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## **Arts & Literature: A Review of the Poetry Book *unBuried-unMarked—The unTold Namibian Story of the Genocide of 1904–1908: Pieces and Pains of the Struggle for Justice***

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*unBuried-unMarked—The unTold Namibian Story of the Genocide of 1904–1908: Pieces and Pains of the Struggle for Justice*

Sarah Jephtha U. Nguherimo

Columbia, USA: Self-published (Bower), 2019

76 Pages; Price: \$19.99 Paperback

Reviewed by Elise Pape

University of Strasbourg

Between 1904 and 1908, over 100,000 people perished in what is today known as the first genocide of the twentieth century that took place in today's Namibia. Only 20% of the Herero and about 50% of the Nama survived the mass extermination committed under German colonial rule.<sup>1</sup> It was not until Namibia's independence from South Africa in 1990 that affected communities began struggling for a formal recognition of the genocide by the German government, an apology and a reparation of the crimes committed. Over decades, the German government has not officially recognized the genocide as such.

After negotiations between the German and the Namibian governments that lasted over five years, the German Minister of Foreign Affairs, Heiko Maas, announced on May 28, 2021 that the German government formally recognized the crimes committed as a genocide and that Germany asked Namibians and descendants of the victims for forgiveness. Namibian president, Hage Geingob, presented this as a historic move. Germany also announced to pay 1.1 billion euros for development aid in Namibia over the next thirty years. This agreement has been criticized and rejected by most Herero and Nama for different reasons. Firstly, the official representatives of Herero and Nama communities were not included in the negotiations, despite repeated demands and campaigns of Herero and Nama to be part of the negotiations. Secondly, the German government refused to frame the negotiations in the context of "reparations," and insisted on a payment framed as a "voluntary aid." Thirdly, the question of land is not addressed in the agreement, although it forms a major issue in Namibia: about 70% of the private farmland today is in the hands of white citizens, often of German descent who benefitted from the expropriation of Herero and Nama following the genocide. Furthermore, the amount of the aid is criticized by different parties as being too low in relation to the crimes committed.<sup>2</sup>

The agreement of the bilateral negotiation still needs to be ratified by the German and the Namibian parliaments, after which the German president will officially apologize for the genocide in Namibia. In Namibia, on September 21, 2021, the day the National Assembly was to vote on the compensation offer from Germany, 300 protesters stormed Namibia's parliament.

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<sup>1</sup> Jürgen Zimmerer and Joachim Zeller, *Genocide in German South-West Africa: The Colonial War of 1904–1908 and its Aftermath* (Monmouth: Merlin Press, 2008). Book was first published in German at the Ch. Links Verlag, 2003; Jan-Bart Gewald, *Herero Heroes: A Socio-Political History of the Herero of Namibia, 1890–1923* (Oxford: James Currey, 1999); Reinhart Kössler, *Namibia and Germany. Negotiating the Past* (Windhoek: University of Namibia Press, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> In an interview of Henning Melber, see Alex Rühle, "Das bleibt eine offene Wunde," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 4 August 2021, accessed November 15, 2021, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/kolonialismus-namibia-kolonialverbrechen-versoehnungspolitik-1.5371979?reduced=true>.

Since then, the vote has been adjourned and heated debates currently take place in the country on the negotiation agreement.

Jephta U. Nguherimo is one of the descendants of survivors of the Herero and Nama genocide. A Herero, he grew up in Namibia hearing bribes of stories on the genocide from his parents and grandparents. At the age of 18, following his involvement in the anti-apartheid struggle, J. Nguherimo left Namibia as a refugee. He spent several years in a refugee camp in Botswana, and later in Kenya. In 1987, he received a scholarship from the University of Rochester in New York State in the USA, where he completed university studies. Since then, J. Nguherimo has spent most of his life in the United States. In the early 2000s, he became active in the struggle for the recognition and reparation of the Herero and Nama genocide along with other Herero living in the US diaspora.<sup>3</sup> He has been one of the active members of the struggle since.

In his poetry book *unBuried-unMarked—The unTold Namibian story of the Genocide of 1904–1908: Pieces and Pains of the Struggle for Justice* that he has self-published in 2019, Jephta Nguherimo gives insights into long-lasting impacts of the Herero and Nama genocide, into ways of dealing with painful memories, and into processes of healing in post-genocidal contexts. Already the title hints at several relevant issues in the book and at the author's positioning. In Namibia, debates on the genocide tend to lead to conflicts on whom the genocide affects and on how the genocide should be named. While official authorities tend to coin the genocide as the "Namibian genocide," most Herero and Nama stress the fact that the written extermination orders issued in 1904 and 1905 clearly concerned Herero and Nama, and that these groups have suffered most, even if members of other ethnic groups in Namibia have lost their lives in the crimes committed. This debate is closely linked to nation-building processes in post-genocidal and at the same time post-colonial contexts. Speaking of a "Namibian story," as the author suggests in the title, therefore offers a compromise in this dispute.

The term "unBuried-unMarked" on their side hint at one of the major claims for reparation of the genocide. Thousands of Herero died in the Omaheke desert during their flight from German troops during the genocide (including Nguherimo's great great grandmother, as appears in the following). Their skulls and skeletons have for the most part not been buried and can still be found there. The same applies to numerous ancestral remains on former sites of concentration camps in Namibia. In addition, some of the human remains of victims have entered scientific and museum collections worldwide in the twentieth century. Descendants of victims today ask for the remains of their ancestors in foreign public collections to be repatriated to Namibia, and for the thousands of bones and skeletons in Namibia to be buried. The terms "unBuried-unMarked" hint to the fact that because the genocide of the Herero and Nama has not been acknowledged in a proper way, pains and wounds remain "unBuried," just like numerous ancestral remains scattered around the world.

The words "pieces and pains" finally stress the emotional dimension of the book. They suggest that traumatic long-term impacts of genocides can perhaps best be expressed in an artistic form, and through "bribes," rather than through extensive and linear narrations.

### Structure of the Book

In the prologue, the author gives information on the history of the Herero and Nama genocide, on the context in which he has written the present poetry collection and on particular events, biographical experiences or encounters that have inspired specific poems: encounters with guards in refugee camps, with white teachers in the apartheid school system, or with a German

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<sup>3</sup> Elise Pape, "Herero Activists in the United States: Demanding Recognition and Reparation for the First Genocide of the Twentieth Century," American Institute for Contemporary German Studies (AICGS), November 1, 2017, accessed November 15, 2021, <https://www.aicgs.org/publication/herero-activists-in-the-united-states/>; Elise Pape, "Human Remains from Ovaherero and Nama: Transnational Dynamics in Post-Genocidal Restitutions," *Human Remains and Violence* 4, no. 2 (2018), 90–106, accessed December 5, 2021, <https://www.manchesteropenhive.com/abstract/journals/hrv/4/2/hrv4.issue-2.xml>.

Namibian lady at a recent conference who summoned Herero and Nama to finally “get over this genocide thing.”<sup>4</sup> These encounters, as the author details, have sometimes led to unexpected friendships.

The book itself is composed of twenty-nine poems that alternate with other text sorts (excerpts of interviews conducted with family members, or of archival documents) or photographs. Jephtha Nguherimo has taken several of these pictures himself. Others have been taken by family friends. Others again are reprints from Jürgen Zimmerer and Joachim Zeller’s seminal book on the history of the Herero and Nama genocide<sup>5</sup> and therewith reveal the author’s contact to different historians and researchers in the world.

The collection can be seen as structured in three parts. The first part<sup>6</sup> gives insights into experiences that family members of the author (in particular women) have made during the genocide. This part opens with excerpts of an interview J. Nguherimo conducted with his grandmother in 2004, when she told him about how her own grandmother was left to die under a tree during the family’s flight through the Omaheke desert in 1904. The following poems depict the flight through the desert, daily life in the concentration camp of Swakopmund, where the author’s great grandparents met and fell in love, or the fate of human remains of victims of the genocide that were sent to academic institutions in Europe and beyond for research. The poem *The Lost Cow* closes this first section and jumps back in time, taking distance from the chronological order. It presents the story of a cow (the matriarch cow) stolen by Germans, whose calves now wail in the stall. This poem suggests that such theft by German settlers during colonization—who did not respect animals nor the high spiritual significance cows have for Herero—were one of the triggers of the Herero-German war, which transformed into a genocide.

The second part<sup>7</sup> deals more closely with the (at the time still unconcluded) negotiations between the German and the Namibian governments on the official recognition of the Herero and Nama genocide and apology by the German government. In a similar way to the first part, this section opens with excerpts of interviews or statements, but this time by German politicians who, over the last decades, have repeatedly rejected the term “genocide” or have made clear that no reparations would be made. Several poems in this part are written from the perspective of Germans: of German settlers at the time of colonization, of German Namibians today, or of German politicians over the past years. In this part, the author explicitly names what would heal his wounds: a dialogue, words of regret, demands for apology. For this, according to J. Nguherimo, it is necessary that the descendants of the perpetrators overcome their “shame,” as shown in *Together as One*: “sit with me at the round table / to find words that will heal my soul / words are impactful / no need to be shameful / tear down your walls of shame / (...) let’s build a wall of togetherness.”<sup>8</sup>

The last part<sup>9</sup> again gathers more personal and family-related texts and documents, thereby closing the collection in a similar way to how it began. A family photo of a scene described in the prologue for example is contrasted with a screenshot of an online conversation the author has had with his daughter, thereby strengthening the dimension of intergenerational bonds that appears throughout the entire book. The book ends with an unsent letter by Jephtha Nguherimo to his great-great grandmother who perished in the desert in 1904. He tells her about the emotions her story has triggered in him, and the way he has struggled for social justice throughout his biography.

<sup>4</sup> Jephtha U. Nguherimoun, *Buried-unMarked – The unTold Namibian Story of the Genocide of 1904–1908: Pieces and Pains of the Struggle for Justice* (Columbia: Self-published (Bower), 2019), 6.

<sup>5</sup> Zimmerer and Zeller, *Genocide in German South-West Africa*.

<sup>6</sup> Nguherimoun, *Buried-unMarked*, 10–31.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 32–66.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 67–71.

## Main Aspects Raised in the Book

### *The Role of Pictures*

Very interesting in this book is the role of pictures. In most cases, they come after a poem. Sometimes, they convey emotions or give complementary information that perhaps were not describable with words in the preceding text. In other cases, the reader wonders if the author chose them as evidence for what he evoked in his poems, as some facts described are so cruel they may appear difficult to believe. The reader also wonders about the chronological link between the text and the picture: did the author choose the pictures in order to illustrate a poem, or did they on the contrary sometimes inspire the poems that preceded?

Some pictures give the readers who are not familiar with the Namibian context insights into how the genocide is still present there today. For example, a picture<sup>10</sup> shows German Namibians at an annual commemoration of the German soldiers who died between 1904 and 1908. Another picture<sup>11</sup> shows a statue in front of the State House in Swapokmund that “honors” German colonial soldiers who fought in the Herero-German war. These pictures show the lack of recognition of the genocide by the Namibian government and by parts of the German Namibian community until today, a perspective often unknown by the German and European public.

While the links between the presented poems and pictures in many cases seem obvious, in others, they challenge the readers to try to understand what led the author to establish these links. For example, in the poem *Tell it. The story*, Jephtha Nguherimo evokes how his grandmother summoned him to tell his family’s and people’s story. In the poem, however, the author refuses to do so, explaining he is “afraid”<sup>12</sup> to tell the story. The photo that follows shows Nguherimo speaking out at an anti-apartheid event at Rochester University in New York State in 1988. Does this contrast illustrate how much more difficult it is to publicly speak about injustices that are not yet known or recognized by a large public, such as the history of the Herero and Nama, compared to the history of apartheid? Or does it show how difficult stories of genocides are to tell?

### *The Use of Languages*

Another intriguing dimension of the book is the use of languages. Several words, verses and in one case a title are written in other languages than English: mostly in Otjiherero, but also at one point in Afrikaans, or South African English. This language switch reminds the readers that while the author expresses his thoughts and emotions in English, thereby making them accessible to a wide public, numerous of his thoughts originally took place in Otjiherero.

The way different languages are used also makes the historical entanglements of Germans, Herero and Nama visible: the picture of a poster at the time of colonization for example<sup>13</sup> portrays German settlers in Namibia telling Herero to “stay on their own” (*Muherero riKarera*) in the Otjiherero language and thereby having themselves learned Otjiherero.

### *The Presence of Nature*

A very powerful dimension of the book consists of the constant mention of nature. Animals, but also different elements such as the wind, the desert, or the sea are personified and communicate with humans. In several cases, they become the friends or allies of Herero, refusing for example to hide the human remains of victims of the genocide under the sand any longer (*The Weeping Desert*). Landscapes also appear on several photos. This constant mention of nature contributes to the strong poetic dimension of the book, and at the same time breathes life into the collection, giving a strong sensation of liveliness and attachment to life in the midst of a topic so strongly marked by death.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 39.

*Intergenerational Bonds*

In addition to nature, the dead also have the ability to speak, which reinforces the sensation of liveliness just mentioned. The voices of the dead express the importance strong intergenerational bonds, even with family members the author has never known. In several cases, the dead speak to encourage their descendants to resist to injustices linked to the genocide, as shown in *Left to Die Under a Tree*: “my body can no longer flee / my spirit and soul will persist / will embody the spirit of generations to resist.”<sup>14</sup>

*Dialogues, Empathy and Compassion*

Overall, the book reflects a high plurality of voices, including non-human ones, which resonate with one another: the ones of Jephta Nguherimo’s grandmother, of his great great grandmother, of German farmers, soldiers, of German or Namibian politicians, of human remains that speak, of the wind, of the sea, of animals. The perhaps most remarkable dimension of this book is the way these voices are constantly set in dialogue with one another: through spoken words, through inner dialogues in the form of thoughts, through letters... These dialogues express the desire and strong capacity of the author to engage in interactions with persons who think differently than him. As J. Nguherimo stresses in his prologue, such encounters only become possible when one gets out of her/his “comfort zone:” “sometimes I would make a conscious decision to step out of my comfort zone and meet those who don’t think like my friends.”<sup>15</sup>

Another leitmotiv of the book is empathy and compassion that make fruitful encounters possible. Empathy, so the author, can or should take place everywhere, even in the most dreadful places, such as the poem *The Unlikely Friends* argues for. This poem presents a Herero woman in a concentration camp who expresses her compassion to a German soldier who just lost his mother. Where has the author learned the importance of such compassion? Is it through stories his grandmother has transmitted him? Through his own biographical experiences? Through inner family experiences numerous descendants of victims of genocide have made, such as the man in the poem *I Carried the Burden of Your Sins*, who accepts to be the adoptive father of a child his wife gave birth to after having been raped by a German? Perhaps this dialogue the author advocates so strongly for is what has most missed in the recent negotiations between the German and the Namibian governments on the recognition and reparation for the genocide.

Overall, this book can be read as a message of hope, as a proposal to set up *dialogues* between different actors of the German and Namibian societies, dialogues motivated by empathy and the readiness to overcome one’s “shame.” This dialogue may represent the vision the author expresses in his unsent letter to his great-great grandmother:<sup>16</sup> “and while / your daughters survived the Kalahari / Omaheke sandveld / they lived to bear beautiful children / we are not deterred, we have a vision.”

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 71.