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## *Holy Fire, Sacred Water* **At Namibia's Edge, Himba Caught Between a Dam and a Dry Place**

James G. Workman

AUGUST 1, 2003

**EPUPA FALLS, Namibia** – Decades from now, when I am old and arthritic and denying Alzheimer's and someone asks me about southern Africa at the dawn of the century, I won't recall AIDS, corruption, crime, famine or official incompetence. I will try to describe a soccer field on the outskirts of a village at dusk.

The field has no grass, not a single green blade. There are no sharp-edged white chalk lines or referees to delineate the confines, corners, rules or regulations of the game. Shouting and arguing, yes, but no whistles. No halftime. No penalty shots or tiebreakers. No anxious, Prozac-popping, minivan-driving 'soccer moms' to cheer, shuttle, and organize a sanctioned youth league. No females at all, in fact, save those small clusters of poised, braless young women balancing water on their heads, carrying it up from the river on a path that traverses the field. At a private joke they laugh and look down, and pause before negotiating a quick route through the game on their way home, glancing sideways at the sweaty torsos of the boys and young men who pretend not to notice them.

The young men enjoy the exalted privileges of marital status, the boys not yet, though on the field all are equals in a life-stage that, not too long ago, would



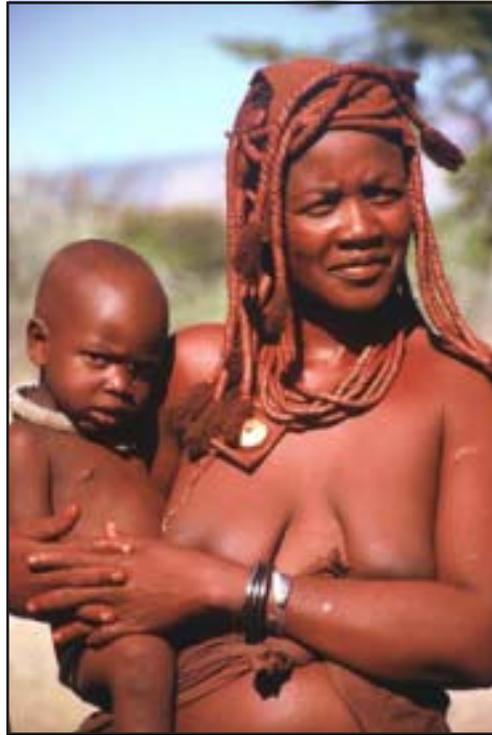
**Three Muses:** *If water is a means to increasing cattle, and cattle a means to increasing wives, wives are a means to increasing the end goal of all Himba: children.*

have linked them as warrior-hunters. So none spares the shins of his opponent. A few wear shoes or sandals cut from used tires. Others run barefoot over the rocks. They have been herding all day, or have returned from school to water their fathers' domesticated beasts. All arrived at the field by some unspoken understanding before any had a chance to enclose the livestock in kraals for the night. So the goats and cattle mill about uncertainly on the sidelines, unattended, sometimes wandering into the game, chased off only when they drift between the ball and the netless goal, which is constructed of three more-or-less straight logs from the nearby river. Within sight, yet at a respectable distance, stand a few men who are too old to play but too young to pass by without comment, drinking warm, homemade beer and judging the players in silence.

I can't say the action itself is spectacular. But there are momentary flashes of grace, or talent, and as the sun nears the horizon the players' efforts intensify, their speed ratchets up, they pass less to their teammates and take more desperate shots from the outside. From a shack nearby a mother hums a melody she absorbed from a religion she declined. By now the cows are growing impatient and stir as a herd, hooves churning up fine dirt clouds that filter and enhance the glow of sunset. The game edges into the night, with wiry, lithe, agile forms silhouetted dark against the opaque dust billows, shouting and crossing dreamlike until they can no longer see the ball. Without saying goodbye they begin to disperse and the noise subsides, leaving only a murmur of the nearby river.

As an old befuddled windbag I may, by then, blur some of the places where I once watched such scrimmages. Was it that time, close to the source of the Tugela in Natal, or near the mouth of the Komati in Mozambique? Along the banks of the no longer great, but still gray-green and greasy Limpopo River that remains all set about with fever trees. I'll recall one certain terraced field, 9,000 feet high, overlooking the Senqu River in mountainous Lesotho, and a second one by the sluggish polluted Black River oozing through the slums outside Cape Town. But perhaps such dust clouds could only rise from Kalahari sand by the Thamalakane River, just northeast of Maun, Botswana. Or Rundu by the Okavango.

No matter. I know at least one place will remain in



**Classic Pose:** *Himba women revere and would seem to spoil their children, never letting them cry for more than a moment before holding them hipside. Constant contact, day and night, binds offspring to parents through love, but also an informal insurance plan to care for them when old.*

sharp focus: only there was I lured into the amateur African soccer arena myself, transforming me from observer to player. Only there did I inextricably become part of the game. And only there did I leave something of myself behind on that field, that uneven, sloping patch of dirt that lay at the center of dozens of dung-plastered huts belonging to scattered bands of Herero-speaking Himba who lived on the southern bank of the Kunene River, within hearing range of one of Africa's most sacred waterfalls.

\* \* \*

What troubles me as I write today is that I can't yet know whether, by the time I become that forgetful old geezer, that vivid, hard-packed soccer field of my memory will have become mud submerged beneath a calm-deep reservoir. Such a fate once seemed a foregone conclusion. As it came to power 13 years ago, Namibia's newly elected democratic government vowed to construct a 163-meter-high, \$700 million hydro-power dam to 'uplift its people.'

True, more water would evaporate in one year than the nation's major cities consume over decades. Yes, the electricity it produced would cost three times what Namibians now pay and can get elsewhere. Sure, there are plenty other sources. But more than one kind of 'power generation' was at stake here; the foreign-financed scheme would lucratively employ 4,000 skilled workers, mounting to a boomtown influx of 10,000, supplied from the loyal ranks of the governments biggest voting constituency, the Ovambo, who live in another part of the country.

And yet, against this juggernaut stood 12,000 Himba who live scattered across 50,000 square kilometers of semi-desert on the Namibian side (another 8,000 live in Angola) of the Kunene. In the mid-1990s, two-dozen Himba leaders spoke out against the dam on the grounds that it would destroy their traditions and way of life. Their comments did not please top officials, who view the Himba as 'backward' and manipulated by foreigners. President Sam Nujoma declared the dam would be built regardless of what impacts a feasibility study revealed. "The Government will not be deterred by the misguided activities of those who want to impede economic development," he said. Deputy Minister of Mines and Energy Jesaya Nuamu went further. He said his own family once lived in an equally 'primitive' state as the Himba until escaping it through 'progress,' adding: "It is not a

question of whether Epupa will be built or not, but rather where it will be built.”

Upon hearing such comments, the Himba reasoned that the decision already had been made. So they refused to participate in, or give credibility to, any semblance of discussions with the government over ‘negotiation,’ ‘cooperation’ or ‘mitigation.’ Or coercion. Armed police broke up Himba meetings on Epupa. Dam opponents have been threatened. Six years after that breach in trust led to deadlock and hesitation by the World Bank, the government — and a majority of the country — remain as determined as ever, saying it will push through its job-creating dam no matter what, even if it must ‘neutralize’ opposition.

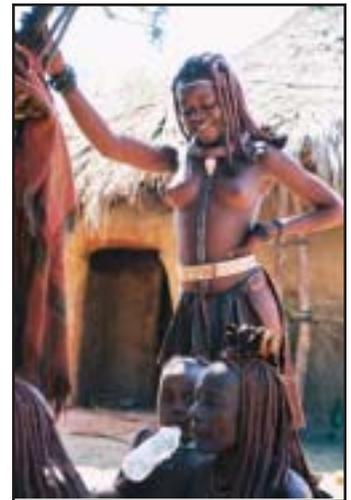
The Himba respond: Build this dam? *Over our dead bodies.*

They are not speaking figuratively. In addition to that unobtrusive soccer field and unsurpassed waterfall, the dam would submerge 160 of the Himba’s ancestral graves.

Such a barrier may at first seem small, quixotic. Indeed, rarely have burial grounds anywhere else in the world in any culture presented such an insurmountable issue for dams desired by the power structure. Leverage for compensation, yes. Deal-breakers, no. Elsewhere, in the past, tens of thousands of graves regularly were exhumed and moved to higher ground, with all due expenses, respect, ceremony and sensitivity they deserve provided by dam builders. In most countries it is never

**Ochre Makeover:**

*From adolescence onward, female Himba begin to spread an ochre, butterfat and herbal ointment over their skin and hair, both to beautify to protect body moisture from harsh dehydration. The striking effect causes visitors like myself to fall in love half a dozen times a day.*



the dead who oppose dam relocation; it is the living who fear (with reason) a risky loss of livelihood, status, direction, identity or wealth, and thus mount resistance. In contrast to the thousands of farmers displaced by the Katse / Mohale Dams in Lesotho, or the tens of thousands shoved away from the Zambezi River by Kariba Dam, few if any Himba would be left homeless by the proposed dam. So why were Himba so intransigent against the government? I had to find out.

This dam clash is epochal because it is one of the few turning points in history where a small, illiterate band of half-naked mud-hut dwellers have halted — temporarily or for good — a democracy’s proposed use of water. Human-rights lawyers and civil unrest in the region



helped their cause. But with peace at last in Angola, the one other political obstacle to the dam has been removed. Only the Himba remain. I twice followed a dirt road to the edge of oblivion to try to see water through their eyes. I came the first time to ask whether, how and why they would continue to resist the dam, a fight that has cemented their integrity. I returned because they also faced a second but subtler water-related conflict, over boreholes, which threatened to soften and unravel it. In between, I tried to reconcile myself to an unusual and uncomfortable request they asked of me.

\* \* \*

To understand Himba culture you have to first appreciate its rocky womb. The harsh, rugged, bone-dry landscape of Namibia's extreme Northwest decrees that only two societies can long endure: that of the hunter-gatherer nomad, like the Tjimba, or the semi-nomadic pastoralist, like the Himba. The Himba keep cattle as the primary source of milk, bartering, clothes, containers, currency, ceremony, health, wealth, status and social ties. They keep sheep and goats for food. They keep tenuous gardens on river banks.



**Chief Hikumenue Kapika:** *As septuagenarian patriarch of a vast region, he leads by virtue of being able to point to the oldest graves of his ancestors along the Kunene.*

Where grass rises predictably in higher places, on mesas and mountain slopes, it rarely accompanies surface water. Herders slowly shuttle between these severe, unpredictable limits.

They may create hand-dug wells in both areas and hand-pour water into hewn-log troughs for cattle. But after a few months of a dry winter the men must uproot and drive their livestock to ephemeral rivers or springs, with or without their families, and soon move on again. And again. Eventually they rotate back to the start, where some of the elders, attended by wives, remain. Each man lucky enough to own cattle hones his own memory at an early age; he knows every permanent and seasonal watering place in an area, plants on which cattle can feed, and the easiest routes between them. But youth first depends on the water-and-pasture memory of their elders and the headmen. And these, in turn, rely religiously on the time-tested advice of their ancestors, their long-de-

ceased kin whom they buried near the river and whom they worship in an animist religion as demigods.

Himba are often compared with their better-known east-African pastoral counterparts, the Maasai. But the parallels go beyond superficial similarities like ritual shaving of heads, carrying of sticks, or smearing of ochre to their root commonality: nomadism. In constant motion, they seem hard to 'develop' or assimilate. Sure, we are struck by their charismatic and exotic appearance, traditions, clothing, dance, jewelry, family structure, diet, values and relationship with their surroundings. Westerners are easily seduced into their culture. But what attracts us most — and so puzzles and irritates the majority-party black governments who insist on national 'assimilation' of these stubborn, reluctant (and opposition-party supporting) peoples — is that their culture is not easily seduced into ours.

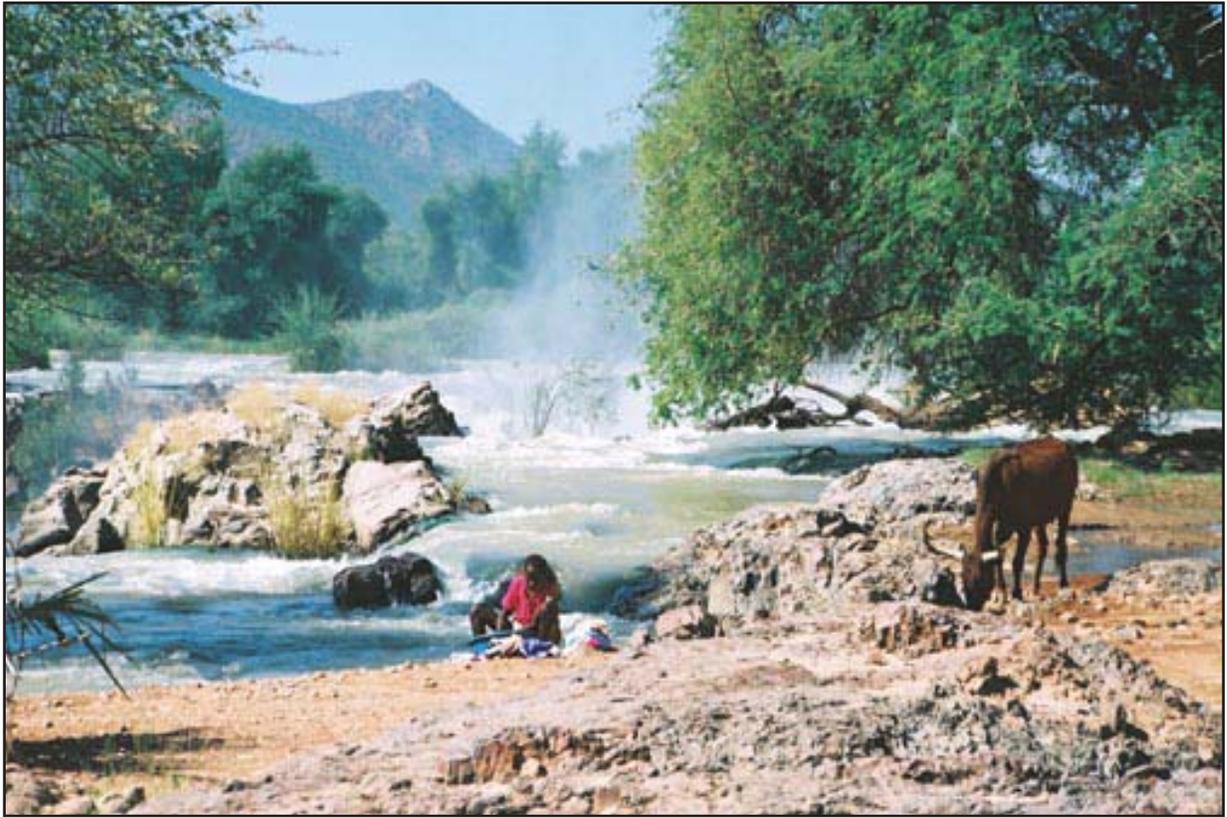
After decades of exposure they remain so goddamn deliberately resistant to the 'new ideas' and 'civilization' of 'modernity' that it makes us question ourselves when walking their arid turf. Perhaps nomadic societies have been so resistant because many of their 'backward' ways have proven so successful. Perhaps their culture, as in architecture, confirms how, in a place of little rain, form follows function.

\* \* \*

The Himba are not human artifacts, frozen in time; they are in constant transition, trying to negotiate the terms of their future, deciding what to choose and what to reject. In some ways their culture holds a position of relative strength, as it is largely free of modern Africa's curses—AIDS, unemployment and pollution. But flawless they are not. The more I got to know them, the more my admiration for and fascination with their social and ecological integrity mixed with uneasiness over certain



**Longhorn of the Lower Kunene:** *Despite the drought afflicting Namibia, Himba cattle appeared far healthier than anywhere else. This is part nature, or breeding stock, and part nurture, when herded by semi-nomads from pasture to puddle, like here.*



*Paradise Revisited: Kunene was no Eden. But there were moments when I felt like I stepped into a Paul Gauguin Tahitian painting: Makalani Palm trees arc over pools; half-naked locals look you in the eye with passive curiosity; women and children splash and wash scant meters from a powerful falls without warning signs, fences or handrails. Something draws and holds you near the dangerous rapids. A naked boy of five joined me in my swim; I swirled him around by the arms, skimming him along the surface, and as I got out he insisted on carrying my hiking boots despite their weight.*

aspects of this evocative, ‘romantic’ culture.

Take sex. Under the Himba’s *okujepisa* tradition, a man will lend one of his wives to a friend or important visitor.<sup>1</sup> Or a wife will invite her husband to sleep with female guests staying with them in the homestead. Or the wife-inheritance system, under which a widow marries her brother-in-law. Imbalanced sexism? Perhaps. But also a way of reinforcing the tight order of intra-Himba networks so necessary when various families migrate with livestock to remote areas and depend for survival on hospitality and advice of distant clans. As a means of conflict-avoidance, it seemed not too large a leap from intermarriage throughout European royal ‘tribes’ like the Hapsburg clan. Unlike the Hapsburgs, there is less danger of inbred genes as the variance of sexual partners allows diversity of offspring. And uncertain paternity helps ensure that all Himba babies are treated equally.

A positive aspect of this inward-focused network of

reciprocal sexual exchange is that it is largely self-contained. In an age where AIDS has been spreading exponentially, the Himba have remained markedly untouched. So far. The danger is that those Himba who are exposed to a more urban lifestyle, or increased tourism, or development (like a dam), will also be exposed to HIV through ‘sugar daddies’ offering school tuition, car rides or cell phones. If they return and introduce it, the sexual exchange systems risk HIV will explode through the Himba.<sup>2</sup>

The ugliest aspect embodied in the spirit of *okujepisa* is that there is no word for ‘rape’ in Herero. Rape, as we understand it, implies that a woman may voluntarily refuse a man’s sexual advances. To the Himba, her consent is a given, so ‘forced sex’ is a nonsensical foreign concept.

Or consider drugs, hygiene and cosmetics. The first impression the Himba make on outsiders is through their

<sup>1</sup> Or not-so-important visitor, as I found out when various men offered me their wives (with the same nonchalance, my American friends offer to lend me their car) with the assumption of reciprocity that I might offer them something of equal value. When I demurred that such beauty was priceless, they seemed to disagree, and scanned the contents of my vehicle in case I changed my mind.

<sup>2</sup> Western ABC campaigns promoting monogamous, Christian-oriented ‘Abstain, Be faithful (exclusive), Condoms’ fall flat in an animist, polygamous culture that enshrines fertility and virility.



*Sacred Gravesite, Old and New: Sentiment aside, a grave holds economic, historical, political, and practical value as the equivalent of binding legal documents. One could no more exhume and 'relocate' Himba graves to make room for a dam than one could 'relocate' the U.S. Constitution from America. This made compromise impossible.*

distinctive hair, jewelry and above all, female painted skin. They are often referred to as 'the red people.' From an early age, the women stop bathing. Instead they start to spread an ointment — made up of ground ochre, butterfat (*omaze*) and an herb, Himbalavender, to add scent. The mixture goes beyond beauty; it builds up a protective layer, a second skin, to help the body tolerate dry-heat stress, limit dehydration and insulate against cold. The overall effect is striking. Recently, Namibia's booking agencies have been marketing the sensuous Himba woman in brochures, latching on to a frozen concept of culture as a tourist draw, and the Himba have grown more conscious of their effect on outsiders. An unromantic counterpoint was the smell, the relentless flies that clung to the women and their children, and the sickness I saw. Dirt may not be dirty, and sanitation may weaken the immune system over time, but an infection remains an infection, and I was frequently badgered for *muti* — western pills and antibiotics. I saw several men and children suffering from malaria, a deadly killer here, and reminder of why Himba so value the production of numerous babies. If the government wants to build trust about a rising reservoir, it might first introduce some soap and medicine to scrub and swallow.

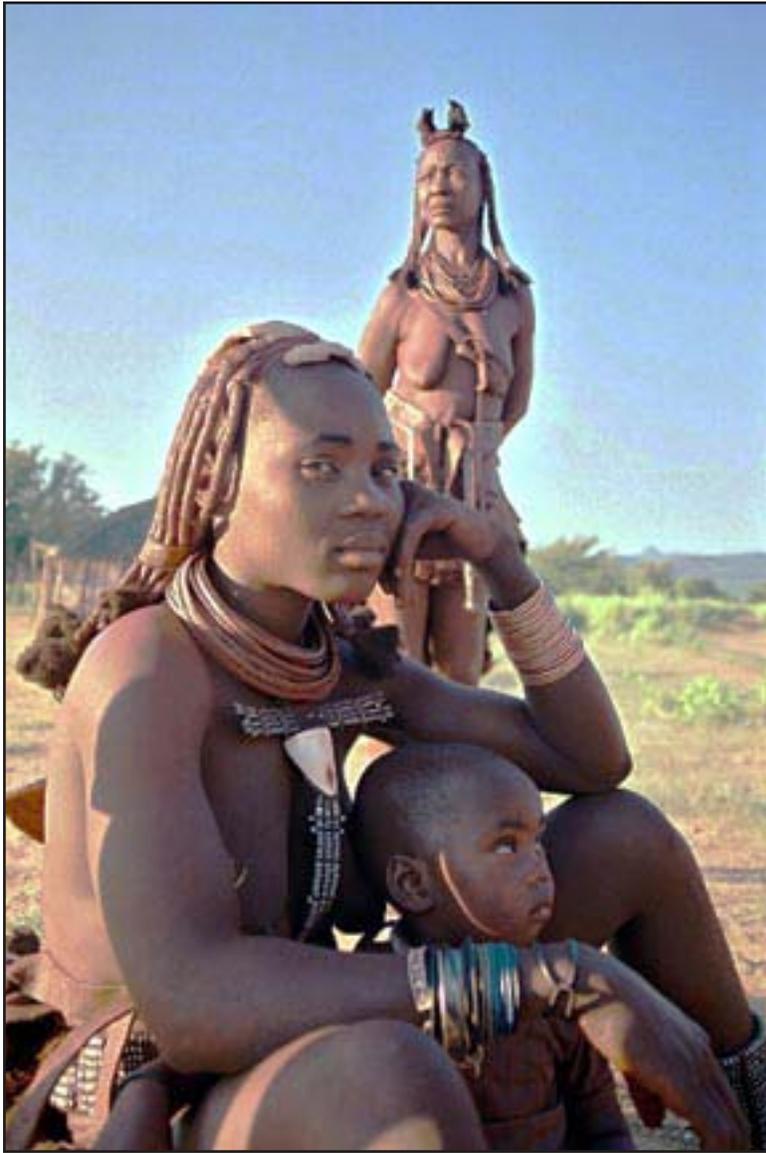
Then there're those dozens of 'quaint' Himba taboos. Most involve some variation on giving, slaugh-

tering or eating a certain color, gender, breed or pattern of livestock at certain times. These seemingly silly superstitions reveal the complex and intricately valued attention they pay to cattle detail. For an oral culture, cattle are the Himba equivalent to our own seemingly quaint little written taboos/subclauses in tax, divorce or contract law. For centuries cattle have been everything. Cattle tied people to place. Cattle linked the living to specific ancestors, like a doll, a watch, a medal handed down through the ages. Himba were bound to cattle, and cattle were bound to water, to grass and rain, to each other. Cattle were more than currency; they could be paid as fines, and were a way of securing wives, and thus offspring, and thus status. Some 95 percent of Himba would rather have cattle than material possessions. Respecting and understanding these quaint taboos became inseparable from the explanation of why the Himba, who endured wars, and theft, and drought, and famine, and Rinderpest, being chased off into Angola a century ago by war, have become, per capita and measured through cattle, one of the richest tribes in Africa.

Finally reflect on death. Himba speak to the dead through a Holy Fire. In turn, the deceased and long-buried ancestors lead meetings of the living; for each man, at least two generations of spirits chair discussions, spur debate, broker compromise and determine outcomes. The dead anchor them in an orderly way to place, to the past, to each other. Only if we recognize that all these 'odd' and complex traditions and taboos that guide the Himba as the equivalent to our contracts and legal codes, and then recall that our supreme, authoritative law of the land is the U.S. Constitution, can we begin to appreciate the value they place on their own supreme authority — the ancestral graves. Imagine how you might react if a newly elected leader proposed flooding the National Archives in the name of development and security and then offered to 'rescue' the Constitution by scrambling it into 160 pieces and then taping those pieces back together else-



*Baby on Board: Most of the fabric Himba use is leather, horn and bone from their cattle, slaughtered only for ceremony or when sick. A small group of craftsmen forge metal bangles and hinges, and trade these with the Himba for leather or milk.*



*Three Generations, One Gender: The Himba's conservative but stable society is the result of a horizontal power structure that knits together the father's family line (or 'patri-clan') authority in the place of life, or community, with the mother's family line (or 'matri clan) inheritance and control of belongings, like cattle, huts and traditions.*

where in haphazard, random order. You might object. You might protest, seek foreign allies with leverage, and consult a charismatic leader to rally behind.

\* \* \*

Chief Hikuminue Kapika, animist, polygamist, tribal senior headman and Keeper of the Holy Fire chased the sacred cattle from his inner kraal out into the surrounding rangeland then brusquely instructed two grandsons where they should herd them. It was a commonplace ritual, yet dignified. He carried it out with a presence that transcended both the long life behind him and the acrid dry manure below. A brief handshake — a learned Western gesture without meaning — was enough to convey his stature and he sat down in the only chair within a 50-mile radius, to discuss water. I could not yet entirely read his eyes, except to write in my

notepad: 'the edges of his irises are bright blue.'

I had read of Kapika years before, when I worked at the World Commission on Dams, and had looked forward to this meeting. Yet rather than approach him right from the start, I planned to climb my way up the hierarchy, gathering various perspectives. It turned out there was a) no conflicting or even variety in opinion about the dam and b) no real hierarchy in the Himba society to climb. Himba consensus was of a different sort than the lock-step 'yes-of-course-we-all-agree' culture I've noticed in certain authoritarian regimes, like Cuba, Singapore, or the Bush Administration post 9-11. It was messier, looser. It reflected the Himba's: oral culture of extensive discussions that preceded any decision or position; horizontal power structure established through intermarriage; centuries of mobility that shifted power according to domain; and the authority of the cult of the ancestor that ensured continuity over five generations.

While not 'democratic' as we would define it, Himba tribal structure appeared a business-management guru's ideal. There was the chief, his several headmen, and then a thousand or so affiliated but individually responsible Himba who must be persuaded, not compelled, to pursue a common cause. Kapika held a position of authority through age and through cattle but mostly through the fact that he could point to the oldest ancestral burial sites, which bound him to the region longer, hence stronger, than others. Distant Himba chiefs, entering his domain, would defer to him, as would he upon entering theirs.

Arriving here days earlier I met my soon-to-be-co-opted translator, Staygu Ruitter (Kapika's grand-nephew), and several other young men when they invited me to kick a soccer ball around with them. They asked what brought me here, other than the scenic waterfalls. I casually mentioned the Namibian government's plan to generate hydropower, and how, with peace in Angola, it might be more likely to raise funds. This comment did not surprise anyone, but it made them sober and serious. They vowed to take up arms, if necessary, in a guerrilla resistance to the dam.

"We will not ever let them build it," said Meno Katupose, evenly. "We have rocks and other weapons. We know the land, the place; we can survive here. They can't." The others nodded, hot-blooded warrior-hunters, all. Good thing they had soccer as an outlet to channel that pent-up aggressiveness.

I did not take their words lightly. Namibia's democracy

was not geographically representative, so the minority Himba had no elected voice, no representative in national government. Its only potential Namibian allies, the sympathetic Herero,<sup>3</sup> had numbers but no clout with the majority party. I learned from Kapika's council of headmen, Okaparu, and Chicoko, and Tjikuva Hepute, that some of the elders had old guns given to them in the 1960s. "We would fight," Hepute confirmed. "Our goal is only to say no until the end. Even if we are forced back into another country we will continue to say no. And our Himba on the other side of the river, in Angola, they also say no."

\* \* \*

'No' is often more easily spoken in solidarity than practiced when alone on the QT. So I played devil's advocate. "But the government is trying to help you. Surely you want what it promises to bring you. Progress, and clothes, and electricity, and schools and clinics?" They thought about this in silence for a moment, then Hepute countered that he had never had electricity or non-traditional clothes (though he was wearing a wool cap) all his life.

"Actually we don't need for anything," he affirmed.

"Maybe a hospital to care for people when they are sick, but it must be private, for Himba. We don't trust the government, which may give us injections that kill us, and which gives us poor treatment. It is the same with schools. We don't trust them."

With that they took me to the man they do trust. Chief Kapika, himself a grandfather, told me how he had helped bury his own grandfather on the banks of the Kunene at a site that would be flooded by the proposed dam. It explains why he is so adamant in his fight against the government. He would not only lose his authority in decision-making, and his family's established land tenure. He would lose his history, and identity. Erased by water.

I asked Kapika why he and others buried ancestors so close to the river. It may first have begun as a practical matter; again, form follows function. Alluvial soils are usually deeper and easier to dig than the hard, rocky scree farther from the banks. Lengthy funeral celebrations involve concentrating large numbers of people coming from afar to show their respects, slaughter cattle and honor the dead in feasts. Such gatherings require abundant water. Yet the riverine areas grow charged with spiritual values as well. Each funeral ceremony, each burial,



**"Where God Left His Footprint":** *Though impressive, Epupa is not the highest, wildest or biggest falls in Africa. It is however one of the most evocative, because of its human ties. Rather than Niagara or Yosemite or Yellowstone, it resembles the late Celilo Falls on the Columbia River, where thousands of Native Americans annually gathered annually for salmon and ceremony, until flooded by a dam. May Epupa escape that fate.*

<sup>3</sup> Herero are a more numerous, closely related, conservative, ancestor-worshipping tribe that spoke the same language as the Himba but, starting a century ago, left behind the Himba pastoral customs to adopt farming and town lifestyles (the women's elaborate colorful dresses are taken from Victorian garb).

adds emotive weight to place. It is heavy with loss, yet strong with reunion. When Himba later pray to ancestors for guidance, their minds' eye conjures this falls, this river. Finally, few can stand in the mist spray before Epupa Falls and fail to be moved by the thin, arcing makalani palms side-by-side with squat baobabs clinging to the edges where, said Kapika, "God has left his giant footprint on the rocks."

Kapika inherited his authority from such ancestors; his charisma and tactics are his own. So far his strategy of forging links with Himba in Angola and alliances with environmental and human-rights attorneys in Namibia have proven instrumental in blunting momentum to build the dam. He had been flown (at the expense of anti-dam activists who joined his battle for river/environmental reasons) to northern Europe, clad in traditional leather clothing, to lobby potential donors against funding it. The Scandinavians were wowed and withheld 'dam development funds.' But Kapika recounted the visit with a mixture of pride and puzzlement, reflecting. "The people in Europe, they seemed rich. But they cannot be happy. None of them had cattle."

Without foreign aid, the dam seemed dead. Since then, peace had come to Angola, which now seriously sought to generate electricity and irrigation; Angola's lucrative oil reserves meant it could help fund any bilateral water-development project, with or without the complicated legal, social and environmental strings attached to foreign and multilateral donor packages. I brought this to his attention.

"I oppose the dam for many cultural and economic reasons, such as inundated graves and lost grazing land," he repeated.

Yes, but *how* will you oppose it?

"I have legal and environmental allies who would help pressure influential nations like yours. We could write letters to argue our position."

Yes, but your government ignored letters, and



**Red Schoolbus or Youth Corruptor?:** *Entering a 'primitive' society tests the scruples of the Western outsider. It forces you to confront every little thing you do or say, asking your conscience: will this help or hurt them in the long run? Is my way better than theirs? These kids begged a long ride to a mobile school; I obliged while recalling the Himba expression: "When we send our children to school, we lose them forever."*

Angola didn't need donor funds on its side.

Kapika paused, distracted. Despite the real threats posed by the dam, I sensed there were other matters troubling him. The government did not yet have the money and wouldn't get it this month, this year. The water issue he really wanted to talk to me about was what he saw as the government's insidious, deliberate neglect to repair few crucial boreholes.

This angle was something I had not prepared for. I came to talk dams, and I was caught off guard. I recalled how, face to face with the president, Kapika had said: "Now that you are here, our bore-holes are filled with snakes. How is it that the apartheid mother took care of us better than you?"

Yes, but how could broken boreholes compare to a massive dam?

"They are using repair of our boreholes as leverage against us to make us support their dam," said Kapika.

Finally I stopped my 'yes, buts' and just listened. I listened to him, to others. To their needs rather than my own. The longer I listened and the more I read and learned of the intricate self-regulation within Southern Africa's last nomadic pastoral culture<sup>4</sup>, the more it dawned on me that

<sup>4</sup> The pastoral nomadic Massai, another border tribe between Kenya and Tanzania in East Africa, have an equally uneasy relationship with their government and nation's popular majorities. Both strike one as colorful and charismatic and rich in tradition. But I have found the Himba, perhaps because of remoteness and isolation from tourism, and because of their relatively peaceful past, to come off as less self-conscious or haughty in their relations with the outsider.

the internationally politicized dam was not the only threat that could quietly unravel their unique cultural identity.

In the conversational silence for the next few moments the only sounds we heard were the cry of a yellow hornbill, the bleat of a calf, and Kapika's ochre-covered second wife, Uvaserua rocking a calabash full of sour milk into butterfat. Kapika's blue-black eyes looked into mine. As much as my past would allow me, I tried to see these various modern forces or water threats from the outside — caught between a dam and a dry place — through eyes of a leader in rapid transition between worlds, trying to adapt to inevitable change on his own terms. I shut off my over-wound American clock and stepped into African Time.

\* \* \*

Though watch-less myself, I used to hate that expression, "African Time." It always had the patronizing connotation of explaining away weakness or inferiority, of the tendency to surrender individual responsibility. By contrast, the Himba concept of time reinforces individual bearing of responsibility in a way that challenges our own. Here's how.

For the Himba, time is a river that flows past them, like the Kunene. No metaphorical difference there with the West in that, right? But they invert the perspective. If time flows, it means that the upstream future, which has yet to pass, is behind them. It is invisible. In contrast, the past has already been experienced, lies ahead and is therefore visible. So when Europeans say (and 'modern' Afri-

can politicians echo) "Let us put the past behind us, and look forward to the future" it makes no sense to a Himba.

Margaret Jacobsohn, an anthropologist, recalled frequent times around a campfire near the Kunene when Himba puzzled about 'white' vs 'Himba' time. "If the past is behind you, you cannot see it and therefore you may easily forget it. This cannot be good. And how is it possible that tomorrow lies in front of you? If it were there you would be able to see it!"

\* \* \*

Kapika satisfied me with his answers, but raised new questions. I knew dams. I did not know boreholes, though, and would have to school myself. I realized that if I were to see the impact of boreholes on Himba I would have to look in front of me, at the African past.

And when I returned? Would I come preaching some solution or advocacy regarding water? With time and proximity here, I realized I was not the freethinking moral relativist I once imagined myself to be. Yet as I interviewed and thus intervened (as Heisenberg pointed out, the observer invariably affects the subject) I questioned whether my values could work here better than their own had for centuries.

Despite the reserve and integrity of the Himba, they are not immune to modernity. They see how exposure to schools, and a bit of English, gives them an advantage in political clashes, such as the one against the dam. They see Western antibiotics working where indigenous medicine may fail. Himba means "those who must beg for something," a name left over from when they were poor and scattered war refugees in Angola a century ago. Today, again rich with cattle, they wear the name with irony. Still, children cry out for sweets. Adults request — with what Paul Thoreau has described as 'a weird sense of entitlement' — addictive things ranging from coffee, tobacco, sugar, or rides in (or on top of) my Land Rover.

Even the soccer players I got to know, the ones who said they did not need money or electricity or new clothing, even they wanted something. Soccer was relatively new to them, but they picked up the game quickly and were competing with their kin, the Himba in Angola, just across the Kunene River. They rowed over, not far above the falls, in order to compete. The previous week they'd lost 2-0. "We are gathering a petition to mail off a request for sponsors," said Meno as I prepared to leave.

"Sponsors for what? School fees? That hospital?"

"For soccer uniforms, so we can beat the team in Angola."

Oh, hell. I envisioned some franchise like



**Keep the Home Fire Burning:** *The Holy Fire, often barely a smudge smolder, is the window through which the living stay in close contact with their dead ancestors for guidance; it is the animist equivalent to an altar and cross where Christians pray to Jesus. It is permanently located between the first wife's hut and the holy cattle kraal, and one takes care not to cross the invisible line connecting all three. It is kept alive by women, feeding small pieces of wood, cut by men with this Holy Axe made solely for that purpose.*

McDonald's, or KFC, or Shell, emblazoning their logo across jerseys worn by these traditional men, then using it in their advertising. It made me raise my voice, almost rudely. "You think the uniform makes the team? Please. You must just practice, and when you beat them, wearing your own clothes, then you will be proud."

Meno just nodded and smiled and handed me his petition again. Ruitter asked if I could make copies of it and distribute it to foreign firms in the cities (local Namibian merchants were mostly from another tribe, and hostile). "Or maybe you could mail it to the United States?" I promised nothing, but took the petition and waved good-bye.

\* \* \*

I did not return to Epupa region for several months. I was traveling and pursuing other stories in other parts of Namibia, and researching groundwater and boreholes there and in Botswana and South Africa as well. What I learned in these places about the past effects of boreholes on Nomadic people in Africa and elsewhere made me depressed, and hesitant to return to Epupa at all.

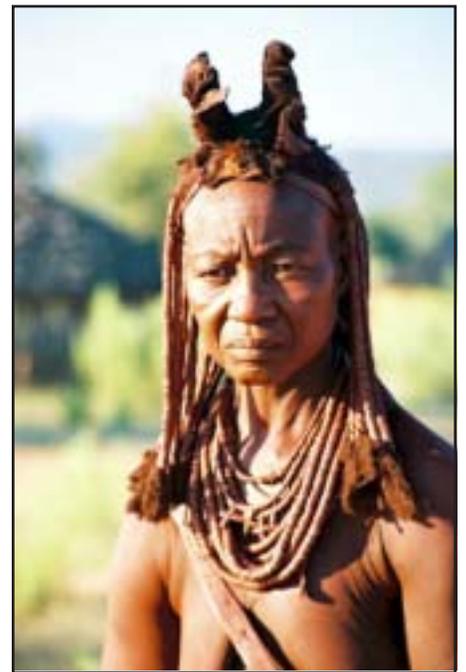
Of all the 'modern' introduced substances — gasoline, currency, coffee, tea, tobacco, sugar, alcohol, etc. — none is more addictive than borehole water. The water tastes cooler, clearer, purer, healthier than any other kind of water. Middle-aged men have cried with hysterical laughter upon tasting borehole water for the first time. Surely, they exclaimed, this can't be the same substance as that muddy, gritty, acrid and sometimes slimy fluid they and their families have drunk all their lives. And unlike other addictive substances, borehole water requires no transformation into anything else. It is ready, as is, dependable for years on end if consumed with restraint.<sup>5</sup>

Increased access to borehole water is rightfully the priority of many 'development' advocates because it improves living standards, lengthens lifespan and decreases infant mortality from the start. And because local control requires decentralization and devolution of funding and authority (limiting corruption) many of the most fervent anti-dam activists advocate boreholes over dams as a sustainable water-supply alternative. I side with this position.

Yet nothing good is gained without loss elsewhere. Borehole water may seem a largely benign addiction, but



**Aging Matriarch, Eligible Debutantes:** Just as a diamond ring on the fourth finger of the left hand indicates marriage in the West, outward appearances reveal status within Himba society. The older woman's hairstyle shows that she is married; the shell (from Angola's Atlantic coast) and belt of the young girl on the right are gifts showing her engaged to a serious suitor.



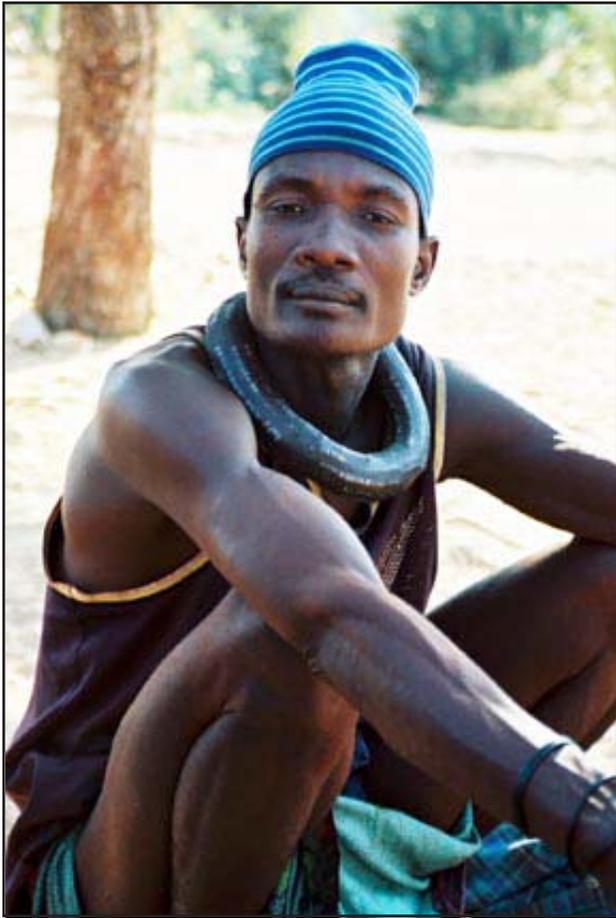
deep and permanent consequences of dependency can't be ignored. Since the 'function' of surviving severe aridity and scarce water sources dictated the adaptive 'form' of semi-nomadic pastoralism, it follows that new artificial boreholes would irrevocably alter, and most likely end, both nomadic form and function. For pastoral nomadic herders, the past appears ominous. "Drought relief" boreholes become permanent. Outsiders can rely on boreholes to enter the dry area and compete with the Himba, forcing them out.

Pumped groundwater tempts year-round grazing in what had been off-limits dryland pasture. This process leads to 'sedentarization,' a process of short-term economic benefits but long-term political instability. A landmark book challenging the "Myth of Desertification" concludes this about borehole impacts:

It can be the all-important factor in upsetting traditional systems, leading to degradation. Sedentarization of mobile pastoralist, is often encouraged by central governments for political reasons, to make control of the population easier, to modernize practice, to make education and medical facilities more easily available, and to bring pastoralist products into the wider economy in a manageable way.

In every dryland, from Mongolia to the Middle East, to north Africa and the Sahel, to east and southern Africa, borehole-drilling projects may carry a sinister tinge, as central authorities deliberately or unconsciously seek a permanent way to harness autonomous nomads and put them under collective control and dependence. The

<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately restraint is not a human instinct, leading to complications I'll explore in the next dispatch.



*“We would fight”:* Chief Kapika’s councilor, Tjekuva Hepute, offers thoughts on the Himba’s future against a dam, or without boreholes. Male appearances are changing faster than women; his stretched leather cap is covered again by a stocking cap.

Maasai and Samburu fell under the sway of sweet, British colonial borehole water. Starting in the 1930s, thousands of ‘drought-relief’ boreholes in Botswana expanded to government ranches that let both human and cattle populations mushroom exponentially, thus displacing hunter-gatherers in favor of livestock and agriculture. And I had seen how abandoned diamond-exploration boreholes made some Bushmen dependent on those permanent water points, giving political leverage to the government hoping to evict them. Never mind the pen. Time after time, at hundreds of thousands of dots around Africa, the drilling rig has proved mightier than the sword.

\* \* \*

When I returned to Epupa, and joined the men on the soccer field again, it was with the knowledge that their society, too, was falling under the seductive, addictive pull of the borehole. I couldn’t blame them. This was not necessarily bad, for unlike the proposed dam it was their choice to use the boreholes. But without becoming didactic, I wanted to make sure they knew the consequences of relying on government groundwater boreholes.

Even if I could, I did not want to preserve their tradition in amber but to help them negotiate the coming

change on their terms. Otherwise the end would come not with a war-like clash as those reserved but proud young soccer players promised, but with a gradual erosion into, and silent submersion beneath, the mud of a dam or borehole.

I met with the councilors, headmen and Chief Kapika again, gratified to be recognized both by the men and their wives. Uvaserua, the Chief’s younger wife, exclaimed and thanked me again for the blue plastic 25-liter water container I had given her, and Kapika said he was using the cast-iron pot for his meat. “It is the Himba way,” my translator, Ruiter, explained. “People remember you from what you give them.” I felt the usual doubts about my own personal legacy of these modern gifts to those who seem to already have what they need; by easing their life was I polluting their culture? How was this different from a dam or borehole?

“The boreholes have still not been repaired,” said Kapika, specifying three of them that use a wind pump, a diesel pump and a hand pump. “We cannot afford to repair them ourselves, and the government is still using them to coerce acceptance of the dam. But we will not give our consent.”

How did the boreholes come in the first place? I asked. And who installed them?

He paused. It was the architects of apartheid, those unwelcome occupants of what was then Southwest Africa. Most Himba I spoke with said they fared better under apartheid than democracy, although that is not saying much. During Namibia’s struggle for independence the nomads — too busy finding water and pasture for their herds — remained (to the combatants) maddeningly neutral, and thus mistrusted by both sides. During the day, the white South African Defense Force accused them of giving meat to the Sam-Nujoma-led rebel South West African People’s Organization (SWAPO). During the night SWAPO molested them as apartheid informers,

**Laughing Woman:**

*Gossipy and inquisitive, this woman found it hilarious that I was not yet married. In the past, children had lower (and sometimes upper) two incisors knocked out, as custom but mainly to ward off tetanus. Few today follow suit.*





***Food Processor:** After Chief Kapika tastes the first milk of the morning and gives his approval that it is safe for others, his wife Uvaserua lets it sour, then churns it into butterfat. Behind her a boy inspects the result through the churn-gourd hole.*

then killed and ate some of their cattle.

In the decades of apartheid, white leaders largely left them alone since the Himba were too scattered and decentralized to pose a threat, the area was too remote to provide labor, the ground was too hard and dry to cultivate with irrigation, the landscape held no mineral wealth to exploit, and their uneducated were too remote to force into schools or successfully convert to Christianity beyond a marginal 5 percent. Moved by pity, or its own sense of cultural paternalism, the apartheid regime did do one thing for — or to — the Himba. It provided them with these few boreholes, and they remain grateful.

“We need them in places where there is no permanent water,” said councilor Tjikuva Hepute, who is one of the potential successors to the aging Chief Kapika. “We want more; where there is no river or spring there must be a borehole.”

Logical enough, perhaps. Adding more boreholes means more water, means larger herds, means more wives, means more children, means more security and stability and a stronger position now and in the afterlife. What could be the downside? I recalled how, without exception, boreholes ended every nomadic culture they touched, and often so degraded the landscape so that animal husbandry became impossible.

If Sam Nujoma’s SWAPO government really wanted  
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to sap the Himba resistance without a fight, ‘modernize’ them, end what he sees as their ‘primitive’ ways, and win universal praise for his efforts all the while, he would immediately fix those few boreholes, then install several hundred more.

I asked them if they still considered themselves nomadic or semi-nomadic, if their culture was still based on the practice of moving and herding from one place to another. The elders shook their heads slowly. “We have changed in the course of my lifetime,” said Kapika. “Our cousins the Tjimba people, with whom we intermarry, they still move. They are truly nomadic. They are rich, some richer than Himba, but do not have a permanent home. They are always moving with their belongings.”

Ruiter translated this, then flashed a smile at me, at the Land Rover, then at the group, teasing. “They are like Jamie.”

Heputa, the councilor, continued. “Now we mostly stay in a permanent village. A few of us may move our cattle to pasture during the rainy season for a temporary period, say four months. But this nomadism involves only a few men and women, not the whole village.

When did this shift start?

“When I was very young,” said Heputa. “I was seven,

so it must have been thirty-one or thirty-two years ago.”

And when did they, the South Africans, install the first boreholes?

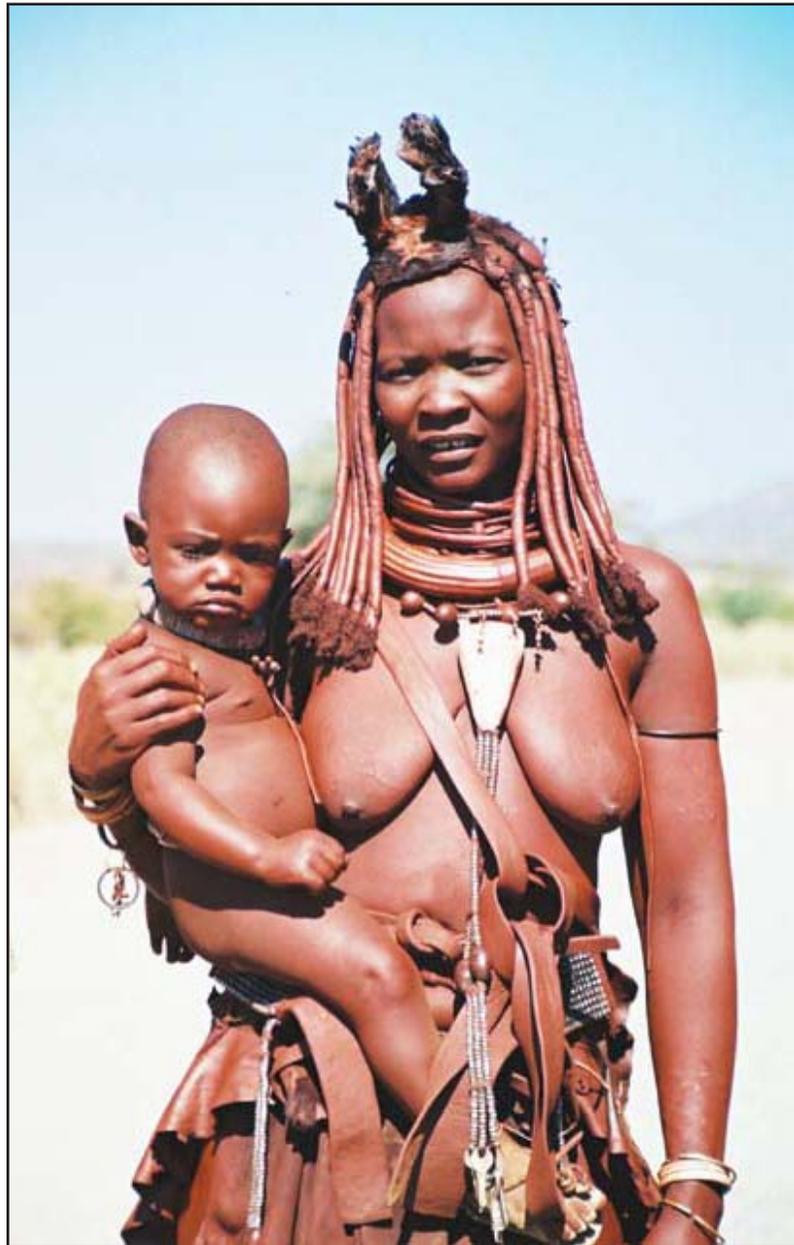
Heputa could not remember, he was too young at the time. He asked some of the other councilors. They did not know. Finally old Kapika spoke up, making the connection clear for all. “They were installed 34 years ago.” The group nodded in silence.

\* \* \*

The evening before I left Epupa I joined the team for one last scrimmage before the sun went down. They had improved only slightly, making up in energy and enthusiasm for what they lacked in organization. A game

against the Himba across the river loomed the coming Saturday, only three days away. As that final, memorable dusk fell I called the team together to say good-bye. I wished them luck, I reminded them that, on my last visit, they said the Himba do not need anything from outsiders, or the government, and told them that I admired them for that attitude. But I also learned how the Himba remember people for what they give them; I would remember them for showing me where to swim by the falls, for displaying courage against the dam, and for inviting me to join their game as a player. In turn I left them a gift in a box I had carried with me for 1,000 miles, and that had been blessed by Chief Kapika two days earlier.

I can't describe the reactions of the soccer team as the players opened the box and took out the 14 items emblazoned with Namibia's colors but a distinctly local and provocative name. One by one they pulled on the uniforms with pride, then spontaneously resumed playing with them, even past the point where we could see the ball. Women came out to stop and watch. Some of the adult men touched the fabric with envy, and several asked if they could join the team.



**Kawawa and Kohodewa:** *Mother and son sought me out as a medicine man with 'muti.' He had crawled too close to a fire and burned a small part of his right forearm. Some Neosporin antiseptic and bandages helped, but I was relieved when a traveling clinic came through.*

I can't reveal who sponsored the uniforms, as he might get in trouble with Namibia's authorities (or his own sponsors in America). And I left the next morning without knowing if we can ever truly resolve the affluent foreigner's quandary: whether our 'modern' gifts can bring strength to a traditional community without simultaneously corrupting its culture.

But back in Windhoek several days later, on that Saturday at 10:30 a.m., I imagined them in this newly adopted form of semi-nomadic migration: several boatloads of boys and young men rowing across the Kunene River above the Epupa Falls, answering a challenge in Angola. They will reunite with Himba relatives in a friendly battle, without spears, rocks or guns. Some remain barefoot; some will exchange bruised shins. All have the adrenaline hearts of warrior-hunters. Somewhere on the rocky northern banks they will explain that the letters across their chests read "Epupa Falls Dambusters," and their opponents may laugh with recognition and delight and pride, just as they did.

But that recognition is still a few hours away. In my mind they are still midstream in the Kunene, caught in the Himba's own unceasing River of Time. They do not look upstream at the future behind them or downstream at the past ahead of them. They simply negotiate the current until they reach the other side. □



*Benign Warrior-Hunters: Posing with the Epupa Falls "Dambusters," in uniforms provided by a mysterious anonymous sponsor, after they have been blessed by Kapika at his Holy Fire of the ancestors. Facing out, my translator, Ruitter, is team manager in goalie uniform on my right; Meno, the player-coach, stands two to my left.*

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### Fellows and their Activities

#### **Alexander Brenner** (June 2003 - 2005) • **EAST ASIA**

Alex received a B.A. in History from Yale in 1998 and has just completed a Master's degree in China Studies and International Economics at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. He is preparing for his two-year ICWA fellowship in China with four months of intensive Mandarin-language study in Beijing. His fellowship will focus on the impact of a new government and a new membership in the World Trade Organization on Chinese citizens, institutions and regions both inside and far from the capital.

#### **Andrew Rice** (May 2002 - 2004) • **UGANDA**

A former staff writer for the *New York Observer* and a reporter for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the Washington Bureau of *Newsday*, Andrew is spending two years in east-central Africa, watching, waiting and reporting the possibility that the much-anticipated "African Renaissance" might begin with the administration of President Yoweri Museveni. Andrew won a B.A. in Government from Georgetown (minor: Theology) in 1997 after having spent a semester at Charles University in Prague, where he served as an intern for *Velvet* magazine and later traveled, experienced and wrote about the conflict in the Balkans.

#### **Matthew Rudolph** (January 2004-2006) • **INDIA**

When work toward a Cornell Ph.D. in International Relations is finished, Matthew will begin two years as a Phillips Talbot South Asia Fellow looking into the securitization and development of the Indian economy.

#### **Matthew Z. Wheeler** (October 2002-2004) • **SOUTHEAST ASIA**

A former research assistant for the Rand Corporation, Matt is spending two years looking into proposals, plans and realities of regional integration (and disintegration) along the Mekong River, from China to the sea at Vietnam. With a B.A. in liberal arts from Sarah Lawrence and an M.A. from Harvard in East Asian studies (as well as a year-long Blakemore Fellowship in Thai language studies) Matt is also examining long- and short-term conflicts in Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia.

#### **James G. Workman** (January 2002 - 2004) • **SOUTHERN AFRICA**

A policy strategist on national restoration initiatives for Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt from 1998 to 2000, Jamie is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at southern African nations (South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique, Zambia and, maybe, Zimbabwe) through their utilization and conservation of fresh-water supplies. A Yale graduate (History; 1990) who spent his junior year at Oxford, Jamie won a journalism fellowship at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies and wrote for the *New Republic* and *Washington Business Journal* before his years with Babbitt. Since then he has served as a Senior Advisor for the World Commission on Dams in Cape Town, South Africa.

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