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Remembering and forgetting under the Western gaze. A Brazilian Historian looks at East Africa

Recordando y olvidando bajo la mirada occidental: un historiador brasileño examina África Oriental

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Abstract: Taking as its starting point how recent social conflicts are remembered (or not) through memorials and museums in Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania, this essay discusses colonial continuities that shape how these countries see themselves and present themselves to foreign eyes. Drawing on the work of Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Edward Said, and Aimé Césaire, among others, I argue that the way these countries present themselves to the Western gaze is largely driven by the needs and expectations of a tourism industry that reinforces imperial nostalgia and stereotypes of Africa as a land of nature and adventure, with folklore playing a side role. Traveling in East Africa is about animals and landscapes, not the history and aspirations of its inhabitants. Although this plays to Western prejudices and fantasies, there is an African complicity. The Western gaze's pervasiveness at the intersection of memory and tourism reveals the limitations of decolonization in East Africa as a whole.

Keywords: East Africa; memory; colonialism; tourism

Resumen: Tomando como punto de partida el modo en que los conflictos sociales recientes se recuerdan (o no) a través de monumentos y museos en Uganda, Kenia y Tanzania, este ensayo analiza las continuidades coloniales que configuran el modo en que estos países se ven a sí mismos y se presentan a ojos extranjeros. Basándome en la obra de Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Edward Said y Aimé Césaire, entre otros, sostengo que la forma en que estos países se presentan a la mirada occidental está impulsada en gran medida por las necesidades y expectativas de una industria turística que refuerza la nostalgia imperial y los estereotipos de África como tierra de naturaleza y aventura, donde el folclore desempeña un papel secundario. Viajar por África Oriental tiene que ver con los animales y los paisajes, no con la historia y las aspiraciones de sus habitantes. Aunque esto responde a los prejuicios y fantasías occidentales, existe una complicidad africana. De hecho, la omnipresencia de la mirada occidental en la intersección de la memoria y el turismo revela los límites de la descolonización en África Oriental en su conjunto.

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Introduction

In 2018, dictatorship supporter Jair Bolsonaro was elected president of Brazil. At the time, many thought that this would not have been possible if the crimes of the dictatorship had been embedded in the collective memory.

But in 2023, the radical right won the presidency in Argentina. In contrast to Brazil, in this South American neighbour, hundreds of military officers have been tried and imprisoned; the dictatorship serves as a backdrop for numerous cultural productions; to this day, its victims are remembered in a weekly ritual in the heart of Buenos Aires (led by *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo*). At the same time a national newspaper (*Pagina 12*) honours them daily through free supplements (*Recordatorios*).

As Paul Ricoeur (2004) once said, "man is capable of making memory and history". But to what extent can the making of memory influence the making of history? To put it another way: Maurice Halbwachs (1992) was among the first to see memory as a social rather than an individual process. As different groups to which individuals belong share a common sense of the past, a collective memory (*mémoire collective*) is forged. As such, collective memory is an organic part of social life that is reshaped as society evolves. But to what extent is the reverse also true: can the reshaping of collective memory influence the development of society?

Even if Argentina's president Javier Milei does not claim the legacy of the dictatorship (although his vice-president does), his election shows that the relationship between memory and contemporary politics is not straightforward. The politics of memory are powerless to prevent historical repetition. But they can be a condition for overcoming the political symptoms that unfolded as tragedies in the past.

These reflections came to mind when I recently visited East Africa (Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania) as a tourist. As a politically minded historian, I was interested in visiting sites associated with popular struggles and the repression they faced, hoping to enhance my scant knowledge. So, the following notes are based on superficial impressions of a region with which I have never engaged academically. My motivation for sharing them is that South-South interactions are necessary and worth the effort. These lines are moved by deep empathy for historical and political challenges that are comparable to those faced by Latin Americans. They are Ubuntu-oriented, as opposed to any *mission civilisatrice*.

Silencing the past

I could not find any organisations or memorials remembering Idi Amin's rule. Not that they don't exist; they're just hard to spot. Inquiring about memorial sites associated with political violence in Uganda, a colleague from Makerere University mentioned the Busega Martyrs Memorial. This site honours the deaths of fourteen Catholics on Kabaka Mwanga II orders in 1886. At some point, I became aware of the existence of the Open Peace Museum in

Revista Wirapuru, 9, año 5, Primer semestre 2024, pp.1-11
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Kitgum, close to South Sudan, which records decades of civil violence under the spell of the Lord's Resistance Army. It appears to be a crucial project from a non-governmental organisation, yet it examines a different period.

Across the border to Kenya, I was keen to learn about the Mau Mau. The scattered information I gathered through various museums suggested a picture comparable to the United States-led repression in Guatemala in the early 1980s, which turned large territories into concentration camps that produced a hundred thousand deaths in a few years (Vera, 2011). I eventually read "Britain's Gulag" by Caroline Elkins (2005), a thoroughly researched book that exposes multiple facets of the terror regime meticulously engendered by the British.

Atrocities are always singular. But it is clear that, as with the Nazis, the British put all the might of Western progress into destroying a people and the social fabric that nurtured its rebellion. However, unlike Auschwitz, this crime against humanity is largely unknown, even to Kenyans. Although the British burned their criminal records, it is widely acknowledged that the Jomo Kenyatta (1963-1978) government and its successors produced the silence. Looking from the vantage point of the Haitian revolution, Michel-Rolph Trouillot consistently argued that a historical silence does not stem from a void but is a transitive process: "one silences a fact or an individual as a silencer silences a gun. One engages in the practice of silencing". (Trouillot, 2005, p.48).

Mau Mau and their leaders were actively silenced, and they are still today. It took half a century for Nairobi to have a statue of guerrilla leader Dedan Kimathi and another decade for a Mau Mau memorial, this time financed by the British as part of an out-of-court settlement (BBC, 2015). I eventually learned of Mau Mau memorial spots scattered in inland Kenya. Rarely visited, they lie on the margins of state-sponsored memory and tourist tracks. They only intersect at the Menengai sacred caves, which are also featured as a former Mau Mau hideout for tourists.

These countless victims of British terror are neither remembered nor mourned. We can assume that the post-colonial Kenyan state did not consider these victims to have anything to say about the present or the future, which is the primary reason memorials are built. Perhaps post-colonial Kenya built itself in opposition to what Mau Mau stood for. They can only be part of history, as told by those who were defeated.

When black lives matter

However, not all black lives go unremembered in East Africa. Wandering through Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, one comes across monuments honouring Africans who lost their lives in the First World War. Their sheer placement reminds us that this was indeed more than a European war.

But if Africa had anything to do with it, it was because of colonialism. Therefore, those statues are an ambiguous token of gratitude, as Africans are honoured for taking their share in a conflict between those who came to civilise them. Another burden that black men had to carry while being civilized. Through these Africans' lives, Europeans are honouring themselves[1].

[1] The Askari that defended Britain later killed the Mau Mau.

Revista Wirapuru, 9, año 5, Primer semestre 2024, pp.1-11
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The American gaze

Unsurprisingly, colonial governments honoured Africans who played a side role in their imperial drama. But post-colonial institutions doing likewise should be a matter of reflection. The National Museum of Tanzania showcases a memorial to the victims of a bomb attack at the US Embassy in 1998. Among all those who died violently in Tanzania, this leading national institution honours the victims of someone else's war (on terror), which happens to be global. Again, black (and non-black) lives are remembered as part of an imperial struggle and not when they struggle against the Empire. The parallel with World War I monuments is striking.

I am not insensitive to that violence or the lives that were taken by it. But should I leave Tanzania's leading museum unfamiliar with the German-led repression of the Maji Maji rebels, to give but one example? Besides the killing done by guns, the Germans also adopted famine as a weapon, purposely destroying the crops of suspected Maji Maji supporters, leaving an estimated 70.000 natives dead by 1907. Should I only hear about the Maji Maji when a Tanzanian colleague reads this piece and draws my attention to that?

This same museum has a "US (United States) corner" where a sequence of panels portraying the relationship between John Kennedy and Julius Nyerere is displayed. Again, the issue is not irrelevant or uninteresting. But the question one asks is: why, among all possible topics in Tanzanian independent history, should this be singled out? Could this be a display of loyalty to please the American gaze?

If the criteria were historical significance, shouldn't connections with African liberation movements or China be discussed instead? These choices speak about the present, and when one considers the US role in the post-colonial world, the implicit message hardly echoes the values Nyerere once stood for.

Furthermore, the exhibition highlights a scholarship program supported by John Kennedy, which is also held in Kenya, as it took Obama's father to the US, where he eventually settled. A similar narrative pattern is perceived: the program is not remembered for fostering East Africa's development, but because it inserted the region in a very indirect and modest way in US contemporary narrative – which is imperial history revamped.

Neither the US nor Obama are subject to any critical appraisal. On the contrary, Kenya had a holiday when Obama was elected in 2008, while Dar es Salaam boasts an Obama drive.

Do Black Auschwitz(es) matter?

If memorials, exhibitions, and street names are statements about the present, so are silences. The production of silences speaks about a present that is impotent to break with the past—or to connect with it. In fact, connecting with the past might be a premise for breaking with it. Unmuting the past is an accomplishment in itself, but it is also a sign that something has changed in the present, and therefore, new pathways to the future are open.

These connections between past and present politics imply that comparable historical experiences can be lived and remembered differently. Rolph Trouillot argues that there is no evidence to support the claim that slavery had a stronger impact in the United States than in Brazil and the Caribbean. He goes on to ask: "But then, why is both the symbolic relevance of slavery as trauma and the analytical relevance of slavery as sociohistorical explanation so

Revista Wirapuru, 9, año 5, Primer semestre 2024, pp.1-11
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much more prevalent today in the United States than in Brazil or the Caribbean?" (Trouillot, 1995, p.19). The answer has to do with how connections between slavery and post-slavery segregation have been woven in these societies. But the way the past is perceived is also shaped by the outcome of precedent struggles: the fact that it took a national war to end slavery in the first country is not unrelated to the distinct relevance of slavery as trauma.

Although rooted in the past, these are ongoing struggles. If the symbolic relevance of slavery is shifting in Brazil today, it is because contemporary movements are bringing to the fore connections between past silences and present oppressions (Ab'Saber, 2022). In other words, unsilencing the past has political implications in the present, while only different politics in the present can unmute the past. Perhaps what Pierre Nora (1989) described as a "dialectical process of remembering and forgetting" is the outcome of a dialectical process of past and present empowerment, as collective empowerment demands a recasting of the past while recasting the past is politically empowering in itself.

Having that in mind, what do the silences involving a Black Auschwitz tell us? If the Kikuyu were targeted to be annihilated as a people by the British, isn't that genocide? Even if the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide did not recognise political identity as a pivotal drive to genocide (therefore shielding US-supported crimes in Guatemala or Indonesia), the Kikuyu were targeted as an ethnic group. The Convention defines genocide as: "any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group, as such: killing members of the group; causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; forcibly transferring children of the group to another group" (United Nations, 1948). The terror regime engendered by the British ticks each and every one of these boxes, and others could be added. So why is this not a relevant trauma for the world?

Perhaps the horror Nazism arouses does not stem from what it did but from who it targeted. As Aime Césaire noted, nazism "applied to European colonialist procedures that until then had been reserved exclusively for the Arabs of Algeria, the 'coolie'' of India, and the 'niggers' of Africa" (Césaire, 2000, p.36). In other words, Nazism shocked Europeans because it inflicted the violence that was commonly reserved for non-white populations. However, as white Europeans were largely accomplices to that same violence when inflicted on non-European peoples, Césaire concludes that they are responsible for Nazism because they cultivated it in the colonial world.

Césaire's reflections may explain the silences around Black Auschwitz(es) in Kenya and elsewhere in Africa - the Herero and Namaqua in Namibia are the first but not the last that come to mind (Häussler, 2021). The underlying message is that, unlike Nazism, Western rationalised violence designed to break and kill entire populations was but a side effect of colonialism —the flip side of the civilizational coin.

Imperial nostalgia

Today, not many would praise Nazism because of the economic growth it produced. Its horrors are recognised as horrors. As such, nourishing fond memories of Nazi-related personalities and their cultural achievements is inconceivable.

Revista Wirapuru, 9, año 5, Primer semestre 2024, pp.1-11
https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13338568

But in East Africa, imperial nostalgia thrives. In Uganda, it starts with toponymy: Murchison Falls, Queen Elizabeth National Park, Lake Albert, Lake Edward, Lake George... One wonders what it means for a continent to have its largest lake and waterfall named after the coloniser's queen. Did they have no names before? Will they not have another name after that? Was independence short of reclaiming the power to name?

Looking from a different post-colonial angle, Edmundo O'Gorman (1984) argued that the idea of America was an invention of history, as was its "discoverer". Despite indisputable evidence that Columbus was not the first European to arrive in the New World, he ended up being enthroned as the "discoverer of America". However, not only was Columbus not the first to come, but the Genovese navigator only ever intended to reach Asia, and he always believed that he had done so. O'Gorman exposed the "logical absurdity" of the claim that, even though he believed he had reached Asia, Columbus managed to "discover" America entirely by accident. The only way to make this claim is to assign agency - or what O'Gorman calls "intention" - to the inanimate object of America instead of Columbus (ICAA, 2024).

Could we face the opposite phenomenon in Africa, in the sense that the intention of imperial explorers to discover is what gave life to an inanimate continent? The unstated implication of long-lasting imperial toponymy is that these places came to life through contact with the colonizer. History kicks off when they are "discovered". Consequently, the narrative fabric that involves the region's landmarks is sown around the 19th-century explorer's saga. In other words, it is framed by imperialism but devoid of its imperial implications. As romanticism rules, we are faced with ideology. Livingstone and Stanley are to be everyone's heroes, I presume[2].

The imperial point of view drives contemporary approaches to these places, not the least by tourists. Numerous markers related to imperial explorers are found even in remote places like Ujiji, Tanzania, where Stanley met Livingstone. Featured as a geographical mystery in Western mythology, the source of the Nile became a must-visit place in Uganda.

Between Livingstone and the Nile - the white explorers and their discoverie - natives of this continent are conspicuously absent. The touris"s imagination is filled with imperial nostalgia as they reenact the discovery of Africa, a continent devoid of agency. But there is an African complicity to that:one virtually follows the explorer's footsteps when he goes to Livingstone in Zambia to see Victoria Falls for the first time[3]

Covering Africans

Tourism feeds on imperial nostalgia while reinforcing it. When I visited the Nairobi National Museum, there was an exhibit on Karen Blixen's paintings and another set of

[2] David Livingstone (1813-1873) and Henry Morton Stanley (1941-1904) were among the most famous 19th century explorers of Africa. In 1871, Stanley embarked on a journey to find Livingstone and when they met in present day Tanzania, he notably said: "Dr. Livingstone, I presume?"

[3] David Livingstone is acknowledged as the European who "discovered" Victoria Falls and named it in honour of the British queen. The Zambian town where the falls are located now bears his name.

Revista Wirapuru, 9, año 5, Primer semestre 2024, pp.1-11
https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13338568

displays that portrayed Joy Adamson's life story. Coming from Brazil, I had never heard of these women before, and it was enjoyable[4].

However, it feels like they have a place in the museum not because of what they brought to Kenya but because they became famous in Europe through books turned into movies. I haven't read "Out of Africa" nor seen the film, but it smells of imperial nostalgia. Blixen's former estate in Kenya turned into a museum certainly does.

As for the Adamsons, the invisible backdrop of their conservationist tale is the Mau Mau Uprising. While Joy and her husband were going out of their way to save lions, their British patrons were going out of their way to crush Kikuyus. It is a bitter irony that her book was entitled "Born Free". But it is also a testimony to what European lenses see when they look at Africa and what they do not.

Again, maybe we should not expect anything different from colonial eyes, even when they see Africans. Writing on the Kikuyu before establishing a reputation as a paleoanthropologist, Louis Leakey's assessment of Mau Mau as a wicked religious doctrine is a case in point (Leakey, 2004). But what if African institutions reproduce and reinforce these patterns? Should I leave Kenya's leading museum acquainted with the deeds of two European women from colonial times while not meeting any Africans I didn't previously know?

In his book "Covering Islam", Edward Said (1998) discusses how Western media coverage of non-Western issues is deeply biased. If knowledge is power, then Western media is power exerted through its unchallenged capacity to control and filter information as if an 'invisible screen' were at work, selecting the pieces of information that are to be released and those that are not. In other words, the media is also a silence-producing device, and its constructed narratives stem from a dialectic between what is said and what is not. Therefore, "covering" Islam should be understood in the double sense of the word. Western media covers Islam as it reports on issues related to the Islamic world, but it does so in a selective way that covers (or silences) what doesn't fit into power narratives entrenched in layers of stereotypes and prejudices ingrained in Western mentality. And what Said says about Islam applies to the non-European world at large.

However, since Western media has a quasi-monopoly of image and news production that circulates globally, people from the Global South tend to shape their perceptions of other Global South people through these lenses too. Therefore, my daughter was downhearted about not seeing elephants or listening to Shakira's "Waka Waka" when landing in Johannesburg, while this city's zoo showcases Amazon species in a building shaped like a Mesoamerican pyramid, which is nowhere to be found in South America.

A Brazilian is likely to learn about Kenya through Western power lenses unless a conscious effort is made to uncover (as opposed to discover) Said's "invisible screen". But what happens when Kenyans (or other people from the Global South) start to see and portray themselves through Western lenses too?

[4] Karen Blixen (1885-1962) was a Danish author who also wrote in English. She is best known for "Out of Africa", an account of her life in Kenya that was turned into a Hollywood movie starring Meryl Streep and Robert Redford in 1985. Joy Adamson (1910-1980) was a naturalist, artist and author who is best known for her conservation efforts associated with Elsa the Lioness – a cub raised in her house that she eventually trained to hunt and released in the wild. That story was told in a book that was also turned into a movie, both named "Born Free".

Revista Wirapuru, 9, año 5, Primer semestre 2024, pp.1-11
https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13338568

The Western gaze

Not only do we read ourselves through imperial lenses, but we also risk presenting ourselves according to what Western eyes expect to see. And when looking at Africa, what do foreign eyes want to see? In Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania, tourism is entirely driven by nature and adventure, with folklore playing a side part. The Maasai people are a plus when going to the Serengeti. However, in practice, they have been evicted to clear new areas for the tourist industry, Tanzania's most significant foreign exchange earner. As in Joy Adamson's days, the preservation of lions does not go hand in hand with the conservation of people.

Tourists don't come to East Africa to learn about their history, and they are likely to be frustrated if they do. This is about animals and landscapes, not about people and their endeavors. The exception is individual white men's sagas with Africa as a backdrop to adventures that ultimately speak about themselves. In fact, Africans' past and present struggles are perceived as a nuisance that interrupts the white gaze.

Culture industry icons top imperial nostalgia, so one who visits Hell's Gate Park in Kenya is bound to learn that this was the real-life inspiration for "The Lion King," while Angelina Jolie's "Tomb Raider" was filmed there. Even charming Zanzibar has hosted, since 2019, a Freddie Mercury museum, although homosexuality is outlawed on the island.

(Re)inventing traditions

But rock is not what rolls in Zanzibar; it is *Taarab*, a traditional music that dates to Omani times in the 19th century. Its Arab roots were enriched by African and Indian influences, reflecting the island's history as a crossroads of trade. By the end of the last century, Taarab was falling into oblivion when it experienced a boom spurred not by an Omani revival but by the tourism industry. It is likely that many young men who embraced music were not primarily moved by a cultural concern but envisioned a way forward – they needed an income.

In other words, modern needs sparked a revival of tradition. In the past, the invented traditions introduced by Europeans provided many Africans with models of "modern" behaviour (Ranger, 2012, p.243), but in the present, "traditional" cultural manifestations can be instrumental in coping with modernity embodied in the commodification of life. Nowadays, tourists can hear taarab in many places across the island.

Certainly, the Taarab revival was faithful to its roots, as old masters were crucial for forming new generations (Yee, 2019). But one wonders if that is always the case. If tourists crave folklore and communities need money, isn't it possible that traditions are reinvented for the sake of tourism? If this revival of traditions no longer supports old-fashioned colonial power, it is not based on community values either. It doesn't seem that the primary drive to learn music or dance is to carry on the tradition, but to carry on their lives. Money is the thread that binds these worlds into one.

In the past, traditions were invented in Africa according to the coloniser's mindset. As Terence Ranger (2012) noted: "Since so few connections could be made between British and African political, social and legal systems, British administrators set about inventing traditions for Africans". John Iliffe (1979) put it more crudely: "Europeans believed Africans belonged to tribes. Africans created tribes to belong to". The invented traditions imported

Revista Wirapuru, 9, año 5, Primer semestre 2024, pp.1-11
https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13338568

from whites included models of command and subservience: for example, the Kikuyu had no chiefs, but the British nurtured them.

Now, the same game seems to be played the other way around. Instead of framing the 'other' according to their standards, Western tourists seek alterity. Ironically, this is not found among Africans who have assimilated colonial manners, since they are less "real": "The African collaborators, playing their role within one or another of the introduced European traditions, then came to be seen as less admirable than 'real' Africans, still presumed to be inhabiting their own, appropriate universe of tradition" (Ranger, 2012, p. 247).

But who are the "real" Africans in the 21st century? Presumably, they belong to cultural milieus that were not destroyed nor engulfed by colonialism: in a way or another, they survived the civilising mission. Nowadays, the traditions Westerners crave are those that don't mimic Europe – or at least, they don't appear to have done so. They stand for the real Africa.

It is not historicity that matters but image. It is irrelevant if a tradition was invented or reinvented, as long as it looks traditional – in other words, as long as it fulfills Western expectations of what an African tradition should look like. We are not in the realm of science, tracing the origins and transformations undergone by any given tradition, but in that of spectacle, where image shapes reality rather than the other way around (Debord, 1992).

In a world where image molds reality, is it possible that communities reinvent the folklore tourists expect to see? If that is the case, to what extent are stereotypes rooted in the colonial imagination shaping how East Africans present themselves today?

The future of East Africa's past

Contemporary Western eyes crave cultures preserved despite colonialism. But then colonialism was a totalizing process that also served as a conduit for market relations. As capitalism conquered the world, a multiplicity of community relations where cultural traditions were rooted were eroded. A comparable process threatens the environment. Can money recreate what monetary relations have endangered?

On the one hand, tourism brings in the money that fosters the revival of traditions that were doomed because of the world that money created. On the other end, cash carries on destruction as always. It affects the bearers of traditions, such as the Maasai who have been evicted from their lands. But also those who strive to preserve the cultural heritage of the continent at large.

The Uganda Museum in Kampala, the oldest institution of its kind in East Africa, was barely saved in 2011 when the government planned to build an 'East African Trade Centre' on its site. However, other buildings that house cultural heritage in the region had a different fate.

In Kenya, former Minister of Foreign Affairs and Vice President Joseph Murumbi became one of the greatest private collectors of African art. In the early 1970s, he co-founded the first pan-African art gallery on the continent and later sold his house to the government on condition that it would be made into an African Studies Centre. However, the house was soon demolished, and its contents were stored in the basement of the Kenya National Archives, where he had once worked. Since 2003, a substantial part of this collection has been displayed in the building, and one can only marvel that the archive still upholds its function.

Revista Wirapuru, 9, año 5, Primer semestre 2024, pp.1-11
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While Murumbi's collection eventually found an exhibition venue, this has not been the case with the doors that once decorated *Nyumba ya Sanaa* in Dar es Salaam. This place became a significant art and cultural hub in the 1970s and was the launching point for artists such as the internationally acclaimed George Lilanga[5], who crafted the doors. In 2010, *Nyumba ya Sanaa* was demolished to make room for a tower building. A German collector managed to save the doors. But when I saw two pieces of them in Tanzania´s National Museum, I was told by the staff that a public campaign had prevented their export to European private collectors. As of now, dozens of pieces remain unmarked and neglected in the museum's backyard.

Between foreign greed and public contempt, what future awaits East Africa's heritage? Going further: what future can be shaped from East Africa's past?

Towards a post-colonial past

As noted in the opening lines of this text, our perception of the past has a limited influence on shaping the present. However, overcoming the ideologies underpinning past crimes is crucial for moving forward in new directions.

The politics of memory reflect the present. We cannot change the past, but we can always look at it differently. In this sense, the past does influence our present. And it opens different landscapes for the future.

Viewed from this perspective, the past, present, and future are intertwined. A thorough postcolonial understanding of the past is essential for building a post-colonial future. Perhaps achieving this will only be possible in a world free from colonialism.

I am uncertain how tourists would experience East Africa under such conditions, but ultimately, this will no longer be an issue for Africans to address.

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[5]George Lilanga (1934-2005) was a painter and sculptor active from the late 1970s until the early 21st century, who arguably became the internationally most renowned Tanzanian artist.

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