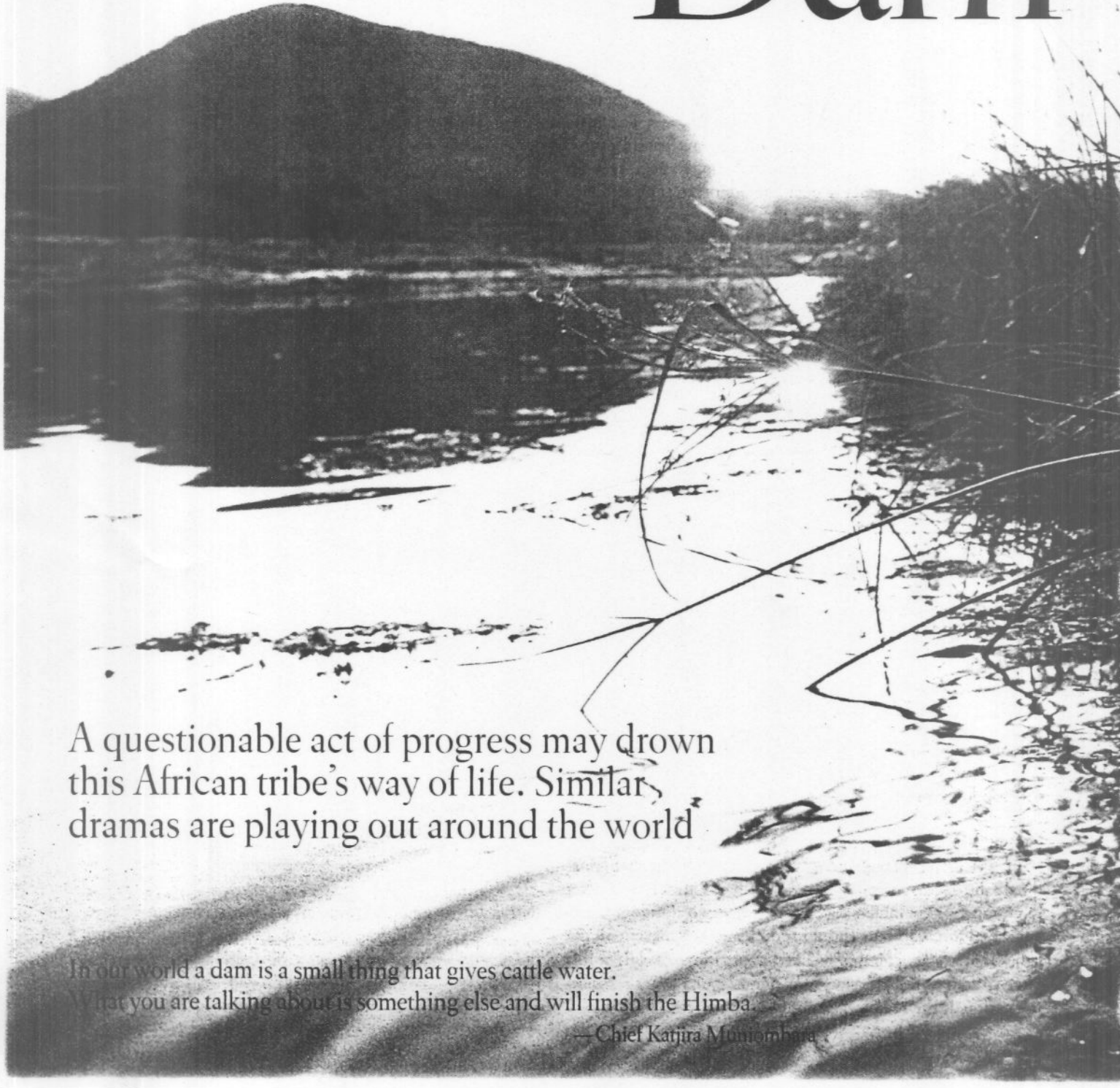


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THE Himba AND THE Dam

By Carol Ezzell
Photography by Karin Retief



A questionable act of progress may drown
this African tribe's way of life. Similar
dramas are playing out around the world

In our world a dam is a small thing that gives cattle water.

What you are talking about is something else and will finish the Himba.

—Chief Karjira Muniombara

Not until

we stand on a ridge overlooking the Kunene River—which forms part of the border between the southern African nations of Angola and Namibia—does tribal leader Jakatunga Tjiuma comprehend the immensity of the proposed dam. “Look there,” I tell him with the help of an interpreter, pointing to a distant notch in the river gorge that a feasibility study says would be the most likely site of the wall of concrete. “That’s where the dam would be.”

Turning, I point to hills in the east. “And the water would back up behind the dam to make a lake that would stretch to there.” I can see the shock and incredulity in his eyes as he begins to understand how high the water would rise up the faraway hillsides, flooding more than 140 square miles of Himba settlements, grazing land and grave sites. He clutches a blanket around his shoulders and crouches on a rock, speechless.

Tjiuma is a counselor to one of the headmen for the Himba tribe, an essentially self-sufficient band of 16,000 people who eke out an existence from the barren, rocky terrain of northwest Namibia, living off the milk and meat of their cattle and goats, along with the occasional pumpkin or melon. The Himba are sometimes called the Red People because they traditionally cover their bodies, hair and the animal skins they wear with a mixture of butterfat and a powder ground from the iron ore ocher. They say they use the ocher-butter mixture because they like the way it looks, although it undoubtedly also protects their skin against the arid climate.

For decades, the Himba have lived in relative isolation. No other tribes wanted their hardscrabble land, and the Germans who colonized the area in the late 19th century rarely interacted with them. More recently, the Himba’s main contact with outsiders has been with soldiers during the fight for Namibia’s independence from South Africa (which was won in 1990), with marauding combatants spilling over from Angola’s ongoing civil war, and with the occasional caravan of hippie Americans or Europeans. But if the Namibian government has its way, by 2008 more than 1,000 foreign workers will have settled in a temporary village just downstream from Epupa Falls, the site the government favors for the dam. With them will come a cash economy, alcohol, prostitution and AIDS—as well as improved roads, better access to medical care, schools and perhaps even electricity.

The situation surrounding the proposed dam on the Kunene River can be viewed as a microcosm of dam projects around the world that are affecting indigenous peoples. A survey by the World Commission on Dams, which issued its controversial final report last November, found that 68 of the 123 dams worldwide they studied would displace people, many of them in tribes that had little prior contact with the technological world. The largest dam project, the massive Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze River, will require the resettlement of up to two million Chinese. Nearly all the dams will change local peoples’ livelihoods and cultures—for good or ill, or some combination of the two.

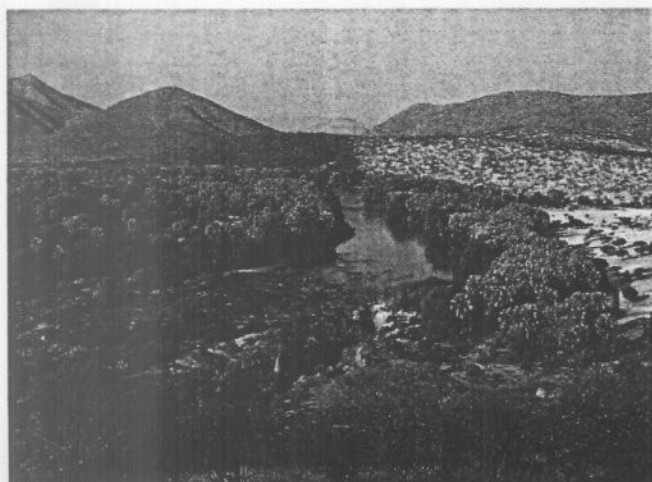
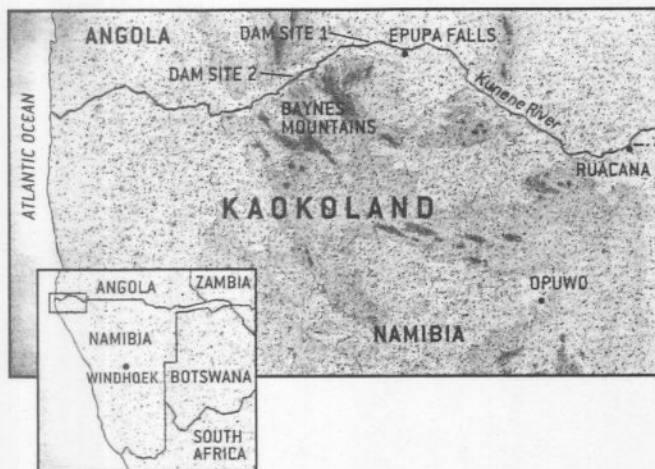
How should global society weigh the right of such peoples to be left alone against, in some cases, the very real necessity for developing countries to take advantage of their resources? Should such countries have the autonomy to decide what is in the best interests of all their citizens, even if some of them don’t want to change? Perhaps most important, how can traditional peoples decide such issues for themselves when they have only a shaky idea of how more developed societies live and what they might be getting themselves into?

Into the Desert

KAOKOLAND, THE CORNER OF NAMIBIA where the Himba live, is truly the back of beyond. We arrive at Epupa Falls, the modest waterfall on the Kunene River that would be inundated by the dam’s reservoir, two days after leaving the last tarred road. Our 4x4 truck is packed with everything from jerricans of gasoline (the closest gas pump is a day’s drive away) to cas-

Himba mother and child glisten red from a coating of butterfat mixed with the iron ore ocher. Like other adult women, the mother shaves her forehead and twists her hair into multiple braids that she daubs with a mud mixture. The heads of infants are shaved until they are weaned.

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es of bottled water, spare tires, emergency medical supplies, camping gear, and small gifts of tobacco, sugar and blankets. Tied to the top of our vehicle is a brand-new bicycle—the payment requested by our Himba translator, Staygon Reiter, in exchange for his services, although how he will use it in this inhospitable landscape I don't know. He has asked specifically that the bicycle come equipped with a carrier basket large enough to hold a goat.

Much of our journey is bumpy, jerky and slow as we attempt to follow the rough track while swerving to avoid washouts and potentially tire-puncturing rocks. More than once we get stuck in sand while trying to cross a dry riverbed, our tires spinning and squealing until we jump out to deflate them a bit or to stuff branches behind them for traction. At one point we stop to look at a particularly large scorpion in our path; I comment that I've seen smaller lobsters.

The settlement at Epupa Falls, where we camp, is a kind of crossroads, a no-man's-land where Namibian Himba mix with their Himba relatives from across the river in Angola and with other tribes such as the Herero—to whom the Himba are closely related—as well as with the Zemba, Thwa and Ngambwe. There is a modest thatched church built by missionaries; a tiny but deluxe safari camp; a corrugated-metal store that sells mostly bags of cheap tobacco, maize meal, and tepid Coke, Sprite and Fanta; and a community-run campsite where visitors like us can pitch a tent under the palmlike *omerungu* trees for 50 Namibian dollars (about US\$6) per night. Scarcely any people live at the settlement permanently: the Himba come for a few weeks or months at a time and build temporary huts while they attend funerals, divide inheritances, sell cattle, conduct other business, and visit with friends and relatives.

Our first stop is to meet Chief Hikuminwe Kapika at his compound near Epupa Falls, which is part of the territory he controls. It is immediately clear that Kapika—who is one of roughly a dozen Himba chiefs—is sick of talking about the proposed dam with outsiders but eager for us to appreciate the importance of his rank. From his shock of grayish hair and weathered face, I guess him to be in his 70s, although Himba don't have a calendar system, so they usually don't know the year in which they were born. He keeps us standing beside his white metal camp chair (the only one in his compound) swatting flies from our faces as I try to catch his attention long enough to answer my questions. Several times during our interview he spits

The Kunene River forms the northwest border between Angola and Namibia; the Himba live in the rocky, arid region known as Kaokoland (top). Tribal leader Tjiuma (middle) points to the spot (dam site 1 on map) the Namibian government favors as the most economical place for the proposed dam. The location is downstream of Epupa Falls (bottom), which would be inundated by the reservoir expected to back up behind the dam wall. The flooding would eliminate the *omerungu* palm trees that provide fruits the Himba depend on in times of drought. The Angolan government prefers a site farther downstream, in the Baynes Mountains (dam site 2), that would necessitate the renovation of another dam, which was damaged in the country's civil war.

through a gap in his front teeth created in his teens when, in keeping with Himba tradition, his lower two central incisors were knocked out and the top two filed to create a V-shaped opening. He makes a point of demonstrating what a busy man he is by continuing to sew a black fabric loincloth and interrupting our translator to correct a group of rowdy children.

Eventually Kapika tells us that he vehemently opposes the proposed dam. He is afraid that the people who will come to build it will steal the Himba's cattle—not an irrational fear, because the Himba were nearly wiped out at the end of the 19th century as a result of cattle raids by the Nama tribe, which lives to the south. And cattle theft continues today. He is also worried that the newcomers will take valuable grazing land, which the Himba are careful not to overuse. Family groups move their households several times a year so that extensively grazed regions can grow back. The area around Kapika's compound illustrates the need for such conservation: the cattle and goats have eaten everything green they can reach, leaving the bushes and trees top-heavy with scraggly growth overhanging trunks like lollipop sticks.

Himba leaders also object to the dam because it would flood hundreds of graves, which play a central role in the tribe's religious beliefs and social structure. In times of crisis, family pa-

triarchs consult their forebears through special ceremonies at grave sites, and graves are often used to settle disputes over access to land. Acreage is owned communally, but each permanent settlement is guarded by an "owner of the land," usually the oldest man of the family who has lived at that place for the longest time. When deciding who should be able to graze their cattle in a particular area, Himba compare the number of ancestors they have buried there. They ask, "Whose ancestral graves are older, ours or theirs?"

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Dammed If They Do

HOW DO YOU DESCRIBE a megadam to someone who has never seen electricity? Or a building more than one story high? The dam planned for Epupa Falls would rise 535 feet—only 15 feet shorter than the massive Grand Coulee Dam in Washington State. It would generate 360 megawatts of electricity per day and cost more than US\$500 million to build.

A dam was first proposed near Epupa Falls in 1969, when Namibia was South West Africa, a territory of South Africa. The idea went nowhere, but it was revived in 1991, a year after Namibia's independence, when Namibia and Angola commissioned a feasibility study to evaluate such a scheme. The study

considered two sites for the dam: Epupa Falls and a spot in the Baynes Mountains farther downstream. It concluded that Epupa Falls made more economic sense, but Angola has favored the Baynes site in part because building a dam there would mean that the country would also get funds to renovate a dam on an Angolan tributary that was damaged during the civil war. That cost is one reason the Baynes site would be more expensive.

When the study's consultants first came to discuss the intended dam with the Himba, the tribal leaders initially had no objections, thinking it was going to be a small earthen dam like the ones they built to help water their cattle. The degree of miscommunication took a while to become apparent. Margaret Jacobsohn of Integrated Rural Development and Nature Conservation, a Namibian journalist turned anthropologist who worked on the social impact part of the feasibility study, recalls a telling incident a few months into the process. She went to visit a Himba family compound near Epupa Falls and began asking their views about the proposed dam. Oddly, they didn't seem to know anything about it, even though the Namibian government had told her that they had been informed. As she finished her questionnaire, a family member asked her to help them with a mysterious piece of paper they had received some time before. When the man brought an ocher-smeared enve-

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lope out of his hut, she recognized it as a letter about the dam in English that they had never even opened. After she translated it for them, an old man of the family shook his head and said, "You're talking about the great death of the Himba."

Lifeways of the Himba

THE HIMBA ARE ONE of the last tribes of traditional people who are generally self-supporting and fully or partially isolated from global society. Anthropologists find them particularly interesting because they observe a system of bilateral descent. Every tribe member belongs to two clans, one through the father (a patriclan) and another through the mother (a matriclan). Tribes that practice bilateral descent are rare: besides the Himba, the custom occurs among only a few peoples in West Africa, India, Australia, Melanesia and Polynesia.

Each Himba patriclan is led by the oldest man in the family. Sons live with their fathers; following marriage, daughters leave to join their husband's family's household and become a member of that patriclan. But the inheritance of material wealth—in the Himba's case, primarily cattle—is determined by the matriclan. Accordingly, a son does not inherit his father's cattle but his maternal uncle's instead.

Bilateral descent is particularly advantageous for tribes that live in precarious environments, such as the drought-prone region of the Himba, because during a crisis it allows an individual to rely on two sets of relatives spread over different areas.

The system could also play a role in alleviating inbreeding among Himba livestock. Various patrilineal clans have taboos prohibiting their members from owning cattle or goats of a certain color or coat pattern. When cattle are born that violate a patrilineal clan's taboos, they must be swapped with nonoffending cattle from another patrilineal clan.

The religion of the Himba is also organized according to bilateral descent and is practiced through an individual's patrilineal clan. Himba believe in a god-creator, but that entity is very remote from human affairs and can be petitioned only by invoking dead paternal ancestors to act as intercessors. The tribe's religious observances center on holy fires that were initially kindled at the graves of ancestors and are maintained by the leader of each respective patrilineal clan in his family compound.

The holy fire is small, often just a smoldering log surrounded by several rocks. It is always located between the opening of the headman's hut and the corral where the cattle are penned at night. That area of the compound is considered sacred: strangers cannot cross between the holy fire and the corral or between the holy fire and the headman's hut without

breasted and wear traditional apron-skirts made of calfskins or goatskins; they smear themselves liberally from head to toe every morning with the ochre-butter mixture and almost never use water to wash. Young girls wear their hair in two thick braids that drape over their foreheads and faces, whereas women have a cascade of long, thin braids, each of which they coat with a mud mixture that dries to a hard shell.

According to anthropologists, Himba women are not merely clinging passively to their traditional dress: they are actively rejecting change because it is the only way they can maintain their prestige and value. Himba men occasionally earn money doing menial jobs or selling livestock, but Himba women have not had such opportunities. By preserving their ochre-covered bodies, braids and calfskin skirts, Himba women are engaged in what modern anthropological theory calls "change through continuity" or "active conservatism." "Remaining apparently traditional can be a strategic—and rational—response to modern events," Margaret Jacobsohn says.

The recent report by the World Commission on Dams declares that tribal peoples such as the Himba, whether they are

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first asking permission. Traditionally, the headman keeps the fire going during the day as he sits by it to commune with his ancestors about any problems facing the family. At night, the headman's wife takes an ember of the fire into the main hut; in the morning, the ember is taken outside to the hearth again.

The Himba are also intriguing to anthropologists as subjects of rapid social change. One way in which this change is manifesting itself is in patterns of dress. Many more Himba men than Himba women have adopted Western clothing and hairstyles. At Epupa Falls, where Himba occasionally have contact with outsiders, a Himba man can be seen one day bare-chested and wearing a Himba apron-skirt and jewelry, and the next day dressed in pants and a shirt. Few young men there wear the "bachelor ponytail" that is traditional for unmarried men, and even fewer married men follow the custom of not cutting their hair and of covering their heads with a cloth. And it is extremely rare to find a Himba man at Epupa Falls who wears ochre: indeed, many wash daily in the Kunene River using soap.

Himba women, however, are much more conservative in their dress. Even at Epupa Falls, most of the women go bare-

actively conservative or not, often get caught between a dam and a hard place. Such projects have "inadequately addressed the special needs and vulnerabilities of indigenous and tribal peoples," the report concludes, adding that the effects of a dam on local peoples are "often not acknowledged or considered in the planning process." It calls for improving existing water and energy facilities rather than constructing new megadams and stipulates that sponsoring countries and international lenders base their decisions to build new dams on agreements with affected communities.

But in February the World Bank said it would use the commission's guidelines only as "reference points" rather than as binding procedures for financing large dam projects. A group of 150 nongovernmental organizations from 39 countries—including Namibia—countered in March with a letter to World Bank president James Wolfensohn to reconsider that stance and to place a moratorium on funding new dams until the bank implements the commission's guidelines. The organizations are requesting that the bank conduct independent reviews of planned and ongoing projects and set up procedures for providing reparations to people harmed by earlier dams. In the letter, they insinuate that the World Bank helped create the World Commission on Dams in 1998 with the World Conservation Union-IUCN only "to deflect opposition or to buy time." Unless the bank amends its position, they write, they "may be less inclined to engage in future... dialogues with the World Bank." According to the commission, the bank has provided

Young Himba man living at a settlement near Epupa Falls shows the result of contact with other cultures. Besides the thick necklace traditional to the Himba, he also wears colorful necklaces from the Zemba tribe and a Western tracksuit jacket. Himba women have been more reluctant to change their traditional attire, perhaps because they seek to preserve their identity.



an estimated \$75 billion for 538 large dams in 92 countries.

So what is the case for a dam at Epupa Falls? Jesaya Nyamu, Namibia's minister of mines and energy, emphasizes that his country currently imports 60 percent of its power from South Africa and needs to pull the plug as a matter of national sovereignty. "No one seems to see our need for independent power," he laments.

Ensnconced in the deep upholstery of a sofa in his cabinet minister's office in Windhoek, Namibia's capital, he labels the foreign environmental groups that oppose the dam as meddlers with a double standard: one for their own industrial countries and another for countries they consider untouched and exotic. "The whole of Europe and America is dammed," Nyamu says. "These people live in their own countries on hydropower."

Indeed, according to a trade group of dam builders, the International Commission on Large Dams, the U.S. has the second-largest number of large dams (higher than 90 meters) in the world, after China. And the American experience with dams and indigenous peoples is less than laudatory: the Grand Coulee Dam inundated the lands of Native Americans from the Colville and Spokane tribes and ruined their salmon fishery. The tribes sued for reparations in 1951, but the government took 43 years to settle the lawsuit. In 1994 the tribes accepted a \$54-million lump sum and \$15 million per year as long as the dam produces electricity.

But Katuutire Kaura, president of Namibia's main opposition party, the Democratic Turnhalle Alliance/United Democratic Front Coalition, contends that another dam on the Kunene River is "absolutely not necessary." An existing dam that was built in the 1970s upstream at Ruacana is running at less than 20 percent capacity, he points out. And the recently discovered Kudu gas field off Namibia's southern coast is estimated to contain 20 trillion cubic feet of natural gas—more than enough for Namibia's needs. "The Kudu gas field can last us 25 to 30 years," Kaura asserts. Shell Oil and the Namibian government are currently working to tap those gas fields.

Kaura adds that the Himba will reap few of the dam's ben-

Himba women and children in a traditional family compound sit by their fires during the early morning [top] to warm themselves after the chilly desert night. The women wear *erembes*, pleated rabbit-skin hats that signify that they are married. Teenage boys [middle] tend the family's cattle as the animals graze during the day. Cattle are a sign of wealth among the Himba: when a rich man dies, his family often slaughters dozens of his cattle, whose skulls are used to decorate the man's grave [bottom] as a sign of status. Such graves—roughly 160 of which will be underwater once the dam is built—are the sites of important tribal rituals.

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Social change is already coming to the settlements near Epupa Falls. A U.S.-based Christian church operates a mission near the river, where church members routinely baptize new Himba converts (*top*). A small shop (*middle*) sells staples such as maize meal but also does a brisk business in cheap liquor and beer. Himba sometimes loiter outside the shop to beg money from the occasional tourist to buy alcohol; the area around the shop is littered with empty bottles. Some of the bottles end up being used by other Himba to carry water (*bottom*). The young girl filling her bottle in the Kunene River wears the two forward-hanging braids traditional for preadolescent females.

efits while paying high costs. They are not qualified to work on the dam, so it will not bring them jobs. They are also unlikely to get electricity from the project. Electricity did not come to the residents of Opuwo, the town closest to the Ruacana Dam, until 1994, more than 20 years after it was built. In the meantime, a dam at Epupa Falls would destroy the Himba's livelihood. It "will dislocate the Himba to the margins of society where they cannot survive," predicts Phil Ya Nangoloh, executive director of Namibia's National Society for Human Rights.

In a way, the dam will take the river away from the Himba and confer its benefits to people outside Kaokoland. According to the World Commission on Dams report, "Dams take a set of resources ... generating food and livelihood for local people and transform them into another set of resources ... providing benefits to people living elsewhere. There is a sense, therefore, in which large dams export rivers and lands."

Toward a Struggle?

ONE MORNING when Tjiuma comes to our camp to share a cup of coffee, I ask him what he really thinks will happen if the government goes ahead with its plans for the proposed dam. I know he is no stranger to combat, having been drafted as a tracker to fight on South Africa's side during the war for independence. As we gaze over the Kunene River in the still of the early morning, he admits that the Himba have a plan for resistance. More than 50 of the Himba headmen were in the military during the war, he says, and they still have their old .303 rifles in their compounds.

A week later, when I visit the minister of mines and energy in Windhoek, I tentatively ask him what the Namibian government would do if the Himba resist with violence. His response is chilling: "We know them; they cannot do anything. If they try anything, we will neutralize them, of course. But I don't think it will come to that."

Carol Ezzell is a staff editor and writer.

MORE TO EXPLORE

Himba: Nomads of Namibia. Margaret Jacobsohn, Peter Pickford and Beverly Pickford. Struik Publishers, Cape Town, 1990. Published in the U.S. by Appleton Communications, 1992.

Dams and Development: A New Framework for Decision-Making. World Commission on Dams, 2000. Available at www.dams.org/report/

For information on dam projects around the world, including the proposed Kunene River dam, visit the International Rivers Network site at www.irn.org

