

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Gö̀nther Reeh. *Hendrik Witbooi, ein Leben fÖ¼r die Freiheit: Zwischen Glaube und Zweifel*. Kö¼ln: Rö¼diger Kö¼ppe Verlag, 2000. 87 pp. EUR 12.27 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-89645-315-0.

Reviewed by Juergen K. Zimmerer (Department of History, University of Kiel, Germany)

Published on H-SAfrica (September, 2002)

Hendrik Witbooi (ca. 1835-1905) was without doubt one of the most interesting and fascinating chiefs in Namibian history. It was especially his role as leader against the German Empire during the Namibian War of 1904-1907 which made him a hero, so that he could be referred to even during the liberation struggle against South Africa in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Still today his picture can be found on Namibian dollar notes. According to almost all eyewitnesses he must have been a very charismatic person, who was convinced that he had a mission in life—a mission to lead his people to a better life and to gain an empire of his own. A devoted Christian himself, he repeatedly stated that it was God himself who gave him his orders when he was still a young man and a prince, not yet chief.

As it turned out, this meant war, first with the Herero people of central Namibia, then with the Germans, who in 1884 had declared the territory which later became South West Africa a German protectorate. Whereas Maharero and his successor Samuel Maharero, the paramount chiefs of the Herero, signed so-called protection treaties, Witbooi warned them against it. In his opinion, the Europeans had to be kept out of Africa by all means. For him, it was one thing for the African peoples to fight against one another—and their natural right to do so—but a totally different story to hand African sovereignty over to a non-African power in order to gain an advantage over an African rival. The Germans, he thought, would under the cover of the so called protection treaties, in the end subjugate all Africans. His deep insight into the nature of colonialism, unrivalled at the time, made him see clearly the deep changes that the arrival of the Germans were to bring about. In his letters to the German authorities, he always insisted on being on equal footing with the German emperor—with whom he

was eventually forced to sign a protection treaty—and by doing so emphasized the minor status of the governor, who after all was only a representative, not of highest rank himself.

Hendrik Witbooi was a very complex person, full of contradictions. On the one hand he was probably one of the African leaders most deeply influenced by Christianity, even serving as a minister. On the other hand, he was blamed by the missionaries for his constant wars and cattle raids against the Herero. He warned, as mentioned above, Maharero of the dangers of siding with the Germans, yet after his defeat by the German army in 1894, he was loyal in supporting the first German governor with warriors until the battle at the Waterberg, where the Herero were finally defeated, before attacking the Germans as well. He corresponded with his fellow chiefs, with the German governor and with various missionaries, always trying to defend his policy. The letters to the governor are fascinating, because Witbooi tries to explain his own position as a chief in terms borrowed from European political philosophy. The question of where he got this knowledge leads to another aspect which makes Witbooi so interesting. In his letters to the governor and to the missionaries, he explains his own mission in life in biblical terms. It was the Old Testament, not the New, whereby he could relate to his own position. Moreover, he could also quote Luther.

It is this theological background about which Gönther Reeh's book enlightens the reader. His text originally was intended as an introduction to a collection of sources about Witbooi written by contemporary missionaries. The latter text, written by Menzel, and Reeh's book have now been published separately.[1] Although Reeh includes some citations from Menzel's book, one really should read both together, because the value of this

project lies in the original sources Menzel makes accessible. Whereas Menzel's book makes interesting reading because it tells Hendrik Witbooi's life from a missionary perspective, bringing to light many unknown details, Reeh concentrates almost entirely on the religious aspects of Witbooi's life. Here one misses the critical distance on the role and influence of the missionary societies in African life and politics. In his attempt to shed light on Witbooi's theological ideas, Reeh takes Witbooi's statements at face value, ignoring the possibility that Witbooi, being the excellent tactician that he was, used biblical language to gain sympathies, and to make himself understood by the missionaries. It would have been an in-

teresting task, too, to examine how the learning of European languages, of which Witbooi spoke several, led to a Europeanising of his thinking.

Nevertheless a future biography of Witbooi will gain stimulation from Reeh's book.

Note

[1]. Gustav Menzel, "*Widerstand und Gottesfurcht*": *Hendrik Witbooi, eine Biographie in zeitgenössischen Quellen*. History, Cultural Traditions and Innovations in Southern Africa, vol 10, ed. by Michael Bollig and Wilhelm J. G. M'hlig (Köln: R. Köppe, 2000).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-safrica>

Citation: Juergen K. Zimmerer. Review of Reeh, Gönter, *Hendrik Witbooi, ein Leben für die Freiheit: Zwischen Glaube und Zweifel*. H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews. September, 2002.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=6712>

Copyright © 2002 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.