



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

## BACKGROUND

### Land and Climate

Namibia is slightly larger than Mozambique, or about the size of the U.S. states of Texas and Louisiana combined. Namibia is the driest country in sub-Saharan Africa, and very little of its land is classified as suitable for farming. Two deserts flank its central plateau: the Kalahari, to the east, and the Namib, along the western coast. The coast is usually foggy and cool because of the Benguela Current, a cold ocean current off the west coast of southern Africa. The Central Plateau region covers about half of Namibia, rising abruptly from the desert to an elevation of over 3,200 feet (975 meters). The Fish River Canyon is among the largest canyons in the world. In the north, *iishana* (singular, *oshana*; the Oshiwambo word for “temporary water holes caused by flooding in the rainy season”) support subsistence agriculture, livestock, and wildlife. *Omiramba* (Otjiherero for “dry riverbeds”) are also a distinctive part of the Namibian landscape, and most rivers are dry at least some of the year. Namibia's abundant wildlife include elephant, lion, giraffe, antelope, cheetah, and rhinoceros populations. Etosha National Park, which encompasses a vast salt pan, is one of Africa's largest wildlife reserves.

Namibia is a hot, dry country. A short rainy season from mid-October to November is followed by a longer rainy season from January to April. Rains are sporadic and

unpredictable. The rest of the year is extremely dry, with daytime temperatures around 104°F (40°C). Winter temperatures can get cold in central and southern regions but rarely fall below freezing. Temperatures in the north rarely reach below 50°F (10°C). Due to Namibia's desert climate, large swings between daytime and nighttime temperatures are common.

### History

#### Early Tribal Groups

Several ethnic groups inhabited present-day Namibia before German colonization. Early nomadic tribes came under pressure from migrating Bantu-speaking peoples, such as the Owambo (or Aawambo) and Herero (or Ovaherero), roughly 2,000 years ago. Later migration waves of other groups from the north and south forced the earliest groups (San, Khoisan, and others) east toward the Kalahari. Descendants of these original inhabitants comprise five or six distinct tribal groups. Though once collectively referred to as San, or “Bushmen” (a derogatory term), these people today prefer to be called by their specific tribal names. Other groups to settle in the region over the centuries include the Nama, Damara, and Basters.

#### Exploration and Colonization

In 1484 and 1488, Portuguese explorers Diogo Cão and Bartolomeu Dias became the first Europeans to reach what is now Namibia, marking their landing spots in the present-day towns of Swakopmund and Lüderitz. However, the Portuguese did not claim any land in the area and instead

colonized western parts of Africa, where the climate was less severe.

Four hundred years later, in 1884, Namibia became a German colony called South West Africa. Uprisings by the Damara, Herero, and Nama groups led to tens of thousands of deaths. The Herero in particular suffered enormously, with as much as 80 percent of the total Herero population killed, according to many estimates, in what today is referred to as the first genocide of the 20th century. Defeated in World War I, Germany lost authority over Namibia in 1920. The League of Nations gave Britain a mandate to prepare South West Africa for independence. The British turned administration over to South Africa. By 1946, South Africa had annexed the region, ignoring UN protests. South Africa instituted apartheid (segregation) and confined each tribal group to a homeland or to “townships” on the outskirts of urban centers.

### **Independence**

By 1957, the Owambo People's Organization (OPO) had emerged as a leading force to oppose South Africa's occupation. In 1960, the OPO became the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO). SWAPO guerrillas began their opposition with isolated attacks in 1966, and fighting eventually (in the 1970s and '80s) became a large-scale war against South Africa's Defense Forces. Under pressure and upon losing key battles, South Africa withdrew in the late 1980s. It retained Walvis Bay, a deep-sea port, until March 1994. Independence was formally recognized on 21 March 1990.

### **New Government and Challenges**

Elections in 1989 gave SWAPO a mandate to form a new government, and SWAPO leader Samuel Nujoma became Namibia's first president. The popular Nujoma won reelection in 1994 and secured a third term in 1999 after the legislature changed the constitution's limit on presidential terms from two to three for the first president of Namibia only. SWAPO candidate Hifikepunye Pohamba decisively won elections in 2004 at the end of Nujoma's third term. Pohamba took office in 2005 and was reelected in 2009. Upon leaving office in 2015, he was awarded Africa's top prize for excellence in leadership for ensuring a stable democracy and protecting media freedoms and human rights. Former prime minister Hage Geingob, who was elected to replace Pohamba, is also a member of the ruling SWAPO party. His government faces challenges such as poverty, corruption, unemployment, land reform, drought, and a severe HIV/AIDS epidemic.

## **THE PEOPLE**

### **Population**

Namibia has one of the world's lowest population densities. More than half of Namibians live in urban areas. The largest urban area is Windhoek, the capital, with about 477,000 residents. About 87 percent of Namibians are of purely African descent; 7 percent are of mixed ancestry, often referred to as *Coloureds*. White Namibians (6 percent of the population) are mostly Afrikaners (descendants of Dutch settlers) but also include persons of German, British, or Portuguese descent.

Namibia's many peoples were once classed into 11 ethnic groups, but many do not consider themselves part of their “assigned” category. The Owambo are classified as the largest ethnic group; statistics estimate that they make up about half of the population. Other groups include the Kavango, Herero, Damara, Nama, Caprivian, Baster, Tswana, Himba, and Khoisan. Basters descend from intermarriage between Europeans (mostly Dutch) and the Khoisan. The Himba are indigenous to Namibia; along with the San, they are one of the last nomadic people living in the country.

### **Language**

Namibia has 13 national languages. To help unify Namibians, the government chose English as its official language and the language of instruction in schools. Other national languages include 10 Indigenous African tongues spoken by the major ethnic groups of Namibia. Most Namibians speak at least one Indigenous tongue as well as English and/or Afrikaans, the latter of which was the official language before independence. The Owambo speak any of eight or more dialects of Oshiwambo. The Kavango speak five related languages; RuKwangali is the most dominant. The Herero and Himba speak Otjiherero. The Nama speak Nama and the Damara speak Damara; the two are closely related. The majority of Caprivians speak SiLozi, and the largest San groups speak Ju/hoan. Nama, Damara, and Ju/hoan are Khoisan languages. *Coloureds*, Basters, and most whites speak Afrikaans. Many people speak German, especially in the city of Swakopmund.

Aside from English and Afrikaans, Namibian languages are mainly oral. However, all have written forms that use the Roman alphabet. Some, such as Nama and Damara, incorporate clicking sounds. These sounds are indicated with special punctuation marks and symbols, such as ≠, /, !, and //. Government documents are written in national languages, and newspapers are published in the more prominent ones (such as Oshiwambo, Otjiherero, and SiLozi).

### **Religion**

German missionaries introduced Christianity in the 1800s, and over 97 percent of people consider themselves Christian. Lutheran and Catholic churches have the largest followings, but Anglican and other congregations are also active. Most Afrikaners belong to the Dutch Reformed Church. Very small Muslim and Jewish populations are also present.

Religious practices are part of everyday life: public schools begin the day with prayer and hymn singing, and official ceremonies and meetings often open and close with prayer.

Elements of traditional religions such as spiritual healing, witchcraft, magic, and ancestor veneration are still practiced. The Herero and Himba communicate with ancestors through a “holy fire,” which is tended by the village headman. Many people turn to witch doctors to receive traditional healing, to obtain charms and curses, and to settle disputes. Most Namibians, including those who are Christian, practice at least some aspects of traditional beliefs.

### **General Attitudes**

Because Namibia is a young and evolving nation, and because

its citizens are of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, it is difficult to describe general attitudes or shared attributes. Nevertheless, some common ground exists in important areas: most Namibians value family, education, good manners, hospitality, and hard work. Individual success (in areas like education, government, or business) brings honor to the entire family. Namibians tend to respect high status, as defined by old age, wealth (often measured in livestock), political power, advanced education, and service to one's people. Government workers have high status, as do businesspeople and individuals who hold university degrees.

Humility is essential in order to gain respect in society. It is considered improper to try to make oneself seem better than one's peers or family; it is better to allow praise to come from others than to seek it. People tend to avoid open confrontation. Though the country's past contains many painful periods, most Namibians are more interested in forging a peaceful future than in gaining revenge for past wrongs. Even so, past events remain important, as represented by the common saying "We shall forgive but never forget." Traditional Namibians believe that a person's actions lead to good or bad luck; doing evil brings misfortune, while doing good brings happiness. Many Christians believe that events are predetermined according to God's will.

In rural areas, clan identity is extremely important. Clan names indicate the ancestry of the clan's members and carry great weight. All royalty, regardless of ethnic group, is believed to have ancestry in the same prestigious clan, known as the Aakwaniilwa (in Oshiwambo) or the Ouvara (in Otjiherero).

### Personal Appearance

Namibians tend to place great importance on a neat and clean appearance. People generally follow common trends and avoid unique styles. For most Namibians, Western-style clothing has replaced traditional clothing. Rural people wear traditional styles more often than urban people. Women often wear skirts, trousers, or shorts. Men usually wear trousers and dress shirts. Clothes are usually ironed, with creased collars and pleats. Shirts are commonly tucked in. Namibians dress up for Sunday church services. Children wear uniforms to school. Urban youth follow some U.S. fashion trends.

Herero women often wear Victorian-style dresses, which were introduced by German missionaries in an effort to replace more revealing traditional attire. The dresses are made with 13 to 45 yards of fabric that form a large bell-like skirt over as many as nine underskirts. A shawl and a large matching hat (*otjikaeva*) complete the outfit. These hats take the shape of cow horns, as cows are sacred to the Herero. Some older Damara women wear a similar dress. Himba are known for wearing little to no clothing but many accessories (such as necklaces, bracelets, anklets, and belts). Himba women cover their bodies with a red mineral called ochre. A paste is made by crushing ochre stones and mixing the powder with animal fat. The paste protects the skin from insects, the sun, and the cold.

## CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

### Greetings

Greetings are considered essential to all interactions. They show respect and recognize a person's presence and value. To not greet someone is to disregard them. Men usually greet with a strong handshake. One always shakes with the right hand; the Owambo also place the left hand on the right elbow. Eye contact among equals shows sincerity. Women greet men and women by shaking hands, but they may kiss or hug close female friends.

Greetings vary according to language and situation. In one major Oshiwambo dialect, one says *Walalapo nawa* (Good morning) and *Wuhalapo nawa* (Good afternoon). *Moro* (Good morning) is the Otjiherero version of the Afrikaans greeting *Môre*. The Nama and Damara say *Matisa?* (How are you?).

One addresses a superior or high government official by title. Elders with high titles can be called *Sir* or *Madame*. Older Owambo are called *Meme* (for women) or *Tate* (for men). Adults are usually called by their family name; close friends and children may be called by nicknames or first names.

### Gestures

Namibians often communicate using hand motions. For instance, a hitchhiker bends a hand up and down at the wrist to hail a ride. The driver might show an open palm to indicate that there is no space in the vehicle. Twirling a finger in a circle means the driver is not traveling far. Pointing two fingers to one's eyes is used when one wants the listener to pay attention. Rather than point, a person may subtly lift the chin or eyebrows to indicate a direction. It is considered rude to point the sole of one's foot at someone, point one's index finger at someone, put one's hands in pockets while addressing an elder, or give or receive something with the left hand. Family members or friends of the same gender often hold hands in public.

### Visiting

Visiting among family and friends is an integral part of life, even for relatives who live far apart. Frequent visits maintain friendships and are reciprocated. It is rarely necessary to prearrange informal visits, and punctuality is usually not strict outside of professional settings. Hosts give their guests the best treatment possible and serve guests coffee, tea, *cool-drink* (any soft drink or juice), or homemade drinks containing sorghum, ginger, millet, or fresh milk. Guests stay at least an hour. A rural visit often takes place outdoors, usually in the shade of a tree. If hosts offer food, it is impolite for guests to refuse it. Whole families participate in visiting, but children are usually sent away to play after they have greeted the adults. Sunday is the most important visiting day. Friends may visit after church, and relatives often gather for a hearty midday meal.

### Eating

Although urban residents eat with Western utensils, rural people more often eat with the right hand. This is especially true of children. Some families eat three meals a day; poor families may eat only one or two meals a day. Breakfast might include tea or coffee and millet porridge or bread in

rural areas, while urban breakfasts vary with socioeconomic status. Schools end their day at the lunch hour, and businesses often close at 1 p.m. so that people can eat at home. Namibians typically pray before midday and evening meals.

Few families can afford to include much variety in their diet; cookbooks and recipes are rare. Sit-down restaurants are too expensive for most Namibians. *Take-away* (take-out) food is reasonably priced and found in every town.

## LIFESTYLE

### Family

#### Structure

Rural Namibians live in extended family groups, often in the same village. Families tend to be closely knit, even though migration to urban areas has separated many families. Urban residents often live in nuclear families, though they try to visit their relatives in rural areas often, and extended families may gather for certain holidays. Rural Namibians often visit urban relatives and may stay for long periods of time. It is common for a niece, nephew, or younger sibling to stay with an urban relative to attend a better school, look for work, or help care for small children. The responsibility to provide for these relatives sometimes strains the resources of urban families.

Rural families may have four or five children, while the average urban family has fewer children. In past generations, families were much larger, but family size has decreased in recent years due to the rising cost of food, housing, and education.

#### Parents and Children

All members are expected to contribute to the betterment of the family through monetary support and good behavior. Many children are cared for by their grandparents or other relatives, especially as more women enter the workforce. Children begin helping with household chores as early as age four. Younger children are given tasks like doing laundry, washing dishes, and cooking. Older children may help look after younger siblings, tend livestock, fetch water, and garden. Girls generally have more responsibilities at home than boys do.

Adult family members work hard to provide their children with a good start in life. In turn, grown children are expected to financially support their elders and younger siblings who are in school or unemployed. To act against a parent's wishes is considered disrespectful. No matter their age, Namibians are expected to listen to their parents. In some cases, the youngest son lives with and cares for his aging parents and inherits the family home.

#### Gender Roles

The man is considered the head of the household, though much of the day-to-day work is performed by women. Most rural women maintain traditional roles, which involve raising their children and farming or herding. Because rural Namibians often migrate to urban areas in search of work, many rural households are headed by members of elder generations, who maintain the household and the farm. In urban areas, both men and women often work outside the home. Household chores are considered the responsibility of

the woman, regardless of how much time she spends working outside the home. Single men living alone sometimes have a sister or girlfriend help with household tasks. Families who can afford it may hire a maid or nanny to help around the house. They may also bring a younger female relative from a rural area to assist.

While Namibian law guarantees equal rights to men and women, men hold most power in the family and society. Although women increasingly have more say in their marriages, many wives are still expected to obey their husbands in all matters. Gender-based violence is a significant problem, and cases of abuse often go unreported. While women have the right to own land, tribal chiefs in charge of distributing land generally fail to recognize this right, assigning most land to men. Tradition also dictates that a man controls his wife's property and any property the couple owns together. A growing number of educated women assert their rights and reject cultural customs that favor men; however, strong pressure remains for women to conform to traditional gender roles.

### Housing

#### Urban

In urban areas, Western-style housing is the norm. A typical house is made of bricks or concrete with corrugated metal roofing. Most homes are one storey. The exterior is usually painted a bright color. Yards contain flowers, bushes, and fruit trees and are surrounded by a concrete wall or a wire fence. In less affluent areas, homes are often rectangular, and the bathroom is located outside of the main house. Yards are surrounded by a mesh-wired fence and are largely bare, without gardens or many trees.

Squatter communities, referred to as "informal settlements," are found on the edges of Namibia's large cities. Shelters in these areas are usually made from corrugated metal and are no larger than a single room. Residents most often get their water from a communal tap; indoor plumbing is uncommon. Some homes use pirated electricity, but legal connections are rare.

#### Rural

In rural areas, people usually live in traditional housing made of local materials. A compound belonging to an extended family consists of several huts. The style of construction varies according to ethnic group. Owambo huts are typically round, while Herero and Kavango huts are often square. Among the Owambo, Kavango, and Herero, huts consist of tree-branch frames and thatched roofs; the Herero fill in framed walls with cattle dung and use corrugated metal for the roof. A few huts are for sleeping, one is for socializing, and an open-air hut is used for cooking. A growing number of rural families build homes similar to those found in urban areas, such as from corrugated metal or other manmade materials. Homes made from manmade materials may be painted in bright colors, while homes made from natural materials are generally not painted. Surrounding the compound is a fence made from branches, wire, old car parts, or whatever materials are available. Beyond the compound, there is usually a *kraal*, where livestock is kept, and a field where grains such as *mahangu* (millet) are grown.

The vast majority of rural houses do not have electricity, though access is increasing. Some families run televisions using car batteries. Villagers retrieve water from a communal well or tap connected to a water tower.

#### **Interiors**

Urban Namibians tend to furnish their homes with Western-style furniture; the average family has couches, a TV, and an entertainment center in the living room; a table and chairs in the kitchen (or in more affluent homes, in a separate dining room); and beds and dressers in the bedrooms. Indoor bathrooms are the norm. In less affluent areas, there are usually just three bedrooms and a kitchen in the home, with the bathroom located just outside.

In rural homes, furniture is minimal, usually only beds and plastic chairs. Throughout the country, decorations often include artificial flowers, framed copies of poems, and family photos. Many people prominently display photos of the country's founding president, Samuel Nujoma, or other prominent political leaders.

#### **Ownership**

In order to combat land ownership patterns left over from colonization, the Namibian government launched a land reform program after the country gained independence. Under this program, when a family wishes to sell their commercial farming or ranching land, the government must be given the opportunity to buy the land before it is sold to anyone else. As a result, just over a third of the land in Namibia is communal land owned by the government. This land is redistributed among the poor, the landless, and other disadvantaged groups. At the community level, land is portioned out by traditional leaders (chiefs and headmen). The program has met with mixed results, and many complain of corruption in the distribution of land, in addition to displacement of those who were already living on it.

Urban areas are characterized by a conspicuous socioeconomic divide in housing; this divide is rooted in apartheid practices that separated neighborhoods along racial lines. Today, people generally rent their homes, as property costs are very high in comparison to the average income. Private banks offer mortgages to those who can afford them, and government programs aim to help lower-income families buy property. Rural families usually live on family or communal land. People often build their homes in stages as funds become available and family size increases.

### **Dating and Marriage**

#### ***Dating and Courtship***

Young people generally start dating in their mid-teens. Urban young people openly congregate in groups, and couples may meet at dance clubs, restaurants, shopping malls, or school functions. In rural areas, interactions between young people of opposite genders are no longer as limited as they were in the past; this modern trend is largely due to access to social media.

Traditionally, a young man asked a young woman's parents for permission to date her. However, this custom is no longer strictly followed and is more common in rural areas than in cities. Many parents still expect the man to formally ask permission to date their daughter, with the understanding

that this meeting will not take place until the couple has been quietly dating long enough to make wedding plans. Among some groups, if a young couple is seen spending time together in public, they are assumed to be courting and are expected to marry. Public displays of romantic affection are not common, though they are increasing.

#### ***Engagement***

Among most groups, engagements consist of two parts. First, the man typically proposes privately to the woman with an engagement ring. If the woman agrees, the groom's family pays a formal traditional visit to the bride's family to become acquainted and to ask the family for the woman's hand. The elders of each family can reject the marriage if they are not satisfied with the other family or the potential spouse. Some couples hold a large engagement party to announce the good news.

Among many groups, the groom must pay a *lobola* (bride-price, usually consisting of cattle or money) to the bride's parents before a wedding can take place. The *lobola* varies according to the woman's education and situation. For example, the price will be higher if the woman is more educated and lower if she has children from a previous relationship who will need to be supported financially.

#### ***Marriage in Society***

Marriage is greatly valued in Namibia, and for many parents, marriage is among their most important aspirations for their children. Much of a person's social standing is based on marriage. The legal age for marriage with parental consent is 18. Rural women might marry younger than age 18, but most people wait at least until the age of 30 to marry. Same-sex marriages cannot be legally performed in Namibia.

Polygamy is acceptable in some rural areas, though its practice is declining. A growing number of women expect their husbands to be faithful, in part due to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Women have long been expected to be faithful to their spouses, though the same was not traditionally true for men. This is changing, however, as male infidelity is becoming less accepted. Still, divorce is rare because marriage is seen as so important and the divorce process can be long, costly, and especially difficult for women. Couples with legal marriages go to court to obtain a divorce. Those without legal marriages must turn to the traditional leadership to obtain a divorce and make arrangements for dividing assets and supporting children.

#### ***Weddings***

Christians often hold both a religious and a traditional wedding ceremony, sometimes combining the two. Namibians who practice traditional beliefs exclusively hold only a traditional wedding. The bride usually wears an elaborate white, Western-style wedding dress. Among some groups, the bride wears a traditional dress designed for the wedding. The groom wears a tuxedo or suit.

Church weddings are followed by a reception at the bride's home or a reception hall. Traditional wedding celebrations involve dancing, a huge feast, and traditional music. Events are often held at the home of the bride or at both the bride's home and the groom's home.

While traditional marriage customs related to a person's ethnic group are important, marriages today often include

customs from various ethnic groups and a growing number of Western elements, such as bridesmaids and groomsmen, set color schemes, and wedding rings. Rural wedding celebrations usually include the entire community, while in urban areas, weddings are usually by invitation.

Herero wedding festivities last at least three days, with events (such as the exchange of the *lobola*) taking place periodically. Guests are not formally invited, but instead anyone is welcome to attend. Guests coming from long distances generally camp around the bride's home. The bride stays inside her bedroom for most of the celebrations leading up to the wedding, as she is traditionally expected to be timid and nervous about the occasion. Older women may visit her during this time to give her marriage advice. The bride and groom are considered married after they eat *omuramwa*, the inner part of a cow's upper mouth. At the end of the three days, the bride goes with the groom to his home village, where she is led by his father to be introduced to the forefathers at the "holy fire" (through which they communicate with the ancestors).

Because of the high costs of providing food and beverages for wedding celebrations, a family may try to combine weddings, perhaps having multiple daughters get married at the same time. Likewise, poor couples often live together and have children before or instead of marrying because they cannot afford the expense of a wedding. These arrangements are widely accepted as long as the couple plans to marry at some point. A growing number of couples, particularly in urban areas, register their marriages with the government.

## Life Cycle

### Birth

Traditions associated with pregnancy vary by ethnic group. Among the Damara, it is the responsibility of the father to inform a woman's parents that she is pregnant. Some cultures believe that a pregnant woman should never be cold; others prescribe that pregnant women avoid ugly pictures at the risk of giving birth to an unattractive baby. Today, most babies are born in hospitals or clinics. In remote areas, a traditional midwife may deliver babies.

When a baby is born to an Owambo family, a goat is slaughtered for the mother to eat, in the belief that doing so will restore the blood she lost during the delivery. Among most groups, families hold parties to celebrate the birth of a baby. In rural areas especially, the celebration is bigger for a boy than for a girl, as boys are seen as future leaders of the family, while girls will eventually become part of their husbands' families. A few weeks after birth, Christian babies are baptized. Among the Owambo, the baby's hair is cut within a month of birth; the baby is not supposed to leave the home until this time. Shortly after birth, Herero and Owambo babies receive traditional beads made from natural materials like eggshells or seashells. A boy wears the beads, around the neck, until his first teeth come in. A girl wears the beads around the waist; many girls wear these beads throughout their life, adjusting the string as they grow.

Choosing a baby's name is a serious decision and may take weeks. Some ethnic groups hold ceremonies in order to choose a name, sometimes calling upon the baby's ancestors

to provide a name to the elders. Children born in urban areas are often taken back to the parents' home village to be named. Children are frequently named after a relative or friend of their parents. The namesake has a responsibility to help support the child, so Owambo parents typically name the baby after someone wealthy. Successful people generally have several children named after them. The person for whom the child is named brings a gift for the child soon after birth. Owambo children are often named after events surrounding their birth (such as weather patterns, historical events, or the death of someone prominent). Approximately one month after the birth of the child, Herero elders go to the "holy fire" (through which they communicate with the ancestors) to announce that a child has been born and to seek the protection of the ancestors.

### Milestones

Some of Namibia's ethnic groups practice coming-of-age rituals. Customs vary between ethnic groups and usually occur in the early teenage years. In many groups, a traditional healer or community elder takes groups of boys to camp in the forest for two to three weeks. During this time, the boys are circumcised and undergo training to prepare them for manhood. Among the Himba and related groups (such as the Herero and Zemba), two or four of the teeth may be removed from children around the ages of 10 to 12, though the practice is decreasing. This ritual is meant to secure the protection of a person's ancestors, align the person with Himba standards of beauty, and aid one in speaking Otjiherero.

A growing number of young people celebrate their eighteenth or twenty-first birthdays as important milestones, but this is more due to Western influence than because these ages represent adulthood. Secondary-school graduation is an important milestone, though not all Namibians reach this stage in their education. At the end of the last year of secondary school, students have a large farewell party called the *matric farewell*. Students save up in order to buy new clothing and to arrange to arrive at the party in a fancy car. While these milestones are important, for some Namibians, people are not truly considered adults until they have children of their own.

### Death

After a death, women immediately mourn the loss by making a loud, high-pitched ululating sound. The vast majority of Namibian funerals follow Christian traditions, whether or not the deceased was a practicing Christian. The funeral may be held several days after the death, often on a Saturday, so that relatives can be notified and make arrangements to attend. From the time of death, relatives gather to help prepare for the funeral. In urban areas, friends and family gather at the deceased's home to comfort the family every evening until the day of the funeral. Families often take the body from the mortuary to the deceased person's home on the evening before the funeral. The family gathers to sing and pray the entire night. The funeral takes place at the churchyard and includes prayers, songs, and readings from the Bible. Afterward, everyone returns to the family home for a feast. Usually a cow is slaughtered to feed the guests.

Some funeral traditions are associated with a person's ethnic group. Among the Herero, the body of the deceased is

taken to the area where he or she was born or to the *kraal*, where the family livestock is kept. The body is then taken to each home in which the person lived. The funeral and burial take place at the final home. As people become more mobile, living in many different cities and houses over the course of a lifetime, funeral traditions are changing, and the body is taken only to certain homes instead of all of the person's homes. When an Owambo person dies, livestock may be slaughtered; the number and type of livestock depend on the deceased's position in the family. Goats are never slaughtered after a death in the Owambo culture, as doing so is believed to bring bad luck and result in more deaths in the family.

## Diet

Rural families grow their own staple crops such as maize, sorghum, and *mahangu* (millet). Rice is popular in urban areas among those who can afford it, as are hot and cold cereals and *rusks* (a type of hardened bread). Processed foods are imported from South Africa and are expensive. A typical meal includes *pap* (stiff porridge traditionally made from cornmeal) or *mahangu*, some sort of soup or sauce, and some meat when possible. Chicken and goat meat are popular. People, especially those in rural areas, buy goats or sheep and slaughter them at home. Because cattle are considered a sign of wealth, they are slaughtered only for special occasions, like weddings, funerals, and other feasts. Fish and frogs are available when *iishana* (temporary water holes in the north) flood. Boys use slingshots to bring down small birds. Meat is often cooked at *braais* (barbecues) or included in *potjiekos* ("pot food," any meal cooked in a three-legged cast-iron pot over a fire).

Common snacks include *biltong* (a jerky made from a variety of meats), *vetkoek* (also called *fatcakes*, a type of fried dough), dried *mopane* worms (a kind of tree grub), and termites. Rural Namibians also eat seasonal wild fruits and nuts. Tea (often *rooibos*, or "red bush tea") and coffee are served throughout the day, when guests come, and with every meal. On special occasions, people eat salads (any food mixed with mayonnaise and parsley). Common salads include macaroni salad, carrot salad, rice salad, bean salad, potato salad, chicken salad, and beef salad.

## Recreation

### Sports

The most popular sport is soccer. People of all ages enjoy watching televised matches of Namibia's professional soccer league and European leagues. Men and boys enjoy playing soccer informally. Rugby, basketball, volleyball, field hockey, netball (similar to basketball, but only played by women), and track and field are also popular.

### Leisure

Visiting and socializing are the most common leisure activities. An informal neighborhood *shebeen* (bar) is a popular spot for drinking beer, dancing, and listening to music. In areas with electricity, most people own televisions, which may be a family's most expensive possession. Soap operas (called *soapies*) from Mexico, Colombia, and the Philippines are especially popular. Women, particularly in rural areas, enjoy weaving. Men play *owela* (a game played

with marbles or pebbles on a wooden board with shallow holes). On weekends, families often attend community events and family gatherings.

Urban teenagers are involved in clubs at school; each club may be related to a sport, interest, or cause. Teenagers may also spend time at community centers that sponsor activities, sports, and volunteer work. Watching movies, listening to music, and reading are other popular activities.

Many games are played by both urban and rural children, and it is common for boys and girls to play separately. All children play games like "house" and the herding equivalent, "cattle." Boys also enjoy horse or donkey riding and bird hunting with slings. Urban boys in particular also enjoy playing marbles and videogames. *Amagoes* is a game played by girls. Two girls stand on opposite ends of the playing area, and a third girl stands between them. The end players throw a ball back and forth, trying to hit the player in the middle. Meanwhile, the player in the middle scores points by filling bottles with sand while avoiding being hit by the ball. *Ouma* is another common game. Girls on opposite ends have a rope looped around their legs while a third girl is in the middle, jumping in various set patterns within that loop. The loop begins low, at ankle or knee height, and moves up the body to increase the difficulty of completing the patterns.

Many children lack toys, so they often make their own from whatever materials they can find. Young girls make dolls and clothes from scraps of cloth. They may also fashion dollhouses out of cardboard or other available materials. Young boys often make toy cars from wire, soda cans, and shoe polish tins. Groups of children often gather to play with their homemade toys, constantly building and improving them together. Soccer balls are precious commodities and will be played with until they are completely worn out. Those without a soccer ball may make one out of old clothes wrapped up in a plastic bag.

### Vacation

Few Namibians can afford to travel purely for pleasure, so most people spend their time off visiting and helping family. For many people, family occasions, like weddings and funerals, are important social events. People living in urban areas often return to their rural hometowns at these times, usually stopping to visit friends and relatives along the way.

## The Arts

Namibian music differs according to ethnic group and region. *Lang arm* (literally, "long arm"), or waltz music, was introduced to Namibia by the Germans and has become entwined in the traditions of the south. Northern music is more rhythmic in nature and involves African drums and three-part harmony singing. Music from other parts of Africa, such as Congolese-style *kwasa kwasa*, is popular. Locally produced hip-hop, rap, R&B, *ovirite*, and *kwaito* are favorite styles among younger Namibians. *Ovirite* is upbeat choir music that is sung in Otjiherero, and *kwaito* music, which was adapted from South Africa, mixes African melodies and lyrics with house, hip-hop, and reggae styles. Dance clubs can be found in all towns and in some rural areas. Children learn to sing early, and music plays a part in most aspects of life.

Each ethnic group has its own traditional arts. Examples

include Herero dolls, Owambo baskets, Caprivian wood carvings, and Nama ostrich-shell jewelry.

Namibia has a long oral tradition in which cultural values and knowledge were passed on through storytelling. Written literature is a more recent tradition but is growing. The country's literary canon includes works in English as well as the country's native languages. Important Namibian writers include Neshani Andreas, Mvula Nangolo, Joseph Diescho, Hans Daniël Namuhuja, and Dorian Haarhoff.

### Holidays

Public holidays include New Year's Day (1 January), Independence Day (21 March), Good Friday, Easter, Workers' Day (1 May), Cassinga Day (4 May), Ascension, Africa Day (25 May), Heroes' Day (26 August), Day of the Namibian Woman (10 December), International Human Rights Day (10 December), Christmas (25 December), and Family Day (26 December). The most widely celebrated holidays are Christmas, Family Day, New Year's Day, and Easter.

#### *New Year's Day*

Namibians may celebrate the New Year at home with family, at house parties, or at nightclubs. Many people hold *braais* (barbecues) and serve drinks. Most people stay up until midnight to greet the New Year with fireworks, drinks, cheers, and kisses.

#### *Easter*

Many people also return to their hometowns for Easter, as most people have the Friday before Easter (Good Friday) and Easter Monday off from work, making a long weekend. Christians celebrate Easter by going to church, eating, singing, dancing, and praying. Colored eggs and Easter egg hunts are growing in popularity due to Western influences.

#### *Heroes' Day*

While Heroes' Day officially honors those Namibians who died for their country, the day has different meanings for people from different groups. For example, among the Owambo, this day marks the beginning of the armed resistance against South Africa, while the Herero honor ancestors killed by German colonizers. The day is marked with speeches by government officials and a ceremony at the Heroes' Acre (a monument to the heroes of the struggle for independence, located in Windhoek).

#### *Christmas and Family Day*

Around Christmastime (from early December to mid-January), most people in urban areas return to their hometowns in rural areas to celebrate with their families and help plant crops. Many businesses close or cut back their hours during this time. Christmas Day is celebrated with the extended family. Christians attend church in the morning. People spend the rest of the day at home, eating, singing, and dancing. Families often slaughter a goat, sheep, pig, or several chickens for the main meal. The following day is Family Day. On this day, families often gather to pray, spend time together, and discuss family issues.

#### *Other Holidays*

Most patriotic holidays are celebrated with government speeches, but the average person spends the day relaxing and socializing, often in a coastal town, like Swakopmund.

Independence Day is celebrated with dance competitions, fireworks, and concerts. Cassinga Day honors all Namibians who died in Namibia's wars and marks a massacre of eight hundred refugees during the war for independence from South Africa. Radio and television programs commemorate the historical events related to the day, and the president gives a speech, which is broadcast throughout the country. The Day of the African Child (16 June) is not a public holiday but marks the 1976 slayings of children in Soweto, South Africa. Children are given the day off from classes, and most schools organize activities for the students.

## SOCIETY

### Government

#### *Structure*

Namibia's president is head of state and head of government. The president appoints an executive cabinet, which is led by a prime minister. The president is directly elected by popular vote to a five-year term and can run for reelection once. A runoff vote is held if no single presidential candidate wins more than half of the votes in the first round. Namibia's parliament consists of the 104-member National Assembly and the 42-member National Council. Ninety-six members of the National Assembly are elected using a proportional representation system, and eight nonvoting members are appointed by the president. Members of the National Assembly serve for five-year terms. The National Council consists of three representatives chosen by each of the country's 14 Regional Councils and functions mainly as an advisory body. Members of the National Council serve five-year terms.

#### *Political Landscape*

Though several political parties are active in Namibia, the center-left South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) party of Namibia has maintained firm political control since independence despite internal power struggles. SWAPO's main political base is the Owambo tribe, which makes up about half of Namibia's population. This relationship has led minority groups to complain about discrimination. Tribal chiefs are responsible for settling local disputes and allocating rural land use. These local chiefs are highly respected, but their position relative to the central government can be a source of friction.

#### *Government and the People*

Many recognize corruption among government officials as a major problem, though efforts are being made to combat it. The government also uses its constitutional mandate to provide for national security and public welfare as a justification to pressure the media to avoid unflattering coverage. However, freedom of the press is generally enjoyed, as are the other legally guaranteed freedoms of speech, religion, and association. The voting age for Namibian citizens is 18. While presidential elections often have high voter turnout, participation in elections has declined to about 72 percent recently, in part because of continued SWAPO dominance in Namibian politics. In November 2014 elections, Namibia became the first African



country to use electronic voting machines.

## Economy

Most Namibians are subsistence farmers or work in agriculture and fishing. Namibia exports cattle, fish, and mollusks. The mining industry exports diamonds, copper, gold, zinc, lead, and uranium. Tourism is an industry with great potential. Namibia relies heavily on South Africa's economy. South African companies own most large businesses, and around 40 percent of goods are imported from South Africa.

Wealth and land ownership are highly concentrated. White commercial farmers own most arable land. The relatively high gross domestic product per capita reflects wealth from diamonds and white-owned businesses; the average person may earn a fraction of that. Poverty disproportionately affects women and people living in rural areas. In recent years, the economy has been damaged by the global recession, increased mining costs and competition, and decreased fishing catches. The currency is the Namibia dollar (NAD), which is tied to the South African *rand* (ZAR).

## Transportation and Communications

Most Namibians do not own cars. Buses and taxis are available in Windhoek. Private and public buses offer service from Windhoek to larger towns on the main north–south highway. People walk or bike short distances. For greater distances, they may *hike* (hitchhike or travel by crowded minibuses, called *combies*, that make frequent stops on fixed routes without schedules). In rural areas without public transport, many people use carts pulled by donkeys. Windhoek's airport has international and domestic flights.

Virtually all Namibians have cellular phones, which, combined with landlines, provide adequate telephone access countrywide. Internet cafés are widespread in urban areas but are rarely found in rural areas. A growing number of businesses and homes have internet access, and many young people access the internet using smartphones. A majority of the total population uses the internet.

The media in Namibia is one of the least censored in Africa. Radio broadcasts reach virtually all areas and are therefore more important than national television. Broadcasts are made in all major languages, and radio is the major source of news, sports, personal announcements, and music.

## Education

### Structure and Access

Until independence, in 1990, Namibia's education system followed that of South Africa—the Bantu System, which incorporated the racial stratification of apartheid. Under the Bantu System, white and non-white students were educated in separate and highly unequal schools. After gaining independence, the government began improving and integrating the educational system. Although the government provides equal resources to all public schools, former white schools still perform better than former Black schools, and schools in urban areas perform better than those in rural areas. Private schools operate in Namibia, but the majority of students attend public schools. As neighborhoods become

more racially integrated, many white families have moved their children to expensive private schools, whose costs prohibit attendance for many Black children.

Namibian children attend school year-round, with 2- or 3-week breaks in May and most of December and January off. Children begin school at age 7. Primary school lasts 7 years and is followed by 5 years of secondary school. Education is compulsory for 10 years, from grades 1 through 10. After grades 7 and 9, students must pass a difficult exam in order to continue on to the following grade level. Students take another test after grade 12 to determine if they can attend university. Students who do not pass may retake these exams the following year. It is not unusual for people to spend years trying to improve their score in order to continue their education.

Enrollment and literacy rates in Namibia tend to be higher than average for the region. Families consider their children's education an important investment. They may pool their resources to pay the school fees for one child if they cannot afford to send all of their children. Girls slightly outnumber boys at all levels of education.

Education is free in primary and secondary school. However, students are responsible for uniforms, supplies, and transportation to and from school. Schools in wealthier areas are able to charge substantial fees (which vary by school and pay for things like utilities and equipment), so students at these schools generally receive a better education, usually with smaller class sizes, more resources, and better-qualified teachers. Students whose families cannot afford the associated fees may receive government subsidies.

### School Life

After Namibia's independence, English became the main language of instruction, beginning with grade 1; before this level, local languages are used. However, many teachers who were trained under the Bantu System lack the English skills required to teach in English.

While the Bantu System emphasized an authoritative teaching style, today's school system promotes a student-centered approach that includes class discussions and group work rather than only lecturing. However, since many teachers were trained under the Bantu System, teaching methods are often still very authoritative. Students' grades are largely based on their results on exams; homework and other assignments are less emphasized.

Students and teachers typically have a formal relationship, with the students referring to their teachers as *sir* or *madam* or as *Mr.*, *Miss*, or *Mrs.* followed by the surname. Corporal punishment in the classroom, though illegal, is widespread. Parents are generally not closely involved in their children's education, particularly in rural areas and poorer communities. Though materials are becoming more accessible, most schools have an average of one textbook for every two students.

Many children walk long distances to school because they cannot afford transportation. Students may have to travel to another city to attend secondary school, as secondary schools are not evenly distributed. Students may also choose to attend a more prestigious school than the one located nearby. Most secondary schools board students in hostels and provide all

meals at the school.

**Higher Education**

Only a fraction of college-age Namibians attend higher education. Students may choose from three universities and various vocational schools. Some Namibians attend universities abroad. Because of high unemployment rates in the country, many university graduates struggle to find jobs related to their degree.

**Health**

Because Namibia's population is relatively spread out, health care and health education do not reach all areas. Clinics are found in most towns; several villages often share a clinic. Clinics provide prenatal care, immunizations, checkups, and diagnosis and treatment for disease. Rural clinics are staffed by nurses. Doctors are available primarily in urban areas and visit small towns weekly to see patients with serious problems. Private hospitals are too expensive for most people, and government hospitals are understaffed and overcrowded. Many people turn to traditional medicine when clinics are unavailable, too expensive, or ineffective.

Namibia's HIV/AIDS infection rate is one of the highest in the world: nearly 12 percent of adults aged 15 to 49. Other diseases (including river blindness, schistosomiasis, and ringworm) are present in various regions. Malnutrition becomes most serious in times of drought.

**AT A GLANCE**

**Contact Information**

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**Country and Development Data**

Capital	Windhoek
Population	2,777,232 (rank=137)
Area (sq. mi.)	318,261 (rank=33)
Area (sq. km.)	824,292
Human Development Index	134 of 189 countries
Gender Inequality Index	111 of 162 countries
GDP (PPP) per capita	\$9,100
Adult Literacy	92% (male); 92% (female)
Infant Mortality	28.7 per 1,000 births
Life Expectancy	56 (male); 63 (female)
Currency	Namibian Dollar