

TYCHO VAN DER HOOG: *Breweries, Politics and Identity: The History Behind Namibian Beer*. Basler Afrika Bibliographien, Basel, 2019, pp. 118, ISBN 978-3-906927-12-1, CHF 25.00.

This concise history of the beer industry in Namibia begins with the pithy observation by Frank Zappa to the effect that every nation worth its salt needs an airline and its own beer. As it happens, the former no longer holds true, while beer remains a marker of national and, for that matter, subnational identities. The brewing industry is today regarded as a source of national pride in Namibia, as Windhoek Lager has not merely conquered the domestic market but has made substantial inroads south of the border where South African Breweries (SAB) held a de facto monopoly for decades. This is a tale, lovingly told, of an unlikely success built on the most fragile foundations.

The early sections of the book are, in effect, a careful piecing together of fragments of information about a series of operations that were very small and left little trace. The nascent breweries relied upon the consumption of a very small number of Germans who remained in South West Africa after 1919. At first, the beer was imported directly from Germany, although the first local brewery was established in 1900. Van der Hoog traces the fierce rivalry between breweries in the “beer triangle,” consisting of Windhoek, Swakopmund, and Omaruru, culminating in the eventual merger that constituted South West Breweries (SWB) in 1920—the company that eventually assumed the current name of Namibia Breweries Limited (NBL). The main rival to SWB from the mid-1920s was the Hansa Brewery. These two companies struggled through the ups and downs of the decades that followed. During WWII, the breweries were suspected of pro-Nazi sympathies and were placed under close surveillance. The author provides a brief, but fascinating account of the subterfuges that were necessary to acquire German hops, the distribution of which was routed through third countries.

Inevitably, the story after 1919 is intertwined with the realities of South African rule, initially under a League of Nations Mandate and subsequently under occupation in defiance of the United Nations. The ban on the sale of alcoholic beverages to Africans that was adopted in 1920 was in conformity with the terms of the Mandate and was arguably more restrictive than in South Africa itself. This changed with the passage of the 1928 Liquor Act, which entrenched racialized prohibition in South Africa, following which the liquor laws seem to have converged. In line with the South African model of control, beer halls were opened by municipalities dispensing an imitation of “native beer,” the proceeds of which financed the administration. In both countries, illegal brewing and shebeens nevertheless proliferated in the 1950s—leading to the abandonment of racially exclusive liquor legislation over the following decade. This happened in Namibia in 1969, seven years later than south of the border.

Van der Hoog demonstrates that the escalation of the liberation wars across the subcontinent had an important impact on the beer industry. The north of

Namibia, particularly Ovamboland, had been treated as a South African labor reserve and had been isolated from the rest of the territory. No beer could be sold there, in effect, but the author indicates there was a lively trade in smuggled beer from Angola. The civil war that accompanied the messy withdrawal of the Portuguese had an impact on the cross-border trade in the mid-1970s. South African soldiers, who backed one side in the war from bases on the northern border, created a demand for SAB beer, but there was also an opportunity for SWB to sell its beer into Ovamboland effectively for the first time.

The most satisfying section of the book investigates the relationship between SWB and SAB. Van der Hoog notes that SAB initially acquired a stake in SWB (which had taken over Hansa Breweries in 1967) and acquired the right to make and sell Hansa Pilsner under license in South Africa. When the two companies parted company, SAB retained the use of this trademark for the South African market. The author traces a long history of suspicion, and eventually open warfare, between the Namibian brewery and its much larger neighbor. Interestingly, Van der Hoog also reveals that brewing, according to the *Reinheitsgebot*, which is often thought to date from the German colonial period, was introduced as late as 1986 to differentiate the products of the company from those of SAB. With a lower alcohol content, Namibian beer incurred lower excise duties in South Africa. This is also the section where the identity politics surrounding beer is discussed in greater detail. The author points to the elision from beer as a white Germanophone preserve to the embodiment of the newly independent Namibian nation after 1990. Despite a checkered relationship, the author notes that the South West African People's Organization government repeatedly blocked SAB from establishing a brewery in Namibia (until 2015) in order to protect the brewery. At the same time, NBL was able to make significant inroads into the South African market. The creation of a brewery inside South Africa, in tandem with Heineken, positioned NBL within a regional struggle for dominance among some of the largest corporate players in the alcohol market.

The book is based on a wide range of archival sources and interviews and is accompanied by some fascinating photographs and examples of advertising material. The writing is understated, and it does not set out to make grand statements—even in relation to the matter of identity. It is also much more about the history of Namibian brewing than of beer consumption per se. Given the richness of the material, it is a monograph that one feels could have been fleshed out in many different directions. The author has laid down a marker that he, or someone else, will hopefully follow up in the future.

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