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**Activities relating to the Working Group on the Promotion of the Recording and Use of
Indigenous, Minority and Regional Language Group Geographical Names**

The Management of Place Names in the Post-Colonial Period in Namibia*

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1. Introduction

Place names in Namibia come from different languages. Apart from English, which is the official language of the country, there are other languages such as Afrikaans, Oshiwambo, German, Silozi, Khoekhoegowab, Setswana, Silozi, Rukwangali, Rumanyo, and Otjiherero. Despite the dominance of indigenous languages, approximately half of the towns, especially in the central, western and southern regions have official names in European languages. Local people have indigenous names for these towns which they use in informal situations. Official names of towns from indigenous languages leave much to be desired, because these names are not spelled correctly. There is, therefore, a dire need to correct the past injustices with regard to place names.

One of the activities of UNGEGN is to record and promote the use of indigenous names. Namibia is a signatory to the UN Thus, Namibia has the obligation to carry out the UN activities with regard to the geographical names according to the letter and spirit of the UN Charter. This paper is intended to reveal the views of the affected communities in Namibia and also to present the attempts made in Namibia to correct the past injustices with regard to place names. It also focuses on the attempts made in Namibia to record and promote the use of indigenous names.

Naming and renaming of places continued in Namibia after independence. Several new places were founded and given new names. The National Place Names Committee dissolved itself before independence to allow for the appointment of a structured committee by the new dispensation. However, no committee was ever appointed. But municipal authorities established *ad hoc* committees which regulate the naming and renaming of places under their jurisdiction. In 2001, the Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture produced a policy document on Art and Culture which proposed that a commission on place names be established by the Directorate of Cultural Heritage to investigate the relevance of existing place names and to control and coordinate the coining and allocation of new place names. Such a commission has not yet been established. According to Karl Aribeb of National Heritage Council, the naming and renaming of places is handled by the cabinet, but part of the policy on Arts and Culture states that The National Heritage Council should increase the number of sites to be proclaimed as national monuments and ensure that they are recorded.

2. Naming and renaming of place names

The municipal authorities and various communities after independence began renaming places that bore colonial names after the national leaders. Some places which bore colonial names were renamed to honour certain individuals, e.g.; the main street in Windhoek which bore the name Kaiser Street was renamed Independence Avenue. The international airport which was named J. G .Strydom during the colonial period was renamed Hosea Kutako International Airport; Talstreet was renamed Mandume Ndemufayo, etc. Some streets were named after African presidents such as Robert Mugabe, Nelson Mandela and Laurent Kabila. The renaming of streets after foreign leaders engendered heated debate in the media. An irate caller to the NBC Oshiwambo phone-in program on 14 September 1998 was quoted as saying:

I think we must identify Namibians who are to be honoured. I do not understand why streets should be named after the foreigners. There are many Namibians who deserve recognition for the contribution they made towards the liberation struggle. Some people sacrificed their lives and their names are not displayed anywhere. The Government should start honouring the heroes and heroines of Namibia by naming streets after them. Naming of places after foreign leaders should not be done at the expense of the Namibians.[*sic*]

On the following day 15 September 1998, another caller to the NBC Oshiwambo phone- in program said:

Streets and places bearing colonial names need to be renamed, because if we retain these names, we are promoting colonialism. But we do not have to name or rename places after politicians only. I think it is high time that we honour our musicians, doctors, and business people. These people should be recognised for the contribution they made towards the development of Namibia. I call on the people who are charged with the naming and renaming of places to consider other prominent people and not only politicians. [*sic*]

It appears that what the caller expressed was considered favourably, because a few years later, two streets in Windhoek were renamed after Namibian tycoons. Stübel Street was renamed after Werner List who owns several business complexes across Namibia and was also a successful farmer. Bülow Street was renamed after Frans Aupa Indongo, a multimillionaire who also owns several shops and is a rancher. Another street in Windhoek was also renamed after the former world class sprinter, Frankie Fredricks. In 2002, Babilon Primary School in the Khomas region was renamed after Frans Aupa Indongo.

The renaming of places in Namibia became a thorny issue in 2005 when Katuutire Kaura of the Democratic Turnhalle Alliance of Namibia (DTA) tabled a motion in parliament asking for the restoration of Namibian place names to their pre-colonial indigenous names. In May, 2005. Kaura in his motivation pointed out that some regions such as Oshana, Ohangwena, Omusati, Oshikoto and Kavango are in a fortunate position, because very few places bear colonial names in these regions and some of these regions have no places bearing colonial names. He indicated that there are many misnomers in town names that are due to mispronunciations and mutilations. He pointed out that the Caprivi region is named after a German coloniser, Georg Leon, Count von Caprivi. According to him it is quite sad, because the inhabitants of the Caprivi region refer to themselves as Caprivians as if they are the descendants of von Caprivi. He suggested that Windhoek be renamed Otjomuise (an Otjiherero name for Windhoek).

Kaura's proposal on name change caused heated debate in parliament when he proposed that towns such as Karasburg, Mariental, Keetmanshoop and Rehoboth should receive Otjiherero names. A SWAPO member of parliament, Marlene Mungunda was quick to point out the Damara>Nama equivalents. She accused Kaura of distorting Namibian history. Kuaima Riruako of the National Unity Democratic Organisation (NUDO) indicated that names did not bother members of his party. Nora Schimming-Chase of the Congress of the Democrats warned that the

changing of names could have a unifying but also a dividing effect. She further urged the parliament that instead of spending money, which is in short supply, on place name changes, it should be spent on other priorities of the government. Prime Minister Nahas Angula suggested that the motion on name changes be referred to the committee of experts in the National Monuments Council for proper research on the origins of names and their meaning. (The Namibian, 2007: 1 et seq)

Several other Namibians also reacted to Kaura's proposal. The editor of the *Namibian*, Gwen Lister, in her column of Friday 13th May 2005, said:

This is a minefield. Therefore, there must be a strategy in place about what criteria should be used to rename towns, villages and settlements. The history of such place names should be thoroughly researched in order to make renaming decision based on empirical facts. Such National strategy cannot be developed without a meaningful national debate.

Gwen Lister emphasises that the significance of a national strategy for renaming of places. Of course, a national strategy is required in the treatment of geographical names and one of the recommendations of the First United Nations Conference on the standardization of Geographical Names, 1967 reads: It is recommended that ,as a first step, in international standardization of geographical names, each country should have a national geographical names authority

In The Namibian dated 19 May 2005, K.M. Aribeb, reacting to Kaura's motion, writes as follows:

I wish to refer to the motion tabled by Kaura regarding name changes for certain towns in Namibia. When important issues of national interest are discussed in Namibia, people have the tendency to shoot the messenger instead of analysing the message. In this case I care less about who made the proposal and therefore would not go for Kaura's political history or his character. I also wish to point out that in principle, there is nothing wrong with changing a few names of Namibian towns. This is because certain towns have simply meaningless names connected to Eurocentric history while other names represent vicious corruption of names which need to be corrected. The question that arises ,though, is how we go about it.

Although I am not surprised that Kaura proposed exclusively Herero names – I am sure he is aware that all the towns he mentioned have Damara>Nama names as well as in other languages. So which names will finally stick, and based on which criteria? Based on this I think he made a good in-principle proposal but he jumped the gun by proposing exclusively Herero names. This is also on top of the fact that quite a fair number of towns already boast Herero names, such as Outjo, Otjiwarongo, Omaruru, etc.

Secondly, he did not fully appreciate the complexities and conflicts that may arise by making a name proposal at this early stage while there are no guidelines in place. Coming back to Damara>Nama names of towns mentioned with loose translations:

- Windhoek - /Ae-// Gams: place with steaming/hot water(hot spring);
- Tsumeb- Tsumep: a place that would sink into earth in Hai//om language;
- Gobabis – Khoan-dawes: place where elephants lick (salt lick). One would suspect that the name Gobabis is derived from Setswana which is strongly spoken in that part of the country;
- Karibib- a corruption of Garibeb: place of farming activities;
- Usakos- a corruption of !Usa-!khōs: place of holding one’s forehead;
- Swakopmund – Tso-axaub-ams: Tsoaxaub= “Swakoprivier” and “ams” =mouth;
- Walvisbay- !Gomen-//gams: a water of the Topnaar people
- Grootfontein- Gai-/aub: “Gai”= big and “/aub” = a fountain or spring. [*sic*]

The issue of correcting the past injustices with regard to the names became hot in 2007. In the *Informanté* of 1 June, 2007, Dieschoe complains about the wrong use of the name, Omashare in Kavango:

The name of the lodge is offensive to the people of Rundu and Kavango. In the Kavango language we do not have the letter ‘o’ before a word and we believe that for our history to be recorded correctly, we demand to be respected as a people. The name should be MASHARE not Omashara. Businessmen and women who want to live in peace with us need to treat us with respect as we wish to treat them. I plan to hold meetings in Rundu in the near future to mobilise the entire Kavango region to descend on the premises in protest should Rosa fail to acquiesce to the demands. I shall lead the marches to your hotel so that you can hear us once and for all. It is also my intention to mobilise a prolonged boycott of your facility until you hear us.

In response to Dischoe’s demand, Rosa, the owner of the lodge says:

I never thought of changing the name because to me it does not make a difference what a business is called, for as long as it is operating legally under the laws of the creating job opportunities. (Informante. 31 May 2007 P.1)

In addition Rosa’s lawyer, Peter Koep described Dischoe’s demands as baseless as they are not supported by any legal parameters that are in the national constitution against the use of any name. (Informante. 31 May 2007 P.1)

When the issue of name changes is raised, it is often accompanied by arguments and counterarguments. Therefore a week later Shamanic Shire, supporting Dischoe’s stand, in his letter to the Informant of 7 June 2007 under the Headline ‘ Dischoe’s battle for tribal name is justified, says:

Please allow me a space in your letter’s column to comment on the story that appeared last week in the *Informanté* newspaper of May 31, 2007 edition, entitled ‘ Diescho in battle over ‘tribal name’. The fact the word tribal was used in the head sentence of the story might have sent a wrong message that Professor Diescho is a

tribalist, which evidently is not the case. Reading further in the story one could get a message that the local people do not have any power over the issues concerning their own languages and cultures as there are people who can articulate it better by using the country's constitution as orthography. It is against this background that I would like to say the following: 1. Issues of languages deal with the identity and culture of a people. They are therefore sensitive especially in former Settler Colonies such as Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe. Evidently, it is in this context that Professor Diescho has cautioned the Lodge owner to be sensitive when dealing with such issues.

2. There is also orthography for Rumanyo which is one of the Rukavango languages where that Omashare name is supposed to have been written. That orthography dictates how to write in Rumanyo. It, for example, states that: "Rumanyo names of places should be spelt according to the officially recognised orthographic form, e.g. Mashare". It is therefore illegal to write Omashare which is confusing to the learners who are being taught to write correctly in their mother languages.

3. The name Omashare is a flagrant insult and a violation of the people's right of Rundu in particular and Namibia in general as the name is not based on any official Orthography of all Namibian languages. [sic]

Clearly, there is a need to consider proposals by the affected communities when they raise their objections against misspelt names. These proposals should not be swept under the carpet. If the orthography, which is an official document of the government, makes suggestions on the spellings of the name, then such suggestions must be taken seriously. But the concerned members of various communities must also be sensitized to the fact that the misspelling of names should not be attributed to Europeans alone.

Although Diescho was supported shortly after his article appeared in the *Informante* newspaper, he was also criticised for committing the same error he wanted to see corrected. In *Informanté* of 21 June 2007, a concerned peace-loving Namibian from Windhoek wrote:

Allow me a short comment on Dr Joseph Diescho's concern over the change of name the 'Omashare' lodge to 'Mashare' This appeared in your previous issues of *Informanté* newspaper. I absolutely agree with the son of the soil concern and the extent to which he advocates the rectification of the name "Omashare", regardless of the costs and inconveniences that the lodge may incur in the process of the name change. However, what I would like to request "the son of the soil" to also do is to closely look at spelling of his surname too, i.e. "**Diescho.**" [sic]

Judging from what the writer expresses, it is obvious that the misspelling of names can also be attributed to Namibians themselves. Diescho is not the only one who needs to get his house in order before criticising others, but there are several Aawambo who have anglicised their names by suffixing h, y or i.e. to their personal names, e.g. Nangoloh for Nangolo, Schivute for Shivute, Nangy for Nangula, etc. These names have become semantically opaque because of the changes. It would be good if justice were done to both personal and place names in Namibia without heaping blame on foreigners.

2. Recording and preserving indigenous geographical names in Namibia

Namibia consists of thirteen regions which are divided into constituencies. The National Planning Commission and the Ministry of Local Government and Housing have produced maps depicting the names of constituencies, wards and villages. The churches have also have done a mammoth task in compiling maps depicting the parishes.

Kadmon (2000: 21) argues that maps are still the best and most helpful graphic aid so far for visually representing geographical locations. Quantity-wise they are the most extensive repository for geographical names: documents of no other type (except, perhaps gazetteers and name indexes) carry as many toponyms as maps and atlases.

Although several ministries have attempted to have maps produced, it has to be pointed out that these maps do not accommodate all the names of places in Namibia because names of most water bodies and historical sites are not included in maps. The maps serve as a tool to guide the users to a place, but they do not provide information on the semantics of a place name; hence the need always exists to complement the work of cartographers. The maps do not include variant names for places because the maps have limited space which makes it hard for the cartographer to include variant names.

The main towns in Namibia such as Windhoek, Swakopmund, Walvis Bay, Luderitz, Keetmanshoop which bear foreign names also have names from local languages such as Oshiwambo, Otjiherero and Khoekhogowab. The use of these indigenous names is confined to informal situations. These names are also heard on radio services for the respective indigenous languages. The question that arises is: How do we preserve the local names with the treasure of knowledge inherent in them?

As a response to the dire need for preservation of place names, the Oshiwambo Section in the University of Namibia has embarked on a project to collect and document the indigenous names of places in Namibia. The project commenced in 2008 and is divided into phases. The initial phase is to collect and voice record Oshiwambo place names for The Dictionary of Oshiwambo Place Names. Despite the lack of funds to finance the activities of the project, several students volunteered to assist with collecting place names during recesses. The project is progressing at a very slow pace but so far more than 1000 place names and their meanings have been collected in the Oshiwambo community. Once all place names from the four northern regions have been recorded, the project will be extended to the other 9 regions. The ultimate aim of this project is to compile A Dictionary of Indigenous place Names for Namibia. Kadmon (2000:19) argues that geographical gazetteers are the comprehensive name lists for a particular region or even for the entire world in which each name is accompanied primarily by information on location, but often also by data on variant names, the history of name or of place and possibly other items.

In preparing the Dictionary of Oshiwambo Place Names care has been taken to include information on location, variant names and the etymology of the name. The following two examples are taken from the list of names collected so far:

- **Outapi** is the name of a town and hospital in the *Omusati* region 90 kilometres west of *Oshakati*. The town is predominantly inhabited by the *Aambalantu* speaking people. In ancient years tribes waged wars against one another. In **Outapi** there is a big baobab tree which has a large cave which was used as sanctuary by the *Aambalantu* during the skirmishes. On one occasion the *Aambalantu* clashed with the *Aakwambi*. The *Aambalantu* warriors ambushed the *Aakwambi* warriors in the cavity of the baobab tree. They were armed with bow and arrows. The *Aakwambi* were not aware of the presence of the *Aambalantu* warriors in the cave. The *Aambalantu* warriors were shooting at the *Aakwambi* from the cave and several *Aakwambi* warriors were shot dead or seriously injured. The survivors escaped and the *Aambalantu* emerged from the baobab tree claiming that *outa pii* (The bow and arrow is excellent.). The place thus began to be called **Outapi**, a compound noun consisting of a noun and an adjective. The final vowel has been elided due to mispronunciation and probably ignorance. Such elision has led to the misinterpretation of the name so that the name is incorrectly linked to the burning down of the hut of *Kamhaku kaHuhwa*, the last chief of the *Aambalantu*. It is reported that when one woman saw the hut of *Kamhaku* on fire she cried ‘*wuu ta pi*; (What a fright! He is burning). This interpretation seems to have distorted the etymology of the name because *ou* is a common prefix in *Oshimbalantu* dialect. The *wuu ta pi* is therefore is a misnomer for **Outapi**.
- **Iiyale yAasimba**: The name of a village in the *Uukwaluudhi* district in the *Omusati* region. In ancient times when the unmarried *Oshiwambo* speaking girl fell pregnant she was burnt to death. The messenger of the chief in this area used to take a pregnant girl to a place where there were many palm bushes and burned her to death. As a result the place was named **Iiyale yAasimba** (the palm bushes of the pregnant ones).

The project’s field workers are expected to record names acoustically in the field so that there is a guide to pronunciation for non-mother tongue speakers. The guide would also help mother tongue speakers to pronounce place names correctly, because *Oshiwambo* consists of eleven dialects. Speakers of one dialect battle with the pronunciation of a name from a different dialect. It would also be useful in the media fraternity, particularly in the electronic media whose announcers are often criticised for mispronouncing names.

3. Conclusion

It has become evident that from this paper that there is a great tendency among the Namibians to rename places after national leaders. Streets are renamed to honour the heroes and heroines of Namibia, but there seems to be reluctance to correct the names that are misspelled because many people regard it as a costly exercise. However, there are certain people who still call for restoration of indigenous names in places where local names have been replaced with exonyms.

It is quite encouraging to note that there are attempts to record and preserve indigenous names and popularise their use in both electronic and print media. Recording place names,

which will ultimately culminate in the production of a comprehensive dictionary of place names, appears to be a step in the right direction for the African renaissance.

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