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Changing Times: Women in Namibia

Permalink

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Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 11(3)

ISSN

0041-5715

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Publication Date

1982

DOI

10.5070/F7113017204

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CHANGING TIMES: WOMEN IN NAMIBIA

Text of address by Anita Pfouts during a panel discussion: "Changing Roles/Women in Southern Africa," which was part of the Third Annual African Activist Association Conference, May 1981

Introduction

I am going to look at the ethnic groups in precolonial Namibia and outline what the traditional division of labor between men and women was in those groups. Then I will examine how German and South African colonialism has affected those traditional divisions. In order to understand the current situation in Namibia, it will also be important to look briefly at the formation of the South West Africa Peoples' Organization (SWAPO), the multinational involvement in Namibia, and U.S. policy in southern Africa. Finally, I will return to the position of women and look at the possibilities for change in light of SWAPO's declaration of how they want their society to be when Namibia becomes a free and independent state.

A brief look at this map will help us to be aware of where we are talking about: geographically, Namibia is between Angola and South Africa on the Atlantic coast of Africa, the Namib Desert runs along the coast, and the country of Botswana and the Kalahari Desert are to the east. The center of the country is mountainous with a plateau running roughly north to south. The conflict presently going on in Namibia is all over the country, but most of the action is here in the north next to the Angolan border.

Precolonial Division of Labor

In Namibia there were pastoralists, agriculturalists, and hunting and gathering societies. The pastoralists were Herero and Nama, the agriculturalists were represented by the Ovambo groups, and the hunters and gatherers were San, Heikom, and "Bushmen." Another group, the Damara, were primarily hunters and then farmers. I say were because, after the devastation of colonialism, people in Namibia lost a great deal of their ethnicity, and today, many people are trying to put aside ethnic divisions and work as one people.

Among the pastoral Herero, the size and quality of his herd was the measure of a man's wealth and position. Women had the say within their houses. Men possessed no huts of their own and, where polygamy was practiced, the men passed their nights

in regulated sequence in the huts of their wives. Marriage could only take place between the members of the same, or an allied *Eanda* (economic societies of heirship), in which the eldest sister of the deceased was the first to inherit. Her eldest son would inherit the office of performing the rites of the ancestral fire.

Within the Nama clans stock farming was the principal occupation of the men, while the women provided everything edible that grew on bushes and shrubs, and made earthenware pots. The clan head's word was law. Inheritance passed from father to son. Similar to the Herero, the Nama wife was mistress inside her house. Polygamy was practiced and each wife had a separate hut.

The seven Ovambo groups had the following ways in common. They did some stock farming (cattle and goats) but they were primarily agriculturalists. Farming was women's work, as it was (and is) in many places in Africa. In addition, the women ground meal, prepared food, made beer, and took care of the children. Men's work was to clear the land, provide the family with meat, look after the stock, clean out the water holes, fix handles to hoes and axes, and repair the hut.

The entire population was divided into families of chiefs, those of the landed nobility, and of the common people. There were fixed rights of succession and the chieftainship passed to the chief's younger brother when the chief died. If there was no brother, the deceased eldest sister's son became the heir. The chief exercised rights of ownership over the herds of cattle and of life and death over his subjects. The chief's mother was the only person who dared voice her opinion freely. Even the nobility were subordinate to the chief. They were not allowed to marry among themselves. The sons married daughters of respectable common people and the daughters had the right of choosing husbands for themselves from the people. Amongst the nobles, succession was in the female line.

Among the hunting and gathering groups, the basic customs were similar. The women gathered veld-food, collected firewood, and roasted the fruits of their search. The men went out to hunt each morning while the women were gathering. All property was common. The head of the family was regarded as the owner of the water holes, hunting grounds, and the sacred fire. He has inherited these from his ancestors and he will leave them as an inheritance to his eldest son.

Marriage within a family circle was forbidden. A young groom worked for his parents-in-law for a year after the marriage delivering all the fruits of his hunting to his mother-in-law. A girl did not display happiness at her wedding, to do so would

have been an insult to her family. Each wife has her own hut; even the sons and daughters live by themselves. When they marry, men do not possess huts; however, when they become old, the men do have their own huts. There were both polygamous and monogamous marriages.

Among the Damara, a man was primarily a hunter, then a farmer with goats. A woman's work was to provide the family with wild berries, roots, bulbs, and everything edible which nature provided. The eldest member of the family was the person in authority. The Damara have substituted the Nama language for their own in most areas, although there are a few groups living in the Erongo and Brandenburg Mountains who retained remnants of their own language (or there were when Vedder was writing in the 1930s). These people were in constant trouble with the Herero and the Nama for taking cattle or sheep. If they were caught taking stock by either group, the Damara were enslaved. Then they adopted the culture of groups with whom they lived.

The Effects of Colonialism

The Germans acquired South West Africa (Namibia) in 1884 at the Congress of Berlin, as part of Germany's drive to catch up with the more established colonial powers. German rulers and businessmen were determined to make up for their scarcity of colonies with ruthless exploitation of the ones they had obtained. False treaties, skillful use of inter-African disputes, and overt repression were used to quell resistance. Four-fifths of the territory was established as a Police Zone, as it remains today, where white rights were paramount.

After Germany's defeat in World War I, South West Africa was turned over to the Union of South Africa as a mandate or "trust territory." South Africa was supposed to develop the territory on terms of equality for the residents, with the goal of ultimately bringing it to self-government and independence. In fact, however, South Africa extended and intensified the oppression of the Namibian people. The South African apartheid system, with its pass laws, contract labor, forced population removals, and "homelands" system, were applied in such a way that some observers consider conditions in Namibia to be even worse than those in South Africa¹

Despite United Nations and International Court of Justice rulings

to the contrary, South Africa continues to the present-day to exert administrative and total economic control over Namibia

The South African colonialists, and the Germans before them, made a conscious effort to prevent subsistence agriculture from evolving into advanced commercial farming. They prevented mechanization and large scale cultivation that would produce cash crops. The motive was to make sure that the largest number of African men would always be readily available for contract labor in the mines or on their plantations. As a consequence, much of the cultivation in rural Namibia is still done with hand hoes, and it is the women who do much of the field work, using their hands for tilling, sowing, weeding, harvesting and threshing.²

The longest time a married contract worker can stay home with his family is about four months, then he goes on contract again for twelve to eighteen months. Traditionally, men would cut and clear trees off the land for fields, and they dug wells to obtain drinking water for both people and animals. They looked after whatever domestic animals are kept. Now the men can only perform these duties when they are not on contract, thus even more of the work falls to the women.

After spending up to seven hours of backbreaking labor in the fields, women in the rural areas must fetch water, grind grain into flour, and prepare meals, in addition to taking care of their children. There are some tasks, such as threshing and grinding grain for flour, which are categorized as women's work and men, even when they are home, do not perform these chores.

The position of women in towns and cities is somewhat different:

German and South African settlers took away the people's land and livestock in the southern and central parts of Namibia (Herero and Nama lands in precolonial times) where most of the towns are located today. Both African men and women in these areas were reduced to the level of a dispossessed laboring class. The central and southern parts of Namibia have been more intensely affected by white colonial settlement than those areas in the north. Evicted from their land, the people in these areas had to work on ranching estates of the colonial settlers, the men looking after the settlers' herds and the women working as domestic servants Women working as servants could obtain no

wages but would be paid in terms of food and clothing handouts. This was the situation in the early days of colonial rule, especially during the German period.³

In recent years women working in domestic service in the towns average 10-15 Rands per month (\$15-20).

When western European, American, and other corporate monopolies came to Namibia in order to extract minerals, a large percentage of the men entered the labor force through the contract labor system to work in the mines. The women were left to do domestic service in the rapidly expanding towns. A few men, after many years work, do become classified as semi-skilled workers; but it has been virtually impossible for women working in domestic service to acquire any kind of productive skills. "The situation has not fundamentally changed since the days of German colonialism."⁴

The only professional women found in Namibia's towns are nurses and teachers. But nearly all the teachers are at the primary school level, which means they receive the lowest scale of pay. The same is true with respect to nursing. Urban women are a little better off than rural women. The majority of urban women have at least a chance to get the rudiments of formal schooling. So most of the urban women are either literate or semi-literate; whereas, many rural women have never had the opportunity to set foot in a classroom (there are no schools in many villages and rural districts). Health facilities in the urban areas for the African population are far from adequate, but they are relatively better than those in rural areas. The only industries which employ a small number of women are fishing and packing industries, thus there is a comparatively high percentage (in comparison with the African men) of unemployment among the women:

Most of the lower professional jobs such as bank teller, secretary or clerk/typist are essentially reserved for white women in Namibia; and there are no trade schools to provide African women in the towns with skills.⁵

The need for African labor has led to the building of townships (similar to Soweto outside Johannesburg in South Africa) on the edges of "white towns." In these townships, African husbands and wives can live together; otherwise, "if a husband is on contract labor, he is not allowed to live with his wife, regardless of whether he lives in the yard of his boss or in the workers' compound"⁶:

Thus, apart from the negative effect of contract

labor which disrupts normal family life and puts extra work pressure on women, there are also remnants of semi-feudal mentality among our men. These attitudes are being struggled against in the process of national liberation, which is the fundamental issue before the Namibian people now. 7

Current Situation in Namibia and Formation of SWAPO

Now, I would like to deal with the present political situation a little bit, on how SWAPO was formed and go on to bring it up-to-date as far as the current struggle is concerned.

As I have said, life in Namibia today for the 1.5 million African population is based on the apartheid system established by South Africa. In the Bantustans there are no jobs and even a subsistence living is nearly impossible to maintain. Thus, the African population has become labor for the modern farms, ranches, and other European-controlled businesses. Few African families can afford to send their children to school. Each person must register for work at age sixteen. From that time the person carries a passbook which he/she must carry for fear of being imprisoned. We saw an example of the passbook yesterday afternoon when Mankikola (Mahlengu) showed us, in the afternoon seminar, what people in South Africa have to carry and it is the same sort of passbook that the Namibians have to carry.

South Africa took over the administration of Namibia, as I have said, under the League of Nations after World War I and, despite United Nations and International Court rulings to the contrary, South Africa continues to the present-day to exert administrative and economic control over Namibia. SWAPO was formed in 1960 to bring about independence for Namibia through peaceful means. By the mid-1960s the Namibian people realized that they would have to defend themselves against military aggression from South Africa. They formed the Peoples' Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN) in order to defend themselves against South Africa's armed forces and to secure the total independence of Namibia. As a result of the mass support for these organizations, the United Nations General Assembly, on December 13, 1974 recognized SWAPO as the sole authentic representative of the Namibian people and gave the organization observer status at the General Assembly and rights of participation in all UN agencies

Since 1978 negotiations, under the auspices of the Security Council, have been going on between five Western powers--the so-called Contact Group, or Gang of Five as they are sometimes referred to: Canada, France, the Federal Republic of Germany, United Kingdom, and the United States--and the South African government to bring about free and independent elections in Namibia. Since multinational companies based in these countries

have been, or are, involved in the exploitation of Namibian uranium and other natural resources, it is rather that the negotiations, under the guise of bringing about a peaceful solution, have been used to prolong this economic exploitation at the expense of the Namibian people.

South Africa, despite recent international pressure, is still refusing to recognize the United Nations' authority in Namibia. The primary reason lies in Namibia's enormous mineral wealth which includes diamonds, lead, tin, zinc, copper, and the world's largest open cast uranium mine. In order to develop these resources originally, in 1966, South Africa accepted capital from many transnational companies. Some examples include: Rio Tinto Zinc, a British-based multinational corporation, to develop the uranium mine at Swakopmund; Tsumeb Corporation, a U.S.-controlled company, to mine copper, lead, and zinc; and Consolidated Diamond Mines, a subsidiary of Anglo-American Corporation of South Africa, which holds a monopoly on the diamond mining industry in Namibia. The British government and West German, French, and Japanese companies also contracted to buy uranium and put up funds to guarantee these contracts.

Under South Africa's Atomic Energy Enrichment Act of 1974 the country's Uranium Enrichment Corporation can step in at any time and avail itself of all the uranium resources in its area of control. Thus, as long as South Africa controls Namibia, it is in control of approximately twenty-five percent of the capitalist world's supply of uranium. At the same time South Africa ensures its supply, it can guarantee uranium to the European Economic Community countries which are importers, such as the Federal Republic of Germany, France, and the United Kingdom. Thus, U.S. support for the status quo in Namibia can be seen in the light of protecting the supply of uranium to its western European allies.

In addition to the economic exploitation, South Africa is currently, and has been for some years, involved in military exploitation. It has frequently violated Angola's borders in pursuit of Namibian refugees. This was brought to international attention during the Kassinga Massacre on May 4, 1978, when the South African Defence Force (SADF) killed over 700 refugees most of whom were women and children. The South African regime has an occupying force of over 100,000 troops in Namibia. The SADF invaded Angola this past summer with a force of at least eight infantry battalions. These military incursions are still taking place.

Jennifer Davis, who is the director of the American Committee on Africa and who, as a representative for *Southern Africa* magazine, was a member of the international commission of inquiry into the crimes of the racist and apartheid regime in southern

Africa, in February of this year (1981), has reported the following: "Evidence of systematic attacks being launched against Angola from the illegally occupied territory of Namibia by South African troops and mercenaries."⁸ The report goes on to describe the U.S. mercenary who led South African troops into Angola and "a light machine-gun, which had belonged to a South African pilot shot down over Angola, was of U.S. origin, stamped 'American International Corporation, SLC, Utah.'"⁹ Descriptions of the detention and torture of SWAPO members was also included in her report. War, terror, and brutality have made many Namibians refugees. Now that the South African army is drafting blacks, more Namibians are fleeing. Many of these are joining SWAPO's ranks.

I have just been given a note that I have virtually run out of my time, so I think that I will try to bring this to a very quick conclusion by simply calling attention to the fact that international support for SWAPO has been growing in spite of the fact that economic sanctions were voted against in the UN Security Council. There is talk of a new solution to the Namibian problem. The United States has proposed what has been termed the Zimbabwe formula, as an alternative to the already agreed upon United Nations basis for negotiations for free and independent elections in Namibia. The new formula says that there should be a constitutional convention *before* elections are held; whereas, it was already agreed (by both South Africa and SWAPO) that the election should take place first and then the constitution should be written. It appears that that this is another way for South Africa to stall about holding elections. Whichever way it goes--whether sanctions are imposed, whether the Zimbabwe formula or some other basis for elections is put into effect, or whether there is a continuing stalemate--international support for SWAPO is growing steadily. The SWAPO conference at UNESCO headquarters in Paris in September 1980 brought this out very clearly.

I think the only way South Africa is going to agree to free elections in Namibia is for the U.S. and the western European countries to put enough economic pressure on South Africa. This will only happen when SWAPO and the liberation movement in South Africa become strong enough to significantly impede the multinational economy of southern Africa. As the SWAPO representative to the United Nations, Theo Ben-Gurirab, said in his address last evening, SWAPO is willing to negotiate but they are not willing to put down their weapons while negotiating. Both the military and the diplomatic struggle will go on until there are free and independent elections in Namibia.

Possibilities for Changing Roles

Now, I would like to come back to the role women are playing

in the struggle and what the mobilization of women in the struggle has meant to the women of Namibia. This pamphlet (see footnote 2) was put out by the Chicago Committee for African Liberation in 1977. I find the two women who were interviewed in this pamphlet speak more succinctly than I do, so I will just give you a few of their comments about what the formation of SWAPO and, especially what the SWAPO Women's Council has meant to them, and what they think their position will be under a SWAPO government in a free and independent Namibia:

In the early stages of SWAPO, the participation of women was slow due to the lingerings of semi-feudal mentality and social structure in the country. We were basing ourselves on our traditions (in colonial times) that a woman is a woman and as such her place is in the kitchen. Against this background, the involvement of women in the struggle was relatively slow compared to that of our male comrades.¹⁰

They go on to talk about the lack of self-confidence among women, but they also speak about the women who began to be persecuted for participating:

Colonial jails also began to be filled not only with men but also with women and over the last two years (this was written in 1976, so this is since 1974), the Liberation Army of Namibia is enlisting a considerable number of women. And today, you will find women in nearly every level of our movement's structure.

For over half a decade now, women have been playing a very active role in SWAPO. Women have been participating in meetings and in elections. Some of which have distinguished themselves as being able public speakers, organizers and chairpersons. So in the process, many more women have begun to realize that being able to do serious political work is not the monopoly of men. Similarly many more male comrades have been able to overcome their feelings of male superiority.¹¹

The SWAPO Women's Council was formulated in 1970, along with organizations for youth and workers.

One thing, I think, I should emphasize about SWAPO's structure is that it definitely has a grass roots structure. It works from the local community, to the regional and district committees, to the Central Council of SWAPO. It is a grass roots organization through the workers, through the students, and through the Women's

Council.

Today, there is a SWAPO branch in every district, municipality, and village, and there is a Women's Council representative who is charged with the specific responsibility of organizing and politicizing women:

We have close working relations with women's organizations in the other liberations movements. The SWAPO Women's Council is furthermore a member of the Pan-African Women's Congress whose headquarters are in Algeria. We have extensive contacts with many women's organizations at national levels, especially in Africa and in socialist countries. Many of the national and international women's organizations with which we have established contacts do give us moral and material support. We have thousands of women under care of SWAPO. Some of these are living in Namibian Centers in the friendly neighboring countries, such as the People's Republic of Angola, the Republic of Zambia, and Botswana. Many others are working in the PLAN's revolutionary underground in our guerilla zones of operations.¹²

Conclusion

I think this gives some idea of the involvement of women in the Namibian struggle. They are laboring to come out from underneath their colonial oppression. Colonialism has done more. I think, that traditional structures to prohibit women from attaining a position of strength. Since the inception of SWAPO, with its emphasis on the participation of all the Namibian people in the struggle for national independence, women have gained confidence in their abilities to fully participate in the decision-making process of running a free and independent Namibia, and the men have begun to recognize the capabilities of women.

I do not mean to imply that the liberation of Namibia automatically ensures the liberation of women but, when the Namibian people are free of the racist South African colonial presence, they will have a much better chance to formulate a society based on the contributions of all people. The women must be careful to retain the decision-making positions and feelings of well-being and self-confidence they have attained when the struggle for political and economic independence has been won.

A luta continua!

NOTES

¹ Chicago Committee for African Liberation, "This Is the Time," interview with two Namibian women (Chicago, Ill., 1977), p. 1.

² Ibid., p. 7.

³ Ibid., pp. 9-10.

⁴ Ibid., p. 11.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., p. 13.

⁷ Ibid., p. 9.

⁸ Jennifer Davis, "Report on a Visit to Angola," February 1-10, 1981 (typescript), p. 1.

⁹ Ibid., p. 4.

¹⁰ Chicago Committee, "This Is the Time," p. 18.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 20.

¹² Ibid., p. 22.

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