



# Between worlds

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For 400 years, the nomadic Himba peoples lived in northwestern Namibia, unaffected by the rest of the world. But in recent years, the government and modern civilisation have been causing difficulties for them. There is now a question over how long the Himba have to preserve their way of life

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A woman is riding a brown cow through a rocky, arid landscape. She is surrounded by a herd of other cows. The terrain is dry and hilly, with sparse vegetation and a clear blue sky. A large tree trunk is visible in the foreground on the right side.

Cattle is the most important thing that the Himba own. They believe that, alongside humans, these animals are the only beings with a soul



The old world clashes with the new in the supermarket of Opuwo. Every three or four weeks the Himba women come from their kraal to do their shopping here



The Himba live a traditional lifestyle. Rules, rituals and daily routines have changed little since the tribe immigrated to northern Namibia in the 16th century

**I**T IS STILL DARK when Rituapi approaches her hut and walks over to the fire. She sits with the other women of the village of Epaco, just like every morning, crowded together in silence, their faces lit by the flames. They drink tea made from the leaves of the miracle bush.

A golden beam of light on the horizon heralds the rising sun, and children are already rounding up goats and cattle to lead them to the nearest waterhole – a walk of one and a half hours along dusty paths. They leave early to avoid the scorching midday heat. The men of the village are far away. With the rest of the herd they move onward to greener pastures, just as their parents, grandparents and great-grandparents did.

Cattle is their most important possession. They are as indispensable as Okuruwo, the sacred fire which must never go out, and as their contact with their ancestors with whom they maintain a permanent spiritual dialogue through the sacred flames. Even the children learn the 20 different names for a cow, their plant feed and the locations of permanent and temporary waterholes.

The Himba believe that humans and cattle are the only earthly beings with a soul. They often tell the following fireside story: a long time ago the Himba lived as hunters and gatherers hunting klipspringers, small springboks and antelope. One day, new animals entered their territory. They had no fear of fire like the other animals, and the Himba have worshipped their cattle ever since. To date, they are convinced that their ancestors have sent them these animals. Cows are rarely slaughtered, and only on very special occasions, because the Himba measure their wealth based on the number of cattle they have. Goats, sheep and deer are a primary source of food. →

**Morning ritual in the Himba kraal: shortly before sunrise Rituapi (second from left) and the villagers keep warm by the fire**







The Himba lead a traditional way of life. Rules, rituals and daily routines have hardly changed since the tribe immigrated from what is now Angola to Namibia in the 16th century. Unlike their relatives, the Herero, the Himba avoided Christianisation and any influence by colonialists. Each morning, women mix powder from crushed haematite with butter fat and the leaves of the Omuzumba shrub to a reddish paste which they rub onto their skin and hair for protection against the scorching sun and irritating parasites, and it seems as if time has stood still.

But appearances can be deceptive. In recent years, modern civilisation has slowly but steadily eroded the Himba's way of life and traditions.

Rituapi is 39 years old. When she was a child in the '70s she thought her world would never change. No one cared about the Himba or what they call their country – the Kaokoland, the inhospitable area that is larger than the Netherlands with its dry rivers that only have water once a year, sometimes only every three, five or

even 10 years. The sun beats down on the hilly countryside so mercilessly that the heat makes being outdoors virtually impossible. But at least they were left alone.

In the early '80s, Rituapi was seven or eight when her people survived a long drought during which 90 per cent of their cattle died. It was a terrible disaster for the Himba, but one which their centuries of experience helped them cope.

Rituapi became an adult at the age of fourteen. The reason she remembers this so well is because growing up as a Himba is associated with a painful ritual: using a piece of timber and a rock as a hammer, a tribal surgeon cuts out the teenager's four lower incisors. Then he trims the top two with a file or a rough stone to triangular wedges – all without anaesthesia. The result of the procedure corresponds to the ideal of beauty and serves as a visible differentiation from other tribes.

But the real turning point in her life, as Rituapi now knows, was five years later, when Namibia finally gained its independence in 1990, following years of a tenacious fighting for liberation. Since then, the new rulers in the capital Windhoek have worked toward establishing a modern state

## The government aims to establish a modern state. The Himba simply don't fit in



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based on the Western model of progress. The nomadic Himba with their archaic way of life, simply do not fit in. And so as in the case of most nomadic peoples around the globe, the inevitable happened: the government started doing everything possible to settle the Himba down. Only citizens with a fixed address and ID card can be controlled by the authorities. And only citizens with a permanent residence can make use of hospitals, schools and other benefits of civilisation.

A further point of aggravation was the fact that the rulers – all of the Ovambo people – were not on very good terms with the Himba. This was because many of them had fought on the wrong side in the struggle for independence and because they had worked as trackers for South African occupation forces.

Rituapi has given birth to six children. With each child, she's had a growing feeling that things are going to change. It started when money started to be of importance. Until then, cattle was the only method of payment. The Himba exchanged everything they needed for natural produce. Today nothing works without money. Corn flour can only be bought with cash in the supermarket, a visit to the doctor costs money and the drive into town has to be paid for in Namibian dollars.

Paradoxically, even environmental protection has contributed to the penetration of money into the lives of the Himba. Namibia is the first country in the world to have made conservation a constitutional objective. As a result, stocks of wildlife have increased, which is presenting a major

problem for the Himba: herds of elephants trample their corn fields and dig out their wells, lions – the number of which has increased tenfold in the past decade – eat their cattle, goats and donkeys.

On the other hand, the abundance of game has opened up entirely new sources of income for many Himba: the communities on the outer edges of the Namib desert earn hundreds of thousands of Namibian dollars from the sale of hunting licenses to tourists. The horns of oryx, kudu or springbok are sought after by trophy hunters and the meat of the animals is sold to factories. In Puros, a village in the valley of the Hoarusib predominantly populated by Himba, around half the inhabitants make a living from tourism by working as safari guides or at a lodge. The result is a classic conflict: wildlife provides them with work but poses a constant threat to their livestock.

Apart from tourism, a new source of revenue has opened up for the Himba – in the form of a golden brown, viscous mass. The resin of the tree Omumbiri, from which they used to create perfumes for their own use, has now emerged as a desirable export product: it forms an excellent basis for cosmetics. The substance is now sold for to Europe (see page 56: “*The new source of income*”).

The dramatic changes across Africa of the past 20 years are hardly noticeable in Rituapi's kraal. The Himba follow their traditions as if nothing has happened. And those of Rituapi's age see no reason to change anything. “I do not need much,” she says. “This is the life I want to live.”

But with their children, things are different. Her four-year-old daughter Kasuko in particular has been noticeably affected by the new times. She has always been reluctant to dress in the traditional Himba way, with loincloths made of goat leather and thick tyres made of iron, brass, and copper on wrists and ankles.

Rituapi thought it would be good to introduce her family to the modern era. She chose a strategy now pursued by many Himba: some children are raised in the kraal in a traditional manner, →

**1 Every day, children round up the kraal's goats and cattle to lead them to the waterhole**

**2 Rituapi with her daughter Kasuko at the home of the surrogate mother in Opuwo**



Africa  
Namibia  
Kaokoland



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**1 Hikuminue Kapika, chief of all Himba people**

**2 A modest life: The chief with his family in Omuramba**

**3 At the age of 14, the lower incisors are knocked out. Only then is the child considered an adult**

while others are sent off to get accustomed to urban living. So six months ago, Kasuko was brought to Rituapi's friend in Opuwo, the county's largest town.

We accompany Rituapi to the city on a sweltering day. The path leads over 100km of gravel slopes, which is nothing compared to the cultural differences we encounter: the demarcation line between the old and new way of living goes right through Opuwo.

In a suburb of the town, the pick-up truck stops in front of a house. It has four brick walls, glass windows and a rain-proof roof made of corrugated iron. In the front garden, laundry is blowing in the wind. The house has a water tap, a stove and a refrigerator. The screen door opens and out comes a girl wearing a pink dress – it's Kasuko.

But the welcome is reserved. In her loincloth, Rituapi sits down on the kitchen floor and Kasuko looks at her as if she were viewing an alien. In



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flawless English, she says, "Hello, I am Joyce and I am four years old."

Rituapi smiles as if she did not catch the sentence and suppresses her tears. Kasuko, who has a new name that is easier to pronounce in preschool, does not recognise her mother. Or perhaps she doesn't want to.

"Maybe she's afraid that I would take her back," Rituapi suggests. But what she also knows deep down inside: surely they did the right thing. Kasuko looks happy. In a few years she will work in Swakopmund or in Windhoek in one of the modern shops as a successful businesswoman. "Then she will understand who her real mother is."

Prior to 1990, only a few hundred people lived in Opuwo. Today there are more than 8,000. Many Himba look for work here in order to earn the money that has become important in their own world. Or they come to stock up on the products of modern civilisation. Between the

## Rituapi smiles as if she did not catch the sentence and suppresses her tears

supermarket shelves, traditionally dressed Himba women fill their shopping carts with corn flour, butter and soft drinks.

Many Himba, who turned their backs on life in the kraal, now live in the Otuzemba district – in windowless mud huts between empty bottles of Black Label beer and cheap brandy.

The houses, scantily covered with plastic sheets, are filled with their personal property: televisions and mobile phones. You can see adults with fake sunglasses from Gucci or Ray-Ban, and children playing with Batman figures. In Opuwo, there is only one paved road dotted with dozens of shebeens, the local pubs, where you'll find a latticed bar, a pool table, a few slot machines. Around 10am, men and women turn up to sit and drink together in these dives. As a guest you can quickly get into a conversation with them. But usually it's all about one question: who's paying for the next beer?

In Champ Style bar, talk this morning is also all about beer. A few drunken Himba stagger out from the shade into daylight. How long have they been sitting here? Since this morning? Since yesterday? Soon we are surrounded by women. They sit down next to us and start begging for beer. A woman asks for a Zorba, a 40 per cent anisette. "Himba are very sensitive to drugs," explains Dr Margaret Jacobsohn, an anthropologist who lived in a Himba kraal for two years. But alcohol is not necessarily a new drug. For many years, the Himba have been brewing their traditional Kari-beer, which is made from honey, the bark of the *Boscia albitrunca* and grass seeds from the nest of black harvester termites.

The crucial difference, as Jacobsohn explains is: "They used to only drink once every one to two months. Today, alcohol is widely available and has become a problem."

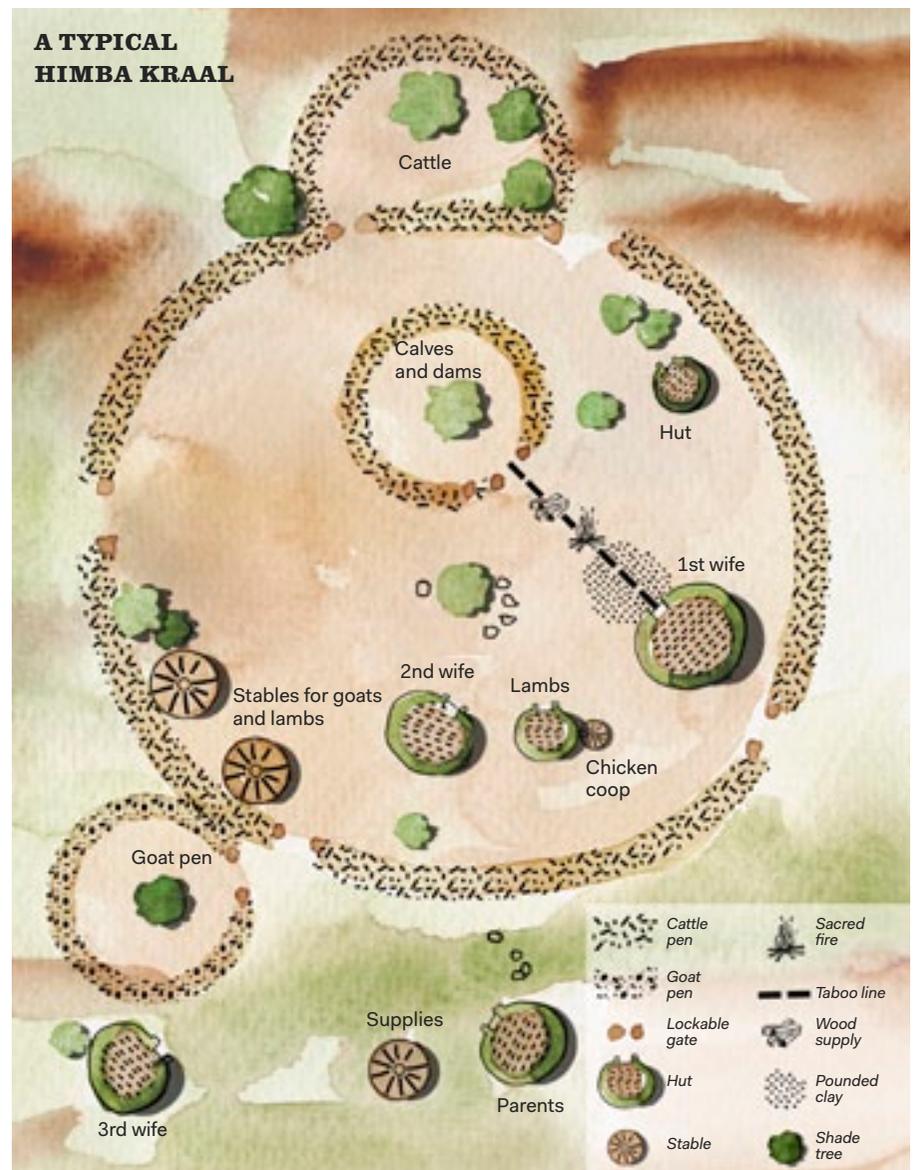
There is not much work in Opuwo, at least not for the locals. On the main street stands a new Chinese-built complex of shops. Inside are a few pale vendors and lots of slippers, blankets and fabrics from China. Some are worried about this change, but Jerry Ngombe sees only benefits, and

he works for a Chinese company. Wearing a red shirt and a bow tie, he plays billiards next door at Arsenal bar. Ngombe works as a driver and interpreter in the nearby copper mine.

The young Himba has already arrived in the new times. He speaks fluent English and has a driving licence. "I have nothing against the Chinese," he informs us. He adds: "They have given me a job – and they pay on time." →



#### A TYPICAL HIMBA KRAAL





▲ A paste made of haematite, butter fat and leaves protects against the sun and parasites

▼ A herd of goats on their long, dusty journey to a waterhole in Ombombo





▲ Drinking and playing billiards is now part of everyday life

▼ Rituapi (front) in Opuwo: demarcation line between the times of old and new



## THE NEW SOURCE OF INCOME

### How tree resin has changed the lives of the Himba



**Coveted.** Tree resin has provided a source of income for the Himba. Five to six tonnes are bought by a French cosmetics firm each year

UNTIL JUST A FEW YEARS AGO, the Himba collected the resin of the **Omumbiri shrub** (also known as balsam bush) exclusively for their own use. From the gunk they made perfume. But now the **cosmetic industry** has become aware of the benefits of tree resin. In recent years, a French manufacturer has imported this resin from northern Namibia in large quantities to the EU. The company V. Mane Fils, one of the largest perfume manufacturers in the world, uses the resin as the basis for many of its products: bath essences, shower gels and **skin lotions**. The company imports five to six tonnes of the resin from Namibia. "For many Himba families this means extra income,"

explains Karen Nott, who works for the Integrated Rural Development and Nature Conservation Trust (IRDNC). Since 2004, the private initiative has promoted sales and **fair payment** for the Himba. The first commercial harvest took place in 2007. **Purchasing centres** have since been set up by the IRDNC in the five Namibian counties of Orupembe, Marie River, Sanitatas, Puros and Okondjombo. Harvesting is difficult. Between September and February, the Omumbiri shrub develops  **fist-sized balls** of resin. The Himba women then wander for hours in the scorching heat over hill and dale to collect as much resin as they can. But the work is worth it: 50 Namibian dollars (about five euros) are paid per kilogram. "A hard-working harvester can collect up to 2kg each day," Nott explains. Nott also knows that this money changes the lives of many Himba. "The great advantage of this work is that mothers do not need to go to the cities to earn money. They stay with their children and their herd." With the help of IRDNC, a small **gum factory** was built in the town of Opuwo. Since 2011, the essence has been produced in Opuwo directly for the local market and sale to tourists. Soon it will also be marketed in Windhoek, Swakopmund and other parts of the country.



**Omumbiri shrub.** The plant is endemic to northern Namibia

In a hut on the outskirts of Opuwo we meet Kondjiwo Muharukua. Up until 2006, the now 39-year-old lived with her family in a Himba kraal before she got a job at a private security service as part of a government support programme.

Muharukua is now wearing a purple skirt with a black blouse, and she laughs in a slightly embarrassed way when she is visited in her new home.

Compared to the past, her housing situation has not improved much: now she has 12m<sup>2</sup>, surrounded by four solid walls. There is still no electricity or running water but a lockable door, a few cases of beer to sit on and an aluminium box for her most important belongings. "I'm happy," she says, as she wraps the red masking tape around her arm emblazoned with the word "Security", and gets ready to go to work. Her shift starts at five in the afternoon. Until dawn she guards a centre for adult education. The security company only pays 800 Namibian dollars a month, the equivalent of about 80 euros. "But I was lucky. Because when an Ovambo and a Himba apply for a job in this country, the Ovambo usually gets the job," Muharukua explains. After all, the money she earns is enough to feed the children and send them to school.

North of Opuwo, not far from the Epupa Falls on the Kunene River, bordering Angola in the village of Omuramba, we have an audience with Hikuminue Kapika. The "old man", as everyone calls him, is the head of the Namibian Himba. At least 8,200 people, about half of his people, still live in the traditional way. And no one knows their history better than he. Kapika doesn't know how old he is. "We do not count the years, but I am very old," the chief says. Friends say he is somewhere between 85 and 100.

The chief lives modestly: some huts made of mopane wood, a few tin cups made in China, a few pots and canisters of water. That's all he has. Twice a day, the women add wood to the fire. Then the old man crouches on his folding chair in front of the sacred blaze, looking into the flames.

When Kapika sits by the fire he often thinks of the past. The chief lives and speaks in the past tense. "Until now, we could always move →

Waiting for payment: each morning women bring harvested tree resin to collection points. For each kilogram, they receive the equivalent of about five euros





In the town of Opuwo, most of the talk is about who will pay for the next beer

around as we wanted. We followed the rain with our cattle,” he explains.

But if the government gets its way, then that will soon be history. Some 700km away in Windhoek, politicians are currently trying to implement the Land Reform Act, which could allow every citizen to own exactly 20 acres of land for farming.

This does at first sound like a reasonable plan. But the chief sees things differently. He suspects the act is intended to force his people to finally adopt the rules of the new era, while simultaneously taking land from the Himba that they have always considered to be rightfully theirs.

It is quite clear what the government is really planning. “Great wealth is slumbering in the earth of Kaokoland, particularly iron ore and copper,” were the words of one politician. Chinese mining companies have already been exploring here for some time – not only in the area of Opuwo, but also elsewhere in the Kunene region. A mining company discovered a 7km-long iron ore vein a few months ago near the village Orumana, south of Opuwo. “We’re talking about millions here,” the chief says indignantly. “And they want to fob us off with small plots of land.”

Kapika is accustomed to having confrontations with the government. His first conflict with the authorities in Windhoek was 20 years ago, shortly after Namibia gained its independence. At the time, the bone of contention was about a dam that was to be built on the border river of Kunene. The plan was to construct a huge power plant. But that would have not only meant the loss of valuable grazing land, it also endangered the sacred tombs of the Himba. It is not hard to imagine what would have happened if these had been flooded during the dam’s construction: their connection to their ancestors would have been destroyed. Without any powerful voices of support, the Himba were initially powerless in preventing

the dam project. But Kapika did not give up. He sought support from abroad, alerting all and sundry to the plight of his people. And then the improbable happened: following international protests, the project was stopped.

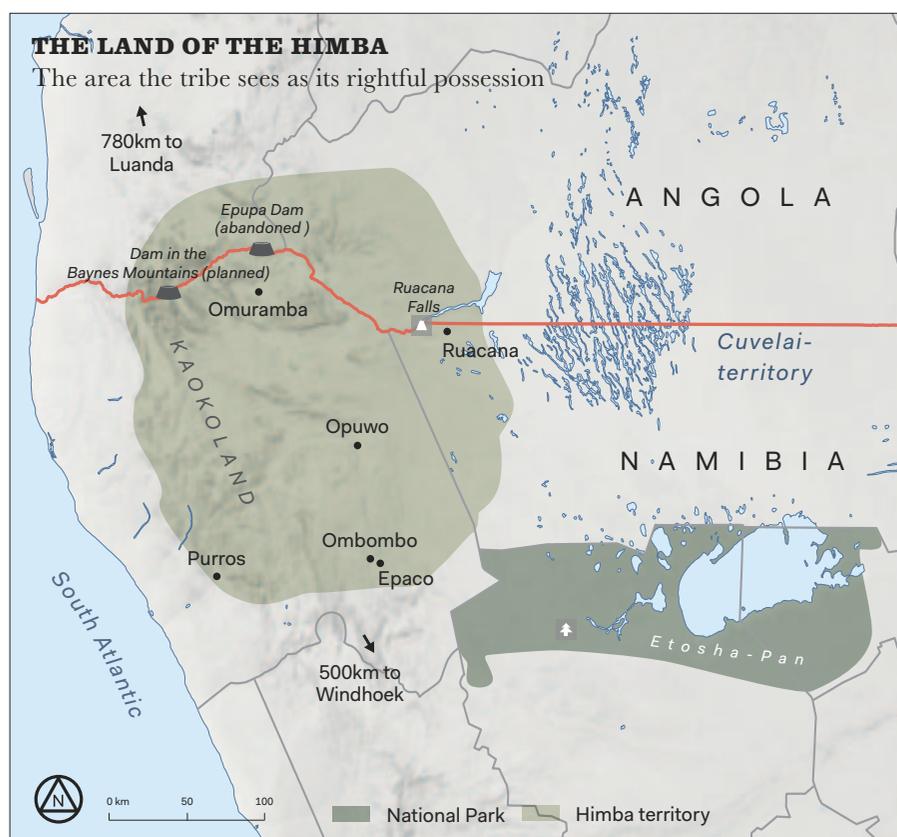
It has been rumoured that the government may build the dam at a different location. The Orokawe Reservoir in the Baynes Mountains, a little further downstream, will, it is said, be 40km long, four kilometres wide, with a 100m to 180m-high dam. “And again, no one asked us,” the chief complains.

On the other hand, if asked, a rejection would be certain.

These days, Chief Kapika sometimes sounds tired – like a man who suspects that he has lost his battle. Only when he talks about the old days does excitement briefly flash in his eyes. “When I was young, I killed a lion, a leopard and a hyena. With nothing but my bare hands and a spear.”

But that’s all over now. Now the dignity of →

## The chief often thinks of the past. He lives and speaks in past tense





**Women collecting wood. The Himba make almost everything from the mopane tree**

the Himba must be preserved as they forge a new identity for themselves in a new era. Rituapi is also full of hope that her daughter, who they once called Kasuko and now goes by the name of Joyce, will benefit from the new Namibia.

Traditions that the Himba have upheld for centuries do have an expiry date, and for a long time Chief Kapika and Rituapi have recognised this fact. They will probably move with the times.

The chief predicts there will always be Himba, “but when people my age die, tradition will become like it is with you in Europe. Then it is only an empty shell. In five, 10 or 15 years, no one will respect the ancestors and light the sacred fire. I don’t want to talk about it, it makes me sad.”

**“Soon tradition will only be an empty shell”**

On his head the Chief is wearing a black wool cap bearing the emblem of English Premier League club, Arsenal. He walks towards the entrance of his tent and looks out across a cold, moonless night sky. What is probably the last chief of the Himba raises his voice. “Raraponawa,” he says. The word means goodnight.

