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Diversity in the Postcolonial State: The case of the return of looted heirlooms from Germany to Namibia in 2019

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Abstract

The restitution of the bible and the riding whip of Namibian national hero Hendrik Witbooi, which had been looted during colonial conquest by Germany in 1893, triggered a controversy that points to fundamental contradictions of the postcolonial state. In particular, the official narrative that highlights unity over diverse historical experience is called into question. In early 2019, issues coalesced around the question of ownership to the restituted heirlooms. These relate to the colonial roots of the Namibian state and its homogenising thrust.

Keywords: Memory – restitution – territoriality – Postcolonial State – Namibia.

SUMMARY: 1. Introduction. 2. Wanderings of a bible and a whip, or: restitution and its pitfalls. 3. At the origins of the Namibian state. 4. The hegemonic narrative and diversity. 5. The Postcolonial State and its colonial heritage.

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1. *Introduction*

At times, seemingly obvious and simple actions expose fundamental contradictions. This is true of the postcolonial situation that exists between Namibia and Germany. In the course of the first restitution by a German state entity of objects looted from its former colony in February 2019, unexpected conflicts, pitfalls, controversies and, in particular, postcolonial entanglements became apparent. Such situations can be termed as postcolonial precisely because they articulate both the persistence of colonialism and its multi-sided nature, which continues to affect both the former colony and its metropole, albeit not in the same forms or on equal terms. Of particular relevance to the topics treated in this paper are diversity and the handling of problems stemming from it by officialdom, including the government and the ruling party, in postcolonial Namibia. The first experience of restitution to Namibia of cultural goods acquired by a German institution in a colonial context brought out some fundamental issues which point to central traits of the postcolonial state and the specific postcolonial situation of Namibia. These problems will be at the centre of this contribution, whereas I shall only briefly recapitulate the actual process of restitution itself¹.

In the following paragraphs, I would like to set out two main and interrelated propositions. First, restitutions of robbed cultural objects, as well as of deported human remains, while unquestionably necessary, still can in no way undo the impact and consequences of colonialism; it can even be said that such consequences become re-articulated in fresh conflicts on the ground. Second, this is reflected in practices of the postcolonial state, which, as in the case that occasioned this paper, positions itself as the immediate heir of the colonial state. In important ways, the colonial state has provided the groundwork on which the postcolonial state rests. Besides bureaucratic practice, this applies in particular to the principle of territoriality, which appears as germane to the present case study. After a brief rehearsal of the circumstances surrounding the restitution of two important heirlooms from the ethnological museum in Stuttgart, capital of the German state of Baden-Württemberg, I shall pinpoint my first conclusion, concerning the predicaments of such actions which cannot undo the effects of colonial rule. Following this, the practice of the Namibian state and its representatives in this particular case, as in other respects as well, is shown not only to underscore this finding, but also to point to broader issues around the handling of diversity, as also epitomised in conceptions of national history in independent Namibia.

¹ For such an account, see R. Köbler, *The Bible and the Whip – Entanglements around the restitution of robbed heirlooms* in *Arnold Bergstraesser Institute Working Paper no 12*, Freiburg, 2019; https://www.arnold-bergstraesser.de/sites/default/files/field/pub-download/kossler_the_bible_the_whip_final_0.pdf (last accessed 8.12.2019). The observation of the restitution was made possible since I was included in the delegation of the Ministry of Science and the Arts of Baden-Württemberg, which I gratefully acknowledge.

2. *Wanderings of a bible and a whip, or: restitution and its pitfalls*

It had been known for some years that the ethnological museum in Stuttgart, the Linden Museum, was in possession of the family bible and the riding whip of Hendrik Witbooi (Auta !Nanseb), renowned for his dogged resistance against the establishment of German colonial rule in present-day Namibia in the 1880s/90s as well as a leader in the Nama war of anticolonial resistance (1904-1908). Today, Hendrik Witbooi is acclaimed as a national hero in Namibia. As stated in a catalogue published by the Linden Museum in 2007, the bible and the whip had been captured when on April 12, 1893, members of the German “protection detachment” (*Schutztruppe*) staged a surprise attack against Witbooi’s mountain fastness of Hornkranz near the Gamsberg in west-central Namibia².

In this way, there was no doubt that the acquisition of the two objects had been illegitimate, and restitution was therefore the obvious way forward. Still, it took the resolve and determination both of the museum’s director and of the Ministry of Science and the Arts of Baden-Württemberg (MWK) eventually to go ahead. This was a bold move, also on account of official German policy to hold back in terms of gestures and actions as long as the inter-governmental negotiations between Namibia and Germany over the consequences of the 1904-1908 genocide, in what was then German Southwest Africa, have not been concluded. These talks have been dragging on since late 2015³. At the same time, restitution of cultural objects acquired under colonial, even formally violent circumstances has acquired urgency during the last few years. In the German context, a retarding element in what has emerged as an arduous and drawn-out process of reconciliation consists in the approach of the Foreign Office, which has resulted in procrastinating an apology for colonial rule and in particular for the genocide⁴. It was hoped that the Baden-Württemberg, when forging ahead, could set a benchmark for other German states to follow. The bible and the whip represented a straightforward case. On the Namibian side, things turned out to be far more complex.

The bible and the whip underwent a series of consecutive transformations of their meaning. They had been objects of everyday use, for scripture reading and for horse riding, both vital dimensions of a spiritually highly charged and at the same time, warlike and very mobile group such as the Witbooi. By being looted by the German *soldateska*, they became war trophies as captured personal possessions of the most persistent adversary to German colonial control; upon entering the Linden Museum,

² H. Forkl, *Von Kapstadt bis Windhuk. „Hottentotten“ oder Khoisan? Die Rehabilitierung einer Völkergruppe. Katalog zur gleichnamigen Ausstellung*. Linden-Museum, Stuttgart, 2007, pp. 89, 111.

³ On the genocide, see J. Zimmerer, J. Zeller (Eds.), *Genocide in German South-West Africa: The Colonial War of 1904-1908 in Namibia and Its Aftermath*. Merlin, Monmouth 2008; on the government negotiations, R. Köbller, H. Melber, *Völkermord – und was dann? Die Politik der deutsch-namibischen Vergangenheitsbearbeitung*. Brandes & Apsel, Frankfurt am Main 2017, ch. 3.

⁴ R. Köbller, H. Melber, *Has the relationship between Namibia and Germany sunk to a new low?* <https://theconversation.com/has-the-relationship-between-namibia-and-germany-sunk-to-a-new-low-121329> (last accessed 8.12..2019).

they were part of an ethnological collection, and changed into objects of curiosity, as well as some strictly limited scholarly endeavour and also of a measure of neglect accorded to holdings in the magazine. Now, through restitution, the objects underwent further transformations. For the institutions that were involved in the restitution, the bible and the whip again took on diverse meanings. For the museum, this was a responsibility its leadership assumed after a lengthy process involving some foot dragging; similarly, the MWK had come to take the stance for restitution after a lengthy process. Thus, the bible and the whip took on symbolic meanings in the context of setting this right and also of opening a broader relationship with Namibia in the cultural field.

In Namibia, the two objects are regarded as heirlooms, closely related to the venerated and legendary Hendrik Witbooi. They again were turned into his former personal possessions, but they were now also linked to the somewhat divergent myths that surround this towering figure. In the event, institutions and representatives of the Namibian state claimed ownership of the bible of the whip precisely on account that the former proprietor, Hendrik Witbooi is regarded as a national hero, while the traditional community of /*Khowesen* or Witbooi and more particularly the closer family claimed ownership as descendants of the great man. Moreover, the bible and the whip are understood as testimonials to an emblematic crime committed in order to enforce colonial rule. Not only was the raid on Hornkranz a brutal massacre, it also marked a milestone in the process of consolidating the territory of what is now Namibia. The colonisation of the South of this country could only be completed by subjugating Hendrik Witbooi and thus the raid was instrumental in creating the territory of the present-day independent state.

The controversy over the meaning of the heirlooms and thereby, their ownership, came into the open rather late in the process, barely a fortnight before the envisaged restitution. It set the stage for intense negotiations and for dramatic negotiations. While not detailing the particulars of these transactions, it is worthwhile to look at the arguments on both sides, since they convey different perspectives on Namibian history, closely related to current issues of diversity, which also played out in the conflict about the restitution.

Shortly before the proposed date of restitution, it became known that an entire web of controversy surrounded the heirlooms. The central issue focused on the protocol during the actual restitution ceremony. Whereas state authorities insisted that the heirlooms were rightly the property of the Namibian state, they envisaged that they should be handed over by Minister Theresia Bauer, of the Ministry of Science and the Arts, Baden-Württemberg Minister to President Hage Geingob. There was no doubt that the ceremony was to take place in Gibeon, the Witbooi traditional capital⁵. However, the group that describe themselves as the Witbooi Royal House, and include the three

⁵ Republic of Namibia, Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture, *Press Statement by Hon. Katrina Hanse-Hirmawa, MP, Minister, on the return of Witbooi bible and whip by the Linder (sic) Museum, City Council of Stuttgart and the State of Baden-Wurttember (sic)*, Windhoek, 14 February 2019, p. 6.

surviving great-granddaughters of Hendrik Witbooi objected strongly against this proposed procedure, since in their view, it violated their own legitimate claims of ownership. Accordingly, the heirlooms should have been returned in the first place to the descendants, in particular to the three great-granddaughters. They would then entrust them to the state, in the person of the President, until such time when there would be a suitable museum in Gibeon for safeguarding these and other historical treasures.

Both sides in this controversy appeared adamant in their positions. In a press statement in which she detailed the proposed programme of the restitution ceremonies, the Namibian Minister of Education and Culture, Katrina Hanse-Hirmawa stressed that «This is a State to State hand-over»; therefore, it was for «the Government and the people of Namibia» to receive the heirloom. The programme mentioned in this press statement did not foresee a visible role of the Witbooi, but it mentioned that the ceremony would be «presided over by His Excellency, Dr. Hage Geingob, President of the Republic of Namibia». This was a clear statement to underline the state's claim of ownership to the heirlooms as well as to the restitution process. However, the statement did mention a «traditional welcoming ceremony in Gibeon» on February 28, the day before the actual handover. It was envisioned in the press statement to create a «Hendrik Witbooi memorial museum in Gibeon [...] where all his artefacts, belongings [...] will be held for exhibition to all Namibians, scholars and international tourists». In its closing paragraphs, the press statement also referred to the renown as Hendrik Witbooi both as a champion of anticolonial resistance and African unity and as a national hero of Namibia⁶.

As mentioned, one section of the Witbooi group⁷ strongly objected to this proposed procedure as well as to its motivation. While stressing that they would welcome the return of the heirlooms to Namibia, in a press statement they contested the «narrative [...] that the assets of the legendary Kaptein Witbooi are state assets due to his National figure profile and inscription of the journals of Kaptein Hendrik Witbooi in the memory of the World Register». This was deemed «disheartening and disrespectful». The statement further stressed that it was «the surviving direct descendants ... of Auta !Nanseb» who ought to «receive these items on behalf of the Witbooi Royal House and Clan at large». These would be the three surviving great-granddaughters of the old Kaptein. It was further argued that at the time of the attack on Hornkranz «in 1893 [...] Kaptein Hendrik Witbooi was neither under a German protection treaty nor was he party to a Peace accord. Therefore the return of these artefacts cannot be treated as an exclusive state to state handover event». Finally, the Royal House stated that they «did not abdicate the rights and privileges vested in them and have never asked any other clan, formation or Government to speak on their behalf». They therefore demanded that

⁶ Republic of Namibia, Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture, cit, p. 6, 3.

⁷ Reference is to the group siding with Solomon Josephat Witbooi in the leadership contest which at that time was as yet unresolved. Meanwhile, according to a decision by a court of law, Ismael Witbooi has been installed as *goab* or *Kaptein*, but this remains contested. His side did not issue a public statement of their own.

«the Namibian and German governments [...] involve the affected community in this process». The blame for the whole predicament was clearly at the door of the Ministry, as the statement concluded with a plea that the «repatriation process» be «escalated» to «the higher echelons of the state and remove(ed) from what has become the proverbial ‘poisoned chalice’ [...] the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture»⁸.

These last remarks point quite clearly to the highly controversial Minister at the time. Hanse-Hirmawa⁹ herself is from the area which is considered as traditional Witbooi territory and before her ministerial appointment had served as governor of Hardap Region, which also includes Gibeon. Still, the gist of the matter refers to fundamental issues of the postcolonial state and its territoriality. The Witbooi group contested the state’s claims to ownership by referring to the intertwined issues of the circumstances under which the heirlooms had been robbed, and the constitution of the territory of what is now the Republic of Namibia. This warrants some further consideration.

3. *At the origins of the Namibian state*

The raid on Hornkranz, when the bible and the whip were captured, marks a vital turning point in the process of colonisation of Namibia. The watershed position of this event was highlighted in the conflict over ownership of the heirlooms just outlined. The assault in 1893 was motivated by the dogged resistance of Hendrik Witbooi and his group to succumb to colonial rule. Consistently and with clairvoyant arguments against the principle of colonial rule, Hendrik Witbooi had refused to sign a protection treaty that would have placed him under the colonial control of the German Empire. He was the last among the traditional leaders in southern and central Namibia not to sign such a treaty. In various statements, mainly directed to other traditional leaders in the region, Witbooi underlined his unwillingness to «surrender [...] under the government by another, by White people»¹⁰, and stressed his claim to untrammelled control and ownership of his realm, as he recognised those of others, asserting «essentially European concepts of territoriality in the Namibian context»¹¹. This concept was based, Witbooi argued, on the divine right of kings, «for every leader on this earth is merely a steward for our common great God, and is answerable to this great God alone»¹². This notion of heavenly ordained rule was maintained by Witbooi spokespersons also in later years, such as in the face of South African rule¹³.

On the basis of such claims to a distinct territory, Witbooi asserted sovereignty on an equal footing with European powers: «Damaraland [Hereroland] belongs to the Herero nation alone and is an independent kingdom on its land, and Namaland belongs solely to

⁸ Office of the Witbooi Royal House, *Press Statement for immediate release*, 19.2.2019.

⁹ A few months later, Hanse-Hirmawa was forced to resign after being convicted of corruption.

¹⁰ H. Witbooi, *The Hendrik Witbooi Papers*. 2nd rev.& enl. ed., Archeia, Windhoek, 1995, p. 52.

¹¹ M. Wallace, *A History of Namibia from the Beginning to 1990*, Hurst, London, 2011, p. 125.

¹² Witbooi, *Papers*, cit., p. 50.

¹³ R. Köbller, *In search of survival and dignity. Two traditional communities in Southern Namibia under South African rule*, Windhoek, 2005, p. 226.

all the red coloured nations, and these are also independent kingdoms just as it is said of the White man's countries, Germany and England and so on ...»¹⁴. Moreover, Witbooi underscored his right to ownership of all of Great Namaqualand, which historically had been the realm of the Red Nation (*Gai-//khaun*) but, as Witbooi claimed, had passed over into the hands of his grandfather and later his own, because they had vanquished the Red Nation's Kaptein, //Oaseb, and later //Oaseb's successor, Manasse !Noreseb, in war. Here, Witbooi clearly asserted the right of property through conquest: «Namaqualand has been bought twice over with blood [...] and old //Oaseb's land is now mine [...] according to the universally recognised law of conquest». For Witbooi, this entailed full rights of disposal of his own free will: «I can do with my land as I see fit»¹⁵. It would, however, be mistaken to read this solely in the sense of a claim to full rights of property in a modern sense¹⁶, since Witbooi immediately declared his main concern, his exclusive right to grant or refuse rights of residence to outsiders. As he stated several times in his correspondence, this right had been violated by other actors, including other chiefs in the region but in particular the fledgling German colonial power. He consistently warned his fellow chiefs about the dangers of the expanding colonial rule.

When in the course of the campaign that followed the raid on Hornkranz, Witbooi was cornered in the Naukluft mountains in August 1894, he continued to defy the demands of commissioner Theodor Leutwein: «I have never in my life met the German Emperor [...] God has given us different kingdoms on earth [...] I [...] want to remain the independent chief of my country and my people.». He further stated that he was prepared to die «for that which is my own»¹⁷.

In this way, Witbooi asserted that he was on an equal footing with the emperor. One might say, he stated the fundamental principle of the Westphalian system, which is based on the mutual recognition of sovereigns and on the equality and mutual independence of these sovereigns. It is important to note that, precisely at the time when Africa was divided into colonial realms and German colonial rule was enforced in Namibia, the notion of sovereignty, along with that of legitimate belligerents and those deemed capable of entering international treaties, was undergoing fundamental change. In particular, Asian and African sovereigns, who until that time had been treated as equals by their West European counterparts, were now stripped of their status as equal participants in the international system. As a consequence, existing treaties were openly abrogated and broken¹⁸.

¹⁴ Witbooi, *Papers*, cit., p. 50; compared with the original Cape Dutch version, H. Witbooi, *Die Dagboek van Hendrik Witbooi, Kaptein van die Witbooi-Hottentotte*, The van Riebeeck Society, Cape Town, 1929, p. 78.

¹⁵ Witbooi, *Papers*, cit., p. 100.

¹⁶ For the definition of *Ius utendi et abutendi*, cf. I. Kant, *Die Metaphysik der Sitten*, in Weisschedel, *Werke*, Sonderausgabe, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt, 1956, Vol. 7, pp. 366, 387.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 174; Witbooi, *Dagboek*, cit., p. 223.

¹⁸ Cf. H. Kleinschmidt, *Diskriminierung durch Vertrag und Krieg* in *Historische Zeitschrift, Supplement* [new series], Vol. 59, Oldenbourg, Munich.

Witbooi combined political acumen with a charismatic personality and a claim to be pursuing a divinely ordained mission intimated to him by visions. In projecting this image, he was very successful in attracting followers from diverse groups across southern Namibia. These people went well beyond what might be considered an ethnically bounded polity, /*Khowesen*, but rather represented a socio-political movement or a kind of proto-party. As such, Hendrik Witbooi and his group constituted the «greatest obstacle to the early establishment of colonial power» and to the completion of German conquest in southern Namibia¹⁹.

The raid on the mountain fastness of Hornkranz, then, was of great strategic significance. This was also acknowledged by commissioner (*Landeshauptmann*) Theodor Leutwein. In a response to Witbooi, Leutwein stressed that the modalities of this attack might be questioned, but overall, it had been instrumental in providing the «calm and peace» of the region²⁰. As any graduate of a German grammar school, such as Leutwein, would have been aware, the idea of such “pacification” was a time-worn euphemism for the most brutal forms of conquest, going back to Caesar’s account of his exploits in the Roman conquest of Gaul. In this case, “pacification” by brute force served the aim not only of eliminating the one remaining serious challenge to the fledgling colonial power in southern Namibia, but also of forestalling the potential consequences of the negotiations that Witbooi was conducting with other regional chiefs to form an alliance against the colonialists²¹. Again, such an alliance, which was intended to include also Samuel Maharero, the head of the most powerful *Ovaherero* community based in Okahandja, would not only have overcome long-standing feuds, but would also have constituted a very serious threat to the still fragile colonial dominion the Germans had established.

The raid, then, can be considered to symbolise a decisive turning point. It also constituted a brutal attempt to violently enforce that which the colonialists had not been able to achieve by negotiation. It should be remembered that the carnage took more than eighty lives, the great majority of them women and children. Most of the mounted fighters managed to escape and continue guerrilla warfare for another one and a half years before being forced to surrender when encircled in the Naukluft mountains. The protection treaty Leutwein had extracted forcibly in this way obliged Hendrik Witbooi to provide auxiliary troops for the numerous punitive expeditions during the following decade. A considerable Witbooi detachment was present at the battle at the Waterberg on 11 August 1904, which signalled the beginning of the genocide against the *Ovaherero*²². On 4 October 1904, Hendrik Witbooi, now well into his seventies, resolved to resume his resistance and launched a *guerrilla* war that was to last for several years and involved the majority of the *Nama* groups in southern Namibia. As his

¹⁹ Wallace, *History*, cit., p. 125.

²⁰ See Witbooi, *Papers*, cit., p. 179.

²¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 93–97, 103–106, 108–118, 124–125.

²² W. Hillebrecht, Hendrik Witbooi and Samuel Maharero: The Ambiguity of Heroes in: J. Silvester (Ed.), *Re-Viewing Resistance in Namibian History*. Windhoek 2015, p.49-50.

motivation, Witbooi confessed that «all the souls which have for the last ten years perished [...] without guilt or cause, without the justification of warfare in time of peace, and under treaties of peace, accuse me»²³. He was killed in action on 29 October 1905 at Vaalgras, northeast of Keetmanshoop. During the months that followed, most *Nama* detachments, including */Khowesen*, capitulated to the Germans. Contrary to assurances, */Khowesen* were not allowed to remain settled in Gibeon. They were deported, first via Kub to the concentration camp in Windhoek and then to the even more deadly concentration camp on Shark Island in the harbour of Lüderitz. In a petition to the South African authorities more than a decade later, the group reported that of 3500 persons taken there, 3307 had died²⁴. Members of the Witbooi group were also deported to Togo and Cameroon²⁵.

One of the manifold symbolical meanings of the bible and the whip consists in their having become symbols of an emblematic crime committed in order to enforce colonial rule. Not only was the raid on Hornkranz a brutal massacre, it also marked a milestone in the process of consolidating the territory of what is now Namibia. The colonisation of the South of this country could only be consummated by subjugating Hendrik Witbooi. For this reason, the raid was instrumental in creating the territory of the present-day independent state. This territory has formed the frame of reference for a national liberation movement that laid claim to galvanise all layers of society and all ethnic groups, to be represented in the dominant organisation, the *Southwest African People's Organisation* (SWAPO), today *Swapo Party*, the ruling party of independent Namibia since 1990.

Obviously, the Witbooi group based their claim on precisely these historical circumstances. In this way, the controversy around the heirlooms clearly highlights the difficult situation of subnational groups in Namibia – and arguably in other postcolonies – inasmuch as they claim the right and the competence to address autonomously, well beyond and independent of governmental policy, the anti-colonial resistance of their ancestors, their sacrifice and their suffering.

Such arguments are closely related to the broader issues of constructing national identity and a corresponding national narrative in independent Namibia²⁶, and they run counter to the hegemonic version followed by *Swapo* in government.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 193.

²⁴ See R. Kößler, *From hailing the English flag to asking for UN control: Witbooi petitions and appeals under South African rule, 1919–1956* in *Journal*, Namibia Scientific Society, Vol. 47, 1999, pp. 51/61.

²⁵ Cf. W. Hillebrecht, H. Melber, *Von den Deutschen verschleppt: Spurensicherung*, in N. Mbumba, H. Patemann, U. Katjivena (Eds.). *Ein Land, eine Zukunft: Namibia auf dem Weg in die Unabhängigkeit*, Peter Hammer, Wuppertal, 1988, pp. 132–150; R. Kößler, *In search op.cit.*, p. 182.

²⁶ Cf. R. Kößler. *Facing a fragmented past: Memory, culture and politics in Namibia*, in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 33, 2007, pp. 361–82.

4. *The hegemonic narrative and diversity*

Since independence, the Namibian government has pursued a historical narrative that focuses on national unity and privileges the military and diplomatic dimensions of the liberation struggle of the 1960s to 1990. Not least, primary anti-colonial resistance²⁷ is relegated to the margins. This concerns the continuous struggles in the Centre and South of the country during the first two decades of colonial intrusion as well as the genocide of 1904–1908. Due to the limited regional extent of colonial power at the time, the genocide was perpetrated in central and southern Namibia, while the northern regions were spared most of the carnage as well as the expropriation of land and the implantation of settler colonialism that followed the war.

Over the years, this hegemonic narrative has known certain variations. Thus, in 2006 the adoption of a resolution by the National Assembly that called on the government to facilitate negotiations with Germany concerning the genocide ushered in a phase where the government can be said to have co-opted the concerns of the victim communities²⁸. As emerged in early 2014, when the second repatriation of human remains from Germany to Namibia coincided with the opening of the Independence Memorial Museum in Windhoek²⁹, such co-optation implied less an effort to accommodate specific, possibly varying concerns, but rather a re-assertion of the hegemonic narrative. This view of history may be seen graphically in the exhibitions and particularly in the murals displayed in the Independence Memorial Museum³⁰. For present purposes, the most relevant features are the projections of precolonial harmony, which are represented mainly by unspecified ethnographic objects, and the representation of unified resistance of all ethnic groups in Namibia in a mural featuring an array of leaders from across the country as well as the time period of ca. 1850–1930. Accompanying photographic images also flatten the chronology, thus inserting pictures from the South African Northern Campaign of 1917 into the ‘Scramble for Africa’, which is usually referred to as having taken place from the 1860s to early 1890s. In this way, the northern regions of Namibia, which at that time were virtually untouched by German colonialism, are made to appear as though they had been part of the story. Again, the Genocide Memorial outside the museum, featuring the «lean, muscular [...] and erect» bodies of a woman and a man with raised fists, represents less the «unspeakable torment of the genocide»

²⁷ Cf. T. Ranger, *Connections between ‘Primary Resistance’ Movements and Modern Mass Nationalism in East and Central Africa Part I* in *Journal of African History* Vol. ix, 1968; C. Sigrist, *Emanzipationsbewegungen in abhängigen Gesellschaften*, in M. Greiffenhagen (Ed.), *Emanzipation*, Hoffmann & Campe, Hamburg 1973.

²⁸ R. Niezen, *Speaking for the dead: The memorial politics of genocide in Namibia and Germany*, in *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, Vol. 24, 2018, pp. 547–567.

²⁹ Cf. R. Köbler, *Namibia and Germany. Negotiating the Past*. University of Namibia Press, Windhoek 2015, pp. 306–316 and 324–326.

³⁰ I refer to a number of visits in 2014, 2018 and 2019.

of 1904–1908 than the heroism that eventually achieved liberation³¹. Significantly, shortly after this memorial had been unveiled, a request was made for a special plaque to refer to the suffering of *OvaHerero*. The responsible Minister rejected this idea, arguing that the genocide had extended over the entire colonial period (1904–1908) and thus, the memorial would also address this pervasive suffering of the people of Namibia³². This exchange highlights the thrust of the hegemonic narrative to level down any difference in historical experience, ostensibly in the interests of projecting national unity.

The Namibian government pressed its claim to ownership of the heirlooms by the Namibian state on account that they had belonged to the “national hero”, Hendrik Witbooi. In this way, the quality of “national hero” set Witbooi apart from the supposedly particularistic or tribalistic opposing claims to ownership by the Witbooi family or */Khowese* ethnic group. Largely in the person of Minister Hanse-Hirmawa, the government insisted on precisely the kind of national narrative outlined above. Ostensibly in the interests of the unity and sovereignty of independent Namibia, this narrative obliterates actually existing differences in historical experiences as well as current challenges. Denial of the deep contradiction between the aspiration to overcome colonialism on the one hand and the strictly speaking postcolonial situation in which Namibia – and certainly the world, including former colonial powers such as Germany – finds itself, does not help to resolve real-world conflicts, such as that which emerged with regard to the restitution of the bible and the whip.

5. *The postcolonial state and its colonial heritage*

In this way, the controversy highlighted an important dimension within the overall complexity of the postcolonial situation, the imposition of the colonial state and its consequences which persist beyond the formal termination of colonialism: what was imposed by colonisation was above all a version of the modern state onto the colonised regions. Importantly, also in its regions of origin, this process was, in most cases, marked by extensive and long-term violence. In this respect, colonial state making was not so different from the emergence of the modern state in its region of origin, Western Europe. Generally, the modern state was a result of external war making and the violent internal enforcement of “peace”³³. For colonial and postcolonial situations, generally a plurality of orders is observed: Analyses of legal or institutional pluralism, otherwise,

³¹ H. Becker, *Changing Urbanscapes: Colonial and Postcolonial Monuments in Windhoek* in *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, Vol. 27, 2018, pp. 15–16.

³² Cf. R. Kößler, *Namibia and Germany*, cit., p. 315.

³³ Cf. A. Giddens, *The Nation-State and Violence. Volume two of a contemporary critique of historical materialism*. Polity, Cambridge 1988; E. Krippendorff, *Staat und Krieg. Die historische Logik politischer Unvernunft*. Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1988; C. Tilly, *War making and state making as organized crime*, in P. Evans, D. Rueschemeyer, T. Skocpol (Eds.), *Bringing the State Back In*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 169–186.

“heterarchy” refer to the co-existence, frequently also the competition, between rules and practices enforced by the modern, central state and other forms of order that are distinct from this state. Generally, such “local” or “traditional” orders are observed to follow social logics that diverge from the modern state³⁴.

This general observation helps to put into perspective what happened in southern and central Namibia during the 1880s and 1890s and thus also to further an understanding of the context in which the bible and the whip had been captured, as referred to in the Witbooi supposition. The campaign to establish German colonial rule in Namibia was a case of projecting the modern state overseas, by a foreign, colonial power. When in 1894, Hendrik Witbooi finally was forced into signing a protection treaty, this process came to a first conclusion, since now, the colonial power was in at least formal control of the entire territory it claimed in southern and central Namibia. On this count, the raid on Hornkranz, along with the taking of the bible and the whip as booty, can be seen as an important milestone in the imposition of modern statehood.

Again, this process of installing a state, with a claim of encompassing sovereignty over its territory, is something that is next to irreversible in a world where the international community is made up exclusively of such entities. States can change by being amalgamated or split up, boundaries can be moved, even though such changes are fraught with violence and grave risks. However, such transformations do not impinge on the principles of modern statehood. It certainly was not reversed by independence. As has been observed many times, the end of formal colonial rule has not brought back precolonial conditions, but has merely changed the face of modern statehood. Namibia is no exception in this respect.

This continuity of the state, then, is inscribed into the postcolonial situation. What is more, it was already inherent in the quest for independence, as far as this quest was aimed at establishing a sovereign, modern state on the colonially defined territory. Even liberation nationalism, which has long been seen not only as the most radical form of resistance to colonialism, but also as a kind of prophylaxis against the ravages of neo-colonialism, has consistently referred to these territorial frameworks.

In a situation as prevailed in Namibia, where the South African occupation regime actively manipulated ethnicity and diversity in the service of its Apartheid strategy, the quest for national unity was obvious. Such a perspective feeds into the pervasive insistence on national unity that characterises much of the rhetoric of post-colonial states, and certainly the discourse of the Namibian government³⁵. The quest for unity is

³⁴ See e.g., T. von Trotha, *The Problem of Violence. Some Theoretical Remarks about ‘Regulative Orders of Violence’, Political Heterarchy, and Dispute Regulation beyond the State* in G. Klute, B. Embaló (Eds.), *The Problem of Violence. Local Conflict Settlement in Contemporary Africa*, Rüdiger Köppe, Cologne 2011; Köbler, *In Search*, cit., pp. 253-259

³⁵ M. Akuupa, G. Kornes, *From “One Namibia, One Nation” towards “Unity in Diversity”? Shifting representations of culture and nationhood in Namibian Independence Day celebrations 1990-2010*, in *Anthropology Southern Africa*, Vol. 36 2013, pp. 34-46; H. Becker, *From “to die a tribe and be born a nation” towards “culture, the foundation of a nation”: the shifting politics and aesthetics of Namibian nationalism*, in *Journal of Namibian Studies*, Vol. 18, 2015, pp. 21-35.

pursued to the point where it subdues, or even represses, diversity. This has been seen in the treatment of the Witbooi heirlooms. A very similar approach lies at the roots of the deep conflict that evolved around the role of the affected communities in the Namibian-German government negotiations over the consequences of the 1904-1908 genocide that in late 2019 are entering their fifth year³⁶. The claim for an autonomous role in the negotiations for victim communities in their own right is based, *inter alia*, on the rights guaranteed to indigenous minorities under ILO and UN conventions³⁷. The Namibian government relies on its democratically founded mandate to represent all Namibians. Moreover, the government points to the need to uphold Namibia's hard-won independence and sovereignty, as the last colony on the African mainland to gain independence, only in 1990. There is little chance for an easy compromise in this conflict, let alone for a constructive solution of this fundamental contradiction.

To understand the import of the issue, again we need to consider the foundations of modern, territorial states. Regardless of their current institutional make-up, it is inconceivable for states in their constitutional boundaries to be the result of a democratic process of self-determination. Such processes can begin at best once the territory is delimited, which is contingent on a host of factors mostly beyond the control of the inhabitants³⁸. This feature is common to all modern states, and by no means restricted to postcolonial situations. It is a strong argument for minority rights, since inclusion into the territory of any state is also beyond the control of communities. Arguably, objections raised against the assertion of indigenous rights in Africa, such as that these rights would not apply on a continent that is the cradle of mankind and thus such claims result from outside interventions³⁹, miss the point of minority situations.

Systematically, such problems related to minorities arise not so much from the much-invoked artificial boundaries of modern states – such boundaries are artificial by definition⁴⁰, as can easily be ascertained by reference to a language map of Europe where language criss-cross state borders, except in cases of prior ethnic cleansing. The issue lies rather in a further general feature of the nation state, its homogenising thrust,

³⁶ See R. Köbller, H. Melber, *Völkermord – und was dann? Die Politik der deutsch-namibischen Vergangenheitsbearbeitung*, Brandes & Apsel, Frankfurt am Main 2017, pp. 76-18; R. Köbller, *Postcolonial asymmetry: Coping with the consequences of genocide between Namibia and Germany*, in Monika Albrecht (Ed.), *Postcolonialism Cross-Examined. Multi-Directional Perspectives on Imperial and Colonial Pasts and the Neocolonial Present*, Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon & New York, NY 2020, pp. 126-128, <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/e/9780367222543> (last accessed 8.12.2018).

³⁷ International Labour Organisation: C169 - Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No. 169) http://ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C169 (8.12.2019); Resolution, adopted by the UN General Assembly on 13 September 2007 <https://undocs.org/A/RES/61/295> (last accessed 8.12.2019).

³⁸ Cf. C. Offe, "Homogenität" im Verfassungsstaat – Sind politische Gruppenrechte eine adäquate Antwort auf Identitätskonflikte?, in *Peripherie*, Vol. 64, 1996, pp. 26-27.

³⁹ See e.g. M. Pelican, *Ethnicity as a Political Resource. Indigenous Rights Movements in Africa*, in University of Cologne Forum 'Ethnicity as a Political Resource' (Eds.), *Ethnicity as a Political Resource. Conceptualisations across Disciplines, Regions and Periods*. Bielefeld: Transcript, pp. 135-150.

⁴⁰ See Giddens, cit.

which plays out quite regardless of whether the national nexus is based on ethnic claims or not. While there are exceptions, most notably Switzerland, the general tendency has for a long time been towards uniformity, even though this comes in quite diverse versions. In any case, the template of the original nation state has been the viable state with a hegemonic cultural pattern⁴¹.

Thus, the claims and argumentative stances that arose around the bible and the whip – even at a rather late hour – are difficult to reconcile. These stances go to the roots of the postcolonial state and indicate clearly distinct perspectives on the experience of colonialism and anti-colonial resistance as well as the liberation struggle, which in Namibia lasted altogether for more than a century. The government insists on a version that sees the Namibian people as united from the very beginning in its struggle against colonial rule and also uniformly subjected to the sufferings this rule entailed. Such a conception runs counter to the diversity of a country that, even though sparsely populated, is vast in its geographical extent.

The tension was brought out clearly when in his speech on occasion of the restitution of the bible and the whip, President Geingob reminded Namibians that colonialism and Apartheid have been overcome and must not return «never again» – a phrase he repeated three times⁴². This was a clear reference to the discourse of liberation nationalism, looking back at the foreign oppression that has been overcome; to safeguard against its return, the nation needs to unite. For good measure, Geingob added that Germany «must eat humble pie» in recognising the wrongs of the past. One may see it as a complement to this discourse when a few months later, in the run up to national elections, Geingob claimed that «Swapo liberated the people of Namibia from the tyranny of apartheid» (*New Era*, 21.10.2019), casting the people of Namibia into the role of recipients with the liberation organization, now the ruling party, as the only actor.

The experience of the bible and the whip has provided a clear example for a much more complex and contradictory trajectory. This trajectory, and associated narratives, involve a plurality of actors, in this case in particular traditional communities that take their cue from primary anticolonial resistance epitomized here in Hendrik Witbooi. At the same time, this experience clearly shows that the overcoming of colonialism in the form of independence and a nation state cannot undo what has been consummated by colonialism – the imposition of the modern state in which subnational groups such as traditional communities such as the Witbooi//*Khowesen* are still groping to find their role and their way forward.

⁴¹ Cf. E. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1789. Programme, Myth, Reality*, Canto, Cambridge 1992.

⁴² Personal observation, Gibeon, 28 February 2019.

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