

Opening

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## Process & Materiality

An Ongoing Conversation within Myself and Between,  
Spaces, Objects and the Moments Unseen

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# Process & Materiality

An Ongoing Conversation within Myself and Between,  
Spaces, Objects and the Moments Unseen

Syowia Kyambi

## Verflechten

The word weaving keeps appearing in my thoughts and practice in both my life and also in my artworks; there is a constant weaving of ideas in my works; you'll see a transition of a thread that is going from one work to the next and the next, items that keep repeating themselves that are interwoven. The German word *verflechten* has an idea of entanglement intermeshed inside of the idea of weaving; that things are woven on top of each other, inside of each other, and my life's work; I'm always a bridge between people and organizations. I'm always connecting and networking, so I'm my practice; there is a heavy use of fabric and weaving and stitching but also there is this overlap that exists as well; of things being intermeshed and interwoven and the origins of this are also to do with my heritage being mixed. The fact that I focus in my practice a lot on British, German and East African history is evident of this *Verflechtung*.

Incorporating photography, video, drawing, sound, sculpture, and performance installation into my approach takes aim at the politics of the time as well as its legacy today. What is remembered, what is archived, and how



Figure 1 | *What Cultural Fabric?* (2009). Archival Ink printed on Photo Rag Paper, 60 × 45 cm, Santa Rosa, D.F Mexico City, Mexico © Syowia Kyambi

we see the world anew. I often engage with museums and/or ethnographic collections, personal and public archives, bridging disciplines together and visually interrogating our histories, the representation of identity, the effects on the psyche and the nuances in our relationships to each other and the world we live in. I'd like to take this opportunity to share projects I have developed which are rooted in archival material, expanding upon my processes and outcomes.

The most recent being “Kaspale”, an open-ended performative intervention first realised during the process of developing works for the “AMANI: Traces of a Colonial Research Centre” exhibition at the MARKK Museum, Hamburg in 2019–2020. I took into consideration what it means to be part of this exhibition, asking myself what does it mean for me, a contemporary artist of mixed German and Kenyan heritage to work within ethnographic museums in Europe? How do I engage with materials such as those from Amani Research Station, built in 1902 during German imperial rule over Tanzania, and

the ethnographic MARKK Museum archive, without inadvertently repeating the assault and extortion the colonisers committed?

I look for refuge by building upon my use of language and methodologies to navigate the terrain of the globalised postcolonial post-industrial affects in my daily life. Creating interventions is an approach in my practice designed to generate dialogue and highlight alternative narratives within the existing narratives around identity, colonialism, and power structures.

The name *Kaspale* originates from a mix of both German and Kiswahili language, creating a multitude. “Kasper” is a word from the German language, and “pale” is influenced by sheng. Sheng is a powerful fluid language that has new words made up on a daily basis. ‘Pale’ in Kiswahili means over there. It is a very specific “there”. A there that is nearby, visible, just around, at close proximity.

The pale in *Kaspale* is no longer pale in Kiswahili but sheng between English and Kiswahili. The process of naming *Kaspale* (German, Kiswahili, and the Sheng effect on the Kiswahili translation) is my own sheng, a mix of my German and Kenyan heritage; coherent and incoherent. The power in this mix is what I embrace using creolisation, as a result, the multitude becomes unbeatable, unbreakable, surviving due to an ability to morph, to adapt to be fluid, moving soft yet hard, as needed. *Kaspale* is a playful trickster who engage in social and satire. They have the task and ability to call out authority when needed. They speak up when others can’t.

The original Makonde mask that inspired this process is part of the MARKK Museum Hamburg archive donated or sold by Hans Himmelheber (1908–2003) in the 1930s, most likely originating from an area between southern Tanzania and Mozambique.<sup>1</sup> In using this I was searching for a symbol of connecting to an ancestral truth, a connection to a higher being and an imagined space, creating an intervention into the Western gaze, opening the possibilities of an alternative narrative. The then curator Mareike Späth, whom I worked with in the MARKK Museum during my residency in 2019 in preparation for the exhibition, further explains her finding about the mask and my interaction with it.

*The Makonde facemasks carved out of wood represent the so-called mindimu, the dead of the community that have risen from the graves. They can represent personified characters or abstract individual aspects of community life. Through their appearances, the mindimu contribute to character formation and awareness of the position that the individual [assumes] in the community, but also to guide questions of good sense in the community and intensive ties*



Figure 2 | Photograph taken of a Makonde mask that inspired Kaspale, whilst in residency at the MARKK Museum, Hamburg, 2019 © Syowia Kyambi

*within the social organization. A special type of mindimu, which includes the mask shown, is characterised by exaggeration or deliberate deformation of individual elements, such as the ears. In this way, magical practices or caricature aspects of a character are depicted. Zoomorphic (mostly hare, antelope or monkey) and anthropomorphic elements are often combined. They embody tricksters, cross-border commuters and similar ambiguous characters who are attributed to the world of the supernatural.*

*Dancers wear these types of facemasks in the last phase of the initiation cycle, before or during their return from seclusion to the community. Gary van Wyk compares the creation of a mature, socially fully integrated person, which is completed performatively with the mask appearance at the end of the initiation, with the carving of a mask. Both are a lengthy process of design and perfection, in which an external transformation is paired with an internal, psychological one in order to achieve maturity, wisdom and knowledge and to render this visible. Van Wyk emphasises that female masks are usually hidden from public view and only appear from women and initiates, but never in public. This applies in particular to a variant of this mask type made of clay. Remarkably, without knowing the object and its use, Syowia Kyambi decided to work with this mask and also to use the mask not from the original, but from clay.<sup>2</sup>*

## Kaspale's Kaunda Suit / 1964–2018

*Kaspale* wears a Kaunda suit made of mosquito netting. The Kaunda suit represents an idea around how ideology has been shifted over time, and how an identity changes. What is interesting for me is that this uniform represented ideas around the independence era on the African continent. It was an expression of freedom, an expression of being able to be a businessman. There is no Kaunda suit for women.<sup>3</sup> The suit was symbolic of a desire for unity; post-colonization, a desire for upper-class citizens to share their roots with the working class. Presidents used the suit to say to their people that they are part of their people that they are together with their people, one and the same. The Kaunda suit was a powerful symbol that spoke of leanings toward socialistic ideologies. It was a way to say, "Here I am! I am free! Here I am and I am my own man! Here I am, I am my own country now; here I am, I am with my own people now; I am together with my people!"

The name Kaunda suit was coined after Kenneth Kaunda (1924–2021), the first president of Zambia, which gained independence in 1964. Several African countries gained their independence in the 1960s. A lot of men from this generation (in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s) who possessed a grey coloured Kaunda suit, have now given their suit away or very rarely have kept one. If they have, it is in the cupboard, tucked away. You will now find the grey version of this suit as a uniform of employment. Employees of shopkeepers in downtown Nairobi wear it and it has become a bus driver's uniform for private schools.

The surviving versions of the Kaunda suits are fancier and have begun to have more of a following in Western fashion, towards the aesthetic of capitalism away from socialism and communism. The suit of the 60s was worn by icons of the independent era like Sam Nujoma, Julius Nyerere and Kenneth Kaunda, pushing an ideology of solidarity with working-class selfhood away from Western thought. This ideology has shifted its power dynamics from independent African man, back to a space of servitude running counter to the post-independence ideological shift on the continent; this is a shift away from socialism and towards capitalism. For me, the suit embodies this transition.

*Kaspale's* version of the suit becomes indexical of the mosquito, symbolic of the ineffectual prevention of the penetration of the colonisers across the African continent, allowing solutions for colonial penetration yet an object of protection for humanity.



Figure 3 | 1964–2018, *Fabric* (two Kaunda Suits). Wood, ash, glue, push pins. Exhibited in *Double Consciousness*, Gallery Mitte im Kubo, Bremen, Germany, 2018 / *Unravelling The (Under) Development Complex*, SAVVY Contemporary, Berlin, Germany, 2022–2023 © Syowia Kyambi

The red ochre colour featured on *Kaspale's* arms and feet was an intuitive act to generate energy, protection, and power. This, for my process, was about reclaiming armour. Somehow, I instinctively protected myself, Syowia, when taking on *Kaspale's* role. In traditional East African ritual, the use of red ochre symbolises power and knowledge, the ochre is used as both an insect repellent and also for protection against the sun. The fingers and toes are

highlighted with golden nail polish, the points of energy exiting and entering the body, and a golden mouth symbolizing the speaker, holding the space for truth telling. With the golden lip powder and the use of the mask, there is an essence of a double mask, as both are revealed in the process of the performance.

*Kaspale* is also gender fluid; this is one more element that feeds the aesthetics of a multitude. Not only in the name but also with gender and the anthropomorphic elements. A mix between human and animal, the spirit world and our world, male and female orientation, and a mix of languages in their origins and in the hybridity of language.

*[...] identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not 'who we are' or 'where we came from', so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. Identities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation. They relate to the invention of tradition as much as to tradition itself, which they oblige us to read not as an endless reiteration but as 'the changing same': not the so-called roots but to coming-to-terms-with our 'routes'.<sup>4</sup>*

*Kaspale* is becoming, a constant fluidity in the tool of intervention. A becoming that is constant.

## Kaspale in the Lecture Room

*Kaspale's* first intervention engaged the old lecture rooms within the MARKK Museum. Idly lying about, waiting, traipsing on top of the rails and tables, hopping about the basement corridors where the first practical lessons of race classification took place. This lecture room is still in use today as a learning environment. *Kaspale's* performative interruption into this space remains a work in progress. It was a beginning for me to actualise *Kaspale's* character and explore their aesthetics.





Figure 4 | *Kaspale in the Lecture Room*. Set of nine Video Stills, taken whilst in residency at the MARKK Museum Hamburg, 2019. Digital photo collage printed on photo paper with matt laminate mounted on aluminium dibond, 100 × 145 cm. Exhibited in solo show titled *KASPALÉ* at the Nairobi Contemporary Art Institute, Kenya 2023 © Syowia Kyambi

## Kaspale's Archive Intrusion

I created a series of ten postcards, which were adapted and used for the audience of the exhibition. The audience was prompted to write their thoughts and questions and their reflections on their colonial past. The questions included, “do you know of any traces of colonial entanglement in your life, your family, your relations, your neighborhood, and your city?”, “Do you collect, keep or use any objects, photographs, or material that relate to the connection between the colonial past and present?”

*Kaspale* intervenes into these archives, disrupting the urge for the audience respond with nostalgia over this period. *Kaspale* also becomes a tool for people to add their narratives to be prompted into self-reflection.

By inserting *Kaspale* into the photographs produced by zoologists, Julius Vossler (1861–1933) and Dr Franz Ludwig Stuhlmann (1863–1928) in the early late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century during their time in Tanzania, which are now part of the museum archive. *Kaspale* disturbs these images, disrupting the urge for the audience to be nostalgic over this period.



Figure 5 | *Kaspale's Archive Intrusion / Waiting for the Botanist*. Digital photo collage printed photo paper with matte laminate mounted on aluminium dibond, 115.11 × 160 cm (also part of the postcard series). Original archive photo from the MARKK Museum Hamburg, Germany. Part of the solo exhibition titled *KASPALÉ* at the Nairobi Contemporary Art Institute, Kenya 2023 © Syowia Kyambi

## Kaspale's Archive Intrusion / The Vortex



Figure 6 | *Kaspale's Archive Intrusion / The Vortex I* (2019). Digital photo collage printed photo paper with matt laminate mounted on aluminium dibond, 78 × 62 cm. Exhibited in the Dakar Art Biennale, Dakar, Senegal, 2022 and the Nairobi Contemporary Art Institute, Nairobi, Kenya, 2023 © Syowia Kyambi

The Vortex series came about from the desire to go beyond the archive. Here *Kaspale* exists in a place where time is uncountable; where things are unrecognizable, a darkness where you can't use your eyes to see. "[...] the structure of the archive is *spectral*. It is spectral *a priori*: neither present nor absent 'in the flesh', neither visible nor invisible, a trace always referring to another whose eyes can never be met [...]."5

The process of creating the vortex series was a desire to strip down the zoologist photographs in the previous works, *Kaspale's Archive Intrusion* and to go beyond what Vossler and Stulhman captured. To go through, and beyond their lens, an attempt to no longer remain in a position of looking at the past with someone else's lens. Someone whose work remains in an archive in Germany to represent what Tanzania, what Amani, what Muheza in 1902 was.

In *The Vortex II*, *Kaspale* is moving towards us in what is hard to see if it's a walk or a run. Their face leaning towards the left, masked. It is an unknown space, a dark space that holds both the past and the future, timeless, somehow unidentifiable.

With this I am seeking to go beyond the colonial past and into timelessness, a void. The vortex is a space that one could reach in meditative states; higher states of consciousness and within this vortex, *Kaspale* is still visible. Roaming through it, sitting in it, lying down in it, being with it, being within it. It is a surface to scratch, and I am still scratching to see how to go beyond the past. There is an attempt to find myself in another space, in a different narrative. This represents my desire to be free. In my practice, I am stuck inside of a colonial narrative, and I desire to observe time in another way. The constraints that are given to the African continent in terms of its historical narrative are that it tends to start and stay inside of the colonial discussion. I'm looking for ways to go beyond that.

## Kaspale's Playground



Figure 7 | *Kaspale's Playground*. Performance installation, wooden chair, wooden suitcase, ceramic mask, *Kaspale's* puppet, golden string, The Contemporary Art Institute Nairobi, 2023 / Spazju Kreativ, Malta 2022 / Afro Vibes Festival, Frascati Theatre Amsterdam, 2022 / Afro Vibes Festival, Kikker Theatre Utrecht, 2022 / ICA Live Arts Festival, Cape Town, South Africa © Syowia Kyambi (Photo: Don Handa)

There is a story my mother told me which stuck with me, it is a landmark moment in history. I don't remember it myself; I was too young. I ran into my parent's bedroom saying "boese maenner machen bang bang". It was 1982, the year when Daniel Toroitich arap Moi (1924–2020), the second president of independent Kenya, drastically changed his leadership approach. The year he became a dictator. We lived next to Kenyatta Market behind one of the major connecting highways in the city called, Mbagathi Way. It was on this street that the Kenyan coup d'état attempt against the president was fought. I was three at the time and all I said was "bad men doing bang bang". It is often said that Moi changed after this. His fear and distrust took over and this is the legacy he is remembered by. Rather heartless, thoroughly feared, oppressive leader. A scary guy, people still hesitate when speaking about him. He died on the 4 February 2020 at the age of ninety-five. The media has spoken

about him with jubilation and his violence has been dumbed down, washed out of the narrative. In death, we all speak too kindly about the deceased. He was Nyayo House. He is behind the philosophy of Nyayo, a philosophy guided by the ideology of nationalism wrapped in authoritarianism. Nyayo means footsteps. Moi is Nyayo House, and in this period the nation walked with footsteps shaking with fear and distrust.

Nyayo House's construction started in my birth year 1979 and was completed by 1983. It was, and still is, the place where you get your papers, all the items that indicate who you are legally. The marker that shows you are part of the country, a place of official counting, official inclusion, official permission. In the basement of the same building was a torture chamber run by the Kenyan government during Moi's era. In the 1980s and early 1990s people would make large loops around the streets that are situated near Nyayo House to avoid walking in front of the building. There are rumours of it shaking, of hearing voices and screams.

Nyayo House is a symbol of the oppression of the government beyond the Moi era. It symbolises how corruption and murder by the government will never have any repercussions. Victims will not have justice. In 2013 the 5,298 Mau Mau torture survivors who filed a suit against the British brutality during the time of emergency in Kenya received £3,000 compensation each.<sup>6</sup> Sixty-one years on, this does not compensate all Mau Mau survivors nor is the amount sufficient compensation. This compensation does not cover in-depth reparation. The question I have is what will it take for Kenya's independent government to be held accountable for its violations on its own citizens?

There was a glimmer of hope with the opening of the Nyayo House basements in 2012, but the hope was short lived.<sup>7</sup>

*Shem Ogola stood in the middle of the small crowd that had gathered to witness the opening of the basement of perhaps the most well-known building in Kenya. And in the glare of world television cameras, he broke down in a flood of tears. His body shook. Choked with emotion, he started talking to himself. Through Ogola, a torture survivor, Nyayo House torture chambers gained a human face. The nation went into shock. Kenyans had heard about the torture and abuse of pro-democracy activists which had become a frightening trade mark of the Moi regime, but seeing the inside of the horror house itself brought home the gruesome reality in a way nothing else could. Eager Kenyans burst into the basement compartments that they either did not know or did not believe existed. The true character of the defeated regime of Moi had been laid bare.*

The basement doors were once again closed to the public and there are still several other spaces from the past and the present that remain secret, some inactive and some I suspect are new active spaces.

The development of *Kaspale's Playground* came about as a need to engage with Kenya's post-independence era and a desire to dismantle a symbol of fear and oppression. To investigate the oppressive nature of a regime in which I grew up in and which informed my sense of self during my most formative years. I selected Nyayo House as a focus as it is a strong symbol not only in my memories but also in today's time.

The development of *Kaspale's puppet* was a tool to engage in Nyayo House without going to Nyayo House, which would have been a risk to my safety. *Kaspale's puppet* allows me to infiltrate in different ways these difficult spaces.

Creating the character *Kaspale* and building upon *Kaspale's* props is a methodology I use to create an extension of myself, an extension of what I needed in order to tell stories that are hard for me to tell and hard for others to hear. *Kaspale* is more than one thing. *Kaspale* is I, and yet *Kaspale* is not I. *Kaspale's* dismantling is releasing me, Syowia, the person, the mother, the artist, the friend, the lover, to be free of self-censorship, to shed what happens to a person who has lived most of her life in a space where you are afraid to speak up and to speak out, told you do not belong here and that you are not valuable. *Kaspale* is also something outside of me, Syowia. A character that can speak for a general public, because as an individual it is hard to represent a greater whole, as a creolised character, an extension of myself, an extension of my multitude, it is easier.

Revisiting Kenya's recent history, I bring to the fore the many layers of violence that underpinned former President Daniel Toroitich arap Moi's 24-year rule. Through the project *Kaspale* I seek to claim both the remembering and the telling of this history in ways that are not mediated by a supposed shared national memory. The origin of *Kaspale's* ability to communicate a 'truthiness' is rooted in my personal experience of being raised in a violent space of dictatorship which has resulted in both self-censorship and national collective censorship/amnesia which is still being played out and activated to this date, as well as the personal psychological violations which were inadvertently passed on by my parents born in 1936 and 1942. In a world at war and a world where seeing humans as nonhuman was the norm<sup>8</sup>.

In the processes of developing this work, I noticed that creating shadows really spoke to an idea that one identity has multiple identities. That one source can produce multiple positions. This is what the project is doing.



Figure 8 | *Kaspale's Playground* (2020). Video still. Background image is a projection of photo documentation of the 1992 mother's protest © Syowia Kyambi

Resistance has always existed in the power of being multiple and not singular. The women's protests in 1992,<sup>9</sup> which inspired some of the performative movements in *Kaspale's Playground*, particularly the stripping off of clothing. The women who stripped in protest were not alone they were in a group. The power inside of a group is important to look at, to respect, to understand. This further prompted me to understand that the multiple *Kaspale's* who originate from the mangroves are a clan and have a relationship to their cosmos identity, the multiverse. There is interconnectedness and there is a power with the multitude.

Annie Coombes describes in her essay *Mining the Archive, Mapping the Future*:

*If conventional forms of autobiography foreground the resolution of difficult journeys, [...] feminist writing of the self, on the contrary, resembles unfinished business, often taking the form of a series of movements between present and past, self and Other, towards the production of an identity that is still 'in process'. And this might also describe one of the strengths of Miriam Syowia Kyambi's work – a journey, with multiple points of entry, grounded in a sense of place and history while recognizing the mutability of those concepts.*<sup>10</sup>



## Kaspale's Ancestors



Figure 9 | *Parts of the Sister's [Kaspale's Ancestors]* (2021). Earthenware ceramics, 28.2 × 26 × 14.5 cm. Exhibited at the Nairobi Contemporary Art Institute, Nairobi, Kenya, 2023 on loan from the private collection of Michael Armitage © Syowia Kyambi (Photo: Kibe Wangunyu)

I have started to create a clan, partly to relieve *Kaspale* of the burden of representation but mainly to give *Kaspales* a context and show them that they are not alone, that they have a history, and they have a community. Further, developing the clan that *Kaspale* comes from reemphasises the strength in numbers. Initially inspired by the double face of *Kaspale's puppet* which gave way to the on-going development of *Kaspale's Ancestors*.



Figure 10 | *The Ancient Ones II [Kaspale's Ancestors]* (2021). Earthenware ceramics, 28.2 × 26 × 14.5 cm. Exhibited at the Nairobi Contemporary Art Institute, Nairobi, Kenya, 2023  
© Syowia Kyambi (Photo: Don Handa)

## The Green Gold



Figure 11 | *The Green Gold* (2019). Sisal, rusted metal, glass container. Exhibited at MARKK Museum, Hamburg, Germany, 2019 / The Museum of European Cultures, Berlin, Germany, 2022–2024 © Syowia Kyambi

*The Green Gold* features a fragmented narration highlighting the role of the plant and material sisal, and the initial plantations introduced by the Germans to East Africa from the Yucatan area of Mexico in the early 1900s.

Hanan Sabea states in her essay *Pioneers of Empire? The Making of Sisal Plantations in German East Africa, 1890–1917*, “since its inception, sisal was [...] synonymous with power, capital, and progress, all ideals of the colonial project that was seeking not only economic profit but also visible signs of dominating presence.”

By braiding the sisal, I am relating to the personhood of the labored black body used to build Europe’s economy. The absence of this body echoes the violence of the eradication of black personhood in the colonial project. The sisal in a glass container in *The Green Gold* is sisal from the *Sansevieria Trifasciata* (Mother in Laws Tongue) plant, which is indigenous to Africa and antedated sisal from colonial times. *Sansevieria Trifasciata* has now become a common houseplant around the world. The short braided sisal in *The Green Gold* is from Yucatán, Mexico. The same variety of sisal that Dr Richard Hindorf (1863–1954), a German botanist employed by the German East African Company (*Deutsche*

*Ostafrikanische Gesellschaft*) brought to Tanga, Tanzania in 1890. The longer sisal is from East Africa, which is the remnants of this original variety of sisal.

One sample of a letter out of three, which are part of the work:

*Dear Sansevieria Trifasciata,*

*We've never met, though I've seen you upon many a windowsill along my treks to wherever my work takes me. I believe my great great grandmother knew you well. You must have come into contact when she was making her baskets and mats. I'm amazed at how far you've travelled and how comfortably you sit within their living rooms listening in on their stories of how their families moved across the lands.*

*Does it feel strange to now be so common? Though your name still carries the weight of the past, as all our names tend to do.*

*Your resilience is astounding. You don't need much, I know, so easy to maintain you and tame you. I guess it's part of life, no, this constant shuffle and metamorphosis.*

*I wish you well.*

*Sincerely,*

*Syowia*



Figure 12 | *I Have Heard Many Things About You* (2016). Municipal Gallery Bremen, Germany, 2016 / Pavilion of Kenya, Venice, Italy, 2023 © Syowia Kyambi (Documentation: Cantufan Klose)

*I Have Heard Many Things About You*, a performance installation, commissioned for the *Kabbo ka Muwala, Migration and Mobility in Contemporary Art in Southern & Eastern Africa* exhibition at the Municipal Gallery (*Städtische Galerie*) Bremen in 2016. The title of the work is an extract from a letter Namibian chief Hendrik Witbooi (c. 1830–1905) wrote to the Germans during the colonial invasion, which also connects to myself as a person that has never visited Namibia, but has heard many things about it. This is also true for the people of Bremen, many of who may have heard about Namibia but never visited or delved into deep discussions about their history and genocide of Namibia. This is a site-specific work as Adolf Lüderitz (1834–1886) born in Bremen was a German merchant and the “founder” of former German South West Africa, Imperial Germany’s first colony. The coastal town, Lüderitz, the main port established to extract resources out of Namibia is named after him.

During my public four hours and thirty-minute walk, from the Oversea Museum (*Übersee Museum*) Bremen, through the railways station to the Municipal Gallery, the curators and assistants of the Gallery gave whoever showed an interest or had a question a flyer, whose text is provided below. I didn’t speak during performance but at artist talk next day.



Figure 13a | *I Have Heard Many Things About You* (2016). Municipal Gallery Bremen, Germany, 2016 / Pavilion of Kenya, Venice, Italy, 2023 © Syowia Kyambi (Documentation: Cantufan Klose)

*It's important to present my work to you in a public way, to do this walk between the Übersee-Museum, through Doms Hof via the Böttcher Street to the Bremen City Gallery connecting with the ground, interrupting our everyday movements in the hopes of creating a moment to ask you to think about our collective history, specifically Bremen's history with Namibia and how the colonial condition is present in our lives yet not deeply explored in educational and social forums. My art often asks how we are personally contributing to situations and my work is demanding of the audience to see themselves in the 'other' and to recognise the struggle in this process. The dress I'm wearing is a national Herero Day dress worn in Namibia in commemoration of the Herero/Namaqua genocide and those who fought for the rights of the Namibian people a country which gained its independence in 1990. The veil that follows the dress that I drag through the streets of Bremen include excerpts of letters and records from Chief Witbooi [...] one of nine national heroes of Namibia) and letters from German administrators engaging chiefs from different areas, constitutional resolutions, photographs from the Mohamed Amin Foundation of historical spaces in Namibia. History is a long and layered narrative, and my work is only a moment, a moment asking for reflection. My performative action is a highlighter, marking some narratives, instigating operations of repair, through acknowledgement, through the sharing of knowledge and through the act of being present.*



Wearing a long red dress which has a brown stomach pooch on the inside that makes the stomach fuller with a white petty coat underneath and a black jacket with red and golden embroidery and a red head dress that emulates cow horns worn in contemporary Namibia to commemorate the genocide. The 14-meter veil I pulled through the street was a collage of elements including patterned fabrics, painted material as well as photographs by Mohamed Amin sourced from the Mohammed Amin Foundation based in Nairobi of Namibia's past, Lüderitz town and national monuments, excerpts from Wit-booi's letters stitched together into one piece.

### Infinity: Flashes of the Past

Between 2005 and 2007 the Nairobi National Museum was supported with funding from the European Union for a facelift and expansion of the museum. It was under this umbrella that I submitted my concept for the stairwell between the two galleries, Natural History and the Ecology Gallery. *Infinity: Flashes of the Past*, consists of wooden frames, scanned archive photographs, chain-link, and an octagon mirror. Commissioned in 2007 for the National Museum permanent collection. I explored various photo albums in the museums archive department. Starting with photo material dated from 1889 to 1918 along with a World War I in East Africa 1914–1919 album as well as investigating the Beecher archival records, the Leakey East Africa Archaeological Expedition, into Kenya's independence era looking at collections titled *Kenya-ta's Functions with the People* the *Kenyatta Election Kenya* albums, to name a few.

The images used in this permanent photographic installation were scanned from the Nairobi National Museum's archive department. I sourced through the records going as far back as 1898 until current times (2007). Photographs in the piece were used to combine normal everyday life with political figures and monumental moments in Kenya's history. It was important

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Figure 13b | *I Have Heard Many Things About You* (2016). Series of video stills describing the second part of performance taking place inside of the Municipal Gallery Bremen, Germany, 2016 / Pavilion of Kenya, Venice, Italy, 2023 © Syowia Kyambi (Documentation: Cantufan Klose)



Figure 14 | *Infinity: Flashes of the Past* (2008). Wooden photo frames, octagon ceiling mirror, brass chain link, Archival Photographs from the Nairobi National Museum Archive Department. Permanent Collection, Nairobi National Museum, Kenya © Syowia Kyambi

for me that the viewer sees several images at once. Looking at photography as the camerapersons' point of view – the idea that we never really see the whole picture, just flashes of one person's perspective. The octagon shaped mirror of which these photographs hang give another dimension to the work. Not only do viewers see see themselves in this history but also the work becomes infinite, the past our constant shadow. In the book *Managing Heritage, Making Peace*, Annie Coombe shares insights to this work, stating:

*Together they represent the key categories which constructed the colonial image of Kenya to a British public keen to be simultaneously horrified, seduced and vindicated. On the one hand, these consist of ethnographic 'types', missionary propaganda, official images from British royal tours or colonial atrocities perpetrated under British colonial rule [...]. On the other hand, images*





Figure 15 | *Infinity: Flashes of the Past* (2008), close up image. Wooden photo frames, octagon ceiling mirror, brass chain link, Archival Photographs from the Nairobi National Museum Archive Department. Permanent Collection, Nairobi National Museum, Kenya © Syowia Kyambi

*from a newly independent Kenya, of presidential social functions and official troops inspections produce another kind of fiction. The colonial archive and its successor's meaning are transformed through Kyambi's reconfigured combinations [...]. Kyambi has intentionally segued interruptions to the official accounts presented through familiar public genres by inserting scenes of private domesticity in unexpected context [...]. Deliberately mixing together images from such different categories produces a tension which serves to shift the monolithic character of most commemorative sculpture.<sup>11</sup>*

When working with the archive, gaps and fiction becomes necessary, so that we can realise that there is another narrative, that there are other stories. And we may not know these stories but fitting them with an idea of what it could be is a process of getting to a more multi-narrative narrated archive. An archive and

narrative that is more relatable. An archive that can be observed, can be taken apart, can be reorganised; can be positioned and repositioned differently, presented differently and is ultimately more accessible. “Truth is both visible and disguised, oscillating between creative labour for the self and for others.”<sup>12</sup> Gaps can be filled with stories; they can be filled with silence or left to be silent.

Speculative fiction is a tool that can be used when exploring the gaps in the archive. What’s important is that it’s not about filling in the gaps, because when one attempts that, more gaps arise. It’s about making the gaps apparent, to make them come to the fore, to highlight them. Speculative fiction helps to do that. It’s a broad category of fiction encompassing different genres creating elements that do not exist in the real world and often deals in the context of the supernatural, futuristic, or other imaginative themes<sup>13</sup>. So, there is a reality but then there’s a fantasy. There’s the historical and then there is speculation around the historical. For example, *Kaspale* is not a real person, but they’re talking about real issues and referencing historical moments.

*Kaspale does not re-enact violence; instead, the character makes bodily gestures to indicate identity and a sense of connectivity through a ‘right to opacity’. This opacity is also in the refusal to adhere to expectations that symbols of violence must be done in mimicry or that history can be isolated from political, national, colonial and economic considerations.*<sup>14</sup>

It’s the unearthing that speculative fiction does. It connects to something that’s supernatural, unexplainable; it connects to histories. Sometimes we need a fictional story to point us in the direction of something that may have happened. To point us in the direction where we need to look further into the things we don’t know about.

“In Creolization you can change, you can be with the Other, you can exchange with the Other while being yourself, you are not one, you are multiple, and you are yourself. You are not lost because you are not disjointed because you are multiple.”

This is a powerful and necessary position for me to take in my practice. The quote comes from Édouard Glissant in the documentary film *One World in Relation* and it describes the power of Creolization.<sup>15</sup> The multitude within Creolization makes *Kaspale* indispensable. To use the methodology of creating a Creolised character has assisted me to excavate hidden narratives, to reveal the ugliness in our humanity, and ultimately to heal from the process of my past and hopefully extend this healing to people affected by the countries collective trauma.

My work is layered, complex and uneasy and asks the viewer to bear witness to the hidden histories embodied in my work. The embodiment of collective experiences, and constant search for links between the now and the morphed now. I reveal the complex framework of prejudices that are based on Western romanticizing of my context, East Africa and simultaneously explore the richness of my artistic self-reflexivity and ability to transform performatively. Eloquently blending apparently disparate ingredients together. Without interfering or directing the viewer too much, I allow my audiences to watch these different ingredients react in front of their eyes. History collapses into the contemporary through various objects and sounds including mythical characters that simultaneously embody mischief, disruption and hurt. I open my gullet like a pelican and try to digest the intangible. Rooted in my practice is a deep connection to land, earth, and home.



- 1 This refers to a time that is pre-colonial. I find it quite important that the museum cannot identify the exact time and origin of this mask. The ambiguity for me here holds a lot of power as it references a time that's pre-colonial. My choosing of this mask was done intuitively, the meaning behind the mask was revealed to me after my choosing to work with it.
- 2 Geißler, P. Wenzel; Gerrets, René; Kelly, Ann H.; Mangesho. Peter (2019): *AMANI. Auf den Spuren einer Kolonialen Forschungsstation*, Bielefeld; Späth, Mareike (2019): *Kaspales Antlitz*, Original print in German, translated by the author.
- 3 The pan African movement in the 1960s and 1970s and the civil rights movement have never fully taken up feminism. Black women were torn between joining feminist movements and black movements against racism. One side wasn't dealing with racism the other wasn't dealing with sexism. The fact that there is only a male uniform for the Kauna suit speaks volumes. Nationalist movements on the continent did not fight for women's rights.
- 4 Hall, Stuart (1996): "Introduction: Who Needs Identity?", in: Stuart Hall (Ed.): *Questions of Cultural Identity*, London, p1. 17, p. 4. The last sentence refers to Gilroy, Paul (1993): *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness Marks a Turning Point in the Study of Diasporas*, London.
- 5 Derrida, Jacques (1996): *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, Chicago, p. 84.
- 6 BBC. Mau Mau Torture Victims to Receive Compensation – Den Hague, 6 June 2013, see <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-22790037>, last accessed 15 May 2023.
- 7 The other moment of hope was during President Kibaki's rule (2002–2013). Several new memorial monuments were created during his tenure.
- 8 Sadly, this is still a way of thinking in today's time between first world and third world countries as racism is still rampant.
- 9 In 1992, women gathered at Nairobi's Uhuru Park and stripped to protest the Government's decision to imprison their sons for fighting to introduce multipartyism.
- 10 Coombes, Annie E. (2013): "Mining the archive, mapping the future: violence and memory in the work of Miriam Syowia Kyambi", in: *Miriam Syowia Kyambi. Contact Zone 13. Nairobi, Kenya: Goethe Institute Kenya*, Kenya, pp. 10–25, p. 15.
- 11 Coombes, Annie; Hughes, Lotte, Karega-Munene (2014): *Managing Heritage, Making Peace: History, Identity and Memory in Contemporary Kenya*, London.
- 12 Blackmore, Kara (2020): "Scale and Silence: Visual Arts and Symbolic Reparations in Colombia and Kenya", in: *Wasafiri*, Vol. 35, no. 4, pp. 54–64, p. 19.
- 13 See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Speculative\\_fiction](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Speculative_fiction), last accessed 15 May 2023.
- 14 Blackmore, 2020, *Scale and Silence*, p. 18.
- 15 Glissant, Édouard (2010): *One World in Relation*, Documentary Film (directed by Manthia Diawara, produced by Lydie Diakhaté, K'a Yéléma Productions and Third World Newsreel).