

Indigenous Use of Mopane (*Colophospermum mopane*) in Northwestern Namibia

Holly Bainbridge

Department of Agriculture and Resource Economics

The University of Arizona

PO Box 210023

Tucson, AZ 85721

hollyb92@email.arizona.edu

Abstract

The ability of people to adapt to limited resources is particularly remarkable in areas dominated by only one plant species. In the case of one indigenous people of northwestern Namibia, the Himba, often the only readily available plant material is that of the mopane (*Colophospermum mopane*) due to harsh soil and weather conditions. By interviewing various Himba in seven different compounds located around Epupa Falls, Namibia, I was able to grasp the wide usage and cultural importance of mopane. They use nearly every part of this tree for various purposes spanning from construction to pain relief clearly showing the Himba's ability to maximize its potential. From personal interaction, it was clear that not only is the mopane ingrained into their daily lifestyle, but also into the Himba culture, as the basis of religious communication with the afterlife. Additionally, based on observation of the area, the cultural importance of mopane for the Himba may unintentionally protect it, given the close relationship between the people and the tree. Based on its myriad of uses, mopane plays an important role in the preservation of a traditional culture that is at the brink of modernization.

Introduction

Northwestern Namibia, known as Kaokoland or the Kunene Region, is classified as a mopane savanna; low lying grasslands with a dominant tree population of mopane (*Colophospermum mopane*) (Chidumayo & Gumbo 2010). Mopane savanna covers a large area, extending from southwestern Angola and into Namibia as far south as Brandberg Mountain, the highest peak in Namibia (Hogan & McGinley 2008). Poor soil conditions and annual rainfall between 60mm and 200mm make mopane the dominant plant life in

certain areas (Hogan & McGinley 2008). The highest biodiversity in the region occurs around water resources, of which the only permanent river is the Kunene along the Namibia-Angola border (Hogan & McGinley 2008). The most numerous native people of this area with a population of less than 30,000, the Himba, rely heavily on this tree as one of their few and valuable resources (Lesieur 2010). For the Himba, livestock is the primary and often sole source of income (Barnett & Hume 2012), but the domestic material used in many cases is mopane. Their traditional lifestyle is being threatened by some aspects of modernization, such as the potential damming of the Kunene River (Lang 2007). However, with a growing tourism industry, there is incentive to maintain traditional practices, including the use of mopane both for practical and religious reasons (Lesieur 2010). The mopane tree is integrated into most aspects of Himba life, from the base of every architectural structure to the medium for communication with their ancestors (Malan 1995). This strong relationship between Himba and mopane reflects an ancient culture that has survived civil war, unfavorable climate conditions, and now, modernization.



Methods

With very sparse literature on the Himba, let alone the Himba's use of mopane, my primary method for gathering information was direct observation and interaction with indigenous peoples located around Epupa Falls, Namibia. From June 20 through June 23, 2012 daily excursions from base camp at Epupa Falls to compounds were made by a group of seven students, two University of Arizona professors, and one translator. Our translator, Anita, was raised in the area in a traditional Himba manner, and was familiar and friendly with the locals. One of the few Himba fluent in English, she translated our questions into Otjihimba, the primary language of the Himba. Each student asked a series of questions regarding their interest of study, in my case, mopane use and significance. My questions were directed at better understanding of the practical use and the cultural significance of mopane to the Himba. In total, we visited five Himba compounds, and one each of Zemba and Hakaona. The Zemba and Hakaona people are closely related to the Himba (Malan 1995), and although their manner of dress is apparently different, their use of mopane is the same. Each compound typically consists of a family unit; a man, his wives and children, and occasionally his parents or unmarried siblings. Additionally, the size of the compound, numbers of trees within the compound, and any other notable features were taken into consideration. Both males and females are active participants in the use of mopane, therefore any adult at a compound was well suited and able to answer questions based on personal experience. The eldest male and his wife or wives answered our questions. At two compounds the lead male had recently passed away, leaving only the women to answer questions. In total, 24 people answered questions, and all were knowledgeable and experienced with traditional mopane use. The enthusiasm with which the Himba people speak about mopane clearly illustrates this plant as something of central importance to every aspect of life.

Results

The most significant role of *Colophospermum mopane* in Himba culture is in traditional religious communication with ancestors. Himba spirituality is centered on a ritual fire at each compound. Mopane is a particularly dense wood, making it good for fueling fires. Located at the heart of a Himba compound between the central goat pen and entrance to the main hut, this fire is referred to as "okuruwo" in the native Otjihimba language and is created using two special fire sticks made of mopane known as "ozondume" (Malan 1995). The fire is fueled only by mopane wood and kept continuously burning by moving the embers into the main hut at night, and then re-feeding it in the morning using a pile of mopane wood kept within the confines of the compound. Allowing the fire to burn out is extremely taboo, as it is said to offend the ancestors of the family. In Himba religion, there is a hierarchy of ancestors gaining in importance by distance back on the family tree, and then topped by the creator (Malan 1995). In order to pray, a Himba will rub crushed mopane onto his or her forehead by the ritual fire and speak to his or her most recently deceased family member, who would in turn communicate up the hierarchy to the creator. Through burning mopane, Himba make requests to their ancestors, who in turn will ask god or "Mukuru", for such gifts as fertile cattle or plentiful rain (Barnett & Hume 2012). Our translator, Anita, recalled to me asking her ancestors for goats as a source of income.

Cattle are an important part of not only Himba economy, but also of Himba religious ceremonies. When speaking with the Himba, I noticed their enthusiasm for mopane was only topped by their

enthusiasm for cattle. On the rare occasions deserving of a cattle slaughter, mopane plays a critical role in every aspect of the process. First, the young men given the role of slaughtering the cow, will rub crushed mopane leaves onto their foreheads for good luck from their ancestors. The cattle are slaughtered by the fire within the compound in order to honor the ancestors. Next, they will chop down a mopane tree and place it on the ritual fire to cook the meat and add flavor by coating it with dried mopane leaves. Lastly, the excess meat will be hung in a standing mopane tree within the compound to be dried and then stored. The events in a Himba's life that usually warrant this procedure are marriage or a naming ceremony for a child. In other smaller celebrations a goat would be slaughtered rather than a cow. Additionally, if an important person is sick, such as the head of a compound, cattle may be slaughtered in order to contact the ancestors for help. One Himba man, brother to the owner of the second largest compound in the region, compared mopane to the Christian bible, stressing its absolute importance to Himba religious practice. It both connects people to their family members who have passed away, and brings people together to keep traditional Himba practices alive.

The only circumstance in which the holy fire is allowed to burn out is when the father of a compound dies. A Himba compound is usually comprised of a single family, a man, his wives and their children. Upon the death of the man, the ritual fire in his compound is put out until the time that his eldest son or younger brother is prepared to take his place. At that time, all ashes are removed from the fire pit, a fresh mopane stump is added, and the fire is relit using the ritual sticks. The sticks are passed down to the new head of the compound and kept with him at all times. Two compounds we visited had recently experienced the death of the father and had yet to replace him. In both cases, the man's widows spoke to us, as the eldest son was away tending to the cattle and not old enough for the responsibility of running the compound. However, he still was in possession of the ritual fire sticks and brought them out with him to the pasture. In addition, young Himba wear a thick necklace made of mopane wrapped in electrical wire, which is to be removed once his or her parents die. The dead are buried in designated graveyards, which are separated from compounds and have well-preserved plant life, shown in figure 1. The gravesites are not cleared of trees as in the western tradition, but mopane are integrated into the monument. If a man or woman who owns cattle dies, his or her cattle are killed. The meat is not eaten, but given away to non-Himbans, and the skulls of the cattle are impaled onto mopane trees at the gravesite. The number of cattle skulls on a grave is directly proportional to the wealth of the person who passed away. Rocks are piled on top of the buried person to prevent new mopane growth on top of the body, however there is a large, established mopane at the head of every grave. This clearly illustrates the high level of integration of mopane into Himba life and continuing into death.

Without sufficient access to modern medical care, the Himba stretch their resources to fill many medicinal roles. At every one of the compounds, the people reported its use as a general remedy for any sort of stomach problem. The mopane leaves are ground up using two stones, as illustrated in figure 2. The paste is then boiled in water to create a tea. The woman in figure 2 additionally described the use of mopane in regards to the birth of a child. After giving birth, a Himba woman is instructed to drink the mopane leaf tea to cleanse out her system. The mashed up leaves are applied to the baby's belly button in order to make the umbilical cord stump fall off. At four of the compounds, Himba also detailed



Figure 1. Gravesite with mopane tree (H. Bainbridge)

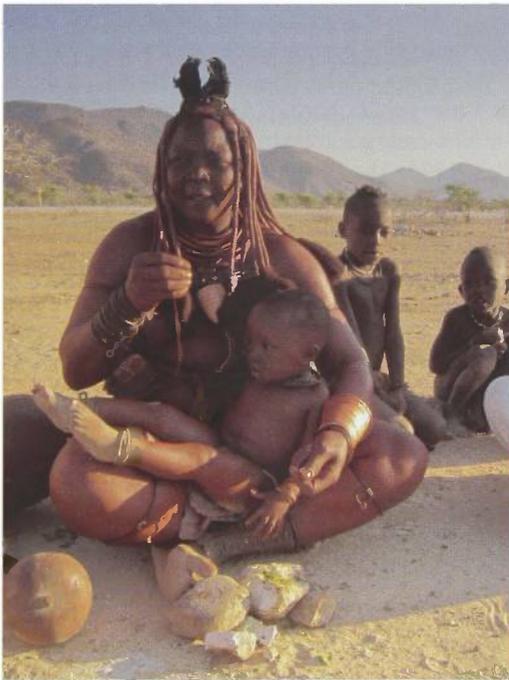


Figure 2. Mopane leaves are ground up using two stones. (H Bainbridge)

the use of leaves in place of a gauze bandage to absorb blood and promote clotting at a wound site, and are also thought to relieve pain (Malan 1995). One case of its use in this manner reported by a Himba man is for snakebites. Mopane leaves are chewed up until all that is left is the white fibers, which are then spat out onto the wound and rubbed in. A similar method is used for the ceremonial circumcision of pre-pubescent boys, applying chewed up fibers to the wound. Another important coming-of-age procedure is the removal of the front four bottom incisors when a child is between the ages of 10 and 12 (Malan 1995). A sliver of mopane is wedged against the tooth and then hit with a heavy object. Hot

coals are then used to press shut the open wounds, and chewed mopane fibers are added on top to pacify bleeding. *Colophospermum mopane* is used across the board in Himba life for minor health issues and there is clearly dependence on this tree for home remedies. By continuing to use these techniques in the modern day, the Himba are preserving cultural practices that date back to the earliest settlements of the Kunene region.

The aspect in which mopane is most obviously dominant in Himba society is in the architecture of a compound. Every shelter is created on a base of mopane wood, usually cleared from the area inside the confines of the compound. The trees inside the compound appear to be nearly enough to sustain the initial construction; the number of cleared trees was minimal in the case of the average sized compound with three or four sleeping huts. Not all of the mopane trees inside of the compound are cut down however; usually some are left for hanging storage, shade, easy leaf collection, or as the base for a structure. The largest compound we visited, second largest in the region to the chief, had an astonishing 22 mopane trees and 12 structures inside of its walls. In figure 3, the small hut used to pen in baby goats while the mother is being milked is comprised of mopane trunks situated in a cone shape around a living mopane tree. This enclosure is standard throughout Himba compounds, along with a circular inner goat pen, a main hut, a hut for each wife, numerous storage shelters, and an outer fence. Both fences are made of vertically placed mopane trunks woven together with both mopane and branches from various *Terminalia* trees. The living huts are circular with either rounded or triangular roofs, built on a base of mopane trunks, then covered with a mixture of fat and mud for insulation. Both women and men are active participants in the construction of huts. Men build

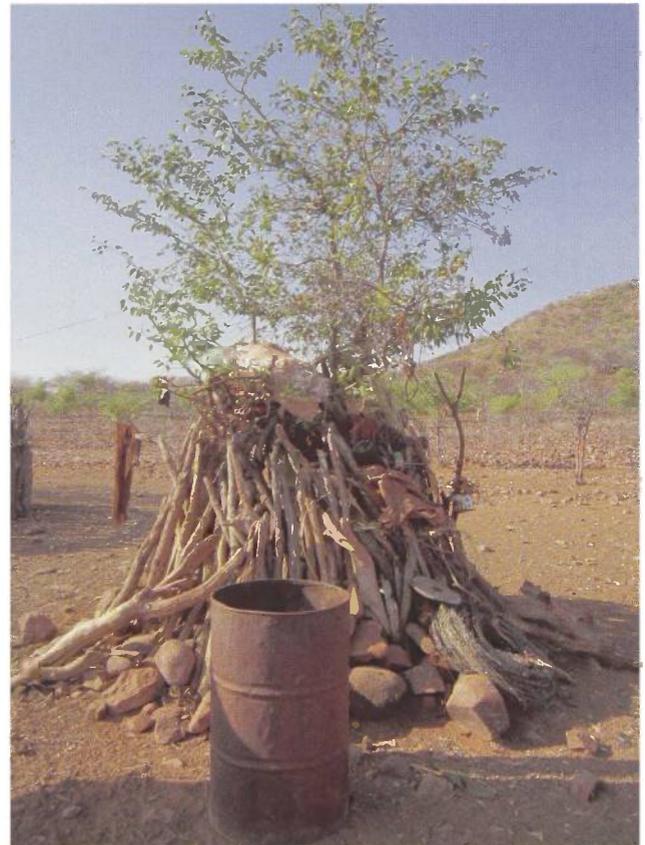


Figure 3. Small hut used to pen in baby goats while mother is milked (H. Bainbridge)

the central hut and fencing, while each wife builds her own hut. The storage shelters come in a myriad of shapes and sizes made to suit the needs of the item being stored, but all based on mopane. In figure 4, a Himba woman is seated in front of one of these storage shelters meant for non-food items. These storage shelters are created in a box shape to allow for additional hanging storage on the protruding mopane trunks at the sides, and flat storage on the top of the building. Similarly, the living mopane within the compound are used to hang pots, cans, dry clothes, and even meat for preservation. For storable food items, a cone shaped hut approximately 0.8m tall is elevated on mopane trunks above the ground to keep belongings out of the reach of goats. Clearly, the architectural uses of mopane show the absolute dependence of the Himba on their primary wood resource.

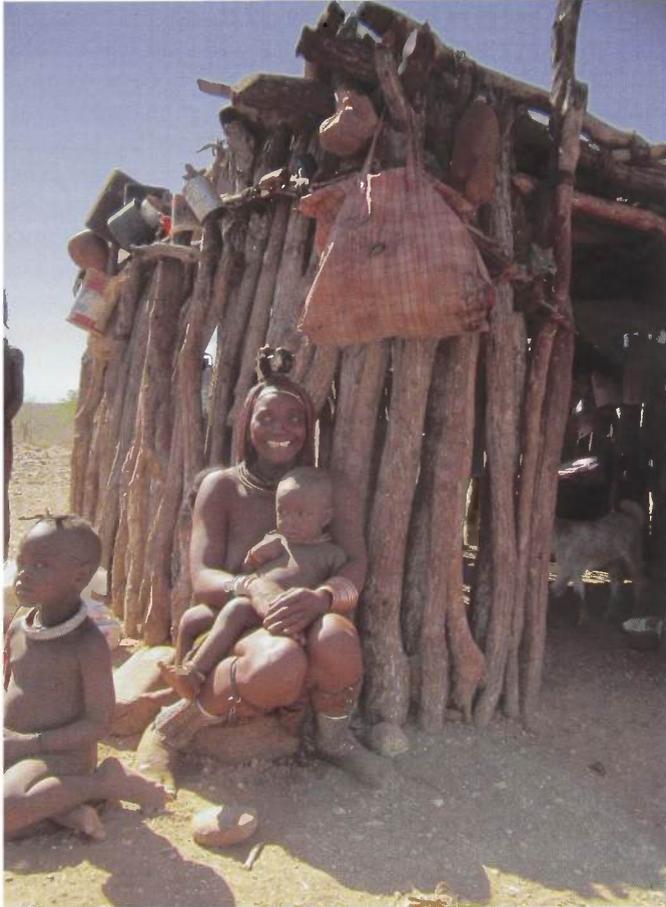


Figure 4. Storage shelter constructed of mopane wood for non-food storage (H. Bainbridge)

Conclusion

The many uses of *Colophospermum mopane* by the indigenous people of the Kunene Region of northwestern Namibia show not only the flexibility of the material, but also of the people. The Himba have adapted a single plant species to provide shelter, medicine, and cultural identity in a place where access to modern means are not yet available. As their society modernizes through increasing tourism and governmental recognition, the preservation of most aspects of traditional life will be at a crossroads, either to be preserved for future generations or lost and only remain in literature. As long as the Himba remain in the Epupa Falls area, mopane will be a valuable resource to them and although it may lose some pertinence, it will still remain as a dominating cultural factor. A possible means for growth for the Himba would be diversifying their economy by branching out from just selling cattle to

utilize mopane as a product. This has the potential to be empowering for the Himba, but also can have negative repercussions due to over harvesting. The ideal course of action to turn the many uses of mopane into profitable ends for the Himba would be to ease into economizing mopane while maintaining its critical role as a religious figure. The Himba people's enthusiasm and openness in regards to answering questions about mopane made learning about their culture very easy. Further studies into the legitimacy of the medicinal use of mopane and marketability of mopane as building materials would greatly benefit the people of this area. Furthering detail in Himba ethnobotany would be possible through viewing religious use in practice or comparison to other tribes' use in a mopane savanna.

References

- Barnett, Errol and Tim Hume. 2012 The Himba: Namibia's iconic red women. <http://www.cnn.com/2012/05/11/world/africa/himba-namibia-inside-africa/index.html>
- Chidumayo, E.N. and Davison J. Gumbo. 2010. The Dry Forests and Woodlands of Africa. London: Earthscan Ltd. 288 pp.
- Hogan, C. Michael & Mark McGinley. 2008 Ecoregions: Namibian savanna woodlands. http://www.eoearth.or/article/Namibian_savanna_woodlands?topic=49597
- Lang, Steven. 2007. Plans to dam the Cunene River re shelved again. <http://www.galdu.org/web/index.php?odas=2212&giella1=eng>
- Lesieur, Alexandra. 2010. Namibia's Himba embrace tourism, with little profit. <http://mg.co.za/article/2010-10-19-namibias-himba-embrace-tourism-with-little-profit/>
- Malan, J.S. 1995. The Peoples of Namibia. Wingate Park, South Africa: Rhino Publishers. 152pp.