Pynchon's Hereros: A Textual and Bibliographical Note

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The Hereros of South West Africa are central participants in Thomas Pynchon's work, as one armature around which he has spun fictions. Their history and anthropology, however, are also the most eccentric, obscure points of reference in Gravity's Rainbow. We do have one bit of second-hand evidence about Pynchon's Herero sources. In a recent essay, Joseph Slade paraphrased a 1968 letter Pynchon wrote to Boston University graduate student Thomas F. Hirsch, whose doctoral work focused on the Hereros.[1] In his letter Pynchon evidently claimed to be "obsessed" with them, and also mentioned texts he had been consulting. But what those source-texts are (beyond some previously identified Herero lexicons), and where their presence can be traced in Gravity's Rainbow are questions for which we still have only incomplete or inconcise answers.[2]

New textual evidence shows that Pynchon's key source was certainly The Religious System and Social Organization of the Herero: A Study in Bantu Culture, by Hendrik Gerhardus Luttig [(Utrecht: Kemink en Zoon, 1933), 121 pages, with bibliography]. A dissertation the author submitted for his doctorate in Anthropology at the University of Leiden, this rare monograph had a number of obvious virtues, for example its availability to Pynchon through the New York Public Library, where he probably did a good deal of his research. Moreover, Luttig's text, primarily in English (some quotes are in German), brings under one expository roof virtually all those earlier, and often more rare, studies of the Herero to which the author of Gravity's Rainbow could have turned--studies by Brincker, Irle, and Vedder that Pynchon's readers have also suspected. Most important of all, Luttig's work is sound Anthropology. His vision is uninfected by the colonialist fever that blurs, for example, William Petrus Steenkamp's pamphlet Is the South-west African Herero Committing Race-Suicide? (see below). Instead, Luttig turns a cool eye on the ways in which Herero cosmology and its social

expressions, once a unified structuration of dichotomies, fell to pieces under the ruling hand of European culture.

Textual parallels reveal that Pynchon had Luttig close by at several junctures. In Part 3, Episode 3 (V, 315-29; B, 365-82), the first section of Gravity's Rainbow to treat the Hereros at length, a number of passages show clear traces of their origin.[3] Here, for instance, is Pynchon at the opening of that episode:

> Among the Ovatjimba, the poorest of the Hereros, with no cattle or villages of their own, the totem animal was the Erdschwein or aardvark. They took their name from him, never ate his flesh, dug their food from the earth, just as he does. Considered outcasts, they lived on the veld, in the open. (V, 315; B, 366)

And here is its source in Luttig:

> the Ovatjimba may at present be considered as a group of outcasts, as they do not possess the requisite number of cattle necessary for social significance. This explains the fact that they do not live in villages as do the rest of the tribe. They live a scattered existence in the veld. Possessing small herds of cattle, in sufficient [sic] for subsistence, they are forced to dig their food from the ground. (53; my emphasis)

Luttig follows with a derivation of their name--Ova- is the Herero prefix signifying "people," while tjimba signifies the "ant-bear," the aardvark or Erdschwein; hence they are the "ant-bear people"--and he mentions that "this animal is not eaten owing to religious beliefs" (53). Indeed, he notes, the animal's power as totem is suggested by one tribal myth which

> relates of a woman all of whose children were still-born, and who was cured after having been placed in an ant-bear hole: "Als sie wieder schwanger war, sagte man, man solle sie in eine Erdschweinhöhle stecken, um sie zu entzaubern, dann würden ihre Kinder am Leben bleiben. So geschah es, sie wurde in eine Erdschweinhöhle gesteckt und bekam lebensfähige Kinder". ["As

> she was pregnant again, it was said that one should plant (stecken) her in an aardvark hole, to rid her of the enchantment, then her children would be able to survive. It so happened, that she was planted (gesteckt) in the aardvark hole and she had viable children."] (53; my translation)

Pynchon's fictional reworking addresses a second-person narratee, a hypothetical old Südwest hand who--in a passage which well represents the embedding of perspectives in this novel--is himself called upon for remarkable powers of empathy:

> But as you swung away, who was the woman alone in the earth, planted up to her shoulders in the aardvark hole, a gazing head rooted to the desert plane, with an upsweep of mountains far behind her, darkly folded, far away in the evening? She can feel the incredible pressure, miles of horizontal sand and clay, against her belly. Down the trail wait the luminous ghosts of her four stillborn children, fat worms lying with no chances of comfort among the wild onions, one by one, crying for milk more sacred than what is tasted and blessed in the village calabashes. In preterite line they have pointed her here, to be in touch with Earth's gift for genesis. [. . .]
>
> Back in Südwest, the Erdschweinhöhle was a powerful symbol of fertility and life (V, 315-16; B, 367)

There are borrowings like these scattered throughout this particular episode and elsewhere in the novel. Luttig was Pynchon's main source on Herero mythology, ancestral devotions, social organization (such as the role of the Omuhona; the system of matrilineal/patrilineal clans, or eanda/oruzo), as well as village customs, including the mandala-like organization of huts. The following catalogue lists borrowings that can be clearly traced to pages in Luttig's monograph, though its presence is strong throughout the narrative. In addition, I supply annotations for the references in Gravity's Rainbow to William Petrus Steenkamp's Is the South-west African Herero Committing Race-Suicide?

[(Cape Town: Unie-Voklspers, 1944), 39 pages], a text whose trace has been inadequately documented.

(V, 100; B, 116) "We make Ndjambi Karunga now, omuhona": Luttig devotes his first chapter to "Ndjambi Karunga," the divine creator of all Herero people and, what is more interesting in this context of homosexual love, a bisexual god. Ndjambi Karunga appears in Herero myth as the father of all created being, and generally a benevolent deity. But while he is thus "the god of life," he is also "the master of death" (8); and in that aspect he is, in short, the Herero version of Blicero ("Lord Death"). The god's bisexuality is signified in the name itself: "Ndjambi reveals more the characteristics of a [masculine] heavenly god and Karunga those of a [feminine] god of the earth" (9). He passes on these dual traits--Lord of the "other world" of the Dead, as well as Lord of this world--to Mukuru, the mythical first man. So in turn the omuhona, Mukuru's embodiment in Herero society, also serves a dual role according to Luttig: not only "chief," but "a living Mukuru" (see below: V, 321-22); thus the omuhona is "one who has been proven" to be the lineal descendent of the Omumborombanga tree and Mukuru at the beginning of time (33-34), and presumably he too embodies the bisexual principle of his origin.

(V, 316; B, 367) "Inside the Schwarzkommando there are forces, at present, who have opted for sterility and death. [. . .] it is political struggle": Luttig clarifies why, for the Herero, a plan involving "tribal suicide" would be construed as an act of "political struggle." It is that for them suicide could also be an act of "blood vengeance." He explains: "a person who commits suicide under these circumstances is also 'actuated by the thought that the dead are capable of bringing about evil and death more effectively than the living'" (107). If so, imagine getting the whole tribe into battle from the other side.

(V, 316; B, 368) "In each village, as noon flared [. . .] the omuhona took from his sacred bag, soul after converted soul, the leather cord kept there since the individual's birth, and untied the birth-knot": the background here is certainly Luttig (72), who ex-

plains that after a child's birth the "funicle, when it has fallen off, is handed over to the priest-chief [the omuhona] to be preserved in a sacred skin bag. In this bag leather straps with knots are kept, and each knot relates to a particular individual member of the oruzo. These knots are only 'untied if the child should die or go over into Christianity.'" The untying of such knots "as noon flared" is Pynchon's touch, consistent with similar moments in the novel where noon looms as a judgment-hour.

(V, 317; B, 369) "Some of the more rational men of medicine attributed the Herero birth decline to a deficiency of Vitamin E in the diet--others to poor chances of fertilization given the peculiarly long and narrow uterus of the Herero female": the source here is Steenkamp (22). He discusses the hypotheses of others who had connected infertility to diets deficient in the Vitamin, and notes as well that after the European incursions a typical Herero diet, formerly consisting of milk products and beans rich in E, began to revolve around vitamin-deficient white rice. Steenkamp himself is the one who advanced the "narrow sex-organ" hypothesis, although Pynchon alters several of its details. Here is Steenkamp: "The Herero woman is tall and slender. Her legs are very long and so are her fingers and arms. . . . This brought me on the idea that all the other organs in the body must be proportionally longer. I thereupon began to examine the length of the cervix with Herero [women] . . . and found to my surprise that this was the case. . . . In one instance I even found a cervix so long that it was impossible with a digital examination to feel the body of the womb (corpus uteri). This much longer cervix must thus logically and virtually form a much longer incubation bed for the development of the gonococcus" (20-21; my emphasis). Thus in Steenkamp's view it is the long Herero cervix (not the uterus) which was the condition, and gonorrhea (not Pynchon's "poor chances of fertilization") which was the culprit in their sterility.

(V, 321; B, 373) "the gathered purity of opposites, the village built like a mandala": Luttig discusses the village circle on pages 32-34. It divides into two

"distinct halves, a southern and a northern, the former the abode of the men and the latter that of the women"; calves-pen, milk-calabashes, and "holy fire" in the center; at the eastern quadrant the Omuhona's house into which fire is brought each morning.

(V, 321-22; B, 374) "Tree . . . Omumborombanga . . . Mukuru . . . first ancestor": in Herero creation myth the Omumborombanga is "a great fig-tree which is thought of as a seat of all ancestors" and thus a "tree of life, from which all life emanates; its location is in the North" (Luttig, 25). Luttig devotes an entire chapter to the deity, Mukuru, and only a summary is possible here. He is a god of the North, regarded as the "first ancestor" (21) to spring from the Omumborombanga; his color is red, and he is "intimately associated" with the holy fire and the sacred cattle (30). His name means, simply, "the old one" (18); and Hereros think of him as "present in the grave" (21) as well as present during everyday life by his extension (symbolized in the "birth knots") through the patrilineal clans.

(V, 322; B, 374) "his tribe believed long ago that each sunset is a battle [. . .] the sun is born again, to come back each dawn, new and the same": All the details of this passage, the battle and killing of the sun, whence its passage into the North (land of the dead and "land of the one-legged"), thus to rise newly born each morning, stem from Luttig, pages 12-13.

(V, 322; B, 374-75) "It began in mythical times, when the sly hare who nests in the Moon brought death among men, instead of the Moon's true message": Luttig explains that the Moon is referred to as a "hare's nest" (ein Nest des Hasen) and relates the story: "the hare functioned as the messenger of the moon, and was responsible for the appearance of death among mankind by the wrong interpretation and delivery of a message from the moon to humanity. For this the hare was punished by the moon" (15). Furthermore, the moon is associated in Herero mythology with the netherworld, abode of Ndjambi Karunga, a deity who is, as Pynchon notes a few lines farther, "both the bringer of evil and its avenger." And finally, this is why, as Luttig explains, "the Herero sang of the Germans: 'Sie kommen

daher wo der Mond ist,' i.e. out of the Netherworld . . . [for when] . . . European ships emerged from the horizon, West Coast tribes thought they were coming up out of the spirit land and were confirmed in their opinion by the pale skins of the mariners. . . . So was Hahn, the first missionary among the Herero, addressed as Karunga, the god of the netherworld." Later (V, 730; B, 851), the myth supplies the nickname to one of Enzian's men, Henryk the Hare, so called "because he can never get messages right."

(V, 351; B, 409) "Kari, which is brewed from potatoes, peas, and sugar, and in Herero means 'the drink of death'": see Steenkamp, who relates that "Alcohol and its attendant evils was formerly unknown to the Hereros because they did not cultivate wheat and vegetables and had no sugar. Now, however, they brew a potent beer called Kari, which translated into English means 'The Drink of Death.' It is brewed from potatoes, peas, sugar, and yeast. It makes them, in Capt. Bowker's words, 'fighting mad'" (23).

(V, 519; B, 605) "Washing-blue is the abortifacient of choice": among the "abortifacient" substances that Steenkamp identifies as being in use among Herero women, "Another remedy used by them also since the contact with the white man,is washing blue," the ultramarine dye of which causes "a strong stomach irritation" leading up to "uterine stimulation" and contractions strong enough to expel the fetus (29).

(V, 727; B, 848) "the sacred idiolalia of the Primal Twins (some say their names are Enzian and Blicero) of a good Rocket to take us to the stars, an evil Rocket for the World's suicide": the "sacred idiolalia" will appear later as what appears to be an anagrammatic enigma--"medoschnicka bleelar medoometnozz in bergamot" (V, 746; B, 870). Puzzled out, it yields the following words, put them together howsoever one will: the-blicero-enzian-mammon-gets-zero-black-doomed. One reading is "Mammon doomed Blicero; the black Enzian gets zero," though any such efforts to find benediction or malediction in the phrase may of course be viewed as the imposition of system where it is unwanted. Nevertheless, Luttig also reports on the quasi-divine status of twins in Herero culture. Because they embody

the same divine polarities as, for example, Mukuru, and because Herero divinity "can give good as well as evil . . . [so] also can the people expect benediction or malediction from the twins." Another of their aspects is antagonism: "They are continually at war with each other and do not hesitate to destroy each other" (115). Compare also the antagonistic searches of the half-brothers Tchitcherine and Enzian, each seeking to murder the other--a collision prevented near the novel's end only by happenstance.

These strategies of reference conform to a larger pattern of intertextuality, which readers of Gravity's Rainbow have been tracing. It shows the way that each of Pynchon's centers of reference tends to draw from one primary text. In the same way that Richard Sasuly's I G Farben supplied the main background on the German chemical industry, or that Thomas G. Winner's Oral Art and Literature of the Kazakhs of Russian Central Asia became the principal reference point for Pynchon's fictional Kirghizstan, so Luttig's monograph appears to have been the primary resource on Herero culture.

There are well-reasoned, and also political, choices behind such moves. In each case we see Pynchon selecting that text which provides the most acute angle of attack on the vices of imperialism.

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Notes

[1] See Joseph Slade, "Religion, Psychology, Sex, and Love in Gravity's Rainbow," in Approaches to Gravity's Rainbow, ed. Charles Clerc (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1983), 160-61. Why he decided to disclose the contents of Pynchon's letter by indirect discourse is a mystery.

[2] Edward Mendelson first pointed out F. W. Kolbe's An English-Herero Dictionary (Capetown: 1883) as one source of Pynchon's Herero vocabulary, in "Gravity's Encyclopedia," in Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon, ed. George Levine and David Leverenz (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), 193. I later added that, in writing V., Pynchon also consulted a 1937 travelogue by Rex Hardinge, South

African Cinderella: A Trek through Ex-German Southwest Africa (London: Herbert Jenkins), as well as J. Irle's Die Herero (Güttersloh: 1906); see my "The End of History?: Thomas Pynchon and the Uses of the Past," Twentieth Century Literature, 25:1 (1979), 66-67. T. S. Tillotson pointed out the presence of Steenkamp's pamphlet in Pynchon Notes, 5 (1981), an untitled note on page 29. Finally, David Seed gave careful attention to Pynchon's uses of the Herero language and documented its sources in Kolbe, as well as in P. H. Brincker's Worterbuch und Kurzgefasste Grammatik des Otji-Herero (Leipzig: C. G. Büttner, 1886), and Heinrich Vedder's "The Herero," The Native Tribes of South West Africa (Cape Town: 1928); see his essay, "Pynchon's Herero," in Pynchon Notes, 10 (1982), 37-44.

3 All references to Gravity's Rainbow are given parenthetically, and indicate pages in both the Viking edition (New York: 1973), and the Bantam (New York: 1974).

[I want to thank Donald Stuttheit, a graduate student in Fine Arts at Kentucky, who first brought Lutlig's monograph to my attention.]