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Annemarie de Wildt

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in conversation

negotiations around the kabra mask

annemarie de wildt

Few museum meetings start with singing. On July 27, 2014 the Amsterdam Museum welcomed the Kabra mask with a gathering including many Surinamese Amsterdammers, not a very usual sight in a museum either. Winti priestess Marian Markelo got up and sang in her powerful voice, inviting the ancestors to be part of this get-together.

It had taken months of deliberations before the Kabra mask had arrived at the museum. Once the meeting was over, it would be packed in its cardboard box and leave for a ceremony for the ancestors in the Muider-church in Amsterdam East, a very unusual thing to happen with a museum object. At the gathering Marian Markelo and artist Boris van Berkum spoke about their creation of the mask. People shared their experiences with Winti. Some told about their grandparents in the then colony of Surinam who were not allowed to practice this religion. A colleague from the Jewish Historical Museum spoke about an ensemble of seventeenth-century religious objects. They not only function as museum objects, but are also used in religious ceremonies at the Portuguese synagogue in the center of Amsterdam. These very precious silver objects had entered the museum on that

Annemarie de Wildt is a curator at the Amsterdam Museum. Since 1995 she has curated many exhibitions at this city museum, with a variety of objects, often a mix of "high" and "low" culture and with a strong input of human stories. Some of the subjects include the history of prostitution in Amsterdam, animals in the city, Amsterdam songs, the love-hate relationship between Amsterdam and the House of Orange, and Amsterdam's role in slavery. She has been involved in several participatory projects, co-creating exhibitions and websites with various groups among the population of Amsterdam. Annemarie de Wildt has given many presentations in the Netherlands and abroad and has written about the practice and dilemmas of curating and (contemporary) collecting.

condition. Museum acquisitions are always a form of negotiation. Curators and conservators anxiously observed the dancing with the silver objects and the pouring of water on the silver plates and afterwards discussed with the leaders of the religious community the best way of handling the objects and whether they should use distilled water rather than tap water.

This meeting was one of the highlights in my work as a curator at the Amsterdam Museum: the welcoming of a museum object that continues to dance. The acquisition was not an easy process. And maybe the process was as important for the museum as the acquisition itself. The mask forced us to think about fundamental questions: what is the function of museum objects? What role does the museum play in society?

I first saw the Kabra mask when it was unveiled in 2002 by Queen Beatrix during the commemoration on July 1, 2013, the *keti koti* (breaking of the chains) celebration in the Oosterpark around the National Slavery Monument, made by Surinamese sculptor Edwin de Vries. A dancer wearing the mask accompanied Marian Markelo at her performance, a remarkable combination of a libation for the ancestors and critical speech to the authorities present there. It was 150 years since the official abolition of slavery and even the Dutch king and queen attended the commemoration. I knew Markelo because I had asked her to contribute to the slavery intervention in the exhibition on the Golden Age in the Amsterdam Museum. Quotations of descendants of slaves were added to the exhibition, including hers: "When I walk along the canals, I often think: part of this building belongs to me, because my ancestors worked hard to make it possible. Unpaid work." In May 2013 the museum had hosted a *keti koti* meal where 60 people from different backgrounds ate and talked about the heritage and effects of slavery. At this occasion Marian also poured a libation. At that moment it occurred to me that for her, and other Surinamese people, the ancestors, the spirits from the past, the ones who suffered slavery were a real presence. A spiritual presence, totally different from their presence on paintings or in documents.



FIG 4

The Kabra mask and Marian Markelo at the 150th anniversary of emancipation in Amsterdam July 1, 2013.

I started a conversation with the creator of the mask, Dutch artist Boris van Berkum about the possibility of acquiring the mask for the Amsterdam Museum, if the museum would allow it to continue to dance. We discussed the possibility of damage. Smiling broadly, Boris told me: “We have the data of the 3-D scanning. The mask can be recreated. That would be similar to the practice of African mask carvers, who created new masks if the old ones were damaged.” Would that be the same mask? Would it be loaded with the same meaning? These questions came up once I presented arguments for acquisition to my fellow curators, the director and colleagues of the Collection Department. Apart from the esthetic value, there were various arguments for the acquisition. The object made its first Amsterdam appearance during the commemoration of 150 years of abolition. It could be argued that 2013 was the first year in which Amsterdam fully acknowledged its share in the history of slavery, while at the same time celebrating 400 years of Amsterdam canals, recently being promoted to UNESCO world heritage status. The mayor intentionally mentioned slavery in every speech he gave that year. The Kabra

258

mask connects the Surinamese presence in the city and the heritage of slavery to the narrative of Amsterdam. The remarkable co-operation between a white artist and a black Winti priestess expresses the shared history of slavery and the collective responsibility for healing the colonial past. The mask also represents a new, or rather renewed, element in the Winti religion that has many followers in Amsterdam. And last but not least, the way of production: scanning, the 3-D printing and milling technique, that enabled the ‘re-appropriation’ of an object that once functioned in a religious context in Africa. 3-D printing will have an enormous impact on human relationships to objects and we can only begin to gasp what that will mean to museums.

The esthetic, historical and material relevance of the object were acknowledged, although there was some discussion whether or not the mask should “belong” in the collection of the (ethnographical) Tropenmuseum. The discussions became more heated around the Kabra mask as a spiritual object that should be allowed to continue dancing. The Collection Department questioned especially the possibility of allowing people other than curators and conservators

FIG 5

The Kabra mask being installed in the Amsterdam Museum, June 2014. Photo Annemarie de Wildt, Amsterdam Museum.



to handle the mask. They worried about the possibility of dirt, moths and other harm from outside, and the need to put the mask in a hypoxic cell every time it had left the museum. Some colleagues wondered if blood would be sprayed on it during rituals. The fact that no blood is used in rituals around the mask seemed almost a disappointment as this would add visible traces and increase the emotional value. There were worries about insurance and workload. A practical solution was to officially label the Kabra mask as a special category of objects that are allowed to be used, at the risk of damage or even loss. Recently the museum introduced this category in order to be more

flexible in exposing or even handling objects from the museum collection. Arguments by James Clifford, who regrets the fact that religious objects lose their function in society once they end up in a museum, played a role in our discussions. The outcome was the acceptance of the dual role of the mask, as a museum and a spiritual object. The Kabra mask connects the museum to the community around the mask, which is producing rituals and practices in which the mask plays a role. As a museum we have to let go of the total control over the object, but we gain a different way of dealing with objects and with people.