

8 *The Caprivi African National Union (CANU) 1962–1964: Forms of Resistance*¹

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The history of the Caprivi African National Union (CANU) is barely covered in Namibian historiography dealing with the liberation struggle.² However, in this chapter I am not interested in presenting a historical narrative of the rise and fall of CANU, and thus to mistakenly assume a simple linearity of events regarding the history of the movement.³ I will also not discuss the relationship between CANU and the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) in exile and the subsequent 'merger' of the two liberation movements.⁴ The main focus will be to examine why the administration enforced a harsh clampdown on CANU activities and activists, forcing many into exile and preventing the movement from operating freely within Caprivi, beyond its official launch and its first meeting.

- 1 I acknowledge the assistance of Mr Alfred Ilukena, Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Education, Republic of Namibia, who assisted me with conducting oral history interviews with CANU activists and family members of Brendan Simbwaye in April 2006. His family ties and the fact that he was a freedom fighter himself made it easier for me to secure appointments for interviews and get the confidence of the interviewees. I sincerely thank him. I would also like to thank Ellen Namhila for her persistent encouragement for research on Simbwaye to be undertaken, and Werner Hillebrecht and staff at the National Archives of Namibia for being very helpful and attentive during the many hours I spent in the archives.
- 2 Often it is presented as a minor and insignificant organisation, which is only an 'appendix' to the history of the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO), with which it 'merged' in 1964 to fight for a common cause. References in the literature are usually to show how SWAPO was a broad based nationalistic organisation representative of the people of South West Africa, and not necessarily to write about the history of CANU (see among others, Mbuende, 1986; Katjavivi, 1988; Pütz, von Egidy and Caplan, 1989; Nujoma, 2001).
- 3 For a more detailed discussion of the history of CANU see Kangumu, (2008). 'Contestations over Caprivi Identities: From Pre-colonial times to the present', (PhD thesis, University of Cape Town). See Kangumu (2011), for the published version.
- 4 On 5 November 1964, CANU and SWAPO announced a 'merger' of the two movements in a joint press release signed by Albert Mishake Muyongo on behalf of CANU and Sam Nujoma on behalf of SWAPO. This agreement is a major source of contention in present day Namibian politics and lay at the core of secessionist tendencies by a group of people from the Caprivi region under Mishake Muyongo. The secessionists allege that SWAPO made an undertaking, in terms of the 'merger' agreement, that the Caprivi would be granted either special status or complete autonomy after Namibia's independence. Sam Nujoma of SWAPO strongly refutes this version of history and maintains that there was always an agreement for one nation (Flint, 2002, p. 421). The press release issued by the two parties does not support Muyongo's version. Michael Morris claims that the merger was first announced by SWAPO's Secretary-General, Jacob Kuhangua, in Dar es Salaam on 13 October, 1964 (Morris, 1971, p. 14).

Symptomatic of the suppression was the fact that Brendan Simbwaye, CANU's first president,⁵ was arrested and banished from Caprivi altogether, and disappeared after several years whilst in the hands of the authorities. The chapter will, therefore, investigate CANU's political activities and strategies between 1962 and 1964, the period when it was accused of 'undermining' the administration. The Native Commissioner for the Eastern Caprivi Strip at the time criticised the activities of 'certain young men of CANU who, as you know, have been creating trouble here, doing and saying things to try and poison the minds of the people against the government.'⁶ What was CANU 'doing and saying' that 'poisoned' people's minds? John Leif Fossé has described CANU's campaign as 'peaceful but successful' and argued that it proved difficult for the authorities to handle.⁷

The scope of the chapter will be limited to examining four aspects of the political activities in which CANU played a role to influence public opinion against the authorities:

1. participation in the Odendaal Commission's public hearings;
2. campaigning on the issue of cattle sales in Caprivi;
3. interventions in public debates on the education system; and
4. debating the functions of traditional authorities.

But before discussing these actions, a brief historical background of Caprivi will be provided to help put these issues into perspective.

The space that would become 'The Caprivi'⁸ was inhabited by subsistence farming communities since time immemorial, who lived sparsely scattered under decentralised forms of governance or tribal administration. During the reign of Ngombala (1725-1775), the sixth ruler in the oral genealogy of the Lozi Kingdom, the Lozi established supremacy over these communities. This was followed, from 1838, by a period of occupation by the Makololo of Sibatwane and then, after 1864, the region fell under Lozi rule again. It was the Anglo-German Treaty of 1 July 1890 that created the Caprivi Strip (Zipfel), and made it part of German South West Africa. However, it took Germany about 18 years before they actually established an operational administration in the Caprivi Strip, and during this time it is alleged that the territory turned into a haven for criminals and poachers (Fisch, 1999 p.12).

In 1909 Germany established a post at a place they called Schuckmannsburg, from where they administered the territory.⁹ This was short-lived for the outbreak of World War I intervened, and the Germans surrendered to the Allied Forces without firing a shot at the Allied Forces, making the capture of Caprivi one of the first victories of the Allied Forces in the war. Along with the rest of South West Africa, the Caprivi Strip

5 See chapter 9 in this volume for more details.

6 NAN LKM 3/3/3 File No. N1/15/2, Kruger, Magistrate Eastern Caprivi Zipfel, to Chief Moraliswani Maiba of the Masubiya, 8 September 1964.

7 John Leif Fossé (1996), 'Negotiating the Nation in Local Terms: Ethnicity and Nationalism in Eastern Caprivi, Namibia' (MA Thesis, University of Oslo) p. 155.

8 For the Masubiya, it formed part of their pre-colonial kingdom of Itenge, see Shamukuni, 1972. In 2013, the Caprivi Region was renamed 'Zambezi Region'. See Shamukuni (1972).

9 In 2013, Schuckmannsburg was renamed 'Luhonono'. See Shinovene Immanuel, 'Caprivi is no more', *The Namibian*, 9 August 2013.

was handed to South Africa at the Versailles Conference under the League of Nations Mandate. Between 1919 and 1989, the administration of the Caprivi was passed back and forth several times between various administrators in South Africa, South West Africa, and the neighbouring British colonies. The reason given for this constant transfer was the administrative difficulties caused by the geographical remoteness and isolation of Caprivi from Windhoek. The colonial administration also considered Caprivi as unsuitable for white settlement because it was malarial and generally of low economic potential. An official, Gibbons, inspecting the region for the British South African Company concluded that the Caprivi was: ‘the poorest district that have [sic] come under my notice’ (Fisch, 1999, p. 17). The territory was perceived as useless, for it did not have minerals such as diamonds and copper, nor, with its few inhabitants, was it a labour reservoir or even an outlet for products. The administration of the territory was based on dual tribal chieftainship under the supervision of one government officer, and the provision of education and health services was left in the hands of missionaries.

This perception of the region as a useless piece of land ensured that Caprivi remained a remote, sleepy, backwater for the most part, until the early 1960s, when the liberation struggle in southern Africa intensified with the launch of the armed struggle, and the strategic location of the Caprivi – in the heart of southern Africa – attracted a heavy South African military build-up there. It was at this crucial time, in 1964, that Northern Rhodesia gained its independence (becoming Zambia), and it became clear to apartheid South Africa that it would play a pivotal role in aiding and housing liberation movements in southern Africa. It was also at this time that CANU became very active as an underground movement, so its relationship with the United Independence Party (UNIP) of Zambia was closely monitored, and its activities were accompanied by political and security concerns. CANU had existed as an informal underground movement since the end of 1958,¹⁰ although it only came to media attention in 1961¹¹ and was formally founded on 7 September 1962.¹² Among the resolutions passed on that day was that the creation of the organisation be kept secret for fear that the South African government would ban it before it could be publicly launched and publicised in Caprivi.¹³

10 Adrian Waluka Simubali, Bukalo, 16 April 2006. Simubali is a founder member of CANU and held the position of Treasurer.

11 See the *African Mail*, 17 October 1961, in Lusaka.

12 Albert Zacharia Ndopu, Katima Mulilo, 17 April, 2006. Albert Zacharia Ndopu was an executive committee member of CANU and served as its Secretary for Information and Publicity. Different writers provide different dates on which CANU was supposedly formed: Kaire Mbuende (1986, p. 154) says that it was formed in 1962; Peter Katjavivi provides two different dates – 1964 (1984, p. 575), and 1963 (1988, p. 51); Ernest Likando argues that it was formed in early 1963 (1989, p. 139) as do J. Pütz, H. von Egidy, and P. Caplan (1989, p. 90).

13 Shamukuni (1972).