

## Do they want to top it all by mocking us?

**Human remains of former colonised people are still considered as objects of research in the German museums that currently hold them. This state of affairs is unbearable for Mnyaka Sururu Mboro and Christian Kopp, working for the organisation *Berlin Postkolonial*.**

*Right before Mnyaka Sururu Mboro flew to Germany for the first time in 1978, his grandmother had requested him to bring the head of Mangi Meli back to Tanzania. Mangi Meli was one of many anti-colonial resistant fighters who were killed by the German colonisers. Forty years later, the co-founder of the organisation Berlin Postkolonial and his colleague Christian Kopp are still asking for the return of thousands of remains of colonised people home and calling for a concrete acknowledgement of Germany's colonial past and racist legacy.*

**Christian Kopp:** Mboro, you have been advocating a critical perspective on colonialism and its legacy for a few decades now. Among other debates, you have actively campaigned for renaming streets of Berlin which still honour former colonial criminals and you guide educational city tours that unveil the postcolonial traces of the German capital. Where do you draw your motivation from?

**Mnyaka Sururu Mboro:** I have experienced British occupation in the Tanganjika region and the ensuing independence movement. My grandmothers also told me a lot on the German foreign occupation before 1918. Many evening stories were dedicated to Hermann Wissman's military expeditions as Imperial Commissioner, to *mkono wa damu*, the "bloody hands" of Carl Peters, but also to the famous resistance of Mangi Meli, leader of the Wachagga people living on the Kilimanjaro. These things are deeply engraved. And when you find yourself in Berlin, and you see that there are still two "Wissmanstraßen" (Wissman Streets) and one "Petersallee" (Peters Avenue), and that this very colonial city does not seem to acknowledge its racist and oppressive legacy, then you tell yourself that you might obviously be one of the only ones here who could shed light upon this history and the pervasive forms of colonial oppression: forced labour, boycott, violent beatings, wars and uprisings, and the demonisation of our cultures and spiritual beliefs by Christian missionaries. This work is essential, and therefore natural to me. What about you? What could have possibly motivated you as a white German during all those years?

**Christian Kopp:** Despite having studied history, I have only found out about our entangled colonial histories by discussing with you and other Tanzanian people more than ten years after graduating. It was not so hard to understand that this violent past, which is typically repressed, divides us more than it brings us closer. You made me realise that my personal engagement with the past may help to bridge this abyss between us. Since then I have critically reflected on Germany's colonial past and I have supported initiatives led by the descendants of colonised people for symbolic acknowledgements and material reparations. The scandalous situation of human remains from former colonies appears to me as the most urgent issue in that process. But you've even got a personal connection to the debate...

**Mnyaka Sururu Mboro:** Well, no doubt about that! When my grandmother heard that I was going to Germany, she made me promise that I would search for the remains of Mangi Meli and see to it that his head is ultimately repatriated to Tanzania. Meli and eighteen of his followers were hanged in March

1900 by German soldiers. Wachagga people are certain that his head was then severed and shipped to Germany. To us, who will all later be inhumed on our original land close to our kin, it is unbearable to know that his head could never be buried, particularly because the heads of the dead play a special role in our burials: they are always turned towards the Kibo, the highest summit of Mount Kilimanjaro. After a year, the skulls of the fathers are then dug up and reburied under the holy tree *Isale* after a sacred ceremony.

The search for Meli's head started in the sixties; Wachagga, and particularly Meli's direct descendants, already tried to locate it in Germany back then. Many believe that the complete evaporation of traces of its existence has been the cause for every misfortune that has descended upon the community ever since. A new request has recently been sent to the Foundation Prussian Cultural Heritage in Berlin. Do you find such a relentless dedication hard to understand?

**Christian Kopp:** Not one bit. I wouldn't either accept that the remains of my ancestors be stored forever in a cardboard box on the other side of the planet! I can fully grasp the desire for descendants to welcome their ancestors back home and bury them with dignity, especially when those remains were sent to Europe to support racist scientific research. Just like the children of Meli's children would like to witness his return, Timothy Frederick recently demanded the return of his forefather Cornelius Fredericks to the Nama community in Namibia in an eloquent intervention in Berlin in July 2015. This renowned leader of the Oorlam resistance against German colonial rule was indeed sent to a concentration camp on Shark Island in the Lüderitz Bay where he died in 1907. According to Nama oral history, his body was later decapitated.

**Mnyaka Sururu Mboro:** The remains of prominent anti-colonial leaders obviously have a deep political, cultural and spiritual significance for the respective communities – it was precisely often for this reason that some were shipped away. The most famous example was the story of Mkwawa's head: he was killed in 1898 in former German East-Africa and his head was displayed by German colonists as the symbol for the crushed anti-colonial rebellion of the Wahehe, and later examined by famous anatomist Rudolph Virchow in Berlin. The return of his skull was part of the terms of the 1919 Versailles Treaty, but it was only repatriated to Tanzania in 1954. The remains of his father and the skull of his son, who was likewise killed by the German colonial troops, are still in Berlin as far as I know.

**Christian Kopp:** The archives of the Berlin Ethnological Museum suggest it indeed, and it is inexcusable that those responsible for the collections have not actively sought for those remains. When one realises the whole bustle that is made around the remains of Catholic Saints, or those of Prussian monarchs such as Frederic William I and Frederic the Great, whose remains were hid by the Nazis from the Allies, it seems unbelievable to me that people in Germany do not understand the importance of a restitution for the Mkwawa family and for the Wahehe in general.

Besides the remains of less-known and unidentified individuals acquired during the colonial era should also be proactively offered for restitution when their origins are known. In other words, the initiative should come from the museums themselves, instead of the usual reaction to repatriation claims. This would ensure that respect is given to the descendants who, as a rule, cannot know where the skeletal remains of their ancestors are presently housed. Other western countries such as the U.S. have

repatriated soldiers who fell in the wars of the twentieth century in a monumental manner. For all that, if, in the case of unknown remains, the referencing and provenancing work leads to nothing more precise than their broad African origin, I would suggest that the African community in Germany be approached so that appropriate burials can be carried out with respect for the dignity of the dead.

**Mnyaka Sururu Mboro:** I am afraid, we are still far from this. One of the main reasons seems to be that only New Zealand, Australia and Namibia have made Germany to return human remains but most other governments – and among them the government of the United Republic of Tanzania we have informed about the matter – are nowhere near to stand up for the rights of the descendants and of the source communities. The statements emanating from German museums also show that they still consider themselves as the rightful owners of our ancestors. They emphasise that only the mere single cases which clearly indicate a “context of injustice” can be subjected to negotiations for their return. The right of being able to define a “context of injustice” is however withheld by those institutions, which maintain that a context of colonial occupation cannot be considered as such in principle. What are they telling us? That our ancestors might have sold or given the remains of their relatives of their own free will? Do they want to top it all by mocking us?

**Christian Kopp:** I fear that there is even more at stake for European museums than the simple question of housing those human remains. The collections were used for racist theories in anthropology. In other words, not only were they acquired in the context of colonial oppression, they also justified an extremely unethical scientific agenda whose apex came only a few decades later: The selection and extermination of Jewish people for “scientific research”, aiming at the completion of German anthropological collections. Therefore I am shocked when I hear nowadays of the alleged precious worthiness of those remains for the greater good and humanitarian scientific knowledge. It is not only inconsistent with the lack of appropriate archival material on these collections which has resulted from decades of neglect and indifference. This argument supports a model in which white German scientists deliberately *continue* studying the skeletal remains of colonised African people and other People of Color and look at them as mere “research material” – this is abusive.

**Mnyaka Sururu Mboro** is a teacher and a board member of Berlin Postkolonial. **Christian Kopp** is historian and board member of the same organisation. They are currently organising a conference for the educational project “Just Listen – Globalgeschichte von unten und zivilgesellschaftlicher Dialog” (“Global history from below and dialogue in civil society”) which will focus on the central position of the views and voices of colonised people and their descendants in the debate about human remains and sacred cultural objects in white museum collections. The conference will take place in Autumn 2017.