WHO ARE THE OSHIVAMBO PEOPLE?

Over half of Namibia’s population speak Oshivambo. It is a cluster of closely related dialects spoken in the northern part of Namibia and in Angola. There are eight mutually intelligible dialects in Oshivambo. These are Kwanyama (meaning ‘eaters of meat’), Ndonga, Kwambi, Ngandjera, Kwaluudhi, Mbalanthu, Nkohonkadhi and Mbadja. These dialects are also quite similar to the Herero language.

Traditionally, the Oshivambo people were farmers and cattle breeders. However, with the coming of European colonization, the Oshivambo migrated to settler towns and mines in search of migrant labour. Urban factories and other commercial enterprises triggered entrepreneurial activity among the Oshivambo. Most of the modern day families engage in trading and other retail activities. The Oshivambo are therefore considerably modernized being migrant workers in the mines and industries and traders in the commercial sector. Their entry into the modern economy has meant that most Oshivambo speakers have dispersed from Owamboland, particularly after Namibia’s independence in 1990.

In cultural terms, therefore, the Oshivambo have gone through considerable social transformation over the past 30 years that has changed most of their traditional way of life. For instance, most homesteads have given way to modern suburban brick and corrugated iron buildings. Although some traditional villages still exist, most agricultural and cattle herding have been overtaken by trading and retail activities. Family groups now live in modernized homesteads enclosed with wooden pole fences.

WHY STUDY OSHIVAMBO?

Although the Oshivambo language is mostly spoken in the northern parts of Namibia, it is also spread all over the country. This means that knowledge of Oshivambo qualifies one to gain access to other dialects in the country since over half of the people of Namibia speak Oshivambo.
WHO ARE THE HERERO PEOPLE?

The Herero are a small group of Bantu speaking people with a population of about 240,000 members. The majority of them live in Namibia but others live in neighbouring Angola and Botswana. The Herero consist of several other subgroups such as the Ovahimba, OvaOvambanderu and vaKwandu in Namibia; the vaKuvala, vaZemba, Hakawona, Taivika and Tjimba in Angola; including the Himba who frequently cross the border with Angola with their cattle herds. All these tribal groupings consider themselves to be Ovaherero because they speak the Herero (or Otjiherero) language.

During the 19th century, German missionaries and merchants entered the Herero land for purposes of proselytisation and colonization. The German settlers entered into an agreement with Herero elders to establish farms. However, the land contract became a pretext for German colonial rule. It was not long before Herero territory became a German colony under the name South West Africa. German colonial rule sparked conflicts between the settlers and Herero herdsmen over access to land and water. By 1904, these conflicts culminated in prolonged uprisings that are popularly known as the Herero Wars. Close to three quarters of the Herero are said to have been killed in the subsequent genocide ordered by the German commander, Lothar van Trotha. Perhaps the German insurgency explains the current sparsity of the Herero population. Apart from speaking Otjiherero, the colonial encounter resulted in linguistic and cultural exchange so that the Herero now speak Portuguese and partly English and Afrikaans.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF THEIR LANGUAGE AND CULTURE?

The Herero were traditionally cattle-herding pastoralists who moved from place to place with their huge herds. Like other Bantu speaking peoples the land belonged to the community and had no limited boundaries. Since Herero wealth revolves around the ownership of cattle, a man without cattle is regarded as nothing. Herero lineage is based on a bilateral descent system that traces each person’s heritage from both the father’s oruzo (paternal lineage) and the mother’s eanda (maternal lineage). Each tribal grouping established itself separately from the other so that chieftainship had no much power in Herero society. However, in times of external threat, the Herero banded together to confront the common enemy.

Due to their separate tribal groupings, the Herero are not a homogeneous people even though they share the same origin, culture and language. Their traditions differ due to cultural exchanges with other tribes and also European culture. As a result, the Himba, Kuvala and Tjimba to the northwest are more conservative, having preserved most of their cultural traditions than the southern Herero and the Mbanderu. The Herero in Kaokoland and those in Angola are still pastoral nomads because of cultural isolation. Since each tribe speaks its own dialect, the Otjiherero consists of many groups of mutually intelligible languages. For instance, the southern Herero can be understood by the northwestern Herero and vice versa. Standard Herero, used as a medium of communication in the media and the national education system was established after the translation of the Bible into Herero by the German missionaries, Gottlieb Viehe and Peter Heinrich Brincker.

WHY STUDY HERERO?

Language is a carrier of a people’s culture and history. One cannot understand other people’s cultures without some knowledge of their language, customs and traditions. Likewise, Herero language and culture can be regarded as crucial to understanding an important segment of Namibia’s population of about 2 million people. Since three quarters of the Namibian population live in rural areas, understanding Herero language and culture enables one to interact with a significant part of Namibian people.

Since a considerable number of Herero people are still practicing their indigenous cultures and traditions, sociolinguists, historians, sociologists, anthropologists and other cultural researchers will only understand the Herero by studying their language. As an example, the Himba people, who even though they have had contact with Western civilization, their relative geographic isolation in the northwestern part of the country has contributed towards restricting the diffusion of cultures. To a great extent, the Himas still reject the modern world, preferring to practice their semi-nomadic lifestyle. The Himas have not changed their dress code as they still wear their beautiful multi-layered goat skins and ochre-and-mud encrusted aprons. The women smear their skins with a mixture of butter, ash and ochre to keep it smooth and free of wrinkles. However, the opposite is also true for those Herero people who have been affected by culture contact and exchange. They are a fitting case study for research in cultural assimilation and linguistic hybridity.