

John ya-Otto's *Battlefront Namibia*: a Namibian political autobiography

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Introduction

During the 1960's as conflict between Namibian rebels and South African forces increased and the South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO) was founded, a kind of political-autobiographical literature appeared in Namibia. According to the writer and revolutionary Frantz Fanon, "this may be properly called a literature of combat, in the sense that calls on the whole people to fight for their existence as a nation" (155). Fanon's statement is substantiated by an up-front declaration by Namibian politician and anti-apartheid activist Herman Toivo ya Toivo:

We believe that South Africa has a choice either to live at peace with us or to subdue us by force. If you choose to crush us and impose your will on us then you not only betray your trust, but you will live in security for only so long as your power is greater than ours. No South African will live at peace in South West Africa, for each will know that his security is based on force and that without force he will face rejection by the people of South West Africa. (Cartey & Kilson 340)

The above pronouncement may be considered the point of departure of a number of political autobiographies by Namibians who joined the struggle for independence such as Vinnia Ndadi's *Breaking Contract: The Story of Vinnia Ndadi* (1974), Helmut Pau Kangulohi's *The Two Thousand Days of Haimbodi Ya Haufiku* (1988) or Helao Shityuwete's *Never Follow the Wolf: The Autobiography of a Namibian Freedom Fighter* (1990). As far as *Battlefront Namibia* (1981) is concerned, arguably the most prominent of all these documents (Melber 23), it basically describes the political awakening and affiliation of John ya-Otto, a Namibian marked by the social and racial conditions in which he grew up.

John ya-Otto

John Guaniipupu ya-Otto was born in 1938 in Ovamboland, northern Namibia. After completing his education ya-Otto worked as a school teacher at the Herero School in Windhoek's Old Location from 1959 to 1966 and at Ondangwa between 1969 and 1974. As a young man he took part in several anti-apartheid demonstrations and witnessed the Old Location massacre in Windhoek in December 1959, tragic incident resulting in many killed and wounded by the South African police. He then joined SWAPO thus becoming one of the first members of this Namibian political organization. Two years later he became SWAPO's Secretary-General in Windhoek, position he held until 1966. In 1965 ya-Otto and Helmut Pau Kangulohi published *Angula Unity Wings*, SWAPO's first political publication. A year later ya-Otto married Ali Akwenye, a SWAPO activist as well, with whom he had two sons and two daughters. By order of the South African Government ya-Otto was taken into custody and subsequently tried at the Pretoria Terrorism Trial of 1967. In 1973 ya-Otto was arrested again, and a year later escaped Namibia crossing the Angola border. Ya-Otto worked as SWAPO's labour minister in exile in 1976. Later on in 1979 ya-Otto left Zambia and settled in Angola where he issued SWAPO's union periodical "The Namibian Worker". In 1981 ya-Otto published *Battlefront Namibia*, autobiography describing both SWAPO's and his own fight for independence. In 1989 he became the Secretary General of the National Union of Namibian Workers (NUNW). Ya-Otto died in Luanda in 1994, where he worked as the Namibian Ambassador to Angola.

Battlefront Namibia: a Namibian political autobiography

Battlefront Namibia was first printed in the United States in 1981 by Lawrence Hill & Coin. Only one year later ya-Otto's autobiography was published by Heinemann as part of its prestigious African Writers Series. It seems there was some kind of call for this book abroad, not only among Namibian exiles but also among people interested in the Namibian cause. As

Ursula Barnett observes, this sort of autobiographies “were falling into the hands of Europeans who provided an ideal readership for works dealing with conflict between black and white” (220). This fact is confirmed by some further editions of *Battlefront Namibia* as well as its Dutch and German translations.

It must be pointed out that *Battlefront Namibia* was compiled and written by Ole Gjerstad and Michael Mercer based upon recordings and interviews with John ya-Otto himself.¹ Consequently, one of the problems that arise when examining ya-Otto’s autobiography is its actual authorship. Whereas ya-Otto voices a society tyrannized by racial segregation and colonial rule, Mercer and Gjerstad articulate these elements through a certain western filter. This is shown both in the structure and the contents of *Battlefront Namibia*, whose readers, as previously mentioned, tend to belong to a white American and European middle class of a certain cultural level. The study of *Battlefront Namibia* must therefore be done without overlooking that “writer and dictator arrive with a vast array of distinctive assumptions about process and product” (Sanders 446), and, as a result, if the dictator –ya-Otto– controls “the substantive content of the autobiography, the pragmatic events of a life, and to some extent the interpretations of those events”, the writer –Mercer and Gjerstad– controls “the form that content must assume often creating meaning at odds with the overt intent of the dictator” (Sanders 446).

On the whole, *Battlefront Namibia* articulates the politics of the liberation movement and the emergence of SWAPO as the coordinating element of the struggle. According to Barnett, *Battlefront Namibia* belongs to a type of narratives whose writers “welcome the opportunity to write what they feel about their homeland, to confess and purge their conscience

¹ Gjerstad, a Norwegian anthropologist, writer, radio broadcaster and film director, also wrote about the Angolan civil war and politics in Guinea-Bissau: *Sowing the First Harvest: National Reconstruction in Guinea-Bissau*. Oakland: Lsm Information Center, 1978, and *The people in power: an account from Angola's Second War of National Liberation*. Oakland, Lsm Information Center, 1976.

of ‘running away’, and to express their dreams for the future” (223). However, *Battlefront Namibia* is also related to the classical autobiographical model within the black South African literature in its description of the Boer elite and the autobiographical exposition of the exile and separation (Haarhoff 226), which, as stated by James Olney, shows “a progressive alienation, which forced to the extreme, becomes a spiritual and a physical exile” (250). We must not forget that the effects of decades of colonial oppression resulted in a culture of silence in which “the colonized is deprived of the choices that he should have in terms of his relation to his past and his present, to himself, to his peers, and to the outside world” (Clinget 128).

Similar to some other Namibian political autobiographies such as Vinnia Ndadi’s *Breaking Contract* (1974) ya-Otto’s recounts his childhood, his growing awareness of the white oppression, his upbringing and career as an educator, his gradual connection to SWAPO, his torture, trial and liberation, and his inevitable journey into exile. From a psychological perspective, this kind of autobiographies:

Offer us a picture from a specific present viewpoint of a coherent shaping of an individual past, reached by means of introspection and memory of a special sort, wherein the self is seen as a developing entity, changing at definable stages, and where knowledge of the external world provides us with a deep gasp of reality (Barnett 224).

However, the main subject around which these political autobiographies revolve is the awakening, growth and consolidation of the revolutionary idea. This aspect leads to the first stages of the armed struggle against the South African rule and the independence of Namibia as the ultimate goal. This fact happens to be quite meaningful for *Battlefront Namibia* clearly stands out as partisan propaganda rather than a full-fledged work of literature. To give a clear example, *Battlefront Namibia* repeatedly exalts SWAPO’s virtues and describes the effort of the Namibian population in its opposition to the apartheid structures not only through civil unrest but also by means of an intense revolution and a relentless guerrilla warfare.

Notwithstanding the fact that ya-Otto's choice "to tell the story of Namibia's Battle was made by the national liberation movement" (*Battlefront* 1), John ya-Otto is undoubtedly a crucial figure. According to Haarhoff, ya-Otto is simultaneously an essential and a marginal figure. This incompatibility makes problematic the existing relationship between autobiography and political propaganda (226). For example, the atrocious torture scenes in which ya-Otto is brutally pounded by the South African police may be interpreted as a praise to SWAPO's indestructibility rather than as a subjective testimony of a person enduring violence (Haarhoff 226). In this regard, the emphasis on politics and the liberation struggle has been a common characteristic in Namibian literature, for as Strickland points out, Namibians gradually realized that "culture divorced from politics is forever and always a delusion" (142).

One of the chosen ones

The starting point of ya-Otto's autobiography is the smuggling of a baby in a basket at a South African police checkpoint: "Anna lifted the cloth from her basket and smiled down at the child, innocently asleep in a nest of blankets. I was six months old and had cleared the first of many hurdles in apartheid Namibia" (*Battlefront* 3). This is no doubt an allusion to the biblical story of Moses, whose mother puts him in a basket and lets it float amongst the reeds by the river to avoid his being killed by the Pharaoh's soldiers. Ya-Otto therefore appears to be one of the chosen fathers of the independent Namibia. His figure can be then compared to Moses, as it is he who has the mission to liberate the Namibian people from the South African yoke.

In another chapter, while ya-Otto is serving a sentence in a South African prison he proudly scratches his name on the walls of his cell right next to those of Govan Mbeki and Walter Sisulu:²

² Govan Mbeki, Thabo Mbeki's father, former president of South Africa, and Walter Sisuli were South African politicians and anti-apartheid activists. Both became leaders of the African National Congress (ANC) and the South African Communist Party (SACP). After the Rivonia Trial both politicians were

Mbeki and Sisulu were names I knew well. Both were veterans of the South African Congress Movement and were now serving life sentences on Robben Island...The more I looked at the mural, the more I felt privileged to be in this cell...if they could stand years of persecution, why was I thinking of giving up after a few weeks?...It was joy to see my own works up there with those of the South African fighters (*Battlefront* 108-09).

As Haarhoff indicates, ya-Otto becomes “spokesperson for the entirety of the collective consciousness, a symbol whose private life is constrained by his political mission” (227). Accordingly, Ali Akwenye, his own wife, is merely mentioned as a militant: “A SWAPO activist in her own right” (*Battlefront* 82), hence the emphasis of the narration relates to the entirety of a society rather than on the private life of an individual. What is more, John ya-Otto emerges as a political symbol instead of as an individual character, which happens to be somewhat problematical in an autobiography (Haarhoff 228).

Aside from ya-Otto himself, no character is described profoundly enough to make the psychological exploration one of the fundamental pillars of the narration as it’s the case in Joseph Diescho’s *Born of the Sun* (1988), probably the first novel written by a Namibian. In consequence, *Battlefront Namibia* mainly focusses on the statement of the facts about the living conditions of a black majority oppressed by the apartheid system and the struggle for independence.

As previously mentioned, *Battlefront Namibia* was somehow read in the western world. However, ya-Otto’s autobiography was essentially directed to a readership from an independent Africa for, according to Fanon, “now the native writer progressively takes on the habit of addressing his own people” (155). For Haarhoff, this self-governing Africa is not only meant to be Zambia, where most of the book was compiled, but also “Namibia and the rest of

imprisoned along with Nelson Mandela for treason against the South African Government. They were released after having served their 24-year sentence.

the world sympathetic to the Namibian cause” (226). All through *Battlefront Namibia* the struggle for the Namibian independence gives emphasis to the different aspects of the Zambian cause. It is not surprising that ya-Otto named one of his sons after Kenneth Kaunda, Zambia’s first president. Kaunda joined the Zambian African National Congress (ZANC), whose leadership was contrary to the British plan to form a federation formed by Southern and Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland. This non-compliance prompted his incarceration. After his release in 1960, Kaunda was elected first president of the United National Independence Party (UNIP), of which he was one of the founders. He encouraged Zambia’s economic development, helped Africans to fight Rhodesia’s white-minority government, and became president of the Organisation of African Unity.

In the same way, the appearance of Sam Nujoma in *Battlefront Namibia* as a charismatic leading figure also works as an analogy with Kaunda and the struggle for the Zambian independence:

Sam Nujoma was already becoming a legend in the old location. Once a labourer for the railways, he had been fired for trying to form a union. Now he was blacklisted by the employers, and, unable to work, he devoted his time to the Advisory Boards and to community issues (*Battlefront* 41).

In a constant way, *Battlefront Namibia* emphasises that the liberation of all Namibians irrespective of their ethnicity or social class is SWAPO’s ultimate goal. On this point, ya-Otto defines himself as somebody who does not belong to any tribe or place in particular. In fact, even though ya-Otto was born in Ovamboland, northern Namibia, he was raised by his aunt in southern Namibia.

Battlefront Namibia stresses SWAPO’s sympathy with the destiny of an individual leader whose personal growth embodies the political development of an entire nation. Just like Kenneth Kaunda in Zambia, the charisma of Kwame Nkrumah, first president of Ghana, is a

model to be followed. Nkrumah was accused of sedition for having led several strikes and demonstrations demanding autonomy from Great Britain. As a consequence, he was also imprisoned. When the socialist Convention People's Party (CPP) succeeded at the 1951 elections, Nkrumah was liberated and appointed minister. In 1957 Nkrumah led the Gold Coast to its Independence, the country changed then its name to Ghana and Nkrumah was elected president. Ya-Otto therefore longs for a Namibian Nkrumah: "I, too, believed that one day we would have our own government that Namibia's Nkrumah would emerge to give us leadership" (*Battlefront* 45). Consequently, on account of his experience, his endless suffering and passion for his country ya-Otto is described as an ordinary Namibian with an undertaking of the utmost magnitude.

Structure and chapter breakdown

As far as structure is concerned, *Battlefront Namibia* is divided into nine chapters covering one hundred and fifty-one pages. According to its contents, the narration may be divided into five different parts. The first one, which comprises the chapters "The Big Family" and "Lessons in Black and White", tells of ya-Otto's childhood and adolescence. In this part, his first years and different family relations are narrated. The fact that ya-Otto's family lives all over the Namibian territory works as a reference for his personal development as a unifying figure of all the different Namibian ethnic groups in the struggle against the South African domination. Throughout these first chapters ya-Otto never appears as an immature person, but as the descendant of the rough proletarian world: "These were the years when it was difficult to find food. A drought hit the country, and the war, too, had something to do with the empty shelves at the store" (*Battlefront* 8). John ya-Otto's first experiences with the apartheid system and his early awareness of the political and social injustices endured by the black population also appear in this part of the book. On this matter, Cabral's words describe with astounding veracity the injustices of this atrocious system: "the practice of apartheid takes the form of

unrestrained exploitation of the labour force of the African masses, incarcerated and repressed in the largest concentration camp mankind has ever known” (“National Liberation and Culture” 54).

The second part of *Battlefront Namibia* commences with the chapter “The Windhoek Massacre”, which shows ya-Otto’s budding personal development as the armed struggle begins. With astonishing realism this chapter narrates the killing of thirteen demonstrators by the South African police and the ensuing events. It too recounts ya-Otto’s first encounter with Sam Nujoma. “The Windhoek Massacre” functions as a link between the protagonist’s political initiation and his later participation in SWAPO’s revolutionary activities. According to Cabral, “at any moment, depending on internal and external factors determining the evolution of the society in question, cultural resistance (indestructible) may take on new forms (political, economic, armed) in order to fully contest foreign domination” (*Return to the Sources* 40).

The third part of *Battlefront Namibia* describes ya-Otto’s political consolidation. In “The Lines are Drawn” ya-Otto becomes involved in the arduous freedom and anti-apartheid process, thus becoming one of SWAPO’s main leaders. This is not a singular aspect, for, as stated by Cabral, “the leaders of the liberation movement, drawn generally from the ‘petite bourgeoisie’ or the urban working class, having to live day by day with the various peasant groups in the heart of the rural populations, come to know the people better” (“National Liberation and Culture” 63). At the same time it shows the tremendous disillusion experienced by ya-Otto: “it was becoming clear that just as there were whites who supported SWAPO, so were there blacks –tribal chiefs for instance– who opposed us and would do anything to crush us” (*Battlefront* 60). In this chapter, ya-Otto becomes one of the chosen ones to liberate the Namibian people from the foreign yoke. This chapter is followed by “Confrontation”, which explores the police and military repression endured by SWAPO during the first half of the 1960’s.

“Torture in Pretoria” and “Between Life and Death” are two of the three chapters that comprise the fourth part of *Battlefront Namibia*. Clearly they show a hero in the making. These chapters narrate the punishments endured by ya-Otto in different South African prisons. These two chapters are followed by “The Terrorist Trial”, which recounts the trial and sentence of ya-Otto and other important SWAPO members such as Hermann Toivo ya Toivo and Joseph Shiyuwete by the South African government: “I could hardly believe my ears –all but one month suspended! But what about the others? Some were given twenty years, others were sentenced to hard labour for the rest of their lives” (*Battlefront* 136).

Finally, “Coming Home” describes a disheartened ya-Otto in a Namibia seized by the South African occupation forces: “Without looking back, I picked up my suitcase and joined the line of dark figures heading into the bush, walking north” (*Battlefront* 151). It is the certainly theme of the forced exile, one of the main characteristics of the Namibian political-autobiographical literature.

Conclusions

On the whole, *Battlefront Namibia* illustrates the early stages of SWAPO. It also describes certain aspects of life in Namibia under the South African rule and its infamous segregation policies. It is, in addition, a valuable social portrait of the life at the Old Location, a segregated area in Windhoek for black residents, before its demolition and the forced transfer of thousands of people to the Katutura suburb, a high-density township reserved for non-whites. Despite all this, *Battlefront Namibia* cannot be considered an entirely historical text as it selects and leaves out certain historical events with the purpose of legitimizing the consolidation of SWAPO. For example, there is no mention of the “other” Namibian exiles. Those people accused of espionage who were kept and tortured in SWAPO prison camps. Nor is there any recognition of the South West African National Union (SWANU), a Herero-based political

party that rivalled Ovambo-based SWAPO, originally Ovamboland People's Organisation (OPO). All this indicates that *Battlefront Namibia* provides a rather subjective vision of history.

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