At the latest estimates, there are about 90,500 of them: 8,000 in Angola, 45,000 in Botswana, 33,000 in Namibia, 2,500 in the South African Republic, 1,500 in Zambia, and 500 in Zimbabwe.

The Bushmen are not one but several groups. They speak a number of different languages, nearly all of them ‘click languages’. (These make use of various click and pop sounds made with the tongue – represented in writing by marks such as ! or /.) They do not have a word for themselves as a larger grouping. Other peoples call them by various names; in Namibia they are generally referred to as San, and in Botswana as Basarwa, but both of these are really terms of contempt. Some of them now accept the name ‘Bushmen’, taking it as meaning ‘people of the land’.

Many people today still imagine ‘Bushmen’ as untouched ‘stone age’ hunters, roaming freely in the wilderness. In fact this is far from the contemporary reality. Almost no Bushmen still live by by hunting and gathering alone, though many do it as a supplementary source of food, and the majority live as herders working for little or no wages, as migrant labourers, as servants, or on government settlements.

Most of the cluster of peoples known as the Bushmen now live scattered in the Kalahari desert of Southern Africa, an area of over 500,000 square km (200,000 square miles), about the size of Kenya or France. However, their ancestors once occupied almost the whole of Southern Africa, and probably parts of East Africa. Outside the Kalahari, some Bushman groups survive in the south of Angola, the Okavango swamps in the north of Botswana, and in western and eastern Botswana.

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We know a lot about the traditional life of the Bushmen because they are one of the most heavily studied peoples in the history of science. An important stimulus to this research was the idea that they were some of the last of the world’s original hunting and gathering peoples. Scholars treated them as if they had lived in complete isolation, and this belief soon took hold among the general public. Yet in fact they have interacted and traded with other peoples for centuries.
Bushmen have generally lived as hunter-gatherers or ‘foragers’. The women had great skill in finding the fruits, nuts and roots which provided most of the daily diet. The meat hunted by the men – mainly nomadic bands of 25-35 people, made up of several families. They had their own system of land holding:

- Some researchers believe that the Bushmen have generally lived as hunter-gatherers and gathering. But since then almost all the land on which they depended for hunting has been taken away for farms, ranches or nature reserves. In Botswana, government settlements have been set up for them; in spite of such facilities as clinics and schools, life in the settlements is generally bleak.

- Not all of them lived by hunting and gathering alone. In the early 19th century, the Bushmen were responsible for one of the most extensive of the pre-colonial trade networks which extended across the Kalahari. At Tsumeb, in what is now Namibia, they controlled one of the richest copper diggings in Africa.

- Of all the peoples in the bloody history of Southern Africa, the Bushmen have been the most brutalised and victimised. In the past, they were hunted down like animals. For instance, in South Africa in the 18th century, special Bushman commandos were organised by the settlers to hunt down other Bushmen. Large numbers were killed, and women and children were carried off to work for white farmers. Their descendants are today found among the so-called ‘coloured’ population.

- In Angola, the Portuguese used the Bushmen as trackers in their fight against independence movements. With the collapse of the Portuguese empire, these soldiers fled to Namibia, where they were incorporated into the South African Army so successfully that the South Africans started recruiting landless and unemployed local Bushmen. Since Namibian independence in 1990, 4,000 of them have been moved to South Africa. In 1993 the South African Defence Force handed over responsibility for them to a Trust largely controlled by the Bushman people themselves.

- As recently as the 1950s several Bushman groups in Namibia and Botswana were still living by hunting and gathering. But since then almost all the land on which they depended for hunting has been taken away for farms, ranches or nature reserves. In Botswana, government settlements have been set up for them; in spite of such facilities as clinics and schools, life in the settlements is generally bleak.

The Bushmen people of today are landless and impoverished. However, some are finding new ways of living, such as learning to farm and keeping small numbers of cattle and goats on the land remaining to them, as well as hunting when they still get the chance. A group of such farmers in Namibia have joined together to form the Nyae Nyae Farmers Cooperative (NNFC); this is supported by the Ju/’Hoansi Bushmen Development foundation in Namibia.

In the past, the great flexibility of their society helped the Bushmen to evade conquest and control. But at the same time it has made it exceedingly difficult for them to organise themselves so that they can put pressure on others and claim their rights. But now they are beginning to do this, through organisations like the NNFC, or the First People of the Kalahari in Botswana. The first two regional conferences on 'Development for Africa’s San Peoples' in 1992 and 1993, where Bushman delegations from both Namibia and Botswana made their demands known, seemed like sign of hope.

Since then however the situation of the Bushman peoples has only become harder. For instance, since the 1980s the Botswana Government has tried every means to remove the 1,500 or so Bushman people who live in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve, to make way for conservation, tourism and diamond mining. In 1996 the pressure was increased and by 1998 about a third of the people had been induced by the authorities to move out of the Reserve to a new settlement. However, a vigorous resistance is being led by First People of the Kalahari, who hope to establish their rights in their ancestral land.