

Unlearning Religion: The “GDR Children from Namibia” between Postcolonialism and Decoloniality

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When South West Africa was placed on the UN General Assembly’s agenda as being the first region to gain independence from colonial rule, no one could foresee that Namibia would be one of the last territories to gain independence. While the political decolonization of most of the former colonies was essentially completed in the mid-1970s, on May 4th, 1978 the South West African People’s Organization (SWAPO) suffered its biggest military setback. As a result of the attack on the Cassinga refugee camp, in Angola close to the Namibian border, between 1979 and 1989 a total of 423 children were brought to the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Experiencing their childhood and youth in the safe socialist state, they were educated according to the ideals of the SWAPO and the curricula of the GDR in order to go on to become the elite of the new Namibia upon their return. Religion was not taught and was largely suppressed. After their sudden repatriation to independent Namibia in 1990, the so-called “GDR children” felt like strangers in their own country. Despite their good education, they were denied the opportunity to make a significant contribution to the development of the young country. Left alone and disappointed by the promises of the SWAPO, the churches began to play an unexpected role in their lives. It seemed that the suppression of religion during their childhood education had brought about a gap that was calling to be filled. This article analyzes the religious practices of the “GDR children from Namibia”. Based on the data available so far (Groop, Hopf, Kenna, Krause, Reuter and Scheunpflug, Schmitt and Witte, Timm), the role of the churches can be described as ambivalent. By filling the vacuum, the churches made it possible for the “GDR children” to reintegrate into the existing system. In the medium term, however, the churches indirectly contributed to leveling out their unique competencies. The potential of the “GDR children” for the decolonization process of independent Namibia was thus left unrecognized.

Introduction

Almost unnoticed by the public, on December 8th, 1978, a group of 37 girls, 43 boys and 15 women landed at the Berlin-Schönefeld airport in East Germany. The children were between 3 and 7 years old and came from Namibian refugee camps in Angola and Zambia. Many of them had lost their parents in the fight for Namibia’s independence, others had been sent as children of leading or disgraced South West African People’s Organization (SWAPO) officials. Their stay in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) initially pursued two mo-

Alexander Schulze Ph.D., teaches practical theology in Friedensau, Germany. He first came into contact with the “GDR children from Namibia” when he was on his vicariate in Namibia. Soon he discovered that these children had grown up only a few kilometers from him, as pre-schoolers in the GDR: Schulze in one of the few church-run kindergartens, and the Namibian children under strict observation from the SWAPO. It seemed that both parties had a great deal to learn from each other about their shared experience in the GDR, which, when they finally met in Namibia, no longer existed in the way they remembered it.





tives: the safe accommodation and care of the children as well as the education of the women, who were to work as kindergarten teachers after their return to Namibia. The previous negotiations between the SWAPO leadership and the GDR government were based on the mutual misconception that Namibia was about to attain independence in the late 1970s and that the children and the women would return very soon. In fact, the Namibian fight for independence would last for more than 10 years: the children stayed, the caregivers changed, more children joined. And, a third motive was formulated that was to become essential for their stay in the GDR: the education of the children in order to become the elite of the new Namibia. Therefore, each Namibian caregiver was guided by two German educators. Together, they formed a trio that was responsible for a group of 12 boys and girls each. They were housed in Bellin Castle, a former manor house 180 km north of Berlin. Until the 4th grade they attended the primary school in the neighboring village of Zehna. From the 5th grade, the first children moved to the boarding school of the “School of Friendship” in Staßfurt. There they attended the Polytechnic High School in neighboring Löderburg. In August 1990, amid the efforts for German reunification, a total of meanwhile 430 children were repatriated to Namibia, which had become independent only a few months earlier on March 21st (Schmitt and Witte 2019). So far there is no coherent study that has analyzed the religious practices of the “GDR children from Namibia”, nor their contribution to the decolonization process of independent Namibia. However, there are studies examining other topics related to the “GDR children” that contain direct or indirect information about their religious practices and their role after their repatriation to independent Namibia. Based on the data available so far, this article reconstructs religious practices of the “GDR children from Namibia” and their contribution to Namibia’s decolonization process.

A unique combination of competencies

“Learning to unlearn” is defined by Tlostanova and Mignolo as “basically pedagogical” (Tlostanova and Mignolo 2012, 25). The GDR children were neither the first nor the only ones sent abroad by the SWAPO. But they were the youngest and the largest connected group. In contrast to postcolonialism,

decoloniality refers to processes that constructively counteract colonial thinking patterns and maxims that have survived the end of formal colonialism. According to Castro Varela and Dhawan, “Postcolonialism cannot simply be thought of as something that ‘came in’ after colonialism, but must be viewed as a form of resistance to colonial rule and its consequences. So instead of looking at history as a linear progression, postcolonial theory turns to the complexities and contradictions of historical processes” (Castro Varela and Dhawan 2015, 16). The education of the GDR children according to the ideals of the SWAPO and the curricula of the GDR, in some cases for more than 10 years, resulted in a unique combination of competencies that can perhaps be broadly characterized into the following three themes: being highly educated, atheistic, and color-blind; areas which could help overcome colonial thinking patterns.

Multilingual

The good education of the GDR children refers not only to their language skills, but to their general education, including the natural sciences. Regarding language skills Ndlovu-Gatsheni states: “The forcible imposition of colonial languages... as languages of teaching and learning created an impression that their mastery was a sign of being intelligent. Consequently, many educated African people distanced themselves from their indigenous African languages.” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018, 41). This decision was taken from the “GDR children”. They grew up trilingual. German emerged as their main language followed by English and Oshivambo (Timm 2007, 174). While they could speak German better than the German-speaking white minority in Namibia, they had to catch up with their deficits in English and Oshivambo.

Cauna Jones is one of the children who came to the GDR in 1979. She reflects about the time after her repatriation: “I had big problems finding my identity. What I’ve noticed about myself since I am married to Paul and more and more involved with other blacks is the mentality differences. I am not the same person I was when I came back from Germany. I adapt more and more to the African culture. 10 years ago I probably would have said that I feel more German, but now I would rather call myself an Ovambo girl, who speaks German” (Möller, Hens and Radelhof 2003, 23:31–26:04).

Atheistic

Although this was neither addressed by the SWAPO nor explicitly requested, the GDR children were raised and educated atheistically. Religion was not taught and was largely suppressed in children’s lives throughout their whole stay in the GDR. This already began with the selection of the staff employed to look after the children: “When I applied, it was said: Yes, immediately. It was four days before Christmas when I should start. It was very fast. And I thought, now I would have to get a message that it starts, because I should be there for Christmas.... Shortly after Christmas I suddenly got back all my papers without comment. I never got told the reason. My lady boss at that time said: I cannot say it, but I’ll tell you anyway. You are ideologically not acceptable because you are religiously bound. People like you cannot be given responsibility for the children” (Rüchel 2001, 30).

This also applied to the Namibian caregivers sent by the SWAPO. Regardless of their own religious beliefs, they were not allowed to talk to the children about the Christian faith nor to guide them in religious practices. Monica Shikwambi had survived the attack on the refugee camp Kassinga. After recovering and training in the GDR, she was one of the Namibian caretakers for the children in Bellin. She remembers the death of one of the children entrusted to her: “The doctor told us there was no hope that he would recover. It was really sad to see my dearest Indongo in the hospital bed helpless and waiting to die... His groupmates asked, ‘When will Indongo come back?’ It was hard for me as an educator to tell them that Indongo would not come back and that he would die” (Shikwambi 1999, 84). Dimo Indongo died at the age of 11 years. His peers were not satisfied with the answer given to them. Monica Shikwambi describes her inner conflict as an educator to give an answer that she does not believe herself and that contradicts her own worldview: “They asked me where Indongo would go after his death. The answer to this question was also hard for me, because I was not allowed to tell them that he would go to heaven because they had learned nothing about Christianity. I simply told them that they would not see him again” (Shikwambi 1999, 84).

With the beginning of the 5th grade, the first 60 “GDR children” were transferred to the “School of Friendship” boarding school in Staßfurt, 300 kilometers away from Bellin. Here they attended the Polytechnic High School in neighboring Löderburg.

At that time, the “School of Friendship” was mainly home to older exchange students from Mozambique. Regardless of their origin, all students were taught according to slightly adapted curricula of the GDR. Religion was not taught here either. Religious questions were widely ignored (Krause 2009). Reuter and Scheunpflug remark that Luther, Münzer and Calvin were mentioned in the revolutionary movement of citizens and farmers, but their importance for Protestantism were not appreciated (Reuter and Scheunpflug 2006, 145).

While in 1978, the Council of Churches in Namibia (CCN) represented more than 80 % of the Namibian population, most Namibian Christians belonged to the Evangelical Lutheran Churches (Kjeseth 1989, 11). On May 30, 1990, just a few weeks before the repatriation of the “GDR children”, which had not yet been scheduled at that time, one of the young people stated in a conversation with government officials that they were denied the possibility of religious education. Notwithstanding this, a relaxation of the religious regulations at the “School of Friendship” can be assumed with the opening of the wall on November 9, 1989. An indication of this may be the hitherto inconceivable baptism of one of the students in the first half of 1990 (BArch DL 3/137/1). Timm concludes: “Basic knowledge of the Namibian children about religion and their own religious affiliation can therefore be accepted without having found their way into the documented analyzes and concepts, or even as a (...) distinctive feature. Because of the SWAPO’s more liberal policy in religious matters, it can be assumed that the great blank ‘religion’ (...) sprang from the anti-Christian ambitions of the SED (Socialist party in the GDR)” (Timm 2007, 176–177).

Nevertheless, religious practices cannot be presupposed for all “GDR children”. Likewise, it must be assumed that possibly familiar religious practices have been lost or at least lost their significance under the influence of the GDR education for many years. The autobiographic alienated short story by Nambata Shapaka “The First Day in the Homeland” (Shapaka 1999) illustrates the unease of the protagonist “Rosalia” immediately after her pickup from the airport: “She is silent on the way to Tsumeb and does not know what to say. Her parents notice the joy of having their daughter back with them after eleven years. Again and again, the mother is praying aloud to God, which makes Rosalia, who grew up in socialism, a little bit scared” (Shapaka 1999, 109).



Ambivalent

Ndlovu-Gatsheni describes colonial thinking as patterns that “arose from a context where missionary and colonial education taught Africans a lot of wrong education ... that white people were superior and black people were inferior” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018, 41). A first collective confusion of their pre-formatting the children already experienced in connection with their selection for transport to the GDR. They knew white people to be occupiers, oppressors and enemies. Then it was a white woman who put their names on the passengers list to Germany (Nagel and Reinhold 2007, 00:08:44). In the GDR, the children witnessed an uncomplicated and mutually respectful behavior between black and white people. The children regularly performed in front of an audience: “The applause often did not end, and tears ran out of the people’s eyes when we began to sing and dance” (Schmitt and Witte 2018, 1360).

Ambivalent therefore does not mean that they have not been able to differentiate between black and white people, but that they have been able to confront whites in a self-aware and unprejudiced way. “Starting from the theoretical considerations of subject positioning in postcolonial orders and the interpretative-theorizing analysis of the empirical material, one can formulate the assumption that the construction of the biography, because of the temporality attributed to it as inherent, first provides the principle of the becoming of the subject and thus can be used as a reference for other difference markers. Without the perspective of the whiteness of the inner being, the external black would not appear in the symbol of the ‘coconut’ (Polat 2017, 209).

The ambivalent social behavior of the “GDR children from Namibia” was expressed not only in their reception of black and white people, but also in how they encountered each other. While the majority of the children were Ovambo, they included members of other ethnic groups too (Timm 2010, 19). Although they perceived the differences, they were able to accept them.

Lucia Engombe

The fact that a certain religious education can be assumed, at least among the older children, is shown by the memory of one of the “GDR children”. Lucia Engombe came to the GDR at the age of seven. She remembers joint worship services with her mother

in the refugee camp. About Sunday school she writes: “Most of all I met a friend there, who was there for me at all times – Kalunga, God. When sad or scared, I knew that Kalunga would help me in distress: I talked to God as to a friend, and he took the sorrows away from me. And I got to know new songs that were about God” (Engombe and Hilliges 2004, 25).

A report of the same GDR child about a nocturnal maneuver in Bellin shows the imprint of her early childhood experience of the Christian faith. Exercises as nocturnal maneuvers served the pre-military training of boys and girls and met the educational goals of the SWAPO. Equipped only with flashlights and wooden toy rifles, the children, who had been rudely awakened only a few minutes earlier, were to crawl down a steep slope: “No one made a sound, my heart was thumping, my panic grew. I can never do that, I thought. But then I remembered Kalunga. ‘Dear God, protect me when I run down the dark road that nothing happens to me.’ So that God really heard me, I spoke half aloud ... ‘Lucia has prayed to God!’ The light cones of all flashlights were turned on me, sneering laughter rang in. The next moment teacher Jonas stood in front of me and gave me a resounding slap in the face. ‘God does not exist, remember that! I do not want to hear that nonsense anymore!’” (Engombe and Hilliges 2004, 25).

In a state of greatest fear Lucia Engombe remembers the God of her early childhood and begins to pray. This forbidden religious practice is denounced, mocked and punished. Immediately after the punishment, she is made absolutely clear that God does not exist and that she should never forget that. Further it is expressly forbidden to repeat ‘that nonsense’. While the punishment primarily applies to the conspicuous child, the unequivocal instruction is addressed to all bystanders. The undifferentiated phrase ‘that nonsense’ implies a vehement exasperation of the teacher, which includes both the Christian faith as well as the religious practice. “Tears came to my eyes, sobs shook my whole body. Such a vulgarity, I thought, God is my friend, my best, my only one. Finally, I also prayed for the soldiers to win for us. And it helped. After all, the SWAPO spanked the South Africans properly the butt. So praying could not be wrong” (Engombe and Hilliges 2004, 25).

The public exposure, reprimands and condemnation were experienced as confusing to Lucia Engombe’s worldview. She experienced God as her ‘best’ and ‘only one’ friend who answers her prayers.

In this belief, she also prayed for the victory of the SWAPO soldiers, which became more and more likely. How could it be wrong to pray to God? “You are the elite of the new Namibia! You do not need God, your guide is Sam Nujoma!” exclaimed teacher Jonas. He shone into my scared face. ‘As a soldier you do not cry. Go down there!’ He pointed into the dark valley. Teacher Jonas could say what he wanted! As I stumbled down the dark path, I prayed softly that nothing bad should happen to me. With God’s help SWAPO pioneer Lucia Engombe arrived, plodding to the campfire” (Engombe and Hilliges 2004, 106–107).

Turning to the bystanders, the teacher repeats the ubiquitous leitmotiv of the children’s education in the GDR. By reminding the children to be the ‘elite of the new Namibia’, he separates Lucia Engombe from the group. The instruction, now directly addressed to her, to obey the command given in advance, opens the way for the child to show loyalty and to belong to the group again.

Back to Namibia, it is Lucia Engombes brother Martin who challenges her to reflect on her repressed religious practice. Their memories of the repression, experienced years ago, are still present: “Are you going to church?” Martin asked. ‘Don’t know,’ I answered. I had too many bad experiences with my belief in God. I was mocked, laughed at and punished for that. Again, I hid Kalunga in my heart. ‘You have to go to church, Lucia,’ my brother said. ‘God gives you support and confidence. He is always there for you’” (Engombe and Hilliges 2004, 317–318). In the music of her brother Lucia Engombe finds a renewed access to her hidden religiosity. While her faith is abstract and internal, her brother encourages her to practice religion: “My big ‘little’ brother did not just play reggae music. He taught me that reggae is a very religious music. But I had hidden God somewhere deep in my heart. ‘Where is God?’ I challenged my brother. ‘God is the air in you,’ Martin replied. ‘The bad air I breathe?’ ‘God is the spirit in you,’ he explained seriously. ‘Prove it to me!’ I demanded defiantly. I believed in God, but in one whom I could entrust my sorrows. Martin spoke of the church I was to visit” (Engombe and Hilliges 2004, 325–326).

Lucia Encombe experiences further access to religious practice through her mother’s regular attendance of church services: “I felt the void in my heart that I wanted to fill and did not know how. I needed a meaning in my life. Something it was worth having been born for. For ten years, it had been the be-

lief in SWAPO, in the great power that relieved my worries. I had suffered many things, beatings and humiliation, but I had a goal. ‘Be ready! Always ready!’ I had lost that in the last few months. I was not really aware of that. I only felt this emptiness, which was filled by nothing” (Engombe and Hilliges 2004, 326). Her mother’s statement that SWAPO President Sam Nujoma also believes in God irritates her conviction that religious beliefs and SWAPO are mutually exclusive: “Even Mother went there often, though I had assumed that faith and SWAPO were mutually exclusive. ‘Even the president believes in God,’ Mother said. Too bad, I thought that teacher Jonas had not known that at the time when he dominated me with: ‘God does not exist!’ Since then, God was something that was there at the same time and not” (Engombe and Hilliges 2004, 326). Many years later, the experience of denunciation, mockery and punishment is still present. This public exposure, reprimand and condemnation have become deeply engraved.

In the right place at the wrong time

With their sudden repatriation to Namibia in August 1990, the “GDR children” were confronted with a reality that did not correspond to the ideal of their childhood. That is how many of them felt. Most of them were no longer children at that time. Not every child could be handed over to their parents. Many of them had already been brought to the GDR as half or full orphans. Children who were not picked up by their parents or relatives or who could not be assigned to a caregiver were eventually released for adoption. Thus, the majority of the remaining children came into close contact with white families of the German-speaking minority (BArch DL 3/137/2). These families gave them a home and enabled them to attend a German school. Kenna states that “through the contact with the German-speaking community, many GDR children have been Christian baptized and confirmed” (Kenna 1999, 56). The Church will play a role for the next generation (Groop 2012, 79) if a culturally- and historically-sensitive Practical Theology succeeds in pointing out perspectives for relevant work of the churches in the here and now, which reveal injustice and constructively encourage the process of decoloniality.



Conclusions

1. In contrast to postcolonialism, decoloniality refers to processes that constructively counteract colonial thinking patterns and maxims that have survived the end of formal colonialism. The raise and education of the “GDR children” according to the ideals of the SWAPO and the curricula of the GDR, in some cases for more than 10 years, resulted in a unique combination of competencies that can be characterized as highly-educated, atheistic and colorblind; valuable qualities for the decolonization process.

2. The GDR children were no longer children at the time of their sudden repatriation, but were still too young to take on responsibility. The SWAPO was incapable, neither of recognizing the medium and long-term opportunities that opened up with the return of the children nor of providing for the completion of their education towards becoming “the elite of the new Namibia”.

3. In contrast to the SWAPO administrators, the church representatives proved to be reliable and constant partners for the welfare of the repatriated children. By caring for the basic needs of the GDR children, the church representatives succeeded in building on their early childhood experiences and their henceforth suppressed religious imprints, which became helpful interpretive templates for the present-day.

4. While the churches made it possible to reintegrate the GDR children into the existing system they perhaps indirectly contributed to leveling out the unique experiences of the repatriated. The potential of the “GDR children” for the process of decoloniality in independent Namibia was thus not recognized. Time will tell if the next generation can build on the potential of the parent generation.

5. Because religion is hard to unlearn, it requires a culture- and historically-sensitive practical theology, whose responsibility it is to develop – in their classical disciplines as well as through interdisciplinary dialogue – perspectives for relevant work for the churches in the here and now which reveal injustice, and constructively build on the process of decoloniality, towards liberating hope for the future.

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