

# ***17 Finnish Solidarity with the Liberation Struggle of Namibia: A Documentation Project<sup>1</sup>***

***Pekka Peltola***

## **Freedom is Seldom a Gift**

Namibia's independence was won primarily by the efforts of Namibians themselves. Acknowledging this, it is also important to remember that the liberation struggle of Namibians took place outside its borders as well: it started in Cape Town, spread to the United Nations in New York, established itself in Tanzania, then in Zambia and Angola. The diplomatic, political and armed struggle led by SWAPO could be fought only with the material, political, and other support given by many governments and non-governmental organisations. Thousands of people dedicated themselves to supporting the fight against apartheid and for a free and independent Namibia.

In order to write a comprehensive history of the struggle, a rich database documenting the mainly selfless efforts rendered by solidarity activists in other countries is necessary. For this reason Finland has contributed by collecting documentary evidence of the work done in Finland or by Finns for the struggle and, therefore, the initiative of the Archives of Anti-Colonial Resistance and the Liberation Struggle (AACRLS) project was welcomed in Finland, where a committee was formally established for that purpose in 2004 as a part of the Namibian effort to save this history.

## **Finnish Motives**

Finland is far away from Southern Africa both in kilometres and in cultural terms and, therefore, a brief description and analysis of Finnish motives for helping the liberation struggle is necessary.

It is a well-known fact that Finnish evangelical Lutheran missionaries arrived in Owamboland in northern Namibia in 1870. A large number of church members back

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<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, an overview of the work of AACRLS-Finland is described in some technical detail in order to help other, similar, projects when they contemplate solutions to some essential and costly issues. Discussion of relevant ethics, privacy, copyright, and some other politically laden issues are discussed in my paper Peltola (2009) 'Picking up the international pieces of struggle: Finnish support to the liberation struggle in Namibia and Mozambique', presented at the Nordic Documentation Project Concluding Workshop, Pretoria, South Africa, 26-27 November, 2009. All the members and project workers of AACRLS-Finland also contributed to both papers.

in Finland supported their work, support that has continued to this day. The long-term interest created through this missionary work, and through the family networks, spread information about this part of Africa to several generations of Finns. Missionaries visited schools and told their stories about 'Ambomaa' to many schoolchildren. They learned to speak Oshiwambo, and Finnish missionaries actually produced the first textbooks on the language and its different dialects and their grammar, and translated books (especially the Bible) into Oshiwambo (Buys and Nambala, 2003). They collected folklore, genealogies, songs, and proverbs in Oshiwambo, as well as artefacts, and they took photographs. The Emil Liljeblad collection from 1930 to 1931 covering this area is a dormant treasure, consisting of 5 000 pages of Owambo history, which otherwise might have been forgotten (Simola, 2001, p. 196).

Interest in the affairs of then South West Africa did not exist outside the activities of the church before the 1960s, when leftist ideas gathered momentum in the universities. Some students became aware of the evils of apartheid, started to spread information about it, and to organise a campaign against it. The first organisation against apartheid was the South Africa Committee, founded in 1965 with support from students and some trade unions. Activities included writing articles to the student press, helping travelling SWAPO emissaries, like Emil Appolus and Andreas Shipanga, to get publicity, and organising solidarity meetings. One very important and significant contribution of the student organisations was financing the studies in Finland of an exiled Namibian student, Nicky Iyambo, who graduated in both political science and medicine. He arrived in Finland in late 1964 and represented SWAPO for many years both in Finland and Scandinavia (Soiri and Peltola, 1999, p.120).

At the time, the Finnish government was not interested in anything relating to Southern Africa, other than the commercial interests of the Finnish paper industry in South Africa. The missionaries also had mixed feelings towards the new nationalist movement, SWAPO. Some were against, and some in favour of the liberation struggle. Then a new leader of the Missionary Society came onto the scene: Professor, later Archbishop Mikko Juva, who had visited Owamboland in 1961 and some years later personally financed Sam Nujoma's visit to Finland. By the end of the 1960s, Mikko Juva's firm guidance had shifted the position of the Missionary Society in favour of the liberation struggle waged by SWAPO. He had to use all his authority, but was supported by other strong personalities like Aarne Hartikainen and Rev. Mikko Ihämäki (Soiri and Peltola, 1999, pp. 59-63).

International influence and student pressure brought about a policy change in Finnish foreign politics. Having received, among others, Amílcar Cabral, the leader of PAIGC from Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde, the President of Finland, Urho Kekkonen, began directly supporting a number of liberation struggles, including that of SWAPO, in 1973 (Soiri and Peltola, 1999, p. 19).

The Finnish government had its own reasons, too, for acting against apartheid. Its main concern was to keep its distance from its powerful neighbour, the Soviet Union, without offending her, so the Finnish Government wanted to be active in the United Nations and to participate in activities together with other Nordic countries: Sweden, Norway, Iceland, and Denmark. Sweden was the leading nation in this group and therefore Sweden's early initiatives to support opposition against apartheid carried