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SERIES OF TALKS ON BANTU TRIBES

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THE LOVALE TRIBES

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We often hear people on the railway line speak of the Balovale, whilst the Malozi generally refer to them as the Mawiko. But these are not their proper tribal names for these terms include several different tribes, the main ones of which are the Lunda, Lwena or Lovale, Luchazi and Chokwe. They live in the North West of Northern Rhodesia, especially in the Mwinilunga and Balovale districts and in the new Kabompo district; they are quite numerous in Barotseland especially in Mankoya and have settled in the west of Kasempa. All these people have various common features which distinguish them from the other Africans of Northern Rhodesia and for that reason it is probably easy to think of them as one people; but this is not correct and the different tribes thus termed have distinctive features among themselves. We shall only call them Balovale people tonight as an easy way of referring to them collectively.

All these people have a tradition that they came from the North West in the Belgian Congo from the country of Mwanchiyamwwe. Outside Northern Rhodesia they live in the South west Congo and in Angola and the Chokwe extend right up to the present border of Mwanchiyamwwe in the Congo. In those countries which are their earlier home they live in different types of environment; the Lunda in hilly, well-wooded regions with plenty of timber, the Lovale in open country on the big river flood
plains. However in Northern Rhodesia they are tending to live together in the same type of country for many of them have only recently come to live in this territory.

Most other Africans in Northern Rhodesia find the languages of the Balovale tribes very difficult to understand and people who study the grammar of Bantu languages have pointed out that these languages have a number of peculiarities which are not to be found in any other of the Bantu languages of Northern Rhodesia. The various Balovale people each have their own language. They tend to use Lovale as a common language when they are in contact with other tribes because Lovale is the easiest of these North-western languages. It is interesting to note that all the Balovale languages make much more use of tone to distinguish the meaning of words than is the case with other languages in Northern Rhodesia. Chokwe uses tone in this way much more than Lunda, Lovale or Luchazi and quite a lot of words in Chokwe have five different meanings according to the arrangement of the high and low tones on the syllables of the word. It is interesting to note that very extensive use of tone in this way is characteristic of West African languages although the latter are not Bantu, and the Balovale tribes have many other peculiarities of their culture which resemble most closely those of West African peoples.

All the Balovale people practice circumcision, which distinguishes them from other Northern Rhodesian tribes. These rites are the occasion upon which they bring out their makishi or masks who perform with dances and other gesticulations. Many people have seen certain of the makishi on the railway line because some makishi dancers take their costumes with them when they go down to look for work and make money by giving performances. The commonest mask which performs in this way is called "mwang pweve" - the young woman. There are other makishi however which are concerned with special rites and to not
come out to amuse the general public. The mokishi masks do not
resemble any of the masks which are found in south or west Africa
but very similar masks extend through the Western Congo into
West Africa. Originally these masks were used to frighten and deceive
the women at these ceremonies and the men used to say, "we are
going to resurrect a likishi," but nowadays all the women know
that there is a man inside the costume.

Like other African people the Balovale tribes believe in a
supreme being or God, but the names which they give to him
("Nzambi" or "Kalunga") are different from those found in the rest
of this territory. These names however are also used from Angola
to the Western Congo and Cameroons.

They also have the belief like other African peoples
that the ancestral spirits play an important part in their lives.
But here again they differ from those to the West of them for
their ancestral spirits often affect them through a special
medium called a "lihamba." When this happens the victim has to
be treated by a special ceremony including a dance; the patient
then goes into a sort of trance and jerks in an uncontrollable manner.
This is believed to show that the spirit possessing him is
responding to the treatment. This belief in spirits which do
not operate directly but through "mahamba" seems not to resemble
any beliefs to the south or east but extends through Portuguese
West Africa and the Western Congo.

Many of the dances of the Balovale tribes to day show
no special peculiarities but mention must be made of the dance
called "Chiyanda" which is danced by the Chokwe. For this dance
it is necessary to use the large oblong drum with a slit in the
top called "chikuvu." This drum has one side thicker than the
other and the drummer can thus produce a high and a low tone
according to the way in which he beats it. He does so in this
dance in order to give signals to the dancers. This wonder drum
is characteristic of Congo and West African peoples and by means of
the high and low tones it can be used to send signals for a long distance. However its use for this purpose by the Balovale tribes seems to have ceased though they remember that their fathers used it in this way, just as people in the Congo and Cameroons do today.

I have mentioned these peculiarities because they and others which could be mentioned all go to show that these people have many features which link them closely to Africans living further to the north and west.

Most of the Balovale tribes use cassava for their main crop and none of them grow much maize. In Balovale they also grow bulrush millet which they eat as well as cassava, and also use for beer brewing. The Lunda at Mwinilunga prefer finger millet for this purpose.

All the Balovale tribes make bee hives which they put in trees for the wild bees to swarm in them, but the Luchazi go in for bee keeping in this way more than the rest. They have for many years been able to make money from the sale of beeswax, for they used to sell it to the Portuguese in Angola long before the British came into Northern Rhodesia.

The Lovale are good fishermen as one might expect, since they live on the plains by big rivers; they have many different methods of catching fish with nets, spears, various traps, wire and so on, and know the names of the different kinds of fish. On the other hand the Lunda and Chokwe do not fish a great deal and the Lovale often laugh because the Lunda and Chokwe do not know the names of all the fish in the rivers. In the same way the Luchazi who often eat grasshoppers, know the names of all the various grasshoppers in the bush whilst the other Balovale tribes know only a few of them.

Before I finish talking about the Balovale tribes I must mention the Ovimbundu who have also settled in this region; like the Chokwe and Luchazi, they are recent immigrants into Northern Rhodesia who have come from Angola; their home lies in
the high country about Bailundo and Silva Porto about two hundred miles inland from Lobito Bay. Although they differ from the other Balovale tribes in various ways and are not as a rule called Mawiko or Balovale, they have in fact, much in common. Historically, they are very important because of their past activities as intermediaries for trade with the interior. We must remember that a long time before Europeans settled in South Africa, the Portuguese had already settled in Angola. The oldest and most continuous European settlement in Africa is in Angola, and Portuguese traders in those early days used the Ovimbundu as their intermediaries for trading slaves, rubber, ivory, beeswax and other things in the interior of Angola and the nearby countries which are now part of Northern Rhodesia and the Belgian Congo. In this way European influences first came into this part of Central Africa, so that the Balovale tribes knew much more about the Portuguese in their earlier history than they did about us, and in this way many Portuguese words came into their languages. It was probably in this way too, that the Ovimbundu, Chokwe and Luchazi and to a large extent the Lovale, became accustomed to trading through their commercial dealings with the Portuguese, and so today we find more village store keepers and traders among these people and fewer traders among the Lunda, who had few early contacts with the Portuguese. Ovimbundu traders reached Barotseland about the same time as David Livingstone made his famous journey up the Zambezi and across Angola to Loanda, but long before that they had been sending trading caravans into the Congo and interior of Angola.

You may wonder why I have said little about the wars of these tribes, for in the past most African tribes were usually fighting with their neighbours on and off. However, we know quite a lot about the early history of these tribes thanks to the
records which have been preserved in Angola, and it seems as
if the early history of the Balovale tribes was less marked
by continuous wars than most other central African tribes' history. Already before 1500 A.D. the first Portuguese settlements
had been established at the mouth of the Congo and from then on
although there were small wars, there was also a great deal of
commerce going on. We know from Portuguese historical records
that a Portuguese traveller reached the capital of chief Kakenge,
the head of the Lovale people before 1800 and found Kakenge living
in the same area where he lives today in Angola not far from
the border of our Balovale district. Portuguese traders
penetrated into Angola well in advance of the administration,
and although peace from tribal wars did not come until later,
there is no doubt that this commercial activity did have a
settling effect on the people there.

One might continue for a long time discussing the many
interesting features of these people who are so often regarded
in this country as rather wild and peculiar people; however, time
is too short. Listeners will see from what has been said tonight
that if the Balovale tribes seem rather different from many other
Northern Rhodesia peoples, it is largely because of their past
history which has given them a cultural background in the more
distant past derived from the north and west, and a more recent
stimulus through their contacts with the old Portuguese settlements
in Angola.