



Tradition

by Laura Sasman • photographs Contributed

SINCE THE MIDDLE OF AUGUST, NEWSPAPERS WERE FULL OF ARTICLES ABOUT ALLEGED CRITICISM SUPPOSEDLY BY 'SOME CHURCHES AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS CAMPAIGNERS...' OF THE OLUFUKO CULTURAL FESTIVAL IN SOME PARTS OF THE NORTH. THE ARTICLES WERE USUALLY ACCOMPANIED BY PHOTOGRAPHS DEPICTING THIS YEAR'S OLUFUKO MAIDENS IN THEIR 'TRADITIONAL' GEAR. THEY REMIND STRONGLY OF THE REED DANCES THAT ARE PERFORMED ANNUALLY IN SWAZILAND. THIS IS A SIGNIFICANT EVENT IN THE TOURIST CALENDAR OF THAT COUNTRY AND IT MAY BE USED AS A PLATFORM FOR THE KING OF THAT COUNTRY TO SELECT THE NEWEST COURTESAN.

Whatever the function of the reed dance might be, I have persisting questions of my own about the reinvention and promotion of Olufuko in Namibia.

Gleaning from an article of the event in 2013 (when the event was performed only once before,) we are informed that 'this rite of passage was used to prepare girls for their roles as respected adults in society, such as cultivating mahangu fields, pounding Mahangu and preparing meals for their families and other tradi-

tional food items, as well as weaving baskets and making clay pots...' (this from a speech on Olufuko made by our Founding President.) From the little that I know of northern Namibia, all of these are chores that young girls and women are performing routinely on a daily basis without the hooha of a cultural event.

We are told that the ceremony 'is done in order to give...our people pride in celebrating their traditions and age-long customs.' I gather that Olufuko fell into disuse



more than eighty years ago. What longevity is referred to in 'age-long' of a by-gone practise?

Since its first re-enactment a mere seven years ago, the event has been promoted and driven by, amongst others, very high (male) dignitaries, including our Father of the Nation, our former President and, this year, our vice President. In a speech made in 2013, our Father of the Nation revealed 'that a central premise and principle behind the revival of culture in general and the Olufuko festival in particular is to empower the people and to dismantle foreign influences from

citizens' everyday life.' I need an explanation as to whether these 'foreign influences' have anything to do with Namibians embracing Christianity as dominant (if not only) faith, the promotion of democracy and equality, international standards for education and health care, modern technology, air travel, designer fashion, hair extensions and all the comforts and advantages of living in the 21st. century. What is empowering to Olufuko participants in being paraded half-naked to visiting dignitaries, various VIPs and to the media at large? Were they ever consulted about if and how they may want to be presented? Judging by the photos that I have seen, they all look rather unhappy (perhaps at being ogled by our dear leaders?)

What is culture if not a reflection of the incredible ability of human beings and communities to adjust, create meaning, relevance and identity in relation to ourselves and to others in a constantly changing and pluralistic world and environment? Must we really turn back the clock to a reinvention of anthropological versions of so-called tradition and culture that is better placed on the side of airport runways as entertainment for visiting foreign and local VIPs and tourists alike? Is it not possible to celebrate those cultural aspects and practices that promote building our nation on the principles of unity and respect for all rather than the creation of regional or ethnic clientele groups?♀



FAST FACTS

As September is the suicide prevention month.

- **SUICIDE REPRESENTS ONE OF THE TOP TEN LEADING CAUSES OF DEATH** worldwide among reproductive-age women.
- Namibia has higher rates of suicide of 22.5 persons per 100 000 as compared to the world average of 16 per 100 000.
- **SUICIDE IS PREVENTABLE**, when a person is depressed they are NOT thinking, feeling or acting the way they normally do. Get them help.
- Risk of suicide during pregnancy is far lower in counties with greater access to legal abortion and less retributive attitudes towards abortion.
- **ONE PERSON TAKES THEIR LIFE EVERY 40 SECONDS GLOBALLY.**
- **DEPRESSION IS MORE COMMON IN WOMEN** than men.
- $\frac{3}{4}$ of **WOMEN WITH LOW SELF-ESTEEM ENGAGE IN SUICIDE** attempts.
- **ACCESS TO A GUN INCREASES THE RISK OF DEATH BY SUICIDE** by three times.
- **MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS ARE OFTEN SEEN AS THE CAUSE OF SUICIDE**, but suicide is rarely caused by any single factor.