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Development from Below
A Namibian Case Study

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# Contents

Preface ................................................................................................................................. 5

*Reinhart Kössler*
Rebuilding Societies from Below:
Reflections on Heroes Day, Gibeon, Namibia ................................................................. 6

*Per Strand*
The Local and the Global. A Comment ................................................................. 24

*Henning Melber*
Nama or Namibian? A Comment .............................................................................. 28
Preface

“Rebuilding Societies from Below: Perspectives from Southern Africa” was the subject of a Research Forum organised by The Nordic Africa Institute in collaboration with the Seminar for Development Studies of Uppsala University. Thanks to generous financial support by the Wenner-Gren Foundation, which is herewith gratefully acknowledged, we were able to invite a prominent scholar to present the main lecture at this event. He was joined by two local discussants.

Part of the intended debate focussed on the tricky question of conceptualising society and its (local, national or super-national) boundaries. Present day post-colonial societies, understood as being involved in a process of ongoing co-evolution with the dominant capitalist countries, have to take into account the difficulties resulting from this context. At the same time, they have to consider internal trajectories and constraints.

The rather theoretical reflections were exemplified by research findings from Southern Namibia: the Witbooi festival among the Nama in Gibeon served as a case study and point of reference. As the social micro-cosmos outlined can claim to be similar to current challenges elsewhere, the lecture and comments (subsequently revised for publication) are herewith made accessible to a wider audience. They are another contribution to the efforts within the research project on “Liberation and Democracy in Southern Africa” (LiDeSA) at present being carried out at the Institute.

Henning Melber
Uppsala, January 2003
Rebuilding Societies from Below:
Reflections on Heroes Day, Gibeon, Namibia

Reinhart Kössler

If you are called upon today to reflect on opportunities for ‘rebuilding societies from below’, this can be seen as a challenging exercise which, above all, involves counterfactual argument in a number of ways. While the basic concepts involved may appear simple and straightforward, they are so only superficially. To reach a proper understanding of the issues involved, we shall have to situate and deconstruct in particular the concept of society, and we shall have to try and clarify in the process what is meant by ‘below’. However, the focus of this contribution is not meant to be conceptual debates and niceties. Rather, I intend to relate a particular case study to highlight the conceptual and analytical issues. My empirical point of reference is the celebration of Heroes Day in late October 1995 in Gibeon, Namibia. This event can be seen as conveying in concentrated form the trajectory of communal endeavours to cope with the challenges and consequences of colonial rule. At the same time, it serves as a starting point to unravel to some extent what is behind the notion of ‘community’ and thus to clarify somewhat the notion of ‘below’. Before I turn to my case study, however, I see a need briefly to situate it in the present-day overall societal framework. Only this will enable us to assess the meaning of ‘society’ which is central to the following considerations.

Any treatment of society today is bound to confront the issue of globalisation. This is evaluated and analysed in a great variety of ways. Globalisation is seen, by some, as beneficial and progressive, mobilising and harnessing intellectual and productive potentials, joining together the ends of the world, enabling people to transcend the boundaries of time and space and, thereby, fostering the most rational and efficient use of raw materials and knowledge at the behest of the market. At the same time, these very same traits are denounced in other quarters as the latest ideological trope to embellish the consequences of deregulation, of structural adjustment or of the dismantling of the welfare state, possibly harnessing national potential to create a ‘competitive state’ (Hirsch, 1995). Interestingly, both these ways of reasoning also agree on fundamental traits of the current world situation. Above all, both acknowledge the erosion of the nation state as the prime frame of reference, not only of political action but more importantly of social life in general. Supposedly, the ‘bordered power container’ (Giddens, 1989:120) of the nation state that has shaped and conditioned much of social research and social theory in the past, has been broken up, and that consequently, the ‘container theory of society’ (Beck, 1997:49) has become obsolete forthwith.

Such views tend to converge further in that globalisation is seen as a path-breaking innovation. The contraction of time and space, the acceleration of com-
munication to a point where distant places on the globe are able to communicate with each other in real time are seen to revolutionise our way of living in a fundamental way. As is well known, the consequences are most obvious and blatant in the reorganisation of the world monetary system and the pre-eminence of the FIRE sector in determining the course of the world economy. Yet, there is a strong case for stressing the secular tendency of the capitalist mode of production to constantly and continuously transcend all given boundaries, to seek the economies that lie in the contraction of time and space, the extension of the sphere of action of any individual capital towards global sourcing etc. From this angle, the present thrust of globalisation may be considered as not that fundamentally new as it is often made to be. For one thing, the progressing contraction of time and space, as well as continuous and recurrent innovation in production methods and styles of living, and also in the concomitant challenges and coping strategies, has been one of the main characteristics of modernity since its very beginnings. The constant upheaval of routines and the concomitant insecurity and excitement can be considered as core characteristics of the modern age since the industrial revolution (cf. Marx/Engels, 1848; Berman, 1987; Chesneaux, 1989). Similarly, the contraction of communication routes, the interdependence, in particular in economic terms, of far-apart regions of the world, and the very notion of living in ‘one’ world—epitomised since 1851 in the great universal exhibitions—have been a feature of public discourse since roughly 150 years or more (cf. Kössler, 2001a).

If we consider the present thrust of globalisation, we can hardly escape recognising the features of intensified domination on an international scale. The erosion of the national scale has become a reality in many regions of the world through the enforcement of structural adjustment programmes and their sequels, virtually disempowering elected governments and thereby their constituents (cf. Abrahamsen, 2000). At the same time, the internet does offer opportunities for information and articulation of dissenting views even in situations where freedom of thought and public speech are endangered or severely restricted; but such subversive potentials are open only to a small, educated and fairly affluent elite. Finally, we have to consider the cultural-symbolic dimensions of globalisation—the emergence of what might be called a world-wide cultural nexus of clues and objects that, however, while outwardly uniform, take on different hues and meanings in various social and cultural settings. And to be sure, those settings are becoming more diverse and to a considerable extent, also more unequal around the world, even though the regional delineation of such social differentiation may not be as marked as during previous decades: today, conditions associated widely with the ‘third world’ may also be found in the nodal centres of the world economy, the global city (cf. Sassen, 2000; Castells, 2000a:ch. 6).

All this contains important implications for the notion of society under present conditions. Thus, one important strand of social thought today holds that as ‘social systems’, according to the basic stance, are made up exclusively of information (cf. Luhmann, 1984), their boundaries will be co-extensive with the realm of ‘mutually reachable communication’—in effect, from this point of view, strictly
speaking society has never been bounded and thus, in a way, it has been a ‘world society’ all along, albeit there were more than one of these. Thus, the novelty in our age consists in the circumstance that ‘society or world society occurs only once’ (Stichweh, 2000:31, 241). According to this conception, social systems ‘are not bounded in space at all’ (Luhmann, 1997:92). Still, even proponents of this approach find it hard to conceptualise world society without reference to its division into ‘regions’ (cf. Ibid.; Stichweh, 2000:ch. 10). Within mainstream social theory, Luhmannian systems theory marks an important advance in the sense that it is able to integrate concepts such as contingency and a plurality of contexts (cf. Berger, 1996:231) and above all, to address the issue of a world social nexus, which Parsonian systems theory was unable or unwilling to do (cf. Sigrist, 1989:840). There are many good reasons to critique this view. Not least, they concern its blindness towards global inequality and its Eurocentric bias (cf. Sigrist, 1989; Kössler, 1998a; 2001a). But at the very least, radical constructionist social systems theory can serve as a clear indicator of some of the central problems involved when we talk about society. Even if we choose to eschew the idea of a ‘deterritorialisation’ (Luhmann, 1997) of the notion of societies, this does not solve our problems. For as soon as we opt for a plurality of contemporary societies and assign them some relationship to any territorial entity, we find ourselves saddled with the dialectic of the border: bounded entities such as states or conceptually bounded societies cannot be thought of other than in a plural mode (cf. also Luhmann, 1998:60–76). Inevitably, they act upon each other, and they go a long way towards determining each other’s conditions of existence. In any case, from these theoretical considerations, the undertaking of ‘rebuilding societies’ must appear as a precarious one—at least inasmuch as it presupposes a considerable measure of autonomous, effective decision making power on the level of any particular ‘society’. One central problem with this concept of a ‘world society’ is its inability to incorporate structural divergence and above all, inequality. As proponents tend to relegate human misery to a kind of incommunicado realm, their treatment of world society takes on a decidedly elitist hue, the global village for the privileged one-third of humankind (see further, Kössler, 2001a).

Stressing the existence of ‘a real unity of the world horizon for all’ (Luhmann, 1971:55), this perspective certainly does address important current issues. Yet, in terms of the basic theoretical starting point I still consider it more expedient to adhere to a notion of societal nexus which is structured by production and reproduction, implying also, and including, co-operation and exchange. In particular, this approach offers better ways of dealing with one of the central challenges presented by the modern world-societal nexus, inequality. If we want to conceptualise unequal development not simply in terms of more or less fortuitous unevenness, we need conceptual tools to come to terms with divergent but intimately related trajectories of development world wide. While this problem was addressed some thirty years ago by dependency theory, these approaches have been critiqued, by and large with justification, for their persistent teleology and scienticism, and also for their persistent perspective on the nation state as the foremost unit of analysis.

However, what can be retained from the dependist perspective is the notion of mutually related, but clearly divergent socio-economic development, a process which may be termed, in analogy with biological terminology, as co-evolution. Just as in biology (see e.g. Thompson, 1994:pt. iv), this involves not only divergence, but also cases of parasitism or exploitation. In the case of colonialism and the ensuing socio-economic development, an intricate and entangled web of agencies has to be accounted for, where people encountering the rise of Western European trading systems and their forcible spread around the world devised their own means and strategies to cope with, and, if possible, make good use of those changes. This applies to the North American fur trade as well as to the transatlantic slave trade, just to name but two prominent instances (cf. Wolf, 1982).

In a systematic outline, we can conceptualise what has emerged during the past 250 years—roughly the era so far of modern, industrial capitalism—as a global social formation, encompassing various forms of society that differ fundamentally from each other by their basic structural traits. I propose to term these modes of production, making up the social formation of modernity (see Kössler, 1998b: ch. 4). With Soviet type societies all but imploded or withered away, we can usefully distinguish two clearly diverse modes of production in the current stage of the modern formation, industrial capitalism¹ and postcolonial societies. For the present discussion, the important feature is the close and skewed relationship that has existed between both societal forms throughout the modern era. Development of industrial capitalism has taken place within a global framework, involving sweeping realignments in terms of trade, production, procurement of raw materials and, not least, the recruitment and conditions of human labour. All this has meant that developments of industrial capitalist and of (post)colonial social relationships have been intertwined inseparably. For a long time, these divergent but mutually complementing developments have taken place in several parts of the globe. Today, we observe to a considerable degree that these regional differences are becoming blurred, and divergent relationships, both of the industrial capitalist and of the postcolonial type, are found in one and the same place. But this can also serve as a rather forceful reminder of the need to arrive at an encompassing, and yet differentiating, view of world-wide social relationships.

To sum up this very brief tour de force through difficult waters: globalisation is a reality, as its current new thrust and the repercussions it entails amply testify. At the same time, today’s world-societal nexus is marked by deep cleavages and gross divergences, which occur both within specific localities and amongst regions. This entails, not only considerable tensions on regional and transnational as well as on

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¹. I cannot address, within the scope of the present discussion, issues such as the ‘knowledge society’ or ‘information-alism’. But I should like to indicate that the approach mapped out by Castells (2000a, b) to distinguish between agricultural, industrial and informational ‘modes of development’, in addition to e.g. a capitalist ‘mode of production’, seems to hold out considerable promise, I believe particularly when integrated into my own concept of the modern formation.
local levels, but possibly more importantly, a diffusion of cultural images, lifestyles and ideas about a good life which insert themselves into a great variety of socio-economic and cultural settings. Again, this situation is not so much a novelty as it is frequently perceived and claimed to be. World nexuses have existed for a long time and so have world-wide interdependences, even though the media and modalities have certainly changed. If a century ago, these included i.a. trade, war but also Christian missions linked to colonial rule, today the spread of mass media has acquired prime importance and attention, while not necessarily superseding economic exchange, violence and various efforts at proselytising around the world.

In terms of societal nexuses, all these considerations show that for a very considerable time indeed, such nexuses have not been bounded, let alone bordered, in any definitive way. In other words, there is a plurality of societal nexuses, and they are interlinked amongst themselves. More specifically, we can discern the local, the regional, the national, the subcontinental (or extended regional) and the global as such levels. It would be erroneous to give precedence to any one of these. Rather, if talk about globalisation is to make any sense at all, it is bound to address these very linkages. This has given rise to the composite term of ‘glocal’ and ‘glocalisation’ to denote the close and intricate connection between the global and subordinate levels, right down to the local (Robertson, 1995). This does seem to make sense, as long as we maintain a clear view of the kind of relationships that exist between the various levels. It would be wrong to conceptualise them as something like the layers of a cake arranged like a pyramid, where processes, information or images trickle down from one level to the other, or vice versa, seep up from below. Rather, in keeping with various notions of the networking structure of present day large-scale social formations, and thereby, their flexibility or even their evanescence, we have to reckon with the direct action of the global on the local, and also, actions from the local level directly addressing various other levels, as the occasion may require.

At this point, I should like to turn from these more general considerations towards the regional setting of southern Africa. This will serve both as an illustration of long-term processes of globalisation during the 19th and 20th centuries, and as a context for the case study I intend to present as an example to bring out further the problems involved with such an attractive idea and research question as ‘rebuilding society from below’.

Southern Africa is a subcontinent that has undergone particularly large upheavals during the last two centuries. This has been occasioned above all by the implantation of settler colonialism. A further important factor was the age of wars and large-scale migrations that was brought about by the rise and expansion of the Zulu realm in the first quarter of the 19th century. With the famous trek and the establishment of Boer republics in what is today the centre and north-west of the Republic of South Africa, these two movements blended. They were superseded later on by the establishment of large-scale systems of migrant labour that have encompassed the entire subcontinent. However, this system has never been uni-
form (cf. Kössler, 1999a). In particular, the western parts of the region have been shaped by the longer-term impacts of the Cape trading system, and later, in colonial Namibia a specific system of migrant labour came into being, mainly involving the mobilisation of the labour reserves that existed at the northern fringes of the territory for mining and settler agriculture in the central and southern parts. To provide background for our case study, as well as to flesh out somewhat the notion of globalisation just outlined, we have to take a brief look at some of these developments.

Southern Africa and particularly its western portion presents a range of especially clear examples for the long-term processes of globalisation alluded to above. In the whole area, communities and their interrelations as well as their internal conditions have not evolved in splendid pristine isolation, but in close connection with the world market and the dynamics of capital. The establishment of Cape Town in 1652 as an entrepôt for the trade of the Dutch East India Company ushered in a process of settlement and gradual territorial expansion by the settlers. At the same time, the Cape became a hub of forced as well as voluntary migration, from Europe as well as from South East Asia. Almost instantly, the expanding colony became a centre of inland trade and at the same time, its slow but continuous extension dislodged the Khoi groups that had been living in the region before the advent of the Dutch. In this way, a long-term double movement towards the northern parts of the later Cape colony was initiated: fugitive Khoi along with Dutch or Boer settler-farmers. The evolving border society (cf. Legassick, 1969; 1992; Penn, 1995) was marked by incisive changes, both in terms of social organisations and inevitably linked to this, in terms of identity formation. The outcome was a whole range of new emerging groups such as the Griqua, Oorlam, Koranna and Basters. Under the leadership of outstanding personalities, some of these groups have reached historic stature. But all of them were marked by the supersession of earlier communal ties based on kinship by those of personal loyalty. This resulted in considerable flexibility and integrative capacity that has also marked these groups in later decades.

When the northward movement of the Cape frontier began to cross the Orange River, thus expanding into Great Namaqualand, the southern portion of today’s Namibia, this amounted to a thorough shake-up of conditions prevailing in this area (Kienetz, 1977), due to the far reach of the dynamics stemming from developments on the global markets. From around 1800 onwards, Oorlam groups penetrated the region. The most important group at the time were the Afrikaners, whose leader Jonker Afrikaner established his hegemony and the first proto-state on Namibian soil, centred around Windhoek and Okahandja (cf. Lau, 1994). One of his allies was Kido (Cupido) Witbooi who along with his group of followers crossed the Orange River during the 1830s, starting from the mission station of Pella; the Witbooi settled in Gibeon in 1863, being the last Oorlam group to found a communal centre in southern Namibia (cf. Jod, 1961/62) from the beginning of the 19th century onwards.
The Oorlam groups or kommandos thrived mainly through the trade in cattle, ivory and ostrich feathers, which were fed into the trading system extending from and centring on Cape Town (cf. also Wilmsen, 1989:92–93). This trade allowed them to provision themselves with horses, firearms and ammunition. These can be considered as the chief means of production employed by the Oorlam at this time, since besides hunting, their tradables stemmed mainly from looting the cattle stock of the pastoral peoples living in the regions adjoining their own realm to the north. In addition, Oorlam life style was marked at that time—as it still is—by heavy consumption of coffee, tea, sugar and tobacco, all of which had to be obtained by way of the Cape trade. From the moment they emerged in southern Namibia, therefore, the Oorlam presence not only shook up established ways of life, but it worked as a powerful agent in the process of linking up the lives of people living in southern Namibia with the expanding world market. At least in Wolfian terms, then, the Oorlam expansion can well be understood as a thrust of globalisation, solidly linking up southern Namibia with the world market, by way of the Cape trading system. This process also included, in keeping with Wolf’s approach, the use of new emerging opportunities by agents present on the scene. While such opportunities existed mainly in terms of the Cape trade, the advent of missionaries provided one important avenue to consolidate the vital trade linkages. In this way, globalisation, which at that time was characterised i.a. by an enhanced Christian missionary drive (cf. Castells, 1997:6), did not only include material and economic dimensions. These were inextricably intertwined with the spiritual concerns, both of the missionaries themselves and the communities they came to relate to. Amongst other features, these variegated aspects are epitomised in the decisive influence missionary presence had in enforcing a modicum of a sedentary way of life—as far as this can be achieved in a vast and arid country which forces pastoralists to move according to rainfall and grazing. However, churches and schools that were erected at communal centres came to serve as beacons of communal identity (cf. Kössler, 1999b:60–622). This sense of locally or territorially based identity was also utilized during the years of dispossession, land alienation and forced removals under colonial and apartheid rule.

Thus, today’s traditional communities in southern Namibia trace their origins or their traditions to groups that were not only involved in great and intricate conflict, but in conflict that had been inseparably bound up with the dynamics of world capitalism, even long before formal colonial subjection took place. In fact, within the trajectory of the incorporation of southern and central Namibia into the realm of a continuous nexus with the world market, the decisive moves seem to have taken place before the establishment of colonial power. This is also one reason why the German colonial conquest met with rather articulate resistance, as epitomised in the celebrated ‘diary’ of Kaptein1 Hendrik Witbooi, where he recorded his extended diplomatic correspondence, both with an array of chiefs and with the German intruders (see Witbooi, 1995).

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1. The Cape Dutch title for a traditional chief.
The first phase of primary resistance in southern Namibia came to an end when after fierce, year-long resistance, Kaptein Hendrik Witbooi finally saw himself forced in 1894 to sign the peace and protection treaty that brought him under German control. Ten years later, Hendrik Witbooi had once more taken up arms, at the head of the great Nama rising. Shortly after he was killed in action on October 25, 1905, the Witbooi bands surrendered to the German Schutztruppe. This was the beginning of a long trajectory of deportation and humiliation, but also of a dogged pursuit, on the part of the Witbooi leadership, of vindicatory politics aimed at reaching the reconstitution of their shattered and brutally subjected community. This cannot be detailed here (see Kössler, 1999c; 2001a). I shall merely sketch out a brief outline of the trajectory which made up the fate of the Witbooi community after 1905 and which is indispensable for an understanding of the Witbooi festival/Heroes Day celebration that will be referred to later.

From 1894 onwards, and even more so after 1905, involvement of communities such as the Witbooi in the dynamics of world capitalism intensified, with deleterious effects for indigenous peoples. This is exemplified by the Witbooi trajectory:

— German retaliation for the Nama rising bordered on genocide, with hundreds being herded into the Shark Island concentration camp in Lüderitz harbour, where a great number of people succumbed to hard labour, and harsh weather conditions in an unaccustomed, chilly and damp environment without proper clothing and food.

— A further stage in German efforts to ensure that anything like the rising would not be repeated involved the deportation of the remaining Witbooi to the central and northern parts of the Police Zone in Namibia, with more than a hundred being transported to the Cameroons and also to Togo, only to return in 1913. The communal bonds were destroyed in an action that may justly be termed as ethnocide (see also Hillebrecht/Melber, 1988).

— With the advent of South African rule in 1915, a return to the region of Gibeon became possible, but only under condition of submission to colonial rule. A vindicatory strategy could be pursued only in terms of subaltern strategies, making use of the institutions provided by the colonial state, above all the reserves which in southern and central Namibia involved a system of direct rule and fairly tight control (cf. Kössler, 2000). In the vicinity of Gibeon, Krantzplatz reserve was proclaimed in 1924.

— At the close of World War II, and with the experience of two decades of the reality of life on a small reserve which was lacking resources, Witbooi vindicatory politics moved on to a new stage in the course of the rejection of the South African incorporation campaign. This stage was marked by petitioning which involved the co-operation of Kapteins David Witbooi and, later, Hendrik Samuel Witbooi with the Herero leader, chief Hosea Kutako.

— Yet a new stage was ushered in by the implementation of the Odendaal Plan for the construction of ethnically circumscribed homelands in Namibia. This
involved large scale resettlements of other Nama groups, mainly Bondelswarts, in the vicinity of the Witbooi traditional capital, Gibeon. This entailed fierce conflicts on jurisdiction both with the other Nama groups and with the South African authorities. Against the backdrop of the boycott against the Turnhalle Conference, conflict culminated in Hendrik Witbooi, the present Kaptein leading a whole array of traditional leaders from southern Namibia to join SWAPO in October 1976 (cf. Katjavivi, 1988:99–100). This ushered in a period of open resistance during the closing years of South African colonial rule, when Gibeon developed into an important resistance centre in southern Namibia, whose activity at times overshadowed Windhoek. This, together with Hendrik Witbooi’s elevated position as SWAPO Vice-President and his church connections in his capacity as an A.M.E. pastor, also secured a considerable inflow of solidarity funding (cf. Leys/Saul, 1995:69, 109).

— Independence in 1990 meant an end to the tribulations of the liberation struggle. But it also led to an uneasy arrangement between the Witbooi traditional community and the independent state. In addition, the issue of the presence of the Bondelswarts community in Gibeon who did not recognise Witbooi jurisdiction remained suspended for the following decade. To this must be added, on the institutional side, the putting into place of institutions of regional and local government, transforming Gibeon into a municipality, while the surrounding communal lands remained unincorporated territory. In terms of social dynamics, conflict was also kindled by the inflow of Namibians from the northern areas, availing themselves of the freedom to move in their own country, attained at last through achieving liberation and independence.

Let us step back from the empirical data for a moment to ask the central question of our concern here: What does all this mean in terms of society, societal processes? Obviously, the answer will depend in large measure on whether we conceive of society as a bounded entity, whether we feel inclined to reject the notion of a bounded society altogether, or whether we try and find some middle ground between these extreme propositions. Also obviously, the notion of ‘rebuilding society from below’ will make sense only in the first and in the last cases. It would be an idea yet to be explored, at best, to talk about rebuilding something such as world society from below. Again, if society is to be considered as bounded in some way, where do we conceive those boundaries to be? This brings to the fore the decisive issue of what or who is the point of reference when we want to talk about ‘rebuilding societies from below’.

If we relate these questions to our empirical case in point, there are some propositions that should be considered in all seriousness: When we talk of society, and taking into account the different levels of social nexuses outlined above,

— do we talk about Witbooi?
— about the intricate societal pattern that came into existence in southern Namibia during the last 200 years of migration, land alienation, racial differentiation?
— about the Namibian nation state?
— the regional nexus of southern Africa?
— or is all this no longer tenable, do we have to face only one world society?

Obviously, all of these propositions have some relevance to our subject, but it is important both to spell out the kind of relevance in each case, as well as the differences implied. The first three of these refer to society as a notion of bounded context, although in various ways.

The principle of the bounded territorial state has been universalised in several steps, the last two may be seen in the colonial expansion at the close of the 19th century and in decolonisation after World War II. However, the current thrust of globalisation reminds us that all along, society has been much more complicated than the container concept suggested. With respect to southern Africa, just consider what has been said about the Cape system, but also, latter-day migration patterns, South African regional hegemony. I shall elaborate briefly on each of the modes indicated.

The most important mode in which societies have been conceptualised as bounded has been, for the last 350 years or so, the concept of the ‘power container’ of the nation state. It dates back to the ‘Westphalian system’ of 1648. It is important to recall briefly its implications. Starting out from the proposition of mutual recognition, for the sake of peace, of each other’s sovereign rights by the contracting princes, over the centuries the notion of sovereignty came at the same time to represent the idea of popular sovereignty, exercised through the workings of democratic institutions. Democratic rights have been secured generally through hard and sustained struggle by the subaltern masses who previously had been discriminated against by reference to class, gender, and race. For this reason, the present trend towards undermining the national state by the consequences of globalisation carries with it the risk of subverting the gains of century-long popular struggles to gain a measure of control over their own lives. In postcolonial countries, this throws into sharp relief the consequences of IMF imposed SAPs in the sense that these may deprive people of even the modest measure of control they have managed to secure, in many cases through many years of hard struggle. In any case, the level of the nation state remains a very important, even central, focus of power which deeply affects the lives of people at the regional and local levels. It does so even by default, in failing to deliver the benefits that had once been associated with the end of colonialism, national liberation, or the abolishment of dictatorial or one-party rule.

Yet, there are other obvious dimensions. Above, something has already been said about the global level, reaching right down to the local one, determining local developments in important ways. But there are intermediary levels as well. The large region, or subcontinent, of which Namibia forms part has been integrated for more than a century by the impact of South African hegemony. This has taken the shape, successively, of the Cape trading system, mentioned above, and later, of 75 years of direct colonial control by South Africa. Today, the Southern African
Customs Union (SACU) as well as the pegging of the Namibian Dollar to the Rand are only two of the most salient features to testify to the continuing preponderance of South Africa in the region at large and in relation to Namibia in particular. They highlight the skewed socio-economic structure of the region and South Africa’s hegemonic role, which makes it difficult for many to move beyond the assertion of hard-won national independence towards a recognition of regional identity (cf. Hastings, 2000:207). Yet, there is a plethora of ties of historical and current significance particularly in southern Namibia, crossing the Orange River i.a. on account of ethnic proximity, but also into Botswana within the nexus of the Kalahari. But mentioning these relationships, we are alerted to the fact that they apply to southern Namibia in particular, while other parts of the country would seem to be inserted into the subcontinental nexus in rather diverse ways. This points to the importance of societal nexuses on the sub-national, regional level. Here, it is probably appropriate to consider most parts of the two political regions instituted in 1992/3, Hardap and Karas, as one societal unit. If we do so, we will find the vestiges of colonial settler society to be probably the most salient features, both in constituting social communication and marking deep cleavages. This may be gauged simply from the fact that in terms of average household income, both southern regions come second (Karas, N$ 26,991) and third (Hardap, N$ 22,308) among Namibia’s 13 regions, only trailing metropolitan Khomas region (at N$ 47,409). At the same time, average household income for Nama/Damara speakers is quoted at N$ 10,401 the lowest amongst the language groups based in central and southern Namibia (Schade, 2000:116–17). While being a rather rough measure, this still points both to the low socio-economic status of Nama groups, and to the fact that white town dwellers and farmers in the south are markedly better off. Again, southern Namibia has been the one region in the country all along, where the colonial strategy of segregation was not very successful, as continuous contact between members of traditional communities and settler farmers was fostered even outside the wage nexus. This is testified, i.a., by frequent border disputes between reserve residents and adjacent farmers, but also by instances of more friendly communication and even of co-operation, which were answered by repression from the side of the colonial authorities at certain times (cf. Kössler, 1999b; 2001a). On the other hand, claims to close contact with Nama, in particular with traditional leaders, can be seen as forming part of the identity construction of whites in southern Namibia (cf. Schmidt-Lauber, 1998: 211–13).

In such ways, the widespread linkage made between the notion of society and that of the nation state, is questionable both from a global or supra-national perspective and from a sub-national one. In the face of the heritage and present performance of many post-colonial states, particularly in Africa, this gives rise to concepts for reconstructing social relationships by circumventing the state, pointing to the way things ‘work’ in real life (cf. Chabal/Daloz, 1999). Again, such initiatives, if successful, will definitely shift the relative weights amongst the various levels of the social nexus. It should be noted that this also implies a shift in power
relations. It is highly questionable to suppose that shifting weights from a higher, more abstract level such as the nation state to a sub-national or local level might by itself effect also a shift of power relations in the sense of ‘empowering’ the downtrodden and exploited. In an African context, such ideas may often be surmised when fresh emphasis is given to measures of decentralisation or to giving traditional authorities a greater role in development and administration. Recent work on ‘intermediary’ political instances and on local power, particularly in West Africa, has shown that things are more complicated at the very least. Moreover, along with the trend towards informalisation of politics (again, linked to globalisation), the opposite may well occur, the strengthening of local power positions that are perfectly suitable to serve as a base for personal enrichment, as a power core for local bullies or as a launching pad into national politics (cf. Rösel/von Trotha, 1999). To this must be added internal power relations, which are structured mainly along the lines of gender, age and wealth. Frequently, the coherence of present-day ‘communes’ is maintained precisely by (re)asserting such traditionally moulded orientations (cf. Castells, 1997:ch. 1). All this should remind us that recognising the importance of local or regional, sub-national societal nexuses is by no means cotemporary with asserting their independence from broader structures, nor with presupposing in any way harmonious or idyllic internal relationships.

If we turn once again to the Witbooi, this, like any specific case is more intricate than this generalised outline, and it certainly is more benign. But Witbooi politics have never occurred in isolation from the regional and national framework and even taken a rather high profile in this context. It may be surmised therefore, that some of the trends I just have sketched out in general terms, will also be present in this particular case. The trajectory of Witbooi politics after the catastrophe following military defeat during the great uprising can be summarised as a vindicatory strategy, aimed at reconstructing the lost communal nexus, and reconstituting communal control over territories, including the ‘traditional capital’ of Gibeon, that were—and are—considered to make up the traditional Witbooi realm.

Rather than detailing particulars, I would like to try and exemplify this set of problems by referring to the occasion that has formed, for several decades, the pivotal event of the year for the Witbooi community, Heroes Day, also known as the Witbooi Festival which is celebrated annually at Gibeon to commemorate the death in action of the older Kaptein Hendrik Witbooi, on October 25, 1905.1

The history of this event can be traced back to 1930, and the incumbent Kaptein Hendrik Witbooi, has given some 25 years of sustained effort, towards transforming a rather inward looking ceremony centred around church and cemetery into a political manifestation, both of the struggle for liberation of Namibia, and of Witbooi aspirations to regain what they consider their legitimate heritage. As I observed the event in 1995, it was a colourful pageant, lasting from Friday

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1. For the following, I refer to my own field diary and some former publications and elaborations, especially Kössler 1997; 2001b.
night to Sunday at noon, and featuring the ceremonial opening of the fountain that originally gave rise to Gibeon, religious ceremonies, horse-rider performances, appearances of a detachment of the Namibian Defence Force (NDF), the presentation of Nama traditional implements, performances of choirs both from Gibeon and from a predominantly white school from Keetmanshoop, Namastap dance, braai, performances of a majorette corps also from Keetmanshoop, informal motorcades between the various venues, performances by the brass band and choir of Gibeon African Methodist Episcopal Church, and various speeches.

This incomplete list may document three important and interrelated characteristics of the 1995 festival: traditionalism, syncretism and inclusiveness. While the combination of traditionalism and syncretism will come as no surprise in the light of current tendencies in southern African popular culture, inclusiveness is more of a reflection of conscious political effort. This concerns not only the appearance of school children and youths, in choirs (partly performing in Nama), and as majorettes for whose parents, and certainly grandparents, the name of Hendrik Witbooi had been fraught with a mixture of hatred, terror and contempt (for ‘Hottentots’) only a short while ago. This was complemented by the symbolic inclusion of Namibian heroes such as Morenga, Mandume or Hosea Kutako, whose pictures were displayed along with that of the older Kaptein Hendrik Witbooi. A further dimension was the array of diplomatic and government guests who arrived from Windhoek in the morning and left in the afternoon to cover a distance of some 300 km (and lose out on braai and Namastap). They included, i.a., the Chinese ambassador, the UNDP representative, and the then deputy minister of transport and communication, who as a German-speaking Namibian gave a key-note speech, commemorating the efforts of the older Hendrik Witbooi to bring the peoples of central and southern Namibian together and form a united front against the danger of colonialism. In these various ways, many elements of the rituals were also suitable to symbolise a form of national reconciliation that does not pass over in silence the days of colonialism, but puts into stark relief both the experience of colonial rule and subjection and the celebrated exploits of resistance and liberation struggle.

All this would hardly have been possible without the exertions, as well as the current political stature and positions, of the incumbent Kaptein. In terms of the relationships between the local and the national, this adds several important dimensions to our picture. As a representative of southern Namibia and as one of the few prominent leaders of internal resistance to South African colonial rule during the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, Hendrik Witbooi rose to national importance in his own right, apart from his highly evocative personal name. He was instrumental in aligning a number of traditional leaders in southern Namibia with SWAPO. He was elected vice-president of SWAPO, and was one of the few prominent ‘internal’ SWAPO members to serve in the government of independent Namibia, first as minister for labour and manpower, and after 1995, as deputy prime minister. Doubtless, the presence of high-profile guests was largely attributable to Hendrik Witbooi’s status as a cabinet member; the same is clearly true for
the appearance of an NDF detachment as a part of the festivities.

But even during the celebration, things turned out to be much less straightforward than might be expected from this summary. The most significant and spectacular part of the entire proceedings was doubtlessly the re-staging of the old Kaptein’s last and fatal battle by a large contingent of horse-riders in the dry bed of the Fish River on the fringe of Gibeon, at a site adjacent to the older Kaptein’s former house which had been blown up by the German Schutztruppe in 1904, and the mission church. The horse-rider event attracted a large crowd of spectators, conveniently positioned on the steep slope descending into the river-bed. After this performance, Kaptein Hendrik Witbooi rose to give a speech through a megaphone in which he pointed out the importance of history in educating youth, and recounted the sufferings and struggles of his community under colonialism. The end of this speech brought into sharp relief the trajectory of Witbooi vindicatory strategy: the Kaptein stressed that in achieving independence this strategy had by no means been consummated: the land had not been restored, nor had the rights of the Witbooi as a community. In addition, the then impending Traditional Authorities Bill—to be enacted shortly after—was seen as a direct attack against the rights and stature of those traditional leaders who had thrown in their lot with SWAPO, in the first place, of Hendrik Witbooi himself. The central sour point in the act was the provision barring traditional leaders from holding political office. Clearly, the Kaptein’s elevated official position was considered, by him as well as by many of his followers, as a due reward for the community’s efforts in colonial resistance and liberation struggle. One interviewee even stated, a few days later and referring to the same issue, that it had actually been ‘Witbooi’ who had achieved Namibia’s liberation, thus confirming the strong link between communal and national identities as well as the problematic issue of precedence between the two.

Significantly, Kaptein Hendrik Witbooi closed this speech with the phrase, “A luta continua”. Of course, this is an allusion to the SWAPO language of struggle, but at the same time, it articulates very clearly the sentiment, that for the Witbooi, or at any rate, their leaders, the struggle against colonialism, and its vestiges or consequences is in fact not over yet, that their objectives remain to be fought for. There was an obvious tension between the gist of this speech and the conspicuous presence of indications linked to the Kaptein’s being part of the power structure of the national state at the same time. It could be understood only as a clear statement that in the last analysis, the striving of the community would have to take precedence. But more outspokenly, and possibly more importantly, this was an appeal to the national state to do its duty in redressing wrongs perpetrated by colonialism. In this sense, the Kaptein’s stance was consistent with the assertive version of national reconciliation noted above. The orientation towards communal restitution became evident shortly after this event, when the launch of a ‘Hornkranz Relocation Fund’ was announced by Hendrik Witbooi, aimed at securing for his community the old mountain fastness of his great-grandfather, located some 200 km away (the idea was rephrased later to accord a special place
to the Witbooi within the framework of a national endowment).

The evocative staging of communal identity, based on a living and evolving tradition, was therefore fraught, at the same time, with obvious tension between the national state and the traditional community. To this must be added local conflict which can be understood, to a large part, as a direct result of late colonialist social engineering. The Odendaal Plan, the blueprint for the South African homeland strategy in Namibia had called for the consolidation of existing ‘native reserves’ in the southern part of the country into one contiguous homeland, Namaland. This plan involved a number of removals, and the most important one among those actually effected was that of the Bondelswarts community from the far south east into Gibeon and the areas adjacent to the town in the west and south. At the time, Kaptein Hendrik Samuel Witbooi objected to this on the grounds that Gibeon and its environs belonged to the Witbooi as their traditional territory. Witbooi resistance to the Namaland scheme was motivated not least by the enforced settlement of the Bondelswarts which was exacerbated by the South African authorities installing a special headman for this group in Gibeon. In basic structure, this conflict has persisted through independence. Although their old reserve was re-claimed in 1977, a large group of people identifying themselves as Bondelswarts have remained in Gibeon and on the farm south of it. Their claim not to come under Witbooi authority and even to constitute a traditional authority or have a ‘headman’ of their own has met fierce opposition on the part of the Witbooi. Informal talks in Gibeon in 1995 ascertained that this conflict is worded much in the language of a unitary nation state, in the formula that Gibeon ‘is part and parcel of Namibia’, barring special communal rights. On the other hand, this is exactly what the Witbooi claim to ‘jurisdiction’ over their traditional capital and land amounts to. The Bondelswarts question had not been resolved in 1998 when I last had a chance to delve into the matter.

The tension and contradiction between communal aspirations and the national state is by no means special to the Witbooi or Namibia. It is a general problem of traditional communities, viz., authorities in Africa and beyond. Obviously, territorial jurisdiction is just one instance. Customary land, inheritance, gender equality, internal land distribution are salient issues which are just as important, and it is easy to see that they are intimately interrelated amongst themselves. This has to be viewed in close connection with the variegated record of traditional communities during colonialism and Apartheid, ranging from more or less consistent trajectories of resistance, as in the case of the Witbooi, to outright collaboration. Thus, local social nexuses present themselves as a complicated and variegated subject, viewed only with regard to their recent political history, and faint hints at internal power relations.

But the question remains, what is their relationship to (which) society, and further, are they ‘below’, or not? In other words, do they constitute a kind of societal base-line from which rebuilding can be undertaken? I think this would be too simplistic a view in the case of traditional communities, and I suspect that they are paradigmatic in this respect for many other small and localised societal nexuses as
In closing, I just would like to enumerate a number of the problems involved:

— traditional communities follow a social logic which differs from that of state-bounded society (this might make them candidates for social reconstruction, but)
— most traditional communities are stratified internally;
— they enforce social cohesion in ways that are clearly not acceptable to all of their ‘membership’, raising the problem of who is to define membership and jurisdiction;
— as we have seen, local intermingling—probably a regular case in much of southern Africa—exacerbates these problems;
— federal solutions, implicitly presupposing ethnically homogeneous territories, are no realistic option under prevailing conditions.

Certainly, such questions have been addressed variously in terms of minority rights or of the position of indigenous peoples—all of which do not fit the position prevailing in southern Africa very well. But these debates have demonstrated one central proposition from which we also have to start in discussing issues such as those that have been addressed here: rights and entitlements carry grave risks once they are accorded or addressed—even in the most well-intentioned manner—to collectives and not to individuals. As long as membership is not open to free decision-making—the very minimal option being opting out—coercion and conflict are looming around the corner.

References

Reinhart Kössler


Against the backdrop of many failed attempts at building viable social relations and state structures in Africa, the notion of ‘rebuilding societies from below’ has potentially much to offer activists, scholars and the aid-community alike. The notion, arguably, conjures up an image of individuals mobilising around an understanding of what ails their local community in an effort to realise a common goal; the ambition is to rebuild what has broken down, according to an agenda set on a grass-roots level. As such, the notion represents a radical shift from various state-led and aid-owned projects of the past and could generate empowerment for those otherwise overlooked. In order for this to happen, however, a number of clarifications are needed as to what would be the parameters in terms of power and rights in such an inherently political project.

My comments on Reinhart Kössler’s text are based on my reading of it as a theoretical contribution that seeks to position the notion of ‘rebuilding societies from below’ in a normative discursive context. Indeed, in conceptualising the links between the local and the global in this regard, Kössler’s rich text spans a wide debate, some of which I will not address. Instead, my comments emerge from the intersection of Kössler’s discourse and that on more empirical and comparative issues of democracy and development in Southern Africa, in which I work. The comments stem from the following question: In what ways would this proposed paradigm provide solutions to the problems related to harmonising relations between state institutions and civil society that enable the establishment of a sustainable democratic society? It is perhaps not altogether fair to pose such a question about what is, in the main, a discursive and conceptual text. However, Kössler’s ambition clearly goes beyond the theoretical as he concludes by formulating some explicitly practical political implications of the paradigm. And, more generally, the issues addressed by Kössler are far too important not to be contextualised in the real-life strife of those who live in societies that desperately need rebuilding.

As I see it, the strength of Kössler’s text is that it proposes a conceptual framework designed for analyses of the increasingly complex relations between actors and organisations on local, regional, national and global levels. The emphasis he places on the tensions that define the very linkages between these different levels is particularly important. In this regard, he points out, globalisation today is no novelty—also previous periods of state-formation and nation-building were fundamentally affected by such tensions. While these are important points to make, Kössler is not clear on whether we should understand globalisation in the 21st
The Local and the Global. A Comment

century to be just more of the same, or if it contains features that are truly new. If so, to what degree do these aspects of globalisation help or hinder the rebuilding of societies from below? As an illustration I propose two such new empirical features of present-day globalisation that put Kössler’s analytical scheme to the test; one relating to the empowerment of the local, and one that delimits the power of the national and global. The arguments are sketched out briefly in turn.

In historic times, local actors and organisations had no real power with which to counter the dominance of global (or national) actors over local resources. Indeed, with few exceptions, local communities were ‘sitting ducks’ in the brutal exploitation by global forces. Forceful resistance could make some difference, but only when interpreted and reported by actors operating on the global scene (see for example Adam Hochschild’s account of the colonial exploitation of the Congo, *King Leopold’s Ghost*). The global spread of information technology has changed all this. Local communities and organisations today have an unprecedented access to information that can assist them in countering the otherwise total dominance by global interests in this regard. And where such communities and organisations are being wronged by globalisation, they can make this known to governments, organisations and activists around the world. Arguably, the activism that forever brought home this point—the ‘battle of Seattle’—would never have happened without the networks of information and solidarity that had been established between local activists on a global scale, and between local actors and international organisations mobilising for local demands. Globalisation has, indeed, empowered the local in this regard.

A second example of a unique feature of globalisation today relates to the discourse on human rights and democracy that increasingly defines the parameters of what constitutes good governance in the global community of states. Liberal democracy—with its many faults and frailties—represents a normative point of reference to which all states are compared. Although many debates are still raging on the merits of the different values and institutions assumed by this democratic paradigm, no other theory of government holds a similar moral high-ground. Thus, when we relate discourses of globalisation to the many efforts around the world to balance state sovereignty with institutions of international co-operation—i.e. the globalisation of governance—the respect for the constitutionalism inherent to liberal democracy defines which states qualify for prestigious membership. Whatever normative paradigms global actors had in common during previous processes of globalisation, these either allowed for (Christianity) or motivated (racism) their brutality. Today, on the contrary, the actions by states and international actors are scrutinised in relation to their stated commitment to liberal discourses of human rights and legitimate government. This, of course, is not to say that all is well. Transgressions, more or less blatant and brutal, still occur. But the means and ends of present day globalisation are, contrary to what was the case previously, delimited by a normative discourse that does not allow for the complete disrespect of local interests and rights. A current example of the globalisation of governance—among countries that took the brunt of the brutality of previous
processes of globalisation—is the transformation of the Organisation of African Unity into the African Union. In early formulations of its founding principles it is made clear that governments of member states that do not meet the standards of good governance disqualify themselves from their right to representation in the future continental assembly. The linkage is obvious: a global paradigm sets the standards of governance for how national governments must relate to local agendas. Accountability is not assured, but its likelihood is radically enhanced since local actors are empowered to both inform themselves of their government’s global commitments and report to a world audience on whatever transgressions afflict their local community. Both these features are, arguably, unique to present day globalisation. They are concrete empirical examples that should provide test cases as to the relevance of Kössler’s analytical framework, an exercise I am not able to further elaborate on here.

My second set of comments relates to Kössler’s concluding remarks. Kössler’s attempt at generalising from the Namibian case study results in a few broad statements, which arguably lack a foundation in the preceding analysis, and in some questions that have been put more succinctly by others or have already been answered convincingly.

A project as fraught with conflicting political interests as the ‘rebuilding of society from below’ would need an institutional framework to even get off the ground successfully. How else should different interests be balanced and represented, how else would all get a fair chance to make their voices heard, how else would a decision finally emerge out of what promises to be a laborious process? The short answer to all these questions reads democracy. And yet, Kössler is remarkably quiet on the merits of democracy in general, and how it can be institutionalised to enhance the prospect of grassroots participation in local projects in particular. Does this imply that we should understand the ‘rebuilding of societies from below’ as happening outside of the institutions that define the political system in the African democracies, Namibia being a case in point? Of course not. I fear Kössler’s vagueness in this regard is more due to his choice of the intellectual discourse within which he frames his argument. But, having made this choice, he is, arguably, not in a position to comment generally on the feasibility of, for example, various federal or consociational arrangements to effect the empowerment of local communities. A broad comparative literature is clear in its suggestions about which institutional means are more likely to realise democracy in a context where divergent and often conflicting local demands emanate from ethnic and traditional communities. It is not easy but, contrary to Kössler’s argument, it is certain never to happen unless power is decentralised, and autonomy and representation are granted to ethnic communities in heterogeneous societies.

Having placed the project of rebuilding societies from below in a context of (fragile) African democracies, a natural and crucial reference for Kössler’s formulation of the problems relating to traditional authority would be Mahmood Mamdani’s *Citizens and Subjects*. Mamdani’s seminal work argues that traditional authority, under which local residents are subjects, is an anomaly in an otherwise
democratic system, which awards rights to and assumes responsibilities from its citizens. I would imagine that Kössler agrees with Mamdani’s normative stance, which is why Mamdani’s simple but powerful conceptual pair—and the logical and normative reasoning that underpins it—would help clarify Kössler’s argument.

To round off, Kössler’s text has clear merits as a theoretical formulation in relation to its particular discourse. The Namibian case study helps him to give nuance to statements and assumptions in the discourse that are too simplistic to be helpful. But once Kössler’s text is read outside of this discourse, a number of questions arise. How does his reasoning relate to democracy? On what grounds are some forms of democratic institutions disregarded? And how should we understand how the unique features of globalisation in the 21st century play into the ‘rebuilding of societies from below’. These questions could be read in a theoretical and scholarly context, but also from the hands-on perspective of the policy-maker, the aid official and the local activist. In order for this paradigm to move beyond academic seminars, much energy needs to be invested in grappling with issues of a more practical and political nature, some of which I have formulated here. I do not mean to fault Kössler for not doing so in this text. On the contrary, his abstract discussion inspires many thoughts along these lines. However, for me, the academic and political relevance of this paradigm depends on the degree to which its proponents can successfully transfer its abstract theoretical eloquence into a theory for how to create sustainable democratic local communities of empowered citizens.
Nama or Namibian?
A Comment

Henning Melber

As Reinhart Kössler points out at the beginning of his general theoretical reflections on globalisation, the process itself is by no means “that fundamentally new” as parts of the current discourse might suggest or imply. The particular case of the Witbooi-Nama as a specific collective entity with a clear identity and (self-)concept of “tradition” is a valid case in point, as he exemplifies later. A product of an earlier (colonial imperialist) stage of “globalisation” themselves, they came into existence in neighbouring South Africa as a result of European occupation and expansion. As a consequence of their efforts to evade or escape subjugation and enslavement, they entered Namibian territory, history and society as relative “newcomers” to roam, fight, at times dominate and finally settle by the mid-19th century. To that extent, they were victims turned into colonisers themselves, and hence agents of “globalisation”. Since then they have left a marked imprint relevant even today, as the focus on the case study and the related debate here illustrates.1

To put evidence also presented by Kössler differently: the festival celebrating Kaptein Hendrik Witbooi and his resistance to German colonialism every October on “Heroes Day” in Gibeon commemorates and honours a son of immigrants to the country. This does of course not reduce the credibility, authority or relevance of the event (nor of the Kaptein), but it should neither be ignored nor forgotten at times, when xenophobia and the notion of the we–they divide in post-colonial Namibia are on a gradual increase and becoming part and parcel of current “nation building” with a negative frame of reference to determine who is “in” and who is “outside” the concept of being Namibian.2

It needs to be stressed—as Kössler suggests—that after colonisation and colonial defeat by German forces the “involvement of communities such as the Witbooi in the dynamics of world capitalism intensified”, but in a rather detrimental and destructive manner. The Witbooi community might have managed to obtain an increasingly higher degree of visibility both regionally as well as internationally, at least more recently in terms of their political involvement in the struggle for


independence from the illegal South African occupation (and here the communica-
tion issue plays a role), but their colonial subjugation clearly marked the beginning
of decline and marginalisation, as the trajectory presented by Kössler in the case of
the Witbooi or Oorlam Nama illustrates. Their hegemony in the southern and cen-
tral regions of the territory now referred to as the Republic of Namibia suffered a
rapid decline during the latter parts of the 19th century. An intensification of “the
dynamics of world capitalism” is consequently from their point of view and expe-
riences a marked increase in the oppressive and exploitative character of the sys-
tem at the expense of the local community. Pauperisation and an increasing
struggle for survival characterised the Southern Namibian communities of the
Nama and Oorlam (as well as the Damara speakers living in close interaction with
them) ever since German colonialism became firmly entrenched. The period of
South African occupation enhanced the marginalisation further, and after indepen-
dence hardly any rehabilitation was visible. Poverty reigns, and disempowerment
has been a continuum for more than a century. A poverty profile of post-colonial
Namibia will offer the necessary empirical data and statistical substance to under-
line and substantiate with concrete figures such a sweeping statement. Alcoholism
is a notorious disease, and HIV/AIDS exacerbates the misery even more. Violence
and abuse of women and children are an integral part of daily life in the distant
towns and villages of the Hardap and Karas regions of Southern Namibia—not to
mention the less than modest living conditions on the farms in the vast and semi-
desert rural areas. While some of the Oorlam and Nama groups might at least
temporarily have benefited from the process of globalisation during the 19th cen-
tury, in which they initially participated not only as passive victims, this seems to
be history of long ago.

It is interesting to compare the Witbooi festival of October 1989 (which I had
the privilege to attend) with the one Reinhart Kössler observed and described in
1995. There were both similarities as well as differences in the two events, six
years apart, of which the latter are certainly more noteworthy. Clearly, as much as
the Republic of Namibia did not yet exist in 1989 even formally, “national recon-
ciliation” was even further from reality than since then. Hence the ceremonies at
that time did not yet display any inter-cultural Namibian features (such as the pre-

1. In addition to the figures indicating the gross inequality as presented by Kössler, one only has to consult the annual
Human Development Report for Namibia, published by the local (Windhoek) office of the UNDP since the mid-
1990s, to find this confirmed. With a Human Development Index (HDI) of 0.611 in 2000, the Nama speaking pop-
ulation in Namibia ranked third last among ten different language groups. Only the people living in the Kavango
region (0.385) and the San or Bushmen (0.326) ranked lower, while the structural socio-economic patterns of colo-
nial society remained intact in the sense that the German-speaking (0.960), English-speaking (0.895) and Afrikaans
speaking (0.885) groups scored the highest HDI. Cf. UNDP with UN Country Team, Namibia: Human Develop-
in terms of the Human Poverty Index (HPI) presented for the groups in the same report.

2. A hegemonic alliance under Jonker Afrikaner had by the mid-19th century constructed a road from the central
parts of Namibia to the coast, linking the territory and its export commodities (mainly cattle acquired through
raids) to other markets, in particular the Cape and St. Helena Island, while importing mainly guns and ammunition
in return to maintain local power based on military superiority.

3. See as a recent anthropological study on living conditions in one of these communities Sabine Klocke-Daffa,
Münster and Hamburg: LIT 2001 (Studien zur sozialen und rituellen Morphologie, 3), originally a PhD thesis
dated 1998.
dominantly white school choir and majorettes from Keetmanshoop) witnessed by Kössler in the mid-1990s. Nor was the Namibian Defence Force or for that matter any official diplomatic corps in existence (and other external observers were more eager then to supervise other political rallies). October 1989 signalled transition to Independence under United Nations supervised elections which took place in November of the same year. Hence the Witbooi festival had an even more deliberately political character in terms of “liberation politics” as represented by the current leader Hendrik Witbooi. He therefore delivered his particular message in that year as part of the election campaign. Noteworthy, however, was the absence of a display of other Namibian heroes during that event, in contrast to what Kössler could observe six years later. Noteworthy was also the complete absence of any meaningful delegation from other than neighbouring Nama groups and a Damara delegation. The political leadership of the national liberation movement SWAPO was, with the exception of Hendrik Witbooi himself, absent. This was certainly reason for irritation and most likely not just an omission in the sense of a failure in logistics by the organisers of the countrywide election campaign of SWAPO. After all, it would have been an excellent opportunity to document appreciation of the Witbooi tradition of resistance to foreign occupation, support to the current Kaptein and his role in SWAPO and at the same time a suitable platform just weeks ahead of the elections to counteract the alliances sought by the South African administration in preceding years not only with other Nama groups but even within the community at Gibeon. Instead, the Witbooi festival of 1989 documented—also by the conspicuous, almost demonstrative absence of any other SWAPO politician—how deeply divided the various local communities in the southern parts of Namibia were. Ever since the return of the so-called ex-detainees several months earlier the division in particular at Gibeon was in marked contrast to the euphoria about the forthcoming elections and the local mobilisation by SWAPO through the agency of the communal and spiritual leader and Kaptein

1. Though there were a number of undercover security agents and police officers still employed by the South African installed authorities among the visitors.

2. The existence of both a relatively well equipped and built (completely under-utilised) secondary school and hostel from the official Apartheid administration as well as a (donor funded) private secondary school run by the AME church with Kaptein Hendrik Witbooi as its principal amply testified to this almost absurd situation in a surrounding environment which looked like the middle of nowhere.

3. The “ex-detainees” are a several hundred people strong group of former SWAPO members, who were blamed for having, as South African spies, infiltrated the liberation movement in exile since the late 1970s. They were arrested, kept in dungeons, tortured and many also killed from the early 1980s in SWAPO camps in Southern Angola. The survivors were ultimately released as part of the transitional arrangements and could return to Namibia in mid-1989. A striking proportion among them was from the south and in particular the communities of Berseba, Tses and Gibeon. Many more among those reported missing or dead were from the same areas. Their traumatic experiences were at the particular time the most sensitive and controversial issue within their home communities, who were torn apart and polarised over the issue. The “ex-detainees” have until today neither received official rehabilitation or apologies nor any compensation, though they continue to claim their innocence. Accounts of the hitherto unresolved issue of the “ex-detainees” are offered by i.a. Lauren Dobell, “Silence in Context: Truth and/or Reconciliation in Namibia”. Journal of Southern African Studies, vol. 23, no. 2, 1997, pp. 371–382; Siegfried Groth, Namibia—The Wall of Silence. The Dark Days of the Liberation Struggle. Wuppertal: Peter Hammer 1995; Colin Leys/John Saul, “SWAPO—The Politics of Exile.” In: Colin Leys/John Saul et al., Namibia’s Liberation Struggle. The Two-Edged Sword. London: James Currey and Athens: Ohio University Press 1995, pp. 40-65; Christo Lombard, “The detainee issue: An unresolved test case for SWAPO, the churches and civil society.” In: Ingolf Dienert/ Olivier Graefe (eds), Contemporary Namibia. The First Landmarks of a Post-Apartheid Society. Windhoek: Gamsberg Macmillan 2001, pp. 161–184.
(who had also managed to open a SWAPO office in Gibeon).

A similar non-interest—and hence a missed opportunity to show empathy and identification as part of a common course—was displayed by the political leadership of SWAPO with regard to southern Namibian matters only a few weeks earlier. In September 1989 the body of the deceased Charly Marengo, the last son of the legendary Jakob Marengo, was brought back home from South Africa to be buried in the barren ancestral land at his place of origin in Khoichas. It was left to one of his direct relatives as the leading local SWAPO activist (later a member of parliament and currently the deputy speaker in Namibia’s National Assembly) to reconcile the cultivation of memory of the primary anti-colonial resistance and its legacies with the then still ongoing struggle for Independence among members of his politically equally divided constituency. Otherwise the historic event with a great amount of symbolic relevance under the given circumstances was largely ignored and remained unnoticed.¹

These short pointers at some perceived discrepancies underline the question raised by Kössler in conclusion with regard to the more general issue of communal aspirations and the central state authority as a general problem of traditional communities, not only, but also, in Namibia. One could ask in a different but similar way, if the people of Gibeon are Nama or Namibians. Depending on what the answer is, this might have far-reaching implications. But most likely, the answer is very simple and less complicated than it could be: that they are both Nama and Namibians. The challenge remains, however, not only for them as Nama, but also for the Namibian authorities and politicians, how the “unity in diversity” for the people of Namibia is to be turned into a social, cultural, political and economic reality to the benefit of all.

¹. It is also revealing that one of the only two Whites participating in the funeral happened to be the later Deputy Minister, who gave the speech on behalf of the Government at the Heroes Day attended by Kössler in 1995. For the only report on the Marengo funeral published at the time see Klaus Dierks/Henning Melber, “Last Marengo Is Buried”. The Namibian, Windhoek, 15 September 1989.


