

Newsletter 12e

Chief David Frederick

Chief David Frederick was not in Bethanien at the time of our visit. He was a key spokesperson for the return of the remains of Nama people whose skulls were taken to Germany during the 1904 – 1908 war of resistance to German occupation of their land. I will dedicate the next Newsletter to this subject, especially the miserable response, not so much by the German Government, miserable as it is, but from the German speaking community in Namibia.

An important new book.

I was fortunate to attend the launch in Swakopmund of a new book “Herrschaft und Alltag – Im vorkolonialen Zentralnamibia” about the Herero and Damara societies in the 19th century¹. Dag Henrichsen, who hails from Swakopmund, is the author and an associate of the Basler Afrika Bibliographien publishing house. In his most excellent address to the Swakopmund Wissenschaftliche Gesellschaft, he eloquently spoke to and defended his thesis that also counters racial prejudice and stereotyping.

His thesis points to the dynamics that made the Herero prosperous cattle owners during the second part of the 19th century – one of the strong societies Germany encountered when they colonized the country after 1884. The absence of animal diseases and plentiful rainfall is one reason for the growth of animal herds, of cattle, goats and sheep in the second half of the century. But other factors equally contributed to this flowering of Herero society and their assertion of power in central Namibia. European big game hunters had come to Namibia at this time, more or less the period when the missionaries also first arrived – but decades before the German colonial project started. These hunters came for ivory and ostrich feathers. The Herero, initially reluctant to sell their cattle, quickly adapted to form commandoes that joined the trade in ivory and feathers. This created a new capacity to purchase horses, ox wagons and guns (not known in the country

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previously) and later an array of other commodities, from Victorian clothing to the purchase of alcohol. The impact changed significant parts of Herero society. The Cape became the point of supply in growing quantities and variety of products. Prominent people replaced their round dwellings with rectangular permanent houses. Conversion to Christian religion played its role in the embrace of modernization. Henrichsen notes that missionaries were no longer the only purveyors of religious conversion as Herero leaders actively promoted conversion and its association with education and training for the progress it seemed to bring.

The book challenges the conventional view that Herero society was static and tied to traditionalism.

Chief Kamaharero's vision extended further when he issued a proclamation in September 1884 in Otjiherero and German in which he asserted a Herero state with boundaries, in Central Namibia. His declaration predates the German intentions, albeit only just.

In my view this provides yet another example how Southern African societies adapted and embraced change in the face of trade and commercial realities.

Colonial powers, whether German or British eventually aimed to defeat these developments, thus breaking and delaying the thrust many African societies pursued in the 19th century. Three examples I know of in South Africa speak to the same theme: When diamonds were first discovered in Kimberley in 1868, a large number of Africans joined the boer farmers and international bounty hunters when claims were staked out according to the provisions laid down by the Cape administration. African people are said to have staked out more claims than other groups. Cecil Rhodes is said to have observed, when he saw the large number of black claim holders, that it would be easy to get rid of them (with brute force and chicanery) and that it would take a little longer to get rid of the boer claimants. – The rest is history and the prospect of Africans becoming part of the first industrialization of South Africa was thwarted by colonial and apartheid policies for 150 years.

Ellen Khuzwayo, at one time known as the mother of Soweto, notes in her auto-biography 'Call Me Woman' (1985), that her grandparents were farming in the Free State and were the first to import a tractor when these machines were first introduced. This happened before any of the boer farmers had exchanged oxen

for tractors north of the orange river. A generation later they were forced off their land. Another example of adaptation and embracing of modernity can be traced in the Eastern Cape when in the late 19th century African farmers often walked away with the prize for the best cattle on display at the agricultural shows in the Eastern Cape. Land appropriation and the goal of making all African people into the labouring class the new settlers desired, once more undermined the possibility for the adaptation of African societies into commercial and industrialized societies.

The thrust of international commercialism in the 19th century was broken, stunted and violently ended by colonial conquest. Imagine ... imagine if the developments in African societies had not been stopped with the tools of racism and violent occupation.

If you read German read Dag Henrichsen's book, this is an important contribution toward knowledge of our past in this part of the world. Importantly it also challenges whites who believe in their inherent superiority. And it is important to black societies who too often have not studied their history sufficiently. I recommend it most highly.

“Daai ding loop in jou bloed”.

Lene Malan and Aneta Shaw have written a light and accessible book '*Daai ding loop in jou bloed – Op reis deur die Namaqualand*'. Through a series of interviews they let the people of Namaqualand, those of Khoi-khoi origin, those belonging to the Bondelswarts Oorlams and others speak about their language, culture, traditions and their history of resistance struggles. The people who come to life in this book come mostly from Steinkopf and the Richtersfeld. The influence of German missionaries is never far away.

The book is in Afrikaans and a German edition is also available.²

Finally: I wish you all well over the festive season and extend my best wishes for 2012!

Horst.

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