



The Commemoration Service on the Occasion of the third Repatriation of Human Remains from former German South-West Africa on the 29th of August 2018 at Franzosische Friedrichstadtkirche, Berlin

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exact digital facsimile of a real book (Figure 3). Perhaps an actual replica book could have been used, but in emphasizing the digital a deliberate attempt is being made to draw in a younger audience, and this was described as vital in the age of the ubiquitous smartphone. How frequently this technology will have to be upgraded and maintained is likely to be significant, but it is currently state-of-the-art. Rihlat ends on a more analogue note with an apt quotation from the Qur'an, "Whatsoever is in the heavens and whatsoever is on the earth glorifies Allah. His is the dominion, and to Him belong all the praises and thanks, and He is Able to do all things" At-Taghabun (64: 1).

Security in gaining access to the complex of which Ithra forms a part is tight because it is in the Saudi Aramco area, but the atmosphere in Ithra is relaxed and friendly. In the restaurant, for example, mixed seating is the norm and only a few family booths with low walls and minimal spatial division

were present. Whether this reflects a more relaxed environment in the Saudi Aramco area or, as seems more likely considering the content of Ithra, broader changes occurring in Saudi Arabia, the Centre is to be recommended and its staff and supervisors congratulated for producing a successful, multi-faceted cultural venue. For what it is worth, Ithra is also listed in *Time* magazine's list of "World's Greatest Places" to visit for 2018 (Web Reference 1 2018).

Reference

Web Reference 1. 2018. Accessed December 03, 2018. <http://time.com/collection/worlds-greatest-places-2018/>

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the commemoration service on the occasion of the third repatriation of human remains from former german south-west africa on the 29th of august 2018 at französische friedrichstadtkirche, berlin

"Lying beneath the terror of the sacred is the constant excavation of missing bones; the permanent remembrance of a torn body hewn in a thousand pieces and never self same ..."

Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*

522 "We address bones. We live with the dead."

Thomas Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead*

The sorrowful words "What Have We Done?" of the South African apartheid era struggle song *Senzenina* conjured up a mournful atmosphere early in the church service commemorating the handover of Namibian human remains from

German institutions of research and higher learning.¹ This was the third handover of Namibian human remains held by German research institutions since 2011, and took place in the Französische Friedrichstadtkirche in Berlin late in August 2018. It was organized by the German Foreign Ministry with the assistance of the Embassy of Namibia, the state of Baden-Württemberg, the Council of Churches of Namibia and the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland. The German Foreign Ministry working with the Namibian Embassy to Germany hoped that the handover would be held in an atmosphere of "solemn, dignified and respectful ceremonial tribute" as an occasion for the observance of the diplomatic "protocol handover of the remains ... brought to Germany in trunks and containers as trophies of colonial conquest."²

Marking the handover of 19 human skulls, tissue samples, and bones—many of which were collected from deceased victims of the German-Herero war and Genocide of 1904 to 1908—to the Namibian state and affected indigenous communities, the high-level event was attended by diplomats, religious leaders, members of civil society organizations from Germany and Namibia and media representatives from around the world. Religious observances had been a part of previous handovers, but the staging of the handover in the context of a Christian service held in one of the grandest churches in Germany was significant.³ The service was meant to be a setting for the expression of suffering, loss, and grief, a context for diplomatic exchange, and to establish the conditions for the restoration of human dignity. Taking place in the

sacred space of the Französische Friedrichstadtkirche in the center of the German capital, the commemorative ceremony was profiled by the German Foreign Ministry as lending the event with the dignity it deserved.

Days before, other religious modalities were invoked for the management of the dead. On the night of 28 August, an officially organized vigil was held at the Friedrichstadtkirche. A selection of skulls designated for repatriation were installed in a glass case at the head of the church for the vigil, in front of a coffin draped in the Namibian flag (Figure 1). The chief reparations negotiators for Germany, Ruprecht Polenz, and Namibia, Dr. Zedekia Ngavirue, were also in attendance. Religious leaders from the Namibian and German churches led proceedings before Herero and Nama traditional leaders paid their respects, which included the Herero delegation performing a Holy Fire ritual as part of their traditional observance for respect for the dead (Figure 2).

Throughout the tightly choreographed ceremony it felt as if the symbolic status of the bones remained unsettled precisely because of, and not in spite of, official attempts to contain all the heavy feelings carried by their histories. The subject of unresolved contestations about recompense, historical justice and spiritual healing, suggested that the human remains reverberated with a sense of unfinishedness—of not being fully humanized, of not being entirely unscientific objects or fully incorporated as ancestors—according to their visual display, appreciation, and rhetorical positioning of the remains. As the anthropologist Katherine Verdery has observed of the use of the dead, “remains are concrete, yet protean ...” (1999, 28).

The solemnity of the handover ceremony was disturbed before the event took place. Days before the ceremony, the Namibian ambassador to Germany, Andreas Guibeb, invoked respect as an interpretive measure for determining genuine solidarity and legitimate commemoration when blocking the German NGO Alliance “No Amnesty on Genocide” from attending the church service (Figure 3). They went on to hold a silent yet visually prominent vigil on the morning of the service. On that day, the independent, large contingent of Namibian delegates representing different affected communities occupied the prime seats in the middle of the hall. The skulls and coffin stood just below the lectern at the head of the church as a centred display, part of a politics of visibility that structured the handling and management of remains since the first handover in 2011 (Förster 2013, np).⁴

Bishop Petra Bosse-Huber of the German Evangelical Churches delivered the first sermon invoking Corinthians, to elaborate on the difficulties of distinguishing between night and day, before reaffirming the church’s 2017 official apology for its role in the Genocide, saying missionaries were misguided by “arrogance of their cultural pride.” Bishop Ernst from the Council of Namibian Churches delivered a stern sermon outlining the significance of the handover as marking the return of remains that stood as witnesses to genocide and martyrs for the struggle of Namibian independence (Figure 4). The sense of instability conveyed by the presence of the remains carried through the fraught ongoing struggle for an official German apology and

FIG 1
Namibian skulls on display at special vigil, 28 August 2018, Französische Friedrichstadtkirche, Berlin. Photo © Debbie Onuoha.



FIG 2

Delegates performing special Holy Fire ritual at the special vigil for the handover of Namibian human remains, Französische Friedrichstadtkirche, Berlin. Photo © Debbie Onuoha.



FIG 3

NGO Alliance "No Amnesty on Genocide" protest, 28 August 2018, Französische Friedrichstadtkirche, Berlin. Photo by the author.

FIG 4

Indigenous communities affected by the Namibian Genocide make their concerns heard during the commemorative handover ceremony, 28 August 2018, Französische Friedrichstadtkirche, Berlin. Photo by the author.



official forms of material restitution as issued by the affected indigenous communities. The Herero delegation was led by Chief Rukoro who delivered a heated speech challenging attempts by the organizing committee to discipline the participating indigenous groups, saying “apart from being told how to behave by the German government as dictated to by our ambassador here, we were also told not to say things that would embarrass the two governments.”⁵ German Minister of State Michelle Müntefering paid special attention to the indigenous religious and ritual management of the deceased in addressing the sensitive issues of genocide, race science and forgiveness without delivering any remarks on reparations. The remains were officially handed to the Namibian delegation for their return home. The Namibian campaign for an official apology and full reparations remains ongoing.

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Notes and References

¹ The version sung on this occasion repeated the chorus and omitted the more biting lyrics “the Boers are dogs, it’s a sin to be black, it’s a sin in this country” that Religion Professor Alton B. Pollard III has cited as being part of another version of the song (Pollard 1999, 113).

² Email correspondence from Ambassador Andreas Guibeb to Mr. Christian Kopp, spokesperson for NGO Alliance No Amnesty on Genocide, August 10, 2018.

³ On these occasions, in total, 40 human skulls and remains were repatriated by the Charite Hospital and 14 skulls were returned by the University of Freiburg (Kossler 2015, 281).

⁴ Seen as witnesses to the genocide, affected communities advocated that they be made visible and accessible, to stand as evidence of, and provide silent testimony on, the violence of the German colonial experience. This emphasis on the visibility ran counter to the ways in which other

indigenous peoples had chosen to visually manage the remains of their deceased ancestors in the context of similar handover ceremonies.

⁵ Cited in "Skulls Repatriation Process Irks Rukuro." *The Namibian*. Accessed September 1, 2018. <https://www.namibian.com.na/180939/archive-read/Skulls-repatriation>

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what is the power of relics? an exhibition at museum catharijneconvent, utrecht

What is the power of relics? Why are they cherished, and why do people travel thousands of miles to see them? From October 12, 2018 to February 3, 2019 more than a hundred remarkable relics could be seen in Utrecht, in Museum Catharijneconvent,

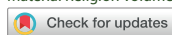
the Dutch national museum for Christian art and culture. Among the relics were a splinter from Christ's crown of thorns (see Figure 1), ZamZam water from Mecca, word-relics of the Buddha (see Figure 2), as well as exceptional remains of ancestors, historical heroes, pop idols and sports champions (see Figure 3). Many of the objects on display were from Museum Catharijneconvent's own collection, such as the hammer with which St Martin of Tours supposedly destroyed idols, and the scarf with which the English princess Cunera was



FIG 1

Relic crown with fragment of Holy Lance, True Cross and Crown of Thorns of Christ, Liège?, ca.1260–1280. Musée du Louvre, department des Objects d'art, Paris. OA 9445. (Photo: © RMN-Grand Palais [Musée du Louvre]/Martine Beck-Coppola.)

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