

# The Lunda Empire

Zambia by Richard Hall

As early as AD 900 there had been a powerful Luba kingdom along the Lualaba river. The people were skilled coppersmiths and used copper ingots as currency. Further west, near the Kasai river, the matrilineal Lunda people lived in a country they called Nkalanyi? Little is known of the Lunda until about 1500, when they had their headquarters at Kapanga, a little to the east of the Kasai. The empire became great after a merger between the Lunda and Luba shortly before 1600. The cause of the merger we are told, was a love-at-first-sight meeting between Luweji, chief-tainness of the Lunda, and Chibinda Ilunga, a chief of the Luba. This is how the Mwata Kazembe's tribal elders relate the story in the records of Zambia's Lunda people :

There came a man from the country of the Luba, and by tribe he was a Luba of Mbiti Chiluwe. In his occupation of hunting game he wandered about in many lands. He came to the country- of the Lunda where Makwe Luweji reigned: he had with him many peoples; he found a stream in the bush and built a rough shelter there and settled down to kill many animals. He went out in the morning and killed an eland which died some distance off, near the village of Makwe Luweji. He followed the trail of the animal a long way and found a well-worn path and realised there were people near. He had come a long distance so he followed the path which took him to a spring, where he sat down, very tired.

Then came women from the village to draw water, and he asked : 'Who is chief of the village ?' and they answered : 'You who are asking about our village, where do you come from?' He replied : 'I am a stranger in this land.' The women went straightway off to the village, being very anxious to inform their husbands. They told them how they had found a man at the spring who said he was a stranger, and said they should go and talk to him. At once the men went and questioned him; and he told them where he had come from and all about himself. And he said he had come with many followers who had remained behind where he had built his shelter. The men said they were going to take him so that the Makwe could see him. They took the hunter to Makwe Luweji, and as soon as the Makwe saw him she loved him for he was handsome.

And so they were married, and that is how the Lunda and Luba peoples joined together.

## The Coming of the Bemba

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The migrations into the 'northern wing of the Zambian butterfly' in most cases involved a crossing of the Luapula river, now the boundary with the Congo. The Luapula valley itself is densely populated and the river is rich in fish. The first people in the valley are said to have been the Bwilile and Shila who lived by fishing and were not averse to catching a hippo with harpoons if the need arose.

Various small groups crossed the river until in the seventeenth century the Bemba appeared. The exact reason for their migration is not clear, although there is a probability that the stimulus of

contact with the Portuguese played a part. Bemba tradition says that the Mukulumpe (tentatively identified with Chibinda Ilunga who married the Lunda chieftainess Luweji) punished his sons Chiti and Nkole for causing many deaths through some scheme of theirs.

What the ill-fated scheme of Chiti and Nkole was we do not know. However, the Bemba-speaking Lala people have their own tradition :

In Lubaland the chiefs sons met to drink beer and when they had drunk well one of them said : 'It is not good for us to live like we do in this country, it is too flat and if fighting men were to come, they could easily attack us and we should all be killed; let us build a high platform which will reach to heaven, then if the fighting men come we shall be able to climb to the top and shoot arrows at them.' His companions agreed : 'Yes, let us build.'

At daybreak they began to build and they worked day after day and they had many workmen. One day, when many of them were on the top, and others were climbing up, some with poles and some with bark-rope, the whole thing fell down with a crash because the poles at the bottom had been eaten away by termites. Many people were killed, all those whom they had forced to work. Their father the chief was enraged : 'You sons of slave women, you have killed off my people to a man.' The chiefs sons were terrified and there was a great scattering...

The Bemba crossed the Luapula well before 1700, (possibly as early as 1640) at Kashengeneke, and then moved eastward, setting up villages or camps as they went. They crossed the Chambeshi river at Safwa and then turned south-east between the Lala and the Bisa. On the journey, say some sources, the leaders Chiti and Nkole sent back a half-brother to fetch a sister, Bwalya Chabala, from the Congo, but on the way the half-brother committed incest with her. This anecdote may be true or perhaps a revival of the legends of 'Sudanic' ritual incest. The Bemba invaders moved on south-east to the country of the Nsenga, where Chiti is said to have seduced the wife of Mwase, and been killed with a poisoned arrow for his behaviour. Nkole then killed Mwase, and his unfortunate wife, and burnt their bodies by the Katongo river. But the smoke from the fire made Nkole ill, and he died too? After this gloomy series of events, the Bemba stopped their advance towards the Zambezi and turned back across the Chambeshi to settle on the plateau and consolidate their position. (It was not good farming country, but the Bemba have never been particularly interested in farming.)

As the eighteenth century arrived, the Bemba began to acquire territory at the expense of the people around them. These included the cattle-keeping Sukuma (Fipa), the Lungu iron-smelters, the Beba and the Mambwe, also called the Nkondo. The Mambwe in particular were worthy opponents of the Bemba and many fierce battles were joined with them. Later the Bemba were to become locked in combat with the Bisa.

Not all the Bemba stayed on the plateau, however; one section of them headed westward towards the Luapula and established a domain there under Chief Nkuba. Today in the Congo, to the west of Lake Mweru, is a powerful Chief Nkuba who belongs to the bena ngandu (royal crocodile) clan like the Bemba rulers in Zambia.

## **THE LOZI ENTER THE VALLEY**

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Well before 1700, another group detached itself from the Lunda-Luba empire. Unlike the Bemba and their associates, this people did not cross the Luapula river but headed south and then south-west to the upper regions of the Zambezi. There are indications that it was a slow journey, extending over as many as twenty years, until the migrants established themselves in the flood-plain beyond the Luena confluence. These were the nucleus of the Lozi people, destined to become as supreme in the south as the Bemba in the north. It used to be asserted that the Lozi were an offshoot of the empire of Monomotapa in what is now Southern Rhodesia (and indeed Rozvi elements may have crossed the Zambezi to settle) but it has now been established that the Lozi are essentially a kin to the Lunda. Places with identical names (Imuba and Namayula) are found in both Lozi and Lunda territory, the dress of the rulers is similar and there are cultural parallels. Both Lunda and Lozi rulers wear feathers as part of their headdress, and like Mwata Yamvo, the Litungas wear a special necklace of white stones known to the Lozi as mande. The fact that the two groups revere their rulers, present and past, in the manner of Sudanic-type states is perhaps not so conclusive as is sometimes claimed, because the same structure exists to the south. Yet the evidence that the Lozi have blood ties with the Lunda appears overwhelming. Ecologists say the distinctive Lozi system of flood-plain farming must have been derived from the north-west. Finally, many words in Luyana, the old Lozi language, resemble Bemba.

When the Lozi first reached the Zambezi, they were given the name Luyi or Luyana, (foreigners) by the existing inhabitants, who called the country Ngulu. These people were Twa or Kwengo, who it is said talked a click language and were pale skinned, and were driven away to the south-west to the edges of the Kalahari, or according to other tribal authorities, set to doing iron-work for their new masters. It is not clear whether the Nkoya people to the north-east arrived in what is now Zambia before, or after, the Lozi, but the two groups are now closely connected and despite some disagreement the baNkoya were incorporated in Barotseland under colonial rule. So also were the Lovale, although the Lovale were later 'liberated'. On linguistic and other grounds the Kaonde further north are regarded as much nearer the Bemba, although Kaonde history makes it clear that the tribe owed allegiance through Chief Musokantanda, who lived in the Congo north of Solwezi, to the Lunda ruler Mwata Yamvo.

The Lozi were ruled by women when they first made their home by the Zambezi. Their queen was Mwambwa, whose daughter Mbuya succeeded her and gave birth to numerous sons and daughters who established themselves around her domain. There is a story that Mwambwa's followers began to plot against her, so she handed power over to her son Mboo. There is also the tale that Mwambwa's daughter committed incest (the recurrent theme) and that the father of the children will remain a secret for ever. The Lunda of the Luapula valley declare that the Lozi were the followers of Mutanda Yembeyembe, younger brother of the first Lunda Mwata Yamvo. They say that Mutanda fled to the Zambezi after killing two chiefs in a quarrel over a discovery of salt on the Lualaba river,<sup>8</sup> but this story does not feature in Lozi tradition.

When the Lozi reached the plain in the Libonda-Lealui area they found conditions ideal for a settled, highly-organised life. There was excellent pasture for their cattle, which were driven up into the woodlands during the floods, fish was abundant in the Zambezi and could be easily trapped in the

shallow lakes, honey was readily available from the forests and the area was rich in game, especially the red lechwe.