

HIMBA PEOPLE OF NAMIBIA

The characteristic looks of the Himba people, an offshoot of the Herero people, are widely known and admired. These tall, graceful semi-nomadic herders regularly feature in fashion shoots, documentaries on vanishing Africa and make the front covers of tourism brochures.

The characteristic 'look' of the Himba comes from intricate hairstyles, traditional clothing, the use of personal adornments in the form of jewellery, as well as the use of a mixture of red ochre, butter and resin from the Omuzumba shrub. This paste is known as 'otjize' used as protection against the weather and a skin lotion. It is rubbed on the skin, into hair and onto traditional clothing.

But the Himba are a people in transition and travellers are more likely to pass them without a second glance as today they are likely to wear western garb. Although traditional life in the homestead or 'kraal' continues, use of traditional garb is declining, and is more often practiced for cultural encounters or in the inaccessible areas of Kaokoland where towns and settlements with western influences are few and far between.

The western way of life offers many benefits to the Himba, aside from clothing. For instance, canvas and other western building materials are used in the construction of huts, making them more able to withstand the elements. Western medicine is now used alongside traditional medicines. Most Himba children now attend schools. Radio brings news, music and entertainment from further a field. Kin lotion is added to otjize. And faced with a life of hardship, particularly in times of drought and hunger, many young Himba men choose to work in towns and villages.

But development also brings challenges, threats and controversy. Although many of the Himba elders insist on tradition, modern garb and lifestyles causes conflict in communities. A proposed 'mega dam' in Namibia's Kunene region would bring much needed hydroelectric power and water security to Namibia, but would submerge a large part of the Himba's traditional range as well as ancestral graves.

Yet traditions endure, and women and children particularly, are expected to adhere to customs in their communities.

Aside from their traditional appearance, the second phenomenon with which the Himba's are associated is the sacred fire, the 'okuruwo'. The sacred fire represents the ancestors of the Himba's, and is kept burning 24 hours a day. The Himba believe in a god who created everything, but this god is very remote, and communication with this god only takes place through the spirits of male ancestors. The male leader, the headman, of the Himba clan sits by the fire during the day and talks to the ancestors about problems facing the family.

While he sits by the okuruwo, he ensures that it carries on burning. At night, his wife takes an ember from the fire inside the hut. In the morning this ember will be used to rekindle the sacred fire.

Although it may be little more than a smouldering log the fire is sacred, and the entire area in which the fire burns must be treated with extreme respect. Strangers are not allowed to pass between the sacred fire and the headman's hut, nor may

they pass between the cattle kraal at the centre of the village and the sacred fire. If need be, guests must walk around the back of the hut.

The headman's hut is the only hut in the homestead which has an opening facing the fire. All other huts and openings face away from the fire.

The homestead, called the 'onganda', is surrounded by a circular fence constructed from large branches, normally from the Mopane tree. In many homesteads there is only one opening. The headman's hut is located furthest from the opening with the sacred fire in front of it. At the centre of the homestead, there is a second circular fence of branches, a kraal for the cattle and goats.

The huts for the rest of the clan are built towards the edges of the homestead with their doors facing away from the sacred fire. Himba huts are circular and constructed of branches and dried mud, though modern material such as canvas and zinc plate may be used to provide additional protection from the weather.

Storage areas are constructed in trees, where small animals cannot get at them. Small plots for growing maize are placed away from the village and are also surrounded by fences made of sticks.

The Himba day starts early. Women arise before or at dawn and apply otjize. Before the cattle are herded to the grazing areas, they are milked by the women, often on one side only leaving the other side free for the calves. Each homestead has two fires, a small one inside the hut for warmth and a larger one outside, for cooking.

Once the cattle are milked, the men herd cattle to the grazing area. If the grazing is poor, the entire village will move to a place where there is better grazing. Young men often set up separate, temporary villages and move around with the cattle, leaving the women, children and older men at the main homestead.

Women spend the day close to the homestead. They occupy themselves with cooking, gardening, milking cattle, looking after children, caring for livestock in the kraal and making clothes, jewellery and the traditional ochre and butter paste, otjize. Flour is made from maize and butter is churned. Wood has to be collected, and water has to be carried from wells. The children help with the tasks.

The diet of the Himba consists mainly of a porridge made from maize and milk. Milk left over after making the porridge is used to make butter which is churned in gourds. Although meat is a part of the Himba diet, beef is consumed sparingly as cattle represent the wealth of a clan. Meat from small stock such as goats is more likely to be found in the Himba meal.

When cattle are slaughtered, it is usually done at a ceremony. Married men eat meat which is kept apart for them.

The Himba homestead is a family unit, overseen by the headman who is normally a grandfather and the oldest male in the village. Most social systems either follow the lineage of the father (the patrilineal aspect, the 'oruzo') or the mother (the matrilineal aspect, the 'eanda'). The Himba social system uses both and a Himba person belongs to the oruzo and the eanda.

The headman is responsible for residence, religious aspects of life embodied by the sacred fire and ensuring that the rules of tradition and the specific rules of the clan are obeyed. The matrilineal aspect is responsible for movable property and economic matters such as handling of money and property.

The Himba headman's authority is identified by an erenge bracelet. He oversees births, marriages and coming of age ceremonies. He performs the various ceremonies at the sacred fire, involving the spirits of the ancestors in the daily life of the village. He is also responsible for the rules of the tribe. If a crime is committed or a property dispute arises, he will be called to give judgement. If his judgement is not accepted, a number of headmen will meet to discuss the matter.

Marriages are arranged with a view to spreading wealth. Once married, the women leave their villages and move to the villages of their husbands where they adopt the rules of the new clan. Himba men are not monogamous and may have a number of wives and children in different homesteads. Women are not monogamous either and may have a number of partners. However courtship and relationships are bound by strict rules and modes of behaviour.

When a woman is ready to give birth, she will be accompanied by a group of women outside the homestead. They will assist her during her labour. Immediately after the child is born, the women return to the homestead. The mother and child then spend a week at a special shelter built to the side of the headman's hut, near the sacred fire, under special protection of the ancestral spirits.

After the week has passed, the child is brought to the sacred fire and introduced to the spirits of the ancestors by the headman. The child is given names from the patrilineal and matrilineal lines, ensuring that the origins of the child are known.

The child remains with its mother until the age of three, after which it lives with its siblings. Although Himba children are very independent, they are cared for by all the members of the family in the homestead.

Between the ages of 10 and 12, the bottom four incisor teeth of the child are knocked out in a ceremony that is believed to protect the child from dangerous influences and ensure the protection of the ancestors. Young males are circumcised and have a coming of age rituals. Young girls also have a coming of age ceremony.

Many of the children receive western education from mobile schools that travel around the homesteads; however some of the children board at formal schools. These schools are a problem as many of the young men who attend these schools don't return permanently to their homesteads, but instead seek work in towns. This leaves many of the homesteads with a population of women, children, young boys and old men.

When a Himba dies, the body is wrapped and bound in the skin of cattle and placed next to the sacred fire. The first period of mourning lasts 24 hours or more, during which time cattle are slaughtered. The person is buried far from the village, and the horns of the slaughtered cattle are placed on the grave. In the case of a man, the horns are placed upright, but when a woman is buried, the horns point downwards. The greater the number of horns on the grave, the greater the wealth and status of the individual.

In the case of a headman, the main hut is dismantled and parts of it are burned. The sacred fire is scattered, to be rekindled later from a new Mopane branches. The headman is bound wrapped in the skin of his favourite ox and buried facing the rising sun in the east. His walking stick is broken in two and placed on the grave along with his sandals and the horn that he used for calling cattle. The elder is believed to enter the afterlife accompanied by the cattle that are slaughtered during the mourning period.

After the person is buried, the clan returns to the homestead and a second period of mourning begins, lasting about a month. More cattle are slaughtered and their horns will be added to those already on the grave. The ancestors are contacted by burning the root of the Omuhe shrub, and a purification ritual takes place.

Cattle owned by deceased males will often be inherited by the family of the deceased male's sister, normally the male son. In the case of the death of a woman, the homestead will be inherited by a brother, or if the woman has no surviving brother, by the eldest child of a sister. In this way cattle rights and property rights are continuously redistributed through families.

The Himba's

Although the Himba's are generally hospitable, due to cultural differences and language differences, it is advisable to visit the Himba's on an organised activity with an activity operator who understands and respects their customs and heritage. The following should be remembered at all times:

- Do not walk between the sacred fire and the headman's hut and the / or the kraal under any circumstances. Ask for guidance if unsure.
- Ask permission before entering the homestead.
- Ask permission before taking photos.
- Do not wash hands or face or even utensils with clean water, as clean water is regarded as a precious resource, best used for cooking, drinking and for animals.