

Neotraditional authority contested: the corporatization of tradition and the quest for democracy in the Topnaar Traditional Authority, Namibia

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Community meeting for Topnaars this Saturday. The Topnaar community is invited to attend a very important meeting ... Important issues [sic] such as the development of the Topnaar community would [sic] be discussed at the meeting that is organised by the youth of the Topnaar community. They are also requesting all councillors and the business community that hold ties with the Topnaar community to attend the meeting.¹

This brief announcement in a local newspaper was the starting point for an ‘uprising’ of some of the members of the Topnaar Traditional Authority in the Erongo region of Namibia in 2007. Three ‘young’ (in a relative, emic sense) Topnaar men – one of them my research assistant, who became a friend in the course of my fieldwork – decided to discuss what they perceived as fundamental local problems and they voiced their complaints about the supposed failings of the Topnaar leadership since Namibian independence. One of their main criticisms referred to a lack of democratic practices in the Topnaar Traditional Authority and thus the young men portrayed themselves as being on the ‘quest for local democracy’.

The request cited above to ‘all councillors and the business community that hold ties with the Topnaar community’ sheds light on a currently debated topic in the literature on neotraditional authority: the interdependence of tradition, capital and the state (Comaroff and Comaroff 2018).² Neotraditional leaders have increasingly become gatekeepers between the three spheres and their resilience and rise is related to their function in the neoliberal state: they offer (global) corporations access to resources and workers in a context in which the state takes ‘a “light touch” approach to the economy’ (Cook 2018: 227). The Topnaar Traditional Authority is an interesting and relevant case study with reference to the ‘tradition–capital–state triangle’: after Namibian independence

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¹‘Community meeting for Topnaars this Saturday’, *Namib Times*, 12 October 2007.

²In my understanding, ‘tradition’ is *not* a matter of an objective length of time – that is, how long a community, institution or practice has effectively existed; rather, it ‘constitutes a discourse by which people assert present interests in terms of the past’, as Spear (2003: 6) makes clear. Hence, ‘neotraditionalism’ is a conflictual process of tradition being reinterpreted and reconstructed by rulers and subjects alike to gain power, legitimacy and access to resources. The adjective ‘neotraditional’ refers to the fact that neither in Africa nor elsewhere does a ‘traditional authority’ exist that has not been transformed – and has not transformed itself – under colonial or postcolonial rule.

and in the context of democratization and neoliberalism, the Topnaar *kaptein*³ and a small circle of followers made use of resources provided by the state (due to the ‘traditional’ status of the Topnaar community) for personal enrichment in cooperation with corporate capital. Since the resulting revenue was not shared equally among members of the Topnaar community, these neotraditional-cum-corporate ventures produced serious local conflicts and resistance to the neotraditional leadership.

This article therefore examines two closely related themes: first, the triangle of tradition, capital and the state; and second, resistance to neotraditional leadership and local activism for democracy – the latter theme is central to a broader public and academic debate on the legitimacy of neotraditional authority in a democratic system (see, among others, Baldwin 2016; Krämer 2016; Kyed and Buur 2007; Mamdani 1996; Myers 2008; Ntsebeza 2005; Oomen 2005; Trotha 1996; Williams 2010; Zenker and Hoehne 2018). This debate is essentially about the (normative) question of whether neotraditional authority hinders democracy. Zenker and Hoehne (2018: 13), however, make clear that extensive empirical evidence defies the (far too easy) categorization of neotraditional authority as either despotic or democratic. This assessment also applies to the Topnaar case study discussed in this article. I explore the political mobilization of young community activists and their local conception and practice of democracy in relation to neotraditional authority. Their quest for democracy gained some external momentum through my research project on neotraditional authority: that is, at some point in my fieldwork, I became an ‘activist researcher by chance’.

Two puzzles confronted me during my fieldwork, in its aftermath, and specifically in comparison with my experiences and findings in KwaZulu-Natal (see Krämer 2016). First, why had there been such a forceful critique and contestation of neotraditional leadership in the Topnaar Traditional Authority since at least the late 1990s? And second, why had all attempts to replace the neotraditional leadership failed so far, even though its legitimacy had been seriously questioned? Were the uprising and quest for democracy about challenging neotraditional authority per se, or were they mainly about replacing the incumbents and achieving a more powerful position within the existing system? These are the key questions that this article will address. The main argument presented here is that the contestation of neotraditional authority in Southern Africa partly results from the corporatization of tradition; more often than not, this generates local grievances and stimulates demands for democratic participation. However, the criticism of particular neotraditional leaders is not tantamount to the delegitimization of neotraditional authority per se, and people distinguish between the incumbent and the office, as the case study of the Topnaar Traditional Authority demonstrates.

The article is structured as follows: the first part reviews the relevant literature on the links between tradition, capital and the state in (Southern) Africa. It shows that the contestation of neotraditional authority is often related to what is perceived as the unjust appropriation of collective resources. In the second part, I introduce the Topnaar Traditional Authority and present a brief historical overview of Nama and Topnaar politics. The third part elaborates on the local misappropriation of collective resources and demonstrates that the

³*Kaptein* is the Afrikaans word for ‘chief’.

corporatization of tradition is a double-edged sword: it empowers neotraditional leaders in relation to their subjects, but at the same time it generates conflict over the distribution of revenues. The fourth part examines the consequences of the mismanagement of resources, which resulted in the resistance to neotraditional leadership and the quest for local democracy; since the uprising gained some of its momentum from my research, I also reflect on my role in local conflict. Part five analyses the Topnaar youth uprising. It explains the general ideal of equality at play in this setting and highlights the significance of generational conflict. Finally, the conclusion reflects on the local conception and practice of democracy.

The triangle of tradition, capital and the state

Since the turn of the century, the literature not only on neotraditional-cum-corporate ventures but also on the interdependence of tradition, capital and the state has proliferated (see, for example, Capps 2016; Comaroff and Comaroff 2009; 2018; Cook 2005; 2011; 2018; Cook and Hardin 2013; Rata 2011). This perspective goes beyond analysing the relationship between the state and neotraditional leadership to explore global forces such as the rise of neoliberal capitalism. Kyed and Buur (2007) see a link between the politics of neotraditionalism on the one hand and a global discourse on neoliberalization on the other. Cook (2018: 227) goes so far as to argue that neotraditional leaders are indispensable in managing the neoliberal state because they offer corporations access to labour and resources. Privatization and liberalization remove the absent state even further from local citizens and create a new economic niche for neotraditional actors. Comaroff and Comaroff (2009: 6–8) demonstrate, for example, that the Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa (CONTRALESA) invested more and more in business enterprises after constitutional recognition of ‘traditional authority’ was achieved in 1996, and they argue that CONTRALESA converts financial into cultural capital and vice versa.

The triangle of tradition, capital and the state is particularly relevant in extractive economies. Where the state retreats from economic regulation and jurisdiction and gives free rein to the collaboration between neotraditional leadership and (global) capital, it often results in the ‘autocratic alienation of collective resources’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 2018: 34). That is, neotraditional leaders act as if they were the private owners of these resources. However, we should be careful not to overgeneralize: in other instances, neotraditional leaders use the revenues of private partnerships to finance public institutions and infrastructure or to provide funds for income-generating projects (see Cook 2005 on the Royal Bafokeng Nation). As Comaroff and Comaroff (2018: 31) make clear, neotraditional leaders not only mediate in material terms between the (global) economy and their subjects; they may also establish a moral order that gives at least some meaning to often desperate circumstances.⁴ Therefore, uprisings against irresponsible and asocial neotraditional leaders are often aimed at holding them to

⁴See Cook (2018: 224) on the role played by *Kumkani Zanozuko Sigcau* in the aftermath of the Marikana massacre.

account in moral terms as local citizens seek a fair share in neotraditional-cum-corporate ventures.

Resistance to neotraditional leadership arises from various sources (see Claassens 2014; LiPuma and Koelble 2009; Ntsebeza 2005; Turner 2014), but discontent with the looting of collective resources is widely reported at present.⁵ Coyle (2018) shows that, in contemporary Ghana, it results in local uprisings and some ‘fallen chiefs’ have had to flee their chiefdoms. This does not mean, however, that protesters necessarily aim to dispose of the institution as such: several authors (see Krämer 2009; Nyamnjoh 2015; Oomen 2005; Turner 2014) argue that people in general distinguish between the institution of neotraditional leadership on the one hand and a particular incumbent on the other – and because ‘bad apples’ can be removed from office, local citizens often try to modify or reanimate neotraditional authority rather than to discard it entirely.

The case study of the Topnaar Traditional Authority that is discussed in this article also deals with the misappropriation of collective resources, but it is not about the extractive economy – although there have been attempts in the past to commence uranium mining on Topnaar territory. The value of the resources used in the corporatization of tradition in the Topnaar Traditional Authority is lower: the Namibian state allocated a fishing quota and a tourism concession to the Topnaar in the past thirty years. However, resembling the dynamics of extractive economies, the (perceived) looting of collective resources has nevertheless sparked discontent and stimulated demands for democratic procedures in the distribution of revenues and in the management of community affairs more generally.

The Topnaar Traditional Authority

Before I dig a bit deeper into the economic activities and conflicts at stake, I introduce the local setting and sketch out the political history of the Topnaar Traditional Authority; this includes a brief historical discussion of Nama and Topnaar politics since the late nineteenth century. In brief, the Topnaar have been politically marginalized throughout the past 150 years and their political history is characterized by two recurring phenomena that continue to be relevant: dependence on outsiders and factionalism within.

The current characteristics and problems of the Topnaar Traditional Authority include a lack of control over land, a relatively low population of fewer than 1,000 people, which contributes to the Topnaar’s socio-economic marginalization by the Namibian state, and unremitting internal strife since at least the 1990s. About half of the Topnaar population lives along the Kuiseb River in the Namib-Naukluft National Park, while several hundred others reside in urban Walvis Bay. However, mobility between the rural and the urban is frequent and the social boundaries are fluid. The founding of the national park at the beginning of the

⁵See, for example, ‘Stealing the crust: how the Bakgatla Ba Kgafela were robbed of their inheritance’, *Daily Maverick*, 1 February 2018 <<http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2018-02-01-stealing-the-crust-how-the-baktatla-ba-kgafela-were-robbed-of-their-inheritance/#.Wr9zBMguA1h>>, accessed 6 February 2018. Also see several reports on the Custom Contested website at <<http://www.customcontested.co.za/>>.

twentieth century by the German colonial administration meant the complete loss of Topnaar land rights, and even today the traditional authority lacks control over the rural land on which the Topnaar live; they merely have permission from the Namibian state to settle along the Kuiseb River.

This lack of land rights is certainly part of the reason why the Topnaar are marginalized in the Namibian economy and often live in precarious socio-economic circumstances. Rural Topnaar in the Kuiseb area regard livestock farming (goats, sheep, cattle) as the most important economic activity (Werner 2003: 21–3). However, animal farming is often insufficient for survival and most households depend on income from casual jobs and especially pensions.⁶ The livelihoods of rural Topnaar are thus linked to the urban economy; conversely, the few Topnaar who are relatively wealthy and belong to the urban middle class (such as the *kaptein*) generally invest in livestock farming in the Kuiseb (*ibid.*: 21). However, the latter are an exception: of those Topnaar living in Walvis Bay and with whom I spent most of my time during fieldwork, only a handful were permanently employed and most were on the lookout for casual jobs. The low educational levels among the Topnaar aggravate the general socio-economic crisis. And this crisis is not a new phenomenon: the apparently destitute living conditions of the Topnaar have turned up over and over again in official reports since the late nineteenth century. For example, missionary reports from the early twentieth century sketch a desperate picture of the socio-economic well-being of the Topnaar; Winifred Hoernlé (1925: 12) even argued that they were ‘probably the most miserable of all the remnants of the Nama’.

From the beginning of the nineteenth century, dramatic changes affected the southern part of Namibia when Orlam groups immigrated from the Cape region and started to clash with indigenous Nama communities; the Topnaar were part of the latter. These waves of Orlam immigration continued until about 1860 and ‘brought along three seminal innovations: the *kommando*⁷ organisation itself, a connection with the Cape-based trading network, and firearms’ (Köbller 2006: 19). Orlam groups benefited from access to firearms in violent conflicts with the resident Nama, and, in the mid-nineteenth century, the Topnaar were caught in a clientelist dependence on Orlam groups. From the end of the nineteenth century onwards, the Topnaar had to endure colonial subjugation. In 1878, Topnaar leader Piet Haibeb signed a treaty with the British Empire, transferring Walvis Bay and the lower Kuiseb region to British control. He also sold the remaining Topnaar land along the Kuiseb River to German merchant Adolf Lüderitz for £20 (Widlok 1998: 122).

According to Hoernlé (1925: 15), who travelled to the Kuiseb in 1912–13 and 1922–23, Topnaar leaders such as Haibeb were not rulers but *primus inter pares* (see also Budack 1972: 205). They were heads of the senior lineage and ‘accorded a great deal of respect’, but they had to cooperate with the male heads of the other lineages (Hoernlé 1925: 15). The conduct of politics was, therefore, the prerogative

⁶See also Pauli (2019: 100–1) on similar experiences and strategies in Fransfontein in north-west Namibia.

⁷The *kommando* organization differed markedly from established Nama political structures because it was based on personal loyalties between (charismatic) leaders and followers rather than on kinship relations (Köbller 2006: 19–20).

of older men. Hoernlé highlights that the loyalty to a lineage was strong and factionalism within Nama ‘tribes’ frequent. The limited power of Nama leaders was also evident from their inability to sanction lineages involved in acts of revenge, or to force them to accept compensation (*ibid.*: 16).

The overall situation of the Topnaar and other Nama communities deteriorated in the second half of the twentieth century. The Odendaal Plan of 1964 was implemented as part of apartheid policies in Namibia, when it was held by South Africa under a United Nations mandate. This dealt another blow to Topnaar political autonomy: so-called ‘homelands’ were established by the apartheid administration and a resettlement plan in the early 1970s aimed to remove all Topnaar from the Kuiseb to farms in the Gibeon area. The German colonial administration had already proclaimed a nature reserve along the Kuiseb in 1907; the apartheid administration enlarged the reserve and eventually established the Namib-Naukluft Park in 1979 (Widlok 1998: 116–19). The implementation of the Odendaal Plan affected the Topnaar in another way: Esau Kooitjie became the first officially recognized ‘headman’ – that is, for the first time in Topnaar history (at least as far as we know), power was institutionalized. Before that, local ‘big men’ exercised power sporadically and their positions remained precarious.⁸ ‘Domination’ in the Weberian (Weber 1980 [1921]) meaning of institutionalized power is therefore a relatively recent development, and the imposition of institutionalized leadership remains one source of criticism of the Topnaar leadership because it contradicts the general ideal of equality among the Topnaar (discussed below).

The collaboration of Esau Kooitjie with the apartheid administration turned out to be complex. *Pace* Mamdani’s argument of ‘decentralized despotism’ (1996), Kooitjie’s actions illustrate the ambiguity of neotraditional leadership in Africa. He was a gatekeeper and not a rural despot; he did not signify ‘power that is total and absolute, unchecked and unrestrained’ and he could not rule with a ‘clenched fist’ (*ibid.*: 54). On the one hand, the headman became part and parcel of ‘administrative chieftaincy’ (Krämer 2009; Trotha 1996), but on the other hand, he also defended local interests, led the resistance to Topnaar displacement from the Kuiseb and could enhance his local acceptance. Eventually, Esau Kooitjie succeeded in leading the resistance: the resettlement attempt was discarded and the Topnaar have continued to live in the Kuiseb area until the present (Köbler 2006: 94–6).

Quotas, concessions, conflicts – or ‘the chief is always where the money is’

Seth Madawa Kooitjie⁹ took over his father’s office in the early 1980s and, after independence, he was officially recognized by the Namibian government as

⁸For example, Budack (1972: 246) mentions that Jakobus Argyll Stevenson was allegedly elected as Topnaar leader in 1936, but he was not officially recognized by the South African administration.

⁹While I was revising and finalizing this article, *kaptein* Seth Madawa Kooitjie died in January 2019.

‘traditional leader’ of the Topnaar Traditional Authority. In public speeches, the *kaptein* often referred to his father’s protective role, in part to legitimize his succession as neotraditional leader of the Topnaar:

When the 4 × 4s of the government drove up to the ≠Aoni [Topnaar] at Ossewater and people were told that they must leave this place to go to the south, who was it who stood up for the ≠Aoni and said ‘No, we are not going’? It was this Ouman Esau. Ouman Esau did not leave this place, even when the Nature Conservation people came and burnt down his house at Ossewater ... The same people who had burnt down the house then came to say that they will tear down the school and that they will build a new school at Gibeon in order to force the ≠Aoni to move. But Ouman Esau Kooitjie replied: ‘I will only go on these knees when they are white,’ that is when he is dead. (quoted in Widlok 1998: 119)

Besides being a recognized neotraditional leader, the *kaptein* was an entrepreneur – or, as one of my key informants put it more bluntly, ‘The chief is always where the money is.’¹⁰ The *kaptein* was a board member and shareholder of a fishing company that was founded after a fishing concession had been allocated to the Topnaar in the mid-1990s due to their status as a ‘traditional community’. About ten years later, the Namibian state assigned a tourism concession to the Topnaar and the *kaptein* established a tourism company with four fellow Topnaar in 2007. Both the fishing and tourism concessions were officially intended to contribute to the social and economic development of the Topnaar community as a whole, but the reality was different. Since at least the mid-1990s, the Topnaar Traditional Authority has been affected by recurrent internal strife sparked by the fishing and tourism concessions. The new economic resources and opportunities have had a severe impact on the legitimacy of the *kaptein* and his traditional council: both in private conversations and in public meetings they were accused of plundering the collective resources without redistributing the revenues to the community. Furthermore, the criticism was often made that important decisions (such as the founding of the fishing and tourism companies) were taken within a small circle of followers of the *kaptein* and the majority only became aware of the problematic overlapping of private and collective interests from local newspapers, radio or gossip on the streets. Hence, criticism of the neotraditional leadership can be found in reports and articles on the Topnaar Traditional Authority since the mid-1990s, and they formed a major thread in everyday talk and interviews during my fieldwork.

This is the abridged version of the fishing quota story: a Topnaar employed with the national state administration was able to obtain the fishing quota in about 1994 due to the recognized ‘traditional’ status of the Topnaar. He founded a private fishing company together with the *kaptein* and some other non-Topnaar shareholders, on the basis that 10 per cent of the total dividends should be paid to a Topnaar foundation.¹¹ Almost from the beginning, severe conflicts flared up between the *kaptein* and his close circle of followers on the one hand, and

¹⁰Personal field notes, 24 September 2007.

¹¹For example, dividends of about N\$438,000 (about €37,000) were paid to the Topnaar Community Foundation, which held 10 per cent of Aonin Fishing holdings, in March 2013. See ‘Small communities enjoy dividends from fisheries shares’, *The Namibian*, 8 March 2013

their local critics on the other: it was debated whether a 10 per cent share for the wider community was sufficient in principle and whether the actual dividends were managed in a transparent way by the foundation (which was chaired by the *kaptein*).

The conflicts surrounding the tourism concession had a similar background and trajectory: the national Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET) granted a concession to a Topnaar community trust for 4 × 4 tours in the Namib desert south of Walvis Bay, which seemed to be a very lucrative economic opportunity. During my fieldwork, a struggle over the ownership of the concession got into full swing: the main contenders were the *kaptein* and his long-time opponent. Both had once worked closely together in the leadership of the Topnaar Traditional Authority but their relationship had deteriorated over the course of the fishing quota saga and the opponent had been dismissed as a traditional councillor by the *kaptein*. With the new tourism concession, both demanded to be in control, and both cooperated with different commercial tour operators and tried to get the MET and fellow Topnaar on their side. The MET attempted to resolve the conflicts, but only half-heartedly, and with greater support for the neo-traditional leadership. By contrast, many local Topnaar mistrusted both the *kaptein* and his rival, with varying and fluctuating degrees of intensity.

In general, these conflicts resonate with Hoernlé's (1925) observations on factionalism in Nama political orders in the past, but the divisions in the Topnaar case were not as clear-cut in terms of kinship as those described by Hoernlé. Apart from small, loyal circles of close friends and relatives on each side, support for either of the two local 'big men' was fluid and opportunistic – that is, it depended very much on specific circumstances and economic opportunities. Even so, the factional divide was not only triggered by the democratic transition and newly emerging economic opportunities, but could also be interpreted as a more enduring feature of Nama political organization.¹²

The conflicts over the quota and concession also illustrate that the *kaptein* was forced constantly to reaffirm his authority and power. Since tradition was not sufficient to emphasize his claim to power, due to the very recent establishment of neotraditional leadership among the Topnaar, he positioned himself as an intermediary figure between the state and the local. That is, he tried to play the state off against local citizens and vice versa – a never-ending balancing act that the *kaptein*, however, accomplished successfully until his death. For example, ordinary Topnaar frequently called the *kaptein* the 'chief on the road' in talks and interviews: he travelled a lot between Walvis Bay and the capital, Windhoek, where he met state representatives, fellow neotraditional leaders and other key figures in Namibian politics. The fundamental point of criticism was that the *kaptein* was more concerned with preserving good relations with state officials than with caring for the needs and problems of his subordinates. The *kaptein* was aware of the widespread discontent and accusations but claimed that the state provided far too few resources (financial and administrative) for him to be able to fulfil his obligations as a neotraditional leader in a proper manner.

<<http://www.namibian.com.na/106042/archive-read/Small-communities-enjoy-dividends-from-fisheries>>, accessed 23 September 2017.

¹²See also Köbller (2006) on the internal conflict in Berseba in southern Namibia.

Finally, the debates and conflicts surrounding the fishing quota and tourism concession resonate with an observation made by Comaroff and Comaroff (2009), who argue that the commodification of culture and tradition often empowers neotraditional leaders in relation to their subjects (and also in relation to the state), but at the same time generates grievances and bitter conflict over the distribution of revenues. The corporatization of tradition by means of quotas and concessions is thus a double-edged sword: on the one hand, it ties neotraditional leaders to the state and enables them to benefit not only in financial terms but also by expanding and stabilizing their local power over their subordinates; but, on the other, it also provokes resistance to and delegitimization of neotraditional leadership. However, the distinction between the office and the incumbent is important, and the Topnaar youth uprising illustrates that, rather than eradicating neotraditional authority per se, the main objective of the rebellious youth was to criticize and modify existing power relations.

On the quest for democracy: the Topnaar ‘youth uprising’

In my interpretation, the youth uprising and quest for democracy were a consequence of the conflicts surrounding the fishing quota and tourism concession: the criticism and political mobilization were aimed at the ways in which the neotraditional leadership approached questions of resource distribution, democratic participation and local power relations more generally. What did community activists understand by their quest (or activism) for democracy? What were their objectives, what did they argue, and how did they act?

What is described here as a youth uprising was not the first challenge to the Topnaar neotraditional leadership since the early 1990s. The *kaptein*'s main rival and former traditional councillor (see above) continuously sought to outdo the neotraditional leader in local influence, authority and power. In doing so, he followed a different strategy from the *kaptein*: he saw himself as a ‘community activist’ and was quite successful in making national and international NGOs aware of the difficult socio-economic situation of the Topnaar. He initiated, for example, a *!nara* harvesting project and training programme for local tour guides.¹³ He also built up translocal relationships with global indigenous movements and presented himself as the spokesperson of the Topnaar at international workshops. Another contender who tried to oust the *kaptein* before and during my fieldwork primarily questioned the neotraditional leader's traditional legitimacy and argued that he was the legitimate heir of one of the Topnaar leaders of the late nineteenth century.¹⁴ In contrast to these previous attempts to replace the *kaptein*, the three young men who initiated the youth uprising were considerably

¹³In popularized reports, the *!nara* fruit is often essentialized as the key symbol of the Topnaar economy and identity. On the economic and social importance of the *!nara*, see Henschel *et al.* (2004).

¹⁴‘Topnaars still at odds over chief’, *The Namibian*, 19 December 2007 <<http://www.namibian.com.na/31243/archive-read/Topnaars-still-at-odds-over-chief-MEMBERS-of-the/>>, accessed 24 September 2017.

younger (in their mid-thirties) and they articulated their critique mainly in terms of democratic ideas and practices.

Before I started my fieldwork in March 2007, I had already been aware of the local conflicts and the divisions between the *kaptein* and his main rival through my reading of newspaper articles and reports. Nevertheless, my intention was to find a more or less autonomous stance, to get access to a variety of opposing actors and to understand their different perspectives. But almost from the start it became clear to me that the *kaptein* had far less interest in my research than did those in opposition to him. To make matters worse – at least, this was how I perceived it at the time – the collaborations with my two research assistants (a nephew of the *kaptein* and a relative of his main rival) turned out to be extremely different, in that my personal and working relationship with the latter was very productive and inspiring. Apart from the overall topic of my research itself, personal and pragmatic factors thus contributed to my positioning in the field. For my research assistant and friend, our collaboration also had the positive financial side effect that he was not forced to look for casual jobs for the time of my fieldwork – and he could thus focus on what he referred to as ‘community matters’.

We had endless discussions (often together with my research assistant’s two closest friends) about the problems and conflicts confronting the Topnaar Traditional Authority; my interlocutors were inspired by the public and academic debate on the struggle over neotraditional authority in Southern Africa. The general questions we discussed were whether neotraditional authority could be in alignment with democracy and how democratic control of neotraditional leaders could be achieved. The three young men were fully aware of their democratic rights, but they also attributed a specific meaning to neotraditional authority as an institution, at least with regard to the Topnaar case: ideally, neotraditional authority could establish and preserve a specific form of cultural identity and thus also serve as a kind of protective measure for the Topnaar community, which was otherwise marginalized in relation to the Namibian state.

In August 2007, my research assistant and I conducted a questionnaire to get a better understanding of who identified themselves as belonging to the Topnaar Traditional Authority, and, conversely, for whom a Topnaar identity was insignificant.¹⁵ My uneasy relationship with the *kaptein* deteriorated afterwards, obviously because he and his allies feared that too much attention to and awareness-raising about local problems and conflicts could intensify the persistent criticism and delegitimization of the neotraditional leaders. In early September, the *kaptein*, his nephew and the senior councillor stopped me on the road and told me to end the questionnaire, to follow the ‘rules and regulations’ of the traditional authority, and to inform the *kaptein* about any statements during my research that might cast an unfavourable light on the traditional authority.¹⁶ When I told my research assistant about this strange encounter, he joked about what these rules and regulations could be and told me that the *kaptein* had allegedly

¹⁵A Topnaar identity is often associated with belonging to the Topnaar Traditional Authority by those defining themselves as Topnaar. What is also often mentioned is an attachment to the Kuiseb area, which is perceived as the Topnaar place of origin.

¹⁶Personal field notes, 11 September 2007.

threatened ‘to chase you out of the Kuiseb and even out of Namibia’ in front of other Topnaar the day before.¹⁷ My research assistant and his two closest friends were also upset about my encounter with the neotraditional leaders, and when I asked them what to do in this difficult situation, they urged me to continue with my research and fieldwork. Moreover, they decided to organize a community meeting in October (see the quote at the beginning of this article), which then triggered a series of additional meetings in the weeks that followed.

The young men and I talked about my role in their quest for democracy and I decided to contribute materially and logistically (I paid the rent for the venue and provided transport for participants) but otherwise did not contribute to the discussions: I attended the public meetings as an observer. Nevertheless, the questionnaire and the reaction to it by the neotraditional leadership was one point of discussion at the first community meeting. The twenty-five participants raised several other issues that they perceived as pressing problems: that there was ‘no development’ but widespread favouritism and corruption; that decisions were taken without the involvement of the community and also not communicated by the leadership; and that the neotraditional leaders acted irresponsibly and did not care about the community’s concerns. One of the participants, for example, claimed vehemently: ‘We want a leadership [that] is available 24/7, not a leadership [that] is not there for the community!’ The three young men, in turn, made the participants aware of their democratic rights. They argued that all Topnaar had the right (and also the need) to rise up and question the leadership: ‘We must stand up and say “Enough is enough!”’ One of them claimed that the leadership usually referred to customary law in order to play down any criticism – ‘But remember our customary law is not higher than the government law.’ The young men also declared that the community had the right to be involved in decision making and that only the community itself could solve the existing problems. In sum, they tried to convince the participants that there was a need for change – and that ‘the youth’ had a larger role to play: ‘When will the leaders realize that the young generation are the leaders of tomorrow? When will we get the opportunity to get involved in the leadership?’

The next day, the three young men and I met to reflect on the meeting and its consequences. I felt that I was part of their political mobilization, but at the same time I was wary of being dragged more and more into local conflicts. The request by the *kaptein* that I provide information about his critics had shown me that my independent stance was seriously being called into question or had even already become an illusion. Two alternatives seemed possible to me: either to stop my fieldwork or to continue to observe the resistance to the neotraditional leadership and to retain at least a minimum of analytical distance from it. Since I thought that the three men had a respectable cause (which was, moreover, in alignment with democratic principles), and since I enjoyed their companionship in a private and professional sense, I decided to continue with my field research. For their part, the three young men perceived me as an ally in their political mobilization and argued that the ‘democratic development’ of the Topnaar community was their main objective.¹⁸

¹⁷Personal field notes, 14 September 2007.

¹⁸Personal field notes, 15 October 2007.

The first meeting conducted by the three young men was a provocation that the neotraditional leadership could not ignore. The leaders obviously became nervous and were forced to call a general community meeting at short notice via radio. On the day of that meeting, I arrived early at the home of my research assistant, and when most of his friends had arrived over the course of the morning, I drove them in my minibus to the traditional office in Utuseb at the Kuiseb River. About fifty Topnaar participated in the meeting, most of them between thirty and fifty years old, and slightly more of them men than women. The meeting continued for about seven hours without a formal break; when participants got tired, bored or hungry, they left the meeting for a while and returned later. Neither food nor drinks were offered by the leadership; this was something that several participants complained about. I took a seat in the back row, took photographs occasionally, listened to the discussions and observed the participants. Sometimes I left the room and joined the participants outside to talk about what had been discussed so far.

The meeting began with the obligatory prayer. After this formal beginning, the atmosphere became very intense, with stern criticism of the neotraditional leadership being voiced openly and passionately by male and female, young and old Topnaar alike. Only a few relatives and immediate followers spoke in defence of the neotraditional leaders. The meeting was democratic in the sense that all could participate in the debate. Nevertheless, one of the three young men complained later that the *kaptein* had more opportunities to speak than other community members. Moreover, the agenda had been set by the *kaptein* and his senior councillor in advance and was geared to their interests. For example, the most disputed topics, such as the tourism concession, were raised only in the late afternoon. As in the interviews I had conducted with the *kaptein* before, he often referred to the national Traditional Authorities Act of 2000 and held up a copy of it in his hand, along with other legal documents, when he tried to convince the participants of his arguments. Yet, although the *kaptein* was at the centre of the debate and the senior councillor moderated the discussion, they had to defend themselves and their activities most of the time. 'Respect' was often referred to by the neotraditional leadership, and the senior councillor reprimanded participants when he felt that somebody had 'lost respect'.¹⁹ However, these admonishments did not prevent several community members from criticizing the *kaptein* in a harsh and sometimes very personal manner. At the same time, despite these noisy arguments, the participants also laughed together here and there and sometimes the meeting seemed almost playful.

The topics discussed were similar to those raised at the first meeting: the neotraditional leadership was openly accused of corruption, favouritism and a lack of transparency, accountability and responsibility for community matters. One middle-aged man also criticized the plans of the neotraditional leadership to build a Topnaar cultural centre. When I spoke to him outside the traditional office, he wondered what sense such a centre would make when the neotraditional leadership 'does not care about culture and tradition at all!' The *kaptein* defended himself by saying that it was the right of the neotraditional leadership to take decisions on behalf of the community, and that 'without the community, we

¹⁹See also Hoernlé's (1925: 15) remarks on the importance of showing respect for a Nama leader.

[neotraditional leaders] are dead'. Besides the three young men, a relatively wealthy, elderly woman (who owned considerably more livestock than the average) was the most outspoken critic of the neotraditional leaders. She obviously sympathized with the young men's cause and one of her interventions summarized many of the grievances that were raised:

[T]hese leaders don't care about the community because these leaders will decide on their own and do [things] on their own ... Why you actually even hold this meeting [is because] you heard that there [were] meetings held in Walvis Bay, that is why you decided to have a meeting. Because of these reasons I'm thinking of taking you off as leaders, you as chief and the councillors! So that we put [some new] leaders, who can look after us and lead us [on] the right path and not in a corrupt way. We don't know what the leaders decide, but they say it's always for the community. This stuff you are referring [to] as the community's stuff, is not ours but it's yours.

The *kaptein* was visibly uneasy after this statement and asked whether this was the general opinion. When nobody replied to his question, the elderly woman stood up again and asked vehemently: 'Why are you all quiet now?'

After this brief moment of perplexity, the intense and controversial discussion flared up again and the meeting ended only when it became dark (the traditional office had no electricity); all of a sudden, a last prayer was said and the participants started to leave. On the way to my minibus, one of the three young men was very upset and shouted: 'So you see, there's no democracy here ... this is like Zimbabwe! No decisions were taken by the participants; they were taken before!' There was a passionate atmosphere in my overcrowded minibus on our way back; the participants shouted back and forth as they recalled what had been said (and left out) by the neotraditional leadership and one of the three young men met with general approval when he recapitulated: 'This meeting showed us that we must continue with our struggle!'

Analysing the youth uprising: equality, legitimacy and generational conflict

At the start of the article, I raised two questions with which I was preoccupied throughout my fieldwork: first, why has there been such persistent and forceful criticism of neotraditional leadership in the Topnaar Traditional Authority since at least the late 1990s? And second, why did the youth uprising and other efforts to replace the neotraditional leaders fail, even though the leadership's legitimacy had been seriously questioned?

One of my arguments is that the persistent criticism of neotraditional leadership is at least in part a result of its attempts to corporatize tradition, which generated local grievances and conflict over the distribution of revenue. More precisely, it was less the corporatization as such that was questioned than the profits that had been obtained over the previous twenty-five years and the fact that a few benefited in the name of the many. This contradicts what I consider to be the general ideal of equality among the Topnaar, in political as well as economic and social terms. Klocke-Daffa (2001: 278–9) shows that community members in another Nama traditional authority (Berseba) generally expect the *kaptein* to

share his wealth. Meanness and lack of interest in their well-being are perceived as antisocial and aberrant behaviour. Therefore, increasing power and wealth put more and more pressure on Nama neotraditional leaders. Seen from this angle, the Topnaar 'chief on the road' permanently tried to escape from the demands of his subjects.

With regard to politics, the egalitarian ideal can be attributed to the political history of the Topnaar, in which informal leadership was the rule (see the comment on '*primus inter pares*' in Hoernlé 1925), while domination – that is, the institutionalization of power – is only a very recent phenomenon. The ideal of equality was evident from other empirical observations I made during my fieldwork. For example, when I once asked an informant how a neotraditional leader should act ideally, he replied that 'a chief should serve the people and not rule over the people'.²⁰ This is similar to what had been argued in the first community meeting, when one of the participants demanded that the leadership should be available '24/7' for the people.

Another incident that highlights the ideal of equality occurred at about the same time as the youth uprising. The main rival of the *kaptein* had been successful in obtaining a container of second-hand items (clothes, bicycles, teaching material) from an English school for the Topnaar community. The huge container was placed near the boarding school at Utuseb and the main rival controlled the distribution of items. A few days later I became aware of accusations that the rival kept the most precious things for himself or distributed them selectively to his close followers, and soon trouble was brewing between him and the neotraditional leadership. Some weeks later, two young Topnaar men broke into the container and were later arrested by the police. When I talked with the traditional secretary (a nephew of the *kaptein*) about the burglary, he argued that the young men were not to blame but rather the main rival was, because 'they just tried to get what is theirs'.²¹ The argument of the traditional secretary reminds us of the practice of 'demand sharing', which I frequently observed in everyday Topnaar interaction and which Widlok (2013: 21) considers to be the 'prototype' of sharing (see also Ferguson 2015; Klocke-Daffa 2001; Widlok 2017).

In addition to the aspiration to (political) equality, the constrained legitimacy of Topnaar neotraditional leaders is crucial in understanding the continuous criticism and resistance. The power of the *kaptein* rested on two pillars: state recognition and the memory of his father's resistance to forced resettlement in the past. What is striking in comparison to my findings from KwaZulu-Natal is that different forms of 'basic legitimacy' (such as the value of order, organizational capacity and cultural belonging; see Krämer 2016) are very limited resources for the legitimation of power in the Topnaar case. For example, ordinary Topnaar complained over and over again that the neotraditional leadership had failed to improve their economic situation since Namibian independence. And although the *kaptein* portrayed himself as a 'guardian of tradition' in interviews, traditional symbolism played hardly any role in his public appearances within or outside the Topnaar community. However, the *kaptein* was recognized and backed by the Namibian

²⁰Interview with middle-aged man, Walvis Bay, 19 April 2007.

²¹Personal field notes, 24 September 2007.

government and ruling party (SWAPO), and the Topnaar Traditional Authority could thus be characterized as a ‘clientelist chieftaincy’.

Köbller (2006: 256) makes clear that the current ‘treatment of traditional leaders as subaltern government functionaries under close surveillance of the local and central bureaucracy replicates, in an astonishing way, the central features of colonial law and practice’. The relative weakness of Nama traditional leadership in the colonial era and during apartheid thus continues in Namibia’s democracy. Ubink (2008: 22) describes the Namibian government’s policy concerning neotraditional authority as ‘the policy of subordination’, meaning that the Namibian state officially recognizes neotraditional leadership but at the same time makes it subordinate to government institutions.²² That is, in comparison to other African cases such as South Africa (see Ntsebeza 2005; Oomen 2005; Williams 2010) and Ghana (see Berry 1992; 2017), neotraditional leaders in Namibia – and Nama leaders in particular – are considerably more dependent on the national administration and have less influence in local politics. Köbller’s and Ubink’s assessments also apply to the Topnaar Traditional Authority: not unlike the situation in the colonial and apartheid past, Topnaar leaders depend on the state in financial and economic terms (quotas, concessions, remuneration). Furthermore, the Topnaar leadership tends to disregard the general welfare of the community as well as neotraditional legitimation. In other words, from the perspective of the *kaptein* and his close circle of followers, it was more important to be on good terms with the state administration and ruling party than to gain local legitimacy in a neotraditional or socio-economic sense.

This does not mean, however, that neotraditional authority as an institution was entirely delegitimized. It has been widely observed across Southern Africa that people make a distinction between the institution and the incumbent (see, for example, Oomen 2005; Turner 2014). In other words, even if neotraditional leaders are delegitimized, the institution of neotraditional authority is often held in esteem. This holds true for the Topnaar Traditional Authority as well, because even the most vehement critics of the *kaptein* generally attributed a specific meaning to neotraditional authority: due to the marginalized status of the Topnaar in Namibian society and the state, neotraditional authority remained one of only a few means of attracting the attention of the state and (trans)national capital.

The three young men made it clear to me that neotraditional leadership was important and that their uprising was not directed against the institution but against the senior incumbents. That is, besides being a quest for democratic ideas and practices, their struggle was also a generational affair. A historical continuity can be ascertained here with Hoernlé’s observations made about a hundred years ago: the conduct of (political) affairs was – and often still is – the concern of older men (and certainly not only in Nama traditional authorities). But some of the youth had had enough and wanted to be part of the local leadership; they wanted their fair share of political power based on their membership of the Topnaar Traditional Authority. The final statement of the first meeting highlights

²²Friedman (2011: 230), however, argues that Kaokoland’s neotraditional authorities penetrated the state (and vice versa) after independence and that ‘local and national power constellations infuse one another’.

the generational aspect of local resistance to neotraditional leadership: the 'leaders of tomorrow' explicitly stated that they wanted to be part of local decision making.

The generational aspect of the uprising also becomes clear from what happened several months after the two community meetings, and also illustrates why the youth uprising fizzled out in the end. One of the three young men went over to the *kaptein's* side and became his adviser, whereas the other two were disillusioned and lost interest in local politics after a while. As my research assistant wrote to me in an email some years after the youth uprising: 'The Kuiseb is still the same, the K. are still ruling, J. [one of the three young men] is now on the side of the chief. I've stopped participating in Topnaar politics, it's just time wasting and my kids are growing up, now I must prepare for the future of my children.' Therefore, my former statement that the youth uprising 'failed' has to be qualified: if the uprising is mainly perceived as a generational conflict, it was at least 'successful' for one of the participants.

Concluding remarks: the conception and practice of democracy

This article has investigated two closely related themes: the general significance of the triangle of tradition, capital and the state in (Southern) Africa, and local resistance to neotraditional leadership combined with the quest for democracy in particular. I argued that the contestation of neotraditional authority partly results from the corporatization of tradition, which is a double-edged sword: neotraditional leaders expand their local power over their subjects in the short term, but this often produces severe conflict that may result in the delegitimization of these leaders in the long run. However, I also argued that the criticism of particular neotraditional leaders is not synonymous with the delegitimization of neotraditional authority per se: subjects distinguish between the institution and the incumbent. In my interpretation, the incessant criticism of and resistance to the Topnaar leadership result from the widespread perception that the neotraditional-cum-corporate ventures once served the cause of a common good but no longer do so. This, in turn, contradicts the general ideal of equality among the Topnaar.

Finally, while the uprising of the young Topnaar men was very much a localized endeavour, it was inspired by public debate on the legitimacy of neotraditional authority in a democratic order (in addition to my presence and research). In general, democratic decision making rests on one of two principles: majority decision or consensus. The two community meetings discussed here, and others I observed during my fieldwork in the Topnaar Traditional Authority, could be described, however, as 'deliberation without decision making'. The manifold local problems and conflicts were discussed openly and almost endlessly, but no explicit decisions were taken in the end – despite the fact that numerous Topnaar complained passionately about the ways in which the neotraditional leadership usually took decisions ('behind closed doors', 'without informing the community') and called these 'autocratic'. One could argue that the participants of community meetings at least reached a consensus in the sense that dissent faded away over the course of the ceaseless debate. However, an 'explicit consensus' was

usually not identifiable (see Flaig 2013: 46–9 for the distinction between ‘explicit’ and ‘apparent’ consensus) and what eventually followed from the debate remained vague. Majority decisions were also completely lacking in the meetings I observed. Voting (either secret or open) on specific issues such as the ownership of and responsibility for the tourism concession was never demanded by the participants or my interviewees: they simply did not perceive this as a desirable and/or realistic option. Nevertheless, numerous Topnaar repeatedly and vehemently complained about the course and outcome of community meetings afterwards, as I outlined above.

The paradox is, then, that although the meetings were an example of democratic deliberation and were conducted according to *formally democratic principles* (free speech, relative equality in terms of gender and age), the relevant *substantive decisions* (on the fishing quota and tourism concession) were *not democratically legitimized* – neither as a majority decision nor as explicit consensus – but rather they were taken without democratic control by a small circle of actors behind closed doors.

A comparison with the *kgotla* (public assembly) in the (pre-independence) political theory and practice of the Batswana as described by Comaroff and Comaroff (1997) may shed some light on this paradox. In a *kgotla*, the performance and legitimacy (since performance was directly related to acceptance) of a chief were evaluated. The main actors were divided into two factions who either supported the chief or criticized his performance in upholding the ideals of good government. The remaining participants formed a sort of jury and commented on the plausibility of the arguments that were presented. Slowly and gradually, a consensus crystallized from the debate and the authority of the chief was either confirmed or rejected. In sum, the *kgotla* was a place for continuous debate on the authority of the chief and a space for antagonism in which the power of the chief was negotiated.

These two aspects certainly also hold true for the Topnaar community meetings: they represented a rare opportunity to confront the neotraditional leaders face to face, to hold up a mirror to them, and to reproach them for failing to serve a common good. Furthermore, the meetings were performative in the important sense that the participants expressed the dividing lines and the distribution of power within the Topnaar Traditional Authority and publicly (re)staged the debate on the legitimacy of neotraditional authority at large.

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Abstract

This article examines two closely related themes: the triangle of tradition, capital and the state; and resistance to neotraditional leadership and local activism for democracy. I investigate an uprising in the Topnaar Traditional Authority in the Erongo region of Namibia by young community activists who aimed to promote democracy in their community in a context of manifold accusations of self-enrichment and corruption against the neotraditional leadership. The article demonstrates that the corporatization of tradition is a double-edged sword: neotraditional leaders expand their local power towards their subjects in the short term, but it often produces severe conflict that may result in the delegitimization of neotraditional authority in the long run. However, the Topnaar youth uprising and quest for democracy was less about challenging neotraditional authority *per se* and more about replacing the incumbents as well as obtaining a fair share of political power. It resulted from the perception that the neotraditional-cum-corporate ventures no longer served the cause of a common good; this, in turn, contradicted the general ideal of equality among the Topnaar. The corporatization of tradition thus generated local grievances and stimulated demands for democratic participation. Since the uprising gained at least some of its momentum from my research on neotraditional authority, I also reflect on my role.

Résumé

Cet article examine deux thèmes étroitement liés : le triangle tradition-capital-État, et la résistance au leadership néotraditionnel et l'activisme local pour la démocratie. L'auteur examine un soulèvement au sein de l'Autorité traditionnelle Topnaar dans la région d'Erongo en Namibie, conduit par de jeunes activistes communautaires qui visaient à promouvoir la démocratie dans leur communauté dans un contexte de multiples accusations d'enrichissement personnel et de corruption à l'encontre du leadership néotraditionnel. L'article démontre que la corporatisation de la tradition est une arme à double tranchant : les leaders néotraditionnels étendent leur pouvoir local vers leurs sujets à court terme, mais avec pour effet souvent de produire des conflits graves susceptibles d'aboutir à la délégitimation de l'autorité néotraditionnelle à long terme. Cependant, avec le soulèvement des jeunes Topnaar en quête de démocratie, il s'agissait moins de défier l'autorité néotraditionnelle à proprement parler et davantage de remplacer les personnes en exercice et d'obtenir une juste part du pouvoir politique. Il

découlait de la perception que les entreprises à la fois néotraditionnelles et privées ne servaient plus la cause de l'intérêt commun; ceci, à son tour, était contraire à l'idéal général d'égalité chez les Topnaar. La corporatisation de la tradition a donc généré des griefs locaux et encouragé des exigences de participation démocratique. Ces travaux de recherche sur l'autorité néotraditionnelle ayant donné une certaine impulsion à ce soulèvement, l'auteur se penche également sur son propre rôle.