

Interview Transkript: Martha Akawa

Interview vom 05.07.2025, Seminarraum an der Universität Bremen.

Vor Beginn des Interviews wurde Marthas Einverständnis zur Aufnahme des Gesprächs eingeholt.

C: Charlotte

M: Martha Akawa

C: Yeah, maybe you can introduce yourself first.

M: My name is Martha Akawa, I'm from Namibia. I am a historian and I'm currently working at the University of Namibia as a historian, but also as an associate dean for the School of Humanities, Societal Development, where history is also under that school.

C: We talked a lot about solidarity and what does that mean and if there is a definition, and I wanted to know what does remembrance work in solidarity mean to you personally, and do you have a personal definition for the term solidarity, or is there no definition?

M: I think it's very important to look at solidarity and solidarity work within specific contexts. And the contexts move and they shift and they evolve, and obviously you cannot have the same and stiff definition of what solidarity means, because it evolves with time and what is at stake at the specific time that you are looking at. For me, the 1970s, when the concept is being referred to in this particular moment, I think it's appropriate because it was solidarity works that were done by Bremen and by the people of Bremen towards Swapo, the liberation movement. Maybe what I want to add is that we need to understand that there were countries, for instance, at the state level that supported apartheid, but it does not mean the state represents everyone, because you will find within a particular country at a particular time that maybe supported apartheid, but there were groups of people that did not support apartheid. And they organized themselves, even in a very structural way, as anti-apartheid movements. So you would have anti-apartheid movements, you would have things like *Friends of Namibia*, and things like that within a particular context. So I think solidarity should not be defined in a very rigid way, so that it excludes other works and activities that were done as solidarity work. I didn't give you a definition, but I think I just gave you a context. It is very important to look at the context and contextualize what was done, so that we can say, yes, this was solidarity work, this was something else, and so on and so on. But I think within the context of the 1970s, I would say what was happening was solidarity work.

C: So there is not one definition, you have to put it in a context.

M: Yes, I think it is safer to put it in a context. It is safer to put it in a context, otherwise then you are stuck in a definition, because the situations are completely different. Currently, for instance, we have things that are happening, some might want to say it is activism, or activists, or solidarity with the people of X, Y, Z. So I think the context is very important, so that we are not stuck within a definition.

C: You already mentioned it a little bit, but from your perspective, what does a successful reappraisal of colonialism look like? For example here in Bremen. So do you think that Bremen's remembrance work is beneficial in a way, and also is it enough to remember?

M: I think it creates a moment and a space for people to think about it. Maybe there were people that didn't think about it, but once it starts, someone can say. Actually, you know. So I think that is very important. It awakens people, it allows people to get involved in whatever way they could. So I think that is quite important. Of course, in any given time, you would always have people that are already away, but you would also have people that might not be away, and that moment creates a spark: „Oh, actually, what they are doing is good, or what they are doing or what is happening is not good, and then I might get involved in this way or the other way.“ I think it creates that space and that moment of a bulb being put on, and people to get on board. And to think about, and also reflect, even at a personal level, what she was referring to. Maybe someone was saying: „Maybe if I put an email in this way, it's not nice, it triggers someone else.“ So it also allows for those moments of self-reflection at all levels, personal level, whatever community level, whatever level. So it creates that space for things to start.

C: Yeah, that's important as well, yes. And how would you assess the change in solidarity work today? Because that's our exhibition chapter, we also focused on the University of Bremen, but also what is Bremen doing today, and also compared to the past?

M: Well, I think one can look at it from different perspectives. There are, of course, a lot of changes, and the changes are not just in geopolitics spaces or environment, but also in the way people do things. I mean, I can imagine in the 90s, for you to learn about this, it's either maybe an article written in a newspaper or a letter written or something. But these days things are so fast, things are so fast. In a day or two we learn something that happened in Spain, or you could even learn about it as it's happening live. So I think those changes are there. But also it's not just, let's say, media or whatever, but also in terms of structures, of structural issues, maybe structural inequalities, structural racism. I mean, there are always those changes. They might not be seen as big, but obviously there is a change. And you need to understand people would always want more. They would always demand, they would always ask for more. Ideally, in an ideal utopia world, we want everything to be nice and same, equal. But maybe reality is not always like that. But it doesn't mean

people should not continue asking and demanding. But for me, I think that evolution is also in the spaces created. I can imagine in the 1970s it was not the same when people stood up and protested. Maybe the measures and punitive measures were worse than now. So those evolutions are there. It might take time, but I think what matters is that it is continuing, it is going, it is not stuck, it is not still, that's the word. English is also not my first language. So that movement, it might not be as fast as we want to see it, but it is moving. And I think maybe that's the good thing about it. And also the fact that space is created for people to demand and ask. I think that's also another evolution or continuous development in terms of spaces of remembrance and spaces of demanding social justice.

C: Do you see any gaps in, for example, Bremen's culture of remembrance or also in a transnational perspective, and how could these be filled?

M: Gaps are always there. There will always be gaps. Even where I come from, I'm from Namibia, memory, memorialization, spaces of remembrance are invented with contestation. The contestations will always be there, and I think it is going to be unnatural if the contestations stop, because the contestations are always there. Yesterday we were taken to the elephant, the whole space, and the first thing that struck me, the elephant, the elephant in its representation and in its presentation, and I'm going to emphasize that one. It's a very huge animal. Even in real life it's very big. And I don't think it was random that an elephant was chosen. An elephant was chosen deliberately to have a symbolic representation and presentation. Now, when I went there, just looking at that representation and that the presentation, for me, was already a question. It's a question of being grand, omnipresent. When you walk and you come, you see the elephant, but you need to reach the place to see the genocide memorial site. Was that random? Was that deliberate? What does that mean? And for me, it's not just symbolic, it's literal. So, for me, that's a big gap. And then it brings this question of, was this comparison and this really just superficial to say we address it? Or is there really a genuine intention to address? So, for me, that's a very big issue. It's a very big issue. The question that I asked earlier, are you going to take a monument which was colonial in its very main, the primary purpose of it? It was a very colonial monument. What I read is that there were even names, 1,500 names, commemorating the people that died in the world wars. For you to say I'm taking exactly the same monument and repurpose or redefine its meaning by adding four or five sentences, is that enough? And those are the questions that are asked, and there are questions that should still be asked so that they can be engaged with. My question earlier, how do you take something that is so colonial and you are going to decolonize it? How do you do that? How do you decolonize something that is embedded with colonialism? It's a very huge task. So, for me, those are very serious gaps. Really, if the intention is to address the past, the intention has to be intentional. It should not be presented as a gesture. It should be intentional. It should result in things that are also tangible. I mean, a lot of inequalities in terms of a lot of things. I mean, it's not about the monument. It's also

about what goes with it. It's about, let's say, the cultural artefacts that are everywhere in this country. It's about the human remains that are in many institutions in this country. So, you cannot just say we have a monument and that's enough. Add other things and other activities that are so tangible that are showing the intentionality of decolonizing. Otherwise, it is superficial. It's a gesture. It's a once-off. It ends there. But it doesn't address many other things. Inequalities are there. And people may think I'm very dramatic. I always question and I always complain, even for me just to get a visa to come here. To do this, it took long. There are a lot of requirements that I need to meet. The airport in Munich, when I landed, I literally had to open my app. And show the officer my bank account. He said, how much money do you have? I said, everything is paid for. Yeah, but still I want to see. How much money do you have? Yes. I said, I'm carrying 60 euros in my pocket. Because, you know, it's for me. When I get there, I should be able to eat. Everything else is prepared for. While that is ongoing. He said, no, it's not enough. If you don't have enough money, I'm going to send you back. I had to literally open my app and show him the amount of money that I had. And he was satisfied. And he said, okay, I'll give you a stamp. Enjoy. And those are the inequalities that I'm saying an elephant as big as it is does not address. So, well and good enough to have an elephant as big as it is. But other activities and other aspects that are tangible must be linked to this thing. Otherwise it's meaningless to say this is an anti-colonial monument. And I think there are many, many others that have to accompany. What is regarded as decoloniality.

C: So what would be necessary from your point of view to ensure that those monuments are not purely symbolic? That they are actually carrying something further?

M: I think I've mentioned earlier, the practical and the tangible part of things that we should feel. We should feel. It's not enough that the first president of Namibia came here and he was at the inauguration. It's not enough that on the 11th of August there's a commemoration or a memorial or a remembrance of that battle of Ohamakari. There should be tangible things that translate into an everyday issue. I talk about inequalities. I talk about unequal power relations that are there. And we feel them. We feel them. We are talking about how issues are dealt with. Even the issue of genocide. I find it very problematic to say that Germany is offering this amount of money as development aid. Because if you look at what development aid and what it entails, it's not something nice. It has its own history. It has its own connotation. And for Germany to say we are giving you this amount of money over a period of whatever years as development aid, for me it's very problematic. So there are a lot of things that need to be addressed. And I'm still going to repeat that there has to be intentional ways of addressing issues more than just having an elephant. For me, it has to be like that.

C: So for example, also incorporate that in schools, more context, more discourse about this? So people feel it more? Or what do you say creates that tangibility?

M: Yeah, yeah. That tangibility must also be taught in schools. I know the ancestors, it's not your parents, it's not your grandparents, it's not your great-grandparents that did that. But just teach what Germany did. And I always say that the more the people understand and learn about this, the more they are going to be empathetic. Because then you understand, where is she coming from? Where am I coming from? From my perspective, where am I coming from? Because you understand better, you understand my space, where I'm coming from. It is a very unpleasant history. One can also say it's a very shameful history. But we must come to a point where we address issues that are unpleasant, issues that are shameful. We don't always have very nice, beautiful things. Even at home or at household level, there are times when you have to confront unpleasant situations. There are times when you have to have difficult conversations, otherwise you are putting things under a carpet or you are just covering a wound and it's not healing. One day that wound will poof in everybody's face. So I think for me, Germany must be open to confront that past. However unpleasant, however shameful, however that it's full of guilt, it is important that it's opened up. You know, when you have a wound, open it up. Remove all those spas, clean it, put antiseptic. So that when it heals, it heals completely, it heals nicely. So that has to be educated. But I must also really say that I am very pleased to see that you are also interested in learning about it. You are interested in confronting that. Earlier I said it's not possible for an exhibition, especially at the level of students, to address everything. It's not possible. But the fact that you even thought about it, you even acted on it, you even say, yes, we are going to do research on it. For me, it's a step that you are willing, and it's not you personally. Don't take it wrong. I'm not talking about you as a person. But the students, the young generation, are willing. And maybe you go back home to visit your grandparents and you talk about it, and then, oh, is it so? Maybe they don't know about it. Maybe there was a gap in generational issues. And then you say, oh, by the way, this is what we... And that's a way also of passing knowledge. So I think what is being done is commendable although there's always more that can be done. But since there is a beginning, there is a start, things are initiated, quite honestly, personally for me, it's not... And it's not expected to be perfect, but it's a beginning, and it's commendable. They say a journey of 1,000 miles starts with the first step. Yeah. Because a step has started, you will get to the 1,000 miles. You just don't get there if you stand still. So the step has started, personally for me, is something, although there's more that can be done. And that should be done.

C: Yes. That should maybe also be addressed that there's always more to be done. Thank you. Is there anything maybe you want to say now as a last statement, something that's been on your mind, something that you want to share also maybe for the exhibition, but also just in this seminar?

M: I just think, I have said it, I'm just going to put emphasis that steps are taken. The willingness is there. It's very commendable. More has to be done. More needs to be

done. And for me, collaboration is very, very important. As I said earlier, it helps you understand from the space I'm coming from, why do I have this perspective? Because I'm going to say that this is what is happening, this is what I think, this is what I feel. And then you understand me better. And then you'd say this and that. That collaborative effort is very important so that you don't just assume that, oh, maybe this is what is happening. Maybe this is what is needed, you know? So that you bring people to the table, they discuss, they agree. They also disagree. It's also fine. But that collaborative effort for me is very, very important. Yeah. Thank you and really well done.

C: Thank you very much.