

Responses to Information Requests - Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

Namibia: Traditions and practices of the Himba [Omuhimba (singular), Ovahimba (plural)] ethnic group of the Ovaherero, including sexual practices and polygamy; location in Namibia; state protection (2019–August 2021)

1. Himba

According to sources, the Himba are ["semi-nomadic" (MRG n.d.)] pastoral people residing in north-western Namibia (MRG n.d.; Scelza n.d.) in the Kunene region known as Kaokoland (Scelza n.d.). Sources note that the Himba speak Herero (MRG n.d.) or Otjihimba, a dialect of Herero (Scelza n.d.). Sources estimate that the Himba population is 20,000 (Scelza n.d.) or 25,000 (MRG n.d.). However, Minority Rights Group International (MRG) notes that "no reliable figures exist" of the Himba population (MRG n.d.). The same source indicates that the isolation of the Himba people has allowed them to preserve their culture and traditions more than other Herero peoples in other parts of Namibia (MRG n.d.).

An article in *The Namibian*, a national daily newspaper, describes the Himba as "a tribe known for their skin coloured distinctly with red ochre, intricate hair styles and enduring way of life" (*The Namibian* 28 Apr. 2020). The BBC similarly notes that the Himba are "known for their red matted braids," which are made from a mixture of animal fat, ash and ground ochre (BBC 31 Aug. 2017).

2. Sexual Practices and Polygamy

According to sources, the Himba are polygamous (*The Guardian* 20 Feb. 2018) or practice polygyny (Scelza n.d.). The BBC describes a Himba village head as having four wives and nineteen children (BBC 31 Aug. 2017). *The Guardian*, a Nigerian daily newspaper, reports that once girls reach puberty, they are married to male partners chosen by their fathers (*The Guardian* 20 Feb. 2018). A 2020 study by Brooke Scelza et al. [1] on the reproductive habits of the Himba, which was published in the American Association for the Advancement of Science's journal *Science Advances*, based on demographic interviews conducted between 2010 and 2017 in Omuhonga, states the following:

Marriage among Himba is arranged by parents, although 'love match' marriages are common, particularly after the first marriage. Polygyny is common, but so is divorce, meaning most Himba adults have more than one spouse over their lifetime (either sequentially or concurrently). Age at marriage is later for men than women. Men marry for the first time in their late 20s, but this is typically to a child bride. (Scelza, et al. 19 Feb. 2020, 4)

An article from New Era Publication Corporation (NEPC), a publishing corporation owned by the Government of Namibia which produces daily newspapers and online content (NEPC n.d.), reports that according to the councillor of the Sesfontein constituency, in Kunene, "it is very rare" for the Himba to marry outside of their community and as a result child marriages are "rife" among the Himba (26 Feb.

2018). The same source also states that "the Kunene region has one of the highest teenage pregnancy rates" (NEPC 26 Feb. 2018). According to the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), from 2005 to 2019, 7 percent of children were married by age 18 in Namibia (UN n.d.). In a video from the Namibian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC), a Himba woman describes running away from home as a child to avoid an arranged marriage (NBC 8 Apr. 2018). The NEPC article further describes an eight-year-old bride being married to a fifty-six-year-old man who had another wife (NEPC 26 Feb. 2018). In an interview with *The Namibian*, a Himba woman states that girls "are still being married off at a young age" and are married "even" before their tenth birthday because of strong cultural beliefs and "influence from some of the husbands" (*The Namibian* 26 May 2016). According to a Himba girl interviewed by *The Namibian*, girls "as young as" twelve years old are married to older men who then get them pregnant (*The Namibian* 26 May 2016). In contrast, Scelza et al. indicates that child marriages are "not consummated, and coresidence typically does not begin" until after the bride experiences her first menstruation and "[e]ven then, a considerable portion of these marriages never come to fruition" (Scelza et al. 19 Feb. 2020, 4).

A 2018 article in *The Guardian* describes *Okujepisa Omukazendu* which is the practice of when a visitor comes to the house, "the wife is given to his guest to spend the night while the husband sleeps in another room" (20 Feb. 2018). The article further states that "[t]he woman has little or no opinion in the decision making" and while she can refuse to sleep with him, she must stay in the room with the guest (*The Guardian* 20 Feb. 2018). An article from NEPC states that the Okujepisa practice is "a cultural instrument of rehabilitation, hospitality, social welfare services and information sharing" and that it is at the wife's discretion to have sex with the guest or not (NEPC 5 June 2020). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, when asked about the sexual practices of the Ovahimba ethnic group, a human rights advocate and project coordinator for Sister Namibia, an "activist driven" media publication focusing on collective action and the empowerment of women (Sister Namibia 16 Oct. 2020), stated that there are "[r]epercussions for people not participating, especially if [they] are a rural woman without the financial autonomy to insist on an alternative for [themselves], include being ostracised, beaten and harassed" (Human Rights Advocate 17 Aug. 2021).

According to Scelza et al., out of 171 married Himba individuals surveyed for the study, 77 percent of women and 85 percent of men had "at least one nonmarital partner" (Scelza, et al. 19 Feb. 2020, 2). The same source indicates that among married couples, including polygamous married men, 70 percent had at least one child whose father was not the husband (Scelza, et al. 19 Feb. 2020, 2-3). According to a 2021 study by Brooke Scelza, Sean Prall, and Katherine Starkweather [2] published in the academic journal *Social Sciences*, based on data collected in a 10-year study of relationships in one Himba community,

women have significant freedoms associated with reproductive decision-making. Although arranged marriages are common for first marriages, love matches, where the couple choose each other and then go to their families to formalize the arrangement, constitute the majority of second marriages. Women are also able to divorce with ease, and do so frequently. Births outside of marriage are not generally stigmatized and there are norms in place to name a 'social father' for that child. (Scelza, et al. 17 May 2021, 5, 7)

However, the 2020 study by Scelza et al. notes that while it is common to have marital and nonmarital relationships, there are "risks to these partnerships,"

including "sexual jealousy" and "physical harm" (Scelza, et al. 19 Feb. 2020, 2).

3. State Protection

Information on state protection for Himba people who refuse to engage in polyamory and multiple marriages and who refuse to participate in Himba sexual practices was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

An article in the *The Namibian* reports that according to the Opuwo police crime investigation coordinator deputy commissioner, while child marriage is illegal, it is challenging for the police to arrest anyone involved due to the traditions of the Himba and lack of cooperation from the parents (*The Namibian* 26 May 2016). The Human Rights Advocate stated that

[t]o my knowledge the state does not offer particular protection beyond the basic promise of the right to prosecute someone who harasses you, but state protocol and extreme levels of victim-blaming at every level of bureaucracy make that promise a practical impossibility, especially for rural women or people who for financial reasons lack the requisite autonomy. (Human Rights Advocate 17 Aug. 2021)

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

Notes

[1] Brooke Scelza is a professor of anthropology at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) who studies the Himba (UCLA n.d.).

[2] Sean Prall is an assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Missouri who has been studying the Himba since 2016 (University of Missouri n.d.). Katherine Startweather is an adjunct assistant professor of evolutionary anthropology and postdoctoral fellow at the University of New Mexico (The University of New Mexico n.d.).

References

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University of Missouri. N.d. "[Sean Prall.](#)" [Accessed 2 Sept. 2021]

United Nations (UN). N.d. UN Population Fund (UNFPA). "[Namibia.](#)" [World Population Dashboard.](#) [Accessed 23 Aug. 2021]

Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: Legal Assistance Centre; Living Culture Foundation Namibia; Namibia – Ministry of International Relations and Cooperation; NamRights; National Museum of Namibia; professor of anthropology at a university in Belgium who conducts research on northern Namibia; professor of anthropology at a university in California who has worked with the Ovahimba since 2009; professor of anthropology at a university in Namibia; professor of anthropology at a university in South Africa who studied the women of Namibia for 30 years; professor of ethnology at a university in Germany who researched Himba society; professor of sociology at a university in Namibia; UN – WHO Namibia Country Office.

Internet sites, including: Al Jazeera; Amnesty International; Australia – Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade; Away to Africa; Belgium – Commissariat general aux réfugiés et apatrides; Bertelsmann Stiftung; Brookings Institution; Centre for Strategic and International Studies; Council on Foreign Relations; Denmark – Danish Immigration Service; ecoi.net; EU – European Asylum Support Office; Deutsche Welle; Factiva; Fédération internationale pour les droits humains; France – Office français de protection des réfugiés et apatrides; Freedom House; *The Guardian* [UK]; Human Rights Watch; International Crisis Group; Journal of Tourism, Culture and Territorial Development; Médecins sans frontières; Monkeys and Mountains Adventure Travel; Namibia – Ministry of International Relations and Cooperation; Namibia Daily News; Namibia Focus; Namibia News Digest; The Namibia Press Agency; *Namibian Sun*; Organisation suisse d'aide aux réfugiés; The Netherlands – Ministry of Foreign Affairs; *Political Handbook of the World*; PsyArXiv; Pulse.ng; Reporters sans frontières; Transparency International; UK – Home Office; UN – Refworld, Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, UNDP, UN Women, WHO; US – CIA, Department of State, Library of Congress; *The Washington Post*.