



# *Two modes of amnesia: complexity in postcolonial Namibia*

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First submission: 17 July 2014

Acceptance: 15 March 2015

Public commemoration of past atrocity, mass crime and particularly genocide has drawn attention both in the public realm and in scholarly debate, meeting general acceptance in recent years. However, the seeming opposite has also been advocated – forgetting. Various, such forgetting is presented as a wiser approach in contradistinction to painstaking and evasive truth-seeking. Taking this tendency as a point of departure, I discuss here two cases that seem relevant to what might be called a strategy of amnesia, both relating to Namibia: (1) reference to the genocide perpetrated by the German colonial army in 1904–08, both in post-World War II (West) Germany and in the independent postcolony, and (2) the debates and conflicts within Namibia around the gross violations of human rights committed under the auspices of SWAPO during the 1980s. Without suggesting that these cases are in any way equivalent, I contend, however, that they are related in the minds of a fair number of Namibians and further, that there are certain connections in the ways both cases have been and are addressed within the public spheres of the two countries concerned.

I argue that in both cases, debate on how to ‘work through’ or otherwise pass over in silence violent acts and large-scale crime arose only with the Namibian independence process in 1989/90. In the first case, we can observe a transnational dynamic, which has resulted in shifts in the positioning of both governments concerned, but at the same time refers back to more long-term official images of history. This concerns in particular

the construction of national identity as a decisive framing of the transition process, which, in Namibia, was intertwined with achieving independence. In the German case as well, memory politics are closely related to transition to democracy, even though this transition was the result of the cataclysmic defeat of Nazism. In such contexts, strategies of amnesia or of repressing memory appear fragile in face of the ever-present possibility that interested or concerned actors may raise seemingly forgotten issues. Precisely because of their relative volatility, such strategies also pose questions about political culture. In a closing section, I therefore consider the societal power relations that influence the prospects of enduring amnesia in the cases discussed.

**T**he ending of large-scale violent conflict, of civil war or of dictatorial regimes raises the issue of how to deal with mass crime and serious violations of human rights.<sup>1</sup> The search for truth, justice for the victims and the struggle against impunity form the mainstays of this debate. Such emphasis tends to sideline real or only seemingly alternative approaches, such as forgetting or passing over in silence of perpetrated violence. Amnesia, in the sense of shunning or forfeiting the taking up of painful events of the past, is unquestionably practised quite frequently. In this article, I explore two such practices, both situated in, and referring to Namibia.

At first glance, it may seem a convincing strategic option not to open old wounds once again. It is hoped that, by not addressing a dire past, by staying memory and not addressing dark contents, one might also achieve pacification of a national nexus, most likely defined by a nation state. In this way, transition processes that initially are fragile almost by routine may be secured, at least in the short and medium term. As we shall see, this pertains not only to situations where acute conflict has occurred in the recent past and may be considered particularly risky and volatile with respect to internal peace, but also to cases such as postcolonial situations that are marked, to a particular extent, by asymmetrical power relations and very long temporal stretches between the time of actual occurrence of large-scale violence and claims for adequately dealing with crimes

1 This article adapts and builds on my previous article (Kössler 2011: 73–99). I would like to thank, in particular, the organisers of the special issue, Stefan Engert and Anja Jetschke, for their initiative, as well as two anonymous referees for their helpful comments. I also gratefully acknowledge the instructive and engaged comments by two anonymous referees for *Acta Academica*, and the support by the editors as well as the efforts of the organisers of the workshop on 'Silence after violence', held in Bloemfontein in May 2014. Thanks to Tessa Coggio for helping with English-language issues. The research was conducted within the project 'Reconciliation and Social Conflict in the Aftermath of Large-Scale Violence In Southern Africa: The Cases of Angola and Namibia', at the Arnold Bergstraesser Institute, Freiburg I.B., Germany, and funded by the Volkswagen Foundation as part of their programme 'Knowledge for Tomorrow'.

committed. Both aspects are inextricably intertwined. This connection stems from the modalities of dealings about claims and 'justice' or, for that matter, 'historical truth'. Power relations play out in delaying processes of recognition and explicit remembrance. Debates and conflicts revolve around defining the relevant events and the modalities, in which they may be addressed and 'reconciliation' achieved. Again, the notion of reconciliation itself and the related quest for internal peace are subject to conflict and negotiation. In this way, the problem addressed in this article concerns a central goal of Transitional Justice – restoring or guaranteeing a damaged or endangered societal nexus, which, in the case of modern states, is linked to the re-assertion or re-definition of the nation.

Somewhat pointedly, one might say that we are looking at two strategies which are distinguished only by a few letters. Public *amnesia* is predicated on the explicit or implicit expectation that a silent consensus might be able to render to oblivion a painful past that still might generate new conflict. The virulence of this past, as it were, is to be neutralised by not addressing it. On the other hand, *amnesty*, going back in the Western tradition to classical Greece, is predicated on the explicit recognition of injustice and a clear statement about suffering that has been inflicted and undergone. Retaliation is waived on account of a public confession and acknowledgement of injustice and criminal acts (see Nippel 1997). This latter procedure can be seen within the broad range of approaches discussed in the context of Transitional Justice and Truth and Reconciliation Commissions. Amnesia, on the other hand, implies that impunity is rendered and enjoyed silently, and silence refers above all to the actual events in question. In this way, amnesia as a memory strategy is outside the purview of Transitional Justice.

Contrary to common perceptions, desisting from public truth searching is by no means rare in the context of transition processes. Obviously, this strategy can be executed in more arcane and quiet ways than is the case with a public exercise of truth-telling. Amnesia and silence evolve from stifling public debate. In terms of practical politics, active involvement or decision-making is not required or may even be counter-productive.

To be sure, expectations that the dire past might effectively be forgotten once and for all frequently prove illusory. This holds true even in cases in which acts of confronting the repressed horror set in only many years or even decades after the option of silence has been chosen. Recent events in Spain have shown graphically that such a tentative arrangement has not been able to dispose for good of the relevant memory contents, or of the needs to address such content (see Mühr 2010).

The amnesia strategy can be understood in terms of classical approaches to national integration. Over 130 years ago, Ernest Renan saw the nation as constituted

primarily by political will, not by ethnicity or common descent. This community of the will appeared more as a community of forgetting than one of remembering. In the case of France, commemorating the horrors of the medieval crusades in the Midi or of the slaughter of Huguenots in St Barholomew's Night would undermine national cohesion (see Renan 1882). Obviously, both horrific events were present in Renan's mind after 300 or 500 years, respectively. Public amnesia, then, encompasses a practice of silently not addressing certain facts and events. It excludes recognition of what has happened. Consequently, the construction of a narration of the past that is meant to bind the nation together should avoid taking up such clearly divisive conflicts and their memory. Linking the nexus of the state to any community not only of communication (see Deutsch 1978), but also of commemoration (see Liebert 2010), therefore, points to at least two distinct strategies. Engaging the past and, in particular, a "dire past" (Meier 2010) entails risks for a fragile internal peace. Such risks are involved both with addressing and with not addressing such dire past, since they constantly need to be referred back to such minimal consensus that is a prerequisite for maintaining a societal nexus. The processes involved are played out in a field that is free neither of constraints nor of domination; rather, we observe a realm marked by societal hegemony (see Kössler & Melber 1993: chapter 3).

I shall now analyse amnesia by taking up two cases which, at first glance, are quite diverse in terms of their social and political contexts. First, the debates and engagements concerning the genocide perpetrated in 1904-1908 by the German colonial army in Namibia, what was then German South West Africa. This example involves an asymmetrical relationship that clearly goes back to the colonial experience. For Namibia, the definition and delimitation of the independent nation in a postcolonial context is at stake; for Germany, whether and to what extent the nation's own postcolonial entanglement is acknowledged. The second case involves more recent human rights violations of SWAPO, the present ruling party in Namibia, during the late stages of the liberation war. These are likewise relevant for determining the nation, the definition of belonging and the image of national history in independent Namibia.

Both instances mark turning points in the history of Namibia, while they simultaneously demonstrate practices of not addressing a dire past as well as difficulties involved when doing so. Regardless of sweeping differences, in both conflicts victim groups raise claims and campaign for the acknowledgement of past mass crimes and human rights violations.<sup>2</sup> Public discourse related to these activities or otherwise the refusal to engage them are expressions of strategies

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2 The term 'victim groups' refers to the victim *position*; in particular, in the case of the genocide in the Namibian War of 1903-1908, this implies the descendants of the actual victims.

pursued by the respective governments in terms of memory politics. The same holds true for civil society actors involved. Thus, the importance these events still have, over two decades after independence, at least to relevant and active groups in Namibia, is articulated in public discourse and debate as well as in formal and informal politics.

Inevitably, memory is a contested terrain – even more so since memory contents are forged into the construction of an image of history that contributes towards founding the nation, thereby also informing the inevitable boundary drawing, rendering plausibility to the inclusion and exclusion of individuals and groups. Such considerations make it seem likely that there will be resistance against serious change in tenets that have often been reached in cumbersome public debate, for instance concerning German history of the twentieth century. At the same time, the power of defining the image of the nation is at stake. This is true not only for postcolonial Namibia (see Kössler 2007), but also for the (West) German memorial landscape which, after 1945, has been characterised, after prolonged conflict and struggle, by a canonisation of the Holocaust as the vanishing point of national commemoration. These points do not just concern the specific circumstances of a postcolonial situation that is still underexamined. Moreover, given its marginal position, this context may at first appear to have little bearing on the transition-related problems of recent German history, which focus on the key years of 1945 and 1989/1990. Precisely from the German point of view, however, we are concerned here with a transnational debate and issue.

I explore this complex set of problems in the following steps. First, I set out the debate surrounding the genocide or otherwise the refusal to address it. This references both Namibian and German memory politics and the exchanges or relationships that exist between them. I then turn to the human rights violations by SWAPO and their consequences, which encompass both the public conflicts concerning these issues in postcolonial Namibia and the blocks in communication that impede shedding light on the difficult aspects of the liberation struggle. Comparative perspectives highlight the underlying dynamics of sociopolitical power relations. Finally, I briefly review the possibilities and limitations of amnesia as a strategy to deal with a dire past.

## 1. Colonial genocide: controversy, reparation and forgetting

Nowadays, the facts are by and large uncontested. The annihilation strategy followed by the *Schutztruppe* in the anti-colonial wars of resistance by Ovaherero and Nama 1904-1908 resulted not only in gross decimation of Africans, but also in systematically stripping, by land expropriation, deportation and resettlement, the Ovaherero and the Nama of any prerequisites for rebuilding their political, social

and cultural lives. Tens of thousands died of hunger and thirst, while survivors – including women, children and the elderly – were imprisoned in concentration camps, subject to annihilation, partly by neglect, partly by labour. Finally, the Native Ordinances of 1906/1907 installed a “society of privilege” under a regime displaying features of a kind of proto-apartheid (Zimmerer 2001: 94). All aspects of the Namibian War are relevant for the criteria of genocide, as laid down in the UN Convention of 1948 (Wallace 2011: chapter 6).<sup>3</sup>

This historical turning point still shapes the image of history and the identification patterns of people in south and central Namibia. Today, all these groups find themselves in a minority position in relation to Oshiwambo speakers in the northern regions. The wars and the genocide of the early twentieth century are doubtlessly still the central historical event for those who originate from, or relate to the region. The memory repertoire of the central and southern regions is clearly distinct from the focus on the liberation war of the 1970s and 1980s that prevails in northern Namibia. This constellation makes it difficult to construct a coherent and consensual image of national history (see Kössler 2007).

The persistent focus on the Namibian War in the various memory practices of groups rooted in the southern and central regions can be gauged above all from strong statements and assertions that contradict each other, at times with vehemence. For some time, such statements have come from German speakers, Ovaherero, and Nama; more recently, Damara, San and Basters have also joined the debate (see Kössler 2008 & 2012, Förster 2010). The mutually opposed viewpoints may be characterised, on the one hand, by a position of denial advocated by a group of German-speaking amateur historians and by vociferous demands for an official apology and reparation for the mass crime of a century ago (Kössler 2015: chapter 5). As part and parcel of primary anti-colonial resistance, the Namibian War had also been accommodated in SWAPO's image of history, but clearly been relegated to secondary importance against the liberation war.<sup>4</sup> German speakers, on the other hand, were able to voice their views on the past in a more open manner, such as at the annual commemorations of the Battle at the Waterberg, and they could rely on their far superior command of material means and education (see Förster 2008 & 2010: 125–54, Kössler 2015: chapter 1). These brief hints underline once again the fundamentally hegemonic character of memory processes.

In the wake of the centennials of key events in 2004, a crescendo of demands, in particular by leading Ovaherero, that ‘Germany’ relate adequately to the

3 See <<http://www.preventgenocide.org/law/convention/text.htm>>

4 The two most important versions, SWAPO 1981 and Katjavivi 1988, differ somewhat in emphasis.

colonial crimes, conveyed a sharper profile to the public debate.<sup>5</sup> This is also true when it comes to the articulation of internal Namibian points of difference. At the same time, such demands had to confront amnesia, which is mainly found on the other side of the transnational, postcolonial relationship, in Germany.

Events in German South West Africa stand out among the genocides of the twentieth century by the publicity given to them at the time. Various media of mass circulation publicised not only the war against the autochthonous groups, but also their annihilation (Kössler 2015: chapters 2, 3). The conduct of the war spawned heated and acrimonious public debate in connection with the so-called 'Hottentot Elections' of 1907 (see Crothers 1941). This remarkable measure of publicity continued after the end of German colonial rule in 1919 within a colonial revisionist movement. In the German public space, colonial monuments kept alive the memory of the colonies and the colonial wars (see Zeller 2008: 238). In this way, the colonial wars, including the genocide, were present in the German public mind until 1945.

After the cataclysmic break of 1945, a process of silence and memorial repression set in. Even among a critical public, awareness of Germany's colonial past and the crimes committed in the colonies was vague at best. Specifically referring to Namibia, successive German governments have systematically skirted an official apology for the genocide and open dialogue, besides recognising, in rather general terms, a "special responsibility" of Germany towards Namibia (see Kössler 2015: chapter 2). Above all, German governments intransigently avoided what Foreign Minister Joseph Fischer termed, in 2003, an "apology with relevance for compensation" ('Wir sind jetzt am Maximum' 2003).

Shortly after independence, Ovaherero had started to demand an apology and reparations from Germany. After stern rebuffs on the occasion of the visits of Chancellor Kohl in 1995 and President Herzog in 1998, the Herero People Reparations Corporation (HPRC) started to pursue law suits in the US against German firms that had been involved in colonial ventures (see Melber 2008: 266-7). So far, the HPRC failed to find a US court that would take up their case.

The centennial year of 2004 marks a turning point in dealing with the colonial past and the genocide in both countries. Considerable mobilisation in Namibia crystallised in two competing committees (see Melber 2004). On the one hand, Ovaherero claimed something of a monopoly on victim status, particularly in the early stages; on the other, there was a quest for more inclusiveness vis-à-vis other ethnic groups. Such tendency of victim competition overlapped with divergent

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5 On the widespread conflation between 'Germany', the German state and German-speaking Namibians, see Kössler 2012: 302, 2015: chapter 4.

party political preferences and allegiances. Finally, rivalry between the Herero Royal Houses and the followers of the late Paramount Chief Kuaima Riruako was articulated in this bifurcation. Still, a diverse range of public activities eventually coalesced into a memorial calendar with individual public events spread over the entire year of 2004, in this way underlining the great importance of the Namibian War for many Namibians.

In Germany, an impressive series of civil society-initiated memorial activities contrasted the refusal of political officialdom to recognise and acknowledge the genocide (see Zeller 2005). Such refusal was not remedied when, in July, the Bundestag passed a motion that ostensibly addressed the centennial, but skirted any mention of genocide.<sup>6</sup> Rather than advancing reconciliation, this motion caused anger and dismay in many quarters in Namibia. To various victim groups, recognition not only of the factual side of what had happened, but the explicit reference to 'genocide' seemed fundamentally important. Obviously, this would have meant a definite end to amnesia.

It was, therefore, a surprise to many when then Minister of Economic Cooperation and Development, Heidemarie Wiecezorek-Zeul, in her speech at the central commemoration at Ohamakari on 14 August 2004, recognised the colonial genocide and asked for forgiveness. As a personal initiative that had not been approved by Cabinet, and for other reasons, this speech cannot be considered a full apology (see Breitweg 2012). Wiecezorek-Zeul's foray had important consequences, since she had definitively broken the official taboo against designating what had happened in 1904-1908 as genocide. Yet again, the Minister's speech did not contain an official statement by the German government, and the issue of reparation that normally would follow from acknowledging a mass crime was not mentioned. Even more than a decade later, the process of reconciliation, which would need to involve a dialogue primarily determined by the victim side, has not seriously gotten under way. The Special Reconciliation Initiative, which the Minister proclaimed some months later, was a unilateral action and remained very modestly funded. In Namibia, this initiative is widely regarded as inadequate.<sup>7</sup>

Subsequently, the issue gained considerable dynamism in Namibia. In October 2006, the National Assembly passed, with one abstaining vote, a motion tabled by Riruako that called on government to take an active stand in the reparations issue (*The Namibian* [Windhoek], 27 October 2006). This clear shift by the ruling party, which enjoyed a three-fourth parliamentary majority, was replicated

6 See Bundestags-Drucksache 15/3329 of 16 June 2004, Bundestags-Protokoll (Hansard), 17 June 2004.

7 On this and the following, see more extensively Kössler 2008: 328-32, 2015: chapter 11, Katjavivi 2014: 158-62.



within civil society. Starting from the painstaking coordination of the various Nama traditional leaders, an inter-ethnic coalition formed that encompassed, besides Ovaherero and Nama, also Damara, San and Rehoboth Basters. To be sure, sectional differences within all these groups persist, which also implies that only some parts of each group entered the informal coalition. Since early 2007, this grouping has articulated the reparations issue with renewed energy. The campaign has gone well beyond material demands. Increasingly, the restitution of deported human remains moved to the foreground, in particular of human skulls which had been brought to Germany in the early twentieth century as objects of scientific research. In many instances, such human remains had been procured in the context of genocidal war. In 2008, a feature on German public television took up the issue of human skulls still held by museums and their institutions in Germany, generating a certain amount of public awareness. A network of small local groups developed which, since 2004, have renewed efforts to address Germany's 'postcolonial' past.<sup>8</sup>

Both strands of activity coalesced for a brief, but important moment in September 2011, with the arrival in Berlin of a Namibian delegation of some 70 members, tasked to collect 20 skulls held by the Charité, the university hospital of Berlin, and to escort them back to Namibia.<sup>9</sup> The event was marked by three dimensions. To the dismay of the Namibians, the German government refused the expected official reception and, in particular, an official role in the handover ceremony. On the other hand, various civil society groups pursuing, among others, postcolonial and Afro-German concerns related readily to the delegation and worked to publicise their cause. During the actual handover ceremony, the conflict broke into the open when placards and vocal interjections with the demand of 'apology now' and 'reparations' confronted the German junior Foreign Minister. The Minister left immediately after her speech, without even recognising the Namibian dignitaries. Again, once the airplane carrying the delegation and the skulls reached Windhoek International Airport, thousands had assembled early morning and stampeded onto the tarmac to honour the occasion. The importance of the event was underlined by state ceremonies in Parliament Gardens and Heroes Acre in Windhoek. Speakers stressed that this could only be a beginning, pointing to the necessity of an official German apology and reparations.

In early March 2014, a second repatriation of human skulls from Germany to Namibia saw a much smaller delegation travelling from Namibia at very short notice. Victim groups had not been advised of the impending repatriation and were not included in the delegation. This situation created open fission between many

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8 For detail and current updates, see <[www.freiburg-postkolonial.de](http://www.freiburg-postkolonial.de)>, *africavenir*.

9 See more extensively, Kössler 2012: 305-9, 2015: chapter 12.

activists and the government. Controversy revolves around the appropriation of the issue as part and parcel of a national history, as opposed to the claims of people who relate to groups whose ancestors had explicitly been targeted by the genocide.<sup>10</sup>

Today, commemoration of the genocide along with the demand for reparation from Germany is inscribed into national and sectional memories in Namibia. Germany observes small-scale and limited efforts to counter colonial amnesia. For some years, these have focused on identifying and commenting on vestiges of the colonial past such as memorials or street names.

However, the picture needs also to encompass the connections and mutual resonance that exist between sometimes quite vociferous German-speaking amateur historians in Namibia and right-wing circles in Germany. Both converge in denying the 1904-1908 genocide. Rather, it is claimed that this was simply a normal war. Connected with this are noticeable overtones to extend this strategy of denial to the Holocaust (see Kössler 2008: 320-8, 2015: chapter 5).

Meanwhile, it is obvious that Namibia's policies vis-à-vis Germany were enmeshed in mutually contradicting claims by influential and vociferous civil society actors. As such, these policies reflect a distinctly internal political dimension. On account of considerable social mobilisation, it seems more difficult currently than in 2000 to marginalise the issue of the genocide in government policy (see Kössler 2007). Thus, the founding of a national identity construct solely on the liberation struggle and on the identification of the nation with the party that issued from the liberation movement, has run into difficulties (see Du Pisani 2010). It would have seemed that government's taking aboard claims for apology and reparation for the colonial genocide should have eased the inclusion of affected communities, also on account of resentment concerning an apparent bias in favour of the northern regions, which at the same time form the decisive electoral base of SWAPO. More recent evidence shows that matters evolved in more contradictory and intricate ways. The repatriation of skulls in March 2014 and, to a lesser extent, the demolition of the Windhoek Rider monument some two months earlier revealed a concern among activists of southern and central communities that the government is appropriating 'their' history by infusing it into a national narrative. In the context of speaking of a dire past or keeping silence, this recent development can be considered a strong pointer to the importance of modalities in setting up ceremonial and staging important events, and of the mediation of ownership.<sup>11</sup>

10 Current newspaper coverage, talks and email exchange with Namibian activists, March 2014.

11 This has by and large been confirmed in talks with activists and members of affected communities held in Windhoek in March 2014.

In Germany, national identity constructs are also at stake. Take the claim to relate, in an exemplary way, to large-scale state crime, in particular to the painful heritage of the Holocaust. The issues of apology and reparation for the genocide in Namibia fit the overall trajectory of (West) German memory politics much easier than may appear at first glance. We need to remember that the present situation is by no means the result of a straightforward quest for truth, justice or reconciliation. Critical analysis will debunk the rhetoric of the world champion in commemoration. There was an arduous process of strenuous struggle for every single step, from the 'politics of the past' (*Vergangenheitspolitik*) of the 1950s, which very nearly succeeded in not only indemnifying high-ranking Nazi perpetrators, but also preventing any serious engagement with the Holocaust, through the trials against Eichmann in Jerusalem and some of the culprits of the concentration camps in Germany, through the attempts at 'normalising' (West) German identity and memory politics during the 1980s, to various debates of the 1990s (see Frei 1996, Olick 2007). Furthermore, victim groups, which heretofore had been sidelined and disregarded and, in some cases, experienced discrimination along much similar lines that had led to their victimisation under the Nazis, came to the fore and raised their claims against heavy odds at first and subsequently, with some success. Even in mid-2010, a public debate on claims of persons who had been employed in Jewish ghettos in Nazi-occupied Poland and paid into the German pension fund demonstrated that the process of unravelling the many forms of injustice, cruelty, murder and genocide, that are collapsed into the term of Holocaust, is by no means at an end. It seems that a strategy of amnesia comes under duress once a dynamic of commemoration gets under way which, in the case alluded to, encourages people of various groups to come forward. In addition, commemorating a dire past is fraught with barriers and obstacles which, in Germany, have been couched in terms of a 'final stroke' that has been called for repeatedly, figuratively a line drawn under a balance sheet, meaning accounting is finished once and for all (see also Weinke 2011).

Efforts to foster a constructive dealing with the more distant colonial crimes may be considered in the trajectory just outlined. In basic analogy to the process of working through (Adorno 1963) the crimes of the Nazis, also in the case of colonial atrocities, continuously raised demands for a 'final stroke' are contrasted by initiatives of civil society actors who advocate a serious approach to the heritage of state-sponsored crime.

Finally (West) German memory politics, generally since the Second World War, is moving within an international context. Mainly, this politics revolved around crimes that had been committed outside the national borders and whose victims in their majority were not German citizens. Thus, the question of reconciliation is posed in fundamentally different terms than after, for example, a civil war.

Such specifics emerged in negotiations over compensation during the first years of the Federal Republic and in the context of litigation in the USA when dealing with claims of former forced labourers in the late 1990s. The genocide in Namibia involves a postcolonial relationship and a yet much longer time frame. Both circumstances impact on the potentials and possibilities for victim groups and their supporters to mobilise the resources needed to create the required publicity and exert political pressure. The asymmetric relationship rooted in colonialism is reproduced at this level, apart from other circumstances such as gross differences in population size and economic clout.

## 2. Human rights violations: elite pact and amnesia by order

The controversies and struggles around remembrance and amnesia in our second case may be read as showing an inverse structure from the first case. The actors are confined to Namibia; the ruling party and the government have shown themselves largely immovable, and the victim groups have drawn some, mainly moral, support from abroad. The rhetoric of reconciliation acquires even greater weight in this case. Reconciliation is turned into a constitutive factor in constructing a nation; thus, an inclusionary thrust is intertwined with the claim of the victorious liberation movement turned ruling party not only to represent, but also to be identical with the nation (see Du Pisani 2010). This also implies that dissent and divergence are tantamount to treason that warrants exclusion from the nation.

The central issue concerns the way in which the SWAPO leadership in exile dealt with several oppositional groups within the organisation that emerged at various times during the 1970s and the 1980s. Here, an organisational culture emerged that carried strict sanctions for any critical questions (see Leys & Saul 1995). A routine of denying debate and discussion is also apparent in aspects of SWAPO's practice as a ruling party. From the mid-1970s, consecutive waves of new arrivals from Namibia, people who had been involved in mobilisation processes against South African occupation, posed challenges to the SWAPO leadership. Many critiqued the leadership, and quests for effective participation and transparency met a routine of repression (see Leys & Saul 1994, Nathaniel 2002). Again, the equating of SWAPO with the nation helped to collapse intra-organisational opposition and criticism of the leading group and its practice with treason against that nation (see Du Pisani 2010).

Such practice attained a new level and quality in the 'spy drama' that evolved since the beginning of the 1980s and intensified in the middle of that decade (see Groth 1995, Lombard 2001, Hunter 2008, 2010). More than a thousand SWAPO members were blamed for being South African spies; many were tortured and kept

captive in subterranean dungeons near Lubango in southern Angola; many did not survive this inhuman treatment. Existing testimony confirms that the leading group of SWAPO in exile, right up to President Sam Nujoma, were aware of these circumstances. The accusations upon which this harsh treatment was based have not been examined so far. In the mid-1980s, the situation of the prisoners was reported to a limited, but global public by a 'Parents' Committee'; they failed to make greater impact. This was only successful in June 1989, when survivors could flee from Lubango during the UN-controlled independence process in Namibia.

The SWAPO leadership countered the demand to acknowledge the gross human rights violations in a two-pronged way. They ignored the issue, following a strategy of not addressing and of denying open debate, and they offered a 'pardon'. This approach upheld and re-affirmed the accusation of espionage, but at the same time opened a way to be re-integrated into the party; in some cases, this also opened careers in postcolonial Namibia. This position has not changed roughly a quarter century later. The point of reference is the tenet enshrined in the transition pact, which guaranteed wholesale impunity or *blanket amnesty*. This form of official amnesia is presented as the only way to pacify Namibia as a nation torn apart by colonialism and wars. At the same time, the nation is represented by, and indeed identified with SWAPO. This approach to dire aspects of the national past is then presented as a prerequisite for 'reconciliation', otherwise little or ill defined. An active form of 'communicative silence' (Lübbe 1983, König 2008: 522-31) thus tabooed crimes that had been committed on both sides during the liberation war. Independent Namibia's first Prime Minister and, from 2015, its third President, Hage Geingob, linked this to the hope of "economic reconciliation", meaning that living standards and full bellies finally would heal the wounds (Pakleppa 1999). Such a perspective is evocative of critiques of postcolonial 'politics of the belly' in Africa (Bayart 1989). In the face of unabated mass poverty and extreme social inequality (see Jauch & Kaapama 2011: 2-3, CBS/NPC 2008: 33-8), such an approach must appear as illusionary. However, Meier (2010) argues quite similarly, albeit with respect to Germany. In any case, within the framework of Namibia's transition, this idea is in accordance with the elite pact that made it possible to resolve the conflict over independence and end a decade-long liberation war (see Hunter 2010: 437). Nevertheless, diverse minority groups hold fast to vastly divergent historical narratives that reference injustice suffered; such narratives inspired various forms of action, particularly in the cases of the affected communities of the genocide and the ex-detainees.

This second case casts doubts on the viability of a postulate of forgetting. Consider that civil society actors are vehemently contradicting the societal consensus that would be a prerequisite for effective forgetting, at least in the long run. Certainly, such counter-arguments are raised, by and large, from a subaltern

position that is clearly distinct from hegemonic agenda-setting, in this case in favour of not addressing the difficult issues.

Concerning Namibian ex-detainees, a group of directly affected persons kept the topic present for years at least in the eyes of a limited public. In 1995, the English and Oshiwambo versions of a popular report by a German Protestant pastor, who had for many years served residents of SWAPO camps in Zambia and raised his voice about the detainees already in the 1980s, elicited vehement and angry public reaction by leading SWAPO representatives, such as the General Secretary, Moses Garoëb and, in particular, President Sam Nujoma (Groth 1995, Lombard 2001: 178-80). Such anger highlighted the virulence of these not-worked-through memory contents. Within the Namibian churches, who in their overwhelming majority had strongly supported the liberation struggle, new efforts were made to deal openly with the problem; however, these initiatives have so far remained ineffective (see Lombard 2001: 183-4, Isaak 2007: 46-50, Töttemeyer 2010: 122-4). Taking their cue from the English title of Groth's (1995) book, a small NGO was formed by affected persons under the name of *Breaking the wall of silence* (BWS).

The ex-detainee issue was re-opened when, in late 2006, the Congress of Democrats, then the largest opposition party, attempted to table a motion in the National Assembly that was intended to resolve the issue. SWAPO used its three-fourth majority to throw this motion out before it could even be tabled (*New Era* [Windhoek], 26 October 2006, *The Namibian*, 30 October 2006). This happened practically at the same time when the National Assembly carried the motion that practically tasked the government to pursue the demands or reparations in connection with the colonial genocide.

Significantly, leading SWAPO cadres respond to questions touching history and, in particular, the liberation struggle with nervousness, often bordering on hysteria. Such a mode of reaction may well be considered indicative of the virulence that accompanies repressed memory content, above all since it is in clear and pronounced contrast to the party's completely unquestionable and seemingly unassailable power position in independent Namibia. This became particularly apparent when, in 2005, mass graves were discovered in northern Namibia, which quite soon were linked to the dramatic events of 1 April 1989. On this first day of the UN-directed and -supervised transition process in this region, which then was the main war zone, for still unclear reasons, fighters of the People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN) had appeared in violation of the letter of the transition agreement. During the following days, the re-activated South African army killed numerous liberation fighters; a failure of the independence process was barely avoided (see Thornberry 2004: 87-141). More than 15 years

later, the discovery of the bones triggered a short, but vehement debate. Certain quarters attributed responsibility for the debacle to Sam Nujoma who, after 15 years of being the Namibian President, still continued as SWAPO President. Nujoma rebuked these allegations in savage responses (*The Namibian*, 25 and 28 November 2005). A few days later, the matter was officially turned over to the appropriate authorities. Thus, the whole affair was neutralised by bureaucratic procedure, effectively procrastinating any concrete outcome (see *Insight* [Windhoek], November 2006). Vehement public exchanges continued as to who would have to be held responsible for the tragic events that at that time were already one and a half decades past (see Hunter 2010: 438-40). Basic questions of memory politics, which had been pushed onto the back burner by officially ordained amnesia, were opened once again.

Bringing the horrors, which in the 1970s and 1980s had shaped everyday life in the war zone, back into people's minds led some to question the impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators (see Toivo 2005). Moreover, the mass graves did not disclose the identities of persons buried there. Such anonymity prevented the dead from being buried by their families in their native soil (see Scheidt 2005). At the same time, SWAPO's responsibility for all the dead, who had at one stage been 'under its care', was asserted. The organisation was accused not only of having neglected such responsibility both in the case of the ex-detainees and of the victims of 1 April 1989, but also of purposefully concealing crimes committed in this connection (see Dempers 2005, NSHR 1996).

Calls for a Truth and Reconciliation commission were then renewed, on the grounds that traumatisation on both sides in the liberation war prevented the development of a national nexus, as long as these issues were not dealt with in public (see Gaomab 2005, Scheidt 2005). Instantly, the Minister of Justice and SWAPO General Secretary rebutted such demands, stressing the principle of 'reconciliation' (*The Namibian*, 1 December 2005), which was thus equated with the official government policy of silence. Nevertheless, striving for working through the past continued and was reflected in the annual report by Amnesty International, which otherwise was quite favourable for Namibia.<sup>12</sup>

The human remains uncovered in the North were ultimately buried in a new memorial shrine in northern Namibia on the occasion of the annual Heroes Day on 26 August 2007. However, no efforts were made to clarify the identity of the deceased or the circumstances of their death (*The Namibian*, 24 and 28 August 2007). Still, the issue of mass graves going back to unaccounted-for conflict

12 <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/POL10/001/2006/en/59ad70c9-d46f-11dd-8743-d305bea2b2c7/pol100012006en.pdf>, see *The Namibian*, 29 May 2006.

and violence remained a virulent topic during the following years. With active participation of NSHR, several such graves in northern Namibia and southern Angola became known. The Namibian government followed the established line of the SWAPO leadership. Immediately when the new facts became known, the civil society organisation was attacked; clarification was procrastinated.<sup>13</sup> In this case, the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances took up the issue. The Namibian government ignored the date set for an official response (*The Namibian*, 28 August 2009, 22 June 2009), without incurring further consequences.

### 3. Remembrance: a contested and skewed terrain

These experiences underline that forgetting, on a societal level, is predicated on a broad consensus; otherwise, memory contents will again and again be washed to the surface. Even small groups can succeed in taking up suitable occasions to do this. At the same time, we can observe in Namibia and to a lesser extent in Germany, how, in the mid-2000s, two topics of memory politics become intertwined which, at first glance, bear little mutual relationship. On closer examination, both topics exhibit – although differently – configurations of demanding remembrance and conceding guilt and/or responsibility, on the one hand, and of refusal of these demands, along with some form of ‘communicative silence’ towards the crimes in question, on the other. The question would be why the latter policy towards the past, predicated on collective and official amnesia, apparently breaks up at certain points.

In the cases reviewed here, remembrance as well as reparation has been the demand of minorities, organised as civil society actors, but finding themselves by and large in subaltern positions. Still, in independent Namibia, these groups have managed to gain a hearing for their concerns at least at certain points in time. At the same time, in Germany, small, but active civil society groups pursued the issue of the genocide. This has created an incipient international alliance that became important, in particular, for civil society actors in Namibia. On a general level, one might say that for dealing with the issue of genocide, such a constellation follows immediately from the postcolonial situation of basic asymmetry. Regarding SWAPO’s political approach to the past, a clearly looser alliance formed in Namibia on account of contingent factors. In the case of BSW, we see a process of self-organisation of directly affected persons. In various forms – not least through publications where Pastor Groth (1995)’s book stands foremost – they received

13 See *The Namibian*, 12 November 2009, 6 October 2008, 3 October 2008, 25 September 2008, 10 September 2008.



external support. As far as this support came from Germany, it was mainly linked to the long-term, postcolonial links with the former Rhenish Missionary Society. On the other hand, the NSHR, albeit in cooperation with UN organisations, deals with the debates on the mass graves discovered in the mid-2000s only in the mode of *advocacy*.

The pervasive weakness of affected groups, in contradistinction to the resources available to governments, is an overarching common trait. For Namibian groups who hold up the demand for apology and reparation for the genocide, this weakness has seemingly been mitigated by the political turn of the ruling party in 2006. Yet negotiation remained an arduous process. The government's insistence on national unity and sovereignty has been omnipresent. This concern is linked to the image of a heroic and united nation, and to the congruence that is presupposed to exist between SWAPO and the nation. From this perspective, national unity appears endangered by the spectre of tribalism and by highlighting issues that might seriously undermine the legitimacy of the ruling party. The inherent legitimisation strategy, based on the liberation struggle, still transcends the project of national liberation decisively. Criticism of the party now ensconced in state apparatuses is dubbed as unpatriotic. Regardless of unmistakable differences, this corresponds closely to a 'patriotic' image of history, aimed not so much at national inclusion, but at the exclusion of oppositionists and at legitimating the group in power (Ranger 2004).

It is also in this context that the failure to give the ostensible spies a public trial may be understood. Apparently, even in April 1989, the threat of such a trial was employed against those accused of espionage for South Africa as a menace; meanwhile, ex-detainees themselves vehemently demanded such a trial as an opportunity for full rehabilitation (see Pakleppa 1999, Dempers 2005). Such a trial would have run counter to the strategy of silence which repeatedly has been embedded rhetorically into the more encompassing conception of national reconciliation, and motivated by this overarching goal. Such silence pertains explicitly to the transgressions and failings of all those who participated on either side of the independence conflict. In this way, the silence approach bars any path towards rehabilitation and recognition of injustice sustained for the victim groups, and at the same time guarantees impunity to the perpetrators on both sides. The case of 'Dr Death', Wouter Basson, is indicative. Having murdered scores of freedom fighters, many of whom were dropped into the sea from high-flying airplanes, Basson could evade justice in South Africa on account of Namibian blanket amnesty (see Hunter 2010: 427-8).

In this way, 'reconciliation' can be identified as a central moment of hegemonically ordained silence, which rests on consensus in limited ways at best.

Such an approach is clearly contrasted by the *programme* of truth commissions, which, at least from their proclaimed agendas, are tasked to deal with the past in public and follow formalised procedure.

As could be ascertained in a number of conversations,<sup>14</sup> many concerned Namibians see a linkage between the ex-detainees issue and the genocide. The link lies, in particular, in the consequences of death under the circumstances of war and prison camps, which have resulted in many thousands who could not be properly buried, let alone be buried in their home places. Such a situation symbolically links the unaccounted dead still buried near Lubango and the repatriation of human remains deported to Germany during colonial rule. Such concerns, however, are not easily brought into line with government's official quests for national unity and reconciliation predicated on crouching unwelcome subjects for debate in silence.

#### 4. Conclusion

Reflecting on the above discussion, one may consider diverse dimensions of amnesia. In particular, formal and informal forms should be differentiated; obviously we have been dealing with cases of the informal. Also, reach and efficiency of such strategies differ from case to case.

In Germany, it has so far been possible to by and large sustain the not formally declared, but practically officially ordained, communicative silence on colonial crimes with only a few minor breaks. The voices raised against this practice within civil society are fairly weak, not least since a postcolonial presence, as is quite vociferous in countries such as The Netherlands, Belgium, France or Britain, is practically absent in Germany (see Lutz & Gawarecki 2005). Thus, not only the asymmetrical colonial situation is reproduced, but also the constellation of reconciliation politics after the Holocaust with at best a limited presence of victim groups. Such reconciliation as can be spoken of is a transnational process, for which diverse kinds and intensities of interest, attention and commitment may reasonably be expected – comparatively low interest at the German pole, and fairly high and vivid attention and engagement at the Namibian pole.

In Namibia itself, things are more complicated. Observation of political process shows a linkage between a specific version of a national politics of 'reconciliation' and a concomitant strategy of legitimation with vivid memory of the horrors of war, particularly in the northern war zone during the 1970s and 1980s. These experiences are invoked at decisive turning points. SWAPO claims to be the sole

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14 Informal talks held in February/March 2012, March 2014.

guarantor of peace in the sense of an absence of such everyday, manifest military violence. Questioning the ruling party's commanding position appears to be equal to conjuring a danger that the spectres of the past return.

A strategy of amnesia is by no means singular in the case of difficult transition processes, even though such strategies come in different forms and guises. One may, however, ask whether conditions can be mapped under which the pact of communicative silence might break up along with the hegemonic situation that underpins this pact. In Namibia, this has happened to a certain extent in the case of the genocide, when the National Assembly adopted the demand for reparation. While recognised all along in formal terms, the genocide was now accorded much more prominence. In 2006, this turn was favoured by both national and international factors. Inversely, SWAPO still succeeds, by appealing to 'reconciliation' and reference to the danger of a return to 'war', in keeping all aspects of the liberation war that go beyond ritual hero adulation out of any official discourse or debate. This has not hindered a limited, but active critical public and civil society to repeatedly take these issues up. As such, one may say that no consensus concerning amnesia was in fact attained in a strict sense; rather, silence was and continues to be executed as official government policy.

Public amnesia, then, is predicated upon more preconditions than may be gauged from the simple call to let bygones be bygones. What is at stake is at least a consensus that may be negotiated, but that also can be decreed. Such amnesia remains predicated on a political process, which inevitably will reflect and reproduce power relations and, in particular, societal hegemony and a power to define meaning. As has been intimated, however, not addressing a dire past remains a precarious strategy. The strategy of silence will be in need of revision once the national identity construct, built upon this strategy, is seriously called into question.

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