
Reinhart Kößler, adjunct professor of Sociology at the University of Münster and senior research fellow at the Arnold Bergstraesser Institute in Freiburg, has written extensively on traditional communities in southern Namibia. The book under review constitutes in many regards the conceptual and empirical centrepiece for much of his writing on Nama communities and the dynamics of identity politics in Namibia. In his book, Kößler delineates the trajectories of the Hai-khauan (Berseba) and Khobesin, resp. Witbooi (Gibeon) communities under South African rule 1915-1990. He extends his analysis into the first years of independence, diagnosing the emergence of traditional communities and their struggle for communal reconstruction and recognition as distinct groups within the postcolonial state. Kößler’s book offers valuable insights when seeking to understand the complexities and conflicts involved in the ambivalent relationship between traditional communities and the post-apartheid state. In his study Kößler explicitly leaves out the era of German colonialism (while of course mapping out important continuities and differences), which turns out to be a useful approach, given the blanks that still characterise much of Namibian historiography regarding South African rule.

In search of survival and dignity is a work combining sociological perspectives on human agency with in-depth historical analysis, drawing on comprehensive use of archival data (archives have been accessed in Windhoek, Cape Town, Johannesburg, Pretoria and Wuppertal), as 1022 footnotes on 77 pages impressively attest to. This is supplemented by a list of abbreviations, a chronology of historical events, several photographs, a listing of archival sources and, commendably, an index. While the book has been carefully proofread, some aspects of layout and typesetting take getting used to. The body text is fragmented by the continuous indenting of quotations, even if they consist of not more than two lines. The frequent appearance of enumerations with bullet points is also rather unfortunate and it would have been better to incorporate these into the running text.

The book opens with an editorial note, highlighting the linguistic bias the researcher encounters in assessing historical sources that originated in and under apartheid administration and its persistence in the post-apartheid democratic order. From the beginning Kößler makes it clear that his study is also to be seen as an endeavour in “addressing the clearly voiced concern of those involved in these communities today who are in search for [sic!] a voice” (p. 4) and in delivering a fair and balanced representation of their social reality.

His opening caveat is followed by a short Introduction that summarises the scope and relevance of the book. By focusing on two prominent Nama communities, the Hai-khauan of Berseba
and the Khobesin of Gibeon, Kößler provides examples of varying strategies for coping with the strains of apartheid policy. While the Hai-khauan, by means of cautious cooperation, managed to uphold their communal structures for a long time even after the advent of South African rule, the Khobesin increasingly challenged the colonial administration’s attempts to exert control over communal affairs. Apartheid in southern Namibia, in this regard, is conceptualised as a grand – and remarkably contingent – experiment in social engineering, profoundly affecting, manipulating and reshaping social, political and economic realities of the traditional communities under its rule. It is first and foremost the establishment of the reserve system, that Kößler pays close attention to. As a central pillar of apartheid rule, culminating in the homeland policy, the populations of southern (and central) Namibia were systematically resettled into designated areas in order to exercise demographic control and secure a steady supply of labour for the demands of the white settler economy. In its longevity as a legacy of colonialism, this massive intervention in people’s social environments still visibly affects the postcolonial state.

Conflicts regarding access to farmland, water and ancestral gravesites, questions of customary law and hereditary rights, or the official recognition of traditional authorities provide daily evidence of the close correlation between the colonial past and the present.

His theoretical approach is developed further in the following Prologue, where he positions his study on traditional communities in a framework of theories of ethnicity and state formation. His assessment that “the relevance of ethnicity as a social and political phenomenon […] cannot be debated away” (pp. 9f.) proves to be a valid one given the heated debates on tribalism that feature prominently in current political discourse in Namibia. Ethnicity in southern Namibia, as social fact and historical process, can thus be traced back both to South African colonial policies and the active role of traditional communities in negotiating the limitations (and opportunities) of colonial rule. It is in this context that Kößler introduces the concept of “revindicatory politics” (p. 15), as opposed to “primary anti-colonial resistance”, meaning strategies of resistance against the colonial Leviathan amidst radically altered political and socio-economic surroundings.

The greater part of the book is comprised of three lengthy sections, one delineating the genesis of the South African reserve system, the other two portraying the experiences of the Berseba and Gibeon communities respectively. After the ravages of German colonial rule, comprising genocidal violence, massive deportation and dispossession, the South African takeover in 1915 was met with cautious hopes for restitution in some communities (p. 31). Optimism was soon to fade when it became clear that South Africa would by and large maintain the status quo of demographic control (i.e. the obligation to be employed and carry passes, as well as large-scale land expropriation). Kößler distinguishes two distinct phases of South African reserve policy. The first,
ranging from 1915 to approx. 1939, was characterised by a primacy of procuring ‘African’ labour for white farms and mines. For this aim segregation was mainly employed as a social engineering technique to control and restrict the mobility of people and stock while being less concerned with establishing tribally homogenous reserves. Ethnic heterogeneity was thus the rule rather than the exception — the reserve of Tses, where groups of Nama, Herero, and Damara were resettled, is a case in point. This changed after 1939 with the establishment of the Tribal Trust Funds, marking a first institutional shift towards the subsequent homeland policy of the 1960s. Here, segregation became explicitly linked to tribal designation, serving the aim of separate development, culminating in the envisaged three-tier Turnhalle administration based on ethnic authorities.

One of the most laudable aspects of Kößler’s book is his dedication to detail when it comes to exposing the microstructure of colonial rule as daily routine and social practice in the reserves. The South African administration, personified by the superintendent and the magistrates, exerted power through a tight regime of control over essential features of communal life, especially in fiscal matters. Here it was first and foremost the imposition of grazing fees that turned out to be a “powerful tool for controlling economic developments in the reserves, especially as regards numbers of stock kept by residents” (p. 53).

While the funds allocated were officially designated for the infrastructural ‘development’ of the reserves, the communities had virtually no control over the use of their tax revenue. Demands for the provision of additional boreholes in Krantzplatz reserve, where arid conditions made stock farming extremely difficult in times of drought, could thus be easily dismissed by the colonial administration as economically unviable (pp. 78f.).

Even though communities were in some regards at the mercy of the colonial bureaucracy, which exercised huge influence on local social structures through proxies, people in the reserves developed remarkable strategies for coping with such situations. In his in-depth portrayal of the traditional communities of Berseba and Gibeon, Kößler meticulously reconstructs individual responses to the colonial situation these communities developed in face of very different social and historical backgrounds.

Unlike most Nama communities, the |Hai-khauan of Berseba did not take part in the great uprising against the Germans 1904–07 and consequently were spared from the wholesale displacement and dispossession that took place in the wake of the war. Throughout the German and South African colonial era, the Berseba community aimed at preserving its special status, above all its communal land. This relative independence was increasingly threatened by the growing indebtedness of the community which ultimately led to fiscal dependency on the administration. This, together with an escalating conflict over leadership succession between the rival Goliath and Isaak factions, presented the colonial
administration with the opportunity to intervene in and manipulate communal affairs. The Berseba case study thus illustrates comprehensively the coloniser’s techniques for extending control on the ground. At the same time it highlights strategies employed by members of the community to make use of the administration’s influence in situations like the succession feud, where strategic alliances were forged in order to negotiate the terms of external policies (pp. 132-148).

While the colonial encounter in Berseba was characterised by the community’s overriding desire to maintain the status quo and preserve its land, albeit faced with a gradual descent into dependency, Gibeon appears to be quite the opposite. The Khobesin were among the last of the Nama groups to immigrate to southern Namibia, settling in Gibeon in 1863. The community can look back on a long tradition of anti-colonial resistance, epitomised by its charismatic leader Hendrik Witbooi who championed the uprising against German rule both in 1894 and 1904, and culminating in the highly symbolic union with the national liberation movement SWAPO in 1976. As a result of the war of 1904–07 the Khobesin were largely affected by displacement, deportation and dispossession. Even though the South African administration allowed the scattered community to relocate to Gibeon in 1915, it strove to limit the jurisdiction of the local traditional authority, and thus the potential for renewed rebellion (pp. 184-187). Consequently, Kößler characterises the Khobesin’s “long-term agenda […] as marked by a revindicatory politics, bent on re-asserting an endangered collective identity and on regaining rights taken from the community by the colonial onslaught” (p. 177). This inevitably created potential for conflict with the colonial administration, crystallising around issues such as the installation of a communal shadow jurisdiction (pp. 188-190) and the conferral of military ranks (pp. 192f.) by headman Isaak Witbooi, the use of (illegal) branding irons (pp. 201f.) or the refusal to resettle at Tses (pp. 202-204). What Kößler captures under the rubric of ‘revindicatory politics’ is first and foremost the struggle of the Khobesin to reconstruct their communal integrity, a venture intimately connected to Gibeon as a place, with school, graveyard and church as symbolic markers of group cohesion (p. 215). Here a nexus of territoriality and belonging becomes evident, tying communal membership to a specific place rather than ethnic affiliation, as imposed by the South African homeland policy. Examples of social inclusiveness and communities’ ability to integrate outsiders, in a context of large-scale resettlement schemes, are ample and a central point in Kößler’s study – as are examples of the successful sparking of inter-communal dissent and open conflict as a result of South Africa’s divide-and-rule tactics. Given the strong reliance on constructivist theories of ethnicity for Kößler’s line of argument, his frequent reference to ‘collective identity’ or ‘community identity’ is debatable. As he himself concludes: “[C]ommunal identity
is not fixed: it is rooted in everyday life and is, therefore, in flux” (p. 257).

*In Search of Survival and Dignity* offers a close reading of South African colonialism in southern Namibia and traditional communities’ strategies for coping with the long-term effects of the reserve policies. Kößler places agency at the centre of his analysis, while at the same time extensively illuminating a period of Namibian history which still occupies a marginalised position in academic research. The longevity of ethnicity in particular, both as a product of the said agency and of South Africa’s social engineering techniques, emerges as a distinctive tenet of Kößler’s analysis. Against that background his book helps in understanding the dynamics at play in social dramas such as the schism within the Ḥai-ǁkhaun community, where there was no reconciliation until 2011 after almost forty years of bitter strife and where the situation remains extremely sensitive.

This actuality helps to compensate for the fact that the book is based largely on empirical data gathered in 1995, although revisions have been made to acknowledge recent developments and scholarly writings. While not appearing outdated, it is noticeable that certain ideas which have since become central to Kößler’s writing are not yet fully developed. These mostly concern the dynamics of “public, communal and individual memory” (p. 1) which Kößler introduces as an important feature of his study, without, however, providing a coherent theoretical framework. While in his later writings, especially on communal memory events such as the Witbooi Heroes Day commemoration, Kößler has rendered invaluable contributions to an understanding of Namibian memory politics, the study at hand touches this complex only marginally (pp. 155; 216; 248-253). Yet, it is precisely this momentum of social memory and localised memory praxes that so persuasively illustrates the long-term effects of colonial rule on traditional communities in Namibia and their trajectories in negotiating their place in the postcolonial state. Kößler has written numerous articles on this phenomenon, for which the book under review delivers contextual information in abundance. Despite its minor shortcomings, *In Search of Survival and Dignity* is a formidable contribution towards a better understanding of the dynamics of ethnicity, identity politics, and the role of traditional communities in Namibia.

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