H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Reinhart Kössler. *In Search of Survival and Dignity: Two Traditional Communities in Southern Namibia under South African Rule.* ISSA Wissenschaftliche Reihe. Frankfurt: IKO, Verlag für Interkulturelle Kommunikation, 2006. xvi + 374 pp. $39.95 (paper), ISBN 978-3-88939-811-6.

Reviewed by Christoph Marx
Published on H-SAfrica (January, 2009)
Commissioned by Peter C. Limb

Rural Communities, Apartheid History, and the State in Namibia

Reinhart Kössler, adjunct professor of sociology at the University of Munster and currently research fellow at the Arnold Bergstraesser Institute in Freiburg im Breisgau, in this book, presents the results of his comprehensive research into the colonial history of Namibia conducted during the 1990s. Publication in English will hopefully result in a wide readership, because this is an excellent analysis, combining the conceptual clarity of sociological analysis with the time-depth of historical research.

The author closely examines traditional leadership during the colonial period and the consequences this has, and might continue to have, for the postcolonial period. He does not follow the trend of regarding only nationalist organizations, like SWAPO (South West African Peoples Organisation), as legitimate representatives of the population, but points to the fact that traditional leadership can be an important political resource for African communities. This book, therefore, is an innovative approach to the discussion of nationalism and ethnicity in Africa. Its value clearly goes beyond empirical research on southern Namibia, for Kössler provides theoretical insights that are of interest not only to students of Namibian history but also to a wider readership.

The book is divided into three chapters, following a prologue in which the author clarifies the main concepts and notions and discusses the problems of ethnicity and nationalism within a theoretical framework. One of the main theses of the book is that the "chieftaincy" can be a political resource for communities in the postcolonial state, because it supports them in fostering their autonomy against the Leviathan of the state. Since the chiefs in these case studies tried their best to protect their communities and organized sustained resistance against the land policy of the colonial administration, they won a legitimacy that these communities can use against the postcolonial state, too. The advantage of a historical and sociological approach is that Kössler not only looks at the political system and its institutions but also analyzes social dynamics within the local communities. Ethnicity and tradition become crucial resources against the overpowering state, be it the apartheid state or the postcolonial state. Kössler, therefore, rejects easy generalizations about ethnicity, and emphasizes "that ethnic groups have been much more than a mere concoction of sinister political strategists designed to lead people astray, perhaps from the supposedly straight path of class struggle" (p. 8). Even in cases like apartheid, when obviously ethnicity was constructed and manipulated, ethnic groups for many people "today form a framework from which they construct their own collective identity" (p. 10). For this reason, he distinguishes ethnic groups and ethnic categories, the latter being those entities that colonial masters use, whereas ethnic groups correspond to the self-perceptions and identities of the people themselves. Hence, it does not make sense to discuss ethnicity in such cases without looking at traditional leadership. Kössler locates his argument within trends in South African historiography when he sees chieftaincy less in the context of kinship and descent but rather as part of clientelism and patronage. Instead of a quasi-natural order, chieftaincy becomes part of a political configuration. Ethnicity is historically changeable and dependent on the development of the social and political standing of chiefs.

The first of the comprehensive chapters is an overview of Namibian history from the German colonial period through the long period of South African rule with its different concepts of "native policy." This chapter is especially valuable because the author outlines and analyzes the whole institutional framework of South African

colonial rule. Besides the fundamental concepts of South African native policy, he discusses the whole administrative outlay, such as native administration, bureaucratic hierarchies, etc. This provides readers with the background knowledge to better judge the detailed narrative of the case studies.

When the South Africans took over the administration of the former German South West Africa, there was hope among the African population of the mandated territory that things would improve for them. But Kössler points out that South African policy remained fairly constant in that it followed the main goal of providing white farmers with cheap African labor. Everything else was political expedience and therefore what was merely tactical maneuvering sometimes looked like a change in strategy. The expediency of cheap labor policy had consequences for the administration of land, since South African administrators were eager to prevent African communities from becoming economically self-reliant. For this reason, the African reserves were kept as small as possible. The administration also was pressed by white settlers who used the usual complaints about African laziness and the necessity to pass laws to force Africans into the colonial labor market. The different political approaches of the South Africans made Namibia, in Kössler's estimation, a "testing ground" for the segregation policy within South Africa itself and especially with the introduction of apartheid and its homeland policy during the 1960s (p. 40). But South Africans were confronted with problems, since the reserves had not been outlaid according to tribalistic criteria. The ethnicization politics of apartheid led to tensions within the rural communities, and it became clear that white politicians had their own ideas about the role and functions of chiefs, which differed profoundly from that of the chiefs themselves. Chiefs became part of an administrative hierarchy with corresponding contradictions, on the one hand, between their responsibility toward their communities and, on the other hand, their obligations as part of the bureaucracy. Out of this field of tensions, different paths and historical developments in rural areas emerged.

Kössler's analysis in his two case studies underlines the value of micro-historical research since he takes a much closer look at the constellations and configurations on the ground than would a purely structural analysis. Nevertheless, it reveals situations of fundamental meaning for the history of colonialism, and Kössler admirably succeeds in tracing these different constellations. The fundamental contradictions of South African "native policy" become visible and simultaneously the voice of the Africans becomes audible. African agency is at the center of this study, but Kössler, at the same time, does not overestimate the capacities of Africans for independent action in an undue way given the colonial situation. Rather the book reveals how South African bureaucrats recklessly implemented their policy of cheap labor by systematically cutting the size of the reserves, preventing chiefs from really improving the lives of the people.

On the one hand, the administration approached the situation in the reserves uniformly, disregarding the very different situations and histories of the communities. Kössler's own analysis, on the other hand, uses this difference as a starting point to show that policies approaching the reserves with a generalized preconception furthered diverging developments. This explains why he chose his two case studies, since the Berseba and Witbooi communities, even at the beginning of South African rule, had very different outlooks.

One section of this chapter analyzes the fundamental shift of policy with the introduction of the homeland policy during the apartheid years. The pseudo-ethnological presumptions of the administrators who classified Nama as "Bantu" had repercussions (p. 90). At the same time, the administration tried its best to keep the different ethnic groups separate even in their communications to prevent co-coordinated resistance. Apartheid led to resettlement and new allocations of territory, which met with the greatest resistance precisely in those regions that originally had not been defined according to ethnic criteria. Kössler, therefore, comes to the conclusion that the land policy "was fundamentally rather ill-conceived, in that it required constant revision during the decisive stages of implementation" (p. 103).

The second chapter is a seventy-page case study of Berseba, following the history of this community from the end of German rule until after independence. Berseba presented the administration with the opportunity to manipulate internal rivalries since there were two houses competing for the office of *kaptein* (chief), the families of Goliath and Isaacs respectively. The structural problem of the Berseba community was its huge debt, which grew during the German period and could only be solved by selling ever more land. This opened the way for the administrators to severely restrict the capacities of the kaptein to act by controlling his finances. Nevertheless, development started from conditions that were not too bad, since the Berseba community had not taken sides during the conflicts of the past and the kaptein, therefore, had control over the land until 1925. Persistent attempts to erode his power were finally successful in 1938, a year

characterized by the author as a "turning point" (pp. 132, 151). The representative of the colonial administration succeeded in intervening ever more decisively in the internal power struggles between the two contending factions and deposed the kaptein. With the implementation of the Odendaal plan, the main blueprint of homeland policy in Namibia, the same situation occurred again. In a concluding section, the author looks into the situation after Namibian independence and shows that the continuities flowing from South African rule are quite strong.

The third chapter follows the history of the Witbooi community, one of the main adversaries of the Germans during the war of 1904-07. Kössler uses their example to trace one of the main points of his study, which is supported by his empirical findings about the continuities of conflicts beyond the end of colonial rule: "There exists a confrontation of basically irreconcilable social logics represented by traditional communities with their self-organizing dynamics on the one hand, and the modern state in its various forms on the other" (p. 178).

To the Witbooi, the transfer of colonial power to the South Africans brought an improvement in their situation, since they were allowed to return to their old territories. The Witbooi, like other communities, were open to integrate other groups and started attempts to build up some kind of autonomous self-administration. In contrast, the state administration aimed at breaking this autonomy and bringing the Witbooi under the sway of the state. A whole series of conflicts started when the Witbooi tried to secure as much of their original territory as possible, while the colonial government planned to give much of the land to white farmers. The Witbooi were successful in winning back some of their territory only to a limited extend. Their communal identity is characterized "not as a set of convictions, but as a specific form of praxis," and the reservation was their main resource to continue as a community (p. 212). After the end of World War II, their kaptein used the opportunities that appeals to the United Nations offered, and the Witbooi, at the same time, separated from the Rhenish mission by becoming part of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Their new kaptein, Hendrik Samuel Witbooi, after 1955 led them away from cooperation with the South African administration. In 1976, the Witbooi community under his leadership joined forces with SWAPO.

It does not come as a surprise that traditional authorities enjoy a lasting popularity, since they are not seen as collaborators but as true representatives of the common interests of the Witbooi. But this leads to new problems, as Kössler states at the end of his study, of "how traditional communities can usefully be integrated into a democratic constitutional structure" (p. 254). After independence, kapteins regard themselves as the protectors of land rights, now vis-à-vis the modern postcolonial state. The Traditional Authorities Act of Namibia has to be seen as following the tradition of colonial rule, because chiefs are treated as members of the lower administrative hierarchy and not as legitimate leaders of their communities. This should not be reduced to a juridical problem only, since Kössler emphasizes that in the light of the colonial history it must be seen as a question of dignity as well.

Kössler has presented a profound and excellent analysis, which is of methodological interest beyond the topic of the case study itself. He deals with questions of great relevance for postcolonial Africa, especially the integration of traditionally legitimized authorities in the postcolonial state. The tension arising from this can extend the scope for autonomy for rural communities. The chances for new forms of democracy, and for survival in dignity even after the demise of colonial rule, should not be overlooked.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Christoph Marx. Review of Kössler, Reinhart, *In Search of Survival and Dignity: Two Traditional Communities in Southern Namibia under South African Rule.* H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews. January, 2009.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=23771

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.