

To present the verdict before the justification for it: this volume deserves to be a reference book for everyone interested in the history of the country, which, as one of Africa's last colonies, finally achieved its independence in 1990 after a long and bitter struggle against South African occupation and white minority settler colonial rule. The serious academic standards maintained by the work are evident not only by the 75 pages or so of notes and 35 pages of bibliographic details (amounting to more than a quarter of the book), but even more convincingly so by the substance of the text these references back up.

A little more than 300 pages of the book is devoted to an account of the country's history from the earliest traceable beginning, based on archaeological evidence (presented by Namibia's most renowned archeologist, John Kinahan). It ends with a short (less than ten pages) forward-looking conclusion that takes stock of the twenty years since independence, carefully seeking to tread the thin line between deserved recognition of achievements and critical observations on factual or potential failures under the South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO), the former liberation movement now exercising political power. It ends on a cautiously optimistic note, which might reflect more hope than certainty that the future is better than the past and that liberation from foreign rule has improved the living conditions for most, if not all, Namibians, outweighing the disappointments over the limits to such liberation, pursued as it is within a neoliberal socio-economic policy strategy geared towards the class interest of a new elite, which has established a *modus vivendi* with those interests who exercised control over the economy earlier.

The archaeological summary presented in the first chapter is a welcome addition to the standard history books, which often tend to skip this long period of human activity in the country due to lack of competence and knowledge. It is hence a definite enrichment that Marion Wallace provided an opportunity to John Kinahan to summarise the current state of the art, thereby sharing considerable parts of his own decades-long research results. Unfortunately, and maybe unavoidably so, at times this tends to be burdened with some subject-related specific jargon and terminology, which makes it difficult for the uninitiated to follow and understand. But it becomes obvious that the country and its diverse peoples had a history of their own with different modes of production and strategies for survival vis-à-vis the surrounding nature, landscape and climate for thousands of years before the white man came.

It is an interesting detail to learn that the rock art at Twyfelfontein with over 2,000 engravings, listed since 2007 as a World Heritage, is considered as 'an outstanding example of a late Holocene hunter-gatherer rock art site'. With 150,000 visitors per year, it 'is the most heavily visited rock art site in Africa'

Namibian History Writ Large

Henning Melber

A History of Namibia: From the Beginning to 1990

by Marion Wallace with John Kinahan

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(p. 42), even though it is not easily accessible. Kinahan also adds that, in contrast to similar national heritage sites in neighbouring Botswana, South Africa and Zimbabwe ('where site visits by school pupils account for a significant proportion of visitors' numbers'), only a few local citizens are among the visitors; as I know from earlier experience, these local visitors happen to be mainly people from the remaining white population and their guests. Kinahan concludes that this might 'illustrate the fragility of traditional practices and the relative ease with which their historical continuity can be broken' (*ibid.*).

What I found a bit disturbing and disappointing is the lack of reference to the road engineer and almost obsessive amateur historian Klaus Dierks, who became deputy minister at independence. After a long professional career, during which he contributed to the further development of the transport infrastructure of the country, he served for fifteen years in the Namibian government before his untimely death. Marian Wallace mentions in her introduction his meticulously compiled chronology of Namibia (published in 2002 and constantly updated; it is still accessible on a web page he created, with a wealth of data and details, if only at times with too biased a focus on his own merits and role). She rightly observes that it is of little use for a historical analysis, as it is – *nomen est omen* – just a rather plain catalogue of places, names and events (p. 4). But when John Kinahan refers to the important site of IIKauxa!nas, 'the ruins of the encampment established by the Oorlam on a remote bend in the Bak River in south-eastern Namibia' (p. 38), which he describes in much detail (over two pages) as one of the most important discoveries for the 19th century history of Southern Namibia, he does not even mention Klaus Dierks but only refers to his own (later) writings. It was, however, the passionate road engineer Dierks, who, while working in the area in the 1980s, discovered the ruins and realised their tremendous historical value. He then made the sensational remnants known by publishing several articles, in which he described the site and alerted readers to its significance. His writings might have been those of a self-proclaimed amateur historian, possibly lacking the competence of a trained archaeologist. But it is definitely one of the few clear (if not sad)

omissions of the work under review that these pioneering writings on IIKauxa!nas are not even mentioned in the otherwise comprehensive bibliography.

The nine chapters that follow are all the result of work over a number of years by Marion Wallace, the African curator at the British Library. She wrote her PhD thesis on 'Health, Power and Politics in Windhoek, Namibia, 1915-1945'. Through it and several more articles in books and journals, she

had exerted considerable effort to reduce the knowledge gap that still exists in Namibian history, not least for the period of South African occupation of the territory between the two world wars. This seems to be among the more neglected time-spans among scholars. As for other blind spots in the present panorama unfolding in historical research since

colonisation, Wallace is especially eager to reduce the gaps, identify the needs for further research and explorations, and add inspiring perspectives – such as the hitherto often noticeable lack of gender-based analysis, as well as the need to overcome the Eurocentric approaches to Namibian history.

Among the many merits of the work is a summary, hitherto not existing in this form, of social processes prior to the direct occupation by German colonial agents of the southern and central parts of Namibia (chapter 2) and the North (chapter 3). The summary offers a wealth of information on matters that have thus far remained outside the core of the hegemonic Namibian historiography. The chapters nonetheless reflect, and necessarily so, the limits of accumulated knowledge in the way the subjects are treated. Far more than one-third of the pages deal with the relatively short era of German colonial rule (1884 to 1915), which at the same time underlines the relative importance of this period for the social structures established (or rather imposed). Wallace rightly devotes a whole chapter to 'The Namibian War', which describes the resistance of the communities living in the southern, central and eastern parts of the territory to the invasions by settlers and their colonial administration and the racially based injustice that prevailed between 1904 and 1908, culminating in what can be termed as the first genocide of the 20th century with the officially proclaimed extermination strategy of General von Trotha.

As a scholar who has personally been occasionally actively involved in this debate for more than 30 years, I have read this chapter with keen interest, especially since it is one of the most heated debates still raging on more than a century later, with implications for current policy. Wallace takes a clear and uncompromising stand and, despite seeking to give a somewhat fair presentation of the dissenting views, is uncompromising in her own concluding judgment:

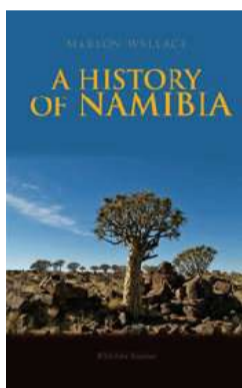
The atrocities in Namibia can be understood as standing at the extreme end of a continuum of violence and repression in which all the colonial powers participated. Nevertheless, it is important to name what happened in 1904-8 as genocide, not least because those who deny this continue to foster a debate that is really 'a constant exercise in denial of historical evidence' [quoting from an article by Werner Hillebrecht, head of the Namibian National Archives]. Because of the tenacity with which they make their arguments, it needs to be restated that the way in which they minimise African suffering is contrary to the weight of historical evidence and the conclusion of most recent research (p. 181).

I could not concur more.

To this day, the shadow of the genocidal past has paralysed reconciliation between some members of the local offspring of the German settler community, the German government (eager to avoid any sort of admission of guilt that might enhance the chances for compensation claims in courts), and subsequent generations of those communities most affected by the extermination of many of their ancestors. It has also complicated issues between the Namibian Government, these local groups with their claims for compensation, and the German bilateral partner (providing the biggest single financial contribution in development cooperation in recognition of what is euphemistically termed 'a special historical responsibility'). But, as Wallace warns, 'the genocide debate can also be a hindrance to inquiry, and above all, to situating the Namibian War as an event in *Namibian*, rather than German, history' (*ibid.*; emphasis in original).

She notes that, as a result of the contested notion of genocidal practices, there has been an emphasis in most scholarly work so far on the policy of the perpetrators:

Yet the war cannot be properly understood without more analysis of the internal dynamics of the African polities, their motivations in going to war and seeking peace, and the relations of the different polities and leaders to each other. The historiography on these points remains thin, particularly for the south. More research – including oral history – would tell us much, about the war not simply as heroic resistance to colonialism but as a harsh and difficult lived experience that affected whole African populations, often forced into migration and flight. Such a recasting might add much to what



we already suspect: that at many points during the war the struggle for survival could be as crucial as engaging the enemy; that reasons for fighting or for making peace, springing both from earlier social processes and the circumstances of the moment, could be less than clear-cut; and that women and other non-combatants were as heavily involved as the fighters in the circumstances of war and peace. Indeed, although the war was broadly 'African' against 'German', resulting in a crushing defeat for the Africans, it might also reveal more of the counter-narratives of individuals: those Africans, for example, who fought rather with than against the Germans, and those whose military success forced their opponents to a negotiated settlement. And it would surely also tell us that, whatever the label given to the events of 1904-8, the atrocious experiences endured by almost all Africans in central and southern Namibia deserve to be remembered and understood, and had a profound effect of shaping the twentieth-century history of Namibia (p. 182).

The last three chapters following the German colonial period are devoted to South African rule (1915-1946), the period of nationalism and Apartheid (1946-1970), and finally the liberation struggles and the road to a negotiated transition to independence (1971-1990).

It is noteworthy that the author resists the temptation of most scholars to cast themselves in well-meaning advocacy roles, glorifying or romanticising the anti-colonial resistance. She does not close her eyes to the human rights violations that occurred on all sides, unfortunately not confined to the oppressors seeking to maintain their control over what has for long been seen as South Africa's fifth province. Considering the loss of human lives on all sides, including the victims of SWAPO among its own ranks in exile, the author concludes justifiably that 'although Namibia was spared the intensity and terrible mortality of the conflict on the Angolan side of the border, the war for the territory nevertheless had very high human costs' (p. 308). The legacy of these costs remains a factor in Namibia more than twenty years after independence; some of the skeletons in the closet still rattle. Ignoring them does not make them disappear.

The author ends her work by reflecting that she has:

sought to investigate the history of the years for which documentary sources exist, while not neglecting the fact that by far the longest period of human settlement in Namibia must be researched principally through archaeological means. Even for the historical period, many uncertainties remain, much has not been analysed

at all, and many things are a matter of lively debate. The opportunities for research are thus rich and promising, and it is to be hoped that historians will continue to take up the challenge' (p. 316).

Not only historians, one is tempted to add...

As the author claims at the end of her introduction, the volume seeks 'to provide a new synthesis of the history of Namibia, and to suggest fresh insights into many aspects of that history' (p. 13). Based on the systematic presentation of the already existing literature, with clear positions on certain contested issues, this effort finds its limits where the literature has so far not sufficiently covered the necessary ground. The author is aware of this limiting framework and acknowledges the constraint. Her summary presentation nonetheless manages to present by far the most comprehensive and incisive overview of the social transformations of Namibian society and the interactions from the early beginnings of human existence in the territory until independence.

The wide range of literature used to attain this successful result makes one wonder, however, if the final introductory words that Namibia is 'one of Africa's least understood and studied countries' (*ibid.*) is indeed a fair and justifiable assessment. Rather, it seems that among

the legacies of colonial rule, with the physical presence of an influential white settler minority for over a century and a half, is the fact that mainly Western scholars from near and far find Namibia a suitable place to roam and acquire degrees, leading to quite an impressive range of published work. The result might be at times a blatantly biased and Eurocentric perspective on local realities, but this kind of misrepresentation is unfortunately nothing unique for Namibia.

In conclusion, the work under review is a laudable effort to overcome at least some of these flaws, thereby contributing to the further awareness that knowledge is power (in the word's direct meaning) and that power has been abused for far too long. The emergence of a young generation of Namibian scholars aspiring to claim greater ownership over the interpretation of Namibia's past and present (adequately acknowledged by Wallace in her references) is an important step forward. This volume might serve as a helpful reference point in that process. It will remain for years to come an indispensable introduction to the history of Namibia for all those interested in the country and its people.

