

Land use rights and gender in Ovamboland, North-Central Namibia, since the 1930s

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In agrarian economies arable land is the most important form of property and productive resource, so that access to land defines the political and social status of a member of society. This paper examines changes in property and particularly land use rights in North-Central Namibia, paying special reference to gender inequality in access to land. The problem is approached by exploring the coping strategies of widowed and divorced persons after the dissolution of their marriage. Where property rights and gender inequality have traditionally been investigated on the basis of administrative records, survey data or oral information, this paper approaches such problems from a new perspective, through life histories of the Christian population transcribed from parish registers of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia. Linking of the parish register data to anthropological, ethnographic, socio-economic and cultural information markedly widens our scope for discussing rights over communal lands. The paper shows that remarriage was a real solution for many widows and divorced women in the 1930s and 1940s if they were at the best childbearing age. A dramatic decrease in the remarriage rate occurred from the mid-1950s onwards, however, which was related to socio-economic changes in society.

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Introduction

“If my husband passes away, everything will be taken away by the family of the man. And I will be left with nothing but I’m the one who does all the working in the fields ... When we got independence, Meme Nentumbo Ndaitwah, she is the one who told people about human rights. She says a woman must have a right” (Lebert 2005: 83).

This comment by Meme C made in an interview reveals well the vulnerable situation facing widowed and divorced women in North-Central Namibia. In agrarian economies arable land is the most important form of property and productive resource, and access to land defines the political and social status of a member of society. The crucial question is on what principles the rights to land are based. One of the most far-reaching changes in African customary land use systems in the long-term has been the transformation in the

direction of western-styled private property regimes. In traditional societies access to land was defined through family structures, marriage laws, inheritance practices and gender (Lastarria-Cornhiel 1997; see also Rocheleau & Edmunds 1997).

In North-Central Namibia, the area studied in this paper, land use was based on communal ownership, so that the allocation of land, its inheritance and various issues related to land use rights were resolved in consultation with the local kings or headmen and their representatives at the village level. This led to a situation in which no written contracts related to the allocation of land were available, nor any statistical data dealing with land use rights. Access to land was an issue that invoked questions among the early European travellers, traders, missionaries and ethnographers. Since the mid-nineteenth century Europeans visiting or staying in North-Central Namibia wrote about their observations and researchers working in the re-

gion were tackled on the topic. The problem prior to Namibia's independence in 1990 was that it was impossible to find any systematically collected information or studies focusing on women's land use rights in North-Central Namibia.

Access to land became a burning issue in Namibia after independence. Questions of the use of communal lands aroused both great hopes and considerable fears among the local population. The leading political party, SWAPO (the South West Africa People's Organization), had emphasized during the independence campaign the importance of eliminating the injustices in the ownership of land, and soon after independence the Prime Minister summoned a land conference to discuss a solution to this question in a spirit of reconciliation and forgiveness. As expected, the process of deciding upon a land reform was time-consuming and fraught with problems. The first land use act governing communal lands, approved in 2002 after years of discussion, provided for the future privatization of land tenure, in that it lent the force of law to the principle of inheritance of land use rights by relatives of a deceased person (Werner 1997; RoN 2002).

During the preparation of the communal land act several research projects were launched to provide information for the political decision makers. Special reference was paid to the situation in North-Central Namibia, which is the most densely populated part of the country. The first visible problem to be tackled was privatization of the communal land by fencing it in, especially since the legislative uncertainty that followed independence had increased speculation in communal land (Tapscott & Hangula 1994; Hangula 1995; Fuller et al. 1996; Werner 1998). Thereafter research has turned to inheritance and gender issues related to the allocation of land. Studies have been based on oral information collected by various methods, which causes problems when analysing long-term changes in land use rights (see Solomon et al. 1994; Becker & Hinz 1995; LeBeau et al. 2004; Gordon 2005; Hubbard & Caplan 2005). The problem related to all previous research is the lack of valid statistical data.

The objective of this paper is to deepen our understanding of changes in property and land use rights in North-Central Namibia from the 1930s up to the early 1990s, paying special reference to the gender inequality in access to land. When contracting a marriage it has traditionally been the man who has applied for land from the headman

of the ward, who is the representative of the king or headman at the village level. 'Ownership' of the allocated communal land has been understood as a life-long lease that terminated upon the death of the tenant. The dissolution of marriages concerned particularly the women, and their behaviour reflects well the changes in the socio-economic and cultural structures of society. The problem to be considered here is approached by exploring the coping strategies of widowed and divorced persons after the dissolution of their marriage. The crucial question is how they reacted to the ensuing insecurity. One survival strategy was a new marriage, which is approached by analysing remarrying patterns among widowed and divorced persons. The second question is related to mobility. Did the end of the marriage compel the widows and divorced women to move away from their homesteads? These parameters predict well the changes that occurred in the rules of inheritance and land ownership.

Where property rights and gender inequality have traditionally been investigated on the basis of administrative records, survey data or oral information, this paper approaches such problems from a new perspective, through life histories of the Christian population transcribed from parish registers of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia (ELCIN). These rarely used parish registers provide excellent empirical data for analysing demographic and socio-economic changes in local communities (see Siiskonen et al. 2005). Compared with the fragmentary ethnographic information, parish registers give us better possibilities for identifying long-term changes in land use rights. The problem related to parish registers is that they do not directly tell us why someone moved or remarried, but when analysing widows and widowers as a group, for instance, it is possible to find common features in their behaviour. Linking of the parish register data to anthropological, ethnographic, socio-economic and cultural information markedly widens our perspective for approaching land use rights in the case of communal lands.

Data and methods

ELCIN has been an independent church since 1957. It is a mission-type church that has its origins in the work of the Finnish Missionary Society (later the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission) (Buys & Nambala 2003: 162–163). Finnish mis-

sionaries entered North Namibia in 1870, but Christianity spread only with difficulty until the 1910s. Thus where only three parishes, with 827 members, had been established by 1900, the figure had grown to 24,000 by 1930 and to 410,000, divided into 92 independent parishes, by the end of 1990. The proportion of Christians in the population of the colonial administrative region of Ovamboland, where the Finnish missionary work was concentrated, grew from about one per cent in 1900 to about one quarter by 1933, and exceeded the proportion of adherents to the traditional religion by the late 1950s. By the early 1990s about two thirds of Ovamboland's population were members of ELCIN, and with the Catholics and Anglicans also working in the region since the 1920s, about 80–85 per cent of Ovamboland's total population is now Christian (Notkola & Siiskonen 2000: 26–30, 59–67).

The five ELCIN parishes selected for the present purpose were Elim, Nakayale, Okahao, Oshigambo and Tshandi, which cover the most densely populated parts of the region quite evenly. The three main selection criteria were: (1) that the parish was old, a so-called 'mother parish', (2) that it had remained administratively undivided for as long as possible, to avoid 'technical' boundary changes, and (3) that the parish registers were in a sufficiently good physical condition and had been kept systematically. The most populous of the Ovambo communities, Uukwanyama, was excluded from the analysis due to inadequate entries in the parish records. Uukwanyama's oldest parish, Engela, is located near the Angolan border and many of its parishioners were living in the part of the traditional Uukwanyama community that belonged to Portuguese Angola and now to Angola, so that it became impossible in many cases to trace couples in this parish on account of lively unregistered migration traffic over the border. The collection and analysis of the data was based on the family reconstitution method (see Fleury & Henry 1965).

The criterion for selecting a person for examination was marriage. The database consisted of 8125 marriages which had been entered into in the sample parishes between 1925 and 1985 and were then traced until 1992. Altogether 1945 of the marriages concerned came to an end during the period 1925–1992, on account of the death of the husband in 1067 cases, the death of the wife in 450 cases, divorce in 408 cases and for an unknown reason in 20 cases. Some of the instances

had to be excluded from the final analysis on account of deficient information. The numbers of these and the reasons for their exclusion will be mentioned when analysing the parameters related to the ending of a marriage. The main reason for ending the investigation at 1992 is that internal migration increased considerably after Namibia's independence in 1990, reducing the reliability of the data.

The Ovamboland area

The region now known as North-Central Namibia was called Ovamboland during the colonial era, when it was governed in a manner that took advantage of the administrative structures of the historical Ovambo communities. Ovamboland was more restricted in area than present-day North-Central Namibia, which is divided into four regions: Omusati, Oshana, Ohangwena and Oshikoto (Fig. 1), but as we will be concentrating mostly on the time before Namibia's independence, the term Ovamboland describes the region better than the neutral term North-Central Namibia, even though it does imply an 'ethnic label' (see Mendelsohn et al. 2000).

Ovamboland is the most densely populated part of Namibia. According to the 1991 census, approximately 44 per cent (0.618 million) of country's population (1.4 million) were living in the former Ovamboland region, which accounted for less than seven per cent of country's surface area. The population of Ovamboland had increased six-fold between the 1920s and 1990s. Assuming an exponential trend, population growth must have been just over 2 per cent per year during the 1950s and 1960s, reaching 3 per cent during the 1970s and 1980s (Notkola & Siiskonen 2000: 17–18). Due to the economic structure of the Ovambo communities, this will have directly increased the pressure on land. Thus access to land began to regulate marriage among the men, in that those who could not afford to pay for land use rights had to stay with their relatives, even though it was every man's desire to have his own homestead. In order to fulfil this desire, a man needed to work as a migrant labourer outside Ovamboland for several years (Moorsom 1977: 52–87; Gordon 1978: 261–294; McKittrick 1996: 115–129; Miettinen 2005: 35–68).

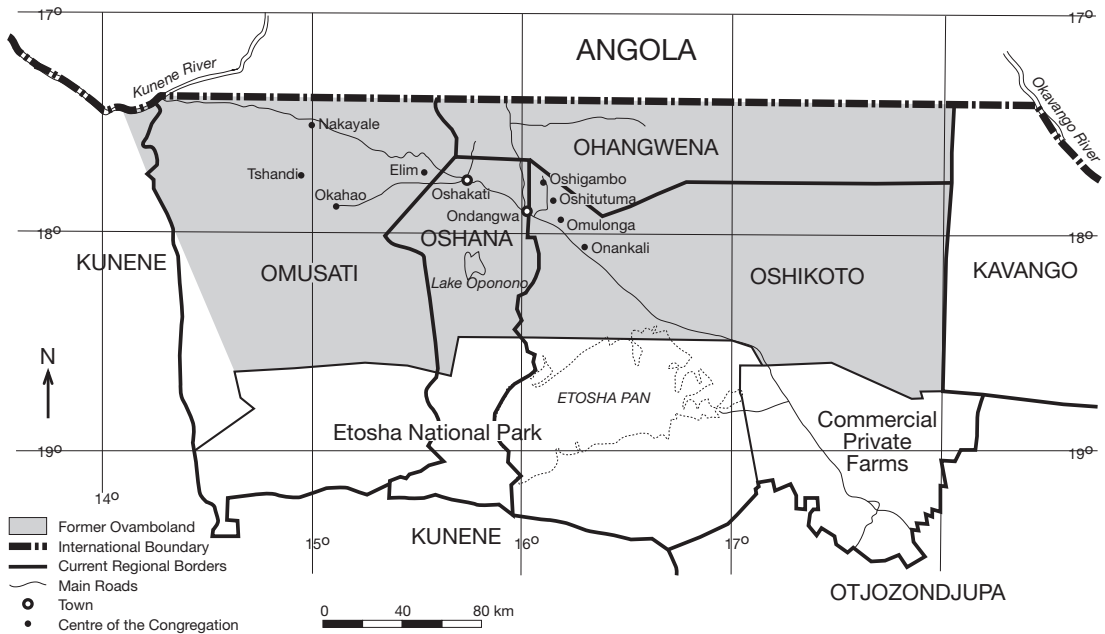


Fig. 1. The area studied and the locations of the sample parishes. Source: Shemeikka et al. 2008: 12.

Remarriage and access to land

In Ovambo communities the husband and wife traditionally belonged to different matrilineages. The ownership and inheritance of property was organized within the matrilineage, which jointly owned certain lineage property, in particular cattle. The individual did not “own” this property in the sense of absolute individual ownership rights. Such assets as clothing, ornaments, household goods and modern commodities such as motor vehicles were regarded as individual property, and in principle both men and women were able to own these. Where the ownership of land is concerned, it was the man who applied for access to land from the representatives of the king or headman at the village level (Becker & Hinz 1995: 64–65). Ownership of land was traditionally regarded as a life-long lease that terminated upon the death of the tenant. This meant that women did not have any legal rights to inherit land. According to Lebert’s recent observations, a young man even today may be provided with land only if he plans to marry (Lebert 2005: 71–92; see also LeBeau et al. 2004: 218–240).

In addition to human suffering, the death of a husband had far-reaching material consequences for the widow and her children. One survival strategy for a widow was a new marriage, the incidence of which can be analysed from the ELCIN church registers. The present analysis of remarriage on the part of widows/widowers is based on two 30-year cohorts (1925–1954 and 1955–1984), the criterion for selection of the cases being the day on which the marriage ended. A total of 1067 marriages ended in the death of the husband between 1925 and 1992, although 227 marriages that ended after 1984 were excluded from the analysis on account of the shortness of the follow-up period. This left 840 marriages in the sample parishes that ended in the death of the husband in 1925–1984. Of these cases, a further 49 were excluded from the final data because of poor follow-up information, so that the final data included 791 widows, of whom 12 per cent (95 cases) remarried during the follow-up period (Table 1). The life of these widows followed continuously until 1992.

Remarrying on the part of a widow was closely connected with age. Thus about 30 per cent of the widows younger than 30 years remarried, and

Table 1. Remarrying of widows by age in the cohorts of marriages ending in 1925–1954 and 1955–1984. Sources: Main Books & History Books. Elim, Nakayale, Okahao, Oshigambo & Tshandi Parish Archives.

Remarrying of widows by age in the dissolution cohort of marriages 1925–1954							
Age of the widow	Time from the dissolution to a new marriage (years)					Total number of widows	Share of remarried %
	<1	1–3	4–7	8–	Total		
0–19	1	1	0	0	2	4	50.00
20–29	7	23	6	3	39	111	35.14
30–39	3	7	0	1	11	65	16.92
40–49	0	0	0	0	0	34	0.00
50–	1	0	0	0	1	22	4.55
Total	12	31	6	4	53	236	22.46

Remarrying of widows by age in the dissolution cohort of marriages 1955–1984							
Age of the widow	Time from the dissolution to a new marriage (years)					Total number of widows	Share of remarried %
	<1	1–3	4–7	8–	Total		
0–19	0	0	0	0	0	1	0.00
20–29	1	12	0	0	13	79	16.46
30–39	3	10	0	0	13	131	9.92
40–49	2	2	0	0	4	150	2.67
50–	0	0	0	0	0	194	0.00
Total	6	24	0	0	30	555	5.41

about 22 per cent of those younger than 40 years. A striking change in the marriage behaviour of widows occurred during the period studied here, however, in that remarriage was notably more common among women who had been widowed before the mid-1950s, 22 per cent of whom remarried, as compared with only 5 per cent of the women widowed between 1955 and 1984. Marriage behaviour also changed noticeably among the young widows (under 30 years old), as about 36 per cent of those widowed before 1955 remarried but only 16 per cent of those widowed in 1955 or after. Remarriage among young widows continued to decrease during the last two decades of the overall period, so that only 2 (9.1%) out of 22 young women widowed between 1975 and 1984 remarried during the follow-up period, which varied in length from 7 to 17 years. Remarriage seems to have been an option to be reckoned with for widows who were at the best fertile age before the 1960s, and 19 per cent of all remarriages occurred within a year of the end of the previous marriage and 77 per cent within three years.

Marriages ending in the death of the wife were less common than those ending in the death of the husband, and the data for 1925–1984 include 450 such cases, only 409 of whom could be included in the final data set, on account of deficient information in some cases (Table 2).

The age structure of the widowers and their behaviour after the ending of their marriage differed markedly from the situation among the widows. One of the greatest differences was the high rate of remarriage, as 44 per cent of the widowers remarried, whereas the corresponding figure among the widows was only 12 per cent. The widowers also remarried sooner, even though they were older than the widows at the time. A radical change also occurred in the remarriage behaviour of the widowers during the follow-up period, in that before the mid-1950s most of those who remarried were between 20 and 40 years of age, but since that time it has been rare for widowers younger than 30 years to remarry. This can be explained by the fact that the age of both females and males at their first marriage was rising throughout the period studied. The mean age at first marriage among

Table 2. Remarrying of widowers by age in the cohorts of marriages ending in 1925–1954 and 1955–1984. Sources: Main Books & History Books. Elim, Nakayale, Okahao, Oshigambo & Tshandi Parish Archives.

Remarrying of widowers by age in the dissolution cohort of marriages 1925–1954							
Age of the widower	Time from the dissolution to a new marriage (years)					Total number of widowers	Share of remarried %
	<1	1–3	4–7	8–	Total		
0–19	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.00
20–29	10	4	1	0	15	32	46.88
30–39	19	12	1	0	32	62	51.61
40–49	14	1	0	0	15	27	55.56
50–	6	1	0	0	7	15	46.67
Total	49	18	2	0	69	136	50.74

Remarrying of widowers by age in the dissolution cohort of marriages 1955–1984							
Age of the widower	Time from the dissolution to a new marriage (years)					Total number of widowers	Share of remarried %
	<1	1–3	4–7	8–	Total		
0–19	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.00
20–29	1	1	0	0	2	11	18.18
30–39	17	20	1	0	38	74	51.35
40–49	22	10	5	4	41	76	53.95
50–	14	10	6	2	32	112	28.57
Total	54	41	12	6	113	273	41.39

men rose from 25 years in the 1925–1935 marriage cohort to 30 years in the 1976–1985 marriage cohort, the corresponding figures among the women being 20 years and 25.3 years. The remarrying of widowers also decreased slightly during the last decades (Notkola & Siiskonen 2000: 75–77).

Migration – a signal of insecurity?

Migration in the Ovambo communities was concentrated around the date of marriage. About 31 per cent of the registered moves of females and about 20 per cent of those of males occurred between one year before and one year after the date of marriage. It is also noticeable that the rate of migration decreased from the 1950s onwards (Notkola & Siiskonen 2000: 131–140). One objective of the analysis of migration on the part of widows is to find out whether the death of the husband affected their mobility. Widowers were excluded from this analysis because they very sel-

dom moved if they had once succeeded in gaining access to land.

Migration was similarly analysed in two cohorts defined by the ending of the marriages, the first including marriages which ended in the death of the husband between 1925 and 1944 and the second in 1945 to 1964 (Table 3). To increase the comparability between the cohorts, marriages that ended after 1964 were excluded from the migration analysis, for two reasons. First, a possible third cohort, of marriages that ended in 1965–1984, would still have included numerous potential migrants, and second, and more importantly, new parishes were established in Ovamboland from the 1960s onwards by splitting the old ‘mother parishes’. The problem from the point of view of migration analysis is that parishioners living in the area of a newly established parish were registered as migrants in the parish registers, even though they did not migrate anywhere. When considering Table 3 it should be remembered that this, too, may include some ‘technical moves’ in the category of moves oc-

Table 3. Migration of widows in 1925–1964. The dissolution cohorts of marriages 1925–1944, 1945–1964. Sources: Main Books & History Books. Elim, Nakayale, Okahao, Oshigambo & Tshandi Parish Archives.

Time elapsed between the dissolution of a marriage and a move	Moves of widows in the dissolution cohorts of marriages					
	1925–1944		1945–1964		Total	
	Moves	%	Moves	%	Moves	%
0–3	19	35.85	30	19.74	49	23.9
4–7	5	9.43	26	17.1	31	15.12
8–10	4	7.55	10	6.58	14	6.83
11–	25	47.17	86	56.58	111	54.15
Total	53	100	152	100	205	100
Widows who did not move	47		158		205	
Total number of dissolved marriages	100		310		410	

curing 11 years or more after the death of the husband.

The final data for the migration analysis are based on information on the behaviour of 410 widows. The shortest distance for a move to be recorded in the register of migrants is between parishes, for although in real life a high proportion of all moves take place within the same parish, there are unfortunately no written sources available to allow us to investigate the extent of this migration. The areas of the parishes also vary greatly, which complicates the migration analysis and detracts from its precision and reliability. Despite these weaknesses, parish registers form the only continuous series of empirical data that permit longitudinal analysis of mobility within the population.

The migration data reveal the insecurity felt by widows after the death of their husbands, in that a half of them subsequently moved, although this figure does not describe the situation in the best possible way because it includes moves which occurred after an interval of up to 11 years and probably also includes many 'technical moves' because of the splitting of parishes. If we concentrate on moves which occurred within ten years of the death of the woman's husband, a marked change in the migration behaviour of widows can be recognised during the period studied here. Almost 19 per cent of the widows whose husband died before 1945 moved within three years, whereas the corresponding figure in the 1945–1964 cohort was 10 per cent. How the decrease in the migration rate of widows is related to societal and cultural changes will be discussed next.

Discussion

Life in rural areas was, and still is, closely bound up with land, which means that the most crucial issues that needed to be solved from the point of view of a widow or divorced woman were related to access to land and the inheritance of movable property. At the beginning of the twentieth century Finnish missionaries were drawing attention to the insecure situation of women if their marriages ended, whether through widowhood or divorce, and they reported cases of the banishment of widows from their homesteads soon after their husband's death. Following the expansion of missionary work and the growth in the number of Christians, it became easier for the missionaries to observe the problem.

The missionaries' concern over the insecure position of widows in the early twentieth century was justified. The parish registers suggest that remarriage was a real solution for many widows and divorced women in the 1930s and 1940s if they were at the best childbearing age. A dramatic decrease in their remarriage rate occurred from the mid-1950s onwards, however, marking a radical change in their marriage behaviour that provokes several questions, since it does not support the common belief that such people aim to remarry quickly. Solomon et al. (1994: 43) drew attention to the same issue and proposed that further research should be conducted on this topic.

The low remarriage rate among widows and divorced women since the 1950s is approached in

this article from three perspectives. 1) Is there a systematic error in recording remarriages in the parish registers? 2) Was remarriage a viable solution for widows? 3) How were remarriages related to changes in property rights and land use practices in Ovambo communities?

The registering of a new marriage might have become a problem, especially for a divorced woman, if the local pastor refused for some reason to solemnize it. Evidence of behaviour of this kind can be found in the minutes and correspondence of the Finnish missionaries (see FELM 1957). It is also probable that some women were married by a magistrate instead of in church and that their new marriage was not recorded in the parish registers. Cohabitation without marriage also seems to have been a solution for both sexes, an assumption supported by the results of the 1991 census. About 10.6 per cent of males (15 years and above) in the former Ovamboland and 11.1 per cent of females were living in an informal relationship, figures which correspond well to the nation-wide average for cohabitation without marriage (12.1%) (RoN 1994: 266–271).

Under-registration of remarriages only partly explains the behaviour of widows and divorced women, as there is also a 'natural explanation'. The mean age at first marriage among both Christian men and women in Ovamboland was exceptionally high in the African context throughout the period studied here. The mean age of women at their first marriage rose steadily from 20 years in the 1925–1935 marriage cohort to 25.3 years in the 1976–1985 cohort. At the same time the age of men at their first marriage rose from 25 years to 30 years (Notkola & Siiskonen 2000: 75). The high age of women at their first marriage restricted their possibilities for remarrying in the monogamous system, as women who were older than 30 years were not desirable partners for men planning their first marriage. Due to the noticeable age difference between men and women at first marriage, there were twice as many widows as widowers in the population monitored here, and this inevitably detracted from the possibilities of remarrying.

Furthermore, the parish registers suggest that remarriage was not the most desirable solution for middle-aged or older women who already had children from their first marriage. It is also worth emphasizing the occurrence of a noticeable change in the behaviour of widows during the second half of the twentieth century. Since the late 1950s remarriage does not seem to have been the

most agreeable solution even for young widows (under 30 years old). The 1991 census also supports this claim (RoN 1994: 266–271).

The traditional rules of inheritance and the expansion of the migrant labour system caused increased insecurity among Ovambo widows and divorced women, so that when dissatisfaction with the traditional inheritance rules was transformed into concrete action among the Christian population in the late 1940s, the Ovambo church ministers' meeting decided in 1947 to send a delegation to the Native Commissioner of Ovamboland, Mr Eedes, to ask for an adjustment to the South West African civil marriage law which would enable community of property in marriage in Ovamboland. Their appeal was recognised in 1954, when the marriage legislation was revised (Mietinen 2005: 294–297; see also Tuupainen 1970: 118–126; Becker & Hinz 1995: 29–30).

Nevertheless, the principle of community of property or the making of a will between spouses has not solved the crucial problems related to inheritance, because both have concerned only movable property, not access to land. The most important issue in the survival strategy of a widow was her relation to the land acquired by her deceased husband. Traditionally the husband's relatives decided whether the widow could stay on the land or not (Hubbard & Caplan 2005: 77–82). Since the 1960s there have been some sporadic observations of changes in the system of allocating land. Bruwer (1961: 40–41) found cases in Uukwanyama around 1960 in which a widow had a homestead of her own where she lived with her children (cf. Kreike 1995: 11), and the recently published report by Hubbard and Caplan (2005) presents some corresponding examples from other Ovambo communities. The Uukwambi headmen, for instance, modified the inheritance law in 1960 so that "widows and children were not to be expelled from the deceased's homestead, but were to inherit the kraal and lands. If the widow was young and married another man she had to hand over the homestead and lands to the senior headman, who could then sell them." An insurmountable constraint on continuing to live on the same land for many widows was the new payment for the right to use the land insisted upon by the local headmen (Hubbard & Caplan 2005: 84–85, 94–95; Lebert 2005: 73–74). Despite of the fact that expulsions of widows have still been common from the land acquired by their deceased husbands, the migration data support the conclusion that the position

of the widow has been improving little by little since the 1960s. Becker (1993: 107) reports that around 1990 land was allocated to women only if they were widows, and a divorced woman could gain access to land only in special circumstances.

A radical improvement in the situation of widows occurred in 1993, when the Ndonga King's Council guaranteed the right of a widow to remain on her deceased husband's land without further payment (Becker & Hinz 1995: 67). The demographic and health survey of 1992 supported the demand for a change in the system of allocating land in North-Central Namibia and claimed that more than one third of the 1809 households interviewed there were headed by women (Katjuijanjo et al. 1993: 9, 150–151).

It is very plausible that the increasing unwillingness of widows to remarry may have some connections with the changes in the inheritance system. The parish registers suggest that instead of remarrying, many widows have preferred to continue living on the farm of their deceased husband either as single parents, if possible, or with one of their sons, to whom the land might have been allocated. Another option taken up by widows if they have been forced to leave their homestead has been to return to their matrilineal relatives. If their children already had homesteads of their own, the widows have sometimes gone to live with one of their sons. Furthermore, children of widows have been a sought-after labour force to be taken in as foster children by the widows' matrilineal relatives. A new marriage has seldom been the best possible solution for a widow if she has passed the age of 30 years (cf. Bruwer 1961: 40–41; McKittrick 1995: 254; Kreike 1996: 267–269; Hubbard & Caplan 2005: 81–97).

The end of a marriage usually affected the life of a widower in a different way from that of a widow, as it did not normally jeopardize his rights to stay on his land. However, if he was incapable of effectively tilling the land it could revert back to the headmen for re-allocation. A man's capability for cultivating his fields was based on the labour provided by his wife and children, i.e. the women's work formed the backbone of the Ovambo economy. The parish register data support the claim of Kreike (1996: 257–267) regarding the importance of the wife and her children as a labour force for the man, since the widowers and divorced men in the sample parishes clearly made an active effort to remarry. This was not restricted to young men,

but older men also tried to find a new wife quickly (see also Lebert 2005: 71–92). The loss of the wife's labour input upon her death caused problems especially for migrant labourers, but there are also several examples where a wife divorced her husband during the latter's migrant labour contract period and moved with her children to the farm of her new partner (McKittrick 1995: 246).

Conclusions

Parish registers provide an excellent source not only for investigating long-term changes in population development but also for analysing societal and cultural changes. In this study parish registers were used for exploring changes in land ownership in the former Ovamboland in North-Central Namibia, and particularly the socio-economic position of widows after the dissolution of their marriage. The use of research results based on oral information and survey data in combination with life histories gathered from parish registers can open up new possibilities for understanding changes in land ownership in North-Central Namibia.

The contracting of a marriage was considered important for both females and males, although the ages of brides and bridegrooms at their first marriage rose steadily. The negative or indifferent attitudes towards the contracting of a marriage that have been presented recently are reflections of growing pressure against the Christian and traditional institutions of marriage, which have been closely linked to economic and power relations within the Ovambo communities.

The parish registers suggest that a return to the oppressed position of a married woman does not attract widows or divorced women who have children from their first marriage, and the minor improvements in the position of widows with regard to land use rights seem to have further reduced their interest in remarrying. Today even young widows and divorcees prefer life as single parents or cohabitation without marrying. The parish registers reveal that traces of such a transformation in the institution of marriage reach back as far as the 1950s.

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