

The Past Will Set You Free: Prophetic Memory in Twentieth-Century Herero Religious Thought

By Fabian Krautwald

Binghamton University (fkrautwald@binghamton.edu)

Abstract: *This article examines how a southern African society commemorated colonial genocide by auguring alternative futures. Drawing on the concept of “prophetic memory,” it illustrates how the Herero combined Christian eschatology, vernacular ideas about freedom and land, as well as pan-Africanist ideology to reflect on the Herero and Nama genocide of 1904-1908 between the final years of German colonial rule (until 1915) and Namibia’s subsequent occupation by South Africa. Based on the analysis of the Otjiherero mission newspaper “Omahungi” (“Conversation” or “Stories”) and prophecies by Herero Christians made between 1946-1948, the article shows that pastors, evangelists, and ordinary believers articulated emancipatory, but often diverging, visions of redemption by combining invocations of pioneering Herero converts and Christian prophets with long-standing notions of slavery and land as well as the rhetoric of Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association and the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The resulting disagreements over how to achieve self-determination contributed to growing opposition to white supremacy and encouraged the founding of independent Herero and Nama churches after 1945. The article demonstrates the lasting impact of the first genocide of the twentieth century as well as the breadth of the registers through which survivors and their descendants remembered its violence.*

Keywords: *Namibia; prophecy; memory; genocide; Christianity; newspapers*

The Past Will Set You Free: Prophetic Memory in Twentieth-Century Herero Religious Thought*

Genocide not only destroys life, but also affects the ways in which survivors and their descendants express what occurred.¹ In this article, I explore this problem among survivors of the first genocide of the twentieth century, which unfolded between 1904-1908 in present-day Namibia. In 1904 and 1905, the Herero and Nama rebelled against increasing European encroachment in what was then Germany's only settlement colony. German troops forced both peoples into remote deserts and newly built concentration camps, killing at least one third of them and dispossessing the survivors of their land and livestock.² In 1915, a South African invasion ended this regime but instituted a second colonial occupation that persisted until Namibian independence in 1990. The death of so many people transformed how survivors spoke to each other. In 1939, the Herero evangelist Gottfried Tjiharine, who had survived the genocide and gathered refugees in the Kalahari Desert, explained that "[t]he Herero of today ... speak Otjiherero starting from 1906."³ Tjiharine meant that the genocide damaged the human and material basis that had

* I would like to thank the anonymous *IJAH*S reviewers and journal editors for their comments on previous drafts of this article. Feedback from colleagues at the African Studies Association Meeting (November 17-19, 2022, Philadelphia), at Basel University's Research Seminar in African History (December 12, 2022), at the European Conference of African Studies (May 31-June 3, 2023, Cologne), and at the Memory Studies Association Conference (July 3-7, 2023, Newcastle Upon Tyne) encouraged me to further explore the relationship between prophecy and memory. I am particularly grateful to Joel Cabrita, Dag Henrichsen, Mercia Kandukira, Reinhart Kössler, Vauanekua Muatjetjeja, Max Pensky, Ato Quayson, Julia Tischler, Gregory Valdespino, and Kerry Whigham.

¹ Dan Stone, "Genocide and Memory," in *The Oxford Handbook of Genocide Studies*, ed. D. Bloxham and A. D. Moses (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 102-122, 102.

² On the genocide see Matthias Häussler, *The Herero Genocide. War, Emotion, and Extreme Violence in Colonial Namibia*, transl. by Elizabeth Janik (New York: Berghahn, 2021); on the camps see Jonas Kreienbaum, *A Sad Fiasco: Colonial Concentration Camps in Southern Africa, 1900-1908*, transl. by Elizabeth Janik (New York: Berghahn, 2019).

³ August Kuhlmann to Ernst Esslinger, Archives of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Republic of Namibia (ELCRN), Windhoek, VIII.1.11, April 11, 1930, 193-195, 194.

underpinned pre-war Herero cosmology. Given the twin challenges of meaning and continued settler control, how did survivors commemorate what occurred?

I argue that in the decades after 1904, Namibians harnessed Christian eschatology to remember the genocide and presage alternative tomorrows. In doing so, pastors, evangelists, and ordinary believers combined Christian language with long-standing vernacular registers of freedom and land as well as novel pan-Africanist ideas of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AMEC).⁴ Drawing on Jennifer Wenzel's analysis of the echoes of nineteenth-century Xhosa prophecies, I refer to these intertwined practices of recall and revelation as acts of "prophetic memory." As Wenzel argues, prophecy and memory constitute related rhetorical strategies through which a speaker may think through possibilities beyond the discontents of the present.⁵ Prophetic memory thereby refers to "remembrance of a moment [or person, F.K.] that, viewed retrospectively, offers a glimpse of a future that bears upon the present."⁶ Herero Christians recalled, spoke as, or embodied legendary chiefs, pioneering Christians, and Biblical figures to console survivors of the genocide, to lament its devastation, and to develop strategies to overcome its legacy, especially the dispossession of their land. After episodes of mass violence, acts of prophetic

⁴ On Garveyism see Ronald Stephens, Adam Ewing, eds., *Global Garveyism* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2019); Robert Trent Vinson, *The Americans are Coming! Dreams of African American Liberation in Segregationist South Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2012); Tony Emmett, *Popular Resistance and the Roots of Nationalism in Namibia, 1915-1966* (Basel: P. Schlettwein Publishing 1999); on the AMEC see James T. Campbell, *Songs of Zion: The African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States and South Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

⁵ Jennifer Wenzel, *Bulletproof: Afterlives of Anticolonial Prophecy in South Africa and Beyond* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009), 117.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 125. Wenzel distinguishes prophetic memory from "remembered prophecy," which describes the explicit recall of a past prophecy. With few exceptions, I focus on the former.

memory may help suture survivors' severed sense of time and place through the re-joining of the past and the present in visions of the future.

To understand this process, I analyze how survivors of the genocide and their descendants drew on and developed the vocabulary of prophetic memory over time. While some of the main categories of this vocabulary—freedom and land—remained relatively stable, the overarching “idioms” through which Namibians articulated them varied, ranging from Christian rhetoric and indigenous concepts of slavery to the expression of pan-Africanist solidarity.⁷ Those who shaped these idioms included both prophets in the narrow sense—self-proclaimed and publicly recognized individuals who profess knowledge about the past or future—as well as ordinary Herero men and women, evangelists, and pastors who expressed eschatological and millenarian ideas.⁸ At the same time, survivors' evolving remembrance only went so far in addressing the challenge of meaning. In the half century after 1904-1908, references to the genocide surfaced intermittently and in idioms obscure to outsiders. This is reflected in the frayed structure of the article, which begins with a discussion of the decade following the genocide and the 1920s before moving to the decade after the Second World War. However, the repeated recourse of the Herero to the idioms of prophetic memory over this period highlights the prolonged consequences of the genocide as well as survivors' efforts to remember it despite the constraints imposed by continued settler rule.

⁷ On prophecy as idiom see David Anderson, Douglas Johnson, “Revealing Prophets,” in *Revealing Prophets. Prophecy in Eastern African History*, ed. D. Anderson, D. Johnson (London: James Curry, 1995), 1–27, 14.

⁸ Anderson, Johnson, “Revealing Prophets,” 17–19.

Historians have shown that Christianity became a source of solace for survivors.⁹ Yet it is still unclear how the faith that over 90 percent of Namibia's population ascribes to today shaped the memory of the genocide.¹⁰ Religious scholar Paul Isaak recently faulted local churches for their sustained "silence" on the issue.¹¹ His impression of silence is not wholly unwarranted. Studies of Namibia's colonial period have tended to focus on how millenarian ideas influenced the political struggle for self-determination.¹² By uncovering the shifting registers of Herero prophetic memory, I highlight the ways in which Namibians have thought about the social, spiritual, and political repercussions of genocide. I do so in the case of members of the Lutheran Rhenish Mission Society, which became the most influential mission in central Namibia after beginning its proselytization among the Herero in 1842.¹³ Although I focus on the Herero, the experience of Nama communities followed a similar trajectory of remembrance and prophecy during this period.¹⁴

This Terrible Thirst Field

⁹ Jan-Bart Gewald, *Herero Heroes: A Socio-Political History of the Herero of Namibia, 1890-1923* (London: James Currey, 1999), 198.

¹⁰ Maria Kapere, "Christianity in Namibia," in *Anthology of African Christianity*, ed. Isabel A. Phiri et al (Oxford: Regnum Books, 2016), 657–662, 657.

¹¹ Paul John Isaak, "The Deafening Silence of Namibian Churches on Genocide," *New Era*, May 10, 2022, <https://neweralive.na/posts/opinion-the-deafening-silence-of-namibian-churches-on-genocide> (last accessed May 10, 2022).

¹² Molly McCullers, "'The Time of the United Nations in South West Africa Is Near': Local Drama and Global Politics in Apartheid-Era Hereroland," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 39, 2 (2013), 371–89; Gesine Krüger, Dag Henrichsen, "'We have been captives long enough. We Want to be Free' – Land, Uniforms & Politics in the History of Herero in the Interwar Period," in *Namibia under South African Rule. Mobility and Containment 1915-46*, ed. P. Hayes (Oxford, James Currey, 1998), 149–174; Emmett, *Popular Resistance*; Zedekiah Ngavirue, "On Wearing the Victor's Uniforms and Replacing Their Churches: South West Africa (Namibia) 1920-1950," in *Cargo Cults and Millenarian Movements. Transoceanic Comparisons of New Religious Movements*, ed. G. W. Trompf (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1990), 391–424.

¹³ On the RMS see G. L. Buys and Shekutaamba V. V. Nambala, *History of the Church in Namibia, 1805-1990: An Introduction* (Windhoek: Gamsberg Macmillan, 2003).

¹⁴ See, for example, Christine Hardung, "God, the Warlord and the Way of the Ancestors. On the Intertwinement of Christianity and Ancestry in Hendrik Witbooi's Politico-Religious Mission of the 1880s (Southwest Africa)," *Civilisations*, 63 (2014), 81-98.

By the outbreak of war in 1904, Christians had become an influential segment of Namibian societies. Since the founding of the station Otjikango in 1844, the sons of leading Herero chiefs had converted to the new faith and founded Christian families. Although these *ovachriste* (Christians) sometimes faced banishment or ridicule from their non-Christian kin, their knowledge of literacy, spirituality, and Western languages made them influential interlocutors in the shifting power dynamics of nineteenth-century southern Africa.¹⁵

The genocide devastated these communities. The Herero congregations of Otjihaenena (481 members), Otjosazu (656 members), Otjozondjupa (319 members), and Omburo (230 members) were wiped out. Of the 87 members of Okazeva, missionary August Kuhlmann could locate only one survivor. Most evangelists stayed with their congregants and thereby became, in the eyes of German colonizers, combatants. Evangelists Josaphat Kamatoto and Eliphas Karamo probably died from thirst while fleeing from colonial troops. Zacharias Kamaituara Kukuri was hanged, and Paulus Plaatjie shot by German court-martials. Others were shot by free Herero when they tried to convince them to lay down their arms.¹⁶

The evangelists who survived this nadir took the lead in rebuilding society. Between 1905 and 1908, evangelists at four mission collection camps gathered about 15,000 surviving Herero, many of whom converted.¹⁷ These conversions resulted from a range of motives, including access to food, water, clothing, and shelter.¹⁸ But conversion

¹⁵ On the Herero see Dag Henrichsen, *Herrschaft und Alltag im vorkolonialen Zentralnamibia: Das Herero- und Damaraland im 19. Jahrhundert* (Basel: Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2011); on the Nama see Tilman Dederling, *Hate the Old and Follow the New: Khoekhoe and Missionaries in Early Nineteenth-Century Namibia* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1997).

¹⁶ Hans-Martin Milk, *God's Feet or the Mission's Pack Donkey. Evangelists of Namibia* (Basel: Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2022), 108.

¹⁷ Gewald, *Herero Heroes*, 195.

¹⁸ Gewald, *Herero Heroes*, 197, 200.

was not just a means to an end.¹⁹ Herero evangelists who preached in the camps enjoyed large interest in their sermons.²⁰ Herero elders in the Swakopmund concentration camp asked visiting RMS Inspector Walther Spieker for a complete translation of the Old Testament because the stories they had heard thus far resonated with their imprisonment.²¹

Although evangelists stood at the frontlines, it is not easy to find traces of how they remembered the war. Some, including Gottfried Tjiharine, disappear from the archival record for the entirety or part of the war, only to re-emerge with no indication of their experience of the conflict.²² Mission scholar Hans-Martin Milk suggests that for many the war's memories were too painful to dwell on. Erastus Nikanor, who grew up in the household of missionary Ferdinand Lang, survived the thirst trek through the desert and turned himself in at Windhoek in 1905.²³ When missionary Friedrich Meier asked him about his flight six years later, he reportedly replied: "Teacher, stop; don't ask me about this. It was too terrible. I do not want to think about it anymore."²⁴

In Groenfontein in the Transvaal, where war-time leader Samuel Maharero had fled with a group of followers, Herero evangelist Julius Karuaise recalled the exodus during a visit of German missionaries in October 1907. When the latter denied Karuaise, who had singlehandedly maintained a congregation of 300 people, the sacraments, he lamented: "[T]he hardship and misery of the past years have made our souls hungry and thirsty. In

¹⁹ On conversion as a process rather than an event see Derek Peterson, *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival. A History of Dissent, c. 1935-1972* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

²⁰ Gewald, *Herero Heroes*, 196.

²¹ Gewald, *Herero Heroes*, 198.

²² Milk, *Evangelists*, 148–49.

²³ Milk, *Evangelists*, 110.

²⁴ Friedrich Meier, "Zwei 'Wanderlehrer' in Deutsch-Südwest-Afrika," *Berichte der Rheinischen Missionsgesellschaft (BRMG)*, December 1911, 272–75, 272.

the desert, this terrible thirst field, we have left behind droves of Christians, particularly children, as prey for the wild animals that followed our footsteps.”²⁵ Sometimes, Christians touched on the genocide in their conversion narratives. In 1936, Salomo Kamuzandu remembered that “after the war of the Germans I was imprisoned and experienced much hardship.”²⁶ Evangelists’ pained recollection of the war illustrate what Kerry Whigham has termed the “resonant violence” of genocide, which affects societies decades after the actual events.²⁷

Faced with these disturbing memories, some evangelists found solace in their faith. Samuel Kariko, during his time in the Omaruru prisoner camp, regularly preached Psalm 73, Verses 23-26, to inmates:

Yet I am always with you;
you hold me by my right hand.
You guide me with your counsel,
and afterward you will take me into glory.
Whom have I in heaven but you?
And earth has nothing I desire besides you.
My flesh and heart may fail,
But God is the strength of my heart
And my portion forever.²⁸

We should not assume that such sermons necessarily resonated among survivors. However, reports of widespread interest in evangelist preaching in missionary camps and Kariko’s repeated use of the Psalm suggest that it struck a chord. As an inmate in the Lüderitz concentration camp, Kariko preached 54 Isaiah 7, in which God affirms his

²⁵ Milk, *Evangelists*, 114.

²⁶ Conversion narratives of evangelists. Written at the evangelists’ conference in Okahandja in January 1936. Salomo Kamuzandu, 8 Januari 1936, ELCRN VIII.2.3, 82-3.

²⁷ Kerry Whigham, *Resonant Violence. Affect, Memory, and Activism in Post Genocide Societies* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2022), 3.

²⁸ Ps. 73:23-26 New International Version. For evidence of the use of this psalm and others see Milk, *Evangelists*, 117.

guardianship over man: “For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with deep compassion I will bring you back.”²⁹ By reminding themselves and other survivors that they were not alone, evangelists sought to console those who had lost everything.

Providing solace also became a central theme in the mission newspaper *Omahungi*.³⁰ Missionary Ferdinand Lang first published the paper in Tsumeb before the war, during which it ceased publication before re-appearing again from 1910 to 1915 together with its new Khoekhoegowab-equivalent, the *//Gao-Sari-Aob* (“Werft visitor”).³¹ By 1912, *Omahungi* had 550 readers compared to *//Gao-Sari-Aob*’s 880.³² According to Lang, if all literate families subscribed to either of the two papers their respective audience would have risen to at least 1,000—a considerable number given the small size of surviving Herero and Nama populations.³³ By the end of 1912, an estimated 83,204 Africans lived in the colony, of whom 21,611 were designated “Herero” in official estimates.³⁴

Under German rule, missionaries wrote most contributions and subscribed for a certain number of issues, which they then sold, or freely distributed to, congregation members. Nama catechist Benjamin Kido assisted Lang as typesetter.³⁵ Before 1914, the paper aided missionaries and evangelists in conducting services by providing them with

²⁹ Is. 54:7.

³⁰ On mission newspapers, see John Lonsdale, “‘Listen While I Read’: Patriotic Christianity among the Young Kikuyu,” in *Christianity and Social Change in Africa: Essays in Honor of J. D. Y. Peel*, ed. Toyin Falola (Durham, N.C: Carolina Academic Press, 2005), 563–94.; on the importance of textuality for German Protestant missionaries, see Jeremy Best, *Heavenly Fatherland: German Missionary Culture and Globalization in the Age of Empire* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021).

³¹ F. Lang, Report on mission work in Tsumeb, April 1 – March 31, 1911, ECLRN VII.32.2, 210–211. *Werft* was the German and Afrikaans term for African homesteads in southern Africa.

³² F. Lang, Annual Report on mission work in Tsumeb 1911–1912, ECLRN VII.32.2, 191–93, 192.

³³ F. Lang, Quarterly report on mission work in Tsumeb, January 1 to March 31, 1911, ECLRN VII.32.2, 212–214, 214.

³⁴ Reichs-Kolonialamt, *Die Deutschen Schutzgebiete in Afrika und der Südsee 1912/13. Amtliche Jahresberichte. Statistischer Teil* (Berlin: Mittler und Sohn, 1914), 56.

³⁵ F. Lang, Conference report on mission work in Tsumeb, October 1, 1910, ECLRN VII.32.2, 220–223.

translated hymns, passages of the Old Testament, and brief reports on recent church conferences.³⁶ The paper also introduced readers to the work of the Rhenish mission across the world.³⁷ The majority of articles was either anonymous or credited to German missionaries. At least three were penned by Gottfried Tjiharine, the main Herero evangelist (*Hauptevangelist*) after the genocide.³⁸ Most of *Omahungi*'s authors were men, which reflected missions' tendency to encourage patriarchal hierarchies of knowledge.³⁹ Beyond the pages of the paper, women equally shaped the making of historical knowledge, whether in oral praises or writing.⁴⁰ The efforts of evangelists such as Tjiharine were therefore only one strand in attempts to reckon with the consequences of genocide.

Omahungi authors did so by casting the life of the Herero in stark contrasts marked by the themes of redemption and eschatology. In 1914, Tjiharine published an article entitled "The world turns like a kudu horn." The title referenced the well-known Herero idiom *Ouje otjivingurura onja johorongo* to meditate on the dual nature of the world. The idiom forms part of a rich, orally transmitted corpus of figurative language ascribed to the man Tjipangandjara, a mythical poet who is said to have spoken in proverbs.⁴¹ According to scholar of Otjiherero Jekura Kavari, the idiom expresses the ever-changing nature of the

³⁶ Bernsmann, "Tangeje Muhona!," *Omahungi*, July 1910; E. Dannert, "Omutima uomundu," *Omahungi*, August 1911, "Oviungura vioruhindo mu Karibib," *Omahungi*, March 1911.

³⁷ "Oruhindo ruetu," *Omahungi*, Januar 1915; "Oserekaze ngue ripura nouzeu uovahepe," *Omahungi*, December 1914.

³⁸ On Tjiharine, see Milk, *Evangelists*, 147–155.

³⁹ On this tendency, see Natasha Erlank, *Convening Black Intimacy. Christianity, Gender, and Early Twentieth-Century South Africa* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2022), 7, 16.

⁴⁰ On praises, see Jekura Kavari, L. E. Bleckmann, "Otjiherero Praises of Places: Collective Memory Embedded in Landscape and the Aesthetic Sense of a Pastoral People," in *African Landscapes. Interdisciplinary Approaches*, ed. M. Bollig and O. Bubenzer (New York: Springer, 2009), 473–500; on writing see Brigitte Lau, "Johanna Gertze and Emma Hahn: Some Thoughts on the Silence of Historical Records, with Reference to Carl Hugo Hahn," in *History and Historiography: 4 Essays in Reprint*, ed. A. Heywood (Windhoek: MSORP, 1995), 53–64.

⁴¹ Jekura Kavari, *Omiano vya Tjipangandjara. Otjiherero Proverbs and Idioms* (Windhoek: UNAM Press, 2013), ix.

world through the image of a Kudu's two warped horns.⁴² Invoking a similar duality, Tjiharine announced: "There are two paths in the world, the path of evil and that of heaven. ... We Christians let us take the path of heaven, so that we can live in heaven, which will never perish."⁴³ Tjiharine sought to reassure readers that the current suffering in the earthly world was temporary, and that turning toward the Christian God would yield eternal life.

Similarly, German missionaries argued that the Herero had to follow the "path of heaven" to uplift themselves from their current state of servitude, which they likened to that of enslaved Africans in the Americas. In April 1915, an article postulated:

In 1732, the black slaves, when they were under the slavery of heathendom in the countries of America, began to be visited by teachers of the gospel. At the end of the year these first missionaries arrived on the island of Saint Thomas in the West Indies. Those farmers did not want that they teach their slaves, and they experienced many hardships.⁴⁴

By likening themselves to missionaries in the slave economies of the Caribbean, German missionaries situated Herero's defeat in the war of 1904-1908 within a larger history of supposed redemption from heathendom.

Missionaries sought to encourage the Herero to think about the genocide in an analogy with the state of enslaved peoples. Like victims of the transatlantic slave trade, they had become enslaved, but they could still free themselves from the supposedly true shackles of heathenism.⁴⁵ The Rhenish missionaries vowed to protect the rights of the Herero and work for their emancipation:

⁴² Kavari, *Omiano*, 138.

⁴³ M.[uhonge] Tj.[iharine], "Ouje otjivingurura onja johorongo, *Omahungi*," Juni 1914. I am grateful to Vauanekua Muatjetjeja for explaining the idiomatic nature of this title to me.

⁴⁴ "Oufakame mombamisiro," *Omahungi*, April 1915.

⁴⁵ An article in 1911 made a similar argument about slaves in colonial Virginia: "Okutjina tjiri," *Omahungi*, March 1911.

At first those faithful were opposed by the people of their community, especially by the slaveowners. But they resisted by furthering the rights of slaves and pleaded very much with the government, so that it would end the capture and abduction of blacks on ships, in which many of them died, after which those who were in the Christian countries would become free after some years.⁴⁶

It is unclear how Herero congregants interpreted the analogy between the effects of the war and Atlantic slavery. However, the comparison with “slaves” (*ovatwa*, sg. *omutwa*) dovetailed with a vernacular discourse of status and would therefore have been at least intelligible to readers and listeners. Before the war of 1904-1908, the term *omutwa* served both to denote “slave” and as pejorative description of all non-Herero.⁴⁷ According to missionary observers, the Herero employed the term for Damara servants.⁴⁸ The genocide upended this social order, but the association of *omutwa* and servitude persisted. Two decades later, survivors still spoke of the post-war conditions in terms of slavery. In 1926, a woman in Windhoek asked Missionary Meier: “Are we supposed to continue to bear children who would later only become ‘*ovatua*’ (slaves) of the whites?” In contrast to other cases of African mission Christianity, the Herero did not associate evangelists and

⁴⁶ “Outua uovazorundu nonguturiro jauo,” *Omahungi*, April 1915.

⁴⁷ Hugo Hahn, *Grundzüge einer Grammatik des Herero (im westlichen Afrika) nebst einem Wörterbuch* (Berlin: Wilhelm Hertz, 1857), 156, 171; F. W. Kolbe, *An English-Herero Dictionary, with an Introduction to the Study of Herero and Bantu in General* (Cape Town: J. C. Juta, 1883), 452; P. H. Brincker, *Wörterbuch und kurzgefasste Grammatik des Otji-Héero, mit Beifügung verwandter Ausdrücke und Formen des Oshi-ndonga - Otj-ambo.*, ed. C. G. Büttner (Leipzig: T. O. Weigel, 1886), 157; on Herero notions of servitude see Robert Gordon, “San Servility in the Omaheke, Namibia,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 54:2 (2021), 217–40, 231–36.

⁴⁸ G. Viehe, “Some Customs of the Ovaherero,” *Folk-Lore Journal* 1:3 (1879), 37–67, 64; G. Viehe, “Die Ovaherero,” in *Rechtsverhältnisse von eingeborenen Völkern in Afrika und Ozeanien: Beantwortungen des Fragebogens der Internationalen Vereinigung für vergleichende Rechtswissenschaft und Volkswirtschaftslehre zu Berlin*, ed. S. R. Steinmetz (Berlin: Julius Springer, 1903), 294–312, 304–5; Heinrich Vedder, “The Herero,” in *The Native Tribes of South West Africa*, ed. Heinrich Vedder, Louis Fourie, and C. H. L. Hahn (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1966), 152–208, 193; the meaning of *omutwa* as “slave” or “servant” has persisted. See Nduvaa Erna Nguaike, *The New Otjiherero Dictionary: English-Herero, Otjiherero-Otjiingirisa* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2011), 311; Wilhelm J. G. Möhlig and Jekura Kavari, *Reference Grammar of Herero (Otjiherero), Bantu Language of Namibia* (Köln: Köppe, 2008), 291, 321.

prophetism with slave descent.⁴⁹ Between 1911 and 1915, *Omahungi* published a total of six articles about enslaved peoples in the Americas.⁵⁰ This was an admittedly small share of the paper's coverage. Nevertheless, *Omahungi*'s comparisons with New World enslavement potentially contributed to the intelligibility—but not necessarily the spread or appeal—of Garveyist ideas among prominent Herero Christians and community leaders a few years later.⁵¹ Indeed, Chief Hosea Kutako, who embraced Garveyism in the early 1920s, worked in the mines of Tsumeb, where *Omahungi* was published, after the genocide.⁵²

Omahungi likened the Herero's post-war condition to Atlantic slavery. But the paper also offered readers hope that this state would end. The key to this was the promise of the restitution of Herero lands expropriated after the genocide. In 1913, an author referred to God's promise to Moses from 28 Genesis 15: "I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."⁵³ For Herero familiar with Genesis, the passage's pointer to the return to one's land must have been particularly meaningful. Before the genocide, the relationship between people and land stood at the heart of Herero notions of sovereignty. By the end of the nineteenth century, Herero leaders had coined the notion of Hereroland, or *ehi rOvaherero*, to describe their claim to central Namibia's pastures, which was based on wealth derived from the accumulation of cattle, participation in Cape trading networks, and the extensive raiding of neighbors and competitors.⁵⁴ After the war, the Bible offered

⁴⁹ On the Bakongo see Wyatt MacGaffey, *Modern Kongo Prophets: Religion in a Plural Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 104–5.

⁵⁰ In addition to the ones already cited, see "Okutjina tjiri," *Omahungi*, March 1911; "Ovirukua viondaukiro," *Omahungi*, January 1913; "Omuzorundu omusiona," *Omahungi*, June 1913.

⁵¹ Vinson, *The Americans Are Coming!*, 79–81.

⁵² Biography of Hosea Kutako, Basler Afrika Bibliographien, Basel (BPA), PA.7 VI.2, 1–5, 2.

⁵³ "Immanuel—Mukuru puna eṭe," *Omahungi*, Januar 1913; Gn 28:15. Author's emphasis.

⁵⁴ Henrichsen, *Herrschaft und Alltag*, 20, 245–56.

the Herero a vocabulary to commemorate the land lost in the genocide and hope for its return.

Yet when German control collapsed after the South African invasion in 1914, support for the mission church declined precipitously. Many men no longer attended services and instead revived Herero cultural practices deemed “pagan” by missionaries.⁵⁵ Open confrontations about the legacy of the war emerged. In 1922, Missionary Heinrich Pardey organized a meeting with Herero men in Grootfontein to discuss a decline in church attendance. Only 14 men attended. When asked about the reason for the large absence, one of the attendees replied:

[W]hen the first missionaries came to the country the Herero were happy, they enjoyed having the missionaries amongst themselves. *But then came the war*. When the war was over, the missionaries came into the *veld* to call for us and said there was peace, but it was not so, since many were killed afterwards. This is why it is said that “The teachers kill the people’.⁵⁶

Pardey in vain protested that the old missionaries had criticized the treatment of Herero and Nama in concentration camps.⁵⁷

Although correct, Pardey’s rejoinder failed to address the heart of the matter. By convincing the Herero to surrender, German missionaries—and evangelists such as Gottfried Tjiharine they sent out for this purpose—had indirectly aided in the people’s destruction. Missionaries had no control over what happened to the Herero who turned themselves in. When the collection camp of Omburo was closed in June 1906, German troops transferred its inhabitants to the concentration camps.⁵⁸ As late as 1930, survivors

⁵⁵ Jan-Bart Gewald, *“We Thought we would be Free ...” Socio-Cultural Aspects of Herero History in Namibia 1915-1940* (Köln: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, 2000), 161–65.

⁵⁶ H. Pardey to Wilhelm Eich, December 20, 1922, ELCRN II.1.36, 69-72, 71.

⁵⁷ H. Pardey to Wilhelm Eich, December 20, 1922, ELCRN II.1.36, 71.

⁵⁸ Milk, *Evangelists*, 150.

sometimes threatened Tjiharine with violence when he visited reserves because of these grievances.⁵⁹

Despite growing disillusionment, the Herero continued to frame conflicts with missionaries in the Christian idiom of prophetic memory. As Jan-Bart Gewald notes regarding the status of Christianity in Herero society around this time: “Knowledge of the Christian faith was powerful knowledge, it set the paradigm which could be used to debate and argue all aspects of life.”⁶⁰ Before the burial of Samuel Maharero in 1923, for example, attendees frequently discussed 1 Isaiah 5-7, in which the prophet admonishes Judah for his rebellion against Jehova:

Why should you be beaten anymore? Why do you persist in rebellion? Your whole head is injured, your whole heart afflicted. From the sole of your foot to the top of your head there is no soundness – only wounds and welts and open sores, not cleansed or bandaged or soothed with olive oil. Your country is desolate, your cities burned with fire; your fields are being stripped by foreigners right before you, laid waste as when overthrown by strangers.⁶¹

Like Judah, some Herero presumably asked themselves whether they should openly resist the re-established colonial order given the desolation of their society and loss of land caused by the genocide. Many retained an extensive knowledge of Christian liturgy. In 1926, missionary Johannes Olpp observed that “many [of the Herero] still quietly read their testament.”⁶²

In the interwar period, the Christian idiom of Herero prophetic memory intersected with wider political movements, particularly the growing popularity of Marcus Garvey’s

⁵⁹ Proceedings of the conference of congregation elders and evangelists at the Augustineum 1930, ELCRN I.1.27, 68–88, 83.

⁶⁰ Gewald, *We Thought we would be Free*, 202.

⁶¹ Is. 1:5-7. Gewald, *We Thought We Would Be Free*, 202.

⁶² Olpp to Deputation Barmen, Report on the Development of Work in Hereroland, 1926, ELCRN I.1.27, 241-251, 244.

pan-Africanist UNIA. Between 1921 and 1923, West Indian port workers based in Lüderitzbucht established several UNIA branches in Namibia.⁶³ The organization's combination of racial pride, self-help ideology, and pan-Africanist solidarity appealed particularly to the Herero. Widespread support rested on millenarian hopes that black Americans would liberate the territory's African population.⁶⁴ As *Omahungi* authors, UNIA supporters intercalated freedom, land, and emancipation in their rhetoric. In March 1922, unknown persons drew an abbreviated message in large, tar-paint letters on rocks outside Omaruru in Otjiherero and Afrikaans. It read: "This land [belongs] to Michael [the last chief of Omaruru under the Germans]. This land is not yours, it is that of the blacks of America and that of the Herero."⁶⁵ The authors of the note challenged the post-genocide order by recalling Herero land ownership through the figure of Omaruru's last chief, Michael Tjiseseta, who had fought in the war of 1904-1908 and managed to escape into exile.⁶⁶ At the same time, they expressed pan-African solidarities by expanding ownership of Hereroland across political boundaries to African American would-be liberators.

Support for UNIA also tapped into memories of the genocide. This is apparent in one of the South African policies the association rallied against: cattle inoculation and branding. Many Herero feared that inoculation would either kill their stock—as it had sometimes done in German times—or that branding would rob them again of their just recently re-

⁶³ Emmett, *Popular Resistance*, 141.

⁶⁴ Emmett, *Popular Resistance*, 143.

⁶⁵ Statement by Rev. August Kuhlmann, Rhenish Mission Omaruru, April 20, 1922, National Archives of Namibia, Windhoek (NAN), SWAA 1850 A396/13, no pagination. My translation is adapted from Kuhlmann's and the original message, which reportedly read: "Omaruru 5.3.22 Michael. dit land / Ehi ndi Karenu / Ph. Amerik on. Hereros."

⁶⁶ On Tjiseseta's flight to Walvis Bay and South Africa, see Caspar Erichsen, "*The Angel of Death has Descended Violently Among Them*": *Concentration Camps and Prisoners-of-War in Namibia, 1904-1908* (Leiden: African Studies Center, 2005), 76–7.

earned property.⁶⁷ These fears could engender a strong sense of defiance. On September 2, 1922, the elderly man David Kazingua told the African constable David Ngxiki near Okahandja: *"In former times the Germans beat us with the flat hand, and afterwards shot us, and we took their rifles and fought them. We are going to do the same again."*⁶⁸ Direct threats by UNIA supporters such as this one were the exception, despite officials' and missionaries' panicky claims about the purported threat of a new uprising. What is more important is that UNIA supporters such as Kazingua grounded the promise of an emancipatory future in the memory of Herero resistance to colonial dispossession.

However, popular hopes in the organization were soon disappointed when it became clear that UNIA operatives had embezzled membership dues.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, ordinary Herero still drew on UNIA rhetoric to criticize the mission for its alleged complicity in the genocide. In 1923, a congregant told Missionary Meier in Windhoek: *"You teachers are responsible that we are done today; you not only deprived us of our possessions, but also of our rights. For us God's word has brought misfortune."*⁷⁰ Echoing UNIA rhetoric, the disgruntled Christian continued: *"Who does the land belong to now, and where are the big herds that our fathers possessed?"* This happened everywhere where God's word arrived, from South Africa up to Togo.⁷¹ As in the case of the Bible, the Herero focused on aspects of UNIA ideology that spoke to the expropriation of what they considered to be their land. At the same time, the congregant in question situated the plight of his people in a pan-African

⁶⁷ On inoculation and branding, see Wolfgang Werner, *"No One Will Become Rich" – Economy and Society in the Herero Reserves in Namibia, 1915-1946* (Basel: P. Schlettwein Publishing, 1998), 127–31.

⁶⁸ Fred W. Henley, Acting Magistrate of Okahandja, to A. J. Waters, Office of the Magistrate, Okahandja, September 1, 1922, NAN SWAA 1850 A 396/4, no pagination. Author's emphasis.

⁶⁹ Emmett, *Popular Resistance*, 146.

⁷⁰ Annual Report Herero Congregation Windhuk, January 28, 1924, ELCRN VII.37.2, 145–46, 145. Author's emphasis.

⁷¹ Annual Report Herero Congregation Windhuk, January 28, 1924, ELCRN VII.37.2, 145. Author's emphasis.

perspective that included other former German colonies such as Togo as well as South Africa's own settler colonial regime.

In the following decade, anger over the perceived complicity of missionaries and evangelists in the genocide gave way to widespread resignation. Nama and Herero congregants increasingly realized that missionaries' commitment to their congregations was secondary to their investment in continued colonial rule.⁷² When Nama and Herero directly addressed the genocide during this period, missionaries deflected responsibility. During a class outing of the mission school Augustineum on August 16, 1925, the Nama student David Witbooi recounted the plight of inmates of the Shark Island concentration camp through a dream episode that formed part of his larger conversion narrative. Witbooi was a grandson of war-time leader Hendrik Witbooi and eight years old when the war began.⁷³ Invoking the passage "He leadeth me beside the still waters" from Psalm 23, he recounted:

The path to these waters was very difficult for me. When I was still a small boy, a war broke out between us Nama and the Germans. My parents had to flee into the Kalahari. But then we were captured. Peace was made and my parents only lived for a very short time in Gibeon. From there we were brought to Windhoek. From Windhoek we came to Lüderitzbucht. 3,500 Nama were sent there at that time. *My father told me the exact figure.* But of those 3,500 Nama, 3,307 died in Lüderitzbucht.⁷⁴

⁷² Theo Sundermeier, *Wir aber suchten Gemeinschaft: Kirchwerdung und Kirchentrennung in Südwestafrika* (Witten: Luther-Verl., 1973), 87–88.

⁷³ Heinrich Vedder, "Stories told on August 16, 1925 by students of the Augustineum," ELCRN XXI 2b, 215–256, 239. Witbooi went on to become a mission school teacher. On Witbooi, see the statement of his eponymous father, Chief David Witbooi, in Monthly Report of the Superintendent of the Gibeon Native reserve, October 1941, October 27, 1941, NAN SWAA 1123 A158/6 v2. I am grateful to Reinhart Kössler for sharing this citation and his research on the Khowese with me.

⁷⁴ Heinrich Vedder, "Stories told on August 16, 1925 by students of the Augustineum," ELCRN XXI 2b, 240. Author's emphasis.

Witbooi's account constitutes one of the rare occasions when a survivor of the genocide not only referred to its violence but quantified the extent of the killing. Indeed, the number of Nama inmates and victims at Shark Island given by Witbooi corresponds closely to recent findings of historians regarding inmate numbers and the camps extremely high death rate.⁷⁵

Missionary Heinrich Vedder, who had himself witnessed the squalor of the Swakopmund concentration camp, at this point felt it "necessary, [sic] to make a remark." But rather than acknowledge Witbooi's harrowing experience, Vedder sought to steer the conversation towards Witbooi's supposed redemption through Christ. Vedder told the assembled students: "It is true what David has said: Here at the Augustineum you sit beside still waters. Drink diligently from them. But also remember those who never were beside the still waters, or who have left them again. Scoop also for them and go out and give it to them. That is your life's work as teachers and evangelists."⁷⁶ It is unclear what Witbooi and the other students thought of Vedder's interpretation of the dream. What is clear is that the next years saw a build-up of grievances among Nama and Herero evangelists, which ranged from insufficient education and salaries to the denial of ordination and missionaries' double standard regarding church discipline, which ignored white men's predations of local women while chastising alleged African promiscuity.⁷⁷ The buildup of discontent erupted after the Second World War, when both factions from both congregations broke away from the mission to establish their own churches.

⁷⁵ Kreienbaum, *A Sad Fiasco*, 90, states that official "estimated numbers of interned Nama were far too low." They indicate that between September 1906 and March 1907 alone, the camp contained 2,000 prisoners of whom 1,203 died. The actual number of inmates and total deaths during the camp's existence lay closer to Witbooi's figure.

⁷⁶ Heinrich Vedder, "Stories told on August 16, 1925 by students of the Augustineum," ELCRN XXI 2b, 240.

⁷⁷ Gewald, *We Thought We Would Be Free*, 172–78.

Prophetic Memory

On May 13, 1946, Nama evangelists announced their decision to secede from the mission.⁷⁸

The immediate cause of this action was South Africa's attempt in the previous year to incorporate Namibia as a fifth province.⁷⁹ In a broader sense, however, the secession took up concerns over freedom first articulated by Nama Chief Hendrik Witbooi, who led his people in the 1904-1908 war. One of the three leaders of the secession, former evangelist and later pastor Markus Witbooi, explained in retrospect that although "prophets" played no direct role in the schism, "there was indeed talk of great changes" and of the radical Nama prophet Sheperd Stuurman, who had inspired the resistance of Hendrik Witbooi against German rule.⁸⁰ A congregation member told Missionary Friedrich Mayer that during the secession "there was a feeling [in Gibeon] as in the days of 1904, when the rebellion broke out."⁸¹ Members of the new church hailed evangelist Petrus Jod, the second leader of the schism and a nephew of Hendrik Witbooi, as the resurrection of his maternal uncle.⁸² Apart from disillusionment, the secession was also spurred by fears that the RMS, which suffered from an acute financial emergency since the Second World War, would hand over its stations to the Afrikaner-dominated *Nederduits gereformeerde Kerk* (NGK).⁸³ The secession shocked missionaries. Most refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of

⁷⁸ On the Nama schism, see Tjibeba, "Rhenish Mission Society," 111–116; Sundermeier, *Gemeinschaft*, 15–84;

⁷⁹ Jeremy Silvester, "Forging the Fifth Province," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 41, 3 (2015), 505–18.

⁸⁰ Theo Sundermeier, "Gesprek met Pastor Markus Witbooi," August 6, 1968, BPA, PA 73, III.1.3; on Stuurman, see Tilman Dederling, "The Prophet's 'War against Whites': Shepherd Stuurman in Namibia and South Africa, 1904-07," *The Journal of African History* 40:1 (1999), 1–19; on Witbooi, see Milk, *Evangelists*, 191–194.

⁸¹ Sundermeier, *Gemeinschaft*, 46. Mayer had no relation to his namesake Friedrich Meier in Windhoek.

⁸² Sundermeier, *Gemeinschaft*, 76–77; Reinhart Kössler, "The Persistent Theme of the Great Rising: Witbooi Leaders and Rhenish Missionaries," *Journal Namibia Wissenschaftliche Gesellschaft* 47 (1999), 19–37, 26; Milk, *Evangelists*, 179–90.

⁸³ Sundermeier, *Gemeinschaft*, 31–34.

congregants' complaints. Instead, they blamed the split on the workings of "communism" among the Nama.⁸⁴

Herero Christians at first rejected overt secession, but the schism of 1946 catalyzed similar discontents. Indeed, the Herero policeman Jonas Katjirungu reportedly first introduced Zacheus Thomas, the third leader of the Nama secession, to the theology of the AMEC.⁸⁵ At a meeting of the Windhoek Location Advisory Board in November 1947, community leaders announced their intention to establish a Herero church because of the alleged misuse of congregation funds by missionaries.⁸⁶ The same year, Chiefs Hosea Kutako and David Witbooi received the Reverend Michael Scott, whose open support for African rights in southern Africa contrasted with the tacit or expressed support of German clergy for white-minority rule.⁸⁷ In 1948, however, the election victory of the National Party in South Africa dashed hopes for change and instead marked the beginning of the gradual introduction of apartheid into Namibia.⁸⁸ Even before this decision, turmoil was brewing among ordinary Herero Christians. Between 1946 and 1948, members of the Windhoek congregation made a series of prophecies, which the congregation member Amon Keeja Kaakuha recorded in sketchbooks.⁸⁹ German mission scholar Theo Sundermeier, who edited a selection of them, called this eschatological corpus the "Windhoek Book of

⁸⁴ Sundermeier, *Gemeinschaft*, 59.

⁸⁵ Tjibeba, "Rhenish Mission," 72.

⁸⁶ Minutes of the Meeting of the Windhoek Non-European Advisory Board, NAN MWI 36/19/37, November 19, 1947.

⁸⁷ Chief David Witbooi should not be confused with his eponymous son, whom I cited earlier. On Scott's work in Namibia see Fabian Krautwald, "Genocide and the Politics of Memory in the Decolonisation of Namibia," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 48:5 (2022), 805–23, 815–16; Christopher Saunders, "Michael Scott and Namibia," *African Historical Review* 39:2 (2007), 25–40.

⁸⁸ Z. Ngavirue, *Political Parties and Interest Groups in South West Africa (Namibia), A Study of a Plural Society* (Basel: P. Schlettwein Publishing, 1997), 235–37.

⁸⁹ "Die werk v. d. erste blasy vd. Boek Otjomuise," BPA PA 73, VI.7.2.

Prophets.”⁹⁰ Namibian historian Dag Henrichsen argues instead that this ‘book’ formed part of a bigger Herero spiritual and political archive.⁹¹ In what follows, I call this archive the “Windhoek prophecies.”

The Windhoek prophecies constitute some of the most important documents for Herero intellectual history in the twentieth century. They concern the moral rejuvenation of the community and make this rejuvenation dependent on believers’ personal and collective cleansing. The prophecies thus resemble the messages of other prophetic movements and African initiated churches that emerged around this time.⁹² The revelations frame their call for rejuvenation and express the grievances of Herero Christians through the vernacular discourses of slavery and land we have seen in *Omahungi* and support for UNIA. They thus constitute a form of prophetic memory in which prophets recalled early Herero evangelists to legitimate their visions of the future.

Prophets embodied different personalities. Some spoke as the Holy Ghost, Christ, or as themselves, while others invoked early Christian evangelists such as Elia Kandirikirira (1842-1897).⁹³ On February 12, 1947, the latter condemned the South African occupation for the division it had fostered between Namibia’s peoples:

Tell your congregation, say: Elders, youths, babies, adults. Listen well, righteous and non-righteous, good and bad, faithful and unfaithful, kings and paupers, educated and uneducated, whites and non-whites, Herero and

⁹⁰ Sundermeier, *Gemeinschaft*, 297.

⁹¹ Dag Henrichsen, “‘The Whites Will Eat the *Veldkos* which the Blacks are Eating Today.’ Radical Political Thought, Millenarian Visions and the ‘Secret’ Potency of an Archive,” Paper presented at the South African Empire Workshop (February 18-19, 2013, University of the Western Cape). I am grateful to Henrichsen for sharing his work with me.

⁹² See Joel E. Tishken and Andreas Heuser, “‘Africa Always Brings Us Something New’: A Historiography of African Zionist and Pentecostal Christianities,” *Religion* 45:2 (2015), 153–73.

⁹³ On Kandirikirira, see his autobiography Elia Kandirikirira, *Elia Kandirikirira: Lebensbild eines Herero-Evangelisten* (Barmen: Verlag des Missionshauses, 1906) and Milk, *Evangelists*, 66–72.

Tswana, Nama, Dama, Mbundu, Germans and English. I say so: Heaven is one, there are multiple heavens. So why do you hate each other?⁹⁴

As a pioneer evangelist, Kandirikirira lamented the prevailing “hatred” between Namibia’s peoples even before the introduction of apartheid. In the nineteenth century, Kandirikirira was one of the elite Christians designated by their fathers to receive Western education and build relationships with European traders and missionaries.⁹⁵ By the 1970s, the Herero reportedly still considered him one of the greatest priests of their people.⁹⁶ To succeeding generations, he thus signified a period of endogenous Christianization before the genocide.

By embodying figures such as Kandirikirira, the prophets contrasted the seemingly intact world of early evangelists with present discord, which could only be overcome by following their prescriptions, which would lead the Herero to freedom. As the authors of *Omahungi* and adherents of UNIA before them, the prophets defined this freedom as reversing the land alienation caused by the genocide. On August 4, 1947, Amon Keeja Kaakuha spoke as the Holy Ghost. He challenged his listeners: “You want to be freed. There is no other redeemer than the admonitions; there is none.” To be redeemed, the faithful had to overcome internal conflict. This would yield true freedom, which the Spirit defined as the restitution of Herero lands: “The people would like to own the land, but it has no owner. The end is nearing for those whom I have given it. The time has come that the oldest of the land to remind [the people], after which you shall receive freedom. But under these

⁹⁴ Sundermeier, *Gemeinschaft*, 304.

⁹⁵ Henrichsen, *Herrschaft und Alltag*, 264-71.

⁹⁶ Sundermeier, *Gemeinschaft*, 297.

circumstances [of current discord] you will not receive it.”⁹⁷ Similar to Herero oral praises, Kaakuha’s obscure announcement does not easily lend itself to interpretation.⁹⁸

According to Kaakuha, the Holy Spirit had given Hereroland to settlers, whose ownership—and suzerainty—was ending. He urged his listeners to abide by the admonitions of the “oldest of the land,” an Otjiherero term that otherwise referenced San as the indigenous people of southern Africa.⁹⁹ In this case, it probably also referred to prophets such as Elia Kandirikirira and chiefs such as Kahimemua Nguvauva, another personality that Kaakuha inhabited. Kahimemua was chief of the Mbanderu, or eastern Herero.¹⁰⁰ In 1896, he led a rebellion against land encroachment by German colonizers and their Herero allies, which he lost; he was subsequently executed. Before his execution, however, he augured that the Herero under their leader Samuel Maharero would be forced into exile by their colonizers.¹⁰¹ His words seemed to be borne out by the twin catastrophes of the 1897 Rinderpest epidemic and the genocide of 1904-1908. Kaakuha mobilized this prophetic tradition of resistance for his own purposes. Jennifer Wenzel has defined such mnemonic acts as “remembered prophecy,” meaning the “recollection of a prophecy, projection, or warning explicitly articulated in the past.”¹⁰² Similarly, Kaakuha announced as Kahimemua that if his audience followed his injunctions “your children’s children will attain freedom, not you yourself.”¹⁰³

⁹⁷ Sundermeier, *Gemeinschaft*, 309.

⁹⁸ On the difficulty to interpret oral praises, see Anette G. Hoffmann, “‘Since the Germans came it rains less’: Landscape and Identity of Herero Communities in Namibia” (Ph.D. thesis, University of Amsterdam, 2005), 29–31.

⁹⁹ Peter H. Katjavivi, *History of Resistance in Namibia* (London: James Currey, 1988), 1.

¹⁰⁰ On the difference between Mbanderu and Herero see Theo Sundermeier, *The Mbanderu: Their History until 1914 as Told to Theo Sundermeier in 1966* (Windhoek: MSORP, 1985), 5.

¹⁰¹ On Kahimemua and his prophecies, see Gewald, *Herero Heroes*, 110–40.

¹⁰² Wenzel, *Bulletproof*, 125.

¹⁰³ Sundermeier, *Gemeinschaft*, 310–11.

The prophets conjured the end of white rule over Hereroland—blurring the map of formal colonial sovereignty. In one of the most poignant revelations, Kaakuha, speaking as the Holy Ghost, announced that this end would entail the reversion of colonizer and colonized: “I am the Holy Ghost and say: ‘What is eaten by slaves, you, too, shall eat.’ The whites will eat the *veldkos* [food gathered in the countryside], which the blacks are eating today. Amen.”¹⁰⁴ According to Sundermeier’s two Herero interlocutors, the later pastors Hiskia Uanivi and Josua Musutua, “What is eaten by slaves” is a Herero idiom and in this case warns that Herero “collaborators” should no longer eat white people’s food.¹⁰⁵ However, this meaning can only be inferred from the text with some difficulty. A more straightforward interpretation, which draws on the work of Jekura Kavari, would be that the proverb sets up the following announcement about the inversion of social relationships through a well-known cultural reference.¹⁰⁶

Similar to the religious texts of *Omahungi* and the rhetoric of UNIA supporters, the Windhoek prophecies fused vernacular Herero ideas about land and freedom with Christian mnemonic and millenarian elements into an idiom of prophetic memory. Seen in light of this tradition, the prophecies appear as an eerie vision of the Herero mission’s trajectory after 1948. In 1950, Herero Christians were distraught when leading missionary Heinrich Vedder accepted his nomination to the South African Senate, which underlined his support for apartheid.¹⁰⁷ In August 1954, Herero Pastor Reinhard Ruzo began calling for the exodus of Herero Christians from the mission.¹⁰⁸ In a decisive meeting one year later, four

¹⁰⁴ Sundermeier, *Gemeinschaft*, 302.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Kavari, *Omiano*, 16.

¹⁰⁷ Sundermeier, *Gemeinschaft*, 100–101.

¹⁰⁸ H. K. Diehl to G. Menzel, December 3, 1954, VEM RMG 2.607, 14–17, 14.

Herero leaders, who acted as representatives of the sick Chief Hosea Kutako, lamented that there was still no African Bishop after a century of Christianization. Then, Reinhart Maekopo, the headman of Otjituuu, asked: “During the Herero rebellion we were killed ... *how can we live with those who have done something like this?*”¹⁰⁹ Maekopo stated a devastating fact, but the question he raised was even more unsettling. To underline their demand for emancipation, attendees had written “Our Country” (*“Ehi Retu”*) on the wall.¹¹⁰ The meeting highlights the extent to which Herero criticism of the mission was rooted in memories of the genocide and the desire to overcome its legacy, especially land alienation.

Indeed, the meeting marked the final break-away of the *Oruuano* (Unity) Church from the mission.¹¹¹ After the meeting on August 22, Pastor Reinhard Ruzo met Chief Hosea Kutako, who appointed him head of the *Oruuano*. Ruzo held his first service the following Sunday at the commando house of the *oturupa* (the troops), a Herero mutual aid society founded after the genocide, in Windhoek’s Old Location neighborhood.¹¹² The exact share of congregants who left the mission is difficult to ascertain and varied regionally. After one year, attendance of mission churches dropped by about 30 percent. In the eastern reserves of Aminuis and Waterberg, it plunged by as much as 100 percent.¹¹³ In 1958, the *Oruuano*

¹⁰⁹ Otto Milk, “Die Lage der Missionsgemeinden in Südwestafrika,” Report to the Mission Conference at Okahandja, December 5-8, 1955, ELCRN I.1.33, 55–63, 56. Author’s emphasis.

¹¹⁰ Werner A. Wienecke, *Afrikanische Wirklichkeit: Abseits der Touristenwege in Namibia* (Gelnhausen: Verlag, 2015), 42.

¹¹¹ On the *Oruuano*, see Wienecke, *Afrikanische Wirklichkeit*; Josué Tomasini Castro, “Sincretismo e Resistência: o caso africano da igreja Oruuano,” *Campos - Revista de Antropologia* 9:1 (2008); Ngavirue, *Political Parties*; Ph. Pöllitzer, “Die eigene Kerze anzünden! Untersuchung zu Entstehung, Lehre, Leitung und Leben in der Oruuano” (Ph.D. thesis, University of Pretoria, 1978); Sundermeier, *Gemeinschaft*.

¹¹² On the *oturupa*, see most recently Fabian Krautwald, “Branches of Memory: Colonialism and the Making of the Historical Imagination in Namibia and Tanzania, 1914-1969” (Ph.D. thesis, Princeton University, 2022), 233–67.

¹¹³ Sundermeier, *Gemeinschaft*, 116.

had 7177 members.¹¹⁴ In total, about 70 percent of Herero Christians left the mission in the following two decades, about 30,000 people.¹¹⁵

As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord

But how did the Herero who remained in the church see the schism and the underlying prophetic memories? *Omahungi*, which had gone out of print in 1915 and was revived in 1949, provides indications here.¹¹⁶ While *//Gao-Sari-Aob* was already re-published in 1930, *Omahungi* remained out of print during the interwar period because of a lack of funding.¹¹⁷ *//Gao-Sari-Aob* had 1,700 readers in 1961. The precise figure for *Omahungi* is unknown and probably lay lower. That it was still influential can be gleaned from the fact that in this new form, leading African evangelists and the first indigenous pastors wrote for the paper. Pastor Andreas Kukuri served as one of two editors.¹¹⁸

Kukuri's family history was deeply intertwined with German colonization. His father, Zacharias, was hanged in 1905 by the Germans. Kukuri himself survived the war after being conscripted as a servant by a German officer.¹¹⁹ Despite this traumatic personal history, Kukuri did not advocate a break with the mission. As editor, he instead sought to affirm the bond between the Herero and the Lutheran faith by commemorating the mission's storied history. For example, an article by Missionary Jakob Irle recalled the late

¹¹⁴ Transcript of cash reconciliation, address book, employee register and statistic of congregation members of the independent Oruano, n.d. [1958], VEM RMG 2.607, 5.

¹¹⁵ Pöllitzer, "Kerze," 41–3.

¹¹⁶ Conference of Members of the Rhenish Mission in South West Africa 1952, ELCRN I.1.31, 4–21, 20.

¹¹⁷ Minutes of the Proceedings of the Conference of Rhenish Missionaries 1922, ELCRN I.1.25.1, 61–77; Addendum to Conference Minutes 1930, September 7, 1930, ELCRN I.1.27, 125–6; F. Pönninghaus, "Der //Gau-sari-aob." Paper presented at the Mission Conference 1930, August 26, 1930, ELCRN I.1.27, 129; Minutes of the Conference of Rhenish Missionaries in South West Africa 1935, ELCRN I.1.27, 42–48, 48.

¹¹⁸ Br. Reeh, "Die Literarische Arbeit in unserer Kirche." Paper presented at Missionary conference 1961, April 15, 1961, ELCRN I.1.36, 14–17, 16.

¹¹⁹ On Kukuri, see Milk, *Evangelists*, 167–78.

conversion of Chief Abraham Kukuri, an ancestor of Andreas Kukuri, with whom Irle grew up in the 1870s in Otjosazu.¹²⁰ Pastor Gottlob Mungunda chided readers for having lost the way of exemplary first Christians such as Wilhelm Maharero, the brother of Chief Samuel Maharero.¹²¹

However, the genocide and people associated with it still loomed over this commemorative work. In the period around the *Oruaano* secession, the editors included more reminders of this past. In August 1954, Andreas Kukuri reported on that year's commemoration of Samuel Maharero's funeral two decades earlier.¹²² One year later, another article described the recent visit of two missionaries to the Herero reserves in neighboring Bechuanaland, "which [the local Herero] were given to live in, after their flight."¹²³ The Maharero family became an important source of prophetic memory in church leaders' attempts to discredit opponents of the mission. In August 1955, an article entitled "The Prayer of Chief Samuel Maharero," included the chief's purported last words, which he is said to have dictated a day before his death:

Lord, I leave my fellows Julius Kauraisa, and Eduard Tjamuaha, and Eliphaz Kukuri, although they stay behind unwillingly. Lord, advise them that they should come, that they should treat the community well, live happily, and that they bring their community together, that they unite with God, and that they fill their hearts with your spirit, live in love, happiness, and faith. Amen.¹²⁴

¹²⁰ Jakob Irle, "Omuhona uovaherero ma rire omukriste," *Omahungi*, Desember 1950. On Chief Kukuri, see Ernst Dammann, ed., *Herero-Texte. Erzählt von Pastor Andreas Kukuri* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1983), 29–34.

¹²¹ Gottlob Mungunda, "Omaronga," *Omahungi*, September 1949.

¹²² Pastor Andreas Kukuri, "Ejuva enene komazemburukiro uombakero jOmuhona Samuel Maharero. Ejuva romueze 29.8.1954," *Omahungi*, October 1954.

¹²³ "Onḡakameno," *Omahungi*, August 1955.

¹²⁴ "Ongumbiro jaMuhona Samuel Maharero," *Omahungi*, August 1955. The last words are recorded in "The Last Greetings of the Chief Samuel Maharero," NAN A 200 and "Zum Tode des ehemaligen Oberhauḡtling's Samuel Maharero," *BRMG*, November-December 1923, 117–22. According to Jan-Bart Gewald, Missionary Vedder probably passed on the message to South African officials after Friedrich Maharero read the last words to attendees at his father's funeral. See Gewald, *Herero Heroes*, 276–77.

The inclusion of this last request in the same month the annual commemoration of Maharero was held in Okahandja was probably no coincidence. By reproducing Maharero's appeal to his "fellows" to "bring their community together," Andreas Kukuri positioned himself and the paper against a break with the mission.

One year later but with the shock of secession still fresh, the August issue opened with a now well-known photograph of the chief. It was taken in 1914 during exile in the Transvaal in South Africa and was captioned with an excerpt from 24 Joshua 15: "As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."¹²⁵

[Fig. 1. *Omahungi*, August 1956 (ELCRN) somewhere here.]

The *Omahungi* editors claimed Samuel Maharero as a Christian who, despite having declared war against European colonizers, had not renounced his Christian faith. Printing Maharero's likeness was part of a broader pictorial initiative. In 1935, Heinrich Vedder had stressed that missionaries should invest more in making Christian literature appealing to readers. One way of achieving this was by including "Herero faces" in pamphlets and photographs of historical figures such as Maharero. By including photographs of historical figures, missionaries could convince those who no longer attended church services that the mission had not turned their backs on them.¹²⁶

In the more immediate context of 1955, Herero and German church leaders harnessed the prestige of Samuel Maharero as war-time leader and survivor of the genocide but emphasized his role as a Christian to bolster their position against critics of the church. This interpretation is reinforced when we consider the remainder of the

¹²⁵ "Ami vari nondjuuo jandje matu karere Jehova," *Omahungi*, Augustus 1956.

¹²⁶ Heinrich Vedder, "Fragen und Vorschläge zur Literatur," paper held at mission conference October 3-6, 1935, ELCRN I.1.27, 28-35, 33.

passage from 24 Joshua 15, which reads: “But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living.”¹²⁷

By invoking the polytheistic religion of the ancient Amorites of Mesopotamia, Joshua impressed on the Israelites that they had a choice between purportedly false gods and worshipping the one, true God. Similarly, the authors of *Omahungi* seemed to suggest that the adherents of the *Oruaano* were free to worship whom they pleased, but that the leader they claimed to venerate had chosen the Christian God and remained in the mission church his whole life. They thus emphasized the long-standing relationship between the Herero and the Lutheran faith. Herero and German mission leaders denied that the *Oruaano* secession resulted from genuine religious and historical grievances. Instead, they asserted that it constituted a corruption of Christianity for political ends. At the first major mission conference following the break-away in October 1956, missionary Otto Milk claimed that the secession could be traced back to the influence of “political agitators from America,” meaning both the past influence of the UNIA and the AMEC. All missionaries agreed that “the *Oruaano* cannot not be treated by us as a real religious movement for self-determination.”¹²⁸

The majority of Herero pastors and evangelists shared this view. At the meeting on August 22, 1955, Pastors Andreas Kukuri and Josua Tjiurutue rejected the calls of community leaders to abandon the mission.¹²⁹ At the following northern synod of the

¹²⁷ Jos. 24:15.

¹²⁸ Minutes of the Conference of Members of the Rhenish Mission in South West Africa, October 1-5, 1956, ELCRN I.1.34, 10-26, 14.

¹²⁹ Milk, “Lage der Missionsgemeinden,” 56-7.

mission in July 1956, African pastors declared the *Oruaano* illegitimate and refused to deal with it.¹³⁰ Ismael Mutange from Omaruru reflected the prevailing consensus when he said: “I am thankful for our church. The Lord is gracious to us non-whites. We have peace with our white teachers. ... We are not yet competent enough to educate our leaders [ourselves]. I am grateful that the white missionaries are gracious with us.”¹³¹ Indeed, the Herero of Omaruru declared their loyalty to the mission. Recalling that his predecessors and ancestors had received the word of God from German missionaries, Headman Gottlieb Kapia declared: “I am a child of Zeraua, Manasse Tjiseseta and Kapia [his father]. My people will not separate themselves from the whites in church service.”¹³²

However, some Herero clergy acknowledged that the war of 1904-1908 and a desire for self-determination played a role in the formation of the *Oruuano*. In 1961, Pastor Gabriel Tjombe held a presentation on the “false prophets” that had allegedly led Herero Christians astray. In the following debate, Pastor Aron Hipondoka observed that “Petrus Tjombo, a Herero from the Kaokoveld does his work in Epukiro Reserve. He says that Jes. [Is.] 5,8 was said particularly about the Germans. The German missionaries told [other colonizers] that the land is rich and then others came too.”¹³³ Although prophets such as Tjombo did not play an official role in the *Oruuano*, they did exert a strong attraction among believers in the wake of the secession.¹³⁴ The passage from Isaiah recited by Tjombo

¹³⁰ Notule van die Noord-Sinode van die Rynse Sending Kerk in SWA: Karibib, 3-5 Julie, 1956, ELCRN I.1.35, 1-11, 3-4.

¹³¹ Notule van die Noord-Sinode van die Rynse Sending Kerk in SWA: Karibib, 3-5 Julie, 1956, ELCRN I.1.35, 4.

¹³² R. Schankweiler, Minutes of the extraordinary session with Herero headmen and a church elder of the Herero congregation Omaruru on August 25, 1955, Archives and Museum Foundation of the United Evangelical Mission, Wuppertal (VEM), RMG 2.642, 25-26, 25.

¹³³ Notule Konferensie van blanke en nie-blanke leraars van die Evangeliese Lutherse Kerk in SWA gehou in Karibib vanag 9 tot 11 November 1961, ELCRN XIX.3, 1-16, 11.

¹³⁴ Sundermeier, *Gemeinschaft*, 121-124.

can easily serve as a metaphor for the division of Herero land after the genocide, and the cementation of this status quo under South African rule:

Woe to you who add house to house
And join field to field
Till no space is left
And you live alone in the land.¹³⁵

Prophets such as Tjombo drew on the language of the Old Testament to remind the Herero that colonizers had deprived them not only of their economic livelihood, but also robbed them of a central aspect of their identity.

Although prophets associated with the *Oruuaano* spoke a Christian language, African pastors of the mission denied that theirs was a genuine theological movement. In his analysis of the *Oruaano*, Pastor Ehrenfried Kandovazu noted that the church's founding "was not due to theological teaching, but ... from questioning the church and also the desire for a steadfast nation."¹³⁶ In his view, the mass conversions after the war of 1904-1908 never amounted to genuine Christianization of his people:

After having been beaten, most of the Ovaherero converted to Christianity, but deep down they were not Christians. *Converting to Christianity was forced onto the Ovaherero as they were imprisoned in concentration camps*, and later taken as *slaves* to urban areas where they had nothing of their own, and no place to practice their traditional belief. The missionaries worked amongst these slaves, and it *seemed* that most of them had converted to Christianity.¹³⁷

Kandovazu's use of one of the terms for "slaves" or "captives" (*ovahuurua*) and the reference to Herero's suffering "in camps in slavery" (*motumbo mouhuura*) in the Otjiherero version of his book echoed earlier analogies between Herero and African enslaved peoples in the Caribbean, supporters of UNIA, and the language of the Windhoek

¹³⁵ Is. 5:8.

¹³⁶ Ehrenfried Kandovazu, *The Origin and History of the Oruaano Church in Namibia*, transl. by Johanna Kahatjipara (Windhoek, Göttingen: Klaus Hess Publishers, 2009), 13.

¹³⁷ Kandovazu, *Oruaano Church*, 24. Author's emphasis.

prophecies.¹³⁸ Johanna Kahatjipara's translation of *motumbo mouhuura* as "in concentration camps" in the book's recent English version correctly incorporates the technical German term but neglects this vernacular genealogy.

An analysis of the deeper theological and social aspects of the Herero secession is beyond the scope of this article. However, it has demonstrated that both supporters and opponents of the *Oruuno* mobilized prophetic memories about the colonial past and a potentially decolonized future while re-defining vernacular discourses about freedom and land through pan-Africanist ideology. Their disagreements were not only disputes about theology but negotiations about what self-determination should look like: complete emancipation from colonial paternalism and the realization of national sentiments (in the Nama AMEC and *Oruuno*), or gradual autonomy within a multi-racial church (in the mission and its successors). While the Nama AMEC and *Oruuno* became important organizing bases for Namibians' political resistance, the 1946 and 1955 schisms also aided the demands by clergy such as Andreas Kukuri for greater equality and autonomy within the church.

Conclusion

This article has examined how genocide not only causes immediate death and suffering but also affects the ways in which survivors and descendants reckon with its violence. It has explored this problem in the case of the Herero and Nama genocide of 1904-1908. I have argued that Namibians commemorated the genocide and envisioned liberation by blending Christian eschatology, vernacular discourses about status and land, as well as globally

¹³⁸ Ehrenfried Kandovazu, *Oruuno rua pita vi?* (Karibib: Rynse Sending-Drukkery, 1968), 15.

circulating pan-Africanist ideas. The resulting prophetic memories—whether uttered by evangelists, printed in the newspaper *Omahungi*, announced by prophets in Windhoek’s churches, or mobilized by Herero pastors who sought to prevent a break-up of their congregations—became central to how the Herero remembered the war. On the one hand, some survivors reckoned that Christianity and its messengers were complicit in the genocide. Many could not forget that evangelists had—inadvertently—aided catastrophe by gathering refugees in the mission assembly camps during the war. When German control collapsed, scores of converts therefore turned away from the mission. In the following decades, Herero evangelists and pastors who had themselves survived the genocide faced resentment and physical threats when trying to spread the gospel. Even the faithful who continued to attend church at times accused the “teachers” of having “killed” their people.

On the other hand, the Herero remembered—and attempted to transcend—the nadir of genocide through the evolving idioms of prophetic memory. Survivors found that the sermons of Gottfried Tjiharine, Samuel Kariko and *Omahungi* spoke to their plight because they incorporated vernacular notions about slavery and land as well as analogies about the fate of enslaved peoples in the Americas. Even those who no longer attended church continued to invoke Christian scripture to defend their actions, and to criticize what they saw as the mission’s complicity in white supremacy. The promises of redemption offered by the UNIA and AMEC therefore fell on fertile ground, offering survivors a related vocabulary to articulate their desire to overcome the order created by the genocide. The tradition of prophetic memory among the Herero and Nama reflects a protracted engagement among Namibians with the colonial past. In the words of the Windhoek

prophets, this engagement could inform anticolonial visions of a future free from white-minority rule. Their words contributed to the secession of the Nama AMEC and *Oruaano*, which in turn inspired a wider rejection of the church's support for apartheid. More research is required to ascertain how African initiated churches and the mission church subsequently interacted and the ways in which different denominations engaged with indigenous religious practices.

At the same time, prophetic memories did not necessarily translate into radical anticolonialism. Most Herero pastors opted to remain in the fold of the mission church because they disagreed with the seeming conflation of Christianity and ancestral religion in the *Oruuano*. Why pastors such as Andreas Kukuri chose to stay with the mission despite their own suffering in the genocide and missionaries' subsequent stalling of racial equality and a reckoning with the past is difficult to answer. However, Herero pastors' commitment to the church and their congregations as well as their theological reservations against the *Oruuano*—even if these seem exaggerated in retrospect—stand as a testament to the self-determination of their faith. In the half century after the first genocide of the twentieth century, its survivors and their descendants recalled, debated, and contested its lasting impact.