

26. Bantu Migrations & Kingdoms in Central & Southern Africa

SECONDARY BANTU MIGRATIONS IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

We have seen how the Bantu expanded and migrated outward from their original homeland just south of the Sahara, following the Congo River and its tributaries until they arrived at the Shaba Plateau in what is now DR Congo. There they found a homeland on a savannah plateau much like the one they had left behind. Other groups continued to arrive for about a thousand years, and the groups began to migrate throughout central and southern Africa, largely displacing the Khoisan peoples who had dominated the land for thousands of years.

By 900 to 1000 A.D., Bantu groups had reached eastern DR Congo, and by 1200 to 1300, they had become predominant in the then Congo forests, largely replacing the indigenous pygmies, who resorted to the deepest parts of the forest.

BANTU KINGDOMS IN CENTRAL AND SOUTHERN AFRICA

Kingdoms likely were built after individual tribes had taken up most of the land so that further expansion was possible only by conquering one another. It is also possible that some kings were most aggressive and conquered as much for personal glory and wealth as for land.

KINGDOM OF KONGO

As far as we know, the Kingdom of Kongo was one of the first Central African Kingdoms, thriving about 1200 A.D. along the Atlantic coast and the Congo River in what is today the Republic of Congo, DR Congo, and Angola. According to legend, the founder was Mimi a Lukeni, son of the chief of a small tribe called Vungu or Bungo near Stanley Pool. He is said to have collected tolls for crossing the river, and when his aunt refused to pay, he killed and disemboweled her. This placed him outside the restraints of tribal law in a godlike, apart position. As an outcast from his tribe, he gathered a band of followers and led them southeast away from what later became known as Stanley Pool, in search of a new homeland.

Since Bantu tribes had by that time taken over the whole territory, Lukeni's new homeland was to be gained only by conquest. His group conquered the Mbundu and Mbwela tribes in what is now Angola and built Mbanza, a court of justice for the fledgling kingdom, high on a hill. Mbanza became a place feared and respected by all inhabitants of nearby territories.

Lukeni probably possessed occult powers, adding to his godlike position and the fear people held for him. He is said to have had an illness which resulted in convulsions, so he consulted the shaman-priest of the newly conquered territory, thus recognizing the authority of the spirits of the ancestors of the area and, in the minds of the people, entering into alliance with them.

Lukeni married the daughter of the shaman-priest as his first wife, and the resulting alliance is regarded as the beginning of the official Kingdom of Kongo.

Thus the people accepted Lukeni and feared him as one possessed of supernatural powers. He could be approached only by prostrating oneself and crawling forward on all fours. The death penalty was imposed if one were to see him eat or drink. When the Maini-Kongo did eat or drink, a slave would strike two iron staffs and all present would prostrate themselves face down on the ground. His feet were never allowed to touch the earth, so the ground was swept bare and covered with mats. He traveled about carried on a litter and escorted by a bodyguard of 20,000 warriors.

The Kongolese believed in a supreme God, the Creator, but they perceived of him as remote, beyond the influence of mere humans, and therefore useless to worship. Instead they worshipped many spirits perceived of a "lesser gods" such as nature spirits and spirits of ancestors. For that reason they have been called animists.

The rulers of the Kingdom were called Mani-Kongos. Five to eight ruled in Mbanza, all supposedly descendants of Nimi a Lukeni.

Through conquests, the Mani-Kongos extended their kingdom to include 200,000 square miles and 4 to 5 million people. At its height the Kingdom of Kongo reached Gabon in the north, Angola in the south, and the Kwango River of the Bandundu Province in DR Congo. There were six provinces of the Kingdom of Kongo at the time the Portuguese arrived in 1482: Soyo, Mpemba (Mbanza), Mbamba, Mpangu, Mbata, and Nsundi. Each of these were independent states or tribal areas before being conquered by the Mani-Kongo, and were called Manis. The Manis in turn appointed lesser district chiefs, etc. The provinces retained a degree of independence, but gave allegiance and tribute to the Mani-Kongo.

The currency of the Kingdom of Kongo was cowrie shells mined from the Atlantic Ocean and called nzimbu by the Kongolese. People of the Kingdom were skilled in many arts and crafts. They mined, smelted and worked iron, worked copper by the lost-wax process, wove raffia of grass so fine that the Portuguese at first took it for velvet, made baskets, nets and furniture, carved in wood and ivory, made pottery, and cured animal hides.

The Kongolese also domesticated goats, pigs and cattle, and fished the Congo River with nets, baskets, harpoons and poisons. They gathered food from the forest, especially from the very useful palm trees, and cultivated yams and bananas.

All their farming was merely subsistence farming, however. They raised food to meet their own immediate needs, not to sell or trade. In fact the Kingdom carried on no extensive trade whatsoever. Thus, it had no need for storage, transport, or writing, and these were never

developed. Living in the present, the Kongolese felt no need for a calendar or a way of telling time. They also had no wheel, carts or carriages. They did not employ their animals for doing work or carrying things.

Monsignor Jean Cuvelier is the preeminent student of the ancient Kingdom of Kongo. He has attempted to reconstruct the Kingdom's capital at Mbanza. The streets were not straight, but were narrow criss-crossing paths. The houses were made of straw, with designed mats on the interior. Houses of nobles were distinguished by being a bit larger and having more mats. Mbanza was surrounded by trees with a sacred forest to the north where the former Mani-Kongos were buried, including Nimi a Lukeni. To the south was a large square, the court of justice called Mbasi a Nkangu, which was also used for giving the Mani-Kongo's blessing, for dances and for triumphal review of troops. Close by was the enclosure in which was the home of the Mani-Kongo. It was shut off from public view by stakes tied with vines, and approached through a maze with guards and trumpeters at the entrance.

Although polygamous, the Kongolese were not sexually immoral as a group. Rape, incest and adultery were severely punished by selling into slavery or even death. The death sentence was carried out by wrapping the victim in dried banana leaves and setting him afire. Sexual encounter with a virgin demanded payments to her family. The vocabulary for talking about sex was indirect and allusive, suggesting that it was not talked about openly.

The marriage ceremony was elaborate and serious. On the other hand, Kongolese dances often were explicit pantomines of sexual intercourse, masturbation was regarded as normal, engaged couples were allowed to live and sleep together in preparation for marriage, and polygamy was common, especially among the chiefs.

European contact with Kongo began in 1482 when Portuguese naval captain and explorer Diogo Cao discovered the mouth of the Congo River while exploring for King John of Portugal. The first European to meet a Mani-Kongo was Rui de Sousa (Goncal) He was also responsible for the Mani-Kongo's conversion to Roman Catholicism, but the Mani-Kongo later apostasized. The Mani-Kongo was about 60 years old at the time of the encounter, and as seen sitting on a throne of wood inlaid with ivory on a raised platform. He was draped in hides and furs and wore bracelets of copper, a zebra's tail hanging from his shoulder, and a cap of palm cloth as fine as velvet embroidered with the figure of a snake. He had a staff and bow with arrows across his lap, and about his waist was a piece of cloth that Portuguese explorer Diogo Cao had sent him ten years earlier.

In 1484 Diogo Cao arrived back in Portugal with four Kongolese captives, the first to see Europe. They were treated royally. The same year, Christopher Columbus presented King John his idea of reaching India by sailing west, but was turned down. The following year, Diogo Cao made a

second trip of exploration down the African coast and again stopped at the mouth of the Congo River with the four hostages he had taken previously (then speaking Portuguese and probably some converted to Roman Catholicism.) Cao soon after disappeared from historical records, leaving some question about the exact sequence of events.

In 1487 Bartholomew Deas sailed around the Cape of Good Hope, thus establishing that Africa did not go on endlessly to the edge of the world as was then believed. He returned with other Kongolese hostages and gifts of Kongolese ivory and palm cloth.

The Kingdom of Kongo gradually disintegrated in the years following the Catholic ruler Affonso's death in 1542 or 43. His oldest son Nkanga Mbemba (Pedro) ruled for two years, then Nkumbi Mpudi a Nzing (Diogo), a second son or possibly a nephew, overthrew him and began a sixteen-year reign of increasing disorder. In 1556 the southern tribes in Angola successfully revolted against Kongo's rule under the influence of the Portuguese, who by then had broken their friendly ties with Kongo in order to profit from the slave trade.

SMALLER KONGOLESE KINGDOMS—ANSIKA & BAKUBA (BUSHONGO)

Later, inland a bit from the same area flourished the smaller Kingdom of Anskia, including the artistic Bateke and Bayoka peoples. The Bakuba or Bushongo Kingdom flourished near the center of the Congo and was noted for its unity, administration, art, craftsmanship, and beautiful fabrics.

WHITE SETTLEMENTS IN SOUTH AFRICA

The Dutch settled in South Africa beginning in 1652. There were very few Africans living there at the time. The English seized the colony in 1775. At the time there were 21,000 whites, 25,000 slaves, and 14,000 Hottentots.

BANTU LANGUAGES

Students of the languages of sub-Saharan Africa today have long recognized similarities that pointed to many of the languages being a family group of common parentage. In 1860 the linguist W. H. Black proposed to call "Bantu" all languages which use "muntu" for a person and "bantú" for the plural—people. These languages are today called the Bantu family.

