

## PROTEST, CONFLICT AND LITIGATION

Dissent or Libel in Resistance to a Conservancy in North-West Namibia

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### Introduction

In the last fifteen years, environmental anthropologists, environmental historians and political ecologists have tended towards a 'corrective and anti-colonial' narrative (Beinart 2000: 270), drawing attention to the ways that environmental discourses can extend a 'northern' hegemony over independent states via donor-funded environment and development programmes (for the African context see Homewood and Rodgers 1987, Fairhead and Leach 1996, Leach and Mearns 1996). Escobar (1996: 56) argues that concepts such as 'sustainable development', 'degradation' and 'community' imply a '... semiotic conquest of social life by expert discourses and economic conceptions'. The constructed and contingent nature of these concepts and goals has been emphasised by several authors, focussing, for example, on the absence of biophysical 'evidence' for degradation narratives and on the occlusion of local descriptions of, and explanations for, environmental change (Fairhead and Leach 1996). Brosius et al. (1998: 159) argue that an unfortunate outcome of such analyses frequently has been an increasing divergence between advocacy in environment and development on the one hand and, on the other, a more abstract academic critique of the concepts on which many environmentalist movements build, including community, rights, management, resources and degradation. They suggest, however, that there is a critical need for case histories which reflect on and examine the development, applications and consequences of such concepts. An ethnographic approach that details the unfolding of local-global inter-penetrations in the environmental arena, can provide public space for a variety of views, including those of local individuals. In

this way, ethnography might play a significant role in introducing the richness and complexity of real experiences into environmental policy debates.

In the interrelated arenas of environment and development, the Namibian context is dominated by two concerns. First, that land productivity is deteriorating through the over use and damage of biophysical resources. This is framed primarily as 'desertification' due to overgrazing by livestock and is championed by a primarily GTZ-funded<sup>1</sup> Programme to Combat Desertification (Seely and Jacobson 1994, Wolters 1994, Seely et al., 1995: 57–61, Dewdney 1996, Mouton et al. 1997). The second related concern is for the effects of human activities on biodiversity, manifest as Namibia's National Biodiversity Programme (NNBP), for which an initial country study received funding from the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) (Barnard 1998). Both these programmes mark Namibia's status as a signatory of the 1992 United Nations Conventions on Desertification and Biological Diversity, thereby coordinating national environmental policy with international environmental priorities.

In pursuit of the ideal of 'sustainable development' (IUCN/UNEP/WWF 1980), and paralleling similar initiatives elsewhere in southern Africa, a third national programme of 'Community-Based Natural Resources Management', or CBNRM, ties environmental concerns to the country's rural development requirements. A key tenet of CBNRM is decentralisation, with 'communities' emphasised as the appropriate 'unit' of civil society to have decision-making powers over, and receive benefits from, wildlife resources. As elsewhere in southern Africa (for example, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Botswana), the Namibian CBNRM programme receives primary funding from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), under the project title Living in a Finite Environment (LIFE). Additional donors are the World Wildlife Fund-United States (WWF-US), the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DfID) and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), as well as other development- and conservation-oriented institutions. Again, as elsewhere, implementation and facilitation is conducted largely by national Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs).

Given the exclusionary conservation policies of Namibia's colonial and apartheid past, a major achievement of the country's CBNRM programme is a policy designed to enable Namibian citizens to make some choices over, and receive income from, the management of wildlife. In communal areas, this right is given to groups of people ('communities') who legally establish a 'conservancy' with a defined territory, a written constitution and a management plan.<sup>2</sup> A 'conservancy', in agreement with the Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET), then can receive benefits from non-consumptive and limited consumptive uses of wildlife (such as tourism) (MET 1995a and 1995b). To date, some fourteen communal-area conservancies have been registered with at least thirty more developing (DEA Website

2001). The programme and policy has been recognised internationally as the most progressive initiative of its kind in southern Africa, becoming the first country to be honoured for a *people*-centred environmental initiative with the WWF Gift to the Earth Award in September 1998 (Sutherland 1998). As such, the programme and its protagonists have attained something of an iconic status within conservation circles (cf. Brosius et al. 1998: 161).

In an attempt to generate debate regarding interrelationships between local, national and international interests and institutions, I present in this chapter an ethnographic analysis of a single incidence of resistance to the formation of a local conservancy. I emphasise that this relates to only one of many Namibian conservancies and is not a critique of the CBNRM programme as a whole, or of the national policy guiding conservancies. I will be focussing in part on documents generated by one NGO, referred to here as Integrating Conservation with Development in Namibia (ICDN), which is not its real name. My story relates to protest against ICDN, the NGO's response to it, and some of the dynamics underlying the rise of the dispute and the allegations surrounding it. These events occurred in an area of southern Kunene Region where I have carried out fieldwork on and off since 1992, my last visit being in 2000, shortly after the events related below.

The situation arose out of the formation of a specific conservancy, which wittingly or unwittingly, favoured one ethnic group, ovaHerero, over another, Damara. To clarify, ovaHerero (and Herero-speaking ovaHimba<sup>3</sup>) are generally cattle and small-stock pastoralists who speak a Bantu language (see, for example, Bollig 1998, Jacobsohn 1998). Herero are thought to have entered Namibia around the sixteenth century, when they crossed the Kunene River into the north-west of the country. A second large in-migration occurred in the eighteenth century, following which they are thought to have occupied the majority of the productive pastures of central Namibia (Werner 1998 and references therein). Werner (1998) argues that since the 'ethnocide' of the German-Herero war of 1904-7, and within the constraints of the Reserve and migrant labour system of the former South African administration, Herero have been consolidating their interests as cattle farmers and have therefore expanded their access to land.

Damara (and Nama), on the other hand, speak Khoekhoegowab, a 'click' language-cluster associated with the Saan languages under the broader grouping of Khoesaaan (Haacke et al. 1997). Damara are thought to have long associations with much of the central and western reaches of the territory now known as Namibia, and perhaps to be descendants of an extremely early migration into Namibia (Lau 1987: 4-5). Their categorisation as 'Damara' is, to some extent, a construct from early missionary and colonial ethnographic writings. These 'lumped' together a number of smaller exogamous groupings whose membership was reckoned with regard to interrelated concepts of geographic territory (*!hûs*) and lineage

(*!haoti*) (Lau 1987, Fuller 1993, Sullivan 2001). Historical records indicate that prior to processes effecting impoverishment among Damara 'groups' in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, those identified as such engaged in a wide variety of livelihood practices including trade in specialist items, livestock herding primarily of small stock, large-scale communal hunting, and plant gathering (Lau 1987, Fuller 1993).

The history of relationships between ovaHerero and Damara is complicated further by the region's pre-colonial and colonial history. Existing and dynamic interrelationships were all impinged on by the influences of mercantile capital, the northward movements of Oorlam Afrikaner commandos from the Cape, and the arrival of European missionaries and colonists. Thus we can imagine a broad regional history of complex interrelationships characterised variously by cooperation, competition, conflict and distance, with shifts in the relative significance of these occurring through both time and space. My intention is to use the case material below to highlight the contemporary significance of a context of overlapping claims to land by people with different ethnic identities and historical experiences of inhabiting the area. The fact that a protest occurred with allegations made by, what some say is, a vocal local faction concerned with a potential loss of power, and by what others might maintain is a disadvantaged group, speaks of political dilemmas in how the goals of community-based initiatives are implemented.

In analysing the case material I highlight two broad issues. First, some implications of the complex relationships which exist between a post-independence 'culture' of NGOs and the local, state and international locations in which they operate. Second, the significance of ethnicity as a factor influencing access to negotiations and to employment positions created by environment and development initiatives. A closer consideration of ethnicity is important for understanding local conceptions of, and possible conflict over, rights to land and natural resources. Following Moore (1996), I feel it is important to highlight the way that historical experience influences who is elevated and who feels marginalised, by the establishment of a particular conservancy. Given the cultural dimensions of both of these issues, as well as the particular complexities generated by the locating of environment and development initiatives in diverse ethnic landscapes, I wish further to raise the possibility that ethnography might have a relevant role to play in making public a *range of views* on the unfolding of such initiatives.

## A case-story: local attempts to bury an internationally-funded NGO

Figure 6 is a photograph of a grave. The inscription on the wooden cross at the head of the grave gives the name of an NGO ('ICDN') with the epitaph 'birth unknown, died 06.02.2000, Rest In Peace'. The grave is located directly outside the conservancy office of the settlement of Sesfontein/!Nani|aus. The office comprises a recently constructed wooden structure placed close to a large, spreading fig-tree (*Ficus sycomorus* L.) growing at the largest of the settlement's natural springs or 'fountains'. This is a location laden with historical, economic and symbolic importance, as I outline below.



Figure 6 A symbolic grave constructed for the NGO Integrated Rural Development and Nature Conservation (IRDNC) on 6 February 2000.

The grave was dug at the culmination of a 'protest march' which, together with a written petition, drew attention to a number of complaints regarding the establishment of a conservancy in Sesfontein/!Nani|aus and environs. The instigators of these events were the settlement's Senior Headman and the Sesfontein Constituency Regional Councillor (or Pastor). The petition formed the basis for a later document listing 145 names of Sesfontein inhabitants with fifty-five actual signatures, i.e., representing a substantial proportion of the settlement of Sesfontein's adult population of approximately 400 individuals (National Planning Commission 1991). The

document also listed thirty-five names of inhabitants from Purros, accompanied by twenty-four actual signatures. Purros is a settlement located north-west of Sesfontein and has a separate gazetted conservancy. Significantly for some of the accusations and counter-accusations made in this case, it is inhabited predominantly by Herero-speaking Namibians.

This document was distributed to a number of international donors active in Namibia as well as to the Director of Resource Management of the Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET). Specific accusations related to a number of employment and other practices by ICDN. These were said to favour external over local interests, to have exacerbated local conflict along ethnic lines, and to have played a role in the initiation and support of an emerging leadership challenge to the Senior Headman of Sesfontein. A particular accusation was that access to NGO and conservancy vehicles was influencing who was able to attend meetings and committee elections, in favour of those supporting the NGO's views and practices. Needless to say, these allegations are controversial and are vehemently denied by the NGO. For the purposes of this paper, I wish to draw attention to two elements of this case. First, the fact that a small but significant group of protesters, anxious that their voice and interests were being undermined, decided to make public their concerns that an externally-funded NGO was making impacts upon the texture of local ethnic and other relations. Second, that the NGO felt bound to respond to these expressions out of concern and for possible implications for the 'place' of NGOs vis à vis local, national and international environment and development interests.

The protest and petition were enacted some six years after the idea of communal-area conservancies was first debated in the area. The immediate catalyst was the removal of the locally elected Treasurer of the Sesfontein conservancy committee, following allegations of fraud. To illustrate the complexity infusing local interrelationships and circumstances, and drawing on personal correspondence and field notes, I include here some details and views surrounding this case. The conservancy Treasurer was charged with being unable to account for some N\$20,000 of donor money intended as conservancy staff salaries. He maintains that he paid the salaries, but that the receipts were stolen in an attempt to frame him. His lawyers have postponed the court hearing at least three times. Additional incidents make these accusations and counter-accusations more complex. For example, given a perception that ICDN considers that conservancies, as legally recognised local resource management institutions, should have the power to vet and approve PTO (Permission To Occupy land) applications, some think it significant that the accused Treasurer already holds a PTO for a location within the proposed conservancy boundary. A PTO is necessary for the establishment of an economic enterprise such as a campsite or lodge for tourists, as such, they are an important resource given the focus on developing tourism as a means of increasing revenue from the non-con-

sumptive use of wildlife. Further, the Treasurer had been in frequent communication with a second conservation-oriented NGO operative in the area. This organisation was hoping to join forces with him in establishing a base-camp and tourism enterprise at the site of his PTO, from where they could increase the effectiveness of their monitoring of tourism and wildlife movements. Despite a shared interest in wildlife conservation and economic 'betterment' in the region, it is widely known that relations between the founders of these two NGOs have been poor in recent years.

After the removal of the Treasurer from the conservancy office late in 1999, unease built within the settlement of Sesfontein. The office was closed. The NGO placed armed guards around the office from the currently Herero-dominated nearby settlements of Warmquelle and Otjimdagwe, as well as from within Sesfontein. This situation became extremely provocative for inhabitants of Sesfontein because the conservancy office is located in what is effectively the economic and symbolic heart of Sesfontein. The spring next to the guarded office feeds an old system of canals which irrigates gardens inherited nearly a century ago by Damara and Nama inhabitants of Sesfontein. The gardens and springs are considered a *!anu* or sacred place (Haacke and Eiseb 1999: 92–93), as a place of God (*Elob*). As such, the ensuing conflict located at this site has generated anxiety among those with a long history with Sesfontein and its gardens. Although the settlement's Senior Headman earlier agreed to this locating of the conservancy office, there is also some feeling that permission to construct the office here was granted without consultation of those who have inherited land in the gardens.

In the ensuing weeks, attempts were made at resolving the conflict situation. On 23rd February 2000, i.e., after the protest march, a meeting with ICDN was called by inhabitants of Sesfontein to iron out concerns prior to registering a conservancy in the area. Those present voiced the concern that the conservancy Treasurer – 'the man who was chosen by the community' – either should be reinstated, or the conservancy office closed. Second, they demanded that those guarding the office should leave so that Sesfontein inhabitants could work their inherited gardens without fear. Third, attention was drawn again to perceived biases in negotiations concerning the conservancy. A particular complaint was that '[t]he weakening tool is the stream of vehicles which carry people to the meeting'. This is an accusation that donor-funded vehicles are made available to carry supporters of ICDN to meetings, while those with opposing views find it hard, logistically, to participate. The meeting was inconclusive, petering out after an official representing ICDN walked out of the meeting. Some within the NGO took the view that the meeting was controlled by an aggressive and unrepresentative faction concerned to bolster their privileged access to resources. Whatever the 'truth' of the allegations and counter-allegations, it is clear that the introduction of donor monies to underdeveloped regions such as

north-west Namibia, even when manifest as rather modest capital resources (the location of a building, or the use of vehicles), can become the focus of intense political debate and attempts at appropriation. At a meeting the following day (24th February 2000), the Director of Resource Management (MET), recommended that a 'Conflict Resolution Forum' be created in recognition of the social problems being caused by the process of conservancy creation.

Unsurprisingly, the petition and ensuing dispute have not been taken lightly by ICDN, the NGO facilitating conservancy formation. In March 2000, the NGO's Directors circulated a four-page response to their donors and partner organisations. In this, the claims made in the petition are dismissed as 'unfounded and defamatory'. Explanations for the protest are attributed to an accusation that the NGO is '... being used opportunistically as a scapegoat in a power struggle between a small elite representing their own and/or their political party's interests at the cost of the rights of a majority of ordinary people'.

For our purposes it is interesting that the document simplifies many layers of complexity reflecting both the political ramifications of the NGO's activities and perceived allegiances within the region, and a context of identity politics based around ethnicity and assertions of difference. At one level, the statement by the NGO's Directors appears to make the claim for an allegiance among the protesters to one of Namibia's political parties, the United Democratic Front (UDF). As successor to the Damara Council of the former 'homeland' of Damaraland's regional administration, and as the party of the Damara 'King' (Chief Justus ||Garoeb), this political party has strong Damara support. So, although the Directors of the NGO do not refer directly to the ethnic dimensions of the dispute, the statement appears a response to accusations that the NGO has favoured Herero people in the area. The defence that the NGO offers here, i.e., that the accusations of the dissenting group can be explained by their links to an elite of a political party, is also interesting in that it deflects attention from the political stance of the organisation itself. As outlined above the NGO itself, and its employees, are also situated politically and clearly their work and actions are perceived locally as political.

In April 2000 ICDN began legal proceedings against those they considered the initiators of the protest and the petition. The charges, in a lawyer's letter from a Windhoek law-firm, are that the petition '... contains allegations and remarks, which are not only utterly unfounded and false, but are vexatious and defamatory', causing '... damage to our client's reputation'. Without receipt of a written apology, the letter affirms 'instruction to institute an action ... in the High Court of Namibia for damages suffered' at the expense of the accused. The Senior Headman was threatened additionally with a charge of criminal assault. Given the circumstances surrounding the establishment of 'traditional' leaders under the country's pre-indepen-



dence South African administration (e.g. Gordon 1991), it might be appropriate to ask questions regarding the legitimacy or otherwise of their positions. I would suggest, however, that similar question might be raised concerning the implications of an externally-funded NGO invoking formal law against a traditional or customary leader, as well as against others voicing criticism and/or dissent.

In March and April 2000 a delegation of high-ranking Leaders of the Damara Traditional Authority visited Sesfontein on a mission to diffuse the 'serious wave of discontent', thus highlighting the potential gravity of the local conflict situation arising from these events. Following a series of meetings, the delegation made a number of comments regarding the proposed conservancy and leadership dispute. They affirmed the legitimacy of the Senior Headman's leadership in Sesfontein, and recommended that allegations of fraud against the conservancy Treasurer be dropped to help generate a climate conducive to cooperation. Regarding the conservancy, they suggested that it be dismantled in its current form. They also appeared to affirm the claim that 'most of the members were registered [for the conservancy] under the false pretext of getting game venison should they so register'.

In the period since these events the Regional Governor has been overseeing negotiations. A large document identifying all the objections made by the Senior Headman's supporters remains in circulation. In a follow-up exercise involving the drawing up of three 'counter-petitions', ICDN gained a mandate to continue working in the area from more than four hundred people from the broader territory affected by the proposed conservancy. Three international consultants contracted by DfID and WWF-UK completed an evaluation of ICDN's Kunene programme in November 2000. This approved the actions of the NGO and affirmed support from a number of 'communities', conservancies and Traditional Authorities. It is difficult to see, however, how this resolves the dispute emerging within the population affected by the particular conservancy which is the focus of this chapter. In December 2000 the conservancy office in Sesfontein/!Nani|aus remained closed and protected by an armed guard.

In summary, this 'story' highlights the intensely political and competitive atmosphere infusing conservancy formation, NGO and donor involvement, and CBNRM as a framework for environment and development initiatives. I acknowledge that it is not possible to represent all of the views of those involved in the multifaceted events and related documents detailed here, many simultaneous and possibly conflicting readings of which might also exist. In interpretation, however, and as outlined in the introduction, I will take up two issues. First, some of the political implications of interconnections between NGOs, new state-policy, and a strengthening civil society which nevertheless may hold its traditional leadership in high regard. And second, the question of how identity politics based around ethnicity might

have influenced the way that support was taken up and, in this case, contributed to emerging dispute.

## **NGOs: measures of success, relationships to state policy and local allegiances**

As in any profession, NGOs and donors are obviously under pressure to demonstrate successful performance, especially given the large amounts of financial resources involved.<sup>4</sup> Roe et al. (2000: 3) point out, however, that community benefits often are 'over-extolled by advocates' (i.e. of 'community-based' resource management endeavours). Elsewhere I have suggested that the financial sustainability of CBNRM programmes in the absence of donor support is questionable. This is because it might be unlikely that revenue from wildlife and/or tourism will ever constitute a particularly large source of income for all members of a 'community' at household and individual levels, and that the costs of running conservancies as new wildlife-management institutions are rarely factored into analyses of income (Sullivan in press).<sup>5</sup>

Here, however, I focus on the implications of the ways in which impressions of project and programme success frequently rely on a conceptual simplification of the socio-political contexts in which they take place. A primary component of this is a depoliticisation of the contexts and issues within and with which implementers, facilitators and donors are operating (for a case-study *par excellence* see Ferguson 1990). Thus, power relationships between northern discourses of environment and development and local self-determination become lost. The tendency to embrace free-market principles as an accepted route to development and conservation (including tourism), for example, remains little problematised. This is so despite their highly political outcomes, including the commoditisation of both 'nature', and of the 'ecologically noble primitive' for consumers who tend to derive from the world's wealthy nations (e.g. Garland and Gordon 1999, Schroeder 1999: 367–370). At the same time, some of the real issues underlying poverty and a lack of options in communal areas tend to be avoided. In this case, history has dictated a context of inequality in land distribution, while current circumstances have stimulated in-migration of land-hungry pastoralists, often those who are relatively wealthy in terms of cattle herds. It might be expected that a continuing depoliticisation of issues relating to the global and national distribution of power and resources will contribute to future protest in development and conservation arenas. This is precisely what happened in the early 1990s when Kenyan Maasai pastoralists, in what has been described as a brilliant symbolic gesture that demonstrated their *power* over internationally valued resources, deliberately attacked elephant

and rhino in Amboseli National Park in protest at the appropriation of their lands for conservation and commercial purposes (Bonner 1993).

NGOs have a particular place in these political dynamics. Elsewhere in Africa structural adjustment has necessitated a reduction of state expenditure on the management of public resources. In Namibia, attempts to raise user accountability for state-owned resources (e.g. Africare 1993), as well as a post-independence administrative weakness at regional and local levels, have paved the way for growth in the activity and significance of donor-funded NGOs. In some cases, donors and NGOs work in what seems like equal partnership with national government institutions in the formulation of new policy recommendations. For the environmental, and particularly wildlife, sectors in Namibia, the donor organisations of USAID, WWF-US and WWF, and particular individuals within these, certainly have been involved in close working relationships with the MET in the development of the communal-area conservancy policy (MET 1995c: 6, IRDNC n.d.). Although constructed as working for the common good, NGOs are not publicly elected or solely accountable to the recipients of their work. While providing expertise and funding and having an ability to redefine donor constraints and discourses, they also have to satisfy institutional and donor criteria for 'success'. This implies a degree of caution in such relationships, as recognised in Namibia in the MET's emphasis on drawing up Memoranda of Understanding with conservation-oriented NGOs (MET 1995c: 6).

In other words, current circumstances dictate that internationally funded NGOs have considerable power over national policy and programmes in situations where state resources are somewhat circumscribed. This is an important route by which the ideals of implementers and facilitators, as well as 'northern' business and consumer interests, can influence the conservation and development trajectories of 'the south'. The political ramifications of these processes tend to be written out in their recounting. While open resistance to such circumstances is rare for many reasons, NGO and donor inputs are generally moulded by local people into forms that inevitably depart somewhat from the implementers' original vision. Where the inputs of NGOs and donors demote local interests, or even *some* local interests, dispute and conflict may arise. In this case-study, the perception of biased allegiances to particular local factions had an undeniable and significant effect in driving dispute. At the same time, the NGO, like other agencies, presents opportunities in the area which can be appropriated and manipulated locally, contributing further to a situation of fragmented support and resistance.

## **Ethnicity: integral to, or excuse for, emerging dispute?**

Murphree (1999: 4) asserts that '[e]xternal agents, inexorably, influence local governance by the power that they wield, the way that they intrude and the personal or functional alliances that they forge'. In the case-story, descriptions of alliances influenced by the presence of an NGO an NGO seem to be bound very much with ethnicity. Here, and in very general and essentialist terms, the donor-supported proposal for a conservancy is perceived as favouring one ethnic group, Herero, over another, Damara. In an official climate of nation building and the construction of a post-apartheid national Namibian identity, so-called political correctness might lead to a disinclination to discuss these complex but uncomfortable issues. Ignoring them or masking them, however, by referring to rural people as 'communities' or 'communal area dwellers' (i.e. without ethnic or other identity) does not change history or people's memories of experiences which may have marginalised them. Instead it might be that not enough sensitivity to, or transparency of, aspects of history, identity and culture vis à vis land have frustrated attempts to facilitate the registration of conservancies in the area, and have contributed to the resistance to NGO involvement described here.

In this area, invoking ethnicity in local arguments against ICDN may arise largely from a conceptual identification of the NGO's two Directors with Herero-speaking people, given their personal histories of working in Kaokoland. That there is also some factual basis to the accusations, however, is suggested by a simple statistic: of 26 members of the conservancy committee at the time of protest, 18 were Herero while 8 were Damara. The proportions of inhabitants characterised by ethnic or language 'group' vary according to how boundaries for the conservancy are drawn and the extent of in-migration and other mobility. I would suggest, however, that this proportionally under-represents Damara under any reckoning (e.g. National Planning Commission 1991).

It is important to emphasise, however, that the situation is not one of a simple split between two ethnic groups, exacerbated by the interactions of an outside NGO. In fact, different Herero groupings were very much involved with and in support of the two Damara factions within a Damara leadership dispute. This reflects the shared and intertwined histories of Damara and Herero in the area. Thus the Kasaona Herero 'group', associated with Warmquelle, Otjimdagwe and Ganamub settlements, aligned themselves with the Damara faction disputing the leadership of Senior Headman Gaobaeb. The Kasaonas in particular were seen to have benefited disproportionately from organisational efforts surrounding the proposed conservancy. Senior Headman Gaobaeb, on the other hand, was supported by a second Herero group associated with the Kangombe family, also from Warmquelle settlement. These two Herero groups have been in conflict for

some time, and current disagreements provide yet another forum for playing out their own dispute.

These cross-ethnic interconnections call into question why it is that the dispute has been framed locally as a rather simple case of the NGO working with one ethnic group over another. I think that the significance of ethnicity in the case-story to some extent becomes clearer only once the broader context is brought into focus. Damara and Herero, as well as other 'groups' present in the area and the wider north-west region as a whole, have a long history of 'muddling through' in their social and economic interactions. While ethnic and cultural 'difference' has been part and parcel of these interactions, they have not prevented mutual respect, intermarriage, and shared regional trade networks, involving extensive travel, for items produced by each other. I have often visited the cluster of huts in Sesfontein inhabited by Suro, my field assistant, and her family to find several traditionally clad ovaHimba visiting and socialising – perhaps exchanging perfume plants obtained from near the Kunene River in the north (*!garib sâi*) for the valued local tobacco grown by Damara in the gardens at Sesfontein. These multifarious interactions and inter-relationships have been forged under political and economic circumstances which, as a consequence of German colonial rule and the ensuing South African administration, were not of their own choosing.

Official changes in access to land, combined with input by NGOs, however, seem to have set in motion a dynamic that has tended to impinge on Damara rights and access to decision-making forums. A history of such dynamics perhaps shapes Damara sensitivities to recent and current changes, particularly a sense that in-migration may amount to loss of their land and historical places. This is a process that has been underway since at least the 1970s with the redrawing of administrative boundaries and the creation of 'homelands' following the recommendations of the infamous Odendaal Report (Government of South Africa 1964). Under this, Warmquelle (|Aexa|aus), which had been inhabited and worked by Damara people from at least before German colonial rule, became part of Opuwo District to the north and as such was re-created as part of a Herero/Himba constituency, i.e. as located in the Kaokoland 'homeland' for ovaHimba. Damara people inhabiting Warmquelle/|Aexa|aus were moved slightly south to Kowareb in what was designated 'Damaraland' (Sullivan and Ganuses in prep.). Reportedly, it is only since this time that the Kasaona and Kangombe families, now so important in the local politics of the area, settled in Warmquelle.

Fears that such processes of settlement and land loss will be repeated perhaps underscore the Damara opposition to the Sesfontein conservancy in its current form (although elsewhere Damara or others have invoked membership of a conservancy in attempts to keep out herders in search of grazing [Inambao 1998, Shivute 1998]). Uncertainty regarding claims to

land is compounded by Namibia's post-independence constitution which provides for all Namibians to move to wherever they wish on communal land with the proviso that they '... take account of the rights and customs of the local communities living there' (Government of the Republic of Namibia 1991: 28–29). Without an institutional basis for monitoring the effects of such movements or for protecting the rights of existing residents, however, this otherwise liberal context can be disempowering for some. This is especially so given a situation where options for movement tend to be greatest amongst the wealthy (Rohde 1993, Sullivan 1996), and where ethnicity as a major axis of difference tends to conspire against certain groups (Botelle and Rohde 1995, Taylor 1999, Twyman in press).

This is precisely what appears to be happening in the Sesfontein area where relatively wealthy (in terms of livestock) Herero pastoralists seem to be increasing in number. For example, Kowareb in the 1991 census registered no Herero households (National Planning Commission 1991) and its largest herd of cattle in 1992 was of 25 (personal field data). Now there are several Herero homesteads within the settlement and large Herero cattle herds roam the village and its surrounding environment. In-migration, of course, can bring benefits including adding vibrancy to local economies and increasing employment opportunities. But it can also instil a sense of loss of control and displace people whose previous claims to, and knowledge of, the landscape are overshadowed (as noted for the 'Saan' elsewhere in Namibia, e.g. Botelle and Rohde 1995, Thoma and Piek 1997). As Andreas !Kharuxab, longstanding Damara headman of Kowareb, describes:

'...There are too many livestock of people that we do not know in this area. ... People of other areas move in with their livestock: people of Opuwo District, people of Hoaruseb area. The people move in here with their livestock and their animals are many.

When this land became independent the government said that everyone can move where they want to. ... But those words bring conflict. Look, if a person moves because of drought and asks if we can please help him because his livestock are dying, and he comes in to another person's area, then we give him space [for herding]. But if at the end of the year when the rain falls at his place he doesn't go back there ... then his livestock are here all the time. The government should look at these things. If the person moves here because of drought, and if the rain falls at his place at the end of year, then he should take his livestock back there and farm at his place.

Recorded interview, 12th May 1999

These dynamics, together with the specific conservation priorities of CBNRM initiatives, act further to overlook, or even displace, the denseness of Damara memory and knowledge of landscape, of specific resources, of ancestral land-areas or *!hûs*, and of place-names (Sullivan 1999, 2001, in prep.). As Moore argues, '[h]istorical patterns of access to resources and exclusion from them mold cultural understandings of

rights, property relations and entitlements: in turn, these competing meanings influence people's land and resource use' (1996: 128). This brief background to current dispute suggests that this is indeed the case. Given historical circumstances, poor representation on the conservancy committee combined with observations of perceived bias in the behaviour of one NGO, perhaps contributed here as a proverbial 'last straw' in provoking dissent.

## Conclusion

This book emerged out of a concern with 'ethnographies of environmental under-privilege'. Here I have related an incident of local protest to dominant and donor-funded NGO activities in the conservation and development arenas. I have suggested that it can be understood as: 1) an expression of resistance in part to what remains a multilayered situation of national and global inequality in the distribution of power and resources, and 2) a protest against longstanding circumstances which are considered to undermine the leadership and other rights of a particular 'group' in the area, and no doubt prompted by their fears of a loss of whatever powers they currently have.

In presenting this case, however, I am driven to consider a further issue about the role and responsibility of ethnographers as chroniclers of interactions between local people and international environment and development institutions. Lurking behind this ethnographic account, as readers may have sensed, is the threat of litigation against words and interpretations that are not welcome in the business of international conservation. This draws us into an ethical issue: should ethnographers present and publish minority points of view held by those who fit awkwardly into the regionalist plans of organisations?

Academics can appear rather sanctimonious in their writings regarding environment and development: preaching from the margins while avoiding 'getting their hands dirty' with the 'real' work of implementation. In consequence, the possibility of engaging those who 'matter' in debate – policy-makers, donors, implementers, facilitators and local people – is compromised, especially if those 'on-the-ground' feel under attack by academic work. In response to my own writings on this region I have experienced resistance and abuse, and threats of libel suits. Some of the responses may sound familiar, or perhaps even have salutary value, to other academics exploring similar issues. For example, it has been said that I can 'afford to be so fiercely critical of others ... [because] in academe the stakes are so low', that my '... arrogance leads [me] to raise serious questions about the integrity and honesty of people working in the field', and that, like 'the news media and the harlot' I exploit my situation in the academy as one of

'power without responsibility'. Several respondents have taken offence at observations I have made of possible gender implications embodied by current emphases of CBNRM activities – stating, for example, that I employ 'smear tactics' in order to 'enhance [my] own reputation as a slayer of all that is white, male and involved in conservation'. Perhaps, needless to say, these ignored my reference to concerns in the wider literature – expressed by men as well as women – regarding constructions of masculinity in a southern African context (e.g. Mackenzie 1987, Ellis 1994, Carruthers 1995). To provide a rather flippant example that these remain real issues I was told on my last visit to Namibia that an employee of the Directorate of Environmental Affairs (MET), on reading my earlier paper, responded with the comment that 'that girl writes as if she doesn't have a boyfriend'! Finally, in some contexts my work has been attacked by association with people attached to one side of a local leadership struggle. I am considered as being 'naïvely manipulated by a local political elite' (personal correspondence) due to my field assistant's support for Sesfontein's Senior Headman.<sup>6</sup>

Others, however, have welcomed alternative views. A representative of RISE (Rural People's Institute for Social Empowerment), an indigenous NGO involved with the Namibian CBNRM programme, commented, for example, that she was 'very animated' by the paper. Moreover, she stated that she 'felt that the LIFE staff should know that they are working with local partners who are thinking critically and reading material beyond what they as LIFE provide', in which the programme tends to be portrayed 'as an enormous success'. Ironically, in her enthusiasm she emailed copies of my paper to various people in local NGOs as well as to the Director of the LIFE programme, not realising that the paper had already elicited an attack from these quarters.

In other words, the uptake of ethnographic and other analyses is complex. Research is either declaimed or utilised depending on an individual's or organisation's needs and positions, never mind the 'truth' of any claims made in such writings. So, two factors might compromise the ability or otherwise of academic analyses to perform some sort of 'public service' (Gordon 2000). First, what might be considered an in-built resistance to external criticism because of institutional needs to demonstrate success, and second, because critique tends to be framed in the rather confrontational manner typical of much deconstructive academic writing, thereby pushing implementers into defensive attack. Without question, implementers uncomfortable with independent analyses have the right to respond to critique. In academia there are accepted channels for doing so, and review and critique are expected as part of debate. However, and although it might be appropriate to review the ways that 'we' write, it should be emphasised that academic researchers and others also have the right to voice critique and alternative views. Perhaps this becomes particularly



important when large organisations have the resources to silence weaker minority groups (and academic researchers) through threats of litigation.

Beyond these ethical issues surrounding rights to public representation, there is yet another dimension to this story which raises the stakes surrounding concepts such as 'freedom of speech', advocacy and duty, and their employment in the complex interrelationships guiding a globalising of conservation effort. This is that African land users potentially hold substantial power over species which, in today's world of a commoditised nature, are highly valued in international circles. Elsewhere, when the state wishes to manipulate land use but where land holders constitute a powerful lobby, realistic alternatives are offered in return for the opportunity costs of sacrificing productive land uses aspired to by the land holder. Given the large amounts of monetary resources flowing from the wealthy countries of the north to wildlife-rich areas of the south, perhaps it is time that some form of direct payment to rural Africans is considered as a means of offsetting the opportunity and other costs that they pay for retaining dangerous animal wildlife and conserving valued habitats on 'their' land. Such suggestions have been made by economists Simpson and Sedjo, who argue that instead of investing in activities felt to be related to conservation but which require external funding '... donors might attempt to pay for conservation performance directly' (1996: 242, cf. Norton-Griffiths and Southby 1995, Norton-Griffiths 1996). Although they acknowledge that instituting the mechanisms whereby this might occur would be an administrative nightmare, they point out that establishing commercial ventures where conservation goals are achieved indirectly, are little better. Were tenure over land to be clarified for Namibia's communal-area residents, such an approach would not necessarily detract from a 'community's' potential to negotiate lucrative partnership agreements with foreign investors, or even from using the current conservancy framework and policy to do so. The allocation of donor monies directly to the individuals who inhabit valued environments, would perhaps be more empowering, would certainly bring greater per capita returns and thereby perhaps make possible a greater range of livelihood and lifestyle options, and, if successfully linked to conservation activities, could bring the conservation returns that are hoped for.

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## Notes

- 1 GTZ = Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit of the Federal Republic of Germany.
- 2 Communal areas refer to land owned by the state but designated to be used and managed by African farmers on a communal basis, in contrast to land owned under freehold title by settler farmers (primarily Afrikaans-speaking). While the latter are in a minority, they hold the majority of the most productive land in southern and central Namibia.
- 3 A term which distinguishes Herero who remained in Kaokoland, and who later fled to southern Angola to escape the violent livestock raids of Oorlam Afrikaner commandos from the Cape, from those who migrated southwards.
- 4 The major USAID-funded national CBNRM programme (LIFE) received US\$25 million from 1993 to 2000 (Callihan 1999: 6–7). Of this, US\$14 million was channelled to 'ICDN' between 1992 and 1999 for work in regions surrounding Kunene (Durbin et al., 1997: 28). A further US\$12 million from USAID was approved to carry the Namibian CBNRM programme from late 1999 to 2004 (Callihan 1999: 6–7). ICDN also received Swiss Francs 2,794,550 from WWF-International towards its work in Kunene Region between 1996 and 2001 (Jones 1999: 76).
- 5 Some of Namibia's 'flagship' conservancies have generated substantial amounts of income. As has been pointed out to me, for example, 'Torra conservancy has weaned itself off donor support and manages its conservancy, office, vehicle and staff of seven from its own income, plus has made a profit for its membership, with more than N\$300 000 in the bank' (personal correspondence). This is rather exceptional, however, when considered in relation to the country as a whole. Moreover, these figures do not factor in the capital that has been required to establish the conservancy over the last six years or so, via both NGOs and investment by private enterprise.
- 6 My field assistant is related by kin to Sesfontein's Senior Headman. It might be added, however, that she is more closely related in terms of kinship to his second-in-command who has challenged his position, a dispute that is considered to be variously supported by the NGO, not least due to participation in the dispute by one of their senior employees.

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