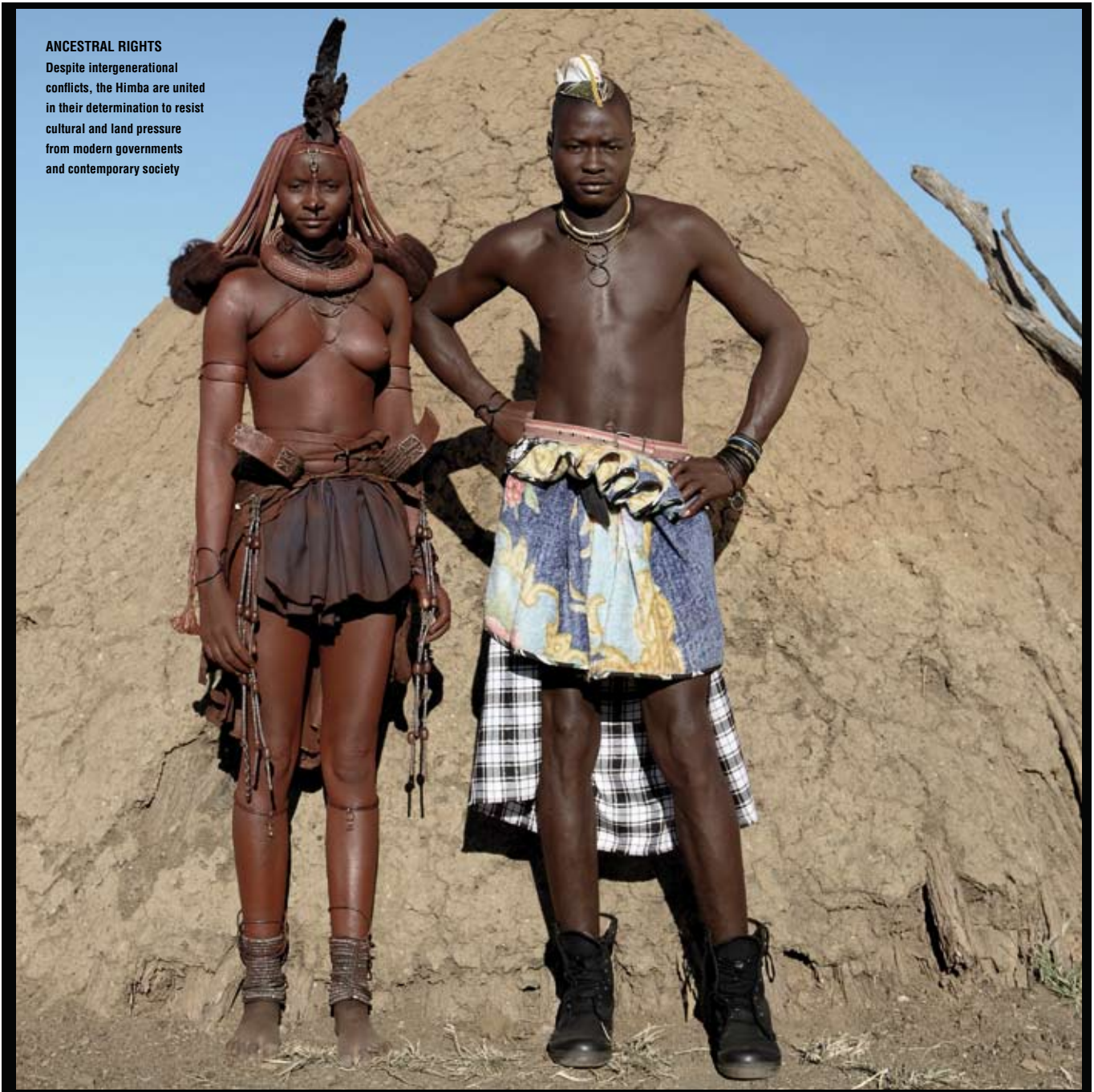


travel tactics for a changing world

SMART TRAVELLER

ANCESTRAL RIGHTS

Despite intergenerational conflicts, the Himba are united in their determination to resist cultural and land pressure from modern governments and contemporary society



FINAL FRONTIER

THE VOLATILE AND ISOLATED BEAUTY OF EARTH'S OLDEST DESERT HAS LONG PROVIDED A CULTURAL REFUGE FOR THE SEMI-NOMADIC HIMBA TRIBES. BUT A PROPOSED NATIONAL PARK IN ANGOLA AND A HYDROELECTRIC POWER PROJECT FOR NAMIBIA THREATEN THE VERY TRADITIONS THAT HAVE SUSTAINED THESE TRIBES FOR MORE THAN FIVE CENTURIES

WORDS SUSAN LEVINE PHOTOGRAPHS LAMBRO TSILIIYANNIS



Smeared with *otjize*, a blend of butterfat and powdered iron ochre, and with their leather aprons, metal collars, spiral copper armlets, beaded anklets and white conch shells, the ‘Red People’ cut a distinctive figure. But all these symbols of a culture intact are betrayed by a harsher reality of intergenerational conflict between an older, more conservative generation and younger Himba interested in what school, Christianity and earning a wage may bring. In recent years, ongoing political and global forces that threaten to destroy the ecological frontier that shapes traditional Himba practices have threatened the Himba identity further.

Everyday life for the Himba revolves around the wellbeing of their ample herds of goats and cows and honouring their ancestors through ancient sacred fires and venerated grave sites. While the more traditional and self-sufficient Angolan Himba have been left to enjoy their desert haven in relative peace, plans to give over more than 13 000 square kilometres of their homeland to build Iona National Park would prove devastating, as it would increase tourism and bring about restrictive land and grazing laws. Meanwhile the Namibian Himba, who have long been chastised by their government for their ‘culture of poverty and deprivation’, seem to have faced down the construction of a R6-billion hydroelectric power project that proposed to flood 350 square kilometres of ancestral lands, sacred grave sites and grazing lands – and wreak massive ecological damage on southern Africa’s water systems. Thanks to a flawed Epupa Dam Feasibility Report and the support of NGOs from 39 countries, the Himba drew international attention to their cause, appealing to the International Rivers Network as well as other environmental groups.

As filmmaker Craig Matthew puts it in his documentary film *Ochre and Water*: ‘For the Himba and in the words of the chief headman, Kapika, “The land is an absolute. If you take away this land, then there is no longer a Himba.”’ Despite the generational tensions and everyday struggles attached to global development, the Himba remain resolute that their ancestral lands will not be flooded and that the baobabs will continue to grow in the most unlikely of places. We certainly hope so.

SACRED LANDS

Himba families may move their households several times a year so that grazed regions can recover, but they periodically migrate back to ancestral watering holes, carrying with them the ashes of their sacred fires

