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Muffling the Fimbifimbi

Namibian GDR Exile Children in Narratives and Discourses Past and Present

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Abstract

After a South African air raid attack against the liberation-struggling independence movement of their parents, more than four hundred young Namibian refugees—preschoolers, primary school pupils and teenagers—arrived in the German Democratic Republic in 1979. This chapter evaluates representations of the deportation of the children and their experiences in the GDR by looking at (auto)biographical depictions. With regard to the question of whether their spectacular life stories have (co-)shaped the prevailing post-independence national narrative of Namibia or not, their own perspective yields both an unambiguous and, given the conditions under which they had been sent on their odyssey in the first place, surprising result. While the former exile children have ultimately been denied the privilege of being part of the country's elite, they do not seem to resent their near invisibility in these self-images of the nation, and seem to have come to terms with their situation (and identity) as Africans with a German past.

Keywords

Namibia – liberation struggle – exile children – “DDR-Kinder von Namibia” – German Democratic Republic (GDR) – South-West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) – Lucia Engombe – Oshideutsch

1 Introduction¹

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When white South African air forces bombarded a Namibian refugee camp in Cassinga (Angola) in May, 1978, killing hundreds of adult liberation fighters and creating as many (semi-)orphans among the children internees, this marked the beginning of a remarkable humanitarian intervention.² Its remarkability notwithstanding, this intervention has ever since remained largely unmentioned—or muffled—in the discourses of (state) identity-founding character in Namibia. In accordance with top representatives from the Namibian independence movement SWAPO (South West African People's Organisation), politicians of the ruling East German Socialist Unity Party (SED) decided on the immediate evacuation of eighty Namibian children to the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in late 1979. The first cohort of 'exile children,' as they were afterwards named, was followed by further five groups, bringing the total amount of toddlers (the youngest were two years old) and pre-schoolers that came to Germany to approximately 430.³ In 1989, the last refugee children arrived via East Berlin international airport; in 1990, the initiative came to an end. The GDR ceased to exist, while the freedom fighters in Namibia finally succeeded in their striving for independence. SWAPO won the first elections in which it was entitled to participate as a political party, triggering the inauguration of its long-time leader Sam Nujoma as the first President of the Republic of Namibia under a new constitution. One of the first tasks the new government had to undertake was to manage the influx of exiled Namibians returning to the country. Among the first to return, without consultation, were the GDR

- 1 Fimbifimbi: Oshivambo for "chameleon." This chapter includes parts of Bruno Arich-Gerz, "Namibische Flüchtlingskinder in der DDR (1979–1989): Diskurse von und über Kindheitserfahrungen zwischen Ostdeutschland und Afrika" in Ewa Żebrowska, Magdalena Olpińska-Szkiełko & Magdalena Latkowska, eds., *Germanistische Forschung in Polen: Gegenstände und Methoden, Formen und Wirkungen* (Warsaw: Wissenschaftliche Beiträge des Verbandes polnischer Germanisten, 2017), 92–101. The present version has been focus-specifically revised, largely extended and updated.
- 2 SODI / Solidaritätsdienst International e.V. *Vor 30 Jahren: Kassinga und internationale Solidarität*, 2008 [<https://docplayer.org/36414854-Vor-30-jahren-kassinga-und-internationale-solidaritaet.html>] (accessed November 11, 2019).
- 3 The second cohort arrived in 1982, followed by a third in the subsequent year and another three in 1985, 1987 and 1989. In her monograph illuminating the concrete educational cooperation between SWAPO and SED, Susanne Timm states that "[m]ore than half of these children were half-orphans (57.3%)" and "another 13.3% were orphans" (Susanne Timm, *Parteiliche Bildungszusammenarbeit: Das Kinderheim Bellin für namibische Flüchtlingskinder in der DDR* (Münster: Waxmann 2007), 133. This translation and the subsequent ones from the German original(s) are by the author).

exile children who were repatriated in August 1990. The youngest of them were three-year-olds while the oldest were deep in their teens.

The aim of this chapter is twofold. First, it provides an outline of the details of the Namibian-East German initiative and a description of the manner in which it was implemented. Second, it evaluates the representations of these children in journalist and (auto)biographical as well as in scientific discourses. By examining periodic outbursts of publicity surrounding the Namibian GDR exile children in the public arena in and after 1989, the article underlines the extraordinary nature of their “transnational growing-up”⁴ as seen from the predominantly *outside(r)* point of view. In contrast, the *inside(r)* perspective emerges in more recent statements (testimonies, interviews and others) from the exile children themselves. With regard to the question of whether the spectacular life stories of the four hundred and thirty returnee children have (co-)shaped the prevailing post-independence national narrative of Namibia (or not), juxtaposing the outside and inside perspective yields both an unambiguous and, given the conditions under which they had been sent on their odyssey in the first place, surprising result. While the former exile children have ultimately been denied the privilege of being part of the country’s elite (as they had been promised in East Germany) and play no notable role in the identity-founding master narratives of the country, they themselves do not seem to crave the symbolic capital going along with these.

2 Promises and Publicity: The Case of the Namibian Exile Children in the GDR

On 18 April 1979, the SWAPO Secretary for Education, Linekela Kalenga, approached the Minister for National Education of the GDR, Margot Honecker, with a request for safe accommodation for child survivors of the Cassinga massacre. The inquiry soon led to a number of concrete actions being taken by Communist Party officials in Germany, such as identifying Schloss Bellin, a former castle near Schwerin, as the reception facility for the children, as well as hastily arranged preparations for their education and coordination with SWAPO officials in Angola. Shortly before Christmas 1979, the first cohort of African children arrived in Bellin.⁵ At the beginning, the schooling of the

4 Matthias D. Witte, Kathrin Klein-Zimmer & Caroline Schmitt, “Transnationales Aufwachsen namibischer Flüchtlingskinder zwischen SWAPO- und DDR-Erziehung—eine biografisch-ethnografische Studie,” *Transnational Social Review: A Social Work Journal*, 3:2 (2013), 1–7.

5 Timm, *Parteiliche Bildungszusammenarbeit*, 19–22.

refugee children took place in the polytechnic secondary school in the neighbouring village of Zehna;⁶ in the late 1980s the earlier cohorts, now consisting of teenagers, were sent to a secondary school in Staßfurt in Saxony-Anhalt.

The living conditions and everyday routines as well as the educational priorities in (primarily) Bellin and Zehna (but also in Staßfurt) have been documented in diverse literary forms. They range from episodic recollections⁷ and full-fledged (auto)biographies⁸ to the reports and files collected in federal archives, regional libraries and documentation centres in Germany.⁹ The memories of the Namibian exile children revolve around a distinct set of instances and topics, such as the new environment and educational regime¹⁰ and the challenges arising from the culture shock¹¹ as well as the struggle with processing the at times traumatic past events experienced in the Southern African refugee camps. While the refugee children from Nyango (Zambia) had only rarely been exposed to violence in the camp, the memories of the air raid survivors from Cassinga were clearly more traumatic, as revealed by Lucia Engombe's remark: "Behind us a chair fell over [...]. I looked more closely

6 Rüchel, Uta. „Wir hatten noch nie einen Schwarzen gesehen“: *Das Zusammenleben von Deutschen und Namibiern rund um das SWAPO-Kinderheim Bellin 1979–1990* (Schwerin: Landesbeauftragter für Mecklenburg-Vorpommern für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen DDR, 2001). See also *Parteiliche Bildungszusammenarbeit*, 56.

7 Constance Kenna, ed., *Die "DDR-Kinder" von Namibia: Heimkehrer in ein fremdes Land* (Göttingen: Klaus Hess, 1999).

8 Lucia Engombe, *Kind Nr. 95: Meine deutsch-afrikanische Odyssee—Aufgezeichnet von Peter Hilliges* (Munich: Ullstein, 2004).

9 For a comprehensive overview of these sources, see Timm, *Parteiliche Bildungszusammenarbeit*, 11–12.

10 'Discipline' was a key word in the correspondence between the GDR female teachers (for example Hannelore Juhl) and those of her pupils who were later brought to Staßfurt (see *Die "DDR-Kinder" von Namibia*, ed. Constance Kenna [1999], as well as the accompanying Namibian adult educators who assimilated the notion too soon (see Engombe, *Kind Nr. 95: Meine deutsch-afrikanische Odyssee*, 61).

11 A minor, but highly impressive shock was the ice-cold sugar which the three and four-year-olds discovered when they arrived at Schloss Bellin (see Hangula Werner, "Zucker," in *Die "DDR-Kinder" von Namibia*, ed. Constance Kenna, 69). There is no snow in Namibia or the countries that hosted the refugee camps, Zambia and Angola—nor is there a word for it. The children resorted to combining German and Oshivambo to describe unfamiliar objects. As Lucia Engombe responded in a questionnaire: "They [the children] just prefixed an O at the beginning of the German word, pronouncing it long, and added another vowel at its end. For instance, in our native language there is no word meaning 'snow'. Just because we did not have any snow in Namibia back then. So we picked it from the English lexicon, Snow, and turned it into 'Osnowu'"; Bruno Arich-Gerz, *Questionnaire 'Oshideutsch,'* (Wuppertal: unpaginated and unpublished typescript, 2014).

and saw that [...] Mark had hidden under the table [...]. Mark always crawled under a table whenever there was a loud bang.”¹² The boy’s anxious response to sudden noises seems as much a post-traumatic symptom as the nightmares of Nawana Trianus. The girl’s mother had lost her life in the air raid while she was saved by her mother’s friend, Nangula, “from the back of my dead mother.” “Half of this story,” she later reports, “was told to me by Nangula, whom I got to see again in 1991, and the other part came alive in my dreams.”¹³

The idea of be(com)ing part of the ruling elite in an independent democratic country led by members of SWAPO who participated in the liberation struggle¹⁴ was another expectation that was reiterated constantly in Bellin and Staßfurt. This was reinforced by the secrecy surrounding the children’s presence, arising from the fear of alleged retaliation missions initiated by the South African regime and carried out by its Western strictly anti-communist allies.¹⁵ Another prevailing myth that shaped the children’s perception of themselves was that of a select group of youngsters articulating their unique and necessarily hybrid “transnational” identity through a creative use of language. By switching to “Oshideutsch,” a creative combination of primarily German and Oshivambo elements, the children sealed their communication from both the monolingual German and the exclusively Oshivambo-speaking Namibian educators.¹⁶

Immediately after the end of the GDR as an independent political entity and Namibia’s almost simultaneous independence—the first free elections took place from 7 to 11 November 1989, which coincided with the fall of the Berlin Wall—the Namibian and German politicians tasked with the responsibility for repatriating the children decided to send them back to their African homeland. From now on, their fate and further lives took different paths. Many returned to their families (often decimated by the armed conflicts); others were

12 Engombe, *Kind Nr. 95: Meine deutsch-afrikanische Odyssee*, 36.

13 Nawala Trianus, “Teil meines Lebens,” in *Die “DDR-Kinder” von Namibia*, ed. Constance Kenna, 65.

14 Brigitta Schmidt-Lauber, “Die verkehrte Hautfarbe”: *Ethnizität deutscher Namibier als Alltagspraxis* (Berlin und Hamburg: Dietrich Reimer, 1998), 403.

15 Engombe, *Kind Nr. 95. Meine deutsch-afrikanische Odyssee*, 33. See also Rüchel, “Wir hatten noch nie einen Schwarzen gesehen.”

16 Bruno Arich-Gerz, “‘Migratsprache’ Oshideutsch: Eine namibisch-deutsche Varietät zwischen Generatidiolekt, ‘invertiertem Pidgin’ und postkoloniallinguistischer Theoriebildung,” in *Sprache und (Post)Kolonialismus: Linguistische und interdisziplinäre Aspekte*, eds. Birte Kellermeier-Rehbein, Matthias Schulz, Doris Stolberg (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2018), 161–175. See also Witte, Klein-Zimmer & Caroline Schmitt, “Transnationales Aufwachsen namibischer Flüchtlingskinder.”

accommodated by German-speaking (and mostly white) Namibian families.¹⁷ Not all of them resumed the school careers or educational studies they had embarked on in Germany. The luckier ones subsequently continued studying and are working as lawyers, or have completed commercial or technical training, others utilised their language skills and are working in the tourism sector or for the German section of the national radio service. There are a few 'double returnees' who returned to Germany and, last but not least, there are those who have not coped well with their repatriation to Namibia and have slipped into precarious living conditions. Their fates are indicative of a more deep-rooted conflict troubling the youngsters, especially in the first years after their repatriation: the loss of a stable identity and their self-perception as "strangers in their own country"¹⁸ under utterly new and demanding living conditions. Lucia Engombe's searing question: 'Who was I anyway?' resonates with the experiences of several returnee children:

Was I like one of those small animals I was scared of as a little child in the Zambian bush and had never forgotten? Was I a *fimbifimbi*? A chameleon? Sometimes white, sometimes black? What colour was I supposed to be? Why had they turned me into a white one if they now want a black person?¹⁹

These stark questions reveal how the returnees grapple(d) with fundamental questions regarding their identities. The children's journey to Namibia triggered a new challenge (in fact, a complete reversal) in yet another respect: that of becoming the centre of public attention. The top secret status as recluses against their will in Bellin and, less strictly so, Staßfurt was replaced by the glare emanating from self-declared advocates of the children's concerns. The first articulations of this kind date from the very moment of their arrival in Namibia when conservative German-Namibian circles instrumentalised their fate. A newspaper campaign peddled scandalous accounts that the returnees were children of SWAPO dissidents who lived as hostages in East Germany.²⁰ The longevity of the false claim has been remarkable, however, as a letter to the editor of the German-language *Allgemeine Zeitung* of 2005 shows:

17 See Volker Gretschel, "Der Weihnachtswunsch," in *Die "DDR-Kinder" von Namibia*, ed. Constance Kenna, 125–128.

18 Schmidt-Lauber, "Die verkehrte Hautfarbe": *Ethnizität deutscher Namibier als Alltagspraxis*, 415.

19 Engombe, *Kind Nr. 95: Meine deutsch-afrikanische Odyssee*, 173.

20 See Engombe, *Kind Nr. 95*, 139; Kenna, ed., *Die "DDR-Kinder" von Namibia*, 36.

To accept children from distant countries for a long time without the consent and active participation of their parents in their upbringing was by no means a good deed. Kidnapping remains kidnapping. Undoubtedly this was only possible in a country whose ruling system regularly carried out forced adoptions. From her Chilean exile, Margot Honecker sends her greeting to those involved in these schemes.²¹

Besides rants of this kind, which polemically use the case of ex-GDR exile children as a lever to articulate their dissatisfaction with the allegedly communist SWAPO government, outsider perspectives on the children's concerns are also taken—or arrogated to themselves—by journalists, filmmakers and self-proclaimed biographers.²² While a more recent example, *Omulaule heißt schwarz* by a trio of young German filmmakers,²³ was unanimously acknowledged by those starring in the documentary, many other films and text depictions of the ex-GDR exile children did not seek the consent of the people they purport to represent. In a personal conversation, Onesmus Shimwafeni complained about his portrayal in *Onesmus: Weiße Kinder mit schwarzer Haut*.²⁴ Other voices such as the complaints channelled through the customer evaluation at *booklooker* likewise criticise the publication:

The book, which adorns itself with the first name of one of the three protagonists, proves to be exemplary for the media exploitation of GDR children. The biographies of these are being (mis)used by the authors who garnish them according to their own intentions.²⁵

- 21 Karl Kraut, "Entführung bleibt Entführung." *Allgemeine Zeitung*, January 18, 2005: 18. ["Kinder aus fernen Ländern ohne Einverständnis und aktiver Mitwirkung ihrer Eltern bei der Erziehung für lange Zeit aufzunehmen, war keine gute Tat. Entführung bleibt Entführung. Ohne Frage war das nur möglich in einem Gebiet, das auch sonst Zwangsadoptionen in seinem eigenen Machtbereich vornahm. Margot Honecker lässt alle Beteiligten aus dem chilenischen Exil grüßen"].
- 22 For a superb overview until 1997, the heyday of reports of this kind, see Kenna, ed., *Die "DDR-Kinder" von Namibia*, 215–226.
- 23 Beatrice Möller, Nicola Hens & Susanne Radelhof, *Omulaule heißt schwarz* [film] (Weimar: no publisher, 2004).
- 24 Kay Brase & Ingrid Brase-Schloe, *Onesmus: Weiße Kinder mit schwarzer Haut* (Nienburg: Betzel, 1996).
- 25 <https://www.booklooker.de/B%C3%BCher/Brase-Schloe+Onesmus-Weisse-Kinder-mit-schwarzer-Haut-in-Namibia/id/A01joGBG01ZZy> (accessed August 7, 2016). ["Das Buch, was [sic] sich mit dem Vornamen einer der drei Protagonisten schmückt, erweist sich als beispielhaft für die mediale Ausbeutung der DDR-Kinder, deren Biografie man sich bedient, um sie nach eigenen Intensionen [sic] auszuschmücken"].

Educationalist Jürgen Krause takes a similar view:

Much of the plot (as far as it exists) is nebulous. When it comes to concrete information, it is often not only wrong, but narrated in an embarrassing manner. This is especially the case in the introductory chapter which deals with the fate of the children who returned to independent Namibia. The freely invented plot of the book pivots on the symbiosis of a down-to-earth child character—Onesmus—who engages in a supernatural rapport, not to say dependence, with the floating ‘Barlach angel in the cathedral of Güstrow.’ In a conversation I had with Onesi [sic] Shimwafeni in Windhoek in September 2000, he expressed himself disparagingly and unequivocally about the book that was dedicated to him.²⁶

The boom of outsider engagement with the issue has in the recent past undergone a slight, yet noticeable change. While the publicists and biographers gradually lose interest in the GDR-raised Namibian youngsters, social scientists and researchers from cultural or language studies have up to the present day produced hypotheses and analyses of the former children’s paradigmatic hybridity (as a ‘fimbifimbi,’ as Lucia Engombe calls it) and their transnational upbringing.²⁷ Newly accessible archive material and other previously unexplored sources have been investigated²⁸ and the linguistic studies of the children’s secret language—their translanguaging practices—have in the meantime been complemented by a theatre play that carries the name of the

26 Jürgen Krause, *Das DDR-Namibia-Solidaritätsprojekt “Schule der Freundschaft”: Möglichkeiten und Grenzen interkultureller Erziehung* (Oldenburg: BIS-Verlag, 2009), 119. [“Vieles an der Handlung (soweit vorhanden) ist nebulös. Wenn es um konkrete Informationen geht, sind sie oftmals nicht nur falsch, sondern auch peinlich erzählt. So besonders im einführenden Kapitel, wo es um die Schicksale der ins unabhängige Namibia gekommenen Kinder geht. Die frei erfundene Handlung des Buches verkörpert die Symbiose eines mit beiden Beinen im Leben stehenden Kindes—Onesmus—in überweltlicher Verbindung bis Abhängigkeit mit dem schwebenden ‘Barlach-Engel im Dom zu Güstrow.’ In einem von mir im September 2000 in Windhoek geführten Gespräch mit Onesi [sic] Shimwafeni äußerte er sich über das ihm gewidmete Buch recht abfällig und eindeutig”].

27 See Caroline Schmitt, Matthias D. Witte & Serpil Polat, “International Solidarity in the GDR and Transnationality: An Analysis of Primary School Materials for Namibian Child Refugees” in *Transnational Social Review: A Social Work Journal* 4.2–3 (2014), 242–258. See also Witte, Klein-Zimmer & Schmitt. “Transnationales Aufwachsen namibischer Flüchtlingskinder.”

28 Timm, *Parteiliche Bildungszusammenarbeit*.

argot in its title. *Oshi-Deutsch*²⁹ premiered in May, 2016, in Osnabrück (Germany) before it toured Namibia.³⁰

3 African First, or: A Child's Kiss on the President's Mouth Does Not Warrant an Adult Career

The staging of *Oshi-Deutsch* in Windhoek, Katatura and Oshakati in September, 2016, was preceded by reports in *The Namibian* and other newspapers in which two of the former exile children appear as interviewees: Monica Nambela whose teenage daughter appeared on stage as a young actress re-presenting the fate of the GDR exile children; and Lucia Engombe, whose *Kind No. 95* memoirs appeared in 2004 in Germany, co-authored by the German publicist Peter Hilliges. The two returnees, both in their late thirties or early forties now, have a lot to say—and have written several accounts—of the promises made to them, and their perception of their present situation. Both still have ties with a number of other returnees, maintaining thus the insider bonds which led to the founding of a youth club in Windhoek in 1995³¹ and, later, an informal association of GDR exile children.³²

Monica Nambela has a remarkably clear definition of herself, she has set her priorities straight: “The question of whether I am German or Namibian does not arise for me.”³³ In an earlier statement she refuted the *fimbifimbi* paradigm: “First of all I am African, then a woman, then an Ovambo and finally I belong

29 The term “Oshideutsch” is highly allusive. It contains the deliberately ambiguous prefix ‘oshi’ which, in the Kwanyama dialects of Northern Namibia and southern Angola, stands for ‘language of’ (here the Ovambo ethnic group). At the same time, it connotes ‘Ossi,’ a derogatory abbreviation (and diminutive) for ‘person from the East [= Osten] of Germany’ (see Arich-Gerz, “‘Migratsprache’ Oshideutsch,” 163).

30 Reviews of the Osnabrück staging include Jan Decker, “Geheimsprache Oshi-Deutsch: Ein Osnabrücker Theaterstück über namibische Kinder, die in der DDR aufwuchsen,” *junge welt*, June 3, 2016, 10, and Bruno Laberthier, “Zwischen Deutschland und Namibia,” *faustkultur.de*, June 4, 2016 [<https://faustkultur.de/2683-0-Oshi-Deutsch-in-Osnabrueck.html>] (accessed November 11, 2019).

31 Hallo Hopf, “Die DDR-Kinder sind besser als ihr Ruf,” in *Die “DDR-Kinder” von Namibia*, ed. Constance Kenna, 151–159, 156. See also Carola Dorner, “Gemeinschaftsgefühl im ‘Ossi-Klub’: Die ‘DDR-Kinder’ von Namibia,” in *Ostalgie international: Erinnerungen an die DDR von Nicaragua bis Vietnam*, eds. Thomas Kunze & Thomas Vogel (Berlin: Christoph Links, 2010), 57–68.

32 Patrick Hashingola, “‘Wir haben viele Ideen’: Interview mit Patrick Hashingola,” *Allgemeine Zeitung*, July 7, 2006, 10.

33 In Anon. “‘If they said run, you ran for your life ...’: GDR Children of Namibia Recount Their Story,” *The Namibian*, April 27, 2016, 6.

to the minority of the black population who have German as their mother tongue.”³⁴ In the *Namibian* report, she reaffirms her self-confidence and adds that she does not conceive of herself as robbed of a once-promised status (“You know, they said we were going to liberate our country. We were going to be the elite”) and dismisses the vain promises made in the GDR. At the same time, Nambelela “refuses to see herself as a victim”:

“I consider myself very, very privileged,” she insisted. “That education system embraced everything you need to know in life, important values about hard work, and punctuality, about standing up for one’s country, about being incorruptible.”³⁵

Nambelela’s self-assessment as an African woman affirms a positive identity that does not require special status for recognition within the young nation’s *grand récit*. As the book-length memoir of her co-interviewee Engombe—more exactly, the reserved response to *Kind Nr. 95*’s translation into English—demonstrates, Nambelela’s motto of positively adapting to a responsible life outside the limelight of public notice is a both reasonable and pragmatic attitude.

On June 25, 2014, the English version of Lucia Engombe’s memoir, the German original of which has ever since been a cash cow for its popularity among German tourists visiting Namibia, was launched at the Goethe Centre in Windhoek. Overtly or covertly, the organisers were curious to find out how the book would be met by the (English-, but not German-speaking) top echelons of the country. While the respective fates of Lucia Engombe’s parents during and after the liberation struggle could not differ more, the way of invoking them in the memoir was a provocation to the SWAPO leaders at that time.

In April, 1976, Immanuel Engombe was sent “to prison because he criticised the embezzlement of donations by the SWAPO leaders.”³⁶ Lucia herself found out about her father’s troubles when her mother visited her in the GDR. Tuahafua Engombe’s “behaviour in Bellin” was unusual: instead of taking her husband’s side, “she [...] called my father a ‘traitor.’”³⁷ The separation of the

34 In Hanna Gieffers, “Die Kokosnüsse von Namibia: Auf der Suche nach einer Identität,” *Allgemeine Zeitung*, March 23, 2010, 14.

35 Anon. “If they said run, you ran for your life ...”

36 Katrin Berndt, “Shared Paradoxes in Namibian and German History—Lucia Engombe’s *Kind Nr. 95*,” in *Transcultural Modernities. Narrating Africa in Europe*, eds. Elisabeth Bekers, Sissy Helff & Daniela Merolla (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), 347–361, 354.

37 Engombe, *Kind Nr. 95: Meine deutsch-afrikanische Odyssee*, 179.

couple was inevitable, the staunch SWAPO follower and the detained father each went their ways and eventually returned to Namibia. After independence, Immanuel Engombe and Lucia meet again in Oshakati, where he repeated his reproach against “the old guard”³⁸ around SWAPO leader Sam Nujoma. At about that time, Nujoma—now the President of the Republic of Namibia—regularly visited Lucia’s mother. Tuahafifua Engombe urges the girl to “[k]iss Uncle Sam on the lips” before the two adults move “into her room.” They close the door behind them. “Please go outside,’ [her mother’s friend] *Meme* Fudheni said. I didn’t understand. ‘Your mother and President Sam don’t want to be disturbed,’ she said.”³⁹

Much as *Child No. 95*’s provocative potential—the intricate (and delicate) details do not end here—is certainly immense, the book launch as well as the bookshop availability of the English version has remained largely unnoticed by the non-German-speaking Namibian public. Where at least a few German benefactors wavered by liking the Goethe Centre’s announcement of the launch on *facebook*, the Namibian dailies stood strong and muffled the issue. The same was the case for the higher echelons in the government and the ruling party. A child’s kiss on the founding President’s mouth was neither worth a comment from the country’s political elite, nor did it warrant the kissing female youngster an adult career.

4 Muffling the Fimbifimbi?

In conclusion, *Kind* or, for that matter, *Child No. 95*,⁴⁰ like the other testimonies by the former GDR exile children, does not feature prominently among the other identity-founding tales of the Republic of Namibia. Instead, the country’s master narratives consist of the self-aggrandising accounts of heroic resistance and armed struggle and the accounts of the diplomatic manoeuvres adopted by a coterie of SWAPO leaders that spearheaded the liberation struggle.⁴⁰ Or they

38 *Kind* Nr. 95, 206.

39 *Kind* Nr. 95, 81.

40 There are two more accounts of children or teenager survivors of the Namibian liberation struggle that have made it to the Namibian book market. While Lydia Shaketange’s *Walking the Boeing 707* appeared in 2009 in the *Footprints* book series issued in Windhoek by AACRLS (Archives of Anti-Colonial Resistance and the Liberation Struggle) and was co-sponsored by the Federal Republic of Germany, Rachel Valentina Nghiwete’s *Valentina: The Exile Child* (Windhoek: VEEM, 2010), the autobiography of a 1979-born girl describing the initially burdensome (and later comparably comfortable) way from the refugee camp Kwanza-Sul in Angola to Great Britain, the United States of America and finally back

become manifest as “national gospels”⁴¹ in architectural-monumental and/or commemorative expressions (such as the Heroes’ Acre outside the country’s capital city of Windhoek) that run in the same vein.

If the (hi)story of the four hundred and thirty youngsters has been considered only in a subordinate sense, and has thus led to the muffling of their voices, this has not led to a feeling of disrespect and marginalisation among them, however. Some have truly made their way and now belong to the elite of the country (though not of the state), such as the one who made it as a lawyer or another who is now working as a senior program officer for a German party foundation. Others have not, and are eeking out their living as trickster-fraudsters overpowering tourists in downtown Windhoek with their perfect German. The muffling of their voices does not concern either of them. As Monica Nambelela’s example reveals, what is more important than the jaded master narratives is a balanced attitude in the present, after all the fimbifimbiness of the past.

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to independent Namibia, appeared as an imprint of a lesser-known publishing house in Windhoek. Stefanie Lahya Aukongo’s *Kalungas Kind: Wie die DDR mein Leben rettete* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 2009), another autobiography by a Namibia exile teenager in the GDR (and, like Engombe’s, co-authored by Peter Hilliges), has not yet been translated into English.

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