

1 *Transforming the Traumatic Life Experiences of Women in Post-Apartheid Namibian Historical Narratives*

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Introduction

This chapter is based on the experience of interviewing five women, and writing and publishing their stories in a book with the title *Tears of Courage: Five Mothers, Five Stories, One Victory*.¹ That book was published with the financial support of the Archives of Anti-Colonial Resistance and the Liberation Struggle (AACRLS) Project. The project was jointly funded by the Federal Republic of Germany and the Government of the Republic of Namibia and administered under the auspices of the National Archives of Namibia. Published in 2009, the book brought out for the first time the hidden and untold sufferings of ordinary village women's experiences at the hands of the apartheid military, police and prison guards, during the formative years of the liberation struggle. Namibian women played a pivotal role in the struggle against colonialism and apartheid as they fed, clothed, nursed, and acted as a shield for the freedom fighters. The women whose stories are in the book were all arrested by the apartheid police. One was beaten until she had a miscarriage, another imprisoned in Pretoria where she had to give birth in jail, another had her house destroyed and burnt to the ground and her husband killed, another was beaten and tortured when the police could not find her brother (who was on the police's list of wanted persons), and the last was sentenced to a jail term in Pretoria along with her two brothers.

In the epilogue of the book, John Otto Nankudhu, Commander of Omugulugwoombashe, SWAPO's first military camp inside Namibia, which was attacked by the South African military in August 1966, stated: 'It is gratifying to see the story of these women written down. They carry a history of our country we cannot afford to lose. I know some of these women very well because it was mainly due to them that we survived in northern Namibia and escaped arrest from the apartheid authority for a long time.' As Beth Goldblatt and Sheila Meintjies argue, 'Our society constantly diminishes the women's role and women themselves then see their experiences as unimportant' (1996). Indeed at the launch of the book, one of the five women who spoke said: 'It

1 Significant sections of this chapter are drawn directly from my previous publication, *Tears of Courage: Five Mothers, Five Stories, One Victory* (Windhoek: AACRLS, 2009) with the permission of the National Archives. However, I felt it was important to expand here on the issues that were raised by the research process that led to that publication.

never occurred to me that our past experiences mattered to anyone or to the history of our country and that it is worth recording and writing.’

What the book did for these women is that it made their contribution known so that it could be shared with the whole country. Afterwards, school children, teachers and film makers approached them in their communities wanting to know more about their experiences. In turn, they felt valued, appreciated and acknowledged, which has helped them in the healthier way in which they are now able to relate to their past experiences and retell their stories without having an emotional breakdown. Seemingly, sharing their experiences was a therapeutic experience.

In this chapter I will outline the importance of the AACRLS project that sponsored the production of the book, highlight my specific research experiences interviewing these five women, and indicate the historical significance of the stories told by the women to broaden policy research on gender and development in Namibia and on the way 26 August is celebrated and commemorated in Namibia every year as National Heroes day. The chapter argues that the book *Tears of Courage* helps remind both the public and historians that amongst those heroes that we celebrate on National Heroes’ Day there are also heroines. The narratives of these ordinary village women are a great contribution to the history of women in Namibia, placing their stories in the national historiography of the liberation struggle alongside those of men.

The AACRLS Project

The National Archives of Namibia has, since the country’s independence on 21 March 1990, attempted to document Namibia’s long underground history of resistance to colonialism and apartheid. Actually, far-sighted individuals at the helm of the Archives already started with such activities before independence, under the obvious constraints of the prevailing political climate of the apartheid regime.

Nevertheless, progress was rather slow, and a substantial boost to such efforts came only about ten years after independence, when two factors came into play. One was the relocation of the National Archives to house Namibia’s most important documents and audio-visual records in new purpose-built accommodation, a proud symbol of independent Namibia and a stark contrast to the dusty, tiny old dungeons which the old colonial archives had inhabited since 1955. The other factor was that the first colonial power to rule over Namibia, Germany, was persuaded to contribute substantial financial support to a special project to document the entire historical heritage of resistance, from the early uprisings against German rule, through the long years when South Africa seemed to rule with absolute power, to the modern liberation struggle, which led to independence.

This special project, had the long-winded name the ‘Archives of Anti-Colonial Resistance and the Liberation Struggle’ Project or, not much shorter, the AACRLS. In its early beginnings in 2001, it was resolved that it did not make sense to create a separate archives for this material but to let it contribute to the holdings of the National Archives or the National Museum as appropriate, so that all funds could be focused on securing the heritage, instead of creating and maintaining a new institution. In doing this, it is also emphasised that there is a single history of a united Namibia, in the