

Editor's Choice: Mail & Guardian: Resisting the muse of imperial 'science'

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By Brent Meersman.

The first usage in German of the word Konzentrations-lager (concentration camp) occurs in 1905, during what should be acknowledged as the first genocide of the 20th century -- a mass murder perpetrated on civilians, two-thirds of them women and children, based primarily on their racial classification.

Planned not by the colonial governor but by the general staff in Berlin reporting directly to the kaizer, the systematic extermination of the Herero, and then the Nama people, would prefigure the Holocaust. The methods are now all too familiar: death marches, deliberate starvation, mass executions, forced hard labour; women were even used as draught animals, eight harnessed to a wagon. Rape was institutionalised. More than half the population perished.

The father of Nazi war criminal Hermann Goering was the first imperial commissioner to Deutsch-Südwestafrika; two of Josef Mengele's (the butcher-surgeon of Auschwitz) teachers conducted pseudo-scientific research on the Herero to justify their annihilation.

One of the grisliest accounts regards the preparation of human materials for doctors in Berlin. The heads of decapitated Herero men were sent in hessian sacks to the women's camp, where the inmates were required to boil them and scrape off the flesh with shards of glass. Some must have recognised their menfolk before they were forced to meticulously obliterate the faces. The skulls were packed neatly into wooden crates. Photographs of this exist, as do pictures of mass hangings sold as postcards in colonial stores.

The Namibian reported on May 6 this year that after lengthy negotiations, the German government will repatriate 47 skulls from the cellars of the Charité University of Berlin and another 12 skulls from the University of Freiburg.

Broken glass and disembodied heads form the leitmotif for director Brett Bailey's provocative human installation, Exhibit A: Deutsch-Südwestafrika, a "meditation on the dark history of European racism in relation to Africa".

Bailey has spectacularly staged his work in the Ethnographic Museum housed in Vienna's vast Hofburg Palace, a grandiose wedding cake of a building in the heart of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire, that alone speaks volumes about the grotesquery of imperialism.

The exhibition of Africans on the stages of Europe is a lingering indignity; most famously there was Sara Baartman, during whose almost-nude exhibition the public were encouraged to touch and squeeze her buttocks. In the human zoos of the 19th century, unlike in freak shows, individuals --

whether "Hottentot" or "Pygmy" (I use these terms in their historical context) -- were not displayed as unique, monstrous specimens but as representative stereotypes of subhuman species.

Today the modern versions of such indignity are the adverts for foreign aid of starving, fly-encrusted black children; and the gratuitous insertion in theatre spectacles of various causes célèbres surrounding Aids, famine and poverty in Africa.

That Bailey has managed to negotiate this problematic and highly sensitive arena with almost faultless judgment is deserving of extraordinary praise. He has learned from previous miscalculations, such as his production of Safari, which was patronisingly praised by European audiences.

This time the knives are out and Bailey subversively turns exotic spectacle on its head. His brave hosts at the Wiener Festwochen have given him artistic free rein.

After a brief prep talk by Bailey, patrons receive random numbers, separating couples and groups. You enter an enormous marble-columned hall, contrived by its architects as much to humble the visitor as to extol the power of its imperial residents. We sit on numbered chairs arranged in a circle around a giant vitrine. A museum assistant in uniform -- light-blue shirt and dark trousers -- ushers in a black woman (South African actress Chuma Sopotela). Slipping on high-heel shoes, she steps up into the cabinet. Her body is painted black and she wears only a loincloth of braided hair. Bailey debated with his cast whether to be completely nude here and elsewhere, which is how Sopotela appeared in her production *U nyamo alunampumlo* (The Foot Has No Nose) at Spier Contemporary in 2007. The revolving platform on which she stands slowly starts to turn as we hear Herero songs about the genocide (by Jodt Hengua and Menesia Puriza). They interweave with Franz Schubert's Ave Maria and his haunting, arpeggiated *Litanei auf das Fest Allerseelen*, sung by Christa Ludwig, which begins: "Rest in peace all souls ..." Individually, at intervals, we are collected by the children of African refugees in Vienna. The last to be summoned will have sat mesmerised by Sopotela for more than 20 minutes.

The black child guide does not speak but takes you by the hand and leads you, a device Bailey first employed last year in *Blood Diamonds* at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown. I hear later that some of Vienna's hegemony struggled with this human contact.

The first room is titled *Trophies from Eden*. The great palace room is slightly eerie -- the wooden floor creaks as you enter, but what strikes you hardest is the beauty of the display. Lit subtly in a golden glow, disembodied antelope trophy heads emerge from the darkness and hover, their liquid glass eyes watching you. Behind them are two glass cabinets -- dioramas of rural Namibia -- a desert and mountain backdrop, ostrich eggs, a snake; in one, a topless Nama woman (Anna Louw), in the other, a Nama man (Steven Afrikaner). He has a bow on his shoulder and yellow measuring tape tied

around his neck, upper arms, legs and chest. On a desk lie charts in German and English, tables of measurements, including penis length, taken by 19th-century anthropologists.

You become accustomed, even desensitised, to seeing such museum exhibits, but nothing prepares you for the shock of the gaze returned. Both Louw and Afrikaner have compelling stares and they follow you with their eyes as you survey the room. The result is a disconcerting transformation of the spectacle into spectator; the viewer is suddenly under scrutiny. Afrikaner, who says he is proud to represent his people, told me afterwards that most people could not look him in the eye. It is a difficult and painful work for the cast to be displayed in, but Bailey appears to have crafted a tightly knit and emotionally supportive team. The result is to detonate the status quo of passive African victim presented sympathetically to the liberal European patron of the arts. This is a work of resistance art.

You are now left free to wander through the rooms at leisure. The next installation is titled *A Place in the Sun*, based on a photograph from the estate of Hermann Schlüter held by the Braunschweigisches Landesmuseum. In the "quarters of an officer of the German Colonial Forces, Windhoek, 1906", a woman (played by Mathilda Joseph) sits with her fleshy, naked back to us. A neck iron chains her to the bedstead. She watches us in a mirror. What is held up to us is not our reflection but the way the other sees us. The officer's boots, his cap, a revolver in a holster, a rifle standing against the wall; the woman, too, an object awaiting his return. The walls are covered in the trophy skulls of animals. A caption for the exhibit states: "I have seen women and children with my own eyes dying of starvation and overwork, nothing but skin and bone, getting flogged every time they fell under their heavy loads. I have never heard one cry, even when their flesh was being cut to pieces with the whip. All feeling seemed to have gone out of them." (Cape Argus, September 28 1905).

The rooms start to coalesce as an account of imperial conquest. The next installation summons up the horrific apotheosis of that chapter. A sinister buzzing soundscape by James Webb sets the mood. *Civilising the Natives* encapsulates (to the extent that you can) the horror of the Shark Island concentration camp. Behind shiny human skulls displayed on beds of crushed glass in showcases, sit two women (Thereza Kahorongongo and Miriam Mukosho) in sackcloth surrounded by barbed wire, an iron pot between them, the ground scattered with shards of glass, a pair of legs protruding from under the rostrum.

A respite from this unbearable cruelty is at hand in the next room, but no emotional relief. Eugen Fischer (1874 – 1967) was a professor of anatomy and the rector of the Berlin University during the Third Reich. His eugenist theories of racial hygiene, developed in the concentration camps of South-West Africa, were the ideological basis for the Holocaust. In Dr Fischer's *Cabinet of Curiosities* only the heads of members of a Nama choir daubed with grey clay are visible in profile, each on a plinth, in a row. That they face the back of one another's heads makes their disembodied isolation all the

more poignant. And yet, they are singing in heartbreaking harmony, lachrymal songs of the genocide, arranged for the choir by Marcellinus Swartbooi, accompanied by Josef van der Westhuizen, Chris Nekongo and Avril Nuuyoma. On the wall behind them are three splendidly framed, gruesome black-and-white photographs taken in 1906 of decapitated Nama heads posed on iron rings.

There are still a few rooms to go, but visible at the far end of the corridor is a puzzling sight. It appears to be a man strapped to a chair and you become intrigued as to where this "narrative" will lead.

To enter the next room, you are forced to squeeze past a table in the middle of the doorway. Under the title *The Age of Enlightenment*, dressed entirely in white, in the frills and lace of Viennese aristocracy, face bandaged, white powdered lips and nose, white gloves, the lower shirt ripped open to expose a black man's stomach and belly button down to a crescent of pubic hair, lies the breathing body of Angelo Soliman (impersonated here by Lamin Jammeh, a Gambian asylum-seeker in Vienna). From the opposite architrave hangs a portrait of Soliman. Born in 1721 in Nigeria, a captured slave and later a valet who saved his prince, Soliman rose to the position of courtier and became a philosopher, mathematician, historian, Freemason and a confidant to Maria Theresia and Emperor Joseph I. His reward upon his death in 1796 was to be skinned, stuffed and publicly exhibited in the emperor's natural history collection among other Africans and wild animals until 1848. Baartman's plaster cast was removed from the Musée de l'Homme in Paris only in 1982 and the body of a 27-year-old Tswana man stuffed and preserved by the taxidermist Verreaux brothers of Paris, was removed from display at the Darder Museum of Natural History in Banyoles, Spain, and repatriated to Gaborone, Botswana, only in October 2001. Just days before the opening of Exhibit A there were demonstrations in Vienna and a public outcry surrounding the deportation of 14 Nigerian soccer players. One was arrested on the pitch in the middle of a game; another, an openly gay Nigerian, was deported and could now face the death penalty for his sexual orientation.

Bailey's response is to include an identity parade of asylum-seekers. Christiana Akinleye, Franca Ibegbulem and Raphael Ogbonna stand in a row behind high-tension electric wire; on enlarged cards are their immigration identity forms, recalling the anthropologists' measurement tables in the first room. The participants are actually all Nigerian refugees, but Bailey has them labelled for exhibit as Ready Mades/Found Objects: 1. Gambian 2. Cameroonian 3. Ghanaian 4. Nigerian. The situation is deeply uncomfortable and confrontational; the accusatory stare reversed. The last enclosure is empty except for a pair of soccer trainers and the red official stamp stating "DEPORTED" in German across the immigration form.

We have reached the end of the corridor and have arrived at that enigmatic sight glimpsed from afar. Titled *Survival of the Fittest*, on a set of aeroplane seats, wrapped in packing tape, is another man. This was Marcus Omofuma (played here by Ken Paul Chukwunonye, also a Nigerian asylum-seeker). He slowly suffocated on a deportation flight to Bulgaria. The Austrian police had

bound Omofuma with adhesive tape across the mouth and nose. He was only 25 years old. The passengers who sat on either side of him are suggested by pairs of empty shoes. The Houses of Parliament are clearly visible from the palace window of this room -- and Bailey has tinted the glass blood-red.

Turning off to the left is the final room. Simply titled Crowns, it sees Vevangua Christof Muondjo, a Windhoek-based artist, sitting surrounded by packing cases, crates and package materials. He has his back to us, but there is once again a mirror. He is making gold hats, the extraordinary buffalo horn-shaped headdresses worn by Herero women on auspicious occasions, and softly singing to himself the songs for which he is famous as a Herero man who sings the traditional women's songs of bygone times. Unlike the other spaces, this one is ambiguous. At first you get the sense of a discarded man, futilely toiling away in someone else's enterprise. The hats are accumulating; perhaps they are for honouring the dead. Yet there is dignity in his efforts, as well as beauty and personal significance.

The exhibition ends with photographs of the cast, their names, occupations and a short comment. The final words are perhaps best left to the cast. Marcellinus Swartbooi: "Looking at the woman waiting to be raped by the German officer, I think about the fact that she could have been my grandmother, my mother or my sister. Truly degrading." Anna Louw: "This makes me ashamed of my German ancestry." Thereza Kahorongo: "I am using this as a healing experience."