Songea Mbano and the 'halfway dead' of the Majimaji War (1905–7) in memory and theatre

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Abstract

Debates on the relevance of repatriation of indigenous human remains are water under the bridge today. Yet, a genuine will for dialogue to work through colonial violence is found lacking in the European public sphere. Looking at local remembrance of the Majimaji War (1905–7) in the south of Tanzania and a German–Tanzanian theatre production, it seems that the spectre of colonial headhunting stands at the heart of claims for repatriation and acknowledgement of this anti-colonial movement. The missing head of Ngoni leader Songea Mbano haunts the future of German–Tanzanian relations in heritage and culture. By staging the act of post-mortem dismemberment and foregrounding the perspective of descendants, the theatre production *Maji Maji Flava* offers an honest proposal for dealing with stories of sheer colonial violence in transnational memory.

Key words: colonial headhunting, memory, theatre, Tanzania, German East Africa

Introduction

In 2017 the traditional leader of the Ngoni people, Emmanuel Zulu Gama, was invited to Berlin by members of the German theatre company Flinn Works. During the conference 'Prussian Colonial Heritage', organised by the local non-governmental organisation Berlin Postkolonial, he was interviewed by German theatre actor and activist Konradin Kunze. Together with Tanzanian activist Mnyaka Sururu Mboro, Zulu Gama told stories of headhunting, colonial violence and indigenous resistance under German rule in East Africa. This was the first time that a Ngoni leader was able to give his perspective on the Majimaji¹ War in Germany. This conflict, which lasted from 1905 to 1907, cost the lives of 100,000 to 200,000 Africans. In Tanzania, it is seen as the first instance of national unity across linguistic borders: more than twenty groups rose against German colonial oppression, including forced labour, corporal punishment and unjust taxation.² In German society, the Majimaji War remains largely unknown. Yet, as civil society, academics and artists convey the perspectives of communities on matters of repatriation and apology, stories of colonial violence have entered the public sphere.

Zulu Gama is a direct descendant of one of the chiefs who was hanged in 1906. In the narratives of descendants, the countless victims of the war have names and agency. His account brings a shoulder to the wheel of transnational remembrance of the Majimaji and German colonial rule in East Africa. Combined with the work of Berlin Postcolonial, his intervention has helped to raise awareness about instances of colonial violence, body snatching and the need to search, find and repatriate the human remains of former anti-colonial leaders, so that these ancestors can rest in peace and collective mourning and reconciliation can begin.

By weaving together local and transnational remembrance of the Majimaji, I argue that stories, memorials and performances that engage with the disappearance of human remains create a corporal archive of colonial history. In this framework, these memory practices have contributed to a critical historiography of the German colonial past, one that refuses to obliterate the political aspects of human remains in the postcolonial present.

Departing from Zulu Gama's intervention, I will first present how sites and ceremonies in Ungoni remember those leaders fallen in early 1906 during the Majimaji. This first section aims to reveal the importance of this history for local and national memory, leading to its presence in the canon of Tanzanian theatre. I will then look more closely at a recent instance of transnational remembrance: the theatre production *Maji Maji Flava*, co-produced by Asedeva (Dar es Salaam) and Flinn Works (Kassel/Berlin). In it, the story of Songea Mbano and the act of headhunting are embedded in a greater call for acknowledgement and restorative justice.

Remembering the Majimaji in Ungoni and in postcolonial Tanzania

The events of late February 1906

As told by Nkosi ya Makhosi³ Emmanuel Zulu Gama on 17 October 2017 in Berlin:

It is a sad story . . . They were sixty. The first day [the Germans] hanged four. Before hanging, they collected all nearby people . . . to sit almost fifty or seventy-five metres from the hanging place, and they were forced to look at what was going on. If you bend your neck, you are being whipped, [so] that you see what is happening. So, the first day they hanged four, and after that they took normal prisoners to take the corpses to the grave which was dug by those prisoners. . . . It took one month to dig that grave. So the first four were put there, looking sideways, so that the vacant [space] can fit all those sixty. They took a little bit of soil, almost an inch or so, to cover the bodies. Then after five days, they hanged forty on the same day . . . So after those forty, they laid them again, the same way, sideways, put a little bit of soil. Next five days, six, until all the sixty were gone. Ah, from there, according to my father, people were crazy, you know, seeing someone being hanged there, especially your father or your grandfather . . .

Songea Mbano was a General, General because he was the war leader. After hanging those sixty, Songea Mbano was the last one. [The Germans] wanted him to join [their] administration, but he refused and insisted that 'I must be hanged because all my comrades have gone and I can't talk to you because all my medicine is gone'. They tried

to convince him for almost three days but he refused By that time, the big grave was covered, so they hanged him on the fourth day and, because that was covered, they dug another grave and put him inside. But after three days, they opened it, they chopped his head [off], cleaned it and put it in a box – I don't know where it is, but I've heard it is in Germany; the place I don't know. So after that, they [buried him] again. So when they were burying, they said: 'this man has no head, so we have to put the sign where the head belongs and where the body belongs'. So here it is, meaning that the body was that side, and the head that is missing is that side.⁴

Remembering the Majimaji in Songea and the memorialisation of absence

In the southern part of Tanzania lies Songea, district capital of the Ruvuma region. Its name directly refers to one of the prominent Ngoni leaders executed by the Germans in 1906 as part of brutal colonial repression during the Majimaji. In a similar manner to Yamoussoukro in Ivory Coast (Queen Yamoussou), Songea and its eponymous anti-colonial leader are inseparable.

At the hanging place where leaders were executed in public, a replica of the gallows stands with threatening empty nooses. Next to it, a memorial lists the names of the sixty-seven soldiers and leaders who were sentenced to death in late February 1906. The first column gives their names, the second one their Christian names, since German officers had asked the fighters whether they would like to be baptised before being hanged. The third column informs on their social rank: Nkosi (chief), Nduna (sub-chief), Jumbe (headman) or Raia (citizen). Number fifty on this list and the first non-baptised victim is Songea Luwafu Bin Mbano.

It is from there that the annual ceremony to commemorate the leaders of the Majimaji starts, every 27 February. In 2019 a delegation composed of members of the government, traditional leaders, the mayor, military officers and the German ambassador to Tanzania paid their respects to the dead. National and traditional leaders laid down weapons at the hanging place (Figure 1). Then, the delegation walked about half a mile to the Makumbusho ya Majimaji ('Museum of Majimaji'), where the ceremony continued. Ngoni leaders came from the whole region, including from neighbouring Malawi, showing how concepts of nations and borders in East Africa are challenged by the history of mobility and displacement. Almost all pupils from schools in and around Songea were there to hear speeches on history and national unity. The army brought a contingent of no less than a hundred soldiers, including heavy artillery. The day was fraught with performances: young pupils had prepared choreographies and songs telling the story of Songea Mbano and his fellow chiefs. They re-enacted the war, the hangings and the decapitation of their bodies, singing *Wimbo Amani*, 'a song of peace'.

To signal the mass grave, a monument lists sixty-six of the sixty-seven names. As Emmanuel Zulu Gama told his audience in Berlin, Songea Mbano was buried alone, thirty yards away. His grave is unadorned and stands opposite this monument, at the far north-eastern corner of the enclosure. About four-fifths of the grave is filled with earth. Approaching the headstone, a visible separation delimits an empty space that signals the absence of his head, a head that has been missing since 1906 (Figure 2).

Figure 1 Commemorative ceremony at the hanging place memorial on 27 February 2019. Nkosi ya Makhosi Zulu Gama (standing in the centre) lays weapons at the foot of the memorial (Photo: Y. LeGall).

In 2019, in front of the mass grave, the various delegations commemorated the deaths of anti-colonial leaders in a solemn and official manner. A master of ceremonies called representatives of traditional authorities, local government and of the German state to come forward and lay down sprays of synthetic garlands in the colours of the Republic of Tanzania. When coming to Songea Mbano's grave, the protocol drastically changed: Nkosi Zulu Gama took the microphone and related the story and the particularity of this tombstone. The crowd gathered around him, disorganised. For a moment, the hierarchies between guests had evaporated. The faces were less stern and everyone was all ears.

The empty space is not a commemoration of absence, as observed in modern cultures of memory such as the tomb of the Unknown Soldier. It is rather a lamentation of lack, a sad reminder that mourning cannot take place before Songea Mbano's head has been found, repatriated and reburied. It is not a resting place, but a disturbing one that hints at the atrocious treatment that awaited leaders and chiefs who would rise against German colonialists. There, the voice of Zulu Gama undermined the prevalence of decorum on this commemoration day. It exactly refused solemn detachment and demonstrates how inter-generational remembrance, affect and orality challenge any musealisation of the colonial past. Deep acknowledgment and reconciliation cannot be achieved without a genuine commitment to listening to the stories that highlight the disappearance of skeletal remains. The tangible void at the top of the grave fuels a narrative that harks back to Ciraj Rassool's observations on the politics of heritage in South Africa. Rassool points out that the dead have 'unfinished business',⁵ and those haunting bodies epitomise

Figure 2 Detail of Songea Mbano's grave (Photo: Y. LeGall).

the entanglements between colonial oppression, headhunting and the history of science.

Songea Mbano was indeed not the only one to have his remains snatched post-mortem. Stories of beheaded chiefs and kings abound in Tanzania: the head of Hehe leader Mtwā Mkwavinyika Mkwawa was reportedly taken to Berlin and studied by the German anatomist Rudolph Virchow. Another one of his alleged remains was returned by the then British governor of Tanganyika in 1954, from Bremen to Kalenga in Uhehe.⁶ The head of Mkwawa's brother Mpangile, whom the Germans hanged in 1897 for alleged treason, was temporarily part of the so-called 'loan collection' at the Berlin Ethnological Museum.⁷ The head of Chaga anti-colonial leader Mangi (King) Meli has been missing since 1901. In 1899, anthropologist August Widenmann also allegedly 'obtained' the remains of chief Nkunde (Mkunde) from

Kibonoto and donated it to the then Imperial University (*Reichsuniversität*) in Strasbourg.⁸ Whilst the authenticity of Mkwawa's repatriated skull is disputed, Nancy Rushohora has placed the story of the Hehe leader in relation to the fate of Songea Mbandu. The presence of a skull in Kalenga somehow reinforces the continuous absence of the head of the Ngoni leader. But claims for the repatriation of Mbandu's remains have become louder in recent years. Yet, more than a century after the end of the German colonial era, museums and universities housing colonial human remains are now only beginning to look into the history of their collections.

In this complex network of empires, soldiers, doctors and travelling researchers participated in a 'scramble for skulls'.⁹ Human remains of Indigenous leaders were traded in a whole economy of accumulation of ethnographic and anthropological data. Scientists would measure and compare human remains from all over the world. A photo of Songea Mbandu taken by a German missionary in 1902 was also used by a German physician as part of a colonial study on the physiognomy of people from the Lake Nyasa region.¹⁰ These studies fuelled discourse on biological determinism and Social Darwinist assumptions on race. In the twentieth century, these theories were then politically instrumentalised for oppressive policies such as apartheid or the infamous Nuremberg laws.

In his introduction to the book *Dark Trophies*, Simon Harrison unveiled a closer relationship between practices of headhunting and racial anthropology. 'Military trophy-taking', he reminds us, 'had been carried out, at least among European and North American military personnel, almost exclusively against enemies whom they have represented as belonging to "races" other than their own.'¹¹ Dehumanisation of heroes and leaders occurred through various processes of objectification: while some remains of prominent leaders were regarded as macabre souvenirs of military achievements, others would further be stored, studied by scientists – and their names were seldom recorded. Harrison and other analysts agree that the line between so-called 'specimen' of physical anthropology and war trophy is thin, even almost invisible.¹² At the Iziko Museum in Cape Town, Kara Blackmore and Wandile Kasibe have openly considered anthropological collections as the 'center of evidence of the colonial crime scene'.¹³ Regardless of whether the missing head of Songea Mbandu was sent to a museum or kept as private property, these entanglements need to be considered.

The Majimaji and colonial headhunting in theatre

Recently, the story of the disappearance of Songea Mbandu's head has been at the heart of Flinn Works and Asedeva's co-production *Maji Maji Flava*. Performed in Kassel, Berlin and Hamburg (2016, 2019 and 2020), and in early 2017 in Dar es Salaam, the piece has participated in a transnational artistic landscape that condemns the objectification of colonised bodies and sheds light upon macabre stories of headhunting. Drawing from re-enactment studies, I argue that *Maji Maji Flava* offers a transformative path for a particular remembrance of colonialism, one that problematises the body as a site of violence and resistance. Besides, it subscribes to

a clear political agenda: an honest recognition of this history and the beginning of a dialogue between Tanzanians (who know well enough about it) and Germans.

From Ebrahim Hussein's *Kinjekitile* . . .

The production drew from the famous play by Tanzanian author Ebrahim Hussein called *Kinjekitile*, one of the canonised works of Tanzanian theatre. In Tanzanian memory of the Majimaji, the figure of prophet Kinjekitile Ngwale plays a central role. He not only explains the name of the movement, but also stands as the common denominator in the unified front composed of different communities fighting a common enemy, namely German colonial rule. A practitioner of the Bokero cult, he lived in Ngarambe, south of the Rufiji river in Matumbi land. In late 1904 he developed a war medicine which, according to the permanent exhibition at the Majimaji Makumbusho, was 'concocted with water, maize and sorghum seed'. Clan leaders and their people visited him to receive this *dawa* based on *maji* (which means 'water'), which, according to the prophecy, would protect them from German bullets. The movement broke out in July 1905 when Matumbi clans started uprooting cotton, a sign of protest against forced labour and ruthless repression for those opposing the cotton scheme.¹⁴ *Kinjekitile* was among the first to fall: he was hanged on 4 August of that year. To crush the emboldened fighters, the German military used a scorched earth policy. They also confiscated food stacks and destroyed crops with the deliberate aim to bring about famine among the people, a famine which lasted at least until April 1908.¹⁵ When captured, chiefs would be hanged by the noose *en masse* and in public, in front of their own people. This brutal repression destroyed the social structure of many groups, especially in the south of German East Africa, where a whole generation of leaders were annihilated.¹⁶

Published in 1969, eight years after independence from the British mandate, Hussein's *Kinjekitile* seems to celebrate the prophet for having sowed the seeds for Tanzanian unity.¹⁷ When asked whether he himself believed in the water's magic, the character *Kinjekitile* exclaims:

Do you know what they will say tomorrow? The officers will tell the children – our children, Kitunda – that we were wrong. Fighting is wrong? Fighting for one's country would be wrong? And he wants me to help him by retracting all that I said. No. If I said that tomorrow, people in the north and south would stop fighting. They would fall into hopeless despair. No! I will not say that. A word has been born. Our children will tell it to their children. Our grandchildren will hear it.¹⁸

Asked by his German captors to publicly deny his prophecy in order to save his own life, *Kinjekitile* remains silent, however. As Jane Plastow argued in her study of the politics of Tanzanian theatre, the character here favours an allegoric vision of a united Tanzania rather than the literal meaning of the prophecy. Yet, she underlines that his silence is neither a denial of his prophecy nor an embrace. The broader political context when the play was released had seen the effect of Julius Nyerere's nation-building policies around the precepts of *ujamaa*, i.e. building a cohesive and egalitarian nation through an imaginary rooted in family ties and self-development

through community. Plastow sees in Kinjekitile's silence the shadow of a doubt in the man's trust in ideological nation building.¹⁹

However, the means for a discursive construction of national history are clear to Hussein's Kinjekitile. When 'a word has been born', it will be told. To him, orality and storytelling convey the dreams of yesterday to shape tomorrow's reality, from the colonial context of subjection to liberation. Conversely, the descendants of the oppressed will not simply listen, but 'hear'. Kinjekitile's speech foregrounds kinship, oral transmission of memory and the recovery from 'wounded identities'.²⁰ The past remembered in theatre becomes a 'tool for resistance' for the postcolonial nation and its subjects.²¹ He reinstates the centrality of inter-generational memory to promote liberatory discourses. Extrapolating this to Hussein's own contribution, the politics of performing arts are also here suggested.

... to *Maji Maji Flava*

These politics of resistance and liberation were taken up in the co-produced piece by Flinn Works and Asedeva, and contextualised in a transnational acknowledgement of a shared history and the legacy of colonial violence. The story of the mutilation of bodies was indeed one of the powerful tableaux staged in the piece. Besides, *Maji Maji Flava* aims to be a vehicle for social change. Before delving into a more concrete analysis, let me first elucidate particular characteristics of the production.

First, it featured four male actors and two female ones. In mathematical terms, that amounts to six. In theatrical practice, it meant more than twenty characters. For example, one actor played the role of a bloodthirsty persecutor, before morphing into a rebellious saboteur, then died as an anti-colonial fighter and finally impersonated a Tanzanian ambassador to Germany.

Second, the play allowed multiple languages to cohabit, to get translated, but also to collide. In Berlin, most of the performance took place in the German language, but one Tanzanian actor spoke only Kiswahili; his speech was then almost always translated by a German actor or actress. In addition, most of the dialogues between the characters (on the level of drama) and between the actors/actresses (on the meta-level of their own reflection on the performance) took place in English.

Third, the costumes and aesthetics challenged exotic portrayals of Tanzania by allowing everyone to put on different clothes. While the colourful kitenge dresses of the colonised contrasted with the light khaki hats characteristic of colonial troops, their association was not incompatible. Besides, customised soccer jerseys worn by the actors and actresses also bore the name of Songea Mbano (Figure 3). The propped bodies were a site for multiple identities. More often barefooted than in boots, the characters both broke the dichotomy between coloniser and colonised and reinforced it, playing on the satiric effect of traditional, colonial and contemporary dress codes.

Decolonising language and knowledge

The imbrication of German and Tanzanian actors, dress codes, languages, identities, symbols, dancing styles and music articulated difference in a communal space that was negotiated through co-producing, choreography and costume design. Clearly,

Figure 3 After the execution of the Ngoni leaders, the soccer jerseys of a fictive Maji Maji FC are worn by the actors. They bear the name ‘Songea Mbano’ (Photo: N. Klinger).

the co-production built upon dichotomies to promote the idea of a shared past that requires contact, dialogue and understanding. Yet, not everything in *Maji Maji Flava* is syncretic.

The performance started with a monologue inviting the audience to choose whether they would like to follow a lecture on the Majimaji, or drink cocktails at the bar for tourists. It was first held in Kiswahili before addressing the audience in German. This foregrounding of Kiswahili sowed seeds of anxiety among a German audience, some wondering whether the monologue would be translated. It clearly posited it as the language of authority on the story in the production, since it is the language of Tanzanian national unity. Kiswahili has been used as ‘a medium for the cultural union of all of East Africa’ since the development of Tanzanian literature even before the country’s independence in 1961.²² Poet Shabaan Robert and playwright Ebrahim Hussein have both contributed to shaping and mainstaying Tanzanian literature through their use of Kiswahili, combined with traditional dance and storytelling. When *Maji Maji Flava* was performed in Dar es Salaam, not only was the occurrence of German language reduced; the lecture on the history of the war did not even take place. Most members of the audience indeed already knew about the Majimaji.²³ The lecture, then, was used only to ‘enlighten’ a German audience relatively unaware of the historical context. Further, in contrast to the privileged position occupied by Kiswahili, German texts or speeches in the play

either conveyed horrendous violence or were ridiculed by the performers. Readings from racist observations of African people written by colonial officers served as ghastly voiceovers accompanying military dances. Testimonies in Kiswahili spoken by Asedeva actor Shabani Rashid remained bare of any mark of violence or antagonising politics. Unlike the use of German, bellowed all over the place by an angry colonial officer, when Kiswahili was spoken, it was heard with attention.

Maji Maji Flava also strongly questioned the role of German scientific discourse in the production of knowledge. With English as a *lingua franca*, a debate was held on stage by the protagonists regarding their respective beliefs in the healing properties of water. German actors mocked Kinjekitile Ngwale's prophetic beverage, supposed to render his fighters immune to German bullets. In retaliation to this attack upon their own systems of beliefs, Tanzanian actors challenged European beliefs in homeopathy, where medicinal constituents are diluted in water by factors well above one-to-one-billion to a point where the substance remains untraceable. This snappy retort challenged both the German actors on stage as well as many people from the audience in Berlin, who raised their hands when asked who in the room actually believed in the healing properties of homeopathy. It also challenged the German contribution to science, homeopathy having been first developed by German physician Samuel Hahnemann. Spectators were then forced to reflect on their own subjective judgement towards prophetic beliefs, as compared to their acceptance of modern medicine and science. The debate broke the fourth wall and offered a pause in the narrative that showed how disagreements arise in polyphonic storytelling and the acknowledgement of a shared past. Dominant systems of knowledge production were then questioned to trigger decolonial thinking.

Re-enacting violence in postcolonial theatre

Let me now come to one of the powerful tableaux enacted by the actors on stage. After a scene of sabotage of German telegraphic lines, a white male German actor/soldier captures, kills and mutilates a Tanzanian actor/soldier. The scene kept the hierarchical relationship of corporeal contact. This was a statement: both Flinn Works and Asedeva knew they were reproducing violence hierarchies, yet they did it deliberately with a twist.

In re-enacting the bloody quest for morbid war trophies in German East Africa, the bodies of the headhunter and the dead anti-colonial leader intermingled. The former tried to carry the latter and the surface of contact of their bare bodies spread from head to toes. The act of carrying the African body, reminiscent of Rudyard Kipling's imperialist poem 'The White Man's Burden', morphed into a dance full of contrasts, involving an encumbered white coloniser and a peaceful black body (Figure 4). The headhunter growled under the weight and gnashed his teeth when stupidly trying to dislodge the head from its body with his bare hands. He sweated and gasped, and finally sat down on the chest of his victim to saw the head off. This self-inflicted strain foreboded the self-inflicted, distressing and shameful legacy of colonial violence: the haunting presence of skulls in European museum collections. The act of hand-sawing happening in the centre was mirrored by the second Tanzanian actor sitting on a cello in the upstage right corner. 'Sawing' above the

Figure 4 The German soldier played by Konradin Kunze carries the body of the Ngoni leader, played by Isack Abeneko (Photo: N. Klinger).

nut with the bow, the high-pitched grating strings functioned as a sound effect to the main action of dismemberment. Both actors were butchers in the open: one savagely cutting through flesh; another butchering the deep, elegant crooning of a cello. After centuries of concealment in the ‘imperial archive’, of gaps in colonial military reports and museum receipts acknowledging delivery of human remains,²⁴ head-hunting in East Africa was finally revealed and re-enacted in the spotlight. It was a gruesome act, with a gruesome sound.

In her book *Performance Remains*, Rebecca Schneider has mapped the broad implications of re-enactment practice: ‘The practice of re-playing or re-doing a precedent event, artwork, or act has exploded in performance-based art alongside the burgeoning of historical reenactment and “living history” [. . .]. In many ways,

reenactment has become the popular and practice-based wing of what has been called the twentieth-century “memory industry.”²⁵ Focusing on an array of performances that attempt to reproduce exactly what had been experienced earlier – ranging from the US Civil War to dance performances – Schneider addressed the tension between the past histories of the dead and the multilayered mock performance of the living. In those re-enactments, the sheer earnestness of re-doing war and the frisky detachment that accompanies the act of performing blend in to create anachronic situations where performers are at the same time ‘halfway dead’ and ‘halfway living.’²⁶ She sees it as analogue to Elizabeth Freeman’s notion of the ‘temporal drag,’ a political move in cross-generational dialogue. In this case, a dialogue between ancestors and descendants.

Dragging these questions into the realm of postcolonial performance, I follow Schneider in her reading of Freeman by refusing to consider re-enactments as simply referential to the past. Rather, they advocate a strong sense of entangled and displaced politics of oppression and representation, playing on the polychronic position of postcoloniality. In other words, they reveal how the temporal transition from the politics of the past to those of the present is articulated. Re-enactments enable the materialisation of Freeman’s conception of ‘generations linked by political work [that] also acknowledges the ability of various culture industries to produce shared subjectivities.’²⁷ Freeman sees the potential of these shared subject-positions to go beyond heteronormativity. In *Maji Maji Flava* colonial violence even becomes homoerotic in the aesthetics of skin contact between mutilator and mutilated. Further, multiple temporalities coexist on the surface of the bodies acting and performing. They inhabit several roles, as well as several eras, linking the corporeality of dismemberment with postcolonial contact and dance. The performers call upon a relationality between ancestors and descendants in a ‘present past’ that extends Andreas Huyssen’s term to staged settings. It cannot be located, neither in time, nor in space.²⁸

Re-enactment here bears clear implications for the transnational necropolitics of colonialism. The legacies of the dead have indeed influenced multiple moments of contact between Tanzania and Germany, from the return of Mkwawa’s skull in 1954 to the performing of *Maji Maji Flava* in the House of Culture at the National Museum in Dar es Salaam. The dead have been stripped of their subject positions through mutilation and dehumanisation of their remains. Their agency can be retrieved only by performing history through the bodies of the living. Nonetheless, any authentic re-enactment would relocate those dead in the object-positions they were put in by military and anthropological discourses at the time. Therefore, the re-enacted violence in the play is not a re-enactment as understood in its strict sense. *Maji Maji Flava* does not aspire to re-do exactly what headhunting in German East Africa was. The play stages the act and its squealing soundtrack to refute discourses that still consider colonial human remains as ‘material’ that was allegedly ‘collected’. The legacy of this morbid practice is also addressed on stage. If the colonised subject was killed on stage, he remains ‘halfway dead’ and ‘halfway living’. After having been butchered by the German coloniser, the anti-colonial subject wearing a jersey with Songea Mbano’s name can be born again, joined by several

others. The lights are dimmed and the dance is macabre. The zombie-like ancestors look straight through the audience. They remind that nothing is ever finished after such traumatic encounters. Their choreographic hand gestures visually draw a line between their heads and the rest of their bodies, like that scar resulting from the hunt for African skulls as trophies or specimens, like that separation in the grave of Songea Mbano.

Bones in the flesh: the corporeal archive

Memory studies have been greatly concerned with conceptualisations of the archive.²⁹ Documentation about past events and processes of recollections blur the constructed border between the realms of history and memory. Historians have used archives as indicators and evidence in a search for truths; activists and concerned groups call upon those archives to claim heritage and positions as witnesses.³⁰ In contrast to the accumulation of archival material, performance has long been celebrated (and at the same time marginalised) for being ephemeral, rather concerned with disappearance than with the craving to leave a trace of its existence.

At the base of historical factualness lies the archive, a potent referential with Eurocentrist roots that run deep down into the ancient Greek principles of patriarchy. The Archon, the head of state and magistral interpreter of the archive, has been the foundational authority for the urgency to document and extend a modern European necessity to take stock and keep records.³¹ If a performance can be recorded on tape, 'live art' still resists the imperialist archive, precisely thanks to its corporeality. Rebecca Schneider therefore asks: '[I]n privileging an understanding of performance as a refusal to remain, do we ignore other ways of knowing, other modes of remembering, that might be situated precisely in the ways in which performance remains, but remains differently?'³² Schneider refuses to exclude performance from the established, materialistic logic of authentic preservation that the archive stands for. She points out that,

in the archive, flesh is given to be that which slips away. According to archive logic, flesh can house no memory of bone. In the archive, only bone speaks memory of flesh. Flesh is blind spot. Dissimulating and disappearing. Of course, this is a cultural equation, arguably foreign to those who claim orature, story-telling, visitation, improvisation, or embodied ritual practice as history. It is arguably foreign to practices in popular culture, such as the practices of US Civil War reenactors who consider performance as precisely a way of keeping memory alive ... In such practices ... performance does remain, does leave 'residue'. Indeed the place of residue is arguably flesh in a network of body-to-body transmission of affect and enactment – evidence, across generations, of impact.³³

Human remains in museum collections are persistent residues of a history or corporeal contact that has stretched the dimensions of colonial encounters to the phenomenology of mutilation and defleshing. They are both material and immaterial tokens of particular acts of colonial violence. To Schneider, living bodies also register such historical acts.

In theatre, the script and the performers carry these residues. Before being crystallised by written words, drama is first imagined, conceived and shaped for the stage, for a vivid enactment. The script serves practical purposes of remembering and structuring. But the text produced by a playwright evaporates as the performance unfolds. It hangs in the air as sound and steam: the sound of dialogues and cues; the steam escaping from the warm bodies of the performers. It also condenses to form beads of sweat running down the contracted muscles, the expressive cheekbones, the dancing feet. Before the flesh of performance can be claimed to have disappeared, it is archived on the body, perhaps not in the ways violence produces scars, but through repeated choreography and ritualised movement. The bodies register movements and speech acts. They will preserve them in a corporeal archive that will transcend conscious individual remembrance, a muscle memory. This archive does not pretend to objective factuality. It is utterly subjective, even intimate for the actors themselves. What remains is the body's impenetrable remembrance of the performance, its having learned and repeated gestures, tone, dance, which are, in some unlucky cases, materialised by an injury. This muscle memory is conveyed through 'affect and enactment' to spectators and fellow actors, but does not slip away. It has appropriated the script and spangled it with improvisation and orality. Like storytelling, the residues of the performance are then found in the actors' bodies, but also in the spectators' reactions and their subjective memories of the performance.

The politics of *Maji Maji Flava*

At the end of the piece, the audience is invited to watch an interview of Nkosi Zulu Gama, telling about his vision of restorative justice for the massacres, the plunder and the scorched-earth policy that reigned during the war. True to their wish to convey grassroots political messages, Asedeva and Flinn Works also recorded some of the reactions from the public following the representations in Dar es Salaam and Bagamoyo. Less concerned with the critical reception of the theatre production, these interviews largely address issues of official apologies and compensation for the Majimaji, as well as future collaboration between Germany and Tanzania.

Some of those contributors to the debate advocate for a future dialogue and cooperation based on the acknowledgement of a shared past and a shared remembrance. An interviewee maintains that for 'a true friendship, you have to cement, you have to say, you have to embrace, and you have to do something to pay for the damage that was done'. Another one argues that 'although this was obviously not a pleasant succession of events, it doesn't mean that such an incident should remain only a painful experience. It can and should teach us to change, and enable us to develop a closer partnership.' Yet, another interviewee also declares: 'This is the history of our parents, whose blood was spilled so that we, their descendants, can fight. This history must not be ignored. Germans did not deem it important to preserve this – our – history in Germany so that they could keep their descendants from finding out what their parents did to us.'³⁴

Interviewees reach out to the contemporary German public and urge them to repair this crack in public memory. The best way to remedy what Stuart Hall has identified as a 'collective amnesia about, and systematic disavowal of, empire'³⁵ is,

then, to listen to the perspective of descendants of the colonised, because their memory of colonial atrocities committed by German colonial troops has not been truncated. As a matter of fact, the example of the Majimaji Makumbusho in Songea comes up in those interviews. A man suggests that the German government should help to protect this museum and keep this history from being ignored.

The other central issue addressed by these interviews is that of financial reparations. The video presents different opinions on how material compensation can be implemented: some argue for direct payments to descendants and people from the areas that were decimated during the Majimaji. A woman asks the German government to help build a symbolic monument that could materialise an apology to the descendants of victims. Others rather argue for concrete and long-term investment in infrastructure, education, technology advancement or healthcare. One speaker reminds the crowd that the systems of exploitation are still in place, and that what Germany once harvested from the exploitation of Tanzania should be shared with the Tanzanian population for a future built on a spirit of friendship, with grassroots partnerships. Generally – and perhaps because of the work of Asedeva and Flinn Works in ‘waking up history’ – interviewees defend a joint project of restorative justice. Little grudge is held against Germans; rather, these voices call for proactive recognition, for ‘it is not yet too late’ to ‘face the consequences’.³⁶

Outlook: missing remains, but repatriated knowledge

In their activism for the recognition of German colonialism in East Africa and for the repatriation of human remains, Flinn Works have stretched the understanding of the term ‘theatre company’. In a cooperation involving the Old Moshi Cultural Tourism Enterprise, Flinn Works and the Tieranatomisches Theater at the Berlin Charité University Hospital, a temporary exhibition on the remains of Chaga leader Mangi Meli was shown in Berlin in 2018 as part of the project *The Dead as far as [] can remember*. In February 2019 it travelled to Dar es Salaam, before moving to the birthplace of Mangi Meli in the Kilimanjaro region to be exhibited there, indefinitely. Meli was hanged by the German military for allegedly plotting against the colonists. His grandson, Isaria Meli, was told by his grandmother that Meli’s head was taken away after his death.³⁷ Just like *Maji Maji Flava*, this exhibition has travelled back to Tanzania. It is now a permanent exhibition in the village of Old Moshi, in a building adjacent to the hanging tree the Germans used to lynch him. A year after the inauguration of this ‘repatriated’ exhibition, the Old Moshi Cultural Tourism Enterprise has already led many tourists through local traces of German colonial rule and local historical places. In addition, with the mediation of Flinn Works, the community and local councils have drafted letters asking German museums and other institutions to inform them about the presence of Chaga remains in their respective collections.

The heads of Mangi Meli and Songea Mbano are still nowhere to be found, however. As long as closure cannot be granted, these ancestors will continue to be restless spirits. To refrain from considering human remains solely as material presences, and thereby excluding the emotive nature of ancestors, both the corporeal and the

visceral aspects of memory and repatriation should be considered. Looking at the scars and the flesh of racial and colonial oppression means going beyond the restrictive categories of resistance and agency. It includes hearing how descendants have ‘registered the wounding’ and looking at how performers enact it.³⁸ This violence is memorialised through affect, theatrical re-enactments and the absence of soil in a grave. The role of ‘implicated subjects’ is therefore central to raising awareness and conveying knowledge about these histories.³⁹ Descendants are implicated *per se*, and seek to restore the intergenerational bonds that have been severed due to colonial oppression. To Zulu Gama, the empty space in Songea Mbano’s grave is a gloomy reminder of the hanging of his great-uncle in 1906. His act of witnessing and the annual commemoration on 27 February are crucial for the acknowledgement of these dreadful events. In their participation in the projects developed by Asedeva and Flinn Works, descendants contribute to global advocacy work on the practice of headhunting in colonial Africa.

Parallel to those witnesses, Tanzanian researchers and political representatives have also contributed to a broader memorialisation of the history of the Majimaji. Since the independence of Tanzania, the state has anchored the Majimaji in national memory. Recently, discussions on restitution and transnational partnerships between European institutions and community members have also pushed for a greater acknowledgement at the transnational level.⁴⁰ For instance, a recent collaborative project between the Ethnological Museum in Berlin and the National Museum of Tanzania invited traditional leaders to discuss the content of a medicine bag which entered the registry of the Berlin museum in 1907. Oswald Masebo even ventures that this object might have belonged to Kinjekitile Ngwale.⁴¹ The return of ancestors of the Majimaji, but also of war booty from that era, could bring a lot to the communities who participated in this movement.⁴² At least, narratives of massacres could finally be told alongside stories of empowerment and reconciliation, provided that German institutions and the Tanzanian government genuinely engage with grassroots perspectives and recognise local leaders as legitimate guardians of ancestors and testimonies.

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Notes

- 1 Spelling of the Majimaji War has differed in literature. Here, I use the compound Majimaji, following Nancy Rushohora’s recommendation. She wrote: ‘Using the term “Majimaji” [...] retains the Swahili meaning and identity, a concern that is important for our understanding of the war. The fact that so few scholars of the war currently use this nomenclature reflects a larger problem with scholarship on the

- war: very little of the research that has been conducted. . . is concerned with the Tanzanian perspective, especially how the memories of the war resonate in modern southern Tanzanian communities.' N. Rushohora, 'German Colonial Missionaries and the Majimaji Memorials in Southern Tanzania', *Journal of Social History*, 50:3 (2019), 483.
- 2 See J. Giblin and J. Monson (eds), *Maji Maji: Lifting the Fog of War* (Leiden and Boston, Brill, 2010), pp. 26–7.
 - 3 Literally 'King of all Kings', i.e. paramount King.
 - 4 Berlin Postkolonial, 'Panel V – Tanzania Headhunting: Mnyaka Sururu Mboro (TZ/DE) and Zulu Gama V (TZ, tbc)', *Youtube*, 15 May 2018, <https://youtu.be/080r2yfUoAo?t=1675>, accessed 29 April 2020.
 - 5 C. Rassool, 'Human Remains, the Disciplines of the Dead, and the South African Memorial Complex', in D. R. Peterson, K. Gavua and C. Rassool (eds), *The Politics of Heritage in Africa* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 133–56.
 - 6 For more information on the numerous remains of Mkwawa and their authenticity, see B. Brockmeyer, F. Edward and H. Stoecker, 'The Mkwawa Complex: A Tanzanian–European History about Provenance, Restitution, and Politics', *Journal of Modern European History*, 18:2 (2020), 130–1. Further reading on the 1954 repatriation includes M. Baer and O. Schroter, *Eine Kopfgagd – Deutsche in Ostafrika, Spuren kolonialer Herrschaft* (Berlin, Ch. Links, 2001); J. Bucher, 'The Skull of Mkwawa and the Politics of Indirect Rule in Tanganyika', *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 10:2 (2016), 284–302.
 - 7 Berlin Ethnologisches Museum, E 575/98, I/MV 719, correspondence between J. Stierling and F. von Luschan, 11 June 1898, pp. 158–9; Berlin Ethnologisches Museum, E 687–25, correspondence between J. Stierling and the Museum für Völkerkunde, 10 July 1925–9 September 1925.
 - 8 A. Widenmann, 'Untersuchung von 30 Dschaggaschadeln', *Archiv für Anthropologie*, XXV (1899), 46–51; K. M. Stahl, *History of the Chagga People of Kilimanjaro* (The Hague, Mouton & Co, 1964).
 - 9 J. A. Lovisek, 'Human Trophy Taking on the Northwest Coast: An Ethnohistorical Perspective', in R. Chacon and D. H. Dye (eds), *The Taking and Displaying of Human Body Parts as Trophies by Ameridians* (New York, Springer Science and Business Media, 2007), pp. 45–64.
 - 10 N. Rushohora, 'Desperate Mourning and Atrophied Representation: A Tale of Two Skulls', *African Historical Review*, 51:1 (2019), 35–6.
 - 11 S. Harrison, *Dark Trophies: Hunting the Enemy Body in Modern War* (New York and Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2012), p. 4.
 - 12 For more information see *Ibid.*; also L. Franey, 'Ethnographic Collecting and Travel: Blurring Boundaries, Forming a Discipline', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 29:1 (2001), 219–39.
 - 13 K. Blackmore, 'Curating the Colonial Crime Scene: Heritage Violence of Ethnographic Racism', *ArtAfrica*, 2017, <https://artafricamagazine.org/curating-colonial-crime-scene/>; W. Kasibe, 'The Skulls of Our Ancestors', *News24*, 18 March 2018, <https://www.news24.com/Columnists/GuestColumn/the-skulls-of-our-ancestors-20180318-2>.

- 14 J. Iliffe, 'The Maji Maji Rebellion, 1905–7', *A Modern History of Tanganyika* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 171.
- 15 *Ibid.*, pp. 193, 199.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 200.
- 17 See also E. S. Mwaifuge, 'German Colonialism, Memory and Ebrahim Hussein's *Kinjekitile*', *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences*, 4:28 (2014), 41–2.
- 18 E. Hussein, *Kinjekitile* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers), p. 50.
- 19 J. Plastow, *African Theatre and Politics: The Evolution of Theatre in Ethiopia, Tanzania and Zimbabwe, a Comparative Study* (Amsterdam and Atlanta, Rodopi, 1996), pp. 139–40.
- 20 In his essay on 'African Modes of Self-Writing', Achille Mbembe argues that the 'idioms of kinship' ('affiliation, genealogy and heritage') influence strategies for receiving recognition, acceptance and understanding of one's subjectivity. In the context of postcolonial reworkings he labels this strategy the 'wounded identity'. This construction emphasises the particularity of local claims for rights, underlining a 'deprivation' that needs to be 'recovered'. See A. Mbembe, 'African Modes of Self-Writing', *Public Culture*, 14:1, 266.
- 21 Mwaifuge, 'German Colonialism', 41.
- 22 Plastow, *African Theatre and Politics*, p. 88.
- 23 Private electronic conversation with Konradin Kunze, Sophia Steph (Flinn Works) and Isack Abeneko (Asedeva).
- 24 L. Förster, D. Henrichsen, H. Stoecker and H. Axasi-Eichab, 'Re-individualising Human Remains from Namibia', *Human Remains and Violence: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 1:2 (2018), 47, <https://doi.org/10.7227/HRV.4.2.4>. For further reading on deconstructing the colonial archive of museums, see P. Lalu, *The Deaths of Hintsa: Postapartheid South Africa and the Shape of Recurring Pasts* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2009); C. Ffordde, L. Ormond-Parker and P. Turnbull, 'Repatriation Research: Archives and the Recovery of History and Heritage', in R. Redmond-Cooper (ed.), *Heritage, Ancestry and Law: Principles, Policies and Practices in Dealing with Historical Human Remains* (Bulth Wells: Institute of Art and Law, 2015), pp. 39–59.
- 25 R. Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (Abingdon, Routledge, 2011), p. 2.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- 27 E. Freeman, 'Packing History, Count(er)ing Generations', *New Literary History*, 31:4, (2000), 729.
- 28 A. Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2003).
- 29 See for instance G. Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (New York, Zone Books, 1999); A. L. Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).
- 30 See, for instance, Joshua Cole's thorough analysis of the memory of the massacre of Algerian activists in Paris on 17 October 1961: J. Cole, 'Remembering the Battle of Paris: 17 October 1961 in French and Algerian Memory', *French Politics, Culture & Society*, 21:3 (2003), 42–3.

- 31 See J. Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 2–3.
- 32 Schneider, *Performing Remains*, pp. 98–9.
- 33 *Ibid.*, p. 100.
- 34 Flinn Works, ‘Maji Maji Flava – Comments’, *Vimeo*, <https://vimeo.com/209781702>, accessed 6 January 2020.
- 35 S. Hall, ‘Conclusion: the Multi-Cultural Question’, in B. Hesse (ed.), *Un/settled Multiculturalisms: Diasporas, Entanglements, ‘Transruptions’* (London and New York, Zed Books, 2000), pp. 209–40. See also, in the German context, J. Zimmerer (ed.), *Kein Platz an der Sonne: Erinnerungsorte der deutschen Kolonialgeschichte* (Frankfurt and New York, Campus Verlag).
- 36 Flinn Works, ‘Maji Maji Flava – Comments’, 1’53”–11’38”.
- 37 See Y. LeGall, “‘You are welcome to Moshi’ – Mangi Meli’s Grandson Visits Berlin to Tell the Story of German Colonial Violence in the Kilimanjaro, *Habari*, 2018:4 (2018), 9–16.
- 38 H. Spillers, ‘Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book’, *Diacritics* 17:2 (1987), 67. See also A. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC and London, Duke University Press, 2014), pp. 2, 39–40.
- 39 I borrow this term from Michael Rothberg’s vocabulary on agents of multidirectional memory. See M. Rothberg, ‘Multidirectional Memory and the Implicated Subject: On Sebald and Kentridge’, in L. Plate and A. Aetkind (eds), *Performing Memory in Art and Popular Culture* (New York, Routledge), pp. 39–58.
- 40 For the case of the *Brachiosaurus brancai* and political calls for its restitution, see H. Stoecker, ‘An African Dinosaur in Berlin: *Brachiosaurus brancai* as a German and Tanzanian Site of Memory’, *Werkstatt Geschichte 77 – unstrittene Objekte*, 2018, 65–83.
- 41 O. Masebo ‘Objects of Resistance against German Colonialism in Southeast Tanzania, 1890–1907’, in Lili Reyels, Paola Ivanov and Kristin Weber-Sinn (eds), *Humboldt Lab Tanzania: Objects from the Colonial Wars in the Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin – A Tanzanian-German Dialogue*, (Berlin, Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 2018), pp. 223–64.
- 42 Nancy Rushohora pointed out that narratives of the Wangoni dominate the discourse on memory of the Majimaji. Thereby, many other communities and stories have been silenced or marginalised in the memorialisation of this movement. More than twenty groups actually participated in the Majimaji: the Wabena, Makonde, Makua, Matumbi, Mwera, Wandendeule, Wangindo, Yao and Zarambo among others. See Rushohora, ‘Desperate Mourning’, 42–3.