

First female Himba Chief

Changing traditions trapped by party politics

by Mark Nonkes

An early morning argument explodes. In the sandy riverbed two men are shouting while others form a semi-circle to watch the drama unfold. "Who gave them permission to see the Queen?" demands the man with a silver arrow tucked behind his ear. - In Etanga, a small outpost northwest of Opuwo in the Kunene Region, our visit to the first female Himba chief has sparked controversy*. "Do you think anyone can just go to her anytime they want?" the man asks, pointing his finger at us accusingly. A young man responds with equal force. "But she's everyone's chief. And this is official business."



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Controversy is never far behind the first female Himba chief, Chief Katjambia Tjambiru. However, the chief herself believes that she is just following in the footsteps of many great leaders before her, doing the job she was born to do. It was always clear that she should be chief, Hiaruuko Tjiningire, secretary of Katjambia's Traditional Council, confirms. "When her father, the chief, was still alive, he told us many times: 'This daughter of mine, I want her to be chief'. - They were thinking alike. They have the same abilities and the same intelligence."

Political wrangling*

After her father's death in 1991, one of Katjambia's brothers disputed her chieftaincy, but this did not disrupt the peace in the Etanga area during most of the 1990s. Her **succession*** to a traditionally male chieftainship was only publicly challenged in 2003, when party politics came into play.

Democratic Turnhalle Alliance (DTA) leader Katuutire Kaura visited Etanga and raised party flags on former Chief Mutuezu Tjambiru's grave in order to honour the late chief's support for the DTA. Chief Katjambia supported the action. However, supporters of the ruling Swapo party allegedly removed and confiscated the flags and threatened to beat up anyone who tried to recover them. When Katjambia tried to get police support to protect herself from intimidation, she was denied assistance. This action attracted major political attention. In May 2003, then Namibian President and Swapo head Sam Nujoma flew with a military helicopter to Etanga and

invited Himbas to join the ruling party. Fifty to sixty former DTA supporters followed this invitation.

In 2005, Katjambia's brother Ukoruavi, who had disputed her title, died. Soon the people around Etanga started celebrating Katjambia as their undisputed chief. Many cattle were slaughtered. Other Himba chiefs visited to offer congratulations. Music was played. The NBC's Otjiherero language station came to broadcast. The Governor of Kunene Region sent a letter. "People made a very big party," Katjambia remembers smiling.

Her celebrated succession as first female Himba chief was, however, again disrupted by party politics. Her nephew Vemuui, a known Swapo supporter, claimed he was the rightful chief of the area. According to a 2008 article in the daily newspaper *The Namibian*, several Swapo ministers had worked behind the scenes to smuggle in Vemuui. "Government seems to be politicising traditional matters with party politics," Chief Katjambia wrote in a letter to the Kunene Regional Councillor in 2007. "I, together with the Kakurukoje community in Etanga, express our objection to that decision."

In 2008, rumours swirled that Vemuui Tjambiru had been officially recognized by the government. Later in the year, an advertisement was placed in a government newspaper claiming Vemuui Tjambiru was indeed the recognized chief of the Kakurukouje Traditional Authority, and not Katjambia Tjambiru.

The chief's kraal

By the time I actually arrive at Chief Katjambia's kraal, it is nearly midday. Her kraal is bordered with thorn tree branches, three children play among the cone shaped huts. In the centre of the kraal is a second paddock, where the cattle are herded every evening.

"Welcome to my place," the chief says warmly. "Now you see where I stay." It is difficult to believe this grandmother could be at the root of an epic-sized controversy. This is a woman who continues to milk

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cows and live the traditional pastoral life in the bush. However, Katjambia sees herself as a born leader. "I was born with leadership, it's my talent," she says, choosing her words carefully. She fondly remembers her father, who encouraged her to learn through observation. "My father used to love me a lot," she recalls. "I was the only one who used to cooperate and listen."

Political divide disrupts development

After the Swapo appointment of Vemuui, a bitter divide was created in the Etanga community. Half of the Kakurukouje constituency now follow Vemuui while the other half remains loyal to Katjambia. The tension is obvious and spills regularly into the streets. Work at community development projects often comes to a standstill, as arguments regularly erupt between the two factions.

Katjambia herself has been the victim of violence at the hands of opposing traditional supporters. According to a member of her traditional authority, she was slapped, pushed and beaten with a plastic hose – an incident that had her hospitalized. The divide is so deep that Katjambia has even been refused treatment at the local health clinic because it is staffed with supporters from the opposing traditional authority.

There are many theories why Katjambia was not officially recognised, while her nephew was. Some say it is a Swapo versus DTA battle and political **wrangling** by influential Himba leaders who wanted more Swapo presence in their area. Others would like to relate it Katjambia's gender.

Katjambia, however, remains committed to honouring her father's wishes by leading her people and caring for her community. "My people are hungry. There's not enough water for the animals. We have a clinic, but people are dying there. These matters are irritating me deep down and giving me a heart ache."

Perhaps, if people of the Etanga area could focus on these issues, the controversy could move beyond political wrangling and questions of gender. Until then, Katjambia will remain fighting for the title she says is rightfully hers. ♀

*The Kunene Region, also known as Kaokoland, lies in north-western Namibia. The capital is Opuwo. It is mainly inhabited by the Otjiherero speaking Himba people.

Glossary

- ***controversy** a drawn-out fight or argument, often about a moral or political matter
- ***wrangling** having a noisy or angry argument
- ***succession** the right to a title such as chief or king