

19 YEARS OF INDEPENDENCE - A NATION LIVING BELOW ITS POTENTIAL

(Dr Joseph Diescho)

This PUBLIC LECTURE was offered by TUCSIN in cooperation with KAS on Tuesday, 31
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in the Moringa Room at the Kalahari Sands Hotel in Windhoek.

Dr. Sandelowsky, the founder of TUCSIN, welcomed everybody on behalf of the two hosting organizations: THE UNIVERSITY CENTRE FOR STUDIES IN NAMIBIA and the KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG. She recalled the public lectures given last year in connection with TUCSIN's 30th anniversary and was pleased to see many well known faces....

“...an audience like this makes my heart sing...” because of the role TUCSIN has played in education and in preparing students for university. She remembered the founding days when the common denominator was that all of us were curious and wanted to learn. One of them was Joseph Diescho. Dr Sandelowsky introduced him to the audience.

Prof Diescho

Thank you very much Dr. Sandelowsky for the introduction and welcome. Thank you all for coming on a Tuesday evening. You will bear with me if this evening we change tactic. We are still in the mode and spirit of celebrating 19 years of Independence. We have come a long way. There are times when we have to regroup and turn to one another in grace and thankfulness. Exactly 20 days ago we celebrated our nationhood and our existence for 19 years. We celebrated the moment when we assumed as a nation our rightful place in the Family of Nations. We speak in, of, about and to an Africa which Pope Benedict XVI just 24 days ago described as a continent of painful wounds yet enormous potential and hope. So I want you to indulge me in joining our leaders in acknowledging our Independence. Please rise:

(Singing)“Let us unite in the name Namibia.” (This refrain was repeated in several local languages.)

It is not a small accomplishment to have been free and independent for 19 years. Those of you who travel around the world, would know: when you have been relatively peaceful as a nation for almost 2 decades, it is cause to celebrate. Tonight I will take a critical look at 19 years of political independence, that is to say we should ask ourselves the extent to which we really understand, appreciate and make good on our promise as an independent nation. We live on a continent which is well resourced yet not altogether very happy. This year we will have, in my humble opinion, to all intent and purposes, the first real democratic election in Namibia.

What we had in 1989 were elections for independence and freedom. The historical background that we will look at is a tapestry of pain, sometimes joy. It's a tapestry of serious mismanagement of human relations. Perhaps it is important for us to acknowledge that our history has not been a very kind and nice history, a history that the German theoretician Friedrich Hegel, would have described as a slaughterhouse, a history that Albert Camus would have referred to as a trial, a history that Jean-Paul Sartre would have looked at as a history of no exit, a history wherein the African American James Baldwin would have reminded us: “Nobody knows my name”, a history that Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe would have described as one where “Things Fall Apart”, where we are “No Longer At Ease”.

Our own John Muafangeyo would have announced out loud: I am loneliness. A history, ladies and gentlemen, that has left us all with psychic bruises and psychological scars. We have to

recover from those bruises and scars. It is also the history of this country that non-Namibian observers looked at and described wonderfully. You will recall that in 1969 a European traveler with an interest in chronicling what he saw and found and noticed, by the name of John White, authored a book titled "The Land God Made in Anger". And on page 11 of that book he writes about Namibia as a land with a face and character of its own, a land whose impact would not leave any one unaffected... He writes that South West-Africa is a country that one cannot easily forget. "The majestic images of the Namib, Kaokoveld and Kalahari unrolled before me, vast and noble, like a landscape of another planet glimpsed upon in dreams."

In 1978 another European traveler writes another book: "Discover Namibia". He writes: This country is unique for those who worship at the altar of Africa at its most unconventional and most resplendent. In 1961 Olga Levinson authored a book "The Ageless Land" and she describes the tenacious *Welwitschia mirabilis* as a unique fossil plant in the family kingdom of plants, that appears only on the southern tip of that strip that runs from Angola to the Orange River and nowhere else in the world.

Two European travelers, Barrister and a friend wrote about "Nature's Harsh Paradise". It's a very strange combination: harsh and paradise. He says that it has a character that is unique and very appealing. Volume 161 no. 6 of National Geographic in 1982 devoted 44 pages under the authorship of Brian Hutchins, talking about Namibia as "Namibia, almost a country". I give you the juxtaposition of these two histories the painful one and the hopeful one. It is important for us to look at that so that we can appreciate what it took from people of this country to become free, so that when we look back with grace, so that we can understand how far we have come.

Let's travel along the route of our historical trajectory. There was something that happened in Berlin in November 1884 through February 1885. When the European master potentates assembled in the capital of Germany their central preoccupation was to carve up the African continent and to recreate it in their own image.

That's how we acquired the name South West Africa. Not one African was present at that meeting, dead or alive. In 1885 the colonial Bund in Germany passes a Law on Namibia, with specific reference on how to treat black people in this country! It was called "The right of fatherly protection (translated) which meant that in a workplace in South West Africa any white person, regardless of age or status had the right to protect black Namibians - the natives at the time - from being lazy. And that protection entailed physical punishment. If any white person noticed that a black person was slow to work or tired easily, the white person had the right to physically assault the black person in order to save him from laziness. Many people died and when matters reached the magistrate court, heed this: The words of one white person at the time could only be equalled by the evidence of 7 black people who must have been present at the time of the beating.

1904 also was the year during in which there was a series of correspondence between the rulership of the Namas down south and the rulership of the Ovahereros. It was this experience, ladies and gentleman that urged Maherero, the supreme chief of the ovaHerero, to write a letter to Hendrik Witbooi, urging him: Brother, we cannot stand alone any longer. Only when we unite in defence of our motherland can we get somewhere. Let us die fighting. In 1915 Louis Botha defeated the German troops and South Africa assumed the responsibility for South West Africa, with more brutality and increased harshness, to the extent that in 1922 the Bondelswarts were bombed with fire power by the South Africa regime, and the reason was that they refused to pay dog tax. The government said that if you have two dogs you must pay tax.

In 1922 with the culmination of the Treaty of Versailles (1919), when the League of Nations, precursor to United Nations, passed a resolution in Versailles, France, with specific references to the people of South West Africa. Article 22 of the League of Nations said that the natives of South West Africa are not ready to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world. Therefore we were handed over to more civilized people, the Union of South Africa, which brought more brutality and suffering.

In 1924 the Resident Representative of the Union of South Africa here in Windhoek wrote a letter to the Governor General of the Union of South Africa describing the fate and the conditions of the black people in this country. In this letter this administrator said: "The learning of the Bible and singing is proceeding very well with the nations. The problem is with other subjects at school because they have too many languages, and they are too divided to learn". Singing was happening very well. That is why in the Kavango languages, even today, when a person/child goes to school we say he is 'singing school'. You go to sing in school. You don't learn.

1964 - South Africa is a Republic and introduces a more sinister plan to vulcanize and divide the people of this country into Homelands. It was called the Odendaal Plan. As a result of the recommendations of the Odendaal Commission, we had a Government for Ovamboland, Caprivi, Kavango and so forth. That history tells you that nation building is not a simple matter. Therefore we need to understand and appreciate the history in order for us to really know, where we are today. My friends, we will never be able to appreciate the wisdom of the Herero Chief's Council that sent Sam Nujoma into exile to petition on our behalf. We'll never appreciate the exchange between Maherero and Witbooi if we don't understand our history. We'll never appreciate the work of Swanu, Swapo, NNF, DTA, RDP, COD, APP or any other party for that matter that wants to play a role in taking us forward, if we don't understand the history.

You cannot appreciate the work of those who drafted and crafted the constitution of the Republic of Namibia, if you don't understand the history. You cannot appreciate Toivo ya Toivo if you don't understand the history when ya Toivo in February 1968 challenged the supremacy of South Africa in the Supreme Court in Pretoria, saying "We are Namibians. Until we are granted our freedom, we are not equal. Only when you recognize us as free human beings can we talk as brothers and sisters. You cannot appreciate that, if you don't understand the history about which I talk this evening. At Independence 1990 we became a free nation.

The subtitle of our talk tonight is: "19 years of Independence, a nation living below its potential". I want to hazard an argument tonight that Namibia is a country with so many resources, both human and material, yet we live below our potential, because of the psychological bruises and psychological scars that we carry with us. We are unable to turn to one another as Namibians and that's why I urged you to sing that song, Let us unite, Let us unite in the name Namibia. It would appear to me that we are less committed to the concept of one Namibia one Nation now, than we were at the time of Independence. It would appear to me that we are more self-righteous now, individually, organizationally, and collectively, than we were at the time of Independence.

On that day when the SA flag came down and the Namibian flag was hoisted, Tate Nujoma said: "Tonight we have become the masters of the land of our ancestors. The destiny of this land is now in our hands. Let's look to the future with confidence and hope." Do we have that confidence now? I argue no! Because we have gone backwards instead of forward. William Shakespeare writes: to thine own self be true. If you are not true to yourself you cannot be true to others. It would not be right, it would not be accurate, and it would not be honest for us

not to say: “We have done certain things very well.” We have done things extremely well. Consider the spirit that we had when we celebrated Independence. We became proud and confident. As a matter of fact the rubric of Namibia united us all under one blanket of security.

That blanket of security is now torn apart by the struggle of who gets what piece for what reason with whose help. The blanket is tearing. Consider the pride that we had when Tate Nujoma introduced the first cabinet. You remember. They were a formidable team of people: men and woman who were enormously capable to take this country forward. In fact, it was a small team that took us forward that has degenerated and deteriorated to this extent that now we have 30 ministers. There is no way, logically and scientifically, that you can argue that the nation can have grown exponentially to justify and validate the size of the executive. You remember how we appreciated the peace. Peace, my friends, is a very rare commodity in Africa. Even when we quarrel we need to be grateful that we have peace in this country. And when we acknowledge that peace, we acknowledge those who fashioned that peace, even if and when we do not like everything they do.

But peace they brought and we owe it to ourselves as a nation. Consider how the new Government introduced programmes and schemes. The growth in our schools – quantitatively: We have more school children learning something than at the time of Independence. Qualitatively, we argue that it is not good enough, but it is better to learn something than not to learn at all. Recall the momentous land conference 1991. My good friend Hage Geingob was then P.M. I was touched by the manner in which he handled that conference. It was for a week. The government of Republic of Namibia sent an invitation to all the regions, to send whoever claimed to be a leader, traditional or other. The only requirement the government put there was that there must be women because 53% of our population are woman. What struck me was that at no the time during that week did the PM excuse himself to go and meet foreign dignitaries at the airport. He chaired that meeting right through. It doesn’t mean there were no visitors to Namibia, but he considered the conversation with fellow Namibians much more important than foreign guests. We don’t have that culture any longer. Our leaders today would leave you and go to the airport. I always argue that Namibians are much better at race relations than South Africa. You see people mingling comfortably. I had an intriguing experience at the Central Café. I was wandering about and I saw an old black person having coffee with an old white person. I went by and did what I had to do and came back. They were still sitting there. So I say to myself: let me find out! I found myself a chair and I’m shocked. Both these old men are yapping away in fluent German. They have known each other for all their lives. Race does not matter. I almost had tears in my eyes, because in the culture where I live that means that they are either plotting or about to start a fight.

Don’t forget we have had the first transfer of presidential power peacefully. Even if there are rumours of machinations and plots, the fact of the matter is there was a peaceful transfer of power from the founding president to the second president and it is still holding. If we in Namibia cannot celebrate that, I don’t know what we can celebrate. We had peaceful elections- relatively peaceful: In other words, we did not kill one another.

We can see that nowhere in the world are elections completely free and fair. This is a story of the Nigerians who had a big national election. They call a meeting together and everybody says the elections were not free, they were rigged. One chief raises his hand and asks to speak and he says: I have heard all the words spoken here. I want to speak my words. If all of us in this room can agree that this election had problems we can also agree that the elections were free because we are still alive.

How do we choose between fairness and freedom? We got to be intelligent about these things in such a manner that we can be critical of one another, yet acknowledging the good things other people have done. Let me refer to the land conference again.

There was a San man who raised his hand and the prime minister let him speak. And this Xho man speaks in Afrikaans and says something to the following effect: "I've heard many things spoken here, but let me tell you something: if there is one of us in this country who has the right to tell you to go back and then invite you to come back, it is me. You all come from somewhere, but I was found here."

I remember the words of then P.M. H. Geingob. He turns to the crowd and he says: "Ladies and gentleman this is what we are talking about, the claim to ancestral land is not possible in Namibia. Let's return to the constitution of the Republic that says: Any citizen of this country can buy, can sell, and can own property anywhere in this country". Do you realize how deep that is? Don't forget that Namibia was in all fairness the first real success story of the UN. For the first time the UN supervised an election that produced a legitimate government and not only that, but a government that wrote its own constitution within 80 days. In fact, we can be selfish enough to say Namibia was the first story of African people really writing their own constitution.

Other African countries that went before us were handed their constitutions by their colonial masters. The constitution of Zimbabwe was registered at Lancaster House in London. Let's look at language. English has never been the first language of any of us. English is the only official language here so that everybody will benefit from it and everybody will be able to communicate. And you can hear us speaking some English and you can call it Namlish but it is some English so we can communicate with one another. You know it is so joyful to see Namibians cracking jokes and laughing at themselves. (Anecdotes English in the mouths of different language groups). We've come a long way but seriously you see that some of us dabble with intellectual freedom and intellectual debate. I do not know of a Namibian who has been jailed yet for speaking their mind. We have to celebrate that and we have to thank our leaders. They don't like it but they don't send spies to come and listen what we are talking about here. You try this in Sudan or neighbouring Zimbabwe.

We were celebrating 19 years of Independence. We take a position that says what we have done well, what we can improve upon and in what way. Where have we not done so well? You cannot appreciate if you do not look at both sides of the coin, the Good and the Bad. The Bad seeks its own destruction. We have not taken inventory of the good things we have done in 19 years. We take it for granted. Therefore there's no memory base, and without memory you cannot build, grow, defend/justify/teach. You may remember the days when we did 'Begripstoets' (comprehension tests). You read the text and you are required to remember the details of what you read. I argue that Namibians do not know the details of what we have achieved in the last 19 years, because we are too busy attacking one another. I have good friends whom I learn from. What I say here I run by them. This morning I spoke to my old friend, Phil ya Nangolo, and some people here get scared when they hear the name. I ask him to tell me in his own words what we as Namibians can be grateful for over the last 19 years. And he went on and on listing the good things. It is very important for the young people to remember when we attack and criticize those who we think did not do enough. Remember, they've done something right. Therefore, if we want to take this country forward, we need to take the best of our achievements into the future, not the bad. We should not become selfish/greedy/too self-righteous.

The government has begun to secede from people. We have become glorified political parties to the point where it is becoming lethal and very destructive. The bad is that we have become

not as serious about one another as we have been before Independence. The bad is that the youth is no longer interested in learning. They are interested in leading, including leading the president who was elected. Good messages are not getting to the people. You can say anything you want about Nigeria but they have one thing right. Teenage pregnancy in Nigeria is under 5%. What is it in Namibia today? Instead of addressing it, we give grants. If you drop out of school to have a baby, we pay you. The bad is that we have not understood the relevance and the power of education for the youth. How many of our leaders have their children studying outside Namibia? That shows us something. The person goes on by saying that our leaders have their children in private schools. How does a teacher who does not have confidence in the school where he is teaching, teach the children where he does not want his own child? Can you imagine Barack Obama sending his children to England? What will the American public say? In fact, he sends his children to a public school. His only concern is their safety and security.

If I ask you now in this room how many languages are spoken Namibia, 90% of you will not know? Yet we consider ourselves leaders of the people that we don't care about, people that you don't respect. The bad is that we have internalized the bad habit where it is always "me". The bad thing is that we have not even begun to look seriously at the future. We are still in the past. We are still wallowing in the victories of yesterday, yester year, yester decade. Until and unless we talk about the future seriously, as all other nations who succeed have done, 19 years will be wasted. What message do we have for young people in Namibia, a message that does not only grow out of the 19 years of Independence, but before?

Barack Obama is the unusual phenomenon that he is because he talks about today and tomorrow, not yesterday. We cannot continue to judge one another on the basis of what we did yesterday. We cannot begin to appreciate one another if we only look at our sins, failures, shortcomings and victories of yesterday. Judge me on what I can do today and tomorrow, not on what I have done yesterday, because none of us is faultless.

Is it too late to do something now? No, it is not too late. How long will it take? Not long, because the young people that I see every day are beginning to appreciate that there is a nexus between problems and crises and possibilities. How long? Not long, because you can fool some of the people some of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all the time. How long? Not long, because like Antonio Granuski would say: "The old is dying and the new is struggling to be born". How long? Not long, because the voices out there do not see colonialism as the major problem. The voices out there see HIV/AIDS, see underdevelopment, see poverty, see self-righteousness, and see political arrogance and intolerance as the major diseases of today. Therefore my friends, we need, in the spirit of celebrating 19 years, to turn to one another, just to find out what the other person's name is, because without knowing that you cannot build.

Leonard Bernstein was speaking to other musicians in 1970, and he said to them: "Let me leave these words with you today, (31st March 2009). It is you sitting in this very room, the thinkers of tomorrow, who will ultimately save us. It's you young people the feelers, who can educate, who can divide, who can insist, who can sing and ask big questions as part of your dreams, that will ultimately set us free". We ought to be thankful for what we have, celebrate Independence, even though it is Independence without freedom. Build on that, so that tomorrow those who are to come will remember we were here before them. Go to the people; live with them; work with them; learn from them; love them. Start with what they have, build with what they know. And one day they will turn to you and say: We have done it ourselves.