EARLY LIFE

Thousands of years in the making
People and their predecessors have been living in Kavango for hundreds of thousands of years, a figure that would go back much further if we include pre-human ancestors. What happened over all those years—especially during the last several centuries—has been of great importance in setting the scene for life today. This is particularly true of processes that helped mould current land uses, farming practices, traditions, outlooks and leadership systems, for example. Efforts to piece together that history are based on archaeological artifacts, oral history and records written down over the past 150 years.

The earliest firm indication of human life in the region, however, comes from stone tools. These have been found upstream in Angola at Menongue and Galengue, at Oriico near the Caprivi’s confluence with the Okavango, and around Rundu. The design of the tools is typical of Stone Age artefacts produced tens and even hundreds of thousands of years ago. The producers of the tools were hunter-gatherers, probably living along the river where food and water was available all the time. Elsewhere and away from the river, people were doubtless more nomadic, moving between different sources of water, hunting grounds and fruiting trees.

Farming in the region could have started as long as 2,000 years ago, although the earliest definite evidence comes in the form of pottery made in about 850 AD at Kapako west of Rundu. The pots were used to store grain, and they provide the first evidence of crop farming in Namibia. This site also shows evidence of iron workings from that period, as well as layers of more recent pottery, which indicates that crop farmers have continued living there during the past 1,150 years. Pottery produced in about 1630 AD at Vungu Vungu was also used to store grain. More significantly, glass beads and smoking pipes were found at this site, indicating that people then had widespread trading contacts outside the region. The pipes possibly came from the Angolan highlands since the use of tobacco probably spread down the west African coast after its introduction to Africa in the 1500s.
These narratives tell us that the ancestors of the different riverine tribes moved into the region from distant origins. Opinions differ on when the movements occurred, some people suggesting dates close to the end of the 1700s or in the early 1800s, others as far back as the 1500s. Some accounts claim that no one lived along the river before the immigrations of these clans, while others suggest that the river valley was already inhabited by Yeys or Tjao and Kxoe people. It is clear from the archaeological record, however, that the river has been home to people for tens and perhaps hundreds of thousands of years. They were hunter-gatherers for much of that time, but crop farmers have lived there for 1,100 years and more. What language those early people spoke or to what tribes they belonged is not known. But even if none of the archaeological remnants had been found, it would be hard to imagine the fertile Okavango valley being uninhabited until so recently. As an oasis in a vast area of arid Kalahari woodland, the valley must have been attractive to anyone that happened to be in this area of southern Africa. And if crop farmers have indeed inhabited the valley continuously over the past 1,100 years, many modern Kavango people could be the descendants of those early farmers.

For San people, the general assumption is that their ancestors have been living as hunter-gatherers in and around the region for thousands of years. Most aspects of their history relate to how they have been dispossessed, oppressed or killed, often being pushed from one area to other inaccessible or less favoured places. This is the main reason why the San population is small, scattered and marginalized. The most recent examples of such movements are the resettlement of San people from north-western Kavango to military bases in what was Bushmanland during the 1970s, and the exodus of Kxoe people to Botswana in 1999 following unrest in Caprivi.

What was life in the Kavango like 100 and 200 years ago? Most people were concentrated along the river where they lived in small villages scattered fairly evenly along the river valley. This was even the case as recently as 1943 (see page 114). Life was probably rather easy in many respects because abundant water, fish, relatively fertile soils, grazing, wildlife and useful plant products were available to the small population. The specialist on ‘native affairs’, Captain Kurt Streisvold, estimated the total number of people living along the south bank in 1931 as being no more than 4,500 and the whole population on both sides of the river probably

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Key notes
- People lived along the Okavango River as hunter-gatherers for tens of thousands of years.
- Farming started along the river at least 1,150 years ago.
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Farming was probably fairly productive as long as good rains fell every year. However, sporadic and long dry spells, and attacks by pests such as queleas, rodents, various insects and even large mammals, would have meant that a whole season’s production was often lost. Predators such as lions and crocodiles depleted livestock herds. Cattle also suffered from foot and mouth disease, lung sickness and sleeping sickness. The rinderpest epidemic in 1897 killed most cattle in the region.

Slave trading was evidently common practice until as recently as the 1920s. The Kavango chiefs traded most slaves with Angolan slave merchants who provided such goods as firearms, ammunition, beads and alcohol in exchange. Slave raiding was also practised by hunting parties that went out to steal women and slaves from other tribes. All of this must have created an atmosphere of insecurity for many people. Other raids were mounted to steal cattle and food, leading one explorer in 1899, for example, to report that the Gciriku had not planted crops or kept any cattle for two years for fear of losing them in tribute payments to the Tawana people from Botswana. This was after the Tawana had killed 80% of all able-bodied Gciriku men in 1893.

Attacks or the fear of raids by warriors of the Kolololo people (from Lesotho) in 1858 and Jonker Afrikaner (from southern Namibia) evidently also had a major impact on the region. Everyone who had been living on the south bank apparently fled across the river leaving much of Kavango in the control of San people. This apparently remained the case until the German administration established a police presence during the early 1900s.

The establishment of a police station in 1910 at Nkurenkuru provided the German government with its first permanent presence in the Kavango. This coincided with the formation of the first mission station at Nyangana, also in 1910. Colonial control of the region shifted to South Africa after 1920 when South Africa was given a mandate to administer the then South West Africa Protectorate, while the Caprivi Strip to the east of the Okavango River was administered from Bechuanaland (now Botswana) between 1921 and 1929. The first superintendent of 'native affairs' was appointed in 1922, but it was only in 1937 that Kavango was formally declared as a tribal area, the ‘Okavango Native Reserve’ (MAP 1). The administrative centre of the region remained at Nkurenkuru until 1936 when it was moved to Rundu, which was first established as a recruiting centre for labour. The region remained under the direct control of a succession of native commissioners until 1970 when new legislation provided for limited self-government by a Legislative Council. The Council changed the name of the region to ‘Kavango’, while the newly independent Namibian government again introduced ‘Okavango’ in 1992 before returning the official name to ‘Kavango’ in 1998.

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