

Everyone was home: a couple of brothers had made the trek north from Oranjemund, a mining town on the southern border with South Africa. The lawyer from Windhoek had come north to Owamboland for a week. Their wives - and a swarm of children - accompanied them. The two sisters, one a teacher and the other an entrepreneur, were at the homestead as well.

As the homestead swelled, the noise level increased. Children sprinted around after each other. Dogs barked. Chickens, the ubiquitous underfoot animal on all Owambo homesteads, screeched as they had to evade even more feet than normal.

I loved interacting with the folks who stayed on my homestead all the time: their acceptance of me - this very obviously different white American - from day one was a thing to marvel at. When everyone descended on the homestead, the number of viewpoints exploded. I appreciated hearing about life in the south, or in the big city of Windhoek.

As we sat under the plastic roof, the conversation turned to life under apartheid rule. I was fascinated by the topic. During the months since I'd arrived on the homestead I had pieced together parts of the family's story, and knew that so much had happened to them in the struggle to end the racist South African rule in Namibia, and I had pieced together parts of the story. But it wasn't a topic I ever wanted to broach, and for obvious reasons. When the lawyer - Tomas - said, "I actually sometimes miss life under apartheid," I couldn't pick my jaw up off the ground. What? How? With all the family had been through!

Months earlier as I left the Peace Corps swearing in ceremony with my principal, I had that distinct 'What the heck am I doing here?' feeling. For the first time, things got real for me. The group of volunteers with whom I started to learn about Namibia, about its language, and its customs with was gone, off to their placements around northern Namibia. Now I was on my own to learn the country, the language, and the customs.

And what was Namibia? What *is* Namibia? As a 23 year old somewhat disenchanted with America's consumer, "me-me-me" culture, it was easy to romanticize Third World countries as places where people lived off the land, places where people were worried about 'us' as opposed to 'I', places where people were happy with what they had.

Regardless of what I thought Namibia might be, my new home was, in a word, different. The northern part of the country, where my group of volunteers were stationed, was flat as a pancake. A few palm trees dotted the horizon, but most trees anywhere near a village of any size had been cut down and used as firewood. The visual impact of the flatness combined with the lack of trees was initially quite jarring, especially to the green American Midwest where I grew up or the mountains of Colorado where I had just finished college. Owamboland - another name for northern Namibia taken from the tribe that lived there, the Owambo people - had the biggest sky I had ever (and still have ever) seen.

In contrast to the jarring landscape was the kindness of the Owambo people, which was evident from the very beginning of my Peace Corps service. It was something to behold. As I stumbled my way through conversations my first few months in the north, every attempt I made to interact with Namibians in their language was met with smiles. And pantomiming ... lots of pantomiming. And a lot of "*Popya kashona*" (literally speak small, more accurately speak slowly) thrown in by me in an attempt to understand a little more of what was being said. Certainly some of this was the whole 'this white dude trying to speak our language' amusement factor. But the understanding smiles and nods made a huge difference for me in my first few months in Namibia.

One thing - besides the skyline - that took some getting used to was punctuality in northern Namibia. Or the lack of punctuality. Meeting times seemed to be mere suggestions. Something's starting at 1:30? Won't start until 2 ... at least. And apologies for tardiness weren't ever particularly forthcoming from the offending parties. So slowly, we visitors adjusted to this. After a while, we assumed that things would start late. It just became an expected thing.

During Peace Corps training, we volunteers shared observations about these different things that we encountered on a regular basis. One of the ongoing discussions we had was when would Namibia - this so-very-different country - seem normal? This conversation would always lead to more interesting stories of cultural acclimatization. Ultimately, the conversation would end with a volunteer tossing out a date - "March 24th" - for when Namibia would finally seem normal to us. Laughter always ensued and the conversation moved forward.

But the thing was, Namibia did become normal. Things stopped surprising me. A fully cooked dog waiting to be eaten? Not something I had seen, but not abnormal. My students being absolutely transfixed by two men riding by on horseback? Well, given that the vast majority of them had never seen a horse before it wasn't a surprise. Not abnormal. Slowly but surely, Namibia became less exotic. Less different. More home.

And as my understanding of Namibia increased, my perception of what was different changed as well. One day I walked down to a set of *cuca* shops - everpresent tin shacks that dotted small villages in the north and sold basic staples - with one of the *memes* (mothers) that lived on my homestead. This mile long walk should have taken about 20 minutes. It took us close to an hour. Every person we came past necessitated a conversation:

How is your family?

What about your son?

No, not the old one that lives in Tsumeb. The younger one at school in Ongwediva.

Yes, that one. Going to be a teacher? Excellent.

How are the crops?

What about your cattle herd?

Another calf was born? That's excellent!

These weren't trivial conversations, or conversations carried out for show purposes. This was a connected community, where people knew each other. And at that moment, all of a sudden, it became clear why people were always late for meetings: it was impossible to wander by a community member and just say hi. These relationships, these conversations were so valued by the community, more so than punctuality. And to be honest, that was kind of neat. And definitely unique. It was clearly a valuable difference in mindset from what I was used to having spent the first 23 years of my life in America.

This tight-knit community that I became a part of was not a rich community. The vast majority of my students lived below the United Nations-designated poverty line of \$2 per day. Was life easy? No. The backbreaking work of hoeing the sand that served as the fields for *mahangu*, a member of the sorghum family, grew in was just that: back-breaking. Herds of cattle and goats - the main forms of protein in Owambos' diets - were watched over by young men who had already completed their schooling. But as long as the rains came, the *mahangu* grew and the cattle and goats had grass to eat. And the Owambos had food to eat. And the rains came every year sometime between January and March. (Interestingly, the word for both year and rain - *omvula* - are the same in Oshiwambo, the language of northern Namibia.)

The Owambos were SURVIVORS. Namibia was initially colonized by Germany in the late 19th century during Europe's scramble for African colonies. The first genocide of the 20th century occurred by German hands on the Herero people of eastern Namibia. South Africa invaded Namibia in World War I and took control of the country from Germany. After Germany's loss in World War I, control of Namibia went from South Africa to the League of Nations before control of Namibia was returned to South Africa in 1920. The election of the National Party in South Africa in 1948 marked the onset of apartheid in both South Africa and Namibia. Despite protests to the United Nations and the International Court of Justice, South Africa's occupation of Namibia continued through the 1960s, a time when many other African countries received or gained independence from their colonizers.

The South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO, still the largest political party in Namibia) was formed from a smaller Owambo political party in 1960 and renamed to represent all Namibians - not just northerners - in the fight for independence from South Africa. In 1966, in response to a setback ruling from the International Court of Justice, SWAPO's armed wing was formed and violent resistance to South Africa's rule in Namibia began.

The Namibian war for independence was a guerilla war that stretched for more than two decades and ended with Namibia receiving its independence from South Africa in 1990.. Both sides - the Namibian rebels and the South African counterinsurgency forces - were accused of committing atrocities. The vast majority of the fighting in the war for independence took place in Owamboland.

My *tate kulu* (grandfather in Oshiwambo), the head of my host family's household had lived in

the same village in Owamboland his whole life. He had served as the pastor of the church in my village for decades and had recently retired when I went to live with him. His children had been born and raised in the village where I was serving as a volunteer. As both a pastor and an elder, *tate kulu* was a highly respected member of the community. Given that he had been a pastor for years, his family was better off than most in my community. His children had opportunities most other village members did not because *tate kulu* could afford to send his children away to secondary school.

His children were wonderful people. The lawyer was whip-smart and always had an interesting take on Namibian issues. The entrepreneur had an unconventional intelligence and was a woman in a business field dominated by men. The miner's tales about how different - but also how similar - life in Oranjemund was to life in the north always intrigued me and made me think.

As time went on, I slowly started to piece together the existence of another brother people rarely mentioned. It had taken time to connect the dots: even as my Oshiwambo improved, figuring out this hidden fact wasn't the easiest thing. Slowly, though, the story came together.

Mateo was one of the middle children in the family. He was a gregarious young man with a sharp mind. He had flourished in school and gone on to college, which is rare for most Namibians. After college, he had returned to the north and become a radio host on the biggest of the Owambo radio stations. Mateo's popularity had grown quickly once he landed the job. He was always vocal about social issues, particularly regarding Namibian independence from South Africa.

As Namibian armed resistance to South African rule continued, Mateo's outspokenness about the illegality of South African occupation and brutality intensified. He trumpeted Namibian victories in clashes with South African troops around the north. In short, he became a royal - and very vocal - pain for the South Africans trying to continue their dominance of Namibia.

As best I could figure out, the Koevoet, a South African paramilitary group, had Mateo assassinated in the mid-1980s. This loss hit the family hard ... very hard. The war for independence raged on around them in the north. The South African troops, trying to fight the Namibian guerilla tactics, had to lean on local leaders to get information about suspected rebels. As a community leader (and father of Mateo), *tate kulu* was often leaned on - and far worse - for information about troops in the area. Church windows were repeatedly smashed. Cattle disappeared at the hands of hungry South African troops. Fields of *mahangu* were burned. The Namibian war for independence was, to say the least, an extremely trying time for my host family. As I learned of Mateo and the difficulty my host family had had at the hands of white South African rulers, I was deeply moved by my family's decision to host me, someone who looked so much like their former tormentors and oppressors, in their home.

So when Tomas said he remembered the days of apartheid fondly, you could have knocked me over with a feather. I was shocked. Astounded even. Without sounding too incredulous, I asked

to hear more. I wanted, *needed*, a rationale for this statement, a statement so in contrary to my perception of Namibian reality. Tomas briefly acknowledged the difficulties of life as a black Namibian under white South African rule and then continued on. He talked about how paved roads to the north were made by South Africans and how this had been a huge boost to the infrastructure of the north. How he had gotten good schooling in Windhoek thanks in part to South Africans. How he was able to go to university in South Africa and study law thanks to South Africans. How, though times were tough, it was what he had known and grown up with.

The complexity and compartmentalization of his answer further fascinated me. I wanted to ask about fifty more questions, right then and there. However, I hesitated. How far could I push? How much of the painful past could I dredge up from this family that had shown me so much kindness? Was that fair?

And just like that, the conversation moved on to something else. I have no recollection of what. But in the moment that had just passed, a moment of such stark contradiction, I was as fascinated and intrigued as I had ever been.

Namibia is a land of beautiful people, places, and animals. There is an abundance of natural beauty. Etosha Park has some of the best game viewing in the world, and the diversity of animals along the Chobe River on the Botswanan border is truly breathtaking. Fish River Canyon is immense. The barren western coast along the Atlantic Ocean - so drastically cooler than the rest of this desert land - has a stark beauty to it. And even the flatness of Owambo land, with its immense sky, has a beauty I still miss, almost ten years after serving as a volunteer in Namibia.

But what makes Namibia special? To me it is the people, with all their contradictions and troubled history, who are still there and so proud to be Namibians.