

## History, memory and society in Namibia

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Namibian history is an exciting and constantly growing field. Since the country's independence on 21 March 1990, historical studies of its colonial and precolonial pasts have burgeoned. They have forcefully reminded how deeply the past is still inscribed in the present. Historians have also brought into question the idea of a bounded space called Namibia or South West Africa. As elsewhere in colonial and postcolonial Africa, the political borders have been porous. If anything, Namibia's long struggle for independence demonstrates the wide regional, transnational and increasingly global connections. The four articles in this special issue bring to fore these linkages.

Namibia and Finland have deep links extending to the late-nineteenth century, when the Finnish Mission Society began its evangelising activities in Ovamboland. More recently, several Namibians were offered scholarships to universities in Finland and Finnish universities contributed to the training of Namibian historians and social scientists.<sup>1</sup> As Marion Wallace has pointed out, the linguistic and cultural riches and complexities can best be unpacked by Namibian historians.<sup>2</sup> Yet, linguistic challenges remain. Mostly written in Finnish and Swedish, missionary materials and other sources produced by Finns remain inaccessible to most Namibians. These sources have been used by Finnish historians and anthropologists to analyse social change in northern Namibia. Pioneered by the missionary historian Matti Peltola, the strongest research tradition on Namibian studies has been based at the University of Eastern Finland (formerly, University of Joensuu) since the 1980s.<sup>3</sup> Problematically, however, research results, especially master's theses, have often been composed only in Finnish, and therefore remain out of reach for Namibians. As an open access online publication, this special issue of the *Nordic Journal of African Studies* can best guarantee the distribution of the articles to Namibian scholars and public.

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<sup>1</sup> Frieda Nela-Williams, *Precolonial Communities of Southwestern Africa: A History of Owambo Kingdoms, 1600-1920* (Windhoek: National Archives of Namibia, 1991); Ellen Ndeshi Namhila, *Recordkeeping and Missing "Native Estate" Records in Namibia: An Investigation of Colonial Gaps in a Post-colonial National Archive* (Tampere: Acta Universitatis Tamperensis, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Marion Wallace, *A History of Namibia: From the Beginning to 1990* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Matti Peltola, *Suomen Lähetysseuran Afrikan työn historia* (Helsinki: Suomen Lähetysseura, 1958); Harri Siiskonen, *Trade and Socioeconomic Change in Ovamboland, 1850-1906* (Helsinki: Suomen Historiallinen Seura, 1990); Veijo Notkola and Harri Siiskonen, *Fertility, Mortality and Migration in SubSaharan Africa: The Case of Ovamboland in North Namibia, 1925-90* (London: Macmillan, 2000); Kari Miettinen, *On the Way to Whiteness: Christianization, Conflict and Change in Colonial Ovamboland, 1910-1965* (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2005).

In the first article, Essi Huuhka addresses a particular event that afflicted Ovamboland in the early twentieth century, namely the famine of 1908–1909. This case provides an insight into the humanitarian aspect of the Finnish mission during the German colonial period. The study focuses on the missionaries' poor relief practices, justifications and explanations of relief, and the role of German colonisers in its distribution. The famine of 1908–1909 was the first time when Finnish missionaries contacted Germans in order to ask them to send famine relief to Ovamboland. Crop failures and famine were common in Ovamboland at the turn of the century and relief work was part of missionaries' every-day work even though it never made sensational headlines in Finland or Germany. Huuhka's contribution demonstrates the concrete policies of distributing relief as well as the divine significance the missionaries attached to the hunger catastrophes.

Like Huuhka, Kaisa Harju examines the Finnish missionary activities in northern Namibia. Her article connects Namibia to the wider theme of African ethnographic collections in Europe, which were created in wake of colonial encounters. Missionaries functioned as links between Africans and museums, scholars and private collectors in Europe and North America. Harju focuses on Finnish missionary Karl Emil Liljeblad as a collector of material culture of the Ovambo people between 1900 and 1932. The Emil Liljeblad collection remains one of the largest collections of material culture of the Ovambo in Finland. By focusing on two main groups of artefacts, religious objects and clothing, the article examines how Liljeblad acquired Ovambo objects and why he chose certain items to his collection. Harju argues that the collection reflects Liljeblad's double role as a missionary and an ethnographic researcher. The collection represented and preserved Liljeblad's research results and his understanding of authentic Ovambo culture but it also reflected Ovambo interests in displaying their material culture to the world beyond South West Africa.

Shifting from history to memory, Heike Becker's article discusses the memorialisation of sites and events in the Namibian public domain. Her focus is on the Namibian Independence Memorial Museum and the Genocide Memorial in Windhoek. The North-Korean built monuments have replaced the Windhoek Rider, a German colonial monument, as the central place of memory politics in the Namibian capital. The North Korean company Mansudae Overseas, which was contracted for the construction project, indicates the global connections Namibia has cultivated in the past decade. The Namibian Independence Memorial Museum's central narrative centres on SWAPO's military struggle for the independence of Namibia. According to Becker, it represents the reiteration of the nationalist 'master narrative' that 'SWAPO brought us freedom through the barrel of a gun'. These constructed sites add new layers of aesthetics and meanings to memories of anti-colonial resistance and national liberation. Yet, they demonstrate less postcolonial nationalism than expected.

In the final article of this thematic issue, Maylin Meincke focuses on the political and social aspects of traditional healing in Namibia. Placing traditional healing in the international context, governed by the World Health Organization, and the national policy making framework, Meincke demonstrates the relative marginalisation of healers in the Namibian context. Although there are regional differences, Namibian primary health care has functioned fairly well and there has been less need to systematically integrate traditional

healers into the healthcare system. In theory, traditional healers have several potential roles in the country's Community Based Health Care policy, but due to political inertia, the legal status of traditional healers remains unclear. Significantly, the article also discusses the professionalisation of traditional medical practice and strategies adopted by healers to attract clients. 'Modern' traditional healers mimic not only biomedical practitioners but also development aid workers. One of Meincke's informants, for example, considers keeping a patient book as essential for a professional and genuine traditional healer. Another seeks to advance his practice by reading books to learn new things. These insights provide an important glimpse into the role of healers in Namibian society.

This thematic collection of articles offers a small contribution to the study of history, memory, and society in Namibia. Despite this effort, the editor and authors are aware that many important elements remain to be explored.