

# Himba People

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- **Total population:** about 50,000
- **Languages:** OtjiHimba (Herero language dialect)
- **Religion:** Monotheistic (Mukuru and Ancestor Reverence)
- **Related ethnic groups:** Herero people, Bantu peoples



Himba / OvaHimba / Himba (OmuHimba) woman

The Himba (singular: OmuHimba, plural: OvaHimba) are indigenous peoples with an estimated population of about 50,000 people living in northern Namibia, in the Kunene region (formerly Kaokoland) and on the other side of the Kunene River in Angola.[1] There are also a few groups left of the Ovatwa, who are also OvaHimba, but are hunters and gatherers. The OvaHimba are a semi-nomadic, pastoral people, culturally distinguishable from the Herero people in northern Namibia and southern Angola, and speak OtjiHimba (a Herero language dialect), which belongs to the language family of the Bantu.[1] The OvaHimba are considered the last (semi-) nomadic people of Namibia.

## Culture

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### Subsistence economy

The OvaHimba are predominantly livestock farmers who breed fat-tailed sheep and goats, but count their wealth in the number of their cattle. They also grow and farm rain-fed-crops such as maize and millet. Livestock are the major source of milk and meat for the OvaHimba, their milk-and-meat nutrition diet is also supplemented by maize cornmeal, chicken eggs, wild herbs and honey. Only occasionally, and opportunistically, are the livestock sold for cash. Non-farming businesses, wages and salaries, pensions, and other cash remittances make up a very small portion of the OvaHimba livelihood, which is gained chiefly from their work in conservancies, old-age pensions, and drought relief aid from the Government of Namibia.



Himba herders in Kaokoland

### **Daily life**

Women and girls tend to perform more labor-intensive work than men and boys do, such as carrying water to the village, earthen plastering the mopane wood homes with a traditional mixture of red clay soil and cow manure binding agent, collecting firewood, attend to the calabash vines used for producing and ensuring a secure supply of soured milk, cooking and serving meals, as well as artisans making handicrafts, clothing and jewellery. The responsibility for milking the cows and goats also lies with the women and girls. Women and girls take care of the children, and one woman or girl will take care of another woman's children. The men's main task is preoccupied tending to the livestock farming, herding where the men will often be away from the family home for extended periods, animal slaughtering, construction, and holding council with village headmen.

Members of a single extended family typically dwell in a homestead (onganda), a small family-village, consisting of a circular hamlet of huts and work shelters that surround an okuruwo (sacred ancestral fire) and a central enclosure (kraal) for the sacred livestock. Both the fire and the livestock are closely tied to their veneration of the dead, the sacred fire representing ancestral protection and the sacred livestock allowing "proper relations between human and ancestor".

### **Clothing and hair style**

Both the Himba men and women are accustomed to wearing traditional clothing that befits their living environment in the Kaokoland and the hot semi-arid climate of their area, in most occurrences this consists simply of skirt-like clothing made from calfskins or increasingly from more modern textiles, and occasionally sandals for footwear, with foot soles often found made from old car tires. Himba women especially, as well as Himba men, are remarkably famous for covering themselves with otjize paste, a cosmetic mixture of butter fat and ochre pigment, to cleanse the skin over long periods due to water scarcity and protect themselves from the extremely hot and dry climate of the Kaokoland as well as against mosquito insect bites. The cosmetic mixture, often perfumed with the aromatic resin of the omuzumba shrub, gives their skin and hair plaits a distinctive orange or red-tinge characteristic, as well as texture and style. Otjize is considered foremost a highly desirable aesthetic beauty cosmetic, symbolizing earth's rich red color and blood the essence of life, and is consistent with the OvaHimba ideal of beauty.

Hairstyle and jewellery play a significant role among the OvaHimba, it indicates age and social status within their community. An infant or child will generally have their head kept shaved of hair or a small crop of hair on their head crown, this soon is sculptured

to one braided hair plait extended to the rear of the head for young boys and young girls have two braided hair plaits extended forward towards the face often parallel to their eyes, the form of wear being determined by the oruzo membership (patrilineal descent group), the style remains during preadolescence until reaching puberty. Some young girls, with exception, may also have one braided hair plait extended forwards, which means they are one of a pair of twins.

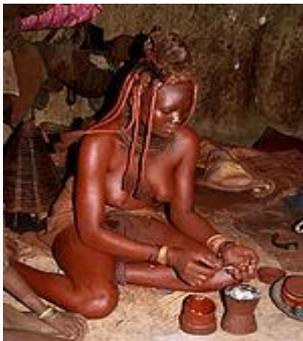
From pubescence, boys continue to have one braided hair plait, girls will have many otjize textured hair plaits, some arranged to veil the girl's face, in daily practice the hair plaits are often tied together and held parted back from the face. Women who have been married for about a year, or have had a child, wear an ornate headpiece called the Erembe, sculptured from sheepskin, with many streams of braided hair, coloured and put in shape with otjize paste. Unmarried young men continue to wear one braided hair plait extended to the rear of the head, while married men wear a cap or head-wrap and un-braided hair beneath. Widowed men will remove their cap or head-wrap and expose un-braided hair. The OvaHimba are also accustomed to use wood ash for hair cleansing due to water scarcity.



Young Himba girls. The Erembe headdress indicates both are married

### Customary practices

The OvaHimba are polygamous, with the average Himba man being husband to two wives at the same time. They also practice early arranged marriages. Young Himba girls are married to male partners chosen by their fathers. This happens from the onset of puberty which may mean that girls aged 10 or below are married off. This practice is illegal in Namibia, and even some OvaHimba contest it but it is nevertheless widespread. Among the Himba people, it is customary as a rite of passage to circumcise boys before puberty. Upon marriage, a Himba boy is considered a man, unlike a Himba girl who is not considered a fully-fledged woman until she bears a child.



Himba woman preparing incense, the smoke is used as antimicrobial body cleansing agent, deodorant and fragrant, made by burning aromatic herbs and resins.

### **Socially dynamic**

Despite the fact a majority of OvaHimba live a distinct cultural lifestyle in their remote rural environment and homesteads, they are however socially dynamic, and not all are isolated from the trends of local urban cultures. The OvaHimba coexist and interact with members of their country's other ethnic groups and the social trends of urban townfolk. Especially those in proximity to the Kunene Region capital of Opuwo, travelling frequently to shop at the local town supermarkets for the convenience of commercial consumer products, market food produce and to acquire health care.

## **Tribal Structure**

Under bilateral descent, every tribe member belongs to two clans: one through the father (a patriclan, called oruzo) and another through the mother (a matriline, called eanda). Himba clans are led by the eldest male in the clan. Sons live with their father's clan, and when daughters marry, they go to live with the clan of their husband. However, inheritance of wealth does not follow the patriclan but is determined by the matriline, that is, a son does not inherit his father's cattle but his maternal uncle's instead.

Bilateral descent is found among only a few groups in West Africa, India, Australia, Melanesia and Polynesia, and anthropologists consider the system advantageous for groups that live in extreme environments because it allows individuals to rely on two sets of families dispersed over a wide area.



A traditional regional Leader or Headman of the OvaHimba - Chief Kapuka Thom (†2009) of the Vita (Thom) Royal House with his grandson because of the harsh desert climate in the region where they live and their seclusion from outside influences, the OvaHimba have managed to maintain and preserve much of their traditional lifestyle. Members live under a tribal structure based on bilateral descent that helps them live in one of the most extreme environments on earth.



Himba girl at work

# History

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The OvaHimba history is fraught with disasters, including severe droughts and guerrilla warfare, especially during Namibia's war of independence and as a result of the civil war in neighboring Angola. Between 1904–1908, they suffered from the same attempt at genocide during the Herero Wars conducted by the Empire colonist government in German South-West Africa under Lothar von Trotha that decimated notably the Herero people and the Nama people during the Herero and Namaqua Genocide.

In the 1980's it appeared the OvaHimba way of life was coming to a close due to a climax in adverse climatic conditions and political conflicts. A severe drought killed 90% of their livestock, and many gave up their herds and became refugees in the town of Opuwo living in slums on international humanitarian aid or joined Koevoet paramilitary units to cope with the livestock losses and widespread famine.

## Religion

The OvaHimba are a monotheistic people who worship the God Mukuru, as well as their clan's ancestors (ancestor reverence). Mukuru only blesses, while the ancestors can bless and curse. Each family has its own sacred ancestral fire, which is kept by the fire-keeper. The fire-keeper approaches the sacred ancestral fire every seven to eight days in order to communicate with Mukuru and the ancestors on behalf of his family. Often, because Mukuru is busy in a distant realm, the ancestors act as Mukuru's representatives.

The OvaHimba traditionally believe in *omiti*, which some translate to mean witchcraft but which others call "black magic" or "bad medicine". Some OvaHimba believe that death is caused by *omiti*, or rather, by someone using *omiti* for malicious purposes. Additionally, some believe that evil people who use *omiti* have the power to place bad thoughts into another's mind or cause extraordinary events to happen (such as when a common illness becomes life-threatening). But users of *omiti* do not always attack their victim directly; sometimes they target a relative or loved one. Some OvaHimba will consult a traditional African diviner-healer to reveal the reason behind an extraordinary event, or the source of the *omiti*.

# Anthropological investigations

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## Color perception

Several researchers have studied the OvaHimba perception of colours. The OvaHimba use four colour names: *zuzu* stands for dark shades of blue, red, green and purple; *vapa* is white and some shades of yellow; *buru* is some shades of green and blue; and *dambu* is some other shades of green, red and brown. It is thought that this may increase the time it takes for the OvaHimba to distinguish between two colours that fall under the same Herero colour category, compared to people whose language separates the colours into two different colour categories.