

Martha Akawa (2014), *The Gender Politics of the Namibian Liberation Struggle*, Basel: Basler Afrika Bibliographien, ISBN 978-3-905 758-26-9, 230 pp.

This monograph, originally submitted as a dissertation to the philosophical faculty of the University of Basel in 2009, fills an important gap in the literature on Namibia. It presents the results of genuinely empirical research based on interviews conducted among Namibian women involved in the struggle for independence. They share their ordeals and insights with the author concerning their life in exile with particular emphasis on their experiences in the refugee camps in Zambia and Angola. The frank conversations include issues hitherto largely seen as taboo, ones not often – if at all – presented in the public domain.

These women's voices put the heroic narratives of the official patriotic history into a different light and add a perspective that has, to a great extent, been ignored. Their accounts contrast with the romanticized political propaganda of an emancipated heroine carrying the torch of the anticolonial struggle, as illustrated by the posters and pamphlets put out by the national liberation movement, SWAPO, as documented in Chapter 1. This chapter also pays tribute to the few popular and well-known women protagonists by portraying them as their struggle rightly merits, drawing a more elaborate female face for the movement than the one presented in past propaganda. The majority of women had remained nameless and faceless and have been characterized as having played second fiddle to the male "heroes" of the struggle. The strength of this book lies in how it differs from most popular narratives of the liberation movement by focusing on a group that has been marginalized and ignored by history.

The accounts offer insights into the often-harsh conditions to which women were exposed in the refugee camps (Chapter 3). Notwithstanding such realities, some reminiscences about the "good old days" surfaced in the memories. As Akawa notes, "Listening to the hardships and some gruesome stories about the camps, I was surprised to hear that some respondents today miss the exile camp. [...] Some even wished to live that life again" (119). As she explains, the camps were, despite all suffering, safe havens that provided a spirit of comradeship, sisterhood and togetherness. SWAPO was the family providing the means for survival and basic protection. But, as is also mentioned, at the same time this setting also promoted a mentality of dependency.

The promiscuity that characterized sexual behaviour in the camps and in exile offered to women a relative freedom – one beyond traditions

at home – to have premarital sex, out-of-wedlock children and children from different fathers, which like “other issues concerning sexuality were not viewed with shame and disgrace in exile. However, these issues were heavily stigmatized in communities inside Namibia and are still stigmatized in post-independent Namibia” (121). In contrast to the relative liberties in a foreign environment, back home, after independence, the perception was prevalent “that women who were in exile did not fight the enemy, they only fought *iota yongali*” (123) – which translates into “war lying on one’s back”, implying that women had sex instead of engaging in the anticolonial struggle by other means while abroad.

The role of women in satisfying the sexual desires of men was indeed a substantial and prominent feature in the camps, as the interviews reveal (Chapter 4). But these physical interactions with men were often far from based on consent and tantamount to rape. Women and girls were often considered as mere bodily objects and the property of the male fighters. Higher-ranking officials in the movement were said to have abused their authority and demanded sexual favours. Complaints (if launched at all) were often ignored, whether immediately or having been brought to the administrative offices at a given men’s camp. As a respondent stated: “The main aim was to fight for independence, other things were secondary” (147). As a result, rape and sexual abuse were often taken for granted as a common feature of camp life and a sacrifice if not a service women were required to provide without complaints.

At the same time, Namibian women were considered only as Namibian property. While men were allowed to enter into relations with women from the neighbourhood, “when women were caught or alleged to be dating foreign men, they could be in big trouble. It was a transgression and severely punishable. [...] Allowing only men to marry foreign nationals and not allowing women to date foreign men or subjecting them to punishment amounted to total control of female sexuality” (144).

In a thoughtful epilogue (195-198), Akawa summarizes the contradictions and double standards to which women were exposed in exile as well as in independent Namibia as regards the limits to their liberation and the gendered bias they were and still are experiencing in their daily life. While the book is exclusively a descriptive account and lacks almost any theoretical contextualization and comparative aspects, its strength is in its adding of credible new evidence and insights into what has been, to a large extent, a matter of concern only in so-called “dissident literature”, which criticizes SWAPO for its repressive structures in exile from the

perspectives of those who had been treated as traitors.<sup>1</sup> It thereby gives additional credibility to the critical assessments concerning the narrow limitations of the emancipatory project.

As the author, now heading the Department of Geography, History and Environmental Studies at the University of Namibia in Windhoek, concludes, since independence “the pretentious pronouncements of gender equality have not been translated into the effective implementation of radical measures to effect gender equality and equity” (194). It remains to be seen to what extent this might change following the implementation of a political decision taken by SWAPO to have 50 per cent female representation in parliament, whereby half of the members of parliament elected in November 2014 and sworn in on 21 March 2015 will be women. At least, one might argue, after twenty-five years the contribution by women to the liberation struggle and nation-building has gained somewhat adequate formal recognition. But in the light of the ongoing gendered violence of shocking dimensions and brutality, where the horrific abuse of girls and women remains a daily occurrence, the author has reason to diagnose: “Even twenty years after the end of the war, women’s bodies remain battlefields” (28).

■ Henning Melber

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1 See, as the latest sobering account, Samson Ndeikwila (2014), *The Agony of Truth*, Windhoek: Kuiseb.