The return of Herero and Nama bones from Germany: the victims' struggle for recognition and recurring genocide memories in Namibia

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Introduction

In April 1904, General Adrian Dietrich Lothar von Trotha delivered his infamous order to exterminate the Herero and Nama people.¹ The '*Vernichtungsbefehl*', or extermination order, signifies Imperial Germany's military response to the Herero and Nama popular revolts against Germany's confiscation and domination of indigenous land. Close to 100,000 Herero and 20,000 Nama, mainly women and children, had been killed by the time the violence ended. This scenario may assert the event as the first genocide of the twentieth century.² It is also felt that the mass murder of Herero and Nama civilians, with impunity and in defiance of European martial codes, corroded German military morality and set the scene for even more extreme crimes by Hitler in Eastern Europe in the 1940s.³ While the campaign to annihilate the population of the Herero and Nama communities was ongoing, hundreds of human remains – especially skulls – of the victims were collected and packaged for exporting to Europe via the Cape. Although most of the skulls and skeletons were shipped to Germany from their transit in Cape Town, it is generally understood that a number of human remains from German South-West Africa did not travel beyond Cape Town harbour. However, the skulls that arrived in Germany became important realia, raw materials for racial scientific studies. This practice underpins 'what has become to be known as race science of the nineteenth Century'.⁴

A number of recently published scholarly works on the discourse of the Herero–Nama genocide has mainly focused on the politics of the victims’ ‘unsettled memory’ and the legacy of ‘embedded history’ between Namibia and Germany: apology, restitution and redress for the victims.⁵ However, none of the existing literature has explored the tension and divide that the return of the skulls has created between the local customary rites, on the one hand, and the political morality of the Namibian and German governments on the other. In particular, difficulties emanating from the disappointment of the Namibian delegation (which will receive a detailed explanation in this work) that travelled to Berlin to witness the official handover of the skulls, as well as the inappropriate treatment of the bones since their return from Germany to Namibia, not only generate controversy, contestation and reignition of acrimony between the concerned parties. These difficulties also contravene the rights of individuals, families and communities in respect of spiritual, religious, cultural and customary rites as standard and universal obligations to which these communities are entitled. To examine this growing acrimonious relationship and the re-emerging trauma, pain and suffering of the affected people, this work relies on a number of sources – government and institutional reports, position papers of the Herero and Nama traditional leaders on the issue of repatriation and treatment of the returned skulls, newspaper reports and oral interviews – to ascertain issues that this work raises and for which it seeks ways to address them. To lay a platform for this discussion, a brief overview of the genocide and its aftermath becomes necessary.

Indiscriminate killing and decapitation

In August 1904, the Schutztruppe overpowered the Hereros at the battle of Waterberg in north-central Namibia. This event empowered the German troops to undertake the indiscriminate killing of the Herero people as the latter retreated. Elsewhere, in southern Namibia, the Germans also subdued the Nama people, whose population was smaller than that of the Herero people. Subsequent to the genocide, the German colonial government pursued harsh policies that saw the establishment of concentration camps in Liideritz Bay, Okahandja, Swakopmund, Windhoek and more.⁶ These centres were notorious ‘death camps’ where survivors were deliberately sent to die from the harsh environment or poor sanitation in the camps. It was during this period that an undisclosed number of skulls and

skeletons were produced, beheaded from dead bodies, wrapped or boxed and prepared for a journey to pathological institutions in Germany. Humane and ethical norms were violated during this process of decapitation and the preparation of body parts for export. For example, it is claimed that Herero women, some of whom the German soldiers regularly treated like prostitutes, 'were forced to clean the severed heads of their murdered menfolk and scrape off the flesh using pieces of broken glass'.⁷ This narrative informs a scenario where survivors were instructed to take the responsibility for their own people's decapitation. German soldiers then 'began to trade in the skulls of dead Herero and Nama people. They sold them to scientists, museums and universities back in Germany'.⁸

The practice of trading human bones, particularly skulls, in German South-West Africa was so widespread that a number of postcards were made 'showing soldiers packing skulls – as normal colonial life'.⁹ It should, however, be noted that human bones were collected under the tutelage of German anthropological research institutes and museums.¹⁰ Eugen Fischer,¹¹ who later became an anatomist for the Nazis, travelled to German South-West Africa in 1908 to conduct research on the Rehoboth Basters, descendants of indigenous South Africans and Cape Colony Dutch, to prove that Mendelian laws of heredity applied to humans. During this time he also visited Riideritz Bay to conduct racial tests on the human remains of prisoners at the Shark Island concentration camp.¹² His studies of the Herero and Nama human remains led him to claim that Europeans were racially superior to Africans, and Fischer is believed to have taken hundreds of dismembered human heads and skeletons to Germany for further research. For over a century, some of Fischer's collections and other bones from Namibia were secretly held by individual institutions across Germany.

Becoming public

The documentary film by Markus Frenzel, a German television reporter with the MDR broadcaster, proved the existence of human remains of Namibian origin in Germany in 2008.¹³ In Namibia, speculations about the existence of the Herero and Nama genocide skulls in Germany started making headlines in the local media in mid-2000. The Alexander Ecker Collection based at the Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg, with over 200 human skulls of African origin, was also suspected to contain skulls from

the Herero and Nama genocide. The skulls from Namibia, it was alleged, most likely entered the Ecker Collection during Fischer's tenure as curator (1900–37). In 1908, as indicated earlier, Fischer, who was at the time curator of the Ecker Collection deposited in the Freiburg archives, travelled to German South-West Africa to conduct research on the Rehoboth Basters. During that trip, he uncovered several graves near Swakopmund that he believed to be Nama burials and took some of the remains with him to Freiburg.¹⁴ Fischer was also interested in conducting research on the Bushmen, the earliest known inhabitants of modern-day Namibia, but with whom he appears not to have made good contact during his visit. A few years later, in 1913, he wrote to the German colonial government in Namibia to ask for the removal of body parts from male Bushmen for research practices. He referred to the Bushmen who had been executed as criminals. He also suggested that live Bushmen could be sent to Freiburg, where they would surely soon 'die off' due to the climate. It is not known whether he ever received such body parts.¹⁵

To come to terms with the possible existence of the Herero and Nama skulls in the Ecker Collection, the Namibian ambassador to Germany in 2010, Neville Melvin Gertze, met with the rector of the Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg, Hans-Jochen Schiewer, and the head of the university's anthropology department, Ursul Wittwer-Backofen, to discuss the likely existence of remains at the institution. At that time, a repatriation project concerning Australian Aboriginal remains within the collection was already under way. As a result of the meeting, a similar project was designed and research began in October 2010.¹⁶

At the same time as scientific investigations to determine the existence of the Herero and Nama human remains at Freiburg were ongoing, Chief Kuaima Riruako acted swiftly by sensitising the Namibian government to initiate a dialogue with the German government for the return of the skulls to Namibia.¹⁷ The motion for the repatriation of the skulls, which Riruako initiated and tabled in the Namibian parliament, was coupled with demands for material and moral reparation payable to the descendants of the genocide victims. Unfortunately, the demands of the affected groups experienced a setback when the Namibian government decided that the skulls must be returned to Namibia without proper investigations to determine whether they really belonged to the victims of the Herero and Nama genocide victims.

Since the Namibian government did not specifically indicate interest in the issue regarding reparations for the descendants of the victims, the German government concluded that the 'lukewarm response' from the Namibian government on this issue affirms the Namibian and German governments' agreement not to compensate affected groups and communities.¹⁸ For a considerable period of time, the Namibian government kept a low profile on the motion introduced by Chief Riruako in the Namibian parliament. This silence continued until November 2007, when Prime Minister Nahas Angula announced in the National Assembly that the Namibian Cabinet had decided to direct the Foreign Affairs Ministry to formally convey the contents of a parliamentary motion on the issue of the skulls to the German parliament.

Nevertheless, while it was the Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg that pioneered research into identifying the Herero and Nama skulls for repatriation to Namibia, it was the Charité, a Berlin university hospital, that became the first institution in Germany to hand over the skulls to the German government for repatriation to Namibia. In his letter to the Namibian Embassy, dated 21 October 2008, Professor Karl Max Einhaupl, CEO of Charité, expressed the preparedness of the Charité to return the skulls to Namibia.¹⁹ The Federal Republic of Germany was expected to cover the cost of transporting the skulls. The official handover of the skulls was witnessed by a delegation of fifty-four representatives (whose travel and accommodation costs were paid for by the Namibian government) from Namibia, among them senior representatives of Ovaherero, Ovambanderu, Nama victims' associations as well as representatives of the National Museum of Namibia, who travelled to Berlin on 26 September 2011 to receive them. The delegation returned to Namibia on 3 October 2011 with twenty human skulls from the Charité University hospital.²⁰ According to the report of the Embassy of the Republic of Namibia in Berlin, scientific research proved that these skulls belonged to members of the Herero and Nama tribes from the period of Germany's rule over South-West Africa.²¹ However, this report did not explain what 'scientific research' was conducted to determine individual identity, biological relationships or prove the 'provenance' of the skulls. Meanwhile, the University of Freiburg report on the identification process of the skulls returned to Namibia in 2013 did outline a number of approaches, in spite of difficulties and anomalies, which researchers used to establish the skulls' provenance.²²

The handover ceremony, discontent and rage

In a report addressed to the Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Windhoek, the Namibian Embassy to Germany issued the following statement:

Despite the difficulties experienced in terms of reconciling the various differences and wishes amongst the members of the delegation as well as dealing with the uncooperative attitude of the Foreign office to meet the expectation of the delegation, the Embassy is satisfied that the repatriation of the first consignment of Namibian skulls was successfully carried out.²³

Amidst issues of dissatisfaction and inhospitality that the Namibian delegation experienced throughout their stay in Germany, it is ironic to attach 'success' to the process of repatriating the skulls from Germany. A number of harmonising factors,²⁴ listed below, that made the stay of the delegation in Berlin uncomfortable would unpack the preceding paradox. First, there was the failure of the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs to designate a representative of the German government Foreign Office to be part of the welcoming committee at the airport upon the Namibian delegation's arrival. As a result, the Namibian Embassy alone received the delegation upon its arrival in Berlin.²⁵ Second, what the Namibian delegation expected to be a solemn event in Berlin turned into bitterness as the Namibian representatives accused the German government of failure to accord them the necessary protocol. For example, they noted the absence of top officials from the German government during the official handover of the skulls. Third, the German government's disrespect for the Herero and Nama delegation was made explicit when Cornelia Pieper, State Minister in the Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who attended the handover ceremony on behalf of the German Federal government, immediately left the hall and the Charité premises before the leader of the Namibian delegation could deliver his speech. This action caused shock not only among the Namibians, but also among the German audience who attended the occasion.²⁶ Fourth, the position of the German government that genocides committed in the nineteenth century did not violate international law because genocide only became punishable in 1948 when the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crimes of Genocide. Fifth, there was Germany's refusal to sign a memorandum of understanding (MoU) between

the Namibian and German governments on the occasion of repatriation. Representatives of the German Foreign Office informed the Namibian side that the Germans do not see an international agreement in the form of a MoU as appropriate. Instead, the German side proposed that a 'Joint Political Declaration' between the two countries would suffice as a record of the handover. To register their disappointment with the German side, the Namibian delegation to Berlin staged a protest. For instance, following the official handover ceremony, the Namibian Embassy in Berlin was informed that the German Namibia Society, in cooperation with the German Foreign Ministry, would host a cocktail reception for the delegation. Unfortunately, this offer came at a time when the delegation had already expressed their dissatisfaction with the hospitality afforded them by the German government. They felt the Foreign Office's gesture came too late and they therefore declined the invitation.²⁷

In considering the unfavourable treatment and situations presented above, it can be reasonably argued that the visit of the Namibian delegation to Berlin 'did not translate into a period of collective reflection and coming collectively to terms with Germany's violent chapter in Namibia ... Instead, [it reinvigorated] ... the hardening of relations between various communities with, among others, commentary and letters of denial of the genocide in the *Allgemeine Zeitung*, the local German-language newspaper.'²⁸ Nevertheless, the unsympathetic welcome of the Namibian delegation was alarming and seemingly reveals an indifference on the part of the German government towards the grievances of the affected communities. Nonetheless, despite the fact that the expectations of the Namibian delegation were shattered during the entire period of their stay in Berlin, the visit remains significant for a number of reasons. First, it can be seen that the shame and humiliation that the delegation experienced in Berlin initiated a positive drive for the affected communities to undertake concerted efforts and actions to demand compensation and justice for the families of the victims. Second, the humiliation of the Namibian delegation in Berlin demonstrates that the German government is less committed to addressing the suffering and pain of the victims. Ironically, Germany sees the strengthening of 'good bilateral relations' between the two states as repairing the damage caused by the genocide and doing justice to its victims. In fact, Germany fears that, if allowed, reparations may risk the 'good bilateral relations' between the two countries.²⁹

Warning against genocide reparations

The German government has repeatedly warned Namibians that the process of returning the genocide skulls to Namibia should not be used as a catalyst to unmask atrocities committed by Imperial Germany. Should the return of the skulls be used as an impetus to demand compensation, Namibia risks depriving itself of multi-million-dollar bilateral agreements with the German government. This genre of socioeconomic and political threat was stated very conspicuously by, for example, Egon Kochanke, former German ambassador to Namibia who, while speaking at the signing ceremony for the multi-million-dollar cooperation between Germany and Namibia, described the return of the Namibian skulls as a 'sensitive topic', which, if not handled with utmost sensitivity, would have a negative influence on bilateral relations between the two countries.³⁰

In a similar instance in February 2013, Kochanke's successor, Otto Huckmann, remarked that although Germany will not forget its colonial history with Namibia, harping on the subject of reparations could tarnish the flourishing bilateral relations between the two countries. He also called on Namibians to accept the call by the German government for reconciliation in order to move past the sad episode experienced by the Herero and Nama tribes. In response, Hage Geingob, the then prime minister of Namibia, reprimanded Huckmann 'not to silence Namibians about their demands for genocide reparations'.³¹ According to Geingob, 'reconciliation was built on the admission of wrongdoing as a first step to mending atrocities committed. We cannot stop people from talking about reparations. It is their rights to do so. People are paining. They are hurt when they see skulls. Where are the skulls coming from? Let us handle this issue carefully and not tell people not to talk about it.'³²

Corresponding to the issues raised above, a visiting German parliamentarian, Doris Barnett, remarked that 'the genocide reparations issue is closed', adding that Germany will no longer entertain reparation demands by Namibians for colonial atrocities.³³ Barnett's remarks somehow relate to an earlier statement made by Nahas Angula on behalf of the Namibian government on the occasion of receiving the skulls from Germany in 2011. During this ceremony, Angula said that the Namibian nation accepts these mortal remains as a symbolic closure of a tragic chapter.³⁴ Technically, Barnett and Angula's statements complement each other as they both entertain the view that the return of skulls from Germany to Namibia would heal and bring 'closure' to the atrocities that colonial Germany

committed against the Herero and Nama people. However, many people who are descendants of the victims of the genocide oppose these views. This became explicit when some leading figures from the Herero and Nama communities publicly repudiated Barnett's remarks. Kazenambo Kazenambo, a SWAPO Member of Parliament who was himself born and raised in Botswana by survivors of the Herero genocide, called Barnett a 'drunkard politician who was talking after she was chucked out of a Katutura bar'.³⁵ Ida Hoffmann, the chairman of the Nama Genocide Technical Committee, said Barnett's remarks would not deter the Namas from continuing to ask for reparations from Germany.³⁶ Speaking at the 2014 Herero, Mbenderu and Nama Cultural Festival in Botswana, Vekii Rukoro, the Ovaherero Paramount Chief-designate, 'accused Germany of failing to pay reparations to Namibians because they were not of European descent',³⁷ describing the Namibian–German Special Initiative Programme (NGSIP) as 'nonsense'.³⁸

Realising that the struggle for repatriations will be long and aggressive, the chairman of the Ovaherero/Ovambanderu Council for Dialogue on the Genocide of 1904 called for the genocide committees to unite under a single body as the only way to achieve their demands.³⁹ This does not of course mean that every Herero heeds the call for collective unity of the Herero ethnic groups to demand reparation from Germany. Likewise, not all Germans, including individuals in government, agree with their government's refusal to acknowledge or apologise for the genocide of the Herero and Nama people and recognise their demands for compensation. It is in this light that the former German Development Minister, Heidemarie Wieczorek Zeul, while delivering a speech at Okakarara in 2004 during the 100th anniversary of the Herero and Nama massacres, called the mass killing of Herero and Nama people a '*Völkermord*' (genocide): 'We Germans accept our historic and moral responsibility and the guilt incurred by Germans at that time. The atrocities committed at that time would have been termed genocide. Everything I have said was an apology from the German government'.⁴⁰

Wieczorek's assertion makes her the first German government official to issue a seemingly apologetic statement for the genocide. However, at the same time she was also quick to 'rule out financial compensation for the victims' descendants'. Ironically, following Wiecezorek's remarks, the German parliament rejected an opposition motion calling on the German government to acknowledge that the killing of more than 80,000 Herero and over 10,000 Nama people constituted genocide. The German parliament also

dismissed Wieczorek's apology as purely personal remarks and not representative of government policy.⁴¹ In attempts to substantiate its argument, the German government claimed that 'international rules on the protection of combatants and civilians were not in existence at the time of that conflict'.⁴² This is while a civil case has been launched by the victims' descendants. In fact, it is reported that as far back as 2001 a committee for Herero reparations filed a \$4 billion lawsuit (which Wolfgang Massing, former Germany ambassador to Namibia, has urged the Herero people to drop) against the German government and two German firms in the US courts.⁴³ This committee was established with the following goals: to pursue justice and moral recognition for the victims of genocide as a matter of urgency and to demand material compensation and negotiations on measures of restorative justice for the genocide victims.⁴⁴ However, such lawsuits face serious hurdles. One such obstacle regards claims that the Namibian government is uninterested in the issue of reparation. Hence, the return of skulls from Germany is seen by some people as a bilateral tactic between the Namibian and German governments to obscure complex issues such as the victims' demand for reparation and to rewrite the history of the genocide. In light of this situation, it is important to trace the marriage between the Namibian and German governments along numerous economic benefits that Namibia receives from Germany. Put differently, Germany has been the main provider of developmental assistance to Namibia since Independence. For instance, Namibia received \$188 million for the 2011–12 period. However, it is generally felt that 'the money that Germany gives as developmental aid to Namibia has nothing to do with reparations'.⁴⁵

Speaking on behalf of the Ovaherero Traditional Authority (OTA), Bethuel Katjimune said the government-to-government negotiations had turned the genocide reparations into a public fund to benefit any ordinary Namibian who may need help. Katjimune's concept of dissociating development aid from Germany, under the mantle of victimhood, to the benefit of all Namibians is divisive as it promotes ethnic identity around the issue of the developmental aid that Germany gives to Namibia, for example, by emphasising that the 1904–08 conflict only involved the Herero and Nama people against the Germans. This seemingly ethnic prejudice suggests the exclusion of other indigenous communities in Namibia from any financial assistance by claiming that they were not targeted by German colonial forces.

Notwithstanding the issue raised above, some local papers reported that bones of Ovambo, Damara and San ethnic groups were among the consignment of human remains that were returned to Namibia in March 2014. These remains had been taken to Germany alongside those of Herero and Nama people. This was claimed by the National Heritage Council of Namibia Chairperson, Esther Mwoombola-/Goagoses, following the repatriation of thirty-five skulls from Germany in March 2014. According to Goagoses, 'the analysis and documentation we got from the German university (Freiburg) indicated which skulls belonged to whom. There were even skulls from New Zealand and Australia, but those from here were clearly indicated'.⁴⁶ It is therefore possible to argue here that apart from the Herero and Nama people, the Germans also committed atrocities against other ethnic groups in Namibia. Thus, like the Herero and Nama people, other population groups in Namibia also have a legitimate case to hold Germany to account for the suffering and loss of lives of their ancestors. However, it is certain that after the war of extermination the Herero and Nama ethnic groups emerged as the most devastated population groups, not just because of the loss of lives but also due to the economic destruction of these communities as their land, cattle and other sources of livelihood were confiscated by the Germans.

Negotiating the future of the genocide skulls in Namibia

Prior to the return of the skulls in 2011, the Namibian cabinet had already designated the Heroes Acre, situated a few kilometres south of Windhoek, as the fitting burial site for the Herero and Nama genocide skulls. In opposition to this proposal, the representatives of the Herero victims felt that the 'historical material evidence should never be buried'. This call was publicly made when, a few months before the return of the first consignment of the skulls, a committee of ten chiefs of the Herero Council met in Okahandja to decide what should be done with the bones on their return. At the meeting, it was decided that the skulls would 'become part of the property of the Namibian government so that they can be kept in a professional way and keep the memory of this part of Namibian history alive for future generations'.⁴⁷

In a memorandum addressed to the Namibian cabinet, Paramount Chief Kuaima Riruako of the Ovaherero and Chief David Frederick

of the Nama conveyed their 'great concern' that the cabinet had already decided, without conducting proper consultations with the affected communities, that 'once the skulls have arrived in Namibia, they are to be given a heroes' burial at Heroes' Acre'.⁴⁸ In this light, the traditional chiefs' memorandum to the government noted the cabinet's unacceptable unilateral decision to bury the skulls at the Heroes Acre without consent and consultation with the Nama and Ovaherero traditional leaders. The memorandum also contained the following recommendations: instead of burying such vital material evidence where no one will see them, the skulls should be kept in a special chamber within the Independence Memorial Museum for restoration and posterity; statistical data about the skulls should include the victim's identity (in terms of Namas, Ovaherero or whoever else), the number of men, women or children and their age; each skull should be labelled with the victim's name for identification purposes; findings of research conducted on the skulls prior to their return home should be provided; the cabinet should take an in-depth interest in humanitarian issues surrounding the victims and their descendants, not just merely request the return of the skulls without further concern for the issues and queries raised in the memorandum.⁴⁹

While the scope of this study does not permit a detailed discussion of the recommendations contained in the chiefs' memorandum to the cabinet, it is important to explore the controversy surrounding efforts to deny the skulls a burial. The Herero chiefs' struggle to stop the burial of the genocide skulls is inspired by the economic interests of the concerned group. As a result, this approach would create cultural problems in its relation to the customary rites of the affected communities. For instance, the Herero people believe that 'the dead will always remain human beings' even when their living bodies have decayed and disintegrated by natural or human factors. Burying their own dead and ensuring continuity of paying tribute to the graves of ancestors therefore remains a standard ritual obligation and the basis for pursuing the unresolved humanitarian issues of the victims. The majority of the Herero population group would generally be happy to see the skulls of their ancestors buried at Okahandja where most leaders of the 1904–05 uprising against the Germans are buried. Hence, a ritual ceremony called Otjizerandu takes place every year at Okahandja during which Hereros congregate in large numbers to commemorate and pay tribute to their fallen heroes and heroines.

However, since the Herero people are the majority, any decision taken in regard to the victims is likely to influence how the minority,

the Nama people, should deal with their past. For this reason, the association between the Herero and Nama ethnic groups as a result of their shared traumatic past is not without differences. For instance, unlike the Herero traditional leaders who want the Namibian government to engage the German government to pay reparations for the genocide, the Nama traditional leaders, on the other hand, take a pro-government approach on this issue. Consequently, while the Namas recognise the essence of 'fairness' and 'justice' in negotiating the future of the skulls, they also feel strongly that the existing bilateral and multilateral agreements between Namibia and Germany must not be disrupted.⁵⁰

In this vein, it is also important to note that the return of the genocide skulls should not be treated as an issue affecting the Herero and Nama communities alone, but something that touches the whole of Namibian society and humanity at large. If repatriation and dealing with the skulls from Germany were to be conducted in a manner that is more compassionate and humane (by involving the affected families and communities, rather than government and traditional leaders alone), this would serve as a catalyst to encourage other families and communities to think about the repatriation of the remains of other Namibians who died in exile during the liberation struggle and are buried in foreign lands.

Of course, government participation would be required, but it should be limited to financial and other matters while allowing families to independently deal with the sociocultural aspects and sundry issues. Creating an environment that allows family and community members to practise burial rites for the dead would be the ideal way to help them deal with the traumatic past by fulfilling the wishes of both the deceased and those still alive. Most importantly, the customary rite of honouring the dead is considered a universal norm, hence the UK's Human Tissue Act of 2004 calling for human remains to 'be treated with appropriate respect and dignity'.⁵¹ As discussed below, should the proposal to display the genocide skulls in a museum succeed, the principles of the Human Tissue Act of 2004 and the International Council of Museums should be adhered to. These would include displaying human remains 'in a manner consistent with professional standards and taking into account the interests and beliefs of members of the community, ethnic or religious groups from whom the objects originated'.⁵²

Speaking at the ceremony to mark the return of the first consignment of skulls to Namibia, President Hifikepunye Pohamba remarked that 'the remains will be interred in the Independence Memorial Museum

to preserve our history for posterity and to remind future generations about the cruelty of war'.⁵³ This viewpoint represents a retreat from the Namibian cabinet's earlier decision to give the skulls a state burial upon their return from Germany. Notwithstanding the fact that Pohamba's perspective on what to do with the skulls has attracted many critics nationally, proponents of this idea believe that when displayed in a museum, the skulls would: create awareness, especially among young Namibians about German colonial atrocities in Namibia; inform and educate museum visitors that the anti-colonial resistance in Namibia did not start with SWAPO's armed liberation struggle in the 1960s, but was initiated by the Herero- and Nama-speaking people during the war of resistance against the German occupation of their land; create a platform for the victims of the genocide to make valid claims and urge Germany to acknowledge the genocide and take responsibility for the damage created by that event.

Some critics of the proposal to display the human remains in a museum have provocative opinions on this topic. Responding to the idea of displaying the genocide skulls as museum objects, Albertina Nekongo, a former Public History student at the University of Namibia, offered the following sentiments: 'It does not really matter to me if a museum is built to exhibit the genocide skulls ... the skulls are unrelated to me ... Moreover, skulls are just skulls ... but I would not entertain to see human remains of my close relative displayed in a museum'.⁵⁴ This remark suggests that displaying human bones in a museum is as good as slighting their dignity and diminishing their sense of being human remains. Arguably, when human remains are displayed in a museum, those who are not directly connected to the deceased care very little about such exhibits. However, Nekongo here provokes the thought that if the skulls were to be displayed in a museum for the purpose of aiding a political agenda, their historical context may be damaged because as public objects they resonate no history and instead create ambivalence about their humanness. A concern is also raised when it is noted that the Herero and Nama genocide skulls have been quarantined and interned in a room at the National Museum of Namibia since their return from exile:

The room where the skulls are kept is isolated from visitors and staff ... So, I must say that entrance to that room, by anyone, is difficult. The only access to the room that I can remember was at the beginning of this year, 2014, when a Brazilian crew, a lady and two men, visited the room to film the skulls. They came to Namibia to film human remains of the victims of the Herero and Nama genocide for a documentary film. I took them inside the room for filming and to answer some of their questions.⁵⁵

The treatment of human skulls here discloses issues of humanitarian, cultural and ethical concerns. In considering these injustices, and the way the skulls are treated in Namibia, it can be argued that the repatriation of the skulls from Germany seeks to open old wounds rather than heal them. Some Herero and Nama people, for instance, find it unacceptable that the national museum, where the bones are kept, is located in the vicinity of one of the notorious former German concentration camps for the Herero and Nama prisoners. It is therefore possible, one would suspect, that some of the Herero and Nama victims, whose skulls are currently hidden at the old national museum, or their associates whose remains are still missing, were once incarcerated or even died at this site. Therefore, the return of bones to the place associated with bitter memories of physical and emotional abuse of the Herero and Nama people awakens memories of untold atrocities experienced in the German concentration camps. The act of confining human remains to a hostile environment raises further ethical and humanitarian issues:

It is emotionally charging when one comes into contact with the skulls and skeletons in their current environment and situation. When I escorted the Brazilian team to the room where the skulls are kept, I opened some of the boxes that contain the skulls. Mind you that apart from the skulls, four human skeletons are also inside that room ... It's painful that these people continue to be treated this way ... You cannot just walk into that room and come out clean.⁵⁶

Indeed, as a matter of principle, ethical issues are raised when keeping human remains locked up without the affected communities' consent or knowledge about their present conditions. By and large, many Namibians would appreciate the Herero and Nama genocide skulls being treated in the same way as the human remains of some of the Namibian liberation struggle heroes. For instance, in March 2014, human remains of five SWAPO leaders killed in Angola during the liberation struggle were repatriated to Namibia. A month later, human remains of two other SWAPO leaders were also exhumed from Zambia and repatriated. On 25 August 2014, these human remains were laid at the parliament gardens in Windhoek for twenty-four hours where a state memorial service was conducted to bid them farewell. The following day, on 26 August, Namibia's heroes day, they were accorded a 'befitting state burial' at the Heroes' Acre in Windhoek.

This scenario raises a concern as to why the skulls of the victims of the Herero and Nama genocide should not receive equal treatment

and recognition. Thus, the preferential treatment given to the remains of those politically recognised as heroes and heroines of the war for Namibian liberation generates a number of questions: Why did the government treat human remains from Angola and Zambia differently? Why did the state have the urge to bury human remains from Angola and Zambia while those from Germany stay unburied? Who decide which people are heroes or heroines? If one did not die as a hero of the Namibian liberation struggle, should one's dignity not be respected? Most importantly, should the Herero chiefs' interference with the Namibian government's proposal to offer the skulls a state burial be blamed for the current situation of the skulls? While these questions would receive polarised answers, the fact that the genocide skulls remain abandoned since their repatriation to Namibia should not imply that the Herero and Nama communities are insensitive to the plight of the unburied bones or they are inconsiderate of their customary rites regarding how the dead must be treated. Instead, this prevailing situation should be understood as a response to rigid circumstances, such as the Herero chiefs' influence in monopolising this process. However, if they were in control of the situation, the Herero and Nama communities, irrespective of the decisions of individuals with power and influence, would have treated the skulls in accordance with their communities and undertaken customary rites for the dead.

Nevertheless, in spite of the ongoing underlying challenges, the belief that, when buried, the deceased's wandering spirit would be finally put to rest remains at the heart of the majority of affected communities. In the same way, the majority of affected communities would be in distress when the human remains of their ancestors are left unburied, as this is believed to impel the spirit of the dead to wander restlessly. In return, culturally, this invites misfortune for the deceased's family and communities at large. Above all, the importance of returning the skulls to Namibia and issues concerning what to do with them appear at the bottom of the victims' priorities – one of which is the affected communities' demand for restitution as an equitable tool for restorative justice for descendants of both the victims and perpetrators of the genocide.

Conclusion

The beginning of this chapter presented a genealogy of the genocide of the Herero and Nama population groups by the Schutztruppe in

German South-West Africa. An attempt was then made to explore the suffering and trauma experienced by the victims during the massacres and in concentration camps. The most critical issue raised in this work concerns the Namibian 'crisis of memory', relating to the issue of how modern Namibia and, in particular, communities that are most directly affected by the genocide deal with human remains, as well as with the recurring emotional memories and negativity of post-imperial Germany's political morality concerning the demands of the affected communities. In this light, the chapter has explored the treatment of the Herero and Nama remains since their return from Germany by arguing that the failure to treat human remains in accordance with the affected communities' customary rites violates particular provisions embedded in the Namibian constitution. In the context of post-genocide Namibia, the chapter has further addressed the historical and political dynamics at play to illuminate the way in which this struggle disempowers and disables societal ethics to give a dignified resting space for the deceased victims of the genocide; it has challenged proposals to display human remains in a museum. The dead, it is argued, should not be displayed for remembrance, to justify reparation claims or for any other reasons. Generally, plans to display human remains should be done with the consent of affected families and communities, also taking into consideration the wishes of the dead. The return of skulls and skeletons from Germany should be accompanied by acceptance, reparation and apology from the perpetrator. However, the question of whether apology and compensation can remedy past injustices creates other debates. Notwithstanding this concern, the most acute scenario concerns the fact that the victims are wounded, even more so when they are reprimanded by both the Namibian and German governments not to demand reparation and restorative justice for the crimes committed by the Germans in the region. Therefore, the repatriation of human skulls to Namibia and issues around how they should be treated becomes less important for most victims who are more interested in receiving monetary compensation for the physical and emotional damage caused by the killings and displacements. As a result, whatever the politics surrounding these bones, accountability and justice for the genocide should be weighed as the key factors in trying to address the grief and suffering of the victims. Hence it is not the question of treating the bones respectfully, but it is currently the issue of reparation for the affected communities that is of paramount importance. Even if the bones were to be given a dignified burial, it would not be enough to heal the wounds and repair the damage inflicted on the affected communities,

except when the return and burial of the skulls and skeletons happens concurrently with or after Germany's acceptance of the genocide and compensation for the victims.

Notes

- 1 General Adrian Dietrich Lothar von Trotha was the Commander of the Schutztruppe during the 1904–08 Herero–Nama genocide in German South-West Africa. The extermination order occurred when the Herero people rebelled against the annexation of their ancestral land and cattle by imperialist Germany. Part of the Von Trotha commandment reads as follows: 'the Herero nation must now leave the country. If it refuses, I shall compel it to do so with the "long tube" (gun fire). Any Herero found inside the German frontier, with or without a gun or cattle, will be executed. I shall spare neither women nor children.' However, some historians are of the opinion that the killing and suffering of these two ethnic groups does not constitute genocide but was, instead, a 'normal war between two parties'. See J. Sarkin, *Germany's Genocide of the Herero: Kaiser Willem II, His General, His Soldiers* (James Currey: UCT Press, 2011), p. 127.
- 2 See, for example, A. D. Cooper, 'Reparations for the Herero genocide: defining the limits of international litigation', *African Affairs*, 106:422 (2007), 113.
- 3 B. Madley, 'From Africa to Auschwitz: how German South West Africa incubated ideas and methods adopted and developed by the Nazis in Eastern Europe', *European History Quarterly*, 35:3 (2005), 429–64; see also D. Olusoga and C. Erichsen, *The Kaiser's Holocaust: Germany's Forgotten Genocide and the Colonial Roots of Nazism* (London: Faber & Faber, 2010), p. 361.
- 4 John Gorbler, 'The saga of the skulls: restitution enacted – recognition failed', unpublished paper.
- 5 Some of these works include M. Biwa, 'Stories of the patchwork quilt: an oral history project of the Nama-German war in Southern Namibia', in A. du Pisani, R. Kössler and B. Lindeke (eds), *The Long Aftermath of War: Reconciliation and Transition in Namibia* (Freiburg: Arnold Bergsträsser Institut, 2010), pp. 331–70; J.-B. Gewald, 'Herero genocide in the twentieth century: politics and memory', in J. Abbink, M. de Brujin and K. van Walvaren (eds), *Rethinking Resistance: Revolt and Violence in African History* (Leiden, Brill, 2003), pp. 279–304; R. Kössler, 'Entangled history and politics: negotiating the past between Namibia and Germany', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 26:3 (2008), 313–39; P. Katjavivi, 'Namibia's bilateral relations with Germany: a crucial relationship', in A. Bösl, A. du Pisani and D. U. Zaire (eds), *Namibia's Foreign Relations: Historic Contexts, Current Dimensions, and Perspectives for the 21st Century* (Windhoek: Macmillan Education Namibia, 2014), pp. 135–68.

- 6 The Schutztruppe used brutal techniques to eliminate the Herero people. These included deliberate strategies of starvation by driving victims into the harsh Kalahari Desert. It is also claimed that stragglers, those who became weak as a result of exhaustion and a lack of food and water from long walks through the desert, were left to die alone and their remains were never buried. However, a considerable number of Herero people, including women and children, were also captured by German army who abused them. For instance, it is claimed that the German troops used women captives as sex slaves in concentration camps (see Sarkin, *Germany's Genocide of the Herero*, pp. 1–2). Prisoners were forced to live under inhospitable conditions of overcrowding, exposure to extreme cold weather without proper shelter and clothing and a lack of basic food. The Hereros were further subjected to forced labour, constructing railway lines and harbours with long working hours. Some prisoners were sold to companies, both locally and continentally, to supply slave labour to German colonies in Africa such as Tanzania, Cameroon, Rwanda and Burundi. Against this background, it is possible that descendants of Herero and Nama people could be found in these countries in the present day; see also 'Statement by Chief Alfons Kaihepovazandu Maharero, Chairman of the Ovaherero/Ovambanderu Council for the Dialogue on the 1904 genocide on the occasion of the official handing-over ceremony of Namibia skeletal remains in Berlin', 30 September 2011.
- 7 Sarkin, *Germany's Genocide of the Herero*, p. 22.
- 8 See the Gallery Ezakwantu, 'The Herero and Namaqua genocide'. URL: www.ezakwantu.com/Gallery%20Herero%20and%20Namaqua%20Genocide.htm.p.10 (accessed 21 January 2015).
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid. 'Geneticist Eugen Fischer came to German South West Africa on behalf of German universities as soon as the deaths camps opened. Fischer's "race science" theories led to the idea of a "supreme race" which not only severely influenced the Second Reich, but also the Third.'
- 12 See University of Freiburg, 'Report on the identification of skulls from Namibia in the Alexander Ecker collection', November 2011, pp. 16–18.
- 13 Welcoming remarks by Ambassador Neville Gertze during the memorial service on the occasion of the repatriation of human skulls of Namibian origin from the period of German colonial rule to Namibia, St Mathew Church, Berlin, 29 September 2011.
- 14 University of Freiburg, 'Report on the identification of skulls from Namibia', p. 5.
- 15 Ibid., pp. 16–17.
- 16 Ibid., pp. 4–5. The Alexander Ecker Collection was relocated to the University Freiburg archive from the Freiburg archives. The collection was originally assembled by the anatomist and anthropologist Alexander Ecker (1816–87) and is mainly composed of human skeletal remains, primarily skulls, of worldwide origin.
- 17 The late Chief Kuaima Riruako was a Herero Paramount Chief and parliamentarian.

- 18 Embassy of the Republic of Namibia, 'The report of the Embassy of the Republic of Namibia in Berlin, to the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Namibia, following Namibia's Ambassador to Germany meeting with Dr. Manig and Ms. Ludwig of German Foreign Office, regarding the repatriation of human remains to Namibia', 20 September 2011.
- 19 This speech was made by State Minister Pieper at the ceremonial event of handing over skulls of Namibian origin at the Charité, 30 September 2011.
- 20 N. Gertze, 'Report on the return of twenty human skulls from Germany to Namibia', Embassy of the Republic of Namibia, Berlin, 6 October 2011.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 University of Freiburg, 'Report on the identification of skulls from Namibia', pp. 4–74.
- 23 Gertze, 'Report on the return of twenty human skulls'.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 N. Eltringham and P. Maclean (eds), *Remembering Genocide* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), pp. 168–9.
- 30 Namrights, 'German aid should target genocide victims', press release, 23 November 2011. URL: www.nshr.org.na/index.php?module=News&func=display&sid=1716 (accessed 21 October 2015).
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- 32 Ibid.
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- 34 See *Kenya London News*. URL: www.kenyalondonnews.co.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=9522:namibian-skulls-ignite-anger&catid=49:world-top&Itemid=46 (accessed 17 November 2015).
- 35 *Namibian Sun*, 'KK fumes at German MP over genocide', 24 July 2014, p. 1.
- 36 Ibid.
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- 52 International Council of Museums, *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums* (Paris: International Council of Museums, 2006), p. 9; see J. Marstine (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Museum Ethics: Redefining Ethics for the Twenty-First-Century Museum* (Abingdon: Routledge), p. 264.
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