

# Ethnology Unboxed

## The Making of Culture Through Its Performative (Un)doing

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Article abstract

This article compares a present-day etsy.com African curio shop — catalogued online and linked to craft-makers in Africa — with the Smithsonian Institution Abbott Collection of ethnological objects from Kilimanjaro, East Africa. The Smithsonian accessioned the Abbott Collection in 1890. A Tanzanian-born Canadian immigrant established the online curio shop circa 2012; she is a descendent of some of the owners of the Abbott collection objects. Building on Butler's notion of museums without walls (2016) and Martín-Torres' concept of chaîne opératoire (2002), this paper argues that the online curio shop, like the Abbott Collection, renders concrete (as in momentarily "still") a chain of relations of production and exchange that link near and distant places. I deepen this argument by presenting the curio shop owner's commentary and reflections on the Smithsonian Abbott collection, which she visited recently. The paper concludes with discussion of ethnology's renewed significance for consumerist and diasporic communities.

## ETHNOLOGY UNBOXED

*The Making of Culture Through Its Performative (Un)doing*

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### Unboxing ethnology

In a white cardboard box in a metal filing cabinet in the Ethnology Division of the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History lie three objects labeled “Chagga snuff box E151778-0, E151778-1 and E151778-2.” Collected in 1890 by Philadelphia-born medical doctor William Louis Abbott on a Smithsonian-sponsored expedition to German East Africa (today’s Tanzania), the objects have remained largely untouched for the better part of 120 years. The three snuffboxes are similar, though they are not really boxes. They are rifle cartridges, repurposed for domestic use. Each is wrapped in beads tied to delicate iron chains, and each sports two labels, one in Abbott’s original hand and the other bearing a Smithsonian bar code.<sup>1</sup>

One Friday in July 2017 I had the opportunity to examine these objects with a friend I have known for nearly thirty years, a woman who was born in the 1980s in what Abbott then called “Chaga Land” and who now lives and works as an independent businessperson in Canada. Nuya, my friend, brought her son, an eight-year-old Canadian citizen who visits his family in Tanzania during school holidays, to visit Washington D.C. and the Smithsonian. Nuya and I took out our smartphones, and Nuya’s son, Jeremy, climbed the footstool to get a better look. His eyes were wide and inquiring. Jeremy had never seen such a collection. Nor, for that matter,

1. I am grateful to the Smithsonian Institute in Museum Anthropology (Summer 2017) program for introduction and access to the Smithsonian Ethnology Collection, especially to Joshua A. Bell, Candace Greene and Fred Reuss. This opening paragraph draws inspiration from Bell’s (2013) essay, “Bird Specimen, Papua New Guinea,” which also unboxes museum collections to ask questions about anthropology’s practice and history.

had Nuya or I.<sup>2</sup>

As Jeremy reached for one of the objects labeled “snuff box,” Nuya remarked, “This is not Chagga. It’s Maasai.” Chagga refers to a region as well as a people and language. 19th-century traders to (not from) Mount Kilimanjaro instrumentalized the term and used it to differentiate Chagga people from “the Maasai” who spoke the Maa language. “Maasai women still wear these today,” Nuya continued. “They sell these kinds of trinkets to travelers and tourists who stop at Namanga.” (Namanga is a crossing point on the Tanzania-Kenya border.) Looking at the bead’s use and manufacture, Nuya elaborated: “But these beads, in Abbott’s collection, are older than what Maasai sell these days. Look at their size; they’re not like the smaller ones we see today.”

As we peered into the shelves and boxes, Nuya, Jeremy and I mused about the inscription of meaning through labeling and categorizing, and we drew connections and comparisons between historical museum collections and contemporary commercial products. I mentioned that I had noted from Abbott’s 1891 report that he had specifically identified these objects as Chagga, not Maasai. In his report to the Smithsonian (the only ethnological report Abbott ever published [Taylor 2015:29]), Abbott wrote of the object-set<sup>3</sup> that it was from the “Wa Chaga tribe; Mount Kilimanjaro, East Africa.” Was Abbott wrong?, I asked.

No, not necessarily, Nuya replied, but these objects had come from Maa-speaking people who lived in the plains below Mount Kilimanjaro, not from farmers who had migrated to and now predominate on the mountain. “But, of course,” she added, “Maasai and Chagga traded a lot in those days, and sometimes Chagga would take these items and sell them to other people in local markets.”

“You mean Abbott probably bought them from Chagga?,” I asked. “Sure,” she reasoned. But how did Chagga get them, I wondered, though knew the answer was probably not something Nuya or I wished to discuss in front of impressionable Jeremy. Maasai and Chagga raided and killed one another. Their conflict was waning but still tense during Abbott’s days. “My dear Dollie,” Abbott had written to his sister on January 15, 1888, “Since natives are always at war up there on Mount Kilimanjaro, I will get lots of surgical practice.” To his sister, Gertude, Abbott wrote on August

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2. Nuya and Jeremy are pseudonyms. Chaga was the conventional spelling in Abbott’s day. Except when directly quoting, I use the contemporary spelling “Chagga.”
  3. The Smithsonian catalogue number for this object-set is E151778.

13, 1888: “The Masai recently speared five of Mandara’s men (allies) by mistake and paid him fifty cows to ‘square up’ the difficulty.” Mandara was a Chagga chief to whom Maasai would have also paid up in trinkets such as snuffboxes.

As Nuya, Jeremy and I examined these and other objects, Nuya and I jumped from idea to idea and began to piece together how they might have come to be labeled and collected here. Of the food gourds and containers shelved in a different drawer, most, Nuya said, “are Chagga.” She had used them as a child and indeed her parents and grandparents and neighbors still used many of these accessories. Among Abbott’s ethnological collection were small “pombe” or beer tubs and cups (*kata*) that were inscribed with the signs of different extended families.

Abbott’s collected shields were again likely of Maasai origin, Nuya said, though I argued that, from having read colonial-era records and ethnographies (e.g., Dundas 1924; Meyer 1891), shields such as these elongated ones bearing symbols associated with warrior groups and made of cowhide or rhinoceros skin were also used by people living on the mountain. Nuya conceded and agreed with this; though frankly, neither of us cared much to focus on the shields. Our attention turned to (indeed we distracted ourselves with) some large and feathery “headdresses” and items Abbott labeled “household goods” and “ornaments.”

Pointing to an ostrich feather headdress Abbott described as “what a string of warriors wear” on Kilimanjaro (1891: 390), Nuya commented with no small surprise: “I saw these worn when Obama visited Tanzania!” And “People wear them during Saba Saba day,” July seventh (*saba*), a national holiday celebrating farmers. “People wear these kinds of headdresses when they want to dress up for events and holidays,” she said of the object labeled “Warrior’s Head-dress”<sup>4</sup> in Abbott’s report to the Smithsonian, suggesting their cooption as an ethnic artifact into a nationalized framework of the nation-state.

After touching and fingering the headdress’s dark feathers (our hands were gloved to protect against arsenic used in Abbott’s day), Nuya made extra sure to clarify for Jeremy that there were no “Maasai/Chagga” warriors donning headdresses for battle these days. Nor were people using rifle cartridges to make snuffboxes, she told Jeremy. “But this,” Nuya indicated, pointing to the object labeled “Cow Horn,”<sup>5</sup> is “real.” Mzee Kilongo, a

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4. Smithsonian catalogue number E151400

5. Smithsonian catalogue number E151244

mutual friend of ours, used to carry one in the 1990s. He filled it with *msokoto*, tobacco to smoke or chew.

“And these,” she continued, referring again to the set of three beaded snuffboxes<sup>6</sup> and draping their delicate chains across her fingers and hands. “People still put these kinds of chains around the waists of children to keep them from going into the waters.” Why?, I wondered. “To keep them from being taken by *chunusi*,” spirits that suck life from people and cause young children to drown. Jeremy’s eyes opened again. “Spirits in the water?,” he seemed to say. “It smells like Kilimanjaro in there,” Nuya said, passing the opened object to her son.

### Performing Ethnology

This museum encounter in the dry collections of the Smithsonian might seem to describe a trivial collection of interest mainly to Nuya, her son and me. But I argue that a closer look helps to illuminate how ethnology has transformed and remains relevant today. Ethnology, I argue, in keeping with others (e.g. Byrne et al 2011; Phillips and Steiner 1999) has always exceeded its boxed, material forms. In its broadest sense, ethnology refers to an analytic framework or imaginative space for thinking about human diversity and possibility (cf. McGrane 1989). More narrowly, as I discuss below, ethnology refers to a practice of cross-cultural comparison of material culture seen as reflecting and connecting people with place. In yet another way, ethnology is a reflection and, in the case of the Smithsonian, an institutional instantiation of imperialist and imperializing aspirations to survey, sample and store the world.

To link all of these approaches to studying and conceptualizing ethnology, and to augment a predominant Actor Network Theory (ANT) that examines the mutability of material and social assemblages but wrongly advocates “flattening these practices out so that no hierarchies exist [and] all actions are seen as equally important” (Byrne et al. 2011:8), I employ a performative framework. A performative framework regards ethnology not as a network of actor-object nodes, but as an ongoing performance, as objects and findings continually shift in their meaning to all involved.<sup>7</sup> A performance framework approaches power in terms of stratification in access to resources, opportunities and privileges and involves interacting with people, objects and social spaces that people collectively and in

6. Smithsonian catalogue numbers E151778-0, E151778-1 and E151778-2.

7. My appreciation to an anonymous reviewer for helping me articulate this.

interaction make and use to identify, express and differentiate themselves.

Influenced by the work of Judith Butler (1993), a performative approach analyzes how social subjectivities are semiotically and materially constructed and represented in the course of everyday activity. Whereas Butler's focus was on the performativity of gender and she sought to undo feminism as a representational political project by which any one theory could speak for women, my focus here is the performativity of the "ethnos" or of culture. Culture, like gender, is enacted. Culture is a repeated iteration of signs and practices that produces an appearance of belonging and, sometimes, of a singular identity; and even then belonging and identity are only some of the ways that culture is re-presented. Culture is a manifestation of power, secured through repetition that creates an effect of substance (Butler 1993; Silverstein 2013). Performances (enacted iterations and reiterations) construct a cultural subject; create (under some circumstances such as museums) a sense of a concrete and discrete cultural self; and are necessarily repeated because the iteration of the ideal or norm is never fully realized. Meanings slip.

Along with others (e.g., Boast 2011; Byrne et al 2011; Jackson 2013; O'Hanlon 2000), I challenge claims that object collections straightforwardly represent a history or a people. I do so by acknowledging the relevance of ethnological object collections to the formation of anthropology (Bell 2017) and by acknowledging that colonial-era power relations are now deeply entangled with international movements of people variously embedded and implicated in a transnational, capital economy.

However, beyond seeing the museum as a field of power that reproduces colonial-era governmentality by which "the educator and the marketing manager--through the changed instrumentality of the museum as set within cultural policy--control the voices of the museum's presentations" (Boast 2011: 58), and beyond seeing the "source community" as "the ex-colonial other" (Boast 2011: 65) that is forever relegated to the periphery, I argue that today the creator/source community *is or can be* the educator and market manager. Nuya has a business to run. She is now the business manager, and I am the informant and informing ethnographer. Together we are "unpacking" Abbott. Today, the unboxing of ethnology is much more than a neo- or post-colonial performance. In the case of Nuya's peering into Abbott's nineteenth-century collection, a "slip" or performative moment, I contend, came when Nuya compared the boxes to her online marketing business.

### **Nuya's work**

Nuya runs an e-commerce side business using a widely used commercial web platform. Her business features handmade goods from Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania. Items she sells are arranged by type of use and place of origin. A set of wood carved salad spoons might be labeled, for example, utensils from Nairobi. Or a sisal handbag made in the Kilimanjaro Region might be labeled "market basket used and made by the Maasai." Nuya holds a masters degree in business administration from an accredited UK university; she received her primary and secondary school education in the Kilimanjaro Region of Tanzania. Her first language is a local Kilimanjaro dialect, and her second and third languages are Kiswahili and English, respectively.

Nuya has worked in the private and governmental sectors in her now country of residence, Canada; and for many years, she has been involved in selling handicrafts from East Africa. I remember her once selling me a nice pair of beaded sandals made by a man we both knew in Tanzania. She and I were living and working (separately and by coincidence of life, really) in Toronto at that time. Nuya, even then, around 2006, was a transnational entrepreneur. By the time she moved to her current place in Canada, she was an experienced ecotourism safari businessperson and was now working hard on her online handicraft shop.

During our visit to the Smithsonian, Nuya and I talked about how her online catalogue resembled Abbott's records. Comparing her business practices to that of Abbott, Nuya reasoned she collects what she thinks her buyers seek. Whereas Abbott sold items to the Smithsonian, Nuya has sold them to people worldwide. She has marketed her goods to an English-speaking audience. Most of her buyers are from North America and the UK and Commonwealth. She also works hard to stay ahead of the bots that have constantly reshuffled her advertising on the commercial server system. Like Abbott as a businessman, she suggested, she has had to stay ahead of her competition.

Differences between Abbott's and Nuya's collections are obvious, but the similarities provide one way to think about ethnology as a performed modality.

My suggestion in this essay is that unboxing ethnology (figuratively and literally) requires recognizing that ethnology itself manifests actions or performances, instantiations of power-differentiated (not flattened) ideals than can never be fully achieved. At the same time, the categories and boxes of ethnological records are constantly changing in the context of human

creativity. Every boxing and unboxing, every iteration and objectification of culture, has the potential to “slip” into another.

### **Accounting for ethnology**

Divergent research programs coexist under the contemporary umbrella of ethnology, including comparative approaches to material culture, studies that focus on national and transnational cultural practices associated with everyday and ordinary life, and in-depth single-case studies that locate a people, place and/or issue in a wider context (Welz 2015). These works share two features. First, they situate ethnology as a field-based research program that analyzes observations and social facts anthropologically, that is through a disciplinary frame that seeks to connect human diversity within a theory of social life and its making and unmaking (that is, through an anthropological theory of sociality).

Second, these works are predicated on the principle that social life and practices, including anthropology, are infused with political power and economic interests rather than primordially founded or determined. This reflexive turn, now fully embedded in ethnological studies, sheds light on how nineteenth-century and twentieth-century institutions and scholarly fields such as anthropology and museum studies have sometimes fetishized and commodified culture. As I use ethnology here, ethnology refers to a project of cross-cultural comparison of ethnographic information by which museum collections (not unlike online catalogues) organize and give meaning to actions and objects that come to represent people and locations.

One of Nuya’s marketed computer bags, made of West African cloth by a woman in Tanzania, is labeled and marketed in such a way as to attract an aspiring urban professional. “The item will appeal to upwardly mobile urban professionals seeking to retain a connection to an Africa past,” reports the online catalogue in so many words. Never mind the computer bag’s pattern historically is from West Africa and marketed as Tanzanian. It is the idea that is traditional, not the material product (cf. Comaroff and Comaroff 2009). In other words, there is a kind of performativity to materiality, whether in the museum collection or online catalogue.

This performativity of materiality raises two conceptual questions: How does a comparison of a 19th-century collection with an online catalogue--linked, as they are, through the ethnographic moment of Nuya’s, Jeremy’s and my looking at Abbott’s collection--help us see new, and old, possibilities for ethnology? What does the encounter illuminate (new, or old) about



the history of ethnology in relation to today's and yesterday's consumerist and diasporic communities?

In the United States, ethnology started in Abbott's day as an evolutionary explanation of human social and cultural differences. Smithsonian Curator Otis Mason, Abbott's contemporary, sought to find a single underlying law that could explain the development of humanity (Henson 2008). His thinking, like others' then, was historicist and Eurocentric: Europe's and European North America's past were represented in other people's present. However, a paradigm shift was emerging such that, by the turn of the 20th century, a new theory associated with Franz Boas came into view: an idea that cultural elements or traits were dispersed through migration and diffusion and that there existed many trajectories on the path toward human progress (Stocking 1968).

Though still Eurocentric and historicist, Boas' model of multi-lineal (not unilineal) evolution was seen as more defensible ethnologically. However, by the 1930s, anthropologists began to conduct long-term field research and to question the comparative and cross-cultural approach, once the hallmark of ethnology. A Geertzian interpretive framework of the 1960s contextualized people in particular cultural settings. Although this framework, too, has been replaced by greater interest in transnational and globalized concerns, its emphasis on field research remains a key part of U.S. American ethnology.

It was in this era of interpretivist anthropology that I first met and came to know Nuya. A Tanzanian secondary school student in the 1990s in Tanzania, (when I, too, was a student trying to learn something about the world by studying anthropology in Tanzania), Nuya was high achieving and aspirational. In the intervening years, Nuya and I moved in and out of touch. By the time we met again in 2017, cultural anthropology had expanded (as though catching up with the world) to account for diasporic, transnational communities. This moment in 2017 was one in which power differences between the 'West' and the 'rest' were highly intertwined, at least as seen and experienced by those, such as Nuya and I who were integrated into the global economy. "We no longer feel like the U.S. is special," Nuya said of the United States, laughing as she indicated that the U.S., too, could be subject, as she (and I) saw it, to external if not colonial influence and political coercion.

With American exceptionalism leveled to a similar space, by some reckonings, as African states, the idea that the Smithsonian collections

were “my” and not “her” domain was not a framework in the first instance that we co-created. Instead, these were neither her nor my artifacts, but objects that she as well as I could use to various professional ends: hers, to photograph for product design and marketing, and mine, to understand and through which to theorize the history and practice of ethnology.

In this way--that is, through our interactions--I came to understand the idea of source community in a broader way than has been described in museological literature: namely, as a social location from which knowledge about history and people situationally and performatively emerges, not as a bounded group of people that serves as an originary community of object creators authorized to narrate origins and co-create or interpret exhibits. My understanding of source community as a performative and performed social location emerges from and relates to Nuya’s and Jeremy’s visit to the Smithsonian in that both Nuya and Jeremy--as well as I--were sometimes perplexed by what was labeled “Chagga” and “from Kilimanjaro.” Like Nuya, I recognized that some of the objects (particularly beads and necklaces) had been taken from people who had once lived on the savannah plains, not on Mount Kilimanjaro, where people mostly wore leather coverings. However, we also recognized that whatever the names and categories inscribed on the labels of the Smithsonian, these objects were part and parcel of more complex histories than Abbott himself recorded. Clifford mentioned a similar awareness of the multiplicity of origin stories several years ago, when he wrote that collaborative work in a museum becomes “a sharing of authority” (quoted in Boast 2011:67). My sense interacting with Nuya and Jeremy in relation to Abbott’s goods was that we were all pooling our disparate and distributed authority.

Seen in this way, namely as a social location from which knowledge about history and people emerge, ethnology is a wide-ranging conceptual project that involves a multiplicity of histories and materialities. In Abbott’s collection--and in some ways in Nuya’s commercial website--primordialist notions of ethnos and culture are evident. Comparing and contrasting the ethnology of Abbott’s day with the ethnological elements of Nuya’s platform allows us to reflect on a myriad of important questions including: How have primordialist sentiments been distributed across communities, such that Nuya and I, but not Abbott or his Smithsonian acquisitionists, could see some objects as ‘Chagga’ and others not? And what kinds of collaborative practices are producing the changing relations between ethnologist and the field?

It is in this context (of Nuya’s vantage of Tanzania from working

online and living in Canada) that I again suggest that the concept of performativity is usefully extended to help us think about ethnology and material collections and the ways that collections are made and experienced through activities embedded in social situations. Rather than being an a priori conceptual scheme into which people are catalogued or self-selected by identity, language, birth or the like, ethnology, as seen from within a performativity approach, observes that people are constituted through repetitive iterations of what they deem, also iteratively, to be cultural.

Through a performativity approach, we can more clearly see ethnology as a convention, a set of norms about culture that operates in multiple simultaneous ways, as a formative period of anthropology rooted in different nationalist and imperialist contexts in Europe and North America, an umbrella term to include comparative research about culture, as well as the study of a local community (also known as ethnography), and even as a concept that reflects multiple divergent histories of culture, some of which have nothing vested in historical legacies with Western Europe or North America linked to ideas of *ethnos*, nationalism, and increasingly, transnationalism and internationally and globally connected communities.

Focusing on the boxing and unboxing of an “African” collection in the Smithsonian and on Nuya’s online business, the following pages continue to examine ethnology as a performance by which culture is (re)produced contextually through interactions.

### **Abbott’s boxed materials**

Founded in 1883, the Smithsonian Division of Anthropology was first headed by Curator of Ethnology Otis T. Mason. Mason was “fascinated by the evolution of human invention” (Isaac and Bell 2013: 783) and, under his direction, natural scientists--key among them, William Louis Abbott--were instructed to collect objects that would reflect what Mason saw as the evolutionary progression of people from savagery to civilization (Taylor 2015).

Accordingly, Abbott collected and catalogued his East Africa materials into five broad categories: “Dress and Adornment,” “Architectural Objects and Furniture,” “Culinary Utensils,” “Agricultural and Industrial Implements,” “Weapons of the Chase and of War,” and “Musical Instruments and Ceremonial Objects” (Abbott 1891). And, lest Abbott’s knowledge remain too deeply unarticulated in the two hundred forty-seven objects he collected from East Africa, Mason encouraged him to author a report on

“Ethnological Collections in the U.S. National Museum from Kilima-Njaro, East Africa.” In opening with a standard account of the people, climate and foodstuffs, Abbott’s report bears the nineteenth-century ideal identifying and locating a people according to a territory. Turning his attention toward social interactions, Abbott writes about one of the chiefs on the mountain:

Mandara has had more intercourse with strangers than any other chief, and has accumulated European curiosities of every imaginable description--toy steam engines, clocks, guns of many patterns, stereoscopes, sewing machines, cavalry helmets, and books, uniforms, and indeed one can scarcely tell what he has not got (385).

This is an excellent example of Byrne’s and colleagues’ (2011:4) observation that collections are “not merely *material assemblages* but also *social collections*.” Some of Mandara’s objects were gifts from Abbott that instantiated Abbott’s and Mandara’s unequal and contingent terms of exchange. In the context of violence and competition, Mandara sought high prestige items from Abbott; Abbott sought items from Mandara that he could ship back to the Smithsonian. Among these goods were boxes and chains.

Abbott writes (in a letter dated August 10, 1889): “[Mandara] said he wanted 2 beautiful iron boxes -- steel water-tight tanks he meant, so I have ordered these and also a working model of a locomotive.” He also notes that among the goods stolen from captured caravans were loads of wire, beads and gun powder--elements, I would note, that go into the making of such items as the Smithsonian’s snuffboxes. Elsewhere Abbott notes Chagga have a special ability to make chains. He says in effect that the Chagga were fine ironworkers. Yet he also suggests that many of the traded chains were made and used around and beyond Kilimanjaro--a sidebar in Abbott’s report that corroborates (and vice versa) Nuya’s and my sense that, despite the Smithsonian labels of these objects as “Chagga”, they are collected from a wider region. Concomitantly, one might reasonably infer that a “Chaga snuffbox” so recorded in the Smithsonian’s ethnology collection might have been made and used in a variety of ways. The objects coded and boxed as Chagga may have been the product of broader and contested interactions.

In a Butlerian sense, then, Abbott’s ethnological report and collection brings into being the object he names--not the objects of Mandara’s trains or clocks but of Mandara as an ethnological subject. Abbott creates the ethnological subject he seeks by declaring it like but different from--and lesser than--himself, and then he repeats this dyad of super-ordinate self and

sub-ordinate for his audience of readers and Smithsonian anthropologists. The results of Abbott's performance are coded in the museum as a social fact, but not so much a social fact that it cannot be unboxed here and repacked. In Abbott's collection, Chagga are an ethnological category that is then repeated for an audience of readers and Smithsonian anthropologists--at least until Abbott's ethnological box is opened and re-established otherwise.

### **Unboxing Abbott's stuff**

This boxing up of objects and items, the institutional commissioning of reports, the performativity of trading and raiding, and the embedding of these activities in the "social life of things" (Appadurai 1986) such as the Maasai-cum-Chagga snuffbox, all make it seem that ethnology produces a direct relationship between ethnos (people) and place (geography). In the realm of daily life, however, whether in Abbott's day or now, anthropological analyses of ethnological collections operate more like a performance or activity. Anthropological analysis both relies on underlying cultural schema created in situational turns and it uncovers signs and practices that are producing and produced by people.

In the institutional realm of museums, nineteenth-century ethnology is one way of organizing experiences and knowledge for various audiences. Visitors, researchers and experts who collect and keep collections--these are the communities anticipated by museum staff. However, these days, ethnological curators have broadened the audience to target a newer community: that of the "source community" whose ancestors are presumed to have "sourced" collections. On the surface, and largely for legitimating ongoing museum funding and support from the broader public (all of which is reasonable and needed, I would stress), "source community" engagement with object and collections is essential.

What is less often recognized, however, is that the mobilization of public support has always been an aspect of museum making. As Boast (2011) and others (e.g., Peers and Brown 2003; Phillips and Steiner 1999) demonstrate, the concept of "source community" is problematic in that such a community has generally been produced by so-called naturalists seeking goods and through cultural-colonial "contact" (Clifford 1997). As early as the mid nineteenth century, the difference between commercially produced replicas and so-called authentic objects was blurry and, by traders, ignored if not intentionally manipulated (Phillips and Steiner 1999). Nonetheless, museologists continued to refer to creator communities as

source communities.

Today, museologists recognize this concept of source community is problematic, even as some scholars (e.g. Boast 2011) pigeonhole source communities as those who live on a global periphery.

In view of the fact that, as I am suggesting, the periphery and center are socially and geographically nested, the claim that so-called source communities are neo-colonized is possible but also questionable. Is Jeremy a source community? Is Nuya? Is sourcing all that people do? The concept is so apolitical; it seems to suggest that people provide and give information absent changing historical, political-economic, and cultural conditions. Instead of seeing the source community as creators or originators, I contend that a source community is performed--and undone--contextually, in the course of different interactions and performances. Nuya's and my Smithsonian interaction, as well as her online business compared to that of Abbott's collecting for the Smithsonian, suggests some ways to rethink how the fieldwork-fieldworker relationship is changing and the concept of source community both does not exist, yet has come to be.

During the two days Nuya, Jeremy and I spent together before visiting the Smithsonian collection, Nuya and I reviewed and rehearsed more than two-decades of shared memories. Our recollections were mixed with commentary about what we wanted professionally and personally. Nuya's generation who graduated secondary school in Tanzania in the 1990s frequently sought higher education and employment opportunities abroad. Successful students, usually coming from already wealthy and socially privileged families, generally sought to pursue a post-secondary degree in another British Commonwealth country. Sometimes, like Nuya, they became dual citizens and had children.

When we met with a same-age friend of Nuya over lunch, I told them about the Abbott collection and showed them a photo of the snuffbox that most interested me. "My grandmother used to take snuff!" Nuya's friend, Neema, announced. "She'd put it under her lower lip and if someone said something she didn't like, she'd spit at them. My grandmother was the Queen of Snuff!" We laughed and imagined Neema's grandmother spitting tobacco at her enemies.

The conversation became a kind of game in looking at and trying to locate Abbott's collection. I flipped through photos of Abbott's items that I had taken on my phone, and Nuya and Neema expressed mixed connection and apathy. The objects they saw were familiar yet general; and

perhaps because these two friends were not overwhelmed by a sense of these objects' authenticity (authenticity being, Phillips and Steiner note [1999: 17], a paradigm operationalized by imperialist economies), conversation then turned first to the problem of seeing "origins" and recognizing that most of these goods were used more widely than among the "Chaga." Conversation then turned toward the ways looking at Abbott's collection resembled shopping for gifts in an online catalogue. "This is like looking at Nuya's online store!" Neema said in so many words, adding that yes, she'd surely like to go shopping in Abbott's catalogue. Again we laughed, now in the course of imagining shopping for Christmas gifts coming from the Smithsonian.

Jokes notwithstanding, we rehearsed how both Abbott and Nuya bought and resold items from local manufacturers to a market overseas; and how their labels condensed long chains of social and economic interchanges. Abbott records in letters to his mother that he employed children to make models of houses and granaries, items too large and fragile (made of thatched trees and leaves) to ship to the Smithsonian. Nuya commissions suppliers in East Africa to make jewelry, handbags and household goods; most of these makers are women who work from and sell out of their homes.

Nuya's goods are labeled traditional earrings or African bracelets and do not detail the ethnicity or nationality of the maker. But both Abbott's and Nuya's catalogue systems are a kind of *bricolage* commissioned and created by them as collectors as they pick and choose objects from "traditional" local culture (cloth and beaded ornaments), hybrid European-African objects (Abbott includes an ebony handmade bowl and other items he used himself), and objects of unusual use. Their collections are in fact interesting representations of these collectors' lives spanning two continents and of the historical-contemporary eras in which they are supplying goods to an exogenous community.

Differences and similarities also can be seen in labeling. In fact, both Abbott's and Nuya's goods' labels are so deeply naturalizing that they make the reality they represent. Abbott's Chagga snuffboxes are Chagga (at least until unboxed) even though they are products of expansive trade networks. Nuya's laptop bags too are African because they are labeled and consumed that way. Ethnology or culture as a "thing" is thus naturalized and repeated. The Smithsonian takes up the goods as such and so do Nuya's buyers. Such identity as "ethnos" is inscribed through repeated activities. At the same time, these collections and suppliers are part of particular situated communities. Yet, now that "Chaga" live around the world, "source

communities” are no longer of a particular place. Rather than trying to rebox Abbott’s goods, or relabel or re-categorize them, Nuya, Neema, Jeremy and I played around with their uses and histories and tried to give them new situational and ethnological meaning.

### **Performance and Reiteration**

I recount this story about our visit to the Smithsonian collections to return to the question raised at the beginning of this paper: how to understand the ways that boxed collections pack away possibilities for discussion and memory, and the many ways ethnological collections present ethnographic space for re-setting and re-creating ethnology--not as, or as only, a schema for comparative analyses nor even as a case study of, e.g. ‘the Chaga’ such as were later to come after Abbott’s day (there are many), but for the relevance of ethnology to the world today, for the field’s relevance within a changing and, self evidently, a future that is unforeseeable.

Many have questioned the place of ethnology or anthropology and certainly of museums today. Trofanenko (2008) regards museums as essentializing. Wallace-Casey (2016) questions their historicity. Sabeti (2015) doubts museums’ creative potentiality. However, there are two possible counter-arguments: first, that ethnology is pedagogic and processual, that the experience of collecting and unpacking, and talking about ourselves and our histories is an ongoing project of discovery. The museum is a “method,” Nicholas Thomas (2010) writes; it is an opportunity to work anew with “originating communities” who might be consulted for exhibitions and research projects. Similarly, O’Hanlon (2000) approaches the ethnography of collecting as, itself, a form a movement from “obscurity to obloquy.” Both of these writers use anthropology to contextualize ethnological collecting and collections; however, I approach the matter in another way, from a framework of performativity. “Source” or “origination communities” are fluid and changing. Indeed, they are more fluid and changing than any documentation or written ethnography can predict or convey. These “mission failures” of academic and museological performances occur because ethnology is always unfolding and unattainable. Peformativity is a methodological and theoretical frame for investigating how people perform, and in performing, produce an effect or relation that is already known by the performer (Fajans 2015; Woronov 2007).

In other words, ethnology never fully attains the label, never fully captures or produces what it seeks to make; additional, reiterative



performances are always added to produce an ethnological subject. The same may be true of collectors making models for the Smithsonian. Abbott's "model houses and granaries," are examples of how regimes of ethnological knowledge in his day made the native through the collector's categories. In other words, ethnology is an ever changing mix of a 19th-century nationalist past, the competing quests and confusions of Euro-American colonial imperialism, and worldwide consumer capitalism. No single performance contains or expresses it.

In this respect, the fact that ethnology as thing or theory is unattainable but rather is performed tells us something about ethnology across the centuries. The many elements in the *bricolage* of ethnology, including in capitalist, consumerist and philanthropic modes, are not experienced as mutually exclusive. Indeed, Nuya recognized the value of collecting and buying and selling handcrafted artifacts. Instead, capitalist and traditionalist modalities come together to produce people as co-created subjects, embedded in the complexity of an always changing and uneven social world. Thus the puzzle that "if only we know the source and trajectories of where ethnology has been and will go" is no puzzle at all. The performativity of ethnology includes asking and interacting, packing and collecting, experiencing and discovering through interaction the practices we create and confront. Ethnology as praxis or performativity is a not-airtight whole, reiterated every day.

This leads to the second possible explanation for how online marketing compares with ethnological collections. I argued above against relying on an objectifying approach to ethnology and suggest that ethnological collections perform iterations about what culture 'is' and who people 'are.' Like all subjects, collectors and online marketers, as well as fieldworkers, perform within parameters that are available to them. Abbott had the guns and money to provision caravans and ship goods to the Smithsonian. Nuya had the MBA and international connections needed to commission craftspeople and shippers in East Africa to send goods around the world. And I had access to the Smithsonian collections and the opportunity to invite Nuya to see them. But these are only the conditions surrounding the possibility that what we set up and anticipated would happen. The larger point is that our engagements with these objects concealed their lack of single, stable essence.

By unboxing objects or comparing them to an online marketing e-catalogue, there is no *a priori* cultural subject that exists as Chagga or African; nor as Canadian or U.S. American, whether in Abbott's day or

ours. Instead, these cultural subjects are constituted through performances that are compelled to be repeated because the ideas and entities they boxed up and sold, or that were bought by institutions or online consumers or written and read by those interested in ethnology, can never fully meet the ideals or norms of a people and place.

In this sense, contents of the boxed and online collections are not icons of a people or ethnos but are simultaneous material-semiotic assemblages pointing to a wide range of social arrangements and practices that are necessary for ethnological performance. In fact, asking Nuya if the snuffboxes and shields and spears are from Mount Kilimanjaro led to the kind of conversation I opened this paper with. "What are these things?," we asked one another. "Are they from Kilimanjaro or somewhere else? Were they made on the spot, or used by people? Would anyone be interested in using or buying these kinds of things today?"

Regardless (or notwithstanding) the details of our answers, we were performing the ethnological enterprise. Searching and re-searching the ethnos in anthropology is itself a practice of ethnology, one that is a broad church of inquiry and intellectualism, key to Nuya's and my, no less than Abbott's inquiry.

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