



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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The Social Life of Cultural Expressions

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Browsing the world wide web in order to find more information on the OvaHimba of northern Namibia, it is hard to escape the generalizing and romanticizing images these websites produce. Almost all depict the OvaHimba as a “proud people” “with many secrets,” that have “clung to their traditions.” Attention is especially focused on the Himba women, who rub their bodies with butterfat against the sun and have an “unusual sculptural beauty, enhanced by intricate hairstyles and jewelry.”[1] The pictures that are often attached definitely appeal to one’s imagination but they serve no other purpose than to portray the OvaHimba as “a relic of a distant past” (p. 29) and an authentic, underdeveloped, and exotic group of people.

In this first volume of a new series called African Pastoralists Studies, Van Wolputte presents a profound study into the material culture of the above-mentioned “people of cattle” (p. 26). According to Van Wolputte, cultural expressions must be interpreted in their broadest sense and should be considered as socially produced and constitutive. Anointing the body with butterfat has more to it than protection against the sun alone, and it is the social context in which the fat is prepared and applied that is important to know and understand. Cultural expressions are an indispensable part of Himba life-world and identity and can tell us a lot about the norms, roles, and values that prevail. Van Wolputte treats these cultural expressions as metaphors and symbols rather than mere

artifacts and focuses on their interrelated meanings.

The book consists of two parts. The first part, “Culture and Society,” provides general information about Himba life and the Himba understanding of the world. A short historical chapter in which the OvaHimba are placed in a wider Namibian and southern African context is followed by vivid and detailed descriptions of Himba daily life and the importance of livestock; Himba socio-political structures; the lay-out of house and homestead; the different stages in the woman’s and man’s life-cycles; ceremonies of death, mourning, and commemoration; and Himba cosmology. The second part, “Material Culture,” focuses on the cultural expressions that play an important role in the first part of the book. Over a hundred objects, ranging from woven porridge bowls to iron stabbing spears, are described in detail in an attempt to establish their “social lives” (p. 166). They are categorized in different groups according to their function, such as “Tools and Raw Materials,” “Household Goods,” “Dress and Attire,” “Jewelry,” “Weapons,” “Musical Instruments,” and “Health and Well-Being.” Both parts are accompanied by numerous extremely beautiful black and white photographs, mostly taken by the author himself, that stand out well on the glossy paper that is used. In addition, the two parts are divided by sixteen pages of fine colored pictures.

Van Wolputte definitely succeeds in his aim “to raise an interest in the practical imagination of a ‘people of cattle’” (p. 26). With an impressive amount of detailed in-

formation, based on extensive periods of fieldwork, Van Wolputte convincingly places Himba material culture in the midst of their worldview. Objects are not just practical to use or nice to wear; they can also refer to someone's social and individual identity and position in society, represent the continuity with the ancestral heritage, emphasize the importance of fertility and potency, or mediate the relationship between people and their herds. Van Wolputte has produced a fascinating volume that should be compulsory reading for anyone traveling to the north-west corner of Namibia. Furthermore, it is a valuable contribution to the domain of pastoral studies in general and the study of Himba society in particular.

No book is perfect, however, and this volume also has its shortcomings. The countless Otjhimba translations in italics and between brackets, with which the text is larded, severely disturb the flow of the narrative. In some cases a linguistic explanation provides us with additional information about the social context in which the word is used, but generally speaking the purpose of the translations eludes me. A wordlist at the beginning or the end of the book would perhaps have been a better idea. At several places the closing bracket is missing, something which should have been noticed by the editor. Furthermore, Van Wolputte puts many words between inverted commas. This is often justified, but at times it is rather confusing since it is not exactly clear what is meant. Without doubt the English language lacks words to adequately describe Himba concepts; however, inverted commas are no solution.

As Van Wolputte himself points out, the categories used in the second part of the book are rather arbitrary. A necklace can be a piece of jewelry and at the same time protect the wearer from misfortune. A belt can be a garment but also function as a piece of jewelry. The categories also differ in magnitude. The section on jewelry knows almost forty entries, while "Musical Instruments" harbors three. Such problems may well be inherent to categorization, but one may wonder whether categorization as practiced in this book is a virtue. Van Wolputte aims to describe the wider social meanings of a wide range of cultural expressions. The extent to which he succeeds varies enormously among the different objects. For some entries (such as the axe, t-shirt, calendar, and rifle), the provided information is rather limited

and does not go beyond a general description of the object, something Van Wolputte says he wanted to avoid (p. 165). For others (such as leather, wood, wooden milk pail, and the woman's lambskin crown) the information is overwhelming. In the case of the latter, however, information from the first part of the book is often repeated. The chapter on the different stages of the woman's life-cycle, for example, provides quite substantial information about several objects that are important during certain ceremonies. This information is partly reproduced when the objects are finally described in the second part of the book. The two parts could perhaps better have been integrated to improve the readability of the volume; thus a detailed description of the development of a woman's life-cycle would also include an elaborate explanation of the different cultural expressions that come to the fore in this realm.

>From time to time, insufficient light is shed on certain important issues. In different parts of the volume, for example, it is explained that the ceremonies surrounding the birth of twins differ from the rituals carried out when a single child is born (pp. 103-104, 250). The ceremony, including the objects that play an important role, is described in detail, but why twins are considered to be a special case is not elaborated upon. In an endnote it is mentioned that in Africa south of the Sahara, "twins in general occupy a very 'special' but ambiguous position," something I do not want to refute, but it would be interesting to know how this position was developed in Himba society. Likewise, a couple of times "the ceremony of the 'special child'" (pp. 98, 256, 257) is mentioned; in it a girl's membership of her patriline of birth is reaffirmed. The father honors his firstborn, thirdborn, and fifthborn daughter, who is endowed with a bracelet or a necklace; a bullock or sheep is ceremonially slaughtered. A reader may well wonder what happens to the secondborn or fourthborn daughter, and what status they do enjoy. Additional information, however, is lacking, and questions, thus, remain.

Note

[1]. See for example: www.namibian.org/travel/namibia/population/himba
<http://www.safari.co.za/himba-day-trip-swakopmund.html>, and http://ywamsca.com/ao/ao_kun/about-h/about-h.htm.

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