

WEST CENTRAL AFRICA

In this region may be included the following political units: the British Cameroons, French Cameroons (Cameroun), French Equatorial Africa (including the Gabun, Middle Congo and Ubangi-Shari), the Belgian Congo, Northern Rhodesia and Angola north of the Kalahari. The populations are, broadly speaking, the Central and Western Bantu tribes, with small enclaves and admixtures here and there of Sudanese Negroes on the one hand and Pygmies and Bushmen on the other. The habitat ranges from heavy rain forest in the northern half of the Belgian Congo to open savanna country in other parts of the region, which may be regarded as essentially the basin of the Congo river. Innumerable smaller but still substantial rivers break up the country, often into long narrow strips, each forming the territory of one or more tribes or subtribes.

The best-known tribes of the Cameroons are the so-called grass-land tribes, a large number of mostly small groups enjoying a rather homogeneous culture, including big boldly carved wooden masks for stilt and other dances and with much emphasis on enhancement of objects with coloured beads. They inhabit the uplands near the borders of northern Nigeria and there is a good deal

of cultural specialization between the different small tribes. The most important towns are Fumban, capital of the Bamum tribe in the French Cameroons, and Bamenda, the administrative centre of the British Cameroons. Nearer the coast are a number of less studied tribes such as the Bassa and Duala (Duala), whose culture is more closely related to those of southeast Nigeria than to those of the grasslands. Farther east again are numerous tribes, mostly unstudied, who are culturally more akin to the Gabun tribes to the south.

In northern central Africa, between Lake Chad and the Ubangi river, are found, first, a number of tribes (including the Sara-Kabba, famous for the enormous wooden disks worn by women in their lips) which are broadly similar in culture to the pagan tribes of northern Nigeria, and the remains of an important tribe, the Sao, which wielded great power in mediaeval times and has left a remarkable terra-cotta art as well as funerary pots about six feet high; and, more to the south, Bantu tribes, not yet much investigated, who are related to those of the northern Congo valley.

In the Gabun (and the neighbouring Spanish territory of Río Muni) the pre-eminent tribe is the Fang (Pangwe, Pahouin), formerly cannibals and one of the most warlike of African peoples. In recent centuries they cut their way across central Africa (with the aid, supposedly, of a throwing knife whose iron blade is shaped like a toucan's beak). Surprisingly they have also produced some of the continent's finest art in the form of wooden heads and figures placed on guard over the bones of the dead.

A little farther south is the congeries of small tribes with a more or less common culture known as the Bakota, best known for their apotropaic figures of similar purpose to those of the Fang but of opposite artistic treatment, being among the most abstract of all African works. The great variety of wood carving found in the Middle Congo is further exemplified among the Bakwele, Kuyu, Bateke, Babwende and Balumbo tribes among others. On the coast is the town of Loango, a famous centre of European trade and influence from the 15th century onward, and between there and the Congo mouth are the Bakongo, Bavili, Mayombe and Bafote, heirs of the great kingdom of Congo which stretched, when the Portuguese arrived, from the coast to the Kwango river, its influence being felt much farther inland still. In this region fetishism, the use of magical figures and "medicines" to bring harm to enemies or to control natural forces, is particularly strong, but it is unlikely that the importation of European ideas, to which it is sometimes attributed, had more than a slight and superficial influence on it. The ancestor cult is also strong there, as elsewhere in west and central Africa, and gave rise, across the river in northern Angola, to a considerable but as yet little-known development of monumental stone sculpture.

The northern half of the Belgian Congo has on the whole been less adequately covered by ethnological research than the southern parts. In the northeast the most important peoples are the Mangbetu (well known for their practice of lengthening artificially the skulls of their children) and a large part of the Azande (the remainder being in French Equatorial Africa and the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan), dwelling between the Wele and Ituri rivers. These are mostly Sudanic-speaking Negroes. In the Ituri forest dwell the best known of the many groups of Pygmies scattered in various parts of the Congo, those known as Bambute. Their culture is, in a material sense, rudimentary, and in part borrowed from their neighbours, but they have remarkable skill in hunting and considerable aptitude for music and poetry. Farther to the west the more important Bantu tribes between the Congo and the Ubangi are the Bwaka, Ngbandi, Bansa, Bangala and Gombe who, like most tribes of the northern Congo, are marked by heavy scarification of the face and body, commonly including a vertical row of keloids to mark the median line of the forehead.

The vast semicircular region between the Congo and the Lukenie, a river flowing westward to join the Congo, is largely occupied by the Kundu-Mongo group of tribes, whose physical characters and culture demand far more detailed and systematic study than they have yet received, for such studies probably contain the keys to many problems of migration of peoples and of cultures now found to the south and west.

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Along the Congo south of Stanleyville, where it is called the Lualaba, live and work the Wagenia, specialists in watermanship and fishing and especially noted for their fine boating songs. To the east again are the Warega who are known chiefly for the small masks and figures carved in ivory in a somewhat severe and simple style for the Mwami secret society. These are so much sought after by European and American collectors as to have become perhaps the most often forged of all African art forms.

Here may be conveniently considered the peoples of the Belgian-administered territory of Ruanda-Urundi, although they are in some respects more nearly related to those of Uganda and Tanganyika. Although it is the tourist centre par excellence of central Africa, it is also among the most interesting parts ethnologically, especially because of the symbiosis there of three racially distinct groups who form a kind of simplified caste system (though it is not comparable to that of India in the essential matter of ritual sanctions). These are the Batutsi (Watussi), the highly cultured Hamitic aristocracy, with their famous cult of the sacred long-horned cattle and other traits linking them with the ancient Egyptians (their aptitude for the high jump is no myth, though it is quite untrue that their average height is seven feet, as is popularly supposed, or indeed that it greatly exceeds that of Europeans); the Bahutu, a Bantu tribe who carry on agriculture and are largely employed by the Batutsi; and the Batwa or Pygmies, who live in the woods or in settlements of their own near those of the other two races, and who live by hunting and performing services, including entertainment, for the Batutsi. The Batutsi women are noted for fine basketwork. The political structure is highly organized, as is usual wherever the theory of the divine kingship (probably of pre-Egyptian origin) survives in Africa.

In the vast region stretching west from Lake Tanganyika to the Lubilash are the Baluba, with a large number of smaller tribes which have become more or less assimilated to them. Luba tribes occupy a large part of Northern Rhodesia, and beyond the western frontiers of their territory they are also found interspersed with Bushongo and other peoples as far as the Kasai river and beyond, where they are known as great traders. Most of the Luba tribes formerly practised wood sculpture of a high order, particularly in the form of ancestor figures. Luba work has an underlying unity, but there is a good deal of variation of detail and even of basic form between the styles of the various subtribes. The central and most characteristic style is that of the Baluba Hemba of the region near the southern part of Lake Tanganyika known as Urua (a dialect form simply meaning "country of the Baluba"). This is marked by a stylization of the human body in terms of bulbous and undulating masses.

Of the more northerly tribes under Baluba influence the Basonge are the most important, with an art style based rather on an aggressive cubism, though the subject matter is largely shared with the Baluba. Decorative wrought-iron work in the form of ceremonial axes is one of their notable skills. Closely related to them in culture are the Batetela along their northern border.

West of the Basonge-Baluba complex, in the large tract bounded on the north and east by the Sankuru-Lubilash and on the west by the Kasai, lies the ancient empire of the Bushongo or Bakuba who have an oral history purporting to go back about 1,500 years, and who claim to have come originally from the north. It is in fact likely that some at least of the ancestors of the ruling group, probably of Sudanic origin, did migrate from somewhere near the upper Nile, perhaps by way of the Lake Chad region, bringing with them certain elements of Mediterranean culture which still survive in their life and art, under the protection of extremely conservative institutions. Comparison of Bushongo culture as a whole, however, with that of other tribes of west central Africa suggests that its basis is related rather to the west and specifically to the old kingdom of Congo and tribes under its influence. This seems to apply to some aspects of their social institutions as well as of their material culture. Whereas simple raffia weaving is common to most of the Congo basin tribes, the raffia pile embroidery in geometric patterns, for which the Bushongo are famous, seems to have been introduced from the kingdom of Congo where it still flourished up to the 17th century. Much further work is

needed, however, before these hypotheses can be regarded as established. Bushongo wood carving is largely decorative (the designs being chiefly of a textile character) rather than sculptural, mainly taking the form of boxes, cups, etc., though for several centuries there has been a tradition of idealized portraiture at the royal court of Mushenge. The Bena Lulua, living along their southern borders, on the other hand, are among the finest of African sculptors, in a style that has curious affinities with the metal sculpture of southeast Asia.

Immediately to the west of the Bushongo proper, across the Kasai, are two groups, the Bawongo and Bashilele, who, though not under the rule of the Nyimi of the Bushongo, speak essentially the same language and practise a closely similar art. They were regarded by Emil Torday as the proto-Bushongo, following certain traditions which he recorded, but these are more likely to have referred to the ruling families than to these subtribes as a whole.

Westward again are the numerous small tribes of the Kwilu and Kwango rivers, chief among them being the Bapende, Babunda, Bambala and Bayaka. In certain of these tribes elaborate dance masks are an important feature of the male initiation ceremonies. Part of the Bayaka tribe live in Angola on the west bank of the Kwango and on the Zombo plateau.

South and west of this region there flourished, side by side with the kingdom of Congo, that of Lunda, exercising a widespread hegemony from central Angola through the territory south of the Bushongo kingdom in what is now the Belgian Congo. The Lunda and the closely related Bajokwe (Badjok, Kioko, Batschioko, Chokwe, Vachivokoé, etc.) are now found through an even greater area, their villages forming isolated enclaves throughout the country of the Bushongo, the Bena Lulua and to a great extent the Baluba also, as well as forming a major element in the populations of Northern Rhodesia (where they are known as the Wiko tribes). In general they rely much more heavily on hunting, and in former times raiding, for their livelihood than the more settled tribes. They are now strongest around the diamond-mining centre of Tschikapa. The Lunda and Bajokwe make great use of masks of wood and fibre and have produced some very fine small wood carvings, often showing Portuguese baroque influence.

In Angola north of the Kalahari the most important tribes are the Ovimbundu, N'ganguela (Ganguella) and Vakwanyama. In the upper Zambezi valley in Northern Rhodesia the chief tribes, besides the Lunda, are the Lovale and Barotse (well-known for their excellent pottery and for carved wooden dishes ornamented with animals in the round). Farther west are several important and well-known tribes—the Tonga, Lamba, Kaonde, Baila, Chewa and Bemba (Wemba)—on which excellent anthropological studies have been produced.

In general the tribes of west central Africa are far more dependent on agriculture, and less on pastoralism, than those dwelling east of the great lakes, and this may at least in part explain the virtual absence of sculpture in east Africa and its prolific occurrence, at least till recently, in most of the tribes between Lake Tanganyika and the west coast. These latter have also, on the whole, been settled for a much longer period in their present territories, whereas east and south Africa have been subject to violent movements of population for several centuries.

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bala," *J. Roy. Anthropol. Inst.*, pp. 398-426 (1905); E. Verhulpen, *Baluba et Balubaisés du Katanga* (Antwerp, 1936). See also AZANDE, THE; BA-LUBA; BAMBUTE; FANG; MANGBETTU; PYGMY.

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