

The heart of the cheetah: Biography, identity and social change in north-western Namibia

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in collaboration with Cornelius Mukuena Tjiuma

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This ethnographic collaboration between filmmaker, anthropologist and translator aims to make visible the often unacknowledged life-story of the translator whose particular positioning as 'cultural broker' between ethnographers and indigenous communities is unmapped. By micro-mapping the interaction between place and personhood, this paper explores the possibilities of biography for understanding the politics of geography over time and the role of the individual and the individuation process. The particular life story of Mukuena Cornelius Tjiuma, a self-identified Himba nomadic herder and consultant/translator, challenges the matrix of stereotypes that bind the Himba to reductionist versions of Himba culture that deny historical and potential processes of social change.

Introduction

In 1995 the Namibian government commissioned a feasibility study into the Epupa Hydropower Dam Scheme in north-western Namibia – a dam scheme that might flood 250 square kilometers of the semi-nomadic Himba people's rare pastures and 160 ancestral graves and 95 cultural sites. Filmmakers Joëlle Chesselet and Craig Matthew documented the different aspects (technical, environmental, social) of the study for two years initially. They have continued to film and conduct research in the area. In the process of this documentary work, filmmaker Craig Matthew met Mukuena Cornelius Tjiuma. The fact that Cornelius commanded some English and Afrikaans opened up an opportunity for him to work as a translator. This paper focuses on the early life-story of Mukuena Cornelius Tjiuma, and tracks the choices he made within a specific geopolitical landscape. These choices and circumstances as over-determined by medical institutions, colonial politics, kinship relations and cultural expectations, the military presence in northern Namibia, education and religion, have brought him to the point of living and studying education at the Center for Creative Education in Cape Town, South Africa.

Mukuena Tjiuma was born in Enyandi in southern Angola in 1977, four years after Angola had gained independence from the Portuguese, and during the struggle by South West African People's Organization (SWAPO) for the independence of Namibia from South African occupation. For the semi-nomadic Herero-speaking Himba herders, living on either side of the river in Angola and Namibia, the linear oasis, which is the Cunene River, serves as a pantry or an emergency fridge during times of drought. However, this land-use 'map' of the Cunene is overlaid by another function: the geo-political border between Angola and Namibia is the result of the use of the river as an efficient colonial demarcation which, in turn, has undermined the land-use cattle 'ranching' patterns and cross-border kinship relations of the Himba people. The territory on either side of the river is a place bound by oral histories and cross-river social relation-

ships that shape, track and place the identity of the Himba cattle herders. The physical geography of the region, its rugged and arid terrain, has prevented ease of access to and influence by missionaries and other agents of modernity and social change.

This paper aims to document how Mukuena Cornelius Tjiuma's biography provides a phenomenological map of the fault lines interfacing modernity and tradition despite the overt remoteness of the space in which it unfolds. In the context of a perceived threat to the integrity of Himba identity in north-western Namibia and southern Angola, we chart the experiences of a boy who, through a chance knee injury and the journey that ensues, questions his allegiance to, according to him, his father's conservative expectations. The journey highlights the catalysing impact of hospitals, schools, mission stations, fuel-based transport, and army bases on the life of an individual whose particular choices resonate larger processes of social change.

Mukuena's birth name means 'pale face' as in the pale faces of the Kuena, the Nama cattle raiders of the 19th century who, besides the German colonial forces, were responsible for the near eradication of the Herero people as cattle ranchers. The suspicion of Kuena paternity has always hung over Mukuena's head. He claims however, that he inherited his aggressive temperament from his father. This inheritance, according to him, was compounded by eating the heart of cheetah at an early age. 'My father' he said, 'killed a cheetah and I ate its heart. I think that is the reason why I've always been so angry. It was said that if you don't want to be a coward, you eat the heart of a cheetah.' Consequently, from an early age, Mukuena was convinced that his temperament was irreversibly antisocial – coded in his genes and further compounded by his belief in the totemic power of the cheetah.

As a child, Mukuena – as is the norm for the young sons and daughters of a family – tended his father's large herds of livestock. With his friends he traversed the Cunene region following fresh pastures, able to identify his goats among three thousand by their markings alone and without a numbering system beyond ten. Mukuena attributes his pivotal

knee injury to fooling around and jumping from treetops to anthills when he was six years old. While tending to his father's goats, Mukuena tricked women by setting thorny traps for them to walk into, and stoning them as they carried their calabashes on their heads. With no remorse, he recalls, he considered them to be inferior beings. This remorselessness and the aggression he believed to have inherited from his father and the cheetah's heart, later gave way to its distinct counterpoint. Indeed, a few years later, as he began interpreting the teachings of the Dutch Reformed Church that he was exposed to and then actively participated in, he felt a deep sense of shame about his childish pranks, and an even greater remorse about his people's poor regard for women. This was crystallised, he says, by the abhorrent fact that his father beat his physically-stronger mother across the knees so that she would never be able to stand up to him.

By recording the life history of Mukuena Cornelius Tjuma from the age of six to fourteen, we have been able to map key moments in his life's matrix, a matrix that comprises a conglomerate of seminomadic cattle herding culture, striated with hospitalisation periods, a Christian national education process, as well as conversion to the Kunene Dutch Reformed Church where they proposed a set of new names and he chose 'Cornelius'. This narrative map illustrates the weave of biography and circumstantial geopolitics that led him to defy his father's belief that education and religion would infect his brain and make him poor, that is, make him a man without cattle or cattle-ranching skills, a man without culture.

Fault Line No. 1: 18° latitude/16° longitude: 1983 Ruacana-Ombalantu-Ondangwa, South African Defense Force Military Bases and Hospital

'The traditional doctor burnt bark and blew it on my leg, rubbing powders onto it. But my leg was swollen. I was feeling the pain in the bone and in the joint. He was treating me as if a snake bit me.'
Mukuena Cornelius Tjuma, 2003

Because Mukuena, aged 7 then, knew a snake had not bitten him, he mistrusted the local healer and begged his mother to take him to a hospital. He knew about their existence because his father had once returned from a hospital after an abdominal operation. His mother at first refused, saying that the healer would heal him. His father was in the North acquiring more cattle.

'When my father returned I begged not to be taken to the healer. They took me by force. I was crying and fighting. My mom was holding me by the back. Others were holding the leg. I elbowed the healer away. I bit my mother. I was hitting my two brothers who were holding me.'

The forcefulness of his reaction and his adamancy shook his parents. He overheard them speaking in their hut late into the night. They were afraid that, should he die, his spirit would blame and haunt them for not having taken him to the hospital. Many cattle would die then, and people too. He would curse them.

Mukuena explains that it took his brother a day to accept

to walk with him to the nearest hospital, and it took a further two days to locate the donkeys that would accompany them on the journey. They walked for two days through the wilderness to the South African Defence Force (SADF) clinic in Ruacana, on the Namibian side of the Cunene River. Mukuena was carried on donkey back: his leg was too sore to walk. They traveled at night and slept in the day to avoid the heat.

'As soon as they put me into the hands of the doctors in Ruacana my family delivered me and they just left me there without saying goodbye.'

According to his description, Mukuena's family 'disappeared' into the mopane scrubland just before he was airlifted by helicopter to the nearest army hospital in Ondangwa. This seemingly unfeeling parting can begin to be apprehended when one imagines the scene at Ruacana. Mukuena, weakened, on donkey-back accompanied by Mukuena's brother and his wife, emerge from the Angolan side of the Cunene River. The handing over of Mukuena to this foreign military command structure, must have been an unsettling, unfamiliar and difficult transaction given the social practice of health care among semi-nomadic herders and the impenetrability of the two hermetic sociolinguistic worlds that met on this frontier where a guerilla war was intensifying. In 1983 Ruacana was a substantial technomilitary nexus point inscribed into the north-western Namibian territory. A hydroelectric dam was built at the Ruacana Falls on the Cunene River to harness and transform into energy the water created by rainfall in the Angolan highlands as it flowed west towards the Atlantic Ocean.

Ways of knowing/embodied knowledge of place and space

The space chartered by the SADF was an unknown place for Mukuena. He was in a familiar territory, now transformed by the occupation by the SADF for very specific reasons: the military map that corresponded to its function did not match the embodied map he might have been able to rely on before the army's occupation. His leg injury and the western medical practice based on the Hippocratic oath, gradually created the conditions for him to enter into a relationship with the socio-technological apparatus of the military medical complex present in the territory for the express purpose of waging war and treating war casualties. The efficiency of his treatment brought his desired relief from pain, and confirmed to him the validity of his own judgement when he rejected the traditional healer's diagnosis and treatment. From this point onwards a series of events would expose him to experiences of modern institutions through which he would learn to navigate and embody this spatial knowledge into his own life-world.

For the first time Mukuena leaves the earth. Frightened, he is airlifted and shunted by military helicopter between a military clinic in Ruacana to the military hospital in Ondangwa, and finally to the state hospital in Oshakati, the biggest town in the then Ovamboland¹, where he underwent surgery. Oshakati was a white-settled fortress town and army base surrounded by barbed wire, tanks, land mines, and regulated by curfews.

1. Ovamboland was one of several tribal based regions demarcated by the South African apartheid strategy to govern South West Africa.

If an aspect of cultural practice is the learnt ability to navigate a particular socio-spatial environment, then when Mukuena was handed over to the South African Army hospital staff, he experienced almost complete estrangement. He could only eat the porridge and milk offered to him in the morning. He had never laid eyes on the vegetables they served and would not eat them. As for the meat, he had heard that the Ovambo of that region ate dog, and when he saw the meat on his plate, he wanted to vomit. The pain in his knee and delirium caused by fever and exhaustion exacerbated such estrangement.

Fault Line No. 2: 1983–1987 Enyandi longitude/latitude; Opuwo 14° longitude/ 18° latitude; Windhoek longitude 17° longitude/ 22 ?° latitude

After two months Mukuena's brother finally tracked him down to the Oshakati state hospital. Mukuena had thought the family had abandoned him because of his aggressive behaviour. When he returned with his brother to Enyandi in southern Angola he discovered that the family had already earmarked cattle for his funeral for they feared that he had died. 'When I got home my father prepared a feast for me', said Mukuena. 'They slaughtered one cow and one sheep. I was happy.' He continued,

'I stayed a few weeks at home, the leg starts paining again. My brother and I went further north of Angola to find a traditional healer. I don't know why the healer was afraid, I think because he couldn't help me. Then he left me again with some people in northern Angola who we called our family. From there we moved to the South with a cousin of my grandmother, and we walked from the North to the South. We walked for one day and slept on the way. It was not good, I could hardly stand, my joint was in pain all over. I spent a long time lying in the bush. There was nothing to take for the pain. So then we reached the village where my sister was married. My brother-in-law cut my swollen leg with a knife to reduce the swelling. Other boys were holding me. This is how they do it. It was normal to me then, but now I think it is horrible. They cut you but they only have medicine from the trees to put in it. But I don't have such bad feelings because those were the old times and the new times are different. It was the best they could do for me then.'

Mukuena's joyous homecoming was short-lived. The pain in his leg persisted and he experienced a growing sense of alienation at home, for this injury hampered his full participation in the herd-based economy and its accompanying age-set bravado. It was long before Mukuena and his brother left Enyandi once more, this time for Opuwo and then Windhoek, the capital of Namibia.

On the plane from Opuwo to Windhoek Mukuena by now aged nine met a young Himba, Vaatakana, a boy three years older than him. He came from the 'south'. For Mukuena, this denoted that Vaatakana had had more contact with westernised Herero people to whom school and church were no anathema. To Mukuena's father in the 'north', going to school was the first step towards a downward slide into

both poverty and stupidity.

Mukuena and Vaatakana's paths parted upon arrival at the Windhoek state hospital. After lying immobilised for three months, Mukuena, slowly recovering, was sent by some older patients to buy matches so they could smoke in the toilets. Returning with sweets bought with the change, Mukuena and Vaatakana's paths crossed once again. Standing inside the hospital elevator Mukuena stood stumped by the operating panel. At that moment Vaatakana stepped in and showed him how it worked and then invited him to his hospital ward, which happened to be in the same bloc as Mukuena's. Mukuena describes:

'There was a teacher who was his friend in the same room. He was Herero. That is when we began to speak about school. The teacher asked my friend when he was going to begin school. I couldn't understand that, a Himba boy going to school? I asked him, what are you talking about? The teacher asked if I had gone to school. I said "no, I am a Himba". I was thinking I am Himba and in Himba culture we don't go to school. I hated school. I was thinking people who go to school are stupid. Poor people who don't have cattle who aren't rich go to school. School is for the unemployed. I was thinking it was people planning their poverty who went to school. I heard these things from people about school since I was a small boy. Always when I am listening they sit together and discuss and I hear what they say. I remember there was one time when my father spoke to me. There were people who preached to us in the village, and they were preaching about the Bible and my father said if you come again you will not get any hospitality. They were another tribe from Angola. When they speak you can hear them, though it is a different language.

Education and the Bible are linked. My father said these are poor people, they come to influence you. They want you to study, and make you poor. My father couldn't tell the difference between religious education and education. He said if you listen to those people's songs anymore, I will beat you. If you attach yourself to these things, you will not be Himba.'

At the time, in response to the teacher's persuasive argumentation and obvious commitment to education, Mukuena honoured his and his father's belief in the validity of a life-world that revolved around successful cattle 'ranching' in a semiarid environment. Its success was underpinned by the employment and therefore the 'local knowledge' or what could be termed 'education' of young boys and girls who graduate through the different levels of livestock herding.

The privilege of the eye versus the other senses

Taking Mukuena's father's argument that 'education makes a herder stupid and poor' and remembering that orality is the Himba's communication medium, the logic behind the uncompromising denunciation of the action of reading and studying becomes apprehendable: observing the actions rejected by the safeguarder of the traditional way of the

Himba from a physio-phenomenological perspective, one can understand why the act of directing the eyes downward into a book narrows the agent's field of action to the written word. This 'splitting' of engaged participation with the environment begins an alienation that threatens the continued commitment to the way of life of cattle herders. The act of reading fundamentally transforms the embodied subject from an integrated participant into an instrument of remote utility for a politicocultural economy that revolves around and relies on cattle ranching. The substantiated fear of the loss of acuity in the field motivates this rejection of foreign education. Furthermore, the valance of the analytical distinction between space and place in this context provides a way to describe the possible phenomenological distanciation that can result from the movement away from oral transmission to transmission in writing. By 'space' as in the Cartesian concept of 'étendue', we refer to an imagined conquerable 'wilderness' that is a Cartesian landscape where space and time are abstract quantitative values as opposed to a qualitative geography perceived by all senses, not only the eye as conduit to the mind.

The attempt to build a hydroelectric dam scheme on a propitious section of the Cunene River is a case in point. Should the proposed Epupa hydropower dam scheme be built, it will flood 250 square kilometers of the pastures of Himba herders, the linear oasis itself, the Epupa falls, and countless ancestors' graves that are each the nexus point in a filigree of socioeconomic relations within that community. That, which was for the developers, a 'space' is in fact a layered historical 'place'.

The choice to resist separating from one imagined integrated sociospatial worldview in favour of another which Mukuena perceived as bifurcated and irreconcilable, was further challenged when Himba boys from the west of Windhoek, also in hospital, visited him in his ward. He recalls:

'These guys said they were Herero and the Herero are the same as Himba. They were doing standard five. They said their family still have cattle, and that they go to school. They already had western clothes, which meant they could not compare themselves to me. I can't remember what they said because even if people had good things to say I wouldn't listen. But my friend Vaatakana was wearing Himba clothes, and he read his name and wrote his name. I couldn't do that. I started to think, this guy is a Himba like me, but he can read and write his name. He is mixed already, and I started to think about me and it started to worry me. It made me feel below. It will make me feel special if I can read and write among the other Himbas. I wanted to keep my hairstyle, but I wanted to read and write my name. My friend said his decision to be a teacher in the future was final. I went back home and he went back home. He is a teacher now at a mobile school.'

Fault Line No. 3 Enyandi, (Angola) Opuwo, Okangwati: 1988

Mukuena returned to his father's homestead in Enyandi with many questions. He asked his mother what she thought of school, and she replied, 'I will not allow a second death to

come into my village.' She 'lost' her first son when he left with German hunters. His father however would have the final say, and Mukuena was determined to confront him despite the threat of his wrath. He would not buy the argument that many Himba boys, though lame, did not attend school. Mukuena's questioning put pressure on the family and at night he could hear his parents arguing in their hut. His father was saying, 'like his brothers, he's got white ideas in his head.' He was afraid Mukuena would not be interested in livestock anymore. The rift between father and son grew over many months and intensified to the point where Mukuena entertained shooting and killing his father in self-defense.

A geopolitical military event deepened Mukuena's growing feelings of mistrust, friction, and rejection towards his father and his beliefs. The MPLA (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola) was 'recruiting' by, in fact, abducting young men to fight against UNITA (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola) forces in the post colonial civil war that followed the liberation of Angola from the Portuguese. Himba youths were rounded up in the dead of night without parental consent or forewarning. Mukuena, who was then twelve, recalls:

'We were discussing legends and wars amongst a group of young boys late in the night. After we fell asleep, I felt someone hitting my hip with a cane. I thought it was my brother because of the way he played. But when I got up I saw that the whole area was covered with light. They threw a flare in the air and the area was lit. It was the MPLA. They were wearing uniforms, and walking with torches. They were recruiting us for the army. They spoke Portuguese. My brother was screaming, and he was saying, "leave me, I'm going to make a pooh." He wanted to escape. They say, "make your pooh here." (someone translated in Themba) He then started to run, and they held his hands and legs. Then he said, "leave me. I will make a pooh on you." We thought he was joking. They said, "Make your pooh now!" Then he made a pooh in the face of the commander. He was wearing a Himba apron. They beat him, and they beat us too. We were shouting for our father, but my father did not come. I think he could hear us, but he did not come. They covered our mouths while we were shouting. They tied us together. They tied our wrists, waists, and they tied our legs. They went to look in the other houses, and the other villages. We could hear other boys shouting. They said, "lets go, we are going to war". The soldiers asked us, "where are the other boys?" I answered, "I am Himba. I herd cattle, not people." My brother said, "don't answer like that." We were beaten on our lips with a cane. "Who told you to answer like this?" I didn't answer that time because the tears were running, saliva, and snot was running, I was bleeding. My brother said "you are getting us in trouble. Be polite". Then we started walking.'

Tied together they walked 16 kilometers through the night. At one point Mukuena, who knew the area 'like the back of his hand', recognised a place along a dry riverbed where an

anteater had dug an underground tunnel that could take him to the 'upland.' In an attempt to escape, Mukuena jumped down onto a stick which further injured his knee. The rain had blocked the tunnel and he was caught. Wiser to his antics, the MPLA men tied him up with nylon instead of the weaker mopane twine. They arrived at a clearing where they came face to face with the chief commander. When Mukuena saw that the boys bowed their heads before him, he insulted them saying; 'From whom did you inherit your cowardice, from your mother or from your father?' The boys told each other, 'Don't answer him. He is crazy like his father.' But when Mukuena was faced with the commander his 'warrior braveness went away.' The boys laughed and insulted him, 'What warrior do you think you are?' They said, 'Don't look down, look at him!' Mukuena looked down. He said, 'It was incomparable to anything I had seen in this world. When I looked into his eyes, it was like someone had taken metal and tickled my eyes. All his teeth were filed into points. He was black and fat with an ugly face, and red eyes.'

They walked further into the night. Mukuena tried to escape every fifteen minutes, standing up to the army officials until he was struck with a rifle to the ground. 'I wanted to die. I would rather my people bury me in the area, than die far away. When you go to war you go to the bush and die in the woods and there is no one to bury you. You could be eaten by the soldiers. My mom had told me about the Congo cannibals.'

A soldier shot over Mukuena's head, and another said, 'Kill the guy, we want to go.' Another soldier replied; 'If you injure him he won't be useful.' Mukuena was pleased to hear this, but when he was confronted with the reality of being thrown into the fire, he changed his mind and ran to the truck. As he ran they exclaimed how very young he was. At this point, Mukuena was on the brink of being set free. Then, unfortunately for him, a man from the South West African Peoples Organization (SWAPO) – who were fighting a guerrilla war against the occupying South African Defense Force – recognised him as a good horse rider. He used to come to Mukuena's village in Angola close to the Cunene River to collect milk. Mukuena recalls,

'I wanted to have a big stomach and swallow him. I wanted to be free and now he is saying that I am a good horse rider. I wished the South African army would come and bomb these guys.'

As they were untying him, he saw 'his blanket' coming closer and closer towards them. What seemed an apparition, was in fact his mother who had followed the boys through the night, wearing his blanket. She spoke to the combatants telling them, 'I brought a blanket for my boy and to say that he is sick.' They looked at his leg and saw it was swollen from the operation, and from his latest injury in the river bed.

As a strategic move to save her son, Mukuena's mother drew on an incorporated sense of geopolitics: her experiential map of the Cunene River and the region it traverses differs from the colonial military map where the river divides ex-Portuguese and German colonial territory. In the first instance the river runs through a region bound by stories and land-use patterns, in the second there are two countries separated by the Cunene River border. Faced with the possible abduction of her son, she superimposes the colonial geopolit-

ical map over the seminomadic herder's map and claims Namibian residency for Mukuena. She tells the MPLA leader, 'You can't take people from another country to fight your war.' While his mother was negotiating his release, Mukuena used the MPLA officials' distraction to escape into the surrounding bush. The next day, his path crossed his mother's, and they walked back to the village. His brother, who was caught at the same time, fought with the MPLA from 1989 to 1992. Of that time he says, 'Don't talk about it.'

Three boys in the family were taken that night. When Mukuena's father enquired about the events he was glad that the MPLA had beaten them because they should have been more alert. Mukuena interpreted his father's response to mean that he did not want him to live in his village. His lack of sympathy pained and angered him:

'My father was not a good guy. If you spoke to him he would say, "You undermine me," and if you said nothing he would say, "You are ignoring me."'

He had been a soldier working with the Portuguese in Angola and the Germans in Namibia before 1975 when Angola became independent.

Fault line No. 4 Enyandi-Ruacana-Opuwo-Okangwati

Religion

Mukuena thus left his father's village at the age of 12. He remembers that the day before he left he 'went far to look for cattle and saw some people with a wagon.' They were going to Namibia the next morning and offered Mukuena a lift in exchange for a goat. He offered them thirty rand which he did not have.

In the past Mukuena had crossed the border by swimming across the Cunene River, but this time crossing at an official entry point, required documents he had never possessed. 'I hid between the cattle and when the guy came to count the cattle I pretended I was working with them. I was dressed as Himba, and they did not say anything.' On the Namibian side of the border members of the United Nations Transition Assistance Group (UNTAG) were posted. There was much official handing of receipts to police, and in the confusion, Mukuena spotted a blue truck in which he would travel to Ruacana in exchange for money he once again did not have. Carrying only his blanket, he negotiated this deal in Ovambo, of which he had learnt a little in hospital. As the driver approached Ruacana, Mukuena pretended to fall off the truck onto the soft ground. In a high pitched voice people shouted, 'the Himba boy has fallen down, stop!' Mukuena ran for he had heard that Ovambo people stabbed with knives, and he would be killed because he only had 20 cents tucked in his apron.

Mukuena hitched a lift to Opuwo with a member of the notorious special police unit Koevoet (crowbar), a South African police unit that had coopted turned SWAPO guerrillas.

'He said, "Normally I would not take you, but if you help me I will help you." He wanted six beers. I agreed to pay him. I cheated him. I told him my cousin was a policeman in Opuwo, and that my brother was in Koevoet, and would give me the money.'

The driver stopped to see his mother one kilometer from Opuwo where Mukuena ditched him.

Mukuena went to live with his father's family in a Himba village outside Opuwo, the most densely populated town in north-western Namibia.

'In the village I saw all different kinds of people singing in the street. White people, Herero people. I didn't know what they were singing, and I didn't like them. When they were talking about God I thought they were stupid.'

Mukuena's brother suggested he visit family near Okanguati. Once again he bluffed his passage, this time with a Herero businessman. Attempting escape, he hid in his outside toilet. The businessman found him and said, 'What are you doing in my toilet? Who told you that my toilet is for the Himba people? Are you not the one who came with me in the truck?' After Mukuena helped the man offload his truck in exchange for payment, he was asked about his family and it was suggested he look after his goats. 'He said my teeth looked like white mealies because they are so big. Look at the ears, like a kudus!'

Mukuena looked after the shopowner's goats for two months. While he was tending the goats, a Themba friend related a story he had heard told by women who attended the local church. The women had recounted that, 'there is a god and you can pray to that god for anything you like.' They said this god created the earth but you can't see him. Mukuena thought this idea was 'stupid'. A little later, when he and his friend were looking after the Herero businessman's cattle, the friend told him another story he had overheard. This one made a greater impression on Mukuena. It went like this:

'There were a lot of people who climbed on a big truck. They didn't ask where it was going. He was driving to a big hole that was filled with fire. There were big knives and spears and it was very hot in that place. They went to see that hole, and as soon as they saw it they wanted to go back. If you enter the hole you will never come back. You will stay there forever. My friend compared this with life on earth. We might get into the wrong truck and go to hell. This story bothered me, and I tried to forget it, but when I slept the images came to bother me. They gave me nightmares. Even when I was walking the images bothered me. Sometimes when I was playing I saw the images and I dropped everything and left.'

This story frightened Mukuena into a psychological space where he began to question what he thought had been his inherent and inherited aggression. He saw his clever manipulation of people along the route from Enyandi to Okangwati in a different moral light. According to him, this was a slow insidious process that led him to observe changes in his behaviour. His friend's interpretation of Christian principles based on hearsay included rudiments of the Ten Commandments, 'Thou shalt not steal nor insult people.' And Roringu told him, 'All of us need to thank God. You can do it like you are talking to your biological father'. Mukuena explained:

'I started to see myself as a bad guy. After these stories, I noticed after a week how I did not want to fight with anyone. I still did not go to Church, but

I changed my behaviour. One month later I started to go to the Dutch Reformed Church in Okongwati. I saw they were singing and I left without feeling touched by it at all. The next Sunday I went back to see more. I did not see anything. But as the Church finished the preacher came to see me and asked me where I came from and whether I knew anything about the Church. I said I did not understand.'

Shortly afterwards, Mukuena asked one of his relatives who lived in Okongwati to cut off his Himba age-set hairstyle and style it like a westerner. She questioned his action. Mukuena lied telling her he wanted to go to school. This lie began to unravel in time as ironically, parallel to his religious conversion, thoughts of attending school began to form once again and drove him to find out what had happened to his friend, Vaatakana with whom he had first debated the virtues of schooling. Mukuena said, 'The more I heard that he might be at school the more my heart started to burn. This was in 1990.'

School and Church

Nineteen-ninety was the year in which Namibia achieved independence from South Africa. Literacy was one of the main tenets of the SWAPO-led new democratic government. In the towns and villages of Namibia, the possibility of going to school became a reality. Yet for the Himba people who mostly lived in homesteads in remote parts of north-western Namibia and Angola, at considerable distances from villages or towns, school remained a practical and cultural problem. As recently as June 2003, a 15-year-old female relative of Mukuena was beaten to death by her guardian because she insisted upon attending school. The murderer was asked to pay ninety-five cattle in retribution.

In 1990 Mukuena was one of five Himba boys to attend school. He had managed to convince his brother to organise accommodation in Okangwati so he could enroll. In return he worked in the shop of his benefactor, Magdelene.

At first the teachers spoke Afrikaans and later, as the policies of the new government were implemented, English. 'The most interesting thing for me was to speak and write my name. I was selected as the class captain.' During this period Mukuena began attending church on a regular basis. The pastor offered him a selection of Christian names to choose from. Mukuena chose to be named Cornelius, the name of a leader of a Roman regiment in the Bible.

It was inevitable that at some point Mukuena, alias Cornelius, would confront his father. This happened when he took part in an interschools athletics competition in Opuwo. 'I didn't know what to do because I had cut my hair. When he saw me, he asked, "Who are you"? And I said I am Mukuena. I was shivering. I was 13. And he said Mukuena, "Whose son is Mukuena?" I said, "I'm your son." Then he said, "My son looking like this, where do you come from? I've been looking for you all these days and I couldn't find you." He said, "The reason why I came to fetch you is that all the goats have gone away since you left. We don't have enough goats, we need you to come home and look for the goats." I felt responsible for the goats, but school was my goal.' At Mukuena's age, his role at home would have been to look after the goats, not the

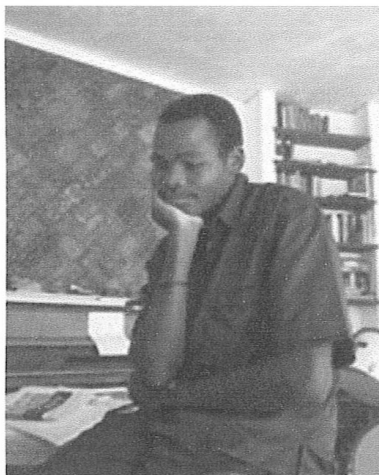
cattle. In accord with Mukuena's shifting priorities, he reasoned that because of the matrilineal inheritance of cattle, listening to his father would not secure him the eventual inheritance of his father's cattle once he died, and therefore, he thought that staying at school held more of a future for him. At this crossroads he opted to lie to his father, thus widening the gulf between himself and the life from which he had come. Although he yearned intensely for home when he was in Okanguati, he dreaded every call out from school, thinking his father had come to take him back there. He recalls,

'During the rainy season I would think about the fruit and home, and when I saw those fruits on the streets I couldn't buy them because I needed the money for school. My heart was burning. Especially at night when I heard the rain I thought about working with the goats. It was even worse during the day because at home I would have been working with the goats. I was home-sick, but if I go home there will be fights. Sometimes I cried by myself.'

Through the gaze of some of his relatives living in the village close to Okanguati, Mukuena experienced being a stranger, an 'other' in a familiar territory. Whereas before he would have benefited from their intimate generosity symbolised by his access to drinking the family's milk, he was now relegated to drinking the bitter milk kept especially for the poor. He recalls:

'They regarded me as stupid. When I spoke to them they asked, "Who are you? Where do you come from?" I was an outcast.'

Conclusion



During this time, Mukuena frequently adopted the posture of a thinker, with his chin cupped in his hand and eyes looking into the distance. To the Himba, this posture is the embodiment of orphanhood. They would say, 'Don't sit like that! You are cursing your father!' It is disrespectful to assume this position if one's

father is still alive, and further, it denotes the idea that if you cannot 'fit in', then you can only watch. Mukuena was thus symbolically expressing the death of his father, which in turn symbolises a greater sociocultural separation. Mukuena chose to end this part of his life history with a dream in which the mountains that separate Enyandi in Angola from Okangwati in Namibia, home from school, became so tall that he could no longer reach home. He concluded, 'I put my Himba life in jail and started to control my life.'

This biography forms part of a much larger collaborative project between the University of Cape Town, The Univer-

sity of Köln, and independent documentary filmmakers and researchers Joelle Chesselet and Craig Matthew entitled: *The Spatial Knowledge Archives Project: Proposal for Piloting Interactive Archives of Historical and Contemporary Ethnographic Data in the Kaokoveld (Namibia) and the Area Indigena do Uaca (Brazil)*. As an entry point to illustrate current thinking in the humanities and social sciences that spatiality is as important as historicity in human affairs, this particular biographical map charts the intricate weave of space, place, chance, and agency in Mukuena's life story.

Since Radin's famous 1926 publication of *Crashing Thunder*, life history in anthropology has remained a cornerstone of the ethnographic method (Langness 1965), and yet life histories remain illustrative of larger social processes and/or cultural practices rather than meditations on idiosyncratic moments of chance or destiny in relation to where particular bodies find themselves in specific places at specific times. The spatiotemporal aspects of life history, which are often glossed over as the 'social context' in which an individual gains his or her identity, is rather under-theorised in terms of the individuation process. In listening to Mukuena as he selected moments of his life to share, we also tried to gather detailed information about the social as well as the spatial context. Once the interviews were 'complete', we were left with pages of narrative stories to interpret and translate, a process that Watson and Watson-Franke (1985:21) argue is a 'subjective activity, subsuming many complex operations, which requires the interpreter to bridge the gap that separates him and the context of his thought from the object of interpretation, in this case, the life history text'. We wondered in what sense the logic of social mapping could be grafted to the logic of life history research, and how mapping would alter or ground the practice of interpreting the text. Is what we have done any different from other life history research in anthropology that extrapolates something about culture or history or social relations from individual stories (cf Ginsburg 1993), or have we, by moving beyond the concept of locating the subject in his or her 'social context', introduced spatiality as a concept that allows for the dialectic relation between chance, agency, place and history to surface? Individuals are sometimes regarded in anthropology as subjects of history, or as subjects who make history but not under the conditions of their own making. These metanarratives of personhood are useful when recording epochs of time, social systems and cultural practices in relation to ritual and social economy. When we begin to apply ourselves more critically to place and space, to the particular axis of action and the meanings that individuals attribute to these locations through recall, then perhaps our life history research will be less about the subject as exemplary of a particular social formation and more about a person intersecting with a geography and the way that particular geography has mapped the individuation process and how that particular agency or character has used the geopolitical space to individuate.

In this particular case, where one is mapping a 'translator's' or 'interpreter's' life story, one is also mapping a fractal or microcosmic slither illustrating the way modernity interfaces with 'encapsulated' groups of people and little by little alters the mindset of agents who are open or are brought into the position of being open to the spatiotemporal changes

inherent in the altering geopolitical landscape of a region. By enumerating the geopolitical landmarks (fault-lines as we called them in the paper), we broaden the concept of social context to the spatiotemporal context and manifest the manifold time-lines within a singular time-space. The fact that the Ondangua air-base was where it was at the time was completely relevant to Tjuma's unfolding lifehistory (destiny). The military presence in this remote area was the catalyst that altered his life-course. The area or war zone was the locus where the cold war manifested physically and (Russian-backed Cuban-backed Mozambicans and Namibians versus American-backed South African-backed Mozambicans and Namibians) was crucial in determining Mukuena's fate and agency. The plaited reality of time, place, fate, destiny and agency is the precipitate of this intersection, the result of this exercise that puts the individuation and modernisation processes under the microscope using mapping and lifehistory as the vectors for interpreting an individual's course. Although it does not necessarily break new ground, what it does is ground the anthropologists' extrapolations, and phenomenologically it eschews a clogging up of theoretical arguments, bringing a freshness to the explorations around modernity and colonialism, grounded in space and place. The paradox of a military occupation of territory opening it up to the possibilities that Cornelius Mukuena Tjuma experiences as positive is a case in point.

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