

**Review:** Michael Akuupa, *National Culture in Post-Apartheid Namibia. State-sponsored Cultural Festivals and their Histories*, Basel, Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2015.

In his book on *National Culture in Post-Apartheid Namibia*, Michael Akuupa examines the role of cultural festivals as interactive spaces between the state and citizens to promote unity in diversity and to pinpoint the social and economic issues in post-colonial Namibia which require urgent attention.

Akuupa emphasises that Namibia, like many African countries at independence, was faced with a colonial legacy of a divided people and that cultural festivals were instituted as a platform to find unifying elements which would promote a national culture of unity in diversity and reposition the country's cultural heritage for economic gains through cultural tourism.

Akuupa indicates how notions of inclusivity and exclusivity play out around the contested colonial notion of Kavango-ness and how these contestations are manifested in Namibia's post-colonial cultural festivals where some ethnic groups feel excluded. He asserts that "the Nyemba, who are not represented by one of the five traditional authorities of Kavango but who nevertheless have an extensive presence in the region dating to precolonial times, are commonly viewed as outsiders who do not belong in Kavango although most songs and dances performed by Kavango troupes are in fact Nyemba origin" (p. XV). Akuupa's assertion about the lack of represen-

tation of the Nyemba despite having been in the area for a long time must be placed in a historical context and it raises a lot of questions such as on what level and in which sense are they not represented?

A Kavango historian has, for example, contested that the Nyemba are not represented in the Kavango or allowed to profess and practice their culture and concluded that "The issues regarding recognition as a distinct Vanyemba traditional community and authority, language and cultural recognition are just a pretext in the place of real and perceived grievances by some individuals who have lost out on political and top civil service positions or by those who intend to use these issues as a blackmailing strategy when seeking for economic and political opportunities within the regions and the country at large."<sup>1</sup> Unless I am convinced otherwise, I tend to agree with the above view.

There are indications that prior to the Portuguese atrocities in the late 1960s in Angola, the Nyemba and the other five Kavango ethnic groups lived in cordial relation under well-defined kingdoms across the three rivers Kavango, Kwito and Kwandu but were later divided by the Portuguese into controlled camps locally called 'Zunda' and 'Tjaisa' where they suffered oppression and death as the quotations below indicate:

"Prior to the Portuguese atrocities in the 1960s the area between Kwito and

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<sup>1</sup> Shampapi Shiremo, "Putting the Vanyemba recognition issue in context (Part II)", *New Era*, 22 May 2015.

Kwando Rivers known as Limbaranda or Mbunda (Nyemba kingdom) was inhabited by a heterogeneous population many of whom had ties of kinship or ethnic affinities with the population on the Kavango River. The older inhabitants of Kavango regard Mbunda or Limbaranda as the land of plenty and that in earlier days, the local people removed temporarily to Limbaranda during times of famine, returning only in time to cultivate their fields with the first summer rain.”<sup>2</sup>

“We were told by the Portuguese that because of the war which was beginning, the Nyemba had to live separately from the Vagciriku. In 1967 when I lived in Tjaisa settlement camp I finally agreed to work for the Portuguese as a police man. In 1968, after my training in Menonge as a spy police, we went to Shimbaranda area (Nyemba kingdom) to go and search for people.<sup>3</sup> My task was to recognise what languages people we came across spoke so that we separated those who spoke Kavango languages from the Nyemba people [...]”<sup>4</sup>

“In the past in Kwitu area, people of various ethnic groups lived mixed up. Then the Portuguese took the Nyemba from Shimbaranda and settled them among the other Nyemba in Kwitu area.

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<sup>2</sup> National Archives of Namibia, NAR 1/1/55, “Unregistered correspondence 1962-67”, group 11, file 20, pp. 4f.

<sup>3</sup> For more information on the search for people during the Angolan war see, Inge Brinkman, *A War for People – Civilians, Mobility, and Legitimacy in South-East Angola During MPLA's War for Independence*, Köln, Köppe, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Interview S. Karenga, 5 August 2009 (Interviewer: K. Likuwa).

Gciriku people who previously lived mixed up with the Nyemba in Kwitu area were then removed and settled along the Angolan side of the Kavango River.”<sup>5</sup>

The above descriptions of Portuguese atrocities against the Nyemba and other Kavango ethnic groups and an indication of their mix settlement patterns show that the contact and kinships between these ethnic groups go back a long way and that colonialism had a great impact on the politics of exclusivity between the Nyemba and other Kavango ethnic groups which Akuupa now highlights.

Akuupa's use of observations of Nyemba songs and dances at the cultural festival to make historical statements on Nyemba claims to Kavangoness raises the question as to whether or not an anthropological approach of theorising based on observations should be a means to make historical arguments rather than making historical arguments based on sources. Could Akuupa's observation that Nyemba songs are sung by Kavango troupes at cultural festivals actually be read as an indication that “Nyemba” are embraced as part of the “Kavango” or that there is integration of people into Kavango beyond ethnic divides? Centrally, contestations of inclusivity and exclusivity as raised by Akuupa speak to various people's struggle for economic access and wealth distribution in post-colonial Namibia.

Turning to debates on the use of the concept ‘performance’ in cultural festivals, Akuupa analyses the structure and

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<sup>5</sup> Interview G. M. Weka, 29 July 2009 (Interviewer: K. Likuwa).

the cultural meaning of performances within the cultural festival process, the conditions under which performances occurs and their place within the broad patterns of community life. He argues that performance, as a social interaction, is only useful when applied to processes and not practices. This is so because the cultural festival process always constitutes practice. This is the case because certain elements of representations showcased at the festival are practiced in everyday life situations and not only in the cultural festivals process. State sponsored cultural festivals therefore must be seen as a social space which contains practice through which perceived social reality is showcased. In other words, actors in the festival process see and believe that what is done in the festival context are facts of their habitus or living spaces in real life.

Centrally, Akuupa's book contributes to the literature on theories of performance as an act and an analytical concept of social life and nationalism. He shows that the interactions of citizens with the state in cultural festival spaces are not only about the ideas of difference and belonging but also of advocacy through culture booklets and songs about socio-economic plights. Therefore, cultural festivals are social spaces of interaction in which society and the state produce and practice ideas of association.

For the first time, Akuupa has written on the centrality of national cultural festivals in Namibia as an important platform for the state and the people for the conservation of heritage. Furthermore Akuupa shows that festivals should not

be viewed in isolation from the State's ambitions for economic prosperity through cultural tourism.

Akuupa's book raises further questions: e.g. are cultural festivals a priority plan for the Namibian state to promote a national culture of unity in diversity considering that there has been a breakdown in the annual preparations of the national festival coupled with reports of mal-administration?<sup>6</sup> Is unity in diversity as promoted under cultural festivals a viable means towards promoting 'Namibian-ness'?

After reading this thought provoking book on the development of a national culture in post-colonial Namibia, one cannot but appreciate Akuupa's contribution to the academic literary world on Kavango and Namibia at large. I recommend Akuupa's book to all social scientists and students who have an interest in understanding post-colonial Namibia and its people.

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<sup>6</sup> In 2012 a state of disorganisation and maladministration of the National Cultural festivals by its organisers was reported and eventually Akuupa asked if National Cultural festivals are still relevant. See, Michael Akuupa, "National Cultural Festivals: Are They Still Relevant", *The Namibian*, 24 May 2013. Eventually, no National Cultural Festival took place in 2013.