



**Journal
of
Namibian Studies**

History, Politics, Culture

32 / 2022

Otjivanda Presse.Bochum

ISSN 1863-5954 (print)
ISSN 2197-5523 (online)

Journal of Namibian Studies
History Politics Culture

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Colonialism, reconciliation and education – learning from the past for the future.

A keynote*

Henning Melber**

Abstract

Slightly edited keynote presented at the International Conference Towards Humanising the Future. Justice in the Shadow of Colonialism. A Transformative Learning Approach at the Pädagogische Hochschule Freiburg, 29 September 2022.

Learning from the past in order to find an approach for the future still poses a challenge when engaging with colonialism in the present. It is tempting to focus on the bilateral agreement initialled in May 2021 by the German and Namibian governments' special envoys, Ruprecht Polenz and the late Dr Zed Ngavirue, and simply tear the document to pieces. Since this has already been done, however, any repetition would hardly bring any new insights.¹ Thus I have devoted limited attention to this interim result which, revealingly, has still not been ratified by the two foreign ministers after 16 months.

The Joint Declaration has the bloomy sub-title “United in Remembrance of Our Colonial Past, United in Our Will to Reconcile, United in Our Vision of the Future”.² Taken seriously, it could serve as a blueprint for this conference. Unfortunately, it utterly fails to live up to

* Slightly edited keynote presented at the International Conference “Towards Humanising the Future. Justice in the Shadow of Colonialism. A Transformative Learning Approach” at the Pädagogische Hochschule Freiburg, 29 September 2022. The text is dedicated to the memory of Tor Sellström (1946-2022). From 1990 to 1994 he was the Deputy Director of the Namibian Economic Policy Research Unit (NEPRU), established at Independence as a local think tank in Windhoek. Tor was a Swedish internationalist, who lived solidarity through what he practised, contributing “Towards Humanising the Future” for “Justice in the Shadow of Colonialism”.

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¹ See among others Henning Melber, “Germany and reparations: the reconciliation agreement with Namibia”, *The Round Table*, 111 (4), 2022: 475-488.

² Full title: Joint Declaration by the Federal Republic of Germany and the Republic of Namibia, “United in Remembrance of Our Colonial Past, United in Our Will to Reconcile, United in Our Vision of the Future”, accessible at <https://www.parliament.na/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Joint-Declaration-Dokument-Genocide-rt.pdf>.

this promise. Clause 13 states “Germany apologizes and bows before the descendants of the victims.” Clause 14 declares:

The Namibian Government and people accept Germany's apology and believe that it paves the way to a lasting mutual understanding and the consolidation of a special relationship between the two nations [...] This shall close the painful chapter of the past and mark a new dawn in the relationship between our two countries and peoples.

If only it were that easy. The deal between two governments has not in any meaningful way involved the people in the two countries, though the governments negotiated on their behalf. And they endorse a *Schlussstrich* (final line), suggesting that history can be put to rest. This is further evidence that colonial relations are reproduced in the present, not only in the asymmetric power relations of global policy, but also in the domestic policies of both countries. Such a formula is deeply flawed. It is tantamount to the abortion of any meaningful concept of memory and commemoration. A rather disrespectful flippant German saying comes to my mind: *Klappe zu, Affe tot* (verbatim: shut up, monkey dead) – which means you're doing this, end of story.

Negotiations between the successor state of the former colonial perpetrator Germany and the state of independent Namibia can be qualified as a statist model. Political elites holding centralised state power in both societies negotiate over historical wrongdoing – without the involvement of the people. But memory is not something you put in a box, seal and store on a shelf in the basement, maybe attaching the label ‘sanitized memory’. Memory is alive as long as people have not forgotten. As the late Ahmed Kathrada once pointed out: “Memory is fundamental. It is on the memory of the past that the present is built, and it will be on the memory of the present that the future will be built.”³

While colonial amnesia is unfortunately a diagnosis applicable to many Germans, it certainly is not applicable to many Namibians. Certainly not for the descendants of those communities who resisted and suffered most under German colonisation and subsequent settler colonial rule. Just imagine for a moment, Germans had offered Jews a similar formula in a Joint Declaration dubbed Reconciliation Agreement, to put the Holocaust to rest. And what the Jewish and wider international response would have been.

In his essay “The Burden of Memory”⁴, Wole Soyinka insists that the distance in time to a crime, whose consequences are still alive in and impact on the present, is no argument for or against the justification of the legitimate demand for reparations. For the descendants of those who were victims of the genocide at the beginning of the 20th century, this history had irreparable consequences for their current existence in Namibian society.

In his posthumously published notes under the title “I am not your negro”⁵, James Baldwin categorically underlines this perspective by stating: “History is not the past. It is the

³ From Ahmed Kathrada's prison notebook of collected quotes: *A Simple Freedom*, as engraved on the plaque for Ruth First at the Heroes Acre of Westpark cemetery in Johannesburg.

⁴ Wole Soyinka, *The Burden of Memory, the Muse of Forgiveness*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998.

⁵ James Baldwin, *I am not your negro*, London, Vintage, 2017.

present. We carry our history with us. We are our history. If we pretend otherwise, we are literally criminals." We cannot step out of the shadows of the past. But we can acknowledge them and try to bring light into the darkness.

Wole Soyinka refers to a healing trilogy of truth, reparations, and reconciliation. As Soyinka concludes: the scars of memory weigh heavy in the scales and block the ways to healing. On the way through the portal of healing, which the joint procession must pass to achieve moral symmetry, reparations constitute the load-bearing stone. Without reparations the portal would collapse, and with it the two other pillars of truth and reconciliation. The final stone, if only as a symbolic offering, is redress.

In "The Case for Reparations" Ta-Nehisi Coates pointed out: "Reparations could not make up for the murder perpetrated by the Nazis. But they did launch Germany's reckoning with itself, and perhaps provided a road map for how a great civilization might make itself worthy of the name."⁶ The Joint Declaration fails to achieve this.

"*Was wären Sie bereit aufzugeben?*" (What are you willing to give up) was Naita Hishoono's answer to a question as to how national reconciliation between Germany and Namibia could be achieved. He said this during a panel debate on the second day of the international conference "Beyond. Towards a future practice of remembrance", held at Frankfurt University of Applied Sciences in collaboration with the Bildungsstätte Anne Frank on 22/23 September 2022. This is an entirely justified reply. After all, the German-Namibian Joint Declaration agreed that a total of 1.1 billion Euro allocated over a period of 30 years would be sufficient to pay off the historic debts. Germany's Foreign Minister Heiko Maas, when announcing the agreement, qualified this as "a gesture of recognition". To avoid any misunderstanding, clause 20 of the agreement categorically states: "these amounts [...] settle all financial aspects of the issues relating to the past addressed in this Joint Declaration". Clause 17 commits to "finding appropriate ways of memory and remembrance, supporting research and education, cultural and linguistic issues, as well as by encouraging meetings of and exchange between all generations, in particular the youth". Thus 50 million Euro are allocated over 30 years "to the projects on reconciliation, remembrance, research and education" (clause 18). The annual maintenance costs of the Humboldt Forum exceed this amount.

If these figures are taken as an answer to Naita's question ("what are you willing to give up"), they add insult to injury. But Naita could also have countered with another question, namely: what are you willing to accept? This touches on the non-material aspect of reconciliation. How much are you willing to engage with, and take in, what we have to offer and share as our own feelings, emotions, and traumatic memories, having been on the receiving end of mass crimes, genocide and theft, not only of our land but also of our practiced way of life and our culture.

Charlotte Wiedemann wonders what a collective world memory would be like which included all human experiences of suffering and the right to share these in narratives, to contribute

⁶ Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Case for Reparations", *The Atlantic*, June 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>

to a shared inheritance. As she insists, only if we categorically dismiss any scaling into relevant and irrelevant deaths can we approach an inclusive attitude guided by solidarity. In her book *Den Schmerz der Anderen begreifen* ('To comprehend the pain of others'), Wiedemann offers what she calls an anatomy of the economy of empathy. This is a mental and emotional self-positioning within a landscape of history, impregnated by 500 years of colonial and postcolonial asymmetries.⁷

In our global realities of asymmetric power relations, we encounter a reduced empathy (if any) with the victims of colonialism. Knowledge of colonial legacies does not, in most cases, include pain or mourning. A cold knowledge. It refuses to take a perspective on the history shaping one's own present, which would point to the structural embeddedness of so-called Western civilisations in the consequences of this era.⁸

But if understanding is taken seriously, even more so within a framework of seeking reconciliation, it requires a new self-critical, reflective orientation and positioning in the shadow of history. We have to interrogate critically the cultural and mental foundations of our worldviews and our framing of knowledge. Our perceptions of ourselves and others need to be challenged. What we take for granted must be questioned. Only from there we can initiate meaningful efforts to understand. This includes the willingness and ability to accommodate the experiences of "the Other". Not only to take note of it, but to allow it to penetrate one's self-awareness and what one has taken for granted. Reconciliation cannot take place if a process of re-establishing and re-constructing memory as a collective act is impossible because those who commemorate are excluded.⁹

But even if we are willing and able to walk the painful road, we need to accept our limitations. In Violet Bulawayo's novel *We Need New Names*, there is an angry outburst of a Zimbabwean who has stayed at home and her childhood friend who has re-located to the USA, when she exclaims: "you are not the one suffering. You think watching on BBC means you know what is going on? No, you don't, my friend, it's the wound that knows the texture of the pain."¹⁰

A few years ago, the growing body of scholarly work on the colonial dimensions of Germany's history from the *Kaiserreich* to the Nazi regime led the historian Geoff Eley to conclude that "the basic case for placing Nazi empire inside a framework of colonialism, whether in the abstract or for purposes of comparison, seems noncontroversial".¹¹ This

⁷ Charlotte Wiedemann, *Den Schmerz der Anderen begreifen. Holocaust und Weltgedächtnis*, Berlin, Propyläen, 2022: 78f.

⁸ Charlotte Wiedemann, Wiedemann, Charlotte, "Ohne Hierarchien des Gedenkens", *südlink*, 201, September 2022: 14-15.

⁹ See on this Kristin Platt, "Gewalt, Trauma und Erinnerung. Zum Umgang mit Völkermord", in Henning Melber and Kristin Platt, (eds.), *Koloniale Vergangenheit – postkoloniale Zukunft? Die deutsch-namibischen Beziehungen neu denken*, Frankfurt/Main, Brandes & Apsel, 2022: 17-39.

¹⁰ NoViolet Bulawayo, *We Need New Names*, London, Vintage 2014: 285.

¹¹ Geoff Eley, "Empire by Land or Sea? Germany's Imperial Imaginary, 1840-1945", in: Bradley Naranch and Geoff Eley, (eds.), *German Colonialism in A Global Age*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2014: 19-45 (38).

has changed. The inroads made by post-colonial initiatives in civil society and among scholars, often with an affinity to postcolonial theories, demanding adequate recognition of the genocidal mass violence during colonial times has met bitter resistance from cohorts of German gate-keepers protecting white supremacy. These maintain that such demands lack respect for and recognition of the singularity of the Holocaust, even accusing those making such demands of antisemitism because, by implication they downplay the Holocaust (a totally invented product of projection). With the publication of the German translation of Michael Rothberg's *Multidirectional Memory*¹², the debate has escalated. It is centred on the keywords genocide, reparations and retributive justice connected to the devastating lasting impact and consequences of colonial rule for the descendants of the affected indigenous people. As observed in a recent article by Sarah Rausch, this interrelatedness has also promoted in the wider public discourse the "emotional relevance of Germany's colonial past", while at the same time "a legal renegotiation of the colonial past is very unlikely because of ordering effects established by Holocaust memory".¹³

This again points to the hierarchical selectivity of empathy and compassion, which is unjustly divided and does not follow the basic premises that all human beings are equal. As Charlotte Wiedemann maintains, compassion is not just. It does not follow the principle of human equality. But while it might be impossible to feel the pain of the others, it is a realistic and necessary goal to understand and respect it.¹⁴ – And, one might add, to endure it.

Let me turn finally more directly to the role of education and learning, which are both connected to what has been shared earlier. Educational systems understood as forms of transmission of knowledge are elements of social reproduction. Thus they tend to execute functions of colonisation. I was a pupil at the German private school in Windhoek during Apartheid days in the late 1960s. The ruler we had received as a gift from a local branch of an international bank displayed the slogan "knowledge is power". I only realised much later its true meaning, namely that certain knowledge is power, and that the power of definition is the decisive element. We were prepared to absorb knowledge based on the understanding that inequalities be reproduced as given. Colonial racist knowledge, so to say, in one of its most blatant versions. Paulo Freire categorised in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*¹⁵ the official transfer of knowledge as a deposit and "banking knowledge". As part of formal socialisation, it is a process of domestication.

True learning, however, requires the ability to gain insights and change attitudes and values beyond what is fed. While many believe in and proudly declare their commitment to

¹² Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2009. German as: *Multidirektionale Erinnerung. Holocaustgedenken im Zeitalter der Dekolonisierung*, Berlin, Metropol, 2021.

¹³ Sahra Rausch, "'We're equal to the Jews who were destroyed. [...] Compensate us, too'. An affective (un)remembering of Germany's colonial past?", *Memory Studies*, 15 (2), 2022: 418-435 (430).

¹⁴ Wiedemann, *Schmerz*: 11.

¹⁵ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, London, Continuum, 1970.

lifelong learning guided by curiosity, this often is reduced to self-affirmative perspectives. But seeking to confirm one's own convictions is not learning. Learning is listening. Learning is also more than a cognitive act. Learning – particularly in inter-societal contexts – requires an emotional dimension too. It benefits from empathy. Education should translate into creating awareness and sensibility towards others. Ideally, education is not only formal knowledge transmission as a cognitive act, but also a value-based affair with emotional, moral, and ethical dimensions. Otherwise, it risks remaining the cold knowledge referred to earlier on. Facts do of course matter, and the transmission of factual knowledge remains an integral part of learning. To that extent, textbook reforms and adjusted curricula as part of organised learning processes in schools do matter. Access to what is on record remains a precondition to challenge amnesia and denialism. But facts need a human face too. The horror of the Holocaust came to life through visual documentaries and personal accounts, not through the plain figures of mass extermination. Memory and commemoration, just as with redress, need to be based on people and their voices. To that extent, we can make good use of accounts and narratives such as oral records and other forms of literature. We can learn from and through Uazuvara Katjivena's *Mama Penee*¹⁶, Jephtha Nguherimo's *unburied-unMarked*¹⁷, Jasper Utley's *The Lie of the Land*¹⁸, and other examples of "Writing Genocide"¹⁹, such as Mari Serebrov's *Mama Namibia*²⁰ and Lauri Kubuitsile's *The Scattering*²¹. But also from further access to recorded oral history²² and literary efforts from writers' with a different point of departure,

¹⁶ Uazuvara Ewald Kapombo Katjivena, *Mama Penee: Transcending the Genocide*, Windhoek, UNAM Press, 2020.

¹⁷ Jephtha U. Nguherimo, *unburied-unMarked. The untold Namibian Story of the Genocide of 1904-1908*, self-published, 2019.

¹⁸ Jasper D. Utley, *The Lie of the Land*, Windhoek, UNAM Press, 2017. See Sarala Krishnamurthy, "Untold Tales and Occluded Histories. Jasper Utley's The Lie of the Land as an Illustrative Nama Genocide Narrative", *Matatu. Journal for African Culture and Society*, 50 (2), 2018: 396-406.

¹⁹ See Heike Becker, "Writing Genocide. Fiction, Biography and Oral History of the German Colonial Genocide in Namibia, 1904-1908", *Matatu. Journal for African Culture and Society*, 50 (2), 2018: 361-395.

²⁰ Mari Serebrov, *Mama Namibia*, Windhoek, Wordweaver, 2013.

²¹ Lauri Kubuitsile, *The Scattering*, Cape Town, Penguin, 2016. See on Serebrov and Kubuitsile the MA Thesis by Anna Ndishakena Nandenga, "Reconstruction of Atrocities Through Fiction in Namibia: an Evaluation of Mari Serebrov's *Mama Namibia* and Lauri Kubuitsile's *The Scattering*", MA Thesis, University of Namibia, April 2019. See also Festus Abiatar and Sarala Krishnamurthy, "Herero-Nama Genocide as Historical Fiction: A New Historical Analysis of *Mama Namibia*, *The Scattering*, and *The Lie of the Land*", in: Sarala Krishnamurthy, Nelson Mlambo and Helen Vale, (eds.), *Writing Namibia. Coming of Age*, Basel, Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2022: 217-240.

²² Sarala Krishnamurthy and Alexandra Tjiramanga, "Exploring Herero Genocide Survivor Narratives", in: Sarala Krishnamurthy, Nelson Mlambo and Helen Vale, (eds.), *Writing Namibia. Coming of Age*, Basel, Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2022: 255-284.

such as Uwe Timm's *Morenga*²³, André Brink's *The Other Side of Silence*²⁴ and Zirk van den Berg's *Parts Unknown*²⁵. These are all educative too. They feed the insights that justice matters – not only for the descendants of the communities exposed to genocide and other forms of mass violence, but also for the citizens who now live in the societies as successors of the colonial perpetrators – often as beneficiaries - in the shadow of injustices.

I take the liberty to end with an even more personal reflection: decolonisation is more than a mindset and talking. True decolonisation requires structural transformation towards social justice and equality – not as an abstract notion we treasure and pay lip service to, but in real terms of material well-being as a precondition of human security. I will not change social realities merely by talking. I will also always remain a beneficiary of white supremacy. To be in denial is to refuse to accept realities. That I have been invited to share my thoughts with you on this occasion is a deeply moving privilege, but also an obligation, for which I am grateful.

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²³ Uwe Timm, *Morenga*, originally Gütersloh, AutorenEdition, 1978; also Reinbek, Rowohlt, 1981, with several more editions, the latest München, dtv, 2020; in English under the same title initially New York, New Directions, 1978, with several editions following.

²⁴ André Brink, *The Other Side of Silence*, London, Secker & Warburg, 2002.

²⁵ Zirk van den Berg, *Parts Unknown*, Cape Town, Kwela 2018.

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