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# Growing Up Transnationally between SWAPO and GDR – A Biographical Ethnographic Study on Namibian Refugee Children

*Matthias D. Witte, Kathrin Klein-Zimmer and Caroline Schmitt*

*“When I was seven years old a White man asked me, ‘Do you want to fly to Germany with me?’ I didn’t know what Germany was [...]. I lived in Germany, in what was then the GDR, for almost eleven years. At the start I even lived in a manor house and was often spoiled. Almost as suddenly as I had been catapulted from the bush to Europe, at age seventeen I had to return to Africa. My mother saw me as the ‘German’ who couldn’t even cook the Namibian national dish, pap. She remained as foreign to me as the country she loved so much.” (Engombe, 2011: 9)*

Lucia Engombe, author of the autobiography “Kind Nr. 95. Meine deutsch-afrikanische Odyssee” (Child No. 95. My German-African Odyssey), was one of 420 children who were part of a large-scale education and training project that operated between 1979 and 1989, established by the South West African People’s Organisation (SWAPO) and the German Democratic Republic (GDR) leadership in the course of the civil war in South-West Africa.<sup>1</sup> During the Namibian liberation conflict between SWAPO’s struggle for independence and the South African occupying powers, Lucia Engombe and many other Namibian children, most of whom were orphans, were taken from refugee camps in Angola and Zambia to the GDR, where they were to be brought up as the new elite ready for a liberated Namibia. In 1990, the political changes that took place in Germany and Namibia’s gaining independence meant that the children were suddenly sent back to Namibia, with very little notice and no preparation.

Since spring 2013, an investigation into the biographies and lifeworlds of these children, who are now adults, has been undertaken by researchers at the University of Mainz. Taking a transnational perspective (see Khagram/Levitt, 2008, among others) enables us to investigate experiences such as those described by Lucia Engombe of a socialization in multiple countries and living situations, and the intertwined combination of a refugee camp, the GDR and Namibia. It can be assumed that the experiences of living in the GDR during the formative period of childhood and youth, and of returning to Namibia in 1990, had a major impact on people’s biographical trajectories and their relationship with their parents and their native country, Namibia.

In this article, we will start by providing an insight into the distinctive historical and political context which shaped the biographies of the children, now adults. This historical insight is followed by a presentation of our research question and design. We finish the report by addressing the relevance of the research project within research on transnationalism and making specific suggestions on what could be added to the discourse at this stage in the context of the transnationalization of lifeworlds.

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1 During the time it was occupied by South Africa, South West Africa was the name for the modern territory of Namibia.

## The Historical and Political Situation

When German colonial rule was overturned after the First World War and the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, the League of Nations made South Africa responsible for administrating the territory now known as Namibia (Melber, 2005). Due to the predominant racism in South Africa, the United Nations demanded on several occasions that South Africa relinquish the administration of Namibia to the UN, but South Africa retained its dominance. Because of racist discrimination by White<sup>2</sup> South Africans and their implementation of apartheid law, anticolonial resistance emerged among the Black population in the territory, leading to the establishment of SWAPO in 1960 as an organized liberation movement (Melber, 2005). The armed conflict against the South African occupying forces, led by the People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN), the military branch of the SWAPO, was supported by the UN General Assembly: In 1966, the South African mandate over the territory was declared terminated. Seven years later, SWAPO was recognized as a liberation movement and as representative of the Namibian people (Rüchel, 2001; Timm, 2007). As the conflict was still ongoing, people fleeing Namibia were given refuge in camps in neighboring African states including Zambia, Botswana and Angola. Sam Nujoma, SWAPO's president, sought out support from countries with socialist and communist leaderships and received it in the form of relief aid, weapons, teachers, doctors and skilled workers.

## Socialism as the Basis for SWAPO-GDR Cooperation

The GDR supported SWAPO as part of its international solidarity policy in the form of specific "solidarity packages" of relief aid and weapons (Kenna, 2010). Moreover, the sick and injured were treated in what was then East Berlin, and civil and military personnel were trained in the GDR. When the civil war in South West Africa came to a head and South African troops attacked the Kassinga refugee camp in Angola, killing 600 Namibians, mostly women and children, SWAPO once again requested support from the GDR and collaboration between the two leaderships was intensified. Sam Nujoma asked for children from the SWAPO refugee camps to be taken in and protected against further attacks, giving them a chance at a good education and care in the GDR. In autumn 1979, the SED<sup>3</sup> Central Committee approved SWAPO's application.

A manor house in the little village of Bellin, in the region of Mecklenburg in northern Germany, was chosen to accommodate the children. Shortly before Christmas 1979, the first 80 Namibian children, aged between three and seven, arrived along with 15 Namibian nursery-school teachers. Their arrival in Bellin occurred out of the public eye, almost in secret (Timm, 2007). The aid programme was initially arranged on a short-term basis, due to end when Namibia became independent, an event which was believed to be imminent. However, time gradually passed, until the children, whose number increased over the years,

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- 2 The terms "Black" and "White" are not defined by the authors as a natural differentiation. Being Black or White is a construct created through social practices. Due to a set of issues, in Critical Whiteness Studies it has become established practice to capitalize the terms "Black" and "White" to indicate their social, political and racist construction and disassociate them from any biological classification (see Arndt/Hornscheidt, 2009: 13ff.).
  - 3 Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (SED) was the leading party in the GDR.

had spent their entire childhood and youth, or most of it, in the SWAPO children's home in Bellin. This ideologically influenced international connection between SWAPO and the GDR, based on their shared leaning towards Socialism, set the historical backdrop for the life courses of the children who were brought from refugee camps in Angola and Zambia to the GDR.

### **Transnational Spaces of Upbringing and Education in the GDR**

As the SWAPO and the GDR leadership saw it, the children brought to the SWAPO children's home in Bellin were to be housed, raised and educated away from Namibia, to protect them against possible SWAPO opponents. They were given a political and ideological upbringing and education influenced by socialist ideas and ideals, with the aim of preparing them children to become part of a future Namibian elite. The concept behind their upbringing and education was made up of elements from general GDR plans (such as the Programme for Raising and Educating Children in Kindergartens), SWAPO's ideas of how they should be raised (e.g. teaching them political aims, giving them knowledge about the living conditions, history and culture of the Namibian people), and a combination of these teaching schemes using specially adapted material (Rüchel, 2001; Timm, 2007). Thus, the children took part in SWAPO reservist training exercises, were educated by their Namibian nursery-school teachers in their mother tongue, Oshivambo, and learned Namibian battle and folk songs as well as traditional dances. The German support workers gave the children a Socialist upbringing; they were taught German, sang songs and did crafts (Rüchel, 2001).

Despite this division in terms of their upbringing, the children and young people created their own transnational space beyond the formalized educational context. For example, the children and young people invented Oshi-German (Oshi-Deutsch), a combination of Oshivambo and German, as their "secret language," which they used deliberately when they did not want someone else to understand them, as Lucia Engombe (2011) describes in her autobiography. Children's letters in Oshi-German and the German/Namibian textbooks represent a materialization of transnational experiences, a sign of their own German/Namibian world.

Growing up in the children's home was similar to living on a "transnational island." The manor house in Bellin took on the character of an island through the politically motivated specific shaping of the children's and young people's lifeworlds and their isolation from GDR everyday life, as intended by both the GDR and SWAPO leadership. Yet the children's and young people's lifeworlds were not completely cut off. The isolated nature of their home was disrupted by contact with children from the village, trips to the surrounding areas, and visits to German nursery-school teachers' homes and to a local disco. The "transnational island" in the Bellin manor house was characterized by an upbringing with national connections to both Namibia and the GDR. In addition to this structuring by SWAPO and GDR political leaderships, the children and young people themselves also created transnational spaces by producing their own worlds, e.g. with Oshi-German as their secret language.

When the preschoolers started school in the neighboring town of Zehna in 1981, this was challenging for the teachers and nursery-school teachers alike. Though lessons were mainly in line with the GDR curriculum, additional aspects related to the country and culture of Namibia were included in the syllabus, integrated into subjects such as local studies, geography, biology and later civic studies. When they reached secondary school age, the Namibian children were moved to the "Schule der Freundschaft" (School of Friendship), a

school in Staßfurt providing boarding and schooling to 900 children from Mozambique. The school, near Magdeburg, was a project organized by the GDR and Mozambique focusing on education and solidarity. Later it involved other countries such as Angola, Vietnam and Cuba (Kenna, 2010). For the Namibian children, this change of schools meant the continuation, even the intensification, of their culturally heterogeneous situation and transnational experience of growing up with more than two national contexts.

### **Return to Namibia and Life Afterwards**

After German reunification and Namibian independence, the question arose as to the future of the SWAPO children's home in Bellin and the "Schule der Freundschaft." After several meetings by those in charge, the GDR government rejected applications to finance the children's home any further, and the Namibian Minister for Education at the time, Nahas Angula, decided that the children would return to Namibia immediately, in August 1990. The children and young people were thus brought back to Namibia with no preparation (Zappen-Thomson, 2010), a decision taken for political reasons and viewed by some with anticipation, but by others with great skepticism. Lucia Engombe (2011) describes her difficult arrival in a Namibia which had become foreign to her, in a family for whom she had become 'the Other.' The children's and young people's experiences of returning were wide-ranging and highly individual, depending on their family situation and how long they had lived in Germany.

However, their renewed and forced change of location, involving relationships being stressfully broken off, just as when they moved to Germany, confronted the young people with yet another situation in which they had to realign. A major role in this process was played by transnational practices and pathways, as well as by belonging to a community sharing the same fate. Though the transnational political connections between SWAPO and the GDR had disintegrated, the way these children had been socialized as they grew up in the GDR, with its many political and cultural influences, had a lasting effect. One important form of support for many was the founding of the "Ossi-Club" in Windhoek, where those who had spent their childhood and youth in the GDR could share their biographical experiences of growing up partly in the GDR, which no longer existed, and partly in a Namibia, where they still had to find their footing. This establishment of a community can be seen as a search for continuity in a biography which was strongly influenced by abrupt changes (Dorner, 2010). The "Ossi-Club" is an indication of their agency to create a shared focus point amidst phases of change, as well as being a specific location for the construction of transnationalism. Discussions in Oshi-German and the feeling of belonging to a community of a shared experience can be seen as important coping strategies of dealing with the situation. Through biographical and ethnographical research, this project aims to investigate what traces the children's and young people's childhood has left in their biographies and what consequences it has had in their experiences and lives.

### **The Research Concept**

Until now the biographies and lifeworlds of the GDR children from Namibia have not been systematically investigated by researchers studying transnationalism, childhood, adoles-

cence or biographies. The few studies undertaken have primarily focused on the background of the education policy programs and how the children were institutionally integrated into the GDR child raising and educational system (Krause, 2009; Rüchel, 2001; Timm, 2007). However, no other research has been conducted into the perspective of the children and young people as actors.

We address this gap in our project from a transnational point of view, which enables us to find relationships between the children's and young people's practices of belonging and acting, practices which took place in multiple locations, crossing national borders. The specific local settings for their socialization and upbringing are examined in terms of how they produced transnationalism, thus investigating the interplay of localism and transnationalism (Guarnizo/Smith, 1998). In particular, we will be taking into account the fact that the migration of the children and young people to the GDR was a forced process that was seen from the start as temporary and was influenced by the political leaderships of the time in the GDR and SWAPO. We reconstruct the children's and young people's biographical experiences and current living situations, focusing on the following questions:

- What were the children's and young people's experiences of growing up in multiple locations and relationships characterized by changes? What coping strategies did they develop to deal with events and to negotiate their specific day-to-day situations? What conditions confronted the children and young people in the GDR and after their return to Namibia in terms of their socialization and upbringing, and what was their experience of those conditions?
- How did the transnationalized living situation in their childhood and youth affect their educational and career biographies?
- How and where do they live today, and to what extent does their experience of forced border-crossing affect their life at present?

The design of the research project and the proposed questions meant that a subject-oriented research approach had to be selected to explore the worlds as perceived by the actors and what united their individual experiences. By combining biographical research with ethnographic methods revolving around the lifeworld, we can enter the actors' lifeworlds on various levels (Honer, 1993; Schütze, 1983). The ethnographic research used in a transnational context of this kind includes biographical-narrative interviews with the children and young people (now adults), participant observations, expert interviews and collecting everyday material. The empirical material gathered will be analyzed by applying narrative structure analysis (Schütze, 1983) and methods of the hermeneutic sociology of knowledge (Hitzler, 1997; Soeffner, 2004).

Within the theoretical and empirical discourses carried out so far in transnationalism research, this research project not only focuses on one specific case which has not been investigated in this manner yet, it also offers an opportunity to tackle a new field of research. It adds to the discourse around processes of transnationalism on two levels. On one hand, we ask what significance is taken on by transnational links, frameworks and upbringing settings in situations of political change involving forced mobility. On the other hand, going beyond this political dimension, the project focuses on the significance of transnational practices as coping strategies, used by communities of shared fates and memories in politically instrumentalized settings.

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