Perception or deception: Vegetation degradation and desertification processes in northwest Namibia

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Several authors have described the Kaokoland (NW Namibia) as a region strongly threatened and affected by degradation and desertification processes. The semi-arid region of Kaokoland shows a history of traditional livestock farming of at least 2000 years. It was assumed that the transition from traditional subsistence farming systems to farming systems more focused on market value has dramatically exacerbated the threat of degradation and desertification in Kaokoland. Periods of drought are thought to accelerate vegetation and soil degradation resulting in desertified landscapes. Based on a sound knowledge of Kaokoland's vegetation types and ecology, the authors report interviews with informants of the Himba People reflecting their perception about desertification processes driving factors. As a common concept the drought period from 1979 – 1981 has caused an irreversible degradation of the vegetation and the soil in the more densely populated and agriculturally more intensely utilised basins. On a large scale the informants´ statements are revisable by comparing pre- and after-drought aerial photographs. They make it obvious that drought driven processes have not resulted in a degradation of whole landscape units as the informants have perceived and reported it. Fig. 1 compares the pre-drought and after-drought situation of the Omungunda basin in central Kaokoland. In contrast to the informants´ perception, in the Omungunda basin the 1979/1981 drought did not result in a lasting degradation of the basin´s sparse savannah vegetation.

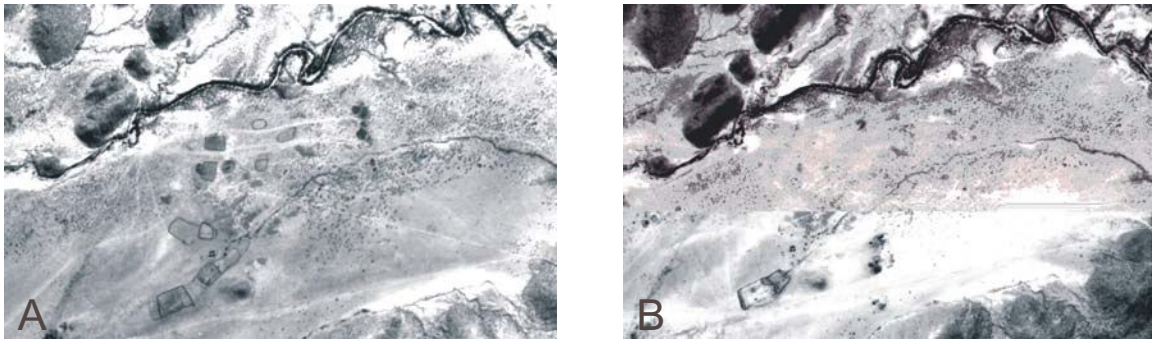

Figure 1: Example of a Kaokoland landscape reportedly having been affected by severe drought driven desertification processes: A. pre-drought situation (1976); B. after-drought situation (1996); source: Aerial photographs supplied by the Surveyor General, Windhoek.

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