











A Stone of Contention. Or: How Can We Un-Learn Colonialism?

The So-Called Herero Stone in the Cemetery on Columbiadamm, the BURIED MEMORIES Exhibition, and Germany's Colonial Heritage

The Historical-Factual and Remembrance-Cultural Framework

The collective memory of the Federal Republic of Germany is profoundly shaped by its confrontation with the Nazi era. Drawing on the material remnants and archival evidence of Nazi terror, an institutionalised culture of remembrance and commemoration has developed in Germany over recent decades and is now widely recognised across society.¹

By contrast, the reappraisal of colonialism in German history remains a largely blank – or rather, white – page. At first glance, this neglect stems from the apparent scarcity of material traces of colonialism in everyday German life and historical consciousness. Moreover, the colonial period lies two to three generations further back than the Nazi era, and the exploitation of the German colonies occurred primarily on site in Africa, Asia, and the Pacific.

Nonetheless, it is undisputable that the colonial era of the German Empire left deep and violent scars, as well as transgenerational trauma, within the worlds of the colonised. Between 1885 and 1918, after all, the German Empire ranked as the third-largest European colonial power by territorial extent.²

Recent debates surrounding the Humboldt Forum in the reconstructed Berlin City Palace and the handling of colonial looted art have brought Germany's colonial legacy more firmly into public and cultural policy discourse. Yet a genuinely open acknowledgement of moral responsibility has not yet taken root within the nation's cultural memory.

A Stone of Contention: The So-Called Herero Stone's Colonial Perspective

In 1907, a memorial stone was erected in Berlin-Kreuzberg on the barracks grounds of the Kaiser Franz Garde-Grenadier-Regiment No. 2 (at what is now Urbanstraße 21). Over the past 120 years, this monument has become a *stone of contention*, in German "Stein des Anstoßes". As the German word "Anstoß" can mean both "offence" and "impetus", the stone invites interpretation in two senses:

- anstößig: It is offensive because the historical inscription reflects a profoundly colonial perspective, honouring only seven soldiers of the so-called German Schutztruppe ("protection force") who were killed during the first genocide of the 20th century as "heroes" – while the more than 80,000 victims from the Ovaherero, Nama, Damara, and San peoples receive no recognition whatsoever;
- anstoßend: It can also serve as an *impetus* to re-examine the historical facts on the basis of available sources, as the stone is both a colonial artefact and a monumental distortion of history.

¹ Only the final assessment of the federal government's memorial concept will show whether the DNA of the cultural memory of the Federal Republic of Germany consists of a triad, that is, in addition to coming to terms with the Nazi era and dealing with contemporary German-German history, whether it also includes addressing responsibility for its colonial legacy. See https://www.bundestag.de/resource/blob/1110098/WD-1-018-25-WD3-053-25.pdf [accessed on 29 October 2025].

² Just one example: despite years of negotiations, the so-called Joint Declaration between Germany and Namibia has not yet been ratified, which is not only due to the hesitancy of German foreign policy, but also to the complex social conditions in Namibia.

The original dedication on the stone reads as follows:

"Of the 41 members of the regiment who volunteered to take part in the campaign in South West Africa between January 1904 and March 1907, the following died a heroic death

Lieutenant Richard von Rosenberg

Bodo von Ditfurth

Grenadier Johann Hovel 1 Comp.
Fusilier Johann Orphel 10 "
Franz Dallmann 12 "
Johann Fausser 12 "
Karl Kliebisch 12 "

With this stone, the officer corps honours the memory of the fallen heroes."



This is the earliest known image of the stone at its original location on Urbanstraße, published in 1914.3

The Colonial Relic Becomes a Public Monument

After the demolition of the barracks in the mid-1970s – only the stately officers' mess remains today, now serving as a community centre – the memorial stone was moved in 1973 to the site of the former garrison cemetery on Columbiadamm, at the instigation of military heritage

³ Published in: Geschichte des königlich-preußischen Kaiser Franz Garde-Grenadier-Regiments Nr. 2. Im Auftrage des Regiments verfaßt von F. von Rieben, Hauptmann und Kompaniechef. Verlag Paul Paren, Berlin 1914.

associations.⁴ Representatives of Neukölln's civic society attended the ceremonial inauguration following its relocation. In addition, the so-called Africa Stone was placed in front of the Herero Stone.

The dedication on this considerably smaller stone slab reads:

"In eternal memory of the German soldiers who fell in Africa."



The so-called Herero Stone with the Africa Stone (after 1974/75). Photo $\ \odot$ Joachim Zeller

In connection with the relocation of the so-called Herero Stone, additional inscriptions were added to the colonial memorial:

- On its upper left side, the boulder now bears the emblem of the German Africa Corps Association (Verband Deutsches Afrika-Korps e. V.), depicting a palm tree within a red coat of arms, accompanied by the Iron Cross and the inscription 'AFRIKA 1941–1943'.
- On the right-hand side appears the emblem of the Traditional Association of Former *Schutztruppen* and Overseas Troops, showing a stylised *Schutztruppe* hat in the colours of the German imperial flag.

Through its relocation to the publicly accessible cemetery grounds – and the aforementioned additions, made seventy years after its original placement on the barracks site – this relic of the colonial era was transformed into a public monument within a shared urban space.

The appropriation of the stone by traditional associations for commemorative purposes also extended its interpretative scope to include the periods of the First and Second World Wars, thereby reinforcing the colonial perspective of the ensemble – a perspective which, in its message, continues to lack historical honesty to this day.

The relocation was initiated by traditional associations such as the Afrika-Kameradschaft Berlin (AKB), the Verband Deutsches Afrika-Korps e.V. (https://verband-dak.de/) [accessed on 29 October 2025] and the Traditionsverband ehemaliger Schutz- und Überseetruppen – Freunde der früheren deutschen Schutzgebiete e. V. (https://www.traditionsverband.de/) [accessed on 29 October 2025]. See Johannes Wendt: Der Afrikastein: Verstaubtes Gedenken an deutsche Kolonialzeiten in Namibia. Entwicklungspolitik Online (epo), 28 June 2008. (https://epo.de/3986-der-afrikastein-verstaubtes-gedenken-an-deutsche-kolonialzeiten-in-namibia/) [accessed on 29 October 2025].

Confronting Cultures of Remembrance



2002, photo © Arndt Beck

In the years that followed, a form of remembrance emerged that rested entirely on a romanticised colonial perspective. This was expressed through the laying of commemorative wreaths at the stone by traditional associations on the occasion of the annual National Day of Mourning.

It was not until the 1990s that the first protests from civil society arose, demanding that the historical facts be confronted.



The earliest photo evidence of a paint attack to date is available for the year 2003. Photo @ Arndt Beck

The First Attempt at Contextualisation

In the run-up to the centenary of the Battle of Waterberg in what was then German South West Africa – which marked the beginning of the first genocide of the 20th century – the Berlin Development Policy Council (*Berliner Entwicklungspolitischer Ratschlag*, BER) sought to draw attention to the historical context through a campaign at the cemetery.

The photograph from 2004 shows activist Israel Kaunatjike at the so-called Herero Stone. The temporary sign beside him commemorates the victims of the genocide, while another plaque to the left refers to the Otjiwarongo Solidarity Project.

^{5 &}lt;u>https://genocide-namibia.net/</u> [accessed on 29 October 2025].

⁶ In the foreground, you can see the so-called Africa Stone, which had obviously not yet been stolen at that time.

At that time, Hans Christian Ströbele, Member of Parliament for the Green Party (*Bündnis 90/Die Grünen*), was strongly committed to fostering a German-Namibian reconciliation process. ⁷



2004, photo © Joachim Zeller

During this period, serious efforts were also made within the Neukölln District Assembly to counter the colonial stone and its troubling message with a contemporary commentary – one that would publicly acknowledge the historical truth. The process of reaching agreement on the wording took almost two years.⁸ In the end, the production of a metal plaque was commissioned, but the stele was never publicly erected.

The inscription on the plaque read as follows:

One hundred years after the bloody suppression of anti-colonial uprisings by German colonial troops in what was then the colony of German South West Africa, we commemorate the countless, presumably more than 60,000 victims.

District Council and District Office of Neukölln Berlin 2006.



The plaque was eventually stored in a tool shed belonging to the Neukölln Parks Department. It was publicly displayed for the first time in 2023 as part of the BURIED MEMORIES exhibition at the Museum Neukölln, presented in conjunction with a room installation by Isabel Tueumuna Katjavivi.

2023, photo © Friedhelm Hoffmann

http://www.stroebele-online.de/print/presse/pressemitteilungen/35818 [accessed on 29 October 2025].

⁸ For this reason, the date 2006 is noted on the plate instead of 2004.

The 2009 Namibia Memorial Plaque as the Second Attempt at Contextualisation

It was only through subsequent efforts – coordinated between Neukölln's District Office, the Berlin Senate Administration, the Federal Foreign Office, and the then Ambassador of the Republic of Namibia to Germany – that, on 2 October 2009, 105 years after Lieutenant General Lothar von Trotha's infamous extermination order, the so-called Namibia Memorial Plaque was inaugurated at the Columbiadamm cemetery as a permanent commentary on the colonial relic.⁹

At the instigation of the Federal Foreign Office, the term *genocide* was omitted from the wording of the dedication text – a decision that has continued to provoke protests from committed civil society actors.

The text on the memorial plaque reads:

In MEMORY OF THE VICTIMS OF GERMAN COLONIAL RULE IN NAMIBIA 1885–1915, IN PARTICULAR THE COLONIAL WAR OF 1904–1907.

The District Assembly and District Office of Neukölln, Berlin. 'Only those who know the past have a future' (Wilhelm von Humboldt).¹⁰





2009, on the occasion of the unveiling of the commemorative plaque. Photos © Joachim Zeller

Leading figures from the city's society, the Ambassador of the Republic of Namibia, H.E. Neville Gertze, and a representative of the Federal Foreign Office attended the ceremonial unveiling of the commemorative plaque. Representatives of civil society were also invited but were not granted the right to speak.

Notably, the dedication text on the Namibia Memorial Plaque credits only the Neukölln District Office and the Neukölln District Assembly as its authors. Neither the Foreign Office, the Senate Chancellery, nor the Namibian Ambassador are named as co-signatories. This effectively reduces the historically documented genocide of the African population by German soldiers to a local Neukölln-Namibian matter.

The irony of history lies in the fact that with the inauguration of the Namibia Memorial Plaque – intended as a commentary on the colonial stone – the stone itself became, in effect, a publicly recognised monument.¹¹

⁹ No later than the installation of the Namibia Memorial Plaque, the Africa Stone from the 1970s was removed. How and by whom this was carried out, as well as the stone's current whereabouts, remain unknown to this day.

¹⁰ In addition, see: https://www.gedenkstaettenforum.de/aktivitaeten/gedenkstaettenrundbrief/detail/gedenken-an-den-voelkermord-an-den-herero-und-nama#:~:text=Am%202.%20Oktober%202009%2C%20105%20Jahre%20nach,f%C3%BCr%20die%20Opfer%20der%20deutschen%20Kolonialherrschaft%20eingeweiht. See also https://www.freiburg-postkolonial.de/Seiten/2009-Zeller-Namibiagedenkstein-Berlin.htm and https://www.freiburg-postkolonial.de/Seiten/Rez-Waterberg-Berlin.htm [accessed on 29 October 2025].

¹¹ However, neither the colonial stone nor the Namibia Memorial Plaque are officially listed on Berlin's monument register.

Although the plaque represents the first permanent commentary on this colonial relic, its wording is widely regarded as inadequate. It has not pacified the culture of remembrance: committed human rights activists continue to carry out colour attacks on the stone, while traditional associations persist in laying wreaths with colonial messages on the National Day of Mourning.

The Colonial Relic Becomes a Monument





2011, photos © Joachim Zeller

The photograph from 2011 is particularly telling – not only because the tour group comprises representatives of affected communities from Namibia, but also due to the staging of the image:

- The colonial stone is completely obscured by the group;
- Only the Namibia Memorial Plaque remains visible in the photo;
- A ribbon draped across the plaque symbolically overrides, at least temporarily, the wording deemed inadequate. The ribbon bears the inscription: TO THE HERERO AND NAMA – VICTIMS OF THE GERMAN GENOCIDE IN NAMIBIA, 1904–1908;
- At the moment the photograph was taken, from the victims' perspective, the state of acknowledgement of guilt had been established.

The memorial ensemble at the Columbiadamm cemetery continues to be regularly visited by Namibian tour groups, as it was on 7 July 2015. During such visits, the site is consistently understood as a memorial – a place of commemoration and a reminder of the still unresolved relationship between the Federal Republic of Germany and the Republic of Namibia in terms of remembrance culture.



2015, photo © Joachim Zeller



3 July 2020, photo © Ute Hempelmann

The photograph from 2020 clearly demonstrates that the colonial relic in the cemetery is sometimes used as a canvas for contemporary historical discourse.

The violent death of George Floyd in 2020 brought significant global attention to the Black Lives Matter movement, founded in 2013. 12 Within days of a paint attack at the Columbiadamm cemetery, occurring after 25 June and before 6 July, the stone was inscribed with the words: 'BLACK LIVES MATTER'.



21 March 2021, photos © Grüne Jugend Neukölln

Another notable event was the veiling of the colonial relic, initiated by the 'Green Youth' on 21 March 2021. 13

07.06.2021, photo © Markus Müller-Schinwald¹⁴

In June 2021, the stone was reportedly subjected to another paint attack. The historical context is significant: the persecution of the Herero people by German Empire troops commenced on 7 June 1904.







¹² See https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/31/us/george-floyd-investigation.html and on the Black-Lives-Matter movement, see: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Lives_Matter [accessed on 05 September 2025].

¹³ The campaign 'Remember the victims, not the perpetrators!' took place on the occasion of the International Day Against Racism. See https://susanna-kahlefeld.de/neukoelln/einzelansicht-neukoelln/article/der-opfer-statt-der-taeter-gedenken-unsere-verhuellungsaktion-des-sogenannten-afriksteins [accessed on 06 November 2025].

¹⁴ https://x.com/muellerschin/status/1405542909168939011 [accessed on 06 November 2025].

Remembrance-Cultural Approaches Exhibition at Museum Neukölln – School Exchange (Windhoek/Neukölln) – Performance Art

The Symbolic Transformation of the So-Called Herero Stone to the *Schutztruppen* Stone

In 2022, Namibian artist Tuli Mekondjo was awarded a scholarship by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). ¹⁵ During her stay in Germany, she performed at the memorial ensemble in the Columbiadamm cemetery, an event documented on video. The artist simultaneously published the following text on her Instagram channel:

"The so-called *Hererostein* sits in the garrison cemetery on Columbiadamm in Berlin Neukölln / First laid in 1907, it commemorates seven German soldiers who volunteered for the campaign in South West Africa between 1904 and 1907 and – as the stones states – "died a hero's death". /The truth is, however, that German colonial troops in South West Africa under the command of Lothar von Trotha carried out a campaign of ethnic extermination against the Herero and Namaqua peoples in those years in what is now considered to be the first genocide of the 20th century. /The fact that a monument remains in place today naming the perpetrators of this as heroes has brought much criticism. / A performance at the cemetery, Berlin 2022." ¹⁶



Video Still, © Tuli Mekondjo 2022

In a letter dated 1 October 2025, Tuli Mekondjo articulates the intention behind her performance: "In my video/performance, I intervened at this colonial monument, symbolically tying it up to anticipate its physical removal. Accompanied by ancestral voices from Namibia, channelled through a speaker in the cemetery, I reclaimed our power and dignity, demanding recognition. This performance, conducted during my DAAD Artists in Residence program in Berlin (2022–2023), reaffirmed that these battles extend into the spiritual realm. It served as a channel for my ancestors, reminding us that they did not perish in vain and deserve to be honored."

In her own unique and characteristic way, the artist powerfully demonstrates, simply by shackling the stone, that its message remains confined to the colonial perspective, and that, as a result, the true victims have

¹⁵ https://www.berliner-kuenstlerprogramm.de/de/events/common-ground-tuli-mekondjo-susana-de-sousa-dias/ [accessed on 26 September 2025].

^{16 &}lt;a href="https://www.instagram.com/p/CzD3K3usFyz/">https://www.instagram.com/p/CzD3K3usFyz/ [accessed on 26 September 2025].

been suppressed from collective memory. She therefore designates the monument – according to its factual historical reference – as the *Schutztruppen* Stone.

School Exchange Between Windhoek and Neukölln

The Albert Einstein Secondary School (AEO) in Neukölln has maintained a school exchange programme with Hage G. Geingob High School in Windhoek for over ten years. The close partnership between the AEO and the Museum Neukölln provided an opportunity to organise an intensive, week-long workshop on colonial remembrance culture with the binational group of students in the summer of 2022 as preparation for the BURIED MEMORIES exhibition at Museum Neukölln.¹⁷ Historian Dr Joachim Zeller was invited to lead the workshop section on colonial history. As a practical outcome, the German and Namibian pupils created their own clay figures, which were temporarily displayed in front of the so-called Herero Stone as a contemporary and at the same time transient commentary.



The group of pupils from Albert Einstein Secondary School in Neukölln and Hage G. Geingob High School in Windhoek in front of the Museum Neukölln.

Photo © FB MSE



Pupils during the practical part of the workshop, making their own small sculptures. ${\sf Photo} \ {\small \bigcirc} \ {\sf FB} \ {\sf MSE}$

¹⁷ https://schloss-gutshof-britz.de/museum-neukoelln/geschichtsspeicher/ausstellungsthemen/buried-memories [accessed on 06 November 2025].



As part of a final presentation, all participants were asked to explain the meaning of their sculpture to the group. This was followed by a two-day drying period, during which preparations were made for the procession to lay the sculptures at the Columbiadamm cemetery.

Video Still © FB MSE



The group of students set off from Museum Neukölln to the location of the so-called Herero Stone in the Columbiadamm cemetery. In order to create a sensory bridge between Neukölln and Windhoek for this performative journey, a Namibian musician was commissioned to set the pace for this cultural walk through the city with the help of percussion instruments via a live broadcast.

Video Still © FB MSE



The workshop concluded with a ceremony in which the small sculptures were placed in front of the colonial relic. As they were made of unfired clay, they gradually decayed under the influence of the weather.¹⁸

Video Still © FB MSE

¹⁸ The entire workshop was documented with the help of a video clip. See video documentation of the workshop on postcolonial remembrance culture – in preparation for the exhibition BURIED MEMORIES: https://schloss-gutshof-britz.de/museum-neukoelln/blog/workshop-buried-memories [accessed on 25 September 2025].

A highly elaborate intervention at the memorial ensemble in the Columbiadamm cemetery took place in April 2023: Activists not only affixed a stencilled inscription reading 'NO RACIST MEMORIALS FOR NAZIS AND GENOCIDAL MANIACS' to the so-called Herero Stone, but also repurposed the text on the Namibia Memorial Plaque by covering it with stickers.¹⁹







April 2023, photos © FB MSE

The BURIED MEMORIES Exhibition: One Response to a Political Motion Using the Means of the Museum

With the establishment of the Museum | City History | Remembrance Culture Department (MSE) at the turn of 2021/22, the Museum Neukölln explicitly expanded its area of responsibility to include the district's urban space.

In response to a motion passed by the Neukölln District Assembly on 18 January 2022, the MSE department was tasked with developing a concept for addressing the memorial ensemble at the Columbiadamm cemetery. The department proposed to approach this challenge through *the means of the museum* – namely, by creating an exhibition concept developed jointly by a Namibian-German curatorial duo with Namibian artist Isabel Tueumuna Katjavivi.

The exhibition was titled:

"BURIED MEMORIES. On Dealing with Memory. The Genocide of the Ovaherero and Nama."

The title itself conveys the project's overarching objectives:

- BURIED MEMORIES pays tribute to Isabel T. Katjavivi's 2018 installation 'They Tried to Bury Us', which formed the exhibition's centrepiece.
- ON DEALING WITH MEMORY serves as a programmatic subtitle, highlighting the ongoing, processual nature of remembering and the repression of responsibility for colonial legacies.
- THE GENOCIDE OF THE OVAHERERO AND NAMA is a definitive sentence that no longer questions the historical reality of the genocide.

¹⁹ These photos show a reddish clay residue on the pavement, which remained of the performance with the students. At the time, this visualisation of transience was a conceptual part of the performance, intended to make it clear that every form of dealing with memory should be seen as a process in flux.

Statement by Isabel Tueumuna Katjavivi, Artist and Co-Curator of the Exhibition

My art installation 'They Tried to Bury Us' is an introspective journey through the traumatic experience of the genocide of the Ovaherero and Nama between 1904 and 1908. This is an often overlooked chapter in German colonial history.

With my installation, I want to give a face, literally, to the historical trauma of this genocide, which has burdened the survivors and their descendants for generations, in order to break open the deep feeling of psychological confinement. The masks hidden in the sand symbolise the 70,000 people who were killed – and at the same time they represent the buried and repressed memories of these cruel events. Within the framework of the exhibition, we are creating a double framing: on the one hand, it is about confrontation and, on the other, about embedding.

The confrontation consists of juxtaposing my decolonised perspective, the depiction of the unseen suffering of the Ovaherero and Nama, on the one hand, with the colonial perspective of the so-called Herero Stone, whose inscription commemorates only seven German soldiers who were killed.

By framing my installation with the help of a timeline of facts and contemporary quotations, we enable museum visitors to independently explore and contextualise the historical events and the ongoing process of collective repression and negation.

Ideally, this double embedding will create a need for dialogue – and this is precisely where the work of the Museum Academy comes in. For our shared vision is to facilitate a moderated dialogue within urban society. We are interested in dialogue with one another – at the threshold between history, art and society. We are interested in developing a common understanding of historical truth – a common language with a new vocabulary and a new grammar – to describe grief, pain and trauma. On this basis – this is our hope – a dialogue of mutual healing can emerge.

(September 2023, Windhoek/Namibia)



Panel discussion with Israel Kaunatjike as part of the BURIED MEMORIES exhibition opening. 04.11.2023, photo © Jens Ferchland

The exhibition's scenography effectively juxtaposed the colonial perspective embodied by the so-called Herero Stone with the decolonial viewpoint of Namibian artist Isabel Tueumuna Katjavivi.

Three key elements defined the spatial experience:

- Photographs of the Herero Stone were projected onto the thermal protection curtain at the exhibition entrance, symbolising the divided culture of remembrance split between colonial romantic reverence and activist interventions such as colour attacks.
- Isabel T. Katjavivi's installation dominated the main exhibition space: 14 tonnes of sand containing 100 fragile, unfired clay faces created by the artist. These faces metaphorically represented the approximately 80,000 victims of the Ovaherero, Nama, Damara, and San peoples, granting them a symbolic presence for the first time.
- Deliberately restrained in design, the exhibition was framed by a timeline comprising 64 panels, which traced the milestones of remembrance and repression related to the first genocide of the 20th century.





Entrance to the exhibition with projection onto thermal curtain | Israel Kaunatjike placing the final face mask in the sand 04.11.2023, photos © Jens Ferchland



View of the exhibition space. On the left side, the 2004/06 metal plaque can be seen.

Photo © Friedhelm Hoffmann

46 WORDS TO TOGETHERNESS

To mark the opening of the exhibition at Museum Neukölln, we collaborated with Isabel Tueumuna Katjavivi and musician Oli Bott to create '46 Words to Togetherness', a sound and spoken word performance presented as a stage-filling video projection during the vernissage.²⁰

In 46 words – spoken alternately in English and German by the curatorial duo – the historical process of dealing with memory was traced from the genocide era to the decision to co-curate BURIED MEMORIES. Vibraphonist Oli Bott's improvisation musically embodied this process of reconciliation.

As often observed, artistic methods can open up spaces for dialogue and action that purely political approaches struggle to achieve.



Video still of the stage installation at the exhibition opening. $\mbox{Photo} \ \boxdot \ \mbox{Jens Ferchland}$

²⁰ Video '46 Words to Togetherness': https://youtu.be/cSSrg3eC8Pk?si=ms3QmZE13rmtVrj0 [accessed on 30 September 2025].

MUSEUM in DIALOGUE The Moderated Dialogue with the Urban Community

Throughout the exhibition's nine-month run, Museum Neukölln and Neukölln's adult education centre (VHS) employed the MUSEUM in DIALOGUE format to facilitate a moderated dialogue. This initiative engaged not only the local urban community but also, from the outset, intentionally sought to include representatives of the affected communities from Namibia in conversation.

Call for Moderators

For the design and implementation of the workshops and seminars within MUSEUM in DIALOGUE, Museum Neukölln collaborated with committed civil society partners to provide professionally curated modules. The call for moderators was issued jointly with the Initiative of Black People in Germany (ISD) and Afrotak TV cyberNomads.²¹

To support the ambitious accompanying programme, a Mongolian yurt was purchased with the aid of Freunde und Förderer Schloss Britz e. V. The Yurt, situated permanently in the museum garden, offered an independent and organic space – proximate to the exhibition and conducive to fostering a natural climate for dialogue.



The round thinking space:
A Mongolian yurt was used to create a sheltered space for moderated dialogue.

Photo © Friedhelm Hoffmann

²¹ Call for Moderators: https://schloss-gutshof-britz.de/museum-neukoelln/blog/call-for-moderators [accessed on 30 September 2025].

Voices from Namibia

As the *Technical Committee* from Namibia was negotiating the Joint Declaration on the colonial-era genocide with the German Foreign Office at the same time as the exhibition was running, seven representatives of the affected communities were invited to participate in interviews at Museum Neukölln.²²



Charles Eiseb²³

(From min. 02:40) "There are so many ways to have a path of remembrance; research has to be done, telling what had happened between Germany and Namibia. Some of us have German blood as a result of the colonial past. This needs to be researched. [...] Museums can play a critical role [...] to exchange objects and to portray the past."

Video Still © FB MSE



Festus Tjikuua²⁴

(From min. 02:13) "If we have a common understanding of genocide [...] once we have reached an agreement, we can come up with a common history that all of us are going to agree on. And that requires a culture between our two people to do research, to come up with a correct history – and accept that both people are involved in that history - and also be able to teach our future generation the correct history."



Dr Seth Nowaseb²⁵

(From min. 2:40) "The blood that is on the stone represents the blood of four communities. [...] We are going forward. We teach our people in Namibia and the people in Germany that we got a shared history, even if some aspects of this history are horrific... We are both victims of what had happened. As a result, we should work together; do not highlight the crime only – but the way we can work together as two people which are united by history. To move forward in harmony and shared history. [...] The stone is there. We cannot re-write the history. But if we could explain the context of the stone – how it came, what it represents and how we can use it as a memory. [...] It is a stone that helps us to remember what has happened – and helps us to look forward as two nations that are joined together..."

²² https://gpil.jura.uni-bonn.de/2023/04/reconciliation-without-reparation-the-german-namibian-joint-declaration-on-our-colonial-past/[accessed on 30 September 2025].

²³ Link to the video: https://youtu.be/Hb5hz6pCLPk [accessed on 30 September 2025].

²⁴ Link to the video: https://youtu.be/-9yOaz372xw [accessed on 30 September 2025].

²⁵ Link to the video: https://youtu.be/RaL9WnvRNAg [accessed on 30 September 2025].



Freddy Nguvauva²⁶

(From min. 2:41) "It is a stone of historical significance. It should be preserved. [...] Similar pieces of remembrance should be considered in the future – put up in Germany and Namibia."

Video Still © FB MSE



Sir Abner Xoagub²⁷

(From min. 2:30) "We need to tell the whole stories [...] This stone should reconcile us. It must heal. In the end this stone should unite us. The stone must bring us to the point, that we have to tell the true story and the full story, and the whole story."

Video Still © FB MSE



John Kasaona²⁸

(From min. 0:58) "I hope to see a culture of the two nations going forward that is more embraced, closer together – that becomes an extended society where Germans and Namibians move easily between the two countries [...] embracing the future together."

Video Still © FB MSE



Timoteus Tiboth²⁹

(From min: 3:23) "Similar something could be erected at different historical sites. [...] And we can exchange further different views."

Video Still @ FB MSE

The representatives' statements consistently emphasise the promotion of a shared culture of remembrance regarding colonial heritage – framed as a collective legacy and thus a responsibility for future generations.

²⁶ Link to the video: https://youtu.be/MsNjIEZCsnE [accessed on 30 September 2025].

²⁷ Link to the video: https://youtu.be/7EACGzqDDSE [accessed on 30 September 2025].

²⁸ Link to the video: https://youtu.be/Pf6dlQvkKU0 [accessed on 30 September 2025].

²⁹ Link to the video: https://youtu.be/dES6-Dj5_Gg [accessed on 30 September 2025].

Statements by Experts



Naita Hishoono³⁰

is a Namibian democracy activist and political sociologist. She was born in exile in Angola. Hishoono spent her early youth in the German Democratic Republic as part of the Namibian liberation struggle. In 1989, she was deported to Windhoek. Naita Hishoono has been Director of the Namibia Institute for Democracy (NID) since 1 January 2015. Video Still © FB MSE



Jephta U. Nguherimo³¹

is a reparation activist, poet and former professional labour negotiator of Herero-descent based in Washington D.C. Photo © FB MSE



Prof. Dr Henning Melber³²

is the son of German immigrants to Namibia. He joined the SWAPO liberation movement in 1974. Since 2012, he has been an Extraordinary Professor in the Department of Political Sciences at the University of Pretoria. Since 2013, he has also been an Extraordinary Professor at the Centre for Africa Studies at the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein. He has lived in Sweden since 2000.

Video Still © FB MSE

³⁰ Link to the video: https://youtu.be/jsoYxnQPo9g?si=CXgkXCBj1SilKxQx [accessed on 30 September 2025].

 $^{31 \}quad \text{Link to the video: } \underline{\text{https://youtu.be/aV499Lxol9l?si=_anGUxyHrgSaF4ui}} [accessed on 30 \ September 2025].$

³² Link to the video: https://youtu.be/Bqh-AlbcSUA?si=Ye9siBT94lwewzkR [accessed on 30 September 2025].



Thomas Fues³³

studied economics in Bonn and Cambridge. From 1980 to 1982, he was a research assistant at the German Institute for Development and Sustainability. He then worked as a research assistant for the Green Party in the Bundestag. From 1997, he was a research assistant at the Institute for Development and Peace at the University of Duisburg. Video Still © FB MSE



Prof. Dr Job Amupanda³⁴ on colonial remembrance culture

Job Shipululo Amupanda's research focuses on the intersection between colonial and postcolonial projects, examining in particular how colonialism persists in postcolonial societies. He holds a PhD in Political Science (University of Namibia), a Master's degree in Political Science, a Bachelor's degree with honours in Political Science (University of Stellenbosch), a Bachelor's degree with honours in History, and a Bachelor's degree in Political Science and History. From 2013 to December 2024, he taught political science at the University of Namibia, where he rose to the rank of associate professor. From 2016 to 2021, Professor Amupanda was deputy dean of the Faculty of Economics and Management Sciences. Video Still © FB MSE

³³ Link to the video: https://youtu.be/LuHaqd40oD8?si=Kx3rCHBrk-GlbShV [accessed on 30 September 2025].

³⁴ Link to the video: https://youtu.be/8TATXhilJA0 [accessed on 30 September 2025].

The Panel Discussions

"Quo Vadis Herero Stone?" 35 1. Panel Discussion, 31 January 2024 at Museum Neukölln



Video Still © FB MSE

The first panel discussion focussed on aspects concerning the Columbiadamm cemetery memorial ensemble's significance to remembrance culture and monument preservation.

The guests on the panel were:

- Moderation: Dr Matthias Henkel
- Prof. Dr Gabriele Dolff-Bonekämper, Art historian and monument conservator (From 01:14:20) "You can only remember something you knew. [...] The complex of memory includes the complex of communication and learning. [...] This is linked to experience of place, personal physical experience, and emotions. As a result, it is learned in a completely different way than when reading a text in a book. [...] We must focus on a culture of communication rather than a culture of memory."
- Israel Kaunatjike, Herero and activist (From 01:15:43) "Remembering means I have to put myself in the story [...] Remembering has to do with coming to terms with the past. [...]" (From 01:23:40) "So, this is a historical place. You can't just ignore that and say, 'Everything has to go, or something like that!' I think that's what convinced me."
- **Jens Rieser**, Head of the Local Monument Protection Authority of the District of Neukölln (From 00:31:32) "The stone stands on land classified as a garden monument. [...] So, the stone is also part of this garden monument. [...] It is a striking monument [...] And I am really excited to see what will become of it."

³⁵ Link to the video: https://youtu.be/PcJkY4eXBLY?si=rAHy4AanMwrTEwh6 [accessed on 30 September 2025].

• **Dr Urte Evert**, Head of the Museum Zitadelle Spandau (From 00:33:28) "Why is there no monument representing colonialism in our exhibition *Berlin and its Monuments*? [...] In principle, it's a gap in the collection. So, when Christian Kopp called, I thought I could fill that gap. [...] I think it's great that the process is taking place here – and how it's taking place. [...] It's not really about the ugliness of this rock – it's about the invisibility of those who suffered as a result."

Closing remarks by District Councilwoman Karin Korte:

(From 01:22:40) "Tonight, I got a sense that [the stone and its history] is a bit bigger than Neukölln; I'm saying this very cautiously. Neukölln got the ball rolling. [...] But it's bigger than that; others need to get involved, the state and also the federal government, when it comes to the 'boulder'."

"Colonial Continuities: The Herero Stone and Its Historic Layers." 2. Panel Discussion, 4 July 2024 at Museum Neukölln



Photo © FB MSE

The current memorial ensemble at the Columbiadamm cemetery – comprising the so-called Herero Stone and the Namibia Memorial Plaque – has experienced several reinterpretations throughout history. The panel discussion examined the visible and invisible layers of history embedded within the memorial ensemble.

Alongside the moderator **Dr Matthias Henkel**, the guests on the panel were:

• **Dr Patrick Helber**, Historian

Is a historian and political scientist. He has been working as a curator for education and outreach at the Ethnological Museum and the Museum of Asian Art at the Humboldt Forum since 2021. He completed his traineeship at the Museum Neukölln.

• Dr Sabine Küntzel, Historian

Studied History and German Studies in Leipzig and Berlin and earned her doctorate at the Technical University of Dresden in the Department of Modern and Contemporary History, where she was also a research assistant in SFB 1285 'Invectivity: Constellations and Dynamics of Belittlement.' Her doctoral thesis was published in 2023 by transcript Verlag under the title 'Colonialism at War: The War Experience of German Wehrmacht Soldiers in the North African Campaign, 1941–1943.'

"Between Relocation and Transformation - the So-Called Herero Stone and the Future of Memory" 3. Panel Discussion, 16 July 2024 at Museum Neukölln



Video Still © FB MSE

Dealing with memory was not only one of the exhibition's subtitles but also the conceptual foundation of the entire project. On the one hand, it addressed the relationship between past and present, and on the other hand, it sought to build a bridge between Germany and Namibia based on historical facts and shared experiences – a bridge towards a forward-looking, collective memory. Our aim was to establish a sustainable culture of remembrance within the social and intercultural spheres, extending beyond the development of the materiality of existing memorials to also address the existing gaps in Berlin's urban landscape. These ideas underpinned the panel discussion.

The guests on the panel were:

Moderation: Dr Matthias Henkel

Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul (Former Federal Minister)

(From min. 00:04:33) "I was influenced by Fritz Bauer, the Attorney General who initiated the Auschwitz trials at the time. [...] Anyone who denies other people their humanity is on the path to the abyss of racism. That has shaped my life. [...] (From 00:06:44) When the federal government received an invitation to an event at Waterberg in 2004 [...] I said, 'I'm going!' [...] It is the event in German history for which no one has yet taken responsibility. [...] The acknowledgement of guilt was what moved me. [...] (From 00:09:20) But now it is finally time for a collective remembrance. [...] (From 00:37:31) With regard to land reform in Namibia: It is really important to me that the actual descendants of the victims are truly better off – especially the young people, the next generation. These are tasks for the future that we should support."

• Israel Kaunatjike, Herero and activist

(From min. 00:13:00) "When Namibia gained independence in 1990, I was preoccupied with the question: What actually happened before that? The genocide of the Ovaherero and Nama – and that's when I said: Now I have to get involved. [...] In 2004, we shot the first documentary, 'White Ghosts'. And Ms Wieczorek-Zeul was a great motivator in calling the crime by its name. [...]

³⁶ Link to the video: https://youtu.be/RxIDxpe4KVk?si=rdrAOz-h9vKl29nj [accessed on 30 September 2025].

³⁷ https://dropoutcinema.org/weisse-geister-der-kolonialkrieg-gegen-die-herero/ [accessed on 01 November 2025].

(From 00:44:26) Of course, the story must be made visible. For me, the question is: should this giant hulk remain there, or must it go? I am somewhat divided on this issue."

• **Hannimari Jokinen**, Artist, curator, author and activist

(From min. 00:38:30) "The decolonisation of public space is important. Where are the traces of colonialism in urban spaces? [...] Existing monuments are sometimes given new attributes. Public interest has really increased over the past 10 years. [...] Monuments and street names are also changing as a result of mediation. [...] (From 00:51:14) There are various artistic means of deconstructing monuments; even the colour red can be a means; or performative means; in many non-European cultures, there is no tradition of monuments - this is more of a Western invention. In contrast, there are many cultures that bring their memories to life through dance, music, etc. The question is: do we need monuments for the next eternity? ... Those standing around the Bundestag – but there is hardly any discussion about them. [...] Is it permissible to interfere with the substance of a monument if one wants to turn it into a counter-monument? [...] Playing with visibility and invisibility would also be possible. [...] Creating spaces that can convey completely different messages. [...] Another important point is to document the debate surrounding the monument. [...] I believe that art can provide an aesthetic approach to this very complex history – we need information boards, but artistic engagement changes perceptions and creates an additional field of open association. That's why I find the international competition for EarthNest so exciting. [...] How about, for example, a double monument - in Namibia and in Germany?"

• Dr Joachim Zeller, Historian

(From min. 01:13:00) "I am reluctant to take the *Schutztruppenstein* so seriously – it makes us forget more than it reminds us of anything. [...] Is the medium of monuments still relevant today – placing something made of bronze or stone? Isn't digital presence much more important? Shouldn't we move the space of remembrance into virtual space so that we can reach the entire population, because they don't come to the cemetery in Neukölln. [...] I think the act of alienation is a good approach – but the stone should definitely remain in place. [...] To this day, we still don't have a central memorial in Berlin to commemorate colonial crimes. [...] Whatever is done, make sure it's also available online!"

COMING HOME DEAD Giving Transgenerational Trauma a Voice



A dramaturgically moving event within the MUSEUM in DIALOGUE programme was undoubtedly the play COMING HOME DEAD – Expressing a Narrative of the 1904–1908 Genocide as a Nama Descendant, performed by a Nama theatre group. Supported by funding from the Heinrich Böll Foundation, the performance powerfully underscored the enduring transgenerational trauma caused by the first genocide of the 20th century in Namibia.³⁸

Performance by and with Keith Vries. Photo © Keith Vries

EarthNest The Decolonial Memorial

Concurrent with the BURIED MEMORIES exhibition, Berlin Global Village hosted an international art competition to design a decolonial memorial. The shortlisted entries were presented at the Kulturstall in Schloss Britz, offering a unique opportunity to juxtapose in close proximity to one another the past of (non)remembrance – embodied by the so-called Herero Stone – with the future of remembrance, represented by the competition's winning design, 'EarthNest'.



Photo © FB MSE

The simultaneous timing and thematic alignment of the exhibition and the memorial competition facilitated institutional support for fostering a forward-looking culture of remembrance connected to civil society and Germany's colonial legacy.

Traditional remembrance culture can sometimes become fixated on a fact-based reckoning with the past, overlooking the emotional and embodied dimensions of intergenerational trauma. Both retrospective reflection and future-oriented imagination are vital processes for deepening our understanding of ourselves and the world, enabling shared co-creation in coexistence.

The transformative potential of EarthNest – already evident in its initial design – emanates a sense of security, becoming, protection, and community – in other words, 'empowerment and healing through art' (Jeannette Ehlers) – and suggests that the 'Decolonial Memorial' could evolve into a space that not only accommodates but actively fosters previously unimagined encounters and social interactions.³⁹

³⁸ See https://greencampus.boell.de/de/afar/event%3Acoming-home-dead [accessed on 30 September 2025].

³⁹ See Henkel, Matthias: DENK[MAL]ZEICHEN. Über die Vergegenwärtigung der Vergangenheit, die Imagination möglicher Zukünfte und die transformatorisch-heilende Kraft der Kunst https://schloss-gutshof-britz.de/museum-neukoelln/blog/denkmalzeichen [accessed on 30 September 2025]. First published in: Berlin Global Village (ed.): VON DER UNGEMÜTLICHKEIT DEKOLONIAL ZU ARBEITEN. Die Entstehung des Dekolonialen Denkzeichen im Berlin Global Village. First edition Berlin, 2024, p. 130–131.

Contemplation, Reflection, and Education

The Museum Neukölln's proposed response to the cultural policy mandate issued by the Neukölln District Assembly – namely, to develop a forward-looking concept for dealing with the so-called Herero Stone – by first curating an exhibition proved highly successful, particularly because its scenography was realised through a German-Namibian partnership. This collaborative, transnational approach was also reflected in the accompanying programme MUSEUM in DIALOGUE, which ensured that many authentic voices – including, and especially, those from Namibia – were heard throughout the exhibition.

The artistic and scenographic concept sought to create a space that united contemplation, reflection, and education through Isabel T. Katjavivi's spatial installation on the one hand and Martin Sulzer's video projection on the other. This conceptual and aesthetic strategy not only earned the exhibition international recognition but also laid the foundation for a lasting network of international research partners.

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to the Federal Foreign Office, the Embassy of the Republic of Namibia, and the Heinrich Böll Foundation, whose support made this international collaboration possible.

Drawing on the collective experiences gained through workshops, seminars, background discussions, guided tours, debates, lectures, and three intensive panel discussions, a concept for dealing with the so-called Herero Stone was ultimately presented to the Neukölln District Council on 3 September 2024.

Threefold Transformation. The So-Called Herero Stone as Its Own Counter-Monument

At the Neukölln District Assembly meeting on 3 September 2024, Museum Neukölln received cross-party recognition for its exhibition and its wide-ranging and participatory programme. During the public session, the Museum | City History | Remembrance Culture Department (MSE) proposed a threefold transformation designed to turn this relic of the colonial era into its own decolonial counter-monument – one that reinterprets rather than erases its historical traces:⁴⁰

a. Rotation of the Herero Stone with its colonial dedication by 180 degrees

This intervention would turn the former front – bearing the colonial inscription – out of direct view.⁴¹ The reverse side of the Stone, brought into focus through this rotation, would offer space for a newly formulated decolonial message. Especially in teaching and educational contexts in schools or in the broader context of remembrance culture, the contrast between the two opposing statements could stimulate critical and illuminating discussions.

b. Establishment of a selection committee in cooperation with representatives of the communities affected by the genocide in Namibia

This collaborative act of co-creation would ensure the development of a contemporary formulation that both acknowledges the historical facts surrounding the first genocide of the 20th century and provides an emotional foundation for cultivating a shared culture of remembrance of Germany's colonial heritage in the future.⁴²

⁴⁰ https://schloss-gutshof-britz.de/application/files/7617/3859/1182/Die_dreifache_Transformation - Vorschlag_des_FB_MSEfinal.pdf [accessed on 30 September 2025].

⁴¹ Since the stone is positioned directly along the cemetery wall, the 'colonial side' of the stone would only be visible with

⁴² The aspect of joint, future-oriented action is particularly evident in the statements made by representatives of the affected communities.

c. Continued cooperation between the Museum | City History | Remembrance Culture Department and the EarthNest Decolonial Memorial team

A preliminary model for this collaboration was already developed on the occasion of Open Heritage Day 2025, with the aim of creating modules for a forward-looking culture of remembrance that actively engages with Germany's colonial legacy.

Unfortunately, the proposal developed by Museum Neukölln for a threefold transformation of the memorial ensemble, which would have allowed the Herero Stone to become its own decolonial counter-monument, did not receive a political majority in the District Assembly. Instead, with the votes of the SPD, Green, and LINKE parties, it was decided that the stone should be removed.

From a specialist and academic perspective on remembrance culture, this political decision represents a missed opportunity to collaborate with the representatives of the communities affected by the genocide in Namibia in developing a new, contemporary dedication grounded in historical integrity and committed to shared remembrance.

Finding a Museum for the So-Called Herero Stone and the Namibia Memorial Plaque

In accordance with the political mandate of 3 September 2024, Museum Neukölln has been tasked with identifying a suitable museum location for the memorial ensemble.

Exploratory talks have been held

- with the General Director of the Humboldt Forum,
- with the President of the German Historical Museum (DHM),⁴³
- · with the management of the Stiftung Stadtmuseum, and
- with the Head of the Museum Zitadelle Spandau.

For technical reasons, the memorial ensemble from the cemetery on Columbiadamm can only be exhibited in the Museum Zitadelle Spandau, as it is the only site that allows for ground-level delivery and installation.

The Void in Remembrance Culture

The politically formulated mandate to remove the so-called Herero Stone only makes sense if both components of the memorial ensemble – the so-called Herero Stone and the Namibia Memorial Plaque – are removed from their current location.

The Namibia Memorial Plaque can only be understood, in terms of remembrance culture, as a commentary on the colonial stone – and simultaneously as a failed attempt to contextualise it. Moreover, the dedication text on the plaque no longer reflects the current state of contemporary remembrance culture.

Consequently, a new concept for an appropriate commemoration of the first genocide of the 20th century must be developed to fill the resulting void in the culture of remembrance at the site.

Whether it will be possible to achieve a historically and didactically meaningful reconnection to the two elements of remembrance once they have been removed from the cemetery remains an open question.

⁴³ The DHM was very interested in adding the stone to its collection. The museum would have been an ideal location for a museum presentation, as the permanent exhibition is currently being redesigned and the memorial ensemble would have been an excellent exhibit on the theme of the 'colonial gaze'. Unfortunately, however, the dimensions of the so-called Herero Stone exceed the transport capacities within the historic building of the DHM.

It should also be noted that the concept 'Remembering Colonialism. A City-wide Concept of Remembrance' is now available and must be taken into account in the further development of the district's remembrance culture.⁴⁴

Interim Summary and Outlook

The Museum Neukölln will continue along its current path, working with the Albert Einstein Secondary School to proactively support the decade-long school exchange programme between Windhoek and Neukölln through decolonial workshops. In collaboration with the Senate Chancellery, the museum is also contributing to the Berlin-Windhoek city partnership, which will celebrate its 25th anniversary in 2025, by developing an accompanying programme of events focused on remembrance culture.

On the occasion of Open Heritage Day 2025, a group of school pupils took part in a workshop on the theme of decolonial memory, made possible by the organisation 'Denk mal an Berlin'.



Photo © FB MSE

The Museum Neukölln is developing a new section of its permanent exhibition devoted to the question of memory in urban space. Urban space – when its historical traces are made visible – can be understood as a walkable, chronographic exhibit; a multidimensional environment that tells stories from different eras through the juxtaposition of historical traces.

As this demonstrates, colonial traces are deeply embedded in our everyday surroundings; making them visible, legible and understandable is a task that, especially at the intersection of museums, schools, and engaged civil society, can foster transnational and transgenerational understanding.

⁴⁴ https://konzept.kolonialismus-erinnern.de/ and https://konzept.kolonialismus-erinnern.de/img/kolonialismus-erinnern.pdf [accessed on 30 September 2025].

Epilogue

The answer to the question posed in this essay's title:

"How Can We Un-Learn Colonialism?"

is both simple and complex to formulate:

- All action must be grounded in rigorous research into the relevant historical facts. To this end, every available source must be utilised.
- Beyond the factual dimension, the emotional, sensory, and aesthetic levels must also be addressed –
 especially within transgenerational remembrance culture since a shared, forward-looking memory can
 only emerge through partnership between the descendants of the formerly colonised and those of the
 former colonisers.
- In this way, un-learning historical practices and colonial patterns lays the groundwork for mutual understanding and for a coexistence oriented towards the future.

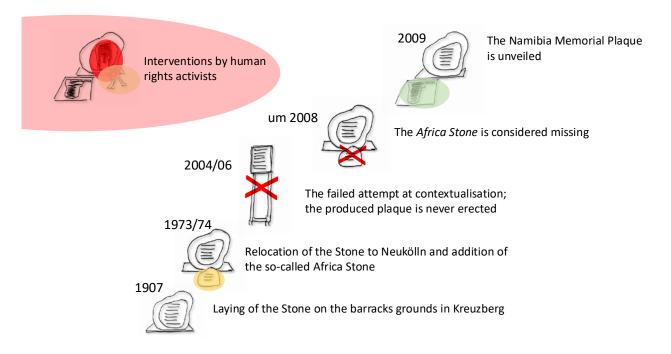


29.10.2024, Photo © FB MSE

The photograph of the so-called Herero Stone from 29 October 2024, emblazoned with the words FREE PALESTINE, vividly illustrates how histories of violence, injustice, and oppression remain deeply rooted in the present; or, as the artist Maurizio Nannucci famously remarked,

"All art has been contemporary."

The Remembrance-Cultural Development of the So-Called Herero Stone



Graphic © FB MSE

The so-called Herero Stone, fundamentally a memorial to those who fell within the colonial context, stands – as the graphic clearly demonstrates – as a symbol of the complex and contested historical legacy that reflects the current state of the still evolving cultural reckoning with Germany's colonial heritage and responsibility.

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