

## From 'One Namibia, One Nation' towards 'Unity in Diversity'? Shifting representations of culture and nationhood in Namibian Independence Day celebrations, 1990-2010<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

In 2010 Namibia celebrated its twentieth anniversary of independence from South African rule. The main celebrations in the country's capital Windhoek became the stage for an impressively orchestrated demonstration of maturing nationhood, symbolically embracing postcolonial policy concepts such as 'national reconciliation', 'unity' and 'diversity'. At the same time, nation building in post-apartheid Namibia is characterised by a high degree of social and political fragmentation that manifests itself in cultural and/or ethnic discourses of belonging. Taking the highly significant independence jubilee as our vantage point, we map out a shift of cultural representations of the nation in Independence Day celebrations since 1990, embodied by the two prominent slogans of 'One Namibia, one Nation' and 'Unity in Diversity'. As we will argue, the difficult and at times highly fragile postcolonial disposition made it necessary for the SWAPO government, as primary nation builder, to accommodate the demands of regions and local communities in its policy frameworks. This negotiation of local identifications and national belonging in turn shaped, and continues to shape, the performative dimension of Independence Day celebrations in Namibia.

### Introduction

2010, the 'African year', impressively brought the history of African independence into the limelight of international attention. No less than seventeen countries celebrated their fiftieth anniversaries of political independence from colonial rule; events that offered fascinating insights into the nostalgia and contestation attached to independence and the routines and practices of national commemoration in Africa (Lentz 2013, 2011; Lentz and Kornes 2011). Less attention was dedicated to another significant jubilee on the continent that marked the year 2010: Africa's last colony, Namibia, celebrated its twentieth jubilee of independence after more than a century of colonial rule.

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<sup>1</sup> This article is the result of both authors' participation at the inspiring *Celebrating the nation, debating the nation: independence jubilees, national days and the politics of commemoration in Africa* workshop in Bamako, Point Sud, Mali, 9-12 January 2012, organised by Anna-Maria Brandstetter & Carola Lentz of the Department of Anthropology and African Studies, Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz. We chose to offer a joint publication that derives from our original papers to make sense of observations we both made, at that time independently, during the celebration of Namibia's 20th Independence Day on 21 March 2010 in Windhoek.

With this paper, we endeavour to contribute to the emerging scholarship on national days and nation building in Africa, by fusing our individual research foci on cultural nationalism and national commemoration in Namibia, respectively. Our vantage point will be a thick description of the main Independence Day jubilee celebration in Namibia's capital, Windhoek, which we will contextualise with the two discourses that characterise Namibia's postcolonial nation building project most aptly: 'One Namibia, one Nation' and 'Unity in Diversity'. By analysing the origins of these respective concepts, we will highlight significant trajectories, continuities, and shifts regarding the correlation between national belonging and culture in nation building discourse and their manifestation in the practice of commemorating Independence Day. While using the 2010 celebration in Windhoek as a point of reference, due to the highly symbolic nature of the event, we extend our diachronically and synchronically informed analysis of Independence Day celebrations to regional celebrations in the Kavango and Omaheke regions, as well as looking into the independence celebration of 1990.

One of the defining characteristics of national days is their potential to serve as social indicators (Etzioni 2004; Zeru-bavel 2003) – an understanding that allows us to draw conclusions on the sentiments and social practices connected to nationhood. In order to make sense of our observations, we pursue an understanding of national day celebrations as distinguished stages for the 'performance of the nation' (Askew 2002). In this we draw on recent scholarship on the poetics and politics of national commemoration in Africa, which has proven to offer valuable insights about the dynamics of nation building and the negotiation of national belonging, history, and diversity (Lentz 2013; Becker 2012; Lentz and Kornes 2011; Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Willems 2009, see also contributions in this volume). It is within this framework that we analyse the representation of culture in Namibian Independence Day celebrations by focusing on culture both as discourse (in form of policy documents) and as practice (in form of performances). The essential relationship between culture and nation building in Namibia has received little academic attention so far – a fact Fosse (2007) lamented in his study on ethnicity in postcolonial Namibia and something this contribution intends to rectify. Another of our aims is to build upon Du Pisani's (2010a) seminal study on nation building discourse in Namibia and to advance it beyond the realm of discourse analysis. In his meticulous dissection of the ruling party's nationalist ideology, Du Pisani (2010a:16) diagnosed an "incongruity between cultural and political constructs of nationalism", an observation that will be guiding our own argumentation. While a few inspiring contributions to this topic do exist (Fosse 2007; Kjæret and Stokke 2003; Diener 2001), our aim is to expand the existing scholarship on culture and nation building with an anthropological perspective on national days in Namibia. In this, available studies are even scarcer, Becker (2012, 2011) and Akuupa (2011, 2006) being notable exceptions. In dealing with culture we are cognizant of the anthropological debate about the inherent ambivalence of the culture concept<sup>2</sup>. Consequently, the notion of culture in this paper is not employed as an analytical tool, but seen as a con-

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<sup>2</sup> A discussion of this debate would go beyond the scope of this paper. We advocate an understanding of culture as social process, open to change and contestation (Brumann 1999), while recognising the methodological shortcomings of the concept (Lentz 2009). We agree with Kuper, that "the more one considers the best modern work on culture by anthropologists, the more advisable it must appear to avoid the hyper-referential word altogether, and to talk more precisely of knowledge, or belief, or art, or technology, or tradition, or even of ideology" (2000:x) – or performance, we may add.

cept used in a specific political discourse, embedded in a specific historical context, with a tangible expression in social practice: the performance of cultural diversity in Namibian Independence Day celebrations. In order to contextualise our analysis of the official Namibian nation building discourse with the practice of celebrating Independence Day, we offer, in the following section, a thick description of certain proceedings and performances of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of independence. The main event took place in Windhoek's Independence Stadium on 21 March 2010, the same place where, in 1990, after more than a century of colonial rule, Namibia's internationally lauded UN-supervised transition to democratic majority rule culminated in the swearing-in of the first President, Sam Nujoma.

### **Observations from the field – celebrating Independence Day 2010<sup>3</sup>**

As early as six o' clock in the morning people were already flocking in masses to the stadium, situated in the southern outskirts of Windhoek. Blue municipal busses were busy arriving, unloading passengers, while market women were setting up their stalls, offering anything from sweets, cool drinks, fruits, grilled fish and meat, to *vetkoeks* and the slightly more exotic *omagungu*<sup>4</sup>. Personnel of the various military detachments were assembling along the access road to the stadium in preparation for their parade – still at ease though and in a relaxed mood, some hurrying to the stalls in search of a quick breakfast, some ready for a chat with passers-by and with curious anthropologists. It soon became apparent that the stadium's capacity of 25 000 would be filled in a wink. Long queues of mostly young people and families were building up in front of the entry gates, which had to be closed temporarily at around seven o'clock to avoid chaos and bodily harm. Yet, despite the long wait in an increasingly soaring sun the atmosphere remained festive and peaceful, even more so when security officers divided the waiting crowd into male and female lines, provoking an immediate upsurge of inter-queue flirting. Still, according to press reports several thousand people were not able to enter the fully-packed stadium and had to either return home or watch the event from outside the stadium on a huge digital screen.

Inside the stadium, volunteers, recruited among the capital's secondary schools, were busy ushering arriving dignitaries to their seats, while others were handing out programmes, flags, sun visors and T-Shirts with imprints of the Independence Day logo to the incoming spectators. Most visitors, especially the younger ones, were dressed in casual wear, while some women wore 'traditional' attire of which the colourful dresses of the Aawambo (*ondhelela*) and the Victorian-style garments of the Ovaherero (*omuzaro wo mbazu*) stood out. Some attendants had decided to grace the occasion by wearing dresses, hats or

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<sup>3</sup> The following rendition of the event is a condensed synopsis of both authors' observations, field-notes, audio, video and photo recordings, media reports and interviews with participants, such as spectators, artists, and members of the organising committee. In addition, G. Kornes was assisted by four history students of the University of Namibia to survey spectators with a questionnaire specifically designed for the event. Their findings also form part of our synopsis. Kornes wishes to take this opportunity to thank Martha Johannes, Erna Mangundu, Nicky Nambase, and Auguste Negongo for their enthusiastic and invaluable contribution to this work. M. U. Akuupa wishes to thank Erastus Kautondokwa from the Ministry of Youth, National Service, Sport and Culture for providing a detailed video recording of the Independence Day celebration.

<sup>4</sup> *vetkoek* is a tasty snack made from deep-fried balls of dough, known and liked in most parts of Namibia. *Omagungu* is a protein-rich caterpillar (*Gonimbrasia belina*) harvested from the Mopane tree which is endemic to northern Namibia and usually eaten in dried form as a snack or, in a more elaborate way, as a dish stir-fried.

scarves in the blue, red and green colours of Swapo<sup>5</sup>, or shirts with slogans of the party. Still, in contrast to what is reported elsewhere regarding the display of party colours on national days (Melber 2003:318), the display of Swapo memorabilia was a noticeable feature, but compared to the prevalence of national symbols, a rather limited one<sup>6</sup>. This situation of collective arrival, of seating, meeting and greeting, was accompanied by the music of the Ndilimani Cultural Group, which entertained the crowd with their eclectic and stirring mix of songs about the struggle days and more contemporary themes<sup>7</sup>.

It was in this early stage of the celebration, scheduled for the arrival of service chiefs, invited guests, members of the diplomatic corps, members of parliament and cabinet, that several cultural groups started to parade in front of the VIP stand and along the racing track. Clad in their traditional attires and carrying banners to indicate their regions of origin, the groups presented themselves to the audience, some performers waving small Namibian flags. Their parade as such was not marked as an item in the official programme, which merely announced a procession consisting of floats and a parade, even though it was only the military parade that took place<sup>8</sup>. The cultural parade thus remained rather peripheral in the total line-up of events, even more so since it was not witnessed by the still absent President and many of the invited guests who had still not arrived. Upon inquiry, an official of the Ministry of Youth, National Service, Sport and Culture explained that it had not been possible to allocate sufficient time to the cultural groups for them to give individual performances as part of the official programme<sup>9</sup>. Yet, notwithstanding their marginalised place of the protocol, their performance still had a tangible impact on the audience, which cheered in appreciation when the groups entered the stadium. It thus seems fair to conclude that these cultural groups – who had all passed through casting competitions and were officially invited to perform at the celebration – were included as part of a celebratory routine to showcase ‘Unity in Diversity’ and to entertain the general audience rather than the invited guests.

In closing this introductory vignette, we will now focus on a specific detail of the celebration<sup>10</sup>. After the military parade marched off and the President started delivering his Independence Day address, the various cultural groups entered the field and assembled in front of the VIP stand in form of a life installation. With most of them taking a seat on the ground, each group appeared as a colourful cluster, framed by a human chain of young volunteers clad in official Independence Day logo shirts. Neatly separated, we could see groups representing ethnic communities of regions such as Kavango, Caprivi, Omaheke, Otjizondjupa, Hardap, Karas, Ohangwena, Omusati, Oshana and Oshikoto.

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<sup>5</sup> Namibia’s ruling party changed its name from SWAPO to Swapo Party in 1990. In order to distinguish between the former liberation movement, SWAPO, and the postcolonial Swapo Party, we will use these respective designations according to context

<sup>6</sup> See also Becker (2012) for similar observations during national days in the central-northern regions.

<sup>7</sup> Ndilimani was established among the Namibian exile community in Angola in 1982 and is closely linked to Swapo, both regarding its history and the content of its songs. The performance of Ndilimani is a regular feature of national days such as Independence Day or Heroes Day, somehow blurring the boundaries between SWAPO, the liberation movement, Swapo, the ruling party, and the Namibian government. For a related case of merging pop culture and party politics in neighbouring Zimbabwe, see Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Willems (2009).

<sup>8</sup> A civil parade on Windhoek’s Independence Avenue took place on 20 March, including floats of companies, various ministries, NGOs, schools and universities, but none of them participated in the main event.

<sup>9</sup> Informal talk of M. Akuupa with E. Kautondokwa during the jubilee celebration, Windhoek, 21 March 2010. Kautondokwa was a member of the organising committee on behalf of his ministry.

<sup>10</sup> For a more extensive account of the symbolism of the event and especially the inauguration ceremony for re-elected President Hifikepunye Pohamba, see Kornes (2011).

Clearly missing, both among the cultural groups and the general audience, were white Namibians, whose absence is a regular bone of contention for media commentators and politicians<sup>11</sup>. It may prove difficult, though, to evaluate the non-attendance of whites, or any other segment of society for that matter, as a statement of deficient patriotism or a lack of identification with the nation. Whites were well represented at the cultural events that marked the jubilee in the week preceding the main celebration, such as pop concerts, theatre plays, exhibitions, and public lectures. Moreover, in the Namibian case the patriotism and national sentiments of the general public seem prone to finding multiple avenues of expression, such as having a *braai* and a couple of beers with friends and family, thus extending the celebration of nationhood to private homes, public *braai* places, and local *shebeens*<sup>12</sup>. This, we argue, applies not only to whites, but to most segments of the Namibian population. Furthermore, the fact that certain people, and again not necessarily only whites, 'shun' national day celebrations, may well have to do with the real or presumed dominance of Swapo's ideological reading of the liberation narrative during such official events (Kornes 2011; Melber 2003). While for the Zimbabwean case the 'othering' of whites and their exclusion from an increasingly culturally defined national imaginary is a recent phenomenon (Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Willems 2009:954), this was not the case in Namibia, if we take the jubilee celebration as a benchmark. White youth formed part of the human chain, described above, and a white athlete, high jumper Hans von Lieres, was given the highly symbolic privilege to light the eternal flame, and this was answered by applause and ululation from the audience, thus resonating the words of President Pohamba (2010:8f):

Peace, security, stability and national unity are essential for the continued development of our country. I am convinced that the power of our common values and goals exceeds our differences. Our strength lies in the colourful diversity of the Namibian people. [...] We must cherish and continue to promote reconciliation and national unity.

At first glance, the described 'installation' of cultural groups offers an alluring symbolism: Namibia's ethnic diversity was put on display, spatially (in the Independence Stadium) and temporally (during the Independence Day celebration) confined within the boundaries of the national event, framed by representatives of the 'born free'<sup>13</sup> generation clad in the symbols of the nation. Taking part in a ceremony to collectively pledge their 'recommitment' to the national community (Etzioni 2004:11), all participants of the event, including the cultural groups, the audience and the President, partook in a performance of national unity. Yet, as Lentz (2011:13) recalls, in retrospection of the 2010 African jubilee celebrations:

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<sup>11</sup> See [http://www.swapoparty.org/where\\_are\\_the\\_whites.html](http://www.swapoparty.org/where_are_the_whites.html) (accessed 13 January 2013); "Whites shun independence celebrations", *New Era*. March 23, 2012; "Public lecture highlights concerns about 'tribalism'", *New Era*. April 23, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> The *braai* is the Namibian variation of the barbecue, which is one of the most cherished and probably also nationally inclusive social activities to spend leisure time with. A *shebeen* is a township bar, which in their tens-of-thousands play an equally essential role for defining Namibianess. With their passionate relationship towards grilled meat and beer, Namibians seem to be a case in point for Nugent's (2010) insightful observations about the culinary subtleties of national identification. On private celebrations of national days in Madagascar, see also Späth (2013).

<sup>13</sup> The 'born frees,' referring to Namibians born after independence, played a significant role during the 20th independence jubilee (see Kornes 2011). For a similar observation from Zimbabwe, see Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Willems (2009:954-5)

Whether the celebrations in fact did promote national unity, as intended, or whether they actually brought to the fore and even deepened the rifts and fault lines that cross-cut the nation remains an open question. National days of remembrance do not per se promote unity. However, they do provide a space for debate, they generate common topics and thus engender a discursive community.

With this caveat in mind, and in order to put our observations into perspective, in the following we attempt to unravel the nexus of culture, ethnicity, and national commemoration with regard to Independence Day celebrations in Namibia. For this purpose we will explore the relationship of the two concepts of 'One Namibia, one Nation' and 'Unity in Diversity' and their respective representation in the practice of celebration.

### **'One Namibia, one Nation': the liberation movement and its discourse on culture and nation building**

Anti-colonial resistance has had a long tradition in South West Africa, as Namibia was known during colonial times, with traditional communities rising up against German, South African and Portuguese rule on several occasions (Wallace 2011:131- 228; Katjavivi 1989:1-19). From the 1940s a wide spectrum of (proto-)nationalist movements emerged, which began to challenge apartheid law and especially the racist contract labour and education system (Wallace 2011:244-50, Katjavivi 1989:29-45). In the 1950s a politicised movement evolved among Namibian contract workers and students in Cape Town, South Africa, that led to the foundation of the Owamboland People's Congress in 1958<sup>14</sup>. One year later the Congress merged into the Namibia-based Owamboland People's Organisation (OPO), with Sam Nujoma as President. Following increasing repression, the leadership of the OPO went into exile, where in 1960 the OPO became the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO). The movement, with structures evolving both inside Namibia and in exile, subsequently achieved far-reaching support from international actors such as the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and the United Nations. Financial support from the OAU was triggered by SWAPO's readiness to take up an armed liberation struggle that commenced in 1966 after six years of preparation, when a SWAPO guerrilla base in north- ern Namibia was raided by South African security forces (Wallace 2011:260, 268-9). SWAPO waged its guerrilla war first from bases in Tanzania and Zambia, and after the down- fall of Portuguese colonialism in 1975, primarily from south- ern Angola. The war lasted until 1989 when a ceasefire agreement was negotiated that allowed the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 435; thereafter constitutional elections were held, leading to national independence on 21 March 1990. Repatriation brought close to 43 000 exiled Namibians back to their native country, many of whom had spent decades in exile, or who were born and raised in SWAPO refugee and military camps. Swapo has won all elections since independence with overwhelming majorities, based largely on its reputation as the 'liberator' (Melber 2003), and has ruled the country ever since. Sam Nujoma served three terms as Namibia's first President and was succeeded by Hifikepunye Pohamba in 2005.

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<sup>14</sup> Most contract workers originated from the central-northern part of Namibia which, during apartheid times, was administered as the Owamboland homeland (on the homeland policy see fn.17) and which is home to Namibia's Oshiwambo-speaking population majority, commonly referred to as Owambo, or Aawambo.

In one of its most elaborate and extensive policy documents and ideological self-portrayals from the struggle days, SWAPO described itself in the following words:

Formed on April 19 1960, SWAPO drew together various anti-colonial forces in Namibia. Then, it was the realisation of the Namibian people's need for a nation-wide movement to confront effectively the South African regime. Now, it has become the embodiment of their aspirations for freedom, locked in combat with South Africa in a war of liberation, and recognised by the international community and the United Nations as the 'sole and authentic representative of the Namibian people'. (SWAPO 1981:i)

Backed by its official recognition by the UN<sup>15</sup>, SWAPO became the leading nationalist movement in Namibia. While SWAPO's armed liberation struggle, in Dobell's words, "was waged mainly for propaganda purposes" (1998:20) and to attract funding to support its substantial exile community, it was in the international forums of diplomacy and the day-to-day routines of the exile camps where the nucleus of a Namibian nationality according to SWAPO was negotiated (Akawa 2010; Williams 2009). Administrating its 'nation in exile', SWAPO designed and enacted policies for nation building that were meant to govern a polity, to instil a sense of nationhood and common destiny, and to counter the ever reoccurring allegations from the side of South Africa that SWAPO was merely the front for an Oshiwambo-speaking communist sect.

These policies<sup>16</sup> were characterised by a strong emphasis on the need to build a nation by overcoming ethnic divisions that were seen as being both engineered by apartheid rule and, in fashionable Marxist-Leninist rationale, as an expression of a primordial and unscientific consciousness (SWAPO 1976). This viewpoint found tangible expression in the slogan 'One Namibia, one Nation', that emerged as the embodiment of SWAPO's nationalist discourse in the first half of the 1970s (Katjavivi 1989:74-75). A close reading of these policy documents reveals an ambivalent relationship between the intention to transcend ethnicity and the necessity to engage traditional authorities as partners, in order to politicise rural communities for SWAPO's national project. Focal points for SWAPO's mobilisation were, first and foremost, the effects of the Odendaal Plan<sup>17</sup> and the 'institutionalised ethnicism' (Diener 2001:233) of South Africa's ethnic federalism, which manifested itself especially in the Turnhalle Constitutional Conference of 1974-76. The Conference brought together representatives of the eleven ethnic 'population groups' and intended to facilitate a transition to independence, set for 1978, under the close supervision of South Africa (Wallace 2011:286). This was met with strong opposition by SWAPO, which, in the words of its

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<sup>15</sup> The UN recognised SWAPO as the 'sole and authentic representative of the Namibian people' - see United Nations General Assembly Resolutions 3111 (12 December 1973) and 31/146 (20 December 1976).

<sup>16</sup> This section is based on the following documents: SWAPO. 1976. *Political Program of the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) of Namibia. Adopted by the Meeting of the Central Committee July 28th – August 1st 1976, Lusaka, Zambia*; SWAPO. 1978. *Information on SWAPO: An Historical Profile*. Lusaka: SWAPO Department of Information and Publicity; SWAPO. 1978. *Inside the Liberated Areas and Beyond*. Lusaka: SWAPO Department for Information and Publicity; SWAPO. 1981. *To Be Born a Nation*; SWAPO. 1983. *Constitution of the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) of Namibia. Amended and adopted by the Second Enlarged Central Committee Meeting, April 17-20, 1983, Cabuta, Kwanza-Sul Province, People's Republic of Angola*; SWAPO. 1984. 'The cultural dimension of the anti-colonial struggle in Namibia,' in: *Namibia Today* 7 (1), 20-8; SWAPO. 1986. *Namibia: Culture and the Liberation Struggle*. Luanda: SWAPO Department of Information and Publicity.

<sup>17</sup> Named after its chairman, Frans Hendrik Odendaal, the Odendaal Plan laid the foundation for the establishment of ten ethnic homelands (Owamboland, Kaokoveld, Okavangoland, Eastern Caprivi, Bushmanland, Damaraland, Hereroland, Namaland, Tswanaland and Rehoboth Gebied) and a white minority-ruled area. The implementation of the plan implied widespread forced resettlement (Wallace 2011:261-7) and the arbitrary creation of ethnic communities (Diener 2001:235).

former Secretary for Information and Publicity, characterised the conference as “merely the Odendaal Plan with allowance for a central authority elected on an ethnic basis” (Katjavivi 1989:99). Faced with South Africa’s divisive ethnic strategies, SWAPO aimed to present itself as an inclusive nationalist movement. This proved to be successful when, in 1976, a number of ethnically based anti-colonial parties and movements joined rank with SWAPO. These included the Namibian African People’s Organisation, the Rehoboth Volksparty, and maybe most significantly, the Nama traditional authorities of Gibeon, Hoachanas, Keetmanshoop and Vaalgras – a clear rejection of South Africa’s Turnhalle politics (SWAPO 1978; also Wallace 2011:288; Kössler 2006:241).

Accordingly, in its 1978 *Historical Profile* SWAPO explicitly acknowledged the contribution that Namibian population groups such as Nama, Ovaherero, Bondelswarts and Rehoboth Bastards had made for the struggle against colonial rule, thereby appealing especially to the people in central and southern Namibia. Yet, despite the appreciation of traditional authorities as the custodians of the ‘early resistance’ (1978:10), SWAPO made it clear in a teleological reading of history that only it possessed the momentum to effectively challenge the colonial regime (1978:9). This document, which can be seen as a predecessor for the party’s major self-portrayal of 1981, impressively underlined SWAPO’s bold self-understanding as the legitimate nationalist movement, which culminated in another prominent slogan of the struggle days: ‘SWAPO is the people, the people are SWAPO’ (1978:26). Publications such as *Inside the Liberated Areas and Beyond* helped to visualise this image, portraying SWAPO as an organisation in close interaction with the people of (rural northern) Namibia. Photos depicted SWAPO guerrilla fighters in a relaxed mood mingling with villagers in a traditional homestead, treating locals from a mobile medical clinic, and, maybe most significantly, being received with traditional dance by a group of villagers, while the caption reads: ‘SWAPO is the people, the people is SWAPO’. In 1983 SWAPO gave itself a constitution, which featured strong objectives to overcome tribalism and to “foster a spirit of national consciousness expressed by a sense of common purpose and collective destiny” (1983:4). This rationale, in line with the expressive title of SWAPO’s official history of 1981 (*To Be Born a Nation – and to die a tribe*, as the popular slogan goes), has been described as an embrace of the concept of the ‘old nation’ (Du Pisani 2010a:10). As such, SWAPO increasingly equated itself with the Namibian people and nation, denouncing cultural diversity as the basis of ethnic politics (Du Pisani 2010a:25).

At the same time, however, SWAPO increasingly incorporated the notion of ‘culture’ in its political discourse, asserting the emergence of a ‘national culture’ as a result of the liberation struggle (SWAPO 1986; 1984). This concept of culture, as used in official documents, encompassed popular culture as a means of engaging artists for the struggle, with a special focus on music, dance and the use of visual arts for political posters, stickers or T-Shirts (1986:5-8; 1984:27)<sup>18</sup>. Concurrently, culture was employed to denote a national collective and its characteristics in a holistic cumulative sense. For example, it is noteworthy that in its documents SWAPO never used the plural form for either ‘culture’ or ‘people’ (Du Pisani 2010a:25) – unlike the South African government, which

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<sup>18</sup> See the contributions on the impact of political posters for the Namibian liberation struggle in the seminal volume of Miescher, Rizzo and Silvester (2009).



pledged its commitment to bring ‘self-determination for the peoples’ of Namibia (in: Katjavivi 1989:74). In other words, SWAPO emphasised that the “natural development of *the Namibian culture*” (SWAPO 1984:22; our emphasis) had been disrupted by colonialism, while it was their liberation struggle that consequently “set in motion a deep-going process of cultural renewal and assertion of a Namibian national cultural identity” (1984:28). The title image of the 1986 publication, *Culture and the Liberation Struggle*, illustrates this vividly: we see a crowd of warriors – some clad in the attire of guerrilla fighters, some resembling Namibian peasants, with machine guns, machetes, bows and arrows – storming onwards and united under the banner of SWAPO. The drawing evokes a strong image of a peasant /pre-colonial society (with a somehow blurred and fuzzy background, though) coalescing into a clear-cut national body, forged by the armed liberation struggle and its ‘vanguard movement’, SWAPO<sup>19</sup>. The party’s understanding of culture was also emphasised by Sam Nujoma, when he addressed the exile community in Angola on the importance of traditional music, song and dance:

[A] people without culture cannot trace its origins and history. They will not have tales to tell about what their forebears did as people with a definite identity.... The task of upholding, practicing and teaching Namibia’s culture is before us all. (SWAPO 1986:5-8).

At the same time he made it clear that the imperative of SWAPO’s policy lay within the political domain: “no authentic cultural liberation without political liberation first” (SWAPO 1986:9). The said publication includes a range of photographs depicting performances of cultural groups, explicitly emphasising the diversity of Namibia as an enrichment of “our culture” (SWAPO 1986:14) – a diversity, embedded in a national culture and, as such, the exact opposite of South Africa’s ethnic federalism.

This short excursion into SWAPO’s discourse on culture and nation building reveals a shifting over time of concepts and models that needs some further explanation. First of all, it makes sense to identify the ideological pragmatism at work that Dobell (1998) outlined for much of SWAPO’s liberation struggle politics. Faced with the precedents of South Africa’s ethnic politics, SWAPO needed a flexible approach towards delegitimising apartheid while at the same time appealing to Namibia’s traditional communities. The alliances of 1976 (referred to above) prove that this could be a successful strategy. SWAPO rejected ethnic politics in favour of a national imaginary that was based on the ‘death of the tribe’ that, during the 1980s, transformed into the vision of a ‘national culture’ (Becker 2011). This unifying approach, embodied in the motto of ‘One Namibia, one Nation’, obviously sought to reconcile the idea of the nation with the reality of a society that was highly fragmented along ethnic lines. At the same time, it highlights the already mentioned incongruity in Swapo’s cultural and political approaches to nationalism, posing specific challenges to its post-independence nation building project, as we will demonstrate later on. In order to trace the transformation of discourse into practice, and to compare Independence Day celebrations over time, the following section will provide a reconstruction of the independence festivities in 1990.

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<sup>19</sup> While at least one ‘sister in arms’ is visible with a child strapped to her back, the gender representation of the image is quite telling; see Akawa (2010) and Becker (1995) on the role of women in Namibia’s liberation struggle, as well as Becker (2011:530, 534) on gender aspects of Swapo’s postcolonial memorial culture.

## **Interlude: celebrating Independence, 21 March 1990<sup>20</sup>**

As a collective rite of passage, independence was declared on midnight of 21 March 1990, thereby drawing on a revered international model of national symbolism (Williams, Holland and Barringer 2008). Even though independence was delayed some odd fifteen minutes, the South African flag was finally lowered to the passionate “down – down – down!” of an excited audience (Vigne 1990:4)<sup>21</sup>. This nightly prelude to the main independence celebration later during the day further included the first parade of the new Defence Force, which was trained and equipped with uniforms by the Kenyan UN peace-keeping military deployment, as well as the swearing-in of Sam Nujoma as first President of Namibia by UN Secretary General Javier P eres de Cu ellar.

Festivities resumed in the morning of the 21<sup>st</sup> with a huge ‘Independence March’ that brought the jubilant masses from the townships of Katutura and Khomasdal to Windhoek’s Kaiersstrasse, soon to be renamed Independence Avenue<sup>22</sup>. Looking at photographs<sup>23</sup> taken during that day, the prevalence of national symbols among the crowd was overwhelming. The newly introduced national flag was omnipresent in all sizes and shapes and featured on T-shirts, dresses and costumes, on floats and busses, balloons and bandanas; some people were even seen with their hair dyed in the national colours. The civil parade included the youngsters of the SWAPO Pioneers wearing dresses and neck scarves in the colours of their party, groups of learners in costumes resembling ostriches and dragons, the uniformed *oturupa* of the Ovaherero both on horseback and in marching formations<sup>24</sup>, floats of companies and schools, often colourfully decorated with the new national symbols, trade union members and women’s rights activists carrying banners with political messages, majorettes, brass bands and cultural groups from various regions. Black and white Namibians stood side by side along the road, watching a surreal and astounding spectacle, which at the same time offered quite a remarkable representation of the eclectic social and political diversity of Namibia’s anti-apartheid movement. The parade finally made its way through town into the stadium, where the official celebration was scheduled to continue.

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<sup>20</sup> The date for the independence of Namibia was chosen by the members of the Constituent Assembly to make a strong statement against apartheid and to commemorate the day of the Sharpeville massacre in South Africa (see *Debates of the Constituent Assembly, 21 November 1989 – 31 January 1990*, 161, 326-29). The motion to choose the 21st as Independence Day was tabled by SWAPO’s Theo-Ben Gurirab and accepted unanimously by all members of the assembly. On 21 March 1960 apartheid police had killed 69 demonstrators in the South African town of Sharpeville. In South Africa the day has been commemorated as Human Rights Day since 1994, while the United Nations has commemorated the massacre since 1966 as International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

<sup>21</sup> For a lively description of the ceremony and the cause of the delay, see Klaus Dierks’ *Chronology of Namibian History*, Ch.7: The Period after Namibia’s Independence: The First Ten Years 1990-2000, available online: <http://www.klausdierks.com> (last accessed 13 January 2013).

<sup>22</sup> The imminent renaming of the capital’s most prestigious street was apparently anticipated – road signs bearing the colonial-era designation *Kaiserstrasse* were stolen already within a week after Independence and allegedly sold to “gullible German tourists for amounts as high as R4 000” (*The Namibian*, March 30, 1990).

<sup>23</sup> Sources are, among others, the illustrated book of Seyman and Venter (1990); the photo collections of the National Archive and the National Museum of Namibia; the ‘Independence Display’ at the Alte Feste Museum; and the digital 25th anniversary edition of *The Namibian*.

<sup>24</sup> The *oturupa* are a central institution of the post-genocide Ovaherero society and have an important function in regards to social memory practice (Wallace 2011:213, 227; F rster 2010:250). Impressive in their uniforms, styled after German and British military garments from the early 20th century, their public performance includes elaborate rituals and parade formations. They perform regularly at various communal memory events such as the commemoration of their late Chief Samuel Maharero’s burial in Okahandja in 1923 (Kr iger and Henrichsen 1998: 156-64) or the commemoration of the Ohamakari battle of 1904 (F rster 2010). The *oturupa* also frequently perform at national events such as Independence Day celebrations and culture festivals, or at commemorative events of other ethnic communities, such as the Heroes Day of the Kai-//Khaun in Hoachanas (as observed by G. Kornes, 4 December 2011). This makes the *oturupa* one of the most emblematic formats for representing cultural diversity in the Namibian national context.

Here, another highlight was the performance by 500 school children that were flown in from SWAPO's exile camp in Nyango, Zambia. All were dressed in the blue, green and red colours of SWAPO, and carrying party flags. They marched, paraded and displayed callisthenics on the field, thus rendering a powerful enactment of SWAPO's (para-)military and educational discipline in exile<sup>25</sup>. Their performance was supplemented by a choreography on the grandstand, where spectators-cum-participants held up coloured sheets that formed slogans such as "United we Stand" and "Namibia is Ours", topped by the picture of a radiant sun with the portrait of Sam Nujoma in its centre. It was their performance, for which they had practiced for weeks, which probably recalled the memories of exile most tangibly for those among the audience who had only recently been repatriated. At the same time their appearance highlighted the still highly transitional nature of the newly-found national condition, as they had to return to Nyango right after their performance in order to finish their primary school education<sup>26</sup>. With their act as a dramatic centrepiece, the independence celebration was characterised by a performative display of national unity. This was demonstrated in a most compelling way by the enthusiastic and playful manner in which people appropriated the new national symbols during the celebrations. In his inaugural speech at midnight, President Nujoma emphasised that independence came as a result of 'national consensus' and that the 'effort to forge national identity and unity' would be the paramount task of the new government and the Namibian people at large<sup>27</sup>. In retrospect, the independence celebration of 1990 thus appears as a solid statement against the divisive apartheid politics and as a most impressive performance of the idea of 'One Namibia, one Nation' as it had been conceived of during the days of the struggle.

### **The ruling party, ethnicity, and the shift from 'One Namibia, one Nation' to 'Unity in Diversity'**

With independence, Namibia, and its incoming ruling party, Swapo, inherited a society characterised by gross inequalities and massive social fragmentation, caused by more than a century of racist segregation and apartheid rule. Especially the latter, designed and engineered as "fractured and hegemonic space, in the sense that it divided society (along ethnic and racial lines) to ensure minority white hegemony" (Du Pisani 2010b:52), profoundly shaped the emergence of localised ethnic identities. Traditional authorities, and their subsequent 'tribes', had in many instances been invented by the colonial state (Du Pisani 2010b:58; Diener 2001:236-7), while pre-colonial societies were actually characterised by a high degree of inter-group exchange and social fluidity (Wallace 2011:45-102; Diener 2001:238-47). Against this background, nation building in Namibia faces the challenges not only of reconciling the manifold political, economic and social cleavages between the colonised and their former colonisers (who still benefit from the structural legacies of apartheid), but also of negotiating a concept of national unity with the multitude of ethnic identifications that exist in Namibia<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> On questions of discipline and order in SWAPO's exile camps, see Williams (2009) and Akawa (2010).

<sup>26</sup> Information provided by Fousy Kambombo, who accompanied the group as one of their teachers and who revelled in memories while browsing through pictures of the performance which one of the authors discovered in the archive of the National Museum (informal talk with G. Kørnes, Windhoek, 7 September 2012).

<sup>27</sup> See [http://www.swapoparty.org/1990\\_inaugural\\_speech.html](http://www.swapoparty.org/1990_inaugural_speech.html) (last accessed 13 January 2013).

<sup>28</sup> Excellent case studies on ethnicity and the politics of belonging in Namibia are available in reference to communities in Rehoboth (Kjæret and Stokke 2003), Caprivi (Fosse 2007) and Kavango (Akuupa 2010). For an overview see Diener (2001).

In line with its election motto – ‘Swapo united, Swapo victorious, now hard work’ – the former liberation movement started implementing policies to dismantle this legacy of apartheid and ethnic fragmentation. For this task, the multi-party Constituent Assembly provided an internationally lauded constitution, which pledged the nation to mutual reconciliation and nation building based on the right of the individual to a dignified life “regardless of race, colour, ethnic origin, sex, religion, creed or social or economic status” (Preamble). Some of the measures to overcome the vestiges of apartheid included the abolition of homelands and the creation of new administrative regions, as well as legal efforts towards detribalisation in fields such as labour law or language use, including the introduction of English as a neutral national language (Diener 2011:251-4). As one of the authors has shown in detail, the government’s policy of defusing ethnicity even led to the abandonment of the annual culture festival (*sangfees*) of the colonial era in 1990, which was seen as a relic of the divisive apartheid past, supposedly reinforcing ethnic identities (Akuupa 2011). The first years after independence were thus characterised by an effort to implement the ideal of ‘One Namibia, one Nation’ as a principle of nation building. This was illustrated by Hage Geingob, one of the ‘founding fathers’ of the Namibian constitution, who explained this ambition with the following metaphor:

At the time of adoption of the constitution, I had compared nation building with the building of a house – the Namibian House. I had said that the foundation for that house was the constitution. The building blocks, the different ethnic groups: Damaras, Ndongas, Afrikaners, Hereros, Germans, Ovambos, etc. Mortar to hold these different bricks was composed of the laws passed by the parliament. When one finalises the laying of the bricks, one plasters the wall, paints it with colours. I further said, ‘We painted our house with the blue, white, yellow sun, green and red, our national colours. Once the house is painted, no one would see the bricks or different ethnicities. All that everyone would see is a strong house in which the children of Namibia will be able to live in peace, security and harmony’. (Geingob 2004:143)

Even though ethnic groups are the building blocks for this national house, they are deemed to disappear under a national plaster, thus transforming ethnic identifications into national ones. This again strongly recalls SWAPO’s vision of a national culture, of ‘dying a tribe’, as outlined above. It may be due to the historical character of Hage Geingob’s PhD thesis that he is writing in the past tense. But, remaining with the metaphor, plaster started falling off the wall rather quickly after independence. As Diener has shown at length, the legacy of apartheid had strong roots in Namibia. The restructuring of the homelands left the socio-economic set-up of the colonial-era reserves largely intact, transforming them into (often impoverished) communal areas (Diener 2001:251; also Keulder 2010). At the same time, traditional authorities were retained: for the first years without a proper policy frame-work, leading to a range of conflicts between state legislation and customary law (Diener 2001:254). Disputes arose especially over questions of land use in communal areas, such as between the Mbunza and Shambyu communities in Kavango or the demands for the installation of kings among the Damara, Kwanyama, Tjamuaha, Zeraua and Kahimemua traditional authorities (Malan 1995:7f). Another challenge that came with independence was the (re-)emergence of ‘politicised ethnicity’ as a strategy to mobilise support in the

competition for political representation and the distribution of resources (Maré 1995; also Fosse 2007:443-4; Kössler 2006:8). As a consequence, the perceived rise of tribalism in postcolonial Namibia, bemoaned by academics, politicians, civil society activists and the general public alike, has become a defining feature of Namibian political discourse since independence (Töttemeyer 2012; Keulder 2010:151; Diener 2001:233).

As early as 1993, the participants of a high-profile conference on ethnicity and nation building diagnosed that 'ethnicity is back' (in: KAS and NID 1993:20). In his contribution, sociologist Andrew Murray outlined a conflict of interest between Swapo's promotion of a non-ethnic national culture and the manoeuvres of 'tribal' entrepreneurs eyeballing political positions (in: KAS and NID 1993:20). Following this conference, the Swapo government was advised to actively embrace the concept of unity in diversity (in: KAS and NID 1993:64). While the impact of academic contributions to the political realm should not be overestimated, this recommendation is an important one for our discussion. As we will show, it was in the first five years of independence, that a significant shift from 'One Namibia, one Nation' towards 'Unity in Diversity' became noticeable. Significantly, this development falls into the time-frame marked by the 'arrival of multiculturalism' (Becker 2011:537) in Namibia, as well as in South Africa, where the transition to democracy was characterised by the celebrated model of the 'rainbow nation'.

The Constitution once again provides a starting point to conceptualise that shift to 'Unity in Diversity'<sup>29</sup>. Bearing in mind the ambivalent relationship of SWAPO to the concepts of culture and nationhood, it is interesting to take a look at the section titled 'Culture', which reads:

Every person shall be entitled to enjoy, practise, profess, maintain and promote any culture, language, tradition or religion subject to the terms of this Constitution and further subject to the condition that the rights protected by this Article do not impinge upon the rights of others or the national interest. (Chapter 3, Article 19)

The use of 'culture' here implies a plurality that is defined as an individual right and at the same time confined by the primacy of the 'national interest'. The constitution became the foundation for further policies and acts that were adopted by the Swapo government and that mark a departure from the pre-independence culture concept in official party discourse. In these documents<sup>30</sup>, the notion of 'culture' and of 'Unity in Diversity' has increasingly been employed as a vehicle for promoting national unity. One important step towards making that shift tangible was the proclamation of the

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<sup>29</sup> The constitution should not be seen as a Swapo document, but rather as the expression of a political compromise between various interest groups and in this case even former enemies (Geingob 2004:117).

<sup>30</sup> Policy documents reviewed for this analysis: Ministry of Education and Culture. 1993. *Toward Education for All: A Development Brief for Education, Culture, and Training*. Windhoek: Gamsberg Macmillan; Government of the Republic of Namibia (GRN). 1995. *Traditional Authorities Act (Act No.17/1995)*, in: Government Gazette No.1158, 26 September 1995; GRN. 1999. *Report of the Presidential Commission on Education, Culture and Training*. Windhoek: Capital Press; GRN. 2001. *Unity, Identity, and Creativity for Prosperity: Policy on Arts and Culture of the Republic of Namibia*. Windhoek: Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture; GRN. 2002. *Communal Land Reform Act (Act No.5/2002)*, in: Government Gazette No. 2787, 12 August 2002; GRN. 2004. *Vision 2030: Policy Framework for Long-Term National Development*. Windhoek: Office of the President; GRN. 2012. *Namibia's Fourth National Development Plan (NDP4)*. Windhoek: Office of the President and National Planning Commission.

Traditional Authorities Act in September 1995. This Act established the framework for recognising traditional leaders while also defining the characteristics of a traditional community as:

an indigenous homogeneous, endogamous social grouping of persons comprising of families deriving from exogamous clans which share a common ancestry, language, cultural heritage, customs and traditions (1995:3).

In doing so, the government laid the foundation for the reification of ethnic communities based on a conception of cultural homogeneity that conspicuously resembles that of the apartheid regime. This found an equivalent in the Communal Land Reform Act of 2002, which by and large perpetuated the spatial order of the Odendaal Plan – including the names of the former homelands (2002:30-5).

It is also illuminating for our investigation to consider the *Culture Policy* of 2001: “State occasions and national events provide important opportunities to project Namibian arts and culture and create a sense of nationhood” (2001:6). While in this case culture is used as a holistic and multidimensional concept including popular culture, the document also emphasises the negative role of culture as an instrument for the divide-and-rule policy of apartheid (2001:9). Yet, with independence “[t]he founders of our new nation wisely saw in our diversity of *cultures* a source of wealth through which we could unite in a common commitment to build the nation” (2001:10; our emphasis). Suddenly, the plural use of cultures has entered official policy discourse, as it also has in the recent National Development Plan 4 (2012:3). This concept of diversity outlined in the *Culture Policy* serves as a neutral signifier of difference, which does not imply the oppression of the other, as was the case during apartheid years. In a similar manner, *Vision 2030*, the Swapo government’s most elaborate policy document so far, envisages a “multi-racial community of people living and working together in harmony, and sharing common values and aspirations as a nation, while enjoying the fruits of unity in diversity” (39). Here, the shift to diversity is advanced by the identification of a ‘multi-racial’ society that ideally should also subsume the Namibian black/ white-divide into the framework of a national diversity.

In order to make sense of this shift, it is worthwhile to look at the surprising ‘reintroduction’ of the Annual National Culture Festival (ANCF), which may serve as a starting point for the final section of this paper: the analysis of regional Independence Day celebrations. As mentioned before, the annual culture festival (*sangfees*) was suspended after independence due to its apartheid connotation, only to be revived again in 1995. It resurfaced fittingly in the form of a competition between Namibia’s various regions, where people showcase and express ‘their culture’. It has since become an important stage for the promotion of ‘Unity in Diversity’ by the government, which in turn creates a space of interaction between the local population and the state – significant, especially, in regions like Kavango where sentiments of marginalisation are widespread. As one of the authors has shown, the ANCF creates a performative arena where ethnic communities can present themselves and negotiate politics of belonging within the framework of the nation-state (Akuupa 2011; 2010). Apart from the revival of cultural festivals, a wide range of activities promoting ethnic identities, local culture and heritage have been (re-)introduced in Namibia since independence (Akuupa 2011:146-9), a trend that is still

ongoing.<sup>31</sup> Since independence, this development has been going through stages: first by ‘culturalising ethnicity’ (Diener 2001:251) and subsequently by ‘culturalising nationalism’ (Becker 2011:536-8). In order to analyse the impact of this shift on the practice of celebrating Independence Day in Namibia, we will now take a closer look at two regional celebrations in the capitals of Kavango and Omaheke as observed by Michael Akuupa and Godwin Kornes respectively.

### **Observations from the field – celebrating Independence in Rundu (2006) and Gobabis (2010)<sup>32</sup>**

Rundu, 21 March 2006.

People had already gathered in large numbers, when I arrived early in the morning at the stadium of Rundu, the capital of Namibia’s north-eastern Kavango region, to attend the 2006 independence celebration. Women of various ages, some carrying babies on their back, were sitting in front of the stadium with big baskets and boxes filled with their merchandise, including food and the local *mahangu*-brew, *sikundu*. I entered the stadium and took a seat on the grandstand. On the field a tent decorated with small national flags was set up for the guests of honour. In front of the tents the flags of Namibia and of the African Union were hoisted on flagpoles. The two lower benches on the grandstand were occupied by performers of various cultural and choir groups, dressed in different types of costumes, some of which were made out of animal skins and herbal material, while others were of bright cotton fabrics. Notable were the blue, red and green Swapo colours, worn by the members of the Swapo Pioneers.

When the Director of Ceremonies noticed that the stadium was packed to capacity, he started to invite performers to present some musical items while dignitaries and other important guests still were arriving, among them the mayor of Rundu and regional chiefs of the security forces. After a while the Regional Councillor of Rundu Urban Constituency arrived, who was the designated main speaker of the day. Still more and more visitors were pouring into the stadium and many people had to find seats on the ground next to the grandstand. Shortly after the arrival of the Councillor, everybody rose and the military band performed the national and the African Union anthems to mark the official opening of the programme. Following the anthems, people sat down again whereupon the Councillor inspected the guard of honour, which then marched off amidst enthusiastic ululation from the crowd. After a short prayer, the Director of Ceremonies took the stage and narrated a brief history of Namibia, emphasising the importance of celebrating Independence Day. In his speech he further stressed the significance of ‘local culture’ and the importance of diversity for any strong nation. Using the words “It is your day today”, he informed the audience that Independence Day would be celebrated through cultural performances from groups of the local areas surrounding Rundu.

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<sup>31</sup> The most recent example was the official reintroduction, or rather reinvention, of *olufuko*, an initiation ritual for young women, in the Omusati region in August 2012. *Olufuko*, in other regions known as *efundula*, was celebrated in the form of a cultural festival that was clearly also supposed to address tourists, investors and the local business community as part of an initiative to promote cultural tourism in the region. The practice of *olufuko* was discouraged by missionaries during the colonial days, and again met with rejection from some quarters of the Namibian churches upon its reintroduction in 2012. On *efundula*, see Becker (2004).

<sup>32</sup> The following two sections are edited ethnographic descriptions based on both authors’ respective field-notes and observations (M. Akuupa on Rundu, G. Kornes on Gobabis). A more detailed ethnography of the celebration in Rundu can be found in Akuupa (2006).

Among the performers were a church choir, the Maria Mwengere Cultural Group, a youth music group, as well as the Swapo Pioneers, who are part of the regional Swapo Party structure. All performances were done in the local languages. The groups were invited one by one to perform their dances, after which the Director of Ceremonies commented on each of the groups and their presentations. Noteworthy in this regard was the performance of the Maria Mwengere Cultural Group, which, compared to the other participants of the day, attracted more attention and interest from the audience. They showcased songs and dances with lyrics about various aspects of Vakavango<sup>33</sup> culture (locally known as *mpo*<sup>34</sup>), such as techniques of catching fish, healing or harvesting *mahangu*. With its performance and the simultaneous employment of dance, attire and drama, the group strongly appealed to local conceptions of ‘tradition’ and ‘Kavangoness’ (Akuupa 2011). The audience was visibly moved by the act of Maria Mwengere and even the Director of Ceremonies could not contain his excitement and at one stage even joined into the singing. When the performance came to an end, he exclaimed: “That is the culture, our culture; it makes us who we are; it is very important that our young people know their culture”, to the cheer of the audience.

In stark contrast to the enthusiastic reception that the Maria Mwengere group found with the crowd, the musical performance of the youth group with its blend of hip-hop and *kizomba*, a dance style from southern Angola, was received in a less favourable way. Amidst lukewarm applause, murmurs were heard among the audience: “What do they know, do they think people like such things?” The performances went on until around midday when it was time for the keynote address by the Regional Councillor. In his speech he emphasised issues of development in the region, but also stressed the importance of unity through the display of *mpo*. His keynote address was followed by another act of Maria Mwengere and the speech of the Mayor, after which the Swapo Pioneers entertained the crowd with a dance performance. At around 13h00 the formal part of the event came to an end and people started to flock out of the stadium, either to go home or to buy some food from the market women. A soccer match and music concerts were scheduled for the remainder of the day.

We see, therefore, that Independence Day in Rundu was celebrated with a significant emphasis on ‘local culture’. Performative formats of the celebration were specifically targeted to appeal to a notion of ‘Kavangoness’, which was acknowledged both by the Director of Ceremonies and, in their reception of the performances, appreciated by the audience. This expression of ‘Vakavango culture’ relied strongly on an understanding of cultural belonging (Akuupa 2006:21), in a rather static fashion, reminiscent of cultural representations from the colonial days. Even though the celebration was clearly dominated by this emphasis on ‘local culture’, at the same time ‘Kavangoness’ became embedded into the framework of the nation, which was represented through its symbols and representatives, such as civil servants and security forces. This situated Kavango – as

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<sup>33</sup> During the times of South West Africa, the colonial administrators defined the area of Kavango as populated by five ethnic groups only, namely Vambunza, Vakwangali, Vambukushu, Vagciriku and Vashambyu. Since then these five groups have collectively been identified as Vakavango (Akuupa 2011:80-123).

<sup>34</sup> The notion of *mpo* is used interchangeably to refer to ‘tradition’ or ‘culture’, see Akuupa (2006:5).



an administrative region, as an 'imagined' cultural community – within the paradigm of Namibian 'Unity in Diversity'.

Gobabis, 28 March 2010:

To allow as many people as possible to attend the main celebration of Namibia's 20<sup>th</sup> independence jubilee in Windhoek, festivities in the regional capitals took place one week later, on 28 March 2010. In order to visit at least one regional celebration, I had travelled to Gobabis, the capital of 'Cattle Country', as Namibia's central-eastern Omaheke region is proudly called<sup>35</sup>. When I arrived at the Legare sports stadium at about 9h00 in the morning, the official part of the celebration was yet to begin. Several hundred people had already arrived, some mingling in the entrance area, some looking for snacks and drinks, and some seizing the few shady seats on the grandstand. In front of a small entrance to the otherwise fenced-off playing field a large group of people had gathered, trying, amidst shouting and jostling, to get hold of T-Shirts and flags with the independence logo that were being handed out by members of the organising committee. Among the audience only a handful of people were dressed in Swapo colours, while most people wore their usual clothes: men and youngsters predominantly in casual dress, many women in *rok* and *doek* (the combination of dress and headscarf worn especially in rural areas). The colourful dress of the members of the various cultural groups stood out in the crowd before they were called onto the field for their performances. Upon receiving my t-shirt and flag I quickly changed into the jubilee attire, like most of the other visitors who got hold of these items, and took a seat on the grandstand just as the official programme began.

The protocol commenced with the erecting of two flagpoles by a group of soldiers, next to the VIP tent that was situated opposite the audience across the field. Following the repeated appeal of the Director of Ceremonies for everyone to please take a seat, a small military parade marched past, circling the field and coming to a halt in front of the VIP section. Now the flags of Namibia and the African Union were hoisted, followed by the singing of both anthems. As the highest-ranking representative of the state, the Omaheke Regional Governor, Laura McLeod-Katjirua, inspected the parade, which then marched off. After a short blessing delivered by a priest, the Director of Ceremonies narrated the history of the struggle for independence in a speech full of religious references, emphasising the will of the Namibian people to make sacrifices and their endurance in the face of oppression.

After this historical attunement, the first entertainment item commenced with a detachment of the Namibian Police and Prisons Services entering the field and parading in front of the VIP tent. The group's performance was a lively display of quasi-military discipline and order that included some unique choreography, at times even resembling dancing steps – at least for the inexperienced observer. This presentation made the otherwise modestly attentive crowd cheer in exaltation for the first time, perhaps due

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<sup>35</sup> Omaheke derives its name from the large desert area bordering Botswana. The region's population consists mainly of Otjiihererospeaking Namibians, with Khoisan- (Nama and San) and Setswana-speakers, as well as a small number of Afrikaans- and German-speaking commercial farmers. The Omaheke played a tragic role in Namibian history, when, in 1904, thousands of Ovaherero perished in the waterless desert while trying to escape to Botswana after their battle against the German colonial army at Ohamakari.

to the fact that the performance vaguely resembled the style of the *oturupa*, the bands of Ovaherero marching in the style of the imperial German army. The next item was a short welcoming address by Deputy Mayor Elizabeth Amutenya and a short performance of the local Swapo Pioneers, after which the Regional Governor took the stage. She emphasised that many people from Omaheke had represented the region during the main independence celebration in Windhoek, but that today's festivities were exclusively for the local community, which, just like all other constituencies in Namibia, would celebrate independence that very day. Omaheke, she said, was "part of this beautiful country" which had gained its independence through the sacrifice of Namibia's heroes and heroines. She then read the Independence Day address from President Hifikepunye Pohamba, which was followed by a short summary of the speech in Afrikaans by the Director of Ceremonies.

For the remaining part of the official programme, cultural groups performed in front of the VIP tent. The first was a group of boys in school uniforms who represented the Ovaherero communities of Omaheke. They presented a 'proper' *oturupa* parade that found tremendous response among the audience, with loud cheering and ululation from the grandstand. The following two groups, also consisting of school children, were Tswana and Nama dance groups performing cultural dances in their respective traditional attires. The groups thus offered a representation in miniature of 'diversity' in the context of the Omaheke region, even though specific groups like the San or the white farming community were absent. At the end of the official part of the programme, the groups mingled with the audience, performing spontaneously at various locations inside the stadium and on the parking lot. Throughout the proceedings it had been evident that the cultural performances were received with much more appreciation from the grandstand than the more formal segments of the protocol. The audience, which was otherwise rather unruly and had to be admonished several times by the Director of Ceremonies to rise for the national anthem, to pay attention to speeches or to take their seats for the military parade, clearly appreciated the cultural presentations.

In summary, it is thus possible to identify the same emphasis on 'local culture' for the Gobabis celebration, as was the case in our Rundu example, despite some significant differences. Independence Day in the capital of Omaheke was characterised by a more tangible display of nation-state symbolism in form of parades by state security forces, speeches that appealed to national unity and invoked the history of the liberation struggle, and, specifically, the distribution of official independence jubilee merchandise, that instantly visually transformed the audience into a national body. Yet, the celebration simultaneously was highlighted by a strong reliance on cultural group performances, which in the Gobabis case offered a representation of 'Omaheke diversity'. It is fair to say that the dominant representation of the nation-state during the Gobabis celebration was a result of the dynamics of the independence jubilee, which had set into motion an elaborate nationhood machinery that specifically sought to reach out to segments of society otherwise not so much in the focus of national days, such as the youth (Kornes 2011) or central and southern communities (Kornes 2012).

## **In guise of a conclusion: making sense of cultural diversity on Independence Day**

As we have shown throughout the paper, conceptions of ‘the nation’, of ‘culture’, and of ‘diversity’ have undergone significant changes since the 1970s. We focused on policy documents of SWAPO/Swapo, whom we identified as the leading nation building agency in Namibia. Further, we traced the emergence of a concept of ‘the nation’ as a product of SWAPO in exile, which envisaged the overcoming of ethnic apartheid divisions through the ideal of ‘One Namibia, one Nation’. This found a most compelling realisation in the independence celebration of 21 March 1990, which was characterised by a “[f]everishly patriotic” (Du Pisani 1991:2) appropriation of the new national symbols by the participating population. Regarding the performative formats employed for that celebration, the plurality of forms was remarkable, as was the level of involvement of different sectors of society. The children from Nyango, the colourful parades of learners, the women’s and worker’s organisations all contributed to an independence celebration that turned out to be a powerful display of the post-ethnic national culture, which SWAPO had envisioned as the model for independent Namibia.

The first years of independence were thus characterised by the momentum of this national discourse (Becker 2011:537). Fosse, however, objects that ‘One Namibia, one Nation’ and its embodiment in the Namibian constitution has remained a project of the privileged political elite, implying that for the majority of Namibians, kinship, ethnicity, or class continue to be the primary modes of identification (Fosse 2007:432). Only a few years into independence, the paradigm of a national culture shifted into the ideal of ‘Unity in Diversity’, and we should note that this is a different diversity from the one that was celebrated during the ‘feverish’ days of March 1990. Thereafter, traditional authorities began claiming recognition, (re-)inventing traditions and promoting cultural heritage; the resurgence of *efundula* being a case in point (Becker 2004). This became part of the dynamics of social and communal reconstruction after apartheid and the emergence of “traditional communities ... as live and resilient collective subjects of social as well as political action” (Kössler 2006:8). This emerging agency found a strong expression, a few years after independence, in the debate about the proliferation of kingdoms and chieftainships, which was initially seen as a threat to national unity (KAS and NID 1993), but soon found a tangible result with the proclamation of the Traditional Authorities Act in 1995. While said act should be seen as an attempt to establish a legal framework in order to contain conflicts between the state and traditional communities (Diener 2001:255), it also perpetuated elements of the structural divide between state and traditional communities, that had characterised apartheid policy. These manifold legacies of apartheid, which continue to have a strong impact on the postcolony, made it necessary to find strategies for accommodating the wide range of ethnic identifications that exist in Namibia. It appears that the national culture approach of ‘One Namibia, one Nation’ did not have the cohesive potential that was necessary for such an endeavour. As Du Pisani (2010a:32) remarks about the first two decades of nation building under Swapo:

During the anti-colonial struggle, people were united in their state of oppression and identified as opposing colonial rule. However, once the state of colonial oppression had come to an end, the newly and hard-fought freedom allowed for multiple, political subject

positions which go beyond the colonial dominator-dominated dichotomy and may be 'national' as much as they may be sub-national, regional and/or ethnic.

Instead, the Namibian government embarked on a national cultures approach, which found its expression in the model of 'Unity in Diversity', envisioning a Namibian version of the 'rainbow nation' (Kjæret and Stokke 2003:593-5). This multiplicity of identifications in Namibia – national, regional, ethnic – and the lively process of negotiating these with a concept of the nation, could be observed well during the Independence Day celebrations. The event, which captured this dynamic relationship most vividly, was the independence jubilee celebration in Windhoek in 2010. The jubilee, as a moment of most heightened national introspection, allowed for the ceremonial reaffirmation of the nation in a powerful performance of national unity. Diversity, on the other hand was performed through the displays of ethnic groups that gave representation to the regional and ethnic variety of Namibia. This ambivalence seemed to be contained during the celebration by the way diversity was framed by the dominant symbolism of the nation state. Judging from this observation, it becomes obvious that the concept of 'the nation', actively mediated both by the government and the general population, is increasingly conceptualised as embracing the notion of cultural diversity. Whether this is a more promising avenue towards national unity, rather than a revelation of existing fault-lines in the postcolonial order, is open for debate.

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