

Remembering Genocide in Namibia

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Remembering Genocide in Namibia

Núrel Bahí Reitz and Sabine Mannitz

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

DTA	Democratic Turnhalle Alliance
GSWA	German South West Africa
NBC	Namibian Broadcasting Corporation
NGTC	Nama Genocide Technical Committee
NTLA	Nama Traditional Leaders Association
NUDO	National Unity Democratic Organisation
OCD-04	Ovaherero/Ovambanderu Council for Dialogue
OGC	Ovaherero Genocide Council
OGF	Ovaherero Genocide Foundation
ONCD-04	Ovaherero/Ovambanderu and Nama Council for Dialogue
OTA	Ovaherero Traditional Authority
PLAN	People’s Liberation Army of Namibia
SWA	South West Africa
SWANU	South West Africa National Union
SWAPO	South West Africa People’s Organisation

ABSTRACT

The paper seeks to provide an overview of memory politics in Namibia. Most of the German media and political debates addressing the genocide committed against the Herero, Nama, Damara, and San by the German *Schutztruppen* during the 1904-1908 counterinsurgency in the former German South West Africa are focused on possible legal implications. Consequences of ‘our’ ways of dealing with the past for ‘their’ domestic relations and memory cultural struggles in Namibia tend to be overlooked. Our paper intends to foster a more thorough understanding of foreign policy decisions’ implications for the target societies’ struggle for recognition. To that end, we first outline key actors in the Namibian memory politics and present contested historical narratives that can be found in the different actor groups. In a second step practices surrounding three physical memory sites in the Namibian mnemoscape are analysed, and memorialisation through commemoration is discussed. Finally, the paper draws attention to the necessity of including as well hitherto marginalized societal actors as controversial topics in memory culture debates to create an arena for productive contestation.

INTRODUCTION

This paper seeks to provide some insights into Namibian politics of memory around the genocide committed against the Herero and Nama, Damara, and San by the German *Schutztruppen* during the 1904-1908 counterinsurgency in the former German South West Africa (1884-1915)¹ (GSWA). Memory politics in Namibia is, on the one hand, part of the “entangled history between Namibia and Germany” (Kössler 2012: 278) which comprises a diversity of trajectories. On the other, it is also situated in the larger post-colonial debate and reconciliation politics that transcend the particular historical events by connecting them to global lessons (to be) drawn from mass atrocities, such as the need for an “integrated memory” (Ben Aharon 2020) to overcome singling out or even hierarchizing victim groups. The question of genocide recognition and what it implies – morally, legally, in terms of reparations and current political relations between successor states of perpetrators and of victims – includes various strands of state as well as non-state actors with differential claims and conflicting interests. Our paper aims to help disentangle this complex web and further an understanding of the necessity of including the diversity of actors below state-level in negotiations of the past. As collective memories are constantly reconstructed and always interwoven with political competition (Halbwachs 1992), the selective support or else neglect of some victim groups and their narratives is a powerful momentum. Post-colonial and post-conflict societies are especially prone to cultivate diverging memories and hence to reproduce friction rather than develop a connecting memory culture (see Björkdahl et al. 2017). To counteract the divisive potential inherent in these frictions, we appeal to decision makers to foster societal processes, which contest the past from a perspective in which everyone has an equal voice, and to work against silencing of public controversies relating to past violence – on either side in international relations.

In the first section of this paper we outline the key actors in the Namibian memory politics, specifically Namibia’s ruling party, the South West-Africa People’s Organisation (SWAPO), two factions within the Herero speaking community, Nama organisations, and the German speaking community. This section will introduce contested historical narratives that can be found in the different actor groups, though, naturally, none of these groups are homogenous entities. The second section introduces three physical memory sites (the Rider Statue, the Independence Memorial Museum, and Swakopmund Memorial Cemetery Park) and analyses how the different actor groups interact with these important places (and objects) in the Namibian mnemoscape. It is

¹ German colonial rule ended in 1915 and, in 1920, the League of Nations mandated what was now South West Africa (SWA) to South Africa. South Africa enforced its laws in SWA, including laws around race and the apartheid system from 1948 onward.

necessary to turn attention to the practices surrounding these concrete sites to understand the different histories they represent for different actor groups. Having looked at actors and examples of how they relate to the physical memory landscape, section three will discuss memorialisation through commemoration, specifically discussing Herero Day in Okahandja and its political significance. Section four will discuss the first repatriation of human remains (i.e., in particular skulls) of genocide victims from Germany in 2011, highlighting some aspects of the debate at the time, around what to do with the skulls once they are in Namibia, and what implications these decisions might have. As genocide remembrance is closely interwoven with specific sites and spatial order, section five addresses the expropriation of land under German colonial rule and focusses on debates around land reform in Namibia.

We have chosen these foci in order to give a more differentiated overview of memory politics in Namibia. While most of the German media and political debate surrounding questions of how to recognise and compensate for the past atrocities are focused on possible legal implications – also beyond the specific case of Namibia – the consequences of ‘our’ ways of dealing with the past for ‘their’ relations and memory culture struggles in Namibia tend to be overlooked. Our paper hence intends to foster a more thorough understanding of foreign policy decisions’ implications for the target societies’ struggle for recognition.

1. NATIONAL HISTORY AND CONTESTED NARRATIVES

1.1. *The South West Africa People’s Organisation SWAPO*

This section will discuss the national historical narrative in Namibia and its significance for the current Namibian government, in order to gain an understanding for certain government actions and positions when it comes to the remembrance of the 1904-1908 genocide against the Herero and Nama.

The South West Africa People’s Organisation (SWAPO) was elected as Namibia’s ruling party in the first national elections in 1989, with Sam Nujoma as President. SWAPO has remained the dominant party in Namibia since independence in 1990. From 1994 to 2020, SWAPO has kept a two-thirds majority in the National Assembly, giving it the authority to make unilateral amendments to the constitution.² Consequently, ‘party’ and ‘state’ are often treated as if synonymous in the Namibian context (Zuern 2012: 496). This conflation is reflected – and also reproduced – by the fact that the national historical narrative, national holidays,³ memorials, and commemorative events are dominated by SWAPO party interests. In order to understand SWAPO’s position regarding the historical importance of the genocide and anti-colonial resistance in the early 20th century, it may be helpful to consider some key aspects of SWAPO’s narrative of Namibian independence.

The SWAPO narrative of Namibian history centres around the military liberation struggle against South Africa (and apartheid), from 1966 to 1990 (Kössler 2012: 290; Hamrick and Duschinski 2018: 440-1; Zuern 2012: 497).⁴ It lays great focus on the bravery and righteousness of SWAPO’s military wing, the People’s Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN) (Zuern 2012: 497) and glorifies the military struggle for independence as a ‘just war’ (Melber 2005: 102). The government adopted a ‘Policy of National Reconciliation’ after independence, meaning there were no official investigations into past crimes of the PLAN (Brock 2019: 37). This policy, in connection with the

2 In September 2020, SWAPO lost the 2/3 majority for the first time since 1994 (Kathindi 2020d). Kathindi (2020d) writes: “The President no doubt had the 2/3rds majority in mind when he appointed a National Unity Democratic Organisation (NUDO) President Esther Muinjangue as Health Deputy Minister”; “This comes as Ovaherero Paramount Chief Vekuui Rukoro earlier this year removed Muinjangue from the Ovaherero Genocide Foundation following her appointment as Health Deputy Minister”.

3 See Melber 2005: 99.

4 The insurgency was conducted mainly from Angola (Nebe 2020; also see Kössler 2007: 372).

glorifying narrative of SWAPO liberation, left no space for discussions on human rights violations committed by SWAPO during the liberation struggle, nor for mourning the ensuing losses (Zuern 2012: 497; Melber 2005: 102).⁵

SWAPO's legitimacy springs from its narrative of Namibian independence and its own pivotal role in it, as the left-wing liberator of the Namibian people (Melber 2005: 103), and with lasting effect: it seems that most Namibians who vote for SWAPO do so not because of "its ability to offer services or address poverty or inequality," but as the country's "liberator from settler colonialism" (Zuern 2012: 510). As SWAPO's legitimacy and voter base are secured through the liberator narrative, it is important for SWAPO to control and keep up this narrative. However, this narrative leaves little room for non-military, non-SWAPO struggles in the 1970s and 1980s Namibia (Kössler 2007: 372),⁶ nor does it include the early 20th century resistance to colonialism and the sacrifices of the Herero and Nama (as well as Damara or San) populations (Hamrick and Duschinski 2018: 444). While the fight for independence is described as a 'national movement', it is associated only with the SWAPO-led military struggle. "[SWAPO] is equated with liberation, and support for [SWAPO] with patriotism" (Zuern 2012: 497). Further, Namibia's foreign relations depend on this narrative to a certain degree. Although SWAPO implemented neo-liberal, free-market policy reforms post-independence, it relies on its historic ties with communism to "maintain international solidarities with former Soviet allies" (Hamrick and Duschinski 2018: 440-1).⁷

The memory landscape in Windhoek is not unaffected by these selective commemoration practices. While still dominated by colonial monuments and buildings, the urban landscape was transformed to reflect SWAPO's narrative of national history, e.g. through the destruction of historical markers of colonialism or apartheid and through the construction of memory sites that serve the purpose of celebrating the military liberation struggle. While historical markers of apartheid are replaced with new structures, (the destruction of) sites relating to Herero and Nama history show a "conspicuous lack of state commemoration" (Hamrick and Duschinski 2018: 439). By changing the physical memoryscape, Namibian history is focussed "on a small and specific people who ... embody the aims and aspirations of the incipient nation-state, and [seek] to transfer this abstract thought into a physical embellishment of the landscape" (Gewald 2009: 270, quoted from Hamrick and Duschinski 2018: 439).

One way in which SWAPO controls the national narrative, is through its "One Namibia, One Nation" slogan.⁸ The slogan rhetorically unifies different ethnic communities in Namibia (Hamrick and Duschinski 2018: 440) while warning of *tribalism* (Kössler 2011: 81). By framing historical events as 'national' movements, achievements, losses etc., criticisms of being

5 Government representatives warn against delving into the past, arguing that "if investigations are to be opened, they must not simply look at [SWAPO]'s actions" (Zuern 2012: 499). Similar arguments have been used by German-speaking Namibians in reference to German crimes in former GSWA.

6 The narrative ignores "a whole array of unarmed, as it were civil, dimensions of the liberation struggle, such as the workers' and trades union movement, student activism, the role of churches and activities of traditional communities and their leaders is obscured by this vision" (Kössler 2007: 372).

7 Background: during the apartheid liberation struggle, SWAPO was a left-wing militant group and received support from communist governments (including military support). SWAPO was also member of the Non-Aligned Movement, thereby gaining wider international recognition and support. SWAPO remains a member of the Socialist International. However, after independence, it implemented neo-liberal, free-market policy reforms to attract international investment (though labour unions continue to resist privatisation in some areas). These policies, following colonialism and apartheid, have intensified social and economic inequality in Namibia. Land reform has also been slow since independence; there are extreme racial disparities in landholdings (Hamrick and Duschinski 2018: 440-1). SWAPO has failed to institute programmes to reduce broader economic inequality. Zuern (2012) notes that the Namibian government is cautious regarding significant economic redistribution and taxing of commercial farms (majority white-owned) because of the German-speaking Namibian community's ties to Germany and the Namibian government's relationship with Germany (p. 506).

8 The 'One Namibia, One Nation' slogan is not free from criticism in Namibia, also from within SWAPO. For instance, while agreeing with the sentiment and highlighting the importance of this approach, Kazenambo has criticised that the slogan has been used in self-interest and political convenience, rather than to unify Namibia while recognising and accepting its diversity (The Patriot 2019).

underrepresented or marginalised, which are voiced by specific (ethnic) groups, are thus delegitimised to a certain degree. This is significant because, while the SWAPO-led “struggle for independence was dominated by Ovambo speakers from the northern sections of the country, who were spared the brunt of earlier colonial violence, [...] the struggle against German rule were overwhelmingly fought by Herero and Nama speakers. These are living in the central and southern regions where the colonial forces and settlers were concentrated” (Zuern 2012: 496).

It becomes clear that the focus on the 1970s and 1980s military struggle does not only stress SWAPO’s sacrifices and victories (and silences its human rights violations). It also favours Ovambo speakers’ contributions to Namibian national history over Herero and Nama speakers’. In effect, rhetorical unification glosses over the different levels of recognition and value attributed to certain groups. This inequality is not only expressed symbolically; while warning of *tribalism*, SWAPO mobilises its Ovambo-majority voter base through “preferential allocation of development aid and other resources” (Hamrick and Duschinski 2018: 440).⁹

However, it should be noted that party-affiliation does not run strictly along ethnic lines; there are Herero and Nama SWAPO members, who hold important government offices. SWAPO-affiliated Herero and Nama may focus on continuities, i.e. frame the apartheid liberation struggle as a continuation of their peoples’ 1904-1908 struggle against colonialism. This narration is apt to challenge both the SWAPO narrative and those who dismiss SWAPO as serving only Ovambos¹⁰ (Hamrick and Duschinski 2018: 444).

Although counter-narratives do not usually contradict SWAPO’s national history outright,¹¹ the government seldomly sends official representatives to non-SWAPO (memorial) events associated with alternative narrations of the past. While it does so on a few occasions,¹² the attendance of government officials cannot necessarily be read as an acceptance of a corresponding narrative. And yet, the government may feel pressure to send an official representative to a memorial event for the 1904-1908 genocide, if the German embassy or another important partner of the country makes such pronouncement (Zuern 2012: 510-1).

Despite the SWAPO’s avoidance of issues and events pertaining to the Herero and Nama genocide, the General Assembly passed the Ovaherero Genocide Motion in 2006. This motion was brought forth by NUDO, an opposition party led by Paramount Chief Riruako, and called the government to support Herero reparations claims against Germany.¹³ The 2006 motion followed a 2001 class action lawsuit, also led by Riruako, which did not bring the desired results.¹⁴ However, the passing of the 2006 motion does not seem to have led to concrete action until 2015, when negotiations

9 The contradictions between official SWAPO positions and its politics is openly criticised. For example, in August 2020, the SWAPO Finance Minister, Iipumbu Shiimi, accused newly forming political parties of being tribalist. Henny Seibeb, deputy leader of the Landless People’s Movement, responded: “SWAPO is the biggest ethnic conglomeration in Namibia. It has always thrived on ethnic politics”. He noted that the positions of Vice President, Prime Minister and Deputy PM all belong to the same tribe, as does most of the cabinet. Seibeb also criticised SWAPO’s selective and biased commemoration practices (Kathindi 2020b).

10 For continuity in the SWAPO narrative see Melber 2005: 96-7, and for contradictions with official telling, see Melber 2005: 104.

11 Direct contradiction of historical narratives is rare in Namibia. However, there are significant segments of the German-speaking community who deny the genocide of 1904-1908 outright (Kössler 2007: 362).

12 The centennial of the Battle of Ohamakari, the inauguration of Swakopmund Memorial Park, and on occasions of the repatriation of human remains (Zuern 2012: 510).

13 The motion sought for Germany to officially acknowledge its crimes against the Hereros, Namas, and Damaras as genocide and to apologise. Germany was also to enter negotiations with representatives of the affected communities and the Namibian government, regarding reparations for said crimes (Brock 2019: 62).

14 In 2001, Riruako’s Chief Hosea Kutako Foundation brought a lawsuit (in the US through the Alien Tort Claims Act of 1789) against Germany and three German companies, which had been involved in the genocide of 1904-1908 (Hamrick and Duschinski 2018: 443). Backdrop: 1995 Kohl and 1998 Herzog refused to formally meet with Herero delegations when in Namibia (Kössler 2012: 296), and former German ambassador to Namibia, Wolfgang Massing, even urged the Herero people to drop the case (Shigwedha 2016: 206). During WWII similar cases had been brought up against Germany (also under the Alien Torts Claims Act), and settlement was reached in 1999 (Kössler 2012: 296-7).

between the Namibian and German governments began. Dr. Zedekia Ngavirue (Herero) was appointed as the Namibian Special Envoy on Genocide to lead negotiations with German Special Envoy, Mr. Ruprecht Polenz. A cabinet committee was established to oversee negotiations, and which founded a Technical Committee (in charge of research and documentation) and later the Chief's Forum. It is important to mention these bodies, because the Technical Committee and the Chief's Forum are the two main organs through which victim groups can take part in negotiations between the Namibian and German governments (Brock 2019: 62-64). Especially this aspect is a contentious issue regarding the involvement of Herero and Nama groups in the reparations negotiations. While chiefs and interested parties are encouraged to participate through these channels, the government has been criticised for limiting the involvement of (certain) traditional leaders. This will be discussed in more detail in the following parts, which will expound on different interest groups within the Herero and Nama communities and their involvement, or lack thereof, in the negotiations with Germany.

1.2. *Actor Constellations in Herero and Nama Communities*

This subsection discusses actors and groups within the affected communities,¹⁵ including contentions between two main Herero factions, the *Maharero Group* and the *Riruako Group*.¹⁶ However, although they are contending groups, they appear to have very similar aims: activists emphasise the continuous suffering in their communities, underlining that the effects of the genocide are still felt today. They call for “efficient and effective land reform processes that acknowledge pre-colonial land claims, financial compensation for stolen cattle and other losses, access to mental and physical health services, repatriation of all human remains and cultural artefacts still in Germany to Namibia following culturally appropriate protocols, development aid in areas populated by affected communities, and apologies and other forms of symbolic acknowledgment, including monuments, memorials, and museums” (Hamrick and Duschinski 2018: 443).

The two Herero groups mentioned above are divided – it seems primarily – by their positions on Paramount Chieftancy, though Hamrick and Duschinski (2018) find that this divide can also be observed in their support for different political parties and genocide committees or organisations. The groups also differ in their historical narratives and legal imaginations. The first group does not recognise the Paramount Chief and supports the SWAPO-recognised Royal Traditional Authorities (Maharero Group),¹⁷ while the second does support the Paramount Chief, currently Vekuii Rikoro (Riruako Group).¹⁸ This distinction between those who support the Paramount Chief and those who support the Maharero Royal House is also referenced in other works,¹⁹ as well as in newspaper articles²⁰ (Hamrick and Duschinski 2018: 445).

While the Maharero Group is affiliated with SWAPO, those in the Riruako Group tend to support oppositional parties. This is also tied to differing historical narratives prevalent in each group: the Maharero Group sees both the genocide and the apartheid liberation struggle as part of the same process of anti-colonial resistance and fight for justice, while the Riruako Group looks to the

15 When referring to the ‘affected communities’, this paper means those communities whose forebears were victims of genocide.

16 Term as used in Hamrick (2013) and Hamrick and Duschinski (2018).

17 Hamrick calls this group the ‘Maharero Group’. For all of Namibia there are 52 recognised Royal Traditional Authorities. The Herero have multiple chiefs, subchiefs and royal houses, including the (most well-known) Maharero Royal House (Red Flag), led by Tjinani Maharero since 2012. Hamrick and Duschinski (2018) argue that the government recognises Royal House leaders and chiefs based on their affiliation to SWAPO. Consequently, the position of Paramount Chief, held at the time by Riruako (opposition), was never recognised by the SWAPO-led government (Hamrick and Duschinski 2018: 445).

18 Hamrick calls this group the ‘Riruako Group’, because Kuaimi Riruako was Paramount Chief at the time of her field research. Riruako held this position from 1978 until his death in 2014, followed by Fanuel Tjombé, who died weeks after taking the position. Rikoro followed him in 2014. The position of Paramount Chief is contested, as it does not legally exist in independent Namibia (Kahiurika 2016).

19 Van Beek, Gewalt and Kaapama (2017) wrote an article on tensions around the Red Flag Day commemorations in Okahandja, which were cancelled for the first time in 2012 due to tensions (and fear of violence) between these two factions (see also Hamrick 2013: 34-57).

20 E.g. The Patriot 2019.

genocide as the primary defining historical event. While the Maharero Group may also criticise SWAPO for Ovambo favouritism, the Riruako Group is more deeply sceptical of state law, seeing it as fundamentally biased. These positions influence the approaches of the two majority-Herero genocide committees. The Ovaherero/Ovambanderu Council for Dialogue (ONCD-04)²¹ enjoys the support of the Maharero Group and seeks to achieve its reparations goals through dialogue with, and support of, SWAPO. The Riruako Group supports the Ovaherero Genocide Council (OGC), which is more confrontational and critical of SWAPO (Hamrick and Duschinski 2018: 445-6). The two committees have worked together in the past, though “such projects have been marked by significant tensions, and past attempts to merge into one committee have been short-lived” (ibid.: 446).

The Nama Genocide Technical Committee (NGTC) is the last of the three main genocide committees. While it avoids positioning itself in Herero politics, it works more closely with the OGC than the ONCD-04 (Hamrick and Duschinski 2018: 442). It has also worked together with the Nama Traditional Leaders Association (NTLA), through which traditional leaders of the various Nama groups and clans are represented.²² Shigwedha (2016) finds differences in Herero and Nama traditional leaders’ relationships to the SWAPO-led government. He argues that Herero leaders are more critical and want the government to take a more forceful approach in negotiations with Germany, while Nama leaders take a more pro-government stance, and seek to avoid disruptions of Namibian-German relations (p. 209). However, these observations are not reflected in the relationships between the genocide committees.²³

While the ONCD-04 has been represented in negotiations with Germany (within the given framework), the OGC and NGTC are not. Many activists have called for a triologue between Germany, the Namibian government, and the affected communities, but the Namibian government has made it clear that the current framework would remain in place and both the German and Namibian governments agreed in that they will remain the leading negotiating parties (Brock 2019: 65). While both the Namibian and the German governments emphasise that affected community leaders are involved and welcome (Brock 2019: 67), how open this process truly is, is most heavily contested.²⁴ The Namibian government has repeatedly been criticised for not involving (the more SWAPO critical) members of the affected communities.²⁵

In August 2020, an English-language weekly newspaper, the Windhoek Observer, published an article, stating that 70% of affected community members do not feel represented in the negotiations, nor are they vested in the results: “As far as they are concerned, the process for reparations has not started yet. Affected communities have stated that whatever is decided by the two governments regarding the genocide, has no impact on their demands for restorative justice from Germany” (Observer 2020). Instead, these community members are vested more heavily in a court case filed in 2017.

In 2017 Paramount Chief Rikoro and Kaptein Johannes Isaack filed a joint lawsuit against Germany and three German corporations.²⁶ While the case has been dismissed after appeal (as of September 2020), traditional leaders plan to file for a rehearing and for ‘En Banc’ proceedings (Kathindi 2020). Traditional leaders contend that “no viable and lasting negotiated settlement is possible without the full, direct and active participation of the Ovaherero and Nama Leaders representing the overwhelming majority of the Victim Communities – as opposed to handpicked pro-Government clan Chiefs” (Kathindi 2020).

In the same vein, the government’s ‘One Namibia, One Nation’ approach also contributes to dissatisfaction with the negotiations in the affected communities. The government avoids naming the Herero and Nama as victims of genocide, speaking rather of ‘Namibian victims’. Activists have read this as an attempt by the government to control the historical narrative: “They want to sidestep the historical reality of the targeted groups of people who were the [...] victims of genocide. Government wishes to keep the victims vague to keep the beneficiaries of the reparations

21 Now ONCD-04, as some Nama chiefs have joined (Brock 2019: 64).

22 Information on Nama organisations (and contestations) is less available than information on Herero groups.

23 Interestingly, similar observations have not been made by other authors.

24 Hamrick and Duschinski find that most activists call for a triologue (2018: 443), as well as for comprehensive compensation, support, and symbolic acknowledgement (ibid.).

25 E.g. Zimmerer 2019.

26 Representing the Ovaherero Traditional Authority (OTA) and the Nama Traditional Leaders Association (NTLA).

vague” (Observer 2020). They also criticise that the Herero, Nama, and San in diaspora are not represented at all in the negotiations (ibid.).

Bernard Swartbooi, leader of the (not ethnically bound) Landless People’s Movement (formed 2018), made a statement in August 2020, calling the affected communities to “organise themselves on a higher level, set up joint technical negotiation team, to start putting figures together”, rather than simply demanding to be involved in the government negotiations (Kathindi 2020). He also argued that the government does not have the power of attorney to negotiate on behalf of the affected communities, as it has never received an official invitation to do so (Kathindi 2020c).

It should be mentioned that there are Herero SWAPO members who are critical of the negotiations and the lack of involvement of the affected communities. The interest groups outlined above do not run along strict lines. For example, Kazenambo Kazenambo is a well-known Herero SWAPO member and former politician,²⁷ who has been vocal on the negotiations between the Namibian and German governments. Early on, Kazenambo criticised the lack of involvement of affected communities, warning of potential dangers of their exclusion, and has voiced support for the 2017 court case in New York (The Patriot 2018).

To conclude this short overview of the main actor groups within the affected communities: the Herero community is roughly divided into two factions; the Maharero Group and the Riruako Group. There is less information on different Nama associations, though the NGTC works more closely with the government-critical OGC. There is very little to no information on Damara or San groups.²⁸

1.3. German-speaking Namibians

The last group that will be looked at in this paper are German-speaking Namibians. As is the case with any group, the German-speaking community is, of course, not homogenous and there are differing opinions and positions within it when it comes to the colonial legacy and the genocide of 1904-1908 (Zuern 2012: 506). However, “a routinised argument denying the colonial genocide is still prominent, if not prevalent, amongst this group” (Kössler 2007: 377).

This denial is reflected in the only German-speaking newspaper *Allgemeine Zeitung* and the radio station, the Namibian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC)²⁹ (Kössler 2007: 377-8). There is a “whole discursive bent and strategy, grasping at every straw to ‘relativise, belittle or embellish’” (ibid.: 378). These alternative narratives of German colonialism and the genocide are made material in multiple privately financed museums (ibid.). It becomes clear that the German-speaking community disposes over resources, in terms of material wealth, expertise, and communicative structures, which allow it to consolidate and materialise its trivialising narrative of German crimes (ibid.).³⁰

Not only are German crimes belittled or denied, the former colonial power began to celebrate the genocide as the ‘victorious Battle of the Waterberg’ shortly after it had taken place. The annual commemoration for the fallen German soldiers even continued until 2003, when it was banned by then-President Nujoma – 13 years after independence (Kössler 2012: 284). Regarding calls for acknowledgement of German crimes and reparations, one common position is, “if one wishes to consider actions of the German colonial authorities, then one must also interrogate the violent acts indigenous groups committed against one another both during and prior to colonial rule,

27 Former Minister of Youth, National Service, Sport and Culture (2010-2012) and former Deputy Minister of Local and Regional Government, Housing and Rural Development (2005-2010).

28 Kössler (2012) mentions the Damara Cultural Heritage Forum, which was formed in 2005. They raise awareness to the 17,000 Damara who disappeared 1903-08 and criticise the marginal role given to the Damara in the national narrative (p. 301). Kössler does not elaborate on the group’s (potential) positions on national recognition or commemoration of the early 20th century anti-colonial resistance and genocide.

29 Funded partially by private donations and the support of successive German governments. “Such activities – including pronouncements on the Holocaust (that would be illegal in Germany) have been met with remarkable tolerance by the Namibian government” (Kössler 2007: 378). Kössler (2010) gives interesting insights into the German-speaking community in Namibia, specifically looking at historical developments between German colonial rule and independence (regarding Nazism and Apartheid) and collective identity.

30 German speakers held central privileged positions during settler colonialism and continued to do so under South African rule. Even today, the minority “remain[s] an economically powerful and conspicuous grouping in independent Namibia” (Kössler 2012: 293). This enduring disparity is a reminder of the sufferings and losses endured during German colonisation and the genocide (ibid.: 292).

suggesting that if one cannot investigate all abuses, one has no right to investigate any” (Zuern 2012: 499).

German-speaking Namibians are not actively involved in the national discourse on genocide issues. The Namibian ambassador to Germany, Peter Katjavivi, emphasised that the inclusion of this community would be an important step in reconciliatory processes (Brock 2019: 55). However, while “most German speakers remain outside of formal politics and keep largely to themselves, a vocal segment of the German-speaking community accords great importance to its monuments and will go to significant lengths to protect them” (Zuern 2012: 506). The removal of the Rider Statue (*Reiterdenkmal*) was particularly controversial. The next section will take a closer look at this and other significant aspects of Namibia’s – and here especially Windhoek’s – physical memory landscape.

2. PHYSICAL MEMORY LANDSCAPE

Apart from the Independence Memorial Museum and its surroundings, “[...] Windhoek[’s] memory landscape remains characterised by German colonial buildings and monuments that reference the Namibian War and underscore the colonial perspective of these events” (Kössler 2015: 31). While there have been informal re-appropriations of these colonial monuments, their “main content and overall import” have not changed (ibid.). This section will look at a selection of monuments and other memory sites, which have been surrounded by activism and continued controversy.

2.1. *The Rider Statue (Reiterdenkmal)*

The Rider Statue was erected in 1912, as a symbol of imperial power and Germany’s perpetual claim to sovereignty, specifically honouring the German soldiers and civilians who died during the 1904-1908 colonial war (Hamrick and Duschinski 2018: 447). The Rider Statue depicts a *Schutztruppe* soldier mounted on his horse, standing high on a platform with his weapon raised. It was erected to the left of the *Alte Feste* (1890)³¹ and across the road from the *Christuskirche* (1910),³² the latter of which also makes explicit reference to these events (Kössler 2007: 373).

There have been several activist initiatives surrounding the Rider Statue, from various communities.³³ For example, in 1994 two German speakers led the ‘Reiterdenkmal Initiative’, which sought to add a plaque to the statue, “to honour ‘all victims of military conflict since the colonisation of the country, as a gesture towards the newly achieved liberty that embraced all citizens of the country’” (Melber 2005: 110, quoted from Zuern 2012: 507). While this initiative does not seem very controversial, it was turned down by the National Museum’s Council³⁴ ten years later, in 2004 (Melber 2005: 110). The initiative’s reception within the German speaking community was mixed; “[a] small number of German speakers strongly opposed the addition of the plaque, while others challenged the wording [...] On the other hand, there is still active denial among a significant number of German speakers that genocide occurred” (Zuern 2012: 507).

When it became clear that there were plans to move or remove the Rider memorial, public debates ensued (especially around 2008 and 2012/13). For parts of the German speaking community, who value their colonial heritage, the Rider Statue serves as a source of pride and identity (Hamrick and Duschinski 2018: 449). When plans to build the Independence Memorial Museum in place of the monument became known, “the Rider became a veritable rallying point of identity statements by relevant groups of German speakers” (Kössler 2015: 153). The image of German colonialism depicted in Namibia’s German language newspaper, *Allgemeine Zeitung*, “thrives on the projections about civilising pioneers and their achievements” (Kössler 2015: 153). This focus on

31 This was “the main military stronghold of the colonial power in Windhoek” (Kössler 2015: 29).

32 Civilising narrative; the Lutheran church stands in part on the site of the historical Orumbo rua Katjombondi concentration camp (Hamrick and Duschinski 2018: 438; Kössler 2015: 27). Prisoners from the camps were used to construct the church (Kössler 2012: 286).

33 This activism was not limited to genocide issues. To protest forcible relocation into segregated township in 1959, Herero activists anonymously covered the Rider’s head with a sack and decorated the statue with flowers (Hamrick and Duschinski 2018: 447).

34 That no broader controversy followed may be due to lacking resources. Kössler (2007) writes: “to attain a voice – in this case a moderately critical one, aimed at genuine reconciliation – is predicated on access to sufficient means: money and organizational skills, connections and available free time” (p. 374).

the alleged “achievements” of German colonisation erase colonial crimes and resulting (current) inequalities from the narrative (ibid.).³⁵ After the move (2010), the German Cultural Council (*Deutscher Kulturrat*) held a rededication ceremony and an event for the 100th anniversary of the Rider, where “aggressive speeches and actions” were held (Kössler 2015: 158-9).

However, moving the Rider Statue did not only meet resistance in the German speaking community. Zuern (2012) notes that, for most in the affected communities, the Rider “is no longer a symbol of colonial might, but offers a site for demands for reparations and who has the right to white-owned land” (p. 510). Kössler (2015) found that, for many Ovaherero, the original location of the Rider Statue primarily marked the site of the of Orumbo rua Katjombondi concentration camp, serving as a reminder of the suffering of their community (p. 31). In 2008, to protest the feared erasure of colonial crimes, activists set up 51 wooden crosses around the statue to draw attention to the indigenous deaths that were not recognised on the plaque (Zuern 2012: 507). In the same year, a number of well-known Herero public figures spoke out against the removal of the statue, including Kazenambo Kazenambo, Katuutire Kaura,³⁶ and Paramount Chief Riruako (leader of NUDO at the time).³⁷ They argued that the Rider Statue has also gained symbolic value for the communities who fought against colonialism and suffered genocide (ibid.). It is important to consider that the Rider Statue is one of the few historical sites, which directly references the genocide.

The Rider was relocated by around 150 meters in 2009, to make space for the construction of the Independence Memorial Museum (Hamrick and Duschinski 2018: 447). The statue was disassembled and stored for multiple months before it was reassembled. This whole process was financed by private donations from the German-speaking community, demonstrating how “the economic power of a rather small but disproportionately privileged group enables them to project quite vigorously their particular vision of the past, which to a considerable extent revolves around the denial of the genocide” (Kössler 2012: 286; see also Zuern 2012: 507).

In 2012 the statue’s removal was discussed again, to which (among others) reparations activists objected, arguing that the Rider Statue was the only historical marker on the former grounds of the Orumbo rue Katjombondi concentration camp, and in Windhoek’s memory landscape as a whole, which makes specific reference to the genocide of the Herero and Nama (Hamrick and Duschinski 2018: 449-50). In December 2013, the memorial was removed, without prior announcement (Kössler 2015: 160). Today the Rider stands, without his pedestal, in the courtyard of the *Alte Feste*, as a “historical object” (Tjihenuna 2014; Kössler 2015: 148). The original site of the Rider Statue is now occupied by a towering statue of Sam Nujoma holding the constitution, while the Rider’s second position is taken by a Genocide Memorial (Kössler 2015: 168).

The debate around the removal of the Rider Statue is particularly interesting because it was so controversial, not only for German speaking Namibians, but also for the affected communities. Across the different communities similar sentiments were voiced concerning the importance of physical sites of remembrance (though, of course, the historical narratives differ dramatically between the discussed groups). The Rider Statue also offered a site for activism (be it for opposing interest groups).

2.2. *The National Independence Memorial Museum*

As it is so entwined with the removal of the Rider Statue and because there were some public debates around the role the museum should play in Namibia’s and Windhoek’s memory landscape, this section will give a short impression of the National Independence Memorial Museum.

The focus of the Memorial Museum and the site on which it stands were subject of debate prior to the inauguration. In 2011, then-president of South West Africa National Union (SWANU), Usutuaije Maamberua, addressed parliament with a motion to rename the planned Independence Memorial Museum to Genocide Remembrance Centre. He argued that an independence museum would be redundant, considering the many references to the 1970s-1980s independence struggle already present in Windhoek (Hamrick and Duschinski 2018: 438; Hamrick 2013: 59). Maamberua

35 However, “such deeply colonial modes of thinking are proving unsustainable. The relocation of the Rider therefore appeared as tangible proof of a change in power relations, at least as far as symbolic politics go” (Kössler 2015: 153).

36 Leader of the DTA.

37 All three were central participants in the Red Flag Day celebrations and support calls for reparations (Zuern 2012: 507).

withdrew his motion upon reassurance that one floor of the museum would be entirely devoted to the Herero and Nama genocide, that the horrors of the Orumbo rua Katjombondi concentration camp would be made visible, and that funds for smaller remembrance centres would be secured in the 2012-2013 budget. However, when the budget was released, such allocations were not made (Hamrick 2013: 60). Maamberua confronted Kazenambo Kazenambo, in his position as then-Minister of Youth, Sport and Culture on the floor of parliament, but this did not bring about the desired changes (ibid.).

The Museum was inaugurated in 2014, on Namibian Independence Day, by then-president Pohamba. It also stands on the former grounds of the concentration camp, breaking up the cluster of colonial monuments there, together with the replacement of the *Schutztruppe* Rider with Sam Nujoma (Hamrick and Duschinski 2018: 450-1). In his inauguration speech, President Pohamba kept to the 'One Namibia, One Nation' narrative, although he recognised the crimes committed against the Herero and Nama on the site. While the museum focusses on the SWAPO-led military liberation struggle, it contains a 'Chamber of Horrors' dedicated to the colonial genocide (ibid.: 438).

The inauguration in 2014 also included the unveiling of the genocide memorial, which replaced the Rider in his second position. A large bas-relief mural depicts the hanging of three Herero or Nama genocide victims. This makes a kind of plinth, on which a victorious bronze statue of a man and a woman with raised fists, revealing broken chains, stands. The words 'Their Blood Waters our Freedom' are raised between these two 'parts' of the monument (Hamrick and Duschinski 2018: 451).

Activists connected with the ONCD-04 celebrated these references to the genocide, as part of the national narrative of Namibian history, as a victory. Activists connected with the OGC and the NGTC were more critical, noting the lack of involvement of the Herero and Nama communities in the conceptualisation of the museum. The Riruako Group first threatened to boycott the unveiling, but then attended and even "expressed pride in the memorial but also reminded reporters that his group, the OGC, had struggled for years to make the monument possible" (Hamrick and Duschinski 2018: 451).³⁸

2.3. *The Swakopmund Memorial Cemetery Park (2005)*

Having discussed the Rider Statue as a colonial monument and the Memorial Museum as a national project, this subsection will give an impression of one citizen-led initiative concerned with the Namibian memory landscape. While there have been various citizen-led initiatives,³⁹ this subsection is concerned with the Swakopmund Memorial Cemetery Park because it represents the dividing lines that run through Namibian society in a remarkable way.

The Swakopmund Cemetery "has long been an abrupt visual reminder of colonialism and apartheid" (Zuern 2012: 507-508). The graves of white Christians and South African soldiers could be found on the well-tended original grounds of the cemetery, Jewish graves were located outside of the original grounds (though they had headstones), and the African cemetery was unmarked in the open desert. The African cemetery comprises graves of those killed during the colonial time and the 1904-1908 genocide, including many who died in labour camps. These graves were often reused, driven, ridden, or walked over by passers-by, and the grounds were partially used for construction. Two residents initiated a project to build a wall around the cemetery, protecting the unmarked graves and creating a single unified cemetery. (Zuern 2012: 507-10) The project was widely viewed as a reconciliatory move. It was supported by the SWAPO-dominated municipality, which called for local residents and artists to participate in the conceptualisation,⁴⁰ and "endorsed by the Herero-speaking community which has since held traditional ceremonies at the site, funded in part by the German embassy" (Zuern 2012: 510).

In 2007, the Herero community inaugurated a monument dedicated to the victims of the German concentration camps at the Swakopmund Memorial Cemetery (on the African side of the unified

38 The OGC's subcommittee on monuments and memorials often has difficulty getting state approval or funding. Some members have expressed frustration at this and suspect the process is politicised – that it is made more difficult for oppositional party members or supporters to gain access to funds (Hamrick and Duschinski 2018: 446).

39 For example the memorial to Captain Fredericks on Shark Island, the site of the country's most infamous concentration camp.

40 It included the involvement of German speakers as well.

cemetery). The monument draws attention to the thousands of Ovaherero/Ovambanderu who died in the concentration camps in Swakopmund between 1904 and 1908. However, the creators of the memorial sought for it to be reconciliatory, “avoid[ing] a direct accusation against German forces by stating that those who died did so ‘under mysterious circumstances’” (Zuern 2012: 508). The occasion of the inauguration was used to draw attention to the issue of reparations from Germany. Residents of Swakopmund and Herero speakers from other communities came together for the All Ovaherero/Ovambanderu Reparation Walk prior to the unveiling (Zuern 2012: 508).

3. HERERO DAY IN OKAHANDJA

Having discussed selected places of memory and how these places are used, this section will turn toward the oldest and most well-known annual communal commemoration in central and southern Namibia: Herero Day in Okahandja (Kössler 2015: 183). Specifically, this section will highlight some important political dimensions of the event.

Herero Day originated as the commemoration of the reburial of Paramount Chief Samuel Maharero, who died in exile and was reburied in Okahandja in 1923. His reburial was important because: 1) this symbolic event recentred dispersed Herero groups, “to constitute them as a ‘nation’”; 2) it increased the prevalence of ‘traditional’ practices in Herero communities; and 3) the organisation of the event itself and its remarkable success⁴¹ strengthened existing bonds between groups and communities (ibid.: 184). Okahandja is also significant, because it is the traditional capital of the Red Band (Kössler 2012: 287-8) and where the first shots were fired in January 1904 (Zuern 2012: 500).

While we will not go into the details of the commemorative activities practiced on Herero Day, a few points relating to the politically charged nature of the event need to be discussed shortly.⁴² The commemorations take place over the course of three days, alluding to or making direct references to current national (memory) politics in a number of ways. Kössler (2015) points to two ways in which Herero Day does this. First, Herero Day often falls together with the national holiday Heroes’ Day, which marks the first military encounter of the liberation war in 1966 (August 26th). While government representatives go to great lengths to attend Heroes’ Day celebrations, Herero Day does not receive such national recognition (p. 189-190). In this way, the coinciding commemorations manifest a central conflict in Namibian national memory politics.

The centennial commemorations of the genocide in 2004 offer an example of these dynamics. Herero Day marked the height of the commemorative events organised by the affected communities. Members of the Red, Green, and White Flags were present⁴³ (Zuern 2012: 502). Between 5,000 and 10,000 Ovaherero from across southern Africa attended the event; it “was an important step in the reproduction and reconstitution of Herero ethnicity” (Kössler 2012: 297). However, no official government representative attended the 2004 Herero Day. Instead, for the parallel Heroes’ Day celebrations that year (38th anniversary), the government unveiled a new monument honouring the SWAPO-led liberation struggle, with full attendance of the cabinet (Kössler 2007: 363; Melber 2005: 107).

However, the then Minister of Lands, Resettlement and Rehabilitation and successor to Sam Nujoma as president, Hifikepunye Pohamba did attend the commemoration of the Battle of Ohamakari at Okakarara that same year (Melber 2005: 107). It remains speculation to what extent Pohamba’s attendance was motivated by the attendance of two other guests that year: the then-German Minister for Economic Cooperation, Heidemarie Wiczorek-Zeul, representing Namibia’s largest donor, or late King Kauluma, the most influential traditional leader in northern Namibia and Chairperson of the Council of Traditional Leaders (Melber 2005c: 142). Zuern (2012) argues that “once the German embassy agrees to send official representation to a memorial event, the Namibian government is pressured to do so as well” (p. 511). She adds that, “when Namibian government representatives then attend commemorations and speak at these events, they give support to the counter-narratives of liberation that the activists organising the events present” (ibid.).

41 In the form of participation of 2,000-3,000 people.

42 For details on Herero Day in Okahandja and further communal commemoration see Kössler 2015: 183-192.

43 Nama groups from southern Namibia were underrepresented; Kössler (2012) ascribes this to a certain amount of Herero exclusionism regarding victimhood (p. 297). For more on competitive victimhood see Melber 2005: 108-109.

In fact, the attendance of each was significant: Wicoreck-Zeul spoke at the commemoration and gave an apology for German crimes, breaking with German policy at the time. As a follow-up, in 2005, she unilaterally announced a 20 million Euro reconciliation initiative.⁴⁴ King Kauluma's attendance "underlined the willingness to acknowledge [...] the primary resistance and its sacrifices" and its importance for nation-building (Melber 2005c: 142). As the most influential leader in what was previously known as Ovamboland (SWAPO voter base), his position on the matter may have been seen as important enough to send government representation to the event (ibid.).

A second important aspect of Herero Day lies in the speeches that take place on the third day. These speeches have often been used to narrate the history of the genocide and to make calls for reparations. These largely make references to "the ongoing campaign, led by the late Ovaherero Paramount Chief Kuaima Riruako, for adequate German apology and compensation for genocide. As long as the Namibian government tended to shun this issue, attendance seemed ill-advised in their point of view" (Kössler 2015: 190).

The emphasis on reparations during Herero Day commemorations increased in the years following the centennial.⁴⁵ For example, the issue became underscored "in 2005 with the attendance of South African Attorney Jeremy Sarkin who briefed listeners on the position about pending lawsuits in the United States, and even more one year later, with the speech by the Left Party Deputy in the German Bundestag, Hüseyin Aydın" (Kössler 2015: 190). Herero Day has thus become a significant site for memory politics around the genocide of the Herero and Nama; however, the ceremonial occupation of Okahandja by the *oturupa* and the visiting of the chiefly graves remain central to the commemorations⁴⁶ (Kössler 2012: 288).

4. REPATRIATION OF HUMAN REMAINS IN 2011

One of the main concerns articulated by activists from the affected communities has been the complete repatriation of human remains from Germany. After the genocide, concentration camps were set up in Lüderitz Bay, Okahandja, Swakopmund, and Windhoek (among others). The death rates in these camps were extremely high. Remains of those that died in the camps (and especially their skulls) were sold to scientists, museums, and universities in Germany⁴⁷ (Shigwedha 2016: 198-199). In the mid-2000s, Paramount Chief Riruako brought a motion for the repatriation of skulls from Germany to parliament. This motion "was coupled with demands for material and moral reparation payable to the descendants of the genocide victims" (Shigwedha 2016: 200). In 2007, the Namibian government forwarded the appeal to the German government (ibid.). This section will not go into detail on this process. Rather, it will focus on the discourse within Namibian society on what to do with the human remains, once they have been repatriated.

In 2011, a delegation of 54 people, led by the then-Minister of Youth, National Service, Sport and Culture, Kazenambo Kazenambo, and Herero and Nama chiefs, went to Germany to receive twenty skulls from the Charité University Hospital in Berlin (Zuern 2012: 512; Shidwedha 2016: 201). The handover ceremony was marked by dissatisfaction at German diplomatic tactlessness as the Foreign Office only sent a state secretary to attend as guest, and she missed the opportunity of stating an apology (see Shidwedha 2016: 202-3; Kössler 2012: 307-308; Brock 2019: 61).⁴⁸

There was some controversy over what should happen with the skulls once they arrive in Namibia. Zuern (2012) notes that Herero and Nama activists envisioned a return of the remains to Shark Island (p. 513), while Shigwedha (2016) states that this proposal came from the Namibian cabinet, without consultation with the affected communities (p. 207). According to Shigwedha, this idea

44 When President Pohamba visited Berlin that year, his delegation refused to sign the agreement (Kössler 2012: 299).

45 This is perhaps also in connection with Wicoreck-Zeul's speech at the commemoration for the Battle of Ohamakari.

46 The chiefly graves are of great importance for Herero claims to ancestral land (see Kössler 2015: 186-189).

47 "The practice of trading human bones, particularly skulls, in German South West Africa was so widespread that a number of postcards were made 'showing soldiers packing skulls – as normal colonial life'" (Shigwedha 2016: 199).

48 There were also multiple occasions, where German government representatives (i.e. through German ambassadors to Namibia, Egon Kochanke and his successor, Otto Huckmann) warned against using the repatriation of human remains as a "catalyst to unmask atrocities committed by Imperial Germany" and against demanding reparations (Shigwedha 2016: 204). The ambassadors used Germany's development cooperation with Namibia to put pressure on the Namibian government (ibid.). In 2013, President Geingob responded: "We cannot stop people from talking about reparations. It is their rights to do so" (ibid.).

was met with criticism from representatives of the Herero communities, who “felt that the ‘historical material evidence should never be buried’” (ibid). Ovaherero Paramount Chief Riruako and Nama Chief David Frederick addressed the Namibian parliament in a memorandum, criticising the government’s lack of involvement of the affected communities. They suggest that, “instead of burying such vital material evidence where no one will see them, the skulls should be kept in a special chamber within the Independence Memorial Museum for restoration and posterity; statistical data about the skulls should include the victim’s identity” (ibid.: 208). It was decided that the skulls would be received by the Namibian Prime Minister, “viewed at Parliament Gardens, memorialised at Heroes’ Acre and [...] interred at the Independence Memorial Museum” (Zuern 2012: 513).

The memorandum followed a meeting of ten members of the Herero Chiefs Council, who agreed that the bones should “become part of the property of the Namibian government so that they can be kept in a professional way and keep the memory of this part of Namibian history alive for future generations” (Shigwedha 2016: 207). This account is very different from Zuern’s earlier analysis, to wrote that “what was initially envisioned by Nama activists as a return of Herero and Nama heroes to Shark Island became a return of Namibian heroes to the key sites of state” (Zuern 2012: 513). It appears that the two authors assessed the controversy quite differently over whether the human remains should be displayed or receive a burial. However, this may be due to differing foci, i.e. on the traditional leaders versus on the broader affected communities. This perspective shines through when Shigwedha (2016) writes that “[t]he majority of the Herero population group would generally be happy to see the skulls of their ancestors buried at Okahandja where most leaders of the 1904–05 uprising against the Germans are buried” (p. 208); or else that “the majority in affected communities would be in distress when the human remains of their ancestors are left unburied” (ibid.: 212).

The question of whether to hold a burial or to keep the skulls at the Independence Memorial Museum can also be tied to discussions on whether the repatriation of human remains should be understood as the “symbolic closure of a tragic chapter” or rather as a starting point for processes of restorative justice (Zuern 2012: 513). While the then-Namibian Prime Minister Nahas Angula framed the returning of the skulls as the former, Herero and Nama activists have criticised this stance (ibid.). “[I]t can be argued that the repatriation of the skulls from Germany seeks to open old wounds rather than heal them” (Shigwedha 2016: 211), perhaps in order to aid demands for apology and reparations from Germany.

Once decided that the human remains would be kept in the Independence Memorial Museum, another debate arose: SWAPO leadership would have preferred “to include the skulls as one small and early piece of Namibia’s struggle against external oppression”, while many Herero and Nama activists believe that their forebears should receive a more prominent role in the narrative, arguing that they “began the liberation struggle” (Zuern 2012: 513). Using the occasion of the repatriation of human remains, activists organised events in Berlin and in Windhoek-Katutura, to which prominent political figures were invited. Neither German nor Namibian government officials attended these events, which “provided key opportunities for activists not only to reiterate the history of genocide but also to make demands for reparations” (ibid.).

2014 saw the repatriation of another 35 skulls from Germany (Shigwedha 2016: 207), and this time, no representatives of the affected communities were present in the delegation, except the deputy chairman of the Council of Traditional Leaders (Brock 2019: 61). Nineteen more skulls and other bones were repatriated in 2018. This was the first repatriation of human remains since Germany officially changed its position on the recognition of the crimes of 1904-1908 as genocide in 2015. For the first time, a state-to-state handover was agreed upon and a delegation of German government representatives travelled to Windhoek to partake in a ceremony to mark the occasion. However, members of the OGF and NGTC were disappointed with the event, both due to the venue and having not given a prominent role. (Brock 2019: 75-76)⁴⁹

49 OGF: Ovaherero Genocide Foundation; NGTC: Nama Genocide Technical Committee. A more inclusive attempt has been made with the 2019 symposium “Colonial Injustice – Addressing Past Wrongs”, organised in Windhoek by the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR), the German Akademie der Künste (AdK) and the Goethe-Institut: <https://www.ecchr.eu/en/event/namibia-a-week-of-justice>.

5. LAND CLAIMS

The last aspect we address in this paper in connection with memory politics is the discourse around land restitution in Namibia.⁵⁰ The reason is that Herero and Nama activists emphasise the “loss of land as a primary consequence of the genocide affecting their communities today” (Hamrick 2013: 82).

After enduring German colonisation and South African apartheid, independent Namibia was left with extreme and racialised land ownership disparities. Half of Namibia’s land was in the ownership of 3,500 white farmers while 1 million black Namibians merely had access to overgrazed communal lands (Hamrick 2013: 81). The new government was “required to honour a rule of law based on the recognition of existing property relations”, protecting landowners from expropriation (Melber 2005b: 137). However, this “constraint for social transformation, does [...] not prevent options to adopt reformist land policies aimed at creating more equality” (ibid.).

Nevertheless, land reform did not take a priority for several reasons. One is that German colonialism was experienced differently in northern Namibia versus in central and southern Namibia. Northern Namibia was relatively unaffected by German rule. “Actual colonial intrusion here only occurred after the end of German rule and did not lead to the loss of land; outright, intense warfare involving continuous suffering and harassment for the resident people, concentrated in the North above all during the final stages of the liberation struggle in the late 1970s and 1980s” (Kössler 2007: 368). For the majority of the population living north of the ‘Police Zone’, land redistribution is therefore not a significant issue (Melber 2005b: 138).⁵¹ It should be noted that this region also makes up most of the SWAPO voter base (Hamrick 2013: 82). Notwithstanding these regional differences, disputing land claims allowed the Namibian government to disentangle historic ties to land from redistributive policies, and regional-ethnic experiences with colonialism from land (Melber 2005b: 139; Melber 2005: 105; Hamrick 2013: 82). Not only did high-ranking politicians secure farmland for themselves after independence (Melber 2005b: 137). This disentanglement also allowed the SWAPO-led government to make its voter base in northern Namibia (former Ovamboland) primary beneficiaries of land reform policies, despite “never [having been] dispossessed in the historical sense” (Werner 2002: 56, quoted from Melber 2005b: 139).

The land issue does not appear to have a significant influence on economic inequality in Namibia. Land in the former ‘Police Zone’ is not very productive⁵² and poverty reduction plans in the late 1990s and early 2000s did not connect land reform to poverty reduction (Melber 2005b: 137). Discussing the government’s conspicuous lack of action regarding resettlement (2001 White Paper Resettlement Policy), Melber (2005b) notes the argument that the quality of the land would not necessarily have “promot[ed] a meaningful re-distributive effect by resettling people” (p. 138). Sherbourne (2004) argues that the land question in Namibia is more about race than about economic equality (ibid.: 139). Moreover, focussing on the economic aspects of land reform would disregard important socio-cultural and emotional dimensions involved. The expressed desire in the affected communities to regain ownership of the land that was taken from them “is a legitimate matter of dignity, self-respect and spirituality, not measurable in bare economic terms” (ibid.: 140).

Hamrick (2013) gives some insights into land reform activism in Herero and Nama communities, which she observed during her field research in 2012. Land reform activists often use “the language of the law[,] including concepts of property rights, national reconciliation and constitutionality”, and pursue land reform through formal legal channels (p. 83). In contrast to the early 2000s when there was some competition for victimhood status, also regarding land expropriation under colonial rule,⁵³ this appears not to have been a point of contention in the past decade or longer. On the contrary, there are meanwhile efforts in the said Herero and Nama communities to connect with other groups on these issues, e.g. affected communities in diaspora, Jewish persons or communities that receive

50 Land gain was one motivating factor for German colonisation of Namibia. Germany’s population was growing rapidly, and it faced social and economic problems associated with industrial capitalism (Hamrick 2013: 80).

51 “Colonial-capitalist patterns of exploitation were established there in different ways: the colonial administration relied on forms of an indirect rule. It rather sought to exploit the people by means of introducing a strictly regulated and systematic system of organised contract labour in collaboration with local headmen” (Melber 2005b: 138).

52 The most productive land is north of the previous ‘Police Zone’ (Melber 2005b: 140).

53 Riruako declared the land issue as solely a Herero issue at the 2002 Herero Day. This statement waved away the dispossession of Nama groups, and “makes a mockery of the suffering of the Damara and San” (Melber 2005c: 141).

reparations from Germany, or civil society organisations and politicians in Germany (ibid.). Not only do activists criticise and use Namibian law (and the constitution) to strengthen their land claims, activists also “[a]rticulate their land claims increasingly in terms of the global legal language of reparations and restorative justice, arguing what has been stolen from them in tandem with the attempted elimination of their communities should be returned” (ibid.: 85).

At the same time, some political figures also – or still – use threatening language, urging the government to take their calls for land reform seriously. For example, at the 2012 commemoration of the Battle of Ohamakari at the Okakarara Cultural Center, Constituency Councillor Kandorozi spoke of the genocide and land issues like this: “We lost out land [in the genocide] [...] and the government has shown no interest in the past years to assist us in getting it back. One day we will organise ourselves as Hereros and grab farmlands around here by force so that the government can start listening to us” (Hamrick 2013: 78-79).⁵⁴ As a matter of fact, the 2001 White Paper Resettlement Policy was not fulfilled: the Ministry of Lands, Resettlement and Rehabilitation has been extremely slow in buying commercial farmland for resettlement. Strikingly, for many years it did not spend its annual budget, although it was getting offers from farmers willing to sell their land (Melber 2005b: 138)!

Kössler (2015) also discusses some positions from within the German-speaking community in Namibia, tied to denial of the genocide.⁵⁵ He uses the example of Schneider-Waterberg, a German-speaking Namibian with an internet platform,⁵⁶ who “accuses ‘the progressive writers of new history’ (*Neuhistoriker*) of calling ‘land seizure (*Landnahme*) ... now theft; pioneers were renamed as “settlers” which now was considered as disparaging; and development now as exploitation” (Kössler 2015: 134). Through his use of the term *Landnahme* “Schneider-Waterberg implicitly lays claim to the whole assortment of colonialist mythology about supposedly empty lands that belonged to nobody (*terra nullius*) and at the same time, he claims the right of conquest” (ibid.: 135). Of course, this is only one position within the German speaking community. Nevertheless, the denial of German colonial crimes is not uncommon in this community, and a wide audience follows Schneider-Waterberg’s platform.

It will be interesting to observe the further developments in public discourse on land reform, which has just started creating spaces of interaction and prompted actors to position themselves in recent years.⁵⁷ One example is the “Namibia – A Week of Justice” conference in May 2019. The conference, organised by the political foundation of the German Left Party (*die Linke*), i.e. the *Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung*, sought to bring together scholars, activists, legal practitioners, politicians, and civil society to discuss current topics around the genocide and its aftermath. Land reform became one of the key controversial topics in the conference, which saw the attendance of German speaking Namibians, government officials from both the German and Namibian governments, as well as members of the affected communities (Taylor 2019).

54 Kazenambo Kazenambo: “We will put the constitution aside. A constitution is a paper. If other people do not respect it, we will not respect it too. The white people must get this information” (Hamrick 2013: 90-1).

55 Denialists of the genocide often ignore the expropriation of African land.

56 He is a German-speaking amateur historian who denies the historical events to have been a genocide. He owns a large farm in the Waterberg – the site of the 1904 battle that drove the Herero to the desert – and draws large all-white audiences (Zuern 2012: 507).

57 The second National Land Conference took place in October 2018. Prior to the conference, the importance of addressing ancestral land claims at the conference was widely discussed and reported in multiple newspapers (see media coverage Tjihenua 2014, The Patriot 2018b, Shapwanale 2018).

6. CONCLUSION

This paper has shown the contested nature of historical narratives in Namibia and the controversies which can arise when such narratives are reproduced and enshrined in (national) monuments, museums, or commemorations.

The first part of this paper analysed the importance of the national liberator narrative for SWAPO as the ruling party since independence. This narrative legitimises SWAPO's position in national and (to an extent) international politics and, together with its 'National Reconciliation Policy', protects it from consequences regarding human rights abuses committed during the armed liberation struggle. SWAPO's interest in maintaining its position as sole liberator of the Namibian people conflicts with the experiences of the Herero and Nama populations in central and southern Namibia, who resisted German colonialism and consequently suffered genocide in the early 20th century. German colonialism disproportionately affected these regions, and the genocide of 1904-1908 forms a central part of the historical narrative and collective identities for the Herero and Nama populations today.

Herero and Nama activists use various platforms and means to achieve national and international attention for their claims to get recognition and reparations from the German government. Two main factions within Herero communities were outlined, with schisms along the recognition of the Ovaherero Paramount Chief and political affiliation to SWAPO. Information on Nama activist groups is less readily available; perhaps there is less mobilisation, or there are fewer clear divisions here. Even less information is available on Damara and San interest groups from the distance. Their positions may only be accessible on site. Lastly, the German speaking community was examined. Here, relativising narratives or denial of German colonial crimes appear to be widespread.

These different actor groups and positions, though fluid in principle, were examined more closely on the bases of various cases. For this, we examined select places of memory, as was the communal commemoration of Herero Day in Okahandja, the repatriation of human remains from Germany in 2011, and the public debate on the restitution of ancestral lands. Taking one of these examples, the removal of the Rider Statue in Windhoek (2013) allowed a more detailed study of the memory politics practiced by the different groups: not only did members of the German-speaking community object to the statue's removal, seeing the Rider as part of their colonial heritage and identity, members of Herero and Nama communities also objected, seeing the Rider as the only monument at the time that made direct reference to the genocide and, moreover, marked the spot of the Orumbo rua Katjombondi concentration camp. "Inherent in the distinctiveness of places is their meaning to individuals," as Björkdahl and Buckley Zistel (2016) point out. This means in fact that spaces cannot be understood as being just there, as sites of certain events. Rather they represent different histories for different (groups of) people (see Björkdahl and Kappler 2017): "Spatial structures impact on representations of peace and conflict, while repoliticising agency on an everyday life basis" (p. 15).

The Independence Memorial Museum and two new monuments replaced the Rider Statue in 2014. Although the museum's focus is on the SWAPO-led armed liberation struggle and there were criticisms from some Herero and Nama activists for their lack of involvement in the planning stages, the museum addresses the crimes committed against the Herero and Nama in a 'Chamber of Horrors'. Further research will be necessary to understand the history (strands) the museum tells, and to study its or else their reception. The creation and representation of national historical narratives always entail conflictual processes, involving contestation on whose histories and contributions should be remembered in what way. As the Namibian situation shows, these processes are tied into current and changing political interests, national and international. Decision makers on either side should be aware of the necessity to not only give way to controversies in memory culture but to actively foster a public debate which allows for hitherto marginalized actors to become heard also and thereby turn places into spaces for productive contestation.

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