



When European ethnologists deny the intimate relationship of Ethnology/Anthropology and colonialism or assert that they tried to restrain colonialism or that their role was insignificant, one has ample evidence to doubt the veracity of such assertions. The evidence of the mutual benefit for both is too obvious for anyone to seriously doubt that the ethnologist profited immensely from the colonial situation. Where else could they have the abundance of skeletons and bones they gathered if not in the colonial situation? Colonialism made several wars and destructions possible and in this process, as in the classic case of the massacre of the Hereros, skulls, bones and other parts of the human body became easily available.

The German ethnologist Felix von Luschan who was director of the Ethnology Museum, Berlin, was known to be obsessed with collecting human skulls and skeletons. He drew up detailed guidelines for travellers to German colonies, instructing them, inter alia, on how to pack skulls, skeletons and human brains for transportation from colonies such as German South-West Africa (Namibia). He added that there were places where for a piece of soap one could get a skeleton! (1)

The same passion for measuring skulls, heads and other parts of the body that made Luschan welcome the opportunity of measuring prisoners of war in German camps, must have made him also enthusiastic about the opportunity offered by the Herero Genocide.

Conflicts between the Hereros and German colonial settlers had been brewing over a long period owing to the seizure of their lands by the German colonial administration and the German settlers. The conflict erupted openly on 11 January 1904 when, according to the standard version of events, the Hereros attacked and killed some 120 German settlers. Since the local German army was unable to contain the Hereros, Germany sent General Lothar von Trotha whose declared aim was to exterminate the Hereros. With his policy of war of extermination, "*Vernichtungskrieg*", Trotha drove the Hereros into the desert area, ordering his men to shoot every Herero man, woman or child not fleeing in the direction of the desert. No prisoners were to be taken. Once the Hereros were in the desert, they were kept away from water sources and some sources were poisoned. When the state of war ended in 1907, the Hereros had been reduced from a population of 80,000 to less than 20,000. The Namas who had also revolted a year after the Hereros were also treated in a similar fashion. Those Hereros who survived the war were captured and put into concentration camps and made to do forced labour.

Just a year after the beginning of the war of extermination, Luschan asked Lieutenant Ralf Zürn, the district chief of Okahandja, South-West Africa, notorious for racism and whose conduct led to the first shots in the war.: "*If you are aware of any possible way in which we might acquire a larger number of Herero skulls...*" (2) This request came after Zürn had given Luschan already a Herero skull. Apparently that was not enough for the scientist who wrote:

*"The skull you gave us corresponds so little to the picture of the Herero skull type that we have thus far been able to make from insufficient and inferior material that it would be desirable to secure as soon as possible a larger collection of Herero skulls for scientific investigation."* (3)

The lieutenant responded that this would be possible "*since in the concentration camps taking and preserving the skulls of Herero prisoners of war will be more readily possible than in the country, where there is always a danger of offending the ritual feelings of the natives*" (4). It could well be that the bones and skulls shown in the post card above landed in the Ethnology Museum and then to Natural Science Museum. The Ethnology Museum had a priority in all ethnographical materials that came from the German colonies. A law passed in 1888, Federal Council Decree "*Bundesratsbeschluss*" required that all ethnographic materials collected in the German colonies by government officials or

expeditions supported by the government funds be sent first to the Ethnology museum and doubles were to be sent to other museums.

We have no way of knowing for sure whose bones these are but since the Germans always kept good records, under all circumstance, it must be possible to determine where specific skeletons, skulls and bones came from. But according to Zimmermann; *“Today, the physical anthropology of the Berlin Anthropological Society can be found in the attic and cellar of the Berlin Museum of Natural History. The collection consists of over six thousand skulls as well as dried skin, hair, plaster casts of faces, heads, hands, and feet, postcranial skeletons, and perhaps even parts that have remained packed in boxes since the Second World War. The cooperation between the Berlin anthropologists and the German colonial state transformed administrators and soldiers into anthropological collectors and colonial raids and massacres into scientific expedition.”* (5)

With a little bit of goodwill and an appreciation of the need for most Africans to perform the appropriate traditional funeral rites, and here we are talking to ethnologists, the German Ethnology museums and the Natural History museums could assist the Hereros and other African peoples to identify and bury their dead, even if only symbolically. Until and unless this is done, the spirits of the dead and the living will remain unsettled.

The Germans have refused to pay any compensation to the Hereros for their land that was expropriated and exploited by German colonists and for the massacre they suffered; the atrocities that were committed on their bodies, the women who were used as sex slaves for German soldiers, the experiments which German doctors conducted on their bodies and all the unmentionable treatment meted out to an African people by an increasingly racist colonial regime that practised what was to become later on examples for the Nazis to follow, do not seem to move the present-day German government and people. But should the bones and skulls of the victims of German colonialist aggression still remain in German possession?

It is really astonishing that the German government which has compensated the Jews for their losses under the Nazi regime is unwilling to adopt a similar policy towards the Hereros who also were victims of genocide under the colonial regime. The German Minister for Development Cooperation, Heidemarie Wiczorek-Zeul made an apology in fairly general terms in 2004 on visit to Namibia after the State President of Germany, Herzog had refused in 1998 to make any formal apology, even though he expressed his regrets at the “massacre” of the Hereros. Wiczorek-Zeul recognized the political, moral and ethical responsibility of the Germans for the war of extermination instituted by Lothar von Trotha against the Hereros and Namas but stopped short of accepting legal responsibility of the consequences of that war. (6) The Germans are willing to say “sorry” but are not willing to make a formal apology or to engage in any discussions on compensation. The Hereros have therefore started legal proceedings in September 2001 in the United States to seek compensation of \$2 billion from the German government for atrocities committed under colonial rule; they are also demanding \$2 billion in damages from several German companies, including Deutsche Bank, mining company Terex Corporation, formerly Orenstein-Koppel Co., and the shipping company Deutsche Afrika Linie, formerly Woermann Linie, all of them were alleged to have profited from German colonial occupation of Namibia.

It is remarkable how fast Europeans have been in massacring Africans but when it comes to making apologies, they are very slow, their lips seem sealed; they have a deep-seated aversion to admitting to Africans that they have done something wrong. Unwillingness or inability to make an open and straightforward formal apology is surely an indication that there is no agreement on the wrongful and unlawful nature of past events. The alleged perpetrator does not fully recognize the faulty conduct that the victim is complaining about. He cannot admit that he had made a

mistake in the past without losing face. This reluctance does not seem to apply when they have to apologise to Jews. The same State President who refuses to apologise to the Hereros had no such problems in apologizing to Jews. Apart from skin-colour, where is the major difference between the Herero Genocide and the Nazi Genocide against Jews? Would the Germans have dared to refuse to apologise to the Jews? Would they have ever thought of sending a Minister for Development Co-operation, instead of a Head of State or Head of Government to make an apology or express regret? It seems the disrespect towards Africans and disregard for their rights is still continuing without shame.

It has been said that the Germans are worried that other groups such as the Namas may come up with further demands if the Hereros were compensated. I do not believe that the Germans are worried about the amounts involved, taking into account the destruction they caused, the losses sustained by the Hereros, and the profits reaped by the Germans. The fact is, no European nation has so far openly and unequivocally apologised to an African people for slavery, colonization, genocide or any other abominable atrocity; it is the continuation of committing indescribable crimes with impunity.

The Germans argue that they give enough aid to Namibia and also that compensation to the Hereros will be unfair to the other ethnic groups. With all due respect, all the other ethnic groups that have a valid claim to compensation, should be compensated. Some persons may be tempted to buy this German argument and hence be reluctant to support the Hereros's claims. It seems to me however that aid or assistance to Namibia is one matter. Compensation for damages suffered in the first genocide of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century is surely an entirely different matter and should not be covered, obscured or drowned in any discussions on assistance to the independent State. We should not allow genocide to be covered by aid or other forms of economic cooperation. The Herero Genocide, preceded by long series of massacres, dispossessions and expropriations of land, blatant racism by the German colonialists should not be obscured or down played by any other procedures. The historical memory should not be blurred or cluttered by other matters. Nobody, quite correctly, made such a proposal in the case of Jews and Israel. Why is such a proposal being mentioned at all in the case of the Hereros?

Whilst the German Government seems to have difficulties in making an open sincere and unambiguous apology to the Hereros and Namas, the family of General von Trotha, the man largely responsible for executing the policy of extermination, did not seem to have too much problem in doing the right thing. A delegation of the descendants of General von Trotha went to Omaruru on 7 October 2007 and apologised to the Herero people for their ancestor atrocities. They expressed deep shame over von Trotha's action. The head of the delegation, patriarch Wolf-Thilo von Trotha declared:

*"We, the von Trotha family, are deeply ashamed of the terrible events that took place 100 years ago. Human rights were grossly abused that time. We say sorry, since we bear the name of General Lothar von Trotha. We however do not only want to look back, but also look to the future."* (7)

The Hereros heard the apology but the Herero Supreme Chief, Alfons Maharero, grandson of Samuel Maharero, leader of the 1904 uprising reiterated their demand for dialogue with the German government: *"We expected the visiting von Trotha family to demonstrate their moral sympathies and political solidarity with us. We demand a dialogue with the present German government to obtain restorative justice."*(8)

It will be a disservice to the African peoples and an injury to our forefathers and mothers who died under colonial rule and, in this specific case, the Namibians who suffered under German imperialist rule and genocide if any time they present a claim for compensation they are rebutted

with arguments based on financial and other aid to the independent State. The two issues are not related and should not be confused. It could be very instructive to study the means and methods used by the German government to induce the Namibian authorities to consider a proposition which, on the face of it, appears unthinkable and unacceptable.

Attempts to subsume the rights and claims of traditional nations and groups under the rights and claims of the national State should be resisted. Its long-term effects will be disastrous for the future claims of many other traditional nations in Africa. They will be told that their claims are represented by the national State and their claims will be covered through bilateral arrangements of development cooperation. They will soon hear from the States that used as pretext for massacres alleged non-observance of treaty obligations that they have no status under International Law. They had status to acquire obligations but none to present claims! Many of the injustices under slavery and colonialism would thus be avoided at no costs to Western Governments since most of the atrocities were committed before the establishment of the present independent States; during the relevant periods there were only traditional national States of the Hereros, Namas, Asantes, Gas, Hausas, Yorubas, Zulus etc. in Africa.

It is easy to imagine the anguish and frustrations of many Africans who do not know where the remains of their ancestors are. How can they ever give them a proper burial in accordance with African customs? The spirits of these ancestors will be roaming about, unhappy and constitute spiritual problems for those who agonize that they have failed to give their ancestors proper burials. Many will feel they have not done their customary duties.

**How long must their unhappy souls  
wander through the vast expanse of the Namib?  
Should they sojourn at Okahanja or should they  
continue to Luderitz or Swakopmund?  
A resting place they must have  
to enjoy eternal peace.**

Kwame Opoku.  
10 January 2008.

## NOTES

1) *Anleitung zu wissenschaftlichen Beobachtungen auf dem Gebiet der Anthropologie, Ethnographie und Urgeschichte*, 1914, (VDM Verlag, Saarbrücken 2007, p.5

2) Andrew Zimmermann, *Anthropology and Antihumanism in Imperial Germany*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2001, p.245.

3) Ibid. p. 244

4) Ibid. p.245.

5) Ibid. p.167.

6) “German minister says sorry for genocide in Namibia”

[www.guardian.co.uk/germany/article/0,2763,1283864,00.html](http://www.guardian.co.uk/germany/article/0,2763,1283864,00.html)

[RaceandHistory.com](http://RaceandHistory.com) - “The tribe Germany wants to forget“

[www.raceandhistory.com/Science/germanynamibia.htm](http://www.raceandhistory.com/Science/germanynamibia.htm)

7) “[German family apologises to Namibia tribe for ancestor |](#)” [www.haaba.com/news-story/german-family-apologises-namibia-tribe-ancestor](http://www.haaba.com/news-story/german-family-apologises-namibia-tribe-ancestor) -

8) Ibid.

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