This paper is my first attempt to engage the findings of two research visits to Namibia. As a result, I fear I have spent too much time trying to lay out the groundwork and not enough demonstrating the significance of different actors’ understandings and actions.

My challenge is to write for a non-specialist audience as Namibia is quite clearly off the radar for most of us. Political analysts tend to argue little has changed since independence or is likely to change anytime soon. But this is not wholly true. I’m arguing that by looking beyond the usual indicators of political and economic power, we do see stark challenges to long hegemonic narratives. The challenge is in demonstrating their significance as they have yet to lead to any significant restructuring of power relations.

I welcome all comments and criticism.

I’m currently grappling with a number of questions:

1) Namibian memorializations – Should I include more background? Are there pieces of the overview of the history or the memorial sites that I could cut?
2) How might I better draw in readers with little interest in Namibia?
3) Sharpening the analysis - I’m attempting to draw a connection between public presentations of history through memorialization and political power. How might I more effectively engage the relationship between the two? Suggestions for further reading?
On August 19, 2009 what had long seemed impossible happened: the infamous Equestrian Statue in central Windhoek was moved. This statue had stood on a grassy hill overlooking much of the capital city for almost a century. It bore witness to colonial rule in what was then German Southwest Africa, to South African control of Southwest Africa, and finally to independence for the state of Namibia in 1990. The Reiterdenkmal, as it is called in German, was a monument to the German colonial troops, the Schutztruppen, who fought indigenous resistance and perpetrated a genocide against the Herero and the Nama people. This history and how to remember it has divided the citizens of Namibia along multiple fault lines and offers a minefield for the post-independence government to navigate. The sight of the Equestrian Statue dangling from a crane over Windhoek (see picture below) begs the question as to whether this long debated move will usher in a more inclusive approach to history and help to establish a more open discussion of different historical perspectives. Alternatively, it might simply signal a shift in which memories and histories dominate others. It is clear that the long delayed move of the Equestrian Statue suggests some form of change. The debate is over the direction and meaning of that change.
Memorials and commemorations offer stylized presentations of the past. They highlight particular actions and people and purposely forget others. They actively work to sanitize and re-remember contested historical events. A bloody battle leading to countless lost lives and great atrocities is transformed into a moment of triumph, promise and hope. It is offered as a symbol of the strength of a new nation even where its people are bitterly divided. Memorials also offer insights into the power relations among actors in a given society. They provide clues as to who is on top and how they treat those that are not. They can work to unite communities and offer sites for cultural and personal memory. They can also have profound political meaning by visibly presenting victor’s justice and offering a warning to those who might continue to resist. The Equestrian Monument in Windhoek served exactly this function. Standing next to the German colonial fort and on the site of a wartime concentration camp, it was erected by the German colonial masters as a symbol of the longevity of their rule. While the German forces in Namibia were defeated only a few years after the memorial was erected, the monument to colonial victory remained at its post. Almost two decades after independence, it was moved as part of a state project to transform the memoryscape of the country’s capital city.

Namibia’s citizens did not all endorse the state’s plans. Their reasons for questioning the new plans varied widely and displayed their divided loyalties. This underscores the basic fact that while states build and remove memorials as part of a larger process of nation building, their intended meanings may not be popularly accepted. States clearly differ in the ways in which they seek to incorporate or exclude the public in their presentations of history. But, even where states seek to become the exclusive arbiters of the collective memory of a nation and to silence any public rebuttals, the public still plays a central role in the production of collective memory (Simpson and Alwis 2008, Webner 1998). States’ official presentations are adopted, adapted, contested, contradicted or ignored by the public. Namibia offers an illuminating case to investigate the potential power and political implications of these various responses due to the rich and often contradictory array of memorializations across the country.

The post-colonial Namibian state has in the last few years worked to offer more visible reminders of its liberation struggle victories and its present day power. These attempts to influence collective memory range from the renaming of streets, replacing the names of German colonial leaders with those of recent leaders of the liberation struggle, to the building of sizable
new memorials which focus on the victories of Swapo (The South-West African People’s Organization), the liberation movement and dominant party in government since independence. A quick look at the capital and its immediate surroundings, suggests that at least some memorials to colonial hegemony are being replaced by those to post-colonial state hegemony, but the politics of memorials in Namibia are far more complex than what is immediately visible in Windhoek. Ordinary citizens are playing a significant role in the creation of a collective memory that neither romanticizes German colonial rule nor the achievements of the post-colonial state.

This ongoing and growing process of memorialization in Namibia offers a crucial case study in the politics of contested memories because of the range of actors engaging in the debate and the diversity of actions and arguments that they employ. Namibian memorial debates offer a window into both the great inequalities in present day Namibia and the ways in which some actors are seeking to challenge political and economic power in subtle and not so subtle ways. In 1998, Richard Werbner argued for the significance of the Zimbabwean case in discussions of memory politics: “Nowhere else in this part of Africa has the politics of nation-building been so significantly advanced through contradictory appropriations, both in memory and in memorial, of the land’s human remains, nowhere else in the region has there been so much memory politics for the symbolic winning of sacred terrain, so much contesting of legitimacy as a sacred bond with the land.” (Werbner 1998: 99) This same process of intense contradictions and active remembering of different narratives now takes place in post-colonial, democratic Namibia. As in Zimbabwe in the first twenty years of independence, a single party has consistently dominated all levels of government in Namibia. This dominance threatens to equate party, government and state power and often works to silence dissent. Through the politics of memorialization, however, this dissent becomes much more visible as do the potential weaknesses of state power.

The following discussion focuses on these contested narratives and the debates they generate. It considers the connections between public representations of the past and present day power relations. This is not to suggest that memorials and commemorations should be understood as merely political acts. They clearly have cultural and personal significance for many who participate in their creation and maintenance. The question of these meanings is not, however, the subject of this work. The focus here is upon public presentations of memory and responses to them through alternative memorials and commemorations as well as debates in a range of Namibian newspapers. This provides a window into the contested nature of memory by
looking at what is remembered, how it is remembered, who is doing the remembering, and what is missing. While it cannot demonstrate the depth and breadth of various understandings across Namibian society, it does offer insights into processes of contention that are not visible in a tour of the key sights in the capital city or an overview of the usual indicators of political and economic power.

THE POST-INDEPENDENCE STATE NARRATIVE

The dominant public narrative in Namibia is clearly that offered by the ruling party, Swapo. This simple fact is easy to understand by looking at the nature of political and economic power in Namibia. “Swapo has dominated every election – at local, regional and national levels – since independence, and since 1994 the party has held a two-thirds majority in the National Assembly, giving it the power to change the constitution.” (Hopwood 2007: 174) As a result the party and the state are often difficult to distinguish and state memorial events also become party events. Economic power is a bit more complex, but the state and with it the dominant party also plays a powerful role in the economy. Of all the countries for which the UNDP collects inequality data (UNDP 2008: 296-299), Namibia stands out as the most unequal.¹ Past inequality was a product of a race-based system of black exclusion under colonial rule and apartheid. Today, economic inequality remains stark as a small black elite from the ranks of the liberation movement has joined the wealthiest (formerly all white) decile and the government has failed to institute programs to reduce broader economic inequality (Melber 2007). Those with the greatest economic resources in Namibia thus include the majority of the white population, a group that largely lacks political power, and a politically connected black elite.

While remnants of German colonialism still dot the Namibian countryside and many German speakers work to preserve and protect them, the dominant presentation of Namibian history is clearly a Swapo-based narrative. This narrative equates Swapo with liberation and support for Swapo with patriotism. It tends to shorten the struggle for independence to the post-1966 period that was dominated by Swapo’s military actions under PLAN (The People’s

¹ Due to differences in data collection, inequality scores are notoriously difficult to compare across countries and regions. The UNDP 2007/2008 Human Development Report cites an inequality (“in income or expenditure”) score of 74.3 for Namibia. The next highest scores is found in Lesotho with 63.2. Though Namibia’s data was collected in 1993; there is no indication of declining inequality and some trends suggest it has actually increased (Melber 2007).
Liberation Army of Namibia) (Kössler 2007). This glorification of Swapo’s military struggle generally ignores the actions of others who worked for liberation outside Swapo and silences any discussion of Swapo’s human rights violations against those presumed to be traitors. This dominant narrative seeks to leave little space for non-state actors to present challenges or alternative narratives. Henning Melber argues: “SWAPO displays an exclusionist tendency which defines nation-building in terms of marginalizing ‘the others’ who are not accepted in their own right as part of the Namibian nation but are instead perceived as being outside of the erstwhile liberation movement and its resistance history.” (2005: 109)

Heroes Acre, located 15 kilometers south of Windhoek, offers the most dramatic example of the state’s attempt to present the long struggle for independence in Namibia as a military struggle led by Swapo. The monument park, designed and built by a North Korean firm, is socialist-realist in style. The design works to make the visitor feel very small in comparison to the 36 meter high obelisk, meant to represent a sword, and the 8 meter tall Unknown Soldier standing in front of it (see picture below with author in the bottom right). The uniformed soldier stands with a gun in one hand, ready to throw a grenade with the other. The fact that this freedom fighter resembles Sam Nujoma, leader of Swapo (1960-2007) and the country’s first president (1990-2005), works to further underline the dominance of Swapo-memorialism at the site.

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2 This socialist-realist memorial architecture is also found in Zimbabwe at that country’s Heroes’ Acre in Harare (Werbner 1998). This has led analysts to suggest a parallel between not only state monuments in these two countries but also the exclusion of other narratives. While the tendency to memorialize Swapo’s struggle as well as that of Zanu-PF and the refusal to address atrocities committed by both liberation movement are worrying, this does not suggest that Namibia will follow the broader political trajectory of Zimbabwe in its response to opposition movements. The leadership of countries such as Mali, frequently praised for its democratic credentials, worked to reconstruct understandings of its history through the creation of new monuments in socialist-realist style (Koulouba Hill) which were also built by North Koreans (DeJorio 2006).
Behind the obelisk is a bronze relief meant to portray the “Namibian journey (history) to independence, from the awakening of the independence ideal and mass mobilization of the armed liberation struggle and finally the achievement of independence” (National Heritage Council of Namibia undated), but it too is dominated by depictions of Swapo’s military struggle.
Reinhardt Kössler remarks: “There the war and genocide of the early twentieth century cede importance to a liberation struggle, represented almost exclusively in military terms, thus referring to the experience and suffering mainly of people in the Northern regions of the country.” (2007: 377) This presentation emphasizes the contributions of Swapo in the late twentieth century over struggles against colonial rule that occurred in the early part of the century largely in the central and southern regions of the country. In official commemorations at the site, Swapo fighters are presented as the heroes of the struggle while other fighters active during the latter part of the century are often presented as traitors (Metsola 2007: 134). The public seating area at the site is built to accommodate 5000 people and the arrival platform is large enough for functions including cultural performances and military parades (National Heritage Council of Namibia undated).

At the inauguration of Heroes’ Acre in 2002, President Sam Nujoma began his address by noting that the planning and construction of the memorial had led to significant public debate. He quickly added, however, that the “genuine majority” supported it: “It is well and good that
the genuine majority of our patriots raised their voices in concurrence with the construction of the national monument in the broadest sense of that concept.” He continued: “In the final analysis, it must be seen as one of those tangible expressions of our policy of national reconciliation, Statehood and unity as a nation.” Toward the end of his speech he stated: “Historically, throughout the world nations and peoples recognize those who fought in defense of their country’s freedom and national interest and not the cowards and collaborators who sided with their people’s enemies. And that is precisely what we are doing here today.” In his presentation he demonstrated the clear limits of the government’s understanding of national reconciliation which seems to be restricted to actions necessary for the prevention of open conflict (Metsola 2007: 139).

While Nujoma did acknowledge other freedom fighters before the founding of Swapo, his overall presentation equates the struggle for freedom with Swapo.³ Nujoma’s successor continued in the same vein. President Hifikepunye Pohamba on his first Heroes’ Day, a national holiday, since assuming office in March 2005 laid a wreath at Heroes’ Acre. He stated: “The Heroes Acre is a place where all Namibians irrespective of their political, racial, ethnic or religious backgrounds should go…” Despite this, much of his speech focused on Swapo’s actions in the fight for liberation, suggesting once again that this is a day for all Namibians to honor Swapo’s heroes and Swapo itself.

As part of the dominant public narrative, government representatives repeatedly warn of the dangers of delving into past injustices. Nahas Angula, the Swapo minister of education and culture argued that if investigations are to be opened they must not simply look at Swapo’s actions. “If you want to return to the past, fine … . But we must know about the consequences of that. You will never stop anywhere. You will have to go all the way from the crimes committed from the Berlin Conference up to 21 March 1990. That you have to do if you are to be honest and do justice.” (quoted in Saul and Leys 2003: 341-2) Interestingly, many German-speaking Namibians have offered a similar argument that it would be unjust to simply focus on one set of crimes. This argument, as presented to the author in a number of informal conversations, proffers

³ Commenting on Sam Nujoma’s autobiography Where Others Waivered Saul and Leys argue: “This book is a true measure of the moral obtuseness that has become part and parcel of the Swapo project – an ironic index of the extent to which, over long years of struggle, the cruelty and callousness of the apartheid masters also entered into the souls of those who spent much of their lives fighting apartheid. The book can fairly be said to have raised the practice of ‘forgetting history’ in Namibia to a new level.” (2003: 351)
that it is necessary to not only consider actions of the German colonial authorities but also the violent acts of indigenous groups against one another both during and prior to the colonial period. In both cases, the argument amounts to a suggestion that if one cannot investigate all abuses, one has no right to simply investigate some. It is intended to thwart any attempt to begin a process of investigation and truth telling and has been fairly effective in doing so. But, slowly, the ground seems to be shifting.

ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVES

The state has built the Swapo-centered Heroes’ Acre, the largest memorial site to the long struggle for Namibian independence, and chosen a key date in Swapo’s history for Heroes’ Day. The date, August 26, marks the first military battle between PLAN and the South African forces in 1966 at Omugulu-gOmbashe (Ongolumbashe) in northwest Namibia. But, Heroes’ Acre has failed to attract many visitors. The National Heritage Council reported in 2006 that only 7533 visitors had been to Heroes’ Acre in an entire year. Entrance fees of N$64 188 (less than $10,000) were collected, but this came nowhere near meeting the running costs of N$500 000 per year (The Namibian Oct 19, 2006). As the expansive Heroes’ Acre stands largely empty, Namibians in different parts of the country have created their own memorials and celebrate their own commemorative days.

There is a separate Heroes Day observed by Nama-speaking communities to commemorate the death of Kaptein Hendrik Witbooi who led the first armed resistance to the colonial forces. He died in 1905 fighting German forces. Similarly, Herero fighters also went to battle. Both the Nama-German as well as the Herero-German wars culminated in fierce repression and genocide against the indigenous communities. Amongst Herero speakers today, numerous Heroes’ Days are celebrated according to the leaders of different families. The Ovaherero White Flag celebrations are held in October to honor the royal family of Wilhelm Zeraua from Omaruru. The Green Flag Ovambanderu hold celebrations in Okahandja in April and near Gobabis in August. The largest of these celebrations is organized by the Red Flag.

4 The site was apparently empty when a reporter visited on Cassinga Day, a national holiday to remember those killed in 1978 in the largest massacre of refugees in exile during the struggle (The Namibian, May 6, 2005). It was also empty when the author visited on January 10, 2008. There were no brochures explaining the site, so the guards at the gate gave us their only a photocopy that they had been using as scrap paper.
Ovaherero in late August to honor the memory of Samuel Maherero and the Tjamuaha-Maherero royal family in Okahandja.

While the state focuses its remembrance activities on recent history (Swapo’s armed struggle from 1966 to independence in 1990) these celebrations draw attention to the actions of indigenous forces fighting against German colonial rule culminating in the wars of 1904-1908. While the Swapo-led struggle for independence was dominated by Ovambo-speakers from the northern sections of the country, the earlier struggles were overwhelmingly fought by Herero and Nama-speakers living in the central region as this was the area where the colonial forces and settlers were concentrated. As a result of these wars and the actions of the Germans up to 80% of the Herero community was killed (Gewald 2000: 22) and an estimated 50% of the Nama people also died (Erichsen 2008). The following discussion focuses on the memorialization of these earlier struggles which play upon central fault lines in present day Namibian politics.

Red Flag Day is the largest of the Herero commemorations. It occurs on the weekend closest to August 26 (Heroes’ Day). The Herero celebration marks the anniversary of Samuel Maherero’s burial in Okahandja in 1923. Maherero led the Herero resistance against the Germans. The first shots in the German-Herero war were fired in Okahandja in January 1904 and while the Herero initially had the advantage, the Germans received troop reinforcements from overseas. At the August 11 Battle of Ohamakari, Herero forces were defeated in battle and dispersed. The Germans then drove them into the Omaheke dessert to the east where the majority of people and their cattle died. The German General Lothar von Trotha then issued the infamous genocide order: “I, the great General of the German troops, send this letter to the Herero people. Hereros are no longer German subjects …. All the Hereros must leave the land. … Any Herero found within the German borders with or without a gun, with or without cattle, will be shot. I shall no longer receive any women or children; I will drive them back to their people or I will shoot them.” (quoted in New Era July 25, 2003)

5 “Before the war there were estimated to be 80 000 Hereros but in the 1911 census only 15 000 were found. Approximately 10 000 Nama died during the fighting and the remaining 9 000 were confined to concentration camps.” (New Era Aug 24, 2009)

6 There is a growing literature on competing narratives of the struggle against South African rule and the actions of Swapo (e.g. Saul and Leys 2003, McConnell 2000) and a number of organizations seeking to draw attention to the state’s refusal to address human rights violations committed by Swapo forces: Breaking the Wall of Silence and the National Society for Human Rights.
Moses Maherero told the story as told to him by his family: “At Waterberg, I was told, my great-grandfather, which is Samuel Maherero, and the whole group of the Otjihazembua clan fought very well … [although] they thought the war had finished. … By then an order was given, maybe from Windhoek, from the German side, for these people to come more into this place, into Waterberg and they fought… So, the whole sad story happened basically in Ohamakari.” (quoted in Erichsen 2008: 52) At commemorative events such as Red Flag day, this story and others are retold. The stories present Herero leaders as courageous and strong in contrast to the brutal German troops. Though the history is one of great suffering, it is a story of small victories and ultimate survival and a call for the unity of the Herero people. Goliath Kaune, a speaker at the 2008 Red Flag commemoration argued that despite the mass killing of Germany’s enemy, the Herero, General von Trotha was a failure. “Von Trotha failed in his objective to decimate the Herero people.” (author interview August 23, 2008)

Samuel Maherero’s story serves, alongside many others, as focal point for the reassertion of Herero identity and pride. After the Battle of Ohamakari, Maherero and a group of his followers fled to the Bechuanaland Protectorate, which is today Botswana. Herero survivors, some men and many women and children, who remained within Namibia, were held in prison camps and forced to work as laborers for the German military and settlers. The camps were closed in 1908, but it was not until the South African invasion in 1915 that Herero speakers were once again able to move about the country more freely and re-establish their own communities in areas they had occupied before the war. In light of these tragic events, Samuel Maherero’s funeral in 1923 provided the basis for the reassertion of Herero society and the re-establishment of Herero identity and traditions (Gewald 2000: 22-29).
Chiefs Maherero and Riruako lead the procession to the grave of Samuel Maherero

The commemorations are led by chiefs, religious leaders and elders within the Herero community and today include not just the Red Flag Herero from Okahandja but also members of the Green and White Flags as well as Herero representatives from Botswana and South Africa. The participants dress in traditional attire and are accompanied by men on horseback as they proceed in a military and civilian parade to the graves of the Okahandja chiefs.7 This event and other Herero commemorations as well as those celebrating the life of Hendrik Witbooi, a Nama chief, work in Kössler’s words to claim “a rightful place for the community within national history” (2007: 375). While these events commemorate the dead, they are framed as a

7 Participants in the 2008 Red Flag commemoration noted that after independence the government attempted to discourage the annual Herero commemorations. The Herero were told they should not buy uniforms or march as troops, but with time the debate quieted down and people continued their commemorations (author interviews, Okahandja, August 23, 2008).
celebration of the survival of a people and an opportunity to retell their history to reinvigorate community cohesion, traditions and political power.

As the chiefs lead the procession on Red Flag Day, they stop to call upon their ancestors and honor not only their own graves\(^8\) but also those of their fallen foes, members of the German

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\(^8\) These Herero graves follow the European-Christian style rather than the traditional Herero style. While the Christian graves are marked by an inscribed headstone, traditional graves are marked by cattle skulls with horns; the larger the number of skulls, the greater the status of the deceased. (The above pictured grave incorporates a single cattle skull to blend these traditions.)
Schutztruppen. Afterward, the participants return to a central site in Okahandja to hear speeches retelling the history of the Herero people and reporting on present day challenges and opportunities for the Herero community. As the party begins on the outer edges of the formal celebration, Herero leaders work to strengthen both the cultural and political community.

In Casper Erichsen’s oral history research among the Damara, Nama, San, Baster and Herero communities he found that “[u]nlike any other groups that took part in this research, the Herero/Mbanderu respondents were able to track the direct impact of the war on their own families, providing both the names of people who had died and the places where they died.” (2008: 48) In response to the devastating number of Herero deaths as a product of German colonial rule, the survivors worked through both public festivals such as the Red Flag commemoration and privately to pass on their family and community histories. This strong sense of Herero identity has served as an example to other communities who seek to bring their history to greater local and national attention.

2004 marked the centennial anniversary of the beginning of the Herero-German war and the genocide. As such, it became the focus of political activities to draw greater attention to the colonial genocide and to demand reparations from the German state. During the year, a series of commemorations took place to recognize the key events in the course of the war. As preparations began in 2003, the chairman of the national committee, Arnold Ranongouje Tjihuiko, explained the importance of the commemorations: “The activities will be more specifically focused on the genocide. Marches and demonstrations will be organized in August to sensitize the community on the event that took place on the 12th of June 1904, which culminated in the extermination of the Hereros, who were reduced from 80,000 to 15,000 people.” (quoted in New Era July 25, 2003) The initiatives to commemorate the events of 1904 were all citizen-led initiatives (Melber 2005: 106). While the government of Namibia did issue a new postage stamp that was released on Independence Day in 2004, this stamp did not mention any individuals or groups, but was instead presented as a commemoration of a broader notion of national progress from colonialism to independence (New Era Dec 5, 2003).

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9 In August 2008, for example, Chief Riarko stopped at the grave of Cuno von Bötticher, a lieutenant in the Schutztruppen who died in Okahandja in late August 2004. He began by stating “We’ve been through a lot together” and called upon the deceased to talk to his people back in Germany to help bring about reconciliation and to return skulls that had been taken by the Germans over a century earlier.
The year’s events culminated in the commemoration of the Battle of Ohamakari. While there had been some tensions over the course of the year between two competing Herero preparatory committees,\(^\text{10}\) both groups came together at this event. Members of all three flags were present as were Herero from Botswana and South Africa. Riarako also managed to include King Kauluma of Ndonga in northern Namibia, who was also the Chairperson of the Council of Traditional Leaders (Kössler 2007: 379). This helped to extend the event beyond the Herero community and Herero struggles to assume a more inclusive nationalism. Despite the broader unity among Herero-speakers and their inclusion of other traditional leaders, in August, on Heroes’ Day, no government representatives attended the ceremony in Okahandja. Government officials were instead attending a commemoration in the north that featured the unveiling of a new monument to the beginning of the armed struggle led by Swapo (Melber 2005: 107). Despite the 100 year anniversary of the Herero struggle and genocide, government representatives commemorated the 38\(^{\text{th}}\) anniversary of their own party’s actions. This underlined Swapo’s resolve not to let the earlier anti-colonial struggles overshadow its own campaign against South African rule.

The Herero demand for reparations from Germany clearly raised concerns within the Swapo government. In 2001, Riruako and others filed a claim in the United States courts (using the US Alien Torts Claims Act) against both the German state and German corporations.\(^\text{11}\) The government did not support this claim, presumably wishing to preserve its relationship with the German government, its largest donor. In the following years, particularly during the commemorative events of 2004 both in Namibia and Germany, the reparations demands gathered increasing national and international attention. While the German government has continued to deny these claims, Minister Wieczorek-Zaul offered a “reconciliation” package of development aid to Namibia. As part of this package the German government offered loans, infrastructural development, enhanced human resource building capacity and education and skills transfer in key fields including science and technology (\textit{New Era} Aug 24, 2009). This broad reconciliation

\(^{10}\) The National Preparatory Committee for the Commemoration 2004, often called the Bishop’s Committee included: Bishop Zephania Kameeta and Bishop Reinhard Keding among its leaders. The Genocide Commemoration Committee was authorized by the Herero Senate and led by Paramount Chief Kaima Riruako.

\(^{11}\) The reparations claim failed in a lower court and in late 2004 the US Supreme Court declined to consider the case.
package was accepted by the Namibian state in 2006, the same year that the Namibian National Assembly voted unanimously to support continuing reparations claim (Kössler 2007: 381).

Speakers at the Annual Red Flag commemorations in both 2008 and 2009 renewed their calls for reparations. In 2008, Deputy Local and Regional Minister Kazenambo Kazenambo (a Herero member of Swapo) surprised the audience and the assembled media by defining the demand for reparations as a “tsunami” that could not be stopped. “We call on the German government to read the mood - it is not the Herero community alone, they have been joined by the Nama people and how that tsunami could be stopped, I don't know.” (quoted in The Namibian Aug 25, 2008) He argued that “reconciliation cannot happen on an empty stomach” (Kazenambo, August 24, 2008), but also made it clear that his comments were made in his personal capacity, not on behalf of government. Chief Riarako called for unity among the Herero people and all Namibians noting: “There are no others. We are all Namibians.” (Riarako, August 24, 2008) He also argued that the German initiation of a special fund for Namibia would not weaken the demand for reparations. The President of the opposition DTA (Democratic Turnhalle Alliance) Katuutire Kaura also participated in the commemorations by offering a narrative of Samuel Maherero’s fight against the Germans and final repatriation back to Namibia.

**Shark Island** just outside Lüderitz serves as another central site of contested memory. Shark Island was arguably the most brutal of the prisoner of war camps established by German forces in 1905. Figures from the German High Command show a death rate in camps across the country of just under 50 percent (Erichsen undated). Shark Island, however, had an estimated death rate of 80 percent or more. The prisoners on the island were drawn from both the Herero and Nama wars against the Germans. The Herero prisoners were brought from Windhoek and Okahandja to work as laborers on the railway line. They were joined in early 1906 by members of Cornelius Fredericks, Hendrik Witbooi and Samuel Isaak’s Nama guerilla fighting units. While Hendrik Witbooi died in battle in 1905, Cornelius Fredericks and Samuel Isaak were captured with their men. Samuel Isaak was one of the few survivors of the notorious camp; Cornelius Fredericks died in the camp on February 16, 1907 (Silvester and Erichsen undated; Erichsen 2007).

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12 Of an estimated 17,000 prisoners across the country, the German High Command reported 7,682 deaths among the prisoners, just under half the total (Erichsen undated). This report may well underestimate the number of deaths.
Willem Boois told the history as told to him by his elders: “‘Cornelius was taken there to Shark Island. It was not only the !Aman who were taken there. There were also Damaras, Hereros and maybe other people. These people were taken there for the purpose of revenge. Of course there were also preachers and other whites amongst these soldiers who bemoaned the situation. The people were destroyed there.’” (quoted in Erichsen 2008: 26) One hundred years later, as a product of the efforts of members of the Nama community (author interview, Pastor Isaac Fredericks, August 22, 2008), a monument was erected to Captain Cornelius Fredericks and the !ama community on Shark Island in 2002. This memorial stands in interesting company.
To the right along the rock face in back of the Fredericks’ memorial is a plaque dedicated to Heinrich Vogelsang who established a trading post for Bremen merchant Adolf Lüderitz in 1883 in what is today Lüderitz. Next, is a stone plaque next to a cross. In German it states that the remains of the dead from the old cemetery were reinterred here in 1976. Further to the right is the “Klink Plaque in recognition of the achievement and courage of Capt. Amyr Khan Klink of Brazil when he rowed and drifted alone in the specially designed lifeboat the Paraty across the South Atlantic…” in 1984. In the middle of the stone patio (pictured below) stands a memorial to Adolf Lüderitz. The white plaques arranged in a semi-circle around the patio (seen from the left side of the picture) commemorate German troops who died in the area during the 1904-08 war, fighting guerilla units including those led by Captain Fredericks.\(^{13}\) All these memorials sit on the grounds of the former concentration camp as does a camping site used by tourists.

\(^{13}\) Pastor Isaac Fredericks who played a leading role in erecting the tombstone on Shark Island argued that he did not meet any concerted resistance to his efforts. But, he expected his new project to rename the town of Lüderitz as well as the street that leads to Shark Island would generate considerable debate. He would like both to be named after Cornelius Fredericks (author interview, August 22, 2008).
In 2007, a century commemoration was held in honor of Fredericks and all the Nama heroes who died on Shark Island. The creation of this !Aman national commemoration for the victims of Shark Island, has according to the oral history research done by Casper Erichsen, led to greater interest in this history among the youth (2008: 28). The so-called “skulls debate” has also drawn greater attention to Shark Island. In the early twentieth century, the skulls of numerous Herero and Nama prisoners were taken to Germany in an attempt to demonstrate the superiority of white Europeans. In 2008, a German television station broadcast a documentary which reported that 47 skulls had been found at two German universities. Reports suggested that one of the skulls might be that of Cornelius Fredericks. At the 2008 Red Flag Day in Okahandja, the demand for the repatriation of the skulls was mentioned by numerous speakers who brought together Herero and Nama claims. Esther Muinjangue, Chairperson of the Ovaherero Genocide Committee called upon Germany to return the skulls quickly so that they might be buried with dignity. Chief Maharero added to the call emphasizing: “No lasting reconciliation is possible without meaningful dialogue, and we will continue to sensitize both governments of this unfinished business.” (quoted Namibian Aug 25, 2008) Herero Chief Riarako and Nama Chief David Fredericks sent a petition to the Namibian government to send a formal request to the German government for the return of the skulls (The Namibian Jan 12, 2009).

**CHANGING HISTORY?**

The continued dominance of memorial plaques to the German Schutztruppen on Shark Island, the site of a concentration camp where hundreds of lives were lost due to German atrocities, is just one example of the still continuing presence of German war memorials in Namibia. To give a sense of the number of these memorials, Steinmetz reports: “Of the 117 sites declared as national monuments between 1950 and 1990, 77 were German structures from the pre-1918 period.” (2008: 224) After the end of South African rule and apartheid, the newly independent Namibian government decided not to remove German colonial monuments

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14 It is unclear whether or not this is true. Researchers at UNAM found some indication that this might be the case but could not confirm this. Once the claim that one of the skulls might be that of Cornelius Fredericks was printed in the paper, it was commonly asserted as a fact (author discussion with Jeremy Silvester, August 25, 2009).
While this has worked to protect much of the German memoryscape, the government began adding new memorials such as Heroes Acre and other smaller memorial sites to reinforce its post-colonial narrative.

As German-speakers remain the wealthiest ethnic group in Namibia and have maintained clear ties to Germany, Namibia’s largest aid donor (Kaapama 2008), the government has engaged them with caution. It has resisted any significant economic redistribution and did not even tax commercial farms, the majority of which are still white-owned, until 16 years after independence (Melber 2007: 116). While most German speakers remain outside formal politics and keep largely to themselves, a vocal segment of the German-speaking community accords great importance to its monuments and will go to significant lengths to protect them.

The visitor arriving in downtown Windhoek for the first time would be forgiven for wondering if it really had been almost a century since the end of colonial rule. On a hill overlooking much of Windhoek stands the Alte Feste, the fort used by the Germans which has been preserved to house the National Museum. The plaque on the outside wall next to the entrance to the museum reads: “The Alte Feste was built in 1890 by the Schutztruppe under Captain C. Von Fancois as a stronghold to preserve peace and order between the rivaling Namas and Hereros.” While Nama and Herero units did fight, more than a bit of revisionist history is necessary to view the German colonial troops as selflessly acting to bring peace to a warring countryside. There is no additional plaque to put these words into perspective. To the left of the Alte Feste stood, until August 2009, the Equestrian Monument celebrating the victory of the German forces in Namibia and the might of the German empire. Finally, only slightly down the hill stands the Christuskirche (seen in the picture on page d). This church was built to commemorate the defeat of the Herero and Nama. Inside the church, the names of the German soldiers who died fighting indigenous forces are listed on bronze plaques. All three, the Alte Feste, the Reiterdenkmal and the Christuskirche thereby offer clear memorials to German military strength, victory in war and the defeat of Namibian resistance.

Many street names were changed after independence without much debate. But in the largely German-speaking town center of Swakopmund, the renaming of the main street in 2001

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15 “Ovaherero traditionally believe that ancestors have more power than the living, and that one should never engage in struggles over a grave, much less desecrate one. Indeed, this may be an additional reason for the failure to remove or alter the offensive German colonial monuments in Namibia… some of which are allegedly understood as German graves.” (Steinmetz and Hell 2006: 168-9)
provoked strong resistance (Kössler 2007: 365). Kaiser Wilhelm Straße, named for the last German Emperor, was changed to Dr. Sam Nujoma Avenue. But almost a decade after the formal name change, signs with the old street name were still defiantly displayed by some residents on their homes. Steinmetz comments: “However politically disempowered and few in number, these settlers are engaged in a campaign of low-level symbolic interference with the very cultural foundation of the Namibian polity. Most indigenous Namibians would love to be rid of these settlers and their ghosts.” (Steinmetz 2008: 224-5) While it is difficult to demonstrate the responses of the majority of Namibians to the cultural and political actions of the German-speaking community, it is clearly the case that German-speakers have had a disproportionate influence upon the public memoryscape of Namibia.

The intense debate over the move of the Equestrian Monument in Windhoek offers a clear example of German-speakers’ dedication to what many see as protecting their heritage, but it also demonstrates the limits of this influence. The monument was installed in 1912 and is best described as a “soldier’s and war memorial” (Vogt 2008). It stands on the site of the largest of the five main concentration camps established by the Germans during the indigenous wars of resistance. At the unveiling of the monument, the German Governor Theodor Seitz stated: “The brazen Rider of the Schutztruppe, who from this site overlooks the country, announces to the rest of the world that here we are the masters and will remain so.” (quoted in Zeller 2008)

The German-speaking community in Namibia today is hardly unanimous in its arguments concerning German colonial history. On one hand, a number of German-speakers organized what was called the Reiterdenkmal initiative. Their proposal was to add a plaque to the Equestrian monument to honor “all victims of military conflict since the colonization of the country, as a gesture towards the newly achieved liberty that embraced all citizens of the country.” (Melber 2005:110) A small number of German-speakers strongly opposed the addition of the plaque, others challenged the wording; the requested change was eventually denied by the National Monuments Council. On the other hand, there is still an active denial amongst many German-speakers that genocide occurred. Prominent members of the community such as Heiner Schneider-Waterberg, an amateur historian who owns a large farm in the Waterberg, still draw large all-white audiences in arguing that the death of the overwhelming majority of Herero at the
Waterberg was not a genocide.\textsuperscript{16} At another talk given in German to an all white audience, audience members suggested that Namibia would be worse off had it not been for colonialism and noted their concern that colonialism is so denigrated by politicians today.\textsuperscript{17}

The debate that occurred in the pages of the German language Namibian paper, the Allgemeine Zeitung (AZ), gives a strong indication of the importance that many German-speakers attach to their colonial history and its public representation. Of the three national dailies (the state-owned, English New Era, the privately owned Namibian, and the German language AZ), the AZ followed the story of the impending move of the equestrian monument by far the most closely. The paper also played an active role in generating concern over the proposed move. The New Era expectedly provided the most dispassionate analysis and least number of articles.\textsuperscript{18} The Namibian ran a larger number of articles and columns\textsuperscript{19} discussing the memorial and the debate. The published pieces were all broadly supportive of the move but raised concerns regarding process, consultation and cost.

The German language\textsuperscript{20} AZ, in contrast, ran ten articles in June 2008 alone. This included historian Andreas Vogt’s long and impassioned critique of the move that ran as three separate

\textsuperscript{16} Schneider-Waterberg spoke at the Swakopmund Museum on January 8, 2008. The title of his talk “Gedanken zum Herero Krieg und der sogenannten Schlacht am Waterberg” (Thoughts on the Herero War and the so-called slaughter on the Waterberg) suggests his argument. Schneider-Waterberg argues that the idea of genocide came from outside Namibia (from radical Germans and later foreign researchers and Herero-speakers who had studied overseas). Interestingly, he suggests that to argue that this was a genocide essentially presents the German as all powerful which he argues they were clearly not and simply presents the Herero as victims (author interview, January 5, 2008). While this latter part of the argument is important, it suggests a needed revision in some accounts of the genocide rather than any refutation of the fact that the Germans did engage in a genocide against the Herero.

\textsuperscript{17} Also at the Swakopmund Museum, on January 10, 2008, Dr. Werner Wienecke presented his more critical talk “Christliche Mission – Wegbereiter des Kolonialismus?” (Christian Missionaires – Pathfinders for colonialism?).

\textsuperscript{18} New Era ran only 3 pieces in 2008 (the height of the debate) concerning the equestrian monument. The first focused on the Independence Museum to be built on the site of the monument, the second on debate in National Assembly over the move, and the third was an op-ed/letter in support of keeping old names and monuments. Overall the three pieces offered quite a balanced view of the debate while excluding the more extreme arguments offered by more right-wing German speakers.

\textsuperscript{19} The Namibian ran 9 new articles and columns in 2008 and printed numerous SMSs sent by readers regarding the debate.

\textsuperscript{20} The fact that the articles are only published in German clearly restricts the paper’s readership. One might guess that at least some contributors might have modified their arguments if they were published in English and thereby potentially read by a far wider Namibian audience. At the 100 year commemoration of the Marine memorial, also a memorial to German fighters. Eckhart Müller, head of the DKR, a German Cultural organization in Namibia, spoke in both English and German. His comments in English noted the importance of the memorial but were designed not to offend any of the participants who included Swapo
articles. Vogt’s piece led to an increase in letters both from Namibia and Germany critiquing the proposed move. Many readers seconded Vogt’s arguments concerning the cultural and historical significance of the monument and a number also argued that the Equestrian Monument was a major tourism draw for Namibia. This was followed by an online reader poll, later expanded to the paper copies of the newspaper, which was overwhelmingly against the move. The AZ published updates on the poll every few days until it finally claimed that over 98 percent of respondents were against the move (AZ August 18, 2008). As the date of the fateful move approached in 2009, the two other papers simply ran an article noting that the move was happening. The AZ, in contrast ran numerous articles and pictures offering day to day updates and letters from Namibia and Germany generally critiquing the move. In the final month before the move, the Namibian Deutscher Kulturrat, DKR (German Cultural Association) asked for contributions to pay for the move and the storage of the memorial. Funds were quickly raised and the DKR organized and oversaw the move. After the move, the paper did run a more critical article by Henning Melber (August 25, 2009) which underlined the great inequality in Namibia, an inequality which clearly allowed German speakers to play a much greater role than their numbers would suggest in the public debate about the Reiterdenkmal.

Outside of the German-speaking community represented in the pages of the AZ, the move elicited less public debate, but this should not be read to indicate broad approval of the move. Herero member of Swapo, Deputy Minister Kazenambo Kazenambo, objected to moving the monument. He argued that the monument also has symbolic value for those who fought against German colonialism. He argued, speaking of the time when liberation fighters were in exile: “[t]he horse is a reference point, a reference of colonial engagement and we wanted to take the horse and control it.” (quoted in New Era June 23, 2008) But he also argued that it was in the interest of all Namibians to open the discussion of how to present their history. “We should stop belittling others and consult more in order to have a coherent nation.” (quoted in New Era June 23, 2008) Similarly, Katuutire Kaura, the leader of the DTA whose ancestors were imprisoned local government office-bearers. His comments in German, in contrast, questioned the government’s plan in moving the Reiterdenkmal, lamented the fact that some historic German buildings had been razed by the post-independence government and called for all memorials across the country to remain in their place. His concluding comments in English, once again, returned to more inclusive statements (Müller 2008).

21 In July 2008, at the height of the debate in the press over the future of the Reiterdenkmal, 51 crosses were erected in the area around the memorial to draw attention to indigenous deaths. Those who placed the crosses around the memorial remain anonymous.
by the Germans during the 1904-1908 war, also called on the monument to remain at its post (The Namibian July 11, 2008). Finally, NUDO (National Unity Democratic Organization) party member and Herero Paramount Chief Kuaima Riruako argued that the horse should not be moved so that all Germans are pressed to remember what they have done in Namibia (AZ June 25, 2008). All three were central participants in the Red Flag day celebrations; all three support the call for reparations.22

To both the German-speakers who sought to stop the move and the Herero-speakers who voiced their opposition, the Equestrian Monument stood as a clear symbol of power. For many Herero, it stands as a visible and prominent reminder of the crimes committed by German forces. By keeping these memories alive, it also supports the demand for reparations from Germany. A number of the German-speakers who voiced their opposition to the move suggested that the memorial represented not only the negative aspects of colonial rule, but also positive developments. This argument is understandably hard to swallow for most Namibians. This kind of colonial nostalgia (Kössler 2003) reflects a certain melancholy (Steinmetz 2008) not only at the loss of German control of Namibia but also of the increasingly diminishing influence that German-speakers have in present day Namibia. Even though their economic power remains largely unchallenged, the unilateral decision by cabinet to move the memorial demonstrates their lack of domestic political power.

Like the Herero critics, the German-speakers attach the question regarding the Reiterdenkmal’s move to how history will be written and re-written as a result. For the German-speakers, the move potentially reflects increased criticism and outright condemnation of colonial rule. This would suggest greater space for demands for domestic and transnational reparations and with it questions concerning who actually has the right to white-owned land. Already in 2003, President Nujoma banned the laying of wreaths at German soldiers’ graves at Waterberg as this was seen as commemorating the victory of German forces at the battle of the Waterberg (AZ September 10, 2004). The president’s argued: “There is no doubt is our mind that if the celebration was allowed to go ahead, there is a strong likelihood that the victims of the deliberate and calculated genocide would react against such insensitive and provocative celebration. This would undoubtedly lead to the breakdown of peace, law and order in the country … I need not

22 Samuel Kavaa, a Herero-speaker who participated in the creation of Memorial Park in Swakopmund, also spoke against the moving of the Reiterdenkmal and all memorials (author interview August 17, 2009).
remind the nation that if there is endangerment of peace, stability and security, no one, including this small group of German-speaking Namibians, would be spared.” (Nujoma as quoted in Melber 2005: 105)

THE CHALLENGES OF RECONCILIATION

The Swakopmund Memorial Cemetery Park offers a new approach to the presentation of Namibian history. It thereby forms a stark contrast to both Heroes’ Acre and the decision-making process regarding the Reiterdenkmal move. It builds upon the inclusive gestures made by a number of organizers on the annual Red Flag Day celebrations and the Shark Island memorial, but also moves beyond them.

Commenting on cemeteries in post-colonial India, Buettner argues: “They act as a barometer that signals how the ex-colonized and ex-colonizers alike not only approach the physical relics and spaces of empire but also reassess the colonial era more generally, imparting them with a diverse range of meanings specific to a historical moment.” (Buettner 2006: 7) The Swakopmund cemetery long offered a very abrupt visual reminder of colonialism and apartheid. Christian whites including German and South African soldiers were buried in a well-maintained, green cemetery. The Jewish dead were buried outside the original cemetery grounds in clear graves with headstones. Beyond the Jewish cemetery lay open dessert marked not by walls or other boundaries or, in most cases, headstones, but just by small mounds visible to the more careful observer. This is the African cemetery. Because the area was not marked, people were reusing graves, riding their motorbikes and horses over the graves, and walking their dogs there.23 The municipality also sold plots for people to build their homes on part of what had been cemetery grounds.

In response to the neglect and abuse of the African cemetery that includes graves from the wars of 1904 to 1908 as well as victims from the concentration camps in Swakopmund, two local residents initiated a project that would result in the Swakopmund Memorial Park. The first

23 In an informal discussion with the author, one Swakopmund resident freely admitted that he had, in the past, ridden his motorbike over the graves, but he argued he didn’t realize that they were in fact graves. Whether or not this was true was unclear. He expressed gratitude that residents had organized to build the wall and protect the graves and confessed that he was embarrassed that he had previously driven through the cemetery.
step was to build a wall around the entire cemetery to protect the graves and to create a single unified cemetery. The Municipality of Swakopmund gave its support to the plan and issued a press release to encourage members of the public to offer proposals for the new park. The organizers stipulated that unlike Heroes’ Acre, the process of designing the park should be as open as possible and that Namibian artists and craftspeople would be commissioned to work on the park. In 2005 *the Namibian* ran an article calling for input into the park’s design under the title: “Swakopmund’s Memorial Park to be a symbol of reconciliation” (July 1, 2005). Erika Rusch, a resident of Swakopmund who played a central role in initiating the project argued that “[this] is the only place in Namibia where two cemeteries can be joined into one park”. She added that this step “is important for reconciliation, as it would unite us as a whole.” (Ibid)

In 2007, the Herero community unveiled a monument on the African side of the now unified cemetery to honor those who died in the German camps. The wording on the memorial (see below) draws attention to the concentration camps but avoids a more direct accusation against the Germans by stating that those who died did so under “mysterious circumstances”. Herero participants made two arguments to explain the choice of words. The first was the history of the time had been obscured and that mysterious circumstances aptly captured this. The second was focused on reconciliation: “the people tell different stories, you must bring all together for the way forward” (author interview, Samuel Kavaa August 17, 2008). He underlined the need to look toward the future, a point with which even the most conservative Germans tend to agree. There was, however, significant debate in the German-speaking community over the new monument. One Swakopmund resident argued that 90 percent of the German-speakers disagreed with what was written on the stone, particularly the words “concentration camps”. Others critiqued the memorial arguing that the wording was “bad English” (author interviews).
Before the unveiling of the new memorial stone, members of the community and Herero-speakers from outside Swakopmund held the “All Ovaherero/Ovambanderu Reparation Walk”. Samuel Kavaa, who participated in the walk, argued “[the] purpose is simple… [the] walk was to show the people we are here, we know what happened, let’s come together and stick together” (author interview, August 17, 2008). Another participant described the walk as a process of “repairing” relations among the different communities in Namibia. The banner leading the
procession read: “Re-dedicating ourselves to our resolve that never again shall we be colonized and enslaved through retracing the footsteps of our ancestors to rediscover their unmarked graves for a dignified burial.” The walk was thereby framed by the “never again” refrain of anti-genocide campaigns but also included colonialism and slavery in the human rights violations that must be remembered. Other signs included: “apology + reparation = reconciliation”, “never again shall we be enslaved”, “the pen is mightier than the sword – let’s negotiate”.

Herero ceremony for the unveiling of the memorial stone - March 31, 2007 – Erika Rusch

Despite its clear reconciliatory tone, the commemoration and the construction of the park itself triggered great debate. This debate was ignited by flier pushed under the door of the German language newspaper, the AZ’s local office. Although there were significant questions regarding the authorship of the flier, the newspaper decided to publish an article describing its contents. The flyer claimed to be written by “Mau-Mau Panafrican Revolutionaries” and called for large reparation payments, land re-distribution without compensation, and violence against whites (AZ April 4, 2007). It thereby played upon the greatest fears of many in the German-speaking community and presumably left many a reader wondering about the intentions of the organizers of the commemoration. The paper did not, interestingly, publish information on the many signs held by the marchers during the commemorative walk that called for reconciliation.
Though the authors of the flier never revealed themselves, participants in the walk were quite certain that the flier was written by a right-wing member of the German-speaking community.

As the construction of the Memorial Park proceeded and new monuments were erected, controversy once again erupted in the pages of the *AZ*.\(^\text{24}\) This debate offered another interesting insight into the continuing divisions that confront the creation of a Namibian nation and the quite different reference points of members of the various communities. One reader in Swakopmund wrote to the newspaper arguing that a new memorial in the park violated German law and argued that this memorial undermined the spirit of the memorial park (*AZ* January 12, 2009). The reader viewed this memorial as a “Keltenkreuz” which is an illegal image in Germany because of its use by neo-Nazi groups. The disputed memorial along with a number of others that make up the “Heritage Circle” (including a statue of stacked horns used on traditional graves as well as a calabash made of granite) were funded by the German embassy. It was therefore the German Embassy that explained to the Namibian letter-writer the local significance of the disputed memorial (*AZ* January 16, 2009). The cross with a circle connecting the four arms is the same figure found on the grave of Samuel Maherero and his father and brother in Okahandja. It is therefore a reference to the Herero memorial in Okahandja rather than any symbol employed by European neo-Nazis. The design for the memorial was also described by the Memorial Park Working Committee in a very inclusive fashion: “the cross shall have a circle connecting the four arms, to symbolize reconciliation between all people and nations.” (2006)

The competing interpretations of the memorial cross underline the difficulty of creating unifying memorials under conditions of such stark disagreement over history and such dramatically different reference points for interpretation. Despite this fact, the Memorial Park offers arguably the first broadly inclusive memorial site in Namibia. The project was initiated by German-speakers, authorized and supported by the Swapo-dominated municipality, endorsed by the Herero-speaking community which has since held traditional ceremonies at the site, funded in part by the German embassy, and designed and built by Namibian artisans. The cemetery itself now includes graves of both those who died within the “realm of their colonial masters” as well as those who died trying to expand and protect the German colony. A memorial to the Schutztruppen in the cemetery carries an inscription that reads: “Sie gaben ihr Leben für Dich”

\(^{24}\) Thank you to Joachim Zeller for drawing this to my attention.
(They gave their lives for you). This memorial will not be removed but now stands in the same park as a memorial which draws attention to the victims of the crimes committed by those forces.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MEMORIAL DEBATES

Looking at Zimbabwe, Werbner argued: “The conflict between popular and state memorialization reaches to the very right of a citizen to have a recognized memory in public, to have the politically caused trauma and loss openly acknowledged.” (1998: 100) Memorials offer the potential to not only begin processes of healing but also to affect broader power relations. This may seem a tall order in a country such as Namibia where Swapo once again won roughly three-quarters of the vote in the presidential and national assembly elections in late 2009 (Electoral Commission of Namibia). But, voters in Namibia tend to vote for Swapo as the “liberator from settler colonialism” rather than for its ability to delivery services or address poverty and inequality (Melber 2009). This underlines the centrality of Swapo’s narrative of liberation to its continued dominance of national politics. If new memorializations begin to popularize alternative narratives of history that place Swapo’s actions alongside those of other actors, they may provide new opportunities for the growth of opposition parties.

Unlike Zimbabwe, in Namibia, non-state actors and opposition groups have been able to establish publicly recognized memorials and alternative commemorations that have also been recognized by government leaders. Despite Swapo’s clear interest in presenting its own narrative of history, one that extols the past victories of the governing party and works to encourage continued voter support, the Namibian government has been pressed to attend ceremonies as part of three significant commemorations: the 100 year anniversary of the Herero uprising, the Nama commemorations on Shark Island, and the inauguration of the Swakopmund Memorial Park. Each of these directly challenges Swapo’s argument that it singularly led the liberation struggle. Recognition of the Herero and Nama genocides also threatens to draw attention to Herero and Nama communities at the expense of the majority Ovambo-speakers who comprise Swapo’s key constituency. While reparations from Germany are highly unlikely, even targeted aid programs would presumably divert resources away from the state as the German government would decrease overall development aid to focus on aid to Herero and Nama communities. These factors make Namibian government support for key alternative commemorative events counterintuitive at best.
High level government representatives have attended these events in response to a combination of internal and external pressures. Domestic memorial activists have called upon the German government in their quest for reconciliation and the German government has sought domestic partners creating a modified boomerang effect (Keck and Sikkink 1998). Namibian memorial activists have reached out to the German state generally through the German embassy in Windhoek and once the German embassy agrees to send official representation to a memorial event, this puts pressure on the Namibian government to do so as well. But, the German government has also initiated events in order to present itself as addressing the past, short of offering reparations. When Namibian government representatives attend commemorative events and speak at these events, they give support to the counter narratives of liberation that the activists present.

While government leaders had not accepted invitations to earlier Herero-organized commemorative events during the 100 year anniversary of the Herero uprising and genocide, it did send a prominent representative to the 100 year commemoration of the battle of Ohamakari which led to genocide against the Herero. Minister Pohamba, the chosen successor to President Nujoma who would assume the presidency the following year, attended. His participation was necessitated by the German Minister for Economic Co-operation, Heidemare Wieczorek-Zeul who traveled from Germany to speak at the event and inaugurate a German-financed Namibian cultural center. At the commemoration, Wieczorek-Zeul surprised the audience by offering what turned out to be an unauthorized apology for the German genocide of the Nama and Herero people (New Era Aug 23, 2004). No less significantly, Pohamba then spoke on the importance of recognizing the significance of this early history. Similarly, the inauguration of the Swakopmund Memorial Park in 2009, funded in part by the German embassy, was attended by both a representative of the German and of the Namibian government.

In mid 2009, New Era, the state-owned newspaper, reported that “Lüderitz’s history has become a national priority, and all who know or have heard stories about what happened on Shark Island are requested to contact the committee [to share their stories].” (August 31, 2009) The Ministry of Youth, National Service, Sport and Culture is overseeing the project which includes restoring the gravesites in nearby Lüderitzbucht where Cornelius Fredericks is presumed to be buried. Government officers have also suggested the Island might become a World Heritage Site (New Era August 31, 2009). These government actions fulfill a number of
the plans that Nama activists such as Pastor Isaac Fredericks have long worked to implement (author interview August 22, 2008). The government has also announced that it will inaugurate the site on Heroes’ Day in 2010. While this goes against the government’s repeated annual focus on Swapo struggles and victories on Heroes’ Day, the German government plans to repatriate the stolen skulls to Namibia in 2010. The skulls of the slain Namibians as well as human remains found in a nearby mass grave are to be buried on Shark’s Island (The Namibian August 13, 2009) and representatives of the German government are sure to attend the ceremony.

While the government of Germany has continued to deny claims for reparation, through its actions, it is having an unexpected impact upon Namibian memorial politics. It is amplifying the voice of communities long silenced by the Namibian government. The Namibian government has, however, also continued to pursue its own plans to redefine Namibia’s memoriescape. While many outspoken Namibians opposed the Reiterdenkmal, the government stood firm because it was moving the statue to make room for its new Independence Museum. The cabinet approved the plans for the museum with no real public discussion in 2001, and the museum is reportedly being built by the same North Korean firm that built Heroes Acre (Namibian July 17, 2008). Numerous critics have raised concern that the museum would “only glorify the actions of the ruling Swapo Party members and ignore other sections of the Namibian population who already resisted oppression a century ago.” One critic raised concern that the government is seeking to “wipe out our rightful place in the liberation history by erecting this museum on the very soil where our ancestors perished in concentration camps”. (Namibian July 11, 2008). While a minister responded that the government would include everyone in the planning for the museum, construction began without public consultation.25 The government has, however, promised to return the Reiter to a spot about 100 yards away from where it previously stood. The new spot is also one that also overlooks much of the city.

Clearly change in Namibia’s memoriescape will be a slow and halting process. But, memorial activists have achieved some successes in creating a more diversified public presentation of their history. While this may be a small step, its potential significance is

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25 The new Independence Museum is being built after another post-colonial museum project has stalled. In 2004, a Military Museum was built in Okahandja, also reportedly by a North Korean firm. It includes a larger-than-life mural of Swapo leader and the country’s first President, Sam Nujoma (Namibian March 20, 2008). By late 2009, the museum had still not been opened to the public.
considerable. In late 2009, Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy marked the end of WWI together for the first time by laying wreaths at the tomb of the unknown soldier in Paris. Sarkozy spoke of the importance of remembrance arguing that this act worked “to consolidate the present and prepare the future.” (New York Times Nov. 12, 2009: 8) Namibia’s new memorials and the state’s recognition of these memorials opens the door, if only a bit, for a new future that is more inclusive of all Namibians. It challenges attempts to silence those who lack political and economic power. The development of once marginalized voices is significant in and of itself, but is particularly so in a state where the dominant party’s voter appeal is so overwhelming and draws upon its self-presentation as the singular force for liberation.
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