

Anne-Marie IssaBrown Garises: Curator of the Keetmanshoop Museum

‘There are a lot of stories of the snake that lives in the !Garib river’ says Issa Garises, admitting that even she is sometimes a bit scared when old people come to her museum to tell new versions of the famous folk tale. ‘The snake is safeguarding the diamonds. She constantly moved with the flow of the river,’ an elder told her. The story shows the mystical side of museums, something that is crucial for Garises. She holds a degree in Wildlife Management and Eco-Tourism from the University of Namibia and now works as a curator in the small municipal museum of Keetmanshoop, located in one of the oldest, still-standing buildings in southern Namibia: the mission church of 1894.

Garises says that she understands the urge for some museums to be moved from being within the walls of colonial buildings. Nevertheless, she would not want to take the museum out of the old, mystic church. Rather she wants to re-interpret the narrative: filling up the colonial building with the stories and narratives of Nama people and their fight against colonial oppression. These stories, she says, are ‘enchancing the elderly, local people, who are often combining errands in town with a visit to the museum’. Together with these visitors, Garises changed the museum’s narrative from only glorifying the white history to including the history of the Nama. However, she also stresses that ‘we can’t have the history of the Nama without showing how the colonialist impacted on our history’.

‘What I would like to have, are more objects and artifacts from the Nama people’, explains Garises, so that ‘we can have the colonial and the Nama side, to tell good opposing and entangled stories.’ However, ‘many of our artifacts were looted, and even if we get them to Namibia, it will not be easy to get them to Keetmanshoop,’ as she says ‘often institutions do not trust regional heritage and cultural workers to safeguard artifacts’. To make up for the stolen artefacts, the museum tries to get objects from local people. Old people, in particular, often make donations when they give up their households and move to care homes.

In her daily work, Issa Garises is mostly concerned with three tasks. She is engaging with the Nama Traditional Leaders Association on creating awareness and lobbying for reparations for the genocide of 1904–1908. Secondly, she is inviting school classes from

the region and beyond to the museum – a task that is close to her heart: ‘School kids are always so excited, as it is often the first time they visit a museum.’ And finally, there are the international tourists. Tourists are the largest group of visitors, and often demanding. Garises jokes, that if you tell them the story about the snake, ‘they want to go to see and catch the snake immediately.’ To entertain and educate tourists, Garises sees the future rather in ‘cultural tourism’, where local people can present how they used to live and produce crafts that they can sell. This could also be done outside of the museums, in smaller towns or on lodges.

For the future, Garises hopes that there will be better education for curators and heritage workers, so that once artifacts get repatriated, they can take care of them in the region. Furthermore, she hopes that the ties over the river and the border to South Africa get closer, so that people from both countries can enjoy and present their shared culture. What is most important to her, however, is that people ‘make it a point to visit the museum.’

Based on an interview done by Luregn Lenggenhager, 8 November 2021, Keetmanshoop