaded with meaning? (Appadurai 1986; Woets 2014) For Marian Markelo/ Okomfo Nana Efua, the Kabra mask embodies the millions of enslaved ancestors. Before the Kabra mask accompanies her during the commemoration, she re-establishes this connection in a spiritual way.

Collective remembrance

The Kabra mask is a symbol of resilience and a catalyst for collective remembrance, inviting participants to honour the struggles of the ancestors while celebrating their freedom. Through its visual and performative elements, it encourages participation and dialogue. This museum object can also be part of spiritual rituals where it dances among the people. To Van Berkum and Markelo, this is an 'African' use of the mask, as opposed to its more static 'European' use in a museum exhibition

Figure 3: *Filming in the Amsterdam Museum for the documentary Traces of Sugar with director Ida Does, Marian Markelo, Vanessa Felter with Kabra mask and camera man Jurgen Lisse*: 2017. Photograph by: Tom van der Molen.

(Balkenhol 2015). The Kabra mask connects people through time by acknowledging the presence of the ancestors. It also connects people through space by connecting the ceremony in an Amsterdam park with rituals performed in the continent where the enslaved originated.

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Endnotes

1 1 July 1963 was the date of the legal end of slavery in the Dutch colonies in the Caribbean. Keti Koti, Surinamese for 'Breaking the Chains', is the yearly celebration of the abolition of slavery.

2 Hollowed-out and dried fruits from calabash trees are a typical West-African household utensil, used for drink and food, but also as vessel for knowledge and wisdom.

3 Keynote speech given during the symposium Collecting Geographies: Global Programming and Museums of Modern Art Symposium on 14 March 2014, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. For more information, see www.stedelijk.nl/nl/nieuws/stedelijk--symposium-collecting-geographies-global-programming-and-museums-of-modern-art

4 The low oxygen chamber is a space in the museum storage centre, where anoxic disinfestation is used as a safe and poison free method to control insect pests.

5 In 2013, the Mapping Slavery project started, aimed at uncovering the oft-hidden traces of slavery and slave trade in Amsterdam. The project resulted in the Gids Slavernijverleden Amsterdam/Slavery Heritage Guide (2014) of which I was one of the authors. This book sparked a flow of publications investigating the (visual) traces of slavery of various other cities. See also Blanca van der Scheer et al. (2024).

6 A theatre performance that is performed in a location other than a theatre.

Markus Balkenhol (anthropologist)

What might it mean to ‘diversify’ and ‘decolonize’ history, to take seriously someone else’s memory, and not to remain in colonial amnesia? The Kabra mask suggests that this might also mean at least to question and suspend, if not reject, neatly modern distinctions: the past and the present, the secular and the sacred, fact and fiction, people and things. Life and death. It might mean to suspend anxiety about things becoming untidy, and to accept that slavery is not simply long ago, but that its afterlives also reach into the present.

The story of the Kabra mask has been making things untidy right from the start when, as the story goes, in 1998 Marian's *afo* Sofia (her mother's father's mothers’ mother) contacted her to give her the task of bringing back religious art back into the Winti. Sofia guided Marian when she met Boris, and she guided them both when they selected the mask in the Afrika Museum. Boris sees the mask as a literal collaboration with the ancestors. 3D technology, in his view, has been able to establish a connection with the ancestors who

Figure 1: *Marieke Kruithof restoring the Kabra mask, restauration atelier Amsterdam Museum*: Amsterdam, 2023. Photograph by: Boris van Berkum.

worked on the same object. Vanessa Felter, the mask's dancer, regularly experiences the presence of the ancestors when she is close to the mask. Marian explains that the mask stands for the millions of people who have been enslaved, and whose histories have yet to be written. And although she emphasizes that the object itself is not inhabited by the ancestors (as would be the case, for instance, in certain artifacts from West Africa), the ancestors are attracted to the mask.

The mask may be seen as an effort to re-write the history of slavery in the Netherlands as an entanglement of enslavement, rupture, violence, survival, resilience and creativity. In this rewriting, the ancestors have an important voice.

Does that mean that the ancestors are historians? There are good reasons to say they cannot be. Boundaries between fact and fiction, for instance, have the function of limiting what is possible to say about the past (Hartman 2019; Rigney 2001); and especially in a time of mis- and disinformation, it is important to insist on certain scientific conventions and standards – like transparency about methods and analysis, and scholarly conduct that prohibits falsification, fabrication or plagiarism (Dutch Anthropological Association 2019). But that is not to say that everything that is not science, is mere fiction, and should therefore be excluded from understandings of how the

present relates to the past. What if we were to take the ancestors seriously, asks Stephan Palmié in his book *Wizards and Scientists* (Palmié 2002, 3), as *"pertaining to a discourse on history merely encoded in an idiom different from the one with which we feel at home?"*

Palmié takes as a point of departure the idea that all historical knowledge, including written history, is a social construction (Trouillot 1995) or a "*historical imagination*" (Collingwood qtd. in Palmié 2002, 4) in the present. Knowledge of the past thus consists of the stories told about the past, and that means that it is possible to tell different stories. But written history is bound by academic conventions, which means that only particular types of evidence, such as texts or objects, are admissible. In the case of the enslaved ancestors, such evidence is rare, because the enslaved were not allowed to write or own property. Within the paradigm of mainstream Western historiography, the ancestors thus remain *"beyond historiographic recovery because the nature of the evidence we deem admissible simply erases [their] historical being and subjectivity"* (Palmié 2002, 8–9).

Palmié suggests that: "*there also exists a history that largely escapes – perhaps cannot be inscribed at all – into the narratives that we construct from the logs of slave ships, plantation account books, or the diaries of slaveholders*" (Palmié 2002, 8). Palmié terms this a 'spectral' or 'ghostly' presence that cannot be captured within conventional written history. This presence defies the idea of a linear notion of time in which the past is sealed off from the present. Instead, the presence of the ancestors is evidence for what Michael Lambek has called a 'past imperfect' – a past that reaches into the present. What might happen if we would listen to the stories the ancestors have to tell?

In the case of the Kabra mask, this would mean that we would have to accept a different set of conventions, those afforded by the Winti cosmology. Listening to the ancestors requires the full depth of ritual and cultural knowledge maintained in the Winti community and its religious authorities. A scholar would therefore be well advised to listen to those, whose expertise allows them to recount the ancestors' stories.

Listening to the ancestors does not replace conventional history; but it does enable us to ask questions that cannot be asked in the framework of a written history that uncritically clings to modernity's distinctions. Might this not also be a way of decolonizing the written history of slavery, one that takes us beyond the archival paradigms of colonial modernity?

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Martje Onikoyi (heritage professional)

I approach the Kabra mask as a young heritage professional of Yoruba descent. My aim is to explore and propose some ideas regarding 'the sacred' within museum spaces, particularly focusing on the transformative power museums wield over objects and their meanings.

The Yoruba ancestral mask, which served as inspiration for the design of the Kabra mask, was acquired, interpreted, and exhibited by missionaries at the Wereldmuseum in Berg en Dal. This mask functions as a vehicle for the manifestation of ancestral spirits (Egungun) and, as such, is a crucial tool for communication (De Wildt 2015). Originally, the mask was valued primarily for its immaterial, sacred significance. However, the transformation of religious forms into 'heritage' – a process often driven by colonial oppression – results in a profanization, where the original sacredness of these objects is diminished or lost (Meyer & de Witte 2013).

While efforts are being made from various activist quarters to liberate African

I approach the Kabra mask as a young heritage professional of Yoruba descent. My aim is to explore and propose some ideas regarding 'the sacred' within museum spaces, particularly focusing on the transformative power museums wield over objects and their meanings.

The Yoruba ancestral mask, which served as inspiration for the design of the Kabra mask, was acquired, interpreted, and exhibited by missionaries at the Wereldmuseum in Berg en Dal. This mask functions as a vehicle for the manifestation of ancestral spirits (Egungun) and, as such, is a crucial tool for communication (De Wildt 2015). Originally, the mask was valued primarily for its immaterial, sacred significance. However, the transformation of religious forms into 'heritage' – a process often driven by colonial oppression – results in a profanization, where the original sacredness of these objects is diminished or lost (Meyer & de Witte 2013).

While efforts are being made from various activist quarters to liberate African material cultures from Western museum display cases, the Kabra mask has instead been deliberately added to the Amsterdam Museum's collection. What makes the case of the Kabra mask so unique? And what happens to the meaning-making of the Kabra mask when exhibited in a museum?

The Kabra mask was created in response to a message received by Winti priestess Marian Markelo (Okomfo Nana Efua) from her ancestors. These ancestors, who were enslaved people and their descendants from Suriname, tasked Markelo with the mission to revive the Winti visual culture. Winti is a Surinamese tradition and religion, rooted in various African spiritual practices brought to Suriname through slavery. It developed within a colonial and Protestant context, where visual culture was actively suppressed (Balkenhol 2015). The use of a (reproduction of a) Yoruba ancestral mask in Winti rituals reproduces a form of the Egungun ritual adapted to a Dutch-Surinamese context, while also reviving a spiritual connection with West African ancestors through the integration of their material culture. The Kabra mask is therefore not representative of the Winti tradition, but shapes a renewed visual culture that proudly depicts the resilience of Surinamese people (Cairo & Deckers 2017).

The mask serves as a conduit for the spirits of ancestors, playing a crucial role in rituals aimed at spiritual healing and the transmission of knowledge. Its use in public ceremonies reflects its significance beyond mere aesthetics. It is a living embodiment of cultural identity and ancestral memory. However, the Kabra mask can also be appreciated as an art piece, with its well-considered imagery. This dual nature – both as a sacred and aesthetic item – poses a challenge for its representation in a museum setting. Traditional museological approaches in Western institutions often prioritize the aesthetic value of non-Western material cultures, frequently overlooking or oversimplifying their spiritual and cultural contexts. The museum space holds the power to transform meanings. What happens when religious things are transferred from a religious to a secular regime? How resilient is the spiritual dimension? (Meyer 2023).

According to François Mairesse, the resilience of the spiritual dimension within the museum space is debatable. He argues that when a spiritual object is placed in a museum, it loses its original meaning and acquires a new one, shaped by the museum's context. Mairesse draws on museologist Kenneth Hudson's observation: *"A tiger in a museum is a tiger in a museum, and not a tiger"*. He extends this idea to sacred objects, stating, *"A sacred object in a museum is a sacred object in a museum, and not a sacred object"*

(Mairesse 2019, 653). This is true considering the fact that sacred or spiritual objects do not carry the same spiritual meaning when interpreted and exhibited by museums. Musealization involves the stripping of original functions and meaning, as well as the becoming part of a new, museological reality where the spiritual item becomes an object of study or aesthetic value, instead of an object of worship or daily use. Religious scholar Birgit Meyer defines this as 'semantic iconoclasm' (Meyer 2024).

Though it could be said that the Kabra mask did not complete the full process of musealization because of the continuing ritual use, within the museum space this ritual use is not part of the visitor experience. Thus, the separation between the spiritual and museological dimension is still evident (González 2019). In contrast, Marília Xavier Cury states that sacred objects remain sacred despite their musealization, as these musealized objects continue to carry the energies of their people's ancestors and can still evoke communication with the spirits (Cury 2019). These 'ancestral energies' are integral to the meaning of the Kabra mask. However, the intangible essence of Winti, rooted in its oral tradition, is lost when the Kabra mask is displayed in a conventional museum setting (Sullivan & Edwards 2004). This creates a tension between the spiritual interpretation and the museological approach to sacred objects like the Kabra mask.

In addition to its spiritual and aesthetic significance, the Kabra mask has emerged as a potent symbol in contemporary discussions surrounding the Dutch colonial past and future (NiNsee 2023). The mask has been used to engage with difficult historical narratives and to advocate for a future that acknowledges and rectifies the injustices of the past (Modest 2015). While this political symbolism is undeniably powerful, it raises important questions about the potential risks of oversimplification. The Kabra mask, though unique and modern in its conception, could become the singular representation of Winti in the public imagination, overshadowing the complexity and diversity of the tradition itself (Cairo & Deckers 2017). Simultaneously, the contemporary confluence of colonial history, a Western art tradition and a Surinamese spiritual practice creates space and attention for a visual culture representative of dealing with the shared past, in which the resilience of descendants of enslaved people from Suriname takes center stage.

The Kabra mask represents a unique intersection of spirituality, art, and politics, making it challenging to display in a museum setting. Its ongoing ritual use preserves the intangible essence of Winti and the mask's spiritual significance. However, within the museum space there are notable pitfalls in reproducing spirituality through sacred items such as the Kabra mask. These include an emphasis on aesthetics, where placing items in display cases risks reducing them to mere 'viewing objects', and the use of Western methods of communicating that may fail to (re)produce the spiritual and intangible meaning of these objects. Additionally, including the Kabra mask in a museum collection can seem counterintuitive, given the colonial history surrounding the acquisition, interpretation, and exhibition of similar African artifacts, such as the Yoruba mask that influenced the Kabra mask's design.

Despite these challenges, museums offer the opportunity to present the collaborative concept of the Kabra mask to a broad audience, while also renegotiating the relationship between Western museums and non-Western material cultures, engaging with the Dutch colonial past and securing its place in Amsterdam's collective memory.

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