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Waiting and voting in the village:
Election Day 2014 in Odibo, Namibia

Gregor Dobler*

Abstract
Unlike other institutions of African political life, elections have rarely been analysed as social situations in themselves. This article offers an ethnographic description of Namibia's 2014 general elections from a village perspective. Through a careful description and analysis of the polling day in a northern Namibian village, I try to show that we cannot understand why people vote if we only see elections as a procedural device. Asking what the act of voting means to people, I argue, can also help to understand why many people in young Southern African democracies continue to vote for the respective ruling parties in spite of growing dissatisfaction. Participating in the elections and waiting together in the queues to cast one's votes is a ritual of participation that derives its force just as much from the acknowledgment of an order of moral politics as from the integration into patronage networks. Symbolic meaning and power hierarchies mutually reinforce each other. The performative consensus that elections reaffirm in the village's public sphere is, however, far from universal. Since participating in the election is in itself an expression of being part of it, disaffected villagers tend not to vote rather than to cast their vote for the opposition.

Introduction

Elections are powerful instruments of political decision-making and interest aggregation. In liberal democracies, they form the procedural basis of government legitimacy and stand in the centre of discourses on good governance, accountability and democracy. An extensive specialist literature advises on the conduct of elections, on voting and counting regimes and on the translation of numbers of votes into numbers of seats in parliament; election analysts and policy think tanks compare voting patterns, predict results or analyse changes in voter behaviour.

In many of these studies, the act of voting appears as little more than the necessary preliminary to counting. We learn little about what people actually do at polling stations, and the significance of an election for ordinary voters is taken for granted rather than explained. A small, but significant minority of contributions to the literature on voting worldwide describes voting not as an instrument, but as an action in itself and asks what

* Gregor Dobler is Professor in the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the Albert-Ludwigs-University Freiburg, Germany. E-mail: gregor.dobler@ethno.uni-freiburg.de

people actually do when they vote.[1] This approach has so far rarely been applied to African countries. Africanist scholars have carefully described the everyday working of many political institutions, but they have largely excluded voting from their analysis.

This article is an essay in the ethnography of voting. I ask what brought voters in rural Northern Namibia to cast their votes in the 2014 general elections, what happened during and before the elections, and what was at stake for villagers when they voted. Analysing voting as social practice, I argue, complements conventional election research in important ways and may offer new answers to a question that has been puzzling electoral analysts for some time: Why do people in many African countries stubbornly continue to vote even when the election's outcome does not promise any significant change to their position?

In Namibia and South Africa, this question gains an additional dimension. These are comparatively robust democracies with generally free and fair elections. Both countries' governing parties show strong authoritarian tendencies, but independent media, a functional judiciary and the section of business interests still independent of the state act as checks on these tendencies.[2] The governments face criticism from the population, and new opposition parties frequently gain a lot of attention. Yet in both countries, the former liberation movements have been in uncontested power since independence. In Namibia, the SWAPO Party has increased its share of votes in every national election since independence, reaching an 80% majority in the general elections of November 2014. Why does pervasive popular criticism of government policies not translate into a different voting behaviour?[3]

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[1] I found most inspiring Mukulika Banerjee, "Sacred elections", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 42, 2007: 1556-1562; idem, "Elections as communitas", *Social Research*, 78, 2011: 75-98; Stephen Coleman, *How Voters Feel,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2013; Kimberley Coles, "Election Day: The construction of democracy through technique", *Cultural Anthropology,* 19, 2004: 551-580; Jonathan Spencer, *A Sinhala Village in a Time of Trouble: Politics and Change in Rural Sri Lanka*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990; Jacques Maquet and Marcel Hertefelt, *Élections en societé féodale. Une etude sur l'introduction du vote populaire au Ruanda-Urundi,* Bruxelles, Académie royale des sciences coloniales, 1959, is typical of a number of early studies. The articles in Romain Bertrand, Jean-Louis Briquet and Peter Pels, (eds.), *Cultures of Voting. The Hidden History of the Secret Ballot,* London, Hurst 2008 complement these works with a deeper historic perspective.

[2] For an excellent inroad into the many debates surrounding Namibia's democracy, see Henning Melber, *Understanding Namibia. The Trials of Independence,* London, Hurst 2014. For Namibia and South Africa, see also Nicola De Jager and Pierre du Toit, (eds.), *Friend or Foe? Dominant Party Systems in Southern Africa*, Cape Town, UCT Press 2013; Roger Southall, *Liberation Movements in Power: Party & State in Southern Africa*, Oxford, Currey, 2013; idem, "From liberation movement to party machine? The ANC in South Africa", *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 32, 2014: 331-348.

[3] For literature on earlier elections in Namibia that examines this question, see: Gretchen Bauer, "Namibia in the First Decade of Independence: How Democratic?", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 28, 2001: 33-55; Christiaan Keulder, *Voting Behaviour in Namibia: Local Authority Elections 1998*, Windhoek, USAID and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 1998; Debbie LeBeau, "Multiparty democracy and elections in Namibia", *Journal of African Elections*, 4, 2005: 1-26; Tom Lodge, "The Namibian elections of 1999", *Democratization*, 8, 2001: 191-230; Henning Melber, "Namibia's national assembly and presidential elections 2009: Did democracy

Scholarly literature usually offers three different explanations.[4] The first, coercion, intimidation or vote-buying,[5] may be significant in many African elections, but seemingly not in Northern Namibia. The second, neo-patrimonialism, argues that rational self-interest induces citizens to vote for the same parties. Where democratic institutions and the rules of bureaucratic domination have largely been hollowed out to provide office-holders with resources for patronage, it might be in the best interest of poor voters to continue voting for those who in the past have been responsible for providing what jobs, infrastructure projects and social grants there were.[6] In multi-party states, this tendency can foster political tribalism; in states with dominant parties, it can perpetuate one-party rule.

The third strand of literature looks at cultures of voting. It either sees elections as rituals or – more common in the African context – explains voter behaviour through other cultural factors: an insistence on consensus, solidarity and distributive equality, for example, or the prevalence of non-democratic images of authority that supposedly leave little room for the idea of democratic elections.[7]

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win?", *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 28, 2010: 203-214; Winnie Wanzala, "Women and Elections in Namibia after five years of independence", *Southern African Feminist Review*, 1, 1995: 49-59.

[4] See also Isak Niehaus, "Doing politics in Bushbackridge: Work, welfare and the South African elections of 2004", *Africa*, 76, 2006: 526-548 (526ff.).

[5] E.g. Andrew Apter, "Nigerian democracy and the politics of illusion", in: John and Jean Comaroff, (eds.), *Civil Society and the Political Imagination,* Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1999: 267-307; Michael Bratton, "Vote buying and violence in Nigerian election campaigns", *Electoral Studies*, 4, 2008: 621-632; Nic Cheeseman and Brian Klaas, *How to Rig an Election*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2018; Harri Englund, "Winning elections, losing legitimacy: Multi-partyism and the neo-patrimonial state in Malawi", in: Michael Cowan and Liisa Laakso, (eds.), *Multi-Party Elections in Africa,* Oxford, Currey, 2002: 172-186; Chin-Shou Wang and Charles Kurzman, "The logistics: How to buy votes", in: Frederic Schaffer, (ed.), *Elections for Sale: The Causes and Consequences of Vote Buying,* Boulder, Rienner, 2007: 61-78.

[6] See Wilhelm Mühlmann and Robert Llaryora, *Klientschaft, Klientel und Klientelsystem in einer sizilianischen Agro-Stadt,* Tübingen, Mohr, 1968, for a classic study; Jean-François Médard, "The underdeveloped state in tropical Africa: political clientelism or neo-patrimonialism?", in: Christopher Clapham, (ed.), *Private Patronage and Public Power: Political Clientelism in the Modern State,* Redwood Burn, Trowbridge, 1982: 162-189; Michael Bratton and Nicolas van de Walle, "Neopatrimonial regimes and political transitions in Africa", *World Politics*, 46, 1994: 453-489; Paul Richards, *Fighting for the Rain Forest: War, Youth and Resources in Sierra Leone*, Oxford, Currey, 1996; Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pierre Daloz, *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument,* Oxford, Currey, 1999, for some influential contributions to the Africanist literature, and Ulf Engel and Gero Erdmann, "Neopatrimonialism reconsidered: Critical review and elaboration of an elusive concept", *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Studies*, 4, 2007: 95-119; Till Förster and Lucy Köchlin, (eds.), *The Politics of Governance: Actors and Articulations in Africa and Beyond*, New York, Routledge, 2015, for critical discussions.

[7] See Frederic Schaffer, *Democracy in Translation: Understanding Politics in an Unfamiliar Culture,* Cornell, Cornell University Press, 1998, for solidarity; Steven Lukes, "Political ritual and social integration", *Sociology*, 9, 1975: 289-308; David Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics and Power,* New Haven, Yale University Press, 1988; James McLeod, "The sociodrama of presidential politics: Rhetoric, ritual, and power in the era of teledemocracy", *American Anthropologist*, 101, 1999: 359-373, for ritualist analyses; William Miles, *Elections in Nigeria: a Grassroots Perspective,* Boulder, Rienner, 1988: 86, for a rural Hausa perspective on elections as culturally inadequate.

Rather than rejecting the two latter explanations, I will use each to shed light on the other's blind spots. Privileging either power or symbolic meaning, I argue, makes it impossible to understand voting. Only if we take their interplay and the force they derive from each other seriously can we understand why voting is important to people. To do so, we first have to stop assuming we know what elections are, and describe voting as social action.

Accordingly, my starting point is ethnographic. I describe polling day in the small northern Namibian village of Odibo and show how, far from merely being a procedural device, voting expresses and reaffirms both moral belonging and political integration. As a ritual that is embedded in power relations and patronage, voting derives its force from its strong performative character. In consequence, participation implies acknowledging one's integration into a joint moral and political order. Those who no longer can or want to do so tend not to vote for the opposition, but to refrain from voting.

The article draws on my familiarity with the region through my roughly 24 months of ethnographic fieldwork since 2004, and three additional months of research in Odibo before, during and after the 2014 elections, living in a peasant homestead and sharing everyday life in the village. I participated in everyday conversations about the elections and their significance and observed political interactions between villagers. Taking the methodological outlook that, if elections are relevant, their relevance has to be visible in everyday life,[8] I did not use interviews and never started conversations about the elections – with the exception of the days immediately following the elections, when I asked as many people as possible about their (non-)voting experiences.

Voting in Odibo

Odibo is a scattered village of around one thousand inhabitants in Northern Namibia's Ohangwena Region. The village clusters around a former Anglican mission station, with a church, a small hospital and a high school. Around the mission, a few shops and shebeens cater for the villagers. A sand track links Odibo to Oshikango, the next town, and a footpath leads to the Angolan border.

Many Namibians know the village's name through St. Mary's High School, which was one of the few places in Namibia that offered English-language education through the apartheid era. Leading members of the liberation movement went to school there: second Namibian President Hifikepunye Pohamba; SWAPO co-founder Andimba Toivo ya Toivo; military commanders Peter Mweshihange, Michael Hishikushitja and Mweukufina Hamaambo; former Foreign Minister and long-time opposition politician Hidipo Hamutenya; three prominent members of Pohamba's cabinet, Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah, Joel Kaapanda and Charles Namoloh. Namoloh was born in the village and is the headman there today. One of his brothers-in-law, the late Ponhele ya France, was

[8] I elaborate this theoretical argument in Gregor Dobler, "Fatal words. Restudying Favret-Saada", *Anthropology of this Century*, 13, 2015, <http://aotcpress.com/articles/fatal-words-restudying-jeanne-favretsaada> [accessed 19 November, 2019].

chairman of the National Union of Namibian Workers, the union federation aligned with SWAPO. Two retired Anglican bishops today live in Odibo; the wife of one of them is a close adviser to Namibia's former first lady Penehupifo Pohamba. Although the village is small, everybody here knows one or more of Namibia's leading politicians well.

From the beginning of the armed struggle for independence in 1966 until the country's transition to democracy in 1990, everyday life in the area was shaped by war and by an increasingly brutal South African occupational regime. For many people in the region, attaining equal franchise was the result of decade-long hardships. Democracy was, and, in spite of some disillusionment, still is much more than an empty word. Since Hidipo Hamutenya and others broke away from SWAPO in 2006 to form the Rally for Democracy and Progress RDP, Odibo and the entire Ohangwena Region has remained, relatively speaking, one of their main areas of support, although SWAPO has always gained a vast majority of votes.

On 28 November 2014, the sixth general elections in Namibia's democratic history took place. Using electronic voting machines (EVMs), voters could cast two votes – one in the presidential elections contested between nine candidates, one in the elections for the national parliament, for which sixteen party lists had been registered.

All previous Namibian general elections had been conducted over at least two days. This time, following SADC election guidelines and confident that EVMs would speed up the process, the Electoral Commission of Namibia (ECN) scheduled the elections for one day only. Fixed polling stations were supposed to be open from 7am to 9pm. Many, among them Odibo, were converted into mobile stations, apparently to reduce the number of voting machines needed. Mobile teams served between two and seven stations during the day. According to the official schedule, Mobile Team 303 would serve Etombo from 7am to 11am, Onamhinda from noon to 4pm and Odibo from 5pm to 9pm. Odibo was the last stop since, unlike the other two stations on the mobile team's list, St. Mary's School had electricity and was thus better prepared for voting to continue into the night.

I spent the morning of election day in Oshikango, a bustling border town five kilometres from Odibo. At 8am, rows of around 350 people were patiently and peacefully queuing in front of the three polling stations. When I arrived at one established in a tent in front of a popular take-away, the owner of the take-away, who was a former mayor of the town, was voting. Like other members of the local elite, he had jumped the queue, later telling me that he had "no patience for this nonsense of standing around the whole day. I have a business to run." He thought it his due to pass before everybody else, but was conscious of the privilege. When accompanying me to a shop later, he avoided the queue, because, as he joked, "otherwise they will *moord* me because I passed before them."

He was not the only one whose patience ran out. A young teacher, who was staying in the same homestead as I, had gotten up at 5.30am to cast his votes before the queues were too long, but like others, he soon gave up waiting. "No, I cannot stand in such a queue and wait all this time. I will vote later in Odibo" he told me over the phone.

Throughout the day, many people used cellphones to update their friends and relatives about their place in the queue or the situation at different polling stations.

The voting process was very slow because the handheld scanning devices for voters' registration cards did not work properly. It often took five attempts before the scanner recognised a card. Since the registration system relied on biometric data, fingerprints had then to be scanned and processed by the machines. This rarely worked on the first try and often did not work at all. In that case, polling officials had to look up the name in a printed register and fill in a form. Only then could voters proceed to the voting machines – which worked swiftly and could have processed votes much more quickly than necessary under the circumstances.

During the day, I regularly stopped the time needed to process ten voters at a polling station. The minimum I found was ten minutes, the maximum 35 minutes. Even at the fastest rate of one person per minute, 350 people in the queue would take six hours to process. The people I saw last in line at 8am in fact cast their votes around 4pm.

At 4.30pm, I drove back to Odibo and found roughly 200 people waiting for the polling officials to arrive, many dressed in their Sunday's best. I knew many of them and, like them, spent my time chatting and waiting for the station to open. At first, nobody showed any sign of impatience. People waited, good-natured and sociable, in clusters according to gender and age – young people who still lived with parents or relatives, active grown-ups and the elders each kept to themselves. New arrivals made the round greeting their acquaintances before getting in line.

Some time after 5pm, a teacher unlocked the door to the school hall and allowed people to carry chairs and benches outside, so that older and more respected people could at least sit down. At half past six, when there was still no sign of any polling official, rumours started to spread. Some said the mobile team was in Edunja, others knew for a fact that officials had just left Onamhinda. An ECN official spent a lot of time on her cell phone, but if she learnt anything, she did not tell us.

When it had become quite dark, somebody told the crowd that the mobile team was still in Onamhinda, but since voting could not continue without electric lights, the team would wrap up there and everybody still in the queue would have to come to Odibo. As a reaction, the crowd which, until now, had clustered in a circle in which everybody knew each other, started to transform into a real queue, so that new-coming outsiders would not be able to pass before them.

At half past seven, one of the retired bishops stood up and loudly told the crowd that he was going home – probably 'they' had decided not to come because they thought that Odibo would vote for the opposition. He would continue to receive his pension anyhow, whether or not he voted. People laughed, but few followed his example.

After that, nothing happened. 9pm, the official closing date of polling stations, passed unremarked and without any election officials arriving. When heavy clouds and winds announced rain, the teacher let the older people into the hall in order to wait there. Soon, everybody streamed inside.

Polling officials and policemen finally arrived at 9.37pm. They set up the polling station inside the school hall and tested and sealed the machines. At the news, many more people arrived – some of them from Onamhinda, where the team had left at 9pm instead of 4pm, leaving around 200 people still queuing. Voting in Odibo finally began at 10.12pm.

The day before, the ECN chairman had declared on television that polling stations would close at 9pm, but that everybody queuing at that time would be allowed to vote. In each polling station, a policeman would stand as last person in the queue to prevent anybody else from joining after 9pm. Yet what should polling officials do when people who had been waiting for hours for them to show up and decided to go home for dinner came back once news reached them that voting was finally about to start?

A growing crowd of inebriated youngsters who constantly streamed in and out of the hall did not make that decision easier. Around half past ten, a pickup brought a dozen young men and women speaking Portuguese, all staggeringly drunk, who after seeing the crowds decided to try their luck in Oshikango.

The situation became calmer at around eleven. By then, around 400 people were waiting inside, and the police shut the doors to everybody else. Even a few people who had gone out to relieve themselves (no toilets were available in the hall) were denied re-entry. Everybody inside had the choice either to stay inside and to eventually vote – or to leave altogether. Through the hall windows, it was still possible to observe events inside and exchange latest news.

The first ones to vote were the nurses on duty in Odibo Health Centre; after them came the elderly and sick – or at least those whose age, frailty or sickness could not be denied. After that first group some pensioners who were by no means healthy were pushed aside by impatient young people, many of whom had already waited in Onamhinda since the early morning.

My observations of the next two hours were rather patchy; I was busy driving old ladies home to their farms through pouring rain, often accompanied by the former mission director who had voted early but stayed until the early hours to look after the elderly. When I came back at around 1am, the number of people waiting had barely changed. The Governor of Ohangwena Region had come and gone, but nobody ever addressed those waiting to explain – let alone apologize for – the delay. Voting continued through the night. At 6am, new people arrived who had gone home the previous evening. When police would not let them in, an angry voter brought a padlock and locked everybody in from the outside. It took around two hours until a different police unit was mobilised and managed to break the lock.

By 8.30 in the morning, the polling station had closed. The last voters had spent sixteen hours in a queue, and the polling officials had worked almost non-stop for 26 hours. One of them told me:

> We got up at 5 am on Friday morning. We started working at Etomba at six and opened up at seven. We were supposed to finish by eleven, but it went on until four. Then we came to Onamhinda at five instead of at noon. There was no

> electricity there. At nine, the election officer told us to move on, but we had to leave many people outside. They were very angry and insulted us. So we came here before ten and finished after eight in the morning. Man, we were tired! I fell asleep between voters. I finished one, two people, and when the next one came, he had to wake me up. Then I decided I would not sit down anymore and continued standing. But sometimes you have to sit down; then I again fell asleep between voters.

When the election results were finally announced on Sunday, SWAPO supporters celebrated their party's victory with a procession of hooting cars and an evening of heavy feasting, while opposition supporters sought to find reasons for their defeat. Public discourse in the village returned to topics of local interest the next day. Within days, the rift between opposition and government supporters that had appeared before the elections seemed to shrink and eventually vanish. The social drama was over and normality returned.

What does voting mean to people?

The events on polling day in Odibo were unusual and, even though similar delays affected many polling stations, by no means representative of the country as a whole. In their extraordinary character, however, they make visible what lies beneath the routine of casting one's vote, and allow us to better understand what voting means to people. The patient and indeed passionate participation, as well as the prompt return to normality suggest that, at least in these particular elections, the act of voting was important for more than just the outcome. To grasp the meaning of voting, we need to move beyond the discourse surrounding it and analyse the election as a social action in its own right.

Before the elections: politicizing village life

Polling day does not happen in isolation, but is rather the culmination of a long process of engagement with electoral politics. As social dramas in Turner's sense, elections give structure to political life and are occasions of its open performance, but the actors use the time between these intensely meaningful events to position themselves for the next drama.

Since the last elections in 2009, a long court battle over the results, two by-elections to fill casual vacancies, new election legislation and a new voter registration process had from time to time reminded people that the next round of general elections was bound to come. From mid-October 2014, people more frequently talked about the elections. I saw no party posters and no trace of official campaigning in Odibo itself, but nobody living in the area and communicating with other people was entirely unaware of the elections. When polling day approaches, the landscape changes: party flags appear on long poles in trees along the roads and on houses; party colours are paraded on cars and from window sills; election posters (and huge adverts by the Electoral Commission urging everybody to vote) hang from lamp posts of nearby towns. Most visible in the

central Northern regions are the blue, red and green colours of SWAPO. The presence of an opposition flag in front of a store or shebeen is a strong statement bound to draw attention and comments.

Even without party colours, villagers can see politics. Some shebeens in Odibo and the area are known as meeting places for opposition sympathiser or for SWAPO militants. People sit there reading and commenting upon newspapers, discussing local and national events and generally talking politics. Villagers immediately recognize these groups as SWAPO or opposition supporters, even though political affiliation intersects with other identity markers. Whenever people walk by such a shebeen, recognition of the affiliations of the groups meeting there reproduces and reinforces the local significance of politics.

Such occasions to identify and take sides multiply as the elections approach. Party rallying intensified about six weeks before the election. One of SWAPO's 'star rallies' took place on November 1 close to Odibo, with President Pohamba as the main speaker. Five kilometres from his old school and some forty kilometres from his home village, many older people in the audience knew him and took the occasion to symbolically renew an invisible bond which they feel much more strongly than the President does.[9]

In the two months before the elections, at least 50,000 people attended party rallies in the four central northern regions of Namibia.[10] Perhaps one in ten people of voting age living in the region attended a party rally – a number much higher than in Western democracies. After rallies, they acted as multipliers, telling others about their experiences and often evaluating the different speeches. Although, apart from me, nobody from my household attended the rally on November 1, everybody was already well informed about the speeches and commented (often rather scathing) on them when I returned in the evening.

Radio, television, newspapers and social media played an important role in anchoring the upcoming elections in people's minds, too. For older people, local language radio was the most important source of information, followed by the evening news on national television for those with access to electricity and a TV set.[11] Party advertisements and messages urging people to use their vote were omnipresent in these media. Newspaper readership is rather small, but interesting articles are passionately read and shared by word-of-mouth, cell phones or social media. For younger people, Facebook (mostly

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[9] On rallying in Namibia, see Michael Akuupa and Godwin Kornes, "From 'One Namibia, one Nation' towards 'Unity in Diversity'? Shifting representations of culture and nationhood in Namibian Independence Day celebrations, 1990-2010", *Anthropology Southern Africa*, 36, 2013: 34-46; and Gregor Dobler, "Les élections en Namibie de novembre 2004", *Politique Africaine*, 98, 2005: 166-179.

[10] In the 2014 Afrobarometer survey, 40% of the population said they had attended a campaign rally before the 2009 elections. Afrobarometer, *Summary of Results: Afrobarometer Results Round 6. Survey in Namibia,* Windhoek, IPPR 2014: 12, <https://afrobarometer.org/publications/namibia-round-6-summary-results-2014> [accessed 19 November, 2019].

[11] Afrobarometer surveys show similar patterns of media usage for the entire country, although electronic media are obviously more rarely used in rural than in urban areas. See Afrobarometer, *Results Round 6* : 9.

accessed on smartphones) has become the main forum for political discussions and rumours.[12] No Namibian using Facebook could have missed the fact that elections were looming – and even in Odibo many people under the age of 40 had an account.

Through all these avenues and media, elections were very much present in local everyday life and became a constant topic of conversation. Few of these conversations were actually concerned with policy issues, and few people had any ideas about what policies might change if the opposition came to power. Yet everywhere in the village, people passionately discussed the prospects of the various parties. Electoral politics, power relations and group identities linked to them were omnipresent.

Electronic voting

Electronic Voting Machines frequently figured in such village discussions. In a first for African general elections, the Electoral Commission had bought 1,700 control units and 3,500 EVMs from the Indian company Bharat Electronics, one of the companies supplying the machines used in Indian elections since 1999. In the face of widespread criticism of the counting process in the 2009 elections, Namibia's ECN hoped that EVMs would make voting, counting and verification easier, faster and more transparent.[13] EVMs consisted of two separate units. Once the election officer had activated the voting unit through a button on the control unit, the voter was free to cast his or her vote by pressing a button on the election unit, whose layout resembled that of a ballot paper. A red light then showed the selection, which the voter had to confirm by pressing a second button.

Initially the EVMs were met with scepticism. Three days before the election, two opposition parties asked the High Court in an urgent application to postpone the elections to February 2015 and ban the use of EVMs. They alleged that, since the machines did not allow the simultaneous utilisation of a verifiable paper trail as prescribed by §97(3) of the Electoral Act 2014, EVMs could be used to rig the vote.

The application was probably not helped when Hewat Beukes of the Workers Revolutionary Party stated that his party did not "want machines that are manufactured by foreigners to be used in the country's elections", and that "we don't want somebody in India who programmed these machines to decide our future." He "dubbed the EVMs as alien since they were not locally manufactured and could not be trusted".[14] This was slightly surprising given that the same opposition parties had, in 2009, insisted that ballot papers should be printed in South Africa because local printers were too close to

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[12] For an overview of social media use by political parties, see Institute for Public Policy Research, *ElectionWatch 5/2014: Social Media and Namibian Elections*, Windhoek, IPPR, 2014.

[13] For more information on the technical and procedural questions of EVM's use in Namibia, see Nangula Shejavali, *Election Watch Briefing Paper 1: Electronic Voting Machines,* Windhoek, IPPR, 2014.

[14] Theresa Tjihenuna, "Election court challenge ruling today", *The Namibian*, 26 November 2014, <https://www.namibian.com.na/index.php?id=130979&page=archive-read> [accessed October 25, 2019].

the government to be trusted. As the opposition parties could not produce any concrete evidence that EVMs made vote rigging possible, High Court Judge Kobus Miller dismissed the application with costs.

Many people in Odibo had similar concerns. A teacher argued that everybody knew the machines came from India, and that SWAPO could use its close ties with the Indian government to programme the machines in their favour. A young man training as polling official told me that control units had to be changed after 2,000 votes. He did not really understand how, but was convinced that this moment could be used for tampering with the SD cards used for recording. A former senior government official alleged after the elections that her party had failed to win because voting machines were programmed to only accept a certain number of votes for the opposition. "It is like an ATM. When too many people cast their votes for the opposition, it just says 'you have exceeded your contingent' and counts the vote for the ruling party."[15]

Many people were convinced that paper was more reliable than bytes. Writing or putting a mark on paper seemed a trustworthy and well-known cultural technique associated with the mission school, with education and social ascent. The pride of having gained the right to vote in a long and difficult struggle and the pride of voting by putting a mark on paper reinforced each other and created a sense of ownership in elections.

EVMs replaced this cultural technique by a different one not even polling officials really understood. In order to trust paper ballots, you have to trust the agents who count them; in order to trust voting machines, you have to trust a code that you have no chance of really understanding or controlling. This made EVMs an ideal site to project fears of vote-rigging and unfairness.

In spite of all scepticism, the voting process itself was in the end very smooth, and almost nobody complained about the use of machines. Old people often seemed more competent in using them than first-time voters, election officials told me. The painfully slow pace of voting was not caused by the EVMs, but by the biometric registration system and the card and fingerprint scanners. This technology, which had not attracted much comment beforehand, severely affected the conduct of the elections.

Waiting

Of everything I observed during the elections, the patience with which people waited for their turn astonished me most. I could not imagine voters in my home country queuing through the night to cast their votes in an election whose outcome was a foregone conclusion. Outsiders in the area usually offered culturalist explanations. The former mayor, for example, who had grown up in Cape Town's coloured townships, told me: "Yes, but they also sit in Church for six hours on a Sunday, and spend half a day in the bank to cash a cheque."

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[15] For an account of similar rumours in India's first electronic election, see Banerjee, "Sacred elections": 1557.

Time might indeed play a different role here than in societies with a longer history of capitalist education to efficiency, but there is much more to voters' waiting than just a lack of impatience. People are not always tolerant of waiting. The same old woman who queues up for ten hours to vote can become very impatient indeed if she thinks her granddaughter is dragging her feet when she calls her. If we stop asking why 'everybody' is willing to wait, and instead analyse who in what situation is willing to wait for whom, the ways people wait to cast their votes can explain how elections reaffirm the relationship between citizens and the state.

Such an analysis has to take seriously what people express in words, but it cannot stop there. When I asked why they had been willing to wait for so long, younger voters who had made their formative political experiences in post-independence Namibia often repeated the ECN's slogans 'Your vote counts' or 'Your vote is your voice', and insisted that 'You cannot change anything if you do not vote'. Older voters frequently referred to the long struggle for democratic rights and insisted that it was their duty to vote: 'How can you expect to live in a democracy and not even care to cast your vote?'

Both groups directly linked the meaning of voting to the foundational myth re-enacted in the ritual of elections: that, in democracies, voting as an individual right expresses voters' dignity and status. In everyday life, "nobody cares what you say', one first-time voter told me, "but if you press that button, your vote is your voice, and it counts as much as the President's". Voting allowed her to experience herself as a member of a community of equals whose voices count.

Yet within that community of equals, voting also reaffirms social ties and hierarchies – a dimension much less frequently put into words. Everybody in a household knew when and where the other household members cast their vote. Older people tried to make sure their dependents were seen taking part in the elections. Men and women, older and younger people, the local elite and ordinary citizens all waited in their respective groups. The former mission director, the Governor and a few teachers, while trying to support those who were waiting, took seriously and underlined their own leading role in the village.

Voting, in short, was a fundamentally social experience. It may not have generated the festive atmosphere Mukulika Banerjee describes for elections in an Indian village, but it was a far cry from the "fleeting", "socially disconnected" experience of voting in British elections in Stephen Coleman's account.[16] It presented an occasion to meet and created a moment of *communitas* that reaffirmed the village's political sphere.

Some of the men and women waiting in front of the polling station had known each other for 80 years or more. Many of the older ones had lived here before apartheid started; they had heard of the founding of SWAPO and had seen the first relatives go into exile. Throughout the years, the same families had remained neighbours – land is too scarce to give up a homestead if you can avoid it –, had intermarried and jointly buried their dead.

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[16] Banerjee, "Sacred elections"; idem, "Elections as communitas"; Coleman, *Voters*: 3.

Such community by no means excludes conflict. Some had supported apartheid's soldiers, some given food to guerrilla fighters and shelter to rebels who today are ministers. An old man shared his bench with the son of a soldier who had killed a cousin of his. One of the old ladies I drove home in the early morning hours lives in one of the poorest homesteads of the village and could barely walk; my host was convinced that she was a witch and could fly by night. The election brought all these individuals together in one place – in itself no small occurrence in a region in which homesteads are scattered across the landscape – and made them wait together for hours. The long communal wait turned them into equals before the state and equal members of the imagined political community embodied in it, but simultaneously reinforced hierarchies within the village.

This double link between waiting and social structure became tangible where people stopped waiting. In my description of the polling day, three people stand out who were no longer willing to wait: the young teacher, the former mayor and the bishop.

The teacher grew up in Windhoek in the household of his uncle, a leading opposition politician. We usually conversed in German, which he speaks fluently. After finishing his B.A., he struggled to find work in the capital, and had come back to Odibo the previous year. He is glad to reconnect with his family's rural roots, but often still feels like an outsider. He spoke about the elections as a textbook democrat would: as a chance to express his opinion and to influence the way his country was governed. He very much hoped the opposition would at least prevent SWAPO from attaining a two-thirds majority.

In the queue, he soon felt very nervous. He had come to actively change things, and there he was, standing in a motionless crowd and, yet again, having to wait for others to let him participate. Waiting was a repetition of the very experience of exclusion from political participation that had induced him to vote in the first place. In this situation, he tried to regain his own dignity by taking the only active decision available: he stopped waiting. Due to the chaotic circumstances in Odibo, he was not able to cast his vote there, so the price he ultimately paid for not being subject to others' will was not to express his own will.

The former mayor went voting in the same way he would deliver a speech in his active days: as an element of his role, simultaneously a duty and a privilege. Waiting was not a part of his position. If voting expressed the relationship between the population and the governing, he did not see himself on the population side of this divide. Accordingly, it was his due not to wait. He enforced the difference between *them* and *him* by simply taking it for granted, and passing before everybody else.

From a different position, the bishop's waiting was similar. He did not mind waiting in front of the school with everybody else; sitting and chatting was as good an occupation for a holiday afternoon as any. What he objected to was being made to wait by polling officials. That was beneath his station and impeded his dignity and honour. When he joked that he would continue to receive his pension even if he did not vote, he declared his independence and affirmed that he did not come as a petitioner, but could walk away if treated with disrespect.

The bishop and the mayor found that too long a wait infringed on the dignity of their position. Assured of their social status and their place in the community, they could afford to stop waiting. The teacher, an urban outsider in the village, did not have that status. When he found the price of participation too high, opting out left him unsatisfied and feeling excluded.

All three cases highlight how, for the voting majority, voting reaffirmed the sense of belonging and the local hierarchies. Waiting, villagers recreated their relation to the governing and to each other. For them, elections were the opposite of an empty civic duty: they were the occasion of re-inscribing one's person in a joint social and political order. This order is democratic, but it is also very hierarchical. Since belonging to the political community includes having a place in its social structure, being subjected to hierarchy is not an expression of a lack of dignity to most villagers, but the expression of being embedded in a relationship. Elections, whose procedural rules express democratic equality, thus integrate equality and hierarchy into a common social logic. Instead of merely expressing political hierarchies or patronage relations, they reaffirm the basis on which both are built.

The results

Can understanding what elections mean to people also help to explain election results? SWAPO received 88% of the parliamentary votes in Oshikango constituency, 91% in Ohangwena Region and 80% nationally. RDP only garnered a dismal 6.5% in the constituency and 4.7% in the region. On the national level, it received 3.5% and lost its status as the largest opposition party to DTA (4.8%). Results in the presidential elections showed a similar pattern, with 86.7% of votes for Hage Geingob.[17]

Political analysts have explained such results by a combination of factors: deep-seated loyalty towards a liberation movement that, during the struggle, managed to emerge as the representative of the Namibian nation;[18] opposition parties' weakness and their lack of any alternative vision;[19] a logic of patronage fuelled by redistribution through pensions and grants, exclusive control of public service jobs and the tendency of people who are just coping to vote for the status quo rather than for any change that might make things worse.[20]

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[17] Henning Melber, "Post-liberation democratic authoritarianism: The case of Namibia", *Politikon*, 42, 2015: 45-66, gives an overview of earlier results and trends.

[18] Dobler, "Elections"; Henning Melber, "Namibia: from liberation to domination", in: Renate Doorenspleet and Lia Nijzink, (eds.), *Party Systems and Democracy in Africa*, New York, Palgrave, 2014: 87-104; idem, *Understanding Namibia* .

[19] Ian Cooper, "It's my party: Opposition politics, party motivation and electoral strategy in Namibia", *Journal of Southern African Studies* , 40, 2014: 111-127; Maximiliam Weylandt, "The 2014 National Assembly elections and presidential elections in Namibia", *Electoral Studies*, 38: 126-130.

[20] Niehaus, "Doing politics".

Survey data support these explanations. Namibians do not necessarily distrust opposition parties – 53% of Afrobarometer respondents 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that opposition parties presented a viable alternative vision for the country, and 46% said they trusted opposition parties 'somewhat' or 'a lot' –, but they generally see no reason to favour them over the governing party. Even though more than 60% of respondents think the government is doing badly in creating jobs and improving the living standards of the poor, between 72% and 87% think SWAPO is still better able to control prices, create jobs and improve basic health services than the opposition.[21] Most Namibians, in short, are partly unhappy about government's performance, but they do not think the opposition would do a better job.

Although this seems a straightforward enough explanation for SWAPO's continuing success, it leaves the most important question unanswered: *why* do people think that SWAPO is the better option? Is trust in SWAPO based on the evaluation of policy facts, or is that evaluation coloured by a trust in SWAPO that has a different origin?

What, in other words, are elections in Namibia really about?

This is where the ethnography of voting can help us to understand patterns. My material confirms Frederic Schaffer's assertion that we fail to understand elections if we conceive of voting in terms of rational choice and interest aggregation – otherwise, since everybody knew SWAPO would win the elections, waiting through the night would not have made sense. Unlike Schaffer and Niehaus, though, I do not see voting primarily as an expression of mutuality and a means to manage patronage networks.[22]

Elections in Odibo were more about *political identity* than about *political interest* – including political interest in resources channelled through patronage networks. They gave people the opportunity to express and reaffirm who they are: individuals endowed with rights; members of a structured village community that, in spite of and through all differences, creates belonging; and citizens of a state who have a share in their leaders' authority, legitimacy and dignity.

Identity, in this sense, is certainly not an underlying, pre-existing trait that all villagers organically share. It is the outcome of a specific history that has created a sense of moral obligation, belonging and mutual ties, ties in which villagers' relationship to the state – seen as the outcome of the struggle – is embedded.

Relationships to the state and to state institutions are partly organised through family ties and patronage networks, but both are embedded in a solidarity many people feel deeply. The solidarity emerged during the struggle and is fuelled by a constant hierarchical exchange, in which all parties acknowledge the other's dignity. This exchange gives sense to patronage relationships – not the other way around. Instead of merely giving voice to their interests, voters reaffirmed their own moral identity. As a

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[21] Afrobarometer, *Results Round 6*: 39, 27, 38.

[22] Schaffer, *Democracy*; Niehaus, "Doing politics".

consequence, the way voters relate to the governing party influenced how they evaluated their interests, rather than being shaped by independently existing interests.[23]

The strong link between identity, community and political self is the outcome of the village public's management of conflict through acknowledgment of hierarchical community and of each other's public dignity.[24] It is not only compatible with, but forms the social basis of SWAPO's insistence on 'unity' or 'unity in diversity'. Applied to national politics, it can simultaneously produce belonging and authoritarian tendencies.[25]

Disaffection

As long as this consensus on identity encompasses large parts of the population, the prospects for Namibia's opposition look bleak. Even people whose trust in SWAPO's government has been eroded do not necessarily vote for another party.

A growing number of young Namibians indeed feel excluded from social participation. Staggering school dropout and unemployment rates, increasing inequality expressed in sharply divided opportunities for consumption and self-assertion, and generally the inability to emancipate themselves in a society dominated by their elders have created a growing sense of disaffection among the youth. Due to the strong link between moral and political community, this frustration in society often translates into disaffection from the state. The affirmative consensus of a village going to the polls becomes yet another sign of one's own exclusion.

After the elections, I asked many people whether they had cast their vote, and if not, what had prevented them from voting. Non-voters' answers were sometimes apologetic, sometimes defiant. Apart from a few who gave practical reasons for not being able to vote, all emphatically told me that voting will not change anything. "The people will vote for SWAPO anyway. And none of the opposition parties is any better." "What am I going to change by casting my vote? Whether it's Geingob or Hamutenya, what does that

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[23] The way I use 'identity' here is very similar to notions of a moral community employed e.g. by Mattia Fumanti, *The Politics of Distinction: African Elites from Colonialism to Liberation in a Namibian Frontier Town*, Windhoek, UNAM Press, 2016, or, in different terms, by Kristin D. Philips, "Pater rules best: political kinship and party politics in Tanzania's presidential elections", *Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, 33, 2010: 109-132. People do, however, belong to different moral communities at once – say, Anglican churchgoers, Ukuanyama traditionalists, subsistence agriculturalists etc. To the core voters of SWAPO in Odibo, this particular political moral community encompasses the others to a higher degree than the others manage to encompass it. This, to me, justifies calling it an identity.

[24] This is very compatible with Robert Ross, *A Respectable Age,* Leiden, Universiteit Leiden, 2014, who reads Southern African history through the denial of and search for respectability.

[25] See Melber, "Post-liberation". I share much of Melber's analysis of SWAPO politics and fear that a likely crisis of the economy might push the country further into the authoritarian direction. Still, I find the term 'democratic authoritarianism' too close to Giovanni Gentile's 'democrazia autoritaria' and Joseph Goebbels' 'autoritäre Demokratie' to characterize Namibia.

change? No, man, that voting thing has nothing to do with me", one young female shopkeeper told me.

Such statements express more than just frustration with the absence of any meaningful opposition. They show a clear rift between parts of the 'born free' generation and their elders. Most of those who lived through apartheid and the liberation struggle still see voting as tangible sign that they have regained their dignity as citizens and belong to the political community. For younger non-voters, the opposite is true: the very act of voting would both necessitate and signal a degree of belonging they no longer feel. Even to voice protest by casting their votes for the opposition (with whom many feel little solidarity), they would need to silently acknowledge the majority's consensus.[26]

The only act of open defiance within their power was to make a show of not voting, or, by 'misbehaving', to transform the event into one that followed their own rules. This explains the crowds of young people hovering at the margins of the polling event, simultaneously drawn to it and unable to become a part of it. The village bars, disregarding regulations against the sale of alcohol on polling day, remained open and crowded with young people getting drunk. Many first-time voters appeared at the polling station late in the evening, noisily laughing and shouting to each other and treating the elections as a spectacle in which they might even participate if socialising with friends allowed it.

A good part of this disaffection is caused by the leaden weight of SWAPO's majority. It is the flipside of the consensus of mutual acknowledgment and patronage that defines the smaller and wider public sphere. Where voting expressed one's ability to participate in political exchanges as an acknowledged member of the local society, the padlock on the polling station's door was an effective symbol of the minority's anger and exclusion.

Discussions accompanying the elections on the national level show that Odibo, the small but well-connected village society, is not exceptional in this regard. At a SWAPO rally in Windhoek, the SWAPO Secretary General acting as Master of Ceremonies announced the President and asked the crowd, in words formerly used to announce the entry of the Ukwanyama King, to 'omake aafyoona nye': 'rise, you commoners', literally 'rise, you poor people'. Intended as a playful sign of respect for the President, the words produced an enormous storm of protest across the country. The words had hit home by exposing the tenuous nature of the solidarity between the governed and the governing, and the widespread fears that, while the governed were fulfilling their part of the social contract, the governing no longer accorded them the respect that can legitimate relations of power by transforming them into an expression of social integration.

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[26] The same dynamics hold true on the level of national party politics – see Henning Melber, Daniela Kromrey, Martin Welz, "Changing of the guard? An anatomy of power within SWAPO", *African Affairs*, 116, 2007: 284-310; Markus Bayer, "Swapo Forever? Prospect for liberal democracy or prolonged one-party dominance in Namibia", *Journal of Namibian Studies*, 21, 2017: 27-54. The exclusionary character of party networks is reinforced by their economic role as means of access to state contracts; see, for example Gregor Dobler, "China in Namibia. How a new actor changes the dynamics of political economy", *Review of African Political Economy*, 153, 2017: 449-465.

Conclusion

Voting is more than a tool to come to political decisions. It is, for people in rural Northern Namibia, a central occasion to inscribe themselves into the nation's political commonwealth, and to situate their own subjectivity in relation to their local and national society. Only when we take the performative dimension of elections seriously and analyse voting as a social practice can we comprehend why people vote at all, and understand the persistence of voting patterns.

In the introduction, I identified coercion, rational self-interest and cultural norms as the three predominant explanations why and how people vote. Isak Niehaus has strongly advocated a neo-patrimonial perspective. Despite their disillusionment voters in Bushbackridge, Niehaus argues, continue to vote for the ANC out of a transactional logic. They live on social grants paid by the ANC government, and "simply cannot afford to bite the hand that feeds them".[27]

In contrast, Mukulika Banerjee argues that the perseverance and verve with which Indian poor continue to vote cannot be understood in a transactional logic. Instead, she sees the vote as providing "one of the very few ways to express one's citizenship [...] in a [...] dignified mode", whose "egalitarian mechanics [...] afforded particular pleasure" – "a festival for the people" and an expression of *communitas*.[28]

Both Niehaus' and Banerjee's explanations resonate with aspects of my own account of the elections in Odibo. Promises of resources flowing featured in all campaign speeches, often coupled with threats of what would happen should the other side win. Many young educated people looking for government jobs see open solidarity with SWAPO as an important part of their résumés; many old people still look to SWAPO, the liberation movement that fought for them, as the body that ensures their state pensions.

On the other hand, I find Banerjee's analysis of voting as a ritual of belonging and equality compelling. I do not see what villagers in Odibo should really stand to gain or lose by voting for a different party, and I do not think they are as badly informed or as apolitical as to vote against their own interests. Why should they wait patiently in a queue only to bring about an election outcome they have been sure of from the start?

Both explanations separate what can only be fully understood if considered in relation to each other. In Abner Cohen's terms, where Niehaus privileges power relations, Banerjee stresses symbolic behaviour, but neither shows how both are integrated and mutually informing.[29] There is more to voting than rational calculations of utility and interest, but if voting is a ritual, we cannot understand it without reference to *what exactly* it brings into a symbolic form, thereby simultaneously reproducing and transforming it: power, belonging and democratic rights.

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[27] Niehaus, "Doing politics": 545.

[28] Banerjee, "Sacred elections": 1560f.; see also idem, "Elections as communitas".

[29] Abner Cohen, "Political anthropology: The analysis of the symbolism of power relations", *Man, New Series*, 4, 1969: 215-235.

Twenty years ago, Bruce Berman showed how in the formation of ethnicity, symbolic form and power relations were mutually constitutive for each other.[30] 'Moral ethnicity' and 'political tribalism' are two sides of the same coin, and sociation within a group simultaneously produces hierarchies and belonging. In the same vein, we cannot separate neo-patrimonialism from political rituals. They derive their force and legitimacy from each other. The ritual reinforces the logic of belonging in which alone patronage makes sense. Clients perceive the resources channelled through patronage as tangible proof that the social contract is still valid and the universe of politics' moral economy still intact.

This interrelation between the symbolic and the power dimension of sociation holds as true for 'citizens' as for 'subjects'. This is not the place to use village politics in Northern Namibia for a critique of the accurate, but one-sided image of African politics emerging from Berman's or Mahmood Mamdani's well-known analyses.[31] Participatory democracy, just like its less friendly brother 'uncivil nationalism', is simultaneously a moral order and a system of power imbalances. Elections are so powerful precisely because both dimensions intersect in them. In a democratic framework, they provide the possibility to reaffirm the political economy's moral order through a free choice as a moral person. In this, they stand for and reaffirm a covenant – a social contract in the fullest sense of the term.

The outcome is fundamentally hierarchical and endows people with very different chances; the only real equality it creates is the common integration of all into a political body. We might call this 'democracy as fetish',[32] a false promise of equality that never lives up to reality. It certainly enables the powerful to reproduce the status quo unchallenged and to continuously betray the trust placed in them. At the same time, it is witness to a much deeper engagement with democracy than conventional wisdom would suggest.

When the social contract expressed in voting remains unfulfilled, such deep engagement can exclude as well as integrate. For the majority of Namibians today, a combination of symbolic form and social grants allows a feeling of integration to prevail over experiences of inequality. A growing number of young people, however, have never felt part of the moral order and are increasingly marginalised by its power relations. The big question for liberation movements in power in Southern Africa in this situation is not so much whether they will be re-elected in the next election, or the one after. The question is whether they will be able to integrate such people into the social contract, and what will happen if they fail to do so.

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[30] Bruce Berman, "Ethnicity, patronage and the African state: The politics of uncivil nationalism", *African Affairs*, 97, 1998: 305-341.

[31] Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject. Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1996.

[32] Begoña Aretxaga, "A fictional reality: paramilitary death squads and the construction of state terror in Spain", in: Jeffrey Sluka, (ed.), *Death Squad: The Anthropology of State Terror*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009: 46-69.

As to research on elections in Africa and beyond, ethnographic studies cannot and should not replace more conventional studies. Just like elections, attempts to understand their impact have to aggregate across a political territory; this sits uneasily with ethnographic methods. The formation of a political will, however, entails more than can be explained by surveys. Understanding it calls for complementary methods that enable us to ask how elections are embedded in everyday life. If we regard voting as a neutral procedural device alone, we will fail to understand its consequences for real-world democracies.

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