

*If you think **The British Tribe Next Door** is racist, you need to face your own prejudices*

I've worked in Namibia for years as an anthropologist. I asked the Himba people myself what they thought of Channel 4's new programme – and I can tell you it's anything but 'poverty porn'

[Margaret Jacobsohn](#)

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Not unexpectedly, documentary series [*The British Tribe Next Door*](#) has become controversial since the first episode was screened on [Channel 4](#). Some viewers loved the first programme. Others found it thought-provoking and educational. But as always, it is the negative lobby that is most strident.

As a Namibian who was privileged to live within Himba communities for a few years and who has spent the last 35 years working with their people, the British criticism that annoyed me most was the catchy phrase “poverty porn”. Yet the writers of this phrase have actually done us a favour: they have helped expose the prejudices and blind assumptions in our own thinking.

Admittedly this unusual and visually bizarre series – a British family in a double-storey house spending a month living next door to a Himba herding community in remote north-west [Namibia](#) – invites strong reaction. But calling the series poverty porn or racist, or a glorification of white privilege, presupposes that the British – or western – perspective and way of life is the norm.

If people don't conform to your way of dressing, if their traditional dress requires bare breasts in their own villages and homes in their own hot and arid country, filming this is pornographic?

It took colonialism and its mega-religions, in which puritanical body shame is a key tenet, to put clothes on the backs of many African societies. Would the series be more palatable/politically correct if Himba women had been asked to put on bras? Ironic coming from the west which has led the way in commodifying the human form and sex.

If Himba people don't have the thousands of possessions that city dwellers regard as essential for their (environmentally destructive) lifestyles, they must therefore be impoverished? Is showcasing the differences between two 21st century ways of living somehow unacceptable or voyeuristic? These ideas are patronising and arrogant – even racist.

The most pernicious biases we filter our lives through are those we don't know we have.

I met the Himba villagers that featured in the series, two months after filming was completed. As a scholar and experienced consultant, I interviewed men and women of all ages, and even some children. I held meetings, private one-on-one discussions and sat around a camp fire talking informally with people at night.

I was satisfied that the community's leaders understood what they were being asked to do by participating in the series, and that they consulted their people before giving consent. They were proud to show outsiders how they live and do not feel exploited.

The new borehole donated to the community by the film group, and the injection of cash and food into the area over a period of months, was hailed as hugely beneficial to the people and their livestock, particularly as Namibia is going through one of the worst droughts in living memory. I was pleased to hear from these experienced herders that this borehole would not change their herding strategies. While it provided a clean,

convenient water source for people, they knew their cattle would starve if kept near the village, even with this new water on tap. So, the young men continued to take the livestock into the hills where some fodder remained.

Over and over I heard how entertaining and fun the filming had been for the village – a welcome diversion from worrying about the drought. The people said they had learned so much by living in close quarters with the British family and film-makers.

As amazing as the house and the things inside it were, what stood out was that local people learned they could make meaningful contact with these outsiders, who were warm, friendly and interested in similar human concerns.

Surely this is what viewers should be taking away from this remarkable cultural exchange, as uncomfortable as it might make some of us feel at times. It tests our assumptions and biases.

The house – which most local people regarded as a rather ridiculous edifice that would be destroyed by termites in a few months – was a novelty to be enjoyed. Only three youths, attending school in the capital town of Opuwo a few hour's drive away, had any ambitions to live in such a place. Often men and women used their renowned wit and humour to gently send up people who need all those possessions and such a house to survive.

They were critical but charitable about people who wasted so much water, trucked in for the house so as not to use up local sources. The British family and film-makers had clearly not been taught how to behave more responsibly.

Young people said they had learned a lot of English – essential for their schooling and to negotiate modern life in Namibia. They also said having time to get to know the outsiders had enhanced their self-confidence and self-esteem.

The Himba people are proud and resilient, famed across Africa for their herding skills in arid conditions and for their outstanding social organisation that underpins their socio-economy. The cash economy, wage labour and all that comes with a developing, modern African state are impinging on these people, and they are negotiating these changes to the best of their ability.

Protecting them from the realities of a bigger world, and from taking part in such a series, is not useful. These rural Namibians broadened their worldview by being exposed for a month to a very different way of living. Now viewers get the same opportunity to see and hopefully recognise the wisdom, strength and humanity of the Himba people in the series.

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The Guardian

The British Tribe Next Door review – why did no one put a stop to this?

1 / 5 stars 1 out of 5 stars.

Scarlett Moffatt and her Gogglebox clan have flown to Namibia to teach the Himba tribe to iron and climb stairs. How has this implicitly racist idea made it to our screens in 2019?

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Taking the gimmickry gobsmackingly far ... The British Tribe Next Door. Photograph: David Bloomer/Channel 4

I often think, when something new is delivered to our screens, of all the forces that have had to combine over the weeks, months, sometimes years to get it there. From the first stirrings in a dramatist's mind or the first steps of a documentary maker nosing out a story, and on through the eternally mysterious journey of creation, their ideas are gradually forming until arriving, finally, at the last stage of fruition – the bureaucratic hoops through which all must jump. Commissioners to entice and enthrall, lawyers to please, notes to take in, paperwork to fill out, the long chain of decisionmakers to be appeased, satisfied and made comfortable, until finally the show is given a slot and aired to the masses.

This, at least, is what I presume happens. But then programmes such as *The British Tribe Next Door* turn up and suddenly all certainties are gone, exploded into nothingness by a series – not even a one-off – that sends a suburban British family to live next door to a group of indigenous people in the Namibian desert to see what cultural hijinks ensue. And it is happening here, on Channel 4, in essence a public service broadcaster, and now, in the year of our Lord 2019.

It is ... exactly as it sounds. The suburban family are the Moffatts, the County Durhamites from Gogglebox, who are perfectly pleasant, inoffensive people distinguished mainly by their eldest daughter, Scarlett, who has both a sense of

humour and the rare and charming ability to put her thoughts into TV-friendly words as she is having them. They are taken to Namibia – younger daughter Ava-Grace barely lifting her head from her phone no matter how many breathtaking herds of wildlife pass their jeep – to live for a month with the semi-nomadic Himba people in Otjeme. You might not have expected the programme makers to take the gimmickry this far, by building an exact replica of the Moffatt house there, but other than that there is nothing you would not have suspected.

The Himba women who visit the house are staggered, and possibly appalled, by the 20,000 Moffattian possessions it contains (“Why do you need so many things for one person?” one asks, gazing round Scarlett’s cushion-covered, shoe-stuffed bedroom), fascinated and seemingly envious of the dishwasher and washing machine and baffled by the amount of housework that matriarch Betty still finds to do. The men reckon termites will take the lot in a few months.

There are some truly fascinating moments that reveal (to the uninitiated in the ways of semi-nomadic tribes in the Namibian desert, among whom I count myself) unsuspected depths to the cultural chasm. The first women to visit the house are perturbed by the idea of having a second floor and then absolutely flummoxed by stairs – “Are we climbing? Will we fall?” – and intrigued by the hall mirror. “I thought there was someone on the other side. It’s like water on the wall.”

But it is not enough to justify a series. And even less so a series that – despite what I’m generously going to assume were best efforts in the other direction – fails to avoid putting the tribe in the service of providing teachable moments to the Moffatts – and Scarlett in particular. The reaction in the mirror becomes the story of Scarlett’s insecurities about her body, as does the tribespeople’s desire that she wear their traditional dress.

None of this is the Moffatts’ fault. Scarlett’s unfiltered responses serve her well (“I don’t want to offend them,” she says on her way back to the house after a failed attempt to explain why she is not happy about wearing the topless dress, “or make them think I don’t appreciate what they’ve done, because I do ...”) but the makers have put them in what seems to me to be an implicitly racist format, working within a tradition that has historically not treated indigenous people well or respectfully, even if there is nothing overtly racist about this specific instance. At the very best, you could say it is a massively flawed premise executed as well as you could hope. At worst, you could say very, very differently. But apparently nobody, at any point in that long, long line of folk responsible between concept and fruition, did.