

A Whale's Hipbone:

The Interrelationship Between
Namibia and Norway



Martin White

Metode

The history I'm about to relate emerges from a complex set of relationships. Relationships between individuals, communities, people, beliefs, development. Between the Church and the State, chaos and control, missionary work and colonialism, the nation-state and cultural identity, extraction and exploitation, and solidarity and collaboration.

The history I'm about to relate emerges from my dwelling upon the details, each time reading slightly differently, understanding new things. I have circled around the events, the people, the photographs, the reports many times over. And this circularity has informed the way I wish to tell it to you.

The history I'm about to relate is contingent upon *how* I relate it to you. I am careful about how I do that, because how I do that matters a great deal. The order in which I sequence the events, and the relationship between the events, all change our perception of the history.

The history I'm about to relate to you is not my history. These are not my stories to tell.

We can begin with one story, but it is neither the only story, nor the only beginning. I have chosen this photo as a starting point. There is something compelling here and something that represents the relationships I want to write about.

So, we will begin with the story of what this photograph is and how it came to be.

It is from a local Norwegian newspaper, taken by Britt M. Solberg. It was printed on the front page of *Østlendingen* on the 18th of May 1983. The photograph shows people in the town of Elverum celebrating the 17th of May, Norwegian Constitution Day, a day marked by children's parades, marching bands, national costumes and Norwegian flags. The caption tells us that 'President Sam Nujoma of the Namibian Independence Movement, SWAPO, visited Elverum on the 17th of May. Here he is waving to the children's parade outside Namibia House.'¹



Before we can continue, it's important to acknowledge that four days prior to publication on the 8th of February

2025, former Namibian President Sam Nujoma died in Namibia's capital, Windhoek, aged 95. Nujoma was the last living African leader to have led their country to independence from colonial rule.

It's also important for us to understand that in 1983, when this photograph was taken, Namibia was not yet independent. The territory that we now know as Namibia was explored by the Portuguese in the 15th century, though they never penetrated further inland than the coast. In the 19th century, Namibia became a German colony until the end of the First World War when South African troops occupied Namibia and deposed the German colonial administration. The League of Nations then mandated South Africa to control Namibia. In the late 1940s South Africa began to impose repressive apartheid policies of racial segregation on Namibia. The subsequent fight against apartheid and for national liberation was led by the Namibian independence movement, the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO), which was recognised by the United Nations in 1972 as the 'sole legitimate representative' of Namibia's people. Sam Nujoma was the leader of this independence movement.² Namibia was the last African country to decolonise.

With this information in mind, let's look at this photo again.

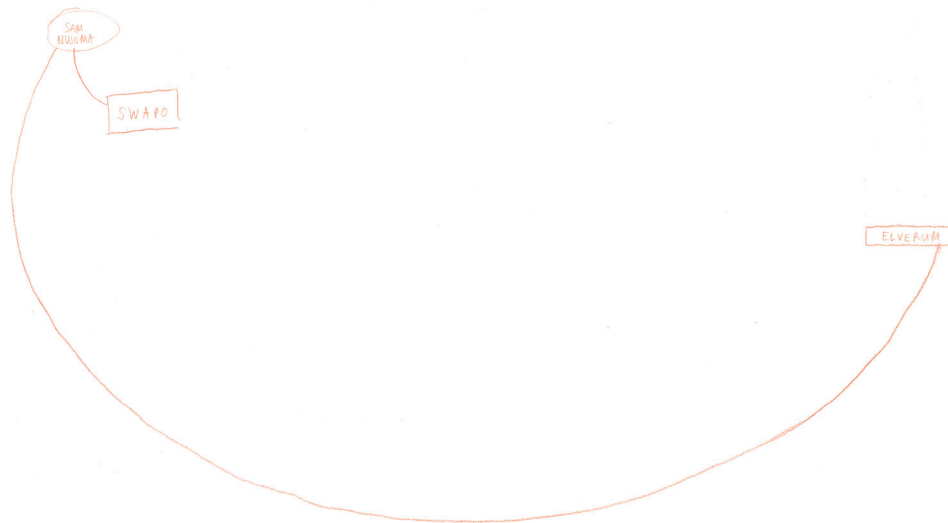
Sam Nujoma and SWAPO were in the midst of a long, violent struggle for national liberation, when this photograph was taken.

And again, the caption tells us that 'President Sam Nujoma of the Namibian Independence Movement, SWAPO, visited Elverum on the 17th of May. Here he is waving to the children's parade outside Namibia House.'

You see how the context changes our perspective of the photograph, and how the photograph itself changes with this information? This perspective shift, or parallax, prompts several questions:



How did the leader of SWAPO – a Namibian radical, militant, guerrilla, independence organisation – come to visit Elverum, a regional town inland in Eastern Norway? Why was he there on Norway's national day? What is Namibia House? And why is Namibia House in Elverum?



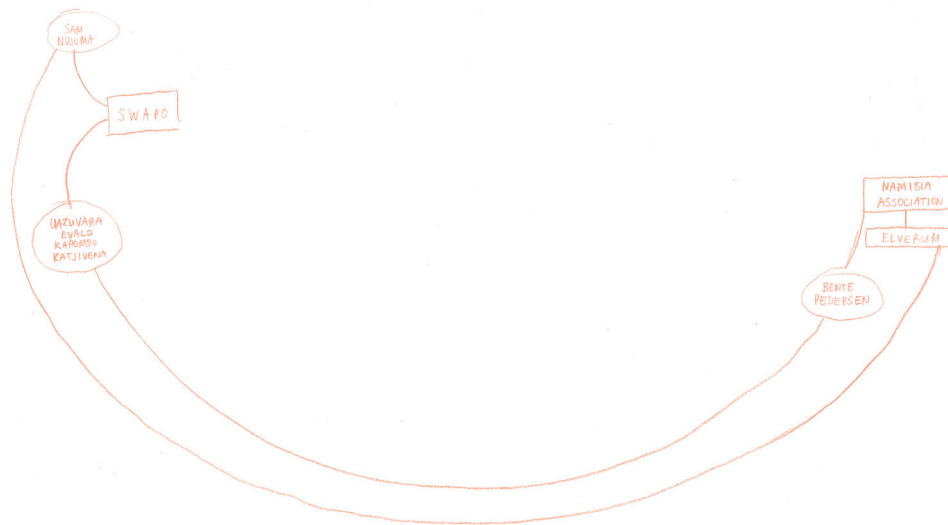
Bente and Kapombo, part I

In October 2023 I was invited to visit former chair of the Namibia Association of Norway, Bente Pedersen and her husband, former senior SWAPO member Uazuvara Ewald Kapombo Katjivena, at their home in Arendal. Bente met me at the bus station after my few hours' journey south from Oslo. She had invited me to go and meet her and Kapombo to look through their personal archive. Bente was responding to an email I had sent at the recommendation of historian Eva Helene Østbye, whose essay prompted my curiosity about the Namibia Association.³ I believed that the relationship between the Namibia Association and Namibia was a compelling subject matter to research. But it was a history that risked slipping from memory. The association still exists but has only one employee one day per week. My emails to the association had gone unanswered. So, after a few years of reading and reaching out to various former members, I was excited to meet Bente and Kapombo.

At their home, Bente shared with me some of the material she had put aside for my visit, including a book of newspaper clippings. 'In many ways,' she said to me, 'this is the story of my life.' The clippings cover the formation of the Namibia Association in 1980 through to the first visit in 1984 by the South African theologian and Nobel Laureate Desmond Tutu and his subsequent visits throughout the

1980s.⁴ What Bente was describing to me as the story of her life was the history of a grassroots, community organisation, the Namibia Association, based in Elverum, a few hours' drive north-east of Oslo.

But why is the Namibia Association in Elverum? In the words of historian Eva Helene Østbye: 'Why Namibia? Why Elverum?'⁵



The Namibia Association

In the summer of 1979, new parents Dag and Ellinor Hareide arrived in Elverum for their posting. They were the freshly appointed catechists at Elverum Church.⁶ The Hareides were both active in the Lutheran World Federation (LWF). Through the LWF the Hareides had contact with Namibian Church leaders. Over 80% of all Namibians at the time belonged to churches that were engaged in the fight against the South African occupation.⁷ The Hareides were therefore aware of Namibia's struggle for independence and the plight of Namibian refugees who were fleeing the violence of the South African military and finding refuge in neighbouring Zambia and Angola. The two new catechists decided to use their position to teach the young confirmands about the Namibian independence struggle.⁸ This information quickly spread through Elverum's population of

14,000, and by April 1980, Elverum was hosting 'Namibia Week' to raise material support for and awareness of Namibia's fight for independence.

This community-based and community-led activity was hugely successful. Nearly 50% of Elverum's population were actively involved.

Local teacher at Elverum Vocational College Oddvar Øieren wrote a play, *Black on White*, about Namibia's history since European interaction, including Lutheran missionaries, German colonisation, South Africa's apartheid control and Namibia's fight for independence. Øieren writes in his foreword to the manuscript, published by the Namibia Association in 1982, that they thought it was a good way to learn this piece of world history, namely by performing it themselves.⁹

At the end of Namibia Week in April 1980, a shipping container was filled with material donated by Elverum to Namibia which included: 20,000 school notebooks, 10 kg of toys made by preschoolers, 27 bicycles that had been repaired by young unemployed people, one truck, 60 knitted blankets, 45,000 protein biscuits made by school children and 25 tons of clothes and shoes.¹⁰

In September 1980, the leader of the Namibian independence movement Sam Nujoma visited Elverum for the first time, to receive a knitted blanket as a symbol of the humanitarian solidarity.

This extraordinary wave of support, its sudden and massive popularity, and its efficacy led to the establishment of the Namibia Association in June 1980, in an historic municipal building in the centre of Elverum, a former workers' house known as 'Glomvang' – henceforth to be known as Namibia House.

By 1982, at the request of SWAPO, the Namibia Association in collaboration with the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the unions of the Nordic and Norwegian typographers, acquired a mechanical lithographic printing press and raised funds to bring eight Namibian refugees to Elverum for traineeships under two printing teachers. The entire operation (the Heidelberg Press, two instructors – professional printers from Elverum – and the eight trainee printers) was then moved to Zambia, where the press became the primary mode of information distribution for SWAPO, who were headquartered during exile in the Zambian capital of Lusaka. The SWAPO print-shop printed all SWAPO publications such as information booklets, posters and textbooks for children in Namibian refugee camps (the school textbooks were written and developed in a collaboration between the Namibia Association and SWAPO). After Namibian independence, the press was moved again, this time to Namibia's capital, Windhoek (where it is still in operation as Namib Graphics).

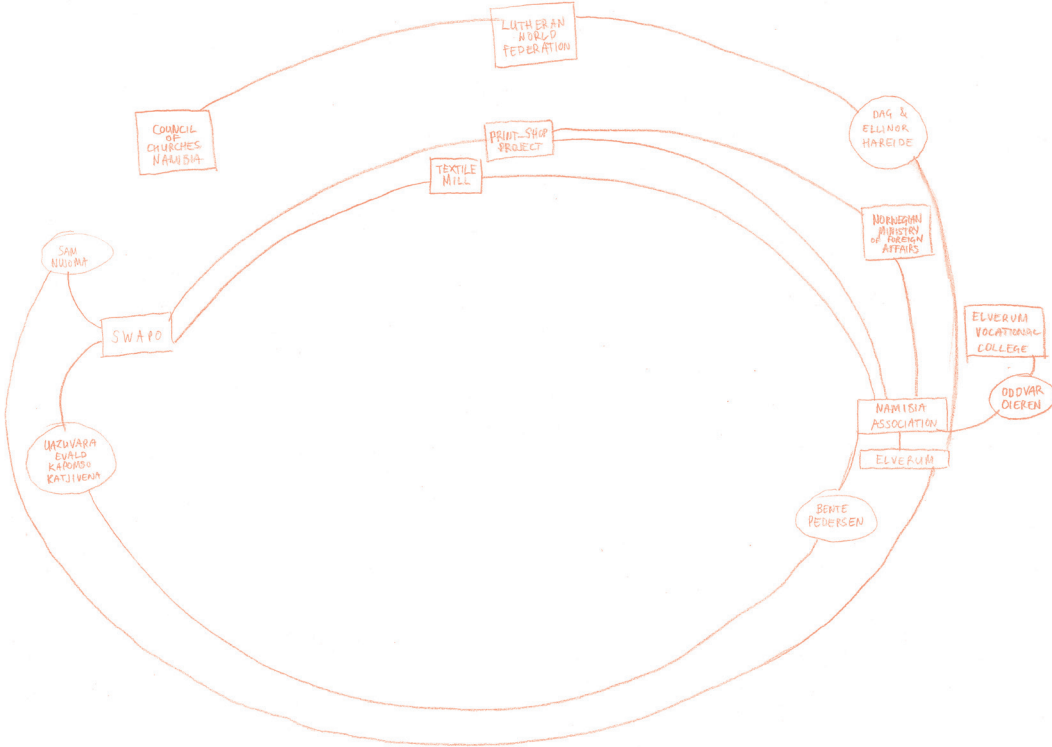
Also at the direct request of SWAPO, the Namibia Association created a textile mill and brought Namibian refugees to Elverum to be trained in weaving.

In the ten years between the Namibia Association's establishment in 1980 and Namibia's independence in 1990, the association, via SWAPO, donated goods and services to Namibia valued at 150 million kroner (equivalent to over NOK 325 million in 2024, adjusted for inflation).¹¹ The association thus became one of the most important international NGOs to Namibian independence.

Unlike other humanitarian, diplomatic and peace projects for which Norway is known, the Namibia Association was led by workers from a regional, industrial town. It was an association of the community, and it is a story that remains largely untold in Norwegian history and even at the time unrepresented by the national press, eclipsed as it was by stories of the elite conducting high-level negotiations and statecraft.

But the Namibia Association was so important to Namibia that, when Namibia won independence in 1990, with SWAPO as Namibia's first elected government and Sam Nujoma as its first president, around half of the ministers of Namibia's first government had at some point visited the Namibia Association in Elverum.

It was an unprecedented diplomatic relationship between an emerging country and a small town that was uniquely intimate, direct and active.

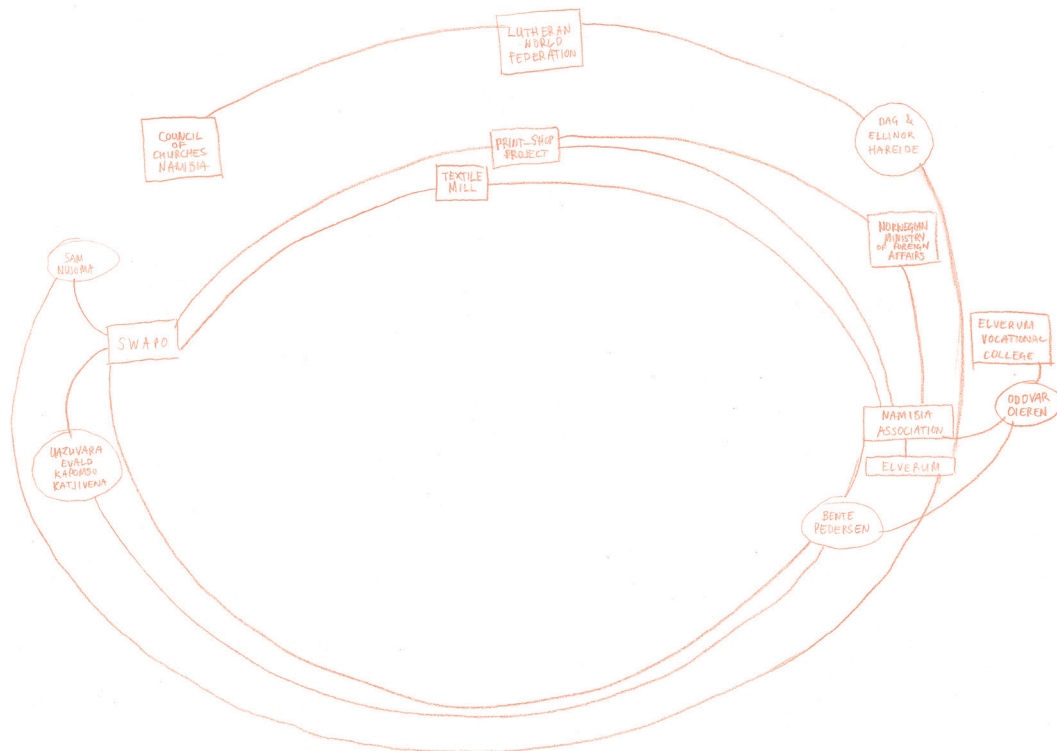


Bente and Kapombo, part II

Bente Pedersen had undertaken her teacher training at a college in Elverum, where she became involved in Namibia Week to such a degree that she travelled together with Oddvar Øieren and a representative from the Council for Southern Africa in 1980 to Angola to see the refugee camps that had been set up by SWAPO to accommodate the Namibian refugees who were fleeing the violent repression of apartheid South African control.

When Bente was 22 she became a founding board member of the Namibia Association, and from 1984 to 1987 she was the board's chairperson.

As a passionate educator, Bente attended a conference organised in 1984 in collaboration with SWAPO to establish education for Namibian refugee children and a hopeful curriculum for what they believed would one day be an independent Namibia. Attending this conference was also Kapombo Katjivena from the liberation movement SWAPO, who several years later became her husband.



Hans Christian Knudsen

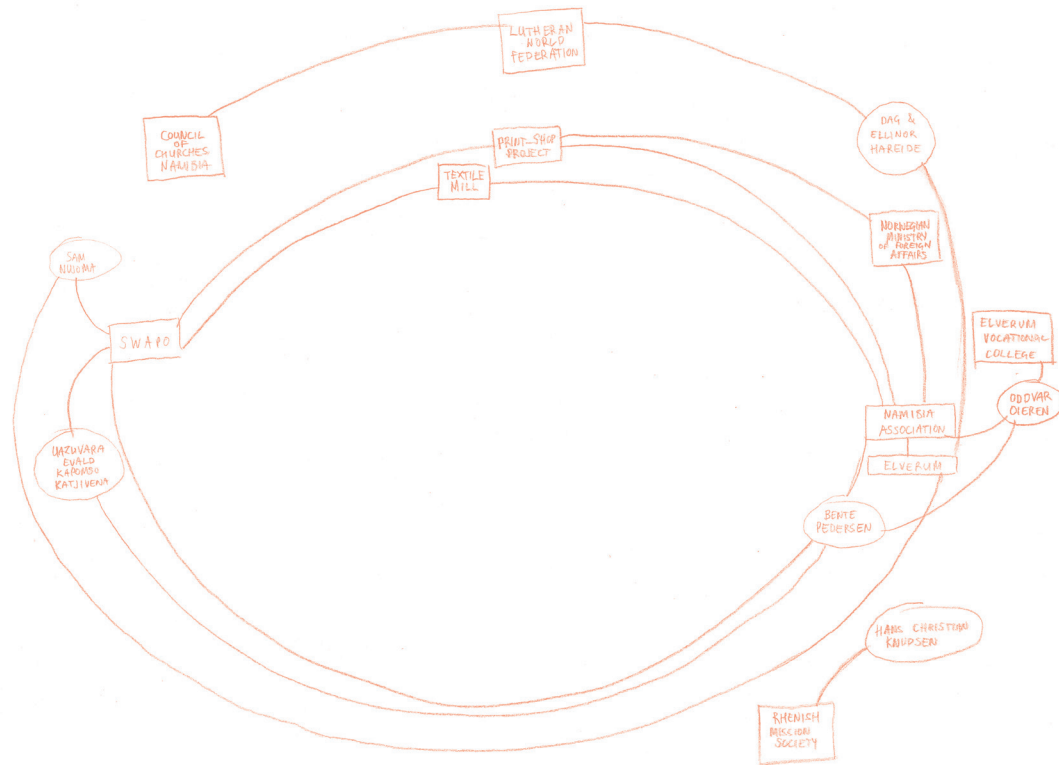
In 1842, Hans Christian Knudsen became Norway's first missionary to Africa. He travelled first through several missions in the British Cape Colony (now South Africa) before arriving in Great Namaqualand (now southern Namibia).

Knudsen was stationed at Bethany in the abandoned and dilapidated former residence of the missionary Heinrich Schmelen. Having stood empty for 20 years, the house required a great deal of repair, and Knudsen took to the restoration with zeal, establishing a large productive garden as a food source.¹²

Knudsen was meticulous in his work. He appointed trusted catechists drawn from the local community and proceeded to hastily baptise many of the local people. He went to great efforts to record and understand the Nama language, producing a children's educational book in Nama and a translation of the Gospel of Luke. He also recorded various tribal laws, vestiges of which are to this day enshrined in Namibian law. Before training as a missionary, Knudsen trained as a lithographer and thus he produced landscape paintings and drawings of his travels and painted several portraits of important local leaders he encountered. He wrote diligently to the Rhenish Mission Society in Germany, to other missionaries, to his family and to Norway in general. He published a record of his travels in Great Namaqualand with the Rhenish Mission Society.

By 1849 however, despite his efforts and scholarship and the work he had done to bridge the gap between himself and the local people, Knudsen felt his parish to be in disarray; many of the congregants had stopped attending due to their involvement in territorial disputes and livestock raids led by local militia. To hopefully bring about peace, Knudsen ceased giving services while his congregation engaged in such activities. Knudsen was exiled from Bethany in 1852.

In 1854, Hans Christian Knudsen returned to Norway where he spent his final years a penniless itinerant preacher until his death in an avalanche in 1863 at the age of 47.



The Walvis Bay whaling station

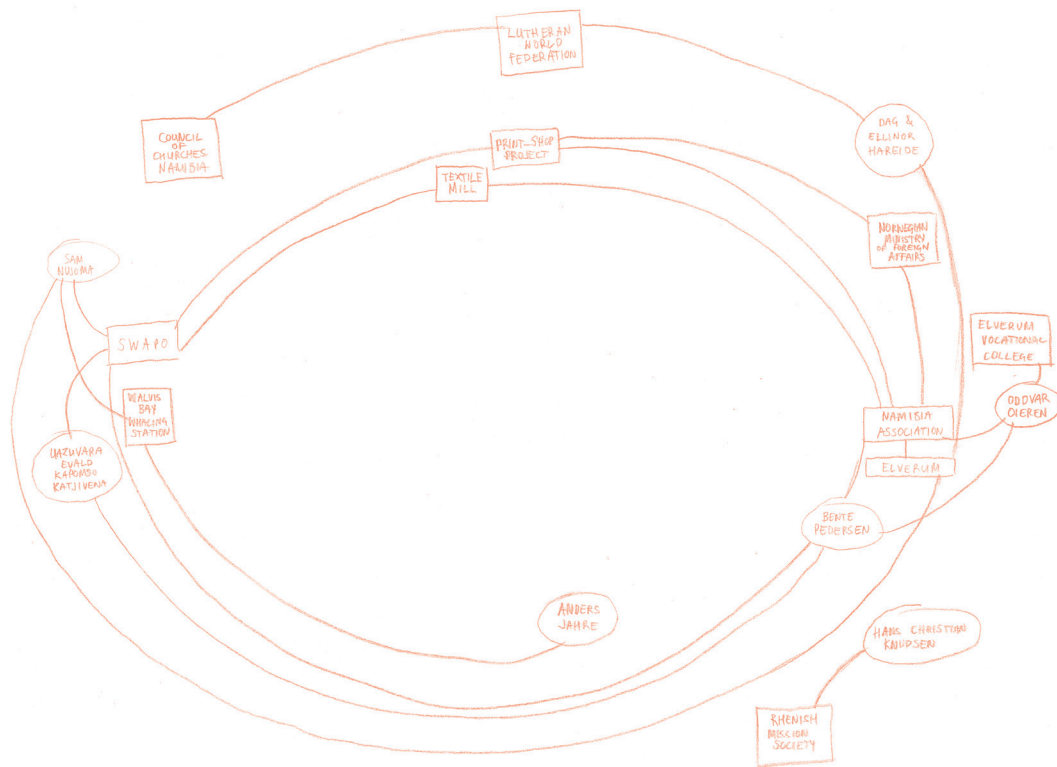
Outside the Swakopmund Museum, in the coastal city of Namibia, is a Norwegian whaling harpoon and cannon. This monument is the vestige of an industry that flourished in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, of which Norway was a leader internationally.

In the 1920s Walvis Bay, on Namibia's coast, was a small town of 3500 people. The largest and most important employer was the whaling station, which was owned by Norwegian Anders Jahre, philanthropist and the founder of both the Anders Jahre Humanitarian Award and the Anders Jahre Award for Medical Research. The entire administrative building of the Walvis Bay whaling station was constructed in Norway and transported to Walvis Bay on the deck of one of Anders Jahre's whaling vessels.

As a young man in 1947, Sam Nujoma – the future leader of Namibia's independence movement SWAPO and future president of Namibia – got a job at Anders Jahre's Walvis Bay whaling station, thus beginning his professional life amongst the Norwegian whalers at Walvis Bay, then known as 'Little Vestfold' after a coastal county in south-eastern Norway, Anders Jahre's home. In a biography

of Anders Jahre, Audun Tjomsland quotes Nujoma as saying that exposure to the whalers in Walvis Bay taught him about independence.¹³ Tjomsland goes on to credit Norwegian whaling with triggering Namibian independence. We can imagine that working alongside Norwegian whalers, Nujoma learnt much about Norwegian culture, workers and national identity. 36 years later he was the leader of Namibia's independence movement, and he heard about the support and humanitarian solidarity coming from a community organisation in regional Norway. He was able to orchestrate further support by implementing his intimate cultural knowledge of Norway. Planning the arrival of a group of African nationalist revolutionaries on Norway's national day was a profound piece of diplomatic theatre, providing a remarkable photo opportunity that can surely have been no accident.

It's a good story, no?



Stories go in circles. They don't go in straight lines. It helps if you listen in circles because there are stories inside and between stories, and finding your way through them is as easy and as hard as finding your way home. Part of finding is getting lost, and when you are lost you start to open up and listen.

T. Tafoya, 1995.¹⁴

The Namibia Association (again)

The history that I will retell you will be changed by what you already know. You have been told the stories of the positive interactions between Norway and Namibia and that (for instance) the Norwegian whaling industry was responsible for Namibian independence. But such assertions will now be countered. What has been glossed shall be dwelt upon. We will hold both in our minds. History is complicated and depends upon the reader's time and place.

The history that I will retell you relates to Namibia, the last African country to decolonise. When this photograph was taken in 1983, anti-apartheid activism was gaining momentum globally.

The history that I will retell you relates to Namibia's active membership of the Lutheran World Federation, alongside Norway's.

The Norwegian priest Gunnar Stålsett was a leader of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and also, for a time, Norway's Centre Party. Through the LWF, Stålsett learned about Namibia's fight for independence from South Africa's apartheid control, and using his clerical and political connections, he advocated for the Norwegian Ministry of



Foreign Affairs to support Namibia's independence. Norway was the first country to enter into diplomatic relations with SWAPO in 1973, the year in which Oslo hosted the United Nations Organisation of African Unity conference, attended by SWAPO delegates. In 1978 Sam Nujoma visited Norway for the first time.¹⁵

In 1979, Gunnar Stålsett was appointed parish priest of Elverum. In 1979 Stålsett appointed Ellinor and Dag Hareide to be the new catechists for the Elverum parish. Stålsett had met the progressive couple through the Lutheran World Federation.

Former Namibia Association leaders Trond Andresen and Steinar Sætervadet write that Dag Hareide was involved in humanitarian aid work for Namibia in Stockholm, having taken a group of ten young confirmands there in March 1980. This, they report, was the direct prelude to Namibia Week, which was held in Elverum in April. But, they suppose, there is reason to believe that Dag Hareide had an earlier vision of a humanitarian solidarity organisation in Elverum.¹⁶

But here we have another divergence – our story again splits.

SWAPO member Hadino Hishongwa once recalled that on a visit to Norway, he stayed in Elverum for two days, during which time he made contact with Dag Hareide and asked them to start collecting clothes to be sent to Namibian refugees in Zambia and Angola.¹⁷

See here that the difference matters. The work may have been suggested directly by SWAPO – which they certainly went on to do – or it may have been inspired by groups in Stockholm, or dreamed up in the altruistic imagination of an inspired radical individual.

In any case, by April 1980, Elverum hosted Namibia Week to raise material support for Namibia's fight for independence. This community-based and community-led activity was hugely successful. Nearly half of Elverum's population of 14,000 were actively involved. And this led to the formation of the Namibia Association in June 1980.

One of the association's most ambitious projects (out of many ambition projects) was to raise money for and build a secondary school for Namibian refugees in the Congo – at the behest and under the direction of SWAPO.

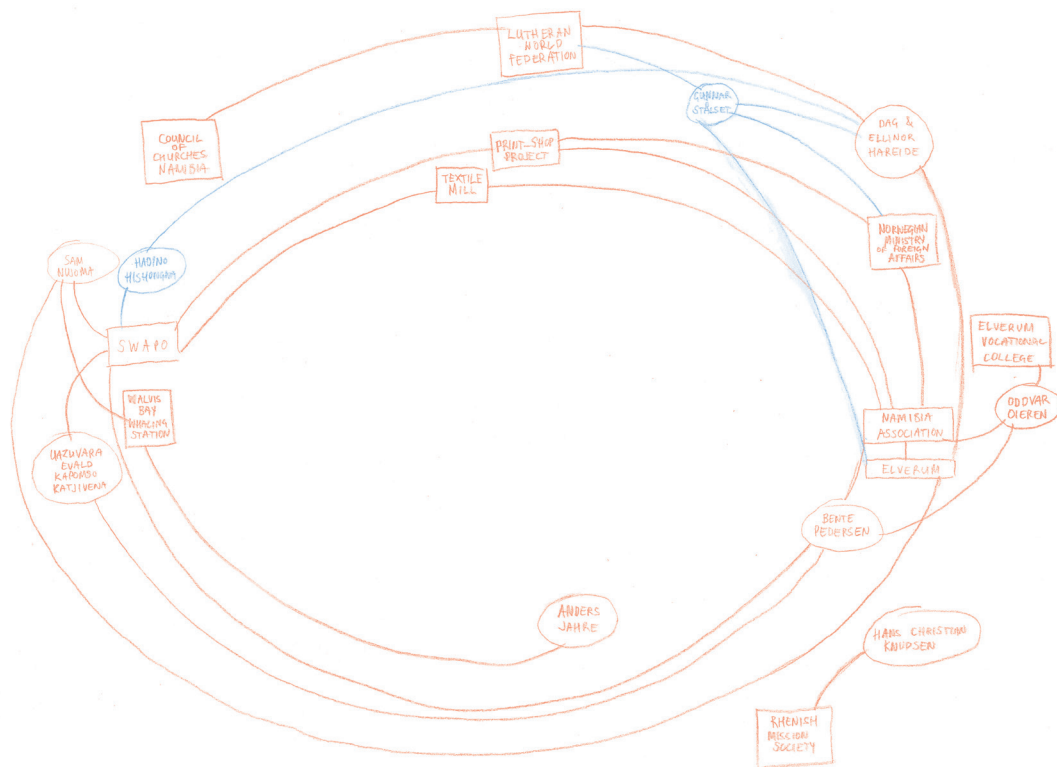
And in 1982, the association published a play written by Oddvar Øieren, a teacher at Elverum Vocational College, in which his students are pictured representing Namibia's history since its interaction with Europeans, including Portuguese colonisation, the arrival of Lutheran missionaries, the Berlin conference and the 'Scramble for Africa', German colonisation and the genocide of the Nama and the Herero in Namibia, South Africa's apartheid control, the emergence of SWAPO and Sam Nujoma's leadership.

The play is a loaded artefact to examine. Having predominantly non-black students representing black history through performative reenactment and via cross-racial makeup is something that would not be considered acceptable now, 45 years later.

Øieren states in the foreword that the play was performed in Elverum nine times to a total of 1600 people in 1980, including a priest from Namibia and SWAPO's minister of justice. Imagine, for a moment, having both your country's trau-

matic past and violent present presented back to you as theatre performed by children. Both of these Namibian attendees, according to Øieren, verified the play's factual and historical accuracy.¹⁸ The play was subsequently performed at schools around Norway.

This artefact begs several questions: On whose behalf was Oddvar Øieren speaking? And on whose behalf am I speaking? Am I, like the student performers and Øieren himself, presuming to represent a black history that is not my history? Is what I am doing now likely to be viewed in the same way 45 years into the future?

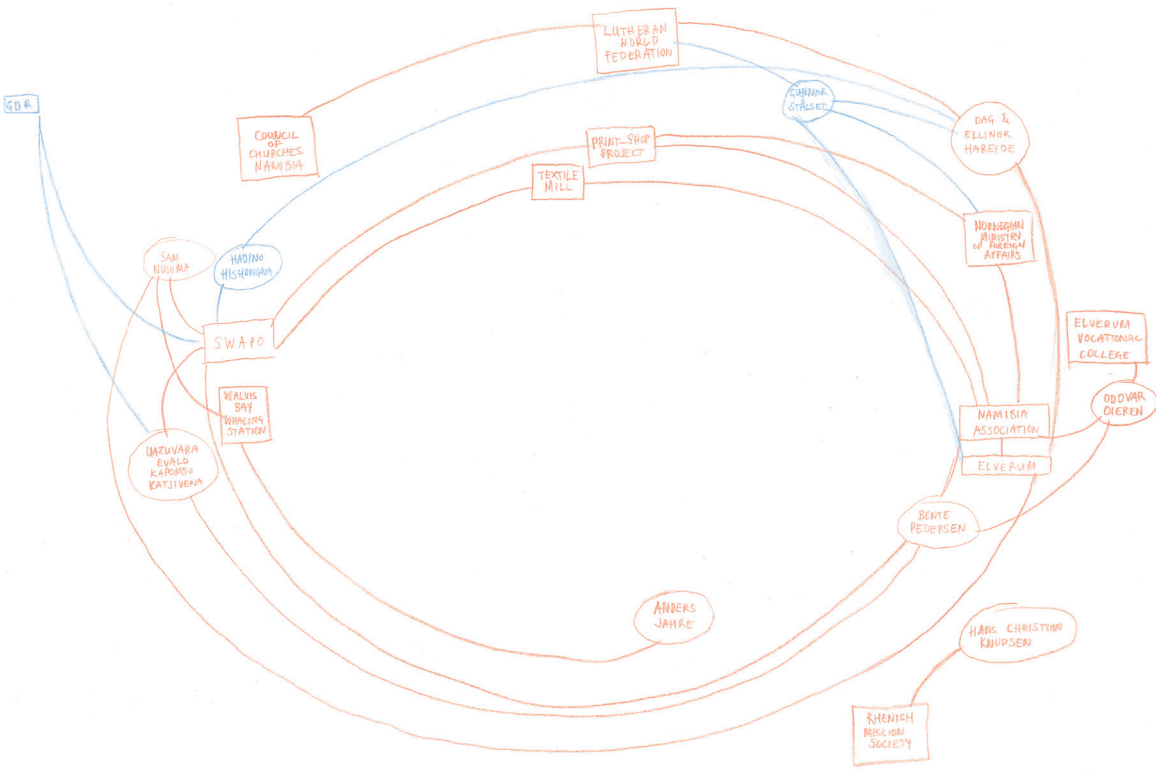


Bente and Kapombo, part III

Bente Pedersen is disarmingly candid and open, neither of which are characteristics for which Norwegians are known. She is also bluntly frank, which is a characteristic for which Norwegians are known. ‘You can ask me anything,’ she told me, ‘as long as you can accept a “no”.’ It’s something she used to tell her daughters when they were children.

As a senior SWAPO office bearer, Kapombo was based in various countries, before studying in Berlin during the Cold War. There was close collaboration between SWAPO and East Germany until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 – the year before Namibia’s independence. Through trade and politically, ‘the West’ supported the apartheid South African regime’s presence in Namibia, whilst communist states and ‘the East’ supported the Namibian liberation movements. Falling somewhere between the two ideological positions, countries in the social democratic Nordic region supported the Namibian liberation movements politically, socially and financially, whilst maintaining some trade relationships with apartheid South Africa.

When Bente met Kapombo, he was in his mid-40s – 18 years older than she. He lived and worked in Berlin, together with his teenage daughter. ‘Moving to Norway was not easy, though we found solutions to starting our relationship despite the age-difference and geographical distance.’¹⁹ After Namibia won independence in 1990, it became possible for Kapombo to return home for the first time in many years. He became the senior controller in the Namibia Broadcasting Cooperation (NBC). Bente and their eldest daughter joined him, and they lived in Namibia for a few years, during which time their youngest daughter was born. During these years in newly liberated, independent Namibia, Kapombo was seriously injured in a bad car accident. His recovery forced him to leave his job in the NBC, and eventually they returned to Arendal, Norway. Kapombo leads a quiet life of retirement, a former Namibian revolutionary in the small coastal town of Arendal. Bente is now the principal of an international school. Both have lived the reality of international humanitarian and emancipatory solidarity, a solidarity with long and complicated antecedents.



Hans Christian Knudsen (again)

This is Namaqualand. A wild and desert-like land and people, you could say. Here stands the poor missionary. He must forget where he comes from. I stood there, so lonely, for five years. The poor torn-apart land looks at you as though with taunting eyes... If you look at the people, what a gap there is between them and you! How will you approach them? They don't understand your thoughts. They don't know your country. They don't feel what you have forsaken. You are oppressed by the heat and everything in spirit, soul and body! Be a missionary! Do not leave! The desert shall bloom.

Hans Christian Knudsen.²⁰

In 1842, remember, Hans Christian Knudsen became Norway's first missionary to Africa. Knudsen applied to become a missionary but was rejected by the Church of Norway. Undeterred, his ideology, coupled with his drive and ambition, led Knudsen to train at the Rhenish Mission Society, one of the largest mission societies in Germany. Knudsen was sent by the society as a representative of German Lutheranism to Namibia, where he was stationed at Bethany in the dilapidated former residence of Rhenish missionary Heinrich Schmelen, who had abandoned the residence in 1822, fleeing a civil war which had 'threatened to envelop him'.²¹

The role of European missionaries in Namibia was socially and politically complicated. They were sought by local leaders because of their access to commodities, traders and secure trade routes (the missionaries sometimes functioned as arms dealers, distributing weapons and gunpowder to those who had submitted to conversion, provoking and exacerbating local tribal conflicts).²²

Sending the Gospel to the heathen must, if this view be correct, include much more than is implied in the usual picture of a missionary, namely, a man going about with a Bible under his arm. The promotion of commerce ought to be specifically attended to... Success in this, in both Eastern and Western Africa, would lead, in the course of time, to a much larger diffusion of the blessings of civilization than efforts exclusively spiritual and educational confined to any one small tribe... for neither civilization nor Christianity can be promoted alone. In fact, they are inseparable.²³

The role of the Lutheran missionary in Namibia must be understood as a 'civilising' and therefore a colonising role. From 1857 the head of the Rhenish Missionary Society, of which Knudsen was an earlier representative member, was

Friedrich Fabri – who published a manifesto in 1879, describing his vision of the spread of Western civilisation by means of the colonial movement.²⁴ This publication was instrumental in justifying Germany's colonial expansion into Namibia.²⁵ Between 1884 and 1915, Namibia was known as German South-West Africa, a German colony. Between 1904 and 1908 the German Empire executed a genocide of the Nama and Herero people of Namibia, during which 80% of the Herero population were exterminated. This was (in a series of portentous firsts) the first genocide of the 20th century, for which the Germans built their first concentration camp in Swakopmund and first work camp at Lüderitz, which later became their first death camp, in which the Germans first experimented with industrial techniques for killing thousands.²⁶ Parts of Namibia are still scarred by unmarked mass graves. At Lüderitz (named after the man who brokered Germany's colonial sanctioning of Namibia, now a German holiday town), eco-tourism buildings directly face the Shark Island concentration camp site, and a short way north are the unmarked graves of hundreds in an abandoned diamond mine.²⁷

The links between the genocide of the Nama and Herero, executed by the Second Reich shortly before the First World War, and the later genocide executed by the Third Reich during the Second World War have been pointed out and explored by several scholars and many Namibian activists.²⁸ The colony of German South-West Africa was cited and referred to in the development of the Lebensraum ideology as pursued by Nazi Germany in its European colonial expansion.²⁹

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. In the 1840s, the role of the missionaries and their accrual of power and influence led to conflicts with the local population and often exile. Hans Christian Knudsen was no exception.

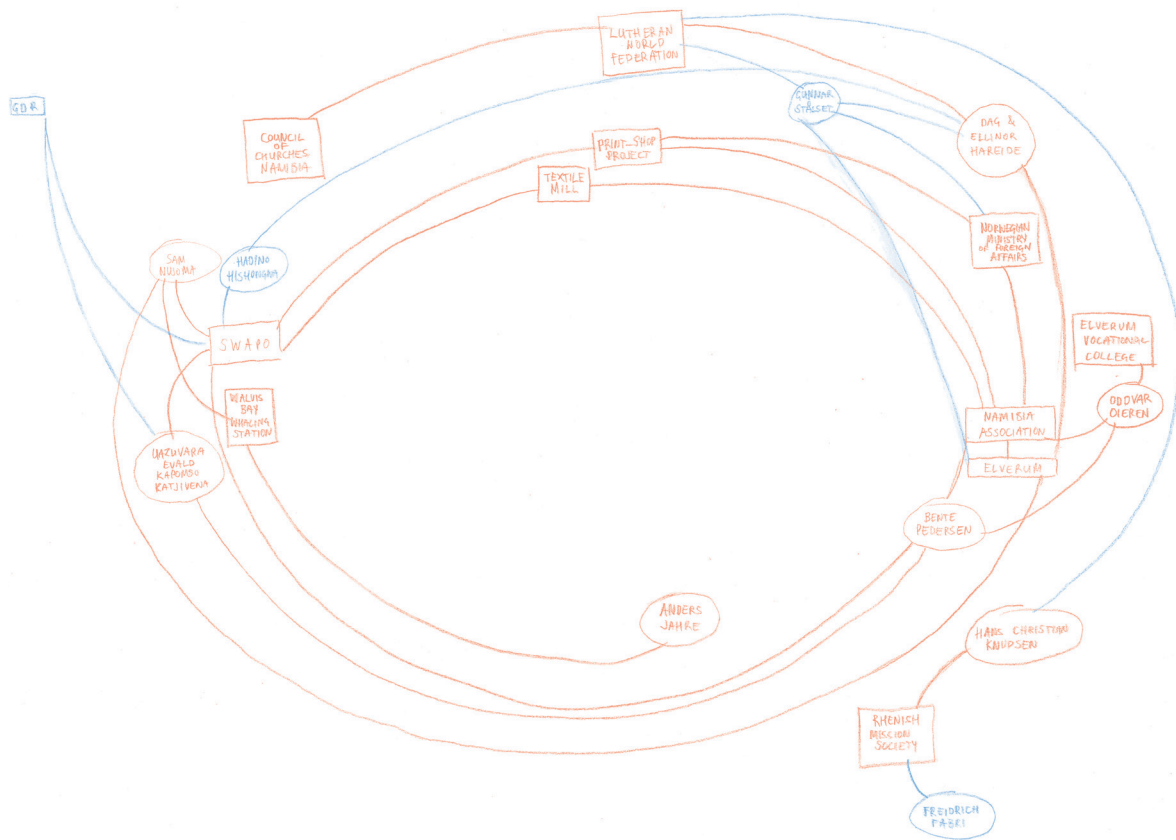
By 1849 Knudsen felt his Bethany parish was in disarray: many of the congregants had become involved in tribal territorial disputes and livestock raids led by local militia wresting political control and influence. In protest, Knudsen refused to give services while his congregation engaged in such uncivilised activities. Knudsen reportedly fought his assistant, Namibian catechist David Christian, in a conflict that missionary Carl Hugo Hahn recorded in his diaries. The conflict concluded with Knudsen violently flogging Christian. Knudsen was subsequently banished from Bethany.³⁰

Examining this incident, we can see that Knudsen's exile in 1852 was due to his powerful position and the resultant ambivalence between local leadership and the missionary as 'leaders in Namaland apparently perceived sharply how missionaries were connected with the colonial expansion at the Cape, a movement they were determined to resist'.³¹

But despite repeated conflicts, Lutheranism was firmly established in Namibia, where it remains the largest denomination nationally, making its church one of the 20 largest member churches in the Lutheran World Federation. Lutheranism in Namibia is a legacy of this colonial period and a remnant ideology originating from a distant place – vestigial. In biology, ‘vestigial’ denotes physical features that are, due to evolution, no longer connected to their original purpose – the wings of an ostrich, for example, or the hipbone of a whale. Although disconnected from their original purpose, they are far from useless, and vestigial biological structures have been found to serve diverse and unexpected purposes. The wings of a penguin, although useless in airflight, are ideal for manoeuvring under water, and the whale’s hipbone, while no longer connected to legs, is used in reproduction. Thus, vestigial structures are frequently coopted for use in other ways.

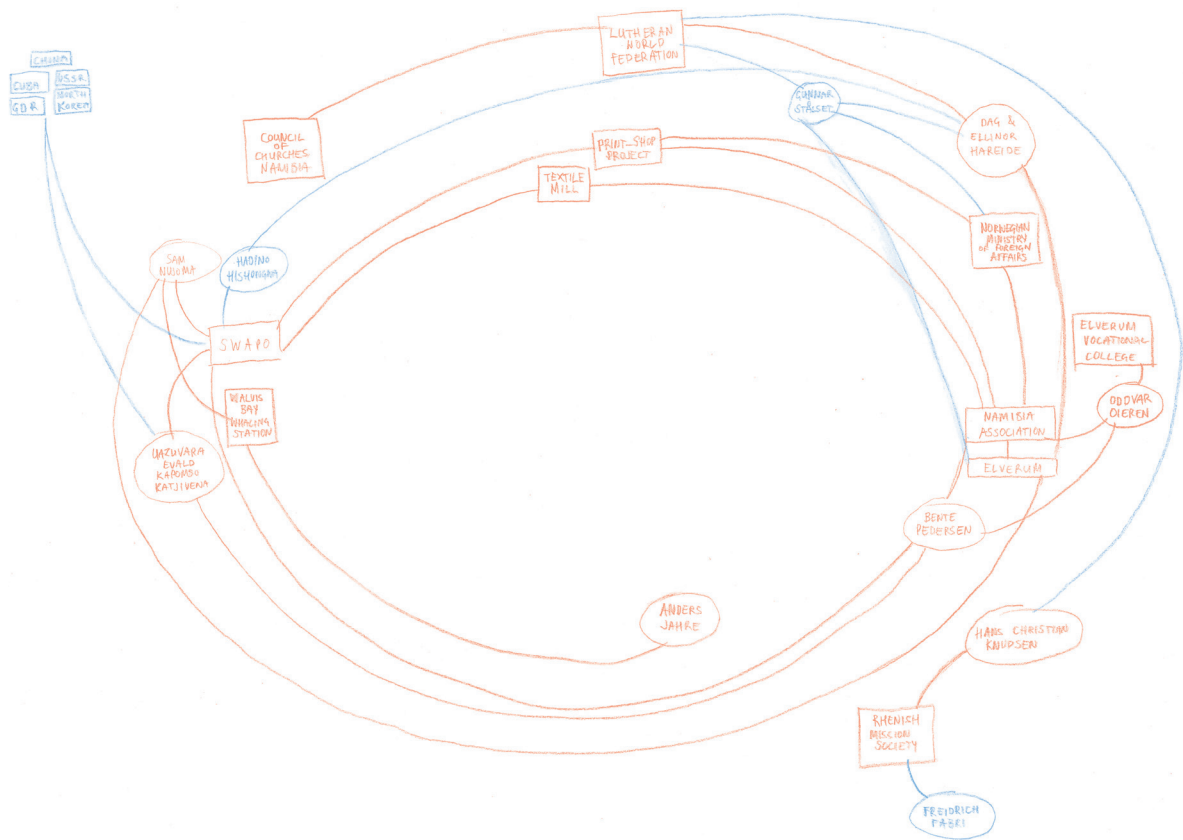
Many years later, Lutheranism in Africa turned from being a tool of oppression to a tool of liberation as the Lutheran World Federation was instrumental in garnering support from other states for Namibian independence. One of the key reasons that the LWF so strongly opposed apartheid and fought for African countries’ independence was that African liberation movements were often supported by communist states. Indeed, SWAPO’s military wing, the People’s Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN), was supplied with weapons, ammunition and vehicles by Cuba, the Soviet Union, East Germany, North Korea and China, amongst other communist states. And what the church feared most was this atheist ideology. As historian Berit Hagen Agøy describes it, ‘Communism, liberation struggle and nationalism seemed closely linked to each other’ – and if communism won, the Church would be dismantled.³² So the fight against apartheid and for Namibian liberation was an existential battle not only for the Namibian people, but also for the Lutheran Church’s presence in Namibia.

In 1854, Hans Christian Knudsen, due to his exile from Bethany, returned to Norway where he spent his final years as a penniless itinerant preacher until his death in 1863 at the age of 47 in an avalanche.



Bente and Kapombo, part IV

After a day spent looking through Bente's material, I persuaded her and Kapombo to let me buy them dinner. That evening, at a Thai restaurant in central Arendal, Kapombo enjoyed speaking some Russian to our Lithuanian waitress. The waitress remembered serving Kapombo at the previous restaurant in which she had worked. She spoke to us about not belonging to a particular nation state. She was born before the collapse of the Soviet Union, behind the Iron Curtain. She is culturally Russian, geographically Lithuanian. An adept linguist, Kapombo's Russian is a vestige of his high-level liaison with the USSR as a senior SWAPO representative.



The Walvis Bay whaling station (again)

In Swakopmund, a coastal city of Namibia established by German colonists, outside the historical museum, in its carpark, next to a children’s playground, is a strange monument – a whaling harpoon and cannon from a Norwegian whaling vessel. It is an example of a grenade-type harpoon. Operational grenade harpoons had exploding heads that fixed themselves into the whales so that they could be winched back to the whaling vessel without coming loose.

The grenade harpoon was invented by Svend Foyn, who was a sealer and a whaler. In the 1860s he conducted experimental whaling in the northernmost region of Norway, Finnmark, and from this experimentation patented the grenade harpoon in 1870. Foyn also developed the first steam-powered whaling vessels. These dual inventions instantly ushered international whaling into the industrial age.

Throughout the 1860s and earlier, whale oil had many uses including domestic lighting (before kerosene took over the gaslight market as it burned cleaner, brighter and with less smell), lubrication and soap-making.

The growth of the petroleum industry led to a sharp decline in the barrel price of whale oil. In 1869, as whale oil was on the cusp of falling into disuse, margarine was invented which capitalised upon the invention of hydrogenation, for which whale oil can be used. Whale oil was 'the cheapest of all edible fats and oil, and less expensive to hydrogenate than other oils'.³³ Foyn's inventions were perfectly timed to capitalise upon this sudden shift in the whale oil market.

By 1873, Foyn was granted a whaling monopoly in Finnmark. Using his grenade harpoon, Foyn amassed a fortune selling whale oil to the new German margarine market. Hailing from Tønsberg, not too far from Arenal, Foyn is described as exemplary of 'Puritan capitalism' – devotedly Lutheran, and committedly capitalist. In a tract entitled *To the Norwegian People*, Foyn wrote that 'God had let the whale inhabit [these waters] for the benefit and blessing of mankind, and consequently I considered it my vocation to promote these fisheries'.³⁴ With the vast fortune Foyn amassed from his whaling monopoly, he donated generous sums to Lutheran missions.

In their comprehensive *History of Modern Whaling*, Tønnessen and Johnsen argue that as a direct result of Foyn's industrialisation of whaling by 1904, there was such a dramatic decimation of the whale population that the Norwegian government banned whaling in its Arctic waters, a move that outraged the international whaling industry: 'After protecting the whale in their own coastal waters, they have the audacity to come and catch it off our coasts!'³⁵ Subsequently, across the Northern Hemisphere, whaling companies were forced to find new hunting waters 'mainly in the Antarctic and off the coasts of Africa'.³⁶ Norwegian consuls in Cape Town and Durban, South Africa, reported sightings of whales off the coast, attracting the interests of Norwegian whalers who were lured by the promise in Africa of 'a shorter journey to and from the whaling grounds, a more pleasant climate, cheap native labour and cheap coal from local mines'.³⁷

The Namibian city of Walvis Bay, whose name derives from the Dutch for 'Whale Bay', has served as a strategic harbour ever since Europeans first arrived. Its position on the sea route around the Cape of Good Hope, coupled by the bay's depth and extreme isolation by land, make it strategically attractive. The cold Benguela Current carries plankton and other nutrients that are trapped by the sand spit Pelican Point. The nutrient-rich waters provide a feeding ground for a rich array of marine life including vast numbers of seals and formerly vast numbers of whales.

At Walvis Bay a Norwegian whaling company operated a fleet of pelagic vessels, that is 'floating factories' that could process the corpse of a hunted whale and cook it, rendering its fat into barrels of oil, without the need to transport the enormous carcass to land for processing. This Norwegian company was owned by shipping and whaling magnate and noted philanthropist Anders Jahre, who was posthumously found guilty of Norway's largest ever tax fraud.

By 1928, the whale population off the coast of Namibia was so depleted that Norwegian whaling operations in Namibian waters were no longer profitable. So, the Walvis Bay whaling station transitioned into a repair workshop and a dry dock. It was much more practical for whaling vessels to be repaired and maintained here, on their way from the (still profitable) Antarctic waters than to have to travel all the way back to Norway.

And in Walvis Bay, there was the aforementioned 'cheap native labour'.

One of these 'cheap native' labourers was Sam Nujoma – future leader of Namibia's independence movement SWAPO, and future president of Namibia who, in 1947 at the age of 17, got a job at Anders Jahre's Walvis Bay repair workshop.

In his 2002 biography *Where Others Wavered*, Nujoma recalls that:

The Norwegians used to go far out into the South Atlantic Ocean to hunt whales. These would be harpooned from small boats, and would then be towed to the accompanying larger factory ships for processing. My Norwegian employer had a shore station... and there I earned a little money.³⁸

On the 3rd of November 1993 – three years after Namibian independence, *Aftenposten* carried a front-page story accompanied by a photo of Sam Nujoma holding hands with an elderly woman.

The headline informs us that Namibia's head of state was Marit Johannessen's 'boy' from 54 years ago.³⁹ The story relates that in 1949, Marit Johannessen lived in Walvis Bay with her husband Knut, who worked for Anders Jahre's company as the manager of the whaling station. A young, local employee of the station, Sam Nujoma, caught the attention of Knut Johannessen. Nujoma was hand-picked to work as a domestic servant for the Johannessen household, or, as the article puts it, soon the 20-year-old was accepted into the Johannessen family as their 'boy'.

There are many things to say about this reunion, the derogatory terminology in the report, and the facts of Nujoma's employment by a Norwegian manager of a whaling repair station and also as a domestic servant.

In Nujoma's autobiography, he doesn't mention his work as a domestic servant. He does describe enjoying socialising with young and old in Walvis Bay, and watching with fascination the international sailors from Britain, Argentina and South Africa still present in 1948. He writes that it was here that he was exposed to contemporary global politics.

Between this time in the late 1940s – talking to Norwegian whalers and sailors, working for a Norwegian company and in the home of a Norwegian couple so shortly after the end of the Second World War – and the 1980s, when he frequently visited Norway, Nujoma related the German occupation of Norway to the devastating German colonisation of Namibia: 'The same nazis who were in Norway during the war [were] taking part in the occupation of Namibia,' Nujoma said in an interview with a Norwegian newspaper.⁴⁰

Elverum played an important role in Norway's resistance to the German occupation. On 10 April 1940, the Norwegian king, Haakon VII, refused the invading Germans' demand to unconstitutionally appoint the Norwegian fascist Vidkun Quisling as prime minister. This refusal took place in Elverum. In response, on 11 April 1940, Elverum was bombed by the Germans. It is said that the bombing was personally ordered by Hitler in retaliation for King Haakon's refusal. Elverum was devastated by the 19 Luftwaffe planes that bombed the town, reducing most of its buildings to rubble. Buildings outside the town centre were left unscathed, including three that are key to our story: the Vocational College, the Church, and 'Glomvang', the historic building that later became Namibia House.

When Nujoma visited the Namibia Association for the second time in 1983, he seemed to know the symbolic importance of this series of events to Norwegian identity and Norwegian nationhood. He reverently laid a wreath at the memorial site to the king's refusal, outside Elverum Vocational College, in a nuanced and sophisticated diplomatic show of respect and empathy to such an identity-forming event. In so doing, Nujoma deftly emphasised a similarity between Norway and Namibia: both countries with small populations, both occupied by Germany and both proud of their resistance to their oppressors.

During this same visit, Nujoma brought with him some senior SWAPO leaders. He wanted them to witness the depth of enthusiasm and the efficacy coming from the Namibia Association in Elverum. They arrived on 17 May, Norway's national day, providing a remarkable photo opportunity.



The Namibia Association (again) (again)

At the end of the 1993 *Aftenposten* article about Sam Nujoma and Marit Johannessen are three paragraphs that allude to another story, an undercurrent that had, perhaps, been present all along. Amnesty International, the article states, received reports of torture in SWAPO prisons and police abuses even after liberation in Namibia, but said the reports were fewer and fewer. Amnesty International repeatedly requested the establishment of a commission to investigate the hundreds of people who disappeared from the SWAPO camps during Namibia's independence fight. In 1990, the article reports, the International Committee of the Red Cross took up the case, but after not receiving the information they required from the authorities in Namibia, they were forced to abandon their investigation.

In 2000, the 20-year-old Namibia Association published its own history written by former manager Steinar Sætervadet and former chairperson Trond Andresen. In it, the authors address these allegations against SWAPO as well as the association's potential complicity in these abuses. They report receiving a letter in 1985 containing allegations that SWAPO had abused, tortured and raped people in SWAPO-run prisons and refugee camps. The letter alleged that many SWAPO dissenters and suspected South African spies had been 'disappeared' and in-

cluded a long list of the missing. Sætervadet and Andresen raise questions regarding the authenticity of the letter they received, as they had been warned by SWAPO that such allegations may be made. But the authors also admit that SWAPO was 'no Sunday school', and that internal SWAPO conflicts had, as far back as the mid-1970s, been resolved with violence.⁴¹

The Namibia Association responded to the letter with an invitation to the letter's writer, Erica Beukes, to travel to Elverum to discuss the accusations, but they received no reply, which, the authors say, made the association even more suspicious about the veracity of the letter.⁴²

With hindsight, they admit that the allegations were correct, but raise a question regarding the scale of the abuses. 'But the fact,' they write, 'that SWAPO tortured and imprisoned many in inhumane conditions is beyond doubt.'⁴³

Sætervadet and Andresen do, however, question if the association were too intimate with SWAPO and if the association had been gullible in their diplomatic relationship with SWAPO, concluding that they were naive.⁴⁴

The authors describe how the association's relationship with SWAPO changed post-independence. They distance themselves from SWAPO and its leadership. They describe a visit made by Sam Nujoma in 1993 to Europe to thank various countries for their solidarity. When in Norway (the same visit during which he met Marit Johannessen), he 'insisted' on 'performing his thanks' in Elverum, the authors report.⁴⁵

Although describing their relationship with SWAPO as at an arm's length, the authors admit that a relationship had been built between the community of Elverum and the new government of independent Namibia that has no parallel in Norwegian history.⁴⁶

Bente and Kapombo, part V

After our meal in the Thai restaurant, we returned to Bente and Kapombo's home. I sat at the dining table looking through the final documents that I wanted to examine, before going to bed in their spare room in the basement.

The following morning, thinking that I had photographed and made notes of all the material I needed, I was having coffee in the kitchen with Kapombo, talking about places I should visit if I travel to Namibia in the future. There was a final folder of documents marked 'SWAPO' that he shared with me. There were two documents that I noticed. Both were lists of names. The first had columns for

'Age, Residence, Year of Arrest, Prison, Year Last Seen'. The second document was titled *People Who Died and or Suspected Killed in SWAPO Prisons*. The list was annotated with a key handwritten in the margin as 'SD = supposed dead' and 'D = dead'. I had read allegations of SWAPO kidnapping and killing dissenters throughout the years of the independence struggle – but I was not expecting a list. Were these, perhaps, copies of the same lists that were sent to the Namibia Association in 1985? Kapombo and I leafed through the lists. 'Many of these people I knew,' he said as he ran his hand over the names. Kapombo was himself warned not to go to Angola – where SWAPO's prisons were – as he would not return. During the liberation struggle, there was a strong and not unfounded suspicion that the South African Secret Service were very active in distorting SWAPO's intentions of liberating the country. Both the international fight to liberate the country and the internal fight to constitute power were so violent that senior members of SWAPO were being imprisoned regularly, and killed, suspected of spying for South Africa.

Months later, after not having heard back from the Namibia Association at all in my three years of attempted contact, I finally received a reply and was invited to Elverum to examine their archive. I spent three days in the attic of Namibia House, going through photographs and files. On my final afternoon I moved some framed posters, which had been printed in the SWAPO print-shop, and found stacks of newspaper clipping books covering all of the association's history. I set up my camera and hastily documented as much as was possible in my final hour. In the front inside cover of one of the earliest books I recognised Bente's handwriting. As chair of the association, she had assembled that year's book and had created a contents page, assigning all the pages with numbers, and identifying the publication and date of each clipping on each of the pages. Doing the kind of work I do, I whispered my thanks to her for her organisational foresight and her care, annotating for the future, for the chance interest of someone like me, who might come along one day and ask why any of it happened.

Bente Pedersen had the sense in 1983 that something was happening in the Namibia Association in Elverum, and that something in these stories was in some way important to preserve and to relate.

Examining this vast tangle of stories, preserved in people and museums, monuments and records in Elverum, in Arendal, in Germany, in Namibia, reveals to us a way of telling history – for what is history without story? And this way of telling helps us to imagine the unpredictable ways our actions, beliefs, desires, relationships, greed, ideologies, generosity, our best and our worst intentions can impact everything else in our densely interconnected realities.

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Endnotes

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- 6 Catechists are church workers employed to teach the young people who were preparing for their confirmation.
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- 45 *Ibid.*
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“Martin’s essay helps us to think of history as multiperspectival, as complex, and dependent on political, geographical and cultural factors.”

- Elisabeth Brun, participant of *Metode* (2025), vol. 3 ‘Currents’

“Uncanniness grows with the essay, and lands in an open and disturbing question filled post-script. You propose to shift gaze; can this action be expanded in the context of solidarity?”

- Petrine Vinje, Member of *Metode*’s Editorial Board

“The idea of temporality in the piece comes forward through these two temporal blips: a newspaper clipping from 1983, and a book in an archive in a remote town uncovered by Martin. To presents, two pasts, converging. Quite elegant. I still wonder if there’s a manner of more forcefully bringing to center the Namibian narrative.”

- Ian Callender, participant of *Metode* (2025), vol. 3 ‘Currents’

“Maybe it could also be interesting to think more about the concept of “naivité”, or what it means to be “naive” and to discover that in retrospect.”

- Wolfgang Hottner, Member of *Metode*’s Editorial Board

Cite this essay:

Martin White, "A Whale's Hipbone: The Interrelationship Between Namibia and Norway," *Metode* (2025), vol. 3 'Currents'

Metode

Metode (2025), vol. 3 *Currents*
ISSN 2704-0550

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