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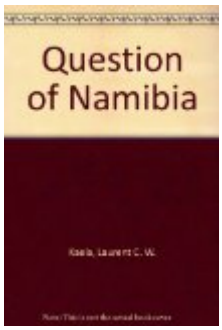
Laurent C. W. Kaela. *The Question of Namibia.* London and New York: Macmillan Press, 1996. xii + 218 pp. $59.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-312-15991-7.



Reviewed by Timothy Dauth

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It may come as a disappointment, but no great surprise, to anyone familiar with the area, that Laurent Kaela's *The Question of Namibia* includes relatively little content related to conditions within Namibia itself, or to the Namibian people. In this book, as in a few other works related to the Namibian transition to independence, the 'Question of Namibia' was apparently less of an issue in the mines of Tsumeb, the streets of Katatura, the cuca shops of Oshikati or for the main liberation movement--the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO)--than it was for the League of Nations, the United Nations General Assembly, and the Security Council.

It might be said that Kaela did in fact do justice to the issue by placing SWAPO and the Namibian people in the background. It could indeed be argued that the resolution of the 'Question of Namibia' had little to do with Namibia or Namibians--eventually finding its answer in the shifting global balance of power at the end of the 1980s and in the battlefields of Angola. Most significantly, it was resolved in agreements in which the Namibian people themselves were not represented.

Accordingly, Kaela's work guides the reader through the disputes and debates around the 'Question of Namibia', beginning with the mandating of the territory to South Africa by the League of Nations, and concluding with the 1989 implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 435. The approach is largely descriptive and essentially legalistic until the fourth chapter, when African nationalism and the Namibian nationalist movements finally make an all too brief entry into the spotlight.

For the reader who may be interested in the history and future prospects of Namibia itself, Kaela's work does little to satisfy. It also seems to miss crucial points in the dialogue over the Namibia question. Kaela is particularly weak, for example, on the role of Namibians and SWAPO in arguing the issue of Namibia in international forums, and offers little insight into the relationship between SWAPO and the UN. Crucially, for example, no significant attention is given to implications of the UN General Assembly's 1973 decision

to accord SWAPO the status of 'sole and authentic representative of the Namibian people'.[1] There is also little mention of the role of the United Nations Institute for Namibia.

The sleeve notes suggest that Kaela's major conclusion is that "Namibia got independence mainly on the terms of the Western Powers, especially the United States, SWAPO having compromised its socialist agenda in the course of negotiations." It would be difficult to disagree with the basic assumptions of this argument. In the end, though, this is not so much an argument as an observation. Kaela does not, for example, examine exactly how SWAPO came to 'abandon socialism' (a contentious point in itself). Were significant aspects of SWAPO's socialist agenda compromised in the process of negotiations, or had SWAPO's reappraisal of post-independence socio-economic possibilities itself helped smooth the path for negotiations? With access to a limited range of SWAPO sources, Kaela could not really afford to make a judgment on this issue.

Another weak point is the section in which Kaela examines the war in northern Namibia at the beginning of April 1989. The details of this episode are still fairly contentious, but it seems that SWAPO had moved a large contingent of its PLAN (People's Liberation Army of Namibia) combatants across the Namibian border on the eve of the cease-fire. South African forces reacted brutally to this 'incursion,' with the response resulting in the death of over 300 people.

Kaela's assertion that the intent of SWAPO was to "boost [its] presence before the cease-fire as a calculated move to safeguard its electoral prospects" (p.122) is not entirely unlikely. However, Kaela does not adequately address the argument that the massacre may have been largely a result of SWAPO's exclusion from the final negotiations concerning the implementation of Resolution 435.[2]

That SWAPO felt the need to show its presence inside Namibia in the lead up to the elections is reasonably clear. SWAPO had always asserted that it had bases and a significant armed presence inside Namibia. This was recognized in the details of Resolution 435, which allowed PLAN combatants to be confined to their bases inside Namibia. On the other hand, the Geneva protocols, in which SWAPO had no involvement, but had agreed to abide by, did not recognize SWAPO's presence in Namibia. SWAPO felt that in this instance it was not bound by the Geneva protocols, and could refer to 435, which it considered the over-riding document.[3]

For Kaela to then assert that SWAPO "not only flouted agreements reached through talks mediated by the US and the Contact Group, but jeopardized Namibia's transition to independence" (p. 122), is certainly problematic. This is particularly so considering reports that South Africa knew of SWAPO's intentions well in advance,[4] and possibly even encouraged them. That South Africa's response was 'shoot to kill' (very few prisoners were taken), may make the reader somewhat uncomfortable with Kaela's apportioning of blame. Certainly SWAPO is also guilty in this instance--guilty of being too trusting of the United Nations, and guilty of underestimating the savagery of the South African response. On this point, and on many others, Kaela might have benefited greatly from a reading of Ronald Dreyer's regional analysis of the Namibian settlement,[5] and from Lionel Cliffe et. al.'s work on the transition to independence.[6]

Perhaps these important works were not available in time for Kaela to address them--but there are other unfortunate gaps in Kaela's bibliography. Authors of works on `the Namibian question' that also escape attention include Robert S Jaster, Owen Ellison Kahn, Vivienne Jabri, and Deon Geldenhuys. Also, among other items conspicuous in their absence from the periodical list are the United Nations publications, ***Namibia in the News*** and ***Namibia Bulletin***. Perhaps this is a serious indictment of the resources available at

the University of Zambia, where Kaela is a lecturer in Political and Administrative Studies, but it also suggests the possibility that Kaela may not have made it across the border to conduct research in Namibia.

Kaela's chapter outlining post-independence challenges for Namibia also disappoints. It particularly suffers from the narrow range of sources and a lack of access to any Namibian- based periodicals or newspapers. Consequently, major post-independence issues, such as the revival of the SWAPO detainees issue, the establishment of Export Processing Zones, and the problem of demobilised combatants, are not addressed. In examining post-independence policy, Kaela also relies rather too heavily on what appears to be his one available SWAPO economic policy document--which is dated November 1988.[7]

Kaela's concluding observation of this period does not extend much further than the obvious: that "after five years of independence, Namibia was still very far from attaining the goal of prosperity for all" (p. 134). The argument that this situation has not been assisted by the government's "incremental approach and the policy of national reconciliation" (p. 142) might also seem self-evident.

What does seem surprising, though, is that Kaela does not make a clear connection between his observations of post-independence Namibia and his similarly uninspiring observation that Namibia's negotiated settlement represented "a triumph of the conciliatory approach to the question of Namibia over the militant one" (p. 141). Kaela might have saved his work by concentrating on aspects of such an argument. An analysis of the impact of the negotiated settlement and United Nations involvement on the Namibian Constitution, for example, would have provided some interesting linkages. However, lacking crucial resources as he was, and not appearing to have conducted research in Namibia, Kaela could perhaps do little other than make superficial observations on such questions.

For those interested in questions of self-determination and trusteeship in international law, or in South Africa's place in international relations, Kaela's work may be worth a look. In an area that has already been fairly well covered, though, there are few points of particular interest. The reader already acquainted with, or interested in, Namibian history and politics will probably find even less to get excited about. Kaela's narrow range of sources and less than original argumentation make it an uninspiring companion to other recent works on Namibia.

Notes:

[1]. General Assembly Resolution 3111 (XXVIII), 12 December 1973.

[2]. An argument advanced by SWAPO, and, among others, Lauren Dobell, in "New Lamps for Old? The Evolution of Swapo's Philosophy of Development, 1960-1991", MA thesis: Queens University, 1992, p.101.

[3]. SWAPO, "Conflict in Namibia: SWAPO Innocent of any Violations," *Information and Comment*, SWAPO Department of Information and Publicity, Luanda, 8 April 1989.

[3]. See, for example, David Lush, *Last Steps to Uhuru: An Eyewitness Account of Namibia's Transition to Independence*, Windhoek: New Namibia Books, 1993, p.158.

[5]. Ronald Dreyer, *Namibia and Southern Africa: Regional Dynamics of Decolonization, 1945-1990*, London, New York: Kegan Paul, 1994.

[6]. Lionel Cliffe, et. al., *The Transition to Independence in Namibia*, Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner, 1994.

[7]. SWAPO Central Committee, Political Bureau, "Namibia's Economic Prospects Brighten Up: An Economic Policy Position Document of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of SWAPO, 28 November 1988 Luanda, People's Republic of

Angola," *Information and Comment*, SWAPO, Bonn, [1989?].

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