

Absorbing CIC show looks at blind spots in history



By Mai Elwakil

In the early 20th century, about 100,000 members of the Herero and Nama tribes (the natives of present-day Namibia) passed away. But this was not due to a natural disaster. "The Black Holocaust," as it has come to be known, was the work of colonial forces in German Southwest Africa. It was the first genocide of the century, and is believed to have been an inspiration for Hitler's later attack on Jews and Roma gypsies. Still, despite the extermination of over 80 percent of the local population by 1908, little is known of the victims — their names have been neither documented nor commemorated. Sudanese-born Cairo-based artist Amado Alfadni is, however, turning this around.

In his "Black Holocaust Museum," Alfadni re-creates images of the Hereros' suffering in the minds of audiences. A room hosting his installation at the Contemporary Image Collective in Cairo is filled with 3,000 wooden logs stacked like a pyramid. Each is marked in red with a number to identify the victims of the world's first extermination camp on Shark Island, and to hopefully set their souls free; traditionally, for

a Herero soul to find its eternal home, a sacred fire must be lit by a person sharing the deceased's last name — a ritual made difficult as the victims were recorded as mere numbers at the camp.

At the "Black Holocaust Museum," audiences stand in the dark contemplating the logs, while listening to a voiceover by artist Fardus Abdul Rahman describing how eight Herero boys are lined up for a photograph. "They are posed in an arrangement reminiscent of a family portrait," she tells us. But they wear shackles around their necks, and a few also have numbered oval tags attached to ropes tied around them. Some of the boys look away, while one defiantly stares at the camera.

"References*" shows a shift in the practices of the participating artists that is fresh and welcome on the local scene.

Eight images are described in such vivid detail that you visualize them while simply staring at the wooden logs. Even in the accompanying publication, in which the narration is printed, the places for the photographs are left blank. On each page there is an empty rectangle outlining where the photo would have been — this somehow has a longer lasting impact. In a way it has the effect of the imaginary yet very personal images one creates while reading a powerful literary work — and what makes it so harrowing is that it is true.

Over the past year, Alfadni collected these fragments of narratives using archival photographs documenting experiments conducted on Herero prisoners in the camp, as well as German soldiers' memorabilia. His "Black Holocaust Museum" does not try to present an objective reading of this event. Like the three other art projects showing at CIC as part of "References* — Artists Activating the Archive," it is subjective and sincere; it triggers curiosity about the subject with an option to dig deeper.