

Reparative justice for the herero: A missiological-diaconal perspective on healing historical injustice

Transformation

1–14

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DOI: 10.1177/02653788251396088

journals.sagepub.com/home/trn

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Abstract

This paper examines the Herero genocide (1904–1908) in German South West Africa (present-day Namibia) through a missiological-diaconal lens, advocating for reparations as a matter of biblical justice and healing. Beyond the mass killings, the genocide’s legacy includes the enslavement of survivors, a historical injustice with enduring parallels to modern-day slavery. Critiquing the inadequacies of the Joint Declaration between Germany and Namibia, the paper emphasizes the necessity of inclusive, Herero-led reparative processes that address material losses, cultural erosion, and intergenerational trauma, including the ongoing impact of forced labour and dispossession. By drawing on scriptural mandates for restitution and acknowledging the Church’s historical complicity, this analysis argues for a transformative role for the Church in advocating for truth, justice, and reconciliation. The Herero experience offers crucial lessons for the Church in confronting both historical injustices and contemporary forms of slavery, highlighting the imperative to reclaim dignity, address structural inequities, and foster solidarity.

Keywords

Reparations, herero genocide, missiology, diakonia, reconciliation

Introduction

This article comes from a PhD study at the University of Pretoria by Dr Hambira with Prof Knoetze as study leader. Dr Hambira is a descendant of the Herero people described in this article. He also becomes a voice for his people from his different leadership positions in the local as well as ecumenical church, informing society about a “forgotten people”. He is asking for restorative justice

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from the political culprits and encouraging the Church as well as the local churches to rethink their responsibility towards current and past genocides.

The Herero genocide (1904–1908) remains a defining and tragic chapter in the history of colonialism, carried out under German colonial rule in German South West Africa (present-day Namibia). Triggered by the Herero people's resistance to land expropriation, forced labour, and other oppressive colonial policies, the genocide unfolded when German forces, under General Lothar von Trotha, launched a brutal military campaign to annihilate the Herero population. Von Trotha's infamous *extermination order* declared that every Herero, regardless of age or gender, was to be killed, leading to mass murders, forced displacement, and unspeakable suffering (Gewald, 1999: 164).

The impact was catastrophic: an estimated 80% of the Herero population perished through execution, starvation, dehydration, and disease as they were driven into the unforgiving Omaheke Desert, where many succumbed (Olusoga and Erichsen, 2010: 101–102). Survivors, including children as young as seven, were forcibly dispossessed of their ancestral lands and livelihoods, fragmented as a cohesive nation, and subjected to forced labour in concentration camps where conditions were inhumane. Many survivors were distributed as slaves to German households, farms, and other establishments, enduring brutal exploitation under the guise of "indentured servitude" (Gewald, 1999: 183). The genocide's aftermath saw the Herero scattered—internally displaced within Namibia and further exiled into Southern African diaspora, to places like Botswana, South Africa, and beyond (Kössler, 2015: 89).

The consequences of this atrocity continue to reverberate to the present day. The Herero nation, reduced to a marginalized minority, faces cultural erosion, economic disenfranchisement, and the loss of its national status, with little prospect of regaining its former sovereignty or unity in the foreseeable future.

The historical and ongoing injustices faced by the Herero people, rooted in the genocide and its aftermath, have led to their call for reparations as a form of reparative justice. Beyond material compensation, reparations aim to address the deep wounds of displacement, economic disenfranchisement, and cultural erosion, seeking to restore dignity to a people whose humanity was brutally denied. Linking the injustices of colonial slavery and genocide to modern inequalities, reparations represent a moral, theological, and practical imperative. This chapter posits that reparations for the Herero descendants are a necessity aligned with biblical principles of justice and healing. Through a missiological-diaconal lens, the Church can play a critical role in this process by advocating for truth, justice, and reconciliation. By reclaiming dignity, addressing structural injustices, and fostering solidarity, reparations not only repair the wounds of the past but also lay the foundation for a future of justice, healing, and empowerment for affected communities.

Theological and missiological foundations for reparative justice

This section begins by examining biblical principles of justice and healing, highlighting scriptural mandates for restitution and the restoration of relationships. The discussion then shifts to the Church's historical responsibility, acknowledging its complicity in colonial systems and its potential as an agent of justice and reconciliation in post-genocidal settings.

Building on these foundations, the section probes missiological reflections on reparations, emphasizing the Church's mandate to restore dignity, address structural injustices, and reclaim identity for marginalized communities. Finally, the concept of diaconal praxis is introduced as a practical framework for reparative action, advocating for inclusive, community-led processes that center the voices of the Herero and other affected groups. The critique of the Joint

Declaration between Germany and Namibia illustrates the risks of marginalization and underscores the necessity of participatory approaches to reparative justice. Together, these components establish a comprehensive theological and missiological framework for the Church's engagement in restorative initiatives.

Biblical principles of justice and healing

Scriptural mandates for justice and reconciliation provide a strong theological foundation for reparative justice. The Bible consistently emphasizes the need for restitution and the restoration of relationships. For example, in Leviticus 6:1–5, offenders are instructed to make amends by returning what they stole or damaged, plus an additional portion, symbolizing not just compensation but a commitment to repairing harm (Wright, 2004: 113). Similarly, the story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19:8–10 highlights the principle of restorative justice, as Zacchaeus pledges to repay fourfold what he defrauded, illustrating a transformative act of repentance and restitution in the context of salvation.

Micah 6:8 underscores the divine mandate to “act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.” This prophetic call for justice is particularly pertinent in addressing historical injustices like the Herero genocide, where systemic exploitation and dehumanization demand deliberate acts of restitution and healing (Brueggemann, 1997: 85). These texts collectively affirm that justice, as understood biblically, is not retributive but restorative—aimed at repairing broken relationships and ensuring the flourishing of all people.

The role of the church in historical injustices

The Church's role in colonialism, including its complicity in the exploitation and subjugation of indigenous communities, necessitates a commitment to restitution and reparative justice. During the colonial era, Christian missions often aligned with imperial powers, providing theological justification for practices like land dispossession and forced labour (Küng, 1991: 225). This complicity demands acknowledgment and repentance as part of the Church's missional calling.

In post-genocidal settings, the Church should strive to position itself as an agent of healing, justice, and reconciliation. By drawing on its spiritual authority and historical role, the Church has the potential to facilitate dialogue between affected communities and perpetrators, advocate for reparative measures, and provide spaces for lament and healing. According to Kärkkäinen (2013: 215), the Church's mission in such contexts must prioritize justice and reconciliation as integral to embodying the transformative power of the gospel. This involves not only addressing the spiritual dimensions of broken relationships but also engaging in tangible acts of restoration that confront systemic injustices and empower marginalized communities.

Missiological reflections on reparations

Building on the discussion of reparative justice in Christian scripture, we assert that reparations are a critical component of the Church's missiological mandate, particularly in reclaiming dignity and identity for historically marginalized communities. The Herero genocide not only stripped people of their land and livelihoods but also inflicted irreparable intangible losses. These include the destruction of cultural heritage, the severing of ancestral connections, and the erosion of community identity and cohesion. Language, oral traditions, and spiritual practices central to the Herero way of life were systematically disrupted, leaving a void that cannot be fully restored. Reparative justice,

informed by missiological principles, seeks to address these irrecoverable losses by fostering processes of cultural reclamation, affirming identity, and supporting efforts to rebuild the dignity and pride of affected communities (Tutu, 1999: 51).

Missiology emphasizes the importance of addressing the whole person—spiritually, socially, and materially (Knoetze, 2022: 292–300). Reparations align with this holistic approach by acknowledging past wrongs and taking tangible steps to correct them. This includes restoring land, revitalizing cultural practices, and addressing economic disparities that continue to affect Herero descendants (de Gruchy, 2002: 134). By engaging in this work, the Church affirms its commitment to the gospel’s transformative power, which extends beyond individual salvation to encompass societal restoration.

Diaconal praxis as a framework

In the context of this study, diaconal praxis refers to the Church’s active commitment to justice through service, advocacy, and restorative action, particularly in post-genocide settings. It provides a practical framework for the Church’s engagement in reparative justice. Rooted in the biblical concept of *diakonia*—service to others—this praxis calls the Church to identify, address, and mitigate the root causes of injustice through structural and systemic change.

For the Herero, this involves challenging colonial legacies that continue to perpetuate inequality and advocating for policies that promote restitution and empowerment (Kärkkäinen, 2013: 211). The Christian concept of *diakonia* is closely aligned with the African ethics of *Ubuntu*, which emphasizes interconnectedness, mutual care, and the belief that “a person is a person through other people” (Tutu, 1999: 31). Boesak (2017: 20) further asserts that *Ubuntu* is “in flight wherever human rights are violated,” highlighting that injustice and oppression erode the very essence of communal humanity. This connection underscores the Church’s role in restoring dignity and justice through a praxis of reparative justice. Although diaconia is God-centered it aligns with ubuntu as it also calls for community-centered approaches to justice and restoration, where the dignity and well-being of every individual are seen as integral to the flourishing of the whole community. This alignment strengthens the theological and cultural grounding for reparative justice, emphasizing solidarity and collective responsibility.

Practical diaconal actions must prioritize the pursuit of justice as the foundation of the Church’s engagement in reparative initiatives. This involves more than serving as a neutral mediator; rather, the Church must adopt an unequivocal stance on the side of the victims of slavery, both historical and modern. Justice, as a theological and moral imperative, demands that the Church align itself with those who have been oppressed, advocating forcefully for their rights and dignity (Belhar confession, 1986; Gutierrez, 1973: 25; Tamez, 2001: 42).

In this context, the Church’s role is not merely to facilitate dialogue or broker compromises but to actively confront systemic injustices and champion transformative change. Supporting Herero-led efforts to reclaim cultural heritage and address the structural legacies of dispossession must be central to the (Namibian) Church’s mission. This requires not only mobilizing resources to fund reparative initiatives but also leveraging its moral authority to challenge power structures that perpetuate inequality and exclusion (Boff and Boff, 1987: 87; Kalu, 2008: 123). The Church’s witness, therefore, must be rooted in a prophetic advocacy for systemic change, standing resolutely with victims as agents of their own liberation and restoration (Segundo, 1985: 96).

The concept of diaconal praxis underscores the necessity of listening to and centering the voices of marginalized communities in reparative initiatives. For the Herero, this means that their narratives and priorities should guide the process, ensuring reparations are not imposed but co-created

in a spirit of mutual respect and partnership (Myers, 2011: 29). This approach fosters genuine reconciliation and empowerment, as it recognizes the affected community as active agents in their healing and restoration.

In stark contrast, the proposed Joint Declaration (JD) between the governments of Germany and Namibia has been subjected to substantial critique for its exclusionary nature, particularly in sidelining the voices of the Herero people. These are the very descendants of the genocide's victims, who were not only subjected to systematic extermination but also displaced from their ancestral lands and dispersed into the diaspora. The exclusion of these communities from meaningful participation in the negotiations has profoundly undermined the credibility of the JD as a mechanism for achieving substantive and enduring reconciliation. While the declaration acknowledges the genocide and commits to development aid, it conspicuously fails to provide direct reparations or address the specific, justice-oriented demands articulated by the Herero for restitution and redress (Kössler, 2021: 45).

The rejection of development aid masquerading as reparations by the Herero descendants is grounded in several critical and principled arguments. Firstly, this approach constitutes a substantial deviation from internationally accepted standards for addressing genocidal crimes, which necessitate reparative measures that explicitly seek to rectify historical wrongs. It is essential that reparations are not viewed as mere philanthropic gestures from the powerful to the disenfranchised, but as a means of addressing profound historical injustices. Secondly, reparations are not only a mechanism for acknowledging the harm inflicted but also a critical tool for addressing the systemic inequities that continue to plague affected communities, as well as for restoring the dignity of victims. Thirdly, reparations are firmly established as a legal entitlement under international law, as affirmed in frameworks such as the United Nations Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation (2005), which unequivocally enshrine the right of victims to seek redress for gross violations of human rights and international law.

This article posits that it must be unequivocally stated that development aid, framed as a substitute for reparations, does not align with the demands of the descendants of the Herero victims. Rather, it reflects what the government of Namibia considers to be an adequate settlement, a perspective that has been categorically rejected by those directly affected. This approach, as it currently stands, is fundamentally incapable of leading to a mutually acceptable resolution, particularly from the standpoint of the descendants of survivors. Until the distinction between reparations and development aid is fully recognized, and the former is delivered in a manner that upholds the principles of justice, equity, and dignity, any proposed settlement will inevitably fall short of being deemed legitimate or satisfactory by the Herero community.

The marginalization of Herero descendants undermines the principles of restorative justice that are central to reparative initiatives. Without the inclusion of the Herero in shaping the terms and implementation of reparations, the JD risks perpetuating the very power imbalances it seeks to address. True reconciliation requires more than acknowledgment; it demands an inclusive and participatory process that empowers affected communities and ensures their dignity and agency are upheld. By side-lining these voices, the JD represents a missed opportunity to satisfy the moral and practical imperatives of reparative justice, leaving the wounds of the past inadequately addressed.

Reparations for the herero: A pathway to justice

Reparations for the Herero must be understood as a multifaceted and justice-oriented process rooted in a missiological-diaconal framework. This perspective emphasizes the Church's mission of

solidarity and restoration, calling for reparations that address not only material losses but also the spiritual, cultural, and social dimensions of harm. Reparations are not merely acts of financial compensation; they are a theological and moral imperative, designed to restore dignity, acknowledge harm, and rectify systemic injustices. For the Herero people, reparations hold particular significance in addressing the enduring consequences of genocide, including the catastrophic loss of land, livelihoods, cultural heritage, and community cohesion inflicted by German colonial forces (Gewald, 1999: 215; Kössler, 2015: 94; Moses, 2021: 14).

A comprehensive reparation process must encompass not only the restitution of ancestral lands but also the reclamation of cultural artifacts and the repatriation of numerous human remains and historical objects that currently reside in museums and private collections in German-speaking countries. These items, taken without consent during the colonial era, are far more than mere historical artifacts; they serve as sacred embodiments of identity, heritage, and history. Their repatriation is therefore not merely a matter of material return but a fundamental act of justice and dignity, essential to the healing process and the restoration of the Herero community's full humanity (Olusoga and Erichsen, 2010: 105; Zimmerer, 2008: 28). Furthermore, reparations must address the enduring psychological and intergenerational trauma caused by the genocide, creating transformative avenues for cultural revitalization, collective memory, and community empowerment. For the descendants of the Herero, the issue of reconciliation remains inherently untenable until such time as these human remains are returned and laid to rest with the dignity and respect that every human being deserves. Only then can the terms for a genuine process of reconciliation, grounded in restorative justice and human dignity, be considered feasible.

From a missiological-diaconal lens, reparations must be understood as an inclusive and participatory process that places the Herero people at the center. Fairness requires that the affected community define the scope, priorities, and implementation of reparative measures, ensuring that reparations reflect their lived realities and aspirations. Transparency, accountability, and adherence to international legal frameworks, such as the United Nations Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation (2005), are also crucial for legitimacy (Gutierrez, 1973: 25; Tamez, 2001: 42).

By addressing tangible losses—such as land and economic resources—and intangible harms, including the destruction of cultural and spiritual practices, reparations must be substantial, targeted, and holistic. They should not only rectify past wrongs but also provide a foundation for a future rooted in justice, dignity, and reconciliation, as envisioned by the missiological-diaconal calling of the Church.

Land redistribution is equally vital as a restorative justice measure. Land lies at the heart of Herero identity, culture, and economic viability. The loss of ancestral land during German colonial rule not only devastated their livelihoods but also fractured their cultural and spiritual connections to their heritage. Many Herero descendants in the diaspora, where they were displaced by the genocide, now live as landless squatters on other people's tribal land, further compounding their marginalization and loss of identity. In Namibia, it is estimated that approximately 1.1 million hectares of land remain under German ownership, a stark reminder of the colonial legacy that continues to perpetuate inequality (Kössler, 2015: 92; Zimmerer, 2008: 29). Restoring access to these lands is essential for achieving justice, as it acknowledges the intrinsic link between land and the dignity of the Herero people, while addressing the ongoing structural inequities rooted in the genocide.

Cultural reclamation efforts are another indispensable aspect of reparations. The Herero genocide disrupted language transmission, cultural practices, and heritage continuity. Reparations should include initiatives to preserve and revitalize Herero cultural expressions, oral traditions,

and indigenous knowledge systems. Supporting the teaching of the Otjiherero language, as well as establishing heritage sites and commemorations, would honour the Herero's history and ensure its preservation for future generations. Substantial evidence shows that some Herero communities, both in Namibia and the diaspora, have completely lost the Herero language and now communicate primarily in Nama, highlighting the urgent need for cultural and linguistic revitalization as part of reparative justice (Olusoga and Erichsen, 2010: 105).

Herero voices and advocacy

The voices of Herero leaders and communities have been pivotal in articulating the necessity for reparations. Herero leaders, such as Paramount Chief Vekuii Rukoro and other community representatives, have consistently underscored the profound moral and historical obligation of Germany to provide reparations that are substantive, equitable, and directly benefit the descendants of genocide survivors (Moses, 2021: 13). Their advocacy emphasizes that reparations transcend the mere addressing of material losses; they are fundamentally about the restoration of dignity, the acknowledgment of humanity, and the rectification of systemic injustices inflicted upon the Herero people.

In global forums, Herero representatives have presented compelling moral and political arguments that draw on the universal principles of justice and accountability. By highlighting parallels between the Herero genocide and other atrocities, such as the Holocaust, they have framed the Herero struggle as part of a broader discourse on historical redress and human rights. They argue that Germany's failure to deliver meaningful reparations undermines its credibility as a nation committed to historical responsibility, reconciliation, and international human rights norms (Kössler, 2021: 46).

This study contends that the German government's introduction of development aid into the reconciliation negotiation process represents a tactical manoeuvre aimed at fragmenting the Herero internally and exacerbating tensions between the Herero community and the Namibian government. Such strategies not only detract from the moral and legal imperatives of reparative justice but also undermine the potential for genuine reconciliation. From a missional-diaconal perspective, this study posits that reparative justice must remain rooted in the principles of truth, dignity, and accountability. Development aid masquerading as reparations must be unequivocally rejected, as it trivializes the gravity of genocidal crimes and perpetuates the marginalization of the victims. True reconciliation demands that reparations address the full spectrum of historical harm, fostering a foundation for sustainable peace and equitable co-existence between the descendants of Germans and their Herero counterparts.

The role of the church in advocacy and implementation

The Church could play a crucial role in advocating for and implementing reparative justice for the Herero. Partnering with Herero communities to amplify their voices is a significant starting point. By offering platforms for Herero leaders to share their stories and priorities, the Church can help ensure that their narratives reach broader audiences and are included in decision-making processes (Bosch, 1991: 399).

Facilitating dialogue between affected communities and state actors is another area where the Church can make a meaningful impact. The Church's moral authority and historical presence in the region could position it as a trusted mediator capable of bridging divides and fostering mutual understanding. This includes hosting forums for negotiation, advocating for more inclusive

reparative frameworks, and challenging the inadequacies of the Joint Declaration (Kärkkäinen, 2013: 212).

Additionally, the Church can support Herero-led initiatives for cultural and economic restoration. This involves mobilizing resources to fund heritage projects, such as the preservation of Otjiherero oral traditions and the establishment of memorials to honour genocide victims. It also includes providing technical and financial assistance for land reclamation projects and community development programs that address poverty and marginalization (Hastings, 2006: 168).

Challenges to achieving reparations

The pursuit of reparations for the Herero faces significant challenges, including resistance from governments and institutions to acknowledging responsibility. Germany's initial reluctance to label the atrocities as genocide and its reliance on the Joint Declaration have been seen as insufficient to address the magnitude of the harm caused. The declaration, which emphasizes development aid rather than direct reparations, has been criticized for perpetuating paternalistic attitudes and failing to meet the specific demands of Herero descendants (Kössler, 2021: 47).

Another challenge lies in the inadequacies of the Joint Declaration itself. The exclusion of Herero representatives from meaningful participation in its negotiation process has undermined its legitimacy and acceptance among affected communities. This marginalization highlights the need for a more inclusive and participatory approach to reparative justice that centers the voices of those most affected (Myers, 2011: 29).

The barriers to reparative justice necessitate the relaunch of reconciliation negotiations with reparative justice unequivocally established as the definitive objective of the process. Such a reconceptualized framework must transcend superficial measures, such as the provision of development aid, and prioritize meaningful restitution, the redress of historical injustices, and the restoration of the Herero people's dignity and agency.

The Church, leveraging its moral authority and global ecclesial networks, is uniquely positioned to advocate for a restructured negotiation process that centralizes reparative justice. Collaborating with civil society organizations and international justice movements, the Church can act as a catalyst for reshaping the discourse, ensuring that the reconciliation agenda aligns with principles of accountability, restitution, and the restoration of right relationships, as articulated in the biblical ethos (Tutu, 1999: 53).

The missiological-diaconal role of the church in healing historical wounds

In many instances the Church bears not only a theological but also a significant historical responsibility for its complicity in colonial systems that facilitated injustices like the Herero genocide. During the colonial era, Christian missions often aligned with imperial powers, legitimizing the exploitation and dispossession of indigenous populations under the guise of civilizing and converting "heathens" (Küng, 1991: 225). This alignment with colonial powers allowed the Church to benefit materially and socially while turning a blind eye to the systemic oppression and violence perpetrated against indigenous communities, including the Herero.

To address this legacy, the Church is called upon to actively seek forgiveness from affected communities. This involves more than symbolic apologies; it requires tangible actions that demonstrate a commitment to reparative justice and reconciliation. By acknowledging its role in perpetuating

injustice, the Church can begin to rebuild trust and establish itself as a credible advocate for healing (Bosch, 1991: 399).

Reimagining the Church's mission as restorative rather than complicit is essential in this process. A restorative mission focuses on healing wounds, addressing systemic inequalities, and empowering marginalized communities. This approach aligns with the gospel's call to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8). By embracing this restorative framework, the Church can fulfil its missiological calling to be an agent of reconciliation and justice in post-genocidal contexts.

Practical strategies for engagement

To effectively address theological and historical injustices, the Church must adopt practical strategies that engage congregations and empower affected communities. A critical starting point is educating congregations about the history and legacy of the Herero genocide and other colonial injustices. Many Christians remain unaware of the Church's complicity in these events and their ongoing consequences. The Church can raise awareness of these issues through sermons, workshops, and Bible studies, connecting them to biblical teachings on justice and reconciliation (Wright, 2004: 115). This education fosters a sense of responsibility and inspires congregations to participate in reparative justice initiatives.

The Church can also mobilize financial and material resources to support reparative justice efforts. This includes funding projects that address the economic and cultural marginalization of Herero communities, such as land restoration programs, heritage preservation initiatives, and economic empowerment schemes. By leveraging its networks and resources, the Church can demonstrate solidarity with affected communities and contribute to their restoration (Myers, 2011: 34).

Collaboration with Herero communities is essential to ensure that reparative efforts are meaningful and effective. The Church must prioritize listening to the voices of Herero leaders and community members, allowing their narratives and priorities to shape initiatives. This collaborative approach ensures that reparative actions address the specific needs and aspirations of the Herero, fostering a sense of ownership and partnership (Tutu, 1999: 53).

Building solidarity through action

The Church's role extends beyond internal education and resource mobilization; it must actively engage in building solidarity through meaningful action. The Church can strengthen its impact by forming partnerships with civil society groups, NGOs, and global faith-based organizations committed to justice and reconciliation. These partnerships enable the pooling of resources, expertise, and influence to advocate for systemic change. Collaborative efforts can amplify the voices of Herero communities and increase the visibility of their demands for reparative justice (Hastings, 2006: 172).

Advocacy is a critical aspect of the Church's missiological-diaconal role. By engaging in campaigns to pressure governments and international institutions, the Church can challenge the inadequacies of existing reparative frameworks, such as the Joint Declaration between Germany and Namibia. Advocacy efforts should emphasize the need for direct reparations, inclusive negotiations, and the acknowledgment of historical injustices as essential steps toward genuine reconciliation (Kössler, 2021: 48).

The Church's unique position allows it to act as a bridge between affected communities and institutional actors. As a moral authority and trusted intermediary, the Church can facilitate dialogue and negotiation, ensuring that the voices of Herero communities are heard and respected.

This role involves advocating for reparations and creating spaces for healing and reconciliation, where historical wounds can be addressed in a spirit of humility and partnership (Kärkkäinen, 2013: 215).

The transformative potential of the Church's engagement

By embracing its historical responsibility and adopting practical strategies for engagement, the Church can transform itself into a powerful agent of healing, justice, and reconciliation. According to Bosch (1991: 390), the Church is only truly the Church insofar as it is missional, embodying the gospel through its commitment to justice, love, and restoration. This missional identity requires the Church to actively engage in situations of historical and systemic injustice, unequivocally opting for justice and standing in solidarity with the oppressed. Logan (2013: 72) similarly argues that the Church's authenticity is tied to its praxis of justice, which demands alignment with the marginalized and resistance against oppressive structures. This understanding positions the Church not merely as a passive observer but as an active participant in dismantling systemic injustices and advocating for reparative measures that restore dignity and agency to victims, such as the Herero.

The Church's missiological-diaconal role extends beyond addressing the Herero genocide; it offers a model for how faith communities can confront historical injustices worldwide. In every situation where oppressor and oppressed are juxtaposed, the Church's allegiance must lie with the oppressed, reflecting the gospel's call to liberation and reconciliation. Through education, collaboration, and advocacy, the Church can embody its transformative mission, demonstrating its relevance and unwavering commitment to justice in the face of historical and ongoing challenges. This proactive engagement affirms that the Church's mission is inherently tied to the pursuit of a reconciled and just world, where the gospel's promise of restoration is made tangible (cf Belhar Confession 1986).

Reparative justice beyond the Herero: Addressing modern inequalities

The injustices faced by the Herero during the colonial era reveal striking parallels with the dynamics of modern slavery. Both systems are underpinned by exploitation, systemic oppression, and entrenched racial hierarchies. In the colonial context, the Herero were forcibly dispossessed of their land and subjected to forced labour, mirroring the economic exploitation that characterizes modern slavery, where marginalized groups are disproportionately trapped in exploitative labour practices (Olusoga and Erichsen, 2010: 106).

Another vivid comparison can be drawn between the transatlantic slave trade and contemporary human trafficking for the sex trade, both of which commodify human beings. During the transatlantic slave trade, African men, women, and children were forcibly removed from their homes, treated as property, and subjected to dehumanizing conditions for the profit of others. Similarly, modern human trafficking commodifies individuals—primarily women and children—subjecting them to coercion, exploitation, and abuse in the global sex trade. Both systems thrive on systemic inequalities, economic desperation, and social vulnerabilities, perpetuating cycles of oppression and exploitation (Bales, 2012: 54).

The long shadow of **these exploitative systems—namely the transatlantic slave trade and contemporary human trafficking**—continues to shape present-day inequalities. Both emerged from and are sustained by broader structures of systemic oppression, including racial capitalism, colonial hierarchies, and economic exploitation. Colonial regimes institutionalized racial privilege

and economic disparity, patterns that persist in contemporary forms of exploitation. For example, many descendants of historically enslaved or colonized communities remain confined to cycles of poverty, much like the Herero descendants who face socioeconomic marginalization in Namibia and in the diaspora (Kössler, 2015: 94). Similarly, victims of modern human trafficking often belong to economically and socially marginalized groups, highlighting the interconnectedness of historical and contemporary injustices. These ongoing inequities underscore the urgent need for reparative justice frameworks that address both the historical legacies and modern manifestations of systemic oppression.

By examining the commodification of human lives—whether in the transatlantic slave trade or the modern sex trade—we see a shared disregard for human dignity, one that demands a holistic and justice-centered response. Reparative justice frameworks must not only address historical wrongs but also dismantle the structures that perpetuate modern exploitation.

Lessons from the Herero experience

The Herero genocide provides a critical case study for understanding and addressing historical injustices. Their experience underscores the devastating consequences of dispossession, forced labour, and cultural erosion, as well as the enduring effects of intergenerational trauma. Reparative justice efforts for the Herero, while still incomplete, offer valuable insights for addressing the grievances of other marginalized communities worldwide.

One key lesson is the importance of acknowledging historical wrongs and the role of systemic oppression in perpetuating cycles of inequality. The Herero's demands for reparations emphasize that justice must go beyond acknowledgment to include tangible measures, such as restitution and cultural reclamation (Moses, 2021: 14). This principle can be applied to other contexts, where reparative justice initiatives must prioritize direct engagement with affected communities and address the structural factors that maintain inequality.

Additionally, the Herero experience highlights the need for inclusive and participatory processes in reparative justice efforts. The exclusion of Herero representatives from meaningful participation in the Joint Declaration negotiations demonstrates how side-lining marginalized voices can undermine the legitimacy and effectiveness of reparative measures (Myers, 2011: 29). This serves as a cautionary tale for similar efforts, emphasizing that justice can only be achieved when those most affected are central to the process.

The Church's role in combating modern slavery

The Church's missiological-diaconal mandate requires it to actively and decisively confront modern slavery and the systemic inequalities that sustain it. Failure to do so not only compromise the Church's credibility but also undermines its identity as an instrument of the *Missio Dei*. Advocating for systemic change is not optional but integral to the Church's mission. This mandate compels the Church to challenge exploitative policies and practices, such as labour laws that fail to protect vulnerable workers and economic systems that prioritize profit over human dignity.

The Church must leverage its moral authority and influence to pressure governments and corporations to adopt equitable and ethical practices, aligning society with the gospel's call for justice and restoration. Anything less constitutes a betrayal of its missional calling to stand with the oppressed and to embody God's liberating justice in the world. By actively engaging in these efforts, the Church fulfils its vocation as a prophetic voice and a transformative agent, demonstrating that its participation in the *Missio Dei* is inseparably tied to its commitment to justice, human

dignity, and the eradication of systemic oppression. To neglect this mandate is to render the Church irrelevant in the face of the suffering it is called to alleviate.

This paper posits that the Church's missional-diaconal mandate necessitates a profound interrogation of the systemic and structural factors that perpetuate suffering, oppression, and systemic evil, with particular attention to the racialized dimensions of these injustices. The disproportionate impact of historical and modern-day slavery on Black communities, such as the Herero people, demands a theological and socio-political analysis that unearths the enduring legacies of colonialism, racism, and economic exploitation. The Herero genocide and its aftermath exemplify how racial hierarchies have not only underpinned acts of historical violence but continue to manifest in contemporary systems of exclusion and marginalization.

Central to this inquiry is the question of why Black communities are consistently overrepresented among victims of systemic injustice. This research asserts that the Church, as part of its missional vocation, must critically engage with the intersection of race and systemic evil. In contexts such as the Herero's quest for reparations, race functions not only as a determinant of victimhood but also as a factor that complicates the pursuit of justice in post-conflict scenarios. The persistent denial of adequate reparations to the Herero people reflects a racialized power dynamic, wherein the mechanisms of justice remain inaccessible to those who have been historically subjugated.

Moreover, this research contends that the Church's credibility as an instrument of the *Missio Dei* is contingent upon its willingness to confront and dismantle all structures of racial and systemic oppression. The racialized lens through which the Herero genocide and its aftermath are viewed underscores the need for the Church to adopt an unequivocal stance on the side of those who continue to bear the burdens of historical and contemporary injustice. By challenging the ideological and material legacies of racialized power, the Church fulfils its prophetic role as an agent of justice and reconciliation.

This research further posits that true reconciliation in the post-genocidal context requires a candid reckoning with the racial and colonial legacies that underpin modern systems of inequality. Germany's reluctance to address the Herero's reparative demands is emblematic of broader systemic evasion of accountability, rooted in the dehumanizing logics of colonialism and racial superiority. The Church, operating within its missional-diaconal framework, must advocate for reparative justice that acknowledges and addresses the racial dynamics at play. This entails not only theological reflection but active participation in dismantling the structures that perpetuate these inequalities, thus embodying the transformative vision of the gospel.

Conclusion


This paper has demonstrated that reparations for the Herero genocide are not only a historical necessity but a profound moral, theological, and missiological imperative. The atrocities committed during 1904–1908 inflicted devastating material and intangible losses—land dispossession, cultural erosion, intergenerational trauma, and the destruction of identity and dignity—that continue to reverberate across generations. Reparative justice must address these multifaceted harms, moving beyond symbolic gestures or development aid to encompass inclusive, participatory measures that empower affected communities to reclaim their agency and shape their own futures.

Drawing on biblical principles of justice and reconciliation, this study has highlighted the Church's pivotal missiological-diaconal role in advocating for reparations. Grounded in its prophetic calling, the Church is uniquely positioned to confront systemic injustices, challenge racialized power structures, and advocate for reparative measures that are holistic, transformative, and aligned with the principles of truth, dignity, and accountability. The lessons of the Herero genocide

underscore the necessity of restitution that not only redresses material losses but also revitalizes cultural and spiritual heritage, addresses intergenerational trauma, and restores community cohesion. Through its advocacy, the Church can amplify the voices of marginalized communities, challenge oppressive systems, and embody the gospel's call to justice and restoration.

Ultimately, this paper calls for bold action from governments, faith communities, and global actors to confront historical injustices with integrity and courage. Genuine reconciliation is not achieved through token acknowledgments or superficial agreements but through deliberate acts of justice and restoration that confront the legacies of colonialism and systemic oppression. Reparative justice for the Herero offers not only a pathway for healing historical wounds but a model for addressing modern inequalities and building a reconciled future—one rooted in justice, dignity, and our shared humanity. In pursuing this vision, the Church fulfils its transformative mission to be a beacon of hope and a catalyst for justice in a fractured world.

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Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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