

Remote but in contact with history and the world

Sauter et al. (1) begin with the premise that the Himba with whom they worked in Kaokoland, northwestern Namibia, lived in isolation “with no exposure to other cultural groups through media or personal contact.” The authors have not adequately situated their informants in a historical or anthropological context. Had they done so, they would have seen how unlikely it is that the people with whom they worked had “not been exposed to the affective signals of individuals from cultural groups other than their own” (1).

Disregarding history, Sauter et al. (1) do not do full justice to their research. The Kaokoland is indeed touted among tourists and reality TV programs as the home of the “primordial” Himba (2). Yet, the Himba have been in direct contact with the outside world for the past 150 years. The Himba are an intrinsic part of the ethnic grouping that speaks Otjiherero, shares a number of sociocultural features, and populates parts of southwestern Angola and northwestern and central Namibia.

Hunters, traders, and raiders began moving into the Kaokoland from central Namibia and Angola in the 1860s. By the 1880s, the Kaokoland fell under centralized polities that maintained extensive links with Afrikaans and Nama-speaking Oorlam settlers established at Sesfontein on the southern reaches of the Kaokoland; additionally, Portuguese and European traders and Boer settlers in southern Angola traveled throughout the Kaokoland. Many Himba migrated to southern Angola to seek employment with Boer and Portuguese settlers (3).

In the 1960s, Namibia was militarized as the war against South Africa’s occupation of Namibia intensified. In the 1970s, as part of its counterinsurgency strategies, the South African Defence Force (SADF) established military bases, resettled Himba, and laid

down a network of roads and tracks; the research team led by Sauter probably used tracks established by the SADF to reach their research settings. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Himba men and women were recruited into the People’s Liberation Army of Namibia (some of whom trained in the eastern bloc and Cuba), and many Himba men served under South African command (4).

After Namibian independence, the inhabitants of the Kaokoland have been free to travel the world, and they, in turn, have been visited by thousands of tourists and hundreds of academics. Itinerant cattle traders from central Namibia traverse the length and breadth of the Kaokoland in search of livestock in exchange for foodstuffs, alcohol, transistor radios, batteries, and a whole host of other commodities. The chance that, in 2010, an adult Himba has not interacted with cultural outsiders is virtually nonexistent.

Additionally, the suggestion that the “Himba do not have a system for measuring age” is not in keeping with the literature. Himba, along with all other Otjiherero-speaking people, maintain a system of ascribing names to years, a system that allows historians and anthropologists to reach back in time to the 1820s (5).

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