

# SCHOLARLY REVIEW ESSAY

## Nationalism in Namibia

**Oiva Angula. *SWAPO Captive: A Comrade's Experience of Betrayal and Torture*.** Cape Town: Penguin Random House, 2018. xvi + 179 pp. Illustrations. Preface. Postscript. Bibliography. Index. \$18.00. Paper. ISBN: 978-1-77609-361-8.

**Wendi A. Haugh. *Lyrical Nationalism in Post-Apartheid Namibia: Kings, Christians and Cosmopolitans in Catholic Youth Songs*.** Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2014. xvi + 283 pp. Maps. Illustrations. Notes. Appendix. Glossary. Bibliography. Index. \$116.00. Cloth. ISBN: 978-0-7391-8845-3.

**Reinhart Kössler. *Namibia and Germany: Negotiating the Past*.** Windhoek: University of Namibia Press, 2015. xiv + 377 pp. Preface and Acknowledgments. Maps. Illustrations. Glossary. Bibliography. Index. \$42.00. Paper. ISBN: 978-99916-42-09-3.

**Henning Melber. *Understanding Namibia: The Trials of Independence*.** Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. xvii + 300 pp. Acknowledgements. Preface. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$25.00. Paper. ISBN: 978-0-19-024156-8.

**Vilho Amukwaya Shigwedha. *The Aftermath of the Cassinga Massacre: Survivors, Deniers and Injustices*.** Basel: Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2017. xiii + 170 pp. Foreword. Acknowledgements. Maps. Illustrations. Notes. Appendices. Bibliography. Index. \$27.00. Paper. ISBN: 978-3-905758-80-1.

**Akira Takada. *Narratives on San Ethnicity: The Cultural and Ecological Foundations of Lifeworld among the !Xun of North-Central Namibia*.** Melbourne: Kyoto University Press, 2015. xvii + 198 pp. Preface. Tables. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Paper. \$32.00. Cloth. ISBN: 978-4-87698-364-3.

In 2020, Namibia celebrates the thirtieth anniversary of its independence from apartheid South African rule and the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of its primary liberation movement, now ruling party, the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO). For many people across these years, SWAPO has been associated with the promise of a postcolonial Namibian nation, committed to the idealistic principles on which its liberation movement was founded: "solidarity, freedom, justice." As a result, Namibia and SWAPO often appear to be indistinguishable from one another, and they are

likely to be presented again as such at this year's commemorative events—SWAPO's setbacks in the 2019 elections notwithstanding.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the conflation of "SWAPO" with "Namibia" and the personification of Namibian nationhood through SWAPO leaders has undermined efforts to create an inclusive national community.

Collectively, the six books under review here comprise a significant contribution to understanding Namibian nationalism's problematic trajectory and latent potential. Of these texts, Wendi Haugh's *Lyrical Nationalism in Post-Apartheid Namibia* (2014) offers the most substantial discussion of nationalism as such and of Namibian nationalism's more inclusive moments. Haugh's point of departure is her experience as a WorldTeach volunteer at Mariabronn, where she taught English, Namibia's national language, at a multi-lingual, multi-ethnic school shortly after independence. As she writes, it was easy to see, amid the diversity and opportunities available to students at Mariabronn, why they would embrace a national identity, but she "wondered... how nationalism was perceived in the largely monoethnic, mono-lingual, and rural ethnic homelands created by the apartheid government, and how residents of these areas experienced the political shift from apartheid state to nation-state. How did they claim, construct or experience membership in the nation?" (2).

To explore this question, Haugh delves into comparative scholarship on nationalism, historical literature on Namibia, and ethnographic data which she collected in Ombalantu, part of the apartheid era homeland of Ovamboland in northern Namibia. As Haugh explains, when SWAPO was founded in 1960, South West Africa (SWA) had neither the education system nor the administrative bureaucracy nor the shared print or media infrastructure to shape a national identity among the territory's inhabitants; it had none of the conditions for nationalism that one might anticipate from Benedict Anderson's work on nationalism elsewhere (1983). Nevertheless, SWA's colonized people were subject to the same oppressive apartheid system, and once nationalist ideas spread from other African contexts to SWA, they found fertile ground there as nationalists mobilized people with quite different histories around shared experiences of oppression. Moreover, and more uniquely relevant to the Namibian context, SWA's migrant labor system compelled a large proportion of the male Oshiwambo-speaking population to move across, but rarely beyond, the territory's length and breadth during their working lives. As a result, these laborers—including the founders and the most substantial support base of SWAPO—developed not only a shared sense of Ovambo ethnicity (bridging kingdoms, clans, and other local markers of identity in Ovamboland), but also of Namibian nationality, which, unlike ethnicity, was well suited to oppose South Africa's apartheid project. Additionally, SWAPO appealed to the international community to assist them in shedding the yoke of a colonial regime set on defying international law and closing them off from the world. As a result, nationalism emerged in Namibia with a decidedly cosmopolitan orientation, focused on crossing linguistic,

ethnic, and national boundaries and creating new social networks (see also Emmett 1999).

When, during the late 1990s, Haugh spent sixteen months conducting fieldwork in Ombalantu, she found a similar cosmopolitan nationalism among a new generation of Namibians, displayed most compellingly in the songs of local Catholic youth groups. In these songs, youth presented their commitment to “Namibia,” a nation organized around individual citizens belonging to a common territory and with shared interests, not a nation rooted in a single language and/or culture. Moreover, the youth presented dreams for their futures, which, while often focused on individual aspirations to access opportunities across regional and national boundaries, were tied to an overarching narrative about Namibia’s newly won freedom and to the Namibian government’s promotion of English as “the national language.” Thus, being a citizen of Namibia and a citizen of the world were not opposing dispositions as one might anticipate (see Malkki 1995), but rather closely intertwined with one another.

Even as Haugh emphasizes the inclusive and cosmopolitan quality of the nationalism which she observed, she also considers the extent to which this nationalism reflects the historical experience of a regionally and ethnically specific group. As she notes, following many others, SWAPO originated from a workers’ rights organization intended for migrant laborers from Ovamboland (first the Ovamboland People’s Congress, later the Ovamboland People’s Organization). Moreover, while the organization’s leadership and supporters have included Namibians of many backgrounds, SWAPO’s dominance over competing liberation movements and political parties has depended on its overwhelming support base in Ovamboland (divided, since independence, into four separate regions and often referenced today simply as “Ovambo”). Haugh’s research adds further insight into the manner in which Ovambo ethnicity and Namibian nationalism are entangled with one another. As she demonstrates through two richly detailed ethnographic chapters, Catholic youth in late 1990s Ombalantu shared an understanding of Ovambo kingdoms and Christian modernity which inflected how they described the Namibian nation, praised its leaders, and exhorted fellow citizens to behave. It follows that Namibians of different backgrounds might perceive such a nationalism as privileging the experience of a dominant group, especially if local variations of an inclusive, cosmopolitan, nationalist project were not permitted to co-exist with it.

The significant question which Haugh’s text does not fully address is the relationship between the national vision of Catholic youth in late 1990s Ombalantu and nationalism in Namibia more broadly. In my view, there are two key conceptual issues here. The first, which Haugh does consider in her concluding chapter, is whether, and to what extent, her research participants represent how other Namibians have viewed the nation since independence. As she notes, people who identify as Ovambo, modern Christians, and SWAPO members comprise a substantial portion of the Namibian population and share historical experiences and subjectivities. Thus, while

there are certainly contrasting visions of the nation within Namibia, perhaps most strikingly in northern Namibia's Kunene and Zambezi Regions (see Friedman 2011; Kangumu 2011), there is reason to see the national vision of Haugh's research participants as reflecting more than an exceptional, local nationalism.

The second issue is how Haugh's research participants' inclusive understanding of the nation relates to the explicitly exclusive nationalism which SWAPO officials and countless supporters have articulated when rendering Namibia's liberation struggle. According to this historical narrative, presented here in its most abrasive form, Namibians are people who fought for Namibia's liberation and have remained loyal to SWAPO—not those who betrayed the struggle or those whose patriotism is suspect because, for example, they are “foreign” or “white” or “homosexual” or “RDP” (a rival political party). To her credit, Haugh acknowledges the enduring significance of such nationalist discourse in Namibia, drawing from relevant historical literature to contextualize its formation in SWAPO's exile experience (for relevant references, see below). Nevertheless, the manner in which the nationalism of Catholic youth in late 1990s Ombalantu relates to the nationalism of Namibia's SWAPO-led government, projected through an official, repeated history of the liberation struggle, remains unclear.

To explore this crucial relationship—and to consider how local nationalisms relate to nationalism in Namibia more generally—it is worth turning to two other recent texts, which delve into SWAPO's construction of Namibian history. One of these is Henning Melber's *Understanding Namibia* (2014). Melber's text is the first monograph to focus on Namibian society since independence; it draws together scholarship across various disciplines on the topic, including Melber's very substantial body of work on “the limits to liberation” in and beyond Namibia. The book, therefore, covers far more than nationalism, with chapters addressing a wide range of topics, including the United Nations' role in Namibia's political transition, the consolidation of Namibia's *de facto* one-party state, the authoritarian quality of Namibian democracy, the enduring unequal distribution of land, the extraction of national resources by elites, the growing gap between rich and poor, and the government's weak track record in promoting democratic norms through international diplomacy.

Nevertheless, nationalism in the form of historical narration is the crucial backdrop for Melber's entire analysis. As he explains, drawing from scholars tracing similar trends elsewhere in Southern Africa, especially Zimbabwe, SWAPO has constructed a “patriotic history” which presents the former liberation movement as the sole legitimate representative of the nation due to its central role in liberating fellow citizens from colonialism through the armed struggle. By presenting the nation's past in this manner, patriotic history marks a stark dichotomy between “us,” the liberators, and “them,” the enemies, obscuring a far more complex historical landscape. Moreover, this history focuses on heroism and triumph, personified in the figure of Namibia's official “Founding Father,” Sam Nujoma, while offering no space for

mourning or empathizing with those who have suffered. Since independence, SWAPO officials have reiterated this patriotic history through countless speeches, songs, symbols, and rituals, including the national anthem, the monuments and museums commemorating the liberation war, and the annual events marking Namibia's national days. As a result, this history has become the discourse upholding SWAPO's nation-building project, a project which has permitted Namibia's new elites to accumulate wealth and power, but which has not substantially improved the lives of many Namibians since independence.

Reinhart Kössler's *Namibia and Germany: Negotiating the Past* (2015) delves into the construction of national history in Namibia from another angle. As Kössler's title suggests, the overarching concern of his book is Namibian-German relations—a topic which Kössler has explored through many publications on how the German colonial period (1884–1915) has been remembered and forgotten in Germany and Namibia. Throughout the text, Kössler emphasizes the asymmetry of Namibian-German relations in the present, such that Germany's colonial era violence figures centrally in the historical consciousness of many Namibians, but yet remains peripheral to the consciousness of most Germans, whose government has avoided taking responsibility for the genocide which it perpetrated in SWA, in stark contrast to its response to the Holocaust. And yet, this Namibian-German asymmetry is compounded by a substantial asymmetry within Namibia's historical experience and national history.

As Kössler explains, German colonialism primarily impacted the southern and central regions of Namibia, wherein Germany expropriated land and deported and killed people on a vast scale, following the German government's extermination orders directed toward “the Herero” and “the Nama” as ethnic groups. By contrast, northern Namibia was largely untouched by German colonial violence and, when the North was colonized by South Africa, it was governed via a system of indirect rule, which focused on mobilizing migrant labor in Ovamboland for the colonial economy. This historical trajectory, Kössler emphasizes, not only shaped the ascendancy of SWAPO as Namibia's primary liberation movement, but also promulgated a Namibian national history focused on SWAPO's armed struggle against apartheid South Africa. As a result, the details of the early colonial period and the impact of the genocide on communities have long been pushed into the background, either diminished in their importance relative to SWAPO's liberation war or situated within a generalized history of colonialism and resistance which obscures substantial differences in regional and group experiences.

Here, as in Melber's work, one notes the power of patriotic history, and of national history more generally, to marginalize people from the nation on the basis of how they figure within a dominant narrative. Nevertheless, one of the most valuable aspects of Kössler's text is its detailed accounts of how marginalized communities assert local histories and identities within this skewed nationalist terrain.<sup>2</sup> As Kössler highlights in the second part (three

chapters) of his book, practices aimed at remembering the German colonial period are widespread among Otjiherero and Khoekhoegowab speakers in central and southern Namibia, and several groups organize annual commemorative days to remember specific events.<sup>3</sup> Although these commemorative days focus heavily on the reproduction of local communities, they are also fundamentally about making claims on the Namibian and German governments. As Kössler details, drawing from his personal attendance at these commemorative days (including the Vaalgras commemorative day in 2007 that he and I attended together), these are carefully orchestrated events, drawing on historical narrations and reenactments, public prayers, flags, and anthems to situate local histories within a national framework. In some cases, loyalty to SWAPO is also performed quite overtly as a means of locating a given community at the heart of the liberation struggle and contesting historical accounts which threaten this image. As Kössler notes, the means through which these communities present their stories to the nation are very limited in comparison to SWAPO, with its capacity to mobilize state resources, or German-speaking Namibians, who use personal wealth, education, and free time to project a version of colonial history which frequently denies the genocide and protects their privilege. Nonetheless, Kössler's discussion of memory politics in local contexts is crucial for understanding the terms on which national inclusion and exclusion is negotiated in Namibia.

Several other recent books about Namibia may also be read in terms of how communities are shaped by, and negotiate their position within, the nation via national history. Consider, for example, Akira Takada's *Narratives on San Ethnicity* (2015), an anthropological/historical study focused on the !Xun, a Ju-language San group, who today number around 1500 people and who live primarily in Owambo's Ohangwena Region. Takada presents his book primarily as an intervention in San studies and the Great Kalahari Debate, centered around "traditionalists" who have sought to reconstruct the hunter-gather past of humans through recording "pure" San culture, and "revisionists" who have presented the same San groups as a Kalahari underclass, moving in and out of hunter-gathering practices in response to shifting conditions of exploitation. By contrast, Takada draws attention to San who have been in ongoing contact with agro-pastoralists in Owambo for hundreds of years, and whose ethnic identity as !Xun emerged in the context of socio-historical relationships in this region which were not merely exploitative, but also often multidirectional and cooperative.

It follows from Takada's approach that the Namibian nation-state is relevant to the evolution of !Xun identity and, indeed, Takada addresses this topic in a fascinating third chapter, tracing the !Xun from the settlement of agro-pastoralists in Owambo through the entry of Finnish missionaries and the South African colonial government, the emergence of SWAPO, and two decades of postcolonial government. In the process, Takada draws from his research participants' stories to debunk apartheid-era myths about "the San," according to which they were overwhelmingly trackers with the South African

Defense Force (SADF), rather than involved on both sides of the struggle, including as SWAPO cadres in exile. The author also provides tantalizing glimpses into how an official national history shapes the relationship of his research participants to the nation and its resources. For example, Takada discusses a press conference shortly after independence wherein President Nujoma contextualized San involvement in the SADF in terms of colonial-era exploitation and maintained that the government would, therefore, prioritize “the development” of “the original inhabitants of Namibia” (78–9). Nevertheless, Oshiwambo-speaking neighbors of the !Xun at Ekoka complained that it was unfair for the government to provide the San with farm allocations, because unlike them, the San had not contributed to the liberation struggle (79–80). Although Takada does not work with these incidents to offer theoretical insights into nationalism, his anecdotes suggest the extent to which marginal communities with dubious struggle credentials are reliant on SWAPO’s paternal support if they are to benefit from government resources.

Vilho Amukwaya Shigwedha’s recent book, *The Aftermath of the Cassinga Massacre* (2017) touches on how a different group of Namibians relates to the nation via national history. Unlike Takada’s research participants, who are marginal to Namibian public life by almost any measure, Shigwedha’s are at the center of the national narrative. On May 4, 1978, they were among the several thousand Namibians residing at SWAPO’s Cassinga camp in southern Angola, when the SADF conducted an aerial assault, resulting in the death and/or wounding of well over 1000 Namibians—the vast majority of whom had no access to weapons or military training. Since then, Namibians have gathered annually to commemorate May 4 as “Cassinga Day” and thereby to remember the brutality of the apartheid South African regime and SWAPO’s triumph over it. Nevertheless, the experiences of those who survived the Cassinga attack and suffered in its aftermath have not been carefully examined, let alone addressed. Drawing from his doctoral thesis on the same topic (2011), Shigwedha highlights the disjuncture between the Cassinga survivors’ oral testimonies and various modes of historical representation, including archival photographs, perpetrators’ written accounts, and even the testimonies themselves when they are translated from Oshiwambo to English and detached from the wounded bodies of those who articulated them. In turn, this disjuncture magnifies the survivors’ experiences of suffering, especially when perpetrators insist on presenting a heroic narrative and obscuring the havoc which their past actions continue to wreak on human lives—a point illustrated through Shigwedha’s long and wrenching citations from research participants.

Shigwedha’s book speaks powerfully to the unfinished business of “liberation” in Namibia and offers a valuable riposte to those who still wish to justify the apartheid regime’s violence at Cassinga and elsewhere. Nevertheless, Shigwedha barely considers how his research relates to Namibian nationalism—a highly relevant context to his study. As he notes in passing, Cassinga is “politically remembered” in Namibia and “the notion of the



‘heroic sacrifice’” at Cassinga leaves Cassinga survivors’ ongoing suffering “unresolved” (72, 123). Nevertheless, Shigwedha does not analyze how political memory in Namibia works, and he either ignores or misreads the arguments of several scholars who do so. For example, Shigwedha frames his chapter on the Cassinga mass grave photo in apparent opposition to my argument that SWAPO used this and other images to present Cassinga’s “refugees” as generic victims of apartheid violence (see Williams 2015:44–47). Rather than consider how my argument may overlap with his own, Shigwedha paraphrases it inaccurately, dismisses it, and then makes a similar argument without considering the extent to which Namibia’s national narrative conceals personal histories of Cassinga (21–22). Similarly, in Chapter Six, Shigwedha maintains that “reconciliation” in Namibia is a misled government policy which protects the perpetrators of apartheid-era crimes from both prosecution and truth-telling and compels Cassinga survivors to lead lives of “endless suffering and anger” (103). In making this point, however, Shigwedha does not consider a substantial body of literature tracing how SWAPO’s reconciliation policy relates to the mass human rights abuses which the liberation movement perpetrated on its exile members (Dobell 1997; Leys & Saul 2003; Hunter 2010; Kornes 2013; Williams 2015:185–214). Thus, here again, SWAPO officials’ construction of a heroic national narrative, sanitized of inconvenient histories, is highly relevant to Shigwedha’s study, but he does not address this issue.

“Lubango,” the site of SWAPO’s exile detention camps in southern Angola and the great taboo of Namibian history, is the primary focus of Oiva Angula’s memoir, *SWAPO Captive* (2018). Other authors have tackled this topic, including Pastor Siegfried Groth, whose book, *Namibia: The Wall of Silence*, generated substantial controversy in Namibia after it was published in 1995, and several scholars who have reconstructed historical developments in SWAPO’s Lubango camps and analyzed how they figure in Namibian memory politics (see, e.g., Leys & Saul 1995; Hunter 2008; Trehwela 2009; Kornes 2013; Williams 2015). Nevertheless, Angula’s text is the first book-length memoir published by a Lubango ex-detainee. It is, therefore, a significant publication, providing a detailed insider’s perspective on what happened at Lubango and why it is important for Namibians to remember this history today.

The opening chapters of Angula’s book resemble many other exile narratives in and beyond Namibia, tracing the author’s early life experiences, his first involvement in national politics (including the Namibian student protests of 1976, a topic which has received little attention), and his decision to join a liberation movement in exile. Angula’s discussion of what he encountered in exile strikes a very different note than other heroic exile narratives, however. Upon arriving in SWAPO’s Angolan camps at the age of nineteen, Angula found a more closed and intolerant SWAPO there than the SWAPO which he had experienced as a teenager in Namibia. Whereas his SWAPO mentors in Namibia had been passionate and inspiring figures who permitted young cadres to develop their own political views, in the camps he



was compelled to repeat dogma and witnessed intolerance toward anyone whose thought or behavior was perceived as “different.” Nevertheless, Angula did appreciate the skills that he learned in military training and the comradeship that he experienced living with other SWAPO members. And, as a well-educated young recruit, he quickly advanced through the ranks of SWAPO’s military wing, receiving special training in Bulgaria and Hungary and serving the movement in Angola as a political commissar. Then, in October 1984, Angula’s fate changed dramatically when members of SWAPO’s security apparatus arrested and tortured him until he was compelled “to yield to [their] fantasies” about his alleged work as a spy for South Africa (110). Thereafter, he was imprisoned with hundreds of other alleged spies in underground pits until May 1989, when 199 survivors were released and later repatriated to Namibia as part of the negotiated settlement preceding Namibian independence.

In the course of presenting his personal story, Angula also offers historical explanations for what happened at Lubango, which, to a great extent, overlap with the scholarly literature. For example, Angula points to the significance of SWAPO’s crisis in Zambia in 1976, wherein President Nujoma and “his self-aggrandizing style of leadership” triumphed over other SWAPO members requesting democratic reforms (60–62). This event in SWAPO’s internal development, combined with SWAPO’s military setbacks in Angola during the 1980s and the utter dependency of Namibians on SWAPO officials in the camps, created the conditions for the liberation movement’s security apparatus to purge anyone whose loyalty appeared suspect. In addition to such explanations, Angula also offers insight into how he and other detainees created meaning out of their torture and detention—permitting the reader to observe realms of experience which more distant analytical pieces have yet to present. Here Angula’s postscript deserves special mention, for it highlights how his will to live has become tied to his will to remember “Namibian patriots” who disappeared in exile and whom the nation’s leaders are determined to forget (163–66).<sup>4</sup>

Of the texts reviewed here, Angula’s touches most poignantly on the costs of an exclusive Namibian nationalism—a nationalism whose power to distinguish loyal cadres from spies was a matter of life and death for exiled Namibians and still casts a long shadow over Namibian society as a whole. Nevertheless, as these studies collectively highlight, nationalism in Namibia is neither uniform nor static. Rather, it continues to unfold, as people articulate their views of what it means to be Namibian at particular sites and moments in time. A handful of SWAPO leaders have heavily shaped the conversation, mobilizing state resources to project a patriotic history of Namibia’s liberation from colonial rule and to dismiss rival claims about the nation and its past. They do not, and cannot, however, control all views of the Namibian nation.

Future research should map more fully the diversity of these views and analyze more closely how specific forms of nationalism, located in place and time, relate to a dominant, state-sponsored perspective. Moreover, research

should track the social processes through which history—a primary medium for national dialogue in Namibia and elsewhere—is produced and contested. Although an established literature exists about SWAPO’s patriotic history, far less is understood about this history’s construction and evolution over time or about how ordinary citizens work with this narrative in their everyday lives. Such research would not only nuance scholarship on nationalism in Namibia, but also contribute, in some small way, to that foundational Namibian dream: “solidarity, freedom, justice.”

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## Notes

1. Namibia held parliamentary and presidential elections in 2019. For the first time since 1994, SWAPO dipped below the two-thirds majority required to amend the Constitution, with 65.5 percent of the national vote. Moreover, electoral support for Namibian President Hage Geingob precipitously declined from 87 percent to 56.3 percent. For insightful commentary on these election results, posted in their immediate aftermath, see Reinhart Kössler's piece: <https://theconversation.com/swapos-unassailable-position-shattered-what-next-for-namibia-128241>.
2. Kössler is not alone in highlighting how marginalized Namibian communities seek national recognition through local memory practices. See, e.g., Williams 2009; Becker 2011; Kornes 2013; Williams 2015.
3. Khoekhoegowab refers to a widely spoken language in southern and central Namibia. The language is associated with the Namibian ethnic categories "Nama" and "Damara" as well as other more localized ethnic identities.
4. According to the estimates of the Breaking the Wall of Silence Movement, a Namibian human rights organization which Oiva Angula chairs, between 1000 and 2000 Namibian disappeared in SWAPO's exile camps.