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“Hide my children” Samuel Maharero’s letter to the Resident Magistrate, 28 September 1904

Matthias Häussler and Andreas Eckl with Jekura Kavari*

Abstract

Having reached the territory of British Bechuanaland after crossing the Omaheke in the wake of the Battle of Hamakari in August 1904, Samuel Maharero, Omuhona wOvaHerero, addressed a letter to the Magistrate, dated 28 September 1904. The letter is published here for the first time in its original OtjiHerero version. A literal translation into English differs considerably from the one made on the spot by British officials. While the contemporary translation has been the only historiographical source so far, a literal and accurate translation into English provides quite a different reading and suggests a new reasoning.

The Herero-German war in central German South-West Africa (SWA), present-day Namibia, began when the OvaHerero launched their first attacks on January 12, 1904. Nama groups were to join the anti-colonial struggle from October 1904 on. The Germans responded harshly, their campaigns of ‘pacification’ taking a huge toll on human life. When hostilities were formally declared over on 31 March 1907, the OvaHerero and at least some of the Nama groups that had challenged German colonial rule found themselves on the verge of extinction. These wars of ‘pacification’ left scars that are still visible today, more than one hundred years after the end of German colonial rule. One of the leading figures of Namibian anti-colonial resistance and indigenous resilience was Samuel Maharero, the Paramount Chief of the OvaHerero.

He was born in 1856, the son of the mighty and wealthy chief Kamaharero, and was raised at the *Augustineum*, a school established by Rhenish missionaries to inculcate European Christian knowledge and values among the offspring of the indigenous political elites. Maharero hence was literate and conversant in different languages. Although his claim to his father’s position in 1890 was for various reasons not unchallenged, his familiarity with Europeans clearly qualified him as successor. One should not forget that foreign relations had been the primary task of the Paramount Chief, and, in the days of the ‘scramble for Africa’, dealings with Europeans made up an important part of these

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relations. However, the Germans made the mistake of underestimating Samuel Maharero who – far from being an irresolute drunkard¹ – was versed in international affairs and knew which strings to pull on the international scene, as we can gather from the newly-translated letter. As the leader of the *Ohorongo* clan, he followed a long tradition of skillful diplomacy – and was to surprise the Germans more than once.²

The initial OvaHerero raids in 1904 cost 123 white lives; in the months to come, the OvaHerero proved tenacious and skillful opponents. Therefore, it is fair to say that “[s]een from the perspective of the Hereros, the March and April battles brought nothing but stunning victories”.³ But despite their remarkable prowess, the OvaHerero did not achieve a *decisive* victory. Their numbers, resources, and morale dwindled, while the capacity of Germans constantly grew. Given this strategic disparity, time was not on the OvaHerero side, and the Battle of Waterberg on 11 August sealed their fate. To be sure, they managed to escape from their encirclement, but they nevertheless suffered a severe defeat and, as a consequence, were not able to offer *organized* resistance anymore. They fled east into the Omaheke, splintering into multiple groups. One of these groups was led by Samuel Maharero.⁴

The German commander, the notorious Lieutenant General Lothar von Trotha, took up the pursuit of the OvaHerero, but his forces were always one step behind, unable to catch up with the OvaHerero and compel them to fight. Trotha did not abandon the pursuit until it literally came to a standstill at the end of September 1904 due to the scarcity of water and provisions. Up to this point, he repeatedly found new reasons to believe that he would catch the fleeing opponent, although the prospects for battle, let alone victory, dimmed day by day. Ever hopeful, he noted on 28 September, i.e. on the very day when Maharero wrote the attached letter: “We’ll scout, and then on 1 Oct. I’ll lead the last push to the east against Samuel.”⁵ As the OvaHerero had splintered into several groups and a total victory over them had thus become impossible, killing or capturing the Paramount Chief would have had *symbolic* importance. But Maharero managed to cross into British territory before this battle could take place. His final escape was, however, momentous. As Trotha realized that he could not achieve victory at this point he turned to different strategy, a strategy that was, as he himself admitted, characterized by “crass terrorism and even [...] cruelty.” He tried “sealing off” the Omaheke, driving the entire Herero nation into an area where it would “no longer be

¹ Up to the present day, the defamation of Samuel Maharero is part of a broader strategy to blame the war and its disastrous genocidal outcomes on the victimized groups and their leaders.

² Cf. Matthias Häussler, “Why OvaHerero accommodated the Germans? On the ‘pacification’ of an acephalous society: Co-operation and violence”, in Wolfram Hartmann, (ed.), *Nuanced Considerations: Recent Voices in Namibian-German Colonial History*, Windhoek, Orumbonde Press, 2019: 41-60.

³ Jon M. Bridgman, *The Revolt of the Hereros*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1981: 105.

⁴ Cf. Jan-Bart Gewald, *Herero Heroes: A Socio-Political History of the Herero of Namibia 1890–1923*, Athens, Ohio University Press, 1999: 175-81.

⁵ Trotha diary, TA 122/17, 28 September 1904.

able to exist” and instead would perish.⁶ Accordingly, he released his infamous proclamation,⁷ ultimately ruling out unconditional surrender, the last remaining exit option that might still have been possible for the Herero. If surrendering had once been exceedingly risky, it now meant certain death, as every Herero person within the borders of the colony was declared an outlaw. By eliminating the last exit option officially, the proclamation ushered in the overtly *exterminatory* phase of the campaign.⁸

When Samuel Maharero reached Onyainyai on the border to British Bechuanaland Protectorate, he addressed a letter to the Resident Magistrate in Tsau, dated 28 September 1904. The letter is published here for the first time in its original OtjiHerero version.⁹ Its content is remarkable in various ways. To begin with, Maharero offers an explanation for the outbreak of the war that is at least surprising. What were – according to present knowledge – the causes for the OvaHerero to challenge German colonial rule? “By 1904 the Hereros had so many reasons for rebelling that it might be more profitable to ask why they had not acted sooner, rather than why they revolted when they did,” as Jon Bridgman states.¹⁰ Bridgman points to the progressive loss of land – a fear exacerbated by the reserve plans that were presented to OvaHerero leaders in late 1903 and the beginning of the construction of the Otavi railroad which was likely to result in a further advance of white settlement. Furthermore, he underscores the importance of the credit ordinance which went into effect on November 1, 1903, designed to discourage abuses of the credit system but which had quite a contrary effect. Bridgman finally mentions the ill-treatment at the hands of Germans – including rape and murder – that the OvaHerero had been subjected to, quoting from a letter that Maharero himself wrote to the German Governor, Theodor Leutwein, after the outbreak of the war.¹¹

Now, in the newly-translated letter, Maharero brings into play another, hitherto hardly considered reason: a dispute between him and the German authorities about OvaHerero

⁶ Strategie, die „Nation“ der Herero „geschlossen“ in ein Gebiet zu treiben, wo diese „nicht mehr existieren können und zu Grunde gehen“ würden, und die den Einsatz von „krassem Terrorismus und selbst [...] Grausamkeit“ einschloss. Trotha to Leutwein, 5.11.1904, Bundesarchiv Berlin, R1001/2089, Bl. 100f.

⁷ Cf. Andreas Eckl, Matthias Häussler and Jekura Kavari, “Oomambo wandje komuhoko wOvaHerero: Lothar von Trotha's 'Words to the OvaHerero People'”, *Journal of Namibian Studies*, 23 (2018): 125-33, <https://namibian-studies.com/index.php/JNS/article/view/7254/6435> [accessed 21 June, 2020].

⁸ Cf. Matthias Häussler, *Herero Genocide. War, Emotion, and Extreme Violence in German South-West Africa*, Oxford, Berghahn Books (forthcoming), chapter 3.

⁹ The original letter in OtjiHerero is to be found in: Resident Magistrate M. C. Williams to Resident Commissioner (Mafeking), Tsau, October 31, 1904, Botswana National Archives and Records Services (GNARS), RC 11/1: Hereros, document no. 3. Given the fact that only the English version is kept in the British Public Record Office in Kew, Nuhn wrongly assumed English as its original language (Walter Nuhn, *Sturm über Südwest. Der Hereroaufstand von 1904 – Ein düsteres Kapitel der deutschen kolonialen Vergangenheit Namibias*, Bonn, Bernard & Graefe, 3 ed. 1996, 291, note 4).

¹⁰ Bridgman, *Revolt*: 57.

¹¹ *Ibid.*: 57-65.

workers that had been sent to Johannesburg at the “English government’s” request.¹² No doubt Maharero knows which chord to strike in order to achieve his goal, i.e. to be granted support by the British. If it was his cooperation with the “English government” that sparked the war, how could they turn down his plea? Although his account certainly is one-sided in focusing on one strategically important aspect while omitting everything else, this is not to say that this one point made by Maharero can be dismissed. On the contrary, it calls for further investigation. Maybe this dispute put further pressure on Maharero, hustling him into the decision to revolt against colonial rule.

There is another peculiarity of this letter which is most remarkable. While Maharero wrote his letter in OtjiHerero, the only available source for this letter so far has been a translation into English made on the spot by British officials and forwarded to the Magistrate.¹³ The literal and accurate translation given here makes quite different reading, According to the contemporary translation, Maharero states that he has “come to the English Government [...] to request permission to live in the country,” whereas, according to the literal translation, he has come for different reasons. Maharero states:

And this is why I came to Onyanyai, in your country, to ask for ammunition.
[...]. This is why I am seeking assistance, ammunitions and a place here at
Onyanyai where I can hide my children.

Apparently, Maharero’s original intention was to acquire ammunition in order to return to his land and to resume fighting, while leaving “his children”, i.e., most likely, the non-combatants of his group, behind in safety. There is some further indication that the OvaHerero warriors, albeit “destitute” and heavily decimated, were not as war-weary as may be assumed.¹⁴ The “Memorandum by Ngamiland Magistrate on the native inhabitants of the German South West Africa Protectorate with special reference to the conditions affecting Ngamiland”¹⁵ reports thus:

The German methods of conducting operations against the Hereros during the present war have [...] the Damaras [i.e. the OvaHerero] to hold them in considerable contempt – and they openly state with conviction that were they able to obtain a sufficient quantity of arms and ammunition they would still – if properly organized – be able to contend with the German forces in such a

¹² Maharero brought up this issue again when being interviewed by a British official later on (cf. Botswana National Archives and Records Services (GNARS), RC 4/18: Memorandum by Ngamiland Magistrate on the native inhabitants of the German South West Africa Protectorate with special reference to the conditions affecting Ngamiland, 20th January, 1905).

¹³ The original letter in OtjiHerero and its contemporary translation is to be found in: Resident Magistrate M. C. Williams to Resident Commissioner (Mafeking), Tsau, October 31, 1904, Botswana National Archives and Records Services (GNARS), RC 11/1: Hereros, document no. 3. The English version is also kept in the Public Record Office in Kew, cf. Nuhn, *Sturm*, 291, note 4.

¹⁴ Cf. the Resident Magistrate’s report accompanying the forwarded letter: Resident Magistrate M. C. Williams to Resident Commissioner (Mafeking), Tsau, October 31, 1904, Botswana National Archives and Records Services (GNARS), RC 11/1: Hereros, document no. 3, p. 4.

¹⁵ Botswana National Archives and Records Services (GNARS), RC 4/18: Memorandum by Ngamiland Magistrate on the native inhabitants of the German South West Africa Protectorate with special reference to the conditions affecting Ngamiland, 20th January, 1905.

manner as to make it necessary on the part of the Imperial German Government to come to such terms with them as would ensure more tolerable treatment in the future.

Note that the OvaHerero in question had narrowly escaped death whereas “hundreds of the Hereros [of Maharero’s group alone!], particularly women and children had died of hunger and thirst on their way hither to endeavouring to reach a place of safety”.¹⁶ That these refugees who had literally dodged the bullet were nevertheless willing to re-cross the border and to carry on a hopeless struggle, is highly indicative of Trotha’s excessive brutality and the embitterment and desperation that it caused.

However, as a rule, the British authorities accorded asylum to war refugees from German South West Africa on the condition that the latter surrendered their arms and ammunition and refrained from re-crossing the German border until the war ended.¹⁷ What Maharero had in mind was, by contrast, using British territory as a base to keep on fighting – and, therefore, violated the conditions set by the British authorities. If he had contravened the regulations, he would have forfeited his status as refugee for good. We can assume that Maharero was instructed accordingly by the British officials. Apparently, these talks made him change his mind and accept the terms, as he eventually chose asylum over fighting.

There is a third remarkable difference between the contemporary translation and the literal translation. The version for the Magistrate reads: “This is my prayer to you that I may follow those of my people who have gone before me till I got there.” A proper translation however reveals that Maharero is not asking permission to follow his people, but quite the contrary, he is asking that asylum be refused to those of his compatriots who seek it without his permission: “when people come to you without my permission, do not accept them, chase them away because I have you. As they escaped from me, please do not accept them.” Apparently, he insisted on his status as a Chief and was not prepared to tolerate any kind of disloyalty.

Maharero had arrived with 200 to 300 followers; other groups of OvaHerero were reported to have reached the Ghanzi district in Botswana at around the same time.¹⁸ Approximately 1,500 OvaHerero refugees were eventually settled in the Lake Ngami area. A few years later, in 1907, Samuel Maharero moved to Transvaal in South Africa.

¹⁶ Cf. the Resident Magistrate’s report accompanying the forwarded letter: Resident Magistrate M. C. Williams to Resident Commissioner (Mafeking), Tsau, October 31, 1904, Botswana National Archives and Records Services (GNARS), RC 11/1: Hereros, document no. 3, p. 3.

¹⁷ See for instance the interactions between the British authorities and Simon Kooper (Resident Commissioner to High Commissioner, Johannesburg, May 29, 1906, Botswana National Archives and Records Services (GNARS) RC 13/6: H.V. Eason – Sub-Inspector. Patrol to Lehututu, p. 65.)

¹⁸ Cf. Resident Magistrate M.C. Williams to Resident Commissioner (Mafeking), Tsau, November 21, 1904, Botswana National Archives and Records Services (GNARS), RC 11/1: Hereros. For a concise overview of different escape routes through the Omaheke see Nuhn, *Sturm*: 289-294.

He had been formally deprived of all his honours and duties as a Paramount chief and was treated just as any other refugee.¹⁹ He died in 1923 and was buried in Okahandja.

Figure 1: Original OtjiHerero Version²⁰

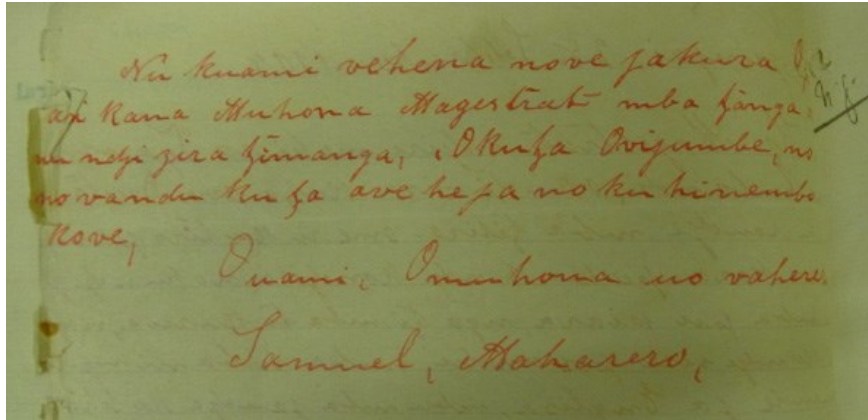
Gaiingai, 28. September. 1904

Ko Magistrate ndjiri mehi ra Tsau
Okavango Emba moti, Oku fi viza Kufya ova Deutscher
eri mehi randje mba fitire ome ri Kuvairo pama
ami, wa kara po Kuvairo Kuvairo, no Kuvairo
nga fi mba pa piara, nga fi mba to Kuvairo, na
Kuvairo Kuvairo sira povander, imba mba ni ngi
Kuvairo pa Englisa, mba mba pa Kuvairo
nga, oho oho pa Kuvairo sira, Omu Englisa pa
Kuvairo Kuvairo, Kuvairo Kuvairo Kuvairo
na mba ovi pamba mba mba, Kuvairo
nga mba Kuvairo, mehi roje Okuvairo ovi
Kuvairo, Omu fi mba Kuvairo Tale uari omu
Serekeze Victoria, Kuvairo mba Kuvairo
me ovi ingo Kuvairo pa Englisa, Kuvairo
Kuvairo ovi Kuvairo, Kuvairo, no Kuvairo
Kuvairo, Kuvairo nganda meho rekke po ovi
Kuvairo Kuvairo Kuvairo Kuvairo, Ovi ovi
Kuvairo

Kuvairo Kuvairo mehi roje mba ovi
Kuvairo Kuvairo, na poas, na ni mba ovi
Kuvairo Kuvairo mba Kuvairo Kuvairo mba
Kuvairo, Kuvairo fi mba pa ovi Kuvairo Kuvairo
Kuvairo, na Kuvairo Kuvairo ovi Kuvairo
Kuvairo Kuvairo Kuvairo Kuvairo ovi mba

¹⁹ Nuhn, *Sturm*: 293.

²⁰ Resident Magistrate M. C. Williams to Resident Commissioner (Mafeking), Tsau, October 31, 1904, Botswana National Archives and Records Services (GNARS), RC 11/1: Hereros, document no. 3.



Proper contemporary OtjHerero

Onyainyai

28 Ndengani (September) 1904

Komangesitarata ndji ri mehi ra Tjawana.

[Ami mba] tjanga embo ndi oku[ku]tjivsa kutja Ovandoitji mbe ri mehi randje mba tjitire omerikutiro pamwe na ami, va kara pokundjikondjisa nokundjizepa nga tji mba pupyara, nga tji mba tokurwa naa[ve] ndji kondjisire povandu imba mba ningirwa i yohoromende yOvaingirisa, mbu mba yandja kOjahannesburg. Otjo otjipo pu ve ndji rwisira. Omuingirisa Juda u tjiwa otjiŋa hi nu mba rwa omieze hambondatu nu nambano oviyumba mba mana. Nopu mba zu okuya mOnyainyai, mehi roye oku[ye]kuningira oviyumba. Nu mo tjiwa kutja tate wa ri omuzamumwe woserekaze Victoria nami wina owami omuzamumwe na ing' ombara yOvaingirisa. Nopu me zu okuningira ombatero nozohanga noruveze muno mOnyainyai, kutja mbi ngunda ame horeke po ovivereko. Narikana kara notjari ku ami okundjivatera motjiŋa nokundjizira tjemanga. Otjo hi otji mba ningire kove.

Nu rukwao mehi roye mwe ya ovandu vandje, Nikodemus na Joas, nu mbe ve vaza mOkaua nu mba yarura tjinga ava hena noviŋa vyandje. Nove tji we ndji pe oruveze kutja tu ye pamwe, nu tji maku ya ovandu nokuhina embo randje, o kambura ve ramba orondu ami mbi na ove.

Nu ku ami ve hena no ve yakura arikana. Muhona Mangesitarata mba tjanga nu ndji zira tjemanga, okutja oviyumba novandu ave hepa nokuna embo kove.

Owami Omuhona wOvaherero

Samuel Maharero

Figure 2: Original contemporary translation²¹

10.04.
Translation

Mjamipi (Mogopa.)
28 - Sept: 1904.

To the Magistrate

I am in the Katavanas country. I am writing to tell you that I have been fighting with the Germans in my country, the Germans were my friends, they made me suffer so much by the manner in which they troubled me that I fought with them. The beginning of this trouble was that I gave the English some boys to work at Jhannaburg, this is the reason that they fought with me. An Englishman called Juda knows this he was the man who came to get these boys. I have been fighting for eight months and my ammunition is finished. As I have come into your country at Mogopa I ask help from Queen Victoria. In olden times my father was friendly with the English government and on this account I come to the English Government for succour and request permission to live in their country. I now ask you to have mercy on me and help me in my heavy trouble. please reply to me. This is my prayer to you that I may follow those of my people who have gone before me till I get there. If you allow me I will leave here at once. Sir I ask you to answer me as soon as possible.

I send my best greetings

I am the Chief of the Damaras

D. Samuel Maharero.

²¹ Resident Magistrate M. C. Williams to Resident Commissioner (Mafeking), Tsau, October 31, 1904, Botswana National Archives and Records Services (GNARS), RC 11/1: Hereros, document no. 3

Literal translation

Onyainyai

28 September 1904

To the Magistrate in Botswana

I wrote this letter to inform you that the Germans that are in my country and with whom I made contract, made troubles with me and killed me until I became tired and took up arms against them. They troubled me because of the people who were begged by the English government, and those who I gave to Johannesburg. This is the main reason why they fought me. The English man, Juda, knows this and I fought for eight months until my ammunition got finished. And this is why I came to Onyanyai, in your country, to ask for ammunition. And you know that my father was related to Queen Victoria and I am also related to the English King. This is why I am seeking assistance, ammunition and a place here at Onyanyai where I can hide my children. And please be merciful for me and give me a quick response. This is what I ask from you.

And once more, my people, Nikodemus and Joas, came into your country and I found them at Okaua and I took them back because they absconded with my properties. And if you give me a chance to meet you, and when people come to you without my permission, do not accept them, chase them away because I have you.

As they escaped from me, please do not accept them. Worship Magistrate, I wrote this letter and please I expect a quick response, as my people and ammunitions will suffer without a word from you.

I am the Chief of Ovaherero

Samuel Maharero