

Mzee Ngala



Mzee Ngala spends most of his life in the Arabuko-Sokoke Forest. His first name is David but everybody calls him „Mzee“, a respectful form of address in Kiswahili for an elderly man. Mzee is in his 60s, has a calm manner and a friendly expression on his face. He worked for the forest administration for 37 years and has been retired for the last 12 years. Nevertheless, he still works as a forest guide, and is also employed to monitor the forest. This entails looking for traps, finding human paths and detecting illegal logging. He grew up and lives on the western side of the Arabuko-Sokoke forest in a village called Dida but usually sleeps in a tent at the Gede Forest Station, if he is not sleeping in the forest. One of his missions is to find the nests of the Sokoke-Scopes Owls, which have never been found.<sup>1</sup> He has been looking for the past 20 years. He can also identify about 130 different birds by their calls.

Mzee Ngala introduced me to the sonic space of the Arabuko-Sokoke Forest. Every first Saturday of the month the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS), organizes a walk through the forest which is open for everybody. Typically not many people come but that day we were ten in total. Eight of us sat in the back of a ranger car and we drove to the starting point of the walk. There were mainly

forest rangers from the KWS, me and a friend and Mzee Ngala. The whole way in the car he did not say a word.

The car stopped, the engine was switched off, we all got out of the car. Excitedly we stormed off in different directions with our binoculars ready and our bird identification books at hand. The last one to get out of the car was Mzee Ngala. After a while, and perhaps some frustration because none of us could really spot any birds we all came back and waited for the old Mzee to show them to us. He said: „This is a walk. But before we walk we must listen!“ Everybody looked a bit confused but then I started to listen. I heard a cacophony of sounds, birds calling, crickets chirping and other noisy insects. It was sonic chaos.

After a few minutes Mzee Ngala started to break down the sounds for us. He pointed to the left and said: „Ring-Necked-Dove“. Pointing to the right he said, „Chestnut Fronted Helmet Shrik“, to the back “Tropical Bubu“ , to the left again “Amani Sunbird“, “Black Bellied Starling, White Throated Weaver, Collard Sunbird, Green Barbett, White Fronted Bee-Eater, Yellow Bellied Greenbul, Retz’s Helmet Shrike, Böhm’s Spinetail, Paradise Flycatcher, Fisher’s Greenbul, Terested Brownbul, Southern Banded Snake Eagle, Blackback Puffback, Tiny Greenbul, ...” This went on for about 10 minutes. I turned my head in the direction he pointed, I could not even see one of the birds. But I could hear them. By listening I could sense their presence.

In the Arabuko-Sokoke Forest the view is often obstructed by a dense thicket. Presences are often hidden, but sonically they are detectable. What can

we understand by listening to the sonic presence of a situation, of a place? What can we know through sound?

The music ethnologist and anthropologist Steven Feld coined the term Acoustemology.<sup>2</sup> Etymologically it derives from the words „acoustic“, the study of sound waves and „epistemology“ the study of the nature of knowledge and refers to a way of knowing through sound. Feld understands Acoustemology as the potential to accumulate knowledge through sound. It uses sound to figure out what is knowable and the way it becomes known is through sounding and listening.

Feld holds that Acoustemology is not about looking at the physical components of sound.<sup>3</sup> However, through its materiality the term becomes clearer to me: Pressure waves move through space and penetrate everything in their way. The expanding nature of sound waves establishes a relational connection between a sounding entity, the source emitting sound and effected presences around it. Sonic presences, be they human, non-human, material or organic are never independent, but exist in a network of interrelations, conjunctions, disjunctions, entanglements, co-presence. Sounding bodies are always in relation to their environment.

This opens up a way of thinking sound as a medium that forces relations. Therefore thinking through sound produces knowledge that is informed by context, process, “between-ness”, “interrelated-ness”. This is a knowledge that is shaped by experience rather than one that is simply acquired; it is accumulated by an ongoing interactive process of participation and reflection. This is regardless of whether knowledge derives from a place of memory, perception, problem solving or elsewhere.<sup>4</sup>

As a method Acoustemology does not understand sound as a measuring factor or an indicator of how humans live and lived in environments. Sound is not researched in terms of its acoustic specifications of, for example, volume or density to evaluate environments, conditions or situations.<sup>5</sup> It rather investigates the histories of listening (i.e. how one listens, how one sounds or hears) to research the relational and reflexive dynamics of networks. Yet Acoustemology does not try to overthrow the current dominance of the visual realm by focussing only on the sound. It rather is a shift in focus that creates a space to experience connections and relationships across senses. It opens a realm where, through listening and sounding, one can understand a reflexivity and a connected-ness.

The fundamental assumption is that we “rest on contingent foundations”, we move in the same realm and are in relation to others. We are different and various sounding sources - human, non-human, living, non-living, technological, material, organic - and we both produce and are effected by sound. These processes are multiple and variable, but they are to a large extent interrelated and interconnected. This encourages us to direct our attention outwards and to listen out for other resounding sources. It leads to the basic understanding of “others as ‘significant’ forms of otherness”.<sup>6</sup>

Mzee Ngala opened the forest to me as a space of co-existence. He established a dynamic and active form of feedback and reflection through sound. But he also turned a place which I did not understand and where I did not belong, into a place where I engaged in the process of making sense. Through listening to the sounds and being effected by them my presence made sense with

others. Connections and relations became obvious. And my existence was one in between others, and not opposed to others.

Acoustemology seems to be a useful way to approach, and rethink, a topic such as colonialism. As Achille Mbembe argues, colonialism and the event of capitalism is a historical event that triggered processes of separation and exclusion which persist until today.<sup>7</sup> Colonialism inhabits hierarchy and promotes separation and discrimination amongst humans and non-humans. It established the notion of borders as a division which regulates movement that favours some and not others. By understanding the multiple actors in our world (human, non-human, living, non-living etc) as sounding presences Acoustemology gives each of these actors an agency. This puts them on the same level of being effected and affected by the past and the present, but also the ability to change the future. It does not suggest countering the established power hierarchies with further asymmetrical power and an hierarchy of exclusion. Rather it promotes a discourse of multitude and idiosyncrasies.

Michel Serres poetically describes the inherent and undeniable connection of sound and the body:

*“We hear through our skin and feet. We hear through our skull, abdomen and thorax. We hear through our muscles, nerved and tendons. Our body-box, strung tight, is covered head to toe with a tympanum. We live in noises and shouts, in sound waves just as much as in spaces, the organism is erected, anchors itself in space, a broad fold, a long brad, a half-full, half-empty box which echoes them. Plunged, drowned, submerged, tossed about, lost in infinite repercussion and reverberations and making sense of them through the body.”<sup>8</sup>*

A sounding body is therefore not detached from the self but is rather intermingled and interwoven within one's subjectiveness. This further suggests the subjectivity is not something that we can command, it is more a result of an ongoing process of interaction, routines, bodily specifications, habits, sensory memories.<sup>9</sup>

This visceral conception of subjectivity can be related to a corpus of postcolonial thought that understands identity as something that is in flux. This holds that identity arises from "multiplicity and dispersion", as something where "self-referral is only possible in the in-between, in the gap between mark and demark, in co-constitution."<sup>10</sup> It places the colonizer and the colonized within the same frame of subjectivity hence complicating the notion of the oppressed as weak, silent and passive. Serres' notion of the sounding body propose an identity which is corporal, fluid and contingent; the body as a space of lived difference that changes over time. This contests an alternative postcolonial position that perpetuates a "colonial imaginary in which the binaries of colonizer and colonized, white and black become impossible to displace."<sup>11</sup> Instead, it suggests an understanding and acceptance of difference and plurality.

Holger Schulze points to the fact that we are effected by the past sonically, what he refers to as sonic traces. These are traces that "any vibrating entity leaves in a specific culture and historical era as well as in a situated environment".<sup>12</sup> Can we see colonization as a "vibrating entity" that left sonic traces on the environment? And if we do, can we more obviously point towards the effects which are still vibrating in the present and effecting individuals and therefor



point towards a global and individual importance of a current discourse about colonialism?

By validating the existence of difference and change and focussing on a research in interaction, transmission and related-ness, thinking through sound opens the discourse of colonialism and postcolonial thinking. Thinking through sound helped me introduce an element of practice into a theoretical discourse, and made me conscious of the global, holistic nature of colonialism and suggested a manner I could participate in countering and deconstructing a pervasive phenomenon and mindset. The discourse about colonialism becomes a different rhythm which is embodied, reflexive and active.

- 1 In early 2021 David Ngala and a Forest Guard found a nest with fledgelings for the first time
- 2 Feld, Steven. „Acoustemology.“ In: *Key Words in Sound*. Hrsg. David Novak, Matt Sakakeeny. Durham: Duke University Press Books. 2015. p 12-21
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid, 15.
- 7 European Graduate School Video Lectures. *Achille Mbembe. Rethinking Democracy Beyond the Human, 2017*. youtube.com. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A\\_k3YUupGok](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A_k3YUupGok) (Accessed März 2019)
- 8 Serres, Michel. *The Five Senses. A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*. London: Continuum. 2008. p 141
- 9 Schulze, Holger. *The Sonic Persona. An Anthropology of Sound*. London: Bloomsbury Academic. 2018. pp 113-115
- 10 *What is postcolonial thinking? An Interview with Achille Mbembe*. Eurozine.com. <https://www.eurozine.com/what-is-postcolonial-thinking/> (Accessed March 2019)
- 11 Long, Wahbie. *Postcolonial theory and the strong arm of identity*. Africasacountry.com. <https://africasacountry.com/2018/11/postcolonial-theory-and-the-strong-arm-of-identity>. (Accessed March 2019)
- 12 Schulze, Holger. *The Sonic Persona. An Anthropology of Sound*, London: Bloomsbury Academic. 2018. p 123



