

# Postcolonial debates in Germany – An Overview<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*Historiographical works and public thinking in Germany have long considered the German colonial period to be marginal because of its short span – 30 years – compared to other colonial Empires. Throughout the last two decades, various studies have contradicted these ideas and emphasized the impact of German colonization not only on formerly colonialized populations but also on today's German collective imagination<sup>2</sup>.*

*In 2004, the centenary year of the Herero and Nama genocide committed in Namibia during German colonization, there was noticeable change in German discussions on the topic. Since then, a renewed interest for postcolonial matters has been observed in public and scientific debates. Several associations have been created in Germany since the mid 2000s with the objective of decolonizing the public space, believing that the process of decolonizing has two sides and cannot only concern formerly colonized states, but also formerly colonizer states<sup>3</sup>. This article focuses on the main crosscutting themes of German postcolonial debates and the light they can shed on other larger European debates.*

**Keywords:** Postcolonial, Empire, Race, Diaspora, Germany, Namibia,

## Résumé

## Abstrait

*Les travaux historiographiques et la pensée publique en Allemagne ont longtemps considéré la période coloniale allemande comme marginale en raison de sa courte durée – 30 ans – par rapport aux autres empires coloniaux. Au cours des deux dernières décennies, diverses études ont contredit ces idées et souligné l'impact de la colonisation allemande non seulement sur les populations anciennement colonisées, mais aussi sur l'imaginaire collectif allemand d'aujourd'hui.*

*En 2004, année du centenaire du génocide des Herero et Nama commis en Namibie pendant*

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2 To review Germany's colonial history, colonization-related remembrance culture in Germany and scientific studies on the matter, see Conrad 2008; Lennox 2010; Repussard 2014; Zimmerer 2013.

3 For example, Zeller 2010: 66.

*la colonisation allemande, il y a eu des changements notables dans les discussions allemandes sur le sujet. Depuis lors, un regain d'intérêt pour les questions postcoloniales a été observé dans les débats publics et scientifiques. Plusieurs associations ont été créées en Allemagne depuis le milieu des années 2000 dans le but de décoloniser l'espace public, estimant que le processus de décolonisation a deux côtés et peut concerner non seulement les anciens États colonisés, mais aussi les anciens États colonisateurs. Cet article se concentre sur les principaux thèmes transversaux des débats postcoloniaux allemands et la lumière qu'ils peuvent apporter sur d'autres grands débats européens*

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## Introduction

### Herero and Nama people genocide – Recognition and reparation at stake

In 1904 and 1905, Prussian army general Lothar von Trotha ordered the extermination of Herero and Nama people who were rising up against German colonial occupation in the then *Deutsch-Südwestafrika* colony (today's Namibia). Only 20% of Herero and less than half of the Nama survived the forced retreat to the desert and deportation to the concentration camps between 1904 and 1908. This genocide is considered to be the first in the 20<sup>th</sup> century but the German government refuses to recognize it as such, despite evidence from historical studies<sup>4</sup>. Yet, the debates triggered by the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Armenian genocide have induced a shift in position from German government representatives. In July 2015 Norbert Lammert, *Bundestag* president, publically declared that one cannot refer to the Armenian genocide without acknowledging the Herero and Nama genocide as well. Shortly after, the Foreign Affairs minister announced that the genocide committed in Namibia would be a one of the government's policy focus. They also both state that their declarations are not an official recognition from the German government. In 2015, the German and Namibian governments negotiated to establish

<sup>4</sup> See Zimmerer and Zeller 2003.

a resolution on reconciliation by the end of 2016. Related debates have intensified since Germany voted a resolution in June 2016 on the memory of the Armenian genocide and Germany's indirect complicity in the massacres.

The unwillingness of the German government to address the Herero and Nama genocide as such, is partly because of the compensation claims an official recognition would raise. The stakes have been raised higher by the victims' descendants who ask for the territories that should have been theirs. Most of these territories currently belong to the German people living in Namibia, some of them, direct descendants of the *Reich* citizens that lived in Namibia at the time of Germany's colonial rule. The outcome of the negotiations can be considered as an important step in how modern society relates to its colonial heritage and how it should be compensated. Nevertheless, the German government stated even before negotiations started that if there is an official recognition at stake, any demand of compensation will be excluded.

Herero and Nama activists' central role in the recognition process and their actions' international scope need to be better presented. Since the independence of Namibia and the end of Apartheid in the 1990s, the Herero and Nama's fight has focused on the acknowledgment and reparation of the damage caused by Germany during the genocide. For instance, legal steps have been undertaken by the US against German companies. These actions are initiated for the most part by the *Herero People's Reparations Corporation*, a transnational association of descendants of Herero survivors living in Namibia, Germany, Great Britain, the United States and in countries close to Namibia such as Botswana. They claim, first and foremost, for the genocide of the Herero and Nama people to be officially acknowledged, for the bones of the victims, which form part of German anthropologic collections, to be returned and for a dialogue to be opened on reparation measures. These associations play a significant role in the intergovernmental negotiations. Since 2006, the Namibian government, criticized by NGOs for withdrawing from their previous commitments, has been pressured into officially supporting their claims to the German government. Various associations, including the *Herero People's Reparations Corporation*, felt left out in the negotiations and have been conducting campaigns since 2015 in Namibia and Germany with the slogan: *It cannot be about us without us. Anything about us without us is against us.* The first transnational conference gathered more than fifty Herero and Nama from all over the world as well as members of German civil society and took place in Berlin in October 2016 in order to debate how to include NGOs in the current negotiations.

## Building the idea of “race” – German anthropological collections on the eve on the 20<sup>th</sup> century

From the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, racist theories about the notion of race and racial inferiority<sup>5</sup> prompted various anthropological collections and establishment of Centers. We can count four main ones in Germany at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>6</sup>. These Centers gather human bones from different regions of the world which are subjected to research in order to scientifically prove how races are different and unequal. These collections expanded a great deal during German colonialism. Thousands of skulls and skeletons, colonization victims for the most part, were transported from German colonies to Germany. A leading collector, Felix von Luschan, after spending most of his career studying human remains, concluded that humanity cannot be divided into races. However, some of his successors did not share his opinion. Eugen Fischer, a Professor of Medicine and Anthropology and a strong supporter of the Nuremberg laws, published, along with Erwin Baur and Fritz Lenz in 1921 *Human Heredity Theory and Racial Hygiene* (*Grundriss der menschlichen Erblichkeitslehre und Rassenhygiene*), a book that was as a major source of inspiration for the Nazi ideology. In 1927, Fischer took part in the creation of the Kaiser-Wilhelm Institute of Anthropology, Human Heredity and Eugenics (*Kaiser-Wilhelm-Institut für Anthropologie, menschliche Erblehre und Eugenik*) and became the first director, until 1942. The Institute, which took over Felix von Luschan's collection among others, applied eugenics and racial hygiene principles in different ways.

In 2011, two of the four collections were incorporated in the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation's funds in Berlin. After several requests for the return of Herero remains, it was granted in 2011 and 2014. The media coverage of the two restitutions played a role in today's rising awareness in Germany with regard to the existence of these collections and their original motive, thus raising awareness, though in a more limited manner, on how the idea of race was built – and how it can be taken apart.

## Colonization and Holocaust, is there a link?: Revisiting history

Another debate central to German (post)colonial studies is the controversial link between Germany's colonial past and the Holocaust, as suggested by Hannah Arendt.<sup>7</sup> Different arguments are used to prove the existence of a link between the two: first, there is a continuity in the stakeholders involved. Eugen Fischer for example spent

5 See for instance Arthur de Gobineau's *Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races*, volume 1 & 2, Paris: Didot, 1853; vol. 3 & 4, Paris: Didot, 1855 and his Haitian detractor Joseph Anténor Firmin's *Of the Equality of Human Races. Positive Anthropology*, Paris: Librairie Cotillon and F. Pichon, 1885, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Paris: L'Harmattan.

6 For more information, see Stoecker et al. 2013.

7 Arendt 1951.

time in Namibia for research in 1908, where he carried out an anthropological study on babies born of African mothers and German or Dutch fathers. A large number of racial theories defended by Fischer under the Nazi regime were developed during these experimentations. Historians supporting the theory of a strong continuity between German colonization and Holocaust argue that the Namibian genocide put an end to a taboo and was the first application of an ideology advocating for the extermination of a human group on German territory.

Several historians also insist on the impact the colonization and genocide in Namibia had on German population's way of thinking. Postcards showing scenes in concentration camps or Herero and Nama people being executed are sent repeatedly by German soldiers to their loved ones in Germany. Gustav Frenssen's novel *Peter Moers Fahrt nach Südwest* published in 1906, in which the author tells the glorifying story of German soldiers participating in the genocide, became a standard read in German schools from 1908<sup>8</sup>. The idea of continuity between colonization and Holocaust<sup>9</sup> has been questioned by several historians, but it is more the degree of continuity that they disagree on, rather than the continuity per se.

Though the idea of continuity between German colonialism and Holocaust is contested, as it does not aim at putting the crimes committed in perspective; it is still an invitation to give the 20<sup>th</sup> century history another look and replace it in a larger context of legitimization of racial classification, reinforced during German colonialism and leading to the extermination of races considered as inferior and harmful in a German colony.

## **Decolonizing the public space – “Postcolonial” associations**

A turning point was reached in the debate as (post-colonial) discussions intensified with the centennial of Herero and Nama genocide and the 120<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Berlin Conference in 2004, partly due to discussions initiated in German Studies Centers in the United States<sup>10</sup>. It increased the visibility over studies of postcolonial remains in the German public space carried out since the 1990s<sup>11</sup>. Starting in the middle of the 2000s, postcolonial associations (for example *Berlin postkolonial*, *Hamburg postkolonial*) are formed in various cities such as Berlin, Frankfurt, Munich, Freiburg, Hamburg, Leipzig and others, but also at a regional scale (for example *Hessen postkolonial*). Their members, from African, German and other origins, look for colonial remains in targeted cities and regions and engage in decolonizing activities aimed at both the public space and German collective mind.

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8 See Kössler 2005.

9 See for instance Kundrus 2005.

10 For example Friedrichsmeyer et al. 1998.

11 For example Heyden van der and Zeller 2002; and Zeller 2000.

Their actions consist in organizing “anticolonial” guided tours of the cities where they are implemented, showcasing different remains from the colonial period, in educational activities in schools, museum exhibitions or advocating for the change of some street names chosen to commemorate key figures from German colonization or including racist terms. One instance of this process took place in 2007, when the Von-Trotha-Straße in Munich was renamed Hererostraße. Currently in Berlin, claims to change the name of the Mohrenstraße<sup>12</sup>, a street housing two key institutions and symbols of power, the Justice Ministry and the European Ethnology Institute of Humboldt-University, raise intense debates.

## The Humboldt-Forum – towards a decolonization of museums?

Postcolonial debates have also gained some ground in Berlin these last few years with the “Humboldt-Forum” construction, a museum, cultural and scientific project that will open its doors in 2019 in the capital city and will house, among other collections, the Dahlem Ethnology Museum collections, which were up to now, in a neighborhood, west of the city. The new museum, to be housed within Berlin’s castle,<sup>13</sup> currently being reconstructed, raises a strong polemic. The display of ethnological objects – acquired for the main part within unequal relationships during German colonialism – in a reconstitution of the castle occupied by Prussian emperors who played a significant role in colonial history is described as a provocation by some of the opponents to the project, including many members of the African diaspora and postcolonial associations, grouped together in the “NO Humboldt 21!” collective. Others, like the President of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation in Berlin (*Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz*), stressed, at the Origin of the Humboldt-Forum that architectural choices would lead to a better awareness of the colonial past in the museum conceptualization.

Since 2015, partly under the pressure of organizations protesting against the Humboldt-Forum, the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation (which the Ethnology Museum and the future Humboldt-Forum depend on) expressed its desire to reinforce the investigations of the provenance of items from formerly colonized regions. An “item provenance researcher” position (*Provenienzforschung*) was created at the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation in Berlin in 2016. Innovating experimentations have been carried out between 2012 and 2015 to reflect on how to address the colonial past in the ethnographic exhibition of the museum’s items.<sup>14</sup> In various German museums, there were requests for the restitution of museum items initiated by the descendants of their original owners in the former German colonies.

12 *Mohr* is a German term considered disparaging for black-skinned people.

13 The former Prussian Imperial residence was destroyed under the German Democratic Republic in 1950, then replaced from 1976 by the GDR’s Palace, which was also destroyed from 2006 onwards.

14 For more information about ongoing projects for the museum exhibit, see Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz 2015; Humboldt-Lab 2015.

Ethnographic collections have played a central role in the colonization process. After the geographic division of the formerly colonized regions, a race started to which European country would acquire the most items from the former colonies and was often described in social sciences as an attempt to better “possess” the colonized populations’ cultures<sup>15</sup>. The purpose of exhibiting these items in European museums was to make cultures perceived as distant more accessible to local populations. The relation established with “the others” was built in a way mainly defined by museum decision boards and European institutions rather than within direct interactions with former colonies’ citizens. In light of these elements, the study of contemporary postcolonial debates in museum institutions appears particularly fruitful.

## Former colonies descendants’ role

It is important to underline the central role played by people descending from former colonies in the current state of German postcolonial debates. We saw before how important are Herero survivors’ descendants in debates around the recognition of the Herero and Nama people genocide. In a similar way, the German population’s awareness of the consequences of the colonial past really started with the publication, in 1986, of a book written by a group of black and German women called *Farbe bekennen*<sup>16</sup>. The point of their piece was to highlight the presence in Germany of black German citizens and how they experience racism. It is one of the first published piece to emphasize the relation between colonial experience and racism. Two of the authors were daughters of a Cameroonian man who emigrated to Germany during the colonial period of the German Empire<sup>17</sup>.

During the meetings that took place before the publication, several initiatives were created, in particular the “Black German initiative” (*Initiative Schwarze Deutsche*), which still leads actions against racism today. The autobiography by Theodor Michael, born in 1925 from a German mother and a Cameroonian father arrived in Germany in 1903, was part of this movement. The author wrote about his childhood, spent in human zoos with his father, brothers and sisters, how he survived World War II and how racism excluded him from the high economic growth between 1945 and 1975. He also discussed the unexpected turn in his life when he obtained a study grant; this, marked, the beginning of an uncommon career: first in the creation of German publications about Africa, then within the federal intelligence service. The title of his book, *German? And black as well! (Deutsch sein und schwarz dazu)* is yet another attempt to give black-skinned German citizens’ existence a place in German collective imagination. The autobiography,

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15 Somé 2003: 41.

16 Oguntoye et al. 1986. The title refers to a pun. The expression *Farbe bekennen* means “to stand by one’s position”. The term *Farbe* means “color”, the verb “bekennen” means to recognize or to admit.

17 For more research on black people’s experience in Germany, see Bechhaus-Gerst and Klein-Arendt 2003.

published in 2013, was listed as a bestseller by Spiegel periodical in 2013–2014<sup>18</sup>.

Another significant figure in the ongoing changes to the postcolonial situation in Germany is Prince Kum'a Ndumbe III. Though, he is yet to be accorded enough importance in research. Alexandre Kum'a Ndumbe III was born in 1946 in Douala, Cameroon. He's the grandson of Kum'a Mbappe, one of the first resistance fighters during German occupation in 1884. At age 15, Kum'a Ndumbe III was sent by his family to Munich in order to finish his education. There he obtained his high school diploma, the *Abitur*, and continued with a History and German degree at Lyon II Lumières University in France, where he defended a dissertation in 1974 called *African policies in Hitler's Germany: 1933–1943. Northern Africa, Central Africa, South Africa*. From his thesis he published *Hitler wanted Africa: the Third Reich's project on the African continent*<sup>19</sup>, in which he questioned the Nazi government's intentions to colonize, not only the East, but the entire African continent<sup>20</sup>. In 1989, he obtained his accreditation to direct research (HDR) in political sciences on African policies in German Federal Republic. In parallel to teaching history and German studies at Lyon II University, Berlin Free University and Cameroon's Yaoundé I University, he also published more than 30 non scientific books, mainly theater plays written in German, French and Duala. He was elected President of the Cameroonian Poets and Writers Association between 1981 and 1991. In 1985, he founded the Foundation "AfricAvenir" in Duala promoting the rebirth of the African continent through educational actions and emphasis on knowledge from an African point of view. Between 1989 and 2003, the classes he taught at the Free University of Berlin gained a lot of popularity. The auditoriums where he taught were always full; several students of his decided to commit to implementing both postcolonial and 'de-colonial' theories that they encountered. In 2004, a certain number of them opened a branch of AfricAvenir in Berlin. Since Professor Kum'a Ndumbe's departure from Berlin, there has been a non-negligible transmission from student to student of his teachings about postcolonial matters in Germany, a phenomenon that would benefit from a deeper, empirical study.

## The importance of intergenerational relations

The point here is to emphasize the importance of intergenerational relations in this process. The students behind *Farbe bekennen* discovered the truth about the consequences of colonialism through talks with older African immigrants, who went to Germany as part of their studies in the 1970s. These students, from East and West Africa, created

18 The book will be published in French in Autumn 2016 by Editions Duboiris and in English in 2017 at Liverpool University Press.

19 Paris, L'Harmattan, 1980.

20 Publication was banned in Germany until 1993. When he heard about the ban, Jean-Paul Sartre published a shortened version of the text in his journal *Modern Times*.

the first African people association in Germany at the end of the 70s. Some of them were motivated, in their immigration to Germany, by reasons specific to colonization. For example, Mr. Safari<sup>21</sup> who originates from Tanzania, a territory that used to belong to the *Deutsch-Ostafrika* colony, told the story of his grandmother and how when he was a child, she would tell him about what had happened during German occupation, more particularly about the repression led by Carl Peters, the colony's founder, nicknamed "bloody hands" in Tanzania and *Hänge-Peters (hanging-Peters)* in Germany. She would frequently mention the cadavers and bones of rebel chiefs that were taken to Germany after they had been defeated. When Mr. Safari left for Germany, his grandmother gave him the specific mission of finding the human remains of these chiefs and bring them back to Tanzania.

In 1984, the aforementioned African students organized a conference on the occasion of the Conference of Berlin's Centennial, to which they invited Wole Soyinka and Ngūgū wa Thiong'o. The young German students who wrote *Farbe bekennen* drew inspiration from the discussions that took place at the conference. Nonetheless, the preoccupations of these two groups – the group of students socialized in Africa and the group of young women brought up in Germany – were not the same. Whereas the former were more motivated by a claim for reparation of the damage inflicted by colonization, the latter were particularly determined to fight against the effects racism has within German society. In the early 1980s, the voluntary activities organized by these groups took different routes but were still closely linked, especially when children of African students came of age and engaged in the associations' activities as well as became in part members of both associations: the *Initiative für Schwarze Deutsche* and the "postcolonial associations".

## Symmetrical perspectives – a marginal story?

The presence of the African diaspora and descendants of former German colonies seems central in how the debates progress since they allow for a more symmetrical appraisal of today's consequences of German colonialism. The so-called marginal role played by German colonialism was questioned in interviews and ethnographical observations of key figures in the African diaspora in Berlin, and, also, in multi-sited studies. For instance, several scientific studies<sup>22</sup> highlight the importance of the Conference of Berlin for many African people, contrarily to Europeans.

In 2016, my fieldwork in Berlin confirmed these observations. An interview with a member of African diaspora in Berlin seems to illustrate particularly well this feeling. Mr. X, originating from West Africa, arrived in Europe after graduating from high

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21 The name was changed for privacy purposes.

22 For example Eckert 2013.

school. He first lived 10 years in France, before moving to Germany in 1982. When I asked the reason why he chose to live in Germany, a choice that implied an important investment, learning a new language to start with, Mr. X replied:

Why did I want to come to Germany? Because this is where African borders were decided. When I was a child in elementary school, our teacher would always talk about the ‘Conference of shame’, because African borders had been decided in Germany without inviting any African representative. My family was impacted by the Conference, and is still split up today between several countries. I’ve always wanted to know this country, this city that decided today’s African borders.

Here, it is not only the country that is named, but also the city. Several people I met in Germany and originating from the African diaspora, as well as people interviewed in Cameroon, talk about the need to rethink the borders separating the African countries and use the term of “deberlinization” of the African continent.

The importance of the Conference of Berlin was finally revealed in current demands issued by African diaspora associations regarding the creation of a monument in Berlin in memory of slavery, colonization and victims of racism. Public authorities haven not yet followed through with these demands. In 2007, a memorial stone, financed by private funds collected amongst people from the African diaspora and German civil society, was raised not too far from where the Conference of Berlin was held. This memorial stone recounts the event in a few words. Interviews of various actors of the African diaspora in Berlin have shown that politicians from different African countries ask to be taken to the Conference of Berlin’s locations during their visit of Berlin and to see the memorial stone mentioned.

A multi-sited empirical approach is another essential tool to have a comprehensive point of view. Förster’s multi-sited study<sup>23</sup> about the restitution of bones in Namibia for instance has evidenced the difference of importance given to the matter by both German and Namibian populations. For the first restitution of Herero skulls that took place at Berlin’s Charity Hospital in 2011, a delegation of 60 Namibians, including members of the government, was present. The German government had no representative present apart from a secretary of state who left before the end of the ceremony. The other people present were Herero survivors’ descendants living in Germany, a few people interested in the matter and journalists. One could say that the event was a small concern for the German population, or at least a concern that was not expressed through physical presence. The contrast with the Namibian welcoming crowd was all the more striking as thousands of people awaited the arrival of the restituted bones in front of Windhoek airport.

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23 Förster 2013.

## Conclusion

It is fair to say that from the mid 2000s, Germany has witnessed a “de-colonial turn”<sup>24</sup>, along with particularly strong debates relating to the recognition of the Herero and Nama genocide, the anthropological collections that have contributed to the idea of “races”, the relation between German colonization and Holocaust and the treatment of colonial remains in German public space. People with origins in German colonies played a central role in questioning whether the consequences of German colonialism are marginal in today’s societies. We can wonder whether the intensity of current postcolonial debates and the number of “de-colonial” actions undertaken by German civil society can be partly explained by the burden of the Nazi past. Regarding the latter, some authors have agreed to say that this burden makes the German people more prone to self-criticism than in other national contexts<sup>25</sup>. In this perspective, we can wonder if Germany’s general environment is not particularly fertile for civil society, stakeholders asking for recognition and reparation of colonial damage. The conflicts that were raised with regard to the Humboldt-Forum could lead to the colonial past being acknowledged in this innovating museum, which can have a domino effect by pressuring other European ethnological museums. On an institutional level, will postcolonial debates go far enough that a *real* decolonization of German public space becomes possible or will they only serve to maintain the status quo, as it is stated by opponents to the project? One of the topics broached by the objecting side concerns the relation between objects, human remains and humans: in many cases, it is true that collectors of ethnological items would collect human bones. In other cases, they would come back from their expeditions with African people, to be exhibited in human zoos in Europe. In the next few years, postcolonial debates led by European civil society could focus on the relation between objects and human beings and how human beings were objectified in the course of a colonial and postcolonial process.

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24 Lennox 2010: xvi.

25 See for instance Schultheis 1995.

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