

Apartheid was deleted, injustice was not

Namibia, the mirage of the coexistence

After brutal German colonialism, the country was the apartheid laboratory created by South African government. A long liberation struggle brought independence in 1990. Since that moment, Namibia has an idyllic image. But beyond appearances, this magnificent land embraces the agonizing contradictions of the modern world

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"Herero people must leave the country. If they do not, we will oblige them by force. Any armed or unarmed Herero, with or without cattle, within German territory, will be killed. Even women and children can not stay, they will be brought back to their people or killed. These are the last words to Herero people from me, the great general of the mighty German Emperor". With this ultimatum, General von Trotha begins the genocide of Herero, the most warlike of the ethnic groups in South-West Africa (this was the name of Namibia at time). It is October 2, 1904, and it is time of German colonialism to show its true meaning (that of all colonialism): the brutal appropriation of land and its resources.

Until that moment, for a matter of power relations, representatives of Kaiser Wilhelm had merely to exploit the differences between the peoples of Namibia, Herero and Nama-Damara in particular, and exploit the work of missionaries, the vanguard of colonial expansion since its inception (1884). Now it was to expropriate the land to give it to the thousands of willing settlers arriving from Germany. Despite some surprising indigenous victories (especially with the war chief of Nama Witbooi), the operation succeeded perfectly: only one Herero in five was saved (we will never know the exact figures), and Damara and Nama peoples were almost halved. The survivors were driven in the most inhospitable regions of this arid country, which owes its name to the Namib Desert.

Tourists visiting Namibia do not have the faintest idea of the bloody hand of the modern Western presence in Africa. They see the Lutheran church in Windhoek, Luderitz Art Nouveau houses, the old railway stations with the lettering in Gothic script, the Teutonic order and cleanliness of the towns in the south, the unique exoticism of German Africa. Too much time passed since those evil days, why remember it with some bulky monument, or some ugly headstones? "Our grandparents tell us about a time when the lands were ours, a mythical time they remembered with pride, and they explained the origin of our ruin", says Rosalinda Namises, 46, former nurse elected to the National Assembly. Land, house, language, tradition: all distorted, defaced, manipulated.

When Germans, during the First World War, were defeated by South African ally of England, the inhabitants of Namibia thought maybe of a better future. They were wrong. German community defeated in the war was treated with respect: but for native people, with a zeal worthy of a better cause, a perfect racial segregation was prepared, according to the aseptic theory of "separate development". Apartheid, in fact implemented in Namibia and then formalized and extended to the entire South Africa (officially the opposite has occurred). Each one in own place: Herero with Herero, Nama with Nama, Ovambo with Ovambo, mixed with mixed, each group its share of land or urban ghetto, the area of the house marked with a letter, to each one a race number: 01 – white, 02 – colored, 03 - baster (which derives from "bastard", cross between Boers and Africans), 04 - Damara, and so on.

"The day they came for my father I was at school", - Rosalinda, still remembers - "They took people away in trucks, and they assigned the new small housing, with the outdoor bathroom in common. Sometimes husband and wife went to two different areas, depending on ethnic origins or simple errors, a traumatic experience. We were uprooted from our lives and transplanted into another". A real racist urban planning: whites in cottages in residential neighborhoods; a downtown park to work and shopping, to be accessed strictly by car; outside, invisible, the black townships, with

people who moved by bus, were to do the humble work in the city and at five p.m. should have already disappeared, and woe to be found in the center after that time.

The past racial separation is the present social separation: in Windhoek, the last being in Katutura (whose name means, not surprisingly, "the place where we do not want to settle down"), quite far from the clean, neat, elegant city center. A perfect environment, spoiled only by barbed wire, electric wire and intimidating iron bars that arouse European visitor's suspicion, what are you afraid of, in a so peaceful, so little crowded setting (the capital of Namibia has only 250 thousand inhabitants)? Old habits, they say, a legacy of the old regime, as the sign of "the right of admission is reserved", seen very often.

The mental laziness of the citizens of European origin (white Namibians) is such that in Luderitz, on the Atlantic, one of the best hotels is located on a street named after a Nazi official (Goering). It was the creation of the ghetto Katutura, in the fifties, the straw that broke the camel's back.

It was time to say "stop" to the occupation of Namibia by South Africa, in spite of the International Court of Justice decision in 1950 to entrust the country to the United Nations, and "stop" to the more and more oppressive apartheid policy.

It was in the north of the country that the SWAPO (South West Africa People's Organization) was organized, the national liberation movement, formed primarily by Ovambo, the majority in Namibia, as then as now.

The Marxist inspiration of SWAPO, led by Sam Nujoma since 1959, allowed the movement to never fall into the tribal temptation, continually fed by the propaganda of the racist regime and the ethnic separation policy .

From the point of view of Afrikaners, the descendants of early Dutch settlers also known as Boers (boer means "farmer" in Afrikaans), the supremacy of the white race was willed by God, and all forms of contamination was immoral. "They are fanatical Calvinists persuaded that God directed them to South Africa and guide them through a thousand adventures, and they are ready to die in defense of his own fortune" (LN Neame, The History of Apartheid). The fight in the early years is only political: demonstrations, strikes, appeals to the UN, requests to the government. The response of the system is always the same: violent suppression. Calling a meeting or signing an appeal are enough to go into jail. The state, which at an official level passes for democracy is a police state, where even the most basic rights are violated without scruple. In 1966, the SWAPO passes to military activity, a hit and run guerrilla war with bases in Angola and Zambia.

Namibia becomes a little Vietnam for the government in Pretoria. But it is mainly at diplomatic level that racist South Africa loses ground: UN condemn once more the occupation of Namibia and in 1973 recognize SWAPO as "authentic representative of Namibian people". All attempts to isolate the movement of Sam Nujoma fail miserably, including the formation of a ridiculous political coalition of collaborators (the DTA), appointed on an ethnic basis, to create a puppet parliament.

In the mid-seventies, Namibian front intersects with the war against Portuguese colonialism in Angola.

Africa is a chessboard where U.S. and USSR clash, according to the logic of the Cold War.

When Angola achieved independence (1975), the Communist faction in power is supported by Soviets and Cubans, who send a military contingent to fight against the opposite side of UNITA, supported militarily by South Africa and financially by the U.S.

South Africa line becomes: "no independence to Namibia if Cubans do not withdraw troops from Angola".

The UN does not accept this setting, but the situation does not change, until, after years of laborious negotiations, they reach an agreement between Cuba, Angola and South Africa (December 1988) which opens the way for the independence of Namibia and the end of apartheid. The time now is ripe: the government in Pretoria, worn out by the guerrillas, by African National Congress opposition and international pressure (as it was "saved" several times by the United States and Great Britain to the Security Council) wants close the far front to better face the internal

situation.

Namibia, once again, plays the role of a laboratory, because despite the large size, it has a population of less than two million inhabitants only: if the multiracial society works there, it can also work in South Africa. Moreover, there is good precedent of former Rhodesia, third African country dominated by a white minority in the name of apartheid: the long war of liberation guided by Robert Mugabe led to the Lancaster House agreement in 1979, which gave life to Zimbabwe, a new nation based largely on a partition of fact: the political power to blacks, the economic power to whites.

It is the same pattern that is applied to finally independent Namibia (March 21, 1990): the president of the new state is of course Sam Nujoma, leader of SWAPO; the result of the polls, the first free elections (1989), was a granted triumph for the "father of the fatherland" and the party of all the natives, according to the established principle "one nation, one leader, one party". The new constitution is the most liberal, democratic and enlightened you can imagine: all individual rights are protected, starting from what is most important to the white minority, the property right.

It is clear that the socialism displayed by Nujoma, just like his colleague Mugabe in Zimbabwe, is good only for official ceremonies and speeches: he greets with a clenched fist, called everyone "companion", but he does not even dream to touch "the hen that lays golden eggs", the capitalist economy that remains in the hands of all time masters.

On the other hand, as a Cuban journalist said ironically, History seems to have shown that "communism is only the longest way to get from capitalism to capitalism". New Namibia seemed destined to become an oasis of stability, democracy and prosperity in a troubled continent, an example of a multiracial and multicultural society, peaceful co-existence. After 14 years of independence, this is the official image, but is valid only for tourists and international investors (there are all conditions for some great bargains, here).

The reality seems to escape to foreign eyes, lost in the immense spaces, the desert horizons of this land of rock, sand and silence. There are so few people, so all the problems seem remote. Namibia is a mirage: it looks like a paradise, but it is not at all.

Statistics show a merciless reality: despite all the macroeconomic parameters are satisfactory (balance of payments in surplus, the growth rate above 3 percent, GDP per capita five times higher than that of poor African countries), despite Namibia is the worldwide leader of high quality diamonds (30 per cent of global production), its human development index places to a painful 124th place.

This incredible paradox is easily explained if we consider that in the ranking of the worst wealth distribution, Namibia stands at the top. A nation that has a small population manages to maintain an unemployment rate above 40 percent.

In other words, inequality becoming system. And among all the inequalities, the most important for people is land.

"We fought for the land, but we got practically nothing. Most of the land is still occupied by those who have enjoyed a long period of prosperity by exploiting Namibians. These people get richer, while people like us live in camps without hope. The land must be divided equitably". A reader of "The Namibian" (the most important national newspaper) writes.

Land reform is perhaps the symbol of the failure of politics in Namibia. The community of European origin feels protected by the same democratic principles that has despised for decades, all the violence perpetrated against the native majority was removed in a moment, there was no "Truth and Reconciliation Commission" as in South Africa, to bring out the past (see the excellent film "In My Country"). On the other hand, many people within SWAPO want to turn the page quickly, forgetting for murder, rape, torture and abuses committed during the conflict, as it invariably happens in all wars.

Political power and economic power were crystallized. The white elite extended its privileges to a new black elite. For agrarian reform, they established the basic principle of "willing buyer, willing seller": the state buys the land that the great white owners decide to sell at market prices (price increases appropriately). On this basis it could not change much. In 14 years only 118 of 4 thousand

farms was bought, and distributed to 37 thousand farmers. The best lands have gone to friends of friends, others had to make shift. Often the new owners sacked black employees who worked for years for the white farmers: to solve a problem, it was created a bigger one.

Someone begins to understand that this is not simply take the land to someone to give it to somebody else: cultivating land is hard and expensive, it requires considerable skills and enormous capital, especially in a country where water is scarce.

(Fake) revolutions are made by the leaders of ruling parties (as it is happening in Zimbabwe): laborers, dependent farmers especially ask for security: a house where no one will ever tell you to go away, a land to cultivate, access to credit and a little technical and trade assistance. Possibly, even a decent wage, not the misery of 40 euros per month, at best (for tourists, the cost of a night in a family pension).

The owners and white entrepreneurs explain that they should not have an emotional approach to the issue, that they should safeguard the development, look at the economic rationality.

Maybe it is for the economic rationality that people are worse off today than two decades ago, despite the growth of wealth: it is not by chance someone comes to regret even the apartheid era (just as someone regret the communist regimes or the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein): there was more work, they lived better, the children were sent to school.

Paradoxes of liberal democracies, so forgetful when it comes to social justice, fundamental rights, equality, redistribution of wealth, progressive taxation. The West, if it exists, seems to never recover from the hangover for the victory over communism.

Entire ruling classes, as in Namibia as in the world, restating the same point: the situation is shameful, but that is okay.

In November, they vote for the new president, and the grand old man Sam Nujoma retires. Surely his name will go down in history, but his political record is a failure. He had enormous power in hands, but three presidential terms were not sufficient to redress the shameful economic and social inequality of Namibian society.

Truly a wrong enterprise, since it had to meet the needs of a population so small in a land so rich. Strong with the weak and weak with the strong, this is the hard truth. For the white elite and the international community he is an example of realism, balance, wisdom. For Namibians who have opened their eyes, he is an arrogant and authoritarian leader, capable of sniping against gays and the opposition, to celebrate himself as all the revolutionaries in power, but utterly unable to bring his people the dignity for which they had fought a long and dirty war.

In the end, beyond the guerrilla iconography, Nujoma is yet another puppet in the hands of the lords of international business, starting from the omnipotent and omnipresent De Beers the famous diamond company.

War and mineral resources are a constant on the continent, and Nujoma involved Namibian army in the dirty war in the Democratic Republic of Congo to support Kabila in return for the exploitation of a mine.

To replace Nujoma as a candidate and likely future president, there is another septuagenarian, another old, faithful companion of many battles, Hifikepunye Pohamba, the current Minister of Lands, the man of Land Reform no one has yet seen.

Everyone takes for granted his election and the fourth consecutive overwhelming victory of SWAPO, despite the huge disappointment of many of his former supporters. Stability is the highest good for investors and tourists, and Namibia seems destined to live in peace for many years to come.

However, for some reason, almost no one goes out at night. Outside the shop closing times, at five p.m., like in the apartheid days, there are only security guards and few cars.

What a powerful synthesis of modernity: a world of consumers scared of everything. Shopping, job, cars and bunker -houses, where television informs us of the episode of domestic crime (crime in Namibia is in marked increase) or the nightmare of terrorism in the world. Fortunately, this is not the only reality.

The new generations in Namibia grow up without the shameful burden brought by their parents.

The poor Africans show an exceptional natural virtue, a great capacity for forgiveness and a hardy pragmatism. A clear example of this is found in the approach of people to the language issue.

After English, the lingua franca of exiles and then of liberation, was adopted as an official language, many natives, especially in southern Namibia, keep talking to each other Afrikaans, the tough language of Boer master, which allows to overcome ethnic barriers (to which Boers wanted to nail them forever).

Hard to disagree with Namibian poet Kavevanga Kahengua, a descendant of tortured Herero people, returned to his country after a long exile in Botswana: "I'd like to learn languages / but I hate them/ because no one / is mine."

Cesare Sangalli