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# Boundary drawing and the notion of territoriality in pre-colonial and early colonial Ovamboland

Gregor Dobler

*Abstract*

*In the extensive debates on borders in Africa, 'traditional' non-state boundaries have received scant scholarly attention. The mainstream view is still that territory, in pre-colonial societies, mattered little, as land was abundant and people were scarce. This article explores the development of notions of territoriality and internal boundaries in pre-colonial and early colonial Ovamboland. While domination had a strong territorial element in pre-colonial Ovambo polities, the territory was defined from the centre rather than from its borders. The different polities were separated by large stretches of uninhabited wilderness used for cattle posts, not for settling. When the international border between South West Africa and Angola was redrawn and demarcated in 1927 and a large number of Ovakwanyama moved from the Angolan side to South West Africa, the population increase led to the cultivation of formerly uninhabited areas and finally to the disappearance of open spaces between the different kingdoms. This provoked border disputes that strengthened the territorial element in domination. Boundaries became increasingly important for territoriality, until finally the colonial model of defining a territory from its boundaries and the local model of defining a territory from its core merged into one conception of territory. While the national border with Angola is more or less uncontested, internal border disputes continue until today. The history of boundaries in the area, and the degree to which they shifted during colonial times, shows that these disputes cannot be resolved by referring to history, but only through negotiation.*

## Introduction

In 2004, a border dispute made the headlines in Namibia's national newspapers.[1] When the Ondonga Traditional Authority tried to install a senior headman in Ekoka, a tiny village east of Ekongo in a sparsely populated part of northern Namibia, the Oukwanyama Traditional Authority formally protested that the area was under their jurisdiction. What started as a minor incident involving a village not many Namibians had ever heard of, evolved into a dispute between two of the largest Namibian traditional authorities. Both Sam Nujoma and President Pohamba were said to be included in the negotiation. In the end, a different senior headman was installed in a different village, while the question of jurisdiction over Ekoka remains unsolved.

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[1] E.g. *The Namibian*, March 8, 2005; June 28, 2005.

In the news coverage at the time, the incident appeared as an isolated anecdote, and no mention was made of its historical roots in the development of the internal boundaries of what was formerly called Ovamboland by the colonial authorities. The conflict, along with a number of similar conflicts that have emerged over the years, cannot be understood without reference to a longer history of territorial domination and colonial boundary demarcation in the area. At its heart lies the migration of a large number of Ovakwanyama peasants from Angola to South West Africa after the demarcation of the international boundary in 1927/28, and the ensuing change in the map of the different Ovambo polities.

The 1927 border demarcation and the population movement that followed, I will argue, changed notions of territoriality in early colonial Ovamboland. While agricultural territory did matter before, it became a very scarce resource after a large part of Oukwanyama's population was confined to the land south of the international border, resulting in recurrent boundary disputes and a new link between domination and territory.

If one follows an influential strand in African studies literature, territory should not be a crucial factor of political domination in Africa. In one of the last decade's most influential books on African politics, for example, Jeffrey Herbst links the weak institutionalisation that he observes in many African states to the low priority effective control over territory had in a context of land abundance and labour scarcity.[2] European states had to develop in a densely populated area in which control of land was an important resource both in everyday life and for political power, and where strong competition between neighbouring states made the control of territory essential to avoid loss of land. This led to a strong institutionalisation of the state and to an investment of state power in territorial infrastructure. In Africa, in contrast, the scarcest resource was labour power, while land was abundant. Political domination thus did not refer to a territory, but to people, and there was no incentive to control land effectively.

In his book, Herbst converts an argument that has long been made in African economic history into a political one. In 1971, Jack Goody used the scarcity of labour compared to land to explain the prevalence of slavery (political control of labour) over serfdom (economic control of labour). He states that in Africa, "chiefship tended to be over people rather than over land".[3] The argument was later expanded and differentiated by others, most recently by Gareth Austin. Austin upholds that, in many parts of pre-colonial Africa, abundance and low productivity of land in combination with the absence of markets for agricultural products made the reservation price of labour prohibitive for producers, motivating forced labour and slavery. As land was not the crucial factor of production, land taxes were comparatively unimportant as a means of domination. As a consequence, African rulers did not invest in controlling the territory, but in gaining

[2] Jeffrey Herbst, *States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000.

[3] Jack Goody, *Technology, Tradition, and the State in Africa*, London, Oxford University Press, 1971: 29f.

access to labour and controlling the people.[4] However, as Austin convincingly argues, this relation between land and labour transformed over time. People developed strategies to deal with the economic constraints and opportunities linked to it, while population growth reduced the scarcity of unskilled labour. The consequence was that over the twentieth century there was a shift to a relative scarcity of land and a relative abundance of labour.

In this article, I will concentrate on the political side of the argument. I am interested in the consequences a shift towards greater scarcity of land on the South West African side of early colonial Ovamboland had for local notions of territoriality, and for the link between domination and territory.[5] In doing so, I hope to draw more attention to the question of borders and territory in pre-colonial Africa. While colonial and modern borders have received extensive coverage in the literature, pre-colonial notions of territoriality and territorial borders have only received scant attention.[6]

In the first part of the essay, I will explore pre-colonial notions of territoriality in Ovambo chieftaincies and kingdoms. Sources are scarce and often sketchy, but they are reliable

[4] Gareth Austin, "Resources, techniques and strategies south of the Sahara: Revising the factor endowments perspective on African economic development, 1500-2000", *Economic History Review*, in print 2008. For influential variations on the theme, see also Antony Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1973 and John Iliffe, *Africans. The History of a Continent*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995. As an explanation for slavery, the combination of land abundance and labour scarcity was probably first used implicitly by Herman J. Nieboer, *Slavery as an industrial system. Ethnological Researches*, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1900: 302: "Where men subsist by agriculture, any increase in the number of slaves brings about an increase of food" – an argument applicable only "where there is an abundance of fertile soil, and capital is of little use".

[5] I hope to explore the economic side of the argument in a later study. As land was abundant and relatively unproductive in nineteenth century Ovamboland (even with high labour investment in water harvesting systems and fertility improvement), investing labour in the local economy was not very lucrative, and even the low wages in the colonial economy were (at least at times) a high economic incentive for migrant labour – all the more so since the internal dynamics of domination changed with the advent of guns and horses in the colonial economy. These technologies of domination made extractive modes of wealth acquisition like internal and external cattle raids easier for the local rulers, and rendered the investment of labour into agriculture even less lucrative. For an excellent description of these dynamics, see Emmanuel Kreike, *Re-Creating Eden. Land Use, Environment and Society in Southern Angola and Northern Namibia*, Portsmouth, Heinemann, 2004.

[6] There are, however, obvious links to a number of empirically and theoretically strong studies on land rights in Africa (see Sara Berry, *Chiefs know their boundaries: Essays on property, power and the past in Asante, 1896-1996*, Oxford, Currey, 2001; Sara Berry, "Debating the land question in Africa", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 44, 2002: 638-668; Martin Chanock, "Paradigms, policies and property: a review of the customary law of land tenure", in: Kristin Mann and Richard Roberts, (eds.), *Law in Colonial Africa*, Portsmouth, Heinemann, 1991: 61-84; Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, "Le régime foncier rural en Afrique noire", in: E. Le Bris, E. Le Roy, and F. Leimdorfer, (eds.), *Enjeux fonciers en Afrique noire*, Paris, Karthala, 1982: 65-84; Richard Kuba and Carola Lentz, (eds.), *Land and the Politics of Belonging in West Africa*, Leiden, Brill, 2006; Carola Lentz, "Land and the politics of belonging in Africa", in: Patrick Chabal, Ulf Engel, and Leo de Haan, (eds.), *African Alternatives*, Leiden, Brill, 2007: 37-58. Most of these studies are more concerned with the problems surrounding individual land ownership, and the politics of inclusion and exclusion that link it to political units, than with the actual geographic delimitation of these political units, but they also shed new light on the formation and change of the territorial component of domination in Africa.

enough to gain a broad picture of the relation between territory and political domination. In the second part, I will explore how this notion of territoriality changed in the first decades of colonial rule in Ovamboland, when population increase made it necessary to transform the wilderness that had formed a broad border between different kingdoms into agricultural land, resulting in territorial conflicts between the kingdoms and finally an internal border demarcation modelled much on the demarcation of the international border in 1927.

## Territoriality in Pre-colonial Ovamboland

In the mid-nineteenth century, the first European travellers in Ovamboland described a landscape of rich agricultural states separated by large stretches of wilderness. Francis Galton relates his experience of reaching the cultivated areas of Ondonga from the South:

> We pushed through thick thorns the whole time, and had begun to disbelieve in Ongonga, when quite of a sudden the bushes ceased: we emerged out of them, and the charming corn-country of the Ovampo lay yellow and broad as a sea before us. Fine dense timber-trees and innumerable palms of all sizes, were scattered over it; part was bare for pasturage, part was thickly covered with high corn stubble; palisadings, each of which enclosed a homestead, were scattered everywhere over the country.[7]

The stark contrast between cultivated land and wilderness Galton sketches is reproduced in early political maps of the area. Travellers' and missionaries' maps showed the different Ovambo kingdoms as more or less well-defined areas surrounded by large stretches of no-man's land (see map 1).

[Map 1]

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[7] Francis Galton, *The Narrative of an Explorer in Tropical South Africa*, London, Murray, 1853: 205. Charles John Andersson's description of the same moment is no less hymnical. It concludes: "Often since have I conjured up to my imagination this scene, and have thought it might not inaptly be compared to stepping out of a hot, white, and shadowless road into a park fresh with verdure, and cool with the umbrage cast down by groups of reverend trees." (Charles John Andersson, Charles John, *Lake Ngami, or, explorations and discoveries during four years wanderings in the wilds of Southwestern Africa*, New York, Harper & Brother, 1856: 187). The general pattern is reproduced by the diary of Hermann Schoch who took the same route in 1920 as a member of the Anglo-Portuguese Boundary Commission: "The difference in the vegetation of the inhabited parts of Ovamboland compared with the uninhabited tracts is most marked. The latter are mostly covered with mopani trees and scrub or consist of open grass plains, whereas the inhabited parts are well defined by different vegetation and are studded with tall Hyphenea or fan palms, looking very stately and picturesque, and by large maroela and sycamores (wild fig) trees." (WCL A839 (Schoch family papers), Ja2, p. 14.)

OVÁMBOLAND
und dessen Stämme und Dialekte
der Lingua-Bantu.

Entworfen und gezeichnet
von
F. Bernsmann.

Die dialektisch näher verwandten
Stämme sind mit einer roten Linie
umzogen.

☿ bestehende Missions Stationen
♀ aufgegebene bezw. zerstörte Miss. St.

0    10    20    30    40    50 Klm.

On Bernsmann's map, these areas of no-man's land are designated as "Waldgebiet, unbewohnt" – "forest areas, uninhabited". Unlike European states we are used to, the Ovambo polities did not cover the whole land. They were separated by large stretches of wilderness, up to 60 kilometres wide between Oukwanyama and Ondonga or Ukuambi, much narrower between other kingdoms. Just like elsewhere in Africa, the wilderness was conceived as the counter-world to the civilised settlement areas, the realm of spirits and wild beasts not subject to human rule.[8]

It is unlikely that the line between civilisation and wilderness was as sharp as Galton experienced it. Cattle posts existed in the wilderness and not all areas within the realm of a kingdom were cultivated. The boundaries between civilisation and wilderness changed over time: civilisation was expanded into former wilderness by new settlements, while malefactors (girls pregnant before their wedding, thieves or simply persons who had angered the king) could be sent to live in exile at the margins of the civilised areas.

Within the cultivated areas, the king (or in some polities a number of rulers that had replaced the king) had very large political, economic and ritual powers. His powers were linked to the land and extended over his kingdom only. When a new king was chosen after the death of the old one, he made a tour of his lands; after his inauguration, he was ritually forbidden to leave the territory.[9] It was thus impossible for two kings to meet; when they had dealings outside their own territory, they sent emissaries who could act in their name. Wars, too, were not waged by the kings themselves, but by war chiefs nominated ad hoc by the king.[10]

War between two kingdoms was frequent (at least in the second half of the nineteenth century),[11] but it usually took the form of cattle or slave raids into more marginal parts

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[8] In general see for example Michael Jackson, *Allegories of the Wilderness. Ethics and Ambiguity in Kuranko Narratives*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1982; Till Förster, *Zerrissene Entfaltung. Alltag, Ritual und künstlerische Ausdrucksformen im Norden der Côte d'Ivoire*, Köln, Köppe, 1997: 53ff. For Ovamboland see Märta Salokoski, *How Kings are made, how Kingship changes*, PhD thesis, Helsinki University, 2005: 69f; (http://ethesis.helsinki.fi/julkaisut/val/sosio/vk/salokoski/, 15 April 2008).

[9] Carl Hugo Linsington Hahn, "The Ovambo", in: C.H.L. Hahn, H. Vedder, and F. Fourie, (eds.), *The Native Tribes of South West Africa*, Cape Town, Cape Times, 1928: 1-36 (9f.). Loeb cites this as current norm in 1948 (Edwin Loeb, *In Feudal Africa*, Bloomington, Indiana University Research Center in Anthropology, Folklore, and Linguistics, 1962: 79). Even in the 1950s it made quite a stir in the country when the King of Ondonga, Kamonde, visited a senior headman in Oukwanyama in the hope of obtaining liquor for his daughter's wedding.

[10] Martti Rautanen, "Das Recht der Ondonga", in: Sebald Rudolf Steinmetz, (ed.), *Rechtsverhältnisse von eingeborenen Völkern in Afrika und Ozeanien*, Berlin, Springer, 1903: 326-345 (336); Hans Schinz, *Deutsch-Südwest-Afrika. Forschungsreisen durch die deutschen Schutzgebiete Gross-Nama- und Hereroland, nach dem Kunene, dem Ngami-See und der Kalaxari 1884-1887*, Oldenburg and Leipzig, Schulz, 1891: 235f.

[11] Märta Salokoski argues that the despotic and warlike character of Ovambo kingship in the late nineteenth century was solely an outcome of early colonial changes. While the availability of guns certainly changed the society profoundly and increased the level of internal and external violence, I find Salokoski's presentation of a peaceful Ovambo society prior to the advent of colonial traders not wholly convincing (Märta Salokoski, *Symbolic Power of Kings in Pre-Colonial Ovambo Societies*, unpubl. Licensiate Thesis Sociology, Helsinki University, 1992: 86-108).

of the neighbouring states.[12] No instance of territorial conquest of one Ovambo kingdom by another is known. Wars over territory would not have made much sense, anyhow: the wilderness that separated two territories could be traversed, but not simply bridged, and territorial acquisitions would have been separated from the main territory by a large stretch of uninhabited land.

The targets of cattle raids often seem to have been cattle outposts rather than the densely populated heartland of a neighbouring kingdom. In mid-nineteenth century Ovamboland, the accumulation of cattle was one of the most important strategies and expressions of political leadership.[13] According to László Magyar, herds owned by chiefs in Oukwanyama could comprise more than 20,000 head of cattle in the 1850s.[14] Even if that number is exaggerated, it stresses the importance accorded to large chiefly herds. Before European traders came into the country on a more regular basis, resources for the differentiation of lifestyles were limited.[15] The most important manifestation of wealth was cattle accumulation. The chiefs' cattle could be used as a resource for economic, political and ritual patronage, enforcing the link between the chief or king and his subjects. But in the fragile ecological environment of Ovamboland, grazing potentially conflicted with crop production during the agricultural season. Large herds made it necessary to have seasonally changing cattle outposts in the margins of the cultivated

[12] See Schinz, *Deutsch-Südwest-Afrika*: 235f.; Hahn, "Ovambo": 21ff.; Loeb, *Feudal Africa*: 81-95; Meredith McKittrick, *To Dwell Secure. Generation, Christianity, and Colonialism in Ovamboland*, Portsmouth, Heinemann, 2002: 57-59; Kreike, *Eden*: passim. It is unclear how often captives were turned into slaves. From Brincker, it seems that most captives were ransomed later, while the remaining ones became family members of their captors (Heinrich Brincker, Heinrich, *Unsere Ovambo-Mission sowie Land, Leute, Religion, Sitten, Gebräuche, Sprache usw. der Ovakuánjama-Ovámbo, nach Mitteilungen unserer Ovambo-Missionare*, Barmen, Missionshaus, 1900: 30). Rautanen, "Recht": 342, mentions that in Ondonga, only the king had the right to sell slaves. For a more thorough assessment of the slave trade and its impact in Ovamboland see Kalle Gustafsson, "The Trade in Slaves in Ovamboland, ca. 1850-1910", *African Economic History*, 33, 2005: 31-68.

[13] Frieda-Nela Williams, *Pre-colonial Communities of Southwestern Africa. A History of Ovambo Kingdoms 1600-1920*, 2nd ed., Windhoek, National Archives of Namibia, 1994: 42f.; Salokoski, *Power*: 137ff.

[14] László Magyar, "Die Reisen des Ladislaus Magyar in Süd-Afrika. Nach Bruchstücken seines Tagebuches, von A. Petermann", *Mittheilungen aus Justus Perthes' geographischer Anstalt*, 5, 1859: 181-199 (198); Magyar's information seems to be based on hearsay. August Pettinen talked of 2,000 head of cattle owned by Ondonga King Nangola dh'Amutenya around 1850 (Salokoski, *Kings*: 120). Loeb states that Oukwanyama King Mandume owned "at least" 7,000-8,000 cattle (Loeb, *Feudal Africa*: 46); Estermann estimates that "even today [1930s], in spite of the decrease in the herds caused by bartering for liquor, there are blacks who own a thousand head of cattle" (Carlos Estermann, *The Ethnography of Southwestern Angola*. Volume 1: *The Non-Bantu People/ The Ambo Ethnic Group*, New York et al., Africana Publ., 1976: 137).

[15] Although I think that possibilities of wealth accumulation and a close linkage between status and wealth have important consequences for domination, I would not subscribe to Gluckman's statement that without possibilities of accumulation, "there was no point to building up power" (Max Gluckman, "The Rise of a Zulu Empire", *Scientific American CCII*, 1960: 157-168 [166]); there are non-economic motivations for power. I would insist, however, that cattle wealth formed both a means and a motivation for the centralisation of resources for domination. Without means of accumulation, a large part of the wealth has to be redistributed, as – in Goody's words – "one man can only eat a limited amount of porridge" (Goody, *Technology*: 32).

land – outposts that needed protection from raids and relied on wells and water harvesting systems.[16] Investment into the marginal lands thus was a crucial factor for the king's internal domination. This structural necessity to invest in the wilderness was the seed for a more pronounced domination over territory in early colonial times.

The urge to protect herds, people and lands from raids sometimes led to peace contracts between different kingdoms. The missionary Sckär relates that in the time of Ovakwanyama King Mweshipandeka ya Saningiga,[17] a peace treaty was concluded between Oukwayama, Oukwambi and Ondonga, and peace markers were built "more or less in the middle of the forest which lies between them".[18] Emissaries from the different polities dug a hole, slaughtered a black cow and let its blood flow into the hole, in which they also threw the intestines and the bones. The hole was then covered with the leaves of several trees. With that offering, eternal peace between the kingdoms was established and ritually enforced.[19] Whoever crossed these markers which were called Okakulukadi

[16] Salokoski, *Power*: 134ff; William Clarence-Smith, *Slaves, Peasants, and Capitalists in Southern Angola 1840-1926*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1979: 46; Kreike, *Eden*.

[17] Mweshipandeka reigned from 1862 to his death in 1885. He was the fifth-last Oukwanyama king before Mandume, whose killing in 1917 ended the kingdom until it was re-established in 1997.

[18] RMG 1477: Karl Sckär, Manuskript Ovamboland. Historisches – Ethnographisches – Animismus – Varia. Ca. 1932, but drawing on material gathered from 1901 onwards in Ovamboland. The original citation: "In die mit den Ovakuanjama einst eingezogenen Stämme wurde in späterer Zeit kein Raubzug mehr gemacht. Es sind mit diesen Stämmen Friedensmale errichtet in der Zeit des Häuptlings Muesipandekas. Diese Male sind heute noch vorhanden. Man erzählt, dass einige Frauen aus der Häuptlingsfamilie diesen Rat gegeben hätten. Der Bruder Muesipandekas Namens Omukuanangobe ja Muenja kam mit den Abgesanden aus Ondonga und Ukuambi zusammen, etwa in der Mitte des zwischen ihnen liegenden Waldes. Hier grunden sie ein Loch, schlachteten dann ein schwarzes Rind und liessen dabei das Blut in die Grube fliessen. Die Einge-weide, Leber usw. kamen auch in die Grube. Das Fleisch assen sie zusammen auf und warfen zuletzt die Knochen auch noch in die Grube. Das Ganze wurde zugedeckt mit Blättern des Omufiatibaumes, des Omu-dimebaumes, den Palmäpfeln, der Fächerpalme und den Schoten der Affenbrotbaumes. Das Speichelopfer fehlt ja bei keinem Opfer. Damit war nun der Friede für immer geschlossen. Diese Stämme bekriegten sich fortan nicht wieder. Wie mir gesagt wurde, sollen diese Friedensmale auch zwischen Ondonga und Oukuambi gemacht sein. Der Name dieser Male ist Okakulukadi, weil Ovakulukadi (alte Frauen) den Rat gegeben hatten. Jeder der nun in feindlicher Absicht über diese Male hinausging, sollte bei der Rückkehr ganz sicher die Beine brechen. Doch wer in friedlicher Absicht daran vorbei ging, brachte auch immer ein Opfer dar, entweder etwas Erde oder Blätter der eben genannten Bäume, oder doch wenigstens ein Speichelopfer. Diese Male wuchsen mit der Zeit zu auffallenden Hügeln heran. Heute liegen sie längst nicht mehr im Walde, sondern mitten im Stammesgebiet. Die Ansiedlungen sind darüber hinausgegangen. Doch niemals mehr haben die Ovakuanjama Raubzüge in jene Stämme gemacht." – The peace treaty and the boundary markers are remembered today. The place where the representatives met (around two kilometres east of the tar road from Ondangua to Oshikango, ten kilometres south of Ongha) is called Ondobe yOmhumba (in Oshi-kuanyama) or Omdombe yOmpumba (in Oshindonga), "the water place of the omasum", because the repre-sentatives of the polities shared the omasum of a slaughtered cow, just like the nieces and nephews of a deceased do before the funeral, thus expressing a ritual kinship that excludes bloodshed. (Interview with Erastus Shamena, Ongwediwa, Feb 17, 2008).

[19] Schinz mentions a similar practice without elaborating: "Sind beide Parteien des Krieges satt, so senden sie sich gegenseitig eine Gesandtschaft zu, die zwischen den beiden feindlichen Stämmen auf neutralem Bo-den Kalunga einen brandschwarzen Ochsen opfern, Geschenke austauschen und damit den freien Verkehr wiederum öffnen." (Schinz, *Deutsch-Südwest-Afrika*: 321).

(and later also established between Ondonga and Ukuambi), brought an offering of earth, some leaves or spittle. With the years, the markers grew into mounds that formed visible landmarks separating two kingdoms: border markers that stressed both the will to peaceful co-existence and the territorial boundaries between two political unities.

The presence of these markers, together with the prohibition confining the king to his territory, is a clear indication that domination in pre-colonial Ovamboland was not solely over people, but extended over a well-defined territory which sometimes stretched well into the wilderness. In 1885, for example, King Kambonde kaMpingana of Ondonga sold the area around Grootfontein that was to become Upingtonia to William Jordan. In his contemporary account, Schinz calls this area "the south-eastern corner of Ondonga" although it was separated from any major permanent Ondonga settlement by more than a hundred kilometres and the Etosha "thirst belt".[20]

The territorial component of domination is accentuated by a variety of political and economic influences over the territory by the central power. The king or the chiefs controlled the movement of travellers within their territory and collected toll; whoever came into the territory was subject to their jurisdiction and could be evicted.[21] Kings had a monopoly over certain commodities, most notably those important for outside trade (ivory, ostrich feathers[22], to some extent salt, copper and iron[23]), and they were the owners of all fish and some animals caught within their territory, whereas fish caught in the wilderness belonged to the hunter.[24]

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[20] Ibid.: 347ff. According to Schinz, Jordan paid 25 muskets, one "salted" horse (i.e. one that is impervious to the tsetse fly) and a small cask of brandy for the area measuring 7,000 square kilometres – an indication that, even if the Ondonga king claimed lordship over the territory, he did not look upon it as a vital part of his kingdom. While permanent Ondonga settlements seemed to have started well north of Etosha, the southernmost Ovambo cattle post in the 1850s was, according to Andersson in Omutjamatunda, present-day Namutoni. "On account of this being harvest time, our friend Chikor'onkombé did not expect to find many of his countrymen here; but he was mistaken, for it swarmed with people as well as cattle. The latter I estimated at no less than from three to four thousand" (Andersson, *Lake Ngami*: 183). At the time of Green's, Hahn's and Rath's journey in 1857, Onondova (today called Fisher's Pan, immediately North of Namutoni) is designated as "frontier of the pasture-grounds of Ovampo land" (Frederick Green, Carl Hugo Hahn, and Johannes Rath, "Account of an Expedition from Damara Land to the Ovampo", *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society of London*, 2, 1857: 350-354 [350]).

[21] It is ironic that travellers from Europe, the paradigmatic region of territorial domination, usually had large problems accepting orders from a local king on the grounds that they did not believe in his sovereignty over his territory. The expedition Carl Hugo Hahn and Johannes Rath conducted in 1857 together with Frederick Green failed due to that non-respect, a fact that Galton acidly pointed out when a letter by Green was read in the Royal Geographic Society (Green et al.: "Account": 352f.) – Hans Schinz' letters and diaries (ZB Zürich, Ms. Z IX 319, 320, 656) are an especially rich source for the difficult interaction between indigenous rulers and travellers. Although Schinz considered himself to be above the law, King Kambonde found means to convince him otherwise and finally to make him leave the country.

[22] Rautanen, "Recht": 339.

[23] For Ondonga Schinz, *Deutsch-Südwest-Afrika*: 293f. (iron and copper); 299 (salt).

[24] Rautanen, "Recht": 343. Social relations, too, showed a tendency to develop within the boundaries of a territory. Marriage into a different polity happened sometimes, but was not the rule, and households usually

These are just a few hints at the territorial component of domination in nineteenth century Ovamboland. Even if the sources are too fragmentary to allow for a more profound assessment of the relation between territorial and human aspects of domination, they leave no doubt that domination had a strong territorial side. Ovambo kings ruled over a fixed territory that was ritually linked to the king and was circumscribed by a region of uninhabited wilderness. Within these territories, conflicts over land between different headmen seem to have been frequent, but the outside border was not subject to territorial conflicts.[25] During early colonial reign, the territories slowly expanded and the notion of territorial domination over a fixed area became more pronounced until finally no stretch of land was left without a well-defined lordship.

## Changing borders: the colonial intervention and local reactions

In 1886, Portugal and Germany shared 'their' South West African territories in a treaty concluded in Berlin. The boundary, they determined, should run from the mouth of the River Kunene up "to the waterfalls which are formed to the south of the Humbe by the Kunene breaking through the Serra Canna. From this point the line runs along the parallel of latitude to the River Kubango".[26] As there were two waterfalls in the area, the treaty was more ambiguous than its authors had thought, and Germany and Portugal – later South Africa and Portugal – came to believe in two different border lines about eleven kilometres apart. In 1915, the zone between the two lines was declared a neutral zone co-administered by the two powers pending a definite agreement. Whether one took the Portuguese or the German reading both lines cut right through the kingdom of Oukwanyama, leaving about two thirds of the kingdom's population as Portuguese subjects.[27]

only moved to a different polity when they had to leave their home following a crime, a witchcraft accusation or political problems.

[25] Hahn, "Ovambo": 19.

[26] I cite an official English translation found in Department of State, USA: International Boundary Study. No 120, *Angola – Namibia (South West Africa) Boundary*, Washington, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, 1972. Strangely enough, Major Manning based his report for the South African government in 1916 (NAN, RCO 10/1916/1) on a completely different reading. He has: "run from the mouth of the River Kunene up to the waterfalls of the Kunene, which, south of Humbe, are formed by the junction of the Serra Cana River with the Kunene River." The original text is to be found in Emile Banning, *Die politische Teilung Afrikas nach den neuesten internationalen Vereinbarungen (1885 bis 1889)*, Berlin, Walther and Apolant, 1890: 69; Hangula gives a different English translation and a detailed account of the treaty's history (Lazarus Hangula, *The International Boundary of Namibia*, Windhoek, Gamsberg Macmillan, 1993: 18f). In German, the crucial passage corresponds to the translation cited above: "bis zu denjenigen Wasserfällen, welche südlich von Humbe beim Durchbruch des Kunene durch die Sierra Canna gebildet werden" (Banning, *Teilung* : 69). – Nitsche explains the ambiguity of the treaty by the fact that the authors of the treaty had mistakenly thought of two small hills as a mountain chain, and had concluded that a waterfall had to be present (Georg Nitsche, *Ovamboland. Versuch einer landeskundlichen Darstellung nach dem gegenwärtigen Stand unserer geographischen Kenntnis*, Kiel, Donath, 1913: 145f).

[27] The arbitrariness of many borders (the degree of which is contested in recent literature) was heavily criticised even by contemporaries. See for example Nitsche, *Ovamboland* : 146: "Es ist nicht angängig, daß

In the first years after the treaty, the border had little significance on the ground. After King Nande of Oukwanyama formally accepted Portuguese sovereignty in 1907 (and concluded a treaty of obedience with the Germans in 1908) this gradually changed. After the German defeat in 1915 and the subsequent British victory over King Mandume's troops, colonial administration was beginning to be more firmly established, and differences in the colonial regimes started to be felt by the people on both sides of the border. The colonial regime in Angola was much more unpopular than the one in South West Africa. South of the border, the authorities' main interest was a stable, pacified society that was affluent and cooperative enough to send workers to the mines and farms which were the backbone of the colony's economy. Taxation was comparatively low and used rather as an instrument to introduce cash economy, and thus to encourage migrant labour, than as a real source of income for the administration. On the Angolan side, tax extraction was much heavier, and the methods used to collect taxes were crueller than in South West Africa. Headmen were held personally responsible for their subjects' tax payments; they sometimes had to sell their own cattle in order to bail out family members arrested to enforce tax payments.[28] In addition to taxes, the Portuguese colonial government introduced forced labour, and slave raids occurred well into the twentieth century.[29] The extractive and often cruel regime of Portuguese colonialism induced many people to flee into the neutral zone or into South West Africa. Often, headmen decided to move south and were followed by the whole village.

So even before it was actually demarcated, the international border had started to divide the territory – not only on paper, but in everyday practices and in concepts that shaped local agency. Population in the neutral zone increased rapidly, and stretches of former wilderness were cultivated by the new arrivals. As a consequence of the colonial intervention, the territory of the Ovambo polities, and most notably of Oukwanyama, began to change.

Meanwhile, the colonial powers were negotiating. An agreement mostly following the Portuguese reading and setting the border south of the neutral zone was drafted in

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ein so in sich geschlossenes Ganze wie der Staat Ukuanjama, dessen Bewohner von den internationalen Abmachungen natürlich keine Kenntnisse haben, sondern blindlings ihrem einheimischen, nach Landesrecht und -gesetz mit der Häuptlingswürde begabten Regenten gehorchen, zu einem Dritten Deutschland, zu zwei Dritteln Portugal gehört". His agenda becomes very clear, however, when he continues: "nur einer kann es besitzen. Zweifellos haben wir ein großes moralisches Anrecht auf Ukuanjama. Es stellt uns jährlich Tausende von Arbeitern". – On the international dimension of the boundary question, see Randolph Vigne, "The moveable frontier. The Namibia-Angola boundary demarcation 1926-1928", in: Patricia Hayes et al., (eds.), *Namibia under South African Rule. Mobility and Containment 1915-46*, Oxford, Currey, 1998: 289-304).

[28] Kreike, *Eden*: 63f.

[29] Christine Messiant, *L'Angola colonial, histoire et société*, *1961, les prémisses du mouvement nationaliste*, Basel, Schlettwein, 2006: 49.

1920, but only ratified in June 1926.[30] In 1927, the authorities set about demarcating the border on the ground. In a joint effort by Portuguese and South Africans teams, a twelve metre wide stretch of land was cleared of trees and bushes, and permanent border markers were put up every ten kilometres.[31] This new border demarcation more or less followed the southern limit of the neutral zone, even if some places formerly believed to be in the neutral zone were realised to actually belong to South West Africa, and vice versa. The line cut across Oukwanyama and made a great stir in the country. It was the first visible marker that the former kingdom was in fact going to be divided, and that the position of a homestead would decide upon its future colonial regime. Silently encouraged by the South West African authorities (who, however, officially denied every charge laid against them by the Portuguese), many families and villages from the neutral zone and the northern areas moved south into South West Africa.[32] It is difficult to assess their exact number, but Loeb speaks of around 40,000, while only around 20,000 Ovakwanyama had remained on the Angolan side.[33] As the total population of Namibian Ovamboland at the time was around 150,000, the increase in population was enormous.[34] For many of those coming from the neutral zone, it was the second exodus in a few years, and it usually came at a moment when by hard labour, the new homesteads, their water infrastructure and the fields had just been sufficiently established to be sustainable.[35]

After the demarcation was completed, the neutral zone ceased to exist, and the South West African representative in Namakunde moved his office to Oshikango in October 1928. In the following eighty years until today, the border has been a reality, structuring everyday life in the area and changing political and social structures on both sides. Both sides developed separately, shaped by political developments in the different colonial regimes. At first, cross-border migration in both directions remained high. After World War II, it seemed to have slowed down (at least as far as permanent migration is concerned). After the armed struggle for Namibian independence started in 1966, and especially since Angolan independence in 1975 and the complicated wars that accompanied and followed it, South African occupation and the war made the separation more pronounced, even if they did not stop all cross-border activities.

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[30] The delay was not caused by land rights, but by a dispute over the use of the Kunene waters for irrigation and electricity generation. For a detailed account, see the excellent thesis by Carol Ella Kotze, *The Establishment of a Government in Ovamboland, 1915-1925*, unpubl. MA thesis, UNISA, 1984: 116-132.

[31] NAN, KAB 1. Major Manning (as Secretary of the 1927 Boundary Commission) to Secretary of South West Africa, June 1927.

[32] See, e.g., NAN KAB 1. For Hahn's attitude, even at a later stage, see NAN NAO 18 11/1, NCO to OC Oshikango, 30.9.1930. Further rich material is found in NAO 16, 10/2; NAO 51, 3/1 and 3/2. For a discussion of the reasons inciting them and more evidence from oral history sources, see Patricia Hayes, *A History of the Ovambo of Namibia*, unpubl. PhD thesis, Cambridge, 1992: 266ff and Kreike, *Eden* : 57-80.

[33] Loeb, *Feudal Africa* : 36ff.

[34] Hahn, "Ovambo": 2.

[35] For many personal accounts of this experience, see Kreike, *Eden*.

In the 1920s, the process of border demarcation was not only crucial for those living in the neutral zone or moving into a different country. The new arrivals had to find a place in the society of South West African Ovamboland – quite literally at first: a place to found a new homestead with the necessary infrastructure to establish a farm. Most of the migrants stayed in Oukwanyama and strived to settle there. Some moved in with relatives or founded a new individual homestead, but migration by whole villages under the authority of a village headman was also frequent. The headmen had been responsible for the distribution of land to the villagers in their area, and they remained responsible after the migration.

As the inhabited areas of Oukwanyama were already densely populated, the new arrivals could only be settled in the former wilderness. It was turned into cultivated land at an unprecedented rate, and very soon the homesteads of the new arrivals had stretched the old boundaries of the Ovambo polities. Oukwanyama expanded south until it reached land claimed by Ukuambi or Ondonga headmen; the same happened between Ukwambi and Ondonga.[36] In the east and the west, the margins of the different polities were extended into formerly uninhabited areas.[37] Together, these rapid territorial changes profoundly altered the balance between the different Ovambo polities. Internal boundaries became contested at the very time when the colonial administration tried to pacify and homogenise the country, and introduced more and more measures that applied to the whole of Ovamboland.

The ensuing disputes over internal borders made the administration uneasy. Howard Eedes – Officer in Charge of Native Affairs for Oukwanyama and Union Government Representative in the Neutral Zone – wrote to his boss, Officer in Charge of Native Affairs, Ovamboland, 'Cocky' Hahn in September 1928:

> If the whole question of the borders of this area is not settled immediately trouble will occur, and I have no doubt that some of the headmen will move over into Angola where they are certain of obtaining sufficient country for their needs. In previous years about 50% of the labour supply came from this tribe and the present slump is only due to the uncertain state of affairs existing here in regard to the Ovakwanyama tribal borders.[38]

Eedes had good reason to believe that "trouble will occur". In fact, trouble had started already: in August that year, a peasant named Amnera, subject to senior headman Hamukoto Nicodemus Kaluvi of Onenghali, had been ordered to leave the homestead he had occupied for two years by the local Ondonga headman, Shahama. When he refused to leave, Shahama sent his followers to the homestead who destroyed all the water troughs and again ordered him to move away. Slightly earlier, an Ondonga peasant had built a homestead a few hundred metres away from the homestead of Ovakwanyama

[36] NAN NAO 18 11/1 (I), Monthly Report Hahn, June and July 1927, August 1928.

[37] For the ecological conditions of the cultivation of former wilderness, see John Mendelsohn, et al., *A Profile of Northern Central Namibia*, Windhoek, Gamsberg Macmillan, 2001.

[38] NAN NAO 18 11/1 (I), cited after Hayes, *History*: 272.

headman Angush near Engombe, and claimed "all the country in the vicinity as Ondonga property."[39]

At first glance, these conflicts were not so much about the territorial integrity of a kingdom as about rights over agricultural land. Headmen had the exclusive right to assign the rights to use land in their area. As these areas are defined by customary ascriptions only, land conflicts between two headmen are not unusual within a polity. They are usually solved by referring to the next level in the hierarchy of traditional authorities. In this case, however, two parallel hierarchies were involved. The authority of both Ondonga and Oukwanyama headmen derived from their link to the central authority. So the problem behind the conflicts was actually the question of the territorial boundaries of the two polities.

The conflicts over the new settlements thus show again that the wilderness between the polities had not just been a no-man's land. As indicated by the peace markers put up in the middle of the wilderness, the rulers knew, and at least roughly agreed upon, where their territories ended, even if they were uninhabited. But before the demarcation of the international boundary squeezed more people into a smaller area, there had never been a need to establish an exact line corresponding to the contours of the respective polities. To use Herbst's argument: previously, boundaries between territories had not been fixed, as in many European areas, in a series of conflicts and negotiations until every square metre of land belonged to a clearly demarcated territory marked with boundary stones and shown in geographical maps. This did not mean, however, that territory did not matter for political domination. There had simply been no occasion to agree or disagree on the exact limits of the other's influence, as the wilderness between the polities had only been sparsely and sporadically used.

Now this opportunity to disagree arose and alarmed the administration. Immediately after his removal from Namakunde to Oshikango, the Union Government Representative, Angola Border (as he was now provisionally referred to) called a meeting of Ovakwanyama senior headmen and Ondonga headmen representing King Martin. The meeting took place at Ongha on 5 November 1928. After having eaten an ox paid for by the administration, the headmen – probably clearly guided by Eedes – decided upon the border between their polities. They agreed that Hiambo Nomyambo, a point on the main road five miles south of Ongha,

> would be the point where the Ondonga area ended, and that a line would be cut from there between the areas eastward. After the eastern portion had been completed the line would be cut from Hiambo Nomyambo westward as far as the Ukuambi border.[40]

The work proceeded very rapidly: it "was commenced on the 8th instant and the whole of the Ovakwanyama-Ondonga border completed on the 14th instant", as Eedes proudly

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[39] NAN A450, 6-2/11. Union Government Representative, Neutral Zone, Namakunde, to Officer in Charge of Native Affairs, Ovamboland, Ondonga, August 30, 1928.

[40] NAN A450, 6-2/11.

relates to his superior officer.[41] As it was not possible to cut a road owing to the lack of water, the line was demarcated by blazing the trees.

The western portion of the line went through sparsely inhabited land and presented no problems of demarcation; it ended in Mashekadeva on the Ukuambi border. The eastern portion, however, cut through recently cultivated and more densely populated areas. Eleven Ovakwanyama homesteads were found to be on Ondonga territory. Both Amnera and Angush referred to above had actually established their homesteads in Ondonga. Like the other nine households, they had to choose either to become Martin's subjects or to move north – a clear example of territory, not allegiance, defining political domination.

As a sketch that Eedes attached to his letter seems to be lost, it is unclear unto which point the boundary ran east. It seems to have soon cut northeast, approximately reaching Omhedi, turning east again to run parallel to the national border.[42] A 1937 map in the National Archives in Windhoek shows a similar, if slightly different, boundary line.

[Map 2]

It is interesting to note, however, that the line is not presented on the map as boundary between Oukwanyama and Ondonga, but as the southern border of Oukwanyama, while the representation of the actual Ondonga area circumscribes a much smaller area. The Ondonga rulers had obviously successfully claimed authority over the very sparsely inhabited area surrounding their settlement area. In Eedes' 1928 memorial, the region between the national border and the Omhedi - Elundu line is referred to as an "area given to the Ovakwanyama by King Martin". In fact Eedes and Hahn had approached King Martin of Ondonga in 1927 in order to obtain land for settling people who moved south from the neutral zone or from Angola. Influenced by Hahn, Martin had agreed to grant a strip of land immediately south of the new international boundary to resettled Ovakwanyama. King Martin had thus temporarily succeeded in claiming a much larger territory as belonging to Ondonga than it would be creditable from pre-colonial maps by extending his rulership over the wilderness east of Oukwanyama. The administration, by accepting his 'gift' to the Ovakwanyama, legitimated this claim.

In 1937, however, the position of the colonial administration changed. By then, Eedes' 1928 hopes that the boundary was now "distinctly marked and there should be no

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[41] Ibid.

[42] I have not yet been able to identify all the localities Eedes refers to: "Martin should be requested to allow the line to be cut from Ndjoba to Enyika, then straight to Ihana leaving Omedi [Omhedi, between Ondobe and Eenhana], Ondanda [between Omhedi and Eenhana] and Enana [Eenhana] on the Ovakwanyama side." (NAN A450, 6-2/11)

cause for complaint in future" had proven to be futile. Indeed in the established agricultural lands of central Ovamboland, conflict seems to have at least temporarily diminished with the demarcation.[43] Where the polities had been closest to each other before the extension of cultivated land due to the influx of migrants from Angola, territories were clearly enough defined and allegiance clearly enough established not to cause further problems. But new people continued to move to South West Africa when the 1929/30 famine was over. As central Oukwanyama was already densely populated, they had to move further east, developing new areas into agricultural land – areas that had formerly been outside the scope of territorial partition in Ovamboland. Eedes' line had ended near Onaihana, three kilometres east of Eenhana. In October 1937, Ondonga headman Kauluma unilaterally carried the boundary about 30 kilometres further east – once again by methods modelled on the demarcation of the international boundary ten years earlier. He had a line in the bush cut by blazing larger trees and chopping down smaller ones that should clearly show where Ondonga lands – and thus his own – started. The new line squeezed Ovakwanyama settlements into a small stretch between the international border and Ondonga territory, not more than three to five kilometres wide. Additionally King Martin claimed all uninhabited land in the east, from Ohauanga right to the Okavango River.[44]

This demarcation threatened the colonial administration's plans for the further development of Ovamboland. Native Commissioner Hahn feared the destabilising effect of overpopulation in Oukwanyama. The problem created by the migrant influx could only be solved by opening up new lands in the east. As that option involved a large amount of labour investment for water infrastructure, people would only chose it if they could be sure to benefit from the fruits of their labour. The territorial claims of Ondonga spread insecurity and made new settlers reluctant to move east – all the more so since, in Hahn's opinion, Kauluma's main motive to draw the new line was to lay hands on the water infrastructure already developed by the new settlers.

The new boundary and King Martin's claim on the land east of Ohauanga left no option for an extension of Oukwanyama, confining the people to a crowded area and making re-migration into Angola probable. Overpopulation in the area, Hahn argued, would

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[43] Until today, they have never completely ceased. What Howard Eedes wrote to the Chief Native Commissioner after succeeding Hahn as Native Commissioner in 1948 could be said for most periods in time: "I beg to inform you that when I arrived in Ovamboland, I found that most of the tribes were involved in disputes over tribal borders." (NAN NAO 51, 3/11, 12. 2. 1948). This often involved the unilateral demarcation of boundaries by blazing the bush, erecting beacons or marking trees. The documentation in NAO NAN 51, 3/11 is particularly rich for the years after Eedes' return to Ovamboland in 1947. Between 1948 and 1954, border disputes arose between Oukuanyama and Ondonga (in different locations, mostly in the Ongwediva area and east of Eenhana); between Oukuanyama and Ombalantu; between Oukuambi and Ombalantu; between Oukuambi and Oukuanyama; between Oukuambi and Ondonga; between Oukualuthi and Onkalonkathi; between Oukualuthi and Ombalantu.

[44] NAN A450, 6-2/11, OC NA Oshikango to NC, Ondangua, January 21, 1937. The description reads as follows: "The 'line' passes within 120 yards of native Joel's kraal at Enghono (near Cornelius Uejulu's area) and continues Eastwards passing between Hauanga Munene [today Ohauanga] and Onamgodji [a waterhole, today trigonometric beacon 30] leaving the latter settlement on the South side."

endanger the entire Ovamboland during droughts, as the other polities drew supplies from the more fertile agriculture of Oukwanyama in times of crisis. Ondonga, on the other hand, had no population problem at all, and could not have any interest in the barren lands in the east.

In this situation, Hahn uses an argument which

> seems to have been overlooked by Mr. Eedes when he did the first demarcation [...] Chief Mandume actually had cattle posts at and personally visited places like Ohaihana and Ovakalunga. In the face of this I do not see how Chief Martin can substantiate any claim to that part of the country. It would seem that the strip of country 'given' by Chief Martin to the Oukwanyama tribe was already occupied by Mandume in 1916.[45]

In the end, this strange mixture of colonial rationale and 'native' justification gained the day, as it mostly did where Native Commissioner Hahn was involved. The Oukwanyama area was expanded to the south and continued towards the east, eventually right up to the border of Ovamboland (where, of course, it had to end by definition). Exactly how this border adjustment was made, and what legal instruments were used, is unclear to me, but the outcome is evident from the following two maps.[46]

[Map 3, Map 4]

Map 3 shows Ovamboland as perceived by Edwin Loeb, a member of the University of Californian Africa Expedition, in 1947-48. Even if Loeb stayed in Oshikango most of the time, he was in close contact with Hahn in Ondangwa, and it is probable that the cartography of the tribal areas relied on Hahn's information. In 1971, a propaganda publication by the South African Department of Foreign Affairs (Map 4) shows the official internal boundaries of the time. They differ from Loeb's map in some important points: the triangle around Ongwediva now belongs to Oukwanyama, and the areas of the different traditional authorities are simply extended into the wilderness until they meet the boundaries of Ovamboland. This map also clearly shows how the populated areas of Ovamboland, formerly islands of civilisation separated by large stretches of uninhabited wilderness, have now merged into a large and uninterrupted settlement area, surrounded by some isolated villages in largely unpopulated bush land. In the process, land became a scarce resource and domination was more and more linked to territory and territorial disputes.

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[45] All NAN A450, 6-2/11, handwritten notes by Hahn, dated 15/9/37: Ondonga – Ukuanyama Boundary.

[46] The gap could probably be closed in the National Archives in Windhoek, but as so often, the material gathered for this essay was collected in a different context, leaving me sadly uninformed of further developments.

Map 3. Ambo Tribes and Languages

COMMUNITY DISTRICTS IN OWAMBO

LEGEND

| | Edge of Inhabited Area |
| •• | Isolated Settlement |
| ▦ | Densely Populated Zones |
| --- | Tribal Boundaries (Approx.) |
| ⊙ | Community Centres |

ETOSHA PAN

KOLONKHADI-EUNDA

KWALUUDHI

NGANDJERA

KWAMBI

MBALANTU

KWANYAMA

NDONGA

Kunene River

Ruacana Falls

Lake Oponono

Kavango River

ONGANDJERA

OMBALANTU

TSHANDI

OSHAKATI

OSHIKANGO

Mahenene
Eunda
Onanime
Onesi
Okahao
Orongo
Ombafi
Okatana
Onguediva
Okalongo
Omugulame
Engela
Ohangwena
Eenhana
Okauvanga
Omboloka
Elim
Oshikuku
Ukuambi
Ovudhia
Onandjukuo
Oshigambo
Olukonda
Onyena
Okankolo
Nkongo
Mamatanga
Endola
Engela

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N

## The structural argument: unimportance of territory?

If we consider pre-colonial notions of territoriality and their changes under early colonial rule, Ovamboland emerges as an area that partly diverges from the conventional pattern identified in African history. Territory did matter for pre-colonial political domination, even if land as such was plentiful and the different polities lay far from each other. Arable land provided with water infrastructure was by no means readily available, and an expansion of territory would not have made economic sense while the cultivated lands supported the population without leaving surplus labour to transform the new areas into equally productive agricultural land.

Territory was not, as Herbst sees it in European history, a resource that had to be constantly controlled in order to avoid losing it to a neighbouring polity. This does not mean, however, that domination was less over territory than over people. The king and his power were strongly linked to the land, and the border between two spheres of domination was usually known, and often marked on the ground. Through cattle posts and kingly tours, domination extended into unpopulated areas. Whoever moved into an area and was accepted there became a subject of the respective king, and a number of indices — from toll collection to the control of watercourses — show the presence of a strong territorial element of domination. This territorial element, however, was always linked to the lived reality; it was a social space visible in geography.

With the demarcation of the international border, a different notion of territoriality became influential. According to the colonial model, a territory was less defined by the lived space from which it could expand, than by the borders that contained it. In this model, each territory was clearly circumscribed by the borders with its neighbours that defined the different spheres of domination. Territory thus becomes a geographic space visible in society.

When population in South West African Ovamboland radically increased as a consequence of the powerful application of that concept by colonial politics, the social spaces that had defined internal political domination expanded until they touched and at times overlapped each other.[47] The wilderness shrunk to a mere line, the transit point between two political realms, and geographic and social space merged. As a result, the practical differences between the two models of territoriality also vanished. The colonial model became compatible with the aims of the local kings and headmen — a dynamic that finally led to the complete assignation of territory to political authority that was a precondition for the apartheid variant of indirect rule. No empty, ungoverned space was left within the colony.

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[47] Eedes summed up the process in his memorandum to the Chief Native Commissioner in 1948 (NAN NAO 51, 3/11, 12.2.1948): "According to the ancient custom the inhabited area should gradually extend by enlarging the circle, so that the country laying between the tribal areas could be kept, as long as possible, for grazing areas (cattle posts). This custom was not enforced, and large settlements sprang up in the bush between the inhabited areas. The result was that border disputes arose [...]. Nothing can be done in regard to the areas between the Ondonga and Ukuanyama, the Ondonga and Ukuambi, and the Ukuanyama and Ukuambi tribal areas, which have now nearly merged."

In that process, borders between the different Ovambo polities were not created, but they were reified and consolidated, and (at least in the case of the Oukwanyama - Ondonga border) their location shifted to an amazing extent. Ekoka, the village that has been a bone of contention between Ovakwanyama and Ondonga headmen since 2004, would have been no-man's land in 1860; it was clearly within the boundaries of Ondonga which King Martin managed to have endorsed by the administration in 1928. Today, most people living in the area speak Oshikwanyama, and the village is caught between the two traditional authorities. None of these boundaries as they existed at a given moment can be called the true one, and it would be counterproductive to define internal boundaries without respect to colonial intervention and the changes it brought about, most notably the division of Oukwanyama by the international boundary. Today's border disputes have to be settled by negotiation, not by an appeal to history.

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Accessions

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Angola Boundary Commission and Kunene Water Commission

KAB 1 — Angola Boundary Commission and Kunene Water Commission

Native Affairs Ovamboland

NAO 16, 10/2
NAO 18 11/1 — Monthly Reports Oukwanyama
NAO 51, 3/1 — Tribal Affairs Oukuanyama
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Resident Commissioner Ovamboland

RCO 10/1916/1

Maps

H 13 – Ovamboland 1937