

## CHAPTER 5. THE HIMBA AND ZEMBA PEOPLE

### 5.1. Introduction

Very little is known about the Himba and Zemba people of Namibia. A search of the literature has revealed that very few studies have been conducted about them. Studies undertaken did not deal specifically with the provisioning of education but rather treated the Himba and Zemba in a peripheral manner, while the studies focused more on issues of water, wildlife and technology. Much of what is reported in this chapter is therefore based on my own observations and discussions with the Himba and Zemba people. Where possible, reference to other sources will be made (EMIS, 2009; UNESCO, 2009; Byer, 2001; Hans & Kavari, 1997; Bolling, 1998; Mlekwa, 1996).

Namibia is a hub of various tribes that make up the population of country. In the North West there is a region called Kunene (formerly known as *Kaokoland*), which is a home to one of the ancient indigenous peoples of Namibia (i.e. the Himba and Zemba). The Kunene region is one of 13 regions, and the largest region in Namibia, covering an area of 144 255 square kilometres in terms of territory, which is 18% of the total land of Namibia (824 292 square kilometres). The region is characterised by a climate that ranges from arid to semi-arid, and high temperatures with less than 90 mm of rainfall a year.

According to 2001 National Population Census, the Kunene region is home to more than 68 000 inhabitants; more than 70% are Himba and Zemba speaking. In most parts of the Kunene region the soil is poor and rains are unreliable; consequently the majority of inhabitants are pastoralists that migrate with their herds to the different waterholes from season to season. The friendly Himba people, in particular, are closely related to the Herero and speak the same language. The Zemba speak their own language (Otjizemba) and live only in some parts of the Kunene region.

The Himba, Zemba and other nomad groups have safe and adequate abodes, and can still freely roam over the wide pastures of the highlands without feeling the need for formal education, or being forced to the industrial centres for employment.

As I said earlier, that the main economic activity for the Himba and Zemba is agro-pastoralism; i.e. the combination of keeping livestock (cattle, goats, donkeys and small number of sheep) and the seasonal cultivation of crops (sorghum, and millet) – this by Zemba in particular. Despite the eminently pastoral economy it is hard to find veterinary services in the nomad areas, and especially in Namibia, where only two percent of the Himba and Zemba population can read or write. The dropout rate in the mobile school units is more than 40%. The nature of the nomadic Himba and Zemba lifestyle and the harsh climatic conditions, coupled with marginalisation by society at large, exacerbate the challenges that are attributed to the nomadic lifestyle (Bolling, 1998).

Topographically, Kunene may be divided into the interior highlands and the western or pro-Namibian plains, which are divided by a rugged and deeply scored escarpment. The region's population growth is at the rate of 1.9 percent per year, less than the national average of 2.6 percent. Similarly, the region's population density is 0.6 persons per square kilometre, which is lower than the national average of 2.6 percent and that of the most density populated regions that have a population density of 18.7 people per square kilometre. Compared with the rest of Namibia, the Kunene region is underdeveloped, and this may be due to the unique and fragile environment, mountainous and inaccessible landscape, and the dryness that significantly hinders agricultural development or any form of commercial farming and industrial development.

Opuwo is the largest town and the capital of the Kunene region. The region's name comes from the Kunene River which forms the northern border with Angola. The interior plateau is drained by a number of large seasonal rivers, either running north into the Kunene or westward to the Atlantic Ocean. Although these rivers only flow on the surface after rains, there is an underground flow throughout the year, and water is often obtained by digging in the sandy riverbeds. Numerous springs also occur in the territory, but on the whole, perennial water is scarce.

Domestically Kunene adjoins five regions: Otjozondjupa in the east, Erongo in the south, Oshikoto, Oshana and Omusati in the north-east. The area is made up of rugged mountain ranges to the interior which fall steeply to the lower lying plains of the Namib Desert. The average annual rainfall of the region is less than 250mm. The region with its splendid landscape and rich cultural heritage is one of the most scenic and unspoiled regions of Namibia. It is one of the last remaining truly 'wild' regions of southern Africa and has a variety of wildlife which includes elephants, lion, cheetah, antelopes, black

rhino, zebra, giraffe, etc. The wildlife reserves are major tourist attractions in the region, giving rise to a thriving tourism industry in some parts. The common languages spoken in the region are Otjiherero, Otjizemba, Damara, Afrikaans, and few Oshiwamba here and there.

As a result of a growing tourism industry in the Kunene region (formerly known as Kaokoveld), the Himba and Zemba's lifestyle and culture have become increasingly endangered. Out of ignorance, tourists are introducing many alien concepts to the Himba and Zemba culture, like giving sweets to the children and alcohol to the old people. As a result many of the Himba and Zemba people, and other nomadic groups living close to towns and tourist attractions in the region, have become beggars and alcoholics. Many nature conservationists are demanding better control of Himba tourism and are advocating declaring the entire region a conservation area. The Namibian government is reluctant to take action and actually accuse the Himba, Zemba and other nomadic peoples of being uncivilised and a hindrance to progress and development in the territory (Bolling, 1998).

## **5.2. Culture and formal education**

### *5.2.1 Culture demands*

At this point, it is important to make a few general observations about the Himba and Zemba cultures as they have a direct impact on the provisioning of basic education. On the one hand, and notwithstanding the undoubted cultural diversity arising from Africa's ethnic pluralism, the most common basic features of all African cultures are ancestral beliefs, customs, traditions, value systems, and socio-political institutions. In the words of Bolaji Idowu (1973:103) as quoted by Bolling, 1998):

*There is a common Africanness about the total culture and religious beliefs and practices of Africa. This common factor may be due either to the fact of diffusion or to the fact that most Africans share common origins with regard to race and customs and religious practice.*

During my study, I learnt that Himba and Zemba tribes are very conscious of their culture. They take great pride in it, and have withstood the many pressures of the 'modern world'. Their pastoralist culture is highly evolved and specialised, and they are probably one of the most socially refined peoples in the world. At the same time they are very realistic about their place in contemporary and future modern society of Namibia, and the world at large.

In this chapter, a number of general observations that were observed during this field study about the Himba and Zemba's traditions and cultural practices will be discussed as they have a direct impact on the provisioning of basic education. Moreover, to understand the challenge of educational provisioning for nomadic people, we need to understand and recognise their culture and way of life as these factors affect the education to be provided. In this chapter I would describes how the Himba and Zemba peoples have accepted the formal education intervention in their daily life activities, and what have been the consequences on their way of life and culture, including their migration patterns as a result of the mobile school system.

Like other African countries, western civilization is exerting an immense influence on people from all walks of life, and Namibia in not exempt from these pressures. All over Africa, including Namibia, the old order is giving way to new ideas and modern practices. Culture, religion, social and political systems, forms of education, and literally every aspect of life is going through transformation as they adapt to the demands of modern society.

However, like any other system, there are also exceptions to the rule. A few communities or societies have either resisted new ideas, or as a result of other factors (such as their isolation) have not intensively exposed to the challenges of change and development. One such community is the Himba and Zemba peoples in the north west of Namibia. The natural conservatism of the Himba and Zemba peoples, together with their geographic isolation and the marginal ecology of their habitat, has contributed greatly towards restricting the diffusion of western culture to the inhabitants of the territory.

As stated earlier, the Himba and Zemba are the ancient tribes of Namibia, and have certain unique cultural dimensions that have enabled them to maintain their distinct culture and nomadic lifestyle amidst the encroachment of modern civilisation into their traditional lands in southern Angola and north-western Namibia. The Himba and Zemba have resisted change and managed to maintain many of their traditional customs, in large because they live in an isolated and harsh environment. That said, because they are nomadic, and because their history is largely an oral record, it is difficult to tell exactly how old some of their customs and practices are (Bolling, 1998; Chesselet, 2004). What is commonly accepted is that livestock is central to their cultural beliefs and practices, and the animals provide a connection to the ancestors through sacrifice.

The inhospitable or unwelcoming nature of the Kunene region and its surroundings have also made it less attractive for invading groups and colonialists, thus they have been less exposed to other modernising cultural influences and have been able to remain true to their traditional lifestyle. Much of the colonial era and the liberation struggle of Namibia's recent past have left them unscathed.

It is only in the more recent times that modern influences have begun to penetrate large parts of their traditional native land. These nomadic pastoralists are extraordinary people and have retained their cultural heritage until today. Although they are labelled as historical objects of the past, no tribe on earth lives in a time capsule, but they have held on to their traditions and adapted to outside world's influences in their own way. For the most part, the modern world hasn't yet intruded on their traditional way of life, and that is why (ironically) more and more tourists are keen to visit the north western of Namibia.

The Himba people, or more correctly the 'Ovahimba' in particular, are descendents of the Herero tribe and still speak the same language (*Otjiherero*). The Zemba have their own language (*Otjizemba*) and only live in certain parts of the Kunene region. Historically, the Himba and Zemba groups have a great deal in common in terms of traditions and cultural practices, and both tribes continue to maintain their traditional beliefs; including ancestor worship and rituals concerning sacred fire (*okoruwo*) which are considered important links between the living and the dead.

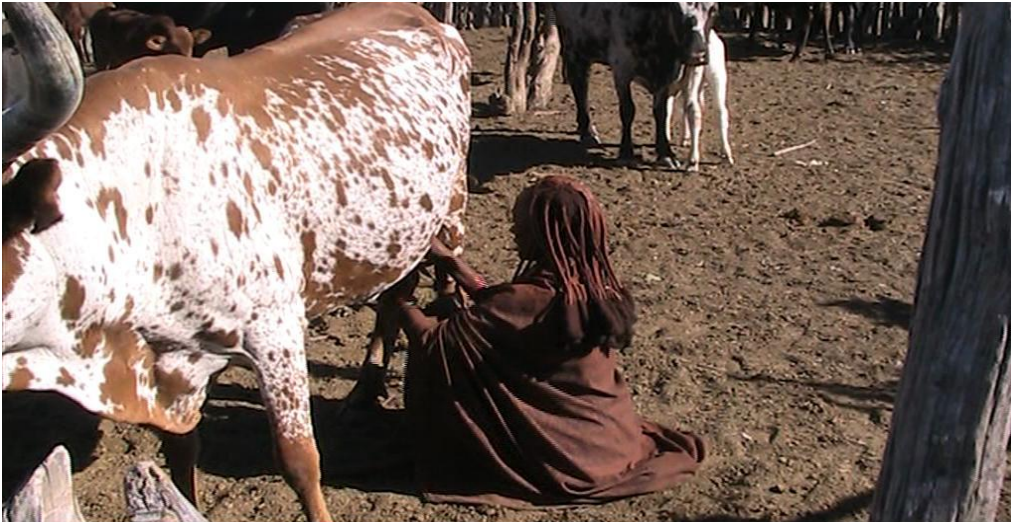
The Himba and Zemba tribes are extraordinary, and a striking people to look at. Traditionally, their clothes consist of animal skin skirts for both men and women, both going topless. The Himba women wear short skirts made of goat skins adorned with shells, and jewellery made of iron and copper. The men wear goatskin loin cloths. Both men and women smear their skin with a mixture of rancid butter, ash and ochre to protect them from the harsh desert climate. The paste (Otjize) is often mixed with the aromatic resin of the 'Omuzumba' shrub; a little like adding perfume to a suntan lotion. Apart from protection from the sun, the deep red colour is a highly desirable look in the Himba tradition and culture. The Himba women use the same paste (Otjize) in their hair which is long and plaited into intricate designs. You can tell the marital status of a Himba woman by the way she wears her hair. The men also change their hairstyle to denote their social position in the society. A married man, for example, often wears his hair in a turban.

During this study, I learnt that Himbas follow a very traditional way of life. The Himba women take great care of themselves, and grooming forms an essential part of their lives. For the Himba, clothes, hair and jewellery hold a special meaning and form an important part of their tradition and culture. Even newborn babies are adorned with pearl necklaces, while older children are given bracelets crafted from copper and decorated with shells. The proud Himba women spend many hours on beauty care and grooming every day.

Roles and responsibilities in the Himba and Zemba societies are clearly defined and they try to observe them in today's fast changing world. Typically, the Himba and Zemba women perform more labour intensive activities than the men. Men and boys are responsible for overseeing the wellbeing of the family, making sure that the clan has something to put on the table, herding cattle, and fencing gardens and homesteads. The Himba and Zemba women and girls are expected to perform the following activities: milking cows and goats, hauling water from the river or waterhole, carrying firewood, constructing huts/homes, herding goats and calves, tilling the land/garden and planting, harvesting maize and sorghum and taking care of children.



**Figure 5.1 Himba woman milking**



Milk is kept in calabashes and is classified according to the importance attached to the cows. Not all milk may be given to a stranger or any person, and some milk is used for making butter. During the research it was observed that traditionally, women and girls do not mingle with men or boys, or talk amongst the men. During the field study, wherever possible, efforts were made to interview women and girls separately on their views about the prospect of mobile schools and their attitudes toward formal education.

Despite the prominent role by the Himba and Zemba women in their societies, they are not strictly matrilineal, as are many African tribes. They are both matrilineal and patrilineal in that each member of the Himba and Zemba tribe is a member of two clans; that of their mother and that of their father. This is referred to by anthropologists as 'bilateral descent', an uncommon pattern that only occurs in a few cultures around the world. The bilateral descent of the Himba and Zemba societies may be an adaptation to the extreme desert conditions in which they live, in that an individual can rely on both their father's and mother's families for support in times of emergencies. That said, the son typically lives with his father's clan, and the older one usually inherits the clan (homestead) after the father dies.

However, he does not inherit any of his father's wealth; rather it is a maternal uncle from whom they will derive their inherited wealth. As with most pre-industrial (and many post-industrial) societies, wives go to live with their husband's clan but children do not inherit their fathers' wealth (livestock etc.). A Himba or Zemba woman lives with her

husband's clan after marriage.

During this study, I also learnt that early marriage is very common in the Himba and Zemba communities. Traditionally a Himba or Zemba man would approach the parent of young girl to indicate his wish to have her as a wife and he will leave attire or cloth with the girl's family as a symbol of his intention to marry her. She will remain with her family until she reaches the age of about 13, when she will move to the man's homestead to learn the roles and responsibilities of a woman in their society. The man will not have intercourse with her until she becomes of age; whereafter the formal marriage ceremony and slaughtering of an animal(s) will take place. A ceremonial feast will then be held.

Both Himba and Zemba's houses are just simple circle-shaped structures made with palm leaves or wooden mopane branches, or saplings covered in a layer of mud and cattle dung. The Himba construct the roofs with palm leaves. Zemba homesteads differ from Himba homes in the sense that they are enclosed with sticks that surround the huts. In the Himba culture the pen ('kraal') will be in the centre of the homestead ('*Onganda*') and the huts will be outside the pen. The Zemba use Western building materials in the construction of roofs, making them more able to withstand the elements. A cluster of huts will form the homestead.

A Himba and Zemba homestead is often enclosed by wooden mopane branches with a single opening. Opposite the opening, at the furthest side, stands the main hut of the head of the clan, which directly faces the sacred fire (*okoruwo*). It is believed that the sacred fire is the connection between the head of the clan and the ancestral spirits. Because of the importance attached to the *okowuro*, no other hut may overlook the sacred fire, and the area between the main hut and the *okoruwo* cannot be crossed without permission from the head of the clan. Visitors or strangers are not allowed to walk in front of the main hut. The sacred fire is kept burning day and night, and represents the spirits of the village ancestors.

The Himba and Zemba consult the ancestors at critical stages in their lives. Each homestead has two fires, a small one inside the hut for warmth, and a larger one outside for cooking - both are kept burning all night. It is believed that wood must be collected for the fires before sunset. The Himba and Zemba settle down for the long nights chatting round their fires, at times seeing to their animals. Villages are never



totally quiet during the night as there is always some activity. By moving around and keeping the fire alight, they are also protected from wild animals that may prey on their flocks.

The study found that both Himba and Zemba, during the course of a year, move with their herds of goats and cattle to places where they can find adequate grazing and, of course, a supply of water. They will then leave their homestead behind and may return to it sometime in future. No other clan will settle in a homestead that belongs to another clan. For this reason it is important not to take anything from a Himba hut, even if it appears abandoned. This is because each community has a core area or village which is their 'home area' for as long as the pastures and water last. They normally move out of their core area or villages only when circumstances force them to do so. The Zemba only live in certain areas, and their core areas or villages are mainly in Etoto west and east, Otjovanatje, the Ruacana area, and an area west of Opuwo.

The Himba and Zemba day starts early, and indeed for women work may go on throughout the night as the cattle and goats are brought back from grazing to be milked. The Himba women arise before dawn and apply 'otjize' on their bodies. Cows must be milked before they are herded to the grazing areas.

During the day women look after the children, making flour from maize and churning butter, and then often have to travel a distance to collect water and fire wood. This they do either by foot or by donkey or donkey cart if they have the luxury of such an item. Although the government has drilled a number of boreholes in the region, most water points are holes dug in seasonal riverbeds.

Once the cattle are milked, the men and/or boys herd cattle to the water points and grazing areas. When the pastures of their core areas are grazed down, the entire village, except elderly people, move to a place where there is better grazing. Men and boys often set up separate, temporary village and move around with the cattle, leaving children and older people (women and men) at the Onganda (homestead). In the Himba culture, however, the homestead is only called home if there are cattle around. As soon as the cattle move to a cattle-post for water or better grazing, then the core area is no longer called a home but an 'etundu' – a home that is not complete.

The diet of the Himba consists mainly of a porridge made from maize meal and milk, while for Zemba it is made with mahangu meal, maize meal and supplemented with milk. Milk left over is often used to make butter which is churned in gourds. Although meat is a part of the Himba and Zemba diet, beef is consumed sparingly as cattle represent the wealth of a clan. Meat from small stock such as goats and sheep is more likely to be found in the Himba and Zemba diet. A goat or a sheep may be slaughtered to provide meat for the household, or sold to provide cash for buying items that are not produced within their own economy. When cattle are slaughtered, it is usually done at a ceremony, like a wedding or funeral. Men in these two societies are socialised to eat separately from women and children.

The Himba and Zemba homestead is a family unit, overseen mostly by the eldest male member who is normally a grandfather in the village. Most social systems either follow the lineage of the father (the patrilineal aspect, the 'oruzo') or the mother (the matrilineal aspect, the 'eanda'). This eldest man in a village performs several of functions, many of which are related to critical stages in the family or village life, such as births, marriage, rites of passage, etc. In most cases he is expected to perform these ceremonies at the Sacred Fire (okoruwo) where he acts as the link between the living and ancestral members of the village.

Members of an extended family typically dwell in a homestead, a small, circular hamlet of huts and work shelters that surround the ancestral fire and the central livestock enclosure. Both the fire and the livestock are closely tied to their belief in ancestor worship; the fire representing ancestral protection and the livestock allowing 'proper relations between human and ancestor'.

Modern clothes are scarce, especially in the remote areas, but generally go to the men and boys when available. Contrary to other southern African communities, boys are not circumcised at the onset of puberty, but at a time determined by the clan (which seldom coincides with the onset of puberty). Himba children's hair styles easily identify their stages in life. Traditionally, young children (of pre-school age), especially in the Himba society, have shaved heads, and as they get older boys and girls can be distinguished by the position of their hair styles. For example, young girls wear two plaits covering the front of the face, while young boys wear one single plait at the back of the head. When they reach the age of puberty their hair styles changes; girls have lots of longer smaller plaits, pasted with otjize, thus denoting the attainment marriageable age.

### 5.2.2 Formal education

During the study, it was observed that the Himba and Zemba groups have a very distinct mode of production and way of life. They are, however, vulnerable to pressure from modern society and the possible social and institutional change linked with modernisation, including formal education. Since the introduction of formal education to the Himba and Zemba communities more than a decade ago, it has been observed that they have numerous reservations. They argue that their children had to be taught by teachers from their own community who understood their culture practices and customs.

Some parents saw education as creating employment for teachers and that the teachers only want their children in schools so that they could get a good salary. Himba parents therefore only allowed some of their children to go to school so that the teachers could get their salaries. Parents (up to today) refuse point blank to send all their children to school as they claim that they need their children to assist with the chores associated with their lifestyle (mainly with herding the goats and calves). This resulted in a type of rotation system where parents would rotate the children attending school. The current statistics estimate that only 50% of the children in the Kunene region had attended school by 2010 (EMIS 2008 Report; 15<sup>th</sup> Day School, 2010).

The Himba and Zemba's experiences with education have also not always been positive. Some stated that those children, who continued their education after completing Grade 4 at the mobile school units, came back to the villages with changed minds and ideas. They learned to smoke and abuse alcohol and refused to continue herding the cattle or perform traditional domestic chores. They also claim that even those who have become teachers are 'useless' because they cannot show any evidence of wealth from education, such as having cattle or driving a new car.

What was observed in the mobile units is that children use both traditional attire and western clothing. It was observed that girls were generally more conservative in dress and hair-style and tend to retain traditional dress styles longer than boys. Boys cut their hair to look like other boys, and in order to play soccer, according to their explanations. Mobile unit teachers become adult role models for the mobile school learners and this is also supported by the observation during the field study. Many parents interviewed, however, want to return to their culture so that their children can dress in traditional attire which is much cheaper than western clothes and do not need to be bought with

cash.

When the concept of mobile schools was developed in 1997 it appears that the migration patterns of the Ovahimba and Ovazemba and other nomadic people were not fully understood by the policy makers. These nomad groups always have a core area, or village, which is their home, thus the majority of the Ovahimba and Ovazemba people are not nomadic in the true sense of the word. Most of these communities are attached to a so-called 'onganda' or homestead where the less mobile members of society (old people, pregnant women, small children, etc.) live more or less permanently. This is where the 'Holy Fire' hut is, which has an important symbolic function in Himba and Zemba community life. The young men are more mobile members of society, and herd the livestock/cattle and range widely, particularly in the dry season around June/July to December in search of water and better grazing.

They range in all directions, and for periods varying from one day, several weeks to months. Experience has shown that it is not always practical for the mobile unit to follow the migrations, as they are difficult to predict and widely dispersed. Numerous interviews with local communities, teachers and parents showed a widespread agreement that units should remain in one point and not move. In fact, there was widespread preference for permanent structures. There was a common sentiment that tents were not very practical as they became very hot in the dry season.

On the other hand, it appears that some communities, particularly in the north west of Kunene Region (Otjinungwa and Onjuva), are more nomadic than others and do not have a permanent 'onganda'. In these areas, schools still find it useful to move short distances in accordance with the migrations, depending on the accessibility of the new locations. During the interviews it was repeatedly claimed that over the past five years, when a major drought occurred, it has become increasingly difficult to predict the seasonal movements of these groups and their cattle because of the need to range widely to find water and better grazing. The pattern of migration varies greatly from community to community, so much so that any common pattern is hard to predict. When the herds are moved to outlying cattle posts in the extended areas they are often split up into two or three smaller herds that will each go in a different direction. This is a form of insurance - if disaster should strike in one place, only a part of their heard may be wiped out, and they may still have enough animals left to build up new stock.

Another important observation was the introduction of feeding scheme at all needy schools, including all mobile school units, by the Ministry of Education. What has been observed was that some of the mobile schools became permanent. The feeding scheme provides one meal per day, but some parents send their children to stay or lodge at the mobile unit for the whole week or entire school term. As a result, some mobile school units are left with no choice but to allow children/learners to sleep in the tents during the night and use it as a classroom during the day. Parents argue that if the government wants their children to attend school and be educated, then the government must provide food and accommodation for their children. In these cases mobile school teachers have no choice in providing two meals a day to the learners. The result is that maize meal runs out before the end of school term and children have to be sent home, and only return to school at the next school term.

In educational terms, this simply results in a shorter school year and a reduction in teaching time. Some of the mobile school teachers indicated that this had an effect on the learners' performance because of the days lost. It was also observed that children enrolled in mobile school units lose 15 schooling days (five business days per term) per year as mobile school units close one week earlier before the official school term closes. Thus mobile school learners are not spending enough time learning: the broadly agreed benchmark of 850-1 000 hours of instruction per year is not reached in the Namibian mobile schools. One reason given is that mobile school unit teachers have to come to the mobile school office in Opuwo for the last week of school term to finalise their administration work (i.e. reports, assessments, etc.) and hand in their work to their Head of Departments on the last official day of term.

Another important factor observed is that, in terms of culture demands and the influence of formal education, there is widespread belief among the Himba and Zemba that formal schooling will erode their traditional culture as there are demands to wear uniforms and western dress which children would find difficult to resist. This seems to be one of the main reasons for the resistance from parents not to send their children to mobile school units or hostel schools for the higher grades. One of the most frequently quoted complaints about hostel schools was 'give them your little finger and they'll take your whole hand'. Parents and communities members repeatedly said, 'Government promised that they would do nothing to change our culture and our ways of living, but before you knew it everything was indeed changed'.

There has been some initial resistance by some communities and/or areas being educated. The common argument is that education will only encourage children to leave a society and they will no longer be willing to look after cattle or their parents. For the Himba and Zemba communities, cattle stock is the culture, the mode of value, the means of exchange, and the only basic resource for survival. There is therefore a clear 'generation gap' between parents and children, cultural demands, and the influence of formal education.

The powerful force of culture was vividly illustrated during the research. At a mobile school I was told about a young girl who wanted to go to school to learn how to read and write. She wanted to get the skills that other girls were learning at school, but her father refused to allow her to attend school. He wanted her to herd the goats. Earnestly wanting to go to school, she slipped away from the herd and enrolled herself at the school. Later when the father came looking for her, he started to beat her for being disobedient. She died from the injuries sustained, and at the time of this study, a murder case was opened in the civil court against the father.

It has been also noted that dropout rates in mobile school units, especially among girls in Ondao Mobile School, are higher than for boys (EMIS, 2009). One of the common problems is that some girls who complete their lower grades at their Ondao Mobile units do not continue with their education because in most of conventional government schools, especially secondary schools, all learners are expected to wear western school uniforms and this is against their cultural practices. For example, in the Himba and Zemba communities, some fathers may present a traditional necklace called '*Omwingona*' to a daughter as a honour. In the Himba and Zemba cultures, the honoured girls are not allowed to take off that necklace, and as a result, most of these girls (in order to preserve their honorary status and their position in their community and society at large) normally drop out after completing Grade 4. Only a small number of girls do take off their honour necklaces in order to continue with their higher grades, but it is against their cultural practices and customs, as well as their fathers' wishes.

Furthermore, in the Himba and Zemba culture, a child is not allowed to greet an older person or their cousins. There are a set of rules and cultural practices when it comes to greetings, which is in stark contrast to what they may learn in formal education.



### **5.3. Features of Himba and Zemba culture that make the provisioning of education difficult**

There are differences between western and eastern part of Kunene region where these communities reside. The west and North West are more arid, and subject to prolonged droughts. This means that herders have to travel further and more frequently in search of grazing and water. Some families could move as much as 100 kilometres from where their children are attending school.

There has been little desire for some mobile units to move, and most parents now want the mobile school units to have a permanent location where children could be 'deposited' and cared for by the teachers.

In the eastern part of the country, there appears to be a tendency to locate the school in the 'onganda' or the traditional homestead. Here small herds gather near a reliable water source, and old people, pregnant women, small children, and other groups not necessarily involved in cattle migration, gather. It is appropriate to locate the units close to the homestead as nomadic or semi-nomadic parents know where their children are, and that they are receiving an education.

Unscheduled or unplanned movements of the Himba and Zemba communities pose challenges and appear to be paradoxical when it comes to the education of the Himba and Zemba communities. Despite many efforts made by the Namibia government in terms of access, school networks remain thin in sparsely areas like in Kunene region. From the perspective of official education statistics, quality education receiving by nomadic children is very poor, as learners are often score badly in terms of achievement, attainment, and gender balance compared with their non-nomad counterparts (EMIS, 2009).

A contributing factor in terms of providing education to children from the Himba and Zemba communities is the weakness of the school network. In the north west of Kunene there are few conventional schools and mobile school units serving a very extensive area (EMIS, 2009; National Population Census 2001). The main reasons given by the Himba and Zemba parents, for their children not attending school is that there were no schools available in the area. The distance to existing mobile school

units are excessive, as some walk up to 50 kilometres from their homesteads.

There are very few conventional schools in the north west of Kunene and mobile school units are also scattered and far apart; as a result parents are reluctant to send their children to school, especially the younger ones. The lack of a comprehensive mobile school network is making it difficult for children from the Himba and Zemba communities to receive basic education in their vicinity.

Another reason they do not send all their children to the school is that some of the children have to assist with the chores; mainly with herding the cattle and goats. Cattle are the prime gauge of wealth and status in the Himba and Zemba cultures, and as a result the cattle herders play a major role in their lifestyles. It is also well known and observed in Himba and Zemba culture that there is a wide range of tasks that both boys and girls are expected to carry out in their daily activities; therefore sending them all to school poses a serious burden on the families.

The Himba and Zemba cultural inhibitions and customs, such as early marriage, and livestock-tending that school age children are engaged in, play a significant role in keeping their children out of school. Traditionally girls are often married off at the age of 10 or 11, but this practice is changing and is rarely found now, especially in the literate communities. The men usually marry at a much older age, because a young man must first acquire sufficient livestock for the 'lobola' (endowment/bride price) before he can marry and set up a family.

Another challenge is that most of the time when these communities move they break into small groups; each heading in a different directions searching water or better grazing. This dispersion poses challenges to the Ondao mobile school management and to mobile teachers because they have to decide either to temporarily close the mobile school unit during that season or move with a faction of the school children. The second option is to re-locate the unit where a number of community move to, but this depends on accessibility of the new area.

## 5.4. Conclusion

Because of the remote nature of Kunene region and its isolation, the Ovahimba, Ovazemba and other nomad peoples who live there are amongst the most marginalised groups in Namibia, especially in terms of access to education. They maintain and guard fiercely a highly individual tribal culture in terms of mode of production, dress, hairstyles and ornaments which delight tourists and anthropologists from all over the world. Whether marginalisation is equivalent to poverty, however, is a matter for speculation and how poverty is define in the context of a developing country like Namibia.

As no statistics exist on monetary incomes, from observations it can be noted that as elsewhere in Africa, Namibian cattle-herding communities are as poor as they are portrayed in the literature (Dyer, 2001). This has been confirmed during the interviews with Himba and Zemba parents, and some are willing to contribute to their children's education.

It has be also noted that the unit cost of providing government services to nomadic groups such as the Himba and Zemba in the north west of Namibia, in general, is probably extremely high. This is because physical conditions are very difficult with high mountains, intense heat, floods and drought, almost no roads and bridges, and a very low density of population. In addition, many are nomadic groups and do not stay in one place. This has made it extremely difficult to provide education, health centres and even water supplies, and this was evident during the field trips.

The alternative solution, which might be cheaper in terms of unit cost, is if children from nomadic communities can be collected together in boarding schools, but this would totally undermine the wishes of the Himba and Zemba people in maintaining their traditional culture. Ethnic and cultural discrimination at schools are major obstacles to equal access to education, causing poor performance and high dropout rates. The Himba, Zemba and other nomad children in boarding schools often suffer from discrimination, misunderstandings of their culture, lack of support, and, in some cases, even physical and sexual exploitation.

For example, in conventional boarding schools, the Himba and Zemba children are not allowed to follow their cultural practices, such as wearing traditional dress and hairstyles. They are often discouraged from speaking their native languages, if not forbidden altogether. Children from nomadic people like the Himba and Zemba often feel unwelcome in the conventional and/or urban schools; they long for their own village mobile school units and often face emotional difficulties in a foreign learning environment that offers little support. The very idea of separating parents and children is unfamiliar to Himba and Zemba people. If separation happens, the Himba and Zemba children are often unable to adjust, feel alienated, and drop out.

This overview of the Himba and Zemba culture and traditions was aimed at highlighting some of the factors that should have been taken into account when education for the Himba and Zemba peoples was conceptualised in 1997. The question is whether the education system is sensitive enough to the cultures of the Himba and Zemba peoples, and whether the education provided to these groups could bring about the same quality of education as in other parts of Namibia.