



THE NAMA / OVAHERERO
GENOCIDE
Memory as Experienced by Descendants of
Victims and Re-Traumatizing Interpretations
of Perpetrator Descendants

S I M A L U I P E R T

In present-day Namibia, the German colonial period in what was then German South West Africa is often narrated as a brief spell, without giving due consideration to how this period has remarkably shaped present-day Namibia and its legal, economic, political, and social landscape, which now forms the foundational premise of Namibia's governance. The official narrative in Namibia has also used the prolonged, oppressive Apartheid era to bury the memory of German colonial brutality, forgetting that Germany laid the firm foundation for racial oppression and institutional dispossession that was continued by the Apartheid regime. In Germany itself, remembrance of the Holocaust occupies the largest place in the culture of remembrance and commemoration, not least because of the industrial scale of the deliberate mass murder. Other extreme forms of state violence must also be brought into public consciousness.

In the case of the Nama and Ovaherero genocide, memory culture has largely been dictated by Eurocentric narratives. Throughout the German and South African colonial period, the mass murder of Nama and Ovaherero communities was interpreted and therefore justified as self-defence against rebellious natives by the educational systems of settler communities.

Descendants of white German and white South African settlers have always maintained that their fore-bearers bought the land they continue to occupy today, discarding the historical fact that the land was expropriated by both racist colonial regimes from Africans through means of genocide, racializing policies, and legal systems. This false narrative continues to be reproduced today through a racialized European lens that foregrounds the experiences and interpretation of perpetrator descendants at the expense of the experiences and interpretation of the descendants of the victims.

This is especially evident in the outcome of the negotiation process between the German and Namibian governments, which was concluded in 2021 with a German financial gesture of reconciliation but no legally binding reparations. What comes through vividly about the German colonial period as one of its profound consequences is how the economic and resource plunder of the

colony led to what seems to be an unbridgeable memory gap between those who were beneficiaries and victims of colonization. Therefore, in the outcome from 2021—widely referred to as the Joint Declaration though it has not yet been ratified—the legal obligations of Germany towards the Nama and Ovaherero people are denied, and the voices and memory of the descendants are suppressed through the false illusion of community consultations and token representation where a state-authority rather than the directly affected communities have the final say.

In recent short forensic documentaries created by Nama and Ovaherero victim descendants about the genocide, in collaboration with Forensic Architecture and Forensis (Goldsmiths University of London), the communities reconstruct the horrors of the German colonial period through their own memory and experience. When juxtaposed with the content of the negotiation process outcome of the two governments, it becomes clear how the erasure of this vivid memory as experienced by descendants of victims has a re-traumatizing effect. Celebrating the outcomes of the process is itself traumatizing for the descendants as it is experienced as invalidating the memory and experiences of the Nama and Ovaherero person specifically, and community more generally. Equally it is reducing the impact of reparations to a mere voluntary development aid—a slap in the face to the ordinary Nama and Ovaherero person. It is further traumatic and rather violent on the part of the Namibian cabinet to approve a document that insults its own citizens.

Shark Island, like many other similar places in Namibia where German imperialists established extermination and concentration camps, are places of tragedy and unparalleled human suffering. Yet this memory is only known through the work of the affected communities. The effort of the Nama and Ovaherero people, who by default have become human rights activists by birth, is a perspective from which the memory work emerges that earnestly considers the atrocities as well as the lasting, transgenerational, and inherited impact on Nama and Ovaherero communities as well. One would hope that the emergence of these memories will lead to a new historiography and a decolonized knowledge production that is less tainted by biases of current scholarship in the field: that these memories will give due consideration to the psycho-social factors

derived from lived experiences of German colonialism, precisely because these experiences have profoundly shaped the psychological conditions and social agency of the Nama and Ovaherero people.

Such community-centred, Afrocentric knowledge production will go a long way in addressing the present conditions of the descendant communities, conditions which are largely a product of their colonial history. The real work should be to heal the wounds and stigma, and improve people's current living conditions in every respect in light of the enormous losses they have suffered, i.e., their psychological well-being, access to services, their political voice and access to power which has been demographically destroyed by the genocide, their economic ability to satisfy their material needs, and their right to access the very natural resources and assets brutally stripped away from them through German colonial savagery.

Community-centred memory will add significant value to the process of decolonizing memory and the way memory is transmitted. If the German and Namibian governments had truly respected the knowledge, memory, and trans-generational experiences of the Nama and Ovaherero people, the bilateral negotiations would not be the lost opportunity they have now become. It is therefore important to put effort into overcoming the biases of scientific disciplines dominated by bodies of knowledge anchored in the Global North. African collective knowledge must provide clues to our joint past and how we have evolved, and such information must help us examine our stories and enable us to develop an awareness about ourselves. Western and Eurocentric civilization has greatly contaminated the traditional value systems of Africans. African ancestry had established, well before colonialism, a pattern of home-grown political systems and governance processes. They ensured there was progression in the pace and dynamics of our own civilization, such as in Great and Little Namakhoeland, as well as a self-styled tempo of technological development.

It is encouraging to observe that new networks of people of African descent, though often being defunded, are doing rounds in the community of social movement literature and working on ontological pluralism which highlights the costly and inherited psychological impact of colonialism upon both the colonizer and the colonized. These critiques and this memory activism envisions a future of global racial equality and equity through transformative and redistributive socio-economic, political, and legal systems in order to project a world beyond the white imperial gaze that continues to deny the significance of the knowledge systems of the Global South. We must cultivate new knowledge systems that transcend rather than authorize and reproduce imperialistic ways of knowledge because the future of memory work depends on it.