



## **'We can be united, but we are different'<sup>1</sup>: Discourses of *difference* in postcolonial Namibia<sup>2</sup>**

**Michael Akuupa**  
**Dept of Anthropology and Sociology**  
**University of the Western Cape**  
**P/bag X17**  
**Bellville 7535**  
**Email: muakuupa@uwc.ac.za**

### **Abstract**

Social scientists who have written about the dynamics of festival rituals have analysed such practices variously as celebrations of commonality, as the enhancement of social cohesion, or as expressions of nostalgia. Festivals have also been studied as spaces, where information is disseminated to the public. This paper demonstrates that in postcolonial Namibia, cultural festivals have become avenues where discourses of difference and belonging are emphasised and contested by local people, festival participants and state officials through a range of ethnic-cultural presentations.

The paper is primarily concerned with the 'making' of Kavango identity as distinctively different from that of other ethnic groups in postcolonial Namibia. This process takes place in a particular political space, that of the culture festivals, which the state has organised and staged since the mid-1990s. Every year during the Annual National Culture Festivals representatives of Namibia's various ethnic groups gather to 'showcase' and express their diversity. Representatives of the state have time and again emphasised, couched in a discourse of 'unity in diversity', the importance of bringing together the country's previously segregated population groups. The paper shows that while the performers act out diversity through dance and other forms of cultural exhibition, the importance of belonging to the nation and a larger constituency is simultaneously highlighted.

**Keywords:** Festivals, culture, performance, Namibia, Kavango, postcolonial state

---

<sup>1</sup> Interview with Rudolf Ngondo; Katjinakatji, 15 January 2010

<sup>2</sup> This research was made possible through the generous sponsorship of the Carl Schlettwein Foundation for three years of my PhD project. Their support is highly valued. My thanks and appreciations go to the Guest Editor of this issue, Heike Becker, and to the anonymous reviewers for their comments and suggestions. This article has benefitted from the comments made by participants in the UWC Anthropology and Sociology Department seminar programme, especially those of Diana Gibson and Jide Oloyede. Thanks to Vashe Kletus Likuwa and Michael Shirungu for sharing perspectives on Vakavango history and concepts on various occasions.

## Introduction

When Namibia gained independence from South Africa in 1990, the colonial festivals which had previously been held in the apartheid colony's former homelands were discontinued. The new Namibian authorities regarded them as tools of the colonial aim of 'divide and rule' and thus removed them from public consumption. They were considered as part of a sad history. Instead other art forms such as choirs or paintings were promoted by the new government's culture officials. Yet, in the country's northeastern Kavango region small-scale festivals continued to be held locally by the Directorate of Youth.

Four years 'into independence' (as Namibians usually refer to the country's postcolonial period) however, culture festivals were officially reintroduced. The first national festival took place during 1995 in the coastal resort of Swakopmund. Every year since then the Annual National Culture Festival (ANCF) has been held, rotating between the country's 13 official regions.

In particular, this paper draws on the events of the Festival's 2008 installment, which took place in December of that year in Rundu, the capital of the Kavango region in northeastern Namibia. The festival lasted eight days. I present a detailed ethnography of the processes of the 'making' of Kavango identity which unfolded during the festival as distinctively 'different' from that of other ethnic groups in postcolonial Namibia. I further explain how a dialectical process takes place in a particular political space, viz that of the culture festivals, which the postcolonial Namibian state has organised and staged since the mid-1990s. My central argument is that while performers act out diversity through dance and other forms of cultural exhibition during these festivals, the importance of belonging to the nation and a larger constituency is also highlighted.

The ethnographic description and analysis focus on the culture performances of two groups, namely the *Ntunguru Cultural Group* and the group from the *Noordgrens Secondary School*. Both these groups hail from the Kavango region. I pay special attention to these specific groups because of their significance in the local festival space. Both these groups have on various occasions been selected by the Rundu regional office to represent the Kavango region in festivals, including those that have been organised by the state and by other institutions. The analysis will show how the organisers from the regional culture office in Kavango perceive the groups' roles in the region, drawing on their presentation, their demographic composition and character. It will be demonstrated, further how these two groups are presented by the festival organisers to show 'difference' and emphasise the 'significance' of 'the Kavango' as a unique ethnic existence in the national festival context.

I will conclude that the event I observed was part of the political rituals enacted by the postcolonial state in Namibia for its projects of decolonising the mind and nation- building. The specific event on which this paper is focused was part of the field work for my PhD project (started in 2007), which investigates the making of identities and nation building in postcolonial Namibia. I have observed numerous state-sponsored culture festivals in Namibia, although my focus has been on the Kavango region.

The first question I have had to deal with was of course, why – after postcolonial Namibia had initially done away with the festival performances - five years into the country's independence, they were brought back. I hold that Namibia's leadership might have realised the vacuum left by the abolition of the colonial culture festivals and recommitted to the same format of performance. However, as I will make clear, instead of simply emphasising regional ethnic-cultural difference, the SWAPO government embarked on an articulated national project of social and cultural 'unification', which explicitly cited cultural 'unity in diversity'<sup>3</sup> (Republic of Namibia 2001:3).

The waves of independence that swept across Africa from the 1950s left a desire to recapture African culture and history in their wake. In the same breath, as has been shown in a substantial body of literature following the publication of Hobsbawm and Ranger's (1984) influential *Invention of tradition* volume, culture and history were mutilated and reinvented by colonial interests. Postcolonial states found themselves faced with enormous diversity and very few unifying elements. African leaders developed different approaches to the problem of internal unification and almost all placed much influence on the production of national culture. State-sponsored cultural festivals in Africa and elsewhere seem to have become avenues in which cultural representations are produced by Africans in a postcolonial context of nation building and national reconciliation, by bringing visions of cosmopolitanism and modernity into critical dialogue with its colonial past. There is a growing body of literature which studies contemporary festivals and their politics in order to enhance the understanding of the making of postcolonial nations and their identities (see for example, Van Binsbergen 1994; Lentz 2001; Askew 2002; Apter 2005; Flint 2006).

Apter (2005) wrote about the Second World Black and African Festivals of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) which was held in Nigeria in 1977 following a first installment in Senegal in 1966. FESTAC 77 as it became known in the western parts of the continent that had already gained independence by the late 1960s and early 1970s, was particularly important. It continues to serve as the point of reference whenever political ritual is discussed in the history of postcolonial festivals. Apter was particularly interested in the transformations and change of value that 'culture' undergoes when it is produced and consumed in a festival space. His study engaged the production of national culture and tradition, a process that converts cultural objects and materials into icons of a 'higher' symbolic order (Apter 2005: 7). Askew's (2002) take was rather different: in her study of dances, such as *taraab* and *dansi*, she shows how they have been enacted and re-invented as 'national dances' during the National Arts and Language Competitions in Tanzania. She concludes that through the hosting of originally ethnically-particular songs and dances in spaces of 'national' cultural expression, the state *performed* nationhood.

---

<sup>3</sup> At the time when the festivals were re-invented there was no policy in place to guide the activities related to the festival. It was preceded by the Presidential Commission on Education, Culture and Training which was gazetted in March 1999.

The work of other anthropologists, including Van Binsbergen (1994), Lentz (2001) and Flint (2006), speaks even more closely to the subject of this paper. Van Binsbergen's (1994) investigation of the Kazanga festival in Central Western Zambia shows how festivals have become contexts in which cultural reconstructions are demonstrated; his argument centers on the connections between culture festival performances and the reproduction of ethnicity. In another study from Western Zambia, Flint (2006) presents an interesting intra-ethnic contradiction of the Lozi people in Western Zambia as regards their representations of their history and heritage. Both Van Binsbergen and Flint show how the festivals they studied created perspectives of difference and, most importantly, how they address the problem of cultural and ethnic demarcation. They demonstrate that cultural and ethnic demarcation is indeed the key question that festival organisers face when they decide which local cultural heritage they will stage and celebrate. Lentz's (2001) study of cultural festivals in Ghana goes back to a critical appraisal of the politics of nationalism; she places particular emphasis on interactions between different local and national social actors by looking at the cultural and political interactions between town and country, between the capital city and local elites, between on the one hand, village and district headquarters, and on the other hand, village chiefs and paramount chiefs, all of whom shape the dynamics of Ghanaian cultural festivals.

The growing body of literature on festivals in Africa has pointed out the different dimensions that these public stagings of 'culture' assume in different contexts. Nothing of relevance has yet been published on culture festivals in Namibia. Yet, beyond simply being a Namibian case study, the paper demonstrates that in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, cultural festivals have become significant avenues where discourses of 'difference' and 'belonging' are emphasised and contested by local people, festival participants and state officials through a range of ethnic-cultural presentations.

### **Note on Kavango history**

The remembered history of Kavango is important for any understanding of contemporary 'identity-making' and discourses of difference. The question from whence the region's inhabitants originated is central to the contestations engaged by local historians and intellectuals, who continue to argue about how Kavango-ness is embodied and what defines Kavango as a space.

There are two popular oral accounts of how Kavango and its people originated. I present first the one as narrated by Queen Maria Kandambo<sup>4</sup> of the Kankora clan in Gciriku and Mbambangandu wa Shihako<sup>5</sup> the son of Nankali, the daughter of queen Kandimba in Shambyu. According to this narrative, three of the ethnic groups that have been officially recognised for a long time, namely the Hambukushu, Vagciriku and Vashambyu, originated from Mashi in what is today western Zambia.

---

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Queen Maria Kandambo at her homestead in Gciriku, January 20, 2007

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Mbambangandu waShihako; Kambowo, January 20, 2007

The groups that settled on the south bank of the Kavango River were led by the royal clan of the Vakankora away from the Vamanyo group during the hunt of an elephant which they followed from Mashi to the Kavango River. While they were in pursuit of the injured animal, a woman who was a member of the group gave birth. The woman's husband decided to remain behind with the new mother while she recuperated and asked his younger brother to continue alone on the trail. The younger brother and some other hunters continued and found that the elephant had already crossed the river. At the river they found a pool where there were many frogs. Instead of continuing the pursuit of the elephant, they settled for this new delicacy. Later, the elder brother who had remained behind also arrived at the river. By then those who arrived first had already settled and claimed to be the owners of the new land.

This narrative is of particular interest for the contestations of Kavango-ness and the ethnic-cultural differences involved because it acknowledges that another group, the Vanyemba, had been in the midst of the to-be-Kavango settlers from the beginning, especially at the time when they settled in the Mbaranda area in what is today southern Angola. As I will show, colonial-era academic and administrative records entirely ignored the existence of those called Vanyemba (see for example, Gibson et al 1981), while the question of Vanyemba-ness has become a major issue in contemporary contestations.

Another history of the settlement of Kavango was told to me by Chief Alfons Kaundu<sup>6</sup> of the Mbunza in the western part of the region. He said that the Vambunza and Vakwangali, the two westernmost among the 'official' ethnic Kavango groups, had their origins in Makuzu gaMuntenda in present-day Angola. This foundation myth revolves around two sisters named Mate and Kapango kaMukuve and their children. Mate's children discovered a pond of fish and laid claim to it. They did not allow their cousins, the children of Kapango, to fish from their new found resource. Later, Kapango's children discovered wild animals which they tamed and domesticated. These animals became known as cattle. The situation became tense when Kapango's children obtained milk from their new assets but refused to share it with their cousins, Mate's children. As a result the two families split. Mate and her children moved southeastwards and later became the Mbunza ethnic group, while Kapango's family moved to the southwest and became known as Ukwangali. Interestingly, this account acknowledges the presence of the San people whom the new settlers encountered not far from the banks of the river at the time of their arrival.<sup>7</sup> However, it does not mention the people known today as Vanyemba at all.

---

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Chief Alfons Kaundu; Sigone (Mbunza), April 14, 2007

<sup>7</sup> Although the San are commonly acknowledged as the first settlers of southern African, they are relegated to remote areas and continue to be forcefully moved from areas they currently occupy. At present, there is an ongoing dispute between the San people in Western Caprivi (to the East of Kavango) and land developers who wish to turn the area into an agricultural irrigation project.

After colonial rule was imposed on the Kavango area in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, colonial policy 'rezoned' ethnic settlement areas in order to implement what became known as tribal trust funds during the 1930s.<sup>8</sup> Some of the Vambukushu people (the easternmost of the Kavango groups) were forcefully moved from the Western Caprivi Zipfel (east of the Kavango region) to the southern banks of the Kavango River. At the same time, the western border of Kavango was shifted eastwards in order to accommodate settlers from Ovamboland in the former neutral zone between the two territories. When the tribal trust funds were implemented, five tribal groups were officially gazetted as the original inhabitants of Kavango (Vakwangali, Vambunza, Vashambyu, Vagciriku and Vambukushu). Other groups living in the area, including those known as Vanyemba and Vachokwe, were declared recent arrivals from Portuguese West Africa (PWA), today's Angola.

Later colonial activities, in particular the proposals of the Odendaal Commission for a system of separate development, were informed and shaped by these earlier administrative mechanisms, which established a specific version of indirect rule in the Kavango area.

In the early 1960s, the Odendaal Commission propositioned that:

As far as practical a homeland must be created for each population group, in which it alone would have residential, political and language rights to the exclusion of other population groups, so that each group would be able to develop towards self determination without any group dominating or being dominated by the other.<sup>9</sup>

Similar to the discourse which accompanied the establishment of the South African system of separate development, the Odendaal Commission proclaimed to investigate the social welfare of the people in the then South West Africa and recommended how their lives could purportedly be improved. Following the Commission's recommendations, ethnic-based homelands were created in Namibia with a political system of differentiation and exclusion.<sup>10</sup>

After Namibian independence, and following the recommendations of the delimitation commission of 1992, Kavango became one of the country's thirteen political regions, where economic, cultural and socio-economic development was supposed to take place. This policy of decentralisation was purportedly aimed at giving local residents the opportunity to participate in decision making; thus, democracy was to be extended to them as a right based on national ideas and values (Ministry of Regional, Local Government and Housing 1998).

---

<sup>8</sup> NAT1/1/54 File 25 Official Communication dated 1937/2/21 Tribal Trust Fund: Okavango Native Territory

<sup>9</sup> NAR/1/155 File BB/0276 SWA- A Five Year Plan- for the development of the Native Areas

<sup>10</sup> For more details on the Odendaal Commission and the creation of the Kavango 'homeland', see Nambadi (2007), Likwua (2005), and Karapo (2008). These historians have looked into the pre-colonial history of Kavango and its inhabitants, the colonial conquest and finally the conception of Kavango as a homeland and the role of traditional authorities.

Some of the new political regions cut across the earlier ethnic administrations<sup>11</sup>; in other cases however, such as that of the Kavango, it followed the same demarcations. What, if anything, changed then? The major difference between 'then' (the era of apartheid colonialism) and 'now' (the era of postcolonial Namibia) is, of course, that people are no longer restricted to live in what is perceived to be their tribal areas.

Whereas the reinvention of the former homelands as political regions created a new meaning based on the ideals of freedom and development, in Kavango and elsewhere in the country people continue to settle predominantly according to the same patterns as they did before independence. Consequently, people who were declared latter-day immigrants by the colonial government are still perceived not to be original Kavango inhabitants; they continue to be relegated to the fringes in the discourse of regional development. Those called Vanyemba, in particular, still cannot claim ownership of 'traditional' land or of 'traditional' authority as the ethnic groups that the colonial government officially declared as constituting the 'Kavango peoples' continue to do. In the postcolonial moment, in order to belong, Kavango residents who have been or are marginalised seek allegiance within the mainstream or generic Kavango. This historical background we need to bear in mind when we attempt to understand the contemporary contestations of belonging and difference.

### **The Annual National Culture Festival**

Every year, the Namibian government organises culture festivals nationwide. The Directorate of Heritage and Culture Programmes in the Ministry of Youth, National Service, Sport and Culture, which is in charge of these events, has offices known as culture centers in all thirteen regions. Their staff is responsible for organising circuit and regional festivals. The culture festivals begin at the 'circuit' level, using the demarcation of school districts, where performing groups that have exhibited 'their culture' to meet the expectation of judges,<sup>12</sup> are selected to participate in the culture festival in their respective regions. Eventually, the regions' top performing groups compete in the Annual National Culture Festival.

Even circuit festivals attract large audiences, although they are held during the week and many people cannot attend. The regional festivals are held over weekends. The national festival draws many spectators, including the local elite and numerous officials from the national government

---

<sup>11</sup> Certain regions, such as Kavango and Caprivi, retained the names that had been used during the colonial time while others were newly named after the delimitation process. The former Ovamboland, for instance, was re-demarcated into the four new regions of Oshikoto, Oshana, Ohangwena and Omusati. In popular parlance, however, the area continues to be generally referred to as Ovamboland. Regions are sub-divided into constituencies.

<sup>12</sup> The judges are drawn from among the circles of local government officials and other local luminaries.

who attend the occasion on behalf of their respective ministries. The national event is held with pomp and ceremony to demonstrate its importance to the spectators and those who participate in it.

Those performing at the festivals certainly take them seriously. During my fieldwork, I found that in preparation for a regional festival, members of the participating groups rehearse intensively. The rehearsal involves the choreography of dances, drama and learning lyrics of song. The majority of participants in the festival are students and pupils from schools in the region. The event is held in a competition format, which as the organisers never fail to point out, is used not as an end in itself but as a means to an end. On one occasion for instance, in response to a question on how 'cultures' could 'compete', the Kavango region's senior culture officer explained during the local radio show *Mudukuli* ('saying it'):

What we do is not gathering and compete, but to 'showcase' our culture. However, we need a guideline that guides how we awards marks so that we have one group that wins in its effort of showcasing culture. We cannot compete at culture level, because of the diverse cultures we have.<sup>13</sup>

But let us now turn to the events of the Annual National Culture Festival, which I witnessed in Rundu in December 2008.

### **The march**

The first item on the event's itinerary was the 'march', which began in the heart of town and ended at the Rundu stadium. As instructed by the director of ceremonies, the members of cultural groups from all over Namibia had donned their 'traditional' costumes for the march and the official opening ceremony, during which a senior state official would officiate. When I arrived at the shopping mall from where the march would leave, the cultural groups had already gathered in front of the new complex. Several culture groups displayed banners advertising the names of their regions of origin. They lined up in the following order: Kavango, Oshikoto, Otjozondjupa, Oshana, Ohangwena, Omusati, Caprivi, Karas, Hardap, Erongo, Omaheke, Khomas and Kunene. However, it was clear that the public exhibition of 'cultures' during the march was about specific ethnic groups resident in the various regions since the participants were all clad in attires that are believed to be 'traditional' costumes. It was a colorful picture and accompanied by vigorous singing. Each group sang a different song; they sang loudly, groups seemed to compete about who could sing the loudest. Since the singing was not coordinated, the result was a high pitched sound and one really had to listen hard to make sense of what was being sung. The police were present to coordinate the march, together with culture officers from various regions. The traffic police

---

<sup>13</sup> Eyi twa ku ya rugana apa kapi si yo kurumbasana nye tuya likide mpo. Ngendeseso izo za kara po zo ku gava yitwa yipo tu ka gwane ogo ana fundu moku likida mpo. Kapi tatu vuru kurumbasana pampo, morwa za kara momarudi gokulisigasiga. (all translations from Kavango languages are the author's)

directed other road users away from the main road as the crowd began to march in the direction of the soccer stadium.

I believe that the march had two consequences: on the one hand, it signified the symbolic representation of Namibia's different ethnic groups. On the other hand, it was a display of power mediated by the state through the presence of its staff and security personnel which led the march. The spectacle can best be understood as an attempt to institutionalise the festival and its world of meanings among the citizens. Residents stood on the roadsides to witness a large number of people move in the town centre; a very rare sight in town, unless there is a funeral or wedding procession, particularly one involving the local elite. As the march entered the stadium, the participants kept singing and dancing, all the while exhibiting the banners and costumes.

### **Inside the stadium**

Inside the stadium seating arrangements were demarcated according to the participants' region of origin. Each cultural group had been allocated a different marquee, which specified the name of its region. The tribune also accommodated participants from various regions; only a small section was not demarcated, presumably to accommodate local festival goers. There was also a sunshade under which the officially invited guests and other dignitaries were seated. The first to arrive and be seated under this canopy was the Deputy Minister of Youth, National Service, Sport and Culture, Pohamba Shifeta. He was followed by the Ministry's Permanent Secretary, Peingondjabi Shipoh. Then the Acting Governor of the Kavango region arrived, shortly before Rundu's town Mayor. Next was the Vambunza chief, Alfons Kaundu. The Roman Catholic Bishop arrived a few minutes after him.

However, for a long time the Festival could not go ahead since the Minister of Youth, National Service, Sport and Culture, Willem Konjore, who was to officiate at the opening, arrived more than two hours later. People became agitated because of this prolonged wait; some lost patience and started demanding that proceedings go ahead as planned.<sup>14</sup>

Finally the vehicle carrying the Minister appeared at the gate, from where it was driven straight onto the lawn and came to a stop a few meters from the VIP marquee. The Director of National Heritage and Culture Programmes (NACP), his Deputy, followed by the Mayor and other government representative approached the Minister's vehicle to receive him in line with the elaborate protocol customary at such occasions. After brief greetings, the Minister was ushered to his seat in the front row, where he took his place between the Deputy Minister and the Acting Governor. All this time, other VIP guests chatted among themselves; the Permanent Secretary who

---

<sup>14</sup> It appears that Konjore is notorious for keeping people waiting. In another incident, about which I read in the media, he also kept people waiting for a very long time in another Namibian region where he was expected to officiate at an event.

was to be director of ceremonies was still compiling a list of names to be acknowledged during the official event. The audience was now calmer since they expected the proceedings to begin after the long delay.

The Permanent Started by greeting the crowd in various languages that are commonly spoken in Namibia. Judging by their enthusiastic response, the audience appreciated his manner of greeting, which symbolised the presence of Namibia's diverse ethnic groups. I understood it to be an enactment of the state principle of 'unity and diversity', where all ethnic groups present at the gathering were acknowledged. He then requested the audience to sing the national and the African Union (AU) anthems. Following the singing of the anthems, the director of ceremonies sternly reprimanded some men for not removing their hats while the anthems were sung. He said: 'In other countries, you will be shot dead if men have their hats on, when people are singing the national anthem, please remember that.' Following the singing of the anthems, the Roman Catholic Bishop said a prayer. The Acting Governor was next to express words of welcome. As he made his way to the podium, the audience applauded. Clad in a black suit and carrying a folder which contained his written speech, he started with a prolonged greeting that acknowledged all dignitaries present. His prepared speech touched on wide ranging aspects of 'culture and tradition' which, he said, would be celebrated on the day of the Festival. He emphasised the importance of showing the 'true color of our origin and embrace culture as a diverse and unique exercise of different ethnic groups on this universe.' He went on to share his expectation that he was looking forward 'to see how happy Herero, Damara, Tswana, Caprivians and other tribes are dancing around at the podium'.

I could not fail to notice how the (ethnic) difference between the various population groups that make up the Namibian nation state was emphasised by the senior regional government officer. This obviously went down well with the audience. The crowd cheered loudly when he read such sections of his presentation. He closed his speech by welcoming people to the 'mighty Kavango'. His presentation of Kavango as a 'mighty' region can be read in various ways, depending on one's reading of the region's current political context. Although Namibia is generally seen as politically and economically stable, some residents of Kavango that I interviewed during my fieldwork felt that an unfair distribution of the national wealth prevailed, as well as a jagged ethnic recognition; both apparently due to the uneven recognition of the contributions to the liberation struggle made by residents of different regions. For some time now, there has been a sense of neglect and discontent with the state of national affairs among local people in Kavango, especially those belonging to the tiny local elite.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> One prominent member of the regional government remarked during the closure of a conference in the region two years ago: '*Ose kumoneka asi vakwatesiko tupu*' (Lit: 'We are regarded as hand lenders.'). He was referring to the role played by people of Kavango during the liberation struggle, which is considered secondary. At the time of the 2008 ANCF a new political party has just been launched in the region. It has been labeled as an ethnic

After the Acting Governor finished reading his short speech, the director of ceremonies introduced the main speaker of the day, Minister Willem Konjore. Like the Permanent Secretary before him, the Minister greeted the audience in the various languages spoken in Namibia, followed by the official protocol of addressing state gatherings. Clad in a navy suit and black hat, the minister approached the podium carrying his speech in one hand, and holding onto a carved cane with the other, thereby embodying symbolised seniority.<sup>16</sup> Before he read his prepared speech, he conveyed greetings from the Head of State who had been invited to officiate at the event, but who failed to attend.

The Minister's prepared speech started with what sounded like a (dated) anthropological definition of the culture concept. He presented culture as a 'thing' in Handler's (1988) sense, a 'thing' that can be shared and used as a tool to identify differences in identities. Furthermore, Konjore presented culture as something that should embrace global developments in order to enhance economic development and social cohesion. From the Namibian government's perspective therefore, culture is presented as a commodity that can change the economic aspects of people's way of life.<sup>17</sup>

Halfway through his speech the Minister warned that people should not regard their 'own' culture as superior to others. Encouraging the audience to acknowledge diversity, he emphasised that the event should be celebrated with the 'sure knowledge that we are different'. Konjore presented the festival as an arena where a greater understanding of cultural diversity could be achieved, because here different people had come together not only to celebrate, but to 'showcase' their cultures and origins.

When he finished his short speech, Konjore declared the festival officially open. The crowd clapped hands and ululated in appreciation. The Minister then left the podium and shook hands with the director of ceremonies. The other VIP guests gave him a standing ovation; each of them moved to shake the Minister's hand. Konjore's speech demonstrated a skillful political articulation. He had concentrated on nationalistic sentiments about 'culture', and he had presented himself as a representative of the nation as a whole rather than of a particular interest group within the society. Once the excitement had settled, the director of ceremonies again rose to call on the culture groups to get ready for their performances.

---

political party in speeches by the ruling party, SWAPO, on many occasions during recent election campaigns and the increasing number of presidential visits to the region.

<sup>16</sup> In several communities in Namibia people move around with a cane in their hands once they have reached an elevated status in the community, or seniority in age.

<sup>17</sup> The commodification of culture is not the topic of this article, but it was evidently a significant part of the event. I observed that throughout the week of the festival, some people recorded dances and took pictures that were developed and sold on site. Many times when I attended festivals during my fieldwork, people asked me whether I was in the business of selling 'culture products'.

## Performances of culture

For my discussion of performance at the festival, I deliberately chose to focus on the stage presentations of two groups, namely the culture group of the *Noordgrens Secondary School* and the *Ntunguru Cultural Group*. During my stay at the Maria Mwendere Culture Centre, where I served as an intern for most of the duration of my fieldwork in 2008, I observed that the officials based at the Centre attached special sentiment and significance to these two groups. When the national festival programme was being prepared, the senior culture officer, Thomas Shapi, motivated that *Noordgrens Secondary* should be included among the groups chosen to provide entertainment during the event, although during the competitions it had not made it beyond the circuit stage. For Shapi and his colleagues, *Noordgrens* presented and signified something special because of its demographic composition. *Noordgrens Secondary* and its culture group comprised both white and black youth. Like any other school in the region that participated in the festivals, however, it presented what is believed to be 'Kavango culture'. Although its performance was not considered particularly successful, the officials considered its inclusion in the National Festival as crucial because of the symbolism of the group's demographics and of how it locates the region within the national principle of 'unity and diversity'.

The *Ntunguru Culture Group*, on the other hand, was perceived to represent Kavango-ness in an exemplary way. It is an adult group from the eastern Kavango and has participated in the finals on many occasions. *Ntunguru* is regarded as a group of performers in the premier category that has represented the region in many local, Africa-wide and international contexts. The group has been officially endorsed by the regional culture office as the representative of Kavango and its people. It has also been accorded national status, which has not delighted everyone. In early 2010, officials from culture offices in several of the country's regions complained publicly that groups from Kavango were given opportunities to travel abroad far more frequently than other groups (*Informante*, February 11, 2010). In the Kavango region, however, no eyebrows were raised by other culture groups about the frequent travels of *Ntunguru*.

The *Noordgrens* group was the first to enter the stage, but not before the Director of National Heritage and Culture Programmes had read the guidelines and rules of the festival to everyone present. The Director stipulated the criteria that judges would use during the adjudication process. He emphasised that the audience and performers should not view the adjudication process as being aimed at ranking or demeaning any act being presented on stage, nor should the process be seen as favoring any cultural presentation over others. He stressed that the process should simply be viewed as a guideline, which would help to identify the group which presented itself in the most original manner possible; this would then make it eligible for a national prize or as 'culture ambassadors'. He maintained that in the fourteen year history of the national festivals, judges had always demonstrated and upheld high levels of integrity in order to promote and enhance fair play.

When the group from the *Noordgrens Secondary School* appeared at the entrance to set the stage for their performance, many spectators seemed shocked by the composition of the group and its

costumes. Several people exclaimed in disbelief amidst applause: '*tatu tarere neina*' (lit: We shall see today what they will show us). The crowd as well as the invited VIP guests applauded and greeted the group with loud cheers, yet the audience seemed uncertain about what the youngsters would perform. The girls wore brown skirts and tops with strings of blue and white beads over their skirts and around their ankles and arms. The white girls in the group sported blonde *vihihho*.<sup>18</sup> The boys wore *marudeve*<sup>19</sup> around their waists. These items of clothing supposedly signified Kavango culture. One of the black boys wore a blazer and a white hat for his part in the group's drama presentation. First, the youngsters came on stage and arranged the props of their performance: a reed mat, a tape recorder, three cloths, a small chair, a big basket made of palm leaves and two plastic plates. Items such as plastic plates, blazers and fabric hats are regarded as foreign to the traditionalist notion of 'Kavango culture'. Their use in the context of the Festival represented the ability of local people to appreciate and incorporate things from 'other cultures' in their own lives, a matter that had been loudly emphasised during the Minister's opening speech.

After laying out the props, most of the group members left the stage. Three male drummers remained behind to welcome the other members of the group as they began the performance from the entrance. On stage, they danced to the tunes of the drums amidst loud cheers and ululation. Some sections of the audience egged them on, shouting 'forward, forward', while others exclaimed, 'wee, culture, wee!' The director of ceremonies drummed up even more applause and ululation from the audience. As the group prepared to present their last item, the senior culture officer for the Kavango region unceremoniously took to the podium for a little impromptu speech:

*Noordgrens* has been a good example in the whole Namibia. We chose *Noordgrens* because it is a group that displays all kind of population groups in Namibia. And that is what we mean when we say unity in diversity. *Noordgrens!* Give them a big applause. Last year when we went to Oshana region people were left speechless to see our composition and they could not stop but praise Kavango region for promoting unity and diversity. Thank you, thank you!

To end their performance the group sang a song about 'Kavango the good land' in Rukwangali, praising the region's abundance of food, animals, people and culture. The song urged people to take care of what they have. Then the two last dancers moved towards the drummers to stop the song. The audience clapped wildly as the group left the stage.

After this - symbolically-charged - performance as a result of competition, it was time for the presentations by the groups that competed for a prize in the Festival. The director of ceremonies

---

<sup>18</sup> *Vihihho* (sing: *sihoho*) is form of female headgear. It is a long snarl that hangs down to the female's shoulders and is made of tree inner bark.

<sup>19</sup> *Marudeve* (sing.: *rudeve*) is clothing made of reeds which grow along the Kavango River. The reeds are cut into pieces and joined together with a string and tied around the waist like a skirt. When a person clad in a *rudeve* dances it emits sound.

announced that the first competitive performance in the adult category would be by the local stars from the *Ntunguru* group. The male dancers had their *marudeve* wrapped tightly around their waists and wore *mutjeketje*<sup>20</sup> around their ankles. Some of the male performers also wore headgear made from animal skin. They wore necklaces made out of green beads with an engraved symbol of a star. The men's upper bodies were not covered with anything else; they were also barefoot. The women were also barefoot. However, they had put on tops to cover their breasts. They wore headgear known as *vihoho*; their brown petticoats were decorated with white and orange beads. Around their ankles, arms and wrists they sported bands made of white beads. In addition, the women also showed off green star necklaces. The group members carried a big canoe and fresh river reeds onto the stage to present a river scene; other props included small axes and small baskets containing millet, sorghum and *nongongo*.<sup>21</sup> They also arranged two black pots and storage baskets. Through their costumes and material items such as the *nongongo* fruit, the group presented the locally essentialised imaginary of the 'typical traditional Kavango'<sup>22</sup> way of life. As became evident from the presentations of other groups from the region, so-called traditional Kavango dress and life have evolved and appreciated new influences.

When the *Ntunguru* group entered the stage to lay out the props for their performance, the director of ceremonies called on the - already cheering - crowd to clap their hands. After they prepared the stage, thirteen of the performers walked toward the entrance of the arena, where they waited for the three drummers left behind on stage to invite them with the beat of the drum. As the drumming began and the group reentered the stage already dancing, the audience cheered and ululated loudly. The dancers entered in two parallel lines which later fused to become one as they formed a half circle. Each dancer carried a small basket containing maize or millet seeds; she or he announced the contents of the basket and explained what it was used for, for instance, '*Mumahangu ghakulima twe Vakavango kuwana mo vitima*' (lit: This is *mahangu*. It is used to make porridge by the Kavango people).

The group moved to the front of the stage holding baskets high before they placed them on the ground and returned to their original half circle position. As the song progressed, three female dancers separated from the rest and danced towards the drummers who also danced as they beat the drum to end the first song. As the three women got close to the drummers, the drum stopped to signal the end of the song.

---

<sup>20</sup> *Mutjeketje* are seeds of the camel thorn tree. They are attached to a string and tied around the ankles, producing a sound when the performers stamp their feet on the ground.

<sup>21</sup> *Nongongo* are dried nutty plums which are stored for the extraction of their nutritious oil.

<sup>22</sup> My usage of terms such as culture and tradition follows local usage and is not meant to suggest that I see earlier forms of Kavango social history as timeless and preserved in their entire integrity which has been disrupted. All evidence shows that life has changed significantly and continues to so.

When the group began to sing their exit song at the end of their performance, the director of ceremonies encouraged the audience to give a round of applause as the group was leaving the stage: 'Thank you, thank you *Ntunguru!* We have learned Kavango culture from you, and I hope everybody will take it forward', he concluded as their drum beat faded. Over the next few days, all the other groups that had entered the national competition carried out their performances.

At the end of the festival, every participating group received a certificate of attendance and prize money which had been raised by the Ministry. The director of ceremonies stepped forward, carrying three large envelopes containing cash and certificates. He announced the winners and runners-up of the different categories and briefly reported on how the results had been arrived at. He called the Deputy Minister to assist him with the prize-giving (the Minister had already left). While the Deputy Minister was making his way to the stage, the director of ceremonies announced business-like:

Everybody who participated today is a winner. Each group will receive a certificate of participation and prize money of N\$300<sup>23</sup>. The runner up gets N\$650, second winner receives N\$900 and first winner will take away a whopping N\$1200 and a certificate. I request the group leaders to collect their certificate and prize money when I call the group names and kindly sign for receiving the money.

The handing out of certificates and prize money began. All the groups received their certificates amidst cheer from the spectators. Then the moment of truth arrived and the director of ceremonies read the names of the groups and the points they had been awarded in the runner-up category. In the adult category, *Ntunguru* came second behind the *Ondjondjo* Culture Group from the Oshana region (in Owambo).

### **Analysis of the festival presentations in Kavango**

To make sense of the events I depicted in the previous section, I shall take a closer look at the roles of the various actors. The National Culture Festival is an annual event on Namibia's social calendar and is organised by the state. The gathering should be considered as one that constitutes social capital in associational life; the performances during the festival can best be read as embodying postcolonial Namibia's official narrative of 'unity in diversity'. The Festival is performative in that it encompasses bodily practices that produce meaning and highlight interactions between social actors and their environment. During the national festival people from all of Namibia's thirteen political regions are represented. The state, through its Ministry of Youth, National Service, Sport and Culture, organises the event that rotates among venues in the regions. The culture office of the region which hosts the event does most of the preparations; it is only assisted by the head office in Windhoek with matters that are beyond the capacity of the regional executive. In 2008, such a

---

<sup>23</sup> 1 N\$ = 1 Rand

matter was the invitation to the Head of State, who the regional office hoped would officiate during the Festival.

It appears that, although it is ostensibly an event of *national* significance, the Festival becomes centered around themes that are important to the host region. The theme for the festival was '*Keeping our diverse cultures amidst globalization*'. Since it was held in Kavango in 2008, Thomas Shapi, the region's senior culture officer and a teacher by profession, made sure that all the local dignitaries were personally invited, including the regional governor of Kavango region, the Rundu town mayor, education directors and managers from local businesses. As he told me earlier, he would very much have wished that the Head of State would officiate, but disappointingly, unlike in some previous years, in 2008 the President was not available and instead a minister from Windhoek represented the national government. Clad in a black blazer with the insignia of the national flag on the front pocket, Shapi had evidently been busy before the event commenced since he was making calls to his colleagues who were responsible for different tasks during the gathering. Together with Shapi, the then Director of National Heritage and Culture Programmes coordinated the event. He, some believed, had a personal interest in this particular festival since he too hails from the Kavango region, although since his appointment to the central government he has settled in the national capital.<sup>24</sup> Herbert Ndango Diaz holds a doctorate in philosophy and he has written novels and poems in the Kavango dialects.

The Permanent Secretary, Peingondjabi Shipoh, who served as the director of ceremonies during the festival, left after the official opening. The Deputy Minister Pohamba Shifeta also arrived on the day when the festival began but, unlike his superior, he stayed in Rundu until the last day. The festival lasted for eight days. Shifeta, a one-time leader of organisations such as the Namibia National Students' Organization (NANSO) and the National Youth Organization, assisted the director of ceremonies with handing out certificates and prizes. The Acting Governor of the Kavango region, David Hamutenya, a constituency councilor from western Kavango, stood in for the Regional Governor, John Thighuru, who could not attend the festival opening because it had been rescheduled to accommodate the potential presence of the Head of State.<sup>25</sup> Then there was Willem Konjore, the Minister of Youth, National Service, Sport and Culture. A pastor by profession, and a former Deputy Speaker of Parliament, he represented the central government at the Festival when it was confirmed that the Head of State would not come to Kavango.

The immense importance that was placed on the possible presence of President Hifikepunye Pohamba at the event is worth greater consideration. The fact that it was never quite known whether or not the Head of State would arrive makes for some very interesting reflection. Of

---

<sup>24</sup> Before he retired from the civil service in 2009, he was accused by several ministry staff members of favoring the Kavango region in many aspects of culture.

<sup>25</sup> Namibian President Hifikepunye Pohamba could not attend because he had to travel to the funeral of Helvi Kondombolo, the mother of Sam Nujoma, the first president of Namibia. Kondombolo was accorded a state burial.

course, there can often be legitimate logistical reasons for the absence of the president, but one would think that any logistical problems could be overcome. The enduring uncertainty and the anxiety that this produced in the regional culture office in Rundu, seem to suggest that the arrival (or not) of the Head of State had perhaps become a power tool. The Head of State had to be kept in mind during all the preparations because of this uncertainty.

Except for the senior culture officer who played a major logistical role in the preparation of the festival, most of those seated in the VIP marquee were dignitaries representing foreign embassies, national leaders, and the local state administrative elite. The presence of national leaders, together with the local leadership and the wider local audience, as well as the participating performers, gave the Festival gathering a particular significance. All the parties, and especially the local officials involved in the planning and organisation of the Festival, were fully aware that this event could not 'make any sense' without the presence of national dignitaries. As Pye (1963: 27) pointed out half a century ago, there is always a human dimension in the celebration of nationhood and the presence of the national leadership since it has to 'appeal for an undifferentiated public' which presents itself as different through performance.

The 'ordinary' audiences of the festival, mostly Rundu residents, were seated on the tribune at one side of the stadium. They moved in groups of children and adults in direction of the residential settlements at the end of each day's festival session. Some members of the public obviously saw the potential to make money from selling snacks and pictures and DVDs of culture groups, which reminded me of the Comaroffs' suppositions of the commoditisation of culture in the sense of Ethnicity INC (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009).

And then, of course, we need to consider the performers. One of the groups, whose performance was discussed in the previous section was the *Ntunguru Cultural Group*. *Ntunguru* ('the star') comes from the eastern part of the central Kavango area of Shambyu and is composed of sixteen younger and older adults; some of the older members have retired from civil service positions in Rundu and moved back to the village. Six members of the group are male, ten are female. *Ntunguru* boasts several trophies and certificates which it has won since it began to participate in festival performances. The *Noordgrens Secondary School's* group includes sixteen young white, coloured and black performers.<sup>26</sup> During South African colonial rule this school accommodated children of white civil servants only. Since independence, it has become a mixed race school; it is also the school of choice for the children of (black) civil servants from other Namibian regions, who settled in Rundu after independence. Previously, before and shortly after independence in 1990, the school did not participate in culture activities. One of the previous local culture officers told me that he attempted to have the school participate in festivals shortly after independence, but his

---

<sup>26</sup> Strictly-speaking, secondary school students are in their teens but, as is common Namibian parlance, as school going youth they are locally referred to as 'children'.

efforts were unsuccessful. The school only started participating in the regional culture festivals in the late 1990s after the festivals had been officially proclaimed by the new Namibian state.

The interactions of these social actors in the environment of the Annual Cultural Festival demonstrated how the official principle of 'unity and diversity' serves as the basis on which difference among the people of Namibia is constructed. One wonders how the festival organisers, participants and spectators interpret the meaning of 'unity in diversity', especially in Kavango, where the matter manifests itself in many complex ways.

Debates on local radio shows around the start of the annual 'festival season' give a good illustration of these complex issues. Radio debates on the festivals included topics such as how the region could participate in the 'national unity' projects implemented by the central government. Presenters and callers also debate, however, how the various groups in Kavango contribute to *regional* unity. For instance, the senior culture officer, Thomas Shapi, called in to the early morning radio programme, *Pinduka* ('wake up') to announce an upcoming festival. He urged people to attend the festival, for it would be 'a perfect opportunity to come together as Kavango people and nation'. Shapi's statement triggered a debate on the radio chat show, *Mudukuli*, later in the morning, which carried on for several days. A few days after the regional culture festival, for instance, an anonymous caller asked the presenter, '*Nani wolye Vakavango?*' (lit: Who are the Kavango people?)

The discussion on the radio points to the origin of the five groups namely the Kwangali, Mbunza, Shambyu, Gciriku and Mbukushu, who according to royal oral histories, can rightfully claim to be Kavango people. This construction of Kavango-ness does not include the people collectively known as Vanyemba, who have also been resident in Kavango since time immemorial, as some local history narratives have it. There was a palpable sense of exclusion in the radio discussion. Although the senior culture officer did not mention who 'makes up' the Kavango, on this as, on other occasions, the discussion routinely lead to the point of who is a (legitimate) part of Kavango. His statement apparently created a situation that Handler (1986) would refer to as an 'anxiety of being' which befalls people when their 'being' and 'belonging' are questioned.

During the ongoing radio show discussions of the purpose and merits of the festival, notions of the allegiance and true commitment to Kavango ethnicity emerged as issues of regional unity and diversity. The radio programme allows for an open discussion, which at times reaches a crisis point, especially when touching on local ideas of inclusion and exclusion. In this context, the debates about the belonging of the residents referred to as 'Vanyemba' are particularly significant.

The Vanyemba are believed to have migrated from areas in Southern Angola to Kavango at different times, and for different reasons. A smaller group is said to have lived along the Kavango River at the time when it became the colonial border between Namibia and Angola. Their claims are that they migrated to the Namibian side, because of who lived there. This smaller group of Vanyemba are locally accepted as *vandambo*, which means 'familiar'. The, at least tentative, inclusion of these earlier migrants from Angola is in contrast with the exclusion of those who came

with the more recent and much larger influx of Vanyemba during the war of liberation in Angola.<sup>27</sup> This group is often seen locally as *vatywayuki*, or refugees, who supposedly have influenced the local culture with their 'alien' ideas, practices and processes of meaning making.

The colonial state's construction of the five Kavango legitimate 'peoples' (or 'tribes') still seems to be commonly accepted. When, for instance, I asked the leader of the *Ntunguru* group what the star in their name and ornament symbolises he said that it represents the people of Kavango, namely the five groups of Hambukushu, Vashambyu, Vagciriku, Vambunza and Vakwangali. This is despite the fact that the Vanyemba are the largest of the groups. However, dissenting views insist that the Vanyemba have been around in Kavango for a long time, and that many, if not most, of the region's 'traditional' songs and dances are actually of Nyemba origin, in contrast with those who claim to be the 'real' locals. This viewpoint also maintains that since the Vanyemba have been living among the so-called local people for a long time, trading and intermarrying with them, their songs and ways of life have been assimilated into Kavango cultural practices. As one very knowledgeable informant pointed out:

Many traditional songs, dances and tales in Kavango are not of Kavango origin; they were told and sung in Nyemba languages. That is how it has been even long time ago. Well, there are also songs and dances that were sung in, say, Mbukushu, Shambyu, Gciriku and Kwangali, but the majority of the songs and dances belonged to the Nyemba, and they dance them. When some people are saying that it is Vanyemba who are spoiling everything, that I do not believe.<sup>28</sup>

### **The 'culture booklet'**

Surprisingly, the belonging of Vanyemba to Kavango-ness remains fiercely contested despite the fact that since independence the state has recognised the Vanyemba as part of the region's people and culture by including them in an official publication about the identity of the Kavango people (MYNSC 2006:13). This concise publication on the history and dances of the Kavango people which was designed by the Kavango culture office has become known as the 'culture booklet'. The booklet is based on interviews that the culture office conducted in the region in order to reconstruct the history and traditional activities of the Kavango. The booklet is also used to present the judges with insights into the local culture when the regional cultural groups participate during the National Culture Festival. While all participating groups at the festivals, starting from the

---

<sup>27</sup> Brinkmann (1991) deals in detail with issues of Vanyemba identity in postcolonial Kavango.

<sup>28</sup> Nonsumo domaudano ndi dina domarungano domoKavango, kapi ava di dimbi moRukavango. Ku dimba moruNyemba, imo ya kere nanare ku tunda kokakuru ka nare. MoruNyemba nga va yi dimbi. Pogeli marusumo gamwe goudano goruMbukuhu ndi ruSambyu ndi ruGciriku ndi ruKwangali nyee maudano gomanzi aawe Vanyemba. Oyo yo ku ninka asi Vanyemba taantani aawe kapi naku yikwatesa ko ngororo nga va ruvongavonga moidimbagera na nare. (Interview with Immanuel Shikukumwa; Safari, January 2009)

lowest circuit levels, independently produce their own 'culture booklets' to explain their background and performances, purportedly to convey a sense of their culture and dances to the judges,<sup>29</sup> for the national festival, the regional culture office prepares a cover narrative about the history of Kavango and its people. The individual booklets of the participating groups are then bound under the official account and presented to the judges.

In the culture booklets produced by the individual groups, invariably there is a clear distinction and assertion of the group's origin. In all the booklets that I looked at, it was boldly stated whether the group originated from Mbukushu, Gciriku, Shambyu or Mbunza and Kwangali, that is, one of the officially recognised, legal Kavango 'tribes' of the colonial time. Yet, even today the Vanyemba are presented as those without an ancestral land in the region, although my analysis of a large number of 'culture booklets' showed that most of the songs in the booklets were written in and performed in Runyemba. This may explain why many Kavango dances continue to be hotly contested if they are seen as being connected to what is believed to be Nyemba culture or tradition.

### **Some preliminary reflections on performing Kavango-ness**

When I analysed the culture booklet in relation to the Festival in general, it emerged as a tool to signify and authenticate Kavango-ness, encompassing the different ethnic groups represented in the festival space. The booklet's ostensible role is to guide the judges during the festival presentation, yet, I conclude that it should also be seen as a tool of differentiation. In what started as a colonial project to present the 'objectified' Kavango, the culture booklet has become a vital tool of the postcolonial administration's nation building project. In particular, it has become a mode through which the state constructs and emphasises regional identities, which are presented in a homogenised form, although they encompass a complex diversity. Furthermore, we need to locate this complex matter within the wider discourse of ethnicity and differentiation as an aspect of identity. Here, we need to return to the two groups whose performances I discussed earlier in this article.

For the organisers of the Festival, the *Ntunguru Cultural Group*, on the one hand, apparently signified Kavango-ness. Because they are adults, they were ascribed a position of experience in a 'cultural' hierarchy, where the young are supposed to 'learn' the Kavango culture from their 'elders'. Arguably, the authentication of material culture and cultural performance is aligned with hierarchies of authority among the actors who participate in the event, and with the officials of the state.

The group from *Noordgrens Secondary* on the other hand, is seen as a product of the local nationhood factory. Because of its multiracial composition, the group's participation in the

---

<sup>29</sup> The judges then use the culture booklet and an adjudication form to judge the act. Groups are judged according to criteria such as how they enter the stage, their décor, costume, song, originality, and the booklet.

'performance of sovereignty' (Hansen & Stepputat 2005: 26) is particularly important to the Kavango region. Moreover, the fact that *Noordgrens Secondary* used to be an all-white school which has transformed over the years, makes it appear as a good example of the 'imagined' unity in diversity, which the state propagates in its 'body politic' (Anderson, 1983; Brinkel, 2006). In this way, past impositions of difference become reconciled with post-colonial notions of national belonging. The notion of unity in diversity is based on what Brown (2001) refers to as the 'shared problematic' regarding South Africa, which acknowledges a mutual history of difference as well as local and global affiliations. Another important aspect of the participation of *Noordgrens* is the demonstrated ability of the group's white members to learn to speak native Kavango languages and to perform local traditional dances. Therefore, the group is regarded, by culture officials and spectators alike as the embodied willingness and ability of those born-free<sup>30</sup> to 'learn' local culture; it is thus seen as an example for others to emulate.

Finally, it is tempting to ask why it is apparently deemed 'proper' for whites to perform the perceived Kavango 'culture', while the performance of Nyemba dances by 'real' Kavango remains disputed. This is quite a complex question. Another one follows: should we view these intra-Kavango tensions and contestations as an attempt to establish ties of community or tools for empowerment? One can conclude, perhaps, that these tensions are about 'modern senses of belonging', which are expressed through ethnic allegiance and emphasis (Guss 2000: 63).

When groups join the march with banners which display their regions of origin, they signify and assert their differences. However, it is also important to not only see difference in the coming-together of diverse groups in the same arena. The motive of the gathering is of utmost importance. As per state discourse the Annual National Culture Festival is held to bring people together for the common good, which is 'unity'. I have shown that the culture festival is a space which is mediated by the state, but it is also highly influenced by the participation of the local community. In conclusion, the National Culture Festival is a space of cultural performance that allows and enables Namibia's different regions to present themselves as a 'cultural community' within a wider 'political community', thus constituting the nation despite all local contestations of belonging. (Bauman 1986; Kymlicka 1989: 135).

---

<sup>30</sup> 'Born-free' is a local term used to refer to those who were born around the time of Namibian independence and thereafter. It is used to indicate that they have only experienced peace and not the wrath of colonial oppression.

## References

- Anderson, Benedict. 1991. *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origins and spread of nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Apter, Andrew. 2005. *The Pan African nation: Oil and the spectacle of culture in Nigeria*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Askew, Kelly. 2002. *Performing the nation: Swahili music and cultural politics in Tanzania*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bauman, Richard. 1986. Performance and honor in the 13<sup>th</sup> -Century Iceland. *Journal of American Folklore* 99 (392): 131-150.
- Brinkman, I. 1999. Violence, Exile and Ethnicity: Nyemba Refugees in Kaisosi and Kehemu (Rundu, Namibia). *Journal of Southern African Studies* 25 (3): 417-439.
- Brinkel, Theo. 2006. *Nation building and pluralism: Experiences and perspectives in state and society in South Africa*. Den Haag: Sdu Uitgevers.
- Brown, Duncan. 2001. National belonging and cultural difference; South Africa and the global imaginary. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 27 (4): 757-769.
- Comaroff, Jean & Comaroff, John. 2009. *Ethnicity, Inc*. Scottsville. University of Kwazulu –Natal Press.
- Flint, Lawrence. 2006. Contradictions and challenges in representing the past: The Kuomboka Festival of Western Zambia. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 32 (4): 701-717.
- Gibson, Gordon D., Larson, Thomas J. & McGurk, Cecilia R. 1981. *The Kavango peoples*. Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner.
- Guss, David M. 2000. *The festive state: Race ethnicity, and nationalism as cultural performance*. Berkeley, Los Angeles London. University of California Press.
- Handler, Richard. 1988. *Nationalism and the politics of culture in Quebec*. London: The University of Wisconsin Press.
- Handler, Richard. 1986. Authenticity. *Anthropology Today* 2 (1): 2-4.
- Hansen, Thomas Blom & Stepputat, Finn. 2005. 'Introduction,' in *Sovereign bodies: citizens, migrants, and state in the postcolonial world*. Edited by T.B. Hansen and F. Stepputat. New York. Princeton University Press.
- Hobsbawm, Eric & Ranger, Terence (eds). 1984. *The invention of tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

*Informante*, Former Youth Director denies tribalism allegations. February 11, 2010

Karapo, H. Kandjimi. 2008. *Living memory in a forgotten war zone: The Ukwangali district of Kavango and the liberation struggle*. Unpublished MA dissertation. Bellville: University of the Western Cape.

Kymlicka, William. 1989. *Liberalism, community and culture*. Oxford: Caledon Press.

Lentz, Carola. 2001. Local culture in the national arena: The politics of cultural festivals in Ghana. *African Studies Review* 44 (3): 47-72.

Likuwa, Kletus. 2005. *Rundu, Kavango: A case study of forced relocation in Namibia, 1954-1972*. Unpublished MA dissertation. Bellville: University of the Western Cape.

Nambadi, A. Haufiku. 2007. *The Kavango Legislative Council 1970-1979: A critical analysis*. Unpublished MA dissertation. Bllville: University of the Western Cape.

MYNSC. 2006. Ministry of Youth, National Service, Sport and Culture. 2006. *Internal Memo/Submission*. Windhoek.

Ministry of Regional, Local Government and Housing, 1998. *Policy on decentralisation*. Windhoek.

Pye, L.W. 1962. *Politics, personality, and nation building: Burma's search for identity*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Republic of Namibia 2001. *Policy on arts and culture, unity identity and creativity for prosperity*. Windhoek.

Van Binsbergen, Wim. 1994. The Kazanga Festival: Ethnicity as cultural mediation and transformation in central Western Zambia. *African Studies* 53 (2): 99-125.