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Reports from 'beyond the line': The accumulation of knowledge of Kavango and its peoples by the German colonial administration 1891 – 1911¹

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Abstract

This paper explores the accumulation of knowledge of the Kavango region and its peoples by analysing twenty reports on expeditions which cover a wide range of observations. The article intends to determine the internal logic of the accumulation of knowledge by German officials as part of the deconstruction of colonial discourse. Kavango became a matter of interest for the colonial administration only at a late stage. It will be shown that all reports by German officials on the region paid tribute to the fact that Kavango was always a region which still had to be brought under control, but actually never was. As a result, the accumulation of knowledge was mostly limited to the economic value of the region while interest in the Kavango peoples themselves remained weak.

Introduction

The Kavango region is to be found in the far north of Namibia, alongside the Kavango River where for some 360 km it forms the border between former Portuguese Angola and German South West Africa.² During the period of German colonial administration, the Kavango region was never part of the police zone (*Polizeizone*) which had been demarcated by what later became known as the 'Red Line' – hence Kavango has to be considered as a territory 'beyond the line' at that time; in some respects it still is that in modern-day Namibia. Until today it is inhabited mainly by five Bantu groups, namely from west to east by the Kwangali, Mbunza, Sambyu, Gciriku and Mbukushu.³ As early as 30 December 1886, Portugal and Germany signed an agreement on the demarcation of mutual spheres of interest in Southern Africa which defined the 'Kubango' river as the

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the conference "Public History – Forgotten History", University of Namibia, August 2004.

² In colonial reports, the river and the adjoining territory were referred to as 'Okavango'. However, since the additional prefix 'O', which is derived from Otjiherero is not common in the local languages, I use the spelling 'Kavango' instead and in accordance with actual official spelling.

³ As a consequence of the long-lasting civil war in Angola, many refugees from there found a new home in Kavango from the 1970s onwards, cf. Mandhavela Khasera, *The 1977 Angolan refugees at Nkurenkuru, Namibia. Socio-economic implications of refugees to their hosts*, unpubl. BA thesis, University of Namibia, Windhoek, 2001.

line of the border.⁴ Nevertheless, it was only in January 1891 that the first German official entered the Kavango region visiting a territory which, according to the colonial administration had by then already belonged to the German sphere of interest for more than 4 years. And yet another 20 years later, Major Joachim Friedrich von Heydebreck, then commander of the German colonial military forces, the *Schutztruppe* noted:

Until today, the Okavango has been considered as a fairyland. Only few people were destined to visit it and the reports of those few were mostly so contradictory that an uninvolved person could barely get a clear image of the conditions there.⁵

From the early colonial period onwards the Kavango region received relatively little attention and was of very limited interest to the colonial administration. The same attitude still holds valid in many spheres of interest (history amongst them) in today's post-colonial Namibia. Despite the fact that the Kavango peoples nowadays form the second largest population group in Namibia, the Kavango region, the peoples and their history are still extremely marginalised. Museums are good examples to illustrate this point. The absence of any Kavango representation in the National Museum's display on anti-colonial resistance explicitly ignores Kavango's part in Namibia's colonial history and therefore implicitly denies that the Kavango peoples have a colonial history of their own. In the Swakopmund Museum, which attempts to illustrate *inter alia* the cultural anthropology of Namibia's ethnic peoples, only a small section is devoted to Kavango's inhabitants who are represented as primitive and without histories. The few explanations deal with cultural aspects and give no information about historical change and development or even the time the displays are referring to. Finally, the Kavango Museum in Rundu, the capital of Kavango, which was established in the 1980s and also concentrated on the material culture of the Kavango peoples, has been closed for many years now. Seemingly no efforts are being made to re-open it in the near future.

Another example of the neglect of Kavango's colonial history – this time in the field of academic historical research – is Grotpeter's comprehensive *Historical Dictionary of Namibia* (1994).⁶ There is not a single entry dealing with Kavango's history or any mention of the former Kavango *Hompas*.⁷ What we find instead are brief remarks on each of the five Kavango groups, suggesting that the Kavangos are simply an 'offshoot of the Wambo peoples' (see his entry *Kavangos*) and historically have all been 'part of

⁴ Lazarus Hangula, *Die Grenzziehungen in den afrikanischen Kolonien Englands, Deutschlands und Portugals im Zeitalter des Imperialismus 1880-1914*, Frankfurt, M. et al., Lang, 1991: 118-124. 'Kubango' or 'Cubango' is the Portuguese name of the river.

⁵ Joachim Friedrich von Heydebreck, *Vorläufiger Bericht über die Okavango-Expedition*, 10 October 1911, Deutsches Bundesarchiv, Abteilung Deutsches Reich (DBR) 1001/1785: 101. "Der Okavango galt bisher als ein Märchenland. Nur Wenigen war es beschieden, ihn zu bereisen, und die Berichte dieser wenigen waren meist so widersprechend, daß es dem Unbeteiligten schwer war, ein klares Bild über die dortigen Verhältnisse zu gewinnen."

⁶ John J. Grotpeter, *Historical Dictionary of Namibia*, Metuchen, N.J./London, Scarecrow Press, 1994.

⁷ '*Hompa*' in Rukwangali, Rucgiriku, and Rusambyu, and '*Fumu*' in Thimbukushu are indigenous titles which generally are translated in English as 'chief' or in German as '*Häuptling*'.

the Greater Wambo nation' (see his entry *Kawangali*). As will be shown later, this strategy of denying the Kavangos a historical identity of their own was already used by colonial officials one hundred years earlier. With respect to the Kavango peoples, Grotperter therefore simply repeats the colonial rhetoric. However, I do not intend to criticise his work; my point here is just that the *Historical Dictionary* may serve to illustrate the limited scientific historical knowledge of the Kavango peoples and the unquestioned treatment of them. Kavango's early colonial history is neither represented in museums nor monuments, nor in academic publications on Namibia's past, its colonial history seems never to have existed.⁸

The accumulation of historical knowledge not only requires scientific endeavour and general interest in a specific subject, it also heavily depends on historical sources which may serve as a basis for the (re-)construction of history. Thus, if we ask why Kavango's early colonial history has not become public knowledge, we first have to deal with colonial sources from that period. Yet whilst the German colonial presence in Kavango was relatively weak and is therefore poorly documented, a strong image of the region was constructed by the reports of the German officials who visited the region. It will be argued that these accounts played a crucial role in the dissemination of information on the Kavango region and its peoples. That was to influence colonial policy-makers for decades to come.

This essay seeks to analyse reports from the German colonial administration and is entirely based on archival data even though some of the reports by colonial officials – especially the early ones – have partly been published in German colonial magazines.⁹ Limiting the scope of this paper to German administrative reports does not mean that other sources on Kavango dating from the German colonial period do not provide important insights into Kavango's early colonial history. Accounts by adventurers and travellers, anthropologists and Portuguese colonial sources as well as various documents written by German Roman Catholic missionaries who established their first permanent mission station at the Kavango River in 1910, can definitely contribute to the reconstruction of Kavango's history.¹⁰ However, for two reasons these sources are not considered in this article. Firstly, this article does not intend to investigate the history of Kavango during the German period. I aim rather at determining the internal logic of the accumulation of knowledge by German officials and hence the grounds on which such a history could be constructed. Secondly, different sources are written from within different

⁸ The History of Kavango and its peoples has extensively been dealt with in Andreas Eckl, *Herrschaft, Macht und Einfluß. Koloniale Interaktionen am Kavango (Nord-Namibia) von 1891 bis 1921*, Köln, Köppe, 2004.

⁹ However, the original of von François' report from 1891 was not found in either the Namibian or German Archives; the published version has therefore been analysed instead. Except for the report by von François, citations refer to the original reports which had been subjected to censorship before publication. Hence, the originals contain additional information. This is especially valid with regard to comments on slavery (see below in the section on 'trade potential and commodities').

¹⁰ Andreas Eckl, "Serving the Kavango Sovereigns' Political Interests: the Beginnings of the Catholic Mission in Northern Namibia", *Le Fait Missionnaire. Missions et Sciences Sociales*, No. 14, July 2004: 9-46.

ideological backgrounds, for different purposes, for different readerships and therefore follow different rules of narrativisation which affect not only thematic but also rhetorical aspects, all of which require a highly differentiated analysis.

The analysis of reports from colonial officials is here considered part of the deconstruction of colonial discourse. According to Asselin Charles, who undertakes to reflect on colonial discourse since Christopher Columbus, "colonialist discourse encompasses all utterances written, spoken, and iconographic aimed at affirming the superiority of a dominant group over another and justifying that dominance so as to perpetuate it";¹¹ whereas Russell Berman who "explores that dialectic within the Enlightenment as it is played out in encounters between the European and non-European worlds" refers to the colonial discourse as "the linguistic articulation of the process through which non-European cultures were integrated into a European system of administration."¹² In the case of Kavango, which was never really colonised by the Germans, Berman's definition is more appropriate.

Firstly, Berman defines the colonial discourse as a 'process'. Even when this process does not lead to a European administration as in the case of Kavango, the reports by German officials are still considered to be part of a colonial discourse and can therefore be analysed from this point of view. Secondly, according to Berman, the result of this process will be the integration of foreign cultures into a system of European administration. Even though the colonial discourse as lead by German officials never resulted in the integration of Kavango into the German administration, their reports clearly served this aim.

David Spurr's *The Rhetoric of Empire* (1993) proves to be particularly stimulating for this study.¹³ Spurr investigates colonial discourse in journalism, travel writing and documents by imperial administrations as well as their main rhetorical features and their writers' implicit attitudes towards the 'other'. His findings clarify the rhetoric of the colonial reports under investigation here. Nevertheless, the focus of this article will not be on rhetorical figures, but rather on the accumulation of knowledge by the reports.¹⁴

Very much like Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes* (1992) this article is to be understood as a "study in genre and a critique of ideology".¹⁵ While Pratt is dealing with European

¹¹ Charles Asselin, "Colonial Discourse since Christopher Columbus", *Journal of Black Studies* 26 (2), 1995: 134-152, (135).

¹² Russell A. Berman, *Enlightenment of Empire. Colonial Discourse in German Culture*, Lincoln/London, University of Nebraska Press, 1998: 7, 8.

¹³ David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire. Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing and Imperial Administration*, Durham/London, Duke University Press, 1993

¹⁴ Knowledge has not only been accumulated by way of writing reports, but is also represented by early photographs, cf. Andreas Eckl, "German and Portuguese colonial ambitions as mirrored in early pictorial documents from the Kavango Region", in: Wolfram Hartmann, (ed.), *Hues between black and white. Historical photography from colonial Namibia 1860s to 1915*, Windhoek, Out of Africa, 2004: 185-210.

¹⁵ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes. Travel Writing and Transculturation*, London/New York, Routledge, 1992: 4.

travel and exploration writing since 1750, the genre under analysis here is somehow different from Pratt's 'travel writing'. Colonial administrative staff visiting the Kavango considered themselves less as travellers than as observers whose mission it was to collect information and to write *reports*. Although viewing through 'imperial eyes', colonial officials have taken a different vantage point and have shown an interest in different aspects. For instance, 'the monarch-of-all-I-survey scene' is missing in reports on Kavango: Kavango landscape is seldom "estheticized" and there is no "density of meaning" which is achieved by the use of a huge number of adjectival modifiers.¹⁶ Instead, Kavango territory is mostly judged in a sober and down-to-earth manner with regard to its economic potential. Scientific vocabulary which Pratt finds to be completely absent in the Victorian discovery rhetoric can furthermore be said to be a characteristic feature of the reports on Kavango. Like Pratt's work, this article asks for the ideological assumptions on which the reports under scrutiny have been based. But while Pratt focuses on how travel writing produced "the rest of the world" for Europeans and 'Europe's differentiated conceptions of itself'¹⁷, this writer's analysis of reports on Kavango is shaped by a number of slightly different questions, namely: Which colonial descriptions of the Kavango region and its inhabitants do in fact exist? What kind of information do these descriptions supply? What did participants in expeditions record, and in which aspects did they show a special interest? How did the desire to bring the Kavango peoples under colonial domination and to make use of Kavango's economic potential shape the explorers' interest and observations? Which rules did the accumulation of knowledge of Kavango and its peoples follow?

It can be shown that all reports by German officials on the Kavango region paid tribute to the fact that Kavango was never really under German colonial rule. Thus, in order to understand the rules which guided officials in their quest for the gathering and accumulation of knowledge it is necessary to visualise the rating of the Kavango region within German South West Africa. As stated above, Kavango became a matter of interest for the colonial administration only at a late stage. Kavango was always a region which still had to be brought under control, but actually never was. Until the *de facto* end of German rule in 1915 the Kavango region was outside the so-called police zone (*Polizeizone*) to which the actual administration of the Protectorate (*Schutzgebiet*) was limited.¹⁸

¹⁶ Ibid.: 291, 204. But see Richard Volkmann, *Bericht über eine Reise nach Andara am Okavango*, 1 October 1903, DBR 1001/1784: 60, Laubschat, *Bericht über eine im Norden des Deutsch-Südwest-afrikanischen Schutzgebietes ausgeführte Reise*, s.d., 1902, National Archives of Namibia (NAN), ZBU J.XIII.b.3, vol. 4: 31 and especially Richard Volkmann, *Über eine Dienstreise in den nördlichen Teil des Distrikts*, 22 July 1901, NAN, BGR F.9.b: 14-15 for a paradisaical description of the Kavango valley.

¹⁷ Pratt, *Eyes*: 5.

¹⁸ The police zone was created by a decision of the Imperial Colonial Office (*Reichskolonialamt*) in 1908 as a cost-cutting measure. Costly administrative schemes had not been implemented beyond the *Polizeizone*, which excluded the Kalahari and the northern parts of German South West Africa, including the Kavango region. In 1895 the Grootfontein district was created which since 1901 also included the Kavango region; the district chiefs from Grootfontein were therefore also responsible for the Kavango. Cf. Imre Demhardt,

It was only on 17 June 1910, nearly one year after the Portuguese had suddenly begun erecting forts along the northern side of the Kavango River, that a small police post was established in Kuring Kuru.¹⁹ Its main task was not to implement German law and order in the region, but rather to observe and control the Portuguese activities which caused the majority of the Kavango inhabitants to move their homesteads to the southern i.e. German side of the River. Due to very limited staff and equipment, the German police post's influence was rather restricted, particularly on the Kwangali, in whose territory it was located; it had virtually no control over other Kavango peoples. The garrison, which had to provide its own supplies and thus was heavily occupied with farming and especially house building, comprised four to six policemen and some eight assistants. Soon the police post was confronted with serious problems. During the rainy season of 1910/1911, the personnel suffered considerably from malaria. An average of three quarters was permanently unfit for duty. One policeman succumbed to malaria, two others barely survived and had to be sent home, whilst a substitute committed suicide in a fever delirium.²⁰ Thus, only half a year after the establishment of the post, Imperial Governor Theodor Seitz had to admit that the post had little importance, with no political or economic value. Nor did the observation and control of the Portuguese activities justify its maintenance. To prevent the weakening and loss of prestige among the indigenous population, Governor Seitz did not close it down altogether.²¹ The police post at Kuring Kuru remained the only formal attempt to establish German colonial rule along the Kavango River and continued as an insignificant outpost until the end of October 1914, when it served as a base for the infamous raid on the Portuguese fort Cuangar after the outbreak of World War I.²²

The analysis presented here is based on twenty reports on expeditions to the Kavango between 1891 and 1911. While it is quite plausible from what has been said above that the first expedition was only undertaken seven years after the declaration of the Protectorate, it is rather astonishing that the last expedition of which a report is kept in the Namibian and German archives dates from 1911, four years before the end of German rule. There appear to be two possible explanations: after a Police Post was

Deutsche Kolonialgrenzen in Afrika. Historisch-geographische Untersuchungen ausgewählter Grenzräume von Deutsch-Südwestafrika und Deutsch-Ostafrika. Hildesheim/Zürich/New York, Olms, 1997: 275; Walther Hubatsch, (ed.), *Die Schutzgebiete des Deutschen Reiches 1884-1920*, Auszug aus dem Grundriß zur deutschen Verwaltungsgeschichte 1815-1945, vol. 22, Bundes- und Reichsbehörden, Marburg/Lahn, Herder, 1984: 429, 437.

¹⁹ 'Kuring Kuru' is the German colonial spelling of present-day Nkurenkuru. For the sake of authenticity, most names of peoples, locations etc. have been used here as they were employed in the reports and not in accordance with the actual spelling.

²⁰ Seitz to German Colonial Office, Windhuk, 12 December, 1910, DBR 1001/2184: 66; Hans Rafalski, *Vom Niemandsland zum Ordnungsstaat: Geschichte der ehemaligen Kaiserlichen Landespolizei für Deutsch-Südwestafrika*, Berlin, Wernitz, 1930: 139, 145-153.

²¹ Seitz to German Colonial Office, Windhuk, 19 March, 1911, DBR 1001/2184: 109-109b.

²² Cf. Max E. Baericke, *Naulila. Erinnerungen eines Zeitgenossen*, Swakopmund, Gesellschaft für Wissenschaftliche Entwicklung/Museum Swakopmund, 1981: 61-63; Eckl, *Herrschaft*: 252-262.

established in Kuring Kuru in 1910, through which German interests in the region were maintained, additional expeditions to the Kavango were only undertaken under exceptional circumstances.²³ The lack of any further expedition might reflect the knowledge gained by earlier expeditions which resulted in the realisation that – especially after the decision of the German Colonial Office in 1912 against an occupation of Kavango – any further engagement in the region had to be postponed until there were more effective means of establishing power and executive control.²⁴

Analysis of reports

The first expedition to Kavango by a colonial official was undertaken by *Landeshauptmann* Curt von François in 1891.²⁵ It remained the only visit of the highest-ranking colonial representative of German South West Africa to the region until the end of German rule. Most expeditions were led by colonial officials whose sphere of responsibility either covered or was close to Kavango, namely the district chiefs of Grootfontein Otto Eggers, Richard Volkmann, Schultze, and Berengar von Zastrow, the district chief of Namutoni, Zawada and the German Resident in the Caprivi, Kurt Streitwolf.²⁶ Amongst them, Richard Volkmann was the first official who in 1903 had toured the whole Kavango. Other expeditions were undertaken by officials who acted under special order and who in addition to their primary tasks made significant observations with respect to land and peoples. Thus, Paul Jodka's visit of the Kwangali in 1902 aimed at establishing a friendly relationship with the indigenous population; Laubschat's journey one year

²³ The reports of the police post Kuring Kuru which mostly deal with Portuguese activities are part of Demhardt's analysis of the German-Portuguese border dispute, cf. Demhardt, *Kolonialgrenzen*: 173-342.

²⁴ Of course, the reports here selected for analysis are not the only colonial documents which contain statements with regard to Kavango and its peoples. The establishment of Portuguese forts in 1909 resulted in a number of documents, which are especially worthy of mention, reflecting various aspects of the Portuguese activities, their impact on the indigenous population and the consequences for German colonial policies in the Kavango. (See various reports by Zawada in NAN, ZBU 1010 J.XIII.b.4, vol. 3 and in NAN, BGR F.9.b.). The reports under analysis here have been selected because they were not devoted to special aspects only but cover a wide range of observations and therefore can be said to be representative of the accumulation of knowledge of the region and its peoples.

²⁵ Curt von François, "Bericht von Hauptmann C. v. François über seine Reise nach dem Okavango-Fluß", *Mittheilungen von Forschungsreisenden und Gelehrten aus den deutschen Schutzgebieten*, 1891 (4): 205-212.

²⁶ Otto Eggers, *Bericht über meinen Zug nach Karakuwisa und dem Okavango*. 27 November 1899, NAN, BGR F.9.b; Volkmann, *Dienstreise*; Volkmann, *Bericht*; Richard Volkmann, *Ueber die militärgeographischen Verhältnisse*, 10 October 1911, NAN, BGR F.9.b; Schultze, *Bericht über eine nach dem Okavango unternommene Erkundungsreise 27.10.-3.12.1908*, s.d., NAN, ZBU J.XIII.b.3, vol. 4; Schultze, *Bericht über eine Reise vom 12.7.-9.9.1909*, 3 October 1909, DBR 1001/2161; Berengar von Zastrow, *Bericht über die Okavangoexpedition*, 24 January 1911, DBR 1001/2184; Zawada, *Der Okavango von der portugiesischen Grenze bis Oshoffue. Die Owakwangari und ihr Land*, 9 September 1909, NAN, ZBU J.XIII.b.4, vol. 3; Kurt Streitwolf, *Bericht über meine Reise zu Libebe*, 13 November 1909, NAN, Accession 536: Caprivi Strip; Kurt Streitwolf, *Das Deutsche Okavangogebiet, seine Bevölkerung und seine Verwaltung*, Grootfontein, 1 February 1911, DBR 1001/2184.

later – again to the Kwangali – was undertaken to explore the water conditions and the geography of the area; Victor Franke's expedition of 1906 as well as Fischer's journey to the Kwangali in 1909 took place for the same reasons, Fischer additionally being ordered to explore the geology of the area. Freiherr von Hirschberg was sent to the Kavango in 1910 to establish the above-mentioned police post and to explore the conditions alongside the Kavango River. And finally Joachim Friedrich von Heydebreck, then commander of the *Schutztruppe*, visited the Kavango in 1911 accompanied by Johannes Hermann Medding and more than 200 soldiers under the command of Major Hinsch to examine the alleged murder of the then German Resident of the Caprivi Strip, Victor von Frankenberg und Proschlitz.²⁷

Irrespective of the knowledge of the area they wished to garner, the reports share a common feature. They can all be read as a plea for colonial conquest mainly grounded on colonial ideology which aimed at controlling the whole area including the north of the territory claimed as a German *Schutzgebiet*. Matters of reputation and prestige played a crucial role in the colonial operations in Kavango, especially after the erection of Portuguese forts in 1909. Seitz's decision not to dissolve the police post at Kuring Kuru despite his conviction of its insignificance clearly illustrates this point. However, an ideological motive requires no accumulation of knowledge in regard of the territory which is to be appropriated. Its only concern with the conquered peoples had to do with the potential resistance which the colonial powers might have had to face. The dominant argument for the colonial conquest of Kavango which was implicitly employed by all the reporters was the prospect of economic benefits for the colonial economy by way of exploitation of its natural resources and human potential. When efforts are made to conquer new territories, economic profit is not guaranteed in advance. Thus, unlike the ideological motive, the economic argument requires the dissemination of knowledge with regard to the territory and peoples. My further analysis of the reports on Kavango will show that the observations recorded by officials exactly followed this pattern.

The economic interest in Kavango

As stated above, all reports put a special emphasis on land and its potential role for the colonial economy. Various ways of exploiting the land and its peoples for economic interests had been considered by the officials and were subsequently examined during their expeditions. Their observations mainly centred on four aspects: Firstly, the

²⁷ Paul Jodka, *Bericht über die vom Unterzeichneten vom 17. Mai bis 6. Juli 1902 nach dem Okawango ausgeführte Reise*, 12 September 1902, NAN, ZBU J.XIII.b.3, vol. 3; Laubschat: *Bericht*; Victor Franke, *Bericht über eine Expedition nach dem Okawango*, 20 November 1906, NAN, BGR F.9.b; Fischer, *Bericht über eine vom 1. bis 28.12.1908 ausgeführte Erkundung des Gebietes zwischen Omuramba und Ovambo und Okawango*, 15 January 1909, NAN, ZBU J.XIII.b.4, vol. 3; Joachim Friedrich von Hirschberg, *Bericht über die Expedition nach dem Okawango*, 14 September 1910, NAN, ZBU J.XIII.b.4, vol. 4; Joachim Friedrich von Heydebreck, *Bericht über die Okawango-Expedition August / September 1911*, 20 November 1911, DBR 1001/2185; von Heydebreck, *Vorläufiger Bericht*; Johannes Hermann Medding, [no title], 17 October 1911, NAN, ZBU J.XIII.b.4, vol. 4.

Kavango region was regarded as a potential area for white settlement. Here, the main interest lay on health conditions. But descriptions of fishing and wildlife clearly were also made with respect to future settlement, since both fishing and hunting could play a significant role in completing the settlers' diet. Secondly, to a lesser degree, the opportunities of trade with the Kavango peoples and possible commodities were examined. Thirdly, the Kavango peoples were judged as labourers, both within the Kavango region in the case of white settlement and for the colonial economy. Aspects of trade and labour clearly could also be interpreted as an interest in populations. However, the focus here was not on people themselves, but rather on their economic value. Fourthly, by far the most important aspect, the Kavango region was judged with respect to agricultural production. While cattle breeding was generally seen as only useful for the settlers' personal needs, the most important aspect was agriculture. Observations of the local modes of agricultural production are here of special significance. However, any colonial attempts at exploitation of the Kavango depended on its physical accessibility.

Water and road conditions

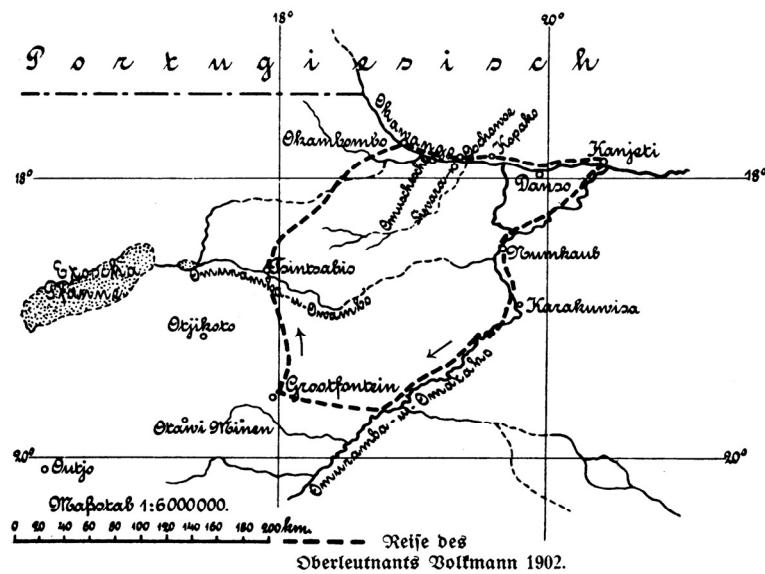
The accessibility of the Kavango proved to be a major problem from the very beginning. Not surprisingly, every report contains statements about road and water conditions, the exploration of which was the explicit task of the expeditions of Laubschat (1903), Franke (1906) and Fischer (1909). Early expeditions could not rely on roads to the Kavango; hard work was required to hack passable roads out of the bush. Volkmann attests to this in attempts to find a passage north of Tsintsabis:

From here I was compelled to have a passage of 160 km cleared through the bush to the Okavango, an effort which took 14 days and which would not have been possible without the excellent help of the bushmen. There were days when the expedition managed only 3-4 km, although 25 white men and native people had worked for 8-10 hours.²⁸

Expeditions took two main routes, which proved to have their own difficulties. Both started from Grootfontein. One lead via Tsintsabis to Okambombo (near Kuring Kuru) in the far west, the other followed the Fontein Omuramba to Blockfontein and from there followed either the Fontein Omuramba or the Omuramba Omatako, reaching the Kavango in a more central position.²⁹ The way via Tsintsabis was shorter, but it went across the country through heavy sands and was therefore especially difficult for ox wagons.

²⁸ Volkmann to Leutwein, 8 July 1901, NAN, BGR F.9.b: 1. "Von hier aus war ich genötigt [...] 160 km bis zum Okavango einen Weg durch dichten Busch schlagen zu lassen, eine Arbeit, die 14 Tage in Anspruch nahm und ohne die ausgezeichnete Hilfe der Buschmänner überhaupt nicht möglich gewesen wäre. Es gab Tage, an denen die Expedition nur 3-4 km vorwärts kam, obwohl 25 Weiße und Eingeborene 8 – 10 Stunden gearbeitet hatten." Despite Volkmann's efforts, the same route was described five years later by Franke as being still 'extremely difficult', Franke, *Bericht*: 5.

²⁹ Most of the places and *omurambas* mentioned here can be located on the *Kriegskarte von Deutsch-Südwestafrika 1904*. For details concerning the roads to the Kavango see the map by Jodka in *Deutsches Kolonialblatt* 22 (1 November, 1902): 524-526.



Source: Theodor Leutwein, *Elf Jahre Gouverneur in Deutsch-Südwestafrika*, Berlin, Mittler, 1906: 179.

Despite being longer, the way via Karakuwisa soon proved to be the better one. It mostly followed dry river beds (*omuramba*) which at least in the dry period provided by far the better route for ox wagons. A particular problem on both routes was the crossing of the so-called *Durststrecke* (thirsty stretch or hard slog), a section of more than 160 km of mostly deep sands where no permanent water-hole was accessible. The first journeys to the Kavango seemed only to be possible during the rainy season. However, von François, who undertook his journey in the rainy season of December/January 1891, faced considerable difficulties. The rains made the road deep and not easy to travel. The dry season however confronted would-be explorers with an even greater problem: the absence of water. Von François concluded that the unfavourable water conditions along the road absolutely precluded a journey to the Kavango with the transport available during the dry season.³⁰ Later expeditions, however, favoured the dry season chiefly because of the malarial depredations of the anopheles mosquito, and the impassable sodden terrain during the rainy season. Volkmann was the first who in 1903 successfully showed how the *Durststrecke* could be overcome: he deposited two water tins at 70 and 120 kilometres, a measure which was also successfully employed by later expeditions like those of Franke 1906 and Schultze 1908 and 1909 and which made possible an

³⁰ Von François, "Bericht": 207.

expedition to the Kavango with nearly 300 soldiers in 1911.³¹ Volkmann reasoned that any journey of a larger unit required the most careful preparation, but could then definitely be undertaken without any loss of oxen and horses. He recommended the end of the rainy season, April to June, as the best time to travel.³² Nevertheless, water conditions always remained a serious problem: Despite the depositing of water tins, Franke's expedition lost 24 oxen and one horse out of a total of forty-six animals.³³

So far as the water conditions on the way to the Kavango were concerned, there was unanimity. This is exemplified by Franke, for whom the securing of water supplies was of "eminent importance for the development of the Kavango region and its military occupation", and by von Zastrow who stated that the "development of the Okavango region cannot take place as long as there is no easily passable road to the Okavango".³⁴ All reporters regarded this as the chief obstacle but their belief that the water problem might be easily solved turned out to be too optimistic.³⁵ Trial drillings for water were not successful.³⁶ Even if military expeditions managed to overcome the unfavourable water conditions, ox wagons, the major form of transport, simply could not negotiate the impassable roads. There seemed to be only one way out: a rail link to the Kavango. Calls for a railway had been formulated from time to time, but never resulted in the expansion of the railway. Grootfontein station, which was opened on 13 March 1908 after a 91 kilometre extension from Otavi, remains to this day the end of the line to the north.³⁷

The Kavango as a settlement area

Despite the difficult water and road conditions, the Kavango region was always perceived as a potential area for white settlement. Climate and health conditions for white people were often discussed. Even von François judged the Kavango to be especially suitable for settlement but was realistic enough to add that such attempts would have to be delayed until later.³⁸ While Jodka described the climatic conditions as favourable for settlement by German farmers, Laubschat pointed out that climate and health conditions might not be as favourable as it seemed since, according to him, crop failure also occurs in the river valley, and fever makes it unhealthy.³⁹ While in the early

³¹ Volkmann, *Dienstreise*: 61; von Heydebreck, *Bericht*: 117b-118.

³² Volkmann, *Verhältnisse*: 30.

³³ Franke, *Bericht*: 1, 3.

³⁴ *Ibid.*: 8; von Zastrow, *Bericht*: 122-123.

³⁵ See Eggers, *Bericht*: 6; Laubschat, *Bericht*: 36; Franke, *Bericht*: 6; Schultze, *Okavango*: 74, 78b.

³⁶ See e.g. von Zastrow, *Bericht*: 122-123.

³⁷ See e.g. Franke, *Bericht*: 15, and Schultze, *Okavango*: 79. Brenda Bravenboer/Walter Rusch, *The first 100 years of State Railways in Namibia*, Windhoek, TransNamib Museum, 1997: 84.

³⁸ Von François, "Bericht": 21.

³⁹ Jodka, *Bericht*: 59; Laubschat, *Bericht*: 34.

years the existence of malaria in Kavango was stressed, later the conviction prevailed that health conditions would not necessarily prevent whites living there if due precautionary measures were taken. This notion was already formulated by Volkmann who believed that Europeans could manage to create healthy living conditions if they did not settle in the valleys but on the hills.⁴⁰ Von Heydebreck gave this opinion a more scientific character by referring to a medical officer (*Sanitätsoffizier*) accompanying him who judged the Kavango region to be at least as healthy as Namutoni.⁴¹ The opening up of the Kavango for white settlement was meant to go hand in hand with the establishment of police posts, thus settlement served as another argument for colonial occupation as propounded by Schultze:

During or even before settlement it is necessary to establish some police posts. Although no uproar or violence is to be expected from the native population, inferior elements might use the absence of protection by the police in order to exploit or cause harm to the natives, which would considerably hinder the peaceful development of this valuable part of the Protectorate.⁴²

Observations on the fauna also underlined the attractiveness of the Kavango region as a settlement area. Besides Eggers and Volkmann, Jodka especially reported extensively on the modes of fishing as practised by the Kavango peoples. The amount of fish as well as their diversity was reported to be huge.⁴³ Apart from fish, observations of wild life obviously were of special interest and can be found in a number of reports which all unanimously point to the astonishing richness of the fauna, both in number and species.⁴⁴ Wildlife observations were also employed as an argument for colonial intervention in Kavango. Von François found bones of 130 elephants south of Andara, which according to him had been shot by Transvaal Boers.⁴⁵ Franke also reported that hundreds of big-game were shot on German territory by hunters from the neighbouring territories and concluded that the protection of game would be a worthy peacetime task for the Okavango detachment.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ Volkmann, *Bericht*: 62.

⁴¹ Von Heydebreck, *Vorläufiger Bericht*: 101b.

⁴² Schultze, *Okavango*: 78b. "Zugleich mit der Besiedelung oder noch vor dieser ist aber die Errichtung einiger Polizeistationen durchaus notwendig. Denn obwohl von der eingeborenen Bevölkerung Feindseligkeiten oder Gewalt nicht zu erwarten ist, so könnten doch minderwertige Elemente, den Mangel jeglichen polizeilichen Schutzes dazu missbrauchen, um die Eingeborenen auszubeuten oder zu vergewaltigen, was die friedliche Entwicklung dieses kostbaren Teils des Schutzgebiets wesentlich hemmen würde." Schultze's argumentation turns the colonial logic upside down: Police posts are not meant to serve the settler's interest; instead, the Africans shall be protected from 'exploitation' and 'harm' by whites!

⁴³ Eggers, *Bericht*: 3b; Volkmann, *Dienstreise*: 9; Jodka, *Bericht*: 48-51.

⁴⁴ Jodka, *Bericht*: 65-66; Laubschat, *Bericht*: 34; Franke, *Bericht*: 14; Schultze, *Okavango*: 78-78b; von Hirschberg, *Bericht*: 20b.

⁴⁵ Von François, *Bericht*: 210.

⁴⁶ Franke, *Bericht*: 14.

Trade potential and commodities

Trade along the Kavango River was never significant and its potential value was only considered in the early years. Eggers reported on small scale trading between the Kavango peoples and Portuguese traders and Boers from British-Bechuanaland.⁴⁷ According to Volkmann, numerous traders and hunters had visited the Kavango in earlier years, but hunting expeditions had ended due to excessive hunting practices, several dealers had been raided by the local population, and only a few Portuguese traders had found their way there.⁴⁸ The indigenous population, used by now to all kinds of commercial commodities, were reported by Volkmann to be suffering from the absence of trade and had appealed to him for dealers.⁴⁹ Jodka observed a number of European commodities amongst the Kavango peoples, especially shirts and suits. However, he also remarked that the demand for European cloth and other commodities did not seem to be significant. According to him, the demand for European goods was small only because the Kavango people had not been subject to the same level of trading contacts as other groups. Trade as such would have increased only if white dealers had visited them more often, assuming that demand would follow supply.⁵⁰ While Jodka considered the prospects of profit in a positive light, Laubschat remarked that dealers did not visit the Kavango often, because profits were small due to rather small herds and therefore limited livestock numbers.⁵¹ Thus, while cattle did not play any role at all, since most people had lost their stocks during the *rinderpest* in 1897, other commodities in the Kavango region were also rare.⁵² Besides agricultural products, only animal skins, ostrich feathers, some low-quality rubber, and craft are named. Ivory was reported to be rare and was exclusively bartered by the *Hompas*. Interestingly, ivory was only exchanged against arms and ammunition, which were generally the most sought-after commodities.⁵³

Remarks on the activities of mostly Portuguese traders can also be read as a plea for colonial intervention. This was for two reasons: firstly, the Portuguese were reported to be dealing almost exclusively in arms, ammunition and brandy, which could in no way be seen as favourable to the cause of taking possession of the Kavango;⁵⁴ and secondly, Portuguese dealers were said to be especially engaged in the slave trade. Eggers

⁴⁷ Eggers, *Bericht*: 3b.

⁴⁸ Andreas Eckl, "Mit Kreuz, Gewehr und Handelskarre. Der Kavango 1903 im kolonialen Fokus", in: Wilhelm J. G. Möhlig, (ed.), *Frühe Kolonialgeschichte Namibias 1880-1930*, Köln, Köppe, 2000: 31-75.

⁴⁹ Volkmann to Leutwein, 8 July 1901, NAN, BGR F.9.b: 2; Volkmann, *Dienstreise*: 6.

⁵⁰ Jodka, *Bericht*: 60-61.

⁵¹ Laubschat, *Bericht*: 35.

⁵² See below in the paragraph on 'stock farming'.

⁵³ Eggers, *Bericht*: 4; Volkmann, *Dienstreise*: 6-7, 14; Volkmann, *Bericht*: 62b; Laubschat, *Bericht*: 35; Jodka, *Bericht*: 62-64.

⁵⁴ Eggers, *Bericht*: 3b; Jodka, *Bericht*: 61.

observed a significant trade with slaves: an adult cost a rifle and an adolescent cost a cartridge belt.⁵⁵ Jodka reported on the slave trade:

[P]retty often young girls especially are enslaved by the mediation of Portuguese dealers. Objects of exchange for humans are rifles and ammunition. I was told that the prize for a muzzle-loader is one girl, for a breechloader with ammunition, three girls.⁵⁶

This observation was reinforced by Laubschat, who gave a most detailed description of the slave trade. His passage reads as follows:

Usually they are prisoners of war who have been captured in the numerous wars between neighbouring tribes, or people who have committed some offence or have fallen out with the chief or one of the elders. Both men and women as well as children are sold. The price is 140 M on average. The trade is profitable as Portuguese traders cannot satisfy the demand.⁵⁷

All passages referring to slavery were omitted in the published versions. The existence of slave trade on German territory was one of several arguments employed by colonial officials to demonstrate the need for colonial intervention in the Kavango, but was withheld by the administration from the public. More than 10 years after the Brussels Act of 1890, which can be regarded as the first far-reaching international agreement against the African slave trade on land and sea, the prevalence of slave trade on German territory would have demonstrated Germany's incapability of ruling its colonies and might have encouraged the colonial administration to intervene in the Kavango at a time when it was not deemed desirable.

All in all, trading conditions were very poor and did not seem to justify the efforts, risks and costs involved in a trading expedition. Thus, not surprisingly, in 1911, von Zastrow demanded a decree by which access to the Kavango region would be dependent on a Government permit.⁵⁸ Von Zastrow justified his proposal as follows: "I cannot object to this measure. The peoples there are poor, business cannot be done, since, apart from

⁵⁵ Eggers, *Bericht*: 3b-4.

⁵⁶ Jodka, *Bericht*: 36. "Oft genug wandern namentlich junge Mädchen durch Vermittelung portugiesischer Händler in die Sklaverei. Als Tauschartikel, für welche Menschen gezahlt werden, gelten Gewehre und Munition. So wurde mir der Preis für einen Vorderlader für 1 Mädchen, für einen Hinterlader mit Munition 3 Mädchen genannt."

⁵⁷ Laubschat, *Bericht*: 27. "Gewöhnlich sind es Kriegsgefangene, die bei den zahllosen Fehden zwischen den benachbarten Stämmen erbeutet werden, oder Personen, welche sich in irgend einer Weise vergangen oder die den Unwillen des Häuptlings oder eines Vornehmen erregt haben. Es werden sowohl Männer, wie auch Frauen und Kinder gehandelt. Der Preis beträgt für den Kopf durchschnittlich 140 M. Das Geschäft ist einträglich und bei den portugiesischen Händlern genügend Absatz vorhanden."

⁵⁸ Similar decrees were enacted in earlier years for Ovamboland in March, 1906 and for the Caprivi Strip in October, 1908 (see *Deutsche Kolonialzeitung* 23 (12), 24.3.1906; 25 (47), 21.11.1908). Nevertheless, and contrary to common assumption, Kavango was never declared a prohibited area for whites during the time of German colonial rule as were Ovamboland and the Caprivi Strip.

traditional objects, they have nothing to give away.”⁵⁹ Two years earlier, the district chief of Grootfontein, Schultze, had already expressed his attitude towards the dealers in an even more outspoken manner: “In deed, only traders that have nothing to loose anyway, have dared to enter these areas, and not one has returned having made mentionable profits.”⁶⁰

Labour

Not only trading conditions were poor: the Kavango peoples also proved to be of little value as a migrant labour force.⁶¹ A distinction was made between labourers needed for prospective settlers and migrant labour. Lack of labourers for settled white farmers was never considered a potential problem. Observations of indigenous workers in the fields alongside the river clearly showed that the Kavango peoples were skilled and diligent labourers, who could also be employed on white farms; only Jodka doubted the Kwangali’s willingness to work and considered Bushmen as labourers instead.⁶²

Population figures were an important parameter in order to estimate the potential migrant labour force.⁶³ This is clearly documented by Jodka who considered only the male population and did not take into account the female population. The passage in his report concerning the population sharply demonstrates how Africa’s Blacks were seen through colonial eyes; it is an illuminating example of a narrative device widely in use in colonial discourse to emphasise the coloniser’s so-called cultural, ethic, and moral superiority:

⁵⁹ Von Zastrow, *Bericht*: 120b. “Irgendwelche Bedenken kann ich gegen diese Massnahme nicht sehen. Die Völker dort sind arm, Kaufgeschäfte können nicht gemacht werden, denn ausser den Eingeborenenkuriositäten haben sie nichts wegzugeben.”

⁶⁰ Schultze to Schuckmann, 3 February, 1909, DBR 1001/2161. “Tatsächlich haben sich in diesen Gegenden bisher auch nur solche Händler gewagt, die nichts mehr zu verlieren hatten, und noch nicht einer ist zurückgekommen, der nennenswerten Gewinn zu verzeichnen gehabt hätte.”

⁶¹ Nevertheless, these early colonial reports document the beginning of migrant labour from the Kavango. Existing historiography shows a clear tendency to focus only on Ovamboland when discussing migrant labour and does not pay attention to the Kavango despite the fact that the north-east of Namibia and even south-western Angola provided a significant number of migrant workers in the following decades, especially on farms, but also in South African mines (cf. Peter D. Banghart, *Migrant labour in South West Africa and its effects on Ovambo tribal life*, unpubl. MA thesis, University of Stellenbosch, 1969; Richard Moorsom, *Colonisation and proletarianisation: An explanatory investigation of the formation of the working class in Namibia under German and South African colonial rule to 1945*, unpubl. MA thesis, University of Sussex, 1973; Richard Moorsom, “Underdevelopment, contract labour and worker consciousness in Namibia, 1915-1972”, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 4 (1), 1977: 52-87). Migrant labour from Kavango became only recently a topic of research, see Kletus M. Likuwa, *Djwaini – A coffin with your recruit number on. The experience of contract migrant labourers from Kavango to South African gold mines 1944-1977*, unpubl. BA thesis, University of Namibia, Windhoek, 2001.

⁶² Jodka, *Bericht*: 58.

⁶³ Of course, population figures have also been a significant factor with respect to peoples as potential antagonists in the case of taking possession of the land and military intervention, as will be discussed below.

As the animal world is full of numerous species and examples, the human population is as dense as nowhere else in the Protectorate. It has to be said, though, that the strip of land on which this is possible is very narrow. On both sides of the river there are distant dunes behind which animal life soon ceases. In the Okavango valley, settlements are on top of each other, and their populations swarm like ants in an anthill. I estimate that the male population amounts to several thousands at Himarua, to about 1000 at Kapongo and to about the same number at Bomagandu.⁶⁴

The whole Kavango population traditionally settled and lived on the left, i.e., Portuguese river bank, and only came to the German side to cultivate their fields. Only after September 1909, when the Portuguese had started to build forts along the Kavango River, did Kavango people start leaving their homesteads to move to the German bank. Kandjimi, de facto *Hompa* of Kwangali, fled to the Kwanyama and later settled on the German bank. *Hompa* Karupu of Mbunza was captured by the Portuguese but managed to escape and moved to the German territory like Nyangana, *Hompa* of Gciriku. Chiabe, *Hompa* of Sambyu, and his people left the Kavango altogether and settled further north along the Kwito river for a couple of years, where they were safe from Portuguese attacks.⁶⁵ In 1910, von Hirschberg found only three small homesteads comprising 10-20 men each next to the location where the police post was to be established, and another 15-16 Mbunza homesteads on German territory.⁶⁶ Only one year later, von Zastrow estimated the Kavango peoples (except the Mbukushu) to amount to four thousand people, of which more than half already lived on the German bank, and reported that resettlement was still taking place.⁶⁷

Since the Kavango population had been living on the Portuguese river bank until 1909, it is only from that year onwards that they began to be considered migrant labourers. The Kavango labour force clearly served as an argument in support of colonial occupation. Thus, not surprisingly, all reports shed a very positive light on Kavango peoples in this respect. Fischer noted that they are born to be field workers and farmers and that some of them have already even been working in the Tsumeb mine. He had no doubt that they would prove to be good labourers; von Hirschberg documented their willingness to work, stating that several Africans had come on the very first day of the establishment of the police post at Kuring Kuru and had expressed their wish to work for food. The people were described by von Hirschberg and von Heydebreck as hardworking, healthy and able-bodied and were praised by von Zastrow as showing

⁶⁴ Jodka, *Bericht*: 66-67. "Wie die Tierwelt in zahlreichen Arten und Exemplaren vorhanden ist, so ist auch die Bevölkerung so dicht, wie sonst nirgends im Schutzgebiet. Allerdings ist der Streifen Landes, in dem dies möglich ist, nur sehr schmal. Beiderseits des Flusses erheben sich in einiger Entfernung die hohen Sanddünen, hinter denen das tierische Leben bald aufhört. Im Thal des Okavango reihet sich Werft an Werft, und in allen wimmelt es wie in einem Ameisenhaufen. Ich schätze die Zahl der männlichen Bevölkerung auf einige Tausend bei Himarua, etwa Tausend bei Kapongo und ebensoviel bei Bomagandu."

⁶⁵ Streitwolf, *Okavangogebiet*: 128b; von Zastrow, *Bericht*: 117b; Medding, no title: 294b.

⁶⁶ Von Hirschberg, *Bericht*: 20.

⁶⁷ Von Zastrow, *Bericht*: 117-117b.

great diligence. According to von Heydebreck the Kavango peoples had expressed their willingness to come down to Grootfontein to work if the road conditions had been better and safer; they especially feared attacks from Bushmen. Nevertheless, von Heydebreck considered the Kavango population to be even more valuable for the colonial economy of the Protectorate than Kavango's agrarian potential.⁶⁸

Stressing the peoples' capability and willingness to work was just one reason for colonial intervention in the region. Exaggerated calculations with respect to population figures were another argument which was meant to serve the same purpose. For instance, Medding's rough estimate of the Kavango population is far from accurate. Withholding information on the abandonment of the Sambyu area, he concluded that 6 to 7000 people lived on German territory.⁶⁹ By doing so he intended to strengthen his argument for the establishment of German posts along the Kavango River which, according to him, became "urgently necessary" in the light of Portuguese activities:

[O]nly in this way can we keep the natives staying on our side and gradually train them as workers. This task, which is of great importance to our country, cannot possibly be achieved on its own by the small police post at Kurinkuru, established in the far west in June 1910.⁷⁰

This point of view was shared by von Heydebreck, who defended his plea for colonial intervention apart from military reasons by the labour force argument:

If I am told that these 4000-6000 Blacks don't justify higher expenses, one has to respond, that in this sparsely populated country, in which there is a huge demand for labour, every coloured person is of value.⁷¹

The most detailed and realistic estimate of the Kavango peoples was made by Streitwolf who gave the following figures: Kwangali 500 on the German, 1100 on the Portuguese side; Mbunza 1000 on the German, 80 on the Portuguese side; Sambyu area abandoned; Gciriku 800 on the German, and 500 on the Portuguese side; Mbukushu 2000 on German territory; and finally, 3000 in British-Bechuanaland.⁷² Streitwolf calculated the potential labour force on a basis of 8 per cent of the total population which brought him to 350 labourers for contract labour per year. Including labourers from the Portuguese and British territory, he estimated the labour force as no more than 500 men a year. According to Streitwolf, only a few people had been working in the colony thus far. Additionally, those people only agreed to half-year contracts, because

⁶⁸ Fischer, *Bericht*: 11; von Hirschberg, *Bericht*: 20b, 23b; von Heydebreck, *Vorläufiger Bericht*: 102; von Zastrow, *Bericht*: 119; von Heydebreck, *Bericht*: 122, 124b, 125.

⁶⁹ Medding, no title: 294b.

⁷⁰ Ibid. "...nur dadurch können wir die auf unserer Seite befindlichen Eingeborenen halten und sie allmählich zu Arbeitern erziehen. Die gerade für unser Land so wichtige Aufgabe, kann unmöglich allein die nun am äußersten Westen im Juni 1910 errichtete kleine Polizeistation Kurinkuru lösen."

⁷¹ Von Heydebreck, *Vorläufiger Bericht*: 102b-103. "Wenn mir gesagt wird, daß diese 4000 – 6000 Neger einer grösseren Kostenaufwendung nicht wert sind, so ist dem zu entgegnet, daß in diesem menschenarmen Lande, in dem die Arbeiternot so groß ist, jeder Farbige ein Wertobjekt darstellt."

⁷² Streitwolf, *Okavangogebiet*: 131b-132.

they had to be at home to work in the fields and to be present during the harvest. This estimated Kavango labour force therefore was seen to be too small to justify any colonial intervention. However, the advantages and disadvantages of colonial intervention with regard to the labour force were never evaluated unanimously. In opposition to Medding, von Heydebreck and others, Streitwolf did not believe that military intervention and stations would be an appropriate means to increase the influx of migrant labour into the colony.⁷³ The Kavango population according to him would prefer not to come into close contact with police posts. For Streitwolf this was evident, as most of the Gciriku and Mbunza people had moved to the German side without there being a German police post, while the Kwangali crossed only in few numbers into German territory despite the police post at Kuring Kuru.⁷⁴

Stock farming

Considerations with regard to profitable cattle breeding did not play a significant role in the potential exploitation of the Kavango region, mainly for two reasons. First and foremost, officials feared the outbreak of *rinderpest* in the Protectorate caused by cattle from the north. After the disastrous *rinderpest* in 1897, Eggers' and Volkmann's expeditions in 1899 and 1901 specifically aimed at investigating this danger.⁷⁵ The import of cattle from the north into the Protectorate clearly was not in the interest of the colonial administration. Cattle breeding therefore did not promise any profit but would only have been of use for the farmer's personal needs. Secondly, the Kavango peoples themselves, who were said to have been rich in cattle in former years, had lost most of their stocks during the *rinderpest* in 1897/98.⁷⁶ In 1902, only the Kwangali *Hompa* Himarwa was reported to own a considerable number of cattle, while the Mbunza *Hompa* Kapongo had only few and the Shambyu *Hompa* Mbambangandu had no cattle at all.⁷⁷ Later estimates showed a similar picture and never exceeded approximately 250 head of cattle for all the Kavango peoples combined.⁷⁸ Only Eggers, who saw the possibility of extended cattle breeding, and Laubschat showed a special interest in the conditions for cattle raising, which were judged by the latter to be much more favourable than in Ovamboland due to good grazing opportunities throughout the year.⁷⁹

⁷³ Medding, no title: 294b; von Heydebreck, *Bericht*: 123b; Fischer, *Bericht*: 12.

⁷⁴ Streitwolf, *Okavangogebiet*: 132.

⁷⁵ Eggers, *Bericht*; Volkmann to Leutwein, 8 July 1901, NAN, BGR F.9.b; Volkmann, *Dienstreise*.

⁷⁶ Volkmann to Leutwein, 8 July 1901, NAN, BGR F.9.b: 2; Volkmann, *Dienstreise*, 6, 9; Jodka, *Bericht*: 51.

⁷⁷ Jodka, *Bericht*: 51.

⁷⁸ Zawada, *Okavango*: 160-160b; von Hirschberg, *Bericht*: 28; Streitwolf, *Okavangogebiet*: 128-130; von Zastrow, *Bericht*: 121.

⁷⁹ Eggers, *Bericht*: 5b; Laubschat, *Bericht*: 34.

Agriculture

By far the most interest was focussed on the area's agricultural potential. Here, considerations with regard to the availability of land and its ecological determinants, its temperature, rainfall and crops to be cultivated can be found in virtually all the reports. The early explorers especially were deeply impressed by the fertility of the soil and stressed the important role the Kavango might play within the colonial economy of German South West Africa. Taking possession of the land was not seen as a problem, as the whole population still lived on the left, Portuguese, side of the river. As mentioned already, it was only after the establishment of Portuguese forts along the Kavango River in 1909 that Kavango peoples started to move to the right side of the river, settling effectively on German territory. Certainly, Kavangos had always had fields on the German river bank as well, but they cultivated only a small portion of the land available. Uncultivated land was simply seen as no man's land through colonial eyes. Therefore, Volkmann talked about hundreds of thousands of hectares which could easily be cultivated, an assessment which was shared by Jodka, who described the Kwangali fields as numerous and vast, but stressed that they nevertheless almost disappear in comparison with the extensive land offering the same favourable conditions and apparent suitability for settlement.⁸⁰

Only Zawada commented more critically on the availability of land. He had spent more time in the Kavango than his colleagues and therefore had a better knowledge of the local conditions. According to him, the Kwangali knew the exact boundaries of their territory which stretched on the German riverside some 25 kilometres into the country; therefore, he stated, there was no way to justify not granting them this land. For Zawada this was not an obstacle to settlement. Potential farmers would simply have to pay for the land; whether the Kwangali would be willing to sell their land is not discussed by him, nor by any other report.⁸¹

A topic stressed repeatedly was the excellent fertility of the fluvial soils of the Kavango river littoral. Here, the observation of local modes of agricultural production played a significant role in documenting the agricultural potential of the region. Early reports put an emphasis on the hard work involved in cultivating the land – von François referred to the Kavango peoples' diligent farmers and for Jodka the widely expanded and numerous fields he observed were a nice reference for the women's hard work.⁸² Fieldwork as well as the preparation of food was a duty of the women and older children. The Kavango peoples were reported to have their fields on both sides of the Kavango River. The fields were abandoned when the output decreased and when the distance became too great the homesteads were rebuilt closer to the fields. The crops cultivated were mainly millet, maize, beans, peanuts, pumpkins and tobacco. Except for tobacco and pumpkins, which were planted in the flood area, the fields were all on hillside locations. The sowing took

⁸⁰ Volkmann, *Dienstreise*: 13; Jodka, *Bericht*: 56-57.

⁸¹ Zawada, *Okavango*: 160.

⁸² Von François, "Bericht": 210; Jodka, *Bericht*: 53.

place at the beginning of the rainy season in December or January, the harvest followed in May or June. There was only one harvest a year, since the water conditions did not allow for a second, and there was no artificial irrigation.⁸³ In contrast to these early descriptions, later observations focused on the primitive modes of the agricultural production. Thus, for Schultze, harvested fields clearly proved that crops could be produced even with the most primitive means, whereas von Hirschberg concluded that the soil was very fertile because the indigenous population produced good crops without dung, by very unsophisticated cultivation with primitive tools, even though the fields were cultivated several years in succession.⁸⁴ A similar observation has been made by Zawada who concluded that the properties of the soil were excellent since the natives cultivated the land only with small hoes, sowed their maize or millet and let nature care for the rest, without ever manuring. Nevertheless, he stated, the maize fields reach a height of up to 3 1/2 metres with a rich yielding of corn.⁸⁵

In addition to the crops and fruits harvested by the Kavango peoples, a large variety of other field crops were suggested as being suitable for cultivation along the river bank, e.g. oats and wheat, potatoes, cotton and rice plantations in the flood areas.⁸⁶ However, Streitwolf and von Heydebreck doubted that cotton and rubber plantations could be planted due to temperatures being below freezing point in the dry season – an observation which had already been made by Volkmann in 1901. He reported that all tobacco plants along the river bank had been destroyed by frost.⁸⁷ Describing the simple ways of local cultivation while emphasising the abundance of the yield was a dominant theme, and served to illustrate the anticipated great potential of the soil. This stimulated the observer's and the reader's fantasy as to what agricultural yields might be achieved by the use of more 'civilised' means of production.⁸⁸

Overview of the colonial economic interest in Kavango

All in all, the economic value of Kavango – its agricultural potential, its labour force and its potential for white settlements – was very highly rated. There was plenty of fertile soil available on which a variety of crops could have been cultivated by white farmers under reasonable health conditions, presumably without lack of black labour. Fish, game and cattle raised for the settler's own needs, in addition to agricultural products, would have

⁸³ Von François, "Bericht": 210; Volkmann, *Dienstreise*: 7; Jodka, *Bericht*: 38-39, 53-56; Laubschat, *Bericht*: 33.

⁸⁴ Schultze, *Okawango*: 76; von Hirschberg, *Bericht*: 26b.

⁸⁵ Zawada, *Okawango*: 160.

⁸⁶ Volkmann, *Dienstreise*: 13; Jodka, *Bericht*: 57; Volkmann, *Bericht*: 62; von Hirschberg, *Bericht*: 26b; Zawada, *Okawango*: 161.

⁸⁷ Streitwolf, *Okavangogebiet*: 131; von Heydebreck, *Vorläufiger Bericht*: 101b; von Heydebreck, *Bericht*: 124b; Volkmann, *Dienstreise*: 13.

⁸⁸ A fine example of such an euphoric and utopian vision of Kavango's future can be found in Zawada's report, *Okawango*: 61-61b.

complemented the diet. However, this positive assessment of the exploitable economic and agricultural potential of the region and for white settlement changed considerably over time. In early reports, when it was still generally believed that water could easily be found along the roads to the north, Kavango was predicted to play a crucial role in the colonial economy.

After it became clear that not enough water supplies could be secured, the problem of physical accessibility was considered more and more an obstacle to the exploitation of Kavango. Its economic value was still rated very high, despite the very limited Kavango labour force. However, there was only one way to make economic development profitable, and that was if – and only if – the Kavango was linked to the rest of the colony by rail. Without the opportunity of affordable transport, there was no way of making the cultivation of crops profitable. This point was clearly acknowledged and emphasised by later officials. Von Zastrow declared any settlement as “absolutely out of the question” because the distance to the closest railway station was at least 300 kilometres. No high-quality product, he stated, can last over such a distance. In his opinion only if a railway was built to Kavango would it be possible to begin thinking about colonising the Kavango valley.⁸⁹ Streitwolf commented in similar vein, stating that without the possibility of cheap transport even the most favourable farming conditions would not secure a profit. For him, no settlement should be allowed in the Kavango as long as the region was not connected to the transport system which in his opinion would only happen if supplies of minerals were discovered.⁹⁰ Furthermore, there was no real need for the development of the region since there was still enough farmland available in the Protectorate outside Kavango, especially in the areas close to the railway, as pointed out by von Heydebreck. He deemed any settlement scheme a mistake and even doubted the wisdom of farmers who showed an interest in settling there and assumed them only to be interested in dubious profiteering.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Von Zastrow, *Bericht*: 115b. “Die Entfernung bis zur nächsten Bahnstation beträgt wenigstens 300-400 Kilometer [...] Es dürfte wohl kaum ein Produkt geben, das hochwertig genug ist, einen solchen Transport zu vertragen. Nur wenn eine Bahn nach dem Okavango gebaut wird, ist es möglich an eine Besiedelung des Okavangotales zu denken.”

⁹⁰ Streitwolf, *Okavangogebiet*: 131b. “Ich stehe der Besiedelung des Okavango mit Weissen sehr skeptisch gegenüber, halte sie direkt für ein tot geborenes Kind, solange ein Bahnverbindung nicht besteht. Denn auch bei den besten Bodenbedingungen ist die Rentabilität eines Unternehmens ohne billigen Abtransport seiner Produkte ausgeschlossen. Solange also der Okavango nicht durch eine Bahn – und dieses wird nur nach Auffindung von Mineralien geschehen – dem Verkehr angegliedert ist, soll man keine Ansiedlung dort zulassen.”

⁹¹ Von Heydebreck, *Vorläufiger Bericht*: 101b. “Da im übrigen Schutzgebiet, besonders in den Landesteilen unweit der Bahn, noch hinreichendes Farmgelände käuflich ist, kann auf eine Besiedelung des Okavango verzichtet werden. Ich würde eine solche sogar für einen Fehler halten, denn ich glaube nicht, daß ein reeller Farmer, der reell rechnet, sich entschließen wird, sein Arbeitsfeld so weit vom letzten Schienenstoss zu suchen. Denjenigen, die sich dort zur Niederlassung melden, muß mit Mißtrauen begegnet werden, da anzunehmen ist, daß sie lediglich durch Fischen im Trüben auf ihre Rechnung zu kommen hoffen.” See also von Heydebreck, *Bericht*: 125.

Thus, despite various pleas for colonial intervention, the Colonial Office in Berlin abided by an earlier decision and ordered in 1912 that an occupation of Kavango was not to take place for political and financial reasons; the profit to be expected would not be worth the candle.⁹² The explanation by von Solf, State Secretary in the Colonial Office, effectively dismantled any plea for colonial intervention in the Kavango and reads as follows:

[E]conomic arguments for occupying the border are not convincing. The possibility of recruiting labourers from the six to seven thousand natives as labourers for the mines and other enterprises in the Protectorate [...] is too remote to justify the cost of such an occupation, least of all precipitate action on the part of the colonisers.⁹³

The interest in Kavango's indigenous population

Compared with the economic interest in Kavango territory, the interest in its indigenous population was only secondary, and corresponds with Heintze's findings with regard to German reports on West-Central Africa: "Basically, it is striking how little these travellers were really interested in the African people they encountered."⁹⁴ Apart from observations especially in early reports concerning ethnographic aspects such as clothing, hairstyling, and material culture, informed opinion concentrated on two aspects.⁹⁵ Firstly, there was an interest in political conditions along the Kavango River. Knowledge of power relations amongst the Kavango peoples was, for this reason, fundamental in order to gain political and military dominance and to establish colonial rule; secondly, the indigenous population was regarded as antagonistic to the occupation of the region. The discussion of arms, belligerent attitudes and the fortification of their homesteads became the want-to-be conqueror's main concern.

Perception and description of Kavango's peoples

The Kavango population was generally perceived as a peaceful and culturally homogenous group, consisting of several tribes. This notion is documented clearly by remarks concerning the language or languages of the Kavango peoples, which were generally perceived as being only *one* language, consisting of several different dialects,

⁹² In 1909, State Secretary Dernburg decided that it was not desirable to expand the area of settlement to the Kavango and informed Governor Schuckmann that any erection of police posts in the Kavango region would not be approved by his office, cf. Dernburg to Schuckmann, 27 February, 1909, NAN, BGR F.9.b.

⁹³ Solf to Seitz, Berlin, 2 March 1912, DBR 1001/1785: 142-145. "...dass wirtschaftliche Gesichtspunkte für die Besetzung der Grenze nicht in Betracht kommen. Die Möglichkeit, aus den 6-7000 Eingeborenen allmählich Arbeiter für die Minen- und andere Betriebe des Schutzgebiets zu gewinnen, [...] rechtfertigt die Aufwendung so erheblicher Mittel, wie sie die Besetzung erfordern würde, nicht und nötigt vor allen Dingen nicht zu einem raschen Vorgehen."

⁹⁴ Beatrix Heintze, "Ethnographic Appropriations: German exploration and fieldwork in West-Central Africa", *History in Africa* 26, 1999: 69-128, (71).

⁹⁵ Volkmann, *Dienstreise*: 8; Jodka, *Bericht*: 37-40; Laubschat, *Bericht*: 32-33; Volkmann, *Bericht*: 62b-63.

and part of the Bantu family of languages.⁹⁶ Not only have the Kavango languages been judged as dialects, but the ‘Kavango language’ itself was described as a dialect. According to Laubschat the people living along the Kavango were tribally related to the Ovambos, a relationship which was most evident in language, whereby the difference between the Kwangali, Ovambo and Herero language is so negligible that these three had no difficulty communicating with each other.⁹⁷ Only Thimbukushu, the language of the Mbukushu, did not fit into this scheme. The Mbukushu were reported not to use the ‘Ovambo language’, but the ‘Bechuana language’ instead. Later reports did not contain remarks on language. Only Medding commented on the Kavango peoples, stating that “they are all Negroes, similar in languages and customs”.⁹⁸

The quotes from Laubschat and Medding point to another dominant topic: the Kavango peoples were judged as a culturally homogenous group, yet not perceived as forming a group of their own. Throughout the German colonial period, ‘Ovambo’ was the dominant label: “All tribes along the Okavango are simply called Ovambos”, as Volkmann stated.⁹⁹ While Kavango peoples were differentiated with respect to political units, they were denied an ethnical and linguistic identity of their own, not only within the Kavango region, but also with respect to their next-door neighbours in the German Protectorate; the Kavango tribes were either described as being closely related to the Ovambo or – as in most reports – were addressed as ‘Ovambos’ collectively.¹⁰⁰ They were said to differ from the related ‘Ovambos’ only by being “less self-confident and less provocative”, while “their inclination to steal is less apparent”.¹⁰¹ This undifferentiated perception is not only documented in a vast number of diverging names and spellings by the same author, but even appear within a single text.¹⁰² Apart from the alleged relatedness to Ovambo with respect to behavioural attitudes, it is also documented through the description of their physical appearance and physiognomy. Laubschat reported that “even with respect to the physique the Owakwangari barely differ from the Ovambo”, while Zawada regarded the “Owakwangari” not to be a “pure race”, but rather “a mixed peoples, consisting of Ovambos of the most different descents”. As is often the case in colonial discourse, this ‘racial degradation’, which was also observed

⁹⁶ Von François, “Bericht”: 210; Jodka, *Bericht*: 67.

⁹⁷ Laubschat, *Bericht*: 32: “Am Okavango wohnen die Owakwangaris, die zur Banturasse gehören und mit den Ovambos stammesverwandt sind. Die Verwandtschaft zeigt sich vor allem in der Sprache. Die Verschiedenheiten zwischen Owakwangari, Ovambo und Herero sind so wenig erheblich, daß sich die drei Stämme ohne Schwierigkeit miteinander verständigen können.”

⁹⁸ Medding, no title: 194.

⁹⁹ Volkmann to Leutwein, 8 July 1901, NAN, BGR F.9.b.

¹⁰⁰ Laubschat, *Bericht*: 32; Fischer, *Bericht*: 11.

¹⁰¹ Laubschat, *Bericht*: 32.

¹⁰² For example, Volkmann used the following names: ‘Ovakwangaw’, ‘Owakuangas’ (Volkmann to Leutwein, 8 July 1901, NAN, BGR F.9.b: 1, 2), ‘Owakoangas’ (Volkmann, *Dienstreise*: 6), ‘Owakwangars’ (ibid.: 7), ‘Owaktoangars’, ‘Owakangaries’ (ibid.: 8); Streitwolf wrote of ‘Mambukuschu’ (*Okavangogebiet*: 128), ‘Mambu Nuchu’ (ibid.: 129b), ‘Mambuckuschu’, (ibid.: 130).

by Volkmann with regard to the Mbukushu, was closely connected to an alleged 'social inferiority'.¹⁰³

Political conditions

Reporting on what were labelled 'political conditions' was mostly very basic. In particular, early reports were limited to the enumeration of four to five more or less independent political groups, their names, their chiefs' names and the geographical areas they controlled.¹⁰⁴ However, and in contrast to cultural aspects, observations on political conditions naturally differ between the Kavango peoples and became more exact over time. Von François had mentioned by name the 'Diriko, Dimbo and Ovambuskuschu' living in the area he was travelling through.¹⁰⁵ He had thus differentiated the Kavango peoples by political units, whereas other descriptions were not so detailed. Either the whole population was addressed as 'Owambos', e.g. by Eggers, Franke and Schultze, or 'less' important groups were subsumed under their 'more important' neighbours.¹⁰⁶ Thus, the Mbunza were subsumed under the Kwangali; Kwangali, Mbunza and Sambyu were addressed as 'Owawangari', and Gciriku were regarded as part of the 'Mumbukuschu'.¹⁰⁷ In connection with the migration of Kavango peoples on German territory from 1909 onwards, 'political' observations became more accurate and considerably improved. Zawada was the first to distinguish the "Owawangari, consisting of a western tribe, the Kuangari, and the eastern Bunja".¹⁰⁸ Detailed descriptions concerning the respective territory of each tribe, the chiefs and the location of the chief's homesteads are given by Zawada, von Hirschberg, and Streitwolf.¹⁰⁹ This general inclination towards greater accuracy is documented by von Hirschberg, who suggested the spelling 'Njangana' instead of the commonly used 'Jangana', since the name of the Gciriku *Hompa* "is pronounced with 'n' before the 'j' hardly audible".¹¹⁰ However, the Kavango population as a whole is still referred to by von Hirschberg as "Ovambo";¹¹¹ a more detailed differentiation with respect to political conditions and spelling did not result in attributing the Kavango peoples an ethnical identity of their own.

¹⁰³ Laubschat, *Bericht*: 32; Zawada, *Okawango*: 158b; Volkmann, *Bericht*: 60b.

¹⁰⁴ See e.g. Volkmann, *Dienstreise*: 7; Jodka, *Bericht*: 33-35; Volkmann, *Bericht*: 61-61b; Schultze, *Reise*: 264. Information on the 'traditional history' (including chiefs and their reign) and on 'politics and law' of the Kavango peoples is provided by Gibson *et al.* in the respective chapters on each of the five Kavango tribes, cf. Gordon D. Gibson, Thomas J. Larson/Cecilia R. McGurk, *The Kavango Peoples*, Wiesbaden, Steiner, 1981.

¹⁰⁵ Von François, "Bericht": 210.

¹⁰⁶ Eggers, *Bericht*; Franke, *Bericht*; Schultze, *Okawango*.

¹⁰⁷ Volkmann, *Dienstreise*: 7; Jodka, *Bericht*: 67; Schultze, *Reise*: 163.

¹⁰⁸ Zawada, *Okawango*: 158b.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*: 159; von Hirschberg, *Bericht*: 20-20b; Streitwolf, *Okavangogebiet*: 128-129.

¹¹⁰ Von Hirschberg, *Bericht*: 21. "Auf Karten ist der Name gewöhnlich Jangana geschrieben, ich halte aber die obige Schreibweise für richtiger, da der Name mit einem schwachen N vor dem J gesprochen wird.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*: 28b.

With respect to the political organisation of the Kavango peoples, only the reports by Jodka and Zawada provide some sparse information. Jodka described the *Hompas* as being “lord over life and death of his subordinates”¹¹² and said the following of his government: “The power is absolute; however, a council assists the *Hompa*, made up of close relatives and older and experienced members of the tribe.”¹¹³ Zawada had to say this on Kandjimi, the de facto Kwangali *Hompa* :

He is an absolute ruler and owner of the whole territory. Apart from him, only the elders and headmen of the villages own land. He also owns the members of his tribes whom he may sell. Generally, he will not do this, but in the case of a famine, which I consider very unlikely, he will, like the Owambo, sell his people to the dealers, in exchange for supplies – of course, as rightfully acquired labourers.¹¹⁴

To sum up, the prevailing view of the Kavango peoples was very much ahistoric – especially early reports which contain virtually no remarks about their tribal history. An exception to this was only made with regard to the Mbukushu and their chiefs. The Mbukushu *Fumu*'s territory was located within a sphere of interest shared by Germany, Portugal and Britain and therefore of strategic importance, resulting in a more detailed interest in him and his people. The most detailed description of the recent political history of the Mbukushu was given by Streitwolf who reported on the circumstances which had left *Fumu Libebe* a “prince without people and power”.¹¹⁵

Of special interest within a political context was foreign influence, mainly of Bechuana people along the Kavango. Eggers reported that after the *rinderpest* in 1897 Bechuana

¹¹² Jodka, *Bericht*: 36.

¹¹³ Ibid.: 34. “Die Regierungsform ist eine streng absolute, doch steht dem Kapitän ein Rath zur Seite, welcher aus den näheren Verwandten und den älteren und erfahreneren Leuten des Stammes gebildet wird.”

¹¹⁴ Zawada, *Okawango*: 159. “Er ist absoluter Herrscher und Besitzer des ganzen Landes. Ausser ihm haben nur die Dorfältesten und Vorleute noch Besitz. Ebenso gehören ihm die Menschen seiner Stämme, die er gegen Bezahlung verkaufen kann. Im Allgemeinen wird er keinen Gebrauch davon machen, sollte aber einmal eine Hungersnot am Okawango eintreten, die ich für fast ausgeschlossen halte, so wird er, ebenso wie die Owambo, seine Leute gegen Proviant an gegen stets vorhandene Abnehmer – selbstredend als rechtmässig angeworbene Arbeiter – verkaufen.”

¹¹⁵ Streitwolf, *Bericht*: 21-21b. For statements concerning Mbukushu political conditions in the reports analysed, see also Schultze, *Reise*: 264, 272-273; Streitwolf, *Okavangogebiet*: 129b-130b; and Medding, no title: 294-294b. See also Maria Fisch, *Der Caprivizipfel während der deutschen Zeit 1890-1914*, Köln, Köppe, 1996: 68-71, for a brief outline of the relationship between the Mbukushu and the Tawana. *Fumu Andara* had chosen Libebe for his successor instead of Mukoya, who according to customary law had the first claim on chieftainship. After Andara's death, the tribe split into two sections, one was ruled by Libebe, who remained in the territory; his people continued to live on German and English territory. The other section was ruled by Mukoya, who had settled with his people along the Luyana river in Portuguese Angola. While Mukoya was said to plot and scheme against Libebe in alliance with the Gciriku *Hompa Nyangana*, Libebe's independence was also threatened by the ‘Botanana of Ngami’ (cf. Streitwolf, *Bericht*: 21). *Fumu Libebe* was therefore inclined to submit himself and his people to German dominance, which was of some importance for the German colonial administration due to its geographical context, especially with regard to the disputed demarcation of the border between Portuguese Angola and German South West Africa.

warriors had undertaken raids along the Kavango and Kwito rivers. Cattle were seized or, in the case of resistance, people were killed, possessions raided, and the women and children enslaved.¹¹⁶ And then there was the influence of foreign powers in the Kavango, which had always served as an additional argument for colonial intervention. For example, Franke asked for the development of the Kavango and its military occupation which he considered a “task, the solution of which should not be delayed any longer even less so, as English influence was busy inciting the Owambo tribes of the Caprivi Strip against the German Protectorate”.¹¹⁷ Due to its geographical position, the Bechuana influence affected mostly the Mbukushu territory. The Bechuana King Matibi was reported to claim sovereign rights over the Mbukushu and underlined this by annual tax collection. Thus, Medding concluded his remarks on the Mbukushu: “The abovementioned strange situation of the Mbukushu tribe makes a strong post at Libebe necessary. Libebe might also be seen as a key to the Caprivi Strip”.¹¹⁸

Kavango’s peoples as adverseries

Most of the colonial officials who toured the Kavango were military staff. Hence it is not surprising that virtually all reports contain observations of its population groups from a military point of view. Of main interest were weapons which were ‘primitive’: Von François mentioned bows and arrows. Other arms included knives and extremely heavy (and hence unwieldy) lances without iron tips.¹¹⁹ Only well-to-do men possessed rifles, reportedly however, old-fashioned muzzle-loaders which seldom functioned only.¹²⁰ Additionally, ammunition was observed to be very scarce. A comment by Schultze reads,

As far as I was able to see, their weapons are primitive. Most had lances without iron tips, some had rifles of an old-fashioned design, and whether they have ammunition for them, I doubt very much.¹²¹

¹¹⁶ Eggers, *Bericht*: 1b. Streitwolf, (*Okavangogebiet*: 129b) reported that the Gciriku *Hompa* Nyangana had been captured by Bechuanas and taken to Tsau in Ngamiland in 1906, but had been released at the intervention of the British Magistrate. See Fisch for a detailed and highly informative description of the Tawana raid on the Kavango which, according to her, probably took place in 1893 or 1894 (Maria Fisch, “Der Kriegszug der Tawana zum Kavango”, *Namibiana* 4 (2), 1983: 43-71).

¹¹⁷ Franke, *Bericht*: 8. “...eine Aufgabe, mit deren Lösung keinen Moment mehr gezögert werden sollte; um so mehr, als englischer Einfluß emsig an der Arbeit ist, die Owambo-Stämme des Caprivizipfels feindselig gegen die deutsche Schutzherrschaft zu stimmen.”

¹¹⁸ Medding, no title: 294b. “Durch die oben erwähnte eigentümliche Lage des Mambukushustammes ist eine stärkere Station bei Libebe notwendig. Libebe ist wohl auch als Schlüssel des Kaprivizipfels anzusehen.” For further comments on foreign influence on the Kavango see also Jodka, *Bericht*: 547, Franke, *Bericht*: 13-14, Schultze, *Reise*: 268, 272, von Hirschberg, *Bericht*: 22b; Streitwolf, *Bericht*: 23-23b, Streitwolf, *Okavangogebiet*: 130-130b.

¹¹⁹ Von François, “Bericht”: 211; Volkmann, *Dienstreise*: 8; Jodka, *Bericht*: 40-41; Laubschat, *Bericht*: 33.

¹²⁰ Jodka, *Bericht*: 40; von Hirschberg, *Bericht*: 21.

¹²¹ Schultze, *Okavango*: 78. “Ihre Bewaffnung ist soviel ich sehen konnte primitiv. Die meisten führen Lanzen ohne Eisenspitzen, einige hatten Gewehre veralteter Konstruktion, ob sie aber auch Munition dazu haben, erscheint mir zweifelhaft.”

A somewhat different situation was observed by Zawada with respect to the Kwangali who seemed to have sufficient ammunition to practise at an event which had been organised by their *Hompa* Kandjimi.¹²²

Another feature usually commented on was the non-belligerent attitudes of the Kavango peoples. Volkmann remarked that “the natives will not cause difficulties in a political sense”, and Laubschat noted that the “Owakwangari make a more peaceful impression than the Ovambos”.¹²³ Throughout all reports, the Kavango peoples were perceived as peaceful peoples. They were described as being “very non-belligerent” (Eggers) or “not very belligerent” (von Hirschberg), “peaceful” (Franke), “extremely peaceful” (Schultze), and even “timid” (Franke, von Hirschberg).¹²⁴ Franke illustrated the anxious behaviour of the people by recounting the following event:

On our way to the camp, we unexpectedly came across a group of Vambos, amongst them 20 armed men. [...] Although I alone approached them on horseback, they refused to stop, but hastily retreated into the thick bush.¹²⁵

Of special interest was the construction and fortification of the Kavango peoples' homesteads, especially those of the *Hompas*. Volkmann reported with regard to the homestead of a certain Haushiku that it was located on the top of the steep drop of the river bank and made stately impression with its palisades, whilst Jodka talked about Kwangali homesteads surrounded by palisades, consisting of pointed stakes, three metres high, which had been hardened by fire.¹²⁶ Additionally, the homesteads were “designed like a snail shell, or a labyrinth, in such a way that a stranger had difficulties finding a way between the narrow corridors which were lined by the stakes.”¹²⁷ However, by far the best shielded residence was the one of *Fumu* Libebe, whose settlement, “like a robber baron's castle”, was located in an “inaccessible island area”.¹²⁸ Although Libebe stated that he had been raided by Nyangana and therefore moved his residence to a more protected place, Volkmann maintained that he had quite a different motivation for his decision and had moved “in order to escape the arm of the law, with which he, like all chiefs of the Okavango valley, presumably had often to do.”¹²⁹

¹²² Zawada, *Okavango*: 160.

¹²³ Volkmann, *Dienstreise*: 15; Laubschat, *Bericht*: 35.

¹²⁴ Eggers, *Bericht*: 4; von Hirschberg, *Bericht*: 20b, 27; Franke, *Bericht*: 13; Schultze, *Okavango*: 77b.

¹²⁵ Franke, *Bericht*: 13. “Unterwegs nach dem Lager stießen wir noch unversehens auf einen Trupp Vambos, bei denen sich 20 bewaffnete Männer befanden. [...] Obgleich ich allein auf sie zuritt, waren sie nicht zum Stehenbleiben zu bewegen, sondern verschwanden in größter Eile im dichten Urwaldgebüsch.”

¹²⁶ According to Volkmann (*Dienstreise*: 7), Haushiku amongst Karupu and Wambaza was one of three Mbunza rulers to succeed the female *Hompa* Kapingo in 1899.

¹²⁷ Volkmann, *Dienstreise*: 7; Jodka, *Bericht*: 42. “...schneckenhaus- oder irrgartenähnlich angelegt, so daß ein Fremder in den engen, beiderseits von den geschilderten Pfählen eingefassten Gängen sich sehr schwer zurecht finden kann.”

¹²⁸ Volkmann, *Bericht*: 60.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

When visiting a *Hompa's* residence, colonial officials also acted as spies, closely observing the fortification of the homesteads from within, such as Jodka did. During a visit to *Fumu Libebe's* residence, Franke had the "opportunity to notice that the homestead was very lightly built and could not begin to be compared with the palisades of the western Owambos in terms of robustness".¹³⁰ Thus, homesteads fortified by palisades and exclusively inhabited by *Hompas* and rich men were never considered effective protection against military action.¹³¹ Indeed, the capacity of Kavango's peoples to resist a potential German occupation with military means was unanimously seen as no serious threat or obstacle to colonising the Kavango.

Summary

This analysis of 20 reports by German colonial officials has attempted to deconstruct the underlying rules of the accumulation of knowledge of Kavango and its peoples. The collection of data on a region which was not yet under real domination provoked two questions. In the first place, what was the economic value of the territory? And would an occupation be viable? In this case the population was only of interest with regard to economic aspects, i.e. as labour force and/or as trading partners. Secondly, what were the prospects of organised resistance in the case of an attempted occupation? In other words, it was closely connected to the people, but limited mainly to a military point of view and observations of the power struggle amongst the Kavango peoples.

The economic interest in land was far greater than the interest in the peoples who inhabited those territories. This could be explained by the following hypothesis: On the eve of colonial occupation, the focus of attention clearly lay on the potential economic exploitation of the land and its peoples. Compared to that, information on other aspects was held to be much less significant. The various arguments which were brought forward in favour of colonial development and occupation of the region – mainly the economic value of Kavango and its peoples but also other considerations – were unable to persuade the German Colonial Office in Berlin to justify expensive operations. The very problematic accessibility of Kavango seems to have been the main obstacle. Even 'political considerations' which had gained currency after the failure of the 'economic argument', and especially after the Portuguese activities of 1909, did not convince Berlin of the need for colonisation.

Thus, Kavango was never brought under effective control or occupied by German soldiers and farmers, although this was urgently requested and predicted by a number of reports. As a result, interest in the Kavango peoples themselves remained weak throughout the existence of German South West Africa. It appears that a more differentiated interest in peoples arises only if and when a region is actually subjected to rule by a colonial power, and thus integrated within a colonial economy. A successful

¹³⁰ Franke, *Bericht*: 11.

¹³¹ Zawada, *Okavango*: 159b.

application of historic and ethnographic knowledge then becomes necessary as colonial policies require both the control of people and their territory. Since Kavango was never part of effective German colonial rule, the accumulation of knowledge was mostly limited to the economic value of the region. Observations and comments concentrated chiefly on economic and military aspects.

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