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## A disaster for Namibian Studies

Chris Saunders\*

Namibian studies suffered a severe blow on Sunday 18 April 2021 when the African Studies Library (ASL) at the University of Cape Town (UCT), with a book stock of over 70,000 books and over 3,500 films and videos, was consumed by fire. It is probably true to say that outside Namibia itself, the ASL contained the largest and finest collection of material on Namibia anywhere on the African continent. This came about partly because UCT recognised that Namibia had been a South African colony for 75 years and that the struggle for Namibian independence had been an integral and very important part of recent South African history. As a staff member with an interest in Namibian as well as South African history, I worked with a succession of supportive librarians from the mid 1970s to acquire as much original and secondary material on Namibia as possible. Among the books and theses destroyed are UCT's only copies of numerous memoirs by Namibians, works on Namibian languages, and, say, such key texts as the late Mburumba Kerina's *Namibia the Making of a Nation* (1981) and Allard Lowenstein's *Brutal Mandate* (1962) are now among the thousands of books listed in UCT's online library catalogue as 'lost in the fire'.

The ASL housed primary material on the early history of Ovamboland and a large amount of original video and photographic material, such as the films of the Himba made by Craig Mathew and his archival footage of protests at SWAPO rallies against South African rule. A guide prepared over fifteen years ago under my guidance by Sarah (Sadie) Wilcox on resources on SWAPO in the Western Cape is revealing of how much there was on that organisation in the collection, including, for example, extensive runs of such journals as *The Combatant* and *SWAPO News*.<sup>1</sup> The ASL also contained much of relevance to the Namibian war of independence in its holdings on Angola, for rare material on Angola in Portuguese and other languages had been collected in Lisbon and elsewhere by Dr Colin Darch, a Portuguese-speaking former member of staff. It is feared that much of the large amount of grey (relatively ephemeral) material on Namibia that was sent to UCT by Richard Moorsom after he settled in New Zealand has also been lost.

As I write in early June, attempts are ongoing to salvage material damaged by fire and water. There is some hope that such major archival collections as those of Jack and Ray Simons, the Black Sash, Neville Alexander, and the National Union of South African

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Sadie Wilcox, *The South West Africa People's Organisation, 1961-1991. A Guide to Archival Resources and Special Collections in the Western Cape*, South Africa, 2004, available at: [http://webcms.uct.ac.za/sites/default/files/image\\_tool/images/25/SWAP0%20Guide.pdf](http://webcms.uct.ac.za/sites/default/files/image_tool/images/25/SWAP0%20Guide.pdf)

Studies, to name but a few, which contained much material on Namibia, may have survived, at least in part. But the loss to Namibian studies of this library will be felt for a long time to come, even the full extent of the disaster will for a while longer remain unclear.

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