

Entangled Bones, Entangled Narratives? Predicaments of Nation Building in Namibia

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In the last week of August 2010 Namibia's sleepy coastal town of Lüderitz was swept by a stampede of government officials for the celebration of *Heroes' Day*. Celebrated annually on 26th August, the day serves to commemorate the beginning of the armed struggle for liberation waged by Namibia's *South West Africa People's Organisation* (SWAPO) against South African occupation in 1966. Besides established registers of celebration such as the President's speech to the nation, military parades, and the bestowal of decorations on national heroes, this year's Heroes' Day was highlighted by the reburial of remains of approx. 460 people, whose bones were discovered near Lüderitz several years ago. The dead supposedly perished in the notorious Shark Island prison camp, where the German Schutztruppe 'concentrated' prisoners of war during the anti-colonial uprisings of 1904-07. In an act of state the dead were declared "martyrs of anti-colonial struggle" even though there has been no forensic investigation and the likelihood of contract workers from northern Namibia, SWAPO guerrillas and even white settlers being among the dead is rather high.

The reburial of Lüderitz, this being the core assertion of my paper, is a case in point for the challenges of nation building in Namibia. It offers valuable insights into the politics and poetics of national commemoration and the construction of a heroic historical narrative by Namibia's former liberation movement and ruling party since independence in 1990, SWAPO. This narrative employs distinctive features of what has been coined 'patriotic history' (Ranger), manifesting itself in the protocol of national holidays, memorial sites and official discourse on the past by SWAPO representatives (parliamentary debates, speeches, autobiographies). Yet, far from inscribing SWAPO with a unilateral 'voice', I argue that the process of creating history in Namibia is rather one of contestation and negotiation, albeit based on unequal participation. Just as the reburial of Lüderitz inevitably raises questions about the representation of minority perspectives in the liberation narrative (Damara, Herero, Nama), so do the counter-memories of SWAPO's ex-detainees, imprisoned and tortured by their own liberation movement during the struggle in exile, hint at prevailing blank spaces. Further examples are numerous: controversies surrounding the construction of a museum of the liberation struggle in Windhoek, reparation demands by Herero representatives, the protest of ex-combatants and 'struggle-kids'. Just like the bones in the Heroes' grave in Lüderitz are inextricably entangled, so are Namibian narratives of liberation: they unfold a predicament of nation building.

This paper draws on fieldwork conducted in Central and Southern Namibia in 2008 and 2010.