

Review: Felix Schürmann, *Der graue Unterstrom. Walfänger und Küstengesellschaften an den tiefen Stränden Afrikas (1770-1920)*, Frankfurt am Main, Campus, 2017.

The role of animals in Namibian history is under-researched – even though, for example, historically the economic and cultural relevance of cattle for the peoples of what is now central Namibia is undisputed. (Human-)Animal studies are, however, now an established field of research in many history departments. The (multidisciplinary) literature has grown impressively over the last decade. Some even speak of an ‘animal turn’.

It is in this academic context that Felix Schürmann has written an impressive study (submitted as a Ph.D. thesis in Frankfurt/M. in 2015) about whaling in the Atlantic and Indian Ocean concentrating on the coast of Africa and offshore islands from 1770 to 1920. Based on a wide array of sources (logbooks, consular files, diaries, letters, etc.) and concentrating on the actors and their interaction, he lays bare an important part of the maritime history of this region. Schürmann does so by intelligently fusing the global and local histories of whaling, whalers and the African coastal communities who came in contact with and were affected by the whalers arriving from North America or Europe.

Given the topic of this journal, this review will only refer to Schürmann’s chapter about whaling in Walvis Bay, 1780-1860 (“Vom Walgrund zum Handelshafen”), the first of eight

chapters dealing with specific coastal towns or islands.¹ In addition, Schürmann narrates in three general (‘in-between’) chapters the economic and social history of whaling, work and life on board and what captains, officers, and ordinary whalers did when their ships anchored in an African harbour.

The rich maritime life due to the cold Benguela Current attracts great numbers of migrating whales especially from May to September. Archaeological evidence shows that for millennia, the people living on the Namibian shores made use of whales that were washed ashore, but they probably did not hunt them at sea. The great numbers of whales populating this huge bay was also the reason why a Portuguese mariner sailing along the Namib coast around 1500, christened it ‘Angra da balea’ – Walvis Bay. In great detail Schürmann describes the (whaling) history of the bay; commencing in 1726 when the Dutch West India Company, attracted by the promising name, sent the first whaling ship. However, this and other journeys failed as business ventures. Not until around 1780 were American and British whalers more successful, especially for the southern right whale (*Eubalaena australis*). In comparison to the Indian Ocean hunting grounds Walvis Bay, like the hunting grounds off the South American coast,

¹ Other chapters deal with Delagoa Bay, 1780-1845 (chap. 2), Saint Augustin, Madagaskar, 1830-1860 (chap. 3), Mutsamudu, Anjouan, 1835-1890 (chap. 4), Port Louis, Mauritius, 1789-1878 (chap. 5), Cabinda, 1850-1885 (chap. 6), San Antonio, Annobón, 1825-1950 (chap. 7) and Furna, Brava, 1770-1920 (chap. 8).

had the geographic advantage of closer proximity to the whaling 'capitals' in New England like Bedford or Nantucket. In 1789 the Ranger from Nantucket hunted in the bay and broke a historic record by being the first ship ever to take home more than 1,000 barrels of whale oil in one season. Around 1790 twenty to thirty whalers reached Walvis Bay each year, most of them from the United States. Whaling in Walvis Bay probably peaked in the decade before 1800. Some of the whalers remained for months in the bay. Captain Thomas Alexander reported in 1795 that Walvis Bay was seen among whalers as "the best bay for that fishing along the [West African] coast." (p. 86) Rivalries between European nations were also played out in Walvis Bay, especially during the Napoleonic era. The British-American war of 1812 ended whaling in the bay until the Treaty of Ghent in 1814. Subsequently whaling was resumed but the dwindling numbers of whales brought fewer whalers in the 1830s and 40s. From 1830 Angra Pequena to the south became more popular with British and American seal hunters, some of whom also hunted whales. Thus Angra Pequena was at times more profitable than Walvis Bay, also due to guano deposits; but the lack of drinking water (as well as sharks) caused problems. Whaling in Walvis Bay was practically dead by the mid-1860s. In 1884, the American Sunbeam was the last whaling ship to reach the bay.

Schürman's analysis of the interaction between the people living around Walvis Bay near the Kuiseb river and the whaling crews is mostly based on the literature on pre-colonial history and

archaeology which is well known to specialists in Namibian history (J.+J. Kinahan, K. Budack, B. Lau, D. Henrichsen). However, the focus on whaling helps not only to explain how this interaction changed ǀAonin culture and practices such as tool-making, language, or settlement patterns. Schürmann also explains how Walvis Bay developed from a whale hunting ground into one of the major harbours on the Southern African coast – what it remains to this day. It all began with barter trade of cattle for tobacco or beads (the traders used mostly sign language) between ǀAonin and American or British whalers. Later, when whaling ceased to be economically viable, the trade in cattle and other goods from the established harbour facilities remained intact. The everyday life of the whalers was harsh, at times dominated by boredom – which led to them seeking distraction among the coastal societies, often indulging in sexual and drinking excesses when they had shore leave. There were occasionally deadly conflicts between ǀAonin and whalers. However, over the period from the 18th century onwards, their interaction was generally characterized by cooperation.

The historiography of Namibia is still all too often limited to the latter half of the 19th and the 20th century. With his more general focus on whaling and maritime history Schürmann has creatively widened this perspective – and not only chronologically. His work also points out that the history of African-European encounters consists of more elements than the historiographic trinity of "European expansion, transatlantic

slave trade, and colonialism” (p. 614). Evidently, the history of whaling overlapped with these developments, but at the same time this history adds an element of ambiguity beyond the dichotomies of “perpetrators’ and victims’ histories” (p. 618). Thus Schürmann’s research fits well into the Africanist historiography that aims to question the dominance of the European actors in Africa.

Jakob Zollmann
Berlin