

## People Profile: The !Kung Bushmen

Population: 50,000 (1996)

Religion: Traditional Nature Animism

### Registry of Peoples codes

Aukwe (*West !Kung*): 100617

Kung-Ekoka (*East !Kung, Xu*): 105420

Kung Gobabis (*East !Kung, Xu*): 105418

Kung-Tsumkwe: 105423

!Kung (*Okung*): 100001

### Registry of Languages code (*Ethnologue*)

Akhoe: knw (formerly a separate lang; now classified as a dialect of Kung-Ekoka)

Kung-Ekoka: knw

Kung-Gobabis: aue

Kung-Tsumkwe: ktz

Okung: oun

## NARRATIVE PROFILE

**Location:** Various San, or Bushman, groups live in the desert areas of Namibia, Botswana and Angola. The !Kung live in the Kalahari Desert of northwest Botswana, the Cuando-Cubanga Province in southeast Angola and in northeast Namibia. The Angola !Kung live in the more tropical open woodlands.

**History:** The San, called the Bushmen by the Dutch in South Africa, were the first people we know of in the Great Rift Valley of Africa. They came under pressure from Cushites, then Nilotes, then Bantu peoples. The non-aggressive hunter-gatherers often moved away or were absorbed by intermarriage, or more often were killed off. Some San peoples seem to be in existence now speaking the Bantu language of their dominant neighbors. Almost all remaining San peoples now live in the desert areas of southern Africa.

The differences between the languages of the !Kung and other San indicate they have lived in their current areas for thousands of years. Bantu immigrants began coming into southwest Africa around 1000 AD. Europeans made contact with "Bushman" peoples around AD1550. As Bantu and European people moved in, the !Kung and other San retreated further into the marginal areas.

**Identity:** Even though there are about 50,000 !Kung in southern Africa, by some reports only about one third of them continue their traditional nomadic lifestyles. Many of them were kidnapped and made to work in people's homes and on farms. Some !Kung work on black-owned farms in Botswana. Because they are paid no wages, only food, they are very poor. These few people are divided into scattered groups of a few hundred to a few thousand, who cannot understand each other's language.

The San people are short and slim, with reddish-yellow skin and kinky hair described as "peppercorn." The !Kung call themselves zhu twa si, "the harmless people," in contrast to non-San, whom they call zosi, "animals without hooves," meaning they are as dangerous as predator animals. The !Kung are descendants of the original inhabitants of Angola. Bantu groups began to expand into their area by 1000 AD. and easily dominated the harmless people.

There are three ethno-linguistic groups called !Kung: Central !Kung of Botswana and Namibia, the Northern !Kung of Angola and the Au//eisi, or Southern !Kung. Most references refer to the Central !Kung. However the only group actually calling themselves !Kung are the Northern !Kung. Categories used by various ethnologists and linguists are not consistent. Names of people and languages are further confused by the different local and popular names and varieties of spelling.

The others are related in language and culture, but call themselves by their language names. The general term is used by linguists and anthropologists for all these groups. They are the best-known of all Khoisan people. The word !Kung is one spelling for !Xû or !Khû, one of their words for people.

**Language:** The languages of the !Kung are also referred to as !Kung. There are various names for

the various forms of language spoken by the different groups. These are "click" languages, as members of the San language family. The ! represents one of the click sounds, made like the English sound some speakers use to imitate the sound of dripping water. The people in the !Kung group speak the following languages (using the name forms used by Summer Institute of Linguistics): Kung-Ekoka, Akhoe (speech of the Aukwe, originally thought to be a separate language, now considered a dialect of Kung-Ekoka), Kung-Gobabis, Kung-Tsumkwe and Oung. These languages, together with Vasekela and Maligo, make up the Northern division of the southern Africa Khoisan languages.

Many also speak the Tswana language and some speak English. The latter two would be used in work on farms and cities. Afrikaans is commonly spoken by many men in Namibia. Portuguese would be needed in Angola. These four languages would be the languages of education in the respective countries.

The San languages are distantly related to the languages spoken by the Khoikhoi, also called Khoi, or Hottentots. Some of the !Kung's San neighbors speak Khoi (Khoe) languages. Together these languages are called by the technical name Khoisan. Some of the unusual click sounds of these languages have been borrowed by a group of Bantu language speakers about 300 to 500 years ago.

The San languages are written in a standardized alphabet based on Latin characters with special symbols for the click sounds unique to the Khoisan languages. Some of these symbols are //, !, /. Technical materials are available to explain the sounds these symbols represent.

**Political Situation:** The San groups are very small, nomadic groups living distantly from other peoples, even other groups of San. They have been oppressed and dispossessed by both Bantu and European immigrant groups. History even documents hunting of San people for sport.

The !Kung and other San exist outside the political arena. They have work relations with Bantu and European farmers. Some in the past generation have gone to school and entered the "mainstream" of life somewhat. Some served the South African forces in the years of the Namibian fight for independence. In the 1960's some few helped the Portuguese against the nationalist guerrillas.

**Customs:** Food is not easy to obtain in the desert so many of the San are forced to live among the Bantu population and the Europeans of southern Africa. In the desert their basic diet is melons, seeds, nuts and antelope. The !Kung are renowned as trackers and are in demand by commercial or government interests for bush tracking.

The !Kung originally had no permanent settlements, but built simple windbreaks of saplings in a semicircle, tied together at the top and covered with grass. They practiced no agriculture and the only domestic animal was an occasional dog. Their hunting and gathering life has suffered continual encroachment. Some have entered the settled life to work on farms and in recent years have even begun cultivating and herding cattle. Some !Kung have goats.

The majority of marriages are monogamous, normally arranged by senior members of the kinship group. It is preferred to marry cousins, but there is a complicating generational naming system which can limit cousin choices by naming cousins as siblings in certain cases. Children are actively socialized with teaching. Ridicule is used for discipline as well as corporal punishment. The !Kung no longer practice male circumcision as initiation to adulthood. Girls still have a brief initiation among the Zhu/oasi group but female circumcision is not practiced. Important events in the family or community are celebrated by the exchange of ritual gifts.

There are hereditary leaders, sometimes considered chiefs, but they have limited authority. Traditionally social order was enforced by ridicule, dispersal (forced separation) and sometimes even execution. Infractions are now handled through district councils or government courts. There was no formal military system. The San peoples were generally pacifist, though minor skirmishes might occur.

**Religion:** !Kung, like the Bushmen as a whole, are traditional tribal religionists and very closed to Christianity. They believe celestial bodies (sun, moon, morning star, and the southern cross) are symbols of divinity. They believe the praying mantis is a divine messenger and when one is seen, diviners try to determine the current message. Other animals also have spiritual significance for them. They also believe that dancing near a sacred fire will give them the power to heal.

Their spiritual leaders are diviners and healers. They believe ancestors are involved in curing rituals, but they do not revere the dead as the Bantu peoples do. Legends play an important role in the life of the !Kung. Each story is someone's perception of the supernatural. Each tells its own truth, bringing to light some aspect of the divine.

The sacred Tsodilo Hills are legendary. The story goes that a man had two wives, but he loved one wife more than the other, and this caused a big quarrel. The one he didn't love hit him on the head, causing a deep wound. Then she ran off into the desert. But the Great God, Gaoxa, decided that because there was no peace among them, he must turn them all into a stone. The man became the largest of the hills; the unloved wife became the smallest hill that stands alone; and the loved wife, with her children, became the cluster of hills in the middle. But they believe there are supernatural powers in the Hills because Gaoxa himself lives there. It was there that he created and kept his cat-

<b>Chart of !Kung (Bushman) Peoples and Languages</b>						
<b>People Name</b>	<b>Countries</b>	<b>Language</b>	<b>ROL*</b>	<b>Total of People</b>	<b>Total of Language</b>	<b>Status of Christian Evangelization</b>
Aukwe (Auen, West Kung)	Angola	Akhoe	ake	3,200	19,200	Unreached
Aukwe	Botswana	Akhoe	ake	11,000	19,000	Unreached
Aukwe	Namibia	Akhoe	ake	5,000	19,200	Unreached
<b>Total Aukwe</b>				<b>19,200</b>		
East Kung (Xu)	Botswana	Kung-Ekoka	knw	8,300	19,900	Unevangelized
East Kung (Xu, Bobabis)	Namibia	Kung-Gobabis	aue	3,000	3,000	Unreached
East Kung (Xu, Tsumkwe)	Namibia	Kung-Ekoka	knw	5,000	19,900	Unevangelized
<b>Total East Kung</b>				<b>16,300</b>		
Kung	Namibia	Kung-Tsumkwe	ktz	3,000	7,000	Unreached
Kung-Ekoka	Angola	Kung-Ekoka	knw	6,600	19,900	Unreached
Kung-Tsumkwe	Angola	Kung-Tsumkwe	ktz	4,000	7,000	Unreached
Okung (Xu, North Kung)	Angola	Oung	oun	1,000	1,000	Unreached
<b>Total Kung Peoples</b>				<b>50,100</b>	<b>50,100</b>	

ROL: registry of languages - <http://www.african.gu.se/khsnms.html#1000>

Orville Boyd Jenkins  
First written January 1997  
First posted May 2001  
Last edited 22 May 2006

**Copyright © 2001, 2006 Orville Boyd Jenkins**