



The Epupa Falls on the Kunene River in northern Namibia at the border with Angola.

PHOTO: AFP

Namibians fear dam will wash away honey, ancestors, traditions

The nomadic Himba bury their dead in an area that is to be flooded by a hydroelectric dam near the border with Angola

BY ALEXANDRA LESIEUR
AFP, EPUFA FALLS, NAMIBIA

Namibia's Himba, distinctive for smearing their bodies with red ochre, say a planned dam that will flood the valleys where they live and their burial grounds also threatens their ancient traditions and lifestyle.

"We survive from the Baynes mountains. It is where we can move our cattle in springtime for grazing, where we get the honey sugar. It is our kitchen," said Muhapikwa Muniombara.

"If they build the dam, they'll kill us," said the 35-year-old, who has traditional necklaces and bracelets adorning her ochre-tinged body.

The largely nomadic Himba also bury their dead in the arid hills around the Kunene River, which forms an oasis in the vast desert and part of Namibia's northern border with Angola.

Generations of these graves will be flooded by the mooted 1,700-gigawatt hydroelectric dam and the Himba worry their ancestors will be angered and could react badly, causing havoc with their lives.

But moving the graves isn't an option, Muniombara says, pointing to a dozen burial sites in the mountains surrounding her village of Okapare.

"If they move the graves, the whole spirit is going to die," Muniombara says. "If they remove the graves, everything will get dry, there won't be more grazing."

The new dam will bring electricity and water to villages like Okapare, which has neither, but this does not convince Muniombara.

"We don't want the water. We don't want electricity. We have water at the fountains. We want to live naturally," she says.

The dam, first proposed in the 1990s, was originally meant to have been built farther up the river but it would have swallowed a popular tourist destination — the Epupa Falls, fringed by palm and baobab trees.

So the government decided to move it toward Baynes.

"The dam will not affect the Epupa Falls and is situated in a deep ravine approximately 40km downstream of the falls, with a low population density of Himba," said Mike Everett of the Environmental Resources Management consultancy that conducted feasibility studies for the dam.

Once Angola and Namibia give the final go-ahead to the project, the dam could take seven years to build, he says.

A group of young Namibians at the Epupa Falls are eager, saying it will help to solve chronic power shortages.

Namibia imports more than half of its electricity from South Africa, but hopes hydropower, new coal plants or even a nuclear plant could boost supplies and feed its money-spinning uranium mines.

"I'm for it because we need energy and it will create jobs. People go to school then they go back



A Himba woman holds her baby as she waits by the road for a car to take her to town on Sunday in Ohungumure, Namibia.

PHOTO: AFP

to the village looking after their parents' goats again," says 28-year-old Raturji Muhenje.

"The dam will bring development with shops," he says, in modern garb of jeans, a T-shirt and sunglasses.

But for older Himba, the new roads that will bring in thousands of construction workers to the dam site could also introduce ideas will erode their traditional culture.

In a sparsely populated nation of 2 million people, about 18,000 Himbas live on the Namibian side of the border, with another 9,000 on the Angolan side, according to anthropologist David Crandall.

Their ancestors migrated from the Great Lakes region of central Africa about 200 years ago, and they have survived with their traditions despite wars and droughts.

"Tradition changes. In the old times, we survived on goats and cows but now people can get many things because of the shops," said Kambo Javara, who says he is the oldest man in Okapare.

With a scarf around his head, signaling that he is a married man, and necklaces over his bare chest, Javara wonders what the future will bring.

"Where am I going to live? Where will my cattle get food?" he said.

"I have no way to say no to the government."

[CULTURE]

Father and son tell Syrian tales on the brink of extinction

The pair keep traditional forms of storytelling alive despite a lack of interest from students and a lack of support from their government and art syndicates

BY DOMINIQUE SOGUEL
AFP, DAMASCUS

When Rashid al-Hallak was a boy, all of the coffee shops in the Syrian capital had their own storytellers, or *hakawatis*, who would recite tales deep into the night of great deeds and heroes of the past.

But now the age-old art of public storytelling that he keeps alive is dying out, as young people shun a craft that attracts little money.

Hallak bristles with excitement for his subject, and says he has 180,000 stories in his repertoire, including the epic tales of Antarah ibn Shaddad, famous for his pre-Islamic era poetry, adventures and romantic trysts, and renowned King Zahir Baybars who battled the Crusaders and the Mongols.

"Narrating a story is about acting and attracting, not just reading," says the sexagenarian storyteller, also known as Abu Shadi.

He held his own against television soap operas during the recent holy month of Ramadan, and all year round he draws the attention of foreign visitors as he stabs his baton to punctuate war scenes and the stilted dialogue of imaginary lovers.

But he fears he may be the last to practice storytelling in Syria where, without state support and recognition, students show no interest in learning a once-venerated tradition.

"You do not eat from this art," says Abu Shadi. "Who will come and learn?" The token tips that customers leave at Al-Nawfara cafe in the heart of Damascus's old city, where Abu Shadi narrates nightly, come to no more than

Syrian families gather at a Ramadan tent in Damascus last month to listen to stories recounted by famous local *hakawati*, or storyteller, Rashid al-Hallak during an evening organized by the Spanish cultural center in Syria.

PHOTOS: AFP

US\$120 a month, barely enough to support a family.

But this has not deterred the storyteller's son, 35-year-old Shadi al-Hallak, from choosing a similar vocation — as a shadow puppeteer.

A new campaign, launched by the culture ministry with the cooperation of UNESCO and the EU delegation to Syria, could mean better times ahead for both father and son, however.

Imad Abufakher, director of the ministry's popular heritage department, says the campaign aims to document

and preserve less tangible aspects of Syria's cultural heritage by spotlighting "human living treasures," in particular those who perform folkloric songs, dances and stories.

"We want to make an inventory of the cultural elements threatened with oblivion so they are not forgotten," says Abufakher.

But while Abu Shadi and his son are the only *hakawati* and shadow puppeteer registered in the campaign, neither has been admitted into Syria's art syndicates as both lack the required

academic credentials.

"If the state does not give salaries and places to teach this art, the craft of storytelling will vanish," Abu Shadi believes.

His son Shadi says that he cannot perform in any of Syria's 52 yearly cultural festivals because he does not belong to a vocational syndicate.

"This campaign can help us if it leads to recognition and sponsorship," he says.

After being excluded from official events two years ago, when Damascus was the Arab capital of culture, the son

staged his first performance at the Dar al-Assad theater in July, an event he calls "a breakthrough."

He then spent much of Ramadan in August and early September casting shadows in Doha after dark, and also performed several puppet shows at the Damascus citadel during the Eid al-Fitr celebrations at the end of the holy month.

Karakoz and Eewaz are the key characters in his shows, two bickering friends building a mosque in the Ottoman period who are eventually beheaded because of their unproductive

but entertaining squabble.

During the Ottoman era in Syria, shadow puppets always came on before storytellers in coffee shops, and their politically charged tales were sometimes codified to protect the narrator.

Shadow puppets often had animal bodies to avoid implicating individuals, and stories that started with Karakoz asleep spoke of the ruler while those that opened with religious rituals relayed official news and military movements.

"The shadow puppeteer was the one in charge," Shadi says. "He was the messenger between the ruler and the people. He puffed up the king's image when in court and then punctured it out in the streets."

He recalls the last Syrian shadow puppeteer, Abd al-Razzaq al-Dhahabi, who died in 1994.

"When I opened my eyes to this art he had already been dead six years," he says sadly.

Self-taught like his father, Shadi spent four years learning how to turn cowhide translucent and paint it with plant pigment to make his puppets.

During a performance, light is shone through the 25cm-tall puppets to cast colorful shadows on to a cloth screen.

Shadi now hopes one day to see puppet-led tours of Damascus's old city and other key heritage sites around Syria, such as the Roman ruins of Palmyra in the desert and the imposing crusader castle of Krak des Chevaliers.

"When Karakoz and Eewaz are finished touring the planet we will make shadows on the moon," he says.