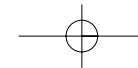


SAND AND WATER
CHAPTER
THREE

EARLY LIFE

Thousands of
years in the making



SAND AND WATER

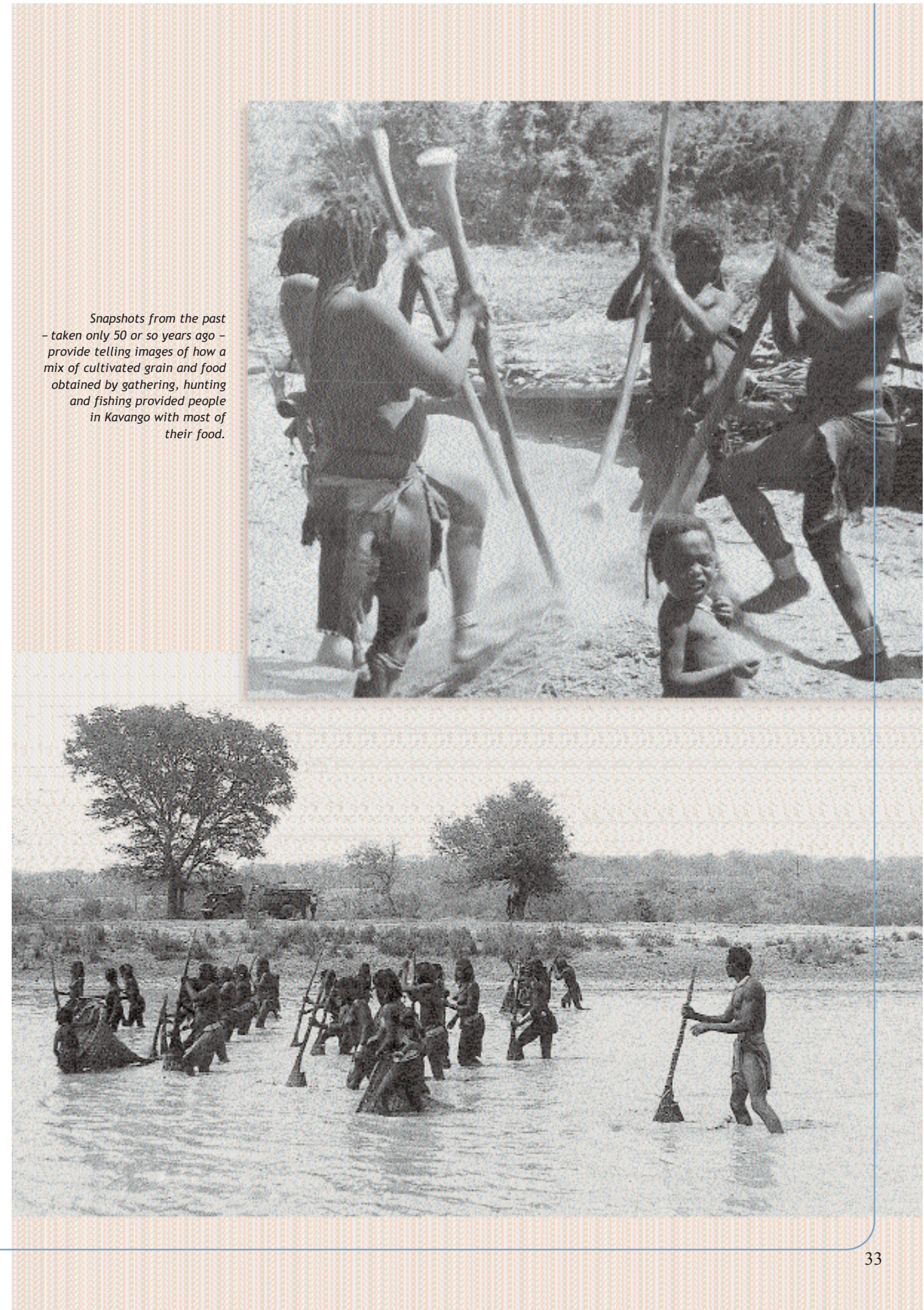
People and their predecessors have been living in Kavango for hundreds of thousands of years, a figure that would go back much further if we include pre-human ancestors. What happened over all those years – especially during the last several centuries – has been of great importance in setting the scene 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.¹

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 Dirico near the Cuito'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.



Images from the past.
 The jaw of *Otavipithecus namibiensis* (right above), an ape forming part of the line leading to the evolution of humans. This 13 million year-old fossil was found to the south near Grootfontein, and it is easy to imagine these and other ancestors venturing across the Kalahari woodlands to enjoy the productive waters and foods of the Okavango valley. Decorative cowry shells from tropical coasts (below) were brought to Kavango as currencies used in an extensive trade network in southern Africa. Major exports from Kavango included slaves. Clay pots (right) were often used to store grain, and pottery fragments found near Kapako from about 1,150 years ago provide the earliest evidence of crop farming in Namibia.



Snapshots from the past – taken only 50 or so years ago – provide telling images of how a mix of cultivated grain and food obtained by gathering, hunting and fishing provided people in Kavango with most of their food.

From at least the 1500s onwards, people living in southern Kavango have been trading with communities along the Okavango River and perhaps in the Okavango Delta in Botswana. Evidence for this comes from pottery discovered near Sikereti, where hunter-gatherers probably used the pots to store honey and perhaps other items. The pots were thus not associated with grain storage or farming. More recent pottery made 150–160 years ago has been excavated at Kamutjonga, near Bagani, and is typical of pottery recently produced by Mbukushu people.

A fairly detailed history is available to explain the origins of the five major tribes that live along the river: the Kwangali, Mbunza, Shambyu, Gciriku and Mbukushu. Most accounts come from oral history, the memories of events passed down from one generation to the next. According to the legends, the riverine tribes originated from people living along the upper reaches of the Zambezi River. Small groups or clans left that area, moving first south and west to the Kwando or Mashi River. One clan then travelled west to settle along the Cubango River in Angola. Imbangala people in that area later forced this clan to move downstream to settle in western Kavango. The people had two leaders who were sisters, but a disagreement between the sisters divided the clan into two groups which were to become the tribes now known as the Kwangali and Mbunza. The

Kwangali concentrated in the west of the region and were farmers primarily, while the Mbunzas lived further east as fishing people.

Whilst the clan that gave rise to Kwangali and Mbunza people settled in the west, a different clan led to the present-day Gciriku and Shambyu people. The original clan also moved from the upper Zambezi, first settling along the Kwando River and then the Cuito River in Angola. They later moved down the Cuito to eastern Kavango and, again, a disagreement led to a division: the Shambyu living to the west and the Gciriku further east. The two groups speak slightly different dialects of the Rumanyo language.

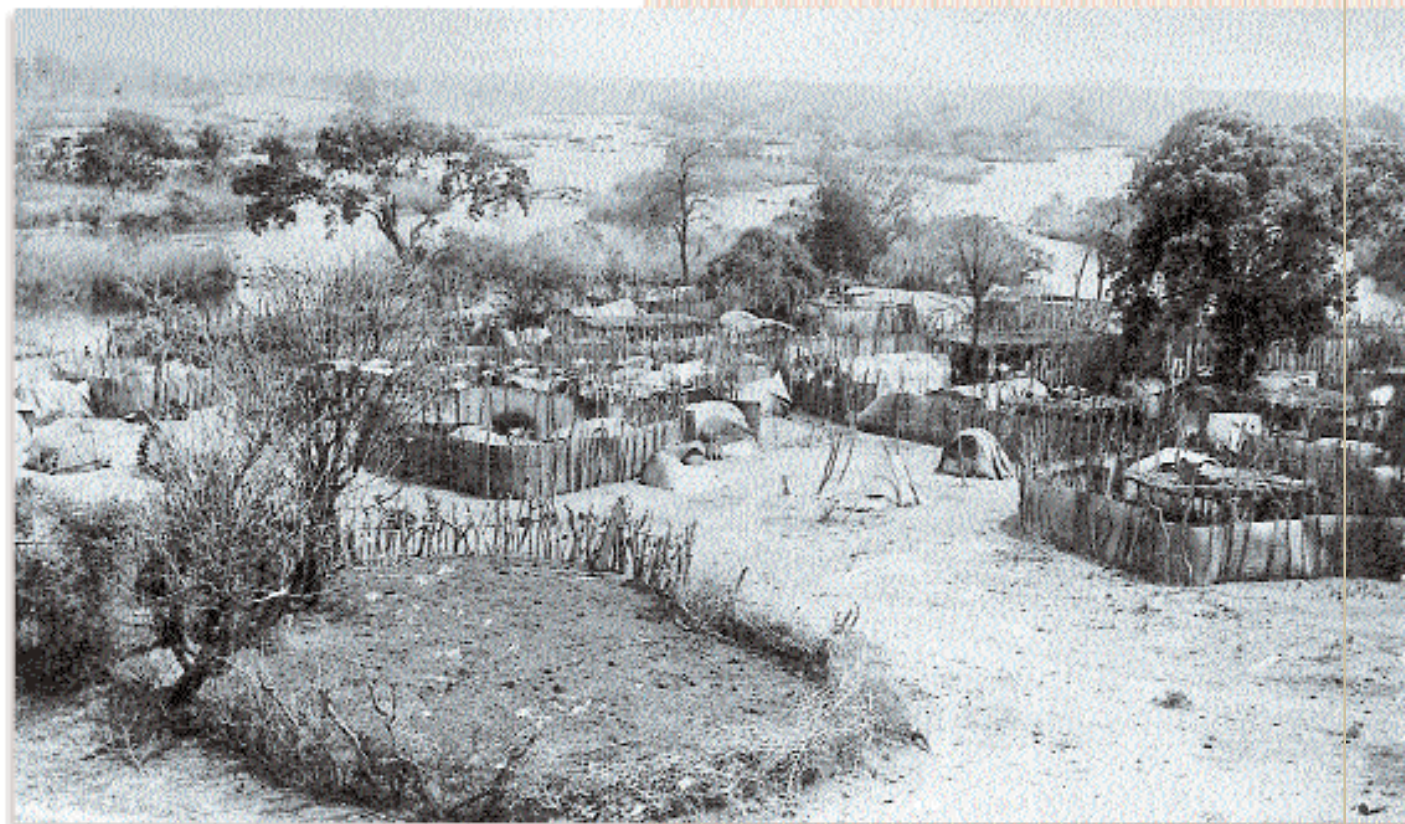
Similarities between the Nyengo and Mbukushu languages suggest the origins of the Mbukushu are also in the upper Zambezi. However, early oral history states that they first settled in the area of Katima Mulilo from where the expanding Lozi empire later pushed them out. This was in the mid 1700s, and they first moved to the floodplain of the Kwando in Angola. Much of the community later moved south to finally settle in the region around Andara. Mbukushu chiefs were famous rainmakers who lived on the island of Thipanana near Mukwe until 1900. People came from far and wide to consult the rainmaker, and the island became an important centre of trade between the east and west coasts of southern Africa. Payments of black cows and oxen, ivory and young women to the rainmaker provided the Mbukushu people with considerable wealth.



Lechwe and other wildlife have largely disappeared as sources of food, while more and more fishing traps are found to be empty.

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.² 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 Yeyi or Tjaube 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 and more years. 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.

Most people lived near the river in small villages, such as this one photographed in 1909. Mats made of plaited reeds were traditionally used for walls around each cluster of huts or households.



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 Streitwolf, estimated the total number of people living along the south bank in 1911 as being no more than 4,500, and the whole population on both sides of the river probably

The mission at Nyangana as it was in about 1920. Many aspects of Kavango's recent development followed the establishment of missions at Kavango: Nyangana (1910), Andara (1913), Nkurenkuru (1926), Tondoro (1927), Bunya (1929) and Shambyu (1930). It was these missions that first introduced formal schooling and health services to Kavango.



amounted to about 10,000 people. This is 10 times less than the population in Owambo at that time. While droughts certainly occurred from time to time, the region apparently never suffered from any of the terrible famines that killed high proportions of the population in Owambo.³

However, there were also many hardships and risks to be faced. Indeed, several aspects of life in the region perhaps developed as a result of these challenges, obliging people to adopt low input-low output strategies. Diseases placed a severe burden on people and were probably the main reason why the population was so small. The most significant diseases and health problems were malaria, diarrhoea, relapsing fever, hook worm, pneumonia, bilharzia, and eye diseases. There were also epidemics, for example of influenza in 1918, 1925, 1928, 1932 and 1940, and of measles in 1928, 1948, 1953 and 1959.

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.⁴

Slave trading was evidently common practice until as recently as the 1920s. The Kavango chiefs traded most slaves with Angolan slave merchants who

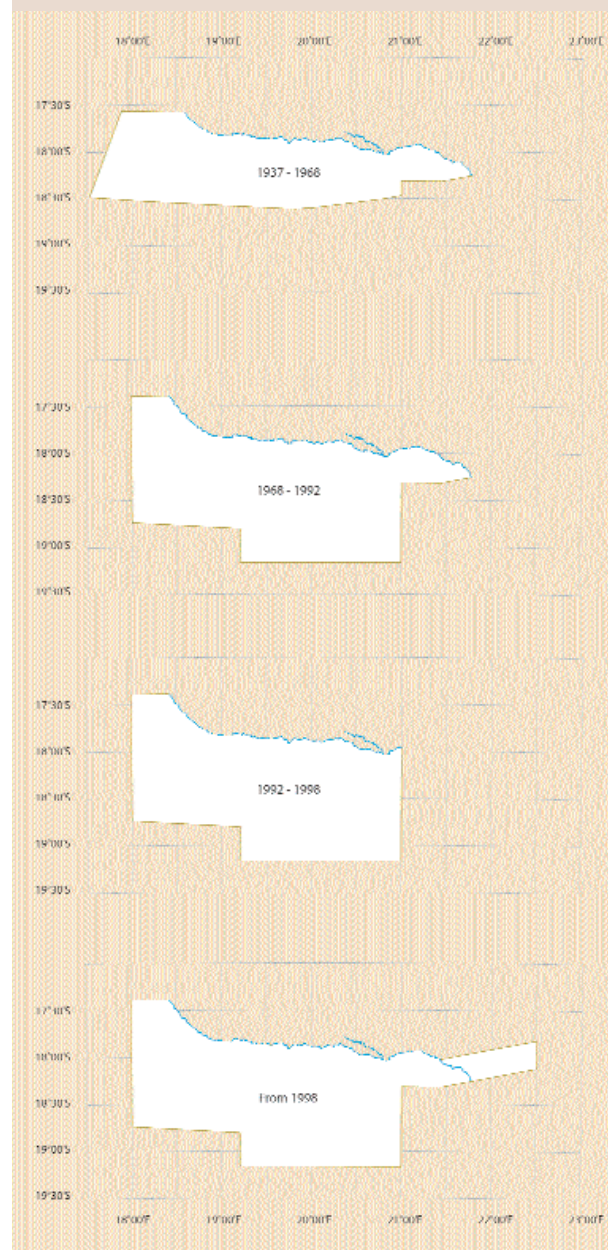
provided such goods as firearms, ammunition, beads and alcohol in exchange. Slave raiding was also practised by hunting parties that went out to steal women and slaves from other tribes. All of this must have created an atmosphere of insecurity for many people. Other raids were mounted to steal cattle 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

FIGURE II-

The changing shapes of the region. From 1937 until 1964, the region extended west into what is now Oshikoto, and the triangular shape to the immediate west was reserved as a grazing area for Kwanyama cattle. From 1964 until 1992, the Okavango River formed the eastern border, while from 1992 to 1998 the eastern border was at 21°East longitude. The eastern border is now taken as 22°30'East.



'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' (FIGURE II). 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.

The borders of Kavango changed after 1964 as a result of the Odendaal Commission's proposals, the main effect being a loss of area to Owamboland and an expansion to the south. These borders remained in place until 1992 when the newly independent government placed the Mukwe area under the administration of the Caprivi regional government. The current borders were declared in 1998.

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 and possibly 2,000 years ago.
- Oral histories claim that the clans from which the Kwangali, Mbonza, Shambyu, Gciriku and Mbukushu tribes originated, stemmed from people living along the upper Zambezi River.
- Most people lived in small villages along the river 100 to 200 years ago, where they had abundant water, fish, relatively fertile soils, grazing, wildlife and useful plant products.
- The first permanent colonial presence in Kavango came about with the establishment of the police station at Nkurenkuru in 1910.
- Under South African rule, the region was proclaimed as the 'Okavango Native Reserve' in 1937. The borders of the region have changed several times since then.
- The six missions established between 1910 and 1929 introduced schooling and health services to Kavango.