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Cases of Restitution

Towards Restitution and Beyond

Reflections on a Multi-layered Dialogue Regarding
the Cartridge Belt of Kahimemua at the
Brunswick Municipal Museum

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Rainer Hatoum

Abstract

What started in 1993 with a first inquiry into the whereabouts of the cartridge belt of late 19th-century OvaMbanderu Chief Kahimemua Nguvauva at the Brunswick Municipal Museum eventually became an issue of paramount importance in recent years. Since then, the belt has become the center of a multi-layered dialogue. It culminated in a visit by a delegation of the OvaMbanderu Traditional Authority to Brunswick in November 2021. The group was to analyze and decide on the belt's authenticity. In the end, the group handed over a repatriation request for the belt. It is currently pending a decision by the city of Brunswick. This document also included a recommendation for sustained collaboration. It is a point of crucial importance to the museum, especially as it is redesigning its permanent exhibition.

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Vers la restitution et au-delà – Réflexions sur un dialogue à plusieurs niveaux concernant la cartouchière de Kahimemua au musée municipal de Brunswick (Résumé)

Ce qui a commencé en 1993 par une première enquête sur l'emplacement de la cartouchière de Kahimemua Nguvauva, chef de la communauté OvaMbanderu, datant de la fin du XIX^{ème} siècle, au musée municipal de Brunswick, est finalement devenu une problématique essentielle ces dernières années. Depuis lors, la ceinture est au cœur d'un dialogue à plusieurs niveaux. Cela a donné lieu à la visite d'une délégation de l'autorité traditionnelle OvaMbanderu à Brunswick en novembre 2021. Les membres du groupe devaient analyser et décider de l'authenticité de la ceinture. Finalement, le groupe a remis une demande de rapatriement pour la ceinture. Cette demande est actuellement en attente d'une décision de la ville de Brunswick. Ce document contient également une recommandation en faveur d'une collaboration soutenue. Il s'agit d'un point d'une grande importance pour le musée, d'autant plus qu'il est en train de réorganiser son exposition permanente.

Present-day Namibia, first reached by Portuguese sailors at the end of the 15th century, had escaped colonial meddling by imperial powers until the end of the 19th century. While German missionaries from the Rheinische Missionsgesellschaft had been active in this region since the 1840s, it was not until Bremer merchant Adolf Lüderitz's 1882 requested protection by the German government that turned its attention there. This request set the stage for the German flag-raising on August 7, 1884, marking the birth of German South West Africa (1884–1915/1919). Establishing itself in a bitterly embattled, multi-ethnic region where British colonial influences from the Cape Colony increasingly grew stronger in the 19th century, Imperial Germany tried to establish its rule through numerous agreements and treaties. One of these, signed in 1895, drew not only new boundaries affecting cattle ranging and access to water resources but also exerted German influence in issues of chiefly successions. This resulted in 1896 in what Namibia's founding President, Sam Nujoma, termed "the first anti-colonial struggle waged by our people." In this connection, he singled out Ovambanderu Late Chief Kahimemua Nguvauva, whom Nujoma highlighted as "the first person to pay the highest sacrifice by the brutal forces of imperial German."¹

At the center of this contribution stands the cartridge belt of Chief Kahimemua Nguvauva. Upon his surrender and subsequent execution in 1896, it had become a trophy of war for Gustav Voigts (1866–1934), who had been charged with disarming him. In 1898, when Voigts visited his hometown, he presented this belt along with a number of other items he had „collected“ under mostly unknown circumstances from among the Herero to the Brunswick Municipal Museum (*Städtisches Museum Braunschweig*). A newspaper article hailed his donation – and here Chief Kahimemua’s cartridge belt in particular – as a symbol of heroism displayed by a native son of the city in a far-off country on behalf of the German Empire. Here one reads the following about the artifacts donated by Gustav Voigts:

Among them [the artifacts Voigts donated] is also the cartridge belt of Kahimemua, the chief of the Ovambandaru, who rebelled against the German rule in 1896, but was defeated after a hard fight. Mr. Voigts, who participated in those battles with distinction – he was decorated for it by the (German) empire – succeeded in capturing the aforementioned chief, and that cartridge belt is therefore a beautiful souvenir for us of the brave deeds of a Braunschweiger in the distant regions of the black continent.²

That instant of high visibility at the beginning of the belt’s biographic chapter as a museum artifact was followed by a century of next to complete disregard and invisibility. Among the factors that contributed to this was that the belt was an item of apparent European influence, which put it outside the scope of anthropological interest for a very long time. Beyond that, Gustav Voigts had given it to the museum under the provision of his continued ownership, which is a point of relevance to this day.

This was the situation when a first inquiry by Namibian historian Dag Henrichsen reached the museum in 1993, in which he asked for the whereabouts of the belt. But, unfortunately, given the poor order of the ethnographic collections at that time, he received a negative answer.³ This was a result of the little general interest taken in the ethnographic collection at the museum. It showed by the fact that no one, in particular, had been in charge of it between 1917 and 1989 and that then curator Evelin Haase had only been hired part-time that latter year.

By 2003, when Henrichsen contacted the museum yet again, Haase had surveyed the entire collection.⁴ Yet, she had not found a cartridge belt bearing

the object number assigned in the files. That was the answer Werner Hillebrecht received, too, when he approached the museum regarding this subject in 2007.⁵

Another decade passed until Hillebrecht, now being a guest of the PAESE Project, had a chance to visit the Brunswick Museum personally in September of 2019. It turned out to be a visit that opened a new chapter in the belt's biography, as he actually did come to identify an unnumbered cartridge belt as the most likely candidate, which had been assumed to be from South America before (Figure 1). Thereby, a rare historic photograph, provided by Hillebrecht, played a key role as it featured some Hereros wearing quite similar belts.⁶



Figure 1 | The Cartridge Belt of Chief Kahimemua Nguvauva
© Brunswick Municipal Museum (Photo: Dirk Scherer)

By then, news had reached the Brunswick Museum that Chief Kahimemua's direct descendants searched for a sacred belt stolen from him upon surrender, which reportedly had been taken to a German museum. In May 2018, journalist Christiane Habermalz had approached the museum in her search for that particular „sacred belt“.⁷ In Brunswick, she was informed that while the museum never had such a piece associated with chief Kahimemua, it did once have his „cartridge belt,“ which was then thought to have been likely taken back at some undocumented point by members of the Voigts family. This information must have filtered back to Namibia, as aforementioned Founding President Sam Nujoma came to address this subject publicly just a month later. Speaking at the 122nd commemoration of the Ovambanderu community, he not only praised Late Chief Kahimemua Nguvauva as the leader of the first anti-colonial struggle in Namibia. He also came to address the Voigts family directly:

I am informed that Gustav Voigts was tasked to disarm Kahimemua and he took off a sacred traditional belt of historical significance, which he presented to one of the museums in Germany for safekeeping, but later went back to collect it. I would like to appeal to the Voigts family, who might be in possession of this belt of historical and cultural significance, to hand it over to the Chief of the OvaMbanderu people, Honourable Kilus Munjuku III Nguvauva, as a token of reconciliation and goodwill gesture.⁸

So, in 2018/19, the search for two conceptually quite different, though historically closely connected belts converged in Brunswick. This led Werner Hillebrecht to suggest a third option: chief Kahimemua's cartridge belt itself might have had a sacred-like dimension due to his standing and the importance of firearms in Herero culture. As I am in no position to talk about these cultural matters, I will leave it to my two colleagues, Freddy Nguavua and Werner Hillebrecht, to illuminate this aspect in their contribution.⁹ At this point, it is only important to realise that by 2019, when the cartridge belt was in all likelihood rediscovered, it had already become a symbol of two powerful narratives making it an object of great historical and cultural significance in both Namibia and Germany.

In the following, I would like to pursue the Brunswick side of the belt's story since its likely rediscovery in 2019, which resulted in the opening of direct relations between the OvaMbanderu and the Municipal Museum by

Mr. Freddy Nguvauva.¹⁰ This period has been characterized by concerted efforts to clarify the belt's provenance once and for all and – with its likely positive identification in mind – to set the course for its restitution. But how to go about this task with a broken chain of documentary proof and circumstantial evidence that might not prove to be strong enough to convince the city council of Brunswick, the ultimate owner of the collections held by the museum in trust?

At first, Werner Hillebrecht proposed analyzing the red patches on the belt's inner side, as he thought these might possibly be remnants of the traditional body paint used by the Herero.¹¹ Yet, these turned out to be patches of disintegrating leather. Next, Dr Peter Joch, the director of the Brunswick Municipal Museum, suggested solving the issue by means of genetic and other scientific tests. That, in turn, was rated as not promising for various reasons by respective experts. Then the question was raised whether there were similar handmade cartridge belts with indisputable provenance records in other collections. Larissa Förster of the German Lost Art Foundation, Department for Cultural Goods and Collections from Colonial Contexts, was so kind to spread an accordant inquiry through her networks. It revealed that there seems to be only one other handmade cartridge belt of clear Herero provenance at the Linden Museum in Stuttgart.¹² But then, ironically, it had been an image of precisely this belt, published in 2007, that had substantially shaped former Brunswick curator Haase's views and expectations in her abortive search for the belt of Chief Kahimemua at the Municipal Museum.

Considering the differences between the belts in Stuttgart and Brunswick, the question was whether one could draw conclusions from the loops on the latter. A revealing answer came from Peter Hauschild from the Military History Museum of the German Armed Forces (*Militärhistorisches Museum der Bundeswehr*) in Dresden.¹³ While he stated that no definitive answer could be given as to the exact cartridge size the belt had been made for, he was quite certain that it had been designed for „rim cartridges.“ These, in turn, were not the ones used for the Modell 88 infantry rifle of the German Colonial Forces that were kept in belts like the one in Stuttgart, but rather in other types of rifles like the popular Martini-Henry rifle, which was widely used in former Southwest Africa.

This point is closely tied to another aspect of belt's story, which Dag Henrichsen first raised in 1993.¹⁴ It is connected to the question as to what happened to the rifle, which Gustav Voigts also took when he disarmed Chief

Kahimemua. This question has been fueled by a book on Voigts published in 1943 by the highly controversial author Hans Grimm, who attributes to him the statement that „both Kahimemua's belt and rifle are „hanging“ in the Brunswick Museum today.”¹⁵ As to this question, I can only say that there is no evidence whatsoever to support this claim. No rifle has ever been mentioned in 1898 when the belt was handed to the museum with much public attention or in 1908 when Voigts supplied more information on the belt. And even repeated searches of the museum's locked gun vault and a 2018 police registration of all „modern“ non-flintlock rifles have revealed any likely candidates. Still, Dag Henrichsen brought a puzzling point to my attention. His research has revealed that Grimm had actually submitted his manuscript to Voigts for review in 1928 and that the latter had not commented on this point, in contrast to others.¹⁶

And so, the museum's focus had shifted towards paving the way for a visit by Ovambanderu community representatives to give the details of the belt's make a thorough analysis. Against this backdrop, Dr Joch and I had been invited for talks to the Embassy of the Republic of Namibia in June 2020 and again in June 2021.

While the first attempt to have an Ovambanderu expert group visit Brunswick to that end in November 2020 failed due to a Covid 19 lockdown, the second attempt, a year later, fortunately, materialised. And so, from 1 to 5 November 2021, the Brunswick Municipal Museum was honored to host a twenty-three-member-strong delegation of the OvaMbanderu Tradition Authority consisting of 12 male and 11 female official representatives. 2 November 2021, began with a fire ceremony in front of the museum. It invited the Ovambanderu ancestors to participate in the subsequent investigation of the belt (Figure 2).

This was followed by a thorough analysis and discussion of the belt's details by all group members in the OvaMbanderu language. Subsequently, the findings were compiled on the spot in a computer-typed document in English by Mr. Frederick Nguvauva. Later, this document was publicly read piecemeal by him and translated by Ileni Henguva, the designated translator of the group, into OvaMbanderu. Some additions and corrections were worked in on the spot. After that, copies of the document were printed out and disseminated to the present delegation members for a final review. On 3 November the findings were shared with the public in a press conference. In the end, this



Figure 2 | Fire Ceremony of the OvaMbanderu Delegation in front of the Brunswick Municipal Museum, 2 November 2021 © Brunswick Municipal Museum (Photo: Dirk Scherer)

document, signed by Arnold R. Tjonzongoro, Senior Traditional Councillor, and Frederick U Nguvuauva, Representative of the Nguvuauva Clan, was then handed over to the director of the Municipal Museum, Dr Peter Joch.

The signed document features a detailed substantiation of the claim of the belt's authenticity, including their findings as to the kind and the treatment of the leather used and the belt's comparison with other authenticated Ovambanderu cartridge belts from that time. The document also features a list of recommendations that culminated in the request for the repatriation of Late Chief Kahimemua Nguvuauva's belt, which is at one point specifically designated as a „sacred belt.“ Thus, the document clarifies that the belt is both historically and culturally sensitive.

A common „cartridge belt“ in the past, it was born out of the chaos brought about by European and German colonial ambitions. Meanwhile, it has become a powerful symbol of many worlds of thought: In the Ovambanderu community, where the belt has left a void from the day it had been taken, it is now considered to be a sacred link to the ancestral past and a symbol of

anti-colonial resistance. But in Germany, too, it has recently come to stand for aspects beyond its material shell. Here, it came to stand for the changing attitude in the nation's dealing with its colonial past and exemplifies, among others, the paradigmatic change that is taking place in museum anthropology. And so, it is now the Brunswick Municipal Museum that has to face the question of how it will fill the "void" that the belt will leave once it is returned. Thereby it was clear, the generally expected restitution of the belt would not come with notions of threat to the collection or a feeling of relief from simply getting rid of a troubling object, but rather with hope and the conviction that this is a unique chance.¹⁷ And so we were relieved and thrilled to learn that the document requesting the return of Chief Kahimemuas belt also included a very emphatically formulated recommendation for ongoing collaborations and joint projects between the Brunswick Municipal Museum and the OvaMbanderu Traditional Authority. With regard to the upcoming new permanent exhibition, this has already led to the installment of a working group¹⁸ that will work towards preserving and presenting the belt's story in Brunswick, ensuring a joint shaping of our future.

A first step on this new path was taken when the OvaMbanderu Traditional Authority extended an official invitation to Dr Joch and me to attend the annual commemoration of Chief Kahimemua Nguvauva in June 2022 in Okanhandja. Among the many honors bestowed upon us on this trip, which included being dressed in new clothing in the green national colors of the OvaMbanderu upon arrival at the Airport in Windhoek, was the invitation to participate as honored guests in the annual OvaMbanderu pilgrimage to the usually closed-off gravesite of Chief Kahimemua Nguvauva (Figure 3).

As to the current state of the actual restitution process, it can be stated that the request by the OvaMbanderu Traditional Authority had been forwarded to the legal department of the city of Brunswick right after the visit of the delegation in 2022, along with a written endorsement from the side of the Municipal Museum. Furthermore, the restitution request was lately further reinforced and reiterated by an official letter from Minister Ester Anna Nghipondoka (MP) of the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture of the Republic of Namibia, dated 5 April 2023. This has led the German Foreign Office to express its general support of this restitution case and state that it will completely hand over the decision to the city of Braunschweig. And so, the pending final decision concerning the restitution of Chief Kahimemua's



Figure 3 | Peter Joch's and Rainer Hatoum's visit of Chief Kahimemua Nguvauva's tomb by in Okanhandja, Namibia, 2022 © Brunswick Municipal Museum

cartridge belt now rests in the hands of the city council of Brunswick. Given the reactions the museum has received so far, we are very optimistic that the city council will reach a favorable decision in the near future and that the way will be finally cleared to have the cartridge belt of late Chief Kahimemua Nguvauva handed over to the OvaMbanderu Traditional Authority, and at last get on its way home.



- 1 Nujoma, Sam (2018): *Statement by his Excellency, Dr Sam Nujoma, the Founding President and Father of the Namibian Nation, on the Occasion of Otjunda that Culminated in the Execution of the Late Chief Kahimemua Nguvauva by the German Schuttstruppe (sic!) at Okahandja on June 12, 1896*. The Sam Nujoma Foundation.
- 2 Brunswick Municipal Museum, Archive: *Braunschweigische Landeszeitung*, 5 Juli 1898, additions in paranthesis, the author.
- 3 Ibid., Emails from Dag Henrichsen to Evelin Haase, 26 April 1993; Evelin Haase to Dag Henrichsen, 23 June 1993.
- 4 Ibid., Emails from Dag Henrichsen to Evelin Haase, 30 July 2003; Evelin Hase to Dag Henrichsen, 31 July 2003.
- 5 Ibid., Emails from Werner Hillebrecht to Evelin Haase, 28 February 2007; Evelin Haase to Werner Hillebrecht, 28 February 2007.
- 6 Ibid., Emails from Werner Hillebrecht to Evelin Haase, 20 September 2019.
- 7 Habermalz, Christiane (2020): "Der Gürtel des Kahimemua – Ein von Deutschen Getöteter Stammesführer, ein geraubtes Heiligtum, eine Spurensuche", in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, 16. Februar 2020, Nr. 7, p. 21.
- 8 Nujoma, 2018, *Statement*.
- 9 See the Interview with Lars Müller, Werner Hillebrecht and Freddy Nguavua in this Volume.
- 10 Brunswick Municipal Museum, Archive: Email from Freddy Nguvauva to Dr Peter Joch and Evelin Haase, 8 October 2019.
- 11 Ibid., Email from Werner Hillebrecht to Dr Peter Joch, 17 December 2019.
- 12 Ibid., Email from Larissa Förster to Evelin Haase, 6 March 2020.
- 13 Ibid., Email from Peter Hauschild to Rainer Hatoum, 21 January 2021.
- 14 Ibid., Email from Dag Henrichsen to Evelin Haase, 26 April 1993.
- 15 Grimm, Hans (1943): *Gustav Voigts – Ein Leben in Deutsch-Südwest*, Gütersloh, p. 35.
- 16 Brunswick Municipal Museum, Archive: Email from Dag Henrichsen to Rainer Hatoum, 5 January 2021.
- 17 In my case, a review of my previous work shows that the engaged, dialogical approach to museum collections and individual museum objects that I am promoting here is not a solitary act under the pressure of special circumstances, but rather the expression of a fundamental conviction that a new approach to museum collections is necessary. See Hatoum, Rainer (2010): "Musealizing Dialogue", in: Lidia Guzy, Rainer Hatoum, Susan Kamel (Eds): *From Imperial Museum to Communication Centre? – On the New Role of Museums as Mediators between Science and Non-Western Societies*, Würzburg, pp. 121–136; Hatoum, Rainer (2011): "Digitization and Partnership – The Berlin Northwest Coast Collection and the Future of the "Non-European Other" in the Humboldt-Forum", in: Andrea Blätter and Sabine Lang (Eds): *EthnoScripts – Contemporary Native American Studies*, Vol. 13, no. 2, Hamburg, pp. 155–173; Glass, Aaron; Berman, Judith; Hatoum, Rainer (2017): "Reassembling „The Social Organization", in: *Museum Worlds – Advances in Research*, Vol. 5, pp. 108–132.
- 18 ASMBs: Nguvauva, Freddy to Hatoum, November 18, 2021; Hatoum Rainer to Nguvauva, November 18, 2021; Henguva, Ileni to Hatoum, November 29, 2021; Hatoum, Rainer to Henguva, November 29, 2021.