

Land Dispossession And Ancestral Land Claims

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NAMIBIA'S second national land conference should purposefully deliberate the realities of colonial land dispossession, unlike in 1991 when it dodged the issue under the pretext that there are too many overlapping and counter-claims of ancestral land.

To the contrary, the dispossessed groups know the core and overlapping areas inhabited by their ancestors, hence undeniably making ancestral land claims easy to delineate. Here, I am presenting dispossession of Ehi rOvaherero (Hereroland), and the raisons d'etre for ancestral land claims.

At the dawn of German invasion in 1885, Hereroland encompassed Okaoko in the north-west of present-day Namibia and much of central Namibia, with the following main settlements: Otjitambi, Omaruru, Otjimbingwe, Okandjoze, Omambonde, Otjiwarongo, Okakarara, Okondjezu, Ouparakane, Ovingi, Otjomandongo, Omburo, Otjituezu and Otjomuise, with Okahandja as the capital settlement.

In this geographic space, the Ovaherero had carried out their traditions and customs, pastoralism and trading with

neighbouring nations of Aawambo in the north, Nama in the south, the Damaras in the western parts of Hereroland, and the Batswana of western Botswana for more than 500 years.

German occupation destabilised Hereroland, and inflicted human suffering and expropriated land and livestock, resulting in a general decline in the socio-economic conditions of the Ovaherero. In 1896, Nicodemus Kavikunua retaliated against lieutenant Lampe when 6 000 cattle belonging to the Ovambanderu were confiscated in the Gobabis area. Lampe did not survive the skirmish. After more skirmishes, chief Kahimemua Nguvauva handed himself over at Omukuruvaro to the Germans, and was subsequently court-martialed together with Kavikunua at Okahandja on 12 June 1896. The battle of Otjunda (Farm Tjunda 292) marked the first skirmishes between the Ovaherero and the German imperial government.

Fraudulent livestock transfers from the Ovaherero to German settlers continued unabated, and by 1902, from an estimated 90 500 head of cattle, 44 500 were in the hands of 1 051 German settlers. In contrast, the 100 000 Ovaherero remained with 46 000 cattle in their possession.

At the same time, vast tracks of Hereroland and Namaqualand changed ownership, whereby 29,2 million hectares, 19,2 million hectares and 3,7 million hectares, respectively, became the properties of concession companies, the colonial state and white settlers.

On 26 December 1905, the land expropriation order was signed to enforce 100% dispossession of Hereroland. The aftermath of the genocidal war was an 80% annihilation of the Ovaherero population and dispersion to Botswana, South Africa, Angola, Zimbabwe, Togo and Cameroon. Those in the German colony were placed in concentration camps, and used as slave labour by the colonial state and settler companies.

For the Ovaherero, ancestral land encompasses three interrelated concepts:

- 1) 'space of origin and culturalisation';
- 2) 'made sacred and of religious value' and;
- 3) 'space of ancestors'.

I use the word 'space' here to denote both a physico-geographic space, and a mental space reflecting a psycho-spiritual construct. Thus, 'space of origin and culturalisation' is for instance places like Ondundu ja tJozondjupa (Waterberg), Ombindi ja Tjijonda, Orutjandja rwa Kahivesa, and Omatako, amongst others, associated with pertinent events and happenings within the cultural space and identity of the Ovaherero.

Also, within this space lived influential legendary figures like Kahitjene ua Muhoko, who lived in the current-day Suiderhof-Olympia-Cimbebasia suburbs of Windhoek. He would always ask 'hi tje?e hi mbura, mbitirwa tjike?' meaning 'I emit no lightning, I am no rain, why are people afraid of me?' And others like Tjahera?i of the Omaruru-Okahandja spatial extent, the mythic legendary ghost in the name of Nganja of the Kaevaua clan who roamed night life in the current-day Khomas region, and the revered spiritual leader Kahimemua Nguvauva, who ruled over the Ovambanderu in the areas of Otjihaenena, Omburo, Okatumba and Okeseta east of Windhoek, and in the Gobabis district.

Ancestral land is dotted with spaces 'made sacred and of religious value'. The Ovaherero worship Mukuru alias Ndjambi through their respective ancestors of the different clans. The living spirits of ancestors and the spaces within which they dwell are central to the spiritual-cultural being of the Ovaherero. Henceforth, burial sites are sacred grounds. The majority of the heads of extended families serve as spiritual leaders and custodians of their respective holy fires, the medium of worship. These leaders are by themselves sacred. Therefore, their burial sites become sacred as they reunite with their forebears and become ancestors.

Burial sites may delineate the ownership of ancestral land too, because clan-specific burial spaces are known to belong to those specific clans, for instance Okandjoze in the Hochfeld area (for Kandirikirira ka Tjirera), Eharui or present-day Kapps Farm (for Kandjii ua Seu), Okahandja (Tjamuaha ua Tjirue tja Mutjise) and Okakango (Rukoro ua Uarukujani).

Chief Mbimbo knows his people come from Farm Omarasa in the Otjiwarongo district, even though they find themselves as descendant-refugees in a remote village of Tsabong in south-west Botswana, where they are scraping a living amidst perpetual poverty.

The value attached to sites where major battles and other events of human rights violation took place during the period 1904 – 1908 have become 'spaces of ancestors' where a culture of remembrance has grown since 1925. Places like Okandjira, Oviwombo, Oturenda, Otjihinaparero, Ovikokorero, Ohamakari, Erindi raTjihenda and Otjimanangombe, among others, are remembered for battlefields, while others like Ombakaha, Ozombu zOvindimba, Otjatjomboimue (Karibib), and Otjozondjii (Swakopmund) are remembered for mass killings and concentration camps where over 7 000 Ovaherero were decimated.

Of the five concentration camps at the time, the Shark Island, Swakopmund and Windhoek camps stood out for the most heinous crimes against humanity ever to have occurred on Namibian soil. It is these historic spaces of victories and sorrow which make up ancestral land claims for the Ovaherero, and similarly for the dispossessed Nama people.

The Ovaherero people know where their ancestral land is. All settlements where Ovaherero once lived and were buried are given praise songs.

Thus, no geographic space exists in the former Hereroland without a praise song.

Praise songs are derived from the very first adult buried in a settlement or area. To this day, it is therefore known who the ancestors of the majority of former settlements are.

Demands for restitution of ancestral land are not only done to meet cultural and religious needs, but also to repair the 110 years of impoverishment.

Therefore, the second national land conference should openly deliberate ancestral land claims; delineate core areas from overlapping claims; and how these could be considered against other pressing political considerations.

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