The Church, the State and the Issue of National Reconciliation in Namibia

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Since its arrival in South West Africa in the early 19th century the Church has attempted to strike a balance between acquiring valuable relations to the political leadership on the one hand and serving as a self-sacrificing church for the people on the other. During the three phases in Namibia's history since the Berlin conference in 1884-1885 (German rule (1884-1915), South African rule (1915-1989) and independence (1990-today)) the governments have enjoyed particular support and legitimacy from one or several churches, which in turn have profited from support by the government. Given Namibia's painful and turbulent history it is therefore obious that also the churches have a turbulent history involving a fair amount of paradoxes and tensions. It may even be questioned whether it is correct to talk about *the* Church in Namibia. In this article I will attempt to examine the relationship between Church and State in Namibia and the issue of national reconciliation from the 1960s liberation struggle until today.

Let us begin with a look at Namibia's church landscape. Of the more than 2 million people nearly 90 percent are Christians. Over half of these Christians are members of one of the three Lutheran churches: the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia (ELCIN, about 610 000 members), the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Republic of Namibia (ELCRN, about 350 000 members) and the German Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia (ELKIN-DELK, about 5 000 members). The Catholic Church of Namibia has approximately 220 000 members and the Anglican and Reformed churches around 65 000 and 23 000 members respectively. Of these churches, all but two are the results of European mission. Whereas ELCIN originates in the work of the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission (FELM) among the Ovambo and Kavango people in the densley populated areas in the north ELCRN is a continuation of the work by the German Rheinmission among the Herero and Naama of central and southern Namibia. The Catholic Church has its roots in a handful (in Europe based) societies' work in more or less the entire country and the Anglican Church in British missionary efforts following the Church's work among soldiers and civilians during the First World War in Namibia. Of these churches the German Lutheran Church in Namibia and the Dutch Reformed Church stands out from the rest. While the former was founded as and has remained a German speaking Lutheran church among Namibia's German descendants as well as recent immigrants, the Reformed Church in a similar way has been a church for the (almost exclusively) white Afrikaans-speaking population. Besides those mentioned so far there are in Namibia dozens of churches – including a growing number of charismatic churches which are believed to have well over 200 000 members.

The Church and SWAPO

When Liberation Organisation South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) in 1966 began its armed resistance against South African occupation of Namibia the churches in Namibia were divided. Both the occupying power and the liberation movement demanded that the church took their party in the struggle. Most churches in Namibia, however, chose a kind of diplomatic middle course. They allied temselves with the goals of the liberation movement, but clearly marked their distance from violence. In an open letter to Prime Minister Vorster in

1971, the heads of the two largest Lutheran churches in Namibia's stated that South Africa had failed to respect human rights and stressed their wish that South Africa comply with the UN demands, and the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice according to which South Africa has no right to be present in Namibia (ICJ 1971: Open letter to his Honour, the Prime Minister of South Africa 1971). Shortly after the Catholic and Anglican churches expressed their strong support for the letter (Kjellberg 1972, 41-42). At the same time as the local church leaders chose a diplomatic struggle the churches both locally and globally stood at the disposal of the liberation movement (well aware of the armed struggle that it was involved in). Many church pastors in northern Namibia, at night, assisted guerrillas from the People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN), which was SWAPO's military wing (Interview: Nambala). The Dutch Reformed Church supported, for obvious reasons, South Africa's policy, whereas the German Lutheran Church in Namibia adopted a kind of middle position between the Reformed Church and the two other Lutheran churches. As a consequence of the Namibian churches' different relationship and commitment to the liberation struggle they today find themselves in very different positions regarding their relation to the government. While the Lutheran, Catholic and Anglican churches enjoy good relations with the government, the situation is diametrically opposed for the Reformed Church. Government represenatives have in many more or less public policy contexts reminded that the position of the Reformed Church in Namibia is anything but good due to its (and its members) earlier legitimatizing of the South African apartheid regime. The country's first President Sam Nujoma (who is still considered to be the person that has the greatest influence on Namibia's political development) has repeatedly stressed that SWAPO recognizes only the three churches which participated in the struggle for liberation: the Lutheran, Anglican and Catholic (Interview: Ndeikwila). And since the Government of Namibia since independence has been in the hands of SWAPO, this recognition has also tended to count for the government. Among others, the charismatic churches have several times come under public criticism as insincere, improper or unwelcome by Sam Nujoma and other high ranking politicians (Namibia Economist, 29 May 2009, The Namibian, 23 January 2006).

This recognition of three churches appears by many as farfetched. First, a categorization of included and excluded churches excludes about one third of Namibia's population and could – if it continues – have serious implications for SWAPO. It is not only the religious map which has changed over the past decade in Namibia. At the same time as the established churches have been challenged by a growing collection of charismatic churches SWAPO's monopoly in the political arena has been challenged by a growing number of freethinkers, some of whom have chosen to vote for the young party Rally for Democracy and Progress (RDP). This is hardly a temporary development. Although both SWAPO and the three largest church communities continue to have an overwhelming popular support, their monopoly may soon be over. It is therefore understandable that the SWAPO leadership reacts when there is movement in (what it has so far considered) its own backyard. One can therefore also be tempted to question the party's choice of direction. Maintaining a relationship with some churches on the basis of their active support of the liberation struggle and excluding others could hardly be considered an effective and long term approach for a political party to win votes in an increasingly pluralistic Namibia.

Secondly, SWAPO's recognition of three churches seems to be rhetorical rather than consistent. Since independence, the Lutherans have enjoyed more respect in the Namibian leadership than the Anglicans and Catholics. Equally clear as this is also the ranking within the Lutheran block. Since SWAPO has always had its greatest support among the Ovambo from the north ELCIN has always enjoyed the best relations with the government. Most Government officials and ministers are Lutherans from the north and much of the

armed struggle took place on ELCIN soil. The sister Church ELCRN has never had quite as warm relations to the government. The German Lutheran Church, by virtue of its colonial past and its ambivalent position in the struggle for liberation, does not enjoy particularly good relations with the government.

The Church – a muted conscience?

In Namibia it seems to be a relatively common opinion that the Church should act as a social conscience. The church should have a (or should use its) prophetic voice in society. What is meant by this, however, differs. Some have emphasized that the church should use its voice in a constructive manner: by helping and guiding the (SWAPO headed) government in order for it to make the right choices (however, without challenging it). Others have rather stressed that the church should be more independent and have a more radical responsibility even if it would entail sharp criticism of the present government. And critics of those who follow a more diplomatic line (or critics of the present political situation) would probably argue that a true prophetic church should not take the adviser's position. Likewise critics stress that Namibian Christianity by large has failed as a prophetic voice after independence (Several interviews).

Many churches in Namibia have expected the ecumenical umbrella organization Council of Churches in Namibia (CCN) to provide a common voice. The CCN, however (at least in sensitive political issues) has chosen to throw the ball back to the member churches and in particular to ELCIN and its two bishops (Interview: Kapolo). It is therefore clear that ELCIN, and its bishops, is in a key position. Paradoxically it is this church which has always stood closest to the government. In fact, ELCIN has been in a similar position as the Reformed Church during the apartheid era: ELCIN has been something of a church of the government – or in other words: ELCIN has largely had a SWAPO identity.

There are both advantages and disadvantages with this good relationship. On the one hand, both the government and the church (mainly ELCIN, but to some extent, the other included churches) have been benefited by good relations. The important position of the church may not have been evident in the government's daily work, or the presidents' and ministers' statements, but on a local level, cooperation between state and church has been very natural. Apart from the fact that the pastors have been involved in people's lives from the cradle to the grave, they have been present in the education system, health care and in many other social functions. Once specific needs have arisen, the Church has been a natural partner for the government. Like the situation in Finland until well into the 20th century, the Church in Namibia has been something of the extended arm of the state and has offered a spiritual dimension in the nation building.

On the other hand, the close church-state relations have had at least some influence on the church's freedom of action. Many critics have emphasized the negative aspects of the church's – and especially ELCIN's – proximity to SWAPO. ELCIN's bishops have been expected to plead the Church's cause in both light and heavy political issues (not least regarding the unequal distribution of Namibia's resources, political power abuse as well as tendencies within SWAPO to blacken dissenters). But Church leaders can hardly be said to have been particularly active in the political sphere. Many of the church's former and current pastors and leaders indeed committed themselves politically during the struggle for independence, which has within SWAPO been something of a prerequisite in order to be taken seriously. Quite few of the church leaders, however, have reached particularly high in the SWAPO hierarchy and therefore their words in policy issues have not been considered as carrying any particular weight. Meanwhile, those people – including church leaders – who have engaged themselves politically within SWAPO, or have had warm relations with its leadership have tended to avoid conflict with the same. Just as their predecessors the recently

retired bishops Thomas Shivute and Johannes Sindano – as well as the ELCRN Bishop Zephania Kameeta – avoided friction with the government. As a result, the church in Namibia is by many considered to be quite toothless. While the church was actively engaged during the apartheid era, many believe that it has failed in its role as a social conscience after independence. Many therefore saw it as a reinforcement of a long trend when the bishops of the three main churches – ELCIN, ELCRN and the Roman Catholic Church – failed to attend the launching ceremony of the Church Leaders' Declaration on Elections in Namibia 2009 an initiative aimed at promoting peaceful elections where most other Christian churches in Namibia were present. According to Dr Abisai Shejavali, the former General Secretary of the Council of Churches in Namibia (CCN) and chairperson of the steering committee, some church leaders disagreed with parts of the message in the declaration. There had been discussions on article five in the preamble which (in the name of *the Church*) claimed that: *having realised the failures of the Church in many instances since independence for not being obedient to God in raising a prophetic voice in search for a just society* (Church Leaders' Declaration on Elections in Namibia 2009; interview: Shejavali).

Does Namibia need national reconciliation?

The issue of the Church's relationship to politics, which we have so far discussed, is also linked to the issue of national reconciliation. The need for reconciliation in the conflict-torn country was to be of such significance that this was highlighted in the preamble of Namibia's Constitution (The Constitution of Namibia, 1). Namibia's first President Sam Nujoma likewise, during his three terms in office, chose to emphasize the need for national reconciliation in Namibia. This was, however, as far as the issue of reconciliation would be taken. In contrast to the development in South Africa no truth commission would be held in Namibia, no one (or at least very few) confessed their misdeeds, and many believe that no one really reconciled (Interview: Henog and Marais). Due, maybe, to a combination of a) the development in South Africa, b) the mentioning of reconciliation in the preamble of the Namibian constitution and c) the mentioning of reconciliation in various speeches by high-ranking political leaders, a fairly widespread opinion in the country seems to be that genuine attempts had been made from the side of the government to bring about reconciliation among its conflict wasted inhabitants. Many (including leading church and political leaders) also wrongly believe (or at least claim) that there is a policy document defining and dealing with national reconciliation (Interview: Kapolo, Ndeikwila).

The inability to deal with trauma caused by conflicts and war is by no means exclusive to Namibia but has globally, throughout history, in fact been much more common than it's much more desired opposite. In Finland, for instance, where a devastating Civil War in 1918 was fought, between rivaling socialist and conservative forces, little was done in order for the previous enemies to become reconciled. Typically, also, the church allied itself with the conservatives, as communism was feared to be the ultimate enemy of Christianity. Whereas the war in Finland, however, divided societies and families and therefore cut right through the society, the freedom fight in Namibia largely, though far from exclusively, went along ethnic and language lines. Therefore the Church in Namibia was also divided, both in the sense that certain churches supported various fractions (for instance the Dutch Reformed Church, the German Lutheran Church and ELCIN), and in the sense that many churches encountered internal tensions or, similarly to the case with the Lutheran Church in Finland, failed to support and defend all its members – in particular those members who belonged to other freedom movements than SWAPO.

When approaching Namibians with questions on national reconciliation and the role of the Church in the same it becomes apparent that the issue has several perspectives.

Firstly, there are different views as to whether or not joint efforts such as the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission are at all applicable in Namibia. Many active leaders (political and church) do not seem to believe that the path which South Africa chose is or would have been the way forward for Namibia. There seems to be a fear that choosing that direction is like opening Pandora's Box: once you open that box you never know where you will end up. This view is embraced also by the newly elected presiding bishop SVV Nambala. Instead of forcing painful and embarrassing confessions upon the Namibians – many of whom in fact don't want to know who killed or tortured their friends and relatives – Nambala speaks in favor of dealing with issues privately (Interview: SVV Nambala). He understands and supports the present direction in Namibia where reconciliation exists as a statement in the constitution without being taken much further than that (Interview: Nambala). Nambala and other like-minded struggle to understand the point in digging in the past, indicating that it will be impossible to find the truth anyway, that it will take more than it gives, and that it may ultimately be wiser to accept (and maybe forget) the past and instead rejoice for having achieved independence (Interview: Nambala, Kapolo). According to Clem Marais, the General Secretary of the (nearly exclusively white) Dutch Reformed Church, his church is divided in this issue. Whereas many Namibian whites have been very uneasy about the way things of the past have been covered up others are relieved. Having been indoctrinated by apartheid development, many Namibian (and South African) whites were unaware of the atrocities which were brought into daylight in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa and therefore would feel uneasy about a similar process in Namibia. But many whites' hesitation to Namibian unification has been further reinforced by the recent development of affirmative action and black empowerment in Namibia, which they have been unable to understand in other terms than reversed apartheid (Interview: Marais).

Secondly there are different views – or doubts – as to what reconciliation in Namibia would or should involve. This is probably one of the key reasons why Namibians are still keeping silent about the past. It would probably be fairly easy to find answers if concentrating only on mistakes done by Namibians (blacks and whites alike) such as in the SWAPO spy-camps in Zambia and Angola and by white Namibians who served in the South African police or South African Defence Force (SADF). But – as highlighted by many – it would be wrong to focus only on Namibians, as much of the evils date back to the oppression by the South African apartheid regime as well as the involvement by a number of players outside Southern Africa. Unfortunately, as all of this may seem like too great a gaunlet to take up, it has been easy for Namibia to continue as before: i.e. to embrace National Reconciliation as a principle but not in deed. But whereas national reconciliation is not defined as a policy, it is widely viewed that it involves not only political reconciliation but also economic reconciliation. In an interview in 1999 the then Prime Minister Hage Geingob declared that political reconciliation had been achieved and that the second stage in the reconciliation process was to look at economic reconciliation (Africa Recovery, vol 12, April 1999). Whereas it can be questioned what is meant by political reconciliation in this case, the government a few years into the 21st century made attempts at tackling the increasing poverty in the country. This is where black empowerment comes in and this is where the previously privileged white minority disagrees. Whereas many of the whites would want to reconcile with the rest of the population they are often criticized for failing to embrace economic reconciliation, i.e. not wanting reconciliation to involve financial concessions or compensations (Africa Recovery, 12, April 1999; several interviews). And it is far from guaranteed that everybody will be satisfied with a plea for forgiveness without any kind of compensation, which we have in recent years seen in the dialogue and reconciliation attempts between the Herero people and German government. It is apparent that all parties want the advantages but hesitate to make concessions, and it is apparent, although the Prime Minister believed that

political reconciliation had been achieved, that the whole reconciliation endeavour either has yet not started or is a journey without a proper map.

Thirdly, fighting for human rights, a fairer society and reconciliation on the one hand and choosing not to do that on the other is sometimes also politically motivated. Several retired or in other ways independent church leaders have stressed, with a fair amount of frustration, that the political cadre in Namibia was never interested in achieving national reconciliation on any level, or democracy for that matter, but rather in achieving and preserving status quo and financial gain. Whereas those who have left SWAPO claim that they felt free (to have an opinion and speak it out) only after leaving the party, others criticize precisely these people for being politically active in other parties instead and for focusing too much on the SWAPO mistakes during the war instead of digging deeper (Several iterviews).

Fouthly, if Namibia genuinely needs to make up with its past and reconcile – in any possible way – who should take the initiative? The first initiatives were taken on a political level and materialized in the preamble in the constitution. Some church leaders have pointed at the failure of the Church or churches in Namibia to minister reconciliation calling it a shame that the Church had to be presented the need for reconciliation by a secular government (Interview: Marais). The individual churches largely ministered to its own people and too often failed to see beyond the borders of their own language or ethnic group. Further the leadership of ELCIN, ELCRN and the Roman Catholic Church had close ties with the President and naturally hesitated go against the will of the leading party. The CCN which could have been the natural church body to raise its voice against the deadlock made some attempts at mediation between conflicting groups (ex-detainees and the SWAPO leadership) under the General Secretary Abisai Shejavali and later Ngeno Nakamhela in the 1990s. In fact Nakamhela wanted to make national reconciliation a key task and responsibility of the CCN but the attempts met substantial resistance not only from SWAPO but also from the ELCIN and ELCRN bishops. As a result the CCN barely touches national reconciliation in its constitution, when stating among its objectives to *promote and foster the churches' concern for the development of a culture of peace* (CNN Constitution, 1992/1994; Interview: Ndeikwila). For a church leader to take on the highly sensitive reconciliation issue – by many seen as the necessary first step for a young nation with a stormy past – could seem overwhelming. Such a political involvement would not only ruin the relations to the country's leadership, but would – as it seems to be feared – involve opening Pandora's Box for which its leadership does not seem to be prepared.

But despite the lack of action so far, there seems to be a genuine will among many Namibians to make up with the past. This tends in particular to concern those not affiliated with high level party politics. One (and maybe the only) organization which has elaborated on the question of reconciliation is Forum for the Future and in particular its director Samson Ndeikwila. In 2004 this NGO published a booklet titled *Towards National Reconciliation in Namibia*. In this publication national reconciliation is defined as follows:

> National reconciliation is a defined framework that encourages harmonious interactions among the citizens emerging from a conflict situation. It entails a process of empowering the citizens to overcome the barriers that prevent them from moving together into the future. In the case of Namibia, such a process requires information leading to a shared memory and rectifying past mistakes. The process calls for critical and constructive ideas how to create a non-racial, democratic and united society. National reconciliation will strengthen Namibia's democratic constitution and contribute to the realization of the goals of Vision 2030 (Forum For the Future, 2004).

Forum For the Future also proposed a model for reconciliation in Namibia which consists on or is sub-divided into ten principles or needs:

1) leadership (i.e. an earnest leadership with vision, character, competence, charisma and willingness to serve),

2) unity in diversity (i.e. equality of all human beings despite sex, tribe or race),
3) mediation (i.e. preparedness to handle differences of opinion and conflict situations),
4) confession & forgiveness,
5) democracy,
6) trauma healing (i.e. a preparedness in society to render assistence to those showing signs of trauma),
7) narrowing of poor-rich gap (in order to ensure future peace, reconciliation and stability in Namibia and for the sake of economic justice for all),
8) interdependence (i.e. realizing the need to hold hands and support each other),
9) loyality (to the constitution, the state and each other), and finally
10) hard work (irrespective of ethnicity or cultural background).

This model has so far not made it to the Namibian parliament, in order to be discussed, debated and amended into a policy document. At the same time as it stands out in all its sincerity – and intended to be *non-threatening to any individual Namibian or community* – it is apparent that it exposes a number of shortcomings and failures by recent governments, and painfully enough, also by the Christian churches in Namibia (Interview: Ndeikwila). It, however, serves as a good starting point for discussion as well as an example of Namibian preparedness and competence to deal with the past.

Conclusion

Although many have put their faith in future church leaders, and in particular to the bishop's election, which was held in ELCIN in December 2010, much suggests that the church's rather conservative (or SWAPO-friendly) line will continue. This will certainly be influenced by the political developments in Namibia, i.e. whether SWAPO in the future is able to maintain its leading position. As for the role of the churches as a mediator for a traumatized people it seems that it has until now failed and will continue to do so until it manages to go beyond its own ethnic borders. It is clear that Namibia is a country which still bears deep wounds from the struggle for liberation, which is clearly visible even within Namibian Christianity. But who can actually blame Namibia for its hesitation in making up with its past. All in all there are very few examples of nations where its people have managed to look back, confess and forgive. The extraordinary point in this – which makes it so easy to point fingers at Namibia – is that precisely the country which occupied Namibia, however under a different government, so visibly put national reconciliation on the map.

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