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THE BUSHONGO

WERNER, Alice

Journal of the Royal African Society, 1912, Vol. 11, No. 42, Jan., 206–212. old.

ALMOST, if not quite, the most important work done in anthropology since the opening of the century is that accomplished by Mr. Torday's expedition to the Kasai-Sankuru region. This expedition, in which Mr. Torday was accompanied by Mr. M. W. Hilton-Simpson and Mr. Norman Hardy (the latter, unfortunately, being obliged to return home before the programme had been completely carried out), left England in October, 1907, and returned in September, 1909.

The travellers ascended the Kasai as far as its junction with the Sankuru, and then followed the course of the latter river to the country of the Basonge, a branch of the Baluba living on the north-eastern bank in about 5° S. They then struck across to the Lubefu (a tributary joining the Sankuru from the south-east) in order to visit the Batetela, a cannibal tribe covering a large extent of territory between 2° S. and 5° S.

Returning from the Lubefu, they visited the eastern ramifications of the Bushongo people, on the other side of the Sankuru, and then proceeded to the study of the Northern Batetela, the Basongo Meno (between the Sankuru and the Lukenye), the Akela, and the Bankutu in the Lukenye basin. The expedition then visited the western tribes of the Bushongo, and remained several months at the Mushenge, or chief's village. From the information here received, it seemed probable that the principal elements of Bushongo civilisation had been derived from the west, but, owing to the hostile attitude of the inhabitants, it was impossible to proceed further in that direction.

Mr. Torday therefore retraced his course down the Kasai and ascended the Kwilu, so as once more to reach the Bushongo by crossing the country of the Babunda, Bapende, Bakongo, and Bashilele. In spite of some opposition from the Bakongo, who have always object-

ed to Europeans entering their country, they reached the Lulua-Kasai confluence without any serious difficulty. The area between the Loan-ge and the Kasai, traversed in this journey, had never before been visited by a white man. At the confluence the expedition turned down river and made its way to the coast.

The results of two years' steady ethnographic work have now been gathered up in the magnificent volume before us.¹ It is superfluous to praise Mr. Norman Hardy's drawings, which will be remembered by those who saw the originals when exhibited at the Royal Geographical Society's rooms and at the Royal Anthropological Institute. They have been beautifully reproduced in colours. In fact, the general get-up of the volume is all that can be desired, except that, instead of being bound, it consists of loose sheets in a portfolio; but, after all, this method has its advantages as well as its draw-backs.

The lavish sums spent by the Belgian Government on the splendid publications of the Tervueren Museum might be calculated to excite a feeling of envy in countries whose Governments do not concern themselves with anthropology, could one refrain from asking questions as to the provenance of these subsidies.

The notes brought back by the expedition have been worked up into a connected form by Mr. T. A. Joyce, who, in addition to his work as Hon. Secretary of the Royal Anthropological Institute, presides over the Ethnographic Galleries of the British Museum, and in that capacity receives strange and weird offerings from all who travel or traffic in remote corners of Heathenness. The complete work was then translated into French.

For various reasons the Bushongo are one of the most interesting tribes in Africa. Their traditional history reaches back in unbroken

¹ *Notes Ethnographiques sur les quelques communément appelés Bakuba, ainsi que sur les peuples apparentées. Les Bushongo*, par E. Torday, Correspondant au Congo de l'Institut d'Anthropologie de Grande Bretagne et d'Irlande, et T. A. Joyce Secrétaire honoraire de l'Institut d'Anthropologie de Grande Bretagne et d'Irlande. Aquarelles par Norman H. Hardy (Being Fasc. I, Tome 11, of *Annales du Musée du Congo Belge: Ethnographie, Anthropologie*, S&rie IIx: Documents Ethnographiques concernant les populations du Congo Beige), Published by the Belgian Colonial Office (Ministère des Colonies) at Brussels (February 1911), and sold there by Falk, Fils, 12a Rue des Paroissiens; Misch and Thron, 126 Rue Royale; and Spineux et Cie, 3 Rue du Bois-Sauvage.

continuity to a period which cannot, on any reasonable calculation, be placed later than A.D. 500. They have attained, in arts and industries, to a level unique in Africa, as is shown by the specimens of wood-carving, metal-work, woven fabrics of palm-cloths, and elaborate embroidery, now on view at the British Museum.

The Bushongo have hitherto been known to Europeans under the name of "Bakuba," which is that given to them by the Baluba, their neighbours on the east. It seems to mean "People of the Lightning," in allusion to their national weapon, the many-bladed throwing-knife (shongo), from which the Bushongo themselves derive their name. They were visited in 1884 by Wissmann and Wolf, but very little information concerning them had reached Europe previous to Mr. Torday's expedition. Sir Harry Johnston says (George Grenfell and the Congo, p. 162): "The Bakuba are a most remarkable race, an unsolved mystery as yet. ... Physically the Bakuba aristocracy suggests affinity with the Bahima of Western Uganda, and consequently with the Hamitic negroids of the Eastern Sudan." Elsewhere he says (p. 515):

"In the Congo basin the Hima type is probably nowhere more marked than in the Bakuba, the ruling people of central Congo-land, who, as an aristocratic caste, possess a considerable territory, which stretches between the Kasai, Sankuru, and the Lulua, and perhaps overlaps the Sankuru to the north-east. They form a very powerful and industrious people, chiefly occupied in the ivory trade. Big and strong, they live chiefly on game and fish. From religious motives, they abstain from eating the goat and sheep and do not take their slaves as wives.² They smelt and work iron, weave cloths to perfection, embroider them and dye them. They also make large mats on a frame and carve wood with much artistic taste. They are much given to trade, but are entirely different from the Baluba in language and customs. . . . The tradition among the Bakuba is that they came from the north-east and settled down as conquerors on the banks of the Sankuru. "

The Bushongo nation is composed of the following subtribes: *Bambala*, the ruling class, who form the nucleus of the nation and live

² See *Les Bushongo*, p. 11. According to Mr. Torday's informants (see p. 37) marriage with slave-women was first permitted in the reign of Mikope Mbulu, the 110th chief (1810–1840).

in the country round the royal village (*Mushenga*) of Mingenja. They are considered superior to the other Bushongo clans, whom they contemptuously call *Bokono*, or "bushmen."

Gwembi, or the "mole people," to the north of the Bambala, in the angle between the Sankuru and Lubudi.

Idinga, east of the Gwembi.

Bashoba (or Shangele Bushongo), a tribe of Basongo Meno who crossed the Sankuru, and were incorporated with the Bushongo by Born Bosh (the ninety-sixth chief), about 1650.

Bakele, between the Sankuru and the Kasai.

Bienge ("the bean people"), on both banks of the Luch-wadi.

Gali-Bushongo, east of the Bienge on the north bank of the Luchwadi.

Cholo, east of the Bienge on the south bank of the Luch-wadi.

Inyenye, south of the Bambala.

Yungu, south of the Inyenya.

Malongo, between the Kasai and the Longula.

Pianga, east of the Malongo.

Mudi-Langa (the "trans-Langa" people), south of the Malongo.

Bakete ("the archers"), south of the last-named.

*Bambo*y ("the grasshopper people"), east of the Bambala.

Bangendi.

Bangongo ("the bell people"), in the angle between the Lubudi and Sankuru on the west. These would seem to come next in importance to the Bambala. Adjoining the Bushongo on the west and south, but independent of them, are the Bashilele and Bakongo.

The translation of some of the above names might seem to indicate the existence of totem-clans, and, in fact, the institution of *Ikina Bari* "appears to be a degenerate form of totemism" (p. I 7). Bumba (the Creator) is said, after having finished the world, to have gone through the habitations of men, and forbidden each village to eat of some particular animal, which prohibition (*Ikina*) is observed to this day. The *Ikina* is inherited from the father, and persons of the same *Ikina* may not intermarry. But it has no connection with the name of the tribe (p. 118).

The traditions of the Bushongo and, more especially, of the Bambala, have been transmitted with a wonderful degree of continuity. A

list of 121 chiefs is given, though the earlier ones, from Bumba to Woto, are, no doubt, more or less mythological. Bumba seems to be identical with *Chembe* (God), and his name is a widespread Bantu root (sometimes found as *Umba* or *Wumba*) signifying "to form," "to mould," as (e.g.) pots from clay. (It is the most usual term employed for the potter's craft.) The creation legend is given on page 20.

There is an official, the *Moaridi*, whose special function it is to preserve the ancient traditions, which are quite well known to the people in general, and were supplied to the expedition by the reigning chief (Kwete Peshanga Kena) and his principal councillors.

The mention of an eclipse, calculated to be that of March 30th, 1680, enables us to fix the reign of Bo Kama Bomanchala, the ninety-eighth chief, as including that date. Reckoning backward, by a process of which we may omit the details, we may reasonably assume that Shamba Bolongongo, the chief under whom the Bushongo attained the height of their greatness, flourished about 1600. Shamba, the Bushongo national hero, whose portrait-statue is now in the British Museum, did not, it is worth noting, distinguish himself as a conqueror, but (like Mohlomi of the Basuto, in much more recent times) as a man of peace, a wise counsellor, a "gnomic philosopher," whose sayings are preserved to this day.

Like Mohlomi, he travelled for many years, and observed the ways of strange tribes, having in his youth a desire "to see the world." He is said to have taught his people the game of lela (elsewhere known as *mankala*, and in Nyasaland as *msuo*) in order to check their passion for gambling, and he forbade the use, in war, of javelins, arrows, and the traditional throwing-knife, allowing his soldiers only a knife for fighting at close quarters – apparently on the ground that missile weapons "might slay the innocent," since they might hit those for whom they were not intended. The arts of basket-making and wood-carving reached their highest point during his reign, and he was the first chief who caused an image of himself to be carved, so that his successors might remember him and his laws.

Reckoning backwards again (see p. 6) from the reign of Shamba we get, approximately, 300 A.D. for the sixth chief, Minga Bengela, under whom the Bushongo migrated from the north, coming, it would seem, from the neighbourhood of Lake Chad. It was Minga Bengela who first taught the Bushongo to hunt with nets and dogs. On reaching the Sankuru he divided his followers into three bands, sending the first

(the Bangongo) in an east-south-easterly direction, and the second (the Bangendi) to the south-east, while he himself pressed on southward with the remainder, who formed the Bambala, to the country now occupied by them, which they found quite devoid of human inhabitants.

It was not till "long after" this migration that the Bushongo became acquainted with maize. Up to that time their vegetable food had consisted of millet, bananas, and yams. How long after is not stated, but, if the date given is approximately correct, and if, as is usually assumed, maize was first introduced by the Portuguese from America, it must have been well over a thousand years.

The Bushongo originally brought with them from the north their own language, known as *Lumbila*, which was finally disused in the reign of the i i ith chief, Bope Mobinji, who was still living, in extreme old age, when Dr. Wolf visited the country in 1884. This language, according to Sir Harry Johnston, is not Bantu, and has some points of resemblance to that spoken on the Shari River (the southern affluent of Lake Chad).

The fact that the Bushongo call the Sankuru Chale may tend to strengthen this presumption. *Chale* is the same word as *Shari*, and (like Nyanja, Nyanza, &c.) means "the river." The present Shongo language is certainly Bantu, and is closely allied to, if not identical with Luba. Specimens are given on pp. 252 et seq.

One wonders whether there is any possibility of connecting the name *Lumbila* with the Bantu verb *lumbila* or *lumbira* (the applied form of *lumba*), meaning primarily "to invoke," and so either "to praise" (or since to mention a man by name is, under certain circumstances, the greatest injury or insult that can be offered him) "to blaspheme, insult, abuse." But what the connection, if any, precisely is, we are unable, in the absence of further evidence, to conjecture.

The hierarchy of Bushongo courtiers and officials described in Chapter II. is extremely interesting, and should be carefully compared with Mr. Dennett's observations. Especially noteworthy is the recurrence of the number six; and we also find that at the Creation the sacred animals produced by Bumba were six in number. Unfortunately, we can only refer to this in passing, but there appears to be much in the Bushongo traditions which is calculated to throw light on the whole subject of the "Categories," to which Mr. Dennett and M. Van Gennep have devoted so much laborious research.

Chapter VII., headed "Legendes et Langue," contains a number of tales and proverbs, but the former are somewhat disappointing. I cannot recognise any of the animal stories, which are of such universal occurrence in Bantu Africa (one, "The Dog and the Jackal," p. 247, I have met with before, but cannot at the moment give the precise reference; it may be Hausa or Mandingo), and those told to account for the origin of various articles or ceremonies are frequently point-less in the extreme-one almost wonders whether they were made up on the spot in answer to inquiries. But two of Shamba Bolongongo's sayings are quaint and pithy, and may be quoted to conclude this inadequate and hasty survey of a most valuable work:

"When you cut the palm-tree, the juice that flows first is very sweet, and not intoxicating; but its strength increases every day and its sweetness diminishes, till at last you get the true wine--strong without any sweetness at all. Man is like palm-wine: Youth is sweet, but lacks the wisdom of age, and age lacks the sweetness of youth."

"Let -three men lie down side by side and cover them with a sheet, then tell each of them to seize a corner. The outer ones can seize the edges of the sheet, and each has a chance to get possession of it, but the one in the middle has nothing to take hold of and has no chance at all. "Never meddle in other people's quarrels; either of the two opponents may win, but the mediator has nothing to gain and can only bring unpleasantness on himself."

A. WERNER