Permeable Borders: Configurations of whiteness and Boer Commercial Ranching in Southern Namibia

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Introduction

The Boers that migrated across the Orange River, from South Africa to Namibia, present a point of departure for this study, exploring the contradictions and legacies of South Africa's colonial project in Namibia.[1] South Africa was granted the mandate of Namibia by the League of Nations in 1920, after the latter defeated the German troops – protecting the German colonisation that began in 1884 – in 1915. From its inception, however, the mandate was politically engineered by South Africa to serve settler and imperial interests, rather than the interests of the indigenous populations, as it was intended.[2] Yet detailed attention to Namibian settlers and their relationship with the 'metropole' on cultural, institutional and economic terms has been less forthcoming.[3] In Namibian historiography more generally, too little attention has been paid to settlers who are often presented as a homogenous group in ways that overlook social and class differences between them, as well as to showing how such differences evolved over time.

In this chapter I address this shortcoming, by situating the cultivation of a Boer community in southern Namibia within the commercial agriculture narrative during the period of South African rule (1920–1990), which was at the heart of the country's imperial ambitions.[4] In his historical research, Miescher highlights the role the South African state has played in maintaining the northern veterinary border in Namibia.[5] Known as

1 In most literature, Namibian-Afrikaans farmers are referred to as 'Afrikaners'. I prefer to use the term 'Boers' (literally farmers in Afrikaans) as it enables me to explore the nuances of Boer migration to Namibia, (which preceded the rise of Afrikaner Nationalism) and Boers' subsequent relationship with Afrikaner Nationalism as it spread to Namibia.

2 Wallace 2011

3 The German colonial period in Namibian history was much shorter than the South African colonial period, but attention to German settlers' relations to their metropole have been studied in much more detail. See for example: Steinmetz 2008.

4 For South Africa as 'empire' see: Henrichsen et al. 2015.

5 Miescher 2012a

the 'Red Line', this border delineated the separation of the settler society from the northern African population. He suggests that from a 'South African perspective the Red Line marked the physical limit of the subcontinent claimed to be "white" settler South Africa, and it drew the line against "dark" or inner Africa'.[6] The social construction of a border that would proclaim control over land and function to protect notions of 'whiteness' has also been made in relation to the South African Border War, which took place on the borderlands between Namibia and Angola.[7] Yet, the SA/Namibian border has received scant attention in terms of how it speaks to configurations of whiteness.

By focussing on Boer commercial agriculture in the regions north of the Orange River, I illustrate instances through which this border came to matter, in spite of the intention to extend South Africa's settler colonial project to Namibia, in ways that should have – at least for South African settlers – dissolved any notion of a national border.[8] These include the processes through which Boer communities came to localise a sense of belonging to Namibian soil, in ways that that intersected with a more inclusive settler Southwestern identity shaped (in part) against South Africa. In addition to this, while an open border for white migration to Namibia was encouraged, the permeability of the border for livestock trade seemed less straightforward. This shows the ambiguousness of the political border between South Africa and Namibia, which contours the Orange River, and is henceforth referred to as the SA/Namibian border. I consider the border as at once open and closed – an ambivalent quality with structuring power in terms of the development of commercial agriculture and its settler identity politics.

Yet, it is important to observe that while borders are commonly perceived as instruments of division, enabling – for example – the development of local identities within the frame of the nation (as this chapter argues), the SA/Namibian border has also been characterised by ongoing transcendence and affiliation. For instance, a communal farmer from the ǁGamaseb conservancy near Karasburg observed that he was farming on both sides of the river, with the help of extended family members. For him, this was a natural arrangement established by his father. Additionally, a commercial farmer from the border town Ariamsvlei told me that the South African farmers on the immediate other side of the border prefer to attend religious services and cultural days in Namibia, as this is where they felt they belonged. In fact, most of southern Namibia's inhabitants have relatives living across the river and visits are frequent.

This chapter, therefore, does not aim to provide a full account of settlers' relations with South Africa as it relates to the ambiguity of borders, but instead touches on some of the complexities of South Africa's settler expansion into Namibia – many of which remain in place as legacies of this period in history. Before turning to these, I first provide a brief history of Boer settlement in southern Namibia – a process during which the ir-

6 Miescher 2012b: p. 669

7 Conway 2008

8 South Africa's attempts to officially incorporate Namibia into its territory as a 'fifth province' were never internationally recognised. Namibia's status as a separate legal entity during the South African period thus remained in place, even if whites were not required to present a passport when passing through the border.

reducible requirement of finding suitable land for settlement proved difficult, given its arid ecology.

The political spatiality and organisation of settler agriculture in Namibia

Some Boer families had already started to settle in southern and central Namibia from as early as the late 19th century, before formal German colonisation began.[9] Early Boer migrations into Namibia were transient, and almost exclusively depended on the approval of African leaders. After settling in Namibia, most Boers returned to regions south of the border in South Africa, only to resettle in Namibia at a later stage.[10] Visits to South Africa for christenings, marriages, and other religious congregations were commonplace. Most Boers came from farming districts in the northern, semi-arid farming regions, which lie south of the Orange River, that could not accommodate the second generation of their families. As with earlier Boer migrations in search of greener grass, many Boers imagined Namibia to be the 'promised land' that had to be civilised, developed, and tamed, in line with a staunch Calvinist-ideology.[11]

While some Boers came to the colony with substantial stock and capital, most were desperately poor and had little resilience when faced with the challenges they experienced, such as theft; recurrent, extended droughts; and animal diseases. Many lived a pastoralist existence and were known as migrant ox-wagon 'trekkers', as they moved between water and grazing – avoiding areas identified with stock theft or African hostility. With German rule, Boer settlement became concentrated in the south, but they remained politically marginal, often still returning to South Africa for long periods. The German administration had mixed ideas about Boer presence in the territory but, in practice, they exerted little socio-economic weight.[12]

It was only through state-driven settlement policies during South Africa rule that Boers came to dominate Namibia's rural areas in the erstwhile 'Police Zone' – the racial geographical ordering inherited from the German colonial period, that was reinforced during the South African period as the 'Red Line'. The most significant period of Boer settlement occurred from the 1920s to the 1960s, when Namibia was politically used to establish poor South African settlers (mostly Boers) in the freehold area. Miescher argues that the Lardner-Burke Commission of 1946 was particularly influential in shaping land settlement policies for the decades following the Second World War.[13] Aimed at providing

9 Stals 2009

10 For a rich and detailed account of the Boer families' travels back and forth across the Orange River, see Stals 2009.

11 Stals 2009: p.182

12 Although most Boers settled in southern Namibia, some also occupied central and northern Namibia. For example, in 1885 a group of 46 Trekboers from the Cape Colony settled in Grootfontein, under the leadership of William Worthington Jordan, and aimed to establish the Republic of Upingtonia. The attempt received considerable local resistance and failed. See Miescher 2012a. Nonetheless, Boers still outnumbered German settlers in Grootfontein in 1897.

13 Miescher 2012a

social security to 'Europeans' in the territory and '[following] the precept of "a farm for every settler"' the recommendations of the Commission resulted in the expansion of the 'Police Zone' and accommodation of more settlers on farms within it.[14] In 1946, half of the settler population constituted of farmers,[15] and by 1960, 88% of the freehold land in southern Namibia had been occupied by settlers.[16]

The South African land settlement scheme for incoming settlers not only provided land on more than favourable terms, but also subsidised the infrastructure needed to make the water-scarce lands usable for agricultural purposes. Extensive subsidisation, extension services, floor prices, and marketing support created an environment narrowly focussed on the development of monoculture livestock production for white settlers.[17] In other words, the state played an important role in creating and enabling the notion of a 'proper' Boer, that was rooted in private landownership and monoculture livestock production. Yet, under the thin veneer of independence, was a heavy dependence on state support and subsidisation.

Thus, given the limitations of the arid ecology and the impoverished state of most settlers, the development of commercial agriculture depended on state support. This, alongside the allocation of land, meant that economic transformation occurred. Most settlers were able to make a relative success of their enterprises, which evolved from mixed-farming enterprises that were barely making ends meet, to viable commercial monoculture production after the 1940s. Subsequently, beef production in the central and northern regions grew exponentially, reaching a peak in the 1960s.[18] Large-scale cattle farming, however, is not suited to the south – due to the arid climate – and sheep farming for mutton and pelt production came to dominate these parts.[19]

In southern Namibia, settlers were allocated farms on land previously taken from Africans during the German colonial period. These were typically around 10 000 hectares in size.[20] Africans in the 'Police Zone' were clustered in communal areas, where they had to navigate overgrazed lands and were subject to taxation, although this was not without room for some manoeuvring. For example, some Africans traded their labour for grazing rights on settler farms.[21] Nonetheless, the racial geography inherited from the German colonial period was further strengthened with the attempt to coerce Africans into farm labour. In general, with the gradual development of white commercial ranching, the

14 Miescher 2012a: p. 145

15 Botha 2000: p. 273

16 Werner 2009

17 Schmokel 1985; Lau and Reiner 1993.

18 Rawlinson 1994

19 Pelts are harvested from the newborn lambs of the Karakul sheep breed. Newborn lambs are slaughtered and skinned a few hours after birth before their uniquely soft skins mature into the coarse hair of adult sheep.

20 The German colonial state considered 10,000 hectares to be a viable size for farms in the southern parts of Namibia. It seems like the South African state adopted this estimate, as most farms allocated to whites during the South African period ranged from 9,000 to 15,000 hectares. This estimate, however, should be considered in relation to the specific region examined, as the carrying capacity varies majorly in southern Namibia as you move from the east to the west.

21 Silvester 1994

powerful combination of private property and fencing introduced a radically new spatial politics – to which both indigenous humans, plants and animals had to adapt.

Increasingly, there was an attempt to limit pastoralism in the freehold area (especially the presence of white *bywoners* and *trekkers*) and allocate the space as being specifically for white settlers on individual farms, which theoretically should have translated into economic stability.[22] This was followed by a subsidisation on fencing and other capital infrastructure needed to provide drinking water for stock on what was known as 'dry farms'. For example, by the 1940s the capacity to accommodate settlers' four-hooved companions in Namibia's fragile rural ecology had been exceeded, and it was only through state-support that settlers managed to remain on farms and survive the periodic droughts so typical of the region.[23]

These events combined to produce two very different agricultural sectors in the territory: the commercial sector on freehold land, used for free-ranch monoculture livestock production; and the communal sector situated in the regions north of the 'Red Line', where pastoralism and crop-growing are practiced (largely for subsistence), under traditional forms of land tenure. Both are mostly still intact. Although efforts have been made rectify this dual agricultural system, it remains one of the most problematic and palpable legacies of the colonial period.

Farmers' Associations and localising the Voortrekker myth in southern Namibia

From the 1920s onwards, the SA/Namibian border became one traversed by numerous political and economic structures that aimed at incorporating the territory more tightly into those of South Africa.[24] In response to this imperial impulse, civil organisations too branched out into Namibia. Reflecting the dominant political mood of the time, the *Afrikanerkring* (1927), the *Federasie vir Afrikaanse Kultuur* or FAK (1929)[25] and the Broederbond (1949) cut across the border to promote Afrikaner Nationalism. These organisations – including the Afrikaner newspaper, *Die Suidwester* – promoted the celebration of particular 'historical markers' that mythologised Afrikaner history in Namibia. Such markers included the 'Great Trek of 1836, the Battle of Blood River of 1838 (which was commemorated as Dingaan's Day), and the South African War of 1899–1902'.[26] For instance, when a group of *trekboers* was accommodated in Namibia in 1929, after an unsuccessful settlement in Angola, Dingaan's Day was commemorated upon them entering Namibia, to celebrate Afrikaner solidarity, belonging and unity.[27] Additionally, the first Afrikaans ad-

22 *Bywoners* were landless Boer tenants who exchanged their labour to live on farms and to use the land for their own stock.

23 Botha 2005

24 Wallace 2011

25 Federation for Afrikaans Culture.

26 Silvester 2015: p. 279

27 Stals 2008. The state-sponsored settlement of the Angolan Boers (approx. 1900 people) drew criticism from all corners, and increased the hostilities between settlers in Namibia (particularly between German and Boer settlers) – see Botha 2009.

ministrator J.A. Werth in 1926 insisted on using Afrikaans in all official communications, illustrating the infiltration of Afrikaner Nationalism in Namibia.

For Silvester, these 'commemorative rituals' had the effect of rewriting 'Namibia and its settler community into a larger Afrikaner historical narrative'.[28] Botha concurs with this observation, suggesting that in Namibia, Boers were 'by and large consumers, instead of producers, of cultural products that emanated from across the border'.[29] On the isolated landscapes of southern Namibia, and removed from the capital from which these observations were largely drawn, Boers also came to incorporate the symbols of the Afrikaner Nationalist narrative into their identity, to frame themselves as pioneers in developing the land.[30] Yet, given their location on the periphery, these practices of memorialisation should also be seen as localised acts that situated belonging and community in relation to their immediate political environment. Within this, organised agriculture – largely in the form of farmers' associations – played an important role in providing the social infrastructure to accommodate a local sense of community and security, that pivoted around notions of whiteness and avoided social interactions with Africans and African institutions.[31] Moreover, it had the added benefit of connecting isolated farmers in the territory with the right 'institutions of privilege' on a national level.[32]

Organised agriculture emerged from a context of growing Afrikaner Nationalism and targeted inward-looking Boers (especially those born in the colony) on their isolated farms, who were often considered politically passive. While farmers' associations had already been established during the German colonial period, after the Second World War the first sustained attempt was made to establish a national network that would align farmers' associations across the country under one organisation.[33] This led to the establishment of the *Suidwes Afrika Landbou Unie* (South-West African Agricultural Union, or SWALU) in 1947, largely dominated by Boers.

In parallel, South Africa's first unified agricultural union – the South African Agricultural Union (SAAU) – was formed in 1946. Bernstein writes that it seems as if Boers anticipated that the National Party (NP) would be voted into power in 1948, and in the alignment of bureaucratic powers SAAU 'came to virtually define the agrarian institutions and policies of the apartheid state until the 1980s'.[34] As in South Africa, 'the way to harness state power was to be organised'.[35] In fact, it was difficult to 'discern the bound-

28 Silvester 2015: pp. 279–280

29 Botha 2007: p. 37. In contrast, despite losing power in the colony, German settlers continued to actively preserve a localised German heritage.

30 Swanepoel 2020

31 For a more comprehensive account of the role of organised agriculture in Namibia, see Swanepoel 2020.

32 Elkins and Pederson 2015

33 It should be noted that previous attempts at unifying agricultural organisations did exist prior to establishing SWALU, but these were short-lived. For example, the Agricultural Council of 1923 was open to all white landowners (except those living with 'native' women). The Council was followed by the establishment of the Agricultural Chamber of 1936 that was disbanded as inter-settler tensions became heightened during the Second World War, see Swanepoel 2020: p. 84.

34 Bernstein 1996: p. 15

35 Morrel 1996: p. 156

aries' between white organised agriculture and state marketing boards and agencies, 'so permeated were all by NP (and Broederbond) membership and patronage'.[36] Thus, running concurrently with a general trend that equated white settler land ownership with an expected economic standard, SWALU ensured that settlers' concerns regarding land, labour, markets, and financial support were addressed.

In 1949, SWALU officially became connected to SAAU through a constitutional federal agreement.[37] This involved the leadership of both organisations being present in joint meetings, and Namibian settlers repeatedly used this synchronisation to their advantage – especially in terms of trade. In fact, it is probably during these meetings that the SA/Namibian border manifested most concretely, as the leadership discussed issues regarding the export and import of livestock. For example, the ban on the export of Karakul across the border to South Africa (discussed later) soured the first congress.[38]

Like the church (notably the Dutch Reformed Church), organised agriculture in the form of local farmers' associations also played an important role in fostering a localised settler identity.[39] Farmers' associations took on the responsibility of 'preserving' Boer communities, as if they had always been there, obscuring the rigid colonial apparatus that would come to ensure the racialised order of rural Namibia was kept in place. Removed from the capital, it was farmers' associations that organised local 'commemorative rituals' – such as Dingaan's Day and the Great Trek.[40] For example, on 16 December 1949, around 100 people assembled next to the Keinab River near Karasburg to celebrate Dingaan's Day – a considerable amount of people for a sparsely populated region. The photos of this celebration were displayed alongside other social events and family portraits on the memorial wall of the Keinab Farmer's Association building.[41]

I suggest that in places such as southern Namibia, where Boers had already been settled for decades, such commemorative rituals might have positioned Boer communities' ancestral roots, in terms of heritage, in places across the Orange River. Boer family trees and culture crisscrossed the SA/Namibian border, and Namibian Boers incorporated South African rituals into their everyday life. Namibian Boers, for example, also paid a lot of money to attend the games of South Africa's national rugby team, the Springboks. In 1930, during the Dingaan's Day celebrations in Windhoek, a play organised by the *Afrikanerkring* featured a backdrop of the Karoo and 18th century Boer culture.[42]

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36 Bernstein 1996: p. 16. For example, at the 1951 SWALU congress there was a debate regarding whether members of the Legislative Assembly or the House of Assembly should be allowed a leadership position in the organisation, indicating the synchronisation of interests between white organised agriculture and political power.

37 Erasmus 1997; Gous 1998.

38 Erasmus 1997: p. 78

39 The parallel organisation – the *Vroue Landbou Vereniging* (VLV, women's farmers' organisation) – played an equally important role in this function. Modelled on colonial gendered ideologies, the VLV supported the business from the domestic realm.

40 Erasmus 1997. Minutes of meetings show that a surprising amount of time was afforded to cultural and social matters during farmers' meetings.

41 To accommodate their social function, most farmers' associations erected small buildings or halls, and many featured a built-in '*kroeg*' (bar).

42 Stals 2008

However, locally, performative events such as the Dingaan's Day celebrations on the Keinab River were also designed to smooth over the heterogeneity of the Boer community.[43] The German community in southern Namibia was small, compared to the central parts. More often German farmers assimilated into Boer culture. Within this, Afrikaner Nationalism – embedded in the Dutch Reformed Church – became one of the many anchors that served to validate whiteness and the unequal racial relations on commercial farms north of the Orange River.[44] The role of farmers' associations (and by extension) organised agriculture, however, should not be overestimated, as ethnic, cultural, political and class differences from time to time eroded the functions of such organisations.[45]

Nonetheless, the local function of farmers' associations in asserting a shared Boer identity also echoed more broadly, as SWALU scrambled to flatten the ethnic and social differences in the settler farming community, in order to create a homogenous class of white farmers that enabled it to serve as the 'mouthpiece' of the entire settler farming community. In this, the relative success of commercial agriculture in the 1940s, and the inter-settler cooperation it required, motivated the construction of a shared 'Southwester' identity. In the next section I consider this movement in relation to the success of the pelt industry.

Karakul sheep: 'The black diamonds of the Desert'[46]

In many ways, the farming of Karakul sheep can be considered a 'living history' of settler colonialism in southern Namibia.[47] Initially spearheaded by German settlers – and for a long time controlled by German business acumen – Boers conceded to the value of pelt production after a harrowing drought in the late 1920s. By the end of the 1930s, Karakul sheep surpassed the number of meat- and wool-producing sheep, the country was exporting close to a million pelts to international markets, and the pelt industry 'ranked as the largest single contributor to the territory's value of exports'.[48]

The arrival of Karakul sheep involved a plethora of agricultural infrastructure and practices that ecologically and politically hardened the restrictions on the mobilities pastoralists and poorer farmers typically depend on in arid regions. However, for the growing settler population, pelt production offered a way into making land settled relatively

43 The Secretary of the Windhoek Dingaan's Day festival in 1929 complained that people left the festivities early 'to go and see whether the three inches of rain that fell had filled the dams!' – giving us an indication of Boers' priorities. Stals 2008: pp. 99–100.

44 Like the church, such organisations were also highly gendered and inscribed local communities with particular moral and social norms. Milton 1997: p. 200.

45 In the northern parts, farmers' associations struggled to keep German and Boers associated to one organisation. For example, in the Waterberg region, organised agriculture was said to follow the pattern of a 'railway track' – as German and Boer settlers each had their own association running in parallel. Erasmus 1997: p. 65.

46 Bravenboer 2007

47 Haraway 2008; Swanepoel 2020.

48 Krogh 1955: p. 101. For the history of labour in settler pelt production, see Moore 2021 and Silvester 1994.

profitable – for some land that bordered the desert seemed otherwise quite useless. Pelt production gave the struggling settlers the boost they needed. In fact, settlers' access to the global fur trade pushed, within one generation, desperately poor families into a period of relative wealth. Locally, in southern Namibia, this enabled the establishment of a settler community based on monoculture pelt production on freehold land acquired through the state land settlement scheme. It also enabled the settler community to differentiate itself from the African population, and indeed in many ways stymied African farming potential.[49]

However, even if the success of the pelt producing industry – on land otherwise severely constrained to commercial production – justified the white settlement scheme in a discourse of development, neither settler nor sheep easily adapted to pelt production. Instead, significant biological and political intervention was required to establish and stabilise the commercialisation of pelt production. The rise of the Karakul industry depended on producing the right kind of pelt and the development of a supply chain.[50] In this, the state improved promotion and marketing channels for pelt production; invested in experimental agricultural farms focussed on Karakul (e.g., Neudamm); offered pelt preparation guidance courses; and, especially, supported the Karakul breeding industry.[51] Crucially, the industry was to be protected from both native Africans and neighbouring states,[52] and especially from the settlers in South Africa.

Even as early as 1920, critics warned against the cost of South Africa's white settlement scheme in Namibia that aimed to solve the colony's 'poor rural white problem', and to establish a political constituency in the territory (e.g., the dumping of poor whites).[53] The state was therefore desperate to find an industry that could provide returns on its enormous spending in the colony.[54] Perhaps, for this reason, it heeded (amongst others) the Karakul Breeder's Association's call – ironically largely consisting of German settlers – to ban the export of Karakul breeding material to areas outside of the mandated territory, through Ordinance 11 of 1929 launched on 17 September that year.[55] The ban was

49 Silvester 1994; Swanepoel 2020.

50 Franklin 2007

51 Swanepoel 2020; Bravenboer 2007.

52 Even though settlers avoided selling Karakul breeding material to African farmers in the communal areas, African farmers did eventually manage to access commercial pelt production to a limited degree. While settlers apparently feared an increase in livestock theft, it was probably competition that denied Africans their access. Moore shows that besides South Africa, the SWA Administration also received requests to obtain Karakul breeding stock from Bechuanaland and Angola, as well as from areas further afield, such as the French colonial administration in Chad. Moore 2021.

53 Botha 2000

54 For an overview of the excessive spending on settler agriculture see Botha 2000; Schmokel 1985.

55 This Ordinance was preceded by earlier restrictions from 1925 on exporting Karakul breeding stock that were considered as having too many loopholes. In 1930, the 1929 Ordinance was further strengthened to include punishment for all accomplices involved in the illegal export of Karakul to South Africa. See Viljoen 2008. Moore writes that the 'law was applicable to any sheep with any documented or observed karakul ancestry; [in other words] this was not merely about pure-bred stud stock'. Moore 2021: p. 97.

motivated by the limited availability of purebred Karakul rams that hampered the growing pelt industry, as well as suppressing any competition in neighbouring countries.

Farmers built their Karakul herds through crossbreeding experiments with either the indigenous fat-tailed sheep or the Blackhead Persian, but still needed sufficient Karakul genes to produce pelts. Given the lack of breeding material in the territory to initiate an industry, it was feared that stronger farmers south of the border would deprive the struggling Namibian settlers of breeding material, as well as flood the market with pelts and compromise pelt prices.[56] Monitoring the crossing of Karakul sheep into South Africa (as well as Angola) was quite difficult, and a lucrative smuggling trade in Karakul breeding material ensued, but transgressors were heavily punished when found: 'unlawful export … was punishable with a £100 fine or six months' imprisonment'.[57]

Farmers on the other side of the Orange River share the same ecological conditions as those in southern Namibia. Naturally, the Nama Karoo Biome precedes political borders and constitutes an expansive region that includes most of southern Namibia and northern South Africa. Thus, given the similar rangeland conditions, it is understandable that farmers south of the Orange River also wanted to capitalise on the Karakul. South African farmers were deeply unhappy about the ban and made various attempts to access Karakul, including trying to reclaim Karakul breeding stock that had been returned to Namibia from the Grootfontein experimental farm in South Africa in 1928.[58] In 1936, the South African Secretary of Agriculture placed further pressure on the SWA Administration to lift the export ban, lamenting the fact that SWA settlers could freely access meat markets in South Africa, but because of 'selfish' reasons, were keeping South Africans from the pelt industry.[59]

Namibian settlers might have had access to South African meat markets, but this trade relationship was on very unequal footing.[60] The SWA Administration nonetheless responded negatively to the pressure, further tightening the border for exports by raising the fine for unlawful exports from £100 to £500. The Union government had the power to repeal the ordinance and open the border for exports, but it occupied a rather awkward position between pacifying the growing reservations against the settlement scheme – that had been unable to provide returns (especially after assisting settling Angolan trekkers in Namibia in 1928) – and satisfying its own settler community. Ironically,

56 Krogh 1955

57 Bravenboer 2007: p. 97, Moore 2021

58 Bravenboer 2007: p. 97

59 Viljoen 2008: p. 92

60 Rawlinson 1994. Meat production in Namibia has always been dependent on South African markets. Throughout the South African period, the local administration appointed various commissions to find alternative markets for Namibian meat, but this proved difficult, and producers remained dependent on the markets across the southern SA/Namibian border. Not only were Namibian producers at a disadvantage in terms of the transportation costs of getting meat across the border (either on the 'hoof' or semi-processed), but they were also subject to trade agreements and quota systems that were unstable, even when they benefitted from floor prices. This is one of the major legacies of South African rule. Yet since independence, various Namibian agents have come into play to promote or prevent Namibian hooves crossing the Orange River.

during droughts, exemptions were made, and Namibian Boers could access emergency grazing in South Africa, even with their Karakul sheep.[61]

It was only after the Namibian Karakul industry was fully underway in the 1940s, and the shortage of Karakul rams had been satisfied, that purebred Karakul rams were exported to South Africa: first by the state from 1945, and then from 1957 by private breeders.[62] Moore adds a global perspective by suggesting that the ban was lifted because 'Pretoria itself passed an export ban on Karakul sheep, effectively creating a single veterinary space comprising Namibia and South Africa, each with legislation to prevent the sale of karakuls to Angola, Bechuanaland and further abroad'.[63] Perhaps, not incidentally, this was also the time in which Namibia became more intricately integrated into South Africa's governing systems. The institutions and organisations tasked with promoting pelt production and Karakul breeding techniques shifted across the borders several times, as South African pelt producing-related institutions amalgamated into Namibian ones, only to later become independent again. For example, in 1940 South Africa attempted to exercise greater control over the Karakul industry by recalling the ordinance through which the Karakul Breeding Association preserved its independence. This points to the institutional tensions South Africa experienced in trying to incorporate Namibia into its territory as a 'fifth province'.

After opening the border for the export of Karakul to South Africa, the number of Karakul rose exponentially there (but remained marginal to Namibia).[64] South African pelts became marketed under the Namibian trademark SWAPL that changed to Swakara in 1966.[65] South African producers thus benefitted from decades of lobbying and campaigning by Namibian farmers and businessmen that carved a niche for Swakara in the global fur trade. Karakul, however, remained symbolic of the arid landscapes of Namibia, and in the next section I consider how Swakara constituted a reference point to unite the

61 For example, Viljoen estimates that as many as 250 000 Karakul sheep crossed the Orange River into South Africa in 1945 and 1946. Viljoen 2008: p. 117. This exemption on the ban of moving Karakul across the Orange River was subject to a permit obtained from the Head of Veterinary Services in Windhoek, and demanded that all Karakul return to Namibia if grazing opportunities improved.

62 Bravenboer 2007: p. 114

63 Moore 2021: p. 99

64 In 1957, there were 1.5 million Karakul in South Africa, and in Namibia there were over 3.5 million: Bravenboer 2007; Rawlinson 1994. It is doubtful that Karakul farming extended further than the Northern Cape of South Africa. Dwarfed by the wool- and meat-producing industries of the other regions in South Africa, producers there never received the same support their counterparts in Namibia enjoyed. This – combined with the short period in which the pelt industry could grow from the lift of the ban on exports of Karakul to South Africa in 1957 to the industry collapse in the late 1980s – meant that South African pelt production remained marginal to Namibia.

65 South African pelts were probably marketed under the Swakara brand to benefit from the efforts the Karakul industry in Namibia made to establish a niche in the global pelt trade. Although this also meant that South Africa could also not develop a competing brand, marketing SA pelts under Swakara did risk reducing the overall exclusive quality proclaimed by the Swakara brand.

divided settler community, constituted largely by German, English, and Afrikaans speakers situated in both rural and urban areas.[66]

Swakara Nation

The first Karakul rams that arrived in Namibia came from various parts of the world, but once in the colony, the sheep became subject to intensive breeding experiments that led to the development of the Swakara pelt. The Karakul sheep thus became symbolically, genetically, and socially indigenous to Namibia. Emplaced locally in this way, to farm Karakul translated into legitimate belonging and differentiated settlers from both South Africa and local Africans. Being involved in the glitzy international trade of high-end fashion furs (and being paid in pounds as some farmers fondly remembered) provided 'a way for Namibia to successfully distinguish itself from its dominating South African neighbour'[67]. The Karakul's own imperial journey to Namibia and its subsequent natural adaptation to the rocky arid landscapes resonated with the naturalised presence of the settlers in the colony. It was the success of the Karakul's adaptation to the land in rendering profits in international trade that resonated with settlers' own identities and their place on the Namibian landscape.

However, the Karakul's hairy overcoat is not really that attractive, when compared to the beautiful patterns of the pelts that made its way into fashion articles, and served as semiotic signs – on seal stamps, magazines, and posters – to signal the successful settlement of the newly 'imagined' settler nation. For example, in both 1970 and 1971 the front page of the *SWA Annual* featured a model showcasing a fashion article made from Karakul pelt. This was considered the 'golden era'[68] of pelt production and both images are striking examples of how Swakara configured whiteness and came to be incorporated into the performance of a modern settler identity particular to Namibia.

On the 1970s cover, a model re-enacts the figure of the 'The White Lady of Brandberg' from the indigenous rock art found in the Brandberg Mountains of the Erongo Region.[69]

66 For an overview of the divisions in the settler community of Namibia in the period before independence, see Botha 2007.

67 Gordon 2003: p. 133. Gordon shows that beer has been an important symbol (and beer-drinking an important embodied everyday practice) to showcase Namibian identity.

68 Bravenboer 2007: p. 200. Combined, Swakara pelts exported from Namibia and South Africa exceeded 5 million during this period.

69 The whiteness of the Brandberg rock art figure has resulted in wide speculation. The French archaeologist Henri Breuil was influential in propagating the female gender of the figure and by suggesting that 'she' was Cretan. Dubow 2019: p. 40. This 'fanciful' interpretation was consistent with the archaeological discourse of the mid-twentieth century, that tended to support the 'long-held view that the finest examples of prehistoric creativity [in Africa] must be attributable to external, exotic influences'. Dubow 2019: p. 40. Even though Breuil's interpretation has since been questioned (including the figure's female gender), the figure's mythical associations persist. Volker Grellman, who was a Karakul furrier, became inspired to model Swakara on the Brandberg lady, by sitting around a fire and wondering about the meaning of her whiteness. Did she 'accompany the Phoenicians in their fabled voyage around

Posing as the 'lady' from Brandberg, the model wears white pants, carries a bow and arrows in her left hand and looks at her right hand, which holds an offering. She wears a black Swakara tunic, ostrich eggshell jewellery, and the backdrop is the Rose Quartz mine at Rossing. The photo probably appealed to its settler audience by asserting whiteness in relation to the other iconic images of the territory conceived as 'premodern' – that is, rock art and 'Bushmen' paraphernalia – alongside the Swakara.[70] The majority of Namibia's Black audience is obscured, as well as the processes through which settler colonialism marginalised indigenous populations from both their land and access to markets, recruiting them onto farms to herd Karakul sheep.

On the 1971 cover of the magazine, the model wears a Swakara jacket, loosely holds a camera and stands next to a large Welwitschia – an iconic plant from the Namibian desert, often referred to as a 'living fossil'.[71] In the background, a small aeroplane and a large truck are parked in the otherwise empty desert landscape. This photograph signals the success of the pelt industry made indigenous – and even primordial – when coupled with the nation's prehistoric plant and desert landscape. In the context of the success of the pelt industry, the aeroplane, truck and camera symbolise modernity, progress and the pioneering, adventurist spirit of the settler, especially in relation to the 'unfolding telos of racial advance and the rational mapping of measurable space'.[72] Together these photographs of the early 1970s invite us to consider the opportunity Swakara presented for settler identification, in spite of the incessant ethnic divisions of the settler community.[73] In other words, '[settlers'] common experiences as conquerors, developers, and leaders in the territory fuelled the assertion of their identity as "Southwesters" – as settlers who had been rewarded for their (self-projected) progressive and modernizing role in history'.[74]

Karakul was made indigenous to Namibia as Swakara provided an 'anchor' to group settlers differentiated in class and sociality, especially in relation to South Africa.[75] Swakara thus presents the relation between capitalism brought about by the expansion of international markets into colonial Africa and the construal of national identities. Swakara, as a commodity, thus also reproduced the effects of capitalism symbolically and materially in the settler colony – as others have also pointed how settlers have forged a new national identity through commodities.[76] For example, considering wool production in Australia, Franklin suggests that sheep have been integral to the 'founding

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Africa? Or did she land from one of the early Portuguese vessels …' Grellman contemplated. SWA Annual 1970: p. 152.

70 Miescher et al. 2008

71 The Welwitschia plant has since become part of independent Namibia's coat of arms indicating how national symbols are re-appropriated in the post-colonial era.

72 McClintock 1995: p. 277

73 Botha 2007

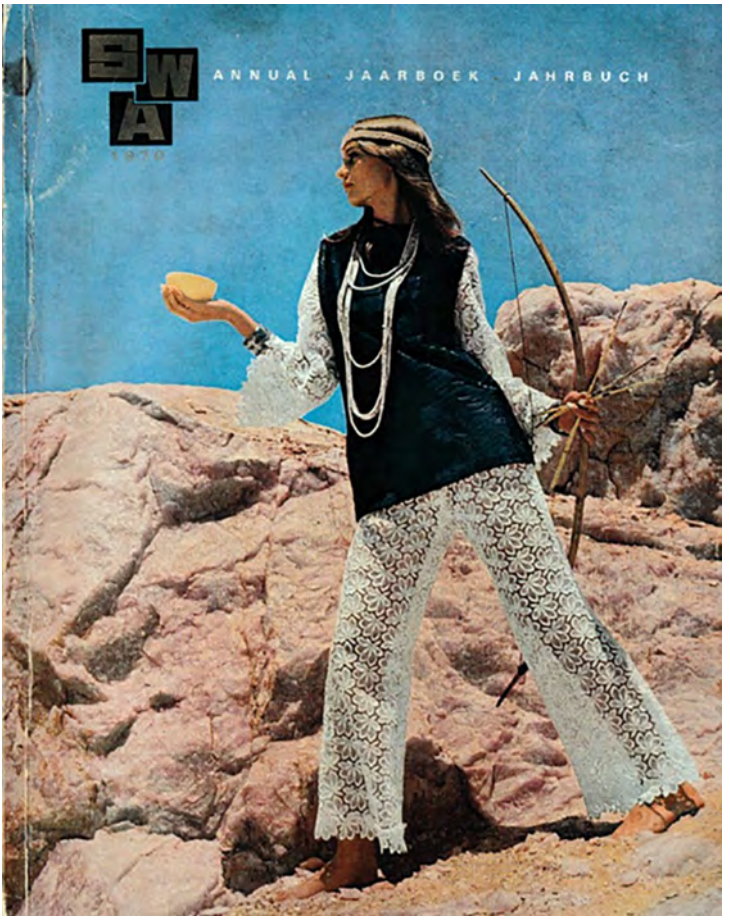
74 Silvester 2015: p. 273

75 Gordon 2003

76 A distinction should be made here regarding commodities produced and commodities consumed and their interrelated aspects. For in Namibia, clothing items made from Swakara pelts were rarely consumed by the public, and almost exclusively exported to international fur markets.

mythology' of the new settler nation.[77] Shukin notes that in the context of settler colonialism, the identification with a commodity – such as Swakara fur – symbolises a nation born, rather than socially and politically constructed in a highly unequal environment.[78]

Fig. 1: Lady in Brandberg (SWA Annual 1970, photographer: Rolf Schroeder).



In Namibia, this was realised through multiple mechanisms, including: the racialised agricultural landscape settler colonialism established; settler cooperation in the Swakara trade (although not without friction); a sheep that adapted perfectly to the Namibian landscape; a lucrative (but short-lived and erratic) supply chain in exotic furs that penetrated the colony; and the ambiguity of the SA/Namibia border. The border enabled the exclusion of South African producers from pelt production but provided the financial and human capital for developing the industry in Namibia. As Gordon

77 Franklin 2007: p. 135
78 Shukin 2009

shows, in 'the Namibian case, because of long historical domination by South Africa, nationalism was defined primarily in terms of opposition towards its former occupier', which ironically also served South Africa's intention to protect white hegemony in the territory.[79]

Fig. 2: Model with Welwitschia (SWA Annual 1971, photographer: unknown).

Due to both local and global circumstances, the Karakul boom slowly started to disintegrate from the late 1970s. Most farmers turned to meat production, and Karakul farming suffered tremendously. Since independence, the Karakul industry continues to struggle to keep momentum, even though the postcolonial state has targeted Swakara production as a strategic market to uplift previously 'disadvantaged' farmers in arid regions. In this vein, in 2007 – the centenary of Karakul in Namibia – a statue was raised on the main

79 Gordon 2003: p. 120

road of Keetmanshoop, a city once considered the capital of pelt production. The statue features a Nama man carrying a Karakul lamb next to a Karakul ram. Co-funded by the state and the Swakara Board of Namibia, it embodies different meanings in tension that also point to broader debates around land management and imagining the future of this arid of part of Namibia.

In the postcolonial space, the statue recognises the role of indigenous labour in building the history of Karakul production in southern Namibia, while at the same time aims to open pelt production to all races. Yet, talking about the statue, a Boer noted that the Nama represented ('in fact') not a farmer, but a herder.[80] In this remark, Boers claim ownership of the heritage of Karakul farming and preserve a history of 'legitimate' white privilege. Karakul heritage has also been incorporated in other postcolonial attempts to reinvigorate the South, such as the Karakul historical paraphernalia being displayed at a state-sponsored refurbishment of a hotel in Karasburg. Yet, such displays of the past do little to disrupt the symbolic and economic power Boers gained through the history of pelt production.

Fig. 3: Karakul Statue in Keetmanshoop (author's photograph).

80 According to the sculptor, the figure represented a herder and symbolised the industry in a romantic and realistic way. Salvoldi, C. Personal Communication, 14 October 2016.

Conclusion

By focussing on the discursive and material traffic across the Orange River that delineates the SA/Namibian border, I hope to illustrate some of the nuances in the configurations of whiteness in Namibia during the South African period, especially in relation to South African imperialism (however incomplete). In representing the settler farming community in southern Namibia, and following the political model in South Africa, organised agriculture was locally appropriated to negotiate better trade deals with South Africa and to protect the Karakul industry. Moreover, in southern Namibia, local farmers' associations to which SWALU belonged played an important role in fostering, for Boers, a localised sense of belonging and identity.

I suggested that South Africa enabled the development of commercial agriculture in Namibia, radically changing the use of space and its local ecologies. However, the pelt industry served as an example of the contradictions in South Africa's plan for settler colonialism in Namibia, as well as how this industry provided an important marker to 'anchor' a settler identity. Furthermore, the intersections between the imperial history of pelt production and the indigenisation of the Swakara pelt provided a useful entanglement to illustrate the ways in which settlers came to see their capitalist projects as validating their rightful claim to Namibia's arid landscapes. This became especially pertinent in a context of growing anti-colonial nationalism and international pressure against the racial ethos of South African control.

Patrick Wolfe has famously pointed out that settler colonialism is a 'structure rather than an event'[81]. Thus, more relevant to the current issues facing postcolonial Namibia, the processes through which settlers asserted a local identity should be seen as an ongoing process of appealing to a notion of rightful belonging. Since Namibian independence in 1990, the SA/Namibian border has hardened. This has meant that those Boers still occupying most of the freehold land in Namibia had to rework their identities in the frame of the nation. Yet, since independence, SWALU has done little to reconcile with its colonial past and has renamed as the Namibian Agricultural Union (NAU), while still largely representing a white settler constituency in the commercial freehold area. Locally, farmers' associations have been gaining momentum in recycling the Afrikaner tropes that served to justify belonging in Namibia in the past, in order to reclaim a place in the postcolonial political space. The legacies of South Africa's rule in Namibia are therefore not only visible both spatially and economically, but also in the discourses and institutions aimed at keeping settler colonialism in its place.

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81 Wolfe 2006: p. 390

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