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BANTU TRIBES.

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CEWA

Pt 1. "Their relationships, customs and history"

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The great Nyanja-speaking section of the East-Central Bantu consists of people known by various local or tribal names such as Nyanja, Mang'anja, Ntumba, Mbo, Malawi, Cipeta and Cewa. These people are found in three of the modern political divisions of Africa, namely Nyasaland, Northern Rhodesia and Portuguese East Africa. In Nyasaland they are found in the Central and Southern Provinces, and include all the tribal divisions we have mentioned. In Northern Rhodesia they are represented by the Cewa, who live in the Eastern Province. And in Portuguese East Africa there live the people who call themselves Ntumba, Mbo and Cewa. In all, the Nyanja-speaking peoples probably amount to about one and a quarter million, of whom half call themselves Cewa.

The past history of the Cewa and of the Nyanja-speaking people generally is not as clear as that of other tribes. This is probably because the historical traditions and legends such as one finds in other tribes have to some extent been blotted out by an event that occurred about a century ago - this was the coming of the Angoni. Although Cewa memories are short, many people believe that the Nyanja speaking tribes who were all formerly known as the Malawi, came from the north. At any rate, about three hundred years ago Portuguese explorers found the

Malawi living in the country bounded in the south by the Zambesi, in the north-east by Lake Nyasa and in the North west by the Luangwa river.

If you place all the modern descendants of the old Malawi on the map, you find that the Nyanja are to the East and South East along the shores of Lakes Nyasa and Cirwa. The Mang'anja are to the south in the valley of the Shire river; the Ntumba, Mbo an and modern Malawi are in the centre, between the Shire and Zambesi; and the Cewa and Cipeta are to the north and north-west in the country between Lake Nyasa and the Luangwa rivers. Cipeta incidentally is a nickname that was given to those of the Cewa who, at the time of the Ngoni invasions, hid in the cipeta or long-grass country of Central Nyasaland.

It will be seen from this map of ours that the Cewa are the most northerly of the Nyanja-speaking peoples. This is probably because about a hundred and fifty years ago they migrated northwards under the leadership of a chief named Karonga. It is believed that this was when they took on the name Cewa, to distinguish themselves from the other Malawi peoples who remained behind. The Cewa having moved northwards spread from Central Nyasaland into what are now Northern Rhodesia and Portuguese East Africa. As a result, they are nowadays not all under one chief. The most important modern Cewa chieftainships are those of Chief Mwase of Kasungu in Central Nyasaland and of Chief Undi, who used to live near the Kapoche River in Portuguese East Africa and who is now Paramount Chief of the Northern Rhodesian Cewa.

Although in the past the Cewa were conquered by the Ngoni armies, the Ngoni since then have been conquered by many Cewa customs. For instance, hardly any Ngoni living in Cewa country today speak the Zulu language of their ancestors, and very few of them 'lowola' their wives - that is hand over cattle to the parents of their wives so that their children may be under their

full control. In other words, they have given up 'kulowola' and have taken over the Cewa custom, sometimes called 'kufungasila cikamwini', by which the bridegroom marries at his bride's village and works in the garden of his mother-in-law for a few years. At the end of this period it may be possible for him, depending on his conduct and on how many children have been born to him, to take his wife and children back to his own village. But even if he does carry out this step, known as 'citengwa' or 'utengwa' the children are still not his in the way that they are in an old Ngoni 'lowola' marriage. For instance, if, after a man has taken his wife by Cewa 'citengwa' custom in his old village, and either he or his wife dies, or if they are divorced, the children always go back to the wife's people.

From this it will be seen that among the Cewa and among the majority of Ngoni, who now follow Cewa custom, blood relationship (relationships through the mother) are much stronger ties than the relationship between man and wife. This fact is to be seen in the way a Cewa village is made up. The Cewa live in large villages which are divided into wards or 'vigawo.' Each ward, (cigawo) is occupied by a group of people consisting of a man and what are called his 'mbumba' - that is his female blood relatives for whom he is responsible. The 'mbumba' usually consist of the ward-head's sisters and his sisters' female children, though it may include some older women as well, such as his mother and her sisters if he has no uncle alive who can be responsible for them. This group, the man and his 'mbumba' form the core of the ward. Other people come and attach themselves on to it by marrying the man's sisters or nieces. It will be seen from what has been said about the Cewa ward, that it contains many people to whom the ward head is the maternal uncle, (mtsibweni). If a Cewa boy or girl (or even man or woman) is in trouble, or if he wants to get married, he doesn't go straight to his father for help. His father is merely one of the strangers who has married into the ward. He goes instead to his maternal uncle.

In the same way if a child misbehaves it is his maternal uncle rather than his father who punishes him. His father is usually afraid of punishing him because the child does not belong to him in the way that a European or Zulu child belongs to his father, but belongs to his wife's family who may object to his punishing a member of their group.

Because of the custom that requires a man to live at his wife's village, the Cewa believe that the best marriage a man can make is with the daughter of his maternal uncle - that is with his cross-cousin, or 'msuweni' as the Cewa call her. This means that the man continues to live in his own village because that is where his 'msuweni' is living too. The Cewa are so keen on this type of marriage that the word for a man's cross-cousin (the brother of his 'msuweni') is 'mlamu' which is the same word that he uses for 'brother in law.' Similarly a man always refers to the wife of his maternal uncle as his mother-in-law even if he has not married her daughter.

The Cewa are very good at agriculture. Their system, like many other systems in Central Africa, involves cutting down the bush before making a garden, but all the land cleared is cultivated. The Cewa plant their chief crop, maize, on small mounds called 'nthumbira.' The maize is thus protected from being swamped in the wet season. The mound system has two other advantages as well. When a man hoes the weeds in December he buries them under new mounds which he uses the following year. In this way he prevents the weeds from growing again, and he ensures that the following year there will be plenty of plant food for his maize. Other crops grown by the Cewa are ground nuts, pumpkins and various kinds of beans. The agricultural system of the Cewa was a very good one in the days when there was a small population on a large area of land. Nowadays, however, there is a danger that the

mound system may lead to soil erosion. The Agricultural Department is now showing the Cewa how soil erosion, which threatens the fertility of their land, can be prevented - not by giving up the old method of cultivation, but by changing it slightly, for instance by making contour ridges among the mounds, or by replacing the mounds by small, continuous mounds or 'mizere.' In this way the wisdom of the Cewa ancestors is being combined with the wisdom of modern science.

Like many agricultural people the Cewa are not warlike, but are friendly and peace-loving. Among them it is a very serious matter if a man loses his temper or becomes violent in any way. In their speech too they are very courteous. The respect-plural ('ni') occurs more frequently in Cewa than it does in any other Nyanja dialects. For instance, a person speaking standard Nyanja (The Nyanja of official correspondence and school textbooks) might say "Munthu uyu wafika tsopanoyapa" for "This person has just come now." A Cewa on the other hand would say, "Wanthu awa wafika tsopanoyapa" although referring to only one person. Similarly a Cewa refers to his wife not as "mkazi wanga" but as "wakazi wanga."

It is only during the last thirty years that certain of the Cewa have become owners of cattle. This accounts for the interesting fact that even in areas where the Cewa own large numbers of cattle, for instance in Chief Kawaza's country in Fort Jameson district, there is little or no ritual connected with cattle. Ceremonial presents are made not in cattle but in fowls or, more rarely, goats.

This evening we have told you something about the way the Cewa are related to the other Nyanja-speaking peoples, about their marriage customs and family relationships, about their agriculture and about the peaceableness and politeness. Next time we shall tell you something about their music and dances, the way their life has changed in modern times and how they have applied some of their old skills to new uses.

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