

BOOK REVIEWS

Tessa Cleaver and Marion Wallace, *Namibia: Women in War* (London: Zed Books, 1990), pp. xv+137; photographs, map, and index. \$49.95 cloth, \$15.00 paperback.

Namibia: Women in War by Tessa Cleaver and Marion Wallace is a welcome contribution to the limited body of literature on women in Namibia. The reader is provided with insights into the lives of women in Namibia, the kinds of oppression they face on a day-to-day basis, how they react to and cope with this situation, and their hopes/plans for the future. Based on a series of oral accounts collected by the authors in 1988 and 1989, the book pre-dates the 1989 elections and subsequent independence of Namibia and leaves the reader with only hope for women in a Namibia no longer under South African rule. The book is valuable. However, this value is due to the paucity of published scholarly works on women in this country and, unfortunately, not the strength of the material presented.

The book is set up in the form of eight chapters, each focusing on different aspects of the role women have played in the attempt to restructure Namibian society. The conditions under which women function on a day-to-day basis and how they cope with their oppressive situation is the thread that is meant to tie together these chapters on the war, economy, unions, women and health, education, SWAPO Women's Council, women's groups, and churches. However, this structure seems to serve the authors better than the reader. Instead of guiding the reader through the book and thus the perils faced by women in Namibia, I found this structure to break any sense of continuity that might have been achieved. Rather than dealing with overall themes that could integrate the material, this seemed only to be an easy format for the authors to compartmentalize their research. I would have preferred to see historical events set up in a chronological fashion and then to have had the reader presented with the forms of resistance taken by women in order to deal with each situation, supported and supplemented by the oral accounts.

Additional problems with the book lie in the editing/proofreading. No error is as blatant as the repetition of the same oral account on two different pages. The eye-witness account given by Erastus Haitengala on page 43 about the police breaking into the girls' dormitory at Oshakati Secondary School and raping schoolgirls is repeated verbatim in the following chapter on page 63. To make a bad error worse, although the source is said to be the same in the text, the

citations in the footnotes attribute the statement to two totally different sources.

The authors' conclusion of the book also illustrates a contradiction running throughout the text. In the chapter on the SWAPO Women's Council (SWC) Cleaver and Wallace state that women are aware that their liberation will not disappear simply by ridding their country of South African rule when they write, "Women in SWC have learnt from the experience of women in other national liberation struggles and those in socialist states that women's position will not necessarily be improved by national liberation" (page 79). And yet, this is precisely the idea they contradict when in the concluding sentence of the book they state, "The only hope for women in Namibia has been independence, and now that this has been achieved there is a chance for changes in women's situation" (page 122). Perhaps this rather impotent statement is an appropriate ending to the book because it does reflect the empty and unpersuasive nature of this text.

I was pleased to find that Cleaver and Wallace relied on oral accounts for their source material because those histories that let women speak for themselves are often more insightful. Though the authors should be commended for their use of interviews, the reader doesn't gain much from their inclusion because of a lack of any kind of theoretical framework. Granted, the reader can gain a great deal of knowledge about how the interviewees viewed their own situation, but all one ends up with is a series of stories. By using only empirical data, Cleaver and Wallace are able to convince the reader of very little except what one already knows when picking up the book — that women in Namibia live under severe oppression. As Belinda Bozzoli stated in her 1985 article in *African Studies*, "It is the life histories that contain the pointers to the ways in which they may themselves be explained."¹ Unfortunately, in their book Cleaver and Wallace don't go beyond the recording of the life histories to follow the pointers within them and to explain the oral accounts.

The problem with the book is illustrated in a statement made in the preface, "As white middle-class women, we are aware of the dangers involved in writing from a point of view of privilege, relative to the women to whom we spoke; the risks of both voyeurism and profiting from others' suffering are real and we have been concerned to ensure that we avoided both" (page ix). In an attempt not to be judgmental or to step on anyone's toes, Cleaver and Wallace give us a book that is rather weak.

¹Belinda Bozzoli, "Migrant Women and South African Social Change: Biographical Approaches to Social Analysis," in *African Studies*, 44, 1, 1985, 92-93.

The book strikes me as a sophisticated version of reports written by missionaries during the colonial era in order to gain support, both monetary and moral, for their work. Like sending back accounts of girls enslaved by Arab traders, these recordings of oppression of women in Namibia could serve to rally British church officials and church goers behind the cause taken up by those who support Church Action in Namibia, the entity which set up Cleaver and Wallace's visits to the country about which they would write. As with earlier accounts, this book appeals to the emotional side of the reader without taking any risks by incorporating the oral accounts into any sort of theoretical framework/argument.

Despite the fact that the book has serious flaws, there are many elements of it that one could find useful in an attempt to compile information on women in Namibia, especially in the way they view their own situation, since this can be gleaned from the interviews. Unfortunately, it does not serve as a significant contribution to recent scholarship, some of which is quite exceptional, on African women. Although it is one of the few accounts specifically focused on Namibia, which lends to its usefulness, it is not of the same caliber as works on women in resistance in other countries, like those by Cheryl Walker on South Africa or Susan Geiger on Tanzania² to name only a few.

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²Cheryl Walker, *Women and Resistance in South Africa*, 2nd ed (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1991), and Susan Geiger, "Women in Nationalist Struggle: TANU Activists in Dar es Salaam," in *International Journal of African Studies* 20.1 (1987): 1-28.