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Steven Van Wolputte. *Material Culture in Himbaland, Northern Namibia.* Tervuren: Royal Museum for Central Africa, 2003. 328 pp. EUR 34.00 (paper), ISBN 978-90-75894-49-3.

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Van Wolputte's book on the material culture of the Himba of northern Namibia is the inaugural volume in a new series on African pastoralists published by the Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium. It is a visually beautiful book filled with high quality color and black and white photographs of the Himba and their "material culture." Van Wolputte approaches his study of Himba material culture from the currently fashionable idea that culturally created objects have social lives and meanings, that these objects serve as cultural metaphors and symbols, and are not to be taken as simple material implements with nothing more than practical value.

The book is divided into two parts. The first section, titled "Culture and Society," provides the reader with a brief historical background of the Himba that places them into the wider context of Namibia and southern Africa before launching into a highly detailed description of daily life, cattle herding, kinship, social, and political structures, the divisions of lived space, the cycle of life for men and women (including some ceremonies), and a Himba understanding of the universe. The second part of the book focuses in detail on scores of material objects that Van Wolputte organizes into various categories such as clothing, jewelry, tools, and so forth, in order to discuss their connections to many of the things he describes in the first part of the book. Thus, a particular kind of iron beaded necklace is not just a necklace, but one that a woman acquires after marriage, one that conveys several different though complimentary social messages.

One cannot help but be struck at the level of detail Van Wolputte brings to bear in his descriptions (he has, as one would expect, much more to say about some objects than others), and convincingly proves his thesis that

many material objects convey unmistakable social meanings, that a single implement may have different social meanings depending on the context in which it appears, and that certain objects have great histories that make them extremely valuable. I believe Van Wolputte succeeds in demonstrating that the Himba, like all other peoples, are interested in material goods not simply because of their usefulness or beauty, but also because of their "symbolic capital."

His prose conveys a sense of confidence, perhaps overconfidence, at having settled the issues once and for all. There are many nouns and adjectives throughout the text that are misused and thus obscure some of Van Wolputte's intending meanings—something a good editor should have set right.

In certain respects this book reminds me of many of the good ethnographies of yesteryear wherein very fine ethnographers assembled masses of detailed information but acted as sole voices for the peoples they studied. As much as I admire Van Wolputte's level of detail, his work nonetheless strikes me as rather doctrinaire, as though he were forcing ethnographic detail into the doctrinally approved pigeonholes. At the level of life as lived, human cultural lives are rarely so straightforward. Despite the many beautiful photographs of Himba men, women, and children, the reader knows absolutely nothing about them as individual people, neither does the reader know anything about what individual Himba think of material objects, their status, their use, their social meanings, and their importance or lack of importance. All of this is mediated entirely through Van Wolputte's own voice. In the absence of real Himba voices, the people themselves are not much more than cultural objects given life as the

ethnographer chooses to do so. I raise this issue not to belittle Van Wolputte's work at all, for I do find it very good, only to point out an area of evidence entirely lacking in this book, a kind of evidence that not only imparts a certain humility and lack of final neatness to a text, but one that more fully establishes the credibility of the ethnographer. In saying this, I do not imply that the basic correctness of Van Wolputte's work is in any way, shape, or

form in question, only that in establishing meanings, real voices from real people are critical.

This much having been said, I find that Van Wolputte has succeeded in producing a commendable book with the virtue of a remarkable level of ethnographic detail, whose reading is now indispensable for anyone interested in the Himba in general, and Himba material culture in particular.

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