Twenty-five years on: Retrospect and prospect

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1990: what a remarkable year!

Friends of ours had just returned from holiday with pieces of colourful concrete, claiming it once was part of the Wall (no need to add ‘Berlin’ here). Throughout the previous three decades that wall had been a ubiquitous fixture in minds all over the world. Then, suddenly, it was gone. That November Germany was unified again. In the same year Lech Walesa became president of Poland and Yugoslavia fell apart. In the Western popular press the tone was triumphant and for a while it seemed that Margaret Thatcher had been right all along, and that, indeed, there was no alternative. That general feeling of invincibility was strengthened further when later that year Operation Desert Storm drove Iraqi troops from Kuwait in the first military operation ever to be broadcast live on television. Also in 1990, somewhere in Switzerland, a team at CERN was laying the first blocks upon which the internet would be built.

It was also quite a year for Southern Africa. On 2 February, State President F.W. De Klerk announced the negotiated end of apartheid and nine days later Nelson Mandela and other Robben Island prisoners were released from captivity. In the course of that year the state of emergency was lifted throughout most of South Africa and racial segregation of public facilities officially ended, even if it would still take another three years before full citizenship rights were restored to all South Africans. Amidst all these pictures of crowds cheering the lifting of concrete slabs, of this videogame-like footage broadcasting successful airstrikes into our homes, and of an iconic hero addressing the world at Wembley Stadium, the fact that in 1990 a geographically vast but thinly populated country also gained its independence almost went unnoticed. In Namibia apartheid ended and Africa’s last colony was no more.

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For Namibians, like for so many others, 1990 was indeed a year of hope, expectation and optimism. As Sam Nujoma, Namibia’s first president and Father of the Nation declared in his inaugural speech:

For the Namibian people, the realization of our most cherished goal, namely the independence of our country and the freedom of our people, is fitting tribute to the heroism and tenacity with which our people fought for this long-awaited day. [...] Our achievement of independence imposes upon us a heavy responsibility, not only to defend our hard-won liberty, but also to set ourselves higher standards of equality, justice and opportunity for all, without regard to race, creed or colour. These are the standards from which all who seek to emulate us shall draw inspiration.¹

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Twenty-five years after the inauguration of the first President of an independent
Namibia, we at the Journal of Namibian Studies thought it was time to pause, take stock
and look ahead. Of course, we were not the only ones. Throughout the year, celebra-
tions and impassioned speeches have marked the anniversary. Indeed, praise is
merited. Namibia has experienced a quarter century of peace and equality, and the
country continues to stand as one of the continent’s most successful democracies. The
list of accomplishments has been impressive, not least the number of new schools,
hospitals and health clinics that have brought essential services to almost the entire
population.

Fig. 2. “The Torch of the Armed Struggle…

… was lit and the path to freedom illuminated. Independence was their aim.” Cartoon by Dudley

But despite Namibia’s remarkable achievements, not all is perfect in the “Land God
Made in Anger”, and many segments of society feel that there is not so much to cheer
about.2 Young people, many of whom were born and educated in a free and inde-

ependent Namibia, struggle to find employment and see few opportunities to fulfil their own dreams; the urban middle class is being priced out of the real estate market; the rural poor still find themselves without access to commercial farmland; and many people, from all walks of life, lament what they perceive as corruption among the country’s ruling elite. So amidst all the congratulations and praise we believe that a more critical and balanced reflection on 25 years of independence is appropriate, while at the same time not wishing to belittle the real and praiseworthy progress.

It is not our intention to put Namibia’s ruling elites on trial — that would do Namibia and its citizens no justice, nor would it adequately acknowledge the debt all Namibians owe to the country’s founding mothers and fathers, and to its ancestors. Instead, we have opted to present a kaleidoscopic snapshot of Namibian society today. It was never our objective to cover all aspects or to provide a satellite view of the country, but only to represent a number of different, even competing, interpretations of recent history. In order to do so, we asked experts from both academia and civil society, from within and outside the country, to offer their take on “Namibia at 25”, with special attention to their respective fields of expertise.

The first replies to our call were overwhelmingly enthusiastic. The manuscripts we received were subjected to peer review, then revisions. Now after almost a one year long process of writing and reflection the Journal of Namibian Studies marks this special milestone by presenting this broad-ranging compilation in this special issue.

Alas, along the way a number of people were forced to drop out of the project. This means that not all the fields we had hoped to cover are represented. We lack, for instance, a reflection on gender (in)equality or LBGT rights in Namibia. Also to our regret, input from leading SWAPO party or government cadres is conspicuous by its absence, as is a view on the current state of Namibian historiography, health and healthcare in Namibia. Absent, too, are the voices of our friends and research participants. Over the years we spent with them, they never ceased to impress us with their resourcefulness, creativity and pragmatism in making ends meet and trying to build a future for themselves and their families.

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Overshadowed by the events in Germany and South Africa, Namibia’s hard-earned independence passed under the radar for most of the world. Indeed, there is a particular irony to this, as there is in the fact that it was the superpowers, which had stalled the implementation of Resolution 435 for so long, that were responsible for re-launching the negotiations in 1989, leading to the first free elections and democracy in Namibia. Although it might have passed unnoticed for most, Namibia’s independence, along with the fall of the Iron Curtain, the re-unification of Germany and the release of Nelson Mandela, was critically intertwined with the broader geo-political dynamics of the times. The world was changing fast, and the less than two million inhabitants of Africa’s last colony, found themselves at the forefront of this rapidly emerging ‘new world order’.
Predictably, the prevailing mood in Namibia during the early 1990s was one of relief and joy over regained freedom following more than a century of colonial rule; there was also a sense of anticipation, a feeling that ‘we will do it better’. By that time, many post-colonial states in Africa had already failed to all intents and purposes, were themselves preying on their own citizens, or had been forced by the Bretton Woods institutions to accept a far-reaching sell-out of their natural and national resources. Many in Namibia (and South Africa) were determined to avoid falling into the same trap.

One of the highest priorities of the new government was to reconcile the country with its apartheid past, with colonial repression, violence and war. With respect to the latter in particular, the years leading up to independence were especially traumatic, as state terror carried out by Koevoet and other military and paramilitary groups reached unprecedented levels. A photograph published by *The Namibian* on 16 January 1987,
showing the body of a slain combatant tied to a Casspir truck brought out into the open
what most Namibians knew all along.3

Fig. 4. “Something for ALL Namibians…


The new government had to bring stability and peace to a scarred and highly divided nation, and the first decade after South African rule illustrated that apartheid had always been more than just a political system: it had embedded itself in the habitus of the people, in the ways they greeted or addressed each other, in their language, and even in the ways people reacted when someone of European descent ordered a particular type of bread at a bakery. Unlike South Africa, Namibia did not opt for a public catharsis in the form of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Instead, it opted to bury past differences, effectively choosing, as part of its Namibianization drive, to publicly ‘forget’ what had happened. This has proven to be easier said than done.

This first period of transition more or less ended with the publication of Vision 2030, in which the Namibian government laid out its ambitious, if utopian, plans to transform

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Namibia into an industrial country. During Sam Nujoma’s third term in office, social problems and economic inequality — issues previously addressed under the blanket of reconciliation — began to be raised more frequently and with more force than in the years before. Thus, when Namibia’s second president, Hifikepunye Pohamba, was inaugurated on 21 March 2005, he declared it time for a ‘new realism’:

I am conscious that the peace, security and stability we enjoy today will have to be accompanied by sustainable economic growth, social development, discipline and self-sacrifice. The question of disparity in socio-economic development, unemployment and poverty will only be addressed effectively if we transform the Namibian economy and accelerate economic growth. This should be done with a strong emphasis on empowering the previously disadvantaged citizens through education, training, and skills development underpinned by efficient economic management and productivity. Let us, therefore, not leave a legacy of high-sounding ambitions and unrealized dreams.4

One obvious paradox here is that while Namibia’s new political elites urged the population to forgive and forget, the authority and legitimacy of these very elites was based on remembering, that is, on remembering their own involvement in the struggle. As the years passed this translated into a growing emphasis on pan-Africanist aesthetics of resistance, something exemplified in the construction of national monuments such as Heroes’ Acre and the Independence Memorial Museum in Windhoek.5

There was also another trend in the portrayal of the nation, this time with respect to the construction of a Namibian identity. During the liberation struggle, and the subsequent decade of independence, the emphasis had been on nation-building. Countering apart-hed’s divide and rule strategy, which constantly worked to reinforce ethnic differences between peoples in Namibia, the Namibian nationalists sought grounds for commonality between the territory’s inhabitants. Since all Namibians shared a common history of oppression, the new state sought to reinforce and further entrench these commonalities, to cultivate a shared sense of being Namibian despite differences in language and culture. But, with time ‘Namibian-ness’ has come to be increasingly understood in local or ‘culturalist’ terms, as is evident in celebrations of cultural difference (even if this implies a ‘folklorization’ of Namibian cultures in festivals and traditional performances). In her contribution in this issue Heike Becker explores these shifting discourses on nationalism and Namibian identity, thereby linking this transformation in post-colonial national discourse to shifts in Black urban culture since the end of WW II.

Political discourse is one thing, but day-to-day life in the post-colony is another. Following the honeymoon years, public expressions of people’s everyday concerns began to replace the liberation rhetoric, even more so once Hifikepunye Pohamba became president. This disenchantment is largely due to the general feeling that too many independence-era promises have not been kept and too many expectations have been disappointed. Despite the country’s progressive constitution, despite the government’s relentless efforts to establish a more equitable gender balance in the political arena,⁶ and despite the country’s seventeenth rank on the World Press Freedom Index (out-ranking heralds of free speech such as France, the UK and the USA),⁷ Namibia (still) has one of the highest levels of income inequality in the world, an observation that has been noted by many of our contributors. Since at least 2005, such concerns – along with others relating to land distribution, the labour market and inflation – have featured increasingly in the press and other such public forums. Now that the thrill of liberation has passed, many people are only concerned about bread-and-butter issues. In the

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⁶ Namibia’s so-called zebra principle guarantees that women and men are equally represented on party lists and in legislative bodies, both in numbers and position.

volume’s second contribution, Toni Hancox approaches “Namibia at 25” from a similar angle, arguing that even though Namibia has an outstanding human rights record, its performance on socio-economic issues lags far behind, as Namibians are not guaranteed standardized access to water, food, housing, education, healthcare or justice.

Furthermore there is widely held view, which has grown over the past decade that a new upper class has emerged and consolidated its wealth through their personal and professional involvement with politicians. In fact, it is the perceived cosiness between ‘big business’ and politics that rankles most. Tender contracts, the distribution of communal land, rising real estate prices, public housing schemes, offshore oil prospecting licenses, and the discovery of other natural resources all lead to allegations that political influence has been bought or used for financial gain. Indeed, the Pohamba administration was severely criticized for its inability change this public perception of large-scale corruption.

Thus it comes as no surprise that the fight against corruption and poverty was high on the list of priorities put forth by Hage Geingob during his presidential campaign. In his inaugural speech on 21 March 2015 he emphasised the point:

> With Independence came expectations, expectations about education, about health services, about land, about safety, about justice, about freedom of movement, and about life and liberty. Many of these expectations were met right away, while others must, by their nature, remain work in progress [...].

> The main priority for the next administration will be addressing the socio-economic gaps that exist in our society. We have been successful in establishing a robust governance framework and implementing sound macroeconomic policies. The prerequisites for a prosperous nation include good constitutions, peace and democracy. We are however aware that people don’t eat constitutions, peace or democracy. People eat decent food, live under decent shelter and enjoy decent employment.

> Therefore, our first priority will be to declare all-out war on poverty and concomitant inequality. Our focal point will be to address inequality, poverty and hunger and that will involve looking at a range of policies and interventionist strategies to tackle this issue.\(^8\)

In Namibia, presidents do indeed have the power to effect change, and in this issue’s third contribution, Henning Melber analyses the institutional characteristics that place strong executive powers in the hands of the nation’s leader. In addition, he dissect the leadership styles of the three men who made it to the highest office in the land, and he evaluates their merits vis-à-vis increasingly critical public scrutiny of government spending.

Of all the issues on the table following the end of colonial rule in Namibia the land issue was and remains the most significant, the most challenging and the most stubborn. In

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1990 Namibians of European descent comprised approximately 5% of the country’s total population but owned over 45% of the country’s total land area, and 74% of the land which could potentially become arable land. Twenty-five years after independence, some progress has been made under Namibia’s so-called willing buyer-willing seller policy, however the pace of change has been exceptionally slow and the colonial legacy of unequal land distribution remains. Even strong presidents have been unable to bring about the change that has been demanded by the many landless Namibians.

It is this very topic, at least with respect to communal land reform in particular, that is addressed in the paper by Wolfgang Werner. He illustrates how recent reforms are proving a threat to rural households’ access to land, as communal land is being transformed into sites of capital accumulation by the ruling elite. As in the urbanized areas, access to (affordable and/or arable) land remains a burning issue in Namibia (as the success of the Affirmative Repositioning movement demonstrates). Issues and contests relating to the privatization of land in rural areas, and speculation on land and real estate in urban areas, remain at the very centre of social and political debates in contemporary Namibia.

Although Namibia has not been overtly praised for its handling of the land distribution problem (it must be stated, however, that successive governments have been successful in avoiding the social unrest and violence that accompanied the issue in neighbouring countries such as Zimbabwe), the country’s successes in another related area, the management of natural resources on that land, has been duly recognised internationally. Starting in the mid-1990s, Namibia began pioneering an innovative approach to natural resource management in which local communities take an active role. The community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) approach, as it is called, allows for the achievement of both conservation and economic development objectives, while simultaneously devolving the state’s role in rural land management. Here, the idea is that local people are best situated to manage natural resources, and that they will fulfil that role if there are economic incentives to do so.

In Namibia, CBNRM was developed and put into practice in the form of a conservancy programme, whereby groups of communal or commercial farmers join together to form local conservancies through which they manage their collective natural resources (most often wildlife) for the benefit of its members. And it is this particular approach that has been lauded as worthy of replication by international conservation groups and sustainable development organizations alike. Twenty-five years of CBNRM in Namibia are also the focus of Karine Nuulimba and Julie Taylor’s article. In their review they assess, from both academic and practitioner perspectives, the successes and failures of the conservancy model. CBNRM has indeed been a success, especially in terms of the recovery of wildlife and the rapid growth in earnings for the communities involved. However, Nuulimba and Taylor also point out that CBNRM has contributed to the

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uncertainty of rural land tenure and the undermining of local authority structures, among other things.

This tension between utopian ideal and practical reality is also what underlies Immolatrix Geingos-Onuegbu’s contribution on technology and innovation within the context of the so-called knowledge society that Vision 2030 envisages. The vision, as formulated by the political elite, of Namibia becoming an industrialised society has not yet been realised and a lot of practical and political hurdles remain to be overcome for Namibia to achieve this goal. In part, the historical legacy of underdevelopment during apartheid is responsible for Namibia’s small industrial base and its low capacity for ‘research and development’. The question of how to implement locally those insights that have been obtained elsewhere remains an additional hurdle. This is, of course, a crucial question that pertains to development initiatives in general — yet one that is often overlooked. Nevertheless, the issue also has implications for education and training, from primary to tertiary level, from grade one history books to university curricula, and from mechanics to the arts.

Figure 6. “Daddy’s Little Boy…

In a similar vein, and with an eye on Vision 2030, Retha-Louise Hofmeyr maps developments in the arts since independence, illustrating how much art education previously depended on western-based models. The arts have, however, undergone a process of ‘Namibianization’. There is now more localized art production and more adequate art education in the country. In her article, she argues that a strong and adequately supported arts sector is indispensable to Namibia’s knowledge-based economy. The creative sector already contributes significantly to Namibia’s GDP (even if it is hard to express this in numbers), but no mention is made of the arts in Namibia’s Fourth National Development Plan (NDP4). This notwithstanding, Hofmeyr argues that the creative sector in Namibia offers a shining example for the rest of the economy. In her view the emphasis on creativity and innovation in arts entrepreneurship is crucial and must be developed further in the run-up to 2030, for instance by promoting it in primary and secondary education.

The next contribution, by Robert Gordon, considers the knowledge produced by social science research in and on Namibia. In a sequel to his literature review of 15 years ago Gordon observes that social and cultural anthropology have dwarfed sociology when it comes to academic output in the country, which for him is symptomatic of a more general undervaluation of the social sciences at Namibia’s tertiary institutions.\(^\text{10}\) He also notes the growing bifurcation between Namibian and non-Namibian based researchers. Indirectly, he pleads for more attention to and investment in the development of the social sciences in Namibia, but social sciences orientated toward issues that truly affect its population (such as the country’s rapid urbanisation, or its economic prospects, or poverty more generally).

These latter topics are especially relevant to Namibia’s youth, as the population is very young and young people make up a large portion of the country’s precariat. This special issue thus concludes with a contribution by Pandu Hailonga van Dijk and Michael Mulunga, two Namibians with long-standing experience in the field of youth development. Well-steeped in the realities of young Namibians’ everyday lives, they highlight the paradox of referring to the young generations as the future, yet at the same time, often denying those generations the opportunity to shape that future, let alone participate in it. To illustrate, van Dijk and Mulunga cite the high drop-out rate of grade 10 pupils, and state that if ever Namibia wants to achieve the objectives laid out in Vision 2030, it should start by investing in its youth, as they themselves did when they launched an innovative youth empowerment project in Katutura.

As we write this introduction students in Cape Town, Johannesburg and elsewhere on South Africa’s campuses are protesting against the proposed rise in enrolment fees for tertiary education. In what is tentatively known as South Africa’s Campus Spring, they are continuing the student protests which began in April 2015 in Cape Town, when thousands demanded the removal of a statue of Cecil John Rhodes which overlooked the UCT campus. Their fight is very similar to the controversy that surrounded the removal of

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the Reiterdenkmal in Windhoek on Christmas Eve 2013. The different ways these events unfolded do not obscure the fact that both statues represent the legacies of a colonial past.

Although Namibia gained its freedom 25 years ago, it is still burdened by its history, in which overt domination and coercion have made way for subtle hegemony and powerful temptation. Southern Africa’s younger generations are not fighting statues; their battle is not ‘just’ symbolic. Theirs is a far more important struggle, as they question the ‘white’ curriculum that continues to dominate tertiary education in Africa and take a stand against the policies and practices that continue to dominate public life at the expense of the underprivileged.11 And not without success, as we now know.

The point, however, as we hope the different contributions to this special issue make clear, is that 25 years of Namibian independence have shown that ‘localization’ (or ‘Namibianization’) is not limited to tertiary education alone. The decolonisation of the mind also has an impact on the arts, on development, on national identity, on land tenure and management, on culture, on the production of knowledge and on the role of youth in creating Namibia’s future.

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Namibian Sun, 26 Oct 2015, “Now Unam wants 15%”.


11 Yet, a few days after the South African government announced that it would withdraw its proposed raise in fees, UNAM announced an enrolment fee increase of 15%, cf. Namibian Sun, 26 Oct 2015, “Now Unam wants 15%”; Tuyeimo Haidula, “Govt needs fixed funding system”, The Namibian, 28 October 2015.

