



# The form and function of Ovambo arrows: Exploring agro-pastoralist hunting technology



Chrislyn Allan<sup>a</sup>, Justin Bradfield<sup>a,b,\*</sup>, Marlize Lombard<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Anthropology and Development Studies, University of Johannesburg, P.O. Box 524, Auckland Park, Johannesburg 2006, South Africa

<sup>b</sup> Evolutionary Studies Institute, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper we describe a single sample of nineteenth and twentieth century bows and arrows of the Ovambo, Namibia. Unlike some other southern African bow-hunting groups, there is a paucity of literature describing the traditional hunting weapons of the Ovambo. Two types of bows and two broad types of arrows were observed, the latter each with multiple variants. The varied arrow designs reflect different types of prey and hunting techniques. There is apparently greater design affiliation with several Angolan tribes, such as the Ovimbundu, than with the Hei//om hunter-gatherers, with whom the Ovambo also interacted. We argue that the basic Ovambo weapon designs and hunting techniques were well established prior to their entrance into Namibia and was not affected tangibly by contact with the Hei//om. There are several features of the arrows that seem unique to the Ovambo material and are probably of local invention. We postulate probable functions of some of the arrow designs, although others remain ambiguous.

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## 1. Introduction

The people of the Ovambo language grouping comprise twelve linguistically-related groups, together constituting the largest population group in Namibia today. Despite the fact that their history and anthropology have formed the basis of several dissertations (e.g., Davies, 1994; Hayes, 1992; Salokoski, 2006; Shiweda, 2011), researchers have made little effort to relate Ovambo bow-hunting practices to their material culture – something noted by Leakey (1926) and still applicable today. The Ovambo were part of the matrilineal Western Bantu-speaking southward migrations (Alves et al., 2011; Holden, 2002; Vansina, 1995), and were agro-pastoralists who also practised bow hunting and cattle rearing (Loeb, 1949; Salokoski, 2006). Most of the literature on their economy is focused on settlement patterns, rituals and social context, with relatively little information provided about the diversity of their hunting technology. In his paper on the classification of African bows and arrows, Leakey (1926) mentions the Ovambo only fleetingly.

It is not uncommon for agro-pastoralists to supplement their diet by hunting (e.g., Badenhorst, 2015; Morton and Hitchcock, 2014; Voigt, 1986). Comparatively little information exists on this topic, however, for the matrilineal Western Bantu-speakers. Bow hunting has probably been practised by various autochthonous hunter-gatherer groups in southern Africa since the later stages of the Middle Stone Age, from about 64,000 years ago (e.g., Backwell et al., 2008; Lombard and Phillipson, 2010; Lombard, 2011). Yet, the extent to which incoming Bantu-speaking groups, with whom the hunter-gatherers interacted, adopted these practices and technologies is still poorly understood (Hall et al., 2013). One means by which prehistoric hunting methods might be assessed is through the study of large collections of hunting-related artefacts (Knecht, 1997).

Here we present the first empirical study of Ovambo bows and arrows collected during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and currently housed in the Ditsong Museum of Culture History, Pretoria. Each of these items was donated to the museum with little to no associated information beyond the year of donation and the fact that the material is of Ovambo origin. Our aim is to describe the collection and provide some insight on the diversity of Ovambo hunting practices and technology. We discuss the possible insights material culture might shed on interactions with neighbouring groups and migration routes.

\* Corresponding author at: Department of Anthropology and Development Studies, University of Johannesburg, P.O. Box 524, Auckland Park, Johannesburg 2006, South Africa.

E-mail addresses: [chrislynallan@gmail.com](mailto:chrislynallan@gmail.com) (C. Allan), [jbradfield8@gmail.com](mailto:jbradfield8@gmail.com) (J. Bradfield), [mlombard@uj.ac.za](mailto:mlombard@uj.ac.za) (M. Lombard).

## 2. Background

It is estimated that the first Western Bantu-speaking groups arrived in northern Namibia before the tenth century AD (Sandelowsky, 1983), and that the first Ovambo migrations into the area occurred in the sixteenth century AD (Wainwright, 1943; Salokoski, 2006). The origin/s of the people who would become the Ovambo is not precisely known. Some think that they originated from the Great Lakes region north of the Zambezi and migrated into Namibia via the Okavango Delta (Hayes, 2009a; Williams, 1991), while others suggest a direct southward migration through Angola (Williams, 1991). There is little archaeological evidence available to corroborate either theory. One of the reasons postulated to account for these migrations was the search for hunting grounds (Williams, 1991; Hayes, 2009a, 2009b). Although meat derived from hunting was used to augment their primary subsistence of millet and beef, hunting also played an essential part in Ovambo culture and economy (Estermann, 1976; Williams, 1991), more so than among the Eastern-Bantu speakers (cf. Voigt, 1986). Ovambo origin myths are intimately associated with concepts of hunting and a primeval hunter (Williams, 1991; Hayes, 2009a, 2009b).

Little is known about the development of herding and agriculture in northern Namibia (Salokoski, 2006), but early traveller and missionary accounts indicate that a mixed farming economy must have been well established among the Ovambo long before the nineteenth century (see Siiskonen, 1996; Salokoski, 2006; Shiweda, 2011). The same is true of the ability to work iron (Hahn, 1928; Wainwright, 1943). The acquisition of livestock by the Ovambo likely took place during their southward migrations through contact with Khoe and Eastern Bantu-speaking groups (Williams, 1991). Unlike most other Western Bantu speakers, cattle appear to have attained socio-economic status among the Ovambo (Davies, 1994; Estermann, 1976; Williams, 1991; Siiskonen, 1996), a factor that seems to have influenced their settlement pattern (Williams, 1991). The number of cattle a man owned was seen to reflect personal wealth, and also served as sacrificial offerings (Williams, 1991; Shiweda, 2011). By the nineteenth century, cattle were being used as currency for trade, and as tax to the Ovambo king (Gewald, 2003; Gustafsson, 2005; Hayes, 1998).

Hunting was an activity carried out during the dry season to provide food during periods of low agricultural productivity (Williams, 1991). Young Ovambo boys hunted small game near the homesteads, whereas men hunted bigger game in the forests around the settlements (Hayes, 1998; Salokoski, 2006). Ovambo concepts of manhood and empowerment were intertwined with game hunting (Hayes, 1998, 2009a). Ovambo kings also participated in hunts – an activity intimately connected with control over nature and their fitness to rule (Williams, 1991; Hayes, 2009a, 2009b). Tokens of Ovambo kingship were an iron-clad bow, sceptre and iron arrows, which would be transferred to the new ruler upon the death of the old (Salokoski, 2006). Arrows were also used in warfare, and by ‘witches’ for ritual activities (Davies, 1994; Hiltunen, 1986). Ovambo large-game hunting techniques are thought to have been acquired through interaction with the Hei//om San of the Kalahari (Louw, 1967; Sandelowsky, 1983). Indeed, there are a number of Ovambo proverbs that refer to the time when they were ‘BaTwa’ or hunter-gatherers (Davies, 1994; Estermann, 1976; Williams, 1991). This interaction may also account for the iron acquired by the Hei//om to tip their arrows (Schapera, 1927). Weapons are known to have been locally traded (Loeb, 1949). In the early twentieth century, the colonial administration placed restrictions on hunting to disarm the Ovambo (Shiweda, 2011), usurping control of one of the traditional roles of the Ovambo king (Hayes, 1998). After the introduction of guns,

the bow and arrow fell into disuse, and with it, the associated concepts of manhood, courage and honour (Hayes, 1998).

In addition to game hunting, the Ovambo also engaged in fishing of which both males and females are said to have partaken (Davies, 1994; Estermann, 1976; Siiskonen, 1996). Two methods of fishing are recorded. The first is harpooning and the second is via baskets placed in weirs (Loeb, 1949). Apart from that derived through hunting, fishing is considered to have accounted for most of the protein consumed by the Ovambo (Estermann, 1976).

## 3. Ovambo bows and arrows at the Ditsong Museum

The Ditsong Museum in Pretoria contains 116 arrows and nine bows attributed to the Ovambo. This collection, although large, should not be considered representative of all extant Ovambo bow-hunting equipment, as there are equally large collections housed in Namibia and elsewhere that we have not yet studied. We treat the bows and arrows collectively as Ovambo material, without ascribing any to distinct groups within the Ovambo population, as no contextual information was recorded.

We apply Schapera's (1927) criteria to describe the various elements of the artefacts, which will also facilitate comparison between the Ovambo and hunter-gatherer equipment. Fig. 1 outlines the various considered elements. We also recorded the physical middle, centre of gravity and front of centre (F.O.C.) of the arrows. The latter is used to determine the balance of an arrow and whether it is suitable as a projectile weapon (Easton, 2014).

There is much diversity within the Ditsong Ovambo arrow collection. Of the 116 arrows analysed, 60 are tipped with a wood arrowhead and 56 with an iron arrowhead of various shapes (Table 1; Figs. 2 and 3). All the arrow shafts are fashioned from wood except 16, which are made of reed (*Phragmites australis*). The reed shafts all have wooden arrowheads. The wooden shafts vary in weight, colour and consistency, and may perhaps reflect different tree species. The wooden-tipped arrows vary in length from 513 mm to 1049 mm with an average of 667 mm. The iron-tipped arrow lengths vary from 525 mm to 918 mm with an average of 706 mm.

Of the 60 arrows with wooden arrowheads, 21 are fashioned from a single piece of wood (we refer to these as homogenous), while the arrowheads of the rest are made from a separate piece of wood. The shafts of the latter are hollowed out at the distal end to facilitate the insertion of the tang of a separate arrowhead. The wooden arrowheads vary in shape (Fig. 2). Of the 21 homogenous arrows, two are carved to form a bulbous end, two are triangular and 17 are pointed. Five of the pointed arrowheads are barbed in a variety of arrangements (Table 1). Among the arrowheads carved from a separate piece of wood, 29 are barbed and 16 of these have a stopper below the last barb (Fig. 2C–F). These arrowheads are of four shapes, namely, pointed ( $n = 19$ ), bulbous ( $n = 4$ ), triangular ( $n = 1$ ) and honey-spoon ( $n = 1$ ). All the separate wooden arrowheads are inserted via a tang directly into the shaft and secured with either plant twine or sinew. Possible mastic, varying in consistency and colour, is visible on 40 of the wooden arrows. At least six of the homogenous wood arrows that lack barbs were probably intended to have been socketed into a metal arrowhead, which is now either missing or incomplete.

Of the 56 iron-tipped arrows, only one arrowhead is missing. The method of attachment of the iron arrowheads can be divided into two main types: (1) arrowheads that are tanged and inserted into the wooden shaft ( $n = 26$ ) and secured with twine or sinew binding and mastic, and (2) arrowheads that are wrapped around the shaft, the shafts being socketed into the base of the arrowhead ( $n = 30$ ). Three iron points are lighter in complexion suggesting a

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