

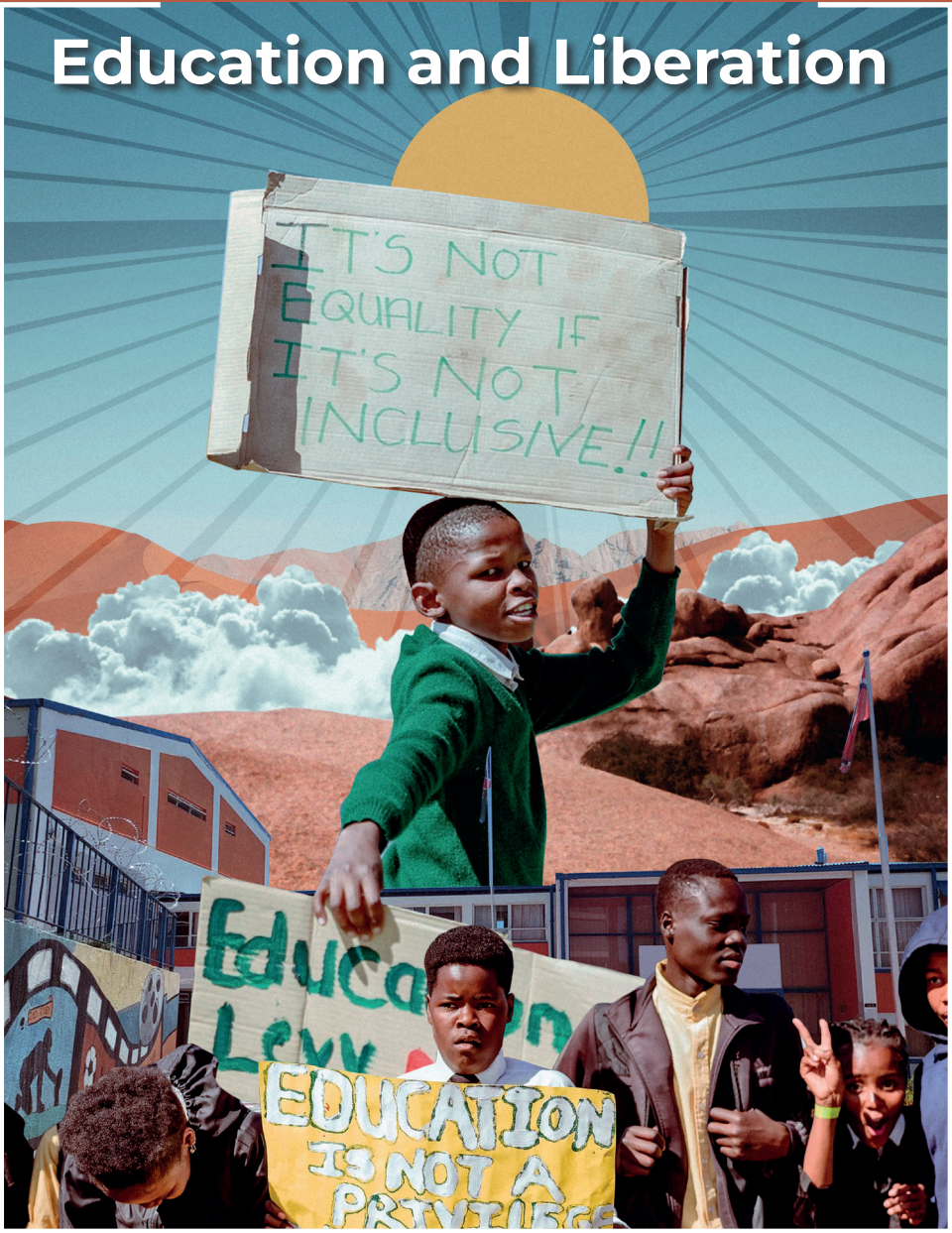
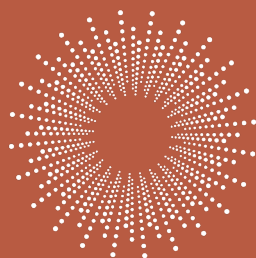


Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	4
Acronyms and Initialisms	5
Editorial: Education and Liberation	7
The Quest for Education for Liberation: The Case of the Namibia National Students Organisation	20
<i>Ndumba J. Kamwanyah</i>	
A Case Study of Radical Pedagogy in Practice: The South African Committee for Higher Education (SACHED) and Regional Liberation Networks (1959–1994)	26
<i>Tammy-Lee Lakay</i>	
Challenges that Outsmart the Transformation Agenda: An Analysis of Why Certain Challenges Persist in the Namibian Education System Despite Several Reforms.....	43
<i>John Nyambe, Marius Kudumo, & Ellison Tjirera</i>	
Social Justice and Education in Namibia: From Theory to Practice	69
<i>Lucy Edwards-Jauch</i>	
Education for All? Unpacking Social Justice and Grassroots Policy Implementation: A Case Study of the Otjituuo Settlement	97
<i>Tjipura Tjipura</i>	
Beyond Colonialities: Leveraging Ubuntu for Transformative Higher Education in Namibia.....	105
<i>Bruno Venditto & Adalbertus Kamanzi</i>	
Epistemic Destruction and Indigenous Knowledge Loss During the OvaHerero/Nama Genocide (1904–1908): A Case study of OvaHerero Epistemicide	137
<i>Kahuhu Alphons Koruhama & Joyce Muzengua</i>	

Epistemological Access at the Institutions of Teacher Education.....	148
<i>Fares Amweenye, Sakaria M. Iipinga & Elizabeth Ngololo</i>	
The Relevance of Theological Education in Contemporary Namibia: A Contextual Analysis of the United Lutheran Theological Seminary–Paulinum..	173
<i>Emma N. Nangolo</i>	
Critical Pedagogies in Anti-Colonial Cultural Work: Oudano as Praxis.....	198
<i>Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja</i>	
Decolonising Early Childhood Development in Informal Settlements: A Case Study of New Elementary Namibia and the Implementation of the Sixth National Development Plan	218
<i>Kevin Wessels</i>	
A Case Study of Parenting a Neurodivergent Child Juxtaposed against the Provisions of the Sector Policy on Inclusive Education in Namibia.....	229
<i>Immaculate Mogotsi & Christel Menette</i>	
Case Study: Bridging the Gender Gap in Education in Zambezi Region, Namibia.....	256
<i>Phiona Nandu</i>	
Political Worker Education in Namibia: The Case of the Labour Diploma Course.....	262
<i>Herbert Jauch</i>	
Dissecting the Subsidised Funding Model in Namibia 2026: Free Registration and the Question of Sustainable Access to Higher Education	269
<i>Benhard Kavau</i>	
Contributing towards Social Justice in Namibia? The Activist School of the Economic and Social Justice Trust.....	274
<i>Herbert Jauch & Nafimane Hamukoshi</i>	
Review of the Namibia State of Skills Demand and Supply Report.....	281
<i>Christophina Ndahambelela Ainima</i>	

Epistemic Destruction and Indigenous Knowledge Loss During the OvaHerero/Nama Genocide (1904–1908): A Case study of OvaHerero Epistemicide

Kahuhu Alphons Koruhama & Joyce Muzengua

Introduction

Epistemicide and cultural erasure remain under-researched and unacknowledged. There is a lack of scholarship on the topic, and it remains a difficult yet necessary task to reconstruct the past using multiple research methods, particularly in the absence of comprehensive written records that reflect the views of indigenous populations. Genocide

encompasses more than just physical harm and loss of land, animals, and lives: it includes deep intellectual destruction, which endangers the ongoing transmission of culture and identity across generations. The OvaHerero indigenous knowledge system has been disrupted and altered through colonialism and genocide; OvaHerero social organisation, pastoral practices, spiritual systems,



One of the authors (Koruhama) during field work. Source: Kahuhu Alphons Koruhama

and ecological knowledge have all been eroded by colonial violence.

This article examines how indigenous knowledge systems and epistemologies were systematically destroyed in present-day Namibia following the OvaHerero genocide of 1904–1908, and explores both the breaks in cultural heritage caused by colonial erasure, and the enduring continuities that have defied it.

The article further explores dance and traditional cultural practices that may reclaim diminished knowledge systems. Through rhythm, movement, song, individual meetings and social gatherings, the OvaHerero dual-lineage system and traditional dances and cultural practices have shown how knowledge is embodied and lived. Cultural performances and traditional dances, such as *omuhiva*, *outjina*, and *ondjongo*, serve as sources of learning, resilience, and social cohesion.

The research upon which this case study is based employed qualitative oral histories, archival records, and existing scholarly works to recall the past. It was further informed by decolonial theory and indigenous ways of knowing.

Background

During the period of German colonial rule, between 1904 and

1908 the OvaHerero experienced the first genocide of the twenty-first century. This involved mass killings, concentration camps, the poisoning of water sources, and the driving of entire groups into the desert. Many studies on the genocide focus on the long-term socioeconomic consequences of forced labour, forced removal, forced relocations, murder, and land confiscation that the German government inflicted on the OvaHerero communities (Sarkin, 2008). Despite this, there is a lack of documentation on the disruption or forced relocation of indigenous knowledge systems, social structures, cultural memory, and land-based lifestyles.

Under the leadership of Samuel Maharero, the OvaHerero communities of German South-West Africa rebelled against the colonial German government in early 1904 (OvaHerero community recollection, personal communication, 2025). As recounted by OvaHerero community members (personal communication, 2025), the German government did not take this resistance lightly, as it resulted in OvaHerero victories at Okandjira and Oviuombo. In response, the German commander, Lothar von Trotha, launched a vicious campaign that resulted in the infamous extermination order of October 2, 1904, which claimed the lives of 80 percent of the OvaHerero. After being

driven into the Omaheke desert (the eastern extension of the Kalahari desert), thousands of OvaHerero died of starvation and thirst; survivors were imprisoned in concentration camps and forced to work (European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights [ECCHR], 2024). The extermination order also included systematic confiscation of livestock and ancestral lands, which led to the eradication of the indigenous knowledge system. According to the ECCHR (2024) report, the economic basis and cultural identity of the OvaHerero people have been destroyed by the land and livestock seizures. The German colonial government declared the land left over from the genocide as communal land and gave it to settlers, thus breaking the traditional ownership of the land.

According to triangulation of archival sources, oral histories, and ethnographic fieldwork from the OvaHerero communities in Namibia, Botswana, and Angola (OvaHerero community members, personal communication, 2025; Koruhama & Virere, 2024; Lynn, 2022), the intergenerational transmission of environmental knowledge, spiritual practices, language, and oral traditions was impaired by the genocide targeting mainly adult males, females, elderly people, and community leaders. These results support the idea that epistemic destruction often takes place in the

shadows of material dispossession and confirm Battiste's (2013) research on the loss of indigenous language and epistemology in colonial regimes.

According to field evidence, the OvaHerero language, songs, dances, and rituals have been eroded by colonial epistemic imposition and displacement. On the other hand, oral traditions, such as praise poetry, songs, and the *omuhiva* dance have served as living archives, preserving political consciousness and historical memory. *Omambo yeri koUno inga ngatwara omuatje waKamuatjimbonde*, for example, refers to the appeal sent



Field interview.

Source: Kahuhu Alphons Koruhama

to the United Nations by Chief Hosea Katjikururume Kutako in 1942.

By focusing on pastoralist epistemology, ecological knowledge-sharing practices such as *omuhiva*, and performance traditions that pass knowledge down from one generation to the next in Namibia, Botswana, and Angola, this paper fills some of the gaps in OvaHerero genocide studies. While attention has been given to these practices in the literature, there has been insufficient focus on their relationship to mortality rates, land theft, and economic impacts.

Methodology

The qualitative decolonial methodology applied for indigenous epistemology and community-based knowledge production is appropriate for analysing epistemic destruction during the OvaHerero genocide, as it focuses on indigenous knowledge and accounts for the historical power imbalances that shaped colonial knowledge formation. The data for this study were collected from three interlinked sources: (a) archival and documentary analysis of legal and historical records, such as Häussler (2021), the European Centre for Constitutional and Human Rights (2024), and Amnesty International (2025), providing a legal and historical context for indigenous knowledge of material dispossession, violence

and the structures of colonial rule; (b) indigenous media, biocultural knowledge and testimony; and (c) the authors' long-term involvement and relationship with OvaHerero traditional authority communities (Tuhiwai Smith, L. 2012; Weber & Weber, 2020). Their thematic and interpretative analysis was informed by the analyses of Lynn (2022) and Morgan (2010) of how the genocide has disrupted ecological knowledge, spiritual epistemology, and the mechanisms of knowledge transfer between generations. These relationships provided context-based understanding with an ethical basis and accountability for the holders of knowledge. This approach respects accepted ethical standards for indigenous and decolonial research, prioritising epistemic equity, reciprocity, and responsible use of cultural knowledge; rejects extractive research practices; respects indigenous sovereignty; and gives priority to indigenous voices (Tuck & Yang, 2012; Ndlovu & Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2024). Cultural expressions and oral histories are seen as common products rather than as appropriated data.

Results

Traditional dance and songs as epistemic resilience

Although almost 80 percent of the OvaHerero people were exterminated in the genocide, their cultural practices, such as social meetings, traditional

dances and their dual patrilineal and matrilineal systems, have left a legacy of resilience and memory (ECCHR, 2024; OvaHerero community members, personal communication, 2025). After genocide and dispossession, the OvaHerero people preserved their traditional knowledge in various epistemically resilient ways:

Memory encoding: The traditional OvaHerero dances, including *omuhiva*, *outjina* and *ondjongo*, the cultural tributes, and *ombimbi* (a traditional chant) are a means of conveying knowledge and a historical memory of migration, conflict, dispossession, and resistance. Even where there are few written records, the younger generations are using these platforms to learn about the past (OvaHerero community members, personal communication, 2025).

Knowledge transmission: The OvaHerero knowledge transmission was diverse in nature, with attributes of pastoral life being transferred during herding and pattern counting, while social relations, lineage, and moral codes were implicitly taught at fire gatherings at night, and also through the dancesong and traditional praises (OvaHerero community members, personal communication, 2025).

Identity reaffirmation: Oral histories show that the OvaHerero of

the nineteenth century wore similar garments and accessories, which became a fixture of everyday life and their cultural identity before the colonial era, and that today, many OvaHerero identify as OvaHimba, wear traditional animal skins, and use *otjize* (red ochre) and *omumbiri* (Commiphora resin) (OvaHerero community members, personal communication, 2025; Koruhama & Virere, 2024; Lynn, 2022). The OvaHerero soldiers removed clothes and uniforms from German soldiers they had defeated in battles during the German-OvaHerero War (1904–1908) and wore them as a symbol of victory. This enabled them to incorporate elements of the German military uniform into their own clothing (OvaHerero oral histories, field notes, 2025).

This becomes a practice of wearing the German uniform at memorial ceremonies such as *okuyambera* (a traditional commemoration) and other important social events such as weddings and funerals to teach younger generations the historical meaning of the dress, and to foster collective memory, resilience, and identity (OvaHerero oral histories, field notes, 2025; Koruhama & Virere, 2024). These military uniforms were later converted into what is now known as a traditional ceremonial OvaHerero dress. The result is that the seemingly colonial-style uniform is in fact a

symbol of OvaHerero bravery, survival, and resilience: a tangible record of past struggle, and a testament to how the tools of colonial domination can be transformed into timeless symbols of cultural resilience and national identity.

Land and ecology link

For the OvaHerero, the land serves as both a spiritual link with their ancestors and as an economic asset (OvaHerero community members, personal communication, 2025; Koruhama & Virere, 2024; Lynn, 2022). Consequently, their knowledge of ecological husbandry extends beyond grazing to include the protection and ritual maintenance of sacred sites and places. An example of this epistemic knowledge is the ability to predict weather patterns and the future of societies.

Colonial erasure and knowledge disruption: Land expropriation, which entails the loss of spiritual and cultural identity of the OvaHerero, has clearly influenced the colonial project in Namibia (Morgan, 2010). Forced labour quite literally involved the removal and separation of families, the destruction of the two-parent system, cultural assimilation, and institutionalisation. Since cattle are essential for OvaHerero customs and rituals such as marriage, naming of children, and burials, the extermination order and confiscation

of livestock was really a confiscation of rich cultural practices. Thus, indigenous knowledge systems, pastoral lifelines, continuity of social institutions, and the transmission of knowledge between generations were all disrupted by internment and labour camps for survivors. Epistemic violence worked in interconnected ways, as outlined below:

- **Dispossession of land and livestock:** The living context of the OvaHerero people has disappeared, leaving them without land and livestock, and their identity, grazing, mobility, and pastoralist ecological and traditional knowledge have been severely eroded (OvaHerero community members, personal communication, 2025).
- **Disruption of social institutions and eldernetworks:** Mentors and community leaders, including chiefs, elders, lineal priests, and social groups, who passed on knowledge were killed, displaced, or rendered powerless (OvaHerero community members, personal communication, 2025).
- **Forced labour and internment:** Survivors were deprived of the freedom to practice or to impart knowledge because they were prisoners of war, and forced to work or interned in

camps far from their homes and villages (OvaHerero community members, personal communication, 2025).

- **Cultural suppression and linguistic loss:** Some OvaHerero communities (particularly those displaced to parts of Botswana and South Africa) experienced a loss of language fluency, cultural expression, and knowledge transmission during and after the genocide, as evidenced by the oral histories of OvaHerero communities.

According to linguistic scholars who study the threats to language and colonial epistemicide, this distortion is central to the larger project of colonial domination. Loss of language prevents the transmission of cultural memory, environmental knowledge, ritual practices, and cosmology between generations, which are all carried out by native language and performance (Battiste, 2013; Hinton & Hale, 2001). Battiste (2013), for example, argues that colonial education and missionary efforts systematically replaced native languages with colonial ones and social structures that maintain traditional knowledge.

According to Nabokov (2002), native languages serve as both communication tools and repositories of epistemic frameworks, which are

ways of classifying the world and establishing relations between time, place, and community. The OvaHerero interpret the disappearance of Otjiherero songs and ritual dances as signalling the disappearance of multimodal knowledge systems documenting ecological practices, historical memory, and social norms. Anthropological research on displaced pastoralist communities shows that traditional forms of learning, such as group storytelling, ritual reciprocity, and elder-assisted learning, are hampered by forced migration and the fragmentation of social networks.

To place the experience of the OvaHerero refugees in the larger pattern of colonial linguistic disruption and epistemic marginalisation in both the African and indigenous contexts—which has led to the loss of not only linguistic diversity, but also the cultures of knowledge and existence that have sustained these communities for centuries—this study integrates the oral testimonies.

Trauma and epistemic discontinuity: The extent of the trauma caused by rape and murder, and even the skinning of family members' skulls, disrupted social formation, memory, and heritage, resulting in intergenerational harm. An epistemic catastrophe resulted from the aftermath, including the loss of identity, methods of know-

ing, living, sharing knowledge, and remembering. These can be seen in Namibia's divided OvaHerero society today (OvaHerero community members, personal communication, 2025).

Community-based and intergenerational education: The way people live together in OvaHerero culture, along with their educational system that puts the community first and includes experienced older people, wise individuals, talented traditional musicians, singers of celebratory songs, dancers, and farming experts, collectively created a hands-on place for sharing information. This is now facing challenges, however, threatening the link between long-standing educational practices and modern lifestyles (OvaHerero community members, personal communication, 2025).

Restorative epistemic justice: Negotiating reparative justice following genocide should encompass more than just giving back land and money; it should also focus on bringing back the knowledge systems of the original people, which involves returning cultural items, writing down songs and dances, helping community archives, and acknowledging the loss of understanding that occurred (OvaHerero community members, personal communication, 2025; Forensic Architecture, 2025).

Decolonising pedagogies: The Namibian educational system must be inclusive, and introduce the OvaHerero genocide and indigenous knowledge systems in the national curricula (OvaHerero community members, personal communication, 2025). This would challenge the dominance of Eurocentric epistemologies and foreground indigenous worldviews, languages, landrelations, and knowledge practices in the educational systems.

Discussion

The OvaHerero genocide was an attack not only on the knowledge systems, cultural memory, and conceptual frameworks within which communities understood the world and themselves, but also on bodies and possessions. We have shown that genocide reporting cannot be limited to accounts of death, land seizures, and physical violence. Instead, the loss of land, livestock, elders, institutions, and social networks led to permanent disruption of the indigenous system of knowledge and highlighted epistemic violence as a major, but little-known aspect of the genocide.

Colonial violence included methods that, in addition to physical violence, methodically destroyed indigenous epistemologies by devaluing language, disrupting traditional education, and marginalising indigenous modes of

knowledge. Settler colonialism has been shown to disrupt indigenous education and knowledge transfer systems, resulting in the loss of the family ties, cultural teachings, and cosmological understanding that shape people's relationship to their land and to each other.

The idea of epistemic violence can be used to understand how these processes operate. It is believed that dominant structures delegitimise local knowledge as inferior or “uncivilised”, silence indigenous voices, and erase indigenous knowledge systems in favour of colonial epistemologies that are presumed to be superior and universal. This results in a lack of cognitive resources that marginalises indigenous understanding of history, ecology, and society, making it more difficult for communities to express their experiences or reclaim their traditions on their own terms.

The OvaHerero displaced to Botswana, South Africa and elsewhere, unable to speak Otjiherero fluently or perform rituals or traditional dances, are examples of the dismantling of the epistemic structures that had been passed down from generation to generation, not as an integral part of life, but as a place of learning and reaffirmation of ecological knowledge, social commitments, and spiritual values.

Similarly, other research on epistemic marginalisation among other indigenous groups has shown that cultural agency, identity affirmation, and worldviews are lost when colonial systems devalue local languages and epistemology through formal education or social coercion. This reduces the ability to manage local ecosystems sustainably and to preserve the collective memory of past injustices. In this way, the OvaHerero genocide narrative as epistemic erasure highlights the colonial epistemic dominance that still exists in post-independence Namibia, where the preference for Western histories and forms of knowledge is still reflected in official education, memorial services, and national narratives.

An analysis of land loss and physical destruction should not be replaced by the identification of epistemic violence as part of a genocidal process. This perspective is consistent with research on decolonisation and indigenous epistemology, which stresses the need for both epistemic, and material and legal compensation to respect, recognise, and restore indigenous knowledge systems. This article argues that the disruption of the cognitive and cultural frameworks that underpin the ability of a people to know, to be, and to pass on meaning from one generation to the next is a more accurate indicator of genocide than the loss of life or land.

By linking the physical and epistemic aspects of genocide, it offers a new analytical perspective for genocide studies and Namibian history.

Conclusion

The genocide against the OvaHerero must be interpreted both literally and figuratively. This supposes a redefinition of genocide that includes an assault on forms of knowledge, identity, and memory, rather than just on bodies and land. The long-term effects of the genocide go beyond losing people and land, and include the loss of indigenous peoples' understanding of the world, and how they connect with the land. More than just the seizure of land and animals, the extensive slaughter of men, women, and children was also part of a deliberate effort to eliminate indigenous knowledge, including the land-centred, pastoral, family-oriented, environmental, and performance-based wisdom that supported generations of OvaHerero. This has led to a sense of disconnection from that heritage for the OvaHerero in Botswana and South Africa.

The Ovaherero have demonstrated epistemic resilience, gleaned from their sense of pride and continued cultural rituals. However, there is a need to acknowledge the effects of epistemic violence on indigenous knowledge systems. Reparations and restorative justice must include

support for community-managed projects that record and research indigenous knowledge to obtain epistemic justice and to restore lost knowledge to be preserved for future generations. The OvaHerero genocide must be interpreted both literally and figuratively. This suggests that the assault on forms of knowledge, identity, and memory should be part of the definition of genocide, beyond the bodies and land.

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