

The Old Congo

By John Henrik Clarke

The people and nations of Central Africa have no records of their ancient and medieval history like the "Tarikh es Sudan" or the "Tarikh el Fettach" of the Western Sudan (West Africa). The early travelers to these areas are mostly unknown. In spite of the forest as an obstacle to the formation of empires comparable to those of the Western Sudan, notable kingdoms did rise in this part of Africa and some of them did achieve a high degree of civilization.

The Congo Valley became the gathering place of various branches of the people we know now as Bantu. When the history of Central Africa is finally written, it will be a history of invasions and migrations. According to one account, between two and three thousand years ago a group of tribes began to move out of the region south or southwest of Lake Chad. Sometime during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the center of Africa became crowded with pastoral tribes who needed more land for their larger flocks and herds. This condition started another migration that lasted for more than a hundred years. Tribes with the prefix *Ba* to their names spread far to the west into the Congo basin and southward through the central plains. The Nechuana and Basuto were among these tribes. Tribes with the prefix *Ama*—great warriors like the Ama-Xosa and Ama-Zulu—passed down the eastern side.

In the meantime some of the more stable tribes in the Congo region were bringing notable kingdoms into being. The Kingdom of Loango extended from Cape Lopez (Libreville) to near the Congo; and the Congo Empire was mentioned by the Portuguese as early as the fourteenth century. The Chief of Loango, Mani-Congo, extended his kingdom as far as the Kasai and Upper Zambesi Rivers. This kingdom had been in existence for centuries when the Portuguese arrived in the fifteenth century. They spoke admiringly of its capital, Sette-Camo, which they called San Salvador. The Kingdom of Congo dates back to the fourteenth century. At the height of its power it extended over modern Angola, as far east as the Kasai and Upper Zambesi Rivers.

Further inland the Kingdom of Ansika was comprised of the people of the Bateke and Bayoka, whose artistic talents were very remarkable. Near the center of the Congo was the Bakuba Kingdom (or Bushongo), still noted for its unity, the excellence of its administration, its art, its craftsmanship and the beauty of its fabrics.

South of the Congo basin the whole Bechuana territory formed a vast state which actually ruled for a long time over the Basutos, the Zulus, the Hottentots and the Bushmen, including in a single empire the greater part of the black population of Southern and Central Africa. This was the era of Bushongo grandeur; the people we now know as Balubas.

Only the Bushongo culture kept its records and transmitted them almost intact to modern research. The Bakubas are an ancient people whose power and influence once extended over most of the Congo. Their history can be traced to the fifth century. For many centuries the Bakubas have had a highly organized social system, an impressive artistic tradition and a secular form of government that expressed the will of the people through a democratic political system. Today, as for many generations in the past, the court of a Bakuba chief is ruled by a protocol as rigid and complicated as that of Versailles under Louis XIV.

At the top of the Bakuba hierarchy is the royal court composed of six dignitaries responsible for cabinet-like matters such as military affairs, justice and administration. At one time there were in the royal entourage 143 other functionaries, including a master of the hunt, a master storyteller and a keeper of oral traditions. In the sixteenth century the Bakubas ruled over a great African empire. The memory of their glorious past is recalled in the tribe with historical exactitude. They can name the reigns of their kings for the past 235 years. The loyalty of the people to these rulers is expressed in a series of royal portrait-statues dating from the reign of Shamba Bolongongo, the greatest and best known of the Bakuba kings.

In the Bakuba system of government the king was above all a symbol, rather like the Mikado in the eyes of

the Japanese. His ministers, the Kolomos, paid him great respect in public, even if they were his known enemies. In private they made no pretense of subservience. If the king wanted to see his ministers he had to go to their houses or meet them on neutral ground. The ordinary members of the tribe had representatives at the court on a political and professional basis. Some of these officials represented geographical areas, trades and professions. The weavers, the blacksmiths, the boat-builders, the net-makers, the musicians and the dancers all had their representatives at court. There was even a special representative of the fathers of twins. The representative of the sculptors was held in highest esteem. The Bakuba sculptors are considered to be the finest in Africa.

Shamba Bolongongo was a peaceful sovereign. He prohibited the use of the shongo, a throwing knife, the traditional weapon of the Bushongo. This wise African king used to say: "Kill neither man, woman nor child. Are they not the children of Chembe (God), and have they not the right to live?" Shamba likewise brought to his people some of the agreeable pastimes that alleviate the tediousness of life. The reign of Shamba Bolongongo was really the "Golden Age" of the Bushongo people of the Southern Congo. After abolishing the cruder aspects of African warfare, Shamba Bolongongo introduced raffia weaving and other arts of peace. According to the legends of the Bushongo people, their history as a state goes back fifteen centuries. Legends notwithstanding, their magnificent sculpture and other artistic accomplishments are unmistakable, the embodiment of a long and fruitful social experience reflecting the life of a people who have been associated with a higher form of culture for more than a thousand years.

Early in the twentieth century when the European writer, Emil Torday, was traveling through the Congo collecting material for his book *On the Trail of the Bushongo*, he found the Bakuba elders still singing the praises of Shamba Bolongongo. They also repeated the list of their kings, a list of one hundred twenty names, going back to the godlike king who founded their nation. From these Bakuba elders, Emil Torday learned of Bo Kama Bomanchala, the great king who reigned after Shamba Bolongongo. The elders recalled the most memorable event that had occurred during his reign. On March 30, 1680, there was a total eclipse of the sun, passing exactly over Bushongo.

Jose Fernandez, one of the first European explorers to visit Central Africa, went there in 1445. Any number of subsequent expeditions were carried out by such men as Diego Borges, Vincente Annes, Rebello de Araca, Francisco Baretto and Dom Christovao da Gama. The parts of Africa visited, explored and discovered by these men included the kingdom of the Congo, Timbuktu, the East Coast of Africa, Nubia, the Kingdom of Angola, Abyssinia and the Lake Tsana region.

Much of the history and civilization of Central Africa and East Africa was revealed by the study made by the Portuguese African explorer Duarte Lopez in his book *History of the Kingdom of Congo*. Duarte Lopez went to the Congo in 1578 and stayed for many years. From his study and description of the Congo we learn that the Kingdom of the Congo included the territory formerly known as the Congo, Angola and parts of the Cameroons.

According to Lopez, the kingdom of the Congo at the time measured 1,685 miles. The King, still reliving his past glory, styled himself Dom Alvarez, King of Congo, and of Abundo, and of Natama, and of Quizama, and of Angola, and of Angri, and of Cacongo, and of the seven Kingdoms of Congere Amolza, and of the Pangelungos, and the Lord of the River Zaire (Congo) and of the Anzigiros, and of Anziqvara, and of Doanga, etc. He also tells us that the Kingdom of Angola was at one time a vassal state of the Congo.

At the time of Lopez's twelve years stay in the country, the Kingdom of the Congo was divided into six provinces. The province of Bamba was the military stronghold of the kingdom, and was capable of putting 400,000 well-disciplined men in the field.

The rich gold mines at Sofala (now a port of Mozambique) attracted the Portuguese to the East Coast of Africa. They used intermarriage with the Africans as a means of gaining favor and pushing into the interior of Africa. In turn, the Africans gradually lost their anti-Christian hostilities and gave in to being converted to Christianity. And thus Christianity was introduced into the Congo before 1491. The Mani Sogno was the first Congo nobleman to embrace the Christian faith. The Moslems, coming into the Congo from the East Coast,

prevailed upon the Africans to resist being converted to Christianity, telling them that Christianity was a subtle method used by the Portuguese to take over their country. This warning notwithstanding, Christianity continued to spread in the Congo.

In 1513, Henrique, son of Dom Affonso, then King of the Congo, was sent to Lisbon and to Rome to study theology. In 1520, Pope Leo X appointed Henrique Bishop of Utica and Vicar-apostolic of the Congo. Unfortunately, Henrique died before he could return to the Congo. He was Rome's first Central African bishop. The royal archives of Portugal still hold the records reflecting the ceremonial respect that was paid to this Christian son of an African king and queen.

In the years that followed, Portuguese evangelization of the Congo continued. The Holy See received ambassadors from and sent legates to the Congo. In 1561, Father Dom Goncalo da Silvera baptized the Emperor of the Court of Monomotapa.

The peaceful relations between the Africans and the Portuguese were eventually disrupted by the rising European lust for slaves and gold. It was from Angola and the Congo that the Portuguese New World was to derive its greatest source of slaves. In 1647, Salvador Correia of Brazil organized an expedition of fifteen ships for the purpose of reconquering Angola, which had been under Dutch rule for eight years. This event might be considered to be one of the earliest political interventions of the New World in the Affairs of the Old.

Portuguese domination founded on the dire necessities of the slave trade persisted in Angola. After a period of relative splendor, the Christian Kingdom of the Congo began to weaken and was practically destroyed by European fortune hunters, pseudo-missionaries and other kinds of free-booters. By 1688, the entire Congo region was in chaos. By the end of the seventeenth century European priests had declared open war on the non-Christian population of the Congo. They were attempting to dominate Congolese courts and had ordered the execution of Congolese ancestral priests and indigenous doctors. Now the Congolese Christians were pathetic pawns of the hands of unscrupulous European priests, soldiers, merchants and other renegade pretenders, mere parish priests from Europe were ordering Congolese kings from their thrones.

Soon treachery, robbery and executions compounded the chaos in the Congo. Violence became the order of the day as various assortments of European mercenaries vied for control of this rich area of Africa. In the ensuing struggle many of the Christian churches built by the Portuguese were destroyed. The Dutch, still feeling the humiliation of the decline of their influence in Angola, came into the Congo and systematically removed all traces of the once prevailing Portuguese power.

By 1820 Arab slave traders had penetrated the Congo from Zanzibar and through Tanganyika. Soon after their arrival their slave raids were decimating the population. The European rediscovery of the Congo and neighboring territories began in the middle of the nineteenth century. In 1858, two Englishmen, Burton and Spoke, discovered Lakes Tanganyika and Victoria, approaching them from the shores of the Indian Ocean. The Scotch Protestant missionary, Livingstone, explored the regions of the big lakes and in 1871, Livingstone and Stanley met on the shore of Lake Tanganyika. From 1874 to 1877, Henry Morton Stanley crossed Africa from east to west and discovered the Congo River.

In the meantime, King Leopold II of Belgium focused his attention on Central Africa and in 1876 founded the Association Internationale Africaine. In 1878, King Leopold commissioned Stanley to establish connection between the Congo River and the ocean in the non-navigable part of the river. From 1879 to 1885, a handful of Belgian officers sent by the King set up posts along the Congo River. They were followed by Catholic and Protestant missionaries.

King Leopold's undertakings gave rise to competition and greed. Other European nations had designs on the Congo. The King's diplomatic successes at the Berlin Conference of 1884 settled this matter. The members of the Conference marked out spheres of influence in Africa and determined boundaries that are still in existence. The Congo Free State came into being. The Belgian parliament agreed that Leopold should have "exclusive" personal ownership of the Congo. The United States was the first power to ratify the arrangement, largely through the efforts of General Henry S. Stanford, who was American minister to Brussels at the time.

And thus began the tragedy of Belgian rule in the Congo.

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