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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

## IS IT REALLY NECESSARY TO MAKE EVERYONE 'MODERN'? REPRESENTATION OF THE HIMBA TRIBE IN 'THE BRITISH TRIBE NEXT DOOR' (2019)

Nishat and Parvez

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### Abstract

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### Introduction:-

'What is modern and what is not?'-is a valid and longer debate from the time being. Who will be the authority to fix the scale of choosing which could be called modern and primitive? This question might come into a viewer's mind when he/shewatches 'The British Tribe Next Door (2019)'. It was aired on Channel-4in October 2019. In this show, they are trying to arrange a cultural exchange between a British family and a Namibian Tribe, Himba.

This show mentioned a 'Tribe Next Door', but Namibia is thousands of miles away from British Island. This British show might remind us of the days of British colonisation of various continents for 200 years, when the imperial rulers thought of those continents as neighbours, and thus attempted 'civilise' their 'neighbours' via colonisation. According to the show, it has presumably been telecast to portray the cultural exchange between the British and the Himba tribe.

The essay is divided into three parts: firstly, there will be some background information about the programme, the tribe Himba, and the Moffatt family. Secondly, there will be a brief analysis of how they are represented and finally, there will be an attempt to explore the impact of these types of shows on the audience.

Europe is declared as the birthplace of modernity by Western scholars. Till now, we could find colonialism in dominant media programmes, literature, language, and so on. This process of modernization is not all in all, and there are a lot of drawbacks. To analyse the show regarding the 'representation' of the British and the Himba, this essay will be explained using the concept of Edward W. Said's 'Orientalism'. The controversy around 'modernity' and trying to make a tribe modern is going to be explained in this essay.

### The documentary and the portrayal of aboriginal people in media:

The British Tribe Next Door (2019) is a documentary series that was aired on Channel 4. It has 4 episodes and each of them is 60 minutes long. The series was produced by Emmanuel Ayettey. The storyline is about GoggleBox Star Scarlett Moffattwho has been shipped, along with her family, to a remote Namibian Village. She took her family and a replica of her childhood home from Durham, United Kingdom. Then they started living with a Namibian tribe, Himba for four weeks.

Corresponding Author:- Nishat

According to Channel-4, the Himba tribe agreed to host a British family to understand the civilisation and the culture they had never seen before. Across the four episodes, the Himba tribe and the Moffatts would find that a lot of things are common between them including their values and feelings.

The indigenous people are usually portrayed in the media as deceptive, primitive, and violent individuals. They suffer from the extensive misrepresentation of media (Downing and Husband, 2005, p. 15). The producers and directors of the documentaries or movies try to make money or grab recognition by showing a stereotypical face of the indigenous people. 'The British Tribe Next Door' is quite a new approach in that it takes 'Western Civilization' to the indigenous people and tries to make a reality show out of it. The viewers could not be sure if the Himba tribe were interested in gaining knowledge about western civilization or they were forced to do so. However, the documentary could be praised for imparting lessons on sustainability and community life.



The Moffatt family is posing with some of their friends from the Himba tribe.

#### **Who are the Himba:**

There are 13 Major Namibian tribes, Himba is one of them. They are the semi-nomadic tribe in the Northern Namibian Desert, most specifically in Otjeme (North West Namibia). According to the Namibia Tourism Website<sup>1</sup>, "The Himba (singular: Omuhimba, plural: Ovahimba) are an ancient tribe in Namibia, closely related to the Herero. They speak in Otjihimba, a dialect of the Herero language. They are a semi-nomadic, pastoral people who breed cattle and goats." 200 years ago, Namibia was a German colony. It gained independence in 1990.

Women of the Himba tribe perform household chores more than men. They carry water, build houses, milk cows and goats, take care of children, go shopping, etc. Men handle cattle rearing, community works, and religious duties. The Himba have been plagued by severe droughts, guerrilla warfare (during Namibian independence and the Angolan civil war), and the German forces that decimated other groups in Namibia. Despite their lives nearly coming to a close in the 1980s, the Himba have persevered along with their culture and tradition.<sup>2</sup>

#### **The Moffatt Family:**

The Moffatts are a British family from Durham. Before this show, this family has been famous for the GoogleBox appearance. The daughter of Mark and Betty Moffatt, Scarlett, is the main celebrity of this show. Mark and Betty's younger daughter Ava and Betty's mom were in the documentary as well.

<sup>1</sup><https://www.namibiatourism.com.na/blog/Fast-Facts-The-Himba-of-Namibia>

<sup>2</sup><https://www.britannica.com/place/western-Africa/The-beginnings-of-European-activity>

**Orient, Occident and the portrayal of 'modernity':**

The representation of the Himba and a British family in this documentary is a perfect match for the idea of Orient and Occident by Edward Said (2003) where he (p. 12) mentioned that the world is divided into two parts not only based on the geographical situation but also for socio-political, economic, religious and cultural differences. These two parts are Orient and Occident. Orient is signifying the colonies of material European civilization while Occident is the representation of the colonizers, mostly European. These two parts also indicate how the socio-political culture of European colonizers has been forced upon the Orient.

Most of the Western scholars have a different view of Orientals, which does not have any real connection with the Orient. Sometimes they make it out of fantasy, sometimes by visiting the place without learning their language and culture. Unfortunately, the literature and the popular culture is based on the dominating view of these scholars who were being called Occidentals by Said. He (2003, p. 15) explained that the ideas of Orient and Occident are shaped by the political concerns of Britain, France, and the USA.

Occidentals and the history of modernism seem to be the same through many scholars, as Seth (2016) explained, "in recent times it has been argued that thinking with the concept of 'modernity' entails or at least makes one prey to, Eurocentrism." As instanced by Jameson (cited in Seth, 2016) the transformation of society after the Renaissance and the start of capitalism, individualism, accompanied by the advancement of science and technology, catapulted the beginning of 'modernity'. Modernity has become a force to change the existing knowledge and practice for the sake of European enlightenment. The narrative of modernity has been circulated through the world and it has been inequitably applied to the non-western/non-European societies to make their inhabitants 'modern'. The documentary 'The British Tribe Next Door' is another example of adjusting the Himba culture which is very unique in its way to the 'so-called' modern British culture.

**The representation of the Himba and the Moffatts for the sake of 'modernity':**

Modernity does not have a proper explanation. The examples and explanations are given by the scholars are mostly given through context and perspective. Appadurai (1996, p. 4-9) mentioned modernity is quite a set of attitudes, technologies, and social forms that are enforced or associated through the Western Countries in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 'The British Tribe Next Door', there are a lot of examples of representation based on race, gender, and consumerist perspective with the postcolonial modernity. The points below are fetched through Appadurai's example of modernity and Said's thought on Orientalism.

**Settlement: A Colonialist Approach:**

In the very first episode, it was shown that the authority of Channel-4 is making a replica house for the Moffatts, as they are going to pass four weeks with the Himba tribe. The house of the Himba are simple, cone-shaped structures of saplings, bound together with palm leaves, mud, and dung. Whilst the replica of the house of the Moffatts is the same one with all the modern amenities like electricity, water, the Internet, etc.

When the house was being made, the Himba were helping the construction workers. The house almost acts as a symbol of the settlements of the British Colonies 200 years ago. According to Britannica<sup>3</sup>, the traders who first came to the coast of Africa in search of gold and other expensive metals started to make their own houses with the help of the slaves. Two of the Himba women risked their lives to arrange water for the Moffatts in the first few days.

Professor Harding's (No date) research<sup>4</sup> showed, "Aboriginals are most often portrayed as noble ecologists, unwelcome warriors or political victims. To refute these false ideas, he suggested, in particular, disseminating more information about the Aboriginal reality, improving the training of communicators, involving Aboriginals in change processes, and using international media to affect local affairs." In 'The British Tribe Next Door', it was revealed that indigenous people are not trustworthy, because except Scarlett, the Moffatts could not take the Himba with a big heart. They seem fearful about the people there. From the very beginning, the youngest Moffatt, Ava seemed very gloomy around the Himba and did not happily take part in any of the works with the Himba children.

<sup>3</sup><https://www.britannica.com/place/western-Africa/The-beginnings-of-European-activity>

<sup>4</sup><https://mediasmarts.ca/diversity-media/aboriginal-people/common-portrayals-aboriginal-people>

**Consumerism: ‘What are you going to do with so many shoes?’:**

The documentary questioned western consumerism as well. The reaction of the Himba women after seeing a lot of shoes for just one person (Scarlett), showed the audience the consumerism in the Western/ European Culture. When the Moffatts live in a small mud-made Himba house for a night, without any bed, window, air cooler, they came to understand that they should lead their life simple as Himba. Again, when Scarlett and her Mom Betty went to the city for shopping, Scarlett commented seeing so many cars after a long time and she found this part to be something that she had been missing. It is not easy for someone to suddenly adjust to the simple and sustainable lifestyle of the Himba's from a consumerist life.

This documentary might have a positive impact on the Himba or the indigenous people if the Moffatts started living in line with the Himba tradition. That would be more honorable for the tribe. The lifestyle of the Himba tribe is very simple. They do not have many things so they are just amazed to see how many things a person could need to pass his/her days. When the Himba women saw the bedroom of Scarlett they wanted to have something like her. This programme tries to show the need for consumerism in this community-led society. The target audience of this documentary is the British people, not the Himba tribe. That is why it was revealed through the subtitle that the Himba tribe also wants to live in a consumer-centric society.

**‘Mirror, Mirror on the Wall’: The image they have never seen:**

The Himba women have seen their image in the mirror for the first time in their life and they do not know how they look like. Betty told them that they look beautiful and she was genuinely praising. But it brings forth the idea that it may be only in Europe's point of view, where it is important to recognise someone's beauty. ‘They never know what they look like’, it was the expression of the Moffatts when they came to know the Himba never use any mirror. Scarlett mentioned many times that she is not happy about her body, on the other hand, the Himba women said that they are happy with their body. When Scarlett wore the traditional dress of the Himba women, she felt insecure about her body. She seemed to be very self-conscious and she is not as confident as the Himba women. The Himba women think they are beautiful whatever they wear, whatever they look like with their minimum dress, red mud, and jewelry.

The Moffatts were shocked after observing that the Himba women did not cover up their breasts. It is normal for the tribe but this documentary wanted to show that covering the breasts is normal and showing publicly is not. The Himba women seemed happy about showing their breasts as well, which is not an accepted norm in ‘modern’ society's dressing manual. But there are a lot of examples of women showing their breasts in myths and history.

**The gendered lenses:**

The Himba women are exhibited as being prepared for luring their male partners, but the Himba Men are not revealed to be interested in impressing women of their tribe. The Himba women are displayed when they were taking their fire shower, using mud to make up and wear dresses. On the other hand, the director did not show how the Himba men are taking their shower, how they are making their hair, and what fashion trends they are following. Unlike other documentaries, here the women are the object in front of the camera.

In this documentary, we also found that the Himba women are portrayed as exotic. It is not a new approach taken in documentaries and movies. This way of presenting indigenous women as untamed, but eventually conquerable, has been perpetuated since the first documentary ‘Nanook of the North’ (1922) by Robert Flaherty. Said (2003, p. 188) argued that the sexual objectification of oriental women is very much influenced by the pattern of relative strength between East and West.

Talking about masculinity or being masculine was another issue related to gender in this documentary. The thought of masculinity is different from culture to culture. Mark was addressed as ‘woman’ so many times in this documentary as the Himba men do not help their women in household works. They just herd the cattle and talk about community issues. Mark is shown cooking for the family, that is why Himba men told him ‘woman’. In traditional societies, men seem to be busy with the outside world, especially in the orient, whereas women are busy with the household. But the idea of sharing every work outside and inside first came from the European societies. That is why being called ‘woman’ so many times is quite aggressive to Mark. But he tried to show his masculinity by telling them about his sporting activities and search for metals.

Himba men and women are shown very much interested in sex. As Peterson (2005) argued, “indigenous peoples were, in part because they were categorised as primitive, considered to be promiscuous and lacking sexual regulation, aspects of being primitive that are confirmed by their living in non- standard families and communities”(cited in Narin et al, 2017, p. 40-41). In the documentary, the wife of the Tribe head comes to Betty to ask for her husband Mark. That woman offered her husband to Betty, but Betty is portrayed to be very pure about sexual issues. She did not show much interest in other men and did not want to share her husband with other women. The Himba women were displayed talking about Mark and why he should need more wives. There was no such type of discussion amongst the Moffatts as they are the portrayal of ‘civilized’ society. There is a gendered way to look at this issue as well. The tribe head was not shown interested in Betty or asked Mark to give Betty. Rather, he asked Mark to look for some new women with them.

**Food and habit of working: two different images:**

The Moffatts in the show ate different types of foods whereas the Himba tribe was presented just eating porridge with milk. This tribe slaughtered and cooked their best cows for showing honor to their guests and used every part of the cow’s body. Unfortunately, in episode 1, it was shown, Scarlett was asking the Himba to have their leftovers, which was very racist and quite a bad manner to their hosts.

The Moffatts are using a lot of foods of different brand labels which food produced by themselves. The part of colonialism has also bestowed upon the ‘extra’ necessity in our life. That is why, these days people all over the world buy a lot of things mostly food items, to live but the life of the Himba showed us how little this civilization needs to survive. The ‘modern’ civilization is represented by the Moffatts over-consumption of food, most of it being processed and artificial. They are not interested in household works. The Moffat sisters remain busy with their cell phones, on the other hand, the Himba children are doing a lot of household works like cooking, raising cattle, taking care of their siblings, and preying.

**The politics of identity for the Orient and the Occident:**

The Himba are not personalized enough in this documentary. Only a few Himba men and women were projected in front of the camera. Even some of them did not get an introduction or name as the Moffatts. On the other hand, all the Moffatts were introduced and talked to the camera through the episodes. Very few people from the Himba tribe were introduced and most of them were rich and politically higher positions. Other people in the village were not introduced or interviewed properly.

The politics of showing the British family as the dominant and the whole clan as submissive has a root with the concept of ‘others’. The Himba are shown as ‘the other’ here though they have their name and identity. Valerie and Bull (2005, p. 3-7) argued, “The fundamental error refers to blaming ‘others’ for their misfortunes. The ‘others’ are not seen as fellow individual members of the human community by the colonizers. They have seen the ‘others’ as a different community which makes ethnic boundaries.”

There was a scene in Episode 3 when the Himba asked the Moffatts which tribe they are from and they answered ‘the County Durham tribe’, though there was no such tribe. The Moffatts used an imaginary name for themselves to deceive the Himba.

**Human rights and sustainability: the ‘new’ modernL:**

Many researchers have already mentioned that indigenous people are displayed to be violent in mainstream media and the documentary by Channel 4 is no different. It tried to show the preying of different animals which might be harmful to the Himba tribe is violent. Using children for hunting animals is also shown as violent. As Narin et al. (2017, p. 38-40) argued, the settlers and the colonising state explain the example of violence represented the indigenous people as violent-prone, malign, and sometimes compare them to the beasts. Even their concern regarding environment, ecology, nature, and spirituality is mentioned as primitive and inadequate.

Besides the Himba are shown to be savage as they are killing the snakes which would be dangerous for them, but Mark and Scarlett were thinking about the ecology more than a Himba’s life. Their concern made them more civilized in terms of ‘modernity’ whilst they were disturbing the whole tribe through their modern lifestyle.

**Have the Himba tribe become modern?:**

Through the documentary, it was mentioned so many times that this programme is related to a cultural exchange between the Himba and the Moffatts. Both of the groups were going to learn valuable lessons in life. Unfortunately, even though the Moffatts are represented to be enjoying their lives with the Himba, the Himba tribe who are living their lives seemed not to enjoy the cultural exchange.

The norms of the Himba and a traditional British family must be different. If Channel 4 wanted to make a cultural exchange, they should give a brief about the culture to both the parties. They tried to show just a family to a whole tribe for cultural exchange but norms can be varied from family to family. That is why it seems very unfair as they divide them basis on the race and mentioned the whole time the Moffatt family is way higher than any Himba family.

'Europe is modern' it is not a new concept to the scholars of cultural studies or anthropology. 'European/ western/ the global north is modern, the 'others'/orient is not modern'-this is the mindset that Said (2003) has proven to be prevalent through the book *Orientalism*. Most of the countries in the Global North are wealthy and have a good transportation and communication system. They are ahead of time with the help of technology. They have less population rather than the global south. In actuality, the criterion of being modern seems to be a concept made by the Global North for their own interest. They did not experience the lifestyle of a citizen of the Global South.

Geography is not the main factor for dividing the Global North or the Global South. International geopolitics is more vivid here. The countries of the Global North are very keen on new communication technologies such as radio, television, and the internet. The internet penetration in this region is twice than of their non-western counterparts. They have privatisation policies and several multinational corporations. Most of their social, political, and economic decisions are taken based on private companies and corporations.

In search of indigenous people to make them modern, is quite an old concept in the post-colonial era. Exploiting the space of the indigenous people for entertainment, research, expedition, etc. began a long time ago. Most of the documentaries made on the indigenous people are exploiting the personal space or not showing the proper respect to their society and culture. The documentary about the Himba is not different but the lessons gained by Scarlett and her family from the Himba tribe about honesty, hard-work, body positivity, and respect for their own culture are priceless. The realisation of being a part of the selfish consumeristic society seems like a big lesson for the viewers as well.

The documentary is made for the British audience as the Himba does not have any electricity or television. They could not see their representation and they are represented through a language that they could not even understand. To sympathise with the Himba, they showed how the British culture is superior to them in every aspect. These perceptions prove how the British media are showing the indigenous people, sometimes the so-called 'under-development' has become the most entertained visual for the people. Some of the critics even asked about the ethical concern around this show. As Bond (2019) mentioned in her review in *Radio Times*<sup>5</sup>, "Without any journalistic sense of a good story or even just basic curiosity, 'The British Tribe Next Door' fundamentally results in the family observing day-to-day life of the Himba and saying: 'That's different'."

In this 21st century, why it becomes important to show the Europeans as modern and others are not? Downing and Husband (2005) tried to answer this question through their research on television channels in the United States. They (p. 5) explained the media concern as follows: "Control from the top is also exercised in general through the multiple filters through which any program must pass – talent agencies, focus groups, executive scrutiny from marketing, legal, and standards and practices departments, script meetings – before it sees the light of day." In these steps, there are a lot of stakeholders who do not have any idea about the 'orient' or the 'others'. They are making programmes based on their attitude towards the 'orient'.

Besides, there is a lack of authenticity when media portrays the indigenous people. The gap is not going to be reduced soon as there are a few indigenous executives in the entertainment industry, most of their works are not praised by the mainstream audience. The 'white'/dominant executives sometimes have the cultural competence to address issues of the indigenous people and their lives. But living with the indigenous people for one or two months

<sup>5</sup><https://www.radiotimes.com/news/tv/2019-10-29/british-tribe-next-door-scarlett-moffatt/>



could not make others understand their language, culture, values, and ethics. 'The British Tribe Next Door' has raised the questions once again and thrown some challenges to the existed modernity and culture.

### Conclusion:-

'The British Tribe Next Door' (2019) is a bit different from other documentaries. It seemed like a reality show as the producers made a British family to live with the Himba tribe for four weeks. The traditions, sustainability, culture, community life of the Himba's, etc. are some of the main highlights of this show. Besides, it highlights some familiar social issues both in the Himba community and British society like marriage, relationship, aging, childbirth, household work divisions, sharing, minimalism, etc.

Four weeks are not enough to show the life of an entire tribe. This documentary compared the lives of the highest technology-savvy society and the life of indigenous people without any modern amenities. It also showed how the West sees the orient and how they treat them in this 21st century. The Moffatt family is depicted as very selfish, ignorant, and intrusive. On the other hand, the Himba are represented as passive victims of 'modernity'. However, at the end of the show the Moffatts gained some positive vibes and lessons from the Himba.

This documentary sparked a lot of debate for its invasion of privacy, racism, and exploitation upon the Himba tribe. Trying to invade private space, showing them luxury when the daily need is a luxury to the Himba people, disrespecting their language and culture are the ways Channel-4 took to make the Himba people 'modern'. All of these analyses led the way to make a sustainable world in respecting the indigenous people's privacy and space.

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