
This book by Erichsen with his team of researchers is firmly rooted in Namibia’s intense oral history tradition. One of the most prominent works to appear after the country’s political independence, this publication is one of many projects that focus on collecting, preserving, analyzing and incorporating Namibia’s oral history into public and scholarly discourse. By interviewing members of the Damara, Nama, San, Baster and Herero populations, “What the Elders Used to Say” provides the general public and academics with previously unheard accounts of indigenous life during German colonial rule in Namibia. Erichsen’s work follows in the wake of several recent studies on the colonial war of 1904-1908; both that war and the broader colonial era are examined through the prism of primary oral evidence and tradition. As it stands, the work provides a wealth of information about oral histories and further illuminates how Namibians interpret this period.

The book’s methodology is highly structured and linear in its approach to five of Namibia’s ethnic groups (Damara, San, Baster, Nama and Herero). These parallel ethnic case studies provide an overview of oral accounts (provided by men and women across all generations, where available) of the war and look at how each group discusses reparations and reconciliation today. In the cases of the Nama and the Herero, the study also addresses regional differences in attitudes to the war and reparations; the Nama study deals with groups living in and around Bethanie, Gibeon, and Warmbad while the Herero study is divided between East (Mbanderu), Central and West.

The Nama and Herero populations have historically been the most closely associated with the war and subsequent reparations and reconciliation movements, so the fact that the lion’s share of the book is devoted to them is no surprise. However, there are also accounts of the war previously unknown to the wider Namibian public or academic world. In the case of the Western Herero, much of the material provided is by or about women. For example the Kariko sisters (Adelaide Puriza and Sarafia Kamuhake, both over 80 years old) provide more information on the life of Daniel Kariko, one of the first Herero chiefs to join Maherero’s forces against the Germans, in particular on his fate after the war. In their story, they add to the narrative provided by Kariko himself in the 1918 Blue Book, detailing his defeat and escape to Northern Namibia where he remained in exile until end of the war (56-57).

Herero heroines of the time also feature in these interviews. A woman by the name of Ngatitwe, also known as “Rupertine,” was well educated and worked for the Rhenish mission in Omaruru before the war. After 1904, she was captured by the Germans and sent to the Windhoek concentration camp where she was recognized by the Rhenish missionary Dannert and returned to Omaruru. Upon her release, Rupertine campaigned against the lynching of Herero people by Germans at the Omaruru concentration camp; on occasion she intervened directly, removing nooses from victims’ necks herself. Said one interviewee: “After Rupertine’s intervention, we never heard of people being hanged again.” (59)

Erichsen concludes this section by emphasizing the importance of oral history, writing: “What is clear… is that a more thorough research of the oral record will invariably bring out further examples of female leaders and heroines of Rupertine’s caliber.” (59)

Similar to the Herero examples, the women in the Nama case study reveal the most interesting and historically original material from the 1904-1908 war. In this case, the Basson sisters of Warmbad recount the origins of conflict as the “war of the goat,” a story that explains how the hostilities came about when a couple of young Nama men traded their goat with a chief near Warmbad instead of selling it to a German shopkeeper. The account is reproduced at length in the book and adds, as Erichsen describes, “totally new information that stood in complete contrast to the existing historiography.” (22) Adding depth and further credibility to this account, a similar story is told by another Warmbad resident, Rosina Rooi. However, the young Nama men in the previous story are replaced by Herero men heading to the Okiep mines in South Africa. Such stories not only contrast starkly with the existing historiography informed by German archival sources, they also offer alternative, feasible and culturally-informed origins to the war.

Other ethnic groups have been excluded from the events of this period in Namibian history. However, their collective views are perhaps the most interesting and provocative in understanding the German period in a wider and more complex framework. The Basters and Damara, for example, have often been pigeon-holed as German collaborators by other Namibians. As Erichsen notes, this can be misleading as various factions of Herero and Nama peoples also fought alongside Germans against indigenous rivals during the war of 1904-1908. Moreover, he reminds us that Herero and Nama “had defined ethnic identities and a direct sense of purpose in the fighting” as opposed to the Damara who were “caught up in the wars, either willingly or unwillingly.” (17)

This assertion seems to be born out by some of the collected oral evidence. Many Damara interviewees confirm that Germans recruited their ancestors; and their ancestors, in turn, cooperated with the Germans. However, Damara participation is put into context by some of those interviewed; said one: “if you were with the Germans, you had no choice but to fight against your fellow blacks.” “In other words,” suggests Erichsen, “it was a matter of survival.”
The Damara’s intimate knowledge of the landscape of northwestern Namibia also cut both ways, helping them to locate watering holes for the Germans but also allowing many to avoid serving the German military.

The few interviews gathered among the Baster population show a different view of the period, with much emphasis on the end of German rule in 1915. The theme of non-cooperation with the colonial authorities and alliance with the neighboring Nama community is stressed in the final days of German rule. En route to Germany’s defeat in World War I, Baster oral accounts suggest a reduction of support for Namibia’s original colonizers. One of the more revealing interviews recalls how Basters failed to carry out German orders to occupy and guard certain POW camps. Other accounts, such as those of Basters and Nama fighting and dying together, stress that Basters were beginning to rethink their own role under German command. (42-43)

While oral history during the German period is Erichsen’s main focus, the reparations question is addressed in all sections. Again, Nama and Herero have strong opinions on the subject; most interviewed thought that reparations should be allocated to the victims of German atrocities. But several acknowledged that all those affected should be eligible for compensation; one informant used the metaphor of a veld fire, stating: “It takes with it many things. And if you are accidentally affected you are entitled to compensation even if you were not the main target.” (59) Unsurprisingly, all groups interviewed favored varying levels of reparations from Germany. Nevertheless, it is notable that the vast majority favored not monetary reparations but reparations that facilitate “basic human rights,” including land, livestock, basic amenities (electricity and sanitation), education, employment opportunities and heritage protection. Considering the stigma attached to monetary reparations in today’s world, such widespread support for “basic human rights” reparations may allow progress in negotiations between Namibia and Germany.

Erichsen’s work rides on the coat-tails of many recent publications on the German colonial period in Namibia. Nevertheless, this book is an important landmark; it demonstrates the critical need for and use of oral sources to understand this period and can be used in a number of ways. While somewhat brief for those acquainted with this era, it provides a useful introduction to the longer versions of these interviews now held in the Namibian National Archives, which will undoubtedly lure many of us back to those archives. However, it is Erichsen’s discussion and use of oral content that may be the most valuable to instructors looking for an accessible tool to introduce oral methodologies to their students. In this respect, “What the Elders Used to Say” is unprecedented. Unlike many oral history publications from Africa, Erichsen’s book is slim

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(under 80 pages), well organized, lucidly written and takes a defined case study to look at the possibilities and pitfalls of oral history. Complete with Larissa Forster’s very critical (but constructive) chapter explaining oral history methodologies in Namibia, this book provides a viable option in a graduate or post-graduate methods course. No matter how you decide to use it, Erichsen has provided an excellent publication for a wide array of potential users.

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