

CENTRAL AFRICAN BROADCASTING STATION

(Lusaka)

BANTU TRIBESNo 5NSENGA AND KUNDA

By

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Have you even been in the Luangwa valley? If you approach it from the west, from the road from Serenje Boma, you suddenly come to a precipice which is so steep that you have to scramble down it. It is very deep too, about two thousand feet. It is like an enormous trench across the country, forty miles wide. Really it is part of that great valley which runs north and south almost across the world: at the north end is the Jordan valley in Palestine, and it comes south right down Africa. In the Luangwa valley live the BaKunda, the BaNsenga and the BaChewa. All these three tribes came from the Congo about 200 years ago.

There is a story about their coming to live in the Luangwa valley. They slowly moved from the Luabala River on their long journey, and on the way they lived for some years where the Ba Aushi now live. All three tribes spoke the same language. When they arrived in the valley they began to build their first village. Some of them were getting bark-rope, some poles, and some grass. Then they began to quarrell about the work. Suddenly they found that each of the three tribes had a different word each for bark-rope, grass, and poles: so they decided to call themselves three different tribes, and to live in three different areas in the valley:

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Just over one hundred and fifty years ago a European, a Portuguese named de Lacerda, travelled from Tete on the Zambezi river, through the BaNsenga's country to the land of Kazembe, to the Luapula. So the Nsengas are a tribe in Northern Rhodesia which we are able to read about in Europeans' books written as long ago as 1797. From this we know that they lived where they live now, and that their villages have not changed in appearance at all. Like all the tribes who came from the Congo they build round huts, about twelve feet across, the walls up to ten feet high, and a round, pointed roof which is thatched with grass. The walls are made of poles which are placed upright in a circle and bound together with withies (mibalō).

There is one custom which is different amongst the Nsengas from that amongst the other tribes. All the other tribes when they build the roof of their huts, lift the poles up one by one to the top of the walls, and bind them together there. The BaNsenga, however, bind their roof poles together on the ground, upside down. Then, when all the roof is finished, they turn it over and lift it complete to the top of the walls.

De Lacerda travelled through the BaNsenga with many African porters, some men and others women. There were several Portuguese in the party too. They left the Zambezi river in July, when it was cold weather, and arrived at Kazembe's in October. All the part of the journey which was through BaNsenga country they bought food with cloth which they had brought with them for the purpose.

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When de Lacerda travelled through Nsengaland he found the people living in peace; when the British arrived one hundred years later they found their way of living was very different. During the time between, the BaNgoni had arrived to the north of the Zambesi and were raiding the BaKunda and BaNsenga. The

The BaNgoni used to go every year to fight against and conquer one or more tribes, and the land of the Nsengas was quite close to their own land. They used to catch all the men and women they could, and the bigger children, and take them with them: the small children and babies they used to kill, because carrying a child hindered its mother on the journey back to Nyasaland. Thousands of people must have been killed or captured by the BaNgoni: those who were left tried to build villages with stockades around them, but the BaNgoni used to shoot arrows with fire over the stockade and so burn the village.

One of the results of the BaNgoni capturing so many BaNsenga and BaCewa women is that the Ngoni language is now forgotten by the BaNgoni. A child always learns to speak the language of its mother. The mothers of the present day BaNgoni were BaNsenga and BaCewa, so the BaNgoni today speak the Nsenga and Cewa languages.

It was only because the British fought against the BaNgoni and conquered them that they stopped raiding the people in the Luangwa valley.

The Luangwa valley is very hot, and the food grows very quickly, especially the Kaffir-corn (Masaka - mapila) and it grows very tall too. The people now have begun to grow a great deal of maize, which is a new crop to them. The women stamp out the grain into meal in large wooden-mortars; as they stampe with their pestles they stand, unlike the Bambas who sit. As they stamp the grain they sing. So today when you get near to a village you still hear the sound of hammering, but it is not the men making bark-cloth, it is the women stamping the grain into meal.

When the British arrived, the BaNsenga knew how to make blankets of cotton. They grew their own cotton, and spun it.

Even to-day some cotton is grown in the Luangwa valley, and some is spun, but it is used for mending European cloth. I do not think any of the people weave the cotton into cloth or blankets. The old blankets made by the BaNsenga were very good and strong and lasted a long time. Perhaps they had learnt to make them from the Portuguese who lived on the Zambesi. Now the people can make no cloth. The tribes in the valley have chiefs, but they do not all belong to the same clan. Many different clans came from the north when the people moved into the valley, and each had its own chief. Today nearly every chief belongs to a different clan.

One custom which the BaNsenga and BaKunda have is different from the customs of other tribes: every headman of a village is named "Chief" (Mfumu). Perhaps the people of the valley honour their village-headmen more than other tribes do: or perhaps they do not! They do not move their villages as often as some other tribes: their land is so fertile that the same fields can be used for year after year. Many villages to day are where they were twenty years ago.

The BaLala and BaBiza who live in the mountains build their villages on the banks of little streams, and in those streams there is water all through the year, good fresh water. The BaNsenga and BaKunda in the valley build their villages on the banks of large river. But for many months each year there is no water to be seen in the rivers. The people dig very deep holes in the sand of the rivers; sometimes the holes are twice as deep as a man is tall; it is from these holes that the people draw their water. Then the rains begin, but still there is no water flowing in the rivers; then several weeks go by, and somewhere, perhaps a long distance away, there is a great storm. One day there is a sound of roaring from the river, and the water comes rushing over the sand. When that happens the people are very glad, because it is a very hot country, and when there is no

water flowing in the rivers it is very difficult to wash and swim, in fact many people do neither in the hot weather because there is not enough water.

In the Luangwa valley you will not see any cattle. All over that country there are very many tsetse fly. Of course these not only bite cattle and kill them, but sheep and goats as well. And, of course they bite the people, and give them that dreadful diseased named sleeping-sickness. So all is not peaceful today in the valley; although the BaNgoni do not come there, the tsetse fly lives there and kills almost as many people as the BaNgoni used to kill.

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Right on the border between the country of the BaNsenga and the BaKunda there is a very large vlei called Chichele. The BaNsenga and the BaKunda have often fought for it. If you drink the water you will find it is very salt, and probably you will vomit it up.

In the Luangwa valley you will not see any cattle. Every year hundreds of people go to that pool and cut the grass which grows all round it. They gather these not only bite cattle and kill them, but sheep and goats as well. And, of course they bite the people, and give them that dreadful diseased named sleeping-sickness. So all is not peaceful today in the valley; although the BaNgoni do not come there, the tsetse fly lives there and kills almost as many people as the BaNgoni used to kill. They then make a thing like a very little hut-roof and place it upside down on a frame, and through the grass of that thing they have made, they pour the ash from the grass, mixed with water. The dirt is caught on the grass and the salty water flows through and is caught in a big pot which has been out underneath. Then the pot is put on the fire and the salty water boils till none is left, only some salt at the bottom of the pot. This salt is made into lumps and is sold all over the

country. Before the Europeans came it was the only salt that the people could use. Right on the border between the country of the BaNsenga and the BaKunda there is a very large vlei called Chichele. The BaNsenga and the BaKunda have often fought for it. If you drink the water you will find it is very salt, and probably you will vomit it up.

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Quite near the hot pool there is a large flat rock. If you ever go there, look at the rock closely. You will see some marks on it, it is where the stone was a little softer in patches and the rain has worn it. However the people who live there think the marks are like the footmarks of a man and a dog. Of course they are not really footmarks. But the old people say that a person called Luchele and his dog once stood there, and it is their footmarks that you see. Perhaps in your own country there is a story like that, and perhaps you have seen other marks in other place which the old people used to think were footmarks.

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