

A New Chapter in Namibian History: Reflections on Archival Research

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Abstract: Since Namibian independence in 1990, historians have increasingly made use of Namibian archives to explore the history of the German and South African occupation. Researching the recent past is, however, much more difficult, considering the absence of a SWAPO archive and an embargo on governmental files of thirty years. But now, thirty years after independence, the files from the postcolonial administrations are set to gradually open up. In anticipation of this new chapter of Namibian history, this article examines the state of various archives in Namibia and offers a number of observations that may be of use to scholars who are interested in consulting them.

Résumé : Depuis l'indépendance de la Namibie en 1990, les historiens ont de plus en plus utilisé les archives namibiennes pour explorer l'histoire de l'occupation allemande et sud-africaine. La recherche du passé récent est cependant beaucoup plus difficile, compte tenu de l'absence d'archives de la SWAPO et l'embargo fait sur les archives gouvernementales de moins de trente ans. Mais aujourd'hui, trente ans après l'indépendance, les dossiers des administrations postcoloniales sont amenés à s'ouvrir progressivement. En prévision de ce nouveau chapitre de l'histoire namibienne, cet article examine l'état de diverses archives en Namibie et offre un certain nombre d'observations pouvant être utiles aux chercheurs intéressés à les consulter.

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Introduction

Once a year, the National Archives of the Netherlands celebrates a “Transparency Day” (*Openbaarheidsdag*) when tens of thousands of formerly restricted documents are released to the public. Newspapers run articles detailing the newly declassified stories, the national broadcaster airs bulletins about interesting revelations, and historians eagerly await the moment when they can rummage through the files and get to work. The Dutch are no exception – similar milestones occur for example at the National Archives of the United Kingdom, which regularly makes headlines with disclosed accessions.

Namibia has not yet organized its own “Transparency Day,” for the simple reason that there were no declassified state files available to be put center stage. The archival record of the German and the South African administrations are (with a number of practical limitations) available through the National Archives of Namibia. The files of the administrations that have governed Namibia since independence are, by contrast, often deposited at the archives but remain closed to the public. But this will change soon, and a new chapter in Namibian history is imminent.

Namibian archives adhere to the Archives Act, no. 12 of 1992, which was a slightly revised version of the colonial South West African Archives Act of 1987.¹ There have been calls to update the law since then, but to no avail.² The current law stipulates that governmental files are to be classified for a time period of thirty years. Recently, Namibia reached the notable milestone of thirty years of independence, which was celebrated on 22 March 2019. This effectively means that, from now on, historians can expect a gradual release of governmental files from 1990 onwards.

This matters a great deal to our understanding of Namibia’s postcolonial era, which so far has been entirely governed by the former liberation movement South West Africa People’s Organization (SWAPO). Children growing up in contemporary Namibia – the so-called *born frees* – know nothing else than a SWAPO government. The governmental records that are being produced since 1990 are incredibly important to hold the ruling party accountable and in order to comprehend the recent past. Hitherto, post-colonial history writing has for a large part relied on oral sources instead of the written record.³ While this is certainly useful, one can only wonder what stories are hidden in the National Archives.

¹ Ellen Ndeshi Namhila, *Little Research Value: African Estate Records and Colonial Gaps in a Post-Colonial National Archive* (Basel: Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2017), 22.

² Werner Hillebrecht, “Archives, Ethics, Salaries, and the Struggle: A View from Namibia,” *Innovation* 24 (2002), 25–31.

³ Moses Ochonu, “Elusive History: Fractured Archives, Politicized Orality, and Sensing the Postcolonial Past,” *History in Africa* 42 (2015), 292.

Archives are not meant to be used by historians only: anthropologists, legal researchers, sociologists, political scientists, and those well-versed in several other academic disciplines may also benefit from the materials that are made available through Namibian archives. In addition, it is important to note that visitors of those archives are not solely professional academics but also people investigating their family history, seeking data for legal battles about land, working on hobby projects, and so on.

The aim of this paper is to outline the current state of archival resources in Namibia, in anticipation of a new chapter in its postcolonial history. It is partially a descriptive endeavor, prompted by the milestone of thirty years of Namibian independence and the prospect of declassified files of the past SWAPO governments. Such an overview – which, to my knowledge, is the first of its kind – might be useful for those interested conducting archival research in Namibia. Therefore, I will not detail archival repositories concerned with Namibia located outside of Namibia, as this would be a different endeavor entirely. Further, this paper hopes to contribute to a more methodological discussion about issues of access, representation, and accountability in Namibia.

The structure of this paper consists of short discussions of major archival repositories containing Namibiana. First, the historical background, contents, and accessibility of the main physical repositories in Namibia itself will be examined. Two of them are publicly owned and operated (by the National Archives of Namibia and the University of Namibia Archives) and five of them are private: the Namibia Scientific Society, the Scientific Society Swakopmund, the Erfdeel-Kultuursentrum, the Tsumeb Museum, and the SWAPO archive. For the sake of brevity, this paper only deals with formal archives and will thus not include company archives, private archives, foreign archives containing Namibiana, and digital collections. The paper concludes with a number of observations for future users.

National Archives of Namibia (NAN)

Background

In many research projects, the National Archives form a natural starting point and is the most frequently used repository by researchers, both local and foreign. The National Archives were founded in 1939 and was originally housed in the *Tintenpalast* (“Ink Palace”), which once was the seat of the German colonial administration. Today, the building is home to the Parliament of Namibia.⁴ German occupation over South West Africa began

⁴ Werner Hillebrecht, “German Records in the National Archives of Namibia: An Under-Utilised Resource?,” paper presented at the Namibia Scientific Society, Windhoek, 29 January 2020.

formally in 1884 and ended in 1915 after South African troops had invaded the territory in the context of the First World War. South Africa established military rule over the land and named it South West Africa.

The new government used parts of the German archival collection for the compilation of the infamous 1918 Blue Book, which detailed German atrocities against the indigenous population and thus “served to scuttle any attempt by Germany to retain control over Namibia.”⁵ In 1919, South Africa was awarded the colony as an official mandate territory by the League of Nations. Apart from the Blue Book, the South African authorities were not very much interested in the historical records of the German power.⁶ The collection of records was also largely disorganized, except for some economically relevant parts such as land registry and mining records.⁷

For years nothing happened until Waldemar Schreve took an interest in the materials. Schreve was the Clerk of the Legislative Assembly (the settler parliament that was established in 1926) and convinced the State Archives in Pretoria to delegate a staff member to Windhoek with the objective to set up a formal archive. The work commenced in 1939, at a slow pace. A new impulse was provided by Jan Endrik Esterhuysen, who served as Head of the Archives from 1946 to 1956. Trained in Germany and a master of the difficult *Sütterlin* handwriting script, Schreve organized the surviving German records and saved whatever records were left outside Windhoek.⁸

Over the course of many years, the archives within the *Tintenpalast* grew too large for the building and had to be moved to another location. The archives moved to a new building for a city library, archive, and museum at Lüderitz Street in 1956, which made the collections available to researchers. The building was sponsored by Diamond Company CDM. Esterhuysen was transferred to South Africa and was succeeded by David Krynauw, who mostly collected materials but hardly documented them. He was replaced by two newly trained archivists from South Africa, Christel Stern and Sally Harper. From the 1970s until independence in 1990, Stern and Harper reinvented the archives. South West Africa served as a guinea pig for South African archives, for instance, with the introduction of microfilm and the digitization of catalogues.⁹

⁵ Jeremy Silvester and Jan-Bart Gewald, *Words Cannot be Found: German Colonial Rule in Namibia: An Annotated Reprint of the 1918 Blue Book* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), XIX.

⁶ Except, as Bernard C. Moore pointed out to me, when the South African authorities reviewed German legislation for “best practices” with regards to hunting or game laws, or Native Affairs Legislations.

⁷ Werner Hillebrecht, “German Records in the National Archives of Namibia: An Under-Utilised Resource?,” paper presented at the Namibia Scientific Society, Windhoek, 29 January 2020.

⁸ Hillebrecht, “German Records.”

⁹ National Archives of Namibia, “Kurze Darstellung des Nationalarchivs von Namibia: Geschichte, Bestände, Probleme,” undated draft of a funding proposal. For a brief historical background on the computerization of the archives, see Ana

In 1982, Stern and Harper hired historian Brigitte Lau, a person who would transform the archives in its postcolonial existence. Lau was trained in Cape Town under Patrick Harries and was initially hired for work on precolonial historical sources, many of which she used in her own research of precolonial southern Namibia. Namibia's transition to independence in 1990 led to the formal establishment of the National Archives of Namibia and posed major challenges to the institution. According to Ellen Ndeshi Namhila, the issue of archives was non-existent within the planning process for an independent Namibia, and the existing staff was "clearly unprepared for the task." The amount of work increased (with extended responsibilities as a national archive and an influx of new material), but the staffing structure remained the same.¹⁰

Lau became the Head of the Archives in 1991 and began converting the catalogue data from an external mainframe computer to an in-house PC.¹¹ She also initiated the construction of a new archive on another location because the building on Lüderitz Street became too small. Lau regrettably passed away in 1996 in a car accident. This tragic event heralded a difficult time for the archives, while two bureaucratic reforms also hampered the functioning of the organization.¹² In 2000, the National Archives were moved to its current location on Robert Mugabe Avenue, together with the National Library of Namibia.¹³

Franqueira, "Computerization of National Archives," *UNESCO Restricted Technical Report* (Paris: UNESCO, 1992), 2.

¹⁰ Namhila, *Little Research Value*, 22–23.

¹¹ The computer was funded by a donation from the German government. See Franqueira, "Computerization of National Archives," 2.

¹² The first bureaucratic reform restructured the archives into a low and unfavorable position within the organization of the Ministry of Education. In the second reform the salaries of the archivists were classified at a very low level, which caused all experienced archivists to leave the institution. Newly hired employees would often leave the archives as soon as a better-paid opportunity came up. The current unfinished status of a large part of the South African records is a result of this time period. During Hillebrecht's tenure as Head of the Archives, the start of two external projects ensured the temporary hiring of young and talented historians. These were the Archives of Anticolonial Resistance and the Liberation Struggle project, cofinanced by Germany, and the Aluka project, funded by the Mellon Foundation. A salary reform in 2014 (partly) restored the competitive status of the National Archives, which allowed the organization to fill the management and several other positions. National Archives of Namibia, "Kurze Darstellung des Nationalarchivs von Namibia." For more on the Aluka Project, see Allen Isaacman, Premesh Lalu, and Thomas Nygren, "Digitization, History, and the Making of a Postcolonial Archive of Southern African Liberation Struggles: The Aluka Project," *Africa Today* 52–2 (2005), 55–77.

¹³ National Archives of Namibia, "Kurze Darstellung des Nationalarchivs von Namibia." For a paper on audio visuals, see Werner Hillebrecht, "The Preservation of the Audio Heritage of Namibia: Challenges and Opportunities," *Basler Afrika*

Jochen Kutzner took over from Lau in 1996 and retired in 2002. He was succeeded by Werner Hillebrecht, who had already begun working for the NAN in 1992 but moved to the National Library three years later. Hillebrecht reorganized the messy physical storage rooms and digital catalogue, introduced the AACRLS project and Aluka project, and oversaw the donations of material that filled considerable gaps in the archival collection.¹⁴ Due to a lack of successors, Hillebrecht remained the Head of the Archives for a few years after his retirement and was finally succeeded by Ndahambelela Hertha Iipinge in 2015, who thereafter moved to the University of Namibia to lead its Archival Unit. She was succeeded by Beauty Matongo in 2016.¹⁵

Contents

NAN holds around 8,000 linear shelving meters of archival material. 6,000 meters are governmental records, 1,000 meters are private accessions (to be discussed below), and the remaining 1,000 meters consist of various media such as library material, maps, plans, photos, posters, films, oral history cassettes, etc.¹⁶

The German records of NAN are the best preserved and most comprehensive archive of a former German colony in the world. The files take up about one tenth of NAN's stored files, around 600 meters. The majority of the central administration (*Zentralbüro*) is preserved, except for a number of files that were destroyed by the South African administration in 1919 (including files from the customs administration and the *Entschädigungskommission*, which dealt with damage claims by settlers during the Namibian genocide). The archives also contain the entire German period legislation through printed gazettes.¹⁷

The decentralized district administrations are incomplete due to ignorant South African government officials who were not very much interested in those files or could not read the German language or script. Esterhuysen

Bibliographien Working Paper, no. 1 (Basel, Switzerland: Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2010).

¹⁴ This included the *Reichskolonialamt* (Reich Colonial Office) records from the Federal Archives in Berlin on microfilm, the Namibiana from the Rhenish Mission Archives in Wuppertal on microfilm, and the repatriation of original files from South Africa related to the office of the Administrator General, the Caprivi Strip, and Walvis Bay. National Archives of Namibia, "Kurze Darstellung des Nationalarchivs von Namibia."

¹⁵ National Archives of Namibia, "Kurze Darstellung des Nationalarchivs von Namibia."

¹⁶ Hillebrecht, "German Records."

¹⁷ For this source, one needs to learn the Fraktur script. Hillebrecht, "German Records."

transferred a number of complete collections to Windhoek, but many others were either destroyed or left to rot.¹⁸ Another gap in the collection are the military records from the Namibian genocide, which were sent to Germany after the war. The General Staff of the German military wanted to use those records to compile an official history of the war. Unfortunately, in 1945 the Prussian Army Archives in Berlin-Potsdam were bombed by Allied forces. All records located there were lost. That does not mean that no information is available about this period in time: a broad and often detailed picture of the war can be painted using the records from the civil administration in Windhoek. The wars before 1904 are all represented within NAN.¹⁹

The files from the South African administration (which formally ruled the territory from 1920 to 1990) are in part available to the public, although the thin paper that was fashionable at the time makes these records vulnerable (as they were in fact carbon duplicates, these files are much more fragile than the sturdy paper used by the German colonial government). The material is written in both English and Afrikaans.²⁰ It is difficult to assess the precise extent of the colonial record present in the National Archives in Windhoek because of the continuously changing status of Namibia throughout the twentieth century.²¹ Between 1919 and 1948, the League of Nations mandate status of South West Africa remained more or less the same and the majority of colonial records were stored in Windhoek. In the early 1950s, South Africa incorporated South West Africa as a fifth province, resulting in more and more records being held in South Africa. The Odendaal Report of 1964, which advised on how to introduce apartheid in South West Africa, reinforced this process. After the Turnhalle Constitutional Conference (1977–1979), the records from various domains (apart from security-related affairs such as international relations, military, police, and others) were repatriated back to Windhoek. Unfortunately, many collections went missing because archival services were not prioritized, and, on the eve of independence, many files were illegally transported from the colony to South Africa.

¹⁸ The district records of Swakopmund, Lüderitzbucht, Keetmanshoop, Rehoboth, and Omaruru are among the collections that were saved by Esterhuysen. As Hillebrecht has pointed out, some were already damaged as a result of inadequate storage. The records from Lüderitzbucht are tainted by bird droppings (because pigeons were breeding in the storage room), while records from Keetmanshoop suffer from termite damage. While in some cases district records are largely absent, the farm property records have been preserved. This exception can be explained through the high importance that was given by South Africa to keep the records of white ownership of land intact. Hillebrecht, “German Records.”

¹⁹ These include the war against Witbooi in 1894, against the Mbanderu and /Khaunan in 1896, and against the Zwartboois in 1898. Hillebrecht, “German Records.”

²⁰ Hillebrecht, “German Records.”

²¹ I thank Bernard C. Moore for this point.

While during the postcolonial era some of these files have since been repatriated, it is uncertain how many records about Namibia were destroyed by the South African government during the final days of apartheid.²²

The third era of governmental files, those from an independent Namibian administration, are also stored in the National Archives but not yet available to the public. The governmental files in the NAN are subject to a thirty-year restriction period, which effectively means that, up until now, records from the ruling party have been unavailable. Researchers could theoretically place a motivated request to the Head of Archives to open up restricted materials, but the chances of success were slim.²³

A significant change is imminent. In 2020, Namibia celebrated its thirty years of independence. This momentous occasion also signifies a watershed moment in the postcolonial history writing of Namibia, because from now on researchers can expect the disclosure of files from the Namibian government administration. A new chapter in the history of postcolonial Namibia awaits to be written. A cautionary comment must however be made, as it is yet unclear what amount of the governmental record will become available to the public. Negomasha and Nyanga noted the “poor management of semi-current records in the public service of Namibia” when records are dumped in unsecure storage areas, which makes them “irretrievable and susceptible to theft, vandalism and damage by environmental factors.”²⁴

In addition to the NAN, governmental files are in some cases also stored at governmental offices, ministries, and agencies. For example, the Deeds Office and the Agricultural Extension Offices have their own archival collections, which may sometimes be used by researchers upon request. These repositories are not formalized archives, and it is therefore impossible to supply catalogues, opening times, or other basic information.²⁵

The colonial government files represent a “distorted and one-sided record,”²⁶ and records from the current regime are still limited and largely

²² Ellen Ndeshi Namhila, “‘We Are Not Going to Prosecute You, We Want Your Records and Stories’: Filling Apartheid Gaps in the Public Memory of the Namibian Struggle for Independence,” paper presented at the World Library and Information Congress: 69th IFLA General Conference and Council, 1–9 August 2003, Berlin, 3; Verne Harris, “‘They Should Have Destroyed More’: The Destruction of Public Records by the South African State in the Final Years of Apartheid, 1990–1994,” paper presented at the Wits History Workshop: The TRC; Commission the Past, 11–14 June, 1999; Hillebrecht, “Archives, Ethics, Salaries, and the Struggle,” 26.

²³ Hillebrecht, “Archives, Ethics, Salaries, and the Struggle,” 29.

²⁴ Cathrine T. Nengomasha and Erasmus H. Nyanga, “Managing Semi Current Records: A Case for Records Centres for the Public Service of Namibia,” *Journal for Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences* 1–2 (2012), 244.

²⁵ I want to thank Bernard C. Moore for this point.

²⁶ Ellen Ndeshi Namhila, “Archives of Anti-Colonial Resistance and the Liberation Struggle (AACRLS): An Integrated Programme to Fill the Colonial Gaps in the

inaccessible – although this is about to change due to the expiration of embargo restrictions. Researchers should however note that the National Archives do not solely contain governmental files. The “private accessions” are of considerable importance but easily overlooked because visitors of the archive tend to primarily use the “files database.”²⁷ Before independence, the acquisition of private materials came almost entirely from the white population and did therefore little to remedy the colonial bias of the archives.²⁸

A major improvement in this respect is the Archives of Anti-Colonial Resistance and Liberation Struggle (AACRLS) project, which has been made available through the “private accessions database.” The AACRLS project was jointly funded by the German and Namibian governments at a cost of around N\$8 million and ran from 2001 to 2010.²⁹ It sought to repatriate records that were illegally removed from Namibia, acquire copies from records that are available in foreign archives, collect historical records from private collections in Namibia, and gather oral histories.³⁰

The project officially covers the period from 1884, when German South West Africa was established, to 1966, when SWAPO engaged in its first military contact with South African troops.³¹ A final report about the AACRLS’s results has not been published, but the project succeeded in the acquisition of more than 300 sub-collections.³² The variety of materials is great, including not only typed manuscripts but also oral interviews, photos, film, and objects. The collections also widely differ in terms of volume: some consist of a single item, while others contain large amounts of documents.³³

Accessibility

One of NAN’s greatest assets is its formal accessibility. Visitors, both local and foreign, can use the archive without the need for a research permit or the

Archival Record of Namibia,” *Journal for Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences* 4–1 (2015), 170.

²⁷ At the moment, more than a 1,000 private accessions and sub-collections are available, covering a wide range of subjects.

²⁸ With a few exceptions, such as the Witbooi Papers and the Maharero papers. Namhila, “Archives of Anti-Colonial Resistance and the Liberation Struggle,” 170.

²⁹ Namhila, “Archives of Anti-Colonial Resistance and the Liberation Struggle,” 172.

³⁰ Namhila, “We Are Not Going to Prosecute You,” 7.

³¹ Hillebrecht, “Archives, Ethics, Salaries, and the Struggle,” 26.

³² On 7–9 December 2009 the AACRLS project organized a conference to mark the end of the project, titled “Monuments, Memories and Monuments: Tracing the Footprints to Independence.” A number of papers were published in the edited volume by Jeremy Silvester, *Re-Viewing Resistance in Namibian History* (Windhoek: UNAM Press, 2015).

³³ Namhila, “Archives of Anti-Colonial Resistance and the Liberation Struggle,” 172.

payment of an entry fee. The reading room has around twelve seats available. The NAN has made progress with regards to the digitization of their collection (around 35,000 records, and counting), but digitized records can only be viewed in the reading room. The digital turn in historical studies is a promising prospect, but – in the case of African studies – certainly not a magic bullet. “Archival research in Africa continues to be a highly personalized and ‘analogue’ process,” as Daly observes, and this is also true for Namibian studies.³⁴

To search through the records of the National Archives, one computer with a search system is available in the reading room.³⁵ The search system consists of several databases, which altogether contain half a million data records.³⁶ In addition, visitors may use paper finding aids, although the collection in the reading room is incomplete. The NAN is one of the best catalogued archives across Africa, with over 70 percent of its government and court records catalogued.³⁷ It must be mentioned that, due to the shortage of staff, there remains a backlog in the cataloguing of materials.³⁸ This mostly concerns the last twenty years of South African rule and the records of the Odendaal Commission, which proposed a plan for the introduction of homelands (Bantustans) in South West Africa.³⁹

Unfortunately, the NAN’s formal accessibility has been significantly hampered by practical obstacles. The NAN has not had a functional website for years, and prospective visitors cannot contact the archivists through mail or telephone. This makes it difficult to prepare a visit to the archive – or to even know where the archives are located and when they are open. The IT equipment of the archive is outdated and, in some cases, defective. The building itself suffered from various malfunctions, including frequent water

³⁴ Samuel Fury Childs Daly, “Archival Research in Africa,” *African Affairs* 116–463 (2017), 311.

³⁵ In the back there is another computer available, but this one is not connected to the internet, so the catalogue is not up to date (as of March 2020).

³⁶ To be more precise, around 536,000 records. Almost 34,600 records within the combined databases allow direct access from the catalogue to a digital or digitized item. The majority of these items are photos (25,200 photos), and the rest are other items (9,500 items). Digital access is only possible in the reading room, as a website is under development but housed under the Office of the Prime Minister.

³⁷ Personal communication with Werner Hillebrecht, 24 April 2020.

³⁸ This mostly concerns court records and files from the South African administration. The backlog unfortunately suggest that the archival collections are in some cases disorganized, as the example of the missing Blue Book shows. In 2002, the NAN reported the original typed manuscript of the Blue Book – an essential document in Namibian history – as stolen. In 2009, it was discovered that the manuscript was just misplaced and was found among a pile of unsorted files from the South West African administration. *The Namibian*, “‘Stolen’ Blue Book Was Just Misplaced,” 23 April 2009.

³⁹ In addition, around 100,000 photos and slides also remain uncatalogued. National Archives of Namibia. “Kurze Darstellung des Nationalarchivs von Namibia”; Hillebrecht, “German Records.”

pipe bursts, and the air-conditioning had stopped working. This caused the NAN to close for short periods every so often, which meant that visitors could not make use of the archive's services. The Ministry of Education had been planning the renovation of the NAN since 2011, but this was delayed because of budget cuts and drawn-out tender processes.⁴⁰ A N\$18,5 million renovation for the National Archives and the National Library commenced in 2019 and was completed in 2021.⁴¹

University of Namibia (UNAM) Archives

Background

The University of Namibia (UNAM) Archives is quite possibly the best functioning archive in Namibia, with a dedicated team of archivists administering a diverse, relevant collection. Founded in 1993, the archive is devoted to the safekeeping of the records of UNAM itself, as well as of private collections from individuals and institutions that have impacted Namibia's past.⁴² Together, this constitutes a rich agglomeration of data on political history and the development of education and religion. The UNAM's Archives strength lies particularly in the recent past, including the liberation struggle.⁴³

Contents

The contents of the UNAM Archives are divided between ten collections. The UNAM Publications Collection holds records from the university and its apartheid-era predecessor, the Academy for Tertiary Education, as well as publications from staff members. Dating back to 1972, this selection comprises monographs, serial publications, yearbooks, inaugural lectures, annual

⁴⁰ *The Namibian*, "N\$18,5 Million Renovations for National Library and National Archives," 13 August 2019.

⁴¹ The renovations included the replacement of water pipes, the repair of the fire sprinkler system, and the installation of new air-conditioning and CCTV systems. This project was funded by the African Development Bank. *The Namibian*, "N\$18m for National Library and Archives Building Upgrades," 16 July 2019.

⁴² Violet Matangira, Mercia Katjiveri-Tjiuoro, and Ndahambelela Hertha Luki-leni, "Establishing a University Records Management Programme: A Case Study of the University of Namibia," *Journal for Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences* 2–2 (2013), 103. The University of Namibia was established in 1992, and the Archives Unit (which falls under the Main Library) originates from 1993. The archives merged the Special Collections Unit into the Archives and Special Collections department of the Main Library of UNAM in 2010. The name "UNAM Archives" will be used throughout this article.

⁴³ UNAM Archives, <http://archives.unam.edu.na/>, (accessed 28 May 2020).

reports, and theses or dissertations.⁴⁴ The Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission (FELM) Collection contains material from Finnish missionaries working in Namibia. The first missionaries (from the Finnish Missionary Society, the predecessor of FELM) arrived in 1870 in northern Namibia, where they wrote books in Oshindonga. During the liberation struggle, their work was partly destroyed by bombing raids, but copies were also sent to Finland, where they were archived in the FELM Library in Helsinki. In 2012, this collection arrived at UNAM.⁴⁵

The UNIN Collection is an extensive collection from a crucial institution during the liberation struggle, the United Nations Institute for Namibia (UNIN). UNIN was founded in 1976 in Lusaka, Zambia, by the United Nations Council for Namibia. It served to facilitate tertiary education for Namibians in exile, in preparation for political independence. During the greater part of apartheid rule in South West Africa, black Namibians were only allowed to use the Bantu Education System and were thus deprived of quality education.⁴⁶

UNIN provided a wide range of courses for the development of a bureaucracy in a future autonomous state. Courses in health care, agriculture, English, biology, history, mathematics, and so on provided exiled Namibians with an education in preparation for independence.⁴⁷ The collection not only comprises material from UNIN itself (e.g., instructional materials, periodicals, books, publications, newspaper clippings, seminar papers) but also includes publications from a wide range of other actors. A major part originates from the United Nations, such as records from the UN Council for Namibia (including Nationhood program documents), the UN Commissioner for Namibia, and many other UN bodies which were of relevance to Namibia.⁴⁸

Of particular interest is the material from SWAPO. UNIN possessed various SWAPO publications (including *The Combatant, Information & Comments, Namibia News, Namibian Woman, Namibia Today, The Namibian Worker, Namibia Youth, SWAPO Information Bulletin, SWAPO News and Views, Omuk-wiita*), statements and speeches by various leaders, pamphlets, booklets, letters, telegrams, interviews, constitution documents, and postcards. In the absence of a SWAPO archive (see below), this is an incredible source for research on Namibia's main liberation movement. UNIN closed six months

⁴⁴ UNIN Catalogue (provisional). I want to thank Ndambelela Hertha Ipinge for giving me access to the catalogue.

⁴⁵ FELM Catalogue.

⁴⁶ UNIN Catalogue (provisional).

⁴⁷ Interestingly, UNIN did not train people for work in archives and libraries. As Namhila notes: "The need for trained records managers and archivists was apparently completely overlooked" during the transition to independence. Namhila, *Little Research Value*, 21.

⁴⁸ UNIN Catalogue (provisional).

after independence, in September 1990. Its files were transferred to UNAM and are still being catalogued, but preliminary finding aids are available through the staff.⁴⁹

One of the key figures within UNIN was Mose Penaani Tjitendero (1943–2006), who served as Senior Lecturer, Head of Teacher Training and Assistant Director at the institute. Tjitendero was a prominent freedom fighter who went into exile in 1964 to join SWAPO's office in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Tjitendero also worked in Zambia and Angola, and he received his doctorate at the University of Massachusetts. In 1990, he became the first speaker of the National Assembly in an independent Namibia. Tjitendero left his personal collections to the UNAM Archives. The lion's share of the collection is devoted to UNIN (and thus the issue of education), but there is also an extensive amount of material from SWAPO available. The number of personal papers is regrettably limited, but one is still able to piece together a comprehensive view of Tjitendero's life through the multitude of conference papers, letters, newspaper clippings and general publications.

The issue of education is clearly represented in the archives of UNAM, as the collections of UNIN and Tjitendero are not the only examples. Thelma Henderson likewise left her private papers to UNAM, in what is now known as the Henderson Collection. Henderson was an adviser on materials development for UNIN in the late 1970s and was an active participant in various conferences and workshops related to education. She also wrote various reports for the Namibian government during independence. Her collection entails around 3000–4000 items which cover a wide variety of topics related to education: curriculum development, literacy campaigns, language policy, manpower development, salaries and wages, and more.⁵⁰

The Williams Collection is also insightful window into the development of education in Namibia. The collection was donated to UNAM in 2015 by Peter Williams, a former Professor of Education in Developing Countries at the University of London. Williams was the director of the Education Programme of the Commonwealth Secretariat and part of the Commission on Higher Education in Namibia, which sought to develop plans for education in an independent Namibia. The collection, which ranges from 1985 to 1994, contains documents that were collected by the Commission in preparation for an educational plan.⁵¹

Another high-ranking SWAPO official who left his personal papers to UNAM is Peter Hitjitevi Katjavivi. Similar to Tjitendero, Katjavivi left South West Africa in 1966 to join SWAPO in Dar es Salaam. Katjavivi gained prominence running the London mission of SWAPO during the prolonged struggle for freedom and obtained his doctorate from the University of

⁴⁹ UNIN Catalogue (provisional).

⁵⁰ Tjitendero Catalogue.

⁵¹ Williams Catalogue.

Oxford in 1986. When independence was secured, Katjavivi served as the first Vice-Chancellor of UNAM, a Professor of History at the same university, and Speaker of the National Assembly, among other positions.⁵²

The Katjavivi Collection covers the period from 1965 to 1988 and is a terrific source for research on SWAPO. The collection provides an insider perspective on the contentious issues within SWAPO's history, such as the internal divisions in the 1970s that almost teared the movement apart and resulted in the secret containment of hundreds of SWAPO members.⁵³ Among other things, the collection covers the role of the churches and of women in the liberation struggle. Because Katjavivi played a key role in publicizing Namibia's yearning for freedom, much of the material consists of SWAPO publications and other efforts to promote SWAPO.⁵⁴

The papers of André du Pisani (1949), a Professor at UNAM, are also located in these archives. The Du Pisani Collection covers Namibian politics through newspaper cuttings conference papers, governmental publications, party manifestos, speeches, and more. The focus lies on the 1960s and 1970s and deals not only with SWAPO but also with the many other parties that competed for political support in the run-up to Namibian independence.⁵⁵ Two overarching collections hold materials (photos and posters) that are organized categorically. Posters from the Du Pisani Collection, the UNIN Collection, and UNAM are accumulated in the Poster Collections. Photos are collected in the Photographic Collections.⁵⁶

Accessibility

The UNAM Archives are located in the basement of the Main Library of UNAM at the Windhoek Campus in Pioneerspark.⁵⁷ Entrance to the archive is free of charge and a permit is not required. The reading room is open five days a week (Monday to Friday) from 8:00 to 16:30, with a one-hour lunch break. Most catalogues are available on paper, but it is recommended to download the online finding aid or use the database on the website before

⁵² Katjavivi Catalogue.

⁵³ Colin Leys and John S. Saul, "Liberation Without Democracy? The SWAPO Crisis of 1976," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 20–1 (1994), 123–147.

⁵⁴ Katjavivi Catalogue.

⁵⁵ Du Pisani Catalogue.

⁵⁶ The website of the UNAM Archives has a digital tool to access the posters: UNAM Archives, "Poster Collection," <http://archives.unam.edu.na/posters-1995>, (accessed 29 May 2020). The photographic collection was taken down from the website because of possible copyright issues. UNAM is currently exploring the idea to implement a watermark on the photos. Personal communication with Ndahambelela Hertha Ipinge, 27 April 2020.

⁵⁷ 340 Mandume Ndemufayo Avenue.

entering the archive to save time. The staff is very helpful with inquiries by visitors.

Namibia Scientific Society (NSS)

Background

The Namibia Scientific Society, also known as the *Namibia Wissenschaftliche Gesellschaft*, is a private institution that was established in 1925 by a group of citizens.⁵⁸ The organization was originally founded as the South West African Scientific Society and membership was open to the white public. The main aim was to provide a platform where scientific research could be exchanged, presented and published. The administration of South West Africa entrusted the territory's public library and museum to the Society, without providing financial support because of general financial woes. This severely limited the Society's activities: between 1932 and 1950, for example, the Society was not able to publish anything. The institution only survived due to the efforts of dedicated individuals.⁵⁹

After the Second World War, the financial situation in the territory improved and funds were made available by the administration. In 1957–1958, the museum was returned to the hands of the government.⁶⁰ The Society sought to establish local branches in other parts of the country.⁶¹ An important function of the platform was the formation of various study groups in which members could convene to discuss a particular field of study. The main fields of interests revolve around astronomy, herpetology, botany, archaeology, mineralogy, ornithology, and speleology.⁶² From the 1950s onwards, the Society carried a distinct German orientation since German replaced English as the *lingua franca*.⁶³ In 1990, the name was changed from the South West African Scientific Society to the Namibia Scientific Society.

⁵⁸ Adelheid Wessler, "Von Lebendabgüssen, Heimatmuseen und Cultural Villages Museale Repräsentation des Selbst und des Anderen im (De-)Kolonisierungsprozess Namibias," PhD dissertation, University of Cologne (Cologne, 2007), 125.

⁵⁹ Antje Otto-Reiner, "The Need for an Intellectual Centre: Looking Back at 75 Years of the Namibia Scientific Society," *Namibia Scientific Society Journal* 50 (2002), 6–7.

⁶⁰ There was concern amongst the Society that something similar would happen to the library, but the members were able to prevent this. Otto-Reiner, "The Need for an Intellectual Centre," 6–7.

⁶¹ Local branches, museums, and activities commenced in Swakopmund, Lüderitz, Tsumeb, Grootfontein, and Otavi. Otto-Reiner, "The Need for an Intellectual Centre," 35–39.

⁶² Otto-Reiner, "The Need for an Intellectual Centre," 40.

⁶³ Otto-Reiner, "The Need for an Intellectual Centre," 8.

Today, the NSS organizes lectures and excursions, publishes a journal and books (through its publishing house Kuiseb Verlag), and maintains a library.

Contents

The NSS is primarily a library, which holds more than 10,000 books on Namibian history, ethnology, vegetation, animal life, and other topics. The library is divided into five collections: the Namibiana collection (with currently around 16,730 titles), a general collection, the Irlich Collection (with currently around 3,817 titles catalogued), a periodicals and serial publications collection, and a reprint collection (with currently 9,141 records). At the moment, two other collections still need to be processed: the collection of Maria Fisch, a doctor and self-trained ethnographer, and the Truebody Collection.⁶⁴ Archival materials are not explicitly organized as such, but the Society nevertheless possesses various sorts of primary sources that are useful for research. Various reference works may be used as primary sources for the study of German and South African colonialism, such as German address books and editions of the *Suidwes Afrika Jaarboek*. In addition, newspaper clippings on various subjects are available.

Presently, the staff of the NSS is focusing its energy on classifying and cataloguing the aforementioned Franz Irlich Collection. This collection was acquired in 2016 for N\$2,5 million, after an extensive fundraising campaign. Irlich was a teacher and a Namibian book collector, who amalgamated more than 10,000 items of Namibiana throughout his lifetime.⁶⁵ The vast majority of this collection is books, but one can also find many SWAPO publications, such as *The Combatant* and the *SWAPO Information Bulletin*.⁶⁶

The NSS holds a unique collection of photographs about life in Namibia before independence, largely consisting of donations by (former) members. Currently, around 7,000 photos are indexed. A large collection of maps (more than 1,000 items) is also present, although many are in poor condition and are thus not accessible to visitors. The map collection consists mainly of historical maps of German South West Africa, geological maps, and farm maps.⁶⁷ The NSS also holds a porcelain and stone collection.⁶⁸

Accessibility

The NSS is open to the public – no permit or entry fee is required. Located on 110 Robert Mugabe Avenue, in Windhoek, the Society is at a walking distance

⁶⁴ Private correspondence with Armin Jagdhuber, 23 June 2020.

⁶⁵ *The Namibian*, “Funding Needed to Keep Rare Books in Namibia,” 22 July 2016.

⁶⁶ Tycho van der Hoog, *Monuments of Power: The North Korean Origin of Nationalist Monuments in Namibia and Zimbabwe* (Leiden: African Studies Centre Leiden, 2019), 20.

⁶⁷ Van der Hoog, *Monuments of Power*, 30–31.

⁶⁸ *The Namibian*, “Inside the Namibia Scientific Society,” 10 October 2017.

from the National Archives. The building is open from Monday to Friday, from 8:00 to 13:00 and from 14:00 to 17:00. Prospective visitors can use an online database to search for books, documents, and photos.⁶⁹ Be aware, however, that large parts of the material are not yet catalogued (this includes the Franz Irlich Collection). It is advisable to contact the Society, either through mail or in person, and ask for the expertise of the librarians, who are very familiar with the entire collection.

Scientific Society Swakopmund (SSS)

Background

The Scientific Society Swakopmund – also known as the *Wissenschaftliche Gesellschaft Swakopmund* – is a private institution based on membership, similar to the NSS. Located in the coastal town of Swakopmund, its roots can be found in the local *Heimatmuseum* that was founded by Dr. Alfons Weber and other individuals in 1951. In the same year, a local branch of the South West African Scientific Society was founded. The Swakopmund branch and the museum were formally separate entities but together formed the focal point of intellectual life in the town. Over the course of time, the Society in Windhoek and the local branch in Swakopmund grew apart, and the independent Society for Scientific Development was formed in 1968.⁷⁰

In 1977, the Sam Cohen Library was established with the aim of safeguarding the extensive Africana collection of Ferdinand Stich. Stich was one of the first bookshop owners in Swakopmund and compiled a valuable collection of around 2,050 books during his lifetime. Weber sought to keep the collection in Swakopmund and persuaded the Rotary Club to purchase the collection and donate it to the Society, while the businessman Sam Cohen sponsored the building of a library.⁷¹ In the 1980s, efforts were made to reunite the two societies in Windhoek and Swakopmund, but a merger never occurred.⁷² In 2006, the Society for Scientific Development changed its name to the Scientific Society Swakopmund.⁷³ It now administers both the Sam Cohen Library (including archives) and the Swakopmund Museum.

⁶⁹ Namibia Scientific Society, <http://www.namscience.com.na/library.htm>, (accessed 28 May 2020).

⁷⁰ Otto-Reiner, “The Need for an Intellectual Centre,” 35–36.

⁷¹ Scientific Society Swakopmund, <https://scientificsocietyswakopmund.com/sam-cohen-library/ferdinand-stich/>, (accessed 28 May 2020).

⁷² Otto-Reiner, “The Need for an Intellectual Centre,” 35–36.

⁷³ Scientific Society Swakopmund, *50 Years Scientific Society Swakopmund* (Swakopmund: Scientific Society Swakopmund, 2018), 3.

Contents

The Sam Cohen Library consists of 10,000 books and is a great reference library for the history of German South West Africa and South West Africa. Examples are passenger lists from shipping lines (such as the *Ost-Afrika Linie*) who transported people to German South West Africa, address books from 1908 to 1958, the German *Kolonialblatt* from 1890 to 1914, and an extensive collection of newspapers and government publications, such as the League of Nations reports.⁷⁴ The archival materials mainly deal with the local history of the town of Swakopmund and the mining activities from the surrounding areas. Digitized historical photos covering a wide range of subjects are gems from the collection. In 2001, the University of Frankfurt digitized 16,000 photos, and digitization efforts are being continued by the library staff.⁷⁵

Accessibility

The library and archive of the Society are located in Swakopmund, on the corner of Sam Nujoma Avenue and Windhoek Street, and are open to the public. A permit is not necessary, but non-members must pay an hourly fee. The reading room is open from Monday to Friday, from 8:00 to 13:00 and from 15:00 to 17:00. Every second Saturday of the month, the Society is also open from 9:00 to 13:00. Although a few hundred photos are digitized and available through an Online Collections Database, the main finding aids can be accessed in the reading room.⁷⁶

Erfdeel-Kultuursentrum

Background

The Erfdeel-Kultuursentrum⁷⁷ consists of an archive, library, and museum and is devoted to the history and culture of the Afrikaner people in

⁷⁴ This includes (with some gaps) local German newspapers from 1898 until the present, the *Suidwes Afrikaner* (1927–1941), *Die Suidwester* (1947–1988), the *Republikein* (1985 until the present) and the *Windhoek Advertiser* (1923 until the present). Scientific Society Swakopmund, “Passenger Lists,” <https://scientificsocietyswakopmund.com/sam-cohen-library/passenger-lists/>, (accessed 28 May 2020).

⁷⁵ SSS booklet 13. See also the information below the subject heading “digital.”

⁷⁶ Scientific Society Swakopmund, “Online Collections Database,” <https://scientificsocietyswakopmund.com/sam-cohen-library/online-collections-database/>, (accessed 28 May 2020).

⁷⁷ Originally, the center was named Soli Deo Gratia Argief/Museum. Sussie van Niekerk suggested a different name to Kosie Pretorius: the Erfdeel Archive/Museum. “Erfdeel” (meaning “inheritance”) was a reference to the Bible, which in Handeling 20:32 states “... dat julle in die seeninge kan deel wat Hy aan al die gelowiges as erfdeel belowe het” (Acts 20:32: “[...] that you may share in the blessings which

Namibia.⁷⁸ The center was initiated by J.W.F. (Kosie) Pretorius (1935–2017), a former leader of the National Party of South West Africa, Minister of Water Affairs, Post, and Telecommunications in the Transitional Government of National Unity, and member of the Constituent Assembly and of the National Assembly. The preservation of Afrikaner heritage was a long-standing wish of Pretorius, who garnered support and donations from various Afrikaner individuals and institutions to form the Erfdeel-Kultuursentrum through the Self-Help Trust of Namibia: a foundation.⁷⁹ Building commenced in 2009, and the Trust had its first meeting on the completed ground floor in 2010. Since then, the organization has been busy organizing the archive, the library (with a reading room), and a small museum. At the moment, several cultural associations and institutions use the facilities, which also include a kitchen and ablution facilities.

Contents

The center is a treasure trove for those interested in the history of Afrikaner politics in Namibia. Among the files are documents (e.g., minutes, newsletters, correspondence, magazines) from the National Party of South West Africa and private papers from prominent (white) apartheid-era politicians, such as Eben van Zijl, Jan de Wet, and J.W.F. Pretorius. Part of the collection is donated by Professor Ernst Stals, author of various books on the history of South West Africa and Namibia. Also covered is the history of the Dorsland Trek, when Afrikaners in Angola migrated to South West Africa in 1928. Furthermore, minutes and activities of *Geloftefees-komitees* (Covenant Day Committees) from all over the territory can be found here, as well as files on the judicial status and history of South West Africa as a mandate territory of South Africa and documents on the establishment of Afrikaans private

He has promised to all believers as an inheritance”). Pretorius was pleased with this suggestion, and the name subsequently came into use, which led to some confusion. The trustees of the Self Help Trust, which manages the center, resolved the matter in 2016 by stating that the official name would be the Erfdeel-Kultuursentrum, with “Soli Deo Gratia” as its motto.

⁷⁸ I wish to thank Bernard C. Moore for making me aware of this archive and Polla Steyn for providing me with additional information.

⁷⁹ The immediate trigger for action occurred April 2006, when the *Windhoek Observer* newspaper ran a story in which the editor, Hannes Smith, highlighted the filthy environment of the Bittereinder Monument on the corner of Blohm Street and Bismarck Street. Although the monument was the formal responsibility of the City of Windhoek, Hannes blamed Afrikaner cultural leaders for neglecting their heritage. The monument commemorates the fallen Boer soldiers during the 1899–1902 war between the Boers and the British Empire. Pretorius subsequently organized support for the establishment of a suitable institution, which led to the founding on the Erfdeel-Kultuursentrum.

schools in Namibia after independence. In addition to files, the center also holds a large assemblage of photos (including but not limited to the South West African Teachers Union, the Administration for Whites, several Afrikaner political figures, and the Dorsland Trek) and artifacts.

Accessibility

The center is located in Windhoek West, on the corner of Blohm Street and Bismarck Street. Officially, the center is not yet open to the public and fixed opening times are not yet set. The organization hopes to accommodate regular visitors in the near future. However, it is already possible to visit the library, archive, and museum. The best way to do this is to arrange a visit with the organization.⁸⁰ Visitors are not yet able to use a finding aid or catalogue, as not all documents have been processed. The material is mainly written in Afrikaans.

Tsumeb Museum Archives

Tsumeb, a town in northern Namibia, is home to the Tsumeb Museum, which holds a small selection of archival material. The museum was founded in 1975 by Ilse Schatz and is devoted to the history of the town and the Tsumeb Mine. In addition to a wide range of artifacts on local ethnic groups, WWI artifacts, and, of course, minerals, the privately owned museum hosts several photographs, books, and documents about local history. The archive is open to the public and has been used, for instance, in Stephanie Quinn's recent work on political mobilization in Namibia.⁸¹

SWAPO Party Archives and Resource Centre (SPARC)

The government administrations that have ruled Namibia since independence solely consist of SWAPO, the nation's most successful national liberation movement. SWAPO was formed as an anti-colonial movement that took

⁸⁰ The center does not have a website, but can be contacted through their official phone number: +264 81 129 9061.

⁸¹ Stephanie Quinn, "Infrastructure, Ethnicity, and Political Mobilization in Namibia, 1946–87," *Journal of African History* 61–1 (2020), 45–66. The Tsumeb Museum is open from Monday to Friday, from 9:00 to 12:00 and from 14:00 to 17:00, and Saturdays from 9:00 to 12:00. The museum may be opened on Saturday afternoon, Sundays, and public holidays upon special arrangement. A small entrance fee is required for visitors. The museum is located in Tsumeb, on the President Avenue opposite United Nations Park. It can be contacted through +264 67 220 447 or tsumus@iway.na.

up the armed struggle in 1966. The movement organized itself as a proto-state long before independence, creating its own bureaucracy.⁸² SWAPO has been extremely effective in maintaining control over the state since 1990 and legitimizes its enduring rule through the heritage of liberation.⁸³ Over-emphasizing SWAPO's role in Namibian history is a pitfall of which historians must be wary, as they would then be reinforcing the nationalist uniform history model that is being produced by SWAPO itself. Critical histories of the liberation movement are essential; for this, sources from the belly of the beast are fundamental.

Chris Saunders notes the reluctance of former liberation movements to make material from their organizations available, observing that "the secrecy that was necessary in the struggle itself [...] has undoubtedly flowed over into the time of peace."⁸⁴ Across southern Africa, "liberation archives" remain largely closed to the public. A positive exception are the archives of the United National Independence Party (UNIP) in Lusaka, Zambia, and the archives of the African National Congress (ANC) at Fort Hare, South Africa.⁸⁵ Although the ANC processed the documents before they were sent to Fort Hare, resulting in the omission of potentially damning files (including documents on *Umkhonto we Sizwe*, personal files, and health and financial records), the party archives are a rare example of openness among former southern African liberation movements.⁸⁶

The SWAPO Archives and Resource Centre was open for a brief moment. In November 2007, the SPARC opened its doors, although the procedure to gain access was, in the words of Martha Akawa, "cumbersome."⁸⁷ Researchers were required to write a letter asking for permission, and the archive only

⁸² Van der Hoog, *Monuments of Power*

⁸³ Henning Melber, "From Liberation Movements to Governments: On Political Culture in Southern Africa," *African Sociological Review* 6–1 (2002), 2.

⁸⁴ Chris Saunders, "Issues in Writing on Liberation Struggles in Southern Africa," in Chris Saunders (ed.), *Documenting Liberation Struggles in Southern Africa* (Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute, 2010), 62.

⁸⁵ M.C. Musambachime, "The Archives of Zambia's United National Independence Party," *History in Africa* 18 (1991), 291–296; T.J. Stapleton and M. Maamoe, "An Overview of the African National Congress Archives at the University of Fort Hare," *History in Africa* 25 (1998), 413–422. The archives of UNIP (1949–1988) and the African National Congress party of Zambia (1948–1973) are digitized and publicly available through the Endangered Archives Programme at the British Library.

⁸⁶ Brown Bavusile Maaba, "The Repatriation of the ANC Archives to Fort Hare," in Kwandiwe Kondlo, Chris Saunders, and Siphamandla Zondi (eds.), *Treading the Waters of History: Perspectives on the ANC* (Pretoria: Africa Institute of South Africa, 2014), 27.

⁸⁷ Martha Akawa, *The Gender Politics of the Namibian Liberation Struggle* (Basel: Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2014), 9.

showcased digitized files, which were digitized at random.⁸⁸ Akawa consulted the archives and describes the difficult working process:

access to the information is strictly controlled. A researcher must, literally, sit with an archivist who holds the computer mouse and decides which files can be opened and can be viewed by the researcher and what is still regarded as classified information – in these cases, the archivist must close the page immediately.⁸⁹

For a brief moment in time, a part of the files of the SPARC was online for the cost of a few hundred rand per page.⁹⁰ The website is currently offline, and it is unclear when exactly and for how long this project ran.⁹¹ The current status of the archival unit is surrounded with rumors about its location. It has been said that the Ministry of Veteran Affairs sometimes uses it to extract photos and stories for promotional purposes.

Today, the SPARC is inaccessible to the public. The ruling party is reluctant to release its documents and face its past. Some voices argue that this might hinder the reconciliation efforts of Namibia, which in contrast to South Africa has not had its own Truth and Reconciliation Commission.⁹² It is also assumed that the SWAPO Archives contain genuine secrets, which can result in scandals exposing the top leadership in party and government. SWAPO has a number of dark pages in its own history, including persistent rumors of corruption, as well as the torture and killing of innocent and alleged “spies” in the Lubango dungeons.⁹³

Observations

A new chapter in Namibian history writing may open up for Africanist historians: thirty years after independence, the public can expect the gradual release of classified files from the post-colonial SWAPO governments. The way that SWAPO will deal with this imminent change in access will be an

⁸⁸ Christian Williams received permission in 2008 to view video footage that was not yet made public, indicating that in rare cases access to specific material may be possible. Christian A. Williams, *National Liberation in Postcolonial Southern Africa: A Historical Ethnography of SWAPO's Exile Camps* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 40–41.

⁸⁹ Akawa, *The Gender Politics of the Namibian Liberation Struggle*, 9.

⁹⁰ Saunders, “Issues in Writing on Liberation Struggles in Southern Africa,” 62–63.

⁹¹ The Wayback Machine of the Internet Archive shows two copies of the SPARC website, from 2010 and 2011, indicating that the website was at least online at that time.

⁹² Hillebrecht, “Archives, Ethics, Salaries, and the Struggle,” 29.

⁹³ Leys and Saul, “Liberation Without Democracy?,” 123–147.

important test for the freedom of information in Namibia. The ruling party has always been guarded about its past (which explains the absence of a formal SWAPO archive) and has never faced serious opposition in its tenure as guardian of the state. Namibia is widely celebrated for its freedom of press,⁹⁴ but, unlike South Africa, it does not yet have a Freedom of Information Act.⁹⁵ The Archives Act stems from 1992 and is in need of revision.

Africanist historians usually adhere to “the basic chronological division of Africa’s past into pre-colonial, colonial and independent periods.”⁹⁶ Stephen Ellis convincingly argued against the view that the era of independence meant a new beginning in African history, as if those time periods are completely distinct. This article must be understood with this view in mind. African history is, like any other history, a continuous process. But our efforts to understand the recent past in Namibia have been hampered by two missing pieces of the puzzle: the SWAPO Archives and the files from the SWAPO governments. Now the latter will become available, which might potentially introduce new themes for research and revise old ones.

In anticipation of this endeavor, the thirty-year mark of Namibia’s existence as an independent country also calls for an assessment of the current state of its archives. Namibian archives are accessible and not accessible at the same time. In terms of formal entry requirements, Namibian archives are largely unrestricted. Contrary to many other African countries, not a single archive requires a formal research permit, and almost all archives are free of charge upon entry. Regrettably, the practical state of affairs hampers the open spirit of Namibian archives. Underfunding by the Namibian government is a real problem and likely to become worse in the coming years. The grave condition of the National Archives is a case in point. Private funding has always been significant in Namibia’s knowledge landscape, as the prominent role of the scientific societies shows. There is a danger to this, in the sense that the erosion of the public sector inevitably results in problems of accessibility and representation.

As Daly points out, “the sources of post-colonial African history are increasingly found outside of state archives.”⁹⁷ This also counts for Namibia, where, for instance, the archival collections of UNAM are an important

⁹⁴ Namibia’s positive image vis-à-vis press freedom has been challenged in recent times; see *The Namibian*, “Namibia’s Press Freedom Paradox,” 24 April 2020.

⁹⁵ To be specific, an “access to information” clause in the South Africa’s Promotion of Access to Information Act (no. 2 of 2000). See Silvester, *Re-Viewing Resistance in Namibian History*, 3. Discussions about an information act in Namibia are ongoing. In June 2020, it was announced by Peya Mushelenga that an access to information bill would be tabled in the National Assembly. See *The Namibian*, “Mushelenga to Table Access to Information Bill,” 2 June 2020.

⁹⁶ Stephen Ellis, “Writing Histories of Contemporary Africa,” *Journal of African History* 43–1 (2002), 5.

⁹⁷ Daly, “Archival Research in Africa,” 312.

supplement to the files in the state archives. Prospective users of Namibian archives should keep in mind that a multi-archival approach is frequently necessary to the writing of Namibian history. While the SWAPO Archive remains an important omission in the knowledge landscape of Namibia, alternative paths are possible to conduct research on the liberation movement. The AACRLS project of the National Archives, the private papers of the UNAM Archive, and the Franz Irlich Collection of the NSS are examples of this.

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