

THE 'BURDEN' OF YOUNG MEN: PROPERTY AND GENERATIONAL CONFLICT IN NAMIBIA, 1880-1945

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I

Central to the colonial experience for most Africans were the new forms of property introduced by European traders, missionaries, and officials. Africans experienced goods such as clothing, guns, liquor, blankets and bicycles not only as new objects to be owned, but also as embodying new methods of property accumulation, whether through the sale of humans, the marketing of agricultural produce, or labor migrancy. And yet while Europeans introduced these goods and often shaped the means by which they were obtained, they could not control their meaning and distribution within African societies. Instead, local dynamics and power relationships provided the context within which these products were assigned both value and ownership.

This article examines these new forms of property within the framework of one such local relationship: cross-generational interactions and conflicts within the northern Namibian societies of Ombalantu and Ongandjera, situated in the region commonly known as Ovamboland. Relationships between old and young were crucial in shaping the meanings European objects acquired in the late precolonial period and in shaping access to and control over the objects themselves when they became more widely available in the colonial period. In particular, the era of long-distance trade, intensive raiding, and impoverishment which occurred from about 1880 to 1917 resulted in widespread generational conflict. The sense of instability and deprivation left young people — children and unmarried adults — open to outside influences and hence to the alternative definitions of status and identity posited by missionaries and labor recruiters. It was these disaffected young people, largely excluded from traditional forms of wealth by the raiding economy and sociopolitical change, who created the system of meanings and value associated with European goods.

The transformation in generational relations during these decades forms the context of a second focus of this study — the way in which generational faultlines affected access to these goods. After South Africa effectively colonized northern Namibia and ended raiding in 1917, these generational divisions continued to have relevance and young people continued to seek out European products. They flocked to join churches against their parents' wishes, in order to obtain European goods from missionaries handing them out as "gifts" to attract converts. But the contract labor economy, which was regulated and expanded after 1917, provided a new and more reliable source of European goods whereby recruits could earn cash wages and make their purchases in stores near labor centers. Young women desiring these commodi-

ties were barred from the main channels of access because colonial officials limited wage-earning opportunities through contract labor to men.

Also in the early colonial period, older people began to adopt the culture of the young and to seek access to these new forms of status themselves. Older men, most of whom were unwilling to leave their homes for long periods of time to engage in contract labor, manipulated a precolonial system of intergenerational gift-giving known as *omutenge* as a means of appropriating the products of young men's labor. The struggle over control of the property thus became one primarily between old and young *men*, and only secondarily between the men who won and the women who tried to lay claim to a share of the prize.¹

Finally, I inquire into the wider meaning of cross-generational relationships for understanding African history and critique the way in which historians of Africa, still tied to a model of African gerontocracies, traditionally have treated the concept of age and junior versus senior status. At a time when many scholars have made great strides in historicizing social faultlines such as class or gender, few have undertaken a similar task with regard to generation. Yet the one is no less important than the others in understanding historical processes.

Insecure Futures and Generational Revolt

The meanings invested in European goods by the colonial period arose out of the era of raiding and long-distance trade in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.² European traders venturing into the Ovambo societies of northern Namibia and southern Angola dealt primarily with kings who monopolized supplies of ivory. When elephant herds were depleted, traders returned for cattle and humans, which kings procured by reworking the traditional practice of raiding, plundering not only the wealth of neighboring societies but also that of their own subjects. A concentration of power and economic resources thus resulted. This concentration had several facets. One was an east-west divide. Eastern kingdoms which were larger were also geographically more accessible to European trade routes. Thus the eastern kingdoms were the first to obtain firearms; they then used those arms to raid smaller western societies, such as Ombalantu and Ongandjera.³ Eastern kingdoms also blocked traders from proceeding west, thereby partially excluding western regions from access to firearms and other European goods.

But another facet of this royal concentration of power and wealth concerns generational divisions. Even kings in western societies had some access to European goods, from traders who ventured into the area and from Finnish Evangelical Lutheran missionaries stationed there after about 1890. Indeed, access to European goods was the primary reason that western Ovambo kings tolerated missionaries, and Europeans who failed to deliver soon found themselves expelled from the kingdom. Ombalantu was an exception to this rule; as the only large decentralized Ovambo society, traders apparently found the community closed or unworkable as a trading partner.⁴ But in all areas of Ovamboland, the increase in long-distance trading enriched royalty at the expense of others, particularly young people.⁵ And even in relatively isolated areas such as Ombalantu, the rank and file were deeply affected by the raiding economy —

if not by their own rulers' greed, then by the accumulation of resources in the hands of eastern elites. South African colonial officials, by defining as "traditional" the landscape they came upon in 1915, threatened to further entrench the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of rulers and, in particular, eastern rulers.

Central to understanding how meanings and value came to be assigned to these new influences is the nature of people's receptivity to new methods of gaining wealth and status within their societies at this time. And central to understanding this receptivity is their assessment of the older systems of wealth and power as they appeared on the eve of colonialism. Over the long term, the generation of young people coming of age in the early twentieth century stood to lose the most in the redistribution of power and resources. Raised in an era of slaving, violence and raiding and then subjected to the uncertainties of colonial transformations, however disguised, they did not know any other situation. The result was a series of actions which were designed to ensure young people's economic and social security but which looked like rebellion against kings and elders, and were treated as such.

Ovambo society disadvantaged its junior members in a number of ways. Missionaries noted that young people suffered most in times of famine in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries and indicated that patterns of household resource distribution favored elders somewhat on a regular, daily basis.⁶ In addition, there is evidence that raiders preferred to capture young people as slaves, at least for local use, because they more quickly forgot their families and were less likely to escape. In a time when households were being depleted of resources, the chances that young captives would be ransomed were small and growing smaller. The development of a long-distance trade in slaves to Angola's plantations heightened the sense of insecurity.

But there were also more subtle changes pervading the social structures of Ovambo society. Young people were dependent on their elders for permission to move ahead with virtually any aspect of their lives — that is, to attain the status that many anthropologists have seen as arising "naturally" from the process of aging. Parental permission was required for girls to undergo initiation and then to marry, and young men were dependent on their fathers and matriclans for access to stock which would enable them to marry and establish their own households. Although obviously there are no comprehensive statistical data, all available reports from the late nineteenth century and throughout the colonial period indicate that this stage of "youth" was drawn out in Ovambo society far more than it was in most preindustrial societies, with women being initiated in their late teens and beyond (and according to one ethnography, into their thirties), and both women and men marrying quite late.⁷ It was the duration of this "junior" status that might have become particularly contested terrain during the late nineteenth century, as the resources necessary to move toward senior status were depleted.

Children in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were enormously mobile and their family ties subject to uprooting. Probably a third of the people I interviewed who were born in the precolonial period had grown up in households other than those of their parents.⁸ Some had been captured in slave raids, some had been orphaned by famine, and some had been "given" to relatives without children

who lived dozens of kilometers away, or had been shuffled about when marriages ended or when parents were expelled from a kingdom.⁹ Orphans and those without lasting family ties were especially eager to leave their houses, since they were often treated worse than their guardian's own children.¹⁰ Frustrations over the lateness of "adulthood" were thus surely heightened at a time when young people's family situations were increasingly insecure.

And yet the socio-economic upheavals of the era of raiding and trade with Europeans delayed decisions on marriage and initiation still further, for young people were often key to household recovery strategies. Families struggling to reconstitute their herds were likely to delay permission for young men to marry in order to avoid losing cattle to bridewealth in the east or to "gifts" necessary to start a young man in adult life in the west.¹¹ The depletion of family herds meant it also took longer for these men, once married, to collect the resources necessary to leave their father's house and start their own household. Extending the time a husband and his new wife had to live at home was generally undesirable to the young couple, given the conflicts which often arose between a new wife and her in-laws. And even if the man's family was willing to let him marry to obtain the extra labor power, households teetering near starvation were not likely to forfeit a young woman's labor power, especially in the west where it was not compensated with bridewealth.¹² Young unmarried women's labor was especially important in Ongandjera and Ombalantu, where polygamy was a fairly minimal institution and a man thus typically had fewer hands in his household to help cultivate. Young people were therefore held in their parents' direct control longer than in many rural societies, and for longer still in times of economic crisis.¹³ And in inheritance — vital as a mechanism for both young men and young women to collect livestock — there was less to go around once raiders, kings, rinderpest and drought had depleted the family herds.

There was little that young people could do about this situation within the hierarchies that they inherited. They were severely disadvantaged in any family negotiations over the timing of initiation or marriage, and informants report that guardians held young people back when it suited them.¹⁴ Similarly, they had no reliable way to pressure their elders into giving them their share of wealth immediately; the timing of this also was determined by these elders. Young people recognized this vulnerability, and it is certain that their desire for European goods, and for the distinct forms of mobility and community that migrancy and churches offered, was linked to their deteriorating position within the wider society. They looked to new ideas and systems of authority as alternatives that might hold a better promise of more reliable networks, increased status, and economic power.¹⁵ It was for these reasons that young people joined the churches in large numbers, risking even ostracism, physical punishment, and expulsion by their parents for affiliation with a foreign institution whose belief system clashed with many aspects of local values, but which nonetheless posited new ideas of wealth and status and promised young people the tools to acquire them.

In centralized Ovambo societies such as Ongandjera during the late precolonial period, the possession of European goods came to be synonymous with wealth and power. To a large extent, European products such as firearms and horses gave a person the means to forcibly obtain indigenous goods; this created a link between the two

forms of wealth. Men with European clothing, horses, and manufactured goods were also those with enormous herds of cattle, secure grain fields guarded with firearms, and many dependents.

In a society where European goods and ideas represented not necessarily colonial power, but indigenous, localized power, institutions which promised such goods exerted a powerful influence over those suffering most from the existing situation. Kings were seen as powerful not because they had what missionaries had; the displays of power were on the other side. Missionaries were seen as useful because they had what kings had, and were more willing to share it with young people. Migrancy served as yet another means of getting European goods, and there is evidence that some young people went south without parental permission throughout the colonial period,¹⁶ while others probably negotiated with their parents or were forced to go. Christianity and labor migration therefore fed off each other. Returning laborers often converted, and the desire for European goods was encouraged by the missionaries, prompting many more young men to engage in contract labor.

It is important to emphasize that young people engaged in contract labor and devoted themselves to missionaries in response to real socioeconomic problems, not just because they liked the clothing or rituals they had been exposed to at labor centers.¹⁷ The attraction of literacy must similarly be situated in a local context; in the early colonial period, there was no indication that literacy and formal education would lead to economic advancement in the colony. Rather, the product of young people's labors and the rituals and knowledge stood for something which held a promise that rapidly changing local economies did not. They served as an alternative source of wealth and status to which young people had access.¹⁸

Young people thus created an alternative cultural sphere independent of and often in opposition to that of their parents — a world with its own set of values and meanings.¹⁹ European clothing was the external marker of membership in this community, but was not its sole feature. In its early years, Christianity seems to have been spread by a network of young laborers and children of both sexes. Their stories indicate not only the growing importance of European goods to young people in particular, but also the creation of an age-based, closed cultural community and set of social practices outside their elders' purview. Children would show their friends the counting or reading skills or the clothing they had acquired by attending the mission school, and would persuade their peers to follow them to church. There, the newcomers would carefully watch the rituals and behavior of the more experienced, sitting when they sat, kneeling when they knelt, and learning the words of the hymns from them.²⁰ Oral history also indicates that the number of children attending church would have been still larger were it not for actual bans imposed by parents on church attendance; as it was, many children would slip away from home with their friends, shirking their chores and potentially causing a household conflict for the chance to take part in this generation-specific social experience. Parents retaliated by physically restraining children, depriving them of dinner, or permanently expelling them from the house.²¹

The locality of the forces shaping such responses is supported by mission records showing that young girls, who were barred from labor centers and thus had never been around Europeans to any extent, were actually the majority of converts until the

early 1940s.²² Reinforcing the idea that “gender” in this case cannot be treated as a monolithic category but must be constantly intertwined with age is the practical absence of middle-aged adult women from congregations at this time.

II

Transformations in both household economies and identities of young people are reflected in the shifting motivations and migration patterns of laborers. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, labor migration was a way for young men to compensate for subsistence economies contracting under the weight of rinderpest, famine and an economy based on raiding with firearms for slaves and cattle. Impoverishment and hunger drove most young men south; others went to earn money to purchase the cattle they could no longer obtain by right at home.²³ But in the decades after colonial conquest, local economies were temporarily strengthened by improved rains, the cessation of raiding, and sufficient famine aid to prevent starvation. At this time, many people chose to focus their energies toward their homes and attempted to replenish family herds and grain reserves. Some continued to go south because they were faced with hunger, but until the 1940s, when subsistence economies again began to contract, they were not in the majority. Nor was there a cash tax to be paid in Ovamboland at this time; laborers were thus not subject to the “economic coercion” that obtained in other African colonies.

Instead, informants reported almost universally that, in the three decades after conquest, migrancy increased dramatically because of the growing importance of European goods within Ovambo economies.²⁴ Contract labor was a temporary undertaking, whereby laborers, who were almost universally young and unmarried, would earn money to buy European goods and then return home. This pattern was repeated until they had substantial savings; after marriage men generally avoided going on contract. The cultural realignment of young people on the side of the missionaries fed this desire for goods, and sparked many generational battles, most of them centered on missionary influence and Christian beliefs forbidding initiation and participation in other indigenous rituals.²⁵ But migrancy became a source of conflict as well, for some laborers left their homes without parental permission, having independently decided to go south after hearing about the potential benefits from networks of returned laborers. One informant left his home at the age of ten without telling his family, and found work on a European-owned farm.²⁶ In such circumstances, a laborer might bring gifts back to his family members to smooth the way for his return, since they would probably be angry at his action.²⁷ Yet such covert migrancy was apparently not common. Rather, an alternative situation, where family permission was sought with the promise of gifts upon the laborer’s return, was the more common one. The system of laborers giving gifts to their older relatives seems to have worked until the 1930s, when families consistently began to seek more from a laborer than a few trinkets upon his return.

A measure of young people’s success in legitimizing alternative definitions of wealth and status can be seen in what began to happen fairly quickly in Ovambo societies. Non-Christians, particularly older men, began using European names and

wearing European clothing, and began demanding a share of those goods that young people obtained. Ultimately, by their very success at defining and legitimizing these alternate identities and cultural spheres, young people inadvertently created new conflicts in the society, centered along "traditional" and "modern" values and cutting across pre-existing faultlines of generation, gender, class and self-identification. At first, however, struggles to obtain the new forms of property remained within a generational matrix and revolved particularly around migrant labor, which held out the promise of enriching the household as a whole. Children might gain a set of clothes or a few beads from missionaries, but this was not a steady flow of goods into their families. Migrancy, on the other hand, brought substantial new resources into the community which could be shared around — and hence fought over. Laborers were going south to get goods they wanted, but as the demand for those goods grew, the system became more complex. Young males now had a substantial weapon to use in negotiations over the timing of marriage and the redistribution of family herds.

European goods could only be obtained at great cost — by a man leaving his family, fields and herds, and going to a labor center, where wages were even lower than they were in South Africa. For older men with their own households, this was not considered a viable option before the mid-1940s. It was in this context that the issue of controlling young men's labor power took on a new importance, for young men were seen as channels through which elder men could gain access to the new forms of status. And until the 1940s, young men were overwhelmingly the labor force; in fact, boys younger than the minimum age constantly tried to slip through official checks, indicating that the median age of the labor force would have been even younger had it not been for colonial restrictions.²⁸ In documents from the first three decades of colonial rule, officials commented time and again that married men with their own households would not go south to labor.²⁹ The demographics of the labor force began to change in the postwar period, as subsistence economies began to decline noticeably and as the demand for manufactured goods grew to a point where married men were willing to make the sacrifice of leaving their farms in order to satisfy these new "needs."

But before World War II, for those older men who had sons of laboring age, there was a workable mechanism through which to obtain the new symbols of wealth and status without assuming the costs involved in leaving home for an extended period of time. This was known as *omutenge*. To marry in Ombalantu and Ongandjera, a young man needed his father's permission and also required a beast, preferably a head of cattle. In special circumstances, a young man's first beast might be killed during the wedding feast, as it was in some eastern areas where it was actually a sort of bridewealth. But more generally, it was simply necessary to own at least one head of cattle because this was the mark of an adult man who was ready for marriage. Before the migrant labor economy was established, some young men received this beast through a practice known as *omutenge* (literally, "burden"). *Omutenge* was some sort of service or payment — salt from the pans to the south or millet from cultivation — which was given to an older male relative, usually the father, as a gift. In exchange, a young man would get a beast — either a goat or a cow depending on the size of the "gift" and the resources of the father.³⁰

Many informants were vague on how *omutenge* had been fulfilled before migrant labor was common, which indicates that it had been only a marginal practice in the precolonial era and that young men had other ways to obtain livestock. But rinderpest, raiding and drought in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries caused a dramatic decline in stock resources, and it may have been this change that initially gave older men power to demand more from young men in exchange for their first cow or goat. *Omutenge* perhaps only became universal when access to cash became important and when these other channels — inheritance, voluntary gifts from maternal uncles, service to a king, or raiding, for instance — were closed due to livestock shortages. The transformation in the *omutenge* requirement doubtless occurred gradually and had not begun when contract labor first started. But oral testimony indicates that it became the norm very quickly, probably by the mid-1920s.

When migrant labor was first instituted during the German colonial period, wages were high relative to the cost of goods. But by 1918, officials noted that earnings were not keeping pace with inflation, and that this was harming recruiting: "... formerly they reckoned on getting the equivalent of a beast for a term of service in the South and some consider they get less value now."³¹ Some informants estimated that by the 1930s and 1940s, four contracts would have been needed to save money for a cow.³² This statement indicates a decline in the real value of wages measured against local forms of wealth. In the very earliest days of labor migration, therefore, some young men could avoid the need to rely on male relatives for the property which would allow them to marry, by contracting in the south and then using their cash earnings to purchase a beast, usually from traders in Angola.³³ But as earnings fell relative to costs, this option became less feasible and *omutenge* became central to the intersection of the traditional and migrant labor economies.

Informants report that earnings or goods purchased with the earnings from their first contract were almost invariably given to their fathers or some other male relative as a "gift," which would smooth the way for them to receive their first beast and permission to marry.³⁴ Sometimes more than one contract's earnings were required. The colloquial expression for going south, "getting one's ax," refers directly to the idea of getting the things one needed for marriage. Most laborers did not actually buy an ax in the south (such tools could as easily be obtained from local smiths); rather, the expression refers to the whole process of earning and then giving cash or goods to a senior relative in exchange for those items one needed in order to marry — in particular, a beast.³⁵

The new version of *omutenge* represented a significant reassertion of the elders' authority, although this was not absolute. In some ways, both parties benefitted, since the wages from one contract were insufficient to buy a head of cattle. Young men were getting more than the product of their labor in local currency by providing goods for elders who did not wish to engage in contract labor. *Omutenge* was thus a way of linking two systems of wealth, and this is why the system remained viable despite the increasing economic resources of young men.

But these laborers were nevertheless largely at the mercy of their elders. The amount of *omutenge* that was owed was probably negotiated between junior and senior family members, but the elder men almost certainly had an advantage, because

livestock continued to be central to definitions of wealth and was difficult to obtain. It became more so as the price of cattle continued to inflate on the cash market, and as herds shrank due to drought and overpopulation caused by colonial policies.³⁶ There also seems to have been some pressure on men to go south for *omutenge* regardless of whether they had access to cattle or not; fathers or uncles certainly had other sources of authority with which to force reluctant young men to go, for they dictated the timing of a young man's marriage, and a man and his bride typically lived with the husband's in-laws for several years.³⁷ This inequality is vividly recalled even today. Some sons would return from the south and present their earnings to their father, only to be told that they were inadequate and the son would have to go on another contract.³⁸ Undoubtedly the higher-paying jobs permitted men to provide *omutenge* faster. Understanding the centrality of *omutenge* to the migrant labor economy provides a new perspective on numerous features of that economy, from the patterns of migration and age of the migrants to the aversion of many men to working low-paying jobs on farms.

But to understand what *omutenge* did to social relationships in the short term, it is important to realize what it had been before contract labor existed. It is certain that the "burden" involved in *omutenge* increased substantially after it was redefined in terms of a cash economy and became universal practice. A man could get a goat or a cow in the precolonial era, presumably in times of plenty, by collecting salt from the pans for his father. One trip to the salt pans south of the settled Ovambo region took a total of six days. Or he could raise a field of millet and give the harvest to his father. Raising the millet took several months, but it certainly did not occupy all of the cultivator's time. Once *omutenge* became linked to the contract labor system, what was required was a young man's entire earnings from *at least* one labor contract — from one year to eighteen months spent in isolation from his community, living and working in harsh physical conditions.

In addition, *omutenge* became something that every man had to provide if he wished to get livestock from his father, while the uncertainty of informants about earlier systems indicates that it was perhaps not a universal practice in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. And when compared to earlier ways of fulfilling *omutenge*, migrancy involved far more labor output for no greater reward. This "inflation" was due to an encroaching colonial economy which, even if it rarely affected Ovambo communities directly, nevertheless set monetary values on objects that the Ovambo wanted, underscoring exactly how "cheap" the labor of these young men was.

IV

Anthropologists have in the past identified a number of social fractures regarded as common to most African societies. Meillassoux targeted inequalities between men and women and juniors and elders, positing a static view of African societies which perpetually reproduce themselves through hierarchies based on gender and age.³⁹ While recognizing the functionalism of his model, scholars have largely accepted the divisions he identified as a basis for understanding most African societ-

ies. In addition, distinctions in wealth or status, usually termed “class” differences, have been duly noted, whether class is taken to be a descriptive or an analytical, Marxist term.

Of these faultlines, both gender and class have been subjected to rigorous historical analysis, whereby scholars have shown how such divisions open up to yield conflict in times of crisis and change such as the colonial period. Meanwhile, however, generation has languished in the old view of stasis. Recently, some historians have directed their attention at how generational divisions drive social change, but they have not considered the process in reverse: that social change can also create changes in the nature of generational identities and conflicts. In addition, historians have on the whole ignored generation’s interaction with gender, positing “juniors” and “seniors” as primarily male; nor have they examined the actual construction of age-based status.⁴⁰

Generation has been ignored, or not subjected to the same theoretical challenges as other widely recognized sources of social inequality, because of the nature of aging itself. That is, a junior status based on age is seen as something that everyone — but particularly men — inevitably outgrows.⁴¹ The inequality is not seen as permanently embodied in certain members of society, but as revolving among those members. This view of age-based differences perceives them as temporary, and thus lacking the urgency which drives social action between the sexes or between classes. Eventually, the argument goes, subordinate young people will gain power; they are less likely to attempt to change the system because they have a stake in its continuation.⁴²

But this was not how people in Ombalantu and Ongandjera necessarily saw their situation. A variety of European influences were popularized, entrenched, and appropriated largely through the agency of young people, both female and male. Conflicts over the meaning and validity of these new influences crystallized along lines of old and young, and some young people paid a high price for their actions and allegiances. Clearly, they felt a sense of urgency, even if anthropologists and historians have not recognized it as such. For seniority rests on more than age, as Sara Berry points out; it is a status which is achieved in many historically specific ways.⁴³

The age at which senior status can be achieved in a given society holds steady only in circumstances which permit the continued transferral of resources to a younger generation. This assumes willingness on the part of the elders, and some measure of continuation of those resources. It also assumes that resources are not being redistributed along other lines to the exclusion of juniors — for example, to kings in the east. When dramatic change occurs, it calls people’s futures into doubt by threatening to restructure social relations and the pool of resources. Contact with Europeans jeopardized the very systems which would have allowed young people to link social mobility to age. In the era of heightened raiding and concentration of wealth before colonial conquest, and in the social and political uncertainties of the early colonial period, seniority as it had been defined before became a status that not everyone was guaranteed to reach simply by becoming physically old. Indeed, in extreme cases of famine, the possibility of even becoming old was minimal.⁴⁴

In focusing on generation for the purposes of this study, I have not intended to ignore the dynamics of gender, for colonialism was itself a gendering project. But the result of this project was to provide *men* with almost exclusive firsthand access to European products, by reserving labor contracts (and thus cash wages) for men. Nor was contract labor the only relevant institution confined to men: *omutenge* itself was a male domain; young women were not given livestock through a similar pattern of exchange, thereby disadvantaging them (in this form of wealth) from the start.⁴⁵

And yet the very exclusion of women from access to European goods is also instructive. The importance of the intersection of colonial (and missionary) ideas and local, institutionalized forms of social control for revising property relations can perhaps best be seen in the lack of access which women had to the new forms of wealth and status. Women were barred by a colonial law, defined as traditional, from leaving Ovamboland; for most, therefore, migrant labor and direct access to the cash economy were not an option. Unlike young children and adolescents, adult women apparently felt that they had little to gain from joining Christian churches. All denominations in Ovamboland forbade divorce among their members, even when a woman was in an abusive marriage. And yet, paradoxically, if a polygamous woman wished to join a church, missionaries *insisted* that she leave her husband. If the woman was in a secure marriage, such a move created economic insecurity for her, and most women apparently decided that access to European goods was not worth losing access to land and livelihood. Some women may have joined churches to escape an unsatisfying marriage, but since women had the option of divorce in indigenous marriage practices, they had little incentive to use another route.

The result of women's involuntary exclusion from migrancy and voluntary exclusion from the church was that women became very dependent on men for access to European goods, if they got them at all. In 1926, the Native Commissioner of Ovamboland said that adult Ovambo women were evincing "a growing desire to retain their tribal garb" — a change which, if reflected in reality, probably corresponded to a lack of access to European clothing as much as anything.⁴⁶ Women, by being excluded from labor migrancy, were unable to access goods such as clothing independently. Instead, they had to rely mainly on husbands and male relatives for these things, thereby increasing their dependence on men.⁴⁷ There seemed to be an expectation that a respectable man would seek to clothe his wife as he clothed himself, and so migrant laborers returned with clothing for women as well as men. But when such goods came from women's husbands, they were often considered "gifts" which had to be returned to the husband's kin upon his death under matrilineal inheritance patterns. Although traditional gifts such as necklaces also had to be returned, women's independent access to these things was far less restricted than it was to European goods. Under this system, when it was enforced to its extreme, a woman who received European goods from her husband could be forced to replace them if they were worn out, and could become indebted to his family upon his death, thereby compounding the economic vulnerability she already faced in a system of matrilineal inheritance.⁴⁸

Even when the system was not pushed to its extreme by the man's family, European goods increased a woman's dependence on her husband, undermining what

had previously been a loosely based union with a great deal of economic autonomy and a strict division of property. Many women found this increased dependence undesirable. It is therefore not surprising that adult women were far cooler to the new patterns of wealth and status than their male counterparts were. In this case, as in so many others, generation and gender are inseparably linked, and historical change cannot be understood without accounting for both.

V

Omutenge was of the most important systems for managing new forms of property in colonial Ovambo societies such as Ongandjera and Ombalantu. Implicit in these practices were certain patterns of authority and social control, in which older men exercised rights over young men's labor power. These patterns were widely recognized, albeit occasionally resisted and negotiated, and there were mechanisms for enforcing such rights. Colonial officials were oblivious to this institution; not once is *omutenge* mentioned in colonial records or ethnographies. Yet these institutions played a tremendously important role in determining other aspects of colonialism, including the timing and size of the migrant labor supply — something officials constantly tried but failed to regulate.

In resisting elders' rights to not only control resources but also to define the importance of those resources, young people showed a degree of creativity and initiative not usually considered possible within scholarly, abstract models of African gerontocracies. They had joined with the new forces within society, the missionaries and labor recruiters, and had pursued that portion of power to which they had access — not the firearms and horses, but the clothing and other cheaper goods, and knowledge — and appropriated its meaning to suit their own situation. Further, *they*, and not their elders, instituted some of the most far-reaching cultural and economic changes in colonial Ovambo societies. Left to their own devices, senior Ovambo men would probably have been far slower to enter into relationships with missionaries and networks of labor migrancy. It was the generational conflicts within Ovamboland that first allowed these new influences to gain a foothold in the society and they, much more than direct colonial rule, were to play a major role in reshaping that society throughout the twentieth century, until the present day.

Notes

¹ For more information on women's place in these struggles over property, see M. McKittrick, "Conflict and Social Change in Northern Namibia, 1850-1954" (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1995).

² The colonial period in Ovamboland effectively began in 1915, with the South African conquest of South West Africa, because Germany, realizing that the Ovambo were numerous and well-armed and beset by problems with the Herero, never attempted to exert direct control over the northern part of its territory.

³ Ovambo societies are scattered on both sides of the Namibian/Angolan border; these societies were politically independent and somewhat culturally distinct from each other in the precolonial period, but recognized a common origin. The largest societies, and those which grew the strongest from raiding, were Uukwanyama and Ondonga, followed by Uukwambi and the Ombandja. The societies which suffered the

most from the raiding economy were Ombalantu and Ongandjera, the focus of this paper, as well as Uukwaluudhi and several small decentralized groups further west.

⁴ Informants recounted that Ombalantu suffered more from raiding than any other Ovambo kingdom, because it was poorly armed, disunited, and isolated from trade networks. The extent to which this isolation was voluntary is unclear. The Mbalantu were famed for assassinating their king in the early to mid-nineteenth century and refusing to enthrone another. The event apparently created horror among neighboring Ovambo kingdoms and European traders, and may have prompted them to shun the Mbalantu, contributing to isolation. On the other hand, European records recount a trader who was chased from Ombalantu, barely escaping with his life, in the 1850s. He probably did not understand the decentralized nature of the society and neglected to ask permission of all the appropriate headmen to traverse the region; however, the story circulated and future traders did not attempt to enter Ombalantu. A policy of barring European traders is not remembered in Ombalantu today, but such policies were not unprecedented. The neighboring Mbandja, who have close cultural and historical ties to Ombalantu, allowed only African traders into their kingdom. But Ombalantu lacked the sheer strength and influence of Ombandja, and the lack of direct European trade isolated them in a way that did not occur in Ombandja.

⁵For detailed descriptions of this period, see P. Hayes, "A History of the Ovambo of Namibia, c.1880-1935" (Ph.D. diss., Cambridge University, 1992); R. Moorsom and W.G. Clarence-Smith, "Underdevelopment and Class Formation in Ovamboland," in Robin Palmer and Neil Parsons, eds., *The Roots of Rural Poverty in Central and Southern Africa* (Berkeley, 1977); and H. Siiskonen, *Trade and Socioeconomic Change in Ovamboland, 1850-1906* (Helsinki, 1990).

⁶National Archives of Namibia (NAN), Resident Commissioner Ovamboland (RCO) Vol. 8 file (9), Famine report, Martti Rautanen (1915); A. Wulffhorst, *Schiwesa: Ein Simeon aus den Ovambochristen von Miss. August Wulffhorst* (Barmen, 1912), 3, notes that young boys herding livestock also did not get a lot of food from their households.

⁷E.Loeb, *In Feudal Africa* (Bloomington, 1962), [37]; also C. Mallory, "Some Aspects of the Mission Policy and Practice of the Church of the Province of South Africa in Ovamboland: 1924-1960" (Ph.D. diss., Rhodes University 1971) [129].

⁸ Between June and December 1993, I interviewed approximately ninety men and women in the Ovambo communities of Ongandjera and Ombalantu. Informants, whose ages ranged from sixty to nearly 100, were drawn from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds. They also varied in their religious experiences; some had converted to Christianity as children while others converted in old age. About equal numbers of men and women were interviewed.

⁹Expulsions from western kingdoms also seem to have increased in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as kings tried to shore up their power, which was being increasingly contested by raiding parties from the east and by their own dissatisfied subjects, who felt the king no longer provided protection and security.

¹⁰Priskila Angombe, interviewed 29 July 1993 at Eengolo, Ombalantu.

¹¹ One of the differences among Ovambo societies is the existence of bridewealth. In Ombalantu, Ongandjera and other western societies, no such institution seems to have existed; in the larger eastern societies, it did exist, but usually in a more limited form than in many other southern African societies.

¹² Möller, traveling among the Ovambo in 1895-96, stated that Ovambo women married as late as 30. Informants concur (Rusia Elago, interviewed 17 September 1993 at Okalondo, Ongandjera; Maria Shikalepo and Henok Shikwabi, interviewed 1 November 1993 at Epumbu, Ongandjera).

¹³Extremely strict controls on pre-initiation pregnancies and harsh penalties for transgressions (death or expulsion) represented another way elders ensured that young people did not move into adult roles too quickly. See McKittrick, "Conflict and Social Change," Ch. 5.

¹⁴ Mariana Oshooka, interviewed 3 November 1993 at Okahala, Ombalantu; Simon Iлека, interviewed 10 September 1993 at Ongozi, Ongandjera; Tobias Amupala, interviewed 20 July 1993 at Uutaapi, Ombalantu.

¹⁵ This vulnerability and openness to new ideas existed in all Ovambo societies, although it was potentially more exaggerated between generations in western societies such as Ongandjera and Ombalantu, where resources had been channeled east, and political systems were facing major restructuring in the colonial era. Christianity and labor migrancy became established in the west at a later period, but both grew faster in the west, to the point where the proportion of converts and laborers alike was about equal to that in the east by the late 1930s and early 1940s.

¹⁶If there are any changes in this pattern over time, it is very hard to tell from either oral or written sources. Colonial officials complain of boys going south without their parents' knowledge in the first years of

colonial rule, and again in the late 1930s, when fears of eroding “traditional” controls were at their height. Two informants reported going without parental permission, and they would have gone in the 1920s or 1930s: Tomas Shihepo, interviewed 22 July 1993 at Ombathi, Ombalantu; Tobias Amupala, interviewed 20 July 1993 at Uutaapi, Ombalantu.

¹⁷ Many historians of Africa have assumed that European goods “naturally” held an attraction to Africans, to the point where they were willing to destroy their own societies to get them. See for example W.G. Clarence-Smith, *Slaves, Peasants and Capitalists in Southern Angola, 1840-1926* (Cambridge, 1979) for Ovambo societies. A few scholars, mostly anthropologists, have argued, however, that the attractions of these goods must not be seen as irrational, nor can the meanings and “functions” be assumed to be the same as those assigned them by Europeans. Rather, the objects take on meaning and function within the social context into which they are introduced. See for example N. Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, material culture and colonialism in the South Pacific* (Cambridge, 1991).

¹⁸ Mallory quotes the Anglican missionary Tobias, writing in 1929, about the eastern Uukwanyama kingdom: “One thing that has greatly helped (our work) is the realization that people of no account who have joined the Church have become personages.” [164]

¹⁹ Informants said children who went to church taught friends to read and that counting skills learned in church and the European languages learned in the south were markers of status among their peers. Tomas Uushiini, interviewed 12 August 1993 at Uukwalumbe, Ongandjera; Johannes Andrinu, interviewed 16 August 1993 at Olupaka, Ombalantu.

²⁰ Eliaser Kaanandunge and Selma Pelema, interviewed 6 August 1993 at Ongozi, Ongandjera; Thomas Uushiini, interviewed 12 August 1993 at Uukwalumbe, Ongandjera.

²¹ Gideon Hishitile, interviewed 3 August 1993 at Oshima, Ombalantu; Aune Namadhila Negongo, interviewed 12 August 1993 at Uukwalumbe, Ongandjera; Aili Mokwandjele, interviewed 26 July 1993 at Onawa, Ombalantu; Joas Mweshanyene, interviewed 16 September 1993 at Oluvango, Ombalantu; Tobias Amupala, interviewed 20 July 1993 at Uutaapi, Ombalantu.

²² Ovamboland was designated by the South African government as a labor reserve, where European settlement was forbidden. In the early colonial period, there were probably not two dozen Europeans in Ovamboland; these were missionaries, colonial officials, and occasionally a trader, all of whom required official permits to reside there.

²³ Hayes, “History of the Ovambo” [99, 146-52].

²⁴ Tomas Shihepo, interviewed 22 July 1993 at Ombathi, Ombalantu; Johannes Andrinu, interviewed 16 August 1993 at Olupaka, Ombalantu; Simon Iлека, interviewed 10 September 1993 at Ongozi, Ongandjera; Festus Shingenge, interviewed 30 August 1993 at Onakaheke, Ongandjera.

²⁵ See McKittrick, “Conflict and Social Change,” Ch. 5 for a discussion of these conflicts.

²⁶ Tomas Shihepo, interviewed 22 July 1993 at Ombathi, Ombalantu.

²⁷ Tomas Shihepo, interviewed 22 July 1993 at Ombathi, Ombalantu.

²⁸ There was of course no way to prove chronological age; in general, officials chose men who looked at least eighteen, but often there was little agreement on who “looked” eighteen.

²⁹ NAN, RCO Vol. 2 file 2/1916/I, RCO to Secretary of the Protectorate, 26 June 1918.

³⁰ Men reported that it was common to give *omutenge* to a paternal uncle if their father was dead or had no stock to give in exchange. In matrilineal Ovambo societies, therefore, *omutenge* also served to redistribute property between lineages.

³¹ NAN, RCO Vol. 2 file 2/1916/I, RCO to Secretary of the Protectorate, 8 January 1918.

³² Mbaranabus Aulamba and Kanelombo Shehama, interviewed 31 August 1993 at Omamboo, Ombalantu.

³³ It is unclear if a contract in Angola, which was an option in the nineteenth century, was sufficient to earn the price of a cow.

³⁴ Tomas Angala, interviewed 29 October 1993 at Ombanda, Ongandjera; Kamboy Kandjele, interviewed 27 July 1993 at Omateleleko, Ombalantu. Once *omutenge* was paid, a subsequent contract was often paid to the king in Ongandjera, further extending the time a man had to engage in migrancy before he could establish his own savings and marry. See McKittrick, “Conflict and Social Change,” Ch. 4.

³⁵ Modestus Andowa, interviewed 3 August 1993 at Anamulenge, Ombalantu.

³⁶ These colonial policies included encouraging Angolan Ovambo to settle in forested land which had been reserved for grazing, and scraping away at Ovamboland’s borders, which also affected grazing land. At first, they circumscribed young people’s access to stock in much the same way that the events of the immediate precolonial period had. Eventually, however, the ecological situation resulted in a contracting of grain production as well. By the end of the time period covered in this paper, some young men were

going south out of hunger as they had on the eve of colonial rule when famine raged, not merely to get European goods.

³⁷Modestus Andowa, interviewed 3 August 1993 at Anamulenge, Ombalantu; Apete Nepaka, interviewed 6 August 1993 at Ongozi, Ongandjera.

³⁸Max Ankumbo, interviewed 29 October 1993 at Ombanda, Ongandjera; Tomas Angala, interviewed 29 October 1993 at Ombanda, Ongandjera; Kashuku Namboga, interviewed 1 September 1993 at Onakaheke, Ongandjera.

³⁹C. Meillassoux, "From Reproduction to Production: A Marxist Approach to Economic Anthropology," *Economy and Society* 1 (1972), and *Maidens, Meal, and Money* (Cambridge, 1981 [Paris, 1977]) offers a structural model for generational tension but leaves little room for agency or change.

⁴⁰M. Chanock, "A Peculiar Sharpness: An Essay on Property in the History of Customary Law in Colonial Africa," *Journal of African History* 32 (1991) [65-88]; C. Murray, *Black Mountain: Land, Class and Power in the Eastern Orange Free State, 1880s-1980s* (Washington, D.C., 1992); S. Berry, *Fathers Work for Their Sons* (Berkeley, 1984); H. Moore and M. Vaughan, *Cutting Down Trees: Gender, Nutrition and Agricultural Change in the Northern Province of Zambia, 1890-1990* (Portsmouth, N.H., 1994). An exception to the assumption that juniors and seniors are men is B. Bozzoli's study of Phokeng women, which however still treats generation as a descriptive, and not an analytical, concept. B. Bozzoli, *Women of Phokeng: Consciousness, Life Strategy and Migrancy in South Africa, 1900-1983* (Portsmouth, N.H., 1991). More recent work has begun to consider gender and generation as linked social constructs; for example, see Lynn Thomas "'Ngaitana' (I will circumcise myself): The Gender-Generational Politics of the 1956 Ban on Clitoridectomy in Meru, Kenya." *Gender and History* 8 (1996) 338-63.

⁴¹Older women often are considered to have a status elevated over that of women of child-bearing age, who are rather Eurocentrically described as "legal minors." But it is men especially who stand to gain from the system, since they will eventually rise to a position of leadership and universal respect.

⁴²Meillassoux, *Maidens, Meal, and Money* [80-81].

⁴³Berry, *Fathers Work for Their Sons* [8-9].

⁴⁴The 1914-16 famine, known as the Great Famine or "the famine that swept," killed a significant fraction of Ovamboland's population, although estimates vary wildly in the absence of solid demographic data. Church conversions, mainly among young people, rose exponentially in the aftermath of the famine.

⁴⁵Women in Ovamboland could inherit cattle, and theoretically an inheritance was supposed to be divided equally among male and female heirs. But in practice, women were often slighted, and in general they did not have equal access to livestock. *Omutenge* is another example of the inequality.

⁴⁶NAN, Native Affairs Ovamboland, Vol. 18 file 11/1, 1926 Annual Report.

⁴⁷Gideon Hishitile, interviewed 3 August 1993 at Oshiima, Ombalantu; Paulina Ekindjo, interviewed 4 August 1993 at Omundjalala, Ombalantu; Frasinia Iitembu, 27 August 1993 at Eembwa, Ongandjera.

⁴⁸Of course women shared in the estates of their maternal relatives. But their labor went into their husband's household, which they had no rights in once their husband died. This was one of several tensions inherent in Ovamboland's matrilineal but partilocal kinship structures.