
The Herero of today's central Namibia have not always been a 'cattle society', where raising and accumulating livestock are at the centre of communal life. Their society only developed thus in the second half of the nineteenth century. This is the key insight of Dag Henrichsen’s study on *Herrschaft und Alltag im vorkolonialen Zentralnamibia* ("Rule and Everyday Life in Pre-colonial Central Namibia"). In developing his argument, Henrichsen explores the social, political, economic, cultural, religious and military processes that transformed Herero society from roughly 1830 until 1890. In so doing, he provides the most exhaustive history to date of the area in this period.1


Large parts of Henrichsen’s argument rely upon his analysis of what he calls a process of re-pastoralisation: at the time Nama and Oorlam groups began to penetrate the area in the 1830s, Herero lived by hunting, gathering, and raising small herds of goats, sheep and cattle. Livestock raids by Nama/Oorlam parties impoverished numerous Herero in the 1840s and 1850s. In responding to poverty, Herero focused their economic strategies on accumulating cattle by the...
late 1850s. Moreover, some clans entered into strategic cooperation with European missionaries, traders and hunters. Collaborating with these agents of merchant capitalism, as Henrichsen labels them, Herero succeeded in shaking off Nama/Oorlam domination and achieved a hegemonic position in the area of today’s central Namibia during the mid and late 1860s. By raising vast herds of cattle, expanding control over wells and pastures, and selling game products to European traders, Herero reached the peak of their prosperity in the 1870s and 1880s. It was in this time that Herero chiefdoms emerged, whose leaders championed the idea of a distinctive Herero territory ('ehi Rövaherero'). It was also in this time that Germany began establishing colonial rule in the territory. The Germans mistakenly regarded the Herero as cattle-breeders by nature, and thus created a stereotypical and distorted, but also very persistent image of Herero society.

Henrichsen reads the process of repastoralisation against the background of structural transformations in what today is central Namibia which re-arranged its spatial configuration and reshaped economic, political and social relations. The most far-reaching of these shifts was the expansion of merchant capitalism from the Cape Colony across southern Africa. Henrichsen shows that Herero played an active part in this system, for instance, by selling cattle, purchasing guns and horses, and working as wagon drivers or hunters. Guns and horses emerged as new instruments and symbols of power, and it seems that in the second half of the nineteenth century the accumulation of guns became nearly as important as the accumulation of cattle. Other transformations such as the advance of Christianity or literacy, in contrast, concerned only a minority among Herero.

The book stands out among works on African history for several reasons. First of all, Henrichsen makes extensive use of archival and published records as well as of oral history, drawing on substantial corpora of both types of sources. Beyond its actual focus as a regional study, the book demonstrates in an exemplary manner how structural transformations and the agency of people involved reciprocally shaped the history of nineteenth-century southern Africa. Henrichsen offers not only an in-depth investigation of a society that was subject to rapid and dramatic changes, but also a study of the transformative power of merchant capitalism. He makes clear that many terms that for a long time have been understood as being ethnic markers were in fact social and at times controversial categories, e.g. ‘Ovatjimba’ and ‘Cattle Damaras’. Instead of translating an African society into Western terms, Henrichsen uses Otjiherero expressions when referring to Herero concepts, for example for rulers (‘ovahona’) or for settlements (‘ozon-ganda’). The book definitely deserves an English translation – not only because it is a highly significant work, but also to make its story accessible to a broader public, particularly in Namibia. Henrichsen’s achievement of portraying vividly a society which was later to be largely destroyed by German colonial troops in the genocide of 1904–1908 deserves recognition, especially in times
of what Richard Reid recently referred to as "marginalization of the precolonial" in the historiography of Africa.\(^4\) With the book’s empirical density and the coherence of arguments there are few points I would criticise. One would be that Henrichsen addresses conceptual and theoretical issues only sketchily and thus leaves some questions unanswered, such as: When did colonialism begin in what is now central Namibia? Henrichsen labels the decades before 1890 as "precolonial", but at the same time emphasizes the active participation of Herero in what he calls a "colonial system" of trade with the Cape Colony. Apart from that, the term 'Alltag' ('everyday life') in the title could mislead readers because the book is less a history of everyday life than it is an analysis of structural processes. Furthermore, Henrichsen’s style of writing is – although not overly complicated – laden with academic jargon, indicating that the book is a largely unmodified version of the doctoral thesis he completed at the University of Hamburg in 1997. All things considered, however, Henrichsen’s impressive work will serve as an invaluable reference for understanding the history of nineteenth century south western Africa.

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