

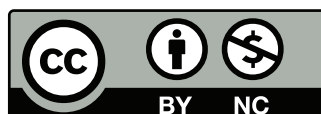
“It’s actually a bridge for you to cross over into womanhood”: Ritual transformation and transportation in the Olufuko Cultural Festival in Northern Namibia

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Abstract

The Owambo female initiation rite known as Olufuko in Northern Namibia has been at the centre of public debate since the launch of the Olufuko Cultural Festival in 2012. This is a large-scale cultural festival where dozens of young women are initiated. The Namibian Lutheran Church and the local human rights organisation have strongly opposed the revalidation of the ritual. Although Olufuko has sparked a heated debate, scholars have paid little attention to what the ritual actually involves. This article focuses on the ritual that takes place at the Olufuko Cultural Festival, considering the multifaceted nature of the festival. The main question addressed in this article is what Olufuko does to the actors. Performance theory is used to analyse the ritual and to illuminate what happens in it. Due to the nature of the festival, the ritual is simultaneously efficacy and entertainment. The ritual transforms the status of the initiates permanently, making them women. It transports the other participants temporarily into their role in the ritual, after which they return to their original selves. This study showed that the liminal phase of Olufuko has two main characteristics: first, the transformation of girl into woman, and second, the preparation for motherhood and the enhancement of fertility.

Keywords: female initiation, Namibia, Olufuko, ritual, performance theory



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Introduction

Olufuko is a female initiation ritual practised among the Owambo people in the northern parts of Namibia. According to Erastus Kautondokwa (2014), Olufuko is a local event, practised in the rural areas in the presence of the initiates’ families. In contrast, the annually held Olufuko Cultural Festival is a large-scale and heavily sponsored cultural festival where a great number of young women are initiated. Since 2012, the town of Outapi in the Omusati region of Northern Namibia has arranged the Olufuko Cultural Festival, and at the centre of this cultural festival is the female initiation ritual, Olufuko. Every year, before the actual festival, the Olufuko Preparatory Committee holds a gala dinner where the committee fundraises for the festival. Companies and prominent persons such as Namibia’s first president Sam Nujoma have donated money to the cause. Besides the ritual, the festival serves as a platform for local entrepreneurs and contemporary music performers. From the beginning, the Olufuko Cultural Festival has received huge media attention. The number of initiates has been on the increase since its establishment. In the first year, there were approximately 20 initiates and in 2016, the number was over 80. Despite the increasing numbers of initiates, the festival has also received criticism. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia (ELCIN) and the National Society for Human Rights of Namibia (NamRights) have strongly opposed the practice of Olufuko. The ELCIN (2012) sees the Olufuko ritual as “paganistic” and not suitable for Christians, whereas NamRights argues that the practice leads to child marriages and the spread of HIV and Aids (Nangoloh 2014).

Despite the controversy over Olufuko, few ethnographic researchers have looked at what happens in the actual ritual. Therefore, this article concentrates on the ritual act itself rather than the public discussion, aiming

to give insight into the ritual.¹ At this point, I should emphasise that this article focuses on the ritual that takes place at the Olufuko Cultural Festival and not the initiation rituals that are practised in rural areas outside of the public eye (see Kautondokwa 2014). I have chosen this viewpoint because the Olufuko Cultural Festival as a public event is what has sparked heated debate in Namibia. The main goal of this article is to determine the different roles of the ritual actors at the festival and answer the question: what does Olufuko do to the actors in the ritual? The Olufuko Cultural Festival plays a pivotal role in cultural heritage discussions as it promotes Olufuko as part of Namibian heritage. Knowing what happens in the ritual will enable further study of the societal discussions surrounding the practice.

The empirical research data used in this article was collected in 2016 at the Olufuko Cultural Festival as part of a research project led by the University of Namibia (UNAM). The outcome of the research was a report (MuAshekele et al. 2018) prepared for Outapi Town Council in November 2017. The head of the research team was Professor Hina MuAshekele, a Research Professor at the Multidisciplinary Research Centre (MRC) at UNAM. Other members included Dr Michael Akuupa, a senior research anthropologist and academic associate with the MRC, as well as Director of the Labour Resource and Research Institute, and Erastus Kautondokwa, an anthropologist and a Senior Cultural Officer in the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture. I was a research assistant on the project, together with Nena Shivute and Hiskia Akuupa. I became involved with the research team when I was studying at UNAM as an exchange student in 2016. Due to the large media attention given to the festival, I had been following the Olufuko debate since 2012, and when I heard about UNAM’s research, I was immediately interested in participating. Pro-

¹ This article is based on fieldwork that I conducted in 2016 during my master’s studies at the University of Helsinki.

fessor MuAshekele took me on board, and Dr Akuupa became my supervisor. As Shivute and I were both young females, we were the ones selected to stay with the initiates at the Olufuko Cultural Festival area for the ritual week, observing the different practices and interviewing the initiates. It was obvious that as a white European, I was an outsider looking in. People were curious and asked me what I was doing there. When I told them about our research, they usually nodded their heads, saying that it was good that Olufuko was being studied. Some argued that the ritual needed to be studied to show how harmful the practice is, while others argued that the study needed to show the good sides of Olufuko.

The Olufuko Cultural Festival that we observed took place from 24 to 31 August 2016. Our key research participants were initiates and their guardians, ritual experts, and festival attendants. Of the 86 initiates that participated in the festival that year, 35 were interviewed during the festival week. At first, many of the initiates were shy and did not want to be interviewed, but, by the end of the festival, they were more open and talkative. They ranged in age from 15 to 24 years, and they came from various backgrounds. Some of them were university students and some came from the rural areas. Additionally, the research team interviewed 28 festival visitors, 25 guardians of the initiates, two ritual experts, and one ritual assistant. This article is based on the collected data and on my field notes from my stay in Outapi in May 2016 and again in August–September 2016.

In this article, I utilise Richard Schechner’s (1985, 1988) idea of performance theory to analyse the Olufuko ritual. Performance theory can be used to study parallel cultural performances, particularly in theatre and ritual. The theory’s emphasis on performance makes it a useful tool to study the practices at the Olufuko Cultural Festival, which combine both common festivities and the initiation ritual. I concentrate on the ritual actors and their roles to illuminate what Olufuko does to its

actors. Schechner (1985) makes a distinction between transformation and transportation in his performance theory and argues that these two can coexist in rituals. In my analysis, I will show how the Olufuko ritual transforms and transports its participants and how it transforms the initiates into women, prepares them for motherhood, and enhances their fertility.

In what follows, I will start by giving a brief background of the Olufuko Festival and explaining the idea behind performance theory. I then move on to describe the ritual actors and actions, which then allows me to show how the ritual transforms and transports its participants.

Revalidating Olufuko

The Owambo are the largest ethnic group in Namibia. At the beginning of the 19th century, the Owambo lived in areas that cover the northern parts of present day Namibia and southern parts of Angola (Miettinen 2005b; Salokoski 2006). Today, the area is divided into four different regions: Omusati, Oshana, Oshikoto, and Ohangwena. The town of Outapi, where the Olufuko Cultural Festival is held annually, is situated in the heart of the Omusati region, which belongs to the Ombalantu area. In this area, the female initiation ritual is known as *Olufuko*, whereas in the Ondonga area the ritual is known as *Ohango* and in Oukwanyama as *Efundula* (Becker 2004; Groop 2014).

According to Märta Salokoski (2006), the Owambo were Bantu-speaking agro-pastoralists who migrated from the north and north-east over a long period of time. Kari Miettinen (2005b) notes that in the 19th century, the social structure of the Owambo was matrilineal and inheritance followed the mother’s family line. Miettinen also points out that even though the Owambo societies were matrilineal, everyday life had strong patriarchal influences. This was perceptible especially in the relationships between husband and wife, and father and child. However, Heike Becker (2007) questions the

assumption that women’s social position was somehow inferior. She argues that, in 19th century Ovamboland, gender was not the most important determinant in one’s identity. As she writes: “Belonging to the nobility was far more important for how individuals would see themselves, and the power they could exert, than being a ‘woman’ or a ‘man’” (2007, 25). In addition, Becker (2005) points out that before the colonial encounter and the arrival of Christianity, Owambo women were active in political power, ritual leadership, and in the transmission of oral history and traditions.

One of the few anthropological studies of Olufuko is Erastus Kautondokwa’s (2014) master’s thesis. Kautondokwa observed the Olufuko rituals conducted in the Ombadja and Ombalantu areas in 2012 and 2013. In his study, he analyses the post-independent Olufuko in the light of Namibian identity discourse. His research material is unique in that it focuses on the ritual as it is practised in rural areas, which differs from the Olufuko Cultural Festival because it is more intimate and does not include the festival aspect. One of Kautondokwa’s observations concerns change in the ritual tradition. During his research, he witnessed the initiation of two young girls. One was dressed in traditional clothing while the other was “dressed in a Western outfit” (Kautondokwa 2014, 27–28). As the sister of the girl with the “Western outfit” claimed, the girl had chosen the clothes herself because she considered the ritual to be for her, and thus she thought that she had the right to wear whatever she wanted. The Olufuko rituals Kautondokwa observed lasted from three to six days. In the shorter versions, the daily activities were merged and the number of days was reduced.

The idea of the Olufuko Cultural Festival was born around 2003–2004, when the members of Outapi Town Council were thinking of ways to raise the visibility and attractiveness of the town. As the town council explained to us in an interview (MuAshekele, Kuoppala, and Shivute, August 30, 2016), they were aware that tourists were driving through

Outapi to the Ruacana and Epupa Falls, and they wanted to attract the tourists and investors to the town itself. Other towns have their trade fairs but Outapi wanted something different. The town council had a meeting with stakeholders and the idea of Olufuko Cultural Festival was established. At first, the intention was to demonstrate how the initiation ritual used to be conducted in the past. However, they consulted ritual experts who stressed that the ritual could not be demonstrated, it could only be performed. This led to the creation of the present-day Olufuko Cultural Festival, where at the centre of all the festivities is the female initiation ritual. During the six-day-long festival, hundreds of visitors come and enjoy themselves and participate in the different activities available. The festival area includes food stalls, exhibition tents, a stage for the music performers, and the Olufuko kraal, where the ritual activities take place. The kraal is an indigenous homestead built according to Ombadja tradition just for the festivities.

Since its beginning, the festival has had two vocal opponents. The ELCIN has strongly opposed the revalidation of Olufuko. At a pastors’ conference at Ongwediva in July 2012, the ELCIN discussed the Olufuko case. Thereafter, they published a pastoral letter for press release in which they condemned the ritual. According to this pastoral letter, Olufuko is “against the Biblical teachings and principles” and “it infringes upon Christian values and morals [...] [and] encourages the youth to practise promiscuities which may also lead to the spread of HIV/AIDS” (ELCIN 2012). This letter is signed by Bishop Shekutaamba Nambala on behalf of all ELCIN pastors. The ELCIN has constantly reminded its members not to associate with Olufuko.

The other vocal opponent of Olufuko is NamRights, a human rights organisation operating in Namibia. Its founder and executive director, Phil ya Nangoloh, sued the Government of Namibia, traditional authorities of Ombalantu and Ombadja, and 16 other respondents in 2019 for organising the Olufuko

Cultural Festival (ya Nangoloh 2014). According to the court case, NamRights declared that Olufuko is a violation of constitutional and human rights. NamRights wanted the court to order the organisers to desist from organising the Olufuko Cultural Festival. The court dismissed the case in December 2019.

Initiation and performance

Transition rituals, including initiation rituals, move a person from one status to another. Arnold van Gennep (1909) points out how there are several rituals in human life that can be classified as rites of passage, such as graduation, marriage, and funerals. Van Gennep argues that rites of passage, or “life-crisis rites” as he calls them, follow a threefold structure: separation, transition, and incorporation. Anthropologist Victor Turner (1967, 1990) concentrated on the concept of liminality, the middle stage in Gennep’s threefold structure. Turner saw this stage as a no man’s land, where a person is caught between the “structural past” and the “structural future”. He describes this as a limbo where a person has not yet arrived at their destination. The initiates have no status, property, or anything that can distinguish them from the other initiates.

Richard Schechner is known for his work in performance studies. He draws on the work of Victor Turner and especially on ritual drama (e.g. Turner 1969, 1982). As a theatre director and scholar of performance studies, Schechner saw similarities between Turner’s description of liminality and actors preparing for a theatre performance. While Erving Goffman (1967) argues that every social interaction can be classified as a performance, Schechner concentrates on the notion of performance. Schechner (1985) argues that all performances, no matter what their ambition, share the same qualities. He points out that performance is a behaviour that is practised, rehearsed, and known in advance. It is an act that is generated by rules that govern the outcome, and the di-

versity of performance events does not change this nature. Schechner (1988) thus approaches ritual as a performance in which theatre and anthropology overlap.

The ritual experience unifies the participants. Victor Turner (1967, 1969) argued that in initiation rituals the initiates tend to share a sense of comradeship. There are no differences that distinguish the initiates from each other because they are stripped from their social status. According to Turner, this leads to an egalitarian atmosphere. There are no social differences present during the liminal phase; everyone is equal. The ritual experience unites the initiates together and a sense of *communitas* emerges. Turner (1969) uses the term “communitas” as distinct from community. He describes *communitas* as a state of equality that is created when the initiates are stripped of their original status. According to Turner, the initiate is “a blank slate” (1969, 103) on which the knowledge and wisdom of the group is inscribed.

In different types of performances, Schechner (1985) separates transformation from transportation. Rites of passage are categorised as transformation. These rituals permanently transform the status of a person, from girlhood into womanhood, fiancée to wife, or dead person to ancestor. Transportation, in contrast, can be understood as a practice that temporarily takes a person into a new role. After the performance, individuals return to their original selves. Stage actors, for instance, transport themselves into a new role in a play, but after the performance, they return to their original selves. Schechner (1985, 130) argues that these two types of performances, transportation and transformation, coexist in rituals in which “[w]hen the performance is over the transported have been returned to their place of entry and the transformed have been changed”. Schechner’s performance theory, and especially his concepts of transportation and transformation, are useful for my study as they allow me to detect the different roles that are active in the Olufuko Cultural

Festival, thus enabling me to study what the ritual does to these actors: which of them are transformed and which are transported?

Ritual actors in Olufuko

The Olufuko kraal where I stayed with my colleague Nena Shivute was full of people and everyone was part of the ritual in one way or another. Besides the initiates and their mothers, there were three older women, two ritual leaders, young girls who were assistants, and young boys representing the “future husbands”. The daily visitors to the festival consisted of the audience to whom the ceremony was performed, the politicians who supported the revalidation of the ritual, and members of the media observing the ritual, as well as the surrounding performances.

Typically, the Olufuko is performed in villages, with only a relatively small number of initiates attending. The Olufuko Cultural Festival is a large-scale event and the initiates come from different villages, towns, and traditions; because of this, initiates were dressed differently, reflecting their backgrounds. One of the first things that I noticed was that some of the initiates were plainly dressed and some had many accessories. One initiate told me that the number of accessories depended on their local customs. All initiates were bare-breasted, which caused heated discussion. In the first days, I noticed that the majority of the initiates were not comfortable being bare-breasted and they tried to conceal their bodies from the public gaze. But as the festival continued some of the initiates told me that the ritual took their shyness away and that they were proud of their bodies. The organisers defended “toplessness” as part of the indigenous culture, whereas NamRights has argued that the bare-breasted performance is harmful for the initiates. The cultural performance of “topless” young women has been studied, among others, by Maheshvari Naidu (2009a, 2009b), who has investigated cultural tourism in the

province of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Her studies raise issues related to the gendered representation of young Zulu-speaking girls in the cultural tourism industry. Naidu studies how young Zulu girls are positioned in tourism consumption as “Zulu maidens”. Part of this “authentic” aesthetic is the young girls being bare-breasted. Naidu’s findings can be applied to the Olufuko context because one of the aims of the Olufuko Cultural Festival is to raise the visibility of the town.

Due to the large number of initiates, there were two ritual experts and three ritual assistants. The ritual experts were referred to as *namuganga* and the assistants as *meekulu*, which is a respectful term for an elderly woman. The *meekulu* took care of the initiates and organised practical things, such as lining them up and getting them ready for the different events. The two *namuganga* were elderly women and they were the ones who conducted the ritual. Audrey Richards (1982) notes that among the Bemba in Zambia, these kinds of ritual leaders are usually elderly women with a respected status in their society. In Olufuko 2016, I was told that one *meekulu* was the wife of the chief of Ombalantu. Bruce Lincoln (1981) argues that if women initiate women then the ritual becomes an emancipation and celebration of womanhood. In contrast, when a male ritual leader initiates women, the initiation can be interpreted as imposed from outside. When all the ritual actors are female, the rite becomes a rite of solidarity. As Lincoln writes, “[r]ather than an act of oppression, initiation becomes an act of unity, of resistance, of commiseration” (1981, 92). In addition to these ritual actors, I also observed small children taking part in the ritual.

From the first day of the ritual I noticed that young girls aged between 6 and 8 followed the initiates everywhere. These girls were called *oufukwena*. Each initiate had two *oufukwena* helping her and following her everywhere, carrying baskets or other small items for her. As I talked to people in the festival area, I noticed that some people had misun-

derstood the role of these *oufukwena*. Some of them thought that the *oufukwena* were also to be initiated. For this reason, it should be emphasised that these little girls were not initiated. They had their own specific role in the ritual but were not transformed into women.

Even though the majority of the ritual actors were female, I also noticed that there were young boys aged between 7 and 10. They were called *eembuhiki* and their role was to represent the future husbands of the initiates. My informants introduced them to me as placeholders for the fiancés. This indicates the idea that every initiate was going to have a partner in their lives and that the *eembuhiki* represented those partners. The *eembuhiki* accompanied the initiates only in the first few days. The boys acted like husbands and they expressed whether or not they were satisfied with the food the initiates served them.

The spectators of the ritual were diverse, and they can be categorised into two separate groups. One group consisted of vendors, local residents, passers-by, and tourists. The other group consisted of the mothers, aunts, and grandmothers of the initiates. The first group remained as spectators and watched the ritual, but the other group moved from being spectators to being performers and back again, as they danced and sang during the ritual.

As I talked to the festival visitors, I noticed that some people did not have a clear picture of the ritual but were curious to find out what it was about. Other visitors were critical towards the establishment of Olufuko. Even though they were attending the festival, they expressed very strong criticism when I asked for their opinions on the revalidation of the ritual. Petrus, a 25-year-old man from Outapi, had come to the festival area with his family.² I met him at the festival stalls. He told me that he came to support the local businesses as he had done the year before. Of all the people I interviewed, Petrus expressed some of the most critical views about the festival. He

² Throughout the article, all the names of the informants have been changed to protect their privacy.

was especially dissatisfied with the way the festival portrayed the young girls. As Petrus explained:

You see sometimes we . . . these things they don’t match with our Christianity. It’s not morally correct to find those ladies there with, with their breasts out there and everybody is taking pictures of them and putting them on Facebook. It’s not correct. Because even those politicians who are talking there, none of their children are coming here to Olufuko. But they won’t . . . All those, if you make a research, all those children are children of poor people who are coming here. And they are the ones to be exposed by all these things. It’s immoral! And it’s not correct.³

Petrus certainly did not support the revalidation of Olufuko, even though he took part in the festivities. He saw the actions of the politicians as hypocritical. The politicians promote Olufuko yet they do not put their daughters through the initiation. There are no statistics on the financial backgrounds of the initiates and therefore it is hard to tell if Petrus is right in suggesting that all the initiates come from poor families. Petrus’ comment on the initiation being immoral is a common view held by the opponents of Olufuko. The initiates being bare-breasted, in particular, has led to heated discussions.

Schechner (1988) argues that ritual emphasises efficacy just as theatre emphasises entertainment. Ritual brings results whereas theatre is purely to entertain. In places, it was hard to tell whether the Olufuko ritual at the Olufuko Cultural Festival emphasised entertainment or efficacy. The hundreds of people who came to observe the events throughout the festivities had an active role in the dynamics of the ritual. Members of the audience have their own role as observers in rituals (Schech-

³ Petrus, interviewed by Saara Kuoppala, Outapi, August 27, 2016.

ner 1985), and the crowd changes the dynamics of the ritual (Appel and Schechner 1990). Anthropologist Corinne Kratz (1994), who has done ethnographical research among the Okiek of Kenya, divides the Okiek female initiation rite into two ritual sections. According to her, daytime events are more general and public, whereas the nocturnal section concentrates on the initiates. In Olufuko, the events that were public happened outside the Olufuko kraal, usually in the daytime. The more intimate events, where the focus was on the initiates, occurred inside the kraal. Although the public could observe all the events that happened during the festival opening hours (from 8 am to 10 pm), the events that took place inside the kraal were performed to a smaller audience, partly because of the lack of space and the additional entrance fee to enter the kraal.

Ritual actions in Olufuko

The Owambo female initiation is one of the oldest and most important rituals of the Owambo people (Tuupainen 1970). According to Kari Miettinen (2005b), the ritual “legalized sexual relations with her [the initiated female] and also gave her future children a legitimate status in society” (2005b: 50), meaning that an initiated female could become pregnant in a socially acceptable way. Many of my informants at the Olufuko Festival told me that the ritual allows the initiates to become respectable adults and to become pregnant without stigmatisation. Pregnancy of uninitiated females is seen as shameful. The ritual itself consists of several different ritual acts, which I have categorised in four different phases: 1) uniting both family lines, 2) transforming into women, 3) motherhood and fertility rites, and 4) concluding rites.

Uniting both family lines

On the first day of the ritual, I observed the initiates arriving at the festival area with their mothers, aunts, and grandmothers. The women arrived singing and ululating; overall, it was a female celebration. The initiates were dressed according to their tradition and their skin was covered with red ochre oil. According to Turner (1967, 1990), before entering the liminal phase, the initiates have to be stripped of their original selves. These initiates, as they arrived at the festival, were already dressed in their traditional clothes and thereby they had already been stripped of their ordinary selves. The initiates were no longer in their everyday role – they had become *ovafuko*.⁴ By putting on the traditional attire and covering their skin with ochre oil, they had differentiated themselves from their original selves.

The initiates at the Olufuko Cultural Festival were dressed differently and the hierarchy between them could be identified, which contradicts Turner’s (1967, 1969) description of the initiates as being egalitarian with no social differences. Throughout Olufuko, I noticed that the initiates needed to be lined up in a specific order. I was told that the first in line was the one who is the closest blood relation to the chief of Ombalantu. Because Outapi is the geographical heart of Ombalantu, the arrival of the chief of Ombalantu marked the starting point of the ritual. He arrived with his entourage late in the afternoon, and the initiates, *oufukwena* and *eembuhiki*, were in line to receive him. Mothers, grandmothers, and aunts were dancing and ululating. I moved along with the crowd that followed the chief from the festival gates towards the Olufuko kraal. At the kraal the chief met the *namuganga* and *meekulu* and they talked for a while, after which the day ended.

The next two days were similar in their rites. One of the members of the Olufuko Preparatory Committee told me that the second day symbolised the day of the father and the

⁴ The initiates were called *ovafuko*.

third day the day of the mother. This meant that all the products that were used during the second day came from the father’s side of the family while the products used on the third day came from the mother’s side. In this way, the two families were united through the initiate. If we understand the initiates as blank slates, as Turner suggests (1969), then the knowledge and wisdom of both family lines were inscribed into the initiate in those days. In the morning hours, I followed how the initiates gathered in line and were taken to the front of the Olufuko kraal. All the rites related to serving food and drink happen in front of the kraal, out in the public. In the mornings of the second and third days, the *eembuhiki* served the initiates *oshihupaela*, which is a traditional drink. After drinking the *oshihupaela*, the initiates were taken into the Olufuko kraal to a hut (*ondjugo*) that would traditionally belong to the first wife. Here they received *mahangu* grains from both family lines.⁵ The aunts and mothers applied red ochre oil to the skin of the initiates. I was told that this ochre oil was not to be wiped away until the last day of the ritual. I noticed that up to this point, the initiates had been passive, and the people around them were the ones performing the tasks (serving *oshihupaela*, applying the ochre oil, and giving the *mahangu* grains). Only at the *mahangu* pounding area were the initiates active, as they milled the *mahangu* grains into flour. I observed the initiates pounding the *mahangu* in shifts, each one pounding the grain for several minutes. Both of these days ended with a communal dinner in front of the Olufuko kraal where the initiates served food for the *eembuhiki* and *oufukwena*. The initiates themselves did not eat in public.

⁵ *Mahangu* can be compared to pearl millet. *Mahangu* plays an important role in the everyday life of the Owambo people.

Transforming into women

The fourth day of the ritual is the most important day of the whole initiation. This day is called *efundula* and it marks the official opening day of the Olufuko Cultural Festival, even though the festival and the ritual commence days earlier. In 2016, when we observed the ritual, it was a Saturday and a national holiday. The festival area was packed with people who had come to witness the much-debated initiation, to enjoy the festivities, and to hear the speeches of the politicians. The events of the ritual started only after the sun had set. Otherwise, the day was full of performances and activities that were part of the festival but were not connected to the ritual itself. On this day the initiates were active and the *eembuhiki* and *oufukwena* did not take part in the performances.

When the sun was setting, I observed the *meekulu* ordering the initiates into line. The initiates were instructed to hold onto the hips of the initiate in front of them with their heads down. The *meekulu* told the initiates to circulate the whole of the Olufuko kraal, starting from the *ondjugo*, going through the cattle enclosure, and ending up back at the *ondjugo*. When I visited members of the Olufuko Preparatory Committee in May 2016, I asked them to describe the ritual. They explained this act in detail and they told me that it was believed that if an uninitiated woman entered the enclosure, the cattle would die. In an Owambo homestead, the enclosure and cattle have traditionally been related to male wealth. According to Salokoski (2006), “[t]he cattle pen was an area of the house that women could not enter in normal circumstances – apparently because it was heavily laden with the symbolism of male procreative power” (2006, 240). Hence, as the committee explained to me, it is believed that this part of the Olufuko ritual neutralises the ominous characteristics of the woman.

Through the cattle enclosure, the initiates continued back to the *ondjugo*. Here the

namuganga were waiting for them. One of the two *namuganga* stood in the doorway of the hut with her legs spread. I had a unique opportunity to stand inside the *ondjugo* and watch as the initiates slowly crawled under the *namuganga*’s legs into the hut. The initiates arrived in small groups and seemed nervous as they stood in silence. After standing for a while inside the *ondjugo*, the initiates slowly crawled back outside, where their mothers, aunts, and grandmothers received them with joy, ululating, and dancing. The day ended in a large celebration that continued until the small hours. Entering the *ondjugo* through the legs of the *namuganga* indicated entering into womanhood. According to *namuganga* Martha, the events of the fourth day are the most important ones of the whole ritual. Without this phase, a girl could not be considered initiated.

One of my many interesting talks was with Helena, an 18-year-old initiate who came from Windhoek. I met her sitting in the shade where she was passing time and waiting for the next event to commence. As she explained, her father had gone through some sort of identity crisis after growing up abroad and losing touch with his Owambo roots. He did not want the same thing to happen to his daughter and that is why he had decided that Helena should go through Olufuko to reinforce her ties to her culture. At first, as Helena narrates, she was not enthusiastic about the idea. She told me that a year ago she only knew the stereotypical stories she had heard from friends and family. Helena explained that her aunts were deeply Christian and they were against Olufuko, whereas her grandmother, who had been initiated, had encouraged her to attend. Eventually, Helena gave up and submitted to her father and grandmother’s wishes. As she narrates:

Up to now Olufuko is actually really, really important for me now because, I just realised that once I got here it’s actually a bridge for you to cross over from childhood into womanhood. So I feel like that if you just wake up one

day and you are like “Oh, now I’m a woman” but you didn’t really go through any ceremony to be officially recognised as a woman. So that’s why I think it’s really, really important.⁶

Helena sees the transition and transformation process as important. She believes that a girl cannot simply wake up one day and be transformed into a woman; she understands that there needs to be some sort of procedure to confirm this transformation. Helena’s view resonates with Schechner’s (1988, 118) argument: “As in all rites of passage something had happened during the performance. The performance both symbolized and actualized the change in status.” The performance of crawling under the legs of the *namuganga* symbolised the initiates’ birth as women and simultaneously actualised the process. The process changed their status from girls into women. After this, the ritual concentrated on the aspects of fertility and motherhood. The initiates were now women and therefore the secrets of fertility and childbearing could be revealed.

Various rumours surround the ritual, some of which claim that it includes sexual acts (Tuupainen 1970; Groop 2014). Many of the initiates expressed nervousness because, as they said, they had heard rumours that there would be a male initiator waiting for them inside the *ondjugo*. On the fifth day of the ritual, I talked to three initiates about their experience of the initiation. Compared to the first days of the initiation, when the initiates were shy, these young women were now visibly relieved and happy. They were talkative and laughed a lot. Aina was at that time a 16-year-old Christian whose parents had decided that it was time for her to go through Olufuko. She told me that she had heard about these rumours. As she recounts:

⁶ Helena, interviewed by Saara Kuoppala, Outapi, August 26, 2016.

And when you are going in the *ondjugo* whereby you pass through the legs of *namuganga*. Yeah, people told us that you’ll find a man there but actually we did not find a man there.⁷

The common rumour was that there would be a man waiting for the initiates inside the *ondjugo*, and he would perform sexual acts on the girls. As I stood inside the *ondjugo* observing the arrival of the initiates, it was evident that some of these young girls had heard about these rumours. They were hesitant to open their eyes. When they finally opened them and saw only me inside, they seemed relieved. The *namuganga* emphasised that men have never been part of this ritual. This issue is, however, debatable. Maija Tuupainen (1970), for instance, refers to the observations of the Native Commissioner of Ovamboland, Carl Hugo Hahn, and of the missionary Martti Rautanen, who both describe how Ndonga used to have two *namuganga* involved in the initiation ritual: one male and one female (see also Groop 2014). Historian Kari Miettinen (2005a, 2005b) has challenged the missionaries’ understanding of the initiation rite. He argues that the missionaries only described the public part of the initiation and therefore questions whether the missionaries had enough knowledge of the rite. According to Miettinen (2005a), due to the hierarchical nature of missionary work, the young missionaries were not expected to question the older missionaries. As a result, Miettinen concludes, the idea that the initiation was evil turned into “truth” and the myth began to live its own life. It is hard to tell whether male initiators have ever taken part in the female initiation. As mentioned earlier, different areas have their own traditions of conducting the ritual. It cannot be excluded that at some point in history in some areas male ritual experts played a role in the ritual. Nevertheless, there is also the possibility that by demonising the ritual the missionaries were

⁷ Aina, Lahja and Maria, interviewed by Saara Kuoppala, Outapi, August 28, 2016.

trying to diminish its practice. Either way, at the Olufuko Cultural Festival all the ritual experts were female.

Motherhood and fertility rites

Around midday on the fifth day, I was wandering around the festival area with my colleague Shivute when a few of the mothers came and took us by the hands and guided us inside the Olufuko kraal, where the next event was about to take place. There the *meekulu* had organised the initiates to sit under the shade, where they all were waiting for the *namuganga* to commence the next steps. It started with the *namuganga* marking the foreheads of the initiates with *mahangu* flour and ostrich shell beads, and then marking an X on the back and chest of each initiate. According to Kautondokwa (2014), the X symbolises a baby-carrier and the connection between mother and child. The initiates were given a cup of the traditional beer, *omalovu*, that had been seasoned with herbs and a pinch of *mahangu* flour. All of these added ingredients are related to fertility. After a few sips of the drink, the *namuganga* poured the rest of the *omalovu* onto the initiate’s belly and back to increase the initiate’s fertility. Meanwhile, the mothers were sitting near the initiates, sipping *omalovu*, and watching the ritual.

While I was sitting with the mothers and sipping the drink that they offered, I noticed that the *namuganga* was starting to prepare the next step. In this step, the *namuganga* took a big salt brick and put it under the initiate’s belt. Kautondokwa (2014) explains that this signifies pregnancy and the salt brick represents a child. Then the *namuganga* took the brick through the legs of the initiate and the initiate symbolically gave birth to a child. After this, the salt brick was passed to the initiate. The initiate cradled the salt brick for a little while. Next the *namuganga* and the initiate had a small dialogue about the “newborn”. The *namuganga* first asked the initiate wheth-

er she had given birth or not and the initiate answered yes. Then the *namuganga* asked whether the baby was a boy or a girl and the initiate announced the sex of the baby. Finally, the *namuganga* asked the baby’s name and the initiate gave the name she preferred. This rite was repeated with each initiate separately. The scripted act of childbirth sets the path for motherhood. By playing the role of a mother, the act prepares the individual for the real-life situation.

Concluding rites

The concluding rites happened outside the Olufuko kraal in front of a larger public on the afternoon of the fifth day. There were many people observing the events and I had to move around so that I could see. The *meekulu* explained to us that in these concluding rites, the initiates and their mothers cut the hierarchical relationship between mother and daughter.⁸ The rite started with the initiate’s mother chasing the initiate with a twig. The initiate had to jump over the fire while running away. From there the initiate ran towards the *namuganga*, who was sitting in the near distance with a long stick. The initiate knocked down the stick and went back to her mother, took the twig from her and started chasing the mother with the twig. The roles had changed, and this time her mother had to jump over the fire. The spectators were amused and they were laughing when they saw the mothers and daughters chasing each other with a twig. At the end, the mothers and the initiates burned the twig as a sign of reconciliation. The rite symbolically marks the end of the hierarchical mother-daughter relationship and the beginning of the new adult-adult relationship.

Afterwards, the *meekulu* organised the initiates into groups to sow *mahangu* grains.

⁸ Even though I use the term “mother”, the person indicated here could be the initiate’s aunt, grandmother, or other close female in the family. It is not necessarily always the biological mother.

Sowing grains and collecting firewood are traditionally considered “women’s chores” in the household. The *meekulu* ordered the initiates to sow the grains quickly before it started to rain. The expectation of rain was a part of the performance. In reality, at this time of the year the rainy season is not expected to commence for months. The initiates sowed the grains given to them quickly and then the *meekulu* ordered them to go and collect firewood. This firewood was imaginary and part of the performance. Soon after that, the *meekulu* shouted that it was starting to rain. Then, covering their heads, the initiates quickly ran inside the Olufuko kraal.

The final day was the sixth day of the ritual and people were starting to look tired. After several days of celebrating the initiation, and of singing and dancing, it was time to leave. I observed how the mothers wiped the skins of the initiates and packed their belongings. All the ochre oil that had been put onto the initiates’ skin throughout the ritual was taken off, symbolising the ending of the ritual. The initiates were stripped of their hair decorations and accessories. After everything was done, it was time to leave. The initiates were now dressed in their everyday clothes. They were no longer *ovafuko*. The rite had come to its end and the initiates had now received their new social status. They had been transformed into women.

As mentioned before, for Schechner (1988), performance both symbolises and actualises the change in status. As the different acts of the ritual symbolise womanhood (i.e. collecting firewood, serving food, pounding *mahangu*, “giving birth”), they at the same time implement the transformation. By enacting these performances in a specific time and place and in a specific order, the ritual concludes with the transformation of the initiates. However, the *meekulu* encouraged the initiates to finish their schooling and not rush into relationships.

Transformation and transportation

Performances can be divided into two separate groups depending on their outcome: transportation or transformation. According to Schechner (1985), people tend to call transportation performances theatre. In contrast, initiation rituals are seen as transformative. They transform a person from one social status into another and the transformation is permanent. Schechner (1985) argues that in rituals, the separation between transportation and transformation does not work: both kinds of performances coexist in the same event. My own analysis shows that the Olufuko ritual transforms the initiates’ social status from girls into women and the transformation is permanent. But the interesting point is that the ritual transports the other actors who play a role in it. By looking at Olufuko from the performance theory perspective, it becomes clear that the ritual transports the co-performers and their role is not changed permanently.

As I observed, the transported actors in the ritual were the two *namuganga*, the *meekulu*, the *eembuhiki*, and the *oufukwena*, and each one of them had a specific role. The *namuganga* were the spiritual agents of the ritual and they were the ones who had the knowledge learned from previous *namuganga* to conduct the ritual and transform the girls into women. These ritual experts had been initiated and transformed earlier in life into women and into the role of *namuganga*. The three *meekulu* had also been initiated earlier. The *meekulu* took care of the initiates and they were referred to as their teachers, guides, and mentors. The *meekulu* and the *namuganga* were transported actors in the Olufuko ritual but they were also the transference agents of the initiates. Without them, the transformation of the initiates from girls into women would not be possible.

The other transported actors were the *eembuhiki* and the *oufukwena*. The *eembuhiki* were the young boys who were the placeholders for the future husbands. I noticed that

some of these boys took their role as a fun play, enjoying showing dissatisfaction with the food that the initiates served them. When I discussed the role of the *eembuhiki* with different people, they explained to me that as the *eembuhiki* acted their role, the performances trained the initiates in how to act with their future husbands. Throughout the ritual, the initiates acted calmly and could not express anger or discontent. These expressions would have been considered offensive towards the community. The *eembuhiki* could express their dissatisfaction with the food and the initiates had to sit calmly and listen. I was told that the whole aim of the ritual was to prepare the initiate for their upcoming role as a wife and mother. The *oufukwena* were the assistants of the initiates and their task was to be helping hands and to carry baskets and small items for the initiates.

After the Olufuko ritual, both the *eembuhiki* and the *oufukwena* were transported back into their original selves. The *oufukwena* were not initiated and the *eembuhiki* did not remain placeholders for husbands. In the first days of the ritual, these *eembuhiki* and *oufukwena* followed the initiate. On the fourth day, when the initiates were transformed into women, these children did not continue acting in the ritual. Instead, I saw them running around the festival area playing their own games. On the fourth day, the initiates stepped into another phase of the ritual; their status was changing and therefore the whole dynamics of the ritual changed. This was shown by the fading role of the *eembuhiki* and *oufukwena*. After the fourth day, the ritual concentrated on the motherhood and fertility rites and the *eembuhiki* and the *oufukwena* were not present in these activities.

The whole structure of the Olufuko ritual prepared the initiates for their transformation into women. When the initiates arrived at the festival area in their traditional attire, they were stepping into the liminal phase of the ritual. Victor Turner (1969) argues that when initiates step into the liminal phase, they also step into a communal phase. As Turner argues,

the initiates are stripped of their old status and they step between girlhood and womanhood. Richard Schechner (2013) describes Turner’s idea of the liminal step as a phase where the initiates are freed from the demands of daily life and the personal and social differences between the initiates are set aside.

Conclusion

Different types of cultural festivals have been on the increase in Namibia since the mid-1990s (Akuupa 2015). The Olufuko Cultural Festival is one of the most controversial. It has been promoted as part of the cultural heritage of Namibia. In this article, I have provided an overview of the initiation ritual practised at the Olufuko Cultural Festival. I have illuminated the different ritual actors, showed what the ritual does to these actors and described the various ritual acts. This enables further consideration of the debate surrounding the practice. This study has confirmed the findings of Richard Schechner (1985) that rituals can be both efficacy and entertainment, and that in ritual performances transportation and transformation coexist.

At the Olufuko Cultural Festival, the ritual performance was both efficacy and entertainment. The ritual was performed to an audience and people came to the area to enjoy the festivities. As Outapi Town Council wants Olufuko to be a drawcard for the town, the ritual has become a new kind of performance: it is a performance of a female initiation ritual that transforms the girls into women, but at the same time it is an entertaining event for tourists and others who come and visit the town.

The Olufuko consists of different ritual acts which can be categorised into four stages. In the first stage, both family lines are united in the initiate. By going through a ritual that has been practised by the initiate’s mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers, the ritual links the initiate to the family chain. In the second stage, the initiate transforms into a

woman by going through the legs of the *namuganga*. The third stage involves the motherhood and fertility rites, and the fourth stage the concluding rites. The initiates step into the liminal phase of the ritual when they arrive at the festival area. At this moment, they are no longer their old selves, they are *ovafuko*. The liminal phase ends when the red ochre oil is wiped off the skin of the initiate and they put on their own clothes. They then leave the ritual scene with a new social status – they have been transformed into women.

One of the more significant findings to emerge from this study is that the ritual has two main characteristics: first, the transformation from the status of a girl into a woman, and second, the preparation for motherhood and enhancing fertility. The second can only commence after the first has been completed. By performing and following the particular steps in the ritual, the performance concludes with the intended status change – girls transforming into women. Little by little the initiates are transformed into women. Through this transformation the initiates are prepared to become wives and mothers. Simultaneously, the other actors participating in the ritual are temporarily transported into their roles in the ritual, but by the end of Olufuko they return to their original selves.

Performance theory has allowed me to study the ritual actions at the Olufuko Cultural Festival. In this article I have analysed the ritual acts and actors involved in the Olufuko Festival, and I argue that this is a necessary first step that will make further study of the debate surrounding the ritual more fruitful, especially in this case, where there are different views and opinions on what happens in Olufuko.

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Fieldnotes

May 16–20, 2016, 20 pages.

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Aina, Lahja and Maria, interviewed by Saara Kuoppala, Outapi, August 28, 2016.

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