

A GREAT KINGDOM IN THE CONGO

By William Henry Sheppard

-Originally Published 1920. Excerpt from "Presbyterian Pioneers in Congo"-

*(Slightly condensed and selected text, with some omissions
made by Chariane Quille. Appropriate for all audiences.)*

I had studied the new dialect of the Bakuba and had made every preparation for our expedition into the "Forbidden Land" of King Lukenga. I had met their people, a far interior tribe, and was interested in their apparent superiority in physique, manners, dress and dialect.

I asked to be allowed to accompany them to their country and king, but they said it was impossible, their king would never allow a foreigner to come into the interior. Nevertheless I determined to seek them out and after some weeks had elapsed, I called our station natives together and laid plainly before them the perils of the journey.

I told them, from the information which I had, that the trails which had been made by elephant, buffalo, antelope and Bakuba natives were many and they led over long, hot, sandy plains through deep dark forests, across streams without bridges, and through swamps infested with wild animals and poisonous serpents. And above all, the king had sent word throughout the land that we could not enter his country. Not a man's muscle moved, and there was not a dissenting voice.

I had picked up the Bakuba dialect from some of the king's traders and tax collectors who journeyed our way. I received from them much information of the general direction leading north toward the capital, the names of large towns on the way, of the market towns, the approximate distances apart, the streams to be crossed, and their names; of the leopard, buffalo and elephant zones, and the names of some of the chiefs of the market towns, etc.

Two days later, when all was in readiness, tents loaded, cooking utensils, a bag of money (cowrie shells), some salt, etc., we left Luebo, led by the Master's hand.

The trail lay northeast by north with a gradual ascent. The country was well wooded and watered. No stones could be seen anywhere, and the soil was sandy. There were many extensive plains with magnificent palm trees, hundreds and thousands of them ranging from a foot high, which the elephants fed upon, to those fifty and sixty feet high.

The forest everywhere was ever green. Trees blossomed and bloomed, sending out upon the gentle breeze their fragrance, so acceptable to the traveler. Festoons of moss and running vines made the forest look like a beautifully painted theatre or an enormous swinging garden.

In the meantime word had come to the king of Lukenga of our presence and, as we neared his kingdom, we were met by a party of [his] men.

My caravan had been resting in the village of a chief named Kueta, who had repeatedly urged me to turn back, and, as the men of King Lukenga appeared, the chief's men fled to the forest. I sat quietly, however, in my seat in front of my tent and my people began to gather around my chair, the youngest of the caravan nestling on his knees very close to me.

The king's people drew near and the leading man called to Chief Kueta in a voice that rang through the village:

"Now hear the words of King Lukenga: Because you have entertained a foreigner in your village, we have come to take you to the capital for trial."

I knew things were now serious, so rising from my seat I called to the head man to meet me half way. He paid no attention. I called a second time and walked up to him and began to plead for Chief Kueta.

"I understand you are sent by your king to arrest these people."

"It is the word of the king," said he.

I continued, "The chief of this village is not guilty; he gave me warning and told me to go away, to return the way I had come, and I did not. It is my fault and not Kueta's."

The leader replied,

"You speak our language?"

"I do," was my quick answer.

"That is strange," said he.

The leader and his men moved off some distance and talked between themselves. In a little while he came back to me saying, "I will return to the capital and report these things to the king."

I said to him, "Tell your king I am not a bad man. I have a message for him. Wait a moment," said I. Taking from one of my boxes a very large cowrie shell, near the size of one's fist, and holding it up, I said, "This we call the father of cowries; present it to the king as a token of friendship."

The men were soon off for the capital and we settled down, hoping and praying for the best.

Kueta told me that the head man was King Lukenga's son and his name was N'Toinzide. N'Toinzide stood more than six feet, of bronze color, blind in one eye, determined set lips, and seemed a man fearless of any foe--man or beast. The villagers told me many things of the king's son, both good and bad.

After some days the messengers reached the capital and reported to King Lukenga. "We saw the foreigner; he speaks our language, he knows all the trails of the country."

The king was astonished and called a council and laid the matter before them. They deliberated over the affair and finally told the king that they knew who I was.

"The foreigner who is at Bixibing," said they, "who has come these long trails and who speaks our language is a Makuba, one of the early settlers who died, and whose spirit went to a foreign country and now he has returned."

The messengers hastened to return and accompany me to the capital.

We had been longing and praying for days for the best. With the king's special envoy were many more men who had come through mere curiosity, as was their custom.

N'Toinzide stood in the center of the town and called with his loud voice saying who I was and giving briefly my history.

The villagers were indeed happy. They flocked around as the king's son drew near and extended their hands to me.

I arose from my chair and made these remarks:

"I have heard distinctly all that you have said, but I am not a Makuba; I have never been here before."

N'Toinzide insisted that they were right, and said that his father, the king, wanted me to come on at once to the capital. The people were mighty happy, Kueta, our host, the townspeople, and my people, too. Their appetites came back, and so did mine.

With a hasty good-bye, "Gala hola," to Kueta, we were off.

On the last morning our trail grew larger, the country more open, and the ascent greater, until we stood upon an extensive plain and had a beautiful view in every direction of all the land as far as we could see.

We could see in the distance thousands and thousands of banana and palm trees and our escort of Bakuba cried out, "Muxenge! muxenge!" (meaning capital! capital!).

Just before entering the great town we were halted at a small guard post consisting of a few houses and some men who were the king's watchmen. They told me that on each of the four entrances to the capital these sentries were stationed. A man was dispatched to notify the king that we were near.

In a short while the people came out of the town to meet and greet us, hundreds of them, and many little children, too. Some of my caravan were frightened and would run away, but I told them that the oncoming crowd meant no harm.

N'Toinzide, the king's son, took the lead and the interested and excited crowd after getting a peep at me fell in behind.

We marched down a broad, clean street, lined on both sides by interested spectators jostling, gesticulating, talking aloud and laughing. The young boys and girls struck up a song which sounded to me like a band of sweet music and we all kept step to it.

N'Toinzide called a halt at a house which I presume was 15 x 25 feet in size. You could enter the doors front and back almost without stooping. The house was made like all the others of bamboo and had two rooms.

There were a number of clay pots of various sizes for cooking and six large gourds for water. My caravan was comfortably housed. I did not put up my tent, but took my seat in a reclining chair under a large palm tree in front of my door.

The crowd was immense, but we had them sit down on the ground so we could get a breath of air.

In the afternoon the king sent greetings, and fourteen goats, six sheep, a number of chickens, corn, pumpkins, large dried fish, bushels of peanuts, bunches of bananas and plantains and a calabash of palm oil and other food.

The prime minister, N'Dola, who brought the greetings, mentioned that the king would see me next day; also that the king's servants would take out of the village all goats and chickens which I did not want for immediate use.

For, said N'Dola, no sheep, goats, hogs, dogs, ducks or chickens are allowed in the king's town.

In the evening we started our song service and I delivered to them our King's message. The crowd was great. The order was good. I went to rest with the burden of these people upon my heart, and thanking God that He had led, protected and brought us through close places safely to the "Forbidden Land."

Early in the morning we heard the blast of ivory horns calling the attention of the people to put on their best robes and be in readiness for the big parade. I saw there was great activity in the town, men and women hurrying to and fro.

Soon two stalwart Bakuba, with their red kilts on and feathers in their hats appeared before my house and announced their readiness to accompany me before King Lukenga.

They noticed an old brass button tied by a string around the neck of one of my men. Very politely they removed it, saying, "Only the king can wear brass or copper."

I was dressed in what had once been white linen. Coat, trousers, white canvas shoes and pith helmet. The officials on either side took me by the arm;

we walked a block up the broad street, turned to the right and walked three blocks till we came to the big town square.

Thousands of the villagers had already taken their position and were seated on the green grass. King Lukenga, his high officials and about 300 of his wives occupied the eastern section of the square.

The players of stringed instruments and drummers were in the center, and as we appeared a great shout went up from the people. The king's servants ran and spread leopard skins along the ground leading to his majesty. I approached with some timidity.

The king arose from his throne of ivory, stretched forth his hand and greeted me with these words, "Wyni" (You have come). I bowed low, clapped my hands in front of me, and answered, "Ndini, Nyimi" (I have come, king).

As the drums beat and the harps played the king's sons entered the square and danced one after the other.

The king's great chair, or throne, was made of carved tusks of ivory, and his feet rested upon lion skins.

I judged him to have been a little more than six feet high and with his crown, which was made of eagle feathers, he towered over all. The king's dress consisted of a red loin cloth, draped neatly about his waist in many folds.

He wore a broad belt decorated with cowrie shells and beads. His armlets and anklets were made of polished cowrie shells reaching quite above the wrists and ankles. These decorations were beautifully white.

His feet were painted with powdered canwood, resembling morocco boots. The king weighed about 200 pounds. He wore a pleasant smile. He looked to be eighty years old, but he was as active as a middle-aged man.

As the sun was setting in the west the king stood up, made a slight bow to his people and to me. His slaves were ready with his cowrie-studded hammock to take him to his place, for his feet must never touch the ground. His hammock was like the body of a buggy carried on two long poles upon the shoulders of many men.

Through the shouts of the people I was accompanied back to my resting place. It was the most brilliant affair I had seen in Africa, but my! I was so glad when it was all over.

The town was laid off east and west. The broad streets ran at right angles, and there were blocks just as in any town. Those in a block were always related in some way.

Around each house is a court and a high fence made of heavy matting of palm leaves, and around each block there is also a high fence, so you enter these homes by the many gates.

Each block has a chief called Mbambi, and he is responsible to King Lukenga for his block. When the king will deliver a message to the whole village or part of it, these chiefs are sent for and during the early evenings they ring their iron hand bells and call out in a loud voice the message in five minutes.

The king desired of his own heart to give me peanuts for my people. I heard the messengers delivering the word and the next morning we had more peanuts than we could manage.

There was not a visible light anywhere in the whole town.

"A chunk or two" is always kept smouldering in the center of the house on the clay floor. The housewife is always careful to have a handful of split dry bamboo near, and when anyone is stung by a scorpion or snake (which often happens) they start up a blaze and hunt for the intruder and medicine.

The moon shines more brightly and beautifully than on Lukenga's plain. And the beauty is enhanced by the thousands of majestic palms, and the singing of birds with voices like the mocking bird and the nightingale. I have sat in front of my house moonlight nights until 12 and 1 o'clock.

Every morning the "courts" and streets were swept. Men who had committed some offense were compelled to pull weeds and sweep the streets clean.

There is a rule in all Bakuba villages that every man every day sweep before his own door. The only littered places I observed were at the four public entrances of the town where markets were held daily at 6 A.M., 12 noon and 5 P.M.--sugar cane, pulp, banana and plantain peelings, and peanut shells.

When the king's drum taps the signal about 9 P.M. at the conclusion of the sleep song there is not a sound again in the whole village.

All the natives we have met in the Kasal are, on the whole, honest. Our private dwellings have never been locked day or night. Your pocketbook is a sack of cowries or salt tied at the mouth with a string.

From the great Lukenga plateau as far as the eye can look you see villages dotted everywhere. You never find a family living alone isolated from the village. The people live together, and usually everybody in a village is related in some near or distant way.

The Bakuba are monogamists. A young man sees a girl whom he likes; he has met her in his own town or at some other, or perhaps at a market place or a dance. He sends her tokens of love, bananas, plantains, peanuts, dried fish or grasshoppers. She in turn sends him similar presents.

They often meet, sit down on the green, laugh and talk together. I have seen the girls often blush and really put on airs. He asks her to have him, if she

has no one else on her heart, and tells her that he wants no one to eat the crop that is in the field but her. The girl and the parents both agree.

On a set day when the market is in full blast, with hundreds of people from everywhere, the young man and girl, with their young friends, all dressed in their best robes, meet and march Indian file through the open market and receive congratulations from everybody.

The new bride and groom continue their march to the already prepared house of the young man. A feast of goat, sheep, monkey, chicken or fish, with plenty of palm wine is served and all is ended with a big dance.

The women of the king's household select their own husbands, and no man dare decline; and no man would ever be so rude or presumptuous as to ask for the hand and heart of royalty.

The husband knows that he must cut down the forest and assist in planting corn, millet, beans, peas, and sweet potatoes, bring the palm wine, palm nuts, make his wife's garments and repair the house.

He is never to be out after 8 o'clock at night unless sitting up at a wake or taking part in a public town dance.

The young man before marriage sends a certain number of well-woven mats and so many thousands of cowries to the parents of the girl as a dowry. If they cease to love and must part, even twenty rainy seasons from marriage, the dowry or its equivalent is returned to the man.

The wife is expected to shave and anoint the husband's body with palm oil, keep his toenails and fingernails manicured, bring water and wood, help in the field, cook his food, and take care of the children.

The Bakuba are morally a splendid people. I have asked a number of Bakuba what was their real ideal of life, and they invariably answered to have a big corn field, marry a good wife, and have many children.

We were astounded when we saw the first new-born baby. It was so very light. But in a few weeks the youngster rallied to his colors and we were assured that he would never change again.

No baby is born in the regularly occupied house. A small house is built in the back yard and is surrounded by a fence of palm fronds. No one is admitted into the enclosure but a few women.

The new youngster receives a bath of palm oil, then the notice is given and all the friends of the family with jugs of cold water vie with each other in giving mother and baby a shower bath. The drums beat and the dance in water and mud continues for hours.

The Bakuba children have many games and but few toys. The girls have wooden dolls made by their fathers, and the boys make [toys] from bamboo. They [catch] mice, lizards, grasshoppers, crickets, caterpillars, butterflies, lightning bugs, etc.

They make mud pies and play market, and tie the legs of May and June bugs to see them fly around and buzz. They love to play housekeeping.

They are also trained to do some work, as bringing wood, sweeping or looking after the younger ones. There are no knives, forks or dishes to wash.

"Baby talk" is not used and the parents speak to the babies just as though they were speaking to grown-ups.

I have seen the children in the streets drawing with a pointed stick or their finger on the smooth sand, men, leopards, monkeys, crocodiles, birds, snakes and other animals.

The boys make a heap of clay and sod it, and with great speed run upon it and turn a somersault, lighting on their feet. A string of them together will play "leap frog," and hide-and-seek is great sport with them. In all these amusements they keep up a song.

I spent hours at King Lukenga's and other villages playing with the little folks and trying to find out what they were thinking about.

They had a name for the sun and moon, names for very brilliant and prominent stars and ordinary ones. The sun was the father of the heavens, the moon was his wife, and the stars were their children.

They knew that a year was divided into two general seasons, the rainy (eight moons), the dry (four moons); though even in the rainy season it doesn't rain every day and very seldom all day at any time; and in the dry season there is an occasional refreshing shower.

They knew the names of all the lakes, rivers and small streams. Roots that were good for medicine or to eat they knew. Flowers and ferns were called by name. The names of all the many varieties of trees, birds and animals they knew.

I was surprised to know from Maxamalinge, the king's son, that every month the king had all the little children of the town before him and he in turn would talk to them, as a great and good father to his own children. The king would have his servants give to each boy and girl a handful of peanuts.

I grew very fond of Bakuba and it was reciprocated. They were the finest looking race I had seen in Africa, dignified, graceful, courageous, honest, with an open, smiling countenance and really hospitable. Their knowledge of weaving, embroidering, wood carving and smelting was the highest in equatorial Africa.

[The end]