
Christian Williams has produced a comprehensive study of the SWAPO camps established in the ‘Frontline States’ during the course of the struggle for Namibia’s independence. His purview spans a period of 25 years from the establishment of SWAPO’s first camp for Namibian exiles in Kongwa in a remote region in Tanzania as early as 1964, through to a string of camps in Zambia and Angola during the 1970s and 1980s. The earliest residents of these sites were political refugees and PLAN recruits, but once the war against the occupying South African forces was stepped up, their numbers were swelled by civilians, including women and children, fleeing the colony.

Notwithstanding the changing demographics of SWAPO’s camps, their daily routines were still modelled on military bases. Those with rank enforced a code of discipline and meted out punishment to those who would not submit to their authority – while often flouting the rules themselves. There were recurrent tensions between military personnel and political commissars, between officers and rank-and-file soldiers, between members of different ethnic groups, between early PLAN recruits and later ones, as well as frequent abuse of women. Suspicions of enemy infiltration of the camps ratcheted up the tensions and the commanders responded by instructing security detachments to arbitrarily detain and torture ‘spies’. SWAPO’s exile leadership was authoritarian and secretive, bordering on the conspiratorial. Indeed, the witchcraft analogy that Williams invokes is instructive in explaining how the irrational behaviour of its functionaries was fuelled by paranoia.

Such behaviour produced a catalogue of human rights abuses in the camps. Granted recognition by the international community as the “sole and authentic representative” of the Namibian people on account of its principled opposition to the apartheid regime, SWAPO mobilized the language of humanitarianism and human rights in justifying its actions. Thus (so the argument went) “supporting SWAPO was critical to supporting human rights, because SWAPO represented the Namibian people, whose rights had been violated by colonialism and apartheid. Thus accusations of abuses committed by SWAPO in its camps were, in fact, a threat to human rights because they undermined the movement capable of protecting these rights by liberating Namibia from colonial rule” (p. 154). Hence the perverse logic used to defend SWAPO’s torture and other abuses amounted to a cynical manipulation of human rights discourse. And (so the argument continued) if there were to be some measure of accountability it should be postponed until such time as SWAPO came to power (p. 171). Yet, such a day of reckoning had been postponed indefinitely. Williams contends that, like the other Southern African liberation movements, SWAPO created a putative nation in exile that “perpetrated abuses on their own
members and have effaced these abuses through histories articulated by national elites” (p. 228). On this score he is only partly correct as the ANC did, at least, appoint its own commissions to investigate human rights abuses in its camps and subsequently admitted a degree of culpability before the TRC.

Williams would no doubt take issue with my summary inasmuch as it places far too much emphasis on the SWAPO camps as being mired in crisis. While he is critical of SWAPO’s conduct, he seeks to provide a more richly textured version of life in the camps. Thus he positions his work slightly at odds with scholars such as Dobell, Leys and Saul, and Hunter who frame the history of camps in terms of ‘crisis’, abuse and torture. Williams reckons that they neglect the experience of everyday life or the quotidian. Indeed, he claims that even the counter-narratives articulated by members of the Breaking the Wall of Silence Movement (BWS) “has tended to focus on a narrow range of years and experiences, mirrored in a critical historiography that makes use of many of the same sources” (p. 195). By adopting what he calls an historical ethnographic approach that draws on an extensive body of oral testimony from not only detainees but also from other SWAPO exiles with different kinds of experiences, Williams insists that the gaps in the national narrative are mirrored in the extant historiography and that he wishes to he avoid the reductionism of both. But his attempt to complicate the histories of the camps only goes so far. For, in the final analysis, his own narrative is constructed in response to both SWAPO’s official national narrative, as well as that articulated by the historiography that is critical of this narrative. In other words, Williams cannot entirely escape the need to position his account against the backdrop of the primary narratives.

This same quandary is evident in his treatment of Cassinga in Chapter 2. Williams charges that I hold that there are no narratives that compete with SWAPO’s dominant discourse about Cassinga in postcolonial Namibia (p. 52, note 71). Admittedly, I make only passing reference to survivors’ stories and then to those that conform with the SWAPO story (e.g. Namhila). And I would concede that the testimonies of survivors that tell another story have undoubtedly been marginalised. Vilho’s Shigwedha’s unpublished PhD thesis attests to this. Shigwedha has made a valiant attempt to rescue the voices of

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such survivors from the condescension of memory (to corrupt EP Thompson’s well-worn adage). The survivor (or survivors’) narrative(s) have not been able or allowed to take hold in public consciousness; they are not likely to usurp the narrative which remains the preserve of SWAPO in Namibia. Indeed, SWAPO claims to speak for the dead, those who have become the martyrs of nationalist iconography. But they effectively silence the survivors whose stories do not conform with SWAPO’s privileged narrative. By way of contrast, the SADF story is managed by the self-styled ‘veterans of Cassinga’ in an attempt to avoid being labelled perpetrators of a massacre. This would suggest that the political elites in post-apartheid South Africa do not exercise quite the same degree of influence in fashioning public memory as does the ruling party in postcolonial Namibia.

Still, Williams is quite right to point out that dissenting Namibian voices that have expressed dissatisfaction with the cover-up of the treatment of SWAPO’s detainees have not been silenced as much as marginalised. This is exemplified by his account of the funeral oration for Emil Appolus, an erstwhile SWAPO leader who had cut his ties with the party, given by Immanuel Hinda in the presence of dignitaries. Although her speech was delivered at the very end of the proceedings, this stalwart of the struggle audaciously suggested that Lubango ‘spies’ should occupy a similar place to Cassinga ‘refugees’ in the national narrative (p. 204). It is no doubt relatively easy for SWAPO to dismiss such discordant notes heard on official occasions when they are expressed by representatives of peripheral communities. However, Williams dismisses the view that Namibians are engaged in “reconciliation by silence” (p. 212) in favour of one that recognises that they are speaking among themselves. He contends that “to render those whose histories have been excluded from an accepted national narrative as ‘victims’ and to reduce their histories to ‘silence’ divests marginalised subjects of the agency that they assert through narrating their experiences to others” (p. 212). Although such stories might not be officially acknowledged, does he rule out the possibility that the voicing of counter-narratives will provide opportunities for dialogue among Namibians?

To my mind, Williams’ major contribution to Namibian historiography is his thesis that the existence of SWAPO’s camps played a formative role in creating the nation in utero. Unfortunately, the camp’s part in building an embryonic nation was, at best, contradictory and, at worst, counter-productive. Camps were sites of liberating practices where residents imagined a postcolonial future (p. 219) but paradoxically also sites of oppression. Camps were sites where SWAPO administered to the needs of prospective citizens but they were also the models for the abuse of power through spy accusations and other undemocratic practices. Williams adduces evidence to show that conflicts accentuated factional and ethnic tensions, and that hierarchies that emerged in the camps have been perpetuated in postcolonial Namibia, thereby undermining democratic governance and social transformation (p. 223). And, I
would wish to add, such behaviours have yet to be unlearned.

Although Williams is convincing when it comes to explaining the influence of the camps on SWAPO’s present political culture, I believe that he overstates the significance of liberation movement camps in defining postcolonial nationalisms and shaping historical narratives throughout southern Africa. For instance, I am not persuaded that the camp or the experience of exile was quite as profound in the South African case. Unlike SWAPO, the ANC comprises a much more varied membership whose experience spans that of the Robben islanders, as well as the so-called ‘inziles’. But my hypothesis cannot be attested until such time as we have a detailed study of the ANC camps that matches that of Williams’ nuanced historical ethnography of SWAPO’s exile camps.

This is a well written, illustrated and edited volume. It is a fine addition to Cambridge University Press’ African Studies series.

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