Chief Hosea Kutako: A Herero royal and Namibian nationalist’s life against confinement 1870–1970

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Throughout his life Hosea Kutako was able to overcome the strictures placed upon him in ways that were totally unanticipated by those who sought to control and determine his life. Seemingly destined to a life of obscurity on the fringes of history, Hosea Kutako has come to occupy centre stage in the history of twentieth-century Namibia. Although administrations consistently sought to downplay Kutako’s role, his personality was such that he overcame the limitations of race and ethnicity that were placed upon him. Far from being an obscure tribal leader living in a rural backwater, Kutako gave form and direction to African opposition to South African colonial rule in Namibia. As such, an overview of Hosea Kutako’s life provides a clear example of the simple fact that, in history, structure is not all explanatory and, similarly, that an over-reliance on individual agency obscures more than it illuminates.

Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-elected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.

Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, 1852

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Introduction

Entering ‘Hosea Kutako’ into a search engine on the Internet will bring up hundreds of references to tourist safaris and package tours passing through Hosea Kutako Windhoek International Airport and virtually no references to the man Hosea Kutako and his importance in Namibian history. In much the same way that very few people realize that New York’s La Guardia Airport bears the name of one of the city’s most controversial citizens, so too have very few people any inkling as to who or what Hosea Kutako may have been.

Hosea Kutako was born in pre-colonial Hereroland in 1870 and died in South West Africa, a colonial territory subject to the Republic of South Africa, in 1970. During his life, he experienced the transition from independence to colonization, and the destruction of Herero society and the loss of its lands, although he struggled to regain the freedom and self-determination that he and his society had previously known. Initially Kutako campaigned only for his own people, yet at a very early stage he began campaigning for the freedom and self-determination of all the inhabitants of Namibia. In this, Hosea Kutako can be described as the country’s first truly nationalist politician, a man who strove for the greater good not only for himself but for all.

Hosea Kutako was born as a Herero royal, but into a position which, but for the course of history, would never have enabled him to claim leadership of the Herero, let alone of the people of Namibia. Like Kofi Annan and Nelson Mandela, Hosea Kutako was born into a position that in the traditional elite would have led to high office, but none of them was, however, pre-destined to command and would not have attained the stature they did if history had not intervened. It is ironic that without the advent of colonial rule in central Namibia, which effectively disrupted the traditional structures of governance as they had existed within Herero society, Hosea Kutako would probably never have gained the standing and authority he later did.

One could provide an overview of Hosea Kutako’s life that would emphasize the subject nature of Africans in colonial Namibia for much of the twentieth century. One could emphasize the grinding poverty, the swelter of repressive racist legislation, the unjust nature of colonial rule and land dispossession, and the seemingly powerless nature of Africans, Kutako amongst them, in the face of a history of so much injustice. Colonial rule was harsh, brutal and repressive

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2 The territory was granted independence as the Republic of Namibia in March 1990.
3 I am well of the fact that it is generally not done to speak of the Herero as being a single non-changing entity. In my work I use the term as an effective shorthand to describe all those who speak an otjiherero dialect as their mother tongue and share socio-cultural ideals.