

Negotiating memory through urban spaces: Traces of the Ovaherero and Nama genocide in Windhoek and Swakopmund

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Introduction

Between 1884 and 1915, the German empire colonised the territory of present-day Namibia, calling it *Deutsch-Südwestafrika* ('German South West Africa' GSWA). Colonial violence escalated between 1904 and 1908, when German forces perpetrated genocide against the territory's Ovaherero¹ and Nama populations.² It was against them that German General Lothar von Trotha pronounced extermination orders in October 1904 and April 1905 respectively (Zimmerer 2016b: 51-55).³ Captured survivors were interned as forced labourers in concentration camps, the largest of which were therefore placed "relative to labour needs in five main localities: Windhoek, Okahandja and Karibib in the interior, as well as Swakopmund and Lüderitz at the coast." (Erichsen 2005: 49) The devastating conditions in the camps led to high death rates, with thousands of prisoners dying of exhaustion and neglect (Förster 2010: 45). The GSWA genocide resulted in the deaths of at least 80% of Ovaherero and 50% of Nama people in the territory (Gewald 2003: 282; Drechsler 1966: 214).

In 1906-07, the Germans enacted laws to wholly dispossess the surviving populations in the 'police zone', barring them from owning land or cattle, effectively forcing them into labour relationships with their oppressors, and strictly controlling their movements (Förster 2010: 45; Drechsler 1966: 231; Zimmerer 2016a: 31; 34).⁴ These ordinances were "designed to keep the

¹ In this text, I use Ovaherero as the plural form, while Herero is singular.

² Larissa Förster writes about the victims of genocide in terms of their spoken language rather than ethnic identifications, i.e. referring to Otjiherero- and Nama/Damara-speaking groups (2010: 13). In doing so, she highlights the historical construction of the ethnic categories typically used today and includes Damara victims of genocide in her work. See also Krüger on the historical construction of Ovaherero and Nama ethnic categories (2016: 17-18).

³ The Joint Declaration (Federal Republic of Germany & Republic of Namibia 2021) states that "[...] through the actions of the German State. A large number of the Damara and San communities were also exterminated" (p. 2). Notwithstanding this acknowledgement, because no extermination orders were explicitly pronounced against them, no Damara or San representatives were involved in the German Namibian bilateral negotiations on the genocide. There is generally limited information on Damara or San affected community advocacy related to the genocide, although Kössler (2012) mentions a Damara Cultural Heritage Forum, formed in 2005, which raises awareness to the 17,000 Damara who disappeared between 1904-8 and criticises the marginal role given to the Damara in the national narrative (p. 301).

⁴ For more on the total control the colonial administration sought to enact see Zimmerer (2016a).

Africans indefinitely in a state of destitution and rightlessness”, and therefore unable to rebuild their societies (Drechlsler 1966: 231). At the same time, strict racialised separations were formally drawn between the settler and colonised populations (Zimmerer 2016a: 26-30).

By 1915, at the beginning of World War I, Germany lost the territory of GSWA to South African troops that had invaded at Britain’s request. In 1920, South African control of the territory was formalised through a League of Nations mandate (Forrest 1994: 89). Continuing where the Germans left off, “the South African administration systematically applied its policies of racial segregation to Namibia, seeking [...] to extract as much wealth from the colony as possible” (Wallace 2011: 205). As the apartheid system was instituted in South Africa after World War II, it was also implemented in SWA (ibid.: 243). In this context, land dispossession and forced resettlements continued in Namibia until the 1960s (Melber 2019: 74). After 75 years of South African rule, and following protracted armed conflict, Namibia finally gained independence in 1990 (Wallace 2011: 243). However, “the skewed distribution of land has remained largely untouched” since independence (Melber 2019: 74), and descendants of the victims of the GSWA genocide continue to advocate for restorative justice today.

The South West Africa People’s Organisation (SWAPO), which led the armed liberation struggle, was elected as Namibia’s ruling party in the first national elections and has held this position since. SWAPO leans heavily on its role as the country’s liberator for legitimacy, centring itself in narrations of Namibian independence (Zuern 2012: 494-5). Hence, “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” in the national narrative (Kössler 2007: 372) – as is the history of resistance to colonialism that pre-dates the struggle against apartheid-South Africa. As SWAPO is historically tied to the northern, predominantly Oshiwambo-speaking part of the country, the families of those who make up its base often did not experience German colonisation in the same devastating way as the central and southern regions (Zuern 2012: 496).

It was only in 2015 that the German and Namibian governments began bilateral negotiations to address this long-neglected shared history, resulting in a controversial Joint Declaration (JD) in 2021, titled “United in remembrance of our colonial past, united in our will to reconcile, united in our vision of the future” (Federal Republic of Germany & Republic of Namibia 2021). In it, the German government recognises that the German atrocities are tantamount to genocide “from today’s perspective” (ibid.: 3), apologises, and pledges 1.1 billion euros to a joint “reconstruction and development support programme [...] to assist the development of descendants of the particularly affected communities, in line with their identified needs” (ibid.: 5). The JD has

been subject to vehement critique from activists from the affected communities in Namibia and the diasporas, German and Namibian civil society organisations, Namibian oppositional parties, and scholars. Some of the main contentions around the negotiations concern the limited representation of the affected communities and their role in the negotiations, particularly the diasporas in Botswana and South Africa, who are not Namibian citizens and are therefore in no way represented by the Namibian government.⁵

The focus of this text is not on bilateral intergovernmental negotiations, however. Indeed, negotiations on how to deal with the past more often take place through every day (inter)actions in schools, universities, living rooms, or through artistic or activist interventions. One important element through which Namibians negotiate reappraisals of German colonial violence concerns its representations in public space. Whether in creating new memorial sites, altering existing ones, or transforming commemorative practices associated with them, monuments “offer a physical location for the playing out of disagreements about shared memory and collective identity” (Rigney 2022: 21). Therefore, the various socio-political tensions around the GSWA genocide and its legacies in Namibia become visible around such sites.

Focusing on the coastal town of Swakopmund and Namibia’s capital Windhoek (see Figure 1), this article will illustrate how commemorative sites are used to (re)negotiate how the 1904-08 genocide is dealt with. It will discuss how residents alter and create new commemorative sites in this process, how they engage with these sites to give them meaning, and how these practices are embedded in larger political debates.

Figure 1: Map of Namibia



Note: From *Namibia Base Map*, by JRC (ECHO, EU), Wikimedia Commons, 2014. (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Namibia_Base_Map.png)

⁵ For more on the contentions around the negotiations and the JD, see the Joint Communication of Special Rapporteurs of the UN OHCHR on the Joint Declaration to the German and Namibian governments (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2023) and their respective responses (Federal Republic of Germany 2023; Republic of Namibia 2023)

Theoretical considerations

Maurice Halbwachs first argued that while remembrance takes place in individual minds, memories are situated in (and to a significant extent, determined by) our social frameworks, through which we think and experience our environments. Put simply, our interpersonal relationships and broader social environments inform and shape how we perceive, interpret, and recollect events – events we ourselves experienced as well as those before our time. This is an interdependent process: An individual remembers through the lens of *collective memory*; at the same time, collective memory only becomes manifest in individual minds, through individual acts of remembrance (Halbwachs 1992: 168-9; see also Erll 2017: 12-13).

Building on these ideas, Aleida and Jan Assmann distinguish between three forms of collective memory: *social or communicative memory*, *political memory*, and *cultural memory*. Communicative memory “refers to the past as experienced and communicated (or repressed) within a given society. It is continuously changing as it disappears with the death of individuals” (A. Assmann 2012: 41). However, this type of memory is embodied, meaning tied to individuals and their day-to-day interactions, and may be transmitted inter-generationally, insofar as those with knowledge of the past preserve this memory by imparting it to others: it is thus *intergenerational* rather than *transgenerational*. Political and cultural memory, on the other hand, are *disembodied* (externalised and objectified) and are transmitted trans-generationally, “involving not only libraries, museums, and monuments, but also providing various modes of education and repeated occasions for participation” (ibid.: 42). These must be interacted with and (*re*-)embodied in order for them to retain meaning and relevance (J. Assmann 2011: 17).

In this vein, this paper will look at such processes of re-embodiment in relation to select *places of memory*, as well as their physical alteration and creation. Pierre Nora first coined the term *lieu de mémoire* to signify “any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community” (Nora 1996: xviii, quoted from Buckley-Zistel 2021: 27). This means that any site, object, text, symbol, or commemorative act, which fulfils these criteria, may be counted as a *place of memory*. (Erll 2017: 20-21; see also Buckley-Zistel 2021)⁶ This

⁶ Critics have argued that the concept of *lieux des mémoires* needs to be re-thought and adjusted and that, in his *nation-mémoire* construct, Nora disregards perspectives from former colonies and memory cultures of migrant communities (see Erll 2017: 22).

text focuses on memorial sites connected to the GSWA genocide in Swakopmund and Windhoek, as “[t]he materialized presence of old narratives in the form of public statues offers a particularly potent site for negotiating the emergence of the new” (Rigney 2023: 21).

In Namibia, unlike in other former colonies, the German colonial monuments remained standing under South African rule and after independence (Lehmann 2021: 249).⁷ Stefanie Kappler (2017) discusses four dimensions that influence the historical narratives that develop around such *places of memory*. Namely, their design – as it determines which events are memorialised and how these are depicted; their location and size – as both influence the visibility of the artefact and which audiences are attracted; the timing – e.g., whether a monument is constructed during ongoing and potentially conflictual processes of historical reappraisal; and, finally, memorial practices – how people interact with and behave around the site is central for its meaning (p. 132), i.e., how memory is *embodied*.

The intention with which a monument was built is important because, as stated above, through its form, imagery, material, placement, and so on, specific historical narratives are inscribed into it (Kappler 2017: 132). However, the creators of commemorative sites do not have the final say on their meaning. They do not have control over others’ memorial practices, nor which conflicting associations the viewer might have with the site. In this sense, they are “‘doubly constructed’ as they are both built or physically carved out, *and* interpreted, narrated, named, understood, and imagined” (Björkdahl/ Kappler 2019: 387).

Tensions can emerge in these processes, between the intended/conceptualised use and meaning of a place and how it is appropriated/ lived. A monument erected to honour the German marines who died in battle in 1904, for example, can evoke very different associations in the viewer. One person might visit such a place and sympathise with the marines and their families for whom the memorial was built, remembering how young many of them were when they died, while another may be called to remember the 1904-08 genocide committed against the Ovaherero and Nama populations by the German colonial forces, to which the marines belonged. When people attach different historical narratives to a site or they reject the narrative attached to it in its creation, the site’s meaning becomes plural. Alternatively, some old monuments are so familiar in public space that they are mostly ignored (Rigney 2023: 24), if the cultural

⁷ Seventy-seven received the status of “National Monument” during this time, as the Historical Monuments Commission was made up almost exclusively of German settlers (Lehmann 2021: 253).

memory tied to them are no longer or very rarely *embodied* (J. Assmann 2011: 17). Nevertheless, these places can “gain new vibrancy in times of contestation and become a focal point both for advocates of change and for those who would resist it” (Rigney 2023: 24).

This article will explore different ways in which residents of Swakopmund and Windhoek have engaged with sites connected to the genocide committed by the German forces in Namibia in 1904-08, to (re)negotiate how this history is interpreted and portrayed.

The *Marinedenkmal* (1908) in Swakopmund

Swakopmund is a windy coastal town in western Namibia, founded in 1892 to serve as GSWA’s harbour (van der Hoog 2016: 42). Its old town centre is a popular tourist destination today and belongs to those places where “more often than not foreign visitors to the country will remark on the ‘European’ or even ‘German’ atmosphere that appears to characterise some of the settlements in the country” (Gewald 2008: 256). Old German architecture marks the town’s historical centre, as well as German-language bookstores, restaurants and bakeries, and even shops selling colonial memorabilia.

The *Marinedenkmal* or Marine Memorial located in front of the Swakopmund State House (the historical *Kaiserliches Bezirksgericht* or Imperial District Court). As inscribed into a plaque on its plinth, it commemorates the German marines who died for “the preservation of the colony against the rebellious Hereros 1904-05”.⁸ The names and ranks of the fallen Germans, as well as the battles/places in which they were killed, are also listed across two plaques. The memorial depicts two marines on top of a rock plinth, one lying down, dying with his weapon still in hand, and the other standing, weapon raised to protect his comrade, standing tall and looking into the distance (Figures 2). This heroic portrayal glorifies the military sacrifice of the German colonial forces while glossing over the genocidal violence they perpetrated against the Ovahe-
rero and Nama peoples.

⁸ Translation from German

Figures 2 and 3: *Marinedenkmal in Swakopmund splattered painted red.*



Note: ©Núrel Bahí Reitz

The memorial was originally meant to stand in the capital city of Windhoek. When the monument arrived in 1908, however, the concern was raised that the image of an injured/dying German marine might project weakness. To avoid evoking this impression in the colonised population, it was moved to the coastal German settlement of Swakopmund instead. Another statue was commissioned for Windhoek, one that was to project unequivocal imperial strength. So, it came that the infamous Rider Statue was erected in Windhoek in 1912, which will make a reappearance later in this text. (Lehmann 2021: 255-6)

This short glimpse into the conception of the two monuments underlines how intentionally they were placed in public space to communicate a particular narration of the colonial wars (see Lehmann 2021: 255-6). The Marine Memorial uses materials and images often associated with strength and heroism – the soldiers are raised high so that the viewer must look up at them, the iron figures are larger than life, strong, the uninjured soldier stands valiantly to protect his comrade. It belongs to the monuments that “impose themselves on the spectator, to generate awe and respect by their sheer size, forcing the viewer to look up, casting shadows over city squares” (Rigney 2023: 22).

The incorporation of the image of the dying soldier also gives it a memorialising character – a young man tragically killed. “The fallen hero’s wrecked body powerfully demonstrates the sacrifices that heroes make. The memorials celebrate German military strength, victory in war, and

the brutal defeat of indigenous resistance.” (Zuern/ Jasper 2020: 7) Unequivocally, the monument projects heroism, representing the German men as having fought bravely, righteously for their empire against the Ovaherero (as stated in the memorial plaque). Conversely, the thousands of “rebellious” men, women, and children who were killed during the genocide, who died in the Swakopmund concentration camp not far from this very site, were not depicted nor mentioned here. Annual commemorations used to be held at each of the sites by those German-speaking Namibians who looked nostalgically on their colonial heritage (Förster 2010: 234; 192-5).

Rejecting its enduring presence in Swakopmund’s city centre, in 2016 unknown activists splattered red paint onto the Marine Memorial (Horáková 2024: 70). The red paint can be understood as an addition to the memorial, symbolising the blood that was shed by the marines that the memorial honours. The victims that were previously invisible are now somehow represented. The change in the physical appearance of the memorial impacts the impression it leaves on the viewer, altering the historical narrative imbued into it.⁹ The ‘blood’ visually communicates the anger that the involved activists from the affected communities associate with the site, condemning the otherwise heroically portrayed German marines.

This latter point is underlined by the context in which the paint was spilled on the monument. It was not done discretely when no one was looking, but during a political, public event: the 2016 annual Swakopmund Reparation Walk (Fischer 2017). The Swakopmund Reparation Walk first took place in 2007, with the inauguration of a memorial for the Ovaherero and Ovambanderu¹⁰ victims of the concentration camps in Swakopmund (Zuern 2012: 508; discussed in the next section). Since then, the Reparation Walk has become an annual event that centres the Otjiherero- and Nama/Damara-speaking communities’ losses at the hands of the German colonial forces and calls for recognition, apology, and reparations from Germany. Each year in late March/ early April, attendees march from the Marine Memorial to the Concentration Camp Memorial/ Genocide Memorial, where a commemoration is held.

Thus, as the Reparation Walk’s point of departure, the Marine Memorial has become part of a commemorative practice centred on those it originally left out, and a site of activism for their descendants and supporters. Combined with the site’s narrative reframing through the red paint,

⁹ The year prior, a petition to have the memorial removed and sent back to Germany gained two hundred signatures. (Tjambari 2016)

¹⁰ Otjiherero-speakers who identify with the Green Flag identify as Ovambanderu rather than Ovaherero, to reflect their differing historical experiences since the 1800s (Hendrickson 1996: 216). There are three main flags that Otjiherero-speaking communities use “to organise people and events” (ibid.: 215): Red, White, and Green (ibid.: 216).

this example demonstrates how such memorials become sites for residents to contest persisting colonial narratives and demand redress. These practices can be understood as a *re-embodiment* of transgenerational memory in relation to specific *places of memory* (J. Assmann 2011: 17). They also exemplify the importance of considering not only how a place was originally conceived but also how it is adapted and appropriated (Kappler 2017: 132). The Reparation Walk bridges the gap between the Marine Memorial's intended meaning and the affected communities' experiences with German colonial mass violence. Nevertheless, the Marine Memorial's intended meaning – commemorating the German losses and celebrating their victories during the colonial wars and ensuing genocide – remains built into the structure, and activists continue to call for its removal (see Deutschlandfunk Kultur 2022). This illustrates too how contestations around memorial sites present a microcosm of more fundamental conflicts around the meanings ascribed to historical events and how they are dealt with in specific socio-political constellations (Kappler 2017: 133), as will become clearer still in the following sections.

The Memorial Cemetery Park in Swakopmund

As mentioned, the annual Swakopmund Reparation Walk ends with a commemorative event at the above-mentioned Concentration Camp Memorial, which was inaugurated in 2007 (see Figure 4).

The memorial grew out of a civil society initiative in 2005 to incorporate the unmarked African graves into the otherwise well-kept cemetery (Zuern 2012: 508). Until then, they lay in the “open desert, marked not by walls or other boundaries or, in most cases, headstones, but by small mounds visible to the careful observer” (ibid.) (see Figure 5).¹¹ Among those buried in the African cemetery are many who were killed during the GSWA genocide, including in Swakopmund's concentration camp. Without anything to mark them, these graves were often reused, driven, ridden, or walked over by passers-by, and the grounds were partially used for construction. Two Swakopmund residents initiated the building of a wall around the cemetery, “to protect the [unmarked] graves and to create a single unified cemetery” (Zuern 2012: 508).

¹¹ One Swakopmund resident and Herero reparations activist organises an annual sweeping of the sandy cemetery. The ocean winds can blow so strongly that the bones of those buried there become uncovered. By reburial of their remains, he commemorates his ancestors' suffering and raises awareness for ongoing campaigns.

[illegible]

A wide-angle photograph of a sandy beach. The foreground is filled with light-colored sand, showing some small, dark, irregular patches. In the middle ground, a line of buildings, including houses and a taller structure, is visible. Several palm trees are scattered among the buildings. The sky is a clear, pale blue.

10

avoid the term genocide and began (controversial) bilateral negotiations with their Namibian counterpart (see introduction). While advocacy from Otjiherero- and Nama/Damara-speaking groups did not typically overlap in the early 2000s (see Melber 2005), this shifted by the beginning of the intergovernmental negotiations (Reitz/Mannitz 2021: 6-8, 15).

These changes were reflected in alterations to the Swakopmund Concentration Camp Memorial, which received an updated inscription by affected community organisations in 2020.¹³ The site was renamed a Genocide Memorial, and rather than alluding vaguely to “mysterious circumstances”, it lists specific abuses their communities were subjected to, clarifying and expanding the memorial’s meaning. Reflecting the increasing cooperation between Otjiherero- and Nama/Damara-speaking advocacy groups, the updated memorial also includes Nama victims.¹⁴ Moreover, it now makes explicit reference to land claims and restorative justice movements, while naming the specific factions of the affected communities involved in creating and updating the memorial, the OvaHerero Traditional Authority (OTA) and Nama Traditional Leaders Association (NTLA).

These transformations, and especially the last, must be understood in context of the contentious political climate in Namibia regarding the bilateral genocide negotiations process. Ovaherero, Ovambanderu, and Nama representatives connected to the descendant group organisation OvaHerero/OvaMbanderu and Nama Council for Dialogue on the 1904-1908 Genocide (ONCD) were involved in the negotiations in a limited, consultative capacity. However, those connected to the OTA and NTLA rejected the negotiations framework, arguing that the limited capacity through which the affected communities could influence the process left them effectively sidelined, and therefore remained on the outside in protest (see The Namibian 2021; Tefera 2023). Instead, they have been calling for renegotiations, directly between the affected communities and the German government, in which the Namibian government plays only a

¹³ Full inscription (capitalisation removed): “Nama & Ovaherero Genocide Monument 1904-1908. In honour & loving memory of thousands of Ovaherero and Nama men, women and children who perished at this sacred site. They died in concentration camps of hunger, slave labour, sexual abuse, disease, fatigue & adverse weather conditions at the hands of German soldiers. Their remains were buried in shallow graves by fellow inmates. Our ancestral lands & restorative justice remain the inspiration for our struggle today, tomorrow, and forever. Inaugurated by the late Dr Kuaima Riruako (Ovaherero Paramount Chief) and late Chief Christan Zeraua (Zeraua Royal House) on 31st March 2007. Script was revised and re-launched by Vekuii Rukoro (Ovaherero Paramount Chief) and Goab PSM Kooper (Chairperson of the Nama Traditional Leaders Association) 28th March 2020.”

¹⁴ However, as a Herero interviewee pointed out to me in 2023, Ovambanderu victims of genocide have been removed from the inscription. This reflects contentions within Ovaherero/ Ovambanderu politics that go beyond the scope of this paper, but nevertheless demonstrates that memorial sites must be analysed in their specific socio-political contexts if they are to be understood.

facilitating role.¹⁵ Hence, the monument's inscription is as much a memorialisation of the affected communities' suffering during the genocide, as it is a criticism of the intergovernmental process in a highly politicised context.

The Genocide Memorial in Swakopmund was inaugurated in connection with the first Reparation Walk, connecting it from inception to the Marine Memorial. Through this then-annual commemorative practice, the Genocide Memorial was positioned as a counter-memorial, pushing back on the colonial narration that obscured the history of genocide in the older monument. In addition to later adapting this commemorative practice to include Nama communities and directing unequivocal, upfront claims towards the German and the Namibian governments, the involved advocacy groups chose to change the memorial itself as well, to reflect changing goals and alliances and protest the intergovernmental negotiations on the genocide. While the physical structure of a memorial does not dictate how/ which cultural collective memories associated with it its viewer embodies (as seen in the appropriation of the Marine Memorial), the Genocide Memorial's new inscription nevertheless communicates a reappraised narration of the GSWA genocide. The discussion of these two sites has illustrated that memorials cannot be understood as static, neutral 'historical' objects. They are rooted in the concrete socio-political contexts from which they emerge, and represent specific, contested positions in public debate (and space) today.

The Rider Replica in Swakopmund

Background

The Rider Statue, commissioned and erected by the German authorities in 1912, is/was perhaps the most well-known monument connected to the genocide in Namibia (see Figure 6). The Rider commemorated the 1.626 "brave German warriors who gave their lives for emperor and empire for the salvation and preservation of this country" and 124 "German citizens who fell victim to the natives in the rebellion" between 1903 and 1908.¹⁶ While honouring the German civilians and military personnel, like the Marine Memorial, the Rider was glaringly silent on the tens-of-thousands of Ovaherero, Nama, Damara, and San who lost their lives to genocide between 1904 and 1908. Seen as "an obstacle to the healing of the nation from past colonial

¹⁵ See the Joint Communication of Special Rapporteurs of the UN OHCHR on the Joint Declaration to the German and Namibian governments (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2023).

¹⁶ Translation of the statue's plaque from German.

oppression by the Germans”, it was removed from Windhoek’s centre by the Namibian government in 2013 (The Namibian 2014).¹⁷

Figure 6: Rider Statue prior to its first relocation in Windhoek in 2009



Note: From Windhoek Christuskirche Reiterdenkmal, by Freddy Weber (for Roger Zenner), 2004, Wikimedia Commons. (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Windhoek_Christuskirche_Reiterdenkmal.jpg)

Of all places, the monument was erected on the grounds of one of the two Windhoek concentration camps (Kössler 2012: 286). Placed between a church (*Christuskirche*, 1910) and the German military base (*Alte Feste*, 1890), the statue “emphasised the message of military conquest and subjugation [...] [and] conveyed an encompassing message of the intertwined political-military and spiritual-cultural modes of domination” (Becker

2018: 5). Beyond providing a place to commemorate the fallen Germans, the Rider served as a symbol for German power over the colonised and lay perpetual claim on the GSWA territory, a point which was made explicit in Governor Seitz’ opening speech at the 1912 unveiling of the statue (Zeller 2007/2021). Nevertheless, like the Marine Memorial, “[f]or those who knew the history of German actions in colonial South West Africa, the Rider stood as a reminder of the unacknowledged victims of genocide. In this way, the Rider was also a prominent symbol for Ovaherero and Nama claims for reparations” (Zuern/ Jasper 2020: 10).

A number of scholars have written about the Rider’s significance in the Namibian memory landscape (see Zeller 1995, Zuern 2012, Kössler 2015). Fabian Lehmann (2021) extensively wrote about the monument’s significance as a *place of memory*, and detailed different ways in which artists have engaged with and disassembled the Rider in their work (p. 225-307). So, why read about the Rider now, if everything has been said and the statue was removed by the Namibian government over a decade ago? Because the Rider reappeared in Swakopmund in 2019. Or rather, a replica of the Rider Statue was privately erected on a restaurant’s premises and still stands today.¹⁸ Its recreation can be understood as an objection against the reappraisal of the German colonial history (particularly the recognition of the genocide as such), in the

¹⁷ This was the second relocation; it was previously relocated only a few hundred metres in 2009, before being removed completely in 2013. See Lehmann (2021: 251-255) for more information on the Rider’s removal.

¹⁸ The original statue is currently kept in the courtyard of the *Alte Feste*.

context of the changing memorial landscape in Swakopmund and the Namibian-German bilateral negotiations.

The new Rider

Six years after its removal from Windhoek's centre, a two-meter-tall replica of the Rider Statue was erected at a restaurant in Swakopmund, visible to both guests and passers-by (see Figure 7). The replica was quickly noticed by residents, some of whom were understandably angry. Laidlaw Peringanda, founder of the Swakopmund Genocide Museum, quickly responded with efforts to have the statue removed (Baas 2022: 54).

Figure 7: Rider Replica in Swakopmund.



Note: ©Núrel Bahí Reitz

Upon hearing that Peringanda had approached both the police and municipality to have the replica removed, the owners simply stated that they would remove the statue if instructed to do so by the authorities, and that they did “not want to stir trouble” (Staff Reporter 2019). Rather, their “intention is to try and get all the old stuff here and make it part of a sort of museum atmosphere. People like to see these things, especially the tourists” (The Namibian 2019). In conversation with Peringanda as well as the press, the owners of the restaurant maintained that they see nothing offensive about the replica, “as it is part of history” (Lennon 2019). One of the co-owners later elaborated, saying:

“It is merely a historical object. We decided to recreate some lost history at our establishment. I don’t want to get into politics, but personally I feel Namibia’s history has been twisted and politicized. This was done to pit the Germans against the Ovahereros. Accounts of what actually happened, differ. The Ovaherero caused the war. They started killing the Germans who in turn retaliated.” (Finck 2020)

Despite the claim not to want to get involved in political arguments, the quote above shows that the owners were aware of the public debate surrounding the original Rider Statue when they decided to commission and publicly display the copy. Rather, it was precisely because of the restaurant owners’ political position in this debate that they felt compelled to do so. Even just the statement that the Ovaherero caused the war is not only highly political but also contested by historians (see Gewald 1999: 141; Zimmerer 2024: 35). In the quote above, the owner relativises the German atrocities and suggests that the removal of the Rider in Windhoek was a result of the twisting and politicising history – turning around an argument that could much

more easily be made against the Rider Statue. The discursive strategy of claiming that the history of German colonialism has been politicised or twisted, implicitly denying postcolonial narrations of colonial violence, is not new (see Förster 2010: 235). Stipulating that a history was “lost” is also telling, given that the Genocide Memorial was inaugurated in Windhoek in 2014. What was “lost”, then, was the public memorialisation/ representation of one narration of history. A narration that (as discussed) denied and concealed much more than it revealed. While the owners do not want to argue these points explicitly, they are engaging in a debate, nonetheless.

Through the symbolic relocation of the Rider Statue from Windhoek to Swakopmund (Baas 2022: 54), the owners are renegotiating the decision to remove the monument from Namibia’s memory landscape in 2013. In reproducing his image, they are also reproducing the interpretation of history tied to the Rider. The relocation should be understood as a reassertion of colonial narratives in a wider context of post-colonial reappraisal. This includes the addition of the victims’ blood on the Marine Memorial, its appropriation into the annual Swakopmund Reparation Walk, the German government’s acknowledgement the colonial atrocities as genocide, and the Namibian government’s newfound interest in this history since (as will be discussed in the following section).

The Genocide Memorial in Windhoek

In Windhoek, the Rider Statue was relocated to make space for an Independence Memorial Museum and a towering statue of Namibia’s first president, Sam Nujoma (Hamrick/ Duschinski 2018: 449; Lehmann 2021: 253). The inauguration of the museum on Namibian Independence Day in 2014 also served as an unveiling for the country’s first national Genocide Memorial (see Figure 8), which stands in front of the *Alte Feste* today (Stonehouse 2018: 4).

The structures were commissioned by the Namibian government and built by the North Korean company Mansudae Overseas Projects.¹⁹ The new sites garnered criticisms both before and after they were unveiled. It was argued that the removal of the Rider would risk erasing the history of the genocide from the city altogether (Hamrick 2013: 74-76), and that a museum dedicated to the independence struggle was redundant in Windhoek’s memory landscape (ibid.: 59-60). Further, it was criticised that the affected communities were not involved in the creation of the genocide memorial (see Hamrick and Duschinski 2018: 451).

¹⁹ Heike Becker (2018) detailed the public debate and aesthetic changes to Windhoek’s urban space that resulted from the decision to commission the constructions from Mansudae Overseas Projects. Meghan Kirkwood (2011) delves into SWAPO’s decision to hire the North Korean company to manipulate Windhoek’s urban landscape across multiple projects.

These three aspects are all connected and may require some context regarding SWAPO's approach to Namibian national history. As mentioned in the introduction, SWAPO's narration of Namibian national history, which emphasises the 1960s-80s armed struggle, is central to its political success (Zuern 2012: 494-5). At the same time, SWAPO is historically tied predominantly to the northern, mainly Oshiwambo-speaking part of the country, hence:

“German colonial rule, and the genocides committed upon the Nama and Herero of central and southern Namibia, did not affect the inhabitants of Ovamboland. Not surprisingly the sites of memory, the sites of the former prisoner of war camps that dot the urban landscape of Windhoek, are of no significance to those whose ancestors were not incarcerated there.” (Gewald 2008: 271)

Figure 8: Genocide Memorial in Windhoek.



Note: ©Núrel Bahí Reitz

This dynamic resulted in a (wilful?) ignorance of the ongoing struggles faced by those populations dealing with the aftermath of the genocide history. The memory landscape was thus constructed to reflect in “physical form the revised history, hopes, and aspirations of the new state”, ignoring or concealing histories deemed inconsequential for Namibia as a whole (Gewald 2008: 270).

However, becoming a more pressing inter-governmental concern since 2004/6,²⁰ the genocide had to be more visibly incorporated into the existing national history narrative. The Ovaherero and Nama resistances were hence framed as precursors to the later independence struggle, which “‘pioneered the struggle

for our freedom and national independence’. Drawing a direct line from the early resistance against colonial conquest to the SWAPO-led nationalist struggle has for long been part of the nationalist narration” (Becker 2018: 17).²¹ Thereby, SWAPO's status as the country's liberating force was maintained while also positioning itself to negotiate on the genocide issue with Germany.

²⁰ With the centenary of the Battle of Ohamakari (Waterberg) in 2004, during which Federal Minister of Economic Cooperation and Development Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul was the first German politician to publicly ask for forgiveness for the atrocities, the genocide issue became harder to ignore (Melber 2005: 144). In 2006, the Namibian parliament passed a motion calling for negotiations between the German and Namibian governments and the affected communities. These negotiations took place between in 2015 and 2021, although there is some controversy over whether this was done in the form in which they were envisaged in the 2006 motion. See the Joint Communication of Special Rapporteurs of the UN OHCHR on the Joint Declaration to the German and Namibian governments (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2023).

²¹ This framing is not entirely new. Similar narrative continuities were also drawn during the independence struggle, including by actors from the affected communities in the nationalist movement (see Gewald 2003: 295-8).

The national Genocide Memorial reflects this approach. It is composed of a plinth, with brass reliefs on either side depicting images of genocidal acts, on top of which stands a bronze statue of a man and a woman on a “Nama Hut”, arms wrapped around each other’s waists, with their fists raised, revealing broken chains (Becker 2018: 15). Their raised arms and broken chains convey a message of ultimate victory after suffering: Their resistance to German colonialism was not in vain; Namibia is independent. This sentiment is captured by the words: “their blood waters our freedom”, written between the plinth and the statue – a phrase is also found in the Namibian national anthem (ibid.: 16). Neither the word ‘genocide’ nor the targeted and affected communities were originally named on the memorial. In this way, the “attempt at making visible the history of the genocide in reality contributes to invisibilise [sic] those whom the genocide was perpetrated against” (Stonehouse 2018: 61). This has since been corrected, and there is now a plaque at the foot of the memorial, which reads: “This monument is erected in honor of the victims of the Herero & Nama genocide. 1904-08”.

The state-sanctioned removal of the Rider Statue and its replacement with the Independence Memorial Museum, inaugurated together with the first national Genocide Memorial on Independence Day symbolically writes the official state history narrative into the urban landscape: In it, SWAPO fills the role of the country’s liberating force (removing the colonial monument and establishing the Independence Memorial Museum, which focuses on the armed liberation struggle from South Africa), while the genocide is framed in terms of anti-colonial resistance and integrated as a prelude to the later struggle (as depicted in the Genocide Memorial). While some from the affected communities valued the reference to the genocide on this historical site, others criticised the government’s approach. The lack of inclusion in the process of creating the memorial was not well-received (Hamrick and Duschinski 2018: 451). Further, in the light of the SWAPO government’s long-held uninterest in the GSWA genocide and its aftermath – and particularly in the context of the contentions that unfolded concerning its representative legitimacy in the negotiations with Germany – some see the memorial as part of a “co-optation strategy” (Becker 2018: 17).²²

Just as with the *places of memory* in Swakopmund, controversies around the national genocide memorial are informed by and reflect contemporary socio-political tensions. These concern SWAPO’s handling of the genocide issue and by extension minority needs and interests in the country: The immediate controversy around the memorial is tied to greater conflicts concerning

²² In this context, “co-optation” implies that the genocide history does not ‘belong to’ the national government and therefore, by inaugurating the memorial, it is illegitimately taking ownership of the history for its own gain, i.e. to legitimise the governmental negotiations with Germany.

the government's insufficient engagement with the genocide and its aftermath for affected communities since independence, which informs the debate around the limited participation in the dialogue with Germany. This again illustrates how memorial sites serve as physical locations where collective memories and identities are constructed and contested.

Conclusion

This article has illustrated how public debates around the discussed memorial sites are informed by political and social changes and tensions Namibia has faced since they were constructed. These are reflected in the ways in which residents and affected community activists have altered, appropriated, or created new commemorative sites in Swakopmund. Each of these interventions seeks to change the narrative of the German colonialism written into the city. Through demands for reparative justice and self-determination, affected community activists fight to remove colonial narratives from their cities, while colonial apologists work to preserve them.

Considering the importance of commemorative practice and *embodiment* of collective memories for the meaning-making of memorial sites, avoidance can also be informative. While the Namibian government has endeavoured to transform Windhoek's memory landscape, not one of my interlocutors from the affected communities shared feeling any connection to the Windhoek memorial. On the contrary, many reported that they had not yet seen it in person (years after its inauguration), including Windhoek residents who regularly travelled across the country for community and commemorative events. In this sense, the national monument currently appears not to serve as a *place of memory* for affected communities or Windhoek residents more generally, but as a place of national and international politics: Similarly to the negotiations, the monument is a place for German and Namibian politicians to perform reconciliatory gestures.²³

²³ See, e.g. then-German Vice Chancellor Habeck's visit to the monument (Fasse 2022).

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