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Relocation of the homestead: A customary practice in the communal areas of north-central Namibia

Antti Erkkilä and Nelago Indongo

SINCE THE SECOND WORLD WAR, there has been a shift in development practice and theory from centralised, technically orientated solutions towards participatory initiatives often focused on poverty alleviation (Agrawal 1995). The current paradigm for sustainable development science emphasizes transdisciplinarity, involving both scientists and non-scientists (Komiya and Takeuchi 2006; Scholz and Steiner 2015). It is evident that the consideration of a broader range of knowledge, and particularly the inclusion of indigenous knowledge, is critical to the implementation of the United Nations Post-2015 Development Agenda (UN 2015).

The concept *indigenous knowledge* appeared in the debate on sustainable development in the early 1980s (Briggs 2005) and it refers to terms such as traditional ecological knowledge, community knowledge, and local knowledge (see WIPO 2002). Indigenous knowledge is considered cultural knowledge in its broadest sense, including all the social, political, economic and spiritual aspects of local ways of life (Langill 1999). Such local knowledge is passed on from generation to generation by word of mouth (Warren 1991). Thus, indigenous knowledge can be defined as locally bound knowledge that is indigenous to a specific area and embedded in the culture, cosmology and activities of particular peoples (McIntyre et al. 2009: 67).

Many farming systems in Africa and elsewhere are based on a profound knowledge of soils, vegetation, climate, and pests. Peasants and small farmers have long understood the benefits of intercropping agricultural crops with trees, a land-use system defined as agroforestry (Nair 1989; Olofson 1983).

In the most densely populated areas of north-central Namibia, agroforestry dominates the landscape, where the original forest cover has gradually changed into on-farm fruit-tree cover (Erkkilä 2001). Indigenous fruit trees, such as bird-plum (*Berchemia discolor* Hemsl.) and marula (*Sclerocarya birrea* Hochst.),

are commonly found growing among cultivated crops, especially pearl millet (*Cenchrus spicatus* L. Cav.), which is known locally as *mahangu*.

In 1851, the English explorer, Francis Galton, commented on north-central Namibia's 'charming' agroforestry landscape (1853: 204–205). Kalle Koivu (1925), a Finnish missionary, was most likely the first to write about the abundance of fruit trees within cultivated fields occurring as a result of human activities. He argued that this particular landscape is not natural but a man-made park. Accordingly, an agricultural production unit should rather be called a garden, not a field.

Traditionally a homestead is placed within a cultivated field, and relocated frequently a few metres within the same field area. This process is called *oludilu*, and it should not be confused with shifting cultivation, where the field in cultivation is rotated. According to Koivu (1925), the homestead was relocated every second or third year. Tönjes (1911/1996) observed that the transfer interval was three to four years.

There are three major reasons for *oludilu*. First, soil fertility at the site and around the homestead is improved by household litter and other debris, including smashed mud blocks from old hut walls. Thus, the relocation of the homestead is a way of improving soil fertility on degraded spots within a cultivated area. Second is the gradual deterioration of constructions, and need for renovation. The third reason is related to the change of ownership of a homestead.

Namibia's 2011 Population and Housing Census defined a traditional dwelling as 'a compound consisting of a hut or a group of huts walled or un-walled with sticks, poles with or without thatch or grass' (NSA 2014a). (In this study, we use the term 'homestead' instead of 'dwelling'.) Traditional homesteads provide a favourable environment for the germination and growth of trees due to the fact that seedlings are protected from browsing animals. *Oludilu* has therefore been an important factor in creating the agroforestry landscape typical of north-central Namibia and southern Angola (see Erkkilä 2001). Despite the central role it has played, not only in crop cultivation and tree growing, but also culturally and spiritually, the practice of *oludilu* has hardly been studied.

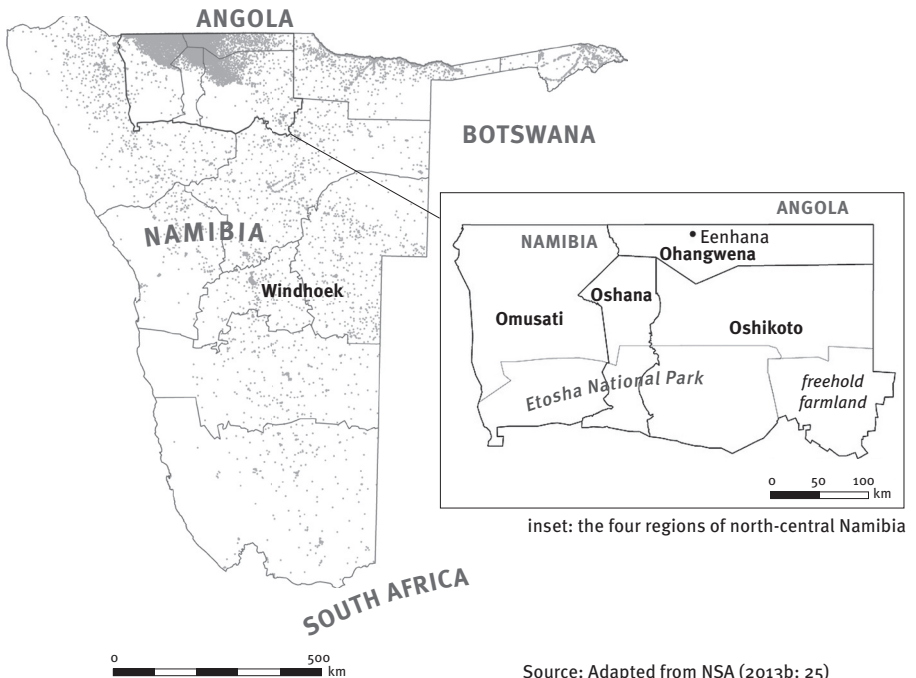
The objective of this study was to increase awareness and understanding of this customary practice, which is still carried out in the communal areas of north-central Namibia and southern Angola. It forms part of a research project on 'Demographic Change and the Resilience of the Social and Ecological Systems in North-Central Namibia' carried out by the University of Eastern Finland (UEF) and the University of Namibia (UNAM) in 2012–2016.¹

Study area

North-central Namibia is located in the southern part of the Cuvelai Basin, and consists of Ohangwena, Omusati, Oshana and Oshikoto regions (see Figure 13.1). The area is bordered by Angola in the north, Kunene Region in the west and south, Otjozondjupa Region in the south-east and Kavango West Region in the east. The southern part of north-central Namibia contains Etosha National Park and freehold farmland of the Oshikoto Region. The area north of latitude 18°30' south is communal land, which consists of eight traditional authority areas.² The main language spoken is Oshiwambo, which has two predominant dialects, Oshindonga and Oshikwanyama.

The Cuvelai Basin has sustained relatively high populations compared to the surrounding areas (Calunga et al. 2015; Erkkilä 2001; Mendelsohn et al. 2000, 2013; Mendelsohn and Weber 2011). This has been possible predominantly because of highly integrated agropastoral farming practices, where plots of land are cultivated permanently. The population of the Cuvelai

FIGURE 13.1 Population distribution in Namibia



Source: Adapted from NSA (2013b: 25)

Basin amounts to about 1.2 million people, of which two thirds live in Namibia. Almost all the people of the area belong to one ethnic group, known as Owambo in Namibia and as Ambó in Angola.

According to the 2011 national census, the population of north-central Namibia amounted to 0.8 million, of which 17 per cent were urban (NSA 2013a). The area is vulnerable to the impact of climate change due to the inherent water deficit and high temperatures during the spring and summer months (Government of Namibia 2015). Increasing drought and flood damage caused by climate change multiply the challenges to farm sustainability.

In the 2011 census, 165 000 private households were counted in north-central Namibia, of which 130 000 were rural (NSA 2013a; 2014b; 2014c). Average household size was 5.1 people. The total number of rural traditional homesteads was 113 000.

As mentioned, traditional Owambo homesteads are placed within a cultivated field. A homestead has a continuous outer palisade, usually two to three metres in height, consisting of tightly packed vertical wooden poles or laths, which are partly buried in the ground. In large homesteads there are inner stockades, which separate the household area into different sections and enclosures: for social life, sleeping, cooking and storage facilities. Typically, there are some two thousand wooden poles in the outer palisade and more than a thousand poles in inner stockades and hut walls.³

Enclosed by the outer palisade are round huts and shelters, which have conical roofs with a wooden frame, thatched using grass or millet stalks (Urquart 1963). The hut walls are built of tightly packed vertical poles or air-dried mud blocks. Sometimes the walls are made using bundles of millet stalks lashed together and installed between a mud wall plinth and the underside of the roof (Mills 1984). The floor of a hut may be daubed with clay. The surface of a homestead compound is earth, similar to the surrounding cultivated field. Livestock pens, if there are any, are either attached to the homestead or form separate enclosures in the same field.⁴

Non-traditional building materials include cement blocks and corrugated iron sheets, which are used in modern buildings among traditional constructions. Mesh wire, cement blocks and corrugated iron sheets are increasingly replacing wooden poles in the outer palisades.

The relocation of a traditional homestead, *oludilu*, means pulling up thousands of poles and carrying them up to two hundred metres to a new place in the same field. The homestead is then rebuilt on a new spot reusing old construction materials, as well as freshly cut poles, new millet stalks and grass, wherever needed. Modern cement block-buildings and walls are difficult, if not impossible to relocate.

Neighbours and others from the village are invited to assist in the *oludilu* process (Ndeutapo 2014). Men help by moving poles, huts and granary baskets from the old site to the new, while women prepare foods and drink in the new homestead. This kind of voluntary group work is called *eendjabi*.

Data collection

A specific case study area was selected from the eastern part of the Ohangwena region, 20km south of the border between Angola and Namibia, and 10km south-west of Eenhana, the regional capital. The study area consists of a cluster of fifty small-scale farms in Egambo and Otaukondjele villages. Egambo is located within the northern margin of the Ondonga Traditional Authority area and Otaukondjele at the southern limit of the Oukwanyama Traditional Authority area. Oshikwanyama is a common language spoken in both villages.

The objectives of the research project were explained and agreed at the beginning of 2012 with the incumbent councillors of Ondobe and Eenhana constituencies, while they visited the UNAM main campus in Windhoek. The councillors then contacted the headmen in the study area, and spoke on the radio in order to explain the objectives of the research to the community and to request their participation. Subsequently, the research team met with the councillors in Eenhana. In addition, they paid a courtesy call to the headman of Egambo village and contacted the principal of Egambo Combined School.

The household survey was conducted between 30 July and 6 August 2012 using a semi-structured questionnaire. The interview team consisted of three senior UEF scholars and two UNAM research assistants. Two of the interviews were conducted in English, and the rest in Oshikwanyama. The duration of the interviews was 90 minutes on average, and a total of 38 households were visited.

Most of the respondents said they were either Lutheran or Anglican. The main respondent was usually the head of the household, some were relatives of the head of the household, and in two homesteads, a domestic worker was interviewed; 24 female and 14 male respondents were interviewed. The median age was 50 years for female and 54 years for male respondents. In one household, a male respondent of 15 years was interviewed, whereas 25 respondents were 20 to 59 years of age and 12 respondents were 60 years or more. In Egambo village 27 interviews were carried out and 11 interviews took place in Otaukondjele.

Aerial photography of 10 to 12 June 2011⁵ was used as reference data to assess possible changes in the homestead location. During the fieldwork, co-ordinate data on homestead locations were obtained using handheld global

positioning system (GPS) devices. Thus, *oludilu* practices were assessed for the period between June 2011 (date of aerial photography) and August 2012 (ground truth). The period consists of two dry seasons suitable for *oludilu*. The interviews included questions related to *oludilu*, such as: how frequently does the practice take place; why is it still carried out; and do householders intend to relocate their homesteads in the future.

Results

A total of 38 homesteads were visited in the villages of Egambo and Otaukondjele (Table 13.1). On-site GPS recordings proved that eight homesteads had been relocated and seven homesteads were in the middle of a transfer process during the visit. Thus, in August 2012, 15 homesteads had been relocated or were in the middle of a transfer process.

TABLE 13.1 Oludilu in Egambo and Otaukondjele between June 2011 and August 2012

| Status of Oludilu by August 2012 | Total | Head of household | |
|----------------------------------|-------|-------------------|------|
| | | Female | Male |
| Completed | 8 | 3 | 5 |
| Ongoing | 7 | 4 | 3 |
| Not relocated | 23 | 10 | 13 |
| Total | 38 | 17 | 21 |

The death of the owner of the homestead was given as a reason for *oludilu* in five cases – three husbands and two mothers of the heads of the household had recently passed away. A large number of respondents mentioned that a homestead site is changed in order to obtain access to more fertile soil. Other reasons given were that the site was unsuitable due to waterlogging or an abundance of termites.

Reasons mentioned for not relocating a homestead were: the head of the household was getting old, permanent structures cannot be moved, shortage of construction poles, shortage of grass for thatching, no suitable site available, no need to move since the land is fertile enough. Four homesteads had never been relocated. These homesteads had been established in 1998, 2000, 2007 and 2009. In two cases, both the head of the household and his wife were migrant workers. One homestead included permanent houses and one was headed by a 95-year-old woman.

One 62-year-old male head of the household stated that he had cleared

the land and established his farm in 1979. He had relocated his homestead quite a number of times:

We first stayed in the same location for two years, and then we moved to new place for four years, and then for three years, five years, two years, and lastly we came to the current location in 2004.

Another respondent, a 40-year-old female head of the household, had moved from her mother's nearby homestead about a year before the interview took place. She had cleared the land from dense woodland and established her first homestead, *oshibambo*. She regarded her current site as temporary, saying it would not be a proper place to perform family functions, such as giving birth, celebrating weddings or having funerals. At the time of the interview she was busy relocating her homestead to a new place nearby.

A 54-year-old widow, the head of the household, had relocated her homestead in 2011, a year after the death of her mother, who had been the previous head of the household. She said that her current homestead was temporary and that she would soon relocate the homestead to a new site nearby. Another respondent, a 56-year-old female head of the household, said:

We came here and stayed for two years, and then we moved again and stayed for a year and then we moved to a place, where we stayed for four years, and then a year, and then for seven years and lastly here.

Her husband had died in October 2011 and, in August 2012, the homestead was relocated about 150 metres to the west. Old poles were used for the outer palisade, but fresh ones were cut for the hut roofs. During the interview, many of the huts were still under construction. The widow mentioned that she was too old to relocate her homestead again, *oludilu* would require at least a month's work.

The husband of one 60-year-old female head of the household had died just a few days before her interview took place. After his death, cattle were brought in ceremonially through the main entrance. The widow's sleeping hut, *ondjurwo*, was destroyed, as were three U-shaped benches (logs) and an ox-skull rack (an indicator of prosperity) at the homestead's main meeting place, *olupale*. The main entrance to the homestead was closed and a new one created. Traditionally, it was believed that death cannot find its way into the homestead again, if the entrance was changed (see Shigwedha et al. 2002).

Discussion

According to Owambo tradition, a homestead is located within a cultivated field (Koivu 1925) and it is headed by a man (Williams 1991). In order

to become the head of a household, men are expected to be married (ELC 1930–1932). A homestead headed by a man is called *eumbo* in Oshikwanyama and *egumbo* in Oshindonga.

In the past, according to the matrilineal customary system, a wife and children were not legally related to the husband and biological father; thus the children were considered kin only to the family of their mother (Hinz and Namwoonde 2010). As a consequence of this, widows or divorced women (and their children) were often evicted from the land and forced to return to their matrilineal family (Siiskonen 2009). Movable property, such as cattle, was not inherited by the widow, but by her husband's brothers and sisters (Gordon 2008).

According to pre-Christian tradition, the deceased was buried within or next to the homestead (ELC 1930–1932; Shigwedha et al. 2002). The death of the head of a household changed the name of the homestead to *oshiumbo* in Oshikwanyama and *oshigumbo* in Oshindonga. After the death of her husband, the widow was supposed to wait for the rainy season, and cultivate and harvest the fields once more before vacating the farm. The next occupant of the farm relocated the homestead away from *oshiumbo* but still within the same field.

Soon after Namibian independence 1990, customary laws on inheritance were changed to allow widows to remain on the land (Hinz and Namwoonde 2010). The 2011 Population and Housing Census showed that 54 per cent of rural households of north-central Namibia were headed by women, most of them never married (NSA 2014b). Widows represented 24 per cent of female-headed households. The analysis of preliminary communal land registration data showed that 43 per cent of landholders were women (MLR 2014). Both data illustrate the important role of rural women in household and farm management.

The findings of the present study confirm that the terms *oshiumbo* and *oshigumbo* are still used in north-central Namibia. Even though the deceased are nowadays buried in a cemetery, the relocation of homesteads is still carried out. Accordingly, a widow is required to cultivate the fields once before relocating the homestead to a new place.

The first study on the relocation of homesteads based on aerial photography was conducted by Erkkilä (2001) using images acquired on 9 October 1992 and 31 August 1996. A total of 246 homesteads were counted in the Ondobe–Eenhana area of the Ohangwena Region. Of these, 45 per cent had been relocated between 1992 and 1996, four of them had even been relocated twice. The results of the present study prove that *oludilu* is still practised in the eastern part of the Ohangwena Region.

The forestry authorities, referring to the Forest Act 12 of 2001 and Forest Amendment Act 13 of 2005, discourage the excessive use of wood. The shortage of wood increases the use of cement blocks and other permanent construction materials. The availability of locally harvested building materials, especially construction poles, together with the prevalence of permanent houses, is a major determinant of *oludilu* frequency.

The introduction of modern building materials, such as cement blocks, obviously makes the relocation of a house impossible. However, if a permanent house is attached to the traditional homestead, palisades and stockades made from wooden poles, as well as other non-permanent structures, are sometimes relocated. In addition, homestead and livestock pens are relocated independently; that is, even if the homestead is not relocated, livestock pens are moved frequently (Erkkilä 2002).

Another reason for the declining frequency of *oludilu* seems to be related to the old age of the heads of the household, and in general the shortage of labour. Many of the households are headed by female pensioners taking care of a large number of grandchildren, whose parents have moved to urban areas. It can be assumed that these elderly heads of the household have great difficulty in carrying out frequent relocations of the homestead.

The findings of the present study indicate that *oludilu* has still a strong cultural connotation. It is practised not only to increase the soil fertility, but also after the death of the head of the household. Nowadays widows continue to occupy the farm and the homestead, and they are not evicted as they often were before Namibia's independence. Nevertheless, a previously male-headed homestead still needs to be relocated to be seen as a fully fledged female-headed homestead. The practice of *oludilu* seems to continue, at least to a certain extent, despite the changes in family and land-tenure systems.

New agricultural and housing practices are increasingly being introduced, and *oludilu* is becoming less common. This may have a negative impact not only on the production of grain, but also on the regeneration of fruit trees.

The United Nation's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development highlights resilient agricultural practices that increase productivity and production. Therefore, the impact of *oludilu* on soil productivity should be better known. The relocation of a traditional homestead can be regarded as a successful implementation of indigenous knowledge. Before introducing new policies and programmes to develop existing farming systems in Namibia and elsewhere in Africa, it is essential to recognise this kind of indigenous knowledge.

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Notes

- 1 The academic collaboration between Namibian scholars and UEF dates back to a Finnish government scholarship programme for Namibian students established in the 1980s. The first research collaboration was on 'Cultural and Social Change in Ovamboland 1870–1915', a project funded by the Academy of Finland from 1984 to 1987, which involved one Namibian and three Finnish PhD students. In 1990 and 1991, a research project on 'Forests and Woodlands in the Development of Namibia', funded by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland in 1990–1991, preceded a long-term Finland–Namibia bilateral development collaboration on forestry. UEF and UNAM first began to work towards an academic partnership in 1991. Joint research interests have included issues as diverse as fertility, mortality and migration, precolonial and colonial history, landscape change, land use, oral histories, tourism, information society and education. At the time of writing, the two universities are working to increase their collaboration in teacher education, healthcare and pharmaceutical studies.
- 2 Communal land is vested in the state by the Constitution (Malan 2009). Individuals cannot own communal land, but may have customary land rights or rights of leasehold with regard to certain areas. According to the Communal Land Reform Act No. 5 of 2002, individuals may obtain rights to customary land for residential and/or farming purposes or rights of leasehold to certain areas of land. The rest of the communal land is commonage, and is traditionally used for the common grazing of stock.
- 3 For a more detailed description, see Erkkilä (2001: 38–42).
- 4 In the 2013/2014 agricultural census, 34 per cent of agricultural households had livestock (NSA 2015).
- 5 The aerial photography was part of mapping processes related to the Namibia 2011 Population and Housing Census (P Minnaar, GeoSpace International, personal communication).

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