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RESEARCH SECTION "KNOWLEDGES"

Karakul Circulations: Colonial Economies and the Un_Making of Disciplinary Knowledges in Germany and Namibia

Summary

Karakul sheep were first brought to Namibia in 1907 as part of a German colonial project. As Swakara, their pelts are sold to high end fashion designers. Until global fur markets collapsed in the 1980s and 1990s, Karakul farming was one of the most important industries in Namibia. Today, Swakara is embedded within narratives of sustainability, indigeneity, animal cruelty and development.

In our project, we are interested in the circulations of people, sheep and knowledges in and through post_colonial spaces and timescales. These Karakul circulations mark and transgress boundaries of race and species in multiple ways. Bred on an experimental farm in Halle (Germany) in the early 1900s, the sheep were exported to the colony of South-West Africa, where they played a major role in colonial settlement and economies. They were also crucial agents in scientific controversies on agriculture, Mendelian genetics and race. In our project, we approach these circulations through different sets of relations. In spatial terms, Karakul sheep connect Germany, colonial South-West Africa, Namibia and South Africa with other regions in the world. They are embedded in specific articulations of power and violence. Temporal circulations bring together German colonialism, South African imperial rule, colonial revisionism in Nazi Germany as well as heritage debates in independent Namibia. Karakul circulations also refer to traveling knowledges, their performed boundary work as well as the silences and absences they represent.

Key questions

Our research is organized around three overlapping trails that correspond with a set of key questions:

The making and unmaking of (scientific) knowledges around race and species.

In what ways are Karakul sheep entangled with the histories and practices of colonial race science and eugenics? How did Karakul sheep emerge as model organisms for broader questions around race and phenotype? How did the knowledge around breeding and Mendelian genetics cut across human-animal

boundaries? How was this boundary constantly shifted, enacted and undone in race science? We ask how specific understandings of purity, indigeneity, alteration and hierarchy came about and how they became associated with concrete bodies in colonial and fascist settings.

Practical and embodied knowledges around human-sheep relations as a way of life and form of production.

In what ways do knowledge practices shape the materialities of/around Karakul sheep? How are these practices in return shaped by post_colonial and racial histories? What actors and institutions have a stake in and authority over what Karakul/Swakara sheep are? How are these relations re-arranged in the dynamic situation the industry faces today? This trail interrogates how Swakara narratives are entangled with the production and circulation of Swakara products, most prominently the famous Swakara pelts. It deals with the particular ways that sensory knowledges, experiences, heritage and memory interact with sheep bodies and economic production.

The interface between (non-discursive) colonial knowledges, silences and modes of presence.

What knowledge practices brought about categories of race/species, of purity/impurity, land use and/or spatial reorganisation? In what ways were specific dominant knowledges circumvented by practices, which were part of longer histories of pastoral modalities and spatial mobility. How are these knowledges silenced, in what contexts, and/or are they rather



Sheep at a Swakara farm in Hardap Region, Namibia. (Photo: Eleanor Schaumann)

PROJECT TEAM



PROF. DR. KATHARINA SCHRAMM
PROFESSOR OF SOCIAL AND CULTURAL
ANTHROPOLOGY
PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR
UNIVERSITY OF BAYREUTH



ELEANOR SCHAUMANN
PHD CANDIDATE BIGSAS
UNIVERSITY OF BAYREUTH



DR. MEMORY BIWA
HISTORIAN
PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR



Gathering sheep at a farm in Hardap Region, Namibia. (Photo: Eleanor Schaumann)



Assessing the quality of a Swakara pelt at a farm near Grünau, Namibia. (Photo: Eleanor Schaumann)

absent presences? How we do we define non-discursive and embodied knowledge, and how is this read, practiced and experienced? What are the uses of the archives, specifically the visual and sonic through attentive artistic approach, in trailing intersecting and contested knowledge practices?

Methods and concepts

Our project explores new methodological approaches that seek to engage with the interlacing of local practices and knowledge regimes across temporal and spatial scales. In this we make use of our transdisciplinary conversations. Taking transdisciplinary work seriously, we employ a combination of ethnographic, archival and artistic methods. We work through documents, landscapes and sounds, seeking to explore and elaborate on what a decolonial and non-extractive practice could look like in terms of a methodology of care. Here, we are inspired by Black/feminist theory that insists on the relationality of knowledge production and its capacity to unsettle practices of colonial extractivism (e.g. Wynter, McKittrick, Weheliye).

Vision

In our project, we seek to analyse the relations between bodies (human and sheep), representations (documents, scientific publications and memories) and knowledges (local, tacit, taxonomic, scientific and silenced). We discuss the ways in which Karakul circulations were instrumental in producing a racialized or nonhuman other, while simultaneously challenging conventional species boundaries. We pay particular attention to the multi-directional pathways and fluid forms of knowledges that shape our object of concern. Turning modes of disciplining (of human and animal bodies as well as of knowledges) into our research focus, we also aim to unsettle these disciplinary practices and thereby to contribute to a decolonial practice of disciplining that lies at the heart of the project of reconfiguring African Studies.

A day-old lamb poised for a photograph on the famous Karakul breeding farm, Voigtsgrund. (Photo: National Archives of Namibia)



Contribution or relation to the Cluster's aims & goals

The project conjoins historical and ethnographic research with theoretical approaches in feminist and post-colonial STS and creative artistic approaches. It thus contributes to the core-themes of the RS Knowledges, examining multiple processes of the making and unmaking of knowledges as well as their particular scopes and scales. Furthermore, our project takes up the notion of relationality in ways that allow us to analyse the entanglements of material knowledge practices, production of Karakul narratives and imageries with the ongoing effects of colonial violence.



Swakara Monument on Swakara Avenue in Keetmanshoop. The monument was erected in 2007, to commemorate the centennial year of Swakara farming in southern Namibia. (Photo: Memory Biwa)

Further Links / Key References

Find more information on the project here:
https://www.africamultiple.uni-bayreuth.de/en/Research/1research-sections/knowledges/Karakul-Circulations_-Colonial-Economies-and-the-Un_Making-of-Disciplinary-Knowledges-in-Germany-and-Namibia/index.html