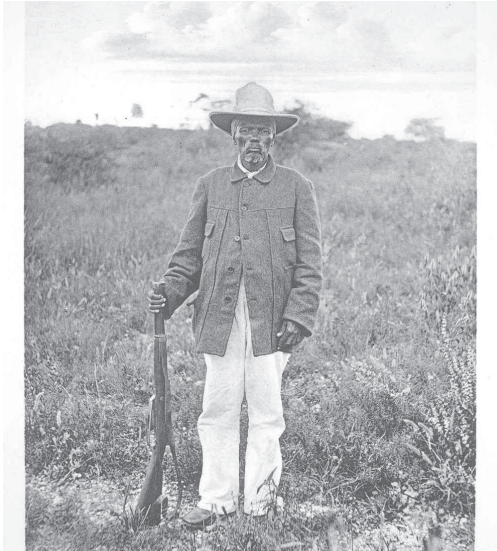


## 2 *Hendrik Witbooi and Samuel Maharero: The Ambiguity of Heroes*

*Werner Hillebrecht*



**Figure 2.1 Hendrik Witbooi**  
(*Deutsch-Südwest-Afrika: Krieger und Friedensbilder*, 1907)



**Figure 2.2 Samuel Maharero**  
(*Deutsch-Südwest-Afrika: Krieger und Friedensbilder*, 1907)

Hendrik Witbooi and Samuel Maharero are two familiar icons. Both of these portraits were probably taken in the same style, but on different occasions, by the Windhoek photographer Lange. Both men started their careers as leaders in a controversial way, Hendrik by rebelling against his father, Kaptein Moses Witbooi; Samuel by succeeding his father Maharero in violation of traditional succession rules. Both led their people in the struggle against German colonial rule. Witbooi died from a German bullet in 1905. He was buried in a secret, forgotten grave near Vaalgras, which has not been rediscovered. Maharero died in exile in Bechuanaland in 1923, eight years after German rule ended, and seventeen years after he had left; indeed he only returned to Namibia for his reburial in Okahandja. Both are remembered to this day by their respective communities in an annual commemoration, and both had a history of fighting against each other, and side by side, both for the Germans, and against the Germans.

This chapter focuses on Hendrik Witbooi, as it is mainly based on research of his correspondence, but Samuel Maharero also appears again and again, as their stories are inextricably linked. The chapter should not be understood as an attempt to tear down

monuments. In any case, although he deserves a monument, Witbooi does not have one, just an empty grave at Heroes Acre, Windhoek, and a memorial stone in Gibeon. In my personal opinion, Hendrik Witbooi is a hero for a number of reasons, and that he died from a German bullet is but the least of them. But this chapter is a reminder of the complexity of history and that ‘heroes’ are rarely as flawless as popular versions of history would like to portray. Contemporary images of cartoon and ‘Hollywood Heroes’ create expectations that run the risk of obscuring histories that contain different and discordant perspectives. History is rather a patchwork, like those tapestries sewn together by Nama women in Gibeon and elsewhere.

## The Hendrik Witbooi Papers

Apart from being a war leader of his people (the Witboois or |Khowesin of Gibeon) as well as of a wider Nama alliance, Hendrik Witbooi is known for his prophetic insights into the nature of colonialism, which he documented in his various writings. It is for these writings that he is known world-wide. The largest portion of his papers are kept at the National Archives of Namibia. Much of it has been published – once in the original text and several times in English and German translations – and these papers are deemed so important that they have been awarded the prestigious status of being listed on UNESCO’s international ‘Memory of the World’ inventory of the most important documentary heritage of humanity.<sup>1</sup> They consist of four books, where Witbooi and his scribes,<sup>2</sup> entered incoming and outgoing diplomatic and administrative correspondence, treaties and proclamations – mostly in Cape Dutch, which served as the lingua franca between different linguistic communities in nineteenth century Namibia.

I want to sketch briefly the complexity of the story of these papers since it illustrates the background against which the AACRLS Project was created and provides a good example of the way in which Namibia has had to reconstruct archives that have been fragmented, scattered and, now, recovered from abroad. The most famous item is the so-called ‘diary’ (although it actually contains only two diary entries, whilst the rest consists of recorded correspondence). It was captured by the German forces when they attacked the Witbooi settlement of Hoornkrans in 1893; the leader of the attack, Kapitän Curt von François, later took it with him to Germany, and it is still not clear how it returned to Namibia, but in 1918 it was at the disposal of the South African administration and it was cited when the latter compiled the famous ‘Blue Book’ (François, 1895, p. 227, Administrator for South West Africa, 1918). It was then kept by the SWA Department of Education, and soon after the National Archives was established, in 1939, it was deposited in the Archives (Hoernlé, 1987).<sup>3</sup>

1 <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/flagship-project-activities/memory-of-the-world/register/full-list-of-registered-heritage/registered-heritage-page-5/letter-journals-of-hendrik-witbooi/>; see also: [http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CI/CI/pdf/mow/nomination\\_forms/letter\\_journals\\_of\\_hendrik\\_witbooi.pdf](http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CI/CI/pdf/mow/nomination_forms/letter_journals_of_hendrik_witbooi.pdf)

2 The texts are in different handwritings. Through comparison with other signed texts, Samuel Izaak, Petrus Jod and Hendrik Witbooi junior (Klein-Hendrik) have been identified as scribes. Although fully literate, Hendrik Witbooi was handicapped in writing because he had lost the thumb on his right hand.

3 Although no accession date is recorded, it was listed as Private Accession no 2 in the Archives.