

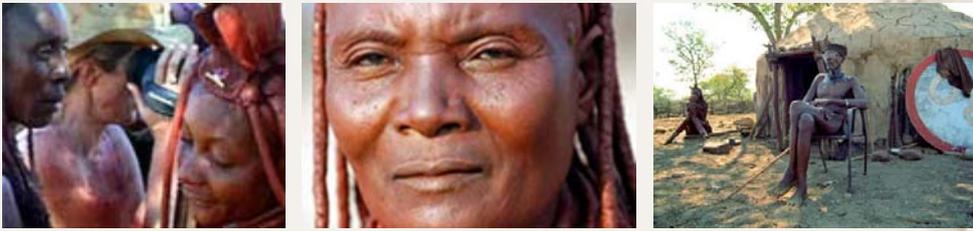
THE OVAHIMBA YEARS



A MULTIPLE MEDIA ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY &
CULTURAL HERITAGE PRESERVATION PROGRAM

BY RINA SHERMAN

THE OVAHIMBA YEARS



DATA BASE

The Ovahimba Years Collection hold the data on the Ovahimba and related Otjiherero speaking peoples of the Kunene Region, in northwestern Namibia, and the provinces of Cunene and the Namib, in southwestern Angola, collected by Rina Sherman since 1996.

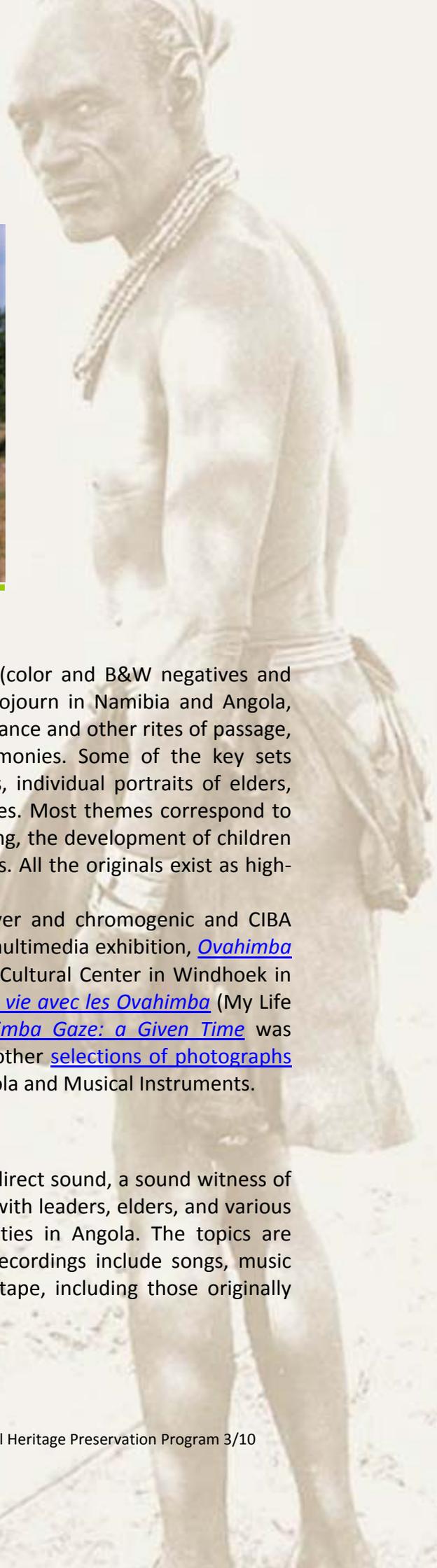
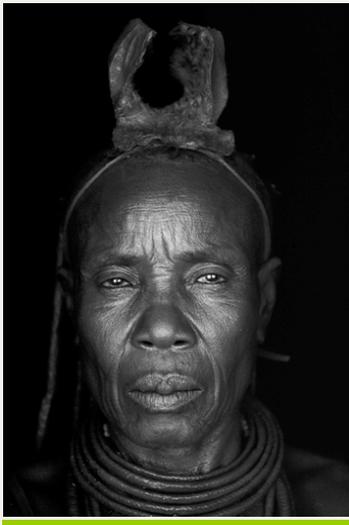
The collection consists of images (film and video), sound recordings, drawings and photographs, a bibliography (copies of articles), texts and notes, correspondence, administrative and production files, inventories and portfolios. Many of these elements cover daily and ritual life, and the recent history of the extended family of the Chief of Etanga, heir to the throne held by the Tjambiru family for many generations. Further elements include information on the lives of family, friends, members of the Etanga community and other Ovahimba communities, and related populations (Ovakuvale, Ovadhimba, Ovahakaona, Ovatwa, Ovacaroca, etc.) of Namibia and Angola. The documentation highlights the important role played by ritual dance and spirit calling ceremonies (trance). Several documents cover customary law trials and important community meetings.

The entire collection of video recordings is indexed with indications of content, medium, date, place, language and translation, and cross-referenced to related media such as photographs, text, drawings, sound, publications and other materials.

FILM & VIDEO

The filmed elements, about 350 hours of video (Hi8, DV SD - Mini DV duplicated in SD and some in SD) and film (about 10 hours in 16mm - not transferred to video) cover Rina Sherman's fieldwork sojourn of seven years. It include topics on daily and ritual life: building houses, burial ceremonies, dressing codes of men and women, customary law, community meetings, spirit-calling ceremonies (trance), haruspications, numerous dance ceremonies, consultations of traditional healers, and conversation recordings on various topics.

PHOTOGRAPHY



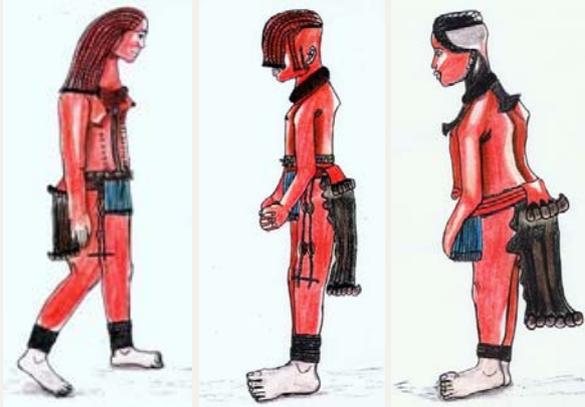
A collection of photographs of 200 films in 135mm, (color and B&W negatives and color slides) documents Rina Sherman's seven-year sojourn in Namibia and Angola, showing images of everyday and ritual life, especially dance and other rites of passage, such as name-giving, healing and circumcision ceremonies. Some of the key sets include presentations of dress codes and decorations, individual portraits of elders, children and members of several different communities. Most themes correspond to the themes of the film and video images: house building, the development of children and people photographed over a period of seven years. All the originals exist as high-resolution digital files.

There is a set of framed black and white silver and chromogenic and CIBA chrome prints of various sizes, presented as part of a multimedia exhibition, [Ovahimba Years: Work in Progress](#) held at the Franco-Namibian Cultural Center in Windhoek in 2002. A set of photographs is included in the book [Ma vie avec les Ovahimba](#) (My Life with the Ovahimba), 2009. A set of portraits [Ovahimba Gaze: a Given Time](#) was exhibited at the Sala Lippi in Perugia (2010). Various other [selections of photographs](#) are online: Ovahimba Portraits, Houses - Namibia, Angola and Musical Instruments.

SOUND RECORDINGS

The sound recordings constitute some thirty hours of direct sound, a sound witness of daily and ritual life. The recordings include interviews with leaders, elders, and various community members of Etanga and other communities in Angola. The topics are autobiographical and historical (oral tradition). The recordings include songs, music and other expressions. Most recordings are on DAT tape, including those originally recorded on analog tape.

DRAWINGS



A collection of some fifty drawings in color (crayons, color or pen) of various sizes depicts scenes of everyday and ritual Ovahimba life. The drawings were created by a research assistant and member of the local community for further documentation of the research. A sub-collection of drawings, with descriptions, represents various types of cattle and a taboo associated with each, and is doubled with photographs of these same types. Ovahimba do not count their cattle, but rather memorize a global image of their herds according to their physical appearance (horns, color, markings, etc.).

TEXTS & UNPUBLISHED NOTES: A collection of notes and unpublished texts on various topics, such as cattle names and research notes on the Otjiherero language.

CORRESPONDENCE: Rina Sherman's correspondence with various friends and colleagues, as faxes, letters and notes sent by email.

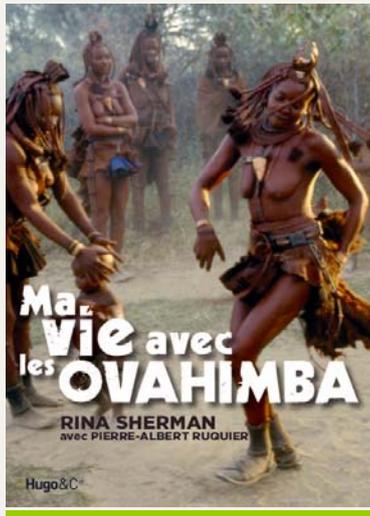
ADMINISTRATIVE & PRODUCTION PAPERS: A collection of [progress reports](#) sent from the field contains documents on the progress of various aspects of the project, and documents on field staff (labor contracts, labor reporting, disciplinary meetings and project administration).

INVENTORIES: Cross-referenced inventories of collected data (video, sound, drawings, photographs, texts, notes, etc.), inventories of books, research and camp equipment in Etanga.

PROJECT PRESENTATION: Presentations of the proposed research, conservation and film projects, funding applications, financing plans, quotes, etc.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC ELEMENTS: A substantial collection of articles (copies), references to books and articles concerning Ovahimba studies and related topics.

AUTHORED WORKS: The films, books, articles, photographs, and other materials of the [Ovahimba Years](#) Collection are indexed on the Internet site rinasherman.com.



RELATED TOPICS

ROCK ART - CHITUNDU HULU (TCHITUNDU-HULU, ANGOLA)

During two extended stays in Angola in 2003, Rina Sherman documented in video and photography most of the paintings and engravings of the two pre-Bantu Chitundu Hulu sites, located near Virei in the Iona National Park, Namibe Province, Angola. UNESCO has classified this site as a cultural and natural heritage site.



ART MBALI FUNERAL STELES - NAMIBE

During this period of study in Angola in 2003, Rina Sherman also documented in video and photographs most of the Mbali tombstones still present in the cemeteries of the town of Namibe and the surrounding areas following a hand drawn map that lists all the Mbali cemeteries in the region. She also filmed interviews with some of the last survivors of the Mbali culture, on the history of the Mbali, an acculturated people of the Portuguese colonial era, and a contemporary Mbali funeral in Namibe.



ABOUT THE OVAHIMBA

KEY ASPECTS OF THE OVAHIMBA CULTURAL HERITAGE

The Ovahimba observe the cult of the Supreme Being, *Ndjambi*, more recently known as *Mukuru* (from the noun *Omukuru* or old man). To communicate with the Supreme Being and the Ancestors, owners of family domains have to keep the sacred ritual altar (*okoruwo*) lit at all times. The sacred shrine is a vital link with the Supreme Being and the Ancestors; it symbolizes life and fertility. In the Ovahimba dual heritage system, cattle are transmitted through the matriarchal family line. For these pastoralists that practice transhumance, some cattle are sacred and cannot be exchanged or sold, and can only be slaughtered under specified ritual circumstances. The Ovahimba observe complex ritual and spiritual practices, including praise, allusive poetic forms creating a bond between the living and the ancestors, and history and sacred places (tombs and monuments). Praise, integrated in various ceremonies and rituals such as singing and dancing are performed continuously and form a link between daily life and ceremonial practices.



A SHORT HISTORY



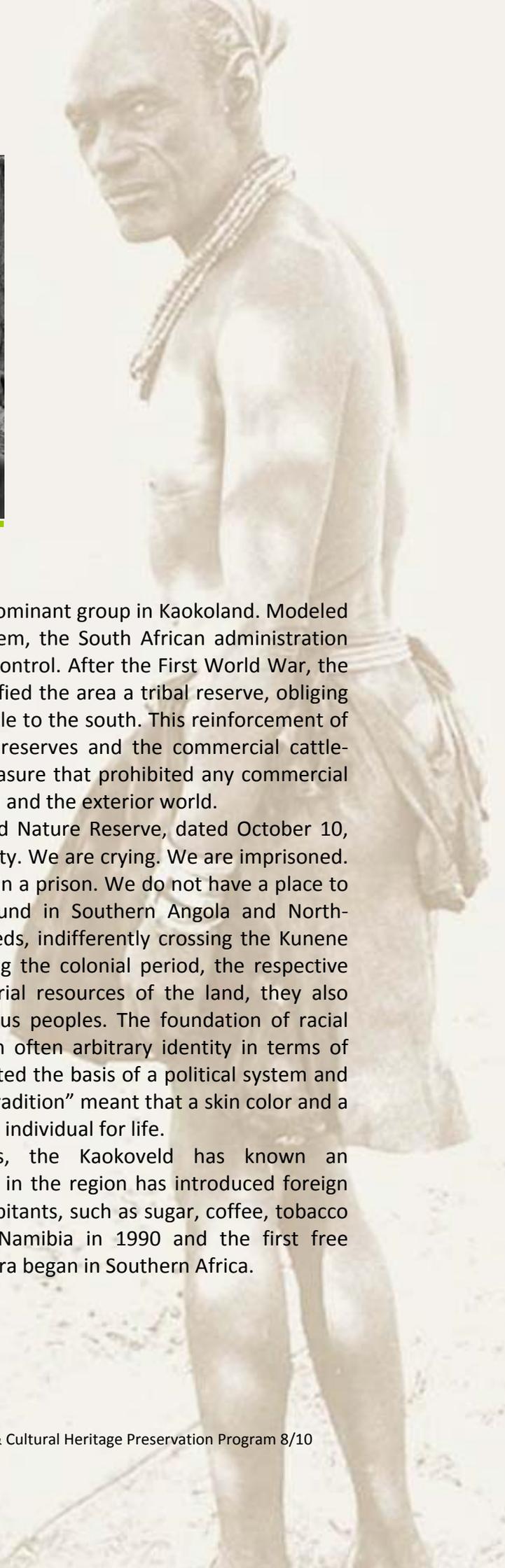
PRE-INDEPENDENCE: The Otjiherero speaking peoples are said to originate from the Mbeti¹ hill situated north of Ruacana, a village located on the northern Kunene River border of Namibia. Ovahimba society was and to a degree still is organized around the ovahona system of rich and powerful men. Elders trace their descent back to one of the ancestral ovahona through praise songs that keep their memory alive and locate their graves geographically.

Toward the end of the 19th century, the neighboring Nama peoples ran successive raids on the Ovahimba, forcing many of them to flee to southwestern Angola. At the time, the Portuguese administration had not yet established posts in this remote area, but exchange with the colonial economy was nevertheless intense. The refugees became guides for professional hunters, worked in the plantations or in the colonial army combating indigenous rebellions.

The German colony of South West Africa was formed in 1884. The colony was disbanded in 1915 and subsequently occupied by the Union of South Africa (British Empire) and administered as South-West Africa. The Treaty of Versailles in 1919 made the South African mandate official. The territory became independent from South Africa as Namibia in 1990. There were 2,600 Germans in 1902 and 12,000 Germans by 1914. The systemic German genocide of 1904-07 is said to have killed some 10,000 Namaqua (50% of the population), and some 65,000 Herero (80% of the population).

In 1907, the German administration declared Kaokoland (Kunene North Region of today) a natural reserve, hence avoiding settlement of white farmers. Toward 1910, pastoral-forager communities had settled anew in the plains from where they developed commerce with the Ovambo kingdoms settled in the east. Between 1910 and 1920, several Ovahimba families returned to the region and settled near their ancestors' graves. The 1915 defeat of the Germans by the South Africans further encouraged their return.

¹ Praise of Okarundu kaMbeti evoking the origin of the Otjiherero speaking peoples: The hills of Mbeti that throws its behind into the deep water of the crocodile of Muakapumba that is standing alone like a lonely elephant (Giorgio Miescher, Dag Henrichsen, Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2000).



By 1927, the Ovahimba constituted the dominant group in Kaokoland. Modeled on the *ovahona* (rich and influential men) system, the South African administration appointed chiefs to create a system of indirect control. After the First World War, the newly mandated South African authorities classified the area a tribal reserve, obliging remaining Settler families to repatriate their cattle to the south. This reinforcement of borders created a frontier between the tribal reserves and the commercial cattle-farming zone to avoid spreading diseases, a measure that prohibited any commercial exchange and movement between the Ovahimba and the exterior world.

In an inspection report on the Kaokoveld Nature Reserve, dated October 10, 1949, an Ovahimba chief said, “We are in difficulty. We are crying. We are imprisoned. We do not know why we are locked up. We are in a prison. We do not have a place to live...” In the past, the Ovahimba moved around in Southern Angola and North-Western Namibia according to their grazing needs, indifferently crossing the Kunene River border between the two countries. During the colonial period, the respective administrations did not only control the material resources of the land, they also sought to dominate the minds of the indigenous peoples. The foundation of racial segregation was based on the attribution of an often arbitrary identity in terms of racial or ethnic groups. These identities constituted the basis of a political system and of a spatial ordering. In this context, the word “tradition” meant that a skin color and a specific cultural disposition were attributed to an individual for life.

Since the beginning of the eighties, the Kaokoveld has known an unprecedented incidence of tourists. This influx in the region has introduced foreign foodstuffs and consumer goods among the inhabitants, such as sugar, coffee, tobacco and alcohol. Following the independence of Namibia in 1990 and the first free elections in South Africa four years later, a new era began in Southern Africa.



CHANGES SINCE INDEPENDENCE: For the past two decades, a dam project to be constructed at the Epupa² falls or at the Baynes site on the Kunene River has been under discussion. The purpose of the dam is to avoid future electricity shortages in Namibia. The construction of this dam will lead to the inundation of the natural site of the Epupa Falls and its neighboring areas, including Ovahimba grazing fields, sacred land and ancestral graves. The Ovahimba continue to commemorate the ancestors buried in these graves with precise descriptions in praise songs and oral legends. Many of the praise songs are land claims in that an individual is buried where he used to live. In social memory, space is less important physically than in the global historical context.

The “traditional lifestyle” of the Ovahimba will change, even if the economy of the Kaokoveld, based on raising cattle, continues for some time... In this pastoral society, the cult of the cattle constitutes the dominant cultural discourse. The Ovahimba say that if someone is poor and has no cattle, and a member of his family dies, he will not be able to sacrifice an animal to honor the life achievements of the deceased. The Ovahimba grow maize but they say, “You cannot drive maize,” as you can drive cattle.

The preservation of Ovahimba identity as we know it today is to a degree at least a result of the colonial racial segregation system. Before independence in 1990, historical writing was controlled by South African government restrictions. However, throughout the colonial period, Namibians continued to transmit the memory of their ancestors in the form of oral legends, praise practices and sung autobiographies. The “myth of Kaoko” has continued to inform discourse on the Ovahimba. Their culture offers an opportunity for spectacular exoticism leading to frequent representation of their material culture in mere aesthetic terms. A steady flow of tourists, activists, politicians, photographers, and anthropologists keep visiting the area, each with an agenda of his own. Many perceive the Ovahimba culture as being in danger due to the proposed dam scheme at the Epupa Falls, the growing tourist industry and increasing exposure in Opuwo to mass culture goods.

Where does the future of the Ovahimba lie? Today, the Ovahimba, who have preserved their traditions for many centuries, living in arid and mountainous regions, have come to a crossroads between their ancient culture and growing urbanism. It is not possible to dissociate the Ovahimba cultural heritage from the historical and current social context. It is, however, important to document and preserve the legends, stories and myths that constitute their thought system and their material culture which is being transformed by the overwhelming and not always detrimental processes of development, urbanization and Westernization. Whatever choices they are going to make or whatever choices are being imposed on them by tourism and development, their culture will undergo major changes in the years to come.

² Epupa means noise; he who makes noise or that which makes noise.

OTJIHERERO LANGUAGE

Otjiherero, a Southern Bantu language, spoken by about 8% of the population of Namibia, is one of thirteen languages spoken in the country. The number of Otjiherero speakers is estimated at 180,000. The language has a standardized orthography and is taught at schools and at the University of Namibia. Otjiherero, in its “r” and “l” versions, is spoken by the Ovahimba, Ovaherero, Ovambanderu, Ovadhimba, Ovahakaona, Ovakuvale, Ovacaroca, Ovatjimba and Ovagambwe that live in northwestern and central Namibia, Botswana and southwestern Angola. For a [lexicon](#) and [grammatical notions](#), see [The Ovahimba Years](#) Web site.

CHRONOLOGY OF NAMIBIAN HISTORY

From Pre-historical Times to Independent Namibia (2000), by Klaus Dierks, accessed January 11, 2013, URL: <http://www.klausdierks.com/FrontpageMain.html>

Rina Sherman

Paris, February 2013

www.rinasherman.com

