

## Beyond toxic masculinity: reading and writing men in post-apartheid Namibia

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# Beyond Toxic Masculinity: Reading and Writing Men in Post-Apartheid Namibia

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## Abstract

Over the past few years, the term “toxic masculinity” has entered public debate in Namibia as a way to describe apparently problematic forms of masculine behaviour, particularly in the light of high levels of gender-based violence. Originating in Western discourse, the term itself is difficult as it can stifle meaningful and transformative conversations concerning men. Describing “toxic masculinity” as a trope, and indicating that tropes of violence have been used and politicised before, this article proposes a different way of reading men: via the mask. To do this, the “tropological place” is introduced as a space of intimacy and trust, in which the kinds of masks that men wear become visible. Although the introduction of “toxic masculinity” into debates around masculinities in Namibia should be acknowledged as an important starting point for conversations, this article urges researchers to think beyond it, encouraging more lateral relations with those that we research.

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## Keywords

Namibia, masculinities, masks, trope, toxic masculinity

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## Introduction

In the aftermath of the death of 22-year-old Shannon Wasserfall, the 2020 #ShutItAllDown protests in Namibia against gender-based violence (see Mushaandja, 2020; Niilenge and Mbathera, 2020), and the public dialogues surrounding them, brought to the fore once again the issue of male violence towards women. Certainly not a new problem (Edwards-Jauch, 2016), gender-based violence takes the form of what Noreen Sitali (2020) describes as a “shadow pandemic”; between September 2019 and September 2020 alone the Namibian Police (NamPol) received reports of 5961 cases of gender-based violence (GBV) and issued 1145 protection orders (Smit, 2020): high numbers given the relatively small population of Namibia, roughly 2.63m people.

Among the public dialogues surrounding these events, the term *toxic masculinity* – whilst already circulating in Namibian dialogues concerning men and masculinities – has gained increasing prominence. “Toxic masculinity, it seems, has torn apart a social fabric that would allow the protesting women to live without fear – if such a fabric ever existed,” states Henning Melber (2020: n.p.), with Rose-Mary Haufiku (2022: n.p.) reporting that “toxic masculinity encourages and glorifies violence because it teaches one to dominate others, and this leads to the perpetuation of rape culture.” In the *Windhoek Observer*, Uatjiua Kasete (2020: n.p.) writes that “I am almost certain that a large majority of men have been raised with the toxic beliefs of what a man should be. Tough, emotionless and “manly” (whatever that means) and if one displays any characteristic outside of that box automatically one is seen as less than or “different.” As if that is such a bad thing.”

For Taffy Chirunda (2021: n.p.), “social norms which breed toxic male egos and machoism are no longer acceptable world over. They haven’t been for a while actually. Namibia (the home of Windhoek Lager) has a high rate of GBV and intimate femicide [and] suicide (often alcohol induced) [that] bears testament to the toxic effect of such a culture.” Before the #ShutItAllDown protests, Hildegard Titus (2018: 1) posited that ““toxic masculinity” is harming all of us, and yes, men it is harming men too”, with an anonymous author (Anonymous, 2019: 1) adding that “many men have difficulty expressing emotion due to toxic masculinity. Toxic masculinity refers to actions that discourage displays of emotion – other than anger – in men while also encouraging behavior that will deem the male “dominant“ in a given situation.”

Based on approximately two and a half years’ fieldwork with young men in Swakopmund, Namibia which took place between November 2014 and October 2018, this article confronts the term *toxic masculinity* in order to think through how we should both *read* and *write* men in Namibian contexts. Here, I understand “toxic masculinity” as a trope, an abstract particular which conceals as much as it reveals (see De Man, 1986). Rooted in Western dialogues concerning men and masculinities – and contested by feminist scholars even in those – although the term is useful as an initiator of dialogue it is also problematic for two reasons. Firstly, it conceals the specific histories which have led to the formation of masculinities as they appear in the present day. Secondly, it reproduces the misogynistic gender hierarchies that it aims to challenge.

Michel Foucault (1963: 20) describes the “topological space” as “analogous to the idea of a mask”, a space in which “a word, like a gaudy cardboard face, hides what it duplicates.” For JJ Bola (2019), in order to understand contemporary men and masculinities, we must go “behind the mask” that men are trained and enculturated into wearing from an early age – for Bola, this is the mask which we now term “toxic.” Yet Steven Van Wolputte (2020) points to our multiplicity of identities and the “dividual” nature of personhood: meaning that we all constantly wear masks which allow us to take part in the social worlds that we inhabit. Therefore, there can be no “behind the mask”: only a series of different, interchangeable ones which define social action and behaviour.

The specific series of vignettes that this article will present explores this conception further. It presents a single day, spent by myself with one young man as we moved through Swakopmund by car on what Margarethe Kusenbach (2003) might term a “go-along” – in which researchers accompany participants on their “natural” journeys in order to explore and understand their experiences and streams of thought. Yet in this singular journey the car also acts as a topological *place* – a more concrete version of the abstract *space* (Casey, 1996) – which, rather than concealing, highlights the different kinds of masks that men can wear, even over the course of a day or an hour.

This article is divided into three main sections. In the first, I present a critique of the term “toxic masculinity”, ultimately recognising it as a trope of synecdoche (essentialism and generality). Building on this, the second section then describes the ways that Namibia and its people have been historically constructed through textual representation and tropes, problematising the intertwined acts of reading and writing men. The third section then moves the conversation towards one concerning a different trope – that of the mask. The article therefore points to the need to recognise and appreciate these different masks worn by our participants, as well as those of the researcher, with the aim of “levelling out” or “lateralising” the participant-researcher relationship.

### *Toxic Masculinity*

The term *toxic masculinity* was coined in Western discourse by Shepherd Bliss in the late 1980s, to “characterize his father’s militarized, authoritarian masculinity” (Harrington, 2021: 347, see also Gross, 1990: 14). Based in the theory that gender and gender identity is socially constructed, it is used increasingly in the international public arena to refer to a hegemonic, hyper-masculinity which espouses overt (hetero)sexuality, a propensity for violence, and a rejection of behaviour which is considered to be feminine (see October, 2018; Ratele, 2008). Moreover, the modifier “toxic” refers to behaviours considered to be detrimental or harmful to both the individuals performing them or society-at-large. Concerning masculinities, in general terms these detrimental effects include high levels of injury, patterns of ill health and mortality, drug abuse, inadequate use of health services and high levels of victimisation and imprisonment (for the individual) and violent conflict-resolution methods, sexual violence, domestic violence against women, homophobic violence and racism (for others and for “society”) (see October, 2018; Connell, 2002).

In the Namibian context, this terminology has seen increasing proliferation since approximately 2018. Before this, it became commonplace in neighbouring South Africa, a country which has also seen high levels of violence associated with men (see Bhana et al., 2021; October, 2018; Swarr, 2012). Most recently at the time of writing, the issue was raised at a panel discussion in Windhoek, in February 2022. The panel, aimed at unpacking the issues towards gender justice in Namibia, pointed to the socially constructed definition of masculinity and the ways that specific forms of masculinity can be harmful to society, women and men themselves. Importantly, the panel stated that toxic masculinity is not just perpetuated by men, but by society as well, and that a more comprehensive approach to gender inequalities is needed in Namibia (see Matthys, 2022).

In that way, use of the term “toxic masculinity” has worked as an initiator of public debate and its success in that regard should be recognised. Nonetheless, both the phrase itself and its apparent opposite, *healthy masculinity*, remain problematic in contemporary discourse. For Andrea Waling, these terms continue to set masculinity up as the only expression of gender that men and boys can legitimately engage in, thus reinforcing the notion that femininity (and by extension, androgyny) remains a less valued, and less legitimate, expression of gender. Not only does it set up a particular kind of masculinity as the only expression of gender that men and boys can engage, but also, deflects attention from forms of female and non-binary masculinity (Waling, 2019a: 4).

Indeed, this medicalised form of masculinity, which posits negative masculine traits as a “disease” which can be “cured” by engaging with more “healthy” behaviours, also infers that masculinity is the cause of specific social relations rather than being the product of them (Waling, 2019a). As Waling describes, this suggests that masculinity pre-exists as an innate quality of men, rather than being created and maintained through repeated performances (see Butler, 2004). The binary of “toxic” and “healthy” means that specific behaviours are considered either “good” or “bad”, with little ability to nuance based on context and specific situations. In a southern African context, this disregards several ethnographic examples which describe men and male behaviours well beyond the existing tropes of violence. These ethnographies variously describe differing sexual relations and gender performances by and between men (Moodie, 1994), point to the existence of “soft masculinities” which exist in contrast to yet also side-by-side with the better-known “hard masculinities” (Gunner, 2014), or point out that although seen as ubiquitously dominant this has not always been the case for men (Morrell, 2001). As Anthony Simpson (2009) has explicated, the patriarchal norms and ideologies of men espousing particular kinds of behaviours also endanger the men that follow those ideologies.

The overall effect, states Waling (2019a: 8), is that ““toxic masculinity” follows in the ahistorical and essentialist steps of inclusive masculinity theory, where material realities and considerations of time, space, and place are absent.” Toxic masculinity becomes tautological: men and masculinities are toxic because they are toxic, and nothing more.

As Carol Harrington (2021) describes, “toxic masculinity” has historically been ascribed predominantly to marginalised men, with only a recent application to power

elites, particularly in the West – for example in discussions of U.S. President Trump and the #MeToo movement. Yet, Harrington also suggests that this moniker is often used as a political tool, to condemn certain forms of masculinity and not others. This has two main effects: firstly, it creates a binary which individualises responsibility for toxicity to certain men and not to others, whilst also reproducing the notion of “toxically masculine villains” and “feminised victims” (Harrington, 2021), once again reinforcing existing gender hierarchies rather than challenging them.

Whilst men are often discussed as the perpetrators of violence, in Namibia there is also a legacy of violence against Black men. Speaking of the colonial period, Lucy Edwards-Jauch (2016: 53) states that “violence was central to the lived experience of masculinity”, and as well as the violence of the Herero-Nama Genocide itself, extrajudicial killings including lynchings were commonplace both during and after it (see Olusoga and Erichsen, 2010; Silvester and Gewalt, 2003). South African military forces are known to have been particularly brutal in their suppression of political rebellion, and it is likely that many civilians were killed during South African administration (Amnesty International, 1986). The contract labour system meant that men would be away from their families for extended periods (sometimes up to twenty months), living in areas in which violence was both normalised and rewarded (Likuwa, 2020; Hishongwa, 1992). For Sheila Wise (2007: 331), “the divisions created through the systems of colonialism and apartheid established, maintained and reinforced men’s ideas about manhood, power, race, ethnic identity, class and sexuality”, with Apartheid comprising the “policing and surveillance of black men’s daily lives and the violent assertion of state authority in demeaning ways” (Swarr, 2012: 964). More recently, the struggle for liberation also constructed specific gender identities, with men represented as “heroic soldiers” and women all but erased, despite their brave and important contributions (Akawa, 2014).

In that way, men in (what is now called) Namibia have been subject to multiple, often contradictory, forces and conceptualisations ranging from self-autonomy to domination by state power, being portrayed as child-like by colonial powers (see McCullers, 2011) to the “dangerous and subversive Black men” of the Apartheid era (see Edwards-Jauch, 2016). Indeed, the behaviours that we are now inclined to describe as “toxic” have not always been considered so, meaning that the definition of “toxic masculinity” is prone to fluctuation over both time and space. In contemporary Namibia, much less reference is made to the former tribal and ethnic divisions which still exert influence within social relations (see Edwards-Jauch, 2016). In short, the “men” that we refer to when we describe “toxic masculinity” are remarkably nondescript, even if its appeal lies in its ability to conjure up a specific “kind of man” with a seemingly recognisable character type (Harrington, 2021; see also Ammann and Staudacher, 2021).

“Toxic masculinity”, then, is the latest in a series of “masculinity tropes” which are designed to typologise masculinities – “hegemonic masculinity”, “metrosexual”, “traditional”, “feminist” and “orthodox” being others that have come into prominent usage (Waling, 2019a; hooks, 2004). Rather than broadening conversations concerning men and masculinities, these categories – which men are more-or-less supposed to adhere to, or alternatively create a new one – deflect from a critical discussion of agency and

subjectivity (Waling, 2019b). Toxic masculinity alludes to specific kinds of behaviours associated with men (as described above), yet it is also remarkably unspecific in its meaning. Its ahistorical nature also means that the histories which have played out to form the basis of contemporary masculinities – both in Namibia and elsewhere – are forgotten in favour of international comparison. As Sakhumzi Mfecane (2018) reminds us, whilst we have perhaps become accustomed to “explaining men” in southern African contexts using theories and concepts designed in the West, these conceptions of masculinity may not be appropriate in non-Western settings; indeed both Mfecane and Kopano Ratele (2014) concur that these modes of knowing have been at least partially responsible for the under-performance of transformative programmes which specifically target men. As both Michael Kimmel (2010) and Waling (2019b) state, despite a burgeoning literature concerning men and masculinities, we still do not know how to talk about men; as the next section will explore, this is especially pertinent in southern African contexts.

### *Trope and Macro-Trope*

Understanding toxic masculinity as a trope of synecdoche – the figure of essentiality and generalisation (Burke, 1941) – means that two things are at stake: both our understanding and representation of men, or the mutually intertwined domains of *reading* and *writing*. The trope, for Alan Rumsey (2004), works on two main levels: the largest of these is the macro-trope, which encompasses entire texts and volumes. Subordinate to these are micro-tropes, “the semantic figures of traditional stylistics and rhetoric” (Chrzanowska-Kluczevska, 2010: 29), which operate at the level of the line or sentence. For Rumsey (2004), “ethnography is inherently figurative. That is, it makes use of tropes – poetic figures – not just as ancillary aids to vivid description, but as essential constitutive features of the form of knowledge which it enables.” Rumsey builds on the “literary turn” with anthropology, the origins of which is pinpointed to the volume *Writing Culture*, edited by James Clifford and George Marcus (1986). Although issues of representation have never left anthropological enquiry and debate, during this period “the problems of ethnography were seen as largely textual and their solutions as lying in experimental writing” (Englund and Leach, 2000: 225).

Namibia (and German South West Africa) has always been constructed through texts, predominantly fictional (Baas, 2018), although the verisimilitude of early ethnographic writing concerning southern Africa must also be considered (see Steinmetz, 2007). The work of James Frazer (1910) has come under particular scrutiny as a classic example of “armchair anthropology”, i.e., Frazer was writing from Europe and basing his ethnographies on accounts provided by missionaries and other “informed individuals”, without actually experiencing the colony for himself or conducting any interviews with local people (Fraser, 1990, see also Mutambo, 2015). As Renzo Baas (2018) describes, the colony and its inhabitants were constructed through a series of tropes which presented its landscape as “empty” and its inhabitants as “barbaric” and “savage”, and therefore in need of Western intervention: an image which continues to be revitalised via German publishing in Namibia (Kalb, 2018; see also van der Hoog,

2022). The trope of “African violence”, and particularly the politicised arguments concerning the Mfecane, has also been used as justification for Apartheid (Epprecht, 1994). Indeed, the “culture” concept of anthropology itself, most especially “cultural difference”, has been used as grounds for exploitation (Stimson, 2021).

Given that writing is inherently bound to tropology (or *tropics*), the use of tropes is largely inescapable; language itself is deceitful because it can never quite capture the spirit of the thing that it signifies (Taussig, 1999). This includes the alternative and complementary forms of ethnography including visual and graphic (see Theodossopoulos, 2020), the insights of which I will draw on shortly. To return though to the trope at hand – toxic masculinity – in what ways does this rehearse the tenacious tropes of violence (see also McClintock, 1995) which were used as the reasoning behind the colonisation projects in general, and that of South West Africa in particular? Does a continued research focus on the so-called “elite” members of society, the “aspiring middle class”, or even “oppressed groups” such as women and queer folk, also reinforce the notion that “non-elite” and underprivileged men are dangerous, and therefore not “worthy of study” outside of the motivation and reasoning for their “well known” violence (see also Mahoney, 2017; Dabiri, 2016)? I will leave these as open questions, but for both Divine Fuh (2012) and Jesper Bjarnesen (2019), representations of men in African contexts – particularly “non-elite” men in urban settings – often feed into a “dangerous hypermasculinity” which have the power to leap from representation to expectation and actualisation – a self-perpetuating circle. Indeed, as Lindisfarne and Neale (2016: 38) posit, “we tend to be very aware of the masculinity of working-class men, while we tend not to mark the masculinity of upper-class men explicitly.” In Namibia, these forms of masculinity are also written through the fabric of everyday life, in the form of statues of soldiers, military barracks and the Hero’s Acre – all acting as constant reminders not only of how men should think about themselves, but also about how others should think of men.

As Namibian (male) scholar Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja (2022: 155-6) points out, “to arrive at or imagine “hygienic love” or alternative masculinities in contexts of racism and rife intimate partner violence for example, we must recognize and work through our violent pasts and presents.” Both Mattia Fumanti (2016) and Jesper Bjarnesen (2017) highlight the necessity for a deeper and fuller understanding of patterns of African male behaviours that are, very often, “written off” as “the biological or psychological essences of individual perpetrators” (Edwards-Jauch, 2016: 49). Moving forward, bell hooks (2004: 103) imagines a different kind of masculinity which replaces its hegemonic form (termed by hooks the “dominator model”) with one “that sees interbeing and interdependency as the organic relationship of all living beings. In the partnership model selfhood, whether one is female or male, is always at the core of one’s identity.”

To discuss men only in terms of violence, or indeed, to come from a place of violence when discussing men, precludes any meaningful conversation about men and masculinities (hooks, 2004). Furthermore, research concerning men should also include those men as active and reflexive participants in the construction of knowledge.



In the next section, I move towards a different way of reading and writing men which has the capacity to both incorporate and look beyond reflections on violence, in a way which also incorporates the ways in which seemingly past-gazing masculinities are orientated towards the future.

### Masks

For Michel Foucault (1963: 17), “words are often turned away from their original meaning to take on a new one which is more or less removed but that still maintains a connection. This new meaning is called “tropological” and this conversion, this turning away which produces it, is called a “trope.”” Drawing on the work of French novelist, poet and playwright Raymond Roussel, Foucault (1963) describes the trope as akin to a mask; it can only ever be a mere rough presentation of that which it seeks to imitate or represent. In that sense, “masking” exists as both practice *and* as a theoretical concept, aspects which do not necessarily correlate in “real life”: people can wear metaphorical masks without adorning objects to conceal their faces, and vice versa (Picton, 1990; see also Pype, 2016).

Linking all of this together – toxic masculinity, tropics, and masks – is the recent writing of JJ Bola (2019), in which Bola describes toxic masculinity itself as a mask, which men are trained and enculturated into wearing from an early age. Although this is, admittedly, a theory designed in the West even if it is written by a Congolese man, as De Boeck, Cassiman and Van Wolputte (2010) also describe, in many African contexts “urbanites... Live simultaneously in multiple territories, pushing them to strategically use multiple identities, thereby making of each of these urban dwellers a community in themselves.” Gender issues aside – surely women also wear masks – when considering men there is a tendency to focus on more public displays of masculinity rather than more intimate, private or reflective moments such as those occurring at home: to focus on the mask(s), rather than the people wearing them, or – to borrow from Elizabeth Povinelli (2011) – to explore the *normative* world as opposed to the *actual* world. The problem being, for me, that by reproducing these public displays through text – skipping over an exploration of agency – we also run the risk of perpetuating both those particular masks themselves, and the necessity for wearing them.

As both David Berliner (2022) and Steven Van Wolputte (2020) concede, there is no hidden selfhood “beyond the mask”: “identity” is built through a multiplicity of factors which move and reform in relation to others. This builds on the notion of the “dividual” (see Strathern, 1988), which understands the person as socially constructed, made in relation to and shaped by other people and the material world inhabited by them (or us) as a “mutuality of being” (Sahlins, 2011). In that way, the self that bell hooks (2004) describes, the “I”, is also a mask: a plastic and malleable one which is formulated through exo-experiences (Berliner, 2022). In that sense, masking (ergo masculinity) is “shared experience and “collective action”” (Butler, 1988: 525), but it is simultaneously dividualizing and individualizing: it highlights the relational or negotiational aspects as being equally as important as those people engaged in masking acts.

What though, does this mean for the main conceit of this article – the ways in which we read and write men, and the relation of that to toxic masculinity? The first and perhaps most obvious, of course, is that it is very unlikely – impossible, even – to assume that with apparently “toxic” men that there will eventually be a huge “reveal” of a hidden, deeper, more genuine “self” which can be in some way “tamed.” The removal of the “mask of toxic masculinity” (to paraphrase Bola (2019)) would simply mean that another one shifts to take its place. In that way, the emotional intimacy that many women strived for in their relationships with men – and was seen as being a more “genuine” expression of personhood – could also be seen as another “mask”, equally a part of men as much as apparently “toxic” behaviour and equally genuine, albeit a much more desirable one in the present day (see also Boulton, 2021).

Yet the mask is also a way of identifying oneself with another (of incorporating a “he” into the point of view of the “I”) and of crossing borders; the mask is also a vector of the possible (Berliner, 2022). In that way, the mask is geared not only to the past – it is not just based on past experiences – but also towards the future, an act of *futureing* (see Van Wolputte et al., 2022). Berliner (2022) describes the way that people adopt the roles of *fictional* characters, for some even temporarily switching to their alter ego; these masks allow us to express parts of ourselves which would otherwise remain hidden. But masks are not always fictional, as Steven Van Wolputte (2020: 69) indicates:

We all wear or are made to wear masks. In the plural: we have different masks that we apply or put on depending on our understanding of the situation. This does not only point towards the multiplicity of identities (we all have many of them), or to their fragmentary character. As these masks are themselves an abstraction, a reduction or stylization of the complex, kaleidoscopic persons we are, they allow us to partake in social interaction and thus become... Us.

This recognition that we all wear masks, all of the time, moves us towards a more *lateral* anthropology (see Pandian, 2021), or “other ways of doing anthropology that might put us into more lateral relationships with other people who are not necessarily scholars in our own field” (Pandian and Green, n.d.). If the masks that we wear are moulded through experiences with others, then in the context of research the relation between “participant” and “researcher” or “observer” becomes of primary importance.

### *Tropological Places*

I use the term “tropological place” to refer to a concrete area or location in which the kinds of masks that men wear are both visible and also available as a matter for conversation: it is, in that way, a place of *intimacy*. The term builds on Foucault’s (1963) notion of the “tropological space”, as described above; I have altered “space” to “place” in order to refer to a localised, specific and perceivable location which although abstract-able, is not abstract in itself (see Casey, 1996). A tropological *place* is one which both allows for and facilitates a discussion of agency and the

kinds of roles that men (in this case, but indeed people in general) perform in everyday life. Concerning men, these are not as common as they may sound and not so easy to “set up”: as Sheila Wise (2007: 335) elaborates, being a man in urban Namibia is often about “doing” rather than “thinking about doing”, or “being” as opposed to “saying”, which in many ways problematises actual discussions about masculinities themselves. As masculinity is also a relational composite and its performance can therefore depend on who exactly is present in any given situation, and in this particular example I am present along with my interlocutor, part of my reflection here comes as response to one conjectural question: I always wondered how the men that I worked with might have “opened up” differently if I were a different demographic – a woman, for example, or younger, or Black, or straight. This section therefore discusses one such tropological place: a car, and one specific day of driving that one of my fieldwork participants, a young man and friend named Chenzira,<sup>1</sup> engaged in and shared with me.

I first met Chenzira in late 2014. He was among the first people that I met in Swakopmund, had been employed on a short-term contract at one of the nearby uranium mines shortly before my arrival in Namibia, and at that time was working on the open market in town. We were of a similar age, differing only by a few days, although had come from remarkably different places before our eventual meeting and mutuality. He had been born in a small village in a neighbouring country, myself in London. Nonetheless, we both had a history of migration even if his journey had taken him a little further: we had both moved between cities in our countries of birth before making a move across a border – myself to Belgium, and him to Namibia.

Chenzira liked to drive, and from time-to-time we would borrow a car from a Congolese pastor who lived close to Chenzira in Mondesa, part of Swakopmund’s township – a black Mercedes with a leather interior which had seen better days, a chip at the bottom of the windscreen and a window on the driver’s side which required manual force to open and close. We would usually give the pastor about 250NAD (approximately 15eur) for this privilege, and were always under strict instructions to return the car clean and with a full tank of petrol – a fair and rather good deal. This cost was usually shared between us based on what we could afford.

These car rides were usually quite directionless, meaning that there was no specific destination in mind. Often they just involved moving around the city, sometimes talking to people and offering free car rides to others, moving between houses, bars, the beach, and the desert. Sometimes (as below) they involved a string of errands which were sometimes planned in advance and sometimes not. Whilst being a very pleasant way to explore Swakopmund – and perhaps an unusual way for a person of lighter complexion such as myself, given the strong and complex legacy of “whiteness” in Namibia (see Boulton, 2021; Fumanti, 2021) – I always felt like I was “behind the front lines”, and being away from the public eye, away from women (and sometimes just being away from other men), revealed a different side to young men than that which we might be accustomed.

1.

*The car pulls up beside a shop and I assume that this is where Chenzira wants to go, but I am mistaken. "Give me a second, I am going down there," he states, undoing his seatbelt whilst pointing to a rather dark gap between the shop and a neighbouring house.*

*"What are you doing?" I ask.*

*"Just stay here, I will tell you in a moment..." Chenzira clicks open the door and jumps out, darting down the passageway and entering a door about four metres down it. He disappears, I exhale sharply, look around for a moment then open the glove compartment to take a cigarette. After about fifteen minutes, Chenzira returns. "OK, I will tell you everything in case I make a mistake. I just swapped that phone for this one. I had to give him five hundred dollars on top. But it works fine, look." He switches on the phone, and it goes straight to the home screen.*

*"Do you know where he got it from?"*

*"It is his old phone. But it is mine now, I will give it to Annika [his wife]. I think she will be happy..."*

2.

*Chenzira's phone rings, it is Annika. He indicates that I should answer, as he is driving. I comply, and Annika wonders where we are. I give her a rough location based on a nearby service station. She asks if we could bring some kapana (food) and a bottle of Jameson's whiskey to her brother's house. She apologises for asking, but I agree. Annika hangs up, and Chenzira and I discuss: it means we will have to go to a bar, where we can get kapana and might get a deal on the whiskey. Plus, the kapana is better at one place that we know, having been there several times together, at night.*

*In the daytime the bars are less lively but still brisk, I state that I will wait in the car, but I give him some money to buy the bottle. "Don't get distracted," I suggest, but a few minutes later I can see he is talking with a group of young men. They wave, indicating for me to come out of the car but as usual I just wave back, waiting for Chenzira to do so before I comply. I do not know these men, but they seem pleased to see me so I reciprocate their handshakes. The conversation moves swiftly between football, cars, and women, I nod along appreciatively and laugh at what I hope are the right places. Today is not the day for questions, and they seem like nice people. We are approached by a group of younger people, who are enthusiastic about wanting their photo taken with the white man, so I awkwardly but amiably comply. Remembering we have errands to do, I leave Chenzira to chat a bit, but once the gifts are collected, this is the sign that we should be going. Chenzira pulls himself away from the crowd, and we move onwards.*

3.

*"You get a lot of attention." My mind has wandered but Chenzira's musing brings me back. "In Swakopmund, you get a lot of attention. Especially in Mondesa, is it difficult to relax?"*

*A little, I suggest, but I am happy people are usually quite friendly with me so it isn't really a problem. I surmise it is probably because I am with him, he agrees.*

*"You are a little different, with other men," I posit. "I noticed at the bar just now, you change a little bit. I cannot say exactly how..."*

*"So do you..." Again, I can only agree with him.*

*"I need to ask you something. When we get to Timo's, can you say that I bought the whiskey?" I don't mind, and I suggest that he hands the bottle to him and I won't say anything at all. It might look a bit more natural. "Let's see," he muses, and we continue along our route.*

4.

*The car pulls to a slow stop outside what looks like a "house in progress" – there are new, clean, patio windows through which I can see living room furniture, a corrugated metal roof, and part of the building is still being built, its breeze-block structure only partly painted. It is the house of Chenzira's brother-in-law, Timo. Chenzira checks himself in the mirror. "How do I look?" I give him a once-over, removing some dust from his t-shirt.*

*"You'll do," I state before we both leave the car. As we walk towards the house, Timo comes to meet us with Sakaria (the wife of Timo) and Annika, Chenzira's wife. Three children are in tow. Customary greetings: kisses and embraces between men and women, and handshakes between men. Chenzira hands the bottle of Jameson's to Timo, who I think feigns surprise. Either way, he is happy. "Thank you, Jack," he jokes as Chenzira looks a bit shocked. "I don't think Chenzira bought this." Before I can say anything, Timo continues, "let me show you around, I've been building since you last came."*

5.

*Driving through the township, we would sometimes be stopped by people that I assumed Chenzira knew. I realised later that this was not always the case (although he was always pretty outgoing towards people, and he certainly acted as though he knew them). I recalled from my earlier days in the field, when Chenzira had told me (sternly) that when I was out in the townships I should not ask questions of people and not to be "too chatty." When I asked why, the answer was not as comprehensive as I might have liked: a simple "they will get ideas" or "there might be trouble."*

*In truth, there rarely was, but as we were moving from brother Timo's house to a butcher's on the east side of Mondesa, Chenzira swerved to the side of the road to talk to a group of men that I presumed he knew. He didn't get out of the car, chatting through the driver's window. One guy looked at me, I waved as discreetly as I could muster, he reciprocated. After a moment, a different man in dark jeans and a brightly coloured shirt jumped into the back of the car, bouncing the suspension. We drove off, and the ride fell into silence, until our passenger said something in Ndonga (an Oshiwambo dialect) that I could not make out, but Chenzira clearly did. Chenzira replied, breezily, "there won't be any*

*trouble, there is a gun in the glovebox!” I gave Chenzira a bit of side-eye – I knew there was nothing in the glovebox apart from a half full packet of cigarettes. Our passenger gave an “oh!” of appreciation and understanding, and we continued our ride in silence, looking out of the windows as the buildings moved quickly past us.*

*(Fieldnotes, Swakopmund, 21 July 2015)*

Although mundane, these brief vignettes offer several examples of masks and masking. The first, it is important to point out, is the writing itself: a powerful mask because it conceals as much as it reveals (Berliner, 2022). As author of this text, I have the power to strategically reveal and conceal certain aspects of both my own and Chenzira’s actions that day – indeed, even by carefully choosing the vignettes and how they are presented (even worded), I am engaging in an act of masking. Note however that I have attempted to remain as accurate as I possibly can in describing those events.

The car itself is a place of both movement (of course) and self-reflection, a private, intimate, and privileged space to be in: a topological place. In it, Chenzira and I rely on and trust each other; in this situation I am rather vulnerable: in the townships particularly I tended to stand out because of my height, colour and association with Chenzira. Although I had a very rough sense of direction in the townships and could flag down a taxi, walking around the townships was remarkably disorientating (for me) and it was quite easy to get lost. Chenzira of course was driving so I had no practical control over our destination. But not once did I feel threatened or in danger, even when there was mention of trouble or an imaginary gun being in the car. We were, ostensibly, “just two guys” out looking around, our “white and Black masks” momentarily a little confused (see Fanon, 2008).

I chose this specific sequence of events because they show quite well the different masks that both Chenzira and I take on (and off) and through which, sometimes, people can see. In the first vignette, Chenzira’s masks as provider and “dealer” are revealed and negotiated as he details the negotiation he made for a new phone. In the second I am masking as I interact with a group of strangers, and then as a “white man” who has his photo taken. In the third, Chenzira and I discuss a past and a future mask. In the fourth, Chenzira’s mask as provider is seen through by Timo, revealing another mask behind it. In the last, we see Chenzira’s mask as both friend and protector. Formed inter-subjectively and idiosyncratically, these masks depend on and reveal themselves dependent on the people who are present either physically or otherwise, and I also slip into and out of my masks as negotiator, researcher, as friend, as provider. Indeed, as these vignettes show, masking always takes place in interaction, highlighting its social character as opposed to more individualistic conceptions of identity.

We can see, also, an intersection with apparently “toxic” behaviour – the bluff of the gun, which in this context becomes another obvious mask. Note also the orientation to the future: Annika’s telephone, relationship-affirming gifts, Timo’s house, Chenzira’s own thoughts and meanderings, all of which mobilise different forms of social resources (including me) in order to “aspire” to something different to present social and economic

circumstances, “creat[ing] and act[ing] upon... Imagined tomorrows and shap[ing] the trajectories of their lives and surroundings” (Larsen and Van Wolputte, 2022: 24; see also Appadurai, 2013). The future is built through comparatively small interpersonal exchanges of words and goods which form the building blocks of tomorrow, the day after, and the day after that, with “the future” existing not only as an idealised abstract but as a concrete vision which is guided by the actions of today (see also Vigh, 2006). These few examples are only a handful from Chenzira’s busy, highly mobile life in Swakopmund (and beyond): he was (and still is) always out and about doing something, rarely sitting, checking on multiple small business endeavours and investments, and checking on his family.

Reading and writing with masks allows for a nuanced conversation about men who not necessarily have the time or the inclination to stop and pause to reflect on their own masculinities. To refer back to Sheila Wise (2007), masculinities in Namibia are often concerned with actions rather than words and, as Matthew Carey (2017) suggests, people who pry and who attempt to uncover hidden truths, can sometimes be greeted with (hostile) suspicion. Yet this sometime reluctance to discuss “masculinity” as a concept does not pre-suppose that these kinds of reflections cannot or do not take place; indeed both reflection *and* emotion can be embodied in action. Chenzira (as with many men throughout my fieldwork) was in some ways “difficult” to interview in more formalised circumstances, precisely because of this inclination; despite this, these are exactly the “kind of people” that anthropological studies of masculinities in Namibia should aim to include. These are regular, everyday non-elite people who are, generally speaking, “getting on with their business” and with life as it unfolds in the day-to-day. Chenzira is not an academic authority on Namibian masculinities, and neither would he want to be described in that way (I asked); yet in the tropological place of the car, he is comfortable talking about himself.

## Conclusion

The term “toxic masculinity” has entered, strongly, public debates in Namibia concerning men and masculinities. This term has its roots in Western epistemologies, and whilst it serves to stimulate conversation it is not entirely suited as representative of Namibian men. The term is flawed because it glosses over the complicated histories of colonialism, Apartheid, and Independence which have led to the varied expressions of masculinities in the present day: indeed, the use of this term in contemporary Namibian debate can serve to reinforce existing tropes of the “violent man.” Patterns of male behaviours should be placed into their specific historical contexts (Edwards-Jauch, 2016); yet this should not be to the exclusion of understanding how those pasts are negotiated in the present and what is hoped and planned for in the future.

This article suggests that men’s behaviours are better conceptualised using the trope of masks rather than that toxicity. This does not erase violence, but allows for an understanding which is engaged with men’s wide-ranging behaviours without placing blame for toxic traits on specific individuals, or indeed without approaching men as being

ubiquitously violent or “dangerous-until-they-prove-otherwise.” Reading and writing, through and with, masks pushes us to contemplate the ways in which people’s lives, as much as being rooted in the past, are also geared towards the future. The tropological place, as outlined here, provides a useful setting for understanding men on their own terms: a setting of intimacy and comfortability in which masks reveal themselves at the micro-level.

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1. A pseudonym. Note also that some of the details have been changed in order to preserve pseudonymity.

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## Jenseits toxischer Männlichkeit: Das Lesen und Schreiben von Männern im Namibia nach der Apartheid

### Zusammenfassung

In den letzten Jahren ist der Begriff “toxische Männlichkeit” in die öffentliche Debatte in Namibia eingetreten, um scheinbar problematische Formen männlichen Verhaltens zu beschreiben, insbesondere im Hinblick auf das hohe Maß an geschlechtsspezifischer Gewalt. Der aus dem westlichen Diskurs stammende Begriff selbst ist problematisch,

da er sinnvolle und transformative Gespräche über Männer im Keim ersticken kann. Dieser Artikel beschreibt "toxische Männlichkeit" als eine Trope und weist darauf hin, dass Tropen der Gewalt schon früher verwendet und politisiert wurden, und schlägt eine andere Lesart von Männern vor: durch die Maske. Zu diesem Zweck wird der "tropologische Ort" als ein Raum der Intimität und des Vertrauens eingeführt, in dem die Masken, die Männer tragen, sichtbar werden. Obwohl die Einführung der "toxischen Männlichkeit" in die Debatten über Männlichkeiten in Namibia als wichtiger Ausgangspunkt für Gespräche anerkannt werden sollte, fordert dieser Artikel die Forscher auf, darüber hinaus zu denken und mehr laterale Beziehungen zu denjenigen zu fördern, die wir untersuchen.

**Schlagwörter**

Namibia, Männlichkeit, Masken, Trope, toxische Männlichkeit