

## Gender, Ethnographic Myths & Community-Based Conservation in a Former Namibian 'Homeland'

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### Introduction

This chapter explores gendered aspects of natural resource use and conservation relating to Damara herders in north-west Namibia. The Damara are a Khoespeaking people who currently rely for subsistence on varying combinations of pastoralism, foraging and horticulture as well as alternative means of income-generation within the formal and informal economies. It is argued that a misleading ethnography from the past, combined with a century of imposed patriarchal ideologies associated with colonial administrative and judicial systems, hampers contemporary understanding of resource-use issues among the Damara. These processes, and the perceptions of women they generate, obscure the roles played by women as users and managers of natural resources and inform contemporary initiatives which consolidate male control.

Drawing on field experience and data accumulated over seven years of work with Damara pastoralists in arid north-west Namibia (see Fig. 6.1), this chapter highlights Damara women's experiences of natural resource-use activities: their management decisions, the depth of their ecological knowledge about their local environment, and their enjoyment of enacting this knowledge as an expression of cultural identity. As such, I focus on women's use of aromatic plants for perfume as

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Figure 6.1 Namibia. The shaded area marks the location of the former 'homeland' of Damaraland which loosely corresponds with the study region

an ideal suite of resources on which to link discussion. Considerable technical knowledge is required in the identification and preparation of plant perfumes and the end product is highly-valued with a wide sphere of trade among women throughout the region. The cultural symbolism associated with plant perfumes, and their appreciation as a luxurious source of personal beauty, lends poignancy to this otherwise 'invisible' economic and cultural activity.

Beyond this, it considers how conceptual gender associations with specific natural resources can both foster and create a climate of contemporary environmental policy and intervention which is hostile to women. This is manifest, for example, in a continuing focus on large mammals in the Community-Based Natural Resources Management (CBNRM) programs of southern Africa, which otherwise emphasize the strengthening of community management institutions as a means of promoting both biodiversity conservation and local livelihoods.<sup>1</sup> Viewed from a feminist political ecology perspective (cf. Rocheleau, 1995), CBNRM initiatives in the drylands of Africa disadvantage women by reinforcing conventionally gendered relationships between people and environment in favor of man the hunter or herder, as opposed to woman the gatherer or gardener. Broader

understandings of the natural resources utilized by herding populations, and the deconstruction of 'ethnographic myths' supporting static conceptions of power and productivity in favour of men, are discussed as realistic means of increasing the inclusiveness of CBNRM activities in relation to concepts of both 'community' and 'natural resources'. Further, the identification of gendered associations with environmental resources, as with the use of perfumes, might open up areas where women (at least some women) are better able, through their own agency and interest, to seize the opportunities potentially available to all Namibians in a post-independence context.

### Men & women, large mammals & plants: how inclusive is CBNRM?

As is common throughout the so-called developing world, Namibia's post-independence government, with the aid of relevant NGOs, has embraced a progressive approach to biodiversity conservation which focuses on two main activities: first, the strengthening of local institutions relevant to natural resources management, and second, the development of policy which enables decision-making and benefits relating to wildlife resources to devolve to local 'communities' (Ashley *et al.*, 1994; Ashley and Garland, 1994; Jones, 1995; Turner, 1996; Ashley and LaFranchi, 1997; Ashley *et al.*, 1997; Jones, 1997, 1999a, 1999b, 1999c). In this sense it mirrors a global trend to reassess the contemporary value of common property resource management practices (cf. Turner, 1996:2), and to use 'community-based management' as the basis for socially acceptable and long-term resource conservation and rural development initiatives (see, for example, Bishop *et al.*, 1994:47; Leader-Williams *et al.*, 1995; Wild and Mutebi, 1996; Hartley and Hunter, 1997).

Mirroring drylands elsewhere, CBNRM initiatives in arid north-west Namibia constitute an attempt to ameliorate the contradictions raised by the following stark fact: while animal wildlife, particularly large mammals, has the greatest commercial and international conservation value in terms of biodiversity, it represents heavy costs for indigenous pastoralists utilizing communally managed rangeland. In Namibia, the dichotomy between animal wildlife conservation and human welfare has a strong historical reality. Draconian measures were imposed by the various pre-independence administrations to establish national parks and prevent hunting of wildlife on remaining communal land, while these same animals caused injury to infrastructure and people for which it was difficult to claim compensation. In addition, current complaints levelled at elephants focus explicitly on their effects on the valued subsistence resources represented by other constituents of biodiversity; thus statements by interviewees during the course of this study emphasize that they 'break' important riparian fruit-bearing trees such as *Ficus sycomorus* L. and the naturalized *Prosopis glandulosa* and make people afraid to range far from their homestead to collect resources in this densely wooded habitat (Sullivan, 1995).

Despite this conflict between welfare and wildlife, conservation initiatives involving local people have conventionally focused on large mammals. In north-west Namibia, the impetus to enlist the support of local people for the conservation



process began through the establishment of a network of male 'community game guards' oriented towards protecting threatened large mammal species, particularly the desert-dwelling elephant (*Loxodonta africana*) and the black rhino (*Diceros bicornis bicornis*) (Owen-Smith, 1995:138). The aim was to reverse large-scale losses of internationally valued species in the 1970s and 1980s. The reasons for these losses are many and complex. After being used as something of a private hunting reserve by top officials in the South African government (Reardon, 1986:13), it is likely that in the 1980s the area was exploited as part of regional illegal trafficking in ivory and horn, traced in part to various organs of the South African state (Ellis, 1994; Jones, 1995). At the same time, devastating drought contributed to wildlife losses, both directly and by stimulating local 'poaching' in attempts to counter the erosion of local livelihoods. The situation was exacerbated by a context of regional warfare which created widespread availability of firearms and increased the effectiveness of hunting.

In other words, the ultimate causes of wildlife losses appear largely to have been beyond the control of local people. Nevertheless, among private conservation organizations local people were increasingly constructed as the locus of responsibility for protecting regional wildlife populations. The employment of male community game guards and trackers of animal wildlife remains an emphasis of post-independence CBNRM activities in this area. While viewed by NGOs and donors as the 'primary link' between 'communities' and the formal conservation authority (Durbin *et al.*, 1997:15), their major functions, like game guards on both protected areas and private conservancies, are wildlife monitoring, policing and anti-poaching.

Two simple stories indicate a bias toward men and large mammals in current 'community-based' conservation initiatives in north-west Namibia. First, at the final meeting of a 'socio-ecological' survey of southern Kunene region initiated by the Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET) with the intention of introducing the idea of establishing 'conservancies'<sup>2</sup> to local communities, all the Damara and Herero women who attended were obliged to sit outside the shelter in which the meeting was held. The convenors of the meeting claimed that they were working within the constraints of the (male) traditional leadership. Notwithstanding the extent to which current forms of this traditional leadership are a construction of Namibia's colonial history (discussed below), this is somewhat ironic, given that the whole purpose of the meeting was to try to begin a process of new institution-building, ensuring better representation and the decentralization of decision-making power. Secondly, at the outset of my research into the regional use of natural resources, primarily plants, I was dismayed at comments from MET officials that 'these people don't gather resources for subsistence any more'. Remarks such as this are related to a wider perception in Namibia that 'systems of common property resource management' have broken down due to the exigencies of colonial rule and apartheid administration during the twentieth century (cf. Quan *et al.*, 1994:5). Despite the liberal and well-meaning intentions lodged within this perspective, it has the undesirable potential to undermine the value for conservation and development initiatives of both the range of resources currently used by local people, and the contemporary resilience of culturally-informed knowledge and practice encompassing these resources (see critique in Sullivan, 1999).

Both these anecdotes illustrate ways in which the exclusion of women and the



wider range of natural resources with which women are associated is rationalized and justified by initiators of CBNRM projects. The remainder of this chapter seeks to identify some of the fallacies informing the assumptions on which these rationalizations are built. First, the creation of an ethnographic myth of a 'traditional' male locus of decision-making power is explored. Second, the role of gathered natural resources in local livelihoods and well-being is outlined, incorporating plant perfumes as a gendered resource associated with women. The chapter concludes by emphasizing the ways in which dialogue built on a range of resources other than animal wildlife could promote local representation, specifically by women, in CBNRM initiatives, and thereby increase the success of these projects in terms of both biodiversity conservation and rural development.

### One more ethnographic myth

The reinforcement of a marginal role for women by contemporary conservation initiatives is related to two processes which, during the twentieth century, have influenced perceptions of Namibian culture and land-use practices: first, the construction of an ahistorical 'missionary ethnography' written in the interests of colonial powers and often reflecting the racial and gender prejudices of its authors; and second, the imposition of an apartheid-style administration built on, and reinforcing, ethnographic constructions of Namibian groups as separate, stable and coherent, and acting to further restructure and limit their productive activities.

These processes supported and promoted a rather negative characterization of the Damara, typified by the following description that they are:

the oldest inhabitants of the country, had no fixed abode and lived under primitive conditions, hunting game and being hunted like game by every newcomer into the Territory. They were the outlaws of the country. ... from the earliest times, those who could not hide in the mountains had been subdued and made the slaves of the Namas. (Goldblatt, 1971:11-12)

Recent deconstruction of these ethnographic 'myths' has important implications for perceptions of contemporary, heterogeneous land-use practices by Damara herders and their 'traditional' distribution of power, and thus for policy and intervention built on these perceptions. First, for example, the precolonial observations of early ethnographers, primarily Vedder (1923, 1928, 1938), which were interpreted as gospel by the South African Administration (Lau, 1979), were often based on small and dispersed groups of Damara in retreat from the devastating historical processes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These included the intrusion of European mercantile capital and the consequent distortion of regional voluntary exchange-based relationships, the raiding of livestock by well-armed Oorlam Afrikaner commandos and the rinderpest pandemic of 1897 (Lau, 1987). These economically and culturally impoverished 'bands', however, were treated as representative of the Damara 'tribe' as a whole (see also Kinahan, 1989). As Lau (1979:66) states, Vedder's consequent 'portrayal of the BergDamara as the pariahs of the country leads him to negate their historical experience totally'.

Secondly, the classification of Damara-speaking Namibians as 'culturally hunter-gatherers' who have only acquired livestock in very recent times, in a way which

implies that they have practised an unchanging mode of subsistence little affected by historical events over the last three to four centuries, is flawed.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, it contributes to a misunderstanding of the opportunistic subsistence practices appropriate for survival in a variable and unpredictable environment, and sustains continuing misinterpretations of the dynamic relationships among Namibia's diversity of cultures. Yet such assertions continue to be iterated in research documents informing major environmental programs and policies in Namibia. Kambatuku *et al.* (1995:2), for example, recently stated that 'The Damara people, who were hunter-gatherers, followed the example of Hereros and became cattle and goat farmers.' In a context of overlapping claims to land for grazing between Herero and Damara herders, the potential implications of such statements are profound.

Historical sources, in fact, reveal considerable variation regarding subsistence practices, particularly stock ownership, by Damara. Reports describe groups at one end of the spectrum with apparently no livestock at all, and those with herds of cattle, sheep and goats at the other.<sup>4</sup> Several eighteenth-century observations of Damara describe them as residing in relatively large groups and engaging in a range of subsistence activities including livestock herding and the specialist production of valued commodities for exchange purposes (cf. Lau, 1979). In addition, there is archaeological evidence for livestock-keeping in the central Namib area for at least 2,000 years (Sandelowsky, 1977:222; Sandelowsky *et al.*, 1979; Kinahan, 1983, 1991, 1993; Morris, 1990) which, not least by virtue of the absence of Bantu groups in the region until ca. 1500s (cf. Malan, 1973:83), is attributed to ancestral Khoisan populations.

Given that herding, foraging and hunting are all appropriate subsistence options under variable semi-arid ecological conditions, and that drastic livestock losses may occur periodically in such a dynamic environment, there would seem to be no real reason why these strategies should not be practised in some sort of pastoro-foraging combination (see, for example, Yellen, 1984:59; Bion-Griffen, 1984:115-7). Furthermore, retaining the relevant knowledge, social relations and optimism with regard to successful foraging and hunting of natural resources may not necessarily preclude the possibility of switching to, or incorporating, herding or cultivation, should the opportunity arise. As emphasized in current debate concerning the role of herding in Khoisan populations throughout southern Africa, this is particularly true if pre-colonial societies are perceived as linked within dynamic regional trade networks allowing both accumulation and loss of movable property.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, the commonly held consideration that the Damara were enslaved by Nama and Herero groups and 'forced' to speak the former's language (cf. Fourie, 1926:62; Hahn, 1928:223; Vedder, 1928:39-42; Knappert, 1981:72) is problematic.<sup>6</sup> Lau (1979:30) alternatively maintains that the Damara and Nama originate from the same stock and that it is their historical separation which has led to contemporary physical and language differences between the two.

Finally, it is widely acknowledged that a classificatory approach to African cultures by colonial governments and ethnographers moulded indigenous social demarcations which were fluid and heterogeneous into separate and static tribal groupings which, conceptually at least, were easier to administer. Namibia, where imposed 'ethnic categorisations were raised to judico-political entities' in the interests of separate development and the apartheid state (Fuller, 1993:83; see also Lau, 1979), is no exception to this. For the Damara this colonial differentiation

involved the 'lumping' together of at least eleven independent groups (Fuller, 1993:93), an amalgamation which has since been appropriated as a tribal structure by Damara themselves in a bid to increase their national standing. The previous groupings have an enduring reality, however, influencing choices of area from which to gather resources and underlying variations in names and uses of particular resources (Sullivan, 1998, 1999).

This tendency to perceive and portray the rural African 'other' in terms of homogeneous groupings seems to spill over, however unintentionally, into contemporary 'community-based' approaches to conservation and development. Much can be said to emphasize current local-level heterogeneity and complexity among Damara herders in north-west Namibia (cf. Fuller, 1993; Rohde, 1993, 1997; Sullivan, 1996, 1998). What is stressed here, particularly in relation to women, is that, like the colonial use of the term 'tribe', the term 'community' is opaque and misleading, obscuring social, economic, cultural and gendered differences with respect to natural resources. In this regard, 'gender' also constitutes a monolithic and constructed category encompassing vast differences and diversity. It also appears, however, that gender universally confers 'distinct relations of disadvantage' for women (Jackson, 1997:169), and that these were often maintained and exacerbated by the colonial experience.

For example, with regard to local leadership, a supposedly unchanging 'traditional' system of male hereditary headmen was promoted and subverted by the German and South African administrations as a means of enhancing control over indigenous populations (Gordon, 1991). In north-central Namibia, the augmenting of the power of male traditional leaders in relation to a 'colonial, gender-biased discourse' has been documented as causing a real decline in women's legal status with regard to access to resources (Krieke, 1991:562). This distortion of leadership is exposed by historical records demonstrating that Nama/Damara leadership can incorporate women should they be considered 'appropriately qualified', a state which was not only contingent on lineage (see references to specific women leaders in Fuller, 1993:137).

Again associated with colonialism, the projection of European fantasies of power on to Africans further systematically undermined the experience of women in Namibia coping creatively with the contingencies of repressive policies enacted during the twentieth century. This again supports the observation from elsewhere that '... the colonial frontier ... provided a more accommodating niche for men than women' (Bell, 1993:277). For example, conceiving of 'households' as focused around men in accordance with a patriarchal family model obscures the reality of a depopulation of men in the rural areas, a process which was related to war and livestock raiding at the turn of the century, followed by regressive taxation which, as elsewhere in southern Africa (cf. McIntosh and Friedman, 1989:439), instituted male labour migration to support white-owned commercial ranching and industry (cf. First, 1963; Fuller, 1993:129). Contemporary data for north-west Namibia indicate that approximately a third of 'households' remain female-headed (Central Statistics Office, 1994), and the proportion of women who are *de facto* 'husbandless' may be much higher. As a consequence, many of the day-to-day herding tasks and other decisions regarding productive activities for the sustenance of the household (which usually comprises various relatives and fostered children in the care of



women) are in fact made and carried out by women as household heads and providers of food and income security (see also Soroses *et al.*, 1994:4). Nevertheless, locally elected administrative posts during the twentieth century were restricted to men by the country's colonial and mandated governments, thus silencing the voices of women who were, and are, responsible to a large degree for the economic and productive life of the communal areas.

So, in accordance with the spirit of myth-making in early Namibian ethnography, and as is the norm in the literature regarding pastoral production, a conceptual role for Damara women has been constructed which under-represents their importance as producers and decision-makers and overlooks the significance of areas of production typically associated with women. In recent years there has been a (radical) reassessment of the underlying, frequently androcentric, assumptions and theories regarding sub-Saharan pastoralist production systems. Particular emphasis has now been extended to the role of women as managers and decision-makers regarding the milking of animals and the distribution of this primary subsistence item, the means by which they have ownership over animals and the authority over consumption, production and social and biological reproduction conferred on them as 'heads of houses'.<sup>7</sup> In addition, the assumption of a 'patriarchal organisation of pastoral life that secludes women and assigns them to economically marginal roles' has been identified as one of the fundamental reasons why many dryland development initiatives have failed in sub-Saharan Africa (Jowkar *et al.*, 1991:vii). In particular, a number of sources since the 1980s maintain that undesirable ecological and social change associated with intervention in drylands is related to a focus on men as the main recipients of aid, a lack of utilization of women's knowledge of the local environment, and the reduction of women's access to productive resources.<sup>8</sup> The relationships described here between Damara women and the wider landscape of resources with which they are associated as users and managers, thus relates to an increasing interest in the specific contribution that women's experiences can make to understanding and preventing environmental 'degradation' in drylands (cf. Monimart, 1989; Evers, 1994).

## A female sphere of natural resources

As indicated by the CBNRM activities in north-west Namibia outlined above, and associated with an orthodox understanding of economic and cultural life with reference to men in pastoralist societies, there is a conceptual marginalization of the gathered natural resources, particularly plants, with which women tend to be linked. This is not necessarily to support the view in much 'Women, Environment and Development' (or 'WED') discussion that women have an especially close and inherent affinity with the environment (cf. Dankelman and Davison, 1988; Shiva, 1989; critique of this view in Leach *et al.*, 1995). Nor does it imply that men do not know or value the plant and other natural resources derived from their environment. Male herders are clearly highly skilled in this area, particularly in relation to forage resources, treatments for livestock illnesses and medicines procured by specialist male healers (see, for example, Malan and Owen-Smith, 1974; Fratkin, 1996). On the contrary, it is to suggest that the value of gathered, as opposed to

hunted ('poached'), resources for conservation and development initiatives in these societies is overlooked at least partly because of their conceptualization as constituents of a feminized, and thus relatively inferior or unimportant, domain of the natural world.

Recent monitoring of the household use of these apparently insignificant resources instead indicates that gathered foods are commonly consumed by Damara herders and that a wide range of species are stored for the treatment of common ailments: of 348 household diet-days between February 1995 and July 1996, 36 per cent included the consumption of gathered foods; additionally, a total of 38 different plant medicines used for the treatment of common ailments were recorded as stored by households during this period (Sullivan, 1998:82-93). At an economic level, this small-scale but widespread use of gathered plant and invertebrate resources occurs as part of the normal course of sustaining and caring for the members of a household and as such is carried out predominantly, although not exclusively, by women.

This use of gathered resources in north-west Namibia, however, should not be considered only as a 'needs-based' response to a lack of alternatives. Instead, analysis of the relationship between the use of gathered resources and a number of indicators (cf. Sullivan, 1998:93-101) suggests a positive approach among Damara to the performing of what can be understood as culturally resonant practices. For example, food items are gathered as and when they become available (i.e. usually immediately following rain), rather than as drought or famine foods consumed out of necessity because of a lack of more desirable alternatives. Similarly, wealth (defined here following Sen (1981) as the unique set of 'entitlements' a household has to resources and manifest as the range and amount of non-gathered foods consumed by a household) appears to be a poor predictor of gathered resource-use. This suggests that the consumption of gathered resources cuts across the range of Damara-speaking households in rural north-west Namibia and is an activity practised exclusively by neither the poor with no access to alternatives (the 'poor man's food') nor the wealthy who can command labor and items for exchange in acquiring desirable gathered products. Finally, while there is some evidence to suggest that a greater history of displacement (i.e. due to historical processes associated with the creation of the former Damaraland 'homeland') exacerbates processes of erosion of natural resource-use practices, the extent of current gathered resource-use among families whose claims to land have been repeatedly disrupted during the twentieth century demonstrates a remarkable degree of resilience of these practices. In other words, vernacular knowledge and construction of landscape seems to be sufficiently grounded and implicit in cultural experience to accommodate drastic patterns of political and historical challenges (cf. Boddy, 1989:7).

Such an actor-oriented approach contradicts the general tendency in analyses of household subsistence to frame the use of gathered resources in somewhat negative terms as a 'coping strategy' in the absence of alternatives. Instead, it demonstrates the recursive and resilient nature of these resource-use practices, which appear to retain to varying degrees their cultural legitimacy and meaning, as well as their practical or economic value, even in the face of the extremely disruptive and undermining historical processes experienced by indigenous



Figure 6.2 Damara woman collecting *Thamnosma africana* or #khanab, a perennial herb used in perfume and medicinal preparations, in the calcrete hills north of Sesfontein

Namibians during the twentieth century. Moreover, a noticeable enthusiasm among the emerging Namibian middle-class to reclaim 'traditional knowledge' as a means of reconstructing an ethnic identity, suggests that it is unlikely that culturally-informed resource-use practices will now cease to be relevant in today's modern, post-independence Namibia. Indicative of the latter point are encounters with Damara absentee herders ensconced for the most part in an urban-based formal economy who, when visiting their herds over the weekend, spend time documenting 'traditional' Damara knowledge and engaging in the gathering of 'wild' resources. Like autumnal blackberry picking by the middle classes in England, these are continually revisited not out of economic necessity, but from a positive desire to be connected with a past cultural experience of the landscape perceived to have meaning when set against a modern urban and capitalist society apparently disconnected from its ecological setting.

With regard to natural resource *management* as opposed to use, the gathering of resources appears to be constrained by an unformalized 'logic of practice' (cf. Bourdieu, 1990) deriving from a culturally mediated understanding of local landscape ecology (Sullivan, 1999). Women, for example, will not entirely strip a tree or bush of its fruit and, when collecting seeds from harvester ant nests, will leave enough seed to sustain the ants into the next season. Vedder (1928:50), however, trivializes resource-use practices observed by women by attributing women's customary silence when collecting resources to the need to ward off the 'danger of her becoming a chatterbox'. In fact, this practice is enacted by both women and men as a mark of respect to a person's ancestors who are called on to



assist in the successful collection of resources and to aid safe passage through ancestral land areas. It also has practical value. In the raiding of seeds for food from the caches of harvester ant nests, for example, keeping quiet when approaching the nest is considered to minimize disturbance to the ants (cf. Sullivan, 1999). This has the dual benefit of reducing the incidence of being bitten by the ants when reaching into the nest as well as enhancing the sustainability of this resource-use practice by causing as little disruption to the nests as possible.

Similarly, the non-destructive harvesting of honey from bee-hives by men is infused with rules which enable the hive to survive; despite the aridity of the landscape, a harvester can return to the same hive for honey for a number of years if these practices are followed. Valued 'wild' resources with spatially patchy availability are also understood as property, particularly where they occur in close proximity to a settlement; thus the nutritious seed cache of a harvester ant nest becomes the property of the woman who first harvests from it and as such can be passed on to her daughter. The same principle applies to honey hives harvested by men. While the treatment of patchy resources as essentially private property does not constrain resource collection from patches further afield, ancestral claims to land do play an important role in influencing where people consider they have the *right* to go to collect resources. In this sense, resource-gathering also becomes an affirmation of one's relationship with the land, constituting 'time away from the settlement, time with close kin, time in one's country' (Bell, 1993:52), all of which are at least as important as the economic dimensions of local resource exploitation.

Against this backdrop of ongoing, but to all intents and purposes 'invisible', resource-use practices by both women and men is the collection and use of perfumes or *sâi*,<sup>9</sup> an explicitly gendered resource. *Sâi*, referred to as '*buchu*' in historical sources, is a powder made of various combinations of aromatic plants. Women are associated in all stages of its preparation and use. It is a luxury in an otherwise marginal environment, which imparts female beauty and attractiveness through its use to perfume body, garments and bed-clothes. If men and women can be considered to inhabit something akin to 'parallel worlds', *sâi* is emphatically a constituent of the separate but contiguous realities (cf. Boddy, 1989: 6) which might be gendered as female.

During the course of fieldwork, I recorded nearly 40 species which are currently used by Damara women in the making of *sâi*, or which are recognized as *sâ-hain* or perfume-plants. Appendix Table 6.1 lists a sample of the most important of these; a full list of *sâ-hain* can be found in Sullivan (1998). A high diversity of species are used and recognized by Damara women as ingredients of *sâi*. Particular mixes of these species are preferred, often reflecting local availability but also incorporating species from dispersed areas available via the regional undercurrent of informal trade. For example, Justine Haraës, herder, widow, mother of seven living children, carer of a continuous stream of grandchildren and long-standing inhabitant of a redistributed settler farm in the southern part of former Damaraland, prepares *sâi* made from a complex combination of the following plant parts: the leaves and stems of *Hemizygia floccosa* (*!hai hais*), the bark of *Commiphora virgata* (*soba*), the dry rotten wood or *≠gae* of *Terminalia prunioides* (*≠kheas*) and *Colophospermum mopane* (*tsaurahais*), and the pods and seeds of *C. mopane* and *Zanthoxylum ovatifoliatum* (*!noboheada*). Justine considered the *sâi* which she had purchased from urban traders

in Otjiwarongo, some 200km away, to be of low quality because of the addition of plants not recognized as 'Damara *sâi*', in this case the leaves of *Eucalyptus* sp. (locally known as *calipto*). In addition to the combination of plant aromas constituting a well-blended *sâi*, the fineness of the powder accompanies distinctions between 'good' and 'bad' *sâi*, and the hours of preparation spent on grinding the raw materials into a fine powder thereby accentuate its local and personal value.

As well as being collected and prepared by individual women in the course of daily household and herd management activities, aromatic plant parts and *sâi* mixtures are also obtained via extensive and historic regional patterns of trade. Women of different cultural groups are connected in dynamic informal networks of exchange which incorporate a range of locally produced and valued commodities such as fruit, beads, medicines, caterpillars (*!girus*), corms and bulbs (*ûias*) and alcoholic beverages brewed and distilled by women from *Stipagrostis* spp. grass seeds (*sâun*). Several important aromatic species found to the north of the former Damaraland are obtained through trade with Himba women at northern centres of settlement, where they are exchanged for items such as plaits (*!nora*) of the highly valued local tobacco grown in irrigated gardens by both Damara women and men. Retaining access to these opportunities for informal trade is crucial to women's economic independence and self-determination.

As a cultural substance, *sâi* is deeply associated with femaleness. All aspects of its procurement, preparation and use are conducted and controlled by women and its cosmetic use is underpinned by forceful symbolic significance. Vedder (1928:48) relates how during the seclusion of their first menstruation girls were instructed how to prepare and grind this perfume, and were given their first perfume or 'buchu' container made out of a tortoise shell and kept afterwards attached to their clothing. For each girl 'this powder box was the symbol of her femininity, and buchu the symbol of her feminine potencies, of fertility and giving life' (Schmidt, 1986:334-5). The power of *sâi* is demonstrated by a myth in which a heroine killed by an 'ogre' is revived by her children through placing her heart in the ash of a fire and sprinkling *buchu* over it, a standard theme in the final episode of Nama/Dama 'magic tales' (Schmidt, 1990:310). In addition to this ability to confer strength and revival, *buchu* in some contexts may have calming and taming properties (Vedder, 1923:1, 7). The significant motif is that *sâi* is a substance with power; this power is conferred through its association with the fertility of women, while, at the same time, women enhance what can be considered their life-giving, female power – that which defines them as female – through the use of this substance.

Particularly in the northern settlements of the former Damaraland 'homeland', seclusion and the supportive and symbolic use of *sâi* remain important components of ritual associated with a girl's first menstruation. Moreover, women have the power to exclude men from this and other transitions and activities understood and respected as part of a female sphere of influence and control. In a more prosaic sense, *sâi* is a substance in which women take personal and individual delight, exclaiming 'aah, this will help me to feel beautiful', or 'this *sâi* smells delicious (*îxa*)' when given *sâi* as a gift. The enhancing of a woman's beauty through the use of *sâi* perhaps is also a source of personal aesthetic and sensual pleasure, independent of any outward direction of its use as a means of being attractive to their menfolk. The use of *sâi* today thus combines a culturally legitimated symbol of female power

with an expression of autonomy and independence in terms of both a woman's experience of the wider landscape and her ability to exclude men from areas of life associated with 'woman's magic'.

Of particular interest for the theme of this chapter is the intimate symbolic tension between, on the one hand, women's life-giving power and the enhancement of this through the use of *sâi*, and, on the other, the hunting of animal wildlife by men. Many prohibitions stem from an analogy between women and wildlife, or, more specifically, between women's blood and that of hunted animals. A woman should not engage in any activities which would demonstrate or enhance her own life-strengthening potency, while a man had to use the opposite powers to kill, and thereby spill the blood of, animals in hunting. The grinding and use of *sâi* was thus prohibited when a woman's husband was hunting, due to the opposition understood to exist between the life-giving potency of *sâi* and the ability to kill required by the hunter (Schmidt, 1986:334–5). Reflecting regional cultural links between Khoisan populations, this is similar to the statement by Biesele (1975:281 cited in Schmidt, 1986:341) that, prior to a hunt, a good hunter in Ju/'hoan society was '... fearful of eating or sleeping with his wife lest his poison got cold because she smelt of milk and *sâ'* (see also, Fourie, 1926:56, 58; Marshall, 1976:96–7). The power of menstrual blood (cf. Boddy, 1989: 101), the symbolic connections between menstrual blood and the blood of hunted animals, and the ability of women to enhance the female power associated with menstruation by using ritualized substances such as ochre or body perfume, are widespread in the ethnographic and ethnohistorical record (see Knight, 1991, especially chapters 10–13).

Finally, many of the species used for perfume have additional and multiple uses (cf. Sullivan, 1998). Often aromatic species contain active substances of medicinal value and as such comprise part of the extensive range of health care utilized by women during the course of their lives, particularly in relation to their experience as bearers and carers of children. *Commiphora virgata*, of the genus whose resiniferous wood is famous for the production of myrrh (cf. Miller *et al.*, 1988:82–7, 304–7) is used, for example, for a variety of medicinal purposes throughout the former 'homeland' of Damaraland. A decoction of the leaves, bark and stem is taken for coughs and colds, general strength and good health, restoring maternal health after child-birth, stomach disorders and for heart and chest pain (see also Van den Eynden *et al.*, 1992:67). This species is also host to an edible caterpillar called *nû* (black) *lgirus* (*Usta wallengrenii*, Saturniidae), which is eaten with relish and traded throughout north-west Namibia. The perennial herb *Thamnosma africana* or *khanab* is similarly used as a medicine for common ailments: a decoction from the whole plant is an all-purpose medicine valued throughout former Damaraland and used to treat coughs, colds, chest pain and influenza, to relieve stomach pains, to 'cleanse' the uterus after giving birth, for menstrual problems, to increase the likelihood of conceiving and as a 'multivitamin' drink (see also medicinal uses among the Nama in du Pisani, 1983:12, and the Kuiseb Topnaar in Van den Eynden *et al.*, 1992:50).

This discussion of gathered products indicates that the natural resource base to which Damara herders in north-west Namibia turn is extremely diverse. Its use is guided by a wealth of culturally mediated technical knowledge and constrained by locally understood management practices. Moreover, natural resources are used not only out of necessity, but also to satisfy a desire for variety in available



commodities, an appreciation of resources which are *îxa* (beautiful or delicious), and a positive view of enacting resource-use practices which are considered to have meaning in their affirmation of cultural identity. Both men and women enact these practices, but a conception of the wider resource-base of plants and invertebrates as a feminized domain undermines its relevance in relation to conservation and development processes when contrasted with a 'macho' wildlife of commercially valuable large mammals. Such a conception reinforces the trivialization of women's experiences by an ahistorical and androcentric ethnography and a colonial tendency to cast men as leaders. Despite their obvious roles both as producers and managers with regard to a range of resources used generally within the household, as autonomous and independent decision-makers in relation to plant perfumes as an explicitly gendered resource, and as culture producers and social actors (Boddy, 1989:5), women's potential contribution to contemporary natural resource-based initiatives is thus alienated and underutilized.

## Conclusion

Namibia is in the process of developing and adopting an extremely progressive conservation policy aimed at devolving the ownership of proprietorship over natural resources to communal area dwellers in order to develop both rural livelihoods and sustainable strategies of biodiversity conservation. Existing efforts to promote conservation in north-west Namibia under the rubric of CBNRM, however, retain a focus on animal wildlife, i.e. resources which are extremely contentious, highly politicized and gendered in favor of men. Such efforts have raised people's expectations concerning the flow of financial benefits, and the situation is potentially open to abuse by individuals confident in negotiations with the government and NGO officials associated with animal wildlife conservation in southern Africa. As Ribot (1996:41) similarly observes in relation to the management of West African open woodlands and forests, '... participatory projects and policies tend to devolve a limited set of responsibilities and benefits to commercially interested, non-representative groups and individuals'; moreover, the processes involved '... systematically under-represent or exclude women'. In other words, community-based conservation perhaps perpetuates a dominant culture of men, even though its explicit aim is full community representation and empowerment. It thereby falls short of escaping the situation described decades ago by de Beauvoir (1949[1988]), that public culture is male, with women located in the context of men, and men located in the context of themselves.

I argue in this chapter that a positive effort to refocus CBNRM initiatives, so that they explicitly incorporate the full range of resources used and valued by people, might increase the representativeness of 'community-based' approaches to wildlife conservation by shifting the emphasis of dialogue on to resource-use practices viewed more positively and confidently by a broader spectrum of individuals. This is particularly true for women, who tend to be associated with plant resources, are symbolically antagonistic to men's control over large mammals, and are, not surprisingly, overlooked in discussion regarding the conservation of, and flow of benefits from, animal wildlife.

Although contemporary conservation and development initiatives may not be explicitly interested in supporting apparently ancient resource-use activities such as seed-collecting, honey-harvesting or perfume-procuring, awareness of, and interest in, these types of locally-relevant practices may be the most successful way to match in practice the inclusive rhetoric of the conservation of community-based resources. These activities can provide a foundation for dialogue which 'makes sense' within local contexts and can thereby extend such initiatives to a wider 'community' of people. Not least is the ability of local resource-use practices to provide pertinent metaphors on which to build appropriate intervention. For example, all of the resource-use and management practices described above are informed by a culturally-implicit logic which often mirrors formal ecological concepts such as biodiversity and sustainability, and as such could be built on to foster conservation initiatives anchored in local realities (cf. Sullivan, 1999). Plant perfumes are particularly significant in this context. Given the culturally understood opposition between the male domain of animal wildlife and female power enhanced by the use of *sâi*, contemporary reference to *sâi* in dialogue regarding natural resources conservation could provide a counter-hegemonic discourse to the male-oriented emphasis on devolving consumptive and non-consumptive rights to large mammals. In other words, and following Cecile Jackson (1997: 163), it is '... the symbolic as well as the material resources offered to ... negotiating parties ... that offer opportunities and power', and awareness of these might be better able to engage women's interest and thereby promote their agency.

Similarly problematic are ideas of 'traditional' leadership structures which justify the exclusion of women, a view which enjoys wide circulation among international conservation circles. As a country representative for the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) recently asserted, for example, there is a need to avoid the '... imposition of western political paradigms in inappropriate social contexts - such as the promotion of gender rights' (Gartlan, 1997:2). This view overlooks two important aspects of so-called 'traditional' institutions: first, and as discussed above, traditional leadership has in many cases already been subverted by colonial interests such that the authority of men has been promoted over that of women; and second, a fundamental capacity of customary institutions, embracing all aspects of gender relations, is their dynamism and flexibility in the context of changing historical circumstances (cf. Krieke, 1991:545-6) which, as has been described for the Damara in Ben Fuller's recent ethnography (1993), allows both innovation and the continual appropriation of new elements.

Current emphases on 'community-based' approaches to resource conservation and rural development among pastoralists in dryland Africa do, perhaps, have real potential to foster representation by normally marginalized groups, including women. If they are to be as inclusive as their name suggests, however, they will need to be built on a greater depth of understanding regarding the wide range of extant resource-use and management practices, and the flexible social relations both guiding this use and sustaining exclusion of certain groups and resources from CBNRM discourse. Listening to people talk about wider resource-use practices may be one way of promoting 'community' approaches to resource conservation which are genuinely more inclusive; which involve individuals, including women, who have a wealth of knowledge concerning the local environment but

who are distanced by continuing perceptions of animal wildlife as under the control of a formerly repressive conservation officialdom, and by the selective dialogue which takes place between these officials and politically-vocal, usually male, 'community' members. In this and other domains of power, a contemporary ethnography which recognizes the androcentric constraints of past analyses of pastoralist societies might go some way to opening '... a discursive space in which the silenced may speak' (Bell, 1993: 297-8), thereby assisting in validating and empowering the everyday experiences of women in relation to natural resources.

## Notes

- 1 In southern Africa the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) funds CBNRM programs in Botswana (Natural Resources Management Programme, NRMP), Zimbabwe (Communal Area Management Programme for Indigenous Resources, CAMPFIRE), Zambia (Administrative Management Design, ADMADE), and Namibia (Living In a Finite Environment, LIFE).
- 2 The 'conservancy' concept emerged in Namibia from commercial farmland, where individual farmers who have had legal rights since 1968 to use animal wildlife on their farms for consumption 'realised that it is advantageous to pool their land and financial resources to make available a larger unit on which integrated management practices can be carried out' (Jones, 1995:4; see also Barnes and de Jager, 1995). This concept has been taken up by the MET and developed as a 'conservancy policy' (see MET, 1992). In recent years this has been debated and transformed to increase its relevance for the conservation of natural resources, primarily animal wildlife, by farmers on communal land, and in southern Kunene several conservancies have recently been gazetted by parliament.
- 3 For examples of this view, see Büttner, 1879:288-9; Hoernlé, 1923:22; Köhler, 1959:33, 56; Odendaal Report, 1964:31; Goldblatt, 1971:11-12; Möller, 1974:153; Knappert, 1981:71; Steyn and du Pisani, 1984/1985:37, 48; Schmidt, 1986:329; Shaw, 1993:274.
- 4 See, for example, Barrow in 1797 (n.d.:288); Alexander, 1838:121, 136; Pienaar in Vedder, 1938:38; Galton, 1853:103; Chapman, 1868:216; van Reenen in 1791 and Wikar in Mossop, 1935; McKiernan in Serton, 1954:45; summarised in Lau (1979:81), Wadley (1979:12) and Fuller (1993:85-6).
- 5 For discussion see Marks, 1972:57; Elphick, 1977:30-41; Hausman, 1982; Denbow and Wilmsen, 1983; Schrire, 1980; Alexander, 1984:19-21; Bieseke *et al.*, 1984; Denbow, 1986; Eibl-Eibesfeldt and Wiessner, 1984:viii-ix; Gordon, 1984; Parkington, 1984; Wilmsen, 1989; Morris, 1990; Solway and Lee, 1992.
- 6 See Solway and Lee (1992:191) for a deconstruction of similar historical portrayals of Kweneng San as slaves of the Kgalagadi in the southern Kalahari during the late nineteenth century.
- 7 Some examples include Broch-Due *et al.*, 1981:252-3; Grandin, 1988:1; Dahl, 1981:207; Horowitz, 1981:85; Talle, 1987:64, 1990; Joekes and Pointing, 1991 6, 11-12.
- 8 See, for example, Waters-Bayer, 1985:9, 22; Carney, 1988:34-7, 345-6; Lane and Swift, 1989:4; Monimart, 1989:12; Whitehead, 1990:54, 62; Joekes and Pointing, 1991:5-6.
- 9 All Damara names are written as transcribed by my field assistant, Suro Ganuses; the orthography may not be as detailed as used elsewhere (cf. Olpp, n.d.; Eiseb *et al.*, 1991) but has been recorded as accurately and faithfully as possible.

## Appendix Table 6.1

Species most commonly recognized and used as *sâi* or perfume by Damara women in north-west Namibia, listed in alphabetical order by family. See Sullivan (1998) for a full list of *sâi* plants recorded during fieldwork and from literature references. The variety of names



recorded for several species reflects dialectical differences between Damara and is associated with particular geographic areas of western and central Namibia. Following Eiseb *et al.* (1991: 17) a full-stop is used to demarcate the stem from the male, female and plural markers .b, .s. and n. respectively.

#### ASTERACEAE

*Antiphiona fragrans*

!âusâ, !âuhai.b; doeba!oa.b, doeba-*oa-sâi*

The dried ground leaves are used as a fragrant body powder.

*Geigeria* spp.

Three *Geigeria* species were recorded as *sâi* plants: *G. acaulis* (|homexare; | |habi.s; |game; ≠oa.s), *G. alata* (|game or tarare (i.e. female) |game; ≠oa) and *Geigeria ornativa* (|game or dani (i.e. honey) |game; ≠oa; ≠gakarube). The flowers are used as *sâi*.

*Helichrysum tomentosulum* subsp. *aromaticum*

!uru *sâ.i*, !uru; !urue.b

The dry leaves and stem are used as *sâi*.

#### BURSERACEAE

This is the family of myrrh (*Commiphora myrrha*) and frankincense (*Boswellia* spp.). North-west Namibia has a uniquely high diversity of the genus *Commiphora* (Van der Walt, 1974), many species of which are aromatic. The bark and other plant parts of four main species are utilized as *sâi* by Damara women (this is not exhaustive).

1. *Commiphora glaucescens*

|hû.b/s; |awa- (i.e. 'red') |hû.b; ba-hai.s; the sweet-smelling dried, rotten wood from this and other old trees is called ≠gae or ≠ae.i; the soft (*tsaura*) wood from inside |hû.s is called *mûnu*

2. *Commiphora virgata*

!âna.s/n (recorded throughout former Damaraland); also called *anto.b* and *soba*

3. *Commiphora wildii*

herare; *anto.b*; *tine.b/s*

The aromatic *haira* or gum of *herare* is pound into a powder and added as a *sâi* or perfume to animal fat (≠gîna) or bought lotions such as vaseline.

4. *C. pyracanthoides*

|inî.b/s

≠Gae, i.e. fragrant rotten wood, is procured from this plant.

*Terminalia prunioides*

≠khee(r)a.s; | |gaetahuo; | |gaetab

≠Gae, i.e. fragrant rotten wood, comes from this plant (recorded throughout former Damaraland).

#### CYPERACEAE

*Cyperus* sp.

The bulbs/corms of this plant are called !hare.s or |arebe.s.

The corms are ground into an aromatic powder and are made into beads, necklaces of which are sold. A large root recorded as *ondao* or *!hare.s* is collected from the Kunene River by Herero women and traded in settlements several kilometres to the south.

## EUPHORBIACEAE

*Croton gratissimus* subsp. *gratissimus*

!abubue, labubuse.b, | | game.b

The roots and bark are dried and ground into a powder for use as *sâi*.*Spirostachys africana*

âui.b and âu-hai; âu-i.b

The aromatic wood is made into beads which are often bought from Himba people from Kaokoveld (who call them otupapa; cf. Malan and Owen-Smith, 1974: 156). Pieces of the wood are burned as incense to bring a fragrant smell to the house or under clothes to perfume them. As such, it is known as a |î-sâi.

## FABACEAE

*Acacia erioloba*

| | gana.b/s

≠gae, i.e. fragrant rotten wood, from this tree is rubbed into rashes.

*Caesalpinia rubra*

au-a-uri

The powdered seeds and leaves are used as a 'sâi'.

*Colophospermum mopane*Known throughout the former Damaraland as *tsaurahai.b/s*.Pods and ≠gae from this species are used for *sâi*.

## LAMIACEAE

*Hemizygia floccosa*

| hai-hai.s (grey-plant), ≠hauta≠aebe

The leaves and roots are collected, dried and pound into a powder for use as body perfume.

## RUTACEAE

*Thamnosia africana*

≠(k)hana.b

The powdered plant parts of this species are often mixed with ground pods from *Colophospermum mopane*, Fabaceae. In northern Kunene the roots and flowers are ground into a neck perfume called otjizumba (Malan and Owen-Smith, 1974: 162).*Zanthoxylum ovatifoliolatum*

nokoma, | noboheda, pepahai.s

The dried fruits and seeds are ground into a body perfume, usually gained through trade with Himba from Kaokoveld (see also Malan and Owen-Smith, 1974: 162).

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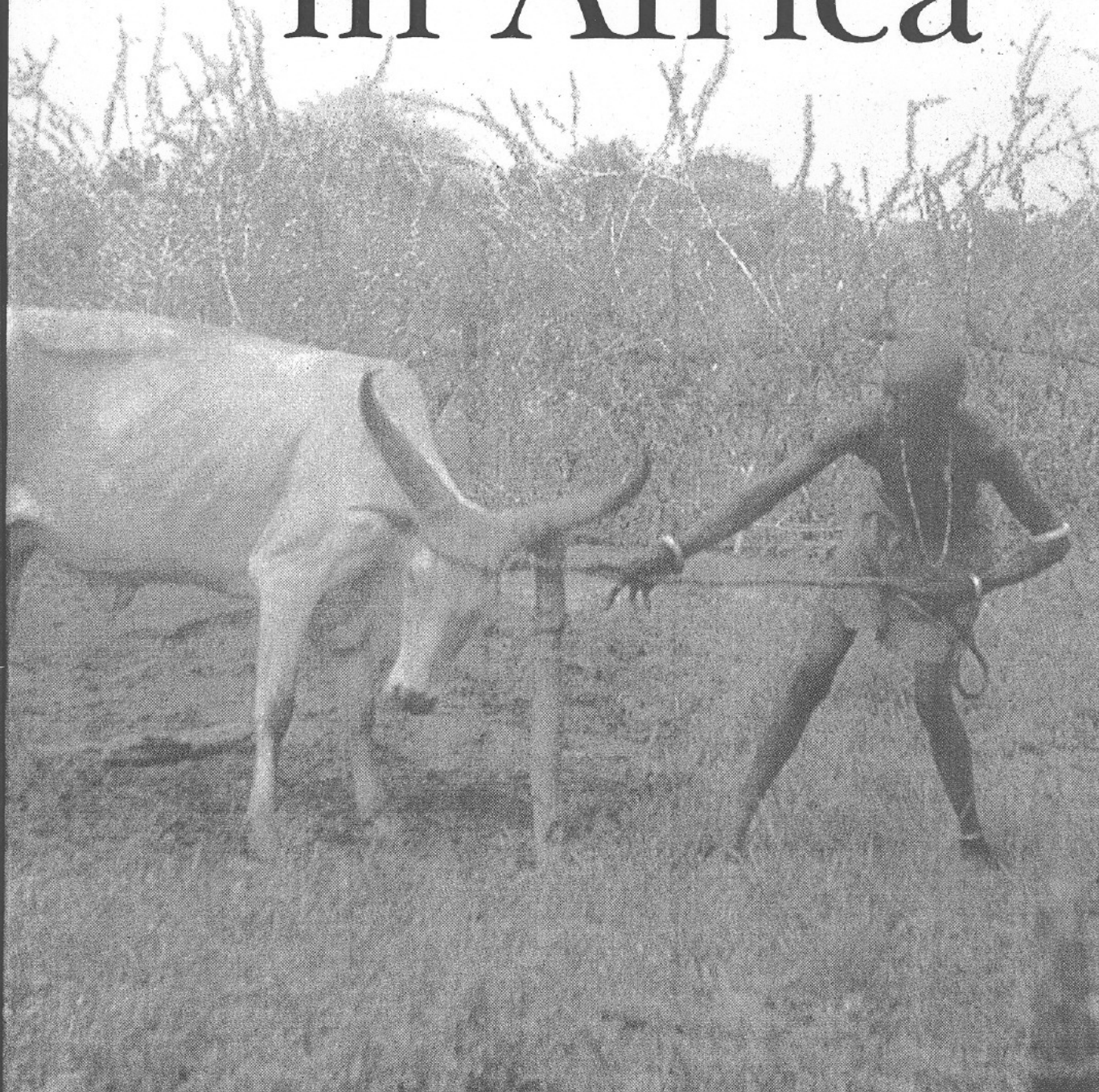
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# Rethinking Pastoralism in Africa



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*Edited by*

DOROTHY L. HODGSON

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