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ETUDES BAKONGO

R. P. van Wing: *Etudes Bakongo: Histoire et Sociologie*, 1920, Bruxelles, Goemaere, pp. 319 and XIII

TORDAY, Emil

Man, 1922, Vol. 22, May, pp. 78–80.

Father Van Wing has produced in this book the most masterly account of the sociology of an African people that I have ever had the good fortune to read. A stay of many years among the people he describes, a deep erudition, the access to many ancient documents, an indefatigable zeal and a sympathetic nature have enabled him to produce a monograph which will undoubtedly become a classic. Among the other advantages I must mention that Father Van Wing had the help of a trained botanist (probably that master of Congolese flora, Friar Gillet), so that in all the cases where plants are mentioned in his book he gives the correct name, which is more than most field-workers can do.

He had not the same good fortune when he dealt with the animal kingdom. it is difficult to identify the animals he mentions in connection with taboos; thus the great crested touraco (*corythaeola crestata*) is simply described as a "big blue bird with a crest and a long tail" and the francoline is wrongly called a partridge. The shells *zimbu* or *nzimbu* are not cowries, but *olivella nana*.

However, these are details of little importance compared to the general excellence of the work.

The Bakongo, like many other tribes of West and Central Africa, have suffered from disruptive forces for centuries and form to-day no political or social unit. It seems that the ostensible division into clans took place when the Bakongo left their ancestral home round San Salvador, and spread over the country they inhabit at present, each clan following the lead of its head. At the time of the emigration the

Bakongo differed considerably from the people of to-day; manioc was not yet introduced, and millet and plantains were their staple food.

Their arms were the spear, the big knife, and bows and arrows. It is still possible, though rare, to see a Bakongo bow as a treasured insignia of chieftainship. The Bakongo were clad in cloth woven of raphia and they had no carved fetishes. Traditions aver that each clan practised a special craft; thus there were clans of weavers, potters, basketmakers, smiths, etc.

This division of labour may have originated by inheritance of trade, or hereditary admission to a guild, running parallel with clan relationship. It is not unique in Africa; among the Bushongo certain crafts are practised by certain tribes only. All clans of the Bakongo, however, practise agriculture, hunting and fishing. The identity of clan membership with guild membership raises complex questions, which I leave to wiser heads to discuss. Another interesting tradition relates that the right bank of the Inkisi was at the time of the emigration a wilderness of grass land, afforested later by the Bakongo, and was inhabited by Pygmies called Banbaka, Babekele and Bansunsa, who have disappeared centuries ago.

F. Van Wing promises that he will publish shortly the traditions and names of the various Bakongo clans, collected during the war by Father Struyf. But he gives us in this volume a great number of *Ndumbululu zi makanda*, the national songs of the clans. They are very old, their language is archaic and they contain in perfect rhythms the abridged history and the name of the root-ancestor of the clan, its wars, important heads, its migrations and offshoots.

These *ndumbululu* are the most precious part of the book. They must not be confused with ordinary oral traditions, *bidimbu bi kanda*, which have none of their quasi-sacred character. Similar clan-songs, which also act as war-cries and as a sign of recognition among the members of the same clan, exist in other parts of the Congo, though, as far as I know, their real nature has not been recognised previous to Father Van Wing.

I met one as far east as among the Batetela (it is to be published), though I failed to recognise its importance. Now that Father Van Wing has made this clear it is to be hoped that others will try to collect these valuable documents of Africa's past. The Bakongo, once united under a single crowned chief, form now a number of independent tribes, the chiefs of these being the former heads of the clans. The tribe is

identified with the clan, and membership is determined according to the female ancestry, quite independent of the place of birth.

The chiefs have lost much of their power, and most of them have preserved their judicial functions only, to which they are entitled by their direct descent from the founder and common ancestor of the clan; they are simply the heads of the oldest branch of the family. Whatever alterations the advent of Europeans may have made, there can be no doubt that the chief has still the land vested in him, and we have documentary evidence that this was so centuries ago.

Father Franco wrote in the early 17th century that a present of land which his mission had received from Pedro II., King of Kongo, had to be confirmed by each of his successors, as "according to the laws" of this people all rights of possession in land ended with the death of the king "who had given it." Father Van Wing adds that to this day it is a fundamental law of the Bakongo that land is inalienable, though the usufruct can be prolonged for the duration of his reign by the existing head of the clan.

The clan is the organisation on which, to this very day, the relation of the various natives among themselves is founded. All members descend in the female line from the same common ancestor, whose name the clan generally bears; they are exogamous and have a common taboo. There are certainly traces of totemism (the leopard might be a clan totem), but it must be left to the readers of the book to draw their own conclusions on that subject. The clan relationship, as distinct from the family relationship, is called *kingudi* or *kimpangi*, while the latter is known as *kitata*. The former is matriarchal, the latter patriarchal.

Another recognised relationship is that of marriage connections; in the descendent line it is called *kinzadis*; in the ascendant, *kizita*. These are of less importance, though they, too, count in the matter of marriage prohibitions. It results from the various importance attached to the different relationships that a marriage with the father's brother's daughter is admitted, while it is prohibited with the father's sister's daughter.

Above the political chief every clan possesses a spiritual head, the "crowned chief," *mfumu-mputu*. His crown consists of a raphia cap, and he must never show himself without it. Other insignia of his office are a spear and an iron bracelet. He is selected by his predecessor, after consultation with the elders, when he feels his end is coming.

The principal duty of the crowned chief is the cult of the ancestors. This office is apparently dying out under the influence of foreign rule; the author says that there are few left, and mentions two whom he has met. I have met one in the land of the Bayaka, though I was far from knowing his real functions, and described Noana N'Gombe as a fetishman of great importance. It is highly probable that there are others existing who keep out of the sight of the white intruder.

The book is full of information, and it is impossible to give an adequate account of its contents in a review. Nor ought this to be necessary, as anyone interested in African sociology will have to acquire this valuable work.