

Colonialism as Shared History. Past, Present, Future

Veranstalter: Bettina Brockmeyer (Hamburg/Erlangen); Rebekka Habermas (Göttingen); Ulrike Lindner (Cologne); Auswärtiges Amt; Gerda Henkel Foundation

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The murder of George Floyd not only sparked demonstrations in the United States and Europe but also fanned the flames of an already ongoing debate about colonialism. Therefore, the conference, which was postponed and then digitized due to Covid-19, had very good timing.¹ It aimed at, as Bettina Brockmeyer put it, bringing together research, arts, and civil society in analyzing colonial memory in Germany as well as in the rest of Europe and, importantly, the Global South. However, even before the conference started, some scholars criticized that there was no speaker from Namibia – the former German colony with the most troubled relationship with the former metropolis.² Nevertheless, whatever reason led to this shortcoming, the genocide of the Herero and Nama people was a recurring theme throughout many presentations as well as in the welcoming speech of undersecretary of state, MICHELLE MÜNTEFERING (Berlin). Rather than being a tame conference, as feared by some, its sound was rather radical.

In her keynote, the Kenyan author YVONNE ADHIAMBO OWUOR (Nairobi) set the tone of the conference in two leitmotifs. The first leitmotif was the critique of the notion of „Colonialism as Shared History“. Owuor underlined that the points of view of colonizers and colonized were far too different for a shared history. Others took up this critique. While the organizers meant it as a starting point for a conversation amongst scholars from the Global North as well as the Global South to develop a common frame for joint future projects, many participants

criticized this notion. For example, Jonas Kreienbaum proposed that it would only be meaningful for the colonizers: They shared a history of colonizing, while the experiences in the colonies differed very much from this experience. David Simo also rejected the idea of a shared history as a move to gloss over the past. Calling colonialism a shared history, he said, would be too easy. In her concluding remarks, Brockmeyer admitted that this criticism of „shared history“ made the organizers feel very uncomfortable, because they thought of the conference as a shared space. However, it made them rethink their aims and the terms researchers use when dealing with colonialism. She reaffirmed the necessity to revise the project to find a title that addresses the connections and the divided memory originating from colonialism.

The second, more problematic leitmotif concerned the question of agency. Owuor spoke about the „horror“ of colonialism, reaching from plunder to genocide. In an emotional literary tone, she addressed the economic dimensions of colonialism, the German genocide of the Herero and Nama as well as the current negotiations between the Governments of Germany and Namibia. Owuor interpreted colonialism as a crime of the „Occident“, committed to the peoples of the world, especially in Africa – and her text was a „literary autopsy“ of a „crime scene“, reflecting on mass murder and trauma. This idea of colonialism as a clear-cut dichotomy between active European perpetrators and passive non-European victims with its problematic representation of agency should, interestingly, come up time and again.

The first panel analyzed the legacy of colonialism – in the former colonies as well as

¹Some presentations can be watched or listened to at https://lisa.gerda-henkel-stiftung.de/sharedhistory_keynote_owuor and https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/kolonialismus-als-shared-history-was-sind-die-naechsten.4000.de.html?dram:article_id=485585

²Jürgen Zimmerer, Das Auswärtige Amt ist ungeeignet für die Aufarbeitung deutscher Kolonialgeschichte, in: Tagesspiegel, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/kolonialverbrechen-des-kaiserreichs-das-auswaertige-amt-ist-ungeeignet-fuer-die-aufarbeitung-deutscher-kolonialgeschichte/26248734.html> (6.10.2020).

in the metropolises. MICHELLE MOYD (Bloomington) examined violence in colonial German East Africa through the lens of sovereignty. To this end, she reread the early historiography, which mainly concentrated on African resistance to German colonialism. Contrary to the leitmotif, she proposed to see Africans as people who exercised sovereignty, which was disturbed by German colonial forces. An interesting discussion was sparked by Bertram Mapunda, who reflected on whether colonialism had had a positive element for African societies. Due to time difficulties, he mainly concentrated on the positive aspects, following the development paradigm, and therefore intentionally provoked objections. Especially other African scholars were outraged and underlined that even if colonial states built infrastructure, African societies never asked for this. While Kokou Azamede highlighted the legacies of the pre-colonial and colonial past in Togo in the field of religion, Elizabeth Buetner asked whether postcolonial migrations to Europe also were part of a shared history of colonialism. While many migrants after World War II came from former colonies in the wake of and after decolonization, this was not the only pattern. People from former colonies not only went into the former metropolises but also to other European countries. Migrants from countries that were never colonized, like Turkey, also came to Europe, where they faced the same problems with racism as people from the Global South.

Panel 2 was concerned with the material heritage of colonialism in the metropolises: statues, street names, and the millions of ethnological objects in the museums. How do and how should societies deal with this? ANDREW ZIMMERMAN (Washington) mainly focused on the debate about Confederate monuments in the United States. Going back to Freud, who pathologized Londoners who paused at old monuments „in deep melancholy“ while healthy handling would be to „go about our business“, Zimmerman criticized some people’s lasting reverence to the old Confederate monuments and then characterized the destruction of statues as a „profound engagement with history“.

While Zimmerman theorized about the

handling of the symbols of the past, the next speakers argued as practitioners of what today is called „decolonizing“. CIRAJ RASSOOL (Cape Town) strongly set out that ethnological museums should not think about co-curating exhibitions with people from the Global South – something he called „neo-colonial ideology,“ but reconstitute their entire collections.

JOSHUA KWESI AIKINS (Kassel) argued for the renaming of colonial street names in Berlin, because colonial street names would normalize white supremacy. He called for new names to recontextualize this history. However, the question remained open what impact destroying Confederate monuments and renaming streets can really have. One must ask whether activists and protesters do not resemble the people who „pause in deep melancholy“ more than they are aware of because they ascribe so much power to them. Despite all the resistance which protesters and activists meet: Statues and street names are comparatively easy targets. Here, change is much easier than social change toward a more equal, non-racist society, in which government institutions or economic conditions must be tackled. Monuments and names do not make people racist – and ideas do not forcibly vanish with their symbols.

Panel 3 focused on presenting projects rethinking colonial history in academia and wider audiences. Its central question was: How can we develop, write, and communicate a shared history? MANUELA BAUCHE (Berlin) conveyed her insights into what sharing history can mean concerning the histories of injustices. To do so, she analyzed the history of an institution, the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute, between 1927 and 1945, and its links with colonialism and National Socialism. Bauche argued that it is time to think about the history of injustices together – and no longer separately.

An institution was also the topic of MICHAEL MEL’s (Goroka) speech. He examined the Australian Museum, the masks, and the Asaro Mudmen group’s performance from Papua New Guinea to ask how we could revisit museums and indeed talk about them as shared spaces.

UWE JUNG (Potsdam) provided an

overview of the *Archivführer zur deutschen Kolonialgeschichte*, an online tool that lists archival records connected to German colonialism. Although the audience recognized this project as quite useful, it asked about access from the Global South. Accessibility is indeed fundamental to make databases and platforms widely known and used. Thus, they mentioned the viability of translating at least the website's user interface to other languages, for example, Swahili. Decolonization, so the discussants, means also creating facilities through languages.

Under the title „Shared Future,“ Panel 4 asked how we could shape a common future. FLOWER MANASE (Dar es Salaam) talked about her experiences as a curator in the National Museum of Tanzania and remembered that it is necessary to pay attention to the partners' conditions when we think of communication. For example, there are different specificities for getting financial support for a project in each country.

BETTINA BROCKMEYER (Erlangen/Hamburg) argued for the creation of a new Center for Research on Colonialism and Racism in Germany. She underlined that this would make necessary a new attitude to do research: A view that takes less investigating, reconstructing or finding out, and more debating, negotiating, and struggling. Such a new centre in Germany is indeed an exciting idea. For a long time, colonial history was not important to German research institutes and public archives. Therefore, the pooling of knowledge and source material, and more means to enable historical research from the Global South in Germany would be very welcome.

DAVID SIMO (Yaoundé) spoke about the problems of collaborative knowledge productions involving the Global North and the Global South because of asymmetric structures. Contrary to Rassool, he pointed out the limits of restitution and proposed some alternatives like itinerant exhibitions.

A public panel on the legacies of colonialism and racism in Germany was streamed by Deutschlandradio Kultur, moderated by René Aguigah. It brought together Ibou Diop (Berlin), Albert Gouaffo (Dschang), Ulrike Lindner, Jackie Thomae (Berlin) and Hadija

Haruna-Oelker (Frankfurt am Main). All participants stressed the importance of making Africans and people of color more visible in the public. They also agreed that it is essential to include black participation and perspectives in Germany's historical narratives to repair what colonialism and racism have erased.

In this final discussion, Gouaffo argued that while colonialism was based on asymmetric and hierarchic relations between colonizers and colonized, these relations were often more complex than presented in many historical accounts. This view contrasted sharply with Owuor's leitmotif of colonialism as a crime with clear perpetrator and clear victim. However, apart from Gouaffo's interjection and some other papers like the one by Moyd, many presentations implied an idea of colonialism as a dichotomy of colonizers versus colonized. Africans were portrayed as helpless victims of absolute European power. It often resembled the Manichean world that colonial discourse fantasized about – an image that hardly matched colonial realities. Relations of power were much more complex, and more groups of people than just colonizers and colonized searched for ways to prosper, make a living, or to survive. As rich research has shown, colonialism was brutal and destructive, but it came into a world already shaped by power and inequality. Colonialism destroyed the lives of millions, but it also created new niches for individuals who were sly, ruthless, adaptive, or had the means and skills to grasp new opportunities. These aspects of colonial history and the overall question of agency were often missing in the discussions – as they are in most contemporary debates about colonialism. However, the workshop earns the merit of having opened up a serious conversation about German colonialism's legacies, which hopefully will continue in the future.

Conference overview:

Bettina Brockmeyer (Hamburg/Erlangen),
Rebekka Habermas (Göttingen), Ulrike
Lindner (Cologne): Opening Remarks

Michelle Müntefering (Berlin): Introduction

Keynote lecture

Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor (Nairobi): Derelict Shards. The Roamings of Colonial Phantoms

1st Panel: Shared History: Colonialism

Michelle Moyd (Bloomington): African Sovereignties and „Counterinsurgency“ in German East Africa, 1890-1908

Bertram Mapunda (Dar es Salaam): Can Colonialism Ever Have a Positive Element? A Reflection on the Three Decades of German Colonial Rule in Tanganyika

Kokou Azamede (Lomé): The Impact of German Colonialism in West African Societies. The Case of Togo and Ghana

Elizabeth Buettner (Amsterdam): Remaking Europe Through Migration. Colonial Legacies in Context

2nd Panel: Shared History: Post-colonialism

Andrew Zimmerman (Washington): Robbery, Representation, Restitution, and Destruction

Ciraj Rassool (Cape Town): Restitution, Decolonization and the Work of Undoing Race in the Museum

Joshua Kwesi Aikins (Kassel): Shifting the Perspective of/on Colonial Commemoration. Decolonising Public Space in Germany

3rd Panel: Shared History: Projects

Manuela Bauche and Christian Kopp (Berlin): Bridging Divides? Collaborative Projects, Entangled Injustices and German Memory Politics

Michael Mel (Goroka): Sharing Stories – Shared Space

Uwe Jung (Potsdam): The Archive Guide to German Colonial Past – an Ppportunity for Dehierarchized Access to Documents

4th Panel: Shared Future

Flower Manase (Dar es Salaam): The Future of Africa-Europe „Collaboration“ on Shared History

Bettina Brockmeyer (Erlangen/Hamburg): Proposal for a Center for Research on Colonialism and Racism

David Simo (Yaoundé): Is it Possible to Imagine Collaborative Knowledge Productions to

Resist Existing Asymmetric Structures?

Public Panel Discussion: Dealing with the Legacies of Colonialism and Racism in a Shared Future

Ibou Diop (Berlin), Albert Gouaffo (Dschang), Ulrike Lindner (Cologne), Jackie Thomae (Berlin), Hadija Haruna-Oelker (Frankfurt am Main)

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