



The Continuing Presence of Trauma. Namibian Artists Dealing with the Genocide of OvaHerero and Nama

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Background Information

Between 1904 and 1908, German colonial forces committed genocide against the OvaHerero and Nama in present-day Namibia, leading to the deaths of around 80,000 OvaHerero and 10,000 Nama. Beyond mass killings, people suffered land dispossession, starvation, forced labor, and life in concentration camps. These experiences caused deep psychological wounds, many of which have been transmitted across generations and are referred to as historical trauma. Today, Namibian artists engage with this history in their work. Through various artistic forms, they address themes of memory, loss, identity, and the ongoing effects of trauma, thereby contributing both to personal coping and to collective remembrance.

Research Question

Which aspects of trauma represent the main motives for the artists to deal with the genocide and to process it in their art?

Main Findings

Interviews with 15 Namibian artists revealed three key characteristics of trauma—collective, intergenerational, and untreated—as well as three central aspects—the struggle for identity, the responsibility for ancestors, and the need for healing. These dimensions together correspond to what is termed historical trauma.

Non-Treatment & The Need for Healing: The untreated nature of trauma is closely linked to the artists' emphasis on healing. Because the trauma was never systematically addressed, it has persisted across generations. Artists view healing as essential, noting that unresolved trauma manifests in present-day problems such as violence or substance abuse. In the absence of formal psychological support, many regard art itself as a form of therapy—both a means of personal expression and a tool for raising awareness within society. Healing, they argue, requires open dialogue about the genocide and its consequences, even if such conversations are painful.

Intergenerationality & The Responsibility for Ancestors: Artists often describe a responsibility to speak for their ancestors, preserving and transmitting their stories. Some see themselves as channels for ancestral voices, while others try to embody their suffering. This responsibility is not only personal but also communal, as remembrance practices are central to OvaHerero and Nama identity.

Collectivity & The Struggle for Identity: The genocide is deeply intertwined with questions of identity. For many artists, engaging with it feels inevitable, as it continues to shape both individual and collective identities.

Answer to Research Question

Artists engage with the genocide because it remains unresolved—there is still no full recognition, apology, restitution, or education. What persists most strongly is trauma. Healing emerges as the central motive, supported by the connection to ancestors and the reconstruction of identity. These aspects are interwoven and together contribute to overcoming historical trauma.



Installation "Pathway to Death"
by Kambezunda Ngavee



Mixed-Media Art "We Were Pregnant and
in Labour" by Tuli Mekondjo



Photpgraphy "Next to the Graves"
by Nicola Brandt

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