

# Hornkranz and Social Justice



Photo: Bayron van Wyk

**'AHISTORICAL HONOUR'** ... The Curt von François statue with placards at its pedestal.

The statue of German military officer Curt von François in Windhoek is a prominent symbol of Namibia's colonial past, honouring a man responsible for the massacre of nearly 80 people in April 1893, and pointing to the complexities of postcolonial Namibia.

• **BAYRON VAN WYK**

ON 18 October 1965, a statue of Curt von François went up in front of the head office of the Windhoek municipality.

The inauguration event of the newly constructed building was to coincide with the 75th anniversary of the 'founding' of the city by Von François.

In 1889 he had arrived in Namibia from a mission in West and Central Africa to encourage traditional leaders to sign protection treaties with the German Empire, which his predecessor, Heinrich Göring, failed to do.

Although he had already signed a treaty with Ova-herero chief Tjamuaha Maharero, Göring failed to convince Hendrik Witbooi (also known as !Nanseb Gâbemab) to do the same.

Witbooi was one of the only chiefs in the south who refused to sign a protection treaty. For this he has been described as a revolutionary.

Von François, however, regarded him as the greatest threat to German colonial ambitions in Namibia. Therefore, Witbooi had to be militarily crushed.

In the early morning hours of 12 April 1893, Von François launched a surprise attack on Witbooi at his mountain fortress of Hornkranz, 120 km south-west of Windhoek.

It is estimated that 78 women were killed and four more wounded by the Germans.

While Witbooi himself and some of his soldiers escaped further south – eventually retaliating with an attack on the German agricultural station Kubub near Aus – the Germans would continue to hunt him down for years to come.

On the present-day commercial farm Hornkranz, now owned by the Cloete family, the graves of the Nama victims remain unmarked.

Close to the kraal a small white monument stands to commemorate the dead. It was erected at a 1992 commemoration event by then deputy prime minister Hendrik Witbooi, himself a descendant of !Nanseb Gâbemab.

When I visited the farm with the artist-cum-activist Hildegard Titus, the owner informed us that the site was under normal circumstances off-limits to visitors interested in this history.

A lack of public awareness about the history of this battle and its brutal aftermath has led to an unjustified and ahistorical honouring of Von François – and even the Hornkranz massacre itself – within modern Namibia.

This is epitomised, perhaps, by the statue of Von François in front of the City of Windhoek's head office.

#ACURTFAREWELL

Titus has been travelling throughout the south to create awareness of her #ACurtFarewell petition, which calls for the removal of the statue (hereafter simply called 'Curt').

The petition, which was launched in June 2020, has

garnered more than 1 500 signatures so far.

Echoing the sentiments of the Curt petition, on Namibia's Youth Day, following the nationwide Covid-19 shutdown, a group of young activists protested at the statue demanding its removal.

Dressed in characteristic Covid-19 masks, the activists argued the statue symbolised existing colonial systems of racism and sexism.

As such, they connected their protest action to the global #BlackLivesMatter movement for racial justice after the brutal murder of George Floyd by an American police officer, and the activists similarly wanted to draw attention to the extrajudicial killings of Frieda Ndatipo, Johnny Doëseb, Benesius Kalola and the Zimbabwe-born taxi driver Tambouna 'Talent' Black.

The former two men were tragically shot dead by Namibian Defence Force (NDF) members in their 'Operation Kalahari' campaign.

This operation followed another (more) controversial anti-crime drive by the security forces, called 'Operation Hornkranz'.

In a press statement released in early 2019, the NDF operation was criticised by Nama traditional leaders for its historical references to the brutal killings of their people by German colonialists in 1893.

A decade later, the Nama would be systematically murdered and enslaved by this colonial force. According to estimates, 50% of the Nama population were killed in this genocide.

STATUE STILL STANDS

Concerning Windhoek's #BlackLivesMatter protests, city spokesperson Harold Akwenye said "I won't mind it coming here", and that the city was willing to work with activists "to change the look and feel of the city".

But several months after the petition was initiated by Titus, the statue still stands.

It would seem that the demands of activists have received the backseat of the city council's priorities.

This may soon change, however, as social activist and political science lecturer Job Amupanda was elected as Windhoek's mayor.

The removal of Curt was identified as part of his political programme for Windhoek's 'Radical Transformation', and recent statements by Affirmative Repositioning (AR) activists show that the push to remove Curt is gaining more traction than ever before.

The continued existence of the Curt statue points to the complexities of postcolonial Namibia, in which the colonial and postcolonial exist alongside each other.

This is also evident in the high income and wealth disparities between black and white people.

The situation is further exacerbated by an emerging black upper class.

With many of the promises of the liberation struggle still not having had a trickle-down effect, activists are increasingly organising themselves and demanding sweeping changes.

They want more social justice and for Namibia to properly decolonise itself – to rid itself of systemic racism and sexism, and to become more economically just for all who live in it.

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