
When introducing a set of papers on Botswana and the liberation of Southern Africa some years ago, this reviewer pointed out that, though valuable, they said little about how Botswana provided political, diplomatic, material and moral support to the liberation movements in South Africa-occupied Namibia. In one of the papers Neil Parsons wrote about the south/north ‘pipeline’ — the term is found in official documents of the early 1960s — through Botswana, used most famously by Nelson Mandela, under the Setswana alias of David Motsamayi, in 1962. While Parsons mentioned that Botswana was the key conduit through which political refugees from Namibia passed from the late 1950s, he did not, I noted, “investigate the help that Botswana gave to the South West Africa People’s Organisation [SWAPO] in the 1970s and 1980s.”1 I did not know then that Johann Müller was, in 2009, to complete a doctoral dissertation that would, to some extent, fill the gap I had referred to. Now published, his study, enriched by twenty-five photographs, some previously unpublished, adds considerably to our knowledge of certain aspects of Namibia’s liberation struggle. It is unfortunate, however, that he did not draw upon Parsons’ pioneering article for a broader, regional picture of the inflow of political refugees into Botswana and what happened to them there. And Müller’s early chapters perhaps set the scene too broadly, introducing too much general context. The first chapter includes a section on theory that many readers will probably skip over.

While Botswana was the major east/west ‘pipeline’ into exile for Namibians from the late 1950s to the mid 1970s, Müller’s book, as his subtitle suggests, goes beyond the way in which Namibians travelled through the country to go elsewhere. The first work to discuss in depth the liberation struggle in Namibia in relation to Botswana, his book is suggestive for other studies on liberation movements in the region, for, as Reinhart Kössler points out in his introduction, most work on the history of liberation struggles in southern Africa has primarily seen those struggles within a national framework, and has tended to play down the significance of trans-national relationships. Ronald Dreyer, for example, wrote about the region in Namibia and Southern Africa: Regional Dynamics of Decolonisation (London, 1994) but he did not focus on liberation movements. While some of the chapters in the fifth volume of the South African Democracy Trust’s “Road to Democracy” series examine how other countries in the region supported the South African liberation struggle, they do so on a country-by-country basis.2

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2 South African Democracy Education Trust (SADET), The Road to Democracy in South Africa,
There is clearly much more work to be done both on connections between the different liberation movements themselves and between those movements and their supporters in other countries. This reviewer has recently explored relations between SWAPO and South Africa’s African National Congress during the years of struggle, but we still do not have detailed studies of, for instance, SWAPO’s relations with its Angolan partners, the Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) and, from 1975, its main host, the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA). While scholars from Botswana interested in the history of liberation have tended to focus on Botswana in relation to the liberation struggle in South Africa, Müller spotted a gap in the literature — relations between the Namibian liberation movement and Botswana — and has filled it admirably. As he discusses in his third chapter, his book is based on a large number of interviews he conducted and substantial archival research in Britain and Botswana (though not in the Ruth First papers in London, which contain relevant material; the SWAPO archive in Windhoek remains, unfortunately, inaccessible to scholars).

Relationships of the kind Müller explores have an intrinsic importance. They may also have significance for later ties. To suggest, however, as Kössler does that Müller’s account “conveys some of the foundations of regional co-operation that today are incorporated into the SADC” (p. x) seems excessive. Müller is not really able to show how, for example, the ties established when Namibians passed through Botswana on their way to countries from which they could wage a liberation struggle fed into the Southern African Development Community (SADC), which was not founded until 1992 and in which Namibia and Botswana have sometimes differed significantly, especially, in recent years, over policy on Zimbabwe.

Müller is mainly concerned with the 1960s and early 1970s, when Botswana was the chief route for Namibians into exile. The importance of that route lessened when the route into Angola opened, even before Angolan independence in November 1975. Müller shows how extreme prudence governed Botswana’s diplomacy, given that it was land-locked and, except in the north, surrounded by countries under colonial or apartheid rule. Having to appease its very powerful neighbour to the south, it

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3 This is the thrust of a project initiated at the University of Evora, Portugal, by Professor Helder Fonseca, who is, inter alia, using the PIDE files in Lisbon to explore such transnational connections.


6 SADC was hardly “embodied in a figure such as Daniel Munamavwa […] along with many other prominent Namibians, including the first and second presidents of independent Namibia” (p. x)
could not allow an armed struggle to be fought from its soil. Botswana’s economy was bound up with that of South Africa, it was a member of the Southern African Customs Union, and its transportation system was integrated with those of Rhodesia and South Africa. As Bechuanaland it was aptly dubbed (with Basutoland/Lesotho and Swaziland) one of South Africa’s Hostages, and as independent Botswana it continued to be heavily dependent on its far stronger neighbour to the south, then occupying Namibia. On the other hand, most people in Botswana wished to be supportive of the refugees that arrived from Namibia, and Botswana offered political support and allowed the Namibian nationalist movements to open offices on its territory. The two countries took very different paths, however: not only was there no armed struggle in Botswana to overthrow colonial rule, but, as Namibia’s armed struggle against South African occupation intensified, Botswana developed as a new multi-party democracy and, thanks to the discovery of diamonds, began to emerge from poverty.

Müller develops further in this book a topic he has written about elsewhere: the Herero networks that linked the two countries, and how the Herero-speakers living in Botswana, descendants of refugees from German rule after the 1904–07 war, were particularly helpful to their kin from Namibia. There is a fascinating account of how David Munamava, the outstanding figure in this regard, helped many members of both the South West Africa National Union (SWANU) and SWAPO to pass through western Botswana, one of whom was Sam Nujoma in February 1960. In chapter 5 Müller comes to the real subject of his book: the role of Namibians and their organisations in the Bechuanaland Protectorate and then independent Botswana. He devotes separate chapters to SWANU, to SWAPO, and to Mburumba Kerina and the National Unity Democratic Organisation (NUDO). Because SWANU has received relatively little attention in the literature on the Namibian liberation struggle, what Müller has to say about it is particularly important. At a time when SWAPO had not yet emerged as the dominant Namibian organization, SWANU was active in Botswana. Müller analyses some of the reasons for its decline: despite the talk of launching an armed struggle, and the plans of SWANU’s external council, no route back into Namibia was created, and the many SWANU refugees in Botswana, having to focus on survival, became increasingly disillusioned. One is struck by the hardships suffered by those who had to traverse western Botswana, much of which is desert, before reaching the more populous regions, and by the extent of the help and co-operation the Namibians received, not only from Herero-speakers but also from the

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Ngwato. Tshekedi Khama had, after all, helped prevent South Africa incorporating Namibia in 1946.\(^9\)

SWAPO was especially active in Francistown and Müller provides a detailed account of the activities of its representatives there: Maxton Joseph, who received funds from Patrick Duncan, the South African liberal, Gideon Kasheta, then Lucky Shoopala, whom SWAPO accused of collaborating with South Africa and was jailed in Zambia. Müller makes the sweeping claim that SWAPO members in Botswana were willing to “follow party instructions on demand” because “they had not fully understood what the liberation struggle was about” (p. 181). He throws new light on what the ambitious Mburumba Kerina, who had been expelled from SWAPO in 1962, did in Bechuanaland, not least in trying to help the 154 Herero refugees from Namibia who became stranded in Makunda (chapter 8).

Müller’s last chapter reflects on Botswana’s impact on the Namibian liberation struggle. After considering the way in which independent Mozambique and Malawi dealt with the issue of what support to give South African freedom fighters, he concludes that Botswana, struck a balance between, on the one hand, overt support, and hostility to South Africa — the latter “might have been an effective means of self-destruction” (p. 236) — and, on the other, refusal to be involved or collaborate with South Africa (p. 228). Both Bechuanaland under British rule and then independent Botswana — and Müller emphasises the continuities in policy between the two — often turned a blind eye to the activities of the Namibian liberation movements and so, he argues, helped their struggle. His book is not the last word on the topic — he says relatively little, say, about how Namibians left Botswana, via the Kazangula ferry to Zambia or in other ways — but it is an important addition to the literature.

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