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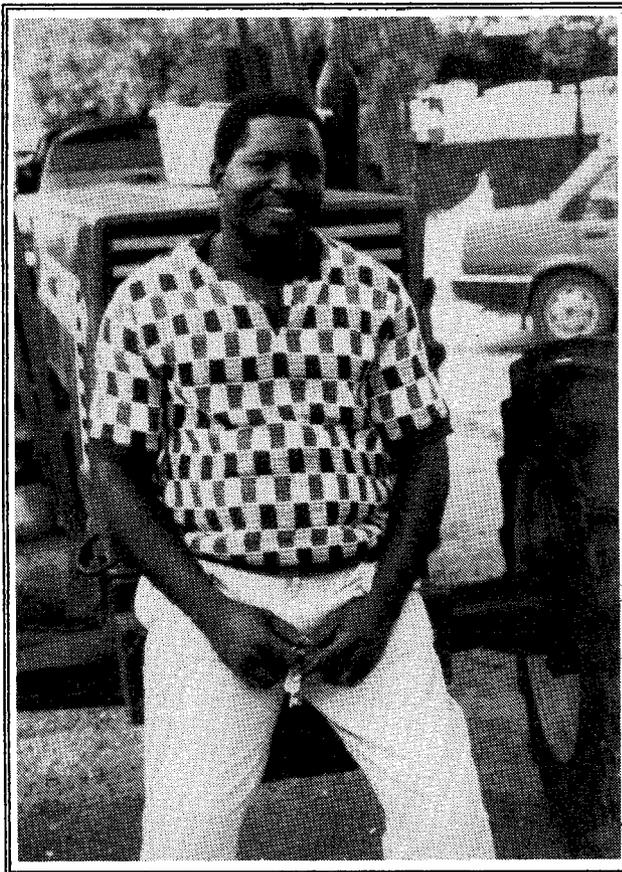
Namibia's victorious "returnees" live more like refugees

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Dear Peter:

Natangwe Nambahu doesn't carry a grudge. He's too busy.



Natangwe Nambahu.

A heavy-set man with a wide-open smile, Nambahu shrugged his shoulders when asked if he feels any resentment against white people. I questioned him as he limped beside me, favoring his right leg that was almost blown off in a mortar attack during the war. It was Nambahu and others in the South West African People's Organization who waged the bitter armed struggle for Namibia's independence from South African rule. His decision to join the 23-year guerilla war followed failed diplomatic attempts at the World Court and the United Nations to force South Africa to grant Namibia freedom. That war claimed more than 11,000 lives from 1966 until independence on March 21, 1990. Thousands went into exile, fracturing society between those who stayed home and those who left, while class differences have emerged among "returnees."

Casey Kelso is a fellow of the Institute studying the societies, economies and food production systems in Southern Africa.

Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

Nambahu, who oversees a struggling cooperative for former exiles like himself, left his village near the town of Ondangwa at 17 with fighters from SWAPO's military wing -- the People's Liberation Army of Namibia -- to receive guerilla training at their bases in Angola.

A few years later he re-entered Namibia on a military mission some 26 miles from Ondangwa. Nambahu's group stopped to eat lunch under the cover of thick bushes when mortar fire suddenly rained down on their position. Seriously wounded, Nambahu was carried by a fellow fighter back across the border to Lubango, Angola for medical help. He was flown by airplane to Moscow for several operations to his leg and hip. After recuperating there for more than a year, Nambahu was too crippled for warfare, so SWAPO arranged for him to study agriculture in Zambia at the United Nation's Institute for Namibia in Lusaka.

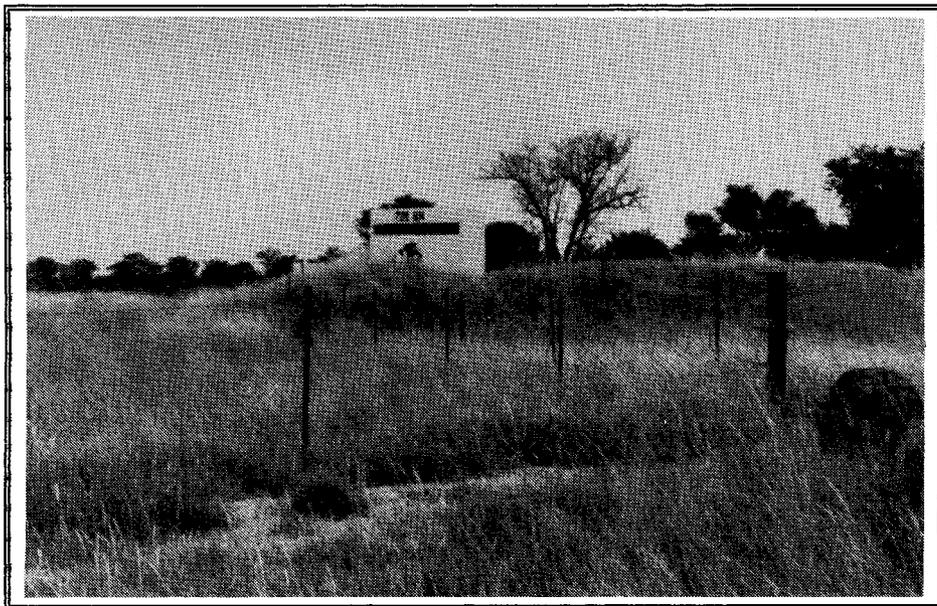
When he finally arrived back home in 1989 for the national election that swept SWAPO into power, Nambahu found that independence did not mean the end to the struggle to survive. Some of the white civil servants who were guaranteed their jobs under the new constitution are hostile to the goals of the new SWAPO government. One government officer almost destroyed the cooperative's future. But Nambahu remains philosophical, while some of his younger compatriots are frustrated at the lack of change. "We are living together now, so you just forgive them and move forward," Nambahu said. "National reconciliation means I can go to South Africa now, no problems. I can go anywhere in Namibia, work anywhere, do anything."

Reminders of the recent past

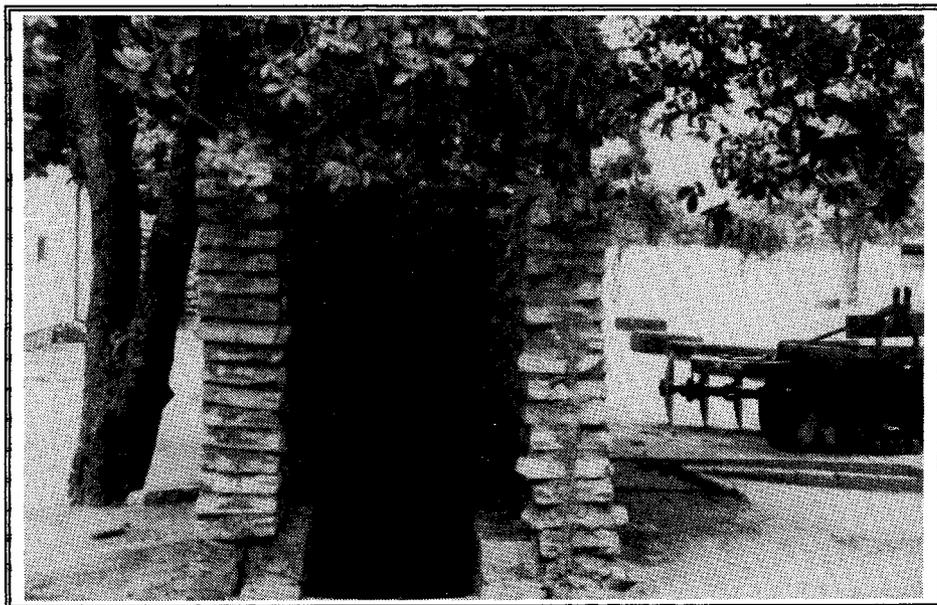
The March 21 Cooperative, founded in 1990 near the village of Mahanene (see map, p.16) just a few miles from the Angolan border, embodies the ironies of the war. There are many reminders of the bad times still around the cooperative, since the collective's members are housed at an agricultural research station that had been abandoned in 1986 as the war heated up.

That area of Owamboland, home to more than half of Namibia's population, had been a free-fire zone where much of the fiercest fighting occurred. The South African-sponsored South West Africa Territorial Force occupied the station's land, erecting a tall radio tower that still looms. They built ramparts around the complex, topping the earthen walls with barbed wire and concrete machine gun nests and planting mine fields instead of millet. Lacking a pass as a black African traveling anywhere outside of your village usually meant a beating by the white soldiers if you were caught and sometimes summary execution, Nambahu recalled. The house Nambahu shares with other members of the collective sits only a few yards away from the underground prison where suspected "terrorists" were tortured. Now chickens roost on the

concrete stairs leading down to the dungeon and most -- but not all -- the mines have been removed. "The government stopped trying to dig them out when their special tractor was blown straight up in the air," Nambahu said, pointing to the fences at the cooperative's front gate that bear red and white warning signs. "The tractor landed back there," he added, looking over his shoulder. "They left the same day and haven't come back."



Land mines and barbed wire line the cooperative's entrance.



A dungeon at the cooperative holds only bad memories now.

The cooperative's troubles

Nambahu is proud of the small achievements of the cooperative, such as the three fish ponds where bottom-feeding talapia are raised, and a diesel engine hammer mill that is used to thresh the millet of local villagers. Yet there's little else to show after two years of work. The cooperative is failing.

One reason the group has floundered lies in the recent changes in the international political landscape. Eastern European countries gave a great deal of educational, financial and material support to SWAPO during its struggle to force South Africa to hold free and fair elections in Namibia. But the black majority government faced the expensive task of reconstruction at the same time that the Soviet Union began to disintegrate.

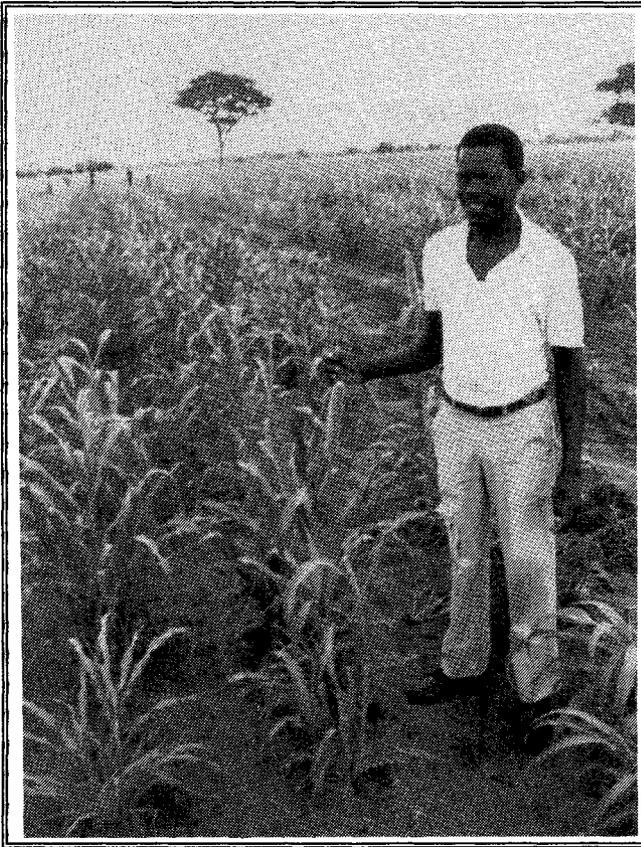
East Germany had supported the launch of the March 21st Cooperative, sending the hammer mill, a tractor and other agricultural equipment. It also promised other assistance, like a diesel pump to irrigate a proposed commercial garden. Nambahu waited in vain for months for word from his sponsors, only to learn that upon the reunification of the two Germanies, West Germany canceled all of East Germany's development projects.

A further constraint to the success of the cooperative came from the expectations of the "returnees" themselves. During the war for national liberation, military discipline and obedience to authority was vital for success. The transition from being a loyal fighter or party member to civilian life can be difficult. Some amount of individual initiative was lost, while dependency set in after national independence. Many looked to SWAPO for assistance and support, even job placement, and despaired when no guidance was forthcoming. The biggest problem, however, was local.

After independence, the Ministry of Agriculture re-established the research station on half of the 800-hectare site; the other half was set aside for the cooperative. The white German-born station director, who returned to his post, was hostile to the "returnees." The director destroyed water tanks that might have been used by the cooperative, locked the gates to their joint fields, fenced off fruit trees that might have been shared with the cooperative members and refused to allow their fields to be irrigated like those of the research station.

"We didn't chase them out of government, so the white government officers block us because they think this is Marxism," Nambahu said as we talked and walked through a drought-withered field of corn. Only 50 meters away, the irrigation pipes spewed out water to the station's healthy crop of millet.

Research, as well as resources, is withheld from the cooperative. Okashana, a new high-yielding, short-stemmed pearl millet from India is grown at the research station. This improved variety grows only two or three feet tall and matures in 90 days, almost half the time a normal millet crop requires. Nambahu cannot get any of the seed unless he buys it elsewhere through a middleman at an inflated price. "Whites in key points block this kind of development," Nambahu said. "Our government likes co-ops, but the white officials in government don't."



Jerry Iileka, the farm manager for the research station, is proud of the type of millet called "Okashana." In the old days, people grew very tall millet, he says, but nowadays one can't wait five months for the grain to mature. The Okashana millet will mature in 90 days, so less rainfall is needed. Unfortunately, Iileka has been caught in the middle of feud between his friends at the cooperative and his boss, the director of the research station.

Nambahu's assessment that SWAPO has failed to "capture the state" is correct. According to Prime Minister Hage Geingob, the new government has only brought in about 800 people in a 62,000 strong civil service that was hired by the colonial and interim government administrations. Under South African rule, the bureaucracy was bloated with a "tier system" that administered 11 racially segregated "homelands" with separate governments.

Lacking a two-thirds majority in the 1989 elections, SWAPO had to compromise in drawing up a new constitution. Almost at the end of that 148-article document, Article 141 (1) reinforces the status quo that "any person holding office under any law in force

on the date of Independence shall continue to hold such office unless and until he or she resigns or is retired, transferred or removed from office in accordance with law." So anyone employed by the colonial government did not lose their employment, while few openings were created for Namibians more oriented to building an egalitarian and non-racial society.

Faced with animosity from the research station director, the cooperative began to fall apart and six of the 14 original members left. Nambahu made a last-ditch effort to save the group by lobbying top government authorities to find a compromise solution. Under a new plan devised by Minister of Agriculture Gert Hanekom, the March 21 cooperative will be moved to Etunda, some 13 miles away. The new site includes 1,500 hectares of land, and plans are to irrigate several plots for tomato cultivation. Hanekom promised the cooperative would be settled first before other groups are relocated to the large site. "We have solved all the problems, there are no problems," said a smiling Hanekom from his office in Windhoek. He said the aim of the resettlement project is to enable the cooperative to grow hundreds of tons of tomatoes, since the government is studying the creation of a puree factory in nearby Oshakati. Members of the cooperative should be able to pay back the costs of electricity and water at the new site by growing at least 30 tons of tomatoes per hectare; skilled farmers could grow at least 100.

Several questions, however, remained unanswered. When the move will take place is still in doubt, while the suitability of the soil for irrigation is also in question because much of Owamboland soil is very salty and becomes worse after a period of irrigation and evaporation. Finally, the local market is too small for the hundreds of tons of tomatoes that would be grown. And success on a large-scale depends heavily on if and when a puree factory would actually be built to buy the produce.

The problems of the March 21st Cooperative are not unique. The majority of the repatriated exiles can be found in northern Owamboland, where jobs are scarce and drought often parches the crops. An estimated 30,000 out of the 45,000 returnees went to live with their families in this rural area after failing to find employment elsewhere. A 1990 UNICEF study revealed that just 7 percent of the "returnees" found formal employment, while 57 percent remained unemployed. The remainder survived through subsistence agriculture. The same is true today.

The official unemployment rate hovers between 35 and 40 percent, although Namibia's labor minister this week estimated that only 200,000 people were employed out of an economically active population of 550,000. That's 64 percent who could want jobs! Minister Hendrik Witbooi blamed the grim numbers on the demobilization of ex-combatants and the influx of returnees.

Sacrifices don't ensure employment

I found Aina Angula, another member of the cooperative, pounding millet in the traditional mortar with a heavy log for a pestle. That sound, more than any other, is representative of Africa. All across the continent, African women daily pound grain for the evening meal in the same manner. Other women take turns pounding in a joint effort with Angula since this is, after all, a cooperative. Each kindled her own fire under a cast-iron pot.



Aina Angula (left) picks spinach from the cooperative's vegetable garden for the evening meal. Co-op members take turns pounding grain (below) for the evening meal.



As we sat eating dinner in the gathering darkness, Angula brought out a cassette player that blared a Dolly Parton tape. She didn't mind telling us about her life, but she preferred to dance. I entertained her with a little jig until she finally sat down on an old tractor tire and talked about her time in exile. When she fled to Angola at age 10 in 1978, she said, she didn't tell her parents she was leaving Namibia because they might have stopped her. Angula left her family at night with four other friends, whom she never saw again after arriving. She spent one year in Angolan refugee camps before she was sent to Cuba, with the help of SWAPO, for education. She later studied agriculture in Havana for several years before joining the thousands who returned to Namibia for the 1989 independence elections. Today, the cooperative is her home only because she couldn't find a job elsewhere and she has no money to travel to Windhoek to look for one. Out of financial necessity, her 2-year-old daughter lives with Angula's mother elsewhere.

My wife, Bobbie Jo, asked Angula if she missed her parents during those years in exile. Angula didn't understand the word "lonely," or "depressed." But the word "sad" finally connected. "Yes, I was very sad not to see my mother, since I couldn't write to her because of the danger," Angula said. And does she hate all the whites for forcing her to leave her family for so long? Angula gave an emphatic, if not shocked, "No!" The question spurred Norbert Herbert, another co-op member, to join the discussion. He answered the question in a calm, resigned voice. "No, We don't hate white people. Everyone is different, so there are some good whites and some bad whites - and there always will be."

Herbert, who left Namibia at 16 to ultimately study in Yugoslavia, explained how most exiles brought their school records with them to Angola and Zambia, since this was how SWAPO determined who would be students and who would be fighters. "A lot of people left the country because they heard you could get a better education outside," Herbert said. "Many South Africans who are in the government aren't qualified, but they don't like us with our certificates from East Germany and Yugoslavia. We can't get jobs." He added that he wouldn't stay at the cooperative if he could get a government position, but there's few chances of getting any job, let alone a government post. "If Nambahu could, he wouldn't be here either, he'd be working for the government."

Norbert Herbert was mistaken, but I didn't say anything. While I'm sure Nambahu would like a well-paying government job like everyone else in Namibia, he had just quit classes at the nearby Ogongo Agricultural Training College to manage the farm. He sacrificed his education to save the cooperative. "I really wanted to study at Ogongo but I couldn't disappoint those who asked me to help preserve the co-op," Nambahu had told me earlier

in the day. "I had to continue with the job before finishing my education. I've made other sacrifices. This is another."

The frustration of those repatriated Namibians, like Norbert, is aggravated by the better standard of living among those who remained in the country (and who are often seen as having collaborated with the former government). Living like beggars off their families and seeing the success of the "sell-outs," many exiles wonder privately why they went into exile. There's a growing belief among these individuals that national reconciliation has gone too far, and that whites and former supporters of the South African regime have benefited more from independence than those who fought hardest for it.

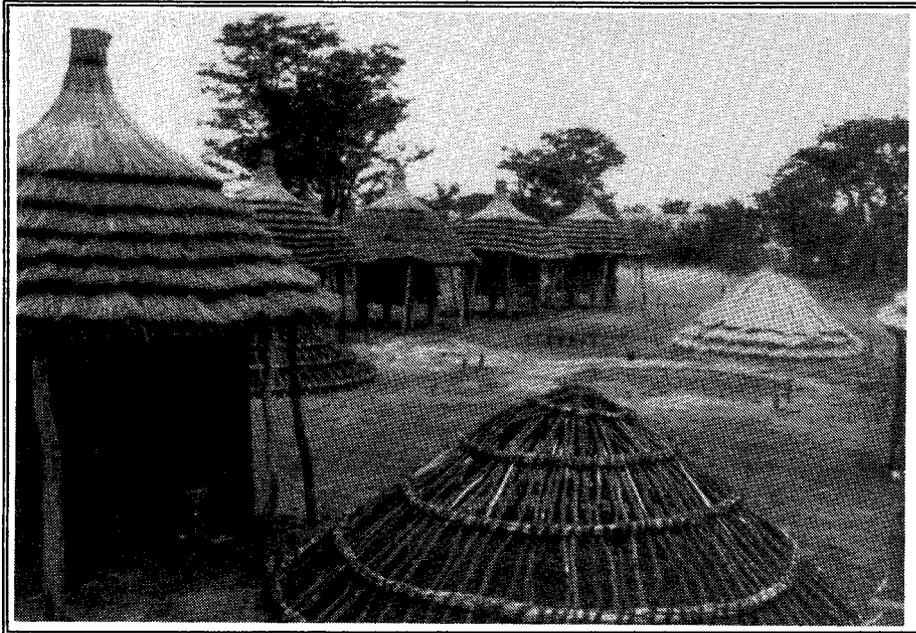
In exile still, across the Red Line

The first impression I received of Owamboland was both alarming and deceptive. After a car trip through the white commercial farming area around Tsumeb, I braked with apprehension at what appeared to be a heavily militarized border crossing at Oshivelo. Two sets of high barbed-wire fences coming from east and west converged at the gate, which was flanked by squat concrete bunkers. The guard wrote down our license plate number and destination before moving a heavy iron pipe out of our path. The Veterinary Cordon Fence, or so-called "Red Line," obviously had political as well as agricultural significance.

The Red Line sealing off northern Namibia from the south was designed to prevent the spread of cattle diseases. Under independence, as a signatory to the Lome Convention trade agreement promoting African trade to Europe, Namibia's beef exports jumped from almost nothing to thousands of tons. No animals from the north are allowed past the fence, cutting off the traditional Owamboland farmers from the lucrative international market. The fence also served a political purpose of enforcing the segregation between races and later provided the last line of military defense against the SWAPO insurgents.

After the cordon fence, the landscape drastically changed. Instead of cinderblock homes, wooden walls with thatched roofs appeared in tangles of brush. Tall weeds grew along the shoulder, while the countryside flattened and thinned into stark, infertile plains with closely-cropped, overgrazed grass that looked like a well-mown golf course fairway. Local people said such a pan, called an oshana, is too salty to grow anything but grass. Goats and sheep browsed on the roadside, a Third World scene that had been missing from the tidy European farming communities in the south of Namibia. And the neat wire fences, strung in precise horizontal lines like a blank musical staff ready for notes to be written in, disappeared. Instead, ramshackle barriers of tree limbs and brambles enclosed the farmers' millet fields. For the first time in Namibia, I felt like I was in impoverished Africa.

After a few days of talking and visiting farmers in Owamboland, I realized I had misperceived the situation. While most people in the north could be classified as peasants growing millet, the majority are not poor. Large, brightly painted cinderblock homes hid themselves from the roadside view. Homesteads are widely scattered because the fields, although traditionally fenced, are huge. Parked under the thatched roofs of many of the small huts, I saw cars and trucks, some brand new. Most of the cars in the bustling regional center of Oshakati, a resident explained, belong to black farmers who drive into town to shop. "Don't think us poor," the man said. "While the drought affects our harvests, we have never experienced any hunger in this region." But then there are the returnees.



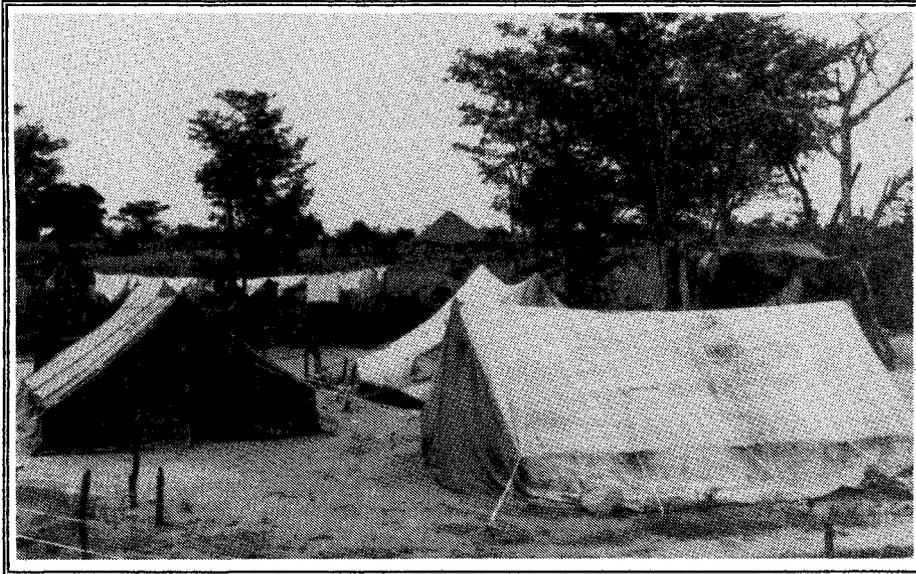
Granaries, like these near Mahanene, show that the land can be tremendously productive in growing millet. Owamboland and the Caprivi Strip get more rainfall than southern Namibia.

Upon return, the landless and penniless exiles found others had indeed prospered in their absence. And as the South African forces withdrew from Owamboland, job opportunities diminished in the area. Some had foreign identity documents and school records that local business owners refused to accept: While the quality of education in Eastern Bloc countries is the subject of skepticism, some business owners use such degrees as an easy excuse to veil discrimination against SWAPO members. Some returnees found their attempts to farm blocked by local chiefs and headmen with demands for cash or in-kind payments for land.

The Development Brigade

Just north along the road from the March 21st Cooperative, the only indication from the road that someone is developing a 60-hectare plot of land is the shiny galvanized mesh-wire fence. The farmers are ex-combatants, settled here as one of 12

"development brigades" created by the government for former soldiers, both those who fought in the name of SWAPO and those black Namibians who fought for pay on the South African side. More than 20 gray tents stand in newly cleared land. Inside one, a group of women listened as Ingard Edjala, a former PLAN guerilla, instructed a class on plant biology. The brigade's estimated 40 members have cleared 20 hectares of land, and have another 12 hectares under cultivation. "We have to clear this land and I think it will stay ours forever," Edjala told me during a break from class.



The tents, bearing the UNHCR emblem (for United Nations High Commission for Refugees), house eight staff members and up to 40 ex-fighters.



Ingard Endjala, who studied agriculture in East Germany and Britain, teaches crop production in the morning and poultry raising in the afternoon.

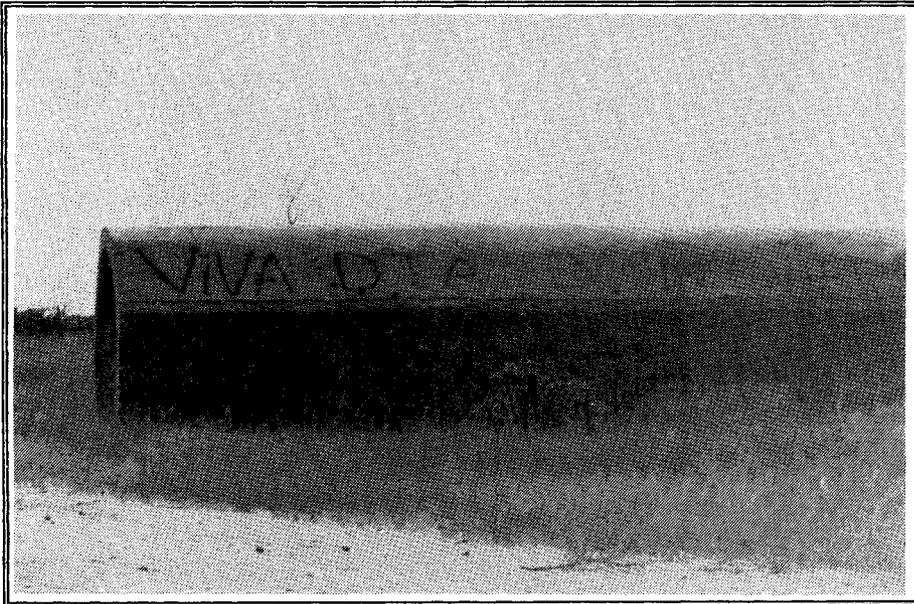
For most exiles, the story of Hileni Iyambo's misery strikes a chord. Iyambo left her home in a small village west of Ondangwa at 15 to join PLAN. At the age of 22, when she came home from the war, she found more fierce fighting inside her family. Her step-brother and brother-in-law had been members of the South African-controlled Koevoet (meaning "Crowbar," in Afrikaans) counter-insurgency force that she had battled. Both had made a large contribution to the support of the family through their salaries, only to lose their jobs at independence. Iyambo's sisters blamed her for the falling fortunes of the family while hostile neighbors asserted that she, as a former PLAN soldier, would someday assault and kill them all. Her hopes to join the Namibian army shattered when the government announced it would not hire women. Like most exiles upon return, Iyambo felt guilty about her inability to contribute income to the family, depressed about being ostracized and disappointed at her lowly status after independence. Iyambo hanged herself on April 29, 1990, leaving behind a 3-year-old daughter.

Many of the exiles know Iyambo's story. They, too, have experienced strong hostility from perspective employers and those who prospered under South African rule. Many families believed that upon the return of those educated abroad, their own fortunes would improve when the "returnees" took up influential positions and big salaries. The exiles' high expectations for the future were dashed by post-war realities, while the disappointment is sharpened by their families' disillusionment. The more educated and trained "returnees" suffer the most from depression. Many are younger men and women who left as teenagers and were in exile for most of their adult lives. Lacking strong ties with the local community, those under 35 are more bewildered and despondent than the older "returnees." Frustrations run high among the unemployed exiles who had scholarships in Europe, because they became accustomed to a higher standard of living in exile compared to their present predicament.

A letter in a local newspaper this week expressed the frustration of the former fighters with their newest struggle. The letter, signed "Ex-Combatants, Windhoek," complained that:

"Officials in ministries tend to employ their relatives through the back door. They ask us for certificates, forgetting that we were kept only at the prisons [in Angola] as guards without schooling. Now that we are back in the country they look on us as nothing... We are grieved. If the Government doesn't do something we shall do something. We don't care whether it is a Swapo government. We don't see freedom here. To whom does this freedom belong?"

The political consequences of this strong dissatisfaction are ominous. In a government-commissioned study of the future prospects for repatriated Namibians in the north, researchers Chris Tapscott and Ben Mulongeni warn that discontent should be taken seriously by those in authority. "Repatriated exiles constitute an important component of the population in Owambo, in terms of both their education and their political leadership," the authors conclude. "Whilst it is not probable, with rising impatience the possibility still exists that dissident returnees could, with promises of social and economic restructuring, be mobilized by forces wishing to destabilise Namibia."



The government's political opponents are surprisingly strong in Owamboland, which is usually considered a stronghold of SWAPO. The dissatisfaction of "returnees" may be a factor.

An agricultural school where the students disdain farming

Welcome to Ogongo Agricultural College, where no one can agree on the purpose of the students' studies. Like the March 21st Cooperative, the school remains heavily fortified from when South African forces occupied the complex, which is located about 40 miles outside of Oshakati. Floodlights and razor-sharp accordion wire still ring the area, while buildings are falling apart from vandalism and disrepair. Fabian Ishengoma, the Tanzanian director of studies, took me on a tour that featured more future plans than present reality. The piggery is in shambles, but will start operation next year. The dairy shed is occupied by a few wild chickens roosting in the cow stalls, while the demarcated horticultural plots remain bare until shade netting can be found. "We've only had a few months to build up what years of war destroyed," Ishengoma apologized as we drove about in his pickup. "Things fell apart and nothing was happening here for so long. We opened our doors in January and things are coming together."

The European Economic Community has given 7 million rand (U.S \$2.5 million) to fund the first year of a three-year project to launch the school. Nine teachers are employed, but there are no textbooks. The 144 students at the school have an EEC-funded scholarship for the first year, while a sponsor must be found to continue their second year. Each student must spend 50 percent of their time in lecture, Ishengoma explained, and 50 percent at "practicals" to insure hands-on, marketable experience.

"Do the students plant their own fields?" I asked, pointing to a tractor pulling an iron-toothed rake through a millet field to rip out weeds. No, he explained, those were the seed multiplication fields where the government employs locals to grow Okashana seed grain. Students will eventually come and observe workers to see how techniques are done, but presently they have no transport. "Do they raise their own goats or cows?" I wondered aloud, pointing to some fine, fat cattle. No, they help the employees who are paid for that chore, he said. "Do they really learn enough practical things about farming to support themselves as farmers afterward?" I asked skeptically. These students would go back and help others improve their skills, Ishengoma said. "Then they will be hired by the government as extension workers," I concluded. Not exactly. Nobody is guaranteed a government job, he said, but students' high scores could earn them consideration.

As it turned out, the same day I arrived at the college, a group of white officials from the Ministry of Agriculture were also touring the school to ask the very same question. When I asked, Ishengoma passed them off as "researchers," but I soon learned why they were there. The group was quizzing students about their goals in attending Ogongo College. Why were they here? Almost none of the students want to be farmers. Many became agitated when asked where their studies were leading, since they had assumed the government would automatically hire them as agricultural extension agents. Others have loftier goals of working in the ministry as researchers and policy makers. Some see the college as cheap education: They're not interested in agriculture, but the education is a stepping stone to more lucrative and interesting jobs in other ministries.

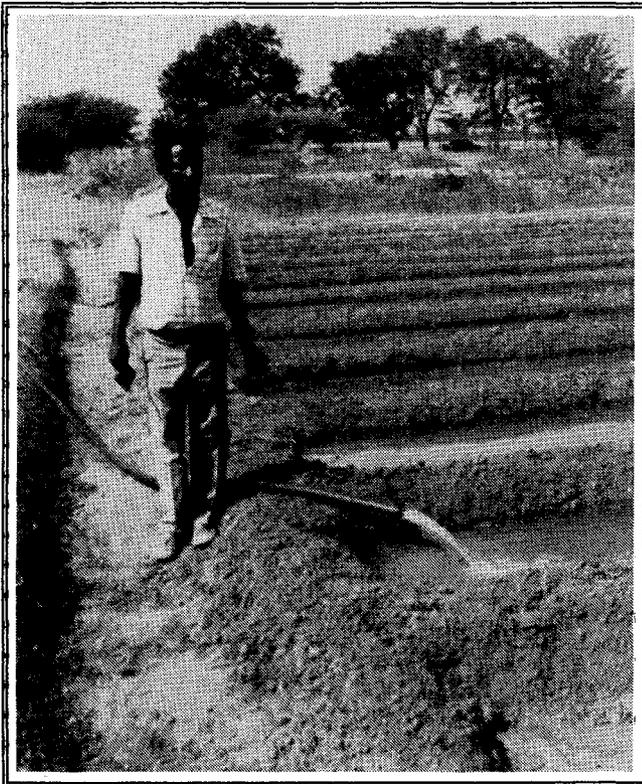
That bias against farming sounds familiar to me. In Botswana, as well, most young people disdain farming and yearn for a government job with all its perquisites. When the state becomes the chief source of income in a society, civil service positions hold the highest status. Namibia is now reputed to have one of the highest civil service salary structures in Sub-Saharan Africa, since the generous system of ample housing, pension, medical aid and car allowances was constitutionally guaranteed to those hired before independence. The government could not tell the new SWAPO appointments to the bureaucracy that they would get less compensation than the former colonial masters, so they also have the same benefits. A tiny fraction of the educated exiles

have joined the skilled, white elite in the capital, worlds apart from their unemployed former comrades who live in rural poverty.

The government's policy of national reconciliation has thwarted its ability to dramatically help the struggling exiles. Namibia dropped socialist ideals after independence and adopted a "mixed-economy" strategy of relying on the white-dominated private sector and international investment for development. But the goal of national reconciliation between whites and blacks is both politically and economically necessary. Namibian politicians have learned from the experience of other Southern African countries like Zimbabwe and Mozambique, which came to power with avowed socialist goals of restructuring their economic systems to promote social justice. When the white population evacuated those nations, economies collapsed from the lack of skilled manpower and capital. Not only was the flight of white skills and money forestalled in Namibia, but adherence to "western" open market principles precluded destabilization by a disaffected opposition.

Of sweet potatoes and freedom

Mauno Nujoma is too busy planning for the future to worry.

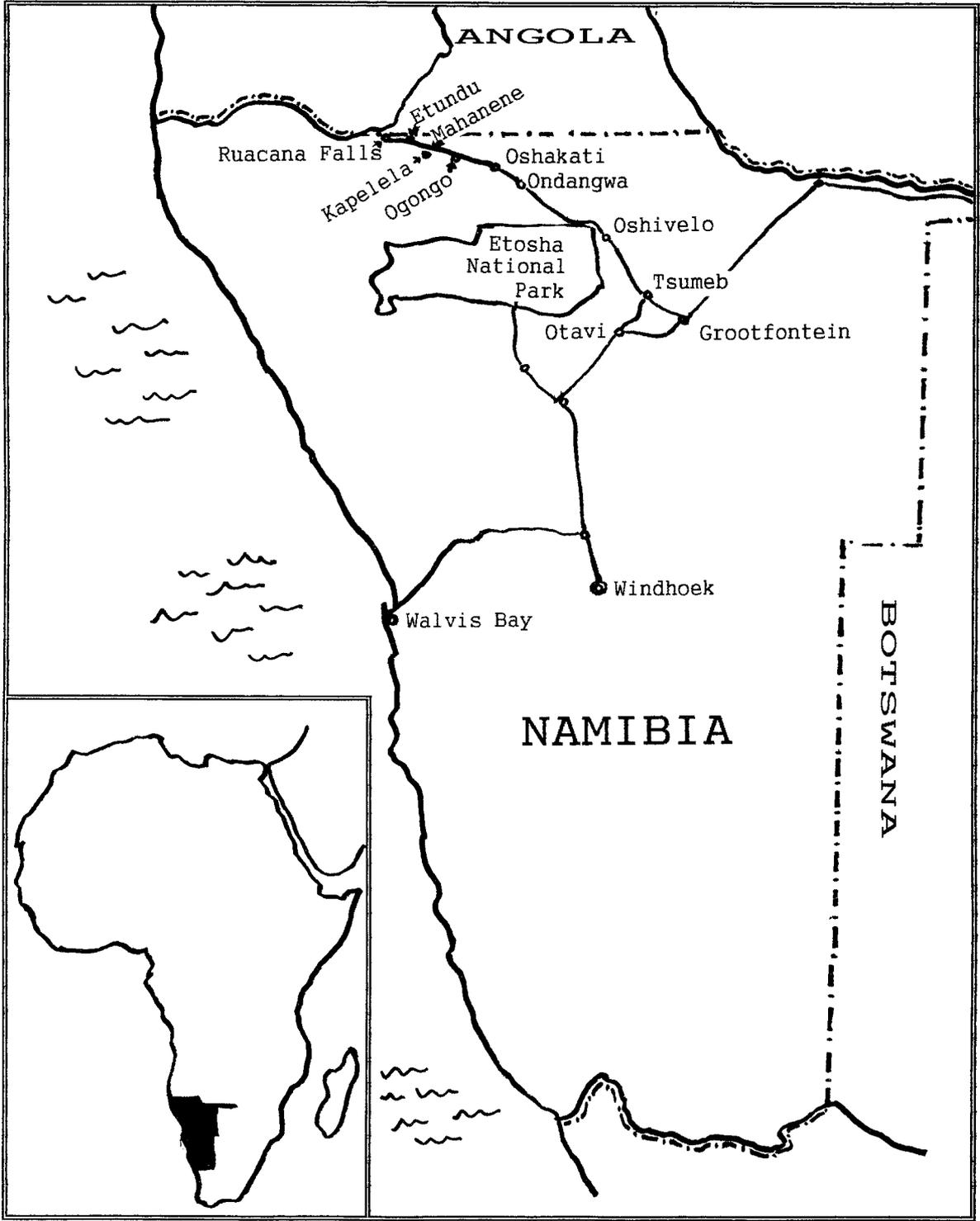


Mauno Nujomo oversees irrigation.

I found Nujoma setting up a water pump near Kapelela to irrigate potato cuttings that had arrived only hours before from South Africa. He slipped a tape measure from his pocket to mark where the 14 workers from the village should plant them. Nujoma, a "returnee," has 200 hectares the government gave him to grow vegetables and fruit. "We need to do things like this, because for too long nothing has been done," said Nujoma, who lives in a tent.

Both Nujoma and the cooperative's Nambahu have no illusions about how hard survival can be in the new Namibia. But I think Nambahu replied for all former exiles when I asked him if independence made his life easier. "No, but we're free, he said. "We're free."

Sincerely, *Casey et al.*



A map of towns and villages in Namibia mentioned in this essay.

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