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IINA SOIRI

The Radical Motherhood

Namibian Women's Independence Struggle

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1. Foreword

This book is based on a Master's thesis which I was obliged to do in order to establish my educational status after running for several years between university and developmental NGOs, firstly in Finland and then in Southern Africa. Thus I have to admit that the first reason for involving myself in this study was highly practical.

But to study Ovambo women—which means my friends and colleagues—was an idea which I first strictly refused as it felt like getting academic merit at the expense of other people. I felt like infiltrating something which was too sacred and too personal to be incorporated into scientific research. And secondly: I was studying international politics and even though academic borders can be stretched they do not tolerate anything! But again—like so many times before—the Ovambo ladies made me change my opinion and this is the result.

Those wonderful Ovambo ladies managed to convince me that doing this study was also in their interest. It would be the first time after independence that their life histories would be documented. This study would be the first opportunity for them to make their voices heard and to tell the rest of the world why they acted like they did during the independence struggle. I was also told that by doing this type of study I could also challenge the traditional approach in international politics and write people's history. Well, sincerely hope that this book can at least in a modest way satisfy their expectations. For me that would be the best reward.

Furthermore I had great fun doing this study contrary to my former beliefs about scientific work and I learned a lot. This study could not have been possible without the Green Namibia Community Project in which I worked more than two years and its members, the small but powerful Emma Shivute, the best and the most beautiful saleswoman Hilia Imalwa, the wise and hard-working Kuku Alisa and all the rest. I thank them all as well as all the other women who shared their time and experiences with me as informants. My young feminist assistant Eva Maria Shivute provided me not only with linguistic help but also with many other practical ideas. A special thanks to her. My son Joseph Benhard taught me how to be mother for an Ovambo boy; a lesson for life. And last but

not least I thank my sister Rosalia Shifotoka, without whom I would not have survived in the jungle of traditions and beliefs of the Ovambo people.

The Espoo Namibia Committee, an NGO in Finland and my employer in Namibia was most supportive and helpful for this research work. Their assistance is highly appreciated. I also want to express my gratitude to Helsinki University Council which provided me with a travel grant and to the Nordic Africa Institute for the library grant and the publication of this study.

Tangi unene, ou li nawa!

Ina Soiri

Helsinki, August 1995

2. Introduction

The purpose of this work is to study the participation of the Northern Namibian Ovambo women in the Namibian independence struggle and their situation after Namibian independence. The study aims to present how and more importantly why women in the Northern areas participated in the struggle which led to the independent Namibia. The women are studied as a social group whose motivations and reasons to join the struggle are seen as a consequence of their changing situation during colonialism, apartheid, war and gradual modernisation of their traditional society. The study aims to find out the motivating forces which were behind the women's participation in the struggle. The traditional Ovambo society, the impacts of the South African colonisation, the ideas of the liberation movement and the influence of the international women's movement are all presented and evaluated in the course of the study.

This study was motivated by the important role held by women in the Namibian independence struggle. The important role is highlighted in a few recent studies which have been done during this short period of Namibia's independence.

*Activism by women inside Namibia was indispensable to the liberation movement. Women, especially in the North, played a crucial role in harboring SWAPO members and fighters, providing intelligence, and assisting with the storage and movement of weaponry around the country.*¹

The other important motivation for this study is to find out and present how women themselves saw the Namibian situation during the years of colonialism and liberation struggle. It aims to present women's perceptions on the political conflict which was a target of the world's attention for years as a unique case of prolonged occupation and illegal administration. This study on Namibian women is important because the understanding of the women's motivation behind their actions is a precondition in improving their life in the post-colonial situation through different development activities.

¹ Sparks and Green (1992), p 142.

Thirdly the study aims to present the position held by women—especially Ovambo women—in the post-independent Namibia. This part of the study is not comprehensive but outlines some of the ideas which women have in the new society. It presents the women's movements in today's Namibia and compares their achievement to the goals adopted during the liberation struggle.

Namibia was first colonised by Germany and then by South Africa. The Namibian population organised itself to resist the illegal occupation of Namibia and fought for the total independence of Namibia. The liberation struggle was led by the South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO), which was recognised as an authentic representative of Namibia by the United Nations General Assembly and the Organisation of African Unity (OAU). The liberation struggle was supported by the majority of Namibians. After many years of resistance by the Namibians inside and outside the country supported by the international community Namibia finally achieved its independence in 1990 in the negotiated settlement supervised by the United Nations.

3. How this study was done

Theoretical framework

Studying the Namibian liberation struggle from the point of view of its individual actors demands a new approach in order to avoid too simplified an interpretation of the subject. Studying women and studying non-western cultures themselves already demand a perspective, that is sensitive to the subject's own concepts and viewpoints different from the conventional theoretical assumptions. This is clearly pointed out in the new feminist research and development theory criticism. This work tries to combine those two in a new manner in the field of international politics.

Women have been almost completely ignored in Namibian historiography.¹ The same can be said about all the other research concerning Namibia. This work tries as its own modest part to cover that gap by taking the women as a core subject of study. It combines the approaches offered by third world feminism, new development theories and the dichotomy between nationalism and ethnicity. It also considers "politics" as a broader concept than the traditional sectoral western meaning has applied. Politics is seen as a way of life, which affects all individuals and shapes their actions but which individuals themselves can also be regarded as having impact on.²

The women are studied as a social group whereby the traditional background of women, the impact of colonialism and the ideologies of the liberation movement (nationalism, socialism, feminism) are undertaken as important forces behind their actions. Other aspects such as ethnicity are brought into the picture. The much debated question of ethnicity can be seen as a newly-emerging factor in international politics, not only concerning Africa and other less-developed regions. Ethnicity is not a fossilized determination but a

¹ Mbuende (1986), p 111.

² See e.g. Palonen Kari (1992), *Politikointi—Politisointi—Politiikka*. Tulkinta Politiikkapeliä ajatusmuodoista.

living presence produced and driven by material and historical forces¹ and an important part of what many Africans are.²

When studying women, one is also drawn into the areas of feminism and women studies. Feminist theory uplifts the meaning of gender as a determining factor when studying social and political life. The Ovambo women are studied in the light of the international women's movement and the ideas it is promoting. The approaches offered by feminism are debated during the study. The debate goes on by examining whether the participation of the women can be seen as a women's struggle, motivated by oppression on the basis of their gender and ideas of equality between the sexes.

Political science is being accused of western orientation and the same applies to women studies and feminism. Feminist social research has tried to prove the generality of women's oppression. Anthropology's contribution to feminist research has been to show that women's situations can be rather different, according to the cultural context.³

The latter is very much emphasised by the Third World women themselves, who are asking "what type of liberation do we want? The liberation that rich women and American women want? Or the other type, which consists of women being respected as human beings..."⁴ Former perceptions on male and female as different and incommensurable tend to be replaced by perceptions that women and men are different but unequal. This type of thinking is the result of influence from colonial and postcolonial Western ideologies most efficiently transmitted through both Christianity, Western law and administration—lately also through foreign donor organisations. As a result women tend increasingly to be measured according to a scale of male values.⁵ Furthermore the national liberation movement has defined women with reference to patriarchal ideology as sisters, mothers and wives, and women's self-perceptions have often been shaped by these constructs. Within these disempowering statuses, however, women often developed new roles of authority and strength. These identities differ from the conventional passivity and silence of the Western middle-class conceptions of sisterhood,

¹ Ake (1993), p 1.

² *Ibid*, p 13.

³ Moore (1988).

⁴ Davies (1983,) p 42.

⁵ von Bulow (1991), p 7.

motherhood and wifehood.¹ Women struggled alongside the men as empowered even though their perceptions could not be classified as "feminist".

Especially in societies organised on a racial basis feminism is almost entirely absent from the social fabric. Women's organisations in South Africa must be viewed in terms of this dichotomy which inhibits sex or simple class fraternities and reacts against feminist coalitions. Even when women focus on problems peculiar to women, they interpret them according to some malfunctioning of the social process rather than blame the men.² The same applies to Namibia. The discourse on gender has put increasing emphasis on how to allow for and conceptualise the differences found amongst women. This means that greater attention is being paid to the many complex ways that gender combines with class, caste, race, ethnic identity.³

This study aims to approach the women not as a homogeneous group, but as a group whose interests are influenced by gender, class and kinship creating a complex pattern of mutual support as well as oppression between women and women and between men and women.⁴ The consciousness of unequal gender relations in Namibia was present in women's lives but it remains to be seen how much it was a precondition of participating in the struggle or if it was a result of the ideas accepted when involved in the struggle.

One can also argue, if the approaches of classical political science and the western-oriented international politics are providing any possibilities at all to understand the events in the so-called Third World, or the actions of the people from totally different cultures. Especially in the area of development studies, many approaches have been criticised as western-biased, ethnocentric and unsuitable in their concepts and methods.

A few researchers with an alternative approach have paid attention especially to the language and concepts used in development studies. They deal with development as a particular cast of mind. Development is much more than just a socio-economic endeavour; it is a perception which models reality, a myth which comforts societies and a fantasy which unleashes passions.⁵ The failure of development projects in the Third World and the inaccuracy of the

¹ Lewis (1992), p 45.

² Davies (1987), p 20.

³ Wilson (1993), p 12.

⁴ White (1984), p 3.

⁵ Sachs, Wolfgang (ed) (1992), p 1.

theories of development research are demanding new alternatives when approaching the Third World countries. There is a need to take the diversity of different cultures into account, and to involve the citizens of the Third World more actively in planning, implementing and studying the development of their societies and environment.

Keeping this in mind, the approach and methods used in this study intend to give a great role to the actors involved, turning them from research objects into active subjects. The participatory methods are seen as a prerequisite to understand and explain the events during the independence struggle from "inside".

Finally even though studying the women's role in the Namibian liberation struggle may have been motivated one may remain with the question: why is this study concentrating on a certain area of Namibia and on a certain group of Namibian women?

One reason for this is definitely the overall limitations of this type of work. To cover all Namibian women would be a task for a much wider study. The reasons to limit the work to especially Ovambo women is, first of all, them being at the core of the liberation movement in many ways. Ovambos are the biggest population group in Namibia. Their culture is quite homogeneous and the area of inhabitancy has remained the same for centuries. Most of the Ovambos themselves feel that they belong to the Ovambo community, so their group identity is strong. The most severe effects of the liberation struggle were felt in the northern areas of Namibia, among others in Ovamboland. SWAPO was initiated by Ovambo migrant workers and was long regarded as an Ovambo party. This is not to undermine the importance of any other Namibian women—or men. Neither is it to be seen as following the artificial "divide and rule" policy in Namibia, which was the main approach of the supporters of apartheid. Besides, the "Namibian" identity is still very weak which is understandable taking into consideration the young age of the nation. Concentrating on a certain ethnic group in my study is based on the identity of the people themselves.

The Fieldwork

The two main methods used for this study are in-depth interviews and participant observation. These methods are more often used in anthropology or when studying human cultures than in the area of international politics.¹ There are, however, a few reasons for using these methods in this study in particular.

Namibia became independent only five years ago. Before that Namibia was under apartheid and relatively closed for outsiders. The voice of the people inside Namibia was strictly silenced. Most of the studies are done in exile, and from exile not based on the experiences of the people inside Namibia. The research also tends to be partial to either one of the parties in conflict, the South African government which occupied Namibia or the liberation movement led by SWAPO. After independence there have been a lot of socio-economic surveys conducted in the area to serve the needs of various development policies, but these often lack analysis of the situation. Some Namibian researches have studied the women in Namibia, but mostly from the organisational point of view.² The best way of gathering information from present day Namibia was therefore through empirical research.

When I formulated this study I soon realised that the most suitable methods to use would be qualitative and participatory. When focusing on Ovambo women, who would be the best people to refer to? When finding out motivations and reasons for actions concerning such events, the only sources available would be oral, the stories of the people who were involved. I was working and living in Ovamboland for two years between 1991–1993 and am familiar with the area and its people. I had a chance to visit Ovamboland once again between December 1993 and March 1994, thus it became practically possible to conduct the field work.

In-depth Interviews

Firstly I used in-depth interviews. I was not only asking women's opinions and facts about their lives but also feelings, perceptions and ideas. That kind of information I could only get through a dialogue, which was not structured but flexible according to the situation. I

¹ See Alasuutari (1993); Grönfors (1982); Mäkelä (1990).

² See e.g. Becker (1993)a and Hubbard & Solomons as well as Mamozai (1989).

used *the life story method*, where each woman interviewed would tell her own personal history. After that the interview continued by me asking a few questions from the checklist made before so that all the areas were covered.

The life story method can be invaluable in deciphering constructs used consciously or unconsciously by those conducting the study and those being studied. I found it necessary to use this method, which would let the Ovambo women express the ideas in their own way with their own concepts which would reduce the danger of defining their actions through my own western-oriented concepts.

Before I started the interviews I listed a few characteristics which I thought of as describing Ovambo women's lives and made a checklist of questions, which were both tested in group discussions with some Ovambo women. I did not decide how many women to interview but decided to use a so-called snowball method. The women themselves told me who I should talk to. I only kept in mind that those women covered all the different characteristics which I had listed: they would differ from the point of view of age, education, social position, political affiliation, background, economic factors and attitudes to family and children. I also tried to find personalities, who are interesting in their personal histories. Then I conducted test interviews with my friends, who have all been in exile to find out how they told their story.

I can speak some oshivambo, the vernacular language of Ovambos, but it was clear that it was not enough to be able to manage the interviews. So I needed an interpreter. I had a few people in mind, and one of them, a young student studying education was available. She had been in exile herself, knew the area and the culture and to my positive surprise was very interested in women's questions. And what was most important she was known to me and she had known me for two years. I appointed her as my assistant.

The geographical area where the interviews were conducted was mostly the central areas of former Ovamboland, nowadays called Oshana and Ohangwena region. The area is a mixture of a semi-urban and rural area. The other area of study was the border area with Angola, belonging to Ohangwena region. The area was selected because the effects of the war were most clearly experienced by the people who live there. Some interviews were done in Windhoek, the capital of Namibia.

In the course of the fieldwork I never experienced any problem or mistrust from the people I interviewed. The reasons for this could be

that I was relatively well known in the area. Ovamboland is a small community and it is very friendly to people who are considered friends. I had worked in the area, set up my own project, created my own social relationships. If I did not know the person I was interviewing before, I was introduced by a common friend or a trusted person.

I was also surprised how ready people were to be interviewed. Very few of them were suspicious of my tape recorder or reluctant to talk. I thought this was because Namibia was in a period of positive development and people understood that their participation was welcomed. I never rewarded anybody interviewed or promised anything. In spite of that people had the idea that their contribution would assist the welfare of the area in one way or another.

The interviews were done in separate phases and in different forms resulting in 24 one hour cassette tapes. Altogether 25 women were interviewed in 23 different sessions. Three women were interviewed more than once. Seven women were interviewed only in groups of two, 17 were interviewed alone and 1 both alone and in a group. The interpreter was present at all but nine interviews. The conditions of the interviews differed a lot. Some interviews were done at the work place or at the home of the informant, some at my home and some at another neutral place. The purpose of the interview, the aims of the study and the possibility of the interviews being kept confidential was always stated in the beginning of the session. Only three women expressed the wish that they wanted to be interviewed anonymously.

The women varied in age, social background, education and profession. The oldest person was older than 70 years, the youngest hardly 20 years old. Most of them had children but few were married. All of the women were born or lived most of their lives in Ovamboland (except the years in exile). All had a farming background. Their education varied from a doctorate to no formal schooling at all. The women had professions such as farmer, senior government official, teacher, student, businesswoman, manager, nurse, policewoman etc. The list of interviews and discussions is found in the appendix.

Participant Observation

The other method I used in gathering information was participant observation. Participant observation is defined as "research, which is characterised by intensive interaction between the researcher and the

object in the social environment of the latter. During that time the material is gathered systematically"¹. I lived and worked in Ovamboland among the people I was studying. I kept a field diary, where I noted the events, ideas and comments which arose during the period of my second stay in Ovamboland. I made it clear to them that this time I had come there to study and told them what I was doing it for. Since I had worked there for two years in an environmental project I was known to many. During these four months I also worked in that same project. I felt a bit unsure whether it was ethically right to make notes while I was still seen in another role. But I just decided to always make it clear when I wanted to note something. Sometimes it happened, that when socialising and gossiping with my friends I asked them if I could use some of the facts they told me. Very few ever refused. In order to get a more balanced picture of the life in Ovamboland I also used my diaries from the earlier stay.

Secondary Data and Analysis

To support the interviews I gathered information on Namibian history, Ovambo culture, the socio-economic situation and so on. I also followed carefully the political developments in the country. I also tried to gather inclusively all the information concerning women's issues and women's movements in Namibia. The project I was working on before was run together with the SWAPO Women's Council, so those structures were familiar to me. I visited women's organisations and talked to their activists.

I have selected the literature on the basis of it reflecting the analysis of the situation made by the people in Namibia themselves. The literature used should give a good understanding of why black Namibians fought the liberation struggle.

When conducting the analysis on the basis of the empirical material the interviews are not used imaginatively to convey wider societal phenomena and change or form general theories about the subject. They are analysed as powerful data telling about the women's perceptions in the light of the theories introduced earlier. Women are analysed as a social group and the interviews are seen more as representing Ovambo women in general than certain individuals. The process goes both ways: the material is used as a testing

¹ Bogdan and Taylor, 1975 p 5 ref. in Grönfors (1982) translated by IS.

ground for the general theories drawn from the Namibian situation and the liberation struggle in particular.

The material gathered here is analysed with the purpose of describing and explaining some patterns of the Ovambo women's behaviour in the light of certain specific historical circumstances. In what ways this particular study can be generalised to describe women's political participation will be tested. As argued previously, women are not an homogeneous group and their circumstances vary a lot according to cultural and situational factors. As such this is a case-study, basically, but with the intention of looking in more general terms at women, liberation and political behaviour.

4. Ovambo Woman—The Mother of the Community

The purpose of this chapter is to present the Namibian history from the point of view of women and especially Ovambo women. Most importantly it tries to describe the changing life of women in Namibia during different periods of Namibian history. A lot of emphasis is put on the traditional Ovambo society because, as will be shown later, it has had and still has a great impact on women's lives and is an important factor in defining women's position.

The Precolonial Namibia and Ovambo Communities

The oldest inhabitants of Namibia, as in the rest of southern Africa, are the nomadic San. During the various migration periods different communities belonging to the Bantu people arrived in the territory at present known as Namibia (Hereros, Ovambos and groups inhabiting Kavango and Caprivi areas). Various Nama clans settled in southern Namibia, the Orlams migrating from the Cape during the early nineteenth century. The Hereros who settled in the central and north-western parts of the territory were pastoralists. The Damaras and Namas also lived on the produce of cattle, goats and sheep, and the Damaras were skilled hunters. The various Ovambo communities who settled in the northern parts of Namibia extending into what is now southern Angola in the 15th century were mostly cultivators and pastoralists. Communities in the Kavango and Caprivi area caught and ate fish.¹

Ovambo Society and Economy

The various Ovambo communities in the north of Namibia were made up of seven groups with different but associated languages and shared common cultural characteristics. They possessed some cattle and a few goats. The main means of subsistence, however, was cultivation on the fertile, river plains, although this was a small area

¹ Katjavivi (1988), p 1-2.

for a large population. In these societies the chiefs exercised greater control over their subjects than in the rest of the country. The family was, however, the unit of production, with men being responsible for stock herding, heavy agricultural work and most crafts. Women were responsible for cultivation, fishing, domestic work and a few crafts.¹

The basic economic and social unit of the Ovambo society is "gumbo", the homestead.² The gumbo structure is composed of several huts, separated from each other by a wooden or millet-stalk palisade. Most writings about Ovambo social and political organisation tend to confuse or apply loosely the word village as parallel to the gumbo. From its structure, one can see that the Ovambo gumbo is different from the village, not only by the complexity of its structure but also by its occupants. The gumbo occupants are blood-related kin. Each gumbo is usually composed of a husband as a head, wife/ wives in the case of polygamy and their children. The gumbo has become a sign of permanent settlement in the region which has laid not only the economic basis of the community but also the basis of social relationship through cooperation which exists between different gumbos.³ Gumbos are located separately from each other surrounded by the fields, belonging to that particular gumbo.

The Ovambo society could best be understood through a kinship relations model. A boy/girl child is born into the society as a product of two different clans. Residential unity is maintained between the husband and his family, since it is traditional that a boy and his wife have to stay with his parents after marriage for a certain period, while he is preparing for the construction of his gumbo. The social integration within the clan does not disintegrate through marriage or distant residence: a woman does not become a member of her husband's clan by virtue of marriage, neither does this happen to their children. This bi-clan relationship can be distinguished by the fact that since Ovambo society is matrilineal, children were never members of their fathers clan.⁴ The matrilineage meant that the main supporter of the children was the mother. The role of the father was, however, not totally unimportant.

¹ Moorsom, Richard (1973) Colonisation and Proletarianisation p 15 ref. in Katjavivi (1988), p 3.

² Hjort af Ornäs (1987), p 13.

³ Williams (1988), p 45-47.

⁴ Williams (1988) p 51-52.

All but two Ovambo communities were kingdoms. The king came from the royal clan, whose members were more highly respected than others.¹ The matrilineage also meant that because the royal linkage was maintained by the system of succession, the deceased king was succeeded by his younger brother or his sister's son.² Women could become rulers as well, but it very seldom happened.

The king was an absolute monarch around whom the system of social life revolved. Together with his officials, this clan i.e. the royal family formed the upper class of the society, holding power over the ordinary subjects. Those in political power usually also controlled the means of economic production—either by virtue of their office or by force—and some members of the ruling class also exercised spiritual authority in society. The king is usually described in European sources as a despot ruling his subjects with an iron hand. It is reasonable to question the picture the sources have painted about the rulers' power, however, as the missionaries and other authors had a distinctly preconceived European concept of royal power which they applied in their interpretation of African society. As the supreme authority, the king was of vital importance for the existence of the whole polity.³ The king governed his community with the aid of his counsellors, who gave advice to the king concerning e.g. political-administrative and juridical matters. The king was not bound by the decisions of the council although it was politically wise for him to listen to them. The king could at any time change and replace the counsellors. The communities were divided into smaller administrative areas or districts governed by a headman who was appointed by the king. They ensured that the king's interest was observed by the community. Districts were composed of homesteads; in large districts there were about twenty homesteads.⁴

The Ovambo institutions of kingship sprang out of the traditional social structure enshrined in the clan system. The household, under the clan structure, became the first nucleus of the Ovambo kingship institution, being responsible for production for both domestic consumption and the tribute to the Kingdom. Hence, the kingdom emerged out of a high degree of economic and social organisation, to

¹ Eirola (1992), p 45.

² Williams (1988), p 51.

³ Eirola (1992), p 45-46.

⁴ Siiskonen(1990), p 46-47.

which the family and the clan contributed through shaping its social, religious, political and economic elements.¹

The land in Ovambo communities was communally owned though it was regarded as the property of the King. The King did not sell the land as such and received payment for usufruct rights. The land always reverted back to the King after the death of the head of the family who had paid for it. A new payment had to be made if the family of the deceased wished to continue using the land.²

The Ovambo economy consisted of subsistence agriculture. Agriculture in Ovambo societies was pursued with individual homesteads as its basis.³ Production in Ovamboland is however a social phenomenon. Neighbouring homesteads assist each other in agricultural work, thus strengthening group relations.⁴ This principle of reciprocity is still common among the Ovambo communities, as it is important in most non-western cultures and at the heart of African society and culture.⁵

The Status of Women in Ovambo Societies

There is a disagreement about the status of the women in the societies of precolonial Namibia.⁶ The Ovambo history is a history of men, which is a common case in any history. One can, however, see signs of the powerful women in the Ovambo kingdoms "behind the scenes" especially in the higher ranks of the society. In the matrilineal kingly clans the women were very important and exercised a lot of power.⁷ References to the powerful women in the king's family can also be found in the old missionary stories.⁸ One must keep in mind that Ovambo communities were matrilineal and especially in the case of dispute over the inheritance of the crown mothers this was of great importance.

The status of women depends a lot on the point of view from which it is being approached. Ndeutala Hishongwa states in her

¹ Williams (1991), p 101.

² A remark by K. Mbuende in *Studying the Northern Namibian Past*, 1986 p 37.

³ Salokoski (1992), p 126.

⁴ Williams (1991), p 50.

⁵ Foreword by Marja-Liisa Swantz in Hakulinen (1992), p 7-8.

⁶ Sparks and Green (1992), p 141.

⁷ Salokoski (1992), p 165. See also Eirola e.g. p 57 about the mother of the heir who attempted to seize the throne.

⁸ Närhi, O.E. (1929), p 93.

book "Women of Namibia" that women played a very important role in the society under the customary and the traditional law. Although they did not directly take part in the public discussions of political and legal affairs of the society, they were always consulted before decisions were taken. Therefore the absence of women at public meetings did not indicate a passive role for women in politics in the traditional society.¹ The women were trusted and respected as mothers and wise advisors of men, helping to keep them in authority. In many cases women acted as de facto rulers while men were de jure rulers.²

According to Magdalena Shamena, women also had charismatic power if the society was in a war situation.³ In the traditional society Ovambo women were excluded from military actions or cattle raids. However, they hold an important position in feeding and taking care of the soldiers and victims of war. Their role was also to encourage soldiers by cultural performances and to take care of community decisions in the absence of men.⁴

Furthermore, it was believed that the presence of a woman in the house contributed a lot to the well-being of the family. A woman was seen and regarded as a mother of the family, clan and nation. She was the vehicle of values. She was the one who transmitted information and knowledge to the children and therefore she must possess the qualities to form, guide and educate to a greater degree than most men. Women upheld cultural and social values.⁵

According to Eirola, women in the precolonial Ovambo communities had the right of possession and inheritance and the right to take legal actions, but political rights were limited to female members of the royal clan. A strict division of labour was applied, the women taking care of the work in the fields besides the domestic work, pottery and basket making, the provision of food and the like. The men were responsible for the cattle, hunting, metalwork and woodwork, warfare and the making of political decisions and they also had certain duties in the fields.⁶

In precolonial societies in Namibia girls learned about their responsibilities and duties through daily experience. They learned

1 Hishongwa (1983), p 15.

2 Shamena (1991), p 2.

3 Ibid, p 15.

4 Hishongwa (1988), p 26.

5 Hishongwa (1988), p 398.

6 Eirola (1992), p 39.

about their future roles as wives and mothers by watching and imitating their female relatives and neighbours. When girls reached puberty, they acquired knowledge of their potential roles through traditional rituals and customs.¹ Women's responsibilities of taking care of the house and children were duties of primary importance.²

In the precolonial African communities the individuals were dependent on each other. The status of the individual is a social status, and it is given to the individual by the community. The transformation from one status to the next is so crucial to the existence of the human being that the life span of an individual can be seen as formed of statuses following each other, which all have a similar beginning and end.³ Young women in Ovambo society were always prepared for marriage by 'efundula or ohango', the initiation ceremony.⁴ The ritual had to be performed by girls in order to be accepted in the women's category. Because women's ability to produce and reproduce was very important in Ovambo communities the efundula was central to the whole community.⁵ Agricultural activities were symbolically present in many vital rituals of individual and social life like the initiation of girls, the birth of the child and the moving of homestead.⁶

Polygamous marriage was a commonly accepted practice. A man married as many women as his status in the society dictated. Each and every wife had her own division in the household where she lived. Each wife was an independent economic unit. The women's ranks in marriage were those of first wife, second wife etc. The rank played a role in determining women's duties and statuses in the household. Each wife also had her own garden where she planted many things. The husband, who was the head of the house, had his own field in which all his wives and older children worked collectively.⁷ The system of polygamy suited the purpose of economic production in a predominantly agricultural society.⁸

¹ Hishongwa (1988), p 398.

² Hishongwa (1983), p 16.

³ Hjort af Ornäs (1987), p 55.

⁴ Different terms used by Hjort af Ornäs 'efundula' p 1 and Närhi 'ohango' p 34 referring to the same ceremony. Different terms mean different phases of the ceremony.

⁵ Hjort af Ornäs (1987), p 1.

⁶ Eirola (1992), p 40.

⁷ Ibid, p 19.

⁸ Eirola (1992), p 40.

According to the Ovambo custom practices, a husband is the "owner" of his wife. Divorce was not very common among the Ovambos.¹ It was, however, possible and did not mean the exclusion of the woman from the community. In the matrilineal society of the Ovambo people, a wife had the right to take all her children with her, because children belong to the mother's family. She was not, however, entitled to inherit any property from the husband.²

... I get married by traditional wedding...during the wedding people were killing cows and making traditional beer --- First I was married by one man, then we divorce, then I was married again by the chief... then I divorce again and then I go to join the church --- and from there I went to build my own house.³

Despite all the customary laws, the difference in gender roles in the traditional Namibian society did not necessarily give women an inferior position. Women simply played the parts which they were supposed to play by virtue of being defined as women. They accepted the system which also gave them respect from everybody in the society.⁴

More importantly, the women felt themselves equal by the side of men and knew that the community was dependent on their contribution. There was a duality of power in the household between men and women. The homestead was headed by men and the dwelling was patrilocal but the descent and heritage was counted through the female line.⁵

The importance of women as a labour force in the subsistence economy of Ovambo's is an acknowledged fact. Women were the backbone of agricultural production.⁶ Men and women in the society agreed upon the division of labour. Men, women and children alike contributed to economic production. A household consisted not of one "economy" but of several, each wife having separate fields to cultivate and separate grain stores which she ruled over. Women were strong in the right over their produce in addition to their strength in regard to the matrilineal descent system.⁷

1 Ibid, p 21.

2 Ibid, p 21-22.

3 Interview 09.

4 Ibid p 22.

5 Salokoski (1992), p 154.

6 Ibid, p 17. See also Williams 1988 and 1991.

7 Salokoski (1992), p 145.

In the precolonial Ovambo communities women's role must be seen in respect to the survival of the community. The communities were dependent on the production and the reproduction capabilities of women. Women nourished the children and bore the main responsibility of the agricultural production. Women's status grew out of the communal responsibilities not through individual actions. The political system of absolute monarchy meant that the social power of individuals existed in relation to their duties in the community. The absence of women in the "official political sector" i.e. women were not appointed as counsellors or headmen did not indicate the inferior role of women in the society as a whole because of their importance to the economy and cohesion of the community. The status of women changed only when the society transformed itself becoming more dependent on outside influences.

Early Influence of Traders and Missioners

Hunting and trading, beside cattle raids, were major external activities in the polities. Ovambos were engaged in trade between themselves and other African communities. Having specialised in different articles, the polities engaged in trade by exchanging articles such as pearls, tools, cattle, ornaments, grain and household utensils. Also salt, and copper and iron articles were traded. In general, natural resources and foreign trade were a monopoly of the ruler.¹ In comparison to southern and mid-South West Africa, and southern Angola, Ovamboland clearly remained more isolated from European influence until the end of the 1850s. For their part, until that time the Ovambo did not have any particular need to seek interaction with Europeans. The first explorers arrived in the 1850s and resulted in increasing pressure for the expansion of trade connections.² Through the control of natural resources, production, movement and trade the Ovambo kings effectively supervised both the members of their own communities and the movements of the outsiders. This functioning control system thus provided the king with a good framework for supervising European led trade, and for monopolising it in his community.³

The increasing external trade changed the power relations in the community diminishing in many cases the King's ability to control

¹ Eirola (19929).

² Siiskonen (1990) p 98.

³ Ibid, p 116.

his subjects and especially increased the power of his closest advisors i.e. the power elite. The impact of trade concerning the ordinary subjects and households was, however, quite minimal. They were only affected in indirect ways. Some kings sold their subjects as slaves to the Portuguese and seized property in need of finance which caused whole families to seek refuge in the neighbouring communities.

On the other hand increased trade did not directly affect the conditions of agricultural and cattle production, because it did not spread any innovations or new crops. The traders were only interested in goods produced and owned by the royal family which in turn was mostly interested in status commodities in general. But the trade also made goods produced by Europeans available for the ordinary subjects. In general the trade increased uncertainty and insecurity within the communities and made it less easy to make a living.¹

The most significant impact of the increasing external trade on households was the development of wage and migrant labour. The contract labour system and its consequences on the lives of the household, and thus Ovambo women, were the main effects of the external influence in Ovamboland. It will be discussed in a separate chapter because of its importance in women's lives.

In addition to the explorers, hunters and traders, missionaries also became interested in the region in the 19th century. The German missionaries started their work in the southern and central part of the Namibian territory. The missionary work among the Ovambo communities was started by the young and small Finnish Missionary Society, whose first representatives arrived in Ondonga in 1870. Other churches followed later, and the Catholic and Anglican churches started their work in Ovamboland in 1924.²

The missionary work turned out to be quite successful in the beginning, and the activities spread rapidly to the Uukwambi and Ongandjera areas as well.³ The missionaries were, however, totally dependent on the kings, who in turn hoped to increase their power by using the missionaries "magical" power and wealth. When the kings found out that this was not the case and that the missionaries could not be kept under their control, the relationship between the kings and the missionaries became less friendly and even hostile.

¹ Siiskonen (1990).

² Hishongwa (1988), p 91

³ Peltola (1958), p 30-31, 40-41.

The missionaries had to withdraw from all areas other than Ondonga.¹ Later on the missionaries returned, but confrontations with the kings were common.

The missionaries started their work amongst the family of the king. Missionary work was also spread amongst the servants of the missionaries who became the first to be converted to Christianity. It was customary that some families, who were unable to support their children brought them to missionary stations to be educated and to work at the station. These “foster children” were both boys and girls.² The spread of Christianity was, however, more common amongst the boys in the beginning. That was understandable, because men were more free and willing to be exposed to new ideas and opportunities. It soon became apparent, that the king was not pleased that his subjects were taught in his community were his potential wives, which practice was threatened by their confirmation and denial of ohango ceremonies by the missionaries. There were several incidents where the interests of the king, the missionaries and a converted girl clashed, and some girls had to seek sanctuary in the missionary station.³ The king was also said to harass the wives and daughters of the missionaries, which made it impossible to send female missionaries to the area in the beginning.⁴

The arrival of missionaries and the spread of Christianity and European habits soon started to change women’s lives as well. Christianity brought new values into the community and undermined the values and habits of the old community. First of all, men who were converted Christians could no longer practise polygamy. Many of those converted were wealthy, and thus already married to many wives, and had to abandon all but one wife. It was also a problem to find a decent wife for the Christian young men, because so few women were converted.⁵ Also the many important rites and ceremonies practised by Ovambos were considered as heathen and abandoned. The important ohango ceremony, which was not only to

¹ Ibid, p 56.

² Ibid, p 76.

³ See e.g. Peltola, 1995 and Shamena, 1991. One of the informants also told an interesting story of a Uukwambi king who tried to force a converted girl to marry him in the 1930s. The girl was smuggled to the missionary station in a coffin. The king attacked the missionary station and was later punished and expelled by South African military forces. (Interview 06) This also shows how the missionaries were protected by the colonial forces.

⁴ Peltola (1956), p 90.

⁵ Ibid, p 114.

change girls into women but also to perform and secure continuity of the community, soon became a problem in the congregation. The missionaries told Christian men and women not to participate in the ceremonies, but with little effect. They soon started to claim that the Christian confirmation ceremony was in fact a substitute for ohango, so that those confirmed need not perform double ceremonies.¹ The practices started to change, but slowly.

On the other hand, Christianity offered a completely different way of life for Ovambo women. Especially the arrival of the first female missionaries from 1899 onwards meant that more attention would be paid to girls and women. As stated earlier, men converted to Christianity needed a Christian wife, a mother who could transfer Christian values to their children. Girls were prepared for that role by female missionaries and wives of missionaries. The unmarried female missionaries also set an example to Ovambo girls in devoting their whole lives to the religion without getting married. It was possible for girls to abandon their traditional community and settle in missionary stations.

The institution of formal education in Namibia was introduced by various missionary societies rather than colonialists.² Missionaries did not only intend to convert locals into God-obeying persons but also "civilized" citizens. As Christians, the Ovambo were taught to respect and appreciate European traditional and cultural values.³ Women were seen as important vehicles in this respect, because they were the ones transforming the family values. The female missionaries started to train and use converted women in educating other Ovambos in elementary schools and kindergartens.⁴ Health work had also always been an important part of missionary work. Its important function was to diminish the power of traditional healers in addition to the actual healing function.⁵ The missionaries soon started to educate local women as nurses and assistants to doctors sent from Finland. Thus, the arrival of Christianity offered the first opportunities for Ovambo women to receive formal education and be trained for a profession.

The arrival of Christianity and the changing cultural and economic patterns of the Ovambo community are considered to have

¹ *Ibid*, p 114.

² Hishongwa (1988), p 95.

³ *Ibid*, p 97.

⁴ Peltola (1958), p 157.

⁵ *Ibid*, p 161.

had a dual influence on Ovambo women's lives. First of all the changes in the life of women cannot be separated from the overall changes in the community. The missionaries worked hand in hand with the colonialists. The colonisation of Namibia, and Ovamboland in particular, was made much easier by the missionaries. They collaborated with colonial authorities and even worked for them.¹ More importantly, the missionaries worked as agents of westernisation, undermining and even destroying the traditional values, ways of life and power structures. The acculturation resulted in loss of the traditional authority and problems in everyday life. The missionaries tried to build an Ovambo community according to their own image of proper behaviour and good society, which caused conflicts with the traditional culture.

The simultaneous exposure to foreign trade, decline of subsistence economy because of cattle diseases, and decreasing productivity caused by the many years of serious drought, made it easier for the colonial powers to take over the communities without military force. The Ovambo communities started losing their self-rule and self-subsistence. The strong opposition faced by the missionaries in the beginning from the king and the power elite, and even the community at large, changed into collaboration and dependency.

Ndeutala Hishongwa has discussed the impact of the missionaries and Christianity on the situation of Namibian women. She shares the opinion of many other historians, and sees the missionaries as collaborators of the colonialists. Ndeutala states that the position of women changed drastically with the colonial conquest and eventual domination.² When trying to convert people not only to the religion but to the western values as well, the missionaries made African converts abandon their traditional and cultural values. All traditional customs were seen as inferior, because the missionaries not only attacked the so-called pagan practices and beliefs, but also opposed many neutral elements of the culture.³

Acculturation has especially severe effects on women, because they have traditionally been the bearers and transmitters of the culture. In the beginning, the women were not considered at all, because the missionaries paid all their attention to converting men.

¹ Eirola (1985), *Namibiana in Finland I: Guide to the Finnish Archival Sources Concerning Namibia before 1938* p 54 referred to in Hishongwa (1988), p 93.

² Hishongwa (1988), p 91 and 112.

³ *Ibid*, p 98.

This caused confrontation in relation to traditional ceremonies like ohango and marriage arrangements. Men were exposed to new values, while women's importance as cultural reproducers was diminished. It meant that the new mode of life altered the distribution of tasks between women and men, which was disadvantageous to women. The introduction of European family structure with male authority, female fidelity, and the elimination of the right to divorce was an essential goal.¹ The Christian patriarchy interfered with the traditional family way of living. When women were regarded as equally important targets of missionary work as men they were made subservient to their husbands. They were taught to appreciate the fact that they had been rescued from the "evil" system of polygamy and that they would benefit from the western "civilisation" of their family patterns.

The introduction of monogamy changed considerably the division of labour and altered the economic relations in the family. Although it is impossible to say, in the absence of studies on the matter, whether women preferred polygamy to monogamy, the polygamous practice allowed some advantages to women in the traditional society. The division of labour was well organised between the wives. The introduction of monogamy meant that all that work needed to be done by only one wife, which severely increased the burden of women. In the traditional family—whether monogamous or polygamous—the wife was her own independent economic unit and had full control over the production entrusted to her. Christianity introduced the system of joint saving, which meant that women lost their independence and control of production.² All property, although produced together, belonged to the husband and his matrilineal relatives. At the same time the introduction of a market economy meant that even more economic power was shifted to the hands of men, because only men had access to wage labour. When converted to Christianity women were also denied the right to divorce, which had been the common practice to solve unhappy marriages in the traditional society. As a consequence women had no way of escaping from their subservient position.

The missionaries made formal education available to the Ovambos—men as well as women. But according to Hishongwa, the education was not only organised on a tribal and racial, but also on

¹ Ibid, p 101.

² Ibid, p 108.

gender, basis.¹ The education also served the economic and political interest of the missionaries and colonialists. The Africans were taught only subjects which would make them proper servants of the colonial and missionary authorities in menial jobs. The girls' education was mainly limited to domestic science while boys were taught clerical, religious and technical subjects.² Women were thus prepared for their role as house keepers and servants of their husbands, which was a common practice in Europe at that time as well. The only careers possible for black women were domestic servant, teacher or nurse. That system started by the missionaries was enforced and maintained by the following colonial and apartheid governments up to the present time. Thus the introduction of formal education also limited women's power in the society, and reinforced the unequal distribution of possibilities. The establishment of sex differentiation in work and education was central to the objectives of missionaries.³ The former social power held by women as midwives, medicine women and as holders of authority within the household or the kinship system, was undermined.⁴

Per Frostin also points out the secondary role and status given to women by European Christianity. Namibian women were neglected by the European Christianity, and were oppressed and forsaken by the inherited and confused theologies of the African churches and by imitated and distorted Western culture.⁵ Only in recent years have women been considered capable of religious work, and some churches have started to ordain women as priests. This development followed the introduction of liberation theology or the theology of protest. The matter will be discussed in the following chapters.

There is no doubt that the arrival of Christianity, and its eurocentric and paternalistic opinion on traditional culture held by the early missionaries, did change the traditional culture and way of life and even destroyed some important aspects of it. One can without hesitation state, that the women's position in traditional society was severely violated by the fact that the whole pattern of the communal life was altered: As shown earlier, women, whose social position was directly drawn from the community and its value-

¹ Ibid, p 99.

² Ibid, p 104.

³ Ibid, p 101.

⁴ Ibid, p 112.

⁵ Mujoro (1989), p 105.

systems and socio-economic relations, lost their position as a consequence of the decline of the whole community and the introduction of new value systems and a new economic order. The whole community became oppressed and ruled by new European religious and economic masters, which meant a double burden for women, as they were reduced to a subservient position even in relation to their own men.

A more positive point of view on the impacts of Christianity, however, has been introduced by many women, who themselves have undergone Christian education. Magdalena Shamena points out that the education of women by the church was important, especially because it improved the distorted illiteracy situation. She also admits that it was men who were the greatest beneficiaries of the missionary work, but women soon entered the scene. According to Shamena, the role of the missionaries in developing women's rights and emancipation was essential and crucial to the future of Namibia.¹ Furthermore, the church made it possible for women to enter public life from their former restricted position. Christianity encouraged the participation of women and aroused their moral values and self-confidence. It was a precondition for the fact that women were later on encouraged and accepted as equal partners in the liberation struggle.²

It may well be that the disagreement on this matter arises from the different perspective and from the period in which the church and Christianity are analysed. The Christian Church itself had to undergo severe changes in its position, before it could be considered as being supportive and liberative from the point of view of the African people. The early missionary work did undermine and destroy the traditional culture and caused confusion in the women's position. On the other hand, the church was perhaps a softer means in penetrating the community, than the direct colonial rule itself. The Ovambo communities were not static, and changes were already on their way. Through their theological point of view, the missionaries gave a certain appreciation to the local people, and aimed at uplifting their personal and material life. One has to bear in mind that when the missionaries entered the area, the Ovambo communities were still quite independent and peaceful, and no direct colonisation was done. In the beginning, the church collaborated with the colonial regime, but at the same time made it possible for the Ovambo to

¹ Shamena (1991), p 19 and 21.

² Ibid, p 44.

obtain skills and capabilities which were later used in transforming the church into a vehicle in the struggle for liberation. The role of the church will be discussed in later chapters.

The Beginning of the Colonial Era

The Namibian territory and its northern parts especially were colonised relatively late. According to Salokoski, the first years of the colonial rule after the so-called pre-colonial state are called the period of informal colonialism, which refers to a societal state of the years 1840–1884. During that period the first impact of European traders and missionaries began to change local communities, as described previously. The formal colonial rule began in 1884, when the Germans occupied the territory.¹ The first two decades of the German colonial rule did not touch the very foundations of the local communities much more than the period of informal colonialism. The most important effects were the increased dependency on trade with Europeans, and the deepening social destruction following the introduction of the market economy.²

In general the colonisation of Namibia resembled the development of colonialism all over Africa. The Europeans took over the territory by forcing the indigenous population under “protection” treaties and settling their own citizens on what they regarded as “no-man’s land”. The local population was regarded as subservient to the new colonial community. The development of the territory aimed at serving the interest of the new inhabitants. It was done at the expense of the locals, who faced a period of “undevelopment” and decline of their pre-colonial societies.

In Namibia, however, according to Green et al., the colonialism had some particular characteristics. Namibia was colonised relatively late and also liberated last. During the First World War, Namibia was occupied by South African forces, opposed to the Germans in 1915. Namibia was placed under the mandate of South Africa by the newly formed League of Nations, in 1920. The colonial rule of South Africa was in one sense special: the country practised a unique form of racism which was the coherent, internalised and operationalised ideology of the state. The system of apartheid was exercised in the Namibian territory as well as in the mother country. South Africa

¹ Salokoski (1992), p 5. The term “informal colonialism” was first used by Richard Moorsom in Moorsom (1979), p 17.

² Salokoski (1992), p 5.

was not a true capitalist core economy itself, but a society with large economic inequalities. It was economically and strategically dependent on Namibia, because of Namibia's rich natural resources. The colonial rule in Namibia was maintained by a strong military presence, because South Africa never managed to create a dependent middle class of Namibian origin which could have governed the country by civil rule. The liberation of Namibia was also psychologically impossible for South Africa, because it needed to defend the ideological and material interest of the white community. Because of the apartheid ideology, which considers other than white races inferior, it was impossible to accept any solution which would have given the local non-white population any power. This also radicalized the liberation movement.¹

The uniqueness of the Namibian colonialism is also characterised by the international nature given to the decolonisation process. The South African regime continued to occupy Namibia long after international bodies had started to protest against it and ended its mandate. The Namibian situation was linked to an overall solution for the whole of southern Africa, and it had elements of a super-power struggle as well. The decolonisation of Namibia was made dependent on the developments of the Southern African region in general, and on the resolving of the ideological tension between socialist-oriented Angola supported by Cuba and the Soviet Union, and the dependency of USA and Great Britain on racist but strategically important South Africa. An important part of the independence struggle was fought in various arenas of the international community. The actual independence of Namibia was achieved by the active help of the United Nations and the international community in 1990, and marked the end of the apartheid rule of the colonial master as well.

For the Namibian population, however, the gradual colonisation of the territory was a pure and bitter reality. The Germans took over and settled in the most fertile parts of the territory, wiping the pastoralist Herero and Nama nations out of the way in the general uprising of 1904–08. The loss of the local population meant that most of their traditional land and cattle was taken by Europeans and the remaining population was settled in the poor areas. The central areas formed the so-called police zone whereby the Germans exercised direct rule, leaving out the northern areas of the country.²

¹ Green & Kiljunen (1981), p 3.

² SWAPO of Namibia (1981), p 13-14.

The Northern parts of the country were under pressure from two European forces, the Portuguese from the North and the Germans from the South. In the beginning of this century, the Portuguese managed to occupy some northwestern Ovambo communities, which in the Berlin Conference of 1884–85 were considered to fall on the Angolan side of the artificial border. The powerful resistance of the Uukwanyama kingdom stopped the Portuguese from moving more southwards. The Germans on their part did show some interest in the northern areas, but were occupied in placing the southern and central parts under their rule. Even when the colonial economy introduced the migrant labour system in Ovambo communities, it limited its contacts to the area in “protection” treaties and diplomatic persuasion.¹ According to Eirola, the Germans made concrete efforts to extend their colonial rule in the area. The attempts were not successful, because of the resistance by the local population and the unwillingness of the central authorities in Berlin for a military take-over. Thus, Ovamboland remained free of local colonial authorities.²

Only at the outbreak of the First World War, did South African troops seize the Namibian territory from the Germans, and together with the Portuguese forces brought the independence of Ovamboland to an end, in 1915. The whole Namibian territory fell under the new colonial authority, which was confirmed by the mandate of the League of Nations.³

Germany’s interest in the Namibian territory was in the beginning more political than economic. Colonial possession enhanced national prestige. The colonisation took place through settling immigrants in the areas that were taken by force from the local population. The overall strategy was to reproduce the German society in Africa by creating a colony of European settlement. Germany sold or leased the land to white settlers and built a network of roads, railways, harbours and communications. In the beginning of the 20th century, minerals like copper were found and the first mines established. When diamonds were found in the southern Namib desert, economic interests finally arose, and companies and adventurers scrambled to the country. The local people soon found themselves in a vast prison camp; no black person was allowed to own land or stock in the whole police zone, and they were compelled to forced labour by law. But the violence and unbearable conditions

¹ *Ibid*, p 14-15.

² Eirola (1992), p 281.

³ SWAPO (1981), p 15.

had caused the death or exile of thousands of the local population. The shortage of labour was severe, and the only solution to this was found by including the still independent northern communities in the wage labour system.¹ In short the German colonial rule in Namibia had three key elements: the occupation of land, destruction of traditional social structures and forced labour.²

When the new colonial masters—the South Africans—took over the territory, they reinforced the strategy of the Germans and made it even easier for international capital to control Namibian resources. Although many Germans fled the country, the South Africans made it possible for the remaining farmers to become its citizens. Most of the farming and trading communities remained intact, only the military, police and administrative personnel was repatriated. The Germans were needed to contribute to a permanent and lasting “white civilisation” on the Namibian soil.³ The South Africans settled newcomer Afrikaners by occupying more land in the police zone, with the effect that by the 1950s all commercially viable ranch land was fully occupied.⁴ The white community was given a self-governing body, an Assembly, in the police zone. The local population was forced into the reserves and given the “right” to govern themselves. However, most of their traditional institutions were already destroyed, which made it possible for the colonial regime to create such institutions that suited its purposes. The use of traditional customary law was also selective for the purpose of complete rule by the regime.⁵ The only value of the local population was to act as a labour force.

The inclusion of the northern population in the colonial economy had started already before the formal colonial rule. The external trade, social change and market economy resulted in a growing need of cash. Men who had always travelled outside the area when hunting, raiding, fetching salt etc. started in growing numbers to migrate to the South to look for work. This migration coincided with the establishment of white farms, mines and construction work. The migrant labour system was created. The migrant or contract labour system was a special form of colonialism created in South Africa and Namibia. Its structure, mechanism and function were determined by

¹ Ibid, p 17–19.

² Katjavivi (1988), p 11.

³ Mbuende (1986), p 74.

⁴ SWAPO (1981), p 21.

⁵ Mbuende (1986), p 74–75.

the needs of the colonial power. For the Ovambo communities and its people, it formed a major link to the colonial economy. It was the most important form of transaction between the rural communities and the colonial central economy. It was also the most important determinant of the family and household life in recent decades, and also one of the most important reasons for the people's resistance.

In general, the colonisation of Namibia meant further destruction of the living conditions of the local people. However, many rural people outside the police zone—including most Ovambo women—did not come into direct contact with the colonial administration in the beginning. Especially in the northern areas, the everyday life continued revolving around the subsistence farming, and many traditional institutions and customs were still in place. But because of the migrant/contract labour system, those communities were drawn into the central colonial economy. The system was crucially important in changing the life of the Ovambo communities in general—and the women in particular. Therefore, it is dealt with here in more detail.

The contract labour system has been studied a lot in the context of the Namibian economy and the colonial rule, because of its unique nature. Here the system will be described first in general, and then, its impact on the life of women will be discussed.

The Contract Labour System

The Namibian economy is said to be dual in character, comprising firstly the capitalist component of the economy—i.e. extraction of the country's various natural resources by foreign companies—and secondly, of subsistence agriculture—the peasant economy—on which the majority of the African population is dependent.¹ Those two components are, however, two sides of the same coin: they are interlinked by the migrant labour system. The migrant labour system can be described "as a phenomenon in which workers leave their permanent residences to work in the public or private sectors, or in the service of private individuals for a designated period of time somewhere further away. The wage labourer's residence at their job locations is temporary and they go there alone while their family members remain at home."² The reason to call the same phenomenon contract labour comes from the practice that men signed a contract

¹ SWAPO (1981) p 23.

² Definition by Banghart (1969), p 1 referred to in Siiskonen (1990), p 229.

with the employers, or the agencies recruiting labour, before they left the area. The conditions of the contract were defined by the agency or by the employer.

The African population had no means of earning its living in the small reserves, in which it was forced to settle. Also, outside of the police zone, the land allocated to Africans was too poor and small to feed the growing population. It is said that the result of the peasant agriculture was "too little to live on and too much to die from".¹ The colonial economy needed labour, and organised a systematic legislation denying the local population any other means of earning their living. According to Mbuende, the peasant economy was an integral part of the capitalist economy. Subsistence agriculture kept the families alive in the reserves, but it did not allow the accumulation of wealth, because of the general conditions in the reserves and the lack of technical assistance or credit facilities. Especially in the times of drought and cattle epidemics, men were forced to take up employment outside the reserves. The agricultural production made it possible to keep the wages at a low level, because the families were supposed to survive on the basis of agriculture.² The women in the reserves were responsible for reproducing labour power for the service of the white capitalist economy.

The success of including the independent northern areas in the contract labour system even before the formal colonial rule can be explained by several factors. Wage labour was unknown to the Ovambo people, even though it was not uncommon to work away from home. Trading, hunting and raiding activities have meant long absences from home and provided men with contacts with the other communities. The slave trade practised by certain kings to finance the external trade had started and continued with the Portuguese until the end of the 19th century. The traders, explorers and missionaries needed labour in their service. The settlers employed locals to work on their farms. In spite of that, Ovambo immigration remained low by the turn of the century. The developments in the police zone, however, increased the need of labour. The colonial powers started mining operations first in the Tsumeb area and later in the southern diamond fields.

It is estimated that by 1910, 85 per cent of the male African population was already working as wage labourers in the police

¹ Magubane (1979), p 129.

² Mbuende (1986), p 129-131.

zone.¹ In need of more labour, Ovamboland soon became the most important recruitment area. The former policy of isolation practised for Ovamboland by Germans did not stop them recruiting labourers. The missionaries and traditional authorities were asked to act as assistants.² They even imposed taxation and demanded the payment in cash to force people to take up wage employment. The new colonial power made the recruitment even more systematic by setting up two contract recruiting agencies in 1925—the Southern Recruiting Organisation for the diamond mines and the Northern Labour Organisation for the Tsumeb copper mine and other employers. They merged into South West Africa Native Labour Association SWANLA in 1943.³ No employment was offered outside these organisations, and the conditions were fully determined by them without the consent of the employees.

The colonial administration made it also impossible for the locals to earn a living by any other means besides agriculture. The selling of cattle outside the police zone was forbidden by law, mainly to protect white farmers from competition. Ovambos no longer had access to salt pan or copper resources, because the areas were occupied by the white settlers. Hunting suffered because of the decline of big game. It was forbidden for the blacks to own business enterprises outside the reserves or homelands.

For the kings, the involvement in the labour recruitment was another means of solving financial difficulties caused by trade, declining agricultural production and cattle epidemics. A king could always expect a reward when assisting the labour recruiters. His subjects, on the other hand, had several reasons to freewillingly agree to employment. One reason was the growing difficulty for young men to obtain enough wealth to get married and set up their own house. The diminishing cattle wealth did not necessarily mean the end of subsistence, because of the agricultural production, but resulted in loss of status. Men's wealth was measured in the number of cattle and number of wives, and the latter was dependent on the former. Some men also took up employment, wishing to obtain the new status symbol, a rifle, which was a normal payment when working in Angola. Christianity and the European culture also introduced new values and new needs: the purchasing of European clothes, financing the church wedding etc. made men more willing to

¹ Siiskonen (1990), p 231–233. See also Werner (1993), p 140.

² Siiskonen (1990), p 187.

³ Katjavivi (1988), p 15–16.

earn their own cash. It was the socio-economic and political situation within the Ovambo communities which proved favourable for the development of migrant labour from the point of view of both kings and households.¹

The migrant labour system, however, was not a positive solution to the economic hardship faced by Ovambo communities. At the individual level, many men ended up disillusioned, because the wealth they hoped to attain was never acquired. The remittances from the wage labour were far too low to satisfy all the material needs created by the changing values, and it was far too little to sustain a newly married wife and the family. The migrant labour did not provide new sources of foodstuffs or technology for the improvement of agriculture, but instead resulted in declining production because of the lack of manpower. The decline in production meant that a new period of work was needed to feed the family. Households ended up in a vicious circle where ends never met.

... later on he (*my husband*) went to work in the South ... but the salary was low, because he was working in the farm ...²

My husband was working in Tsumeb ... is still there --- he comes only for one month a year --- this was normal ---³

The rejection of old values increased the identity crisis of young men, which had already been created by Christianity and European influence. Even the missionaries were worried about the "foreign influence" brought by the returning migrant labourers, because "they made contacts with the white people who did not know Christ." ... "The respect towards the white men started to waver".⁴ Regardless of the moral viewpoint, it was obvious that the traditional values were forgotten, and the gap between men and women grew even larger. The rejection of old values also decreased the social unity of Ovambo communities and caused further destruction of the communal life.

... the subheadman (*was the leader here*) but he was not here, he was working at the Oranjemund, he only came to visit here for a month ...⁵

¹ Siiskonen (1990), p 234-236.

² Interview 06.

³ Interview 09.

⁴ Peltola 1958, p 167.

⁵ Interview 09.

Women were denied access to wage labour. The growing recruitment of able-bodied men soon resulted in a situation where the population in the reserves and outside the police zone consisted only of women, elderly and handicapped people, and children. In the police zone women could work as domestic servants, and were later employed as factory workers and shop assistants. In the northern areas like Ovamboland, however, women were forced to stay behind. The division of labour in the Ovambo communities was well organised and included all members of the household. The absence of men resulted in a serious shortage of manpower and meant a double burden for women. Women had to do all the agricultural work, including the work traditionally done by men. The social customs had prevented women from herding cattle or entering the cattle post. They had to rely on neighbours' help in solving that matter, among others.¹ Children had to do more household work, which prevented them from enjoying their childhood and attending school.

Even more problematic was the fact that the women had to assume full responsibility for family and household decisions, that were traditionally made by men and women together. Many men were on contract for several months or even for a year. Many women were afraid of or not used to making decisions alone. And even though women were allowed to make decisions, it did not mean that they gained in terms of freedom or independence. On the contrary, the dependency on remittances and the cash economy took away even that economic independence women had possessed before, in the form of their own field and products. Their burden in agriculture increased, but the significance of their social labour decreased.² The matrilineal law of inheritance ordered that all the property belonged to the man, because it was obtained by the money men earned in wage labour.³

... I was doing most of the work, because even the looking after the animals is a work of husband, but I did it. Even milking is the work of husband, I did it, I could do everything--- The mother of my husband was very happy, because I could do everything ...⁴

¹ Hishongwa (1983), p 44.

² Hishongwa (1988), p 399.

³ Hishongwa (1992), p 99-101.

⁴ Interview 07.

... During that time when the husband died, they said that the house belong to the son... Women are not good people, because she may get a husband to get married and go out (*of the house*) ...¹

Men learned new ideas and rejected old values when residing in the South. Women were, however, in most cases living in the traditional society even though influenced by the European missionaries. The relationship between men and women changed considerably and caused misunderstandings in the family. Men could not respond to the expectations women held in regard to material well-being and caring for the children. Communication between the parents was difficult, due to long distances and illiteracy. Many men totally rejected their family back in the North and married a new wife in the South. Children did not recognize their father and lacked parental guidance. Social problems, like alcoholism, crime and venereal diseases increased.

Women were drawn into the colonial economy as “invisible” reproducers of manpower. Their living conditions were of little concern for the colonial authorities. The women could not resist the contract labour system, but accepted it as the only solution to meet the economic needs. Women swallowed the extra burden of work, and ended up in conditions of slave labour. However, many women increased their trading activities (pots, baskets, food etc.) to earn some cash, because the remittances were rare and irregular. Very few formal labour opportunities were still open to women. Women continued living according to communal values and relied heavily on the help of the community’s other members, which strengthened the system of reciprocity.

Emancipation of Churches and Its Impact on Women

As described in the previous chapters, the missionaries and the church were of crucial importance in penetrating the lives of the Ovambo people already in the 19th century. In the beginning the missionaries worked as agents of the colonial government, while being on the other hand very dependent on the traditional authorities. As middlemen and mediators between the local rulers and the Germans, they were unavoidably involved in politics to safeguard their own interests in the missionary work.² This close cooperation continued after South Africa established a permanent rule in

¹ Interview 06.

² Eirola (1992) p 286.

Ovamboland. The missionaries were ready to sacrifice the local structures to the colonial powers, when they saw the interests of their members threatened.

What then made so many Ovambos join the Christian religion and abandon their traditional beliefs? It has been estimated that by 1966, over 80 per cent of Ovambos were practising Christianity, which gives the area the highest density of Christians in Africa.¹ Gordon argues that the deteriorating conditions in the area, like acute population pressure, worsening farming conditions, and smaller production returns resulted in people losing faith in their ancestors' spirits, and they turned to Christianity. The Church also provided an opportunity to Ovambos with a poorer background. People no longer trusted the king as the utmost authority, because of the growing dependence on the colonial masters and economic pressure that was imposed on households. The church was an alternative to challenge the king's power and authority. The missionary stations also provided some form of employment, which was an alternative to migrant labour.² What is more, the church provided education and health care, both totally neglected by the colonial authorities.

The Christian faith itself made it easier for many Ovambos to accept their lot. Whatever happened, it was the will of God and had to have some purpose.³ This view is very much expressed by the older generation even today.

In addition to mental relief the church provided economic relief to many women who were left behind to take care of the family.

... so we involve in politics ... my husband was chased away from SWABC (*work place*) --- also myself I involve in politics ... so what happened my husband had to locked up in prison ... and my home ... what happens we had problems ... because I was not working and my husband was in prison ... so the churches ... the CCN ... was paying for us, our houses, and also my husband was a catholic, so the church was helping us with money ... since I had seven children ... and then things went out of hand ...⁴

... during that time the church was just helping the people who were very poor ... I was not so poor ... We were the most people who were contributing to the church so that the poor people could be helped by the church

¹ Gordon (1978), p 284.

² Ibid, p 285-286.

³ Cleaver & Wallace (1990), p 104.

⁴ Interview 15.

... so unless if I am serious sick and I don't have money then the church could take me to the hospital ... because this hospital was burned ...¹

The church added to the traditional system of reciprocity by providing material and mental support, especially during the years of most intense harassment by the South African military forces. Much of this support has been given on the basis of the Christian teachings. It was the duty of the church to help the poor and the suffering. The attitudes of the missionaries, however, remained often very superficial. To them, the locals were like children and needed guidance and care. The Church itself was led from Finland, even though many Ovambos had acquired a theological education and were running its activities independently. The missionaries did not want to jeopardize their activities by taking a radical stand against the colonial authorities. In response, they were given relatively free hands to operate in the area.

The change in the role of the church was caused by its members themselves. The more people got educated, the more strongly they started to question the role of the church and its relations with the colonial administration. The growing awareness of their inferior position, and the illegality of their country's occupation made people look for forms of resistance. The church brought people together and provided a proper channel.

The Anglican church operating in Namibia was the first to raise political concerns. In 1949 its priest, Reverend Michael Scott—in cooperation with some traditional leaders—brought a petition to the United Nations on behalf of the Namibian people, asking the UN to withdraw the South African mandate. At the same time some members in the Southern areas formed a black-led African Methodist Episcopal Church. The biggest church by the number of its members, the Finnish Missionary Society, formed an independent Evangelical Lutheran Ovambo-Kavango Church (ELOK) and appointed as its first black bishop Leonard Auala in 1963.² He and other church leaders became later important figures in speaking out about the demands of the Namibian people. In the South, the German origin Rhenish Mission Society was finally changed by its members after many had already left the congregation and established independent religious communities. The Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELC) was established in 1957. The activities of the churches caused many of its members to be harassed and foreign missionaries expelled from the

¹ Interview 08.

² *Ibid*, p 107.

country. Many church premises were violated and destroyed, like the Lutheran Press in Oniipa. It was bombed twice. Some churches were forced to close down because of attacks, like the Anglican St Mary's mission and clinic at the Angolan border.¹

The church became an inspirer and the centre of resistance especially for women. After World War II, a growing number of men migrated to the South. South Africa continued its occupation of Namibia and increased its presence outside the police zone. The traditional authorities were bought or forced under its control. In that situation the changing church became almost the only arena where women could find comfort and articulate their will.

... during that time we use to go to church ... because even the church was burnt because they know that everything which was (*done*) was concerning about SWAPO. ... I was a member of those woman organisation the women resisted the German-origin apartheid practicing Lutheran Church in Namibia, which culminated in the formation of the Oruaano, an independent community church, in 1955.²

In the South, the women resisted the German origin apartheid practising Lutheran Church in Namibia, which culminated in the formation of the Oruaano, an independent community church, in 1955.³ In Ovamboland, the Finnish Lutheran Church was more flexible and ready for reforms, so the activism was channelled through ordinary church structures.

--- as far as I can remember, I felt I was even Christian before I was even baptised ... I think the whole area, the whole area (*Ovamboland*) was very Christian ... from the age 6 to 12 I was living with my aunt who was very religious ... I remember seeing women like ... the late Reverend Hilja Shilongo Pauli ... so those women were in seminar when I were in the primary school ... in the 1970s.(---) I could also remember that they could have been part of my having developed interest in this whole field.⁴

Some of the women were granted a scholarship by church bodies to study in the missionary schools and even abroad. In that way the church provided an alternative channel to many women to get education instead of going into exile. Many studied in Oshigambo High School, which provided an alternative channel of education. Later these women became teachers or nurses, having studied in the church institutions. It was still rare for women to study other than a "traditional profession".

¹ Cleaver & Wallace (1990), p 108.

² Interview 08.

³ SWAPO (1981), p 286.

⁴ Interview 17.

I remember talking to an Anglican seminar student, asking him about the idea of me going to seminar after high school, and then he went like, you know, in our church we don't ordain women ... of course he was totally against it. --- I have felt some kind of discrimination in the past ... when I mean the whole idea of going to school and not being able to study what I want because I happen to be woman and just because I happen to feel that I want to be a priest like man ...¹

When studying abroad, many church members were influenced by new forms of Christianity.

... today I can say then we developed a theology of protest ... I mean we had to make it clear in our mind that God was on our side ... otherwise there was no way we could make it ... because I think if you have people who are very religious ... you have only to communicate with them, to address them, their problems from that very point of view, of being Christian and how you relate to that ... we started talking about the context, you do everything in the context of the situation ... right ... you know ...²

When the church turned to the side of the oppressed, some considered that it started practising liberation theology. In their article, Zelekia and Emma Mujoro say: "Liberation theology first considers the victims of the oppression and injustice as the context, or 'Sitz-in-Leben', of its theologizing. Christ is on the side of the oppressed and dehumanised in order to move them, that they can proclaim the message of the liberation to the oppressors."³

According to them, the church further regards the emancipation of the women as a serious concern. "God through Christ makes the woman the person, who is created; the person who is equal; the person who is liberated from all sources of slavery, domination and oppression."⁴ The Liberation theology as a people's movement is better known in countries such as El Salvador, Nicaragua and other Latin American countries. In spite of the few individuals who got inspired by its teachings, mostly abroad, the Namibian churches cannot be said to be practising it. Instead, the definition "theology of protest" seems more appropriate in the Namibian case.

... I was not convinced (*about the Bible as a basis of gender discrimination*) after I studied theology ... I cannot buy someone who tells me that there were no women amongst the apostles ...⁵

¹ Interview 17.

² Interview 17.

³ Mujoro (1989), p 104.

⁴ Ibid, 48 p 106.

⁵ Interview 17.

But what was most important, especially in the case of Ovambo women, was that Christianity was regarded as a liberating experience. And since the church leadership openly changed both its attitudes and staff and started speaking for its members, the church became a community to trust. According to David Barrett's *World Christian Handbook*, 97.7 per cent of the Namibian population was Christian by 1989.¹ Most of the active members are and have been women. Churches soon emphasised the role of women by setting up women's groups, and starting empowering women in their lives.

One should bear in mind, however, that while turning to the side of the oppressed, the church's attitude to family life and women's status remained intact. The man was seen as the head of the house, and traditional customs and beliefs were regarded as pagan, as seen in the previous chapters. The woman's duty was to serve the man and the family and to uplift the morality of the community.

Later on the church became an openly political actor.

¹ Barrett (1989), p xiv.

5. Resistance to Colonial Rule

“The Final Colonial Takeover” and the War

The occupation of Namibia and its integration into the world economic system was finalised by South Africans. After physically taking over the southern and central areas of the country, South Africa included the other areas in its economy by the migrant labour system. However, South Africans soon started to build political administration in those areas in order to secure their economic interests. According to Gordon, the South African rule was forcibly established in Ovamboland, when its troops defeated the Uukwanyama king Mandume in 1917, when a permanent white official was stationed in Ovamboland. Until the late 1950s, the area was controlled by a handful of white officials. The traditional authorities had been defeated, replaced or forced to collaborate.¹ The idea of the indirect rule implied that the traditional authorities, though appointed directly or indirectly by the white authorities, had total control over the Ovambo juridical process.² The missionaries acted as important collaborators.

Together with the more direct presence of the South African troops, the dependency on the cash economy had become more important. In spite of the growing number of migrant labourers in the beginning of this century, money became an important means of exchange only after World War II. This correlates with the decline of cattle raising as a basic subsistence strategy. The appreciation of money and the articulation of the new needs resulted in an explosive increase in migrant labour. The authorities also started granting trading licenses to Ovambos, which brought new consumer goods nearer to the people.³ In general, the life of the commoners continued as earlier, even though economically more difficult, until the 1960s.

After that time there was no more difficult things which is make people confused, after the king was captured (*the Uukwambi king in the 1930s*) ---

¹ Gordon (1978), p 264–65.

² *Ibid*, p 276.

³ Gordon (1979), p 282–283.

So after the SWAPO front (*in the 1960s*) so many people start going outside the country, then everything was boiling, people were beaten and so on ...¹

Thereafter, the early resistance of the Namibian people, the attention its demands gathered in the international community, and the developments in Africa in general made South Africa look for solutions of the Namibian situation. It had no idea of granting independence to the territory but enforcing its indirect rule. By the 1960s, the National Party in South Africa had gained political power and started to implement its apartheid policy more systematically. In 1962, a five-man commission of enquiry, called the Odendaal commission, recommended a bantustan policy in order to divide the area into "ethnic homelands". The reserves were to be abolished and people would be moved into their original areas, which would consist of 40 per cent of the total land area, leaving the remainder in the hands of whites and the government. The act was passed in 1968, and the bantustan administration was established providing political sovereignty to the bantustan citizens. The sovereignty was, however, meaningless, because the bantustan areas were not economically viable, so the citizens of the homelands had to work in the white areas as migrant labourers. The political authorities of the bantustans were totally dependent on the white administration.²

The 1960s also brought war into the area. The whole Northern zone was turned into a military operational area. The resistance of the people against the colonial rule, its stubbornness in not accepting the international decisions, and the failure of the internal solutions inspired the Namibian people to start an armed struggle. The colonial administration was further reinforced by military rule. It was said that Namibia was one of the most militarised countries in the world.³ The military occupation increased, when Namibia's northern neighbours Zambia and Angola gained their independence in 1964 and 1975 respectively.

As a consequence, since the 1960s, the women in Ovamboland were living under the conditions of war which ruled all aspects of life. The area was placed under curfew, and anybody moving outside after dark was automatically shot. This caused enormous difficulties e.g. for pregnant women to reach the hospitals. People were arrested randomly, tortured and killed.

¹ Interview 06.

² Mbuende (1986), p 91-93.

³ Cleaver & Wallace (1990), p 9.

... there was a lot of problem for war --- oooh --- they just tell me ... they (*the police*) tell me it was a war and I was in a jail --- they tell me that the terrorists are just around here at my home ---¹

As a part of the South African total strategy it started a "hearts and minds" campaign, whereby the country tried to portray itself as a development agency offering assistance and running schools and hospitals.² The schools and hospitals were transformed from being run by the church to by the colonial administration. Military camps were set up near the schools and soldiers acted as teachers. Pupils were harassed and beaten. Some people were forced to move from the operational area near the border, and their land was confiscated. The South African army also decided to establish ethnic-based armies in 1976 and to impose conscription. But the turnover was always very low and only increased young men's departure to exile.

The South African authorities tried to resolve the situation, and introduced an internal settlement scheme in the 1970s by calling a constitutional conference, the "Turnhalle conference", in 1975. It introduced a three-tier government: central, regional, and local. Every Namibian was a subject of one of the second tier governments in accordance with his/her ethnic identity.³ In some areas it resulted in former anti-colonial forces starting to collaborate with the government and setting up ethnic-based political parties.⁴ The arrangement did not, however, change the essence of the apartheid system and had little impact on everyday life in Ovamboland. It increased existing bureaucracy and gave some power to some locals, but they totally lacked the respect of the people. The Ovambos had long ago accepted other bodies as their source of authority: the church and the resistance movement.

¹Interview 09.

²Sparks & Green (1992) p 34.

³Mbuende (1986) p 95.

⁴See Brown, 1991; SWAPO (1981) and Katjavivi (1988).

Women's Role in the Early Resistance

The people of Namibia had resisted the occupation of their territory from the very beginning. The Germans met resistance from the southern and central communities during several different periods. It resulted in the extermination of nearly the whole Herero population in the resistance war 1904–1907. The Ovambo communities managed to defend their territory to such an extent, that the Germans never even tried a military occupation of their territory. Later on, different social groups—students, workers, church leaders etc.—rose up in demanding the end of the illegal occupation.

Mbuende has divided the resistance into two stages: the primary resistance and the national struggle. The earlier period was manifested by the individual ethnic groups who tried to preserve and/or restore their pre-colonial political institutions, and lasted until the end of World War II. The national struggle which followed, was a common struggle of the various ethnic groups for political self-determination.¹

During the early years of resistance, there were also local protests organised by the workers against the poverty-level wages, bad working conditions and the contract labour system. Strikes were organised in the mines in Luderitz and Oranjemund. Attempts to cooperate between different mines and the Cape Town workers were, however, effectively prohibited by the South African authorities and no formal organisations were established.²

The early resistance managed to slow down the occupation of Namibia, but did not prevent South Africa from gradually increasing its presence. According to Emmett, the early resistance did not succeed because of the fragmented nature of the Namibian social formation, the nature of the organisation, and the preponderant power of the colonial state. The colonial power succeeded in its policy to divide and rule, and the resistance movement did not manage to co-ordinate its actions to pose a serious threat to the government. The urban population was small and most of the people were scattered around the farms and reserves.³

When using Mbuende's definition of the resistance, the early resistance is to be seen as a very male-dominated movement. The

¹Mbuende (1986), p 140.

²Katjavivi (1988), p 19–21.

³Emmett (1983), p 197–198.

military troops of the different ethnic groups did not include women. There were no women in the formal labour force. Women had a supporting role, though, by serving their communities while men were in action. However, if we accept the approach which makes the support work done at home as important as the military action itself, we find women performing very important tasks during the resistance. And as described in chapter 4, women were often powerfully affecting the decisions of men as mothers of the kings. For example, the Uukwanyama king Mandume and the Uukwambi King Ipumbu were only teenage boys when they became kings.¹ Women were also believed to hold symbolic power in securing victory in war.

In addition to this, there are also some examples of independent women's campaigns during the primary resistance. After the Herero genocide of 1904–05, Herero women decided not to bear children while German rule lasted in the territory. A little later, Herero women refused to abase themselves to become "nannies" for white families.² The scope and outcome of these actions are not researched in further detail, but they show that already at the beginning of the resistance, women were playing a powerful role. They might have been acting in ways which can be regarded as traditionally feminine. This is more than natural in respect of their role in the traditional society, and in any case no less vital to the resistance movement.

Most of the recorded women's resistance actions were done by other population groups than Ovambos, because their lives were more directly affected by the colonial repression. For ordinary Ovambo women themselves, the presence of the occupation forces was not that prominent before World War II. They performed the duties defined by the community. Life changed, though, only in the 1960s, when the ideas of nationalism spread in the rural areas with migrant labourers.

The National Liberation Struggle

The Social Forces behind the Resistance

The most significant characteristic of the Namibian resistance against colonialism after World War II is the emergence of nationalism. According to Mbuende, the resistance was no longer based on

¹Silveste, (1992), p 2.

²SWAPO (1981), p 286.

demands for the restoration of precolonial order, but instead on the demand for the formation of a sovereign nation state. The common experience of the colonial oppression and exploitation created a sense of unity among the Namibian people.¹

The ideologies of nationalism were widespread all over sub-Saharan Africa after World War II. People in the colonies were inspired by the ideas of an independent unitary state free from white oppression and ethnic segregation. Mbuende believes that there are different forms of nationalism in different African countries, depending on the historic circumstances and social formations. Nationalism can also have different forms in the same country in different periods of time. Referring to Markovitz, he identifies at least four types of nationalism in Africa: 1) genteel nationalism or bourgeois nationalism, 2) cultural nationalism like the ideology of negritude, 3) mass nationalism involving all sectors of the society and 4) peasant-based nationalism like the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya.² Nationalism in many countries was linked with different forms of "indigenous" ideologies, like that of African socialism.³ According to Mbuende, nationalism in Namibia had three different phases, the aristocratic nationalism (1946–59), mass nationalism (1959–1976) and social-revolutionary nationalism (1976–).

Emmett states that nationalism is a controversial and problematic area in social sciences. There is disagreement whether nationalism should be seen as an ideology or a movement, whether it is a rational or irrational response, and whether it should be regarded as conservative/reactionary or revolutionary and progressive. Like Mbuende he concludes, that there are different forms of nationalism: the European nationality differs from the Third World nationalism aimed against colonialism. There are at least two different trends in the definition of nationalism: first, the one which emphasises the assertion of an identifiable community with its own rights, self-determination, autonomy or uniqueness, and secondly, the trend that emphasises the relationship between nationalism and social change. The last definition is more "modern" and is linked with the underdevelopment paradigm that sees nationalism "as a response of disadvantaged or peripheral areas to inequality, exploitation and underdevelopment forced on them by dominant, advantaged or core areas". Emmett also shares the idea of the distinction between

¹Ibid, p 145.

²Markovitz (1977), ref to in Mbuende, p 145.

³Hettne (1990), p 109.

primary and secondary resistance, the latter being inspired by a "modern" meaning of nationalism.¹

Emmett points out that there is an interesting relationship between nationalism and ethnicity (or subnationalism). According to him, the theories explaining the Third World situation have failed to come to terms with the surviving elements of precolonial formations, which were based on ethnic identity.² For Mbuende and other SWAPO historians, the question of ethnicity has always been seen as a somewhat negative ideology, which did not assist but prevented the national struggle. Ethnicity was characteristic of primary resistance, while it was overcome by nationalism and the national identity during the liberation struggle.³ This is understandable, bearing in mind that the essence of colonial rule was the implementation of ethnic politics and the rhetoric of ethnic identity. Although it served the colonial policy of divide and rule, it also helped different groups to identify themselves as an anti-colonial force.

Ethnicity, on the other hand, was more often connected with the negative concept of "tribalism". During the years of struggle, tribalism was officially regarded as non-existent. The ethnic parties were seen as artificial creations of South African rule and an opposition to nationalism. Those supporting the ethnic parties were collaborators.⁴ In her study on a labour reserve in Western Namibia, Brown outlines different manifestations of ethnicity. The Damaras never produced a common identity by culture or virtue of birth, but it was clearly a survival strategy in the ethnic-based homeland system of Namibia. The Damaras identified themselves as Damaras, because it was politically wise and because they were dependent on the resources allocated through the ethnic council. It resulted from the assumption that SWAPO was also an ethnic party representing Ovambos. Thus the Damaras did not employ ethnicity as an opponent to nationalism. They appointed ethnicity as a vehicle because of the society in which they were living, not because of opposing national liberation. She concludes, that we should get away from the the notion that what we are dealing with is a choice between the ideologies of ethnicity and nationalism.⁵

¹Emmett (1983), p II-VI.

²Ibid, p VII.

³See Mbuende (1986); SWAPO (1981) and Katjavivi (1988).

⁴Brown (1991), p 7.

⁵Brown (1991), p 41-48.

In comparison to the other ethnic groups in Namibia, one might ask the question why Ovambos did not identify themselves with the ethnic-based Ovambo government. The same reason seems to explain the difference. The Ovambo administration never offered any security for Ovambos in comparison to SWAPO. Before the appointment of the Ovambo administration, SWAPO had already won the support of the Ovambos and established itself as a community to rely on. SWAPO was started by the Ovambos and thus became their strategy for survival. Because of strong participation from all ethnic Ovambo communities, SWAPO was regarded as an "Ovambo party". Many Ovambos stated they were "born-SWAPO"—automatically SWAPO supporters. SWAPO operated in the area of Ovamboland, assisting and mobilising people in the war zone. Damaras of the homeland, on the other hand, saw SWAPO mainly as an Ovambo party and due to the settlement politics were forced to stay in the areas where the Damara Council held the key to all resources.

Ethnicity must be regarded as a factor in mobilising people during the colonial era, but as Brown points out, it should not be taken as an alternative to nationalism. As we will see in connection with the women, ethnicity—"the Ovambo identity" and "the sense of community"—was definitely one source of political participation and led to national struggle. As one woman interviewed said:

although we are all Namibians, I am Ovambo by birth and proud of it.¹

Towards National Identity

The link between the primary resistance and the national struggle is, according to Mbuende, the phase of "aristocratic" nationalism (1946–1959) which was led by the same groups as the primary resistance, i.e. traditional chiefs. It was a phase of the national struggle without a formal national movement.² It was the era of petitions, demonstrations and church involvement. Many traditional leaders, especially in the Northern areas, were fully cooperating with the colonial authorities after their power bases had been totally destroyed. In the South, however, the traditional chiefs were more vocal in their demands.³ According to Mbuende, the ability and willingness of

¹Interview 15.

²Mbuende (1986), p 146–147.

³SWAPO (1981), p 275.

certain ethnic groups to take an anti-colonial stance was a product of the colonial policy. Instead of trying to assimilate all ethnic groups, it practised a policy of racial segregation, which aimed at promoting the self-assertion of individual ethnic groups as a device of divide and rule. That resulted in Herero and Nama groups reflecting their identity in relation to their anticolonial history.¹

The first resistance which came outside of the framework of traditional ethnic institutions and which was inspired by nationalism was led by students and migrant labourers. A few Namibian students who studied in South Africa organised themselves into a body called South West Africa Student Body in 1952 which was later constituted to South West Africa Progressive Association (SWAPA) in 1955. It aimed at creating an African national cultural identity and preparing Africans for the struggle against colonialism. Education was to be the instrument. SWAPA's struggle against colonialism was conducted on the basis of European political ethics viz. the notion of liberal democracy. Nationalism was thus based on the western notion of democracy.²

The other early formation of resistance was carried out by the Ovambo migrant labourers in Cape Town, who organised themselves into the Ovamboland's People's Congress in 1957 which was later renamed as the Ovamboland's People's Organisation (OPO). The organisation was inspired by the African National Congress (ANC) and its most important aim was the abolishment of the contract labour system. Thus, the struggle of OPO was first and foremost against economic repression. But under the colonial circumstances, the economic struggle was bound to be a political movement as well. Its struggle became meaningful only when placed within the broader context of the struggle for national independence.³ SWAPA and OPO both united their forces with the traditional authorities in the petition campaign to the United Nations. This then resulted in the establishing of two national liberation movements, SWANU in 1959 and SWAPO in 1960, which can be seen as the turning point in the national liberation struggle.

¹Mbuende (1986), p 148.

²Ibid, p 150.

³Ibid, p 151-152.

Women's Organised Resistance

Needless to say, perhaps, but both of these formations (SWAPA and OPO) were predominantly male. Women were not allowed to study or work at that time. Both movements were started outside the Namibian territory. However, they attracted a large following among the Namibians, when their activists started to organise in Walvis Bay and in Ovamboland among the migrant workers. Most of their followers were men living in workers' compounds.

In the larger cities, there were already a few settlements where women had managed to move and settle in, many of them working as domestic servants. In Windhoek, the black and coloured population had already at the turn of the century settled in the area called "The Old Location". The area had been a lively and open mixture of different ethnic groups. It had dynamic economic interaction with the "white" Windhoek, where most of the people worked. The South African administration had developed its infrastructure on a small scale, but did not intervene in settlement patterns until the 1950s. Families lived in houses constructed by themselves, and the area had its own schools, recreation centres, health care facilities etc.¹

In the 1950s, the South African controlled Municipality of Windhoek wanted to demolish the Old Location and build a new township on the outskirts of Windhoek. It was part of its overall plan to impose more strict segregation on different ethnic and racial groups.² One part of the plan was to forbid the brewing of local drinks, which was an important source of cash for many women. The community was never consulted, but it was united in its opposition to forced removal. The new location with its proposed fences, its enforced segregation, its higher rentals, complete lack of facilities, restricted ownership of land and property, non-viability of business activities, and remote site could not present itself as an attractive alternative. It was seen as a threat to the very fabric of people's lives and a limitation of the little freedom they still enjoyed.³ Although the protests by the residents were mostly spontaneous, a strong part was played by the newly formed resistance organisations OPO and SWANU and the spirit they represented.

¹University of Namibia (1991).

²Ibid, p 5.

³Ibid, p 19.

The residents of the Old Location organised themselves and sought negotiation with the authorities. A non-European advisory board was set up, but it lacked the true representation of the community. And the municipality refused to listen to the arguments of the residents and decided to go along with the plan. The houses were violently destroyed and people were deported to the new area. It did not happen without several confrontations between the police and the residents, ending up in the shooting incident of 10 December 1959, where 13 people were killed and 54 wounded.

The Old Location incident has been earmarked as a turning point in the resistance movement in Namibia. It was a clear sign of the brutal violence which the regime was prepared to use in order to impose its power. The 1950s was an era of forced removals also in the other communities, when the South African regime started to pay more attention to the settlement policy.¹ After the shooting, the harassment against the leaders of the still young resistance movement intensified. Some of its leaders had no other choice but go into exile. Many people chose rather to move voluntarily to the new area "Katutura", although its construction was not yet completed. Some fled the Old Location back to their home areas.

Furthermore, the Old Location resistance is seen as the starting point for the women's organised resistance against the regime. Women had already in September 1959 organised a protest march against the harassment of the local beer brewers. The brewing of the local beer "tombo" had been in fact illegal since the 1930s, but the law was not enforced until the end of the 1950s. The municipality had established a municipal beer hall in order to combat home made beer. The women resented the way in which the municipality was taking over the brewing of beer, which traditionally had been handled by the women in the community and was a valued source of income. It was a way for women to earn cash independent of white employers, a fact which did not please the South African authorities. The women organised another protest march on 8 December. The leaders and the number of participants of both of the marches had not been established, but it was estimated that there were hundreds of them. This time, the march was also against the planned removal. The protests were not heard, and the residents decided to start a boycott against the municipal facilities. This boycott remained in

¹Katjavivi (1988), p 47.

effect until 10 December, when another protest march was organised with fatal consequences.¹

Unfortunately none of the interviews done for this study gives any information about this powerful women's protest against the South African authorities. However, many women regard it as an important turning point in their political participation. Especially amongst the women's organisation in Namibia, it is regarded as the starting point for more organised women's protests and celebrated as Namibia Women's Day. The women's march was participated in by women from all ethnic groups, because segregation was not in place in everyday life. The beer "tombo" is, however, a traditional Ovambo drink made by Ovambo women, which could mean that many of the women affected by the ban on brewing were those few Ovambo women living in the urban area. However the female Ovambo population must have been very small, because, according to one resident there was no oshivambo school in the Old Location. Ovambo-speaking children were normally sent to relatives in the North.² Besides the movement restrictions, the ban on brewing traditional beer was the first significant act from the authorities to restrict the economic activities of women. Thus it was the first time when the women felt the need for united actions to defend even the limited rights they enjoyed.

By the time of the Old Location incident the urban population was still very small. Most of the women were staying in reserves. However, it was at that time when women started to be involved in the resistance movement in the reserves, too. The ideas of nationalism were taking a stand. Women learned about the resistance from their male relatives and husbands.

... in 1963 I remember SWAPO, my uncle went to join ... I became interested because there were many problems... you know my brother and my family ... and ... now we understand what they are talking about now --- we are fighting with the boer ... As women we work at home in the field ... we come together as women and we try to do everything at home ... the church was very very important ... it can help women...³

Women's contribution was limited in supporting the first guerillas and providing safety for men who were wanted by the police. There was no organised resistance by women, but they were involved through their families and traditional communities. There were only

¹Ibid, p 25.

²Interview 15.

³Interview 21.

a few women, educated by the church schools, who also got involved through their own activities.

For the majority of Ovambo women, the resistance community became something connected with their own community. Their husbands were involved and their relatives were threatened. Women identified with the resistance not so much because of its ideological basis, but because it was another community to rely on. Ovambo women did not yet communicate a lot with other communities in Namibia, but lived according to their traditional beliefs. They identified themselves first and foremost as Ovambos and supported the early national resistance from that point of view. Although the resistance movement employed the rhetoric of nationalism, for many women it was of little importance. They wanted to defend their community, and the national liberation movement offered a proper and "familiar" channel for that. In the case of women, the sense of common identity—being part of the same ethnic group—served the purpose of mobilising for national resistance better than the yet unfamiliar ideas of nationalism or "class consciousness".

... there was just the conflict between the government because people were not allowed to travel and so --- first this conflict was not straight to me, but it was just my daughters and sons who suffered ... they were beaten, they were tortured, they were taken out from the school ... so from there it is when they (*the police*) start to go around the houses and the house were checked and they say that they were looking for SWAPO guerillas until I was captured and I went to the jail and was beaten by a white person ...¹

The Birth of the Liberation Movements SWANU and SWAPO

The mobilisation of the workers, the petition campaigns by the traditional chiefs, the students movements, and finally the Old Location incident resulted in establishing the first national liberation movements in 1960. SWANU, which was the successor of the Chiefs Council and the student-led SWAPA was, though, formally established in 1959, and it took an active role in resisting the forced removals. It was "conceived as an umbrella organisation, which would bring together the different elements of anti-colonial resistance into a single nationalist organisation".² Already from the beginning, there was a disagreement between different groups within the organisation about its role and leadership. Furthermore,

¹Interview 08.

²Emmett (1983), p 382.

SWANU was never a mass-based organisation.¹ Yet it succeeded in continuing its lobbying work in the United Nations and outside Namibia. Its importance declined drastically after its refusal to launch an armed struggle, and its involvement in the Sino-Soviet dispute favouring the Chinese line. The first decision meant that it did not get material support from the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), and its recognition was withdrawn by 1968. The second decision resulted in its expulsion from the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organisation (AAPSO). Furthermore, its external wing disintegrated and it finally split into two fractions in 1984. The first fraction collaborated with the South African regime and the other maintained an anti-colonial stand.²

The workers mobilisation soon took the form of the general liberation movement and SWAPO, the South West African People's Organisation, was formed in 1960. There was a little confusion and competition in the beginning between the two liberation movements, but their cooperation was still active. Both organisations had their support base in different social groups of Namibia. SWAPO was from the beginning a national organisation, whose aim was to struggle for the independent government of South West Africa. Its policies were inspired by the various other liberation movements and their achievements in Africa. It worked to "unify all Namibian people into cohesive national political organisation irrespective of their race, ethnic origin, religion or creed."³ There were several attempts to unify the two organisations, but they proved unsuccessful.

The Struggle Goes International

The Namibian national struggle became international from the very beginning. The SWANU and SWAPO leaderships were forced into exile after the Old Location incident. The Organisation of African Unity (OAU) was formed in 1963, and one of its main tasks was to channel assistance to the nationalist movements in the countries not yet independent. It recognised both SWANU and SWAPO. SWAPO followed the recommendation of OAU and the example of many other liberation movements, and launched an armed struggle in 1966. This followed the long but unsuccessful diplomatic cam-

¹Katjavivi (1988), p 43-44.

²Mbuende (1986), p 153-154.

³Katjavivi (1988), p 45-46.

paign—in the International Court of Justice and in various committees of the UN—which failed to recognise the illegality of the South African Regime. At the same time, South Africa prepared to go along with the planned Bantustan act. The UN General Assembly did, however, withdraw the South African mandate later in 1966, but it did not manage to force South Africa to leave the territory.¹

SWAPO had continued its mobilisation work all around the country despite the harassment of its leaders. Especially the people in the northern areas started to support its claims, because many of the early activists were Ovambo migrant workers. Although most of the followers were men, women were also affected. Activists harassed by the police were assisted and hidden from the police. Some youngsters started to cross the border to go into military training, which SWAPO had started already in 1962 with the assistance of some independent governments. Amongst those early exiles were only three women.

... I went abroad into Angola ... at that time there was a war of bangas ... it was 1963 --- from there we went into Zaire ... I was with my boyfriend... we left together --- while we were in Zaire we met with the president (*Nujoma*) in Zaire in 1964 --- the president organised somebody to represent our case ... when our passports were organised we were authorised to board a plane to Tanzania --- we were told to go military training --- it was a SWAPO training camp ...²

Women were having more difficulties to leave the country because of family and social responsibilities. And traditionally fighting was a male activity which women supported from home. One of the first women fighters tells, however, that she was treated equally with men, and received military training alongside men in Tanzania.

... (*I left the country*) ... because of colonial oppression ... I decided on my own to go (*there were not many women at that time*) ... I was treated very well, because many men when they saw that I was the only woman among them, they treated me very well ... in Tanzania there was no other Namibian women ... there were other two women, but they were not on the side of military, they were sort of students ...³

When the number of refugees rose, some were sent to study, because not all could be accommodated in military training. Two other women went through a short period of military training, and continued their SWAPO service by studying. These women were very exceptional, because they all left the country of their own free will.

¹ Katjavivi (1988), p 55–60.

² Interview 18.

³ Interview 18.

Many more women politicised and joined SWAPO, but did not leave the country until the beginning of the 1970s.

The launching of the armed struggle resulted in the state of war in the Northern areas. It was also followed by arrests of several SWAPO members, who were accused on the basis of the new legislation—the Terrorism Act—introduced in 1967. Thirty-seven men were charged, 20 of whom were sentenced to life imprisonment. The trials and the sentences attracted a lot of attention and resulted in growing dissatisfaction with the regime. Following the intensified action on the international front taken by the church leaders, the International Court of Justice finally came to the conclusion that the continued presence of South Africa in Namibia was illegal. South Africa rejected this opinion in the UN Security Council. The church leaders continued their efforts in pursuing independence by sending an open letter to the Prime Minister of South Africa with no noticeable considerable effect.

Encouraged by the ICJ opinion and frustrated by the South African unwillingness to respect the international opinion, the contract workers started a nationwide strike in 1971. It was the first time a strike was centrally organised and covered the whole country. It was organised by ordinary workers who were inspired by the nationalist struggle. The strikers demanded the ending of the contract labour system, better working conditions and more freedom in choosing their employer. The strike itself continued until January 1972 when the South African authorities decided to abolish the central recruiting agency SWANLA, by setting up labour bureaux run by the tribal authorities. It was claimed that the workers had achieved a major victory.¹

According to Katjavivi, the main achievements by the strikers were not the concessions made by the South African authorities, which were merely cosmetic, but the politicizing effect it had on the workers and their families. He claims that through the strike the workers gained a wider perspective and understood, that in order to bring about changes they had to strive for much wider political change.² This interpretation of Namibian history is an example of the idea that all resistance was serving the main aim—the national independence struggle—and that all actions must be put in relation to that. Peltola has shown in his dissertation, however, that workers actually gained a number of real benefits after the strike. For

¹Katjavivi (1988), p 67–69.

²Katjavivi (1988), p 71.

example, the nominal wages of black miners rose 4.2 times between 1972–77, and the inflation deduced real wages 2.5 times. At the same time, the wage difference between white and black miners was reduced from 1:10.4 to 1:5.5.¹ Katjavivi's interpretation was dominant among the leaders of the national struggle during the years of struggle, which is later shown in connection with the women's questions as well. By the time of the strike, SWAPO had already established itself as a leader of the nationalist struggle inside Namibia. Its importance grew thereafter, when the UN General Assembly voted in favour of recognising the organisation "as the authentic representative of the Namibian people". The resistance movement was legitimately led by SWAPO.

On the internal front, the strike led to a further militarisation of Namibia. Many of its leaders were arrested, brought to trial and sentenced. A state of emergency was declared in Ovamboland in 1972 and imposed on the whole country by 1977. South Africa tried to enforce its presence by implementing the Bantustan Self-Government Act, and organising elections for legislative assemblies. The SWAPO Youth League and a few other organisations started mobilising people to boycott the elections. The campaign was successful and only 2.5 per cent of the people voted. In the second election the turnover was bigger, but the election was still rejected by the people. Several people—students, teachers and nurses—were arrested and punished by public flogging. The trials, repression and the revolution in Angola in 1974 made thousands of Namibians leave the country by crossing the border to Angola. The Namibian exodus had begun.

Reformulation of the Policy and Strategy

The increasing membership and intensified struggle demanded ever more from SWAPO in an organisational sense. SWAPO was also still seen mainly as an Ovambo organisation, which caused dissatisfaction amongst members of some other ethnic groups.² It decided to restructure itself in order to establish itself firmly as an exile organisation, provide better communication between the internal and external wing, and to reaffirm its policy and strategy. The first major gathering was held in Tanga, Tanzania in 1969–1970. Several amendments to the constitution were made, new leadership was

¹Peltola (1994).

²Katjavivi (1988), p 93.

elected and separate affiliated wings for women, youth and the elderly were established.¹ After the internal crisis of SWAPO in 1976, a new political programme was drawn up. The main organisational activity demanded by SWAPO in between those two congresses was, however, the establishment of its educational and health centres to gather together the increasing numbers of exiles arriving from Namibia. Several refugee centres were set up in Angola and Zambia. By the end of the 1970s, SWAPO had become an exiled liberation movement with headquarters in Luanda, Angola.

The main ideological inspirer of SWAPO was, during the years of the liberation struggle, primarily nationalism. SWAPO's first objective was the national liberation of Namibia. That aim was successfully adopted by most of its followers.

... I wanted only to participate during that time in order to get the country free.²

... I came here for fighting not for school ... (*when lying about the age on arrival at the camp*).³

... oh I do not want even to go to school ... I say no, how can I go to school ... I am a soldier ... I am coming to fight.⁴

Concerning the means by which to reach liberation, SWAPO preferred a total strategy varying from the petition campaign to mass mobilisation and the armed struggle. The decision to wage an armed struggle was, according to Per Strand, probably the policy change which had the biggest influence on how the struggle for independence was to develop.⁵

During the thirty-year long struggle, SWAPO also developed different ideas of which kind of society it wanted to build. Strand, who has studied SWAPO policy changes before and after the Namibian independence, states that before 1976, SWAPO was pursuing a policy of a liberal, social-democratic nature, whereby the state would redress the injustices created by the racist colonial state. The policy programme of 1976 was a turning-point, with which SWAPO embarked on a struggle of "social revolutionary nationalism". It wanted to create a society "based on the ideals and prin-

¹Katjavivi (1988), p 105.

²Interview 07.

³Group discussion 01.

⁴Interview 02.

⁵Strand (1991), p 52-53.

ciples of scientific socialism". Then again the Economic Policy Document of 1988 marked a shift in SWAPO's policy generally, and towards private enterprise in particular, by formulating a pragmatic approach. Mbuende, who was one of the main researchers involved in SWAPO itself points out a similar change in SWAPO's political ideology in 1976. After that, the struggle involved four interrelated elements: political independence, economic independence, social revolution and cultural regeneration.¹

According to Strand, the adoption of Marxist-Leninist ideology was done mainly because of the strong support provided to SWAPO by the socialist bloc of countries, and also because it was an ideology to attract a large following. In practice, SWAPO had been more pragmatic in its intentions during the struggle. Policy formulation was a means to reach its prime objective – national liberation. There is no doubt, however, that some of the SWAPO leaders were and still are convinced of the supremacy of socialism over capitalism. SWAPO used Marxism–Leninism in its official rhetoric, but was in practice more open towards different alternatives by leaving the door open for different analysis of its intentions. That brings Strand to the conclusion, that the economic policy favouring private enterprises SWAPO is implementing in independent Namibia, is not such a big change.²

The other question remains, whether the Marxist-Leninist ideology was adopted by its followers and if so, what were the consequences of it not being implemented by the first SWAPO government. According to Strand, the former liberation fighters are today forced to play according to the political and economic rules set by those, who for many years were portrayed as the enemy.³ The question of SWAPO's ideology is one of the issues this study will raise in respect to women. The question will be studied in the next chapters. However, at this point we can already note that among those "main ideologists" of SWAPO interviewed by Strand, there were no women. As he points out, the circumstances inside the country and the structures of the organisation itself meant, that the policy documents of SWAPO were always drawn up by a very limited group of activists. In reality, in fact, there was a plurality of political ideas within the movement. National liberation and a future

¹Mbuende (1986), p 158.

²Strand (1991), p 52–53.

³Ibid p 53.

better society were the unifying forces, the ideological aspect was not that important.¹

After the UN recognition in 1973, SWAPO also intensified its diplomatic campaign. It established a number of offices overseas in order to attain international support and humanitarian assistance. Its members were sent to study all over the world. It was a recognised party in the Security Council negotiations for Namibian independence in 1978. Resolution 435 was approved to provide independence. The South African government, however, favoured an internal settlement and went along with the so-called Turnhalle proposal. The South African military attack on Kassinga refugee camp intensified the war, and the failure of the international community to pressure the South African regime to accept the UN plan, resulted in resolution 435 only being implemented in 1989. The 1980s meant growing action inside and outside Namibia by SWAPO.

Women's Life on the Battlefield

The turn of the decade 1960–70 was central to the liberation struggle. Those who had been “outsiders” could no longer remain so but the whole population was drawn into the struggle. There was a war and there was a clear enemy – the violent South African colonial regime.

The competition between the two movements SWAPO and SWANU ended up in SWAPO's favour. SWAPO formed a strong anti-colonial alliance which unified other groupings of different ethnic and social background. As Mbuende points out, SWAPO was integrated into the Namibian society as the negation of the South African regime. Since the mid-1970s there were two warring parties in Namibia; SWAPO on the one hand, and the South African regime on the other.² Those who wanted to express dissatisfaction against the South African regime, did it in the context of SWAPO. The only other operational party on the national front was the Democratic Turnhalle Conference, which was seen as a puppet organisation for the South African regime. Furthermore, the ethnic parties were considered as collaborators with the regime and operated only in their respective ethnic homelands.

In Ovamboland many women were left with few options. Strikes, trials, arrests and harassment became everyday life. The society in Ovamboland was in a state of chaos, in a state of war. There was a

¹Strand (1991), p 27–28.

²Mbuende (1986), p 155.

curfew, which seriously restricted people's movements. The old traditional structures and safety nets collapsed, when traditional authorities were bought on the side of the colonial regime. The authority of the newly-elected bantustan leaders was rejected by the people, and Elifas, the Chief Minister of Ovamboland, was murdered seven months after the elections. The economic and social conditions deteriorated. At the same time people disappeared, being either arrested by the police or attracted by SWAPO to go into exile. SWAPO was not banned, but its activities were severely restricted. In spite of this, it managed to organise in schools, penetrate into the villages and move among the people.

... Later it became normally that after the guerillas came inside the Namibia, they (*the police*) were trying to go around the house again. If they capture one of the guerilla they were trying to torture him and may kill him. After that ... when they put the people in the prison, because we were living near here Oshakati, we never sleep well because we just hear ... uuuuuuuu ... the people when they are shouting ... screaming.¹

Many women were afraid, even terrified by the situation. Most of them being sympathetic to the guerilla's, they were afraid to provide help because it happened at the expense of their own safety.

Sometimes they (*the military*) come to our home and beat us, and ask about SWAPO. I tell them I don't see SWAPO ... but I see them and help them --- but sometimes I fear because of the police.²

On the other hand the hatred against the colonial regime was so strong that it overcame the fear of consequences. Repression and war, poverty and starvation in the rural areas, unemployment and trying to bring up children single-handed led the majority of women to support the cause of the liberation movement. People were simply tired of the situation. Furthermore, SWAPO offered a legitimised and well-known channel for resistance.

Most of my family went to exile ... all seven sisters and brothers ... I was left with my mother ... my father was shot death. --- I just learn (*politics*) from my parents --- What force me to cook for them (*guerillas*) was because this colonial Namibia and because of my people, my brothers and sisters, they are all out and I don't know where they are, maybe they are at Ongandjera and those Ongandjera are here, so I cook for them ... they come and need help ...³

¹Interview 06.

²Interview 05.

³Interview 03.

Everybody knew somebody who had joined the SWAPO in exile. In addition women were politicised through their husbands and fathers, who were migrant labourers and brought home the ideas of nationalism.

... you know I use to tell people that maybe I was born in my blood there is an injection of politics ... because when I was a young girl I had high interest in politics... at fifteen I started to join SWAPO rallies and I became a member of SWAPO youth league ---my parents were so worried about me... my father use to say ... my goodness... my daughter is just behaving like a man... I really did --- but I think what made me to join it was my father ... before I was born my father was already a migrant worker ... I said to my father one day that when I get married my husband is not going to work as migrant labour --- that really made me to join liberation struggle at the early age because I didn't want my children grow like I did ...¹

Women did not only provide food, shelter and moral support but took political initiatives themselves. One of the mothers in Ovambo-land wrote a letter to the United Nations in 1973, reporting the treatment people were subjected to in the war zone.

We, the Namibian women, are tired of giving birth to children who are going to be treated like slaves in their own country of birth and do not have the chance to eat the fruits of their land peacefully ...²

The letter was smuggled out of the country by missionaries. The author's name was blacklisted and she was forced to leave the country. Women did not have a common organisational base for their activities, but a lot of the resistance was centred on the church. SWAPO Women's Council, which was established in exile in 1970 and mobilised women in other parts of the country, could not operate in the war zone before the end of the 1980s. Even then, its operations were done secretly.

The different congregations became important channels for women's resistance. The churches were practically the only places where women could gather. The clear commitment to the people's cause by the church leaders increased confidence amongst the members. The churches organised prayers, relief operations and self-help groups. Many women were educated by the church institutions and remained in close cooperation with it. In the 1980s, different churches came together and protested against the illegal occupation.

We start to organise a women organisation where I was a member and we start paying for our children who went abroad ... we prayed for South

¹Interview 16.

²Shamena (1991), p 53.

Africa to go out---it was Ongwediva congregation (*who organised the group*) --- So all the church came together and start writing a letter to the administration of South Africa to tell them to go outside the country --- We were fighting because the girls where taken out of the school and raped in the bush --- (*In the big women's march*) the king started shouting to us:you women, 'you women, you don't have husbands, where are the husbands.' So one of the women said: we don't have men, our husbands, you bury them alive ... you put them in prison ... some they are lost".¹

The resistance by the church was always seen in connection with the general liberation struggle. It was clear that the church covered operations done by SWAPO activists and even hid some of its members in its premises. The communist ideology, which SWAPO openly pursued, was not regarded as contradictory to religious belief. As a matter of fact, SWAPO regarded religion and the involvement of the churches as a valuable contribution to its cause.² This strengthens the point made by Strand about the pragmatic nature of SWAPO's policy.³ SWAPO realised the power the churches had on the Ovambo population, which was almost totally Christian and did not want to argue about atheism, which would have been more in line with the socialist ideology.

A very important involvement in the struggle was that of teachers and nurses. The church schools taught women for two main professions: teaching and nursing. The South African "hearts and minds" campaign included the taking over of these institutions and employment of many women in its vacancies. They tried to create a "buffer"—a middle class—to be dependent on South African employment and against the socialist rhetoric of SWAPO. Women who were working either at the church or state hospitals or schools, were, however, amongst the strongest supporters of the liberation movement. The regime realised soon that educated people were a danger to the traditional bantustan authorities and the colonial regime.

I didn't think of going (*exile*) because we were those people who were helping SWAPO combatants (*in the bush*)". We helped SWAPO combatants by food, wearing and by giving them medicine --- sometimes we help them when they got injured we could help them to sleep in the house --- deep deep in the bush (*we treat them*) --- they (*SWAPO combatants*) used to send some of the people to whom they know that this

¹Interview 06.

²See Katjavivi et al (19899.

³Strand (1991).

can help us ... to the nurse... so when we finish our work here (*in the hospital*) then we go..."¹

When I started nursing when I go to home I just met comrade there and they have a need of medicine, of first aid and something like that ... and ... so I tried to get medicine for them and ... and bandage and syringes and those who have got injured then we hide him in a special place where I know and I go there, I try to get my day off, and go there and give him a treatment..."²

Like nurses, the teachers did not feel any contradiction working for the colonial authority and supporting the liberation struggle.

... that time I feel like working for ... even if I was under South African government ... I feel that these people I am serving are my people ... the government which is ruling us is not our government but these people I am serving are my people ... and ... I mean ... I know that I receive money from South Africa, but one thing is that ... that money they use is from our resources here ... so they are the ones who get a lot of money ... in mining ... so they are using my resources --- and they get a lot of money but what they are giving is nothing..."³

Some women, who did not have other means of supporting their families, started small-scale business activities by selling groceries, home-brewed beer or liquor. The illegalisation of home-brewed beer was not in effect in the bantustans, and as part of its strategy the South African regime provided cheap alcohol to the locals as well as its own soldiers. These *cuca*-shops or "tombo places" soon became important centres of intelligence for SWAPO guerrillas and gathering places for those going into exile.

... I remember it was in the evening one day, these SWAPO -PLAN fighters came to our place... so my father had a *cuca*-shop, so they were asking for some money ... but he did not have enough cash there... so he came to me, and tell me that the PLAN fighters are here ... they want money ... so do you have any cash with you so that we can give them some ... I gave him ... so they went.. the next morning when I was in my class the South African soldiers came..."⁴

(*did your business suffer during the war*) ... yeah, suffer, suffer, suffer, that time you get nothing to sell and the *makakunyas* (*black policemen*) come there and destroy everything --- and you go to wholesale and speak those people to help you they say you support SWAPO we don't help you ..." ⁵

¹Discussion 10.

²Interview 11.

³Interview 22.

⁴Interview 22.

⁵Interview 21.

Some women, though, worked for the regime by portraying themselves as “neutral” in respect of the conflict. Many worked for the police in the end of the 1980s when the police force started to recruit black women. The military had already in the 1970s recruited men. Women were also needed as cleaners, kitchen and office-help. Some women were from the families of the bantustan authorities and thus followed the opportunities given. One reason to work for the South African administration was that the work and status it provided was better than unemployment or being self-employed. Many of the policewomen, for example, joined the police force mainly because it was a means for survival.

... I got it very difficult to have a job ... and because I can't do anything ... I decided to become a police ... although it was difficult at this time because of political conflict ... because I can't do anything ... I have my new baby ... I decided to become a police --- because I have my standard 8 (*relatively high school attendance*) --- it was easy to get a job as a police --- I am educated and I have so many children, so I got it difficult to be unemployed --- before I work at the hospital as a cleaner ... I have my standard 8 ... but there was no posts... then I decided that I don't like hospital work (*you didn't want to become a nurse or teacher?*) ...no... no.¹

I was working for the government (*South African*) ... and my husband died long time ago --- I worked as a cook ... and cleaning ... (*did you like the work?*) ... hah ... I was just doing it because I didn't have other work ... I was chased a way from the college because I was supporting SWAPO --- from there I was demoralised to support SWAPO --- and I was sick and then I got a work from the government, when I was working for the government they were harassing me that I am not on their side that I am in SWAPO's side --- (*then she joined DTA to keep the job*)²

Some women were simply bought by the regime by being offered a job. Towards the end of the 1980s, when the solution to the Namibian situation was at the door and the elections to come, women were recruited by the DTA. Naturally many women were suspected of collaborating with the enemy, especially when their colleagues were detained by the police, accused of supporting SWAPO. This caused tension in some communities and work places.

First in 1974 we start to organise ourselves here in the hospital, then from 1974 there was maybe some of the people who didn't want to work with SWAPO so they get away from the organisation, so from then when people were started beaten --- They were those who were working for the

¹Interview 14.

²Interview 12.

DTA --- Most of them were married to the boers or makakunjas (*black policemen working for SA*)¹

The number of those women who openly supported the colonial regime was always, however, minimal. The regime simply did not represent a viable alternative to support. And surprisingly, even though some of the whites and the chief authorities were hated and even faced a physical threat from the people, the common workers were mainly seen as victims of the system rather than active enemy agents. The explanation women gave when asked why some of their fellow women joined the colonial forces, was that they were forced by the circumstances or misled. Many of them were uneducated and illiterate.

Most of the people were not doing the work because they wanted, but because they were forced to do it or maybe they were poor they just needed the money so they do it ... Maybe their eyes they were blinded ... and they were just doing it because of the government which was ruling ... you know the old people use to say if maybe my mother was married with my father then later they divorced then she take another man, then I said that man is now my father because he married my mother ...²

The success of SWAPO presenting itself as an alternative to the repressive colonial rule is one reason why so many women fell on its side. The image of SWAPO was positive, it belonged to the people. The reason to join SWAPO was found in the circumstances; life was miserable and that misery was caused by South Africa. The political aims of SWAPO, spelled out by the SWAPO supporters interviewed, were primarily peace, national liberation, and the abolishing of the apartheid regime. Women interviewed for this study did not state any other ideology they wanted to support. When asked about Marxism-Leninism, some of the women mentioned having heard about it. At the same time, none of the informants mentioned the improvement of women's position in particular as a motivating force when joining the struggle. Like Strand pointed out in his study, the ideology was of little importance to the people in the rank and file of SWAPO.³ Joining SWAPO was not a political choice per se, but a natural reaction to the situation.

I support SWAPO because one thing it is my political group and another thing it is the right group who fight for the right independence of this country that we must not be under the pressure of the boers. I know

¹Discussion 10.

²Interview 07.

³Strand (1991), p 28.

exactly that it is the only organisation who wanted that Namibia must be free.¹

... many of the teachers are SWAPO, but those people who don't understand are DTA --- but all the people who understand things are SWAPO ...²

Women in Exile

The intensified struggle and increasing militarisation of the Northern parts of Namibia resulted in growing numbers of Namibians leaving the country in the beginning of the 1970s. There had been a constant flow of exiles since SWAPO started operating outside of the Namibian borders, but the increase was noticeable only after the workers' strikes and following arrests. The independence of Angola further increased opportunities to flee to a friendly-minded country just across the border. Most of the people leaving Namibia were Ovambos in their twenties. Crossing the border became an option not only for men but for women as well. Students left in groups organised in schools, families fled together with their young children.

It was a secret meeting (*at school*) ... and ... some of them ask who want to go exile. Then we say: me I want to go. Then we write a paper ... if we are three we can go. Then we go.³

In the beginning very few Namibians actually knew where they were going to and what the circumstances were in exile. The motivation was strong, however, and the purpose in leaving the country was to "fight the boers". Women as well as men wanted to learn how to fight a war.

(*when working as a nurse in the border area*) ... there was this event of the situation change in Angola and from that time I heard about SWAPO and I heard that there are some people who left the country they went to Zambia so I also decided to leave the country to go to Zambia to join others ... and then this is what I did I left Oshandi, leaving the patients there and other nurses, I left in secret ... I walked on foot to Odibo then from Odibo I crossed the border ...⁴

¹Interview 11.

²Interview 21.

³Interview 02.

⁴Interview 13.

Before the end of the Angolan war, there were also warring liberation movements fighting in the bush. Some of the Namibians ended up in UNITA (an Angolan liberation movement), which was still allied with SWAPO. There was no clear distinction with the camps before Angolan independence. Namibians however clearly indicated that they had come to look for SWAPO.

...Those people, they tell us, you are now inside Angola. This is Angola. And there is many political party and those people wanted to steal our people. If you see some people and then he tell you, you must be careful. --- we see the place of UNITA, MPLA and the place of FNLA --- We stay at UNITA camp for two weeks --- Early in the morning the man come to tell us: This is SWAPO. If you came to join SWAPO you have to stay in SWAPO --- He has a gun, we think maybe he is going to shoot us --- The war start between MPLA and UNITA and we are at the same camp with UNITA. Then SWAPO decide to start new camps. We decided to go the village... we didn't know how to say hello for them... we just "SWAPO -Namibia ... tumtum (*imitating a gun as a sign of a guerilla*)¹

SWAPO faced an enormous task to receive and take care of the flow of refugees. Before the exodus there were only one refugee camp, temporary military camps and guerilla groups as well as a few offices in Zambia. The first groups of refugees to arrive had to build everything themselves. A lot of help was given by the locals in the villages.

It is (*the village*) bordering to Zaire and Angola. And they tell the women to cook us food. Now the women they welcome us and give us any kind food: bananas and what what ...²

Women I interviewed for this study did not, however, state any disappointment concerning the circumstances they faced when leaving the country. For many, Namibia had become an impossible place to live in because they were wanted by the police or their homes had been demolished. To see an independent country, Zambia and later Angola, was for many a dream come true and increased their commitment to fight for their own country's liberation.

... so we travelled from Senanga to Lusaka --- then we were in Lusaka, so it was our first time to see an independent country and so ... for it was a wonderful thing to us...even it was the first experience to stay in modern houses, seeing many cars, seeing big town ... and ... oh, it was an amazing experience...³

¹Discussion 01.

²Discussion 01.

³Interview 13.

A decision was taken by SWAPO to establish refugee camps for the growing number of exiles. SWAPO applied for and received a lot of material and logistical support from the neighbouring African countries as well as from overseas. Both the Angolan and Zambian governments allocated some land to set up permanent "Health and Education Centres". The main centres were in Nyango, Zambia, and Kassinga—later Kwanza Zul—Angola. By the end of the independence struggle, all the centres together had gathered more than 45,000 Namibian exiles. A few years later, schools for secondary education were established in other friendly countries like Congo, Cuba and DDR. The United Nations Institute for Tertiary Education was established in Lusaka, Zambia. The camps were made as self-reliant as possible, consisting of houses, schools, clinics, workshops and food-producing units. Families could live together and children were taken to schools.

In the beginning the motivation and capabilities to study were not very high among the refugees, because most of them were committed to fight with the gun.

... then we were selected to go to the front --- that time I wanted to go and join the liberation struggle ... to go and fight ... do you know what made me to be very much interested in that ? (*because they beat you?*) ... yeah, because they beat me, but ... what made me to be very much interested in having a gun ... when we went to Europe we passed one of the immigration (...) where I found a white women having ... wearing a gun, a pistol ... and I was so ... wanted to have that as well --- I was thinking that it was good to have a gun, a woman to have a gun ... maybe with the gun you will become more stronger than ...¹

we were six women and many many men --- after finishing our (*military*) training --- we were then assigned to the mission of coming to Angola ... then from that time we are really in the bush, we are now guerillas ... we were working underground in Namibia telling the people that we are opening a front --- I was the only woman in the group and I was a nurse and I met many nurses who brought me medicine ...²

Women were accepted in the military alongside with men. All refugees underwent first a military training, and were thereafter assigned to different tasks. In the guerilla groups women were often working as nurses.

SWAPO highlighted the fact that it pursued the equality of the sexes, and that the opportunity to be promoted in the military ranks was possible also for women. However, according to my sources,

¹Interview 13.

²Interview 13.

women were mostly taught self-defence and none of the informants could mention any highly ranked female officer. There might have been a few, but the majority of the military units who actually fought at the front were composed of men.

We just stay in the camp, but if the boers came to attack us, we have to fight ...¹

The need for women to be able to defend themselves was tested in the Kassinga camp in Angola, which South African forces attacked in 1978. The camp residents were mainly women and children, although the South African Defence Force accused it of being a military base. Hundreds of Namibians were killed and wounded, and the whole camp had to be transferred further from the border. The attack on Kassinga was organised just prior to the negotiations of the settlement in Namibia by the UN and manifested the unwillingness of the South African regime to accept the resolution. Today, the Kassinga Massacre is commemorated as a public holiday.

The life in the camps was aimed at being organised according to the principles SWAPO wanted to implement in the future society. Education was meant to serve the interests of the Namibian people, being fundamentally different from Bantu education in Namibia. According to SWAPO's policy "a deep going socio-economic transformation of the Namibia society depends upon the speedy development of the Namibian productive forces, particularly the development of the skills, knowledge and cultural activity of the toiling masses".² In addition to the centrality of the teachers training, SWAPO embarked on training people with practical skills: technicians, nurses, doctors, who would be needed in the future Namibia.

SWAPO provided both sexes with equal educational opportunities in principal. The ability for further education was tested in examinations. Women's opportunities to study were improved by the child-care system, which was established in the camps. Furthermore, the elderly women were assigned with the task to care for children.

The rôle of education was greater than merely providing skills in reading, writing, counting or qualifying pupils for further studies or a job. The education was aimed at making the pupils aware of the tasks of the liberation movement, and preparing them for the society

¹Discussion 01.

²SWAPO (1983), p 3, ref. in Mbuende (1987), p 60.

that fights against oppression and exploitation, and where solidarity and principles of self-reliance are the cornerstones of national development.¹ In short, the education was to reflect the ideological background of SWAPO carrying out the aims and objectives of the organisation. It was a means of political mobilisation. According to Mbamba, the success of the SWAPO schools in carrying out these tasks varied a lot depending on the education of the teachers, their political awareness, the educational objectives—which appeared to be too broad—and the society where the camp was situated. SWAPO employed its own members, with higher education acquired abroad, as teachers to work at the camp schools. Many of the teachers were inspired with ideas learned in capitalist countries. The camps also operated in societies with different ideologies: in the capitalist Zambia and the socialist Angola. The spirit of individualism was greater in the former environment, whereas in Angola pupils were more aware of the principles of collectivism and self-reliance. Mbamba concludes, that there was a lack of awareness among the majority of the pupils about what the organisation demanded from them and in the future. He emphasizes the need for constant political education according to the party philosophy, outside and inside the classrooms.²

Mbamba's study was carried out in 1979, after SWAPO had adopted a policy of Marxism–Leninism and of socialist revolution. It shows that at least in the end of the 1970s, the ideology was not reflected in education or adopted more widely by the SWAPO members. One former exile tells us that the education was indeed of Marxist-Leninist nature, but it was not given a great emphasis.

... we attended many lessons including political ... political ... studies ... and we were taught many things and then I came to realize that this really ... something bad ... we have to ... I have to be strong to fight for this so that the South Africans can give our ... our country --- I think by that time (1974-75) they didn't show which ideology ... would we follow or we want to have ... so I became a political commissar—my job was to give lectures on politics and the history of the country and that time (1977), I think we were introduced to Leninist-Marxist, Marxist-Leninist... so we were giving lectures based on that ideology.³

OK, there (*in the camp*) they normally used to teach things which is concerning SWAPO, those if we are doing history .. is mostly put the part of struggle and how Namibia is colonised and the other subject is just

¹Mbamba (1979), p 28–29.

²Mbamba (1979), p 46.

³Interview 13.

like.. they normally teach us ... if they were to teach this life science ... they just teach us life science ... they won't mix others.. (so they didn't teach you any ideology?) no ... no actually we were not in deep of that ... they just teach us these ... things which we can remember.¹

The traditional reproducing capabilities of women were fully utilised in the camp education. Women were trained as political commissars, whose task was to uplift and maintain the morale of the soldiers and to explain the "correct political orientation"² to their comrades. The content of this "political orientation was simply national liberation".

I stop my training (*in military*) and I train as a political commissar... My job is to give the morale to the soldier ... to ... the commissar is the mother of the soldier ... give them the morale, encourage and everything ...³

As a conclusion from Mbamba's study and the interviews for this study, one can state that the political ideology of Marxism-Leninism as such was not highly adopted by the SWAPO members in exile. The political objective commonly shared was the aim of national liberation. The ideas of a socialist revolution were not accepted per se, but as a means of promoting the main aim: independence of Namibia. This is further reinforced by the perceptions women held about the meaning of politics. Nearly all of the women interviewed for this study perceive the meaning of politics as a national liberation struggle.

Politics is something which is telling you what is going on in a ... country or in organisation when there is a party fighting to each other to make people understand and tell them what is happening and what people are suppose to do ---- my main reason to believe in SWAPO is that we were just determined that SWAPO will win the South Africa troops.⁴

Politics ... that is very difficult question ... there are those people who are afraid of the boers ... who don't want Namibia to be for Namibians and those who are outside fighting for their country.... now there is two groups which are fighting each other ...⁵

The life in the camps seemed to be organised as normally as possible, in contrast to Katjavivi's claims that the camps were organised completely differently from the traditional Namibian societies.⁶ Families could live together and children were taken care of by their

¹Interview 19.

²Hishongwa (1983), p 62.

³Discussion 01.

⁴Interview 19.

⁵Discussion 23.

⁶Katjavivi (1988), p 111.

own parents when possible. The refugees developed a new kind of community, based on the principles of reciprocity and sharing similar to the old African societies. Many people had lost contact with their biological relatives. The exile camp functioned as a new common village, whereby biological relatives were replaced by people with similar destinations or from the same age-group. Even today, many of the children born and grown up in the camps regard their foster mothers as real mothers, and call people of their own age "brothers and sisters". The ease to adapt and reproduce a new community is found in the rather similar background: most of the refugees were from the Ovambo nation, and the Herero and other cultures were not that distant. One proof of the cultural unity was that the kwanyama language (one of the Ovambo languages) became the unofficial common language between the refugees, because the command of English was relatively poor.

What unified people as well was the awareness of the common cause and strong commitment to survive. Women were essential in adapting the way of life in the camp and transferring the sense of unity in the community. According to Mbamba, the exile camp was to be 'a model nuclear community' for the future socialist society, inspired by the ideological education.¹ But as he has stated, the ideological education did not play such a great role in creating the sense of community among the people. It was rather the circumstances they were living in, their similar background, and their commitment to national liberation and survival.

The administration of the centres like the SWAPO structures in general was hierarchical. Against the democratic principles promoted by SWAPO, all the decisions concerning the centres were made by the office of the SWAPO president. The president appoints the Director and the Deputy Director of the centre to supervise daily activities. The Director was assisted by the Centre Council, whose 12 members were drawn from the representatives of all sections of the community.² There is no information on how those representatives were selected. One student pointed out that they organised elections in the school in Congo to choose the leaders of the SWAPO Youth Council.³

No political meetings, except those called by a member of the Central Committee or the Executive Committee of SWAPO could be

¹Mbamba (1979), p 29.

²Mbamba (1979), p. 10.

³Interview 19.

held at the centre without permission from the office of the president. The director communicated with the residents mainly through the morning parade.¹

In the camps people were under the strict control of the leadership of the camp. People were not free to select their home, their lifestyle or their profession. They were always "sent somewhere". SWAPO's orders were law, disobedience was unknown. Discipline was an honour. Perhaps that was one reason that made it easy for SWAPO to attract young uneducated women, because after they crossed the border everything was taken care of by the organisation.

... (how did you react when the commander came to say do this and that, did you always obey) yeah, you can't, you can't do that because they can say that you don't have a discipline --- I was trying to go and tell to commander but --- no, the problem is when you are not having a discipline because you can even get punishment ... you see ... if they tell you that do this but you don't want.. they can give you some exercise to do so that you can come right ... (what is the punishment)... like exercise ... (but they don't beat?) ... yeah they can't beat (do they put you in prison) NO!²

... normally when we were in abroad if we are in the responsibility of SWAPO... he is the only one ... because we only know when we complete our studying in Congo we have to go back to Angola because we are not given a freedom from there to have your own .

... to take your own way where you prefer to go ... we are just under control of SWAPO.. (did you feel it was alright) ... I was accepting what I was told to do ...³

The same feeling of powerlessness in regard to the decision-making was felt by the teachers interviewed by Mbamba. They were not involved in the administration of schools or planning of the educational objectives.⁴ Sometimes women, though, got bored with the control, but there were very few means of resisting.

One day I think, ah, I am not going to work at all ... If the commander says that come and do this and do this, I said I don't want at all or I am going to sleep or I am not going to say anything to them ... (why) I am tired to stay at the camp because some of them are sent to the school but we are just staying in the camp --- I feel I like SWAPO, but I don't like the way they are behaving --- because if you got discipline you can't go anywhere --- I look now as a person who is sick in his mind --- I am going to behave as a person who is mad --- I decide that now my behavior is

¹Mbamba (1979), p 10.

²Interview 02.

³Interview 19.

⁴Mbamba (1979) p 42.

break-down. I go under the the bed with my gun --- (*and miss the commands*). --- It is just always when they say you are going to do this, I cannot say it NO, my eyes said OK I do this and then I just go under the bed and sleep ...¹

However, the trust in leaders and the tasks of the community were shared by most of the women. Because of their traditional upbringing, they always considered themselves as a part of the community in an organic way. Some African cultures appear to be essentially and unavoidably communal. Persons have identity only because they are part of the community, their freedom lies in the concrete capabilities, privileges and immunities which arise from the communal life.² The exile camp manifested itself as a new community for the refugees. The struggle became a way of life.

The refugee flow in the 1970s put great pressure on SWAPO not only in a logistical sense but also in political terms. The situation developed into an open rebellion in 1976, when some newly arrived radicals demanded a SWAPO Congress and accused the external leadership of incompetence and corruption.³ According to Katjavivi the crisis was caused by the power struggle between the external and internal leaders of the organisation. Those responsible for the criticism toward the external leadership of the organisation demanded to be part of the overall leadership because of their leading role in the SWAPO Youth League inside the country.⁴ The rebellion was stopped, and its leaders arrested and sent to prison camps in Tanzania. This event resulted in two far-reaching decisions by SWAPO; the congress in 1976, where the new socialist-oriented policy was accepted, and the establishment of the prison camps.

The issue of the SWAPO prison camps has not been fully studied yet, but the organisation admitted having detainees and such camps. The question was raised prior to the first election in Namibia. After the elections the issue was debated in the National Assembly, and the government agreed to investigate the matter. The process is not yet concluded.

What is interesting in respect to this study is the existence of such camps, and that there were women detainees as well. It also questions the amount of political freedom refugees enjoyed during the struggle. According to Africa Watch Report many of the women,

¹Discussion 01.

²Ake (1993), p 10.

³Strand (1991), p 23.

⁴Katjavivi (1988), p 106.

like their male colleagues, never knew the reason for their arrests. SWAPO accused them of being spies and sent by the enemy. The conditions in the camps were, however, below any acceptable standard, and especially bad for women who were pregnant or had children.¹ The issue of the SWAPO prisoners has been extremely troublesome to the government and it has been reluctant to take up the issue. There were no doubt "real spies", but many of the accused claim to be falsely accused. And the treatment of the prisoners does not seem to stand further investigation.

The government's reluctance to discuss the matter seems to have had an impact on the general opinion of the people interviewed. Women let me understand that they knew about the treatment of those "who did not obey" but were not interested in discussing the matter further. They seemed to hold the official opinion, that the prisoners were enemy agents who infiltrated the organisation, and they deserved to be treated as such. No women who had been detained or mishandled by SWAPO was found to be interviewed. There is one well-known female SWAPO activist, Bience Gawanas, who was detained by SWAPO for being a spy. She was released, however, and is today a member of the Public Service Commission and a powerful advocate of women's rights.² The readiness to accept the treatment of the "spies" lies in the general conditions during the war. Mistreatment and distrust existed on both sides.

The Establishment of SWAPO Women's Council

The women in SWAPO had their own organisation: SWAPO Women's Council (SWC). It was, like the Youth League and the Elders' Council established in Tanga Congress 1969-70 as an affiliated wing of SWAPO. Its task was:

not only mobilising women to participate in the national struggle, but to make them conscious that they have the same right and obligation as men to make decisions concerning their nations' interest: that the woman should therefore develop herself to be a comrade in all aspects and not just a 'homemaker': that both male and female should understand the system of exploitation and combat it as comrades.³

¹Africa Watch Report 1992.

²Gawanas, interview in Namibian Weekender 1994.

³Martha Ford, then secretary of SWAPO Women's Council. See SWAPO of Namibia (1981), p 291.

The SWAPO Women's Council was mainly operating in exile organising the women in the camps. In 1977 the first meetings of women were held inside Namibia and the secretary was appointed. It started operating all over the country, although in the war zone its activities were kept secret. The SWAPO Women's Council was in the beginning predominantly an organisation for women to forward the aim of national liberation, and to mobilise and organise women under its wing. In the camps it tackled mainly "women's issues": the well-being of women comrades, their political education and the care of children. It planned and administered its own projects for women in the camps and represented Namibian women in the international women's forums.

As an affiliated wing of SWAPO, it had the right to appoint its own representatives to the SWAPO structures. The representation of women in SWAPO administration remained low during the years of struggle, and by 1982 there were only three women in the Central Committee and none in the Executive Committee. Inside the country it managed to mobilise a lot of women at the grassroots level to support the liberation struggle.

SWC's analysis on the position of women in Namibia was that of inferiority: women were oppressed by the traditional structures and by the colonial system. Only later was the concept of "triple oppression" applied: women were not only oppressed by their race and class but also by gender.

The SWAPO Women's Council as well as other women's organisations will be further analysed in the next chapter, which adds the dimension of gender-awareness in the women's struggle for freedom.

6. Women's Emancipation and the New Dimension in the Struggle

Women's Equality as a SWAPO Policy

The women's forms of resistance in Namibia have differed according to the specific context. This context is central in understanding how Namibian women have tackled the different forms of resistance, state the authors of the book *Namibia Women in War* and warn of the danger of interpreting it in terms of "Western"-bound feminism.¹

As we have seen above, the women's participation in the liberation struggle had during the years been motivated by the overall commitment to the fight against the exploitation by the colonial regime. Women's participation was mainly motivated by the same forces as men's: nationalism, rejection of foreign rule and the aim of self-determination and a better life for all Namibian citizens. The sense of community and the responsibilities adopted as a member resulted in women's active participation in the liberation struggle.

The question remains in what respect the women analysed themselves as being oppressed as women and struggling for their own liberation as women. The struggle for gender equality was explicitly declared by many female SWAPO activists, and is stated in the documents of different women's organisations. The purpose of this chapter is to analyse the gender awareness of Namibian women and men during the years of struggle and to find out its consequences in regard to political participation.

SWAPO adopted an official policy of gender equality in the 1970s. This was due to the growing number of women joining its ranks. A considerable influence was also brought by the developments in the international community, where women's questions were put on the agenda for the first time in the 1970s. Especially important was the declaration of the United Nations International Women's Decade 1975-85, which influenced the gender

¹Cleaver & Wallace (1991), p 80.

the liberation movement.¹ Gender equality was also in line with the general policy of equality of all Namibians, regardless of their race, religion or ethnic origin. What is interesting to note here, is that the SWAPO Women's Council was created on the initiative of a hundred per cent male leadership, because there were few women in its ranks in the 1960s. Only later did women "take over" the organisation and start shaping its politics.²

In practice, gender equality was not reflected in SWAPO's administrative structures in which there were few women, Katjavivi points out.³ He further argues that the very structure of the separate women's organisation could lead to women's interests being marginalised.⁴ For SWAPO the separate women's struggle was to be fought inside the very liberation struggle itself. The voice of the women was heard, because it did not challenge the foundation of the organisation, but instead women's participation served its aims giving the organisation an image of tolerance and modernity. The ideas of gender equality, though, were widely spread around the world from the 70s and especially in socialist rhetoric. This further strengthens the idea of ideological plurality in SWAPO argued by Strand.⁵ Anything was used for the purpose of national liberation, even feminist demands. According to Heike Becker who has studied the women's organisations in Namibia, the SWAPO Women's Council—like other party-political women's organisations—was subordinated to male dominated political structures.⁶

The SWAPO female activists themselves concluded from their analysis that the women were oppressed not only because of the colonial society, but because of the patriarchal nature of the Namibian society prior to and during the colonial regime. Hishongwa points out that although all Namibians were the victims of the colonial regime, the women were also discriminated against simply because they were women. The opportunities of women regarding education and jobs as well as access to land and resources were fewer than those of men. The struggle for national liberation would thus never have been completed without the women's

¹Becker (1993a), p 309.

²Ithana (1993), p 11.

³Katjavivi (1988), p 111.

⁴Ibid, p 112.

⁵Strand (1991), 28.

⁶Becker (1991).

emancipation.¹ The adoption of a new active women's role and the growing confidence about the importance of both sexes in the liberation struggle was a common attitude of the SWAPO women in exile.²

*... (did you feel neglected as a woman inside SWAPO?) not really, because most of our male comrades or friends who at that time joined already SWAPO they encouraged women to join ... they knew already this term of equality ... so we felt really welcomed and we find out that we were part and parcel of it ...*³

For Hishongwa, the awareness of women of their inferior position is a result of the education given by SWAPO. Both sexes have started to challenge the patriarchal society, because they have adopted the policy of equal opportunities pursued by SWAPO.⁴ The struggle for women's liberation was thus a consequence of joining the liberation movement, not a precondition. Through the liberation struggle women were able to understand their oppression in the Namibian society.⁵ In the Namibian society women were unaware of their inferior status, and believed that they were just performing their duties by virtue of being defined as women.

The belief in SWAPO's policy of equality was deep in the exile years. The female activists did not question the male-dominated structure of the liberation movement itself, although they realised that in practice women had lower status in its structures. Now, in independent Namibia, many highly educated women have publicly expressed dissatisfaction with the unwillingness of the SWAPO-led government to implement the policy expressed during the struggle.⁶

How did SWAPO, then, adopt the policy of gender awareness, if the Namibian women were not aware of their disadvantages? According to Becker, it was the young relatively well-educated women in exile, who reshaped the gender perceptions in exile. The women in exile were not a homogeneous group, but consisted of at least two major distinct groups of women; the young educated ones and the "family-mothers" from the North. The young women had already been active in the liberation movement inside the country and wanted to continue "to fight for freedom" from abroad. These

¹Hishongwa (1988), pp 408–409.

²Namibian Women's Voice (1989).

³Interview 16.

⁴Hishongwa (1988), p 409.

⁵Davies (1987), pp 73–74.

⁶Interview 16.

women found themselves in a completely different situation in exile than at home, being remote from their families and the traditional role of women. Especially when sent to study in institutions of higher education all over the world, they had to develop a new identity and new perspectives in order to cope with the situation.¹ The “family-mothers” were mostly staying in the camps maintaining the old community values, as described above.

... it was completely unusual for women to participate in politics this was suppose to be a male's work --- so my father felt that I was involving myself in a dangerous male occupation... but he didn't disapprove ... I didn't really ask his permission²

Being introduced to the ideas of women's equality and facing the challenging opportunities in education in the SWAPO ranks, these young women considered themselves as being “just as capable as men”. They promoted the ideas of gender equality, and started putting forward demands for women's liberation inside the liberation movement. In the beginning the reason for the women's organisation to speak about women's issues, was to attract the women to join the struggle based on the assumption that women would be more likely to join, if their demands were taken seriously. The “women's issues” were considered something “additional” to the overall liberation struggle. These young feminist-oriented women brought a new approach, women's issues being an integral part of the politics of national liberation.³ As a result, the emphasis of the SWAPO Women's Council shifted towards more emphasis being put on women's equality than before.

What then was the analysis of the situation of the Namibian women made by these active women, and could they be called feminists? As described in chapter 2, the concept of feminism has been regarded as very western-biased, and not suitable to be applied to Third World women or women with different traditional and cultural backgrounds. It has been rejected by the Third World women's activists themselves.⁴ However, the other alternative is not

¹Becker (1993b), p 5.

²Interview 16.

³Becker (1993b), p 11.

⁴See e.g. an interview of Ellen Musialela in Davies (1983), p 87. The question was often the reductionist meaning given to feminism, that it considered only women's issues regardless of the circumstance while in many countries like Namibia all human beings were oppressed. See also Davies (1987), p 53: “The attempt to impose a Western, non-political concept of ‘women's issues’ is a kind of cultural imperialism, a political act in itself. It aims at

to reject the concept, but to give it a broader meaning by adding new dimensions in the interpretation of "feminism" or "feminist politics". As quoted by Becker:

Feminism cannot be monolithic in its issues, goals and strategies since it constitutes the political expression of the concerns and interests of women from different regions, classes, nationalities and ethnic backgrounds. While gender subordination has universal elements, feminism cannot be based on a rigid concept of universality that negates the wide variation in women's experiences. There is and must be a diversity of feminism, responsive to the different needs of different women and defined by them for themselves.¹

In the light of this definition, feminism is thus a recognition of the systematic discrimination against women on the grounds of gender. Furthermore, feminist politics can be described as a commitment to work towards change through empowerment of individual women. It is based on women's own analysis of their situation, and adoption of the goals and strategies to work for.

Namibian women recognised themselves as being oppressed not only because of being black, but also because of being women. In exile this analysis became another reason for women to struggle for their country's independence. Women's equality was adopted as an official policy of the liberation movement, which seemed to be widely accepted not only by the young well-educated women but others as well.

... (you consider yourself as a woman activist?) very much (do you consider yourself as feminist?) well ... I think so ... I can say so without even thinking properly ... because I mean ... my understanding of a feminist is someone who is trying to speak about the rights of women especially and those of a marginalised people...²

... we (the returnees) are different from those who stayed ... I want to control my own money and work ...³

... (did you ever learn about women's rights or feminism or are these things familiar to you?) actually I didn't learn about them .. I only use to think of something what will happen and what will like you ... and when I think of

forcing Third World women to accept the status quo and acquiesce in their national subordination". At the Nairobi Conference the women's issues were to be non-political, which for the Third World women was impossible, because their liberation was dependent on the political liberation of their colonial status.

¹Sen/Grown (1988), p 18-19, referred to in Becker (1993b), p 3.

²Interview 17.

³Interview 02.

something --- I do not expect the husband to be a boss in the house only to tell you do this and you do everything. .. we should work together ... (*you don't consider yourself a feminist ... do you know what feminism is?*) no ...¹

Not many women used the concept of feminism, and it was unknown for many women I interviewed. However, many women in exile regarded themselves as "being different", "better" or "more confident" when returning back to their home areas and comparing themselves to those rural women who had stayed behind.

... no, I haven't regret for that (*going into exile*) because I have learned ... I have experienced a lot ... and I never say that because I have left the country I couldn't do that. .. I am happy that I was abroad --- you know I use to think for myself that if supposed I wasn't abroad maybe I could be as those of my agemates who got children.. or maybe.. you know I am proud of that maybe I could be educated --- when I compare myself to my sisters, there is a big difference ...²

They consider themselves better educated, more powerful and free to lead they own lives, even though they cannot identify the reason for that. The better self-respect and strong identity as independent women can be seen as a result of the empowering effect the liberation movement and the ideas of women's equality produced. Thus the liberation movement and its women's organisation managed to plant something different in the women involved. Another matter is, whether this different role and the expectations it raised can be met in independent Namibia.

The Radical Motherhood

Before we go into the women's situation and organisations inside the country, we must come back to those "family-mothers" who formed another important group of women in exile, and who were mostly Ovambo's in origin and then the subject of this study. The purpose of this study is to find out the motivating forces which led to the women's active participation in the liberation struggle. This chapter has shown, that at least some of the women were inspired by the equality of the sexes and fought for the liberation of themselves as women. However, for none of the women was it the only—not even primary—force behind their political actions, but the ideas for national liberation were always the main cause. Gender equality was

¹Interview 19.

²Interview 19.

added as another dimension of the liberation struggle, and it was to be achieved alongside the general political liberation.

When it comes to the family-mothers, who were always the majority of the women involved,¹ their participation can be described as less influenced by ideas of feminism or women's equality. This, however, does not mean that those women contributed less to the liberation movement. Neither does it mean that their participation is to be seen as less valuable from the point of view of women's liberation. As quoted above, women's actions must always be based on their own interpretation of their own situation and needs. The willingness and ability of the "family-mothers" to take an active part in the political struggle lies in their interpretation of their own responsibilities and capabilities as members of a community, faced with a threatening situation. They acted as mothers, daughters and sisters utilising the potential opportunities given by their traditional role. They were not aware of or even interested in feminism or its analysis of their situation, but were still empowered as women.

The adoption of an active role produced by their traditional self-perceptions, without challenging the male dominance, can be called "radical motherhood". As noted by Lewis, who has studied women and politics in South Africa, the political struggle was waged in private domestic areas, which generated powerful material and emotional bonds within the family and the community. The regime threatened the lives of children in homes and at schools. The family became then the most effective site of resistance and support which strengthened women's self-perception as "mothers", "wives" and "sisters". This definition of motherhood was different from western middle-class conventions of mothering as a silent, passive and domestic activity.² They seem to "transgress the household boundaries" in order not only to defend their traditional position and community but to fight against a clear expression of injustice they are exposed to.³

This type of action by women was earlier considered as conservative and even harmful for women's concern, but is nowadays

¹It was estimated that only about 15 per cent of exiled Namibians underwent comprehensive post-secondary training. The proportion of women is not known, but definitely less than 50 per cent. Hubbard and Solomons, *The Women's Movement in Namibia*. Date and year unknown.

²Lewis (1992), p 44.

³See e.g. von Bulow (1991).

seen as a natural response and resistance to women's subordination. The "family-mothers" were not essentially threatening the male-dominance or gender hierarchy of their own community when protesting the colonial regime, but however, proved themselves capable of fighting alongside the men. It remains to be seen in the Namibian case, whether these women will ever end up in interpret themselves as unequal in their own community compared to men, and start to challenge the patriarchal society. As everywhere, in Namibia it seems to be a question of age and education.

The Community Organisations Addressing Women's Issues

Inside Namibia, the SWAPO Women's Council started organising women from 1977. Two months after its launching, a women's meeting was held in Walvis Bay, and a week later a Women's Council rally was held in Katutura attended by almost 4,000 women and men. SWC had a solid grassroots support among the women from all sectors of the society, mobilising them to the liberation struggle. It also emphasised the women's specific oppression and struggle for equal rights.¹ Hubbard points out that SWC was an important conscientizing force providing the first significant framework for discussion and analysis of gender issues.²

As described in the previous chapter, women in the war zone were living in the conditions of war. Outside the war zone the situation was better, but political participation often meant harassment, detention and torture. Free political mobilisation was impossible in the war zone and severely restricted in the whole country. After the 1970s strikes, plenty of women were deported to their home areas. In spite of that, the worsening conditions in the rural areas forced more and more people to move into the urban centres, especially Windhoek. More women took up wage employment, and it has been estimated that 46 per cent of all women in formal employment were classified as service workers.³ Most of the women stayed in the countryside, dependent on subsistence farming and remittances from their migrant worker fathers, husbands and/or brothers. Their main organising framework was the different churches and their women's groups. These mainly conservative but

¹Cleaver & Wallace (1991), p 82-85.

²Hubbard, 7.

³Manpower survey (1998). Department of Economic Affairs. Referred to in Hubbard, p 6.

openly anti-colonial denominations also started to take up women's issues in the 1980s. A Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) was formed in 1985, working on an ecumenical basis and running small income-generating and educational projects for women.¹

According to Becker the roots of growing gender-awareness inside Namibia in the 1980s can be traced in new ways of anti-colonial resistance that differed from the earlier party-led politics of national liberation. The 1980s was a decade for mobilisation for the community-based organisations, when social movements such as residents' associations, workers' and students' organisations and also women's organisations started to emerge. The underlying reasons for mobilising at the grassroots level was in the deteriorating living conditions, which demanded improvement that could not wait until independence, and the attempt of the South African regime to find an "internal solution", which resulted in limited reforms. People, mostly in the urban areas, started to work for immediate development in their living conditions based on their voluntary participation.² Similar development can be traced in South Africa, where community organisation became a powerful vehicle in the struggle against apartheid. Before, women in South Africa were mainly organised by church groups and the liberation movement ANC, PAC and AZAPO.³

This grassroots organising also challenged the conventional understanding of politics. For SWAPO and the liberation movement in general, politics was understood as "grand" politics consisting of male-dominated spheres of international diplomacy, armed struggle and conventional political mobilisation. The community-based organisation linked up the immediate concerns of daily life with the general aim of political liberation. This was especially appealing to women, who carried the responsibility of production and reproduction in the families, and thus provided a more suitable access point for them to politics. The women's grassroots organisation politicized the "private" sphere of reproduction which was formerly considered as non- or pre-political.⁴

The community organisations were based on a similar idea of politics as that of those "family-mothers", who were politicised

¹Hubbard, p 7.

²Becker (1993b), p 9.

³Fatima Meer (1987), *Organising under Apartheid*, in Davies 1987, p 20-30.

⁴Becker (1993a), p 310.

through their own daily experience of oppression and injustice. For them the struggle for liberation was a struggle for defence and survival. The community organisations applied this approach, bridging the gap between educated feminist-oriented women and traditional women. The most important women's organisation formed on the basis of this approach to politics and women's issues was the Namibia Women's Voice (NWW) established in 1985.

Namibia Women's Voice was started by the ecumenical church body, Council of Churches in Namibia (CCN), but it soon acquired an identity of a women's movement across the party-political spectrum. It is necessary to note here, that while the liberation struggle was mainly concentrated on two opposing parties: SWAPO and the South African regime, the introduction of the Internal Settlement (or Turnhalle Conference) had brought other parties in to Namibia. These parties which more or less collaborated with the South African regime and formed its "puppet" government had their supporters mainly among whites and some small ethnic groups who had organised themselves along the Bantustan structures.¹ These parties, the largest of which was DTA, formed their own women's organisations. The position towards the liberation struggle had, however, prevented any cooperation between them and SWAPO-allied women before the emergence of NWW.

NWW managed to establish 13 regional branches by running small income-generating and developmental projects. It aimed at raising gender-awareness, and though being outside the party-political structures it was a clearly anti-colonial and black organisation. One of its main aims was to organise a campaign against the birth-control injection Depo Provera, which many black women were given against their will by the white hospital authorities. Despite—or rather because of—the success of NWW in raising the concern of women, it disbanded after a few years of existence.

Women's Liberation Can Wait

The reason for its closure is found in the very nature of the liberation movement. As described above, SWAPO assumed the leading role in the liberation struggle and monopolised its policy and strategy formulation. Although it was a wide and broad organisation in its ideological and support base, it could not tolerate any challenges whatsoever. The establishment of the community-based structures

¹See e.g. Brown (1991).

was soon seen as a divisive force in the Namibian society, which could lead to people's alienation from the main aim—national independence. Secondly SWAPO did not approve of any kind of development activities in Namibia prior to nationalist victory and independence. Development efforts were to be postponed until after independence. This hostility of SWAPO towards grassroots organising ranged from women's organisations to workers' committees.¹ As we saw in chapter 5, SWAPO deliberately undermined the achievements of the workers already during the strike in 1971–72, because for SWAPO the issue that mattered the most, was political consciousness and the struggle for political independence. The policy towards grassroot organising in the 1980s followed this line.

The situation around the women's organisation went so far, that some of the founders of the NWV were suspended from the party for six months, unless they dropped their community activities. According to one of them, SWAPO was pressurising them to bring the organisation under the SWAPO Women's Council.² The Namibia Women's Voice was disbanded, and SWAPO Women's Council continued to organise inside the country.³ It seems that the activists of NWV themselves agreed to close down the organisation more or less accepting its subordinate role in comparison to the more general liberation struggle, and being prepared to wait for women's liberation after independence.

Hubbard and Solomons argue that one reason for the demise of the NWV was its challenge to male authority in church and party political hierarchies. They share the analysis of Bauer that its autonomy was threatening, although there are conflicting accounts of the situation.⁴ It remains to be further studied whether the autonomous structure of NWV as such was considered threatening by the leadership of the liberation movement, as appears to be the case because all community-based organisations faced resistance from its side, or whether the apparent feminist approach implemented by NWV added another threat to male-dominance was the main factor of its closure. Whatever the case was, the main point remains that SWAPO and the liberation movement did not tolerate any "disturbance" or competition from any dimension, be it development or women's activities. And it also shows that women were prepared to

¹Bauer (1994).

²Ibid, p 11.

³See also Mamoza (1989), and Becker 1993 a and b.

⁴Hubbard, date and year unknown, p 8.

wait for their turn to be liberated till after independence was achieved. Women's liberation was secondary, after all, to general liberation.

To answer the questions raised in this study about the Ovambo women's mobilising political forces, it is impossible to establish what kind of a role they played in establishing and shaping the community-based structures. But as was shown earlier, many of the Ovambo women hold a similar perception of politics as the community structures were based on, i.e. that the private sphere was as much political as the public domain. The difference lay in the strategy they chose not to threaten male-dominance, but to fight alongside the men.

A more important conclusion is the fact, that many of the community-based structures were truly based on individuals' voluntary participation regardless of their ethnic origin or cultural background. This was the case with women's organisations and especially with NWV. It is of course natural that in a segregated society like Namibia, e.g. that the residents committees are automatically composed of people of the same ethnicity, because they are forced to live in the same areas. But in the same way as the national liberation movement managed to organise all sectors of the society against the colonial regime, the community-based organisations went beyond the party-political and ethnic boundaries. The main distinction remained between the anti-colonial and pro-South African forces, because the "truly" community-based organisations were openly critical toward the South African occupation.

Another significant difference can be seen between the rural and urban population. The CBOs were in any case mostly an urban phenomenon. The mobilisation in the countryside was almost impossible, because the regime saw all activities however non-political by nature in the framework of the "communist" threat from SWAPO. This led to the situation that the church was the only arena of mobilisation, though itself not free from harassment and suspicion.

The problems facing the community-based organisations during the 1980s contributed to the fact, that there is a severe lack of grass-roots organisations in Namibia in general, and for women in particular. It also resulted in women's issues, even though being part of the general liberation movement itself, never being given an independent and priority role. This problem was to be faced after independence, when it appeared that women's equality was not an automatic result of the political victory.

7. Independent Namibian Women

Namibian independence was achieved finally in 1990. The exiles were repatriated, SWAPO formed the first independent government in Namibia after winning the elections, and the South African forces withdrew. The elections for regional and local representatives in 1992 completed the restructuring of the Namibian society. The racial, ethnic and regional segregation was abolished by constitution. The government of Namibia declared the policy of national reconciliation in order to unify the different population groups under a common national identity, and to secure the peaceful development of the society. In the economic sector, the SWAPO government implemented a policy of mixed economy, safeguarding the interests of the private sector and wishing to combat the alarming unemployment rate. It embarked upon a programme of social development, but did not address the unequal distribution of land. The territorial independence was completed after the harbour town Walvis Bay was officially integrated into the Namibian state in 1994.

The Status of Women in Namibia

Before we look at the situation of women's political participation in today's Namibia, there is a need to describe the heritage left for the women by the hundred years of foreign rule.

The women's situation in post-independent Namibia is characterised by a great diversity, like the small Namibian population of 1.4 million in general.¹ The population is unevenly distributed among the districts, the majority of the people and women living in the northern areas (former war zone Ovamboland, Kavango and Caprivi). The migrant labour system has resulted in that there are more women in the rural than urban areas, whereas in urban areas men overtake women.² The living conditions and socio-economic factors differ considerably between the urban and the rural population. In general, the rural population is less educated, more un-

¹National Planning Commission, Republic of Namibia (1992). The women are 51.4 per cent of the total population.

²*Ibid*, p 28.

employed and economically poorer than the urban people. The apartheid system imposed the policy of divide and rule on the different ethnic groups, who were physically and socially kept apart. This segregation is still found in people's perception of each other, their life-styles and cultural habits, although the government is promoting the policy of national unity. The Ovambo nation is the biggest and the most influential of the at least 12 major ethnic groups, because of their size and power in the liberation movement—now the leading party—SWAPO. The political map is still characterised by the ethnic division inherited from the colonial past, and SWAPO and Ovambos are continuously accused of "ethnic dominance". The other division in Namibia was caused by the liberation war which resulted in more than 40,000 people leaving the country. These returnees have different experiences of the past, and while adopting many "foreign" ideas have lost touch with the practical conditions inside Namibia.¹ This has caused some tension in the women's movement, especially notable in SWC's first congress inside Namibia since independence in 1992.²

There are also a few common unifying factors despite the strong ethnic, political, racial, regional and class-based conflicts inside Namibia. More than 90 per cent of the population is Christian and shares common moral ground on certain issues. Furthermore, there is a growing sense of nationhood actively promoted by the political and cultural circles in the country. The commitment to "forgiving the past" seems to be widely accepted, and is confirmed by the women interviewed for this study.

... the political differences are there, the colour of skins are there up to now (*and the sex, I mean, the gender*) yeah, the gender is there, its black and white ... while our country has democracy, we have to reconcile --- it will take time, its not so easy (...) yeah, I have a faith in government, I have a faith in my president, because really he try to unite the people ...³

The situation of women inside Namibia was not well known before independence. The data and statistics were either not available or were biased for the purposes of the South African regime. It was clear, however, that the women's situation in the former war zone was severely worsened by the effects of the war, economics and the decline of the traditional structures. Now the implementation of

¹Hubbard, date and year unknown, p 2.

²The author of this work participated in the first SWC Congress inside independent Namibia in Windhoek and Dobra 1992.

³Interview 15.

development policies by the government, donor agencies, international and local non-governmental organisations have put emphasis on the assessment of women's situation and needs. There is a growing consciousness that the development of the nation demands the inclusion and participation of the women and children in the development efforts.¹

The women's situation is characterised by structural inequality and unequal access to resources and services (production, education, health, water and sanitation, employment). The survival of the traditional male-dominated society, strengthened by the patriarchal structures created by missionaries, colonialists and the liberation movement, resulted in women's inferior status. As I argued in chapter 4, the women's status in the traditional society cannot automatically be labeled as unequal or subordinate. The society was structured in such a way that each of its members had an important but separate domain. According to Hishongwa, in the traditional societies, where women were often excluded from public decision-making, they had a number of ways to make their voices heard. It is only when the society was established on the basis of the distinction between the so-called private world of the household, and the public life, that women's status was marginalised. This distinction was imposed by Christianity—which organised the family hierarchy based on male-dominance and colonial influence—which resulted in dependency on the "modern" society. The inner or private sector was considered women's domain and secondary. Now, if we accept this distinction as an important one and that the women's status is eventually defined by the access to the public sphere, we must consider women as subordinate.² In addition, women's discrimination is further increased by the common family concept which places men as the "main breadwinner" of the family. On the other hand, the "ordinary" Ovambo women and the community organisations do not accept this dichotomy as a hierarchy, but regard both sectors as important and as a basis for political action.

However in the modern Namibia, women can generally be said to be less educated, more dependent and deprived of access to resources. The education in Namibia is still generally poor, but women appear to have equal access to schooling. Many girls, however, drop out of school more easily than boys, because of the heavy workload at home, teenage pregnancies, and no support from parents. And

¹NISER and UNICEF (1991).

²Hishongwa (1998), p 285–286.

furthermore, girls tend to choose rather stereotyped areas of study in preparation for gender-specific careers. As described earlier, only few professions were available to women during the colonial era (nursing, teaching, domestic work), and this pattern is still maintained in post-independent Namibia. Also among the exiles the education followed gender stereotyped lines, although women were also trained in technical subjects. However, twice as many male refugees than females received a degree.¹

Namibia has serious problems with unemployment and it is estimated that between 25 and 33 per cent of the labour force is unemployed. The economy is narrowly based and heavily dependent. Women accounted for only 33 per cent of employees 46 per cent of whom are classified as service (domestic) workers. A constricted labour market and gender stereotyped professions limit women's access to the formal labour market.²

Many women are still dependent on subsistence farming and remittances from their migrant labour husbands. The customary law which is still valid in many communities prevents women's access to land and resources.³ Although the Namibian constitution guarantees equal rights for all individuals and employs a gender neutral formulation of "she and he" throughout, the statutory law is still discriminating against women. In order to address women's discrimination as regards the law, the government has set a Women and Law Commission in order to recommend legal reforms. The commission outlined the areas discriminating against women as being the marriage law (women are still seen as minors when married), maintenance law (many women are single-parents and do not receive any support from the child's father), sexual crimes (crime rate is very high and sentences low) and customary law.⁴ At the time of writing this study the reforms were on the way. Furthermore, what is more alarming is that regardless of constitutional changes and law reforms, very few women are aware of their rights. Education in that respect is greatly needed.⁵

¹ILO (1991), p 18, 27. See also Country Gender Analysis (1992).

²Ibid, p 20.

³Hubbard, date and year unknown, p 9.

⁴National Planning Commission (1993).

⁵Ibid, p 5. See also Namibia Development Trust (1994).

The Struggle Continues

Regardless of the reforms, women in Namibia still have to fight the hardest battle in the area of traditional beliefs and attitudes. The male-dominance and patriarchy were reinforced during the colonial era and Christian teachings resulting in men and women believing in female subordination. The liberation movement, as we have seen, did not change this pattern in practice, despite the gender-sensitive rhetoric. Although many women have started to question the present situation, the main attitude is still of men's superiority.

He (*my husband*) wanted me to be a typical housewife --- once my husband said "I think I made a mistake to marry an educated woman, I wish I married a village woman who I can dictate"--- so that is what most of our men here in Namibia. ... because we are still living in a middle of ... we are actually in transitional period ... one half of the brain is traditional, half of brain we think western ... and it doesn't go together ... either we think western-wise or we think traditional ... the mixture ... we'll find most of the marriage are get broken because our husbands still want to go back to polygamy ... they have many women around ... running around with many women and the wife must have only one man ... we want one wife one husband ... this is the problem in today's Namibian women lives.¹

As described in previous chapters, the women are the transmitters of the culture and beliefs, which raises a question whether and why women themselves reproduce the subordination of themselves? This is a result of religion, traditional socialisation, division of labour and a dynamic exclusion of women from the public life and decision-making processes.²

It is the question of women's self-perception that still reproduces male-dominance and prevents women taking active part in building an equal society. As a conclusion to be drawn from what has been written above, the struggle for the independence of Namibia did contain elements of women's liberation, but for most women the driving force was overall repression, not gender-oriented repression. Especially the "family-mothers" seem nowadays quite happy with the situation, and do not regard themselves as less powerful than men.

¹Interview 16.

²Gawanas (1993), p 33-34.

I am proud to be an Ovambo woman --- because I am still alive --- the God protected me to be alive --- now I am the head of the house (*because of the husband's death*).¹

For these women, the most important task after the war is the reconstruction of the society and the improvement of material well-being. They regard themselves as capable of leading their lives, and do not need to question the equality inside the family because of shared responsibilities. They regard, however, the younger women somewhat differently, and a bit reluctantly admit their different way of life of not getting married or choosing a career. These family mothers seem, though, to have a great confidence in female politicians and many of them encourage women to study and participate in public life.

Because of the education there could be a woman president ... the young generation just say that : "I am educated and I could do what like, we no longer believe in the old wives or the old culture"... it is good elect a person who know normally ... who know the behaviour whether it is a man or woman I can just vote because of the work being done by that person --- I will rather talk to the woman (*politician*), because I am also a lady ...²

... she (*my mother*) was proud of me ... although it is not ... it is not so easy for a mother ... a village mother to have a daughter who is working for this high position and so ... and it is also others who are looking at her and not all appreciate it ... but it is a reality we have to face --- of course I have two roles as a mother, a household-mother, and an official and I do these two jobs with dignity and honour ...³

She like many other younger educated women seems to try to cope between two different identities as a woman both respecting the old Ovambo traditions but also demanding a better share for women in public life.

I have a big responsibility in the house to look after the family and the house ... and he also has got his own responsibility to do and I feel I am important in the house and he shows that he respects that and that is what I am looking for --- and I am the one who travels a lot --- and there are many times I have left him with kids... and to an Ovambo man it doesn't ... it doesn't happen ... I feel also on that basis some kind of equality --- because he respects my career and me as a modern woman --- but of course on the other hand we have to understand that we are still living in Ovamboland --- he cannot cook here ... because my mother cannot find

¹Interview 07.

²Interview 07.

³Interview 16.

him cooking ... my mother-in-law ... I cannot let her see him cooking---(it is a way of adapting?) oh yeah ...¹

The difference in women's self-perceptions seems then to be a question of different generations. This does not mean that older women are less conscious of their womanhood. They seem to hold that traditional belief which, as seen earlier, regards women as important in the community context. The younger women, though, have woken up to see that in the modern society women are deprived of both traditional power and access to public life. For them the disappointment after independence has meant further radicalisation in gender-issues.

Yes ... It is important for women to participate in politics and those to be ministers ... because they can express the view of the woman ... tell them how they want the woman to be treated and what is going on concerning and how they are suffered and how men are treating women ...²

(the official policy of affirmative action, do you think it works?) ... it works mostly on a piece of paper, because in this country we still have ... our society is still led by men..men are heads of everything ... as you might know we have a Department of Women Affairs which is in the Office of the President ... of course it is led by women but it still has no representation in the cabinet or parliament ... where these women's issues are discussed ... it is artificial.. because although we have women sitting in the parliament, in our National Assembly ... what we want to be seen is legislation!³

The gender politics in today's Namibia seems to be shaped according to the analysis of the younger women. The women's movement is still divided according to party-political and socio-economic barriers. There was an attempt to form a unified umbrella body, but because of the great differences in population in general and women in particular the "womenness" seemed not to be a powerful enough unifying force.⁴ The SWAPO Women's Council is the biggest women's organisation in Namibia. Other organisations form a colourful group of grassroots, religious, labour unions and issue-oriented groups and organisations, but lack of unity seems to be the dominant factor.

Becker regards the women's mobilisation in Namibia, however, as a success story in a sense, because the question of gender has been raised on the agenda. The women are, because of their participation in the liberation struggle, regarded as a social group and an import-

¹Interview 17.

²Interview 19.

³Interview 16.

⁴Hubbard, date and year unknown, p 11.

ant power-base for the SWAPO-government. Secondly she argues that the present type of democratic dispensation in Namibia encourages self-organisation. Thirdly, the women's issues have emerged to be relevant political claims which are seriously addressed by the government.¹ The Department of Women Affairs (DWA) was established in the office of the President to address the issues of gender, to lobby the government and run educational and developmental projects especially for women.² The government also implements affirmative actions, whose first practical example was the Local Authorities Act. All parties had to include a specific number of women in their lists for local elections in 1992. This resulted in 31.5 per cent of the members of the local councils being women, which far higher than of National Assembly (6.9 per cent) and of regional councils (3.1 per cent).³

Becker further argues that it remains to be seen how the women in Namibia manage to pursue the interest of women of different strata in post-independent Namibia. Bearing in mind the high division in population it can be said that women's issues are still a concern of mainly middle-class educated urban women, who have little information about the women in the rural areas.⁴ These urban women are more concerned about the fact that there are only seven female representatives in the General Assembly, one in the National Assembly and two ministers. As a contradiction the rural women seem to be proud that those women in the first place exist, their number not being so important. They find it easier to talk to women and trust in their ability to speak on their behalf.

According to Becker confrontation is not a favoured strategy of Namibian women's activists and although they are vocal in their criticism and demands about gender-biases, they, too, are mainly concerned about the overall development of the Namibian society. The government adopted a policy of national reconciliation, which seems to sweep possible conflicts under the carpet.⁵ Many women seem to be critical towards the slow developments and transfer of power to the new government being disappointed at the promises not yet kept. But at the same time they seem patient, because "this government is still young".

¹ Becker (1993 a), p 308–309.

² Department of women affairs, Republic of Namibia (1992).

³ Hubbard & Kaveri (1993), p 16–18.

⁴ Becker (1993 a), p 309.

⁵ *Ibid*, p 310.

Their concern is related to the fact that the well-being of women is not a result of the gender politics alone but dependent on the general political decisions like land reform, health and education, improving employment opportunities etc. As long as this struggle is still going on, the gender specific needs seem—again—to have a secondary importance.

However, in independent Namibia the women might have greater access to being among those who decide which was not a real case during the liberation war. This requires improvement of the strategical and lobbying capabilities of women and furthermore awareness of what the women, in fact, actually want.

The lack of civil society in Namibia as a result of the “monopolist” nature of the SWAPO-led liberation movement is in this respect a serious hindrance. Women are not used to organising themselves outside SWAPO structures. SWAPO became the “vanguard” of the liberation struggle and the key for development. Now many of them seem to hold an opinion that the government will take care of all the tasks promised by SWAPO. And SWAPO has consciously promoted the idea of nation-building and the unitary state. The need for self-reliance in resolving social and political problems is not a familiar concept among the women who were never encouraged to participate in anything else but defending their community. What many of them understand about “politics” seems to end now when Namibia is independent.

The task of the women’s organisations is then not only the promotion of women’s issues in the “upper” political level i.e. in parliament and government although it is important that women’s representation is secured, but to educate and encourage women to start analysing their own situation and empower them to take necessary action. The danger is that the female activists become “professional” as well as their male counterparts alienating themselves from the everyday life of “ordinary women”. Women’s organisations brought the “private sphere” into politics which encourages more women to enter into public life. This approach should be maintained if women are to change the patriarchal structure of Namibian society.

(How do you think it will change (male-dominance), is it through strong personalities like Doctor Libertina?) yeah, strong personalities, but also legislation and education ... most, most needed is education ... probably there is.. we have strong personalities of traditional women, but they you can’t just pick that strong woman from the village and bring her to the parliament so she need education to cope with that and that is the

education we are lacking ... we need to increase adult education so that ... or leadership quality education.¹

Would this result in "real" people's democracy and participation in Namibia, which can take totally different forms of organisation than perceived in "western" democracy? The SWAPO government has embarked on building the Namibian society according to the principles of western liberal democracy in contrast to the socialist model it was promoting in exile. This model of democracy seems to include neither an active civil society nor easy access for less-educated, illiterate women (or men) to the roots of power.

The irrelevance of liberal democracy and its disempowering elements in the African context is not only a women's problem neither necessarily only a Namibian problem. Recent years have seen the introduction of multiparty democracy in Africa as well as its disappointing results in regard to people's participation. In the elections another political elite has displaced the former. Claude Ake has argued that liberal democracy does not necessarily apply to Africa at all because it presupposes individualism and the privatisation of interests. In Africa over 60 per cent of the population is rural and their society largely communal. Living is still largely communal as are interests. The rule of law which liberal society celebrates is the market society where people are first and foremost sellers and buyers and their relations primarily contractual. This is hardly appropriate for the people in rural Africa. Their sense of freedom is not defined by autonomy and opposition but rather in terms of cooperation and in the embeddedness of the individual in an organic whole.²

The question of democracy and the state-building project in Africa is well beyond this study. However, it is interesting to note how the sense of communality applies especially to Namibian women, who on the other hand have not found the way for promoting their aims and gaining power in independent Namibia. One can ask whether their weakness is a result of their unsuccessful action or a result of the structure of the state which is based on trivial democracy and wrong premises on the individual and social life.

But as shown in the years of struggle, there is a certain strength in individuals and women in particular. Perhaps the women will again find their own ways of organising themselves and promoting their interest if given the opportunity to decide by themselves, like they

¹Interview 16.

²Ake (1995).

did by employing "radical motherhood" and sense of community in the service of the liberation struggle. It demands an active civil society, which can take completely different forms of people's participation and mass mobilisation than used in the past or used in Europe. Perhaps when criticising the undemocratic structure and practices of the African societies we are barking up the wrong tree? Have African women really been given a chance to build up their own life the way they want it to be?

8. Conclusion

The participation of women in the Namibian liberation struggle took many different forms. Women were part of the resistance community from the beginning by supporting the attempts to prevent the colonial take-over of the territory. In the national liberation movement SWAPO women took an active role not only in the supportive functions but also by performing many tasks traditionally reserved for men. Now in independent Namibia women are encouraged to be part of the reconstruction and development politics of the new state. They are also contributing in building an active civil society which is a precondition in creating functional democratic practices in Namibia.

The reasons for women's active participation were several. The most important—perhaps—lie in their understanding of the colonial situation. The repressive military rule South Africa imposed in Namibia and especially in the northern Ovambo communities became a serious threat to the lives of the people. The colonial regime was not something distant but infiltrated private areas of people's lives by forcing men into migrant labour, harassing all people even children and preventing normal family and community life. Women, who have always been very aware of their role and responsibilities given by the community, felt themselves compelled to resist the destruction of the community. They interpreted their roles as mothers, wives and daughters in a new active way instead of through silent, adaptive response to the situation.

In Namibia SWAPO assumed the leading role of the resistance from the very beginning. SWAPO was started by Ovambo migrant workers and thus portrayed itself as an Ovambo movement in people's minds. It was then a legitimised channel for men and women to express their protest not only because of its nationalist ideology but because of its "familiarity" in the community. It was our brothers and sisters who suffered, women concluded. On the other hand SWAPO—when pursuing nationalist and socialist ideology—managed to address the needs of the people. The national liberation simply meant "to get rid of the "boers" and socialism was an answer to the poverty and a promise of well-being.

The life in exile further strengthened women's sense of community but also exposed many younger ones to new ideas. Being

alone and faced with new challenges through education many women were in search of a new identity. The gender questions which were already on the international agenda, became part of Namibian women's struggle as well. Women started to analyse their situation not only as black but also as woman. Women, however, always regarded the national liberation struggle primary to gender equality, although many of them believed that they were goals which it was possible to reach simultaneously. The liberation movement, which was always pragmatic in its approach, included gender equality on its agenda.

In post-independent Namibia the women's situation is characterised by great diversity. The attempts to unify women behind common gender oriented policy have not been successful. Women's status from traditional society to the modern state changed through the influence of Christianity and European male-dominant culture. It was also affected by the exceptional role women assumed during the liberation struggle. Although one cannot argue that in post-independent Namibia women are forced "back to the kitchen", there is a lot of disappointment amongst women at their modest participation in the government structures. But nearly as many women are relatively happy with the position now achieved. Especially rural women regard the women's active representation in politics as a start and a positive one.

The gender question has—though—successfully been raised in Namibia. It is not only "women's affairs" but a question of human rights in general. A lot depends on the understanding of women's needs before any successful gender politics can be implemented. Women have been and are different in their self-perception and their demands on society. Perhaps the best way to address the well-being of women and even the whole Namibian population is to provide alternative channels for participation in addition to the government structures. SWAPO has again assumed a leading role in Namibia, but also this time it is not capable of solving the problems alone. There is a need for greater political plurality which would lead to an active civil society. Those structures must be created by the women themselves, and this will only come about through empowering women in their cultural and situational context.

APPENDIX

List of Interviews and Discussions

- 01 Group discussion. 3 returnees, living and working in central Ovamboland all educated in Zambia. 11.1 1994 Ongwediva.
- 02 Interview. A returnee, educated in Zambia, working in central Ovamboland, a widow with three children. 18.1 1994.
- 03 Interview. An unmarried teacher from the border area, 3 children, working in Literacy Campaign, active in assisting combatants during the war 16.1 1994 Odibo.
- 04 Interview. Second interview of 03. 17.1.1994 Ongwediva.
- 05 Interview. A young policewoman from northern Ovambo, working in Osakati, widow with one child. 18.1 1994 Oshakati.
- 06 Interview. An old woman farmer from central Ovambo, no former education, widow with 6 children, subsistence farmer, active in resistance. 19.1 1994 Ongwediva.
- 07 Interview. Second interview of 06. 24.1 1994 Ongwediva.
- 08 Interview. An old woman farmer from the border area, no former education, divorced with 4 children, detained during the war, church activist. 25.1 1994 Odibo.
- 09 Interview. A nurse from the border area, single mother, husband a migrant labourer, detained during the war, active in assisting combatants. 25.1 1994 Odibo.
- 10 Group discussion. Three nurses from the church hospital, active in assisting combatants. 27.1 1994 Engela.
- 11 Interview. A former nurse, now a businesswoman from western Ovambo, active in resistance, one son. 27.1 1994 Oshakati.
- 12 Interview. An unemployed elderly widow, no formal schooling, member of DTA, active in politics. 27.1 1994 Ohangwena.
- 13 Interview. A returnee nurse and ex-guerilla, educated in Zambia and Great Britain as a teacher, working for SWAPO in Ovamboland, divorced, two children 31.1 1994 Ondangwa.
- 14 Interview. A young policewoman from central Ovambo, secondary school education, married with 5 children, not active in politics. 1.2.1994 Oshakati.
- 15 Interview. A journalist born in Old Location, a returnee, divorced with 6 children, working in Windhoek for NBC (Namibia Broadcasting Corporation). 10.2.1994 Windhoek.

- 16 Interview. A Ph.D. in education, returnee, educated in Sweden, working as a high officer for government, 2 children. 11.2.1994 Windhoek.
- 17 Interview. A theologian from central Ovambo, educated in Great Britain and USA by a church scholarship, active in resistance, married with 2 children. 23.2.1994 Ongwediva.
- 18 Interview. One of the first SWAPO-exiles, no formal education, living alone in the border area as subsistence farmer. 24.2.1994 Oshikango.
- 19 Interview. A young student of education, returnee, educated in Congo, unmarried. 10.3.1994 Ongwediva.
- 20 Interview. A young policewoman from central Ovambo, unmarried, expecting her first child, not interested in politics. 14.3.1994 Ongwediva.
- 21 Interview. An elderly businesswoman from central Ovambo, active supporter of the SWC, married with 8 children. 15.3.1994 Ongwediva
- 22 Interview. A teacher from northern Ovambo, working in Ongwediva, single mother, husband a migrant labourer, active in resistance, 16.3.1994 Ongwediva.
- 23 Group discussion. Two young returnees, educated in Angola as technicians, working as teachers in government programme for returnees in central Ovambo. 17.3.1994 Ondangwa.

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