



Henning Melber. *Transitions in Namibia: Which Change for Whom?* Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2007. 262 pp. \$37.50 (paper), ISBN 978-91-7106-582-7.

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Continuity and Change in Postcolonial Namibia

The present volume is a collection of essays by various scholars studying social, economic, ideological, and gender issues in postcolonial Namibia. As the title suggests, the work critiques the extent of change that has occurred in Namibia since its independence from South Africa in March 1990. By examining the continuities and changes in postcolonial Namibia, the volume successfully portrays the historical significance of European imperialism in Africa, specifically the sheer difficulty postcolonial countries experience in establishing their own social, economic, and political traditions.

Henning Melber, the volume editor, presents the major aims of the volume in the introduction. The study continues his earlier work focusing “on the political culture and ideology cultivated since Namibia’s independence and its effects on governance issues and different sectors of society” (p. 7).[1] Thus, Melber seeks to analyze the public rhetoric utilized by Namibian officials, especially Sam Nujoma, president of the South West Africa People’s Organization (SWAPO), the major national liberation movement in the late twentieth century, and Namibia’s first head of state. Nujoma and other SWAPO leaders have presented and constructed themselves as liberators who successfully overthrew Namibia’s colonial oppressors, rid the country of white minority rule, and created a socioeconomic structure vastly superior to the one before national independence. However, Melber contends that the social, economic, and political realities of postcolonial Namibia tell a much different story, one that includes some positive changes but also many remaining inequities and injustices from the colonial past.

The ultimate goal of the volume is to bring much-needed public attention to Namibia as a country not liberated, unlike what its leaders suggest, but in transition and in dire need of a reevaluation of its values towards its own people.

The essays can be roughly organized into four major categories: politics, economic history, social history, and gender issues. Christopher Saunders, Graham Hopwood, Wolfgang Zeller, and Bennett Kangumu Kangumu write about Namibian political history. Perhaps the most important of these is the first essay by Saunders, which lays the groundwork on political culture by outlining the historiography of the nationalist armed struggle. Saunders’s thesis is that scholarly and popular writing on Namibian liberation and independence has been dominated by SWAPO, which has only allowed for limited descriptions of the “inner history of the struggle” and “is dismissive of critics” (p. 26). In short, most writing on the Namibian struggle fits into “patriotic history,” which claims to represent the history of African nations’ struggles for independence during the second half of the twentieth century but in fact mythologizes armed resisters as the predominant heroes of national revolution. In the case of Namibia, the People’s Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN), the armed wing of SWAPO, is largely viewed as the champion of liberation against South Africa. Saunders openly refutes this interpretation, stating that such a viewpoint diminishes the thousands of Namibians who participated in the struggle without resorting to violence. Furthermore, Saunders points out that it was one thing for SWAPO supporters to propagandize their

agenda while the liberation struggle raged on, but quite a different matter to continue this approach after the founding of the Republic of Namibia in 1990. The author laments that, although some alternate views are allowed, patriotic history in Namibia may “become hegemonic” and follow the “Zimbabwe path” (p. 26). Saunders is referring to the prevalence of patriotic history in Zimbabwe, which, like Namibia, began its armed resistance in the 1960s but achieved its independence a decade earlier. More discussion of the way that patriotic history has become pervasive in Zimbabwe would have strengthened Saunders’s important essay, which gives readers a solid, concise overview of the historiography of Namibian independence and serves as a warning against hegemonic political discourses in the postcolonial world.

Several important essays treat economic matters such as land reform, class formation, and globalization. Gregor Dobler writes about China’s economic presence in Africa and its challenges for countries like Namibia. He surmises that Chinese–African relations offer mixed benefits to African nations: on the one hand, the partnership is mutually beneficial, as Africa exports raw materials to China and in turn imports many manufactured products; on the other hand, the shifting of the global economy towards China still leaves Namibia and other African nations with the same conundrum as decades past—how to end their roles of dependency in the international system? Volker Winterfeldt examines Ramatex Textiles Namibia, a Malaysian multinational in Namibia, to demonstrate the weaknesses of Namibia’s neoliberal economy. He asserts that Namibia’s reliance on huge corporations like Ramatex, which exploit its neoliberal arrangements, only benefits a minority of Namibians because of its reliance on the trickle-down of prosperity to the masses. Similarly, Melber, in an insightful essay on poverty in Namibia, argues that genuine social transformation has not occurred since independence, despite the government’s claims to the contrary. Rather, new black elites have been coopted into the established capitalist, class-based structure. Phaniel Kaapama analyses the unfinished agricultural land reform under the Namibian government. He concludes that such reforms have been “largely modeled on neoliberal economic principles,” which reinforce the “pre-independence extroverted model of economic accumulation from above” (p. 47). Kaapama’s essay, which contains striking parallels to those of Melber and Winterfeldt, is of particular importance because the promise of land reform was central to support for national reconciliation after independence. As Kaapama correctly notes, social stability in Namibia

may rest on the execution of comprehensive land reform for Namibians of all classes, not only a new black elite.

Essays by Herbert Jauch, Lalli Metsola, and Mattia Fumanti deal with critical social issues. Jauch’s piece is a socioeconomic examination of what he describes as a “four-tier labour market” in Namibia: a tiny elite; a large lower middle class with permanent employment; a growing class of workers who accept any work available; and the unemployed, who often resort to sex work and crime (p. 56). The author surmises that Namibia’s labor movement lacks a cohesive ideology to garner broad support beyond the country’s trade unions, thus inhibiting workers’ ability to combat the state’s neoliberal policies. Metsola confronts the complexities of reintegrating ex-combatants from the nationalist struggle into Namibian society. Apart from ex-PLAN combatants, according to Metsola, the results have been decidedly mixed. The government recently widened the definition of ex-combatant from ex-PLAN to ex-SWAPO members, but many potential “reintegreees” have not sought benefits out of fear, apathy, or hesitancy towards the manner of reintegration. Metsola’s insights reveal the direct negative consequences of Namibia’s one-sided political discourse. Fumanti focuses on youth involvement in the public sphere via music and associations such as the Shinyewile Club, a youth club dedicated to civil service. In addition, the author points out the need for scholars to go beyond traditional studies of violence, unemployment, and AIDS, which characterize youth as simple perpetrators or victims (although he does not refute their importance) in favor of age and intergenerational relationships. He stresses that today’s youth in Namibia are being raised in an independent nation, not in the anti-apartheid SWAPO movement of decades past, and naturally have different identities, beliefs, and goals than the generation currently holding power.

The last two essays, by Dianne Hubbard and Lucy Edwards, examine gender topics. In her analysis of family law, Hubbard notes that socially conservative Namibia draws on a long-established patriarchal tradition. In particular, “men who support gender equality in other spheres are reluctant to countenance such equality in the home” (p. 209). Hubbard argues that family law in Namibia is still in its beginning stages, mostly due to the reluctance of men to change but also to the devious behavior of some women, who either “bringing false charges of rape” or exchange sex for money and security (p. 227). The author urges an increased public awareness in Namibia of the meanings of gender equality at a time when definitions of masculinity and femininity

themselves are in flux. Edwards discusses the links between HIV, AIDS, gender, and class in Namibia. She states that current gender and class inequalities “that fuel the spread” of HIV and AIDS are rooted in Namibia’s colonial past. Even worse, in the author’s view, these inequalities have continued unabashedly since independence. Like Hubbard, Edwards points out the need to abolish the deep-rooted dependency of women on men in Namibia in order to confront larger issues of gender and class injustices directly.

This volume is mostly a success. The authors bring much-needed attention to significant socioeconomic, political, and cultural issues in postcolonial Namibia. Moreover, the essays use a fine combination of statistical evidence, newspaper reports, primary accounts, and theoretical studies to demonstrate effectively the continuities and changes in Namibia since independence. More back-

ground and context, however, would have greatly aided the study. The introduction does not connect the essay topics. Likewise, maps would help orient readers. The authors wish to serve as advocates for social justice by presenting a dichotomy between the rhetoric and reality of life in postcolonial Namibia. The absence of necessary background might make some skeptics out of general readers who need more information to fully understand and assess the inequities in Namibia. Nevertheless, the volume is a useful addition for postcolonial scholars, for studying both the legacies of colonialism and the vast difficulties in creating a just, equal postcolonial society.

Note

[1]. Henning Melber, ed., *Re-examining Liberation in Namibia: Political Culture Since Independence* (Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute, 2003).

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