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# 'I'D RATHER THEY KILL ME'

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The Angolan and Namibian governments are planning to build a dam on the Kunene River that will displace thousands of Himba people and flood their grazing land and burial grounds. Thus far, government planners have ignored growing protests from international environmental agencies as well as the Himba people themselves

By **Marco Turco**



RIGHT: The Kunene River, looking into Angola ... the projected dam will flood almost 300 square kilometres of this pristine landscape

PREVIOUS PAGE: A Himba family at a nomadic settlement near Tomakas in the Kaokoveld ... the Himba survive under conditions unimaginable to urban dwellers

The meeting takes place near Okangwati in north-western Namibia, in the searing heat of the Kaokoveld. It is attended by a distinguished group of Himba chiefs and Angolan and Namibian politicians – among them the Namibian president, Sam Nujoma.

An old man, clad in discarded European clothing, his body smeared with red mud and clutching traditional weapons, struggles painfully to his feet. He is Katjira Muniombara, a headman of the Himba people, who live as cattle-herding nomads in the Namibian/Angolan border regions stretching from Okarundu to Otjavaja.

'We refuse this dam,' he cries out. 'The [Kunene] River is our hope, our life. We refuse this dam. It is our death.'

His apocalyptic words hang uneasily in the air.

Then Nujoma breaks the silence with a harsh bark of laughter. 'That's enough!' he declares. 'This man is really scared ... He doesn't welcome me. This is the life of the black people.'

Rising, the president abruptly turns his back on the tribesmen and saunters to the lunch table.

Ignored and vilified once again, the Himbas rise. Like a group of somnambulists, they walk back into the desert.

For generations, '... from the time our grandfathers walked down to meet the little people [the Khoisan] ...' says Hikominue Kapika, a Himba headman whose people live close to the scenic Epupa Falls, these people have remained aloof from the tribal feuds, border conflicts and civil wars that have ravaged south-western Africa.

Now, it is not war that is threatening to decimate





ANTHONY BANNISTER (ABPL)

their livestock, destroy their villages and crush their lifestyle. Rather, it is the damming of the Kunene River for a 650 megawatt hydroelectric power scheme, at an estimated cost of R3 billion. If the dam is built, it will flood more than 290 square kilometres of their summer grazing grounds, submerge ancestral graves, and displace almost 5 000 tribal people – all this in a desire to supply more electricity to the squalid and overcrowded towns of Namibia and Angola.

The Namibian government is determined to go ahead with the scheme, despite Himba resistance and international protests.

Government officials argue that the dam will ease the huge burden of unemployment that cripples both countries, bring 20th century development to the border regions, carry water to the

drought-stricken northern and central provinces, and provide electricity to Namibian industry. This particularly involves the mining sector, which already gobbles up 50% of the country's electrical supply (despite the fact that its production is declining).

This stance is in contradiction of a number of facts that the Namibian government in particular has quietly relegated to the archives:

- The electricity South Africa currently supplies to Namibia is reliable and cheap enough to obviate the need for the Epupa Dam.

- The funds could be used to develop the Namibian Kudo offshore gas fields, which the World Bank believes is a far more viable proposition.

- Given that Namibia is a sun-baked desert



## SPECIAL REPORT

**RIGHT: Women at Orupembe ... the Himba are not averse to change, their advisers say, but want to be consulted on how their ancestral lands are to be developed**



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country, solar power would provide a sustainable and cheap source of energy.

- Several smaller, less harmful, dams would spread the benefits of electricity over a wider area and improve the standard of living of more people.

- The Namibian government will have to borrow the funds needed to build the dam. This will push up income tax and strain the national budget even further, thus widening the enormous rift that already exists between middle and low income groups.

### WHAT YOU CAN DO

If you wish to help the Himba people and stop the Epupa Dam, you may contact the following organisations:

#### **Survival International for Tribal Peoples**

11-15 Emerald Street, London WC1N 3QL, United Kingdom.

Tel (0171) 242-1441, fax (0171) 242-1771

#### **Earthlife Africa**

P O Box 11383, Johannesburg 2000, Gauteng, South Africa. Tel (011) 833-1060.

#### **Third World Network**

87 Cantonment Road, 10250 Penang, Malaysia.

Tel (60) 4-373511, fax (60) 4-368106.

#### **United Nations Environment Programme**

P O Box 30552, Nairobi, Kenya. Tel (254) 2-333930, fax (254) 2-520883.

Letters of protest may be written to the following ministries:

#### **Namibian Ministry of Trade and Industry**

Private Bag 13340, Windhoek, Namibia. Tel (61) 22-9933, fax (61) 22-0227.

#### **Namibian Ministry of Mines and Energy**

Private Bag 13297, Windhoek, Namibia. Tel (61) 22-6571, fax (61) 23-8643.

#### **SWAWEK (Suid-Wes Afrika Water en Elektriesiteitskommissie)**

P O Box 2864, Windhoek, Namibia. Tel (61) 23-1830, fax (61) 23-2805.

#### **Angolan Ministry of Energy and Water**

P O Box 1260, Luanda, Angola. Tel (2) 33-7492, fax (2) 33-7448.

#### **Angolan Ministry of Geology and Mining**

P O Box 1260, Luanda, Angola. Tel (2) 32-2766, fax (2) 32-1655.

Government agencies researching the proposed project estimate that the feasibility study should take another two years to complete – more than enough time, they intimate, to displace the 1 000 Himba who live on the banks of the Kunene River, where the flooding will occur.

Ignoring advice from the World Bank and media-linked protests from the NGO Survival International for Tribal Peoples, which has consultant status at the UN, the Namibian and Angolan governments have decided to forgo the search for other energy sources and to concentrate on the preliminary plans for the Epupa Dam instead.

But the Himba (known to anthropologists as the OvaHimba) are not standing idly by while their ancestral lands are drowned around them, and are increasingly vocal in condemning the project. Addressing the government-supported Kunene Regional Council in late 1994, Katjira Muniombara made this poignant statement:

'Why are you killing the land? This land was first occupied by the Boers. They colonised us, and treated us like slaves. On the other side, in Angola, there were the Portuguese who also treated us like slaves. But now Namibia is an independent country – for everybody. Everybody has the right to freedom.

'You will kill everything, from the life of the livestock to the life of the human beings. Where are the people [Himba] to go?'

The Namibian prime minister retorted: 'Be careful! You shouldn't stand face to face with the government.'

In the Himba encampments and settlements, the elders will not allow their tribesmen to accept the work contracts being surreptitiously offered to them by government touts.





ABPL

'... If you continue to talk about this dam, blood will flow,' said one Himba nomad at the Okangwati meeting.

Advisers to the Himba say the building of the dam and the translocation of the Himba will contravene several human rights entrenched in the Namibian constitution, among them the right afforded to all Namibians to practice their traditional culture and religion.

This, they argue, would be done by the very government that penned the constitution in 1990, and which, given its own struggle for liberation, should really understand the agony and despair of those who would end up dispossessed and landless.

The more outspoken and defiant Himbas, notably headmen and youths, are increasingly demanding that these rights be observed.

In a recent submission to government officials, they asked that the Himba be afforded the following:

- The right to make a free and informed decision about whether the dam should be built;
- The right to express their views on the proposed project, and to have them considered by the government in deciding whether the dam should be built;
- The right to continue to occupy and use the current land and water for homes, burial sites and livestock;
- The right to the development of traditional lands and natural resources in ways the pastoral Himba believe are appropriate;
- The right to freely choose to continue a traditional lifestyle, become assimilated into Namibian society, and receive adequate education without losing their cultural identity;
- The right to legislative representation and

equal treatment under all Namibian laws;

- The right to discuss the impact of the proposed dam with the UN's Working Group on Indigenous Populations;
- The right to complain to the ombudsman, or to ask a Namibian judge to stop the dam from being built;
- If the dam is built, with or without Himba consent, the right to receive just and adequate compensation;
- The right to have any agreement for compensation made enforceable in a Namibian court of law.

The Himba are not rejecting all development, their advisers say. They point out that the few clinics and schools built in Kaokoland are attended by patients and students from local Himba settlements, keen to be physically healed and scholastically enlightened.

Instead of schemes such as these being foisted on them without their consent, they suggest that the Himba people should be supplied with honest, accurate information so that they can choose, in consultation with legal advisers and government ministries, which projects should be implemented on their tribal lands, and what effects this would have on their traditions and the future of their children.

Until the governments of Namibia and Angola realise that they are embarking on a project which amounts to cultural genocide for the Himba, the haunting words of Katjira Muniombara will continue to linger and may find a terrifying resonance in the hearts and minds of these gentle and beautiful people.

'I will never accept the Epupa Dam,' he told the meeting; 'I'd rather they kill me.'

**ABOVE: The Epupa Falls ... this superb natural feature will be completely submerged if the dam is built**