

# THE EMPTY GRAVE

a film by Agnes Lisa Wegner and Cece Mlay



kurhaus  
production

KIJIWENI  
PRODUCTIONS

DAS KLEINE  
FERNSEHSPIEL

MFG  
BADEN-WÜRTTEMBERG

Die Beauftragte der Bundesregierung  
für Kultur und Medien

DEUTSCHER  
FILMFÖRDERFONDS  
DER BKM

<b>Genre</b>	Documentary
<b>Category</b>	Cinema
<b>Length</b>	97 minutes
<b>Format</b>	Cinemascope
<b>Languages</b>	Swahili, English, German
<b>Subtitles</b>	English
<b>Directors</b>	Agnes Lisa Wegner, Cece Mlay
<b>Producer</b>	Christoph Holthof, Daniel Reich Amil Shivji, Luna Selle
<b>TV-Editor</b>	Sara Günter (ZDF)
<b>DOP</b>	Marcus Winterbauer
<b>Sound</b>	Oliver Stahn
<b>Editor</b>	Donni Schoenemond
<b>Music</b>	Hannah von Hübbenet

THE EMPTY GRAVE follows the emotional journey of two Tanzanian families in search of their stolen ancestors. Their quest leads them to Germany, where tens of thousands of skulls and bones from former German colonies are stored in museum depots — a haunting legacy of colonial plunder in the early 20th century, taken for racist research and as macabre trophies.

Set in the present, the film unveils the enduring traces and traumas inflicted by colonial crimes on families and communities. It navigates the obscure maze of German and Tanzanian bureaucracy, revealing the struggle to reckon with this painful history. While the issue has gained political attention, the film shifts perspectives and highlights the resilience of the families while scrutinizing the complexity of identifying and repatriating these human remains.

THE EMPTY GRAVE is a compelling German-Tanzanian collaboration by kurhaus production and Kijiweni Productions, directed by Agnes Lisa Wegner and Cece Mlay. The film is a co-production with ZDF - DAS KLEINE FERNSEHSPIEL and received financial support from MFG Filmförderung Baden-Württemberg, the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media (BKM), and the German Federal Film Fund (DFFF).

# SYNOPSIS

PP.

Von meiner ersten Reise nach Madagascar habe ich eine große Anzahl von Haarproben der Beize auf Fadenaprilien sowie zwei Hova-Schädel und einige Sahalava-Schädel aus Madagaskar, die ich seiner Zeit Professor Virchow zur Untersuchung übergeben hatte. Ich erlaube mir die ergebene Anfrage, ob die Sachen in den Bestand des Museums übergegangen sind oder wo sich dieselben, die zur Zeit noch immer mein freies Eigentum sind, behufs wissenschaftlicher Bearbeitung reklamieren kann.

PP.

gez. A. V o s i t s k o w.

Berlin, den 7. Juni 1906.

7

8

9



In the South of Tanzania, the Majimaji resistance war was fought 115 years ago. One of the leaders of the resistance was Songea Mbanu. He was executed by the Germans. He was buried and his head was exhumed and taken to Germany. 115 years have passed and his family still lives under a heavy cloud of sorrow as they gather at his grave: the truth beneath it is that Songea Mbanu's head never rested in this sacred place.

His great-grandson John Makarius Mbanu takes on the assignment from his elders to bring his ancestor's remains back home. John is driven by the hope that his own children will not continue to live under the shadow of this grief and loss that has lingered in the family for too many generations. John's wife Cesilia is a history teacher and becomes a formidable partner in John's journey. Her path leads through the classroom where she is gripped with the pain and questions of the school children who want to know details of this painful history. John searches for traces of his ancestors' existence in their home town of Songea. He visits a memorial, goes to the last sacred place of his great-grandfather's life and walks through corridors of government offices – all in search of a path to getting to Germany.

Their determination opens a new chapter for them and finally, John and Cesilia make it all the way to Germany.

Mnyaka Sururu Mboro, born and raised at the foot of Mount Kilimanjaro, moved to Germany 40 years ago and has since been

battling institutions to open their doors to the basements where the remains of his ancestors from his home country of Tanzania are kept. Konradin Kunze, an activist, joins Mboro in his fight. Their resolve and dedication to unearthing what is hidden behind the doors of the institutions bears fruit as they make an important discovery about the remains of a chief from the North of Tanzania, Mangi Lobulu Kaaya. Mangi Lobulu was executed by the German colonial army in 1900, alongside 18 other leaders.

The Kaaya Family, based in the rural region of Mount Meru in Northern Tanzania, receive the life-changing news of Konradin's and Mboro's findings. It seems like it is only a matter of time until the Kaayas can bring their ancestor home and bury him. They are on the brink of ending the long period of mourning. Not just the family is relieved but also the community that longs to see the return of their deceased leader.

The cousins Felix and Ernest Kaaya take their family's and community's demands for the return of Mangi Lobulu to Dar es Salaam, the country's economic center. Here, they hope to meet with those who have the power to ensure the return of their great-grandfather. Their requests are heard but left unanswered. Felix and Ernest are left to themselves, swallowed among the high-rise buildings of the big city, and contemplating whether the pain of the past will ever be brought to an end.

Meanwhile in Berlin, John and Cesilia's search gathers pace. Joined by Mnyaka Sururu Mboro and Konradin Kunze, they get the opportunity to share their lived experience of grief and trauma with a high government official. Before their return home, they have an encounter with bones of beloved community members. For the first time, they see hope of an end to their mourning.

Back in Tanzania, as time passes on, they receive news that the President of Germany will be making a State visit to Tanzania. To their surprise, they are informed of the President's plans to come to Songea just to meet the Mbano family and hear their story in person.

An apology is made to the family and the community.

After the whirlwind of this significant visit, John and Cesilia are left weary and tired.

After all this time.

After all this grief.

They are still left longing for the return of their beloved.

## DIRECTOR'S NOTE



As the question of restitution became the lore in the current politics of the day, we found each other staring at our entangled history from both the Tanzanian and the German perspectives. As two women in film, our shared passion for tackling questions of injustice, inequity and community steered us away from the abstract political debate towards a more personal one, towards experienced history. The questions we each had about this past were searing. They circled around what trauma had been caused, what violence and suffering those former generations had inflicted and experienced, and how the restless ghosts of an unresolved past continue to haunt us now.

And so, this is where the story began for us.

In museum basements in Germany, thousands of boxes are hidden in the dark. These are not artifacts but human remains – who were these people? Far from being objects they are people whose lives were part of societies, part of communities and part of families. Ours was the work to reconstitute personhood.

The search began in Tanzania, formerly the largest colony of “German East Africa”, referred to by Germans as “Ein Platz an der Sonne” (a place under the sun). The German colonial rule is said to be one of the most brutal of all. It was a system that relied on forced labour, sexual violence, physical punishment and arbitrary hangings. During this colonial period, communities were decimated as men, women and

children disappeared, torn from their families, sometimes after public executions.

One of the largest and most brutal colonial wars was waged across the midlands to the Southernmost tip of what was then known as Tanganyika (now mainland Tanzania). The *Majimaji War* and its aftermath claimed the lives of around 300,000 people. This war was the largest resistance towards colonial German rule and it unified the nation. The gravity of this history is paramount to the national identity of Tanzania. However, in Germany, the Majimaji War is practically unheard of.

Politicians and researchers have been in the foreground of shaping the debate around restitution. As this debate rages around the return of remains there have been voices missing: The communities and even more so the family members who have lived with the absence of their loved ones for over a century now are not being heard.

This film breaks the silence. It gives the audience an opportunity to learn about colonial crimes that have been shoved under the rugs for over a century. And it asks crucial questions: How does a family, a community live with intergenerational trauma? Who is responsible for the actual restitution of ancestral remains? Which role do communities and families play in this process? Who will have the patience and tenacity to search for individual ancestors and how will

this be financed? And what it all comes down to: How do we want to live with each other?

*The Empty Grave* is a way toward remedy. The two families and activists take us on their personal journeys seeking peace and final rest for their loved ones in order to end the mourning of their families and communities. They tackle political inaction and institutional racism and deal with intergenerational grief in hope of a final return.

Our task as directors was to ensure that we told this story from the lens that matters most to us. Understanding that the personal is political, we let the families' own perspectives guide us through the process of making this film.

# DIRECTORS





**Agnes Lisa Wegner** studied American Studies as well as Film Sciences in Berlin and African-American Studies at Harvard University. After

receiving her M.A. from Freie Universität in Berlin, she worked with German human rights organizations for several years (Pro Asyl e.V., Forum Menschenrechte e.V.). In 2013, she began to work as a freelance writer and filmmaker. Since then, she has written and directed numerous films that were presented at international film festivals, on German public television as well as Netflix Europe. Her award-winning documentaries – among them “King Bansah and his daughter”, “No fucking ice cream”, and “The girl with the long hair” – are characterized by her intense engagement with topics such as discrimination, racism, human rights and solidarity. She lives in Mannheim, Germany.



**Cece Mlay** enjoys the communal work of filmmaking. She is currently at Kijiweni Productions working as an Assistant

Director and Creative Supervisor. She has been working through different departments collaborating with artists from various disciplines and backgrounds with the projects being produced by both Tanzanian and international film-makers. These stories take a critical and honest exploration into the social, the political and the historical. Her work ranges from tv series, award winning feature length and short films and documentaries: Siri ya Mtungi (2013-2014), Shoe Shine (2014), Aisha (2016), Vuta N’Kuvute (2021), Apostles of Cinema (2023).

She lives in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

# PRODUCERS



**kurhaus production** is an independent German film production company, founded in 2007 by Christoph Holthof and Daniel Reich in Baden-Baden. kurhaus production develops and produces feature films and documentaries as well as series for the international cinema, TV and streamer market. The company's award-winning films are engaging, courageous, relevant and touching. They are screened at the most important film festivals all over the world.

Filmography (selection):

**JONJA** | 2023 | Feature Film

Written & Directed by Anika Mätzke

**THE GOOSE PRINCESS** | 2022 | Fairy Tale

Written by Katrin Milhahn, Antonia Rothe-Liermann, Directed by Frank Stoye

**NIGHT FOREST** | 2021 | Feature Film

Written and directed by Katrin Milhahn and André Hörmann

**THE SEED** | 2021 | Feature Film

Written by Mia M. Meyer, Hanno Koffler, Directed by Mia M.I Meyer

**HEAD BURST** | 2019 | Feature Film

Written & Directed by Savaş Ceviz

**STRANGE DAUGHTER** | 2017 | Feature Film

Written by Karsten Dahlem & Stephan Lacant, Directed by Stephan Lacant

**FREE FALL** | 2023 | Feature Film

Written by Karsten Dahlem & Stephan Lacant, Directed by Stephan Lacant

[www.kurhausproduction.de](http://www.kurhausproduction.de)

**Kijiweni Productions** is an independent and esteemed Tanzanian film production house, spearheaded by Amil Shivji, boasting a decade of expertise in film production, mentorship, and exhibition. Committed to upholding international standards while authentically portraying local narratives, our focus revolves around sharing stories from marginalized communities. Our fiction films have garnered recognition at renowned festivals worldwide.

Filmography (selection):

**VUTA N'KUVUTE** (Tug of War) | 2021 | Feature Film

Written & Directed by Amil Shivji

**MOZIZI** | 2021 | Short Animation

Written & Directed by Amil Shivji

**WAHENGA** | 2018 | Feature Film

Written and directed by Amil Shivji and Rebecca Corey

**T-JUNCTION** | 2017 | Feature Film

Written & Directed by Amil Shivji

**AISHA** | 2015 | Feature Film

Written by Hamadi Mwapachu & Directed by Omar Chande

**SAMAKI MCHANGANI** | 2014 | Short Film

Written by Directed by Amil Shivji

**SHOSHINE** | 2013 | Short Film

Written by Directed by Amil Shivji

[www.kijiweniproductions.com](http://www.kijiweniproductions.com)

# CONTACT

kurhaus production  
Film & Medien Gmbh  
Fremersbergstraße 77a  
76530 Baden-Baden  
Germany

[office@kurhausproduction.de](mailto:office@kurhausproduction.de)  
[www.kurhausproduction.de](http://www.kurhausproduction.de)

Kijiweni Productions LTD  
P.O.BOX 953  
Plot 54, Alykhan Rd  
Dar-Es-Salaam  
Tanzania

[kijiweniproductions@gmail.com](mailto:kijiweniproductions@gmail.com)  
[www.kijiweniproductions.com](http://www.kijiweniproductions.com)