

## 21. BANTU POPULATION EXPLOSION & SECONDARY MIGRATIONS

Camels, reintroduced into the Sahara about 200 A.D. by the Romans, enabled limited life to continue in the Sahara in the face of increasing hardship. They, however, rapidly ate all the remaining vegetation that had provided some anchor for the sandy soil. With the plants gone, the sands shifted and blew and the desert increased in size and in aridity.

The peoples of Egypt and the Middle East were acquainted with the dark skinned Ethiopians and with the darker Sudanese, but by this time only a few Arab traders probably knew that a black people existed to the west of the Sahara. For about a thousand years, the Bantu people had been multiplying prolifically in the Niger-Benoué river valleys of the land that today lies in Cameroon and Nigeria. Geographers do not mention blacks living on the eastern coast of Africa prior to the fourth century, suggesting that their move there was probably not long before that date.

By about 100 A.D., their homeland savanna was thoroughly overrun with people, so some of the group set out in search of new lands. Immediately to the south of them was the inhospitable rain forest of the Congo River basin. Following the streams and tributaries of the Congo, they traveled to the southeast, until at last they emerged on the Shaba Plateau in what is now the Shaba region of Zaire. This plateau was a savanna much like the homeland they had left behind. For the next thousand years, groups continued to leave the northern homeland and travel southeast to the Shaba Plateau that had become the secondary Bantu homeland. They displaced the hunting bands of the Bushmen and the cattle herding communities of the Hottentots, who probably voluntarily moved farther and farther south, as the Bantu dominated more and more of the continent south of the Sahara.

At first the Bantu were limited to the savannah areas, but about 200-300 A.D. they found some southeast Asian food plants growing in the mouth of the Zambesi River. With the cultivation of these Asian yams, taro and bananas, they were able to make homes in the hotter forest areas as well. By about 500, they had reached Africa's east coast.

Although the Bantu did not leave written records, science gives us some clues as to their history. Linguistic analysis shows that the Bantu speakers were first split into western and eastern dialects, suggesting that the first moves from the Shaba homeland were to the east (into what is today Zambia, Malawi and Tanzania) and to the west (into what is today Angola). Close similarities between Bantu languages shows that they differentiated recently (after the move to the new homeland) and that they spread out quickly, which suggests that once the Bantu found new land, individual families spread out widely rather than congregating in one spot

This spreading caused isolation and thus, differentiation in the languages. Luba and Bemba are amongst the very oldest Bantu languages still surviving today.

Bantu culture has changed little until recent years, so it is likely that the Bantu who first moved to southern Africa lived much like their ancestors who lived in the savannah north of the rain forest. Evidence suggests that Bantu religious ideas were influenced by the religions of Kush to the west. Today, for example, the ram is used all over western Africa, including Nigeria as a symbol for major gods, yet the ram is not indigenous to this area. The symbol may have been borrowed from ancient contact with Kush, where the ram was used as a symbol of the sun god or may have been common to black culture as it developed in the Sahara, with both groups taking with them common symbols and beliefs.

Meanwhile other cultures of black people were continuing to develop to the north, all along the Sahel region where the Sahara desert turns into a more livable savannah. Other cultures were developing along the rivers and lakes of the horn of western Africa. Although what we now call the "Golden Age of West Africa" did not begin until about 700 A.D., the beginnings of these cultures are of course much more ancient.

The beginnings of Ghana, for example, go back to about 300 A.D. and a group of related tribes called the Soninkes. These people called their land Duagadou and spoke the Mande language. They traded gold and salt and claimed Kumbi as their capital.

#### FIRST CHRISTIANS

The first known Christians appeared in Niger about 650. They were North African Berbers driven south by Islam.