

“What’s your Nation?”

Nationalist Itineraries in Namibian History

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At the end of November 2005 I was leaving for what would be my first field-work experience. I landed in Namibia, in the southern portion of the African continent, where I would stay for three months in Okondjatu, a mainly Herero village, situated in the north of the country, which during the colonial period was called Hereroland.

I was warmly received in the village and in the first weeks I already had been informed of many small details of different aspects of the daily social life of these people. My initial intention to work with religion was left aside for a moment and these various other experiences that called my attention, interest and curiosity were branching off my thoughts in different directions. At one moment I spoke with the representative of the local development committee about the village’s economic and social problems; at another I spoke with young people about the lack of jobs and their ties with the capital of the country (situated just under 300 km from the village and more than 6 hours over the disfigured sand roads). Later, I would find a group of old people, married and with children, recollecting histories of their families from the days of colonialism and Apartheid.

One afternoon, I was chatting with a group of young men about their self-perceptions as Hereros. Their pride in the Herero’s brave and warlike past was the main subject of our conversation – which did not differ very much from the first stories heard by early European travelers and colonial administrators (as we are told by Stone, 2007). A young man joined the small group at the very moment we were speaking about differences of attitude between Hereros and Ovambos (the largest ethnic group in Namibia), and I automatically asked the newcomer what, after all, was he: “so, are you

Herero?” His reply, without charm or elegance was: “yes. What about you?”. Now I (thinking about soccer, samba, and carnival), equally without any enchantment: “Oh, I’m Brazilian”. Our discussion continued, and finally the simple initial curiosity led to an interesting postscript: “Ok, but I meant what is your Nation?” The poetry of the dialogue lost some of its rhythm when I tried to answer: “well, yes, you know. Down there, I’m just ‘Brazilian’. I mean (...)”. I explained that there are ethnic groups in Brazil, but I am not part of any of them, and even tried to sketch a short genealogy of my parents and their forefathers: certainly nothing that could answer his question, as was clear by the confused expressions of my interlocutor.

I was inspired. That brief encounter completely altered my day, penetrated my diary and here, for the first time, takes the reflected form of an intellectual hypothesis on the national question. In itself, the spelling of those sentences indicate the complexity of formulating (and perhaps finding) what comes to be a Nation in the current conjunctures of contemporary African States. In the end, however, because of the developments in my fieldwork, this dialogue remained a small anecdote among my experiences and I did not have an opportunity to search for the specific meanings that these issues had for this people.

My reflections in this text follow the inspiration of that brief dialogue to search for the itineraries of nationalism in Namibia – as it was thought by Europeans and Africans during the process of colonization of the country. My intention is to begin a reflection without necessarily completing it here (to do so a wider bibliographical and ethnographic effort would be required). Somehow this can be seen as a circular effort. That dialogue inspired me to think about how the national question in Namibia (as elsewhere) is problematic, and specifically how Hereros see themselves in relation to Namibia. My objective is to conduct a historic reflection in which I intend to highlight the contradictory versions of nationalism in Namibia – exactly what that dialogue made me think exists. To close the circle, it would be necessary to go back to the field inspired not just by the first dialogue but also by this historic analysis.

I begin with the initial premise that, for that young man and his friends, “Namibia” is only a political unit that does not necessarily function as a criterion of identification and that, moreover, the notion of “Nation” to a certain

group of people is constrained by a distinct Herero identification.¹ Before looking at the history of nationalism in Namibia, I will conduct a brief review of the history of anthropological studies on the national question in Africa. The purpose of this first reflection is to also situate historically the ways that Anthropology has dealt with the problem addressed here: the study of an African State.

Anthropologists and the State in Africa

It was only in the 1940s that anthropologists became more strictly concerned with the existence of African States. Obviously, perhaps with the exception of studies conducted at the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute and the school of Manchester, these States were not considered the "modern" State formations of those countries. They were always seen as "primitive States", those that Gluckman and his students affirmed were in a rural and not urban environment. Even if recognizing the existence of colonial relations, the anthropological trend was to consider such societies as if the white man had never been there, that is, to think of them as "traditional".

I believe it would be naive not to associate the increase of the nationalistic struggles in Africa and the first independence movements in the continent since the 1950s with that yaw in anthropological studies (meaning that those events influenced anthropological thought). In this sense, it is possible to distinguish two anthropological perspectives within this field of research (with a risk of being too schematic). The first has a more intellectual inclination and reflects on the history of African societies *with* and *without* a state-like structure and establishes comparable patterns and abstract typologies (Fortes & Evans-Pritchard, 1940; Middleton & Tait, 1958 – both books were published with the contribution of different and distinct researchers –; Vansina, 1962). The second, focuses on the formation of "modern" African States, urban movements, the unfoldings of Africans' work in the mines (with the region of the Copperbelt, in Rhodesia, being one of the main fields of analysis) and the migration (forced or not) of African populations to the new urban centers (Schapera, 1934, Wilson & Wilson, 1954 [1945]; Firth, 1961

¹ In this sense, it was interesting to observe the preaching of Rev. Matuzee's, one of my interlocutors in Okondjatu, when he was in Brazil, some months after my fieldwork. Before beginning his talk he introduced himself as a Herero from Namibia, working among "his" people: the Hereros.

[1951]; Gluckman, 1958 and 1963; Mitchell, 1956; Balandier, [1955] and [1966]).

This categorization is not very common in anthropological studies but it seems interesting, because we can see in it a division between works that "ignore" the contact between Africans and Europeans and others that "address" it as an object of study (this schematic distinction is not, of course, as strict as it seems). The reflections of that second perspective are those that, when facing these situations, are confronted with nationalistic movements and the formation of a Nation-state structure. It could, however, be divided yet in another two groups: one faithful to the integrational proposal of the State formation, believing in the possibility of the creation of a "modern" State where Africans and Europeans could coexist in harmony (Schapera, Gluckman, Mitchell, the school of Manchester and the Rhodes-Livingston Institute would be included here), and another, more critical and perhaps less ingenuous, that perceived the perversities of such commonalities, somehow admitting that the formation of a "modern" African State without conflict would always be the colonial State disguised by the masks of an independent Africa – "White skins, Black Masks" as Frantz Fanon said (1967 [1952]) – (Balandier would also be on this side).

In general terms – that is, historically recognized – the relation of these distinct fractions with the liberation movements of African countries was practically inexistent. Moreover, even if these anthropological trends were not compromised to the racist colonial ideal – as is well reminded by Adam Kuper (2002) –, they were also not in favor of the pro-independence movements – perhaps exactly because these anthropologists did not believe in *revolution*, only in *rebellion*: small revolts that in the end served only to maintain order and the (non)balance between Africans and whites (Gluckman).

That, at least, was what they believed. The nationalistic movements, however, presented an opposite image. It is interesting to perceive some of the correspondence between such resistance groups and the anthropological approaches. First, these political movements criticized the maintenance of the ethnic bonds that were seen as a barrier to the creation of a united black front against the – social and physical – colonial armies. The valorization of "tribal" bonds was seen as a segregationist vision that attended the colonial politics of dividing to rule better. Those researchers who believed in the possibility of an integrated State (the first faction of my "typology") came close to this position. They went a step further in this direction when analyzing

the creation of this polarization (the colonized “African”, and the “white” colonizer) in Africa’s increasing urban situation. This, however, did not mean the end of the ideology of “tribalism” in anthropology – as Mafeje pointed out (1971) –, in spite of the work of anthropologists such as Gluckman and his contemporaries who were already reflecting on the State formation phenomena in Africa.

The movements for the independence of African countries had a similar premise. They were, however, much more critical of “tribalisms”, and affirmed that – opposed to what many anthropologists at the time thought of the exercise of their function – to survive as a group they did not need those ethnic bonds, to the contrary, it was necessary to leave these bonds behind to be able to achieve their liberation objectives.

Another interesting element of these (somewhat) imaginary convergences is a less explicit concept found in the studies of the second faction (of my first ‘typology’), highlighted by the works of Georges Balandier (mainly that of [1966] but also [1955]), in which a clear opposition is expressed between the possibility for an African State created by the Africans from the revolution and a pacific transition to independence. Let us take, for example, the anecdote presented in Balandier’s “Ambiguous Africa” [1966], written when he was in Congo in 1961:

A young Mukongo turned to one of the Tunisian soldiers who was on sentry duty near the university and had the following exchange: “Is your country independent?” “Yes.” “Since When?” “Five years ago.” “Only five years and you’re white already?” (265)

Analyzing the history of liberation movements in Africa, we find similar dialogues. The symbolism of color is clearly a weapon for the creation of a people whom in spite of their ethnic bounds intends to be united. It is clear that this symbolism is not merely a separation between Africans and Europeans, but also between *black-whites*, those Africans who reproduce or support the colonial regime (the Tunisian soldier being one of them), and *white-blacks*, those Europeans that support the cause in question.

More than trying to atone for the noncommitment of the discipline towards such movements, my brief reflection on the “invisible” and not always recognized relations of anthropology with nationalist movements since the 1950s is a brief effort to point out that, aware of these convergences and

conflicts, anthropology can contribute efficiently to the analysis of the formation and maintenance of actual African States.

The book edited by the Comaroffs, "Civil Society and the Political Imagination in Africa" (1999) and the previous work of Igor Kopytoff, "The African Frontier" (1987) are two interesting efforts in this direction. The first detaches the conflicts lived from the new governments and the other reflects on possible continuities between those said to be "primitive states" and the "modern" creations of the last century.

These efforts are certainly not new to the discipline. Others could be cited, but would take us farther from the main objective of this article: to reflect on the itineraries of nationalism in Namibia. The point of this summary (perhaps too categorically) was to situate the reader within the itineraries of anthropology itself, without, however, conducting a deeper reflection on these issues.

Itineraries of Nationalism in Namibia

To describe the history of nationalism in Namibia is to observe the history of the formation of the Namibian state itself – passing through the first contacts during colonialism until independence in 1990. This will force me to confront more than 100 years of history that will be summarized here not only to highlight the history of Namibian nationalism but "the birth of a nation". My text, however, will not be a typical chronological description of facts, to the contrary, looking for "native" and academic reflections on nationalism, I will consider two periods of Namibian history (the German settlement and then the period of South African rule). The chronology of the facts serves to mark beginnings and endings of certain historic trends.

What do I mean when I say nationalism? The main purpose of this article is not to conduct a strict theoretical reflection on the term, but to contribute to the construction of a historical/ethnographic approach to the national question. A theoretical discussion of this notion would require more than what I propose in this essay, thus I limit myself to saying that I use nationalism here as a concept that includes ideologies that 'define' a nation as well as political strategies to reach independence.

The initial contacts between Europeans and Africans in southern Africa occurred between the 15th and 19th centuries when the first merchants,

missionaries and explorers established relationships with the native societies in the territory (always marked by conflicts). The first relatively permanent European settlements were established between the end of the 18th and early 19th century by Dutch migrants who moved from the Cape colony in search of new lands. Later, in the first decades of the 19th century, the Dutch, known as Boers, migrated in greater quantity due to conflicts with English settlers in the south.

Reports of these pre-colonial contacts confirm the existence of five main groups in the territory. The Namas and Hereros were the most powerful. Situated in the southern and central regions of the territory, both had a rich pastoral system. Damaras and San (the “bushmen” or, in Otjiherero, “*Ovakuruvehi*”: “the first ones”), inhabited the same region, but their political importance was inferior. Finally, there were the Ovambo agricultural societies in the north that remained relatively separated from colonial politics until the first decades of the 19th century.²

Politically, the territory was divided into three major regions (Hereroland, Namaland and the relatively isolated, Ovamboland), that together would soon be called German South West Africa – extending to what are now Botswana, Angola and South Africa. As an anthropologist, it is important to highlight that these societies were neither static nor were their experiences of the world limited to old invariant traditions: they were societies in transition, undergoing fusion and fission, constantly being transformed by contacts with other societies (Kopytoff 1987). Moreover, their relations were not always pacific, and the conflicts, as emphasized by Peter Katjavivi (1988) “did not always run on ethnic lines as some colonial writers would have us believe. Rather, they were the product of wider socio-economic changes” (3-4).

We should include at this point the Oorlan migrations that, coming from the Orange River region, contacted Nama communities in the central region of Namibia. Because of the European expansion pressures in the Cape, these groups entered the territory in search of grass and water for their flocks and

2 Speaking about Ovambo’s independence during the German colonization, David Simon (1993), affirms that “it was only under South African rule, after the German surrender in 1915, that the whole of Namibia fell under colonial domination” (5). If we consider the regional relations (between different colonial governments) we can assume that the fact that these communities were on the border between Portuguese rule in Angola and German rule in South West Africa possibly influenced the maintenance of the independence of these kingdoms – that is to say that it wasn’t necessarily some Ovambo resistance spirit that kept their independence (as stated in SWAPO, 1981).

the first conflicts soon flared between Namas, Hereros and Oorlams. In the 1860s, the largest dispute, described by historians as the “Herero war for freedom”, finally marked “the end of economic independence in Namaland and Damaraland. In this sense, the conflicts set the scene for the German military invasion of central Namibia in 1884” (Lau 1986: 29).³

As in other colonial empires in Africa, since the beginning of the German colonial onslaughts in then South West Africa the known technique of “divide and rule” was used (Simons 1967). By selling Western weapons and other goods, the Europeans main objective was to pit the different groups of the territory against each other so they could force them into signing peace and protection agreements – which were usually broken quickly, ending in the loss, on the part of the Africans, of many of their possessions and with the concomitant increase of lands and flocks at the hands of the settlers.

Reflecting on the distinct periods of colonization in Namibia, Zedekia Ngavirue ([1972] 1997) affirms that “the effects of conquest in South West Africa were loss of land and stock by the Africans and their ultimate conversion into a labor force for the Europeans” (245). Initially, during the German rule (1884-1915), the struggle for land and flocks was the main reason for the conflicts between colonizers and the Nama and Herero societies – at the time still the largest political groups in the region. The first and perhaps most drastic war between Africans and settlers in Namibia was a consequence of these disputes conjugated with other factors.

Germans, Africans, historians, anthropologists and other scholars, speak in different ways of the severe conflicts that occurred in German South West Africa between 1903 and 1908 (the dates vary, some say that it was between 1904 – when the first shots were discharged – and 1907 – when Jakob Marengo, the last great leader to resist German domination died). In the academic historiography, the conflicts had been seen as “the Herero and the Nama wars of resistance” (Ngavirue [1972]: 115), generally emphasizing “the tribal” bonds of those communities: “There was no traitor among the Hereros; the whole nation united behind their paramount chief, who suddenly revealed leadership qualities on the battlefield, which raised his prestige among his people” (117).

3 It is important to see the supposed “tribal” conflicts with reservation to avoid the the naivety of many writers who didn’t consider (for political reasons or because of romantic ideals) the influence of other (colonial) relations in the territory.

The opposing trend emphasized the value of this revolt as the first Namibian nationalistic movement,⁴ characterizing it as a war of national liberation (SWAPO 1981) or the great war of resistance (Dierks 2002), terms generally defended by those who looked for continuities between the post 1950 liberation movements and the anti-colonial wars.

Attempting to reflect beyond these clearly politically charged terms, Neville Alexander (1988), affirms that we should insist on describing such events as “the Namibian war of anti-colonial resistance”, highlighting that “the use of Namibia in this case would have geographical and to a lesser degree political and ideological significance” (195).

The war was historically more clearly linked to the Herero and Nama onslaughts, but we should not assume that other groups did not also participate in the conflicts. The Hereros certainly had the largest populational and material losses. They were the ones that initiated the struggle, but before the end of the first year of war they were already practically exterminated. If, for the Hereros – and in the words of Samuel Maherero –, the desire was that “*our weak nations rise against the Germans; or we destroy them or they will all live in our country*” (cf. SWAPO 1988: 175), for the Germans, the main objective was to kill all of them. As was affirmed by General von Trotha in October of 1904: “*I believe (...) that the Hereros should be destroyed as a nation*” (176).

Each variation of these points of view, has a different explanation for what occurred. The discourse of German colonial officers⁵ usually focused on a racial explanation (cf. Stone 2007: 189) and with the passing of years these conflicts were even said to be “*an incident, and no more, in an imperial adventure which has now ended*” (Bridgman 1981).

Meanwhile, researchers not tied to the German colonization described the events as a result of a long process of land and livestock dispossession by the German government (Ngavirue 1997). In the words of Horst Drechsler ([1966] 1980) “it was the systematic expropriation of the Herero and their consequent status of rightlessness that impelled them to their national uprising

4 A trend clearly defended by Terence Ranger in his “Connections Between ‘Primary Resistance’ Movements and Modern Mass Nationalism in East and Central Africa (I e II)” (1968a; 1968b) and, some years later, reconsidered by him in “The People in African Resistance: A Review” (1977).

5 And not English, as the Blue Books publications makes clear. For an annotated version see “Words Cannot be Found: German Colonial Rule in Namibia”, published in 2003, by Jeremy Silvester and Jan-Bart Gewald.

against German imperialism” (132). Other academic perspectives considered other explanations. This is the case, for example, of Jan-Bart Gewald (1999), who tried to understand the causes of the conflict from the perspective of European perceptions of what should have been the life of those societies with which they confronted themselves and which they should convert either to Christianity and civilization.

In 1907-8, with the end of the war, there were no organized forces to oppose the German forces. Those that participated in the war had been dispersed and suffered great losses, while those – like the Ovambo – who were “spared” during the war were forced to migrate to work for the development of the German colony that now suffered from few resources and no cheap laborers – as some German politicians had foreseen during the slaughters. The war was followed, by an eight-year period (1907-1915) usually described “as a time of African suffering and misery” (Prein 1994: 100) or, as Horst Drechsler ([1966]) stated, as the time “of the peace of the graveyard”. Yet other scholars analyzing events of this period identified forms of silenced and creative anticolonial resistance – “by paying close attention to the complex nature of consciousness as well as the various means involved in resistance” (Prein 1994: 121).

After these years a new period in the history of an independent Namibia (now a protectorate of South Africa) was inaugurated, catalyzing a new moment in the history of Namibian nationalism. With the increased need for human labor and the recent loss of potential workers during the wars (the one just described and World War I) space was given for the formation of an African proletariat situated around the colonial industrial-urban settings.

Before this, the years between 1915 – when the South African armies, “following” English orders and with the aid of other political groups of the territory (Hereros and Namas that had joined the invading forces seeking to recoup their stolen properties), invaded Namibia – and 1920 marked a time when many groups who had migrated years earlier, returned to their previous territories believing in the devolution of their lands by the South African government.

Thus, on December 17 1920, South Africa and Great Britain became officially responsible for the development of the territory and its inhabitants. According to the decree signed under the terms of the then League of Nations, the South African administration would have to

“promote to the utmost the material and moral well-being, and the social

progress of the inhabitants of the Territory ... the Mandatory shall see that the slave trade is prohibited, and that no forced labour is permitted except for essential public works and services, and then only for adequate remuneration” (cf. Katjavivi 1988: 13)

During the first years of South African rule, the general feeling among Africans was of self-determination and independence (Belfiglio 1979). There were a reviving of the “old practices” among the groups that returned to Namibia (what resulted in the considerable weakening of the influence of Christianity and, consequently, of colonial power). However, after the end of World War I, the expectations of the local populations regarding the South African government were frustrated (Gewald 1999) with the inauguration of a rigid system of native labor reserves which, restricted to small and unproductive portions of the territory, watched the country being auctioned off and the numbers of white settlers almost doubling in less than 10 years (Katjavivi 1988).

In the words of the department of information and advertising of the South West Africa People’s Organization (SWAPO) – a political party created in the 1960s to fight for independence at any cost– the period of frustration that followed the 1920s was a period of African privation and exploration: *“The colonial conquest deprived all Namibians of their right to be born and subjected them directly or indirectly to an implacable class exploitation”* (SWAPO 1981: 65). The formation of this worker class, in turn, is closely connected to the creation, in the final half of the 20th century, of a new type of nationalism.

After the first years of the 20th century when, it is said, the first steps towards a “modern” form of nationalism were taken and with increased pressure on the labour force, South Africa’s plans (of not returning the land to its inhabitants and including the territory to the South Africa domains) were formalized. This sparked the formation of a number of points of political resistance against the annexation that, in 1946, became even more problematic with South Africa’s refusal to deliver its mandate to the recently created United Nations (UN) (this under the allegation that it did not recognize the UN as the successor of the former League of Nations [Beer 1988: 10]).

In 1949, as a product of these tensions, Herero Chief Hosea Kutako – recognized, among others, as one of the precursors of Namibian modern nationalism – and Frederick Maherero, son of Samuel Maherero, exiled in Botswana, sent through the Rev. M. Scott what would then be the first Namibian petition to the United Nations requesting the end of the South

African government. In the following years, a mobilization of the resistance front was perceived by the colonial government “as a consequence of nationalist ‘confusion and false doctrine’” (Dierks 2002: 216).

The process of decolonization of the territory (Dreyer 1994) or – in the words of those directly involved with the independence process – the initial phase of the national resistance began (SWAPO 1981). The first councils and political organizations were created under the “auspices” of the ethnic affiliations. In the 1950s, for example, the political importance of the Hereros’ Chiefs Council grew, and it later became the National Unity Democratic Organization (NUDO). Moreover, the Ovambo People’s Organization (OPO) was created and later became SWAPO.

A few years later, some purposefully multi-ethnic associations (and, perhaps, exactly for this reason, “non-ethnic”) appeared in Namibian political space which combined the distinct political movements in the territory. This was the case of the South West African National Union (SWANU) that even before the end of the first half of the 1960s had its efforts weakened because of the constant political struggle between the different “factions” of the Union; of the Democratic Turnhalle Alliance (DTA) that would become the biggest opposition to SWAPO (a movement proclaimed for its “non-ethnicity” and which was the first political party to rule the country when Namibia gained independence).

However, while it was Herero leaders who sent the first petitions to United Nations for the end of the South African regime and the concomitant independence of Namibia, it was SWAPO that acquired to United Nations the status as the legitimate representative of the Namibian people - but not without challenges. Peter Reid, commission agent of Australia in the United Nations, stated during a meeting of the organization that his government “could not support the position that SWAPO was the only representative of the people of Namibia” (apud Belfiglio 1979: 507). By the same token, Clemens Kapuuo, once the Chief of the Herero Council and president of the DTA (which was constantly attacked by SWAPO leaders for its pacifist attitude in the struggle for independence, and for that reason, said to be allied with South Africans), defied the United Nations by affirming that “authentic representatives could best be elected by people inside and not outside the territory” (508).

Thus, growing since the first years of colonization, the ethnic language of nationalism continued to be latent, at the same time as a national ideology

was developed that intended to purge the ghosts of tribalism, thus transcending the ethnic bonds seen as perverse to the possibility of an independent Namibia. Many factors, in turn, had contributed so that this ideological shift did not occur in a unanimous form.

On one hand there was SWAPO, which in 1960 maintained it was “*the authentic liberation movement of the people of Namibia*” (SWAPO 1981: 195), refusing to participate in the multiracial meetings of the Democratic Turnhalle Alliance (DTA), since they were “*oriented to a tribal sense and there the authentic leaders of the people of Namibia do not intervene*” (241). On the other side – not exactly as an alliance with the South African government, but believing in the possibility of independence under a “never-truly-materialized” self-determination – there were political groups that still preserved their ethnic character and criticized SWAPO for denying its ‘traditional’ bases (Ovambo). They maintained that “SWAPO’s character remained largely the same in spite of the leaderships’ various efforts and willingness to give it a broader ethnic base”, also acknowledging that SWAPO’s impact “was mainly a function of its activities, and the absolute numbers of the group on which it was based” (Ngavirue [1972]: 221).

The Namibian political scene then plunged into a tense moment during which political organizations with an ethnic base claimed their independence from SWAPO, affirming, in other words, not to share the same nationalistic trend that was established within SWAPO and the United Nations. It was, perhaps, as a reply to these critics that according to the 1976 constitution written by SWAPO, one of the nation’s major political programs would be to “*combat all tribalisms, regionalisms, ethnic orientation and racial discrimination manifestations and trends*” (SWAPO 1981: 285).

I previously mentioned Zedekia Ngavirue’s ([1972]) argument that colonialism’s main effect on Namibia was the loss of land (and other possessions related to it) and the almost immediate conversion of Africans into a labor force for the Europeans. Our analysis of the history of nationalism allows clearly identifying that the political movements based on the ideology of ethnicity (the politically correct version of ‘tribalism’) are usually linked to the first factor (loss of land, flocks and other wealth). From the other side, those “unitary” ideological groups (what they now call “nationalists”), focus on the second issue. This cleavage seems very clear and logical – and if we take a close look at the history of such events we will see that the creation of both

trends (the "tribalist" and the "nationalist") is chronologically related with the increase or not of such disputes (for land and labour force).

Thus, it is necessary to consider the increase of the pressure on the labor force at a moment in which the societies attacked by the European contingents were decimated and spread through different regions of all of southern Africa, to understand the concomitant colonial invasion in Ovambo territories (the north of the country). In addition, we would have to consider this invasion and the forced migration of the Ovambo to the urban industrial areas to reflect on the creation of a class consciousness that considered itself to go beyond ethnic bonds. They were not only a bigger population, but in a place in which the use of "tribalist" ideologies to resist the new reality (in which other groups took part) was not enough to create an efficient anti-colonial movement.⁶

Finally, the "unity-in-difference" nationalism of SWAPO (the "Together in unity" of the national anthem) continued its efforts to mobilize the masses. Thus, approaching the particular problems of African proletarian situations – "*population relocation to the urban areas, employment contract system etc.*" (Barbosa 1981: 70) – and developing, at the same time, "*an awareness of an unitary, national character, in favor of the emancipation of the territory*" (ibid), SWAPO took power in 1990, after winning the elections in the previous year with 57.4% of the votes (Dierks 2002).

SWAPO's victory, however, did not imply the legitimization of its ideological structure. This is exactly what that initial dialogue indicates: there are various nationalisms' in Namibia, not a single vision of the Nation. For that man and his friends, contrary to SWAPO's ideology, Namibia is a political surrounding where they live, not their Nation, an ideological and identity-based framework.

Conclusion: the ambiguities of the nation

"*We made Italy: now we have to make Italians*". This was d'Azeglio's commentary on the unification process of Italy (cf. Hobsbawm 1997: 275) and it is pertinent to the concluding thoughts of this essay, in that it highlights the dilemmas (that have reached the extent of open conflicts) found in the

⁶ Gluckman (1958 [1940]) certainly points out something of these transformations - Mitchell (1956) follows in the same direction. A more critical approach to the situation can be found in Mamdani (1998).

creation of “Namibians” from the ambiguities of the nationalistic ideologies that struggle to construct that which is said to be Namibia.

In this sense, the purpose of tracing the itineraries of nationalism has been to reflect upon these issues, to ask ourselves (and our interlocutors in the field) who, after all, are the Namibians, how are they recognized: is it by their “ethnic” bonds now politically compromised with a democratic system? Or are they defined by their new national affiliation, which disdains the bonds of a “non-united” past?

The answer is certainly not simple, we must recognize both possibilities as ideological projects in search of hegemony (cf. Comaroff & Comaroff 1991). If on one hand we have the Namibian government’s efforts to emphasize its “united in difference” motto,⁷ on the other we have struggles for ethnic recognition and a history that was denied by SWAPO’s “official” history of the independence struggle,⁸ which they say is the real history of the birth of Namibia. However it may be, if it is possible to speak of Namibia as a Nation, the effort would have to conjugate both arguments. But the length of this essay does not allow me to go that far, so it is a task yet to be undertaken.

I have only tried to consider here that an analysis of the different nationalistic trends could be a good starting point for inquiring about the existing conflicts in the construction of national identities. This involves approaching a certain history of nationalism – as Terence Ranger (2004) emphasized – understanding it “as a movement, or set of movements, and as an ideology” (216). Thus, we would have to analyze those different nationalisms looking for the ways they become related with each other. This must be done as much on the empiric level (describing which types of nationalism are defended in certain places and to which groups they are connected) and on the analytical level (reflecting on how these different trends contribute to the creation of a Nation). In the end, we will see that “Nation” will always be an “imagined community” (Anderson 1983) the contours of which depend on our own point of view and world experience (Chatterjee 1996).

7 A common characteristic in African and Asian States – the work of Jacqueline Knörr (2007) on Indonesia and Serra Leoa is a good example.

8 Perhaps the Herero commemorations is the most visible of them, even under the accusation of “tribalism” being annually realized so that the historical conflicts between Germans and Hereros will not be forgotten, (Koessler, 2006; Bertout, 2006; Werner, 1990).

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Resumo: A intenção deste texto é refletir sobre as construções históricas de diferentes conceitos de “nacionalismo” defendidos e apreendidos na história da Namíbia. Começando com os primeiros anos da colonização alemã, passando pelo governo sul-africano e terminando com a independência em 1990, destacarei alguns aspectos da história namibiana que poderão me auxiliar no entendimento dos contornos empíricos com os quais me deparei em campo. Para isto, atento a uma experiência etnográfica específica, iluminando-a através de uma análise histórica, elaborando ainda algumas considerações sobre a relação entre antropologia e o estudo dos Estados africanos.

Palavras-Chave: Nacionalismo, Namíbia, Antropologia, Estados Africanos.

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to reflect upon the historic constructions of different concepts of “nationalism” defended and grasped during the history of Namibia. Starting with the first years of German colonialization, passing through the South African government and ending with independence in 1990, I will highlight some aspects of Namibian history that can help me better understand the empirical contours I encountered during my fieldwork. To do so, I consider an specific ethnographic experience through a historical analysis, and make some considerations about the correspondences of Anthropology and the study of African States.

Keywords: Nationalism, Namibia, Anthropology, African States