

Strong local archives/library content: A mirror of society

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Abstract

Africa continues to be depicted in literature as a marginal contributor to world's knowledge, "silent", "voiceless", yet the continent is host to rare and irreplaceable pre-colonial manuscripts in its Libraries and Archives. The National Archives of Namibia (NAN) houses remarkable and original handwritten work with high cultural, historical and genealogical research value, written before the formal colonization of the country. These manuscripts and records are largely unknown and under-researched and this perpetuates the knowledge gap in the existing scholarly work that contributes to shaping what is known about Namibia and its people. This paper describes pre-colonial writing in Namibia. It urges scholars to utilize these pre-colonial documents, records and manuscripts as valuable research resources for cultural, genealogy and local history.

Keywords: Pre-colonial, manuscripts, reading, writing, research, local content, Namibia

Introduction

Africa has been described as "unhistorical, underdeveloped spirit still involved in conditions of mere nature... devoid of morality, religion, and political constitution." (Hegel, cited in Kuykendall, 1993, p.572). This despondent interpretation of Africa is further characterized as "the heart of darkness" (Conrad, 1899) "has shaped not only how outsiders have viewed Africa, but also how Africans themselves view their continent." (Gatune and Najam, 2011)). Yet, the continent has produced documents and manuscripts

of world significance, written before the colonization, as exemplified by the Bamun script in the Cameroon¹ and the Witbooi Papers in Namibia.²

The 18th century Hegelian view of Africa is still underlying much of the writing on Africa although not so often openly proclaimed. An example is the widely reported lecture by Hugh Trevor-Roper on the BBC of 28 November 1963, where he claimed that “there is only the history of Europeans in Africa, the rest is darkness.” He also described Africa’s past as “the unedifying gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque but irrelevant corner of the globe.”

Although this verdict has been widely criticized and no serious historical scholar would dare to utter such a statement today, the echo of such claims continues to reverberate in official academic speeches. The speech given by the former French President Nikolas Sarkozy, at the University of Dakar, on July 26, 2007, is a recent example. He stated: “The tragedy of Africa is that the African has not fully entered into history. The African peasant, who for thousands of years has lived according to the seasons, whose life ideals was to be in harmony with nature, only knew the eternal renewals of time, rhythmmed by endless repetition of the same gestures and the same words.”

Further, the writings of current scholars find that Africa continues to be “viewed as a consumer of the world’s knowledge production” (Raju et al, 2013, p.44), and that the continent has supplied only about 0.7% of the world’s published knowledge. Overwhelming literature evidence supporting these claims exists (Gatune and Najam, 2011; Nwagwu and Ahmed, 2009, p.90) and even some African scholars have jumped onto the bandwagon to condemn the continent as passive consumer of the world’s knowledge. Shortage of locally relevant content combined with lack of writing culture is another common feature in literature (Nassimbeni and Desmond, 2011; SACMEQ III, 2010; Tella & Akande, 2007; UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2004), about Africa despite continuing efforts to eradicate its persistence. Is the much lamented lack of knowledge production and the writing culture really based on a cultural trait of a timeless African character, or a self-fulfilling prophecy?

Statements such as “0.7% knowledge production in Africa” are being repeated without questioning the methodology behind these figures. There is lack of clarity of what is measured and how it was measured. The persisting condemnation of Africa as a failure is damaging especially to younger generations who have to carry Africa into the future. Being constantly reminded as a continent with a history out of which no goodness shall come is a heavy burden and a stumbling block for those wishing to propel Africa’s development agenda into the future.

¹ <http://bamumscript.org/font.php>

² NAN: A.0002

This paper therefore concurs with a view advanced by Craig (1992, p.12) who, while speaking of archivists, said: "Just as personal identity is anchored in a strong historical sense, so is our professional identity - both come from ability to experience self as something that has continuity. Surely if you have nothing to look backward to, and with pride, you have nothing to look forward to with hope." During liberation struggle, Namibians took strength from the example of their forbearers, Hendrik Witbooi, Samuel Maharero, Mandume yaNdemufayo and others who resisted against colonialism. Colonial education prepared the learners to celebrate the history of the colonizers and the indigenous history was associated with inferiority and defeat. Now after independence, they became aware that there is so much more their ancestors have said and done, so much more to be remembered and explored, and to be built upon. This heritage has been covered and silenced under layers and layers of colonial brainwashing. It needs to be unearthed and popularized by libraries and archives, to be researched thoroughly and the research outcomes would serve as strong foundation for a knowledge-based society.

The indigenous people of Namibia authored manuscripts of outstanding universal value, such as the Hendrik Witbooi papers inscribed on UNESCO memory of the world. Namibia's pre-colonial manuscripts include handwritten laws and constitutions, a regional cooperation treaty, the official archives of African leaders, and oral traditions written down for posterity. These manuscripts have immense research and historical value to Namibia and to the world. Although we have these manuscripts preserved, they are hardly known, not taken up in research and teaching to enrich the understanding of the philosophy and ideas from Namibia's past.

I am focusing on my motherland Namibia, but this can certainly be applied across the African continent. One pertinent example is, the Bamum Script of the Bamum Kingdom in the Cameroon. It was invented by King Njoya, and valuable traditional knowledge was written down in it. Such materials must be studied, published and widely popularized. It is encouraging to know that now, almost 100 years after the Bamum script was forbidden by the French colonial power and its letter-press destroyed, the Bamum Scripts and Archives Project at the Bamum Palace is reviving the script, it is being taught again, has been standardized into Unicode, and even a beautiful computer font has been designed for it.³ It is not clear whether the local library in Cameroon is involved in this project, but it should be in the forefront of such activities. Such local content in our local libraries and in our internet presence will go a long way to keep our heritage alive, restore African cultural pride and produce self-confidence youth and instill pride in their identity.

The pre-colonial manuscripts are not taught in schools in Namibia, I became aware of them only while in the service of the National Archives of Namibia. Libraries and archives have a responsibility to disseminate and popularize such relevant local content that gives society a sense of their written history from pre-colonial times and to expose and make

³ <http://bamumscript.org/font.php>

known under-researched local sources. The librarian and archivist know the contents of collections in libraries and archives. They are best placed to expose the contents of their collections for the public good. As Craig (1992) writes: “In our past lies our future ... the seeds of our future are germinated in the soil of our past.”

Indigenous writing in Namibia

The need to write, to paint, to document human activities did not start with the written words. The first ever known written record of human activities in pre-literate Namibia are the prehistoric rock engravings found all over the country, wherever the terrain supported the production and preservation of such artifacts.



Above and below: Figurative and abstract petroglyphs at Twyfelfontein.
Photographer: John Kinahan. Source: Twyfelfontein Nomination Dossier, National Archives of Namibia, A.0862 (1)



/Ui-//aes or otherwise known as Twyfelfontein, one of Namibia's world heritage sites proclaimed on the UNESCO's World Heritage List, has one of the largest concentrations of petroglyphs (rock engravings) in Africa. This site has material culture from Late Stone Age, and "forms a coherent, extensive and high-quality record of ritual practices related to hunter-gather communities in this part of southern Africa over at least 2,000 years, and eloquently illustrates the link between the rituals and economic practices of hunter-gathers."⁴ And while this rock art gallery has probably not been created with the intention of making a record but for cultural practices and ritual purposes, it has been argued that certain wide-spread abstract petroglyphs have been created with the intention of marking territorial rights, denoting boundaries, proclaim trade monopolies and group identities. (Schaafsma, 1985; Heizer and Baumhoff, 1959; Hewett, 1904; Snyder, 1966). These communities have made history through these petroglyphs, contrary to the colonialists' view that Africa has not entered into world history.

⁴ <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1255>

Pre-colonial manuscripts in Namibia

The concept of literacy, numeracy and preserving written documents and manuscripts was introduced into Namibia by Christian missionaries in pre-colonial times when they brought spiritual education. The London Missionary Society (LMS) was the first to send its missionaries to Namibia, in 1805, to establish missions including mission schools. Other followed in their footsteps. They produced and maintained records, manuscripts and documents in a form of baptismal, confirmation, marriage and death registers, minutes of meetings, letters, reports, photographs etc. which later became archives and are often preserved, either in the country of origin or at the seats of the mission societies in Europe.

The traditional leaders soon embraced the culture of reading and writing. They encouraged their people to acquire these skills, predominantly in Dutch language. The local leaders made use of the newly acquired skills to write down the laws governing their communities and developed a culture of recording their business transactions and maintained records and manuscripts. The most well-known include the Laws of Bethanie “Ryksboek” of (1847), the Laws and Constitution of the Swartboois of Rehoboth (1849), the “Vaderlike Wette” Laws of the Rehoboth Basters of (1870-1872) and the Laws of the Rietfontein Basters (date unknown) were written and enforced. The Laws of Bethanie were the oldest written Laws in pre-colonial Namibia, beginning in 1847.

Most of these documents are written in Cape Dutch which at that time was considered as useful in the communication with white traders, with the missionaries⁵ and soon also as a lingua franca between communities with different linguistic background.⁶

Some of these laws, such as, the laws of the Rietfontein Basters and the Swartboois were unfortunately not preserved and there is no evidence on how and when they got destroyed. While the laws of the Rietfontein Basters were made known in a published German translation⁷, the existence of the laws and constitution of the Swartboois is made known through references made to them by Missionary Kleinschmidt⁸ while the original of the Law is assumed destroyed or lost.

The Ryksboek and Vaderlike Wette survived and they now form part of the pre-colonial records at the National Archives of Namibia.⁹ These pre-colonial laws made provision

⁵ Many missionaries came from a Northern German background with a home dialect which was quite close to Dutch

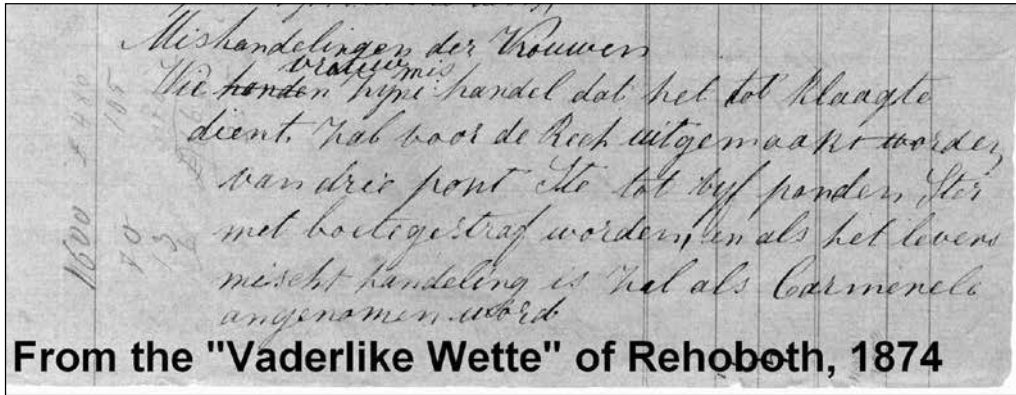
⁶ Stals, E.L.P. (2001)

⁷ Francois, Curt von (1899)

⁸ Kleinschmidt to Rhenish Mission Board, 17.11.1851. This original letter is in the Archives of the Vereinigte Evangelische Mission, Wuppertal (Germany) a copy is in the National Archives of Namibia (NAN Accession A.786, Vedder Quellen, vol.30a p.8-9).

⁹ Vaderlike Wette, in: NAN, Private Accession A.219. Ryksboek of Bethanie, in: ELCRN Archives, no. X 15.21

for the administration of justice, and punishment. An excerpt from *Vaderlike Wette* shows:



National Archives of Namibia, A.0219.

This provision deals with women abuse and reads as follows:

“Women abuse. If a man abuses his wife and she sues him about it, the Court shall fine him to pay between 3 £, and if the abuse is life-threatening, it shall be deemed a criminal case.” These pre-colonial communities provides for the right of women, a condition which even in today’s world some countries are still struggling to understand.¹⁰

However, the most systematic effort towards producing records and manuscripts and maintaining them was made by Kaptain Hendrik Witbooi, who kept his government administrative records in letter copy books. The Kaptain Hendrik Witbooi manuscripts include the registration of births and deaths, and lists of office-bearers in his government, letters he wrote and letters he received, things he sold and bought.

Amongst the Witbooi papers were commercial records and manuscripts created by traders that came through the Cape or through Walvisbay to trade in Namibia. Evidence from the Witbooi journal 2 and 3 shows that they are “recycled” record books formerly kept by traders.¹¹ The Witboois recycled these books and used them to create their own commercial records such as the “Witbooi debt book”¹². Witbooi’s financial record books were seemingly created as evidence of business transactions between his government and the European traders. These record books were maintained as a proof of what took place so that the traders could not cheat his government. Witbooi used these record books to protect his government and to maintain reliable trading partnership.

¹⁰ *Mishandelingen der Vrouwen. Wie zyne vrouw mishandel dat het tot klagte dient, zal voor de Reg uitgemaakt worden, van drie pont Ster[ling] tot vyf ponden Ster[ling] met boete gestraf worden, en als het levens mischthandeling is zal als Carmenele angenomen word.* (Translated by W. Hillebrecht)

¹¹ NAN, Private Accession A.650

¹² NAN, Private Accession A.177

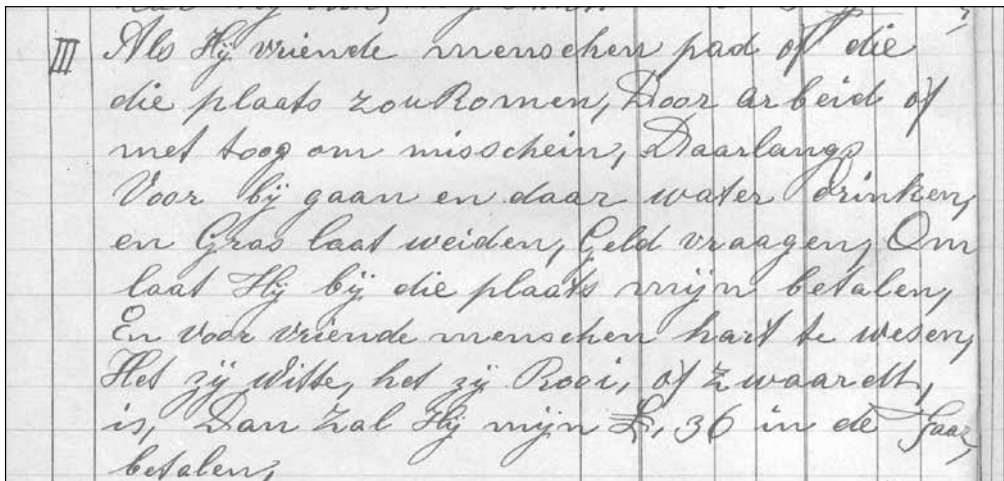
Below is an extract from the Hendrik Witbooi letter-copy book, National Archives of Namibia, Accession 002. It include four paragraphs taken from a Contract of Witbooi with François Daniel Voeis dated 9 January 1893 (pages 289-291) which attempts to express traditional communal land use practices in the language of modern lease contracts. The original text and its translation by Heywood and Maasdorp:¹³

I "Als Iemand aan mijn pla[a]ts huurt, en als ik hem aanneemt, Dan vraagt ik hem £12 in de Jaar, Ik meent aan die ééne wat ik niet zijn bezit of waardes zien, maar wanneer als ik zijne bezet zien, Dan zal ik weer veranderen, Als daar verandering is."

If somebody is renting a farm from me, with my permission, I ask from him 12 Pound annually. This is provisional. Once I have assessed his worth, my price will be changed as follows.

II "Als Hij eigene regten op die plaats gebruiken, en ve[e]lmeer op die geld wat hij betaaldt denken en daar door mijne zwak[k]e menschen, wat bij hem komen, Om tog mond vol aan hem te loeren, om vriendelijke te wesen, en zijne hart van die zwak[k]e menschen toemaken, Dan zal hij voor mij £24 in de Jaar betalen."

If he applies his own rules on his land, and shows more concern for what is due to him than for my poor people, and is unkind to them when they come to him to fill their mouths, and closes his heart to their want, than he shall pay me 24 Pound annually.



An insert from the Hendrik Witbooi Diary No.1, National Archives of Namibia, Accession No.2. The translation of the above handwritten text read as follows:

If friendly people come that way on business or moving through with their herds, and he asks them money for grazing and water, because he is hard to strangers, be they white, red or black, he shall pay me 36 pound annually.

¹³ Witbooi, Hendrik (1995)

III *“Als Hij niet onder mijn wet wil buigen, en daar door mijne Ampenaars tegenstand, Wat ik naar hem stuiren en mijne Ampenaars zijne kwaadrigheid en Toornigheid toonen, en met hem vecht, of met mijne natie strijdt of vecht houden, of zetelijk en als ik met mijne oogen Dat zien Dan zal ik Die eene van mij en van mijne plaats en van mij streekt uitsloden, want ik kan niet twee honden wat niet Dracht malkanderen in eene bak laat drinken, dat kan ik tog niet doen.”*

If he cannot abide by my laws, and resists my officers with roughness and scorn, and fights with them, or quarrels or fights with my nation, and if I see that with my own eyes, then he shall be turned off my land, because I cannot keep two dogs who will not drink from the same bowl.

This innovative rendering of African *Ubuntu* philosophy in the form of a European-style written contract reveals the level of development of these communities at the time the colonizers came. Is this Sarkozy's peasant speaking who knows only “the eternal renewals of time, rhythmmed by endless repetition of the same gestures and the same words”?

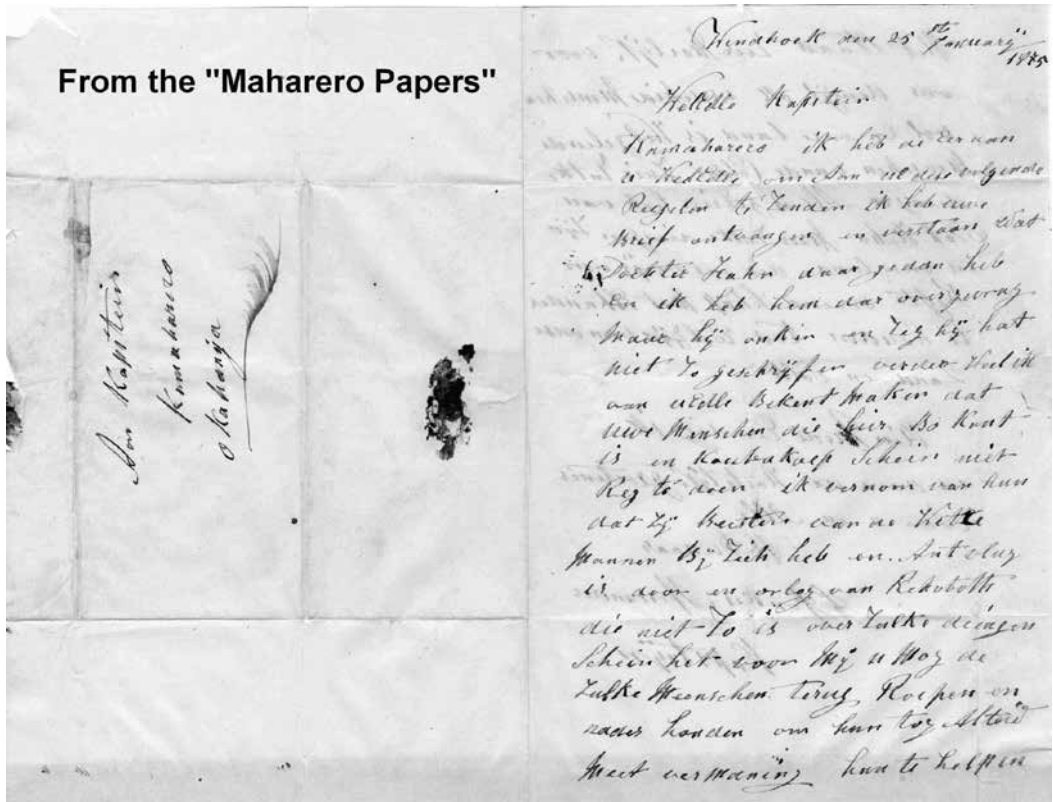
There is so far no written evidence that other indigenous leaders in Namibia created such a rich body of records as Witbooi did. However, it can be assumed that many leaders kept archives, papers of their governmental affairs, but that many of these records perished in the colonial wars. Some of the Witbooi manuscripts that survived the wars with the Germans were looted and barely escaped the fires that were set by the German troops on defeated local homes and villages.



Source: National Archives of Namibia, Photo collection. From Stuhlmann Diary

An album with a similar photograph of Hendrik Witbooi's house in Rietmond being burnt down in 1904 was recently auctioned in Germany. It disappeared again into a private collection. African archives rarely have the means to purchase such documents for the public domain.

Another significant source that survived is the Maharero Papers. They consist of seventy-five handwritten documents. Apart from letters addressed to Maharero, and Maharero's own proclamation about the borders of Hereroland, they contain mainly correspondence between various Nama Chiefs such as Jan Jonker Afrikaner, Willem Swartbooi, Moses Witbooi, Kido Witbooi, to name but a few. Chief Maharero Tjamuaha captured them during his wars with the Nama Chiefs.

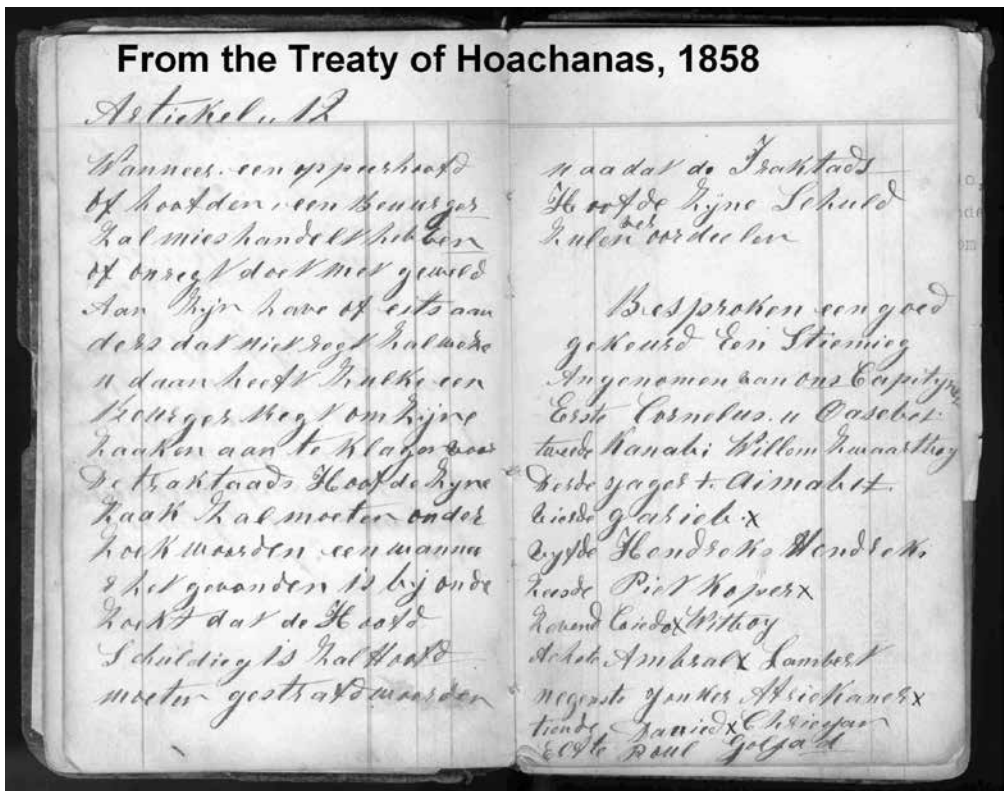


He did not destroy them because he saw their significant value, but he kept them and after reading handed them over to the local missionary for safekeeping. Thus, these manuscripts survived the 1904 war with the Germans, where presumably many records were destroyed, because Mission homes were usually not targets of the German aggression. Although neglected, these letters were allegedly rediscovered by accident by missionary Vedder in the 1920s, and they now form part of the pre-colonial manuscripts at the National Archives of Namibia, as accession A.0002.

They are remnants of a rich diplomatic, commercial and private correspondence of Africans in 19th century Namibia. Given the vast distances to be covered between the headquarters of local leaders from one another, this proved to be more practical than

meeting face to face and possibly more reliable than sending messengers with oral communication. The Chiefs wrote on their own or frequently used school teachers as scribes or secretaries (or occasionally the missionaries – who were however too much meddling in local politics to be much trusted with such matters).

Another outstanding example is the original handwritten *Treaty of Hoachanas 1858*, one of the oldest original records in the custody of the National Archives of Namibia.¹⁴ This is the earliest written manuscripts of political and diplomatic relations between the different indigenous communities of Namibia. It is written in Dutch language and addresses issues that are still relevant today.



National Archives of Namibia: A.0178

According to this treaty the various Nama groups, in the presence of some Herero observers, agreed on various issues of common concern. The treaty covers amongst others a common policy how to deal with foreign mining companies, a non-aggression policy agreement between their kingdoms, a human rights policy provision for good governance. For example, the treaty provided for an appeal procedure for a subject who feel unjustly treated by his own Chief can appeal against that Chief's decision with another

¹⁴ NAN: A.0718

Chief and he would be given a fair hearing. Kaptain Hendrik Witbooi in 1904 invoked this *Treaty of Hoachanas 1858* as the legal basis for unifying the various communities of the Nama and Herero in a joint struggle against the German colonial forces.

These valuable pre-colonial manuscripts are hardly known, despite being available and accessible; current research is not benefitting from these manuscripts. They need to be exposed, to inspire the young generation to look at their past with pride, to draw inspiration from the intellectual achievements of their forefathers instead of the continuing colonial brainwashing that label Africa as a continent without history and other mindsets. If libraries and archives could take this active role, they will make themselves relevant to society, in overcoming the stigma of the unhistoric, stagnant, and uncreative continent.

Provenance and integrity

However, it is not only the popularization of already available records that must be addressed, but also their discovery in forgotten repositories or private hands and their introduction to the public domain.

By the time the first German imperial commissioner Dr. Heinrich Göring was sent in May 1885 with two other officials by the German Foreign Office to Namibia, the then South West Africa, there was already a substantial body of written records in the country. A great number of local Namibian communities knew how to read and write and actively documented their business transactions and maintained archives. Within a few decades of colonial rule, much of this heritage was scattered, destroyed, or disappeared and the governance structure of indigenous communities destroyed by colonial forces.

It is important to mention that such valuable historical documents do not come to archives and libraries in an automatic process, nor do they fall from heaven. The stigma of unhistoric Africa had relegated them to be treated as “curiosities” instead of historical documents, and they had been displaced and forgotten.

The Treaty of Hoachanas, for example, had been kept for many decades by the Undercaptain of the Bondelzwarts in Warmbad, Timotheus Snewe, who served as secretary to the Conference of Hoachanas. It somehow got into the hands of a local farmer, Mr. LeRiche, who eventually was convinced to donate it to the National Archives.

It is quite instructive to look at the history of the Witbooi Papers, listed in 2006 on UNESCO’s Memory of the World Register. The currently known Witbooi papers at the National Archives of Namibia mainly consist of four journal books, into which Witbooi, respectively his scribes, entered copies of in-and outgoing diplomatic and administrative correspondence, treaties and proclamations. Journal 1 is fully intact and had been

captured by German troops at their attack on Hoornkrans in 1893, and eventually ended up at the National Archives soon after it was established in 1939. Journals 2 and 3 were looted by a German trader in Gibeon at the outbreak of the German-Nama War in 1904, taken to Germany, eventually sold to a museum in Bremen, entirely forgotten and only rediscovered in 1990. This museum, in a rather exceptional case of cultural restitution, returned the originals to Namibia and kept only a microfilm copy.¹⁵ These two journals cover the period after 1893 until 1902. But unlike the Journal 1, which consists of carefully written copies in a clean book, they contain mostly drafts, written in a re-used traders account book on empty or half-used pages. There is reason to assume that another more “official” book with clean copies existed, which may not have survived or may not yet have been re-discovered. Journal 4 is only a fragment of a few pages, but clearly taken out of a larger book. That book – of which we do not know any further detail – had apparently been looted by German soldiers when they attacked Witbooi’s residence at Rietmond, and probably taken apart and distributed among themselves as war memorabilia. The fragment was in unknown private hands in East Germany, and after German re-unification was sold to a Namibiana collector in Munich who publicised the discovery and eventually agreed to return it to Namibia at no cost.¹⁶

Meanwhile, there is evidence that during the 1960s another Witbooi journal appeared in private hands in Namibia, was given to the National Archives, and disappeared again without a trace. During the 1960s, Namibia was occupied by South Africa, the Archives was a “depot” of the National Archives of South Africa, and more concerned with white settler history than with African records. Research about the further fate of this document, in the hope of re-discovering it, is still going on.

These document histories make it clear that libraries and archives cannot be content with what they have. Because of the previous neglect, African records and manuscripts must be actively sought and safeguarded and repatriated, if needs be.

Conclusions

The stigma of Africa as being unhistoric, illiterate, uncreative, and not innovative is a self-fulfilling prophecy that is hindering the development and uplifting of African nations. It must be recognized that Africa has

- A rich history that is largely untold
- A rich documentary heritage that is neglected, scattered, and hidden.

African libraries and archives must therefore

¹⁵ NAN: A.0650. The Überseemuseum Bremen also had the two volumes professionally restored by the Bremen State Archives before returning them.

¹⁶ NAN: AACRLS.117. The National Archives of Namibia expresses its gratitude to the donor, Dr. Goebel of Munich, and the assistance of the German Ambassador Dr Massing in obtaining the document.

- Make active efforts to identify, secure, and repatriate this heritage;
- Make active efforts to publicize its existence and promote its use in research and education.

A strong society is built and sustained by its own will to develop and succeed on the basis of its historical and cultural roots. If a society does not believe in its own ability to make things happen and relies entirely on the philosophy of others, it is a lost society.

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A.0177 Witbooi debt book
A.0178 Treaty of Hoachanas
A.0219 Vaderlike Wette van Rehoboth
A.0650 Hendrik Witbooi Journals 2 + 3
A.0786 Vedder Quellen
AACRLS.117 Hendrik Witbooi Journal 4