

## **Building Collections of Ephemera at the Basler Afrika Bibliographien and Posters as a Historical Source**

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### **I Building Collections of African Ephemera in Basel**

The formation of collections at the Basler Afrika Bibliographien (BAB) is deeply rooted in the building of collections of ephemera from and on a particular African geopolitical domain. BAB's collections grew out of specific interests of a private collector, BAB's founder, Carl Schlettwein.<sup>1</sup> As such, BAB's history is an example of what seems to be often the case, when it comes to building ephemera collections, namely the interests of individual collectors.<sup>2</sup> Many ephemera collections grew from collectors' interests in either specific genres (post cards, posters, labels etc.) or themes (the history of advertising, graphics, or theatre brochures, etc.) BAB's collections emerged from of the convergence of both, coupled with the interests of an academic, if not a modest political strategy. The theme of BAB was – and is – the bibliographical coverage of Namibia as a geopolitical domain (NB not only Namibia as country), which includes Namibian relations elsewhere and for example, its various colonial metropolises as centres of documentary output (Berlin, Cape Town, Pretoria,

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<sup>1</sup> On BABs history and ist various collections see Dag Henrichsen, Giorgio Miescher (eds): Documenting and Researching Southern Africa. Aspects and Perspectives. Essays in Honour of Carl Schlettwein. Basel, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> On the role of private collectors see, for example, the Report of the Working Party on Ephemera set up by CILIP (the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals): Ephemera: the stuff of history. January 2003, p. 16. – In addition, being a collector of art and/or scientific material is an important component of a bourgeois representation among the local elites in Basel since centuries, although Africa is and remains a rather exceptional topic.

Geneva, London and New York). The strategy was – and to a certain extent still is - an attempt to decolonise knowledge and to make information with regard to this domain accessible. Carl Schlettwein attempted a quest for bibliographical comprehensiveness for this particular country out of personal sentiments and in the wake of rigid controls by the South African colonial power institutions to control any kind of information, data and knowledge on its colony (1915-1990).<sup>3</sup> The logical outcome of this quest, in order to succeed, was a quest of any kind of primarily printed material on and from the domain, Namibiana in the broadest sense of its definition. Bibliographical comprehensiveness implied, right from the beginning, to collect, at least in theory, everything and anything that was printed in and on Namibia. Obviously then, neither specific genres of material or themes or fields of knowledge with regard to Namibia defined acquisition policies, but a non-hierarchical collecting strategy. The basic assumption was that any material, as trivial it might look, could be of relevance for the decolonising project.

The – theoretical – absence of a hierarchy of genres and topics meant, that next to monographs and periodicals, the vast range of what - in German we call "Graue Literatur" - grey literature was part and parcel of BAB's decolonisation project right from the beginning. In many ways, the BAB, as its stand today, is an institution whose collections are either formed by ephemera or are interspersed with ephemera. To put it differently: Ephemera were – and are – enmeshed in the bulk of Namibiana, they are regarded as Namibiana themselves and not only, as most collectors tend to do, leather-bounded travel literature. The basic cut-off edge of what to collect or not, was the question of what is regarded as printed, published or written (i.e. unpublished), and what not. In our case, everything from books to periodicals, reports, brochures, theses, posters,

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<sup>3</sup> On similar projects and their history, see Dag Henrichsen: *The Periphery as the Heart of the Matter. Contextualising Namibia at the Basler Afrika Bibliographien*. In: Henrichsen, Miescher, op.cit., pp. 67ff.

photographs, calendars, postcards, leaflets and hand-outs, newspaper cuttings and press statements etc. was – and is - regarded as printed material, and hence of primary concern, whilst film, art and sound materials were regarded as non-written materials and of secondary concern. I hasten to say, that the latter materials are also represented and acquired in the BAB to a certain extent.

The character of such a collection displayed features of a National Library and in some ways the BAB shows traits of a National Namibia Library 'in exile'. To phrase it differently: An institution in Switzerland attempted – and continues to attempt – an acquisition policy for the purpose of collecting as many published and/or written materials from an African country and its world-wide relations. In the 1970s this allowed for the first National Bibliography of Namibia to be published out of Basel (for the years 1971 to 1979), the BAB collections forming its main basis of material.<sup>4</sup> The first real National Bibliography being published by the newly formed National Library in Windhoek came only in existence in 1996, thus after Namibia's independence.<sup>5</sup> In contrast to a National Library, Basel also collected - and collects - everything that is published or written on Namibia all over the world. This makes clear that the specific focus of today's Workshop, political ephemera, is only one focus of BAB's ephemera collections.

This brief sketch of the BAB's genesis of collections gives rise to a couple of questions which might be of relevance to this Workshop.

*First:* What are political ephemera? In our case, the specific colonial history of a settler colony, an apartheid society and a war of liberation makes any kind of material from and on Namibia political in both a broad and narrow sense. As our

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<sup>4</sup> Eckhard Strohmeyer: Namibische National-Bibliographie. Basel, 1978, 1979, 1981.

<sup>5</sup> See also the introduction in Namibia National Bibliography, 1990-1992. Windhoek, 1996.

case study, Giorgio Miescher's presentation of posters as a historical source, makes clear, commercial posters, beer posters for example, or posters advertising ethnographic topics in Namibia, need to be juxtaposed against this particular history and as such are as political as any political party poster. Much of BAB's printed material of the past decades was produced by the various elites and ruling bodies of the settler society, with a clear sense of targeting specific (international) audiences, legitimising existing power relations and mobilising them for particular political issues. From the perspective of the collector, whilst striving for a broad coverage of materials, Carl Schlettwein's connections to members of the German-speaking settler society, implied a political limitation and a gateway for this Namibian section of the society to be able to represent itself in Basel. Only the broadly defined bibliographical quest allowed, in part at least, for a more general quest of materials.<sup>6</sup> What, then, are political ephemera in the Namibian context? What are non-political ephemera?

*Second:* The – theoretical – absence of hierarchies of genres and topics begs the question, how such a broad coverage was – and is – translated into what was – and is – a central aim of the BAB, namely, to make these materials accessible. This question relates to questions of acquisition, management, conservation and accessibility, and hence relates to the question how materials are identified and converted actively into documents as research items of evidence. This is an active, i.e. conscious process of dividing, classifying and selecting the material into units.

For the sake of this panel, let us briefly outline to you, how the ephemera in Basel where – and are – acquired, and handled.

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<sup>6</sup> On the various historically formed building blocs of BABs collections, see Henrichsen, in Henrichsen, Miescher, op.cit.

It was and is only possible to obtain such a wide range of material from and on Namibia by accommodating a wider network of collectors. These are collectors whom we managed to gain an interest into specific genres, printers in Namibia, office clerks in ministries, students whom we pay for specific tasks like getting election posters, or researchers whom we ask to collect for us whilst they are doing field research. In the latter case, the archives of African historians will, in future, be of enormous importance with regard to ephemera. Our own acquisition trips to Namibia are not bound to any specific genres. We buy and collect anything we can get hold of, including the vast output of tourist brochures, post cards, official application forms, material from any society or NGO, etc. which we manage to visit. Only in Basel such a body of acquisitions is then literally divided and put into the special collections, with cross-references regarding their origin and context. As such, for example, unassumingly trivial collections such as the tourist brochure collection or even shopping bags are accumulating and once might form separate special collections.

Carl Schlettwein himself obviously had to design ways and means in order to handle such a broad range of materials. He adhered to a simple division, that between a library and an archive, with a loose division between what could be catalogued according to library standards, and 'the rest'. As such, many ephemera like brochures and leaflets became incorporated into the library, not only books or periodicals.

Today, given the vast expansion of printed production on Namibia over the last 40 years or so, BAB presents itself as a library and archives of various special collections which all keep Namibia as its main focus. This means, that for curatorial and organisational reasons, much of 'the rest' accumulating in Basel was transformed into special collections. These special collections were only defined some 10 years ago, in order to keep ephemera manageable. The special

collections at BAB today encompass a photo archives (which includes postcards and other picture cards), a poster collection, a calendar collection, a map collection, a papers and manuscripts archives, and a sound- and video archives. Of these the poster collection is, on first sight, the most relevant to our topic here today and you will be introduced to this collection and its building blocs later on. Whilst initially being part and parcel of the quest for Namibiana in general, it today is a collection which is formed on the basis of the genre itself. As will become clear too, the poster collection became a source of research only recently, thus was made into a body of documentary evidence for the sake of research on the history of Namibia, only through the active process of division, cataloguing and accessibility.

Other relevant collections here are housed with the papers and manuscripts archives, which holds various entities kept separately for various thematic and organisation reasons.

The one entity is the so-called General Archives which grew out of the broad range of ephemera like brochures, pamphlets, handouts, leaflets, press statements and press cuttings, etc.. In this, the collection of tourist brochures is a special one. We all know that tourism is not only an important income generating sector in Namibia. It is also vital with regard to the recycling and intervention of images on and from Namibia and Namibians; researchers and established archives tend to ignore these materials. Also, in the BAB's General Archives, various collections are kept which are of thematical or organisational origin, for example the "SWAPO of Namibia collection",<sup>7</sup> another collection with a broad range of printed material of any kind from and on this Namibian liberation movement. Other collections with many ephemera of published nature

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<sup>7</sup> On this see Giorgio Miescher: Registratur AA 3. Guide to the SWAPO collection in the Namibia archives of the Basler Afrika Bibliographien. Basel 1994. This guide is currently updated.

are the various Swiss solidarity and anti-apartheid archives, of which BAB houses at least four. There are separate collections on Namibian theatre brochures, or, a recent example, a growing collection of Namibian shopping bags.

Most of these collections are actively designed, not simply acquired: The choice of starting to collect shopping bags, is related to ideas such as: How can the mundane printed materials in Namibia which rely on basic images and textual phrases, be collected in the framework of a broad coverage of printed materials from this particular country? Or: How and what do Namibians read, apart from newspapers, books and brochures? Or: What is the role of advertising in the Namibian society, apart from the classic genres of advertising on radio and TV, through advertisements, billboards, etc.?

We should mention that the absence of hierarchies with regard to genres has led us to opt for an electronic cataloguing system (FAUST) which eventually will allow for the accessibility of all collections through one system and one thesaurus. The system allows for the inter-relatedness of materials for research purposes, which for organisational and conservationist reasons cannot always be granted.

*Third:* What does the title of this Workshop: Ephemera FROM the Commonwealth, which includes Namibia as a member-state, mean? Does this imply a purely geographical focus, pointing to the geographical origins of material? As said, BAB's collections right from the beginning encompassed anything On and FROM Namibia. Given the centrality, in the Namibian case, of exile, given the quest by the colonial elites for the mobilisation of an international audience, etc., it is clear, that a purely geographical location of materials FROM a Commonwealth country makes little sense, at least to us. It

would, in our case, exclude the vast body of SWAPO materials, for example, or the important collections of solidarity and anti-apartheid movements. Yet it is these collections, for example, which so deeply influenced the construction of a particular vision of a now dominant Namibian historical perspective, that of an anti-colonial resistance history. This nationalist history, its public side, and its historiography, cannot be grasped without looking at the very large body of grey literature having been produced notably outside Namibia from the 1960s onwards.

These three questions, and the outline of BAB's collection activities, make clear, that at least in our case we deal with a particular invention of an African country in Switzerland in the fields of collecting and documenting. Again, the invention as such is an active process and was at least in the past, a political intervention, labelled a bibliographical one. It continues to be of political relevance, given the fact that there are very few places outside Africa where there is the attempt, to regard comprehensive documentations on Africa as relevant. Documenting one African country outside Africa as broadly as possible, without hierarchies and without topical limitations, is obviously a value *an sich (in itself)*, in order to participate in a post-colonial order as well as in dealing with the legacies of colonial archives and libraries. Ephemera, it seems to me, are central to this approach.

## **II Case Study: Poster as historical source – The BAB poster collection.<sup>8</sup>**

1. Introducing the BAB poster collection with a special focus on posters relating to Namibia

Let us first introduce the BAB collection in a few words. The foundations of the collection were laid by posters from pre-independence Namibia collected by Carl Schlettwein prior to 1990, together with Namibian posters from the period of transition to independence, 1989/1990, collected by Resi Henrichsen (Swakopmund). In the middle of the 1990s, these were joined by posters associated with the historic 1994 elections in South Africa, and posters from the disbanding Swiss, German and other solidarity and anti-apartheid committees. Systematic enlargement and consolidation of the poster collection began in 1995, with Namibia as the focal country and southern Africa as the focal region. Since then, the original holding of 250 posters has increased more than ten times. In addition to those from southern Africa, numerous posters from and relating to other African regions, especially West Africa, have found their way into the collection. Because there has never been a thematically selective acquisition policy, the collection covers a broad spectrum of subjects from politics through economy to leisure activities. In terms of timespan, posters from the last three decades are the most strongly represented. – In our presentation we will restrict ourselves on posters on and from Namibia which are at the core of the collection. In what follows we will provide you with some insights into, first, how we collect, archive and catalogue our collection and, second, how we understand posters a part of a visual history and thus how one can make use of posters in teaching and researching.

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<sup>8</sup> The following part of the paper mainly summarises, complements and updates which we have developed in depth on other occasions. (See: Introduction of Giorgio Miescher and Dag Henrichsen: African Posters. A catalogue of the poster collection in the Basler Afrika Bibliographien. Basel, 2004, p. 8-14, and: Giorgio Miescher, "Posters as source. Collecting and researching posters at the Basler Afrika Bibliographien." in: Dag Henrichsen and Giorgio Miescher, 2001, op. cit., p. 136-159.

## 2. Challenges to the curator: collecting, archiving, cataloguing

The curator of a poster collection is confronted with the specific peculiarities of the medium when he or she wants to build up a collection. The *first task* is to acquire the material.

Posters are short-lived visual representations, made for very specific purposes at a certain moment in time in a specific place. Normally, they are not produced in order to be offered for sale. Given the fact that there is no market for posters related to Africa, we had to find other ways to expand our holdings. As a short-lived medium, old posters are the ones of yesterday. Luckily there are private persons who have collected posters for various reasons. We were lucky to acquire substantial collections as donations or on permanent loan from private collectors (i.e. from people engaged in the former solidarity movement), and it is to them that the BAB collection owes its historical depth, as, for example, concerning the liberation and solidarity movements. The most efficient way of acquiring new posters would be to obtain them directly from the printer. But it was no easy task to persuade printers in Namibia of doing so, although we are slowly making progress. As a result we rely on a network of persons willing to help us, and we visit regularly government offices, NGOs, private companies, etc., and especially printers to ask them for posters. In addition we have made special efforts to acquire representative sets of posters of, for example, Namibian elections, and we regularly ask students to collect systematically in their region. Such a job can, however, be rather tricky and a collector has to be prepared to justify his or her actions in terms of collecting for archives or museums, and not for personal reasons. Removing posters can cause trouble to a collector into trouble, even provoke confrontational situations, especially if people think that collecting a certain political poster is an expression of the

collector's party affiliation. Just think of someone who collected election posters in a situation such as experienced in Zimbabwe in the last few years.

In spite of all our efforts there are situations and circumstances in which a poster cannot be removed. In such cases the only option is to make a photograph, so that the poster is at least documented. The curator's frustration can be caused by posters glued to a wall for eternity, as, for instance, the posters inside a club in Opuwo in north-western Namibia (*IMAGE 1; Bar in Opuwo*). Sometimes a poster still serves its purpose and is out of reach for the collector, like the one on which the Namibian president Sam Nujoma is calling the nation to the arms in the struggle against aids (*IMAGE 2; Poster Nujoma c. 2004*) displayed in Rehoboth in central Namibia. In other situations the size alone prevents taking down a poster, as, for example, the beautiful poster advertising with "Black Label" Carling beer outside Otavi (*IMAGE 3, Black Label*).

*The second task* in building up a poster collection is cataloguing and storing the material. It has been of advantage that our institution is placed in Basel due to the proximity to the well-known local school for design which holds a famous collection of Swiss posters with several ten-thousand copies. Thanks to the director and curator-in-chief Rolf Thalmann, we were able to profit from its rich knowledge and experience. We decided to adopt their cataloguing system, which, though rather complicated and expensive, satisfies both the need for preservation and that for accessibility. Its main feature is that researchers work with slides or photographs of the posters, while the originals are kept in special map-boards and are no longer touched. In addition we started to digitalise the posters in 2003. We did not scan the posters directly but used the slides to produce a scan of a printable quality (2-7 Megabite). In 2004 we published a catalogue, designed as a reference book, containing full colour images of around 900 posters with all the biographical information. We wanted to produce a

'classical' printed catalogue, in a first step, as we thought that this medium is still the most valuable for students, especially when it comes to researching audiences of posters. E.g. Namibian students can use the catalogue in interviews, inquiring issues such as the perception of particular images. A catalogue easily fits into a bag and can be taken anywhere. Thus, we are working to put, in a second step, our whole collection in the internet in near future to further facilitate its accessibility.

### 3. Posters as part of visual history

What all posters have in common is their use as propaganda medium in the widest sense – their function is to sell something be it a product or be it an ideology. The design of the poster, therefore, requires special visual strategies. Using little text and/or only a few pictorial elements, contact must be established with the attentive or casual viewer. The intended message should reach the attentive or casual viewer, and stick. The design alone is not sufficient to achieve this goal, and also depends on where and how frequently the poster is displayed.

Posters are part of a visual history. As a visual communication medium in public spaces, posters participate in our everyday visual experiences. Most of them we encounter in passing, now and again registering the odd one consciously, and only very rarely reflecting on what we have seen. This superficial perception is reinforced by the rapid changes in the poster landscape. In general, posters are a very short-lived medium. They are replaced every few weeks, postered over or torn down – very rarely does a poster remain hanging in the same spot for months, let alone years. Nevertheless, more of what we have seen remains in our memory than we might first think. Leafing through a catalogue of posters which we might have seen ten or more years previously, for example, is often

accompanied by the return of memories of certain events or particular feelings. Thus, posters serve as it were, as stored visual markers of past experiences. There are good reasons, therefore, for the frequent use of posters as illustrations for modern history. Posters are likewise a suitable starting point for discussing history because, as Max Gallo shows in his popular book 'Posters in History', historical events and ideologies come alive in posters. Our own experiences have confirmed the potential of posters to elicit and recapture a certain 'Zeitgeist'. Ideological convictions, political conflicts, consumer identities (whether aspired to or rejected), but also daily material products, exhibitions and events return in all their immediacy and tangibility, when looking at/ being shown posters. This process of remembering, or perhaps more precisely being reminded and recalling, can trigger many kinds of reaction, from nostalgic enthusiasm or light irritation right through vehement emotional outburst.

The significance of posters for visual or 'optical' memory is largely conditional on the specific contexts of their production and employment, which differentiate them from other visual media such as photography, film, painting and sculpture. Visual communication via a poster requires the simplification of a message and concentration on a core statement, on the essential. Posters must operate with a 'graphic language', comprising images, signs, colours and a few words, that is quickly understood. But whether or not such a condensed message reaches and remains with the viewer depends, as already mentioned, not only on the graphic design but also on where and how frequently a poster is displayed. If a single picture alone cannot establish itself in a viewer's memory, perhaps through repetition it can. Not least because pictures are not simply copies of what exists but generate their own genuinely productive performance. One can consequently argue, for example, that it is not a specific sensibility that is represented and communicated, but, much more, that a picture evokes or induces this sensibility

in the viewer. This is particularly the case for posters that are both well-designed and displayed in large numbers.

Posters, then, are part of a visual history in which each poster has its own individual history. Understanding and evaluating the significance of a poster cannot be limited to an interpretation of the design but also requires knowledge of its production, purposes, distribution and reception. But even focusing just on the stylistic aspects of a poster raises many questions. What visual and technical methods were employed to fulfil the assignment, to communicate visually a particular message to a public? In other words, what iconography is employed in the poster? What colours? What typefaces? How are the visual and textual elements arranged? Which printing technique was used? And so on. In addition, a poster is not just the sum of its individual and textual elements, but a 'composition'. This is true not only for the poster in itself but also for its situation in a broader context. So, on one hand we must try to understand and demonstrate what processes of seeing a poster evokes in a viewer, i.e. how the visual communication takes place, while at the same time taking into account the social, political and cultural setting for these processes. Included in this context, that is in the specific history of a poster, are the circumstances of its creation – which group or individual(s) initiated the production of a poster and why, the condition under which it was produced. Then, as discussed above, because multiplicity is a characteristic feature of the poster medium, we naturally want to know where the poster was displayed, and how many were put up. Finally, there are the questions about the reception of the poster and its message: who saw it and how often, did it stick into the viewers' memory, and what reactions did people have on seeing the poster. The reception or perception of a poster can vary with place, time and person, and is embedded in a wider history of seeing or vision.