

# Introduction



The Sokoke-Scopes Owl is a tiny bird. It measures about 20 cm tall and only exists in the Arabuko-Sokoke Forest on the East African coast in Kenya. Birders come from all over the world to catch a glimpse of the tiny creature. The rangers of the forest have been searching for the nest of this bird for many years. It has never been found.<sup>1</sup>

The main reason the nesting site is so difficult to find is that the call of the Sokoke-Scopes Owl is unplaceable. When you hear it, the sound seems to come from all around you, but not from any clear direction.<sup>2</sup> To find where the birds are roosting, the best strategy is to go as a group of people and when you hear the call, to cross reference your idea of where the call is coming from with the idea of the others of where it is coming from. Sometimes you are lucky, and at least see the owl. More often you do not.

This paper is a collection of short essays which investigate my experience with the sound of two forests in Kenya, the Kereita Forest Block and the Arabuko-Sokoke-Forest. I try and understand and grasp the present, the past and the future of these two places through their sounds. Through listening to their sound I wanted to find out about, get a better idea of and maybe contest

the hierarchies and power relations between people and plants, that play out in these landscapes. They are often a result of the colonial past they lived through. In sound I found a medium that opened me up to a new way of thinking and through which I could re-contextualize colonialism for myself. Through listening to the places, the wind, water and sun that effects them, the trees, plants, insects, animals and people, that are connected to them, I could understand their relations. Through listening I could also place myself in the forests and reflect on my presence amongst the constellation of actors in the forests.

I developed the project *Forest Scapes* over a period of 6 months. In September 2018 I made an initial research trip to listen into the forests and get a sense of their surroundings. I then returned in February/March 2019 to spend two weeks in each place, recording, interviewing and experiencing the forests. The research is still ongoing.

This collection of essays is my theoretically articulated ideas that stem from the artistic endeavour I set out on. The writings are rooted in my practice which is, in turn based on the experiences and observations I made as an artist in the forests. My work emerges from these observations and tries to resolve these core ideas and observations in form. Both *Kereita Forest Block* and *Arabu-ko-Soko-ko Forest* exist as sound installations and sound compositions.<sup>3</sup> But I also try to think through and interrogate these observations through writing. These essays are not strict academic writing, they are anchored in my work as an artist and extend outwards from this experience to connect with affiliated theoretical positions. My ideas about my experiences are embedded in theoretical thought, the same way my experiences exist within and react to the surroundings.

All the six essays start with a personal experience I had in one of the two forests. This experience functions as a framework, a context and a starting point from which I pursue and explore different theoretical ideas that were important for me in my debate with the place and the topics surrounding it. What is landscape? How do we sense a place? How is our perception influenced by the past and shifted by discourses and ideologies, that we do not necessarily know we hold? How does cognitive research in plants enable us to understand and question the existing power relations, not only between plants and people, but also more general between the powerful and the less powerful? What can we know through sound? And what kind of knowledge does sound produce?

The writing connects with a broad range of disciplines from Sociology to Anthropology, over African History to Philosophy, Ethnomusicology, Sound Studies, Postcolonial theory, Biology, Silviculture, Feminist Studies, Phenomenology. I bring varied discourses together in a similar way as to how I bring the different sonic materials from the forests into contact with one another in the installations and compositions. Relating these different ideas together, reading them in parallel and making them inform each other was a useful strategy to engage with a place and its history.

Like the sound of the Sokoke-Scopes Owl the topic of, and discourse surrounding the European colonialism from the 18th and 19th century and its continuing perpetuation of structures in places, people, animals and plants often leaves me without orientation. I find myself getting dizzy and numb by the overwhelming entanglements and connections of the colonial past into our present. The Arabuko-Sokoke Forest and the Kereita Forest Block are both

places that are influenced by their colonial past with the British colonial power in Kenya from 1985-1963. The sonic qualities of these two forests seem to embody a general entangled connection between the European colonizer and the African colonized.

In a similar manner in which one tries to find the little owl, I tried to cross reference the sounds of the places as well as the theoretical ideas to reflect on this vast and perplexing situation. My intention is that this paper should be read in a similar way. None of the ideas in the essays exist separately from one another. They follow each other loosely, they are connected and they interrupt each other. These essays can be understood as pairs, in groups of three, or indeed in larger constellations of four, five and six. They are to be read and associated with one another as an open-ended assemblage.

I am still at the stage of trying to find the Owl...

- 1 In early 2021 David „Mzee“ Ngala and a Forest Guard found a nest with fledglings for the first time
- 2 Interview with Willie N'ganda am 20.03.2019
- 3 <http://sophiabauer.net/kereita-forest-block/>

