

Land and landscape in Herero oral culture: Cultural and social aspects of the land question in Namibia¹

Larissa Förster²

February 2005

1 Introduction

2 The area around the Waterberg in Herero oral tradition

3 The "oral character" of the Waterberg area

4 Interpretation

4.1 The mountain itself: Fauna, flora and natural resources

4.2 The surrounding landscape: Wells and settlements

4.3 People and cattle: A landscape of pastures

4.4 The living and the dead: Graves and ancestral land

4.5 Venues of the 1904-1908 wars: The political dimension of landscape

5 Conclusion

6 References



¹ An earlier version of this essay was published with a different contextual focus; see Förster (2002).

² The author was one of the curators of the exhibition entitled "Namibia – Germany: A shared/divided history. Resistance, violence, memory", held at the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum in Cologne, Germany, from March to October 2004.



1 INTRODUCTION

Ownership of and access to land are two highly debated issues in Namibia today. With its long history of the African population's dispossession, the country is now striving to work out a framework for the just re-distribution of land in order to guarantee equal opportunities for economic survival and prosperity to all members of the contemporary society.

However, land and land use are not only important because they provide Namibian households with a source of income, but also because they form the basis of economic stability and social peace. Thus, the land question has symbolic aspects as well: the re-distribution of land signifies the re-empowerment of the previously disadvantaged. Solving the land question means re-establishing social justice. Therefore, the just redistribution of land can be seen as a symbol of independence and of the objective of national reconciliation.

Thus, on both a national and local level, the land issue touches upon symbolic aspects of people's lives. This holds true, for example, where ownership and access to land are considered vital to the cultural and social identity of a local community. The latter applies to most Namibians. In this context again, land use is not only a matter of economic well-being: various social and cultural practices

link up with access to land and are drawn upon by people in constructing their cultural and ethnic identity. Especially when such practices are regarded as having their roots in pre- or early colonial times, maintaining them can be central to the historic identity of Namibian communities and their self-definition as part of the contemporary multi-ethnic society.

One indication of such practices and how people draw upon them when constructing their cultural and ethnic identity is, for example, when people refer to a particular piece of land as 'ancestral'. In central Namibia, many areas are known as the 'original' settlement areas of certain communities like the San, the Damara, the Nama or the Herero. When these communities were expropriated under German and South African colonial rule, minimal sections of the areas previously occupied by these communities were turned into ethnic "homelands"; these former homelands became what is termed communal land after Namibia's independence. Most of the land thus claimed by the colonisers was converted into commercial farmland. This entailed that the African communities were henceforth excluded from ownership of and access to it. However, an attachment to 'their' former land was and is still



felt by the communities concerned. The concept of 'ancestral land rights' was discussed intensively during the National Conference on Land Reform and the Land Question in 1991. However, claims to ancestral land were ruled out on the grounds that the redistribution of land was and continues to be considered a national issue that should not lead to ethnic debates or competition amongst Namibians (Republic of Namibia 1991). Nevertheless, the notion of *ancestral land* still exists in many parts of Namibian society and, therefore, continues to influence discussions and debates on the land question.

In this discussion, I argue that the historic and cultural bonds between people and 'their' (former) land – even if (re-)constructed nowadays within the framework of the modern nation – need to be explored in order to better understand some of the social and cultural, symbolic and emotional aspects of the land question. In illustration, I will focus on the Herero-speaking community of central Namibia and an area the community regards as its ancestral land, namely a zone south of the Waterberg in the north-eastern portion of central Namibia.

The area in question has very recently been the focus of public debates. It also served as the venue for the

main commemoration of the colonial wars of 1904–1908 held in August 2004 by the Herero-speaking community – represented by the Coordinating Committee for the First Official Commemoration of the Ovaherero Genocide, 100 Years After – in cooperation with the National Preparatory Committee for the Commemoration of 1904. One of the main focusses of the commemoration was the issue of genocide, which was also the starting point of the court case filed by the Herero People's Reparations Corporation against the German Government and German companies in 2001.

In order to show that there is still a vivid memory of that particular strip of land among the Herero community of Namibia, and of how it was settled and used by their ancestors in pre-colonial and early colonial times, I will make use of a piece of Herero oral tradition. Oral tradition is very rarely looked at when talking about the land question in Namibia. However, oral tradition, oral history and orature³ have become important sources for historic, sociological, anthropological and literary research in Southern Africa during the last decade⁴; they contain not only information about the past, but also a great deal of interpretative, metaphorical and even controversial comments on the past from the perspective of the community concerned⁵.

³ Oral literature

⁴ For some of the many examples, see Brinkman et al. (1999), Darian-Smith et al. (1996), Hofmeyr (1993), and Vail et al. (1991).

⁵ Of course, written sources should not be taken as presenting pure, undisputable and undistorted facts and information any more than oral sources should. Both are influenced by their authors' views of and feelings towards the past.



2 THE AREA AROUND THE WATERBERG IN HERERO ORAL TRADITION

In the late 19th century, Herero cattle herders inhabited the area south of the Waterberg, using the local pastures as grazing for their livestock⁶. After the genocidal colonial wars of 1904–1908, the land was confiscated by the German colonial administration and distributed to German settlers who established cattle farms there. Survivors of the war who returned to the area later were settled or were forced to settle some distance from ‘their’ former land, mainly in the area around Okakarara up to the Omaheke, which became one of the ‘reserves’ for the Herero-speaking population under German as well as South African rule. The area south of the Waterberg, which is relatively fertile, was turned into commercial farmland. Subsequently, members of the Okakarara community and the surrounding villages only had access to the land as labourers on privately-owned commercial farms in the area or as employees of the state-owned Waterberg Plateau Park or the Bernabé de la Bat Rest Camp – as is the case today⁷.

The area around the Waterberg is referred to extensively in Herero oral culture. In this context the Waterberg itself is referred to as “Kaondeka”. An abundance of sources feature the area as the subject of descriptions,

praise songs and poems, recitations of oral history, and even speeches. The famous local musician, Jackson Kaujeua, is not the only one to have composed a song on the Waterberg (“Kaondeka”, 1994); the young members of *Wilddogs* from Okakarara also recently released a song entitled “Kaondeka” on their *Ombara otjitambi* album. Popular songs like “Ndundu yomeva” (“Mountain of water”) that refer to the Waterberg are sung at many schools all over Namibia (see Erlank 2002:29f). Even modern Herero poetry has delivered treatments of the Waterberg theme (Tjoutuku 1998). All these texts are based on the same traditional oral genre in Herero, namely *omitandu* (sg. *omutandu*; “praise songs”), among which are a variety of verses on the area around the Waterberg.

Omitandu recall, describe, praise and comment on a particularly remarkable subject, place or person. Usually, they are part of singing and dancing performances carried out by male and/or female singers, dancers and oral historians at social gatherings like weddings or funerals. *Omitandu* on places form a major group within the genre of *omitandu*⁸. Nearly every place inhabited either permanently or temporarily by members of the Herero society has been given one

⁶ It can only be mentioned here briefly that Damara and San communities used to live in the area as well. ‘Their’ local history has unfortunately not yet been documented, although even Herero oral tradition frequently refers to these other communities. However, the Herero are assumed to have become the dominant group in the area until at least the end of the 19th century.

⁷ In 1981, farmland only within the area east of the mountain was handed over to the then Administration for the Hereros.

⁸ For a profound, detailed explanation and discussion of the literary genre of *omitandu*, see Kavari (2002) and Ohly (1990).



or more *omitandu* that are known not only to the communities that live at each such site, but also to the wider Herero-speaking community.

A compilation of *omitandu* is given below. These praise Kaondeka and the places on its southern side. All of these places are known as areas historically settled by the Herero. The recitation could, therefore, be seen as a 'mental map' of the area, comparable with its printed or hand-drawn counterparts. A presentation of the original recitation text in Herero will be followed by its English translation and an interpretation of the text within the context of the culture from which it stems.

The *omitandu* were recited by Kasisanda Muuondjo from Ombinda, which lies near the town of Okakarara. He is a well-known local specialist on Herero traditions and oral history⁹. The performance was part of an interview that dealt with the history of the area and was carried out as part of fieldwork in Okakarara¹⁰. Even if the compilation of *omitandu* given here is an individual recitation, it contains many parts that can be heard from other Herero-speaking singers, dancers, poets and oral historians in a very similar way¹¹. Here, therefore, it will be treated as representative of

the genre of *omitandu* in general, and of what Herero oral tradition has to say about the area around the Waterberg in particular.

The language of *omitandu* is very elaborate. What is typical for the genre is the formulaic character of the verses and their very stereotyped, metaphorical and encoded language, which is full of allusions and omissions – mostly of verbs. It takes patience to become adept at listening to and figuring out the meaning of *omitandu*. Even mother-tongue Herero-speakers rarely fully understand and interpret *omitandu* straightaway. The English translations below, which can at best only paraphrase the original, have drawn considerably on the translation approach developed by the linguists Rajmund Ohly (1990) Jekura Kavari (2002), the latter being Herero-speaking. In general, Ohly and Kavari have both chosen to translate *omitandu* in a relatively literal way in order to reveal the formulaic character of the verses, their syntactical arrangement, and the system of combining various *omitandu* into one longer praise. Nevertheless, in some cases, Herero idiomatic expressions cannot be translated literally; in such cases, a paraphrase of their meaning is given.

⁹ See his narratives in Heywood et al. (1992). Herero-speaking oral historians deal very openly with their historic and poetic knowledge. I am grateful to Kasisanda Muuondjo for sharing his knowledge – even in the somewhat artificial situation of the ethnological interview conducted by Marvis Kandundu and me.

¹⁰ The fieldwork, conducted over a period of approximately one year, formed part of a project entitled "Landscape and memory in postcolonial Namibia" within the University of Cologne's Special Research Project known as "Arid Climate, Adaptation and Cultural Innovation in Africa", or ACACIA.

¹¹ Even if *omitandu* in general are fixed expressions, they can be brought up to date, revised, changed and extended, when new information or new events at a place seem noteworthy enough to be woven into the formula of the existing *omitandu*. In this way, *omitandu* can fuse information, interpretations and reflections from different times and by different authors. This makes them a very dynamic genre.



A simple translation of *omitandu* is, in any event, insufficient: true comprehension requires extensive historical knowledge as well. Therefore, the explanation following the recitation has tried to merge translation, interpretation and contextualisation of the verses together. In these specific examples, I will draw upon the approach adopted by the historian Dag Henrichsen (1994; 1997; 1999), who has interpreted the genre and the content of *omitandu* against the background of the pastoralist Herero society of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

3 AN "ORAL CHARTER" OF THE WATERBERG AREA¹²

The recitation below is a compilation of *omitandu* on 11 individual places in the Waterberg area. To help the reader understand this structure, the recitation is grouped into several stanzas, each of which refers to one of the places. Place names are written in bold type. Among the striking characteristics of *omitandu* is that a great number of persons are mentioned in each stanza. They are mostly introduced by a construction with the word "of" indicating possession: either denoting kinship such as that between father and son, or denoting ownership, e.g. of cattle.

OMITANDU¹³

(1)

Kaondeka kaTjombua onaaKakura
omumbanda
kongeama yaTjambaza
omukova mbwa tukirue nomaihi
wozonyanda korumbimba

ondundu yozondjima omarunga
yozonjoka omapongo nde ha rumata
ondundu ndji ri omuatje
waKangombe
omukwendata wojaKatuse kaTjivanda
eye Kambazembi waKangombe
Kangombe wa za mu Tjiueza.

(2)

Tji mo tara posyo mukuma mbwini
komukuma weyuva rongurova
ondji ri omuatje waMujazu
eye Pejangu.

(3)

Tji mo tara komukuma mbwina
ondji ri **kOkamuru** kovineya
kondjuwo yomukazendu waHoke.

(4)

Amakumunika nawa **pOkarupahu**
pondjuwo yomukazendu
wanguwomake nu ngu ha u zongoro
otjowamwari Nangombe.

(5) (Omuverumue)

Pongotwe yondundu tji mai tanauka
nai
opongombe yoviuru yaKapui na
Kajore
ndjaai tutuma onyama ayoo ombura
mozoni.

¹² Henrichsen (1999:17)

¹³ As recited by Kasisanda Muuondjo, Ombinda, Otjondjupa Region, 5 October 2000. This author carried out the final transcription of the oral recitation herself. Any mistakes in the text are, therefore, attributable to the author and not the reciter.



(6)

Tji mo tara nai
oku indji oya **Kozongominja**
ookoutana waTjirondero waKuhanga
outana mbwa ngarere omaryo nu
ngurova a karira orutjindo.

(7)

Tji mo kotoka mba nai
okutja op **Otjikaru**
oopozonduwombe zahiyaKavari
Kaengombe
womusuko waTjizumo waNdjoura
ombandi
ngwa tezere orutjindo rwomutena na
ha kondisa ondunda yakarora.

(8)

Tji mo yaruka nai
okutja we ya motjiendo tjomuzandu
waRukoro
mu Katjimbonda waRukoro
Okambukomatemba.

(9)

Tji mo kotoka mba nai
Otjozondjupa tjinga atji ri nao
tji wa tanauka mba nai
momuramba wa**Vitombo**
opu pe na tate wahiyaTovekua na
hiyaNangombe
ongombe yaMunduva
ongerero yomaoko nu ndji he ri
oyamarama

Epumbi Kaengombe onaaMuvi
Muherero
Kaukundua omuho wokuoko nu mbu
he ri owamarama
u ri mbo.

Nu aa kanwa pozombango
zozondundu otjondjima ondwezu
eye Tjiponda wooKarukua na
Nangombe,
ongombe ya Munduva
omuatje waKamarenga
ngwaa turire kOtjahevita
we yekutira mbo
u ri mbo.

Otjozondjupa tjinga tji ri nai
u ri nai
oopomuramba wa**Vitombo.**

(10)

Ondji ri **Ohamakari** yaKakonge
okona ku kwa tira ouye potjirongo
tjovita
Ehi ri hanike mokati.

(11)

Imba **Otjozongombe**
ondana yaMihe ongozu
ndji ha taurire oina
ndj iri koMutima waMungendje.

**“PRAISE SONGS”¹⁴**

(1)

Kaondeka of Tjombua and Kakura,
the second wife
at the lion of Tjambaza
whose skin was rubbed with the milk
of goats that were being herded
mountain of the thievish baboons
and of the tame snakes which do not
bite

mountain that is the child of
Kangombe
of the matrilineage of Katuse of
Tjivanda
- he is Kambazembi of Kangombe
Kangombe, who was born of Tjueza.

(2)

(Okatjonzondjupona)

When you look close to that side
the sunset side
it is the child of Mujazu
- he is Pejangu.

(3)

When you look to that side
it is at **Okamuru** of the hidden things
at the house of the wife of Hoke.

(4)

While it looks nice at **Okarupahu**
at the house of the woman
who falls on her hands and not on her
knees, like the child of Nangombe.

(5) **(Omuverumue)**

Behind the mountain, when the
mountain turns like this
at the cattle with the big nostrils, (*the
cattle*) of Kapui and Kayore
the meat of which was shining like
raindrops on ozoni-berries
(*when it was slaughtered*).

(6)

When you look like this
to that side of **Okozongominya**
at the calves of Tjirondero of Kuhanga
the calves that went grazing where
later the people settled.

(7)

When you come back here like this
that is at **Otjikaru**
at the oxen of the father of Kavari
Kaengombe
of the brave lady of Tjizumo of Ndjoura
who traced her brother on his trek so
that it did not reach the small hill of
the small river.

(8)

When you move to this side
that is when you come to the grave
of the son of Rukoro
to Katjimbonde of Rukoro
that is **Okambukomatemba**.

¹⁴ Translated by Marvis Kandundu, Alexander Kaputu and Larissa Förster, with editorial clarifications in square brackets by Larissa Förster. I am greatly indebted to Marvis Kandundu, who conducted the interview with Kasisanda Muuondjo in Herero and drafted the first translation. Alex Kaputu was very helpful in clarifying some of the translated text and providing historical background due to his specialist knowledge of Herero oral history. Angela Tjoutuku and Jekura Kavari kindly made some final refinements to the texts. In some cases, this author has chosen a provisional English translation (indicated by italicised text in square editorial brackets) of certain Herero expressions in the absence of accurate alternatives. Some translated stanzas might, therefore, be disputable. Comments that could provide clarification are welcome.



(9)

When you come back here like this
when **Otjozondjupa** lies like that
when you have turned here like this
in the river of **Ovitombo**
that is where my father is
who was born of the father of Tovekua
and the father of Nangombe
the cattle of Munduva
who was the last-born with arms, not
with legs
the Giant Kaengombe who was like
Muvi Muherero
Kaukundua with a shin bone of the
arm and not of the legs
he is there.
And he used to go to drink at the
mountain pass like a male baboon
he is Tjijonda of Karukua and
Nangombe
the cattle of Munduva
the child of Kamarenga
who was staying at **Otjahevita**
he died there
he is there
when **Otjozondjupa** is like this
he is there
in the river of **Ovitombo**.

(10)

This is **Ohamakari** of Kakonge
that is the site where the people died
at the place of war
the land where the people split (*and
fled to Botswana*)

(11)

Here is **Otjozongombe**
the tame calf of Mihe
which does not jump (*to run after its mother*)
which is to Mutima of Mungendje."

4 INTERPRETATION

4.1 The mountain itself: Fauna, flora and natural resources

The recitation deals with the Waterberg and its surrounds. The Afrikaans name, 'Waterberg' ("water mountain"), refers to the great number of natural springs at its foot, which are due to the mountain's geological structure. In Herero the Waterberg is known as *Kaondeka*, which is said to refer to its remarkable size (ca. 41,000 ha).

The first lines of the recitation focus on the fauna of the landscape: a lion, baboons and snakes. The "thievish baboons" and the "tame snakes" have great popularity in Herero recitations about the Waterberg. Baboons and snakes continue to inhabit the rocky terrain of the mountain today. The largest of the springs in the area even used to be called *Otjongonga*, which referred to a certain snake (*ongonga*) said to have lived in the spring's water for a long time.

Today, *Otjongonga* is known as *Otjozondjupa* ("place of calabashes") (stanza 9), a name that relates to the abundance of water and the fact that calabashes flourished at the foot of the mountain. *Otjozondjupa* has, therefore, always been considered as the area's main spring. A Rhenish mission station was established close to the spring in 1873, and traders' and settlers' houses were built here. Fruit and vegetables were cultivated near the spring by the German



missionaries, and later on by German settlers until the 1960s. In 1989, the Bernabé de la Bat Rest Camp, located on the southern slopes of the Waterberg where the spring has its source, was officially opened. In addition, after independence, the popular spring even lent its name to the politically demarcated *Otjonzondjupa Region* in which the Waterberg lies.

Stanza 9 also refers to the great supplies of water that were available everywhere around the spring and on top of the mountain by mentioning that the singer's (great)grandfather used to drink from them. In fact, the mountain is occasionally called *ondundu yomeva* ("mountain of water") in Herero.

Fauna, flora and natural resources are an important topic of description, while comments on the landscape's physical characteristics and aesthetic judgements (e.g. "While it looks nice at *Okarupahu*") are rare. Apparently, land and landscape are defined not so much by their visual appearance as by their natural resources, which – of course – form the basis of the history of human settlement in the area.

4.2 The surrounding landscape:

Wells and settlements

Originally, Kasisanda Muuondjo had been asked to provide us with a praise song on the Waterberg – but the recitation we were eventually given

not only dealt with the Waterberg, but with additional places. While the starting point of Muuondjo's recitation was indeed the prominent landmark of the Waterberg, the singer added other places situated up to 20 km from the mountain. Their names are *Ohamakari*, *Okambutomatempa*, *Okamuru*, *Okarupahu*, *Okatjonzondjupona*, *Okozongominya*, *Omuverumue*, *Otjikaru*, *Otjonzongombe*, and *Ovitombo*. *Okatjonzondjupona* and *Omuverumue* were not mentioned explicitly, but can be identified clearly through their typical praise songs (stanzas 2 and 5).

All these place names are well known as pre- or early colonial Herero settlements. The landscape that the singer had in mind during his recitation comprised not only the landmark of the prominent mountain itself – which due to its rocks has never been a place of permanent settlement – but, rather, all the places in the vicinity of the Waterberg that had been inhabited and used for cattle herding by the Herero in earlier times. These places were presented as the basic elements that constitute the historical-cultural landscape of the Waterberg area from the point of view of the local Herero community.

Unlike the praise songs associated with them, the place names are easy to translate and understand. They already hint at the natural features of the areas and their settlement history.



Thus, *Okamuru* is “slope” or “hill”; *Otijkaru* is “place of the *omukaru* tree” (*omukaru* is a species of thorn bush); *Ovitombo* describes the muddy soil that is produced by the nearby ephemeral river. *Otjozongombe* is “place of the cattle”, possibly since there was good pasture for the livestock; *Okambukomatamba* is “well of the troughs”; *Otjozondjupona*, derived from *Otjozondjupa*, is “little place of the calabashes”; and *Omuverumue* is “one gate” – which refers to the valley between the *Kleiner Waterberg* and *Großer Waterberg* (so-called “small” and “large” Waterberg) that used to serve as a passage for people migrating through the area and across the Waterberg plateau.

Most of these areas of settlement were located close to sources of water like springs, riverbeds, vleis, or man-made wells. As holds true for the whole area of central Namibia that was settled by the Herero, the Waterberg area was covered by a network of partly natural, partly man-made water points in pre- and early colonial times (Henrichsen 1997:51–68). The accessibility of this network of wells was crucial for the families and their herds who migrated temporarily, seasonally or permanently into the dry savannah landscape south of the Waterberg. Once they had established themselves in the area, they obtained the right to access the water and use the pastures, or inherited these rights from their forefathers

and relatives who had lived there before them. Due to the difficult climatic conditions that prevailed, their lifestyle remained highly mobile. Yet oral history and orature stored the social geography and knowledge about which place ‘belonged’ to which family in the collective memory of the community.

In *omitandu*, therefore, places of settlement are usually linked to the names of their former inhabitants, mostly by a construction signalling possession – similar to the English word “of”. Thus, in stanza 1 there is “Kaondeka of Tjombua and Kakura”, and stanza 10, “Ohamakari of Kakonge”. Also, the lines “at Okamuru ..., at the house of the wife of Hoke” in stanza 3, and “at Okarupahu, at the house of the woman who falls on her hands and not on her knees” in stanza 4 link places to their inhabitants.

Individuals are identified by genealogical references (e.g. in stanza 1, “of the matrilineage of Katuse of Tjivanda”); by characteristics of their personality or behaviour (e.g. in stanza 4, “the woman who falls on her hands and not on her knees”); or by events in their lives (e.g. in stanza 7, “the brave lady ..., who traced her brother”).

It is very typical of the praise-song genre that the first inhabitants of a place, i.e. its founders and their families, are mentioned very prominently. Nevertheless, famous figures in local



history who accomplished remarkable deeds can also be referred to prominently – even if those person-ages never actually settled there. The formulas of the *omitandu* store the settlement history of places by focussing on the relevant protagonists in their history. To this day, in Herero oral tradition every place is thereby connected to certain historical figures.

The Herero-speaking people of the area know the settlements mentioned in the above recitation – even if the places no longer exist. The settlements date back to pre- and early colonial times, but were destroyed through colonial conquest. After the 1904–1908 wars, when the German colonial administration area confiscated, divided up and sold the area around the Waterberg as private farmland to German settlers, the latter partially adopted the original Herero place names for their new farms. Examples – albeit slightly distorted – are *Hamakari*, *Okamuru*, *Okosongomingo*, *Ombujomatemba*, *Otjikaru*, and *Otjosongombe*. Other farms in the wider area were given German or Afrikaans names, e.g. *Elandsweide*, *Heimaterde*, *Hohenstein*, *Jacht-plaas*, and *Rodenstein*. The place name *Omuverumue* was used to name a cattle post on one of the German farms, which is why the name no longer appears on the map of Namibia. Other local names such as *Okarupahu* were left out completely in the process of renaming the land.

To summarise, we need to treat oral culture as a source that can give an extraordinarily precise and detailed documentation of the pre-colonial network of wells and settlements from an insider's view of Herero society. *Omitandu* have preserved the knowledge of pre-colonial land use as well as the names of the land. Consequently, one can derive a mental map of the area from the praise songs: a map that reflects the perspective of Herero society in pre- and early colonial times, or, as Henrichsen (1994:5) has called it, a “precolonial topology grounded in the pastoralist ideology as it evolved in the 2nd half of the 19th century”. Even if fragmentarily, *omitandu* do indeed reconstruct this topology, which probably existed until the beginning of the 20th century. While the printed map of contemporary Namibia in use today is structured according to large farm plots of an average of 3,000 to 8,000 ha each (Office of the Surveyor-General 1994), the above oral recitation unfolds a mental map of the area on a much broader scale. The topology formulated by means of *omitandu* challenges the colonial and post-colonial map of Namibia by describing the landscape before the German colonial conquest. It can be read as an “oral charter” (Henrichsen 1999:17) of historic customary land rights.



4.3 People and cattle: A landscape of pastures

In some of the stanzas, the places described are not directly connected with a person's name; however, an additional element typical of the genre links the name of a place and that of a person, namely the mention of a head of cattle that is equated with the place name. For example, *Omuverumue* is described as being "at the cattle with the big nostrils, (*the cattle*) of Kapui and of Kayore" (stanza 5), *Okozongominya* is called "at the calves of Tjirondero of Kuhanga" (stanza 6), and *Otjozongombe* is phrased as "the tame calf of Mihe" (stanza 11), mostly with additional remarks on the characteristics of the respective cattle.

The mention of cattle pays tribute to Herero communities' main domesticated stock, which, since the 19th century, have lent prestige to their owner and continue to do so today. *Omitandu* describe the cattle economy and pastoral lifestyle of the 19th century Herero, even though the foundations of these were severely shaken by the colonial land grab and the war, and further eroded through the apartheid 'homelands' policy. After the 1904–1908 wars, cattle played a major role in the economic reconstruction of Herero society (Werner 1998). To date, cattle have formed the economic base not only of Herero communal households who practise subsistence farming, but also of emerging commercial farmers.

Thus, Herero-speaking Namibians regard cattle farming not only as a means of making a living, but also as a store of wealth and badge of prestige. Rather, many cultural concepts and social customs were and continue to be associated with acquiring, owning, breeding, exchanging, donating and slaughtering cattle. Social bonds are created through the distribution of cattle, for example via the bride price, the inheritance of cattle or cattle loaning; and ritual importance is given to cattle at funerals and commemorations. All these practices make cattle a medium of social exchange that is highly appreciated by all members of the society. A person or their family may even praise their favourite cattle. By this, individual heads of cattle – in connection with their owners – can gain 'reputation' and become the subject of praise songs, as is the case in stanzas 5, 6, 7 and 11, which refer to *Omuverumue*, *Okozongominya*, *Otjkaru* and *Otjozongombe*. A place can be characterised by mentioning and describing cattle that have been driven there for grazing. By having their cattle graze in an area, a family or clan could economically appropriate it. It is precisely this connection between people, cattle and land that is expressed through the mention of cattle in praise songs. It accounts for the people's historical attachment with the land through their economic activities on it.



4.4 The living and the dead: Graves and ancestral land

In 3 of the 11 stanzas the places are not (only) characterised as settlement areas or pastures, but (also) as the 'home' of a deceased person: "that is Kambazembi of Kangombe of Tjiueza" (stanza 1, interpreted by the singer as "that is the place where Kambazembi ... was buried"), "when you come to the grave of ... Katjimbonde of Rukoro" (stanza 8), or "that is where my father is ... he died there, he is there" (stanza 9). The memory of the graves of deceased members of the community turns the area into ancestral land. The graves of one's ancestors are regarded as a particularly spiritual place. Graves are visited to initiate communication with one's ancestors and thereby ensure the well-being of one's community, family or household. This custom continues to the present day: the graves of historical figures and well-known individuals serve as venues for celebrations that are recognised nationwide by the Herero community, e.g. in Okahandja, where influential chiefs and politicians of the 19th and 20th century like Samuel Maharero or Hosea Kutako were laid to rest. In addition, many Herero-speaking Namibians describe an emotional bond with the place where their ancestors are buried.

Kasisanda Muuondjo's recitation mentions three individuals – Kambazembi, Katjimbonde and Tjiponda –

who were buried in the area. Their graves date back over a hundred years. Kambazembi wa Kangombe is particularly prominent in the recitation. In general, he is remembered as the influential and particularly wealthy leader of the local Herero community in the 19th century. Kambazembi is especially famous for his generosity: he is said to have provided any poor person who asked him for help with a cow and a calabash, which guaranteed his or her economic survival (Secretariat of Kambazembi 1998:1). Kambazembi was also related to Tjamuaha, grandfather of the famous Chief Samuel Maharero. This has made Kambazembi a central figure in Herero history. The late Kambazembi's settlement was situated at the foot of the Waterberg. When he died in 1903, his grave was erected at the very place of his settlement. Later on, his burial place was extended and became the graveyard for the Kambazembi family, which it continues to be to this day. Kambazembi's social status and prestige, but also his 'rootedness' in the area, are underlined in the above recitation by referring to his famous genealogical background and by calling the Waterberg "mountain which is the child of Kangombe". Both elements also hint at the family's historical claim to power over the area.

The descendants of the Kambazembi family have ever since resided in a homestead in the nearby town of Okakarara, and were officially



acknowledged as a traditional authority in the Otjozondjupa Region in 1999. On that occasion a heraldic emblem was designed for and by the Royal House of Kambazembi, which shows the characteristic silhouette of the Waterberg. Typical utensils of traditional culture and local history appear in front of the prominent mountain: the *okuruuo* (the so-called 'Holy Fire'), the snake *ongonga* (see above), a cow, and a calabash (Secretariat of Kambazembi 1998:cover). They symbolically 'root' the Kambazembi family in the landscape of the Waterberg. The significance of the landscape for the construction of local ethnic identity is also underpinned by the fact that the private farmland on which the Kambazembi family's graveyard is situated was recently purchased by a member of the Kambazembi family from its previous German owner.

In contrast to Kambazembi's grave, Tjijonda's grave can no longer be located. Tjijonda is a historical figure of the 19th century with a legendary reputation amongst Herero-speaking Namibians. Oral tradition has it that that he trekked from central Namibia to the coast with his cattle in order to let the cattle drink the sea water, and thereby find out whether the coast would be a potential settlement site for Herero cattle herders. Tjijonda traversed the whole of central Namibia. Near the Waterberg he became involved in a violent conflict with the Damara and San, and died at the place known as

Ovitombo. Since Tjijonda is the singer's ancestor, he is reported on in the *omitandu* in great detail: not only his grave, but also details from his life story. We hear, for example, about his homestead at *Otjahevita*, east of the Waterberg, and his habits ("he used to go and drink at the mountain pass").

The third historic figure mentioned by reference to his grave is Katjimbonde, who is only known by Herero communities in the vicinity of the Waterberg. However, the locals interviewed in this study were not able to say where the graves used to be. But even if Katjimbonde's grave at *Okambukomatemba* and Tjijonda's at *Ovitombo* do not physically exist anymore, they are remembered by being mentioned in *omitandu*. Hence, they are not preserved *in situ* – as is for example the case with the Kambazembi family's graveyard, with Christian graveyards, or settlers' graves on their farms – but *mentally*. Like wells, graves are understood to be part of the settlement history of the area. Even more than housing structures, graves mark the social history of a place. The above-mentioned 'topology of water points and settlements' is complemented with by a 'topology of graves'. Both water points and graves, being fixed and stationary, used to form ideal points of reference for the nomadic society of the Herero who migrated through space and landscape. But while water points and

settlement sites were still subject to physical decay or could be given up due to seasonal or permanent migration, burial places could never be shifted: they were permanent – even if not permanently visible. Graves were the most ‘stable’ points of reference within the spatial network of memorable places.

4.5 Venues of the 1904 –1908 wars: The political dimension of landscape

The area around the Waterberg is not only valued for its exploitable natural resources or for the achievements of varyingly heroic ancestors in settling, appropriating, and ‘cultivating’ the area. The area is also remembered for its significance in the colonial wars that started in 1904. The Waterberg serves as a symbol for the near extinction of a people, and at the same time is symbolic of its survival in spite of colonial suppression. This is what gives the area south of the Waterberg its particular significance in Herero historiography.

The latter is precisely what is called to mind in stanza 10 which defines *Ohamakari*, one of the historical water places, not only as a place of human settlement (probably inhabited by a certain person named *Kakonge*), but also as a battlefield: “this is the site where people died at the place of war / the land where the people split”. The line that contains “where people died at the place of war” refers to the great number of people who lost

their lives during the flight from Ohamakari towards Okakarara and further into and across the semi-desert of the Omaheke from August to December 1904. As a result of the politics of persecution and annihilation initiated by the German military leadership, in their flight a great number of Herero died of starvation and thirst. The anthropologist Kirsten Alnaes (1989:292), who conducted research among the Herero in Botswana in the 1970s, describes the formulaic phrase “That’s when we were scattered” as being commonly used by Herero to denote the Ohamakari battlefield. Ohamakari is thereby marked as the spatial and temporal starting point of a long history of flight, expulsion, deportation and dispossession to which the Herero community was exposed under both German and South African rule.

In this way Ohamakari has become an emblematic place name, which stands for the many aspects of the politics of oppression brought about by colonialism. For example, it is used this way during Red Flag Remembrance Day celebrations at Okahandja in August each year. The Red Flag Remembrance Day marks the anniversary of Samuel Maharero’s burial at Okahandja in 1923, which signified the famous Chief’s homecoming after nearly 20 years of exile in Botswana. Samuel Maharero, leader of the Herero during the colonial war, had gone into exile



shortly after the battle of Ohamakari, when he realised that the only chance of survival lay in escaping to Botswana. Ohamakari is regularly mentioned in speeches delivered at Okahandja to describe the war, flight and exile during the German colonial era.

In addition, the National Broadcasting Corporation's (nbc) radio programmes usually cover Ohamakari Day, which commemorates the so-called 'Battle of Ohamakari'¹⁵ on 11–12 August, by having oral historians narrate the history of the war in the Waterberg area. Schools in and around Okakarara hold relatively regular, small-scale commemorations of the anniversary of this battle, during which the history and traditions of the Herero are explained to younger members of the community. Ohamakari has become a symbol of the genocide, like Okahandja symbolises the Herero society's resurrection after the colonial wars. For this reason Ohamakari was chosen in 2004 to be the main venue of the commemoration of the war events of 1904.

Although Ohamakari is the most prominent place with regard to the war of 1904, it is not the only one. In Herero oral tradition, the whole area south of the Waterberg is associated with the war. Talking with senior members of the Okakarara community

revealed a rich and detailed knowledge about further sites of war surrounding *Ohamakari*, e.g. *Okambukomatamba*, *Omuverumue*, *Otjozongombe* and *Ovitombo*. Narratives on the war, its course, its protagonists and its heroes; on fathers, mothers, grandfathers and grandmothers fleeing; and on the survival of one's own family – all played an important role as oral history within the family, but also as recitations at public events and as content for national radio programmes.¹⁶

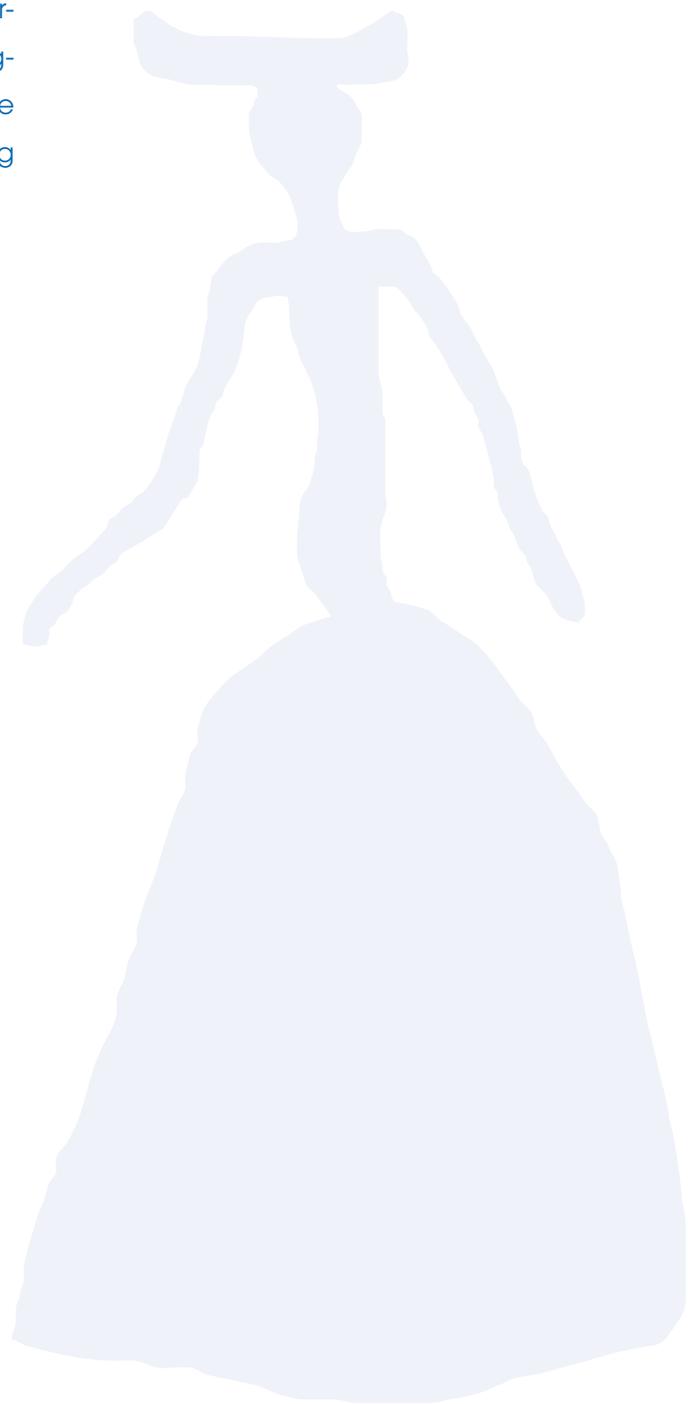
In this context, many pieces of oral tradition emphasise the Herero's power to resist the colonial troops. They make clear not only that the Herero died and were killed, but that they themselves also killed, deceived the colonisers, managed on occasion to escape their clutches, and survived against all the odds. In this sense, referring to *Ohamakari* denotes the genocide *and* the fact that some managed to survive or escape it. As it was put at the "Commemoration of the Ohamakari Battle" in August 2004, Ohamakari is not only "the place of brutal mayhem, the last bastion of the early colonial resistance", but is also "the cradle of the liberation struggle, democracy, reconciliation, peace & stability".¹⁷ Oral traditions on the area around the Waterberg are, therefore, also a source for

¹⁵ The term *Battle of Ohamakari*, as used in the Herero oral tradition, corresponds with *Battle of the Waterberg* as used in German oral tradition, German colonial and popular contemporary literature.

¹⁶ The weekly programme "Our inheritance" on nbc radio, which is presented by prominent oral historians like Alex Kaputu, frequently broadcasts such recitations and narrations in Herero.

¹⁷ Text on a banner mounted on the stage during the speeches.

(re-)constructing and reinforcing a positive collective identity out of a destructive phase of history. The fact that many fragments of oral history have obviously been passed on over a period of 100 years and have thereby become widely shared oral tradition, testifies not only to the physical, but also to the cultural survival of the group. Herein lies the significance of oral tradition as a source and means of (re-)constructing historic identity.



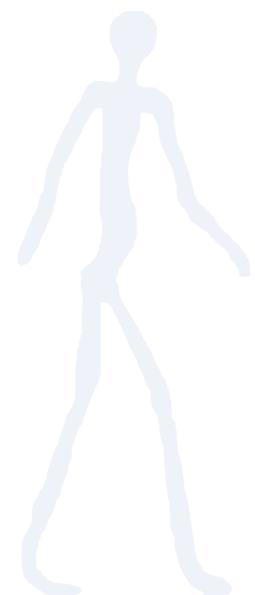


5 CONCLUSION

The Waterberg area is not the only place referred to in Herero oral history: there are many others in central and southern Namibia as well. Moreover, Namibia's Herero-speaking community is not the only one to have an oral culture that preserves the memory of land use and ownership and strengthens their symbolic ties with the land. Even Namibian communities of European descent who own the land of the dispossessed African communities nowadays maintain such symbolical and emotional ties with the land.

For example, the German farming community at the Waterberg – a great deal of whom have owned their farms for almost 100 years – also plead that their ownership of land implies cultural and social values for them (see Förster 2004). And finally, even those who are not part of dispossessed communities, but more generally count among the historically disadvantaged members of Namibian society, have right of access to the land. This is one of the reasons why the redistribution of land touches upon an extremely complex network of individual and collective identities; of economic, cultural and social factors; and of material as well as psychological and emotional aspects. Therefore, the land question sometimes eludes the arguments and calculations of politicians and economists.

Looking at oral tradition, oral history and orature in Namibian society provides us with very important hints as to how the perception of certain topics such as land use and ownership has been shaped in history. This can also give us an understanding of how such perceptions and the resulting emotions, attitudes and judgements influence current debates.





REFERENCES

- Alnaes, Kirsten. 1989. "Living with the past: The songs of the Herero in Botswana". *Africa*, 59:267–299.
- Brinkman, Inge & Axel Fleisch (eds.). 1999. *Grandmother's footsteps: Oral tradition and south-east Angolan narratives on the colonial encounter*. Köln: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag.
- Darian-Smith, Kate, Liz Gunner & Sarah Nuttall (eds.). 1996. *Text, theory, space: Land, literature and history in South Africa and Australia*. London: Routledge.
- Erlank, Niels & Samuel VK Haakuria (eds.). 2002. *24 Otjiherero concert songs*. Windhoek: New Namibia Books.
- Förster, Larissa. 2002. "Erzählte Landschaft". In Busch, Bernd (ed.). *Erde. Schriftenreihe Forum, Vol. 11: Elemente des Naturhaushaltes III*. Köln: Wienand, pp 421–437.
- Förster, Larissa. 2004. "Zwischen Waterberg und Okakarara: Namibische Erinnerungslandschaften". In Förster, Larissa, Dag Henrichsen & Michael Bollig (eds.). *Namibia – Deutschland: Eine geteilte Geschichte. Widerstand, Gewalt, Erinnerung (Ethnologica Neue Folge, Vol. 24)*, pp 164–179.
- Henrichsen, Dag. 1994. " 'Ehi rOvaherero': Mündliche Überlieferungen von Herero zu ihrer Geschichte im vorkolonialen Namibia". *WerkstattGeschichte*, 9:15–24.
- Henrichsen, Dag. 1997. "Herrschaft und Identifikation im vorkolonialen Zentralnamibia: Das Herero- und Damaraland im 19. Jahrhundert". Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Hamburg.
- Henrichsen, Dag. 1999. "Claiming space and power in pre-colonial central Namibia: The relevance of Herero praise songs". *BAB Working Paper*, No 1/1999. Basel: Basler Afrika Bibliographien.
- Heywood, Annemarie, Brigitte Lau & Raimund Ohly (eds.). 1992. *Warriors, leaders, sages and outcasts in the Namibian past: Narratives collected from Herero sources for the Michael Scott Oral Records Project 1985–6*. Windhoek: John Meinert.
- Hofmeyr, Isabel. 1993. "We spend our years as a tale that is told": *Oral historical narrative in a South African chiefdom*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press.
- Kavari, Jekura U. 2002. *The form and meaning of Otjiherero praises*. Köln: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag.
- Office of the Surveyor General. 1994. *Republic of Namibia: Map*. Windhoek: Office of the Surveyor General.
- Ohly, Raimund. 1990. *The poetics of Herero song. An outline*. Windhoek: University of Namibia.
- Republic of Namibia. 1991. *National Conference on Land Reform and the Land Question: Consensus document*. Windhoek: Office of the Prime Minister.
- Secretariat of Kambazembi (compilers). 1998. *Onguatjindu fundamentals*. Okakarara: Royal House of Ombara Kambazembi.
- Tjoutuku, A. 1998. "Kaondeka". In Mukonge, Mburo (ed.). *Ourenga weraka*. Windhoek: Gamsberg Macmillan Publishers, p 28.
- Vail, Leroy & Landeg White. 1992. *Power and the praise poem: Southern African voices in history*. Oxford: James Currey Publishers.
- Werner, Wolfgang. 1998. "No one will become rich": *Economy and society in the Herero reserves in Namibia, 1915–1946 (Basel Namibia Studies Series, 2)*. Basel: Schlettwein Publishing Switzerland.