

Pynchon's Herero

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The most thorough attempt to explain and translate Pynchon's use of Herero words in Gravity's Rainbow has been made in Appendix II of Douglas Fowler's A Reader's Guide to Gravity's Rainbow (1980), which is by no means complete and very patchy in its commentary.¹ The following is an attempt to fill some of its gaps. Fowler and Edward Mendelson have rightly identified Pynchon's two linguistic sources as F. W. Kolbe's An English-Herero Dictionary with an Introduction to the Study of Herero and Bantu in General (Cape Town: J. C. Juta, 1883) and P. H. Brincker's Wörterbuch und Kurzgefasste Grammatik des Otji-Herero (Leipzig: C. G. Büttner, 1886).² Brincker's dictionary was reprinted in 1964 by the Gregg Press (Ridge-wood, NJ). Pynchon is characteristically scrupulous in his use of Herero and often provides enough contextual hints to make the meaning of particular words evident.

a) Common words and phrases

1. omuhona (GR 100, 101, etc.).³ Fowler 270 glosses this term correctly as "lord, master." Kolbe gives both these meanings (308, 318) but also "chief" (85) which adds a tribal dimension to Enzian's individual submission to Weissmann. As the V-2 becomes the Herero totem, Weissmann logically assumes the status of a substitute deity or chief.

2. . . . mba rara m'eroto ondyoze . . . mbe mu munine m'oruroto ayo u n'omuinyo (GR 152). Fowler makes no more than a gesture at translating this section. The first sentence is taken verbatim from Brincker 168, except that the third word appears me roto, where it is given as an example of ondjoze (i.e., "nightmare") in use.⁴ It means "I have dreamt a nightmare." The second sentence is taken verbatim from Kolbe 32 where it appears as an example of ayo (i.e., "as if") in use. Kolbe translates the sentence "I saw him in my dream as if he were alive," but this does not take into account munine which means "shine." The sense of the sentence would thus seem to be "he was shining

in my dream as if he were alive." Fowler 270 draws attention to the derivation of ondjoze (i.e., "phantom") from the motion of a spider. These two sentences appear in Section 18 of GR, which consists of fragments of visitations which the medium Carrol Eventyr experiences. Although Pynchon mentions the Herero on the next page, which gives the reader a clue as to the language, part of the mystery of these two sentences is the fact that they are incomprehensible, like some of the other fragments. The actual meaning of the sentences ties them in very closely with the related themes of nightmare and visitation which run through Part I of GR. The first sentence is almost repeated by Enzian later, imitating Martin Luther King: "My people, I have had a vision . . ." (GR 525).

3. eanda and oruzo (GR 316). Pynchon identifies these terms as signifying matrilineal and patrilineal descent respectively. Heinrich Vedder explains that these formed two familial groups within the Herero nation, eanda being organized according to maternal rights and oruzo according to paternal rights; he goes on to translate eanda as "origin" and oruzo as "derivation."⁵ Clearly the terms refer nostalgically to the tribal organization which the Herero have lost.

4. Otukungurua (GR 316, 318). Although Pynchon explains the grammatical construction of this noun, its meaning does not become evident until its second appearance. The Herero have adopted as their title the "Empty Ones," in order to articulate their proximity to tribal death. Kolbe 177 explains kungurua as "emptied out" and Pynchon carefully points out that the prefix otu- denotes the inanimate and rising, as distinct from the animate prefix oma-. The exact meaning of Otukungurua would thus be "the emptied vessels" which would capture Pynchon's sense of spiritual deprivation.

5. outase (GR 325). Pynchon glosses this as "a large, newly laid cow turd," Brincker 229 as "frischer, weicher Kuhmist," and Kolbe 170 as dung "of large cattle, if fresh."

6. okanumaihi (GR 328). Pynchon echoes Kolbe's definition as "the little sweet milk drinker" (187).

Brincker 113 explains that the word means "Venus als Abendstern, gleich nach Sonnenuntergang, wenn die Kinder die frisch gemolkene Milch trinken, daher der Milchtrinker genannt." [Venus as the Eveningstar. The Children drink the freshly milked milk; therefore, (Venus) is also called the Milk-drinker.] This is another nostalgic reference to the culture which the Herero have lost. The star's name harks back to the time before the German conquest when the tribe still possessed cattle. The name of the star is all the more poignant a memory since, as Enzian recognizes, the star he is seeing from Germany, i.e., from the northern hemisphere, would be a different one anyway. Brincker 113 gives this word as oka-nu'omaihi and Kolbe 187 as oka-nu(a)-maihi.

7. mba - kayere (GR 362, etc.). Kolbe 361 gives this word as mba-kaere, but with the meaning Pynchon supplies, i.e., "I am passed over." As a mantra this represents an attempt by the Herero to salvage some spiritual consolation from their victimization by history.

8. m'okamanga (GR 456). Kolbe 279 gives mokamanga as meaning "instantly" or "instantaneously." Pynchon in fact gives us a gloss by commenting "there is urgency and gravity in the word." Probably the sense of this radio transmission would be "come in."

9. orururumo orunene; omunene (GR 520). These terms mark a further step in the sacralization of the rocket by the Herero. Pynchon now takes his words from the grammatical section of Kolbe's book. Orururumo means "a flame" and orunene "great" or "big." Omunene is the animate form of the latter adjective, the prefix omu- contrasting with its inanimate equivalent oru- (Kolbe xxxi). Now the Herero are reversing the process of word-formation which Pynchon indicated on GR 316. Then they were erasing their own vitality; now they are projecting life on to their adopted totem, the rocket. Pynchon's gloss on these words comes almost verbatim from Kolbe who translates ru-, rurumo and nene as "the high, rising dead one," "blazing" and "large" respectively (xxxii). Pynchon here develops the attributes of the rocket yet further, retaining the paradox that, although the Herero attribute to it some kind of spiritual life, it remains nevertheless

a dead object which only mimics ascension. The Herero words occur at a crucial point for Enzian, when he sees a bombed-out oil refinery, possibly in perfect working order of a sort, and now begins to suspect that the rocket is only one particular manifestation of a larger technical process at work.

10. iya 'kurandye (GR 673). Iya is probably a form of ia/ya, i.e., "we are going" (Kolbe 235). 'Kurandye does not mean "my brother" (Fowler 272), but "my fellow" or "my mate" (the apostrophe signifying a vocative form). Kolbe 203 gives as an example the phrase indyo, 'kurandye, i.e., "come, my fellow."

b) Herero names

1. Ekori (GR 730) = "cap" (Fowler 272; Brincker 12; Kolbe 75).

2. Khama (GR 323). King of the Bechuanas who sent help to the Herero on their trek across the Kalahari. Pynchon's source for this detail is W. P. Steenkamp's Is the South-West-African Herero Committing Race Suicide? (Cape Town, c. 1935), 12-13. Khama and Samuel Maherero are the only historical native names Pynchon uses.

3. Maherero, Samuel (GR 323). The Herero chief who led his people across the Kalahari into exile in Bechuanaland, where he died in 1923 (v. "Mondaugen's Story" in V.).

4. Nguarorerue (GR 314-16, 320, 362-63, 673, 730, 732). Pynchon explains the name, or more properly the title, as meaning "one who has been proven" (GR 316). Kolbe 515 gives the root of this word roro as meaning "try" or "test." Nqua- is the pronominal prefix "who," and -erue is an adjectival suffix. Hence, as Pynchon states, "one who has been tested." The title grows out of a mock-parable (probably mimicking Buber's Tales of the Hassidim) and is applied to Enzian in his capacity as a tested leader. Fowler 270 rightly points to Enzian's Moses-like role, of course ironic because any Judaeo-Christian analogue would be alien to true Herero culture. This paradox emerges grotesquely in the last use of Enzian's title in the novel as "Oberst Nguarorerue."

5. Okandio (GR 730, 732) = "little bell" (Fowler 272; Brincker 112; Kolbe 51).
6. Ombindi, Joseph (GR 319-21, 328, 519, 523-25, 673, 732-33). From the Herero word ombinda, i.e., "pig" (Fowler 271; Brincker 130; Kolbe 369). One of the Herero leaders and a close associate of Enzian's; he preaches the return to an innocence he has only heard of. Cf. entry for Ovatjimba.
7. Omuzire (GR 730-31) = "shadow" (Fowler 272; Brincker 160; Kolbe 439). A glance at the attenuated identity of the Herero.
8. Onguruve (GR 327-28) = "wild pig" (Fowler 271; Kolbe 369).
9. Orukambe, Andreas (GR 325, 327-28, 362, 455-56, 518-19, 562-63, 657-58, 730-31) = "hartebeest" (Brincker 186; Kolbe 249), a kind of antelope. Another of the Herero leaders whose name symbolizes the tribal split between two cultures.
10. Orutyene (GR 732) = "steep" (Brincker 193; Kolbe 471).
11. Otyikondo (GR 316) = "bastard" or "mulatto" (Fowler 271; Brincker 204; Kolbe 44). Enzian's derogatory tribal title. His racial mixture parallels Andreas Orukambe's hybrid name and underlines the Herero's irreversible loss of tribal unity.
12. Otyiyumbu, Jan (GR 638, 700) = "firebrand" (Brincker 202; Kolbe 209). Apart from the relevance of his name to his actions as an "herb-smoker" in the novel, Pynchon may also be glancing at the fragmentation of the Herero's tribal fire, which was sacred to their ancestors.
13. Oururu (GR 732) = "bitterness" (Brincker 228; Kolbe 57). Perhaps chosen for the name's similarity in sound to orururumo (GR 520). Kolbe defines the oru- class of nouns as including "inanimate, solid things, but chiefly such as rise or climb up" (xxix).
14. Ovatjimba (GR 315, 323, 403). Pynchon draws on Heinrich Vedder for his explanation of this name, which denotes the poorer members of the Herero tribe, i.e., those below the cattle-owners in status. According to Vedder, these people got the name of tjimbas from living off what they could grub out of the earth

("ant-bears").⁶ Pynchon (GR 315) develops this legend by suggesting that the people took as their collective symbol the aardvark, in German the Erd-schwein, and hence the Zone Herero are mimicking their tribal animal by living in holes in the ground. This linkage is both verbally precise and also broadens out into the general significance of the pig as victim in GR (cf. Slothrop's Plechazunga role). Ombindi and Onguruve thus have particularly significant names.

15. Ozohande (GR 732). A facetious Herero nickname for a wireless operator. Ozo- is a plural prefix, and ohande = "spark" (Kolbe 461). Hence "Sparks."

c) Sacred names

1. Ndjambi Karunga (GR 100, 322, 323). Pynchon identifies this within context as the name of the Herero God, first invoked in the novel by Weissmann's Herero catamite, Enzian. Vedder comments that "his name is invoked only in thanksgiving after some unexpected luck; or they [the Herero] pray to him when all other means of help fail."⁷ The use of this name is heavily ironic because the essence of Ndjambi is kindness, whereas the boy is in fact stimulating his own sexual submission. Ndjambi is also important here and elsewhere in the novel as a sacred name which still carries traces of its original magical power.

2. Mukuru (GR 322, 524, 562). Vedder translates this term as "the old one" and explains that it signifies the primal ancestor of the Herero, the first man to emerge from the tree of creation (see following entry) with his wife Kamungarunga.⁸ Another Herero name for God. Early in GR Pynchon mentions the Herero's communication with their ancestors. The repeated phrase "the breath of Mukuru" (GR 524) seems to carry connotations of threat and death. On GR 562 Mukuru is referred to as a guide, leading the Herero on in their search for the rocket 00000.

3. Omumborombanga (GR 321). This term appears within an associational sequence of Enzian's thoughts which drift back to his lost tribal pieties. According to Herero myth, man originated out of the omumborombanga tree, which is accordingly venerated for symbolizing the tribe's sacred descent.⁹ In GR this tree merges into the cabbalistic Tree of Life (v. GR 747-48).

In the Central Asian section of GR Pynchon uses a strategic number of local terms in order to evoke an ethos or culture. With the Herero this is impossible, since they are in permanent exile. Accordingly the Herero names, by referring to creatures and objects of the South-West, underpin the nostalgia of the Schwarzkommando for their lost land and lost tribal pieties. Any invocations of Mukuru, for instance, seem absurdly anachronistic and only demonstrate how the Herero have fallen between their native culture and an incompletely assimilated Christian culture. Pynchon's use of intermittent Herero vocabulary also underlines this irony. The Herero are in a linguistic position similar to that of the Maltese in V., in the sense that their native language has been smothered by a superimposed colonial tongue--German. Their situation is doubly ironic since their colonizers are themselves under occupation; hence the pressure to speak a second alien language--English. The recurrence of Herero terms thus reminds the reader that Enzian and his followers are the ultimate Displaced Persons of the Zone.

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Notes

¹ Douglas Fowler, A Reader's Guide to Gravity's Rainbow (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1980), 270-72.

² There is also an undated English edition of Kolbe published by Trübner & Co. of London.

³ I am grateful to Khachig Tölölyan and Clay Leighton's An Index to Gravity's Rainbow for help in locating page references, which are from the Viking edition, New York, 1973.

⁴ Brincker transliterates Herero into German phonetic script, Kolbe into English, with the result that their spelling varies in some cases. Pynchon usually uses the English transliteration.

⁵ Heinrich Vedder, "The Herero," in The Native Tribes of South West Africa (Cape Town: Cape Times, 1928), 185-86.

⁶ Heinrich Vedder, South West Africa in Early Times [1938] (London: Cass, 1966), 135.

7 Vedder, "The Herero," 164.

8 Ibid., 165.

9 Ibid.