THE EXHIBITION NAMIBIA-GERMANY: A SHARED/DIVIDED HISTORY. RESISTANCE, VIOLENCE, MEMORY
Clara Himmelheber

Abstract
The year 2004 was the centenary of the outbreak of a colonial war in former German South West Africa in which thousands of Africans were killed by the colonial power. Although of crucial importance for Namibia, the war had not entered public memory in Germany. The exhibition aimed at presenting colonial history, as well as the contemporary relationships between the two countries, showing a ‘shared’ and a ‘divided’ history. The exhibition created a public debate, which certainly supported the initiative of the German Minister of Economic Co-operation and Development to deliver an apology at the commemoration in August 2004 in Namibia. The article is a post-reflection of one of the co-curators on the exhibition putting it into a larger context and reviewing it concurrently.

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Biographical note
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1904 was a tragic year in Namibian history: in that year, a colonial war between the African population and the imperial power of Germany broke out. Between 35 and 80% of the Herero-speaking population and up to 50% of the Nama-speaking population were killed. In historiography, this war is defined as genocide (Zimmerer, 2003, pp.52-3). A hundred years later, in 2004, the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum in Cologne staged an exhibition entitled Namibia – Germany: A Shared / Divided History. Resistance – Violence – Memory to remind the public of the atrocities, which, although of great meaning to Namibians, had not yet become part of public memory in Germany. This article is a post-reflection of one of the co-curators on the exhibition putting it into a larger context and reviewing it concurrently.

The exhibition was a joint venture between the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum and the Anthropological Institute of the University of Cologne. It was prepared in close cooperation with Namibian and German historians and in consultation with interview partners and colleagues from museums and archives in Namibia. Discussions started already in 1999 and continued

* Some passages of this article have been taken from the exhibition texts.


2 Whereas the Holocaust has been an integral part of German political and historical discourse since the 1960s, the genocide of the Herero- and Nama-speaking population in then German South West Africa (today Namibia) has only recently and very selectively moved into the public consciousness, e.g. on the occasion of the commemoration of the colonial war in 2004 or with the repatriation of human remains to Namibia in 2011 and 2014 (Fürster, 2013; No Amnesty on Genocide!, 2014)

3 Michael Bollig, Larissa Förster, Jan-Bart Gewald, Wolfram Hartmann, Dag Henrichsen, Clara Himmelheber, Gesine Krüger, Zedekia Ngavirue, Klaus Schneider, Ute Stahl, Joachim Zeller, Jürgen Zimmerer.
up to the opening including several research trips to Namibia.

What was the outcome of the discussions held during the preparations of the exhibition? Two main issues developed: First, each topic was viewed differently by Namibians of German descent, and those of Herero- and Nama descent; secondly, neither side was satisfied with the time period originally intended to be covered by the exhibition. Namibians of African descent felt it would depict them as victims, not as actors, if the exhibition did not go beyond the end of the war; German-speaking Namibians wanted to emphasise the ongoing relationship of Germans and Namibians up to the present day, as well as the role of the roughly 30,000 German-speaking Namibians today – less than 1.5% of the Namibian population (Mesenhöller, 2004, p.11). These two issues became extremely relevant to the planning of the exhibition: first, the exhibition developed into two parts, a historical one and another one focusing on present-day Namibia. Second, in order to take into account the different, sometimes opposing views of German-speaking Namibians and Herero- and Nama-speaking Namibians, two running metal bands were used throughout the exhibition.

On the left side of the hall, on the metal band were objects representing the perspectives of German colonialists and settlers. The band on the right-hand side visualised the topics from the African perspective. The objects in the central part of the hall showed objects which were used by both groups, but which were often interpreted differently by the various actors.

A mental walk through the exhibition will illustrate these ideas: to introduce the visitors to the idea of different perspectives, a picture was placed at the entrance which could be viewed from two sides, showing on one side Kolmanskoppe, the early 20th-century city of diamond diggers, as a symbol of the colonial past, and on the other side the independence celebrations of 1990 representing Namibia today. The two-sided picture was followed by five objects, placed in the centre of the room: a church bell cast in Germany in 1736 and found in the Namibian desert in the 1940s, a Herero tomb taken from Namibia to Germany in 1736 and found in the Namibian desert, a cartridge and a potsherd symbolising two different aspects which in the end eventually led to the war. In the section on trade, objects traded from Namibia to Germany such as ivory (in the form of a snooker ball) or ostrich feathers, in the form of a fan were shown on one side. On the other side, objects which had been shipped to Namibia were exhibited – such as guns, alcoholic beverages and a lighter, which a German trader had given a Herero in exchange for a cow.

The main part of the historical section was reserved for the ‘War’. The colonial war in then German South West Africa began on 12 January 1904 with the Herero attack on German farms, military staging posts and rail links. It had been preceded by growing tensions between the Herero and Germans, the cause of which was disadvantage and loss of land by Africans. After a whole series of skirmishes, the Herero suffered overwhelming defeat at Waterberg on 11/12 August 1904. Those who survived were driven into the sandveld of Omaheke where thousands of them died of thirst. In October 1904, the Nama rose against the German colonial authorities. The guerrilla war, which they subsequently waged, was not put down until 1908. As a result of the war, the Africans who had survived lost their land and livestock. Expropriated and largely deprived of any rights, they were henceforth subjected to a rigid system of controls by their German colonial masters. In this section titled ‘Resistance, War, Genocide’ the bands turned into walls.

The topic was visualised amongst other things with four central showcases one of them displaying a cartridge and a potsherd symbolising two different views of the war. The cartridge had been found by a German tourist on the site of the 1904 battle between

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4 For an overview of the self-perception of German-speaking Namibians see Schmidt-Lauber (2004).

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5 From 1979 (during the time of the Namibia liberation war) up to 400 Namibian children were sent to the GDR where they grew up until they were abruptly sent back to Namibia in 1990 after Namibian independence and German reunification.
Figure 1.3.3: Section on German-Namibian contacts in the 19th century © Rheinisches Bildarchiv, Cologne.

Figure 1.3.4: Section on the war of 1904 © Rheinisches Bildarchiv, Cologne.
Germans and Herero. Such ‘war souvenirs’ symbolising Germany’s victory are much appreciated by tourists even today. The potsherd was given to one of the curators by a Herero who explained that it had formed part of a cooking pot belonging to German soldiers who had been forced into flight by Herero soldiers. This in a way visualises the Namibian interpretation of the war: Namibian historians often interpret the war of 1904 as a war of anti-colonial resistance or as the first anti-colonial war of liberation followed by the armed freedom fight of the SWAPO against the south African occupying power in 1966 (Förster et al, 2004, p.19). The two objects can be seen as intercultural documents, which in O’Hanlon’s sense ‘can be calibrated to illuminate all the cultures in which they are implicated, and the relationships between them’ (2001, p.218).

In general, this section focused on topics such as war and resistance, violence during the war, concentration camps and genocide, and concluded by looking briefly towards the developments following the war such as the reservation policy.

According to the original plan, the exhibition would have ended here, but as a result of the discussions with the Namibian contributors, a second, larger part followed, concentrating on Namibia as a whole and on Namibian-German relations of today, still deeply rooted in the colonial past. The first section ‘Windhoek – Urban Life’ intended to present the lifestyles of two urban middle-class families, which gradually grew closer together. It was visualised with the help of a living-room cupboard showing on one side objects more likely to be found in an African middle-class family, and on the other side, objects more likely to be found in a German-Namibian family of the same social level. The differences between the objects on both sides have become so minimal that it is difficult to identify at first glance who their users were.

The section dedicated to ‘Living in Rural Areas’ presented a totally different Namibia. The bulk of the country still bears the scars of Apartheid. Segregation is still visible in the division of the country into commercial and communal farmland. Commercial farmland comprises 75% of the fertile agricultural land and is mostly owned by white farmers, whereas the communal land is mostly inhabited by black farmers. There is little exchange between the two even though labourers from communal households have often worked on the farms of white Namibians for generations. This discrepancy was characterised by presenting two rural households, visualising the differences and common features through everyday objects. These two sections, urban and rural life, were vital for an understanding of the subtitle of the exhibition, which was ‘Geteilte Geschichte’.

Figure 1.3.5: Section ‘Windhoek – Urban Life’ © Rheinisches Bildarchiv, Cologne.
meaning of the word ‘geteilt’ in German is twofold: it means both shared (as in the living room) and divided (as in the rural areas).6

After dealing with urban and rural life, the next section concentrated on family issues — by the way, the most popular part of the exhibition. ‘German Fathers: German-Namibian Families’ displayed the biographies of five Namibian citizens with both German and African ancestry. In this section the person and his/her parents or grandparents were introduced, each with a photo and a personal object representing the individual — these objects were chosen by the represented persons themselves.

In the 19th century, at least some marriages of Namibian women with German men were recorded. The marriage of the missionary Franz Heinrich Kleinschmidt to his Namibian wife Johanna Kleinschmidt, parents to Ludwig Kleinschmidt is just such a case (Roller, 2004, pp.194-211). The law on ‘mixed marriages’ (‘Mischehenverbot’) of 1905 prohibited marriages between Germans and Namibians (Hartmann, 2004, p.182). This led to the following stories: the grandparents of Nora Schimming-Chase, former Namibian ambassador to Germany, were forced to divorce and the families lost contact. It was at the exhibition that Mrs. Schimming-Chase first saw a picture of her German grandfather Otto Schimming. Nora Schimming-Chase was born in Windhoek in 1940 and studied political science and English in Berlin. From the 1970s through to the 1990s she held leading positions in SWANU (South West Africa National Union) and in the WCC (World Council of Churches). In 1989, she returned to Namibia and in 1990 worked in the first independent Namibian government as deputy state secretary in the ministry of foreign affairs. As the ambassador for Namibia, she again lived in Germany from 1992 to 1996. Her grandmother Metha Ngatjikare came from the dynasty of the Herero chiefs of the Mbanderu, her grandfather Ferdinand Otto Schimming was a soldier in the German colonial army. It is unknown how they first met. They got married and had two sons: Otto Ferdinand and Rudolf. As a result of the law on ‘mixed marriages’, their marriage was annulled. After the divorce, their two sons lived for a time with their father until they were collected by their Herero relatives. Ferdinand Otto Schimming later married a German woman. The contact to Metha Ngatjikare as the two first-born sons was broken off. Ferdinand Otto Schimming died in Swakopmund at the beginning of the 1960s, Meeta Ngatjikare lived on the reservation and died in 1960 at the age of 98.

A couple which resisted the law on ‘mixed marriages’ were Wilhelm and Hilde Bayer from Rehoboth. Wilhelm Bayer came from a wealthy Stuttgart family. He arrived in Namibia in 1911. While building a dam, which he was constructing for Stauch the ‘diamond king’, he met his later wife Hilde Diergaardt, who came from a Rehoboth kaptein’s family. They were married in 1925. The young couple moved to Rehoboth. Wilhelm soon withdrew from the German community, as his wife was not welcome there. During the Second World War, Mrs. Bayer looked after her five children alone as her husband was imprisoned in an internment camp in South Africa for six years. Mr. Bayer died in 1956 and was buried in Rehoboth. Many people from Rehoboth attended his funeral but there was only one German. Mrs. Bayer died in Rehoboth in 1984. Their daughter, Annalie Olivier, née Bayer, was born in Rehoboth in 1928. The events in Germany associated with National Socialism made it impossible for her to attend as planned a higher secondary school in Germany. In 1983, she founded the first Old People’s Home for non-whites and a kindergarten in Namibia. In addition, she takes an active interest in the history

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6 In fact, the sometimes puzzling character of Namibian history seems to be best described by the German word ‘geteilt’ (see Conrad and Randeria, 2002).
of the ‘Rehobother Baster’. In contrast to many other Namibians with German and black ancestry, Mrs Olivier has a good relationship to the German branch of her family. She has visited her German aunt several times in Stuttgart. Her daughter is married to a German and lives on the island of Rügen. Mrs Olivier chose a photo to depict herself with the very teapot and in the same pose in which her mother had been photographed 50 years earlier – the picture shown in the exhibition to depict her mother. Wilhelm Bayer had taken the photograph of his later wife at the Stauch family home. Later, he took it with him to the internment camp where he kept it in the breast pocket of his shirt directly above his heart.

Contrary to that emotional love story of the Bayer family, another interview partner, Mr Javee Gottfried Kangumine, only knew that his German grandfather’s name had been Arnhold, but there was neither a photo nor an object to represent him. Javee Gottfried Kangumine was born in 1949, the son of a respected Herero family. He lived as a cattle breeder and petrol station owner in Otumborombonga, a settlement in the Eastern part of the communal area. In his herd, there were still offspring of the cattle which his grandmother once received from his German grandfather. As with numerous other inhabitants of Otumborombonga with German ancestry, his relationship to his German grandfather was ambivalent: on the one hand, he emphasised his German descent when he characterised himself as hard-working and punctual. On the other hand, he told people that many white men rejected the children they had with African women and that Herero women hid these children because they were ashamed of their light skin. During the preparation of the exhibition, not much was known about Mr Arnhold, Mr Kangumine’s grandfather. He had been stationed with his company at Namutoni and presumably had had relationships with several African women. One of these was Javee Kangumine’s grandmother, who bore him a daughter. A son called David Arnhold who inherited his father’s farm at Grootfontein was born from another relationship. Javee Gottfried Kangumine reports that his German grandfather, asked his grandmother’s parents whether their daughter could go with him to Fort Namutoni to his company. Later when, as a consequence of defeat in the First World War, Germany had to cede Namibia to South Africa, he took her back to her parents. He left the following note: ‘My wife is pregnant. If the baby is a girl it should be called Franziska, if it is a boy it should be called Arnhold ... I am going back.’ The woman had a girl called Franziska, later to be the mother of Javee Gottfried Kangumine.

The cases presented in this section were in no way unique, but actually quite typical of the period. A large number of Herero- and Nama-families of today have at least one German ancestor. Since the country became independent, there has been a vital interest in re-uniting families particularly on the part of the Herero, whereas the German-speaking families have often been reluctant, to say the least, to get into contact with their ‘new’ family members.

The exhibition’s next section ‘Sharing the Future’ referred back to the war of 1904, demonstrating how the war is remembered nowadays by different ethnic groups, as well as by the Namibian state. The metal tapes were discontinued in this section to make room for five showcases, giving an idea of the commemoration ceremonies of different ethnic groups – focussing on a multicultural Namibian society.

In the concluding section of the exhibition, ‘Sharing the Future’, ten Namibians and Germans – some of them had already appeared in earlier parts of the exhibition – commented on their ideas of the future of Namibian-German relations. The intention was to show different voices irrespective of their ethnic background, in order to strengthen the idea of a future Namibian society where the ethnic background is no longer relevant – the official position promoted by the Namibian government today.

What sort of feedback did the exhibition receive from the visitors? Did the exhibition have any kind of impact or influence on relations between Germans and Namibians? The exhibition was – according to the standards of the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum – extremely successful; some 80,000 visitors came to see it in Cologne and Berlin. It was covered extensively by German and Namibian media (over 90 articles in national and international print media, 25 reviews on radio and 14 on television). The echo in Namibia was equally positive: both Namibian Radio and Television reviewed the exhibition positively and there was full-page coverage of it in Namibian newspapers (Santer, 2004, p.20; Singer, 2004, p.18). The comments in the guest book proved that the exhibition touched many people. The Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum had rarely received so many personal and emotional notes for an exhibition. Some commentators called the curators ‘Gutmenschen’, do-gooders. In some comments it was criticised that the focus of the exhibition on German colonial history would neglect the fact that other colonial powers were ‘as bad’ as Germany, others comments even took a colonial revisionist point of

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7 Personal conversation with Javee Gottfried Kangumine.

8 Personal conversation with Joachim Zeller in April 2013. Joachim Zeller is a German historian working on German colonialism with a focus on the Namibian genocide.
view stating that colonial times had been a good time. But the vast majority of the visitors were grateful for the detailed information which had been offered on an often neglected chapter of German history. History teachers admitted that they had known very little about this period of German history. Tourists stated that they had previously viewed Namibia as a lovely country without any history. The majority of the visitors were shocked by the atrocities committed by the imperial colonial forces and acknowledged Germany’s long-lasting responsibility.

The visitors’ positive feedback compensated for the problems the curators had had while working on the exhibition with representatives of different interest groups, both in Namibia and in Germany, on the use of the term ‘genocide’. Members of the German right wing denied the fact that Namibians had been killed on a large scale and called for ‘a more positive interpretation of colonialism’. German-speaking Namibians several times mentioned their apprehension of being depicted as racists and Nazis by German scholars. Representatives of the Church were afraid that missionary activities during the war could be seen ambiguously, and the German government feared restoration claims. The Namibian government did not want the Herero to be the centre of attention, whereas the Herero themselves feared ending up on the periphery. The fact that all of these interest groups were not able to come to terms was one of the main reasons why the original plan, to show the exhibition in Namibia, was not realised.

However, after its opening, the exhibition caused a public debate which certainly supported the initiative of the German Minister of Economic Co-operation and Development to deliver an apology to the Herero- and Nama-speaking people at the commemoration of the centenary of the outbreak of the war in August 2004 in Namibia (Hintze, 2004, p.4). Whereas Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul did not call the war directly a genocide, she apologised for the ‘atrocities committed at that time, [that] would today be termed genocide’ (‘Die damaligen Greueltaten waren das, was heute als Völkemord bezeichnet würde’) (quoted in Förster, 2004, p.9).9

Apart from public discussions, there were also a few incidents of a more private nature. During the exhibition, the lighter shown in the section on trade was stolen. It was an heirloom belonging to

9 Until today, the German government has not given an official or formal apology for the genocide.
Mr Ndjombo, an elderly Herero gentleman whose grandfather had exchanged it for a cow with a German trader in the 19th century. When the director of the museum went to Namibia in order to compensate Mr Ndjombo for his loss, Mr Ndjombo donated another lighter to the museum, which he had also inherited from his grandfather. An elderly German, who read about this in the newspaper, decided to travel to Namibia and refund Mr Ndjombo with a cow, thereby evening out the historical deal.

Towards the end of the exhibition, the curators received a letter from a Mr Albrecht Arnhold informing them that he was a descendant of Mr Kangumine’s German grandfather. Mr Arnhold (himself over 70 years) travelled to Namibia with his wife, and the two branches of the family celebrated a reunion. These incidents proved that some of the visitors were ready to contribute personally to a reconciliation between former oppressor and oppressed.

In conclusion, this article aimed at showing how the co-operation with Namibian institutions and individuals of different political, cultural and social backgrounds influenced the concept, as well as the architecture of the exhibition. It also demonstrated how objects were used in the exhibition as important intercultural testimonials to visualise the entangled histories. Last but not least, it aimed at showing that the exhibition not only led to discussions and public debate in Germany, but also to new and promising contacts between Germans and Namibians on the basis of their ‘shared history’.10

Bibliography


