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**Review of Todzi, K.S. (2023) Unternehmen weltaneignung:  
der Woermann-Konzern und der deutsche kolonialismus  
1837-1916**

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Kim Sebastian Todzi, *Unternehmen Weltaneignung: Der Woermann-Konzern und der deutsche Kolonialismus 1837-1916*, Göttingen, Wallstein Verlag, 2023 (Hamburger Beiträge zur Geschichte der kolonialen Globalisierung, 2), 503 pp., ill.

This book, based on the author's dissertation and recent winner of the *Walter-Markov-Preis für Geschichtswissenschaften*, details the history of the Woermann business conglomerate, one of Hamburg's and Germany's most prominent *Konzerne*, active across Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Kim Sebastian Todzi has produced an excellent, detailed history of the Woermann conglomerate in relation to broader historical developments, such as the Scramble for Africa, Germany's colonial turn in the 1880s, and Germany's genocidal actions in present-day Namibia. Todzi shows how crucial the conglomerate was for Germany's colonial expansion across Africa, but also the extent to which Woermann depended on German colonial expansion for its profits. The Woermann firm was therefore at the centre of German imperialism in nineteenth-century Africa, but has hitherto been largely neglected: bar some hagiographical works commissioned by the conglomerate itself, its history has largely been confined to the margins of the scholarly literature on private enterprise in colonial and/or imperial history.

The book chronicles the history of the Woermann conglomerate between its establishment in 1837 until 1916, when the First World War obviously put an end to German businesses operating in Africa. In the extensive introduction, Todzi ably lays out the theoretical and historiographical framework of the study, situating his work, first, in the new scholarly trend of *capitalism in action* within the American-inspired New History of Capitalism (p. 15), and, second, in the perspective of *global microhistory* (p. 18). Chapters 2 to 5 subsequently analyse the development of the Woermann conglomerate in Africa, in particular in German Cameroon after the take-over in 1884. Chapter 6 is a more thematic chapter, analysing the social dynamics of the colonial market in Cameroon, including the middlemen and African entrepreneurs dealing with Woermann in the Douala region, as well as the role of the *Kru* maritime labourers for its shipping business. Moreover, it analyses the role of women (both European and African) in the operations and social life of the Woermann conglomerate. Chapter 7 and 8 then pick up the chronological thread again, analysing Woermann's transition from trade to logistics in Namibia and German East Africa in the early twentieth century, as well as the problems it faced once World War I started. Chapter 9 offers a short but pointed conclusion, teasing out some of the main themes of the book.

Woermann was established in 1837 in Hamburg, the 'Hanseatic' city that in the nineteenth century was still among Germany's major trading hubs, and therefore well-positioned to participate in the African trade. The first incarnation of the Woermann firm was established by Carl Woermann: although the original firm did exist for a long time, the many joint ventures and subsidiaries of the firm lead Todzi to call it a *Konzern*, or conglomerate. Todzi clearly shows the entanglements of the Woermann family in Hamburg's commercial and political elite circles in Chapter 2, emphasising the role of Hamburg as a major centre for the im-

ports of colonial commodities in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the interests of the economic and political elite in the German colonial project (p. 35). Moreover, in sketching the dynamics of the transition from the slave trade to the so-called 'legitimate commerce' in West Africa, Todzi demonstrates that the Woermann conglomerate was quite successful in the palm oil trade of Douala and Lagos, proving able to compete with the more famous British palm oil traders on the West African coast in the period before German colonial efforts gathered pace. Throughout the book, Todzi provides extensive figures for both Woermann's trade as well as Hamburg's colonial connections to support his claims.

Chapters 3 and 4 clearly show the interaction and entanglements between German political and economic interests in the case of Cameroon. Todzi argues that for German firms like Woermann there was no strong urge to support the acquisition of African territory by the German government, but once Bismarck had changed his mind about colonialism, the Hamburg entrepreneurs turned into ardent supporters of German colonial efforts (p. 115). Nevertheless, the Woermann conglomerate and other German firms were disappointed about the opportunities for profit in German Cameroon, letting some government contracts lapse in due course (p. 191). Still, expansion inland was hardly possible without the military support of the German government, making the Woermann conglomerate reliant on the German colonial government for opening up new opportunities (p. 236).

Chapter 5 focuses on what Todzi calls 'colonial capitalism', the nexus between (forced) labour, trade, the market and violence. He argues that spreading colonial capitalism was regarded as a sort of 'civilising mission', and treats the many excesses so commonly known to have been perpetrated by the European colonial powers in nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Africa. The section on forced labour is particularly well-researched, even if this is well-known territory to most scholars of colonial African history. Another interesting part is the 'excursion' into trans-imperial ties, where Todzi shows the entanglement and cooperation with other European firms, including the British palm oil trader/firm John Holt (p. 247) and Albert Thys, the Belgian colonial magnate (p. 251).

The lengthy Chapter 6 is perhaps the most interesting for Africanists and non-economic historians, as Todzi's entangled and thoughtful approach to 'postcolonial entrepreneurial history' (as detailed in the conclusion) comes into full play here. It considers and analyses the relationship between Europeans and Africans, the roles of sexuality, gender, ethnicity and race within the conglomerate, as well as the role of women and the agency of African middlemen, entrepreneurs and maritime labourers *vis-à-vis* the Woermann conglomerate. Despite the reliance on European sources, Todzi succeeds admirably in teasing out the perspectives of Africans, from prominent individuals (like the entrepreneur Manga Bell, p. 293-294) to the Kru maritime labourers (p. 308) who were so instrumental in running shipping across Africa (as the 2021 book by Jeffrey Gunn also showed<sup>1</sup>).

1. J. Gunn, *Outsourcing African Labor: Kru Migratory Workers in Global Ports, Estates and Battlefields until the End of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*, Berlin-Boston, De Gruyter-Oldenbourg, 2021).

Chapter 7 shifts back from the thematic to the chronological, and considers the transition of the Woermann conglomerate from trading firm to logistics. After having launched a liner service to West Africa first, Woermann also set up a steamship service to East Africa in 1885 (p. 330). The conglomerate was also instrumental in transporting troops and prisoners of war in the 1904-1908 Herero and Nama War (p. 375), which is nowadays seen as a genocide against those very Herero and Nama. Todzi meticulously analyses Woermann's role in the war and genocide, the extensive use of forced labour in Namibia by Woermann, and shows that Woermann played a non-negligible role in offering infrastructural and transport services to the German colonial army. The 'demand' from the German army for transport services therefore also explains to a large extent the transition from trade to logistics. The short Chapter 8 chronicles the decline of Woermann at the outset of the First World War. Although the firm was rebuilt in the interwar years and established itself on the Gold Coast again in 1954, this episode falls outside of the book's scope.

The book is extremely readable and well-embedded in new historiographical approaches. Acknowledging that he has drawn primarily on 'white men's sources', Todzi still manages to bring out African agency to a significant extent, without stretching the point. The conclusion of the book offers food for thought, as Todzi makes four main points: first, that economic history should be a *Verflechtungsgeschichte*, or a history of entanglements (p. 423); second, that, in the German case, there existed a strong interdependency between colonial/political and economic interests (p. 425); third, that a colonial firm like Woermann moved from trade to logistics as a result of the demands of the German colonial army (p. 427); and fourth, that the history of entrepreneurship needs cultural, social and economic history, as entrepreneurs are always socially embedded (p. 430). This leads him to make a plea for 'postcolonial entrepreneurial history', a concept that holds much promise for future business-historical and economic-historical scholarship on Africa and colonial history more broadly (p. 431).

Here, it may have been interesting to read a bit more on the potential applicability of the concept outside of the case presented here. Moreover, in this reviewer's opinion, the link could have been made a bit more strongly to recent approaches like trans-imperial history, and how this approach can be improved by global microhistory and postcolonial entrepreneurial history. For example, more could have been said about how Woermann managed its relations to foreign colonial governments, not just its foreign business partners. But these are all minor quibbles about what remains an excellent and deeply researched book. The book is a model of linking source-based research to larger historical events and historiographical trends, while shedding light on a lesser-known but hugely important private enterprise active in various parts of Africa before and during the colonial period, and its enduring consequences.

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