

## Heroic Narratives, Patriotic History and Namibian Politics:

### The Case of (Herman) Andimba Toivo Ya Toivo (1924-2017)

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On 9 June 2017 Namibia became poorer. A moral beacon physically left behind the people, whose freedom in dignity was at the core of his engagement during most of his 92 years alive. (Herman) Andimba Toivo Ya Toivo – Toivo is Finnish and fittingly translates as hope – was active until the end. He had just returned from a trip with his Robben Island fellow inmate and close friend Helao Shityuwe – one of the largely ignored and little recognized icons in Namibia’s struggle for liberation.<sup>1</sup> Hours later he fell asleep forever at home.

Judging from the countrywide shock and mourning, shared by generations across political differences, Namibians realized what tremendous loss this was. Ya Toivo had been a torchbearer of the determination for freedom from foreign rule. He embodied a generation, of whom many after Independence left behind the values, which were motivating their commitment to self-determination and human rights. In contrast, Ya Toivo remained loyal to what made him the personification of the desire to live in an independent country governed by and for its people in decency.

This article combines the portrait of Ya Toivo and his legacy with the heroic narratives at play, when patriotic history reinvents the liberation struggle in an official version. It

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<sup>1</sup> He published his autobiography as Helao Shityuwete, *Never Follow the Wolf: Autobiography of a Namibian Freedom Fighter*, London, Kliptown, 1990. A biography of Andimba Toivo Ya Toivo was drafted in close cooperation with him during the last few years. Finalised by 2016, it has unfortunately not yet been endorsed for publication. Among several other published memories in the genre of struggle histories is so far the most popular (published in the prestigious African Writers Series) John ya Otto (with Ole Gjerstad and Michael Mercer), *Battlefront Namibia. An Autobiography*, Westport, Lawrence Hill, 1981 (also London, Heinemann, 1982, with further English editions in Harare and Bulawayo 1982). For a detailed overview on such literature see Henning Melber, “The Shifting Grounds of Emancipation: From the anti-colonial struggle to a critique of post-colonial society”, in: Sarala Krishnamurthy and Helen Vale (eds), *Writing Namibia: Literature in Transition*, Windhoek, UNAM Press, 2017 (in print).

tends to be more exclusive than inclusive, thereby suiting the gatekeepers who obtained and remain in control over the politics of liberation and its national discourse shaped accordingly.<sup>2</sup>

### *Ya Toivo's Way to Robben Island*

Born on 22 August 1924 in Omangundu village, Ya Toivo was brought up in the Northern Namibian region then called Ovamboland. Despite from his mother's side a descendant of the royal family governing the Ondonga kingdom, he had anything but a privileged upbringing. Ya Toivo was trained as an artisan and volunteered to fight for South Africa in World War II. He subsequently was a contract labourer on a farm and further educated at the mission school in Odibo. On contract since the early 1950s in Cape Town, he became politically aware through ANC activists and started to mobilize his fellow Namibian contract workers.

He founded the Ovamboland People's Congress (OPC) there in 1957, the forerunner of the Ovamboland People's Organisation (OPO) established in 1958. OPC like OPO demanded the abolition of contract labour and an end of South African administration over the occupied country.<sup>3</sup> Clandestine political meetings were held in the backroom of a barbershop, to discuss strategies to bring the case of South West Africa to the attention of the outside world. In 1958 Ya Toivo managed to dispatch a tape-recorded petition to the United Nations and was subsequently deported back to Ovamboland. There he became involved in the formation of the South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO).<sup>4</sup>

Despite having reservations as regards the timing and success of military action, he assisted the first liberation fighters returning from training abroad in their preparations for the armed struggle. On 26 August 1966, after the discovery of a camp by the South African army, the first military encounter occurs with the occupying Apartheid regime.

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<sup>2</sup> Parts of the text were also published as "Portrait of a Namibian Patriot: The Life of Andimba (Herman) Toivo ya Toivo (1924-2017)", *Journal of the Namibia Scientific Society*, 65, 2017: 57-66.

<sup>3</sup> Involved were in this early modern formation of organized political resistance through OPC, finally resulting in SWAPO as a national liberation movement, several activists who later joined the first national anticolonial movement of the South West African National Union (SWANU), such as its president Fanuel Kozonguizi, or fell out with SWAPO, such as Otilie Schimming Abrahams and Kenneth Abrahams and later on Andreas Shipanga and Solomon Mifima, who were victims of the purge in the mid-1970s. It is noteworthy that President Hage Geingob mentioned their names and thereby gave them recognition in the eulogy at Ya Toivo's funeral.

<sup>4</sup> For a kind of official patriotic historiography on these early stages of the formation of the national liberation movement see SWAPO of Namibia/Department of Information, *To be born a nation. The liberation struggle for Namibia*, London, Zed Press, 1981. For a less partisan overview see chapter 8 ("Nationalism and Apartheid, 1946-70") in Marion Wallace with John Kinahan, *A History of Namibia. From the Beginning to 1990*, London, Hurst, 2011, 243-271.

Ya Toivo and hundreds other are subsequently arrested. Together with Eliaser Tuhadeleni (as accused no. 1) and 36 others he is put to trial in Pretoria. The notorious Terrorism Act was passed in the South African Parliament only after their imprisonment to be applied retroactively. In defiance, Ya Toivo spoke at the end of the trial. His speech from the dock of 1 February 1968 became a lasting document of Namibian aspirations for freedom:

We are Namibians and not South Africans. We do not now, and will not in the future, recognise your right to govern us, to make laws for us in which we have no say; to treat our country as if it were your property and us as if you were our masters. We have always regarded South Africa as an intruder in our country. This is how we have always felt and this is how we feel now, and it is on this basis that we have faced this trial.<sup>5</sup>

Thanks to international pressure, the accused were spared the death penalty. Ya Toivo and several others were sentenced on 9 February 1968 to 20 years imprisonment. Accused no. 1, Eliaser Tuhadeleni (dubbed for his melodic voice Kaxumba kaNdola, “the organ of Endola”), was finally released a year after Ya Toivo as the longest serving Namibian political prisoner. Born 1918, Tuhadeleni died in isolation, impoverished and bitter in 1997. Only a later biography brought some historical recognition and secured him at least posthumously the deserved place in Namibia’s history of the liberation struggle.<sup>6</sup> The biographic narrative also indirectly created further awareness as regards the disrespect the SWAPO leadership - formed in exile and consolidated by the early 1970s - displayed towards some of the old cadres sacrificing the best years of their lives for the struggle at the domestic front. For the heroic narrative claimed by those returning during the transitional period 1989/90 after decades in exile to seize the positions in government at Independence, the heroism of this generation was detracting from their own claims to be the one and only liberators. For them, their sacrifices counted more and gave them the legitimacy for the entitlements claimed.<sup>7</sup>

Such selective and exclusive perspective could not be applied to Ya Toivo, who since his speech from the dock had entered the history of Namibia’s liberation struggle as an icon. On Robben Island, his continued defiance, stubbornness and resilience made him the most respected among the Namibian prisoners, who entered close ties with their

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<sup>5</sup> Reproduced in full length in a special supplement *In honour of a legend*, published by *The Namibian* on occasion of Ya Toivo’s 90th birthday in August 2014, 9 <<https://www.scribd.com/document/306287947/In-Honour-of-a-Legend-Andimba-ya-Toivo-at-90>> [accessed 23 June 2017].

<sup>6</sup> Ellen Ndeshi Namhila, *Kaxumba kaNdola: Man and Myth. The Biography of a Barefoot Soldier*, Basel, Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Until today the gerontocratic tendencies within the higher ranking structures of SWAPO and government display a disproportionate amount of first (and increasingly second) generation activists having been considerable time in exile over those, who were risking their lives while organizing resistance at home; see i.a. Henning Melber, Daniela Kromrey and Martin Welz, “Changing of the Guard? An Anatomy of Power Within SWAPO of Namibia”, *African Affairs*, 116(463), 2017: 284-310.

ANC inmates. Andimba and Madiba had more in common than a striking similarity of the letters in their names. They remained friends for the rest of their lives. As remembered by Denis Herbstein:

In prison Toivo was unbending, seizing every opportunity to show his disdain for his jailors. A fellow prisoner described the scene when Toiva [sic] responded to his treatment by a young warder: Andimba unleashed a hard open-hand smack on the young warder's cheek, sending [his] cap flying and [the warder] wailing (in Afrikaans), "The kaffir hit me". The inevitable spell of solitary confinement followed. When Toivo was released in March 1984, short of his full term, he refused to leave his fellow prisoners and had to be coaxed out of his cell.<sup>8</sup>

### *Into Exile and Namibian Independence*

After his return back home, Ya Toivo refused to accept a South African initiated transitional government and left for exile. But by the time he returned to active SWAPO policy, the hierarchical structures abroad had long been consolidated. Vested interests of an authoritarian nature had already earlier on resisted challenges for inner-party democracy. Those involved as ordinary soldiers in the military operations complaining about the lack of support and neglect, as well as young activists of the party's Youth League joining the exile in 1974/75, demanding accountability and regular elections faced ruthless prosecution.<sup>9</sup> During these years Ya Toivo was imprisoned.

When released, the SWAPO leadership positions were firmly occupied. The party hierarchy left no room nor provided any meaningful institutionalized consultations for re-negotiating, who should execute decisive influence in which function. SWAPO, unable or unwilling to fill an existing higher-ranking position with Ya Toivo, created the post of Secretary-General for him as a niche, thereby eliminating any direct impact on policy, by keeping him outside of the consolidated inner circle of power. He humbly accepted what was mainly a symbolic position to represent SWAPO internationally without influencing its policy. By doing so, Ya Toivo added considerable symbolic value to the organisation, thereby enhancing what could be termed "social capital". After all, since his role in the Pretoria trial he embodied more than any other Namibian alive as an upright patriot the resilience and thirst for freedom. Meanwhile, many others from the first generation of SWAPO political activists arrested in Namibia since the mid-1960s and released after many years of imprisonment in South Africa remained even more at

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<sup>8</sup> Denis Herbstein, Adimba Toivo ya Toivo obituary, *The Guardian*, 27 June 2017 <[https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/27/andimba-toivo-ya-toivo-obituary?CMP=share\\_btn\\_tw](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/27/andimba-toivo-ya-toivo-obituary?CMP=share_btn_tw)> [accessed 29 June 2017].

<sup>9</sup> Accounts offering first-hand insights into the internal struggles of the mid-1970s, which led to the execution of fighters in the People's Liberation Army (PLAN) and the arrest of many others first in Zambia and then in Tanzania include Keshii Pelao Nathanael, *A Journey to Exile: The Story of a Namibian Freedom Fighter*, Aberystwyth, Sosome Press, 2002; Samson Ndeikwila, *The Agony of Truth*, Windhoek, Kuiseb 2014; Hans Beukes, *Long Road to Liberation. An Exiled Namibian Activist's Perspective*, Pavilion, Porcupine Press, 2014.

the margins and were never allowed any meaningful role again in the organisation. Their sacrifices remained often without any adequate recognition.

While serving the goals of the anti-colonial struggle, Ya Toivo's biggest moral challenge might have been when SWAPO tasked him in 1989 during the UN-supervised transitional period to monitor the release of several hundred so-called ex-detainees. They had survived a purge in exile. During the 1980s thousands of members were tortured by a terror regime of 'securocrats', executed or not surviving the appalling neglect in the dungeons, where they were kept nearby the Southern Angolan town of Lubango.<sup>10</sup> Ya Toivo's internationally recognised credibility and authority might have been the reason why he was appointed as the head of a high-calibre SWAPO delegation<sup>11</sup> traveling to the camps to supervise the encounter between journalists, officials and the prisoners still alive to be repatriated to Namibia. His moral dilemma might have been captured by the personal recollection of one of the released. She afterwards recalled:

It [was] a lady from France ... [who] said, "Tell us, who are these?" She asked Ya Toivo. But Ya Toivo did not want to say it. He said, "No, you will hear from them." And she insisted saying that you are leading this delegation, you have to tell us who these people are. And that's when he started saying that "these are the spies." Then the lady ... asked, "Did you also imprison children?" Then Ya Toivo just couldn't answer that. I remember he could not say anything. He just said, "You will hear from them."<sup>12</sup>

At least in public, Ya Toivo never condemned the injustice and violation of human rights committed by SWAPO. His loyalty to the organisation seemed in this only case on record stronger than his belief in ethical and moral values, justice and truth. But it must have been for himself a sore point and might have plagued his consciousness.

Despite this exception he remained close to the people. On the evening of 20 March 1990, before the official Independence ceremony at midnight, the SWAPO leadership

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<sup>10</sup> See on this dark chapter of SWAPO's history among others the accounts by Siegfried Groth, *Namibia: The wall of silence*, Wuppertal, Peter Hammer, 1995; John S. Saul and Colin Leys, "Lubango and After: 'Forgotten History' as Politics in Contemporary Namibia", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 29(1), 2003: 333-353. Some of the victims have also shared their stories in Barbara Becker, *Speaking Out: Namibians Share Their Perspectives on Independence*, Windhoek, Out of Africa, 2005 and Colin Leys and Susan Brown, *Histories of Namibia: Living through the liberation struggle*, London, Merlin Press, 2005.

<sup>11</sup> It included SWAPO's Administrative Secretary Moses Garoeb, Secretary of Defence Peter Mueshange, and the Deputy Commander of the People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN) Solomon "Jesus" Hawala (nicknamed "the butcher of Lubango"). Cf. Christian A. Williams, *National Liberation in Postcolonial Southern Africa. A Historical Ethnography of SWAPO's Exile Camps*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 160-162.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 160-161.

gathered for a banquet with local VIPs (including the white business elite), diplomats and other celebrities at the hall of the Sport Klub Windhoek (SKW) in the city's centre. Not so Ya Toivo. He joined for most of the time a come together of local activists and members of the international solidarity movement at the premises of the Roessing Foundation, a venue on the outskirts of the city in Khomasdal. There he reunited with old companions such as Jack Simons (1907-1995) and Ray Alexander Simons (1913-2004). They were close friends since the labour movement activities during his Cape Town days and had joined the festivities from their exile in Zambia.

### *Husband and Father*

The feminist and student movements since the late 1960s popularised the slogan that the personal is political (often also phrased as the private is political).<sup>13</sup> What is known about the personality and character of Ya Toivo seems to confirm this. His personal convictions and his strong belief in certain fundamental values were at the same time visibly guiding him also in his public conduct and his understanding of what politics should be.

Soon after his release he met the much younger Vicki/Vicky Erenstein.<sup>14</sup> As a US-American labour lawyer in New York she was also a political activist in the solidarity movement supporting the ANC and SWAPO. Their first encounter took place at an event addressed by the Afro-American activist Angela Davis, which Ya Toivo attended while he was in town to speak to the General Assembly of the United Nations. They immediately 'hit it off'.<sup>15</sup> But due to the circumstances, they maintained for most of the time a long-distance relationship and only married a week into Independence on 29 March 1990 to form a proper family. In 1993 they became parents of the twin daughters Mutaleni and Nashikoto. They also adopted two of Ya Toivo's nephews.

Vicki Erenstein ya Toivo continued to professionally engage with labour laws now in the service of Namibian ministries. She represented her new home country on numerous occasions also in official international affairs related to her expertise.<sup>16</sup> Asked about what they have in common, she declared in the interview given in 2010:

Almost twenty-six years of shared experiences; shared beliefs in the importance of honesty and integrity; education and hard work; friends; family; especially our two daughters, who are still in secondary school; a passion for politics, for the ideal of socialism; for Cuba, for New York, for reading and the color red, enjoyment

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<sup>13</sup> <<https://www.thoughtco.com/the-personal-is-political-slogan-origin-3528952>> [accessed 28 July 2017].

<sup>14</sup> Her first name is interchangeably spelled Vicki and/or Vicky.

<sup>15</sup> She shared their romance in a long and detailed interview published as "Being Ms. Ya Toivo", *Prime Focus Magazine*, August 2010 <<http://primefocusmag.com/articles/77/BEING-MS--YA-TOIVO/>> [accessed 28 July 2017].

<sup>16</sup> As a matter of fact, she was attending a meeting in Geneva at the International Labour Organization when she was informed that her husband had suddenly died.

of travel, love of bagels (yes!).<sup>17</sup>

She described him as “(d)etermined, honest, brave, secure, respectful, friendly, modern, tolerant, wise, stubborn, candid, fit, and handsome” and declared: “If old age implies limitations rather than wisdom, then neither of us believes in being old. In our outlook on life, we are ‘forever young.’ We fight old age together.”<sup>18</sup> And on occasion of his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday she characterized him in the following way:

My husband believes that elders can help to shape the character and values of the younger generations and he has therefore spent a lot of time advising the children and discussing with them the importance of respect towards others and of hard work. He will always tell the children that he does not like cheats, liars and lazy people. Our children have been brought up to be friendly, open, tolerant and humble.<sup>19</sup>

The children remember their father as youthful, “fun-loving, yet strict, attentive, playful and loving”. He raised them being loyal to fundamental principles such as honesty and modesty: “He was simple, loyal, always grateful for everything, even for a plate of food we would give him, always positive and someone who never boasted.” He followed a strong conviction in being truthful: “Papa hated liars, thieves and lazy people. Once you lied to him, it was difficult to regain his trust.”<sup>20</sup> And his wife Vicki characterized him in the interview earlier on as

a human being with strengths and weaknesses like anyone else. But he is very much his own man. Some of his former Robben Island colleagues have asked me, jokingly how I could stand living with him, because he is so stubborn. Once he makes up his mind, it is very difficult to get him to change his mind (although our daughters and I have strategies).

[...]

When I first met Andimba, I asked him how he avoided becoming crazy in jail. Without skipping a beat, he said that it was simple: he knew that he was fighting for a noble cause. That is how Andimba is. He is secure in his beliefs and he does not fear possible rejection. He speaks his mind. He still does not say things just to please someone. He is democratic-minded and values tolerance. To him, having political differences is normal. He has friends who are also his political foes.<sup>21</sup>

### *Ya Toivo's Loyalty to True Liberation*

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<sup>17</sup> "Being Ms. Ya Toivo", op. cit.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> "Vicki on Ya Toivo the family man", *New Era*, 22 August 2014

<<https://www.newera.com.na/2014/08/22/vicki-on-ya-toivo-the-family-man/>> [accessed 28 July 2017].

<sup>20</sup> Patience Smith, "Ya Toivo's children pay tribute to family giant", *The Namibian*, 22 June 2017 <<http://www.namibian.com.na/55944/read/Ya-Toivos-children-pay-tribute-to-family-giant>> [accessed 28 July 2017].

<sup>21</sup> "Being Ms. Ya Toivo", op. cit.

Since Independence Ya Toivo served three terms in Cabinet as Minister of Mines and Energy (1990-1999), Minister for Labour (1999-2002) and Minister for Prison and Correctional Services (2002-2005). The declining relevance of his portfolios suggested that his political weight in party and government affairs was at best marginal. As before, he put the party's interest above his personal ambitions. Or rather, he acted in accordance with what he understood as being in the best interest of the country. Power politics were a strange thing for him. What mattered were the party and the people. But he realized that the two are not identical. As a result, he displayed the wisdom one would expect from a true leader. Speaking for the last time in the National Assembly, he reminded on 16 March 2005 his comrades:

Being a member of parliament or even a minister should not be seen as an opportunity to achieve status, to be addressed as 'honourables' and to acquire riches. If those are your goals, you would do better to pursue other careers.<sup>22</sup>

He responded to violent clashes during the election campaign in 2008, when SWAPO supporters and members of the new opposition party RDP (Rally for Democracy and Progress) – established by disgruntled members of SWAPO after losing an internal power struggle - ended in physical scuffles, with an open appeal. As he urged:

We are living in new times that require new ways of conducting political struggle. The formation of new parties and the exchange of differing opinions in the political arena is a normal occurrence in the life of a democracy. The flourishing of new ideas can only contribute to the vitality and development of our nation. The present should be a battle of ideas and not of swords, and the battle should be conducted with respect for our fellow human beings.<sup>23</sup>

While since retirement he withdrew increasingly from the political sphere and public life, he remained active especially in the Namibia-Cuba Friendship Association. On his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday on 22 August 2014 *The Namibian* published a fitting tribute.<sup>24</sup>

Ya Toivo remained critically observant of the limits to liberation. As late as 17 October 2014 he commented on the values of the Freedom Charter and the current ANC leadership. He quipped in a video recorded interview that the people did not support

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<sup>22</sup> Toivo's message to Namibia and the world, *The Namibian*, 23 June 2017  
<<http://www.namibian.com.na/56028/read/Toivos-message--to-Namibia--and-the-world#>> [accessed 28 July 2017].

<sup>23</sup> Andimba Toivo ya Toivo, Appeal for Tolerance and Respect in Namibian Politics, *New Era*, 21 November 2008; also published in *Die Republikein* at  
<<https://www.google.com/search?q=Andimba+Toivo+ya+Toivo%2C+Appeal+for+Tolerance+and+Respect+in+Namibian+Politics&ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8&client=firefox-b>>  
[accessed 28 July 2017].

<sup>24</sup>  
<<http://www.namibian.com.na/public/uploads/documents/00ebfdf6eb2f1/toivo.pdf>>  
[accessed 28 July 2017].



the struggle for them to just fill their pockets and to loot the country.<sup>25</sup> As former Prime Minister Nahas Angula reminded at a memorial service, using SWAPO for material gain amounted to a betrayal of what Ya Toivo stood for.<sup>26</sup> And Vicki ya Toivo already in her long interview pointed out, her husband believed that “persons who aspire to positions of political leadership must be honest and committed to the well-being of the nation and should not seek such positions merely to acquire the benefits of a ‘good job’ and a title of ‘honourable’”.<sup>27</sup> Referring to Ya Toivo’s example, a reader posted in *The Namibian*:

Namibian government leaders, you must honour Ya Toivo's memory by stopping corruption and exploiting your positions to get richer; eradicate poverty and unemployment. Live humbly not in super luxury and make the best use of Namibia's rich resources to uplift the lives of the have-nots.<sup>28</sup>

The true dimension of Ya Toivo’s enormous popularity among Namibia’s people and their admiration for him became visible in the reactions after the news of his death spread like wildfire. His modest lifestyle, his loyalty and his faithfulness to values he embodied and maintained in politics and as a public figure made him a much-admired role model. A common definition of patriotism is “love for or devotion to one’s country”.<sup>29</sup> Engaging with the meaning of “true” patriotism, a descendant from Scottish emigrants quoted his ancestors. Their Declaration of Arbroath during their fight against the invading English ended in 1320 by stating: “It is not for honor or glory or wealth that we fight, but for freedom alone, which no good man gives up except with his life.”<sup>30</sup> While patriotism in our days is often referred to in shallow meanings very different from this one, the understanding by the Scottish nationalists almost 700 years ago most likely strongly resonated with that of Andimba Toivo ya Toivo.

#### *Patriotism and Heroic Narratives: Ya Toivo and Namibian Politics*

If there is a positive meaning to patriotism, all too often abused for inventing heroic narratives by those holding political power and celebrating themselves, then with Toivo Ya Toivo a true Namibian patriot departed from this world. He left behind a lasting legacy to those Namibian people who share his belief in true liberation as emancipation from greed and social injustice and a life in human dignity. 26 years into Independence,

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<sup>25</sup> <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1j2xcFEJK9U>> [accessed 28 July 2017].

<sup>26</sup> Marx Itamalo, “Ya Toivo abhorred tribalism, greed – speakers”, *The Namibian*, 19 June 2017 <<http://www.namibian.com.na/55801/read/Ya-Toivo-abhorred-tribalism-greed-%E2%80%93-speakers>> [accessed 28 July 2017].

<sup>27</sup> “Being Ms. Ya Toivo”, op. cit.

<sup>28</sup> SMS Of The Day, *The Namibian*, 28 June 2017

<<http://www.namibian.com.na/SMSes/0/2017-06-28>> [accessed 28 July 2017].

<sup>29</sup> <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/patriotism>> [accessed 28 July 2017].

<sup>30</sup> Lawrence W. Reed, “The True Meaning of Patriotism”. Posted at the Foundation for Economic Education, 1 July 2016 <<https://fee.org/articles/the-true-meaning-of-patriotism>> [accessed 28 July 2017].

a growing number of Namibians articulate frustrations and disillusionment over what has been dubbed the “limits to liberation”.<sup>31</sup>

Ya Toivo’s death, which should have not come that unexpected given his advanced age, came nevertheless for many as a shock. For them his departure symbolized the end of an era personified in a person’s moral integrity and commitment to what has been considered the true liberation in the service of the ordinary people. Ya Toivo’s modest if not humble personality and interaction - though guided by traditional moral values not free of hierarchical components, as the upbringing of his children testifies to - resembled features of steadfastness and a firm belief in values of genuine emancipation from a system of injustice. In such view, learning from the past would imply not to reproduce similar injustices or inequalities or disrespect for others under a new regime. Such strong moral compass would prevent erstwhile victims from turning into perpetrators. It would mean to remain loyal to the people.

Ya Toivo had maybe the highest credibility among all those alive since Independence, to which a genuine commitment to liberation was attributed. The consternation, which after the news of his death almost paralyzed public life, showed the extent to which Ya Toivo had been seen as the desirable and accepted face of the Namibian nation. It is impossible to assess how much of this was a projection, motivated by the protest against the newly established elite. What matters more than such speculative thought is the factual side, which the widespread mourning had as a clear indication of the recognition of the values the deceased had personified.

The praise of Ya Toivo culminated in numerous references to him and his role as a “founding father” of the Namibian nation. This could be seen as a deliberate or unintentional challenge of the official historiography, which had not set aside such label for Ya Toivo. Namibia’s First Lady Monica Geingos only days after Ya Toivo’s funeral publicly criticized this form of recognition as “dishonest” and qualified it as an “undignified way” of behaviour. Ya Toivo, she stressed, “was a hero of mine. But the founding father of this nation is Sam Nujoma.”<sup>32</sup> This provoked furious responses<sup>33</sup>:

IS it the First Lady's position to accord the title of the founding father of the nation to anyone or to cement the status to the first President or are her sentiments expressed entirely out of fear of the unknown? Every Namibian has the right to

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<sup>31</sup> See among the early critical literature on this subject among others Henning Melber (ed.), *Limits to Liberation in Southern Africa. The unfinished business of democratic consolidation*, Cape Town, HSRC Press, 2003; Henning Melber (ed.), *Re-examining Liberation in Namibia. Political Culture Since Independence*, Uppsala, The Nordic Africa Institute, 2003; Henning Melber (ed.), *Transitions in Namibia. Which changes for whom?* Uppsala, The Nordic Africa Institute, 2007.

<sup>32</sup> Ndanki Kahurika, “Nujoma is founding father – Geingos”, *The Namibian*, 29 June 2017 < <https://www.namibian.com.na/166322/archive-read/Nujoma-is-founding-father-%E2%80%93-Geingos> > [accessed 9 October 2017].

<sup>33</sup> “SMS Of The Day”, *The Namibian*, 3 July 2017 <<http://www.namibian.com.na/SMSes/0/2017-07-03>> [accessed 28 July 2017].

their opinion about who deserves to be the founding father, hence I stick with Andimba Toivo ya Toivo, the man deserved the title and rightfully so. So I regard her statement as her own opinion and her constitutional right and not that of the entire nation.

MADAM First Lady, please spare us the fake details you want to refresh our minds with about the founding father of the nation that we don't want. We know too well it's Andimba Toivo ya Toivo. Why don't you want the truth to be spoken? We don't want to make statements because you might be rewarded to say what you are saying. We know our hero, viva Ya Toivo! May his soul rest in eternal peace.

DEAR First Lady, please stay in your lane. Leave politics to the politicians. Or are you aspiring to become the Namibian Grace Mugabe?

The First Lady had indeed erred. The official titles awarded to President Sam Nujoma by the Namibian Parliament in April 2005 following his retirement are “Founding President of the Republic of Namibia” and “Father of the Namibian Nation”. But this is of course only a matter of semantics, given that the two titles in their combination clearly embrace the notion of “Founding Father”, which was now in parts of public opinion allocated to Ya Toivo. To that extent, the dispute indicated a rift over who deserves which kind of recognition and respect in terms of the personal contribution to the formation of the independent Namibian nation. It hence was a significant pointer to some issues related to the official patriotic history and heroic narrative.

Notably, Andimba Toivo ya Toivo had never been pictured wearing a combat uniform, while being recognized as a true freedom fighter. In contrast, Sam Nujoma did on several occasions until now in his high age like to pose as an armed patriot in army clothes. In comparison, however, one is tempted to suggest that the soft-spoken but firm Ya Toivo in the end represented more determined militancy than most others in the fight for self-determination and liberation – understood as a personal and collective emancipation from discrimination and injustice in the spirit of solidarity guided by the slogan of the South African trade union movement COSATU that “an injury to one is an injury to all”. True patriotism of the Andimba Toivo ya Toivo kind does not need radical rhetoric and pseudo-revolutionary militancy. It gains recognition for its steadfast loyalty to fundamental values and principles of human and social equality. Values, which when lived, turn someone into a true role model for social transformation. To that extent, the countrywide deep mourning was indeed convincing testimony that the ordinary people were aware of the loss of a role model and true leader, whose patriotism deserved recognition beyond a heroic narrative constructed to legitimize continued execution of power over but hardly for the ordinary people.

In his eulogy at the memorial service at Independence Stadium, President Geingob declared Ya Toivo as “one of the spiritual Godfathers of SWAPO”. He pointed out that, “Andimba’s compass was calibrated to seek fairness and justice”. And he observed that,

we have lost a man who epitomizes the core ideals that make us the nation we are today ... His durable principles and inexhaustible reservoir of compassion,

forgiveness, patience and sense of justice allowed him to shun the murky waters of greed and factionalism. ... May the passing of Ya Toivo be the moment we straighten our hearts and re-align our words and actions for the attainment of a Namibia that Ya Toivo would be proud of.<sup>34</sup>

But among all the praise and sorrow articulated by his fellow comrades, it was Nahas Angula, member of Namibia's Cabinet and Parliament from 1990 to 2015 and Prime Minister between 2005 and 2012, who commented on the loss in no uncertain political terms. He expressed regrets that Ya Toivo had passed away at a time when the party was facing severe challenges in living up to its vision, goals, ideals and values. Describing him as a true patriot, he stressed it was unfortunate

... that the Swapo Party that endured a bitter struggle and drew its support and strength from the rural persons seemed to have drifted away from the workers and peasant bases. It is important, therefore, that to honour the legacy of comrade Herman Andimba Toivo ya Toivo, we must return to our original mission of defending the dignity of workers and peasants, and the interests of the masses at large.<sup>35</sup>

In November 2017 Nahas Angula announced his intention to return into active politics by competing with President Hage Geingob for the position of the party president at the forthcoming SWAPO congress.<sup>36</sup> At a time, when Namibian politics are viewed in the context of a party leadership to be elected at the end of 2017 as the initial stage preparing for the next parliamentary and presidential elections in late 2019, the legacy of Andimba Toivo Ya Toivo serves as a timely reminder of what the struggle was supposed to be all about.

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<sup>34</sup> Republic of Namibia, President Hage Geingob, *Eulogy at the Memorial Service of the Late Comrade Herman Andimba Toivo Ya Toivo: A Life of distinguished service*. June 23, 2017, Independence Stadium, Windhoek  
<<http://www.gov.na/documents/10181/337569/President+Geingob+Eulogy+for+Late+Cde+Herman+Andimba+Toivo+Ya+Toivo++230617+-+Final+Final.pdf/37b642c7-b020-41c4-ac0e-a51e5dda5bc9>> [accessed 9 October 2017].

<sup>35</sup> Ndanki Kahiruika, "Swapo has lost purpose, vision – Angula", *The Namibian*, 14 June 2017 <<https://www.namibian.com.na/165755/archive-read/Swapo-has-lost-purpose-vision-%E2%80%93-Angula>> [accessed 9 October 2017].

<sup>36</sup> Kelvin Chiringa, "Mbumba tipped for state VP's job ...as Nahas Angula takes on Geingob", *The Villager*, 9 October 2017  
<<https://www.thevillager.com.na/articles/11722/mbumba-tipped-for-state-vps-job-as-nahas-angula-takes-on-geingob/>> [accessed 9 October 2017]; Shinovene Immanuel, "Angula challenges Geingob", *The Namibian*, 9 October 2017  
<<https://www.namibian.com.na/60191/read/Angula-challenges-Geingob>> [accessed 9 October 2017].