

## USING NARRATIVES TO INTERPRET PRE-COLONIAL INHABITANTS OF SOUTH WEST COAST OF AFRICA IN THE TIMES OF THE WRECKING OF THE BOM JESUS SHIPWRECK

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper analyses the chances of survival among shipwreck survivors who endured the initial wrecking of the Bom Jesus shipwreck in 1533 within Southern Africa. The paper takes a comparative historic analysis centered on the pre-colonial historic relationship between the European sea farers and the indigenous people of South Western Africa in terms of trade, social interactions etc, and shipwrecked survivors narratives in Southern Africa helped to reconstruct the factors at play in ensuring survival or death of the sailors in such situations.*

**KEYWORDS:** Carreira da India, Indian Route, Bom Jesus, Ship Christened Name, Meaning Good Jesus, Naus, Large Portuguese Galleon Ship in Service, Narratives, Written Diaries or Storyline About an Episode

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### METHODOLOGY

Narratives from five 16<sup>th</sup> century Portuguese shipwreck survivors in Southern Africa were analysed for statistical differences of initial survivors of the wrecking vs those who survived the trek to Portuguese ports. Other secondary sources were used in this study (Hanzimanolis, 2009) and factors that played a role in high mortality rate among shipwreck survivors in South East Africa were identified based on the narratives with the objective of constructing comparison with the survivors of the Oranjemund shipwreck (*Bom Jesus*). Secondary sources mainly those from archaeological evidence on the Namibian coast (Kinahan, 2000) were analysed as well as those from naval epitaphs of European seafarers particularly the royal navy (Kinahan, 1991), these accounts gives a vivid picture about the pre-colonial people found on the South Western Coast of Africa. The accounts were analysed for general interaction with Europeans seafarers in order to gain a general understanding on the settlements and wealth of the people on the south western coast of Namibia who possibly encountered the shipwreck survivors from Bom Jesus (Oranjemund Shipwreck) in Southern Africa.

### LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Although we cannot say for sure if all the sailors reached the Namibian shores after the initial wrecking since no narrative of the episode exists. This is due to the fact that most Portuguese maritime records disappeared in the Lisbon fire (Rambling 2014), however there are some old Portuguese naval epitaph that survived such as the one below sourced from Rambling (2014), it gives a grim picture of what happened in 1533 after the Bom Jesus wrecked; translated says “*The Cirne and S Roque will arrive in Goa in September, not the Bom Jesus. Periera is still in Africa, at the Cape of Good Hope. Noronha’s ship capsized near the Cape and nobody escaped, perhaps by his carelessness at the critical moment while the other Nau’s scattered and escaped.*” (Rambling 2014)

mandantes erão Vasco de Paiva, na Santa Barbara; Diogo Brandão, na Santa Clara; e D. Francisco, ou D. Diogo de Noronha (que de ámbos os modos he nomeado) no S. João.

A segunda Esquadra partio em Abril: era seu Chefe D. Gonçalo Coutinho, na Não Sirne; e os outros Commandantes Simão da Veiga, no S. Roque; e Nuno Furtado de Mendonça, no Bom Jesus. Estes tres navios chegarão em Setembro a Goa.

A Esquadra de D. João Pereira teve prospera viagem até ao Cabo de Boa Esperança, onde com hum furacão soçobrou a Não de D. Francisco de Noronha, sem escapar ninguém, talvez por ignorancia, ou descuido do Official que naquelle momento critico se achava mandando; as outras Nãoes espalharão-se.

D. João Pereira, vencido o parcel de Sofala, e achando-se com as Ilhas, quiz esperar pelos outros navios: o Piloto, e o Mestre disserão-lhe, que arriasse todo o penno, e Antonio Galvão, que lha de passagreiro, e entendia melhor a navegação, oppoz-se a este conselho, querendo que se aguentassem velejando, porque se amuze muito para a Costa: e assim se

*Fig 1. A description of the account about the wrecking of the Bom Jesus. Source: Rambling (2014).*

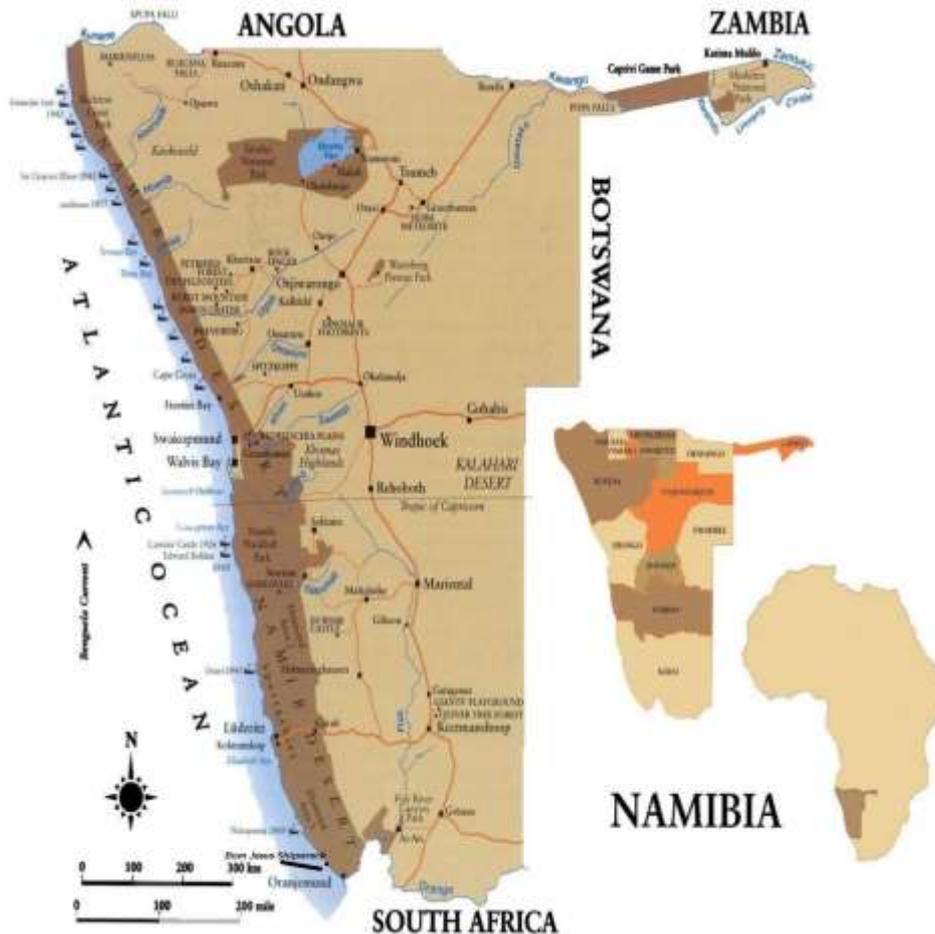
According to Smith (2009) no human remains were found on the shipwreck except for a human toe in a shoe, this was a remarkable find even though no laboratory tests has been done to prove if the bone in a shoe is indeed a human bone.

According to Chirikure, Sinamai, Goagoses, Mubusisi and Ngoro (2010) the bone was indeed an animal bone this is based on visual assessments, no laboratory test were done with this conclusion as well. With an overwhelming absence of human bones on the wreck site and the fact that the Bom Jesus shipwreck sank just two hundred meters from the shore (Smith, 2009) there is a high probability that most if not all sailors made it to the shore, then what happened from there we are unsure and little (Rambling 2014) to no information has been written.

The wreck site was discovered in 2008 (Chirikure et al, 2010) in an inhabited area, twenty kilometres south lies the orange river that could have offered a lifeline to the sailors, navigating along this river to the east joins the Limpopo river that meanders its way to east Africa discharging its volume of water in the Indian ocean, the choices of the captain would have meant life and death to all survivors, did they head north or into the sandy interior that lies east? What sort of people did they meet? Could they have been given food by indigenous people as provision to their journey as it has been East Africa among Portuguese shipwrecked survivors (Hanzimanolis 2009)? This research therefore wish to tackle some of these questions by analysing Portuguese shipwreck sailors' interaction with the local people in East Africa in order for presumption comparison to be made. Thus an analysis of the wealth of indigenous people of the Namib coast by which the Bom Jesus sailors could have traded with was made.

The Mary rose shipwreck was discovered with all its human cargo intact (Marsden 2003) after it was capsized in a battle with the French in the English channel in 1545, very interestingly is the fact that both ships have remarkable similar artefacts owing to the same period that both were in operation, Mary rose sinking (1545) some twelve years later after the Bom Jesus 1533. Inhabitants of the Namibian coast

For thousands of years the country has been inhabited by the *Khoisan* people, who culturally can be divided into two groups. The “*San*” and “*Khoekhoe*”, they belong to the same ethnicity or race (Kinahan 2004, 45), thus distinction between the two groups lies within their cultural and economic practices. Historically the Khoekhoe or Nama people inhabited the coastal and western extreme of the country and economically are pastoralists, the San people on the other hand are hunter gatherers who inhabited the north central and eastern regions of Namibia (Kinahan 2004, 153).



**Fig 2. The Bom Jesus shipwreck indicated north of Oranjemund town on the map. Source Mowa (2010)**

According to Kinahan (2000, 155) livestock were introduced in the first millennia AD to the hunter gatherers in Southern Africa by groups of Bantu people migrating from the Central Africa. Some Khoisan people inhabited the area around Brandberg before some of them transformed from hunter gatherers to pastoralism.

A group of pastoralists migrating from North-Central Africa are said to have introduced livestock rearing to the Khoekhoe (Kinahan 2004, 166) a question of identity that is still debatable in the country to this day and age on the origin of the Damara people (Blench, 1999), these are somewhat dark skinned people that speak the Khoisan language and inhabit the central and western part of Namibia, Damarans were also copper-smiths known for their ability

to melt copper and used to make ornaments, jewellery, knives and spear heads out of iron, it is thought such workmanship came with them from central Africa even though little anthropological evidence points to this. The Namib coastal areas especially along perennial rivers have been inhabited by the Nama people (belongs to the Khoisan ethnic group). The Nama people are pastoralists who inhabited southern and western part of Namibia, According to Kinahan (2004) these are the groups who came in contact with the European seafarers on the Namib coast.

Since the early Portuguese explorers such as Diego Cao, the coast has claimed thousands of ships (figure 5) and human life due to absence of permanent fresh water, the coast became known as the “Skeleton Coast” in reference to thousands of shipwrecks, whale bones and human remains found there (Werz 2007, 124).



*Figure 3. Eduad Bolen one of thousands of shipwrecks that fell victims to the treacherous coast (Rijsdijk 2009).*

## RESULTS

Hanzimanolis (2009) identified eleven accounts of Portuguese shipwreck narratives on the Southern Coast of Africa dating between 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century, her narrative compilation gives historical accounts of Portuguese shipwreck survivors in Southern Africa and shows how they kept alive while they marched on foot to Portuguese ports in East Africa, the narratives describes the social life of the survivors, trade conducted, food they ate and the people they met.

This description on the working condition of Portuguese *Naus* explains why shipwrecks were recurrent on the *Carreira da India* “*The scramble for control of the shipping routes and trading network was characterised by voyages that were often recklessly planned and the galleon that were pressed into service were often overloaded, inadequately outfitted or structurally unsound particularly those returning to Portugal*” Hanzimanolis (2009,47).

**Table 1. The first five shipwreck narrative accounts in Southern Africa, Adapted from Hanzimanolis (2009, 38).**

Name and date of shipwreck	Place of shipwreck	Initial/eventual survivors	Time in southern Africa	Food bartered
St John (1552)	100 km south of Durban	500/25	5.5 months	Scarcity.Millet,milk and "Provision"for five days at delagoa bay,
St Benedict (1554)	Near port St John	322/62	7 Month	Scarcity:,millet milk,goats,hens at four battering spots
Santiago ~(1585)	Mozambique channel	300(est.)/30-50	5 Months	-
St.Thomas(1589)	St.Lucia Bay	98+*30-50	3 Months	Abudance:no description give.
St.Albert(1593)	Near East London	285/181	4 Months(100 days travelling)	Abudance.Hundreds of cattle;Sheep,goats,hens,also milk,millet,beans and melons.

### The St John (1552)

The first narrative was that by Captain *Camoës* who was wrecked with the St John in 1552, he describes the inhabitants of the Southern Coast of Africa as unfriendly in that when his men approached the inhabitants (likely the Zulu kingdom subjects) for trade they were chased and several of his men were wounded.

Nevertheless in the course of the trek they came to a village on the East African Coast and the people were more friendly and receptive; trade was conducted, Hanzimanolis (2009,39) states that beads and bells were exchanged for gathered honey, this provision was enough to last them a few days before they reached another village.

The St John was wrecked 100 kilometres south of modern day town of Durban in South Africa, Initial survivors were about 500 but only 25 made it to East Africa and the reason for many deaths was due to lack of good leadership (Hanzimanolis 2009, 39). The captain (leader) was described to be uncooperative with the rest of the crew thus divisions resulted, lack of mutual understanding with the local peoples was also highlighted as a factor as

a result they had no food for a prolonged time; thus starvation and lack of fresh water claimed the lives of many of the survivors even though they had provision from an African king who gave them millet and milk that lasted for only five days (Hanzimanolis 2009).

#### St Benedict (1554)

The second shipwreck was the St Benedict (1554) that wrecked two years after the St John, this one had 322 survivors and only 62 of that number were rescued after about seven months in the wilderness. Cannibalism was reported to have been frequent among the survivors, victims were those who were too weak to continue with the journey and were likely to die. It is possible that the scarcity of settlements contributed to the high mortality rate, scarcity of settlements was also due to drought that forced local people to move to other areas, according to the narrative they reported seeing abandoned settlements, cultivated land and kraals which suggest that there were people living there before (Hanzimanolis 2009, 40).

#### Santiago (1585)

The third shipwreck in chronological order is the Santiago, shipwrecked in 1585 about 30 years after the St Benedict. It was wrecked in the Mozambique Channel, it also had a similar high mortality rate, out of 300 survivors only 30-50 survivors completed the journey through to Portuguese ports in East Africa, and it is unknown as to why the mortality rate was high. Possibility of an outbreak of a disease is a plausible explanation.

#### St Thomas (1589) and St Albert (1593)

The other two ship wrecked in the late 16th century was the St Thomas 1589 and St Albert 1593, both had the highest survival rate of the five ships under discussion. The high survival rate was due to the abundance of African settlements along their path which means trade took place with indigenous people they encountered, this is best demonstrated by an episode when one local chief they came across graciously offered them to stay in his village for a few days and before they departed he gave them a provision of five chicken a day for each person this provision led to the situation where by out of 285 initial survivors 181 made it to the Portuguese ports in East Africa (Hanzimanolis 2009, 40).

## DISCUSSION

We can clearly see that the survival rate of shipwrecked survivors among the five narratives under discussion was low and depended on availability of settlements. This is despite the fact that these survivors marched through East Africa whose biomes has abundant permanent water bodies and plenty of rainfall compared to the desert coast of Namibia where the *Bom Jesus* shipwreck survivors found themselves. The Namibian coast has fewer fresh water permanent water bodies even the interior is as dry thus sparsely populated (Werz 2007) therefore the chances of survival for a month or more in this environment is close to zero.

Nevertheless the coast of Namibia is rich in marine life (Smith 2009) and if we assume that the *Bom Jesus shipwreck* survivors marched north along the coast; there is naturally available food such as beached whales (Kinahan J 2000), shell fish, Nara plants, that could have kept them alive for few days even though thirst in a hot desert would had decimated their numbers.

If we assume that they marched south (fig 3), there is abundance in desert snails, beached whales, shellfish and fresh water along the Orange river just 20km South (Smith 2009), this could have kept the survivors in good health for some time provided they marched along the river or carried enough water.



**Figure 4.** There are three plausible options the Bom Jesus shipwreck captain would have chosen to trek. Namely southern trek (Green), river trek (Blue) and northern trek (Black). Blue is the plausible option for optimal survival of the sailors Source: Author

According to Smith (2009, 6) beached whales often find it difficult to make their way back in the sea once they become trapped in the rocks. Kinahan (2000, 16) points out that some of the Khoekhoe groups particularly the *Aonin* along the Namib coast after losing their cattle in the 18<sup>th</sup> century through trade with American whalers began to scavenge on these beached whales, this was the period American whalers were prevalent on the Namibian seas hunting of sperm whales and also conducting trade with the locals to supplement their diet, cattle were exchanged for European goods such as beads and tobacco and guns to mention a few. Archaeological excavation conducted along the mouth of the Kuisieb River attests to this (Kinahan 2000, 44).

As stated shipwreck survivors in Southern Africa depended upon availability of settlements to provide both water and food, good leadership and attitudes towards natives was a factor, negative attitudes towards locals led to situations of wariness among locals leading to no trade and lack of provision that resulted in high mortality. Availability of settlements resulted in trade and good provision of food and water thus high number of shipwreck survivors made it to East Africa. It is for this reason that we investigate and analyse the native population along the Namib coast by which the *Bom Jesus* shipwreck survivors would have come in contact with.

The first explorer to venture at this coast was a Portuguese by the name of *Diogo Cao* at the instructions of Henry the navigator he was to explore the route to India by sea (Axelson 1973). Upon reaching the Namib coast, Cao was attracted by a large colony of brown seals and from here he set up his *pradaos* or cross, at a place known as Cape Cross (figure 4), interestingly this was the furthest point Cao reached on his journey before he returned back. (Axelson 1973).

The second Portuguese explorer was Bartholomew Dias, Dias left his store ship at Luderitz on 25 July 1488 and raised his third *Pradao* at Luderitz and left a store ship with nine men and three women who Axelson (1973,112) describes that they were slaves taken from West Africa. In support of this fact Axelson (1973,107) states that three skeletons presumably left by Dias in 1488 have been archaeologically excavated and are kept in a special museum at Luderitz. It is not clear how they died and it is not known whether they were killed by men Bartholomew Dias had left with the store ship or they were killed by the local Khoekhoe who were always hostile of foreigners (Kinahan 2000, 17) it is also possible that they died from starvation and thirst.

According to Kinahan (2000, 21) the earliest recorded European ships to come to this coast was the Dutch East India Company ships *Grundel* and *Boode* that visited Walvis bay for trade in 1670 and 1677 but without success. Lieutenant Botcher of the *Baracounta* in 18<sup>th</sup> century experienced a south easterly gale off the Namibian coast on the 21<sup>st</sup> November 1825 (Boxer 1984, 161) that it forced him to go onshore at *Angra Paquena* (Luderitz) to determine his latitude. It is not clear from his account whether any trade was conducted with the local people.



**Figure 5.** A drawing entitled “*Topnaar Hottentots spearing fish*” Walvis Bay, 1864, by Thomas Baines: Source: (Kinahan 2000,2)

Axelson (1973,104) observes that “*Bartholomew Dias and his men might have encountered the Hottentots who lived in villages at saint Helena bay, and whose way of life did not change until the late nineteenth century.* (Axelson 1973, 104-105) Furthermore Kinahan (2000, 40) describes that; “*their wealth was depended on cattle and sheep and on marine life*”.

Captain Benjamin Morell of the British sealing vessels on the Namib coast off Luderitz observed the indigenous people and describes that “*with their sixteen foot lances they could*

*spear seven or ten pound fishes at a distance of thirty yards and arrows shot from their longbow could drop a gull on the wing at a distance of fifty yards. They had techniques of drying and preserving sea birds so that they could be preserved for the whole year*". It is plausible to state that despite the scarcity of settlements there were indeed settlements that existed here along the Namib coast 300-500 km north of the initial wreck site.

Furthermore Kinahan (2000, 16) argues that when the American whalers identified the Namibian coast to be a good whaling ground for sperm whales; their whaling season would last up to four years during this time they would rely on the local inhabitants to supply them with meat and they would exchange goods such as tobacco, pipes, rum, tin ware, wire, cloth, soap, muskets, and gunpowder for cattle.

Captain *Cecille* of the French Corvette *L'Heroine* describes his visit to *Angra Paquena* (Luderitz) in 1835 that the rate of trade was "two flasks of gun powder for a 300lb ox, and an inferior quality gun for two oxen, in the north at Walvis bay captain *Cecille* found that there was no cattle for trade, he acquired a goat and three kids for less than a pound of tobacco" (Kinahan 2000,17). This account apart from opening our eyes that indeed there were settlements along the South Western Coast of Africa it also explains why the Khoisan people lost cattle to trade within such a short period.

British sealers at *Angra Paquena* (Luderitz) conducted trade in livestock with the Khoisan as well. In 1786 Captain Thomas Bolden Thompson on a voyage by the order of the admiralty to survey the South West African Coast reported on the lack of fresh water at this coast which prompted the admiralty to opt for Botany Bay in Australia instead (Kinahan 1991, 16).



**Figure 6. A late 19<sup>th</sup> German sketch map of Walvis Bay and the lagoon; Log no: C625/3. Courtesy of the (Hydrographic office 2010).**

When the Dutch East India Company ships *Grundel* and *Boonde* visited the Namib coast to trade bangles and beads for cattle; the local inhabitants are reported to have reacted with fear and suspicion which discouraged further Dutch exploration of the coast, interestingly though is the fact that the Dutch remained armed while wanting to negotiate trade with the locals which is possibly why trade negotiations did not work (Kinahan 2000, 15).

At *Angra Paquena* (Ludritz) Captain Thompson Thomas Bolden after failing to find the

Orange River mouth is said to have been confronted by hostile inhabitants, they did not allow his seamen to come closer from the shore while at Walvis Bay people approached Thompson and his men and escorted them to their villages (Kinahan 2000, 16).

Captain Duminy followed Captain Thompson in 1793 and he describes that at Walvis bay the local inhabitants were so wary of the Europeans and this reaction to Captain Duminy and his men at Walvis Bay is in sharp contrast with the reception Captain Thompson received there earlier; this can best be explained by examining some European attitudes and behaviour towards local people.

Kinahan (2000, 17) describes the behaviour of American whalers as “*violent, strong drinker, women chaser and hail raisers*”. Prestage (1933, 129 -133) states that’s upon reaching Saint Helena Bay in 1498 Vasco da Gamma anchored and saw the natives and came onshore with boats (possibly to capture them as slaves). He ordered his men to seize and capture the natives while they were unaware, however this did not happen as planned the inhabitants fought back, Captain Goncalo Alvares of the *Sao Gabriel* and two other men were injured in the skirmish, Vasco da gamma himself was also wounded on the leg by arrows that rained on their boats as they escaped back to their ship. Vasco da Gamma is said to have commanded his men to arm themselves for revenge and engage with the natives, Prestage (1933) does not give any further details about the outcome of the fight. It is likely that such behaviours would have likely contributed towards warring the natives against Europeans.

## CONCLUSION

It is inconclusive however with the absence of narratives or sources to state that the shipwreck survivors of the *Bom Jesus* travelled in the northerly direction, southern direction or eastern direction. However it is plausible that seasoned sailors if they were any on-board would have known that Cape of Good Hope was not far and trekking south would have been the conceivable decision. The people of South Western part of Africa are traditionally pastoralist even before the 16<sup>th</sup> century, thus whether the *Bom Jesus* shipwreck survivors trekked north or south, it is more likely that they came across wealthy pastoralists who possessed cattle, sheep and goats as we have seen the Namib coastal inhabitants. In regard to the *Bom Jesus* shipwreck survivors with a good attitude towards natives it is likely they would have had a provision of food along the way and a high survival rate if they had wisely navigated the Orange River all the way to East Africa. This is supported by the fact that in the 18<sup>th</sup> century the inhabitants of the Namib coast lost their cattle owing to unfair exchange with the American whalers and European seafarers. The five narratives of shipwreck survivors in East Africa paints a vivid picture on the factors at play in determining life or death of the sailors in that the availability or unavailability of settlements along the way was a key factor that either led to a high mortality rate due to lack of food and water or to a high survival rates of sailors reaching the Portuguese ports in East Africa if provision was attained.

Could the same factor have played a role in the 1533 when the *Bom Jesus* wrecked? This paper thus opens a door for more questions to be asked and research to be conducted in the quest to unravel the fate of the *Bom Jesus* shipwreck survivors.

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