Book review: Namibia 1884-1984 - readings on Namibia's history and society, selected papers and proceedings of the International conference on 'Namibia 1884-1984: 100 years of foreign occupation: 100 years of struggle'

For URPE

Brian Wood, ed., Namibia 1884-1984 - Readings on Namibia's History and Society, Selected papers and proceedings of the International conference on 'Namibia 1884-1984: 100 years of foreign occupation; 100 years of struggle', London, 10-13 September, 1984, organized by the Namibia Support Committee in cooperation with the SWAPO Department of Information and Publicity (London: Namibia Support Committee in cooperation with United Nations Institute for Namibia, 1988). 762 pages.

This 762 page set of readings appears at an appropriate time. As Africa's last colony, Namibia -- one and a half million people in a land area more than twice the size of England-- stands on the threshhold of freedom from a century of foreign rule. This volume provides a gold mine of material, not only about Namibia's struggle for liberation and its significance for Southern Africa; but also as a case study to illuminate the benefits of probing more deeply into the African peoples' resistance to European imperial conquest. The conference on which the book is based involved over 300 people, about a third of them Namibian. It brought together leading Southern African scholars to debate critical themes touching almost every aspect of a century of Namibian struggle:

> "the claims of scholarship and historical study and the demands of political struggles; the contradictory consequences of Christian evangelism and colonial education in encouraging resistance as well as collaboration; the need to develop, from below, a national culture recognising the diversity of peoples, their languages and cultural forms; the specific impact of Namibian and South African forms of exploitation on the lives of women and children; South Africa's incorporation of the 'Western contact group' as complicit allies in their strategy for dominating the countries of southern Africa; the close, if possibly ambiguous, relation of capitalism and racism; and....'that (the) quite extraordinary military presence of some 100,000 and more South African troops, aided by hired mercenaries in Namibia itself...failed...to stop the continued mobilization and support for SWAPO within Namibia.'"(1)

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1. Gavin Williams, Summary of the Conference, p. 759.

Like those dug from any mine, of course, the findings here require sifting and refinement. As reiterated by the editor, as well as by most of the authors, all the issues discussed require further research and analysis. Space limitations here permit consideration of only a few themes. First, using a historical materialist approach, several authors undertake the difficult task of reinterpreting the limited sources available(2) to explore the impact of conflicting imperial interests on pre-colonial modes of production. They aim both to dispell the idealist myth of a pre-colonial concensus society and to deepen understanding of the contradictions inherent in the resistence struggles. They note the emergence of stratified societies and militarily-powerful kingdoms that for decades, especially in the relatively rich lands of southern Angola and northern Namibia, successfully withstood Portugese and German penetration. Over the century, the on-going struggles of the Namibian people, highlighted by the 1904-1907 war of colonial resistence and later the growing militancy of the increasingly proletarianized working class, forged a growing unity among the different ethnic groups to lay the foundation for the national support enjoyed by SWAPO. A number of papers focus on the specific features of the oppression of Namibian women and their role in the liberation movement, leading to their integration as fighters in the Peoples

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2. Primarily missionary and colonial administrators' reports, including those made available from the Imperial German Government archives to scholars in the German Democratic Republic; linguistic; and archaeological evidence. The creative attempt to resolve the methodological issues raised by the use of these materials, alone, warrant study of these papers.

Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN). The conference agreed on the necessity of further studies in these areas, especially, before it is too late, to gather oral histories from the participants. Conference contibutions, including plays, songs and artwork reproduced in the volume, underscore the fruitful potential of this approach.

Second, several papers expose the way first German and then South African colonial rule forcefully integrated Namibia into the world economy, coercing the Namibian people into a low cost migratory labor reserve to produce agricultural and mineral riches for industries in Europe and South Africa. By the 1970s, some 40% of Namibia's national income went in the form of large companies' profits, 9% in small business profits, 20% in South African taxes, and 18% to white administrators and supervisors--leaving only 12% to one and a quarter million Namibian workers, peasants and petty traders. The papers document how--collaboring closely with some 6000 subsidized white settlers and a handful transnational corporations in violation of United Nations and international court rulings -- the South African state accelerated the degradation of Namibia's fragile soils, hastened the extraction of its minerals and denuded its offshore fishing grounds. Several authors spell out how the Western 'contact group' worked with South Africa to link Namibian liberation to withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola, and to weaken the United Nations' stance on the elections and post-election administration of Namibia.

Outlining the prospects for a liberated Namibia, other

authors focus on the necessity to keep the administration and economy functioning to provide incomes and jobs while implementing priority reforms. Conference participants agreed on introducing a minimum living wage(3), adequate educational and health facilities, and measures to reduce inherited gender, class and regional inequalities. Namibia cannot rely too much on the mining sector to generate growth. The government should repudiate the debt incurred by the South African puppet state and reorganize its mis-managed budget. Some papers propose agrarian reform to enable peasants, both as family units and perhaps--especially in the southern ranch areas -- through cooperatives and state farms, to achieve food self-sufficiency. They recommend introduction of domestic processing industries, a central bank and national currency, and control over and reorientation of foreign trade in cooperation with neighboring states in the Southern African Development Coordination Conference (SADCC). In large part because of SWAPO's efforts to educate the youth(4), Namibia has a higher per capita educated population than most African countries enjoyed at independence. The conference participants emphasized, however, the necessity of research in all these areas to understand the inherited institutional constraints as well as the resource base for

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3. Which would greatly reduce and in some cases eliminate altogether the profitability of existing capitalist farms, highly subsidized by the colonial state as well as through cheap labor.

4. The papers spell out the extent of United Nations' aid (especially through the United Nations Institute for Namibia in Lusaka), the neighboring states that house schools for SWAPO refugees, and Church and international support groups.

initiating these programs.

The conference apperently devoted relatively little attention to the essential issue of changes required in the law and state structures, themselves, to formulate and implement the kinds of post-independence programs suggested. The papers on law focus primarily on international law in relation to the imposition of colonial rule and the role of SWAPO. Experience throughout Africa, however, underscores the necessity of detailed analyses of the way the colonial state structured control of key sectors of the political economy to serve settler and transnational corporate interests. Several papers mention that the South African state and transnationals, in recent years, enabled 30-40,000 blacks to enjoy working and living conditions exceeding those of most Namibians. These will likely seek to perpetuate inherited institutional structures to preserve the status quo, resulting in the emergence in Namibia -- as elsewhere -- of a new black bureaucratic bourgeoisie. Unfortunately, the conference paid little attention to this critical issue.

Nevertheless, in sum, readers will find in this volume a useful compilation, not only for study and reference by interested individuals, but also as rich materials for courses relating to the struggle for Third World liberation and development.