

Where do they come from?

Kaokoland is an extensive territory in the North West of Namibia sharing a common boundary with Angola in the North. The Atlantic Ocean and the Skeleton coast form its Western boundary.

The landscape is made up of rugged mountain ranges to the interior which fall away steeply to lower the lying plains of the Namib. These merge in the West into scorched gravel and sand flats of the desert through which seasonal rivers flow. The only perennial river is the Kunene which forms the Northern border with Angola. The average annual rainfall of much of Kaokoland is less than 250mm. Even this is enough however to transform the apparently lifeless plains and desert into waving golden grasslands providing grazing for the Himba cattle.

It is in this harsh and unforgiving environment that the Ovahimba live.

The Himba or more correctly – Ovahimba – were originally all one with the Herero. Hence the reason for the shared language – outjaherero. They arrived in Kaokoland in the middle of the 16th century from Angola. A section of the tribe remained in Kaokoland while most of the other Herero migrated towards central Namibia. This group of Kaokoland Herero were very dispersed and roamed freely with their cattle visiting the widely scattered waterholes. In time they fell victim to other marauding tribes and most of their cattle were lost during raids by other tribes in the area. Because they were so dispersed they found resistance very difficult and now impoverished, the Kaokoland Herero were forced to adopt a hunter – gatherer lifestyle. This subsistence existence was looked down upon by other cattle herders and earned them the name Tjimba-Herero or Aardvarks!! Large numbers of the Tjimba-Herero fled to Angola and now without land and livestock they were called Ovahimba or beggars!!

Their stay in Angola was not for too long though as under the leadership of a prominent Herero named Vita they resettled back in Kaokoland. With the help of the Portuguese colonists and their leader they were able to seize many cattle and accumulate sizeable herds. In 1920 they re-crossed the Kunene back into Namibia. They dispersed throughout the northern part of Kaokoland and some to this day still remain in Angola.

Today they live a nomadic existence, moving with their herds of goats and cattle to where they can find adequate grazing and of course a supply of water.

The Kids.

Young Himba children leave their parents huts to live with other village children at about the age of 3. They play together, stay together and during the day will help with chores around the village i.e. looking after the cattle and goats and grinding maize. Around the age of 10 – 12 the bottom 4 incisor teeth are knocked out. This is done in a ceremony where all children in the area of a similar age will come together. It is done to protect against dangerous influences and to ensure the protection of the Ancestors.

Young boys are circumcised and later in life go through a rites of passage ceremony, as do girls at the age of puberty.

Himba children will rarely know their age and are often just 'given' an age when they go to school depending on how they look. However the way they wear their hair gives information about what stage in their life they are currently in.

Young children tend to have shaved heads and as they get older boys and girls can be distinguished by the position of the hair plaits. Young girls wear 2 covering the front of the face young boys wear one at the back of the head. When both reach puberty and are marriageable this changes. Girls have lots of smaller plaits covered in the characteristic red mud and the young men wear 2 plaits at the back. Once married women wear a particular headdress in the shape of a crown made from animal skin and the men cover their heads. This covering is only removed if they are in mourning.

Himba children wear beads and similar loin clothes to those worn by their parents.

Toddlers are very self sufficient at a young age and it is wonderful to see children as young as 12 months walking, running, feeding and totally independent of their mothers. The community

is made up of really only one family and so ties are very close – children are very well cared for and the overall feeling in a Himba village is one of happy very content children.

Village life

Himba villages in Kaokoland all follow a similar plan. A fence of Mopane wood – a wonderfully organic looking structure – strong and very durable surrounds the village.

The fence has a single opening and at the furthest side from the opening stands the Main Hut of the Headman, which directly faces the Sacred Fire. No other hut may overlook the Sacred fire and the area between the main hut and the sacred fire cannot be crossed without permission. Visitors are expected to walk behind the main hut. The sacred fire is kept burning all the time and represents the spirits of the village ancestors and so for this reason is very important to the Himba as they consult the ancestors at critical stages in their lives.

In the centre of the village stands another Mopane fence – this time a kraal for the animals.

The huts are usually rounded – made of branches covered in mud. Storerooms are built in trees – off the ground to protect the stored maize etc. Fences away from the village often surround a Himba garden where they grow their own maize.

The day starts early and indeed work may go on throughout the night as the cattle are brought back from grazing to be milked. The Himba are totally in sync with their animals and this is reflected in the wonderful condition of all livestock. Fires are kept burning all night – a small one in the hut and another outside which is used for cooking. Women milk the cows wrapped in their blanket to keep out the cold of the dawn until the hot Namibian sun fully rises. Often they milk on one side of the cow while the calf feeds at the other – enough for both!!

The day is spent looking after the children, making flour from maize and churning butter. They often have to travel a distance to collect water. This they will do either by foot or on donkey, sometimes in holes dug in seasonal riverbeds.

Young men often leave the permanent villages with the cattle to set up temporary villages where they can find better grazing leaving only the women and children and older men.

Himba Villages are very sociable places and the Himba love to talk and laugh. Children play in groups and women work and talk. The pace of life is unrushed and everyone has time to stop and talk especially to visitors.

Before sundown wood must be collected for the fires - a superstition and the Himba settle down for the long nights chatting round their fires at times seeing to their animals. Villages are never totally quiet during the night as there is always some activity.

Family

The Himba have a system of dual descent where every person is linked to 2 distinct groups of relatives one through the line of the mother the other through the father. Each of these lines is responsible for different functional interests. Residence, religious activities and authority are organised according to the patrilineal principles whereas economic issues and moveable wealth is under the control of the matrilineal principle.

Marriages are arranged and usually to ensure that wealth is accumulated. Women move to their husband's villages after marriage and assume their customs and taboos.

Himba men are often not monogamous and may have children in several villages. For women too it is not unusual to have other partners.

Children leave their parents huts at about 3 years and live with other children in the village. Each village is essentially one family and so the level of care for children and the elderly is high as it is every one's responsibility.

The Boss

The eldest male member of the village who is usually also a grand father holds the position of Headman. His position of authority is symbolised by the wearing of the erenge bracelet

The Headman in a village has to perform many functions – many of which are related to critical stages in village life i.e. the headman oversees all births, marriages, rites of passage etc. Usually he performs these ceremonies at the Sacred fire ensuring protection by the spirits for all concerned. He acts as the link between the living and dead members of the village.

One of his most important tasks is the administration of justice. His judgement will be sought in issues ranging from crime to resolving disputes over ownership of cattle. If his judgement is not accepted then a number of prominent headmen may be called together in the hope that they will carry more weight.

The death of a Headman affects the whole religious organisation of the village.

Beauty.

For all Himba women the day starts when they cover themselves completely with a mixture of ground red rock called ochre and butter fat. This gives them their characteristic deep red colour. The mixture is not only smeared on to their skin and hair but also their clothes and jewellery. As a result of this they have the most beautiful skin. Himba women are fiercely proud of their traditional dress and it is mainly through them that many of the traditions have and will survive.

A lot of time is spent making sure clothes and jewellery is perfect and plaiting the hair can take up to 5 or 6 hours. They sleep on a neck rest to make sure that all the work is not spoiled in the night.

They adorn themselves with intricate necklaces, collars and anklets made of metal, beads and shells. Their short skirts made of the softest goats skin add to the striking appearance.

Food

The diet of the Himba consists mainly of maize flour or mealy mixed with goat or cow's milk. Excess milk is made into butter, which is churned in a gourd. Meat is sometimes eaten – usually at a ceremony – when cattle may be slaughtered.

Men in the village who are married eat meat specially kept apart for them.

Birth and Death

Himba babies are born out with the fence, which encloses the village. The expectant mother will be helped by other women who escort her and the new born infant back into the village to a shelter of Mopane wood branches which is built at the side of the main hut. This is a special area where mother and child will remain for a week. It is believed that here they will enjoy special protection by the spirits.

The child is then introduced to the ancestral spirits round the sacred fire by the headman. The child may receive several names from both the maternal and paternal lines and is introduced to the rest of the village. The Himba keeps no formal written records and so this is a way of making sure information about the birth of the child.

The sacred fire features strongly during burial. The deceased is bound tightly and placed next to the sacred fire where the grief stricken family will lament the death for over 24 hours. If the dead man is the village head then the main hut is broken down and parts of it are burned. The sacred fire is also scattered. In the morning ritual dances and singing celebrates the good deeds of the deceased. The burial often takes place far from the village and the horns of cattle slaughtered during the initial mourning period are taken to be displayed at the grave. The number of horns reflects the wealth and standing of the person being buried. The horns are turned upside down on the grave of a woman.

On returning to the village purification rite is performed to restore the blessing of the forefathers. The ancestors are contacted by burning chips of the root of the omuhe shrub. The second phase of the mourning may last a month or longer and during this time more cattle may be slaughtered – their horns being added to the grave.

Health

First impressions on visiting the Himba in their villages are of a healthy well-fed people. This is perhaps correct in the main – though new problems are affecting the Himba. Inevitably AIDS is a major threat and because of many of the Himba customs the use of condoms and safe sex practice used to combat the spread of the virus are not acceptable solutions for the Himba. They see many of these practices as contrary to their beliefs and so this could lead to major problems in the future.

Another growing issue is their move away from traditional remedies in favour of medicines bought in shops. Many of their effective remedies will be lost and forgotten and instead they will become dependent on modern drugs. This in itself has the issue that Himba do not usually have money – their lifestyle does not require it. However if they are to become dependent on bought medicines then their way of life will have to change in order for them to earn money. Perhaps the most serious issue today is that

There are very few hospitals and clinics in Kaokoland and these charge on a daily basis if even a child is ill! Reaching such a dispersed and nomadic population in this hostile environment even to carry out vaccinations we consider routine is almost impossible.

Education

This is another dilemma for the Himba and for those who wish to deliver education. There are several initiatives already for Primary education. Some of these are in permanent schools – others in mobile schools. However if young people wish to continue with a secondary education they have to leave their villages and board at a school usually in Windhoek. Many of the young men who go down this line never return to their villages as they find work elsewhere. This has resulted in many villages being populated by women children and only young boys and old men. Bringing education to the Himba may ironically be the thing, which results the demise of the culture.

Even in the most remote villages – young children can speak some words of English and many can write their names.

Crafts

Himba women are now using many of their traditional crafts to produce items to sell to tourists. A visit to Himba villages usually ends in an impromptu market where all the women bring out necklaces, bracelets, baskets and carvings they have made. They are very skilled at making jewellery and are certainly shrewd businesswomen.

Housing

There are 2 types of Himba village and their permanency is reflected in the construction of the huts. In the permanent villages a lot of time is spent on the huts which are usually round and domed. Some though are square and have rushes on the roof. All are made of wooden branches covered in a layer of mud. Some have 2 levels the upper level used to store and dry maize whilst others have small fences and even gated round them. Inside is one room – occasionally 2 - where all of life takes place. A fire burns throughout the night for heat and possessions hang up from the roof. The Himba sleep on the smooth earth with blankets round them for warmth. Wooden neck supports are used to prevent undoing the elaborate hair arrangements.

Temporary huts are very often just wooden frames over which blankets or animal skins are spread. These can be set up at short notice where the grazing is good.

Where do they go now?

Western civilisation is exerting an immense influence on the people of Namibia. Everywhere tradition is giving way under the pressure of modern practices and new ideas. To every rule there are is often an exception and to some extent the Himba to date - have managed to resist many of these pressures. This may be because of their Geographic isolation away from the influence of larger towns and also because of their natural conservatism. Himba women

especially seem to want to uphold many of the traditions – especially of dress and they more than men are currently resisting change.

The development of a country inevitably leads to a process of intense culture change.