

RISK AND RISK MINIMISATION AMONG HIMBA PASTORALISTS IN NORTHWESTERN NAMIBIA

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Introduction

Research on risk and risk minimisation has become a prominent theme in studies on African pastoralists during the last decade (Galaty and Johnson 1990, Galaty and Bonte 1991, Fratkin, Galvin and Roth 1994). Many studies relate social institutions such as social networks, bridewealth and inheritance, to their effect on risk reduction. Interdisciplinary studies of the South Turkana Ecosystem Project (Dyson-Hudson and McCabe 1985, Ellis, Coughenour and Swift 1993) have been ground breaking in showing the rational management of environmental and socio-political risks by pastoralists. However whilst in the 1960s and 1970s, the heyday of an adaptationist cultural ecology, institutions were analysed as sets of rules contributing to the sustainable use of natural resources (e.g. Sweet 1970, Vayda 1971), today the analysis frequently concludes that certain institutions exist because they act as a buffer against risks. Systematic studies relating various risks to individual strategies, and strategies to social institutions, are still rare. It is my belief that the sustainability of traditional pastoral systems and the pastoralists' clever strategies of risk reduction are almost over-emphasised nowadays, overlooking intra-societal disputes on resource allocation and resource protection and under-emphasising actor-specific solutions to certain risks (see Bergerhoff Mulder and Sellen 1994 for a systematic description of such studies). We are still far from understanding how the self-interested behaviour of single herders leads to institutions which further security and sustainability and why, in specific socio-political contexts, individual risk minimisation does not correspond with social institutions guaranteeing sustainability over the long term.

Taking one south-west African pastoral society – the Himba – as an example, this paper identifies different factors from which risks may derive (climate, degradation, livestock diseases, political economy) and tries to link them to individual risk-minimisation strategies and social institutions. Risk is defined here as variance in access to central resources. This variance ranges from seasonal stress (e.g., the decline of fodder and lactation during the dry season) to the virtual loss of important resources (e.g., high livestock mortality rates due to drought or epidemic) or the loss of entitlements (see Sen 1981) due to failure of the market. These risks may be either predictable or unpredictable (see Cashdan 1990). Drought and livestock epidemics are unpredictable, whereas entitlement decline and environmental degradation are creeping processes which gradually destabilise the economic base. Thus, in an insecure environment, the herders' objectives are: (1) to minimise the risk that production will drop below subsistence levels; (2) to