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Cases of Restitution

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Kahimemua Nguvauva, his Belt,  
and the Colonial War of 1896

# Kahimemua Nguvauva, his Belt, and the Colonial War of 1896

Interview with Lars Müller, Frederick Nguvauva and Werner Hillebrecht

## Editorial Note

Frederick Nguvauva and Werner Hillebrecht gave a joint presentation at the PAESE conference about their involvement in the history of the belt of Kahimemua Nguvauva, reporting on the long-standing restitution claim to the object and the challenges around it, but also the recent developments concerning the return of the belt. Due to the dynamics of the situation and ongoing negotiations, we decided to include the interview here in the book.

*Kahimemua Nguvauva, sa ceinture et la guerre coloniale de 1896.  
Interview de Lars Müller avec Frederick Nguvauva et  
Werner Hillebrecht (Note de la rédaction)*

*Frederick Nguvauva et Werner Hillebrecht ont fait une présentation commune lors de la conférence PAESE sur leur implication dans l'histoire de la ceinture de Kahimemua Nguvauva, faisant état d'une demande de restitution de longue date, des défis mais aussi de l'évolution de la restitution de la ceinture au cours des derniers mois. En raison des situations dynamiques et des négociations en cours, nous avons décidé d'inclure l'entretien dans ce livre sous la forme d'une interview (en ligne).*

## The Belt of Kahimemua Nguvauva

*Lars Müller:* Thank you, Freddy and Werner, for agreeing to provide us with some insight into your work in this interview. Whenever we talk about German-Namibian relations, there is a strong focus – in Germany at least – on the German-Herero War of 1904–1907/08. However, today we are talking about an event that dates back earlier. Perhaps we should begin with a short description of who Kahimemua Nguvauva was.

*Frederick Nguvauva:* It is true that the current history debates around genocide, land and livestock disposessions and related atrocious acts of colonisation are mainly limited to 1904–1907/8, and refer only to the Herero and Nama communities without making any mention of the Mbanderu community. This is also the case in Namibia, while it is well known that the OvaMbanderu community under the leadership of King Kahimemua Nguvauva were an independent community exercising jurisdiction over the eastern region, currently referred to as the Omaheke Region.

Kahimemua Nguvauva was the son of Munjuku I Nguvauva, the elder brother of Riraera Nguvauva and Njoronjoro Nguvauva. Njoronjoro was my great grandfather, thus Kahimemua was a great grandfather of mine as well. He was born at Omusorakuumba near Okahandja in 1822, and it was a breech birth. His birth was prophesised by great traditional prophets of that time. He assumed leadership from his father, Munjuku I Nguvauva, who took off the sacred traditional cartridge belt and a thong with knots representing the children of the House of Nguvauva and the country in general, and handed these instruments to Kahimemua as a sign of succession. These events happened at Okeseta (Gunichas). His father sent him to Gobabis to introduce himself to and notify other leaders that he had now assumed the leadership position of the OvaMbanderu people.

*Lars Müller:* Can you give us closer insight into the historical context of German land dispossession?

*Frederick Nguvauva:* The German agenda of land dispossession started with the OvaMbanderu under Kahimemua when Major Theodor Leutwein, the then commander of the German Colonial Force („*Schutztruppe*“) and



Figure 1 | Nikodemus and Kahimemua © Basler Afrika Bibliographien, Archive, BAA.20 4, Copy in the National Archives, Windhoek, Namibia

administrator of the colonial German South-West Africa, visited Kahimemua in 1895 at Otjihaenena to ask for land on which to resettle German settlers. Kahimemua refused to allocate land and told Leutwein that the land belonged to the community and cannot be given to foreigners.

During that time, Kahimemua Nguvauva had defused a potential war between Samuel Maharero and Nikodemus Kavikunua (Kambahahiza) over a dispute as to who would succeed Maharero Tjamuaha, who had died in 1890. Samuel Maharero had the backing of General Leutwein to succeed Maharero Tjamuaha because he befriended the Germans and was eager to give them land, unlike his father who, like Kahimemua, refused land to German settlers.

The Germans started to unilaterally demarcate colonial boundaries without the consent of the Indigenous communities and began to confiscate cattle that crossed over into the German boundaries for grazing. This led to rising tensions.

*Lars Müller:* And these tensions led to violence, and ultimately the execution of Kahimemua Nguvauva?

*Frederick Nguvauva:* Yes – the Germans then started to organise fighters in large numbers from their troops stationed in different parts of the country, and also volunteers such as Gustav Voigts. They also called upon Hendrick Witbooi and Samuel Maharero, with whom the Germans had signed treaties to join forces to fight Kahimemua and the OvaMbanderu in the east. Some OvaHerero people and the /Khaus from the Nama community, who were against German land occupation, fought alongside Kahimemua and the OvaMbanderu. The Germans were further joined by Simon Kooper of the Nama and Hermanus van Wyk of the Basters community of Rehoboth. It was at the Battle of Otjunda (Sturmfeld) on 6 May 1896 that fierce fighting erupted and the OvaMbanderu with their allies were defeated due to the superior conventional warfare equipment of the German troops.

Kahimemua Nguvauva escaped from the battle with a leg injury, and later handed himself to the German troops on 15 May 1896 after sending an envoy to the latter, who were looking for him having noticed that his body was not amongst those killed. Kahimemua was led more than 300 km on foot from Kalkfontein (Omukuruvaro) near Epukiro to Okahandja. It was at this place, Omukuruvaro, where Kahimemua was disarmed and detained by Gustav Voigts under the orders of Major Leutwein. Voigts removed Kahimemua's sacred cartridge belt, rifle and other artefacts. Kambahahiza was shortly arrested in Okahandja after news emerged that Kahimemua had been detained, and they were both tried in a kangaroo court without any legal representation, pronounced guilty and sentenced to death. Both were executed in public by a firing squad, but beforehand, Kahimemua requested that the firing squad shoot Kambahahiza first, knowing that if Kambahahiza were to witness his execution, it would scare him to death.

They shot Kambahahiza, who died with the first shot, and then turned to Kahimemua. Eleven shots were fired and he did not die, upon which he informed the Germans where they should shoot him, pointing to his forehead between the eyebrows after identifying a high-ranking officer to shoot him. (*This is where my family name derives from: "Ueriurika", meaning he pointed to himself where exactly he should be shot at*). On the twelfth bullet, he fell, then rose and grabbed sand with both hands and fell back again, at which point he died with the sand in his hands.

*Lars Müller:* What happened to Kahimemua's family and clan?

*Frederick Nguvauva:* These events took place on 12 June 1896 at Okahandja. The remaining children bearing the name of Nguvauva and known to be the descendants of Kahimemua were persecuted, hunted down, searched, and when found they were killed for fear of retribution. Many had to change their surnames and refrain from mentioning Kahimemua or Nguvauva or even from being a "Mbanderu". Many fled into exile in neighbouring Bechuanaland; others were deported as forced labourers to Windhoek. *Their experiences clearly fulfil the definition of genocide as per the United Nations Convention of 1948.*<sup>1</sup>

After the execution of Kahimemua, Leutwein ordered the confiscation of all livestock (cattle) belonging to Kahimemua and the OvaMbanderu, which was to be collected and sold to compensate for war damages. The total number of cattle collected and assembled at Orumbo near Omitara was about 13,000, of which 3,000 belonged to Kahimemua personally. Leutwein also ordered that the OvaMbanderu people no longer be allowed to have their own chief, but would be placed under Samuel Maharero. They also ceased to be recognised as an independent tribe, but were known and referred to as OvaHerero. This is how the OvaMbanderu people were driven from their ancestral land and all land in the east was confiscated by the Germans, who later sold it as private farmland.

*Werner Hillebrecht:* The entire war is very well documented in German sources, both in printed form and in the government archives in Berlin and Windhoek. Leutwein himself writes in his memoirs how he manipulated the agreement about the border of "Hereroland" to disadvantage the OvaMbanderu and provoke their resistance, which gave him the opportunity to mobilise for a war against them. It was his tactic to isolate and subjugate Namibian communities, one by one, according to the motto "divide and conquer".

*Lars Müller:* Freddy, can you tell us more about the significance of Kahimemua Nguvauva's belt?

*Frederick Nguvauva:* As I mentioned above, Kahimemua received the belt from his father, Munjuku I Nguvauva, at Okeseta as a sign of succession. Anything inherited or passed on to you by an extraordinary person is something one should cherish and preserve for future generations. These items normally represent the spirits of our ancestors as per our beliefs, custom

and tradition. It is our conviction that the belt was made from the skin of a sacred cow of *Katjivare*, which was the holy cow that mothered the sacred cows of the clan. To have something that belonged to Kahimemua personally, who was revered by his people as a leader and a prophet, is therefore simply a good omen for the members of the clan, the community and Namibia at large. It is our conviction and strong belief that having the belt of our ancestors back would strengthen our contact and communication channels with our ancestors.

It is also striking that Gustav Voigts never donated the sacred cartridge belt to the Brunswick Museum as he did the rifle/s and other artefacts, but only made it available on loan, retaining the option to demand it back at any time. What value he saw in the belt while he had modern conventional belts in abundance in the German arsenal is a question that we have been wondering about. He must have had an idea of its significance.

*Lars Müller:* Freddy, you did some research on the history of the belt after it was taken from Namibia. Can you summarise what has been known about the belt in Namibia since 1896?

*Frederick Nguvauva:* According to oral history that has been passed down from one generation to the next, Kahimemua was not alone when he was detained at Omukuruvaro. He was together with Nikodemus HiaTuvao Nguvauva, the son of Kavarure. Kavarure was the younger brother of Kahimemua. Nikodemus HiaTuvao Nguvauva was hidden behind a small bush when the Germans approached Kahimemua to arrest him. Nikodemus was assured by Kahimemua that the Germans would not see him from his nearby hiding place, although the Germans were aware of the fact that Kahimemua was speaking to someone nearby whom they couldn't see. HiaTuvao was ordered to relocate the OvaMbanderu people, and specifically some members of the Nguvauva clan, to Botswana from where "one day the future leader for the OvaMbanderu people would come from". Thus, Nikodemus Nguvauva witnessed everything that transpired during the arrest of his father and relayed everything when he returned to Namibia in 1931.<sup>2</sup>

He also recounted how the Germans had disarmed his father and taken items such as the rifle/s and belt. The other item he mentioned was the ox wagon left at the battlefield at Otjunda (Sturmfeld), which was also sacred to Kahimemua (no raw (red) meat was allowed to be transported on it). All along, it was believed that the descendants of the Voigts family were holding

these items at one of the numerous farms in their possession, and no one thought that any of these items had been exported to Germany.

But then I learned from Mr Werner Hillebrecht that he had come across a book written by a Nazi German writer by the name of Hans Grimm, who way back in 1928/9 had conducted an interview with Gustav Voigts. Voigts told Grimm that he had deposited Kahimemua's belt and rifle with a museum in Brunswick.<sup>3</sup> It was based on this information that I engaged a journalist with Deutschland Radio, Mrs Christiane Habermalz, to visit the Brunswick Municipal Museum and to see what she could find there. When Mrs Habermalz visited the museum initially, she found a record about the said belt and cuttings of newspaper articles on how Gustav Voigts was hailed as a *hero*, having disarmed a feared native leader in the former German South West Africa.<sup>4</sup> However, the director, Dr Peter Joch, could not locate the belt.

## In Search of the Belt

*Lars Müller:* There had been an earlier demand for more information about the whereabouts of the belt – can you tell us more about this, Werner?

*Werner Hillebrecht:* From an old catalogue of the African collection of the municipal museum in Brunswick, I had long been aware that Gustav Voigts had donated several objects to his hometown, including a letter by Samuel Maharero. They were well catalogued. When I read in Hans Grimm's interview that Voigts had also given Kahimemua's belt and rifle to the museum, items that were not mentioned in the catalogue, I made enquiries in Brunswick. I only learnt later that the Namibian historian Dr Dag Henrichsen (Basel) had also done the same. The response from the museum was that they knew nothing about a gun. A catalogue card about the belt existed, but the problem was that the object could not be found. Interestingly, the catalogue card mentioned that for this specific object, Gustav Voigts had wished to retain ownership and had given it to the museum only on loan. But no record about a possible return could be found.

*Lars Müller:* We invited you, Werner, as well as Nzila Mubusisi, to come to Germany from Namibia to work in a museum in Lower Saxony in 2019 – as part of the PAESE joint project. In our email conversation, you said that you wanted to visit the Brunswick Municipal Museum. After earlier responses that the belt was not there, what were your reasons for visiting the museum?



*Werner Hillebrecht:* I know very well that objects in museums can be misplaced; this is not at all unusual. Collections are moved, labels fall off, inscriptions become unreadable. Moreover, the former curator in the Brunswick Municipal Museum, Dr Evelin Haase, had informed me that there was an unlabelled cartridge belt. She thought it belonged to the South American collection. So I was eager to see it for myself. I informed Freddy of what I knew about the belt when I got to know him in the context of the reparations issue. When I went to Germany, he specifically asked me to look for the belt and the rifle.

When I arrived there, I closely examined all the Namibian collections, of course, but I specifically asked for the cartridge belt. The museum staff were very helpful and allowed a thorough inspection. It was immediately obvious that the belt was not a European product: it had been laboriously hand-sewn with animal sinews in a manner I knew from the heavy leather cloaks of Ovaherero women with their iron bead ornaments. And it had a reddish colour consistent with the ancient use of ochre pigment mixed with butter as used by several Namibian communities, both as body ointment and on clothing items.

The issue about the rifle remains unsolved. So far, no trace of it could be found on the German side, not even on paper, but it often happens that vital clues turn up in unexpected places.

*Lars Müller:* As far as I know, there were some negotiations in Namibia on how to proceed after you found a belt that might be that of Kahimemua Nguvauva. Can you describe what happened after Werner returned to Namibia?

*Frederick Nguvauva:* It was only after Werner Hillebrecht had visited the Brunswick Municipal Museum and informed us of the need to positively identify the belt that I informed Christiane Habermalz. I asked her to pay the museum a second visit in order to view the belt that had been found and consult the museum on further action to verify its origin. Initially, the museum conducted investigations by involving experts working with chemical laboratories in order to determine the possible origin of the belt.

It was at this juncture that Christiane Habermalz was invited by the OvaMbanderu Traditional Authority to visit Namibia and provide a full report on her findings and possible solutions for the way forward. The conventional process proved to be futile since no sample could be obtained from the belt with which to do an analysis.

*Lars Müller:* Then, in 2022, an OvaMbanderu delegation visited the Brunswick Municipal Museum to examine the belt. Can you tell us more about this visit?

*Frederick Nguvauva:* After Werner's visit the museum decided to engage the OvaMbanderu leather experts and historians by inviting them to view the belt and provide evidence that the belt was in fact the one deposited by Gustav Voigts. It was at this juncture that a group of traditional leather experts and historians from the OvaMbanderu Traditional Authority and the Nguvauva clan visited the Brunswick Museum in November 2021 to view and examine the belt and have consultations with the museum management. Having done so, a comprehensive report was submitted in writing to the museum, the city council, and members of the media.

The findings were overwhelmingly convincing and an agreement was reached to proceed with the restitution process using the relevant formal channels between Germany and Namibia. The Namibian embassy in Berlin was involved as an observer due to the involvement of the citizens of Namibia in an item that is said to have belonged to a national hero of Namibia. Kahimemua Nguvauva had been recognised as such after independence and his grave was proclaimed a national monument. The embassy was involved and appraised from the beginning, and made all necessary arrangements towards restitution.

*Lars Müller:* It is interesting for us to hear how the delegation concluded that it was actually the missing belt. Can you tell us more about how the delegation worked in the museum and the results of the visit?

*Frederick Nguvauva:* When the belt was displayed in the open and the delegates were given the opportunity to view and touch the belt, it was a very emotional event at which most people, especially the women, cried heavily. There was a great difference between looking at the images sent to many of the delegates while in Namibia and seeing and touching the belt at close quarters. The images made the belt look more conventional, but a closer view and the opportunity to touch it showed that it was plainly traditional and original. The delegation were then left on their own for about three to four hours to critically examine and put on paper all features of the belt that resonate its originality and relation to items made by the Indigenous OvaMbanderu communities.



Figure 2 | President Sam Nujoma with Mbanderu Chief Munjuku II Nguvauva (left in white jacket) at the grave of Kahimemua Nguvauva at Okahandja, 17 December 1989

© National Archives, Windhoek, Namibia

The most striking features were the reddish powder our communities use that is made from certain stones found in the Kunene Region called Otjize. The belt remains red today as a result of this powder. Secondly, the stitches used from the sinews of either a calf or small game, as well as the skin from which the belt was made, which was of a similar size to a young calf, probably the lower belly. Thirdly, the softness of the belt after over 125 years as of 2021 could be attributed to the way our Indigenous communities used to soften their skin products by putting them in milk for some days and then applying raw unpasteurised cow fat. These are some of the convincing facts that supported what was stated in the report on the findings.

Interestingly, no record could be traced to suggest that Gustav Voigts came back at any point in time to claim the belt he had deposited with the museum.

## Preparing for Restitution

*Lars Müller:* After the delegation had returned to Namibia, the OvaMbanderu Traditional Authority asked for the restitution of the belt. Can you tell us more about how the OvaMbanderu community debated the case?

*Frederick Nguvauva:* The OvaMbanderu Traditional Authority submitted a request to Brunswick city council after discussions with the city's mayor, but after some time they were informed that the council would prefer a written request for restitution from the government of the Republic of Namibia. When the director of the National Museum in Namibia was approached, she had a different view and demanded that either the museum or the city council write to Namibia informing the latter of the finding. A number of meetings had to be initiated by the OvaMbanderu Traditional Authority in order to have the request issued from Namibian side, where there were some bureaucratic bottlenecks. The OvaMbanderu Traditional Authority did everything to get the process moving from the Namibian side and on 5 April 2023 the Namibian government sent an official restitution request to the Municipal Museum in Brunswick.

*Lars Müller:* You said that the OvaMbanderu Traditional Authority sent a restitution request to the city of Brunswick, the official owner of the belt, towards the end of 2022. If the belt returns, what are your plans for it in the OvaMbanderu Community?

*Frederick Nguvauva:* As the OvaMbanderu Traditional Authority we would like to preserve the belt for future generations of the OvaMbanderu community and Namibia at large for another 130 years and beyond. We would therefore like the belt to be kept in a safe facility, as it has been kept in Brunswick by either the National Museum or Archive under internationally accepted storage conditions of such item. The only condition we placed before the Namibian government is that the belt should be readily accessible to the OvaMbanderu Traditional Authority and the Nguvauva clan during specific community activities and rituals, while under the protection of the supervising institution.

*Lars Müller:* What are the main challenges in this process of negotiating restitution? And what have been the more positive experiences? Do you think some practices could be seen as a model for further restitution cases on how

to deal with these questions together – the museum and the community of origin working in concert?

*Frederick Nguvauva:* The only challenge is that government offices or institutions are manned by different individuals from different traditions, cultures, norms and political persuasions. Sometimes, support and understanding of the value of a specific item for a certain community isn't taken seriously by those in power to make things happen. Differences in perceptions and sometimes personal agendas in government offices, agencies and institutions will remain a challenge, especially in developing countries such as Namibia. There seems to be no clear-cut policies and guidelines as to how one should conduct restitution processes. In some instances, the political decision-makers are more influenced by their own political convictions and persuasions, unfortunately.

*Lars Müller:* You told us about the political and sacred meaning of the belt in the OvaMbanderu community. For German-Namibian relations, it is also a sign of the violent history that is not limited to the war of 1904–1907/08 – but there is also a debate suggesting that restitution can lead to a new ethical relationship. If the belt is returned to Namibia, do you think this could lead to a new relationship between OvaMbanderus, Namibians and Germans? If so, what is needed in order to achieve such a new relationship?

*Frederick Nguvauva:* The reality is that the restitution of the belt could lead to an improved relationship between OvaMbanderu, Namibians and Germans. In fact, the OvaMbanderu community has already started building a relationship with the Voigts family in Namibia. I have had several meetings with senior members of the family who are the descendants of Gustav Voigts in Namibia. Last year, on 12 June 2022, we invited the Voigts family to the commemoration of the death of Kahimemua at Okahandja, and Karin Voigts attended the occasion with her husband, Mr Reinhardt, and gave speeches at the event.

What is needed is for the former enemies to engage one another, understand that what happened in the past between our grandparents was cruel and inhumane and that we need to work towards reconciliation. The Germans in Namibia need to accept the fact that they benefited from colonialism to the disadvantage of the Indigenous communities; they should start acknowledging this fact and to some extent assist those who have been negatively affected by colonialism. We should all start to acknowledge that we are all Namibians, and we should make this country great, pleasant, and safe

for us all. Assistance shouldn't be viewed purely from a materialistic point of view but also as the sharing of knowledge, information and skills, and creating an enabling environment; these are areas that the more fortunate German-speaking Namibians could consider for the less advantaged.

*Werner Hillebrecht:* In relations between Germany and Namibia, the story of Kahimemua and his belt is an important reminder that the history of our two nations cannot be reduced to the genocide of 1904 and Von Trotha's infamous order. The violent conquest of Namibia started with the unprovoked attack on the Witbooi Nama at Hoornkrans in 1893, continued with the war against the OvaMbanderu and the /Khauan Nama in 1896, and so it went on and on. And after 1907 the genocide culminated in summary land expropriation and reducing all "natives" to a landless, leaderless, and disenfranchised mass of labourers.

- 1 For further information see <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/genocide-convention.shtml>, accessed 15 May 2023.
- 2 In European terms, his uncle. In several African kinship systems, an uncle is considered like a father, and a cousin (in European terms) is called a brother.
- 3 See also Grimm, Hans (1943): *Gustav Voigts – Ein Leben in Deutsch-Südwest*, Gütersloh.
- 4 For the early research by Habermalz, see Habermalz, Christiane (2020): "Der Gürtel des Kahimemua Nguvauva", on: *Deutschlandfunk*, 5 February 2020, <https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/eine-deutsch-namibische-kolonialgeschichte-der-guertel-des-100.html>, accessed 15 May 2023.