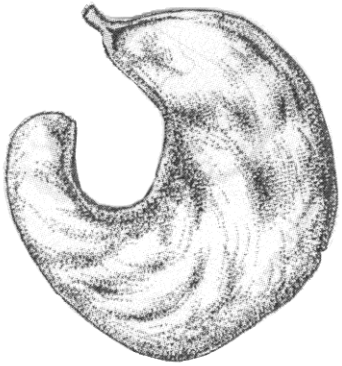

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Review: Uazuvara Ewald Kapombo Katjivena, *Mama Penee: Transcending the Genocide*, Windhoek, UNAM Press, 2020.

Mama Penee is a small yet precious book. Originally published in Norwegian[1], the books is now available in English and thus accessible to the broad readership it deserves. It tells the life story of Jahohora Petronelle Inaavinuise who became known as Mama Penee.

The story of her life is recounted by her grandson, Uazuvara Ewald Kapombo Katjivena, who she brought up. Although he had left Namibia in 1964 and spent many years in exile, he kept in contact with his grandmother with the help of his two brothers who communicated his questions and took notes of Inaavinuise's answers. The story of Mama Penee's life as presented here is based on these notes, along with the author's own memories.

The book is divided into two parts: Part I, "Born to Survive" (pp. 1-45) and Part II, "Challenging Power" (pp. 47-106). The second part is based primarily on talks Jehohora had with her grandchildren whom she brought up and recounts the lessons she taught them. A picture emerges of a remarkable woman who was very firm in her values and obviously had a strong moral compass. It describes how she taught her grandchildren about right and wrong, about tolerance and respect toward all people irrespective of their skin colour. For example she advises them: "Never allow someone consumed by power to make you live your life as they wish you to" (p. 56).

Not surprisingly, the trauma of genocide is also a theme when it comes to moral behaviour: "Have you ever thought about those young German soldiers who came all the way from their far country? That they were afraid of us? Yes, they were, and because of that fear, they could justify killing the people they feared. Fear is never clever, but if you don't control it, it will make you do terrible things." (p. 63).

Throughout her life, she seems to have been very sceptical about 'white' thoughts especially as taught at school which all of her children attended: "At your school, the teachers can only teach you what is in the books, and these books are written by white people. The white people wrote those books with the aim of teaching you what was in their interests for you to learn. This was their way of telling you about your history and your way of life. It's hardly an unbiased presentation. It's a version where the white man is supreme. They dominate and are even prepared to kill you if you stand in their way of occupying the space they want." (p. 79).

Maybe her priority was to make her children to think themselves in a critical way. As she said to her children: "I'm convinced that at your school, you are not learning, but you are being taught. In our language learning means 'sharpening your mind' not just being fed by others. I think that if you want to be a balanced person, you should be able to

[1] *Mama Penee jenta som gjennomskuet folkemordet,* Tvedestrand Bokbyen forl., 2017.

see the difference between what is yours, and what is theirs." (p. 79f.).

This second part of the book in particular honours Jehohora as a person and her way of thinking and seeing the world. Yet, from a historian's point of view, the first part is the most revealing. The book's value is not so much in the historiography of the Genocide as presented by the author (e.g. it is not correct that the encirclement at the Waterberg intentionally was only on three sides so that the only way out led into the Omaheke, and there is no historical evidence to support the claim that water-holes had been poisoned by the German colonial army, p. 20), but rather in the narration of a life story against the background of Genocide and colonialism. "She lived in a society which was built on military occupation, racism, expropriation of land and cultural repression", as Tore Linné Eriksen points out in his preface (p. xi).

Jahohora Inaavinuise Petronella was born on 12 August 1893 and died on 5 November 1975. She was 11 years old, when she witnessed the murder of her parents in 1904. This is the deciding moment from which the story sets out: "The eleven-year-old girl approached the cave where she and her parents were in hiding. A series of loud cracks rang out and she turned to see where they came from. She saw her parents fetching water from the river. A line of soldiers was coming towards them. She saw the soldiers lift their rifles and aim at her parents. The fired again and her parents collapsed on the ground. The soldiers cheered." (p. 3).

Jahohora was born and lived with her parents and siblings in Omaruru. When war broke out in 1904, "her parents thought it wise to move to Omuramba-wa-Ndjou, now known as Kalkfeld. They divided up the family for safety, with two boys being sent to families some distance away in Opuwo. [...] Jahohora was to stay with her parents in their new home in Kalkfeld." (p. 12). After a few months, they felt unsafe there too and "went into hiding in the Okavaka Mountains, close to a dry riverbed. In this mountainous landscape they found a cave in which they hoped to be able to hide and live until the fighting was over." (p. 13). It was there, hidden behind a bush, that the 11 year old girl witnessed the coldblooded shooting of her parents by German soldiers: "Her parents lay dead at the feet of the Okavaka Mountains, and she was totally alone. She was in shock and wandered without direction or purpose, as if sleep-walking." (p. 16). What followed was a long journey through a land marked by genocide: "As she continued her wanderings through the empty landscape, she saw more and more evidence of genocide. There were fresh graves everywhere; decomposed bodies of old people, children and cattle; and the bodies of Ovaherero soldiers who had been hung by their necks from branches of tress. The vultures were having feasts everywhere. She had never seen so many vultures before in her life." (p. 23).

After many months of wandering she finally reached Khorixas: "At long last when I reached Khorixas, it was April 1905. It was terribly cold and I was really lucky to have reached my destination before the start of winter. The people at Khorixas were very good to me. They

took me to their Chief who took me in as his granddaughter."

After some time, one of her great-uncles who had also survived the Genocide came to pick her up. His story is worth recounting here also:

"Uncle Katunu was first forcibly deported to work for the construction of the railway line between Swakopmund and Tsumeb without compensation. They were all prisoners of war who were forced to work from dawn to dusk. Many died of starvation and exhaustion but, miraculously, he had survived. He was later made to be a cook for the other prisoners. In the end, he was sent to work at a farm near Otavi for one of the German leaders of the Otavi-Minen-Gesellschaft, who was compensated with a gib piece of land for his military service and for becoming a settler. The farm was known as Omutjirauondjimba, which the Germans could hardly pronounce." (p. 29).

In summer 1907, Katunu died suddenly. Jahohora was 14 years old and Katunu's sisters became mothers to Jahohora according the traditional Herero matrimonial rules. Jahohora was taken to a German farm to work where another crucial event in her life took place upon her arrival:

"Jahohora was forced to take off her headgear, which traditionally would have been removed only in a ceremonial act officiated by her parents or appointed relatives. She moaned her tragedy in silence as the German women also cut her headgear into pieces and put all the pieces in the fire. She did not cry, but she felt terribly humiliated. That headgear was the last visible connection with her parents. She was devastated by it being destroyed in such a brutal manner. After she had washed herself thoroughly, Jahohora was commanded to stand naked in the sun until she was dry. She was shamed by this, but it was far less of a humiliation than being robbed of her headgear. When she was dry enough she was dressed in a German Victorian style dress that made her move clumsily. She felt uncomfortable, and very hot, but she soon adapted as had the other Ovaherero women on the farm. This was the beginning of a new phase in her life." (p. 33f.).

Very few readers of this booklet (and it deserves to get many!) will have known Mama Penee personally in her lifetime. So why should one consider putting the book on one's personal reading list? *Mama Penne* not only looks back at the life of a remarkable woman, but it also looks at the present and towards the future. The book by no means advocates forgetting the Genocide, and nor does it seek to downplay the ongoing trauma it has caused. It shows how this particular person learned to live with barely imaginable traumatic experiences. The book is not about *overcoming* the Genocide, but about *Transcending the Genocide*. The subtitle reads like a life strategy for Mama Penee and possibly not only for her, but also for her children and grandchildren, and indeed any descendants of survivors of the Genocide. A genocide, that begun in 1904 but – as this books reminds us – did not end with the dissolution of the concentration camps. No, the Genocide did not end in 1908, nor is it gone; it is still present and will be present as long as it is remembered. The transgenerational effects of this traumatic event have long been neglected and

underestimated. “I was born to survive!” as Mama Penee said (p. 5). And so will the memory of her, thanks to U.E.K. Katjivena, who recorded and wrote down her life history. Reading *Madame Penee* makes one wish there were more books like it, especially now that we know so much about the Genocide, but hardly anything about its lasting consequences for survivors and their descendants.

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