



AN ARTISTIC RESEARCH

**Listen
to the
Elderly**

**by Cornelia Hänchen, Lefteris
Krysalis, Listening at Pungwe,
Friedrich Lober, Tuli Mekondjo,
Frederike Moormann, Luka
Mukhavele, Nashilongweshipwe
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West Uarije, Keith Vries and
Angelika Waniek**

In the project "Listen to the Elderly" we, a team of artistic positions from Namibia and Germany, work together in an open artistic process.

The outcomes lead to an audio walk that explores pre-colonial communication and the present reverberations of telecommunications technology usage in Namibia during the German colonial era (1884–1918).

The performative audiowalk also reveals a connection to today's form of communication via satellite and asks about the conditions and use of current communication channels.

In doing so, our aim is to grasp the enduring patterns of violence inherent in telecommunications, along with the resistance against them, while emphasizing a trans-cultural exploration of telecommunication with instruments.

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On wireless connections

Short notes on the interviews throughout *Listen to the Elderly*

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FREDERIKE MOORMANN

I With many African instruments there are words attached to a melody. The way you pitch bend it, you are mimicking words. The people from the same context know what means what. For example when they play: [Melody] The words that are being said there are: You must catch the cattle. [...] If you don't do anything with the instrument, it will just die there, in the context. So, I adapt the instruments for new contexts.

Luka Mukhavele, horn player, music scholar & instrument builder

Luka Mukhavele reinvents instruments to play them in different contexts. He forms transcultural wires with his music. The conversation with him made me think about the tension and mutual enrichment of tradition and invention. Part of the subsaharan tradition is the "choral" use of instruments. You need several Xigovias with different tunings to play one song that you could not play on your own.¹ The playing is not abstract but part of a context. How does my listening to music change, if I listen from this angle, from inside a context, in which the music is embedded?

¹ I met a similar principle in the telecommunication instrument of the gong in the Cordilleras, Philippines. Four to several hundred people play together, forming a melody by playing together on different beats. Gongs are also used for spiritual forms of telecommunication as well as an early taifun or other danger warning system. This social dimension of instruments is entirely lost in the context I grew up in. "The agong is played in festive gatherings particularly in musical competitions, it is also used to mark the time of the day, and [...] during emergency. The sound of the agong is believed to have supernatural powers because of its loud sound." Palabunibunyan, Aga Mayo Butocan, Manila 1987.

If you are depressed, sometimes we all are depressed, they would come and blow the Kudu horn, either behind you, or on your head, or between the shoulder blades here. To shout or maybe to chase the spirit on you. With the Kudu Horn, you call the ancestors, the sound is connecting to the spirit. It changes everything. If I blow in your head, in your spirit, you are connected to something. The sound is not only the Kudu Horn. It means something. It brings something healing.

West Uarije, horn player & performance artist

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Horns are used for telecommunication. Not least we use the horn of a car to warn, to greet or to ask: is there somebody around that bend? Natural horns have been used for centuries to telecommunicate. All of the horn players we talked to, connect something spiritual with their play, with the telecommunication of the horn. It is not only functional, but a calling of ancestors and spirits. In this understanding, wireless telecommunication is multidimensional. The knowledge of this wireless communication is much older than technical telegraphy apparatuses, and maybe the latter were only possible because of it.

These instruments possess an archaic quality. In the past, they were not primarily considered musical instruments. For me their depth, the deep notes are profoundly impressive. Music is perceived differently with natural horns compared to other wind instruments, precisely due to the depth they possess, a depth that holds a certain power. A single note, in its duration, already holds great potency. With other instruments, I am often tempted to showcase virtuosity right away. With natural horns, I sense the tone much more deeply; I continue to feel until I perceive an inner warmth.

Gundolf Nandico, horn player & composer

Playing the horn is a bodily activity. The air you breathe produces sound. A sound that can travel up to 10km, up into the sky, a sound that is calling.

Following the conversations with horn players,
telecommunication came to mean something
different to me.

II Telegraphy was the very first wireless technology that
was introduced. The first time it was tested in Namibia
by the Germans during the genocide between 1904 and
1908. Before people used all kinds of telecommunica-
tion, one example is blowing into a horn. What is inte-
resting to me is that this was the time of the geno-
cide, that this new technology was introduced during
this very critical time in Namibian history."

Tuli Mekondjo, performance & visual artist

I have a passion for maps, construction plans, and
huge technical facilities. I find beauty in the
abstract mathematical way of counting time, the
counting before the rocket leaves the ground
to dispatch satellites in outer space: 10, 9, 8, 7...
However, on the other side of the coin, counting
is closely connected to control.

The well tempered tuning, a very mathematical and
controlled way of thinking about music, pushed
alternative tunings to the periphery, and killed poly-
phony. In my life, polyphonies have become faint,
barely hearable. I try to listen carefully to Tuli
Mekondjo, making the quiet hearable, talking about
pictures taken at the telegraphy facilities in Namibia.

In each picture I can see my ancestors working, doing
the hard labour. I am starting to imagine their
heavy work. How they had to carry all this equipment.
And I start to think of the health issues that they
took on from carrying so much equipment from A to B.
These images are very much stylized. The people in it
were maybe told: You must look at me, so that I can
capture you. It is almost as if they want to hide
something. There is a distance in them. And maybe the
distance comes from... when the West talks about Africa
it is always a dark, primitive continent, and the
people from this continent were always perceived and

depicted as subhuman. It is almost like we were alien in a way. From this I start to understand what they did to us on Shark Island. They felt it was okay to decapitate and cut the people up in pieces and to take the human remains for scientific studies. [sigh, silence for some while]

Tuli Mekondjo, performance & visual artist

The telecommunication infrastructures of the early 1900s and of today bear a violence. They are very expensive, so that no one human or collective can set them up. They were set up by nations, or big companies, also in large parts to control.

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Since 1957, about 15,000 satellites have been launched. So just to put this into perspective, space has become a crowded place.

Christopher Vasko, space engineer

I want to hold this contradiction in my open hands between the beauty of mathematical systems and technical sketches; and their inherent violence. Between holding onto rationality and opening up for magic telecommunication with other times and outer space. Perhaps this contradiction can only be experienced and listened to, played and improvised upon, rather than conveyed by words on a paper.

Verbally I am sometimes unable to explain, but I think my body remembers. Everything I am remembers. It doesn't matter whether it happened a hundred years ago or whenever. It is there within my system. I can sometimes just sob. Then I go out, and hug myself. And I say to my ancestors: For the first time I start to understand what this pain is about, and why things are as they are today. We haven't processed these traumas. Until now. We just have been piling them up in our systems. For centuries we haven't been in dialogue about this. Despite putting a distance, it will always come back. Even if you are trying to avoid it, it will come back to haunt us.

Tuli Mekondjo, performance & visual artist

Sonification of a map

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Part of the artistic research was a joint examination of a colonial archival document. A map showing the 1904 military radio network around the Waterberg. The performers and musicians were asked to respond to this map with their respective artistic practices, aiming to disentangle and appropriate it.

What remains of a colonial archive when aesthetic practices re-read colonial power relations?

↗ Listen here







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Luka Mukhavele
Xizambi



Friedrich Lober
Natural horn

→

Gundolf Nandico
Vogelhorn

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Gundolf Nandico &
Robert Machiri









Horn blowers outside



↑

Robert Machiri & Luka Mukhavele playing the mbira



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→

Tuli Mekondjo
Voice recordings



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↑

Preparing the kudu horn. Further finger holes are needed for use.



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Horn blowers outside



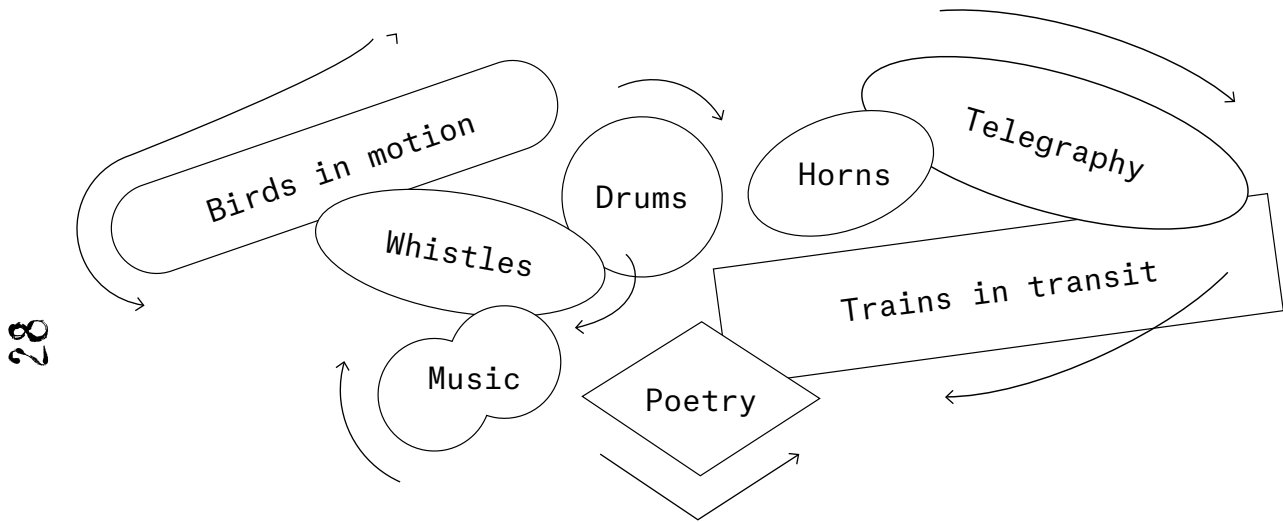
↑

Robert Machiri
Recordings with the geophon



Fire as a sonic source

NASHILONGWESHIPWE
MUSHAANDJA



These are some of the key terms that have been circulating during the process of working on the artistic-research project, *Listen to the Elderly*. Reflecting on this terminology reminded me of one crucial aspect of intergenerational dialogue which is how fire, such as the Holy Fire (Okuruuo) of Ovaherero creates a space for Africans in which listening the elders can take place.

In this essay, I'd like to bring fire into the mix of things. I would like to think with and through fire as sonic source (amongst other things) that requires deep and close listening. In Owambo, the northern Namibian region where I was born, the fireplace is a space for intergenerational transmission and sacred rituals. It is a site in the home where we listen to our elders' tales, riddles and praise poetry. Fire is a mediator that facilitates engagements with the ancestral and the cosmic. Here, we are all required to listen to the fire.

It is for this reason that I always take fire with me wherever I go in the world. Over the last few years, my artistic practice and research has explored fire and its critical usefulness in various public museum, theatres and archival contexts in South Africa, Namibia, Germany, and Switzerland. In my performance of *Ondaanisa yo pOmudhime* (Dance of the Rubber Tree), I negotiate fire into institutional spaces, and I suggest literal and metaphoric burning them up as a gesture of cleansing, disruption, and potentially restorative justice. Here, I am not only aware of the destructive nature of fire, but I am also interested in its generative and productive elements. This performance is a ritualized encounter that relies on fire as an enabler of knowledge production and heritage

preservation. It references a range of indigenous practices to situate this argument. For example, the burning or burying of Mukishi (masks) at the end of Mukanda (boys) initiation of the Chokwe and related groups of Zambia, Democratic Republic of Congo and Angola¹. These Mukishi represent ancestral spirits, meaning that they are crafted to be used in a given place and time which is often to call in sacred communal and ancestral presence that are necessary for live and embodied archives. They are not made to for modern museum collections and exhibitions.

While this is a completely different context of fire, this is one of many indigenous practices which offer a functional framework of fire as a source of knowledge. Here, fire is intentionally used in processes of material culture. A lesson here can be drawn from this notion of fire as a tool of de-toxifying museum or university collections which are historically implicated in colonial practices. In 2019, I participated in a workshop at the University of Bayreuth titled *Un-doing post-colonial knowledges: Perspectives from academia-arts-activism*, where we discussed de-toxifying, as part of the restitution of African cultural objects in European museums. The workshop report noted that "...de-toxifying can be understood as a process of cleansing in a much broader sense, as a process in which objects are being relieved of the violence they had to endure, in which they are treated with care and sensitivity, in which European institutions take responsibility."² Therefore, I am interested in the knowledges that we were able harvest from the processes of mitigating and managing fire and the loss it causes? I turn to the words of Xola Mehlolakulu³ who wrote about burning buildings in a Fallist context asking, "... what if the real answer comes from the ashes of this building, rather than its erection, what if the answer to our calls lies in burning buildings?" We can only know if we chose to embrace the critical usefulness of fire amidst its destruction.

There is something about this fire and loss that teaches us to let go and not be so in control of knowledge. I am hinting towards the ephemerality of knowledge in any case and the notion of 'erasure is not permanent' as curator and scholar Nontobeko Ntombela once said to me. To grasp this, we must turn to embodied and spatial modes of knowledge production which are immediate and undisciplined. My theorizing of fire is rooted in its sources and intentionality as threads of experiencing and understanding its complexities in various contexts. It is on this basis that I argue for us to sit with the difficulty and the potential generative results of fire as it manifest (in the future).

1 <https://africa.uima.uiowa.edu/topic-essays/show/20?start=5> and <https://www.revistas.usp.br/gis/article/download/142391/141961/300595>

2 <https://www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/tagungsberichte-8415>

3 Mehlolakulu, 2017. What if the answer is in the fire? In Public[action], A. Gamedze L. Naidoo, Magano, T, Eds. Cape Town: Public[action].

Of cooperation and obstacles

CORNELIA HÄNCHEN

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As project coordinator for the Audio-walk project *Listen to the Elderly* in Leipzig, I have had an exciting journey. My personal starting point was the Moroccan Atlantic coast, where I lived at the beginning of the year and started collaborating in spring. One of the most remarkable aspects of my work was meeting Angelika and Frederike, two artists and colleagues who had been unknown to me until then. It was amazing how we understood each other right away and immediately sensed across the distance that our collaboration would be promising.

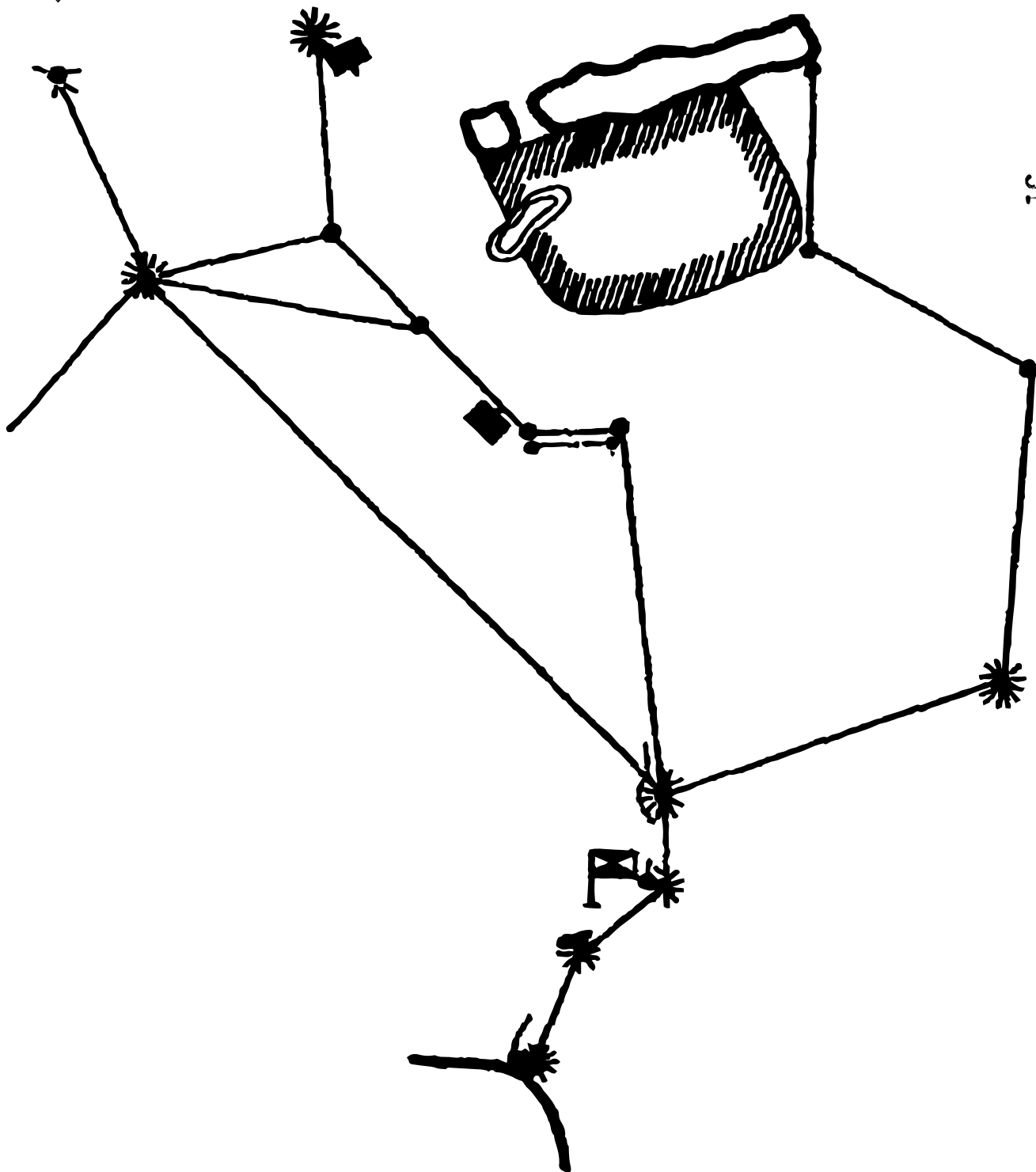
In the course of the project, we also encountered unforeseen challenges. In particular, the entry of the artist Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja turned out to be bureaucratically complicated and unfortunately not feasible. His visa was not granted by the German Embassy in Namibia for our joint work on site in Leipzig. This unexpected hurdle caused us great frustration and disappointment. We had to rethink and look for alternatives in order to be able to push forward with the work despite the physical distance.

Organisationally, this was a considerable challenge that put us to the test. We had no choice but to hold the project together with the help of virtual meetings, regular exchanges and innovative approaches in order to continue to participate intensively in the artistic processes of the participating actors. Even if we were able to find a way of working remotely, there are still numerous structural problems that we cannot solve. I hope that we will nevertheless be able to bring the project to a successful conclusion.

Experience has shown me that in difficult situations, close cooperation and understanding can lead to the right results. *Listen to the Elderly* will not only be marked by the fascinating stories and sounds, but also by the memory of successfully overcoming obstacles and the strength of our team. I am excited about the future of the project and all that it will bring.

*As of August 2023. tbc

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Recorded sounds, blanks, and gaps

ANGELIKA WANIEK

Stories told by various women.

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"And if we don't make an effort to preserve these narratives, we will not know what happened. We won't have their recorded voices to tell us what happened. What life was like in colonial Namibia and the apartheid system. When she dies, she goes with her stories, with her narratives. When she dies, she will take all her stories with her. But I will still have her voice, be able to listen to the recording of her voice," visual artist Tuli Mekondjo tells us in Berlin in June 2023. She is referring to Makulu Olivia, a woman from her village whom she and everybody else simply call grandmother. She wants to preserve her voice and incorporate it into the knowledge about Namibia's past, an archive that is plagued by gaps with regard to the resistance narrative. Makulu Olivia knows the villagers, has a nickname for everyone, while everyone refers to her simply as History. Listening to stories can make us aware of the existence of time, and that we are part of it as individuals. It also might make us aware of other individuals who we know, who know us, who were there before us, who have something to do with our present life.

We have set ourselves the target of telling part of the media history of telecommunication for a transnational audience. One that includes pre-colonial communication. A history that puts the focus on the authority of Blacks in Namibia who have engaged in anticolonial resistance, and not the history of those who engaged in violence. And a history that exposes the connections to today's satellite-based form of communication. The process that produces these narratives is that of telling each other stories, discussing connections that we have heard or read about. Those who listen will then have to retell what they heard before and put their fingers on the spot where they notice gaps. What Tuli Mekondjo knows about the history of Namibia is what she has heard or read, including stories related to the experience of resistance; stories that are passed on within families, villages, the country. What Frederike Moormann and myself know is the result of documents that we had a chance to read in various archives; documents related to Germany's colonial rule in Namibia: military maps, meticulously written reports, journals from technology companies and photographs.

Here is one of the stories that we put together from archive material:

At the beginning of the 20th century, electric telegraphy constituted a new technology that for the first time enabled the transmission of news across the globe wirelessly and in real time. The development of this technology coincided with Germany's colonial era. It was used during the war that the Germans waged against the Herero and Nama and the ensuing genocide.

A moment of silence. When Tuli Mekondjo retells the story, she starts out with the fact of the innumerable workers who were subject to forced labor and died in the construction of the railway: "They built the railway tracks. They did all the labor." They made sure that the raw materials, such as the country's copper reserves could be transported from the town of Tsumeb, in the interior, to the port town of Swakopmund and then be shipped to Europe. The mine at Tsumeb turns into a supply place for the German industry. Tuli Mekondjo adds: "Where are the narratives of black people that were living in Swakopmund. What is the history of Swakopmund in relation to the black people that are staying there?" She talks about expropriation of landowners, the violence that the indigenous population was exposed to and the consequences this has had to this day. She discusses how foreign rule and human rights' violations produce anticolonial resistance in the form of strikes and other actions aimed to thwart the plans of the colonial masters. How and that

the new technology was used as an instrument of military power during the German war against the Herero and Nama is not part of her narrative. This is one of the blanks that is filled in when the story is retold. Marius Kothor, PhD candidate in history at Yale University writes: "Telling nuanced stories about colonialism isn't just about telling a story of white violence. It is about completely decentering the logics of whiteness that makes us see and present history from the perspective of white men."⁴

At the beginning of the 20th century, electric telegraphy is a new technology. It allows news for the first time to travel wirelessly and in real time across the globe. It was also made possible as a result of Namibia's copper reserves. Extraction and telecommunication are in a violent relationship. Such horizontal and vertical land robbery and forced labor produced anticolonial resistance among the local population. The resistance offered by the indigenous population constitute the beginning of the German-Namibian war that led to the genocide of the Herero and Nama.

Exploitation and technological development create a circle: The exploitation of nature and human labor enables technological innovation that becomes the very means of continuing such suppression.

⁴ Marius Kothor: The way we tell stories. <https://africasacountry.com/2021/06/the-way-we-tell-stories>

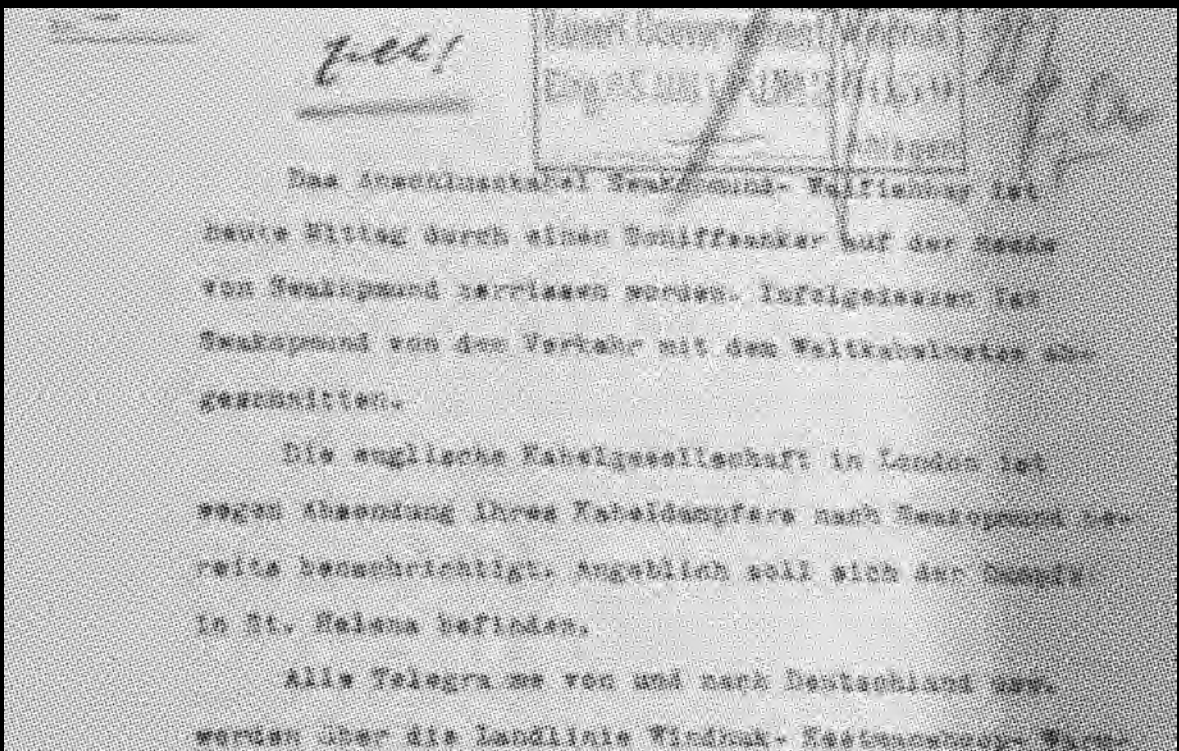
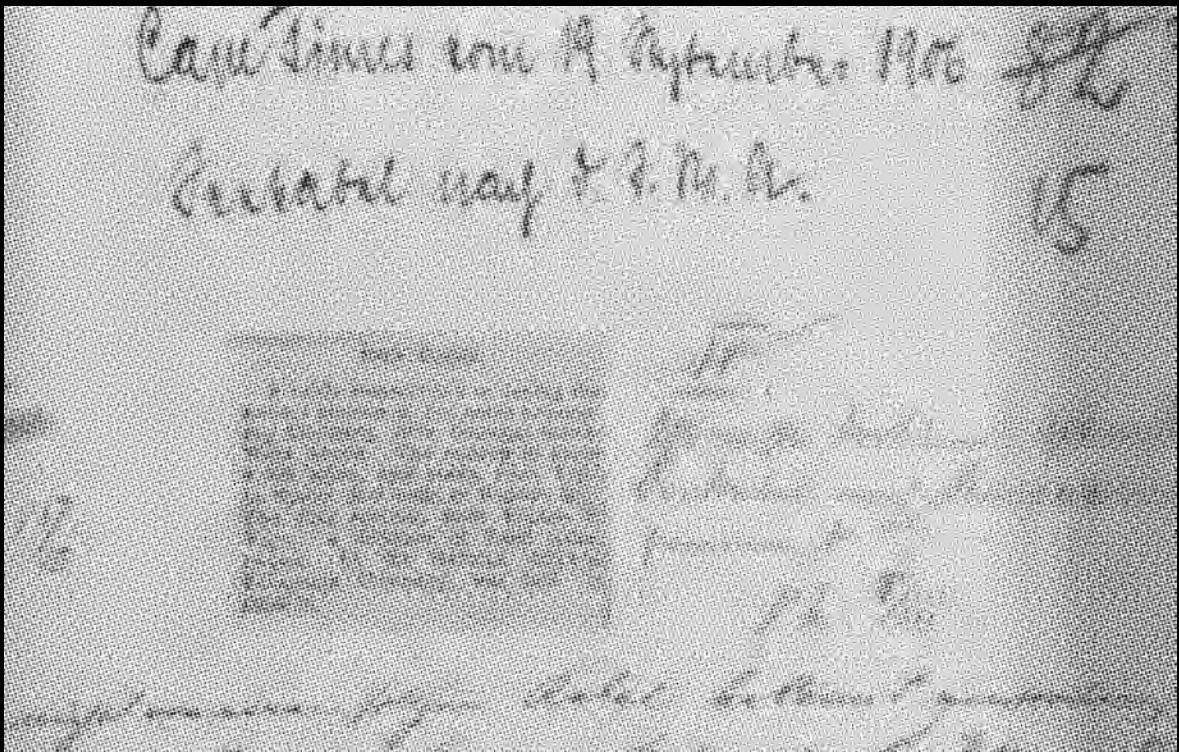


Fig. 1-2

View of colonial files stored in the National Archives of Namibia

In response to the audio clip: 'A prayer to the ancestors; in search of medicine in Tsumkwe.'

KEITH VRIES

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CONCEPT

As someone that grew up in a predominantly urban, multicultural with English and German education, it is not common for a twenty and thirty year old Khoekhoe Namibian like myself to grow up and old without ever hearing or being a part of a traditional Khoe/Khoi/San ritual or prayer ceremony.

I do not discount that the genocide of 1904 that was committed in Namibia also resulted in a genocide of identity, culture, prayer, ritual and – perhaps – in essence, pathed the way for us to entirely forego our 2000-year-old symbiotic relationship with nature, the celestial and the otherworldly. Listening

to 'the prayer, and medicine search' invoked in me a great sense of loss and internal, cultural, spiritual and communal displacement. It created a sense of dread that was rooted in longing for lost things, retracing with memory mental, physical and spiritual – as well as longing for healing, well-being, community and peace – whatever that may mean for me and my people.

This piece is called 'The Prayer for Hendrick and Others' and hopes to bring peace to those that are either knowingly or unknowingly suffering from the loss of prayer and ritual.

The Prayer of Hendrick and Others

I READ TO YOU TODAY, IF YOU WILL HAVE ME
FROM THE BLACK BOOK OF RE-IMAGINATION,
INSERTION AND CONFRONTATION
FROM THE TWENTY-THIRD CHAPTER, ITS FOURTH VERSE

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HENDRICK WITBOOI, and those like him
Are my Shepherd, and therefore I have yet – all that I need
They let me rest under camelthorn trees
And lead me peacefully along the Orange River

They renew my strength
They guide me along histories long path
To bring honor to their names
Even when I walk
Through the desert in the shadows of death
I shall not fear, for they are close to me
With their bows and arrows
To protect and comfort me
They prepare a feast for me
In the presence of my enemies

I am honored by birthright and plight
Through and by chant and ritual, all the days of my life
My cup runneth over with resilience and foresight
Surely the might and fortitude of these people
Will follow me all the days of my life, as I live
Like they did, in this majestic land
Called Namibia forever.

The Prayer for History

I READ TO YOU TODAY, IF YOU WILL HAVE ME
FROM THE BLACK BOOK OF RE-IMAGINATION,
INSERTION AND CONFRONTATION
FROM THE TWENTY-THIRD CHAPTER, ITS FIRST VERSE

Those who live in the house of history
Will find rest in the shadows of lessons learned
This I declare about History;
That it alone is my refuge,
My turn to let it not happen to me and mine
History is my God and in it I trust

For it will rescue me, from every trap of erasure or theft,
or murder
And protect from their deadly second coming
History will cover me from further plunder if not pillage
And shelter me with its wings

Its faithful lessons are my armor and my protection
Now I know to be afraid of the terrors of the night
And know to sharpen my arrows for day time

I know as my ancestors did, the dreaded diseases
That are shipped and brought in the darkness of night
And the disaster that it brings at midday in our villages

For history says more than a thousand of us have fallen
Died and captured, that we know that true evil had
Really befallen us, and now we open our eyes, again

To history and see how we were not the wicked deserving
punishment
If you make History your refuge, if you make Namibia's
history
Your refuge, no evil will conquer you, no plague of
imperialism

Shall come near your house, and your ancestors will order
angels
To protect you wherever you go

They will hold your hands, so you don't hurt your soul
on a lie

You will trample upon colonialist and neo-colonialist
You will crush fierce socio-economic and political
conditions

Under your feet. History says 'I will rescue those whom
love me

I will protect you those who trust in me

When they call on me, I will answer, I will be with you
in times of trouble

I will rescue and honor you and your ancestors

And reward you with a long life filled with salvation and
rest

For I am history

Your lord and savior.

Thank you. Finished.

CONTRIBUTORS

CORNELIA HÄNCHEN

Cornelia Hänchen is an art historian and anglicist. Among others, she worked for many years at the Werkleitz Gesellschaft e.V. in the area of project co-ordination and public relations. She currently works freelance for Werkleitz in Halle in the field of production and administration for the Centre for Immersive Media Art, Music and Technology (ZiMMT) in Leipzig.

LEFTERIS KRYSA LIS

Lefteris Krysalis is a radio and sound artist and freelance researcher. He has a degree in art history and in media art and design. He is currently an artistic collaborator at the Experimental Radio of the Bauhaus University Weimar. His artistic and research focus is the politics of listening.

LISTENING AT PUNGWE

Memory Biwa and Robert Machiri, known as *Listening at Pungwe*, are a multidisciplinary collective working between Windhoek (Namibia) and Johannesburg (South Africa). Their practice deals with archived memories – which frailly echo traces of life and movement – as well as transcendence linked to the violent colonial legacy and its implication on contemporary lives.

FRIEDRICH LOBER

Friedrich Lober is a horn player who lives and works in Leipzig and Jena. He is part of the Junge Kammerphilharmonie Berlin, the ensemble of the Junger Freundeskreis Berliner Philharmoniker.

TULI MEKONDJO

Tuli Mekondjo (b. 1982, Angola), is a self-taught Namibian artist who works with mixed media including embroidery, collage, paint, resin and mahangu (millet) grain — a Namibian food staple — textures which she extends into modes of performance.

FREDERIKE MOORMANN

Frederike Moormann is a freelance artist and artistic assistant at the Department of Experimental Radio at Bauhaus University Weimar. Her research-based and site-specific sound works revolve around remembrance culture and spatial perception.

NASHILONGWESHIPWE MUSHAANDJA

Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja is a cultural worker, educator and writer with practice-research interests in performance, archives and public culture. He is currently based in Windhoek, Namibia after completing his PhD in Performance Studies at the University of Cape Town.

LUKA MUKHAVELE

Luka Mukhavele is a musician, scholar, artist, instrument builder, and language teacher, from Mozambique. Both his artistic and his academic work are grounded on his "African Contemporary self-built instruments, from which he draws otherwise lost concepts and paradigms, aiming to address the shortfalls and inherent detriments of musicology in a global perspective.

GUNDOLF NANDICO

After studying music at the Hanns Eisler Academy in Berlin, the Zeitz Theatre engaged him as a solo horn player. In 1989, the year of reunification, he co-founded the theatre group Titanick. Since the beginning of the nineties he has been a freelance musician and composer.

WEST UARIJE

West Uarije is a Herero/Himba, 27 years old. He graduated in dance from the College of the Arts in Windhoek and is now a celebrated dancer in his home country of Namibia, specializing in contemporary traditional dance.

KEITH VRIES

Keith Vries (born in 1990) is a Namibian poet, writer and performer. For the past decade, he has been performing poetry and has been involved in productions that seek to create awareness about and around the 1904–1908 Namibian Genocide. As a »genocide activist«, his work has appeared in performances and exhibitions in Namibia, Tanzania, Cameroon, Germany, the United States, the United Kingdom and South Africa.

ANGELIKA WANIEK

Angelika Waniek is a performance artist. Her artistic work is characterized by her interest in the political perspectives on performative and visual practises. By working at the interface of knowledge and experience transfer she uncovers the potential of joint actions.

Imprint

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