

Threatened pastures

'All the Himba were born here, next to the river. When the cows drink this water they become fat, much more than if they drink any other water. The green grass will always grow, near the river. Beside the river grow tall trees, and vegetables that we eat. This is how the river feeds us. This is the work of the river.'

Headman Hikuminue Kapika

A self-sufficient people

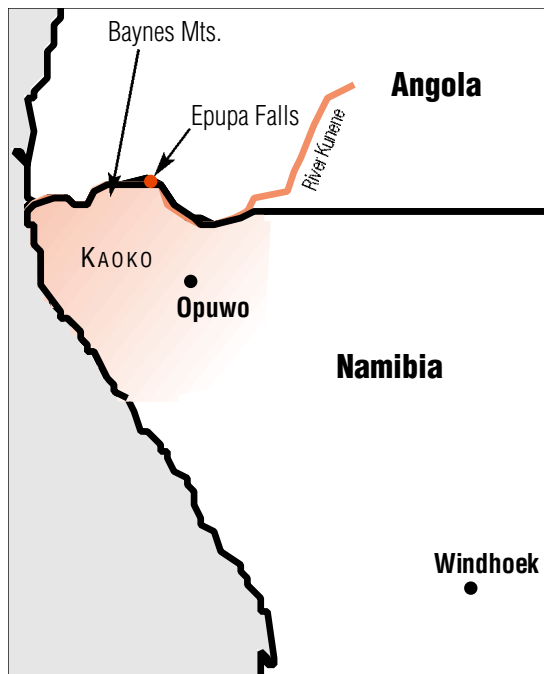
The 15,000 Himba people have their home in the borderlands of Namibia and Angola. The country of the Namibian Himba is Kaoko or Kaokoland, a hot and arid region of 50,000 square kilometres. To the east, rugged mountains fringe the interior plateau falling toward the west to a plain which ends in the Skeleton Coast. The only permanent river is the Kunene, which marks the border between Angola and Namibia; otherwise people rely on seasonal rivers and springs and the pools that form in the rainy season.

The Himba are a pastoral people. They value their herds of cattle above all, while they also keep sheep and goats, and grow some crops. Their skill and dedication as stock breeders and herders has enabled them to remain self-sufficient amidst wars and droughts; they are a strikingly prosperous and healthy people. On the rare occasions that they go hungry, they simply tighten their leather 'hunger' belt to lessen the resulting stomach ache.

Himba culture is flourishing and distinctive. All Himba are linked by a system of clans. Each person belongs to two separate clans; the eanda, which is inherited through the mother, and the oruzo, which is inherited through the father. The two serve different purposes; inheritance of cattle and other movable wealth goes through the mother's line, while dwelling place and religious authority go from father to son. The Himba believe in a creator God, and to pray to him they ask the help of their ancestors' spirits. It is the duty of the male head of the oruzo to pray for the welfare of his clan; he prays beside the okuruwo, or sacred fire. Most important events involve the okuruwo; even the first drink of milk in the morning must be preceded by a ritual around the fire.

The Himba were comparatively little affected by the German colonisation of Southwest Africa, or by the South African rule which succeeded it. (However, chiefs and headmen are an introduction of colonial times - before that, homesteads were self-governing and settled their differences by negotiation between senior men, though women had influence behind the scenes). Government only really began to be imposed on them in the 1960s. In the war between SWAPO and the South African Defence Force they were caught in the middle, and on top of this came the devastating drought of the early 1980s, which killed off almost 90 percent of their herds. When, in 1990, Namibia gained independence





under a SWAPO government, the Himba began to think their troubles were behind them: the war had ended, and their herds had recovered. But new problems were fast approaching, including tourism. Tourists from Europe, Southern Africa and the US have been drawn in increasing numbers to the isolated splendour of the Himbas' homeland. Often they strain local resources and treat people and sacred sites with little respect. One Himba community, living round the settlement of Purros, has responded by setting up its own programme, controlling tourists' access and taking a levy which is distributed among the people.

The dam

A more profound threat is posed by the project of the Namibian and Angolan governments to build a hydroelectric dam on the Kunene river. The river provides essential dry-season grazing and vegetable gardens for a large section of the Himba, and in addition the dam would flood their ancestral burial grounds, which are of great religious significance to them.

A Feasibility Study for the dam has been prepared by NAMANG, a group of consultancy firms from Norway, Sweden, Namibia and Angola, with funds from Sweden and Norway. The Namibian government, however, seems to see the Feasibility Study as a mere formality, rather than a serious evaluation of whether or not the project is practical and in its best interests (there are a number of other possibilities for supplying Namibia's power needs, notably the offshore gas field at Kudu). President Sam Nujoma implied in August 1997 that Namibia will build the dam no matter what the study's findings: *'The Government will not be deterred by the misguided activities of those who want to impede economic development and upliftment of the standards of living of our people'*, Nujoma told government ministers.

The report of the Feasibility Study was published in draft form in September 1997. It proposes two main potential sites for the dam: one immediately above the famous Epupa Falls, and the other in the Baynes Mountains further down the Kunene. The Epupa site would mean flooding a much larger area; 380 square kilometres at the high water level, compared to 57 square kilometres at Baynes. The Epupa site would be less expensive, and preferable on engineering grounds, but would be much more damaging both for the Himba and ecologically. According to the report the Epupa option would flood the land of about 1000 'permanent users' and 5,000 'occasional users', as compared to 100 'permanent users' and 2,000 'occasional users' at Baynes. (This may well be an underestimate). It would mean the loss of 160 ancestral graves - which are of deep importance to the Himba - compared to only 15 graves at Baynes. It would also lead to a higher incidence of malaria and water-borne diseases.

Whichever scheme is adopted, the influx of outside labour if the dam goes ahead would have disastrous effects on the health and social stability of the pastoral Himba. With an estimated 2,000 to 3,000 workers, nearly all coming from outside the region, the result would be a temporary town of anything from 5,000 to 10,000 people, doubling the population of the area. Few, if any, of the local population are likely to gain regular employment, though crime and prostitution will probably follow.

The Feasibility Study Report is being severely criticised on technical and economic grounds. Meanwhile, the component that should have dealt with its social effects has not been completed, because the Himba most directly affected by the dam felt that their opinion was being ignored, and so refused to cooperate further. In addition, field staff who were conducting these portions of the study reported harassment and intimidation by local government officials.

Support for the dam among the Himba comes mainly from a small but vocal group of younger people, estranged from the pastoral economy, and needing employment. The majority of the Himba, however, are vehemently opposed to it. Katjira Muniombara, a Himba Headman, asked, *'Will we live as Himba if we are taken from Epupa?'* Headman Hikuminue Kapika is rather more direct, *'They will have to shoot all the Himba before they build the dam.'*

Background Reading

Jacobsohn, M., Pickford, P. and Pickford B., *Himba, Nomads of Namibia*, New Holland, London and Struik, Cape Town, 1990.
 Bley, H., *South-West Africa under German Rule 1894-1914*, Heinemann, London, 1971.
 Poewe, K., *The Namibian Herero*, Edwin Mellen Press, New York, 1985.
 Malan, J.S., *Peoples of Namibia*, Rhino Publishers, P.O. Box 2252, Wingate Park, Pretoria, 0153, South Africa, 1995.

Threatened pastures® Survival 1998.
 For copies of other background sheets or more information about Survival's work contact:
Survival, 6 Charterhouse Buildings,
 London, EC1M 7ET, United Kingdom.
 Tel: 020 7687 8700, Fax: 020 7687 8701.

Survival is a worldwide organisation supporting tribal peoples. It stands for their right to decide their own future and helps them protect their lives, lands and human rights.

