

## BOOK REVIEWS

### ***Mukwahepo: Woman, soldier, mother: As told to Ellen Ndeshi Namhila. Windhoek: University of Namibia Press, 2013; pp 141.***

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#### **Introduction**

Unlike many stories that deal with high ranking and public figures, *Mukwahepo* is a book about a humble and unknown personality who made outstanding and remarkable contributions to the liberation of Namibia, popularly called The Land of the Brave. Mukwahepo is an ordinary woman who performed extraordinary duties for her country. This book is a clear testimony that the contributions, especially those made by women, did not have to be ambassadorial or political.

**The early days of the liberation struggle.** The book does not tell us much about the involvement of women in the early years of political activities in Namibia. Although Mukwahepo's experience is not to be generalised, it seems she went into exile by default and without knowing what she was getting herself into or not having an idea where she was going. It was her fiancée who took her Tanzania without explaining much the purpose of their journey. If women get to write more, we might be able to profile the expose and political activities of women in the early 1960s.<sup>1</sup>

**Women as soldiers.** Mukwahepo was the first woman to go into exile and as well the first to be trained as a soldier, although she did not fight in any battle. This is very crucial in the sense that women in the context of the liberation struggle are stereotyped to have only been involved in 'soft and feminine' activities. The stereotypes are at time maintained in how the liberation struggle is narrated and represented as having been 'won by men through the barrel of the gun'. Heroes' Acre is an example of such narration and representation, although Eenhana National Shrine counteracted that befittingly by making a woman soldier as the centre piece of the shrine.

**The mother and grandmother of the nation.** Mukwahepo spent and dedicated all her life looking after and guiding the lives of Namibian children, youth and other women in exile. Many children had no parents and Mukwahepo was the parent figure. On this Mukwahepo says:

If you asked one them (children): 'Who is your mother?'  
'Mukwahepo,' the child would reply.

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<sup>1</sup> L. Amathila in her autobiography *Making a difference*, did not as well clearly highlight how she got into politics, apart from mentioning her male compatriots with whom she was at high school. These men became prominent in SWAPO and one might conclude that the political influence might have come from these men.

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If you asked further, 'Who is your father?'  
'Mukwahepo.'  
(*Mukwahepo*, p.70).

She continued that role even after independence. This is a responsibility that she performed whole-heartedly and with dedication. She has been moved from one camp to another in the name of looking after children. This is a crucial and sad reality of this book, that despite all her commitment and loyalty to the children of Namibia and to the liberation at large, her contribution after independence was not equivalently rewarded comparing to her other comrades (men and women) who were involved in other activities that are 'deemed' substantial and significant. The narration and representation of the liberation struggle of Namibia, (in whatever form such as monuments and memorials, documentaries, songs, exhibitions etc.) have omitted the contributions such as that of Mukwahepo.

**The book and the liberation struggle.** The book is of significance in the in the sense that it tries to present and reflect how life in exile was, the camps in particular. That it was not a walk in the park and all was not that rosy. This is the part the many exile life does not present. Many things are presented as 'we were determined to fight and liberate the country' and that was that. This sanitized version does not reflect on issues of lack of basic materials, lack of food, the administration of the camps, the youth/girls falling pregnant, security issues; just to mention a few. Despite the fact that people in exile tried to live a 'normal' life, celebrating birthdays and weddings, narrating fairy stories to children, risks hovered above their heads day after day. For example, Mukwahepo tells of the Cassinga massacre of 1978:

Nyango was not the only civilian camp SWAPO had in exile. Like Nyango in Zambia, Cassinga was a settlement for the SWAPO civilian population in southern Angola. Most of its inhabitants were women, children, young adults, elderly people and the sick. On 4 May 1978, the South African Defence Force (SADF) attacked Cassinga, and many innocent people were killed in cold blood. From this experience, the SWAPO leadership learnt the hard way that the South African apartheid regime intended to target their civilian camps with military aggression and kill all Namibians in exile, whether they were PLAN members or civilians (*Mukwahepo*, pp.75-76).

**Life after the liberation struggle.** This part of the book reflects the sad reality of what some people experienced after the liberation struggle. Having loyally served the liberation struggle, only to be forgotten and neglected after the attainment of independence. This is not particular to Mukwahepo, but a lot of people went through that experience, irrespective of whether they were in exile or inside the country. The book might serve as a reminder to those that are today in high positions to look around them and make sure that all people that contributed to the liberation struggle, in various ways are deservingly and equivalently rewarded.

Mukwahepo spent more than twenty years in exile and this story was narrated from 1997 to 2012, the narration first started seven years after independence and in total it took around 15 years. However, out of 138 pages, only 8 are dedicated to her early childhood in Namibia and 25 are dedicated to Mukwahepo's

life after independence respectively. This might validate the stereotype that 'genuine and legitimate' liberation of the country took place in exile. Ironically, her 'struggle' did not end with the attainment of independence since she continued to struggle economically just like many thousands of freedom fighters, now called veterans of the liberation struggle.

*Mukwahepo* is a story of courage and determination. A true reflection of what loyalty is. It is a great read as it sheds light on the fact that the liberation struggle was fought by various participants in various ways. The book adds to the number of literature on women's contribution towards the liberation struggle and attainment of independence. It is still an important contribution to our knowledge and appreciation of the contributions made by women during the liberation struggle in various ways. The book can be used in various disciplines, for example, public history, literature, sociology and anthropology.