

## **Picturing Our Memories: Liberation War Memory and Auto-photography in Northern Namibia**

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The proposed paper presents a discussion of visual ethnography during a period of field work in Owambo, northern Namibia, which has been part of a larger project to trace the complex transfigurations of liberation war memory, culture, and belonging/citizenship in the former war-zone. I argue that the visual expression of liberation war memory allows for a unique understanding of the local social processes of producing memory.

The discussion is centred around a photovoice project, which involved men and women of different ages (between 25 and 80 years old in 2004), who lived during the war on the border to Angola, in the vicinity of Oshikango. Using disposable 35mm still cameras, they took pictures of what that they connected with their memories of the liberation war. Images ranged from landscape sites and portraits of people that had local significance through to re-enactments of war-time homestead scenes. A few photographers used the opportunity to visually recreate themselves as heroes of the liberation struggle. The images and accompanying verbal narratives showed a multivocal discourse about liberation war memory in rural Owambo, which contests assumptions of the nationalist master narrative, ('SWAPO brought us freedom through the barrel of the gun').

Unlike other investigations of visual depictions of cultures of violence and memory (e.g., Allen Feldman 1997), which mostly examine pre-existing visual representations, 'Picturing Our Memories' collaborated with social actors in the *production* of visual representations of memory and how they create a particular, inevitably subjective, selective and fragmented version of the past.

The paper addresses questions, such as, does popular photography provide a possible avenue for making sense of an essentially incomplete past and its relations to the present in ways that verbal narrative (oral history) may not be able to do? Can it raise issues of representation and reflection concerning ostensibly muted local memory? And, can projects such as 'Picturing Our Memories' possibly be appropriated by the photographers and their wider 'community' as an instrument for challenging a dominant public memory discourse?