



# *Against trauma: silence, victimhood, and (photo-)voice in northern Namibia*

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First submission: 20 October 2014

Acceptance: 25 February 2015

The article shows how the discourses of trauma, victimhood and silence regarding local agency contributed to the production of the nationalist master narrative in postcolonial Namibia. However, I point out repositories of memory beyond the narratives of victimhood and trauma, which began to add different layers to the political economy of silence and remembrance in the mid-2000s. Through revisiting visual forms of remembrance in northern Namibia an argument is developed, which challenges the dichotomy between silence and confession. It raises critical questions about the prominent place that the trauma trope has attained in memory studies, with reference to work by international memory studies scholars such as Paul Antze and Michael Lambek (1996) and South African researchers of memory politics, particularly the strategies of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The fresh Namibian material supports the key critique of the TRC, which suggests that the foregrounding of pain and victimhood, and rituals of therapy and healing entailed a loss of the political framings of the testimonial moments.

Fifteen years ago, Richard Werbner (1998a: 1) declared a “postcolonial memory crisis, emerging widely across the African continent”. He called for new analytical perspectives on memory, remembrance and memorialisation; perspectives that would put ‘the political’ and the analysis of power relations back into memory studies.

Werbner’s challenge followed another significant publication. Paul Antze and Michael Lambek (1996: xii–xiii) raised critical questions about the prominent place that the trope of trauma had attained in memory studies and in popular culture: “Increasingly, memory worth talking about – worth remembering – is memory of trauma”, they noted with grave concern about the individualising and medicalising commands of this discourse.

This article sets out to connect Werbner’s as well as Antze and Lambek’s concerns by engaging Namibian postcolonial memory politics. Insisting that social memory is primarily about contested claims to power, I engage critical questions concerning the prominent place that the trauma trope has attained in memory studies. A key critique in this regard suggests that the foregrounding of pain and victimhood, and rituals of therapy and healing entailed a loss of the political framings of the testimonies. I ask a set of questions that bring together the concerns about the trauma discourse and the production and contestations of the nationalist master narrative following Namibian independence.

Silence surrounding local people’s agency, which is linked to the portrayal of local people as having suffered and being traumatised by historical events, appears to be a crucial dimension of the foundation myth of postcolonial Namibia (Becker 2011). Politically, public memory narrations, the country’s ritual political calendar and monumentalisation all celebrate the armed struggle from exile as the foundation of national liberation. While the narrative of the Namibian liberation struggle has recently begun to open up, if tentatively, to more inclusive perspectives (Kössler 2007), for the largest part of Namibia’s post-independence period, the country’s public history discourse emphasised the role played by the exile-based armed liberation politics. By contrast, the part played by the civilian population during the liberation war has been, at best, contingent on the hegemonic discourse (Becker 2011).

As Werbner (1998b) has shown, in the southern African context particularly, memories of the violent nationalist struggles of the past and their commemoration are crucial in the making of contemporary subjectivities; at the same time, the ostensibly ‘new’ nation state imagines itself to be founded on the recent violent conflict. The central question, to which I have had to return continuously during my decade-long research into Namibian liberation war memories, has been this: Do local people in the country’s rural North recognise the master narrative of the

postcolonial Namibian state, with its emphasis on “SWAPO brought us liberation through the armed struggle”? On the one hand, I have had to consider whether – and to what extent – local ‘audiences’ in Owambo recognise the dominant historical narrative of the postcolonial Namibian state, with its emphasis on “SWAPO brought us liberation through the armed struggle”. On the other hand, I have been compelled to consider whether – and how – the war memories of Owambo residents also contest and, perhaps, destabilise the dominant historical narrative.

I further ask: What about silence and the trauma discourse in northern Namibia? Here I start from the recognition that, while public memory in Namibia was, until a few years ago, marked by conspicuous silences surrounding the wartime actions of civilians, these did not merely denote ‘absence’. Instead, they formed part of a specific narrative performance of memory, which emphasised victimhood and trauma as the key experiences of those who had lived during the war in the northern war zone. Local people *did* tell war narratives to researchers and journalists; yet these were invariably tales of pain and suffering, which had been inflicted on individuals and communities in the war zone. The narratives were almost entirely void of agency; they hardly ever spoke about how people acted (rather than being acted upon), and how they enacted their selves. My central argument is that trauma confession and silence surrounding local agency served to co-produce the nationalist master narrative after the country’s independence, nationally as well as locally, but that repositories of memory have existed beyond the narratives of victimhood and trauma.

Ethnographically, the article challenges the dichotomy of silence and confession by revisiting visual forms of remembrance in the former war zone. It revolves around a photo-voice project, in which I worked in 2004 with men and women who lived on the border with Angola during the war. I conclude, tentatively, that the image-based memory performance shows a multi-vocal discourse about liberation war memory in rural Owambo, which contests assumptions of the nationalist master narrative, and goes beyond silence and the prevalent discourses of victimhood and trauma following large-scale violence.

## 1. Trauma: the career of a trope

The notion of ‘trauma’ (from the ancient Greek τραῦμα = wound) has been used in medical settings since at least the sixteenth century. At the turn of the twentieth century, Freud, among others, developed it into a psycho-analytical concept to understand situations in which “unable to confront or understand the memory of the unspeakable event, victims repress these memories” (Colvin 2008: 224). After the Vietnam war, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) gained currency.

As Colvin (2008) acutely observed, from then onwards, trauma has become the term of choice in the clinical treatment of victims of all kinds of violence: from political violence and gender-based and sexual violence through to violent crime. Recently, beyond medical and psychiatric settings, having spread out from the US, any disturbing event that 'traumatises' its victims and witnesses has come to be labelled 'traumatic' in popular discourse.

In the 1990s, the dominance of the trauma trope became particularly apparent in South Africa, where a therapeutic discourse using this particular model of violence, suffering, and recovery ran through the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which held most of its public hearings under a banner inscribed 'The TRC – Healing the nation'. Richard Wilson (2001: 14) commented on the slogan's inherent medicalisation, arguing that, "the TRC constructed a collectivist vision of the nation as a sick body, which could ritually be cured in the TRC hearings". The idea was that individual psychological processes could be replicated at the national level through the catharsis of victim testimonies, in which, due to the extensive media broadcasting, the public were to share in the 'healing' and come to identify with the 'new' South Africa, that was imagined to be 'cured' through forgiveness.

Drawing from his extensive fieldwork in Soweto, Wilson showed that the restorative justice exemplified by the TRC found little acceptance among township residents, whereas another anthropologist critically approached the TRC discourse of healing and redemption in a remarkable study of traumatic storytelling. Colvin (2003, 2004) demonstrated that the members of the Khulumani support group, who were victims of severe human rights abuses under apartheid, resisted the idea of therapeutic historiography, the telling of events as the privileged mode of recovering from traumatic events, in order to arrive at 'reconciliation' and a new status as reconciled 'survivors'. Instead, he argued, the Khulumani members were more interested in sharing their stories with each other, with the aim of strengthening the solidarity within the group of those who were victims under the old regime, and continued to be victims under the new dispensation that ignores their past and present sufferings.

Contrasting the critical perspectives of anthropologists such as Wilson and Colvin, the concepts of the TRC's approach to 'trauma' and 'healing' South African society served as keywords for other scholars who set out to understand the significance of 'truth and reconciliation' in the post-apartheid society. Njabulo Ndebele (1998) wrote an influential piece on memory, metaphor, and the triumph of narrative. He argued that, with the TRC and its characteristic traumatic storytelling, the public telling of personal memory narratives had become a widely accepted form of individual and social catharsis, which

extended to autobiographical and fictional literary texts, and that these forms of public remembrance embraced liberating moments, beyond trauma-telling and catharsis, when they gave legitimacy and authority to previously silenced voices.

In the following I present three key critiques regarding the TRC's strategy of catharsis and 'healing' by means of testimonials, which leading to redemption had given 'voice' to, and thus broken the 'silence' of the subaltern (in Spivak's sense), as a prominent instance of the trauma paradigm. The first one concerns the cultural constitution of the idiom of social 'illness'. Critics of the medicalising discourse suggest that the foregrounding of pain and victimhood, and rituals of therapy and healing, entail a loss of the political framings of the testimonial moments. Heidi Grunebaum (2011: 74), whose research on South Africa after the TRC was conducted while she was working with the Centre for Direct Action in Cape Town, writes:

Framing testimony under the sign of pain alone, however, inscribes the complex subjectivities forged within oppressive systems, everyday forms of resistance, the courage to defy and to hope, and the modes of repression with which the state met such expressions as both ahistorical and emptied of the radical politics of change to which such testimony has borne witness.

Grunebaum suggests that the medicalisation entailed a de-politicisation, which contravened the intentions of the witness-narrators who testified during the TRC hearings and often wanted to be heard as political activists with a collective vision. Had the intentions and meanings of their statements been 'read' as embedded in their complex worlds, historical, socio-political and material contexts, "this would crucially affirm the social and political importance of speaking as a (symbolically also) reclamative act, and not only as a (possibly only) therapeutic one" (Grunebaum 2011: 74).

How do the observations of South African testimony and traumatic historiography assist the present article's aim to challenge the dichotomy between silence and confession by revisiting visual forms of remembrance in northern Namibia? We need to unpack the trauma paradox further by disrupting the universalising discourse, which assumes that psychosocial phenomena in the aftermath of excessive violence necessarily follow the observations made in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe (for example, regarding the 'shell shock' of First World War soldiers).

The second critique thus argues that the trauma paradigm has mutated into a global discourse, but, as Argenti and Schramm (2010: 15) show, "individual and collective reactions to extreme violence, over both the short and the long term, may not be universal but rather socially and culturally informed or determined".

A third key critique takes on the assumptions of the logocentric Euro-Western culture, which gave rise to the notion that narrative remembering constitutes the only “healthy” form of memory (Shaw 2007). For instance, Passerini (2003) has offered that talking about feelings or (traumatic) memories is not always the best strategy for coming to terms with the past; silences, and the reasons for, and content of such silences, form an equal part of memory work. I tend to disagree, partially, with Valentine and Feldman, who, drawing on fieldwork in Sri Lanka and Northern Ireland, respectively, foreground the power of words to construct historical narrative and memory. As I have argued elsewhere, while words, in oral testimony or testimonial and creative writing, as acts of remembering create order and structure in the shared experience, silence too constitutes a significant performance of memory and strategies for life after violence (Becker 2008). Argenti-Pillen (2003), among others, has shown that where civilians have to continue to live face-to-face with former combatants in the aftermath of violence, they often reconstruct their lives through strategies of silence. It is of particular significance to my argument that, as Honwana (1998) has shown in the case of post-civil war Mozambique, people also engage their memories in *non-verbal* modes.

## 2. Silences and the nationalist master narrative

While the narrative of the Namibian liberation struggle has recently begun to tentatively open up to more inclusive perspectives, during Namibia’s immediate post-independence period, the country’s public history discourse emphasised the role played by the armed liberation politics from exile (Kössler 2007, Becker 2011). In contrast, the part played by the civilian population during the liberation war has been, at best, contingent to the hegemonic discourse (Becker 2011).

The triumphalist heroism has found its most potent symbol in the national Heroes’ Acre on the outskirts of Windhoek, which was completed in 2002. The SWAPO leadership intended this expansive memorial, built by a North Korean company in Stalinist realism style, as the central site for the staging, display and narration of very material power in Namibia in the postcolonial era.<sup>1</sup> The site has served as the venue of the annual performance of national political rituals to commemorate the official milestones of the liberation struggle, such as Heroes’ Day (26 August) and Cassinga Day (4 May).<sup>2</sup> Agency in the liberation war, thus, is

1 While the more recently constructed Heroes’ Shrine at Eenhana in northern Namibia began to incorporate different aesthetics and narrative layers, more in line with local manifold experiences and narrative and cultural expressions, the newly inaugurated Namibia Independence Museum in central Windhoek has returned to the North Korean-produced artistic aesthetics (Becker 2011).

2 Heroes Day marks the start of the armed liberation struggle on 26 August 1966. Cassinga Day

located – in stone as in quasi-official publications such as President Sam Nujoma's (2001) autobiographical tome – in discourses of national liberation that legitimate and authorise the power of the postcolonial elite as the sole, heroic liberators from apartheid and colonialism.

### 3. Silences and victimhood narratives from Owambo

Johannes Fabian's (2003) insightful observations about the paradox of secrecy and common knowledge allows for an interesting perspective on silence/s in Namibian memory politics. As Fabian elaborated for the Congo, the silences surrounding the actions of civilians in northern Namibia during the liberation war are not about unknown events and experiences, but about a specific narrative performance of memory, which emphasises victimhood. This becomes evident, for instance, in the reading of brief texts of largely unmediated memories of violence of Owambo residents who had lived through the war in northern Namibia, which were written by women who participated in the mid-1990s in an adult-education English class in northern Namibia (Orford & Nicanor 1996).

The women described moments of the war that had become traumatic memory for them, particularly beatings they suffered at the hands of soldiers of the South African Defence Force (SADF) and *Koevoet*, when the 'security forces' suspected that rural residents refused to disclose the whereabouts of combatants of the People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN) (the SWAPO guerrilla) in the area.<sup>3</sup> They also recounted that their houses were burnt down and that women were severely beaten, because the 'security forces' suspected them to have prepared food for the guerrilla. Some extremely violent, deadly incidents were narrated. Over and over again, the women told how they themselves or close relatives were hurt, injured, maimed, or killed. These narratives of pain and suffering inflicted on individuals and communities in the warzone come across as highly restrained voices.

The women's narratives were almost entirely void of agency. Only one of the fifteen women positioned herself as an agent, giving a detailed description

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commemorates the South African Defence Force's raid on the SWAPO refugee and military training camp at Cassinga in southern Angola on 4 May 1978, where hundreds of Namibian exiles died.

3 From 1980, newly-formed Namibianised units, such as the ethnic battalions of the South West Africa Territorial Force (SWATF), and the counterinsurgency unit known as *koevoet* (crowbar, in Afrikaans) fought alongside the South African Defence Force (SADF) and paramilitary South African police in northern Namibia. *Koevoet*, made up of locally recruited young Black men under the command of White officers, became synonymous with the terror to which the local people were subjected during the decade prior to independence.

of an incident where she and her young daughter outwitted the 'security forces' who were chasing a SWAPO guerrilla fighter, who had visited her house, and with whom she discussed 'ideas for the war'.

Contrasting these silences, it is common knowledge in Namibia that civilians in the war zone played a major role during the liberation war. Why then were their actions conspicuously absent from these essays? If Paul Connerton's (1989) argument is correct that the way in which the official historical narrative is constructed can profoundly shape a social group's memory and identity, this may help explain this silence, as the official Namibian historical narrative of the nationalist kind, the master narrative, is indeed silent on the contributions of the civilian population, whereas their sufferings have received recognition.<sup>4</sup> The memories of those who lived through the war in Owambo may thus have been and continue to be reshaped by the hegemonic public discourse – at least, those memories that a marginalised section of the population feel safe to tell (Becker 2008). In contrast to the dominant trauma paradigm, 'telling' may, in some historical contexts, *not* assist the processes of memories of violence. Instead of pulling together shattered fragments, words may threaten the margins of experience and memory where, as in postcolonial northern Namibia, 'telling memories' oscillates between the master narrative of SWAPO's victorious 'barrel-of-the-gun' campaign and the victim-trauma narratives.

In the remainder of this article, I show how visual forms may provide an alternative medium to contest the dominant historical narrative, where alternative narratives cannot be expressed through the registers of (verbal) language.

#### 4. Public memory, visibility and ethnography

Initially, the methodology of my research on liberation war memory in northern Namibia relied on conventional oral history. I came to appreciate the significance of visual and spatial memory practices, however, when I realised that Owambo residents hardly ever contested the dominant (state-sponsored) version of liberation war history in verbal discourse. Yet, a different kind of memories of the liberation war regularly emerged in practices that involved space and embodied performance, which contrasted the master narrative's triumphalist heroism. I began to understand that more attention needed to be paid to spatial and visual memory practices in an exceedingly ambiguous situation.

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4 Former President Sam Nujoma's published autobiography, for instance, recounts some of the better known 'atrocities', which the 'security forces' committed against the civilian population (Nujoma 2001: 326-8, 357), but makes no mention of the local residents' agency.



It was obvious that the violence has deeply affected all those who lived in this hotbed of liberation war violence in the 1980s. Their bodies had experienced the actions of the SWAPO guerrilla, and those of *eembulu* and *koevoet*.<sup>5</sup> Some had been caught particularly badly within the complex web of wartime politics: my research assistant's elderly grandfather, for instance, had suffered detention, been locked up in jail by the *boers*, and been beaten up by the *boers* and *koevoet*, as well as by PLAN guerrillas who were suspicious of his connections with the Bantustan administration and the 'tribal authorities'. Everyone knew of someone who had been immediately affected by the war-time violence. Some had spoken with pride about their actions in support of the liberation struggle. Most of the memories of bravery and cunning trickster tales of local residents' actions during the war, however, had been produced not as verbal '(hi)stories'. Rather, most often they were mediated through visually marked landscapes and place.

During an extended stint of fieldwork in 2004 in the border area around Oshikango, in the western part of the Oukwanyama section of Owambo, I thus embarked on a project that married visual and historical ethnography, and transmuted the significant issues raised by scholars of visual culture and public memory into a reflexive approach to the visual in ethnography.<sup>6</sup> In an environment where people regularly took or directed me to formally or informally marked sites, which they linked to liberation war memories, the *production* of visual representations of liberation-war memory appeared to be an interesting avenue to understand local memory practices and the multiplicity of experiential histories they frame.

I wondered: How would Owambo residents' visualisations relate to a particular version of the past (the nationalist master narrative)? How would people visualise memory that otherwise remained intangible, or indeed 'invisible'? Would 'auto'-photography possibly allow the expression, and indeed the performance, of subjective, individual and collective memories by imagining the essentially incomplete past and its relations to the present in ways that verbal narrative was evidently not able to do? Could a visual approach break the pertinent silences on local agency and subjectivities in the dominant discourse of public memory?

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5 From 1980, newly formed Namibianised units, such as the ethnic battalions of the supposedly independent South West Africa Territorial Force (SWATF), and the counterinsurgency unit known as *koevoet* (crowbar, in Afrikaans) fought alongside the South African Defence Force (SADF) and paramilitary South African police in northern Namibia. *Koevoet*, made up of locally recruited young Black men under the command of White officers, became synonymous with the terror to which the local people were subjected during the decade prior to independence.

6 For example, Coombes 2004, Jager 2002, Sturken 2004.

## 5. The 'Picturing our Memories' photography project

I gave out disposable 35mm still cameras to residents of three *omikunda* (hamlets) in the Oshikango district on the border with Angola. At my behest, twelve local residents, six men and six women (hereafter: 'the photographers'), produced pictures of 'anything and/or anybody' that they connected with their memories of the liberation war. The photographers ranged in age between 25 and 80 years; they included two elders, a man and a woman, who were eighty years or older, as well as two young men who were only ten or fourteen years old when the war ended in 1989. However, the majority of them were in their forties and early fifties in 2004; they had been young adults during the hottest phases of the war from the late 1970s through to 1989. Except for one woman who had gone into exile in the mid-1970s, all had been living as civilians in the area for the entire duration of the war. While all were rural residents, their formal education ranged from an elderly woman with no schooling at all to the headmistress of a local school (who held a Masters degree in Education) and two young men with college-level academic training.

All were untrained as photographers, although two men owned still cameras and had an abundance of framed pictures displayed in their homes. In one instance, where both the husband and the wife participated in the project, I was invited to go with them through several albums of family photographs dating back to the 1970s. None had as yet acquired a camera cellular phone, which at the time had not yet penetrated the mass markets in southern Africa. A decade ago, taking and sharing images was still a rather unfamiliar concept in most people's everyday lives.

When the cameras were returned, I had the photos processed at a photo-shop in Oshakati. Two sets of each negative were printed. I gave one set of prints of his or her film to each photographer (filed in a mini-album in the order in which the pictures had been taken) and returned a few days later for an extended discussion of the pictures. In an intensive dialogue between the photographers, myself and my research assistant (who also participated as a photographer on the project), the readings of the images in relation to memory were explored, debated and ultimately condensed into captions, ranging from a few words to three sentences for each picture. The following discussion of the process of photographic remembrance, images and captions has to draw on the verbal exclusively, since the poor technical quality of the images does not allow for a reproduction of the visuals in the Journal. It is hoped that the close description allows for a visual re- imagination.

## 6. Home spaces, bush and people in the borderlands

The images used by the photographers to visualise their memories varied widely. Some produced mainly images of landscapes and sites, which they connected to specific events during the war or to the everyday significance of a place. For some among those, the 'bush' was intimately connected to mobility across the space of the border into Angola. Others re-enacted homestead scenes from the times of the war. A few photographers portrayed local people who were party to certain incidents during the war. Remarkably, some of the photographers re-created themselves as the victorious heroes of the liberation struggle. In this section, I present selected images and photographers, which I will then discuss in the concluding remarks on silence and mediation in traumatic memory.

### 6.1 Home spaces

As my research assistant Jafet Nakanwe and I moved through the borderlands, we often popped in at the homestead of the parents of Jafet's close friend Immanuel Shikongo, a teacher at the nearby primary school. This was an old, long-established homestead located in Onamhinda, a few kilometres southeast of Oshikango; Immanuel's father was born here in 1933; since 1962, Tate Frans, a former migrant labourer who had returned home permanently in 1980, was the recognised owner of the house, which was larger than most in the area, well-built and maintained, and very neatly kept.<sup>7</sup> While none of the adults living in the homestead was currently employed, adult children, such as Immanuel and another older son, a former exile who worked in a government office in Windhoek, provided financial support. Unlike the suburban-style mansions (complete with brick walls and satellite dishes) of the local elites, however, the homestead of Tate Frans and his wife, Meme Cecilia Hamutoko, was an assemblage of 'traditional' mud and stick constructions, with only one rather modest brick structure set at the centre of the compound.

Whereas Meme Cecilia always welcomed us in a friendly manner, she did not speak much. Evidently, in her eyes, our visits were intended for Tate Frans and the important (male) business of 'learning about history'. So, when – after Tate had already agreed to participate in the 'Picturing our Memories' project – we arrived to give the aspirant photographer some basic training, we did not find him at home; Meme was initially rather surprised when, on the spur of the moment, I asked her whether she would also like to take pictures of her memories of the liberation war. Within a few minutes, however, she sat engrossed with the

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7 'Tate' literally means 'father', the general address for a mature man.

camera, eager to figure out the technology, and took her first shot of her teenage daughter Naufiku.

We left a camera with Meme Cecilia. When we returned a week later at the appointed time, she had completed the set, which demonstrated an astounding creativity and photographic talent. Meme Cecilia's pictures told a close-up story of everyday homestead life during the time of the war. She set up her family to re-enact war-time homestead scenes. Sixteen-year old Naufiku, who was only a toddler when the war came to an end in 1989, was made to demonstrate the demure position the homestead's children had been taught to assume when *boers* came to the homestead. The assumed shyness was to convincingly communicate that, 'we don't know anything' about the whereabouts of *ovamati* ('our boys' in Oshikwanyama). In another picture, several young members of the family demonstrate 'how we prepared to run from the *Boers* whenever we heard the sound of casspirs'. Meme Cecilia herself posed in some photographs, showing how she was cooking at an open fire and had to hide in the enclosed kitchen when it was too late 'to run'. Yet another photograph takes the viewer through to the area where she used to, and still continues to distill *ombike* (local liquor). With this image she told us the story of the day during the final years of the war when *omakakunya* arrived while she was busy distilling. The black soldiers immediately started drinking the freshly distilled liquor; 'without even asking', as Meme Cecilia remarked on this total lack of manners. Her pictures took us around the homestead, demonstrating time and again both the fear instilled by the *omakakunya* and their ruthless requisitions of *omavanda* (spinach left to dry) and even 'nice, fat' cattle on the hoof.

Meme Cecilia's photographs demonstrated a memory of the war, which was mostly lived in the home space. Her images depicted the sense of violation she experienced during the regular 'visits' by the *boers* and their local mercenaries. They also expressed a strong will and practice of continuing living an everyday life, and demonstrated how people had carried on living during the time of the war.

Other women also produced visualisations of memories that were connected to their homesteads and adjacent fields. Everyday life, and the disruptions caused by the war featured large; however, some also produced images that demonstrated their subversive actions during the war. Meekulu Ndiipala Nghihalahamba of Odibo, a woman in her eighties who had never been to school and whose homestead was located close to the Anglican mission, pointed out a tree near her homestead and explained: "Sometimes South African soldiers came to this tree near the house. They chopped down poles from our fence and used it for cooking; they also enquired whether we had seen SWAPO combatants".<sup>8</sup>

8 'Meekulu' literally means 'grandmother', the general address for an elderly woman.

This lively octogenarian proudly demonstrated her active support of the PLAN fighters in several other photographs. Her image of the open-air homestead kitchen demonstrated its significance as a source of food for the combatants; she added that, over and above the cooked meals, she also provided them with soap and washing powder. Meekulu Ndiipala's household had evidently played a substantial role in the liberation war. In two other images, she pointed out the hut, or rather its present-day replacement, where she had kept a range of supplies, provided by a local businessman, for PLAN soldiers. Meekulu Ndiipala's home had, in fact, served as a significant supply-and-relay station immediately south of the one-kilometre deep strip of the *okapate no go*-zone, which the administration had cleared of human settlements along the border with Angola. Her modest divorcee's 'small house' had served, mostly, as storage for everyday necessities, such as body lotions, soap and clothing; at other times, she had also hoarded weapons and ammunition for the guerrillas.

Meekulu Ndiipala's home space thus had taken on significance as an active war space. Meekulu Ndiipala had paid dearly for her active support of the armed struggle. She had been arrested repeatedly and, on one occasion, had been taken to the notorious Oniimwandi SADF base in Oshakati, where she had been tortured and detained in solitary confinement.

During the many visits Jafet and I paid to her homestead, Meekulu Ndiipala frequently expressed her anger and disappointment about the fact that "our friends we had fought with have forgotten us". She named a number of prominent SWAPO politicians, whom she had known since the days when they were students at the St Mary's Odibo Anglican mission high school in the earliest phase of the struggle in the mid-to-late 1960s. These youngsters were the first to introduce SWAPO's cause to people in this location on the border. She also told us how she and her children had later supported them on their journey into exile. Yet, she asserted that, except for one of these former 'children' now in prominent positions in the postcolonial government of Namibia, who occasionally visited with a small monetary gift, they all no longer 'knew' her. What was even worse, she said, was that they only 'looked after' their own families, including even those relatives who had previously collaborated with the *boers*.

## 6.2 Bush spaces

Unlike the older women whose war memories were often intimately connected with home spaces and fields adjacent to homesteads, men of different generations tended to portray spaces in the 'bush', which they connected with their memories of encounters with South African and *omakakunya* soldiers or SWAPO combatants. They pictured trees, shrubs, grazing areas and water dams, which

appeared inconspicuous to the unassuming viewer of these photographs; yet, to them, these spaces signified experienced history. These remembered warscapes were often maps of mobility, charting their own movements as much as that of the armed opponents, the SWAPO guerrilla and the 'security forces'.

Friends Jafet Nakanwe (born in 1979) and Immanuel Shikongo (born in 1975) took their cameras to places where, as young boys, they had herded livestock or played with friends. Jafet, for instance, took a picture of a cluster of trees and shrubs just off a sandy track and told me about the significance of this place in his experiential history: "Sometimes, when we drove cattle home at dusk, here we suddenly saw SWAPO soldiers who apparently had followed us all the way from Angola. They asked us to inform the adults about their presence". Similarly, Immanuel explained a photograph he took of the Onanghuwa dam as a memory space, since this was the location where he and his cousin Philipp had experienced a frightening encounter with a group of mounted South African soldiers.

The 'bush' was unequivocally remembered as a masculine space of the wild, where only men and boys ventured with their animals, but 'hardly any woman could be found'. These were remembered spaces of danger. Even if they did not result in encounters with soldiers, as Jafet recalled when he took an image of cattle crossing a sandy tract near the Oshikango water tower, they were aware of the potential dangers: "we used to take our animals to this area, which was actually very dangerous. You could step on a landmine or pick up ammunition".

The young men used the cameras to recollect incidents and places, spread across an area stretching for several kilometres between the villages in the border zone. They also recalled during interviews and everyday conversations that they had frequently ventured into the *okapate* no go-zone and beyond by crossing across the border into Angola with their livestock.

The intersections of mobility, landscape and war memory became most apparent, perhaps, in the photo-memory story of Frans Lazarus, Immanuel's father (born in 1933). Tate Frans took us on a rollercoaster photographic journey from his homestead in Onamhinda, criss-crossing tracks, fields, anthills, and shrub areas for half a day; we only reached our destination in the late afternoon after we had driven for about two kilometres into Angola. His photo-story relived a particular day in the 1980s when he was followed, shot and finally arrested by *omakakunya* for illegally entering the *okapate* area. Taking Jafet and me along on this remarkable memory trip in March 2004, we moved in my little car, following Tate Frans's instructions to stop, take pictures, move on, hear what he recalled had been happening to him; we ended up crossing over the torn-down border fence into Angola. While Tate Frans – as he recalled that day – was acted upon (by the *omakakunya*) rather than a proactive hero, the immense, fast-paced events

he developed into a photo-story at the same time also let him appear as an actor in relation to others.

### 6.3 Marking place

Landscapes, home spaces and the making of place have been connected to the experiential history of everyday life. They have equally been the spatial dimensions of the more immediate experience and intimate knowledge of the violent encounters during war. Jafet's grandfather, Tate Victory Samuel (born in 1924) took great effort in marking place when he traversed Onamhinda with the mnemonic camera. He used a pierced stick and a piece of white cloth to mark otherwise inconspicuous sites.

"Gabriel Katamba's daughter was killed by SWAPO combatants. The family planted this aloe plant to remember their daughter", Tate Samuel commented on one of these images. He explained further that the young woman had been shot for allegedly having had sexual relations with black soldiers of the 'security forces', known as *omakakunya*. The execution of local young women who were said to be collaborating with the enemy by entering into intimate relations with *omakakunya*, was apparently not uncommon.

Tate Samuel also pointed out other places of war-time encounters, such as the *omuve* tree where a PLAN fighter was shot and killed from a SADF helicopter, and the exact location where he, assisted by another local man, had buried the fallen combatant. In the very same manner, he indicated the place where South African soldiers beat him; his commentary described the incident in 'scientific', third-person terms, "This is where Victory [as he referred to himself in the third person] was beaten nearly to death by South African soldiers". Tate Samuel also directed the camera at spaces of civilian agency, such as the tree where he and other locals hid SWAPO documents, given to them by combatants. Overall, his attempt to precisely document local war-time history, and his careful measured commentary, were rather unusual. But so was the man.

Tate Samuel (despite his advanced age, no one seemed to ever address him as *tatekulu*) was a peasant intellectual in Feierman's (1990) terms.<sup>9</sup> A few months short of his eightieth birthday, when I met him in early 2004, he laboured in the fields daily, yet he was also very active in local politics, where he contested the vacant headmanship of Onamhinda. He was sometimes called upon as a source of local knowledge about the war to speak at local public commemorations. His word counted, even though this mainly self-taught man (who was found with a book

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9 'Tatekulu' literally means 'grandfather', the general address for an older man.

in his hands most of the time) was regarded as rather controversial. After a few years of schooling at Odibo mission, he had in the 1950s worked in South Africa and the then Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe). When he returned home to the northern Namibian border zone in the early 1960s, he became the postmaster at Oshikango (which position earned him the lifelong moniker 'Tate Oposa'), where he witnessed SWAPO's earliest armed attack in 1966. In the 1970s and 1980s, he served as the secretary to the Kwanyama Traditional Authority office, which put him into a delicate position, as the tribal authority was closely associated with the colonial administration. While he was vague about his exact role, we realised that he had played a definite part in Peter Kalangula's Ovamboland Bantustan administration. He lost these positions in 1985 after a lengthy stint in detention, due to his actions in support of SWAPO and the combatants. His wife, Meme Patricia Samuel, and his grandson, Jafet Nakanwe, who had grown up in his grandfather's homestead, both vividly recalled frequent night-time visits of *ovamati*.

While Tate Samuel was unique in his 'scientific' style of visually marking place and presenting historical narrative, other local residents – mostly men – also pointed their camera at places that marked local collective war memory. Peter Kamati, a teacher at a local school, who was in his mid-forties in 2004, took the image of a remarkable tree and the track alongside which it stands, because "this is the road that we used to take people from the Onamhinda area to Angola" – the final stretch of the long road 'across the border' taken by those who left northern Namibia to 'join the struggle' in exile. He also pictured a zinc structure because, similar to Meekulu Ndiipala's place, it had served as a supply station for PLAN combatants who operated for extended periods inside the Namibian war zone.

With another picture of place, Kamati laid full claim to his own contributions to the war. The picture, depicting simply a big tree in the eyes of an unsuspecting viewer, takes on a very different meaning when read together with the caption given to it by the photographer: "During the war, this was the place where we met with SWAPO soldiers for information and assignments."

#### 6.4 Marking people – making heroes

Similarly, Maria Shiluah's (born in 1961) photography authenticated a remarkable experiential history and exceptional actions during the war. In the mid-1980s, she was the only woman among a group of six young locals who bought supplies and delivered them to the PLAN bases. The youngsters also conducted intelligence, closely observing the movements of South African forces in the area. They met weekly with their PLAN contacts to report. In order to allow them to move around more swiftly, PLAN issued each of the members of the *oifini* group with a bicycle, which was an effective mode of transportation and did not raise suspicions. At



the time, vast numbers of local residents, both men and women, used bicycles as their chief means of transport.<sup>10</sup>

Maria worked her photographic narrative mainly through portraits of people whom she connected with the *oifini* local history: her first-born daughter Nangula (“I was involved in the *oifini* group when I fell pregnant with her”), her erstwhile comrade Joseph, pictured standing under the tree, where the *oifini* group held its meetings. Maria also took a picture of her mother, frail by 2004. Her commentary revealed a great deal about the contradictions and ambiguities of social relations during the war: “My mother, Meme Julia Lazarus, was chased out of her brother’s house. He feared trouble because of mine and my boyfriend’s involvement with *oifini*”. The uncle in question was no other than Frans Lazarus, who had proudly presented his activism in the whirlwind tour of the borderlands.

Maria expressed a high level of frustration with Namibia’s post-independence dispensation. Unlike anybody else, who at this time breathlessly followed the Nujoma succession drama prior to the national elections of November 2004, she openly declared that she had “decided not to vote anymore, because we just vote for people to have a far better life than others. [...] they eat their food and they ignore the people who voted for them”. Her situation in 2004 was precarious enough. She had never obtained waged work nor married, and to feed her children, divided her time between tilling the fields belonging to her widowed mother’s homestead and running a small *cuca* shop.

Whereas Maria had given up hope that her contribution to the liberation struggle was going to be rewarded, others still made hopeful claims by boldly displaying the SWAPO colours. Helena and Isai Hainghumbi, who were in their mid-fifties in 2004, belonged to the ‘modern’ local elite. Tate Isai had worked in the mines at Oranjemund as a young man after he had dropped out of Oshigambo High School – Owambo’s first secondary school; he now ran a vehicle repair shop while his wife had worked as a nurse at Engela hospital since the 1970s, and was still employed there when I visited them in their well-furnished ‘modern’ house. They proudly talked me through several albums of photographs. The pictures showed the couple, their children, family members and friends posing in groups at weddings and other social gatherings; the albums also showed off images of family members dressed in professional and graduation attires. None of the pictures, which had been taken during the 1970s and 1980s indicated that the photographer (most photographs had been taken by Tate Isai) and many

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10 *Oifini* refers to the balustrades inside the homestead; the name of the group thus indicated the protection they provided.

of those pictured had taken an active part in a war. These fading images rather demonstrated a sustained production of civil life in the face of adversity.

Meme Helena demonstrated how she had often quickly made a fire and cooked for the PLAN combatants who came to the house. She pointed out a hidden opening in the ceiling of one of the bedrooms, which allowed visiting combatants to hide in the attic when South African soldiers came to check on the house. Other photographs demonstrated how she made off with medicines for the fighters from the Lutheran Hospital where she worked and how she procured radios, watches, or even bicycles for the *ovamati*. In the final picture of her series (this photograph was taken by her husband), she had changed into a dress in the blue-red-green SWAPO colours; she proudly held up her party membership card and proudly commented: "I fought under this flag and we won. Long live SWAPO!"

Tate Isai's photographs emphasised his past actions as a 'gun runner' for PLAN. He photographed a battered 'bakkie' (pick-up truck), which he had used to fetch weapons from across the border in the middle of the night. When they arrived back at the couple's home in Engela, he unloaded the cargo onto a wheelbarrow, which he also photographed, and finally kept the weaponry hidden in a large trunk in a dark room of the Engela house until PLAN combatants, based in Namibia, collected them. Commenting on a picture of the now empty trunk, he told us that, in May 1990, he had handed the trunk full of weapons over to the new government.

Like his wife, Tate Isai dressed up in SWAPO colours for the final shots (taken by his wife) and hauled out the SWAPO and new Namibian national flags, as well as the certificate, which he had received for his services with the Namibian Council of Churches RRR Committee during the repatriation process of former exiles in 1990. These images presented a proud claim to his actions in the armed political liberation struggle. This was linked to the expressed disappointment that he and his wife had not received the recognition of their war-time actions, which they had expected for their contributions to Namibian independence.

## 7. Concluding thoughts on memory, silence and mediation of a non-traumatic historiography in the northern war zone

I set out to demonstrate how visual ethnographies in memory studies can challenge a postcolonial nationalist project that represents the postcolonial elite as the sole liberators from apartheid colonialism, while rendering ordinary people into silent victims who suffered the trauma of large-scale violence. The visual

expression of alternative liberation war memory allows for a unique insight into the local social processes of producing memory.

Contrary to the official silence surrounding the agency of local people and their portrayal as silent victims, the 'Picturing our Memories' project revealed a multi-vocal liberation-war memory in the northern Namibian borderlands. With their images and accompanying narratives, the photographers conveyed manifold facets of experiential history and memory. The photographers first positioned themselves differently in relation to SWAPO's postcolonial project, which had them incorporated through silence and narratives of traumatic victimhood. The visualisation of memory that emphasised own agency was closely connected to spatial practice, marking place, and the dialectics of 'home' and 'bush' in the life of the former war zone. The Owambo war-scape emerges as more physically and socially mobile, contradictory and ambiguous than the simple dichotomy suggested by the postcolonial master narrative: silent victimhood of the local population versus heroic agency of the liberators.

The images and captions emphasised the interconnections between different webs of both silence and agency in the liberation war. The visual narratives discussed in this article showed that local 'audiences' in Owambo widely recognise the official historical narrative of SWAPO's nationalist project. In their visualisations, the photographers tended to prioritise locations and situations, which were connected to the armed struggle, particularly encounters with combatants of either SWAPO or the South African forces. Many local residents did not question the historical master narrative as such; however, they claimed recognition of their active participation in the liberation war by writing themselves into such encounters as active supporters, mostly drawing on established local roles, which were often gendered, such as women's cooking and/or the stock-herding of male youth. Some, like the Hainghumbi couple, went beyond in their portrayal of their participation in smuggling provisions, including weaponry for the PLAN guerilla. While I found in my research that most Owambo residents did not verbally contest the dominant version of liberation-war history, it was also evident that those who lived through the war as civilians felt 'left out' where their agency had been obliterated in the official discourse. Many Owambo residents emphasised the material consequences of the obliteration of their agency, such as large-scale unemployment and the social disintegration of local 'communities'. In the popular perception in Owambo, as elsewhere in Namibia, former exiles have been given unfair preference for employment in the public sector, the country's biggest employer. According to such local understanding, historical narratives of silence, trauma and victimhood blend into current economic and social marginalisation. These are not repressed memories, as conceptualised in the original understanding of 'trauma'; during localised fieldwork in the Odibo-

Oshikango-Engela area, I noticed informal exchanges of memories through networks of those local residents who had been particularly active during the war. I also noted that, while the memories of local residents' agency had earlier been absent from official history narrations, tentative changes began to occur with the first-ever inclusion of local civilian memory-telling during a Cassinga Day commemoration I attended in the area in May 2004. The memories, which emerged through solicited photography, drew on personal experiences and recollections; however, they also spoke to the public memory and history discourse, some directly, and others in more indirect ways. They are thus far from purely personal, or 'private', but significant for the understanding of citizenship and belonging in postcolonial northern Namibia in the early twenty-first century.

The alternative memory chronicles that came out of 'Picturing our Memories' thus reiterate Werbner's (1998a) call for a renewed critical, social and political commitment to addressing postcolonial memory crises.

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# *Two modes of amnesia: complexity in postcolonial Namibia*

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First submission: 17 July 2014

Acceptance: 15 March 2015

Public commemoration of past atrocity, mass crime and particularly genocide has drawn attention both in the public realm and in scholarly debate, meeting general acceptance in recent years. However, the seeming opposite has also been advocated – forgetting. Various, such forgetting is presented as a wiser approach in contradistinction to painstaking and evasive truth-seeking. Taking this tendency as a point of departure, I discuss here two cases that seem relevant to what might be called a strategy of amnesia, both relating to Namibia: (1) reference to the genocide perpetrated by the German colonial army in 1904–08, both in post-World War II (West) Germany and in the independent postcolony, and (2) the debates and conflicts within Namibia around the gross violations of human rights committed under the auspices of SWAPO during the 1980s. Without suggesting that these cases are in any way equivalent, I contend, however, that they are related in the minds of a fair number of Namibians and further, that there are certain connections in the ways both cases have been and are addressed within the public spheres of the two countries concerned.

I argue that in both cases, debate on how to ‘work through’ or otherwise pass over in silence violent acts and large-scale crime arose only with the Namibian independence process in 1989/90. In the first case, we can observe a transnational dynamic, which has resulted in shifts in the positioning of both governments concerned, but at the same time refers back to more long-term official images of history. This concerns in particular