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Nord magnétique

# #06

## Nord

### magnétique

HENNING MELBER AND  
KRISTIN PLATT, (EDS.),

*KOLONIALE  
VERGANGENHEIT –  
POSTKOLONIALE  
ZUKUNFT? DIE DEUTSCH-  
NAMIBISCHEN  
BEZIEHUNGEN NEU  
DENKEN*

Brandes & Apsel, Frankfurt a. Main, 2022.

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Following more than five years of negotiations, the Namibian and the German governments issued a Joint Declaration in May 2021, entitled “United in Remembrance of our Colonial Past, United in Our Will to Reconcile, United in Our Vision of the Future”, a declaration, that almost immediately evoked controversial, at times even



fierce debates. One contribution to this debate was the broadcast of a conversation by *Deutschlandfunk* in the series “Word exchange” (Wortwechsel) between Ruprecht Polenz, the negotiator of the Declaration on the German side, Michael Küppers-Adebisi and the two editors of the volume under review here, Henning Melber, one of the most active Namibianists dealing with political, sociological and historiographical matters in countless contributions, and Kristin Platt, director of the Institute of Diaspora and Genocide Studies (IDG) at the Ruhr-University Bochum and associate professor at Berlin’s Humboldt University’s Department of Cultural History and Theory and a leading expert in the field of genocide and trauma studies. Based on this conversation, Roland Apsel came up with the idea to this volume. It only took 9 months to publish *Koloniale Vergangenheit – Postkoloniale Zukunft? Die Deutsch-Namibischen Beziehungen neu denken*“. The result is a book which is characterised by and composed of „Vielschichtigkeit von Erfahrungen, Erinnerungen und Einschätzungen“ (complexity of experiences, memories and assessments), as the editors state in their introduction (p. 15).

Probably the main criticism of the agreement is formulated by the editors as follows: “Die Auseinandersetzungen um die einzugehenden Konsequenzen und die bisherigen Schritte zu einer Versöhnung zeigen deutlich die Grenzen des deutsch-namibischen Abkommens auf: einer seitens zweier Regierungen verfolgten (und erklärten) Völkerverständigung, die ohne maßgebliche Beteiligung beider Völker und nur unter höchst begrenzter Beteiligung der Nachfahren der von den Gewaltakten betroffenen Bevölkerungsgruppen ausgehandelt wurde.” (p. 14). Hence it is the aim of the book “die vielschichtigen Perspektiven in einem anregenden Panorama zu versammeln, das zeigt, dass wir die Erfahrungen der kolonialen Vergangenheit nicht erinnern können, wenn sie nicht zuerst erzählt wird” and in particular “bislang weitgehend ignorierte Stimmen aus Namibia Gehör zu verschaffen” (p. 9).

To state it right away: *Koloniale Vergangenheit – Postkoloniale Zukunft?* is an amazing book. I hardly ever come across a book which is this heterogenous as this one, heterogenous regarding its contributors just as much as their contributions. One wonders (and is indeed curious to know) on what grounds the authors haven been addressed and invited to contribute – and what topic – if any – they had been given.

The book is structured in three parts: Three contributions serve as some kind of introduction: Kristin Platt in her article, “Gewalt, Trauma und Erinnerung. Zum Umgang mit Völkermord” is sharing her outstanding knowledge and expertise when dealing with Genocide as a general challenge for a culture of remembrance and memory, Henning Melber in “Zum Völkermord in Deutsch-Südwestafrika” explores in his dedicated and inimitable way the politics of dealing with the Genocide in the past and present while Medardus Brehl, also based at the IDG, who for many years now focuses on the relationship between textuality and historicity, and the thematic area of ‘violence and language’, provides an insightful overview of related debates in the German *Bundestag* since Namibia’s Independence in 1990. These contributions are well grounded in either outstanding expertise and empirical / scientific data.

A second part provides contributions dealing with various aspects and topics on Genocide, and more generally, colonialism from a European, mostly German perspective, by presenting a panorama of voices from the spheres of politics, civil society and culture. Here we find contributions by Albert Gouaffo, a Cameroun based expert in German colonial literature, Uwe Tim, the well known if not to say famous novelist of “Morenga”, Dominic Johnson, a British born journalist who has become known with publications on Africa and especially Kongo, Carola Lentz, acting President of the Goethe Institute and a scholar who has so far not been prominent with respect to South West Africa / Namibia, dealing with the topic of colonial heritage, Olaf Zimmermann, dealing with debates related to the Humboldt Forum in Berlin, Julia Böcker, suggesting ways of gaining a

critical consciousness of the colonial past, Sevim Dağdelen, the outspoken politician from the party *Die Linke*, and last but not least Ruprecht Polenz, resuming essential aspects of the Joint Declaration from his point of view.

It would have been convenient if the corresponding document itself, the Joint Declaration, was also printed in the volume, even if its easily found on the internet. A more regrettable shortcoming is certainly that the German negotiator Polenz is able to offer his perspective, but no one who was involved in the negotiations for the Namibian side. The Namibian negotiator Dr. Zed Ngavirue unfortunately died shortly after the agreement was paraphrased because of Covid-19, but the perspective of other Namibian representatives in the negotiations who also supported this agreement would have been desirable to gain a somehow more balanced view.

The third part finally brings aspects, views, and opinions from a Namibian perspective, i.e. from Namibian-born authors. It is especially this part of the book, which is the most personal one, with all papers written from a very personal perspective. For me it was especially this part which I appreciated most. All the contributors in this section share their individual “Namibian” memories and perspectives. Each article comes as a surprise, and many contributions, indeed, provide insights not easily accessibly by other ways. There is, for example, the contribution by Horst Kleinschmidt, setting a spotlight on his family history, being one of the numerous descendants of his great-great-great-grandfather Hinrich Schmelen, who, while a missionary in present-day Namibia, married Kleinschmidt’s great-great-great-grandmother Zara //Gaixas/, the daughter of a local Khoi leader. Or there is the contribution by Namibia-born Dag Henrichsen, one of the best known and most active Namibian historiographers, who narrates his personal “multigenerationale (post-) koloniale Familiengeschichte”. Uazuvara Katjivena is sharing his “Erinnerungen an Mama Pene”, bringing to the readers attention his remarkable book on “Mama Pene. Transcending the Genocide” (Windhoek, 2020). Further

contributions to this section are noteworthy wise considerations by Rakkell Andreas, a young Namibian social scientist, on emotional intelligence, by Naita Hishoono, Executive Director of the Namibia Institute for Democracy, who, being one of the so-called GDR-kids growing up in Berlin (East Germany), by Jephtha Nghuherimo, a Namibian born writer now living in the US, recollecting some of his talks and interviews on the colonial past with Germans and German-speaking Namibians. Last but not least we find contributions by Stephan Mühr, former head of the Namibian-German Foundation for Cultural Cooperation (a predecessor of the current Goethe Institute in Windhoek) who is reasoning on the difficulties of coming to terms with the past from a Namibian-German perspective, as do Erika von Wietersheim, a well-known journalist and novelist, and, finally, Sylvia Schlettwein, who was and is active in so many cultural and educational fields, not the least as a novelist. This part concludes with excerpts from four speeches held during the debate in the Namibian Parliament in the end of 2021 on the Joint Declaration, thus offering a truly Namibian perspective which is seldom heard in Europe, here presented by Tom K. Alweendo, Calle Schlettwein, Bernadus Clinton Swartboi and McHenry Venaani.

Two more contributions need to be highlighted: Firstly, Adetoun and Michael Küppers-Adebisi's "Afrofuturistischer Kampf der Narrative", a remarkable piece of textual and pictorial art which stands not only in between, or, maybe better, above the three parts of this book, but also blurs the limits of established genres. And finally: The magnificent cover photograph contributed by Reinhart Kößler, a multi-layered picture which – linking the Namibian Genocide to the Holocaust – has many inherent meanings and readings.

Namibian scholars and other colleagues who have a special interest in ... , well, almost any topic in some way or another related to Namibia will probably be disappointed by this volume. This, however, is not meant to be a criticism, but rather highlights the strength and the special value of this book. *Koloniale Vergangenheit – Postkoloniale Zukunft?* does not primarily address experts in any field, but rather



anybody who has emotional or intellectual ties with Namibia – whatever they might be. Readers will appreciate this compilation of very diverse topics, ideas and thoughts and considerations – at least most parts of it. Some of the contributions are informative, others inspiring, many are very private in their character, some are based on empirical data and scientific sources, others mainly on experience, some are short and rather notes, while others are more elaborate, but they are all definitely worth reading. To be frank, this is a book which I did not read while sitting on my desk, but at night-time in bed and on train during traveling. And I enjoyed it very much! This volume being the first outcome of cooperation between Henning Melber and Kristin Platt, one can only wish that more will follow.

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## Pour citer cet article

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