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"Let Me Come to Tell You": Rethinking Gender, Colonialism, and Narratives of Modernity from the Northern Namibian Sound Archive

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Abstract

This contribution to the special issue develops an argument about time and gender in African history in relation to historical sound recordings. Revisiting a case study from the Namibian sound archive I demonstrate innovative methodological strategies that open up new avenues of conceptual and theoretical thinking about gender and time in African history.

Using the example of Nekwaya Loide Shikongo, a prominent woman from Ondonga in northern Namibia (the colonial 'Ovamboland'), and an epic poem on the deposed King Iipumbu yaShilongo that she performed in 1953, I discuss how gender was constituted and mediated in relation to colonial temporalities. The article presents a historical ethnography of how both the Christian mission's cultural discourse and the South African colonial administration's efforts to masculinize the 'native' political authority produced a gendered perception of Owambo women during the first half of the 20th century. However, it also demonstrates the performer's powerful, creative reappropriation of these discourses, which we can gauge by approaching the historical sound archive with a methodological strategy of 'close listening'.

The argument thus extends to a broader reflection on the potential of historical sound recordings for challenging Eurocentric teleological narratives of gender and modernity. It also looks into the inherent limitations, and thus the opportunities and challenges, which the colonial sound archive presents for the development of decolonial methodologies in fields such as historical ethnography, cultural studies, and historiography.

Keywords: historical sound archive; Namibia; gender; time; performance

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About the author

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In my contribution to this special issue on gender and time in African history, I develop an argument about time and gender in relation to historical sound recordings. Revisiting a case study from the Namibian sound archive, I aim to demonstrate innovative methodological strategies that open up new avenues of conceptual and theoretical thinking about gender and time in African history. The argument thus extends to a broader reflection on the potential of historical sound recordings for challenging Eurocentric teleological narratives of gender and modernity. It also looks into the inherent limitations, and thus the opportunities and challenges, which the colonial sound archive presents for the development of decolonial methodologies in fields such as historical ethnography, cultural studies, and historiography.

In order to develop this argument, I revisit material which I first published more than 15 years ago (Becker 2005). Drawing on sound recordings, textual analysis, and field work in northern Namibia, the earlier article offered an analysis of cultural discourse, gender, and the subjectivities of local people on the frontier of empire in mid-20th century southern Africa. Using the example of Nekwaya Loide Shikongo[1], a prominent woman from Ondonga in northern Namibia (the colonial 'Ovamboland'), and an epic poem on the deposed King Iipumbu yaShilongo that she performed in 1953, I discussed how gender was constituted and mediated. The article focused on the narrative of a remarkable woman's life and her poetry. This story was told in order to understand how gender in relation to other forms of identity was constructed in different cultural discourses.

My point was not so much about historically specific, changing ideas of 'women' and 'gender (relations)'. Instead, my central argument was that the colonial institutions gendered a set of women whose identities had previously included 'gender' only as a rather contingent component. This argument was inspired, theoretically, by scholars such as Ifi Amadiume (1987), Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí (1997), and Karla Poewe (1981), who have shown, on the basis of ethnographic data from different parts of Africa, that the concept of gender stratification was a Western colonial construct.

Drawing on this significant conceptual revision of conventional gender theory, I presented a historical ethnography of how both the Christian mission's cultural discourse and the South African colonial administration's efforts to masculinize the 'native' political authority produced a gendered notion of Owambo elite women. I further showed how many Owambo continued to pursue heterogeneous, and sometimes ambiguous, strategies in their claims to Christian models of modernity.

My contribution to the present volume of reflections on gender and time retains the core argument I made in the earlier critical analysis of the historically specific shaping and re-shaping of gender as a central category of colonized persons in northern Namibia. This paper, however, shifts the focus to a *methodological* reflection of what close listening, a new translation of the recording into English, and fieldwork in Owambo could 'do' for theorizing the centrality of colonial institutions in the gendering processes of African societies.

Following Anette Hoffmann's (2020, 2022) work on the colonial sound archive in southern Africa, I argue that if historical sound recordings are taken seriously, and explored through both close listening and the reconstruction of connections, the archive can start 'speaking' differently and in polyphonic voices. The sound archive may thus challenge not only the absence and the muting of women in the colonial archive but, significantly, contribute to historical knowledge about time and gender in new and creative ways.

[1] Throughout the text I will refer to the paper's protagonist as "Loide" Shikongo; everyone we spoke to during the fieldwork in May 1999 referred to her as "Meme Loide", thus using her Finnish 'Christian' name rather than her OshiNdonga birth name.

My reflections explore how the sound recording of the epic poem performed by Loide Shikongo allows access to new routes of thinking about different discourses of colonial modernity and gender. The recording of Loide Shikongo's performance of her epic poem has been held in the collection of the German linguist Ernst Dammann (1904–2003), now stored in the archives of the Basler Afrika Bibliographien in Switzerland. In 1953 and 1954, Dammann and his wife Ruth spent nine months on a 'collecting' trip to Namibia, which was under South African rule, at the invitation of the missionary and colonial historian-ethnographer Heinrich Vedder, with the explicit purpose "to document African languages and literature – orality in its widest sense – in the territory" (Sullivan and Ganuses 2021).

The trip included an eleven-week stay in northern Namibia (the colonial 'Ovamboland'). On December 23, 1953 Ruth Dammann recorded, at the mission hospital in Onandjokwe, what was, according to her husband's announcement on the tape, ostensibly a narration of 'tribal' customs by "a woman" from Ondonga. In contrast to Dammann's recorded voice note, however, Loide Shikongo presented a powerful performance of an epic poem on the deposed King Iipumbu yaShilongo. This epic poem (*oshitewo*, pl. *iitewo* in oshiNdonga) is a striking, skilfully crafted piece of orature. A poetic appraisal of the performer's own sons is interwoven with the story of the controversial King Iipumbu yaShilongo, the former ruler of the Uukwambi kingdom, adjacent to Ondonga, who had been deposed by the South African colonial administration in 1932. Loide Shikongo's analytical poetics of modernity, gender, and power, with all its paradoxical images, allows for a rare glance into the multiple facets of one woman's lived-in world and its endemic colonial era modes of acceptance, conflict, reappropriation, and rejection.

Travelogue 1: Loide Shikongo and the analysis of gender and time in northern Namibia

When I stumbled upon the extraordinary performance in January 1999, I had been interested for some time in how gender was constituted and mediated, in a specific historical situation and time, in relation to other forms of identity: How did people in colonial Ovamboland think about gender, if they thought in those terms at all? How was gender constructed in the 'long conversation' between missionaries, the colonial administration, and the local people? Which cultural discourses on modernity and gender did Africans appropriate in specific situations, which did they appropriate piecemeal, and which did they, perhaps, reject outright?

I was already well aware of a host of anthropological and historical research on the matrilineal Owambo that suggests that the commonly-held imaginaries of a highly patriarchal 'tradition' might well be inaccurate in several respects (Becker 2007, 2019). A close reading of works by Meredith McKittrick (1999, 2002) and Märta Salokoski (1992), for instance, shows that contrary to their representation in earlier writings by missionary-ethnographers and, equally, in late 20th century popular, post-colonial Namibian discourse, women were not invariably subordinated to men on the basis of their female-ness. This notion appears to be based, incorrectly, on imaginaries of a unitary pre-colonial past without temporal, spatial, or social disjunctures.

The contemporary literature and even some earlier sources (e.g. Tönjes 1911) show that within Owambo, there were distinct variations over space and time regarding the margins of female power and discourses and practices of gender (see, e.g. McKittrick 2002; Tönjes 1911). I suspected that in the past gender might not have been the only, nor even the most important, determinant of an Owambo woman's margin of power or of her identity. I maintained that attempts to draw a more

accurate picture of gender, space, and time in African pasts needed to take into account that gender was and still is entangled with other categories in most social and cultural situations. In the case of Owambo those key categories included elite membership, age, and rank among the co-wives in a polygynous marriage.

Thus far, the argument remains rather predictable. My somewhat more radical proposal, however, was that, in the case of Owambo elite women during the historical moment shortly before the advent of colonial rule and Christianity, gender as a social category played only a negligible part in the constitution of identity, if indeed it played any role at all; belonging to the nobility was far more important for their sense of identity than being a 'woman'. The core aim of my earlier article was thus to take a close look at the gendering of female subjectivities in time and space. In revisiting this topic, I attempt to show how 'listening to' rather than 'reading' the archive may enhance this understanding.

Travelogue 2: Encounters with Loide Shikongo and her interlocutors

My travels to, and with, Nekwaya Loide Shikongo began in January 1999, in Basel, Switzerland, where I discovered and purchased a well-thumbed second-hand copy of Dammann and Tirronen's (1975) *Ndonga-Anthologie* during a visit to the Basler Afrika Bibliographien (BAB). I was quickly drawn to the long poem, titled, in the German translation, "Ein Lied über den Häuptling Iipumbu" ('A Song on Chief Iipumbu'). It struck me how powerfully Loide Shikongo had asserted her right to political criticism, at once directed at King Iipumbu, who was deposed some 20 years before the recorded performance in December 1953, and at the 'brick house', the signifier for white supremacy.[2] I was equally stirred by her direct, and yet gentle, critical comments on her sons, who she depicts in those parts of the piece which are given to her more personal experience.

The volume was edited by the linguist Dammann and his collaborator Toivo Tirronen (Dammann and Tirronen 1975).[3] It does not provide much contextual information on the creators and performers of the pieces they 'collected', nor on the historical context of specific offerings.

Published as a supplementary to the Hamburg-based journal for native languages (*Zeitschrift für Eingeborenen-Sprachen*), the publication contained texts in OshiNdonga with a translation into German; the minimal commentary was also in German. The texts were mostly drawn from the collection of the Finnish missionary Martti Rautanen (1845–1926), while a number were based on the recordings made by Ernst and Ruth Dammann during their trip in 1953–1954.

From this first encounter I learnt that Loide Shikongo was the mother of Leonard Auala, who in 1963 became the first bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Ovambo-Kavango Church (ELOK). A German church publication on Bishop Auala's life (Auala and Ihamäki 1988) and Auala's autobiography, written in oshiNdonga (Auala 1977), provided additional details on Shikongo's background and life. She emerges as a member of the historical Ndonga elite, who was at the same time also part of the new Christian elite around the Finnish mission's heartland at Oniipa. It is clear that she played an active part and was

[2] I am aware that the term 'white supremacy' may sound slightly awkward in the context of southern African colonialism. Despite these misgivings I have decided to use it, since discussions I had with Nepeti Nicanor and Ben Ulenga, who translated Loide Shikongo's poem into English in the later 1990s, indicated that the term indeed refers to the broad complex of Western modernity.
[3] Tirronen was a member of the Finnish mission at the time of the Dammanns' visit to Owambo.

highly respected in both spheres. A photograph reproduced in her son's autobiography shows a strong, stout woman in late middle age, smiling warmly into the eye of the unknown photographer's camera. She is clad in the style originally introduced in northern Namibia by the Finnish missionaries, which consists of a loose-fitting peasant-style frock and *doek* ('headcloth'), and has become typified as 'Owambo dress'. The photograph was taken in an open space near the Oniipa mission centre, with the old church building in the background, possibly around the time of the recorded performance of the "Song on Chief Iipumbu".

A few months after this discovery in Basel, I had the opportunity to conduct research in Owambo on Loide Shikongo and her poetry. Together with my research assistant Monica Kalondo, a University of Namibia student and the daughter of a well-known local family, I spoke to numerous people who had known "Meme Loide", as she is fondly remembered, including family members and close friends. During most interviews, at some point, Monica would read the *oshitewo* to the interlocutors, whom we then asked to comment on it.[4] The research also included questions about people's perceptions and memories of King Iipumbu.

We learnt that Loide Shikongo is very well remembered in the area around Oniipa. Many older Lutheran Christians from areas beyond her Ondonga home also had vivid memories of her. Everyone who knew her emphasized her strong and caring personality. Everyone also remembered her strong voice and her fine singing in church.

No-one, however, including her granddaughter Katrina Lughodi Auala, who was already a grown young woman of 24 at the time of her grandmother's death in 1961, had ever heard her performing, or had even heard of her as a performer of poetry or songs outside the Christian orbit. Several of our interlocutors, however, suggested that public performances of Owambo orature were made impossible by the prohibitive stance of the mission at that time.

Unfortunately, at the time of the fieldwork, I had not yet had access to the actual recording, nor did I even know whether this still existed. However, about six months later, I had a telephone conversation with Ernst Dammann, who was then living in retirement in Pinneberg (Germany). He had vivid memories of the recording session, which had taken place in the private confines of the missionary's home at Onandjokwe. Along with other performers of orature, Loide Shikongo had been invited for this specific purpose, on the recommendation of her son Leonard Auala, who was then the Oniipa parish priest. After this telephone conversation, Dammann sent me a tape recording of Shikongo's performance. The woman's voice that reached across to me from half a century ago was remarkably strong.

I played the tape to several Oshiwambo-speaking friends, who confirmed that the transcription and translation prepared by Tirronen in the 1950s was by and large correct. My close friend Nepeti Nicanor, together with Ben Ulenga, prepared a translation into English, which became the basis for the textual analysis, and, importantly, for our discussions about time, space, and gender. As with any process of transcription and translation, the new translation of Meme Loide's *oshitewo* was profoundly shaped by the positionalities of the translators, as critical Namibian intellectuals during the country's late colonial and postcolonial eras.

[4] The interlocutors' responses would undoubtedly have been different if we had already had access to the actual sound recording and had been in a position to play it to them. The impact of voice and emotion on listeners during a sound recorded performance cannot be underestimated. Unfortunately, additional fieldwork was not possible at the time, once I had received the tape of Meme Loide's recorded performance.

Nicanor took the lead in the re-translation. She was raised in the port city of Walvis Bay, and spent several years in the 1980s in exile in Zimbabwe and England. Her mother tongue is OshiKwanyama, another one of the closely related cluster of languages collectively known as OshiWambo. Nicanor is an avid reader and writer. In the 1990s she was working as an editor in educational publishing in Namibia. She was also an active member of the Namibian women's movement. We had met, and become close friends and feminist allies, when we were both members of SISTER NAMIBIA Collective, which published a feminist magazine and ran a small library and women's centre in Windhoek.

Ulenga, an OshiNdonga native speaker, had been incarcerated for nine years as a captured SWAPO guerilla fighter on Robben Island; after his release in the mid-1980s he returned to Namibia and became a co-founder of the Namibian labour movement. After Independence Ulenga joined the SWAPO government as a deputy minister and later as the country's high commissioner in London. In 1998, however, he left SWAPO in protest against the obstinate authoritarianism in the ruling party, and a year later founded an opposition party, the Congress of Democrats (COD). Ulenga is also a published poet. Working with translators who were Namibian intellectuals and activists of the 1970s and 1980s struggle generation made for engaging joint discussions of the poem, colonialism, time, and gender. The latter dimension was emphasized in crucial ways by Nicanor.

Nekwaya Loide Shikongo: Biographical notes

Who was this woman whose life and voice still command an unusual presence in the post-colonial world of Owambo?

Nekwaya lyaShikongo was born at Oniipa in about 1886. Her father, born the son of a king, was a wealthy and powerful man. He set up his homestead at Oniipa and ruled as the *elenga* ('headman/councillor') over a large area, reaching from Ondangua to Onamulunga and from Oniipa to Oshigambo (Auala and Ihamäki 1988). Nekwaya's mother, Namandjala Angula, one of his many wives, had two sons and two daughters; Nekwaya was her lastborn child.

Nekwaya Shikongo's lived-in world extended between two poles. Although not considered a royal (*omukwaniilwa*, pl. *aakwaniilwa* in oshiNdonga) in the matrilineal social organization of Owambo, she was born into the Ndonga nobility. During fieldwork it became clear that she was a highly influential member of the nobility who was well respected by the royal family, and whose advice was frequently sought (Jason Amakutuwa, interview, May 13,1999; Katrina Auala, interview, May 18, 1999; Toivo Ambambi, interview, May 19, 1999).

However, Nekwaya Shikongo also came into close contact with the missionaries at an early age, and after her baptism in adolescence was known by the Finnish Christian name Loide. Unlike her non-Christian contemporaries, who were commonly approaching their thirties when they went through initiation and got married, she became a wife and mother while she was still in her teens. She had two children, named Maria and Joseph, who both died in early childhood. Soon afterwards, her first husband, Toivo Indongo, also died (Auala 1977).

Her second husband, Vilho Auala, was a widower who brought a daughter, Elizabeth, into the marriage. On September 25, 1908, she gave birth to her eldest surviving son, Nangolo, who was christened Leonard. She was still only about 22 years old. Six more sons followed, and finally in 1929 her last child and only surviving daughter, Hanna Nandjala, was born.

Loide Shikongo and Vilho Auala settled at Oniipa, which at the time was already growing into the hub of the Finnish mission's local

world. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Vilho Auala never went away on contract labour. The couple and their sons tilled the land together. They were known to lead a good life as an exceptionally close family, modelled along the lines of the 'Christian' nuclear family.

The housekeeping services Loide provided for various missionary families, as well as for the families of the administrators C. H. L. ("Cocky") Hahn and Harold Eedes and the shopkeeper at Ondangwa, also brought her into close contact with the tiny white society in Owambo. Her close proximity to the mission, in mundane work as well as in spiritual terms, apparently enhanced her already high standing in the Christian community.

Christianity had led Nekwaya Loide Shikongo into the experience of early marriage, motherhood, and widowhood. But she also actively appropriated new leadership roles that opened up within the growing Christian community, as an active church member, and particularly as a highly respected lead singer (*omutameki* in oshiNdonga) of choirs at Oniipa and beyond. She was much admired and adored for her leadership in the church and in the community. When she died in 1961 at the age of 75, her funeral drew a large crowd.

Performance of orature and Christian identity

When Loide Shikongo performed the "Song on Chief Iipumbu" just before Christmas 1953, she had been called by Toivo Tirronen, then the head of Oshigambo Continuation Training School, to take part in a recording session of Owambo orature arranged specifically for the benefit of Ernst and Ruth Dammann. Loide Shikongo supposedly willingly agreed to perform for the sake of the recording (Ernst Dammann, personal communication, December 2, 1999).

When I first listened to the tape, as indicated above, I learnt that, before her recital, Dammann announced in German that "now a woman, Loide Shikongo", was going to "narrate some of the customs of her tribe". It is not known whether Shikongo chose to perform the *oshitewo* instead of "narrating tribal customs", or whether Dammann's announcement was simply due to his lack of linguistic skills.[5]

The latter would be nothing unusual in the creation of sound archives, as Anette Hoffmann has demonstrated in her study of the recordings made by the Austrian anthropologist Rudolf Pöch (Hoffmann 2020, 2022). Equally clear is that the studio-type recording situation was rather typical of the methods of anthropologists of the colonial and apartheid eras, who worked with the endorsement of the mission or the administration. Collectors like the Dammanns called specific informants who were deemed to be knowledgeable for interviews to gather information or to collect 'traditions and customs'. Such interviews or performances were usually highly formal and took place at the mission (Jason Amakutuwa, interview; Petrus Shipena, interview, May 18, 1999; Selma Amutana, interview, May 19, 1999). They thus followed the apartheid colonial administration's procedural prescriptions (and at times direct proscriptions), which were fuelled by the administration's fear that researchers might get too closely involved with the 'natives' (see Gordon 1992).

[5] Ernst Dammann's knowledge of OshiNdonga and other indigenous Namibian languages was extremely poor. Three weeks into their stay in Owambo, Ruth Dammann noted in her diary entry of November 13, 1953 that it "was enough to drive you crazy ('es ist zum Verzagen')", having a linguist husband who wasn't able to express even the most basic vocabulary or sentences in the local language (Tagebuch von Ruth Dammann, August 17, 1953 – May 4, 1954, PA.39 I.A.1, Ernst und Ruth Dammann, Afrika Bibliographien, Switzerland, 33.).

"Song on Chief Iipumbu" (excerpt)

Andiy' u tale, ndi mu lombwele	Wait, let me come to tell you
andiya ndi mu lombwele	Allow me to tell you
ngoye Iipumbu, penduka	You, Iipumbu, wake up
penduk', u tal' etanda	Wake and see the initiation of men
penduk', u tal' etanda	Wake and see the initiation of men
tal' iihuna tiyi longwa pombanda	Look at the horrors being done in the sky
penduk', u tale ondhila	Wake and see the bird/aeroplane
Nelomba tay' ende pombanda	Nelomba, the plane, is moving up in the sky
gamugulu og' itula omaana	The long-legged ones have settled in the fields
gamugulu otag' itula oshaana	The long-legged ones are settling on the oshana*
ongoye ga lombwelwa	It's you they have been told about
ngoye, ongoye ga lombwelwa	You, it's you they have been told about
ngoye Iipumbu, penduka	You, Iipumbu, wake up
u penduk', u tal' etanda	Wake and see the initiation of men
tal' iihuna tiyi longwa pondjugo	Look at the disgusting things done at the sleeping hut
penduk', u tal' etanda	Wake and see the initiation of men
penduk', u tal' etanda	Wake and see the initiation of men
owe yi uvil' ohenda	Are you feeling sorry for yourself?
owe yi uvil' ohenda	Are you feeling sorry for yourself?
ngoye owe yi uvil' ohenda	You, are you feeling sorry for yourself?
ngoye owe shi ininga mwene	You, you brought it upon yourself
owe shi ininga mwene	You brought it upon yourself
owe shi ininga mwene	You brought it upon yourself

* *Oshana* (pl. *iishana*): wide, shallow riverbeds that are dry unless the seasonal *efundja* floods that originate in the Cuvelai river system in Angola reach the Owambo plains.

"A song on Chief Iipumbu": Contents and context

Loide Shikongo's *oshitewo* embraces and comments upon different reactions to the changing social and cultural logic of colonial Owambo. The struggles between individuals and groups predicated upon – seemingly – incompatible norms and values are at the core of the "Song on Chief Iipumbu".

The first part of the poem comments on the deposed King Iipumbu yaShilongo in the context of broader colonial politics and change in Owambo. Following the poem's second focus on Shikongo's sons, she resumes the first theme by means of reiteration. Throughout, Shikongo directs her address to Iipumbu himself, the deposed ruler of Uukwambi, the Owambo district adjacent to Ondonga. She calls on him to "wake (up)" (*penduka* in oshiNdonga) and "see" or "look at" (*okutala*) the advancing colonial world of 1930s Owambo in which he lived. While Shikongo noted the increasing claims and gains of the "long-legged ones" (*amagulu*), also denoted "wanderers" or "strangers", she makes it unequivocally clear that Iipumbu has brought his fate upon himself.

King Iipumbu yaShilongo of Uukwambi is one of the most colourful and controversial figures in the northern Namibian history of colonialism and anti-colonial resistance. From the early 1920s the records of the mission and the colonial administration were full of complaints about his rule. Complaints were launched about his intransigence, especially concerning male migrant labour, which did not come forward as readily from Uukwambi as required by the administration. But Iipumbu yaShilongo also emerges from archival records and oral history as a tyrant whose autocratic and often arbitrary rule made many of his subjects flee Uukwambi for neighbouring Owambo districts. It was, however, his alleged and real sexual misdemeanours that eventually led to his deposal and banning. Iipumbu forced young Christian girls to participate in the *ohango* female initiation rituals, and allegedly also forced many into sexual relationships with him. In 1932 his conflict with both the mission and the administration came to a head when he directed his attentions towards Neekulu yaShivute, a baptismal candidate, who was his social – and according to some sources possibly also his biological – daughter (Hartmann 1998).

Neekulu fled to the missionary at Elim, who hid her and smuggled her out of Uukwambi. Iipumbu sent his men to fetch her from the mission, where they fired into the air. This act of violence towards the white missionaries finally brought about military intervention by the administration and Iipumbu's deposal. Iipumbu was banished from Uukwambi; from 1932 to 1938 he was forced to live in the Kavango. Thereafter he was allowed back to Ovamboland, but was only allowed to take up residence in Oukwanyama, where he died in 1959 (Hartmann 1998).

The complex and contradictory nature of Iipumbu's anti-colonial stance revolves around the ways in which his anti-colonial and anti-mission politics converged with deeply problematic authoritarian and gender politics. The contradictions between Iipumbu's fierce resistance against the multiple variants of the 'brick building' (see below) and his cruel attitude towards his own subjects have been expressed in conflicting popular perceptions of the controversial king. Whereas the standard nationalist historiography praises him as a "symbol of Ovambo defiance" (SWAPO of Namibia 1981, 165), to many among the older generation of Christian Owambo people, even at the turn of the 21st century, Iipumbu remained an anti-Christian tyrant. Several of our interlocutors during our 1999 fieldwork recalled the cruel treatment that made many Kwambi seek refuge in Ondonga (Petrus Shipena, interview; Selma Amutana, interview). Others stressed his dubious gender politics, saying that "he

liked women too much" and "had his fair pick on women" (Erastus Shamena, interview, May 13, 1999; Nuusiku Namuhuja, interview, May 15, 1999).

Beyond any doubt, the critical view of Iipumbu yaShilongo is exemplified in Loide Shikongo's *oshitewo*, where she calls upon him to "wake up" and see what "you brought upon yourself". She repeats these central lines many times throughout the poem, interspersed with the rhetorical question, "Don't you want to see?" ("*ino hala kumona*?"). Loide Shikongo makes it clear that she is ambiguous about "feel(ing) sorry" for the deposed king.

She asserts her right to warn and criticize the autocratic king. The boldness with which Shikongo avows her right to criticism is a most intriguing aspect of this poem. She does this in part through the adoption of the missionary discourse. This does not prevent her from also expressing a fair level of scepticism about what was going on at the 'brick buildings' (*pombonge*). *Ombonge* symbolizes colonial modernity; it may refer either to the mission or to the administration, both institutions instrumental in changing the cultural, social, and political logic in colonial Ovamboland. She seems uncomfortable about how *amugulu*, the "long-legged ones", have been "settling on the oshana". Whereas in principle *amugulu* may refer to any men, Dammann and Tirronen (1975, 229) suggest that it stands for 'foreigners', or the whites. This seems plausible, as it is clearly linked to the experience of Iipumbu's deposal. *Nelomba*, the aeroplane, also occupies prominent space in Loide Shikongo's *oshitewo*. The experience of the aerial bombing of Iipumbu's *ombala* (royal homestead) in August 1932 must have left a deep impression. She frequently refers to the "horrors being done in the sky".

In the second part of the poem, Shikongo comments on the whereabouts, occupations, and characteristics of five of her sons. *Nelomba*, the aeroplane, links the two parts of the poem, as one of Shikongo's sons, Filippus, was nicknamed likewise. He earned this nickname when he travelled by aeroplane to work in Oranjemund in Namibia's deep south, which was almost unheard of for a black person at that time (Erastus Shamena, interview).

There is considerable ambiguity around Shikongo's comments on her grown-up sons, who, as pastors, teachers, or relatively highly skilled workers in 'white' Namibia, had become members of the new Owambo elite, who aspired to the cultural materials and ideals of Christian modernity. While she commends them, she also articulates a sense that the young men were being lost to her world. Loide Shikongo expresses a special concern about the alienation her eldest, Nangolo, the future Bishop Leonard Auala, may have experienced because of his early years spent as the foster child of the Finnish missionaries Tylväs, when she refers to him as "Nangolo the one raised at the brick house/at a mission/ where he is not an offspring".

Loide Shikongo's critical appraisal of King Iipumbu as an alternative reading of history calls for a reconsideration of previously accepted views on the gendered transmission of history in Owambo, namely that "the chain of transmission and preservation of oral traditions in Owamboland appears to centre around male members", with transmission following the line from father to son or uncle to nephew (Williams 1991, 10–11). It may rather be a recent development in Owambo that 'official' local history now resides with men who are recognized as official storytellers and repositories of cultural and historical knowledge, in contrast to women, who – nowadays – only tell stories within the confines of the home. If this is the case, the gendered division between 'official' and 'in house' history is linked to recent cultural discourses on gender. It emerges that the variants of official history and alternative readings have taken on gendered meanings during the course of the 20th century, which

corresponds with the rising processes of gendering in Owambo.

Gender and nobility

The considerable political and sexual powers of royal women in the Owambo kingdoms are well documented, and an appropriate starting-point for the analysis in this article. Whereas only Ongandjera in western Owambo historically had ruling queens, female royals (*aakwaniilwa*, sg. *omukwaniilwa* in oshiNdonga) had outstanding status and power everywhere. Royal women ruled over large sub- sections of the kingdoms. The king's mother has been described as particularly powerful; she usually ruled over her own district, and commanded much influence over her son, the king, who commonly asked her advice in all important affairs, and usually acted accordingly. Mothers of kings also frequently engineered succession to the kingship.

Royal women also enjoyed sexual privileges. They could choose any man they liked, whether he was married or unmarried. If a royal woman fancied a man who was married already, he had to leave his wife or wives in order to join her and the royal family as an *oshitenya* ('son-in-law' in oshiNdonga). The role of the royal husband was to carry out and oversee all orders around his wife's area. He had little say in decision-making, although there are reported instances where royal husbands tried to expand their margin of independent power, apparently not always successfully.

Those were the observations of missionaries, administrators, and conservative academics during the colonial period (see, e.g. Tönjes 1911; Loeb 1962). There are indications, however, that the (non-)gendering of ruling relations was even more advantageous for elite women before the centralized and militarized political organization came into being with the introduction of firearms and the economy of raiding in the later 1800s, even before the onset of colonialism. Salokoski (1992) points out that in the earlier kinship-based dispensation several of the important posts at the king's court were filled in line with a parallel sex system, with both male and female officers in the same positions.

In contrast, the non-hereditary nobility of *omalenga* ('headmen') of the later 1800s was no longer rooted in a ritual and kinship system. *Omalenga* were, in Salokoski's words, "a horse-bound and gun-carrying militarily equipped cadre of the king which also carried administrative power" (Salokoski 1992, 187–188). McKittrick (1999, 7) points out that these changes tied in with shifts regarding gender. She emphasizses that most Owambo societies, by the late 19th century, had developed militaristic and violent forms of masculinity ("a gun culture linked to male power").

Cultural memory in some parts of Owambo suggests that in the older local discourse, gender had ontological status (Kornelia Iyambo, interview, July 19, 1997). As evidenced in her orature, Loide Shikongo herself had recourse to culturally available subject positions, which did not preclude her from mapping out power. This she most certainly did when addressing a former ruling king in a direct and highly critical manner.

In my earlier work (Becker 2005) I engaged with sources in the documentary colonial archive which showed how the colonial administration's efforts to masculinize local political authority gendered a stratum of Owambo women whose identities had previously included gender only as a rather contingent component.

The administration's politics were complemented by the increasingly dominant Christian discourse; social, cultural, political, and economic power became tied up with male-ness, whereas containment of sexuality and domesticity became the defining characteristics of femaleness, irrespective of rank. Gendering created, or at least amplified, the difference between women and men. At the

same time, it discursively erased the existing differences *between* women and *between* men.

The missions did not bar women from community participation. Instead, they substituted the banned practices in which women had played a prominent part, such as the female initiation ceremonies, with women's Christian fellowship groups and female choir leadership. However, these were strictly gendered spheres.

Christian religious and cultural practices became new sources of status, renewed self-esteem, and gender solidarity. Social institutions fostering a sense of solidarity based on gender may have encouraged new forms of communication and cooperation among women, but they also accelerated the push towards the generation of gender as an ostensibly unitary, ontological social category that, certainly in the case of women of the historical Owambo elite, diminished women's power and autonomy. Yet, as her poetic and symbolic expressions demonstrate, Loide Shikongo was just one of many Owambo who continued to pursue heterogeneous, and sometimes ambiguous, strategies in their claims to Christian models of modernity.

"Why what could be heard is rarely accessible in reading": Sound archives, close listening, critical connections, and fieldwork

Starting from the case presented in the foregoing sections of the paper I shall now explore ways in which historical sound recordings may be useful in rethinking gender, modernity, and time in African history. The guiding question is: What innovative methodological strategies might help us to open up new avenues of conceptual and theoretical thinking about gender and time?

As indicated in the introduction to this article, I draw on the cultural studies scholar, Africanist, and curator Anette Hoffmann's recent work. Hoffmann (2020, 2022) argues that if sound recordings are taken seriously as part of the archive and explored through both close listening and the reconstruction of connections, the archive can start 'speaking' differently and in polyphonic voices.[6] The sound archive may challenge not only the absence and muting of women in the colonial archive but, significantly, contribute to historical knowledge about time and gender in new and creative ways.

Hoffmann (2020, 2022) suggests 'close listening' as a key method. This involves listening closely to recordings, including audible small and performative 'noises', and possibly seeking careful new translations. In my work with the recording of Loide Shikongo's *oshitewo*, much of this revolved around the performer's voice, which was strong, clear, and confident. There were no pauses or insecure noises that might have indicated uncertainty about what she wanted to communicate to her immediate listeners, the Dammanns and Toivo Tirronen, of the mission's education department. She may have had a wider audience in mind; this remains speculative, however, and we will never know. Audibly, Meme Loide was in no way intimidated by the situation and intended to bring across a powerful message about the ambivalence of the developments associated with *pombonge*, the 'brick house'. Thus she expressed, symbolically and figuratively, an all-encompassing reference to modernity and the dialectics of colonizing practices and the new religious ideology.

Transcriptions and translations play a major role in how sound recordings constitute particular temporalities and (gendered) subjectivities. This relates to

[6] The German-language edition of Hoffmann's book *Kolonialgeschichte Hören* was published in 2020; a slightly revised English-language edition, published by the Basler Afrika Bibliographien, was launched in Windhoek and Cape Town in March 2023 (Hoffmann 2022; see also my extended review essay, Becker 2021).

Hoffmann's (2020, 2022) point that new translations of oral recordings often play a major role in close listening. The initial translation of Loide Shikongo's poem was into German. This translation was done by Tirronen, a long-time Finnish mission worker in northern Namibia whose aptitude in oshiNdonga was solid. However, the close engagement with the text by mother tongue speakers, writers, and critical thinkers, Nepeti Nicanor and Ben Ulenga, teased out a deeper understanding. Our joint discussions of the translation and the historical and cultural context of text and performance helped the analysis immeasurably.

Hoffmann argues further that close listening ought to be connected to reconstructing connections between different archives (e.g. those of artefacts, visual, the documentary). As in the case of the collection of the Austrian Rudolf Pöch, which she worked with, these connections may be strewn across a number of different holdings. Reconstructing connections further requires careful consideration of the historical context of recordings and, where possible, fieldwork. In this way, acoustic recordings can be deciphered as sense-making texts and contribute to challenging colonial knowledge production. Even though I was able to access the recording of Meme Loide's performance only some months after the initial fieldwork period in May 1999, speaking to the performer's contemporaries and members of the younger generation of her family contributed immensely to my understanding. The research assistant's reading of the carefully transcribed OshiNdonga text to our interlocutors also played an inordinate role: Monica Kalondo, a mother tongue speaker of OshiNdonga, who was raised in the mining town of Oranjemund in the deep south of Namibia, was at the time of fieldwork a University of Namibia law student in her twenties. Her engaging reading to our interlocutors created yet another significant polyphonic performance. This does not deny that if the interlocutors could have encountered the performer's own voice, this would have been inherently powerful.

Hoffmann's exploration of the challenges and opportunities presented by the sound archive follows in the footsteps of significant recent scholarship on the colonial institution of the archive. The influential work of Ariella Aïsha Azoulay (2019, 170–171), for instance, has powerfully demonstrated how ontological and epistemic violence are conflated in the archive, which is ostensibly a collection of documents to preserve the past. Azoulay argues that, instead, the archive shapes a world that violates people's rights to preserve their worlds and pursue their activities.

The Dammann collection: A critical reflection on a coloniser's sound archive

Azoulay's statement becomes evident also in the case of the Dammann collection, which presents a complex, even complicated case of a tremendously rich sonic and visual resource, which has now been digitalized. Soon after my brief telephonic contact with Ernst Dammann in December 1999, he donated the Dammanns' entire Namibia collection to the Basler Afrika Bibliographien. This collection is among the most significant southern African historical sound archives. During their nine months in southern Africa, Ernst and Ruth Dammann taped about 750 audio recordings with dozens of speakers and singers in about 20 languages and produced a host of manuscripts and notes.[7]

The sound recordings are now also available at the National Archives in Windhoek, where Namibians can consult them; they can

[7] The Dammanns spent most of their time in Namibia, but also recorded some orature in Botswana, South Africa, and Angola. Although these are not the subject of my reflections here, Ruth Dammann also took about 8,100 photographic images, which created a significant visual archive.

hear ancestral voices of their past compatriots or even family members. The collection is, according to a research project recently completed at the University of Basel, "one of the most extensive archives of regional languages, song repertoires and oral literatures of Namibia containing the voices, images and biographical fragments of more than 200 individuals" (Rensing and Rutishauser 2021).

While recordings such as Loide Shikongo's performance of a significant *oshitewo* provide us with fresh insights into gender and time, this is juxtaposed by the historical and political context of 1950s Namibia under Apartheid colonialism, and the collectors' positionality.

Ernst Dammann (1904–2003) was a German theologian and linguist. He had trained at the University of Hamburg in Theology and Missionary Studies, as well as in African languages as a student of Carl Meinhof. In 1957 he was appointed as chair of African Languages and Cultures at the University of Berlin (today known as Humboldt University), succeeding linguist Diedrich Westermann. Dammann left the University of Berlin, which was located in East Berlin, when the Berlin Wall was constructed and became Professor of History of Religion and African Languages at the University of Marburg in West Germany, where he taught from 1962 until his retirement in 1972.

Much criticism has been directed at Dammann due to his problematic political history, and particularly the fact that he became a member of the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP, the Nazi Party) as early as 1931, paying "tribute to the new political zeitgeist" and bringing "very conservative" perspectives to his research (Sullivan and Ganuses 2021). In the 1930s Ernst Dammann worked as a missionary of the Bethel Mission in the city of Tanga in the former German East Africa of Tanganyika (now Tanzania), from which he was later removed by the mission because of his activities as a *Landesgruppenleiter* (regional leader) of a foreign branch of the NSDAP (Henrichsen and Schaff 2009, xv).

Dag Henrichsen has further brought attention to Ernst Dammann's political activities regarding Namibia during the 1970s and 1980s, when he sometimes publicly attacked the Namibian liberation organization SWAPO (Dammann 1999, 265, 283, cited in Henrichsen and Schaff 2009, xv). He also pointed out, however, that at the same time Dammann "cultivated longterm contacts not only with the conservative settler society but also with well-known African priests and educators, some of them opponents of apartheid and colonization" (Henrichsen and Schaff 2009, xv).

Directly related to the Namibia collection are the context and the networks of the Dammanns' journey and collecting enterprise in the early 1950s. The Dammanns' collecting trip to South West Africa was made possible by the invitation of German colonial missionary ethnographer Heinrich Vedder, who was himself deeply implicated in the apartheid state's colonial administration of 'South West Africa'.[8] At the time of the Dammanns' visit Vedder was "the political representative for the African population" of the territory (Sullivan and Ganuses 2021). He welcomed the Dammanns upon their arrival in Cape Town in September 1953; Ernst and Ruth Dammann also stayed at Vedder's home in Okahandja.[9] The position Vedder occupied as the representative for of the black population of Namibia in the South African Senate was a paternalistic colonialist post created by the regime in Pretoria. The 'job description' for Dammann's research was explicitly in the interests of the colonial administration's efforts

[8] The research trip was funded by the German Research Society (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, DFG).
[9] Tagebuch von Ruth Dammann, Basler Afrika Bibliographien.

to document the 'cultures' of their colony.[10] We can thus rightly describe the Dammann collection as a "coloniser's archive" (Sullivan and Ganuses 2021).

Ernst Dammann's research interests comprised emblematic Africa-related subjects of the time, as well as religious studies in the broadest sense, regionally focusing on South-West and East Africa (Henrichsen and Schaff 2009, xiv). In both Germany and Africa, Dammann served occasionally as a cleric. As mentioned above, during the 1930s he was a missionary with the Bethel Mission and the pastor for an overseas German community in Tanzania. During the Dammanns' 1953–1954 trip to Southern Africa, Ruth Dammann noted in her diary on numerous occasions that he conducted religious services, in German, Afrikaans, and English, at various places where they spent time in Namibia.

Ernst Dammann has had the reputation of being a very conservative as well as a contrarian scholar, who was involved in a number of scholarly-political controversies, especially during his tenure at the university in (East) Berlin (Henrichsen and Schaff 2009, xv, footnotes 15 and 16). Corresponding with his political orientations and practices, he followed a conservative approach regarding his research methodology. As a linguist he focused on 'documenting' African languages in terms of language structure, syntax, and lexicon. He had minimal if any interest in the performative and social aspects of language and literature or orature. The German linguist's approach perfectly fit the expectations of those who had invited him to South West Africa for an extended research visit.

Importantly for the present considerations are the Dammanns' gender politics. Most of Ernst Dammann's informants were male, especially members of the emerging new elites, including clergymen and teachers, but also younger migrant labourers. We know little about how Ernst Dammann saw and responded to African women. Ruth Dammann's detailed diary, written throughout their nine-month long trip between September 1953 and May 1954, allows us a closer look. Her daily written notes are peppered with racist asides about black people they encountered in South West Africa, and demeaning remarks about black women in particular, especially their bodies, movements, and attitudes.[11] Like her husband's, Ruth Dammann's outlook was profoundly conservative and colonialist.

Also critical is the conservatism evident in the gendering of the Dammanns' working arrangements. Ruth Dammann (*née* Scholtisek, 1911–1995), from Wrocław (at the time of her birth known as Breslau), left medical school in Hamburg to assist in her husband's missionary and linguistic work in Tanganyika in the 1930s. For his research in what was then South West Africa, which aimed to document comprehensively as many African languages as possible, using a magnetophon, her exertion and skills were indispensable. As Ernst Dammann admitted in his memoirs, "My wife was to accompany me to perform the technical aspects of the language recordings which, unfortunately, are not within my competence" (Dammann 1999, 120).

Their research partnership was clearly structured along conservatively gendered lines. Ernst Dammann acknowledged that she "substituted for an assistant and a secretary", compensating for his "technical shortcomings" regarding "sound recordings, the photography as well as the driving of a car" (cited in Sullivan and Ganuses 2021). Even though Ruth Dammann played a decisive role in their collaborative knowledge production,

[10] Dammann's research can thus be considered in a similar light to the work of the government anthropologists appointed by the South African Department of Native Affairs, such as Guenther Wagner (see, e.g., Gewald 2002)

[11] See, e.g., Tagebuch von Ruth Dammann, Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 13.

publications were in Ernst Dammann's name only. There was only the most perfunctory acknowledgment of his unnamed "wife", for example in the introduction to the Ndonga anthology, which includes Loide Shikongo's *oshitewo* (Dammann and Tirronen 1975, x). There can be no doubt that Dammann's typically 1950s conservative middle-class perspectives on gender also played out in his work.

Coda

These observations on the context of the Dammanns' research trip and the epistemological underpinnings of the linguist's work are significant for the present reflections on historical sound recordings and the colonial archive. Doubtlessly, as indicated above, violent epistemes of colonial knowledge production were at play in the case of the Dammann collection. Looking at it from this angle, one might argue that it is indeed suggestive of the technology of the archive, as it embraces the recorded voices of the people and in the process suffocates and 'devours' their words in systematic ways that render them absent (Hoffmann 2020,13).

Yet, at the same time, the recording of Loide Shikongo's epic performance challenges the notion of *the* colonial archive as monolithic and allows for a different assessment of gender and time in northern Namibia. As Hoffmann (2020, 2022) argues, taking historical sound recordings seriously as resounding sources of colonial knowledge allows for a shift in perspective: if and when we approach colonial history as a *listener* of sound recordings rather than as a *reader* of written documents, we become able to incorporate different forms of expression from the past.

Hoffmann puts it boldly when she states: "Why, what could be heard is rarely accessible in reading" ("Warum, was gehört werden könnte, selten zu lesen ist"). She explains that the colonial archive is, at its core, an assemblage of discursive formations, which determined what was preserved by whom, and what was categorized and documented as 'knowledge'. This is where the epistemic violence of colonialism starts.

Close listening, fieldwork, efforts of sensitive connection to different archives, and adequate consideration of historical context may however reveal new avenues to open up 'the (colonial) archive' from problematic technology to polyphonic voices, which will allow for different perspectives on gender, time, and modernity.

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