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Bodies for Exchange: Indigenous Sexualities and the Politics of Representation in Himba Culture

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how Western media, anthropology, and feminist criticisms have influenced narratives about the Himba people by examining how Himba cultural practices are portrayed through the prisms of gender, sexuality, and colonial discourse. In order to make the case that these representations frequently serve to uphold colonial hierarchies rather than engage with Indigenous epistemologies, the paper examines the exoticisation and misinterpretation of Himba customs, specifically with regard to wife-sharing, polygamy, and physical autonomy. Using feminist and postcolonial theoretical frameworks, such as those of Judith Butler, Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí, Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, and Michel Foucault, the paper critically analyses how the Western gaze imposes Eurocentric gender and moral norms while constructing Himba sexuality as hypersexualized and primitive. The study, which draws on African feminist viewpoints, emphasises how Western feminist critiques, which frequently force binary gender notions on civilisations with alternative family patterns which frequently neglect the autonomy and social roles of Himba women. Additionally, the study discusses current African-led media portrayals that recover Indigenous voices and challenge colonial narratives, including Wode Maya's documentary. The research promotes a decolonial approach to comprehending Himba traditions outside of the confining frameworks of Western patriarchy and Orientalism by combining media studies, ethnographic discourse, and literary analysis of Paulina Chiziane's *The First Wife: A Tale of Polygamy* (2001).

KEYWORDS

Himba culture, Indigenous epistemologies, polygamy, decolonial gaze, gender, sexuality

1 | INTRODUCTION

The Himba people of Namibia are a semi-nomadic Indigenous tribe, living on the margins of modern society with their traditions romanticized and excluded by others. Misreported and

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misread, they have been represented frequently in a discourse of fear and exoticism with reports of violence and witchcraft obscuring understanding of their way of life. This colonial legacy, which created self-doubt and fragmentation among African societies, persists to this day in the understanding of the Himba, not only among Western audiences but among other Africans as well. But with recent African critiques of Eurocentric models, the call for Indigenous peoples to reclaim their stories and assert their identity grows ("The Myths of the Himba"). This paper seeks to explore the Himba tribe as a site of cultural resistance, where an alternative way of life and an alternative understanding of sexuality challenge dominant narratives of modernity and civilization. Their communal lifestyle, polygamous relationships, and gender dynamics exist outside Western norms which offer insights into a worldview where the self is deeply embedded in kinship, oral tradition, and ecological interdependence.

One of the most striking aspects of Himba society is its polygamous character, a phenomenon which is apt to call to mind other African societies, as in the case of Paulina Chiziane's *The First Wife: A Tale of Polygamy*. Chiziane's novel, based in Mozambique, offers a critique of the gendered power dynamics involved in polygamous marriage, stripping bare the emotional cost and hardship for women coerced into it. In the novel, Rami, the protagonist, finds out step by step that her husband Tony has multiple wives, all of whom are linked to him in a number of ways, but all subject to the same oppressive forms of patriarchal control. Chiziane describes polygamy as an institution that forces women into competition and subordination: “We were victims of the same man, pieces of the same puzzle, trapped in a game we did not design” (Chiziane 87).

A feminist critique of the Himba practice of wife-sharing, where men share their wives with male guests, raises considerable questions about women's agency, bodily autonomy, and patriarchal control. The practice, while usually explained within the community as a means of cementing social bonds and preventing female infidelity, must consider the beneficiaries of the practice and how it is a manifestation of broader power dynamics.

From a feminist perspective, the wife-sharing practice can be seen as an ingrained manifestation of patriarchal domination, where women's bodies are perceived as an extension of male power and not as independent agents. A woman's sexuality, instead of being an element of her individuality, becomes a collective good. It is subjected not to her own desires but to male kinship arrangements' needs. This is in line with the argument made by feminist scholar Gerda Lerner, who argues that patriarchy has classically defined women as commodities to be traded between men, a theme which can be seen in various traditional matrimonial practices across cultures (Lerner 8).

Namibian feminists assert that the wife-sharing practice, locally known as *okujepisa omukazendu*, is a form of sexual violence, as women who do not want to comply or who do not want to engage in sexual intercourse with visitors are punished with social ostracism, physical abuse, and harassment. Politician and activist Rosa Namises has denounced the practice, explaining that it "is not benefiting women but men who want to control their partners" (Namises, qtd. in Becker 14).

In Paulina Chiziane's The First Wife: A Tale of Polygamy, the heroine Rami learns that her husband keeps several wives, all of whom he controls through deceit and economic domination. In a feminist epiphany, Rami reflects, "A woman is never alone. Her body belongs to her father, then to her husband, then to her sons" (Chiziane 102). Similarly, in

Himba wife-sharing practice, a woman's consent is presumed and not even asked for, further confirming the idea that her existence is to gratify men's desires, whether of her husband's or that of a visitor.

One of the justifications offered for wife-sharing is that it deters women from seeking extramarital affairs. This justification is ultimately flawed, however, because it assumes that women's sexuality is inherently suspectful and must be controlled by external forces, a trope characteristic of patriarchal cultures. Feminist philosophers such as Simone de Beauvoir resist such control of women's bodies and argue that it is in fact a sign of male insecurity about women's independence and not evidence of concern for the sanctity of marriage (de Beauvoir 283). If the practice were actually concerned with equality, it would insist that men also practice sexual sharing with the wives' visitors, an idea unthinkable under patriarchal systems.

Feminist philosophers such as Sylvia Tamale, who examine polygamous practice in African cultures, argue that polygamy and other such practices such as wife-sharing have the tendency to empower women as objects of exchange rather than as persons with desire and agency of their own (Tamale 45). In Himba culture, women are offered cattle as dowry, an economic exchange and not a romantic or consensual one. The assumption that women can be given to guests but not repay privileges indicates how such practices reinforce a double standard of male pleasure and control. This is also a dominant discourse in *The First Wife* (2001), where Rami adopts the notion that polygamy is a normal practice at the start; however, she increasingly starts questioning the patriarchal rhetoric that negates her agency. She affirms, "I was never asked. I was only taken" (Chiziane 134). For Himba women, sharing wives is also practiced in a gendered order where 'giving' a woman is not one she does consciously, but one chosen on her behalf.

While a strict feminist critique raises the repressive nature of wife-sharing, there are some African feminists who favor culturally sensitive interpretations of such practices. For instance, Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí challenges Western feminist accounts of African gender relations and argues that all gender-based practices are not repressive if they are aimed towards communal purposes rather than individualist desires (Oyěwùmí 67). In the Himba context, there are certain arguments that women are participating in such practices as part of wider collectivist awareness of marriage and sexuality, where marriage is conceptualized less through romantic monogamy and more in terms of forming social solidarity. Even within this context, a feminist reading would still question the extent to which women actually consent to these arrangements. If wife-sharing were consensual and reciprocal, women would have an equal say in instigating or withholding such transactions. The absence of such mutual agency is evidence of a power imbalance that advances male desire over female agency.

A feminist analysis of wife-sharing among the Himba people reveals a deeply patriarchal practice that restricts female agency, sustains male domination, and commodifies women in social exchange. Although some may insist on a culturally relativist stance, feminist ethics value bodily autonomy and informed consent, both of which are devalued in a system in which men dictate when and how their wives are "shared" (Tamale 89).

Chiziane's *The First Wife* is ultimately a literary counterpoint to such systems, showing us how women, even in rigid patriarchal traditions, attempt to reclaim their voices and counter their commodification. In Rami's feminist moment of realization, we find the words, "We are not shadows. We are not property. We are women, and we demand to be

seen" (Chiziane 210). The challenge, therefore, is to rethink and reform such practices in a way that does justice to cultural heritage while guaranteeing women's inherent rights to agency and self-determination.

Appealing to Indigenous poetics and transcultural ecologies, this paper attempts to step beyond exoticization and cultivate an enriching appreciation of their cultural resistance. Some observers enjoyed watching a video titled *How The Himba Tribe Bath With Offer Sex For Visitors & Bath Without Water* by an African artist, Wode Maya, who depicted African culture. A commenter below the video noted that it was pleasant to watch a representation of Africans "without the white Nat Geo Colonizer voice" (Shubhumanpriest). These stories put Indigenous epistemologies at the center as legitimate, evolving, and radically alternative ways of being in the world.

2 | BETWEEN TRADITION AND MISREPRESENTATION: A HIMBA[N] WAY OF LIFE

Western media and anthropologists have been inclined to misrepresent Himba traditions by portraying them in an exoticized and colonized setting, often idealizing or demonizing their cultural practices. Himba women, for instance, are usually portrayed as "exotic" with their bare breasts, ochre-painted bodies, and intricate hairstyles; but rather than being revered as cultural expressions of beauty, identity, and strength in the face of environmental adversity, these are usually sensationalized or fetishized in tourist brochures and travel documentaries. This is typical of what Edward Said (1978) called Orientalism, where non-Western societies are portrayed as strange and otherworldly, and thus perpetuating Western superiority. In addition, Himba gender and sexuality are reduced and oversimplified in Western discourses, and wife-sharing and polygamy are portrayed as necessarily oppressive, in disregard of Indigenous understandings of kinship, autonomy, and social bonding. According to Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí (1997), most Western feminist descriptions of African societies employ Eurocentric gender ideals and impose them on societies with different social structures, thus ignoring the diverse ways agency and power are enacted outside Western paradigms.

Roxanne Reid, in her article, *The Himba: My Dilemma Over the Clash of Cultures* describes how the Himba can be perceived as being frozen in time. They rigidly hold to the ways of their ancestors, a perception that does not take into account their capacity to approach modernity on their own terms. Writers like Johannes Fabian (1983) have criticized this image of the "denial of coevalness," which places Indigenous peoples as remnants of the past rather than as active members of contemporary global society. This misrepresentation is compounded by colonial witchcraft and violence discourses, which have historically been used to exclude African spiritual practices. Western ethnographers have been disposed to highlight putative "superstition" in African societies, thus perpetuating stereotypes of irrationality and primitivism instead of analyzing the philosophical and epistemological foundations of these belief systems (Mudimbe). In the media and tourism industries, this process of exoticization is taken to the next level of commodification, as Himba communities are often treated as "human zoos," ("An Uncomfortable Experience") where tourists take pictures without facilitating meaningful interaction with the inhabitants.

However, today's African scholars and Indigenous activists are pushing against these distortions, reclaiming their histories and cultural narratives through literature, film, and academic discourse. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) clearly stated this in *Decolonising the Mind*

that to take back language and storytelling from colonial control is central to a project resisting epistemic domination. The growing movement to place indigenous voices at the center of discussions around their own cultures contests the colonial narrative that has long shaped global perceptions of African societies. It calls, therefore, to critically assess how Himba cultural practices are represented and, beyond this gaze of exoticism, to acknowledge them as dynamic, evolving traditions affected by history, agency, and resistance.

In his article, *Africans must tell their own stories*, Mohamed Mohamud interrogates the notion that "Africans must tell their own stories." He argues that if the Africans and people of African descent narrate their own stories, they will manage to confront the deep and corporeal scars left upon them by colonisation and slavery. Storytelling gives a mental and cultural restitution by correcting historical records and celebrating African achievements. This gives recognition to the contribution of the continent to the advancement of civilization. Additionally, he also notes that these stories inspire generations that follow. Being able to visualise their history and culture represented provides the basis for developing a better self-esteem. This empowers and helps in building leaders who are proud of their heritage and will drive changes in their communities with a sense of pride ("Reclaiming Narratives").

The Himba people of Namibia symbolize an alternative mode of existence that directly opposes mainstream Western representations of indigenous African cultures. In the documentary-style video entitled *How The Himba Tribe Bath With Offer Sex For Visitors & Bath Without Water* produced by Wode Maya, the host raises the necessity for African self-representation in the media, in direct contradiction to very colonial narratives that stigmatized that community. He observes that all too frequently, the Himba have been painted through the wrong lens with allegations of witchcraft and violent practices on hand, pointing towards a broader pattern of prejudicial concepts so ingrained in the psyche of many Africans themselves due to the ramifications of colonialism. The intention of the video is to help deconstruct these myths altogether, and present their lifestyle as seen through their eyes, away from the gaze of exoticization.

The Himba tribe are classified as pastoralists and semi-nomads. Cattle and sheep constitute both an important factor of economic production as well as a symbol of societal status to the clan. Marriage is directly connected with economic exchange: women receive livestock as a form of dowry when married. The social structure is polygamous, with men usually possessing several wives. However, in a comical tone, the oldest in the village narrates he has only one for he thinks he is less desirable (“How The Himba Tribe” 20:10). Early marriages serve to confirm these traditions since young girls are occasionally married off when they are newborn to secure familial alliances, create economic ties, and promote stability. Also, there is a contentious tradition that features descendants of a visiting guest being offered as wives. A local man defending this custom states that being offered as wives by a Himba man is a safeguard against infidelity (“How The Himba Tribe” 22:57).

The distinct cultural logic that the Himba people's hygienic and bodily aesthetics represent is also very important. With little access to water, nevertheless, they apply a red-orange, ochreous substance in the areas of chassis and face, known as *okra*, for cleanliness and protection of the skin (“How The Himba Tribe” 14:44). It is a common cultural belief in that region wherein their limited dressing, made entirely from animal skins, recasts their cultural attitude toward it: use what nature has provided. This sense informs their domestic and culinary practices: they seem to prefer unspiced and just water boiled meat, which is for

them healthier than the spiced ones ("How The Himba Tribe" 26:29). Viewed from some strange perspective, these appear strange things, but they are nothing but a remarkable adaptation both ecologically and culturally: this is the kind of life the Himba society has preserved through numerous generations.

The Himba embodied practices range from their polygamous social structures to the use of ochre as a cleansing agent, which can be reevaluated as acts of resistance by the intent of colonial and neocolonial narratives in service of the eradication of indigenous ways of being. In all of these different and dynamic bodily practices alluded to in this discourse, Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*, (1952) analyses the colonized body and how colonial rule imposed racialized hierarchies when discussing bodily representation based on bodies theory. shaping how indigenous people perceived their own bodies in relation to Western modernity. Fanon asserts that the colonized subject internalizes the gaze of the oppressor, viewing their own cultural expressions as inferior. Bodily practices could be seen as a form of a colonial assertion of one's identity, indicating that practices such as the use of animal skins in clothing, lack of Western hygienic practices, ritual storytelling customs exemplified by the Himba people can be termed a form of reclamation of indigenous epistemologies according to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind* (1986). These practices work to preserve cultural identity while deconstructing colonialist frameworks built on the Eurocentric notions of dressing, cleanliness, and social organization.

From the background above, the use of ochre, or *okra*, as a cleansing agent by the Himba women becomes all the more remarkable. The very premise of "hygiene" becomes a weapon in the colonial discourse, which forcibly imposes Western standards of cleanliness on others for purposes of subjugation and control. Aníbal Quijano's theory of *coloniality of power* (2000) allows for a fruitful opening for understanding this dynamic. As Quijano posits, coloniality extends beyond direct colonial rule and continues to shape modern power structures by imposing Western epistemologies as universal. An alternative set of bodily care practices among the Himba counters the preferred hierarchy of knowledge by presenting evidence of the extent to which the body can be purified through any praxis other than the medical-industrial complex of the West. Their practices critically unravel the colonial binary of "civilized/primitive" through offering a different ontology that refuses Western rationality.

In the same spirit, Homi Bhabha's (*The Location of Culture*, 1994) notion of the *Third Space* offers another way of understanding what the Himba pursue is not merely seen as relics of a precolonial past but as a blend of traditions that evolve in concurrence and resistance against the binary of tradition versus modernity. The Himba lifestyle is not fixed but continually contested and negotiated vis-à-vis other pressures-culture shifts resulting from modernity or globalization. Their refusal to yield and embrace the totally expected assimilation into Western custom while operating on select adaptations simultaneously illustrates, in quite a different light, how indigenous cultures do not simply exist against modernity but, on their own terms and they redefine it actively. The *Third Space* allows for a reconfiguration of identity that is neither fully indigenous nor completely Western but is constantly in a state of negotiation and adaptation.

The attempt to confine Mbembe's (Necropolitics, 2019) theory of state control over life and death, very especially in the context of colonial and postcolonial Africa whereby indigenous populations have always endured extreme stigmatization that virtually renders their very existence expendable, strongly highlights the experience of the Himba. They are withstanding prejudices from the outside and are deliberately excluded from state

structures. However, they maintain their standing as a resilient group in many systems laden with neglect. The necro-political framework in Mbembe's theory explains why certain indigenous groups, like the Himba, have remained scorned not only by observers in the West but also by other African communities steeped in the internalized colonial logics of civilization. Stigmatization of the Himba people by calling them witches and voodoo practitioners serves to highlight the disjointedness of narratives structuring colonial imposition, as in undercutting African spiritual practices while boosting European religious and epistemological frameworks.

This very mentality is what the host of Wode Maya's video strikes at. He engages in what Stuart Hall (Cultural Identity and Diaspora, 1990) describes as a counter-narrative that seeks to reclaim agency over representation. Hall argues that cultural identity is not a fixed essence but a construct shaped through discourse and historical context. The exoticizing gaze through which the Western media largely represents the image of the Himba has indeed operated to perpetuate stereotypes of primitivism and hypersexuality. On the contrary, by allowing the Himba themselves to speak, the video displaces them from being passive subjects of anthropological inquiry to self-affirmative agents. This act of self-representation aligns with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's idea of decolonizing the mind by resisting imposed narratives and reclaiming traditional knowledge systems.

Additionally, gender and sexual norms shape an important mode of cultural expression in Himba life. Judith Butler's work *Gender Trouble* (1990) elucidates how gendered practices among Himba operate within their own cultural logic while simultaneously engendering a challenge to Western gender norms. The performance through which women are constantly seen without tops, coupled with a practice where male oral storytelling is restricted from women, further enhances power dynamics inside their own society, while at the same time resisting Western gender norms. For too long, Western feminist discourses have viewed indigenous women's bodily autonomy through the lens of oppression, ignoring that within alternate cultural frameworks different meanings can be assigned to the mere act of exposing the body. Rather than a mark of subjugation, within Himba society, the generalized acceptance of the naked female body confirms a cultural norm in resistance to shame about nudity found in the Western patriarchal models.

Polygamous marriage practices and norms of giving one's wife to visitors go against Western expectations of marriage and exclusivity. While viewed from an outside perspective they may reflect patriarchal customs, they should also be analyzed within their own cultural framework. If, as Butler suggests, gender is performed in society according to the continual enactments of appropriate and accepted behavioral codes, then Himba marriage may represent a performative role in establishing their form of social order, rather than a denial of rights to women. This is consistent with Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí's (1997) critique of Western feminist frameworks which subject gender binaries on African societies without taking a serious consideration of indigenous alternatives to gender constructs. Oyěwùmí implies that the precolonial African societies were not constructed solely on gender divides but organized along lines of age, kinship, and communal responsibilities. Applying this perspective to the Himba people's social structure allows for a more nuanced understanding of their polygamous and communal living arrangements.

The Himba people manifest from their use of animal products in their dress, food, and even house building materials an ecologically sustainable system that proves antithetical to Western capitalist paradigms of consumption. They exist in close communion with the

land, exhibiting what Arturo Escobar (*Encountering Development*, 1995) calls the alternative ontology that stands against the developmentalist discourse of progress in his work. By way of a self-sustaining life, they oppose the extractive logic of capitalist modernity so as to give a survival alternative to communally based existence over individual accumulation. To address such work, it requires one to engage the theory of transcultural ecologies, which recognizes indigenous practices of stewardship as forms of resistance against neo colonial exploitation.

Fundamentally, the Himba people's embodied traditions, from their ochre-covered bodies to their communal storytelling practices, serve as acts of cultural resistance against colonial and neocolonial narratives that seek to render them obsolete. Through Fanon's decolonial critique of the colonized body, Bhabha's *Third Space* of cultural negotiation, Mbembe's necropolitical lens on indigenous survival, and Butler's performative gender analysis, it becomes evident that the Himba people's way of life is not merely an anachronism but an active engagement with modernity on their own terms. The host, Wode Maya in his video, is allowing the Himba to speak for themselves. His emphasis on self-representation disrupts the colonial ethnographic gaze that has historically defined African cultures through an external, often dehumanizing, perspective. This further recognizes the decolonial turn into media studies that calls for resisting the Eurocentric view of cultures in favor of indigenous voices that challenge historical renderings (Moyo). He is participating in the broader project of decolonizing knowledge production, and is challenging the hegemony of Western narratives that have historically misrepresented indigenous African societies. As the *International Journal of Indigenous Language Media and Discourse* highlights, media produced in indigenous languages plays a vital role in asserting epistemological sovereignty and resisting imposed narratives (ILMA). Through this lens, the Himba way of life is not merely an anachronistic remnant of the past but a testament to the plurality of human social organization and the resilience of indigenous epistemologies.

3 | PERFORMING IDENTITY: THE HIMBA PEOPLE AS TOURIST SITES

Tourism plays a pivotal role in forming the outside perceptions of Himba identity, usually strengthening colonial narrative about primitivism, exoticism, and spectacle. With the advent of global tourism, there is always a tendency of mimicry of indigenous cultures which are packaged and presented for the white audience. Dean MacCannell (1976) in his work *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, articulated how tourism creates "contrived authenticity" when Indigenous people are forced to perform their culture following what is desired by tourists, rather than their lived realities. The case of the Himba would be illustrative of this, where their villages have become living museums where tourists come, take photos, participate in rituals, and consume an essentialized version of their culture. Such tourism-oriented representations often deprive the Himba of its own agency, further broaden the binary that they solely exist outside of modernity rather than being an active participant in contemporary African society.

Through fictional portrayals of tourism, we see several expressions of the workings of the dynamics. For instance, in Zakes Mda's *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002), the exoticization of Black South African women by white tourists runs parallel to how Himba women are fetishised in the gloss of global media. Again, in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Petals of Blood (1977), we see how encroachment by foreign interests into Indigenous spaces is expropriation, rolling in economic and cultural cloture; western visitors yearning for

"authentic" African experiences are just eroding the very traditions they say they admire. Such narratives tell us of an unlikely juxtaposition between Indigenous peoples and heritage preservation on the one side, and external economic coercions on the other.

Much like the exoticisation of Himba bodies, a Khoikhoi woman called Sarah Baartman was tricked into going to Europe in the early 19th century under the pretense of providing her with wealth and opportunities. What followed was very similar to what colonial gaze had served for the Himba tribe. She was paraded as a spectacle in freak shows across England and France (“Sarah Baartman”). The colonial gaze stripped her out of humanity and treated her body both as hypersexual and subhuman. This idea still prevails when Western narratives depict Himba women’s sexual customs as either primitive or immoral without considering the cultural context.

Theoretically, Frantz Fanon's work *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) provides a critique of the psychological trauma caused by such tourism. Fanon argues that Indigenous people were often treated as objects of curiosity and entertainment by means of colonial representation, which have dehumanized them. This applies to the Himba, whose portrayal in travel documentaries and luxury safari brochures often aligns with what bell hooks (1992) terms the "oppositional gaze," where the dominant culture controls how marginalized groups are seen and represented. The constant representation of Himba women as bare-breasted, shadowy figures appears to suggest a detachment and that they distanced from modernity, only reinforcing this stale dream of some colonial fantasy of untouched tribal purity.

Framed within these postcolonial critiques, writers like Achille Mbembe in *On the Postcolony* (2001) have criticized the Western narrative that constructs Africa as a space of alterity where Indigenous cultures are either romanticized as premodern or disdained as backward. The tourism industry, in its providing of this binary, has made it possible for the traveler to imagine such a return to a "simpler" time, free from all the complications of a modern world. In truth, however, the Himba people actively confront contemporary issues of their own, navigating globalization, climate change, and changing gender norms on their own terms. The very expectation that they should remain "untouched" for the enjoyment of tourism creates a contradiction whereby they are required to perform an idealized version of their culture while they strive to negotiate the economic realities wrought by global capitalism.

4 | WESTERN SEXUAL NORMS AND THE HIMBA: A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

There has long been a call for critical discourse on the construction of sexuality and gender roles in different societies, especially within postcolonial and feminist frameworks. Western patriarchal institutions, which are products of Judeo-Christian influences under capitalist modes of production, impose very rigid gender definitions that are often centralized on female subjugation and sexual propriety. In contrast, the Himba tribe of Namibia holds an alternative framework of sexuality and gender that challenges these prevalent Western narratives. The communal and polygamous social makeup of the Himba, with their unique approach toward sexuality and embodiment, repudiate the colonial legacy of imposed moralities.

Sexuality is constructed through mechanisms of discipline and are controlled by Western patriarchy, particularly over women's bodies. According to Michel Foucault, in *The History of Sexuality*, power operates not only through repression but also by generating discourses around sexuality. He avers that it is institutions like the church, the state, and the medical system which regulate the body and in which individuals are disciplined into normative heterosexuality. That is the historical and present policing of female sexuality that has taken place within Western discursive contexts, where controlling modesty, monogamy, and, indeed, reproductive roles are regarded as marking individuals as morally respectable. In contrast, the Himba traditions do not impose such rigid moralistic frameworks on female sexuality. The practice of wife-sharing amongst the Himba, where a husband may offer his wife to a guest as a gesture of hospitality, directly contradicts Western notions of female chastity and exclusivity.

Judith Butler's theory of performativity indicates that gender is not a stable identity but merely a series of repeated acts performed according to social standards (34). Specifically, in a number of Western societies, femininity is constructed through policing modes of dress, sexual behaviour, and bodily exposure. In contrast, however, that of the Himba is performed in such a manner as to resist Western aesthetic and moral expectations. Topless Himba women shock and amaze the Eurocentric gaze, as their discourse hypersexualizes the naked female body. This scrutiny may be explained with the help of Achille Mbembe's usage of the term 'necropolitics' which defines how colonial structures dictate which bodies are deemed respectable or disposable (Mbembe 27). By existing outside these moral codes of conduct, the Himba women reject the concept of modesty, or that female bodies are to be covered and controlled.

In his critique on colonialism, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Fanon depicts how colonized subjects internalize the European beauty norms and morality to a degree of self-alienation (Fanon 120). The Ochre body painting and nakedness preserved among the Himba serve as a subversive stance against internalization in the hand of colonial body politics. Rather than yielding to normative [Western] expectations of decency, their symbols serve to legitimize their cultural identity alongside the commandeering of their own representational power.

Arranging polygamous marriages among the Himba can better be discussed from the angle of Gayatri Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (2009), which criticizes the Western tendency to speak for and about indigenous women in ignorance of their cultural context (Spivak 78). While many Western feminist discourses denounce polygamy as inherently oppressive, such discourses rarely engage with the lived realities of the Himba women. As the video documentation of the Himba by Wode Maya revealed, the Himba women actively participated in their marriage arrangements and obtained social and economic benefits from polygamous unions. By managing the labour and distribution of domestic chores among multiple wives, they achieve a kind of collective power that contradicts the isolating structures of Western nuclear family structure.

Western portrayal of Himba traditions, mostly portray a primitive, hypersexual, and backward image, which enforces colonial representations of African societies as either unmodern or uncivilized. Edward Said's theory of *Orientalism* (1978) gives insight into how the media and anthropology represent the Himba. Said goes on to argue that the West constructs the 'Other' as an exotic spectacle and reinforces its own cultural superiority (Said 85). The frequent depiction of Himba women without upper garments has often tantalized,

or shocked, as the explicit objective of the Western audience, rather than giving an insight into the cultural significance of this practice.

Wode Maya's documentary on the Himba challenges these colonial portrayals by giving voice to the Himba to narrate their own stories. The host explicitly critiques the Eurocentric gaze that dominates African representation; insisting that the Himba should be understood on their own terms and should never be judged through any moralistic lens imposed by the West. This might as well be aligned with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's idea on the decolonization of the mind as calling the indigenous to reclaim their stories from the Western crafting (Ngũgĩ 45). By centralizing Himba voices, Maya's documentary brings a disruption to the colonial dynamic of the production of knowledge, thus claiming that African traditions should be understood from within their cultural logics rather than the ones that are imposed by the outsiders.

The erotic language, gender practices, and community life of the Himba people stand in opposition to the Western patriarchal structures that exert regulation over bodily entities and enforce moral uniformity. Viewed through a postcolonial critical lens, such traditions are modes of resisting colonial and neocolonial discourses that define African cultures as backward. The works of Foucault, Butler, Fanon, Mbembe, and Spivak offer insights into how the Himba disrupt Western frameworks of sexuality and gender. As highlighted in the documentary by Wode Maya, granting indigenous populations the opportunity to narrate their own stories remains central to breaking free from the shackles of colonial epistemologies that have historically disenfranchised them.

5 | CONCLUSION

The Himba's embodied practices of dressing, their polygamous structures, or sexual communal codes are radical declarations of autonomy that trouble Western patriarchal models and rethink gender and sexuality outside the purview of colonial modernity. Through a critical decolonial lens, this paper has attempted to dissect gender norms and parameters surrounding sexual practices, marriage, and even kinship of the Himba, demystifying the European notions of "civilized" versus "primitive" that continue creating pluralities for the world today. The Western patriarchal structure enforces monogamous norms for married women under the sexual ownership of their husbands or modesty norms over members of society. On the other hand, Himba ways normalize fluidity and communalism among partners.

Moreover, other postcolonial theorists like Frantz Fanon and Achille Mbembe offer a lens to critique the Western narratives which have skewed Indigenous sexuality, reinforcing racialized stereotypes of African bodies as hypersexual or deviant. The Himba, like other Indigenous groups, have reclaimed agency in resisting the onslaught of globalization and modernity by maintaining their cultural practices. Resistance signifies control over their own bodies and relationships. They position sexuality not as a space of moral deviance but as embodied expressions of communal belonging.

Efforts toward decolonizing desire will lead into an acknowledgment of Indigenous sexualities that are not built on the logic of colonial assumptions, but rather a perception based on their own terms. As Wode Maya's documentary shows, the act of Indigenous people telling their own stories is an act of rebellion against the hegemonic representations that have for so long been placed on them. The politics of representation must change from

Eurocentric anthropological ethnographies to an ethical and self-determined portrayal of Indigenous communities. Recognition of the sexual and cultural autonomy of the Himba people is not merely about correcting historical misrepresentations, but also about affirming their right to define their identity on their own terms.

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