WHAT CAN I SAY?

The Role of Dutch Curators in Representing African Culture
in a Context of Decolonization of the Museum

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Abstract and keywords

This thesis will discuss how curators perceive and understand their role in representing African culture in a context of decolonization of the museum. Thereby looking at the role of museums in society and the prevailing influence of a colonial history. The combination of an analysis of the publication 'Words Matter' (2018) by the Research Centre for Material Culture, and interviews with curators who are working on exhibitions about African culture, will provide a comprehensive overview of the current situation in museums. This thesis will offer the perspective of an outsider looking at the behind-the-scenes of museums and how they deal with research, collections and exhibitions of Africa. The results of this research show that curators are dealing with past practices of categorizing and (racial) stereotyping, which reflects the origins of ethnographic museums. In this context, curators perceive and understand their role as gatekeepers and storytellers, which implies that they decide which stories are told and in which ways, thus carrying a lot of responsibility.

Nowadays, there has been a lot of critique on the way museums present and represent 'other' people and 'other' cultures. Museums have to deal with their colonial legacy in order to stay relevant, which has led to the process of decolonization. Current approaches are dealing with word choices and provenance research, but also focusing on the communities to include different voices in the creation of exhibitions. Besides this, curators aim to be socially concerned on different levels and want to contribute to mutual understandings in society. Their practices revolve around being self-aware and self-critical in the process of creating representations.

The process of decolonization is interesting as it marks a new direction for museums and involves a lot of internal processes regarding the role of curators. Through the in-depth interviews with curators working on exhibitions about African culture, more insights were obtained about the curatorial attitudes and practices in the context of decolonization of the museum. Moreover, the role of the curator is often neglected in other researches and is therefore of crucial importance in this thesis as it provides a dynamic overview of their role in representing African culture. Especially in the context of a 'booming' Africa, it is important that museums display the diversity and positive sides of developments in Africa.

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1 Introduction

Dating back to colonial times, objects, peoples and cultures have been interpreted from a predominantly Western perspective, reflecting the origins of ethnographic museums (Pearce, 1994, p. 10). In this context, curators play an important role in representing history, narratives, images and perceptions of nations and continents (Lord, 2006, p. 3). In particular, Africa and African culture is often steeped in stereotypes when (re)presented in museums and exhibitions.

Therefore, curators need to be aware of their own position and their influence on society in representing 'other' people and 'other' cultures, because representations can be subject to racial stereotyping or may be seen as "exotic and mystical" (Said, 1994, p. 9). The objects in museum collections often disclose a colonial legacy, by for example being stolen during this period of injustice and great inequality in power relations. To counter this, the process of 'decolonization of the museum' has finally become more visible by statements of several museums in the Netherlands, such as the Rijksmuseum and the Afrika Museum.

The process of decolonization is about changing perceptions and relationships between the colonizer and the colonized, for example in acknowledging the rights and perspectives of 'other' people, who used to be ignored (Simpson, 2001, p. 2). By empowering these new voices, the authority of established voices could be diminished as curators are asking themselves: *what can I say?* (Smith, 2005, p. 435).

Recently, the National Museum for World Cultures (NMVW) has published guidelines asking for the restitution of works taken without consent (NMVW, 2019). The Rijksmuseum followed upon this and declared that they will act by sending researchers to former colonies who will develop guidelines on how to deal with claims for returning artefacts (Brassem & de Wolf, 2019; Boffey, 2019).

In addition to researching the origins of objects, the process of decolonization should also entail considering what stories are told and which words are used in doing so. Above all, the increased tensions in society about issues of representation, for example on the Africa Museum in Brussels, have led to changing dynamics that curators have to deal with (Snijders, 2018, para. 1).

Therefore, this master thesis will analyze the role of curators in the representation of African art and culture, on the basis of the following question: How do Dutch curators perceive and understand their role in representing African culture in a context of

decolonization of the museum, and how does this affect practices in the process of creating exhibitions?

The challenges of current dynamics will be discussed in-depth with curators who are involved in representing African culture in exhibitions. In the Netherlands, ethnographic museums have merged into one organization, called the National Museum for World Cultures, which makes them of particular interest, as these ethnographic museums are always working on exhibitions about Africa and African culture.

1.1 Relevance

Former research has focused on issues of representation in museums (e.g. Simpson, 2001; Barringer & Flynn, 1998; Macdonald, 1998; Pearce, 1994), but often lacks a focus on the role of curators and their practices in creating exhibitions. Curators are dealing with limitations and possibilities of representation, for example in exhibiting new objects and incorporating popular art. Therefore, the societal relevance of this thesis will be to add the dimension of day-to-day activities of curators concerning cultural representation of Africa in museum exhibitions in the Netherlands. More specifically, it will clarify the translation from vision to practice.

The academic relevance is reinforced by the relatively scarce research that has recently been conducted on the impact of decolonization of the museum, which is indicating a gap in the literature and leaving input for the current behind-the-scenes processes of museums and personal experiences of curators. The process of decolonization is interesting as it marks a new direction for museums and involves a lot of internal processes regarding the role of curators.

The purpose of this thesis is to add to the current debate about representation of African art and culture by analyzing the role of curators in this process. Curators are defined as people who are initiating and contributing to exhibitions, in museums or independently, permanent or temporary.

In doing so, the aim is to provide insight in the visions concerning the topic and to complement this with day-to-day practices in the museums, such as which choices have been made to select and innovate exhibitions and which motivations underlie these changes. The thesis is focusing on the creation of exhibitions, as this is the final output of the work of curators. Other aspects of curatorial practices, such as research and collections, will also be discussed in their past and current context.

1.2 Scope

The focus of the analysis will be on how different curators perceive and understand their role in representing African culture and how they bring this in practice. A mixed-method approach is used to connect the visions and practices of curators. Firstly, a qualitative content analysis of the publication 'Words Matter' (2018) is used to discover visions and ideas about the processes of decolonization of the museum and challenges regarding representation. Secondly, in-depth interviews with curators working on exhibitions about African culture were conducted to create an understanding of the current dynamics and the day-to-day decisions that influence what is represented and in what way.

The National Museum of World Cultures, which is the collaboration between the four ethnographic museums in the Netherlands, forms an important point of reference in the research. In 2014, the four museums fused into one administrative body in Leiden but have kept their own public locations in Leiden, Amsterdam, Rotterdam and Berg en Dal. All museums are addressing topics about humans from different parts of the world, showing how cultures are connected and how to give meaning to cultural identities and histories. The museums share their mission, which is to "contribute to inspiring world citizenship nationally and internationally" (NMVW, 2019, p. 4), and have connected their academic research activities in the Research Centre for Material Culture.

Recently, the document 'Words Matter' (2018) was published by the research center, in which the importance of choosing the right words to describe objects, peoples and practices is discussed. This publication is used as a guideline for museum staff and reflecting on how to make representations in a context of decolonization. The document will be used as the common ground between the four museums and is regarded as a visionary approach to the challenges of representation by curators and researchers.

When discussing the output of the work of curators in exhibitions, it would be interesting to investigate public perceptions of African art and culture, but this will be beyond the scope of this thesis. Most of the curators aim to be socially concerned and want to have an impact on society in changing ideas about Africa, which is something that is relevant, but hard to measure. Besides this, the return of cultural objects attained during colonial times is a topic that might come up during the interviews, but in this thesis, there will not be paid in-depth attention to this relatively current issue. The restitution of goods is a significant part of decolonization and thus of relevance, but also entails a lot more political and organizational debates, which are not about the role of curators.

Similarly, there will be no attention to specific objects and their origins, or their perceptions by the curator or public. Instead, the research focuses on different aspects of the roles of curators and their practical choices in addressing challenges of representation. So, the curatorial perspective will be dominant in order to remain focused on their attitudes and practices.

The next section will present the theoretical framework for the research on the role of museums in society and the challenges regarding representation. A special focus will be on curatorial practices in exhibitions, followed by a sub-section about representation of African culture, which will both already touch upon some of the approaches that will be discussed into further detail in the interviews with curators. The methods that were used are elaborated on in the third chapter, which includes an operationalization of the main concepts, the process of data collection and the coding procedure. The analyses will combine the curatorial guidelines of 'Words Matter' (2018) with the perceived role of curators and their curatorial practices, looking at the dimensions of research, collections and exhibitions. Then, the fourth chapter discusses into depth the results of the analysis, which show specific examples of the dimensions and provide an overview of the actual reality in the museums nowadays. The fifth and final chapter will provide an answer to the research question, and discuss limitations, implications and suggestions for further research.

2 Theoretical framework

The following section will introduce several theories concerning the challenges of representation, in which context they can be placed and how to deal with them. The theories will form a framework for the rest of the thesis and contribute to a better understanding of the findings. The first part of this theoretical overview will focus on literature about the role of museums in society, and in particular ethnographic museums.

Numerous researchers discuss this topic, yet I have chosen to consider the following three roles: educational purposes, making culture accessible by engaging the public, and being part of identity formation. These roles were seen most relevant as they were discussed frequently and can also be derived from the general definition of museum provided by ICOM.

The main theories can be applied to different kinds of museums, when a theory or statement is only suiting ethnographic museums, this will be stated explicitly. Speaking about this, an ethnographic museum is different from other museums, because of its history as colonial institute aimed at educating people about 'other' cultures from the colonies, which is now a contested idea. Whereas for example, art or science museums, have to deal with different challenges, which needs different approaches.

In the second part of the theoretical framework, the challenges regarding representation in ethnographic museums will be discussed, which have to do with distribution of power and challenges of colonialized representation. These challenges find their origins in colonial times and led to the current approach of decolonization of the museums. In the processes of creating exhibitions, curators play an important role, and therefore the third section will discuss their role in museums, which can be applied to other people of the museum staff working on exhibitions as well. Then, the final section will focus specifically on representation of African art and culture in museums, but also in auctions. Thereby considering different perspectives on the framing of Africa and African culture, in order to find out to what extent colonialism and imperialism have left a legacy on representation in museum exhibitions. The two main concepts of this framework that will be discussed in the context of decolonization of the museum, are; representation of African culture and curatorial practices, and will be interwoven throughout this theoretical framework.

2.1   Roles of museums in society

In the first place, it is important to understand the role of a museum in society to determine the ways in which representational issues can take place. Moreover, it will provide insights in the impact of museums on society nowadays. The International Council of Museums (ICOM) provides a general definition of a museum, which will be employed throughout this thesis:

> A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment. (ICOM, 2007)

This definition also mentions different tasks of curators more specifically, such as to acquire, conserve, research, communicate and exhibit heritage, which will be discussed later on (idem.). Museums began as equivalent of a cultural memory bank of human society but have evolved into much more over the years (Dean, 2002, p. 1). In most modern societies, museums are a major public investment; their origins reflecting the conditions that led to the creation of nation states over 200 years ago (Hein, 2005, p. 357). The influence of museums as a major cultural force in society is often underestimated (idem.). Whereas in the past, museums were perceived as elitist institutions, today many museums have close relationships with the communities they are displaying and have proven to be relevant and functional in addressing contemporary issues (Simpson, 2001, p. 247).

As mentioned in the definition by ICOM and found in various academic sources, the purpose of education and study is important for museums and thus will be discussed in the first following sub-section about educating the public. The other two purposes are identity formation and engagement of the audience, which can also be taken from the definition. Namely, a museum does function as a place of identity formation by exhibiting "tangible and intangible heritage of humanity", which will be the topic of the second sub-section (ICOM, 2007). Besides this, the museum is also a place for leisure time and should therefore be a place of enjoyment, which will be discussed in the section about engaging the public.

2.1.1 Educating the public

As public institutions for the preservation of the past and of cultures, education is at the center of museum activities (Hein, 2005). By striving to educate the audience, the museum develops understandings of the people and cultures it displays (McLean, 2008, p. 283). They try to contextualize the artefacts and to create meaning from it, which shows their mediating role in the process of meaning-making. In this process, museums can be seen as an alternative educational partner for schools, providing invaluable and unparalleled access to knowledge (Dean, 2002, p. 6).

It is a great responsibility to preserve and present this knowledge. One museum visit can stimulate the interest of a student in a certain topic, thus making museum education important in a student's personal development. In practice, the educational staff of a museum may represent fifty percent of all employees, and they are engaging in a broad range of activities, such as family programs, school programs, classes and online educational programs (Hein, 2006, p. 344). However, museums carry out more than these kinds of tasks, they are also "organizing community festivals, developing partnerships with universities and city agencies, setting up video-conferencing, and assisting students to curate exhibitions on museum websites" (idem.). Museum education is a broad and demanding field, which is constantly changing and expanding.

In another article, Hein (2005) introduces 'constructivist theory' as the most powerful and suitable theory to understand museum education, which focuses on how people learn and how meaning is constructed. The constructivist approach entails the view that learning is an active process of meaning-making and constructing concepts of the encountered phenomena (Hein, 2005, p. 359). In the so-called 'Constructivist Museum', the goal is to facilitate opportunities for visitors to reach their own understandings and thus forcing the authoritative curatorial voice to be muted or modified (Hein, 2006, p. 347).

The constructivist approach for museums is agreed upon by Lidchi (2006) and she argues that this can be defined as a triangular relationship (p. 94). Meaning that in general, museums should connect objects, people and meanings. This is a powerful way to describe the core of all museum work, which is focused on facilitating the relationship between objects, people and meaning (Lidchi, 2006, p. 94). In that sense, constructivism is a dynamic process, in which museums give meaning to (tangible or intangible) artefacts and visitors create meaning.

Therefore, it is important to recognize that nowadays the attitudes and ideas of people visiting a museum will affect not only their interpretation of what they see, but also the experience they take away with them (Watson, 2007, p. 29). In doing so, museums have to keep in mind that every visitor has his or her own personal background, influencing the way experiences of visiting a museum are interpreted and how meaning is created.

One should continue to argue that this does also imply that any experience in a museum has validity, even if it does not match with the accepted 'truth', presented by a particular culture or profession (Hein, 2005, p. 359). Museums are displaying the objects, but they are not the only ones imposing meaning. It has become an active process where the audience involves in meaning-making and what is perceived as the truth. Nowadays, one can argue that museums should be accessible institutions for people with different backgrounds having particular experiences and thus encouraging everyone in society to visit and participate in their exhibitions. Nevertheless, museums can contribute to personal and national identity formation, which will be discussed in the next sub-section.

2.1.2 Identity formation

Museums have played and still play important roles in the formation of (national) identity through telling stories and displaying tangible and intangible heritage. They are tools by which nations 'imagine' themselves (Anderson, 1983, p. 49). By colonial powers, the museum as a means of supporting identity formation of nations was exported across the world (Watson, 2007, p. 6). Also, globalization has contributed to the way communities in different nations have been encouraged to think about how they view themselves, and museums form a part of this process of global identity making (idem.).

When we talk about museums as contributors to identity formation and how they do so, McLean (2008) provides a great overview of three layers to the negotiation of identities in museum representations. In one of her earlier publications, she defines representation as "the process by which members of a culture produce meaning" (McLean, 1998, p. 247). So, meaning is not directly derived from a certain object, but from how it is represented. In this process, the first of these layers is about the identities of those encoding the representations; second, the identities of those decoding the representations; and finally, the identities of those being represented (McLean, 2008, p. 284). The first layer represents the ones who regulate the museum and create the displays. This has much to do with the politics of regulation in the museum and attracting

a more diverse museum staff, in particular ethnic minorities. The second layer is about the increasing social responsibility of a museum, which deals with inclusiveness in exhibitions and diversification of the visiting public. The third layer of the identities of those on display, has implications for the contemporary people who associate themselves with the cultures. (idem.) All of the three layers are of interest when looking at curatorial practices regarding representational challenges.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the establishment of museums and nation-states increased rapidly with the advance of industrial capitalism, scientific knowledge, and the increasing access to knowledge in more open and democratic societies (Kaplan, 2006, p. 165). Nowadays, museums are sometimes understood as "secular sites of contestation and representation", as places where groups are competing to define and redefine "themselves" as nations (idem.).

It was therefore argued that everything we see in a museum is put under the pressure of a way of seeing (Alpers, 1991). This means that the objects on display, the topics discussed and the connections that are made, and in which order, influence our way of perception. Who is able to tell the stories is a question of power (Thumim, 2010, p. 291). Specifically for ethnographic museums, it is therefore important to consider how the histories of particular objects and collections, and of the institutions itself could become lenses to look at much larger questions of cross-cultural and colonial history (Thomas, 2010, p. 10). So, through what museums present and collect, they define identity and give meaning.

2.1.3 Engaging the public

When we focus on ethnographic museums, their exhibitions are often defined as one of the primary means for people to access 'other' cultures (Lidchi, 2006, p. 94). Therefore, ethnographic museums and their displays act as vehicles for the public understanding of other cultures. Amongst others, Lidchi (2006) suggests for ethnographic museums to highlight the cross-cultural encounters that have co-created these specific products on display in order to make people understand the processes that precede an exhibition in a museum (p. 96). Yet, there are other researchers who argue that the entertainment factor of exhibitions should not be ignored in engaging the public (Dean, 2002, p. 6). Since in a relaxed and enjoyable environment, visitors are more willing to learn and to continue learning.

Besides this, a museum often seeks to develop and employ techniques that encourage greater dialogue with the visitors (Macdonald, 1998, p. 98). Therefore, one of the most important roles for a museum is to engage not only with their visitors, but to make them in turn engage with society and societal issues. Nowadays, museum have the possibility of being critical about society in their exhibitions and they should use this power to engage people in debates about controversial topics. On the one hand, engaging the public overlaps with the educational role of a museum as museums have to introduce these topics to let people learn about new aspects. On the other hand, their efforts should aim one (or two) steps further, in which people are encouraged to create an opinion about certain topics and raise their interest in order to possibly act upon it.

In conclusion, the roles of museums in society are varying from preserving history in order to educate people, to engaging people in societal issues, and to tools of identity formation in creating representations. In that way, museums are part of the production of the past in the present, they are part of our heritage (Harrison, 2013, p. 5). More specifically, museums have the power to decide which artefacts are put on display and how they will be explained. Yet nowadays, they often leave space for input from the audience, for example in leaving comments on a wall. This is one of the ways to engage the public and stimulate their thoughts about the exhibitions and to create an opinion and deeper meaning about it.

It shows that museums have to deal with complex societal dynamics on various levels, making the creation of exhibitions an interesting process. However, the theories also touched upon the inequality in power in 'telling the story' and creating representations, an inequality that might prevail in the creation of exhibitions in museums. This topic will be discussed in the next section, which aims to answer more specifically the question what the issues are concerning representation in ethnographic museums.

2.2   Issues of representation in ethnographic museums

The previous section about the roles of museums, already touched upon the issues of representation, which might arise during the creation of exhibitions. This section will focus on the challenges that underlie the dynamics of making representations in ethnographic museums in particular. As ethnographic museums are often described by academics as the cultural institutions that have the power to tell stories, there might occur difficulties in representation of 'other' people and 'other' cultures (Anderson, 1983). Representation will always be a delicate topic and can be defined as "the description or portrayal of someone or something in a particular way" (Oxford University Press, 2019).

Thereby it always includes the assumption of certain things that are regarded as the 'truth'. In the context of a museum, this means that curators should be really careful in the words they use, and what is portrayed as being an accurate representation. When making representations in exhibitions, there should always be an awareness about one's position and background, which has an influence on what is perceived as true. Therefore, curators should be careful as they are in a position of deciding about someone else's stories and experiences.

In that sense, there should be particular attention to questions about representation in museums – that is, to how meanings come to be inscribed and by whom, and how some come to be regarded as 'right' or taken as given (Macdonald, 1998, p. 6). This has much to do with movements of increasing diversity in ethnographic museums as well, which aims for more inclusive institutions by for example promoting diversity in the museum staff and the visiting public. Diverse and inclusive museums should have a place for each and every one, and not scare away from difficult discussions about this, as most museums are still 'white' institutions founded in colonial times. These questions of representation and ownership, can be traced back to the colonial era, and are now demanding solutions in the changed relationships of the post-colonial era (Simpson, 2001, p. 2). Colonialism has played a significant role in shaping the collections and the audiences that use them, which has left its legacy on museum exhibitions (idem.).

The discourse produced by colonial influence informs the design of museums exhibits in three different ways, according to Smith (2005), who identified three governing concepts: the boundary, the label and the meta-narrative (p. 424). The 'boundary' is relevant because "it allows the classification of collections according to time and space

as well as the dichotomies essential to colonialism, such as that of 'self' and 'other'" (pp. 424-425). The 'label' is important as it shows that the unknown is known, and that the world can be ordered. The 'metanarrative' is important because it demonstrates the authority of the institution and the positional superiority of the colonizers. (p. 425) All together, these concepts shape the colonial legacy of museum exhibitions, thereby normalizing the power relations essential to cultural hegemony. To challenge these concepts is an important step in the process of decolonization, and this is something curators have to deal with on a daily basis. In the following sub-sections, the challenges of colonialized representation and the unequal distribution of power, will be discussed into further detail.

2.2.1 Challenges of colonialized representation

When it comes to representation, ethnographic museums have to deal with several complicated topics, such as associations of anachronism, disturbing histories of colonialism and movements of multiculturalism (Blackwood & Purcell, 2014, p. 238). One cannot ignore the colonial legacy, which has led to a new approach that aims to decolonize the museums and their systems of documentation and classification (Turner, 2015, p. 659; Smith, 2005, p. 424). To a certain extent, decolonization of the museum has to do with research about what the legacy is of certain objects that were taken during times of colonialization, who collected them and why they did so. But it also has to do with decisions that are made about what is displayed and how.

Since 2015, the Dutch National Museum of World Cultures has worked on interventions that critique the language, imagery and accessibility of its current exhibitions (Warsame, 2018, para. 2). As part of a group of co-curators that were invited to set up an exhibition at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, Sumaya Kassim (2017) wrote a critical essay named 'the museum will not be decolonized', in which she argues that decoloniality is a very complex set of ideas, which "requires complex processes, space, money, and time, otherwise it runs the risk of becoming another buzzword, like 'diversity'" (Kassim, 2017, para. 10). She argues that we should be careful and critical when museums claim to commit themselves to 'diversity', 'inclusion' and 'decoloniality', as this goes deeper than just being represented in a museum (idem.). Nevertheless, the context of decolonization of the museum became part of the title of this thesis as it shows the current dynamics and controversy around this topic.

Obviously, the controversy started during colonial times, when objects were often taken without consent and then interpreted from a predominantly Western perspective.

The categories and documentations of artefacts have developed and formed a basis for standards of practice at modern museums. This is not something new, already in the nineties, the book 'Colonialism and the Object' by Barringer and Flynn (1998) was published, where one can find several case studies of challenges regarding colonized representation in institutions of the British empire. For example, the framing of Chinese culture and art in the British Museum is discussed by Craig Clunas (1998), who argues that art is 'a way of categorizing', a manner of creating knowledge that has been applied to a wider set of manifestations of material culture (p. 43).

This continues to be a site of conflicting interpretations, because most of the Chinese elite categorizations of art excluded much of the Chinese material that was displayed in museums, such as chairs, ceramic wine jars and items of clothing (Clunas, 1998, p. 43). However, these are the artefacts that visitors now recognize as Chinese culture, and thus often will stay on display. Clunas does not mention recommendations or changes in display, thus colonialism remained displaced into culture (p. 50). The next sub-section will focus on another aspect the challenges regarding representation, which is the power imbalance prevailing from colonial times.

2.2.2 Distribution of power

The challenges of representation are issues of power and knowledge. Taking a Foucauldian perspective (1977, 1979), Macdonald argues that, power and knowledge are "thoroughly mutually implicated", because power is involved in the construction of truth and has implications for power (Macdonald, 1998). Therefore, it is important to ask questions regarding the consequences of specific forms of representation in terms of the distribution of power, like: "who is empowered or disempowered by certain modes of display?" (Macdonald, 1998, p. 4). This shows the importance of determination of meaning and the distributions of power that are defined in museum exhibitions and is something that should be taken into account in researching curatorial practices.

One of the prevailing challenges in curatorial practices is that through the preferences, decisions and social interactions of the curatorial staff, board of directors, and donors, museums might be promoting a narrative of whiteness (Blackwood & Purcell, 2014, p. 240). Narratives of whiteness are privileged cultural constructs, primarily Western and white, examples of how museums are still showing parts of colonial history. This challenge can be linked back to the first layer of representation as presented by McLean (2008), which is about the identities and backgrounds of those encoding the representations. Moreover, this reflects the power to reproduce narratives

of whiteness as the dominant view, which alternatively become the social reality, perceived by the public as normal and legitimate (Blackwood & Purcell, 2014, p. 240).

The theory of Bourdieu (1989) about social space and symbolic power underlies these assumptions and claims that someone's social position is defined by their location in a social space, which exists of economic, social, cultural, and symbolic resources. When the access to these resources is differing between people, it creates a variation in social relationship with individuals and (within) groups. So, a social space, such as a museum, can be a place of conflict, or of collective unity. The resources include cultural images and symbols, which can be labeled as 'schemata of classification'; a symbolic language that creates and reflects social reality (Bourdieu, 1989). In that sense, those in control of these 'schemata' control the social space, and in turn, the social positions within. This might lead to social space (or museums) as a mean of exclusion by the dominant groups that control the resources.

Consequently, there has been a move towards self-representation of audiences as consequence of tensions regarding the debatable role of museums in the late twentieth century (Thumim, 2010, p. 294). This has become clear in (usually subtle) changes in ethnographic museums in response to the pressure of becoming culturally inclusive, recognizing coexisting modernity of all people, developing multivocal interpretative strategies and becoming increasingly accessible to non-traditional audiences (Philips, 2007, p. 9). This means that in museums, everyone is perceived equally and has the right to share in the experience. Overall, these new methods are a reaction to the challenges of representation, countering the colonial legacy that might still be visible in museum institutions and exhibitions nowadays.

In conclusion, one can argue that representation in ethnographic museums can be quite a challenge that involves complex subverting processes. The legacy of colonialism is deeply rooted in our society and minds, and we need to consider concepts like 'decolonialization of the museum' as they carry a deep layer of implications. All these challenges have to with unequal distributions of power and certain prevailing structures in organizations. One of the main solutions can be to more actively stimulate dialogues between curators, the museum, visitors and society. This way, the museum will become a more accessible institution for people to visit and engage, thus tackling the issues that might prevail around the so-called 'narratives of whiteness'. In the next section the role of a curator will be further discussed, focusing on their practices regarding representational challenges.

2.3   Curatorial practices regarding representation

In the process of initiating, creating and coordinating exhibitions, the museum staff and especially curators play an important role. Curators work on different levels, such as research and collections, in order to create the exhibitions. Curatorial practices can be defined as everything that is done to create exhibitions; it is the day-to-day work of a curator working on the museum's output. The nature of interpretation is examined in terms of viewer-response, which leads to a discussion of the relationship between individual responses and the social consensus of meaning, and so the role of the curator (Pearce, 1994, p. 21). Therefore, this section will discuss the role of curators in addressing the challenges regarding representation. These challenges have their influence on all the dimensions of work, so research, collections and exhibitions.

When we talk about the role of curators, one can argue that they act as civic agents to promote general discourse on issues such as the changing concepts of race, ethnicity, politics and culture (Blackwood & Purcell, 2014, p. 238). Curators are seen as the 'gatekeepers' of museums as they choose which objects are exhibited, which artists are displayed, how art and artist are presented, and how the audience interacts with the art within the frame of the physical and ideological space of the museum (p. 239). There are different ways of curating, the first sub-section will focus on the role of curators, challenges and developments in general. Then, the currently most popular form of 'dialogical curating', will be discussed into further depth in the second sub-section, connecting it to the context of decolonization.

2.3.1   The role of a curator

Over the years, there has been a lot of critique on museum practice, which mainly had to do with categorization, management and storage of things in an offensive or even dangerous way (Harrison, 2013, p. 221). In the past, curatorial practices have mainly focused on just presenting objects and imposing meaning on them. While nowadays, the focus is more or less on leaving space to create one's own meaning and to be open about the processes that precede exhibitions. Therefore, museums have recently begun to acknowledge 'indigenous' categories and curatorial practices as equal forms of expertise as of museum curators (idem.).

Contemporary approaches to curation aim to take into account the power dynamics and give a voice to the communities on display. However, one of the challenges of museums working with communities is how to determine that the majority view is represented by the spokespeople (Watson, 2007, p. 12). It can be very difficult

to negotiate between contested versions of stories among communities and across generations (idem.). In this process, the role of the curator is crucial and belief in impartiality is not without contestation.

Ideally, curators act with historical carefulness, a self-conscious awareness of the theory of their practice and an understanding of how meaning and knowledge are negotiated and mediated with a fine-tuned sensitivity to the process of cultural translation (Shelton, 2000, p. 5). In this way, one can argue that curating is a constant process of self-reflection and awareness in the process of representing different cultures with integrity. Harrison (2013) argues that notion of 'curatorial responsibility' carries within it two concepts: care and responsibility (p. 222). This implies that curators have a certain responsibility to the things themselves, which might be different from the obligations to the individuals and groups on display (idem.). All in all, curators should be aware of their position and background, and use their responsibility carefully.

Similarly, the distinction between what is 'primitive art' and 'fine art' is important in creating exhibitions and can have a major influence on the perception of African arts and culture. Thus, curators have to deal with the categorization and status of 'indigenous' arts (Simpson, 2001, p. 251). As part of the developments in creating more inclusive institutions, museums want to attract new audiences and develop greater relevance to the communities which previously have been the subject of research but have not benefited from this (p. 253).

Besides this challenge, there are often a lot of practical and economic restraints to fulfilling the role as curator. Often times, a curatorial team is designed to fulfill multiple agendas and commitments, such as achieving high and competitive standards of presentation, good design and adequate scientific support, which can comprise their expectations of creating a good exhibition (Shelton, 2000, p. 5). Overall, this makes the role of curators rather difficult to define as it involves many dynamics and nuances.

2.3.2 Dialogical curating in a context of decolonization

As mentioned before, the most popular approach to challenges in representation is to let the public 'speak for themselves', but also to influence important debates in society, which is often referred to as dialogical curating (Thumim, 2010, p. 294). This approach is linked to the process of decolonization as it often involves the local communities and the communities on display, and also leaves space for different perspectives and other implications on the presented topics. Some examples of what dialogical curating might look like, are: openness of the curatorial process to collaboration; to understand the

exhibition as process-based, rather than output-based; to welcome visitors as participants in dialogue and possibly contributing to the exhibition; and a focus on the exhibition as a space to share knowledge and memory, rather than presenting objects (Unruh, 2015, p. 88).

All these aspects already became clear in the statements by Sumaya Kassim (2017) as she argued for more dialogues and openness of the curatorial process as part of decolonization strategies. Besides this, it is important to see exhibitions as a process, rather than having a fixed output, which can be done by inviting visitors to contribute to the dialogue or the exhibition itself. In this case, it offers the possibility for a museum to be a place where people can share their experiences and knowledge. In her book about 'The Participatory Museum', Simon (2010) argues that curators have the goal to make visitors create, share and connect with each other, in contrast to traditional exhibits, where the institution provide content for the visitor to consume (p. 2). This is for many museums a new area and requires trust in their visitors, yet it would be a great opportunity.

In conclusion to this section about curatorial practices, one can argue that the role of curators is important, but also faces numerous challenges in regard to distribution of power and questions about representation. On the hand, curators have the power to tell stories about 'other' people and decide what will be put on display, but nowadays are feeling the pressure of being inclusive and incorporating all possible voices. On the other hand, there is often a lot of critique coming from academics, visitors and communities about exhibitions and displays, which has created space for a dialogical approach to curating. Dialogical curating includes openness to collaboration and making exhibitions a process, in which visitors are open to participate in the exhibitions, in discussions or in contributing in another way. One could argue that this is having an impact on the overall role of museums in society, as it becomes a place to share knowledge and memory, rather than just presenting objects and imposing meaning on them. The next section will more specifically elaborate on the representation of African art and culture in exhibitions.

2.4   Exhibitions about African culture

By now, it will be clear that representing 'other' people and 'other' cultures is a complex practice, which involves many choices and considerations on how to deal with historical cultural discourses. This section will deal with the representation of African culture in exhibitions, discussing the challenges and developments, increasing participation of artists from the African continent, but also looking from different perspectives to the framing of African culture. To define a culture is not easy, as it entails innumerable elements and personal opinions, especially when we talk about a continent as diverse and large as Africa. Therefore, African culture should not be limited to certain objects or traditions, but one should be open for personal experiences and interpretations in order to broaden ideas about culture. Nevertheless, in this thesis 'African culture' will be defined as cultural interpretations from Africans or Africans of descent.

African arts and culture are historical products of a complex process, in which actual realities of people have become 'objects of knowledge' when they were understood, classified and defined as cultural symbols observed from the traditional Western cultural perspectives (Mudimbe, 1986, p. 3). This is still clear in the fact that exhibitions are often criticized for their failure to represent traditional or tribal societies as dynamic, living cultures (Simpson, 2001, p. 35).

Since the birth of African nationalism in the 1950s, African people have consistently sought to tell their own stories and since the past thirty years, Western curators and museums have been challenged by both African diaspora curators and curators on the continent for telling the African story (Chikukwa, 2011, p. 225). For example, by the involvement of more Africans in the creation of exhibitions and them being part of the process of curating. In particular, numerous curators have emerged from the African continent, indicating a curatorial development of more diversity. But also, some African artists have been part of solo or retrospective exhibitions in major Western museums (p. 227).

Other researchers have tried to identify the challenges of representation of African culture, their insights are interesting and relevant for this thesis, even though they are not specifically focusing on museums. For example, one could take into account the integration of African born artists into Western auctions, which is an important measure of cultural globalization as these sales bring together art from across geographic places (Banks, 2018, p. 3).

In her research, Banks (2018) looks at how power relations and politics of race influence the representation of African artists at auctions. Although contemporary auctions are not the focus of this thesis, they indicate the extent to which African and non-Western artists are incorporated in the global art world. Moreover, this is relevant in the sense that it shows that generally only traditional African art was legitimized, whereas contemporary African art in the Western cultural world was perceived critically and seen as 'primitive' aesthetic (Rawlings, 2001, p. 26).

This trajectory from 'primitive art' to 'contemporary art' is related to the context in which it is presented, and the values attached to it, but it is also indicating the discourse that might still be prevailing in museums. The recent changes in recognition for contemporary African art and culture are part of a larger critical movement towards artists falling outside the range of non-Western, non-White and non-male (Banks, 2018, p. 14). This movement is also part of the process of decolonization of the museum, which will be discussed from different perspectives in the next sub-section about the framing of African culture.

2.4.1 Framing of African culture

From a Western perspective, the issues of representation of African culture are part of the colonial history, which should be told in the right way. Particularly ethnographic museums and their curators have to deal with these issues of representation of African culture. The first ethnographic museum was founded in Copenhagen in 1846 with the motive to display all (groups of) people in the world and make visible, and insightful differences between them (Fromm, 2016, p. 90). Those ethnographic collections were acquired by anthropologists who were sent on scientific expeditions often sponsored by royalty; by military raids returning with spoils of war or gifts; by missionaries, colonial officials, and travelers whose personal collecting activities included gifts and purchases; and by the great international expositions (idem.).

For example, the Afrika Museum in Berg en Dal was founded in 1954 by missionaries who had been working for several years in Africa and wanted to provide a broader view of human experience in those areas they had been working for so long (Afrika Museum, 2019). It is then argued that the main goal for ethnographic museums is to collect objects, yet with the responsibility to document living traditions, because most traditions are still relevant and not something from the past.

Nowadays, ethnographic museums try to become 'lively' and 'engaging' spaces, in which it is no longer the knowledgeable curator or scholar that tells the story of African

culture, but the community member with first-hand experiences (Geoghegan, 2010, p. 1465). This shift is often characterized by learned conversations in which there is place for the community and Western points of view (Fromm, 2016, p. 92). Thus, museums are attempting to provide a role for these community members as stakeholders in preserving their past culture and to keep it relevant in the future. The following vision for museums in general, was provided by Anthony Shelton and also mentions the new dialogical relationships:

> The new museum is intended to instigate a new pedagogy, to close the space between the everyday lived world and museum activities, to conflate academic learning with popular expression, and empower communities to be part of new dialogical relationships, which would acknowledge both scientific and subjective facets of culture. (Shelton, 2006, p. 75)

The currently made statements by museums, both art museums and ethnographic museums, in the Netherlands, about repatriation of goods taken without consent, reflect these visions for the future, but also demonstrate the difficult challenge in representing African culture (Boffey, 2019; With, 2019). There is not one answer to accomplishing these challenging goals as colonialism cannot be denied and has led to a powerful bias that has shaped practices of representation.

When representing African culture, there are a lot of perspectives of different people at stake, including numerous people in diaspora and migrant communities; they are part of the third layer to the negotiation of identities in representations (McLean, 2008, p. 284). Already in the 1990s, a series of articles in the 'Museums Journal', highlighted the frustration that black people feel over the failure of museums and other heritage institutions to adequately reflect 'black history' in Britain (Simpson, 2001, p. 16). Moreover, despite the major role of slavery in the development and prosperity of British cities, the museums have often failed to address the issues around slavery (p. 18). Participation of people from the African continent in the creation of museum exhibitions was non-existent. The neglect of the history and culture of African people is now widely recognized and there are several exhibitions addressing this. Yet, nowadays, many people of color will feel that museum collections symbolize historic and ongoing trauma and theft (Kassim, 2017, para. 4).

In an online essay about her personal experiences as a black co-curator at the British Museum, Sumaya Kassim (2017) argues that she does not "want to see decolonization become part of Britain's national narrative as a pretty curio with no substance – or, worse, for decoloniality to be claimed as yet another great British accomplishment: the railways, two world wars, one world cup, and decolonization" (para. 10) The key to changing the narrative and facilitating the process of decolonization in museums, is to accept that the museum needs African people and other minority groups, not the other way around (Kassim, 2017, para. 11). This attitude is also something that should be enhanced by African artists, as Banks (2018) noted that the shift in recognition of contemporary African artists was partly due to the efforts of Africans, who were not afraid to push African interests to the foreground (p. 14).

To conclude this section about attitudes to representation of African culture, I would like to emphasize that to talk about this topic might involve personal feelings and ideas, which are all equally important and should be considered carefully. However, it has also become clear that the process of decolonizing the museum and adequately addressing African arts and culture has been a difficult challenge that has been developing over the past twenty-five years, or maybe even longer. Current developments go further than before and aim for telling the honest story and tackling issues of unequal distributions of power. This might be an ongoing struggle, but slowly steps are taken in the right direction by the curators working on the exhibitions.

This was the final section of the theoretical framework, which discussed different theories about the challenges of representation, the roles of museums and curators, and the specific challenges for representation of African culture. The academic literature that was discussed supports the empirical part of the thesis as it provided insight in the context of decolonization, which concerns the contested origins of museums. Museums are still perceived as institutions that tell stories, which implies that they decide what is told, how, and by whom, making them powerful institutions.

Nowadays, there is a lot of critique on the way museums present and represent 'other' people and 'other' cultures; they are urged to keep up with society to remain relevant, which can be done by curators through being self-aware and self-critical. Other approaches are focused on the communities, to hear different voices and to break through the existent structures to make power more equally distributed. However, this is just theory, the visions and practices of actual curators have to acknowledge the

supposed reality; the methods that were used to find out about this will be discussed in the next section.

3 Methodology

The aim of this thesis is to analyze the role of curators in the representation of African art and culture, focusing on visions and complemented by practices, such as which choices have been made to select and innovate exhibitions about Africa and which motivations underlie these changes. This is done on the basis of the following question:

> How do Dutch curators perceive and understand their role in representing African culture in a context of decolonization of the museum, and how does this affect practices in the process of creating exhibitions?

The research question will be answered by means of both a qualitative content analysis and qualitative semi-structured, in-depth interviews (Bryman, 2016). Qualitative research was found most appropriate as it leaves space for personal thoughts, ideas and experiences. Moreover, the concept of 'decolonizing the museum' is open to interpretations and I wanted to discover underlying meanings and patterns of relationships by talking to the curators (Babbie, 2016).

The combination of the two methods was chosen to complement each other and find similarities and differences between visions and practices. Especially because of the current relevance of decolonization of the museum, it will be interesting to analyze and compare curatorial practices to representation of African culture, and to find out how visions are put into practice.

The content analysis focused on a recent publication of the Research Centre for Material Culture (RCMC), which is the research institute of the museums of the National Museum of World Cultures and serves as a vocal point for research on ethnographic collections in the Netherlands. Therefore, the RCMC is of importance when researching representations of African culture in the context of decolonization processes. The analyzed publication is called 'Words Matter' and addresses in twenty short articles the difficulties that curators of ethnographic museums encounter in describing and representing other cultures (NMVW, 2018). Moreover, it provides an overview of the aims and objects of the decolonizing work of the museum staff.

In addition to this, seven interviews have been conducted with curators and researchers who work (or have worked) on exhibitions about Africa in the three ethnographic museums in the Netherlands (Tropenmuseum, Museum Volkenkunde and Afrikamuseum), the Rijksmuseum, or who are working independently on exhibitions

about Africa. During the process of conducting interviews, I decided to include the perspectives of independent curators and a curator of an art museums to broaden my focus and hear different experiences. The next sub-sections will discuss the operationalization, data collection and coding procedure of the analyses.

3.1 Operationalization

The research question is focusing on how curators understand and perceive their role in representing African culture, which was investigated through focusing on the practices of curators, revealing certain approaches and experiences of day-to-day decisions. The two main concepts derived from the research question, are:

- Representation of African culture;
- And, curatorial practices.

Representation of African culture is operationalized by context, aims and objectives, and implementation. The curatorial practices will be investigated in the dimensions of research, collections and (permanent and temporary) exhibitions. The next sub-sections will discuss the main concepts further and an overview will be provided of the operationalization that guided the data collection of the document and the interviews.

3.1.1 Representation of African culture

First, when looking at representation of African culture, the context will be discussed, which provides insight in the background of the museums and the work of curators. This was already an important aspect of the first part of the theoretical framework about the roles of museums in society. However, the context in which curators operate goes beyond this, and also involves the research that is done on dealing with the colonial history visible in archives and museum collections.

The second dimension of representation of African culture, is aims and objectives, which is about the underlying motivations of the curators in creating exhibitions about African culture. This can be seen as the visionary approach of curators about how they perceive and understand their role. Then, the dimension of implications focuses on the challenges and limitations that curators come across in their work. For example, there are limits to what is possible in the creation of representations of a certain culture, because a culture is so difficult to define. Some of the possible ways to address these limitations are analyzed in this part as well.

3.1.2 Curatorial practices

The second concept of curatorial practices has been operationalized in three dimensions that cover the practices of curators to a certain extent. In the first place, a lot of research is done on representation of different cultures, on how to display certain artefacts and how to talk about other practices. For the Dutch ethnographic museums, there is an entire research institute, which supports the museum staff. This indicates the importance

of research, especially on the topic of word choice for example, which became tangible in the publication 'Words Matter' (2018).

Then, there is a large influence of the museum collection on what is displayed, and what has been displayed; curators are constantly working with the museum collections and expanding them for future displays. Moreover, the collections will to a large extent reflect the colonial legacy that nowadays is tried to be 'decolonized'. The process of acquiring new pieces is one of the occupations of curators, which is of importance for the process of decolonization and thus the future of museums. So, one of the main interests of this context can be found in the museum collections. And finally, the dimension of exhibitions, both permanent and temporary, can be seen as the end-product of the work of curators. They are the ultimate test for representational challenges and efforts to decolonize the museum.

3.1.3 Measuring instruments

The table on the next page shows an overview of the main indicators that has guided the data collection during the interviews and content analysis. This list should be regarded as a general list with questions for the interviews and is not a fixed tool. The publication has been analyzed with the same list of questions in mind, in order to be able to create a comparison between the approaches of the authors of the articles and the curators that were interviewed. Besides this, the main concepts have been important in selecting the articles for the analysis.

Some changes have occurred in the structure, for example the concepts 'representation' and 'African culture' were fused, which led to new dimensions for a better understanding of the data collection. During the interviews, changes in questions appeared occasionally according to context and expertise of the interviewee. This was done in order to get to the core of the experiences of the curators and make more sense of certain questions for a particular situation.

The first part of the interviews consisted of some 'warming-up' questions, in which the interviewees were asked to tell something about themselves and their daily occupations. These questions served as a short introduction to their background as a curator and the work they have been doing, which to a certain extent could have influenced their approach to representational challenges. In the second part, the questions that can be found in Table 1, were discussed in depth. Some of the dimensions of curatorial practices were not applicable to every interviewee, for example, sometimes

there was an emphasis on research, and sometimes we focused more on exhibitions. Similarly, not all of the dimensions could be found in every analyzed article of the publication, but the diversity in approaches provided a proficient framework for the final findings. The fluctuations in data collection made comparison between the sources more difficult but this was necessary to get a variety in experiences.

Table 1. Operationalization of concepts

	DIMENSIONS	QUESTIONS
Representation of African culture	Context	What do you regard as the most important role of museums in society? Why? Do ethnographic museums fulfill this role? How has research on 'dealing with colonialism and representation' developed over the past years? How do museum collections and archives reflect colonial history? How was this in the past? And how is it now?
	Aims & Objectives	Is there a right or wrong way in dealing with representation of African culture in museum practices? How do you see your role in representing African culture in museum exhibitions?
	Implementation	What are the challenges of representation in creating exhibitions nowadays? To what extent do museum collections reflect African culture? How do you address these challenges in permanent and temporary exhibitions? And give some recent examples.
Curatorial practices	Research	How does the publication of Words Matter contribute to curatorial practices? What does research of African culture entail for museums?
	Collections	What are the main artefacts representing African culture? What is taken into mind by acquiring new museum pieces?

		What is the impact of returning artefacts on existing museum collections and acquiring new collections?
	Exhibitions	What would be the best way to adjust permanent exhibitions to the current standards and ideals of a museum? What practical choices are made regarding this in making exhibitions? What kind of decisions do/would you make in the creation of exhibitions about Africa to counter the challenges of a colonial past? How can temporary exhibitions contribute to a better understanding of African art and culture? What are the biggest differences between temporary and permanent exhibitions? Which choices are made in improving exhibitions?

The Dutch version of the operationalization can also be found in Appendix A. In the final part of the interview, I asked the question, what the interviewees thought of the concept 'decolonization of the museum', and whether they think it is possible to 'decolonize' the museum. This provided some interesting visionary approaches for museums and will be discussed in chapter four of this thesis. The next sub-sections will discuss the sampling and data collection strategies and will provide an overview of the coding process of the content analysis and the interviews.

3.2   Content analysis

In this section, the sampling and data collection strategies of the content analysis will be explained and made explicit in relation to the research question. The data for the content analysis is the 147-paged document 'Words Matter' (2018), which includes twenty short essays by researchers and curators of the NMVW about language and word use in the museum sector. In the articles, they address different aspects of representing cultures and identities, identifying the challenges that come across. The second part of the publication consists of a glossary of terms that can be sensitive, and some suggestions on how to use those words. This is done in order to raise awareness in the museum sector about the meaning behind certain words, like "blank", "negro" and "primitive", in order to make choices more conscious and informed. The content of this part of the publication is not specifically used for analysis. The following sub-sections will explain more about the sampling strategy and data collection, and the process of analysis and coding procedure of the content analysis.

3.2.1   Sampling and data collection

During the sampling process of mission statements of Dutch museums representing African culture, I have selected the recent publication of the RCMC, which comes closest to a document that extensively discusses different views on representational issues in museums. The publication of the RCMC, as research institute of the Dutch ethnographic museums, was chosen, because they represent African art and culture. Even though, most of the challenges that were mentioned in the publication are more general, and thus applicable to different museums and topics. Nevertheless, it provided interesting grounds for the analysis of the current situation and could be used during the interviews to find underlying motives.

In the first instance I have been focusing solely on ethnographic museums and their practices, while during the process of conducting interviews, I found out about the relevance of discussing different curatorial stances and perspectives. For the content analysis, a lot of the visions of curators and researchers of the NMVW can also be applied to other museums, as all kind of sectors have to deal with a colonial legacy and mindset. The essays provided an interesting overview of different kind of perspectives on the use of words in museums, which is inherently connected to representational issues. Besides this, the curators also mentioned other challenges that arise in their daily practice and how they wish to deal with this.

When sampling the articles within the publication, I was looking for the main concepts of representation of African culture and curatorial practices. Few articles were solely about African culture, but many of them discussed challenges regarding representation in general. Moreover, the context of these representational challenges was a major theme in most of the articles. I decided to leave out two of the articles and two short case study texts, which were about disability and gender diversity, which are not relevant for my research. So, in the end I have been analyzing sixteen articles by researchers and curators of the NMVW.

3.2.2   Coding procedure

The short articles of the RCMC publication were approached for thematic analysis, which entails that I was searching for common themes in vision and practices (Bryman, 2016, p. 548). In practice, I have been looking for very practical visions and ideas about how curators should deal with challenges concerning representation. Besides this, I focused on the approaches to the decolonization processes, which were often times part of the argument as this concept is very relevant when discussing word choices.

Moreover, personal views and experiences were incorporated to provide a sincere image. This enabled me to compare findings from the document to the findings from the interviews. At first, I used the open coding method to identify the themes, exposing the thoughts, ideas and meanings contained therein (Babbie, 2016, pp. 388-389). This was done by using the program ATLAS.ti for a good overview. Besides this, I searched for common approaches in how the difficulties are described and aimed to tackle, in order to find a general approach. In this manner, I discovered a pattern of curatorial approaches, which could be further researched and applied in the interviews.

Overall, I found that the articles in the publication were describing elements of past traditions, present challenges and future visions in relation to the processes of decolonization of the museum. These became the main categories of the content analysis. This enabled me to make distinctions between what has been tackled and how, and introduced me to the current challenges regarding representation of African culture in museums. Moreover, the future visions made me aware of what could be improved, and which possible curatorial practices could be found during the interviews. All in all, the content analysis proved a great starting point for being introduced to the topic and how to deal with representational challenges. In that way, I choose to describe the publication of 'Words Matter' (2018) as a 'curatorial guideline', which helps museum staff

in a way that enhances their daily efforts. The codes that were created are included in the code book, which can be found in Appendix C.

3.3   Interviews

After the content analysis, I have conducted seven semi-structured in-depth interviews of approximately sixty minutes each with curators and researchers, who are involved in creating exhibitions about Africa. The process started with one curator I knew beforehand, as he was a tutor during my bachelor's, who is working for the NMVW now; I contacted him through e-mail. He advised me to send an e-mail to the secretariat of the research center, so that they could bring me in touch with more people.

So, the start of the process was done through snowball sampling, where a small group of people relevant to the research question was sampled and proposed other participants (Bryman, 2016, p. 415). However, many curators were extremely busy and unable to meet with me or did not answer my e-mails at all. In the end, I also contacted some curators through LinkedIn, which was an effective way as my e-mails did not end up on the pile of other e-mails. Another way was through Google, were I was able to find the independent curators. The Rijksmuseum was quite responsive and answered my e-mail within a week. The following sub-sections will discuss the sampling and data collection in more detail, and then focus on the coding procedure of the interviews.

3.3.1   Sampling and data collection

The aim of the sampling was to interview a variety in curators, in order to discover the different experiences, yet from people who are part of the same team. However, in practice this seemed a difficult task, as museums are rather closed institutions and employees were busy. Therefore, numerous interviewees were unable to have an interview, which made the process of data collection a challenge. However, in the end I managed to conduct seven interviews with some slight changes in the research approach, as I switched from the role of ethnographic museums, to the role and practices of curators more generally. In doing so, I would like to define a curator as someone who is initiating and contributing to exhibitions about African culture.

An important factor in the selection process is to what extent someone is, or has been, working on exhibitions and representations focusing on Africa or the concept of decolonization of the museum. Thereby, a curator or researcher who is not connected to the museum (anymore) can provide an interesting overhauling idea of the topics and their experiences in creating exhibitions. The exhibitions can be permanent or temporary, in which a variety is desired as well. In the process of broadening the scope of my respondents, I started focusing more on the challenges regarding representation and the

topic of decolonization, instead of specifically representation of African culture. Therefore, I have approached several researchers and curators focusing on African art and culture, but also for example, slavery and popular culture. This was done in order to gain knowledge on the wider perspectives of curators on the topics of representation and decolonization, which is to a certain extent also applicable to African culture more specifically.

So, the main group of interest were curators who work on exhibitions about African culture, yet I hoped to find other occupations through snowballing (Bryman, 2016, p. 424). In the first instance, I had the possibility to interview a researcher of the research institute (RCMC) as well. She helped me understand the structure of the NMVW and the people who are involved in creating exhibitions. This way, I found out that the Dutch ethnographic museums only have one (!) curator for Africa, who was extremely busy and not able to talk to me in person. Besides this single curator for Africa, I was able to talk to a recently hired (junior) curator for Southern Africa, who was able to introduce me to the work environment at the RCMC and NMVW. While conducting the interviews, I found that the museum staff of the NMVW was working in similar ways, which is also why I decided to broaden my view and not solely to focus on present curators and researchers of the NMVW.

The interviews were semi-structured, and an interview guide was created for structure during the interview and after interviewing, in the process of transcribing and coding (Bryman, 2016, p. 471). One interview was conducted in English, and the others in Dutch, which felt more natural. The interviews took place at the RCMC, Café Abel, just outside the research institute, and at the home or the office of the interviewee. It was important to meet the interviewees in their natural surroundings to ensure their comfort and honesty. One of the interviews was conducted by phone, while all the others took place in person, which has my strong preference. At the beginning of the interview, the interviewees were asked to sign a consent form, which asked for permission to audio-tape the interview, and detailed anonymity. After conducting the interviews, they were transcribed verbatim, partly by using the online service of Amberscript, which is a useful tool that uses artificial intelligence to transfer audio to text. The transcripts were then double-checked; any mistakes were corrected, and missing parts were added afterwards.

A full list of the interviews and further details can be found in Table 2 below and Appendix B. The first column shows their occupation, and if applicable, the museum(s)

they work for. The expertise of the researchers and curators is in the context of museum exhibitions they have created or are the names of their function. So, the junior curator is specialized in Southern Africa, while the researcher has worked on exhibitions about slavery, this can be found in the second column. The date, time and duration of the interviews are included to give insight in the process of data collection. Transcripts of the interviews can be found in the appendices of this thesis, which will be included in the digital version.

Table 2. Overview of interviews

OCCUPATION	EXPERTISE	DATE	TIME	DURATION
Junior curator – NMVW	Southern Africa	17 April 2019	14:00	1:00:12
Researcher – RCMC	Slavery	18 April 2019	15:00	57:40
Independent curator	"Black is beautiful"	26 April 2019	11:00	55:53
Former curator – Tropenmuseum	Africa	30 April 2019	11:00	1:08:01
Curator – NMVW	Popular Culture and Fashion	2 May 2019	13:00	54:40
Curator – NMVW	Contemporary Art	13 May 2019	13:00	48:07
Curator – Rijksmuseum	South Africa	16 May 2019	10:00	23:09

In the fourth chapter of this thesis, which will display the results of the interviews, the interviewees will be referred to as interviewee 1, interviewee 2, interviewee 3, et cetera, to ensure their anonymity.

3.3.2 Coding procedure

For the process of coding the interviews, the program ATLAS.ti was used, in which I identified common themes, differences and similarities between the answers of the interviewees (Babbie, 2016, pp. 282-283). Overall, the same approach was taken as the thematic content analysis, where the method of open coding was used to define the general themes. More specifically, the interview questions already focused upon discovering comparable approaches of curators in the creation of exhibitions in a context of decolonization. This approach is called cross-case analysis as I was looking for the patterns appearing across several interviews (p. 383). Through the coding process, new

connections could be made between the smaller pieces of information provided in the different answers, and new codes could be collected and added to a new category. Every new interview led to new insights, leading to changes in the names of the categories and exchanges of codes between the categories. This procedure was applied until a point of saturation was reached, where no more new information was found in the transcribed interviews.

The first set of codes focused on how the curators perceive and understand their role in representing African culture, which was defined as 'curatorial attitudes'. So, curatorial attitudes are the approaches of curators in regard to representational challenges; how they address challenges and what their visions are about this topic. In that way, the codes were divided into three categories of context, strategies and outcomes. The context defines the strategies of the curators and explains the situation, in which they are acting. These strategies mainly have to do with having social impact and raising awareness on the topic of representational challenges and process of decolonizing the museum. The curators expressed the desired outcomes of their efforts, which is an important factor in their motivation.

Then, the category of 'curatorial practices' was addressed, which deals with the three different dimensions of research, collections and exhibitions. These dimensions were divided into the categories of context, strategies and outcomes as well, in order to create coherency and to find more similarities between the codes of the interviews. The dimensions research, collections and exhibitions were chosen, because the social impact on these terrains is different.

For example, research has little impact on society, it is something internal of the museum, which sometimes becomes visible in a publication such as 'Words Matter' (2018). Then, the collections of museums are increasingly put under the attention of the public by the media, and people are asking questions about the origins of objects in museum collections. Finally, the exhibitions have the most social impact, as they will be visited by thousands of people. Moreover, they all have different connections to the context of decolonization of the museum, because a museum collection shows different aspects of colonialism than an exhibition. The research question of the thesis solely mentions the process of creating exhibitions, because in the end, the dimensions of research and collections contribute to creating exhibitions and all decisions lead up to this. The code book can be found in Appendix C.

3.4   Reliability and validity

In order to increase the reliability and validity of this thesis, the identified codes, patterns and themes were constantly re-evaluated to make sure they fitted the research aims and reflected the opinions of the interviewees. This method is also known as the "validity-as-reflexive-accounting" (Altheide & Johnson, 1994, p. 489). Some general guidelines were applied to fit the research goals and to apply the same criteria to every kind of code, such as the interpretations needed to be clearly formulated and supported by quotes or excerpts to provide evidence. Moreover, I gave no personal opinions and was a as neutral as possible, because especially when talking about sensitive topics such as representation, it is important to be aware of your own position.

In addition to this, a similar research with comparable participants, needs to reflect similar outcomes. However, the project deals with personal opinions and experiences and is thus open to change, making reliability something that is harder to prove. However, to increase the possibility that the research would have comparable outcomes with another researcher, someone with similar academic experience looked at the data and applied codes to identify possible differences. The results were compared, and no significant differences were found, other than differing descriptions of similar meanings. It was argued that this peer-review method is effective in increasing the reliability of a research projects (Babbie, 2016, p. 408).

4 Results

The aim of this thesis is to analyze the role of curators in the representation of African art and culture, focusing on visions and complemented by practices, such as which choices have been made to select and innovate exhibitions about Africa and which motivations underlie these changes. This is done on the basis of the following question:

> How do Dutch curators perceive and understand their role in representing African culture in a context of decolonization of the museum, and how does this affect practices in the process of creating exhibitions?

In order to answer this research question, the analysis of the document 'Words Matter' (2018) by the RCMC, has provided a framework for developing an interview guide and increasing my knowledge on the current dynamics in Dutch ethnographic museums. Therefore, the first section will deal with the findings of the document analysis. The findings of the document provide an overview of the current challenges regarding representation, and more specifically, word choices in museum texts. Curators have to deal with colonial narratives and increased pressure from the public, leading to the change of labels for example. Their efforts aim at increasing awareness of their position as a museum, and thus the stories that they tell.

After this, the findings of the in-depth interviews with the curators will be discussed. These results provide insights in the attitudes and practices of curators who are representing African culture. Thus, the second section will discuss how curators perceive and understand their role regarding the creation of exhibitions about African culture. This includes the role of museums in society, and the changing dynamics in the context of decolonization. Curators see their role as 'gatekeepers' and storytellers, in which they address challenges regarding representation.

The third section will focus on the day-to-day practices of curators in the process of creating exhibitions, combining the knowledge from research and the influence of collections. Research is mainly focusing on community involvement and provenance research, as curators have to deal with the colonial legacy in museum collections. In acquiring new museum collections, curators try to move beyond racial stereotypes and develop new ways of dealing with representation.

4.1　Words Matter

Developments in museum studies have had significant implications for museum policy and practice, because they provide not only more nuanced theoretical tools but also methodological techniques and a growing and more robust empirical base of research and critical accounts of existing museum practice (Macdonald, 2006, p. 8). A great example of this is the publication 'Words Matter', which is "An Unfinished Guide to Word Choices in the Cultural Sector" (NMVW, 2018). The guide is developed for exhibition makers, curators, marketers and educators in order to support them in word use. The list of words with an explanation of why a particular word is considered sensitive or contested, and alternative terms, was intended for the museum staff of the NMVW, but has been used worldwide in museum practice (interviewee 5). The main focus of this section will be on the thematic analysis of the publication 'Words Matter' (2018), which deals with challenges regarding word choice specifically, and has led to interesting insights. Some references will be made to interviews that discussed the same matters.

While analyzing the articles and looking for common themes, I examined specifically the authors' observations about the current state of events, approaches to representational challenges, and their visions for the future. Some authors also mentioned how the situation used to be in the past, or former challenges, which to a large extent is defined by colonial narratives. The perspective of the past will help to understand the current situation, and how the ideas about museums have developed.

So, the first sub-section will discuss the past traditions of colonial narratives, moving on to the current situation, where museums are challenged by the public. This involvement of society arises in a context of increased attention to decolonization of the museum and developments in the field of representational matters. In the publication, curators describe their situation and common experiences to elaborate on their personal thoughts about topics related to representation in a museum-context. One of the major points of attention is the process of rewriting labels of museum texts, which will be discussed in the third sub-section. The final sub-section will focus on the perspectives and objectives for the future, which is focused on increasing awareness of word choices within the museum sector and outside.

4.1.1　Colonial narratives

When talking about past traditions of ethnographic museums, we mainly have to deal with the colonial roots that have led to the representational challenges of today. Although

museums are still often seen as places that are dedicated to just displaying beautiful things, and therefore are perceived as neutral and non-political spaces, the reality is that they are players in the social and political arena too (NMVW, 2018, p. 7). Museums have to deal with their colonial roots and image, which has determined a great amount of their ideas and perceptions about for example their word choices in exhibitions.

Therefore, curators have had to adjust their documentation of artefacts to current standards, because many traditions of naming and categorizing museum objects and collection databases contain words and phrases that are full of stereotypes. For example, in the representation of African culture as being 'primitive' (Rawlings, 2001, p. 26), or depicting the African continent as 'poor and sad' (interviewee 3). Representations might not say those specific terms, but often wordlessly entail these stereotypes, which are often disrespectful and offensive towards the people and cultures they try to describe (NMVW, 2018, p. 29). The terms that are used reproduce these colonial stereotypes and thus continue to shape the view of how people on display used to be described. Therefore, one cannot argue that museums are neutral places of display, the displays always carry a deeper meaning.

Besides the publication of 'Words Matter' (2018), there has been a lot of research about terminology in museum practices. The Rijksmuseum has a terminology-project as well, which looks at the words that are used in texts signs and catalogs (interviewee 7). This is a slow process as it is not that easy to change words, and thus needs time and research. It is a process of being aware about possible negative connotation of a certain word. In the past, this was not, or less, the case. Interviewee 3 told me that it was totally normal to use the word 'neger' in academic circles, about ten years ago. Therefore, addressing terminology is difficult as it is often times intertwined with unconscious behavior and no specific wrong intentions. However, curators can take the lead in subverting a certain discourse.

In her chapter within the publication, Hodan Warsame (2018) comes up with five common narratives that can be found in ethnographic museums, which are products of a colonial past and need to be reconsidered (pp. 82-85):

1. Stuck in time and space. People of color are often represented as existing in the past, because texts do not mention their present-day lives, the developments of culture or the larger context of colonialism, which led to the encounter of those white people that collected a certain artefact;

2. Exotification, "Othering" and the assumption of whiteness. In museums, "non-Western people are often presented as more spiritual, closer to the natural world, more magical, and primitive" (p. 82). These assumptions, amongst others, make visitors believe that they do not share a heritage with the people on display, they are perceived as the 'other';

3. Heroic adventures. The stories that are told in museums often feature a heroic white man, who is an explorer, scientist, artist, photographer or missionary, and bravely went where few white people had gone before to tell stories of wild, untouched people. This narrative hides the fact that these adventurers were the vanguard for colonial forces;

4. Euphemistic language and erasure. This can be found in texts about the Dutch East Indies and the Dutch slavery, which for example has the word 'progress' in it to describe colonial industries. Or, a text describing the end of slavery presented the fact as a benevolent act of the Dutch government, erasing the struggle of enslaved people for their liberation. "These are not just oversights, but misrepresentations of history" as a result of lack of attention for the perspective of the colonized (p. 84);

5. Authority and the illusion of objectivity and neutrality. The knowledge that is presented in museums is supposedly trustworthy, because it is assumed to be objective and scientific. However, the presentations are not neutral as the knowledge has represented and legitimized a colonial hierarchy that places white Western people at the top.

All of these narratives can still be found in a lot of ethnographic museums and are important aspects that need to be considered. However, this is not just a task for ethnographic museums; it is a society-wide issue. For example, the 'heroic adventures' of Michiel de Ruyter are not so heroic when looking from an African perspective of slave trade. These narratives should make us aware of the things that we do not want anymore and show the things we would like to change for the better to create a more equal society.

When creating new exhibitions, it is important to be aware of the ways in which these colonial narratives work in museum texts in order to avoid their reproduction (NMVW, 2018, p. 81). Curators need to consider how museums might still contribute to social injustice through such narratives. According to Warsame (2018), the first step in addressing colonial narratives is to make time for a critical self-reflection, thereby

acknowledging the complicity and responsibility, which will open doors for collaborations with communities that are put on display (p. 85). Another author, Guno Jones (2018), puts it in other words, but aims for the same outcome as he argues that "perhaps a starting point, at least for museums, is to acknowledge how categories can reinforce notions of difference, and, together with the diverse groups, expand these categories to create new and more inclusive possibilities" (p. 57). So, this reflects a deep awareness of how museums work and what they can do, and which responsibility they have. Hopefully, this will lead to better collaborations with groups and communities that are put on display in museums, driving new insights and possibilities.

During the interviews, curators mentioned comparable aspects of the narratives presented by Warsame (2018) and we discussed ways to deal with those specific discourses. However, some of these narratives are very deeply rooted in our societies nowadays and thus very hard to avert. This shows that past traditions can definitely leave a stamp on current practices, especially when this tradition is drenched in colonial ideas. However, museums might be a good starting point for broadening the discussion and creating a stage for new ideas as already argued by Macdonald (1998, p. 2) and fitting with the role of museums to 'engage' the public.

4.1.2 Museums challenged by the public

Challenges of representations are discussed into depth in the publication, and therefore are a great contribution to the understanding of the concept of decolonizing the museum, and curatorial approaches to representation of African culture. The main focus of the articles is on the roles of the museum staff and the museum practice, which often contains a conscious effort to move away from the colonial logic of labeling and displaying (NMVW, 2018, p. 81). In the colonial logic, peoples and cultures were understood, classified and defined as cultural symbols observed from the traditional Western cultural perspectives (Mudimbe, 1986, p. 3). The publication is part of the process to move away from these approaches and find new ways of telling the colonial story. However, an important challenge is the increased media attention for museums and their colonial past.

Current discussions in the Netherlands about the challenges of colonial narratives have encouraged museums to take action and be more open about the steps that are taken in the process of tackling representational issues. The director of the

National Museum of World Cultures (NMVW), Stijn Schoonderwoerd, writes that "public institutions are under close scrutiny from diverse corners of society as to whether, and how, they address the colonial past or deal with questions and claims about (national) identity" (p. 7). So, museums are examined closely by for example the press of popular media, for their efforts in the process of decolonization. This has mainly to do with the research institute, which is publishing documents like 'Words Matter' (2018), but also guidelines on the restitutions of objects taken without consent.

Similarly, the head of the Research Centre for Material Culture (RCMC), Wayne Modest, mentions that "recent controversy in the Netherlands surrounding whether museums should change the titles of some of their paintings and refrain from using discriminatory, derogatory and racist words in wall texts or catalogues is in part the lead up to this publication" (p. 13). Hence, one could argue that the public involvement is leading the current developments, and close inspection of society, has finally led to concrete actions of the museum. This is an example of how it takes so much time for traditional institutions to change as these issues exist for some time now. Societal pressure is something that can drive change, and museums have to act in order to be appropriate for their time.

4.1.3 Changing labels of artefacts

However, these changes may also reflect wider tensions between the legacies of colonial collecting and current academic trends (p. 22). Nowadays, museum staff should know that through their practice, word choice can be very sensitive and needs to be addressed accordingly in a self-critical, reflective way. It is argued that "we have come to question our perspectives and our practices of marketing and display, and seek to include diverse voices" (p. 8). One way to do this, is to remove old labels from artefacts, as labels are not just proof of authenticity, but they concern the relationship between collections and living cultures, reflecting and re-iterating discourses of society and the object (p. 23). For example, labels such as 'Kaffir', which is the colonial label for Nguni speakers in the Eastern part of Cape Town at the time of their nineteenth-century conquest by the British, are a challenge for museums (idem.).

However, changing labels might lead to tensions as one can also not ignore what has happened, and the colonial legacy remains part of history. Yet, certain terms should not be provoking or sensitive to particular groups and therefore the aim to eliminate

racism is often weighed as more important. In the chapter about Museum Labels and Coloniality, Ciraj Rassool (2018), argues that:

> In these cases, removing old labels is part of a desire to show respect for the societies from which such objects have come. Yet there is also pressure to hold on to the historical record, in order to preserve the history of such notions of tribe and race as they were used in labeling. The desire to stop the perpetuation of administrative racism is met with the desire to document this history. (NMVW, 2018, p. 23)

In doing so, curators and museum staff should also be aware of the world views that are spread through the language and words that are used (p. 45). These words are part of larger racist and discriminatory discourses, which have shaped the ways in which certain groups are perceived and represented (pp. 13-14). Therefore, changing labels should be part of a larger process, in which the museum needs to reconsider its role in representing, categorizing and ordering knowledge (p. 24). This does also imply that museums should be more aware of their position in society, where they can act as vocal point for change, instead of being a slow follower of change. All in all, there is still space and time to do this, but they need to be quick.

Although awareness about the discourses that prevail in museums is already a great starting point, it should not be overestimated, and the more practical questions need to be asked as well. Simple questions about how this will be done in everyday life, but also whose values are important at what time, what do we actually want to achieve, and what does it practically mean to live in a changing society? This concern was also mentioned by Anick Vollebergh (2018): "Policy documents mentioned 'having understanding for each other' and the importance of 'meeting' and 'dialogue', but without any clarity on what this would look like in everyday life" (NMVW, 2018, p. 51). This critique is extremely important in tackling the representational challenges of ethnographic museums as museums should be clear in their practical objectives. It has become clear that many more questions can be asked concerning word-use in museum exhibition, which will not always be easy or even answerable in many cases. However, several authors also talked about their objectives and visions for the future, and how things could be improved, which will be discussed in the next sub-section.

4.1.4 Increasing awareness of word choices

In writing up the past traditions of colonial narratives and current challenges of representation, the authors also expressed their future visions, which are characterized by the changing perceptions about museum practices. Firstly, it became clear that curators should be aware of their own background and personal experiences. Yet, this should also be transferred to the public, the audience should also be aware of the position of the museum and the position of themselves. African culture cannot be defined, there are always other perspectives and elements, which was also mentioned by interviewee 5, who said:

> …you cannot define a culture and say this is that culture, because there are so many international influences and so many movements within such a culture, outside such a culture, that you cannot say at all and that is how it is.

Museums hope to increase this consciousness by their audience and make them aware of the fluidity of a culture. Finally, the curators also mentioned their aims at becoming more inclusive institutions; institutions that are welcoming and valuing each and every visitor. This is an important responsibility in the process of decolonization, as people might feel excluded when stories are told in the wrong way.

Another important theme of aspirations for the NMVW, is to increase awareness within the museum sector about the meaning behind certain words in order to make choices more conscious and informed. Yet, this should have impact more broadly on the public as well, which is seen as part of the responsibility of any public museum (NMVW, 2018, p. 32). This can be done through including explanations on the site of the collection about the decisions that were made by the museum regarding the replacement of derogatory words with more respectful terminology (p. 31). The publication itself is a good example of how to deal with this, yet there is a large part of society that still needs to be educated on this topic. Even in the museum sector, there might not always be the awareness of certain discourses that might prevail.

By promoting openness and transparency, museums show that they want every visitor and researcher to feel included, and not offended when engaging with the collection (p. 32). In that sense, museums are responding to the rapidly changing society and striving to become more inclusive institutions (p. 16). Bringing me back to the director

of the NMVW, who provides an explanation of the work that is done in order to make the visions come true. He uses the term 'work in progress' to describe the strategy:

> This classification also applies to a number of other projects that are central to the National Museum of World Cultures' current working practice, which include attracting a broader and more diverse range of audiences, strengthening the diversity of our staff, developing a framework for rethinking questions related to the return of cultural objects, conducting provenance research on colonial heritage, developing new organizational models, and to deepening our experience with the de-accessioning of large collections. (NMVW, 2018, p. 10)

This is all an attempt in the hope to move beyond categories of migrant and non-migrant, Western and non-Western, allochtoon and autochtoon, contributing to make the future better for all and perhaps always being a 'work in progress' (p. 61). Our society is ever-changing, and perceptions will always come from somewhere. However, there is still a lot of work to do and improvements are just around the corner. The next sections will focus more on the practical sides as perceived by the curators in the interviews, which is divided into curatorial attitudes and curatorial practices.

4.2   Curatorial attitudes

The aim of the in-depth interviews with researchers and curators working on exhibitions about African culture, was to find out more about the curatorial attitudes regarding their role in the processes of decolonizing the museum. The role of the curator is often neglected in other researches and is therefore of crucial importance in this thesis as it provides a behind-the-scenes look at the practices in Dutch (ethnographic) museums representing African culture. The theoretical framework already touched upon some methods of curating that might be interesting to discuss, such as dialogical curating, which has to do with openness of the curatorial process to collaboration; to understand the exhibition as process-based, rather than output-based; to welcome visitors as participants in dialogue and possibly contributing to the exhibition; and a focus on the exhibition as a space to share knowledge and memory, rather than presenting objects (Unruh, 2015, p. 88).

The interviews led to a greater understanding of past approaches to representation of African culture and more recent developments. This section will show the results of the in-depth interviews with curators of African exhibitions in different contexts, connecting it to the theories that were discussed in chapter two. The following sub-sections will discuss the emerging themes of the analysis, which deal with the context, strategies and outcomes of curatorial attitudes to decolonization of the museum.

The first sub-section will discuss how the curators perceive the role of museums in society in general, to gain a better understanding of the context and motivations that underlie their daily activities. Museums were seen as the 'gatekeepers' of history, connecting different elements to raise awareness on mutual understandings between different cultures. The mean to do this, was primarily through storytelling, and more recently by providing a stage for new artists in museums. This leads to the following sub-sections, which deal with how curators perceive and understand their own role as a gatekeeper and storyteller. These roles are part of the strategies that are used to fulfill their role and eventually lead to the outcomes that will be discussed in the final sub-section about the challenges of representation in a context of decolonization.

4.2.1   Roles of museums in society

The curators were asked how they see the roles of a museum in a society, which was perceived as a hard question. Even though this could to a certain extent determine the work they are doing on a daily basis. The roles of museums in society is connected to

curatorial attitudes regarding representational challenges, as this gives insights in how the challenges can be addressed and what the impact can be. Moreover, it uncovers the underlying motivations of curators working for museums and representing 'other' people and 'other' cultures. The main consensus of the curators focused on museums as being socially concerned, in ways of educating, identity formation and engagement. These functions were also discussed in the theoretical framework, and correspond to the definition provided by ICOM about the functions of a museum:

> A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment. (ICOM, 2007)

The curators focused on the fact that museums are institutions in service of society and its development as they want to be socially concerned on different levels. First of all, curators want to inspire people and educate them about 'different' cultures, which can be done through connecting different components of a society (interviewee 2). It was argued that in a time of increased tensions between different groups in society, it is important to focus on the comparable elements of a culture. One of the interviewees referred to this as being "classically idealistic" to stimulate mutual understanding within society. In this process, interviewee 4 saw himself as "a sort of ambassador of Africa", feeling the pressure "to show how nice, interesting, diverse, multi-colored, dynamic and vital Africa is, relative to all the classical, negative images that were at odds with that". Interviewee 6 puts it this way:

> …it is interesting to show the similarities and in doing so, you also contribute a little to mutual understanding of people…then we often think; we are so completely different, but the more you compare, the stronger it actually turns out that the similarities are much greater than the differences.

In this way, museums can contribute to a better society, in which people are inspired and learn from each other, reflecting the educational role of a museum (interviewee 2). In the context of identity formation, interviewee 1 argues that museums could also contribute to 'new ways of being Dutch' and 'new ways of understanding the world'. However, this

can be a challenge for curators, as most museum collections were originally not intended to do so. Collections were aimed at showing African culture as perceived by Western colonizers, without involving the local communities. It was already argued by Thomas (2010) that especially for ethnographic museums it is important to consider how the histories of particular objects and collections, and of the institutions itself could become lenses to look at much larger questions of cross-cultural and colonial history (p. 10). In this way, some elements of collections could also contribute to telling the colonial story by putting it in a different way.

4.2.2 Changing roles in a context of decolonization

The process of decolonization has been an interesting point of discussion during the interviews and has contributed to changing perceptions about the roles of museums in society. The interviewees were asked what they think about the concept of 'decolonization', and whether they think it is possible to decolonize the museum. Most of them argued that they value the process, because it is important to keep on asking questions and being critical about your own museum practice. Especially when you are in a position of authority, and people expect that you know the answer (interviewee 7). On the contrary, one can argue that the process of decolonization means to give up power and authority, to show different sides of the story and be open for external input. It can even be seen as a global social process, in which we have to reflect on the colonial legacy, and that is what the ethnographic museum in the Netherlands are doing.

For example, interviewee 1 told me that they constantly keep asking questions like, "can we involve the community? Can we get an artist to make art that reflects on this? Can we buy art that reflects on this?" (interviewee 1) This is a practical illustration of the dialogical approach that was discussed before (Thumim, 2010, p. 294). This approach is linked to the process of decolonization as it often involves the local communities and the communities on display, and also leaves space for different perspectives and other implications on the presented topics. Also, Sumaya Kassim (2017) argued for more dialogues and openness of the curatorial process as part of decolonization strategies. Besides this, it is important to see exhibitions as a process, rather than having a fixed output, which can be done by inviting visitors to contribute to the dialogue or the exhibition itself. For museums, it is a constant quest for what do we want to present and what does that say.

Some of the interviewees talked about the complex choices that need to be made in the process of decolonization. One of them put it this way: there are practically two choices; (1) to sell, return, burn everything from the museum and destroy it all, or (2) to keep it and contextualize it (interviewee 4). Of course, the second option is way more appealing to curators, and they will never want to choose option one. The second option to keep and contextualize the artefacts on display, requires constant efforts to create better representations by the curators.

That this is an ongoing process, was acknowledged by interviewee 4 who noticed a recurring theme in history, as history is constantly changing from the vision of the now. There is constant change in how we look at history, and thus our point of view might be completely different ten years from now. He argues the following:

> …if you keep throwing away, there is never anything left, but I think, the layers that lay over it, by combining things in a different ways, questioning them differently and providing them with new contexts and different comments, I think that is a role of a museum. (interviewee 4)

In that sense, one can argue that decolonization is a process, maybe not so much a goal. The curators with more experience in their jobs were the ones who argued that decisions need to be made, and that you cannot make everyone happy (interviewee 3). There should be a gradual process of becoming conscious without forcing it too much. And they are probably right, there is still a gap between what the curators say and what the public hears. Museums can take the initiative to change certain discourses, but to actually change the mindset of the public will take time. Therefore, one can argue that the roles of museums have become more complex in the sense that the aims are higher, and the process of decolonization has led to more critical discussions about museum practices.

4.2.3 Curators as gatekeepers

Moving on to the perceived role of curators, the academic literature already argued that they act as civic agents to promote general discourse on issues such as the changing concepts of race, ethnicity, politics and culture (Blackwood & Purcell, 2014, p. 238). Curators are seen as the 'gatekeepers' of museums as they choose which objects are exhibited, which artists are displayed, how art and artist are presented, and how the audience interacts with the art within the frame of the physical and ideological space of

the museum (p. 239). One can argue that they are even the 'gatekeepers' of history, as they get to decide which topics, moments and events are put on display for a wider audience. In that way, museums (and their curators) are part of the production of the past in the present, they are part of our heritage (Harrison, 2013, p. 5). They get to decide which historical story is important enough to be exhibited. In that sense, museums also have the power to inspire other institutions to bring attention to different stories, for example about the afterlives of slavery (interviewee 7). Curators have the power to change the discourse.

Therefore, curators need to be aware of current events in society to be able to show the latest developments and stay informed about societal movements. Curators bring a certain degree of authority and are thus perceived as the experts. To a certain extent this might be true, however it can be dangerous to give that much power to an institution or specific person. For example, in the case of looking for curators to interview, I found out that there is only one curator for Africa in the Netherlands. She is responsible for everything that is put on display in the ethnographic museums in the Netherlands. Of course, the teams that create exhibitions consist of multiple people, but still she is the one in 'power'.

This was also one of the prevailing challenges discussed in the academic literature, that through the preferences, decisions and social interactions of the curatorial staff, board of directors, and donors, museums might be promoting a narrative of whiteness (Blackwood & Purcell, 2014, p. 240). These narratives of whiteness are privileged cultural constructs, primarily Western and white, examples of how museums are still showing parts of a colonial history.

This challenge can be linked back to the first layer of representation as presented by McLean (2008), which is about the identities and backgrounds of those encoding the representations. The curators of museums are predominantly white, and also all of the interviewees participating in this research were white, representing an imbalance in curatorial staff. Ethnographic museums try to change this by working with community groups in the creation of exhibitions (interviewee 5). However, most of the curators are white people, which can be seen as problematic. It was argued by interviewee 5 that diversity in the museum staff is required, even though it will not possible to have an African curator for every single country on the African continent. This is an intense discussion that is going to need some time to come to a consensus.

Besides addressing this white domination of museums, it was also argued by interviewee 5 that museums need to raise awareness that they do not tell *the* truth, *the* history of the Netherlands, or *the* story of a certain country in Africa. Exhibitions are sort of a "manipulation of reality" (interviewee 4), because it is not that when you travel to a certain part of Africa, these artefacts are what you see. It is still a museum truth. It is the story of a curator with his or her own background, which made them tell a story in a certain way. According to her, the best way to make this clear is to "tell different stories from different angles" (interviewee 5). This approach will be discussed in the next sub-section about the role of curators as storytellers.

4.2.4 Curators as storytellers

Curators do also perceive telling stories as one of their most important roles, yet it is also a mean to reach other goals, such as raising awareness in society. Exhibitions can fuel and speed up certain discussions, which for example happened in the 'Black is beautiful' exhibition in 2008 (interviewee 3). This exhibition was an attempt to embed black history in Dutch history from an art-historical point of view, by telling the stories of the black people on paintings of famous Dutch artists. One of the other curators told me about the process of creating exhibitions, where she starts with a story line that she wants to tell (interviewee 5). Next, she looks for elements that can tell the story, through objects, audiovisuals, games, or in other ways.

For ethnographic museums, this nowadays often entails providing a stage for promising artists, who for example critically reflect on the colonial history. This approach has two sides, because on the one hand, artists do not want to be put in the box of being 'ethnographic' or 'exotic' art. But on the other hand, when their works are contextualized in the right way, they feel honored to be displayed in a museum. It was argued that "you have to ask somebody because of his work, not for his background" (interviewee 5). This seems to be the best approach, because it works both ways as it will increase potential for young African artists and will create a new image for ethnographic museums.

The ultimate goal in telling stories is to be 'inclusive', which might be one of the words that is overused all the time. Yet, it is constantly mentioned as an objective in museum exhibitions as no one should feel excluded. It is a term that is easily used, but extremely difficult to put into practice. There is always more to it; another story, another perspective, another audience. As already discussed in the theoretical framework, who is able to tell the stories is a question of power (Thumim, 2010, p. 291). Therefore,

curators should be careful as they are in a position of deciding about someone else's stories and experiences. We should consider whether the term 'representation' is used in the right way, because how is it possible to represent something or someone you are not? To what extent can Dutch curators represent African stories? As mentioned before, this is a major point of discussion and the only thing a curator can do, is to tell the stories of the people from that certain culture and how they experience things (interviewee 5). In that sense, it is not a representation, but a presentation of their stories.

The approach of letting people tell stories, was used in the exhibition about Fashion Cities in Africa, where four people told about their experiences in the fashion industries of four African cities. So, every city was represented by four different people, who told their own perspective, which provides an image of the diversity of the fashion industry in their city. In contrast to saying, this is the fashion of Casablanca and this is fashion in Nairobi. Although it is still the museum that decides who is talking, the exhibition is based on research in Africa, in the cities and the people that work in the fashion industries. This indicates a shift in curatorial practices, as the community on display is given a voice. As already argued by Smith (2005); by empowering these new voices, the authority of established voices could be diminished (p. 435). They tell the stories, not the museum.

4.2.5 Challenges of representation in a context of decolonization

This is all part of a continuous process of increasing self-awareness, of being aware of your own background and experiences as a (privileged, white) curator. Especially, when your institution carries the name of a colonial institute such as the Royal Tropical Institute (Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam), you have to know your past and what you are doing. In a context of decolonization of the museum, you need to know what this term means and what you are fighting for in the end. It should not become such a term as 'diversity' and 'inclusiveness', which is put on a lot of processes that are going on (interviewee 2). This was already mentioned in the section about theories, that we should be careful and critical when museums claim to commit themselves to 'diversity', 'inclusion' and 'decoloniality', as this goes deeper than just being represented in a museum (Kassim, 2017). Decolonization requires structural change in for example the use of words, but also in the structure of the museum staff.

In addition to this, curators need to position themselves in the process of decolonization, asking questions about which place they have in the story. This is

another example that can be applied to the first layer to the negotiation of identities in museum representations, provided by McLean (2008). The first layer is about the identities of those encoding the representations, which has much to do with the politics of regulation in the museum (McLean, 2008, p. 284). Interviewee 3 tries to bring this in practice, as she told me:

> … and that you take yourself into the whole, that you know where you were born, what your education is, how you are guided. And what the other, opposite stories might be, and that you also hear those, so that you are aware of what you are doing and who you are in the story.

This touches upon an important debate behind-the-scenes of museums nowadays, there is a colonial legacy in museums, that curators have to deal with, which is not easy and requires a lot of discussion about who says what.

To conclude this section about curatorial attitudes to the role of museums in the context of decolonization, it is important to understand that we are discussing ongoing topics that are still being investigated by the museums themselves. Therefore, there is not always an answer to questions, and we can only look at the attitudes and possible outcomes. However, it is interesting to see that curators perceive and understand their role as gatekeepers and storytellers in order to create better representations. The curators are aware of their position and try to approach decolonization in an honest way, even though these processes take time and their audiences need time to come along as well. The challenges regarding representation remain, but steps are taken to create more equality.

4.3   Curatorial practices

This section is dedicated to the actual practices of curators, which is about the choices that are made in the creation of exhibitions and which topics are relevant in relation to representation of African culture. The interviewees provided a lot of examples of how they reached a certain end-product in the exhibitions. However, a large part of the work of museums is already defined by their research and the museum collections. Especially the NMVW, which has its own research institute, the RCMC, publisher of the 'Words Matter' (2018) publication. The RCMC thinks about new ways to deal with communities, how to do provenance research and how terminology can be improved. Besides this, the curators have to deal with the museum collections that show a colonial legacy in different ways, such as racist imaging and disinterest in certain parts of Africa.

So, the elements of research and collections are connected to the creation of exhibitions, which are dealing with categorization, contextualization, stereotypes and word choice. Nowadays, museums have to manage these representational challenges on different levels and are constantly checking their impact on society. This section will first discuss the practices of curators in research, which are divided in community involvement, for example in digitization projects, and provenance research. Then, preceding to the challenges regarding museum collections, which is about the colonial legacy in museum collections and acquiring new museum pieces. And finally, the practical side of creating exhibitions about Africa is discussed in the sub-sections about moving beyond stereotypes and the idea of merging museums.

4.3.1   Community involvement

The practice that was mentioned the most in regard to research, was the involvement of community groups in talking about what should be displayed, and how. Also known as the dialogical approach. Especially the RCMC, which is hosting different kinds of workshops with communities, and academics. Interviewee 1 told me about his experiences in workshops: "I hear a lot about how we can interact with the local communities", there are always questions like do you know anybody from that community, modern artists, musicians, fashion designers, anyone (interviewee 1).

Interviewee 1 would like to see in the future that there is the possibility for Africans to tell the story for themselves, on a larger scale. He argues: "…I have been talking a lot to people from website design to Wikipedia to registrars about how we can get this information out there so that South-Africans can see it for themselves" (interviewee 1).

So, he aims at creating online space where South-Africans can read about their heritage, their histories, and add elements where necessary.

The involvement of communities online, started during the 1990s, when digitization projects started to take place. In that time, museums already struggled with what to do with sensitive terminology (NMVW, 2018, p. 29). The article in 'Words Matter' (2018) by Marijke Kunst, mentioned that "after putting the information online, the museum invited viewers to take a critical eye and help improve their documentation" (p. 30). However, some other museums were more careful and first let the staff review all the data of artefacts before putting it online.

This makes clear that museums must make choices when it comes to making their historical documentation accessible to the public. This has been done in the past, and the publication of 'Words Matter' (2018) is another example of how this can be done as a way of being open about the processes of word use in museums. So, one can argue that the openness and accessibility of museums as cultural institutions has increased.

Increasing openness and accessibility of museums is important in the process of decolonization as it raises awareness on the position of a museum, for example in their authority and illusion of objectivity and neutrality. The public needs to know more about the internal processes of museums to understand the challenges of representation and to engage properly. For example, this can be done in the educational role of a museum when a group of students visits, by telling them about the colonial narratives and the current struggles.

Moreover, increased accessibility leads to engagement of people on display, creating a new space for discussion and involvement of the communities (interviewee 1). Besides this, these online spaces are important sources for curators when creating new exhibitions. For example, interviewee 5 did online research for the Fashion Cities Africa exhibition in the Tropenmuseum, by reading online blogs about fashion labels and to find out about current developments.

4.3.2 Provenance research

Another important element of research is provenance research, which has increasingly been under the attention of the media. Provenance research encourages to think more critically about the collection in more permanent presentations. Museums should know the origins of their objects, but also their link to the objects, how they were involved. One of the curators argued:

Provenance research is not always just about reinterpreting objects, but it is what we need to know, what the interpretation and intention was in the first place, its story how it got here, and only then we can start to think of subversive counter narratives. (interviewee 1)

So, provenance research is especially important in the case of colonial items, and items that were acquired in the past. The origins of many items in museum collections is unknown, and especially when the background of an object is questionable, it is important to do research whether objects were taken without consent of the owner. However, nowadays there is the internet, and a lot of the research for an exhibition can be done online, provided that the information is out there. In the case of contemporary artefacts, this should not be a problem, but older items can lack information about their origins and interpretations over time.

Also, the main aim of involving communities and creating online spaces, is to stimulate provenance research and to be able to tell a story from multiple perspectives. In the Netherlands, we are used to tell the white victory story of the Dutch East India Company (VOC), while that might be something you do not want to restore (interviewee 5). There is another side to the victorious story of the VOC, which is the side of slave trade and oppression. This side of the story tends to be neglected, and artefacts originating from that time tend to show the Dutch Golden Age perspective. Therefore, the result of provenance research should be that artefacts are contextualized in the right way. The texts accompanying the artefacts should tell about the origins, the intentions and interpretations in the first place, and the current perspective.

4.3.3   Colonial legacy in museum collections

The most recurring theme when talking about the museum collections, was the colonial legacy that still has an impact. It was argued that the colonial past is actually influencing everything, because it has been an important part of our past and our society (interviewee 7). Moreover, one can argue that most of the museum collections were acquired during colonial times and can thus be seen as part of the colonial legacy.

To a certain extent, museum collections can be good at showing a colonial past; they are telling the story about the Dutch nation itself in that time, rather than telling the stories of the people whose objects were acquired (interviewee 5). A large part of the

collection on Africa of Museum Volkenkunde was donated by the zoo Artis, which received a lot of objects from the colonies to put on display. This shows that there used to be this idea that colonial items (and people) belonged in a zoo, they were seen as exotic. Besides this, more than half of the collection of South Africa consists of just weapons and beads, which in that sense, also represent very Western ways of perceiving Africa (interviewee 1).

In the past, there used to be a fear of displaying paintings of, and from black people in art museums. A museum did not want art with a black person (interviewee 3). The objects in art museums need to have an aesthetic quality, which makes curators filter the works in a specific way, in which they have to define art. In contrast to art museums, ethnographic museums were literally colonial institutes to get more information on doing business and making money in the Dutch colonies.

Therefore, parts of the museum collection used to be propaganda for the colonies, teaching how to make financial profit of the colonies. In her research as an art historian, interviewee 3 argued that in most artworks from that time, we see the colonial past as a nice image, or as propaganda for the prosperity in the colonies. So, one could argue there used to be a certain façade in front of the museum collections, which created a distance between museum visitors and the people who lived in the colonies. This is an important element of the colonial legacy in museum collections, which needs to be 'decolonized'. Most curators seem to argue for better contextualization of these artworks or objects in order to eliminate the barrier between the viewer and the colonized.

Furthermore, there has often been a disinterest in certain stories and objects, such as the stories of slaves and objects from those periods. Thus, it becomes a challenge to come up with new ways to say something about the experience of slaves. Nowadays, there is much more interest in the stories of slaves themselves, to hear their own stories. While in the past, the stories of slaves were told from an elitist perspective. Interviewee 7 told me that her predecessors, who have collected the slavery collection, never put attention to the stories of slaves, they did not think that was interesting or important. The stories were told from a Western perspective and were part of the myth created in the twentieth century that 'we' were spreading civilization into the heart of Africa. The collections were there to support and underpin that.

So, in many ways, the collection is informed by racial stereotypes, but also intent to create racial stereotypes (interviewee 1). Nowadays, the process of decolonization

tries to get rid of these racial stereotypes by focusing on new perspectives on for example the slave trade. The exhibition on Afterlives of Slavery in the Tropenmuseum places the enslaved and their descendants center stage, by telling personal stories from past and present to bring the history of slavery and its current-day legacy up close (interviewee 1). The next sub-section will discuss how acquiring new museum collections can contribute to a better understanding of stories and cultures of 'other' people.

4.3.4 Acquiring new museum collections

Around 1950, ethnographic museums started to realize that they needed to play another role, as they were not required as colonial institutes anymore. Moreover, their representations of Africa were outdated and needed improvement. Thus, curators started to build a new Africa collection, which was focusing more and more on contemporary artefacts. For example, dark-wooden mysterious sculptures were replaced by colorful items, such as fashion, handicraft and modern art (interviewee 4). Over the past years, curators have come to realize that the showcase of popular culture is especially interesting, as this is the kind of culture that many people are consuming nowadays. Many people will recognize popular culture from all around the world, which will create connections between different cultures.

Besides this, something that cannot be ignored was the recurring theme of money in the acquisition of new objects for museum collections. There is a limited budget for collecting new items, which makes curators more conscious in their decisions about which artefacts need to be put on display. So, sometimes they need to be flexible and deal with the possibilities at hand. Museums are constantly looking for new ways of finding funding, and sometimes get generous donations. However, they have to be creative in order to survive as an institution.

Therefore, in a lot of temporary exhibitions, curators make use of rotating exhibitions and loans from other museums or from the artists themselves. So, these items are then actually not part of the collection of the museum. However, the loans are interesting for attracting larger exhibitions, such as the Fashion Cities Africa exhibition, which was first exhibited in Brighton Museum. This is relevant, because it shows the opportunities for curators to work together with other museums to share knowledge and increase awareness about representations of Africa.

4.3.5 Moving beyond stereotypes

In the process of creating exhibitions in a context of decolonization of the museum, it is important for curators to move beyond stereotypes. Categorizations of artefacts are often connected to existing stereotypes of countries and cultures. Even though African cultures are really diverse, and therefore should be presented by different levels and types of objects, the origins of exhibitions lie in colonial times.

Interviewee 4 told me that his approach regarding this has changed throughout the years of his career, because in the beginning there was a lot of focus on telling the colonial story. This meant to be showing the victory story of that moment, to show the postcolonial relations and neocolonialism in the relationship between the poor, exploited Africa, versus the rest as oppressors. Although he could understand this imaging, there was something that stuck, as this harms so much of the power and character of Africa itself. Africa was always seen as a "kind of derivative from the Western hegemony" (interviewee 4). There is so much more to say about Africa, different perspectives to take.

For example, by telling the story of slavery from the perspective of descendants of enslaved people. This was done in the exhibition about slavery in the Tropenmuseum, in order to show that "even within such an inhuman system as slavery, those who were enslaved still possessed so much resilience that they continued to make culture, that they had the power to escape, started new communities themselves" (interviewee 2).

Besides this, there has been a new approach to telling the colonial story, which revolves around showing colonial encounters by combining European art with the collections of ethnographic museums. This will give an insight in how artists have been inspired by different cultures, but also to explore the interface between these cultures and their traditions (interviewee 6). This is an approach that will increase in importance, because cultures are mixing and there are many artists in diaspora, or who have migrated to other parts of the world to find inspiration (idem.). In doing so, the importance of contextualization will remain, to tell which perspective is put on display and why.

In the process of creating exhibitions, curators are writing texts to put on the walls and general texts about the exhibitions. These texts are written to show all the nuances in a story but are often too difficult to be readable and understandable by every audience member. Therefore, different people are checking and adjusting the texts, which can lead to a loss of 'sparkle' in a text. These adjustments by other people can also have an impact on marketing of an exhibition.

For example, when choosing a poster for an exhibition, which can in terms of marketing be really appealing, but a curator might not want to make it look nice, as it is a serious topic (interviewee 5). Moreover, images are often subject to stereotypes as a 'nice' or 'recognizable' picture will be more appealing and attract a larger audience. This can lead to a clash between what is presented, which words or images are used and who reads it. For curators, it is a constant process of facilitating the relationship between objects, people and meaning (Lidchi, 2006, p. 94). Especially in the context of decolonization, word choices are very important, and storytelling becomes a challenging task.

Next, there has been an increase in the incorporation of current events in museum exhibitions, which means that they try to reflect on the social reality. Rather than just displaying "strange and faraway" and "poor and sad", which used to be the case in the past (interviewee 6). For example, one of the curators was trying to get some of the current electoral posters in South Africa, where every tree and phone booth is covered in posters, billions of posters (interviewee 1). Of course, this is bad for the environment, but it is an essential part of South African culture nowadays. It should become possible to integrate these parts into exhibitions in order to be able to respond to recent developments. In this way, museums become lively and engaging spaces, in which it is not just the curator who tells the story of African culture, but the original electoral posters for example. Besides this, curators can use audiovisuals, semi-permanent set-ups, or create rotation systems (interviewee 5).

Somebody mentioned the approach of doing interventions as part of decolonization processes, by installing something visible in the exhibition as a reaction to what is on display. She provided the example of museums, in which "certain showcases were screened with a piece of cloth, including a text like; this is colonial, and we don't want that" (interviewee 2). So, instead of removing colonial items, such as statues of colonizers, curators can also choose to highlight the connotations. Thus, the process of decolonization becomes very visible, which might give visitors a better understanding of what is going on behind-the-scenes of museums. All in all, there are several ways to include current events in museum exhibition, creating the dynamic spaces that are pursued.

4.3.6 Merging museums

Recently, curators have been trying to bring the process of decolonization to a next level, by asking the question of how to choose the highlights of museum, which stories we want to tell. And this can become as far stretching as choosing new heroes. Curators need to decide about who the heroes of our time are, who should be put on a pedestal? And what should we do with a statue of Jan Pieterszoon Coen, an officer of the VOC? Is he still a hero? Initially, these 'old' heroes and highlights of our history were chosen during the nineteenth century, when nationalism and colonialism reigned supreme (interviewee 7).

A lot the times, when people talk about slavery, it is referred to as a 'black page' as if it is unrelated to our society nowadays (interviewee 2). As well, our references to the Golden Age are mainly positive, without the cases of slavery and exploitation. The colonial story should become more interwoven with art history, and other disciplines, for example by having interdisciplinary workshops. For the purpose of increasing knowledge about the other stories rather than well-known highlights.

Furthermore, there seems to be a new approach in museum practice of merging museums, which entails that art museums and ethnographic museums are slowly but surely getting together. For example, museum Boijmans van Beuningen is cooperating with the Wereldmuseum in Rotterdam to loan some pieces of art during the time of their renovation (interviewee 6). There is movement, in which different types of museums are connecting and exchanging ideas and practices. The aim in doing so, is to eliminate the barriers between art museums and ethnographic museums and to work together. Especially ethnographic museums often have the connotation of only exhibiting 'exotic' or even 'primitive' art, while curators want to get rid of those labels. Simpson (2001) also argued that curators have to deal with the categorization and status of 'indigenous' arts (p. 251).

However, all kinds of museums are now dealing with the influence of the movement of decolonization of the museum, and the topic of slavery is on a momentum in society. So, a lot of museums are discussing their colonial history in relation to slavery. For example, the Mauritshuis in The Hague has an exhibition about Johan Maurits himself, as he was governor-general of the colony Dutch Brazil, an art lover, but also involved in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The exhibition is the starting point of a research project focused on getting more insights in the financing of building the Mauritshuis and the influence of Johan Maurits on the trade in enslaved Africans (Vinde, 2019). This is a

practical example of how the colonial history can become more interwoven with art history. It starts with an awareness about the on-going influence of colonial times on current times.

In conclusion to this section, one can argue that curatorial practices involve a lot of different elements, which have changed in the context of decolonization. The section included a lot of practical examples, which have not been discussed before in relation to the role of curators in the academic literature. Therefore, references to the theory were scarce, indicating the gap in the literature that needs to be filled.

The involvement of community groups has become an important focus point for curators in doing research for the creation of exhibitions. Besides this, there is always the process of conducting provenance research to be aware of origins and intentions of objects, in order to create subversive counter narratives. The origins of objects often reflect the colonial legacy in museum collections, which is now tried to be decolonized.

For example, by focusing on stories that used to be neglected, such as slavery histories. But the impact of curators becomes also visible in acquiring new museum collections, focusing on popular art and moving beyond racial stereotypes. This has led to another approach that tries to combine forces of ethnographic museums and art museums. The merging of ethnographic museums and art museums is still a future prospect, but it is definitely interesting for the museum world which is put under a lot of financial and social pressure. Working together might be the way for them to survive and to create new platforms where people can learn and get inspired.

Overall, the findings of the document and interview analysis, have shown a variety in challenges regarding representation of African culture and how they have been addressed by curators. First of all, the context in which curators are operating is dominated by colonial narratives of racial stereotypes and categories. An important approach to counter this is by consciously dealing with word choices, as seen in the publication 'Words Matter' (2018), which has led to changes in labels and museum texts to increase awareness on this topic by the public as well.

Then, the curatorial attitudes to the role of museums in the context of decolonization, have been discussed, which remains an ongoing topic of discussion that is still being investigated by the museums themselves. Therefore, there is not always an answer to questions, and we can only look at the attitudes and possible outcomes. However, it is interesting to see how curators perceive and understand their role as

gatekeepers and storytellers in order to create better representations. The curators are aware of their position and try to deal with decolonization accurately, even though these processes take time and museum audiences need time to come along as well.

The final sub-section about curatorial practices has been dealing with this in terms of actual choices of curators in community involvement, provenance research and acquiring new museum collections. Moreover, the day-to-day practices of curators reflected their attitudes as they are trying to include different perspectives in exhibitions. In doing so, curators try to move beyond the stereotypes and categories that were created during colonial times. These colonial ideas have an ongoing impact on society and need to be addressed in museum exhibitions to change the public perception.

5 Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been to analyze the role of curators in the representation of African art and culture, focusing on visions and complemented by practices, such as which choices have been made to select and innovate exhibitions about Africa and which motivations underlie these changes. This has been done on the basis of the following question:

> How do Dutch curators perceive and understand their role in representing African culture in a context of decolonization of the museum, and how does this affect practices in the process of creating exhibitions?

To answer this research question, existing academic theories about representations and museum practice have been discussed to provide a framework for the research. The content analysis and interviews have shed light on the actual reality in the Dutch museum sector, in which curators are dealing with past practices of categorizing and (racial) stereotyping. The colonial roots of ethnographic museums remain a challenge and there is a general consensus that this legacy need to be tackled in the near future.

Curators deal with this through showing different perspectives in their roles as gatekeepers and storytellers, in which they constantly ask themselves: *what can I say?* The title of this thesis is referring to the challenge in choosing the right words for representations and exploring the limits and possibilities of representations. During the interviews, the curators perceived and understood their role as a gatekeeper in the sense of having the power to decide what is put on display and what needs attention of the public, which corresponds with the findings of Blackwood and Purcell (2014, p. 240). Besides this, their perceived role as storyteller allows them to tell stories from a different perspective and to include diverse voices in exhibitions.

The publication of 'Words Matter' (2018) has shown to a certain extent the curatorial attitudes regarding word choice, which is an important element of creating exhibitions about African culture in the context of decolonization of museums. Research on terminology has aimed at providing the right information about the objects and putting it in the appropriate context. To counter the ongoing colonial narratives, museums have been adjusting their documentations of artefacts, because these are full of racial stereotypes, which keep on being reproduced. Furthermore, provenance research needs to be conducted in order to be aware of origins and intentions of objects, and to create subverting counter narratives. As found in the academic literature, ethnographic

museums specifically should consider how the histories of particular objects and collections, and the institution itself, could become lenses to look at the larger questions of cross-cultural and colonial history (Thomas, 2010, p. 10).

In order to address the colonial legacy in museum research, collections and exhibitions, it is necessary for curators to be self-conscious and self-reflective. Curators should be aware of their own background and personal experiences in positioning themselves. This represents the first layer to the negotiation of identities in museum representations as suggested by McLean (2008), which is about the identities and backgrounds of those encoding the representations (p. 284). In that capacity, curators have the power to reproduce certain colonial narratives as the dominant view, which alternatively become the social reality, perceived by the public as normal and legitimate (Blackwood & Purcell, 2014, p. 240). However, curators try to break through these layers and divide their power, by involving community groups in the creation of exhibitions and by being open about their internal processes of decolonization to increase their relevance and functionality in addressing contemporary issues (Simpson, 2001, p. 247).

Decolonization of the museum has been an important element of the attitudes of the curators, yet this is a very personal approach, which requires reflection on personal aims and objectives. Therefore, the interviews also have been focusing on actual decisions and daily practices of the curators to find out more about how this attitude has an impact on their work. The first practice is to transfer this self-awareness to their public, in the sense that they should be aware of the position of the museum and the position of themselves as an audience. That means to understand how meanings come to be inscribed and by whom, and how some come to be regarded as 'right' or taken as given (Macdonald, 1998, p. 6). In that way, curators want to contribute to the inclusiveness of their museums as well, because they see their role as socially concerned institutions. Moreover, as gatekeepers of history, they have the ability to connect elements of different cultures and thus increase mutual understandings. As Shelton (2000) argued, that curators ideally should act with historical carefulness, a self-conscious awareness of their practice and an understanding of how meaning and knowledge are negotiated and mediated with a fine-tuned sensitivity to the process of cultural translation (p. 5).

Besides this, museums have the ability to provide a stage for new, emerging artists, which should be part of their efforts to counter the colonial legacy. This offers opportunities to improve representations of African art and culture. Even though, the

word 'representation' is ambiguous in the sense that someone should be careful in representing something or someone, he or she is not. Therefore, there are a lot of discussions going on in museums about who is able to create representations of who, and how the actual communities can contribute to this. However, what is displayed in exhibitions is still a manipulation, because it is simply impossible to 'represent' a whole continent, or country, or culture. It will always be a museum truth.

5.1   Implications

This does not imply that it is impossible to make better representations of African art and culture. Curators are constantly working on their approaches and also the RCMC plays a significant role in asking the right questions to the curators. There are many elements that will remain a challenge in the coming years, for example how museums can become less 'white' institutions and how power can be distributed. Also, the concept of merging ethnographic museum and art museums could lead to new challenges, offering new opportunities for both types of museums.

In addition to this, there will always be new movements and new perspectives that need to be taken into account. What is progressive now, will be normal in a few years and be replaced by something else, which we are now not yet aware of. This has become clear by the analysis of 'Words Matter' (2018), which profiles itself as a 'work in progress' (p. 10), indicating the fluidity of language and the awareness of museums that they need ongoing processes of revising and improving their choices. However, as already argued by Kassim (2017), decolonization is a very complex set of ideas that has the risk of becoming another 'buzzword' (para. 10). Therefore, curators should act with carefulness and the future will prove its impact. Overall, the discussions about decolonization of the museum have become more accessible and visible in the past years, which is a necessary step of the process.

The findings imply that research on 'dialogical curating' should be further investigated, as this seems an important approach to creating museum representations (Thumim, 2010, p. 294). Especially, its practical appliance needs more attention in order to monitor the outcomes of this curatorial practice. This concern was also mentioned by Anick Vollebergh in the publication 'Words Matter' (2018), where she argued for more clarity on how policy documents would look like in everyday life (p. 51). Thus, practical objectives are important in tackling the representational challenges of ethnographic museums.

5.2　Limitations

Although this research was carefully prepared, I am still aware of its limitations. The most obvious shortcoming is that only white interviewees took part in this study, so a more diverse group of respondents, by for example interviewing a curator from Africa would be an improvement. I have approached two black co-curators from Africa, but they were either not able to participate or responded too late. However, they are co-curating and thus only temporarily involved in the creation of certain exhibitions. This shows that museums are still very much in the power of white people. To change this should not be a goal per se, but it should at least be normal to have several black or African people working at the museum.

The interviewees have acknowledged the fact that their institutes are still mainly white. However, they argued that this has to do with their predominantly white audience and the fact that an African curator is not necessarily better at creating representations of a certain African country. However, this remains an interesting point of discussion and something museums need to find ways of dealing with.

Besides this, to interview curators has been interesting as they are 'on top of things', but it should be noted that they are working in teams. Especially at the NMVW, the structure is really based on team-work, and therefore curators are not the only ones responsible. Therefore, more interviews with different people would lead to an even better understanding of the challenges regarding representation and the processes of decolonization.

Furthermore, the concept of decolonization is a loaded, complex topic with on-going social tensions and increased media attention, which can lead to carefulness in the answers of the interviewees. During the interviews, I did not notice any specific withholdings in the conversation, but I can imagine that the curators were careful in their word choice and what they were able to say.

5.3　Further research

My recommendations for further research would be to focus on the impact of changes in exhibitions on the audience, by looking at public perception about African culture. Data collection could be done through surveys by museum visitors or experiments with different displays and observing people's reactions. However, this is something that is hard to measure, but it is part of the aim of museums to increase awareness and to

contribute to social movements. Therefore, it would be good for them to know how different approaches influence perceptions by the audience.

Besides this, it would be interesting to look more specifically to the items and actual representations of African culture through time. Although I have mentioned some examples of this, more research could be conducted on which artefacts were chosen with which intention. This can be done through analyzing the objects in museum collections and comparing it to other museums. Moreover, this would be interesting to combine with the concept of merging museums, in order to analyze the process, and look for possibilities. Probably, curators will keep on playing a significant role in creating representations, in which they need to keep asking themselves: *what can I say?*

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Appendices

A. Interview guide

Table A1. English version of interview guide

	DIMENSIONS	QUESTIONS
Representation of African culture	Context	What do you regard as the most important role of museums in society? Why? Do ethnographic museums fulfill this role? How has research on 'dealing with colonialism and representation' developed over the past years? How do museum collections and archives reflect colonial history? How was this in the past? And how is it now?
	Aims & Objectives	Is there a right or wrong way in dealing with representation of African culture in museum practices? How do you see your role in representing African culture in museum exhibitions?
	Implementation	What are the challenges of representation in creating exhibitions nowadays? To what extent do museum collections reflect African culture? How do you address these challenges in permanent and temporary exhibitions? And give some recent examples.
Curatorial practices	Research	How does the publication of Words Matter contribute to curatorial practices? What does research of African culture entail for museums?
	Collections	What are the main artefacts representing African culture?

		What is taken into mind by acquiring new museum pieces?
		What is the impact of returning artefacts on existing museum collections and acquiring new collections?
	Exhibitions	What would be the best way to adjust permanent exhibitions to the current standards and ideals of a museum?
		What practical choices are made regarding this in making exhibitions?
		What kind of decisions do/would you make in the creation of exhibitions about Africa to counter the challenges of a colonial past?
		How can temporary exhibitions contribute to a better understanding of African art and culture?
		What are the biggest differences between temporary and permanent exhibitions?
		Which choices are made in improving exhibitions?

Table A2. Dutch version of interview guide

	INDICATORS	VRAGEN
Representatie van Afrikaanse cultuur	Context	Wat ziet u als de belangrijkste rol van een museum in de maatschappij? Waarom? Vervullen etnografische musea deze rol? Hoe heeft het onderzoek naar omgaan met kolonialisme en representatie zich de afgelopen jaren ontwikkeld?
	Doelstellingen	Hoe reflecteren museumcollecties een koloniaal verleden? Hoe was dit vroeger, en hoe is dat nu? Is er een goede of slechte manier in omgang met representatie in museumcollecties? Hoe ziet u uw rol in het vertegenwoordigen van de Afrikaanse cultuur?
	Implementatie	Wat zijn de uitdagingen tegenwoordig met betrekking tot representatie in het maken van vaste en tijdelijke tentoonstellingen? Hoe gaan museums om met deze uitdagingen? Kan u voorbeelden geven? In welke mate weerspiegelen collecties van musea de Afrikaanse cultuur? Welke praktische keuzes worden er gemaakt op dit gebied in het creëren van tentoonstellingen?
Praktijk conservator	Onderzoek	Hoe draagt de publicatie van 'Woorden doen ertoe' bij aan het werk van conservatoren? Wat houdt onderzoek naar Afrikaanse cultuur in voor musea?

Collecties	Wat zijn de belangrijkste artefacten die de Afrikaanse cultuur vertegenwoordigen? Waar wordt rekening mee gehouden bij het verkrijgen van nieuwe museumstukken? Wat is de impact van het teruggeven van artefacten op bestaande museumcollecties en het verwerven van nieuwe collecties?	
Tentoonstellingen	Wat zou de beste manier zijn om permanente tentoonstellingen aan te passen aan de huidige normen en idealen van een museum? Welke praktische keuzes worden daarin gemaakt? Welke beslissingen neemt/zou u nemen bij het maken van tentoonstellingen over Afrika om de uitdagingen van een koloniaal verleden te overwinnen? Hoe kunnen tijdelijke tentoonstellingen bijdragen aan een beter begrip van Afrikaanse kunst en cultuur? Wat zijn de grootste verschillen tussen tijdelijke en permanente tentoonstellingen? Welke keuzes worden gemaakt bij het verbeteren van tentoonstellingen?	

B. Overview of respondents

Table B1. Overview of interview respondents

	OCCUPATION	EXPERTISE	DATE	TIME	DURATION
M	Junior curator - NMVW	Southern Africa	17 April 2019	14:00	1:00:12
F	Researcher - RCMC	Slavery	18 April 2019	15:00	57:40
F	Independent curator	"Black is beautiful"	26 April 2019	11:00	55:53
M	Former curator – Tropenmuseum	Africa	30 April 2019	11:00	1:08:01
F	Curator - NMVW	Popular Culture and Fashion	2 May 2019	13:00	54:40
M	Curator – NMVW	Contemporary Art	13 May 2019	13:00	48:07
F	Curator – Rijksmuseum	South Africa	15 May 2019	11:00	23:09

C. Code book

Table C1. Code book of content analysis

CURATORIAL GUIDELINES		
Past traditions	**Present challenges**	**Future visions**
Colonial narratives	Audience engagement	Changing perceptions of the public
Digitization projects	Battle over representation	Changing roles of museums
Neutral spaces	Discrimination	Decolonization
Naming and categorizing	Identity formation	Inclusive institutions
Stereotypes	Museum practice needs attention	Increasing awareness of the public
	Political dimensions	Respectful terminology
	Racism	
	Self-critical	
	Societal involvement	

Table C2. Code book of interviews

CURATORIAL ATTITUDES		
Context	**Strategies**	**Outcomes**
	Connecting elements	
	Expertise	Equality
Complex choices	Gatekeepers	Inclusiveness
Reflection	Providing a stage	Mutual understanding
Story telling	Self-awareness	Raising awareness
	Socially concerned	
	Value of decolonization process	

CURATORIAL PRACTICES		
Research	**Collections**	**Exhibitions**
	Colonial legacy	Aesthetic quality
	Disinterest	Categorization
Context Unconscious behavior	High costs	Fear
	Propaganda	Highlights
	Racist imaging	Stereotypes
Community groups		Colonial encounters
Provenance research	Loan	Contextualization
Strategies Terminology	Past vs. Now	Current events
Different perspectives	Popular art	New approaches
		Word choice
Outcomes		Merging museums