

“I Want to Tell You about My Story” The New Oral Tradition of the Himba

Michael Weingartner

The purpose of this study was to collect and interpret a series of stories and oral histories through interviews from members of the Himba communities near Epupa Falls, Namibia, with special attention taken to record the stories and interviews of the youngest generation. The results of this study reveal a series of changes, both gradual and radical, in the oral tradition of the younger generation as a result of changes in the Himba society at large due to globalization and the introduction of new technology. An exploration of two distinct oral traditions, formal and informal, is also made with regards to the role of gender in the oral tradition. Finally, a collection of stories is used to compared and contrasted with more Western storytelling with regards to content and form, including the responses of Himba youth to a number of pieces of Western literature.

INTRODUCTION AND METHODS

In his 1997 book, “When War Came, the Cattle Slept,” Michael Bollig established the most thorough ethnography to date of the oral tradition of Namibia’s Himba people.¹ Bollig’s study, a touchstone methodology of oral sources, provides an unedited and un-annotated account of ten Himba informants, presented in the original language, as well as in translation. While landmark, Bollig’s accounts, in the opinion of this observer, suffer in three great ways. First, the accounts come exclusively from the most elite and politically prominent members within the Himba society, and thus do not provide a thorough explanation of the greater cultural leanings. Second, the accounts are the results of a series of interviews in which

1. Bollig, Michael, and Tjakazapi Janson Mbungu. (1997). *When war came the cattle slept: Himba oral traditions*. Köln: R. Köppe.

informants responded to questions, rather than being allowed to provide their own stories in a more organic setting. Third, and most importantly, Bollig's study fails to address the greater question of how storytelling evolves and is generated within the Himba society. In a sense, this present study draws heavily upon Bollig's work, while striving also to pick up where he left off. This study, in particular, focuses heavily on storytelling as presented not only by the elder members of Himba society, but also by the children of the various villages. In this way, the observer hopes to provide an analysis more representative of the entire culture, while also tracking the intergenerational changes in the oral tradition.

This study uses at its primary source observations and data collected during a weeklong period in Epupa Falls, Namibia. A more detailed list of sources is provided at the end, but here are outlined the three methods used over the course of the study. First, the observer traveled to five local villages and – using a translator – requested that each Himba informant “tell a story,” as well as explain its significance. (This was the exact phrase used and no further clarifications were made as to content or form). These instances were recorded digitally and analyzed for content, language, musicality, and non-verbal components. Second, it was requested for twenty-four male and female students roughly between the ages of six and eighteen at the Epupa Primary School to orally present a story as part of their English curriculum, from which the observer made a similar analysis. Third, the same group of students was asked to write and illustrate a story, the results of which were collected and digitally scanned. In addition, a number of the students agreed to be interviewed by the observer with regards to their stories and to the role of storytelling in their culture. Combined, these three sources of data will provide a framework from which to explore the differences and similarities between the oral traditions of the oldest generation and those of the Himba youth.

RESULTS

Defining Narrative and its Use

As in any study into oral traditions, it becomes a question of paramount importance to determine, in the eyes of the subject group, a definition for the word

story.² Doing so not only serves to distinguish storytelling from other aspects of culture and tradition, but also to gain perspective into the practical use of a story, such as the terms of information transfer and preservation of ritual. To this effect, the observer at no point made any effort to define the term “story” in all interviews. The results of this intentional ambiguity show a particular vagueness within the Himba community regarding what constitutes a story.

Speaking with the chiefs and elite of the Himba villages, it becomes apparent one of the most historically relevant uses of the oral tradition in Himba society is the recounting of history itself. The Himba lack a defined writing system and do not record the passing of years in any numeric system. Instead, time in the Himba society focuses on defining events in terms of their temporal proximity to other events or memorable periods, such as those of war or drought or transition.³ These epochs have, for the majority of Himba history and indeed the majority of the academic record on the Himba, served as the only sense of keeping track of time, and much effort has been put into assigning dates to these epochs.⁴ Examples include the SWAPO war epoch of the nineties and the recent drought epoch of the eighties. This method of history-keeping is apparent in the stories collected within the villages.

In some instances the request to tell a story was answered with an account of war. Such tales are common in Himba culture, as they are in most indigenous cultures.⁵ Oral accounts of war and history serve as the only accounts of such events in these communities. However, the memory of the Himba community with these stories is disturbingly short. Bollig’s work touched on this, where the bulk of historical accounts extended no further than the Kuena wars in the late nineteenth century.⁶ Even these stories, however, had faded considerably in the fifteen years before this study was conducted, and the bulk of historical accounts provided were concerned with the newer history of the Himba people in the SWAPO conflict

2. Mucina, Devi Dee. (2011). “Story as Research Methodology.” *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*. 7 (1): 1-14.

3. Gibson, Gordon D. (1977). “Himba Epochs.” *History in Africa*. 4: 67.

4. Ibid.

5. Bollig, Michael, and Tjakazapi Janson Mbungu. (1997). *When war came the cattle slept-: Himba oral traditions*. Köln: R. Köppe.

6. Ibid.

along the Namibia-Angola border near the end of the twentieth century. When asked, only the oldest members of the society recalled stories of earlier conflicts, and none could recite the stories in their entirety. This provides a very different picture of Himba storytelling than the earlier ethnographies, such as Bollig's. First, the degree to which epochs were remembered was much degraded. Secondly, the observer observed that, in the process of interviews, the elite and the younger generation alike referenced two distinct periods: Now and A Hundred Years Ago. The period described as Now seems to refer to the last two decades during which the Himba people in the Epupa Falls area became more integrated with peoples and cultures from whom they had been previously isolated. Now is a time period that describes a way of life that includes stores, a much less nomadic lifestyle, the use of Western-style clothing, and, most recently, the acquisition of cellular phones by some members of the Himba society. Also, during the period referred to as Now, the Himba seem more willing to describe events in recent memory as having occurred 'last year' or in another manner that makes use of a more Western chronology. In contrast, A Hundred Years Ago seems to refer not to a specific period in the past, but an older way of living which exists now only in memory, though it may describe events and practices as recent as three decades ago. During this period, the Himba were isolated, they continued their nomadic practices, along with a number of other rituals that are no longer in common practice. Again, the Himba do not historically recognize the passage of time in recordable years. When asked about this, an informant reported that, as Epupa Falls caters to some tourists, there has been yearly progress in the campgrounds and resorts. The municipality gains new buildings, people, etc. This process breaks with the normally cyclic time system of recurring rainy and dry seasons which has been characteristic of the Himba society in the past and replaces it with a progressive linear system of time to which the recording of years clings with relative ease.⁷

Another element of the oral tradition by the Himba is the musicality of certain 'stories.' Some informants responded to the request for a story by singing.

7. Ibid.

Oral tradition, a branch of ethnomusicology, very often takes the form of singing.⁸ As one informant put it, “songs are easier to remember,” and it is not uncommon for newer stories to be converted into song. Other story-songs serve a more didactic role, with children using them to remember chores or the specifics behind some of the various cultural traditions, such as the rituals associated with marriage or a girl’s entry into womanhood, both of which are accompanied with singing. The Himba’s songs follow the Call-And-Response pattern, where a principal vocalist will begin a phrase that is either echoed or responded to by the rest of the group, as in verse-chorus form. Their cadence resembles a less-refined form of the rhythms and beats of the Herero *orivitje* and other nearby groups such as those in southwestern Angola. Even in stories told without singing, a degree of musicality could be observed. More specifically, these stories lack the casual variance of pitch and inflection common in ordinary speech. Rather, they are presented chant-like, most often in a single flat tone punctuated by a single stress on the first syllable of a given clause or sentence. Such flatness is mirrored in the physical stiffness of posture shown by those performing, in contrast to the exaggerated hand gestures that accompany singing. An exception to this trend presents itself in what will be hereafter referred to as ‘informal storytelling,’ or the use of narrative in instances not recognized as a cultural experience.⁹ For example, when members of a Himba village were asked to describe the process of slaughtering cattle, one of the men, in the course of explaining, lifted a younger boy and lay him down on the ground. He then proceeded, amongst the boy’s fits of laughter, to draw his blade and mime the process while the boy played the role of the animal. The narrative of explanation, while conceived purely for the benefit of the observer, nonetheless belies the spirit of storytelling that is central to the communication between members of the Himba society.

Another common element present in much of the storytelling of the Himba is the use, when possible, of illustration. Within the villages, this takes the form of making lines in the dust, usually to represent a border or a particular path taken by characters in a story. This can be explored and perhaps interpreted easier in the

8. Foley, John Miles. (1995). *The singer of tales in performance*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

9. Lange, Karen E. (2004). “Himba: consulting the past, divining the future.” *National Geographic*. 205: 32-47.

insistence of the students at the Epupa Primary School, who accompanied their written stories with illustration, despite not being originally asked to do so. This can be found and regarded in the attached supplemental data.

Other stories told included many of the jokes and fables, explored in more depth in later sections of this study. Generally, though, it can be determined that no single definition for “story” exists for the Himba people, and it is from this ambiguity that this study moves forward to determine the nature of both the formal and informal oral tradition in the cultural evolution of the Himba.

The Response to Western Stories

The students at the Epupa Primary School are given lessons in English and speak the language at various proficiencies from elementary-level through near-fluency. For some, it is their primary language, and it has become a necessary function of the Epupa Primary School to encourage study of Otjiherero, their ancestral language. At the Epupa Primary School the observer read a short story in English to the student informants. The story read was a slight re-imagining of “The Little Green Pig,” an excerpt from Martin McDonagh’s stage play, “The Pillowman.” The story contains several narrative elements that are characteristic of much of Western literature, particularly the focus on a central figure and the Aristotelian dramatic structure (rising action leading to a conflict and then resolution). In the story, a farm full of pink pigs contains a single pig who is uncharacteristically green. The other pigs make fun of the green pig, who rebuffs them, saying that he enjoys being different. Unable to get a rise out of him, the other pigs snatch the green pig in the middle of the night, and use a magical paint that cannot be covered up or washed off, to turn him pink like them. The formerly green pig, lamenting his loss of uniqueness, prays to God for three days and gives up when he does not get a response. After three days, while the pigs sleep, a magical green rain comes, that also cannot be covered up or washed off, that turns every pig on the farm green – except for the protagonist, who remains pink. This pig is ultimately happy because he is still different. In the version read to the students, pigs were replaced with goats and the color pink with the color brown.

This was done in response to the Himba students being unfamiliar with pink as a color characteristic of pigs.

Students were asked, after two readings and after being allowed to ask clarifying questions, to give their opinion of the piece, as well as to point out any parts they may have preferred. In general, the overall opinion of the story was positive, but this could likely be as a result of a desire to be polite to the observer. However, when charged with choosing a preferred aspect of the story, the student's opinions differed along two major axes, age and gender. As the exact age of the students was unknown, the observer categorized student responses in terms of either Older (appearing to be roughly eleven or older) or Younger (appearing to be roughly ten or younger). Of the Older males, particular interest was placed on the act of snatching the green goat. Many of them believed it to be a resolution to what they viewed as the major conflict of the story: not all goats were the same. They considered the goat's struggle and the physicality of being forcibly painted interesting. Members of this group also generally disliked the ending, in which the goat is returned to a state of uniqueness. In contrast, the Younger males enjoyed the twist ending and were particularly interested in the magical qualities of the story, asking for more specifics as to the 'rules' of the paint and the rain, as well as the source of the storm. Was it God or just a coincidence? Members of this group did not like the fact that the goat was initially green. They asked for an explanation as to this variance of color and appeared, to the observer, disappointed when there was none given. Older female students were likewise interested in the magical qualities of the story, but for different reasons. Many of these girls, when not at the Primary School, dress in a traditional Himba fashion, which includes covering the skin with a reddish ochre color.¹⁰ These girls were particularly interested in the paint and rain, and joked about how nice it would be to have such a permanent paint. They did not like, however, the parts of the story in which the goat was described as unhappy and praying to God. They reasoned that these details did not have anything to do with the plot. Comparing these reactions to the content and attitude towards their own stories, a possible explanation for the rejection of emotion and motive is developed in a later section.

10. Lange, Karen E. (2004). "Himba: consulting the past, divining the future." *National Geographic*. 205: 32-47.

At the Epupa Primary School, a small number of western texts appear. These include, but are likely not limited to, the tale of Daedalus and Icarus from Greek mythology, Grahame's "The Wind in the Willows," and a book of Aesop's fables. Informants, when asked to tell a story to the observer in front of the class, recounted a number of these tales. The manner in which these stories were treated is particular and warrants description. These texts were either read aloud in English or sections of them were committed, almost word-for-word to memory for the purposes of recitation. In these instances, the observer pressed for informants to explain the stories they were reciting. It soon became apparent that, while the students could recite many of these stories, they had not given their content or meaning much thought. In fact, over the course of the interview, students asked what a "toad," "mole," and "badger" were, in addition to seeking an explanation of the "tower" in Icarus' legend. The observer attempted, perhaps to ill effect, to provide more colloquial replacements for these elements that were more common in the environment of the Himba. These were, however, rejected by the students, who cited that, as the stories were easily found in books, there could be no re-writing. In fact, across much of the information found in books at the school, from agriculture to those books written in the Romanization of Otjiherero, Students were more willing to accept the information presented in books than information from their parents. This was even the case in which there was a conflict in ideas, such as a disagreement over the definition of a term in Otjiherero, their indigenous language.

As with western texts and also narratives as presented in the school's social studies textbooks (usually taking a narrative approach to describe different themes and ideas), it was not uncommon for students the Epupa Primary School to, when asked to write and illustrate a story, to copy from one of these sources. This was particularly true of female informants, some of whom claimed not to know stories of their own. This will be discussed later in the course of the study, but it should be noted that written texts were seen as more authoritative examples of formal storytelling. Such a pointed insistence upon the authority of the written word, particularly in a society that has existed for so long without a writing system, establishes the shaky and somewhat awkward position of the prescriptive story, those concrete tales

emboldened in written books, contrasted with the descriptive and more fluid nature present, as we will see, in even the most formal of Himba narratives.

Tropes, Jokes, Themes, and Commonalities

The stories collected by the observer from the Himba elite and elders reflected, in many cases, the same trends as in Bollig's study. Namely, the stories presented to the observer represent the most formal and pervasive of the oral traditions.¹¹ These stories were far from the most prevalent, as later described, but were the best known. Because of time limitations, informants described a desire to tell their "best" stories, which could be in part responsible for this phenomenon. However, close to fifty other stories were collected at the Epupa Primary School from students ranging in age from six to seventeen (approximate figures, as the Himba people do not keep track of the specific ages). These stories display a much greater diversity and thus are more representative of the Himba culture at large. Because students attempted whenever possible not to repeat the stories of their classmates, the stories they offered are not biased in favor of what they felt was best, but rather drew more widely on all the stories the students knew. Curiously, though, the list of stories consisted of several repetitions. When asked, students responded that these were some of the more common stories and further cited a generally low number of stories in circulation. Thus, it is unsurprising that a sample of this size would contain duplicates. Even when stories were not repeated exactly, however, it can be noted that the mutual stories of the Himba have a number of common elements.

The stories collected shared a number of common thematic elements. The most prevalent element is found in the opening of many of the stories, in which characters will go "into the wilderness," usually in search of food. In fact, the search for food is almost a universal theme, and often the sole motivation possessed by characters. The use of the wilderness as a setting makes both logical sense, given how male members of Himba society spend so much of their time outside of villages, but also serves a clear role in the structure of the narrative. The wilderness allows characters to be introduced to new elements, in particular new characters and

11. Bollig, Michael, and Tjakazapi Janson Mbungu. (1997). *When war came the cattle slept-: Himba oral traditions*. Köln: R. Köppe.

plot twists, which are resolved either in death or in return to the familiarity of the village. In this regard, the wilderness as a setting becomes a signal to the audience of impending action and potential danger. Of stories featuring human characters, the ritual of the hunt, while uncommon in practice amongst the Himba, is often used to describe one of several thematic elements, often taking the form of a warning or lesson. Common morals include warnings against greed, laziness, and pride. To illustrate, one story followed two hunters who, out in the wilderness, become fearful that their partner will be lazy, and, when it comes time to split the kill, will receive more than his fair share. To resolve this, both men decide to hunt alone, each with the belief that he will succeed where his lazy companion will starve. Both men successfully kill a Kudu (or other large animal, depending on the telling) and find themselves unable to carry the carcass on their own. Both men, as a result, die of exhaustion in their attempts to do so. The clear moral of this story is that the benefits of working together are more important than greed or personal pride.

The majority of stories collected were fables and featured anthropomorphized animals. Crocodiles, birds, fish, baboons, monkeys, jackals, hyena, and lions were among the most common. Cattle and goat were conspicuously absent. This is perhaps due to the role these domesticated animals play in the Himba culture. In these fables, there exists a clear winner-loser dichotomy (uncharacteristic of stories with human characters), in which a stronger or more clever animal succeeds at the expense of another. This can be categorized either by a prey animal escaping a predator, a predator outwitting a prey animal, or one prey animal surviving whilst another is killed and eaten by a predator. A particularly common trope is the relationship between the Hyena and the Jackal. In these stories, the Hyena and the Jackal, usually seeking food, run into trouble when one of them foolishly causes the pair to lose their food. In retaliation, the more clever animal will kill and eat the foolish one instead. Which one, the Hyena or the Jackal, is more clever and which one is more foolish changes with the telling, but the general outline of the story stays very consistent.

Humor in the collected Himba stories is also common, and often stories will exist for no other reason than to support a single punchline.¹² In some cases, humor is drawn from familiar tropes, such as the Hyena-jackal scenario, in which fun is poked at the foolish animal. In most jokes collected, in fact, humor is had at the expense of a foolish figure, usually one who is depicted as speaking very slowly. In humorous stories, there is a lot of gesturing and impersonation, with different characters getting different voices. One such joke is the story about the men who find a baby springbok wandering in the village and decide to take it in. They soon realize the springbok is hungry and attempt to nurse it from one of their cattle. They have trouble doing so and a slow-speaking character approaches, observes the situation, and offers the advice that the men should try another cow: this one might not be the springbok's mother. This story prompted a conversation between the observer and the storyteller about the role of verbal irony in jokes and stories. The concept seemed foreign to the storyteller through translation and, even when the concept was described to English-speaking students, none could recall a use of sarcasm or other verbal irony in any of the stories.

The Inheritance of Culture and the Gender Bias

The majority of stories that have been described thus far have come exclusively from male students. This is not accidental. Male students were more willing to offer stories, whereas most female students had to be asked to tell a story or coerced by classmates. Interviews with the student informants reveal a potential explanation. Male students reported having heard their stories from their fathers and other adult males in the evenings when the men would visit the villages. These instances of adults passing down stories were restricted to male youths, and the majority of female students had either no knowledge of these stories or had overheard them. Thus, oral tradition in the Himba society is preferentially passed down through males. Before addressing the ramifications of this gender bias, we will explore the function of the oral tradition being passed down through generations.

12. Lange, Karen E. (2004). "Himba: consulting the past, divining the future." *National Geographic*. 205: 32-47.

A particular story collected from the leader of one village concerned the journey of a group of warriors into and subsequently out of Angola, and the joy of their families upon their return. This story, which contained a singing element, was described as a very old story, despite the specific historical event having occurred within the last two decades. The reasoning behind this is that the story of the warrior's return and the accompanying song is one that is repurposed over and over again in the Himba society depending on the most recent armed conflict. It had at one point been used to describe warriors in the Kuena wars, and even by then it was considered to be very old. It is difficult, if not impossible, to determine the actual age of this story, as the Himba do not keep a written record of their history and their collective memory extends only slightly more than a century into the past. However, the repurposing of this story reveals a function of the oral tradition and a capacity to respond to changing times. Several of the stories collected from male students include more modern elements such as cars and toilets, which they reported introducing themselves. These elements often replace their counterparts in antiquity and often carry with them new interpretations of earlier themes.

In a similar vein, stories that are more specific to a particular group or village as opposed to the larger Himba community have a tendency to focus on a particular figure, a chief or other elite elder of that community.¹³ This figure is referred to by name and is often a specific person in living memory. However, this appears to be a construct which changes over the course of time. In one example, an informant told a story in which his grandfather leaves his village in search of a group of lost cattle. Upon further questioning, the informant admitted that the story was not actually about his grandfather. Instead, his grandfather – a chief – filled the role of central figure. Before him, the role had filled by the informant's great-grandfather, and with each new generation the story is re-written to include familiar names and characters. As the specific members of the community are forgotten, they are replaced in the story by an equivalent figure still present in the communal memory. This sense of moderate communitarianism reduces members of the Himba society in stories to

13. Bollig, Michael, and Tjakazapi Janson Mbungu. (1997). *When war came the cattle slept-: Himba oral traditions*. Köln: R. Köppe.

being defined by their community, in the sense that an elder's role in the story is tied to his duties as an elite and his position in the society.¹⁴ The content of stories such as this does not matter as much as tying familiar concepts and narratives to figures within memory. Thus, the deceased members of the society who are grafted onto old stories are a source of pride and identity for the community in a way that a forgotten name could not be.

The repurposing of old narratives can be tied to encroaching modernity as well.¹⁵ Returning to the Hyena-Jackal dynamic, one story involves the two after a successful hunt, in which the clever animal fetches water while the foolish animal is charged with cooking the food. The foolish animal mistakes a toilet for a cooking pot and places the meat inside. The clever animal, upon returning, chastises the foolish animal for not understanding the difference and being ignorant. The clever animal then kills the foolish one and eats him instead. This story originally was centered around the foolish animal's inability to distinguish between good seasoning and a poisonous plant, and was presented as a fairly new invention by the younger generation, one crafted in response to the slow influence of technology and modernity in Himba society. Whether because of its humorous nature or its applicability to the lives of a younger generation, stories like this were reported as being much more popular than the musical oral histories of the older generation.

Overall, the content of stories collected from older and younger generations lends support to radical changes in the Himba oral tradition. Older, less relevant stories are preserved only as long as they can be repurposed, while new stories are created in response to the needs of the times. In addition, stories are remolded in transition to younger generations. This re-defining of oral tradition within the younger generations is likely permanent, owing to a lack of a written record. This fact alone provides a call to the anthropological community to create and update story records, especially in the face of encroaching modernity on formerly isolated groups like the Himba.

14. Gaylard, Rob. (2004). "'Welcome to the world of our humanity': (African) humanism, ubuntu and black South African writing." *Journal of Literary Studies*. 20 (3-4): 265-282.

15. Ibid.

This study sought to define a story in terms of its use and relevance to the Himba, and it was determined that stories serve both formal and practical purposes. With respect to the gender bias, a second definition must be pointed out. There is little to no transition of structured narrative from mother to daughter, and as a result female students did not present stories to the observer that were of a fictional nature. Instead, stories from female students tended towards the informal, focusing on the autobiographical nature of their own lives. Stories focused not on tropes and talking animals, but on memorable events from recent memory. It should be noted that these stories were almost exclusively autobiographical, focusing on the teller and not, for example, on an interesting memory of the teller's mother or other female relation. When asked for such a story, female informants could not recall having heard such stories with enough clarity to recite them.

Stories from female informants tended to lack much of the clear narrative structure present in the stories of the male informants. Stories lacked a clear ending or thematic element. For example, one female described an event in which she was asked to go to the nearby town with her brother to purchase items from the market. She went to the market, made her purchase, and returned home. When asked the significance of the story, the informant responded that she does not usually go to the town, and that it was interesting. When asked why she did not include this fact in her telling of the story, she responded that she did not know how to tell a story and apologized to the observer. Another female informant refused to tell her story in front of the classroom, and only in private told the informant. In her story, the teller goes to school and learns about different subjects. At home, she tells her mother what she has learned. Her mother does not appear interested. Consequently, the girl stops telling her mother what she has learned. The informant confirmed that this story was autobiographical and that her reasons for not wanting to tell her story in front of other students involved the idea that storytelling is a predominantly male activity.

Comparing the general reluctance of female students to participate in storytelling with their older female counterparts within the villages, the older Himba women, when asked for a story, would seek out a male member of the village to tell

one. When pressed, the Himba women would provide either a song or a didactic story regarding a ritual or set of chores. For example, a Himba woman demonstrated the process of what follows a young woman's entry into puberty. Her explanation involved the participation of those around her, and together they acted out the practice of chasing the girl out of the village until she is captured by young men who bring her back to the village. In this ritual, a woman uses a stick to attempt to prevent the men from doing so. The informant telling this story played this role. The entire spectacle was rife with laughter in a manner similar to the demonstration of the cattle slaughter previously mentioned. Thus, it appears as if, while formal storytelling is passed exclusively through males, the enthusiasm of informal narrative does not show this gender bias.

Informal narrative, with the exception of the didactic elements that are male-specific (such as the slaughter), seems to be passed down through females, specifically mothers to their children of both genders. Mothers are responsible for the songs, gossip, lessons, and rituals which are understood universally within the Himba society. Because of the lifestyle of Himba males, they are only inside the villages at night, where campfire circles allow for the transition of formal storytelling.¹⁶ However, during the day, when much of a child's work and education takes place traditionally, it is the mother who is the primary source of knowledge and the oral tradition. Because this is a more passive and informal system of using narrative and storytelling as an information transfer mechanism, it is not recorded even in memory and thus does not manifest itself in the conscious memory of the Himba society. In short, while the Himba will not recall such informal stories when asked, these are the stories that make up the majority of the unconscious culture and the foundation for a lifestyle and belief system across the various villages. What separates the informal elements of the oral tradition from the formal ones, and what keeps recited stories from containing ritualistic or didactic elements, is the exclusivity of adult males to tell formal stories only to young males, and the converse by which males, upon adulthood, are effectively removed from the then female-centric

16. Lange, Karen E. (2004). "Himba: consulting the past, divining the future." *National Geographic*. 205: 32-47.

informal oral tradition taking place in the villages. The result is two distinct and separate traditions whose elements are both necessary to defining the role of narrative in the Himba society.

The Motive Vacuum and the Final Ending

Motive is conspicuously absent from many of the Himba's stories, and characters often seem to act without reason. Stories, especially fables, are presented as an objective series of linear events, and the feelings and thoughts of characters are not expressed. When asked about the reasons why (See the "Snake and the Jackal"), informants plead ignorance, and did not seem to see the relevance of such a question. Apart from the clear motive of food, characters are not explained as wanting anything. When the Jackal kills the Hyena (or vice versa), it is never explicitly because of the foolish creature's failure. In other stories, choices are made without a given reason (See the "Two Couples" or "The Skeleton"¹⁷). It seems that a goal of storytelling in the Himba tradition is impartiality. Informants, when asked why a character took a particular action, would commonly respond that they did not know, but that the story says that the character took that action, and therefore this should not be questioned. One informant expounded, saying that stories are about things that happen and not why things happen. Connecting this to the style of performance, in which formal narrative is lacking in musical or gesturing elements, a clear sense of detachment evolves on the part of the storyteller. Analysis and emphasis are removed from the stories, so that each listener may abstract their own analysis, given a set of concrete events. This allows stories to be easier to remember, more difficult to reject, and allows for freedom of interpretation.¹⁸

There does appear, in the course of the stories collected, to be a common thread concerning hazard and inevitability. Characters seem to take actions without reason and often without clear motivation. Often events will occur and choices made without explanation, a sentiment that seems very in line with the Himba people's set of beliefs. Specifically, the Himba seem to accept the unpredictability of life as it comes. In a similar vein, stories seem to address all actions and events as generally

17. Muhonje, Ben. *Omantupa: The Skeleton*.

18. Mucina, Devi Dee. (2011). "Story as Research Methodology." *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*. 7 (1): 1-14.

being inevitable. Effort is not made to build suspense or to suggest other potential endings. In “The Grandmother’s Birthday,” for example, it is not made secret to the audience that the crocodile intends to eat his guest; it is clear to all but the guest. It is worth noting another instance of inevitability in the Himba’s stories. It is a tenant of much of familiar Western literature that a story in which a character outwits another ends as soon as the outwitting has been achieved. However, in many of the Himba’s stories, these stories will continue until the successful character has died. Usually this takes very little time, as the winner will simply go to sleep and die. A similar instance is seen in the only written example of a Himba story made use of in this study – a children’s book titled “Omatupa,” which translates as “The Skeleton.”¹⁹ The book, along with its side-by-side English translation, was recorded by Ben Muhonje, the schoolmaster at Epupa Primary, as a language teaching tool. The story concerns a group of women who come upon a living skeleton while walking. The skeleton asks each of the women to marry him, and all but one refuses. The skeleton then reveals himself to have been previously wealthy in life and calls back all of his wealth and his body along with it. The two live happily until the man drinks all their omaere (a sour milk), whereupon the woman insults him. The man then sends away all of his wealth, becomes a skeleton again, and returns to the grave. The story ends, without further explanation, with the line “In the end, the wife stabbed herself with a knife and died.”²⁰ At no point in this story, reproduced in its entirety among the supplemental data, is explanation given for some of the more important plot points. It is not explained why this woman in particular would agree to marry a skeleton that so many refused. It is not explained why the skeleton drank all the omaere. It is not explained why the wife kills herself in the end. When asked, informants responded that stories are life, and life ends with death. There is a clear realism inherent in the Himba’s storytelling, which is as unforgiving as it is useful in a culture where stories are used as a teaching tool. The reminder of the inevitability of death, then, becomes a very important lesson, even to the successful.

19. Muhonje, Ben. *Omantupa: The Skeleton*.

20. *Ibid.*

Conclusion

The form and content of the stories collected in Epupa Falls, Namibia, suggests that a number of radical changes have occurred in the oral tradition of the local Himba people. Some of these changes, such as the use of Western chronology and general shallowing of collective memory, are recent as of the last few decades. Other changes, such as the encroaching of modern and western ideas and elements into storytelling and the intentional repurposing of ancient narratives are changes which are occurring much more rapidly between the older and the younger generation. In general, the above shifts in storytelling and the oral tradition can be attributed to the influence of Western culture and modern technology in the lives of the Himba people. Informal storytelling, however, seems relatively unchanged as a didactic and ritualistic tool in the Himba lifestyle, and an observed gender bias remains a contributing factor to the separation of the formal and informal oral traditions. The results of this study demonstrate a need for continued observation and recording of oral histories both within the Himba populations and other similar groups around the world whose oral traditions are likely changing in similarly radical ways.

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Supplemental Data

Stories:

Each of the stories collected below comes from a story that was repeated at least once or was confirmed by other informants to be a story characteristic of Himba culture (i.e., they were familiar with it). As for informal narratives, please see the description in the section titled “The Gender Bias.” Note: none of the Himba’s stories bear titles. The ones used here are of the observer’s invention and are used for convenience only.

The Grandmother’s Birthday

In this story, which has several slight variations, a crocodile plans to throw a birthday party for his grandmother. He goes out into the wilderness to seek party guests and finds one (with variation, a bird, a fish, a baboon), who agrees to come to the birthday party. Once there, the guest helps the crocodile start a big fire to cook dinner, but soon realizes that there is no food to cook. The party guest realizes that he is the food and manages to escape by telling the crocodile that he must leave to find party hats. After this, in several versions, the guest goes to sleep and dies. In the original version of this story, it is not a birthday, but a funeral for which the crocodile sought guests (again, the Himba do not celebrate birthdays, and the informant added this as a modern element), and the guest did not actually escape, but rather was killed and eaten.

The Snake and the Jackal

A Snake and a Jackal go into the wilderness in search of food. They come upon an Ostrich and, when the Jackal attempts to attack, the Ostrich kills the Jackal and escapes. In the end, the Snake eats the Jackal before going to sleep and dying. There is some debate as to the interpretation of this story, and as to whether or not the Snake was tricking the Jackal or simply being opportunistic.

The Fish, the Fish Eagle, and the Crocodile

There are three friends, the Fish, the Fish Eagle, and the Crocodile. There is a drought and not much food. The Crocodile, then, asks if he may eat the Fish. The Fish responds that because he was hungry yesterday, the Crocodile may go hungry today. The two begin to fight, and cause the Fish Eagle to step in and tell them to stop fighting. When the Crocodile will not stop fighting, the Fish Eagle kills the Crocodile.

The Three Hunters

Three hunters go to the wilderness in search of food. Two of the hunters are strong men and the third is a weaker man. Each man goes off on his own. The two strong men each kill a Kudu and the weaker man kills a bird. The three of them eat their kills out in the field. The weaker man finishes the entire bird, while each of the stronger men is unable to eat the entire kudu. In the end, the leftover meat from the Kudu attracts vultures, which kill the two stronger men.

The Two Jackals

Two jackals go out into the wilderness for a hunt. They come upon a springbok. In an attempt to kill the springbok (which they cannot outrun), one of the jackals hides behind a tree while the other warns the springbok that there is a lion coming to eat him. He tells the springbok to hide behind the tree, whereupon the waiting jackal kills the springbok. Successful, the jackals bring the meat back home. When one jackal leaves to get water, the other jackal steals the food and runs away.

The Chicken's Shoes

In this story, a Chicken buys shoes from a Tsetse fly with the agreement that he will pay next week. At the end of the week, the chicken says he will pay the following week. This postponement continues for several weeks, until the Tsetse fly confronts the Chicken and demands payment. In response, the Chicken eats the Tsetse fly. In another version, a chicken bullies a worm into collecting food and the worm, upon standing up for himself, is eaten instead.

The Two Couples

There are two boys and two girls. One boy has many goats and one has only a dog. One girl has a big garden and the other has none. In the story, the poor boy and the poor girl sleep together, and the wealthier boy and girl sleep together. One day, the boy with many goats sleeps with the poor girl, and in retaliation the poor boy kills all of the goats. The rich girl, then, leaves the formerly rich boy and kills herself.

The Jackal and the Rooster

A Jackal regularly steals eggs from a group of chickens. He steals eggs, and every day there are fresh ones. One day, the Jackal gets greedy and decides to eat the rooster. Once he does this, there are fewer and fewer eggs every day. He starts to eat the chickens. Soon, once he has eaten all the chickens, there are no more eggs. The jackal starves to death.

The Jackal, the Hyena, and the Lion

In this story, the Jackal and the Hyena go to find food. (In this telling, the Jackal is clever and the Hyena foolish). They successfully find and kill a kudu. The Hyena goes to sleep and the Jackal hides the meat. When the Hyena awakes, he asks where the food has gone. The Jackal blames the lion. The Hyena goes to fight the Lion and is killed. The Jackal keeps all the food for himself.

The Bat and the Snake

A Bat and a Snake are fighting to the death. The Bat can fly and knows that the Snake cannot catch him. But the Bat cannot win without killing the Snake. Soon the Bat becomes tired and is forced to land, whereupon the patient Snake kills him before going to sleep and dying.

The Lion and the Fire

In this story, a Lion is friends with a Fire. The Lion is old and can only eat cooked meat, so he and the Fire have a deal. The Lion will make a shelter for the Fire whenever it rains. In exchange, the Fire will cook meat for the Lion. The Lion soon

realizes that the Fire cooks for him every day, but rain only comes once a month. The Lion takes a big nap after every meal. One day, he eats to excess and sleeps all day. A rainstorm comes and puts out the fire while the Lion sleeps. When the Lion awakes, the fire is gone, and, unable to cook meat, the Lion starves to death.

The Crocodile and the Duck

In this story, a Crocodile attempts to lie very still to kill a duck when it enters the water. The duck sees this and tricks the crocodile by pretending many times to go into the water, always turning away at the last moment. The crocodile, staying very still all this time, soon starves to death. The duck then goes to sleep and dies.

Page Scans of illustrated stories:

Please find full-page scans of the stories written and illustrated by students at the Epupa Primary school in the online version of AZJIS.