



Tycho van der Hoog

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We need to interrogate the North-South dichotomy in African Studies publishing

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Relations between Namibia and its former coloniser, Germany, are impacted by ongoing negotiations about reparations for a brutal and violent past. The 1904-8 genocide that decimated large parts of the indigenous population continues to cast a shadow in the present. One overlooked aspect is the Namibian book market, where German-Namibian publishing houses perpetuate a whitewashed version of history.

The remnants of German occupation (1884-1915) remain highly visible in Namibia today. When I first visited, I was amazed to see so many German street signs in Windhoek, the capital city. Swakopmund, a quaint coastal town, is popular with tourists because of its abundant German architecture. I remember eating excellent bratwurst and found that in some beer gardens the service was better if I ordered in German.

On one hot summer evening, I even dared to put on traditional lederhosen to join the boozy festivities of the local Oktoberfest – all in the name of research, of course. I travelled to Namibia to investigate the history of Namibia Breweries Limited – a company that has produced world famous beers for more than a century. Naturally, the beer that flowed freely from the taps was brewed according to the *Reinheitsgebot* regulations.

For many international visitors, the German heritage on display amounts to a charming, if slightly odd, dimension to their holidays. But for those who live in Namibia, it can often be a painful reminder of the wounds of colonial occupation. And this extends to the contemporary publishing world, as illustrated through the treacherous journey to get my book, **Breweries, Politics and Identity: The History Behind Namibian Beer**, published in the country. My recent article in **Africa Spectrum**, based on this experience, highlights the problems of gatekeeping and the whitewashing of history that permeate the German-Namibian publishing industry.

Brewing tensions

Today, Namibian beer is one of the cornerstones of national pride in a country that was one of the last African states to become independent, in 1990. Throughout my archival fieldwork and interviews in Namibia and South Africa, I noticed considerable interest from the public in this topic and I was grateful to sign a book contract with a local publishing house based in Windhoek. This would ensure that my findings would become accessible in Namibia to a wide audience. My manuscript was revised following editorial feedback and copy-editing and, once the book design was finalised, I received the proofs. At that point we were already thinking about the book launch in Windhoek.

But five days before the printing deadline, my editor suddenly raised significant issues with the text that were never mentioned before. The choice was simple: adhere to these revisions, or nullify the book contract and throw away eighteen months of work.

The comments I received cast a light on the colonial legacies of this particular African publishing industry. German-Namibian publishing houses continue to dominate the Namibian book market because of their historically grown positions in the national knowledge landscape. The colonial gaze of these institutions is not a deliberate strategy but simply part of the microcosm in which they operate. Prospective authors have few alternatives. My story therefore also addresses a **general weakness of Namibian civil society**.

Most importantly, I was advised to remove my references to the 1904-8 genocide of the local population by the German colonial army. This military campaign was essential for the Germans to establish control and set up industries, including breweries. I was not allowed to criticise the German monument that celebrated the genocide and subsequently became the logo of the main brewery, or a German missionary who **"cemented and shaped colonial ideologies in Namibia"** who was revered by my publisher. And certain respected academic authors were off-limits, too, simply because my editor disagreed with them – it was impressed upon me that if I referenced their books, my manuscript would be thrown into the dust bin.

Decolonising African Studies

With my refusal to accept these far-reaching changes came the dissolution of my book contract. It was a terrible development, but I was fortunate in the sense that, two years later, my book was published with **Basler Afrika Bibliographien** (BAB) in Switzerland. BAB is the largest Namibian documentation centre outside Namibia and regularly publishes books in the field of Namibian and Southern African Studies.

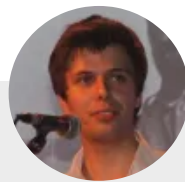
Around the same time, **another book** about the history of Namibian beer was published by a different local publishing house. In line with the ideas propagated by my editor and widely shared among the German-Namibian community, this book presented a completely whitewashed and patriotic version of the history of Namibian beer – without references to the painful past.

A tight-knit German-Namibian community maintains a considerable influence on the national knowledge landscape in Namibia. A steady stream of new titles and reprints sustains a certain colonial nostalgia, but books that are eventually never published because of gatekeeping are also affected. More than a hundred years after the end of German rule, this appears to be a sustainable model with more German-speaking white people residing in Namibia today than during the era of colonialism.

This saga may at first seem a highly localised affair, but it serves as an interesting case study for the ongoing debate about the decolonisation of African Studies. Discussions often focus on academic journals and overlook the important role of book publishers; book markets are also marketplaces of ideas. In addition, the North-South dichotomy so present in decolonial thinking needs nuancing. In this case, publishing houses in the “Global South” perpetuate a colonial gaze, whereas critical studies about Namibia are instead published by an institution in the “Global North”.

Photo by Mikhail Nilov.

About the author



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