

HISTORY OF THE BELGIAN CONGO AS SEEN BY COLONIALS

(According to Inforcongo - Office d'Information et de Relations Publiques du Congo Belge et du Ruanda Urundi – 1958)

There are no chronicles written on the spot to perpetuate the events, the peoples or the dynasties. No monuments have carved in their stone the memory of the dreams, aspirations and emotions which have vanished over the years. Here and there only, a few engravings on the rocks bear traces of the migration of these forgotten people. That is all.

Should it therefore be assumed that for almost two thousand years, cut off from European progress by the desert and hostile rivers, central Africa knew only disorderly swarms similar to the human hordes of the prehistoric age? The answer is no. This false conception still prevails in some circles, which maintain that before the Europeans arrived in the 19th century the history of black Africa was similar to that of prehistoric times.

In fact, the first Europeans to set foot in Africa often found politically well organised communities, some of which actually became kingdoms under the impulse of a head of family who had proclaimed himself a monarch. Such was the case of the kingdom of the Congo, near the mouth of the river, founded as early as the 13th century, and of the empire of the Lunda on the border of the Katanga, created in the 16th century.

Many testimonies relating to the history of these old Congolese kingdoms are still in existence: some, the greater number, are oral tribal traditions, still observed to some extent, often collected and archived by researchers, missionaries, or territorial civil servants; others, more rare and therefore all the more precious, are the writings, mainly those of travellers in the 15th and 16th centuries, published in Europe at that time, which show that the Congo was not at a stage of mere protohistory, based on legends and oral chronologies of events, but at a stage of history proper, which is vouched by written documents.

Whether this evidence has up to now been used to its full value is far from certain. There are indeed some written documents relating to a few tribes, and more particularly the Bakongo, the Bakuba, and the Mongos. There still lacks, however, a synthesis which, making use of all the available documentation and linking it with the traditions that still prevail but will soon disappear from living memory, would recount the history of the Congo as it happened before Stanley travelled across the country.

Such a narrative could begin at the start of the second millennium.

No precise recollection of what happened during the first millennium has been preserved.

However, it seems that the first millennium saw a succession of peoples of bantou origin making their way into the Congo. Were they "proto-bantou" or "semi-bantou", or real bantou? The debate on this question continues and is far from being resolved. But it would seem that these peoples who slowly, in waves, coming from different points, reached the edge of the inhospitable tropical forests, were not themselves so much conquerors as peoples driven on by invaders. Their origins would seem to have been in the Sudanese and Abyssinian regions. What was the reason for the migration of the Bantous towards the South? Could it have been foreign invaders? Or was it due mainly to the drought extending from the Sahara?

Whatever the reason, while a slow flow of populations, drifting along the great lakes and the Indian Ocean, stretched all the way to South Africa, other branches, scattered to the extreme, penetrated through the valleys and along river banks to the heart of the equatorial forest where gradually their movement stopped. The paths of these migrations, superpose, cut across themselves, and cross each other, to such an extent that a map of these great tribal movements looks like a labyrinth of crazy lines knotted into an intricate mosaic. Some of these tribes, in fact, travelled in a rather strange spiral formation of which traces remain today in oral tradition.

These successive and complex bantou invasions continued during the whole of the second millennium and were still taking place at the end of the 19th century when the Europeans occupied the country. It can even be said that the arrival of the Europeans put an end to the great ethnic migrations of central Africa. Today, the shifts in population are due to the country's industrialisation and urbanisation.

Little is known about the role played by the Pygmies over this long period. Bantou traditions agree, however, that they were the first inhabitants, living from hunting and gathering, and were found in various parts of the great forest by the Bantous.

During the last two centuries, newcomers have appeared on the northern border of the country: the Sudanese and the Nilotics, who thus succeeded the Bantous in various neighbouring regions.