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THE PAST

Trying times



Over 4,000 individual paintings have been found at Tsodilo Hills, 50 kilometres to the west of the Panhandle. Excavations indicate that Tsodilo has been occupied continuously over the past 50,000 to 40,000 years, first by hunter-gatherers and then by livestock and crop farmers from about 1,500 years ago.¹

OKAVANGO RIVER

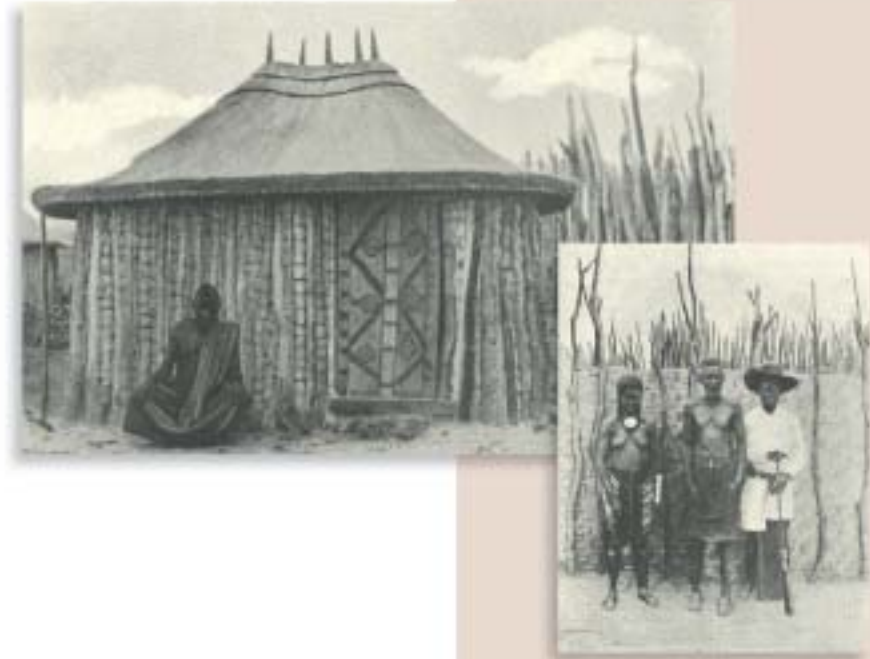
THE ENGLISH EXPLORER and missionary David Livingstone trekked for months across the Kalahari to reach Lake Ngami in 1849, and Alexandre Serpa Pinto, a Portuguese explorer and surveyor, battled for months to reach the headwaters of the river system in 1877. Nowadays, anyone from any part of the Earth can reach the heart of the Delta in one or two days. The journey is comfortable, water is on tap everywhere, and the traveller is protected from disease. We can also see any piece of the globe in satellite pictures, and dozens of documentary films bring home the nature and character of places far away.

Nothing is remote, and little is beyond easy reach. All this is possible because of new technology: aeroplanes, cars, good roads, film and satellites, utilities most of us take for granted. We also readily accept the fact that many people are now attracted to the Okavango. But this, too, is new. Until recently the whole Okavango River system was isolated: unknown to most people in the world and also to most citizens of Angola, Namibia

and Botswana. Only certain people made the trip: folk pushed away from their homes in other parts of southern Africa, explorers such as Serpa Pinto and Livingstone, and traders in search of slaves and ivory. Incidentally, the capital of Kuando Kubango – Menongue – was named Villa Serpa Pinto until recently.

Many books could be written about the history of the Okavango Basin. The few pages here cover aspects we believe have a bearing on the Basin as it is today. Thus, the area was always sparsely populated, partly for reasons of disease, warfare and slavery. Leadership systems were generally weak, and most inhabitants are descended from groups that moved into the Basin quite recently. Outsiders either ignored or neglected the area, much of which was called the *as terra do fim do Mundo* – the place at the end of the earth. Generations of people were subjected to extreme inhumanity, and it is only in recent decades that law and order started to prevail in certain places. History, in summary, has not treated people in the Basin kindly.

Images of life and colonial exploration in the Basin a century ago are provided by old maps, such as this one compiled (opposite, bottom) in 1890–1891, and photographs taken during the 1903 Kunene-Sambesi Expedition of the Kolonial Wirtschaftliches Komitee.² The bundles of roots are reported to be those of *Landolphia*, from which rubber was extracted and exported to the Angolan coast (right), while the decorated hut (centre) was photographed at Longa. One of the three people in the picture at the bottom was the king of the Kwangali people who lived along the middle reaches of the Cubango/Okavango.



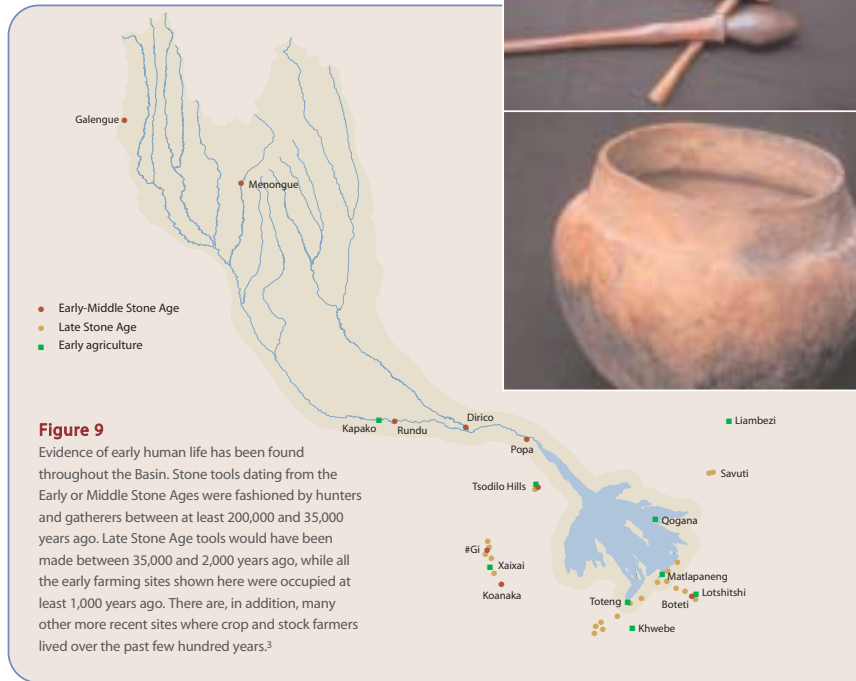
OKAVANGO RIVER

The earliest times

That the Okavango was remote and neglected for much of history is true, but some people inhabited the Basin for hundreds of thousands of years. The earliest firm indication of human life comes in the form of stone tools found at several places. These all date from the Early and Middle Stone Ages and were produced between at least 200,000 up to 35,000 years ago (Figure 9). That all Late Stone Age sites from between 35,000 and 2,000 years ago are in Ngamiland is a reflection of the more extensive archaeological research that has taken place there than in Kavango and the Angolan provinces. There is, indeed, no reason to suppose that any one area of the Basin was occupied more intensely than any other, and many more sites will be found as archaeologists explore further. Climatic conditions during the past were often quite different from those of today (see page 67). Patterns of settlement changed, people being more widely

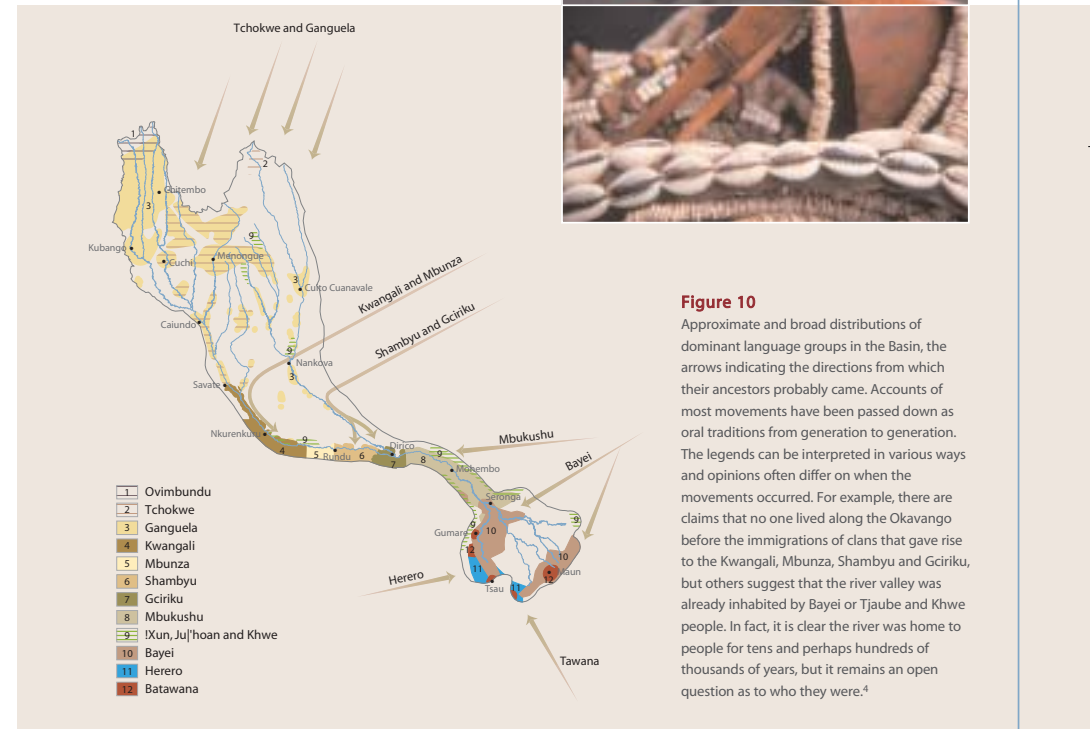
distributed during wetter periods and then more concentrated near river water in arid phases.

Livelihoods during that long history were based on hunting, fishing and gathering, and most researchers agree that people living during the more recent Late Stone Age would have been so-called Khoesan people. Some Khoesan remained as hunter-gatherers and the ancestors of modern San people, but others switched to livestock farming. Farming could have started here as long as 2,000 years ago after Bantu farmers arrived in southern Africa from east and west Africa. Most sites



showing evidence of farming in Figure 9 date from between 1,500 and 1,000 years ago. The remains of livestock, crops and pots used to store grain at these sites are often accompanied by evidence of iron working, this too being an innovation brought south by Bantu immigrants. Glass beads, copper and cowry shells indicate that people in the Basin then had widespread trading contacts across much of southern Africa. More recently during the 1700s and 1800s people in the Angolan highlands were famous as traders of wax, rubber and honey, selling or exchanging these goods on the coast.

Artifacts offer glimpses of lifestyles and values from the past: clay pots were used for grain storage by the earliest crop farmers (opposite bottom), evidence of widespread trading comes from the presence in the Basin of marine cowry shells (right below), while bows and arrows (right) and knives and axes (opposite top) emphasize the importance of hunting long ago.



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Populations in and around the Basin were small over all these tens of thousands of years, and it was only during the last 100 years ago that populations really expanded (see page 128). Three factors limited the number of people. First, diseases such as malaria and sleeping sickness were extremely prevalent, and child mortality rates were high because children were often affected. Second, numbers were kept in check by frequent raids to steal cattle, and slaves and women to boost the labour force and populations of the raiders. Most raids came from the bigger kingdoms, such as those of the Ovimbundu, Lunda, Tchokwe in central and northern Angola, the Kwanyama in central northern Namibia and Kolololo from Lesotho. Tribes in the Basin were often helpless because they were small and lacked strong leadership. Finally and most importantly, areas to the north and east were more attractive as places to live because they offered higher rainfall and better soils on which to grow crops.

People on the move

Apart from San people, most inhabitants of the Basin belong to groups that moved here during the past few hundred years (**Figure 10**). What is more, most groups came to live here because they were under pressure where they lived originally. For example, most Herero people are descended from those who fled German troops in Namibia during the 1904–1907 Nama–Herero war against German forces. The majority of people living in Kavango are descended from Angolans that moved south over many generations (see page 129), first to escape tribal raids and disease and then slave traders and the hardships of Portuguese rule.

More recent emigrations have been to flee civil strife after Angola's 1975 independence and to benefit from better services and economic opportunities in Kavango.

Both the Ganguela and Tchokwe people are thought to have arrived in the upper Basin area from further north in central Africa, perhaps between the 1300s and 1600s. The Tchokwe later moved further south from eastern Angola to escape slave raids. Accounts passed down over the years relate how the Kwangali, Mbunza, Shamyby and Geiriku tribes all had their origins along the upper reaches of the Zambezi River. Small groups or clans left, moving first south and west to the



Fishing has supported livelihoods in the Basin for many thousands of years. Cowry shells were often used to adorn head dresses (bottom left).

Kwando River. One clan then travelled west to settle along the Cubango River in Angola, but was forced to leave by Imbangala people. They settled in western Kavango, but a disagreement between their leaders led to the clan dividing into two groups that were to become the tribes now known as the Kwangali and Mbunza. A different clan from the upper Zambezi moved down the Cuito to eastern Kavango and, again, a disagreement led to a division that gave rise to the Shamyby and Geiriku tribes.

Oral traditions also suggest that an expanding Lozi empire pushed both the Mbukushu and Bayei out of what is now Caprivi. Ngombela, the Lozi king, is said to have overcome the Bayei and Mbukushu after a series of attacks in about 1750. The Mbukushu lived along the Kwando River and then moved to the present Mukwe area and partly downstream along the Panhandle. Later movements of more Mbukushu to the Delta occurred in response to raids to gather slaves for Angola and, as recently as the 1970s, to the civil war in Angola. Their base remained at Mukwe, however, because Mbukushu chiefs lived on the nearby island of Thipanana up until 1900. The chiefs were famous rainmakers who were consulted by

people from far and wide, and the island became a 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.

The first Batswana clan moved from near Shoshong in southern Botswana to the Khwebe Hills 25 kilometres from Lake Ngami. This was in the late 1700s or early 1800s, and it was caused by a dispute, between their leader (called Tawana) and his brother, on who would succeed as chief of the larger Tswana tribe. Although San people have probably lived here for hundreds of generations, they, too, have been dispossessed and pushed from their settlements to less favoured places. This is one reason why the San population is so small, scattered and marginalized. The most recent examples of such movements are the resettlement of San people from Angola and Kavango to South African military bases in Namibia south of Kavango during the 1970s, and the exodus of Khwe people to Botswana in 1999 following unrest in Caprivi.

Wholesale slavery

In the 1400s Portugal began venturing down the African coast, successive ships pushing and exploring further and further south. The first ship to reach Angola was under the command of Diogo Cão who erected a cross in 1483 south of what was to become the port of Benguela. A major purpose of the expeditions was to search for gold, but they found another more abundant commodity: slaves. For Angola, this marked the start of two periods of Portuguese influence. The first was

essentially a commercial phase lasting from the early 1500s until the late 1800s, while the second was the colonial phase that ended with independence for Angola in 1975. Commercial activity centered on slaves and an estimated four million people were shipped out of Angola. About half the slaves were sent to Brazil, initially to work on Portuguese plantations, while another third were sold in the Caribbean. Yet others were sold at slave markets in West Africa, often to pay for gold to be carried home to Lisbon. The Portuguese slave traders operated as middlemen, buying slaves along the coast and then shipping off their human cargo for sale elsewhere. Much of the buying was at Luanda and Benguela, and Luanda was once called the slave capital of the world. The slaves were bought from Angolan traders who ventured far inland to obtain them for sale along the coast. Buying trips ventured as far south as the Delta in Botswana. It's possible that millions of people died en route to the slave shops on the coast. Slave trading also became rife within Angola, slaves being bought and sold to plantation growers in the central highlands and north of the country.

Slavery, in one form or another, had been going on within the continent for perhaps hundreds or thousands of years before the Portuguese started to export millions of slaves. To the east there was another slave trading power, that of Arab and Swahili merchants who travelled up and down the eastern coast of Africa. Most of their buying trips were to places closer to the coast, but Mbukushu leaders sold their own people, often as whole villages, as slaves to the Arab trade up until 1912.⁵

Chained slaves, ready to be marched off to a distant slave market.



Chiefs had a great many wives, many of whom might have been taken during raids of neighbouring tribes.



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The Portuguese fort at Cuangar in about 1912; built to enable Portugal to establish control over the most remote parts of its new colony.

Portugal formally stopped the slave trade in Angola in 1858, but that didn't bring the practice to an end. Informal slave trading for labour on plantations within the country continued for several decades, and forced labour was only abolished by law in 1962. The effect of all of this is that Angolan society was consumed by the indignities of wholesale slavery for three to four hundred years, perhaps 15 generations! Little wonder that more recent periods of history have seen such disrespect for human life. The Portuguese did not introduce slavery but the scale and nature of slavery during those four hundred years was different. Many more people were taken and they were exported for the first time. The trade also served to enrich a handful of people: the Portuguese and Angolan traders and local chiefs who were rewarded with such payments as firearms, alcohol and clothes.

Colonizers

During the mid-1800s European powers came under increasing pressure to occupy more formally and effectively the areas they claimed, and they had to reach beyond the coast if they were to maintain a grip on their territories. Growing condemnation of slavery also stimulated a search for other resources. It was these kinds of motives that encouraged explorations into the interior of Africa, such as those that led David Livingstone to Lake Ngami in 1849, Alexandre Serpa Pinto to the headwaters of the river system in 1877, and Charles John Andersson to be the first European to see the Okavango River in 1859. The expeditions made the Basin known to the outside world for the first time.

The borders of Angola, Namibia and Botswana owe their origins to the Berlin Conference in 1884 and several treaties signed during the 1880s and 1890s between Portugal, Britain and Germany. This was the period when Africa was sliced up to give European powers their colonies and protectorates. Colonial administrators began to be posted inland, often to places where police stations, forts and labour recruiting centres were built. For example, the establishment of a police station in 1910 at Nkurenkuru provided the Germans with their first permanent presence in Kavango. Missionaries followed, with mission stations being founded at Nyangana in 1910, Andara in 1913, Nkurenkuru in 1926, Tondoro in 1927, Bunya in 1929 and Shamyu in 1930, for example. It was these missions that first introduced formal schooling and health services to Kavango.

Colonial control of Kavango shifted to South Africa in 1920 when it was given a mandate to administer the then South West Africa Protectorate, and for the next 70 years Kavango was really managed as a reserve for the Kavango people. The first superintendent of 'native affairs' was appointed in 1922, and in 1937 Kavango was formally declared as a tribal area, the 'Okavango Native Reserve'. The administrative centre of Kavango moved from Nkurenkuru to Rundu in 1936, which had been established as a recruiting centre to supply labour to white farms south of Kavango. Other than labour, Kavango had little to offer Namibia during all those colonial years, and development accordingly came slowly. Schools, health facilities, roads and other infrastructure were built here and there, but for government administrators Kavango was always a rather forsaken and remote part of Deutsch Südwest Afrika and later South West Africa.

On the other side of the Okavango, the Portuguese began asserting their territory by building forts at Cuangar, Dirico and Mucusso from 1909 onwards. Most early Portuguese administrators were *degradados*, convicts from Portugal, often guilty of serious crimes. These were the people expected to guide the development of the colony, but their behaviour frequently set bad examples for the people they were supposed to administer. Such influences, harsh racial discrimination, taxation and forced labour did little to endear Portugal to the Angolans or to develop a civil society. Other Portuguese began immigrating to Angola, often to establish farms and plantations to produce exports of coffee, sisal, cotton and rubber, for example. The government actively encouraged settlement in its colony from the early 1900s onwards.

For example, 55,000 Portuguese were brought to Angola as recently as between 1955 and 1960. Angola was correctly seen to be rich in resources, and Portugal's economic interests were reinforced by the discovery of diamonds in the 1920s and oil in the 1950s. Other resources were found or developed, such as iron, coffee and fish exports. However, the enormous increase in production that followed the arrival of immigrants and exploitation of resources all occurred to the north of the Okavango Basin: oil in Cabinda, diamonds in the north-east, farming and coffee plantations in the central highlands. The Basin area of Angola thus remained undeveloped and remote. A few missionaries ventured south, and a handful of schools, clinics, roads and farms were developed. Even though the railway line to Menongue was named the 'door to the wilderness', the area was still known as the *as terra do fim do Mundo*.

'We have no interest in the country to the north of the Molopo except as a road to the interior. We might therefore confine ourselves for the present to preventing that part of the protectorate being occupied by either filibusters or foreign powers, doing as little in the way of administration or settlement as possible.' That is how the High Commissioner of Britain summed up British interests shortly after it had gained Botswana as the Bechuanaland Protectorate in 1885.⁶ The foreign powers referred particularly to the Germans to the west in Namibia and the Boer Republic in the Transvaal. Britain had no wish for either to expand their influence in southern Africa.

Very little development came to Botswana over the next 70 years. Administration of much of the land was left to traditional

chiefs. Almost the only interest anyone outside Ngamiland had in the Okavango was as a source of water for grandiose schemes to irrigate huge areas in the Kalahari. Development in that area was also limited by the presence of sleeping sickness, the disease transmitted by tsetse flies (see page 123). The Moremi Game Reserve was proclaimed in 1963. This was shortly after Britain began to realize that political and economic independence had to come to Botswana. The capital of Gaborone was quickly built since the country had previously been administered from Mafikeng in South Africa, and Botswana became independent in 1966.

Recent dreams and nightmares

Recent years have seen Botswana achieve fame as a peaceful, prosperous and rapidly developing country: an African dream. The same years have seen Angola's reputation develop for prolonged civil war, disregard for human life, corruption and economic ruin: an international nightmare.

Angola became independent in 1975. Much of the country's expertise left and many businesses closed down immediately. Portugal's hasty withdrawal was followed by chaos as the MPLA, UNITA and FNLA⁷ hammered out who was to run the country. The MPLA won the contest and quickly gained the backing of the Soviet Union and its ally, Cuba. UNITA responded by launching a war that was to last until 2002, when its leader Jonas Savimbi was killed. Those long years of war saw the country decline into turmoil, as millions of people were killed or maimed by bullets, bombs, landmines or famine and poverty. Less conspicuous was the increasing theft of public money through rampant corruption. Even though the

The armed struggle against Portugal's colonial rule launched in 1961 came to an end with the independence of Angola in 1975. Much more bloodshed was to follow over the next 26 years.



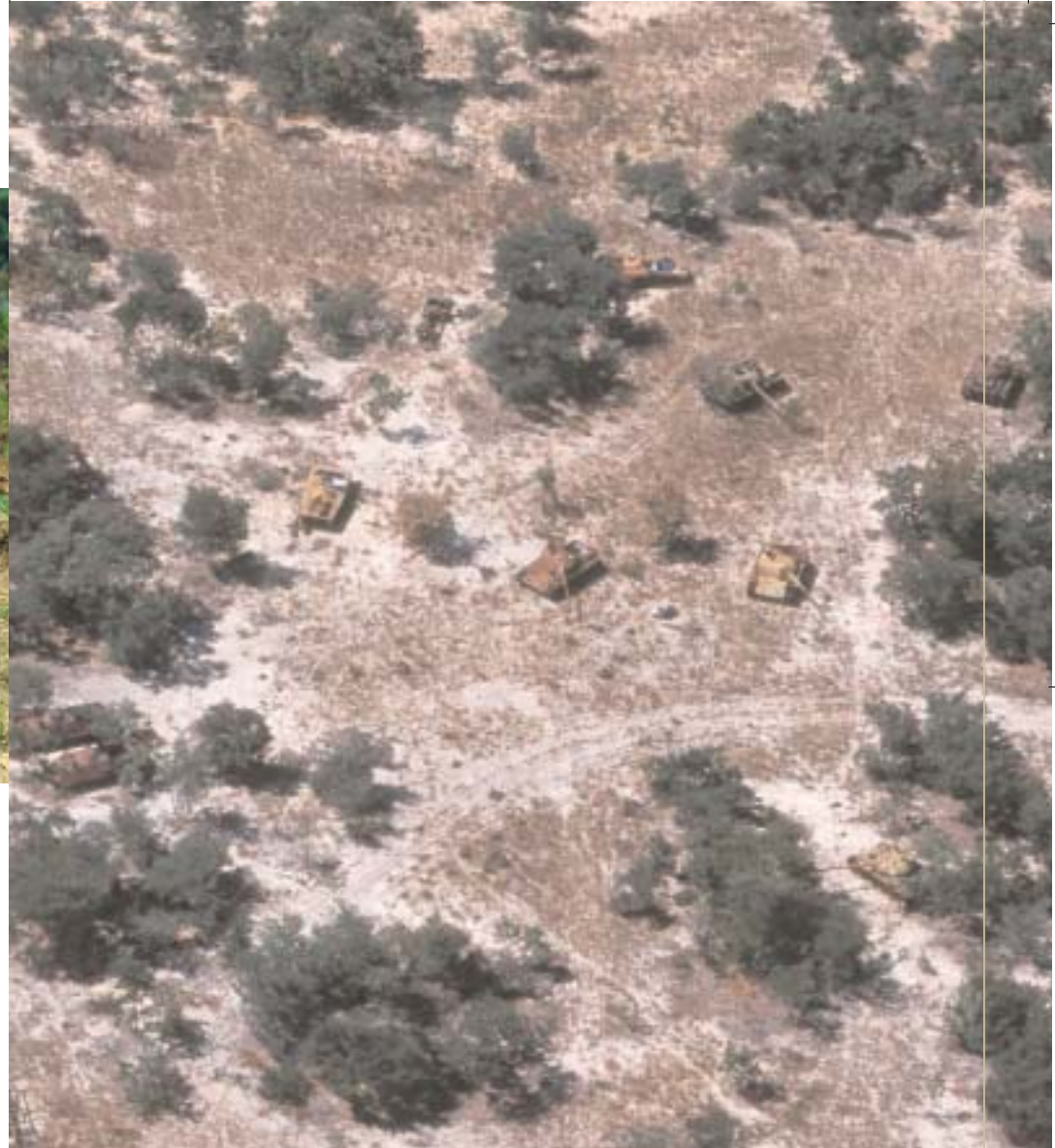
OKAVANGO RIVER



There are perhaps more landmines than people in the Angolan catchment. The mines are now long forgotten by the UNITA, FAPLA, Cuban and South African forces that planted them over the past 30 years, a legacy that will remain a threat for many years to come.

war was fought under political banners, it was really a contest to enrich the leaders of the parties, especially to control and pocket massive profits from diamonds and oil. The war was thus one in which power, people and resources were exploited for the personal gain of a handful.

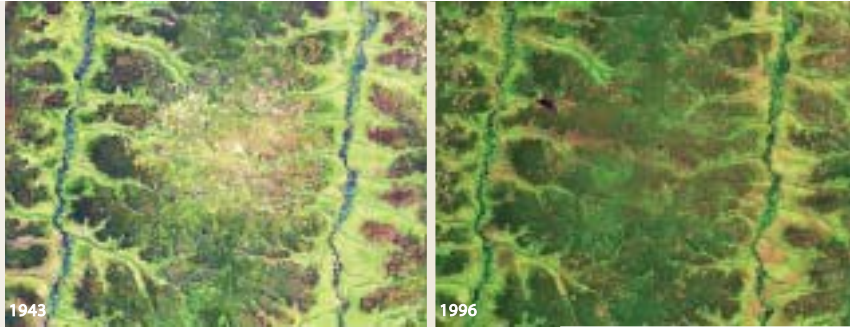
There was a brief period of peace in 1992 during the run-up to Angola's first elections, but worse fighting followed when UNITA rejected the results of the election. Although UNITA's stronghold was amongst the Ovimbundu people in the central highlands, hundreds of thousands of soldiers, supporters and families were pulled south into Kuando Kubango, the province that makes up most of the catchment of the Okavango. The catchment thus became a UNITA stronghold, and Menongue was the only town held by government forces for many years. Government forces steadily gained ground in south-eastern Angola during the 1990s, eventually taking control of the border area between Namibia and Angola. UNITA people in the area were now trapped, and many turned to theft and



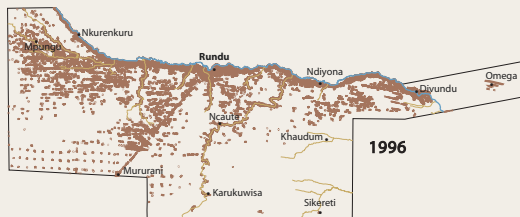
The Angolan catchment is replete with images of war and inhumanity, of desolation and neglect that create a dramatic contrast between the spending of billions of US dollars on sophisticated military technology and the absence of investment in social development. Tanks litter the surrounds of Cuito Cuanavale, remnants of the Battle of Cuito Cuanavale on 23 March 1988 when the Cuban and Angolan army repelled South African and UNITA forces. This was the second largest artillery battle in Africa; the biggest was at El Alamein, Egypt, during World War II.

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People have come and gone. The two satellite images give an example of how a whole town disappeared between the early 1990s (on the left, as indicated by the many fields and the bright white town centre) and 2000 when the image to the right was taken. The village spanned an area about 10 kilometres across and was home to hundreds of people, now displaced as a result of the civil war. The town of Chitembo lies 20 kilometres to the north-east, across the Cuchi River, while the river to the west is the Cutato. On the other hand, very large numbers of Angolans moved to Namibia, both before and during the civil war, one reason why there was such a dramatic increase in the amount of land cleared for crops between 1943 and 1996 in Kavango, as shown in the two maps below.



Right: scars of war in downtown Menongue, a town always held by the Angolan government forces but often bombed and besieged by UNITA.



murder. Angolan government troops were allowed to pursue their quarry from the Namibian side and a period of unrest and attacks broke out, causing an enormous decline in tourism and other economic activity in Kavango (see page 122).

What was the effect of civil war on the Basin area in Angola? Foremost was the damage to human life. No one will know how many people were killed, but landmines maimed thousands of people in the catchment. Huge numbers of people were also displaced, either forced away by soldiers or, more voluntarily, to seek a better life (see page 129). Both government and UNITA forces closed down and sometimes burnt whole villages. Landmines were planted around many remaining villages and towns, both by UNITA and government forces to keep each other out. People either fled into the bush or were trucked into towns. Tens of thousands of people settled in Namibia. Much of the infrastructure in the catchment was lost: bridges across most of the rivers, most schools, clinics and other services. The railway line to Menongue ceased to exist, and only a few roads are now free of mines. Perhaps millions of landmines lie hidden along roads and around villages and towns, limiting the physical movement of people but also dampening initiatives for development.

The war and high level of corruption has also cost Angola hundreds of billions of dollars, money that could be spent on development in the catchment. Even though the Angolan government may now allocate funds quite generously to the area (partly to win support from what was UNITA territory), there are far fewer people in the Basin than in the rest of the country. Most development funds will therefore be spent elsewhere in Angola. Finally, there has been a complete loss of social development and order. A whole generation of people has been displaced, literally and figuratively. Most Angolans have a history characterized by exploitation on a scale that few outsiders will appreciate: the mistreatment of millions of people over the last three decades, and for hundreds of years before that.

Ngamiland in Botswana and Kavango in Namibia have had a much more rosy recent history. Both countries have devoted large sums of money to rural development in both areas, most funds going to education and health services, roads, telecommunications, transport infrastructure and small-scale agriculture. Botswana has not lately entertained any plans to develop large-scale farms around the Delta, but many Namibians see the Kavango river valley as a potential bread-basket to make the country self sufficient in food production. Several large farms have thus been planned (see page 163).

Both Ngamiland and Kavango have also seen an enormous growth in economic activity based on the natural resources and beauty of the Okavango, for example through

tourism, hunting and a variety of support services (see page 120). Both areas have thus capitalized on the comparative and competitive advantages that the river system offers. One challenge for those who plan and negotiate a good future for the waters of the Okavango is to see how such benefits can now be shared with the Angolan custodians of the river's source.

Key points

- Although people have lived in the Basin for hundreds of thousands of years, it has always been a difficult place to live because of disease, warfare, slavery and, in many areas, poor soils and low rainfall.
- Most people now living in the Basin are descended from recent immigrants usually pushed out of other areas in Angola, Botswana and Namibia.
- The Basin was unknown to the outside world until the mid-1800s and thereafter was generally ignored and treated as a desolate area. Only certain parts of the Basin have been developed in recent years.
- The cumulative effects of centuries of slavery, the recent civil war and corruption have damaged Angolan society enormously.

Important events

- Before 500: Sparsely populated by people living as hunters and gatherers
- 500s: Start of crop and cattle farming, iron work
- 1483: Diogo Cão is first European to visit Angola
- 1500–1850: Large-scale export of slaves
- Mid-1800s: Okavango river system becomes known to outside world; 1849 – David Livingstone visited Lake Ngami, 1859 – Charles John Andersson reached Okavango River near Nkurenkuru, and 1877 – Alexandre Serpa Pinto explored upper reaches of the river system
- 1884–1890s: Formal colonial territories are established in Angola, Namibia and Botswana
- 1966: Botswana becomes independent from Britain
- 1961–1975: Liberation war in Angola
- 1975: Angola becomes independent from Portugal
- 1976–2002: Civil war in Angola
- 1966–1989: Liberation war in Namibia
- 1990: Namibia becomes independent from South Africa