

**Review:** Gregor Dobler, *Traders and Trade in Colonial Ovamboland, 1925-1990. Elite Formation and the Politics of Consumption under Indirect Rule and Apartheid*, Basel, Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2014.

In this well-researched and accessible book on traders and trade in Ovambo, Gregor Dobler offers a welcome and nuanced account of social, political and economic change in Namibia under South African rule. This period, Dobler says, was not merely a timespan between two eras of independence. It should be understood rather as an era that profoundly influenced (and continues to shape) Namibian society. His story is that of the rise of a new elite – traders – and of how this emerging elite instigated new patterns of consumption and new forms of social and political exchange. Commendable is indeed Dobler's serious treatment of the ambivalent and pragmatic position of traders vis-à-vis the colonial administration and vis-à-vis the other, old and new, elites in today's North-Central regions.

This then is a book by an anthropologist looking at the history (of the medium durée, p. 212) of the women and men who took to trading between 1939 and 1990, with an emphasis on the period between 1955 and 1975, a period that in contemporary historiography has yet to be adequately researched, as Dobler rightly points out. It is predominantly based on a thorough analysis of the archival material available in Windhoek, Pretoria and elsewhere, complemented with interviews taken in 2006 and with

fieldwork in today's shops in northern Namibia (even though the latter receives less emphasis here than it does in the author's other work).

I would summarize the main ideas in *Traders and Trade* as follows. First of all, the rise of traders in northern Namibia and the particular form trading took in the region was made possible by the contradictions of a modernist but also abusive and violent regime, by the social engineering under indirect rule and (especially) under apartheid. Migrant labour generated the cash needed to start a shop and fuelled consumption at these shops. At the same time, homeland policies created a monopoly on trade and freed Namibians from external competition. This became painfully clear in the period following independence, when many traders saw their income drop dramatically as the war's cash economy ground to a halt and there as an influx of competitors from South Africa and China. As a result, after 1990, only the most successful traders remained in business.

In other words, the social and political changes that took place in northern Namibia as of the 1920s led to the gradual emergence of traders as new actors on the social scene. The second theme Dobler elaborates in *Traders and Trade* is how these traders themselves instigated social, political and economic changes. These changes became especially noticeable after 1950, as the administration shifted from indirect rule to a more centralized system of bureaucratic rule (apartheid) and the ties between this bureaucracy and the existing political elite (chiefs, headmen, ect.) were strengthened. First of all,

stores became the material base for a new elite that entered into competition with the existing one (the chiefs); also, they were public spaces that came to be associated with particular social circles and new forms of support and patronage, made possible by the relative wealth of the most successful store owners – especially the happy few that were able to become full-time traders. Thirdly, stores were also imaginary spaces that represented ‘development’ (ehumokomeho) and ideas about a better life associated with particular social forms, patterns of consumption and new ideas. In that sense, these stores functioned as proto-urban centres that changed the political and material landscape.

It is here that, thirdly, the author situates the split between the emerging “intellectual” elite (such as preachers, teachers and nurses) on the one hand, and the “economic” elite (successful businessmen who usually only had a very rudimentary educational background) on the other. The former group developed a growing revolutionary consciousness, leading to the formation of SWAPO and the struggle for liberation. Many of its members became “professional politicians”, often in exile. The second group shared similar political ideas but took a more pragmatist stance and reformist ethos. Though both groups were shaped by the repression of political opposition under apartheid, they parted ways. They made different choices that left their marks in today’s political landscape. The author, however, repeatedly insists (and, more importantly, demonstrates) that this new trading elite cannot be categorized

in simple dichotomies: “traders [were] an active political group that tried to further their common interests through organization, while simultaneously pursuing very different political agendas in other forums” (p. xxx).

Dobler analyses these three principal ideas in seven more or less chronologically ordered chapters. The first of these sketches the pre-colonial history of (caravan) trade in North-Central Namibia from the eighteenth well into the early twentieth century. In broad strokes he depicts the competition for access to new and existing routes and commodities. To readers familiar with contemporary historiography of northern and Central Namibia this first chapter may offer few new insights (one can refer to the work by Immanuel Kreike or Brigitte Lau, respectively). It does the job, however, by setting the scene for the emergence of the first monopoly stores in the 1920s – the topic treated in chapter two.

Like elsewhere in Namibia these first (white-owned) general stores were deemed instrumental in promoting a cash economy and were explicitly part of the South West African Administration’s efforts at labour recruitment and at installing a generalized system of contract labour: they did not need to be profitable. Yet, the introduction of a far more centralized and bureaucratic form of governance after 1948 – the victory of the National Party in South Africa – coincided with a wave of African-owned stores opening their doors.

This wave Dobler analyses in chapter three. Here he also answers the – seemingly banal, but really pertinent –

question as to why so many people took to trading and not, for instance, to manufacturing. According to the author, structural circumstances (migrant labour and its consequences for structural underdevelopment) and policy regulations (the administration's desire to encourage a money economy and thus provide the incentive for contract labour) made trading the only viable option for local actors to partake in the contemporary economy while preventing them from being drawn into a dependency on short-term labour contracts.

In the fourth chapter, then, the author further scrutinizes these structural circumstances and policy regulations for the first two decades under apartheid rule. This chapter also concentrates on the appearance of new, African, actors on the social scene, a newly emerging elite that entered into competition with the chiefs and headman – the African political elite. The latter witnessed a steady decline in its authority because of the new social forms, resources and ideas in the North-Central regions of Namibia. This partly drove them into the arms of the apartheid regime that supported them which, in turn, further undermined their position.

In the next chapter however, Dobler switches perspective, placing the emphasis more on the actors than the structures. Central now are the life histories of (successful) traders, how they experienced and tried to reconcile the contradictions of an oppressive regime. By further looking into how stores were designed and operated Dobler underlines the social role of traders and of the places they operated from. Among the reasons for their

success, says the author, was the fact that traders added a new layer to society that did not compete with other activities (such as labour or agriculture) for scarce resources: the cash one needed to purchase commodities came from outside sources and on top of the already existing forms of exchange. Also, local stores raised the purchasing power and value of money earned, for instance through wage or contract labour: as soon as there were local stores, it became more rewarding to have cash to spend.

But stores were more than that: the sixth chapter analyses how they constituted small cores that brought with them new social forms and ideas characteristic of the new actors on the scene who wanted to break free of the control of the ruling elites and an increasingly oppressive regime. These stores were the link between rural life, and “modern” life in the urban centres in Namibia and South Africa. In that sense, and despite their rural character, they became proto-urban centres that in a few cases also managed to develop into today's main towns and cities in the region.

Stores thus also became places of political exchange and, despite their pragmatism, traders played an increasingly important role in a society torn further and further apart by the war economy. The seventh chapter looks at both the contradictions of apartheid rule and at the ambiguities of and tensions between the various responses it generated. The ongoing war of liberation radicalized the positions of the different local elites. At the same time, for the traders, it also made business flourish,

not least because of the spending power of the many soldiers in the region and the improved infrastructure (such as roads) the border war demanded. This seventh chapter sees the author at his best, combining vivid ethnography with a more structural analysis, the main points of which are taken up again in the conclusion.

*Traders and Trade* also raises a few questions: the author himself underlines the importance of the two decades from 1955 to 1975 in the formation of contemporary Namibian society, and its relative neglect in Namibian historiography. The book also draws attention to the form apartheid and South African rule took in various regions of Namibia and made me wonder how differently similar processes would have played out in, say, the Kunene or Zambezi Regions, or in Windhoek or Walvis Bay. On a more critical note, though, I question Dobler's emphasis on the social and political role of elites, and on the loose use he makes of the term. While the history of elite formation is undoubtedly important I do wonder whether the current emphasis on elites in anthropological and historical scholarship does not get in the way of an understanding of other social actors' motives, strategies and uncertainties. Having said that: this is a highly commendable book for everyone interested in Namibia's past and present and, more broadly, in the history and continuing legacy of colonialism and apartheid. Read it. You will not be disappointed.

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