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Turning Landscapes into 'Nothing': A Narrative on Land Reform in Namibia

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1. Background

Namibia has one of the most unequal distributions of land found anywhere in the world. This inequality in control over land is regarded, by the majority of Namibians, as the main cause of rural poverty and economic inequalities (Werner, 1997). In fact, it is often said that the war of independence was fought over land (Adams and Devitt, 1992). After independence in 1990, the SWAPO government announced its intentions to carry out land reform, but 12 years later little agricultural land has been redistributed to secure a livelihood basis for the rural poor. At independence, approximately 4,200 white farmers owned more than half of all agricultural land in the country (Adams and Devitt, 1992), while most of the black major-

Note of acknowledgments. This article is based on Eirin Hongslo's MSc thesis from Noragric, Agricultural University of Norway (Hongslo, 2001). Ms Hongslo would like to thank the farmers in the Kuiseb who willingly shared their views with her and accommodated her with great hospitality. She is also grateful to the Desert Research Foundation of Namibia (DRFN) for all the help it provided, including an office to work in, and to Frank Wittneben, extension officer in the Department of Agriculture, who put her in contact with the farmers as well as giving helpful advice. Hongslo originally set out to write about perceptions of water management in the Kuiseb. However, as the work with the interviews proceeded, land reform emerged as a recurring theme. The open structure of the interviews, and the fact that she transcribed all of them, made the writing of the thesis and this article possible. The authors hope that the respondents and the people who assisted Hongslo during the fieldwork are not too disappointed with the final outcome. Tor A. Benjaminsen, who was Hongslo's supervisor during her MSc work, acknowledges support from the Research Council of Norway through a project on 'Perceptions of landscape change'. Finally, the authors are grateful for comments received from Rick Rohde, Sian Sullivan, Randi Kaarhus and one unknown referee. However, all opinions and possible mistakes remain the responsibility of the authors.

ity lived in the homelands or constituted a landless workforce in the urban townships. This situation is not very different today.

It is common to present the Namibian economy as dualistic, one sector being 'commercial' or 'modern', and the other 'communal' or 'traditional'. The proposition is that the communal areas are dominated by subsistence-oriented production, which is incompatible with commercial agriculture. It is, for instance, assumed that livestock in the communal sector is kept primarily for social and cultural than for economic reasons (Adams and Werner, 1990). In this article, we have chosen to maintain these established and commonly used terms, for lack of good alternatives, even though the assumptions behind them are problematic. Alternative terms, better reflecting the structure of these two land-use systems, might be 'land-intensive' and 'people-intensive',¹ but their use would also be more cumbersome.

The dualism in land use and tenure has a long history in Namibia and dates back to the German occupation from the late nineteenth century. After the First World War, German South West Africa became a League of Nations South African mandated territory and was henceforth administered basically as a South African province. Under South African rule and reinforced by the apartheid policy from 1948, the two land tenure systems – freehold for white farmers, and communal tenure under state authority for Africans – continued to develop in isolation from each other until independence.

Whereas the new South African government launched a comprehensive land reform programme based on the three pillars of redistribution, restitution and tenure reform, the Namibian government seems to have been less ambitious, despite its declarations at independence and earlier. The latter has only to a limited degree redistributed white-owned farms to the landless or to people from the overcrowded communal areas. In recent years, there have also been widespread disappointment and dissatisfaction with the slow pace of land reform in South Africa, while in Zimbabwe the government has supported the occupation of white commercial farms by so-called 'war veterans' after 20 years of modest government interest in land reform.

The reasons for the slow pace of land reform in southern Africa are many, but in Namibia, one reason could be that from the beginning there were fears that large-scale land reform would have adverse effects on economic productivity as well as on the environment.

1 We thank Professor Pauline Peters for this suggestion.

For instance, the World Bank early on warned against such consequences (Pankhurst, 1995).

The two land-use systems operate in similar ecological environments, but with contrasting management aims. In the commercial system, livestock is raised for the rapid production of meat for national and international markets. Optimal stocking densities give maximum growth per animal during its first year of life, predictable calving or lambing rates, low mortality and a steady production of high quality meat demanded by the market (Rohde *et al.*, 2001). Communal farmers, on the other hand, have multiple production objectives; milk and meat are important for household food security, livestock provides capital (to pay for school fees, medical emergencies etc.), and is used as draught power in agriculture and for transporting goods (Rohde *et al.*, 2001). In line with their production objectives, communal farmers tend to maximise herd size instead of adopting the stocking rates recommended by agricultural extension services. Hence, stocking densities are normally several times higher on communal land than on commercial ranches.

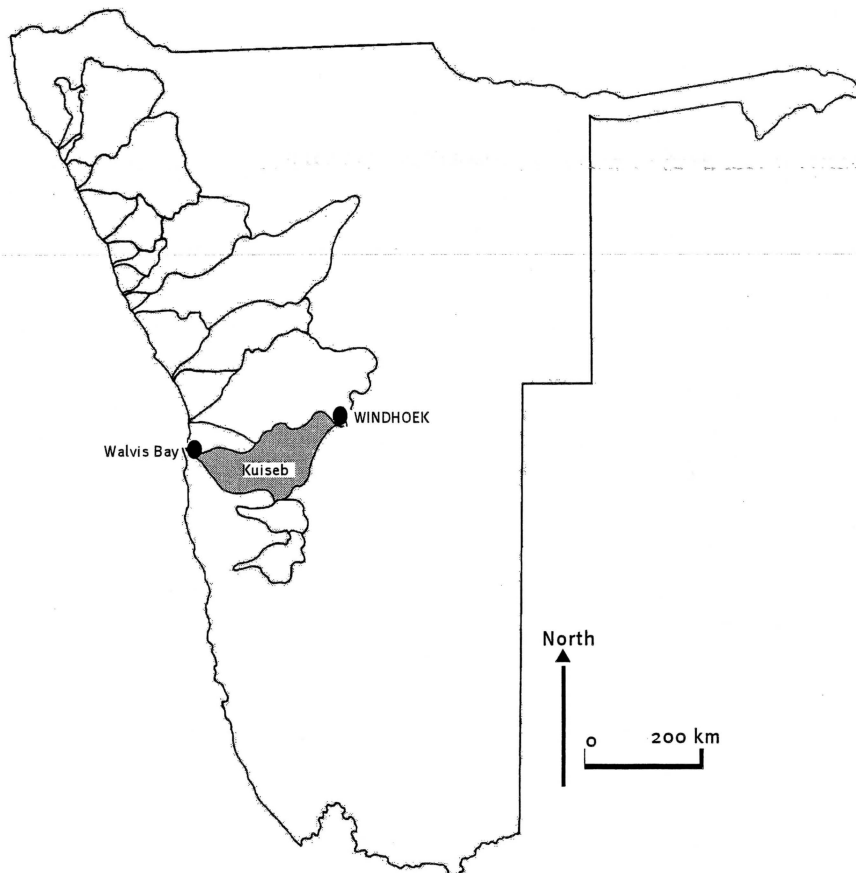
However, decision makers and agricultural departments in southern Africa rarely acknowledge the different management goals in the two systems. The commercial ranching model is still seen as the ideal, which the communal system should evolve towards. The latter is frequently perceived as inefficient, unproductive and overstocked.

Through a discourse and narrative analytical approach we try in this study to contribute to an increased understanding of southern African commercial farmers' views on issues of land management, environmental change and land reform. White commercial farmers and their organisations are still important actors in the struggle over land reform in this region. In addition, since rangeland policies in southern Africa have been dominated by the thinking behind the commercial ranching model, even in the context of communal areas (Abel and Blaikie, 1989; Adams and Devitt, 1992; Barrett, 1992; Scoones, 1992; Rohde *et al.*, 2001), the arguments and perceptions dominating among commercial farmers can be expected also to be widespread in for instance, the extension services and agricultural and environmental ministries, as well as among politicians generally. Hence, this article is based on the idea that commercial farmers, extension services, agricultural and environmental departments and central politicians form networks of actors who, through their use of language and actions promote, establish and reproduce a particular discourse (Keeley and Scoones, 2000).

‘These networks are the mechanisms through which knowledge becomes practice. What joins the network together is a sharing of some common values and outlooks. Networks are generally informal, and actors may not think consciously about their links with other actors’ (Keeley and Scoones, 2000: 91–92).

This article is based on interviews with 17 commercial farmers in the upper Kuiseb catchment area in central Namibia (Figure 1). Most of the farmers are of German descent and still use German as their main language at home and in contacts with neighbours, while English, and to a lesser extent Afrikaans, are used in relations with government and the wider society. The farmers were interviewed in English during August–December 2000, using a mini disc recorder.

Figure 1. The Kuiseb catchment area and the catchments of the eleven other westward flowing ephemeral rivers in Namibia



In the following sections of this article, we first give a brief presentation of agriculture in Namibia and in the study area, before presenting some central issues in debates about livestock keeping and the environment in southern Africa. Then we move on to discourse and narrative analysis within political ecology as the theoretical and methodological approach used in the article, before presenting the interview material in the form of stories linked to some main topics. Finally, we present a possible counternarrative and discuss how science and politics intermingle in the stories presented.

2. Agriculture in Namibia and in the Kuiseb

Agricultural production in Namibia is severely constrained by the arid climate. Only 34 per cent of the country receives on average more than 400 mm of rain per year, which is considered to be the minimum for reliable rain-fed crop production. The scarcity of productive soils further limits cultivation. In most parts of the country, low average annual precipitation allows only extensive livestock farming: cattle in the northern parts and small stock in the more arid western, southern and south-western regions (Werner, 2000).

All the commercial farmers interviewed in this study have farms in the upper part of the Kuiseb catchment area. The Kuiseb is one of 12 major westward-flowing ephemeral rivers in Namibia (Jacobson *et al.*, 1995). The course of the Kuiseb River, from the headwaters to the Atlantic Ocean, is 420 km. The headwaters of the catchment start in the Windhoek area; the river runs through a commercial farming area, with 109 farming units; flows further south-east through the Namib-Naukluft National Park and ends in the ocean a little south of the town of Walvis Bay.

The upper part of the Kuiseb is basically a cattle-producing area, where the average rainfall is between 150 and 330 mm per year. In this part of the catchment, rainfall is higher and less variable than in the arid West. The commercial farmers cope with the challenge of farming in a dry area with variable rainfall by means of an agricultural practice that makes extensive use of land. The properties of the farmers interviewed were between 3,500 and 17,000 hectares, with between 200 and 1,000 cattle on the farms. The largest farms are found in the driest areas bordering the Namib Desert.

Most commercial farmers interviewed manage their rangeland according to 'the camp system'. This entails the fencing-off of portions of the range. In each portion, or camp, livestock are left unattended both day and night. This rangeland management sys-

tem depends on conservative stocking rates and rotational grazing between camps in order to maintain the productive potential of the vegetation and a constant sustainable off-take or 'crop' of livestock. The camp system is relatively intensive in capital in the sense that big investments are needed for water installations and fencing. On the other hand, the system is based on low labour inputs compared to the communal model.

3. Stock Farming and the Environment in Southern Africa

The whole environment and development literature on Africa is rife with references linking African pastoral and farming systems with land degradation and desertification. This commonly perceived link may be traced back to colonial ideas about African land management (Anderson and Grove, 1987; Fairhead and Leach, 1996; Leach and Mearns, 1996; Benjaminsen, 2000).

During the last decade, the desertification discourse in Africa has been heavily criticised and undermined by a substantial amount of empirical research (see, for example, Swift, 1996, and Adger *et al.*, 2001, for reviews). However, despite this research, 'desertification' remains an institutional fact within African government policies and donor-funded programmes. In Namibia, the country's Programme to Combat Desertification (NAPCOD) states as an undisputed fact that land degradation continues to take place at an alarming rate (referred in Sullivan, 2000a: 20). This statement and a host of other confident assertions on 'desertification' in the country are made without reference 'to a shred of supportive natural science "evidence"', according to Sullivan (2000a: 19).

Debates about land degradation and desertification in African drylands are linked to conflicting views of carrying capacity and whether livestock systems operate within equilibrium or non-equilibrium ecological systems. Carrying capacity (CC) in its most basic definition determines the maximum livestock or wildlife population that a habitat or ecosystem can support on a sustainable basis. In livestock production, the concept has been applied mainly to the management of the arid and semi-arid rangeland regions of the world and especially to pastoral systems in Africa where livestock are primarily dependent on grazing resources within a given area for feed supply. The CC concept has provided a planning and management tool that has formed the basis of many proposed development interventions designed to ensure the continued sustainable

exploitation of these rangeland ecosystems (Dijkman, 1993).

Since the management goals of commercial and communal systems are radically different, determining the CC of the land will have to take the differences in objectives into account. If the objective is to produce high quality meat, stocking rates within the recommended range will be important, whereas when the objective is capital storage, i.e. to keep as many animals alive as possible, because the herd is an insurance, then the quality of the meat is of less importance. Hence, recommended stocking densities will differ between commercial and communal farms situated in the same ecological environments. However, high stocking densities are usually said to lead to long-term land degradation and desertification. But this again is a debated issue.

Recent developments within range science tend to characterise African drylands as non-equilibrium environments (Ellis and Swift, 1988; Behnke *et al.*, 1993; Scoones, 1995; Oba *et al.*, 2000). In non-equilibrium environments, it is highly problematic to base management on the determination of carrying capacity. The concept of CC is often based on the assumption that pastures are in equilibrium. Any notion of carrying capacity, be it ecological or economic,² is predicated on the notion that herbivore numbers are controlled through the availability of forage and that the availability of forage is controlled by animal numbers. In turn, this pattern presumes that conditions of plant growth are stable. This is a pattern of negative feedback that eventually produces a stable equilibrium between animal and plant populations. However, such stable equilibria seldom occur in African drylands (Sandford, 1983; Behnke *et al.*, 1993; Scoones, 1995). In non-equilibrium systems, external factors such as climate, rather than livestock numbers, tend to determine the vegetation cover. Moreover, unavailability of forage in bad years may depress livestock populations to the point where the impact of their grazing on the vegetation is minimal in most years. Thus, in areas of fluctuating climates, rainfall rather than forage availability may ultimately be the variable that limits herbivore population growth.

2 The ecological carrying capacity indicates which level the pastoral pressure should not exceed without having negative consequences for the regeneration of the pastures. The economic carrying capacity sets a theoretical limit which marks the number of livestock units pastoral resources in a certain area can support in order to attain a certain management objective (optimal meat or milk production, for instance) (Hiernaux, 1982).

An example from southern Zimbabwe supports this idea. Using livestock data over a 60-year period, Scoones (1992) concludes that during relatively good rainfall years, cattle populations do approach a ceiling set by an ecological carrying capacity. As stocking densities increase, the birth rate declines and the death rate rises; but the two rates never attain equilibrium and thus the cattle population never reaches the limits of its growth. The maximum stocking densities determined by ecological carrying capacity are never attained because of the random intervention of exceptionally stressful years. In the long run, therefore, non-equilibrium factors tend to be the major influence on cattle population numbers, resulting in populations below potential 'equilibrium' density. Hence, grazing has little effect on grassland productivity compared to rainfall in non-equilibrium environments.

However, some researchers claim that the non-equilibrium model is not valid for southern African rangelands (Illius and O'Connor, 1999). This discussion is currently only emerging in the region (see Sullivan and Rohde, forthcoming, for a response to Illius and O'Connor). In the meantime, concepts associated with the equilibrium model are used by powerful actors in the debate on sustainable land use to give their arguments scientific weight.

The contribution of communal land to livelihood security in southern Africa is generally underestimated, because these assessments are only based on the contribution of communal areas to meat markets (Shackleton *et al.*, 2000). However, assessments of the contributions of all land-based activities in communal lands may yield surprising results. Adams *et al.* (2000) have estimated, for instance, that in 1999 the aggregate value of communal areas in South Africa was US\$ 2 billion per year, or around 2.5 per cent of GDP.

Few studies have actually tried to compare the productivity of the two land-use systems. However, Scoones (1992) assessed the value of cattle and goats in a communal area in Zimbabwe and compared the data with official figures on communal and commercial systems. As mentioned, while commercial productivity is measured as the amount of meat produced, communal stock is used for many purposes. Scoones used the replacement cost method to calculate the value of production according to local economic criteria. On the basis of these calculations he found the total productivity of cattle and goats in the communal area to be much higher than the official estimates of area-based productivity in communal areas as well as significantly higher than the per-area productivity in ranching systems in Zimbabwe.

Another study, by Rohde *et al.* (2001), used monetary values to compare productivity in a commercial and a communal area in Namaqualand in South Africa, which is basically a sheep-farming region. It was found that the off-take (sales and consumption) calculated in rand per hectare was slightly higher in the communal area even when only the value of the production of live animals was included. Hence, other uses of livestock, which were included by Scoones, were excluded from this study. On the other hand, gross income per ewe was considerably higher in the commercial area. Hence, this study indicates a higher land productivity in the communal area due to higher stocking densities and more intensive use of pastures, and higher productivity per animal in the commercial area because of more favourable conditions for weight increase.

4. Discourse and Narrative Analysis as Political Ecology

This study uses discourse and narrative analysis within a broad framework of political ecology (Blaikie and Brookfield, 1987; Peet and Watts, 1996; Bryant and Bailey, 1997; Stott and Sullivan, 2000; Adger *et al.*, 2001). We define political ecology broadly as the study of power relations in land and environmental management. Within this field, we are particularly interested in the ways that power relations are reinforced in discourses about 'the environment' maintained by powerful actors.

A discourse can be identified as a shared meaning of a phenomenon. This phenomenon can be small or large and shared by a small or large group of people. Through written and oral statements, discourses are produced, reproduced and transformed. A discourse analysis may involve an analysis of regularities in expressions to identify discourses, an analysis of the actors participating in the various discourses as well as a study of the social impacts and policy outcomes of discourses (Adger *et al.*, 2001).

Discourse analysis is an example of a constructivist approach focusing on claims and claims makers related to specific phenomena (Hannigan, 1995). This type of discourse analysis focusing on the discourses of power and how powerful actors frame the objects of which they speak usually refers back to the classic contributions by Michel Foucault (e.g. Foucault, 1966).

The messages within discourses are communicated through narratives, stories, metaphors and other rhetorical devices (Adger *et al.*, 2001). In this article, the focus is on narratives. Roe (1991,

1995, 1999) presents development narratives as stories, scenarios or arguments that form the basis or the assumptions of decision-making. A narrative has a beginning, a middle and an end. If presented as an argument it has a dramatic structure revolving around a sequence of events or positions in which something is said to happen or from which something is said to follow (Prince, in McQuillan, 2000). A narrative has its premises and conclusions, and the archetypes of hero, villain and victim are often included in the 'cast' (Adger *et al.*, 2001; Svarstad, 2002).

Roe argues that narratives are usually constructed to simplify a complex reality. A narrative can be seen as a generalised abstraction rather than a specific case or story. Prince (in McQuillan, 2000) insists that narratives are unique in fulfilling certain functions. A narrative not merely reflects what happens, it also invents what can happen. It does not simply record events, it constitutes and interprets them as meaningful parts of meaningful wholes, whether the latter are situations, practices, persons or societies. Thus, narratives are part of discourses. Narratives provide to the people who construct them an explanation of individual fate as well as group destiny. By showing that disparate situations and events compose one signifying structure and by relating this structure to a possible reality, narratives can be used as a strategy to form a new reality.

Dominating narratives about Africa have been characterised as 'crisis narratives' (Roe, 1991). Roe's solution to dealing with such standard narratives is first to 'denarrativise' by criticising a narrative with reference to its factual shortcomings. The narrative is simply proven wrong. However, to have an impact on development policies, denarrativisation is not enough. One should also come up with 'counternarratives', alternative stories that are nevertheless as simplified as those they oppose.

Some narrative analysts limit the analysis to the study of the linguistics in narratives (Reissman, 1993). However, we would argue with Roe that more interesting findings would result from comparing the narratives of various actors with what recent research tells us and to identify correspondence or divergence.³ It is also interesting to link a study of narratives to the actors promoting them as well as to analyse the policy impacts of the narratives.

3 Such an approach may be labelled environmental pragmatism or critical realism (Proctor, 1998), implying that both the real biophysical processes in nature and nature's discursive constructions are acknowledged. According to the view of environmental pragmatists, our knowledge of the natural world is neither a representation of something that exists outside us nor merely a social construction.

Peet and Watts (1996), in reviewing the frontiers of political ecology, argue that discursive approaches to the analysis of environment and development are central to this emerging approach. This area of political ecology includes research on the sociology of science and knowledge, the history of institutions and policy on environment and development and, most importantly, the globalisation of environmental discourses in relation to 'new languages and institutional relations of global environmental governance and management' (Peet and Watts, 1996: 11). Likewise, to Stott and Sullivan (2000: 2), political ecology is 'a concern with tracing the genealogy of narratives concerning "the environment", with identifying power relationships supported by such narratives, and with asserting the consequences of hegemony over, and within, these narratives for economic and social development, and particularly for constraining possibilities for self-determination'.

The interviews with the white Namibian farmers carried out in this research were open-ended, although focusing primarily on the management of water and pastures. The discussions often led to issues of good and bad management, the land-use practices of 'the others' (the communal farmers) and the question of land redistribution. Most of the interviews took place on individual farms.

5. The Narratives of the Farmers

Desiccation

Most of the commercial farmers in the Kuiseb argue that climate change is taking place in their area, leading to a permanent decline in annual rainfall. Evidence for this presented by the farmers is the decline in average rainfall during the past 20 years or more, which is supported by available rainfall data.⁴ They also report that water sources (boreholes and dams) have decreased in recent years.

The presence of an environmental crisis due to desiccation plays a central role in the stories presented by the Kuiseb farmers:

From 1978, our rainfall is coming down, it's getting dryer, and dryer and dryer. Just to give you an example, in the early 70s, the rivers were

4 Rainfall data are only available from two stations in the Kuiseb catchment area. These data tend to support the farmers' sense of desiccation in recent decades by showing a tendency towards a decline in five-year average rainfall since the 1920s, but with cycles of wet and dry periods. The last two decades have been particularly dry (Hongslo, 2001).

still running in September. You had a lot more rain in the fountains, and the level of water in your boreholes... Everything is going down. (Farmer 5)

Accounts of the water situation in the countryside in the old days support the argument of a permanent change in annual rainfall. Farmers are convinced that the environmental situation was better in the old days because there was more rain:

I don't know how the ozone layer works, but it definitely has an influence on the rainfall, and that is why, you know in the Namib, there were a lot of farming activities in the early years, and there was strong farms, and they were farming like hell, they had a lot of sheep. And where is everybody now? They are bankrupt. They start a new living. Question: So the farms produced more in the old days? Yes, definitely. (Farmer 5)

The farmer makes a connection between desiccation, changes in the local environment and global climate change.⁵ Many of the farmers interviewed focus on rainfall in recent years and the subsequently decreasing stocking rates. There is an environmental and economic crisis in the upper Kuiseb, and this crisis is due to the declining rainfall. One farmer explains how varying and uncertain rainfall is taken into account in deciding the stocking levels:

If you have an average year, which means you have 270–280 mm per year, then you can have 12 hectares per head of cattle, with 500 kg cattle. But if you don't get rain, then you can have zero cattle. But we know that after one good year a not so good year will follow, most probably. You always have to work with reserves, for the second and third year. That is why you can't stock the land fully. (Farmer 7)

The above citation indicates how the commercial farmers reason when it comes to the management of grazing. It shows how they estimate the size of the herd according to a recommended stocking level in order to maintain a certain minimum grass cover. The rationale behind this is to maintain some security grazing in case of a prolonged dry period. Hence, the farmers adjust stock numbers to the annual rainfall. They have also adopted the practice of moving stock, as in the communal farming system. When rainfall is low in one region, the farmers rent grazing from neighbours or from farmers

5 He probably confuses ozone layer depletion with the greenhouse effect.

in other areas in order to keep the stock constant. One farmer said that he had cattle in 12 different farms during the severe drought of 1996. However, the farmers normally pay for access to other grazing areas. Rohde (1994) and Sullivan (1996) corroborate the existence of these practices amongst commercial farmers.

Overgrazing

'Overgrazing' is a word often mentioned in the interviews. Most of the time, it is used in relation to the farming system of 'the others' – the communal farmers. The following quote presents an explanation for overgrazing:

You see, if you are talking about stocking, you must know that for 50 kg of life weight, I need a certain amount of grass, whether it is cattle or sheep. If you talk about cattle of 500 kilo and a sheep of 50 kilo, then you can say it is one to 10. Then you will have the same relation with the grazing. Actually, you must be very careful here. When the grass is still 10 cm, there is not enough for cattle any more, but the sheep will have enough to survive for a little while, but then the plant is destroyed completely. If this happens you will have an encroachment of the desert, which you really have in the marginal areas here. If you destroy the permanent grazing, it won't be able to re-establish itself, because the rainfall is too erratic, and for a plant to establish itself it needs a lot of rain. And then you need to withdraw your animals completely to let the area recover. (Farmer 7)

According to this farmer, overgrazing implies destroying the permanent pasture represented by the perennial plants. Furthermore, the farmer argues that overgrazing is the result of poor management. If you do not pay enough attention, you will let your animals overgraze. We see here a connection made between what commercial farmers consider poor rangeland management and desertification.

The next quote includes examples and words often used by commercial farmers:

I know a couple of farms that have been given out to people two years ago; if you go there today there is *nothing*. The farms are in the Karibib area. The problem is with the communal farmers, they tend to take a piece of land like this, it is 10,000 hectares, and with a rainfall like ours, this farm at this stage with the drought of four years, I can barely keep going. But they will come, and put 20 families there. And there is

no way that this can carry and sustain so many people. There are too many cattle, everyone's got goats, donkeys, horses, and within two-three years there is *nothing*. Here one must make the grass last for two or three years, but the communal farmers don't plan like that. They use what there is and that is that, because they don't think of tomorrow, or next week or next year. That's unfortunately how it goes. Because they don't plan, they just use what they have. It's the same thing with firewood. That's why, if you take an aerial photograph from Africa, you will see all the areas they have cleaned out, where they live like this and you see that the places they clear get bigger and bigger. So once they have done 10 km², they must move. Hundreds of years ago, that was not a problem, because there was enough space, but now they can't move, because there has been people before them, and there is *nothing*. (Farmer 14)

Hence, the causes of overgrazing are found in the communal areas. This farmer assumes that since the areas in northern Namibia are what he considers to be overgrazed, communal farmers will manage new areas in the same way, if they take over land as a result of redistribution. Because bad management is inherent among communal farmers as a group, they will continue this management when they get more land. Thus the settler landscape of today, developed over several generations of 'good' management, will be turned into *nothing*.

Nothing is a word commonly used by commercial farmers to describe the areas of the communal farmers. The *green pastures/ nothing* dichotomy is important in the commercial farmers' stories about land reform. *Nothing* describes the perceived result of African management. In a broader sense, *nothing* also refers to the absence of nicely maintained settler-style farm buildings and other features of settler life, which the farmers appreciate, and, which serve as symbols of a well-managed farm.

Overpopulation

Some farmers are primarily concerned with overpopulation among Africans:

Two thousand years ago northern Africa was producing a lot of food for the Romans, and Europe was full of trees, and only a few people lived there. When we cut down all the trees, more of Africa dried out. And here, with our intensive farming, we do the same, we increase the desert. So we are in a very bad position in Africa because if they get

enough food, they get children. In the early times the population was controlled by the rainfall, in the sense that it varied with it. So over thousands of years it was stable. But now, with our Christian ethics, if somebody is hungry, we have to help. The next point is making children, and we help again, and more children. We have an increase in Namibia over 30 years from 900,000/1,000,000 people, and now 1,700,000 people.

Question: So, there is overpopulation?

Yes, but with AIDS I don't know how quick it goes. It is a terrible thing, but it's not quick enough. (Farmer 2)

This farmer talks about overpopulation as a problem for Namibia in relation to available natural resources. In his opinion, overpopulation will cause desertification because highly populated communal areas require more intensive grazing. Hence, intensive farming refers to the farming practices in the communal areas. African farming practices were once at a reasonable level, but they are no longer acceptable, with the increasing population in the area. The white population does not increase, only the African, and overpopulation is therefore a problem inside the communal areas, and the solutions must also be found there. In addition, communal farmers do not plan; they just eat and produce children. Christian ethics and development assistance only aggravate the problem, inhibiting the natural checks on population growth that existed in Africa in the past. According to this farmer, AIDS works as a new check on population growth in Namibia, but it is not efficient enough.

Knowledge and rights

Ongoing processes of land redistribution in southern Africa are also touched on by farmers in the interviews, but often in an implicit manner and usually only after direct invitation:

Question: Some people are worried about the things happening in Zimbabwe. Is that something all farmers consider?

Yes, all farmers in Namibia. We will have to wait and see, there is nothing we can do about it. We all bought our land, and why must it be taken away? We know how to farm, and to maintain the vegetation, and if people without that knowledge come in, they will destroy the land. But if political reasons decide, you don't have a choice. (Farmer 13)

This farmer thinks that if new people take over the land, without the necessary 'knowledge' that commercial livestock farmers have,

they will ruin it. Implicit in the statement is that no other management system would function in the area. However, the political objectives of land redistribution may overrule common sense.

In the next quote the argument is taken further to include economics:

Question: In the yearly convention of NAU,⁶ they referred to the fact that Sam Nujoma⁷ had said that such a thing (land invasions à la Zimbabwe) was not going to happen in Namibia.

Yes, he gave us a guarantee that it is not going to happen, and one of the ministers said that it is not worthwhile to take the land away from the whites, because they have all the experience in how to work the land. They distribute the income for the country, and there is no use giving the land to someone who comes in new. In Zimbabwe the problem is the tobacco farms, and they are big, and there is a lot of money in it. New people will always have something to do there. If you take the farms away from someone here, they put on cattle and overgraze, and the land is broken down, and you have to wait six to eight years for the land to recover. You can see when you drive around, especially in the North, that some places have bushes and others don't. That's all overgrazing. (Farmer 13)

Again a reference is made to 'knowledge' defined as the experience of commercial farmers. If you take land from someone in the Kuiseb catchment area and replace him with communal farmers without the same knowledge, degradation of the area will be the result. Consequently, if the new farmers do not have the knowledge, they should not get land. Having the right knowledge is something that commercial farmers repeatedly come back to, as a way of legitimising their continued use of the land. In addition, the economy of Namibia depends on what the commercial farmers produce. The income from this production also benefits the poor as it is distributed (e.g. pensions), the farmer says.

The farmer also implicitly says that the land in Namibia cannot be redistributed because the climate is too harsh. He refers to Zimbabwe, where they have an easier climate and says that with tobacco production, anyone can make a living, whereas in the harsh climate of Namibia, sound land management depends on the experience of the white commercial farmers.

6 The Namibian Agricultural Union organises the commercial farmers of Namibia.

7 President of Namibia since 1990.

In the quote by farmer 14 below the connection between the 'right' to own land and the management of the land is drawn. This farmer says that communal farmers should not have the right to own farms in their area because they do not have education and thus cannot run the farm in a way he sees as scientific. Several of the farmers interviewed linked knowledge to land rights. There seems to be an understanding that land in this area should be managed in one specific way. If future owners do not know how to manage rangeland according to the same principles as those used by the commercial farmers, land should not be allocated to them.

References to science in different forms were frequently made. The commercial farmers use what they perceive as scientific concepts to argue implicitly against land reform. Communal farmers 'overgraze', and exceed 'carrying capacity' of land by 'overpopulating' the land with livestock and people.

The ones that get the farms are not the ones with education from agricultural colleges, it's the nephews and nieces of whoever is there. All they know about agriculture is what they know from their fathers and grandfathers before them. If they water the livestock, they stay there until the water is finished, and then they go to the next place. You can't do like that. Look, I have met some very good black farmers, but they had made their own money already, and could afford to buy the farm, and they are running the place exactly like we do, from an economic point of view, scientifically, but the farms that they give out on the redistribution is for people who have nothing. I would love to take you up to the North and show you the farms, even the ones that were redistributed before independence – the Odendaal farms. That was in the 70s. And there were some very nice farms, but people moved in there and they broke the roofs off the buildings and put up the shacks, and they brought the goats into the houses, and from the roofs they made a crib. (Farmer 14)

The Odendaal farms are represented as having been prosperous in the 1970s. Now the farms and the land are destroyed. The aesthetic aspect is of importance: the farms that were ruined were very nice, and were replaced by 'shacks'. The heavy subsidies that supported these farms during apartheid are obviously not mentioned.

The main premise of this farmer's argument is that communal farmers cannot manage the land. From this he concludes that moving them, through land reform, will lead to even more overgrazing. In other words, land reform would be unwise for scientific reasons.

The problem with the communal farmers is not the colour of their skin. An African farmer may also be a good farmer, as long as he operates with the same premises as the commercial farming system.

6. Damaraland – Creating a Counternarrative

Damaraland is often mentioned in the interviews as a once prosperous commercial farming area where, due to land redistribution, heavy overgrazing has taken place. However, other sources draw a different picture of Damaraland.

The Odendaal Commission⁸ of 1964 proposed the creation of the homeland of Damaraland, which after independence became a communal area. A total of 223 commercial farms were to be bought from their white owners. These varied in size from 4,000 to 25,000 hectares and were typically extensive cattle and small-stock enterprises. Most had been abandoned because they were not economically viable. In other cases, farmers living elsewhere used them as additional grazing reserves. Stock was occasionally moved onto these farms to graze, and then returned to inland farms. This pattern imitated the movements of nomadic pastoralists in response to rain (Rohde *et al.*, 1999).

The Odendaal Commission stated that Damaraland would offer 108 hectares per individual to its residents. However, this figure does not reflect the fact that well over half of the region is desert and unsuitable for stock farming (Jacobson *et al.*, 1995). Since only one-third of the total area of 48,000 km² is utilisable from a commercial farming perspective, it means that each family is left with 250 hectares, whereas about 8,500 hectares are regarded as necessary to sustain a white settler family (Rohde, 1997).

Rohde *et al.* (1999) challenge the standard perception of communal farmers as careless managers whose actions invariably lead to destruction of pastures. They show how systems developed in Damaraland during recent drought years enabled the farmers to migrate to areas of better grazing.⁹ It might be tempting to see these

8 The Commission of Enquiry into South West African Affairs, known as the Odendaal Commission, examined the land requirements of the main racial and ethnic groups and designated a tract of land to each. In some areas, this involved the purchase of a few white-owned farms where black families who were no longer needed as labourers in the white economy were settled (Adams and Devitt, 1992).

9 From 1978 to 1994, rainfall in Damaraland fell by an average 25 to 30 per cent below the long-term yearly mean (Rohde, 1997).

movements of people and livestock across an expanding communal landscape as chaotic, and yet something intangible seemed to order this process. Communal farmers were able to accommodate substantial influxes of livestock and people from drought-affected areas, with a minimum of conflict. Indeed, each episode of drought in this region has been followed by predictions of environmental and agricultural collapse, and yet the farmers in former Damaraland seem to have survived reasonably well.

Damaraland might be conceived of as one large farm, supporting over 33,000 people and 100,000 LSUs (Large Stock Units) within its borders; the equivalent amount of land in adjacent, privately owned commercial farms supports only a fraction of this human population and produces less per hectare in spite of its higher agricultural potential (Rohde *et al.*, 1999).

In addition, to study temporal landscape and environmental change, Rohde (1997) used historical landscape photographs from 49 sites in Damaraland and matched them with photographs he took on the same spots between 1994 and 1996. His main conclusion was that the overall vegetation changes observed cannot be attributed directly to pressure from humans or livestock. He concluded that the major factor driving environmental change in Damaraland is the annual rainfall:

In spite of 15 years of poor rainfall, the ability to rebuild decimated herds is a testament to the resilience of the environment as well as to the determination of communal farmers. If, as many observers have predicted, the environment of Damaraland is degraded and on the verge of collapse (whatever that means) then the evidence for such an eventuality is certainly not born out of an analysis of the lands' continuing productive capacity. Several factors are responsible for this dramatic herd recovery: transport assistance for emergency grazing, fodder subsidy, but most importantly, herd mobility within the communal area of former Damaraland (Rohde, 1997: 266).¹⁰

Likewise, Sullivan (1999), also working in Damaraland, empirically investigated outsiders' narratives about heavy degradation taking

10 An alternative counternarrative might present a story concluding that the range is overgrazed, but that this is caused by the historical eviction of African farmers from areas reserved for white commercial farming and the establishment of overcrowded 'reserves' for Africans (see for instance Hoffman and Ashwell, 2001).

place in communal areas in southern Africa. She collected and analysed data relating to community floristics, plant diversity, density and cover and population structure for woody vegetation. The study indicated 'only very localized impacts of settlement, rather low levels of use by branch-cutting and browsing, and resilient, if variable, secondary productivity' (Sullivan, 1999: 273).

These findings from Damaraland by Rohde and Sullivan are comparable to those of Ward *et al.* (1998) who studied a communal area in Otjimbingwe in northern Namibia. Vegetation and soil parameters in the communal area and on surrounding commercial farms were compared. In spite of far higher stocking densities on the communal area, Ward *et al.* (1998: 369) concluded that 'communal farming in Otjimbingwe is not more destructive to the natural environment than commercial farming' and that these 'results point to the resilience of desert margins in Namibia in the face of heavy human and livestock pressure'.

In addition, local stories collected by Sullivan in Damaraland in 1999 form part of this counternarrative. The Damara interviewed are also concerned about desiccation or an overall decline in rainfall. Echoing non-equilibrium theory, their stories focus on rainfall and variations in rainfall to explain vegetation change or 'degradation':

When it rains, in the places where people stay the grass comes out like in the past. But if it doesn't rain then there is no grass. There is *nothing*. At Hurubes where the people are staying with cattle and goats ... the grass still grows when the rain falls (quoted in Sullivan, 2000b).

Hence, according to the commercial farmers interviewed, *nothing* is created by communal farmers' bad land management, while communal farmers in Damaraland attribute the existence of *nothing* to lack of rainfall. This counternarrative from Damaraland is also supported by international research carried out during the 1980s and 1990s, dealing with range science and pastoral development in general. This research now forms part of a wider counternarrative or maybe an alternative discourse on people-land relations in Africa.

7. Science and Politics

One of the farmers said that 'politics is a threat to reason'. An interpretation of this would be: 'We have scientifically based argu-

ments, but if politics decide, we will lose.' This may be the reason why outright political arguments are not used in the debate on land reform. Instead, the commercial farmers use what they perceive as scientific concepts in their argumentation. Some key concepts are important here: 'carrying capacity', 'overgrazing', 'overpopulation' and 'productivity'.

A view of science implicitly represented in the farmers' stories is that science produces objective truth and provides a rational non-political basis for policy making. By producing and reproducing a narrative constructed around the concept of carrying capacity, the farmers avoid political themes such as land redistribution. This view of science does not separate facts from knowledge claims and values. It tends to see the passing-on of scientific information as a one-way process, from researchers to farmers and policy makers, and this information is seen as unproblematic.

Mackenzie (2000) has studied the blend of political and scientific argumentation in Kenya from 1920 to 1945. On what she calls 'the discourse of betterment' she writes: '... from the early 1920s the doctrine of trusteeship, which informed colonial thinking, drew increasingly on the authoritative claims of the "scientific method" both to generate "crisis narratives" in the Reserve and to construct discourses of "betterment" and "environmentalism", which legitimated a deepening of administrative control.' She also provides evidence that this scientific method was contested among the scientists of the time, and that protests were ignored by the authorities.

From the interviews in this study, one notes that the commercial farmers use the same strategy in their arguments, more than half a century later. In their own areas, there is an environmental crisis caused by desiccation – rainfall being an external factor, which cannot be controlled. Their own management is scientifically correct while management in the communal areas is characterised by carelessness and lack of foresight. They show this through the representations of the communal areas in the North. *Nothing* is the result of the communal management of these areas. They argue that when it comes to land degradation in the North, the solution to the problem lies within the communal areas themselves. This takes pressure away from the political arguments for land reform and redistribution. If overgrazing is caused by unscientific management by the communal farmers redistributing land to them would only make the situation worse.

Mackenzie (2000) also discusses a crisis narrative with respect

to soil conservation that became dominant in the 1930s in Kenya. This narrative enabled a political issue, the distribution of land, to be presented as a problem that technology could fix. If the African farmer was at fault, then the solution lay within the Reserve, not in recognising the racist relations on which the state was founded and restructuring the socio-economic system. Western science would once again provide the solutions.

The portrayal of the African farmer as agriculturally and environmentally irresponsible created the political space for the exercise of state 'paternalistic authoritarianism' and the rendering of a deeply political issue, the redistribution of land, as amenable to technological resolution. Likewise, the farmers of the Kuiseb implicitly argue against redistribution through their claims that African farmers lack the relevant knowledge to take proper care of the land. They also try to redefine the debate, away from politics, and towards science, by using scientific arguments in the political debate. This draws the attention away from the highly politicised matter of justice, towards more technical issues.

Mackenzie (2000) argues that the notion of 'carrying capacity' as used in Kenya similarly allowed the African landscape to be quantified and thus, at least figuratively, brought under control. If, through a ruse of scientific objectivity, the density of people and livestock in a given area could be assessed against ecological resources, as implied in the equilibrium model, so could the state construct a 'crisis', the solution to which demanded an intensification of administrative intervention. Thus, as part of a discourse of science and a principle of objectivity, the concept of carrying capacity provided a means through which the deeply political issues that the racial distribution of land created for African agriculture could be recast as a problem that technology could solve. Again, the problem, and therefore the solution, lay with African systems of land management inside the Reserve.

It is our hypothesis for further studies that a similar network of actors consisting of settlers, agricultural and environmental authorities and politicians as the one existing in Kenya in colonial time can be identified in today's Namibia and southern Africa in general. This study has focused on stories told by settler farmers in an area of Namibia. Together, these stories form a generalised abstraction, or a narrative, which depicts what is currently happening in commercial and communal areas in Namibia. This narrative is not uniquely coming from the white settlers. It is shared by a network of actors. Further studies may demonstrate how this narrative is linked to a

broader discourse of actor-networks in southern Africa, which informs both agricultural policies and land reform.

8. Conclusions

In this study we have used narrative analysis in order to investigate attitudes and perceptions on land reform held by commercial farmers in Namibia. Since rangeland policies in southern Africa have a long history of being dominated by the thinking behind the commercial farming model, we believe that the stories received from the farmers form a narrative that represents more than the views of white commercial farmers alone. It is our thesis that this narrative is part of a wider discourse on environment, agricultural development and land reform in southern Africa supported by a network of actors.

The standard narrative from the commercial farmers would contain the following premises:¹¹

- ▼ It is becoming increasingly difficult to live as a farmer in Namibia because of external factors such as declining rainfall (which is sometimes linked to global climatic issues) and politics, represented by the threat of land reform or land invasions à la Zimbabwe.
- ▼ Commercial farmers are the real experts on land and range management. Any sound management has to be based on their experience and knowledge.
- ▼ The Namibian economy depends on the commercial farmers' production. This production also benefits the poor through the distribution of benefits such as pensions.
- ▼ Communal farmers lack the ability to plan ahead; they therefore overstock the range and are unconcerned about the effect of overgrazing on vegetation.
- ▼ Over time, Africans tend to overpopulate the land, leaving degraded and desertified areas in their wake, before moving on to new areas.
- ▼ Communal farmers in Namibia do not have the right education, knowledge or experience to take care of the land.

The resulting conclusions would then be that:

¹¹ If a narrative is seen as an argument presented as a story with premisses and conclusions.

- ▼ Communal farmers' lack of foresight, tendency to overpopulate the land and lack of knowledge and experience lead to the transformation of well-managed landscapes into *nothing*.
- ▼ It is therefore not wise to redistribute productive commercial farmland to communal farmers.

Commercial farmers are both victims and heroes in their own narrative. They are victims of external factors such as desiccation (which could be caused by global climate change) and southern African politics. They are heroes because sound and sustainable land management depends on their knowledge and experience as caretakers of the land. The villains in the narrative are obviously the communal farmers who mismanage land by letting livestock overgraze and by being a general threat to the environment. If the state redistributes land to the villains, it would cause ecological disaster, as mismanagement would spread to new areas. By using scientific arguments, the heroes may convince the state that the land should stay in their hands.

However, recent research on African non-equilibrium grazing systems, more specific research on landscape and vegetation dynamics in Namibia, as well as local stories by communal farmers contribute to the creation of a counternarrative on the interaction between livestock, people and the environment in communal areas. This counternarrative is about the central role of erratic rainfall in explaining landscape change, and about a resilient environment, which quickly recuperates when the rains return. Hence, *nothing* is not created by overgrazing, but by drought.

The land reform process in Namibia is slow. One of the reasons for this could be that the ideas implied in the commercial farmers' narrative still dominate today's policy making. We have shown how, in the Kuiseb catchment area, these revolve around 'scientific' arguments, which are questioned by recent research. Despite the scientific uncertainty and disagreement, concepts associated with one side continue to be used by important and powerful actors in the debate about the best use of the land in order to give their arguments scientific weight and to avoid more problematic political issues such as social justice through redistribution of land.

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