

Memory politics in *Where Others Wavered The Autobiography of Sam Nujoma My Life in SWAPO and my participation in the liberation struggle of Namibia*

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It is easier to cope with a bad conscience than with a bad reputation.
Friedrich Nietzsche, 1844-1900

We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark. The real tragedy of life is when men/women are afraid of the light.
Plato

Abstract

*The standard assumption is that memory is a source of knowledge about the past. For proponents of this view, the causal links between personal experience and present memories form a bridge to the past. The promise of this view seems great, for there are few other comparable roads to the past. Unfortunately, to regard memory as a source of knowledge is risky. Memories occur in the present, just like archival and other historical documents, and genuine memory is often indistinguishable from mistaken ones or from mere imaginings. There is no contradiction in regarding a given mental experience as a memory, yet there being no reliable connection between it and a past event. In the nature of the case it is impossible to verify a memory fully, because it is impossible to set the memory side by side with the event that putatively caused it, thus testing its accuracy. Memories can change, adding or losing details, distorting events. A critical reading of *Where Others Wavered The Autobiography of Sam Nujoma My Life in SWAPO and my participation in the liberation struggle of Namibia*, shows that although memory is an unreliable source of knowledge about the past, its role in self-identity is unquestionable. What makes a person the same person through life is the accumulated memories he/she carries with him/her. When these are lost, he/she ceases to be that person and becomes someone else.*

Introduction – negotiating a conceptual forest

This review article is based on an earlier and edited version presented at an English Seminar at the University of Namibia (UNAM). It is premised on the understanding that all memory is unavoidably shaped by individual subjective experience and fashioned by collective consciousness and shared social processes so that any understanding of the representation of remembrances and of the past more generally, must necessarily take into account both contexts. This understanding implies at the very least, that all memory

is constructed, selective, partial and to some degree fictional.¹ In addition, research on the witnessing and testimony collected in the aftermath of genocide, war, or systemic political repression (such as in the case of apartheid Namibia and South Africa) has pointed to the imprint of trauma on memory and the distinction between 'narrative' and 'traumatic memory'.²

This contribution argues that *Where Others Wavered* signifies a partial act of political recall in the present. At one level, it is an attempt to reclaim and negotiate the past and to instill dignity, hope and human agency despite the vicissitudes of exile life and the humiliation and brutality endured at the hands of the former apartheid state. On a more philosophical plane, *Where Others Wavered*, mirrors Wittgenstein's assertion that the philosopher's work "consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose".³ While not suggesting that the author of *Where Others Wavered* is a philosopher (by his own admission he does not care much for philosophy, history and fiction), he nonetheless, in keeping company with Plato's Socrates, seems to believe that all genuine knowledge is achieved through recollection and deployed as a mnemonic device, by means of which the protagonist recreates himself/herself so as to command attention and respect from a loyal and prostrate flock. The author becomes 'the remembered self'. The title says it all; *Where Others Wavered*. The implication is clear, in the face of danger and adversity lesser souls wavered, suffered from visitations of doubt and uncertainty. In the words of Christopher Saunders,

the title clearly indicates the strong political and polemical purpose of the book: to assert and substantiate the heroic role of SWAPO in bringing independence and freedom to Namibia, to praise those who stood firm, and to condemn those who did not.⁴

In autobiographies where the past is chronicled, memory is given pride of place. In this sense, autobiographies are 'memory journals' in their own right.⁵ Memory, in the words of Köbller, "is central to the image persons as well as societies construct of them-

¹ For elaboration of this point, see Paul Antze/Michael Lambek, (eds.), *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*, London, Routledge, 1996. See also the recently published books on South Africa: Sarah Nuttall/Carli Coetzee, (eds.), *Negotiating the Past. The Making of Memory in South Africa*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998, and Annie E. Coombes, *Visual Culture and Public Memory in a Democratic South Africa History After Apartheid*, Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 2004.

² Susan J. Brison, "Trauma Narratives and the Remaking of the Self", in: Mieke Bal/Jonathan Crewe/Leo Spitzer, (eds.), *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, Hanover, N.H., University Press of New England, 1999: 39-55, (56).

³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. Anscombe, Oxford, Blackwell, 1958: 127.

⁴ Christopher Saunders, "Liberation and democracy. A critical reading of Sam Nujoma's 'Autobiography'", in: Henning Melber, (ed.), *Re-examining Liberation in Namibia. Political Culture Since Independence*, Uppsala, Nordic Africa Institute, 2003: 87-98, (89).

⁵ I am indebted to Helen Vale for this insight.

selves”.⁶ Personal memory becomes social and public by its display and enactment, and as such is important for the production and reproduction of society and its history. Following Maurice Halbwachs and more recently, Aleida and Jan Assmann the shaping of social memory, itself, is connected to the notion of social cohesion, to the construction, the re-imagining, of a self-image of any given society.⁷ Thus, such processes have important implications for political projects, such as nation-building, national reconciliation, democracy and state hegemony among others. Remembrance and forgetting also leave imprints on repression and splitting-off (*Abspaltung*), to invoke two Freudian terms. Reconciliation in Namibia has been premised on forgetting the darker crevices of our recent liberation and more distant colonial past.

The construction of what Köbler calls, “a national memory”, which he defines as “the building of a national historical tradition”, is both complicated and contested. It is linked to notions of societal consensus, political, social and cultural hegemony and to “the power to determine the relevance of things, deeds and events, and to convince people that this is so, or at least to acquiesce in such determinations”.⁸ Those who manufacture and control the “national memory” not only write the script, but also fictionalise the public imagination.

In political life, hegemony notwithstanding its resilience and compelling attractions is never totally ubiquitous or eternal. Competing framing of the political and of history and their attendant political projects imply competing concepts of public remembrance. These manifest at different levels of society and within different social formations (as evidenced by the various commemorative gatherings linked to specific historical events and ethnic groups in this country such as the *Otjiserando*).

At the conceptual level, it is also important to distinguish between mnemoscapes and memory landscapes. While both concepts emphasize the presence of a constitutive element (such as the liberation struggle), the former (mnemoscapes) embodies the more intangible aspects of the remembrance of collective or societal experience. The latter, memory landscape addresses the concrete shaping and transformation of the political landscape by memory politics. It is entirely possible that the two might be contradictory and that the configuration of a memory landscape might be deeply divisive.

⁶ Reinhart Köbler, “Public memory, reconciliation and the aftermath of war. A preliminary framework with special reference to Namibia”, in: Henning Melber, (ed.), *Re-examining Liberation in Namibia Political Culture since Independence*, Uppsala, Nordic Africa Institute, 2003: 99-112, (99).

⁷ Maurice Halbwachs, *La mémoire collective*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1950. Maurice Halbwachs, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1994, (originally 1925). Aleida Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume. Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses*, München, Beck, 1999. Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*, München, Beck, 1992.

⁸ Köbler, “Memory”: 101.

Memoir Literature

Although Nujoma is not the first Namibian to have written a memoir of the Namibian liberation struggle, his book has a special importance.⁹ That he is the principal figure in that struggle gives his book a special authority as a chronicle of remembrances for particular purposes (following the logic of Wittgenstein). The book was published in the PANAF 'Great Lives' series. A series that chronicles the lives of such African notables as Kwame Nkrumah, Sékou Touré, Eduardo Mandlana, Patrice Lumumba and Frantz Fanon. Nujoma sees himself as belonging to the distinguished lineage of great African freedom fighters, and praises Nkrumah, Gamat Abdul Nasser and Kenneth Kaunda in particular for their support of SWAPO and its cause.¹⁰

Where Others Wavered is now the longest memoir in print by any Namibian (inclusive of the index and appendices it runs over 476 pages). Primarily based on Nujoma's own memory, it also draws upon other accounts of the events it describes. At least one analyst, Christopher Saunders, sees it as providing a narrative to update the earlier published SWAPO book *To Be Born a Nation*.¹¹

Despite the title, the primary concern of the book is not in fact with those who wavered, but the book brings into sharp relief the career of a formidable political activist who displayed enormous courage, determination and will to survive against considerable odds. *Where Others Wavered* makes the reputation of the narrator unassailable. Almost as if the text subscribes to Friedrich Nietzsche's celebrated dictum that "[i]t is easier to cope with a bad conscience than with a bad reputation".¹² In this case, reputation is the cornerstone of personal power and agency. No one is meant to outshine 'the Master'. Reading *Where Others Wavered* there seems never to have been any doubt in the narrator's mind about the morality and eventual triumph of his cause. His story is of an inexorable march towards victory. "We pursued policy with vigour and determination until the final victory..." he writes. With bravado, he adds "[t]he national liberation war was increasingly effective. Every year we made more progress until 21 March 1990 when genuine freedom and independence were achieved".¹³ In the end, of course, history proved him right in the sense that South Africa did disengage from Namibia and SWAPO was able to form the first post-independence government.

Given the heroic and patriotic tenor of the narrative, his account is hardly self-reflective. After all, 'the Master' needs to appear more brilliant than he is. Not unsurprisingly, much

⁹ Other accounts of the liberation struggle include, among others Helao Shityuwete's *Never Follow the Wolf. The Autobiography of a Namibian Freedom Fighter*, London, Kliptown Books, 1990, and Keshii Pelao Nathaneal's *A Journey to Exile*, Aberystwyth, Sosiumi Press, 2002.

¹⁰ Sam Nujoma, *Where Others Wavered. The Autobiography of Sam Nujoma. My Life in SWAPO and my Participation in the Liberation Struggle of Namibia*, London, PANAF Books, 2001: 99.

¹¹ Saunders, "Liberation": 89; Department of Information and Publicity, SWAPO of Namibia, *To Be Born a Nation The Liberation Struggle for Namibia*, London, Zed Press, 1981.

¹² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce homo*, trans. by Richard J. Hollingdale, London, Vintage, 1979: 52.

¹³ Nujoma, *Others*: 260.

of it is about the events that Nujoma was involved in, or connected to, rather than about his own experiences and internalization of the protracted conflict. Consequently, to quote Saunders,

[t]here is hardly any of the personal details that enlivens most autobiographies. There is no suggestion that his position as leader was ever under serious challenge, or that there were setbacks, or that any wrong decisions were made. There is hardly anything, in fact, about the decision-making process within SWAPO and very little about his interaction with close friends or colleagues.¹⁴

Given these shortcomings, Saunders opines “that the internal history of SWAPO in these years remains to be written”. For Saunders, this “fits the post-independence pattern of secrecy within the organisation, and unwillingness to open up to others”.¹⁵

Looked at from the perspective of power and its laws, so brilliantly captured by Robert Greene in his bestselling book titled *The 48 Laws of Power*, Nujoma seems to practice the forth law of power, namely ‘always say less than necessary – the more you say, the less you are in control’.¹⁶ On a more cynical note, this analyst is reminded of Cardinal de Retz’s (1613-1679) celebrated view of the priesthood: ‘It is even more damaging for a minister to say foolish things than to do them.’

Inner landscapes

This analyst is in agreement with Saunders, when he writes that “the word ‘autobiography’ is misleading, in that this is not primarily the story of a life. *Where Others Wavered* does not reveal the inner man”.¹⁷ It is only in the early five chapters of the book that the focus is on himself and his family, and for that reason they make for arresting reading. In them the reader encounters his maternal grandfather Kondombolo ka Kambulua – a trained fighter and noted herbalist – who grew up in Ukuambi during the reign of Chief Nujoma ua Heelu and his father Utoni Daniel Nujoma, a noted sprinter and celebrated hunter of giraffe and eland. In the words of the narrator; “no animal could get away if it ran in front of him – once he had taken aim he would shoot to kill, often with a single arrow. He was also a sharpshooter with firearms”.¹⁸ Nujoma writes approvingly about the prowess of his late father and does not hide his admiration for this aspect of his late father’s life. There is also a sensitive vignette of his mother, Mpingana-Helvi Kondombolo. The reader learns that he was the first born of 11 children, six of whom survive: himself, Hiskia and Noah, and three girls, Frieda, Sofia and Julia. Also, that one of his younger brothers, Elia (Kanjeka) who joined the Peoples’ Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN), perished in battle on 1 January 1976.

¹⁴ Saunders, “Liberation”: 90.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Robert Greene, *The 48 Laws of Power*, London/New York, Penguin Books, 1998: 26.

¹⁷ Saunders, “Liberation”: 90.

¹⁸ Nujoma, *Others*: 21.

As the eldest son, Nujoma looked after the 'little ones', carrying them on his back. He also tendered for the cattle and goats. The narrator recounts that his mother remembers how she once heard him singing a song he had learnt from other boys when they were looking after cattle: "I'm going to make a problem with the whites". He also remembers that some of the older boys who went to work in the South told "us dreadful stories of cruelties committed by white masters, of workers who were beaten or even shot to death".¹⁹ It is clear from these passages and others that the young Nujoma cut his political teeth at an early age. The author also credits both King Mandume ya Ndemufajo and King Lipumbu ya Tshilongo with being inspirational to him as a "young man of awakening political awareness".²⁰

The book offers valuable insights into Nujoma's degrading life as a migrant worker in the harbour town of Walvis Bay and Windhoek when he was far removed from his beloved *oshikundu* (millet porridge) and *oshifima* (thick mealie porridge). Throughout he depicts himself as displaying remarkable courage and self-confidence in outwitting the security forces, in what was already a highly repressive society. The author also writes about his admiration for soldiers, "especially when they drilled, making about-turns and saluting."²¹ In addition, he recounts that Salatiel Nghaamua, an older friend, and he bought military boots from Commonwealth soldiers stationed in Walvis Bay during World War II; how they used to practice football with them, "kicking other boys when playing football".²² Walvis Bay was especially formative in deepening Nujoma's nascent political awareness – he writes about the degrading experience of Africans under the contract labour system and the starvation wages paid to them in the country of their birth. He writes warmly about the work of the Reverend Michael Scott, who worked as a British clergyman with the Anglican Church in South Africa and his efforts to make the outside world aware of conditions in apartheid South West Africa.²³

Tragedy brought the young Nujoma to Windhoek, when his aunt Julia succumbed to tuberculosis at the end of 1948. There he joined his uncle, Hiskia Kondombolo. He worked by day for the South African Railways (SAR), and at night attended adult school (St. Barnabas) where classes were taught in English. Nujoma completed primary school at Okahao (in the Omusati Region), but there he had not been taught English, only Afrikaans. (English was taught at Odibo, at the St. Mary's Anglican Mission some 100 km north-east of his home district).

Windhoek railway station was a particularly corrosive example of apartheid in practice: whites bought their tickets inside the station, coloureds (persons of mixed race) outside but under the cover of some shade, and blacks outside in the open where they had to

¹⁹ Ibid.: 23.

²⁰ Ibid.: 29.

²¹ Ibid.: 33.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.: 34.

purchase their tickets from behind a screen so that they could not see the white ticket clerk.

After living with his uncle Hiskia Kondombolo, he bought his own house in the Old Location in Windhoek. The Old Location was the epitome of apartheid urban social engineering – it was divided into ethnic units. It was here, that Nujoma got married to Theopoldine Kovambo Katjimune. She was called Kovambo, to signify her as an Ovambo child because her mother was a Herero and her father was an Ovambo. On his account, it was the first Black African marriage to be attended by a white photographer. He writes that he paid six pounds to the photographer!

His job at the SAR enabled him to travel extensively in the country, as well as to visit Cape Town in 1955-56, where he met with Namibian migrant workers living there. In 1957, at the age of 29, Nujoma resigned from the SAR with the purpose of devoting his life to politics. He then worked briefly for the Windhoek Municipality and left for Cape Town where he found employment. Political events such as the deportation of Andimba Toivo Ya Toivo and Jairetundu Kozonguizi (the latter from SWANU), the petitioning of the United Nations by the Reverend Michael Scott and others, as well as the uprising in Windhoek's Old Location in December 1959, not only galvanized Nujoma politically, but hastened his departure into protracted exile in February 1960. An exile that was to last for a long 29 years.

Chapters 3 and 4 that deal with the formation of the Ovamboland People's Organization (the antecedent to SWAPO) and the 1959 Old Location uprising, respectively, provide important insights into the politics of the time and Nujoma's close relationship with Chief Hosea Kutako. Kutako is accorded special recognition for his inspirational influence on the young Nujoma.

Exile

Nujoma's account of his escape from South West Africa in February 1960 makes for pleasurable reading. The narrator chronicles his escape and epic journey that took him to Francistown (Botswana), Harare (Salisbury) (Zimbabwe), Mbeya and Dar-es-Salaam (Tanzania), Khartoum (Sudan), Lagos (Nigeria), Accra (Ghana), Monrovia (Liberia) and ultimately to New York. He recounts his interaction with many fellow African leaders, among them Kwame Nkrumah, Patrice Lumumba, Josef Kasavubu, and Frantz Fanon. Yet for all the space Nujoma gives in his memoir to the intricacies of the diplomatic activities in which SWAPO engaged (for example in Chapters 5 to 7), it is the armed struggle that was, for him, decisive in winning the goal of independence. For example, the author writes: "It was the armed liberation struggle that more than anything else motivated the Namibian people to support the struggle waged by SWAPO".²⁴ While he emphasizes that SWAPO's strategy hinged on three interconnected aspects – mass mobilisation, armed struggle and the use of diplomacy – he gives scant attention to the first of these. For all

²⁴ Ibid.: 268.

the difficulties of mobilising from an exile base, part of the reason, suggest Leys and Saul, is that the external leadership was suspicious of internal resistance and acted to damp it down.²⁵ The 'master' has to appear more brilliant than he is. Giving due recognition to internal resistance and leadership would detract from the power of the 'supreme leader'. In this sense, *Where Others Wavered* perpetuates one of the core myths of the liberation struggle, namely that the external leadership almost single-handedly sustained the struggle. At the same time, it is also one of the fault lines in postcolonial Namibian politics.

His account of his early political life is decidedly selective: he makes no mention, for example, of his role in the South West African National Union (SWANU), at the time, the principal rival to SWAPO.²⁶ Enough has already been said to show that this is in important respects, no accurate or generous memoir. A full review would need to point to the numerous errors in the text – many names and dates are wrong – there are serious distortions in Nujoma's account of the history of the struggle. For example, the battle of Omugulu-Gwombashe (since independence commemorated as Heroes Day) that took place on 26 August 1966 is enveloped in myth. The narrator's account of the tragic events of 1 April 1989, too, is hardly convincing.²⁷ The text, too, is rarely gendered. By and large, it is preeminently about the heroism of one man and a few other men. The communicative practice is that of impressing the reader with the bravery and heroism of men. In this sense, the book perpetuates the deeply engrained notion that politics and war are the near-exclusive domains of men.

Nujoma displays resolute loyalty to SWAPO and to the cause of liberation. There is an unshakable belief in the inevitable victory of the cause. *Where Others Wavered* is ultimately less thoughtful, less reflective and less honest about some aspects of the liberation struggle. For example, the reader does not learn much about his personal life, and the internal debates about strategy, tactics and ideology that came to characterize SWAPO, particularly in the mid-1980s. He also exaggerates and fictionalizes the military success of PLAN (not unique to Nujoma!) by suggesting that PLAN always had a permanent presence in the north of the country and had a mechanized brigade there by 1989. At one point he asserts that "our PLAN combatants were effective and permanently fighting in all the regions inside Namibia at all times".²⁸

On the unfinished business of the 'detainee' issue, the narrator sees it "as the main weapon used against SWAPO in the Independence election in 1989". While admitting that "we detained individuals who had been detected to be South African agents, or for

²⁵ Colin Leys/John S. Saul, (eds.), *Namibia's Liberation Struggle: The Two-Edged Sword*, London, Currey, 1995, chapter 3.

²⁶ Tony Emmet, *Popular Resistance and the Roots of Nationalism in Namibia, 1915-1966*, Basel, Schlettwein, 1999: 300-301; Zed Ngavirue, *Political Parties and Interest Groups in South West Africa (Namibia): A Study of a Plural Society*, Basel, Schlettwein, 1997: 217.

²⁷ Saunders, "Liberation": 93.

²⁸ Nujoma, *Others*: 271, 389.

whom there were strong grounds for suspicion”, he continues to write [that] “some of them had caused the deaths of many of our people in Shatotwa in the Western Province of Zambia in 1976 and at the Cassinga massacre in May 1978”.²⁹ The author continues to assert that “the discovery of these sites was the work of spies the South Africans had sent to infiltrate SWAPO rank and file” adding that “people accused SWAPO of detaining these people unjustly, but we had to detain enemy spies”.³⁰ Invoking the cruelty of the enemy, the narrator continues to justify the actions of some SWAPO ‘securocrats’ when he writes;

If we are accused of ill-treating detainees, this was very little compared to the killing, cruel torture and brutal treatment the South African regime inflicted on our people over so many years – from major atrocities such as the Shatotwa and Cassinga massacres, to the murder of innocent individuals and the disappearance without trace of many SWAPO members – in an effort to further their anti-SWAPO propaganda campaigns.³¹

The above passages from *Where Others Wavered* suggest that for the narrator, dangerous times such as during the latter phase of the liberation struggle require extraordinary measures taken by one man or by a small coterie of men. Also, that he deliberately cultivated an air of unpredictability, that in turn, kept others in suspended terror. Human life and dignity had to be sacrificed on the altar of divine political destiny; an independent, free Namibia. The end justifies the means.

Homecoming, Independence and a New Beginning

The last chapter deals with the narrator’s return home, formal independence and what he calls “a new beginning”.³² This chapter provides interesting insights into the preparations for the November 1989 Independence Elections, the tragic assassination of SWAPO activist Anton Lubowski, the elections themselves, the crafting of the Independence Constitution, the transition to independence, formal independence and ‘the tasks ahead’. Weaved into the text, is a sensitive rendition of the narrator’s visit to his ageing mother near Okahao (in the Omusati Region), as well as to the last resting place of his father, Daniel Utoni Nujoma, in the Lutheran Church graveyard at Oneeke, where the Finnish missionaries established the first church in the Ongandjera district.

Conclusions

Nujoma’s book then is, in the words of Saunders,

²⁹ Ibid.: 56.

³⁰ Ibid.: 357.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.: 413-443.

a partial, highly selective account. It is valuable nevertheless, for revealing the way the President remembers the past and wishes to try to stamp a certain version of the past on the nation's collective memory, to shape the future.³³

Saunders concludes [that] "A reading of *Where Others Wavered* will bring no comfort to those concerned about the future of democracy in Namibia today".³⁴

While the wider implications for the democratic project and for the political culture embedded in the book deserve serious consideration by scholars, it also makes sense to speak of democracy and rights only relative to mechanisms for ensuring their survival and enforcement. It is this debate that still awaits closer consideration by voices that are skeptical, engaged, and clear.

Finally, *Where Others Wavered* assembles memory for the purpose of building the reputation of one person and one movement, and this in turn, becomes the cornerstone of his power. Many other important actors and events in the drama have either been 'air-brushed' from history or receive selective mention in the text. Nonetheless, the book speaks of courage, honour and pride. To this litany one could add dogged endurance.

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