

Bars and Segregation in Namibia

The colonial authorities in Namibia tried to control the consumption of alcohol and the places where people meet over drinks, establishing patterns of racial separation which still persist.

• ERICH MAISLINGER

BARS of any kind are essentially social places, offering a non-committal getting-together of a variety of people.

It must be noted, though, that not everybody has always had access to any bar. After all, bars are also environments where social hierarchies are reproduced and sometimes challenged.

The (poorly documented) history of such localities in Namibia is often one of segregation. However, since independence, we can see that these racial and cultural boundaries are not as fixed as they once were.

Segregation in drinking establishments in Namibia has its origin in the Brussels Conference of 1890, when European colonial powers (including Germany) decided to forbid the sale of any alcoholic drinks to indigenous Africans on the grounds that colonialists believed Africans could not drink responsibly.

The German administra-

tion tried to implement laws to follow these policies, although not very successfully.

Prior to the Ovaherero and Nama genocide, alcohol laws were not always enforced very stringently, and even later, when there was more administrative capacity to enforce legislation, prohibition was never fully achieved.

An excellent example to underline this is the picture of one of the first 'pubs' in Windhoek, which was called 'Gaststätte zum Deutschen Kaiser' (Restaurant to the German Emperor). Photos like this one are rare, and compared to later ones, the setting is really different, because non-whites usually would only be seen as workers and not relaxing next to their 'masters'.

Of course, even bars which were frequented by both blacks and whites were still subjected to the power politics of colonialism (the position of the black people in this photo is already making this clear). Nevertheless,

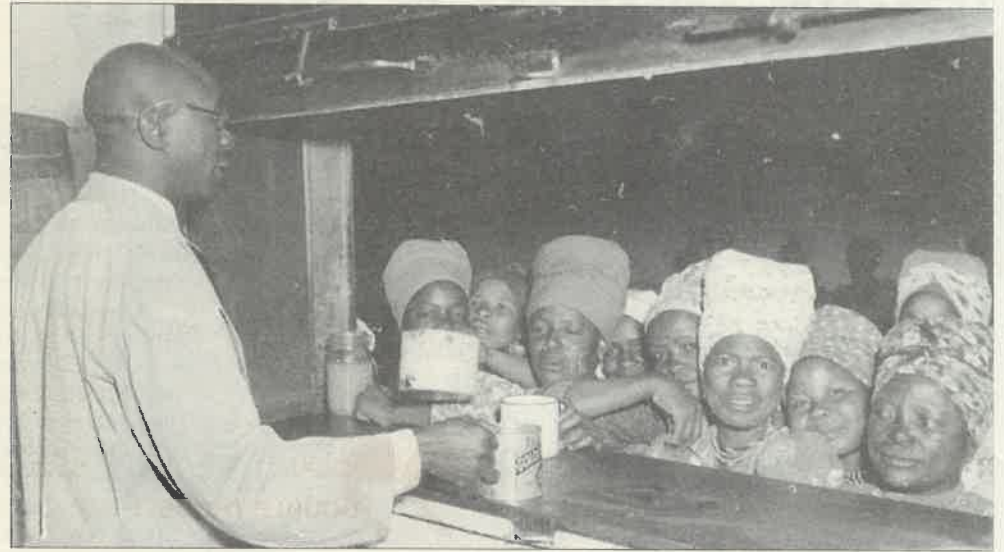
it took a long time for full segregation of drinking establishments to become implemented.

As the infrastructure of the German colonial towns improved and administrative powers increased, the separation of people of different skin colours deepened. Gradually, if black and coloured Namibians wished to enter a bar, they had to be employees there.

Historical records show many of these waiters and waitresses received alcohol from their employers as a means of payment, reward, or even bribery. These actions technically contradicted the alcohol laws at the time.

Many bars also functioned as brothels, which was another reason why the administration sought to regulate those places. While alcohol consumption among Europeans was initially not seen as a major problem, by the end of the colonial era, drunkards were placed on so-called 'alcoholic lists' (*Säuferlisten*), which meant they would not be allowed to buy drinks at a bar.

Drinking culture was so pervasive among Europeans that by 1903 there was approximately one licensed



SEPARATE ... Beer hall patrons and serving staff in Windhoek's Old Location, 1950s.

drinking establishment for every 78 whites in Namibia.

Though the Germans were concerned (at least on paper) with black people consuming European liquor, they did not really care about the homebrewing of traditional drinks in the locations. With the South Africans coming into power after the First World War, this would change.

CONSOLIDATING SEGREGATION

Under the South African administration, the authorities sought to more tightly control all alcohol consumption among black people. This included both European beer and liquor, as well as traditional brewing in shebeens and cuca shops.

In Windhoek during these years, many police raids were carried out, home brews were destroyed, and black Namibians had to pay fines for the illegal production and consumption of alcohol. As a result, many people started to produce and drink traditional brews outside of the city in the surrounding hills.

Even the South Africans recognised that enforcing complete prohibition was not possible.

In the 1930s, the administration installed beer halls in the Old Location. These were the

only places where black people could drink alcohol legally. Here, beer with low alcohol content was sold, and revenue was used to finance segregation in the locations, understandably creating discontent.

Fights over equal civil rights often took shape as fights over equal drinking rights, and many protests occurred at, or in connection with, beer halls. The most famous was the protests and shootings in the Windhoek Old Location in December 1959.

Even though the planned removal from the location to Katutura was the primary reason for the protest, additional grievances included the administration's prohibition of traditional brewing. According to the freedom fighter John ya Otto, who witnessed what happened on this day, some people just wanted to drink their after-work beer while others smashed the windows of the beer hall as a sign of discontent.

CROSSING BORDERS

Ultimately, unlike the German bars, shebeens, and cuca shops, beer halls did not make it into the period of independence. When alcohol consumption was fully legalised in the 1970s, their story ended. During the liberation war, many cuca-shops in northern

Namibia served as places to have a drink for both people of colour and sometimes whites (often soldiers). This caused difficulties for the owners, as one's allegiance for or against the apartheid administration was contentious.

Some bars in Windhoek opened their doors to all patrons in the late 1980s, allowing for a multiracial atmosphere.

The nightclubs 'Namibia by Night' (Khomasdal) and 'Midnight Express' and 'Club Thriller' (Katutura) are worth mentioning. Up to the present, however, bars are rarely multicultural establishments.

While positive steps have been taken since independence, so long as the gap between rich and poor continues to grow, these few multicultural spaces will retain a different sort of segregated exclusivity – one of class instead of race.

This gap is the most serious border that has yet to be crossed, and which still divides Namibians.

* The author is a teacher in Salzburg, Austria. He conducted research in Namibia in 2018 for his master's degree. Those interested in sharing stories about the history of beer drinking can contact him at erich.maislinger@gmail.com.



Photos: National Archives of Namibia

COLONIAL ... A scene at a colonial-era bar bearing the title of the German Kaiser.

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