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Title

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Permalink

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Journal

Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal, 5(1)

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Publication Date

2022

DOI

10.5070/R75159678

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Tenga Tenga: Can I Help Carry Your Load?

Aaron Samuel Mulenga



2,000 carriers from Barotseland

Figure 1 Tenga Tenga conscripted from the western region of Zambia. Courtesy of Mbala Museum, ca. 1918.

The genesis of my work stems from an illustrated family Bible my grandfather gave to my mother. As a child, I used this Bible as a reference point to copy images from. Only as I got older did I realize that none of the images in this Bible looked like me. Due to this realization I began to explore alternative ways to represent spirituality and my own lived experience while seeking environments that were inclusive of black people. My work intends to look further than just a representation of skin color: it also engages with ideas of cultural heritage and one's place in



Figure 2 Image of the monument to the Tenga Tenga. Courtesy of Aaron Samuel Mulenga, 2021.

history. For this reason, I began to explore the visual representations of Zambia's history as well as its content by researching topics that I had not encountered in school, such as the story of African porters in World War I, whom I first learned about from the Moto Moto Museum in Mbala, Zambia, and not a history textbook.

My work can be read as a reengagement with colonial history that seeks to center Indigenous voices. As colonial monuments are being torn down in various parts of the world, how can artists use existing monuments to draw attention to pertinent historical events and contributions that Indigenous peoples have made? A monument that has interested me is one created from red bricks to remember the Tenga Tenga, Africans drafted as porters during World War I. Their jobs involved carrying heavy loads of about forty-four pounds for distances of over fifteen miles a day. It took roughly six Tenga Tenga to carry one British soldier's equipment, revealing the grotesque amount of human labor needed to move the soldiers in that region.

The two world wars are often portrayed as dominated by valiant white soldiers and generals; however, images of exploited people such as the Tenga Tenga are never

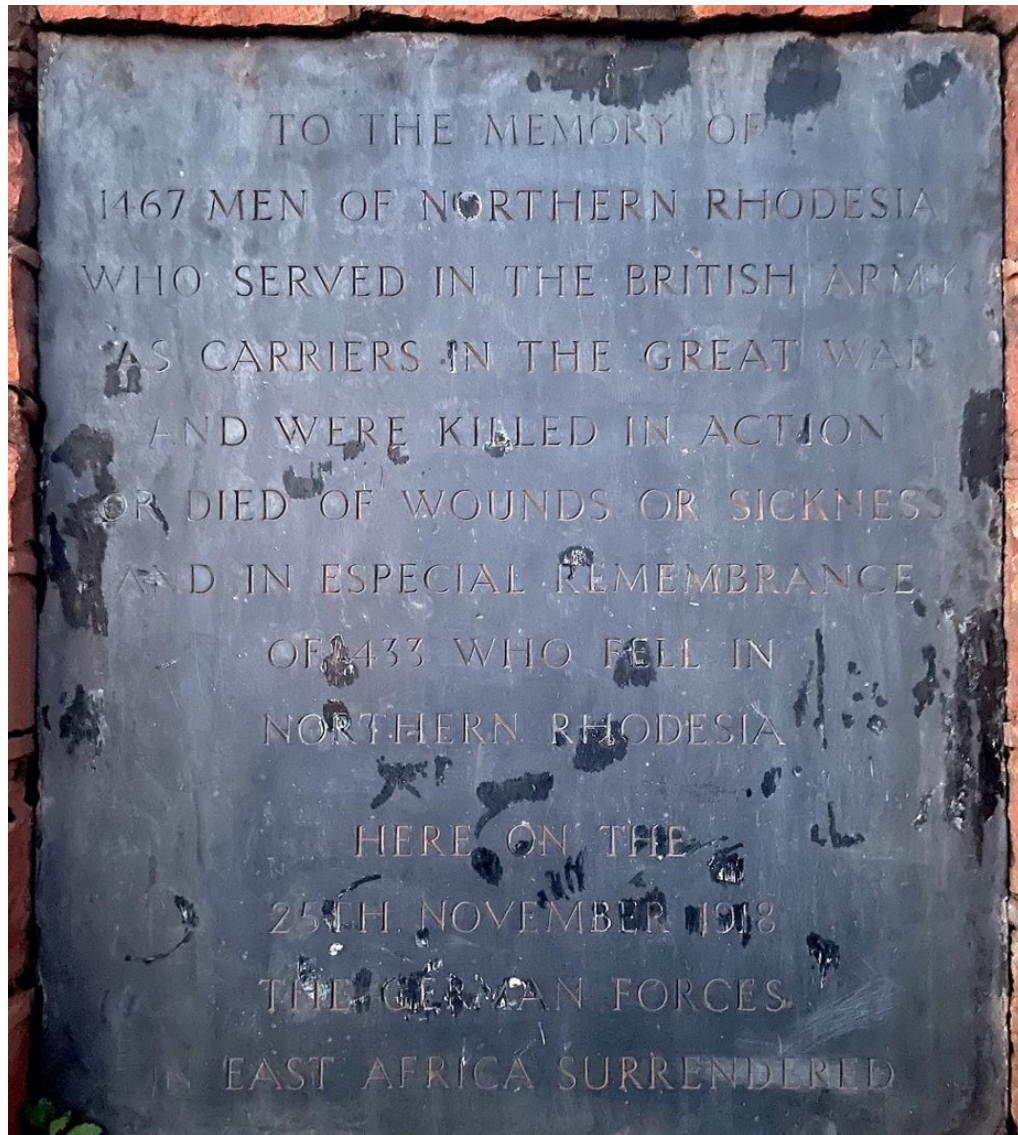


Figure 3 Close-up of the plaque on the monument. Courtesy of Aaron Samuel Mulenga, 2021.

brought to the foreground. My research revealed that over 80,000 Africans were conscripted into this labor, many of whom died on the job. A modest brick monument was erected in Mbala in their honor, and though this is a necessary recognition of their service, the monument commemorates a mere 1,467 men, which erases the memory of the majority of the Tenga Tenga. Mbala was chosen as the place for this monument due to its significance as the location where the German soldiers under the command of General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck surrendered to the British, three days after the armistice of November 11, 1918. This in essence meant that the end of World War I was officially in Zambia, the last place where the Germans conceded defeat.



Figure 4 Close-up of the plaque on the monument. Courtesy of Aaron Samuel Mulenga, 2021.

From Research to Performance

Through performance I aim to engage with the memory of the Tenga Tenga by tracing a route in Mbala that they would have walked during World War I, up to the place of the monument dedicated to them. I aim to engage the story of the Tenga Tenga, the loads they carried, and the metaphoric loads they left behind: the weight of memory and cultural narratives that affect the way the history of the world wars is shaped and how it is told. This creative research engages the complexity of interacting with collective memory and loss while exploring how the imprints of the past can influence the present and the future, which is critical, as it allows for a re-presentation of history in a way that includes narratives of people who were rendered voiceless through omission. It posits visual art as a medium to both remind and make additions to the existing narratives of Mbala and its people. A key question I explore is, how can contemporary art from Zambia help decenter Europe in the memory of Zambia's history and the imagination of the country's future?

As part of the performance, which I conducted in July 2021, we carried plastic sacks over our heads as we walked through the town of Mbala, dressed in burlap sacks and Dutch wax print. I engaged seven local youths from Mbala:



Figure 5 Still image from performance piece of the Tenga Tenga walking through the town of Mbala. Courtesy of Joseph Kasau, 2022.

Benjamin Siame, Blessed and Steward Mutale, Dobson Progress, Emmanuel Sinyangwe, Christabell Chisha and Cecilia Nachula. My two collaborators were Joseph Kasau (my videographer) and my partner Nkondelina Chileshe Mulenga (who participated as one of the performers).

The significance of the performance was to invoke the memory of the Tenga Tenga while also questioning the role of monuments in Zambia and whether people could interpret or understand such monuments. For this project I was specifically interested in the monument to the Tenga Tenga. Our performance began at Lake Chila,¹ two and a half kilometers away from the monument. Walking through the town, we noticed several people stopping to stare and take photographs of us on their phones. Once we arrived at the monument, we laid down our sacks at the foot of the monument and had a moment of reflection and silence, remembering the Indigenous people whose lives were forfeited in World War I for the success of the British army. Once we concluded our performance, we invited those spectators gathered around us to engage in conversation about the monument, what it meant for them and what they thought our performance was about. This gave us an opportunity to share our research findings with those willing to listen while opening a channel for dialogue between ourselves as artist, performers, and the local community.



Figure 6 Still image from performance piece of the Tenga Tenga walking through the town of Mbala. Courtesy of Joseph Kasau, 2022.

Through this work I seek to foreground and reframe *Zambian Indigenous* histories and narratives through an engagement with their stories to place them at the center of such conversations. I utilize critical fabulation, a theory developed by Saidiya Hartman² to engage with historical evidence by proposing possible narratives extrapolated from fragments of documentation that were often written from dehumanizing and oppressive perspectives. Critical fabulation has allowed me to imagine ways to interpret the stories of the Tenga Tenga through archival research while attempting to focus on their contribution to World War I, which is all but neglected save for the monument in their honor.

The performance of walking through the streets of Mbala allowed for the Tenga Tenga to be brought into our present moment by reimagining their story and appearance, through the burlap garments the performers wore, and the route walked through the town. Not only do the garments make a direct connection to the Tenga Tenga and what they wore, they also connote a sense of spirituality and humility that references biblical scripture where sackcloth was used as a sign of mourning or humility (2 Kings 19:1). I refer to biblical text due to its association with spiritual practices in Zambia, particularly because Christianity is the predominant religion in the country. Through this work, I aim to invoke references to *Zambian cultural practices* that provide an opportunity to engage with



Figure 7 Still image from performance piece of the Tenga Tenga in Mbala. Courtesy of Joseph Kasau, 2021.



Figure 8 Still image from performance piece of the *Tenga Tenga* in Mbala. Courtesy of Joseph Kasau, 2022.

spirituality from multiple perspectives, even through dress, which is why *chitenge* material (Dutch wax print, worn from the waist up) is also used as part of the Tenga Tenga attire. This cloth represents a form of Zambian cultural heritage. The story of the Tenga Tenga allows us to re-present history from the perspective of a marginalized group of people who have the potential to shift the perspective of history by adjusting our gaze toward Indigenous peoples' stories.

The performance served as a form of education not just for us as the performers, but also the residents of Mbala who were curious enough to engage in conversation with us. Several individuals we spoke to had no idea what the purpose of the monument was, which allowed us to share with them our interpretation of our performance and the monument as we understood it. The implication for remembering an Indigenous Black experience is important to the work I engage with because information such as the story of the Tenga Tenga is not common knowledge. This has meant that there is a need to seek out such narratives and find creative ways to engage and educate myself and others about them. Most schools, even public schools in Zambia, contain curriculums that are influenced by a British standard of education, which has meant that many local narratives are not being taught in these schools.

The scope of my project moving forward is to provide an alternative source of information that combines historical knowledge focused on Indigenous people of Zambia from both a theoretic and practical perspective using visual art as a point of departure. Visual art serves as an ideal medium to engage the interest of a broad public, as it can reach a vast number of people depending on the method



Figure 9 Still image of the artist and one of the performers engaging local residents after the performance. Courtesy of Joseph Kasau, 2021.



Figure 10 Color image of visitors to the Ulemu exhibition, conceptualized by Modzji Arts, Zambia; curated by Julia Taonga and George Mahashe, with participating artists Aaron Samuel Mulenga and Joseph Kasau, as part of the second edition of the Congo Biennial 2022. Courtesy of Aaron Samuel Mulenga, 2022.

that the artist chooses to use. In this instance, the performance piece allowed me to engage and converse with a public audience that was not familiar with performing art. Furthermore, through video and photographic documentation I was able to create a video art piece which I presented at the second edition of the Congo Biennial in Kinshasa in September, 2022. Through the video piece I was able to increase the audience of people engaging with the story of the Tenga Tenga. My hope is for viewers to question the version of history they are familiar with and from whose perspective such histories are taught. Hopefully, they will be encouraged to find their version of the Tenga Tenga in their own spaces.

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Aaron Samuel Mulenga (he/him), Graduate Research Fellow, is a Visual Studies Ph.D. student at the University of California, Santa Cruz. His area of study includes the contemporary art of Africa, post-colonial theory and the role that museums play in shaping cultural narratives. Mulenga is a multi-disciplined artist with a keen interest in sculptural forms and installation. Mulenga uses his art practice to inform aspects of his doctoral research process. His most recent art collaboration was with Zambia's Modzi Arts Gallery at the 2021 FNB Art Fair in Johannesburg.

Notes

¹ The guns of German soldiers were dumped into Lake Chila after they surrendered to the British. See "Let's Correct History," *Zambia Daily Mail Limited*, November 27, 2018, <http://www.daily-mail.co.zm/lets-correct-history/>.

² Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 12, no. 2 (2008): 8, <https://doi.org/10.1215/-12-2-1>.