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## The Kavango Peoples

The peoples of the Kavango have been less studied or at least had less published about them than any other of the peoples of South West Africa. They do not figure at all in the standard book on South West African ethnology, *The Native Tribes of South West Africa*, published in 1928. In all the monumental work left behind by the great pioneer in South West African studies, the late Dr. H. Vedder, they receive hardly a mention; from his considerable book *Das alte Südwesafrika* one would hardly gather that they had a history, and while there may be more available in the 29 volumes of *Quellen zur Geschichte von Südwesafrika*, we have not had an opportunity to examine them. The late Prof. J. P. van S. Bruwer showed great interest in the Kavango area, and stimulated at least one of his students to carry out a large-scale study of one of the peoples, to which we have been fortunate enough to have access; but very few of the results of his investigations have been published.

At the Congress of the South West African Scientific Society held in Windhoek from the 17th to the 19th April, 1965, Prof. Bruwer delivered a paper on the Khoisan and Bantu populations of South West Africa. The paper was later published by the Society in a useful little volume entitled *Die Ethischen Gruppen in Südwesafrika*, and embodies in two pages most of what was known at the time about these peoples. Bruwer states that the Kavango peoples total about 5,3% of the total population of South West Africa, and comprise, from west to east along the Okavango River, the Kwangali, the Mbunja, the Sambyu, the Geiriku and the Mbukushu. His orthography, incidentally, differs slightly from ours. He excludes the Hukwe, Barakwengo or Kwengo, a very small Khoisan-speaking people associated with and living to the east of the Mbukushu; he considers them, as Gusinde (1966) does, to be San ("Bushmen"), while we have lately been able to demonstrate that they are not (Nurse and Jenkins, publication pending). Bruwer goes on to point out that there is a reasonable linguistic and cultural unity among the four first-named, while the Mbukushu stand somewhat on their own. They are settled along both sides of the river, and all the peoples extend into Angola.

Together with the Ambo, the Kavango peoples represent the furthest southwestern part of the band of matrilineal peoples that stretches across Central Africa. Among them, the family of the mother is treated as cognate and that of the father as affinal kin. The matrilineage is exogamous, and there is also

... of the twelve participants, each of which claims descent from a common ancestor. There is a preference for cross-cousin marriage. Chieftainships are inherited in the female line, and chiefs may be male or female.

The area had hardly been visited by Europeans before this century. Andersson (1911) made contact with the Kwangali, and learnt of the existence of the other peoples, while discovering the Okavango river. None of the British or Portuguese travellers came into contact with them, and the first Caucasian people to travel along the river were some elements of the Dorstrand Trekkers, who were well received by the Mbukushu but suffered greatly from fever (Preller 1941). The Kamene-Zambesi Expedition of the Kolonial-Wirtschaftliches Komitee, Berlin, started the area and suffered from the deprivations of the Kwangali (Baum 1905); they classified the Mbukushu as a kind of Barotse, or Lozi. An English traveller, A. St. H. Gibbons (1904), exploring the upper Zambesi, obviously confused the Gciriku with the Kwangali — a mistake which, as we shall show, is quite excusable. The first real description of the Kwengo is given by Capt. Streiwolf (1911) in his account of the Caprivizipfel.

Traditional history is hardly more revealing — Bosch (1964) has collected everything possible on the history of the Sambyu, which suggests that they, and not all probably the Kwangali, Mbunja and Gciriku as well, are offshoots of the Mashu, a people inhabiting the upper reaches of the Kwando valley and apparently related to the Luyana, the ancestral group of the Lozi prior to the coming of the Kololo. Lozi traditions (Manga 1966, Muuka 1966) mention the Mbukushu as a southern people bordering on the Subiya in the present Eastern Caprivizipfel, and the Kwengo as a yellow people chased by the Lozi to the margins of the Kalahari.

Towards the end of 1972 we had an opportunity to visit the area and collect blood for a sero-genetic survey of the Kavango peoples. The expedition was a lengthy and eventful one, and its success was in great part due to the extreme friendliness, interest and co-operation accorded to us by the members of the different populations, by the missions at Bunja, Mupini, Sambyu, Nyangana and Ndara, by the officials and police at Rundu and Bagani, and in particular by the hospital staffs at Rundu and Andara and the schoolteachers and pupils at every school we visited. We collected specimens of blood from Kwangali, Mbunja, Mbyu, Gciriku, Mbukushu, Kwengo and Giǀgǀai San volunteers, and in all more than six hundred individuals were included in the samples investigated in the U.S.

The object was to collect a representative sample for each of the populations, but as it turned out the samples we were able to get differed from one another in size, and shortage of reagents prevented us from doing much on the small number of Mbunja specimens. Since what we were able to find out about the Mbunja suggested strongly that they in fact constituted a single population with Kwangali, this was probably no great loss. The other populations showed some interesting contrasts.

The blood tests included blood grouping, the differences in certain serum proteins, and the examination for variants in the enzymes of the red blood cells. The characteristics are all inherited in a simple Mendelian fashion, and are consequently much more reliable in describing a population biologically than are

the visible traits like stature, head shape and skin colour, whose mode of inheritance is obscure. They also furnish more exact methods of comparing populations with one another than the traditional measurements, which are strongly subject to environmental influences, ever could.

Jenkins (1972) has made a collection of the data which enables us to decide on the genetic affinities of Southern African indigenous populations. He has shown that the presence of the ABO blood group variant Abantu' the red cell acid phosphatase R variant and the immunoglobulin type known as Gm (1,15) are highly characteristic of the admixture of Khoisan ("Hottentots" and "Bushman") with other populations. He has confirmed the frequency of other weak group A variants in the Bantu-speaking Negro, as well as of the A and A<sup>-</sup> variants of the red cell enzyme glucose-6-phosphate dehydrogenase, the PepA2 variant of peptidase A, and the comparative uncommonness of finding Fy(a) in the Duffy blood group. This latter is much more common in the Khoisan groups, and is hardly ever detected in West Africa; in Southern Africa it is another indicator of Khoisan admixture.

Immunoglobulin testing has unfortunately not yet been carried out on any of the Kavango peoples, but all of the rest of these genetic systems indicated that all of them, including the Kwengo, have received a rather lower contribution of Khoisan genes than the Bantu-speaking Negroes of South Africa have. These findings were confirmed by the genetic profile in the Rhesus blood group system, the two phosphoglucomutase enzyme systems, and above all — but in only three of the populations — by the finding of fairly high frequencies of sickle-cell haemoglobin. This was not found in either the Kwengo or the Mbukushu; but its absence does not necessarily signify that these peoples are not Negro, since it does not occur in South African Negroes, or the unixed Dama or Herero. Though it is common in the Central African populations with whom the affinities of both the Kavango and the Ambo appear to lie, it appears either not to occur or to be uncommon in the Ngandjera, Kwambi and Mbalathu divisions of the latter as well.

Though the Kavango are often thought of as closely related to the Ambo, and indeed do bear some cultural resemblance to them, the two groups appear not to be linguistically very closely allied, and their genetic resemblances are about as close as their linguistic ones. It seems that if we were to search for the closest biological and linguistic relatives of the Kavango peoples we would be most likely to find them where traditional history suggests they should be found, among the Luyana, Subiya and Mashu of the Eastern Caprivizipfel and Barotseland. When we compare the Kavango peoples with one another, we find that the closest resemblance among them is that between the Kwangali and the Gciriku. The Mbukushu and the Kwengo form another cluster, and the Sambyu lie between the two clusters, though there is evidence, much of it from the MNSS Henshaw blood group system, that there may have been recent gene exchange between the Kwangali and the Mbukushu.

The Kwengo are emphatically a member of the group. They resemble the Sambyu and Kwangali more closely than the Gciriku do the Mbukushu, and are genetically closer to the Mbukushu than either the latter or the Gciriku are to the Sambyu. There can no longer be any question of their being "Black Bushmen", except in a purely cultural sense; they speak a Khoisan language, and they hunt and gather, but then so do the Dama around the Brandberg. We did collect a small sample

of San ("Bushmen") at Nyangana in the Gciriku country, but these people in no way resembled the Kwengo. They were smaller and lighter-skinned; they spoke a dialect of !Kung, unrelated to the Kxoe spoken by the Kwengo; and their genetic markers show that their resemblances are with the !Kung of Bushmanland more than with any of their closer neighbours.

We consider that the establishment of the Kwengo as members of the Negro rather than the Khoisan race is of some anthropological interest. It signifies that the Dama are no longer the only Khoisan-speaking Negro people known for certain, and it calls into question the hypothesis that the most likely reason for the adoption of a Khoisan language by a Negro people is enslavement. The Kwengo claim to have lived in servitude not to the Khoi ("Hottentots") but to the Mbukushu; yet they have not adopted the Mbukushu language. There are suggestions that yet other Khoisan-speaking Negro peoples live further to the east, in Botswana, and perhaps northwards in Angola. We are in the process of investigating the first of these possibilities, but at the time of writing our chances of investigating the second look remote.

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*Kwengo = Kxoe of Western Caprivi!*

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