

13 *Okongo: Case Study of the Impact of the Liberation Struggle in the Ohangwena Region*

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Introduction

This chapter will present the history of Okongo (although the South African military base at the town was known as ‘Nkongo’) and the ways in which the residents’ daily lives came to be completely changed during the liberation struggle.¹ Traumatic memories include cases of interrogation, harassment, violence, deaths, and the climate of fear created by the conflict between South African forces and the Peoples’ Liberation Army of Namibia and the presence of armed combatants from both sides in the community.

Okongo is a village situated in Ohangwena, one of the 14 political regions in Namibia. The chapter will give background on how Okongo village was established and how it became a politically active centre where many acts of violence such as executions, landmine explosions, harassment and detentions took place during the liberation struggle (1966-1989). The limited availability of literature on the impact of the war on communities in northern Namibia during the liberation struggle, especially in Ohangwena Region, motivated me to carry out research on this topic. The information to be presented will be largely based on a set of seven interviews that I conducted with local residents and their personal accounts of the events that took place in the area where they lived.

In this chapter witnesses share their wartime experiences through oral interviews and so are based on human memories of events that took place many years ago. Oral sources present the challenge that the information provided may sometimes not be reliable since memories fade, depending on the length of time that has passed since an event. When a story is told the sequence of events can also become confused and oral narratives are seldom in chronological order, with the exact date that an event took place often being only vaguely remembered. However, as more than two decades have already passed since the end of the war, this history will be forgotten unless the new generation of Namibian historians take action. Today we tend to use sweeping statements to talk about the liberation struggle and lose sight of the thousands of individual incidents and personal tragedies that combine to create the ‘collective memory’ of northern Namibia. The casualties of the war remain largely anonymous.

1 See <<http://www.wikimapia.org/25376381/Nkongo-Okongo>>. {Accessed on 20 February 2011}.

The aim of the chapter is to focus on the impact of the war on one village, Okongo, in order to convey a real sense of the impact of the war on the communities living in the war zone. The memories and experiences of people who witnessed the liberation struggle reveal the changes the war brought to their everyday lives (such as the dusk-to-dawn curfew), their attempts to give safety to their loved ones during the attacks of the Peoples' Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN) and the South African Defence Force (SADF) and their locally recruited allies in the South West African Territorial Force (SWATF) and the para-military police unit (Koevoet).

Research identified sites where some of the most violent incidents in the war took place in the area around Okongo and the graves of some of those who lost their lives when they were shot for 'breaking' the curfew, killed by landmine blasts or executed in the middle of the night. The war changed the community's social life and some cultural activities had to stop being practised, such as the tradition of children dancing under the moon light (*okudanauka oshihamwedi*) or helping with weeding and threshing (*oikukula noikungungu*). Old men hardly came together as was normal, in peacetime, for a cup of traditional beer (*omalodu oilya*) or marula juice (*omaongo*) and to discuss the news of the day. Informal education that normally took place at the main seating area after supper was suspended for as long as the war was in the area. People rarely travelled to visit their distant relatives as they feared they would end up being arrested and interrogated if they were suspected of being PLAN fighters. As in other parts of northern Namibia, the display of the bodies of dead PLAN fighters on the mudguards of Casspirs (armoured military vehicles) that were driven through Okongo was another practice that had a traumatic impact on the community (Kamonga, 2011, p. 130).



Figure 13.1 (From left to right) Ms Nampala, Mr Ndadi and Hon. Mwahanyekange at a steel drum that was used to hold prisoners at the Okongo Military Base. Hon. Mwahanyekange shows the 'breathing holes' provided to give air to prisoners in the drum. On the top of the drum one can see the hatch which prisoners had to climb through to enter the drum
(Jeremy Silvester)

Many people abandoned the area that was a ‘hot spot’ in the conflict, and travelled to the west to the relative safety of towns such as Ondangwa and Oshakati, whilst some were either forced or volunteered to join either the PLAN fighters in Angola or the South African security forces. One concern about going into exile was that it risked the lives of those who remained behind, because South African soldiers and PLAN fighters harassed the relatives of those who had left the country and interrogated them about the whereabouts of absent family members.

The relationship between the South African military bases and the community was difficult as people’s lives were in danger, especially during conflicts between the two groups. Civilians were sometimes detained in a large, uncomfortable metal drum that was used as a kind of prison in the military base at Okongo. One could imagine that prisoners hardly had enough oxygen as the holes that were made in a pipe at the top of the drum, to supply air, were very small.²

One Sunday, whilst the community was in a church service, the South African Defence Force came and dumped a mass of corpses at the church entrance and requested people to come and witness how they had killed SWAPO. Sometimes they also flew corpses tied to a helicopter above the town to warn those who might like to join SWAPO what would happen to them if they were caught while crossing the border. The South African Defence Force tried to intimidate the civilians in as many ways as possible. The local residents took the responsibility to make sure that dogs did not feed on the corpses, but were only able to bury them once they received an order from the SADF camp. Graves provide one of the most visible reminders on the landscape of the painful memories of the war. The community under the leadership of their headman, Moses Kakoto, decided to bury the corpses in mass graves and as a result there are today two mass graves in Okongo settlement where two groups of PLAN fighters were buried just a few metres from the military base.³ Research has yet to be conducted to cross-reference the community’s accounts of these atrocities with archival sources. Memorial tombstones have been erected at both grave sites stating ‘A Namibian Hero SWAPO/PLAN Combatant Lies Here’, but giving no information about the number of guerrillas buried at each site, nor giving the date of their deaths.

Residents’ lives were in danger when PLAN fighters and the SADF fought, as the shooting was indiscriminate. In that way, several houses caught fire or were destroyed, and some livestock were reported killed. The landmines planted by both PLAN fighters and the South Africa Defence Force were everywhere, and the community used to be vulnerable and many people and animals lost their lives by being blown up by landmines. In Okongo there are several graves that provide evidence of the large number of landmine victims and some of the people who were killed in the area were buried elsewhere (for example Cornelius Ndjoba and one of his bodyguards are buried in Ongwediva in Oshana Region after his assassination on 25 November 1982).⁴ The graves of the victims of all these incidents provide a visible reminder of the war to this day.

2 Jeremy Silvester, Lovisa Nampala and Erica Ndalikokule (2010), *Heritage Hunt Report for Ohangwena Region* Third Edition, Windhoek, pp. 76-80.

3 Ibid, pp. 61-69.

4 ‘At the Noon Hour they Passed safely, but Three Hours later the Road Roared’, *Windhoek Observer*, 19 March 1983, p. 6.