

Chapter 1

Early Dutch-Namibian encounters

This article explores - preliminarily - the first encounters between explorers and indigenous people living north of the Orange River, in modern-day Namibia during the period that the Dutch East India Company (VOC) ruled at the Cape of Good Hope. Several sea-borne voyages and exploratory expeditions on land were organised during this period. The nature of these encounters was either cautiously reserved and sometimes openly violent on the side of the indigenous populations as these had been subject to manifold contacts with seafarers of many nations over the centuries.



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Ships logbook

A photograph of a page of a ship's logbook in the South African State Archives in Cape Town. The VOC's policy required detailed reports on everything that happened on board and of all the observations and encounters during each voyage. Most of the original diaries are kept in the Dutch National Archives in The Hague.

The research and description of early Dutch-Namibian contacts on the coast and in the interior of southwestern Africa that is modern-day Namibia disproves the myth of an untouched, quasi-virginal pre-colonial Africa, a time unencumbered by the presence of foreigners and their influence, positive as well as negative. It will demonstrate that even this remotest part of Africa, the most uninhabitable coast of Namibia, was of interest for the growing exploratory and commercial networks emanating from Europe from the late 15th century. Not all available sources for this aspect of southwestern African history could be consulted though; only the materials available in Namibia and South Africa were consulted. The findings of this article remain preliminary for this reason and the information contained in the secondary literature on the topic were used with great caution only.

After the Dutch East India Company (VOC) had established and consolidated the Cape of Good Hope as a victualling point for their India-bound vessels from the early 1650s, an interest to explore the hinterland soon arose. The exploration or 'discovery' of the northerly regions adjoining the Cape of Good Hope took two organisational forms. Early on the VOC dispatched sea-borne expeditions in a northerly direction along the western shores of southern Africa. Three such official expeditions that explored the coastline north of the Orange River are documented for the years 1670 (*Grundel*), 1677 (*Boode*) and 1793 (*Meermin*). As a matter of fact, however, there may have been more encounters between seafarers and indigenous populations on the shores of Namibia through shipwrecked, surviving individuals. However, of these we know next to nothing, as this kind of information could not have been reported and also, this history has not yet been systematically researched. As time progressed and the interior became gradually known, mainly through the successive appropriation of land from the indigenous Khoikhoi by the so-called *trekboers*, land-based expeditions were sent to the north and the east.

The main aim of these expeditions was to find out who was actually living in the remoter parts of the region, hence about ways and means of trade for victualling, and later hunting and settling purposes. Furthermore, this quest was propelled by the desire for precious ores.

Through the existing trade between Dutch and indigenous Khoikhoi, it was known that copper was available somewhere inland - Khoikhoi were often adorned with beads made of copper - the location and amounts of which, however, remained unknown. This metal was valued highly, as its rather slow oxidation made it ideal for military and naval purposes.

Sea voyages along the western coast 1668-1677

The first official expedition from the Cape up the western coast was decided upon in the higher echelons of the VOC already during 1668. The policy-making body of the VOC at the Cape dispatched the *Grundel* in 1670 under commander Gerrit Ridder Muijs to explore the *cust benoorden dese Caap tot op 30:2 a 33 graeden* with the instruction to *naeuwkeurigh sullen doen ondersoecken, mitsgaders wat luijden, negotie off handel van vee voor de Compe. aldaar nogte sijn de behaelen, en insonderheijt off daar niet eenige bequame plaatsen tot berginge van scheepen, neffens vers water &a. conde uijt te vinden sijn*. A cartographer, Sijbert Jansz Boon van Enckhuijsen, was hired in early March to accompany the team to record the coast. Both, Angra Pequena and modern-day Sandwich Harbour are recorded to have been ports of call. In Sandwich Harbour, people were encountered, who reacted aggressively, when approached by men from the ship. The latter retreated back to the ship. The nature of this encounter could suggest, that people living on the coast knew that arriving boats would not necessarily come with friendly designs. A couple of days to the north of Sandwich Harbour, the ship turned back, reporting mere sand dunes without any harbour or other inlet. In June 1670 the vessel's return to the Cape was reported.

A next expedition was sent in 1677, when the commander and detachment of the *Boode* was instructed to in '*t selve fatsoen als de Grundel jongst derwaerts is geweest (bij d'eerste bequame en daer toe overigen bodem) te doen hervatten om nader kennisse van alle bayen, inhammen, revieren en insonderheyt in de Grundelsbaaij te moogen bekoomen, en of op het eijlantje daer voor gelegen als mede of op alle andere in 't passant aandoende geen vers water, branthout soude te vin-*



VOC expeditions between 1690 and 1793

Some of the official expeditions from Cape Town carried out on the instructions of the administration of the Dutch East India Company at the Cape of Good Hope. Map by Bart Hendrix.

den, of aen de vaste kust te krijgen wesen, voorts wat voor anckergrondt voor groote en kleijne schepen en wat dies meer soude mogen wesen. The available material suggests that the *Grundel's* expedition had been considered largely unsuccessful; further that a place called Grundelsbaai (obviously another bay or inlet explored by the *Grundel* seven years earlier) had left the impression that a possibility existed for further trade and exploration. To the brief was added the request to survey the coast up until the Portuguese sphere of influence, that is to the north of the Cunene River, and to find out where the border between Khoi-speakers and Bantu-speakers was. Willem van Dieden, a free burgher and *gepriviligieerde traanbrander* joined the voyage, obviously to explore the possibilities of whaling.

Arriving on the coast at an unidentifiable little inlet, members of the crew went to investigate and came across a group of people; no acrimonious interaction was reported this time, as these were interrogated with the assistance of Khoi-speakers (who had been taken along from the Cape for this purpose) albeit with difficulties. Alcohol, provided as a gift, did indeed facilitate the conversation. What little information was obtained was about a neighbouring group with whom they were having an ongoing violent conflict over cattle. The information was clouded by the assumption that one may have understood things not correctly, however.

The experience made by the crew during their visit to the next inlet on the coast, Sandwich Harbour, however, was similar to the experience made by the crew of the *Grundel*. Aware that indigenous people might not be thrilled about alien visitors, the *Boode's* crew made an effort to not antagonize the few people they encountered. Negotiating this encounter over two days with cautious behaviour and the offer of gifts in the form of beads, tobacco and alcohol, a deal of two bartered cattle was struck. However, as the concluding part of this deal, the handing-over of the two beasts was to happen, the locals gave way with the animals. When the Dutch reacted with their guns, they were attacked with great courage with assegais and arrows, forcing them to retreat to their vessel.

Whether anybody was killed in this encounter could not be ascertained. What seems clear if not astounding, is

the fact that this poorly armed and economically deprived population by now had, obviously, a clear sense of the inherent and potential dangers brought by the seafarers. Repeated contact with by-passing Portuguese and Dutch ships on their way to the Cape and to India and vice versa, and American and British whaling boats with their groups of sexually voracious men must have led to this development on the southwestern African coast, particularly at the relatively safe haven of Sandwich Harbour, which during that century seems to have been less silted up. After making it into Angolan waters, the *Boode* returned to Cape Town in late May 1677.

Land voyages crossing the Orange River 1760-1795

The first important northwards sojourn on land was undertaken in the years 1685/6 under the auspices of the Dutch Governor at the Cape, Simon van der Stel. A report, *Dagregister en beschryvinge van de voyage gedaan naar het Amaquasland, onder het beleid van den Ed. heer Simon van der Stel, commandeur van Cabo de Boa Esperanca* relates the events of this trip to the north, which travelled to the *Koperberg*, the Copper Mountain near modern-day Springbok in the Northern Cape. Its main aim was to prospect for minerals and ore. Some copper was found eventually, though apparently not profitably exploitable. News about the land lying on the other side of a river situated to the north of the *Koperberg* would surely have circulated, as the indigenous pastoral and hunting Khoikhoi survived the harsh environment only because of transhumant mobility, enabling them to follow the seasonal availability of water and pasture.

Another 75 years passed before the first on-land expedition to cross the Orange River into modern-day Namibia was headed by one Jacobus Coetzé Jansz, a rather coincidental expedition though. He had applied to the authorities to leave the Cape of Good Hope in search for elephants in 1760. He and his group, consisting of 12 *Hottentots van de Gerigriquas natie*, that is, local Khoikhoi assistants (drivers, hunters et al.) in 2 wagons, started out in a northerly direction in July 1760, past Piquetberg. When the party had reached the above-



Namaqua Kraal

The illustration is part of the Gordon Collection and is reproduced from "Reizen in Zuid-Afrika in de Hollandse Tijd" by E.C Godée Molsbergen. The original caption mentions the saddled ox that is used by the Namaqua, to herd the fat-tailed sheep. It also points out that dancers in the picture are mainly women and children.



Giraffe hunt

The expedition of Jacob Coetzé Jansz in 1760 encountered the first giraffes, a few days after they had crossed the Groot Rivier, nowadays the Orange River, into present day Namibia. A year later Burger Capitein Hendrik Hop gives an extensive description of these new animals in his diary. He also sent the skin of a young giraffe to Professor Allamand in Leiden who had it prepared for exhibition in the "Cabinet for Natural Rarities of the Academy". The illustration is part of the Gordon Collection.

mentioned *Coperbergen*, those which van der Stel had visited in the previous century, they had only been able to hunt down two elephants. For this reason the expedition was extended and travelled twelve days to the north, where it found and traversed the *grootte Rivier*, which had been *bevoorens door gene Europische Natie gepasseerd*. This great river was later given the name Orange River - a story that we will deal with further down.

The party then travelled along the banks of the *Leeuwen Rivier* (named after the many lions encountered and killed) for a few days before the country changed to grassy plains, described as *'t land der grootte Amacquas*. According to Coetzé, this population, the Great Namaqua, had moved here roughly 20 years earlier. This population movement, to be dated accordingly to c. 1760, could already have been spurred by displacement and marginalisation processes resulting from the above-mentioned, gradually moving, dispossession frontier of Cape-Dutch *trekboers*. Coetzé found it necessary to guard himself against this population as *zijne verscheijning aldaar niet sonder bevreesding wierdt aangesien* - a fact that suggests that this population was able to appreciate the armed presence of European hunters on account of former negative experience.

The conversation was conducted by Coetzé's assistants in the Khoekhoegowab variants spoken to the south of the river. This obviously facilitated the communication and must had a pacifying effect as the expedition was allowed to pursue its way past *een uijt de grond opwellende warme waterbron* - probably modern-day Warmbad - to a location termed *Swarte berg*, a mountain consisting of black rocks. The local population encountered here spoke a variant of the earlier experienced language; also, they seemed to be *vrij sagtsinniger* to the author of the report. Here the expedition learned of the presence of *Damrocquas*, living approximately another ten days of travel to the north. This term, reminiscent of the term *Damara* refers most probably to *OvaHerero* populations, who were termed Damara by their southern neighbours. A few ethnographic comparisons, the discovery of giraffe, which were unknown to the south of the *Grootte Rivier*, remarks on the flora of the area travelled, and the absence of elephant and rhinoceros conclude this report. Coetzé himself was ob-

viously an alphabet, as he signed with a cross.

Coetzé's report on his rather spontaneous sojourn across the Great River inspired the VOC-authorities to dispatch *Burger Capitein* Hendrik Hop on an explorative trip to facilitate the discovery of this northerly region in 1761. Organised in a way resembling contemporary public-private partnership, individuals interested in the possibility of trade and commerce contributed with their means to this pursuit, while the VOC made available three wagons, 30 draught oxen, arms and ammunition, a boat, tools and *snuisterijen*. The instruction required in particular that specimens of flora, fauna and minerals were to be collected. A gardener, a surveyor and a person knowledgeable in metallurgy were hired to accompany the party.

This trip lasted from July 1761 into early 1762. It followed the route taken by Coetzé the year before, most probably traversing the Great River at what today is known as Raman's Drift. For several weeks the party continued their trek to the north. A diary was kept minutely for presentation, together with a formal report, to the authorities. However, nothing remarkable nor spectacular was reported from this journey; the diary contains descriptions of the overwhelmingly difficult nature of the terrain travelled; lack of water compounded the difficulties. In early December, the party, after deliberating on the pros and cons of continuing with this trek, decided to return, following the same route. From the diary and report it is not clear altogether until where the party had been able to proceed. None of the aims of the exploration had been met thus, save for unconfirmed news of a people, whose houses were *op Paalen gebouwd, mitsg met Riet doorvlogten, en van binnen en buyten met een vermengsel van koemist en kley bestreken zijn, en dat derselver kleding wel meede van huyden gemaakt wesende, ...mitsg een gantsch andere Taal, dan de Namacquas spreeken*. This refers most probably to the *Damrocquas* or *Tamacquas*, above-named *OvaHerero* populations.

The next batch of recorded news from the country to the north of the Great River comes from a Swede. Hendrik Jakob Wikar (1752-18??) had been hired by the VOC as a soldier in Amsterdam and arrived in the Cape in 1773. On account of gambling debts, which he

The Duyfken visits Walvis Bay

More than 200 years after the voyage of the Meermin, the last ship of the Dutch East India Company to visit Walvis Bay, the port welcomed a replica of a VOC vessel. From 11 to 16th December 2001, the Duyfken, an exact copy of an original sailing vessel that was built around 1595, visited Namibia's major port on its way from Australia to Texel in the Netherlands. The Namibian press and TV reported extensively about the visit and for two days the ship was open for visits by the general public.

The Duyfken was one of the smaller and faster ships of the East India Company. It weighed 110 ton and carried light armour. The Duyfken saw service in the Indonesian archipelago. On a voyage in 1606 in search of gold and other trade from the Indonesian island of Banda to New Guinea, the crew of the Duyfken found the northern coast of Australia, the first recorded visit by European visitors to this continent, more than 150 years before the 'official' discovery of Australia by Captain James Cook.

The replica of the ship was constructed 400 years later in Fremantle in Australia. 300 year old Latvian oak was used for the hull. The decks and masts were made from Portuguese pine, grown in Western Australia. The original 16th century construction techniques were applied.

The Duyfken was launched in 1999. It first retraced the journey that led to the 'discovery' of Australia. It later sailed the waters around Australia and left from Sydney in May 2001 on its 30,000 mile journey to Texel, where it's original predecessor was built.



Welcome for the Master of the Duyfken

On 11th December 2001, on day 221 of its voyage from Australia to the Netherlands, Master Glenn Williams manoeuvred the Duyfken safely into the harbour of Walvis Bay. Master Williams (left) is welcomed by Hans van der Veen of the Royal Netherlands Embassy and Mr. Uno Hengari, the Ports Operations Manager. Photo courtesy of Hans van der Veen

More information about the Duyfken project is available on the excellent website www.duyfken.com

could not pay, he deserted the military and roamed the country, hunting to the north of the advancing colonial frontier. He was clemenced, when his rather detailed observations, composed into detailed reports of his wanderings during 1778/9, found the interest of Governor Van Plettenberg. His reports are written in a language then spoken among people outside the official contexts of the colonial administration and the church. As such they resemble a rare example of early Cape Dutch, hence early Afrikaans.

His reports do not really contain much information on geological, faunal and floral particulars of the country that he travelled through, as he was not primarily an explorer, but a hunter who could only survive by blending in with the indigenous population. That he was able to do so is evidenced for instance when he explained to one of the folks he encountered near the Great River, that he was . . . *een inboorling deezes lands . . . , en dat ik graag met zijn gezelschap wilde meegaan om booven langs te groote rivier een plaats voor my te zoeken, daar hy om verblyd was, weetende dat hy my, by zig hebbende, beeter als anders voor roovers verzeekerd was*. Because of this rather uninhibited behaviour towards the locals, he was able to observe and report intimately and in rich detail on particularly ethnographic issues. In fact, his is the first thorough report about the people living to the north of the river; it also contains more detailed information on those Khoekhoegowab-speaking groups farthest away and it also refers to Damara and Herero. His rendition of local names, both toponymical and ethnonymical, makes for a difficult understanding though.

Robert Jacob Gordon (1743-1795) needs to be mentioned at least in passing. He arrived from Holland in the Cape in 1777, led an explorative party to the northeastern stretches of the Great River to modern-day Bethulie in 1779. An ardent patriot, he re-named this river on this occasion after the Dutch Royal House of Orange, *Oranje*. This name has since then replaced all other names of this river: *Gariëp* (literally Great or Groot Rivier) or *Ein*. Gordon was the last commander of the Dutch garrison, handing Cape Town over to British forces in 1795, whereupon he committed suicide.

Sea and land voyages towards the end of the VOC period

The early 1790s saw one last, yet concerted effort to explore what lay to the north of what now was officially called the Orange River. With the knowledge of the authorities, one Willem van Reenen ventured to the north, aiming to reach the Rhenius Mountain where the Damaras were living. During 1791/2 Van Reenen trekked with his party across the Orange River, following the route taken by Hendrik Hop through Warmbad to Modderfontein, today's Keetmanshoop, towards the Rhenius Mountain, where he arrived in January 1792. Here he found fertile land and a fountain with abundant, yet hot artesian water. It is not entirely clear, whether this could have been either present-day Rehoboth or Windhoek. It seems certain, however, that he had reached the vicinity of these places, somewhere near the Auas Mountains; the report also mentions rumours of rich copper deposits, but fails to locate these more precisely. The descriptions of the people he encountered, leaves one wondering, whether he had met Ovaherero or Damara. His over all impression was one of abject poverty; this may have been the result of a long period of drought during the early 1790s, to which he repeatedly refers as the main hindrance for his journey, causing the loss of most of his oxen. On account of this, he was not able to pursue his journey in northerly direction. Instead he sent his co-traveller Pieter Brand with what little draught animals were still available in a northerly direction. But even this did not deliver the hoped for discovery of people, rich in cattle, i.e. Ovaherero. He subsequently returned to the Cape. Of interest might be the fact that he mentions one Guillaume Visagie as a resident at Modderfontein, referring to him as one that *heeft mij veel plaisier aangedaan*. Visagie was, obviously, of great help to Van Reenen, and the suggestion is that they were compatriots. This would make him the first European settler in Namibia.

In January 1793 a brother of Van Reenen, Sebastiaan Valentijn, undertook the last official venture to the north. This expedition was sea-borne and carried by the *Meermin*, between early January and early April and was under the command of Captain Duminy. Aside another Van Reenen brother, Dirk, the team consisted of one Pieter Pienaar, and additional Khoikhoi servants (*een*



The “*Duyfken*” entering Walvis Bay harbour under full sail on 11th December 2001. *Photo courtesy of Hans van der Veen*

knegt en Hottentots en twee lijffongens). The voyage surely was connected to the land-based trip undertaken just the year before. The report of this journey, even though quite detailed in some respects, requires quite some conjecture as no official briefing orders from the Cape authorities have been left; that there had been such orders is clear, as Captain Duminy did, indeed, formally declare the two harbours that were visited, to be henceforth under Dutch rule. Lüderitz and Walvis Bay were officially considered Dutch possessions as from January 1793 - a fact corroborated when the British after their take-over at the Cape of Good Hope, affirmed these claims in their own interest.

Also, the report suggests that more detailed information on the country had been received and there is an indication that two European men, Barend Vreyn and Wysman, were present to the north of the Orange River. These were to be met on the coast, at Walvis Bay, from where they would accompany Van Reenen and his party to what seems to have been motivating this expedition: the quest for copper and the promise of large (Ovaherero) cattle herds. As the previous trip had been unsuccessful on account of the difficult terrain and the problematic climatic situation, it was thought that maybe one could approach both, copper and cattle, easier from the sea.

On its way along the coast, the vessel encountered some difficult weather conditions. It also met with substantial numbers of American whalers on some of the islands off the coast. This actually attests to the

fact that the indigenous population had been subject to the presence of Europeans all along. Finally the vessel anchored at Walvisbay for about a month. During this period the coast was explored, while Pieter Pienaar undertook the exploration inland. Pienaar's attempt to explore what lay inland, was, however, fraught by thirst, as it had not rained for the last five years. He travelled up country along the course of a dry river, most probably the Swakop valley for twelve days before he decided to return as there were no real prospects of ever reaching either the copper deposits or the cattle herds without seriously endangering his party for lack of water - *de natie zeide meede dat het hier in geen vijff jaren gered had en men van hier niet na de mijnen kost komen*. While under way, the report relates the presence of large herds of rhinoceros, elephant, antelope, buffalo and lion in the Swakop River valley. An exploration of the mouth of the Swakop river was undertaken as well, from which fresh water, traces of former British or American whaling activities, but no navigable harbour were reported. Finally, just before the ship's return to the Cape, Captain Duminy *liet de baken ten zuyden van de baay steeken, vernoemde dezelve de Walvischbaay*. The vessel was back in the Cape in early April.

