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Cattle for Beads: the Archaeology of Historical Contact and Trade on the Namib Coast

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Department of Archaeology & Ancient History and Namibia Archaeological Trust
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With this publication of her doctoral thesis, Jill Kinahan adds to the fine tradition of archaeological and historical work on the central Namib Desert upheld by herself and her husband John. Many of these publications have been published within Namibia, and such a commitment to producing a body of work on Namibia over a relatively long research period, as well as to making the work available within Namibia itself, is to be valued indeed. Further, the addition of artefacts collected during this research to the collections housed by the National Museum of Namibia makes this an invaluable contribution to possible future comparative work and demonstrates the important rôle played by the Museum in the curation and conservation of Namibian heritage.

The primary aim of *Cattle for Beads* is to elucidate the "... effect of colonialism on indigenous people ..." of the Namib coast around the delta

of the !Khuseb River (p. 9); and particularly to use the material culture of both the archaeological and the historical (i.e. documented) record to explore indigenous incorporation of, and responses to, externally-generated change. Such changes include trade with European exploration expeditions along the coast, the later establishment of European-run enterprises for the extraction of commercially-valuable natural resources, predominantly fish, whale and seal oil, and guano, and the ensuing and frequently brutal establishment of Namibia as a German settler colony.

The publication opens useful and accessible introductions to historical archaeology as a growing field of research that generally is underrepresented for Africa, and to the known history of the Namib coast, the latter drawing extensively on Jill Kinahan's own relevant work on historical sources. The biophysical environment of the research is then introduced, followed by four extensive and informative data chapters: on the archaeological survey of indigenous settlement and commercial fisheries; on the material remains found there; and on trade beads and ceramics.

The later chapters locate the !Khuseb bead and ceramic artefacts in a comparative framework with assemblages known from elsewhere in southern Africa and trace the substitution of beads and pottery produced locally with equivalent items introduced from elsewhere. The implications of such substitution were profound.

For example, the replacement of copper beads produced inland in the |Khomas mountains would have undermined a local economy based on metalworking, probably by |Khomani Dama people, which depended on the exchange of copper items for livestock. In the detailed chapters on beads and pottery, descriptive analyses are complemented with multivariate classification techniques which confirm chronological changes in artefacts and further corroborate a picture of decline in the local livestock economy. For example, the early contact period of the 18th century, with a high volume of glass beads of only a few types, is interpreted as indicating a high ability of local people to assert choice for preferred bead types. The later increase in bead types and corresponding reduction of type selection, Kinahan suggests, illustrates a 'collapse of indigenous commodity values' and an associated loss of local control over trade (p. 70). Although described and analysed in the rather 'dry' manner dictated by academic research, focusing in on these everyday household items, combined with the colour reproductions of artefact samples, provides the reader with a tempting imaginative window into the reality of everyday existence for the inhabitants of the !Khuseb delta.

Kinahan's concluding chapter argues against conventional explanations for the collapse of Khoekhoe society as 'obvious in the face of Khoekhoe poverty' and the 'superiority' of European culture and technology. Instead, she affirms the innovative response of †Aoni Khoekhoe of the !Khuseb delta in a context of marginalisation by both Oorlam-Nama from the Cape, whose power were consolidated under Jonker Afrikaner in the mid-nineteenth century, and the structural inequalities signalling the incorporation of a local economy within an expansionist European culture of capitalism.

Cattle for Beads thus develops and consolidates the picture of pastoral nomadism in the central Namib, established in the early 1990s by John

Kinahan, by bringing to the field a wealth of archaeological detail for coastal settlement sites and complementing this with written historical sources documenting European contact with coastal Namibian peoples. Such an approach emphasises the ways in which, from the 1700s on, Namibia was drawn into a far-reaching system of world trade that extended as far a field as the east coast of North America, Europe and South East Asia. Importantly, it seems that local herders were initially well able to take advantage of the opportunities presented by the presence of European traders as they were already integrated within broad regional trading networks, involving the movement of goods (such as copper beads and cowrie shells - the latter from Africa's east coast), over long distances and *via* long-established trading routes. In other words, these new trade opportunities, while generating changes in the quantities of goods exchanged and the types of goods available, perhaps did not produce a qualitative shift in trade or in local social relations, despite the significance of the moment of European contact. This came later, as the influx of imported goods such as beads lost their relative value and a decline through trade demand in productive local goods (i.e. livestock) added to the erosion of local livelihoods and standing. Combined with the inevitable momentum of the frontier, as imperial settlement and the annexation of land became important, a later and an unprecedented collapse in the regional livestock economy occurred. The value of such an analysis lies in its affirmation of the relative coherence, wealth and social standing of a diverse local economy that incorporated seafood, 'wild' products, and traded items as well as livestock, even during an initial period of European contact based on exploration and trade.

Belying my own interests and discipline (anthropology), and given Kinahan's 'historical archaeology' approach, i.e. combining historical documents with the archaeological record, I would like to see this extended to incorporate, or reflect on further, ethnographic material for the

area. I realise that there is a well-founded reticence in archaeology to link the archaeological record with extant peoples. But when much of the archaeological and historical timeframe is so recent, there perhaps is something to be gained from observing a handed down material culture used by contemporary inhabitants of the broader central Namib region, as well as in discussing relevant terms and aspects of lived history. This perhaps is something that may be

developed in the near future. As it is, and albeit as a non-specialist, I welcome this addition to an understanding of the realities of life over a recent past that culminated in such a radical upheaval of local lives, livelihoods and aspirations.

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