

## Culture



# Karla POEWE, *The Namibian Herero: A History of their Psychosocial Disintegration and Survival*, Lewiston/Queenston : The Edwin Mellen Press, 1985. 364 pages

Mathias Guenther

Volume 7, Number 2, 1987

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1078977ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078977ar>

[See table of contents](#)

### Publisher(s)

Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie

### ISSN

0229-009X (print)

2563-710X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this review

Guenther, M. (1987). Review of [Karla POEWE, *The Namibian Herero: A History of their Psychosocial Disintegration and Survival*, Lewiston/Queenston : The Edwin Mellen Press, 1985. 364 pages]. *Culture*, 7(2), 75–77.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1078977ar>

Tous droits réservés © Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie, 1987

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

**Érudit**

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

author's previous and subsequent career. The volume is introduced by an introductory chapter in which the translator discusses the significance of the work, and provides a brief biography of Kamenskii; the volume is completed by 16 appendices (mostly translations of directly relevant pieces of briefer correspondence), glossaries of Tlingit and Russian terms, and an index.

Kan has set a high scholarly standard for this work, and the meticulous attention to details of translation and annotation indicate that he has recognized that the principal audiences are specialists in the ethnology of the Tlingit, historians of missionization, and 19th century historians of the area. Ethnographic and historical information has been cross-checked against contemporary accounts from newspapers and the reports of other missions in the area, and was further verified by Kan's interviews with Tlingit consultants during 1979-80. Kan suggests (p. 17) that the volume will be of interest for understanding the relationship between theory and practice in the work of Russian missionaries, and will dispel the view that they were tolerant cultural relativists, while still highlighting some contrasts to Protestant American missionaries from the same time/area.

I do have some small dissatisfactions with the form of the book as it stands, and I will mention them before discussing the content in greater detail. First, the format used for notes is awkward—the reader must leaf back and forth between the text, the original notes and the translator's notes. The two sets of notes could easily have been merged, since they are distinguished by use of an asterisk with the translator's notes in the text. Some readers will find the typeface used in the text for note numbers is so fine that it is illegible; this is really quite an unnecessary distraction and the publisher should have been able to predict the problem. Finally, Kan has included references in his Bibliography that are not cited at all; for example, Drucker's 1958 study of native brotherhoods is in the bibliography, but isn't cited, and doesn't appear in the text.

Kan provides a considerable amount of commentary to contextualize Kamenskii's writings. He succeeds admirably with respect to the reflections of Russian culture and social history, but glosses over some of the more general issues in 19th century debate. I may be judging a bit unfairly in this regard, since my comment is grounded in a very recent reading of R. Bieder's *Science Encounters the Indian*, which does an extraordinarily fine job in this area.

There are other areas where the volume could have been profitably extended as well. For example Kan suggests that the volume will contribute to an understanding of the Orthodox versus Protestant mission activities in the area, but while he points out examples of tension between Kamenskii and Protestant administrators and missionaries, he doesn't explore the

direct influence that the missionary William Duncan had on the direction of Kamenskii's ideas. (Kamenskii discussed Duncan and the Metlakatla community in very positive terms (p. 121), but Kan discusses the derivation of his program for the future of natives in Alaska from "a particular blend of ideas, with a clear influence of the Russian idealization of the patriarchal lifestyle of peasants, hunters, and fishermen" (p. 10).

A final area in which the book falls short of my hopes for it was in the discussion of the Indian Society of Temperance and Mutual Aid, of which Kan says (p. 11) "Soon thereafter, Indian Brotherhoods spread to other Tlingit communities and continued to be quite active until 1940s-1950s." It is not clear from his comment whether the brotherhoods were the same "Native Brotherhoods" that Drucker's 1958 account discusses (for B.C. and Alaska), or whether they were their inspiration, or were quite unrelated to them. This may be an instance of insider knowledge being presumed by Kan.

In summary, though I have complaints small and large, this is overall a well-done, interesting book, with some special relevance to those interested in ethnology of Tlingit/NWC, and especially 19th century history in the area. It also offers a contribution to historians interested in the process of missionization. Kan has done an exceptional job of making the original material accessible to contemporary scholars. The nature of the material may ensure that it will have a small audience, but it is well worth recommending for library acquisition.

Karla POEWE, *The Namibian Herero: A History of their Psychosocial Disintegration and Survival*, Lewiston/Queenston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1985. 364 pages.

by Mathias Guenther  
Wilfrid Laurier University

The psychological effects, three generations after the event, of the colonial German genocidal war on the Herero of Namibia, are examined in this compellingly written book, which the author presents as an "addition to the broader universe of survivor literature".

The author first provides a brief historical account of the war and the subsequent internment of the scattered and emaciated Herero survivors in "collection camps", whence they were sent off to work on white farms and railroads. After surveying the effects on the

Herero of German and Union rule, as well as of the missionaries, throughout the first three decades of the century, the book turns to the present. What is examined closely are the attitudes and mental states—the “moral vision”—of the Herero, as well as their physical and mental illnesses, all in the context of life within the townships and reserves of white supremacist, Pretoria-ruled Namibia. The information is derived from field work which the author conducted for an unspecified length of time in the early 1980's. It consisted primarily of interviews, tests and questionnaires, the informants being Herero elders, children, women, labourers, prophets and politicians who were interviewed either singly or in groups. Moreover, interviews were held with a psychiatrist, nurse and doctor, all of them working within township-based institutions.

The Herero emerge as a deeply ambivalent, troubled people. The children are insecure, as they learn to master, for better or worse, their culture's psychological coping strategies, prime among them “negative mutuality”, consisting of the twin strategy of emotional isolation and withdrawal from their mothers, and empathetic identification and dependence. The men and women are seen to harbour mutual distrust and resentment, as well as pessimistic and deeply indignant, and frequently rebellious, attitudes towards the whites, whose role as oppressors the Herero have articulated clearly and unanimously. They yearn and strive for political liberation and independence and their feelings and actions towards this end are conceptualized by Poewe in the terms of a classic revitalization movement (*à la* Anthony Wallace).

Special attention is given by Poewe to the political actions of the women against the forced medical examination campaign the government undertook against the Herero women in the 1930's to wipe out venereal disease. This event dramatically brings across the forcefulness, determination and antagonism of the Herero women, not only against the colonial government but also against their own menfolk whom the women deemed ineffectual dupes in this affair. The reader is also given a perceptive account of the Herero conceptualization of disease which emphasizes body fluids and the bond of sympathy between individual and community, explaining disease in terms of tears and breaches of this bond. Because such concepts were incomprehensible to the colonial officers their clash with the Herero women was sharpened by having added to it the complication of cross-cultural misunderstanding.

The book is written in the “humanistic” tradition, replete with pensive and emotive lyrical sections (for instance, the author's arrival at Windhoek airport and at Katatura, the black township). Lengthy and poignant dialogue passages are offered which move the reader and present to him striking literary images that could be

seen to take the place of photographs, which regrettably the monograph does not feature. Such classic problems besetting the humanistic genre of ethnographic writing, caused by excessive subjectivism and impressionism, as lack of analytic crispness and incisiveness, of conceptual elaboration and clarity and of methodological soundness, afflict this monograph as well. While rich and varied in the qualitative information presented (such as interview texts), this information is, for the most part, selective and drawn from just a few informants. The size of the sample is not specified and tabulated summaries of the information are generally not provided. The conclusions about the attitudes and mental states derived from this select number of informants are not infrequently offered as pronouncements on *the* Herero.

With regard to matters of theory, there appears to be no integrated conceptual framework in this problem-oriented study, except Wallace's concept of cultural revitalization to which occasional reference is made. Also some specific concepts, most notably that of “negative mutuality”, are explicated and provide the study with some theoretical moorings. In the one place in the book where the author does engage in theory head-on, I found her arguments unconvincing and somewhat shrill or overstated. They are found in the historical section, in the form of a polemic against “the left” (*viz.* Drechsler), specifically their “currently popular thesis about genocide”. Drawing largely on secondary historical sources, Poewe presents the argument that this thesis is “not in accordance with the facts, conflicts and language of the time.” Part of her argument is that casualty figures are typically inflated in these writings. However, instead of giving alternative figures, she presents vague arguments about German colonial officers and Herero both having overestimated such figures, the former out of imperialistic, triumphant zeal, the latter because of some Herero propensity “always greatly” to overestimate numbers of people. Especially dubious is Poewe's claim that the term or concept of “*Vernichtungskrieg*” did not, in colonial Prussian German, mean “war of extermination” but “breaking of resistance”. This translation, or interpretation, of a standard and unambiguous German term sounds quite contrived, spurious and disconcertingly apologetic to the reviewer (a native German speaker who, to test his hunch about this matter, consulted several German dictionaries without being able to find a trace of support for Poewe's claim).

Turning now to a minor question, one not on theory but on substance: the reader is told (on page 237) that the normal blood pressure of the chronically hypertense Herero varies between 180/200 to 180/230. Is this not erroneous, a reversal, perhaps, of the systolic and diastolic pressure ratings?

While I do have some misgivings about Poewe's book, I nevertheless recognize and commend it as a

skillfully written and crafted, insightful examination of issues that are complex and emotionally wrenching. The issues—oppression, suffering, despair, survival, hope—can and perhaps should be treated by anthropologists in the humanistic mode, along lines followed by this book. On balance, the study is a contribution of some value to psychological anthropology and to the anthropology and sociology of southern Africa, specifically the fields of social change, cultural maladaptation and revitalization. Moreover, while certainly not a conventional “ethnography”, the book does provide bits of solid and interesting ethnographic information, on such matters as child rearing, medical and cosmological concepts, gender roles and relations and group personality. It is an addition to the ethnographic record on an important southern Bantu group about whom relatively little has been written by English-speaking anthropologists.

Danielle JONCKERS, *La société minyanka du Mali. Traditions communautaires et développement cotonnier*, Paris, L'Harmattan, Collection « Connaissance des Hommes », 1987, 239 pages, cartes, tableaux ; ill. h.t.

Par Jean-Claude Muller  
Université de Montréal

Ce livre fait le point sur les changements que l'on peut constater aujourd'hui chez les Minyanka du sud-est du Mali suite à l'introduction de la culture commerciale du coton. Comme les Minyanka possèdent les meilleures terres du pays pour ce cultigène, le gouvernement malien a consacré beaucoup d'efforts à persuader les résidents du Minyankala d'entrer dans une économie axée sur l'exportation. Principal producteur de coton en Afrique de l'Ouest, le Mali doit la moitié de cette production au Minyankala. Bien que le coton soit une culture relativement ancienne, ce n'est qu'à partir des années 1960 que les Minyanka y ont été fortement incités par un encadrement technique, des prêts d'argent pour se mécaniser et pour acheter des engrais chimiques. L'analyse des répercussions de ce changement d'orientation sur l'organisation sociale et familiale est le thème dominant du livre mais comme il faut bien exposer ce qu'est la société minyanka dans son ensemble pour comprendre le sens de cette transformation pour les intéressés, l'ouvrage se présente aussi comme une monographie équilibrée des Minyanka. Ils étaient assez mal connus, hormis par quelques articles

récents de l'auteur de ce texte, de Philippe Jaspers et de Jean-Paul Colleyn—qui ont travaillé chez les Minyanka en même temps que Danielle Jonckers. Cette lacune est maintenant comblée grâce à ce livre qui débute par un court chapitre expliquant qui sont les Minyanka. Leur origine est complexe ; ils sont environ 250 000 à parler une langue proche du sénoufo mais leurs pratiques religieuses ressemblent plus à celles des Bambara qui les bordent au nord. Les Minyanka se prétendent autochtones mais ils ont accueilli des fugitifs d'autres ethnies qu'ils ont assimilés. De toute façon, les patronymes sont pour la plupart mandé, les uns se disant aborigènes et les autres se présentant comme migrants de l'ensemble mandingue—Soninké, Bambara, Dyula—ou Peul. Malgré cette diversité d'origine et bien que la majorité parle aussi bambara, les Minyanka ont « une vive conscience de leur appartenance ethnique ».

Le livre se poursuit par un chapitre sur l'occupation du territoire—configuration et implantation des villages, système d'utilisation des champs cultivables, techniques et calendrier agricoles et mode d'accès à la terre. L'organisation sociale est ensuite abordée : communauté familiale, lignages et leurs évolutions respectives d'hier à aujourd'hui—où l'on assiste à une atomisation rapide des unités de production—, sociétés initiatiques, associations religieuses et groupes de travail qui contrebalancent l'influence des lignages et, enfin, associations de chasseurs. Tout ceci est fort complexe et chaque individu obéit à des allégeances multiples (*cross cutting ties* en anglais). Le système matrimonial nous est ensuite présenté ; les hommes minyanka se marient relativement tard et l'écart entre l'âge des conjoints permet un taux de polygynie assez élevé, ce qui est un grand avantage pour le système global de mariage basé sur l'échange direct—quelquefois différé—des soeurs, mais seulement des soeurs classificatoires car donner sa soeur ou sa fille pour en recevoir directement une épouse est vu comme un inceste. On joue ainsi avec les demi-frères et les demi-soeurs un ballet hautement sophistiqué où l'on réussit, sans épouser de consanguins et en faisant entrer dans le système les unités de productions distinctes comme lignages autonomes, à respecter les règles tout en pratiquant une endogamie poussée entre lignages. L'analyse doit beaucoup au travail de Françoise Héritier sur les systèmes omaha. Le système minyanka en est une variante qui passionnera tous les férus de parenté et de mariage. On reste assez ébloui devant tant d'ingéniosité. Toute une série de règles que Françoise Héritier n'a pu découvrir qu'à l'aide de l'ordinateur se vérifient aussi ailleurs même si les Minyanka n'ont pas la même profondeur généalogique que les Samo. Les découvertes de Françoise Héritier ont donc une portée plus générale et, sans qu'on ait nécessairement besoin dans tous les cas de l'ordinateur, il faudra se référer à ces deux études lorsque le chercheur sera confronté à de tels systèmes.