Untapped Sources
Slave Exports from Southern and Central Namibia up to c.1850

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This essay was written as a reaction to the attempts to prescribe the ‘Mfecane’ as a historiographical panacea for Namibian history. Until the mid-1980s Namibia’s unique historiography – the idea that Namibian history did not exist prior to the German and South African occupations – served to shield it from mfecane mythology. However as historians have sought to develop an ‘authentic African’ Namibian history, they have begun taking nips of this addictive brew. Of late historians have had Kololo or other ‘Zulu-ised’ hordes zigzagging out of the southern African highveld and attacking Herero settlements in western Botswana and eastern Namibia.¹

At present I do not dispute that these attacks took place for there is no question that central and southern Namibia were shaken up in the early nineteenth century. I do, however, dispute the idea of the mfecane as the cause of all these disturbances. The perspectives robs Namibia of its history, and might, as was the case with South African history, spawn decades of informationless history, obscuring details of Namibia’s past. In no way do I wish to argue that Namibian history was formed within a unique area encapsulating present-day Namibia, untouched by events in surrounding areas. Jonker Afrikaner did not suddenly materialise out of nowhere. Namibian history is inextricably linked with that of the rest of southern Africa and the world; the same historical processes operating in the rest of Africa operated in Namibia. It would, however, be wrong to sully Namibian history with the myths of the mfecane. Instead this essay falls within the stream of thought which argues that the expulsion of the Oorlam into present-day Namibia and the raiding for cattle, goods and slaves for the Cape and Atlantic trade were the prime causes for the instability in central and southern Namibia in the early nineteenth century.

It is a generally accepted historical thesis that no slaving for the transatlantic or

Sotho-speakers, signifying a period of wars 'waged by nomadic tribes accompanied on the warpath by their women, children and property, as distinct from the ordinary kind of war between settled tribes where only the fighting men go out'. Its initial rendering, however, seems to relate to the coming of the Nguni-speakers who brought with them a distinctive time of trouble in the Vaal-Caledon region.

Certainly the precise functioning of the socio-economic and political processes behind the initial African motors of violence and subsequent chain reactions remains unresolved. To what extent were eastern European forces involved behind the coming of the Nguni-speakers? What part did economic and environmental factors together with their effects upon the internal dynamics within African polities play? These are questions that lie beyond the boundaries of this study. The essay does, however, attempt to provide a more adequate framework for approaching these questions. It has been suggested that Cobbing's Eurocentric theory of the chains of violence west of the Drakensberg is built upon an inadequate foundation. Instead, a synthetic approach has been proposed: the conflicts in the west need to be viewed as a complex interplay of European and African forces. They were essentially African in character in the years 1822-3, stemming from the arrival of northern Nguni-speakers west/north-west of the Drakensberg, with 'European' forces from the west increasingly coming to play after 1823-4. What is needed is the recognition of two macro-myths – one Eurocentric and the other Afrocentric – both of which require dismantling. They have both in their own ways created a barrier with respect to the history of the period.

In conclusion, the battle of Dithakong has shown itself to be crucial to the very heart of the latest debates on early nineteenth-century history of the southern African interior. Discussion of events at Dithakong has revealed both the poverty of the revisionists' singular Eurocentric theory of violence in the west and their methodology, posing questions for other areas of their work. To be sure, Dithakong remains more than just an historical battle site of the 1820s: it is a critical location for the very future of nineteenth-century southern African historiography of the interior.

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Map 13. Overland trade routes in south-western Africa up to 1840
Cape colonial trade ever occurred in precolonial central and southern Namibia. Between 1800 and 1835 the partly intermeshing Cape colonial, Mozambican and Angolan slave systems were ensuring slave imports and exports throughout much of southern Africa. By 1825 the Cape colonial system had expanded into the areas of trans-Orange and trans-Vaal. Here it linked up with the Mozambican slave system which, further north, extended far into Africa along the Zambezi where it connected with the south-western fringes of the Angolan slave system. Thus in a swath that extended from Cape Town to Delagoa Bay and beyond slaves were imported and exported from south-eastern Africa. Similarly, north of the Kunene River through to the Bight of Biafra and beyond, slaves were imported and exported from west central Africa; and within the confines of present-day South Africa Griqua and associated raiders operated along the Vaal, Orange, Molopo and Limpopo River systems supplying cattle and slaves to the frontier farmers of the Cape colony.

When these systems are transcribed on to a topographical map of southern Africa one finds a terra incognita, as far as slavery is concerned, that extends from the north-western boundary of the Cape colony through to the Kunene and Okavango Rivers in the north and the Makgadigadi pans in the east. The expanse described contains most of what is now Namibia and a very large section of present-day Botswana.

Given that central and southern Namibia were surrounded on all sides by the Angolan, Mozambican and Cape colonial slave systems, the question that naturally arises is whether one can continue to believe that the territory of central and southern Namibia was indeed a vacuum within which no slaving for the transatlantic and Cape colonial trades took place. This essay argues that Namibia did not proceed through history unaffected by the demands of these slave trades. It provides evidence which substantiates this refutation and suggests further avenues of investigation.

Europe’s First Recorded Contacts with Namibia

Europe’s first contact with Namibia was characterised by slavery, indeed Namibia’s first ocean-borne immigrants were slaves. When in 1486 Dias attempted to round the southern tip of Africa he had on board four women slaves taken from the coast of


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Guinea. Two of the women were consigned to an almost certain death when they were put ashore at Angra Pequena and at Angra das Voltas, near the mouth of the Orange River, . . . 'to make discoveries and report to the next white man they should see'.

The Dutch East India Company's (VOC) permanent settlement at the Cape of Good Hope, was dependant on slave labour and the settlement's appeals for slaves were frequent. Slaving expeditions, which sought to appease this demand, were regularly sent out. In 1669 the directors of the VOC expressly ordered an expedition up along the west coast from Table Bay. Captain Gerrit Ridder Muys, commander of the yacht De Grundel, was directed to sail:

. . . along the coast and as much as seamanship allows until about the tropic, at the same time putting into all the bays, inlets and rivers which you are able to enter, . . . and as it is certain that along this coast you will meet no 'Hottentoonen' but a nation named 'caffres' you will have to deal with them carefully, . . . Furthermore you are advised to (if it is possible) negotiate or trade for some of this nation as slaves.

In May of 1670 a heavily armed landing party from De Grundel was repulsed by people living at Walvis Bay. Though the landing party had attempted to use their muskets, the damp mists so characteristic of Namibia's coastline had ensured that 'the powder in the pan refused to spark'. A few years later, in 1677, a similar VOC expedition also ended in bloodshed following a dispute regarding cattle.

The Northern Cape Frontier and its Movement into Southern Namibia

Slavery overland from southern and central Namibia appears to have been the by-product of the cattle trade: pastoralists deprived of their cattle became either captives or free San. Within ten years of the founding of the VOC settlement the company, in an effort to feed its insatiable appetite for beef, began sending expeditions north to the 'cattle rich' Namaqua. The Namaqua, 'once they became aware of what contact with the Colony entailed', seldom ventured south beyond the Kamies Berg. Khoi captain Hannibal, asked about to the paucity of his flocks, illustrated what colonial contact implied when he replied:

8. I use the term San as a prefix or suffix denoting dispossessed, as in San-Dama and Khoi-san. The Herero suffix -Tjimba denotes the same.
A couple of years before a certain freeman, commonly known as Drunken Gerrit, accompanied by others, had arrived at his kraal, and without saying anything, opened fire from all sides, thereby chasing away the 'Hottentots', they had set all their houses alight, and took all the cattle with them, without them knowing what the reason was, as they had never insulted the Hollanders.  

Within the first twenty-five years of the eighteenth century the cattle raiders passed beyond the little Namaqua ... to the big “Namaquas” [Namaqua] and “Briquas” [Damara] who lay beyond the river ... to take cattle from the above named nations’. It has been estimated that the VOC consumed over 100 million kilograms of meat per year in the 1720s and that in the early 1720s the Company experienced an acute shortage of meat. The shortage of meat led to an ever-expanding raiding frontier and the gravest excesses being committed by Company meat contractors. In 1722 Company meat contractor, Jacobus Van der Heyden, armed and equipped a commando of no less than seventy men, which raided cattle and sheep nearly one thousand kilometres from Cape Town.

By the third decade of the eighteenth century it had become the norm for the survivors of commando raids to be enslaved. The first recorded instance of this occurred in February 1731 when a commando attacked a Khoisan grouping known as the ‘ten sons of Grebnan’. Six of the Khoi were killed, and a woman and three children were taken captive to be distributed amongst colonists over the mountains.

By the late 1730s major expeditions were being sent into southern Namibia for hunting, trading and raiding purposes. In one such instance ten colonists, some of whom had taken part in the ‘ten sons’ commando, accompanied by a number of Khoi servants, crossed the Orange River to the establishment of the Namaqua chief Gal. Here they spent a month. However,

When the time came for their departure ... the colonists slipped secretly away and instructed their servants [having supplied them with firearms] to return to the kraal, attack the Great Namaqua and carry off their cattle.

An indication as to the profitability of these raids is given by the fact that in this instance no less than a thousand cattle and an unspecified number of captives were acquired.

14. Penn, ‘The Frontier in the Western Cape’, 471. ‘Commando’ is used in this instance as referring to the groups of mounted gunmen used for raiding, slaving, hunting, defensive and offensive purposes characteristic of the South African frontier.
17. Penn, ‘The Frontier in the Western Cape’, 477.
Given the incessant raids, instability and general insecurity of living close to the expanding frontier, it is hardly surprising that Khoi moved away. In 1760 Jacobus Coetsé’s party encountered communities which had fled across the Orange River twenty years previously, now living a full five days’ travel north of the Orange. The people, whom Coetsé met living at present-day Warmbad, were the !Khami nun or Bondelswartz. An indication as to the extent of the flight of the !Khami nun is provided by the journals of Olof Bergh, who met the ‘Caminge’ in the neighbourhood of Garies 240 kilometres to the south in 1682; and Simon van der Stel who encountered the ‘Kamizons’ on his trip to Namaqualand in 1685. Suggestive of the Namaqua distrust and fear of people from the colony is the fact that ‘they did not hesitate to tell him [Coetsé] frankly that his arrival there pleased them little’. This did not however prevent Coetsé from proceeding further and returning to Cape Town with one of their number.

One of the largest parties organised was the massive Hop expedition, which entered Namibia in September 1761, and which consisted of no less than 17 Europeans, 68 Basters, 15 wagons, 400 kilograms of powder and other goods. The journals record the manner in which the Namaqua (!Khami nun) reacted to the appearance of the expedition and are instructive as to Namaqua perceptions of the colony and its representatives:

... we arrived today at one of the ‘Great Namaqua’ kraals, of which the inhabitants, although they had been told of our approach, when they saw some of our company approaching on horseback, all fled, so that in the huts we could only find old wives and men, both of whom were very shy ...

By the early 1760s people associated with the colony – those people with firearms and horses – were actively sought after and involved in inter-community conflicts in southern Namibia. The Hop expedition was invited to take part in attacks and in March 1762 Baster wagon drivers reported that burghers Jacobus Coetsé and Josua Joubert were active in southern Namibia.

Ross has estimated that in the fifty years prior to the 1770s the meat requirements of the VOC had risen by 150 per cent. This spectacular increase was reflected in conditions along the Orange. The testimony of VOC runaway Wikar, who had been...
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allowed to accompany a trading party, as he had a horse and a gun, indicates the tumultuous nature of the Orange River communities at the time. Khoi cattle-owning communities which had impressed travellers with their wealth ten years previously were 'now scattered after one of Cupido Roggevelt's raids'. Even the very well protected inhabitants of Paarden Eylandt in the Orange River - 'you have to walk for half an hour or a little longer through four streams of water and a dense thicket of trees before you get to their kraal' - hid their cattle at the approach of strangers as 'they thought we would treat them as Cupido Roggevelt had done, the terror of which had not yet left them'.

Whilst Wikar was with the party they traded with Namaqua who lived in Namibia. These Namaqua were engaged in raiding to the north and supplying the colonial market to the south with cattle and slaves. Wikar provides first-hand evidence of Damara captives living amongst the Namaqua:

I have seen four persons of this tribe among the Kamingou [!Kham.n]. They have not long hair as has been written of them.

... two men with two women and children of the Damroqua tribe, who were as black as the natives of Terra de Natal ...

In 1774 the colony had grown to such an extent that the slaving massacre known as the 'general commando' of 1774 could take place. A total of 503 Khoi were killed and 241 captured. The captured were used to alleviate the labour shortage of the growing colony and were 'placed with the inhabitants'. By the late 1770s the settlement frontier entered Namibia when farms were granted to colonists along the Orange River. It was through these farms that VOC meat contractors, such as the Van Reenens, were actively engaged in channelling the herds tapped from the Namibian interior south to the slaughter houses and farms of the colony.

The economic boom experienced by the Cape colony in the 1780s is reflected in the dramatic increase in slaves during the same period. Though there was undoubtedly a definite labour shortage throughout the colony by the late 1700s, it was not until 1791 that the VOC permitted the free trade in slaves. It is therefore no coincidence that in the same year Willem van Reenen, one of the affluent land-owning VOC meat contractor Van Reenen clan, returned from an expedition to

27. Brink and Rheinert, The Journals, 65; Wikar, Jansz and Van Reenen, Journal, 47.
32. Tabor, Pioneers, 86, 112.
34. Armstrong, 'The Slaves', 82.
central Namibia with eight Damara. Interestingly, in the early 1860s, one of Willem’s descendants, Johannes van Reenen petitioned the Governor of the Cape ‘Recommending Introduction of Negroes from Damaraland’ and ‘Proposing to be Government Agent at settlement of Kaffirs in Damaraland’.

With the colony’s ever increasing pressure in the south the original inhabitants of central Namibia were forced into an accommodation with or retreat from the expanding Namaqua; whose acquisition of cattle was a very direct event:

The Damraas, and even the Numaquas themselves, gave us to understand that if the Numaquas wish to obtain cattle they go to the Commaka Dammerassen and barter or steal as many as they want or can manage to take away.

The increasing introduction of firearms into the Namibian interior during the second half of the eighteenth century had resulted in the Herero/Damara inhabitants between present-day Kalkrand and Windhoek being relieved of their stock and forced to withdraw north and into the mountains.

Between 1800 and 1840 the Namaqua inhabitants of Namibia were overtaken and subsumed in their northern expansion by the wave of people from the colonial frontier collectively known as the Oorlam. In the late eighteenth century Oorlam communities had emerged along the north-western Cape colonial frontier around the institution of the commando. They consisted of an amalgam of Khoi community remnants, runaway slaves, Basters, Cape outlaws and others. A contemporary succinctly sketched the development of an Oorlam community when he stated that Klaas Afrikaner

... collected a band of his people of his own race, runaway slaves and other desperadoes, and having by some means procured firearms, commenced a regular system of depredation upon the defenceless Namaquas and Korannas, plundering them of great numbers of their cattle which he exchanged again with some unprincipled colonists for further supplies of arms and ammunition.

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35 Wikar, Jansz and Van Renen, Journal, 317. Van Renen, accompanied by a number of hunters, had been provided with oxen and servants by Guilliam Visage who had fled the colony in 1784 after having assisted Josua Joubert, an accomplice of Coetsee and Hop, in the murder of his Khoi slaves. Visage lived at Modderfontein, present-day Keetmanshoop in southern Namibia, where he built up a raiding/trading dynasty based on the exchange of cattle and slaves for guns, powder and lead. In the 1830s Visage’s son was accompanying the ‘Khami run on raids on the Herero.

36 Cape Archives Depot (hereafter CA) Source CO 4127, Memorial J H van Renen, Recommending Introduction of Negroes from Damaraland, 1862; Source CO 4117, Memorial J H van Renen, Proposing to be Government Agent at settlement of Kaffirs in Damaraland, 1860.


The Development of the Atlantic Frontier and its Penetration of Namibia

By the 1790s whaling, sealing and cattle trading had become significant economic activities along the Namibian coastline. By later years the American captain Benjamin Morrell, who claimed to have exported more than 50,000 cattle from the Namibian coast, wrote:

For the lucrative jerking beef there is not a more eligible situation on the whole surface of the globe, as any number of bullocks, in finest order, may be purchased at 50 cents each, delivered at the beach; ... thousands of fine cattle may be purchased for as many toys and the bargains consumated under the guns of your vessel.

Not only cattle, oil, ivory, skins, and dried fish were exported from Angra Pequena, Sandwich Harbour and Walvis Bay, but also captives were sold to the passing ships.

A fine example of this combination of cattle and captive export is provided by the two journals, (which abound with reports of whalers and sealers), of the VOC slaving frigate Meermin under the command of slaving captain Renier Duminy. In early 1793 the VOC ordered Duminy, to take possession, in the name of the United Provinces of the Netherlands and the VOC, of all the harbours between Cape Town and Walvis Bay, and to report on the position of mines, accessibility of wood, water and food, and whether the inhabitants could be used as ‘werkvolk’ (labourers). Furthermore the Meermin was to convey a party, financed by the meat contractors Van Reenen, to Walvis Bay where it would attempt to link up with a wagon party, sent up overland from the Cape via the outlaw Visagie’s settlement at Modderfontein.

En route the Meermin put in to Angra Pequena where Namaqua inhabitants refused to trust themselves on board as one of their number had previously been abducted by an English crew. Upon arriving at Walvis Bay, a trading tent, with goods, was set up and a mounted commando of nine riflemen was landed. The commando pursued Namaqua cattle, recaptured a runaway slave and captured two...

41. Nine years earlier, in 1784, the VOC had ordered Duminy, whose fame as a slaver off the East African and Madagascan coasts in the service of the French was well known, to captain the Meermin on a slaving trip off the Madagascan coast. Duminy was told to acquire 250–300 slaves, of whom two-thirds were to be adults and one-third adolescent men, named Capors by the French, and a number of women of either kind (my translation). In 1787 the Meermin and Duminy, being very experienced in the trade (my translation), were again sent to Madagascar. In 1791–92 Duminy captured the slaver Meermin to Delagoa Bay and Mauritius. Franken, Duminy, 14–15, 404–31.
42. Franken, Duminy, 202–3, and see note 35.
43. Franken, Duminy, 306.
44. The commando was led by the notorious veld-korner and Gariep raider Petrus Pienaar. Franken, Duminy, 281–4.
The captured survivors of the cattle raids that supplied the limitless demand for cattle were undoubtedly the main supply of people offered for barter. That it was not uncommon for the numerous ships that put into Walvis Bay to take on slaves is demonstrated by the inhabitants’ offer to supply this demand. However as the testimony of Charles Medgett Goodridge, on board HMS Princess of Wales, clearly indicates, this demand for slaves was not always met with an enthusiastic welcome. Arriving in Walvis Bay in 1828 Goodridge reported that:

The natives presented a very formidable appearance, to the number of nearly 500, all naked, but armed with spears. The hostile appearance we were led to believe, was from their fear that we were come to entrap and carry them away for slaves, as had been practised by other vessels on this coast.

It is probable that Indian ocean slavers, who had sold part of their cargoes at Cape Town, sought to replenish their stocks lost to trade and mortality, as they sailed north-west along the Namibian coast upon the Benguela current. Slaves often reached the Cape ‘semi-illegally as the “cargo” of sailors and officials on VOC ships’. Writing in 1772, Thunberg clearly noted the manner in which VOC ‘plakkaaten’ (notices) prohibiting the clandestine import of slaves into the colony were ignored and the manner in which slaves were landed at Cape Town without the official knowledge of the Company:

The company brings the greatest part of its slaves from Madagascar, whereas private persons buy their’s [sic] of the officers belonging to the ships, as well Dutch as French, that are on their return home from the East Indies, seldom of the English and never of the Swedish.

Apart from returning Company ships slaves were increasingly bought from French and English interlopers who put in for refreshment at the Cape prior to trading through to Barbados and later Virginia and Buenos Aires. In the late 1700s more than half the ships that put into Cape Town were not Dutch. Boom conditions at the Cape in 1780s made it a profitable market for the slavers, who by this time were mainly French and Portuguese.

Miller has noted that due to the currents and winds of the south Atlantic the barren coasts south of Benguela could not be reached directly from the principal Portuguese
ports in Angola. As the coasts remained permanently beyond the control of the Portuguese garrisons,

they became havens for foreign slave buyers, particularly French slavers from the Indian Ocean on their way north down the coast laden with Asian textiles.52

In the 1780s Ovambo traders, responding to the growing demand for slaves in much the same way as the Walvis Bay traders, were engaged in selling slaves to French ships calling at the mouth of the Kunene.53 The Finnish missionary Rautanen recorded reports of the Ongandjera, living to the south of the Kunene River, who built 'kraals' on the beach, 'where the slaves were locked in until the ship arrived'.54 Recent archeological work in the area has provided material evidence to back Galton's claims of 1852 that the Herero had trade routes, with temporary settlements, from the hinterland to the coast, where they traded with the Portuguese and Ongandjera.55 The missionary Hahn reported on his trip to northern Namibia in 1857 that Herero prisoners had been traded by the Ndonga to the Portuguese.56

The Namibian Interior

The arid climate of the Namibian interior ensured that the river systems that drain the central Namibian highlands became the main routes of trade and transhumance. The rivers that make up these systems only flow following heavy rains and years are apt to go by before this happens.

The Oorlam movement of conquest into the central Namibian highlands of the early 1800s was along the Fish River. The Oorlam communities received supplies through trade overland with the Cape colony or through trade with ships calling at Angra Pequena and later Walvis Bay. By the mid-1820s Jonker Afrikaner was established just south of the Auas mountains and raiding northward and eastward for Herero cattle. These cattle were driven to the coast along the Kuiseb River and traded at Walvis Bay where American whalers had been active since the late 1700s. The German missionary Schmelen, referring to these activities, wrote in 1828:

The Afrikaners and most of my people treat the natives in an abominable manner, not only by depriving them of everything, but also by using the women and children as whores and by treating them worse than slaves. If we cannot close off the coast on this side, so that the whale fisherman cease selling gunpowder there then I believe that little good will be done here in future.57

52. Miller, Way of Death, 320.
53. Miller, Way of Death, 222.
Map 14. Overland trade routes in south-western Africa from 1850
By the early 1830s Jonker Afrikaner had forced the Herero and Dama-speaking groups to the north of the Kuiseb River into the Khomas Hochland and beyond. At the same time the Mbanderu along the Nossob River had been driven north by the commandos of Amraal, away from their seasonal grazing grounds in the southwestern Kalahari.58 By the mid-1830s Jonker Afrikaner had partly created, and gained control over, the trade system that firmly linked and drained central-southern Namibia and western Botswana into the south Atlantic and the Cape colonial trade systems. The importance of river systems as routes of commerce and the extent of Afrikaner’s dealings is reflected in his words:

I have been to Latakoo [Dithakong] myself, but to reach it from the banks of the Fish river I was obliged to travel first South, towards the Orange, I next went up it, and then by Griquatown, I reached the Bechuanas.59

With the possibilities of cattle trade for the Atlantic shipping trade and the refreshment station at St. Helena in mind, Captain (later Sir) James Alexander was commissioned, in 1836, to explore the Namibian interior in order to ‘promote trade [and] . . . to become acquainted with the Damara [Ovaherero]’60. Apart from rambling on about the virtues of olives, Alexander’s journals make for excellent reading and shed valuable light on a rather murky situation.

The journals describe the incredible violence in the societies affected by the Cape colony; a colony whose settlers thought it only natural that the original inhabitants be driven off the land.61 Roaming Khoi groups armed with muskets preferred to trade the spoils of their Herero plunder with whalers at Angra Pequena rather than trading south and being robbed as ‘verdoemde Hottentots’ by Boer settlers.62

The journals indicate that raids were conducted by Oorlam commandos in Namibia not only on Herero but also on rival Namaqua/Oorlam groups.63 As Van Reenen had reported forty years earlier, so too, Alexander noted that the Herero were,

... a great nation, and their country is full of cattle – ‘which,’ say the Namaquas, ‘they get from a cave as they require them; so there is no great harm in our taking a few from them now and then, as they can easily make up the loss.64

It is hardly surprising that travelling through Namaqua homesteads Alexander could note that:

60. Alexander, Expedition, vol. 1, vi.
61. Alexander, Expedition, vol. 1, 94.
63. Alexander, Expedition, vol. 1, 188. Raid by Hendrik on Choubib in which women are raped, abducted and killed, and 30 oxen, 40 sheep and 2 guns taken.
Some of the cattle had the Damara mark upon them, vis., a deep cut in the
dewlap.65

The Namaqua did not, however, raid solely for Herero cattle. Alexander reported
Herero captives at Nama encampments in the vicinity of the Karas mountains.66
After observing '2 or 3 fine Damara boys, carried off by Namaquas in northern
forays', Alexander bought one of these captives, a boy of about nine years old, for
two cloth handkerchiefs and two strings of glass beads.67

Even at the best of times the Namibian shoreline is plagued by cold winds, thick
mists and a lack of fresh water; it is a harsh inhospitable place. Walvis Bay stinks and
this is especially so during low tide when the tidal flats of the bay exude the cloying
sulphuric smells of rotting seaweed and fish. To Alexander however, having barely
survived the Namib, the bay, with its skeletons of murdered sailors, was a welcome
sight. The bay meant direct contact with the wider world in the form of American
whalers who landed there, shortly after Alexander's arrival, to trade muskets and
powder for oxen and small stock.68

As noted earlier American whalers and others were active at the various bays of
Namibia prior to 1793. Here the seaborne traders and raiders interacted and
transacted with the inhabitants of Namibia; here Namaqua women were prostituted
'for cotton handkerchiefs, or brandy'; charcoal was traded as gunpowder and palm
oil as brandy; Herero cattle for western goods and Herero captives as slaves.69 By
the 1830s trade with the interior of Namibia was extensive, an American captain
'expected to purchase cheaply two or three thousand cattle from the Nama in the
interior and to return to the United States with a shipload of hides'.70

Cobbing has noted elsewhere that a number of United States slavers were
converted or disguised whalers; it is possible that a number of these whaler slavers
traded for slaves at Walvis Bay.71 Alexander's conversations with Jonker Afrikaner
demonstrate that slavers were indeed active among the Herero. Afrikaner claimed
that it would be impossible for Alexander to approach the Herero from the south, as
they were 'so exasperated against us [Afrikaners] for turning them out of this
country', that

65. Alexander, Expedition, vol. 1, 203. Still the case in parts of Namibia described as Herero 'communal
areas'.
66. Alexander, Expedition, vol. 1, 219–25; in this regard see earlier references in this essay to Wikar's
reports fifty years previously regarding Herero captives among the Bondelswarts and Veldskoen-
draers.
68. Alexander was told to, '... speak to the Niggers here, ... a musket for two or three bullocks',
69. Alexander, Expedition vol. 1, charcoal as gunpowder, 177; Prostitution, 196. Whilst at Hendrick Boot's
kraal Alexander obtains sexual services for a handkerchief, 265–8.
70. A. Kienitz, 'The Key Role of the Oorlam Migrations in the Early Europeanisation of South West
71. J. Cobbing, 'Grasping the Nettle'.
they can only be seen by going by sea to the coast, and from thence communicating with them, though even then they might be suspicious of being carried off for slaves.73

In driving the Herero off their lands the Oorlam had themselves carried off a number of them for slaves. Alexander, who went to the extent of checking their teeth, observed and described these captives with the eye of a stockman:

. . . there were several Kamaka Damaras, of both sexes, prisoners of war . . .
The young men were square built, and the finest specimens of bone and muscle I had almost ever seen whilst their skins shone like polished ebony. The young women were tall and graceful . . . 73

. . . a fine Damara slave boy of Choubib's, Appolon by name, appeared among my people, he had run away from his master, . . . Choubib sent two men after him, who carried him off by force . . . they flogged the poor fellow unmercifully with thorn bushes.74

That farmers from the colony made grateful use of this supply of slaves is shown by the fact that people along the Orange believed that Alexander's expedition was one sent to procure slaves.75

Subsequent to Alexander's reports, traders Dixon and Morris, who actively prevented others from penetrating the interior, established themselves at Walvis Bay to supply the Atlantic trade routes systematically with cattle from the interior.76 In 1843 the guano rush along the Namibian coast started. Hundreds of ships thronged the Namibian islands. Ichaboe Island, with guano deposits up to four metres thick, was cleared of its guano within five years. At times up to three hundred ships visited Ichaboe Island, tensions ran high and rival guano collectors did not refrain from shooting at one another.77 Rhenish missionary Heinrich Scheppmann reported that during his stay at Walvis Bay between January and March 1845, 'exceptionally many ships have come here, six to nine at once; they come from Ichaboe and purchase oxen here'. On his way to Walvis Bay Scheppman claimed that he saw three hundred and fifty ships with some six thousand crewmen at Ichaboe. These men were fed the beef of Herero cattle taken from the Herero in the interior of Namibia.78

The incredible demand for beef and labour engendered by the guano rush had direct and profound effects upon the Namibian interior. In March 1846 Jonker Afrikaner, already in debt to Morris to the tune of 800 head of cattle, successfully

76. Tabeler, Pioneers, 29, 78, 93.
78. This paragraph is based primarily on Wilmsen's study, Land Filled with Flies, 89.
raided eastwards among the Mbanderu. To the east of Afrikaner, Amraal Lambert had moved up the Nossob River into the area around Naosanabis (Leonardville) and Gobabis and now straddled the trade route eastwards into Ngamiland and southwards to the Cape along the Nossob. It is important to note that by the occupation of Gobabis and Eikhams the Oorlam had effectively cut off Herero control over the trade routes east to Ngamiland, south to the Cape, and west to Walvis Bay. This situation forced the Herero to rely solely on the produce of their cattle without the ability to control or tax the trade in their own cattle. With the supply of cattle through Walvis Bay being consumed by the guano industry Amraal sought to supply the cattle demands of the Cape colony. Amraal was highly successful in this and his resident missionary, Tindall, reported that between 1846 and 1851 Amraal was conducting annual raids on the Mbanderu.

What happened to the uncaptured survivors of the Oorlam raiding is well illustrated by Chapman who wrote of the Ghanzi area in 1856:

... here we met a party of Damaras [Ovaherero], poor emaciated and scabby creatures, equaling in poverty the most wretched Bushmen I had yet seen. They were once the possessors of immense flocks and herds, and owners of the soil where they now grubbed for roots.\textsuperscript{79}

A reading of the contemporary trader reports in Namibia shows that the Herero were extremely hard hit by the drain of cattle from their possession. Reports indicate a preponderance of women in Herero society, women who were forced to sell their bridral jewellery -- the very last resource for pastoralist peoples -- indicating that they were either the widows of those who died attempting to defend their cattle, or the wives left behind by the commandos that enslaved their husbands. Galton, who travelled with Andersson through Namibia in 1850, accompanied one of the quarterly Herero trading expeditions to the Owambo and reported that the caravan consisted of

... 86 Damara [Ovaherero] women, nearly half of whom had yelling babies on their backs, and 10 Damara men ... the 86 women went on various speculations -- some to get work in Ovamboland, some to try and get husbands, others merely to sell their ostrich-shell corsets.\textsuperscript{80}

A number of Herero who survived the cattle raids as the captives of their aggressors were exported along the trade routes draining central Namibia. In the late 1850s H. Enslin, an inhabitant of the district of Victoria West, complained to the Governor of the Cape colony regarding the manner in which his resident magistrate had

\textsuperscript{79} J. Chapman, \textit{Travels in the Interior of South Africa Comprising 15 Years Hunting and Trading}, London, 1868, vol. 1, 166

\textsuperscript{80} F. Galton, \textit{The Narrative of an Explorer in Tropical South Africa}, London, 1971, 198-9, see also C J Andersson, \textit{Lake Ngami; or, Explorations and Discoveries During Four Years' Wanderings in the Wilds of South Western Africa}, London, 1856, 180.
disposed of Damara children obtained from 'certain Bastards'. However, the majority of Herero captives were enslaved by the Oorlam. Mbanderu traditions record that in the latter half of the nineteenth century, when Nama/Oorlam hegemony was declining, the Mbanderu leader Kanangati Hoveka travelled to southern Namibia and the northern Cape to collect and take these ‘Oorlam Damara’ back into central Namibia. In the 1850s traders made numerous mention of these unfortunate. Two of these captives, ‘Onesimus, who was a Damara by birth, but had been captured as a child ... [and] Phillipus ... also a Damara by birth’, were presented to Andersson by William Zwartbooi in 1850. Andersson’s own perceptions with regard to Herero in his employ is to some extent demonstrated by his journal in which he recorded:

I had intended to send two or three Damaras with Hans to Australia;

The export of people to the east, and south to the newly established Boer republics, continued until at least 1870. Thomas Baines, commissioned by Andersson in the early 1860s, noted the following in his diaries:

[1870] Saturday, September 17th. We were talking of traders in Damara-land ... Wood told me that Martinus Swartz and others had made a good thing of going right across the country, having obtained 3 lb of best white feathers in Damara-land alone. I asked ‘And how much black wool?’ The answer was, ‘70 samples, most of whom walked along the road, while a few who were likely to run away were caged in the waggon by wooden bars lashed upright so as to close the fore and aft ends of the tent.’ It must have been a curious sight, this caraña of boys and girls thus marched across from western Africa to east. . . . I made a sketch of the waggon from Mr Wood’s description. It had a large wattled affair like a hen-coop and was probably set apart for the carriage of the weak and sickly, or those likely to run . . . there were about fourteen waggons.

Conclusion

The introduction to this essay warned that if we are not careful the cause, answer and effect ascribed to all events in nineteenth-century Namibian history will be the ‘Mfecane’. History did not stop at the ‘boerewors line’ of the Orange, Molopo and Limpopo Rivers. Namibia was involved in the same historical processes that

81. CA: Source CO 4108, Memorial H. Enslin, Complaining about the Resident Magistrate of Victoria West and Mr Horak regarding the disposal of Damara Children, 1859.
82. Interview conducted with Mr. E. Ndjoze, ‘Ondangeri’ of the Ovambanderu, on 4 January 1992 at Talismanus, Namibia.
84. Andersson, Lake Ngami, 349.
affected the rest of southern Africa in the early nineteenth century. However, Namibia was not ravaged by 'Zulu-ised' hordes. Instead this essay supports the idea that the expulsion of the Oorlam into present-day Namibia and the raiding for cattle, goods and slaves for the Cape and Atlantic trade were the prime causes for the instability in central and southern Namibia in the early nineteenth century. The essay focuses on one specific aspect of these events, that of slavery.

The generally accepted historical thesis – that no slaving for the transatlantic or Cape colonial trade ever occurred in precolonial central and southern Namibia – is in need of review. It is unacceptable for us to continue believing that central and southern Namibia proceeded through history unaffected by the demands of the Cape colonial and transatlantic slave trades.

Throughout this essay the overriding importance of Namibia’s unique climate and river system has been made evident. Namibia’s harsh shoreline and arid interior served to shield it from early white settlement but not from the effects of colonial depredations. From the early 1700s through to the late 1800s commandos, ‘entirely dependent on the Cape-Colony [and later the Atlantic traders] for their supplies of arms and ammunition, clothing, and other commodities’, were raiding into the Namibian interior. It is clear that the southward trade with the colony dominated though at times the trade with the Atlantic traders may have overshadowed the colonial trade. Defined and enforced by the aridity of the Namibian climate, the routes of trade and transhumance were along the river systems of the country. Merchandise was exported and imported from the Cape colony and the Atlantic traders along the river systems of the Kuiseb, Fish and Nossob/Molopo.

From the early 1700s onwards the enslavement of commando captives became standard policy. At all stages the acquisition of cattle appears to have been the prime motive for Atlantic traders and commando raiders alike. The commando raids to supply the trade ensured an increase in the number of free impoverished and dispossessed people, and ever-growing number of enslaved captives. At the same time the unceasing demand for cattle led to the advance of the raiding frontier even further north. In the late 1700s ships calling at Walvis Bay could expect to be offered cattle, ivory, and hides as well as captives. In the early 1800s in southern and central Namibia travellers such as Alexander could be mistaken for slavers and could purchase captives.

A number of captives, the survivors of the commando raids that had robbed them of their cattle, were exported south along the trade routes to the colony during periods of labour shortage in the Cape. This illicit trade continued well into the second half of the 1800s, with Boer commandos raiding in the western Kalahari for slaves.

The conclusion of this essay must be a conditional one: slaves were indeed exported from south-central Namibia to supply the Cape colonial and transatlantic trade.

86. Andersson, Lake Ngami, 287.
slave trades. It would, however, appear that at no time did the slave trade dominate the trade coming out of southern central Namibia. At all stages the slaves exported appear to have been the by-product of raided cattle.

Further research regarding the export of slaves from Namibia ought to concentrate on and attempt to analyse trade networks in south-central Namibia and southern Africa as a whole prior to 1850, the ships, particularly the New England whalers, that called at Namibia’s harbours up to the 1850s, the slave and apprentice registers in the Cape colony, and the various missionary archives dealing with Namibia, the north-western Cape and Botswana.

It would be fortunate if further linguistic research into sources such as Koelle’s Polyglotta Africana (which has Mbandu wordlists), was to provide linguistic evidence regarding the export of people from south-central Namibia. However, it is unlikely that research regarding exported Namibian slaves centred on the countries of destination will provide much more than physical descriptions of people alleged to be Khoi and thus southern African.

It is extremely frustrating to attempt to argue that slave exports from south-central Namibia did in fact take place when most of the evidence available is circumstantial. It is, however, clear that amongst historians dealing with Namibian history the evidence dictates the necessity of a broader awareness which encompasses the possibility of slave exports from south-central Namibia and western Botswana; an awareness that does not accept the mfecane as the be all and end all of early eighteenth-century southern African history.

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87. S. W. Koelle, Polyglotta Africana: Or a Comparative Vocabulary of Nearly Three Hundred Words and Phrases in More Than One Hundred Distinct African Languages, London, 1854; Koelle collected wordlists, ranging from Tuareg to Umbundu, from slaves landed by the British anti-slavery squadron in Sierra Leone.