King of Tanzanian island of Ukerewe finds looted statue in Berlin
“Kigiilya just wants to go home”
Article for the Groene Amsterdammer by Mar Oomen

At the Humboldt Forum cultural centre in Berlin, a famous statue of the Tanzanian island of Ukerewe alias Bukerebe is part of an exhibition. As this is a cultural-historical sculpture of great sensitivity, the German curators decided not to display the original, but a 3D presentation of it. The sculpture itself, Kigiilya, is safely stored in the depots of the Ethnological Museum Berlin. Why? Talengwa Kaseza Lukumbuzya, the king alias omukama of Ukerewe, went to have a look.

At the Humboldt Forum cultural centre in the heart of Berlin, Talengwa Kaseza Lukumbuzya, king of the Tanzanian island of Ukerewe, stands in front of a large glass vitrine containing a curious, snow-white statue of a human figure called *Kigiilya*. At the level of his crotch and where an ear and nose should be, the statue is coloured red, the legs end in red stumps, a long red-coloured stripe seems to split the white skull in two.
The sight of the sculpture impresses. As curator Maike Schimanowski explains circumstantially why it looks the way it does, King Kaseza is overcome with emotion for a brief moment. "Perhaps with the return of *Kigiilya*, I can finally unite our families," he murmurs, "and give my ancestor King Lukonge the grave he deserves: with the other kings of my island." Kaseza is also moved by the care with which the Humboldt Forum exhibits the statue. For it is not the real kigiilya that is on display, but a, as they say in Berlin, 3-D presentation of it. ‘No consent - No object’, is the motto of the curators of the exhibition *Exhibiting. Omissions. Objects from Tanzania and the Colonial Archives*. No consent from the rightful owners to exhibit? Then no object to show the public either, at least not the original.

Next to the display case is a drawing made by German cartographer/ethnologist Oscar Baumann as he found the wooden statue in 1892 in King Lukonge's palace in Ukerewe: the feet, pecker, nose and both ears are still neatly attached. Next to the display case is also a picture of *Kigiilya* as it presumably looks now,

and as Kaseza and I know it from various publications on African art: quite battered and without feet, penis, nose and ear. And with one eye pierced.
The wooden sculpture itself is safely stored in the depositories of Berlin's Ethnological Museum. We get to see it, we hope, tomorrow. Curators annex historians Maike Schimanovski, Kristin Weber-Sinn and Paola Ivanov set aside no less than three days to show the king around and talk to him ('omukama' he is called on his island). As if, as Germans, they had something to make up to a Tanzanian. And maybe they do. Kaseza: "Of all the wazungu, all the whites who visited or occupied our country, only the Germans were called 'wazungu wakali': cruel whites."
But how come the statue Baumann drew looks so different from the wooden statue in the photo? In the picture, *Kigiilya* is badly battered, it looks mistreated, tortured even. By whom? Why? How did the sculpture end up in the German depositories, why did they keep it all these years, why don't the curators want or dare to show the original? Why is it represented in this exhibition at all? And what should the current king do with it, how did he know of its existence?
What does this sculpture stand for?

It all started in December last year. Working on a research project on the history of Ukerewe, an island in Lake Victoria where I was born during the time my father worked there as a medical doctor, I was visiting Kaseza Lukumbuzya, the omukama, the king of the island. He lives in Vienna.
His father was the last king in office. To make it easier for his country to become one nation, President Julius Nyerere had stripped the kings of their political power after independence - appointing Kaseza's father as a diplomat in successively the United Nations, New York, in India, the USA, Sweden and Canada.
"Since then," says Kaseza, who grew up mainly in Sweden but fell in love with an Austrian during an internship in Vienna, "we, kings of Tanzania, are the Cultural Custodians of our people, custodians of our heritage. Think of me as a kind of cultural heritage ambassador of my island."
Like his father, Kaseza has his affairs for and on the island overseen by a mkamambili, a viceroy. They call and app each other weekly, sometimes even daily. But now that he is retired - Kaseza worked in Vienna for a United Nations

organisation - he would like to do more for his people. During his annual visits, he has seen Ukerewe turn from a rich and fertile island into a poor, barren, depleted area, with only one hospital left for 300,000 people and a huge shortage of teachers. Classes of more than 100 students are not uncommon. Kaseza: "While the education level of islanders has been so high. Since independence, the island has delivered at least a hundred professors!"
He would also like to restore his grandfather's palace and rebuild his great-grandfather's. On the internet, he found a drawing of it made by a Scottish explorer who visited it in the late 19th century. A few years later, it would be destroyed by the Germans. When I suggest to Kaseza that we look for lost heritage together, he is immediately enthusiastic, finally something concrete that clearly fits with his job as primary custodian: tracking down cultural heritage. At the same time, he does not have much faith in our venture. Every attempt he and his family have made in that field so far has come to nothing.

I myself, of course, hope to do something for my native island in this way. As a child of white Catholic missionary doctors, I feel I have a certain debt to settle, even though I had neither part nor share in the looting and greed of the time. From diaries of White Fathers that I was allowed to consult in Rome for my research into the island's history, I know that there is, or must have been, 'all kinds' of heritage. In late 1938, Catholic missionaries wrote that on his deathbed, they had managed to persuade King Gabriel Ruhumbika, Kaseza's grandfather, to hand over to them a casket filled with objects from which he derived power as king: amulets, horns, weapons and many more, mostly spiritual attributes.
But how do you tackle such a thing? Track down heritage and possibly reclaim it?

I turn to Jos van Beurden, a specialist in colonial cultural heritage and its restitution for many years. He talks about partnerships between Germany and Tanzania and about activists with an African background who have been fighting in Vienna and Berlin for the return of objects for years. In recent years, he has noticed a change for the better in the attitude of governments and museums towards claims to colonial heritage. More and more countries are breaking with the rule that looted objects from colonial territories are part of

their national heritage and should therefore not be alienated. This is already the case in Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands. France has new legislation in the pipeline. Britain is not so far along. And many missionary organisations are also still, he says, holding off. They do not really know how to deal with requests for restitution.
Van Beurden advises us to email museums before visiting them. I scour the internet, compile a list of museums that might have something from the island and draft emails. Just to be sure, I look in a big thick book on African art I inherited from my parents. Surprisingly, it contains objects and sculptures from Ukerewe, under one of them is a brief but rather dramatic description: it is *Kigiilya*. I send a picture of the image and the text to Kaseza. In his family, stories circulate about large wooden statues of past kings that are all said to have disappeared, but no, this statue tells him nothing. We try to track down the story on which the description in the art book is based. It is by Gerald Hartwig, an American historian who spent months researching the island of Ukerewe in 1968. He wrote numerous publications on his findings, all of which can be traced via the internet or university libraries, but the article on *Kigiilya* in particular seems untraceable. Hartwig's widow cannot help us either. It appeared in Tribus, a journal published by the Linden-Museum für Völkerkunde, Stuttgart 1969. And then a Dutch antiques dealer suddenly turns out to have exactly that publication.

King Machunda, a distant ancestor of Kaseza, had been given the sculpture by a trading relation who bivouacked on his island for a while in the mid-nineteenth century. Exactly on the day the carving was completed, a powerful uncle of Machunda died. But this king's spiritual powers proved so great that he managed to let his uncle's spirit take possession of the wooden sculpture, giving it additional gifts that he could benefit from as king. By providing enough rain in time - neither too much nor too little - the statue helped him stay in power and keep possible attackers at bay. (For example, his elder brother Ibanda, whom he himself had managed to chase away to a remote corner of the island after a long drought). When Machunda died, his son Lukonge was crowned king and with the throne he also inherited *Kigiilya*. Lukonge was very careful of it, unlike all other attributes that gave him power, he kept it in his

bedroom where he had it guarded by a female bodyguard. Only special guests were allowed to see the statue.

Meanwhile, the conference at which European countries divided the African continent among themselves took place in Berlin. Among other regions, Germany had managed to secure part of East Africa, at least on paper; in reality, of course, it had yet to conquer the area. But ethnologists were elated; now they could do even better research on what they saw as 'the nature man', the human being who was at the origin of all development and who could still be found in Africa. Influenced by the ideas of Adolf Bastian, who wanted to write a cultural history of mankind, the then director of the ethnological museum in Berlin instructed everyone who was 'at work' somewhere in Africa - soldiers, colonial administrators, missionaries, 'explorers' - to collect as many objects of these 'nature men' as possible and deliver them to him, in Berlin. Because, was the idea at the time, by studying the objects that people in Africa used in everyday life, German ethnologists could get an idea of the essence of the 'nature people' and their way of life.
And the collectors had to hurry up, it was thought in those days, because with the contact with the 'civilised world' that would result from the colonisation of the continent, these 'nature-human societies' could disappear very quickly. Historian and provenance researcher Kristin Weber-Sinn: "In 1880, the museum had 3,361 objects listed in the African department catalogue, by 1914 the number stood at 55,079. Of many artefacts, we don't even know what they are, who they belonged to and under what specific circumstances they were obtained."

Austrian Oscar Baumann was such an ethnologist. For years he wandered around East Africa, gathering information about the people who lived there and mapping the area. On the island of Ukerewe, he met King Lukonge and saw the statue of which he made a drawing and about which he noted in "Durch Massailand zur Nilquelle" (1894): "In any case, a metre-high figure of ebony, which I found in Ukerewe and which I interpreted as the effigy of the deceased chief, is also related to the ancestor cult. The favourite wife of the deceased always stayed with it. Given the rarity of depictions of the human body in East Africa, this figure is particularly interesting."

In 1895, a year after Baumann's book was published, there was a major conflict on the island between islanders and Ugandan Christians in particular that would have serious consequences for the incumbent king. According to some, the Christians, who had been sent ahead from the mainland by the White Fathers, were said to have taken advantage of islanders' fear of the Germans and imposed precepts on them that caused much irritation, such as not being allowed to work on Sundays, or having only one wife. According to others, the Christians allegedly opposed the slave trade with which some of the king's soldiers were involved. Still others claim that Mkaka, a cousin and rival of the king had incited the population against the Christians, hoping that King Lukonge would be blamed and possibly lose his position.

Whatever the cause of the conflict, for the Germans, writes the Dutch White Father A. Smoor, in *Annalen der Afrikaansche missiën*, it was reason to “bring the coercive Lukonge to reason with force of arms. Lieutenant Kalb led the expedition. Lukonge was driven out, his residence set on fire, and his goods, consisting of a large mass of cows and women, confiscated. A good portion of the cows ended up in our hands."
The Germans appointed Kaseza's great-grandfather King Mkaka as the island’s new king. (King Mkaka was the late King Ibanda’s son and King Lukonge's cousin and rival who had been ruling on a remote part of Ukerewe). And apart from Lukonge's cows, they also gave the missionaries *Kigiilya*, the statue of Lukonge's father, the statue that would have given him extra strength.

Why? Could the missionaries have asked for it? Missionary Smoor ends his account of the conflict with the Germans with: "We had taken advantage of that opportunity to get a foothold on the island. Once again, the fear of the Germans was the beginning of the fear of the Lord."
The missionaries erected the statue in their church, perhaps to allow their Christians to vent their anger on it. After all, in the conflict with the islanders, many converts had lost their lives. It could also be that the Fathers had their followers abuse the statue to show that it was in fact 'powerless', that there could be no spirit in it, that they could torture it at will because it would do

nothing in return anyway. To show that their new, Christian faith was stronger, superior to that of the exiled king.

How badly the statue had been abused became clear a day after our visit to the exhibition at the Humboldt Forum, when we were allowed to visit the dungeons of the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin to view some of the items from Ukerewe that the museum holds. With the invitation to Berlin, Kaseza had received a list of some 106 artefacts in total: spears were on it, beautifully decorated shields and gourds, hardwood stools, musical instruments, walking sticks, drinking cups, cooking utensils, a harpoon, fishing gear and anything else that must have belonged to the household of an average islander in the late nineteenth century. Kaseza was allowed to pick forty things to examine more closely. To his great relief, *Kigiilya* was also among them, as Menschliche Skulptur aus holz.

But before we were allowed to enter the premises where the museum stores its treasures from Africa that morning, in a small room on the fifth floor of a large desolate-looking building, we first had to sign a declaration that we were aware of the health risks of visiting the depot. On the objects and in dust particles in the air could be residues of highly toxic pesticides and insecticides that had been used in the past to keep the storage rooms free of pests. Curator Schimanowski: "With all the measures we now have to take, it sometimes feels like the things in the depot with all that poison are increasingly hostile to us. As if they are taking revenge on us."

Dressed in white dust coats, blue gloves and wearing a big white air mask, Schimanowski and Weber-Sinn took us down by lift. We walked through a large steel door, entered a dark corridor, had to go through another steel door, and suddenly, right on entering, we see it. There he is: the wooden statue, *Kigiilya*, lying on a big white cushion on a kind of stretcher with a white sheet over it, as if he were laid out.
For minutes we say nothing at all, then everyone starts talking interchangeably. Like a pathologist anatomist, Maike Schimanowski describes the injuries: broken feet, broken penis, broken nose, large crack in the skull - and discovers one she has not seen before: below the right ribs. The wood is dry there,

splintery, not oiled like the rest of the body. Kaseza takes photos for his family. Kristin Weber-Sinn says that eventually German “collector” and officer Paul Kollmann delivered the statue at the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin. In 1897. He must have read about it in Baumann's book. Or heard about it during his visits to the island. A lot of the items displayed on the tables in front of the showcases were brought in by him.
Kristin Weber-Sinn: "How he obtained them, we don't know. Whether he got them, bought them, stole them or looted them by force, such information is in most cases missing from our archives or is described only from the perspective of colonizing Germans. Who the objects originally belonged to, what they were for, who made them, it is rarely known. And this is true of many artefacts in our archives. They are omissions, which is why our exhibition is called ‘Exhibiting. Omissions. Objects from Tanzania and the Colonial Archives’. Everything we don't know, or that has disappeared, we have coloured pinkish red in the exhibition, and you have seen it: a lot of it is in that colour."

For years, the National Museum of Tanzania, together with the Ethnologisches Museum, have been researching Tanzania's history, at the request of Tanzanians primarily on the history of kings and powerful traders and on the resistance Tanzanians had offered against the Germans. The depositories in Berlin turned out to house vast quantities of war booty that had been 'forgotten', or thought lost: spears, arrows, bows, bags full of attributes of executed healers, but also endless numbers of rifles, of no interest to the museum at the time, because firearms did not fit the image people had and wanted to portray of the African as a man of nature. Due to the pandemic and institutional entanglements, the plans by Tanzania and Germany to jointly organise an exhibition on their findings were on hold for a while.

Perhaps also inspired by the fraught nature of the location of the Humboldt Forum - at the time the castle of coloniser Kaizer Wilhelm II stood there - the curators in Berlin seized the opportunity to put together a highly critical interim exhibition on the insights they had gained during the research in the depositories, especially into the way the Germans had acted as colonisers. Meanwhile, the National Museum of Tanzania in Tanzania is trying to get in touch with the relatives of former owners of objects from the German

depositories that they would like to include in the large, joint exhibition. Maike Schimanowski and Kristin Weber-Sinn will start helping them in September. The King of Ukerewe was also on their list.

Why the curators are so keen to exhibit *Kigiilya*? Schimanowski: "So much is known about him, so many stories can be told on the basis of this statue. But *Kigiilya* is also very present. Usually he stands in the display case next to the entrance. Every time I have to be in the depot, I turn to him first, kneel before him and greet him. He seeks acknowledgement, he wants to be seen." The statue is proof, say Schimanovski and Weber-Sinn, of previous generations' lack of respect for a culture foreign to them. It represents the maniacal collecting frenzy of the Germans and the brutality of the colonial system.
"*Kigiilya* wants peace," says Kaseza. "He just wants to go home."
That afternoon over lunch, Paola Ivanov, Curator for the collections from East, Northeast, Central and South Africa at the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, tells us that *Kigiilya* is on the list of objects to be returned. On behalf of the German government the Board of Trustees of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation has given permission, the Tanzanian government just needs to make an official request. That afternoon, she also offers King Kaseza a residency, entirely at the museum's expense. He is invited to come to Berlin with a group of people to be selected by him to research all the objects from Ukerewe that they have in their depositories. Next year, a group of Maasai will also come.
"How would it be," says Kaseza that evening, "if, as a sign of reconciliation, the Germans would come to the island and help me rebuild the old palace, Bukindo Nkokoro, the palace of King Lukonge and his ancestors and set it up as a museum. So that *Kigiilya* can come home safely. And the island and our families of former rival kings can finally find true peace."

The exhibition *Exhibiting. Omissions. Objects from Tanzania and the Colonial Archives* at the Humboldt Forum in Berlin lasts until 24 June 2024.