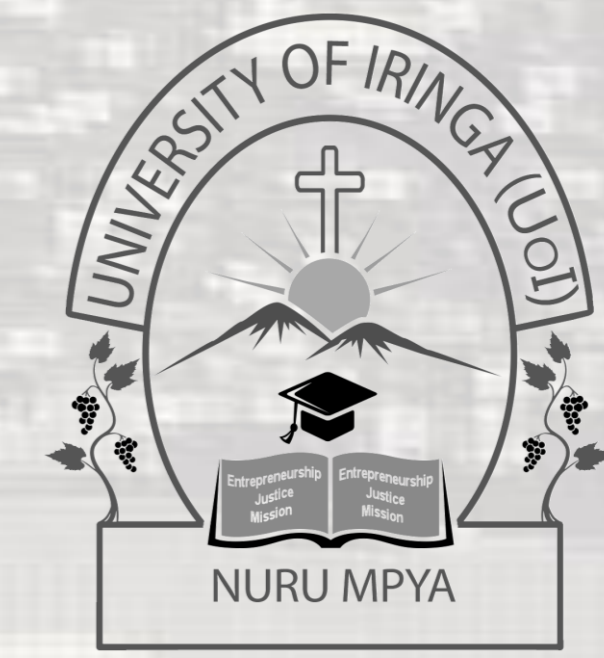


# Stirring up a hornet's nest or letting sleeping dogs lie? Historical narratives of the whereabouts of human remains from Iringa, Tanzania



**Dr. Jan Kuever**

Senior Lecturer, University of Iringa, Tanzania  
& Managing Director, fahari yetu Tanzania



## Background

- Iringa Region in Tanzania is known for the history of the Hehe kingdom and its war of resistance against the German colonial conquest at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.
- In the course of the war, mortal remains of a number of Hehe people were taken to Germany, allegedly including those of important rulers of the kingdom.
- The provenance of these remains touches on epistemological questions of authenticity, the construction of historical narratives, and possible calls for restitution.

## Cases of investigation

1. **Mtwa Mkwawa's skull**  
in 1898, the famous leader committed suicide in the war against the Germans to avoid capture. His presumed skull was taken to Germany and restituted to Iringa by the British administration in 1954.
2. **Relics of Mtwa Munyigumba**  
German records claim that Mkwawa's father's remains were exhumed from the Hehe royal graves in Lungemba and sent to Germany where they lie until today.
3. **Sultan Mpangile Wangimbo**  
In 1896, the Germans installed Mpangile as regent of Uhehe before executing him in early 1897 for aiding his older brother Mkwawa in the war. The trace of his skull in Germany was lost during the 1920s.

## Methods

- From a mere historical research perspective, Brockmeyer, Edward & Stöcker (2020) conclude that the skull returned as Mkwawa's may not be authentic and argue for the restitution of the Munyigumba's and Mpangile's remains. LeGall & Mboro (2019) questions the authenticity of all three relics through a mix of historical and ethnographic investigation, but nevertheless see a further investigation of the cases as potential avenue towards restitution projects.
- I argue that prospects for restitution cannot be assessed with a historical focus on authenticity but require thorough ethnographic research.
- This contribution explores narratives attached to the mentioned cases of Hehe remains among local communities in Iringa, including descendants of the deceased, and sounds out opinions towards possible restitution projects.

## Results

- From Hehe epistemological perspective, authenticity derives from oral tradition and not from DNA tests.
- Most community respondents don't believe that the remains of Mkwawa and Munyigumba were taken to Germany. Their ancestors never left the homeland and their spirit was not broken. This narrative eludes the deceased ancestors from foreign control and thus maintain the colonized people's cultural integrity.
- Therefore, I argue that the restitution of Munyigumba's remains would undermine the Hehe's narrative claims for sovereignty of historical interpretation.
- The story of Mpangile does not carry such assertive claims, and the prospect of returning his skull was received with assenting indifference.

## References & acknowledgements

- All interviewees and focus group participants in Iringa.
- Brockmeyer, B., Edward, F., & Stöcker, H. (2020). The Mkwawa complex: A Tanzanian-European history about provenance, restitution, and politics. *Journal of Modern European History*, 18(2), 117-139.
- LeGall, Y. & Mboro, S.M. (2019). *Remembering the Dismembered. African Human Remains and Memory Cultures in and after repatriation*. PhD Thesis. University of Potsdam

