

Marion Wallace with John Kinahan (2011), *A History of Namibia: From the Beginning to 1990*, London: Hurst, ISBN 978-1-84904-091-4 (hardback), 451 pp.

Writing the history of any modern state that encompasses a considerable spatial expanse confronts the author with the difficult task of synthesizing the array of processes that have been going on in different parts of the current territory for a long period of time, but which often occurred with little or no reference to each other prior to the advent of the modern principle of territoriality. Namibia is no exception here, and the regional diversity of this country may add to the challenges that historians face.

Marion Wallace, an established historian of Namibia and African curator at the British Library, has taken the most ambitious route possible by choosing to look at the history of Namibia “from the beginning”. To make this possible in a convincing way, she has enlisted the cooperation of Namibia-based archaeologist John Kinahan, who contributes the first chapter. Besides giving an account of the available records, and by and large the state of current awareness, the book also looks throughout at historiographic issues and points out at least some of the many *lacunae* that still exist in this unevenly researched field, as it highlights many regions and topics that scholars have thus far paid little attention to. In this way, the book represents a solid reference guide as well as an introduction for anybody wishing to delve deeper than a merely superficial survey would allow. Wallace also takes onboard recent efforts to highlight “an Africa-centred – and indeed Namibia-centred – perspective” (9), as well as strongly emphasizing looking at marginalized groups, integrating the issues of gender and power, and taking a critical view on the pervasive issue of ethnicity.

Namibia’s archaeology incorporates in one way or another all of these identified challenges. Due to both natural conditions and stark regional differences, archaeological sites are very unevenly distributed – there is a strong emphasis on the central and western parts, while the more densely populated northern regions are largely left out. Conventionally, the available archaeological record has been interpreted in terms of the continuity of ethnic identities and colonial apologetics. Kinahan’s chapter reflects, *inter alia*, that such myths have been exploded; he maps multiple and intricate patterns of adaptation, in particular to the arid environment of central and southern Namibia, but takes the account also to the threshold of the nineteenth century, with a view to archaeological evidence about the inner workings of the Oorlam groups that were then advancing from the Northern Cape. This provides the link to the initial stages of the written record.

Due to the great regional diversity that exists among the territories which today make up Namibia, Wallace's account of pre-colonial history during the nineteenth century – as well as during early German colonial rule – proceeds on two separate trajectories. For the southern and central parts, the expansion of the Cape trading system became a more and more decisive influence, resulting in migration, armed conflict and state-building. This resulted in shifting hegemony, first of the Afrikaner Oorlam, later of ascendant Otjilerero speakers. A further important development was the advent of the Rhenish missionaries. In the northern regions, similar dynamics were at work, but within the different context of an array of Owambo polities that displayed quite varied characteristics – including Ombalantu as a polity where monarchy had expressly been abolished. Overall, Wallace notes the relatively strong position of women in these societies before the advent of the Christian missionaries and colonialism. She maps the slow encroachment of “merchant capital”, including rapacious taxation and the increasing concentration of wealth. The end of the nineteenth century then witnessed the advent of missionaries, the beginning of migrant labour to the regions in the south and centre that by then were coming under direct colonial control and, above all, the start of the isolation of the North – as well as of Kaoko, adjoining to the west. Again, the Caprivi to the east experienced yet a different trajectory, which was linked with the fate of the Lozi empire.

The beginnings of German colonialism formed only the closing part of a period stretching from 1870 to 1893, which cast a “shadow of protection” over central and southern Namibia, as the title of Chapter 4 indicates. In this way, Wallace maps the intricate processes where ongoing changes and conflicts among groups vying for regional hegemony – much along the lines theorized by Norbert Elias as “struggles of elimination” (*Ausscheidungskämpfe*) – intertwined with the forebodings of colonial intrusion, and in particular of designs by Boers from the Transvaal. Significantly, this led some of the chiefs in the region to request protection from the Cape Colony, which in the end, however, limited its action to the annexation of Walvis Bay in 1878 – in Wallace's view, a consequence of the redoubtable power position of the regional polities. The advent of German colonialism was also inserted into the ongoing power struggles, and it took the fledgling colonial power a decade, as well as a thorough revision of its strategy and much greater resources than originally envisaged, to institute effective rule. This was finally achieved with the defeat of the Witbooi group, which also signalled the beginning of the divide-and-rule tactics of Governor Leutwein, who made ample use of African troops to subdue a succession of resistance struggles while also focusing on the acquisition of land for eventual white settlement. Besides natural disasters, above all the rinderpest epidemic, this policy of piecemeal

encroachment led to growing tensions that finally exploded into a series of large-scale resistance wars that Wallace treats under the appropriate heading of “The Namibian War” (Chapter 6).

This war was “crucial in creating the structure of unequal, racially determined, land ownership that Namibia obtained until independence (and that has proved remarkably robust thereafter)” (155) – although this, again, does not apply to the northern regions. Wallace gives a balanced account of this rather well-researched period. Inevitably, this includes the more serious aspects of the debate on the issue of genocide. She summarizes mortality figures as well as the overwhelming evidence for the clear intention to annihilate, and she points out that beside Ovaherero and Nama, Damara and San were also affected as well. Her closing concern that the controversies about linkages pointing forward to German history in the twentieth century and the Holocaust might be “a hindrance to inquiry, and above all, to situating the Namibian War as an event in *Namibian*, rather than German history” (181) may sound persuasive to many. However, it also beckons the further question of whether, from a post-colonial perspective, the insistence on national histories in this sense can still be rightfully maintained.

As with German colonial impact generally, the war was limited to the Police Zone, the area of effective colonial control. The next two chapters show increasing density in documenting the connections that were established between the various regions of Namibia. The last decade of German rule was marked by enhanced settlement efforts, along with stricter and more systematic forms of racial segregation that involved severe strictures against “mixed” marriages; a measure of urbanization; and, a considerable increase in mining activities, above all after the discovery of diamond deposits in 1908. Labour requirements increased, and this resulted in an enduring structure that combined indirect rule in the northern regions with the harnessing of their human resources – in the form of migrant labour and the otherwise isolation of the region from outside communication. Military superiority beyond the Police Zone was asserted effectively only by the South African army in 1917, after its 1915 occupation of the territory. In early 1917, it defeated the assertive and modernizing Kwanyama king, Mandumeya Ndemufayo, and in the following years a continuous colonial presence was established in what was termed “Ovamboland”. Still, the crucial combination of indirect rule and labour recruitment continued, while autochthonous hopes for a revision of wrongs sustained under German rule were disappointed, in particular once South Africa had secured the League of Nations mandate in 1921. The policy of segregation was systematized, even though “administrative weakness” (214) and “minimal” policing (222) provided loopholes. The spatial division of the Police Zone provided for

small and marginal reserves for Africans, and “the South African regime proceeded to ride roughshod over African resistance to removal” (224), with the aerial attack on insurgent Bondelswarts in 1922 being the most dramatic occurrence. The 1930s saw more vigorous control by the authorities, both in the North and in the Police Zone, with a drive towards re-tribalization at the end of the decade. Parallel to this, the administration’s attempt to align the white population to its project of white domination ran into serious problems when the Nazis started to organize the German speakers in the territory. In other ways, World War II turned out to be, as Wallace stresses, not as much of a turning point as was the attempt by South Africa in 1946 to formally incorporate Namibia.

Resistance against incorporation sparked developments that were to coalesce into the independence – later the liberation – movement. As Wallace also notes, “the social and economic effects of South African policy within the territory” (250) added to the momentum of this: the implementation of Apartheid; closer institutional integration with South Africa; and, the Odendaal Plan, a strategy to extend the Bantustan policy to Namibia. These changes and the struggles around them were intertwined with the emergence of organizations that represented the liberation movement, in particular the South West African People Organization (SWAPO). That organization’s ascendancy was linked not only to the surge in resistance connected with migrant labour and enhanced segregation policies in the Police Zone but also with the policy of the Organization of African Unity to advance armed struggle against the remnants of colonialism. Nevertheless, Wallace’s account once again demonstrates how sustained and widespread resistance inside the country remained throughout the decades leading up to independence in 1990. She provides a concise and balanced picture of the intricate and contradictory processes around the attempts to unite the various resistance organizations; the South African attempts to force an “internal solution” that excluded SWAPO; the positioning of various groups towards opportunities seemingly presented to them; ongoing struggles; and, the diplomatic game at the level of world politics. In this, she does not omit the dark side of the liberation struggle – SWAPO’s harsh dealings with opposition groups in exile – while of course highlighting the brutalization experienced by people living in the war zone in northern Namibia. Still, Wallace notes that “at independence, Namibia’s civil society was not very robust” (305), thus pointing to very real problems that lay ahead after the negotiated transition to an independent state. A brief conclusion provides some hints about trends during the subsequent 20 years, including the evident political stability – as well as the controversies that would also lead to political turmoil on a modest scale. One of the most important observations in this

chapter may be that, besides the very evident “presence of the past”, there is the “resilience of many ‘traditional’ forms of authority, custom, culture and practice – however changed and reinvented” (315). A missing feature – of central importance – is the extremely high level of social inequality.

Overall, this book is a great feat and provides essential reading for those who want to familiarize themselves with the country; it also forms a crucial and comprehensive reference for the more specialized researcher. Its pointers towards *lacunae* and *desiderata* for future research will remain pertinent for some time to come in directing interested and aspiring scholars.

- Reinhart Kößler