

Celebrating Independence Day: The aesthetics and politics of national commemoration in Namibia

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Abstract

Through the sequencing of singular past-time events into a commemorative calendar of national holidays, dramatic narratives of the nation are construed, enacted, stabilised, continuously reactivated and renewed. This makes political national holidays rewarding objects of analysis for the study of nation and nationalism. Namibia, as many other nation-states, has a distinct commemorative calendar that distinguishes marked and unmarked times of national significance. Political national holidays feature prominently in the efforts of Namibia's ruling party, the former liberation movement Swapo, to mediate and popularise its particular brand of heroic liberation struggle memory. By focusing on the centrality of Swapo's heroic narrative of armed liberation, the politics of dress, and the question of national inclusivity, some of the contestations of national commemoration in Namibia are explored and discussed with reference to Independence Day celebrations since 1990.

On 21 March 2015, Namibia celebrated the 25th anniversary of its independence in what had been announced beforehand as the “the biggest event so far” in the relatively short history of the country’s Independence Day celebrations.¹ As with the 20th independence jubilee five years ago, which had raised the bar for celebrating national holidays in

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Namibia,² the festive protocol involved a huge military parade, the attendance of numerous international dignitaries and an elaborate programme of music shows, sport events and cultural performances. The 2015 Independence Day celebration was further remarkable for not only being a jubilee, but also for including the official inauguration ceremony of Namibia's new president, Hage Geingob. He took over the reins as the country's third president since independence from Hifikepunye Pohamba, whose retirement was sweetened with the award of the prestigious Mo Ibrahim Prize for Achievement in African Leadership.³ What probably stirred the most optimism and enthusiasm among the audience, however, were the showers of rain that followed incoming President Geingob's inaugural speech, providing both welcome cooling and a subtle commentary on people's hopes for relief in times of drought and economic hardship.

While assessments of development and good governance since independence are the subject of analysis elsewhere,⁴ this paper focuses on the aesthetics and politics of celebrating Independence Day in Namibia. Political national holidays feature prominently in the efforts of Namibia's ruling party, the former liberation movement Swapo, to mediate and popularise a particular brand of heroic liberation struggle memory which, however, is not uncontested.⁵ Even though this type of 'patriotic history'⁶ has been the subject of numerous academic contributions on Swapo's politics of memory and nation building efforts in postcolonial Namibia, little research has been devoted to analysing the role of national day celebrations in this regard.

² Cf. Michael U. Akuupa and Godwin Kornes, "From 'One Namibia, one Nation' towards 'Unity in Diversity'? Shifting representations of culture and nationhood in Namibian Independence Day celebrations, 1990-2010", *Anthropology Southern Africa*, 36 (1/2), 2013: 34-46. Godwin Kornes, "Der Kampf geht weiter. Das zwanzigjährige Unabhängigkeitsjubiläum in Namibia", in: Carola Lentz and Godwin Kornes, (eds.), *Staatsinszenierung, Erinnerungsmarathon und Volksfest. Afrika feiert 50 Jahre Unabhängigkeit*, Frankfurt, Brandes & Apsel, 2011: 211-229.

³ Cf. Mo Ibrahim Foundation, "President Hifikepunye Pohamba wins the 2014 Ibrahim Prize for Achievement in African Leadership", <<http://www.moibrahimfoundation.org/news/article/president-hifikepunye-pohamba-wins-the-2014-ibrahim-prize-for-achievement-in-african-leadership>> [accessed 6 June, 2015].

⁴ Cf. Henning Melber, *Understanding Namibia: The Trials of Independence*, London, Hurst, 2014; Thomas Christiansen, "Assessing Namibia's performance two decades after independence. Part 2: Sectoral analysis", *Journal of Namibian Studies*, 11, 2012, 29-61.

⁵ The South West Africa People's Organisation, SWAPO, was established in 1960 and soon became Namibia's, then South West Africa, most eminent national liberation movement. In 1966, SWAPO waged an armed liberation struggle against South African occupation of Namibia, mostly from its exile bases in Tanzania, Zambia, and Angola, which ended with a negotiated settlement in 1989, monitored by United Nations mission UNTAG. SWAPO has won all subsequent national elections with either two-thirds or three-quarter majorities and is Namibia's undisputed ruling party ever since independence on 21 March 1990. In 1990, SWAPO changed its name to Swapo Party. In order to distinguish between the former liberation movement, SWAPO, and post-independence Swapo Party, I will use respective designations according to context.

⁶ Cf. Terence Ranger, "Nationalist historiography, patriotic history and the history of the nation: the struggle over the past in Zimbabwe", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 30 (2), 2004: 215-234.

To fill this gap, and to extend our understanding of social memory and commemoration in Namibia, this paper addresses several questions: firstly, what is the significance of national days in the study of nation, nationalism and memory? Secondly, how can we conceptualise national days as a subject of analysis? Thirdly, what conclusions can we draw from this on the relationship of commemoration and nation building in postcolonial Namibia? In order to provide answers to these questions, and to move beyond the limitations of discourse analysis and ideology critique, I offer an anthropologically informed perspective on Independence Day celebrations and the routines and practices of national commemoration in Namibia.

On memory, commemoration, and national days

Besides Namibia's 20th independence jubilee 17 other countries in Africa celebrated the 50th anniversaries of their independence in 2010. These celebrations not only brought the history of African independence into the international limelight, but also created an occasion for the jubilant countries and their citizens to reflect on the postcolonial status quo and the intricacies of national history.⁷ At the same time, the jubilees provided a unique opportunity to analyse national days as nation building in the making. To apply such a perspective could allow one to heed Charles Turner's call "for a critical hermeneutics of commemoration as part of a broader ethnography of nationhood".⁸ In order to conceptualise national days as a field of research for such ethnography, some theoretical reflections on the nature of memory and commemoration are necessary.

In line with recent theory I conceive of memory as "a social-constructivist model that takes as its starting point the idea that memories of a shared past are collectively constructed and reconstructed in the present rather than resurrected from the past".⁹ In a dialectic process of re/constructing pasts and presents by actively remembering and forgetting, memory is mediated with "the help of symbolic artefacts".¹⁰ While Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney consider speech, photographs, film or literature such artefacts, it is necessary to extend the formats of mediation in order to conceptualise commemoration as a social practice within a national framework. It therefore makes sense to consider "all those devices through which a nation recalls, marks, embodies, discusses or argues about its past, and to all those devices which are intended to create or sustain a sense

⁷ Cf. Carola Lentz, "Celebrating independence jubilees and the millennium: national days in Africa", *Nations and Nationalism*, 19 (2), 2013: 208-216; idem, "The 2010 independence jubilees: the politics and aesthetics of national commemoration in Africa", *Nations and Nationalism*, 19 (2), 2013: 217-237; idem and Godwin Komes, (eds.), *Staatsinszenierung, Erinnerungsmarathon und Volksfest. Afrika feiert 50 Jahre Unabhängigkeit*, Frankfurt, Brandes & Apsel, 2011.

⁸ Charles Turner, "Nation and commemoration", in: Gerhard Delanty and Krishan Kumar, (eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Nations and Nationalism*, London, SAGE, 2006: 205-213 (212).

⁹ Ann Rigney, "Plenitude, scarcity and the circulation of cultural memory", *Journal of European Studies*, 35 (1), 2005: 11-28 (14).

¹⁰ Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney, "Introduction: cultural memory and its dynamics", in: eadem, (eds.), *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2012: 1-11 (1).

of belonging or 'we feeling' in the individuals who belong to it".¹¹ For Charles Turner, such devices are "public rituals of remembrance and individual acts of recollection" as well as museum and memorial projects, the naming of streets, public debates on the national significance of places and events, "and the unspoken or gestural ways through which nationality is not so much represented as incorporated in the practices of everyday life."¹²

Seen from this angle, national days are particularly rewarding events for the analysis of the subtleties of national commemoration. Most nation-states make use of commemorative calendars to distinguish marked and unmarked times of national significance.¹³ Through the medium of commemorative holidays and the sequencing of singular past-time events into a commemorative calendar, "a dramatic narrative that encodes temporality, and therefore, history" is construed, enacted by means of commemorative practice, stabilised and continuously reactivated and renewed.¹⁴ Dramatic narratives thus structure national pasts and allow mnemonic communities to synchronise their memory through commemoration.¹⁵

Irrespective of whether one attends a particular commemorative event, follows it on television or avoids it entirely in protest, national holidays are pervasive points of reference for citizens to engage with 'their' nation. Featuring most prominently in the commemorative calendar is usually one central national day, which is emblematic of the foundation myth of the nation: revolution, as with France and 14 July; re-unification, as with Germany and 3 October; independence, as with Namibia and 21 March. National days thus "invite citizens to remember, re-enact and re-define the national past and aim to enhance their emotional attachment to the nation-state" – a quality, which one should not, however, equate with unequivocal identification.¹⁶ Instead, national days reflect the contestation inherent in the very concept of the nation, by crystallising debate and dissent, by providing public arenas for the negotiation of national belonging, and by dramatising national imaginaries with their explicit and implicit politics of inclusion and exclusion.¹⁷

National day celebrations usually consist of a wide variety of complementary elements that in sum constitute a political ritual, but which can also be deconstructed into single

¹¹ Turner, "Nation": 206.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Cf. Eviatar Zerubavel, "Calendars and history: a comparative study of the social organization of national memory", in: Jeffrey K. Olick, (ed.), *States of Memory: Continuities, Conflicts, and Transformations in National Retrospection*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2003: 315-337.

¹⁴ Don Handelman, *Models and Mirrors: Towards an Anthropology of Public Events*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998: 191.

¹⁵ Cf. Zerubavel, "Calendars": 315-317.

¹⁶ Lentz, "Celebrating": 208.

¹⁷ Cf. *ibid.*; Rigney, "Plenitude"; Akuupa and Kornes, "Shifting representations".

ritualised sub-units, often eclectic, yet cohesive in their own right.¹⁸ Central features of commemorative practise in national holiday celebrations are presidential speeches and addresses to the nation, the attendance of national and international guests of honour, military and/or civilian parades, music, religious liturgy (prayer and blessing), the bestowal of decorations on merited representatives of the nation, the lighting of torches, the ceremonial display of national symbols (flag, constitution, coat of arms), dress, seating order etc.¹⁹ Often, national day celebrations include popular forms of entertainment such as concerts, cultural performances, stage-plays and sports competitions, replete with drink and dance.²⁰ This adds an additional layer to the complexity of the event, by infusing the solemn nature of national commemoration with celebratory elements of feast and festival. Accordingly, national day celebrations should be seen as total events, comprised of a multitude of heterogeneous elements, all engaged in one grand orchestration to ceremonially re/imagine, re/enact and re/affirm the nation.

However, the general public's voluntary attendance at national holiday celebrations should not be misread as unconditional approval of a particular government's policy. Rather, it should be analysed in its own right: who is attending, and who is not; how are audiences interacting, how are they involved; how are people dressed; what is happening on the side-lines; how does one talk about it. Given its characteristics as an 'imagined community'²¹, or, more aptly, its manifestation as "national imaginaries"²², identification with a nation does not presuppose a congruent level of identification with a state or government. On the contrary: the critical voices of audiences and opposition groups were part and parcel of the 2010 independence anniversaries.²³ People are usually well aware of the division of state and nation, whose equation is idealistic nationalist projection rather than the lived experience of most citizens in a given nation-state.²⁴ Against this background, it is of particular interest to analyse the strategies members of organising committees for national day celebrations, as memory-makers,

¹⁸ Cf. Turner "Nation"; Åsa Boholm, "Introduction", in: idem, (ed.), *Political Ritual*, Göteborg, IASSA, 1996: 1-13.

¹⁹ Cf. Lentz, "2010"; Heike Becker and Carola Lentz, "The politics and aesthetics of commemoration: national days in southern Africa", *Anthropology Southern Africa*, 36 (1/2), 2013: 1-10; Lentz and Kornes, *Staatsinszenierung*; Gabriella Elgenius, "National days and nation-building", in: Linas Eriksonas and Leos Müller, (eds.), *Statehood Before and Beyond Ethnicity: Minor States in Northern and Eastern Europe, 1600-2000*, Bruxelles, Lang, 2005: 363-384.

²⁰ Cf. Akuupa and Kornes, "Shifting representations"; Lentz, "2010": 219.

²¹ Cf. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London, Verso, 1983.

²² Kelly M. Askew, *Performing the Nation: Swahili Music and Cultural Politics in Tanzania*, Chicago and London, Chicago University Press, 2002: 273.

²³ For a comparative overview, see Lentz and Kornes, *Staatsinszenierung*. My own opinion survey among visitors during Namibia's Independence Day celebration in 2010 provoked many surprisingly balanced opinions. Criticism of government expenditure on the event was common along with patriotic approval of the need to celebrate the country's anniversary of independence.

²⁴ Cf. Elgenius, "National days": 363-365.

employ to convey particular imaginaries of the nation: “It is through national rituals (such as the National Day) that we understand how national elites and nationals perceive the nation, as well as how they wish others to perceive it”.²⁵

On patriotic history, liberation struggle memory, and national commemoration in Namibia

For an analysis of national days and commemoration in Namibia it makes sense to consider some of the inspiring scholarly contributions on the politics of commemoration written with a focus on Zimbabwe. Richard Werbner has famously called “for a theoretically informed anthropology of memory and the making of political subjectivities” in postcolonial Africa.²⁶ While his challenge resonates well with the direction of contemporary memory studies, his own contribution on ‘elite memorialism’ in Zimbabwe has contributed immensely to our understanding of the politics of memory of former liberation movements-turned-governments in Southern Africa.²⁷ Based on similar observations Terence Ranger has established the notion of ‘patriotic history’ to designate a shift in postcolonial Zimbabwean historiography:

It is different from and narrower than the old nationalist historiography, which celebrated aspiration and modernisation as well as resistance. It resents the ‘disloyal’ questions raised by historians of nationalism. It regards as irrelevant any history that is not political. And it is explicitly antagonistic to academic historiography.²⁸

This critical perspective on the emergence of heroic nationalist narratives has been utilised to analyse commemorative practice. Both Joost Fontein and Terence Ranger emphasise the predicaments of national commemoration and hero worship in Zimbabwe, arising from the contestations tied to differing liberation narratives and past-time violations.²⁹ Faced with conditions of severe political repression, commemorative holidays in Zimbabwe reveal socio-political fault-lines and provide platforms for dissent, limited as they may be.³⁰ Beyond the confines of state-sponsored violence, however, nationalism in Zimbabwe has also undergone transformations, as Sabelo Ndlovu-

²⁵ Ibid.: 363.

²⁶ Richard Werbner, “Introduction. Beyond oblivion: confronting memory crisis”, in: idem, (ed.), *Memory and the Postcolony: African Anthropology and the Critique of Power*, London, Zed, 1998: 1-17 (2).

²⁷ Cf. Richard Werbner, “Smoke from the barrel of a gun: postwars of the dead, memory and reinscription in Zimbabwe”, in: idem, (ed.), *Memory and the Postcolony: African Anthropology and the Critique of Power*, London, Zed, 1998: 71-102.

²⁸ Ranger, “Nationalist”: 218.

²⁹ Cf. Joost Fontein, “Between tortured bodies and resurfacing bones: the politics of the dead in Zimbabwe”, *Journal of Material Culture*, 15 (4), 2010: 423-448.

³⁰ Ibid.: 426-429; Ranger, “Nationalist”: 233.

Gatsheni and Wendy Willems demonstrate relating to commemorative practice.³¹ Through the medium of *galas* and *bashes*, nationalism has taken on increasingly cultural and popular forms, directed especially at Zimbabwe's *born frees*, the generation born after independence. Thus infused with the idiom of a youthful, yet militant patriotism, the elite memorialism of the 1980s and 1990s has been both transformed and re-mediated.³² This finds expression in the celebration of national holidays such as Independence Day, Heroes Day or Unity Day, with their institutionalised heroism and liberation struggle nostalgia which are increasingly merging with formats of Zimbabwean popular culture. A "revival of commemorations of liberation war victims"³³ in recent years thus seeks to address new audiences, on the one hand, while on the other it is characterized by ostracizing white Zimbabweans (*Rodies*) and the political opposition of the MDC as enemies of the nation.³⁴

This emergence of liberation struggle memory in Zimbabwe has inspired scholarship on memory politics in Namibia. Here, a recurrent theme is the centrality of Swapo's heroic narrative of the armed liberation struggle in official state-sponsored commemoration. As Heike Becker writes: "This master narrative of national liberation, having become the foundation myth of post-colonial Namibia, legitimates and authorizes the power of the post-colonial elite as the sole, heroic liberators from apartheid and colonialism".³⁵ Swapo's liberation struggle narrative has been scrutinised from various angles, such as nation building discourse³⁶, the centrality of exile³⁷, patriotic history³⁸, national

³¹ Cf. Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Wendy Willems, "Making sense of cultural nationalism and the politics of commemoration under the Third Chimurenga in Zimbabwe", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 35 (4), 2009: 945-965.

³² *Ibid.*: 954f.

³³ *Ibid.*: 956.

³⁴ *Ibid.*: 955-962.

³⁵ Heike Becker, "Commemorating heroes in Windhoek and Eenhana: memory, culture, and nationalism in Namibia, 1990-2010", *Africa*, 81 (4), 2011: 519-543 (520).

³⁶ Cf. Akuupa and Korneš "Shifting representations"; André du Pisani, "The discursive limits of SWAPO's dominant discourses on anti-colonial nationalism in postcolonial Namibia – a first exploration", in: André du Pisani, Reinhart Kössler and William A. Lindeke, (eds.), *The Long Aftermath of War – Reconciliation and Transition in Namibia*, Freiburg, Arnold Bergstraesser Institut, 2010: 1-40; Henning Melber, "'Namibia, land of the brave': selective memories on war and violence within nation building", in: Jon Abbink, Mirjam de Bruijn and Klaas van Walraven, (eds.), *Rethinking Resistance: Revolt and Violence in African History*, Leiden and Boston, Brill, 2003: 305-327; Johanna Åfreds, *History and Nation-Building: The Political Uses of History in Post-Colonial Namibia*, Uppsala, Department of Economic History Uppsala University, 2000.

³⁷ Cf. Martha Akawa, *The Gender Politics of the Namibian Liberation Struggle*, Basel, Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2014; Christian Williams, *Exile History: An Ethnography of the SWAPO Camps and the Namibian Nation*, Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Michigan, 2009.

³⁸ Cf. Gary Baines, "Conflicting memories, competing narratives and complicating histories: revisiting the Cassinga controversy", *Journal of Namibian Studies*, 6, 2009: 7-26; André du Pisani, "Memory politics in 'Where Others Wavered. The Autobiography of Sam Nujoma. My Life in SWAPO and my participation in the liberation struggle of Namibia'", *Journal of Namibian Studies*, 1, 2007: 97-107.

reconciliation³⁹ or public memory and the politics of commemoration⁴⁰. National holidays, as media of commemoration, have received less scholarly attention, however, which is surprising given the striking characteristics of Namibia's postcolonial commemorative calendar. While this calendar is to be analysed elsewhere in more detail,⁴¹ some features of it are worth highlighting at this point.

The national holidays were officially gazetted in 1990 and include six political holidays (out of a total of twelve): Independence Day (21 March), Workers Day (1 May), Cassinga Day (4 May), Africa Day (25 May), Heroes Day (26 August), Day of the Namibian Women and International Human Rights Day (10 December).⁴² Namibia's dramatic narrative of the nation is closely intertwined with the history of the struggle for national independence. At the same time, it also embodies the liberation history of SWAPO in carefully selected episodes. *Cassinga Day* commemorates airborne attacks by the South African Defence Force on exile camps of SWAPO in Angola in 1978. The simultaneous raid on Cassinga transit camp and Chetequera base left approximately 1,000 people dead, the majority of them women and children. Ever since 1978 the attack has been commemorated by SWAPO within Namibia and among the Namibian exile community, symbolising the willingness of Namibians (and SWAPO) to make 'the ultimate sacrifice' for independence. Accordingly, Cassinga Day is the national holiday related most closely to the history of SWAPO, annually stirring debates on whether Cassinga Day is a day of inclusive national commemoration or a day to commemorate SWAPO's liberation struggle exclusively. *Workers Day*, despite being an international holiday, was always a focal point of political mass mobilisation in Namibia during the struggle for liberation, given the close connection between Namibia's labour movement and the national liberation movement. *Africa Day* commemorates the founding of the Organization of African Unity

³⁹ Cf. Godwin Kornes, "Negotiating silent reconciliation: the long struggle for transitional justice in Namibia", *Working Papers of the Department of Anthropology and African Studies of the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz*, 141, 2013; Vilho A. Shigwedha, *Enduring Suffering: The Cassinga Massacre of Namibian Exiles in 1978 and the Conflicts Between Survivor's Memories and Testimonies*, unpubl. PhD thesis, University of the Western Cape, 2011; Gustine Hunter, *Die Politik der Erinnerung und des Vergessens in Namibia. Umgang mit schweren Menschenrechtsverletzungen der Ära des bewaffneten Befreiungskampfes 1966 bis 1989*, Frankfurt, Lang, 2008.

⁴⁰ Cf. Akuupa and Kornes, "Shifting representations"; Kornes, "Kampf"; Heike Becker, "Anticolonial nationalism in the postcolony: performance, political ritual and the liturgy of national days in Namibia", paper presented at the conference *Celebrating the nation, debating the nation: independence jubilees, national days and the politics of commemoration in Africa* at Centre Point Sud in Bamako, Mali, 9-12 January 2012; Becker "Commemorating"; Reinhart Kössler, "Facing a fragmented past: memory, culture, and politics in Namibia", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 33 (2), 2007: 361-382; Napandulwe Shiweda, *Mandume ya Ndemufayo's Memorials in Namibia and Angola*, unpubl. Master thesis, University of the Western Cape, 2005.

⁴¹ Godwin Kornes, "The commemorative calendar of national holidays in Namibia", article, forthcoming.

⁴² Public Holidays Act 20 December 1990, Act No.26 of 1990 of the National Assembly. The act was amended in 2004 to rename *International Human Rights Day* to *Day of the Namibian Women and International Human Rights Day* (Public Holidays Amendment Bill No.12, 2004). According to the act, if a public holiday falls on a Sunday, "the following Monday shall also be a public holiday, unless the Monday is already a public holiday."

in 1963 (renamed African Union in 2002) and can be seen as a token of appreciation for the role the organisation played in supporting the struggle for Namibian independence. *Heroes Day* serves to commemorate the first skirmish between SWAPO guerrillas and South African troops near Ongulumbashe in north-western Namibia on 26 August 1966. While the military impact of the encounter was rather insignificant, SWAPO actively construed Ongulumbashe as a symbol of the liberation movement's bravery and endurance in the struggle for independence. This was supported by the United Nations, which officially recognised 26 August as *Namibia Day* in 1973 and declared SWAPO the legitimate representative of the Namibian people.⁴³ Since independence, Heroes Day has been dedicated to commemorating the 'heroes' and 'martyrs' of Namibian anti-colonial resistance, often crystallising contestations over Namibian liberation history.⁴⁴ *Day of the Namibian Women and International Human Rights Day* officially commemorates the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the UN in 1948, but also has different layers of meaning. The holiday was renamed in 2004, announced by then Prime Minister Theo-Ben Gurirab in "recognition of the heroism of Namibian women [and their] determination to end apartheid brutalities and colonial domination in Namibia".⁴⁵ It thus also commemorates the active role of women in the liberation struggle, in general, and the key role women played in the Old Location uprising in 1959, in particular.⁴⁶

Despite the compelling structure of Namibia's dramatic narrative-cum-commemorative calendar, which also prompted Eviatar Zerubavel to include it in his comparative analysis,⁴⁷ few contributions have explicitly focused on commemorative holidays as an arena for the mediation of this particular brand of struggle memory. Lalli Metsola refers to the reproduction of Swapo's heroic narrative in political leaders' statements during official events commemorating the liberation struggle.⁴⁸ In more detail, Henning Melber underlines the importance of national holidays in independent Namibia as one manifestation, among others, of Swapo's liberation narrative, criticising Swapo's monopolising of public events as "one-sided celebrations, including the display of party emblems by the head of state during official ceremonies".⁴⁹ Gustine Hunter, in her analysis of national reconciliation vis-à-vis Swapo's track record of human rights abuses in exile, describes

⁴³ UN Declaration 3111 of 1973. The same declaration, amended in 1976, declared SWAPO to be the "sole and authentic representation of the Namibian people".

⁴⁴ Cf. Godwin Kones, "Nation building, nationale Erinnerungskultur und die Politik der Toten in Namibia", in: Larissa Fuhrmann et al., (eds.), *Beiträge zur 3. Kölner Afrikawissenschaftlichen Nachwuchstagung (KANT 3)*, Köln, Institut für Afrikanistik, 2012: 1-25.

⁴⁵ "Rights day to be renamed", *The Namibian*, 30 September, 2004.

⁴⁶ Cf. Marion Wallace with John Kinahan, *A History of Namibia: From the Beginning to 1990*, Auckland Park, Jacana, 2011: 254.

⁴⁷ Zerubavel, "Calendars": 318.

⁴⁸ Lalli Metsola, "Out of order? The margins of Namibian ex-combatant 'reintegration'", in: Henning Melber, (ed.), *Transitions in Namibia: Which Changes for Whom?*, Uppsala, Nordic Africa Institute, 2007: 130-153 (134).

⁴⁹ Melber, "Selective": 318.

political national holidays in Namibia as exemplary for the selective memory of the liberation struggle mediated by the ruling party.⁵⁰ All three, subsequently, see national holidays as a platform for Swapo to convey its particular master narrative; in studies, one should add, conducted during or focusing on the tenure of Namibia's first President, Sam Nujoma (1990-2005), who displayed an increasingly authoritarian style of governance in the course of his presidency.⁵¹

More recent scholarship on national holidays in Namibia has contributed diversified perspectives, accentuating their potential to stir debates on the status quo of liberation,⁵² to illustrate the performativity and localisation of memory,⁵³ to accommodate and nationalise alternative liberation struggle narratives,⁵⁴ to negotiate regional and national frameworks of belonging,⁵⁵ or to illustrate the transformation of national imaginaries since independence.⁵⁶ In summary and with a focus on Independence Day celebrations, a "tentative repositioning of liberation war memory [... and] modification of post-colonial Namibia's prevalent ideational foundations"⁵⁷ is recognisable. Against this background, the study of national holiday celebrations, and Independence Day in particular, has the potential to offer profound insights into the construction and negotiation of national imaginaries and memory in one of Africa's youngest nation-states.

Celebrating Independence Day in Namibia

Independence Day is a regionally rotating holiday and has been celebrated annually with varying degrees of magnitude since 1990. The date for the independence of Namibia was chosen by the members of the Constituent Assembly to make a strong statement against apartheid and to commemorate the day of the Sharpeville massacre in South Africa in 1960.⁵⁸ The motion to choose the 21st as Independence Day was tabled by SWAPO's Theo-Ben Gurirab and adopted unanimously by all members of the Assembly on New Year's Eve 1989, to be publicly announced on 29 January 1990.⁵⁹ This decision

⁵⁰ Hunter, *Politik*: 161-164.

⁵¹ Godwin Kornes, "Whose blood waters whose freedom? Gegenerinnerungen in der namibischen Inter-niertenfrage", *Working Papers of the Department of Anthropology and African Studies of the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz*, 122, 2010: 58-67; Melber, "Selective".

⁵² Cf. Kornes, "Kampf".

⁵³ Cf. Becker, "Anticolonial".

⁵⁴ Cf. Kornes, "Nation building".

⁵⁵ Cf. Michael U. Akuupa, *'Checking the Kulcha': Local Discourses of Culture in the Kavango Region of Namibia*, unpubl. Master thesis, University of the Western Cape, 2006.

⁵⁶ Cf. Akuupa and Kornes, "Shifting representations".

⁵⁷ Becker and Lentz, "The politics": 7.

⁵⁸ The massacre, following mass protests against apartheid pass laws, became a catalyst for the emergence of armed resistance in South Africa. Sixty-nine people were killed and approx. 180 wounded. In the wake of the uprising the African National Congress was banned.

⁵⁹ Debates of the Constituent Assembly, 21 November 1989 – 31 January 1990, 161, 326-329.

underlines the great importance of struggle memory for Namibia's commemorative calendar, while also inscribing Independence Day with the trans-national dimension of the liberation struggle.⁶⁰

Drawing on an established model of national symbolism⁶¹, the independence of Namibia was declared at midnight of 21 March 1990, with some minutes delay, and an enthusiastic crowd cheering “down – down – down” to the lowering of the South African flag.⁶² The event saw the first parade of 850 troops of the new Namibian Defence Force, trained and equipped with uniforms by the Kenyan UN peace-keeping military deployment.⁶³ The ceremonial swearing-in of Namibia's first President, Sam Nujoma, by UN Secretary General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, with F.W. de Klerk and Nelson Mandela looking on as unlikely witnesses, soon became one of the most iconic moments in Namibian history.

On the morning of the 21st, a huge *Independence March* formed in Katutura and Khomasdal, and moved to central Windhoek's Kaiserstrasse, which was soon to be renamed *Independence Avenue*. As has been outlined elsewhere in more detail, the civil parade impressively embodied the values attached to the slogan *One Namibia, One Nation*, which was popularised during the struggle days as a rallying cry for an independent Namibia.⁶⁴ The newly introduced national symbols were visibly adopted by the jubilant crowd, appearing on shirts, dresses and costumes, on floats and busses, balloons and bandanas. The parade included SWAPO pioneers, learners, *oturupa* both on horseback and in marching formations, floats of companies and schools, activists from trade unions and women's rights groups carrying banners with political messages, majorettes, brass bands and cultural groups from various regions. Namibians of all backgrounds and complexions stood side by side, witnessing a moment both surreal and historic, which brought together a broad cross-section of the heterogeneous anti-apartheid movement and Namibian society at large.

⁶⁰ In his autobiography, Sam Nujoma refers to both Sharpeville – “a day of poignant memory” (p. 437) – and United Nations Day (p. 427) as motivating factors for choosing the 21st. The latter is misleading, as United Nations Day has always been 24 October. He further, incorrectly, writes that the United Nations designated the 21st as Human Rights Day. While South Africa declared the day of the Sharpeville massacre a national holiday called Human Rights Day in 1994, international Human Rights Day is commemorated on 10 December – as it is in Namibia. The UN does, however, commemorate the 21st in remembrance of Sharpeville as International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, see <<http://www.un.org/en/events/racialdiscriminationday/>> [accessed 6 June 2015]; cf. Sam Nujoma, *Where Others Wavered: The Autobiography of Sam Nujoma*, London, Panaf, 2001.

⁶¹ Cf. Susan Williams, Robert Holland and Terry A. Barringer, “Preface: the midnight hour”, in: Robert Holland, Susan Williams and Terry A. Barringer, (eds.), *The Iconography of Independence: 'Freedoms at Midnight'*, London and New York, Routledge, 2010: ix-xix.

⁶² Cf. Randolph Vigne, “Independence celebrations”, *Action on Namibia*, May 1990: 4-5. For a lively description of the ceremony and the cause of the delay, see Klaus Dierks' *Chronology of Namibian History*, Ch.7: The Period after Namibia's Independence: The First Ten Years 1990-2000, available online: <<http://www.klausdierks.com>> [accessed 6 June 2015].

⁶³ Cf. Martin Shalli, “Tribute to the Founding President”, *Windhoek Observer*, 18 May, 2012.

⁶⁴ Cf. Akuupa and Kornes, “Shifting representations”: 39f.

Later that day, the *Independence March* moved on into the stadium in Olympia suburb, where the main festivities were to take place. The highlight among these was a mass gymnastics display by 500 school children from SWAPO's exile camps in Nyango (Zambia) and Kwanza-Sul (Angola), who were trained by a team of North Koreans and whose performance vividly displayed SWAPO's (para-)military and educational discipline in exile.⁶⁵ Theirs, and other performances during the day, mediated tangible memories of exile and a strong notion of national unity, which was again visibly emphasised by the appropriation of the national symbols by the audience. In his inaugural speech, President Nujoma construed independence as a result of "national consensus", declaring that the "effort to forge national identity and unity" would be the paramount task of the new government and the Namibian people at large.⁶⁶ In retrospect, the celebration of independence in 1990 appears as a powerful dramatisation of the notion of *One Namibia, one Nation* as an idealised model for nation building in postcolonial Namibia.⁶⁷ At the same time, the event established a relatively stable format for celebrating Independence Day in postcolonial Namibia.

This was evidenced by the events of the first anniversary of independence. While drawing on formats of the previous year's celebration, such as the President's address, the attendance of foreign guests of honour, most prominently Robert Mugabe, who also delivered a speech, the lighting of the Independence Flame, a military parade, sports competitions and music shows, it also reactivated organisational structures within ministries and government departments involved in planning the event. The first anniversary celebration also included a reissue of the mass gymnastics display by, this time, 1,200 school children, again with the help of North Korean trainers.

Since then, Independence Day usually involves a carefully planned protocol consisting of, among other things: the attendance of international guests of honour, a military parade, the President's speech, prayer, a torch-lighting ceremony, the conferring of national orders on visiting guests of honour and selected public figures of national significance, state banquettes, as well as an entertainment programme involving performances by cultural groups and sports competitions (e.g. the popular *Boxing Bonanza*), music shows and fireworks. Occasionally it also involves the pardoning of

⁶⁵ Cf. Akuupa and Kornes, "Shifting representations": 40, for a more detailed rendition of the performance. The learners had to return to Zambia and Angola after the celebration, in order to finish their school education. On their way back by bus, they also performed in Northern Namibia. On North Korean-Namibian relations, cf. Godwin Kornes, "North Korean aesthetics as travelling model: Mansudae memorial projects in Namibia", article, forthcoming.

⁶⁶ Cf. <http://www.swapoparty.org/1990_inaugural_speech.html> [accessed 6 June, 2015].

⁶⁷ This is reflected by the centrality given to the independence celebration in Namibia's eminent history school textbook. Here, the iconography of the event, in connection with the slogan *One Namibia, one Nation*, is placed at the beginning of the chapter on the rise of Namibian nationalism, cf. John J. Katzao et al., (eds.), *Understanding History in Context. Grade 10*, Windhoek, Longman, 2007: 2. Furthermore, the book continuously contextualises significant events from the history of the Namibian liberation struggle, such as the Old Location uprising in 1959, the attack on Cassinga, or the 'battle' of Ongulumbashe with the respective postcolonial commemorative holidays.

convicts by the President. National broadcasting covers the celebrations live, with themed shows and documentaries as run-up usually some days ahead of the event. Most Namibian newspapers contribute special Independence Day editions, which – depending on orientation and closeness to the ruling party – heap praise on the government or take a critical look at developments since independence. Independence Day is often the occasion for the inauguration of institutions with national significance, such as the independence display at *Alte Feste* museum (1990), the new State House (2008) or the Independence Memorial Museum (2014). Every five years, Independence Day becomes the stage for the swearing-in of the Namibian President-elect by the Chief Justice and the official presentation of the new cabinet, which involves an even more elaborate protocol.⁶⁸

The official Independence Day celebration in Windhoek still takes place in Olympia's Independence Stadium, which is situated rather remotely from the city's main residential areas. In order to attract visitors and allow poor people to attend the City of Windhoek provides shuttle busses free of charge. In regional capitals venues sometimes are closer to residential areas (Oshakati), while others are removed from town centres (Gobabis), thus allowing for different dynamics of socialising. Often the organisers provide free meals and drinks for the audience, while in front of the venues, stadiums mostly, market women set up their stands, offering Namibian culinary treats such as *kapana*, *vet koeks* and *omagungu*, and of course, chilled lager. Depending on the location, celebrations thus also expand into the surrounding quarters, providing customers for small and medium sized enterprises – eateries and *shebeens*, mostly.⁶⁹

Independence jubilees

Jubilee celebrations are more extensive and rely on complex organisational structures. The organising committee is routinely headed by the Prime Minister, while a Technical Committee is chaired by the Secretary to Cabinet, who acts as a link between the Prime Minister and Cabinet. The Technical Committee is subdivided into six sub-committees (Finance; Information and Publicity; Entertainment; Catering; Logistics, Transport and Accommodation; Protocol, Safety and Security), which are chaired by the respective Permanent Secretaries and bring together representatives of the private and public sectors, media practitioners and artists. Both Technical Committee and sub-committees hold regular meetings.⁷⁰ This organisational structure is stable and reactivated for every jubilee, and also, on a smaller scale, for all annual national holidays. It is here that form and content of holiday celebrations are conceived, negotiated and put into practice.

Jubilee celebrations usually have unique themes which are reflected in specifically designed logos and slogans. The logo of 1995 displayed a burning torch, inscribed with

⁶⁸ Cf. Kornes, "Kampf": 212-214, 218-221.

⁶⁹ A *shebeen* is a township bar and epicenter of social life. The many thousands of *shebeens* play an essential role for defining Namibianess – for better, and for worse.

⁷⁰ Cf. Kornes, "Kampf": 218f.

the number 5 and flanked by two Namibian flags. The design for the 10th jubilee was more nuanced, depicting a radiant sun with three wavy lines in the colours blue, red and green, and the words “10th Independence Anniversary” and “1990 – 2000” written above and below in semicircles, thus combining the national colours with a symbol of motion. The logo for the jubilee of 2010 was chosen by the organising committee from the entries for a competition and presented to the public on 17 February 2010 by the committee’s chairman, Prime Minister Nahas Angula. It consists of an oval-shaped national flag, underlined by the words “independence 1990 – 2010” and the official jubilee slogan “a visionary nation on the move towards 2030”, the latter referring to the government’s policy concept *Vision 2030*.⁷¹ Across the flag the words “20 years” are written in gold, which in turn are crowned by 11 jubilant human figures, each having a different colour, representing “national unity in diversity”.⁷²

Figure 1: Logo of 1995



Figure 2: Logo of 2000



The 2010 logo thus symbolically refers to the negotiation of national and regionally, culturally, or ethnically framed identifications in Namibia, which also finds an expression in the aesthetics of Independence Day celebrations. While the central event alternately takes place in one of the administrative regions’ capitals, regional Independence Day celebrations, modelled on the protocol of the main event, are held in all other capitals as well. As a close reading of media reports, government publications and official programmes since 1990 reveals, regional Independence Day celebrations follow an exceedingly steady routine and have become a well-established genre of national commemoration in Namibia. Regional celebrations involve speeches by local dignitaries, such as mayors and/or regional governors, usually including a reading of the President’s address to the audience, prayer, performances by cultural groups and musicians. By means of the protocol, the President’s speech and the presence of national symbols such as flag and constitution, which represent the script of the main

⁷¹ The slogan of 2005, “Celebrating a legacy and continuing nation building”, made reference to Sam Nujoma’s end of office and the transition to Hifikepunye Pohamba’s presidency.

⁷² From the official press release, copy is in authors’ possession. On ‘Unity in Diversity’ as a concept for nation building in Namibia, cf. Akuupa and Kornes, “Shifting representations”.

event, the general theme of regional celebrations is national unity. This, however, often contrasts with performative displays of ethnicity and a commitment to regionalism in themes and speeches, which allows space for the negotiation of regional modes of belonging within the framework of the nation-state, as *Unity in Diversity*.⁷³

Figure 3: Logo of 2010



With this in mind it is worth looking at the 2010 logo again, and the use of the number “11”, in particular. The number 13, while often avoided due to superstition, would have been a clear reference to Namibia’s administrative structure of 13 regions (in 2010; 14 as of August 2013). The number eleven, though, evokes a range of ambivalent connotations such as the Odendaal Plan and the restructuring of Namibian society into 11 ethnic units during apartheid rule. It also relates to the number of officially recognized languages which, however, is only a fraction of the languages spoken in Namibia. A cursory internet search provides ample evidence that in unscientific contexts, especially when tourism-related, the number 11 is used in a highly confusing and incoherent manner to indiscriminately designate languages, ethnic groups and linguistic communities in Namibia. While the government in its press release did not explicate the reason for choosing 11, instead of 13 colourful Namibians to represent “diversity”, this somehow attests to the *longue-durée* of the apartheid rationale.

Jubilee celebrations also include civil parades with floats representing public institutions, companies, schools and universities, fly-pasts by Namibia’s air force, soccer and rugby matches with teams from neighbouring countries, and also more advanced cultural

⁷³ On the more recent emergence of cultural representations of the nation in the context of regional celebrations in Northern Namibia, see Becker, “Commemorating”, and idem, “Anticolonial”.

programmes. The jubilee of 2010 was preceded by a week of concerts, art exhibitions, public lectures, special television broadcasts and educational events, highlighted by the musical *Creation*, which was written and choreographed by Sandy Rudd, Banana Shekupe and Haymilch Olivier for the occasion. According to Frans Kapofi, Chairman of the Technical Committee, this focus on arts and entertainment reflects the organisers' shifting objective towards making celebrations more attractive for diverse audiences, especially youth.⁷⁴ This emerging trend to involve artists more directly in the celebrations was also reflected in the 2015 jubilee, which was characterised by the significant contribution of artists and educational institutions like the College of the Arts.⁷⁵ As was mentioned above, and as has become evident from the focus on entertainment and educational formats, the organisers are increasingly putting the spotlight on Namibia's *born free* generation. For this, the respective sub-committees conceive of ways to attract more young people to official national holiday celebrations and to raise awareness of the history of the liberation struggle.⁷⁶ This recent development, finally, allows one to explore some of the contestations attached to Independence Day celebrations in Namibia in more detail in the following paragraph, focusing on Swapo's liberation narrative, the politics of dress, and the question of inclusivity.

The aesthetics and politics of commemorating Independence Day

The goal of attracting *born frees* not only to attend commemorative events of the nation-state, but also to engage with Namibia's liberation history, is a sign of the shifting demographics of the Namibian society. At the same time, it illustrates how the older struggle generation is mediating its memory of the liberation struggle – most vividly rendered in the figure of Sam Nujoma as a national icon⁷⁷ – to a younger generation with no direct experience of the struggle and very often other priorities in life. By increasingly popularising the formats of Independence Day celebrations, the nation-state creates a platform for identification more appealing to young people, while at the same time rebranding the aesthetics of Swapo's heroic narrative. The regular performances of Ndilimani during national holiday celebrations are a case in point.

Ndilimani, which means 'dynamite' in Oshiwambo and refers to the combat name of SWAPO commander Peter Nanyemba, was established among the Namibian exile community in Lubango, Angola in 1981/82. Its founding members, musicians like Banana Shekupe, conceived of the band as a platform to "mobilise the world [and] encourage also our colleagues in the struggle with music; to give a message, through music".⁷⁸ As such part of the 'cultural front' of the liberation struggle⁷⁹, Ndilimani

⁷⁴ Interview with the author, Windhoek, 25 March 2010. At the time of our interview, Kapofi was Secretary to Cabinet; since March 2015 he has been promoted to Minister of Presidential Affairs.

⁷⁵ Cf. "Namibian arts shine at silver jubilee celebrations", *The Namibian*, 24 March, 2015.

⁷⁶ Cf. Kornes, "Kampf": 224-227.

⁷⁷ Cf. *ibid.*: 219f.; du Pisani, "Memory".

⁷⁸ Interview with Banana Shekupe, founding member of Ndilimani, Windhoek, 23 March 2010.

became a powerful instrument for SWAPO to mobilise people and to convey its message of national liberation through the medium of music. Still existing today, the band is constantly rejuvenating itself and regularly performs at national holiday celebrations. Ndilimani is an established link between SWAPO, the armed liberation movement, and Swapo, Namibia's postcolonial ruling party, transferring the aesthetics of the liberation struggle into the present. With its blend of popular music and struggle lyrics, Ndilimani mirrors similar dynamics in neighbouring Zimbabwe, where the ruling ZANU-Pf is merging its heroic narrative with popular culture, producing new formats of national commemoration.⁸⁰ Ndilimani, though, is just one example for the politics of memory embedded in national holidays such as Independence Day.

Another regular bone of contention is the display of Swapo party colours⁸¹ by government representatives, or even the head of state, during national events. Henning Melber has criticised this as a conflation of state and ruling party, making his observations against the background of presidency of Nujoma, who had displayed an increasingly authoritarian style of governance in the course of his three terms of office.⁸² While the colours of the ruling party are indeed a noticeable feature during national events, when members of opposition parties hardly ever put their colours on display, one should try to differentiate. In most cases, the Swapo colours are not nearly as prominent as the national symbols and/or dress signifying cultural or ethnic belonging. In addition, there are differences according to the occasion: the frequency of Swapo colours on Independence Day is rather negligible compared to Heroes Day and especially Cassinga Day – holidays in Namibia's commemorative calendar which are more closely tied to the history of the ruling party.⁸³ In an opinion survey of visitors to the independence jubilee celebration in Windhoek in 2010, 37% of respondents answered the question "Should party colours stay at home on national days?" with "yes", while 57.8% answered "no".⁸⁴ While just a snapshot, it indicates that even though a majority among the audience deems the display of party political affiliation at national events legitimate, the issue of party colours is a contested one.

It is also important to differentiate as to who is wearing the respective colours. While Nujoma, as president, often sported Swapo attire during official events, and continues to

⁷⁹ Cf. Akuupa and Kornes, "Shifting representations": 37-39.

⁸⁰ Cf. Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Willems, "Making sense".

⁸¹ Referring to clothes and accessories bearing colours, logos and slogans clearly linked to political parties – in the case of Swapo mainly the colours blue, red and green, as well as liberation struggle iconography like the burning torch (*onyeka*) or the man with the raised fist (*mannetjie*).

⁸² Cf. Melber, "Selective": 318; Kornes, "Gegenerinnerungen"; Hunter, *Politik*: 147-161.

⁸³ Cf. Akuupa and Kornes, "Shifting representations": 35f. See also Becker, "Anticolonial": 7-9, for similar observations during the Independence Day and Cassinga Day celebrations in Ohangwena, one of the 'Four-O'-regions in Northern Namibia, which constitute Swapo's electoral stronghold, in 2004.

⁸⁴ 5.2% ticked neither "yes" or "no" (n = 154). The survey was conducted by the author, with the help of four history students of the University of Namibia. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Martha Johannes, Erna Mangundu, Nicky Nambase, and Auguste Negongo for their contribution.

do so in his role as “Founding Father of the Namibian Nation”⁸⁵, his successor preferred to wear a suit during national holiday celebrations.⁸⁶ This difference in appearance between the presidents also points to differing attitudes in governance and especially to a more accommodating tone towards the political opposition and minority groups under Pohamba.⁸⁷ In his role as “Founding President”, Nujoma has become the perpetual guest of honour at national events, usually wearing party colours of some sort, a Swapo scarf mostly. His obligatory power salute, raising a fist in the air to the sound of Ndilimani playing “Sema Oulipeni”, their song to his tribute, always manages to excite the attending crowd and tangibly represents Swapo’s particular brand of heroic liberation struggle nostalgia.⁸⁸ Through speeches and performances, the veneration of Nujoma as living national heritage has become a regular feature of national holiday celebrations, contributing to the active and ongoing construction of Nujoma as a hero of the struggle and national father figure.⁸⁹ In contrast, President Pohamba preferred a more civil and statesmanlike representation of the nation-state during national holiday celebrations. He did so through his body language; his clothing; by avoiding signs too closely associated with Swapo, like the power salute; by performative references to the symbols of the nation-state, such as the constitution.⁹⁰ At the same time, however, he was also routinely lauded for his struggle credentials by Masters of Ceremonies, Ndilimani and media commentators during Independence Day celebrations, and his speeches were characterised by Swapo’s patriotic history prose. This highlights the ambiguity and contestation of national holiday celebration in Namibia, which are crystallised in the questions as to whether the nation or the ruling party is the centre of attention and the degree of inclusivity of national commemoration.

⁸⁵ His official title since 2005, see Conferment of Status of Founding Father of the Namibian Nation Act, 2005. An interesting contrast to Nujoma’s colour-clad public appearances as Head of State and President of Swapo in personal union, is his depiction as statesmanlike president, in civilian clothing, on the official poster for the first anniversary of independence in 1991, cf. Giorgio Miescher, “Posters as source: collecting and researching posters at the Basler Afrika Bibliographien”, in: Dag Henrichsen and Giorgio Miescher, (eds.), *Documenting and Researching Southern Africa: Essays in Honour of Carl Schlettwein*, Basel, Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2001: 136-159 (144). This iconic representation has become the official portrait of Nujoma on display in many public buildings.

⁸⁶ An exception was the Cassinga Day ceremony of 2013, where Pohamba combined a shirt with Swapo colours and a baseball cap with the Namibian flag. In 2012, he preferred suit and hat (both ceremonies, at Zoo Park, Katutura, attended by the author).

⁸⁷ A point that has also been made in regards to Pohamba’s interaction with Southern Namibian communities, cf. Reinhart Kössler, “Political intervention and the image of history: communal memory events in central and southern Namibia”, in: André du Pisani, Reinhart Kössler and William A. Lindeke, (eds.), *The Long Aftermath of War – Reconciliation and Transition in Namibia*, Freiburg: Arnold Bergstraesser Institut, 2010: 371-402 (372).

⁸⁸ Cf. Korne, “Kampf”: 219f.

⁸⁹ Cf. Giorgio Miescher and Dag Henrichsen, “Fathers and sons of the Namibian nation: posters, visuality and African leaders”, in: Giorgio Miescher, Lorena Rizzo and Jeremy Silvester, (eds.), *Posters in Action: Visuality in the making of an African Nation*, Basel, Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2009: 125-137.

⁹⁰ Cf. Korne, “Kampf”: 219f.

This becomes even more obvious in another controversy tied to national holiday celebrations: the attendance, or rather, non-attendance of white Namibians. The absence of the 'white compatriots' and their alleged lack of patriotism is a regular and reoccurring cause for lamentation voiced by commentators and politicians.⁹¹ In 2005, then Prime Minister Theo-Ben Gurirab appealed to "the white citizens of Namibia who have not been forthcoming in participating in national events", to make their contribution to "unity in diversity". Asked about his motives for such critique, he explained:

It was a well-intentioned appeal to both sections of the society and I spoke in terms of one Namibia under one flag, a united nation of people who share a common vision for the future and who look to a future that is inclusive and who will not remain prisoners of the past forever. The 21st of March would therefore signal hope for all and prosperity that is inclusive for all.⁹²

Based on my own observations during official national holiday celebrations, Independence Day in particular, white Namibians do attend, yet in conspicuously low numbers. Outside the stadiums and in the larger capitals, especially for jubilees, whites are usually well represented at the cultural events that precede Independence Day celebrations, such as music shows, theatre plays, exhibitions or public lectures. Inside the stadiums, the activities occasionally involve whites, such as the youths, who formed part of the *Unity in Diversity* performance during the 2010 jubilee celebration, or high jumper Hans von Lieres, who was given the highly symbolic privilege of lighting the Independence Flame, which was met with applause and ululation from the audience.⁹³ In earlier years, cultural groups of German-speaking Namibians were also seen performing at Independence Day celebrations, something which, however, has become a rare sight. Whites were and continue to be involved behind the scenes as members of organising committees and representatives of ministries, departments and institutions involved in planning national holiday events. While for Zimbabwe the 'othering' of whites and their exclusion from an increasingly culturally defined national imaginary is a recent phenomenon, this is not the case in Namibia, if we take the 2010 or 2015 jubilee celebrations as a benchmark.⁹⁴ Beyond the significance of jubilees, attendance of white Namibians, however, is indeed remarkably low and active participation of white Namibians as performers, as well as audiences, is virtually non-existent for official Cassinga Day or Heroes Day events.

⁹¹ Cf. "Whites shun independence celebrations", *New Era*, March 23, 2012; "Public lecture highlights concerns about 'tribalism'", *New Era*, April 23, 2012; Kakeda ka Nangula, "Where are the whites?" Posting of March 2010, <http://www.swapoparty.org/where_are_the_whites.html> [accessed 6, June 2015].

⁹² Elizabeth Kalambo, "Namibia changes guard", *Namibia Review*, 13 (1), 2005: 1-6 (4).

⁹³ Cf. Akuupa and Kornes, "Shifting representations": 36f. See also Akuupa's rendition of the Annual National Culture Festival in Rundu in 2008, where the performance by white learners of *Noordgrens Secondary School* was lauded as exemplifying 'Unity in Diversity' as a model for nation building, cf. Michael U. Akuupa, "'We can be united, but we are different': discourses of difference in postcolonial Namibia", *Anthropology Southern Africa*, 33 (3/4), 2010: 103-113 (108-113).

⁹⁴ Cf. Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Willems, "Making sense": 954.

It may prove difficult, though, to interpret the non-attendance of whites, or any other segment of society for that matter, as a statement of deficient patriotism or a lack of identification with the nation, as Gurirab does. While many Namibians naturally use the occasion of national holidays as leisure time, to travel and visit family, or stay at the farm, the patriotism and national sentiments of the general public are prone to finding multiple avenues of expression, such as having a *braai* and a couple of beers with friends and family, extending nationhood to private homes, public *braai* places, and local *shebeens*.⁹⁵ In addition, events to celebrate Independence Day such as exhibitions, concerts, lectures and theatre plays are also organised by civil society organisations, churches, and private schools, such as the *Deutsche Höhere Privatschule Windhoek*, which may be more appealing to an urban middle class. Finally, the fact that certain people, and again not necessarily only whites, 'shun' national day celebrations, obviously has to do with the degree to which these are characterised by Swapo's liberation struggle narrative. This can easily be gathered from informal conversations, discussions in the comment sections of Namibian newspapers, call-in radio shows or Facebook groups such as 'Politics Watch Namibia', where these fundamental questions regarding national identity and belonging are routinely debated with great passion. For many white Namibians it is especially the party-political inscription of national events and the perceived ostracising as 'boers' and 'colonisers' in speeches or songs referring to the history of the liberation struggle that is cited as a reason not to attend. In this regard, the non-attendance at national events is most common among but not exclusive to white Namibians and may be seen as indicative of the wider social and political fragmentation in Namibia's post-apartheid society, tying national holiday celebrations to issues of nation building and national reconciliation. Yet, despite this evidence of polarisation and the resultant sentiments of exclusion, the situation in Namibia is different to that in Zimbabwe. Even though Swapo's heroic memory is still the main resource of the aesthetics and politics of state-sponsored national commemoration in Namibia, shifts and alterations are observable. Especially with respect to Independence Day, the shift towards representing cultural diversity, appreciating arts and entertainment, and attracting new audiences points in that direction. However, as far as the reluctance of certain sections of society to attend such events goes it is the degree to which organizers are willing and able to make national events more inclusive which determines their cohesiveness as political and civic rituals.

Conclusion

Independence Day in Namibia has turned out to be a national day with relatively stable formats of commemoration. As a political ritual with formalised structures and protocol,

⁹⁵ The *braai* is the Namibian, and South African, variation of the barbecue, which is one of the most cherished and probably also nationally inclusive social activities. With their passionate relationship towards grilled meat and beer, Namibians seem to be a case in point for Nugent's insightful observations about the culinary subtleties of national identification, cf. Paul Nugent, "Do nations have stomachs? Food, drink and imagined community in Africa", *Africa Spectrum*, 45 (3), 2010: 87-113.

organised within the framework of the nation-state, Independence Day is an established medium for the making and unmaking of both state and nation. Consequently, Independence Day, as all commemorative holidays, exposes existing societal fault-lines, contestations over history, as well as the dialectics of inclusion and exclusion inherent to the concept of the nation. The distinctive character of Namibia's commemorative calendar thus constitutes a fascinating field of research into the construction of memory and national pasts. Independence Day, as Namibia's national day, epitomises the dramatic narrative of the national liberation struggle and its trajectory of armed resistance (Heroes Day), ordeal and martyrdom (Cassinga Day) to independence.

As becomes evident from an analysis of Namibian political holidays, the dramatic narrative of the nation is closely intertwined with the narrative of SWAPO's liberation struggle; at times even congruent. This narrative, with its narrow focus on armed resistance, mirrors the elite memorialism and patriotic history characteristic of national commemoration in Zimbabwe, where another former liberation movement took the reins of government after independence. In Namibia national holidays such as Independence Day reflect this heroic memory by means of struggle folklore (Ndilimani), the veneration of the 'Founding Father', or the display of party colours. As in Zimbabwe, a shifting of focus on formats of popular culture to refashion and rejuvenate nationalism has characterised Namibian Independence Day celebrations in recent years, especially with the aim of attracting youth to attend the festivities and identify with the nation-state. However, the aesthetics and politics of Namibian Independence Day celebrations lack the militancy of patriotism in Zimbabwe, which is probably most obvious in the way the 'othering' of whites is carried out in the two countries.

While in Zimbabwe whites are increasingly excluded from the dominant national imaginary of the ruling party, the organisers of national holiday celebrations in Namibia try to attract more and diverse audiences, including youth and white Namibians. As was outlined above, a shift towards pop-cultural and educational formats aims to foster a sense of national belonging and patriotism in Namibia's *born free* generation. On the other hand, Namibia's 'white compatriots', just as other segments of society who avoid official national holiday celebrations, most likely do so not out of lack of patriotism but rather because of the dominance of party-politics during such events. Decentring Swapo's heroic liberation struggle narrative and shifting the emphasis to idioms of civil patriotism, beyond party-politically defined modes of belonging and with a focus on cultural and educational formats, might ultimately attract more (white) Namibians to attend national holiday celebrations. At the same time, this would provide an opportunity to acknowledge the complex and multi-faceted history of independence and the individual contributions Namibians have made to its attainment, regardless of complexion or ethnicity. Given its characteristics as a "robust"⁹⁶, yet dynamic national holiday, open to heterogeneous and not necessarily concordant narratives of liberation, Independence Day has the most potential to provide a platform for affirmation with an inclusive national imaginary in Namibia.

⁹⁶ Lentz, "2010": 234.

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