

## The Okavango Delta Peoples of Botswana

John Bock and Sarah E. Johnson

### The People

The Okavango Delta Peoples of Botswana consist of five separate ethnic groups, each with their own language and ethnic identity. The five ethnic groups are: (1) Bugakwe (Kxoe, Bugakhoe, Kwengo, Barakwena, Mbarakwena, Mbarakwengo, G/anda, /anda), (2) Dxeriku (Dceriku, Diriku, Gceriku, Gciriku, Vagciriku, Giriku, Mbogedo, Niriku, Vamanyo), (3) Hambukushu (Mbukushu, Bukushu, Bukusu, Mbukuschu, Mamakush, Mampakush, Ghuva, Haghuva, Gova, Cusso, Kusso, Hakokohu, Havamasiko), (4) Wayeyi (Bayei, Bayeyi, Bakoba, Bajei, Jo, Hajo, Tjaube, Yei), and (5) Xanekwe (Gxanekwe, //tanekwe, tannekhoe, River Bushmen, Swamp Bushmen, G//ani, //ani, Banoka). Note that for each of these groups, there are many different spellings (and pronunciations). Some of these are names from another language; others are corruptions or misinterpretations. Since many outsiders have contributed to the written history of these groups and people have moved across national boundaries, it is important to recognize this disparate nomenclature to preserve the breadth of each group's cultural history. Here we are using the spellings which members of these ethnic groups in Botswana use in referring to themselves.

Understanding the historical distribution of people and their patterns of migration and association are key elements to interpreting the present. Members of all of these ethnic groups live outside of Botswana as well. Bugakwe, Dxeriku, and Hambukushu live in northern Namibia and southern Angola. There are also Hambukushu people in southwestern Zambia. Some Xanekwe and Wayeyi people also live in northern Namibia. Due to the Namibian war for independence and the Angolan civil war, communication and travel between Botswana, Namibia, and Angola has been difficult since the 1970s. As a result, the ethnic communities in these countries have grown apart. Although now travel along the Okavango River is easier between Botswana and Namibia, the ongoing civil war in Angola has left Angolan members of these ethnic groups relatively isolated.

Aside from the distinct ethnic identities of these groups, there is a further important distinction. Bugakwe and Xanekwe are Bushmen peoples (also called San or Basarwa again we use the term preferred by most members of these groups whom we know). Bushmen are the aboriginal inhabitants of southern Africa and have lived in small groups as nomadic hunter gatherers. Dxeriku, Hambukushu, and Wayeyi are Bantu peoples who speak distantly related Central Bantu languages. This suggests that the Dxeriku, Hambukushu, and Wayeyi are more recent inhabitants of the area, having separately migrated from central Africa several hundred years ago.

Today, people from all five ethnic groups live throughout the Okavango Delta. Historically the Bugakwe, Dxeriku, and Hambukushu lived in the Panhandle and eastern edge of the Delta. The Xanekwe lived in the Panhandle and along the Jao and Boro Rivers in the central and western Delta, and the Wayeyi lived along the Jao River in the northern Delta, on the northwestern side of the Delta, and on the southern edge of the Delta.

### The Setting

The Okavango Delta is a lush tropical wetland surrounded by Kalahari desert savanna. At around 20,000 km<sup>2</sup>, it is recognized as one of the world's largest inland deltas, with over 98% of the water

evaporating. The water starts its journey in the highlands of southern Angola. There, the Okavango River (called the Cubango in Angola) rises and flows south. It cuts through Namibia's Caprivi Strip, and then enters northwestern Botswana. This area is extremely flat, and, with such a small gradient, the water fans out. The northern part of the Delta is called the Panhandle. Here there is still enough of an elevation change that the river fans out for only 14 km. (9 miles) or so. This swampy area has immense stands of densely packed papyrus and reeds. Hippopotami, crocodiles, sitatunga (an aquatic antelope), and otters are plentiful. Elephants and buffalo are seasonal visitors. Fish are plentiful, and there are several hundred species of birds present, including African fish eagle and malachite kingfisher. On either side of the Panhandle, Kalahari desert savanna extends for hundreds of kilometers. These areas are forested with acacia and mopane trees, but standing water is very scarce. African mammals are plentiful in these areas, including many types of antelope, elephants, zebra, giraffe, and predators such as lions, leopards, cheetah, hyena, and African wild dogs.

South of the town of Seronga, the narrow Panhandle gives way to the wide Delta, which spreads out for over one hundred kilometers to the south, east, and west. This area is a patchwork of swampy areas and islands. The swamp is similar to that of the Panhandle. The islands are heavily forested with acacia, palm, and figs. Animal life here consists of mostly the same species as both the Panhandle and the desert savanna, with hippo, crocodile, sitatunga, and lechwe (another aquatic antelope) in the swamps and other types of antelope, elephants, zebra, baboons, giraffe and predators such as lions, leopards, cheetah, hyena, and African wild dogs on the islands.

Central to this ecosystem is the annual flood, which brings water and nourishment to the Delta. The summer rains in Angola bring a flood in the winter months (June through September, since this is the Southern Hemisphere). The flood makes travel for both people and wildlife difficult, and the islands become surrounded by water. Once the flood recedes, the area can become quite dry, the formerly riverine floodplain becoming grassy plains. In many ways, this flood determines the life cycle, not only for the animals and plants, but also for the people of the Delta.

### **Traditional Subsistence Strategies**

The five different ethnic groups all pursue different traditional subsistence strategies. Bugakwe and Xanekwe are both hunter gatherers, but the Bugakwe forage in both the desert savanna and the swamps, while the Xanekwe historically had a riverine orientation in their foraging. Dixeriku, Hambukushu, and Wayeyi peoples all engage in mixed subsistence strategies of farming, fishing, hunting, collecting wild plant foods, and cattle and goat herding.

Bugakwe men hunted in the desert savanna using poison darts shot from a bow. Using these darts required immense skill to track the animals, get close enough to shoot, and to accurately deliver the dart. Men would be away from their communities for days hunting. If we think about that way of life for a moment, we can imagine that tracking animals in the Delta environment is a challenging task. Footprints may leave clear demarcations in the sand of a floodplain and then the trail seems to end with the start of an open grassland or a wooded island. A successful hunter needs to know enough about the behavior of his prey to anticipate their movement and be so familiar with the environment as to detect the slightest alteration in the soil or vegetation that indicates the distance and direction their prey has traveled. In this environment the stalker also has to guard against becoming the prey of several large carnivores, crocodiles, or an accidental encounter with a territorial hippo or black mamba (a highly poisonous snake). This knowledge acquisition begins with small children tracking each other and builds through a lifetime.

Xanekwe men also hunted using poison darts in the desert savanna, and hunted using spears in the river. Here they would lie in wait for aquatic antelope and even crocodiles and hippo. Balanced in a

dugout canoe, a man would harpoon an animal, holding it while his hunting companions attacked the animal with their spears and arrows. Dxeriku, Hambukushu, and Wayeyi men also used this hunting technique. Beginning in the late 1800s men began using firearms in hunting, but the traditional methods persist to this day. Men from all of these groups also are expert fisherman, using bow and arrow, spear, hook and line, or nets to catch bream and catfish.

Dxeriku, Hambukushu, and Wayeyi men historically built fences from acacia thorn trees to protect their agricultural fields from elephants, buffalo, hippo, cattle, and rhinoceros. Men from these ethnic groups also plowed the fields and tended the cattle. Men from all five ethnic groups are expert craftsmen, making axes, weapons, and canoes.

Xanekwe women were adept at collecting foods from the swamps, such as bird eggs, roots, and small animals caught with snares. Women specialized in fishing using conical baskets, called weirs, in shallow water. Fish are herded into the baskets; the mouth of the basket is then lifted out of the water trapping the fish. Women also used poison to catch fish. Bugakwe women collected some foods from the swamps but also collected foods from the savanna. These included eggs, roots, fruits, birds, and small game in addition to mongongo and marula nuts. While Dxeriku, Hambukushu, and Wayeyi women are also adept at these collecting activities, especially fishing, historically women from these groups also tended the fields and processed grain and other produce. This entailed planting, weeding, harvesting, separating the grain from the chaff, and finally, processing grain into flour. This processing is done using a mortar and pestle, sometimes referred to as a stamping block, to pound the grain. Once the outer husk has been removed, sifting begins using specialized baskets. After several cycles of pounding and sifting, flour is produced and the chaff discarded. Our attempts to perform this task were comparable to the efforts of a four year old child from the community.

Boys and girls are able to contribute to the household economy to varying degrees depending on the subsistence ecology. For instance, Bugakwe and Xanekwe children historically could contribute relatively little. This is because in a hunting and gathering subsistence ecology high levels of skill are required to be a competent producer. These skills take a long time to acquire, and for many types of hunting and gathering activities adults do not become capable until their 20s and expert until their 30s. While young people can catch some fish, collect some plant foods, and do some hunting, they are consuming far more than they can produce. Children and teenagers are still learning and adults, in a sense, are paying for their learning by providing food that children and teenagers are not yet skillful enough to acquire. In the mixed subsistence ecologies of the Dxeriku, Hambukushu, and Wayeyi, children can contribute more to their households since some of the tasks take less time to learn. Boys and young men do the bulk of the labor in herding and taking care of the cattle and goats. Girls and young women can perform many of the agricultural related tasks at the same level as adult women. For instance, 14 year old girls are as good at grain processing as 35 year old women. Contrast this to foraging related tasks, such as processing mongongo nuts, where 14 year old girls are only one tenth as competent as adult women. Among all the ethnic groups, young people do a great deal of the domestic chores, such as collecting water and firewood.

In addition to traditional forms of food collection and production, people from all groups have been involved in the market economy to some extent for nearly one hundred years. Xanekwe people used their great hunting skill to acquire pelts of leopards, zebras, and other animals to trade for consumer goods such as pots, axes, knives, and clothing. Members of all these groups were heavily involved in elephant hunting for the ivory trade from the late 1800s. Men from all these groups participated in migratory labor to work in the South African mines beginning in the 1930s. Hambukushu and Wayeyi women are famous all over the world for their skill at basketry, and selling baskets to tourists and collectors has been an important source of income for some women since the 1960s. Since the 1960s, men

from all of these ethnic groups have worked in safari lodges as guides and at other jobs, while women have worked in the lodges as maids, cooks, and other occupations.

Today, the distinctions in subsistence ecology between these groups are less clear. Partly due to living in multi ethnic communities and partly as a result of education, government programs, and modernization, members of all these groups are converging on a common mixed subsistence strategy of fishing, farming, collecting wild foods, herding, and hunting. Government regulation of hunting has greatly diminished the hunting component of all these groups' subsistence regime. Still, Bugakwe and Xanekwe peoples are substantially more oriented towards foraging, with far fewer cattle and smaller fields than members of the other ethnic groups.

### **Social and Political Organization**

Bugakwe and Xanekwe people historically lived in small groups centered on extended family relationships. These family groups moved periodically in response to local depletion of game animals, and groups would sometimes camp together for several months or even years before going their separate ways. There was no central authority figure. Dxeriku, Hambukushu, and Wayeyi people all lived in semi permanent, patrilocal extended family settlements. Within a region of several kilometers most families were related, and a hereditary headman was the political focal point. Beginning in the late 1700s, the chief of the Batawana, a Tswana speaking group, began to exert political control over the peoples of the Okavango Delta. This external control resulted in changes to the traditional political structure of these peoples that is ongoing, and many matrilineal oriented customs regarding property and the family were replaced by patrilineal Tswana traditions. In the early 1900s British civil servants also began to exert political control over the Okavango Delta, integrating traditional political institutions into government based ones. It was not until after Botswana became independent in 1966, however, that government political institutions became formalized in much of the Okavango Delta. Today headmen are government employees, and are assisted in their duties by police, court personnel, and citizen committees. The Tswana kgotla style of government has been universally adopted.

Political and social relationships with members of these ethnic groups in other countries have been limited. In Namibia and Angola, Dxeriku and Hambukushu people have had paramount chiefs, that is a leader who exercises authority over all others for that people. Since before Botswana's independence, members of these groups in Botswana have not recognized this authority, and have had no such central authority within or outside Botswana. In recent years, Bugakwe people in Namibia have had a chief. This is an artifact of the period before Namibian independence when South Africa administered the Namibian government. Bugakwe in Botswana do not recognize this authority.

### **Religion and Worldview**

Bugakwe and Xanekwe peoples have historically had religious practices similar to those of many other Bushmen groups. These practices incorporate a strong belief in the supernatural with a deep reverence for the natural world. Dxeriku and Wayeyi peoples historically practiced religions that placed a great deal of importance on the spiritual connection with ancestors. Hambukushu people also saw these relationships as central to their religion. Dxeriku and Hambukushu traditionally had matrilineal totem clans related to certain animals such as elephant, crocodile, and lion. Members of a totem clan did not hunt or eat the totem animal. Moreover, people could not marry within their clan, but only married people from specific clans. In this century many Bugakwe, Xanekwe, and Wayeyi peoples also adopted this tradition. The Hambukushu also believed that certain individuals had the power to make rain, a precious commodity in this arid environment. These "rainmakers" exercised great religious and political authority, not only among Hambukushu but also among the other groups and even Batawana and Ovaherero (a nearby group of pastoralists).

To members of all these groups, physical, and emotional health are but facets of spirituality. To varying degrees, shamans and herbalists occupy important positions for their connection to the supernatural world and their healing abilities. Hambukushu and Wayeyi shamans are also expert herbalists and are sought out by people from within all five ethnic groups and also by others.

Today, most members of these groups practice their traditional religions. Many people also practice forms of Christianity, ranging from Western denominations or missionary organizations to indigenous forms of Christianity. The largest example of the latter is the South African based Zion Christian Church (ZCC). By the late 1990s, the ZCC had become the largest and dominant denomination in many of the communities around the Okavango Delta, and members in their khaki (men) or white (women) uniforms could be seen marching to and from services. This affiliation has in some cases created a voting block, and in many communities ZCC members exercise substantial political clout.

### **Threats to Survival: Loss of Traditional Lifeway, Language, and Cultural Traditions**

The Okavango Delta Peoples face a number of challenges to preserving their traditional lifeways, languages, and cultural traditions. These challenges have their roots in the Okavango Delta Peoples' integration into national political, social, and economic institutions. People have been experiencing this to some extent since Botswana's independence and far more intensively since the mid 1980s. Two of the major influences are interrelated: market incorporation and universally available primary and secondary education. As stated above, even today the main economic activities are traditional subsistence strategies. While some people have had access to cash for many years, this has been more of a supplemental source of income. We conducted surveys of cash market participation in 1992 in a traditional community, and found that the greatest amount spent by a family during any one month was 3 Pula, then worth a little over one U.S. dollar. Currently, however, many people see full participation in the national monetary based economy as the most desirable route in the future. People all over the world have changed their economic orientation from traditional forms of subsistence to participation in cash market economies. A driving force may be that people find the stability of resources attractive. Compared to traditional economic systems, which are subject to great variation due to weather, disease, and other environmental factors, cash market economies provide a more stable flow of resources. This is not to say that economic downturns cannot affect that flow; however rather than the total loss a drought might bring in a traditional economy, cash market resource flow might only be reduced or disrupted for relatively short periods.

This shift to a cash market economy means that there is also a shift in the types of skills and knowledge that are important for children to acquire. Instead of becoming skilled at hunting, fishing, farming, or herding, children and young people attend school to acquire skills and knowledge such as proficiency in language, math, social sciences, and sciences. Rather than obtaining detailed knowledge about animal behavior and the natural world that are intrinsic to a traditional lifestyle, children and young people acquire knowledge about politics, geography, and cultures outside the Okavango Delta, Botswana, and Africa. Our research has shown that these changes occur very quickly when people believe that an education will lead to employment in the cash market economy. Comparing girls who grew up in a traditional community and those who grew up in a community where their parents worked in wage labor, we found that only girls in the traditional community knew how to process grain. Whereas only a few girls in the traditional community had attended school, all the girls in the wage labor community had attended school since they were six or seven. We also found great differences in children's and young people's knowledge of animals, plants, and the environment. Children in the traditional community had detailed knowledge about animal behavior, how to track and hunt animals, the food and medicinal qualities of plants, and where to find those plants. In the wage labor community, we found that children knew no more of African animals and plants than children in the United States or Europe.

A key to this shift is the availability of education. The government of Botswana has made education accessible to all children. Even in the most remote parts of the Okavango Delta, there are primary schools. Most children board at secondary schools in the larger towns. Setswana, the national language of Botswana, is the language of instruction in primary school. Children also start to learn English during the last three years of primary school. English is the language of instruction for secondary school, and is the language of government, business, and commerce in Botswana. The investment of time in learning Setswana and English has caused young people to invest less in learning the language of their ethnic group. Because children in remote areas now attend primary school, Setswana is more and more the language of play and camaraderie and in some cases is becoming the language of home.

A further consequence of formal education is the loss of cultural traditions. Customs marking life events, music and dance, and other which define a group's ethnic identity have come under pressure as more and more young people receive formal education. There are several reasons for this change. In addition to the Setswana language being taught in schools, Tswana customs, songs, and dances are also taught. Young people find that a mastery of not only the Setswana language but also Tswana culture may open doors both economically and socially in this predominantly Tswana country. In addition, as stated above, the customary law of Botswana which is applied to civil and minor criminal cases, especially in rural areas such as the Okavango Delta, is based in Tswana customs. These factors together mean that more and more young people are adopting Tswana language and cultural traditions in their daily lives. The Batswana are justifiably proud of their great literary and musical heritage, and being able to participate in this proud tradition may also attract young people from other ethnic groups to Tswana language and culture.

### **Land Reform and Development Schemes**

In addition to these changes in children's pattern of learning and socialization, there have been external factors that have affected people's relationships with the land and traditional subsistence economies. Foremost among these have been changing government policies with regard to land utilization. Prior to Botswana's independence, land use in the Okavango Delta was governed by traditional practices and by the chief of the Batawana, whose greatest interest was in regulating hunting. After independence, much of the authority over land and many of the regulatory functions passed from the Batawana chief to the government. The Okavango Delta was seen as an underdeveloped region containing natural resources important to the development of Botswana's economy such as water, large herds of cattle, and large numbers of wildlife. Compared to many countries around the world, both developed and developing, Botswana is widely recognized as having pursued farsighted policies regarding wildlife and habitat conservation. Balanced against these policies have been the need to utilize natural resources and provide for the population. In the Okavango Delta, this has meant that environmental policies have been implemented along with policies to encourage cattle raising, exploitation of the Okavango River's water resources, and promote nature based tourism.

An important consequence has been the increasing formalization of land use classification into wildlife management, commercial hunting, and nature based tourism; agricultural; protected parkland; and settlement areas. To separate wildlife and cattle, ostensibly to prevent the spread of disease from wild buffalo to cattle, a series of "veterinary cordon fences," popularly known as "buffalo fences," has been erected around the Okavango Delta since the 1940s. The northern series of fences, erected in the 1990s, effectively demarcates the interior Delta as a cattle free area. Botswana's National Development Plans 7 and 8 along with other legislation and regulations allocated the land in the Okavango Delta to these purposes with little consultation with local people and without sufficient consideration of traditional utilization patterns. Large parcels of land were leased to concessionaires for hunting and photographic safari businesses. As a result, people were no longer able to live in or participate in

many forms of traditional utilization, such as hunting and collecting wild reeds and grasses for building materials, in these areas.

Some land was set aside for Community Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM), with mixed results. There are several communities in the Okavango region, such as Mababe and Sankuyo, that have had sizable sums of money and some jobs come from safari hunting and ecotourism. At the same time, there have been disputes over what to do with the money. Some of the other problems with the CBNRM approach were: the aggregation of separate villages into artificial communities, disputes with enterprise partners, slowness in the distribution of benefits generated, and allegations that the land set aside for CBNRM was inferior.

### **The Okavango Pipeline and Dredging**

Southern Africa is extremely arid, and thirsty countries in the region periodically eye the Okavango River as a wasted source of much needed water. As stated above, 98% of the Okavango Delta's water evaporates. Faced with water shortages in the town of Maun and farther south at the Orapa diamond mine, the government of Botswana planned to dredge the Boro River in the southern Okavango Delta in the 1980s. This plan was shelved as a result of impact assessment and lobbying by the World Conservation Union (IUCN). The social impact assessment focused attention on the negative impact dredging would have on the traditional lifeways of the Okavango. In 1996 Namibia was faced with a dire water emergency due to continuing drought. The Namibian government announced plans to build a pipeline from where the Okavango flows through the Caprivi Strip to Namibia's capital Windhoek. This plan was shelved when well timed rains ameliorated the water shortage, and after considerable objections by NGOs and the government of Botswana. Again, the negative social impact of decreasing the water level of the Okavango River and Delta in Botswana was a major objection.

Two of the results of the debate over the use of the Okavango River waters were the decision to establish a regional research center in the Okavango and the effort to plan a transboundary environmental impact assessment involving all three countries that use the waters of the Okavango River (Angola, Botswana, and Namibia). These three countries have an agreement that is overseen by a Permanent Okavango River Basin Water Commission (OKACOM) to manage the waters of the Okavango. That was established in 1994. It remains to be seen whether or not OKACOM can help alleviate some of the tensions among the three countries over the waters of the Okavango River.

### **The HIV/AIDS Pandemic**

Perhaps the greatest threat facing the Okavango Delta Peoples is HIV/AIDS. In 1998, the HIV/AIDS prevalence rate in the Okavango Delta was estimated at between 25 and 40% of adults, one of the highest in the world. Over 90% of hospital deaths were HIV/AIDS related. Several factors common to the African HIV/AIDS epidemic contribute to this high rate: a longstanding high rate of STD infections; high levels of multi partnered sexuality; and no male circumcision. Infrastructural improvements in transportation which have occurred throughout the 1990s also contribute to the high rate of transmission. In 1990, there were only a few kilometers of paved roads in northern Botswana. Today there are well over a thousand kilometers, and many more of improved gravel roads. This means formerly remote and difficult to reach villages have become easy to visit. Tourists, merchants, and truckers all ply these roads, and some of them bring HIV with them. In addition, the improved transportation means that people travel from remote villages to large towns, the capital Gaborone, and even Johannesburg to work, go to school, or to purchase consumer goods. Again, this can provide a means of rapid increases in HIV/AIDS prevalence.

The rise of nature based tourism in the Okavango Delta since the mid 1980s means that even the most remote areas are affected. Previously inaccessible areas have thousands of tourists visiting each year.

Small planes constantly travel between bush camps and the town of Maun, providing another vector for HIV. Although the government of Botswana has an admirable AIDS education and health plan in place, it has not kept pace with the dramatic increase in movement afforded by improved transportation to remote areas of the Okavango Delta.

One of the most tragic features of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Botswana is the pattern of mortality. Younger, educated, highly motivated people in the prime of their lives are the main casualties. This serves to deplete families, communities, and the workforce, leaving the very old and the very young. It is estimated that by 2006 Botswana will have over 50,000 AIDS orphans. The Okavango Delta is one of the most remote and least developed parts of Botswana, and is perhaps least prepared to handle this disaster. Among the Okavango Delta Peoples, traditional lifeways and extended families are already under great pressure, and the HIV/AIDS epidemic adds a further burden.

### **Economic Development and Modernization: A Two edged sword**

In the Okavango Delta, as in many places around the world, people are in a process of integration into national level political, social, and economic institutions, partly within and partly outside of their control. When we have talked about these issues with people in the Okavango Delta, they say that economic development has benefits and it has costs, and that the benefits outweigh the costs. People see development and modernization as unstoppable and irreversible, and say they wish there was a way to maintain their individual cultures while participating in Botswana's national institutions. One Xanekwe man we know said that he would like to return to the bush and be a full time hunter gatherer. When we asked why he did not do this, he said "But what would my children do? They don't know how to hunt, they don't know the bush. All they know is school. There is nothing for them in the bush."

Economic modernization has brought with it competition for land and resources, and it has contributed to growing social and economic stratification in the Okavango region. There are certainly people who have done very well, having established lucrative businesses and expanding their holdings of land, livestock, and capital. There are others who have become poorer and who have lost access to land and natural resources. The issue facing the people of the Okavango and the district council that oversees the region, the North West District Council, is how to ensure that economic development and modernization can provide for a better life for all people, not just the wealthy few.

Ironically, the development of the mining industry has been a key reason that the Republic of Botswana has done so well economically, but it is also the reason that there are threats to the well-being of the peoples of the Okavango. The sale of diamonds have contributed to the stability of Botswana. At the same time, the sale of diamonds excavated in Angola have helped fuel the civil war that has wracked that country for over 25 years. Now, the fighting in Angola is starting to spill into the Okavango region, with attacks by armed groups on civilians occurring in the West Caprivi region of Namibia. Diamonds have been used to purchase the weapons that at least some of these groups are using. Several hundred people, including members of the Xanekhwe and Bugakwe communities, have had to flee the fighting in West Caprivi and are now living in a Botswana refugee camp at Dukwe. As one refugee put it, "In Africa, diamonds have become war's best friend."

### **Response: Struggles to Sustain Cultural Survival**

#### **Preserving Language and Cultural Traditions**

Although preserving language and culture in the face of integration into national level political, social, and economic institutions is a daunting task, there are many among the Okavango Delta Peoples who are working towards this goal. Bugakwe and Xanekwe representatives are active participants

in organizations, workshops, and conferences regarding Bushmen peoples throughout southern Africa. There are several NGOs dedicated to this issue, among them Kuru Development Trust, Kgeikani Kweni (The First People of the Kalahari), Kalahari Peoples Fund, the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, and Survival International. While there are common elements to the struggle to maintain cultural identity, the situation of the Bugakwe and Xanekwe is somewhat unique. More than most other groups, they are at the heart of issues concerning economic development, especially in regards to nature based tourism. Many Bugakwe and Xanekwe people live in communities that are involved in community-based natural resource management. Moreover, many people work in safari camps. For many years Bugakwe and Xanekwe were the last to reap the benefits of economic development and modernization. Today, they have come farther faster than almost any other group in Botswana. Thirty years ago, many were nomadic hunter gatherers who had little contact with other groups. These days, many Bugakwe and Xanekwe have secondary educations, and some have attended technical schools or university.

The challenge will be to preserve their languages and to begin teaching them to younger people. A group of linguists at the University of Cologne is compiling orthographies and studying the languages of the Bugakwe and Xanekwe. This documentation, in conjunction with the participation of local people, will be of primary importance in preserving these languages. The skills and knowledge of the hunter gatherer lifeway must also be taught to younger people. Both of these will take concerted effort to encourage young people to see the benefits of acquiring these traditional skills and knowledge in addition to a formal education. These same challenges are evident for Dixeriku, Hambukushu, and Wayeyi peoples.

While Dixeriku and Hambukushu in Botswana are struggling with these issues, members of these groups in Namibia are in somewhat different circumstances. There, Rudixeriku (the Dixeriku language) and Thimbukushu (the Hambukushu language) are official languages. There are dictionaries, school books, literature, and radio broadcasts in these languages. These are also languages of primary education. As contact between members of these groups in Botswana and Namibia increases, there may be more opportunities for people on the Botswana side to utilize these materials. While the language of primary instruction in Botswana has been Setswana, recently the law has been changed to allow the use of other languages. Although only Ikalanga has been used, languages of the Okavango Delta Peoples may be used in schools in the future.

The Hambukushu people have an excellent forum for the preservation of their cultural traditions such as craftwork and dance in the Botswana Christian Council's Etsha Project in the town of Etsha 6. At the BCC's center there, people can learn and refine traditional skills such as basketry, pottery making, and leatherwork, as well as participate in traditional cultural activities. Artists from North America and Europe stay in residence for one to two years as resource persons and teachers. Hambukushu artists have visited North America and Europe demonstrating their outstanding basketry, and some baskets sell for substantial sums of money in these markets.

A group of Wayeyi educators and students formed the Kamanakao Association to preserve Wayeyi language and culture. In their language, Shiyeyi, kamanakao means remnants, symbolizing the remnants of Wayeyi culture. Of all the languages of the Okavango Delta Peoples, Wayeyi has suffered the most. In the early 1990s, it was spoken mostly by the elderly and was in danger of disappearing. Through the efforts of the Kamanakao Association, an orthography of Shiyeyi has been compiled, and in many communities lessons in Shiyeyi are conducted for both children and adults. The Kamanakao Association is planning a Wayeyi cultural center in Maun and efforts are being made to collect data on the Wayeyi, including oral history information.

## **Conservation, Traditional Lifeways, and Economic Development**

A principle of CBNRM is that community control and preservation of natural resources when preserving wildlife and habitat is profitable to people. Because much of the nature based tourism industry and concession land is controlled by people from outside the Okavango Delta, there are risks that the interests of the inhabitants will not be given the highest priority in the decision making process. And, without active benefits from the preservation of wildlife and habitat, local people will lose incentive to participate in conservation and natural resource management.

Traditional subsistence pursuits, especially hunting, have come under a great deal of pressure from land reform and conservation policies. Hunting is heavily regulated and in some years licenses are not issued in certain areas. This is based partially in the belief that subsistence hunting and "poaching" have equally detrimental effects on animal populations. This is not the case, however. Subsistence hunting has little if any negative effect on animal populations due to the low population density of people in the Okavango Delta and the low tech weaponry people are using. It may have a positive effect in weeding out old and sick animals. Poaching of elephants and rhinos usually entails organized bands using high tech, often military, weaponry and killing large numbers of animals. According to the Botswana Defence Force, most of these bands have come from outside of Botswana.

In response to these concerns, the Okavango Peoples Wildlife Trust (OPWT) was founded under the leadership of Kgosi Tawana II, chief of the Batawana and paramount chief of Ngamiland (Ngamiland is the district, similar to a province, which contains the Okavango Delta). The OPWT has been active in bringing together the headmen from all of the communities in the Okavango Delta to present a united front regarding policies on CBNRM, subsistence hunting, the "buffalo" fences, and utilization of the Okavango water resources. It is the only grass roots based conservation organization operating in the Okavango, and as such gives high priority to the interests of area peoples.

## **Preparing for the Future**

The Okavango Delta Peoples stand at a crossroads. While working to preserve their languages, traditional skills and knowledge, and cultural traditions, people do not want to be left out of Botswana's dramatic economic achievements and political stability. The organizations working towards these ends are small and underfunded. Yet, everywhere we go in the Okavango Delta people point with pride to their ethnic identity and to being a Motswana a citizen of Botswana. Paradoxically, as more and more members of these ethnic groups become educated, these organizations will become stronger. And, as more people receive educations, the learning materials available will become more widely accessible.

The threat of HIV/AIDS, however, is not ameliorated by ethnic pride or education. The government's AIDS education campaign and condom distribution efforts are admirable. In the face of this epidemic, it is crucial to preserve these languages, traditional skills and knowledge, and cultural traditions for the rebuilding period that is bound to follow, and for the thousands of AIDS orphans who are facing life without parents to teach them.

## **Food for Thought**

In this chapter we have shown that the five ethnic groups who comprise the Okavango Delta Peoples face a number of challenges in the preservation of their traditional lifeways, languages, and cultural traditions. Some of these challenges are common to indigenous peoples all over the world. Others are specific to the case of the Okavango Delta. Still others are specific to only one ethnic group. The linchpin of this variation is economic development. The effects of economic development and modernization are felt in the loss of traditional lifeway and language, changes in the utilization of land, the threat of dredging and water offtake, and the devastation of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Many people and organizations are responding to these threats. They face an uphill battle, but are

making inroads in documenting and teaching the five languages, preserving and teaching cultural knowledge, demanding a greater voice in decision making, and working to preserve this unique ecosystem. Education can work for or against this process; it is up to governments to make educational systems responsive to local needs.

The Okavango Delta Peoples provide an example to the world of how a multi cultural society can function successfully. Even under grave threat to their cultures, people live and work together, and know and respect one another's traditions, lifeways, and languages.

### **Questions to Ponder**

- \* What are the different traditional subsistence strategies of the five ethnic groups who comprise the Okavango Delta Peoples?
- \* What are the main threats to the preservation of the languages, traditional lifeways, and cultural traditions of the Okavango Delta Peoples?
- \* Does education improve or diminish a groups' ability to preserve its language, traditional lifeway, and cultural traditions?
- \* How have economic development and modernization impacted the HIV/AIDS epidemic among the Okavango Delta Peoples?
- \* Could more be done to help the Okavango Delta Peoples in their efforts to preserve their languages, traditional lifeways, and cultural traditions? By whom?

### **Resource Guide**

Bock, J. 1993. Okavango Delta Peoples of Botswana. In *State of the Peoples: A Global Report on Human Rights*, Marc S. Miller, ed. With *Cultural Survival*. Pp. 174 175. Boston: Beacon Press.

Bock, J. 1995. *The Determinants of Variation in Children's Activities in a Southern African Community*. Ph.D. Dissertation, Dept. of Anthropology, University of New Mexico. Ann Arbor, MI: UMI.

Brenzinger, M. 1997. *Moving to Survive: Kxoe Communities in Arid Lands*. Working paper 2. Cologne: University of Cologne Institute for African Studies.

Cowley, C. 1968. *Fabled Tribe: A voyage to Discover the River Bushmen of the Okavango Swamps*. New York: Atheneum.

Larson, T.J. 1995. *Bayeyi and Hambukushu Tales from the Okavango*. Gaborone: Botswana Society.

Ross, K. 1987. *Okavango: Jewel of the Kalahari*. London: BBC Books.

#### **Films and Videos**

*Okavango: Jewel of the Kalahari* 1988. British Broadcasting Corporation and Public Broadcasting Service.

*Wildlife Warriors: Defending Africa's Wildlife*. 1996. National Geographic Society.

### **Organizations**

First People of the Kalahari (FPK), P.O. Box 173, Ghanzi, Botswana, Tel: +267-596 101

Kuru Development Trust (KDT), P.O. Box 472, Shakawe, Botswana, Tel: +267 675 085

Ngwao Boswa. Ngwao Boswa Basket weavers' Cooperative. PO Box 43, Gumare, Botswana. Tel: +267 674 074.

Working Group of Indigenous Minorities in Southern Africa (WIMSA), P.O. Box 80733, Windhoek, Namibia, Tel: +264-61-244 909

### **Internet and WWW Sites**

The Okavango Delta Peoples of Botswana: <http://www.mindspring.com/~johnbock>

The Kamanakao Association: <http://www.mindspring.com/~johnbock/kamanakao.html>

Okavango Peoples Wildlife Trust: <http://www.stud.ntnu.no/~skjetnep/opwt/index.html>

The Government of Botswana Web Site: <http://www.gov.bw>

University of Cologne project: Hunter Gatherers in Transition: The Conceptualization of Space and Environment:

<http://www.uni-koeln.de/phil-fak/afrikanistik/sfb389/c5-section.html>

Working Group of Indigenous Minorities in Southern Africa: <http://www.san.org.za>