



**CHALLENGES OF COLLECTING MEMORIES OF THE  
LIBERATION STRUGGLE IN NAMIBIA: A LEGACY OF POST-  
COLONIAL ARCHIVES**

By  
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## 1. INTRODUCTION

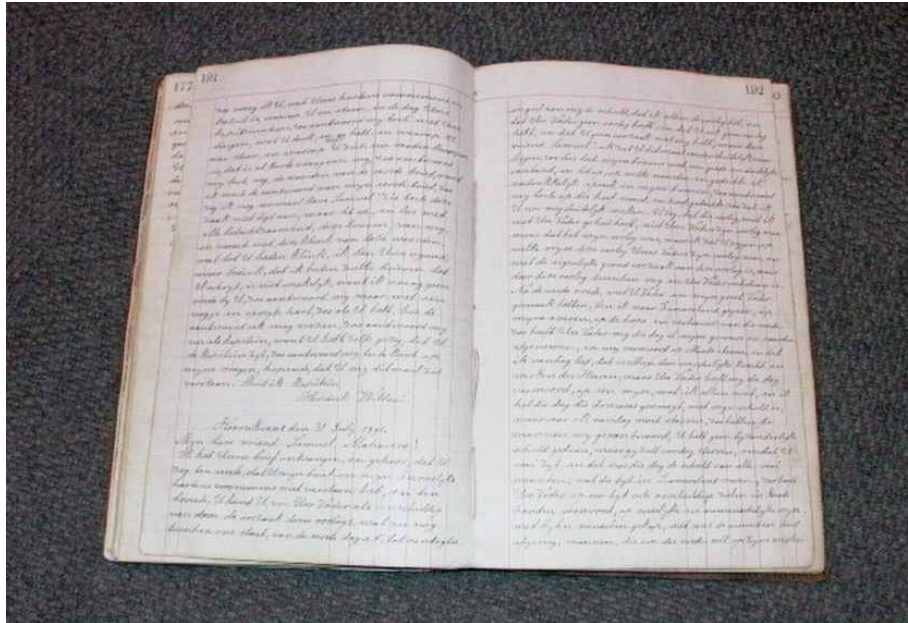
Namibia has a well-established National Archives with a quite comprehensive set of government records since the beginnings of German colonisation in 1884. Archives are about memories of the people and of societies. Archives are about history and identity of a country and its people. It is about who we are, where we had come from, things we did, with whom we did them, whom we met, how we met them, whom we lost and under what circumstances we lost them. However, history had shown us that archives and memories do not start with institutions. In Namibia people had ways of preserving memories of their society<sup>2</sup> and passing them on to future generations, even though they did not establish archives as institutions. The administrative records of traditional leaders which survived wars and destructions of colonial conquests, such as papers of the Chief Maharero Tjamuaha (covering 1860-1887) and Captain Hendrik Witbooi<sup>3</sup> (covering 1880-1905) now form part of the holding of the National Archives of Namibia. However, the modern building and computerised catalogue holdings of the National Archives cannot hide the fact that the country's over 100 years of anti-colonial struggle are not adequately documented.

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<sup>2</sup> The much celebrated /Ui-//aes Twyfelfontein inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage List based on authenticity and integrity of the rock art engravings and paintings which forms a coherent, extensive and high quality record of ritual and economic practices of hunter-gather communities over at least two millennia.

<sup>3</sup> The Hendrik Witbooi papers are since 2005 inscribed on UNESCO Memory of the World Register for its outstanding universal value to heritage of mankind.



Precolonial Records: The Letter-Copy Book of Hendrik Witbooi

### 1.1. THE POWER TO ARCHIVE

Even in developed countries with long-established democracies, historians and archivists see the need to complement the archives with materials beyond government records. National archives always have a strong bias towards the documentation of government activities, towards “official” history and “mainstream” culture. Namibia is not an exception. Indigenous Namibians had no opportunity to influence the processes which selected and structured the records of the colonial administration. What was preserved by the colonial administration as important, were records documenting the colonial interest. They were structured and clustered according to the colonial agenda. For example, if one looks at the archives of the Deeds Office, there is no record or maps documenting land originally occupied by indigenous Namibians. Yet the indigenous people farmed long before the arrival of colonisers and they continued to farm to this day, but their farming activities are not registered anywhere. The maps are only showing which commercial white farmer owned which land. The Archives of colonial administration reflect the selective power to archive.

It is necessary to add alternative materials to the record, neglected histories, diverse and divergent evidence. For example, documentation of the history of social movements, religious or ethnic minorities has increasingly become the subject of archival attention in the last few decades. Archivists find this quite a challenging task, as it may diverge substantially from their established mode of operation and their legal mandate, and may require alternative and additional financial means. The archivists were faced with the big issue: Whether the change from apartheid to democracy meant re-defining the archival modes of collecting, and preserving memories not only those generated by government departments, but by the whole country and its people?

## 2. ARCHIVES OF RESISTANCE

For countries which have emerged recently from colonial or other oppressive rule, the documentation of this alternative history has proven even more challenging. The once “alternative” viewpoint of the liberation movement may have become the “mainstream”

viewpoint, and yesterday's revolutionaries may be today's rulers and hold the state power: but this by no means automatically changes the material held by the archives, or even the focus of archival attention. How can one make the National Archives truly representative of the history and experiences of all the people of the country.



Where is their side of the story? Resistance leaders Kahimemua and Nikodemus before their execution by the German military, 1896

There are many reasons why little archival evidence may remain of a liberation movement. It does not have a strong administrative apparatus to generate records – especially not in its usually very humble beginnings. In our Namibian case, there are very few documents of the first decade of the liberation movements SWAPO and SWANU. Furthermore, their functionaries and structures were forever on the move, either in hiding from the state power, or in exile according to the internal and foreign policy changes of their host countries.<sup>4</sup> Revolutionaries are acutely aware of the dangers of documenting their activities, because documents may fall into the wrong hands.<sup>5</sup> Oppositional publications are illegal, are banned and burnt by the authoritarian regime. Once documents fall into the wrong hands, they may be kept in the archives of state security services who themselves are hardly accountable to their own governments, and may fabricate or destroy evidence at their own whim. Moreover, liberation movements are prone to internal dissent which creates an additional element of insecurity and disappearance of records.

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<sup>4</sup> For a variety of reasons, SWAPO moved its exile headquarters from Cairo to Dar Es Salaam to Lusaka to Luanda.

<sup>5</sup> This awareness is already documented for Namibia in a letter of a survivor of the 1904 colonial genocide, written in 1909, by a Herero women who wrote to her husband, “Do nor keep any papers, if you have any in your box, throw them away and burn them, because for us it is not good to have any papers in these times”. Ironically, this letter was intercepted by the colonial authorities, and its translation survived in the German files at the National Archives of Namibia.



Their archives is still difficult to access for Namibians: The South African military

All the mentioned factors mean that there is already a shortfall of records before the opposition or liberation movement comes to power. When there is a regime change, very little changes immediately for the archives. Truly, although it is no more illegal to own the previously banned and burnt materials, it is even difficult to assemble a complete set of publications which had been printed in thousands. The few copies that may have survived are cherished memory to the owners who held onto them under great danger. The liberation movement may hold the state power, but the revolutionaries themselves, the individual persons, may not trust the government institutions which had already served the old regime. Rival movements or dissenting factions will see even less reason to surrender their documentation to an organ of a state which they feel is not entirely theirs.

If the previous regime was held by an external colonising power, this power may take their records out of the country. The secret services of the old regime will do their best to destroy all evidence, even – or especially – if the transition has been gradual, negotiated, and peaceful.<sup>6</sup> And last but not least, a completely new government set-up will see much more urgent needs in economic, social and political transformation than to care about the records of a past struggle.

We have seen all these factors at work in the transitions from colonialism and apartheid to majority rule and democracy in Southern Africa. For archives which takes its task seriously – needs to collect, maintain and preserve truthful, reliable, authentic and balanced historical evidence – this means that it has to take some extraordinary measures to complement its record.

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<sup>6</sup> This has been amply documented in the proceedings of the South African TRC.



### 3. THE AACRLS PROJECT

The National Archives of Namibia has, since the country's UN-supervised transition to independence and democracy during 1989/1990, attempted to document Namibia's long underground history of resistance to colonialism and apartheid. Actually, far-sighted individuals at the helm of the Archives already started with such activities before independence, of course under the obvious constraints of the prevailing political situation of the apartheid regime.



The National Archives of Namibia

Nevertheless, progress was rather slow, and a substantial boost to such efforts came only about ten years after independence, with two factors coming into play. One was the move of the National Archives to a new purpose-built accommodation, a proud symbol of the independent Namibia and a stark contrast to the dusty and tiny old dungeons which the old colonial archives had inhabited since 1955. The other factor was that the first colonial power ruling over Namibia, Germany could be convinced to contribute substantially to a special project or programme to document the entire historical heritage of resistance. Attention should be given to the entire history of resistance, from the early uprisings against German rule, through the long years when South Africa seemed to rule absolute, to the modern liberation struggle which led to independence.

This special project, financed jointly by the governments of the Republic of Namibia and the Federal Republic of Germany, got the long-winded name "Archives of Anti-Colonial Resistance and the Liberation Struggle" or, not much shorter, AACRLS. In its early beginnings in 2001, it was resolved that it did not make sense to create a separate archives for this material but to let it contribute to the holdings of the National Archives, or the National

Museum where appropriate, so that all funds could be focused on securing the heritage, instead of creating and maintaining a new institution. In doing this, it is also emphasised that there is a single history of a united Namibia, in the sense of the slogan of the liberation movement “One Namibia – One Nation”, and not a compartmentalised history in compartmentalised institutions.

The main impact of the AACRLS Project has been that it made it possible for a rather independent body, the National Steering Committee of the project, to focus additional financial support to key areas where the National Archives is hampered by insufficient funding, insufficient staffing, and a bureaucracy with very inflexible and time-consuming procedures. These areas are

- Collection of oral history, through encouraging and enabling volunteers to interview resource persons and deposit the results centrally
- Collection of existing scattered documents, including photos, sound and video documentation, both from Namibia and from abroad
- Popularisation of “struggle” history, especially in the education sector
- Capacity building for the National Archives to store, document and preserve the material

### **3.1. PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION**

The AACRLS project is administered by a Cabinet appointed National Steering Committee (NSC) whose members were drawn from various institutions on the merit of their expertise and experience as needed by the project’s objectives.

- Four sub-committees on (1) Research, (2) Collection, (3) Education and (4) Capacity Building were established to assist the NSC with evaluation and assessments of incoming project proposal, collections, research and manuscripts and transcriptions.
- Four staff members based at the National Archives form the project secretariat that carries out day to day work of the project.
- Regional Committees are established in each region of Namibia to identify suitable research topics, provide lists of historical sites, places and persons carrying memories, encourage, mobilize and support individuals in the region to submit proposals to the NSC for financial support.
- International Country Committees are also established to assist in the identification and repatriation of Namibian records dispersed, displaced, entangled or created abroad.
- An adhoc Publications Committee is also established to assist the NCS with editorial matters pertaining to manuscripts that meet the publications criteria of the project.

### **3.2. THE GENESIS OF THE AACRLS PROJECT**

The AACRLS Project is dealing with dispersed, displaced, entangled, hidden, and destroyed archives.

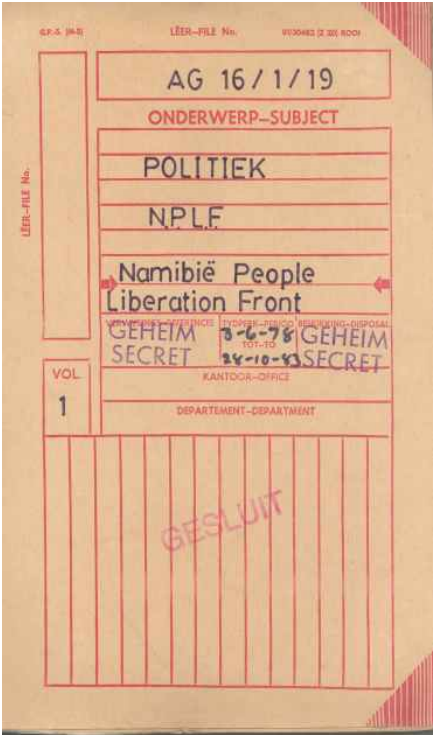
#### **3.2.1. DISPERSED ARCHIVES**

Archives are **dispersed**, because a central record-keeping facility of the liberation movement did not exist. Correspondence, reports, publications can be found scattered world-wide in the archives of supportive governments, solidarity organisations and individuals, as well as United Nations bodies. For example, no single archives or library has a complete set of the liberation army’s journal “The Combatant”. However, such a set can be pieced together, physically by collecting donations, and digitally by scanning at various repositories. Here,

related projects have come to complement the effort, such as the ALUKA Project to document the liberation struggles in Southern Africa in electronic format.

**3.2.2. DISPLACED ARCHIVES**

Archives can be **displaced** by wars and occupation forces. This is not alone a phenomenon of developing countries. Europe is still grappling with the legacy of cultural heritage displaced by the Second World War. Namibia suffered the removal of archival records to South Africa during the transition to independence. Fortunately, the new South Africa is willing to restitute these archives, and has already done so with several important fonds, such as the records of the South African Administrator-General in Namibia.<sup>7</sup> The return of military records of the former “South West Africa Territory Force” (SWATF), which were removed to Pretoria on the eve of independence, is however still outstanding.



File returned from South Africa

<sup>7</sup> “Those records were created in SWA-Namibia; they reflect a core aspect of the country's constitutional and socio-political history, and they constitute an integral part of the archival heritage of the people of Namibia.” A statement issued on 20 August 1997, by the South African Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, Mr. Lionel Mtshali.

### 3.2.3. ENTANGLED ARCHIVES

Archives can be seen as **entangled** by being an inseparable part of one country's or organization's archives, while also being of central importance to another country. In such a case, it should be feasible to ask for copies in whatever format. Namibia can lay a claim to many entangled archives, and the AACRLS has been quite successful in obtaining relevant copies. Outstanding examples of this are the donation of microfilms of the entire German Colonial Office records, which were handed over by the German Foreign Minister in 2003, as well as the microfilms of the Namibian and South African records in the archives of the former Rhenish Mission, now VEM, in Wuppertal/Germany, and digital copies of the United Nations Security Council documents concerning Namibia: resolutions, official documents and letters (covering 1960-1990). Bilateral co-operation with the National Archives of Botswana under the general cultural co-operation agreement of both countries is expected to yield another important set of copies. The collection of entangled records has been the most successful operation of the project.



Handover of Microfilms by the German Foreign Minister

### 3.2.4. HIDDEN ARCHIVES

Archives can be **hidden** in the memories of those who witnessed history which has not been recorded. The AACRLS is encouraging interested individuals to record oral history, with a particular focus on recording the experiences of the common people with apartheid and repression. It also attempts to collect and centralise oral history recordings which have been done for academic theses and other purposes, and are now gathering dust in the private custody of researchers. "Oral history gives history



back to the people in their own words. And in giving a past, it also helps them toward a future of their own making.”<sup>8</sup>



Oral History Collection by the AACRLS Project

### 3.2.5 DESTROYED ARCHIVES

And finally, archives can be **destroyed** by uncaring custodians or disasters. The AACRLS has, in its quest to secure records from organisations involved in the liberation struggles, come across several instances where the entire central records of an organisation have been carelessly destroyed, because the custodians did not realise their importance. In such cases, the quest for surrogate records extracted from individual members and from correspondents, such as foreign solidarity organisations, can be quite successful, but is work-intensive and professionally challenging to piece together.

Equally, there is little evidence to clarify how many of the German files were destroyed by the German forces before they surrendered, and how much was sent to Germany and perished in the bombing of the German military archives in Berlin during the Second World War, or was destroyed by the incoming South African officials out of ignorance of the value of the enemy records.

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<sup>8</sup> Voices of the past: Oral history, Paul Thompson, 1978



Destroyed records: German photo without surviving documentation – who, where, when, why?

#### **4. INTERNATIONAL INVOLVEMENT**

Namibia is a special case insofar as it has elicited more and longer involvement of the international community than any other country, except maybe Palestine. This means that there is a vast amount of entangled archives abroad. Important records on the struggle for Namibia can be found in all international organisations, starting with the League of Nations, in the UN archives at Vienna and Geneva, at the International Court of Justice in The Hague. Non-governmental as well as governmental involvement in all major Western and Eastern countries can be traced, particularly strong in the Nordic countries. African countries were involved in diplomatic support, as places of exile and rear-bases of the military struggle. The Non-Aligned Movement and several of its leading nations, such as India and Yugoslavia, played a significant role, as did Cuba. How to deal with such a vast and widely scattered heritage?

Here the AACRLS developed the concept of country committees of involved academics, mostly connected to the former solidarity movement, to assist in tracing, soliciting, copying and transferring records. So far, such committees are working in Germany, Switzerland, and Finland, while contacts in Sweden, Norway, the UK, Russia and Portugal exist. While the committee members are unpaid volunteers, at least they can be paid their operational expenses for meeting, travelling and other activities. Another activity on that side is the collection of oral history among former solidarity activists. We consider their activism as an important contribution and part of a shared history which should not be forgotten.

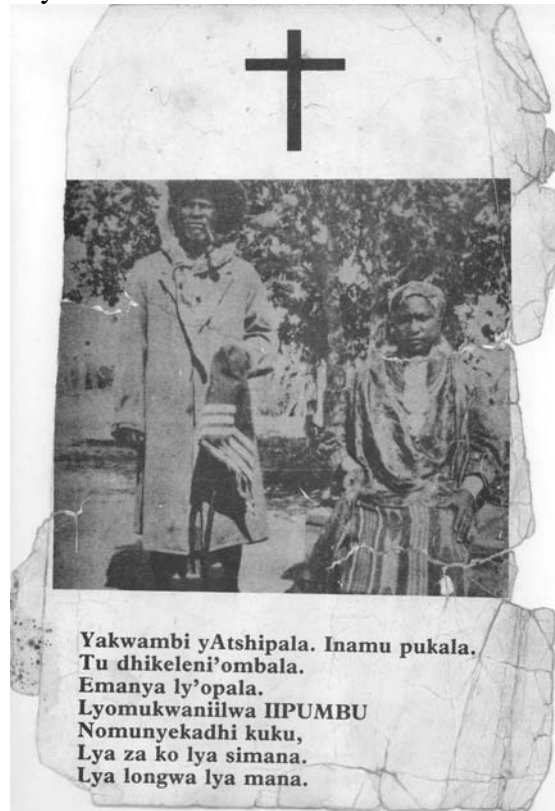
#### **5. PRESERVATION CHALLENGES**

The collected material faces serious preservation challenges. These are not yet adequately solved. The problems include

- Preservation of audio material. Most of the oral history is currently collected not on professional recording equipment, but on inexpensive and easy-to-

handle audio recorders and cassettes. This leads to the accumulation of original recordings on a medium which is essentially unstable, and needs digitisation for more permanent preservation.

- Preservation of video material. Some video recordings are in obsolete formats for which it is meanwhile difficult to find functioning playback equipment.
- Acidic paper where the degradation is, in some cases, so severe that the documents can hardly be handled anymore.
- Photos and documents which carry the traces of decades of carrying on the person in wallets, briefcases, degraded polythene wrappings, and being shown around with sweaty hands and food traces.



Damaged document: Funeral Programme of King Ipumbu

- Documents which have been stored under moist conditions with mould development and insect damage.
- Documents which have been soiled and vandalised because they were abandoned.

In addition, it is often hard to convince the custodians of such documents to give them out of their hands for safer storage and preservation, even if they are supplied with copies. There is however the imminent danger that these documents will be destroyed once the owner passes away, because the inheritors attach no value to them.

## 6. METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

The AACRLS project does not have a research agenda of its own; all the research projects completed and ongoing are the initiatives of the regional committees and individual researchers. These projects are submitted to project secretariats, passed onto the research sub-committee which evaluate and assess each submission according to the project guidelines and overall objectives of the project and also the

proposed budget. The Sub-committee has the power to solicit external assessors where such expertise is not available amongst the committee members. The secretariat and the sub-committee may refer the work back to the applicant in cases where authenticity, integrity and the provenance of the sources may be questionable. If the applicant is willing to carry out the research but lacks the skills, the project may attach a senior researcher to provide support and guidance under capacity building.

Following the scrutiny and advice by the Secretariat and sub-committee, the proposal is forwarded to the NSC for approval. Following the approval the researcher signs a legally binding contract with the project and the signing date is the commencement date of the project. After this, researchers can be issued with the finances according to their budget.

When they return with their results, which are to be deposited at the National Archives, the sub-committee has to evaluate again. Even materials such as photos, letters, publications submitted to the project are subjected to scrutiny by establishing preservation needs, and needs to follow up on issues of provenance and property rights. Even oral history is subjected to scrutiny by first having them transcribed, and where possible read by a person or persons who witnessed the same event. This can also lead to follow-up interviews with the same or other persons.

If the story is found worth of publication, the committee encourages the researcher to go on with the research to produce a manuscript. The manuscript is again reviewed by the research committee and submitted to the NSC for approval as a research publication. Following the NSC approval the manuscript is forwarded to the publications committee for editing and preparation for publication. Research results of an archival nature are sent straight to the archives. Sensitive materials containing names of persons named in police cases, in arrest of persons, in disappearance of persons and or as collaborators of the discredited regimes, are treated as confidential and closed for appropriate periods. In any case, the conditions of the respondent are being respected.

## **6.1. AUTHENTICITY AND INTEGRITY OF RECORDS**

Doubts have been voiced about the authenticity of oral testimonies, particularly in an area as emotional as the struggle against oppression and violent colonial regimes. We are aware that the accounts we are collecting, are coloured by the memory of the persons who are being interviewed, but this is inevitable and just as important as part of the history.

What you think is authentic is also influenced by what you believe is authentic. As Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela has put it in connection with the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, ‘The accounts given by victims and survivors are not simply about facts - they are primarily impacts of facts on their lives created by past violence’.<sup>9</sup> Historical facts are as important as their impacts on peoples’ lives and memories.

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<sup>9</sup> Truth and Lies, ed. by Julian Edelstein, 2001: p.26





The AACRLS Committee consulting local communities

## 7. CONCLUSION

What is the main impact of the AACRLS Project? It has achieved quite substantial results in making sources on the Namibian struggles available.

Over 180 private accessions have been collected by the project. Some of these are single (but highly significant) items, such as the only and previously unknown photo of the national hero Kakurukaze Mungunda, a courageous woman who was shot dead by police in the 1959 demonstrations in Windhoek Old Location. Or the only photo of the Witbooi soldiers deported by the German military forces in 1905 to Togo, or the first secretly taken photo of the South African practice to display dead “terrorists” on the spare wheels of their armoured vehicles to the local population.



Late Kakurukaze Mungunda



Witboois deported by German military to Togo in 1904



S.A. Military display an assumed fallen SWAPO guerrilla on casspir

Others are massive document collections, such as the archives of the New York-based organisation ECSA of Reverend Bill Johnston, which covers forty years of solidarity work and comprises of approximately 40 shelving metres, and likewise the collections of the Namibia Communication Centre, and of the veteran campaigner Randolph Vigne with the Namibia Support Committee.

Some are very special and precious collections, like the several hours of children's songs and liberation songs recorded in Angolan exile by the East German kindergarten teacher Sabine Zinke. About 1,000 cassettes of oral history have been recorded and collected, of which only a small portion has yet been evaluated for publications. Some priceless letters of the early resistance leader Hendrik Witbooi have been donated from private custody in Germany and now form part of the reunited "Hendrik Witbooi Papers" inscribed in UNESCO's "Memory of the World" Register.

But even larger is the amount of work to be done. A database of records and resources known or suspected to exist continues to grow. The Project has succeeded in raising awareness about the importance of struggle archives. It cannot follow up on all the leads, but the movement to collect and safeguard the memories of the nations is generating its own dynamics and continues to grow. It is sad to realize that we can no longer find survivors of the 1904 genocide with firsthand testimony, and have to rely on what has been passed on to their children and grandchildren. We are at least trying not to let this happen with the war of liberation.



AACRLS training in oral history collection