

Slavery and the colonial state in German South West Africa 1880s to 1918

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Abstract

A considerable trade in slaves took place along the Portuguese-German colonial border, as the German colonial administrators learnt after some years. Their means and willingness to act against the slave hunters and traders were limited at best, especially since the definition of slavery to be applied to the African realities on the ground was uncertain. It was, therefore, more practical to remain in the position of bystander, demanding that the neighbouring Portuguese colonial officials intervene and abolish slavery.

Introduction: Source critical remarks

From time to time, the colonial administration in German South West Africa (GSWA) was confronted with slavery issues. It kept files on these but only reported back to Berlin on the odd individual case. Slavery, which in some areas was centuries old, was firmly established in the north of the protectorate and it proved difficult for administrators to distinguish traditional African from colonial European versions. The sources on which this article's argument is based are entirely German. The apparent research lacunae for the German side of this history can somehow be filled in with the work of William Gervase Clarence-Smith on the Angolan side of the issue; he researched his findings in Portuguese archives.¹ Further, Kalle Gustavson's article on the slave trade in Ovamboland, based on research in the Archives of the Finnish Mission Society² and Jan-Bart Gewald's article on slave exports from pre-colonial southern and central Namibia³, as well as Dag Henrichsen's analysis of the labour recruitment and shipment of so-called Damara people from central Namibia to the Cape Colony in the 1870s and 1880s⁴, provide a first inroad into this complex topic. The sparse German administrative sources

¹ William G. Clarence-Smith, *Mossamedes and its Hinterland, 1875-1915*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1975; Idem., *Slaves, Peasants and Capitalists in Southern Angola 1840 – 1926*, London, Cambridge University Press, 1979.

² Kalle Gustavsson, "The trade in slaves in Ovamboland, ca. 1850-1910", *African Economic History*, 33, 2005: 31-68.

³ Jan-Bart Gewald, "Untapped sources. Slave exports from Southern and Central Namibia up to c. 1850", in: Carolyn Hamilton, (ed.), *The Mfecane Aftermath. Reconstructive Debates in Southern African History*, Johannesburg, Witwatersrand University Press, 1995: 417-435.

⁴ Dag Henrichsen, "'Damara' labour recruitment to the Cape Colony and marginalisation and hegemony in late 19th century central Namibia", *Journal of Namibian Studies*, 3, 2008: 63-82.

about slave trade and slavery in the northern borderlands of GSWA (1880s to 1918), on which this article is based will now be examined.

Preceding this, a more general question arising from this is quite pertinent for the deliberations and needs to be raised here: how reliable are such colonial voices as this information was almost exclusively compiled from the perspective of the colonial observer and from unverifiable hearsay. Eyewitness accounts, as far as they are available, cannot conceal their ethnocentric character. Further, the points of view of those directly involved are never discernable as such, whether they be of the slaves, the slaver-hunters, slave traders or slave keepers. The question remains as to how these missing voices can be rendered and made available⁵ so as to complement our argument.⁶

The limits of colonial power

The colonial state's power and potential to exercise influence have become a topic of discussion – also in the Namibian context. Tilman Dederich points to “a new generation of historians of colonial Namibia” who tend to question the “colonial hegemony”.⁷ The debate on the effectiveness of colonial regimes and the characterisation of its attempts to establish control has indeed been wideranging. While some still refer to the colonial regime as “totalitarian”⁸ and describe German colonialism as a predecessor of Nazi-rule⁹, others already pointed years ago to the “weak government”¹⁰ of the colony and

⁵ This kind of archaeology of missing voices can take an example from the successful work of philologist Martin Lienhard, who managed to reconstruct discourses and social structures of slaves from the Congo and Angola in the Brazilian Caribbean region, cf. Martin Lienhard, *Le discours des esclaves de l'Afrique à l'Amerique latine. Kongo, Angola, Brésil, Caraïbes*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2001.

⁶ The significance of these voices can already be seen in the question of labelling: can one really talk of slavery within the borders of what is now Namibia the way the sources do? Can a history of slavery really be written as part of a description of free and forced labour forms in Namibia, which of necessity must include the compulsion of the German Labour Ordinance of 1907 and its later South African equivalents? Or is there a danger of erasing fundamental differences for the sake of linguistic clarity by adopting the terms of the sources?

⁷ Tilman Dederich, “War and mobility the borderlands of South Western Africa in the early twentieth century”, *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 2006: 275-294 (276), with an overview on the secondary literature.

⁸ See e.g.: http://www.bundesarchiv.de/oeffentlichkeitsarbeit/bilder_dokumente/00663/index.html: “Nach ihrer Entlassung aus der Gefangenschaft wurden die Herero einem totalitären Regime unterworfen” (“after their release from captivity the Herero were subject to a totalitarian regime”); Ludwig Helbig, “Der koloniale Frühfaschismus”, in: Nangolo Mbumba, Helga Patemann and Uazuvara Katjavena, (eds.), *Ein Land eine Zukunft. Namibia auf dem Weg in die Unabhängigkeit*, Wuppertal, Hammer, 1988: 102-118 describes German colonial rule as “frühfaschistisch” (early fascist); but see Lewis H. Gann and Peter Duignan, *The Rulers of German Africa 1884 – 1914*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1977: 238: “A totalitarian state requires a coercive state machine much more extensive and elaborate than that available to any colonial power in Africa.”

⁹ Overview on the arguments and the debate in Robert Gerwarth and Stephan Malinowski, “Hannah Arendt's ghosts: reflections on the disputable path from Windhoek to Auschwitz”, *Central European History*, 42,

“the thin white line”¹¹ of colonial officials which was barely in a position to span the colonial territory. The colonial administration was for this “much too small in all the colonies”.¹² George Steinmetz thus correctly describes colonial states, including its German versions, as “extremely weak” in terms of their material basis, their “apparatus”.¹³ The attempts to obtain information on and to limit the slave trade in northern GSWA, which were mostly half-hearted, provide a good example of the limits of colonial power. While hierarchical connections, inequality and violence did exist, the actual regulatory and control capabilities of the colonial staff in the areas to be colonised remained largely marginal. Thus the transformation of the existing societies, their cultural traditions, economic systems and power structures were never likely to succeed in the short term. The presence and power of the ruling colonial system became weaker the further it was removed from the few colonial centres. In GSWA these were the “colonial capital”¹⁴ Windhuk with the *Gouvernement* and the seats of the regional offices such as Swakopmund, Keetmanshoop and Grootfontein.

According to the sociologist Trutz v. Trotha, early colonial rule was typified by its lack of constancy.¹⁵ It needed time – and considerable means – to take root. The infrastructure

2009: 279-300; Robert Gerwarth and Stephan Malinowski, “Der Holocaust als ‘kolonialer Genozid’? Europäische Kolonialgewalt und nationalsozialistischer Vernichtungskrieg”, *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 33, 2007, 3: 439-466; Birte Kundrus, “Continuities, parallels, receptions. Reflections on the ‘colonization’ of National Socialism”, *Journal of Namibian Studies*, 4, 2008: 25-46; Georg Steinmetz, *The Devil’s Handwriting. Precoloniality and the German Colonial State in Qingdao, Samoa, and Southwest Africa*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2007: 10f; on potential “German exceptionalism” in the colonies, see *ibid.*: 68f.

¹⁰ Roland Oliver, “Introduction”, in: Roland Oliver and G. N. Sanderson, (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Africa*, Vol. VI, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985: 1-9 (6f.); Michael Pesek, “Die Grenzen des kolonialen Staates in Deutsch-Ostafrika”, in: Alain Chatriot and Dieter Gosewinkel, (eds.), *Figurationen des Staates in Deutschland und Frankreich 1870-1945. Les figures de l’Etat en Allemagne et en France*, München, Oldenbourg, 2006: 117-140 (117) talks about the “nicht starker” Kolonialstaat (not strong colonial state).

¹¹ Anthony H.M. Kirk-Greene, “The thin white line: the size of the British colonial service in Africa”, *African Affairs*, 79, 314, 1980: 25-44.

¹² Andreas Eckert, “Die Verheißungen der Bürokratie. Verwaltung als Zivilisierungsagentur im kolonialen Westafrika”, in: Boris Barth and Jürgen Osterhammel, (eds.), *Zivilisierungsmissionen. Imperiale Weltverbesserung seit dem 18. Jahrhundert*, Konstanz, UVK-Verlags-Gesellschaft, 2005: 269-283 (275); see also Dirk van Laak, *Imperiale Infrastruktur. Deutsche Planungen für eine Erschließung Afrikas 1880 bis 1960*, Paderborn, Schöningh, 2004: 148f; Gann and Duignan, *Rulers*: 70 add a comparative view by pointing out that German colonial governors in Africa had only „a skeleton staff even by the modest British administration standards, and not at all comparable to the large European staff of the French colonial service”.

¹³ Steinmetz, *Devil’s*: 31.

¹⁴ “Kolonialhauptstadt”. A contemptuous remark about Windhoek made by the German military physician Georg Hillebrecht in his diary entry of 22.1.1905 in: Andreas E. Eckl, (ed.), *“S’ist ein übles Land hier”. Zur Historiographie eines umstrittenen Kolonialkrieges. Tagebuchaufzeichnungen aus dem Herero-Krieg in Deutsch-Südwestafrika 1904 von Georg Hillebrecht und Franz Ritter von Epp*, Köln, Köppe, 2005: 191.

¹⁵ Trutz von Trotha, *Koloniale Herrschaft. Zur soziologischen Theorie der Staatsentstehung am Beispiel des “Schutzgebietes Togo”*, Tübingen, Mohr, 1994: 3, 117; see Peter Sack, “Grundzüge der Rechts- und Verwaltungsordnung im deutschen Kolonialreich”, in: Rüdiger Voigt and Peter Sack, (eds.), *Kolonialisierung*

and personnel available to it were insufficient – even in the eyes of its protagonists. “Colonial officials were usually keenly aware of the weakness of their own authority”.¹⁶ This led to an irregular, patchy colonial presence in large areas of the territory, which was referred to as a colony but was barely colonised. The colonial state was “a territorial state”¹⁷ but the penetration of the state into this territory was at best meagre well into the 20th century: “Germans – like their colonial rivals – were exceedingly thin in the field.”¹⁸ In order to secure and administer GSWA “effectively” according to the General Act of the Berlin Conference (1885) a colonial army (*Schutztruppe*) had to be established in 1889 by Commissioner, later *Landeshauptmann* Curt von François (1852 – 1931) and was constantly reinforced.¹⁹ However, around 2000 men (1913) as well as the colonial police (*Landespolizei*), founded in 1905/07, of around 500 German and 370 African servicemen, were barely sufficient for this end. “The regime was initially established on a linear basis and then extended over larger areas” through individual military centres which developed into villages.²⁰ The fragmented, inconsistent nature of colonial power became particularly clear to the colonisers when they looked at the areas which lay nearby yet beyond the reach of their own often astonishingly small centres of power. There were indeed colonial “power utopias”²¹ but beyond the routes between villages and farms, which were patrolled by the army or the police and away from the few railway lines, arteries of colonial power and strength, the colonial state ceased to exist until one encountered the next official or soldier.

des Rechts. Zur kolonialen Rechts- und Verwaltungsordnung, Baden-Baden, Nomos, 2001: 41-68 (41) on regularity as the goal of colonial law.

¹⁶ Richard Roberts, “Review of Suzanne Miers and Martin A. Klein (eds.), *Slavery and Colonial Rule in Africa*, Portland 1999”, *Journal of African History*, 41, 2000: 307.

¹⁷ Jürgen Osterhammel, *Kolonialismus. Geschichte – Formen – Folgen*, 4th edition, München, Beck, 2004: 77; Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, “Ville coloniale et formation de l'état. Le cas de l'Afrique noire”, in: Hélène d'Almeida-Topor and János Riesz, (eds.), *Rencontres franco-allemandes sur l'Afrique. Lettres, sciences humaines et sociales*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1992: 11-25 (23): “Avec la colonisation, l'objet devint, explicitement, de constituer un territoire, puis un Etat (colonial puis post-colonial) sur le modèle forgé au cours des siècles en Europe, comme si l'évolution africaine antérieure n'avait pas existé.”

¹⁸ Gann and Duignan, *Rulers*: 71.

¹⁹ André Tielbe, *Die Entstehung der Schutztruppengesetze für die deutschen Schutzgebiete Deutsch-Ostafrika, Deutsch-Südwestafrika und Kamerun (1884-1898)*, Frankfurt a. M., Lang, 2008: 149.

²⁰ Karl Vorläufer, “Kolonialstädte in Ostafrika. Genese, Funktion, Struktur, Typologie”, in: Horst Gründer and Peter Johanek, (eds.), *Kolonialstädte. Europäische Enklaven oder Schmelztiegel der Kulturen?*, Münster, LIT, 2001: 145-201 (154).

²¹ “Herrschaftsutopien”, see Andreas Eckert and Michael Pesek, “Bürokratische Ordnung und koloniale Praxis. Herrschaft und Verwaltung in Preußen und Afrika”, in: Sebastian Conrad and Jürgen Osterhammel, (eds.), *Das Kaiserreich transnational. Deutschland in der Welt 1871 – 1914*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004: 87- 106 (88): “In Afrika blieb das Ideal des rationalen Staates mit Gebietsherrschaft, Gewaltmonopol, Steuern, schriftlich fixierten Gesetzen und der Verheißung der aktenmäßigen Erledigung [...] in großen Teilen eine Herrschaftsutopie, die gleichwohl beträchtliche Folgen hatte.” (In Africa the ideal of the rational state with territorial integrity, monopoly of power, taxes, laws fixed in writing and the promise of their according execution remained [...] largely a utopia of the rulers, which also had considerable consequences).

By 1914 approximately 12,000 Germans had settled in GSWA but the majority of them had remained in the centre of the country. It was the recognition by leading colonial officials of the impossibility of controlling the huge areas which led to the administrative 'division' of the colony in 1907 into a central police zone (*Polizeizone* – around 60% of the formal colonial territory) along railway lines, within which farmers could buy land and where the protection of their lives and property should be guaranteed and into other areas, where this was not the case.

Nowhere in the protectorate was German colonial power as weak as in the north of GSWA. The barely marked border with Portuguese Angola and British Rhodesia stretched for more than 1000 kilometres from the mouth of the Kunene in the west as far as the Zambesi in the east. The entire Caprivi Strip as well as the area between the Atlantic and the Angolan border and the Etosha Pan lay outside of this police zone. Since 1906, the German administration discouraged or even prohibited European private individuals to enter these areas. This was due to the fact that in the partly densely populated regions of Caprivi Strip, along the Okavango River, in Ovamboland and in the Kaokoveld the real power lay with the traditional authorities." [C]ontact with white settlers, companies or colonial officials was reduced or non-existent" until 1917.²²

The area later known as Ovamboland²³ was established by the Finnish Mission Society as their first mission field in 1870 (the first mission station being at Omandongo) at the request of the Rhenish Missionary Society, which had already commenced its work in Namaland and Hereroland in 1842. In 1897, 12 Europeans lived in three mission stations in Ovamboland, being the missionaries and their family members. Only a few European explorers coming from British Walvis Bay, the Cape Colony or the Angolan coast had travelled to the areas north of Etosha or the Okavango region since the mid-19th century. The Rhenish Mission Society founded its own station in Ovamboland among the Oukwanyama in 1891 and maintained four stations by 1905.²⁴ The first German military expedition arrived in Ovamboland in 1899; a few skirmishes occurred. Governor

²² William G. Clarence-Smith and Richard Moorsom, "Underdevelopment and class formation in Ovamboland, 1845-1915", in: Robin H. Palmer and Neil Parsons, (eds.), *The Roots of Rural Poverty in Central and Southern Africa*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1977: 96-112 (96).

²³ Shigwedha emphasises: "In the pre-colonial period the term 'Ovamboland', the land of the Aawambo was not popularly used among the Aawambo themselves. [...] There is clear historic evidence that before colonialism the eight groups [of Aawambo people] did not form a unified social entity 'Aawambo'; rather, neighbouring kingdoms co-existed as separate and different heterogeneous groups or even as 'nations'." (Vilho Shigwedha, "The pre-colonial costumes of the Aawambo. Significant changes under colonialism and the construction of post-colonial identity", in: Lovisa T. Nampala and Vilho Shigwedha, *Aawambo Kingdoms, History and Cultural Change: Perspectives from Namibia*, Basel, Schlettwein, 2006: 111-269 (117).

²⁴ Hari Siiskonen, *Trade and Socioeconomic Change in Ovamboland, 1850-1906*, Helsinki, SHS, 1990: 131f.; idem, "Migration in Ovamboland. The Oshigambo and Elim Parishes 1925 – 1935", in: Patricia Hayes, Jeremy Silvester, Marion Wallace and Wolfram Hartmann, (eds.), *Namibia under South African Rule. Mobility and Containment 1915- 1946*, Oxford, Currey, 1998: 219-240 (222); Nils Ole Oermann, *Mission, Church and State Relations in South West Africa under German Rule*, Stuttgart, Steiner, 1998: 220-228; Kari Miettinen, *On the Way to Whiteness. Christianization, Conflict and Change in Colonial Ovamboland, 1910 – 1965*, Helsinki, Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2005: 87-92.

Theodor Leutwein (1849 – 1921) even intended in 1900 to invade the region but was stopped by the colonial administration in Berlin. In 1904 King Nehale († 1908) attacked the German military post at Namutoni. In the following years, the German administration considered King “Nehale [as] seemingly the enemy and Kambonde [as] seemingly our friend.”²⁵ Only in 1908 were the first protection treaties concluded between the Kings Kambonde († 1908) and Iipumbu (1873 – 1959) and German administrators. Whereas Captain Victor Franke (1865 – 1936) considered these treaties as a kind of submission, King Kambonde insisted that his treaty stipulated reciprocal obligations between partners. No direct administrative control was ever exerted by Germans in Ovamboland; the treaties remained “no more than words.”²⁶ However, more and more Ovambos became migrant labourers in the police zone.²⁷

In the neighbouring Okavango region, a German police station was established in 1910 at Kuring-Kuru after a treaty in this regard was concluded. Andreas Eckl emphasises that this station was rather a response to Portuguese encroachments on German colonial territory than an instrument of colonial domination of the local population.²⁸ Three to five police sergeants were not in a position to exert any power along the Okavango River. Within the Caprivi Strip, where a German police station called Schuckmannsburg was established in 1909, opposite the British Sesheke on the other side of the Zambesi River, the situation was similar.²⁹

While the contention that Ovamboland “was left untouched by German Imperialism”³⁰ seems erroneous considering the labour migration, it must be stated that the colonial government was less present in the north of GSWA than in other areas and remained less likely to be in a position to radically impose itself on the societies it encountered.

²⁵ BAB R 1001/1491, Bl.48, Gouv to KolA, 16.11.1900; Bl.65, Bülow to Wilhelm II., 4.2.1901; Bl.69, Telgr, 13.2.01; Bl.72, KolA an Gouv, 25.2.01.

²⁶ Martti Eirola, *The Ovambogefahr. The Ovamboland Reservation in the Making. Political Responses of the Kingdom of Ondonga to the German Colonial Power 1884 – 1910*, Rovaniemi, Pohjois-Suomen historiallinen yhdistys, 1992: 163f., 237.

²⁷ Meredith McKittrick, *To Dwell Secure. Generation, Christianity and Colonialism in Ovamboland*, Portsmouth, Heinemann, 2002.

²⁸ Andreas E. Eckl, *Herrschaft, Macht und Einfluß. Koloniale Interaktionen am Kavango (Nord Namibia) von 1891 bis 1921*, Köln, Köppe, 2004: 70-75.

²⁹ Maria Fisch, *Der Caprivizipfel während der deutschen Zeit 1890 – 1914*, Köln, Köppe, 1996.

³⁰ See Jan-Bart Gewald, “Herero genocide in the twentieth century. Politics and memory”, in: Jon Abbink, Mirjam de Bruijn and Klaas van Walraven, (eds.), *Rethinking Resistance. Revolt and Violence in African History*, Leiden, Brill, 2003: 279-304 (300); however, the migrant labour of the Owambo alone meant it did not remain “untouched” – see Meredith McKittrick, “Forsaking their fathers? Colonialism, christianity, and coming of age in Ovamboland, Northern Namibia”, in: Lisa Lindsay and Stephane F. Miescher, (eds.), *Men and Masculinities in Modern Africa*, Portsmouth, Heinemann, 2003: 33-51 (39-41).

The slave trade practised in these regions illustrates this weakness.³¹ The following sources show the German colonial state as merely indirectly involved.

Colonial administrators in GSWA and the definition of slavery

Slavery in Africa ended “not with a bang, but with a whimper”³². Throughout the entire 19th century the struggle between abolitionism and the inertia of the African, European-American and Arab slave industries can be seen.³³ The first German colonisers of what later became GSWA were not aware that those areas of southwestern Africa which they sought to incorporate into the colonies had been touched by these problems.

For centuries the edge of the Namib Desert north of the Kunene River, which later became the German-Portuguese border and the Okavango constituted the southern limit of the area from which most slaves for the African and Transatlantic trade were taken. However, “Namibia did not proceed through history unaffected by the demand of these slave trades.”³⁴ The neighbouring colony of Angola was the most important source of slaves for the Brazilian market. In a certain sense it was a “subcolony” of Brazil, which had been independent of Portugal since 1817.³⁵ Moreover an extensive system of plantations on the Portuguese islands in the Gulf of Guinea and in parts of Angola was run using slave labour. Portugal had nominally abolished slavery in its African possessions in 1875. However, the ban had hardly any effect; slaves were not liberated and enslavement continued with the involvement of African slave hunters. The historian

³¹ “The [Portuguese] colonial state was powerless and unwilling to try to limit slavery in southern Angola. [...] On the German side, the colonial government in South West Africa was no more successful in hindering the trade and smuggling that were going on across the border to Angola.” (Gustavsson, “Trade”: 32).

³² Patrick Manning, *Slavery and African Life. Occidental, Oriental and African Slave Trades*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990: 161; Claus Füllbeck-Stolberg’s review article “Neue deutsche Veröffentlichungen zum Thema Sklavenhandel und Sklaverei”, *Zeitschrift für Weltgeschichte*, 7, 2006: 65-74 deals almost exclusively with the Caribbean; see also Wolfgang Kaese, “Sklaverei in Afrika. Versuch einer Annäherung”, in: Helmut Bley, (ed.), *Sklaverei in Afrika. Afrikanische Gesellschaften im Zusammenhang von europäischer und interner Sklaverei und Sklavenhandel*, Pfaffenweiler, Centaurus, 1991: 1-19.

³³ See Paul E Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery. A History of Slavery in Africa*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983: 136.

³⁴ Gewalt, “Sources”: 419; 434; see: Roland Oliver, *The African Experience. Major Themes in African History from Earliest Times to the Present*, New York, HarperCollins, 1991: 124 (map): “Regions affected by the Atlantic slave trade: 16-18th centuries”; Goldblatt mentions “the coastal sand belt ... which must have effectively kept any form of slave-trade away from the Territory.” Israel Goldblatt, *History of South West Africa, from the Beginning of the Nineteenth Century*, Cape Town, Juta, 1971: 1; Axel Fleisch and Wilhelm Möhlig, (eds.), *The Kavango Peoples in the Past. Local Historiographies from Northern Namibia*, Köln, Köppe, 2002: 24; Alexander Röhreke, *Der Kosmos der Herero. Entstehungsbedingungen und Verbreitung von kosmologischen Zügen in der Herero-Kultur*, Berlin, Reimer, 2001: 375: “Es ist denkbar, daß in früherer Zeit Männer, die sich zum Tauschhandel aufmachten, gleich mit ihren Waren einbehalten und als Sklaven verkauft wurden.“ (“It is possible that in former times men, who set out to barter were taken along with their goods and sold as slaves”); see also Gustavsson, “Trade”: 32f.

³⁵ Osterhammel, *Kolonialismus*: 22; Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Africa and the Africans in the Nineteenth Century: A Turbulent History*, Armonk, Sharpe, 2009: 171.

Roland Oliver emphasises the fact that the Ovimbundu kingdoms continued to attack their neighbours in the 1880s and 1890s and that the prisoners they took were transported in caravans to the coast, where they were sold to Portuguese traders as *serviçaes* ('contract labourers') for the plantations in the north and on São Tomé and Príncipe.³⁶

Ovamboland, the southern end of which was supposed to be under German administration since a border treaty with Portugal in 1890, remained involved in the illegal trade in slaves, arms and alcohol on the Portuguese side. Patricia Hayes stresses that, "[t]he Portuguese colonial presence was too weak to control these networks; smuggling was a 'general deep-lying condition of the place and population.'"³⁷ Already in the "1780s Ovambo traders, responding to the growing demand for slaves [...] were selling slaves to French ships calling at the mouth of the Kunene."³⁸ This connection became, if anything, even stronger towards the end of the 19th century according to Kalle Gustavson, when "trade in slaves became an object of serious competition for the Ovambo rulers." Their desire for firearms, for which slaves were traded, was the principal motivation. In the Ovambo kingdom of Uukwambi slavery and/or *corvee* caused social unrest. King Nujoma (in power 1863 – 1875) "was often visited by slave traders sent by the Portuguese and it was no secret that they did good business with him."³⁹ Wolfram Hartmann states that even if the character of slavery in Ovamboland was "incorporative [...]" this does not mean that it was without coercion and violence. Raiding seems to have been an everyday feature" and led to an "exodus of Ovakwambi

³⁶ Oliver, *African Experience*: 192; see also Fola Soremekun, "Trade and dependency in Central Angola. The Ovimbundu in the nineteenth century", in: Robin H. Palmer and Neil Parsons, *The Roots of Rural Poverty in Central and Southern Africa*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1977: 82-95 (92): "If moral censure is to be levelled in the matter of the slave trade, it must be shared between the Ovimbundu and Portuguese."; Jeremy Rich, "Where every language is heard: atlantic commerce, West African and Asian migrants, and town society in Libreville, ca. 1860-1914", in: Steven J. Salm and Toyin Falola, (eds.), *African Urban Spaces in Historical Perspective*, Rochester, University of Rochester Press, 2005: 191-212 (192); Albert Wirz, *Sklaverei und kapitalistisches Weltsystem*, Frankfurt a. M., Suhrkamp, 1984: 50: "[D]ie eigentliche Versklavung war das Werk von Afrikanern. Damit stellt sich das Problem afrikanischer Voraussetzungen und Folgen oder, in moralischen Begriffen gefasst, das Problem einer afrikanischen Mitverantwortlichkeit am transatlantischen Sklavenhandel." (The real enslavement was the work of Africans. Thus we have the problem of African conditions and consequences, or in moral terms, the problem of African co-responsibility for the Transatlantic slave trade); William G. Clarence-Smith, "Runaway slaves and social bandits in Southern Angola", in: Gad Heuman, (ed.), *Out of the House of Bondage. Runaways, Resistance and Marronage in Africa and the New World*, London, Cass, 1986: 23-33 (23): "As the Atlantic slave trade slowly came to an end, slavery enjoyed a new lease of life in Africa."; Tidiane N'Diaye, *Der verschleierte Völkermord. Die Geschichte des muslimischen Sklavenhandels in Afrika*, Reinbek, Rowohlt, 2010: 93-114; Ibrahima Thioub, "A critical evaluation of African readings of slavery and the Atlantic slave trade", in: Issiaka Mandé and Blandine Stefanson, (eds.), *Les Historiens Africains et la Mondialisation: Actes du 3e Congrès de l'Association des Historiens Africains (Bamako, 2001)*, Paris, Karthala, 2005: 271-292 (291).

³⁷ Patricia Hayes, *A History of the Ovambo of Namibia, c. 1880 – 1935*, unpubl. Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 1992: 84.

³⁸ Gewalt, "Sources": 427.

³⁹ Gustavsson, "Trade": 31; 34; see also Clarence-Smith and Moorsom, "Underdevelopment": 100-102.

into Oukwanyama” territory since the 1890s.⁴⁰ Finnish Missionary Martti Rautanen (1845 – 1926) reported in 1888 about Ongandjera, who allegedly “built ‘craals’ on the beach, where slaves were locked in until the ship arrived”. Similarly, Missionary Carl Hugo Hahn (1818 – 1895) already noticed in 1857 “that Herero prisoners had been traded by Ndonga to the Portuguese.”⁴¹ An American trader described with little sympathy his encounter with a trader from Humbe in Angola in Oukwanjama lands in 1876:

Most of the Portuguese traders who penetrate to the interior are ticket of leave⁴² men from the penal settlement on the west [Atlantic] coast and are a hardened lot of criminals, well fitted for the traffic they carry on in slaves. [...] [In the camp of the trader I] saw slaves in chains. Women with iron collars around their necks and chains extending from the collars to the ankles; naked miserable wretches. Some of the slaves are sold on the coast plantations, other to distant tribes for ivory. A Portuguese will trade trade for everything: cattle, slaves, native iron wares, and then exchange it with other tribes for ivory.⁴³

Also southern and central pre-colonial Namibia was partly affected by the slave traders, especially those originating from the Cape Colony. However, “at no time did the slave trade dominate the trade coming out of southern central Namibia. At all stages the slaves exported appear to have been the by-product of raided cattle.”⁴⁴

As the abolition of slavery and the slave trade acted as one of the main arguments for the partition of Africa among the European powers and the establishment of direct colonial rule, the colonial officials were supposed to focus on the suppression of the slave trade.⁴⁵ Already in 1815, during the Vienna Congress, eight European powers declared: “[T]he slave trade has been considered by just and enlightened men of all ages, as repugnant to the principles of humanity and universal morality.”⁴⁶ This aim to

⁴⁰ Wolfram Hartmann, “‘Ondillimani!’. lipumbu ya Tshilongo and the ambiguities of resistance in Ovambo”, in: Patricia Hayes, Jeremy Silvester, Marion Wallace and Wolfram Hartmann, (eds.), *Namibia under South African Rule. Mobility and Containment, 1915 – 46*, Oxford, Currey, 1998: 263-288 (270), translating a quotation from E. L. P Stals, “Die Aanraking tussen Blankes en Ovambo in Suidwes-Afrika”, *Archives Yearbook for South African History*, 2, 1968: 257; see also Clarence-Smith and Moorsom, “Underdevelopment”: 100-102.

⁴¹ Quoted in Gewalt, “Sources”: 427.

⁴² In the 19th century a “progressive penal system” was introduced in Great Britain (“step-by-step return to liberty”) the third step of which was, after solitary confinement and forced labour, conditional release with the possibility of it being revoked (“ticket of leave”); Portugal introduced a similar system (cf. Franz von Liszt, *Lehrbuch des Deutschen Strafrechts*, 18th edition, Berlin, Guttentag, 1911: 263).

⁴³ Petrus Serton, (ed.), *The narrative and journal of Gerald McKiernan in South West Africa 1874 – 1879*, Van Riebeck Society, No. 35, Cape Town, Van Riebeck Society, 1954: 109;106; see also Lovejoy, *Transformations*: 230f.

⁴⁴ Gewalt, “Sources”: 435.

⁴⁵ Kaese, “Sklaverei”: 6.

⁴⁶ Declaration of February 08, 1815 – Annex to the Vienna Congress Act of June 09, 1815, quoted in: Steffen Eicker, *Der Deutsch-Herero-Krieg und das Völkerrecht. Die völkerrechtliche Haftung der Bundesrepublik Deutschland für das Vorgehen des Deutschen Reiches gegen die Herero in Deutsch-Südwestafrika im Jahre 1904 und ihre Durchsetzung vor einem nationalen Gericht*, Frankfurt a. M., Lang, 2009: 262f., also on the following.

suppress the trade in slaves, however, did not constitute a legal obligation to act. In 1841, the Quintupel treaty obliged the signatories to suppress the slave trade on their ships but shied away from formally banning slavery. The Berlin Conference, during which chancellor Bismarck explicitly referred to the “holy commitment” stipulated by the Vienna Congress to suppress the slave trade,⁴⁷ banned the slave trade in 1885. The signatories agreed on an obligation to suppress slavery. Furthermore, Article IX of the General Act also stipulated that slave traders are to be punished. And indeed, the colonial master narratives of German activities in East Africa deal mostly with the battle against Arabian slave traders during the first 10 years of colonial presence.⁴⁸

In GSWA, there were, however, no obvious signs of slave-trading in Herero- and Namaland, the regions first visited and ‘administered’ by German officials.⁴⁹ In a dissertation published in 1914 it was still claimed that it was practiced nowhere in the German Protectorates besides Togo, Cameroon and East Africa.⁵⁰ However, the Finnish missionaries, who had settled in Ondonga and Uukwambi from 1870 onwards, could not fail to notice the above-mentioned slave trade in areas where they were working; particularly as it provided a reason for wars with the objective of enslaving the enemy.⁵¹ In view of their unsuccessful, if not powerless, stand against slavery and the slave trade it is quite consistent that Missionary Pettinen, from Olukonda near Ondonga, drew the attention of one of the first colonial officials, the chancellor Louis Nels (1855 – 1910), to “a case of slavery which has apparently taken place in our sphere of interests here” in 1889.⁵² Slave hunting had reached a new peak at this time and thus the missionaries

⁴⁷ Opening Speech of Otto von Bismarck, 15.11.1884, in: Jean Suret-Canale and Frank T. Gatter, (eds.), *Protokolle und Generalakte der Berliner Afrika-Konferenz, 1884-1885*, Bremen, Bremer Afrika-Archiv ; 20,1984: 101-106 (101) (“heilige Verpflichtung”), see also Reichstagsprotokolle, 6. Legislatur-Periode, 1884/85,7, Aktenstück 290 : 1664f.

⁴⁸ The leading German Catholic parliamentarian Ludwig Windthorst, who had initiated a debate in the Reichstag about the slave trade in German East Africa, remained sceptical: “die Sklavenfrage [sei] anscheinend mehr ein Mittel zum Zweck.” (The slave question seems more a means to an end), Windthorst to Reuß, 17.12.1888 in: Ludwig Windthorst, *Briefe 1881-1891*, Paderborn, Schönigh, 2002: 707 No. 657; see Michael Schubert, *Der schwarze Fremde. Das Bild des Schwarzafrikaners in der parlamentarischen und publizistischen Kolonialdiskussion in Deutschland von 1870er bis in die 1930er Jahre*, Stuttgart, Steiner, 2003: 191f.; Tiebel, *Entstehung*: 45.

⁴⁹ See Siiskonen, *Trade*: 111; Gustavsson, “Trade”: 35.

⁵⁰ Arthur Wege, *Die rechtlichen Bestimmungen über die Sklaverei in den deutschen Schutzgebieten*, Diss. iur., Greifswald, 1914: 1; regarding the difficulties in Northern Cameroon see Albert Wirz, *Vom Sklavenhandel zum kolonialen Handel. Wirtschaftsräume und Wirtschaftsformen in Kamerun vor 1914*, Zürich, Atlantis, 1972: 188.

⁵¹ See Holger Weiss, “The beginnings of Finnish missionary society activity in Northern Namibia and its first setbacks, 1869-1872”, in: Ulrich van der Heyden and Jürgen Becher, (eds.), *Mission und Gewalt: Der Umgang christlicher Missionen mit Gewalt und die Ausbreitung des Christentums in Afrika und Asien in der Zeit von 1792 bis 1918/19*, Stuttgart, Steiner, 2000: 541-450; Gustavsson, “Trade”: 37.

⁵² BAB R 1001/1959, Bl.3, Pettinen to Nels, 16.7.1889. Auszug: Olukonda, 16.7.1889: “Vor einigen Tagen wurden wieder 10 Fässer Branntwein nach Kambonde’s Hof (Ondonga) gebracht. Es sind die Portugiesen, die dieses Lebenswasser diesen armen Leuten schicken und dafür Sklaven kaufen. Wann wird wohl diese jämmerliche Schurkerei in Afrika ein Ende nehmen? gez. Pettinen”. (“A few days ago another 10 barrels of

sought the support of the colonial administration which was being established in the south.⁵³ Nels reported the matter to Reichskanzler Otto von Bismarck (1815 – 1898), but admitted to him that he did not know enough about the incident:

I will only be able to establish after further inquiries whether the Portuguese traders mentioned in the appendix really buy slaves or just obtain from the chieftains [Kambonde], against payment, people who are willing to go with them to work for a time in Angola.⁵⁴

As far as the Foreign Office was concerned, this report contained too little evidence for them to take action. And, as futile and expensive German attempts to curb slave trade in German East Africa at the same time resulted in open revolt, it was questionable what action Berlin or Walvis Bay, where Nels was, could take against the local ruler, King Kambonde.⁵⁵ Furthermore it seems, as Nels hints, that the definition of what exactly could be labelled slavery as opposed to permissible labour recruitment was anything but clear.⁵⁶ However, the attention of the central authorities in Berlin had been drawn to potential slave trading in the north of GSWA. Therefore it does not seem groundless that the head of the colonial administration in Berlin, Colonial Director Paul Kayser (1845 – 1898) – whom Alfred v. Kiderlen-Wächter (1852 – 1912), later to become State Secretary at the Foreign Office, referred to as his “dear friend and slave director”⁵⁷ – sent the agreements of the “Brussels Anti-Slavery Conference” of 1890 to the Commissioner of GSWA, Curt von François. Also this conference did not prohibit slavery per se. Regarding the slave trade, Article III took into consideration the experiences of the first five years of ‘formal’ colonial control by stipulating more cautiously: “the powers exercising a sovereignty or a protectorate in Africa [...] engage to proceed gradually, as circumstances permit, [...] with the repression of the slave trade, each State in its respective possessions and under its own direction.” In addition, the limiting of the

brandy were brought to Kambonde’s court (Ondonga) It is the Portuguese who send this water of life to the poor people and buy slaves in return. When will this appalling roguishness in Africa ever end?”).

⁵³ Gustavsson, “Trade”: 47: “Finnish missionaries were [1889] alarmed as murders and robberies became more and more common in Ondonga. [...] After twenty years of preaching, the Finnish missionaries were as powerless against the slave trade as they had been in the early 1870s in Uukwambi.”

⁵⁴ BAB R 1001/1959, Bl.2, Nels to RK Bismarck, 2.8.1889: “Ob die in der Anlage erwähnten portugiesischen Händler tatsächlich Sklaven kaufen oder nur von den Häuptlingen [Kambonde] gegen eine entsprechende Vergütung Leute erhalten, welche bereit sind, mit ihnen zu gehen und eine Zeit in der Kolonie Angola zu arbeiten, werde ich erst nach weiteren Erkundigungen feststellen können.“

⁵⁵ See Tiebel, *Entstehung*: 54-63; Schubert, *Fremde*: 198; 210f.

⁵⁶ On the definition of slavery and forced labour not just in African history see Marc Buggeln, “Tagungsbericht – Unfreie Arbeit. Ökonomische, rechtliche und geistesgeschichtliche Perspektiven”, *WerkstattGeschichte* 41, 2006: 76-80; regarding the problems of the term “slavery” in Africa see Steven Feierman, “Afrika in der Geschichte. Das Ende der universalen Erzählungen”, in: Sebastian Conrad and Shalini Randeria, (eds.), *Jenseits des Eurozentrismus: Postkoloniale Perspektiven in den Geschichts- und Kulturwissenschaften*, Frankfurt a.M., Campus, 2002: 50-83 (70f.); Lovejoy, *Transformations*: 1-11; Gustavsson, “Trade”: 43; 49f.

⁵⁷ BAB N 2139/9, Bl. 8, Kiderlen to Kayser, 12.2.1895, “Mein lieber Freund und Sklavendirector”.

import of alcohol into the “areas north of the 22nd parallel” was agreed in Brussels, the control of which was von François’s responsibility.⁵⁸

Driven by the Brussels treaties, under which Germany had committed itself to combat the slave trade under international law, as well as by a discussion in the Colonial Council (*Kolonialrat*) about the fight against slavery, which led to an imperial law, *Reichskanzler* Leo von Caprivi (1831 – 1899) in 1892 requested a report on the conditions of service and the slave question in GSWA. Von François thus asked the missionaries for statements on the issue. And although he had at first only received answers from two missionaries, Friedrich Viehe (1839 – 1901) (Okahandja) and Friedrich Meyer (1847 – 1922) (Otjimbingwe), both located in Hereroland in central Namibia, he assured his superiors “with satisfaction [...] that the terms slave and slavery are unknown in these parts of the protectorate”. An occasionally “strongly forged service relationship between servant and master” [“bondage”] has not yet led to any unacceptable situations.⁵⁹

The missionaries’ answers on the *Fragebogen zu den Dienstverhältnissen* (Questionnaire on Service Conditions) in the colony, which was drafted by the Colonial Council, show how difficult it was to distinguish – due to a lack of legal definition of slavery – the European notion of ‘slavery’ from other service relationships. The colonisers focussed on the formal ownership structure within a power relation between master and slave; the former being entitled to treat the latter as a material asset, denying his freedom and thus having the right to transfer the slave at will.⁶⁰ However, as is emphasised by researchers, it was not the “lack of freedom”, nor the “placing of people on the same level as material assets”, nor the “freedom to transfer” which from their perspective typified a traditional African status of slaves. Such status was rather characterised by “the position of the slaves as extreme outsiders”, their marginalisation and “cultural alienation”⁶¹ from their masters. It thus becomes clear how difficult it was for missionaries and even more for colonial officials who had only just begun their observations, to identify a ‘slave’ within an African society.⁶² The open ‘sale’ of people was different, but it was not always possible to produce this most obvious proof of slavery.

⁵⁸ BAB R 1001/1959, Bl.4, Kayser to von Francois, 28.4.1892; Art. III quoted in: Eicker, *Deutsch-Herero-Krieg*: 266.

⁵⁹ BAB R 1001/1959, Bl.8-11, von Francois to RK von Caprivi, 7.10.1892; AELCRN, C I 1.2, Protokollbuch Namaland, Bl.210, 18.9.1892.

⁶⁰ Eicker, *Deutsch-Herero-Krieg*: 264; on a universal definition of slavery see N'Diaye, *Völkermord*: 17; Egon Flaig, *Weltgeschichte der Sklaverei*, München, Beck, 2009: 16-32, referring to C. Meillassoux and O. Patterson, describing the slave as “socially dead”.

⁶¹ Wirz, *Sklaverei*: 74.

⁶² See Lovejoy, *Transformations*: 12f.; Kaese, “Sklaverei”: 8; Schubert, *Fremde*: 191f.: Es “flossen zwei eigentlich völlig unterschiedliche Vorstellungen von Sklaverei [...] undifferenziert zusammen.”

Whereas reports survive according to which “slaves existed once in Hottentot and in Herero societies”, a fact established also by researchers for mid 19th century,⁶³ it was stated in 1914 this slavery would now belong “completely to the past”.⁶⁴ Previously, contemporaries had claimed they witnessed slavery in Hereroland: Hugo von François (1861 – 1904), younger brother of the Commissioner, e.g. saw in December 1890 during his visit of chief Kambazembi (ca. 1860-1903) at Okamaye in “[Kambazembi’s] enclosure the huts of the slaves [Sklaven]”.⁶⁵ Historian Jan-Bart Gewald calls this reference to slavery “intriguing” and poses the question: “did he really mean slaves [?] This may well have been possible, given Kambazembi’s close links with both traders and hunters from around Lake Ngami [...] involved in the slave trade. [...] François’s remarks might indicate that slavery was present in Kambazembi’s area of jurisdiction”.⁶⁶

Also coevals phrased cautiously their observations on slavery and/or dependency. Missionary Meyer’s (Otjimbingwe) answers to the questionnaire on slavery, as referred to by Curt von François in 1892, made no real contribution to clarifying the matter: “One cannot speak of slavery among the natives here, but of serfdom. This serfdom is a result of birth, robbery, captivity after war and voluntary subjugation.” The master was the absolute master over life and death of those in his serfdom. “The abolition of serfdom is *not advisable* at the moment. Conversion to Christianity offers the most effective means of ending serfdom.”⁶⁷ Thus, in Meyer’s opinion there was no slavery as such, but robbery and captivity following war could well lead to slave-like conditions. This is also the impression given in the report by Missionary Viehe from Okahandja, who noted that “‘slave-like relations’ existed in central Namibia between Herero and Damara”⁶⁸: He

⁶³ See Gewald, “Sources”: 430f.; Jan H. Esterhuysen, *South West Africa, 1880 – 1894: The establishment of German Authority in South West Africa*, Cape Town, Struik, 1968: 4; see also hints by Theodor Leutwein, *Elf Jahre Gouverneur in Deutsch-Südwestafrika*, Berlin, Mittler & Sohn, 1906: 4.

⁶⁴ Wege, *Bestimmungen*: 1, footnote 2; see Steinmetz, *Devil’s*: 107 on the Swedish traveller Anders Sparrmann (1748 – 1820) who had diagnosed “Khoikhoi customs as corrupted by slavery”.

⁶⁵ Hugo von François, *Nama und Damara. Deutsch-Süd-West-Afrika*, Magdeburg, F. Baensch, 1896: 134, quoted in and translated by: Jan-Bart Gewald, *Herero Heroes. A socio-political history of the Herero of Namibia, 1890-1923*, Oxford, Currey, 1999: 89.

⁶⁶ Gewald, *Herero*: 89.

⁶⁷ BAB R 1001/1959, Bl.12-16, Kolonialrat, Fragebogen zu Dienstverhältnissen beantwortet von Missionar Meyer, 1892: “Man kann unter den hiesigen Eingeborenen von einer Sklaverei nicht sprechen, wohl aber von einer Hörigkeit. Diese Hörigkeit entsteht durch Geburt, Raub, Kriegsgefangenschaft und Selbstgebung.” “Die Aufhebung der Hörigkeit ist zur Zeit *nicht rätlich*. Die Christianisierung ist und bleibt das wirksamste Mittel zur Aufhebung der Hörigkeit.” [orig. emph.].

⁶⁸ Quoted in Henrichsen, “Damara”: 77; on Henrich Vedder’s contention that Damara are considered by Herero “to be their slaves” see also Ben Fuller, “‘We live in a Manga’. Constraint, resistance and transformation on a native reserve”, in: Patricia Hayes, Jeremy Silvester, Marion Wallace and Wolfram Hartmann, (eds.), *Namibia under South African Rule. Mobility and Containment 1915 – 1946*, Oxford, Currey, 1998: 194-217 (213): “Not only did he mindlessly lump indigenous Namibians into tribes, he also places these tribes in a master/slave hierarchy. Unfortunately for the people of Otjimbingwe, the two dominant groups in the reserve, Hereros and Damaras, were designed by Vedder as masters and slaves respectively. And, tragically, they believed him.”; see also: Helmut Bley, *Kolonialherrschaft und Sozialstruktur in Deutsch-Südwestafrika 1884 – 1914*, Hannover, Leibniz, 1968: 125; referring to the trader James Alexander

wrote to von Francois: "Those experiencing conditions which look most like slavery are the people who were captured during raids against enemy neighbouring tribes." In individual cases children were released in exchange for a reciprocal gift. Viehe answered the question on the legal regulation of these service conditions frankly: "Written legal requirements do not exist in the country and the practical application of the law does not follow any set norms so that it is extremely difficult to recognise, what constitutes law and what does not".⁶⁹ The question, at which degree of dependency a service relationship becomes slavery, is the basis of the missionaries' reports; a question they were not able to answer. Only a few European observers devoted as much attention to this problem of definition as the hunter A. Schulz after his journey along the Okavango: "When talking of slaves amongst natives, the term slave does not bear the same import as to the European mind ... [the] position between master and slave is more one of relative domesticity than actual slavery."⁷⁰

German-Portuguese interactions on slave trade

German-Portuguese colonial relations were defined by competition along the border, which neither colonial power was capable of policing effectively. As was the case with other colonial borderlands, the northern region of GSWA "constitute[ed a] diffuse area where hegemony is fragmented through the Imperial rivalry". The area between the Kunene and Okavango Rivers was highly disputed.⁷¹ When Captain Kliefoth arrived at a village in Uukuanjama in 1901, a French missionary explained to him that he was now on Portuguese territory. Kliefoth responded that the borders had "not yet been conclusively defined" and emphasized "that I can visit the chieftain as often as I wish". Following this incident, a report appeared in Lisbon about the invasion of German conquerors ("*conquistadores*") in Ovamboland, as the German consul reported.⁷²

This distrust was not without foundation. Germany had made no effort to conceal its interest in the Portuguese colonies, and its officials looked with scorn on the Portuguese

(1837); Gewald, "Sources": 430 points out: "Alexander reported Herero captives at Nama encampments in the vicinity of Karas Mountains" in the south of Namibia.

⁶⁹ BAB R 1001/1959, Bl.17-18, Viehe to von François, 30.8.1892: "Eigentlicher Sklaverei am nächsten stehend ist das Verhältnis solcher Personen, welche als Kinder auf Kriegs- oder Raubzügen gegen feindliche Nachbarstämme erbeutet worden sind." "Geschriebene Rechtsbestimmungen fehlen im Lande ganz und die praktische Rechtspflege verfährt so wenig nach festen Normen, daß es vielfach schwierig ist, zu erkennen was als Recht gilt und was nicht."

⁷⁰ A. Schulz (1897) quoted in: Thomas Tlou, "Servility and political control. Botlhanka among the BaTswana of North Western Botswana, ca 1750 – 1906", in: Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff, (eds.), *Slavery in Africa. Historical and Anthropological Perspectives*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 367-390 (383).

⁷¹ Dederich, "War": 275; see Gregor Dobler, "Boundary drawing and the notion of territoriality in pre-colonial and early-colonial Owambo", *Journal of Namibian Studies*, 3, 2008 :7-30; Helmut Bley, "Künstliche Grenze, natürliches Afrika?", *iz3w*, 282, 2005: 280-283.

⁷² BAB R 1001/1491, Bl.119, Gouvernement to Auswärtiges Amt-Kolonialabteilung (AA KoIA), 10.1.1902; *ibid.*, Bl.112, Deutscher Konsul Lissabon to RK Bülow, 5.11.1901, including translation from *Correio Nacional*, Bl.114.

colonial administration, which was underfinanced and its staff poorly trained. The German *chargé d'affaires* in London, Richard von Kühlmann (1873 – 1948) spoke in 1912 of “administrative mismanagement”⁷³. An official who had been sent to Angola summarised his “judgement thus [...], that essentially the administration takes no actions whatsoever, and the whole government exists more or less only on paper.”⁷⁴ The magazine *Kolonie und Heimat* poked fun saying that the Portuguese state seemed “to consider its obligations to the island [São Thomé] as fulfilled by collecting taxes and other contributions.”⁷⁵

The accusation that slavery continued in Angola reinforced the negative impression, which was also prevalent in other European capitals. There were even demands for a boycott of Portuguese goods on account of slavery.⁷⁶ At first there were only very occasional factual reports to the German colonial authorities, but they increased with time both in Windhoek and in Berlin: The first questionnaire on slavery, which the government had also sent to the missionaries in Ovamboland in 1892, was lost in transit. But the commissariat showed its conviction that “similar conditions also prevail in Ovamboland as in the rest of the Protectorate”. It thus attached no great importance to the whole question.⁷⁷ Colonial Director Paul Kayser, however, did not agree with this, remembering Chancellor Nels’ report on Portuguese slave traders in 1889. Thus developments there over the preceding four years were “of interest” to him; particularly as private reports reached him about the “flourishing trade in weapons, spirits and slaves being carried on by Portuguese traders in the north of the South West African Protectorate.”⁷⁸ The new head of the protectorate’s administration, *Landeshauptmann* Theodor Leutwein, was then able to submit the first reports “according to which a sort of slavery really did exist in Ovamboland”.⁷⁹ Also later on he pointed to trade in weapons and slaves which were “pursued actively by Ovambos”.⁸⁰

⁷³ Rolf P. Tschapek, *Bausteine eines zukünftigen deutschen Mittelafrika. Deutscher Imperialismus und die portugiesischen Kolonien*, Stuttgart, Steiner 2000: 307, FN 160 on the “administrative mismanagement” of the Portuguese colonies as an argument for German annexations.

⁷⁴ BAB R 1001/9027, Bl.124, Geheimbericht Dr. P. Vageler, [~ 12/1914]: Er fasste sein “Urteil dahin zusammen [...], dass im Grunde von Seiten der Verwaltung überhaupt nichts geschieht, und die ganze Regierung mehr oder weniger auf dem Papier steht.”

⁷⁵ *Kolonie und Heimat*, 1911, 13: 6: Der portugiesische Staat schein “seine Pflichten der Insel [São Thomé] gegenüber mit Erhebung von Steuern und Abgaben so ziemlich als erledigt anzusehen.”

⁷⁶ William G. Clarence-Smith, *The Third Portuguese Empire 1825 – 1975. A Study in Economic Imperialism*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1985: 108; Soremekun, “Trade”: 90.

⁷⁷ BAB R 1001/1959, Bl.19, Kommissariat to AA Kola, 5.9.1893.

⁷⁸ BAB R 1001/1959, Bl.31, AAKola to von François, 9.12.1893 (Note by Nels); *ibid.*, Bl.32, Note regarding letter of 22.5.1894: Berichte über den “durch portugiesische Händler im Norden des südwestafrikanischen Schutzgebietes schwunghaft betriebenen Handel mit Waffen, Branntwein und Sklaven”.

⁷⁹ BAB R 1001/1959, Bl.33, Landeshauptmannschaft to AA Kola, 11.12.1894: Berichte, “nach denen tatsächlich im Ovamboland eine Art Sklaverei bestehen” soll.

⁸⁰ Leutwein, *Elf Jahre*: 172: “unter den Ovambos lebhaft betriebenen Waffen und Sklavenhandel”.

August Wulfhorst (1861 – 1936), the Rhenish missionary there, described to Leutwein in 1894 raiding parties which were “called wars”, the aim of which was “to steal children. It was at the chieftain’s discretion to sell the people. It seems to be a common occurrence that the Portuguese transport people they have bought from the chieftains away from here. A foreman of the chieftain’s told me that he sold people for the chieftain’s clothes.” Wulfhorst considered the abolition of slavery impossible “among the natives at the moment”, but the missionaries did “give the chieftains an idea of it verbally”. As “slaves were transported out of the German territories such as Ondonga etc.” by the Ovakuanjama, the most powerful of the Ovambo kingdoms, which lay on the Portuguese territory, Wulfhorst felt it appropriate to inform the Portuguese.⁸¹ This happened after some delay.

The German envoy in Lisbon, von Derenthal, informed the Portuguese government of the “terrible state of affairs” caused by the “raids in our territory” and reported that Minister d’Avila “knew nothing about what was happening”. Months later the envoy received a reply stating that the authorities in the “province Angola would take immediate measures to suppress [...] any attempted slave raids.” Of course, the border was difficult to control “because of its enormous length”, but measures would be taken to avoid violating it. Besides, the “natives” raids were, as a result of “European colonisation disappearing completely”.⁸²

Nothing could have been further from the truth, despite a ban on importing weapons which – also following German reproaches – was declared in the south of Angola in 1895. According to the long awaited report by Missionary Martti Rautanen from Olukonda (March 1895) about the slave trade in Ovamboland, it continued just as it had before. Rautanen was familiar with the details and prices: slaves (*tapika*) could be bought for between two and ten head of cattle. He complained particularly about the Portuguese who exchanged slaves for spirits.

As far as the Portuguese trade is concerned I am sorry to say that since the ban on the import of munitions from the south their business has flourished. All kinds of weapons and munitions, as well as [spirits] are being imported in huge quantities [from the north], partly by the Portuguese themselves, partly by their

⁸¹ BAB R 1001/1959, Bl.35-40, Fragebogen zu Dienstverhältnissen beantwortet von Missionar Wulfhorst, Mai 1894. “Der Häuptling behält es seinem Ermessen vor, die Leute zu verkaufen,” “Es scheint häufig zu geschehen, daß Portugiesen Leute von hier fortführen, welche sie von den Häuptlingen kaufen. Mir erzählte ein Vormann des Häuptlings, daß er für Kleider des Häuptlings Menschen verkauft habe.” See also McKittrick, “Fathers”: 38 referring to a diary entry of Missionary Rautanen: “The men in the [Ovambo] palaces and *omalenga* were deeply feared and resented because of their predations; prisoners of war, once enslaved by elites, were by the 1880s often sold to Portuguese traders in exchange for alcohol and firearms, as were the king’s own subjects”; Gustavsson, “Trade”: 50.

⁸² BAB R 1001/1959, Bl.41, AA to Kaiserlich Deutsche Gesandtschaft in Portugal, 1.2.1895; Bl.42, Kaiserlich Deutsche Gesandtschaft in Portugal to RK Hohenlohe, 17.2.1895; Bl.44, Portugiesisches Ministerium des Äußeren to Kaiserlich Deutsche Gesandtschaft in Portugal, 18.7.1895.

native agents. If this trade will not be brought under control soon the whole country will be ruined.”⁸³

The decline of the trade with Hereroland, which was increasingly under the control of the Germans, strengthened the position of the Portuguese traders in Ovamboland. This assessment has been confirmed by researchers.⁸⁴ Rautanen was afraid that by giving this “factual description of the situation” he could have problems with the Portuguese or the “natives”, as the missionaries were “currently beyond all European protection”. The missionary could act as a “mediator”⁸⁵ and informer of the colonial administration, but he was well aware that he remained at the mercy of the African authorities. As a consequence the German envoy in Lisbon once again raised with the Portuguese government the issue of the seemingly unhindered “trade in humans and smuggling of munitions by individuals” across the border without mentioning Rautanen; but it did not remedy the situation at first.⁸⁶ On the contrary: in particular the cattle pest of 1897 led to an “acceleration of the slave trade”.⁸⁷ Only when the Germans tried to take a firmer grip on southern Ovamboland after 1909 and following the construction of Portuguese forts along the border, the growing economic and political importance of migrant labour and the increasing influence of Christianity in Ovamboland, were restrictions slowly applied to the slave trade. Nevertheless, Missionary Hermann Tönjes reported in 1911 about raids by opposing “Ovambo tribes” and the enslavement of those who were attacked and who were only freed on payment of a ransom.⁸⁸

Officials observed similar practices in other parts of the Portuguese-German border area: the German consul in Luanda and later Undersecretary Dr. Otto Gleim (1866 – 1929) travelled through the south of Angola in 1899/1900 where not only rubber, but also slaves were traded, who “first served as porters, but later, on the coast, were sent as plantation workers to St. Thomé for 150 milreis per adult. Without exception the

⁸³ BAB R 1001/1959, Bl.46, Rautanen to Leutwein, 19.3.1895: “Was den portugiesischen Handel anbe­trifft, so muß ich mit Bedauern sagen, daß seit dem Munitionseinfuhrverbot aus dem Süden, floriert ihr Handel. Allerhand Feuerwaffen und Munition, sowie auch [Branntwein] wird massenhaft [aus dem Norden] eingeführt, theils durch Portugiesen selbst, theils durch ihre eingeborenen Unterhändler. Wenn dieser Handel nicht bald gesteuert wird, so wird das ganze Land ruiniert.”

⁸⁴ Siiskonen, *Trade*: 144; Gustavson, “Trade”: 52.

⁸⁵ Pellervo Kokkonen, “Religious and colonial realities: cartography of the Finnish mission in Ovamboland, Namibia”, *History in Africa*, 20, 1993: 155-171 (155).

⁸⁶ BAB R 1001/1959, Bl.48, AA to Kaiserlich Deutsche Gesandtschaft in Portugal, 27.8.1895; see Clarence-Smith, “Slaves”: 23: “de facto slavery continued until the republicans seized power in Lisbon in 1910”.

⁸⁷ Gustavsson, “Trade”: 54: “Raiding was one of the internal Ovambo responses to their own cattle losses”.

⁸⁸ Hermann Tönjes, *Ovambo. Land – Leute – Mission. Mit besonderer Berücksichtigung seines größten Stammes Okuanjama*. Berlin, Warneck, 1911: 124: Ein “[geraubter] Mensch ist völlig in der Gewalt seines Herrn, der nach freiem Ermessen mit ihm schalten und walten kann [...] Das Lösegeld für einen jungen, arbeitsfähigen Sklaven schwankt zwischen 6-10 Stück Großvieh.” (A kidnapped person is completely at the mercy of his/her master, who can decide freely what to do with him/her [...] The ransom for a young, able-bodied slave fluctuates between 6-10 fullgrown cattle); on ransom paid see also Gustavsson, “Trade”: 42.

plantations on Planalto work only with slaves.”⁸⁹ In 1904 Gleim’s successor in Luanda heard that “a brisk trade in breechloaders took place, which had been smuggled onto the Angola coast for slaves being delivered by the Walessis [?]”.⁹⁰

The contemporary attitude was a shrug of the shoulders: “In one point only are almost all the peoples of Africa equal: in their predilection for slavery and the slave trade.”⁹¹ And it was assumed that Portuguese officials tolerate the trading of slaves or even actively encourage it.⁹² The “Bailundo Rising” came about as a result of it in April 1902 after Chief Mutu ya Kevala called on the Umbundu to fight against the slave trade, alcohol and exploitation. The Portuguese did not succeed in putting it down until August; a short-term loosening of the compulsory recruitment of *serviçaes* was promised. However, in 1906 the British journalist H. Nevison wrote in “A Modern Slavery” of his impressions of Portuguese slavery and was of the opinion that “the export of slaves to San Thome [...] has gone back to its old proportions now – the numbers averaging about four thousand head a year (not including babies) and gradually rising”⁹³. Under increasing international pressure and following the fall of the monarchy the newly founded Republic of Portugal once again passed a law on the abolition of slavery in Angola.⁹⁴ Nevertheless a German magazine wrote that “the accusations from the English

⁸⁹ Hugo Marquardsen, *Angola*, Berlin, Reimer, 1920: 90; 96; 98 [Nach Aufzeichnungen des früheren Konsuls in Luanda, UStS a.D. Dr. Gleim, 1899/1900]: Sklaven, die “zunächst als Träger dienen, später aber an der Küste mit 150 Milreis pro Erwachsener als Plantagenarbeiter nach St. Thomé versandt werden. Die Pflanzungen auf dem Planalto arbeiten auch durchweg nur mit Sklaven”.

⁹⁰ BAB R 1001/9023, Bl.202, Konsul Luanda to RK Bülow, 8.11.1904.

⁹¹ Oskar Lenz, *Wanderungen in Afrika. Studien und Erlebnisse*, Wien, Verlag der Literarischen Gesellschaft, 1895: 184: “Nur in einem Punkte sind fast alle Völker Afrika’s gleich: in der Vorliebe für Sklaverei und Sklavenhandel.” Der “Sklavenhandel [...] ist Jahrtausende hindurch fast die einzige Erwerbsquelle zahlreicher afrikanischer Völker gewesen. [...] Dieser Sklavenhandel führt nun zu einem anderen furchtbaren Übel, unter welchem Afrika zum Theil noch leidet: zu den Sklavenjagden. Kriege zwischen den einzelnen Völkern [...] wurden gewöhnlich nur unternommen, um Sklaven zu erhalten.” (“Through the millenia the slave trade was the sole source of income for many African peoples [...]. This slave trade led to another dreadful evil, under which Africa still suffers today to a certain extent: slave-hunting. Wars between the individual nations [...] were normally only started to obtain slaves.” This portrayal of Africa, which goes back in no small part to G.W.F. Hegel (cf. *Wirz. Sklaverei*: 51), however emphasizes “that slavery was a possibility everywhere” (ibid.: 75); Schubert, *Fremde*: 190; 197.

⁹² Marquardsen, *Angola*: 56 (Tafel 7) shows a photograph of Benguela with the description: “great courts which were originally served to accommodate slave caravans”.

⁹³ Quoted in: Lawrence W. Henderson, *Angola. Five centuries of conflict*, Ithaka, NY, Cornell University Press, 1979: 107-110 (109).

⁹⁴ Jan S. Hogendorn, “Abolition and antislavery: Africa”, in: Seymour Drescher and Stanley L. Engerman, (eds.), *A Historical Guide to World Slavery*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1998: 1- 5 (3) adds: “Euphemistic terms such as *libertos* did not conceal the survival of slavelike status in Portuguese colonies”; see also William G. Clarence-Smith, “Slavery in coastal southern Angola, 1875-1913”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 2, 1976: 214-23; idem, “Slaves”: 23-33; Linda Heywood, “Slavery and forced labor in the changing political economy of central Angola, 1850 – 1949”, in: Suzanne Miers and Richard Roberts, (eds.), *The End of Slavery in Africa*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1988: 415-36. In the Transvaal, slave raids continued “at least up to 1870”, see Fred Morton, “Slave-raiding and slavery in the Western Transvaal after the sand river convention”, *African Economic History*, 20, 1992: 99-118 (99). For the abolition of

side that slavery still persists on St. Thomé today are grossly exaggerated”.⁹⁵ On the other hand the *Deutsch-Südwestafrikanische Zeitung* published an article in several parts in 1914 about the “slave trade in Angola”, which dealt particularly with the fate of the *servicaes* whose lot had hardly improved.⁹⁶

The fear of being enslaved remained in the Portuguese-German borderlands even though the demand for slaves ebbed and a more or less open market for them was impeded after 1910. As late as 1918 the Missionary Welsch reported to Governor Theodor Seitz (1863 – 1949) of a family in Omatimba that had fled from the Portuguese in July 1915 because, as the eldest claimed, these “would take away his children and make slaves of them.”⁹⁷ Decades later the contemporary Alex Hamunyera (b. 1916) remembered that people were sold out of pure necessity – there was a famine: “If the child of one’s sister is stubborn, then [he/she is disciplined by saying]: ‘your uncle will sell you.’ And also the chiefs acted in the same manner. Even the accusation of laziness was enough to place girls and boys in danger of being sold.” Like the Missionary Wulfhorst, Hamunyera remembers that chiefs, whenever they were interested in the goods of Portuguese traders, would sell their own people “so they could dress [in a European way]”.⁹⁸

German reports on slave trade along the Okavango and in the Caprivi Strip

As ascertained in 1899 by Lieutenant Otto Eggers (1878 – 1904), one of the first German officers to visit the area, the population of the Okavango region also carried on “an apparently not insignificant [trade] in slaves” which was a source of dispute among the *Hompas* (chiefs).⁹⁹

The values of these articles are measured in rifles and munitions. Some of the traders are Portuguese but most of them are Boers from British Bechuanaland. Just before my arrival a travelling party of five traders had returned from there, where it was said they had bought very many people; there were apparently two Boers by the name of Lorenz and one named Du Toit among them. For a grown man one pays one rifle, for an adolescent one belt of cartridges. I received this information directly from the natives themselves who are predominantly Otjherero-speaking and I believe it to be all the more reliable for the fact of its being given in complete innocence. For example I received various offers

slavery in Africa, cf. Nelly Schmidt, *L’abolition de l’esclavage. Cinq siècles des combats XVIe – XXe siècle*, Paris, Fayard, 2005.

⁹⁵ *Kolonie und Heimat*, 13, 1911: 7 (“die englischerseits erhobenen Vorwürfe, auf St. Thomé herrsche noch heutigen Tages Sklaverei, sind maßlos übertrieben”).

⁹⁶ *DSWA-Zeitung* (2. Bl.), 11.3.1914: 2.

⁹⁷ BAK Kleine Erwerbungen Nr. 443, Bl. 3, Bericht des Missionars Welsch über die Vorgänge in Ovakuanjama während der Kriegsjahre 1914-17, Welsch to Seitz, 2.5.1918.

⁹⁸ Alex Hamunyera’s account of Kwangali history: 79-85, in: Fleisch and Möhlig, *Kavango*: 285f.

⁹⁹ Cf. Mangondo’s account of Kwangali history: 381f., in: Fleisch and Möhlig, *Kavango*: 220: “The chiefs [Nasira and Himarwa] found that they did not agree any more. Himarwa had possibly heard how, in the old times, they had slaves and that they were selling people.”

because the people took me for a trader; the only whites with whom they have any contact.¹⁰⁰

Since the 17th century the slave trade was an element which indirectly connected the Atlantic trading system with the south-east African states and their inner African trade, for which nations such as the Mbukushu provided middlemen and also Portuguese traders were involved.¹⁰¹ Further south, in British ruled Ngamiland, slavery continued well into the early 20th century to be an important political tool to extend one's support base: "through slave raiding, cattle loans, and other forms of patronage ... large following of dependent commoners and immigrants" could be built up.¹⁰²

Africanists Axel Fleisch and Wilhelm Möhlig emphasize that the "Kavango Bantu considered the Bushmen to be their slaves."¹⁰³ However, any such assessments as well as the following quotations from contemporaries need to be contextualised in the difficulties German observers had to establish what "slavery" actually meant in a traditional African environment. Lieutenant Eggers's report of 1899 already indicated some sort of doubt as he felt obliged to state that he "believe[d] it" since the information on slave trading was "being given in complete innocence". Communication with the local population remained unsatisfactory. Nevertheless, "colonial rulers constantly tried to hear what their subjects were saying through actions, words and symbols."¹⁰⁴ Whatever Germans learnt from listening and witnessing in these areas

¹⁰⁰ NAN BGR 2, F 9 b, Bl. 3-4, Eggers to Gouvernement, 27.11.1899: Die Bevölkerung betrieb "einen scheinbar nicht ganz unbedeutenden [Handel] mit Sklaven." "Der Gegenwert für diese Artikel besteht in Gewehren und Munition. Die Händler sind teils Portugiesen, hauptsächlich aber Buren aus Britisch-Betschuanaland. Gerade vor meiner Ankunft war eine Reisegesellschaft von fünf Händlern nach dorthin zurückgekehrt, welche wie es hieß, sehr viele Menschen gekauft hätten; es sollen darunter zwei Buren Namens Lorenz und einer Namens Du Toit gewesen sein. Es wird für einen erwachsenen Menschen ein Gewehr, für ein halbwüchsiges Kind ein Gürtel Patronen bezahlt. Ich habe diese Mitteilung aus dem Munde der Eingeborenen selbst, welche größtenteils Otjiherero sprechen und halte sie umso mehr für zuverlässig, als sie in aller Harmlosigkeit gemacht wurden. Z.B. erhielt ich selbst verschiedene Angebote, da die Leute mich auch für einen Händler hielten; die einzige Klasse von Weißen, mit welcher sie in Berührung gekommen sind."

¹⁰¹ See Röhreke, *Kosmos*: 361; Edward A. Alpers, "Introduction: slave routes and oral tradition in south-eastern Africa", in: Benigna Zimba, Edward Alpers and Allen Isaacman, (eds.), *Slave Routes and Oral Tradition in Southeastern Africa*, Maputo, Filsom Entertainment, 2005: 1-12; Helmut Bley and Uta Lehmann-Grube, "Sklaverei in Südafrika", in: Helmut Bley and Clemens Dillmann, (eds.), *Sklaverei in Afrika. Afrikanische Gesellschaften im Zusammenhang von europäischer und interner Sklaverei und Sklavenhandel*, Pfaffenweiler, Centaurus, 1991: 138-152 (150).

¹⁰² Gewalt, *Herero*: 211, referring to Sekgoma Letsholathebe, *Kgosi* of the Batawana, who incorporated "large numbers of Herero refugees" into his support base.

¹⁰³ Fleisch and Möhlig, *Kavango*: 31: "Still in the [19]sixties the Kavango Bantu considered the Bushmen to be their slaves. However, this social stratification is by no means peculiar to the Kavango area, for instance in the relationship between the Herero and the Bergdamara (*Vedder* 1923: 3f.; 172f). Thus, the overall theme is that the Bantu consider themselves to be the lords and the Khoisan their servants"; but see the remarks of Fuller, "Manga": 213, who deems this "social stratification to be designed by Vedder [...] And tragically, they [Herero and Damara] believed him."

¹⁰⁴ Dederling, "War": 276.

remains doubtful. Social stratification, dependency and bondage were as hard to recognize for short term visitors like traders and officers, as was the “cultural alienation” of slaves from their African masters. They were thus only able to report what was known from hearsay and/or some few personal observations.

The hunter Brunk, who later became a police officer, reported in 1908 about his journey across the Caprivi Strip that despite there being a considerable arsenal the people of Chief Libebe “were treated as their slaves by the Barotze tribe,” irrespective of the fact that slavery had been declared abolished in 1906 in Barotzeland, which was under British sovereignty.¹⁰⁵ Lieutenant Eggers learnt from the “Bushmen” of a “large campaign by the Bechuanas” along the Okavango and Kwito Rivers in 1897 during which they stole great amounts of cattle and “carried away women and children to make them slaves [...] Since then the Bechuanas have come to regard the entire Okavango region up to Karakuwisa as their lawful possession.”¹⁰⁶ In 1911 Chief Libebe complained to the German officer in Schuckmannsburg, Victor von Frankenberg that “the Bechuanas continue to carry off my people to make them slaves.”¹⁰⁷ The German trader, Paul Schramm, who was based with Libebe also claims to have mentioned the slave trade to the British magistrate in Tsau: “In my presence the Mambukushu foreman Saurombo sold Bushman girls to Bechuanaland in exchange for cattle.”¹⁰⁸ The District Chief of Grootfontein, Richard Volkmann (1870 – 1954), admitted in 1901 that the “captains” had promised to “trade no more in slaves, which has been in vogue until now.” However, the situation was complicated because “the left bank [of the Okavango River], where the main settlements are located, is Portuguese and the traders are not subject to any control; they conduct a robust trade in munitions and slaves.”¹⁰⁹

As the presence of the missionaries on the Portuguese–German border was much greater than that of the German colonial state, they were regularly witnesses to what they considered slave trading, as their written accounts show. Their means of taking

¹⁰⁵ BAB R 1002/2704, Bl. 9, Brunk: Mein Gutachten über das Andara Gebiet. o.D. [~ September 1908]; Hugh Macmillan and Frank Shapiro, *Zion in Africa. The Jews of Zambia*, London, Tauris, 1999: 19; Fisch, *Caprivizipfel*: 126.

¹⁰⁶ NAN BGR 2, F 9 b, Bl.1, Eggers to Gouvernement, 27.11.1899.

¹⁰⁷ BAB R 1001/2185, Bl.106, Libebe to Gouvernement, 16.7.1911.

¹⁰⁸ BAB R 1001/2185, Bl.103, Aussage P. Schramm, Libebe, 10.7.1911. Even with this it is still unclear which nation is being referred to as “Betchuanas”. Tlou, “Servility”: 387 emphasises with regard to the BaTswana: “The uncritical use of the word ‘slavery’ with reference to the social relationships between the BaTswana and their subject peoples is not acceptable [...] Nor can it be denied that some form of slavery did exist.” Marti Koskenniemi, *The Gentle Civilizer of Nations. The Rise and Fall of International Law 1870 – 1960*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000: 125 refers with regard to the “interesting example” of the legal character of a “Protectorats” to Bechuanaland: “Not being British territory, British law, including that against slavery did not apply in Bechuanaland.”

¹⁰⁹ NAN BGR 2, F 9 b, Bl.9, Volkmann to Gouvernement, 8.10.1901: Die “Kapitäne” hätten sich zwar verpflichtet, “keinen Sklavenhandel mehr zu treiben, der bisher sehr im Schwange ist.” Doch werde dies dadurch erschwert, dass “das linke Flussufer, wo die Hauptwerften stehen, portugiesisch ist, und dort die Händler keinerlei Kontrolle unterworfen sind; sie treiben starken Munitions- und Sklavenhandel.”

action against it were limited – both in terms of their contact with the traders as well as with the officials. The mission on the Okavango tried to act against the slave traders as the “attorney of the people”.¹¹⁰

However, it was not only Portuguese and Africans who traded slaves. As the colonial borders were open and considerable profits were to be made others were attracted to the business too. Father A. Bierfert, who worked for many years at the Nyangana mission station on the German side of the Okavango, reported that even Arab traders were operating there:

Up until 1909, the natives told us, brown people (Arabs) came from the north every year to buy people here. They were carried on litters. They exchanged rifles, powder, blankets and textiles for people. [...] As soon as the traders had handed over their goods the slaves' hands were tied behind their backs and they were driven off in a northwesterly direction towards a big water [Atlantic Ocean].¹¹¹

It is, however, questionable if these really were Arabs, given the fact that the East African coast is an estimated 2000 km away from the Okavango River. The colour of their skin alone can hardly be seen as proof because the traders could just as easily have been the offspring of European fathers and African mothers from the west coast. It is also not clear why Arab traders would drive their slaves “in a northwesterly direction towards a ‘big water’”. While it was nearer than the Indian Ocean, contact with Portuguese officials would have been unavoidable there and they would hardly have been prepared to tolerate competition if they were profiting from their own slave trade.¹¹²

Irrespective of whether the oriental slave trade also influenced the Okavango region alongside its Atlantic and traditional counterparts, it is remarkable that the last appearance on the Okavango of what could possibly have been Arab slave traders is dated 1909 and thus coincides with the intensified control of this piece of land by the Portuguese and British, as manifested by the construction of forts and stations, as well as the repeated ban on the slave trade in Portuguese Africa in 1910. The last “Ovimbundu slave trading caravans” were supposedly also sighted around this time further north in the border region between Angola and Rhodesia.¹¹³

¹¹⁰ Eckl, *Herrschaft*: 390.

¹¹¹ August Bierfert, *25 Jahre bei den Wadiriku am Okavango*, Hünfeld, Verlag der Oblaten, 1938: 51, quoted in Eckl, *Herrschaft*: 392f.: “Bis zum Jahre 1909, so erzählten uns die Eingeborenen, kamen jedes Jahr vom Norden her braune Menschen (Araber), um hier Menschen zu kaufen. Sie ließen sich in Sänften tragen. Gegen Gewehre, Pulver, Schlafdecken und Kleiderstoffe handelten sie Menschen ein. [...] So bald die Händler ihre Tauschartikel los waren, wurden den Sklaven die Hände auf den Rücken gebunden und dann wurden sie in nordwestlicher Richtung zu einem großen Wasser [Atlantischer Ozean] geführt.”

¹¹² See Lovejoy, *Transformations*: 226. According to Lovejoy the Arabian slave trade stretched as far as the Congo basin and Katanga; N'Diaye, *Völkermord*: 131f.

¹¹³ Macmillan and Shapiro, *Zion*: 21.

The sporadic colonial presence, it seems from the sources, was sufficient to curtail the spread of the traders. This does not mean, however, that the assumed slave trade ceased:

It is true that the brown human traders [...] were no longer seen here, but the slave trade still didn't cease. Through secret trading among the local native tribes the buying and selling of slaves continued. This trade was so secret that even we missionaries would not have heard of it if the people who were to be sold had not turned to us for help.¹¹⁴

Reactions of the German colonial administration to the slave trade

If trade in slaves was successfully concealed from the locally based missionaries who spoke the local languages, then it is little wonder that the German administration hardly ever found themselves in the awkward situation of having to take action against it – apart from letters of protest to the Portuguese government.¹¹⁵

With regard to German East Africa, Chancellor Bismarck – no friend of any colonial endeavours – already in 1885 (shortly after the end of the Kongo-conference) clearly stated to his administrators that he did not want them to take any action against slavery.¹¹⁶ This policy changed for GEA, but the hesitancy to interfere in 'internal affairs' as the chancellor termed it, remained. Also later on German colonial officials in GSWA seldom heard of traders on German territory who were attracted to the slave trade. To monitor this and where necessary to catch the offenders was the task of the northern (police) stations. Thus the occupants of Okaukuejo station south-west of the Etosha Pan had to intensify the controls after the government became aware of letters from the "Ovambo trader C. H. Sabatta, who lives in Okakuere" to the trader Franz Koch, who lived in Okaukuejo, "from which it was clear that the former is not only involved in smuggling munitions but also in the slave trade from as well as to Portuguese West Africa [Angola] and is trying to do business with weapons on the side!"¹¹⁷ German obligations to take action against such trading activities arose from the General Act of

¹¹⁴ Bierfert, *Jahre*: 51, quoted in: Eckl, *Herrschaft*: 392f. Zwar "ließen sich die braunen Menschenhändler [...] nicht mehr hier sehen, aber der Sklavenhandel hörte damit nicht auf. Durch geheimen Zwischenhandel unter den hiesigen Eingeborenenstämmen ging der Sklavenkauf und -verkauf weiter. Dieser Handel war so geheim, daß selbst wir Missionare nie etwas davon erfahren hätten, wenn nicht die zu verkaufenden Menschen sich hilfeschend an uns gewandt hätten."

¹¹⁵ On German reaction to slave trade: Holger Weiss, "The illegal trade in slaves from German Northern Cameroon to British Northern Nigeria", *African Economic History*, 28, 2000: 149-165.

¹¹⁶ See Schubert, *Fremde*: 198, FN 80, Note of Bismarck to Gerhard Rohlfs, 1885 "Die Sklaven gehen sie nichts an".

¹¹⁷ NAN BOM 52, S I, Bl. 1, Gouvernement to BA Omaruru, o.D. [~ 6/1904]. Abschrift eines Briefes von G. Goerne an Gouvernement, 15.3.1904: Briefe des "Ovambohändlers C. H. Sabatta, wohnhaft in Okakuere" an den in Okaukuejo wohnenden Händler Franz Koch, "aus welchen klar ersichtlich, dass ersterer nicht nur Munitionsschmuggel, sondern auch Sklavenhandel von resp. nach portug. Westafrika [Angola] betreibt und nebenher auch Geschäfte in Waffen zu machen versucht!"

1885, in which the signatory states committed themselves to suppress the slave trade, as well as from the Brussels Act of 1890.

In this respect it needs to be emphasised that around 1900 customary international law did not prohibit slavery *per se*.¹¹⁸ However, the fight against slavery and the slave trade became anchored in national law: § 234 RStGB (Imperial Penal Code) penalised kidnapping for the purposes of enslavement with prison, but it did not penalise trading in slaves. Furthermore non-Germans could not be punished for this crime abroad although it was irrelevant whether slavery and bondage were legally recognised abroad.¹¹⁹ It was only after the enactment of the Slave-taking Law of 1895 (*Sklavenraubgesetz*) that traders like Sabatta were taking a great risk: apart from military law there were four cases in which the death sentence could be pronounced under German law – one of these was for “organisers and leaders of raids for the purposes of taking slaves, if, as a result one of the persons, against whom the raid was undertaken, is caused to die.” (§ 1 II SkIRG 1895) “The more remote acts of preparation are also [...] covered by the penalty for completion. The organising of a raid for the purpose of taking slaves belongs to them as a subcategory.”¹²⁰ However, neither § 234 RStGB nor the slave-taking law, which always assumed that there was more than one offender, could be used against Africans; if need be an analogous use could be considered.¹²¹ As “the slavery crimes were mainly committed by coloureds – Negroes, Arabs, Indians, Syrians” the governors of East Africa, Togo and Cameroon issued conditions of implementation, which ‘tailored’ the slave-taking law to the local situation and set as its target the ending of house slavery.¹²²

In GSWA such regulations were not considered necessary although at least the higher colonial officials were aware of slavery in the northern parts of the colony. In this respect the “self-delusion” of the colonial masters’ supposedly active battle against slavery was forfeited.¹²³ The chances of enforcing bans and punishments against the inhabitants of

¹¹⁸ See Eicker, *Deutsch-Herero-Krieg*: 270.

¹¹⁹ See Wege, *Bestimmungen*: 2; Friedrich Oppenhoff, *Das Strafgesetzbuch*, 14th edition, Berlin, Reimer, 1901, § 234: 552.

¹²⁰ Die Todesstrafe drohte dem “Veranstalter und Anführer eines zum Zwecke des Sklavenraubes unternommenen Streifzuges, wenn durch diesen der Tod einer der Personen, gegen welche der Streifzug unternommen war, verursacht worden ist.” (§ 1 II SkIRG 1895); Liszt, *Lehrbuch*: 259: “Auch die entfernteren Vorbereitungshandlungen fallen [...] unter die Strafe der Vollendung. Zu ihnen gehört als Unterfall die Veranstaltung eines Streifzuges zum Zwecke des Sklavenraubes.”; see also *ibid.*: 364; see Richard Katzenstein, *Die Todesstrafe in einem neuen Reichsstrafgesetzbuch*, Berlin, Prager, 1902: 23, footnote 38: “in praxi [...] wird man es nur billigen können, wenn bei der Strafausmessung gegenüber jenen Menschenjägern nicht unser verfeinertes Rechtsgefühl zu Grunde gelegt, sondern die einer roheren Kulturstufe mehr entsprechende Erfolgshaftung schärfer betont wird.” (“in practice [...] it can only be approved if in defining the punishment for hunting persons it is not our fine sense of justice which is applied but that of a sense of responsibility for success which suits better the more primitive cultural level.”).

¹²¹ Reinhard Frank, *Das Strafgesetzbuch für das Deutsche Reich*, Tübingen, Mohr, 1914: 402: § 234.

¹²² Wege, *Bestimmungen*: 1 (1-23 [on German East Africa]; 23-32 [on Kamerun]; 33-36 [on Togo]).

¹²³ Wirz, *Sklaverei*: 74 (“Selbsttäuschung”).

these areas were minimal in view of the weakness of the colonial state. To arouse their antagonism would not have been wise in view of the competitive situation with Portugal in the colony and the German intention to convince Ovamboland kings to send more of their men to work in the police zone. The missionaries' reports also provided a vague insight into African economic practices, which led individuals into situations of dependency, from which they could also be released,¹²⁴ without it having to correspond to slavery or the European idea of the horrors of the "middle passage" or the plantation labour in the New World associated with it. It therefore seemed advisable to trust in the 'civilising influence' of the missions and in the eventual implementation of the bans by the Portuguese and otherwise to trust in forcing the slave trade into secrecy.

In addition the officials were concerned about making slavery in their area an issue for philanthropists at home, as it had become in neighbouring British Bechuanaland, which would undoubtedly have put it on the agenda during the colonial debates in the *Reichstag*. The colonial administration's powerlessness against traditional forms of law would have been laid bare. "The last thing the administration wanted was to have questions about this raised in parliament."¹²⁵ The policy did not get off to a completely unsuccessful start – the comforting message to the *Reichstag* in 1911 was: "The fight against the slave trade has slipped over time into the background."¹²⁶ It still existed but it was no longer on the colonial administration's agenda.

However, the colonial administration's influence in the north of Namibia also remained limited after World War I and South Africa's defeat of Oukwanyama King Mandume ya Ndemufayo (ca. 1894 – 1917) in 1917: "As late as 1921, in connection with a raid of lipumbu in Oukwanyama, it is reported that 'they [lipumbu's troops] intended coming back to fetch more natives for slave works at lipumbu's kraal'.¹²⁷ Also along the Okavango River things did not change over night: at the end of 1924 the South African colonial official who was stationed in Kuring-Kuru, René Dickman prided himself on the successes regarding the abolition of slavery. But he remained critical in his assessment: "much still remains to be done and investigations I have made there [in the] last six months prove that by stating that 50% of the population were practically slaves, I did not in the least ever overestimate their number."¹²⁸

¹²⁴ Lovejoy, *Transformations*: 240. "[S]laves, especially those purchased or enslaved in their youth, often became full members of society with the passage of time. Certainly there were societies in which slavery remained closely associated with marriage and kinship structures and was relatively mild."

¹²⁵ Tlou, "Servility": 384: The resident commissioner [Ngamiland] warned "the resident magistrate who had sent a scathing report on bothlanka [clientship/serfdom] 'for goodness' sake not to draw attention to slavery."

¹²⁶ SächsHStA 11248/Nr.7676, Bl. 151, RKA to Sächs. Kriegsminister, 11.2.1911 [Begründung zum Schutztruppengesetz].

¹²⁷ Quoted in Hartmann, "'Ondillimani!': 270.

¹²⁸ NAN SWAA A 519/1, vol. 1, Monatsbericht November 1924, Officer-in-Charge Native Affairs Okavango District – Secretary for SWA Windhoek, Kuring Kuru, 30.11.1924. (Thanks to A. Eckl for pointing this out.)

Conclusion

Taking into consideration that the above-quoted sources on slavery and the slave trade in present-day northern Namibia tell more about German perceptions and the lack of action regarding this matter than about the issues of slavery in an African context at the turn of the 20th century, the following observation can be made with regard to continued reports on the slave trade and slavery in the north of GSWA:

1. The early colonial masters knew very little about the northern border regions for which they were responsible according to the Berlin Conference. From this lack of knowledge arose much of the powerlessness regarding the circumstances the officials encountered (including hints on slavery). One of their most pressing goals must thus have been to inform themselves of the situation on the ground, in order to be able to decide, if and how to act. However, the available administrative sources of German origin on this subject are almost exclusively of a descriptive nature. The very fact that the officials, whose descriptions are recounted here, were neither willing nor able to act, meant that they mostly depended on observations and information passed on by missionaries and other travellers and – later – a few expeditions of public officials who assumed they were witnessing slavery.

2. It is noticeable that in 25 years relatively little material on slavery and slave trading was compiled by the colonial administrators in GSWA. The subject was, it seems, of minor importance to them. On the one hand this is probably because the northern regions were not under their control. German officials had, at first, little or no interest in the area. On the other hand – whilst it cannot be excluded that new and more German material on the issue will be found, especially material compiled by ethnographers – it may be assumed that colonial administrators consciously avoided going into too much detail. As there were no means at their disposal to change conditions such as slavery and slave trading, it was inherently advantageous for the administrators to avoid too much attention to the issues, either within the settler community or in Germany; thus von François's eagerness to report to Berlin that "the terms 'slave' and 'slavery' are unknown" in the area of his responsibility. Any emphasis on the slave trade could have drawn attention to the fact that German administrators were not in a position to actively "proceed [...] with the repression of the slave trade", as envisaged by international treaties. 'Slavery' could mean embarrassment for the colonisers, as was the case with the Portuguese administration. The issue was thus to be avoided.

3. Definitions of 'slavery' remained latent in many of the German reports. European law – for this end called 'international law' – focussed on the formal ownership structure within a power relation between masters and slave, the former being entitled to treat the latter as material assets, thus having the right to transfer a slave at will. However, the administrators and travellers did not always experience or receive information which would have suggested such formal ownership structures. They had a hunch that they did not fully comprehend the social stratification within the African communities they were observing, as already the first report of Louis Nels to Chancellor Bismarck indicated. Limits between labour recruitment and the slave trade, between slavery and bondage

were fluid. Considering the language barrier, the possibility of misinterpretations was always real, a fact known to the colonisers.

4. Progress in gaining knowledge about the slave trade and slavery is not recognizable on the side of the administrators of GSWA. Thus, a periodisation of the quality of the information received and German reactions based on this increased knowledge on African slavery is also not possible. A clear-cut definition of what actually constituted slavery in northern GSWA was not developed. The Germans or their informers had only information about the sale of people, kidnapping or captivity after war, i.e. the degree of personal freedom or the treatment of people as material assets, to use to establish an assumed slave-status.

5. Sporadic hints at slave trading and slavery did not enable contemporaries to analyse the social context of these issues. Therefore, historians find it difficult to use these administrative sources to gain valid insights into the characteristics of the assumed slave trade and slavery and into questions of, e.g., modes of production, social marginalisation or violence against slaves.

6. Efforts to be invested in issues related to slavery remained limited and were rather initiated from Berlin than from Windhuk – also from a legislative point of view. As stated above (2.), bad publicity may have cast doubt on the local administrator's ability to rule the colony according to the principles of international treaties. Since the prosecution of slave traders was barely feasible, it was advisable not to have too much information available, which may have found its way into the press or even worse, to the *Reichstag*. Non-intervention and non-prosecution of slave traders would have proven to the wider public and colonial critics once more that the expenses and imperial subsidies on colonial ventures did not result in the envisaged 'civilisation'.¹²⁹

7. German aspirations in a wider imperial context influenced the depiction of Portuguese policies in the border areas. In the sources discussed, the Portuguese were regularly reprimanded for their inertia and idleness regarding slavery and the slave trade. However, German administrators, focussed on German aspirations to areas hitherto under Portuguese rule were prejudiced against their Portuguese counterparts and held a mirror up to themselves when they lamented the Portuguese omissions. German officials could just as easily be judged to be incapable of stemming the assumed slavery and slave trade in their own sphere of interest. Neither in Ovamboland nor along the Okavango or in the Caprivi Strip were they in a position to do so. Their few attempts to gain – if not influence – at least some information on the issue thus serves as an example of the powerlessness on the ground and of the "incompleteness" of colonial rule.¹³⁰ The hopes of the missionaries – who informed them cautiously about slavery and slave trading – for German intervention were not fulfilled. For that the distance from

¹²⁹ Kaese, "Sklaverei": 8; on colonial critics in Germany see: Maria-Theresia Schwarz, *"Je weniger Afrika, desto besser". Die deutsche Kolonialkritik am Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts: Eine Untersuchung zur kolonialen Haltung von Linkliberalismus und Sozialdemokratie*, Frankfurt a.M., Lang, 1999.

¹³⁰ Dederling, "War": 276.

the German administrative centres was too great and the means at the colonial officials' disposal were too small.

8. With regard to slavery and the slave trade in GSWA, colonial administrators were not actors but observers. They received a few reports on the issue, compiled them and hesitantly informed superiors in Berlin. Apart from colonial powerlessness, such inaction proves to be a counter-example for an alleged "humanitarian colonialism" as recently described by historian Egon Flaig in view of European actions against the slave trade in Africa. In Flaig's analysis, colonial powers intervened in Africa in order to suppress African and Arab slave hunts and the slave trade. Without denying new forms of forced labour introduced by European colonisers, Flaig regards European "humanitarian interventionism" against slavery to be more than just an excuse for imperialist expansion; a claim angrily disputed by other historians.¹³¹ However, although it is undisputable that the slave trade diminished gradually under the onslaught of colonialism during the first half of the 20th century, a direct German contribution to this downfall of slave trading and slavery in northern Namibia was nonexistent.

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¹³¹ Flaig, *Weltgeschichte*: 210-214; criticised by Andreas Eckert, "Barbaren und Muslime. Wie der Althistoriker Egon Flaig gegen den Islam ins Feld zieht", *Die Zeit*, 04.06.2009.

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