

## **Introductory Speech**

### **Christian Kopp**

#### **Berlin Postkolonial**

Ladies and Gentleman, dear traditional authorities, distinguished friends, dear guests from Namibia, the USA, Canada, UK, France, Sweden, and Germany,

it is exactly one year ago that a small group of us set together in a Café very close to this place and amongst us were our American Ovaherero friends Vepuka Kauari, Jefta Nguherimo, Veraa Katuuu and Kavemuii Murangi. Our friends had come all the way to Berlin to witness the discussions in three different parliamentary committees concerning a motion of the left party demanding that the German government would take over its full historical responsibility concerning the genocides against the Ovaherero and Nama people 1904-08. The motion appealed to the government to ask them for forgiveness and it proposed to invite the Ovaherero and Nama representatives into the ongoing negotiations between Namibia and Germany. It asked that these official talks must also address the subject of symbolic and financial reparations for the expropriation of and the genocide against their ancestors.

Our friends did not only come to experience that this motion by the Left Party was turned down in all three committees. What makes it even worse is that no matter how hard we tried the nation state that inherited the responsibility for this genocide did not even allow them to listen – let alone to speak to these committees – though one of them was indeed the committee of human rights.

At the same time they had applied at the Berliner Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, Ethnologie und Urgeschichte who owns a gruesome collection of several thousand human remains from all over the world that Rudolf Virchow - who is the namegiver of Berlin's biggest hospital just around the corner - has brought together. Their wish was to see all remains belonging to Ovaherero and Nama people as they could have been their direct ancestors. The answer they received was that the persons in charge would not have time to meet them and that they were not allowed to inspect them because they would not do serious scientific research on them. It was only when we informed the media and after

we literally forced them to talk to us when our friends were finally allowed to have a look at their Ovaherero and Nama ancestors who have been stored overhere like shoes in small card board boxes.

It was after this shocking experience that we came together and discussed what should be done. Our American friends came up with the great idea to bring the Ovaherero and Nama people living not only in Namibia but in all the world together for a transnational conference. And it was soon clear that the best place for this was Germany itself where the Ovaherero and Nama genocide has first been planned and then systematically been ignored, covered up and denied for so many years. We activists from Berlin Postkolonial and the NGO alliance „No Amnesty on Genocide!“ committed ourselves to applying for funds to provide the basic infrastructure for this congress but it was clear from the beginning that – as usual – we would not get any money to invite speakers from Africa or America.

So if today we can proudly welcome more than 50 Ovaherero and Nama delegates from all over the world here at our joint congress we should above all thank our guests themselves as they personally invested great amounts of time and money to prepare and discuss the congress in advance and to come overhere. So please give them a warm applause for being with us today!

A second group of people without whom we would not be here today is the large number of volunteers who have helped to prepare the congress as Mnyaka Sururu Mboro, Andreas Bohne, Siggi Wittig, Ginga Eichler, Mara Stirner, Felicitas Qualmann, Cibele Kojima de Paula, Momme Diederichsen, Kerti Puni-Specht, Anastacia Nganga, and many more. I am sure you deserve an applause from the audience too.

We would also like to thank all those human rights activists and politicians who volunteered for welcome speeches and to take part in or moderate the different panels as Elisabeth Kaneza, Fellow of the UN Decade for People of African Descent, Moctar Kamara and Marianne Balle Moudoumbo of the Central Council of the African Community in Germany, Israel Kaunatjike and Kaya de Wolff of the NGO alliance „No Amnesty on Genocide!“, Tahir Della, Karen Taylor, Kwesi Aikins and Sharon Dodua Otoo from the Initiative of Black People in Germany ISD; Hans-Christian Mahnke and Nicolai Röscher

from AfricAvenir International as well as Adetoun and Michael Küppers-Adebisi from AFROTAK TV cyberNomads. I am convinced that their willingness to support this congress testifies strongly for the moral credibility of your cause, dear Ovaherero and Nama friends, which is not only of highest importance for all Africa and for the Black and African Diaspora but for the whole of humanity.

Last but not least we would like to thank our funding institutions, the Foundation Nord-Süd-Brücken and the Berlin Senate for their extraordinary support. We also have to thank the Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development/Engagement Global whose representative I would like to welcome here amongst us. Considering our government's unwillingness to talk about this subject, we are grateful that Engagement Global was willing to support us even if not with enough financial means that were necessary to publish a conference reader with the important speeches we are looking forward to hear. Thanks to the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation who invited Hon Ida Hoffmann and Esther Muinjangué to Berlin. Finally I want to thank the Centre Francais de Berlin for their supportive attitude concerning the congress and for their charming venue.

Let me finish my speech by telling you why I find the title of our congress - which was proposed by our American Ovaherero friends - so appropriate. I am not a lawyer so I had to find out for myself that restorative justice is not just a catchy word or a well sounding political phrase but an age old judicial concept recently discovered anew. In opposition to our anonymous, often abstract law procedures focussing on punishment by the state it rather looks

1. to the specific needs of the person affected by a crime and
2. to the reintegration of the perpetrator into human society

The key to this process of healing a relation that was damaged by a crime is the willingness to start anew some form of communication between the victim and the perpetrator, a communication which is difficult for every side and therefore is often in need of a mediator.

And the first thing this mediator has to care for and to guarantee is the right of the affected person to report - extensively and without any limitations of time or any interference - about what was done to her or him and what is needed to heal the wounds. As the victim's

dignity, body or property was hurt and damaged it is absolutely necessary to grant this privilege as anything else would rather aggravate his or her situation than being the first step in a healing process of restitution.

It is on the other hand a necessary first step on the perpetrator's way towards resocialisation to listen carefully to what he or she has done to the affected person for this is the only way to develop a deeper understanding of what the crime meant to the victim. It is the precondition of any true repentance and the most effective way of saving the victim, society and the perpetrator from a repetition of what has happened.

This is the point where I want to come back to the American Ovahereros' experience last year when they were not listened to in the German parliament and when the persons in charge of the scandalous Rudolf-Virchow-Sammlung either did not want to listen to them. It is the point to scandalize the German Historical Museum's recent refusal to invite a representative of the Ovaherero and Nama for a short address at the opening of an exhibition that aims to be critical about German colonialism. It is the point to mention the German government's obstinate and insulting refusal to enter into direct negotiations with the Ovaherero and Nama communities affected by Germany's first genocide. And it is the point where it should become clear to everybody why we have invited so very few white German speakers like me and why we all feel so privileged to have so many Ovaherero, Nama, African and Black speakers with us today.

There are only few exceptions to this and I would like to share with you the words of another white German right in the beginning of this congress and at the end of my introduction. It is a short statement sent by the former German minister Heidemarie Wieczorek Zeul who has always been a big step ahead of the German political elite when it comes to the genocide that she was first to recognize and to apologise for. Already in Namibia 2004 she used much clearer words in front of the Ovaherero community than were later on documented in the official German government's version of her speech. Now she offered what can only be interpreted as a full acceptance of the principle of restorative justice after genocide. She wrote:

1. Transnational Non-governmental Congress on the Ovaherero and Nama Genocide  
RESTORATIVE JUSTICE AFTER GENOCIDE  
Berlin, 14.-16.10.2016

*„Dear friends,*

*it is with great sadness that I will not be able to participate in your important congress "Restorative Justice After Genocide". I feel close to your discussions and your desire for justice after all those years, and after years in which the genocide had been denied.*

*Your congress is all the more important as it is indispensable that civil society engages in these questions and does not leave discussions to governments. Only with the participation of the Herero and Nama will there be lasting understanding.*

*I sincerely hope that finally the formal acknowledgment of the responsibility for the genocide will be delivered by the German government, as well as the apology for the committed crimes and also the necessary moral and financial compensation.*

*I wish your endeavors the success that you deserve so very much!*

*With all my heart yours  
Heidmarie Wiczorek Zeul“*