

DIFFERENCES IN FRUIT TREE USE AMONG OVAMBO HOUSEHOLDS IN NORTH-CENTRAL NAMIBIA

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Human activities such as tree cutting, over-grazing, and urbanization have led to vegetation changes associated with “desertification” in arid lands. However, in some arid lands, human activities have increased the number of useful trees such as those bearing edible fruit. In north-central Namibia, tree use by Ovambo agro-pastoralists has altered the land cover and created semi-artificial vegetation of indigenous fruit tree species such as palm (*Hyphaene petersiana*) and marula (*Sclerocarya birrea*). However, Ovambo life has recently undergone rapid changes due to factors such as national independence, commercialization of indigenous food, and new employment opportunities. This paper examines the main factors affecting vegetation dynamism in north-central Namibia, with a focus on differences in fruit tree use among Ovambo households.

Until the mid-20th century, use and maintenance of fruit trees in Ovambo communities was regulated by the chief or headman. Fruit trees actually belonged to the chief or headman, and cutting them down without his permission was prohibited. However, this regulation has been undermined by land privatization and new laws introduced after independence. This deregulation has resulted in each household deciding the use of certain fruit trees. Some households now purchase palm fruits or reciprocally use marula fruits. For these households, the value of these trees has declined, and some families have cut their trees for timber and firewood. In contrast, other households sell their fruits to acquire cash and to get palm stalk as building supplies. For these households, the value of fruit trees has increased, leading to more intensive the activities for facilitating tree growth.

This new situation means that instead of a general communitarian regulation of fruit trees, the crucial factor affecting vegetation transition has become the economic decisions of individual households, which have differing economic goals and utilize trees for their own benefits.

Keywords: Difference among households, Ovambo, Namibia, Tree utilization, Vegetation change