

# National History in Southern Africa: Reflections on the ‘Remember Cassinga?’ Exhibition

CHRISTIAN A. WILLIAMS

*Centre for Humanities Research, University of the Western Cape*

‘Remember Cassinga?’ is the name of an exhibition of photographs and histories prepared for display at the University of the Western Cape in South Africa and the National Archives of Namibia in April and May 2010. The exhibition examines the SWAPO camp at Cassinga, Angola, where more than six hundred Namibians were killed on 4 May 1978 during a South African attack. In contrast to the competing national histories, which have condemned or justified the attack by labelling Cassinga a ‘refugee’ or a ‘military’ camp, the exhibition renders Cassinga before the attack, arguing that the terms ‘refugee’ and ‘military’ obscure the community which formed at this site. At the same time, the exhibition examines how photographs have been used to support Cassinga’s two national narratives and how people have become victims of this form of historical production.

The idea for ‘Remember Cassinga?’ began to develop in 2007. At the time I was living in Namibia, conducting doctoral research on the camps wherein SWAPO governed Namibian exiles during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s.<sup>1</sup> Among the relevant sources which I located early in my research were photographs housed at the National Archives of Namibia. The photographs, most of which were acquired from the Mayibuye Centre at the University of the Western Cape and, before that, from the International Defence and Aid Fund, provide a rich visual record of how Namibians lived, and how they were presented as living, in the SWAPO camps. At the same time, the captions attached to these photographs include little detail about the people and sites which were photographed and of the contexts in which the photographs were taken. In response, I began to collect and circulate such information about the photographs, drawing from techniques developed by other scholars working in Namibia.<sup>2</sup> At first I shared some of the photos with individuals whom I was interviewing about their and others’ experiences in exile. Later, I put photos and histories I had gathered on public display in different regions of Namibia.<sup>3</sup> Many viewers took an interest in the photos, which pictured people, places and events which were part of their past, but which they had not previously seen depicted in photographs. And the photos

1 The title of the dissertation which I subsequently wrote is ‘Exile History: An Ethnography of the SWAPO Camps and the Namibian Nation’ (University of Michigan, 2009).

2 In the mid-1990s historians Wolfram Hartmann, Patricia Hayes and Jeremy Silvester began to connect colonial era photographs from the National Archives in Namibia with the oral histories of people living in post-colonial Namibia. Connections were made through several interrelated projects. Photographs were introduced to research participants through oral history work. An exhibition, titled ‘The Colonising Camera’, was displayed and eventually published as *The Colonising Camera: Photographs in the Making of Namibian History* (Cape Town: UCT Press, 1998), alongside essays about Namibian history, colonial photography and the exhibition itself. Photographs were also published in *The Namibian* newspaper and readers were invited to contact the paper or the author, Jeremy Silvester, to share any information that they might have about the photos.

3 The title of this exhibition was ‘Living in Exile’. It is printed and discussed at length in my doctoral dissertation.

evoked rich details about daily life in camps, many of which had been obscured by the highly politicised narratives that dominate histories of exile across the southern African region.

Earlier this year, I revisited the idea of assembling a photo exhibition through which I could share my finished dissertation with those most directly involved in and affected by it. Cassinga seemed like an appropriate topic for such an exhibition. Of the camps which SWAPO administered in exile and which I discuss in my dissertation, Cassinga is the most widely known, commemorated annually on May 4 in Namibia and recognised by many who lived in southern Africa, or who followed southern African affairs, during the 1970s. Nevertheless, knowledge of Cassinga has been constrained by the refugee and military camp narratives at the expense of other, more nuanced histories. Part 1 of the exhibition, ‘The Camp at Cassinga’, weaves together several of these histories, which I have detailed in my dissertation and rendered in the exhibition for academic and non-academic publics. To this end, I draw from archived photos of Cassinga, available at the National Archives of Namibia and the Mayibuye Centre, and my own pictures, taken during a trip to Cassinga in September 2007. Photos are displayed alongside three layers of text: a narrative which holds together the exhibition’s content, captions which offer context for the specific photographs, and footnotes which list sources and additional information. In so doing, I hope to draw viewers into the exhibition’s content at different levels, depending on their interests, reading abilities and historical knowledge.

At no point, however, do I intend to let the photos ‘speak for’ Cassinga. On the contrary, the second part of the exhibition, ‘The Photos of Cassinga’, is a critique of this use of photographs, highlighting how photos have been used to support highly politicised narratives at the expense of more genuine efforts to remember Cassinga’s past. Photos could support these narratives precisely because they have appeared, or been made to appear, as evidence for them within societies polarised by war and structured around national elites. Through ‘Remember Cassinga?’ I respond to this use of photographs by returning Cassinga’s iconic photos – especially those of an open mass grave – to the contexts in which they were produced. To this end, I accompany the exhibition’s photos with captions discussing people, sites and events pictured in them and, in some cases, the histories of the photographs themselves. I also place some of my captions alongside others which have previously accompanied a given photo, highlighting the different stories that a photo may tell depending on the context that is, or is not, provided for it. In this manner I hope to interrupt the process by which these photos have previously ‘spoken’.

Because of its central place in Namibia’s national narrative, Cassinga also lends itself to discussion of how people are affected by representations of the past within and across national communities. Part III introduces this topic by identifying ‘Victims of Cassinga’s History’, beginning with those most directly affected by the South African attack and extending to others whose lives have been shaped by how Cassinga’s history has been told. Thus, the exhibition includes photos of Cassinga’s graves today, inhabitants who survived the raid, non-Namibians excluded from the Namibian history of Cassinga, ‘spies’ who

were accused, and are stigmatised, by Cassinga rumours, and citizens, all of whom negotiate social relations through national history. By placing these groups alongside one another, I hope viewers are challenged to think broadly about what is at stake when they ‘remember Cassinga’ and what might be done to create more complex, inclusive narratives about this and similar historical sites.

‘Remember Cassinga?’ opened on Monday 12 April at the University of the Western Cape and ran there for two weeks. Photographs and captions, which were laminated and displayed on boards in the library’s atrium, were open to the public and received attention daily from UWC students and staff.<sup>4</sup> During my regular visits to the exhibition, I had the opportunity to speak with some of the visitors; others, whom I did not meet, wrote in a comment book. UWC’s Centre for Humanities Research also hosted an exhibition launch, during which I was able to introduce the exhibition and exchange ideas with participants. The University of Cape Town’s reading group on ‘Archives and Public Culture’ also hosted me for a discussion of the exhibition. Immediately after dismounting the exhibition at UWC, I travelled with it to Namibia where it was launched on Thursday 29 April at the National Archives and remained on display for two weeks. During the launch three participants in my doctoral research spoke about their personal experiences at Cassinga, including Namibian Defence Minister Charles ‘Ho Chi Minh’ Namoloh, former camp commander Darius ‘Mbolondondo’ Shikongo, and former journalist Per Sanden.<sup>5</sup> Two ‘memory cloths’, soliciting visitors to add the names of persons known to them who had died on 4 May 1978 at Cassinga and others who had previously inhabited the camp, were also added to the exhibition in Namibia.<sup>6</sup> Reporters covered the exhibition in *New Era*, *The Namibian*, *Die Republikein*, and *Informanté*, while the *Windhoek Observer* and Namibian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) held interviews with Namoloh, Mbolondondo and Sanden.<sup>7</sup> Many other participants in my doctoral research also engaged with the exhibition, including several who met with me at the National Archives in Windhoek and others who viewed a printed version of the exhibition with which I travelled to far-flung sites in northern and southern Namibia.<sup>8</sup> After the exhibition was dismounted, I donated a copy of it to the Museums Association of Namibia, which offered to lend it to interested organisations, beginning with the Outapi War Museum, where it was on display from the middle of May through the end of July.

Viewers of ‘Remember Cassinga?’ responded to histories displayed in the exhibition from their various perspectives. For many UWC students who stopped

4 Photographs were originally printed A4 size but were increased to A3 with the generous assistance of the Museums Association of Namibia. The text of the exhibition narrative was also increased in Namibia from 18 to 24 point font and the captions changed from italics to roman.

5 Ellen Ndeshi Namhila, librarian at the University of Namibia and survivor of the attack on Cassinga, was also scheduled to share her story at the launch, but she was unable to attend due to work obligations.

6 Through the ‘memory cloth’ I hoped that viewers would interact with the exhibition, much as many have with the cloth, referenced by the same name, at the District Six Museum in Cape Town.

7 ‘Cassinga Massacre Must Unite Us’, *Windhoek Observer*, 1-7.5.2010; ‘The Cassinga Massacre Remembered’, *New Era*, 3.5.2010; ‘Remember Cassinga’, *The Namibian*, 7.5.2010; ‘Oorlog Museum op Outapi geopen’, *Die Republikein*, 20.5.2010; ‘Remember Cassinga Exhibition opens in Outapi’, *Informanté*, 20-26.5.2010.

8 During my doctoral research I was based in Windhoek and, over 20 months, travelled regularly to meet research participants scattered throughout north-central Namibia and parts of southern Namibia near Tses, where I had previously worked as a volunteer teacher.

to look, the exhibition was their first introduction to Cassinga, and several remarked about a student residence called ‘Cassinga’, indicating that they were previously unaware of the source of the residence’s name or of the historical ties between UWC and Namibia.<sup>9</sup> Other viewers who already knew something about Cassinga volunteered what they had learned about the camp in particular parts of the exhibition. Many Namibians took an interest in the history of the camp’s origins narrated by several of its early administrators including Minister Namoloh, who, despite his prominent position in the Namibian government, had never been recognised publicly for his role in founding an office for SWAPO’s guerrilla army (PLAN)<sup>10</sup> at the camp. Those with personal ties to people who died at Cassinga often responded to the photographs of the mass graves which I took in 2007, asking about what has and has not been done to mark the graves and suggesting improvements that could be made through remodelling the grave sites or repatriating the remains of the dead to Namibia. Some viewers, including prominent critics of the Namibian government, argued that Cassinga had breached the Geneva Convention and that SWAPO had responded to the threat of a South African attack irresponsibly. One SWAPO ex-detainee pictured in the exhibition elaborated on how ‘spies’ had been falsely accused of facilitating South Africa’s attack on Cassinga.<sup>11</sup> And he and others responded with counter-narratives, according to which a SWAPO leader must be the real ‘traitor’ for placing so many ‘civilians’ at a camp like Cassinga, including several hundred unarmed soldiers who arrived at the camp shortly before the attack.<sup>12</sup>

Viewers at the UWC launch also drew from the exhibition to initiate a theoretical discussion about national history, concentrating on the forms that it takes and the consequences of its production in southern Africa. One colleague asked about the extent to which South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission had covered the attack on Cassinga, introducing a conversation about the failure of the post-apartheid state to consider much of the violence which the apartheid government committed beyond South Africa’s borders. Another question about Cassinga’s prospects as a heritage site prompted me to identify conditions in southern Angola – the culmination of years of war and

9 During the apartheid era there was no university accessible to students in Namibia, and none of the universities in South Africa, organised as they were according to the apartheid government’s racial and tribal categories, catered to Namibian tribal groups. As a result, the South African government made provisions for ‘non-white’ Namibians who qualified for tertiary education to study at the University of the Western Cape, the university which the government had designated for ‘coloureds’.

10 PLAN is an abbreviation of the SWAPO guerrilla army’s official name: the People’s Liberation Army of Namibia.

11 Seminal scholarly texts on the detention of accused spies by SWAPO in Angola include: P. Trewhela, ‘A Namibian Horror: Swapo’s Prisons in Angola’, *Searchlight South Africa*, 4, 1990, 78-93; C. Leys and J.S. Saul, *Namibia’s Liberation Struggle: The Two-Edged Sword* (London: James Currey, 1995), 53-58, 63-65; J. Hunter, *Die Politik der Erinnerung und des Vergessens in Namibia: Umgang mit schweren Menschenrechtsverletzungen der Ära des bewaffneten Befreiungskampfes, 1966 bis 1989* (Frankfurt am Main: P. Lang, 2008), 92-107. I also discuss these detentions in chapters 4 and 5 of my doctoral dissertation, titled ‘An Anthropology of “the Spy” and “Wall of Silence”: Challenging National History in the International System’.

12 These soldiers were among those imprisoned for participating in ‘the Shipanga Rebellion’, a conflict within SWAPO in Zambia in 1976. Seminal scholarly texts on the Shipanga rebellion include F. Ansprenger, *Die SWAPO* (Mainz: Matthias-Gruenwald-Verlag, 1984); P. Katjavivi, *A History of Resistance in Namibia* (London: James Currey, 1988), 105-108; P. Trewhela, ‘The Kissinger/Vorster/Kaunda Détente: The Genesis of the SWAPO “Spy Drama”, Parts I and II’, *Searchlight South Africa*, 5 1990, 69-86; 6, 1991, 42-58; C. Leys and J.S. Saul, ‘Liberation without Democracy’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 20(1), 1994, 123-147; Leys and Saul, *Namibia’s Liberation Struggle*, 46-53; J. Hunter, *Die Politik der Erinnerung und des Vergessens in Namibia*, 80-92. I also analyse the conflict in chapter three of my doctoral dissertation, titled ‘Ordering the Nation: SWAPO in Zambia, 1974-1976’.

government neglect – which have shielded Cassinga both from potential visitors and from sustained, critical observation. Other participants drew attention to the mass grave photos, suggesting how these and other images of ‘the anonymous dead’ may be incorporated into narratives of national suffering, serving the interests of those organisations and people who are best able to lay claim to them. Together, such conditions make Cassinga, and histories of exile more generally, susceptible to mythologies. And these mythologies wield extraordinary power in southern Africa, where post-colonial states rely on a narrative of colonial oppression and anti-colonial resistance from exile as a means of governing their nation’s citizens.

Often ‘Remember Cassinga?’ seemed to have little impact on the practices through which dominant histories are reproduced. In conversation and at the launches, viewers frequently referred to ‘the refugee camp’, affirming the socially accepted narrative in the places where the exhibition was displayed without considering such content in the exhibition that calls this narrative into question. Meanwhile, those who narrated controversial histories of Cassinga usually did so in one-on-one conversations with me or in small groups of trusted persons. In so doing, they shielded themselves, not only from the risk of stigma but also from the potential for dialogue with those whose views of the camp differ. As a result, viewers could write in the exhibition’s comment book that they ‘remember Cassinga’ without reflecting on the more probing questions which I hoped the exhibition would raise. Do we, in fact, remember Cassinga? When we claim to ‘remember Cassinga’, what do we remember and what do we forget? And at whose expense do we forget so much?

Even previously ‘forgotten histories’ asserted publicly through the exhibition were quickly incorporated into a new narrative which could not easily accommodate other views. For example, at the Namibian launch audience members directed their questions to Minister Namoloh, who, having just narrated his role in founding the Cassinga PLAN office, was asked to speak for Cassinga. How had the attack on Cassinga affected SWAPO’s morale? Why did the South Africans attack it? Was Cassinga really a refugee or a military camp? In his responses, Minister Namoloh rendered a new national history,<sup>13</sup> which incorporated the Minister’s previously excluded knowledge of Cassinga but which also moved outside his own experiences and never invited others to share their own – not even the other panelists whose perspectives, while overlapping, were not identical to his. That the launch had not highlighted panelists’ different viewpoints struck me forcefully when, thereafter, Minister Namoloh called me over to the Cassinga grave photos. There he asked me where I had learned that the mass grave was re-opened before international journalists arrived at the camp. When I told him that Mbolondondo was one of those who had narrated the re-opening of the grave to me, he wanted to speak with him about it. But, by then, Mbolondondo was gone and the opportunity for any public

<sup>13</sup> Minister Namoloh’s interest in rethinking Namibian history was evident not only in remarks that he made at the launch, but also in his interview with the *Windhoek Observer* (‘Cassinga Massacre Must Unite Us’, *Windhoek Observer*, 1-7.5.2010).

acknowledgment of what the panelists might learn from one another's different experiences of Cassinga had passed.

Perhaps the exhibition could have been presented more effectively to initiate a conversation among those who render the history of Cassinga. For example, if the exhibition's text had been more succinct and printed in a larger font, as several colleagues suggested, viewers might have engaged more closely with its content and the people whose histories are embedded in it. There were reasons for the length and size of the text chosen – above all, my aim to challenge viewers' expectations that they already know, or can freely interpret, the meaning of photographs of Cassinga. The text could, however, have had the opposite effect, overwhelming viewers with too much information and permitting them to focus only on the details that they were prepared to see. Other constraints on the exhibition's circulation among potential audiences should also be noted. As a self-funded project, organised in Cape Town and Namibia over a two-month period, 'Remember Cassinga?' did not benefit from a large budget or extensive publicity. And while I made considerable effort to inform participants in my doctoral research of the exhibition, many other potential audiences have not yet had an opportunity to see it, including former SADF soldiers living in South Africa and the inhabitants of sites neighbouring Cassinga in Angola.

Nevertheless, the responses which 'Remember Cassinga?' did evoke are significant, highlighting both the contradictions of national history and the potential for an exhibition to advance dialogue on this topic. For even as two opposing narratives have been repeated about Cassinga in public space, multiple, overlapping histories were shared with me by those who commented on my exhibition. Viewers often framed their stories in terms of the history of the refugee or military camp, thereby affirming or challenging the narrative of a nation through which they access social status and material resources. Nevertheless, by placing themselves in a national narrative, they introduced detailed histories – such as those of the PLAN office and the mass grave – which have been excluded from it. In so doing, they provide the material through which claims about Cassinga's past may be interrogated and more complex histories of Cassinga written. And they draw attention to communities of people – both within the Namibian nation and across southern Africa's international borders – who are excluded from history when history is framed in national terms.

'Remember Cassinga?' draws from historical detail, accessed through my relationships with Namibian former exiles, to present a history of Cassinga. In turn, the exhibition has also evoked other histories as viewers have responded to this rendering of the past. As people continue to respond to my work on Cassinga, I do hope that they will not see it as the new, authoritative history of the famous SWAPO camp. Rather, I hope that they will see one another and imagine the many histories that may still be written by those who think words like 'Remember Cassinga' should be more than a cliché.