

# Fragmented Memories - The Struggle for

## Reconciliation

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FRAGMENTED MEMORIES, COLLECTIVE MEMORY, RECONCILIATION, NAMIBIA, GENOCIDE, COLONISATION



The Ovaherero and Nama mass grave in Swakopmund, which is being maintained by Laidlaw Peringanda.  
Photo by Meret Knichel.

Meret Knichel  
University College Freiburg, Germany  
[mknichel@gmx.de](mailto:mknichel@gmx.de)

In order to achieve a meaningful and lasting reconciliation related to the German genocide in Namibia, representatives of the affected groups, the Ovaherero and the Nama, must be included in the negotiation process. In the struggles around collective memory in Namibia, these affected groups do not feel represented by the South West Africa People's Organisation (Swapo), the governing party since Namibia gained independence in 1990. For 35 years the Swapo party has tried to establish a unifying narrative to unite all Namibians. This narrative focuses on the events surrounding the country's liberation from apartheid, but it omits the memory of genocide. The Swapo government's dominance is evident inter alia in the limited number of monuments commemorating the genocide. Hence, the collective memory in Namibia is fragmented. This influences not only the country and its people but also the outcome of political negotiations, such as the joint declaration between Germany and Namibia.

## Abstract

Although reconciliation efforts between Namibia and Germany have been ongoing since 2015, the agreement published in 2021 has yet to be signed. Even if both governments were to sign this joint declaration, however, it would not lead to meaningful and lasting reconciliation. A critical reason for this is that the affected groups, the Ovaherero and the Nama, were not involved in the negotiations, nor do they feel represented by their own government. In order to better understand the dynamics and perspectives of the affected groups, I travelled to Namibia to conduct interviews with descendants of the victims of the genocide. After analysing these interviews it can be stated that Namibia's memories are fragmented; experiences of colonialism and attitudes towards the past vary between groups, and consequently the country has no shared, unifying past.

According to Hodgkin and Radstone (2003), contested memories does not refer to disputes about what happened in the past, but rather to disputes about who is entitled to speak about it, how they should speak about it, and in which situations. For 35 years the Swapo government has tried to establish a unifying narrative to unite all Namibians. However, this has not been successful because the narrative focuses solely on liberation from the apartheid system, thereby silencing the counternarratives of the Ovaherero and Nama minorities. This is also visible in the physical memory landscape in Namibia: while there are several monuments commemorating Samuel Nujoma, the first Namibian President, the state has so far only funded one monument commemorating the genocide. Including the narratives of the Ovaherero and the Nama could destabilise the narrative itself, since it would reveal internal power asymmetries and strengthen minority demands for reparations and land justice, thereby complicating Namibia's diplomatic relations with Germany (Melber, 2025; Kössler, 2007).

This fragmentation of memories influences the country and its people, but also affects the outcomes of political negotiations such as the joint declaration between Namibia and Germany. In practice the fragmentation undermines national unity, reinforces asymmetric power structures between the Namibian government and the affected communities, and leads to different interpretations of justice and different expectations for the joint declaration. The colonial continuities embedded in the negotiations for the joint declaration hinder genuine reconciliation by reproducing the unequal power relations that characterised colonial rule. Ultimately, the joint declaration as it exists today creates a form of negative peace that preserves

ongoing inequities, and perpetuates conflict both within Namibia and in its relationship with Germany.

## Introduction

Since the first democratic elections in Namibia in 1990 the governing South West Africa People's Organisation (Swapo) party has tried to unify all Namibians under one narrative. Considering the state of the country today, it seems clear that the party has not been successful in this endeavour. There is no unifying national narrative of independence that all Namibians support and which reinforces national identity. Instead of a shared collective memory, memories in Namibia are fragmented. Rather than working towards the creation of a shared memory that encompasses the experiences of all the country's different groups, Namibia's memories are scattered across multiple competing narratives, each of which narratives is supported by particular social or ethnic groups and has memory practices that reflect the divisions within society (Moll, 2013). These fragmented memories structure not only how the past is narrated, but also how justice is negotiated in the present (Reitz & Mannitz, 2021).

## Shared Unifying Past

The Berlin Conference in 1884<sup>1</sup> had multiple consequences in Namibia. The first was that the so-called 'scramble for Africa' resulted in disparate ethnic groups being forced to unite as one nation. Second, when the German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck declared Southwest Africa to be a German protectorate, German settlers began to expropriate land from local communities in order to set up farms (Sarkin & Fowler, 2008). The Ovaherero and Nama peoples, who had previously lived in these parts of the land, were forcibly displaced (Boyd et al., 2024).

German soldiers retaliated against uprisings by the Ovaherero and Nama people, resulting in mass killings which are now finally being acknowledged as genocide. Between 1904 and 1908, pursuant to explicit extermination orders, approximately 60,000 Ovaherero and 10,000 Nama people were brutally murdered (Sarkin & Fowler, 2008). Armed resistance by the Ovaherero and

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<sup>1</sup> In 1884 the German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck summoned all major Western powers to 'establish rules for the claiming of territory on the African continent by the colonial powers' (Auswärtiges Amt, n.d.). This was the start of a process that is referred to today as 'the scramble for Africa'.

the Nama ended in 1907, largely because the drastically reduced population no longer had the weaponry or the strength to continue the resistance (South Africa History Online, 2015).

After the end of the First World War and the defeat of Germany, South Africa was given a mandate by the League of Nations and imposed apartheid in Namibia, treating the country as its fifth province (Boyd et al., 2024). Namibia only achieved independence in 1990, with the first democratic elections taking place in 1989 in order to form the country's Constituent Assembly the following year. Since then the Swapo party, which is mostly led and supported by Ovambo people (Kamwanyah, 2024), has been predominant. The people who were the most affected by the German colonisation were the Ovaherero and the Nama (although they were not the only ones), while those who were mostly involved in the fight for freedom from apartheid were the Ovambo (although, again, they were not alone in this struggle). Therefore these groups have different wounds, different traumas and different priorities in terms of commemoration.



The „Reiterdenkmal“, depicting a German soldier with a rifle on a horse, it previously stood on the grounds of the former concentration camp in Windhoek; now it is hidden in the „Alte Feste“, a former fortress of the German colonizers.  
Photo by Meret Knichel



A memorial for the former Nama Gaob Cornelius Fredericks, who died in the genocide. The memorial is on Shark Island on which a concentration camp used to be during the German colonization.  
Photo by Meret Knichel

## Contested Memories

Memories in Namibia are contested – the memories of the Swapo-led government are more dominant, while the memories of the Ovaherero and Nama peoples are being silenced. Following Hodgkin and Radstone (2003), however, the fact that memories are contested does not mean that there is a dispute over what happened in the past. The Swapo party recognises that the genocide happened but there is a contestation about who is entitled to speak about it, how to speak about it, and in what situations.

As the Ovaherero and the Nama have oral cultures, orality plays an important role in the preservation of their cultures and memories (Krishnamurthy, 2024), with memories of the genocide being passed on to the next generation through oral stories. Jephta Nguherimo, an Ovaherero reparation activist and scholar, has stated:

*I asked my grandmother, who was in her eighties at the time. I was like, can you tell me more about what happened to your family during the genocide? [...]. So, she told me the story, and continued to tell me that story.*

Deodat Dirkse, the General Secretary of the Nama Traditional Leaders Association (NTLA), explained that when he was a child Nama people were reluctant to talk about the genocide. It was common for Nama people to tell the stories of the genocide as if they had happened to someone else, thereby creating distance from what had happened. Because the Ovaherero and the Nama have still not been able to come to terms with the genocide, the trauma they experienced over 120 years ago is being passed on through the generations (Hesse & Main, 2000).

For both the Ovaherero and the Nama people, ancestral land is of crucial importance in the commemoration of the genocide. Land is not only important for economic reasons; as Jephta Nguherimo explains, for the Ovaherero land itself is the most important memory and source of identity. The Ovaherero commemorate the atrocities of the genocide through the land on which these atrocities took place. The Nama people also have a deep emotional connection to their ancestral land; Deodat Dirkse explains that it is common practice at funerals to place a handful of soil from the ancestral land in the tomb of the deceased.

The Ovaherero and Nama have established a variety of local commemoration practices. Nama groups and clans hold annual local festivities to commemorate the death days of their respective Gaob, their leaders, during the genocide. In addition, the Nama Cultural Festival was founded a few years ago. Pveclidias Gertzon Witbooi, a descendant of the Nama Gaob Hendrik Witbooi and a reparation activist, explained that Nama people join this festival to commemorate and mourn the victims of the genocide, but also to take part in and listen to panel discussions and talks on the consequences of the genocide. Similar to the Nama people, the Ovaherero also commemorate their dead chiefs in local festivities. Hoze Riruako, a Paramount Chief of the Ovaherero, gave me an insight into what these festivities can look like:

*The event will start Friday. They start with slaughtering of a lamb, where they perform some cultural, you know, activities. [...] We talk to our ancestors. So, they will do that to connect the spirits, to say that, okay, we are here now. We will have an event over the weekend. Please know that we are here. We are not trembling over your graves. We are paying homage to you. [...] And then Friday we will have the walk. It starts from, if I'm not mistaken, from the cemetery from where the people were buried. And then we walk throughout town and then go to the main hall where the speeches will be delivered.*

A few years ago Laidlaw Peringanda, an Ovaherero artist, activist and founder of the Swakopmund Genocide Museum, started another commemoration practice: he and some volunteers cleaned up the mass grave in Swakopmund, and have continued to maintain it.

Even though land plays such an important role for the Ovaherero and the Nama, the Swapo government has funded only one monument that commemorates the genocide, namely the Genocide Memorial in Windhoek. Simultaneously, the government has been reluctant to take down monuments celebrating German soldiers. For Becker (2018) the Genocide Memorial in Windhoek follows the nationalist narration since it draws a direct line from the early resistance against colonial conquest to the Swapo-led nationalist struggle. Descendants of the victims of the genocide remain unconvinced about the monument, and after its inauguration Esther Muinjangué – the former president of the Ovaherero Genocide Foundation and a Namibian opposition politician – stated that ‘it means nothing’ (quoted in Niezen, 2018, p. 556). Other statues that commemorate the genocide – two humble monuments on Shark Island and one monument



power relations (Zuern, 2012, p. 495); in contrast to the few humble monuments commemorating the genocide, there are several statues – some of them very ostentatious – celebrating Samuel Nujoma, the first president of Namibia and a key figure during the fight for freedom from the apartheid state. The Ovaherero and Nama memories are excluded from this national narrative because including it could destabilise the narrative itself, potentially revealing internal power asymmetries and strengthening minority demands for reparations and land justice, thereby complicating Namibia’s diplomatic relations with Germany (Melber, 2025; Kössler, 2007).



The pedestal of the Genocide Memorial in Windhoek.  
Photo by Meret Knichel



The Genocide Memorial in Windhoek.  
Photo by Meret Knichel

In conclusion, while the governing Swapo party is supposed to represent all Namibians, in fact it focuses on the hegemonic narrative created by the liberation movement. The Ovaherero and Nama people I interviewed reported that both ethnic groups accuse the Swapo party of neglecting and concealing any kind of history that occurred before the apartheid regime. Hoze Riruako said:

*People are frustrated. They are also frustrated with the Namibian government of today. Because they are also of the opinion that if this was an issue that affected the majority of Ovambos, this issue would have been handled differently.*

## Consequences of the Fragmented Memories on the Joint Declaration

The creation of a single, dominant narrative by the Swapo party has overshadowed other narratives, resulting in fragmented memories. This has consequences, inter alia, on the negotiations related to and the content of the joint declaration between Namibia and Germany.

First, Namibia's fragmented memories undermine any sense of national unity, leading the affected communities to feel that the Namibian government lacks the legitimacy to represent them in negotiation. Additionally, it complicates the legitimacy and inclusiveness of the joint declaration, thereby challenging its potential to achieve genuine reconciliation. The Ovaherero and Nama people believe that only they can negotiate a sincere and sustainable reconciliation, since only the affected communities know what is needed for this to be achieved.

Second, the fragmented memories are intricately interwoven with already existing asymmetric power structures, thereby serving to reinforce these structures within the negotiation process (Luipert et al., 2023). This means that the dominant narrative of the Swapo government shapes both the agenda and the material outcome of the joint declaration.

Third, the fragmented memories lead to different interpretations and expectations of the joint declaration. The main goal of the Swapo government in the negotiations was 'to secure an acknowledgment and an acceptance [...] that the German Imperial troops [...] committed [a] genocide', and to 'seek a genuine and sincere apology and reparation to the affected [...] communities' (Republic of Namibia, 2023). Overall, the Swapo government negotiated in the joint declaration for a state-centred, diplomatic and development-oriented justice. In doing so, however, the position of the Swapo government remains ambivalent. On the one hand the government has negotiated and paraphrased the joint declaration as it exists today, and therefore it agrees with the matters the declaration emphasises and addresses, and with the manner in which the joint declaration has been negotiated (Republic of Namibia, 2023). On the other hand, it should be noted that at the time of writing (at the end of 2025) the Namibian government has still not signed the joint declaration. Following the publication of the joint declaration, then-Vice President Nangolo Mbumba stated that although he had accepted the agreement, he was not proud of the amount of the grant that had been negotiated (Petersen, 2021; Luipert et al., 2023). This is also evident in the claims of Festus Ueriuka Tjikua, an

Ovaherero and part of the negotiation team, who told me that the amount was ‘less compared to what we had calculated’. Furthermore, even though the joint declaration, which was published in 2021, was supposed to be the final version of the agreement, there were additional talks in October and December 2023 to revise parts of the agreement (Melber, 2024).



A duplicate of the „Reiterdenkmal“ that is still standing today in Swakopmund in a restaurant.  
Photo by Meret Knichel



The still standing „Marinedenkmal“ in Swakopmund that commemorates the German soldiers. The rifle of the soldier is directed to a mass grave of victims of the genocide.  
Photo by Meret Knichel

The standpoint of the affected communities can be summarized as a full rejection of the joint declaration. From their perspective the agreement and the negotiation process violate several areas of international law, such as the ‘[i]ndigenous people’s right to adequate participation, and the collective human rights to free, prior and informed consent and to freely choose a group’s representative’ (Articles 1 and 25 ICCPR and Article 5 ICERD) (Imani et al., 2021 p. 3), and are a continuation of colonial injustice (Melber, 2024; Luipert et al., 2023). There are two reasons for this, the first of which is because the German and Namibian governments prioritize financial aid. In 2021 the German then-Foreign Minister Heiko Maas even stressed that ‘the agreement was purely voluntary with no legal obligations and was not a matter of reparations’ (Melber, 2024, p. 783; Deutscher Bundestag, 2021). The second is because the negotiations only took place between the two governments and did not include the affected groups. The Ovaherero and Nama have stated that representatives of affected groups who participate in the negotiation process

should be chosen by the affected communities, rather than by the German or Namibian states (Melber, 2024). The affected groups demand a restorative or reparative justice that encompasses the legal admission of guilt on the part of Germany, direct compensation through authentic co-ownership (Luipert et al., 2023), and the absence of state mediation in this process.

## Conclusion

The colonial continuities embedded in the Germany–Namibia joint declaration negotiations hinder genuine reconciliation by reproducing the unequal power relations that characterised colonial rule. The decision to negotiate state-to-state, rather than with the Ovaherero and Nama who were the primary affected groups of the genocide, mirrors historical patterns of exclusion and reinforces internal hierarchies within Namibia, where Swapo’s liberation narrative dominates over minority memories. These continuities also normalise structural injustices such as land dispossession and economic marginalisation. Consequently, the joint declaration only deepens the mistrust between the affected groups and the Namibian state as well as between these groups and Germany, which many accuse of evading full legal and moral responsibility. Instead of fostering social cohesion, the process has exacerbated internal fractures, sustained asymmetrical power dynamics, and transformed reconciliation into a new site of contestation.

Ultimately, the current attempts at reappraisal without meaningful participation of the affected groups, acknowledgement and justice will lead to a form of negative peace (Galtung & Fischer, 2013). The current version of the joint declaration does not create a fair, just, strong or harmonious system. Rather, it preserves ongoing inequities and perpetuates conflict both within Namibia and in its relationship with Germany.

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Edited by Viviana García Pinzón & Miriam Bartelmann

Arnold-Bergstraesser-Institut (ABI), Windausstr. 16, 79110 Freiburg, Germany

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