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The political ecology of hunting in Namibia’s Kaokoveld: from Dorsland Trekkers’ elephant hunts to trophy-hunting in contemporary conservancies

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ABSTRACT
Throughout the past 120 years, hunting has linked the semi-arid Kaokoveld (northwestern Namibia) to global trade networks simultaneously embedding it within global aspirations to preserve African fauna untrammelled. The hunting of elephants for ivory, of endemic species for scientific inventories, of large game for the leisurely hunt, and clandestine poaching by South African officials and military, as well as contemporary forms of legalised hunting for trophies and saleable game meat, have continuously connected local pastoral communities, the environment, the state, and external globally operating actors. Flows of trophies, commodities, services, knowledge, and weapons between hunters, carriers and scouts, scientists and translators, intermediary traders and operators, state officials, and experts of international organisations have contributed not only to the dynamic development of a specific local–global interface, but also to the continuous re-shaping of biocultural frontiers between game species and humans. These flows have been strongly driven by the shifting tides of commodification of game, its state-enforced de-commodification, and its recent recommodification. This paper first addresses the elephant hunts of the late nineteenth/early twentieth centuries, and the hunting for scientific purposes in the first half of the twentieth century. It then proceeds to look at ‘subsistence’ hunting, and leisure hunting by colonial officials, and finally deals with modern trophy-hunting in the context of community-based natural resource management.

Northwestern Namibia has been and continues to be depicted as a remote and isolated place – a trope that developed throughout the twentieth century (Bollig and Heinemann 2002). Isolation resulted from colonially induced encapsulation (Bollig 2013; Van Wolputte 2007). The strict control of borders, the prohibition against selling and bartering produce across these borders, and the notorious pass system, which inhibited mobility, contributed to a colonially mandated encapsulation which was then reified in colonial and postcolonial imagery and imagination (see also Hayes 1998). Hunting has always transcended the politics and imageries of encapsulation: the hunt for ivory, hunting, and killing for scientific

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purposes and academic audiences, trophy-hunting by South African officials and military, vermin-control hunting, and contemporary forms of hunting for trophies and saleable game meat have linked local pastoral communities, the local environment, state officials, and other external actors. From the late nineteenth century, the political economy of hunting was crucial in defining inclusion and exclusion into/from trans-local commodity chains, and in shaping power relations between local community, the state, and powerful non-state actors. It also played a definitive role in fashioning ideological concerns for human–environment relations within the region. Notable publications on the region, from Von Moltke’s Jagkonings (1943), to Green’s Lords of the Last Frontier (1952), to Reardon’s The Besieged Desert (1986) and Owen-Smith’s An Arid Eden (2010), are first and foremost morally charged accounts of hunting in the Kaokoveld. Beyond the discursive, hunting has also altered local social–ecological relations profoundly. Changes in hunting practices and the legal constraints framing them have strongly impacted the dynamic production of biocultural frontiers. At the same time, such changes have also underlined historical continuities in terms of race and gender ascriptions: hunting has been (and has been depicted as) a thoroughly male-dominated affair, from early commercial elephant hunting to recent hunting for game trophies; hunting practices which furthermore were and remain entangled with a predominantly ‘white’ prestige economy.

This paper provides a historical account of the social and political history of hunting over 120 years in one of Namibia’s erstwhile, and today once again, game-rich areas. From this diachronic account different theoretical strands are touched upon. These could potentially help in understanding the role of local agency within trans-local networks and its effects on commodity chains as well as in analysing some of the dynamics of shifting biocultural frontiers.

A short note on methodology: major parts of this paper are based upon archival work in Namibia’s National Archives in Windhoek. Additional information on the history of hunting was collected in numerous interviews conducted between 1994 and 2015. In 2012, 2014 and 2015, more formal interviews on contemporary trophy-hunting in the context of modern conservancies took place and a household survey was conducted to ascertain the livelihood impact of conservancies. Elsemi Olwage currently conducts long-term ethnographic fieldwork in the Kunene region.

In search of ivory: hunting in the pre-colonial and early colonial period

Archaeological (Vogelsang 2002) as well as oral evidence (Bollig 1997) testifies that hunting has had a long history in northwestern Namibia. In fact, pastoral communities established themselves in the region only a few hundred years ago, and communities relied to a large extent on hunting and gathering for their subsistence well into the twentieth century. Local historical narratives with regard to past hunting practices often foreground the changing technologies of hunting – which apart from being reflective of local ecologies also provide critical insight into significant social and political histories and the changing dynamics of local–global relations. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, subsistence hunting by local people involved hunting with dogs, bows and arrows (often poisoned), and later also with wire and metal traps. People also made use of small ‘hunting lodges’, constructed next to natural springs, where one could wait for animals during the night. These were mostly used for hunting zebra
within the mountainous areas. Guns were, however, also in circulation within the region—the cattle raids on local pastoral communities by Topnaar and Swartboois commando groups during the mid- to late nineteenth century firmly established them as a desired and powerful technology (Lau 1987).

Elephants were rarely exclusively hunted for their meat by local residents, as other game were much more easily acquired—although the killing of large game such as elephant did warrant a certain social and ritualistic recognition crucial in the production of local masculine identities. Rather, the political economy and ecology of elephant hunting within the region, especially from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, was strongly determined by the global demand for ivory as a highly prized commodity. Commercial elephant hunting in southwestern Angola and northwestern Namibia probably began in the 1860s, signalling a major shift towards the integration of the region into global networks of trade and economies of desire. The major onslaught on elephants in the region occurred after herds in central Namibia were devastated in the mid-nineteenth century (Lau 1987, 45) and elephant herds in neighbouring Ovamboland were seriously diminished in the 1870s (Siiskonen 1990).

Mossamedes, the most important harbour on the southwest Angolan coast, became the main outlet for ivory from northwestern Namibia in the 1880s and 1890s (Siiskonen 1990, 148). Access to the Kaokoveld had been controlled by the well-armed Swartboois and Topnaar commando groups from their settlements at Sesfontein and Fransfontein well into the 1890s. These commando groups had also preyed upon elephants and had traded ivory at least until 1892, when the German colonial administration restricted ivory exports from southwest Africa’s coastal harbours (von François 1899 1993). Only when the power of the Swartboois and Topnaar communities was broken by the German colonial forces did Kaokoveld’s plentiful game become accessible to professional hunters operating mainly from southern Angola. The consequences of the Rinderpest epidemic in 1897 spurred engagement in elephant hunts by local residents in the Kaokoveld and in adjoining areas in southwestern Angola for another decade: communities dependent on livestock husbandry vied for opportunities to procure commodities or to render services in order to exchange them for cattle. Large-scale commercial elephant hunting in the Kaokoveld peaked after the end of the Rinderpest plague in 1898.

**Commercial elephant hunting in northwestern Namibia by Humpata’s Dorsland Trekker community**

The Dorsland Trekkers, a predominantly white Afrikaans-speaking community, had settled in Humpata at the southwestern edge of the Angolan plateau in the late 1880s after having trekked from the southeastern parts of South Africa across Botswana and Namibia in search of autonomy and settlement (Chapman, n.d.; von Moltke 1943 2003, 96). There they established an economy based on agriculture, transportation business, and commercial hunting (Chapman, n.d.). They started large-scale elephant hunts in the northern Kaokoveld in 1898, and continued to conduct major hunting expeditions into the area every year until 1908 (von Moltke 1943 2003, 222). Dorsland Trekkers hunted in small groups of usually less than ten well-armed hunters. Elephant hunts were conducted on horseback, and herds were surrounded and chased in order to tire them out (34). In year 1900, for example, a group of hunters conducted a ‘record hunt’ in the
altogether they spent five months in the Kaokoveld, starting their hunt by shooting hippos at Enyandi, and then tracking further south via the Ondoto River. Local scouts were usually employed to track down elephant herds. At the end of the hunt some 100 (!) locally recruited carriers transported elephant tusks across the Kunene back to Humpata, crossing the river at Epupa (285; see also Rizzo 2009, 44). That year was not an exception: in the following years the number of elephants killed usually reached between 130 and 150 animals (von Moltke [1943] 2003, 289: in total perhaps 1000–1500 animals), usually with a large number of local residents being engaged in the hunt and the transportation of goods. Elephant hunting was highly profitable. Von Moltke’s informants state that they got about £30–40 per tusk (331). A thousand-elephants shot would thus sell for some £60,000–80,000, concentrated in a small group of hunters.

Next to elephants, hippos were also hunted. Whips produced from hippo skin were sold at two shillings for a large whip and one shilling for a small whip. Von Moltke reported that they made some £30 profit from a single hippo skin. About 300 hippos were shot along the lower Kunene and the hippo population was practically wiped out.

**Other white commercial hunters**

The Dorsland Trekkers were not the only white commercial hunters vying for game in the Kaokoveld, although there is little direct evidence on these other hunters roaming the Kaokoveld individually in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1928 the last white commercial hunter was forcefully removed from the Kaokoveld. Steinhart, a German hunter, explorer, and lay scientist, left a lengthy published account of his hunting exploits in the Kaokoveld in the 1910s (Steinhart 2001). He described at great length his hunting adventures and observations of fauna and flora. In a bizarre twist, he placed all the blame for the dwindling fauna on native hunting, but failed to describe to what commercial purposes he put his own hunting exploits. There are further scattered accounts of single commercial hunters in the Kaokoveld: one hunter lived at Okorosave (today near Opuwo) for a couple of years, also engaging locals in the hunt. Local traditions rate him as a (co)-founder of Okorosave village which then came into existence in the first decade of the twentieth century. Overall the impact of these individual hunters on game populations was limited, and by the early 1920s nearly all had left the Kaokoveld.

**Commercial hunting by local African hunters**

Besides the Dorsland Trekkers and other white hunters, Tjimba communities resident in the Kaokoveld, and Thwa communities in southwestern Angola were also preying on elephants. We turn first to the Tjimba communities, who lived in small communities all over the Kaokoveld. In contrast to the Dorsland Trekkers, they did not directly sell tusks to traders or operate as traders themselves. Several Tjimba communities acknowledged the king of Uukwaludhi, further east, as their political leader and accepted his royal monopoly on ivory trading. In contrast to white commercial hunters, Tjimba hunters were not well equipped with guns. Vedder reports in (1914) reports that they used old-fashioned muzzle-loaders, which they had received on a loan basis from their Ovambo overlords. The client status of the Tjimba becomes clear when looking at exchange rates:
Vedder asserts that a great tusk was exchanged for two small sacks of seed-millet (whereas the Dorsland Trekkers earned up to £30 pounds per tusk; see above).

The Thwa, a small, almost caste-like (e.g. endogamous, despised) southwestern Bantu-speaking ethnic community living mainly in southwestern Angola, became specialised in elephant hunting. von Moltke ([1943] 2003, 353) asserted that the Thwa were highly successful elephant hunters.7 Thwa interviewed in the 1990s claimed that the term ‘Thwa’ was actually a misnomer, and that the proper ethnonym should be ‘Thwe’, which they translated as ‘the courageous ones’, alluding to their exploits as elephant hunters. In oral traditions, they asserted that in the past, when elephants were still plentiful, they had predominantly lived by hunting elephants and selling ivory. After the ivory boom, the Thwa found new income-generating activities in a growing local demand for iron products, pottery, and ritual services among their rich pastoral and agro-pastoral neighbours.

Local mercenary leaders resident in southwestern Angola during the 1890s and 1900s – like Vita Thom and Muhona Katiti, who were offering their services to the Portuguese army – were also elephant hunters, engaging directly with the Dorsland Trekkers in their efforts (Gewald 2011).

**Violent regulation, globalisation, and the reshaping of biocultural frontiers**

The great elephant hunt presaged the violent expansion of the colonial state and the intrusion of colonial administrations into the arid lands of northwestern Namibia and southwestern Angola. When the large-scale hunting of elephants came to an end in the 1910s due to the enforced suppression of commercial hunting and trading in game products, elephant numbers had massively declined. While before 1900 elephants had populated most of the Kaokoveld, they were now constrained to specific areas (the eastern Sandveld, the basins of ephemeral rivers in the pro-Namib, the Omuhonga Basin). Hippos had by now been more or less eliminated from the Kunene River. The biocultural frontiers between humans and large herbivores had shifted. On the basis of comparative evidence from different sources, Viljoen (1988, 48) estimated the number of elephants remaining after the onslaught of commercial hunting in the Kaokoveld to be around 600–1000 animals, implying a decline in numbers of 60–80%. What were the consequences for social-ecological relations? Hakansson (2004, 586) reports that in the East African interior reduction of elephants caused massive changes in vegetation. We do not have any data at hand which would suggest a similar trend in vegetation dynamics in northwestern Namibia – the issue simply has not been researched. However, observations from East Africa and other parts of southern Africa suggest that comparable processes may have been at work in the Kaokoveld: bush encroachment along the seasonal rivers may have increased, and the spread and rejuvenation of *Faidherbia albida* stands may have been hampered.8 Furthermore, the coppicing effect of heavy elephant browsing was significantly reduced, leading to a vegetation structure with more trees, and denser stands of trees.

The effects of dramatically reduced elephant numbers on settlement patterns are more obvious. The riverine valleys could now be used more consistently for agricultural activities, without running the risk that elephant herds would destroy the harvest. Furthermore, settlement near waterholes became less risky, as humans were now in efficient control of permanent water sources.9 Biocultural frontiers in the region became restructured in
manifold ways. The partial removal of one species had effects on other species and necessitated the reorganisation of other interspecies linkages.

Moreover, in northwestern Namibia and southwestern Angola, commercial hunting was linked to an increase in stratification. Commercial hunting peaked during a period in which mercenary activities, violent engagements between local communities and colonial powers, and raiding between communities were of crucial importance. The first wave of commodification of game was deeply entwined with violence and marginalisation. Local people were given a peripheral role in this commodification process: they acted as carriers of goods, and were used as scouts or as badly remunerated hunters. Notably, the commodification of game during the last quarter of the nineteenth and the first quarter of the twentieth centuries only targeted very few game species: elephant and hippo. We found no evidence that other game or other game products became marketable.

With the repastoralisation of the Kaokoveld in the beginning of the twentieth century, brought about by the immigration of dozens if not hundreds of livestock-rich nomadic households from southwestern Angola (among them the mercenary groups alluded to above) wanting to escape harassment by Portuguese forces (Rizzo 2009), a second process set in. State control became more intense: German police patrols tried to restrict elephant poaching in the Kaokoveld,10 and in 1907 the German colonial administration incorporated the Kaokoveld into the newly founded Game Reserve No. 2. This move was intended as a state strategy to create conditions which would allow for a clear differentiation between legal and illegal hunting. With the change in colonial regime, from 1917 onwards the South African administration stipulated more intense controls, with a Native Commissioner operating from Ondangwa touring the Kaokoveld regularly. Already the first South African official visiting the Kaokoveld in 1917 made it clear that local hunting and trading in game products were to be unacceptable.11 For a number of decades hunting became the privilege of a small group of white officials and scientists, and game was transformed from a res nullius to a non-marketable public property, ambiguously guarded by state officials (see also Van Sittert (2005) on comparable processes in the Cape Colony).12

**Colonial hunting from the 1920s to 1980s: leisurely sport and poaching by high- and low-ranking officials**

The elephant hunts by the Dorsland Trekkers were discontinued after 1906 due to expanded police control on both sides of the Kunene River. This did not prevent hunting though. District officials and their invited guests, and also, on application, scientific expeditions and even tourists were allowed to hunt. Long-time District Commissioner Hahn’s photographs of hunts in the 1920s and 1930s cherished the sportsman’s ideal of trophy-hunting (see Hayes 1998). Hayes (180) argues that these photographs connote and make visible the comprehensive dispossession of Africans with regard to their hunting rights: she argues that ‘as white men assumed mastery over the hunt and posed with one foot on the trophy, the historical presence of African hunting forms in such landscapes was obscured’. Some photographs allude to the levelling potential harboured by hunting practices between the ‘white’ hunter and African hunter.
Hahn cherished the idea of making the northernmost parts of the Kaokoveld a game reserve which would offer ‘fine opportunities for tourists and sportsmen to shoot trophies under special licences and instructions’ (cited in Hayes 1998, 183). Hayes shows that against modernising trends in Ovamboland, where labour migration, Christianisation, and schooling led to various forms of cultural transformation, the Kaokoveld was visualised by Hahn as the last remaining frontier – a social and biocultural frontier – of the South African colonial empire, and hunting was a key ingredient to the image constructed. It was here that this frontier was defined, both in ecological terms (humans diminishing and in some instance eliminating wildlife) and in social terms (white officers excluding hunting as a livelihood option of locals).

Reports from the 1920s also vividly discuss the possibility of traces of remnant fauna. It is especially the quest for the quagga, a specific subspecies of zebra, which runs like a red thread through accounts on Kaokoveld’s fauna in the 1920s and 1930s. Many pages were filled discussing whether quaggas were still to be found. In 1923, the South African military officer Shortridge organised the ‘The Third Percy Sladen and Kaffrarian Museum Expedition ‘Ovamboland’, which ventured into the eastern margins of the Kaokoveld in the Ruacana region. It was the aim of Shortridge’s expedition to produce a complete inventory of the fauna of northwestern Namibia. Against the general prohibition on shooting game, the expedition was given rather high quotas to hunt for food and to provide specimens for museum exhibitions. For the first time animals were photographed from a plane and Shortridge fuelled the imaginations about remnant fauna in the region as he identified and had the Quagga photographed referring to it as quagga Kaokoensis (Shortridge 1934, 398).

The 1920s–1950s saw a number of scientific expeditions. They were all given permits to hunt specimens for scientific purposes and to provision themselves with game meat. Perhaps the last such expedition was that of Bernhard Carp in 1951. Carp was a businessman with excellent relations with the South African and Southern Rhodesian academic establishments. He financed a number of expeditions for various southern African museums. Carp proudly reported on his expedition to the Kaokoveld to the Administrator. Many thousands of different insects were collected, including ‘over 100 new forms’. Carp’s report underlined the exceptional status of the Kaokoveld as a repository of biodiversity and emphasised the ‘otherness’ of the Kaokoveld’s fauna and people.

The first half of the twentieth century saw an enforced de-commoditisation of game. The status of game animals was changed from res nullius – things without an owner that could be killed and used by anyone for commercial (and other) purposes – to public property. All use of game had to be endorsed by the state, through a long bureaucratic process of applications and formal responses. Generally, official permits to hunt were only given to scientists and administrative staff.

**Anti-conservationists agendas and ‘Pot Licences’ in the 1950s–1970s**

In contrast to earlier decades, the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s were characterised by anti-conservationist ideologies and activities: many South African administrators held the idea that the intensification of livestock husbandry in the northern communal areas was unavoidable, but in the long run incompatible with conservation. Damage done by game was anxiously reported on, and seen as a hindrance to economic development. White
administrators advocated ‘vermin control’ and aided the local population in eliminating ‘vermin’.\textsuperscript{18} An annual report for 1950, for example, referred to vermin traps being given out on repayment.\textsuperscript{19} In the 1960s locals were given poison, and later even guns.\textsuperscript{20} Even the fabled elephants were up for discussion. During the hearing of the Odendaal Commission in Opuwo in 1963, the ‘olifante plaag’ (elephant plague)\textsuperscript{21} was raised by locals, and in stark contrast to earlier times the official chairing the meeting simply agreed with their complaints, and emphasised ‘Ons stem saam die olifante moet doodgeskiet word’ (‘We agree that the elephants have to be shot dead’). Some of the administrators in Namibia’s north adopted a strongly anti-conservationist stance – game was not only de-commoditised but also devalorised, it was certainly out of place in a livestock-producing native reserve. In 1976, the commissioner in Opuwo claimed that wild animals were often a severe liability to local farmers, and reported that officials were frequently asked to help with the eradication of so-called problem animals. He suggested reconsidering the hunting ban, and advocated that locals be allowed to hunt, or that the extent to which trophy-hunting could be used to lower the number of ‘problem animals’ in the Kaokoveld to an acceptable degree be investigated.\textsuperscript{22} The de-gazetting of the Kaokoveld as a game reserve in 1970 was a key measure to prioritise agricultural development over conservation.

Game was legally hunted by administrative staff in Opuwo for subsistence purposes. It was one of the prerogatives of white staff stationed in Opuwo to receive private hunting quotas, to provide themselves, their families and also their staff with meat regularly. The issuing of so-called pot-licences had been a standard administrative practice to allow and control subsistence hunting for white officers. In 1971, the Native Commissioner in Opuwo, Jooste, wrote a letter to the Chief Bantu Commissioner in Windhoek to ask for higher hunting quotas for white staff. He argued that 20 white staff were living in Opuwo at that time with their families, and that a school and a hospital had to be maintained. He also recounted that Opuwo, the administrative headquarter, was isolated, and shop-bought fresh food was hard to obtain. He pointed out that game was plentiful in the region and asked for an annual quota of 200 springbok, 30 kudus, 20 oryx, and 25 zebras, proposing a scheme in which a hunter would pay ZAR4 for large game and ZAR2 for small game.\textsuperscript{23} Apparently, the issue was seen as problematic in Windhoek and was handed on to Pretoria, where officers questioned the high demand for game meat. About a year later Jooste felt the need to argue again for a high quota, and reasoned that there was a ‘redelike oorvloed van wild’ (‘a relative abundance of game’). He then asked for a more moderate quota of 100 springbok, 20 kudus, and 20 oryx. Additionally, he argued that chiefs should also be given their own hunting quotas, and cited chiefs pleading for the right to use game.\textsuperscript{24} Later that year, the Administrator became involved, and sent a letter to all Bantu Commissioners saying that pot-licences were legal but that hunted game should be paid for. In 1973, the Chief Bantu Commissioner attempted to regulate the rather opaque granting of pot licences, and awarded quotas to white officers resident in reserve areas. The quota allotted to the Bantu Commissioner in Kaokoland was indeed much higher than any other quota in the country: he was allowed to shoot 80 springbok, 10 kudus, 10 oryx and 20 zebras per year. Such high quotas also paved the way for poaching by officials and created a great deal of mistrust among locals against officials who were often rumoured to be implicated in poaching.\textsuperscript{25}
The return of poaching in the 1970s

From the mid-1970s reports on poaching in the Kaokoveld became ever more pressing. Hall-Martin, Walker, and Bothma (1988, 63) describe that the illegal hunting of elephant, rhino, and black-faced impala became ‘epidemic’. Two major reasons were discussed at the time: high prices for ivory and rhino horn, and the militarisation of southern Angola and northern Namibia. While cross-border weapons trading may have contributed to the increase in poaching in northern Namibia, there were other more salient reasons, which were less frequently voiced. As SWAPO insurgents had opened a western front in the Kaokoveld with repeated forays into the territory from strongholds in southwestern Angola, a panicking local administration had handed out between 2000 and 3000 rifles (mostly .303 gauge), most of them unregistered, along with approximately 200,000 rounds of ammunition to local residents, allegedly to protect themselves against the SWAPO fighters in the 1970s and 1980s (Owen-Smith 2010, 377). Furthermore, the centennial drought of 1980/1981 with losses of cattle up to 95% certainly fuelled motivations for poaching.

Yet another cause was not talked about at all: top-level South African politicians as well as the local white administrative staff contributed significantly to poaching. Owen-Smith (2010, 371–377) documents the extent to which leading South African politicians, senior military personnel, and white local administrative staff were involved (see also Ellis 1994).26 While anti-poaching efforts were publicly encouraged by the political elite, they were often the same people breaking these rules. Reardon (1986), a South African journalist, accompanying the conservationist Owen-Smith in the late 1970s, observed: ‘Let loose in a wildlife treasure house the majority of men appointed to safeguard the Kaokoveld embarked on a hunting frenzy, the profligacy of which astonished the resident tribes who bore witness to it’ (13).

By the early 1980s, the once-abundant game resources of the Kaokoveld had been depleted. While the drought of the early 1980s contributed to the demise of game, the major reason for the collapse was the rapid increase in poaching. But governmentally legalised killing of so-called problem animals also contributed. During the drought of 1980/1981 predators became a problem for local livestock farmers, who were then granted permission to kill predators: in two years, 76 lions and 33 cheetahs were killed with traps in the two former homelands of Damaraland and the Kaokoland (Reardon 1986, 34). The demise of wildlife in the Kaokoland generated concern in the international media, and initial efforts to cope with the situation were widely publicised. In March 1979, Die Republikein (a Namibian daily) asked ‘Gaan Kaokoland se wildlewe dié aanslag oorleef?’ (Will Kaokoland’s wildlife survive the attack?) Die Republikein 1979. The newspaper article clearly points at the international dimension of the issue, referring to statements by Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands, who had been president of the WWF for some time, and Anton Rupert, the South African industrial tycoon and head of the South African Nature Fund, both of whom expressed deep concern over the situation in the Kaokoland. The catastrophic decline of wildlife brought global conservationists to the region. While in the 1980s funds to improve conservation were still moderate, in the 1990s major donors like USAID and WWF Great Britain paid for participatory conservation efforts.
Contemporary quota hunting

In 1990, Namibia gained independence from South African colonial rule. In the second half of the 1990s, several decentralisation reforms stipulated the devolvement of rights and obligations in natural resource management to rural communities (Bollig and Menestrey Schwieger 2014). From 1996, rural communities in Namibia could apply to the Namibian Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET) for conservancy status in order to further their claims to game and other natural resources. While under the previous administration game had been ‘owned’ and protected by the state, now such rights were to be devolved to local communities (Jones and Murphree 2001). Local communities were then encouraged to establish corporate entities with a formalised membership, a well-defined territory, representative forms of internal leadership, and detailed management plans. In return, the MET delegates, for example, rights of game management to the conservancy (Owen-Smith 2010, 540–542; Republic of Namibia 1996). The conservancy programme was made much use of in the Kunene region, and within 15 years conservancies covered most of the Kaokoveld’s landscapes (see Figure 1). The drive towards conservancies was not only conditioned by local aspirations for nature conservation. The mapped establishment of boundaries suggested the allocation of group property rights to rural communities, and competing traditional authorities used conservancy boundaries to foster their claims to authority.

Figure 1. Conservancies in the Northern Kunene Region in 2014.
Conservancy activities aim at the conservation of game, and at turning this capital into livelihood assets. Most conservancies have designed comprehensive wildlife management plans under the guidance of NGO staff and MET officers. The internal zonation of conservancies differentiates settlement and livestock zones from tourism and hunting zones. All conservancies define core conservation areas in which livestock husbandry is strongly discouraged or even forbidden.

Many conservancies are allotted sizeable game quotas for hunting. All conservancies in Kunene Region had received wildlife utilisation quotas by 2015. Quotas are set every year (and from 2015 onwards, every third year). They result from the annual game count conducted by the ministry and various approaches to assess the number of game by game guards employed by the conservancies. The exact quota is discussed at some length in a meeting involving MET officials, NGO staff and representatives of the conservancies. The final setting of the quota occurs in the ministry, and the conservancy is informed about its quota in a formal letter. About 70% of the quota is for own-use hunting, 10% for the use of traditional authorities (in order to, for example, provide food at public meetings), and c. 20% is allotted to trophy-hunting. Hunting companies will contractually specify how many animals out of the trophy quota they will definitely take and pay for. Own-use hunting includes game supplied to local meetings, to chiefs and potential communal hunts. Animals from the own-use quota are also allotted to ‘shoot-and-sell’ operations (basically game culled by butchers, who pay a much lower price than trophy-hunters).

Table 1 shows that a wide range of game has been put on the quota of conservancies in the Kunene Region. From baboon to crocodile, elephant, gemsbok and kudu, many

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<tr>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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species are present on the list. Conservancy hunting quotas are tendered to registered Big Game Hunters in Namibia. Table 1 sums up the quotas for all conservancies in Opuwo and Epupa constituencies (the former Kaokoland). Some animals have sizeable quotas: springbok with c. 2000 animals or gemsbok with almost 1000 animals. These are enormous numbers but, astonishingly, most of the quota is not hunted at all as the table shows – there are apparently hindrances to the full commoditisation as well as local utilisation of game. The quota is only fully utilised for status species such as elephants, lions, or crocodiles. In other cases, it is not used at all: of some 113 baboons offered on the list, only 6 were actually hunted; or, perhaps more astonishingly, of some 236 ostriches, only 28 were actually hunted. We established that conservancies compete for trophy-hunters, and a number of them do not find anybody interested in their quotas. Currently, only three trophy-hunting companies share the conservancies’ trophy-hunting quotas: one dealing with eight conservancies, another with just two, and a third with an unspecified smaller number of them. Conservancy committee members alleged that hunting companies are only after some specific game: elephant is clearly the most cherished type of game, a view that was corroborated by the director of one hunting company. He also ascertained that some game listed on the quota does not have any market at all.

Trophy-hunting, as well as shoot-and-sell hunting, has become income producers only to some conservancies. Figures suggest that only about 20% of the value ascribed to hunting quotas are actually realised (see Figure 2). Commercial hunting is hardly relevant to the larger number of game-poor conservancies (and will probably remain so for a number of years).

Moreover, liaising with private business partners in trophy-hunting is a complicated issue. There is little exact knowledge within conservancy committees about exactly how beneficial contracts with trophy-hunting enterprises are made. Conservancies are very much dependent on advice from IRDNC and MET staff, or officers from the WWF. Practically, these advisors formulate all details of a contract and supervise to ensure that such contracts are drawn up in a fair manner. Part of the ‘own-use’ part of the quota is sold

Figure 2. Economic utilisation of quotas allotted to conservancies in 2013.
under shoot-and-sell contracts – mainly to butchers from Oshakati and Opuwo who furnish a growing urban middle-class in northcentral Namibia with cherished game meat.

While local communal conservancies receive ample quotas from the state specifying game to be legally hunted within their set jurisdictions, the individual hunting of game for household consumption has not become socially sanctioned. Rather, quotas are mainly used for public meetings and gatherings, where other resources are pooled, such as diesel for the use of a car, bullets and guns, and where the meat can be shared with full accountability. In other words, these quotas are also partially seen as a public currency and are, in some instances gifted, for example to local police when they assist with settlement disputes, or to contract-construction companies to pay for assistance in the construction of dams or roads. Hunting purely for the consumption of meat at the household level is seen as wasteful and deviant behaviour, as each quota can potentially be sold or used in beneficial exchanges. Additionally, it is shrouded in a sense of criminalisation and illegality. This despite the fact that locally and collectively owned hunting quotas are rarely completely filled. This perceived illegality associated with the act of hunting is, on the one hand, a legacy of particular historical contingencies, while on the other hand, it signals the ways in which game and peoples’ relationship to wildlife have come to be re-imagined and reconfigured.

According to neo-liberal doctrines of conservation, game is (re-)commoditised within the framework of conservancies. The commoditisation is meant to directly contribute to conservation: income generated from trophy-hunting is intended to motivate conservancy members to guard game as a resource. Game quotas are set along scientific standards and allotted to conservancies. The value of each game species is communicated, but it falls upon committees and their advisors to negotiate exact rates with tour operators. Figure 2 shows that the commoditisation of game is only partial, and with some species it does not take place at all, although legal conditions are stipulated. Moreover, as noted, at the local level, game has also gained an exchange value (beyond the market-led commoditisation brought about by commercial hunting): game can be exchanged for labour, thus benefitting the community; it can secure assistance from state agencies; and can also be gifted to public institutions like schools. Dominant valuations of game among local residents are rooted for the most part in an economic rationale and allude to possibilities for progressive rural development. Yet local residents value increasing numbers of game positively in other ways as well. Some alluded to the aesthetics of increased game species and elephants specifically are narrated as being part of their tradition and heritage – although informants were often understandably critical of the increasing number of predators.

Contemporary criticism of quota hunting

There has been consistent criticism of trophy-hunting in communal conservancies over the past decade. When the first elephant bulls were put on hunting quotas in 2008, there were protests from animal protectionists. Grobler (2008) listed some of the critique. He quotes the (little known) NGO Elephant-Human Relations Aid, which had presented data suggesting that the entire region only had fewer than 60 adult cows and, as of 2006, only five bulls of breeding age. The three elephants put on the quota had been classified as problem animals by the Ministry. The arguments of those opposing culling
were not new at all. Given that there were no official figures on elephants, the allegation that they were immediately threatened was hard to refute. The NGO claimed that the last three breeding bulls of the fabled desert elephants were about to be killed, and that the entire elephant population was on the verge of annihilation: in the NGO’s statement, elephant calf mortality was put at 80%.

Contemporary trophy-hunting has also been criticised from an ethical perspective. A newspaper article (The Namibian, 28 May 2012) staunchly criticised the practice of shoot-and-sell hunting. In 2011, about 70 zebra and an ‘unknown number of gemsbok and springbok’ were put on the quota for Okondjombo conservancy. Apparently, this quota was claimed in one massive hunt by a shoot-and-sell contractor. The newspaper alleged that wounded animals were not followed up, and that a number of them died in the bush undiscovered. Such behaviour would also strongly contradict the code of conduct that the association of professional Namibian hunters has established. The author of the article also alleged that this kind of hunting has negative consequences for tourism.

Notably, none of the criticisms fundamentally question hunting or the re-commodification of game in the region; but rather the process of quota-setting, the placement of specific animals on the quota list, and actual hunting practices that were questioned. We did not come across local criticism of trophy-hunting – in general local people were favourably disposed towards the opportunities of trophy-hunting and saw it as offering the possibility of broadening options for the local pastoral economy.

**Conclusion: hunting, commodification of game, and shifting biocultural frontiers**

During the past 150 years, commercial hunting, and the commodification of game, and activities to actively suppress and regulate it, have contributed pertinently to shifting biocultural frontiers. The emergent colonial state saw the unregulated hunting by locals and commercial hunters from southern Angola and central Namibia, as well as the international trade in game products, as a major threat to its authority, and for decades fought for the de-commodification of game. Game was only to be hunted by a very small group of administrators for non-commercial purposes. ‘Pot licences’ and licences for hunting for scientific purposes were issued in a highly controlled and bureaucratic manner. However, at least in the 1970s and 1980s, the bureaucracy connected to controlled hunting was more a pretence than an effective hindrance to unregulated hunting. The number of game shot illegally far outnumbered the few animals shot in a regulated manner. State regulation masked uncontrolled hunting, which was partially commercial and partially linked to the prestige economy of elitist military and political circles. Since the early 1990s, decentralisation and the liberalisation of conservation has contributed to a comprehensive yet controlled re-commodification of game. The latest news on the poaching of rhino suggests however that the forces of strongly commodified markets may only be contained for restricted periods of time. Commoditised hunting has also led to and continues to valorise certain body-parts of the animal, tusks, skins, and trophies – implying a disaggregation of value of the animal body. Moreover, contemporary hunting produces new differential yet comparable values of game species. This has repercussions for human–animal relations at multiple levels.
On the everyday level, these relations are also changing as game numbers in northwestern Namibia have increased significantly, as they have in the rest of Namibia and South Africa. Populations of species such as oryx, kudu, and springbok have increased exponentially. Elephant numbers, too, have steadily increased. While elephants were nearly hunted out in the early 1980s (it is estimated that less than 200 individuals survived in the entire Kunene Region), nowadays about 1000 elephants are roaming Kunene North alone. Rhinos are still rare, but in order to increase their numbers, several of them have been re-introduced to Orupembe and Omatendeka conservancies in spectacular helicopter operations. Furthermore, other game species have been reintroduced to the region. The black-faced impala is a notable example. This development is certainly connected to improved protection, but is also linked to a number of above-average rainfall years. We hope to have demonstrated that this increase in game is not solely driven by commodification but rather by the complex interplay between historical contingencies, emergent local logics, and hegemonic conservation ideologies.

Notes

1. The concept of a biocultural frontier is used here to denote the interface between biological entities (e.g. game species, humans) and biological processes (e.g. diseases), and manmade infrastructures (e.g. artefacts, settlements, roads, and social institutions) and cultural dynamics (e.g. meaning, symbols, and visions). This frontier has been characterised by mutual interpenetration and attempts at both delimitation and closure.

2. One Otjiherero-speaking informant reported that a man who had killed an elephant would be taken behind the main house, where markings would be made on his body and also on the bodies of his age-mates. There would be a feast in his honour and he would be praised for his courage in acknowledgement of his heroic feat (Elsemi Olwage, fieldnotes, June 2015).

3. An important precondition for the rapid development of the trade in ivory was the dissolution of the Portuguese government’s monopoly in the ivory trade in 1830, and the fact that the slave export trade from Angola was banned in 1836 (Miller 1996, 649). These legal reforms made ivory a financially competitive substitute for slaves.

4. Von Moltke’s informant, Robbertse von Moltke ([1943] 2003, 150, 273) at one point, speaks of 50–182 elephants, and later of 130–160 animals being hunted per year. He reports that only bulls were shot. The numbers he gives may include animals shot in the Western Ovamboland. The fact that he emphasises that only bulls were killed may be an argument directed against early environmentalists in South Africa who campaigned for a halt to elephant hunting.

5. von Moltke ([1943] 2003) had one of his informants exclaim: ‘The hunt in Kaokoveld was the biggest (hunt), and I can say that uncle Jannie made most of his money with ivory from Kaokoveld’ (222). (Daaride Kaokoveldse jagte was die grootste, en ek kann maar se dat oom Jannie die meeste van sy geld uit Kaokoveldse ivoor gemaak het).


7. von Moltke ([1943] 2003) reports on the Thwa community:

The Thwa is a poor black tribe that lives in Angola on the other side of the Chella Mountains. They were slaves of their defeated and oppressors, the Makuari. But they were the most courageous and best elephant hunters that I ever came across among the black nations. (353)
(Die Mutwas is ’n armsalige swart stam wat in Angola onderkant die Chellagebergtes woon. Hulle was die slawe van hul oorwinnaars en verdrukkers, die Makuaris; maar hulle was die dapperste en die beste olifantjagters wat ek nog ooit onder die swart nasies gesien het).

8. Through experiments in the Kaokoveld, Viljoen (1988) found that the chance of sprouting for *Faidherbia albida* seeds is much higher once such seeds have gone through the intestinal tract of elephants.

9. Stals and Otto-Reiner (1999, 41) give the following main wells for elephants in the Kaokoveld: Kaoko-Otavi, Ombombo-Kaoko, Otjitundua, Epembe, Ombazu, Oruvandjei, Ombiba, Otjinyere-ese, Okamizi, Okapembamba (next to the Kunene river itself). These wells became hubs of human settlement in the early twentieth century after the removal of significant elephant populations from the surrounding areas.

10. Franke NAN A560 Accessions, Victor Franke reports in his diary on efforts in 1901 to curb hunting of ‘Portuguese poachers’.

11. NAN SWAA 2516 A552/22; field diary Manning, 1917.

12. Rizzo (2007) in her contribution on ‘poaching’ and its suppression shows that state officials took their obligation to suppress the commodification of game seriously and enforced it with an almost religious fervour.

13. The quagga (*Equus quagga quagga*), an extinct form of zebra, was apparently one of the more common ungulates roaming the South African savannahs until the seventeenth century. By around 1850, the quagga had become extinct south of the Oranje region due to excessive hunting (Shortridge 1934, 408).


15. Shortridge (1934, 411) gives the exact body size of a large female Quagga – another hint at the fact that animals were not only observed but also hunted.

16. SWAA 1336/A198/39, Carp Expedition.


18. Commercial farmers were allowed to destroy what were defined as vermin (jackal, hyena, wild cats, leopards, wild dogs, and lynx). Ambitious jackal hunters were remunerated with a bounty for bringing in jackal skins (personal communication, Rob Gordon). Botha (2013) reports that in 1960 alone some 6000 jackals were killed on commercial farms.

19. NAN NAO 61 9/1, Annual Reports 1946–1952 Officer in Command, Ohopoho to Chief Nat. Com. Windhoek

20. I did not find any evidence that bounties were being paid for. Van Sittert (2005) showed that the state paid for jackal bounties for decades in the Western Cape, thereby creating a new commodity: bounties could be ‘sold’ to a state agency at a fixed price.

21. SWA/KC/7E/52, page 630.

22. NAN BOP 83 N21/1/2 in die Kaokoland, Natubewaring; Bantoesakekommissaris and Hoofbantoesakekommissaris, 10 November 1976.

23. NAN BOP 83 N21/1/2. Bantu Commissioner, Jooste Opuwo to Chief Bantu Commissioner Windhoek, 28 May 1971.

24. NAN BOP 83N N21/1/2, Bantu Commissioner Jooste Opuwo to Chief Bantu Commissioner Windhoek, 6 June 1972.

25. One anonymous reviewer detailed a rumour that a nature conservation officer resident in Opuwo was said to have had piles of ivory and skins hidden in his house. Owen-Smith (2010) describes the 1970s and early 1980s as a time in which rumours about poaching by officials were plentiful.

26. Ellis makes clear that poaching by officials and the army was not only for trophies, but that ivory was also exported in some quantities from the region and fed into clandestine international networks.

27. Weaver and Petersen (2008) report that per annum approximately 5800 trophy-hunters from different parts of the world come to Namibia and that trophy-hunting contributes c.US$70 million to the national economy. While in 2000 the income from trophy-hunting in conservancies amounted to US$ 165,000 by 2006 this had increased to US$1.33 million.
28. It is basically the conservancies themselves who first propose what game should be put on the quota list. This explains why a number of game that is hardly to be sold to trophy-hunters enters the quota list.

29. Professional hunters are hierarchically ordered, with the entry level being Hunting Guide. A Hunting Guide who has passed their hunting examinations may guide clients on their farm or within a company. After two years of successful hunting operations and at least 12 hunting safaris, a Hunting Guide may apply for the status of Master Hunter, which allows them to hunt on different properties (and not just on their farm. After another two years, the Master Hunter, after a theoretical and practical examination, may apply for the status of Professional Hunter. The final category is Big Game Hunter. One can only become a Big Game Hunter after two years of employment with a registered Big Game hunter and passing another exam successfully (Weaver and Petersen 2008).

30. Weaver and Petersen (2008) suggest that the commercial ranching areas of Namibia support about 80% more game today than 30 years ago.

31. Richard Schroeder posits that the number of large game in South Africa increased from a low of 0.5 million in 1965 to a staggering 16 million in recent years. He links the increase in wildlife to the emergence of a hunting economy: nowadays one fifth of all agricultural land in South Africa is used by game farms (Schroeder 2015). These numbers are, however, contested and Cowley (2016) rates them as grossly overstated in an effort to prove that private conservation efforts are contributing significantly to the increase of game.

32. Elephant numbers are auspiciously lacking from the more recent CBNRM publications. Some experts interviewed on this point said that a publication of high elephant population numbers would increase the pressure to put many more elephants on the quota list.

33. The species is endemic to Kunene North, but the last remainders of an erstwhile large population were relocated to the Etosha Park in the 1970s. In connection with the conservancy programme, the MET relocated black-faced impala in considerable numbers, and their populations have again reached such levels that they have reappeared on hunting quota lists.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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