

Mulling over art



with Andrew Mulenga

Arts

Culture

Heritage

Does the “African Futures” conference suggest a new scramble for Africa?

The world—or at least 14 countries—met in Germany once more to ponder the destiny of Africa. The former is the notorious Berlin Conference of 1884–1885, also referred to as the Congo Conference or the West Africa Conference. Otto von Bismarck, the first chancellor of Germany, organised it at King Leopold II of Belgium’s request and its topic was regulating European colonisation and trade in Africa during a new era of Imperialism. This is the conference at which Africa was carved up, the infamous partition of Africa. It must be noted that not only did this gathering result in Leopold II establishing Belgium as a colonial power in Africa, it was on his watch that over 10 million Africans died in the Congo Free State. That is about twice the amount of Jewish people who were murdered by the Nazi government and its allies during World War II.

The latter, however, was organised by AEGIS (Africa-Europe Group for Interdisciplinary Studies) a network of Europe-based member institutions connected to research and education on Africa and African Studies that was set up in 1991 “to make visible and build upon the resources and research potential available among Africanist institutions in Europe.” AEGIS organises ECAS, the European Conference on African Studies (ECAS), the largest international conference on African studies.

The Global South Studies Centre at the University of Cologne (GSSC) and Institute for Anthropological Research on Africa (IARA), University of Leuven, organised the 9th edition, dubbed ECAS9, which was held in Cologne, Germany, from May 31 to June 3, 2023, with the theme of “African Futures”.

In the official invitation, Dr. Clemens Greiner of the GSSC stated that the intention was to bring together “leading researchers, policymakers and leaders from across the world” and that there will also be a complementary series of artistic and cultural events, as well as various networking and capacity building events, included “some particularly aimed at the next generation of African researchers”.

The conference statistics suggest the event brought together more than 2,000 scholars from over 80

countries. Over 245 panels and roundtables, consuming 6,000 lunches, an estimated 15,000 cups of coffee and more than 1,450 paper presentations including my own. My paper, was derived from using metaphors of space travel and science fiction to challenge presumptive notions of African backwardness” which is the 4th chapter of my 2020 PhD dissertation titled “Kuntanshi yamikalile (The Future): speculative nonconformity in the works of Zambian visual artists”

The paper used space travel as a frame of enquiry, to reinforce the claim for speculative nonconformity in the work of contemporary Zambian artists. It situates aspirations for travel into outer space being nothing new, drawing reference from Mukuka Nkoloso’s Space Programme of the 1960s. It focused on using both space travel and science fiction as mechanisms to position not only speculative futures, but to reinforce the claim for speculative nonconformity in the work of Zambian artists for the purpose of arguing against African belatedness. It examined to what degree and in what ways metaphors of space travel and science fiction could be used in artistic portrayals that go beyond simplistic tropes and the escalating trends that suggest revived Afrofuturism, in order to delink from Western notions of time and space, not only in relation to the arts of Africa.

The paper was presented at a roundtable convened by Kate Cowcher (University of St Andrews) and Abel Tilahun, chaired by Tobias Wofford (Virginia Commonwealth University) titled “African artistic imaginaries, from the Jet Age to the Space Race”. It argued that works by Sary Mwaba, Mwenya Kabwe and Milumbe Haimbe, which posit Space Travel or images of the Afronaut as central to their thematic content, make bold statements that counter perceptions of Africa as backward. These works reference the past and stake claims for African life in the future. The full chapter and PhD can be downloaded from the Rhodes University’s digital repository.

Other members of the “African artistic imaginaries, from the Jet Age to the Space Race” panel were Delinda Collier (School of the Art Institute of Chicago) with “Paths to the Stars”, Rachel Kabukala (Indiana University) with “Congo Gravitational Waves: A Metadigital and Tantalean

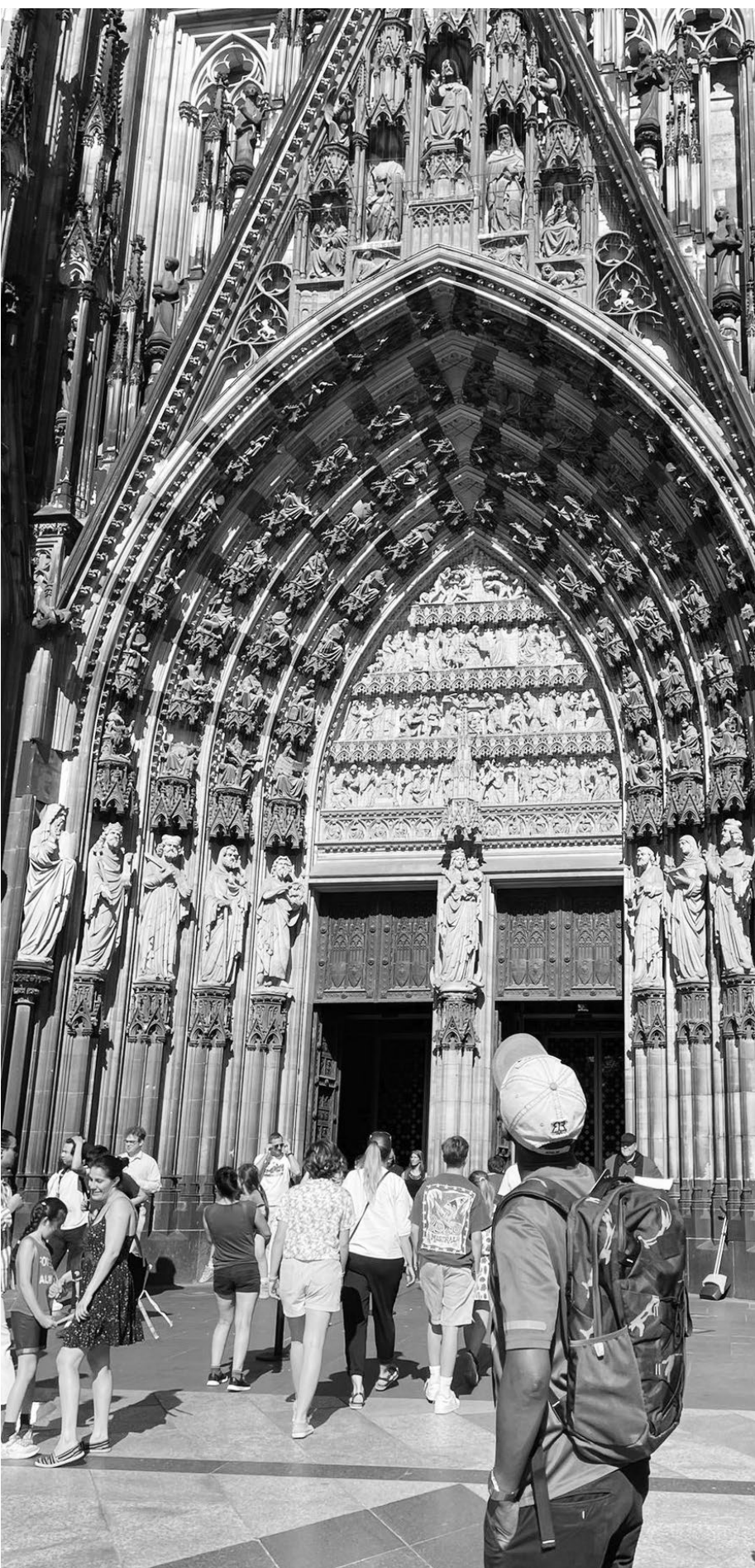
Tale” and Pius J.Vögele (University of Basel) with “Sun Ra’s Outerspace Explorations and the Arkestra’s Stopovers in Egypt and Nigeria”.

Outside the main conference, ECAS9 had over 70 events ranging from performances to workshops, discussions, theatre, film, music, literature and exhibitions, not to mention Cologne’s night life which is hinged on a rich beer culture. The fact that it is as bright as day even at night during the summer, with darkness falling only at 22:00 hours, might have served as some solace.

My own experience at ECAS9 was indeed so overwhelming that I frequently felt pulled in two, unsure of which event to attend because I was always spoiled for choice. On the very last day I even had to skip the conference because I thought I would leave Cologne without enjoying some site seeing. I got to see the Cologne Cathedral, a renowned monument of Gothic architecture which was declared a World Heritage Site in 1996 and is Germany’s most visited landmark, attracting an average of 20,000 people a day. Construction started in 1248 but was only completed in 1880 for several reasons. Apparently it is supposed to contain some relics that belonged to the Three Kings. Although it is monument, mass is still held every day.

Nevertheless, reflecting on the whole ECAS9 it had me thinking, why is it important for Africa’s future to be discussed at such great length and why was this being done in Europe? It made me ponder the power relations that still exist. For instance, the majority of European nations, including Germany, do not require visas to enter Zambia. They must, however, have valid return tickets in order to enter Zambia by air. This is in stark contrast to the severe visa criteria that Zambians must meet in order to enter Europe. Along with the 80 Euro non-refundable visa cost, I had to submit other documents as part of my preparation for my travel to Germany, including bank statements, proof of health insurance, housing reservations and letters of invitation.

Despite having all the necessary paperwork, my visa was first rejected on the dubious justification that I would not have medical insurance on the day of my arrival. My sponsors, the German Development Fund, sorted out the cover, but the visa section still told me to come back in



The author admiring Cologne Cathedral which is Germany’s most visited landmark, attracting an average of 20,000 people a day

three months because there was a long waiting list. I was however fortunate to get help from someone I know within the German Embassy in Lusaka. So you can imagine, if an academic travelling for a conference invited by a credible German institution and funded by the German government can face a tough

time getting a visa, what of someone just hoping to go to Germany for non-business related visit? Anyway, returning to Europe’s interest in addressing Africa’s future, it is unclear what the underlying motivations are. Whether they are motivated by concerns over China’s increased participation in

Africa or something else entirely, in any case, there does appear to be a fresh scramble for Africa.

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