

Review: Henning Melber, (ed.), *Transitions in Namibia: Which Changes for Whom?* Stockholm, Nordiska Afrika-institutet, 2007.

As the title suggests, the chapters in this edited volume address the great post-liberation challenges faced by the Namibian state and people. Together, the contributors demonstrate clearly that independence did not usher in the dramatic transformation that many had hoped for and SWAPO had promised. A number of contributors also highlight the actions of those who seek to address the shortcomings of the post-apartheid state and the possibilities for change. Though the chapters are not explicitly organized into sections, four broad themes emerge: competing post-liberation narratives; land, labor and the economy; state development and incorporation; and equality, gender and sexuality.

Four chapters, two at the beginning of the volume and two closer to the middle, illustrate quite different perspectives on the creation of a dominant narrative in post-apartheid Namibian society and some responses to state attempts to define that narrative.

The book's introduction by Henning Melber discusses SWAPO's idealized notion "that the seizure of political power ... [will lead to a] transformation of colonial structures into a liberated society and economy that benefits the majority among the formerly colonized masses." (p. 8) It thereby situates the collection as a whole as an interrogation of this promise and a "challenge [to] parts of the dominant narrative of the

liberation movement now in political power" (p. 10).

The following chapter by Christopher Saunders builds upon the introduction by analyzing former president Sam Nujoma's as well as Oswin Namakalu's (who was trained in PLAN) histories of the armed struggle to demonstrate their uncritical presentation of SWAPO's actions. Their texts thus work to demonstrate the dominant narrative of liberation. Saunders suggests that critical voices offering alternative perspectives on the history of Namibia while "muted" do exist within Namibia, but unfortunately offers little detail of the projects or discussion of their potential contributions.

Later in the text, Lalli Metsola offers a very interesting chapter on the politics and meanings of ex-combatant integration, from the definition of who qualifies to the question of who wants to qualify for the benefits offered by the state. By discussing the different responses of a number of young Namibians, Metsola demonstrates how each individual engages what is an inherently political process and why some potential beneficiaries actually turn down ex-combatant benefits to escape the disciplining that such benefits demand. Their refusal to participate constitutes a critique of the dominant SWAPO narrative of liberation and post-liberation governance. In this way, Metsola demonstrates both the incredible power of the state as well as the continued agency of individuals and offers an insight into the choices that a few people have made.

In the next chapter, Mattia Fumanti also moves beyond the official narrative that suggests deference to the SWAPO elite and presents youth as a problem requiring control. Instead, he considers the innovative actions of a group of youth in Rundu who seek to challenge elite culture while also gaining access to its ranks. The exclusive youth club organizes events which range from a youth festival and beauty pageant to a symposium on the history of the region. The organizers of the symposium carefully include and honor members of the ruling elite while also offering students an opportunity to share their interpretation of the region's history. The group's innovative actions offer a challenge to the straightforward SWAPO narrative as offered in the two books reviewed by Saunders but also recognize the political importance of SWAPO's understanding of the liberation struggle.

Following Saunders, five chapters in the volume address the questions of land, labor, business and the post-apartheid economy.

First, Phaniel Kaapama demonstrates that commercial agricultural reforms have "tended to perpetuate the concentration of land in the hands of both white and black economic elites" (p. 47). This, he argues, is due to the fact that land policies support neoliberal economic principles. This chapter presents different perspectives on land reform and legislation. More updated data on post 2000 land reform as well as data on poverty and landlessness would have further strengthened the argument.

Next, Herbert Jauch offers a broad overview of the declining influence of trade unions in Namibia and the great challenges that union organizations face due to the government's neoliberal economic policies and the dominance of a single party, SWAPO, in government. The author argues that the future prospects for unions as representatives of workers rights will depend upon their ability to establish their independence from the ruling party. The chapter briefly mentions the Trade Union Congress of Namibia (TUCNA) which is not affiliated to SWAPO. A deeper discussion of TUCNA's potential would have helped to illuminate the prospects for the strengthening of worker influence in Namibia.

In the following chapter, Volker Winterfeld offers an engaging discussion of the impact of an Export Processing Zone (EPZ) enterprise in Windhoek, Ramatex Textiles Namibia. The chapter stresses the difference between the promises and actual benefits of the EPZ and the concessions offered to Ramatex by the Namibian state. While Ramatex "has become the biggest single employer in Namibia's private sector economy" (p. 73), it employs significantly less Namibian workers than was initially envisaged. The company has also flouted Namibian environmental laws and those concerning workers' rights. Winterfeld argues that the Namibian government's arrangements with Ramatex demonstrate a de-prioritization of broader economic development for the majority. This chapter also includes a discussion of a successful strike action taken by Ramatex workers in which the workers were able to press the

company to increase both wages and benefits. This example demonstrates some room for maneuver for those employed by the Malaysian corporation and for the Namibian state as well. Winterfeld remains pessimistic, however, suggesting that the Namibian state will probably not exploit this opportunity to improve the terms of its deal with Ramatex for the benefit of the general population.

Next, Gregor Dobler demonstrates clearly the expanding influence of China and Chinese migrants within the Namibian economy. Increased Chinese investments offer the possibility for development and Chinese shops offers cheap consumer goods for local consumers. Despite these potential benefits, the author argues that the current configuration of Chinese capital does not encourage successful indigenous industrialization and further marginalizes Namibian competitors. It is therefore clear that it is up to the Namibian government to implement policies to attempt to spur local development for the benefit of the majority.

Henning Melber's chapter argues that the government is clearly failing in this regard. He demonstrates a lack of effective government policies to address poverty and inequality and argues that the country's black economic empowerment has simply benefited a small elite group. Melber concludes that the "skewed class character of Namibian society has hardly changed since independence" (p. 125) and instead of social transformation, Namibia has been characterized by the cooption of a minority into the ranks of

the existing upper class. Melber effectively critiques current economic policy and corruption, but it is worth noting that international organizations such as Transparency International still rank perceived corruption in Namibia as among the lowest on the continent. The chapter concludes that current Namibian economic policy suggests a desire to physically remove the poor in a manner similar to that seen in Zimbabwe during the devastating Operation Murambatsvina. While Namibia's extreme inequality and the lack of a reduction in that inequality deserves critical attention, the comparison to Zimbabwe seems somewhat exaggerated.

Following the discussion of economic opportunities and constraints, another two chapters consider state development and incorporation.

Graham Hopwood tackles the question of decentralization and finds that "[t]hirteen years after Namibia's system of region government was put in place, the 13 regional councils have very little meaningful power" (p. 173). Since regional representatives are the only Namibian officials elected directly by constituents rather than via party list, they offer a clear opportunity to strengthen democracy. This is true, even as SWAPO has dominated every level of government and after 2004, all regional councils. Hopwood argues that while Namibia has not seen any meaningful devolution of power away from central government, decentralization, if enacted according to existing legislation could bring government closer to the people.

The next chapter by Wolfgang Zeller and Bennett Kangumu Kangumu considers the peripheral position of the Caprivi region. The authors argue that the Caprivi presents both dangers and opportunities to the Namibian state. The region's marginalization has recently been reduced by the building of an access corridor to meet the interests of transnational business. But, it is unclear as to whether local residents will see any benefit from their increased incorporation into state and transnational networks. The authors posit that the increased interest in the region could offer residents a chance for development, if the state were to prioritize broad scale development, as well as the threat of increased state violence.

The volume concludes with three chapters addressing questions of equality, gender and sexuality.

Diane Hubbard offers an interesting discussion of debates regarding equality in family law and the question of the appropriate role common practice and particular circumstances should play in discussions of legal steps toward achieving greater equality. Hubbard notes that Namibia does have some progressive laws on gender issues such as affirmative action and gender-based violence, but it is also a "socially conservative society where the home is the last bastion of patriarchy" (p. 209). Her review of a number of legal and political battles concerning the enactment of these progressive laws leads her to conclude: "The law can lead, but not if it moves so far ahead that the public can no longer see its light" (p. 226). This points to the need for a dual approach

that engages both legal precedents and common practice.

In the following chapter, Lucy Edwards argues that the HIV/AIDS crisis can only be effectively addressed by engaging the broader inequalities in society. Her research demonstrates that condom use, the most effective means of preventing HIV transmission, is "relative to male preference" and that the overwhelming majority of men (73.7%) believed that "a man has a right to have sexual intercourse with his wife without a condom" (p. 240). Edward's chapter thereby reinforces Hubbard's argument that informal social practices and beliefs, rather than simply formal law or policy, must be engaged in order to begin to bring about real change.

The final chapter of the volume by Suzanne LaFont, argues that sexual rights have not been recognized as essential human rights. Returning to a dominant theme in many of the volume's chapters, LaFont demonstrates a lack of significant change since independence. She also importantly demonstrates that organized civil society groups are continuing to work to press for change and to demand equal sexual rights.

Overall, the volume offers many significant contributions which together present a detailed picture of key issues facing Namibian society. The collection is, however, presented as a series of individual chapters that are not expressly organized around themes (as this review has attempted to do) or contextualized in relation to one another in either an overarching introduction or conclusion. The short introductory chapter says too little

about the book's aims beyond broadly questioning SWAPO's powerful liberation narrative. It does not include a discussion of the chapters, how they are organized, how they build upon one another, or how they work together. The volume also does not include a conclusion. As a result, this collection does not fully exploit a wonderful opportunity to build on the ideas presented by the authors from chapter to chapter and to demonstrate points of debate.

It is also worth noting that a substantial section of Saunders' chapter in this volume is taken directly from his chapter in the previous volume published by the Nordiska Afrikainstitutet and edited by Henning Melber entitled "Re-examining Liberation in Namibia" (2003).

The volume as a whole tends to focus more on the demonstration of a lack of transformation than on the prospects for change. While the chapters offer an accurate assessment of the current state of Namibian society, politics and economy, they might have more fully engaged those who seek to offer alternative narratives and demand change. While these actors may often be marginalized and their success far from certain, a fuller discussion of their efforts and the challenges they face would have added a great deal to this collection. The chapters that do engage challenges to the dominant narrative and existing policies offer some of the most interesting contributions.

This collection of chapters, along with those of the previous volume, provides a comprehensive overview of the key challenges facing Namibians. It is well

worth reading. Perhaps a third volume might be added to engage citizens' efforts to bring about greater transformation in their country.

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