

Changing Urbanscapes: Colonial and Postcolonial Monuments in Windhoek

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Abstract

This article investigates how recently-constructed sites that anchor memories of anti-colonial resistance and national liberation have changed the urban landscape of the Namibian capital, Windhoek. The discussion is focused on the Namibian Independence Memorial Museum and the Genocide Memorial. These North-Korean-built monuments in a prominent hilltop position central Windhoek have significantly altered the city's skyline with their massive aesthetics of Stalinist realism. Built in a particular position, they have replaced an infamous colonial memorial, the 'Windhoek Rider', and dwarf the 'Alte Feste' fort and the 'Christuskirche', iconic German colonial remnants of the built environment.

Keywords

Namibia, Windhoek, urban landscape, Independence Memorial Museum, Genocide Memorial, memory politics

Author bio

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MAIN PAPER

Walking Windhoek in 1990

During the early Southern winter of 1990 I spent a fair amount of time walking downtown Windhoek.

Those were exhilarating times in the newly independent country's small capital city of then just over 100,000 inhabitants. People hummed with excitement – the young and the old, the poor and the better-off, those who had just returned from years of exile and those who had remained inside the country. On weekends I visited my new friends who lived in the sprawling township of Katutura, or others who had moved to the city's western and northern, more modest, suburbs that were rapidly becoming racially mixed. We were dancing to the tunes of Yvonne Chaka Chaka, Brenda Fassie and other popular South African musicians of the time. Our parties perfectly captured the activist spirit, boundary-crossing desires and the celebratory mood of those, mostly black but also some white young activists of the late apartheid era in Namibia, as much as this music appealed to their peers in South Africa. From 1989, with independence approaching the Namibian affection for South African popular music was fast matched with a growing desire for 'African music', which had been introduced by some returned former exiles. Congolese rumba and various genres of West African music quickly garnered considerable interest in Namibia. Favourites among the newly-discovered 'African music', summarily called 'kwassa kwassa', included the likes of Mbilia Bel and Koffi Olomide.

The city centre however, where I spent my days reading in the National Archives seemed awkwardly disconnected from this emphatically postcolonial vibe and its cultural aspirations to 'bring Africa South', as the byline of the alternative *The Namibian* newspaper went. For me, a young student and solidarity activist from West Germany the built environment felt eerie. When I was soaking up the mild winter sun, eating my take away lunch on the lawns of Zoo Park just off the recently renamed Independence Avenue, I thought that really this was still 'Kaiserstrasse' (Emperor's Street), the name by which Windhoek's highstreet had been known until Independence.

From where I was sitting in the park I marvelled at, yet was puzzled about the sight of three well-maintained colonial-era buildings of a peculiar German architectural style. Complete with steep red-tiled roofs and picturesque windows, they had been designed by the architect Willi Sander in the early 1900s. Later in the afternoon, when the winter fog settled at an early dusk I occasionally splashed out on German-style coffee and cake in the restaurant housed in the Gathemann's complex, as the so very 'German' buildings were known. From the restaurant's upstairs balcony I had a good view of Peter Müller Street as it wound its way up the hill. At the bottom, on the corner of Independence Avenue, craft sellers displayed their wares, typically baskets and woodcarvings from northern Namibia. Further up the hill, however, a bygone German era was again remarkably present with more, less conspicuous buildings from the early 20th century on the left, and on the right hand, the Ludwig von Estorff

building with its wrap-around veranda and columns, which housed the reference library, where I sometimes worked.

At the top of the hill, in the centre of the traffic circle that connected Peter Müller and Leutweinstrasse I could see one of Windhoek's most iconic buildings, Christuskirche (Christ Church). The church, a prominent landmark with its 42 m high steeple, was built in a neo-romantic style with some Art Nouveau elements. Its walls were constructed with sandstone from the Windhoek area. Parts of the roof and the clock however had been shipped from Germany in the early 20th century. Similar to my reaction to the business, administrative and residential colonial era buildings in the lower part of the city centre, looking at the church I was intrigued – and somewhat perplexed – about how decidedly 'German' the architecture of central Windhoek was.

In these early days, and despite having had read my way through the enormous German literature of colonial memoirs and novels, which dealt with the settlers' and soldiers' experiences in the former German South West Africa, I was only vaguely aware of the city environment's more baleful history. Only later did I learn that the church was consecrated in 1910, although the plans had been designed already a decade earlier by the German government architect Gottlieb Redecker. The construction had been delayed due to the Namibian-German war of 1904-1907. That much I knew. But little else knowledge did I have about the site's significance during the war and genocide, and its aftermath.

More immediately associated with colonial warfare was another landmark. The *Reiterdenkmal* (Equestrian Statue; most commonly known as the *Windhoeker Reiter*/ Windhoek Rider) was positioned at the top of the hill between the Christuskirche and the *Alte Feste* (Old Fortress, a military building dating back to 1890). Sitting on a 5 m high sandstone plinth, the double life size (4.5 m) bronze statue of a mounted German colonial soldier with rifle had over the years been printed on countless post cards and car stickers. It had been used as the logo for Windhoek lager beer, and in many other formats served as perhaps the most iconic image in the city's efforts to draw in (mostly German) tourists. Inaugurated in 1912, its plaque commemorated the German military and civilian casualties during the 1904-7 colonial war (as did, since 1923 a plaque in the nearby Christ church). No mention was made of the about one hundred thousand Herero and Nama who had been murdered in the genocidal mass atrocities. That much I understood.

Over the next twenty years Windhoek's skyline changed quite drastically. This included the part of the city, which housed the remarkable German colonial built environment. In the mid 1990s, the imposing new building of the Namibian Supreme Court went up just below the Estorff Building, a little further afield rose the multi-storey Windhoek Hilton hotel. Leutweinstrasse was renamed Robert Mugabe Avenue in the early years of Independence and, some years later, the name of Peter Müller Street changed to Fidel Castro Street. Its very core however, comprising the German colonial 'city crown' (Kössler 2015) of hilltop Christuskirche, Reiterdenkmal and Alte Feste continued to dominate the expanding capital's urban landscape.

Changing urban landscape and the questions of memory

In the second decade of the 21st century, however, the urban landscape appears changed through recently-constructed sites that anchor memories of anti-colonial resistance and national liberation. At the heart of the changing urban nationalist memory scape are the Namibian Independence Memorial Museum, where, before entering, visitors are greeted by a more-than-life size statue of the country's first president Sam Nujoma, and a memorial commemorating the colonial genocide of 1904-08, which has been erected nearby. The museum, from architecture to exhibition, has been designed and constructed by North Korea, as were the two memorial statues. Together, these monuments in a prominent hill-top position of central Windhoek have significantly altered the city's skyline. Built in the particular position, whose former shape I detailed in the opening vignette, they have replaced the infamous colonial memorial of the Windhoek Rider, and dwarf the Alte Feste and the Christuskirche.

These changes have been examined before. Reinhart Kössler (2013; 2015) argued that they had 'broken' Windhoek's colonial era city crown; Elago (2015) presented a similar argument. Central to these analyses were the shift and eventual removal from public space of the Windhoek Rider. Art historian Meghan Kirkwood (2013: 250), on the other hand, investigated Namibia's postindependence architecture through North Korean modes; she argues that Namibia's postcolonial governments used the North-Korean built monuments explicitly to formulate and assert a break with a colonial past. Kirkwood (2013: 249) certainly has a point when she asserts that, "the postindependence government in Namibia interpreted the bold, dynamic, and monumental works of the Mansudae Overseas Project as a decisive, modern, and authoritative means of asserting their nationalistic self." Kirkwood's assertion echoes social historian Jan-Bart Gewald's characterisation that in postcolonial Windhoek as elsewhere, "city planning – being the manipulation of urban landscape – can be used to obliterate history" through inscribing a distinctive interpretation of the historical past (Gewald 2009: 256). However, in contrast to the implied claims that the country's older public history and colonial memory would have been obliterated through the new postcolonial nationalist aesthetics, I argue that the intermingling of iconic German colonial remnants and the decidedly 'nationalist' designs with their massive aesthetics of what I have called 'Stalinist realism' (Becker 2011) rather accentuate a multi-layered built environment and memory narrative.

The political aesthetics of German colonialism

The political aesthetics of the old – and new – central space of memory politics in the Namibian capital has found quite a bit of scholarly attention. The contestations surrounding the Windhoek Rider, in particular, have been discussed by a number of researchers of Namibian memory politics and nationalism who have explored the meaning of German colonial monuments in Namibia (eg., Elago 2015; Du Pisani 2015; Kössler 2015; Kössler 2013; Zeller 2008). Indeed, the Windhoek Rider has taken such a central place in the discussion of postcolonial Namibian memory politics that I will not go into much detail of this

matter, but only present a brief summary, in relation to the issues of memory and urban landscape, which are at the heart of this article.

Reinhart Kössler's work particularly has explored not only the multiple meanings but also the peculiar aesthetics of the Windhoek Rider as a triumphalist monument. He points out that whereas other Rider monuments that were erected in German cities celebrated identifiable rulers and noblemen, the Windhoek statue represented an anonymous member of the German colonial army (the 'Schutztruppe'). The martial Windhoek Rider was an unequivocal celebration of war and conquest. Kössler (2015: 148) emphasises that the Windhoek Rider was a monument of victory, erected at a time of apparent consolidation of colonial rule after the devastating defeat of any African challenge to German colonial conquest. The "most aggressive colonial symbol in all of Namibia" (Steinmetz & Hell 2006: 177) was intended "to document and symbolically underline Germany's claim to permanently dominate and rule her colony" (Kössler 2015: 148). The statue was unveiled four years after the Namibian war, which had brutally eradicated any African challenge. During the war's initial stages however African resistance to conquest had generated a sense of existential danger among the colonial settler society, which is expressed in the statue's plaque that referred to "salvaging and safeguarding this country during the Herero and Hottentot Rising 1903-1907" (cited in Kössler 2015: 216).

For more than a century the Rider looked from the top of the incline all over Windhoek into the distance and surveyed the central Namibian highlands. The statue brought out forcefully the claim to perpetual colonial domination coupled with a brash martial assertiveness that expressed readiness for its violent defence. Significantly, while the Rider statue was the single most prominent monument from the German colonial era; its powerful claim derived from its interconnectedness with the two buildings that framed the statue. To its right, the military architecture of the Alte Feste German fortress emphasised the message of military conquest and subjugation of the African population. To the Rider's left the Christuskirche conveyed an encompassing message of the intertwined political-military and spiritual-cultural modes of domination (Steinmetz & Hell 2006: 175).

As a whole the ensemble sent an aggressive colonial claim that remained for the most part unchallenged even after the major road along which it was located no longer bore the name of one-time German colonial governor Theodor Leutwein, but was now known as Robert Mugabe Avenue, renamed soon after Independence during a visit of the Zimbabwean President to the Namibian capital. The postindependence government stopped illuminating the Rider at night, and nearby, but far enough as to not distract the memorial ensemble, a group of German and Namibian artists painted a mural that de(con)structed the Rider and horse in an explosion, and replaced the statue with a white rabbit (Farbfieber 2001).

Other artistic and unofficial political interventions subverted the Rider monument's colonial claims particularly. 'The Rider without a Horse' (2008), an ironic short film made by the Namibian filmmaker Tim Hübschle, has the rider step of his horse and walk into present-day Windhoek. In another subversive initiative, in July 2008, overnight 51 white wooden crosses were planted around the statue, each cross bearing the name of a central place of the German genocide committed against the Ovaherero and Nama during the 1904-08 war.

Three months later, one morning passers-by were greeted by the Rider holding up a small flag in postindependent Namibia's national colours (Kössler 2015: 156).

These were thought-provoking initiatives intended to subvert and decolonise the public space. Indeed, every time protestors re-signified the statue, controversial discussions flared up in local media (Niezen 2018: 559). Though less militant than the anticolonial activism that has recently arisen in South Africa, these Namibian initiatives also came from within civil society; particularly activists connected to the various Ovaherero and Nama victim-descendant pressure groups demanded justice for the communities that had suffered most during the colonial war and genocide.

In South Africa colonial monuments were recently removed due to activist pressure exerted by a militant young generation from outside the established ANC government structures. This was best exemplified with the statue of British colonialist and mining magnate Cecil John Rhodes on the University of Cape Town grounds, which was removed following a massive student uprising in 2015. The movement that became known as #RhodesMustFall combined militant street protests with intensive social media campaigns (Becker 2016; see also Nyamnjoh 2016). In significant contrast to the South African campaigns, the eventual move, and removal of the Windhoek Rider came about less through civil society pressure than following a decision by the country's national government to build the Independence Memorial Museum on the very same spot where the equestrian statue had been sitting.¹

With the construction of the Independence Memorial Museum and the two statues that came along Windhoek's urban landscape changed profoundly, and permanently, from 2009-2010 onwards. This involved the shift of the Rider from its earlier conspicuous location to a still visible but less prominent position in front of the Alte Feste in August 2009, and its eventual removal from the urban public space altogether, when it was moved on Christmas Day 2013 into the Alte Feste's inner courtyard, where it remains – without its plinth – a far less imposing sight, propped up by wooden supports. The statue that previously dominated the city from its high pedestal appears shrunken and is only visible now to those who work in the government offices housed in the Old Fortress, and the occasional visitor who makes it into the old colonial fort, which has been rather deserted since the museum displays previously housed here have been moved to the new independence museum.

The changing cityscape and memory politics of independent Namibia have been affected by the removal of undesirable artefacts; equally significant for the changes of both the built environment and the postcolonial memory politics, however, have been the installation of new monuments. Since the turn of the 21st century Windhoek's cityscape has come to bear "the

¹ In the instance of the Windhoek equestrian monument, it can be argued, the victim-descendant activists and the nationalist SWAPO government joined forces, although the memorial that came to replace it was controversial, with some opposition politicians with close ties to the victim-descendant groups clamouring, unsuccessfully, that a genocide memorial centre should be built in the statue's place rather than the national museum that tells the dominant historical narrative of SWAPO's armed liberation struggle (Zuern 2017).

imprint of Pyongyang” (Tjirera 2014: 33), with several large-scale building projects that were awarded to the North Korean firm Mansudae Overseas Projects.

North Korean Stalinist realism and nationalist memory politics: Mansudae in Namibia

The imprint of Pyongyang first took shape on the periphery of the city. In 2002 the Namibian government inaugurated the Namibian National Heroes’ Acre, located on the southern outskirts of Windhoek. From the very beginning, this vast North Korean-built commemorative space was to be complemented with a museum and exhibition in the city centre. For some years these plans remained shelved due to financial constraints; construction eventually started in 2009 and accelerated from 2011; the museum was finally inaugurated in 2014.

The Namibian Heroes’ Acre’s material-social embodiment is revealing. Heroes’ Acre is a key site for the production of social memory in Namibia, embedded in the dominant historical narrative, it significantly contributes to the making of post-colonial futures. The monument is Namibia’s primary space for the staging, display and narration of power in the post-colonial era (Becker 2011). It is the site where the official historical discourse of agency – vested in the armed struggle directed from exile – is performed in commemorative practices, and where heroism has been symbolized in stone.

The memorial’s visual and iconic signifiers are crucial for developing a deeper understanding of the underlying discursive practices and the contestations surrounding them (Becker 2011). The gigantic monument with its symbolic system of the statue of the ‘unknown soldier’, obelisk, the eternal flame, and the commemorative mural panels, encapsulates the notion of nationalist modernity that accompanied the emergence of these symbols with the post-First World War memorials in Europe, as Richard Werbner (1998: 72) showed in his discussion of Zimbabwe’s Heroes’ Acre, which was constructed by the same North Korean company, and which has served as the blueprint of the Namibian monument.

Heroes Acre’s imagery is distinctly masculinist, phallic and militaristic. Its aesthetics is best described as a modernist realist symbolism, which, as Werbner (1998) showed with reference to the Zimbabwean monument, closely followed the patterns developed in the modernist construction of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European war monuments. A century later this particular version of modernist nationalism arrived in post-colonial Southern Africa in its incarnation as what I have come to call ‘North Korean Stalinist realism’.

Postcolonial Namibian nationalist symbolism and rhetoric draws on these images, manifest in the visual arts components that were produced in the socialist realism version of nationalist monumentalism and imported from North Korea. Heroes Acre and the new additions to the urban memoryscape have been designed and constructed by the North Korean company Mansudae Overseas Projects (MOP). MOP is the international commercial arm of the Mansudae Art Studio in Pyongyang, a gigantic art factory established in 1959 with 3,700 employees, including about 1,000 artists. Mansudae has built most of the monuments and public art works in Pyongyang. Since the 1970s the company has been working in African countries – about eighteen countries on the continent as of 2015, including, among them, Zimbabwe, Botswana, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola, Senegal, Benin, where the

North Korean company has designed and constructed memorials, monuments and buildings. With four large-scale commissions, Namibia has been the biggest African nation customer of the North Korean public art works to date.

Kirkwood (2013) shows that the particular aesthetic of Mansudae public works projects has been copied directly from monuments and public buildings in Pyongyang. As I have argued in my consideration of the Heroes Acre monument, the iconic and visual imagery gives expression to a version of an aggressive nationalist imagination. In respect of Zimbabwe's recent historiography, this was dubbed 'patriotic history' by Terence Ranger (2009); in a slightly tuned-down version patriotic historiography has also dominated postcolonial Namibia's public history. Public memory narrations, the country's ritual political calendar and monumentalization all celebrate the armed struggle from exile as the foundation of national liberation. Heroes' Acre is both a physical, topographical space for the spatialization of this sanctified memory and a social space, which, remarkably, is scaping social memory into a fixed form. There is no doubt that the Heroes Acre monument on the southern outskirts of Namibia's capital imposes a narrative of triumphalist victory.

The question I am asking here is: how does the North Korean political aesthetic of nationalist memory politics play out within the urban environment of Windhoek's older colonial city crown? How does it interplay with the older triumphalist monumental architecture of the German colonial era?

In the following I will first discuss the politics and aesthetics of the Namibian Independence Memorial Museum and the two statues that accompany it. My interest, in this article, is not so much in the museum's historical narrative and its exhibitions. The museum's central narrative is of SWAPO's victorious military battle for the independence of Namibia, and of Namibia as being embodied by Nujoma, "the founding father of Namibia"; hence it represents largely another reiteration of the nationalist 'master narrative' that 'SWAPO brought us freedom through the barrel of a gun' (Becker 2011: 522). I discuss this in my wider work on Namibian memory politics (Becker in prep.; see also Niezen 2018). However, in the present analysis I am primarily interested in how the recently erected memorial with its iconic architecture, statues and reliefs has impacted on the urban landscape of the city. I will finally take a close look at one of the statues that came with the Independence Museum: the Genocide Memorial.

Independence Memorial Museum

The 'Independence Memorial Museum', most people simply refer to it as the 'Independence museum', was inaugurated by former Namibian President Hifikepunye Pohamba on 20 March 2014, one day ahead of the country's 24th anniversary of independence from its former (second) colonial power South Africa. The museum occupies a prominent hill-top location in central Windhoek, just above the country's new Supreme Court. The Museum has been built close to some of the city's iconic colonial buildings, dating back to the German colonial period before 1915, the Alte Feste and the Christuskirche. The museum was erected at a historically significant and controversial site. Where the glittering building now stands four stories high,

previously the Reiterdenkmal, the primary memorial icon of the German colonial period had stood since 1912.

As a brazen signifier of brutal colonial rule, the Rider became an item of major contention in the second decade after Namibian independence. In 2009 the statue was first shifted to a nearby site in front of the 'Alte Feste', from where it was again removed on Christmas day 2013, to make way for the new 'Genocide memorial' – courtesy of the North Koreans –, which was unveiled along with the museum's inauguration. In the exact location of the Rider's original place now stands a statue of 'founding father' Sam Nujoma (with Constitution in hand), who guards the front of the museum. The site of the museum is heavy with symbolism. It was the location of the Windhoek concentration camp for Ovaherero and Nama who had been rounded up for what it is remembered now as the second phase of the genocide of the Ovaherero and Nama.

The significant symbolism of location, and the aggressive and assertive contentions in Namibian memory politics played out primarily between the mouthpiece of the German-speaking Namibian minority, the *Allgemeine Zeitung* daily paper, and Namibian social and political constituencies of various origin. These include, evidently, the postindependence government, but also the various communities of those descended from the primary victims of the genocide, and the unofficial communities of personal commemorative practice.² The debate had distinctive racial undertones although, as Elke Zuern (2017) pointed out, the Rider was not just defended by descendants of the German settlers. A number of leading Herero politicians, both from within government and the opposition parties also argued that it should be kept as it the statue served as a daily reminder of German colonial-era crimes. For some activists for a German apology and reparations the monument even stood for their demands (Zuern 2017). The Rider, and its eventual replacement almost a quarter century after the country's Independence signify multiple, contested claims to power.

The removal of the statue was explicitly endorsed when in 2001, the Cabinet decided to build an Independence Memorial Museum at the very site where the monument stood. When in 2009 construction of the museum began, the monument was wrapped, disassembled, and stored at a warehouse over several months until it was re-erected the following year in front of the Alte Feste, where it continued to attract scores of – mostly German – tourists until its second removal – this time it was banned from sight and exiled to the Alte Feste's inner courtyard - at the end of 2013. The removal of this conspicuous colonial historical artefact signalled a key moment in the postcolonial reconfiguration of the cityscape.

Initially, the museum was to be completed after a six months construction period; its inauguration was scheduled for 2012, which was postponed however for two years due to several delays. The museum and two new statues were designed and constructed by the North Korean company Mansudae Overseas, which had earlier been contracted for the construction of the Namibian Heroes' Acre (2002), the new State House (2008), and the

² Kössler (2015: 155) recounts that among Ovaherero the knowledge of the exact site of where their forebears had suffered had been transmitted over the generations by fathers who took their sons to the Rider and told them about the site's dark history.

Okahandja Military museum (constructed in 2004 but still not open to the public in mid-2017, although rumours have it that there is a completed exhibition inside.)

Art historian Meghan Kirkwood, who has compared the aesthetics of the Namibian Heroes' Acre and State House with monuments and constructions in Pyongyang, has noted a direct formal relationship and argues that the Namibian edifices "appear as Namibian translations of a North Korean design vernacular rather than as original, site-specific interpretations" (Kirkwood 2013: 549). As I pointed out earlier, she argued that while the North Korean visual culture was clearly "foreign" the postcolonial Namibian government opted for the Mansudae designs as a "decisive, modern, and authoritative means of asserting their nationalistic self" (ibid.). On the one hand, Kirkwood demonstrates, former president Nujoma, who was instrumental in orchestrating the North Korean commissions, would have clearly seen parallels between the revolutionary anticolonial histories of both countries and would have been inspired by the public celebrations of the anti-Japanese struggle and the leadership of Kim Il-Sung he saw during visits he paid to Pyongyang before and after Namibian independence. On the other hand, and probably most significant is the Namibian perception of an alternative, non-western source of modernity inherent in the North Korean aesthetics, which make them appear as fitting expressions of local, anti-colonial agency and mediated in some instances through earlier North Korean-built edifices on the African continent, particularly the Zimbabwean Heroes' Acre (Becker 2011: 525). Thus, Kirkwood claims, the SWAPO government may have chosen Mansudae monuments not, as public contention often has it because they were inexpensive (she emphasises that this is not the case) or easy to obtain (which is contradicted by the lengthy delays between the initial decision in 2001 to build the museum, and its completion in 2014) to articulate an assertive break with the colonial past.

Kirkwood contends that the Independence Museum – which had not yet been opened at the time of her research– even more so than the earlier Namibian Mansudae commissions borrows from aesthetic precedents of Pyongyang monuments and buildings. Thereby the edifice pronounces authority and global modernity and functions "first and foremost [as] an aggressive symbol of the Namibian government's triumph over colonialism" (Kirkwood 2013: 561).

The towering building of the museum – forty metres high – is situated between the Christuskirche and the Alte Feste. Both these iconic colonial structures have clearly been dwarfed by the architecture of the new museum, and as I discussed above, the most aggressive monument of German colonialism, the Rider, was removed altogether. This led to heated controversies, and may be at the root of some objections against the new structures.

It was not only colonial nostalgia, however, that objected to the Mansudae aesthetics. During the museum's construction period a leading Namibian architect expressed concern, saying that while he did not care at all about the removal of Rider, the site's design was disastrous. In an interview with The Namibian newspaper, Jaco Wasserfall claimed that the new building made architectural references, which he considered to be "completely foreign to Namibia, its people, culture and history." He concluded that, "Architecturally, we are being colonised by the East", referring to what has often been criticised as the colonial era of the Chinese in

Namibia, and wider southern Africa. The architect criticised that while it was entirely understandable that the Namibian government was trying to negate the built environment legacy of German colonialism, it had failed to reflect the “soul of the new Namibian nation, its beliefs, cultures and values” however in public buildings. This was the case, he said, because unfortunately local expertise and talent had been sidelined because there had been no transparent open competition process. (The Namibian, 27 August 2010)

Similar objections had been raised at about the same time in Botswana, where a \$1.1 million National Museum and Art Gallery contract was awarded in 2004 to Mansudae for design and construction of a monument to three of the country’s most storied tribal chiefs, now known as the “Three Dikgosi monument” in Gaborone. Similar to Wasserfall’s complaint, local artists in Botswana expressed frustration at being shut out of an non-transparent bidding process, where they felt unfairly denied the chance to work on a project of national pride. Many also questioned the artistic integrity of the work, with one artist describing the sculpture as “standard busts and statues of some European generals with the nicely combed heads of three Botswana chiefs.” Others – here echoing the quoted Namibian architect - pointed to the work’s resemblance to Socialist Realism, a style that has nothing to do with any indigenous African culture (Baecker 2011).

In Namibia, some public sources have claimed that the Independence Museum had generally been rather well received (Zuern 2017; Mupetami 2014). This is certainly quite in contrast to the reception of the earlier construction of Heroes’ Acre where members of the public, including some from within the ruling SWAPO had complained early on about the cultural incompatibility of the monument’s aesthetics (Becker 2011: 530).

The question beckons: What does the urban memory landscape look like now, what does it *feel* like now to be in the Windhoek city centre, twenty-five years after independence? In the following I give my impression of my first visit to Windhoek following the completion and opening of the Museum. To remain as close as possible to what met the eye and the senses, I deliberately present my unedited field notes as I wrote them at the time.

Approaching the museum: walking Windhoek in 2015



Picture 1. *Christuskirche and Nujoma statue. Photo: Heike Becker.*

In January 2015 I returned to Namibia after an absence of almost two-and-a half years. On my first morning in Windhoek I walked up to the museum, which I had previously only seen from a distance since it had been encased by a high barbed wire fence when I had last spent time in the city in October 2012. As I walked up Fidel Castro Street, I noted my observations:

The Independence museum is outwardly of an oddish shape (friends I had met the night before called it a 'coffee pot' or 'golden espresso machine') but rather modernist of clean tile lines. I note the three outside relief murals of heroic style in the entrance area. An apparent effort has been made to connect it with the city in a certain way through the two lifts, encased in glass that give the visitor a panoramic view of Windhoek. From above the victorious struggle, the city, in its still very colonially dominated architecture, appears dwarfed. I certainly found the fast-moving lifts impressive and enjoyed the ride, taking pictures of the different corners of downtown

Windhoek, as they appear from the different levels. Interestingly, I realized a little later that the lifts were not much appreciated by visitors – presumably people from overseas – judging by the repeated comments in the museum’s visitors’ book and on various websites. Repeated complaints: they are “too hot”. It didn’t bother me even though Windhoek was certainly at its mid-summer hottest – at least mid-30s with no relent at night. I kept returning to the museum over the next couple of weeks that I spent in Windhoek. My visits were at different times of the day, mostly however I arrived during the late morning or early afternoon.

Approaching the museum from the steep incline of Fidel Castro Street, passing Zoo Park on the left, a major new construction site and the Court on the right, then the modest colonial Estorff House on the right, which today houses The Goethe Zentrum, other German era houses on the left (one of them housing the German Lutheran Parish), crossing Robert Mugabe Avenue, on the left a giant billboard advertises various Windhoek attraction, including - still - the Reiter. To the right are the colonial buildings of the National Museum offices and the now largely defunct Alte Feste (there are no more exhibitions there, housing only some offices of Khomas region Cultural office and the ‘demobilised’ Reiter in the court yard), getting through several keen vendors of Makalani nuts products, and here I am at the bottom of the staircase leading past Nujoma with the constitution book to finally arrive at the museum building.

I walk up the first set of stairs to the Nujoma statue. The lettering on the plinth, in what is supposedly Nujoma’s handwriting heralds that Namibia “be free, sovereign and independent”. The statue – constructed by Mansudae Overseas (as much as the ‘Genocide memorial’ nearby, which was inaugurated together with the Nujoma statue), allegedly in North Korea and shipped to Namibia for erection – about four metres tall (approximately), holding the Constitution aloft, lacking artistic merit (although in my view the Genocide martial heroic statue is far worse). Two young, black presumably Namibian couples are taking pictures at the pedestal, as do East Asian looking tourists and some Western European looking visitors. I pass the statue and enter the outer courtyard of the museum, passing the inauguration plaque. In the courtyard a pair of rather bored security guards are hanging around. I notice the three murals, in decided North Korean Stalinist fashion, dedicate to the struggle, one interestingly highlighting trade unions (NAPWU the inscription reads) and students (NANSO), the third more in general fashion – these murals are less militaristic than the inside exhibits, I realise later.

As one walks up the stairs on the final ascent to the museum, the larger-than-life statue of Nujoma holding a book raised aloft certainly looks fairly domesticated, certainly compared to the martial statue at Omgulumbashe (where he stands with an AK 47 in hand) or the arguably Nujoma-depiction of the statue of the “Unknown soldier” at Heroes Acre. The book represents the Namibian Constitution, on the base of roughly hewn stones I read in the same Nujoma handwriting I have been familiar with from Heroes’ Acre, “Namibia be forever free, sovereign and independent/ Sam Nujoma/ 21 March 1990”, and on a plaque beneath, “Dr Sam Nujoma/ Founding

president and father of the Namibian nation.” More East Asian looking tourists hover around and some take selfies with the founding father.

Another outside attraction catches my attention on the first visit – a giant screen (size c 3x5 metres), to the right of the Nujoma statue and the museum, which on the back displayed one of the historicist paintings from the exhibition, which shows the struggle all in khaki uniforms and with armoured vehicles/ tanks, while the front – which one sees from the entrance and side of the town – displays a cartoon clip of about 3 minutes length, which ends by saying “freedom”. It is rather confusing, the animated clip depicts dunes and deserts with odd limb and characters moving across; the connection with the liberation struggle is certainly not immediately clear. I was wondering who was supposed to be attracted by it? During my second visit that day, I asked a heritage professional working with the Ministry of Culture, who accompanied me to the site, what he thought of it; he was equally stupefied, said he had no idea. We were joking that “maybe they think that’s for the youth”.

From the outside, the museum is strikingly modernist, but it does not immediately remind one of the bombastic Stalinist aesthetic, which is so characteristic of the Heroes’ Acre. Despite its size, the museum appears fairly inconspicuous – less arresting than the nearby grand building of the Supreme Court. The impression of comparatively moderate civility is also invoked through the Nujoma statue in front of the museum. A young Namibian visitor commented thoughtfully:

And there we met, standing guard, the giant bronze statue of the founding president Sam Nujoma, holding high the constitution in his right hand. Many may contemplate the fact that he carries a mere book in his hand, but I understood immediately the significance. The constitution is a book of law. It is there to demonstrate the power of freedom. It means that a country and its people that were once ruled with a heavy hand are now free. (Mupetami 2014)

While large the new sculpture is far less imposing than the Rider, which previously stood in this very location. Through both its iconic presences – the emphasis placed on the book of the Constitution the cast-in-stone Nujoma holds up – and the absence of weaponry, in contrast to the Nujoma statues at Heroes’ Acre and at Omugulugwombashe in northern Namibia, the sculpture emphasises a democratic dispensation and a decidedly ‘civil’ postcolonial Namibia.

It is only upon entering the museum building and the floors of exhibition that the militaristic assertion of anticolonial war as the main break with the colonial past becomes evident with aggressive imagery of war scenes, and another more than life-size bust of Nujoma, which emphasises his presumed role as the ‘Father of Namibia’.

The Genocide Memorial



Picture 2. *Genocide Memorial. Photo: Heike Becker.*

The second statue that came along with the Independence museum, and was shipped to Namibia from North Korea is the 'Genocide Memorial'. This memorial has taken the place in front of the Alte Feste, which between 2010 and 2013 was the temporary location of the Windhoek Rider. On a high pedestal of sandstone (said to include parts of the Rider's old plinth), a bronze sculpture portrays a man and a woman standing on top of a 'Nama hut' ('matjieshuis'). Each of the figures raises an arm and pushes the sky with a fist. The most dramatic dimension of the statue are the broken shackles that dangle from the raised arms of the two figures – the man's right one and the woman's left one. Their bodies are lean, muscular (especially the male figure's) and erect; their sculptured bodies convey heroism, rather than suffering – which seems somewhat astonishing in a monument that ostensibly commemorates genocide, and those who perished during it. The figures' faces look into the distance, straight ahead, with determination. These sculptures surprisingly do not indicate a site of mourning; they represent heroic victory. The unspeakable torment of the genocide is

present only in two reliefs inserted in the plinth, which have been moulded after photographs of survivors and victims of the genocide. Above the relief facing Robert Mugabe Avenue, a busy thoroughfare, lettering cites a line from the Namibian national anthem, “their blood waters our freedom”. This line has often been used as a reference to the “sacrifices” of the liberation war of the 1960s-1980s; under this title, for instance, in the mid-1990s SWAPO published a documentation of those who died during battle and exile of the national liberation war.³

This apparent paradox requires deeper reflection. During the inauguration of the Museum and unveiling of the statues, then President Pohamba elaborated in his speech regarding the Genocide memorial that,

“Today, our nation is in a somber mood as we inaugurate this Genocide Memorial Statue. We are filled with mixed emotions. Emotions of sadness because we recall the horrors that our people were subjected to by the colonial troops, and emotions of pride because through this Memorial, we are saying, as a nation, that despite the hardships, we prevailed and emerged victorious.”

The Namibian President continued to delve more deeply into the two sets of emotion, which the memory of the Namibian war of 1904-07 and the genocide evoked. First he referenced the “untold hardships and suffering” that “our people” endured:

“This Genocide Memorial Statue was conceived and erected as a national symbol in remembrance of all our people who lost their lives and were subjected to untold hardships and suffering at the hands of the heartless and heavy-handed soldiers of the Schutztruppe and the entire German colonial machinery.”

Later in his speech, however, he emphasized the heroism of “those who gave their lives” in anti-colonial resistance:

“It is in honour of our fallen heroes and heroines, those who gave their lives, those who resisted German colonialists with all their might and those who never gave up in the face of a merciless enemy, that we dedicate the Genocide Memorial Statue today.”

Finally he attempted to draw the two disparate aspects together, when he concluded that,

“This Memorial Statue must always remind our people and indeed all others, that we will never forget what happened to our people at the turn of the 20th Century. We will never forget the pain, the suffering and the humiliation. Doing so would be tantamount to an abdication of our patriotic duty to honour our history, and a betrayal of those who pioneered the struggle for our freedom and national independence.”

³ This publication – if perhaps not intended so – de facto served to dispel the revelations about SWAPO human rights abuses in exile, especially the Lubango dungeons of the 1980s, which were in the mid-1990s again a prominent theme of Namibian politics and public discourse after the publication of Siegfried Groth’s *Breaking the Wall of Silence*, and the concurrent efforts of ‘ex-detainees’ to mobilise around demands for a transparent discussion of these events.

These are interesting rhetoric twists. Pohamba reminded his compatriots of the suffering yet instantly turned the victims into heroic figures who “pioneered the struggle for our freedom and national independence”. Drawing a direct line from the early resistance against colonial conquest to the SWAPO-led nationalist struggle has for long been part of the nationalist narration. The new memorial is located in this tradition, and this becomes very explicit in its visual and iconic aesthetics of a lean and muscular heroism.⁴

The peculiar aesthetics and symbolism of the new memorial signal that the genocide of the Ovaherero and Nama has been belatedly entered into the public history narrative of Namibian nationhood. The inclusion of a statue to explicitly commemorate the genocide in the latest ‘package’ of North Korean designed memorials in Namibia has certainly advanced a new level of recognition and inclusion, which would have been impossible a few years earlier. Prior to 2004, the centenary of von Trotha’s infamous extermination order after the battle of Ohamakari, which turned the Namibian war into a colonial genocide, the early African resistance was not much publicly discussed in Namibia, as the editors of the English edition of the seminal edited collection on the genocide in German South West Africa observed in 2008 (the original German edition of this seminal collection was published in 2003). Jürgen Zimmerer and Joachim Zeller (2008: xiii) write: “Until the anniversary year, it did not seem that memories of one of the darkest chapters of the past would fit easily into the picture of the new Namibia of the post-apartheid era.” While several of my interlocutors in Windhoek have welcomed the new statue as a more inclusive approach in Namibian memory politics, some of the victim-descendant group activists remain unconvinced. Esther Muinjangué, the chairperson of the Ovaherero/Ovambanderu Genocide Foundation, when asked about the significance of the genocide memorial was dismissive of it, saying that, “it means nothing” (Niezen 2018: 556). The erection of a monument to commemorate the colonial genocide of the Ovaherero and Nama hence appears to fit into what some have called the SWAPO government’s co-optation strategy regarding the genocide and its place in the narrative of the Namibian nation (Förster 2008: 188-89; cited in Niezen 2018: 559).

It remains equally significant to consider the historical narrative and its setting in the stone and bronze of postcolonial memorials as an issue of, if not ethnicity then certainly regionalism (see, eg. Kössler 2007; see also Becker 2011 for related Namibian reactions to the Heroes’ Acre monument). Zimmerer and Zeller (2008: xiii) conclude, “It is above all the Herero who demand a critical reappraisal of the war, for it was they, together with the Nama, who suffered most severely the consequences of the genocide.” The SWAPO government’s stress on the liberation struggle against apartheid South Africa in the second half of the 20th century has done much to obliterate this early history. The ethnicised and regionalised fragmentation of history and memory continues to play a significant role in the current law suit brought by Ovaherero and Nama traditional authority representatives before a court in New York (Becker 2017)⁵.

⁴ The aesthetics and symbolism of the erect, powerful figures – the signifiers of heroism - are reminiscent of another, much larger North Korean built memorial on the continent, the African Renaissance Memorial in Dakar, Senegal.

⁵ On 5 January 2017, Ovaherero Chief Vekuii Rukoro and head of the Nama traditional authorities David Fredericks filed a class action lawsuit under the Alien Tort Statute in New York. The plaintiffs are suing Germany

Conclusion

The recent changes of the Windhoek urban landscape indicate a somewhat paradoxical memory politics in, and of postcolonial Namibia. While most of the city's colonial memory landscape has been left quite untouched, the present article has shown how recently-constructed sites that anchor memories of anti-colonial resistance and national liberation have changed the urban landscape. The North-Korean built monuments located in a prominent hill-top position of central Windhoek have significantly altered the city's skyline with their massive aesthetics of Stalinist realism. Built in this particular position, they have replaced an infamous colonial memorial and dwarf iconic German colonial remnants of the built environment. However, a closer look at the new sites suggests more nuance. From close proximity, the outward appearance of the Museum itself, and the Nujoma statue in front of it, demonstrates less embodiment of an aggressive postcolonial-anticolonial nationalism than expected. Despite the removal of the iconic Windhoek Rider colonial monument, the ensemble of museum and Nujoma statue appears to be rather blending in with other architectural changes in the Windhoek city centre, such as the nearby new Supreme Court building. Paradoxically, the memorial to commemorate the colonial genocide stands out particularly in the aesthetics of martial heroism in the North Korean iconic style. This seems at first surprising, considering the incomparable suffering associated with the genocide; however, the re-dedication of genocide victims as proto-nationalist 'heroes and heroines' corresponds well with a longer tradition of the historical narrative of anticolonial resistance and nationalist liberation struggle. In a reasonably tentative conclusion then, the new memorial sites, instead of dramatically changing it, have rather added new layers of aesthetics and meaning to the Windhoek urban landscape of memory.

for damages to be paid directly to the descendants of the Ovaherero and Nama genocide survivors. Rukoro and Fredericks are also seeking an order from the court requesting that, as the lawful representatives of the "peoples" directly affected, they be included in any negotiations and settlements between Germany and Namibia. Ovaherero and Nama victim groups have objected to the fact that current talks between Germany and Namibia about the still outstanding formal apology and the contested issue of reparations are taking place without delegates of their communities.

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