

# Reclaiming history: Who was Johanna Urieta Gertze?

Story: Liz Frank

From a quick look at our history books, it would seem that men made Namibian history. Even a closer look reveals hardly one woman's name among the long list of men: kings and chiefs, explorers and missionaries, freedom fighters, politicians and bishops.

But thanks to Brigitte Lau, Head of the State Archives in Windhoek, we at least know something about the life and work of Johanna Urieta Gertze, above all her great linguistic knowledge of her mother tongue, Otjiherero.\*

Johanna Urieta started work in the household of the Rhenish missionary Carl Hugo Hahn and his wife Emma Hahn at Otjikango when she was still a little girl.

Apart from assisting Emma with the housework, she also helped her with the sewing classes held for women at the mission station. These soon became very popular, and it is likely that Emma relied not only on Johanna's sewing skills but also on her language ability as an interpreter. Apart from her

own language, Johanna Urieta became proficient in German, English, and Dutch.

Carl Hugo Hahn went on to receive fame and laurels as a linguist who discovered that Otjiherero belongs to the Bantu language family. He also developed a grammar and dictionaries for Otjiherero.

It is Lau's well-argued thesis that much of Hahn's research relied on the linguistic skills and input of Johanna Urieta. Hahn wrote many diaries and Emma many letters, but Johanna Urieta and her work hardly received a mention.

Yet Johanna Urieta accompanied the Hahn family to Cape Town, where Hahn did extensive research on other Bantu languages and quite probably required Johanna's assistance in his interviews with slaves from Central and West Africa.

On one of the visits to Germany by the Hahn's, Johanna Urieta went with them, and was paraded at big fund-raising fairs of the Rhenish Mission Society as the first Herero convert to

Christianity. During the same time Hahn was busy getting some more Herero books ready for publishing.

In an interview with Johanna Urieta by Vedder, she recalls that Hahn discussed every word and grammatical form with her.\*\* Johanna Urieta later married a widower, Samuel Gertze, who worked on the mission station.

She became mother to his eight children and had another nine children herself. This marriage was very much in Hahn's interest, as Gertze was a backbone of the agricultural work on the mission station, and needed a Christian wife for his motherless children. Was Johanna Urieta ever asked what she wanted? That, of course, we will never know.

\* *Brigitte Lau: Johanna Urieta Gertze and Emma Hahn: Some thoughts on the silence of historical records, with reference to Carl Hugo Hahn.*

*In: Logos 1968, Vol 6 no 2.*

\*\* *Vedder: Schwarz Johanna, Teil 1 (Bamen: 1936)*