

## ***The Baherero of Botswana and a Legacy of Genocide***

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The Republic of Botswana is an African success story. It emerged in 1966 as a stable, multi-ethnic, democracy after eighty-one years as Bechuanaland, a British Protectorate. It was a model for progress, unlike many of its neighbors. Scholars from around the globe were eager to study and chronicle its people and formation. They hoped to learn what made it the exception, and so different from the rest of the continent.<sup>1</sup> Investigations most often focused on two groups, the San, who were indigenous hunter-gathers, and the Tswana, the country's largest ethnic group. But the scholars neglected other groups in their research. The Herero, who came to Botswana from Namibia in the early 1900s, long before independence, found themselves in that neglected category and were often unmentioned, even though their contributions were rich and their experiences compelling.<sup>2</sup> The key to understanding the Herero in Botswana today lies in their past.



### **A Short History of the Herero People**

The Herero have lived in the Southwest region of Africa for hundreds of years. They are believed to be descendants of pastoral migrants from Central Africa who made their way southwest during the 17<sup>th</sup> century and eventually inhabited what is now northern Namibia. In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century they expanded farther south, seeking additional grassland for their cattle. This encroachment created conflicts with earlier migrants and indigenous groups. As a result, the Herero were engaged in on-and-off inter-tribal wars. By 1870 the Herero had proven their dominance, and a short-lived truce followed. Despite the peace agreement, strife and disunity continued, and in the 1880s, wars began once again.<sup>3</sup>

### **The German Colony of South West Africa**

In 1884, during those tumultuous times, the Germans established their colony of South West Africa in the Herero homelands. German authorities were quick to exploit the inter-tribal wars for their own advantage. To gain and cement their authority, the Germans developed a ruthless strategy. They formed an alliance with the Herero and supplied them with expertise and weapons in order to use the Herero to suppress other troublesome groups. The German military strategists calculated that the unwitting Herero would prevail. And once the Herero vanquished other groups, the Germans fully intended to turn on the Herero and render them powerless.

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<sup>1</sup> Personal conversations with Baherero in Botswana, 10 -2008

<sup>2</sup> [https://Journals.co.za/content/botnotes/The History of the Herero in Mahalapye Central District:1922-1984](https://Journals.co.za/content/botnotes/The%20History%20of%20the%20Herero%20in%20Mahalapye%20Central%20District:1922-1984), accessed 8-2017.

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.jstor.org/stable/The Entry of the Herero into Botswana/Frank Robert Vivelo](https://www.jstor.org/stable/The%20Entry%20of%20the%20Herero%20into%20Botswana/Frank%20Robert%20Vivelo), accessed 8-9-17.

The Germans' calculations were right. By the 1890s the Herero had suppressed most adversaries. German colonial officers, then well-entrenched, betrayed the Herero, and did so without mercy. The Herero were disarmed; their movements were restricted; plans were laid to confine them on native reserves; and their cattle herds, critical to their way of life, were confiscated. In addition, the Herero signed away their valuable mineral rights, were charged exorbitant interest rates on debts, and were subjected to arbitrary fines, all done to subjugate an entire people.

While the ruling German regime was focused on quelling the Herero, German immigrants were moving into the new colony, hoping to forge better lives and flourish in Africa. They led a tenacious grab for land, expropriated resources, and blocked the Hereros' access to water. Tensions were raised to high and alarming levels.<sup>4</sup>

### **Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing**

By January 1904, the Herero had had enough and rose up against their oppressors. Then, in August 1904, at the decisive Battle of Waterberg, German soldiers decimated the Herero. German troops terrorized survivors, hanged them from nearby trees, cut off food supplies, and poisoned the water sources. The Herero were surrounded and forced to flee into the desert to an almost certain death. German troops were unrelenting, escape was impossible, and thousands of Herero perished from starvation and thirst. In October, following that devastating battle and doomed retreat, General Lothar von Trotha, the German Commander-in-Chief, issued an extermination order against all remaining Herero people. The century's first genocide followed and claimed 80% of the Herero as victims.<sup>5</sup>

### **Escape to Botswana**

Somehow, small groups of Herero managed to escape the carnage and made the brutal crossing through the Kalahari Desert into Bechuanaland (today's Botswana). A few brought their cattle, but, like the people, most livestock died from lack of water. When the destitute Herero arrived in Bechuanaland, with numbers as low as 2,000, they sought permission to stay. Permission was granted by the Tswana and the Herero settled, but they were scattered, with the majority in Ngamiland and the Ghanzi District, the western part of the country, and smaller numbers in the east.<sup>6</sup>



*The Kalahari Desert*

### **The Transition**

An earlier group of Herero had migrated to Ngamiland in 1896. They were still new to Botswana, and as recent immigrants they were outsiders, not fully established. When they were able, they hired survivors to work with them. However, the finances of these earlier Herero were meager, and there weren't enough cattle for the sudden expanded Herero population; survivors had few choices. In order to eke out a living, the newcomers went to work for the Tswana as servants or herders.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Op.cit., Viveló

<sup>5</sup> <https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/handel> Jan Bart Gewalt, *The Great General of the Kaiser*, Botswana News and Records, Volume 26, accessed 8-2017.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.jstor.org/stable/>The Entry of the Herero into Botswana/Frank Robert Viveló, accessed 8-2017.

<sup>7</sup> Op. cit., Viveló

Once in Botswana they became known as Baherero, and in a short time they made a remarkable transition. Survivors were ambitious and industrious and started trading their labor and prowess with cattle for crops and milk. (Accounts tell of survivors turning milk into butter and selling it back to the Tswana). By living frugally and saving their small profits, many eventually bought the cattle so central to their culture and traditions. As early as the 1930s, just twenty-five years after they made their harrowing trek through the desert, survivors had built homesteads, established herds and cattle posts, they were independent from the Tswana, and they were considered affluent. From then on, the Baherero were vital contributors to the country's beef industry, a cornerstone of Botswana's economy. Even though they are a small percentage of the population and still considered an ethnic minority, they have made a lasting mark in Botswana.<sup>8</sup>

Although many have done well, it is imperative to remember that ethnic cleansing and genocide forced the Baherero out of their homelands and brought them to Botswana. Historical records make that impossible to deny. General Lothar von Trotha wrote in his diary, "I believe that the (Herero) nation as such should be annihilated, or, if this was not possible by tactical measures, have to be expelled from the country by operative means and further detailed treatment.... They have to perish in the Sandveld or try to cross the Bechuanaland border."<sup>9</sup>

### **Descendants and Hopes for Repatriation**

Genocide and the dislocation and heartbreak that it caused have shaped the survivors' lives and identity. The trauma of being wrenched from their homelands and forced to flee to Botswana is now part of the Baherero collective memory. As a result, many descendants long for their rightful ancestral lands in Namibia and wish to be repatriated.<sup>10</sup>

Repatriation is not easy. Those seeking permission for repatriation face many daunting challenges. Complex laws in both Botswana and Namibia hinder the process. The government of Botswana is reluctant to lose a productive group of its citizens, and Namibia is not always welcoming of returnees.

The challenges that repatriation present do not end for the Baherero once they return to Namibia. Finding housing and obtaining employment is difficult, at times contentious, and almost always a constant struggle. Recent outbreaks of bovine Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) in Botswana have decimated cattle herds, making it impossible for the Baherero to sell their animals on the open market. Groups of once well-off herders arrive in Namibia impoverished. At the same time, repatriated herders who own healthy cattle have trouble getting adequate land essential for them to prosper. To add to that list of daunting obstacles, several Namibian political factions oppose their repatriation and integration.<sup>11</sup>

Identity documents are necessary in Namibia to carry on most aspects of everyday life. For years, the government failed to issue national identity documents to the repatriated Baherero, making integration impossible. Not holding documents as proof of Namibian permanent residency or citizenship prevented them from applying for work, opening bank accounts, receiving pensions, and even attending

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. Vivelo

<sup>9</sup> [https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/handle/Jan Bart Gewald, The Great General of the Kaiser, Botswana News and Records, Volume 26](https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/handle/Jan%20Bart%20Gewald,%20The%20Great%20General%20of%20the%20Kaiser,%20Botswana%20News%20and%20Records,%20Volume%2026), accessed 8-2017.

<sup>10</sup> Personal Conversation with Baherero in Namibia, 6-2017.

<sup>11</sup> [https://www.newwra.com.na/2015/08/19/Nguvauva Thankful as Gam, Eiseb Residents Get IDs.](https://www.newwra.com.na/2015/08/19/Nguvauva-Thankful-as-Gam-Eiseb-Residents-Get-IDs)

universities. About 3,000 Baherero residents who arrived in eastern Namibia in the early 1990s were not issued documents until 2015, when a law was finally passed intending to remedy this situation.<sup>12</sup> The governments of Namibia and Botswana continue to discuss logistics and concerns related to repatriation, but progress is slow, especially for those who are hoping for and awaiting return.

Even though repatriation is fraught with problems and upheaval, hundreds of Baherero have begun the registration process. Reverence for their ancestors and for their rightful homelands are powerful inducements.

Genocide has a long reach. After more than a hundred years in Botswana, Herero descendants continue to feel its repercussions. They are citizens of Botswana, yet they have intense emotional connections to their ancestral lands in Namibia. This sense of being half-immersed in Botswana and half-immersed in Namibia is difficult to resolve, and it continues to cause psychological and spiritual harm four generations later. The 1904 genocide of the Herero people has left an indelible legacy.



*Repatriated Baherero hope to receive identity documents in the near future.*

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<sup>12</sup> [www.namibianewsdigest.com/gam-eise](http://www.namibianewsdigest.com/gam-eise).