

## 1. Description

1.1 Name(s) of society, language, and language family: “Alternate names: Cuanhama, Humba, Kuanjama, Kwancama, Kwanjama, Kwanyama, Ochikwanyama, Oshikuanjama, Oshikwanyama, Ovambo, Oxikuanyama” (1)  
The Ovambo speak Angola, they also have different dialects that are like that of Ndonga [ndo], Kwambi [kwm], Mbadja. The Ovambo write in Latin (1)

1.2 ISO code (3 letter code from ethnologue.com): “kua” (1)

1.3 Location (latitude/longitude): “Namibia's latitude and longitude is 22° 00' S and 17 ° 00' E” (3)

1.4 Brief history: “The **Ovambo** or **Ambo people** (endonyms *Aawambo* [Ndonga], *Ovawambo* [Kwanyama]) consist of a number of kindred ethnic groups which inhabit Ovamboland in northern Namibia as well as the Southernmost Angolan province Cunene. In Namibia, these are the Ndonga, Kwanyama, Kwambi, Ngandjera, Mbalantu, Mbadja, Kolonkadhi and Kwaluudhi. In Angola, they are the Kwanyama, Kafima, Evale and Ndonga. The Ambo people migrated south from the upper regions of Zambezi and currently make up the greatest population in Namibia. The reason that they settled in the area where they now live was for the rich soil that is scattered around the Ovamboland. The Ambo population is overall roughly 1,500,000. The Ambo are part of the great Bantu family. They speak Oshivambo, which includes the Kwanyama, Ongandjera, Mbadja, Ndonga and other dialects.” (2)

“Flat sandy plains of Northern Namibia and Southern Angola make up Ovamboland, with water courses that bisect the area. These are known as oshanas. In the northern regions of the Ovamboland there are thick belts of tropical vegetation. The average rainfall in this area is around 17 inches during the rainy season. The oshanas can become flooded and sometimes submerge three-fifths of the region. This poses a unique problem for the Ambo people as they have to adapt to the changing weather patterns. In the dry season they are able to use the grassy plains for stock to graze upon. The Ambo have been able to adapt to their land and their environment. They raise cattle, fish in the *oshanas*, and farming. They are skilled craftsmen. They make and sell basketry, pottery, jewelry, wooden combs, wood iron spears, arrows, richly decorated daggers, musical instruments, and also ivory buttons.” (2)

1.5 Influence of missionaries/schools/governments/powerful neighbors: “In recent times, most Ambo consider themselves Lutheran. Finnish missionaries arrived in Ovamboland as early as 1870 and most of the traditional beliefs have been replaced with Christian traditions, but a few traditions still carry on. As a result of the missionaries.” (2). “The Ambo people migrated south from the upper regions of Zambezi and currently make up the greatest population in Namibia. The reason that they settled in the area where they now live was for the rich soil that is scattered around the Ovamboland.”

1.7 Population size, mean village size, home range size, density “:421,000 in Angola (Johnstone 1993). Population total all countries: 668,000.” (1) Most Ovambo families have large plots of land to grow crops and raise livestock (2).

## 2. Economy

2.1 Main carbohydrate staple(s): “Most families have a large plot of land, and their primary crop is millet, which is made into a thick porridge. They also grow beans, watermelons, squash, and sorghum.” (2)

2.2 Main protein-lipid sources: “Most households own a few goats and cattle, and occasionally a few pigs” (2). Also, “Most houses have chickens” and “When the rains come, the rivers to the north in Angola overflow and flood the area, bringing fish, birds, and frogs.” (2)

2.3 Weapons: Bow and arrow, blowguns?: “The Ovambo are skilled craftsmen, they make and sell wood iron spears, arrows, and richly decorated daggers” (2). Axes and knives with handles (4). During World War I the people gained more access to weapons and the area they lived was used by Germans and was known as the League of Nations (5).

2.4 Food storage: “They make and sell basketry and pottery” (2).

2.5 Sexual division of production: “It is the job of the young men to attend to the goats and cattle, taking them to find grazing areas during the day, and bringing them back to the home in the evening.” (2). “They are also known as traders, and shopping complexes, stalls and cuca shops are found all over their region. The women are involved in intricate artwork and crafting like dressmaking, pottery, basketry and wood carving. Like in many African cultures, the women are also traditionally responsible for cultivating the land and raising children. Many Ovambo's

now work on mines or have moved to cities, however, the majority take pride in their heritage and identity and continue to maintain their kraals (a village consisting of traditional houses and a fence around it as protection" (6).

2.6 Land tenure: "If someone wanted to leave some of his property to his wife or children, he could sell it to them for a nominal price. After he had informed his maternal kin of the transaction, they could no longer claim that particular part of the husband's property after his death. Today, the Namibian constitution protects the widow and the children from such inheritance mistreatments. When a woman died, her property was inherited by her children, mother or other more distant matrilineal relatives" (7).

2.7 Ceramics: Fertility dolls (8) and pottery (2).

2.8 Specified (prescribed or proscribed) sharing patterns: "The traditional home is built as a group of huts surrounded by a fence of large vertical poles. Some families also build a Western-style cement block building within the home. Each hut generally has a different purpose, such as a bedroom, storeroom, or kitchen. Most families collect water from a nearby public tap. (2)

2.9 Food taboos: No evidence found.

2.10 Canoes/watercraft?: Canoes are used in times of high water levels (9).

### 3. Anthropometry

3.1 Mean adult height (m and f): Evidence not found.

3.2 Mean adult weight (m and f): Evidence not found.

### 4. Life History, mating, marriage

4.1 Age at menarche (f): Adolescents that are not under weight (10).

4.2 Age at first birth (m and f): Most likely young, "Total fertility rate: 4.71 children born/woman (2003 est.), 4.89 children born/woman (2000 est.)" (11)

4.3 Completed family size (m and f): Monogamy (12.)

4.4 Inter-birth-interval (f): Most likely one to two years, they have an average of 4.71 children (11).

4.5 Age first marriage (m and f): Males and females are usually close to the same ages and they don't have arranged marriages, they look to be in their twenties (12).

4.6 Proportion of marriages ending in divorce: There is no divorce. Not allowed. (13)

4.7 Percent marriages polygynous, percent males married polygynously: None. (12)

4.8 Bride purchase (price), bride service, dowry?: Brides are not purchased. The female does move to the male's homestead (12).

4.9 Inheritance patterns: "Each tribe has a chief that is responsible for the tribe, although many have converted to running tribal affairs with a council of headmen. Members of the royal family of the Owamboland are known as *aakwanekamba* and only those who belong to this family by birth have a claim to chieftainship. Because descent is matrilineal, these relations must fall on the mother's side. The chief's own sons have no claim in the royal family. They grow up as regular members of the tribe." (2)

4.10 Parent-offspring interactions and conflict: Conflict not mentioned. Parents seem to be close to their children (12). "The traditional home is built as a group of huts surrounded by a fence of large vertical poles. Some families also build a Western-style cement block building within the home. Each hut generally has a different purpose, such as a bedroom, storeroom, or kitchen. Most families collect water from a nearby public tap." (2)

4.11 Homosexual activities, social attitudes towards homosexuals: Terms for Same-Sex Patterns: *kimbanda*, diviners; *esenge* (pl. *omasenge*), man possessed by female spirit; *eshengi* (pl. *ovashengi*), "he who is approached from behind" —Ambo/Ovambo (Wanyama)" (14)

4.12 Pattern of exogamy (endogamy): Both exogamy and endogamy are present in the Ovambo groups, usually only endogamy is present (12).

4.13 What is the belief of the role of males in conception; is paternity partible? Are these "other fathers" recognized? "Amongst Ovambo groups, conjugal bonds are important for economic co-operation, but not to determine kinship, since descent is traced matrilineally, and historically a woman and her children were not considered to be the relatives of the husband (Williams 1991; Becker 1995)." (15)

4.14 What is the belief of the mother's role in procreation exactly? The children belong to the mother (15). Fertility dolls are used (8).

4.15 Is conception believed to be an incremental process (i.e., semen builds up over time)? Evidence not found.

4.16 Occurrence of sexual coercion, rape: "Domestic abuse and violence are widespread, and cultural views of women exacerbate the problem" (16)

4.17 Preferential category for spouse (e.g., cross cousin): Cross cousins, husband not "related" to children (15).

- 4.18 Do females enjoy sexual freedoms? Sex is not discussed (17).
- 4.19 Evidence of giving gifts to extramarital partners or extramarital offspring: No extramarital partners, monogamous (12). A lot of society has been Westernized (2).
- 4.20 If mother dies, whose raises children? Maternal and paternal family members (18).
- 4.21 Adult sex ratio: number of adult males divided by number of (reproductive) females: About a 1:1 ratio (11)
- 4.22 Evidence for couvades: Evidence not found
- 4.23 Different distinctions for potential fathers (e.g., lesser/younger vs. major/older) Only one father, monogamy (12).
- 4.24 Kin avoidance and respect? No evidence found
- 4.24 Joking relationships? Yes (19).
- 4.25 Patterns of descent (e.g., bilateral, matrilineal) for certain rights, names or associations: Matrilineal (2).
- 4.26 Incest avoidance rules: No mention of incest avoidance rules.
- 4.27 Is there a formal marriage ceremony? Westernized marriage ceremony and multiple people can get married at a time (12).
- 4.28 In what way(s) does one get a name, change their name, and obtain another name? Kin (2), order of birth is sometimes a factor (5).
- 4.29 Is marriage usually (or preferred to be) within community or outside community? (m/f difference?) No preference (12).
- 4.30 Are marriages arranged? Who arranges (e.g., parents, close kin)? Arranged marriages are not present in this generation, but have been in past generations (12).
- 4.31 Evidence for conflict of interest over who marries who: They get to usually choose (12).

#### **Warfare/homicide**

- 4.14 Percent adult (male) deaths due to warfare: There have been several warfare events over the last several years, including that of World War I, death tolls vary (5).
- 4.15 Outgroup vs ingroup cause of violent death: “The Owambo is actively involved in the politics of the country. SWAPO (South West Africa People's Organisation), the current ruling party started as non-violent pressure group who led by Herman Toivo ya Toivo and Samuel Shafiishuna Nujoma (today's firstly elected president).” (6)
- 4.16 Reported causes of in-group and out-group killing: This group is non-violent (6). Government and other country intervention can cause killing/warfare (2)
- 4.17 Number, diversity and relationship with neighboring societies (external relations): “Namibians feel strong dislike for the racial hatred of apartheid and the ethnic distrust common in many other African countries. They vow to greet each other as brothers and sisters. Many northern groups traditionally greeted one another with hugs. During the years before independence, the hug became a political symbol of secret camaraderie (loyalty and friendship) among those opposed to South African domination. Since independence, hugging has been making a comeback as a simple, friendly gesture.” (24) Very close ties with neighboring societies, like the Herero are important (5). “The Owambo, mainly involved in agriculture and cattle farming, make up more 50 per cent of the Namibia's population. The Owambo is actually a collection of various tribes with a common culture and origin who moved to this region from East Africa. Today the various groups live in southern Angola and another eight in the northern Namibia, with the largest tribe called the Kwanyama.” (6)
- 4.18 Cannibalism? It's illegal or at least frowned upon (20).

#### **5. Socio-Political organization and interaction**

- 5.1 Mean local residential (village) group size: The Ambo population is overall roughly 1,500,000 multiple descent groups are present (2).
- 5.2 Mobility pattern: (seasonality): “The average rainfall in this area is around 17 inches during the rainy season. The oshanas can become flooded and sometimes submerge three-fifths of the region. This poses a unique problem for the Ambo people as they have to adapt to the changing weather patterns. In the dry season they are able to use the grassy plains for stock to graze upon.” (2)
- 5.3 Political system: (chiefs, clans etc, wealth or status classes): “Each tribe has a chief that is responsible for the tribe, although many have converted to running tribal affairs with a council of headmen. Members of the royal family of the Owamboland are known as *aakwanekamba* and only those who belong to this family by birth have a claim to chieftainship. Because descent is matrilineal, these relations must fall on the mother's side. The chief's own sons have no claim in the royal family. They grow up as regular members of the tribe.” (2)
- 5.4 Post marital residence: With new husband on his homestead (12).
- 5.5 Territoriality? (defined boundaries, active defense): “Namibians feel strong dislike for the racial hatred of

apartheid and the ethnic distrust common in many other African countries. They vow to greet each other as brothers and sisters. Many northern groups traditionally greeted one another with hugs. During the years before independence, the hug became a political symbol of secret camaraderie (loyalty and friendship) among those opposed to South African domination. Since independence, hugging has been making a comeback as a simple, friendly gesture.” (24)

5.6 Social interaction divisions ? (age and sex): No evidence found.

5.7 Special friendships/joking relationships: “Aspects of daily life and rituals include: trance-dancing and curing, a tribal council, an Ovambo beer party, the ostrich game, dancing, singing, and playing the thumb piano (21).

5.8 Village and house organization: “The traditional home is built as a group of huts surrounded by a fence of large vertical poles. Some families also build a Western-style cement block building within the home. Each hut generally has a different purpose, such as a bedroom, storeroom, or kitchen. Most families collect water from a nearby public tap”. (2)

5.9 Specialized village structures (mens’ houses): Traditional home. Each hut generally has a different purpose, such as a bedroom, storeroom, or kitchen. Women and men share house. (2)

5.10 Sleep in hammocks or on ground or elsewhere? Beds connected (22).

5.11 Social organization, clans, moieties, lineages, etc: Chiefdom (2).

5.12 Trade: “They make and sell basketry, pottery, jewelry, wooden combs, wood iron spears, arrows, richly decorated daggers, musical instruments, and also ivory buttons.” (2)

5.13 Indications of social hierarchies? “Each tribe has a chief that is responsible for the tribe, although many have converted to running tribal affairs with a council of headmen.” (2)

## **6. Ritual/Ceremony/Religion (RCR)**

6.0 Time allocation to RCR: “Traditionally, the Ovambo people lived a life that was highly influenced by their magico-religious influences. They not only believed in good and evil spirits but also they are influenced by great superstitions. Most members of the Ovambo tribe believe in a supreme spirit, known as Kalunga. This spirit is known to take the form of a man and move invisibly among the people. This spirit is very important to the tribe. When the tribe is visited with a famine or pestilence it is the responsibility of the Kalunga to help the people along. Beliefs among the Ovambo people centre around their belief in Kalunga. For example, when a tribe member wants to enter the chief’s kraal, they must first remove their sandals. It is said that if this person does not remove their sandals it will bring death to one of the royal inmates and throw the kraal into mourning. Another belief deals with burning fire in the chief’s kraal. If the fire burns out, the chief and the tribe will disappear. An important ceremony takes place at the end of the harvest, where the entire community has a feast and celebrates.”(2)

6.1 Specialization (shamans and medicine): All of the tribe is superstitious (2).

6.2 Stimulants: No stimulants were mentioned.

6.3 Passage rituals (birth, death, puberty, seasonal): “Rituals dealt with the transition between girlhood and womanhood in Ovambo societies on the northern floodplain, grappling with issues of sex and death, generation and regeneration, and its implications were understood to embrace the entire social body.” Male circumcision has been present (23). “Cows play a particularly important role in funeral rituals, too. When an Ovambo man dies, his body must remain in the house for at least one day before burial, during which time all his pets must be killed. Traditional Ovambo compounds, called *kraals*, have gates used by both cattle and humans. At death, the Ovambo believe that the owner may not pass through this gate, or the cattle will die and the kraal will come to ruin. A new hole is cut for him to pass through. A bull is slaughtered, cooked without oil or flavoring of any kind, and a portion is eaten by everyone in the village. Then the kraal and all its contents must be moved at least 50 feet (15 meters). The cattle are not permitted to rest on the same earth that witnessed the death of their owner.” (24)

6.4 Other rituals: No evidence found.

6.5 Myths (Creation): “Namibians describe themselves as very spiritual. European missionaries found success here, and today 90 percent of Namibians are Christian, mostly Lutheran. Traditional religion was animistic, attributing souls and spiritual powers to natural objects and phenomena. While it is typical for Africans to incorporate traditional beliefs and practices into their religious life, less than 20 percent of Namibians claim to do so. Western churches hold great influence in Namibia.” (24)

6.6 Cultural material (art, music, games):” American popular culture is known all over the world. In Namibia in the late 1990s, Arnold Schwarzenegger movies were popular, and Michael Jackson and Michael Jordan were youth

icons (idols). Most popular music, however, tends to come from South Africa, with its rich history of township jive. Performers such as Lucky Dube, Yvonne Chaka Chaka, and Mahlathini and the Mahotella Queens have captured the Namibian music market. The infectious rhythms of the Congo, farther to the north, are also gaining in popularity in Namibia. Traditional arts and crafts in Namibia focus on daily living. Woodcarving, despite the relative lack of trees, has a long history. Beautiful utensils, knife handles and sheaths, and toy cars continue to be made from wood and sold. Baskets for holding everything from fish to grain to water are made out of the palm leaf, or, along the northern rivers, out of reeds. As everywhere in Africa, soccer ("football" as it is known in Namibia) is the national sport with the most passionate followers. Children grow up playing it, sometimes using a ball made of twine. Track and field, called "athletics" by Namibians, is becoming more popular. Namibian Frankie Fredricks won a silver medal in the 100- and 200-meter dashes at the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta. Most Namibians get their physical exercise through daily chores. Many rural children must walk or run 3 miles (5 kilometers) a day to school. Most adults hoe and harvest regularly. Not surprisingly, many Namibian folk heroes achieved their status through courageous battles with oppressors. One nineteenth-century Ovambo subchief, named Madume Ndemufayo, fought the Angolan Portuguese from the north and the Germans from the south, only to be captured and killed by the Germans. His exploits were passed on through oral tradition (storytelling), since native languages had never been written." (24)

6.7 Sex differences in RCR: Men have a large ceremony at death (24).

6.8 Missionary effect: "Namibians describe themselves as very spiritual. European missionaries found success here, and today 90 percent of Namibians are Christian, mostly Lutheran. Traditional religion was animistic, attributing souls and spiritual powers to natural objects and phenomena. While it is typical for Africans to incorporate traditional beliefs and practices into their religious life, less than 20 percent of Namibians claim to do so. Western churches hold great influence in Namibia." (24)

6.9 RCR revival: No evidence found.

6.10 Death and afterlife beliefs: "At death, the Ovambo believe that the owner may not pass through this gate, or the cattle will die and the kraal will come to ruin. A new hole is cut for him to pass through." (24)

6.11 Taboo of naming dead people? No evidence found.

6.12 Is there teknonymy? No evidence found of teknonymy.

6.13 Briefly describe religion (animism, ancestor worship, deism, magic, totems etc.): "Traditionally, the Owambo people lived a life that was highly influenced by their magico-religious influences. They not only believed in good and evil spirits but also they are influenced by great superstitions. Most members of the Owambo tribe believe in a supreme spirit, known as Kalunga. This spirit is known to take the form of a man and move invisibly among the people. This spirit is very important to the tribe. When the tribe is visited with a famine or pestilence it is the responsibility of the Kalunga to help the people along. Beliefs among the Owambo people centre around their belief in Kalunga. For example, when a tribe member wants to enter the chief's kraal, they must first remove their sandals. It is said that if this person does not remove their sandals it will bring death to one of the royal inmates and throw the kraal into mourning. Another belief deals with burning fire in the chief's kraal. If the fire burns out, the chief and the tribe will disappear. An important ceremony takes place at the end of the harvest, where the entire community has a feast and celebrates." (2)

## **7. Adornment**

7.1 Body paint: Other tribes in this area use ochre, a reddish pigment extracted from iron ore and smear it all over their bodies (24).

7.2 Piercings: Circumcision (24). "Women wear elaborate braids and copper or leather bands around their necks, making their figures appear very elongated." (24)

7.4 Scarification: Circumcision (24). "Women wear elaborate braids and copper or leather bands around their necks, making their figures appear very elongated." (24)

7.5 Adornment (beads, feathers, lip plates, etc.): "Women wear elaborate braids and copper or leather bands around their necks, making their figures appear very elongated." (24)

7.6 Ceremonial/Ritual adornment: Days before an Ovambo wedding, the bride gets an intricate hairdo, which must be covered with a white headdress until the ceremony (12).

7.7 Sex differences in adornment: Males do not have specialized adornment for ritual (12).

7.8 Missionary effect: “Most Namibian city-dwellers dress in modern fashions, as in the West. Several examples of traditional dress stand out, however. Herero women have adopted the German Victorian fashions of the nineteenth-century colonists. They wear long petticoated gowns with shawls, along with extravagant headdresses.” (24)

7.9 Cultural revival in adornment: Traditional clothing is unusual for the younger generations (24).

## 8. Kinship systems

8.1 Sibling classification system: No evidence found.

8.2 Sororate, levirate: No evidence found.

8.3 Other notable kinship typology, especially cross-cousin (MBD/FZD) typology (Crow/Hawaiian/Omaha etc.): No evidence found.

**9. Other interesting cultural features (list them):** “Despite women's gains in reproductive choice, their rights to family property are still not guaranteed. In most Namibian cultures, when a man dies, his parents and siblings often take his property from the widow and her children” (24)

## Numbered references

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