

Traditional Authorities in North-Central Namibia:

Seeking to Maintain Legitimate Authority Between two Fields of Land Reform, and Transforming Ideas of Law, Justice, Space, and Accountability

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This dissertation attends to shifting conceptualizations of agency for Traditional Authorities in the process of Namibian land reform. Particular focus is given to the nuanced effects of Communal Land Reform as it in part reinforces (through formalisation), and in parts weakens (through prohibition) basic pillars of Traditional Authority. I conceptualize land governance as a game, which is shaped by a number of normative transformations, including how discourses of democratisation, decentralisation, and gender equity are drawn into local negotiations on land rights and ultimately on land authority. In this manner, fundamental contradictions are exposed between the logics of power inherent in the traditional authority and in that of the modern state government.

In the process of establishing a democratic Namibian state, land as resource, and land reform as a pillar of reconciliation politics turn into particularly urgent matters of debate. The central questions I attend to are how far the national government is prepared to concede the Traditional Authorities power within their jurisdictions; hence, how it navigates between decentralising and recentralising its own power. The central argument of the study is that the political characterisation of TAs as homogeneous groups of interest obstructs a comprehensive assessment on the current phase of deep normative renegotiations, in which they are partaking as co-negotiators. Being actors, and members of a semi-formalised institution, they are particularly exposed and forced to take position with regards to their appreciation of tradition and of land management.

Amidst this volatile system of rules, individual and institutional agency is hard to anticipate. Whereas some Traditional Authorities manage to turn this insecurity into opportunities, others feel deprived of their power. This thesis illustrates the variety of strategies employed by Village and District Headmen as they confront a challenging environment. The ethnographic analysis identifies, among other things, how narratives such as *Tradition* or *Development* are turned into changeable, yet essential instruments on all levels of discourse and land governance. The functionalisation of these two codes goes so far that they become representatives of two separate currencies of symbolic capital, which are upheld by force of the respective capital holders. Consequently, TAs navigate their position by combining or choosing among those narratives or moral fabrics.

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