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Understanding Liminality and Intangible Difficult Heritage through Film

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ABSTRACT

The tourist's role in engaging with difficult heritage is described as a liminal one, in a state of "limbo" outside of their ordinary lives, embracing the challenging historical narratives presented by difficult heritage while also maintaining a certain detachment. This liminality parallels the cinematic experience, where the audience temporarily resides in a similar state of in-betweenness, delving into imagined traumatic pasts from the safety of the present. This paper contributes both to literature on difficult heritage and to intangible cultural heritage to reveal the need for a more nuanced appreciation of intangible difficulty heritage when concerning genocide and war. It presents the 'Dealing with Trauma through Film' project, with a particular emphasis on its materiality within the context of the German-Namibian conflict and genocide, regarded as difficult heritage. Nelson's concept of liminality plays a pivotal role in understanding the dynamic between the film audience and the experience of the actors involved. The primary focus here is on the production of the German movie 'Der Vermessene Mensch' (The Measures of Men and outlines the intricate representation of intangible aspects of difficult heritage related to conflict through the medium of film.

KEYWORDS

intangible cultural heritage; difficult heritage; memorial; film

Introduction

'Heritage is a material as well as a symbolic practice. (Even what is sometimes called "intangible heritage" – e.g. dances, songs or ideas – typically takes a material form, if only in its recording, of a sort.) This materiality matters.'[1]

In the aftermath of war, it is the embodied landscape, a palimpsest of stories and lives written and rewritten in memory and shared experience[2] which may provide the last legacy of difficult heritage. In this landscape, the physical remains of conflict and its materiality may indeed be very sparse. Therefore, it is often the painful memories, stories and written histories that we rely upon to remember those involved in bloody war. Heritage is passed on through stories bringing us closer to people's past and the present and allowing us to learn about their points of view, their values and their aspirations and help us to re-negotiate ours.[3]

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Throughout this process, important questions exist around the agency of the victims, appropriation, exploitation and restitution: *Who tells the story? Who finances the manifestation of the story? Who controls the exploitation of the final product and the exhibitions? Who gets recognition for telling those stories and who owns the copyright? Who makes money from the storytelling of traumatic events and how?*

In Namibia, for instance, the formally recorded history is mostly contextualised through the perspective of the dominant white minority experience. It is this community that controls the narrative, funds most of the content produced thus far, and it is the white minority who run or own most tourist sites concerning history and culture. Colonial monuments such as the Tower in Omaruru, the plaques at the Christuskirche, the museum at Kolmanskop, the museum in Swakopmund, the Shark Island site all honour the memory of settlers/colonisers or for instance the fallen German soldiers. There are no formal Herero (OvaHerero) nor Nama museums, telling the stories of these inhabitants of Namibia, who were there before settler communities, nor are there films made from their perspectives. There are parallels here in the 'storytelling' of film and the 'storytelling' that

Figure 1. 'Der Vermessene mensch' (the measures of Men).

frames memorial sites for tourists and citizens. Film is a medium which represents this aspect of history and shared intangible heritage, but it is also through film that memory and story is rendered material. It is a dynamic inscription of a people's relationship to the events of the past, a means of connection between the present and the past, which itself defines the notion of heritage.

Nelson in 2019 described[4] the role of the tourist in difficult heritage as a liminal one, they 'occupy a state of limbo outside of their normal places and lives', they are both immersed in the experience of difficult heritage whilst visiting the site but detached from it at the same time. Parallels between tourism sites and film remain, where the audience is similarly placed temporarily in this limbo state – visiting an imagined traumatic past from the relative safety of the present.

In this article, we explore the project 'Dealing with Trauma through Film' and specifically its materiality in the difficult heritage of German-Namibian conflict and genocide. The theoretical lens of liminality offered by Nelson is important here for appreciating the relationship with the film audience, but also the experience of its actors. The focus is the production of the German movie 'Der Vermessene Mensch' (The Measures of Men)[5] (Figure 1) in which the lead author, Joel Haikali, was one of the Executive Producers of the film in Namibia, and it is through this lens that we consider the intangible, difficult heritage of conflict through film.

Namibia is a highly segregated society with a lot of unspoken racial dynamics that influence how people interact with each other. Other than managing relations within the production as one of the local Executive Producers, it was therefore also important to manage relations with interest groups involved in the negotiations of genocide and politicians as this topic is highly charged and politicised. As persons of colour, the local executive producers received the benefit of trust from survivor communities and their descendants in that their voices and their trauma would be acknowledged and respected. On the other hand, it was also necessary to manoeuvre within the power dynamics that otherwise formed a borderline hostile and undermining environment during and after production.

This film brought together both OvaHerero and German descendants to shed light on the darkest period in human history. Putting on costumes like their forefathers and re-enacting some of the most dehumanising acts, it was important to explore that experience for the actors and extras.

The film is an important tribute to the first genocide of the 20th century (1904–1907) and as such it validates the demands for dealing with it. There is a hope that it opens the possibility of creating safe spaces for mainstreaming the dialogue about the genocide and bringing it from the political elites and into the mass consciousness both in Namibia and Germany. Lastly, through its protagonist, the film also highlights the dark role of science and universities in the intellectualisation and absolution of atrocity.

Literature

The approach to cultural heritage adopted by UNESCO and outlined in the Paris convention of 1972 focused initially on Western museological principles of 'great' monuments and 'great' civilisations considered as artistic masterpieces. Through pressures to acknowledge cultural expression, a section on 'non-physical heritage' was

added in 1982 with a legal framework created in 1989 with the 'Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore'.[6] The drivers behind this acknowledgement were the protection of valuable knowledge, customs, traditions and lifestyles that were increasingly under pressure in the face of rapid globalisation. Intangible cultural heritage defined by UNESCO is therefore defiant and valorised in positive terms (or at least any conflict or dissonance is downplayed). It is described as a 'living heritage' which includes community gatherings, oral traditions, songs, knowledge of natural spaces, healing traditions, foods, holidays, beliefs, cultural practices, skills of making handicrafts, methods of agriculture and cattle breeding, traditional navigation skills, cooking skills.

UNESCO describes the potential for intangible cultural heritage as a medium for inclusivity. Here the shared nature of expressions and the potential to bind and create cohesive communities is underlined 'whether they are from the neighbouring village, from a city on the opposite side of the world, or have been adapted by peoples who have migrated and settled in a different region, they all are intangible cultural heritage: they have been passed from one generation to another, have evolved in response to their environments and they contribute to giving us a sense of identity and continuity [. . .] It contributes to social cohesion, encouraging a sense of identity and responsibility'.[7]

Overwhelmingly intangible cultural heritage is expressed in celebratory terms and represents an important acknowledgement of the otherwise unseen, it 'represents the variety of living heritage of humanity as well as the most important vehicle of cultural diversity'.[8] But what about the intangible heritage of trauma? Celebratory terms are obviously not appropriate here and our definitions of intangible cultural heritage require nuance and sensitivity. Intangible cultural heritage can equally be a source of division as inclusion and the antecedent of conflict as much as cohesion. The intangible heritage of memory and story is a critical means for those experiencing trauma to process and pass along to the next generations the impacts of their experiences.

The initial absence of immaterial heritage from the Paris convention of 1972 can be seen as evidence of the traditional belief that cultural and social identities were automatically transferred and preserved at the local level through the ongoing performance of traditional practices.[9] This perspective is based upon Bourdieu's theory of cultural (re) production whereby the link between an original group membership and subsequent members is reproduced and forged via transmission through socialisation and cultural practices.[10]

However, the maintenance of indigenous storytelling and performance was acknowledged by the mid-1980s as being under pressure with reference to Aboriginal culture in an Australian context. We may consider the living heritage of trauma an area of particular concern, with its preservation rendered highly sensitive through performance. The audience is placed in a liminal position, unable to fully immerse in the meaning and context.

Challenging and difficult heritage refers to those aspects of cultural inheritance which evoke controversy, conflict, or discomfort due to their associations with painful events, difficult narratives, or sensitive topics. This is an area of heritage research which has tended to focus on the materially visible such as sites, buildings, artworks, monuments and other artefacts. It is society's struggle with reconciling the presence of the past which creates dissonance. 'Dissonant heritage' describes the 'contrast of meaning and value systems between past and present'.[11]

In the exploration of Germany's remains of its Nazi past, MacDonald emphasises issues surrounding the physical presence of difficult heritage in relation to the public representation and consumption of the past and questions 'how far forgetting is possible in the face of an enormous physical presence, and how far meaning and historical understanding are constrained or shaped by materiality'.[12] But memory and shared understanding can loom as large a presence as any monument; however, the difficulty in reconciling this with the present is not as uniquely obvious to all as when physical remains exist.

For those who do not share the burden of remembering or of cultural knowledge of painful events, reconciliation with the present bears little concern or direct impact. Therefore, the rendering of memory into the performance and material form of film serves as an important, albeit painful, means of creating equitable grounds for negotiating the past through the present. MacDonald employs the term 'negotiating the past' as a 'less evocative or discourse-specific term than some of those that have been used by others – often to interesting effect – in discussion of Germany's landscapes. Several commentators, for example, have talked of "ghosts" – of being "haunted by" the Nazi and other pasts; and many have used psychoanalytical terms such as "repression" and "trauma"'.[13] However, referring to these latter terms as 'tropes' MacDonald could be interpreted as casting criticism of them as overly used, resulting in a devaluation of the role of emotion in difficult heritage discourse.

Smith and Campbell present the importance of acknowledging emotion in heritage interpretation and presentation: 'understanding how the interplay between emotions and remembering are informed by people's culturally and socially diverse affective responses must become central in a politically informed critical heritage studies'.[14] Emotional and affective approaches to heritage highlight the emotional responses evoked by challenging and difficult heritage. From this perspective, the role of affective engagement in shaping interpretations, memories and attitudes towards heritage acknowledges the complex emotional landscapes that ultimately arise.

From the perspective of Conflict Theory, difficult heritage arises from the social and political conflicts surrounding historical events or cultural practices. Interpretations of the past can give rise to multiple narratives and contested memories. This theory underscores the importance of acknowledging diverse perspectives, engaging in dialogue and understanding the power dynamics inherent in heritage representation.[15]

'Simmel (1908 and 1950[16]) was concerned primarily with abstracting the "forms" of social reality from ongoing social processes, whereas Marx in 1848 and 1867 was committed to changing social structures by altering the course of social processes. Thus, Simmel's analytical scheme was the product of a more passive and less passionate assessment of conflict, while Marx's scheme reflected political commitment to activating conflicts which would change the structure of society'.[17]

In exploring the difficult heritage of Fascism in post-war and contemporary Italy, Carter and Martin[18] refer to the term 'dissonant heritage' used by Tunbridge and Ashworth[19] as 'history that hurts' and inevitably involves 'a contrast of meaning and value systems between past and present'.[20] However, they state a preference for the term difficult over 'dissonant' as the former is more explicit in confronting us with the impact of the past upon the present.

The spaces through which this confrontation occurs are equally important. Liyanage and Powell[21] present the rich literature on 'Dark Tourism' (with particular reference to

Lennon and Foley 2000)[22] to explore the visitor experience at the Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial Site. It is clear in the account of participants' experiences that the site also forms an important space for supportive reflection whilst confronted with difficult heritage. Feelings of anger, sadness and empathy may be disorientating and hard to process[23] placing the audience in a liminal position 'out-of-time'. Samuels[24] reinforces the importance of the space as a medium through which to help heritage audiences process difficult heritage confrontation. For the film audience, this is particularly the case given the vast array of spaces through which film may be consumed ('The Measures of Men' is currently on a major airline's offering of inflight movies). Space may be considered as to be 'literally filled with ideologies'[25] which serve to maintain or challenge institutional interests.[26]

Gaventa's 'Power Cube'[27] is a framework to help understand public and community agency through space and has been employed, for example, by Giva and Sriskandarajah[28] in exploring engagement between management of the National Park in Mozambique and local communities. Investigating local participation in conservation management at Kangchenjunga in Nepal, Myhrvold[29] presents the multi-scale geographic nature of political space using Gaventa's three axes of the Power Cube; 'Forms' (visible, invisible and hidden), 'Levels' (global, national and local) and 'Spaces' (closed, invited and claimed/created). Claimed spaces offer the highest form of community power and range from 'ones created by social movements and community associations, to those simply involving natural places where people gather to debate, discuss and resist, outside of the institutionalised [or smothered] policy arenas'.[30]

This paper explores the potential for film to create that safe space to deal with collective trauma.

Namibian Conflict

Most black[31] Namibians have no safe space, agency or resources to express stories of colonial oppression and atrocity inflicted on them from own perspectives and for imagining or rather telling alternative narratives. The systemic violence faced by black Namibians ensured that their suppression was further perpetuated in the visual narratives about non-white people, their humanity and their abilities or the lack thereof. These dominant narratives shape the way people perceive themselves and the world around them. Scholars such as Edward Said[32] argued that colonialism left a cultural legacy that replicates the justification for superiority of the imperial culture over the 'native' culture in need of being 'civilized'. And exploring the impacts and legacy of colonisation Amoako[33] highlights how:

> Colonial governments established new or hybrid institutions which focussed on assisting the administrations to plan and rule, and supported trade with the colonies. Yet, in most African countries, the imported, formal capitalist institutions were not congruent with the indigenous institutions and thus hampered development of trust in institutions of state. (Amoako 2019, 109)

Consequently, many African countries struggle to present arts and culture to the international community as having economic and historical values to humanity and instead have a tendency to bow to international interest.[34] This in many ways influences the

content that is produced today and how a dominant narrative can still impose a 'colonial gaze' through a lens that oppressed people use to view themselves as well.

Namibia has an extensive history of Colonialism and Apartheid, which has subsequently resulted in long-term traumatic effects experienced by individuals and communities. Under German colonial rule (1884–90) the Namibian population was dispossessed, oppressed and deprived of their rights, which continued under the South African Apartheid until Namibian Independence on the 21 March 1990. The non-white population had been systematically excluded from meaningful participation in the economy, consequently affecting society today socio-economically but also psychologically. For instance, over 70% of the 39.7 million hectares of commercial agricultural land still belong to Namibians of European descent. The huge economic disparity has resulted in a dual economy – a highly developed modern one, co-existing with one that is informal and subsistence-oriented. The Global Entrepreneurship Monitor data for Namibia[35] reinforces this phenomenon in its Total Early-Stage Entrepreneurship (TEA) figures. TEA represents the percentage of 18–64 population who are either a nascent entrepreneur or owner-manager of a new business. The global average in 2013 (Namibia's latest available data) is 13.55%, the regional average covering Sub-Saharan Africa is 23.81%. For Namibia, this figure is 33.34% of all adults 18–64. This statistic puts into stark spotlight the level of necessity and subsistence-level enterprise that is taking place to compensate for lack of stable employment. To capture this, we may consider GEM's Motivational Index, which calculates the ratio of necessity-driven entrepreneurship to improvement-driven entrepreneurship among early-stage entrepreneurs. The Global average is 2.76 the Regional average is 2.06, and for Namibia, this figure is 0.98 which illustrates a much lower level of enterprise activity through perceived opportunity. To a large part, Namibia still uses the judicial and financial systems that were set up to serve the interests of colonial power. That explains why Namibia is one of the most unequal countries in the world with youth unemployment of about 40% and high rates of domestic violence. According to a report by the Ministry of Health at the end of 2022, alarmingly there are also increasing suicide rates among young men, making it the fourth highest in Africa.

The wounds of the past and the psychological scars resulting from the trauma of genocide under German colonial rule, as well as the traumatic experiences suffered under the apartheid regime, have yet to be addressed. The history that is taught at Namibian schools is still that of Jan Van Riebeek, and the names of those that brought so-called civilisation and development to Africa. There is a lot of pain around the posturing and appropriation of pain and trauma in Namibia. In the absence of tools for dealing with that, or any policy for dealing with trauma as a society, it is often left to politicians to fill in the blanks. The official discussion about the return of artefacts and the reaction to the joint declaration[36] in the Namibian parliament is a case in point. There are no Herero or Nama museums nor are films made from their perspectives. This proves contentious with the Nama and Ovaherero communities rejecting the 'deal' between the Namibian Government and the German government on the reparation for genocide (although it was not called that in their joint declaration which is the matter of a court case in Namibia and has been criticised by the UN Special Rapporteurs).[37]

In her Ted talk in 2009 Adichie speaks about the danger of a single story which we call the dominant narrative here[38]: 'The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story'.[39]

The internalisation of this narrative is used to control people because ultimately their identity is imposed upon. Chapman[40] further argued that national identity and creating a story of a nation requires people to make decisions about what they remember and how. Film as a narrative construct can therefore play a role in raising consciousness and cultural reaffirmation in formerly colonised people, furthering national healing, reconciliation and nation building.[41]

'The Measure of Man' (Der Vermessene Mensch)

In 2021, the first cinematic portrayal of the German genocide of the Ovaherero in the film production 'The Measure of Man (Der Vermessene Mensch)' was screened. This deeply traumatic story about the German colonial past in Namibia was written and directed by a white German filmmaker Lars Kraume. Generally, the first reception of the film in Namibia was positive especially among the Ovaherero community who were able to see it. The affected communities appreciated that their story was finally on screen. It was hoped that this would subsequently open a gateway to better access and funding for more storytelling from different perspectives about this important founding trauma of the nation. Generally speaking, though, there was no open debate about the film locally in general as there were only two public screenings in the capital, Windhoek.

The story of the film follows a German anthropologist into what was then German Southwest Africa at the end of the 19th century during the time of the genocide. As such the film also highlights the role of science and universities in intellectualising and providing the necessary theoretical framework, and moral absolution, for committing these atrocities and for maintaining these racist systems enforced by minorities on local populations. The perspective through which the genocide is told is therefore ultimately one of the spectators and the audience is placed in this challenging, liminal space.

At the same time, the production of the film provided a space for involved descendants of both German and Ovaherero actors to engage with their past by re-enacting the lives of their ancestors. When the film was completed, efforts were made by the German production team to show the film to the Namibian audience first, especially to the Ovaherero community.

The process of producing the film also revealed how segregated Namibian society still is, with a lot of unspoken racial dynamics that influence how people interact with each other, especially with regard to the highly politicised topic of genocide. During the production, there were concerns of interest groups and affected communities that the film might interfere with ongoing discussions with the German government for reparations and that it absolves perpetrators of having to further deal with the impact of the genocide on Namibians.

On the occasion of the German premiere of the film 'Der vermessene Mensch' at the Berlinale International Film Festival in February 2023 there was an open letter criticising the film and two others as well as the Berlinale and ending with a call for more diversity and fairer, non-discriminatory funding structures in the German film industry.

While there is a lot of hurt around the appropriation of pain and trauma in Namibia, the writer and the director of the film Lars Kraume explained at different screenings that he can only provide an outsider's perspective on the topic, in fact the German perspective. The authors of the open letter criticised the lack of the Herero perspective under the 'misguided' pretext of avoiding cultural appropriation and questioned whether the claimed 'German perspective' reflects the diversity of German society.

The film especially takes the audiences from surviving communities into a dark place that might well force them to re-live traumatic experiences passed down as stories through generations. Telling Namibian stories for the most part is almost always about confronting or dealing with collective trauma. The popular African Proverb about story-telling says that 'Until the lion tells its own story, tales of the hunt will always glorify the hunter'. This implies the need and necessity to own one's narrative as the dominant narrative does serve a self-interest. There is a European saying 'he who pays the piper calls the tune'.

Ultimately the narrative will reflect the interest and power of those who are paying, and they therefore get to shape the perspective of the narrative and ultimately people's understanding of the world. Making local resources available for filmmaking enhances ownership and Bomba (2010) stresses the importance of the availability of local financing as it helps to decrease the dependence of cultural practitioners on Western funding, enabling them to exercise more control over this powerful medium.[42] As Adichie stated in 2009 'It is impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power. [. . .] Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person'.

Reflections

The 'storytelling' of film and that which frames memorial sites for tourists and citizens have strong complementarity. However, the spaces which are opened-up for discourse are potentially more politically charged in the ephemeral and 'invited' space of film as compared to the formal sense of place at memorial sites. Desperate formerly colonised storytellers who are queuing for limited and highly competitive funding from former colonisers, are forced to accept the compromised stance of engagement with the colonial past and trauma. In considering the narrative space of film, the necessary shift here is from the invited space offered by foreign storytellers to one of claimed/created space formed by those to whom the stories belong. The initial positivity received from the Ovaherero stakeholder audiences in Namibia was due to the expectation that the film would represent an opening of discussion, the hope that it would essentially represent a difficult 'monument' requiring negotiation thus generating awareness and debate which they may come to claim. However, the very limited screening would not be able to achieve this, and it remains critical that this political space does not become closed.

The current structures of collaboration and creative engagements give priority to the posture of the west as a prerequisite for the release of funds by setting up power relations that are unbalanced and recreate existing dynamics. Producers *needing* to be from the funding countries, significant funds *needing* to be spent in funding countries, editing *needing* to happen in funding countries. This gives very little autonomy and power over narratives for local storytellers. Power dynamics are critical when it comes to storytelling

and the transformation of difficult heritage from intangible to tangible. The question remains whose story are we telling, to which audience and from which perspective? A white writer/director from Germany telling the story about the deeply traumatic German Namibian past can only provide his perspective. Making a film in a very fragile environment about the founding trauma of the country, despite the progressive intentions by the incoming German team, the power dynamics in the production and the creative process were imbalanced.

To help create the claimed spaces of political discourse, it is important to facilitate audience feedback and reactions into meaningful debate, and local screenings of the film would benefit from a context and possibly more engagements after the screenings. Rendering the intangible traumatic memory and culture of stakeholder audiences and communities into tangible form through film creates a dissonant/difficult media-based artefact. Through dissemination and exposure, it can stand as a 'monument' which will inevitably become the dominant narrative. As a single perspective, it must therefore serve to open further debate to reduce its own dominance and generate a multitude of stories, so that those communities concerned may claim a space in the narrative that is their own heritage. The liminality of the audience cannot be avoided nor should it, as it is this liminality that helps create agonistic space for the past to be continually negotiated by audiences into their present. That is, as long as all perspectives are afforded materiality. This materiality matters.

Notes

1. Macdonald 2010, 26.
2. Fairclough 2003; Turner and Fairclough 2007.
3. Celi and Boiero 2002.
4. Nelson 2019, 298.
5. Tschierse 2023.
6. Bortolotto 2007.
7. UNESCO, Article 2: Definitions https://ich.unesco.org/en/what-is-intangible-heritage-00003 Accessed 2/1/0/23
8. Lenzerini 2011, 10.
9. Lenzerini 2011.
10. Bourdieu 1973.
11. Nauert 2017, 18; Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996.
12. MacDonald 2010, 19.
13. MacDonald 2010, 20.
14. Smith and Campbell 2015, 443.
15. Jameson and Baugher 2022.
16. Wolff, 1950.
17. Turner 1975, 619, citing Simmel (1908), 187
18. Carter and Martin 2019.
19. Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996.
20. Nauert 2017, 16.
21. Liyanage, Coca-Stefaniak and Powell 2015.
22. Lennon and Foley (2000).
23. Nelson 2020.
24. Samuels 2015.
25. Soja, 1989, 80.
26. Harvey 1989.

27. Gaventa 2006.
28. Giva and Sriskandarajah 2014.
29. Myhrvold 2014.
30. Gaventa 2006, 10.
31. And "coloured" so here meant as non-white.
32. Edward Said (1994); 2012
33. Amoako (2019), 109
34. Dobson et al 2020.
35. https://www.gemconsortium.org/economy-profiles/namibia Accessed 2/10/23
36. https://www.parliament.na/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Joint-Declaration-Document-Genocide-rt.pdf Accessed 2/10/23
37. The Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence; the Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights; the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions; the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living and on the right to non-discrimination in this context; the Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples; the By the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance and the Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences. See Teffera 2023.
38. Referring to the "Authorised Heritage Discourse", Smith 2006.
39. Adichie, Ted Talk 2009.
40. Chapman 1998.
41. Bomba, 2010.
42. Bomba, 2010, 12.

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