

ORAL TRADITION AND IDENTITY: THE HERERO IN BOTSWANA

by

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Preamble

The problem of ethnicity, ethnic minorities and ethnic boundaries is a recurrent theme in social anthropology. Much of the discussion about ethnic identity has centred on the cognitive or categorizing aspects, and few have included the affective dimension, although indicating an awareness of it. (1) In fact, the affective dimension seems deliberately not to be included. As Cohen puts it, "In terms of observable and verifiable criteria, what matters sociologically is what people actually do, not what they subjectively think or what they think they think". (2) Epstein, however, suggests an approach in which the affective aspects of ethnic identity are also incorporated. He says: "... the one major conviction that emerged was the powerful emotional charge which seems to underlie so much of ethnic behaviour; and it is this affective dimension of the problem that seems to me lacking in so many recent attempts to tackle it [the problem of ethnicity]." (3)

This paper is a preliminary attempt to analyse the perception of history - as it appears in oral tradition - as an expression of ethnic identity. I will argue that oral tradition not only upholds and reinforces ethnic identity, but that it is also an idiom which can be used to voice, and give form to, the emotional aspects of identity. In this paper I am particularly interested in showing why, for the Herero, it seems to be necessary to keep the past alive so as to justify the present.

We know that historical documentation is selective and that this applies to written sources as well as oral tradition. However, there is probably a stronger element of selection in oral tradition as it is a malleable body of knowledge, dependent upon social circumstances for its emphasis. As Vansina put it, "It cannot be sufficiently stressed that, in the last analysis, every tradition exists as such only in virtue of the fact that it serves the interests of the society in which it is preserved, whether it does so directly, or indirectly by serving the interests of an informant". (4)

When collecting oral tradition among the Herero in Botswana I mainly had access to three kinds: (a) personal recollections; (b) second- or third-hand information; and (c) songs which had been composed during or after an event. It is likely that personal recollections are most reliable regarding details, but that the choice of details would be idiosyncratic, although reflecting a general trend. A second-hand statement would be less reliable as far as details are concerned, but would tend to be placed in a general historical context, and would express a higher selectivity regarding the choice of historical items. In a song one finds the highest degree of selectiveness and greater use of symbolism; in fact, one might suggest that

the songs, with the descriptions couched in a symbolic shorthand, would have the strongest emotional overtones.

I did fieldwork in Ngamiland in Western Botswana, and the oral tradition I analyse derives from there unless otherwise stated. Thus, my analysis applies mainly to the conditions in that area, although it probably illustrates trends common to all Herero in Botswana.

The Herero in Botswana

The Herero (5) are easily visible in Botswana's social landscape. With their relative wealth, their thrift and industriousness and the women's striking Victorian dresses, they have become a living legend. The majority live in Ngamiland, but there are pockets of Herero in many parts of Botswana, especially in Ghanzi and Rakops. Although citizens of Botswana, the Herero regard Namibia as their country, and there are strong links between those in Botswana and those in Namibia. Kinship is an important factor in the Herero social fabric, making for social cohesiveness. Most Herero in Botswana have relatives in Namibia, a factor that strengthens the links between them across the borders.

Pre-colonial settlement

The majority of Herero came to Botswana as refugees after the uprising against the Germans in 1904. However, archaeological evidence (6) as well as oral tradition indicate that Herero lived - either permanently or transitorily - in the Botswana part of the Kalahari long before the present settlement. Oral tradition collected by the Resident Magistrate of Ghanzi in the beginning of the twenties supports this. According to one of the Resident Magistrate's Herero informants, "the country from Gobabis to Ghanzi was full of Damara cattleposts and big game ... The Damara used to come with their lot of cattle and their family from South West Africa in order to find good grass for their cattle ..." (7). The informant said that these were the conditions at the time of Mbanderu chief Munjuku, who was born in the early part of the 19th century. (8) According to oral tradition I collected, when the Herero fled in 1904 they knew the area from before, especially the young men who had herded there earlier, and they knew which route to take.

The earliest recorded influx

Around 1896 a couple of hundred Herero came across the border to Botswana as the result of an early battle against the Germans led by the Mbanderu chief Kahimemua and the prominent Herero, Kambahahiza, also known as Nikodemus. The two leaders were executed by the Germans, and their followers subsequently left for Botswana with their families, their cattle and their small stock. Many of my informants mentioned the agreement between Tawana chief Letsholathebe and the Herero that they were to help each other in times of crisis. Lt Scholefield in Ghanzi suggested at the time that they came at the invitation of the Tawana chief Sekgoma. (9) The invitation to the Herero was supposed to be a bid by Sekgoma to increase his supporters. The immigrants went through what is now Mamuno in Ghanzi District and northwards to Ngamiland, where they settled in the Makakun area. Some of the immigrants stayed behind in the Ghanzi area, where their descendants still live.

As the immigrants came with all their possessions, and were able to settle in an area with relatively rich pastures, they in fact established the economic basis for Herero existence in Botswana, according to informants. Another aspect of this early settlement was the establishment of power positions, both in Makakun and later in the area towards Lake Ngami, power positions which were accepted by the authorities as headmanships. Those who were appointed headmen were not traditionally in the position to take up chieftainships.

The flight from the Germans in 1904

Already in the first months of 1904 scattered groups of Herero began to come across the border to Botswana. However, the majority came after the bloody battle of Hamakari, the Herero name for Waterberg, in August. Many came through NyaiNyai under the leadership of Chief Samuel Maharero of the Herero and Kahimemua's successor, Chief Nikodemus of the Mbanderu. Others came through Ghanzi.

The uprising and the German "war of extermination" resulted in horrendous devastation. About 80 per cent of the Herero were killed, many of them during the battle of Hamakari. Many of the refugees travelled for a long time, suffering many hardships. Their impoverished condition even moved representatives for the colonial authorities. Sub-Inspector Hodson wrote about meeting refugees in Kalahari: "The poor natives presented a terrible appearance; men, women and children were in an absolute state of starvation, and, to add to their miseries, were suffering from smallpox ..." (10)

Many of the survivors of the war against the Germans and the subsequent flight have vivid memories of their experiences. Some of my informants were present at the battle of Hamakari. They were not very responsive when I asked them about it, but gave detailed descriptions of what happened afterwards as they fled. Almost all the survivors went into great detail about what they ate during the flight, how they obtained liquid from roots and melons, how they would grab food when they found it and eat it raw as they were too hungry to wait for it to be prepared. Some of my informants had not come through Hamakari, but they had had the same battle against hunger, thirst and heat.

One of the events during the flight which obviously made a great impact was an ambush by a water-hole. One informant told me:

[After Hamakari] the war was not over. We went from Hamakari to Matjajeva because the fight had not ended. From early morning the Herero fought by the water-hole. They met each other there, those from Hamakari and those from Tjihenda. I saw it with my own eyes as I see you now. Samuel Maharero was there. People went towards the water-hole. [Then someone called:]

There is something in the water-hole!
There is something in the water-hole!

They were weeping. They shouted. They were told about it like that. Therefore people did not run to the water-hole, they remained with the cattle and the men.

This eye-witness account is reflected in a song which was composed about the incident:

A shallow water-hole of birds
Ate my father's younger brother yesterday
When he put tails of beige cattle around his waist,
Cattle he did not eat.

When our hill shows me the other side
I will go around [it] towards the east

Do not follow the horses with white face-markings

The newly weaned are good
They are with the wife of Hijakame

A home which you can recognise from the sounds
Like a brook

Do not go to drink the water which give you sores
In that water you will be shot.

The song describes in a symbolic form the horrors of the ambush. It was well known to the refugees that if they saw doves circling over a small area, this indicated water.

By one of these watering places several refugees met. The enemy was waiting for them. As the refugees ran forward to drink they were shot. To prevent this, Samuel Maharero told his followers that they must not drink, because if they drank they would be infested with sores - of the earlier mention of smallpox.

"Our hill" in the song was a known landmark, indicating that the water-hole was not far away. It was when the refugees had gone around the hill and were facing east that they saw the doves circling over the shallow water-hole.

There was some confusion among informants over who the enemy behind the ambush was. One of them thought it was Nama fighting Herero, and referred me back to the Herero-Nama wars. The singer said the enemy were Nama in German service. He also mentioned that the name of the "horse with white face-markings" was Boi, and that it belonged to Witbooi. I did not get a clear explanation of the reference to "white face-markings", but it may have to do with the Nama uniform. We know that Witbooi's men used a white scarf on the hat as a distinguishing mark (11), and that the Herero earlier had painfully experienced the Nama guerrilla tactics. This may also link up with the fact that Witbooi did have to supply armed men to support the German forces as part of his peace agreement with them. (12) The singer continued his explanation: "It was also said, 'Don't follow the horse with the white face-markings because you don't know how many bullets are still left. If you follow it, you go to your death.' People warned each other in that way." He also mentioned how "the brook" refers to the holes in the ground behind the water-hole where the enemy was waiting. "'The brook' means holes in the ground where men can hide. The holes were so large that a man could stand up, and only the upper part of his body (lit. "his chest") would show. When the refugees came towards him, he crouched and waited for them. They could not see him. When they were near him, he shot."

The stanza about the "newly weaned" is a reminder of the suffering inflicted on small children during the flight. That they were newly weaned is another way of saying that their mothers had been killed, and there was no one to suckle them. The destruction and confusion inflicted on innocent civilians is also the theme of another song which was sung to me by an old woman, herself a survivor from the war:

Herero, where are you going?

...

And now they shoot,
They shoot at the thornbush of the sheep of Mujema
They are running,
They have guns.
Bring me my stick.
They are running
And guns are in their hands.
They are fighting the war ...

Here the singer changed into oratory:

They are running, they are running with guns under their arms. Prepare and let us go, Johana, let us go and drink from the shallow water-holes. Be ready to go, let us drink from the shallow water-holes. The bulls have white markings ... Johana, carry the child on your back and let us go. - My child, my child, where is it? It has fallen. Let us go, the sun has gone down and darkness is coming. Johana says, I am not going to ride that horse, it will throw me down. - Come to my horse which is black and white ... Samuel, hear the guns [lit. "the gun has shot"], people are distraught, the child has lost its mother, the mother has lost her husband, the lambs have gone to suckle the goats ...

This song echoes the themes in the previous song. It contains pithy descriptions of the confusion, the fear and anxiety which the war created. It is impressed upon us how the refugees had to run and run to avoid getting shot; how mothers were

desperately trying to get their children with them, and, at the end, we see how the war has led to total disruption of normal conditions: the children are motherless, wives have lost their husbands, and lambs find food from unnatural sources. All this epitomises the destruction which took place.

From these examples one appreciates the dimensions of the holocaust which the war constituted for the Herero. It was with this background that they started their life in Botswana.

Wrangles with the Tawana and quest for identity

Although the refugees settled among their fellow Herero, the situation was far from easy. Samuel stayed in Ngamiland until 1907, when he left for Nylstroom in Transvaal. According to written sources, the main reason for his recruitment by the Anglo-French Land Company of the Transvaal Limited was his finances, but oral tradition suggests that he had difficulties with the established Herero, and, also, that he did not want to be ruled by another African, i.e. the Tawana chief, whom the British had instituted as the indirect ruler.

Nikodemus, the Mbanderu chief, stayed in the Nokaneng area, north of Makakun, until 1918, when he left for Crown Lands. He first went to Kavimba on the Zambesi, then to Toromeja near Rakops, where his descendants still live. The written sources cite his disagreements with the Tawana chief, while oral tradition suggests that he was in the same position as Samuel Maharero as regards his fellow Herero. However, in Kavimba conflicts over the leadership emerged from within his own group. The young Keharanjo, claiming to be a direct descendant of Kahimema, declared himself the rightful chief. When Nikodemus moved on to Toromeja, Keharanjo returned to Ngamiland with his followers and settled by Lake Ngami.

One of the reasons for the relations between the Herero and the Tawana deteriorating may have been that Sekgoma, their initial host, was deposed by the British in 1907. Mathibe became the new chief. He had no traditional alliance with the Herero. It is likely that he regarded them as a threat, as followers of his deposed rival. The result was long, drawn-out quarrels between the Herero and the Tawana, with the British as reluctant go-betweens who also had the ultimate power.

One of Mathibe's pet ideas was that the Herero headmen should go with him when the royal village was moved from Tsau to Maun. The Herero were not willing to do this, and the disagreement continued until Mathibe died. In 1937 his son, Moremi III, came to power. He was "young and enthusiastic and wanted to practise his power", as one of the traders in the area put it. Moremi insisted that the Herero should go and live in Maun, but they refused. In 1938 the situation worsened: a number of prominent Herero were imprisoned, and two of them died there.

Informants often talked about this. Their statements reflected the Herero insistence on keeping their identity intact. One informant, who acted as an interpreter during the court case, said:

When we had arrived here and were living here, we had difficulties with the Tswana. We said, 'We are Herero, we do not want to do what you do and eat what you eat.' We had many cases because of this. We had cases because of our name. They wanted to obliterate our name, to say we were Tswana ... They told us to adopt Tswana life-style, but we refused. There was quite a noise about it until the chief of the Tswana caught us and put us in prison. We still refused ... Now we have made up with them. In the law of the country we are Herero, and we have agreed to the law. Not that we have become Tswana, but we are Tswana in law. Our country is Namibia; we are not from here, no!

One of the men who was imprisoned talked about it like this:

The chief said we must go and live in Maun. However, we explained that we were afraid of tsetse. The chief insisted that we must come and live [close to him] ... We asked him if the old, abandoned homes [we saw] had belonged to Tswana. He said that the homes had belonged to Tswana who abandoned them because of tsetse. We said, if that was the case we could not bring our cattle because they would die ... He then said, 'If you will not come now, wait until the rains.' ... In December the rains came. We said, 'We fear the rains, we will be overcome by rain ...' and we went to see the DC. However, shortly after the DC's truck came to Makakun and we were caught. There were no Tswana there, only the police ... who took us to Maun ... In the morning we went to court. We were told by the chief, 'I said "Stay here", but you left'. We said we were afraid of the rains. The chief said, 'Now you are afraid of the rains, and I am the chief of the land and the rain. Which is the more powerful?' We answered that the raid was the more powerful, that the chief did not come up to the power of the rain. [He said] 'If you say that, you have to go to prison because it means that you despise me.' We went to prison.

In this account the main reason for their imprisonment was that they expressly did not want to let themselves be subjugated to the power of the Tswana chief. Nor did they allow themselves to be treated as second-class citizens by moving into areas others had had to abandon.

In written sources the same sorts of tensions are clearly evident. In his opening speech at the trial of the Mbanderu headmen, Chief Moremi said:

Know the accused before the court. They are members of the Mbanderu section of the Damaras who form part of my tribe. They are my people and under my authority ... The defiance of my order in the old days would have led to the death of those who disobeyed. (13)

In the aftermath of this upheaval there were many plans for change, among them wholesale migration by the Herero out of Ngamiland to Ghanzi and Rakops. However, only a handful left, and an uneasy peace was restored.

Attempted return to Namibia

In the years after, the Herero applied to the British for permission to return to Namibia. The British tried to delay it, as there was no realistic prospect of the South African authorities allowing them to settle. In 1957, however, the Tswana Regent (14) had said, in a meeting with a Herero delegation, "That the Batawana had no objection to the return of the Damara provided the Government agreed". (15) This was taken by some Herero as a go-ahead, and a group from the Mbanderu section, adherents of Kaharanjo's son, Munjuku, who had been appointed headman in 1951, decided to go, taking all they owned. At NyaiNyai they were stopped by South African police, and 108 of their cattle were shot. The migrants turned back to Ngamiland, but did not give up the hope of returning to Namibia. They again applied for permission to go, and the British approached the authorities in Namibia with the request. These replied that the area around NyaiNyai, although still uninhabited, was earmarked for white settlers.

A popular song was composed about the event in the idiom of a praise song for an ox, Kaevaramurunde. In the song there are references to the shooting:

The beast in the valley, which is it?
The cattle are in the valley where they are shot

The singer of the song described Kaevaramurunde's role in the event: "The guns were fired as if there was a real war ... Then you saw Kaevaramurunde coming. The ox ran the other way. It made [the other cattle] also run back. The guns were fired, but the cattle went away to stay, again, in their homes here." Thus the song not only expressed the bitter experience at NyaiNyai but also, implicitly, the rescue, symbolized by the ox turning the herd and thereby preventing further destruction.

Munjuku's return to Namibia

Munjuku now became the main figure in a new wrangle with the authorities. In 1959 the Tawana Regent deposed him without consulting the British. This led to a wrangle between the Herero, the British and the Tawana Regent. It was a long process, which included an administrative enquiry in 1960, appeal to the United Nations by Munjuku after which he went to Namibia, and his eventual settlement in Epukiro reserve in Namibia.

Munjuku's return to Namibia had a profound effect on his followers in Botswana, especially in Ngamiland. They did not want a new headman to replace him, and still regard him as their leader. The relations between Munjuku's followers and those whose power positions were established before 1904 were also strained. Today the two factions still disagree, but socially there is no obvious animosity between them, and they intermarry.

Munjuku enacted the realization of the Herero dream of going back to Namibia. Many of my informants, who were also his followers, told about his departure with gusto. The reason for their continued allegiance to him was explained in the story about the manner in which he left, yet kept his authority over them:

He left us as if we were a parcel on a tree and he the owner of the parcel. He gave up [his position here] saying, 'I am the chief, but someone must look after my belongings which are hanging on the tree. The belongings are not yours to keep, they are mine. I am still looking for somewhere where people will agree to let me stay. That parcel is mine only, and [one day] I will come and take it back.'

A popular song was composed "to praise him":

Follow the tracks of the pangolin
on which a cow would travel.
A small thing fell from the ear
Onto the lap of father's younger brother
And he failed to pick it up.

It was bravery which got him into trouble
in the country of the boers.

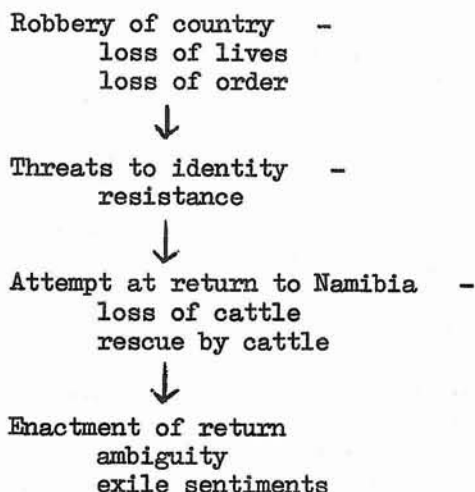
The tracks of the pangolin in the sand are often used by cattle to walk on. Here the pangolin symbolizes Munjuku, and the cattle following in his track are his adherents. To the Herero, pangolins are regarded as ritually sacred, and meeting a pangolin in the forest means luck. In homes where the holy fire is still used, the skin of the pangolin is among the regalia. Its meat can only be eaten by men. Thus, the use of the pangolin to symbolize Munjuku shows he is a man, a strong and brave man who brought good fortune to his adherents. He made a track for others to follow. According to the singer, the father's younger brother is one of Munjuku's relatives who did not follow him to Namibia because he thought it would force him to live in a town, which he feared. The singer ended his explanation of the song with the rather surprising reflection:

We [who are here] became cowards for not going to Namibia. That is why we sing about him, about the bravery which brought him there. We who are left, we are cowards because we are not going to the land of the boers.

This reflects the ambiguous feelings of those who stayed behind. They praise the man who dared to realize their dream and who braved the uncertainties in white-ruled Namibia. At the same time they admit that they chose the safety of Botswana. It is the ambiguity of exile.

Summary and Conclusions

The process of Herero existence could, on the basis of the material presented here, be summarized as follows:



R. J. Lifton has shown how a disaster of great magnitude has a long-lasting effect on those who survive it. He says: "There is, in fact, mounting evidence that the effects of disaster can extend over generations, and that adverse effects of significant proportions can occur in children of survivors, even when the children are born some years after a particular disaster." (16) He mentions several manifestations of the effects of a disaster. One of these is what he calls the death imprint, the recurring image of the disaster in the minds of the survivors.

We have seen how the Herero remember vividly the ravages of the war against the Germans and their flight through the desert. They keep their images intact through oral tradition. I would suggest that it is necessary for them to do so because the effects of the destruction are still with them - the loss of their country, the order of their existence. Peter Marris analyses the effects of loss as a process of grieving. He argues that if meaning and predictability are disrupted, one experiences a loss with which one has to come to terms through the process of grieving (as opposed to mourning). He links tribal rivalry with grieving, saying that "Both arise from situations where the meaningfulness of life is threatened by the loss of familiar relationships ...". (17)

In my analysis I have shown how the Herero have used history to reformulate their identity. They use conquering of suffering to symbolize strength of identity, and history is therefore a demonstration of identity. If a loss is given a form, this may in itself be a factor in the reformulation of new meaning. Through their insistence on maintaining identity, the Herero have come far towards recovery. In addition, they have given themselves a means of articulating, and thereby acknowledging, the effects of their devastation which are still with them. They are, however, left with the ambiguities and sadness of exile.

Notes

- (1) See, for example, Fredrik Barth, Ethnic Groups and Boundaries (Bergen - Oslo: Universitetsforlaget; London: Allen & Unwin, 1969); Abner Cohen (ed), Urban Ethnicity (London: Tavistock Publications, 1974).
- (2) Cohen, Urban Ethnicity, p. x.
- (3) A. L. Epstein, Ethos and Identity (London: Tavistock Publications; Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1978), p. xi.
- (4) Jan Vansina, Oral Tradition (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965), p. 78.
- (5) When I use the term Herero I refer to all Herero speakers in Botswana. The Herero-speaking population is divided into two sections, Mbanderu and Herero "proper". This is neither a linguistic nor a cultural division, nor are the two sections mutually exclusive as there is a considerable degree of intermarriage between them. However, in terms of political allegiance, they seem to keep apart. In written sources the Herero are often referred to as Damara.
- (6) Edwin Wilmsen, "Prehistoric and Historic Antecedents of a Contemporary Ngamiland Community" (forthcoming).
- (7) BNA S.3/1, Resident Magistrate Ghanzi to Government Secretary, 17.2.1926.
- (8) The Herero have a calendar which goes back to 1830. According to I. Schapera, Notes on some Herero Genealogies (Cape Town: Communications from the School of African Studies, New Series No. 14, 1945), p. 36, Munjuku was circumcised in the Herero year ojundu, and thus born a few years earlier. Schapera did not date the Herero year. According to oral information by Ketanga Hange, the year ojundu was 1834.
- (9) BNA HC 145/1, Lt Scholefield's report on Ngamiland, 10.12.1897.
- (10) Arnold W. Hodson, Trekking the Great Thirst (London: T. Fisher Unwin Ltd, 1912), p. 91.
- (11) See Helmut Bley, South-West Africa under German Rule (London: Heinemann, 1971), photo no. 3.
- (12) J. H. Wellington, South West Africa and its Human Issues (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 183.
- (13) BNA S.214/1/1.
- (14) Chief Moremi died in 1946, and his wife was appointed Regent in 1947.
- (15) BNA S.126/3/1, Divisional Commissioner North to the Government Secretary, 14.2.1958.
- (16) Robert Jay Lifton and Eric Olson, "The Human Meaning of Total Disaster", Psychiatry, Vol. 39, February 1976, p. 14.
- (17) Peter Marris, Loss and Change (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), p. 67.