

# 18 Colonial Monuments in a Post-Colonial Era: A Case Study of the Equestrian Monument

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## Introduction

Colonial monuments litter the Namibian landscape, but a shallow reading of their significance fails to recognise the layers of meaning that have attached to these landmarks over the passage of time. The issue that we need to explore is what happens to the monuments, memorials, museums and other sites representing the previous regime's core values and memories when a new regime, based on very different values, comes to power? When the ruling government changes, the state is faced with basic decisions concerning the past and what to do with the inherited 'public history' such as the monuments, memorials, museums and other symbols of power of the previous regime. In some African countries, like Angola, Kenya, Malawi and Angola, heritage sites and objects from the past regime were removed and destroyed as a way of breaking away from the past (Kriger, 1995, p. 141; Marschall, 2008, p. 350; Salvador and Rodrigues, 2012, p. 423). But is this the right way of dealing with a painful past?

In Namibia and South Africa there has been little removal or destruction of colonial heritage. Instead, as an alternative for changing the symbolic inherited landscape, the governments have created new sites commemorating previously ignored events and heroes in the struggle to end apartheid, e.g. Heroes Acre in Windhoek, Namibia, and Freedom Park in Pretoria, South Africa. In fact, the Equestrian monument that used to stand next to the Alte Feste located in Windhoek, which was moved in 2009 and 'removed' in 2013 is the only colonial monument to date to have been changed since independence. The new Namibian regime has emphasised the importance of teaching the new generation about history and seems to have recognised the value of having tangible commemorative sites such as monuments and memorials.

This chapter concentrates on the Equestrian monument, which during the German colonial period was known as the 'Country War Memorial' '*Landeskriegerdenkmal*'. German speakers today often refer to it as the '*Reiterdenkmal*' (the soldier's monument), whilst English speakers call it 'The Rider'. The monument was erected in 1911 and inaugurated in 1912, in commemoration of the Germany military and civilian casualties who died in the colonial wars against the Ovaherero and Nama in Namibia (Vogt, 2004, p. 103). The relocation of the monument on 19 August 2009 and again on 25 December

2013,<sup>1</sup> provides an opportunity to engage with a wider debate about the ways in which the colonial legacy (in terms of the heritage landscape) should be dealt with in a post-colonial independent African nation.

The chapter provides a brief, contextual, overview of the ways in which Southern African countries have dealt with the ‘dissonant heritage’ that is, partly, represented by colonial monuments (Tunbridge and Ashworth, 1996). I will argue that the Equestrian monument has several complex layers of meanings – as a German memorial, as a symbol of the significance of the 1904 war in the visual historiography, and as an icon used by commercial companies and the tourism industry to highlight the unique Germanic cultural dimension to Namibian identity. I will argue that a clearer understanding of the significance of the monument to different audiences would assist in ensuring that the monument is not only physically moved, but that the way in which it is viewed is also changed, so it is not only re-positioned, but also re-viewed by those who visit it.

The chapter will explore, briefly, how other neighbouring countries in Southern Africa have challenged or preserved their colonial legacy in the post-colonial era; survey the heritage landscape in Windhoek; and focus, in particular, on the Equestrian monument and the reasons why it was moved, and then removed.

## The Colonial Heritage

All over the world, monuments were created as a way of marking certain events people wanted to remember. However, in Africa, monuments from the colonial period were built to honour colonial soldiers and leaders for the role they played in conquering a territory. The monuments ignored the African perspective of history, which viewed those same figures as oppressors, rather than heroes. Still, throughout the region, there are complex issues connected to the challenge of re-imagining heritage institutions and re-presenting colonial heritage in post-colonial independent African states, and this heritage review includes monuments.<sup>2</sup>

One response has been to dismantle statues that are perceived as celebrating colonial rule. For instance in South Africa, the statue of Hendrick Verwoerd, known as one of the architects of apartheid, was removed from public display in Bloemfontein in 1994 and the statute of Cecil Rhodes was also swiftly removed from the centre of Harare, Zimbabwe, when the country became independent in 1980 (Saunders, 2007, p. 183). After Zimbabwean independence came a moment of celebration, triumphal and monumental.

Crowning this triumphalism a national monument, Heroes Acre was build west of the capital Harare. The Heroes Acre was created with an expression for Zimbabweans to

1 *The Equestrian Monument (Reiterdenkmal), 1912-2014: A chronological documentation of reports, newspaper clippings and photos/illustrations*, 2014.

2 For a more detailed analysis and recommendations on the ways in which the education system in Namibia could engage with heritage issues, see Jeremy Silvester and Helvi Elago (2011), *Heritage into Education, Education into Heritage*, Windhoek: Museums Association of Namibia/MDG Achievement Fund, March, 2011.