

SHAMBA BOLONGONGO: AFRICAN KING OF PEACE

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MUCH of Africa's native history has been lost to posterity through the lack of written records. Occasionally, however, special circumstances have enabled scholars to rescue sufficient data so that a fairly clear picture of a particular African people and its ethos may be discerned. Such is the case with the Bushongo, an extraordinary group of tribes inhabiting the present-day Belgian Congo.

The Bushongo developed and maintained for centuries an advanced, complex type of political organization which fell only under the harsh impact of European invasion late in the nineteenth century. Further, these tribes repeatedly gave birth to outstanding leaders who instituted and carried out the constructive policies that made the Bushongo a great nation. Perhaps the most outstanding among them was Shamba Bolongongo, a king who reigned about 1600 A.D. and epitomized the essential spirit and character of the Bushongo people.

In 1884, when Europeans first encountered the Bushongo, a Bantu-speaking federation of seventeen tribes living along the Kasai and Sankuru rivers of the Congo, they found a powerful nation proud of its long history and traditions. Officially appointed historians of the Bushongo kingdom kept account of 121 dynasties, going back to about the fifth century A.D. Each ruler customarily named two tribesmen and charged them with the task of learning national history from their predecessors. Thus the memory of kings and important events was kept alive by word-of-mouth transmission from generation to generation.

The solar eclipse of March 30, 1680, which occurred during the reign of Bo Kama Bomanchala, the 98th monarch, made it possible for investigators to work out an approximate chronology of the Bushongo dynasties. In addition, native legends provide information as far back as the third ruler, a woman named Lobamba, who held the throne about 490 A.D.

Shamba Bolongongo early exhibited a desire to learn from the foreigner and, equally important, to teach his people new

things. When he was nineteen years old and heir to the throne, he requested of the king and queen permission to travel beyond the borders of the Bushongo kingdom. This request seemed fantastic to the rulers because of the dangers attaching to foreign travel—dangers from wild beasts and, even more deadly, from strange, unknown tribes. Naturally, therefore, the king and queen strongly opposed the trip.

But they could not hold out long against Shamba's fervent entreaties, nor against the logic of his desire to learn. Hence, Shamba, accompanied by a large entourage of aides, servants, and warriors, undertook a tour lasting two years, during which he travelled far and absorbed the knowledge that made him the great and wise ruler worshipped by the Bushongo to the present day. It was on this journey that Shamba first observed the practice of monogamy, and what he saw made a deep impression on him. By the time he returned to Bushongoland, the king had died, and Shamba Bolongongo ascended to the throne.

During his kingship, Shamba introduced many significant cultural changes among his people. He taught them, for example, to weave raffia fibre into cloth; hitherto, the Bushongo had clothed themselves with fragile barkcloth. He taught them to cultivate cassava, a plant which the locusts could not destroy, and thereby augmented the uncertain staple food supplies of maize and millet. He initiated the art of embroidery and, furthermore, encouraged all forms of arts and crafts to such an extent that these attained their highest development in his reign. He instructed his people in the game of *lela* (known as *mancala* elsewhere in Africa), a game of skill, in an attempt to divert their passion for gambling.

Shamba Bolongongo abolished war, which he abhorred, and restricted his armed forces to police duty. He eliminated the use of bows and arrows and the *shongo*, a many-bladed throwing knife which had given its name to the people. As a symbol of his passion for peace, King Shamba ordered that the State knife be exchanged for one with a wooden blade during moonless nights, a custom that persisted into the twentieth century among the Bushongo.

Though he hated war, Shamba made the name of the Bushongo respected all over the land. His subjects travelled freely among neighbouring tribes in pursuit of commerce, the Bushongo traders wearing no other arm than the leaf-shaped knife-of-state



Wooden statuette of Shamba Bolongongo, carved by an artist of his court and showing the King seated in front of a 'lela' board.

By Courtesy of the British Museum

by which they were recognized and left unmolested.

If a subject was killed in some distant village, King Shamba would exclaim: "Do these people think we are women because we love peace? Sound the war horn." The Bushongo, armed with their swords, then went off "like a swarm of locusts" to attack the offenders. They burnt the villages, destroyed the crops, and cut down the plantain trees. But bloodshed was avoided, for Shamba commanded: "Kill neither man, woman nor child; are they not the children of *Chembe* (God), and have they not a right to live?" Only those who resisted were hurt, and by the strength of their numbers the Bushongo obliged the rest to submit, pay a fine, and give hostages.

Although the Bushongo readily accepted most of Shamba's innovations, they were not easily persuaded to give up polygamy for monogamy. The king waged a long campaign, and, when the time seemed especially propitious, he called the tribal leaders together and told them the following tale:

"Once there was a man who had two dogs. He loved these dogs dearly, and they loved him, too. Every day they accompanied him to his fields, and after the day's task was done the three of them returned home and ate dinner. He always gave each dog its separate meal. For a long time the man lived happily and peacefully with his two dogs.

"One day misfortune struck. While working in a field, a heavy storm broke and drenched both man and dogs. Exasperated, the man became careless and bent his hoe on a rock. When he tried to repair the hoe, he cut his left hand deeply with his axe. He could not finish the day's work until long after dark. Hungry, tired, and irritable, the man wearily and silently trudged home, the dogs tagging along. He quickly cooked dinner, but found that there remained only one large meaty bone for the two dogs. Impatiently he hacked away at this bone for a while, but, unable to split it, he became furious and tossed the one bone to the dogs. They fought so viciously over the bone that soon afterwards both dogs died of wounds. The tragedy left the man saddened and forlorn."

Shamba Bolongongo paused for a moment and then said: "The moral of this story is quite plain. *To every dog his bone, to every woman her man, and peace will reign in the village.*"

Tribal history relates that with this story King Shamba succeeded in convincing the Bushongo to adopt monogamy, a marriage form they have indeed continued until the present day.

Shamba Bolongongo's striking political reforms undoubtedly constitute his greatest contribution to Bushongo life. He was responsible for introducing the basic democratic principles which permeated the entire administrative structure, both nationally and locally. Most notable among these was the role he gave to essential crafts and industries in the government. At its height, the Bushongo nation probably boasted the most elaborately organized government ever developed in Africa, one which clearly merits description as an example of aboriginal African political capabilities.

The Bushongo nation consisted of a federation of seventeen tribes of which the Bambala tribe—where Mingenga, the capital, was located—formed the core. The government comprised an extensive hierarchy of officials who constituted the royal court and served under the supreme authority of the king. This hierarchy, numbering 118 officials, included administrative, judicial, military, and tribal functionaries, as well as representatives of the various Bushongo crafts and industries and court dignitaries. In addition, fourteen women held official positions. The nation was divided administratively into four provinces, each headed by an official who ranked among the six highest in the land.

The king theoretically governed as an absolute monarch by virtue of his descent in direct line from *Chembe*, the Supreme Deity of the nation. Practically, however, the hierarchy of officials performed the large part of governmental activities. The king owned all fields and held the exclusive right to grant their usufruct, but he could not sell any land. Succession to the throne descended in the female line, i.e., to sons of the eldest sister in the royal family, by age. The king's right to disinherit such of his successors as he chose, which made it possible for him to designate the next king, was qualified by the restriction forbidding him to go beyond the legitimate heirs.

The hierarchy of 118 officials was distributed through seven categories, and the group of women functionaries constituted an eighth. Six officials held highest rank, representing as a group probably the most powerful administrative body in the Bushongo political system. At the top was the prime minister, who served in addition as the supreme judge and replaced the king when the latter was absent from office. The next four officials acted as representatives of the nation's four provinces.

The commander-in-chief of the army occupied the sixth highest office and, as part of his duties, presided in court cases involving injuries inflicted by means of a sharp instrument.

A second category of officials included individuals charged with special administrative functions. The chief treasurer, for example, received all gifts or tribute offered to the king, while the third treasurer exclusively collected funeral taxes. Another member of this group was listed as an assignant to one of the provincial heads.

The judiciary comprised fifteen judges in addition to the prime minister and the commander-in-chief. Each judge presided over cases involving a particular crime, and no others. For example, one judge tried individuals charged with theft; another sat in cases of matrimonial disputes; a third judge decided whether certain deaths were suicides—if so, the parents of the deceased were subjected to penalties; two judges heard sorcery (or witchcraft) trials, etc. It is worth noting that actions causing material damage either to the community or to persons were punishable crimes, but accidents resulting in death and homicides done in self-defence were not deemed punishable. Modern observers have reported that Bushongo trials were conducted with meticulous fairness.

Fifteen officials served as representatives of several of the more important tribes under Bushongo rule. In addition to the four provincial heads included in this administrative category, a council of six officials, headed by the king, managed all affairs relating to the Bambala tribe, the nuclear group of the Bushongo nation. Two officials represented the Bakete tribe, and one each the Piange, the Batwa, and the Bangendi tribes.

All essential crafts and industries were represented at the king's court, where the delegates participated actively in the administration of the government. The eighteen trades represented included wood-sculptors, weavers, blacksmiths, leather workers, singers, dancers, musicians, fishermen, hunters, boat makers, oil manufacturers, mat makers, salt processors, tailors, rope makers, hosiers, and spinners of thread. Oddly, one member of this category was an official who represented "fathers of twins." The individual representing wood-sculptors ranked above all others in the group, even over the delegate of the dancers, who was a son of the king.

Four military officials assisted the commander-in-chief and voiced the rights of the military at the king's court. A large

contingent of fifty-eight court dignitaries filled the remaining official posts. This group included a sixteen-member Council of Elders, several positions described as "sinecures," five king's messengers, the first, second, and third heirs presumptive, and so on.

The fourteen women officials were under the leadership of two sisters or daughters of the king. These two ranked among the highest officials in the land, along with the top six officials. Women, in fact, enjoyed considerable prestige and power in Bushongo life, emphasized by the great role accorded the king's mother; she was regarded as the first personage in the kingdom, and in certain respects she wielded even more authority than her son. Several women, moreover, served on the important Council of Elders.

The political organization of the individual tribes of the Bushongo nation reflected that of the central government. Each tribal chief was surrounded by a hierarchy of officials—judicial, military, administrative, court dignitaries, and a prime minister. Although succession to chieftainship followed the same rules that applied to the kingship, the nomination of a tribal chief required the king's ratification. Within each tribe the local chiefs maintained a similar, though smaller, administrative organization.

All government officials enjoyed permanent tenure in office, but the posts were not hereditary. Theoretically, the nomination of an individual to a vacant office was the prerogative of the sovereign. In general practice, however, public opinion largely determined the king's choices.

The above brief description presents in bare outline the main features of the complex political system developed by the Bushongo prior to contact with Europeans. It was a system of checks and balances in which the voice of the people made itself heard through the delegates at the royal and local courts representing all trades and industries. King Shamba Bolongongo, by introducing such representation into the government, gave strong impetus to the slowly developing democratic forms that were emerging in Bushongo life. Indeed, the Bushongo people were well on the way to a high political, aesthetic, and ethical civilization when Europeans invaded the Congo. One cannot help but wonder what would have happened had this extraordinary people been left alone to work out their own destiny.