

Review: Samson Ndeikwila, *The Agony of Truth. Autobiography of Samson Ndeikwila*, Windhoek, Kuiseb, 2014.

After reading this book, the reader will understand that Namibia's recent past is a (political) battleground – on which historians, mostly, are mere onlookers. The history of the decades prior to and following Namibia's independence in 1990 is – currently – being written by those who (claim to) have shaped it. What is at stake? While the individual and collective experience of independence as historical telos is barely problematized by the competing narratives, the ways and manners in which this telos has been achieved are disputed.¹

There is the dominant ('dominant' because the full force of government support and officialdom is behind it) narrative of SWAPO-Party history-writing. The essentials of this version of Namibian history can be gleaned from a glance at Windhoek's Independence

Memorial Museum exhibition, from a visit to Heroes Acre on the outskirts of Windhoek, or from reading a few chapters of Sam Nujoma's autobiography *Where Others Wavered* (2001). As summarized by political scientist André du Pisani in this Journal, the text "is pre-eminently 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."²

And there is a different narrative to the one told by the frieze at the Heroes' Acre with its AK-47s, howitzers and tanks; a narrative that not only places more emphasis on diplomatic aspects in the fight for Namibian independence, but that also asks about the human aspects of the "struggle" beyond the great-men-perspective – inside Namibia and in exile. And there is good reason to ask such questions, as Samson Ndeikwila's autobiography shows.³ The author, certainly a public figure in

¹ On this issue, from an academic perspective: Christian A. Williams, *National Liberation in Post-Colonial Southern Africa: A Historical Ethnography of SWAPO's Exile Camps*, Cambridge, CUP, 2015; Johann Alexander Müller, *"The Inevitable Pipeline Into Exile". Botswana's Role in the Namibian Liberation Struggle*, Basel, BAB, 2012; Justine Hunter, *Die Politik der Erinnerung und des Vergessens im Umgang mit Menschenrechtsverletzungen in Namibia in der Ära des bewaffneten Befreiungskampfes 1966 bis 1989*, Frankfurt / Main, Lang, 2008; Henning Melber, (ed.), *Re-examining Liberation in Namibia. Political Culture since Independence*, Uppsala, Nordiska Afrika-institutet, 2003; Lauren Dobell, *Swapo's Struggle for Namibia, 1960–1991. War by Other Means*, Basel, Schlettwein, 2000; Colin Leys and John S. Saul, *Namibia's Liberation Struggle. The Two-edged Sword*, London, Currey, 1995.

² 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 (104); for a critical reading of Sam Nujoma's book see: Phil ya Nangoloh in "Exposé: An Exposé about Nujoma's CIA Connections" Parts 1-22; first published 2007 in *Windhoek Observer*; see also the autobiography of Libertina Amathila, *Making a Difference*, published 2012 with UNAM Press.

³ Further critical autobiographical approaches to the Namibian struggle for independence: Keshii Pelao Nathaniel, *A Journey into Exile. The Story of a Namibian Freedom Fighter*, Aberystwyth, Sosome, 2002; Siegfried Groth: *Namibia – The Wall of Silence. The Dark Days of the Liberation Struggle* [German: *Namibische Passion. Tragik und Größe der namibischen Befreiungsbewegung*], Wuppertal, Hammer, 1995.

Namibia as director of the NGO *Forum For the Future*, and previously a leading figure in the *Council of Churches in Namibia*, lays bare a twisted path from the young man's hope for betterment for his country and people, to the recognition of the fallacies of those he once considered the leaders in the struggle for Namibia's liberation.

Born in 1946 in the Ombalantu area of northern Namibia, Ndeikwila first set out in 1965 to pursue "better education abroad" (p. 10). With the help of fellow Namibians he made his way to Zambia where he attended an African-American High School. The international aspect of the individual "struggle" – at this early stage – is fascinating. After the attack on Ongulumbashe in 1966 Ndeikwila "became convinced that only the armed struggle would lead our country to freedom" (p. 19). Joining the SWAPO training camp Kongwa in Tanzania, he soon noticed a crisis of morale among the military trainees.

The reasons for this crisis were manifold; among them tribalism and disputes over cold war allegiances, but the sudden return of SWAPO leader Sam Nujoma to Windhoek in March 1966 and his surprising release by the SWA Police (despite being considered public enemy No. 1) while others were arrested or remained in detention, increased the level of mistrust among SWAPO cadres to an unbearable level. After writing a memorandum on the difficulties in Kongwa and deciding to resign from SWAPO, Ndeikwila and others were arrested on request of SWAPO officials (among them Moses Garoëb and Peter Nanyemba) and held in prison for over a year. He escaped to Kenya and was

lucky to receive a UN scholarship to study theology. In Nairobi, Ndeikwila and his fellows (who were characterized by SWAPO officials as 'reactionaries, renegades, and deserters') set up the *Namibian Welfare Organisation* to support fellow countrymen, many of them disillusioned by the corruption and tribalism within SWAPO ranks.

Things went from bad to worse when he learned about the so-called Shipanga rebellion of young party members demanding a SWAPO congress and open discussions of the existing problems (ca. 1975). From refugees, he heard of the terrible conditions under which Namibians arrested in Zambia and Tanzania were held. Given the starvation, torture and killing there, the *Namibian Welfare Organisation* petitioned the OAU and other international organisations to investigate the detainee issue. These petitions eventually led to the release of many detainees in 1977 (p. 66). It is truly saddening to read how little the *Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia* (ELCIN) and most of all Bishop Leonard Auala was willing to do for the detainees. Misled by SWAPO, the church leadership – when visiting a camp in Zambia – turned a blind eye to the suffering of the inmates.

Following the adoption of UN Resolution 435 of 1978 on Namibia's independence, Ndeikwila decided to return to Namibia and to establish a "broadly based movement [...] to exert greater pressure on South Africa" to 'release' Namibia. (p. 75). Back in Namibia, he faced open hostility and, as someone who dared to mention the SWAPO atrocities in Zambia (and later Angola), was repeatedly accused of being a

'South African spy'. For the next 17 years, Ndeikwila worked for the *Council of Churches in Namibia* (CCN), where he sensed an unmistakable pressure from SWAPO affiliates who wanted to get rid of him. When Ndeikwila speaks of his role in setting up the *Namibia National Student Association* (NANSO) which successfully reached out to black and white students, the reader can sense his (justifiable) pride in his work, underlining that "today, this generation of students [of the 1980s] plays an important role in the life of post-independence Namibia and elsewhere" (p. 94).

Ndeikwila's account of the rise and fall of the organisation *Namibia Women's Voice* (NWV) is a fascinating description of the struggle for national independence and SWAPO's ruthless efforts to silence all voices outside of the party hierarchy. There is a wealth of insights into the workings of SWAPO and others would become available if there were a monography about NWV. Hopefully, there will be soon some masters or Ph.D. students at UNAM who will find the means and the sources to write this monography while they can still undertake an oral history project on NWV. In fact, several of the headings of Ndeikwila's biography would make good research objects on their own, be it as articles or books.

Given his insights into the unwillingness of SWAPO to accommodate differing voices in the struggle for Namibia's independence, Ndeikwila grew increasingly concerned over the course of the 1980s "that independent Namibia might fall under a dictatorship where democracy and human rights would not be

respected." He was well aware of the realities of Christian life in the Soviet bloc and thus foresaw the possibility of an "Angolan and Mozambican type of independence" (p. 123). And indeed, the smear campaigns against Ndeikwila that had started in the late 1960s continued well into the post-independence era. The establishment of a *Parents Committee* in 1985 by the parents and relatives of those Namibians abducted and incarcerated in Angola by SWAPO resulted in hostility that did not abate even when those finally released in 1989 showed their tortured bodies to the press. Church leaders were conspicuously silent about all these events. While SWAPO showed videos with staged 'confessions' of 'South African spies', the CCN even expelled its own staff members Erica Beukes and Attie Beukes who had campaigned for the release of SWAPO detainees.

Following independence the organization *Breaking the Wall of Silence* (BWS) was founded, whose chairperson Ndeikwila became in 1995. The objectives of BWS included keeping the issue of the SWAPO detainees on the nation's agenda and finding out more about those who died or were still missing. In independent Namibia, the ex-detainees also faced insurmountable difficulties at times; they could not find jobs, were socially ostracized and rejected by their families and (former) friends, some even faced death threats after speaking about their experiences at the hands of SWAPO. (The book contains a comprehensive list of those who have died or 'disappeared'.)

When in 1996 CCN asked its staff member Ndeikwila to decide whether he wanted to remain either with CCN or BWS, his response included the question: “What is the difference between human rights abuses by South African and human rights abuses by SWAPO?” (p. 190) This question remains as pertinent for contemporaries as for (future) historians. Samson Ndeikwila has many more questions; and even if his book cannot — and never claimed to be able to — disclose the ‘whole truth’ about Namibia’s liberation struggle (as a surprisingly critical reviewer in *The Namibian* bemoaned who even used SWAPO speak when insinuating that the author “abandon[ed] the struggle”!)⁴, historians and everyone interested in contemporary Namibia should be grateful to him for letting us share in his experiences — and that of his generation. We need more of such autobiographies!

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⁴ Wonder Guchu, “The agony of never knowing the whole truth”, *The Namibian*, 20 June, 2014, <<http://www.namibian.com.na/index.php?id=124729&page=archive-read>> [accessed 1 April, 2016].