

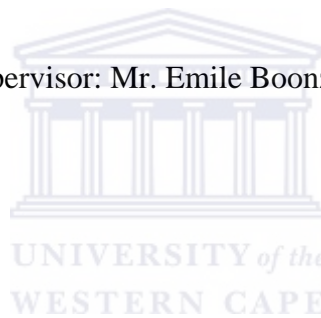
**“Checking the Kulcha”:  
Local Discourses of Culture in the Kavango Region of  
Namibia**

Presented in partial fulfillment of the degree of  
**Masters of Arts in Social Anthropology.**

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## Abstract

This thesis makes an ethnographic contribution to the anthropological debates about the contested nature of 'culture' as a central term in the discipline. It examines discourses as tools that create, recreate, modify and transmit culture. The research was done in the town of Rundu in Kavango region, northeastern Namibia.

In attempting to understand the local notions of culture this study focused on two main events: the Independence Day celebration on 21 March 2006 and a funeral that was held earlier in the month of January. During the study two particular media through which cultural ideas are negotiated, language and clothing were observed.

It emerged that the state and its agencies participate fully in meaning making processes of 'culture' locally and nationally through organized public events. Such public event where local culture is negotiated through display of performances creates a crossing point between the local communities and the state. Contestations of notions of 'culture' is also intense between the youth and adults, with the former associating modern things and specific contemporary practices with '*kulcha*', while the latter associate older practices that are assumed to be passed on from generation to generation as '*Mpo zetu*' or 'our tradition'.

## Declaration

I declare that “*Checking the kulcha*”: *Local Discourses of Culture in the Kavango Region of Namibia* is my own work, that it has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other university, and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged as complete references.

Michael Uusiku Akuupa

November 2006

Signed.....



**Dedicated**

**To**

***Ndakora, Junior and Nanguroni***



UNIVERSITY *of the*  
WESTERN CAPE

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Firstly, I would like to thank and express my profound gratitude and appreciation to my guide and mentor Mr. Emile Boonzaier for his superior guidance and encouragement in writing of this thesis.

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## Chapter 1. Introduction

‘Culture’ is not something that concerns anthropologists alone. Today people throughout the world have become aware of their culture – it is not just something that is taken for granted or implicit in what they do. People increasingly recognize that their culture is different from that of others; that their culture is something that is recognized by others; and that culture constitutes a core part of their identity. In other words, they have become reflexively aware of their ‘culture’.

This trend is particularly noticeable in Kavango, where there are open debates among the communities of Kavango about what constitutes ‘Kavango culture’. These debates become fuelled by the various ‘cultural festivals’ that have taken place, and the region has been successful in winning most of the government sponsored ‘cultural contests’ (*Nampa*, 16 Dec. 2003). Local radio chat shows and other public spaces regularly focus on the theme of ‘Kavango culture’ and strong opinions are expressed about whether these festivals actually display ‘culture’ and whether culture can be anything other than ‘preserved traditional activities’.

To further illustrate this point, some years ago, on the Namibian Broadcasting Corporation’s TV, Boli Mootseng reproduced and remixed a popular liberation song titled ‘*Shirongo Shetu*’ (‘Our Country’). Featuring in this song was a prominent local musician, Jackson Kauyeua, dressed in what is commonly known in Namibia as ‘African gear’<sup>1</sup> and seated in front of a big glowing fire. Also seated around the fire were younger people, facing towards Jackson, who appeared to be an elder relating folk tales to them. When the song commenced large letters appeared at the bottom of the TV screen reading: ‘Checking the kulcha’. And as the song picked up momentum, the producer’s voice thundered in the background, shouting the importance of ‘checking the kulcha’ before he led Jackson into the song.

The above episode shows how ‘culture’ has become a subject of overt public concern. As Sahlins records for a different context:

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<sup>1</sup> It is a full length loose robe, imported from West Africa.

...the cultural self-consciousness developing among imperialism's erstwhile victims is one of the more remarkable phenomena.....'If we didn't have *kastom*, we would be just like the white men'! (1994:378)

This theme is the focus of my dissertation: to understand how the people of Rundu interpret and reinterpret their culture. I initially relied heavily on formal interviews to try and answer this question, but soon recognized that meaning was being constructed in ways that could not necessarily be captured or articulated verbally in contrived question and answer sessions. I therefore focused, instead, on observation: specifically, of two public events that took place in Rundu during the time of my study, namely the Independence Day celebrations and a funeral. The Independence Day celebrations were held on 21 March 2006 at the Rundu Sports Stadium, and the funeral I focus on was held during the month of January in the same year. These two events are used as extended case studies, along the lines of the method pioneered by Gluckman (1961), because they allowed my research to be focused on specific episodes that I could describe, analyze and discuss with informants. They offered a forum within which I could observe the general process of making meaning around cultural issues, but each highlighted a particular medium – language and dress respectively – through which cultural ideas were negotiated. I pursue these in some more detail.

The dissertation is located against the backdrop of current anthropological discussions of the concept of 'culture'. More specifically, it draws on Susan Wright's identification of the 'old' and 'new' notions of culture (1998), and the current recognition that the former has proven to be particularly resilient, both within anthropology (Rapport and Overing, 2000: 94) and amongst the general public (Wright, 1998: 7-8; Rapport and Overing, 2000: 95). I argue that both of these notions are integral to current discourses about culture in Kavango.

## 1.1 Basic Conceptual Issues

### 1.1.1 Anthropological notions of culture

While the rest of the world was keenly discovering the concept of culture, it was undergoing a crisis in anthropology (Mazzarella, 2004:347). Within the discipline the 'old' idea of culture as a homogeneous, bounded, static entity uniquely associated with a named and circumscribed group of people has been thoroughly criticized and largely discarded (see, for example, Thornton 1988, Wright 1998, and Abu-Lughod 1991). This notion of culture, which essentially retains Tylor's 1871 original formulation, was also implicit in ethnographies of Namibia until at least the 1970s (see, for example, Bosch, 1964 and Van Tonder, 1966).<sup>2</sup>

It is difficult to generalize about the current status of 'culture' in the discipline, but three trends seem to have emerged. Firstly, there are those who have tried to reformulate our understanding of the term, emphasizing its fluid, dynamic nature and recognizing that it transcends population and geographical boundaries (Wright, 1998:7-8). Following from this is the focus on culture as a resource, something that can be contested and manipulated. This approach can be usefully applied to the Namibian situation, where culture can be used to make a stand for patriarchy, against women's rights and liberation, for corporal punishment and against homosexuality. More generally, it is used in context where people see themselves as African traditionalists and are against what they perceive as western influences (Hillebrecht, 2002: 208).

Becker (2000) provides a detailed account of the debates surrounding the Marriage Persons Equality Bill that was tabled in parliament in 1995. This bill, which was meant to do away with the husbands' automatic "marital power" and his position as "head of the family" led to heated debates, ensued in parliament and elsewhere. Politicians across the political party range and lay participants in national radio chat shows opposed the projected reform strongly. Of the resources used in this opposition

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<sup>2</sup> These two studies were done in the Kavango region, and dealt with the Hambukushu and the Shambyu people.

were “African tradition” and Christianity both of which argue that women and men are not equal (Becker, 2000:171).

Thornton (1988) promotes a similar argument, but points to another idea that I find quite useful: that our (laypersons’ and anthropologists’) ideas about culture and the categories and boundaries that the term allows us to construct, are an essential part of what culture does: “...the boundaries that are created, we can now seem are at the centre of culture, not at its edges.”(Thornton, 1988:28)

The second trend is encapsulated in the title of Lila Abu-Lughod’s article, “Writing against culture” (1991). She argues that it has been a dangerous term that has been used to construct otherness and has given rise to “ethnographies of the particular” (1991:147). Her conclusion is that it has outlived its usefulness as an analytical concept and should be discarded. I think she is right to a certain extent, when one looks at the negative instances where the concept was used.

And finally, there is Brumann’s response to Abu-Lughod. He fears that she might be throwing the baby out with the bathwater, for it remains a “convenient term for designating the clusters of common concepts, emotions, and practice that arises when people interact” (1991:1). He is particularly concerned about the fact that laypersons are today using the term in this way. It has become part of popular discourse and anthropologists would be unwise to deny its existence.

### **1.1.2 Lay notions of culture in Kavango**

Although this thesis focuses on ‘culture’, it should be emphasized that this entails going beyond the mere term itself. I am interested in *ideas* about ‘culture’ and the *meaning* that it has in people’s lives, and the way in which these unfold in particular contexts.

“The idea of culture is not different...from other human ideas. In fact, there are a number of competing words that have meanings and uses similar to ‘culture’ in some

contexts. The list might include ‘tradition’, ‘customs’, ‘way of life’, ‘civilization’, and even ‘race’, ‘nation’ or ‘folk-ways’, among others” (Thornton, 1988:26).

In Kavango the vernacular Rukwangari word for ‘culture’ is ‘*Mpo*’. ‘*Mpo*’ is generally used, and most commonly by older people, to refer to something that is old and different from the modern – in other words, synonymously with ‘tradition’ (see Spiegel and Boonzaier, 1988). But it is seldom used alone; rather, it is generally linked to ‘*zetu*’, meaning ‘our’. The phrase ‘our tradition’ thus clearly signifies something that carries the authority of the past, and that is associated with a particular population. It is commonly used to refer to practices that are assumed to have been handed down for generations and that need careful protection against foreign influence (Sahlins, 1993:4). In other words, a conception perfectly in line with the ‘old’ anthropological notion of culture.

Younger people, on the other hand, have imported the word ‘*kulcha*’ into the local languages (and obviously talk of ‘culture’ when speaking English). In general the term is associated with something modern or originating elsewhere, and specific practices, such as plaited hair or men wearing earrings, can readily be referred to as ‘*kulcha*’.

Not surprisingly, the same practices might be labeled or thought of as either ‘*mpo*’ or ‘*kulcha*’, depending on the vantage point. Some years ago a group of male youths were harassed by the police Special Field Force, apparently for wearing earrings. Reports in the local daily and subsequent debate in the National Assembly drew diverse comment. Some leaders claimed that it was “despicable for other people to dress in cultural wear” (*The Namibian*, 2 May 2001), and it was pointed out that wearing earrings was a fashionable norm and culture of elderly Nama- and Herero-speaking men. Others disputed this and claimed that it was not ‘cultural’ at all (the phrase ‘uncultural’ is often invoked here<sup>3</sup>). And finally, younger people might well view the practice as ‘*kulcha*’ in the sense that it is related to fashionable modernity.

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<sup>3</sup> Another case is when homosexual relations were condemned by some senior members of government as ‘uncultural’ (Hillebrecht, 2001: 207).

### 1.1.3 Discourse

Many people would use the word ‘discourse’ to encapsulate what I mentioned earlier about culture. In fact, the centrality of the concept of discourse to contemporary anthropology (and other social disciplines) has made it a target of critics unhappy with the challenge it poses to traditional ways of understanding representation. It has also become so widely and often so glibly used as to have lost much of its precise meaning (Bennett et al. 2005:93). Nonetheless, it has come to be used widely and synonymously with ‘rhetoric’, ‘mindset’ or ‘ideology’.

In a certain respect I am comfortable with such imprecise use of the term, for I feel that ‘rhetoric’, ‘mindset’ and ‘ideology’ do convey similar ideas. But perhaps there is a need to look at the concept in a bit more detail.

While the term has its origins in linguistics, in a Foucauldian sense it has been expanded to refer to a mode of organization of knowledge in relation to material institutions (Bennett et al. 2005:93). In the context of discourses of culture in Kavango, however, these are not circumscribed by specific ‘material institutions’. I therefore understand discourse simply as set of ideas about the world that are manifested in language and other forms of behaviour. It “creates, recreates, focuses, modifies and transmits both culture and language and their intersection” (Sherzer 1987:295; see also, Hymes 1964).

It appears that the discourses are either state sponsored (largely modernist) or traditionalist. Note the examples of the debates of the Married Persons Equality Bill and the way the youth are dressing or behaving. Discourse in Namibia is manifested mainly in the media, legislation, and educational institutions and that in turn serves to mediate or guide behaviour of the people. This mediation seems to involve in some cases notions such as harmonization and the resolution of differences (Mazzarella, 2004:356). However according to Appadurai (1996:44-45) contestations of such cultural and discursive productions and reproductions are not eased by the effects of mechanical art,

for they afford powerful resources for counter nodes of identity that youth, for example, can project against parental wishes or desires.

## **1.2. Setting the Scene: the research area**

### **1.2.1 Namibia**

During German colonial rule towards the end of the nineteenth century the country was known as the “Deutsch Sudwestafrika” (Maho 1998:1). After World War I it was changed to “South West Africa” when Sud-Afrika took over the mandate from the Germans. The name Namibia was only chosen around the 1960s by South West Africa People’s Organisation (SWAPO)<sup>4</sup> and is derived from an old Khoekhoegowab word, *namib*<sup>5</sup> (Maho 1998:1). Namibia is situated in the southwestern part of Africa and shares borders with Angola in the north, Zambia and Zimbabwe in northeast as well as Botswana in the east and South Africa in the extreme south to the southeast. It is bounded by three perennial rivers: such as the Kavango and Zambezi in the northeast, Orange in the south and Kunene in the north. It covers an area of just about 825 000 square kilometers of which most is very dry and arid; it also covers large tracks of national game parks, coasts and dunes (GRN, 2006)<sup>6</sup>. It is demarcated into thirteen political regions namely Caprivi, Kavango, Kunene, Omusati, Oshana, Oshikoto, Ohangwena in the north Otjozondjupa, Omaheke, Erongo and Khomas regions in the central; Hardap and Karas regions in the southern part of the country. The total population is about 1.830.330 with 51% female and 49% male (Hopwood, 2004).

Topographically it can be divided into three main regions namely the coastal desert (Namib Desert) in the west; the northern coast and the southern central are both national parks the Skeleton Coast Park and the Namib- Naukluft Park respectively. The above areas are accessible to tourists by air or road except the southernmost part which is

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<sup>4</sup> SWAPO is name of the liberation movement that is currently governing the Namibian state.

<sup>5</sup> *Namib* is an old Khoekhoegowab word which means ‘the shield’ or ‘enclosure’ which was used for the desert coastline, the Namib Desert, by the local inhabitants.

<sup>6</sup> Government of the Republic of Namibia (GRN).



not accessible to visitors, because of its diamond mining activities. Generally Namibia does not get high levels of rainfall; it ranges between 300-600mm per annum. The Namib Desert is characterized by low (or none) rainfall, with high sand dunes and without much plants. However, a very rare and old plant the *Welwitschia mirabilis* grows there. From central to the north to northeastern areas you find mountain ranges, shrubs and bush savannahs and woodland plants. The east is characterized by the semi-desert Kalahari that stretches in to western Botswana (GRN, 2006).

Namibia is also endowed with natural resources such as mining products that include gem diamonds, uranium deposits, copper, zinc and lead; fishing and agriculture also form part of the economy. The above assets play a very important role in the economy of the country with the latter sector employing a lot of people. The government website states that Namibia is a land which is rich in natural resources and has large untapped human resources and skills (GRN, 2006).

The first colonial rule of a Namibian territory was by the British Cape Government around mid 1870s, when they annexed Walvis Bay which became the port town. It was until 1884 when the Germans occupied the territory of Namibia except the harbor town that was still in possession of the British authorities (Maho, 1998: 6). After World War I when Germany lost to the Allies, Namibia (South West Africa) then was handed to the Union of South Africa by the League of Nations in December 1920 (Diener and Graefe, 2001: 21). The custodianship mandated the Union of South Africa to impose its own laws on Namibia while the territory was being prepared for independence. Instead South Africa aimed at including Namibia within its own borders and incorporating it as a province (Maho, 1998:8). This move was, however, rejected by the League of Nations, and South Africa complied. After World War II when the League of Nations was replaced by the UNO (United Nations Organisation and later the UN (United Nations) the Union of South Africa enforced its apartheid system in Namibia and further demanded the incorporation to their territory. The move was again refused by the latter organisation (Maho, 1998; Diener and Graefe, 2001), but South Africa continued to perform and enforce the apartheid laws vigorously.



The apartheid system that was implemented by the mandated power in Namibia was a replica of the system in South Africa where territorial partition was between ‘white homeland’ and ‘black homelands’. The system consolidated native reserves into homelands, embarked on what has been termed “ethnic cleansing among native groups and imposed Bantustans of consultative councils” (Diener and Graefe, 2001:23). The above sequence of events led to the formation of labour movements such as OPC (Ovamboland People’s Congress), OPO (Ovamboland People’s Organisation) that later became resistance movements such as SWANU (South West African National Union) and SWAPO (South West Africa People’s Organisation) around the late 1950s and early 1960 (Diener and Graefe, 2001:23). SWAPO was eventually recognized by the UN as the sole authentic representative of the Namibian people and gained a full observer status within the international body.

The protracted war of liberation in Namibia culminated into its independence after the UN resolution 435 was implemented. The end of over a century of colonialism coincided with the end of apartheid (Diener and Graefe, 2001:21). The implementation of the UN resolution 435 was the result of the decolonization process that was drawn out against the background of up to nearly thirty years of armed struggle for national liberation between South Africa, Angola aided by Cuba; and the West supporting South Africa.

The independence foundation was the free and fair elections for the Constituent Assembly that were held in November 1989 by universal suffrage with a voter participation of over 90% in accordance with the revised condition of the UN resolution 435 (Diener and Graefe, 2001). Following these UN supervised elections SWAPO party won 53% of the votes and its exiled leader Sam Nujoma was installed as the first state President of the Republic of Namibia on 20 March 1990 midnight in Windhoek which then became the capital city (Maho, 1998:11). This very important occasion (Independence) did not come without challenges. The new government had to start building a nation that had a heritage of close to a century of very authoritarian

administrations and had been the victim of ideologies of racial inequality (Diener and Graefe, 2001:24).

### **1.2.2 Kavango**

The Kavango region forms the northeastern part of the Namibian territory. It shares borders with the Caprivi region in the east, Otjozondjupa in the south; Oshikoto and Ohangwena in the northwest. It borders with the Angolan town of Calai up north along the river known to be Kavango. The Kavango River stretches from central Angola southwards and along the Angola- Namibia border, then through Namibia into Botswana, where it diverges into the swamp area called the Okavango Delta (Maho 1998:36). The people that inhabit this area on the Namibian side are considered to be Kavango, although much talk implies that those on the Angolan side are Kavango too. Some Kavango people are also found in Botswana around the Okavango Delta (Fleisch and Mohlig, 2002). There are wide ranging debates with the term 'Kavango' and 'Okavango' that the former refer to the inhabitants while the latter refers to the geographical area.

Early history of settlement in that area indicates that the inhabitants entered the current habitat from the place called Mashi along the Kwando River in southwestern Zambia (Maho 1998; Fleisch and Mohlig, 2002). All the groups in Kavango namely the Gciriku, Shambyu, and the Hambukushu claim to have originated from the Mashi area; except the Kwangari and the Mbunza that claim to have move downstream from their abodes, but it remains debatable due to contradictory historical accounts (Fleisch and Mohlig, 2002:20). They all settled along the banks of the Okavango river stretch from the east to the west. They were subsistence farmers and supplement their living by hunting game and fishing (Fleisch and Mohlig, 2002).

The people of Kavango came into contact with Western civilization and Christian messengers of faith relatively late due to difficult access to the region from the centre of Namibia (Fisch, 2005:5). There were waterless stretches and heavy sand dunes to overcome and alternative routes via Botswana were considerably longer (Fisch, 2005:5).

It was only around 1910 that the missionaries managed to establish a permanent settlement in the Gciriku territory under Hompa<sup>7</sup> Nyangana (Fleisch and Mohlig, 2002; Fisch, 2005). Two or three years later the next mission was founded at Andara in the Hambukushu tribal area. Thereafter followed the missionary stations of Tondoro in the Kwangari area, Mbunza and in Shambyu around 1930s. These stations formed an interethnic infrastructure not only by Christian faith, but in the perspectives of school instruction, handicraft teaching and health services (Fleisch and Mohlig, 2002).

In the meantime the mandated power of South Africa that followed the German Reich established itself first in Nkurenkuru and later in Rundu, which is in the center of the Kavango region; and on the boundary between Mbunza and Shambyu (Fleisch and Mohlig, 2002: 22). Rundu, which was initially the residence of the native commissioner with his office and a police station, became the capital of the Kavango region. Today it has government buildings, banks, a hospital, a radio station, several schools, churches, shops, hostels, bars and sports grounds. Naming the station Rundu, “was not a simple affair, but created a series of bureaucratic problems for the colonial administration” (Fumanti, 2003:59 unpublished); and until today there are on-going controversies over the name.

Since its birth in the 1930s, Rundu as a town has grown from what was the native commissioner’s office and residence to a big town with many people and good infrastructure. The town is demarcated into two political constituencies: Rundu rural east and Rundu urban; the former consist settlements such as Sauyemwa, New Millennium Park, Kehemu, Kings Park, Ndama, Sun City while the latter is made up of Safari, Nkarapamwe, Tutungeni, Queens Park and the town center where the shops and government offices are. It has up to five high schools and nine primary and junior secondary schools, all together making education the highest employer in the region followed by the army and other government agencies such as health etc. Its business sector also employs a lot of low paid people. Such growth has also resulted to the influx

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<sup>7</sup> Hompa is the traditional title of the tribal chief used by the four western Kavango tribes namely the Shambyu, Gciriku, Kwangali and the Mbunza.

of people from different regions and underlying villages in search of greener pastures, while expatriates have entered on the basis of skills improvement and development.

Most teachers, police officers and government civil servants stay in areas such as New Millennium Park, Kings Park, Queens Park, Safari and Nkarapamwe respectively. The elite and the middle class of the town are to be found in Tutungeni<sup>8</sup> suburb; before independence it was a white-only residential area. At independence people that were in management and middle management of the government agencies moved into Tutungeni. Other people that are either casual or lower ranking employees, such as cleaners, shop assistants and vendors, are mostly staying in Kehemu, Ndama, Sauyemwa and Sun City informal settlements. The above areas surround Rundu Urban constituency or Rundu ‘proper’ as it is referred to by some local people.

Despite the above demarcations of the town, people of Rundu have common spaces that they occupy such as the media, religion, national events, funerals, weddings and education. The local radio station, which is state owned, plays a major role in the public space of Rundu and in shaping the local discourse. Its content programming includes public service and death announcements, entertainment, traditional talks and open-line<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Tutungeni means ‘lets built together’ it was a whites-only residential area before independence.

<sup>9</sup> It is locally known as ‘mudukuli’ which literary means ‘speak-out’, it is a call in program that anybody can call and raise any concern or complaint.

## 1.3 Methodology

### 1.3.1 Research Methods

Participants in this study were youth and adults of the Kavango region, specifically from the town of Rundu. For the purpose of this study the youth were identified as those between the ages of 15 and 30 while the adults were identified as those between the ages of 35 and 50. Youth is an “elastic concept”<sup>10</sup> in Namibia, so I selected this age group, because of its legislated definition of what a youth might be (Mufune, 2002:179). Due to complexities of exactly determining who the youth is, it seemed fair to regard it as part of the negotiations and contestations of the cultural process. There were no clear indications of ‘induction into age systems’ as found in other African societies (Spencer, 1988:65).

During the initial phase of the study, five residential households were selected (including mine). Particularly in these households I focused on the youth and their parents’ (adults) views on culture and observed some of their daily activities. I examined how they understood and describe their culture, their expectations and how they are informed for example through the media. I held several interviews with the members of these households. I also conducted interviews with some people in the Ministry of Education Directorate, Ministry of Youth, and National Service, Sport and Culture and also one member of the prominent local cultural group by the name of Ukumwe Cultural group. The interviews with these officials and member of the group were done in order to establish and examine how culture is interpreted and used in the official context.

According to Keesing and Strathern (1998), ethnographers bring techniques of mapping, census-taking and skills of interviewing and observation to the task of research. There have been some criticism regarding the lack of rigor associated with the qualitative research method of participant observation; nonetheless I still feel that this method

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<sup>10</sup> Young people are described variously as young adults, teenagers, adolescent or juvenile, and they all qualify under the rubric youth.

provides very useful research data beyond that which can be collected using the more structured techniques of quantitative research. I observed among other things some day to day activities within the households, the Independence Day celebrations, weddings and funerals. I also participated in preparation of activities like Christmas, weddings and funerals where most discourses that denote certain activities as uncultural featured most of them with opposite idealized notions of culture. The above were not the only areas I observed, I also went to the bars, schools, parent meetings and sports field.

### **1.3.2 Fieldwork in Rundu**

It is important to state from the beginning that I did not only come or go to Rundu during the period of my intended study. I have been a on and off resident of Rundu since 1994, when I started working there for a local bank, until I settled there in 2004. In the eyes of the people of Rundu, particularly those that were involved in the research, I was not a foreigner per se, but only to a certain extent. I did not, like any foreign anthropologist or researcher, have to go through the hassle of getting a contact person that would introduce me to the wider population targeted for the study.

I did not have to learn to speak the local language, as I was conversant in two common vernaculars, namely Rukwangari and Rumanyo. I can speak and write the former fairly well and it also my household language. The latter I can only speak, but not write. The people that knew that I was not a ‘MuKavango’<sup>11</sup> generally chose to speak Afrikaans with me. At times when I presented myself in Rukwangari they would rather comment: *“you really have been here for a long time now, look how you are speaking our language without any problem”*. Although I would not qualify my stay as being long enough in order to learn and observe people more like Paul Stoller (1989) when he did fieldwork in Niger, I can claim that I have stayed long enough with the people of Kavango to have gained general acceptance as an insider.

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<sup>11</sup> ‘MuKavango’ refers to being a Kavango person.

Before I started to do fieldwork, my duty was to approach the heads of the households that I had identified and inform them of my intention to include them in my study. I explained to them what my study was about and why I was interested in them taking part. My female neighbor, who is a teacher, commented when I asked her if she would participate: “*you Mike you know people like us do not have culture, because of our background*”.<sup>12</sup> I did not meet any resistance in arranging for and identifying my study population although I had fears whether some of them would ask me for an official document from the institution that would inform them of my intended study, which I did not have.

I went out daily in the afternoons or morning during weekends in order to visit the identified households. If I was not visiting them I would take an afternoon walk or drive and hang out at the bars or soccer field and just mingle with the people and talk about any issue on the town’s agenda. If you go to any bar in locations such as Kehemu or Sauyemwa you would find any young adult male or female, but there are certain bars in the same locations that are mostly frequented by those in the middle and top elite of the town. Some of these bars in many cases belong to their colleagues. Otherwise you would only find them in the up-market bars at the local lodges; the popular ones being Backstage and New World both owned by Portuguese businessmen. These particular bars are equipped with slot machines and big screens for international soccer viewing.

Weekends in Rundu, particularly Friday afternoons and Saturday mornings, are spent at events like funeral memorials, burials and weddings. I spent most time during weekends observing some of the said events. I attended two funerals and also assisted preparing the grave, driving people around town as they were preparing insurance claims and acquiring the coffin. I also attended two weddings in one of which I had assisted in the planning.

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<sup>12</sup> Dorothea Sisanda, interview 10 Feb 2006.

### **1.3.3 Problems Encountered in the Field**

The first problem that I experienced was the usage of the term 'culture'. Anthropologically the term denotes the 'way of life', but I realized that locally it refers to tradition or age-old practices and custom of the Kavango people. So during the initial stages of the study I was using the word 'culture' or 'mpo as it is locally referred to, unaware of the implications it could have on the outcome of the study. I decided to use the word '*nkareso*'<sup>13</sup> instead of 'culture'. I thought that would help me greatly when I gather and interpret the data.

The second problem was the unwillingness of the women participants to speak when their male partners or husbands were present. Instead they would let their male counterparts do the talking while they were listening. Following consultation with my colleague from the University of Manchester, who was in the field the same time as me, he advised me to use my female partner to do some interviews with them on my behalf. This advice bore some good results.

The other issue was the problem with my photographic equipment. I had procured four cameras that I distributed among the households so that they could take any picture around their homes that they saw as depicting their culture. Unfortunately the cameras had some factory defects, so I could not get pictures from the people involved in the study.

### **1.3.4 Ethical Considerations**

Three issues concerning ethics have emerged during the course of my research:

The first relates to the notion of confidentiality. In general I have tried to retain the anonymity of informants with whom I conducted interviews, even though the material I present is not likely to be deemed sensitive. My observations of public events, on the other hand, do not involve any privileged information. Since it is already public, I do not

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<sup>13</sup> 'Nkareso' is the Rukwangari word which means 'way of life'.



see the need to exercise particular caution in this respect. Regarding private interviews with public officials – whose identities would be readily apparent to anyone familiar with Rundu – I have not identified their specific posts or positions where I have felt that the individuals concerned would have preferred to remain anonymous.

The second issue concerns my own subjectivity regarding the way in which I view culture. As a member of the ‘younger’ generation, and as an anthropology student who has had to follow the arguments deconstructing culture and the critiques of the ‘old’ notion of culture as a coherent, bounded and static system of shared beliefs and actions (Rapport and Overing, 2000: 95), I obviously have ideas that differ radically from those of some of my (especially older) informants. While it was relatively easy for me to sublimate my own opinions while in the field, I did experience a nagging uneasiness whenever I found myself agreeing (usually through nodding) with views that radically differed from my own. This was particularly pronounced whenever someone expressed pleasure at the fact that I, as a young person, was showing such interest in ‘tradition’. My discomfort was related to my having misrepresented the aim of my research, but I was only able to crystallize this much later.

Finally, I have had to consider my role as a ‘halfie’ (Abu-Lughod, 1991:138) anthropologist: as someone neither an ‘outsider’, nor an ‘insider’ – an hybrid straddling two worlds and certainly not a ‘native’ better able to provide an authentic account of the native’s point of view. However, I was clearly perceived by my informants as more ‘native’ than any white anthropologist from outside Namibia, and this meant that their expectations differed. My colleague from Manchester who was in the field was time and again reminded by his informants to “write a different story about Rundu in his book”. However some of my informants expected me to know some of the cultural issues I enquired.

Being an insider in the sense of being a citizen anthropologist (Cheater 1987) also implies a greater degree of accountability to research subjects (rather than to the discipline and funders). I anticipate that some of my informants will eventually read what I have written about them, and promises made during the period of my research will have

to be fulfilled. I see this not as a problem, but as a useful check on my research honesty and integrity.

## **1.4 Structure of the Thesis**

Chapter 1 briefly introduces the aim of the study and identifies some political issues related to the usage and meaning-making of the concept culture in Rundu. Before it introduces Namibia and specifically the town of Rundu as the research area it focuses on the conceptual aspects of the study, in an attempt to position the study and derive theoretical sense of the notions of culture and discourse. It also outlines the methodology that was used during the study, fieldwork process and the problems encountered in the field. It also outlines ethical considerations observed during the study. This leads in to Chapter 2 that describe events that were observed at the Independence Day celebration on 21 March 2006. It present this event in order to illustrate how the state creates space where people, being it at national or regional level gather and display their culture and promote the professed goal of learning and tolerating each other in diversity.

Chapter 3 describes events that were observed at PM's<sup>14</sup> funeral during the 7<sup>th</sup> of January 2006. This chapter attempts to show how a funeral gives rise to public space and civil discourse. It also tries to show how certain things or sentiment are distinct or disrupt certain social relations and how it is acted upon. Current practices at funerals are being criticized especially by senior adults and elders as uncultural or too modern, to the effect that the elements that constitute sadness and grief are lost.

By describing events of the Independence Day celebration and the funeral certain themes such as language, clothing and food emerged as potential media for culture expression. Chapter 4 describes the observed ways of clothing at the Independence Day celebration and funeral. It will also examine general discourses of clothing in the public space of Rundu.

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<sup>14</sup> I will use PM as a pseudonym to refer to person that has died.

Chapter 5 attempts to show what languages are used in Rundu by describing the observed language usage patterns among the youth and between the youth and adults. The youth were observed during their mini-school project that they carried out during the month of April. Eventually, I argue that there is possible development of a hybrid language among the youth of Rundu due to its usage of English and Afrikaans. It also examines whether discourses of protection of the local languages from foreign ones exists. Chapter 6 concludes the thesis by focusing on the broader and overall aspects of the study and findings. It outlines things that were not done or could have been done during the study. It also raises questions for further research.



## **Chapter 2. Independence Celebration: ‘Unity through diversity’**

Cultural discourses, especially as they relate to ‘authenticity’, continue strongly in Namibia. These discourses involve not only laypersons, but are intense at state level. Within government debates arise around a range of issues, from nation-building and ethnicity to patriarchy and homosexuality. Recovering and preserving ‘African custom’ are inseparable from the processes of postcolonial nation building and the construction and contestation of national identities (Fairweather, 2002:32). Although anthropologists are cautious of assertions of the authenticity of culture; they have been at pains to try and understand how culture is interpreted, constructed and contested, especially as this varies within different sectors of the society (Fairweather, 2002:32). Thus they have come to regard cultures as invented and continually reinvented in the discourses of every day life, rather than as distinct entities that are preserved and passed down from generation to generation (Fairweather, 2002: 32-34).

In this chapter I attempt to describe the way in which culture is articulated by the state at the Independence Day celebrations where emphasis is still put on the maintenance of ‘authenticity’ and ‘purity’ through staged performances of traditional songs. According to Lentz (2001) such festival create crossing points between local communities and the state and at same time function as public arenas where local cultural identities can be articulated within a framework that is largely set by the state. Activities that are performed during such encounters have national dimensions even if they are containing local material. Such representations at independence celebrations or cultural festivities can be of particular importance to the state when it comes to the integration of local populations into the mainstream nation (Lentz, 2001:47).

Independence celebrations are big in Namibia. A week before the 21<sup>st</sup> of March intensive publicity about the forthcoming Independence Day celebration was undertaken. The media shifted its lens from other issues and focused on independence celebrations.

During the run-up, interviews were conducted with ordinary citizens on the street and with key figures in the government. The content of most aired interviews contained information about the successes of the government, and of the importance of unity through diversity. The program for countrywide celebrations was also broadcasted daily on television, national and regional radio.

The RuKavango radio service was no exception in fulfilling the above duty. It had been announcing the Independence Day celebration program for the whole week. The program contained information about the venue, time and the main speakers. However, this year's celebration was not to be like the usual celebrations, when the main speakers came from Windhoek to represent the central government - it was more a 'local thing'.

Like government the local radio also emphasized on the importance of unity for the people through cultural performances. The station played music of the popular SWAPO Cultural Band known as Ndilimani<sup>15</sup> rather than playing any musical items. This group has transformed its musical style from liberation to more contemporary music genre and focuses on social issues such education, HIV/Aids, unity and respect.

## **2.1 21<sup>st</sup> March 2006: Celebration Events**

The previous day I and fellow anthropologist Mattia from the University of Manchester agreed to meet at the venue of celebrations in order to see how people were going to enjoy the public holiday. On Tuesday morning I woke up at 06h00, took a shower and had breakfast before I took off to the Rundu Sport Stadium. As I was walking through the streets, I saw people moving in groups of two or three headed towards the direction of the Stadium. These groups consisted of adults, small children and some youth.

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<sup>15</sup> Ndilimani is a combat name of one fallen soldier of the People Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN), it means 'dynamite' and the cultural band was named after him.

When I arrived at the gate of the stadium, I found the area already crowded by people including those that saw business opportunities at any type of gathering announced on radio. Adult and younger women carrying babies on their backs sat in a half circle with their big baskets, boxes and containers filled with the merchandise. The atmosphere around was filled with the fresh aroma from the fat cakes and meat that was for sale. Most young women had boxes of sweets, glucose biscuits, containers of a nutritional homebrew known as 'sikundu'<sup>16</sup> and cooler boxes stacked with sweetened colored ice cubes. Their business was already picking up, because some people appeared to have not grabbed anything to eat on their way to the stadium. (See picture 1)

The state security personnel searched everybody that was entering the gate in order to prevent those that might carry dangerous objects such as guns and knives inside; I entered after being searched. Military and other government vehicles were visible all over the stadium. As I was still behind the sitting stand I could not see what was prepared in front. People rushed inside in order to grab seats up the sitting stand for a better view of the anticipated activities. When I came in the front of the sitting stand, I decided to take a seat on the lower bench anticipating my future movements when the celebration gets into full swing. There was a red line in front of the sitting stand demarcating the sitting and movement of the crowd from the stage area.

On the pitch there was a big white and green striped tent decorated with small national flags at each support rod facing the sitting stand. In the front two flags, a National and the African Union flew up high. Inside the tent were chairs arranged in rows from left to the right. The media were seated in front with their live broadcasting equipment. On the far eastern side of the stadium was another tent of the same color, but smaller in size that was also filled with tables and chairs.

The lower two benches of the sitting stand was occupied by the performers that would brighten the day later. The performers were dressed in different types of costumes some of which were made out of animal skins and plant material, while others were of

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<sup>16</sup> Sikundu is nutritional home brew made from mixtures millet and sorghum flour.

bright cotton colors. Notable was the blue, red and green SWAPO party colored costumes. Some performers dressed in black and white clothes.

At around eight the stadium was almost packed to capacity, but the tent in front of the sitting stand was still empty except for the director of ceremonies who arrived shortly after seven thirty (07h30). He had to come earlier than all the other invited guests and dignitaries in order to welcome them to the event. The director of ceremonies who seemed to be in his early forties is a lecturer at the local vocational training centre. (Note attendance of people on picture 2)

When he noticed that the stadium was packed to capacity he started to invite performers to present some musical items while dignitaries and other important personalities were arriving. As the invited guests started to appear one by one he announced their arrival amidst applause and ululation from the crowd. Noticeable at this gathering was the town mayor, regional chiefs of security forces namely the army and police, education inspectors and some expatriates from different world organizations that are represented in the region.

The Regional Councilor of Rundu Urban Constituency who was the main speaker of the day only arrived at exactly quarter to ten (09h45). The director announced his arrival and urged the crowd to give him a good welcome as he was moving towards the tent. Following shaking of hands and hugging with the director of ceremonies he was ushered to his seat. Before he took his seat he continued to shake hands with the other dignitaries that were in the vicinity of his seat.

By then, I decided to shift my sitting position from the original one in order to have a good glimpse of what was happening and also move freely when I was taking pictures. At this point in time the tent was filled with the very important people of the town. The stadium too was packed to capacity, some people who could not get a place on the stand sat near the track rail covering almost fifty meters both sides away from the sitting stand. I noticed my colleague Mattia with his parents also standing on the right

wing end of the stand taking pictures. After exchanging greetings we parted for each had his own plan of the day.

Shortly after the arrival of the Councilor everybody rose and the military band performed the National and the African Union anthems respectively to mark the official opening of the program. The crowd joined the military band in singing both anthems in English. Following the anthems people sat and the guard of honor was inspected by the Councilor who later returned to his seat, and gave permission for the military personnel to march off. The crowd was ululating to the eye catching march skills of the military personnel.

The director of ceremonies took the podium and invited a priest from the local church to make a prayer for the day. After the prayer the director gave a brief history of the country and how it became independent and the importance of celebrating the day of Independence. He mentioned the importance of embracing each other and how vital it is for the unity of the diverse people into a strong nation. He announced that the day will not be marked with lengthy speeches as usual but performances. *“It is your day today”*, the director said.

Several performing groups exhibited eye-catching presentations. Traditional groups composed of adult women and young men; church choirs, youth group and political party pioneer groups were the main actors of the day. The groups were invited one by one to present an item and the director would comment about them or their performance when they were leaving the ‘stage’. There were about five people covering this event including myself. Initially we did it from the distance using the zooming facilities on our photographic equipment thanks to the technology, but there were certain angles that required us to change positions. I approached one elderly usher and asked him whether it was possible for us to take pictures from the other angles. He said we could, but we should return to our original places when we were done. My colleague



Mattia was very fortunate, because the same usher I asked about the position of taking pictures invited him and his family to the VIP tent.

When we were allowed to move nearer to where the performances were taking place, I could take aim at any point I wanted. The presentation of musical items continued and every time when the people seemed to enjoy it they clapped hands while cheering. Notable was the performance of the Maria Mwengere cultural group; this group is composed of adult women with five young men three of whom were beating the drums while two were supporting dancers. This group moved the crowd when it took to the stage, even the director of the ceremony could not contain his excitement about their performance. At one stage he started shouting and singing after them and when they were leaving the 'stage' he commented: *“that is the culture, our culture it makes us who we are it is very important that our young people know their culture”*.

When the youth group presented its musical item, the crowd was not going wild like when Maria Mwengere group performed. Their performance was more of a blend of hip-hop and 'kizomba'<sup>17</sup> flavor, the type of music that one would normally hear at bars and 'shebeens'<sup>18</sup>. Only pockets of applause could be heard from different sections of the crowd; in fact I could hear murmurs from some people in the crowd saying things like: *“what do they know, do they think people like such things”*. It is evident that many people did not enjoy that performance.

Groups that performed items that are related to tradition, religion and liberation were well cheered. The Lutheran church choir that was composed of two males only and more than ten women was also well received by the onlookers who in some instances sang along. There were some religious choirs that were not well cheered by the crowd and even the director had to intervene to call the crowd to order and begging it to treat everybody the same. All performances were done in the local languages.

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<sup>17</sup> It is musical genre produced in Southern Angola and danced by the Kimbundu people.

<sup>18</sup> Shebeens are in most cases unlicensed liquor outlets within municipal or informal residential areas.

The performances went on until around midday when it was time for the key note address by the Regional Councilor of Rundu Urban constituency. Before he rose the director of ceremonies introduced him in English and Rukwangari languages, “*councilor gwetu ige ana ku kwama ko nosiuyungwa sendi sezuva lyanaina, please give him a hand of applause*”.<sup>19</sup> Amidst applause he reached the podium and started sloganeering for the ‘long life’ of the republic and the region as well. It was obvious that the speech was prepared in English, but he made some local language additions when he delivered the speech for the benefit of those people who could not understand the English language. His speech focused on the development of infrastructure in the region, health and welfare and employment creation. He also took stock of the previous year’s successes for the region. Finally he stressed the importance of unity through the display of “*mpo zetu*”.

When his speech was done, the Maria Mwendere group performed again one of their items to send him off the podium despite the availability of other groups. There appears to be what Lentz (2001) refer to as “the politics of invitation with regard to stage performance” when the director of ceremonies invite groups to perform.

The next speech was delivered by the town Mayor, who is also a senior education officer in the region. Her speech was less political than the Councilor’s. The Mayor’s speech focused on development of the town, cleanliness and prompt payment of municipal services. During the rest of her speech, I briefly excused myself in order to go and see what was taking place outside the stadium. Outside the stadium business was in full swing unlike in the morning when I arrived, people were buying the merchandise on display. There were a lot of children buying sweets and fat cakes while adults consumed fat cakes which they downed with the ‘*sikundu*’.

When I returned inside the stadium musical performances had commenced. I found young girls of the SWAPO Pioneers cultural group dressed in the party colored tops and mini skirts performing some traditional song and the onlookers seemed to be

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<sup>19</sup> Translation: “The next on agenda is our Councilor to come and give his independence speech”.

entertained by the body maneuvers of these girls. In the meantime movements of people going outside the stadium were increasing as the time approached towards lunch time.

At around 13h00 the director of ceremonies announced the end of the official program and invited guests and dignitaries to move to the other tent for lunch treat. He also invited people to a soccer game that would commence around 15h00. It appeared that food was only prepared for the invited guests and not for the general public. People started flocking outside the stadium towards the women that were selling, while some moved in the direction where houses are located. The people dispersed until it was time for the soccer game. When the dignitaries and other important people had lunch some of them left. The tent on the pitch was disassembled in a very short time before the game started.

Towards 15h00 the pitch was cleared for the match and many people left the stadium, while some were just showing face for the first time. This time the general appearance of the crowd had changed drastically from its original state; the amount of children and elders has decreased and there were more youth and adults this time. Except those people that did not leave the stadium at lunch break people appeared dressed differently. They were casually dressed in jeans, shorts, some miniskirts and tops for females. There was more noise this time, drinking and music blasting from vehicles parked behind the sitting stand. Sounds of the 'the Dogg', 'Gazza' and 'Sunny boy'<sup>20</sup> could be heard. The security personnel were also around, but not in big numbers as initially.

The two teams appeared prepared for their encounter and the crowd had also differentiated itself according to which side it was dedicating its cheers. The atmosphere this time around was typical of any at any field of playing that of shouting, dancing screaming and insults to adversaries through songs. The match went on up until nearly to 18h00 and following the final whistle blow the people started to leave the stand. Some female youth were dancing and shaking to the tunes of Gal Level oozing from the slow

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<sup>20</sup> These are three popular kwaito musicians in Namibia.

passing sedan speakers. It was observable from the gate how people were moving into different directions leading to their houses.



## **Chapter 3. ‘Culture’ at Funerals**

### **3.1 Increase of Deaths in Rundu**

HIV/AIDS is the primary cause of death and hospitalization in Namibia (USAID, 2003). It accounted for almost 50% of deaths among the individual people aged 15-49 in the period 2000-2001, while related hospitalization amounted to 75% in all state health centers. Namibia has an overall prevalence rate of 22% with rates varying from 9% to 43% in its political regions, where the most affected region is the Caprivi. This prevalence rate puts Namibia at the top five highly infected countries in the world.

According to the same report the Kavango region had a HIV prevalence percentage of about 20% - 24% in the year 2002. The Namibian epidemic is generalized and is still on an upward path. A complex contextual array of socio-economic and cultural factors such as poverty; “internal labour migration; the presence of major transportation corridors connecting Namibia to other high prevalence countries; sexual norms and attitudes; geographical inequalities in access to services and information; and unequal power dynamics between men and women” drives the curve up (USAID, 2003).

Despite increased deaths in Rundu, it is difficult to attribute them to HIV/AIDS; primarily because of the manner information leading to the person’s death is handled. Concealment of death information is very common among the people of Rundu, because of the stigma that is attached to HIV/AIDS. Witchcraft and jealousy are attributed to be the causes of death. Generally funeral platforms allow for public revelations of issues with regard to the deceased and the survivors, but concealments are intentionally done in order to prevent bad intentions from the family members.

Funerals in Rundu are distinct spaces where the identity of the deceased and those that survive are negotiated through well prepared tributes and the importance of the place where the body of the deceased is to be buried. According to Durham and Klaitz (2002)

funerals constitute distinct public spaces that focus local attention on how particular persons' sentiments influence the well being of others. In the context of death they argue further that people shape forms of community and difference along the lines of ethnicity, kinship, class, gender and religion through the mutuality of their emotions. It is where struggles over support, identity and other social issues are seriously worked with unpredictable consequences.

Information about the social goods that the deceased engaged into is displayed in the public space, while identity of the survivors is in many times created, changed or recreated at this platform especially if the deceased are buried in their village of origin (Durham and Klaitz, 2002:780). Survivors also play a role in the estate of the deceased in order to display their relations to the deceased and determine their identity through the number of people that attend and support them.

When a person dies things become hectic around the household. First they decide on which key people are to be particularly informed about the death in order to solicit any kind of assistance. The survivors discuss issues related to the burial site, who would direct and manage the whole process of the burial; and the execution of the deceased estate. They also decide about the types of food and drinks that people would eat on the day of burial. Not only food is deliberated on, but clothing and color too. In this chapter I attempt to show how 'culture', identity and association is negotiated and renegotiated at funerals in Kavango by describing some of the funeral events of PM that I observed during the month of December and January respectively. PM was a young adult with age ranging between 30 and 37. He was single and a teacher by profession. He was survived by four children.

### **3.2 Death News in Rundu Public Space**

During the months December and January the local radio aligns its programming according to the festive mood, except for the daily general public service announcements '*madiviso*' and death announcements '*madiviso gonomfa*' programs. These programs run

everyday from 15h00 to 16h00 and from 19h00 to 20h00 respectively and are aired nationally. When the program was on air I observed that many people especially adults tune in. This is the way how it operates, people can write the death announcement and have it certified by the local police in order to validate the death news, and alternatively one can call in on the live program and announce the death.

The usual caller will go like this: *“I am Michael Akuupa announcing the sad news of the death of my brother or (sister) who passed on in the hospital of Rundu after a short illness”* or if the announcement about the death has already been done, but the burial date was not yet known it will go like this: *“I am Michael Akuupa announcing the burial feast of my brother or sister (name) that became late on the (date) at Rundu”*. During the program the presenter seem to display sentiments of compassion and feeling of togetherness with the callers by sending them off with a religious hymn. The above makes radio an important medium of communication to the people of Rundu and other RuKavango<sup>21</sup> language speakers nationally.

When the news of the death is spread, depending on whom the person was it becomes the town talk. People talk about what might have caused the death. In fact the news that the death was a result of a short or long illness makes people conclude in their own way as to what might have killed the person. Another probe is in relation to whom the deceased was hanging with. In that way death already becomes a platform for public discourse on certain sentiments pertaining to the deceased and the survivors. People speak about the deceased in civility or conceal certain information intentionally in order to show empathy towards the family of the deceased.

The amount of visitors to the house of the deceased depends on the relationship of the bereaved family with the people outside and their identity in the community. Their (family) civility and ability to assist other people when they are in the same circumstances, determines the type of assistance they would receive from other people.

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<sup>21</sup> RuKavango refers to all languages that are spoken in the Kavango region.

### 3.3 The News of PM's Death: Funeral Events

When PM passed on, during the last week of December I got the news of his death from his cousin *Mumbyange*, beside the number of times I heard it on the local radio. I knew PM through his brother who was my University friend. He was the kind of guy that was reserved, but loved to make jokes. He stayed at the teacher's quarters in the school premises. On some occasion he would be seen driving his fathers' pick-up around town, usually an indication that his parents were in town from the village. In fact his parents are all retired civil servants and well known in the town of Rundu let alone the region.

He became sick at the beginning of the year, but never recovered fully. He was in and out of the hospital before he became bed-ridden towards the end of the year. He died in the hospital at the town some 250km from Rundu. His death happened at the time when people were preparing for Christmas holidays and during that time a lot of weddings take place. To some of his relatives his passing 'threw a spanner in to the works', because some of them were preparing for some weddings. Few days later another person related to the family also died in the local hospital. This family was surrounded by a cloud of death and was not sure of what to do first. Eventually they decided to delay the funeral until 7<sup>th</sup> of January and allow the festive season to pass by.

People and relatives started visiting PM parents' homestead for support and prayers. Their homestead is situated some sixty kilometers south out of the town and all activities had to be done at their homestead, because he (PM) did not have a house of his own.

PM's relatives all over the country were already in Rundu, because it was a festive season and they met every day to arrange his funeral. In fact some of them had temporarily relocated to their uncle's (PM's parents) house in order to carry out all funeral related activities easily. People gathered every evening for devotion and left after that. The vigil was held on the evening of the memorial service and people sang the whole night through.



Under 'normal' circumstances, funeral undertakings are carried out within a week, but in this case it took almost two weeks to prepare the logistics of the burial date. During that time squabbles were experienced with regard to who was to do what, when and how. These squabbles were between the two families of the deceased parent's as each wanting to make an impression during preparations. However some contents of these squabbles and disclosures were concealed in order to show civility and to prevent enmities and permanent disruptions of social relations within the family and shame from the onlookers.

Finally it was decided where the deceased was to be laid to rest (buried) and a local contractor was contracted to build the grave with a deadline of when he is supposed to complete the job. The grave was built at some village 30km east of Rundu. It was also decided what his relatives, parents and his children would wear and which choir groups would perform. The funeral color was purple, the clothes and ribbons that were to be worn by female relatives were prepared by a local person that specializes in sewing. (See the discussion of this in the next chapter). The funeral undertaker was tasked to repatriate the remains of PM from the town where he died and undertake the funeral process. The Lutheran church minister was also appointed to conduct the funeral service.

When all the logistics were in place an announcement about the memorial and burial service was made on the local radio on Thursday and Friday respectively. On Friday afternoon people started driving out of town to the village where the memorial service was held. The people that attended the memorial service were PM college friends, family friends and some members of the town's elite. I could not make it to the memorial service; because of the distance and transport difficulties instead I waited with other mourners the next morning at the local Lutheran church when the funeral procession arrived from the village.

By 07h00 I was already at the church gate, but many people had not arrived yet until at around 08h00. In the meantime I was talking to one person I have known for

quite some time about life in the town of Rundu. While we were waiting, notable was the arrival of the Deputy Minister of Health in company of two other women.

The arrival of important people at the church indicated the associations and identity of the bereaved family within Rundu. My friend was telling me: *“You see Mike, these are big people. Just have a look at all the cars and the amount of people present here, even a Minister is here. For an ordinary person like you and me there won’t be so much people”*. I have observed such remarks at other funerals; that in order for a person’s funeral to attract many and important people the survivors must be well connected or identify with a particular class. The importance of being connected plays a vital role as I indicated earlier.

It was after a short moment that I saw a bottle green BMW automobile flashing emergency lights hit the corner, followed by another latest Toyota Corolla and then the hearse followed by the rest. I observed that these first two vehicles carried the immediate family members of the deceased such as his parents and his children. The immediate vehicle after the hearse moved the pallbearers. The deceased brothers and sisters traveled in the Toyota Corolla.

When the first four vehicles entered the church yard, people started to move closer in order to view how people were going about removing the casket and carrying it in the church. At that moment brief greetings between some immediate family members and those waiting at the church took place. The funeral processions entered the church and inside were four ushers who were directing people where to seat. Inside the church a big maroon casket with golden handles surrounded by maroon flowers and four glowing candles were visible. Notable at this particular occasion was the funeral undertaker and his wife who both were busy moving this or that. Despite them being owners of the funeral undertaking they are also government middle management employees.

The church has two seating compartments and during normal church services the women sit on the left side and men on the right side of the church. It is only during

events such as weddings and funerals that you would find a mixed seating order. On this occasion immediate family members were seated in the front row, but the parents were seated separately with the father of the deceased seated on the left side while the mother was seated on the right with the rest of their children and grandchildren. The choir group was seated in the front left corner close to the pulpit, but facing the congregation. The pallbearers were seated in the second row on the left just after the father of the deceased.

During the church service not many activities happened, because most of them were done during the memorial service. The pastor raised and commenced the service. After the hymn she blessed the corpse and the congregation; subsequently the deacon performed the preaching. Following the preaching, the deacon descended from the pulpit in order to arrange the collection basket and announced the collection hymn. Later than some ten to fifteen minutes of collection the congregation sat down and the pastor again rose to comfort the bereaved family. The pastor also announced that she would not make it to the graveyard instead her assistant would accompany the funeral procession, as she still had to officiate at the wedding ceremony that was to congregate shortly after the funeral procession left the church premises.

Thereafter the funeral procession prepared to leave the church building. The coffin was carried in front followed by the immediate family members some of whom were weeping very loud while talking how they will suffer for being left behind by the deceased. At the same time there were those that were taking pictures and videotaping the whole event. The coffin was loaded in the hearse and it took- off in the order that they arrived followed by other vehicles to the village where the burial was to take place.

On arrival at the grave site the space was so little that all vehicles and people could not fit. There were many people and it almost took them half an hour to just congregate at the grave. The grave was build with bricks and on its sides covered with green mats and a mini- canopy mounted on the other side facing the grave. Seated under the canopy were the deceased's parents, his brothers, sisters and children. The coffin was carried out of the hearse and was laid on the casket lowering device that the undertaker

prepared. Noticeable at the site was the deceased college colleagues dressed in their graduation gowns.

The final service commenced and after the benediction by the deacon the undertaker was set to lower the casket, but could not as the grave was built too small. The person who built the grave had to enlarge the grave by breaking off some bricks in the front end. Soon the grave was enlarged and the coffin was lowered. As it was slowly being lowered people started sobbing after being quiet for some time.

When the coffin reached the ground base the director of ceremonies prepared himself to make the announcement: *“Moomu za kara mpo, ta tu ka pa vanekoro mpito yi po va ka zugumine evu mombira, ntani ta va kwama ko vakaume na natuvanye<sup>22</sup>”*. People started to move in the order that was announced by the director. As people were strewing soil on the casket, the director of the ceremonies was preparing himself to say the vote of thanks. During the vote of thanks the director acknowledged and thanked the presence of the distinguished people by naming them in the order of importance before including the general followers who assisted with their transport. Finally he invited everybody present to escort the deceased parents to their homestead in order to wash their hands.

At the homestead there was a big canopy erected. People washed their hands at the entrance. Apparently they have to do that in order to remove bad omen. Some people went to sit under the trees while others were ushered into the canopy. Some of the important people joined PM's parents in the inner section of the house. When everybody was seated they were served with cold drinks while waiting for the food. The type of food served was maize porridge and boiled beef. When the deacon blessed the food, people started to eat. The beef was cooked to the extent that even the bones were soft and easy to chew.

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<sup>22</sup> “As it is customary we will be requesting the family to come and strew some sand in the grave, then we will then give a chance to the friends and everybody to do the same”

People chatted as they ate and one could hear louder laughs from certain sections of the sittings. Talks centered on how things have changed and political issues. Movements of the people increased as some of them started to leave the homestead while others were networking by exchanging their contact details.

### 3.4 Discussion

I discussed some of the events I observed at many funerals including PM's with three people. During these discussions, 'tradition', 'culture', 'custom' and 'modernity' featured dominantly. There was displeasure of certain practices at funerals and there was an emphasis on the need to salvage the situation. Even when you listen to the local radio programs of heritage, the presenter and the studio guests communicate sentiments of digging for the old.

One JM<sup>23</sup> that I spoke to is a member of a local cultural group (Ukumwe). This group has earned a reputation for winning national and international cultural contests (*Nampa*, 16 Dec 2003). He was concerned by the way funeral practices were contaminated and modernized. He gave me an example of when he was growing up, that when a person died such information was kept away from young children. And when they realized that a person was missing they were just told that he or she has been taken by wild animals. In fact children were moved to other relatives' house when there was a death incident. He was referring to the manner in which death news is broadcasted on radio. *"Now even children know that someone has died and they also view dead bodies"*.

JM emphasized the importance of practicing and digging for the 'old' in order to maintain the Kavango identity and deal with the future. He referred to the manner in which Westerners bury their people as proper, but those that emulate that culture blow it out of proportion. He said that it was okay to imitate other nations, but people must observe their local culture norms as well. He bemoaned the current mourning manner as not befitting. He also criticized the process of organizing funerals as characterized by

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<sup>23</sup> JM is a pseudonym that refers to one of my key informants.

money spending and greed.<sup>24</sup> He saw the current funeral practices as parties and not occasion of loss and sadness. He also highlighted that funerals of well off families attract huge crowds that anticipate the impending feasting.

He also indicated how the weeping manner has changed, for example people would not sob and cry uncontrollably the way they do it now. There used to be patterns of weeping, like in PM's case only his first cousins would weep. They would mention how they would suffer without him while imparting insults, because traditionally they are the ones he could share explicit jokes with. KL<sup>25</sup> demonstrated like this "*Rambuka, rambuka vinke shi ku ku rarita? Rambuka, rambuka mukombo woye wo! Omu ka u ayhara shi? Shinkorama!*"<sup>26</sup> Suddenly they would change the weeping tone in to a more respecting and sad note like: "*Mu unyande nare ngoli ni danauka? Nke u na ntsuvire mu unyande?*"<sup>27</sup> According to JM such local cultural norms of respect and mourning at funerals have disappeared, instead everybody cries and makes a mockery out of it (funeral).

AD<sup>28</sup> is in his late forties and is the senior education officer in the region. During our discussion he spoke about change of 'culture', but through adaptation and integration. Although he spoke about the importance of adaptation and integration, he emphasized on '*a culture of a people*'. He seemed to advocate the instrumentalists' perspective on culture probably as a government representative, because of his anthropological background. However essentialist notions of culture still underlay some of his interpretations of 'culture'.

AD mentioned the impossibility of an 'authentic' way of life among the community of Kavango, because of the global interconnection. "*When you look at how people are living today and what they display as their culture during festivals is totally*

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<sup>24</sup> This continues to be debated nationally, (*New Era*, 20 Oct. 2006).

<sup>25</sup> KL is a pseudonym of one key informant.

<sup>26</sup> "Wake, wake up why are you pretending to be asleep? Wake up, wake up asshole! What did you think? Animal!"

<sup>27</sup> "My dear, with who will I play and joke? Why did you leave me my dear?"

<sup>28</sup> AD is a pseudonym of one key informant.

*different*". He said that people are rather taking worldly cultural practices and integrate them within their local way of life. He also bemoaned the loss of traditional foodstuffs they use to eat when they were young and the general conduct at events such as funerals and weddings.

The introduction of mortuaries in Namibia or specifically Rundu created a space for culture negotiation and renegotiation at funerals. Unlike in the olden days when people had to be buried the same day they died, funeral undertakings are prolonged in order to carry out logistical needs and allow for people that are far to come and attend. Whatever is seen today, what they display as not culture at funerals, results from the period spent on planning while the corpse is still preserved.

Relation of the survivors is also negotiated according to which person paid towards whose funeral. That leads to future assistance in case something happens to anybody that assisted during this time. Strained relations can also be repaired by contributing towards the current funeral.

Identity of both the deceased and the survivors is established here, it appeared to be bound to the material wealth of the deceased and the connection the survivors have with the rest of the community. At the time of the funeral talk of courtesy is enhanced so as to improve relationships or acting in a good manner.

## Chapter 4. Clothing in Rundu

During the study two of events, namely the Independence Day celebration and the funeral, certain themes such as food, clothing and language emerged. Due to the limited scope of this study I focused on clothing while other themes such as food could be dealt with elsewhere in detail. In this chapter I intend to show how people in Rundu dress at the events mentioned above, by describing the observed patterns of clothing.

Clothing changes every time and in most cases fashion influences the change. There are many discourses with regard to clothing ranging from authority, value creation to identity creation. In some instances it has cultural meaning that people attaches to it. Hollander (1975) quoted in Bastian (1996) observes that when people put clothes on their bodies, they are primarily engaged in making pictures of themselves to suit their own eyes and out of completed combination of clothing and body. It is further observed that people do that, because they live in civilizations in which the naturalistic image of a man is the cornerstone of art and the pictures they make out of dressing are directly or indirectly connected to the pictures they ordinarily see and accept as real (Bastian, 1996:97).

Clothing says a lot about those that are wearing them; and those that look at the dressed make notions that influence our opinion of good physical presentation; and our idea of 'good' is greatly influenced by images that we see in media being it electronic or print. In some cases these images make people get ideas sometimes very odd, as to how ordinary people should dress or look. In some cases people go to the extent of even prescribing as to what women or men should or should not dress and when. Clothing also allows people to express their perceived connection or disconnection to the mainstream cultural construction (Bastian, 1996:97).

Clothing can cause generational conflicts between people especially youth and adults. It (clothing) plays a major role in "demarcating the different phases of life cycles



from one another and provides for a gradually deepening distinction” between the youth and adults (James, 1996:38).

#### **4.1 Types of Clothing seen at the Independence Day celebration**

I start by describing how the important guests for the occasion were dressed. The guests were clothed in a semi-formal style, because of the weather condition. Most of the male guests were dressed in pants with long sleeved shirts without a tie while some were wearing formal short sleeved khaki two pieces. Some of them wore leather hats and one of them sported a baseball cap. The rest had their hair either cut short to the skin or at least 1cm length.

The director of the ceremony had his hair cut in what is known as a ‘panga style’ by the younger generation or the ‘English style’ by elders; this is a style when the hair on the sides of the head are cut almost to the skin while the top is trimmed to some one or two centimeters. He was wearing dark green colored pants with a long sleeved shirt that cannot be tucked in, affectionately known as the “Madiba shirt”<sup>29</sup> or the “state house shirt”. They are called as such, because most of the Namibian state house personnel are fond of wearing such shirts. These particular shirts were not readily available in the country until recently when some suppliers started to import them from Indonesia and South Africa respectively.

Some of the women were dressed in what Hillebrecht (2001) refers to as the “West African attires” with matching head tie or scarf. While some wore what could be termed as “European dress” or conventional female dress and displayed different hairstyles ranging from hair plated with synthetic extensions to synthetic pony-tail and wigs. I observed that those that had grey hair complemented them with some grey synthetic hair as well. All the women carried a hand bag that presumably had a cellular phone, money wallet, spectacle case and probably some lip gloss or so. Like some of

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<sup>29</sup> It is a designer shirt worn by the founding president of the RSA. It is a loose shirt that is not tucked in the trouser like any conventional shirt.

their male counterparts women also wore spectacles. However one would not conclude in the case of the women whether they were semi-formally dressed; because the same dressing style is likely to be seen around the government offices during office hours and after hours. I assumed they were officially dressed.

Turning the lens to the general public at the celebration I observed a type of mixed dressing that ranges from skirts, jeans, tight pants, t-shirts, to loose dresses and caps. Most young people especially female were wearing tight jeans with tops, short skirts and matching shoes. Different hairstyles, but similar to those observed in the tent were evident; except that many young females styled their hair in what is locally referred to as a 'ball'<sup>30</sup>. On a closer look to females that wore jeans their tops only covered their upper bodies up to the navel, while supplementing the open space with a belly button. Some of them wore necklaces, bracelets and baseball caps. Those that did not carry a handbag had cellular phones on their hands or in their front jeans pocket. Tattoos featured more among the young female lower backs and ankles.

The male youth was not very different from their female counter parts, as far as their general clothing is concerned. They also appeared with many different types of hairstyles ranging from bald or 'baby cut' and 'panga style' to creatively plaited or blonde dyed hair. Cutting their hair did not seem a problem, because they could do it at any makeshift salon at any corner of the street. My curiosity was where they plaited their hair so good, that I was at times tempted to think that their hair looks neater than the female folk. I enquired from some male youth staying in my vicinity and they said that their sisters or female cousins did it for them. Some wore shiny earrings on their ears like the female youth.

Those that wore a beard had it nicely trimmed or totally removed. There were some of the male youths that were dressed in 'baggy'-like jeans, that just hang at their lower butts with protruding underwear. They wore American basket ball shirts and

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<sup>30</sup> A 'ball' is a mound of synthetic hair attached at the back of the head but facing upward.

bandanas. This male youth also wore oversized sport sneakers such as Nike and Adidas. There is generally high brand consciousness among the youth in Rundu.

Among the youth that was present, there were those that did not clothe themselves in the manner described above. They were dressed in what could be described as conventional clothes rather than clothes of the particular brand. These youth for example the female were dressed in pants and tops with hair styled in a particular way like the one I described above. Like most people they also carried a cellular phone. I observed that many youth did not wear a wrist watch instead they wore a golden chain or some ornaments made out of ostrich egg shells. Many people wore shades. (See picture 1)

Performing groups also displayed a variety of 'traditional' clothing style in their quest to entertain and educate the spectators. Among the groups I will mainly focus on the Maria Mwengere Cultural group and only briefly describe others. This group displayed how people in Kavango supposedly lived long time ago.

This group underwent numerous transformations in terms of the way of dress and the stuff they display, because of its continuous contact with other groups of people. I will not dwell into details here of how their clothing was transformed, but rather describe it. The female clothes consisted of hair style called 'vihiho', which are braided artificial plaits and a thick bulge that is put on their forehead. These types of hairstyles are creatively decorated with shells and pearls (Fisch, 2005:66). They covered their lower bodies with processed skins (skirts) and reeds on top of it. Their body was smeared with a cosmetic mixture of oil and ochre. In fact a replica of 'vihiho' style could be seen in the form of modern synthetic hair types worn by women in the street of Rundu.

They also wore knitted wrist and armbands on their ankles. They did not wear shoes. Another observation was slight difference in dress between the younger female performers and the older ones. Unlike the senior women they did not wear the 'vihiho' on their head or headscarf; instead they displayed well plated synthetic hair. Other 'traditional' accessories such as armbands were blended with the modern ones.

Three of the five male performers of the group wore skirts made out of reeds over their shorts, while the other two dressed in contemporary clothes. The first three were bare footed and their upper bodies were also not covered with any cloth. In other related festivities that I have witnessed the male also carry accessories such as a little axe known as 'nzimbu' usually worn on the waist. They only held it on their hands when they performed the dance. They sported a head gear made out of a skin of some little mammals.

There was also another group of female youth from Sauyemwa that performed some liberation dance fashioned from Oshiwambo traditional rhythms. They dressed some pink or reddish dyed traditional skirts known as 'ondhelela'<sup>31</sup>, white tops, white or brown shoes (takkies). Some elderly youth wore a necklace known as 'onyoka' made out of ostrich eggshells. Initially these types of skirts including the one by the Maria Mwengere cultural group were worn without any tops until when singlets were introduced and became the popular fashion (Shigwedha, 2004: 200 unpublished). (See picture 3)

Another group was the SWAPO (South West Africa People Organisation) Pioneers group composed from various party branches of the town. The groups consisted of young girls presumably under the age of twelve led by an adult woman who coordinated their performances. In one group each of the girls wore a short skirt and top that was light and loose to enable smooth maneuvering, made out of SWAPO party colors. The other group of girls wore pink colored short skirts and tops of the similar pattern. This type of performing dress appeared dominantly at the dawn of independence in 1990 and apparently it has been brought from the neighboring countries where most exiles of Namibia were based. (See picture 5)

Most religious choir groups featured in black and white or blue and white colored clothes. Particularly the ELCIN (Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia) choir

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<sup>31</sup> This type of skirt is known as 'ondhelela', because of the way it flaps from side to side when the women who wore it walk or dances.

members wore white t-shirts imprinted the face of their Bishop. Both men and women wore the same t-shirts complemented by a black skirt or trousers. Men had their hair cut to the scalp while women sported a variety of hair styles such as those I explained earlier. The remaining group of performers did not have something striking or uniform like the ones I describe, but just ordinary clothes. (See picture 6)

## **4.2 Clothing observed at P. M's funeral**

Ways of clothing that are observed at funerals are not the same as those seen at the above festival. They differ, because of the particular of meanings that are attached to the event. Clothing in a particular way at a funeral display the relation of the person dressed as such to the deceased. The common example in Rundu is when a husband dies that the widow is supposed to be dressed in black for the whole year following the burial of the husband. In the next paragraph I describe the types of clothing that I observed at PM's funeral.

Despite the general public being dressed in black colored clothes at the funeral, there were some outstanding purple colored clothes among some sections of the mourners. The male mourners wore dark colored suits while the female clothes were also colored in not so bright assorted colors. The pallbearers were dressed in black suits and sported some black hats as well. His (PM) father and his mother were also dressed in blacks complemented with a purple ribbon on the jacket and purple flowers. His three sons were also dressed in black colored clothes and each was holding a purple flower. The other close relatives such as aunties wore purple colored dresses, while female choir members dressed an assortment of black and purple colored sari covering their shoulders. Also at this occasion, his college mates wore their graduation gowns while another gown presumably PM's was laid on top of the casket. (See picture 7, 8, 9)

### 4.3 Discussion

One of the questions that came to my mind when I was discussing some of the issues related to clothing was whether there was anything that can be called a Kavango dress? If it exists how does it look like? When is it worn and by whom? My discussion on clothing with the three informants that I mentioned in the previous chapter centered on some of the observed ways of dress. I asked them whether people should dress daily like the performers of the Maria Mwengere Cultural group. JM was particular about the importance of keeping and preserving the type of dress (traditional) in order to teach the current and the oncoming generation the ways how the real Kavango person should be or looked like. “*Mulyo unene na nge vantu ava kungu vi ninke vyo mpo...*”<sup>32</sup>. In the same breath I realized that JM was not necessarily saying that people should be dressing the traditional clothes on the daily base, but rather preserve them as it make those that have them identify with the Kavango culture (Fairweather 2002).

However, he was much concerned about the transformation these particular traditional dresses have undergone. It had a “remarkable transition from the popular culture of not covering the breasts to the tradition of assuming that the sight of a woman’s breasts was sinful and even sexually attractive when not covered”; these sentiments seem to have been promoted strongly by the missionaries (Fisch, 2005; Shigwedha, 2004 unpublished). In fact Fisch (2005) who was attached to the missionary service for a long time in Kavango showed with disgust how the Mission fought an enduring battle against what she terms “the physical dirtiness and the hairstyles of young girls and women”. This AD saw as the adaptation to the new ways of life where some of the African clothing was modified in order to fit with the expectation of the Missionaries. He also gave an example of the current clothing that makes them as adults not comfortable being in the same environment with their young girl children. He was referring to the amount of nakedness the modern clothes display.

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<sup>32</sup> “It is important if people can preserve their cultural objects...”

I engaged them both about what the difference is between now and then, because according to some historical records even their immediate ancestors did not cover their upper bodies. Their sentiments echo those of Shigwedha (2004, unpublished) on what he says about the missionary role in transforming the clothing manner of the natives. Seemingly the missionary influence resulted in people denouncing and dishonoring their cultural traditions in a way that confused, estranged them and to shy away from wearing their traditional clothes (Shigwedha, 2004: 201 unpublished).

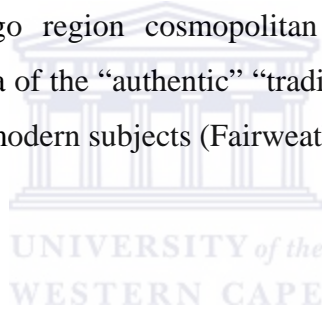
On clothing at funerals the informants did not indicate whether there was a shift from traditional funeral clothing to the current way of dress. When someone passes on, the question of whom from the relatives will be clothed and be treated in what fashion and by whom is often subject of controversy (Durham and Klaitz, 2002: 785). I have observed at PM's funeral that there was an assortment of two colors namely black and purple. In fact some reaction from my informants in relation to clothing at funerals is that funerals are like wedding parties, because of the manner how people decide what to wear and the increased costs in carrying out the exercise. According to AD current cost of funerals often directs attention to the issue of who is refusing or agreeing to contribute to whose funeral, later resulting into long-term family squabbles.

One of the informants that also attended PM's funeral commented that "*close relatives of the deceased were dressed like bridesmaids*" although he appeared to be in support of the people that wore black academic robes. To him they identified that they and the deceased belong to learned fraternity. There seems to be a general sense among the informants that people at funerals dress in a particular fashion for show-off or '*makumonikito*' as it is locally referred to. They apparently also show their status in the society; thus making death the site of identity creation, differentiation and where mutual relations are recognized (Durham and Klaitz, 2002:781).

There are discourses of culture loss due to foreign influence among some people of Kavango. Some view the alleged influence in the negative way while others see it in

high regard. In his paper on Universal Suffrage in Kavango, Kampungu (1967)<sup>33</sup> said that the Kavango people were gradually becoming Christianized and a form of westernization was taking root thus making change for African culture imminent. He further said that it was imperative for African culture to blend with western civilization in order to further develop (Africa) culture (BAC-1/1/55.NAR10 File 7, See also Salo, 2003). According to him change in culture of the Kavango has already taken place since they started embracing Christianity and some aspects of westernization such as judicial system into their tribal system. It is doubtless that cultural discourse and practice were shifting through the impacts of Christianity (Becker, 2004:47).

People can for instance only wear their ‘traditional’ clothes during events where the aim is to stage and display their ‘culture’ but they would exchange their traditional clothes for western attires at the end of the display (White, 1993:63). One can probably just conclude that in Kavango region cosmopolitan and local attitudes are often articulated through the nostalgia of the “authentic” “traditional” past that will provide the basis for the production of the modern subjects (Fairweather, 2002:280).



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<sup>33</sup> Dr Romanus Kampungu was a first black Catholic priest in Namibia to obtain a Doctor of Philosophy in 1966.



## Chapter 5. Languages in Kavango

“It is discourse that creates, recreates, focuses, modifies, and transmits both culture and language and their intersection, and it is especially in verbally artistic and playful discourse, such as poetry, magic, verbal dueling, and political rhetoric, that the resources provided by grammar, as well as cultural meanings and symbols, are activated to their fullest potential and the essence of the language-culture relationship becomes salient” Sherzer (1987:295)

One possible problem that earlier anthropologists might have created in the process of understanding the (native) people and their way of life especially the language was to analyze their “linguistic knowledge as a self-contained system” (Keesing, 1979:14). Due to the complexity of understanding linguistic issues many people in the discipline evaded it as much as possible. It is only with the advent of the “ethnography of speaking or communication” in the early 1960s when it was properly defined that it was not difficult to undertake language studies anymore (Baumann & Sherzer, 1975). This time the subject matter of investigation was defined as speaking and the use of language in the conduct of social life (Baumann & Sherzer, 1975:95).

Following the likes of Sherzer, Baumann, Hymes and Keesing, in this chapter I attempt to show how languages are used by describing how the youth and adults communicate. I observed the youth of Rundu Secondary School during their mini-school project. I argue that there is a possible development of a hybrid language among the youth of Rundu due to traits of linguistic borrowing from Afrikaans and English languages mixed with local vernacular. I also examined whether protective discourses of the local languages exists among the adults towards the youth.

In pre-independent Namibia the Afrikaner group had conventional language rights and decided on what Ohly (1991:41) refers to as the “Afrikaansification” of the country in order to establish a specific lingua franca, necessary in a multilingual society. Afrikaans was thus until decolonization overtly applied as a dominant language. It was used as a legal and official medium of communication in public administration including

the media and education sector.<sup>34</sup> English was only minimally used for example in religion and other ceremonial address (Ohly 1991:41).

In order to standardize the usage of indigenous language and strengthening of homelands during the apartheid system it was recommended for example by the Odendaal Commission in 1964 that formal language planning be established (Maho, 1998:10); it culminated into the Bureau for Indigenous Languages. Accordingly the objective of this bureau was to standardize the indigenous languages by creating orthographies and creating a uniform educational literature. The end result was that Afrikaans was widely used in the media together with English and German; while the indigenous languages were mainly used in the context of family and interpersonal relations and in environmental and recreational contexts (Maho, 1998:10).

The situation continued like that until the end of 1989 when the SWAPO movement won the UN supervised elections. Due to the way and manner in which the population was settled it was imperative for the SWAPO government to design a strategy that will unite Namibians into one nation and one obvious opportunity was to choose English as an official language (Ohly, 1991). For the masses in general English was seen as a language of liberation and unity whereas Afrikaans was seen as symbolizing the oppressive apartheid ideology. Accordingly there was no indigenous language that could fulfill the above function without creating unnecessary inter-ethnic enmity.

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<sup>34</sup> The pre independent Namibia functional language distribution model clearly indicates the supremacy of Afrikaans and the subordinate function of indigenous languages.

## 5.1 English the ‘Language of Independence’

In post-independent Namibia the government formulated a language policy in order to address certain thorny issues that emerged with regard to the usage of English as the official language and medium of instruction in schools. The educational language policy emphasized that the medium of instruction in primary school education be done in the mother tongue of the children with the gradual shift to English when they reach the fourth grade. The Namibian languages continued to be taught as subjects up to the twelfth grade.

In fact the government promotes the usage of indigenous languages in order to enhance understanding among its citizens (*New Era* 11 Aug 2006). An interesting debate arose on the national radio chat show when one caller complained about government representatives that are assigned to their area of origin on official business and still used the English language when they addressed these assemblies. This particular caller was demanding these government officials to speak in local vernaculars and the translation be done in English for those that do not understand the local languages “*It is unacceptable for these highly respected people not to speak their languages, how do they expect the children to learn from them and our people to understand what they intend to say*”.<sup>35</sup>

The position of the adults is not clear on the usage of English as the official language. Some parents encourage their children to master the English language and they also communicate with them in English in their homes. The young parents make sure to send their small children to day crèches that uses English in preparation for them when they start primary school. Other parents’ support the usage of local languages and also attach ‘cultural values’ to it. The local vernacular is seen to serve as an identity tool for their “culture” and tradition hence the importance of speaking it (Keesing, 1979:14).

## 5.2 Languages Spoken in Kavango

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<sup>35</sup> A complain by the caller on the national radio chat show with regard to officials not using their vernaculars when addressing their areas of origin. Same sentiments are also expressed in the newspaper article on language. (*New Era* 11 August 2006 - Mother languages are just as good)

What was happening towards and after the transition nationally, also impacted the Kavango region directly or indirectly. As a political region in post- independent Namibia its cultural trends are influenced by a relatively medium size middle class and intelligentsia in the education sector; it being the largest civil service employer in the region followed by the safety and security departments respectively (Ohly 1991:42). The process of national reconciliation that has been adopted at independence created an enabling environment for the integration of other ethnic groups into the region of Kavango.

The inter-political regional movements of people and the rapid rate of urbanization have also had an influence on the linguistic picture of Namibia recently (Maho, 1998:194; Baumann, R. & Sherzer, J. 1975:97). These obvious movements and urbanization have resulted in the demand for new terms because of the rapid social changes and the media influence. These new terms and expression only make way to rural settings after they have been introduced in the urban environments.

Rukwangari is the language spoken by the people from the west of the region known as Vakwangari, while those from the east such as the Shambyu and the Vagciriku speaks Rumanyo. Initially Rumanyo was only spoken by the Vagciriku or 'Vambongedu'<sup>36</sup> while the Shambyu people spoke Shishambyu. The two languages are very identical except for some minor differences within and after independence they were all classified as Rumanyo for the education curriculum purposes.

When the Vakwangari and the Vamanyo people communicate they understand each other despite the click words that are heard in the Rumanyo language. It is not difficult to make sense out of what they are saying when conversing. Other languages such as Tshinyemba and Thimbukushu are also spoken in the area; these languages were difficult for me to understand. If my informant was not conversant in Rukwangari I

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<sup>36</sup> Vambongedu is another name for the Vagciriku people, their country was also known as Mbongedo in earlier times.

required a translator, but in most cases somebody in the houses that I visited spoke or understood Rukwangari. The Tshinyemba language is spoken by the group of people referred to as the 'Vanyemba'<sup>37</sup> who came from deeper parts of southern Angola and settled in Kavango during the period of the Portuguese colonialism and has been residents since. Thimbukushu is spoken by the group known as the Hambukushu settled further east from the Vamanyo people; they were famous for their ability to make rain.

Not local languages only are spoken in the region, English, Afrikaans and Portuguese are well spoken. English is the official language of the Republic and that make it compulsory for everyone to speak or learn it. However many adults are more clear with Afrikaans than English because they only started learning or using it at independence. It was an experience for them to change from the language they have spoken for over thirty years of colonialism and suddenly switch to English. During my interviews with some adults more Afrikaans words emerged when they tried to make something more clearly. The youth spoke English more frequently. They also did not have a problem to express themselves in their local vernacular.

Rukwangari is widely spoken, but it is not necessarily spoken in all sections (locations) of Rundu. It is regarded as a "regional language and is used for educational, administrative and media broadcasting purposes" (Maho, 1998:40). If you travel to settlements of Kehemu or Kaisosi which is in Rundu rural constituency one notice that people speak Tshinyemba more than Rukwangali. In Sauyemwa and Kasote, Rukwangari is widely spoken, but there are also significant traits of Tshokwe and Tshinyemba languages heard in these settlements. Tshinyemba can only be used for unofficial activities such as in households and in some churches that are situated in their vicinities<sup>38</sup>. Rundu urban constituency consists of a multiracial society which communicates in English or Afrikaans, Rukwangali, Rumanyo and other languages.

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<sup>37</sup> The term Vanyemba as used here does not denote one single specific group of people but several. It (the term) is used to denote all the Angolan Bantu-speaking immigrants in Kavango.

<sup>38</sup> There were some Tshinyemba speaking elite that have been serving within the Ministry of Education who were advocating for the recognition of the language and eventually the installation of some Nyemba chiefs within the region of Kavango. This situation was dealt severely with by those in the Shambyu tribal council resulting in the removal of all Nyemba foremen that has been serving under the Shambyu chief.

English language as an official tool for communication is widely used in government institutions including schools and service agencies. High school learners are forced to learn to speak the language or even master it, this results into the usage of the language off-duty like in the streets. I observed that youth spoke English frequently than adults, especially among themselves. Their conversation would start in Rukwangali or Rumanyo and end in English. It would go like this: “*Apa nga tu za kodoropa, nga tu ka checka ko post office*”<sup>39</sup> or “*Ngapi man? What are you up to?*”<sup>40</sup> The youth do not only speak English among themselves, but with their teachers and those who appear strange to them.

There are many people from different political regions and even other parts of the world residing in Rundu, thus people are forced to communicate in English or Afrikaans languages if they are not able to communicate in any local language. Otherwise people communicate in the local languages. When you meet a youth on the streets of Rundu and greet “*Ngapi tamwei*”<sup>41</sup> or “*Ngapi ngumwei*”<sup>42</sup> and they to respond to you accordingly as “*nawa*” which means fine then you know that you can probably carry out a conversation in the local language.

To be able to communicate in other languages such as English and Afrikaans means a lot in Rundu, but it is even better if you can speak your mother tongue properly. During fieldwork I always tried to speak Rukwangari with anybody but conversations were rarely concluded in the same language I started with. Some adults who knew me when I was working for the financial institution in Rundu communicated to me in Afrikaans, while those who do not know me or have not seen me before would speak to me in Rukwangari but doubtingly.

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<sup>39</sup> “When we go to town we will check the post office”, note the word ‘cheka’.

<sup>40</sup> “What’s up man”, note the word ‘man’.

<sup>41</sup> “How are you sir or mister”

<sup>42</sup> “How are you madam”

There seems to be something that made people to communicate to me in Afrikaans or English and not in Rukwangari even though I spoke the language fluently. The youth particularly those I interviewed spoke Rukwangari with me, but when I told them that I wanted to record the conversation they would switch to English. One of my youth informants was a nineteen year old high school boy who usually speaks Rukwangari with me, but was not keen to be recorded while speaking the local vernacular.

I observed that the youth spoke a type of language that is blended with Afrikaans, English and local vernacular words among them, different from the one spoken by the adults. It is used as a street language or slang when they meet at the pubs or sport fields. They also used that language when they did not want their elders to understand what they were talking about. Its vocabulary seem to originate from the kwaito musical genre that contain words such as “*my gazzi*”<sup>43</sup> or “*ek check jou*”<sup>44</sup>, and “*ek zulla to survive*”<sup>45</sup> respectively. They do not only use Afrikaans and kwaito slang commonly, but English slang too. These are borrowed from the American movies that are shot in the hoods. Expressions such as “*nigga*”, “*homie*” and “*watz up nigga*” are commonly used among the youth that favor hip-hop and rap music. These expressions are popular among the youth groups and it is easy to loose the conversation if you do not concentrate properly. I already mentioned that the way how the youth of Rundu mix and match words from other languages and blend them with the local vocabulary shows likelihood of the emergence of a hybrid language.

On a trip to a village (Mayana) that is about twenty kilometers out of town, I was going to buy a ‘goat for the pot’. The young male who was undertaking a transport business approached me in order to find out whether I wanted a ride. This was how our conversation went: “*Watz up bro? Are you hitting to M square?*” I was confused by the second part and did not have an idea of what he was referring to. I politely asked him what M square was, but he laughed and continued to talk to: “*Wher yhu aar from bro?*”

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<sup>43</sup> It is an expression used to say “my friend”

<sup>44</sup> It is an expression used to say “ I will see you later”

<sup>45</sup> It is an expression used to say “ I struggle or try to survive”



*Arent' yhu from de hood?"* He could not understand my apparent ignorance of not knowing what M square was and whether I was from the hood. Later, during our journey he told me that M square stood for Maria Mwengere. Maria Mwengere is a name of a high school situated alongside the road we traveled. It is shortened by the youth, because it is long and M square to them sounded very cool.

I want to touch on Portuguese, a language spoken widely by the people of Angolan origin settled in the town of Rundu. Even the Congolese that come from southern parts of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) bordering with northern Angola also speak Portuguese. It (Portuguese) is not taught in schools. One adult of Angolan origin lamented how their children were losing their languages and 'culture', because of adapting to a foreign language such as Portuguese. I observed that youth of Angolan descent spoke Portuguese more frequently than Umbundu, a vernacular naturally spoken by the majority of people in southern Angola where their parents have originated. I noted that many people that sell at the Rundu Open Market communicate in Portuguese, this trend continues at Portuguese held retailers in town. The merchandise at the market ranged from foodstuffs, clothes, farming implements, seeds, imported cassettes, videos and DVDs.

### **5.3 In Company of the History Club**

My friend affectionately known as 'Vashe'<sup>46</sup> is a teacher at Rundu Senior Secondary School. He invited me to address his grade 12 learners about career possibilities, universities and the importance of passing grade 12 with good marks. It was a chance for me to establish how the youth in multitude behave and communicate while in the education environment. The class was fully packed and when he introduced me to the class, it was necessary for me to break the ice with a joke. I addressed the class in English and Rukwangari, following it was time for questions.

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<sup>46</sup> 'Vashe' is a Rumanyo word for 'uncle' or 'father'



One female learner asked me: “*Sir, why do you have dreadlocks?*” She wanted to know that, because their upbringing dictates that anybody with dreadlocks should be a Rastafarian and smoke marijuana; it also emerged that it is ‘uncultural’ for men to have dreads or even plate hair. I responded: “*Please call me Mike...It’s just a fashion statement...In fact I don’t even know how it feels to smoke...*” I noticed that there were some learners that wanted to participate, but did not and I could conclude whether they were shy or it was the English language barrier. I asked the same girl what her home language was in Rukwangari: “*Eraka musinke omu uyunga membo lyeni*”<sup>47</sup> Instead of responding in the language that I used when I asked she answered in English. I remember asking the gathering as to which languages they were using when communicating among themselves or while with parents. There was an impression that they spoke Rukwangari or any local vernacular when they are with their friends or parents. That impression actually made me to observe learners of the History club, but from the same class that I addressed.

The History club was collecting data on forced removal of residents from Mangarangandja to the current Kehemu settlement area. Their fieldwork required them to take pictures at the grounds where the people stayed. I spent two days with them as they were going about their activities. I also assisted them on certain research aspects such as how to ask questions and how they could organize their information. What I observed was contrary to what I was made to understand earlier during the class session that they spoke their vernacular when they are together and out of the school environment. Their conversations went like this: “*This people are not really answering questions that we are asking...Makura ngapi omu nga tu kayi tjanga mo report*”<sup>48</sup>. The usage of English language among them was more frequent than what they claimed. When I observed the interviews they held with adults that stayed in the area of concern it appeared as if they did not actually know the meanings of some words that were used by these adults.

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<sup>47</sup> Translation: “Which language do you speak at home”

<sup>48</sup> Translation: “Then how are we going to write this report”

My fieldwork also started at a crucial moment when the year end national examination results were released and unfortunately the region did not perform well. English language as a promotional subject was the main cause of poor performance resulting in many learners' scripts 'ungraded'<sup>49</sup>. One caller of the local radio chat show (mudukuli)<sup>50</sup> expressed concern over the poor performance, despite the fact that their children were speaking English every time. His other concern was the competency of the teachers in teaching English.

Despite the general poor performance of the region, one privately owned high school performed very well and was ranked second nationally. When I attended the parent's meeting there I observed that most of them were of the middle class elites and they advocated for English to be made the first language. According to them, if their children were taught in English as first language they will attend any university particularly in South Africa without a hassle.

In fact the parent's meeting I am referring to was conducted in English despite calls from some parents to cater for translation into the local vernacular. Before the meeting commenced a vote was made in order to determine whether there was a need to translate from English to any of the local languages. It came out that people did not vote in favor of the translation, but murmurs from the floor seemed to indicate the dissatisfaction of not having a translation.

## 5.4 Discussion

Kavango region participates fully in all global cultural processes where "imagination has become an organized field of social practice" (Appadurai, 1996: 30). This is evident when some youth emulate the tongue rolling American accent whenever they spoke, while the other use the "watz u, nigga" language which is spoken by the

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<sup>49</sup> Ungraded is a symbol that is awarded to the exam candidate' script that is not graded by the examiners.

<sup>50</sup> It is Rukwangali word that means 'expose' or express what is on your (heart) chest.

thuggish youth that appear in most American hip-hop music videos. The usage of these expressions creates an imagined identity that is in turn indigenized (Salo, 2003).

It appeared that the youth communicated in a particular way among themselves and differently when they spoke to their adults. Although the youth confidently expressed that they spoke their vernaculars, I observed that they spoke English and they “mix and match” language frequently. This language usage trend among the youth is confined within their circles only and when they are in the adults’ surrounding they speak ‘proper’ vernacular for fear of being reprimanded or labeled as bad youth.

Adults used their vernaculars frequently, but they also spoke Afrikaans at great length during their leisure time. Besides Afrikaans they spoke English normally at work, because of policy obligation. Even if the adults supported the usage of English by their children some had reservations in that regard. They feared the risk of losing their vernacular, because of the enormous emphasis on speaking the English language. One adult parent who is in the employ of the government constantly warned against the losing of culture by adopting other languages like what happened with the Angolans who are speaking Portuguese more than their local languages.

Language is both cultural and social and it is used according to context in order to show social and cultural backdrops that grounds the rules and assumptions of language use (Sherzer 1987: 296). It also becomes the discourse of culture expression and group relationship.

## Chapter 6. Conclusion

When I returned from the field where I spent six months, I rushed to organize my data in order to start writing, because of the academic deadline. I initially felt that focusing on one event (either the funeral or the Independence Day celebration) would be too limiting, but with hindsight this decision has meant that the thesis perhaps tries to do too much.

The process of research and report writing was not an easy one, because I was swamped by the wealth of information of different kinds, such as detailed interviews, personal accounts, and impressions on one hand and the academic expectations on the other. In writing up the thesis I drew on all these sources and in the whole process of exploring and moving between the different kinds of data and discussing the meaning of the often complex evidence observed. I found that it required more time than I had available.

The main findings of this study are based on observation rather than interviews, because some discourses are articulated better in performance than in word. Below I will summarize the main findings of the study:

Firstly, the state in Namibia, through its agencies, is involved fully in meaning making of 'culture' nationally. Through organizing and sponsoring cultural and independence festivals, a crossing point between local communities and the state is created. At same time this particular space functions as the public arena where local cultural identities are articulated within a framework negotiated by the state. Representations at cultural festivities are of particular importance to the state when it comes to the integration of local societies in the mainstream nation (Lentz, 2001:47).

Secondly, funerals are spaces of civility. They are not only spaces where courteousness is expressed, but where identities of both the deceased and those that survive are created and recreated. I have observed that family relationships of the

deceased are either broken or mended here. Current practices at funerals that are considered to be modern are criticized by some sectors of the society, because of the enormous costs involved and lack of good behaviour or 'nkeddi', as it is locally referred to (my emphasis *New Era* 20 Oct 2006). The availability of mortuaries will bring continuous evolution in funeral practices, because the periods in which the bodies are preserved allow space for constant creation and recreation of certain practices performed at funerals.

Thirdly, language is used in Rundu to display your being a 'MuKavango'. However, English is used in official contexts, in business and in schools. This presents a potential conflict. Vernacular languages are widely spoken among the adults and when they communicate with their children, but not when the youth communicate with their peers. I have observed some youth that were working on their school projects after school hours and they spoke English or the 'street language' that is composed of mixture of some local vernacular, Afrikaans and some English words. This slang or the "mix and match" language seems to be developing into a hybrid dialect particularly among the youth of Rundu. Some of the adults that I have held interviews with lamented that their children might lose their mother tongue, because of the high concentration of "foreign" languages in the town. Others encouraged their children to speak English.

Finally, the other theme that emerged during my observation was clothing. I described some clothing practices that were observed at the independence celebration and the funeral. I noted that maintaining 'customary' clothes was important for display at festivals only. This is important for identity purposes, because one needs to be seen as a MuKavango from what one wears during such festivals. Discussions on clothing did not really emphasize on wearing traditional clothes daily, but indicated that the youth would not lose their identity if they simply knew the traditional clothes. Nonetheless, here too there was some difference of opinion.

This study also raised issues that require further exploration. Useful here is the comparison of public events in different regions of Namibia in order to explore fully how

globalisation influences the portrayal of culture ideas locally. Lacking in this study also is the female voice. Due to complex domestic arrangements that I encountered, I could not become involved intensely with women and their views. Perhaps that can also be pursued elsewhere in order to give a more balanced account.



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# Appendix 1

## Pictures



**Picture 1 Women selling food stuffs at the entrance of the stadium**



**Picture 2 People gathered at the Independence Day celebration**





**Picture 3 The Maria Mwengere Cultural group performing on Independence Day celebration**



**Picture 4 Sauyemwa Youth group performed the Oshiwambo traditional dance.**



**Picture 5 SWAPO Pioneers clad in the party colors**



**Picture 6 The Lutheran Choir singing**





**Picture 7 PM's parents and his children**



**Picture 8 PM's colleagues dressed in academic gowns**



**Picture 9 PM's coffin with an academic gown on top**



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