THE BEMBA—THEIR COUNTRY AND DIET

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Living in undulating tree-covered plateau country that is well watered but has generally poor soils, the Bemba traditionally have practiced a type of shifting cultivation typical of many South Central African peoples. As in other areas where the distribution of rainfall is marked wet and dry seasons permits only one crop a year, the food supply of the Bemba alternates between periods of dearth and plenty. Although they are organized politically in a kingdom with well-defined class differences, these are not expressed in the type and quantity of food consumed, for in Bemba tradition wealth is defined not in terms of land or of cattle but of the amount of service a person can command. A chief owns land in theory and exacts tribute from those who farm it; in turn, he is supposed to use his supernatural powers over the prosperity of the land and the welfare of his subjects in carrying out the economic rituals on which their food production depends. Thus a person accumulates wealth by acquiring food to give to his followers. Both political and kin relationships are symbolized by the giving and receiving of food, which, being scarce for all Bemba at times and representing power and prestige in their minds, is of great emotional importance to them. As a herding people they may see the outsider to be obsessed with cattle, or of a landowning agricultural group with its land, the interests of the Bemba center around food, and this may be seen not only in their feelings concerning generosity and hospitality but also in their perception of their natural environment.

Although Bemba economic conditions had been altered considerably from those of pre-European times by the 1950’s, when the research on which this section is based was done, and have changed even more since, this paper, and the larger work of which it forms a part, remains an important contribution to the study of African diet and its significance in human relations.

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[The Bemba, originally an offshoot of the great Luba tribe, and neighboring tribes such as the Bisa, Lunda, Lamba, Kaonde, and others, are all predominantly agricultural peoples of Congo origin who are closely akin and have a matrilineal descent system and a common body of custom, as distinguished from other tribes of Northern Rhodesia that have been dominated by the invasion of predominantly patrilineal herding peoples from the south and from the cattle-owning tribes of the area.]
Mode of Life

As regards their general mode of living and economic activities the Bemba are, broadly speaking, typical of the Central Bantu. . . . [They] live in small communities, the average village consisting of 30 to 50 huts, while that of the present Chitimukulu numbers 150, and in the old days chiefs' villages reached higher figures still. Each village is a kinship unit under the rule of a headman who is appointed by the chief of the district and responsible to him. It changes in composition from time to time, as well as shifting from site to site. The settlements are widely scattered and the density of the population never reaches a greater figure than 39 per square mile. This system of local grouping resembles that of the kindred peoples of North-Eastern Rhodesia, but is in marked contrast to that of the Eastern Bantu tribes such as the Ganda, Chagga, &c., who live in isolated homesteads, from the smaller family kraals composed of a man, his wife, and his sons common in South Africa, or the larger Bantu settlements numbering as many as 10,000 inhabitants found, for instance, in Bechuanaland.

The Bemba have already been described as an agricultural people, though, like most of the Bantu, they are fond of hunting and fishing and rely on the bush for many of the wild plants and fruits used for food. Their chiefs used formerly to capture cattle from the surrounding tribes, and kept these sporadically, but the Bemba lack entirely the pastoral tradition. Only a third of the Province is free from [waste] fly, and today neither chiefs nor commoners own more than a few goats or sheep, and occasional cattle in urban areas. The people are shifting cultivators; that is to say, they clear a fresh strip of the bush each year to make their gardens, and when the forest land round their villages has all been used (four or five years) they move to a fresh site a few miles away, build themselves new huts, and start cultivating again. This general type of agriculture is practiced over most of Northern Rhodesia, the Belgian Congo, large parts of Nyasaland, Tanganyika, and the less highly developed areas of Uganda and Kenya, everywhere giving place to fixed cultivation of an elementary type with the introduction of European cash crops, shortage of land, or urban development. But a recent intensive study of native agricultural methods in one area—North-Western Rhodesia—shows that the term "shifting cultivator" can cover the greatest variety of methods of utilizing bush land. The Bemba cultivate by clearing the undergrowth, pollarding the trees over a strip of bush, and burning the branches and brushwood so obtained on a small space in the center of the cleared patch to make an ash-fertilized bed on which the seeds are sown broadcast without further hoeing. In subsequent years the gardens are dug up into mounds on which other crops are grown. This method, known from the earliest days of the British occupation as the citemene system after the native name for a cut garden, is practiced all over this part of North-Eastern Rhodesia, and by some of the Lamba-Kaonde and Lunda-Luba peoples on the northern plateau of North-Western Rhodesia. It is reckoned as one of the most primitive forms of bush cultivation, everywhere associated with poor soil. The Bemba show great ingenuity in the alternation of crops and the use of the fertile soil of old village sites, yet as a whole their cultivation is much less complex than that of a number of the neighboring tribes. . . .

The aboriginal crops in this part of the country seem to be finger millet, Kaffir corn, bulrush millet, Kaffir beans, Livingstone potatoes, and numerous cucurbits—pumpkins, edible gourds, cucumbers, melons, etc. Groundnuts, maize, cassava, sweet potatoes and yams, all grown widely in Central Africa, are of New World origin, apparently introduced by the Portuguese in the seventeenth century. Bemba tradition confirms this classification. They declare that their first ancestor, Citi Muluba, travelled from the Luba country carrying in his hair the seeds of Kaffir corn, finger millet, Kaffir beans, cow peas, pumpkins, and the small wrinkled cucumbers known as amankolobwe. Their most important economic rites center round the cultivation of Kaffir corn, now less often grown, quick-growing finger millet, cow pea, Livingstone potato, pumpkin, maize, and amankolobwe, and the ritual associated with any particular crop has often been reckoned as an index of its age. Bemba maintain that they have grown maize and groundnuts "for a long time," that sweet potatoes were introduced by Swahili traders in the reign of a chief who lived at the end of the nineteenth century, while the Bisa, the neighboring tribe to the west, taught them how to grow cassava.

Of all these crops their staple is the finger millet, a coarse tufted grass about 3 feet high bearing fine grain of the size of birdseed on five or six radiating fingerlike spikes. This is a hardy plant specially suited to poor soils, but its distribution in Central Africa seems to show that Kaffir corn is grown in preference wherever the soil makes this possible, and that it has been ousted from its position as a staple crop by cassava and maize in all the more fertile environments. . . . In many other parts of Africa the finger millet is now cultivated entirely for the purpose of brewing beer, for which it seems specially suited, and is grown in this way in Southern Rhodesia, Tanganyika, the Congo, Uganda, and Kenya. Thus in their almost complete reliance on finger millet the Bemba are now in rather an unusual position as regards the composition of their diet. They grow less Kaffir corn than before because of the lack of suitable soil and the labor to protect it from birds. It is sometimes described as a chief's crop on the latter account. Maize gives a poor yield in this district, and sweet potatoes and cassava have only been grown widely during the recent locust raids in response to direct Government pressure.
Material Culture and Economic Organization

The material equipment of the Bemba is of the simplest. It consists of four implements, (a) a wedge-shaped axe blade (isembe, plur. amasembe) forged locally, fixed into a wooden haft, and used to clear the bush, to cut poles for fencing, hut-building, and simple furniture such as beds or storing racks, to hollow out tree-trunks for canoes, to fashion logs into drums, stools or mortars, or to hammer out bark-cloth; (b) a hoe (alukasi, plur. amalukasi), the only instrument used exclusively for cultivation, formerly traded from the Lungu and other more skilled iron-workers to the west and now bought at European stores; (c) a spear (útufuma, plur. amútufuma) forged locally and used for war, hunting, fishing, and protection against wild beasts; (d) a bow (ubata, plur. amubata) formerly used in war and hunting and important as a family heirloom, but rarely made nowadays. All these implements are of the simplest kind, neither carved nor ornamented, and all arts and crafts are extremely poorly developed in this district compared to the contiguous areas. Iron-work, which reached such a high perfection among peoples like the Shona, Kabwe, and Luba, and is practiced to a greater or less degree among the Kaonde, hardly exists among the Bemba.

The economic organization of the Bemba is not a complex one. The strongest ambition of the old Bemba chiefs seems to have been the conquest of territory and the exaction of tribute from the surrounding tribes rather than the accumulation of material goods. Wealth among the Southern Bantu consisted in herds of cattle, which marked a man's status, enabled him to marry, to pay his fines, to make offerings to his chief or ancestral spirits, and to carry out all his kinship obligations, but the Bemba had few material possessions that could be accumulated as capital or used as any form of currency. Ivory tusks were the monopoly of the chiefs of each district and used for display, or traded for Arab goods, such as bales of cloth or guns, with which faithful warriors and subjects were rewarded. Beyond this the wealth of a Bemba chief consisted in the amount of service he could command as agricultural labor or military force, and the number of slaves, whether of his own tribe or conquered peoples, he possessed. Marriage contracts and most other kinship obligations were fulfilled by the giving of service, not goods, and enslavement was often enforced in lieu of a fine. No organized system of barter or exchange existed. Sak and hoes seem occasionally to have been traded, but regular markets which are a prominent feature of tribal life among the Eastern Bantu, in many Congo tribes as the Shongho and Kongo, were quite unknown among the Bemba. We are dealing with a warrior people in which the whole economic system was dominated by the political relationship of subject and chief, and the organization of labor founded on it.

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[The present economic position of Bembaland is that of a labor reserve, where large numbers of adult men must leave annually to look for work. The agricultural system is deprived of its manpower and traditional incentives to work.]

Social Structure

It is impossible to describe in detail the tribal structure of the Bemba, either as a preface to this special study, or from a comparative point of view. There are, however, certain main principles of their social organization which are absolutely fundamental to an understanding of all their organized activities and forms of cooperation, and give the direction to their interests. Of these the dominant institution of the Bemba is their highly complex political system and the particularly authoritative character of the chieftainship on which it is based. Allegiance to a common Paramount—the Citimukulu—is the main tie uniting the members of a tribe that is scattered very thinly over a wide area. It determines their local grouping, and is the basis of the traditional pride of this warrior people and its distinction from neighboring tribes. On a man's relationship to his chief depends his residence, his use of land, the economic group he works with, the way in which his food is distributed, the religious and magic beliefs that sustain him in his work, and his social ambitions.

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The power of the chief rests ultimately on his people's belief in his supernatural powers over the prosperity of the land and the welfare of his individual subjects. By his inheritance of the guardian spirits (umupashi, plur. umupashi) of the line of dead chiefs, and his possession of the sacred relics (bembe) of the tribe, he has power of approach to the tribal deities and he is responsible for the economic rites on which the food production of these people is thought to depend.

Besides their supernatural powers the chiefs formerly based their apparently unchallenged authority on the physical force they could exert. They controlled and armed their warriors, and had power of life or death over their subjects, whom they could kill, enslave, or sell, and in the case of women, bestow in marriage. Their legal system gave them the right to mutilate those who offended them, and it put them in supreme charge of the poison (mwaft) ordeal. The land theoretically belonged to them, and they exacted tribute in labor and kind from those who culti-
vated it, and maintained monopolies over ivory and salt. No Bemba could reach a high social status or obtain economic privileges unless related to the royal family or a personal favorite with them. Thus it is impossible to study land tenure, leadership in economic enterprises, incentives to agricultural labor, the distribution of land and goods, or exchange, without bearing the political system of this tribe in mind. Linton has recently used the word “Orientalism” to describe for comparative purposes the chief focus of the interests and social institutions of any particular people under review. In this sense military ambition under an autocratic chieftainship is the orientation of the Bemba tribe.9

It is obvious that chiefs of this type who relied on the use of military force, tribute labor, and slavery for their supremacy, but did not accumulate material possessions or possess any valuable economic resources in their territory, are in a particularly poor position at the present day. The Bemba chief receives a small subsidy from the Government—£60 a year in the case of the Paramount chief and less for the territorial chiefs—and therefore earns annually about the same amount as a clerk. Rich African rulers such as the Nigerian emirs, the Barotsi king, or some of the South-African potentates, do not exist in this area, and hence one of the important practical problems to discuss is the effect of this poverty of the Bemba chiefs on an economic system which is as closely linked with the political organization as its theirs.

THE BEMBA DIET

All Bemba individuals can be reckoned as eating, roughly speaking, the same type and quantity of food. Class distinctions practically do not exist in this respect. Chiefs certainly have a much more regular supply of food than commoners and drink very much more beer. In fact they often subsist entirely on the latter to the complete exclusion of solids. Their wives, children, and courtiers also eat on the average more than the ordinary family, so much so that natives describe especially lavish hospitality as “housekeeping after the fashion of the capital” (unusango wa ku musumba). But the difference is one of certainty of supply rather than of greatly increased consumption per day, and a small class of individuals only are affected. Otherwise the rich man and his poorer neighbors eat very much the same throughout the year.

Sex distinctions are not marked either. The man gets a larger share of meat or any favorite relish, but there are no foods specially tabooed to women, and I do not think the inequality is any greater than that common in many working households in this country. Age distinctions in diet are not pronounced. Young boys between 10 and 16 are probably the worst-fed section of the community since they have to forage for themselves and have no regular portion allotted to them, but even then the difference is not a striking one. Geographical variations in the food supply certainly exist, but they are limited chiefly to differences in the amount of meat and fish consumed and not to the staple food. Therefore for all general purposes the following account may be taken as applying to the population as a whole.

Variations from Hunger to Plenty

The most pronounced feature of this dietary is its alternation between hunger and plenty, a characteristic common to African peoples in areas where the distribution of rain allows only one season of cultivation a year, and where one staple crop is relied upon. In this territory the existence of a definite scarcity is noticed at once by the most casual observer. The Bemba constantly talk about ‘hunger months’ as distinguished from food months. At the end of the rainy season they regularly expect a shortage, whether it is severe or not. When the scarcity becomes marked the whole appearance of village life is changed. For adults meals are reduced from two to one a day, and beer is rarely if ever brewed. Children who seem to munch extras all day long in the plentiful season (April to October) are reduced to a single dish late in the day. In one bad year I saw cases of elderly people who ate nothing during the course of a day, and though this is not common, most adult natives can remember occasions when they went two days without food, and “sat in the hut and drank water and took snuff.”

These extreme cases of hunger are admittedly rare, but it is a fact that when the supply of the staple millet is at an end, the Bemba are reduced to foods with a much lower nutritive value. The millet, of which, as we shall see, their diet is mainly composed, lasts on an average for nine months of the year only (April to November or December). Chiefs reckon to make their supply last till the new harvest and even later. In a good year some commoners would be able to do so, but I should doubt if this number ever reached more than half of the villagers in any one settlement. When the staple food runs low, the only other cultivated crops available in the scarce season are edible gourds, which are largely composed of water, and small quantities of maize. Otherwise the natives rely on the bush, which provides fungi and caterpillars during these months.

Thus the existence of a pronounced hunger season can be established without making any elaborate quantitative investigation. It is correlated with changes in the social life of the people which are equally marked. All activity is reduced to a minimum when food is short, and in a specially bad year garden work tends to be skimmed.

Other activities are also affected. There is little or no dancing in the hunger months, partly owing to the absence of beer.10 Few journeys are
planned, and the children tend to play listlessly. Usually more good-
tempered than the average English baby, they whimper at the slightest
provocation. I found it difficult to get informants to concentrate for more
than short periods at this time of the year.

The physical effects of a seasonal shortage of food on the health of a
people and the growth rate of their children has not yet been investiga-
gated, but from a sociological point of view there are other effects to be
considered besides the lowering of energy due to actual under-feeding
which the natives themselves recognize and describe . . . In a society in
which people regularly expect to be hungry annually, and in which traditions
and proverbs accustom them to expect such a period of privation, their
whole attitude towards economic effort is affected. In some primitive
tribes it is considered shameful for an individual or whole community to go hungry. It is something unexpected, and to be resisted
with energy. Among the Bemba scarcity is within the ordinary run of
experience, and accepted as such. This fact has a subtle but very powerful
effect on their ideas of wealth and their incentives to work.

Composition of the Diet

The Bemba diet is in a sense a simple one since it is composed very
largely of one cereal food—the finger millet already described. The bulk
of each meal consists of a porridge made of this flour, and the subsidiary
foods, meat or vegetable, are eaten with it in small quantities only (about
half a pound of the latter to five pounds of the former). For their nutrition
the Bemba depend almost entirely on the amount of millet they are
able to get, and the seasonal variations from hunger to plenty consist in
effect of the shortage or absence of this particular grain. As a staple food, finger millet has a high nutritive value compared to
other cereals used in this area. It is far superior to cassava in protein, fat,
and mineral salts, and to the white millet of East Africa both in fat and
minerals. Though inferior to maize in protein and fat, it is only very
slightly so, and is again superior in minerals (iron, calcium, and phos-
phorus). On the other hand, as has been pointed out, the supply of millet
as produced by the Bemba only lasts some nine months of the year,
whereas the cassava roots remain in the garden beds throughout the year
and are used a little at a time as wanted, so that people like the Bisa, who
live on this crop, have a regular diet throughout the year. Sweet potatoes
also can be eaten at most seasons, except during the rainy months. Millet
has a further drawback in that it is used for beer as well as for porridge,
and though the former evidently provides a valuable source of vitamin B
contained in the germinating grain, yet it is an extravagant way of using
the supplies, and the Bemba are in a worse position than peoples who
grow a separate cereal for the purpose of brewing.

Their next most valuable foodstuffs are the pulses, groundnuts,
groundbeans, Kaffir beans, cowpeas, etc., commonly grown by most of
these Bantu peoples. These are a valuable source of protein and fat,
groundnuts being particularly rich in the latter, and this adds to their
importance in a diet in which fats of all kinds are very deficient. In fact,
Traphern suggests that the nutritive value of most of these simple cereal
diets of Northern Rhodesia depends largely on the amount of the sub-
sidiary pulses grown in addition to the main cereal crop. In the case of
the Bemba this supply of pulses seems to be far from adequate. The store
of dried beans and peas lasts only a few months of the year.

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Bemba obtain animal proteins from fish, game, and insects. Green
leaves, fruits, gourds, and mushrooms are available during some months
of the year.

As far as it is possible to speak of the composition of the diet as a
whole, generalizations based on figures collected in three villages at di-
different seasons of the year show that the average calorie intake is 1,706 per
man value per day, i.e. just over half that which is considered adequate
in England and America. The fat is only an eighth as much as is usually
eaten on our mixed diets. The intake of calcium and phosphorus compar-
are very favorably with those in England and America. Salt is exeo-
dingly deficient at all seasons of the year.

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[Here follow a discussion and a table showing the comparative amounts
of various foodstuffs and total caloric value of the daily diet of Bemba
villages, of a minimum ration scale laid down by Government for in-
dustrial workers, and of a Rhodesian mining company.]

Seasonal Changes in Diet

It is obvious, however, that the seasonal changes are so marked in
this area, as in most other African tribes, that such figures of “average”
daily intake do not represent the actual situation at all. In effect the
people have a harvest season from May to September in which millet, beer,
green food, groundnuts, pulses are plentiful, and meat in some areas, and
the diet is therefore ample and probably varied. This is followed by a dry
season (October-November) in which millet and beer are still available
but green vegetables scarce or nonexistent. The wild fruits are much
liked, but only last about a month or six weeks. Meat and fish are ob-
tainable in these months also, but only in certain districts. At the begin-
ing of the rains, November and December, the diet changes. Millet is
already beginning to be short, and mushrooms and caterpillars are the
main standby as additional relishes. In the late rains millet is practically nonobtainable, and gourds and occasional maize-cobs are often the only available foods. Thus the diet changes completely in composition from one season to another—a characteristic feature of primitive societies, of which the effects have not yet been investigated. Such essential constituents as are provided by the green vegetables, fruit, meat, and fish, are only available for short periods of the year.

To conclude, it can be said that most constituents considered essential to a balanced dietary are present in the Bemba environment, with the important exceptions of sufficient animal protein, fat, and salt. There is an absolute shortage of millet reckoned either by the figures of the amount available annually or from the obvious seasonal scarcity, and the natives’ reliance on this one staple makes this lack a dangerous one. The most valuable accessory foods such as the pulses only last part of the year, and the supply of green vegetables is limited to a few months. Milk is never obtainable. Except in the case of meat and milk these deficiencies appear to be due to difficulties of production, storing, and exchange rather than to any particular environmental defects. . . .

NATIVE VIEWS ON FOOD

Food as a Center of Interest

Food and beer are without doubt the most exciting and interesting topics of native conversation, with the exception of money, in areas affected by white contact. Any one who can follow the ordinary gossip of a Bemba village will be struck at once by the endless talk shouted from hut to hut as to what is about to be eaten, what has already been eaten, and what lies in store for the future, and this with an animation and a wealth of detail which would be thought quite unusual in this country.

It is, of course, natural in an area where the supply is never constant from day to day that the daily meal should be a subject of vivid interest. For those who are accustomed to buy food ready prepared, it is difficult to realize the emotional attitudes to foodstuffs among peoples who are directly dependent on their environment for their diet. Most of their food the Bemba grow, and hence they view their fields and gardens concretely in terms of their future prospects of food and drink. These they constantly discuss. I timed two old women talking over an hour on the single topic of the probable order of ripening of the pumpkins in three gardens, and the way in which they were likely to be distributed. The question evidently dominated their imagination. I have visited millet fields, near harvest time, and heard the owner exclaim ecstatically, “Just look at all that beer!” Foods collected from the bush, animal or vegetable, are perhaps of even greater interest because of the element of luck in their discovery. A sudden find of caterpillars or mushrooms, or a fish caught by hand in the reeds of a swamp, will be discussed all over the village that night.

The European notices, too, that the natives tend to describe their actual environment and the passage of the seasons in terms of the dietetic changes associated with them. They talk of different parts of the country according to their food deficiencies as “where they only eat pumpkin leaves,” i.e., where game is short and the people have to rely on vegetable relishes. They refer to a visit to a village on a big river as, “He has gone to eat fish with So-and-So.” The fortunes of each district are discussed by year and villages described as “with hunger” (pa nscala) or the converse, “with beer” (pa buwala), i.e., with so much grain that they can make beer frequently. The seasonal changes in food, and the stages in its production, give their names to the periods of the year. While a definite calendar of moons exists . . . the Bemba more often time events as having taken place “in the hunger months,” i.e., the last months of the rains when the millet supply is low; or “when we were eating mushrooms,” “when the vupunda fruit was ripe,” and “when we were reaping, sowing,” etc., and the ages of babies are usually reckoned by their births in this manner.

The position of the Bemba traveler, dependent as he is on the hazards of hospitality, provides a further element of uncertainty. The correct greeting to one who has returned from a journey is Mwalyeni bimbo, “Have you eaten well?” To which the courteous reply is Kukila mulenda, “Provided you have eaten well yourself,” or E Mahali kuipwinya, “Yes, sir, I eat everything up completely,” or else Fia kwa cime bupawa kano wa kulepo ngando, “It would have been impossible to finish up all the crops unless you had built a house alongside,” i.e., it was so plentiful.

There is a regular form of magic used to ensure a guest’s arrival before a meal has been finished and not after. A knot tied in the grass with the right formula repeated will secure this result, and I found my staff even performed this rite on my own behalf if at all doubtful as to my reception on a visit to unknown English hosts.

Besides this direct interest in the food he is going to eat in the day, or the beer he may have the luck to come in time for, the secondary values acquired by food—give it an added emotional interest to the Bemba. It must be remembered that there is no other way of accumulating wealth in this area except by acquiring sufficient food to feed many followers. The giving or receipt of food is a part of most economic transactions, and many come to represent a number of human relationships whether between different kinsmen or between subject and chief. For this reason the whole question of handling or dividing food acquires tremendous emotional significance for the native, and discussions of personalities or legal relationships tend to be ultimately expressed in this
idiom. To speak of a chief is to mention before the end of the conversation his reputation for generosity or meanness in the giving of porridge and beer. To describe an attitude to any particular kinman leads almost invariably to a comment, for instance, on the food in his granary, the number of relatives he supports, the share of meat he has asked for, or the amount of beer he contributed at the marriage of his daughter or the visit of an elder. In daily life the women, whether at work in the kitchen or sitting gossiping on their verandas at night, exchange interminable criticisms as to the way in which some particular dish of food has been divided, or the distribution of the four or five gourds of beer made at a brew. These casual observations of native life are significant. For us it requires a real effort of imagination to visualize a state of society in which food matters so much and from so many points of view, but this effort is necessary if we are to understand the emotional background of Bemba ideas as to diet.

NOTES

[The starred items are recommended as further readings.]

1 J. Moffatt Thomson gives the following figures for the biggest tribes of N.E. Rhodesia: Bemba 714,574, Cowa 78,000, Ngoni 53,000, and none of the other tribal groups number more than 30,000.


3 Here as in other parts of Africa the establishment of European rule and the prevention of war has led to a far greater dispersal of the people than was possible in the old days when they tended to group themselves under the protection of their chiefs in large stockaded villages. At the present day the Bemba villages divide and subdivide as often as possible within the limits of the Government minimum of ten adult males.

4 [Here and elsewhere footnotes, and sometimes passages of text, showing variation among Bemba subgroups and comparisons with neighboring tribes have been omitted.]

5 Small wedge-shaped razors, reaping knives, and flat Sichs needles for threading make for additional implements.


8 "Balsam," Research.

9 Dr. Widdowson calculates that the Bemba gets 75 per cent. of his calories from this carbohydrate food, and about 5 per cent. from fat, whereas we get 50 per cent. from carbohydrates and 30-40 per cent. from fat. Cf. A. I. Richards and J. M. E. N., "A Dietary Study in Northern Rhodesia," Africa, vol. IX, no. 1, 1936.


11 [A chart showing seasonal changes in the food supply of the Bemba has been omitted.]

FOR FURTHER READING


INTRODUCTION

LOCATION  South of the equatorial forest that dominates most of the Congo River Basin, a wide band of savanna, sometimes open, sometimes lightly forested, stretches from the Atlantic coast to the area south of the great lakes of central Africa. In the centuries before the establishment of European control, the history of this region was no less eventful than that of the Sudan, although its details are, for the present, less well known. When the Portuguese, in 1482, reached the mouth of the Congo River, they found that the hinterland was controlled by three states, the best known of these being that of the Kongo. After they had rounded the Cape and touched the east coast, they heard of a kingdom in the interior, called Monomotapa. In the following centuries, other names, such as Luba, Lunda, and Kuba, became known, together with those of a number of smaller and often transient states.

One of these petty states is represented by the Suku, some 80,000 people who live in the Kwango district of the province of Léopoldville in the Republic of the Congo. Linguistically, they belong to the Bantu subgroup of the Central Branch of the Niger-Congo family of languages (Greenberg 1955). In the more local setting, their speech is closely related, to the point of mutual intelligibility, to the languages of the Kongo and Yaka groups to the west and south. This close linguistic relationship parallels presumed historical connections. Suku legends contain ambiguous memories of the Kongo kingdom and reflect the welter of conflicts and migrations that accompanied its disintegration and the subsequent establishment over the Kwango area of the hegemony of the expanding Lunda empire. The Suku appear to have emerged as a political entity around the early nineteenth century, when they escaped Lunda domination by moving into the largely empty lands to the east of the Kwango Valley, lands that they presently occupy.³

There are strong indications that periodically, over the last century and a half, the region has drawn in additional refugee lineages from surrounding
Most active during the rainy season, with the onset of the dry period, large cooperative hunts dominate the scene. These two principal phases of the subsistence economy also correspond to the division of labor between the sexes. The bulk of the subsistence is provided by free agriculture, which is entirely the work of women, who plant their fields in the open grassland; hunting, on the other hand, is done exclusively by men. Fishing is engaged in separately by both sexes.

Crops. The agricultural staple is cassava (manioc); at present, with the diminution of meat from hunting, it provides the overwhelming portion of the Suku diet, as much as 90 percent of the total calories (Holmes 1959). Planted among the cassava are sweet potatoes, pumpkins, beans, and peas; these are harvested first, the cassava being left for at least twelve months. Thereafter, the tubers remain in what may be called an underground storage, to be dug up when needed. For peanuts, separate fields are kept, usually on the sites of abandoned villages, where the soil is more fertile. During the rainy season, every adult woman plants three and sometimes four fields in succession, so that new crops are available from the previous fields while a new one is being prepared. With the end of the wet season, however, no new fields are made and a shortage of vegetables, though not of cassava, sets in by the middle of the dry season. Cultivation is necessarily of the shifting type because the soil, once used, requires fifteen to twenty years to recover its fertility. The fields are always small, a little over an acre a year being sufficient to feed a family of four or five persons. Population density being low (some fifteen persons per square mile), land is more than abundant, and is, in fact, treated as a free economic good.

In addition to what is grown in the fields, miniscule gardens are made inside the villages, sometimes by men. Here bananas, tobacco, and the more recently introduced vegetables, such as tomatoes and radishes, are grown. Palm trees and small bamboo groves constitute another important resource; the men tap them for the “wine” that is a necessary accompaniment of all social occasions.

Cultivated crops are supplemented by collections of wild fruits, berries, mushrooms, and various roots of bush and forest. The delicacies include caterpillars, small types of mudfish, flying ants, palm-tree grubs, and wild honey.

Hunting and Animal Husbandry. Hunting, the primary male occupation in the productive economy, is of more than mere economic importance. A man must provide meat for the family, and prowess as a hunter is greatly valued and boasted about. The introduction of firearms has depleted the game considerably, but hunting is still pursued with undiminished enthusiasm even though, from the purely economic point of view, it represents...
Making Pottery

one of the least productive investments of labor. Among the principal animals that are hunted are the various kinds of antelopes, wild hogs, leopards and several varieties of wild cats, buffalo, monkeys, birds, rodents of different types, and a few species of lizards. Hyenas and jackals are considered inedible. The hippopotamus and the crocodile are rarely hunted; the elephant, though prized, makes only a very occasional appearance in the region; lions, although remembered from the past, are at present entirely lacking. The traditional weapon, the bow, is extensively used, but firearms have become rather common in recent years. Hunting methods also involve the use of pits, net-drives, and traps.

Domesticated animals include dogs, goats, pigs, and chickens, and, since European contact, pigeons, ducks, guinea pigs, turkeys, and rabbits. No special care is given to the first group of animals which are by far the more numerous, and they are expected, on the whole, to fend for themselves.

CRAFT SPECIALIZATION - In addition to these subsistence activities, the Suku engage in crafts, and here the division of labor between the sexes is also clearly pronounced. Pottery is made exclusively by women. The men weave baskets, mats, raffia cloth, fishing nets and weirs, and carve wooden objects, such as drums, household utensils, mortars, and statues used in religious ceremonies. Blacksmithing is an important and respected occupation, surrounded with taboos and requiring a special initiation; the smith produces hoes, knives, arrowpoints, and axes. To some extent, all adult males are craftsmen in a general sense, for all men can build houses, make a bow, weave a simple mat, and hammer out a crude arrowpoint. At the same time, those knowledgeable in more specialized crafts never make them a full-time occupation, and every craftsman is also engaged in the more ordinary activities, such as hunting and fishing. Many craftsmen tend to specialize in making particular objects of their trade; for example, most basketmakers weave only one or two types of baskets. There is also some tendency to regional specialization, certain villages producing particular kinds of baskets or mats.

Other part-time specialists to be mentioned may be classified as "professionals." These are the medical practitioners who engage in curing; dancers and musicians who, at the time of ceremonies, travel from village to village and perform for money; circumcision specialists; diviners; and judges who settle disputes for a fee.

MARKETS AND EXCHANGE - The Suku and surrounding regions are not famous for large markets, and the Suku are in no sense inveterate traders. But economic exchange does take place by means of individual trading and small-scale markets, and money as well as barter was an integral part of this exchange system long before European contact. At present, the unit used is the Congolese franc; as recently as the middle 1930s, shell money was used.

One of the striking characteristics of the Suku productive economy is its individual orientation. Trading, engaging in craft production, and animal breeding are done individually; women farm individually, houses are individually built, fishing weirs are individually exploited. Even in the large communal hunts of the dry season, involving as many as five hundred hunters, every man hunts for himself, and the game is never divided among all the participants. This pattern contrasts sharply with the system of ownership, distribution, and consumption, where the lineage and not the individual is the relevant unit. This point will emerge clearly when Suku social organization is examined.

SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

THE VILLAGE - When Belgian administration became firmly established in the Suku area in the middle 1920s, most Suku villages varied in size between fifteen and seventy-five persons. The administration pursued a policy of amalgamating the many small villages into larger settlements; at present, about a few of these contain as many as five hundred persons. Within these amalgamated settlements, however, the Suku view the old villages as separate entities.

The distance between neighboring settlements is seldom less than two miles and ordinarily is more. This is to be expected, given the low density of population. Villages are relatively stable; those that move usually resettle in toto within a short distance of the old location. An entire village is moved when it is decided that the existing site is "unlucky" after a chief dies, or an epidemic breaks out, or an unusual series of misfortunes occurs. Shifting cultivation is not a factor in the displacement of villages. Planting
is always done half a mile or more from a village to keep it out of reach of domestic animals; this provides a large area of cultivable land around each village, within which shifting cultivation is carried on.

THE COMPOUND • At present, under Belgian influence, the compounds in most villages are set on both sides of a central street. Traditionally, however, settlement was more haphazard, with irregularly shaped spaces separating clusters of compounds. A compound consists of a roughly circular or square area, about a hundred feet across, whose boundaries are marked by a row of low bushes. The Suku house is rectangular in shape, with a gable roof; it consists of a skeleton of piles driven into the ground and reinforced by a framework of light strips of branches and bamboo, the whole covered with thick, even layers of grass. The typical house measures roughly eight by fifteen feet; houses of chiefs may be larger, the upper limit being about ten by twenty feet. As a rule, the house is divided into two communicating rooms, the inner room serving for sleeping and the outer for storage and sitting.

Every compound lodges a husband, his wife or wives, and their unmarried children. A son, at his marriage, starts his own compound in the vicinity of his father's. There are several houses in a compound. In his own house, the husband receives visitors, eats by himself or in male company, and keeps his personal belongings. Every wife has her own house, which she occupies with her small children. Adolescents rarely have a specified house to sleep in; they find their quarters wherever they can around the village, usually staying with their friends of the same sex in whatever empty

house is available; such houses are found in every village and are used for storage and for putting up visitors.

Lineages

Although a Suku village is the area where most of the face-to-face social relationships take place, the residents of a village do not represent the fundamental unit of Suku social organization, that unit being the matrilineage. The Suku are an example of a society that follows matrilineal descent but patrilocal residence at marriage, with adult sons continuing to reside in their own father’s village. Therefore, while the village itself is said to “belong” to a particular lineage (the one that first established it), about half its residents are not members of that lineage. Thus the grown sons who build their compounds near their father’s belong not to his lineage but to their mother’s, which is usually (but not always, since lineages are not exogamous) different from their father’s. At the same time, every married daughter of the family lives with her husband, who is usually a resident of some other village, and raises her children there.

Every Suku belongs to several matrilineally based groups, all of which are known by the same term—kikanda. At its widest, kikanda may be called the clan; its members recognize their common descent but ignore the genealogical details of the relationship. Clans, however, are widely dispersed territorially and there is little persistent interaction among their members. Functionally, the fundamental unit of Suku social organization is the kikanda in its narrowest sense, to be referred to here as the “autonomous lineage” or simply as “the lineage.” On the average, such lineages number about thirty persons. Several such lineages further combine into a group of the somewhat less immediate importance, the “major lineage.”

CORPORATE NATURE • An autonomous matrilineage is a corporate group in that it has a name and a formal head, in that it possesses continuity through time even while its membership changes, and in that it acts as a single unit in a variety of economic, social, juridical, political, and religious contexts. Formally, the headship of the lineage belongs to the oldest male member, but in fact authority rests with the entire group of elders; no decision of importance is taken and no negotiations affecting lineage interests are held without consultations among this group. As this oldest generation begins to die out, the next one, containing by then several middle-aged adults, becomes involved in making decisions and, in time, becomes the generation of elders.

Lineages, as corporate groups, own certain resources. As has already been stated, land for agricultural uses is regarded as a free good. But ownership of land in the sense of hunting rights over determined stretches of bush
is in the hands of specific lineages. Through prior occupation or later purchase from the first owners, a lineage acquires the exclusive right to burn its land during the communal hunts of the dry season, to hunt freely in this land, and to collect a portion of all the game killed by other hunters. Similar rights are exercised by lineages over fishing sites and small streams, and over palm and bamboo groves.

The Suku say that when a person acquires any property, he does so because of the supernatural and physical protection of his lineage. Thus all individual domestic property is viewed as ultimately belonging to the lineage as a whole and there is a continuous circulation of household goods and money among members. Such sharing is especially pronounced at times of collective lineage needs, when legal fines or taxes are to be paid or when bridewealth for a lineage member is to be assembled. Conversely, when a legal compensation or bridewealth is received, every adult member claims a share.

This does not mean that everything in the lineage is continuously and meticulously redistributed. Individuals do manage to accumulate money, domestic animals, and household goods. What counts, and this is no Suku questions in principle, is that the rights to these possessions are ultimately held by the lineage, which may exercise them in times of need and that upon a person's death all his property actively reverts to the lineage as a corporate body. Since it is the elders' responsibility to look after lineage interests and to manage its affairs, they must of necessity control greater means than the younger men. They usually do, first, because they have had some time in which to accumulate wealth, and, second, because they can use their authority to channel much of the lineage wealth into their own hands by claiming a greater share when subdivisions are made. Thus, although wealth is distributed throughout the lineage, it is concentrated in the group of elders.

THE LINEAGE CENTER. Every Suku lineage has a center, which is the village originally built by its founders and bearing its name. Here the head of the lineage resides and sacrifices; here ceremonies are performed, marriages are celebrated, and lineage members are preferably buried. The functioning of an autonomous lineage around this center, given its strongly corporate organization, presupposes relative ease of communication among members; in this society, as in most, this requires geographical proximity. Yet as has already been pointed out, the lineage cannot ever be strictly localized, since patriarchal residence results in scattering the membership among several villages.

FISSION AND FUSION. As long as marriages are contracted with close neighbors, this dispersal does not greatly affect communication among lineage members. When, however, a woman of the lineage marries a man from a distant village, and bears children who remain in their father's region, the effect is to produce a lineage offshoot which, in time, may grow in number. Given Suku conceptions of lineage unity in economic, legal, and ritual matters, this offshoot must of necessity possess a certain degree of autonomy in its dealings with its own neighbors. This factual autonomy, if it persists, is confirmed in time by a formal separation of ritual paraphernalia from the original lineage. Thus what before was one lineage now becomes two. Another way in which lineages segment is through quarrels: an elder may be accused of cupidity, of witchcraft, or of favoritism to those members who are closest to him, and a formal separation between two lineage segments may follow.

Such separations, however, are never viewed as final and irrevocable. Blood ties, the raison d'être of lineage unity, are seen as indissoluble; segmentation resulting from quarrels is always viewed by the Suku as a temporary aberration, and segmentation caused by geographical distance as a necessary concession to the reality of difficulties in communication. At certain levels, the old lineage continues to be a corporate body, and we shall refer to it as the "major lineage." Thus hunting lands and political offices, when such were held by the previously unified lineage, still belong to the major lineage as a whole. When one autonomous lineage lacks any mature adults to head it, it will call upon another related lineage to supply it with a head. Finally, an autonomous lineage may move back into the territory of its parent-lineage and the two segments become reunited. Suku lineage structure thus allows for refusion as well as separation. But in the flow of everyday life, each lineage acts as a corporate body, installs its own head, and controls de facto the lineage property that is in its vicinity while holding it in trust for the entire major lineage.

MAINTENANCE OF THE LINEAGE CENTER. We have said that as long as the women of a lineage marry men within a relatively short distance from the lineage center, the dispersal of lineage membership, resulting from patri-local residence, need not vitiate communication among the members and the smooth functioning of the lineage as a corporate group. Even under these conditions, however, patri-local residence poses a problem as far as the maintenance of the lineage center is concerned. At first glance it would appear that such a village will lose all members of its founding lineage within a generation because the women leave to reside with their husbands and produce children who will live elsewhere, while at the same time the lineage members living in the center bring in wives from outside and thus populate the village with children who are members of other lineages.

This trend, among the Suku, is countered by several mechanisms. As a rule, the lineage head resides in the center; if he lives elsewhere at the
time of his accession, he changes his residence. Other members, with advancing age, also tend to drift into the lineage center. Ideally a man is expected to reside with his father and, after the latter’s death, with his father’s lineage, but in fact a few men move to their own lineage center at their father’s death and even more men do so once all their classificatory “fathers” (that is, their father’s lineage members of his generation) have died. A certain proportion of men do follow the ideal rule and live with their father’s relatives to the end, but enough people do not, and thus repopulate the center with lineage members.

There are ways in which marriages may be arranged to bring about the same result. Some women marry men who already live in their (the women’s) lineage center. It is in this connection that the Suku express some preference for patrilateral cross-cousin marriage, that is, the marriage of a man with his father’s sister’s daughter. An elder living in his lineage center may arrange such a marriage for his son who lives with him and thus bring a woman member of the elder’s lineage (his sister’s daughter) and her future children into the center. Finally, Suku lineages are not exogamous, and incest prohibitions preclude marriages only between lineage members of the same generation (for they are regarded as siblings). But a man may marry a daughter of his classificatory sister and even that of his true sister, although the latter match is not generally approved. In such a marriage, a man living in his lineage center brings in a wife of his own lineage and thus assures that their children will also reside there.

Through a combination of these various patterns, the centrifugal forces of lineage dispersal are counteracted and the lineage center continues to hold a core of members in residence, giving the entire lineage organization a fixed point of reference in space and over time.

Marriage

Polygyny is an accepted pattern among the Suku, but the majority of married men (some 80 percent) are in fact monogamous. There is no culturally defined limit to the number of wives a man may have but only a few can afford to pay the bridewealth for many. The majority of polygynous marriages (about 70 percent) involve only two wives, but there are individual cases on record, particularly in the past, when important chiefs had as many as ten or more, and one of the Suku kings had close to forty.

As in every society, there is a formal, legal side to marriage as well as a personal one. Choosing one’s mate is primarily a personal matter. To be sure, a certain number of marriages are prearranged by relatives, but it is rare for such a marriage to be forced on a person who strongly objects, for the Suku know that it will not last. Most marriages are initiated by the young people themselves and acceptance by a girl is preceded by a period of courtship. However, once the girl has agreed, the arrangement of the legal side of marriage is a matter between the lineages concerned.

First, the groom must secure the consent of the bride’s father, to whom he comes with a gift of palm wine, and of her mother, to whom etiquette requires a small present, such as a handkerchief. Acceptance of these gifts signifies that the parents have no objections. The next visit, also accompanied by a gift of palm wine, is to the head of the girl’s lineage or her mother’s brother (true or classificatory). The young man is accompanied by the head or an elder of his own lineage. At the meeting, lineage genealogies and histories are reviewed and any past quarrels between the two lineages discovered; if there are outstanding claims, arrangements are made for their settlement before the marriage. At this time the amount to be paid as bridewealth is agreed upon. The groom is allowed a period of several months to assemble it.

At the time of its payment, the bridewealth is formally handed to the head of the bride’s lineage, who immediately gives the greater portion of it (between two thirds and three quarters) to the bride’s father. The Suku regard this as payment to the father for his care and trouble in bringing up his daughter for her lineage; once the sum is paid, her lineage assumes the legal responsibility for the woman in any future matters connected with the marriage. The groom’s lineage considers that the payment has been made to the woman’s lineage and should there be a divorce it will claim reimbursement from the woman’s lineage and not from her father. If the woman later remarries, the new bridewealth will go entirely to her own lineage.

If the wife dies, her lineage must either return the bridewealth or provide another wife. Should the husband die, the bridewealth must similarly be reimbursed or the widow must remarry another member of her husband’s lineage, his true or classificatory brother.

The return of bridewealth in case of divorce or death represents a readjustment in the balance of reciprocity between the lineages involved. When the marriage has produced children, new factors enter into this balance. Since the husband has the right to collect the greater part of his daughter’s future bridewealth and since his sons will live with him and help him, these advantages are taken into account. The presence of a daughter reduces the amount of the reimbursed bridewealth by a half, that of each son, by a quarter.

In effect, then, bridewealth is exchanged, and may be re-exchanged in the future, for certain rights in a woman that are acquired by the husband and his lineage. The most important of these rights are those to her domestic labor and exclusive sexual rights. For the actual exercise of the right of sexual possession, however, a ceremony must be performed in which a goat is sacrificed. Until this is done, sexual intercourse is punished by fines levied
on the groom, lines that are the same as those collected in any case of
fornication.

The goat is supplied by the groom, and it is the only transfer in marriage
that is not reimbursable. The sacrifice is performed at a crossroads by the
head of the bride's lineage. Sexual intercourse between members of different
lineages is viewed as a "mixing" of different "bloods"—a dangerous thing,
potentially threatening the life of any member of the woman's lineage unless
the danger is removed by sacrifice.1

The interweaving of the personal and the legal elements in marriage
appears clearly in the relations between the spouses. Love, warmth, and
affection exist, as do indifference, distrust, and rancor. But this natural play
of personalities and individual feelings takes place within a given family
structure in which the principle of lineage unity is dominant. When the
spouses belong to different lineages, they have no rights to each other's
property; for example, the husband cannot use his wife's food without her
permission. It is her duty to plant fields so that the family may be fed, as it
is his duty to provide her with meat, clothing, and household utensils.
Whatever a wife earns by selling the produce of her fields, she shares half with
her husband; what she earns from making pottery or breeding livestock, she
keeps as her own. This arrangement reflects the Suku woman's relative inde-
pendence of her husband, for she remains throughout her life a full-fledged
member of her own lineage and is never incorporated into that of her hus-
band. One consequence of this is that divorce is rather easily resorted to.
Roughly half of the Suku women in their late middle age have been married
at least twice. When an old woman becomes widowed, her life in her hus-
band's village is often a lonely one, and she will usually move to her lineage
center, where she can be among her own and where some of her middle-aged
sons may also be moving.

THE PATRILOCAL RESIDENTIAL UNIT

Matrilineal descent divides the Suku family into two subunits—the father as opposed to the mother and her
children—each of which owes its primary loyalty to its own matrilineage. Although the father is not interfered with in the day-to-day task of educating
the child, he always consults his wife's lineage about serious matters affecting
the child. Legally, it is the matrilineage that is responsible for a child's mis-
demeanors, and it pays the fines in cases of theft or homicide. In contrast
to this division of lineage affiliation within the family, however, is the
residential unit composed of a father and his adult sons; the father, in turn,
together with his brothers, lives by the side of his father, and the latter's
other sons, by his other wives, also live in the same village. Hence there
may emerge a residential group that is a patrilocally extended family with a
depth of three and even four (if small children are included) generations.
Such a group, however, does not last. It begins to break up at the death of
the oldest man (that is, the grandfather) around whom it was organized,
when each group of brothers by the same mother begin to drift away toward
its own lineage center. The transient nature of this patrilocal group appears
to be related to the recognition of a transient patrilineage of a depth of only
two generations, called kianna kya mukongis (literally, father-in-law of the
hunting "medicine"), whose functions are primarily related to the main-
tenance of the hunting luck of its members. Such a patrilineage includes a
person's siblings by the same father, the father himself and his siblings by
the same father, and the children of the father's brothers, but it specifically
excludes the father's father.

LIFE CYCLE

CHILD TRAINING AND SOCIALIZATION

Children are very much valued among the Suku, who have a strong and realistic
belief that a lineage derives strength from large membership. An expectant
mother continues with her household duties right until childbirth and goes
back to work a few days after. Difficulties at delivery are far from rare, and,
before the establishment of the relatively extensive medical network of
recent years, death of women in childbirth was not infrequent. In the early
1940s, infant mortality was high, hovering in the vicinity of 20 percent in
the first year (Lamal 1949:68); since then it has been reduced roughly by
half.

A few weeks after birth there is a "coming out" and a "naming" cere-
mony for the child, when it leaves the inside of its mother's house for the
first time. Exclusive breast feeding lasts for about six months, after which
time solid foods are added to the diet. But breast feeding continues, though
gradually waning in frequency, until the child is at least two and sometimes
three years old; occasionally even four-year-olds may be given the breast.
As long as breast feeding is regular, sexual intercourse on the part of the
mother is believed to be dangerous to the child's health.

Young boys enjoy considerable freedom from household tasks. The
learning of adult occupations takes place gradually, without compulsion, and
largely through participation and imitation. As a result, by late adolescence,
boys control the ordinary skills that every Suku male does, and many of
them begin to concentrate on some specialty they find attractive. Sometimes,
this involves a period of apprenticeship and a payment to the teacher.
Traditionally, this was the case with professional dancers, blacksmiths, diviners,
and specialized curers; at present, apprenticeships are served by tailors, car-
penters, mechanics, drivers, and sometimes even by those who wish to become
domestic servants to Europeans and the wealthier Congolese.

In contrast to the boys, the girls are expected to help their mothers
with household tasks almost as soon as they have learned to walk. At first,
Male Circumcision - Though a boy's journey into manhood is gradual and without definite landmarks as far as the learning of tasks is concerned, there is one point in it that represents a definite psychological and social break with the past. This is the circumcision ceremony, which at present normally takes place between the ages of ten and fifteen and, in the old days, at eighteen or even later. For the girls, there is no comparable ceremonial.

A lineage chief in a given region takes the initiative in organizing the ceremony when he feels that there are enough boys of the right age in the area. Participation is entirely unrelated to lineage, clan, or political ties. The ceremony occurs in the dry season, partly for hygienic reasons. The organizer secures the services of a professional circumciser, who must also be knowledgeable in the details of the ceremonial because mistakes are considered to expose the children to witchcraft. The organizer is paid a fee by the parents of each child, out of this money he must pay the circumciser and the professional dancers who provide both entertainment and ritual protection against supernatural dangers for the children.

Circumcision takes place at early dawn, and the children immediately move to a special hut that has been previously erected outside the village. At present, they reside there only a few weeks, since most of them have to return to school in early September; traditionally, the period lasted for several months. During their residence, they learn various dances and songs (most of which are derisive of women) and they are exposed to systematic hazing by their elders. Some of this hazing may border on physical cruelty, much of it consists in forcing the boys into admitting imaginary incestuous relations and making sexual jokes about their parents—behavior that would be unthinkable under normal circumstances. The entire ceremony is believed to ensure the boys' virility. Throughout the period of seclusion, women are strictly forbidden to approach them; those that do so by mistake are fined by the boys. At the end of the period, the boys go to the river, wash themselves, put on new clothing, and return to the village amid dancing and singing. They have now acquired new names and may collect a fine from anyone using their old ones.

One of the most apparent effects of the ceremony is psychological: the boys feel that they have become adults, superior to all females and uncircumcised children, and that this superiority is based on the fact that they have "suffered" as the others have not. There is a rather vague feeling of solidarity among the men who went through the same circumcision ceremony together, but it is neither obligatory nor institutionalized in any way.

The Kita Ceremony - Another ceremony, called Kita, crosses lineage ties and, this time, involves both males and females of different ages. Periodically, and usually after the death of a regional chief, it is felt that the land and the society require a kind of renewal, particularly if there has been what is regarded as an unusual number of abnormal births, of albinos, and of twins (the latter, though not welcome, are both allowed to live). The ceremony is directed by a man and a woman who possess a special ritual medicine concerned with abnormal births. The initiates are all those in the region who have not previously been through Kita; since Kita occurs at long intervals of time—at least a decade and often longer—the initiates vary greatly in age.

The ritual itself consists of the symbolic killing of the initiates, a resi-
dence of some weeks in a specially built large house in which the initiates literally “play dead” during the daytime, and, finally, a coming-out ceremony, with special songs and dances, after which the initiates are known by their new names. As is true of the circumcision ritual, Kita is viewed in personal terms and does not give rise to any kind of society nor to any feeling of commonality among the initiates.

Stratification and slavery

The absence of age grades and of secret societies that would introduce ties other than those of kinship and residence points up once again the pervasive functions of the corporate lineage. Solidarity based on lineage affiliation similarly eliminates individual differences in wealth. To be sure, some lineages own hunting lands whereas others do not. A few lineages control the offices of regional chiefs and profit from the tribute they collect in the king’s name. But the resulting differences in wealth are, on the whole, slight, and the successful pursuit of hunting, animal breeding, or trade, or of a profession, such as blacksmithing or divining, easily offsets such differences.

One Suku institution, slavery, may lead to the conclusion—it has, in fact, been so interpreted by some travelers in this region—that the society is at the very least divided into two classes, the “slaves” and the “free.” The way the institution functioned in the past (at present it is illegal) indicates that such a description does violence to reality.

Among the Suku, homicide was compensated for by the guilty lineage by substituting for the dead person two persons of the same sex, or by paying the price of two slaves. A lineage without money was therefore forced to give up two of its members. Also, persistent thieves and adulterers, whose behavior cost the lineage numerous fines or exposed it to supernatural dangers, were sold after several warnings. On the other hand, the desire to increase lineage membership always made it easy to find a willing buyer who would not always be informed about the true reasons for the sale. The people bought were usually children and adolescents, and sometimes young women; these could be expected to adapt to their new environment and, above all, to find it harder than would a mature male to escape back to their original lineage.

The Suku are too far east to have been directly touched by the large-scale slaving activities on the Portuguese-held west coast, and too far west to have been reached by the Arab slavers operating in central Africa. Slave raiding appears to have been unknown, and the buying and selling within the Suku region was done on an individual basis, Suku slavery cannot even be called “domestic slavery”; perhaps the term “adoption” is closest to the truth. A slave was, for all practical purposes, a full-fledged member of the lineage, living the same life as the other members and engaging in the same occupations. What he accumulated as property was his in the same limited sense that any Suku property is ever personal. In conformity with matrilineal descent, the children of a female slave became members of their mother’s adoptive lineage, and the children of a male slave belonged to that of their mother. Marriage with a slave was neither more nor less desirable, the amount of bridewealth was the same, and elders descended from female slaves could become lineage heads. Nevertheless, a subtle difference in treatment did exist. If the lineage was faced with the necessity of selling one of its members, it was more willing to select a slave member, all other things being equal; similarly, less patience was shown a slave thief or adulterer. But an undesirable true member would still be sold before a good slave member.

Slaves, then, did not represent a “class” in Suku society. Such a term emphasizes a horizontal division over the far more significant vertical one separating the different lineages. The importance of the cultural context of slavery may be clearly seen in the fact that in some lineages all the members are “slaves” in the sense that true blood membership has entirely died out and only the descendants of slaves are present; such a lineage continues to operate in the same way as before vis-à-vis the lineages and the clan to which it was originally related.

POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

At the present time, the Suku are a part of the political organization of the Republic of the Congo, an organization that has been largely inherited from the Belgian colonial system. The changes the colonial administration brought about will be touched on later. For the moment, the traditional political system will be discussed and, consequently, the past tense is necessarily used.

Traditional kingship

Upon the arrival of the Suku in the north of their present area, after their exodus from the Kwango Valley, the MeniKongo, as the king is called, established his village at its very border, in the northeastern corner, and it is here that his successors, including the present and powerless one, have lived. The king’s village was large by the usual standards; comparisons made by informants with modern villages suggest a population in the neighborhood of three hundred persons. It accommodated most of the members of the royal lineage and the numerous wives of the king and of his brothers and sororal nephews. The women of the royal lineage were preferentially married to its slaves so that they would remain in the capital and there bring up their children (some of whom would succeed to the kingship) while conform-
ing to the rule of virilocal residence. In addition to a considerable number of slaves of the royal lineage, the village also housed many sons and grandsons of former kings, who, rather than join their own lineages, preferred to remain at the capital and enjoy the advantages of their kinship ties.

The king’s compound was surrounded by a fence of bamboo and visitors had to be admitted by a guard. The compound contained the king’s own house, those of his wives, and a small hut containing the ritual paraphernalia of kingship. These consisted of several kinds of magical medicines that had the power to injure enemies and to maintain the well-being of the people as a whole; there were also bracelets that had belonged to previous kings, the king’s stools dating back to the time of the exodus, and the skull and jawbone of a Lunda chief killed in the war. The paraphernalia were in the charge of one of the king’s specially initiated wives, and of a male guardian with his boy assistant. The male guardian was, in effect, a kind of priest of the royal cult; he performed the main sacrifices to the royal ancestors, buried dead kings, and initiated their successors. He was always chosen from among the slave members of the royal lineage.

The king’s person was surrounded by a number of taboos. No one could see him eat; he could not walk in cultivated fields for fear of affecting the fertility of the soil; he could not see a corpse nor cry over the dead, for that, too, would spoil the land. He could not die a natural death, for that would affect the power of his sacred “medicines;” it was the duty of the male guardian to smother him when he was about to expire. When the king drank, those present had to cover their faces while one of the attendants recited proverbs and sayings recapitulating historic events, praising the king for his good deeds and also hinting at those where he had shown himself unjust.

The symbolic association between the king and the political order in the society was clearly revealed during the interregnum after his death. The Suku say that when the king dies, “the land also dies.” As the news of the king’s demise spread through the country, a period of institutionalized anarchy would set in: strangers were attacked, animals and crops were openly stolen, warfare would break out, and the authority of the regional chiefs was defied. With the installation of the new king, these eruptions of violence ceased, and the “land,” meaning social order and political authority, was considered restored.

The king had no formally constituted council nor assistants with highly specific functions. One cannot, without forcing facts, speak of a “court” or of “ministers.” The guardian of the king’s paraphernalia sometimes handled political matters, such as settling disputes between regional chiefs, but at other times this was done by the king or by any of his brothers. Similarly, the king’s sisters, when they were old and respected, could play an important part in the deliberations of the royal lineage, but there was no formal office of “Queen Sister” or “Queen Mother” that is often found in other African groups.

In any immediate sense, the king actively ruled only over some twenty or thirty villages surrounding the capital, and for this purpose no elaborate organization was necessary. The principal problem in the political organization was that of administering the rest of the Suku state, of keeping as a political unit a population divided into strongly autonomous lineages, numbering probably less than the present figure of 80,000, and scattered over an area of some fifty by one hundred miles (roughly the size of Connecticut). Given the limited means of communication imposed by the existing technology, the problem of organization required special techniques of political control.

Regional organization

The model that was followed was, in general, typical of the kingdoms of the savanna belt of central Africa; more specifically, it appears to be Lunda, for much of the terminology is of Lunda origin. The kingdom was divided into several major regions of unequal size (before European occupation, there were about a dozen such regions). Ideally, the structure was pyramidal: the king at the apex delegated his powers to these regional chiefs; each of them, in turn, stood over several local chiefs who themselves had authority over groups of villages. Just as political power extended downward, step by step, from the king, so tribute, the visible expression of this power, flowed upward from the local level and by way of each successive link to the king.

The position of regional chiefs duplicated that of the king, but on a smaller scale. They were surrounded by the same kind of ritual and constrained by the same taboos. Like the king, they could act as judges in any matters brought before them, and they similarly lacked any well-defined council but relied on informal consultations with the elders of their village. There were no formal and continuous lines of communication between the king and his subordinate chiefs, and the latter had no representatives at the king’s village.

The king’s position as the center of the system was reasserted periodically and forcefully by his travels around the kingdom every few years for the purpose of collecting the tribute that the regional chiefs had previously gathered in his name. At this time, too, unresolved quarrels and complaints against local chiefs would be brought to the king and, conversely, a regional chief could inform the king of cases of insubordination. The king had no professional standing army, but his judgment could be swiftly enforced by his retinue, much of it consisting of hangers-on amassed during the trip and only too eager to burn and loot a designated village.
The above description represents what is more or less an ideal conception of the political organization. In reality, the political system appears to have been more successful in providing a tribute-gathering network than in regulating conflicts and maintaining order. This variation of the ideal is understandable when the position of the regional chiefs is examined. Their authority was maintained by their prestige as the king's representatives and by the fear that recalcitrance would bring retribution during the king's next visit; this ensured a more or less successful collection of tribute. But positive interference with quarrels between lineages was more difficult and brought no visible rewards. If a war broke out between two lineages, the regional chief could mediate and try to stop it, and in this his person was inviolate. But if passions were running high, it was not easy to enforce his decision, since all he could rely on was his prestige and the support of the membership of his own lineage whose strength was no greater than that of any other. Even such factors as the chief's age, energy, and physical strength influenced the operation of the political system. It is not surprising that there were always some chiefs who restricted themselves to collecting tribute (a right seldom disputed them) and avoided the discomforts of keeping the peace. The political vacuum that resulted was filled by other mechanisms outside the formal political system; some of them may be viewed as extralegal even though institutionalized. Their importance will be seen presently, when Suku law is examined.

Law

Any disputes inside the lineage were within the exclusive jurisdiction of the lineage itself, that is, of its elders; no other authority, not even that of the king, interfered with this lineage autonomy. As a result, such internal conflicts either were settled or remained unresolved, to be eventually outlived or forgotten or, if very serious, to bring about a division of the lineage into two autonomous segments.

One of the correlates of the strongly corporate organization of the lineage was that conflicts between persons of different lineages automatically pitted one lineage against another. Correct relations between lineages were conceived of in terms of strict reciprocity, and Suku traditional law made no allowances for intent or accident when someone's interests had been infringed upon. A theft demanded the return of an equivalent object and a fine, or a reciprocal theft. Homicide, accidental or not, was erased only by furnishing two persons to the wronged lineage, or their equivalent in money, or, finally, through the reciprocal murder of a member of the lineage at fault.

When a lineage felt that it had been wronged, the initiative of obtaining restitution belonged entirely to it. A moot could be called, in which neighbors and friends of both sides were free to participate and argue and thus to put some public pressure on the recalcitrant. If the moot were not successful, several other approaches remained. The case could be taken to the regional chief when both parties were of the same region; if they were not, this procedure, involving two different chiefs, became cumbersome. Also, as has already been shown, enforcement of the law by regional chiefs could not always be relied upon.

Another possibility was for both parties to take the case to a judge who specialized in settling disputes but worked entirely on his own, without any relation to the formal political organization. Such judges had no power to enforce their decisions; hence they demanded in advance from each side a fee and a deposit of money equivalent to the amount at stake in the dispute, the total of the two deposits being awarded to the party judged to be in the right. A judge's reputation rested on knowledge of custom and precedent, adroitness at questioning witnesses, and impartiality.

The procedure at the trial was well defined. Each side, represented not only by the person directly involved but also by an elder of his lineage, ordinarily chose a friend, talented at pleading, as an advocate. Each advocate stated his case; the judge summarized it, emphasized the main points at issue, and allowed the advocate to correct his summation. If necessary, additional arguments and questioning by the judge would follow. Although witnesses were used, little stock was put in their testimony: they were by definition biased and acted, in effect, as minor advocates for the side they favored. There was always a crowd of onlookers during the trial; they could contribute to the arguments, make additional points, and remind the audience of precedents. At the end of the trial, the judge retired to his house to think and to "sleep" over the decision and also, secretly, to consult various elders of his village. When the final decision was to be given, the judge emerged dancing and singing out various proverbs whose meaning favored now one side and now the other, thus keeping the audience and the litigants in suspense. Once again, the cases were summarized, first on their merits, and then, slowly, by allusion and proverb, the summary would begin to favor one party as the inconsistencies of the other became crystallized. By the time the decision was given, the outcome had been clear to all for some time. The entire deposit was then handed to the winner. If he had been the wronged party, he was thereby compensated for his original loss; if he had been unjustly accused, the extra amount he received was seen as compensation for libel.

If the parties to a dispute could not agree on a judge, the remaining possibility for the claimant was to take direct action. For example, in case of theft, one simply took one or several animals belonging to the other lineage or one captured a member of the other lineage as hostage to force it to come to terms. There was one interesting variant of self-help. Since the other side was usually on guard against direct action, the wronged lineage would resort
to self-help against any third lineage that had nothing to do with the quarrel, telling it to lay its claims against the people responsible for the quarrel in the first place. The effect here was to involve forcibly a third lineage in a matter that had reached an impasse and thus to ensure that a third party, impartial yet actively concerned about having the issue settled, would act as a mediator.

Another method of direct action was warfare. The wronged lineage invited the people of neighboring villages, particularly of those where there were relatives, to join in the coming battle; the other side similarly asked its neighbors for help. After a night of drumming and dancing, the first party would begin the attack on the village of the enemy. The goal was to put the enemy to flight, loot the village, and burn it. Few people were killed in these skirmishes, which, more often than not, were stopped by the elders of both sides as soon as any person was killed or even seriously wounded. The main purpose was to frighten the opponent into settling the dispute, and the warfare itself had some of the character of a mock battle in which more insults than arrows were traded.

It has been said that, in general, any violation of the principle of reciprocity in the relations between lineages held in it the potential for overt conflict. The strength of this principle is seen in quarrels over such apparently inconsequential matters as a borrowed basket of peanuts. At present, in the tribunals established by the administration, in which a fee must be paid before any matter is examined, one sometimes sees cases brought for judgment where the stakes are no higher than the fee itself. Such behavior, however, is not illogical, for the problem of an unsettled dispute is a moral one. The defense of its interests, no matter how small, is a duty to the lineage and to the community of blood that it stands for; lack of such defense is a betrayal. Hence the persistence with which justice in these terms is pursued.

Most of the conflicts among lineages may be grouped into a few categories recognized by the Suku themselves. The most inclusive of these is theft, which covers any infringement on lineage property in the widest sense, such as refusal to reimburse the full bridewealth upon divorce, evasion of the customary hunting tribute, any destruction of property (accidental or willful), or loss of a borrowed object. Another broad category is that of trouble related to political subordination or to kinship ties, such as the failure to present regular gifts to one's father or, if he is dead, to his lineage. A great number of cases falls under the rubric of illicit sexual relations, insults, libel, and injuries that draw blood may also lead to a court case. Finally, homicide is an important but rare cause of serious conflict.

Traditionally, minor claims, such as insults, were rarely taken to court. In the recital of conflicts in the past, what stands out most is theft, the enslavement of strangers, adultery, failure to pay the hunting tribute, accidental homicide, and arguments over the ownership of hunting lands. Arguments over hunting lands and the occasional quarrels over the chieftaincy and political tribute were settled in the framework of the formal political organization, that is, through the chief's and the king's court. By contrast, moots, independent judges, and extralegal self-help were more prominent in matters involving the reciprocal relations among individuals and their lineages.

Political organization and law: An interpretive summary

If one considers traditional Suku political organization in all its manifestations, two seemingly contradictory features emerge. On the one hand, there were the politically quasi-independent lineages, maintaining relations among themselves by means of techniques that are generally associated with stateless societies. On the other hand, there was the formal political organization, built on a hierarchical model and imposed from the top, which functioned successfully within certain limits. The two systems are not so much contradictory as they are complementary. Historically, when the power of the formal political organization weakened, the political mechanisms based on the segmentary principle rose in importance in maintaining the balance of political relations. This happened regionally when chiefs lacked energy and in the entire Suku kingdom, about 1920, when the MeniKongo's own area in the north came under colonial control while the south still remained largely untouched by the administration. Thus Suku society may be said to have possessed the characteristics of both the principal types that have been proposed to classify African political systems (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940).
as the growing of crops or the everyday relations among people. In addition to their psychological reality, these concepts must be viewed as part of social reality as well, for their effects on behavior are no less observable and concrete than those of economic or political factors.

The system of ideas with which we are dealing is organized around several key concepts: the Creator, medicines, witchcraft, the powers of eldership, and, finally, divination.

THE CREATOR GOD • Of the concepts listed, that of Nzambi (the Creator) has the least functional importance, for it scarcely affects behavior, is not integrated with the other concepts, and remains a necessary but essentially isolated logical axiom. The nature of Nzambi is regarded as unknown and largely unknowable. The Creator is not anthropomorphized in any way. He (“it” would perhaps be a better pronoun) is by no means a distant god; on the contrary, his presence is seen everywhere and serves as the ultimate explanation of all things, but precisely because he is so pervasive, because everything is attributable to him, the concept has no practical utility in understanding or influencing specific events. No appeal is ever made to Nzambi, no prayer or sacrifice is ever addressed to him. In the causative chain explaining any phenomenon, he is the ultimate link, accounting for the inexplicable.

MEDICINES • The generic term mukisi (plural, mikisi) is applied to a whole range of objects and special preparations, and is best translated by the term "medicine." Within this category, more specific words exist to indicate the different kinds of mukisi. The simplest, the mienu, are what we would call herbs and are used for treating wounds, coughs, and aches, and for curing sterility or for setting broken limbs. What distinguishes these herbs from the other medicines is that they cure but cannot harm, and they act directly upon an individual through physical application. The other medicines, by contrast, can act at a distance, can harm as well as cure, and belong more clearly in the realm usually called magical.

These magical medicines are of two types: those held by and acting on individuals, and those whose field of action is the lineage as a unit. The first, called bunganga, include such things as good-luck charms, love potions, preparations that help their owners to find lost objects and ensure their success in hunting or trade, harmful magic used against enemies (including poisons), as well as ways to counteract such harm. These preparations are kept secret and may be acquired only by purchase. As a rule, the recipes consist of various herbs but also involve the sacrifice of an animal (a chicken or a goat) and the use of the animal’s blood; it is this that gives them their special strength and clearly differentiates them from the more ordinary herbal medicines. At present, many such new magical preparations have come

RELIGION

Any description of the total environment in which the Suku live would be incomplete without treating that part of it which, in the rationalist tradition of Western culture, is usually segregated under the rubric of the supernatural. To the Suku themselves, however, the concepts about to be described stand for a reality as natural, as mundane even,
from the urban centers, where a brisk trade in such things takes place among members of different ethnic groups.

The medicines in which the lineage and not the individual is the relevant unit are called bisungu (the "great medicines"). Every lineage possesses a certain number of these, many of them dating back to the time when the Suku lived by the Kwango River. Whereas the individual magical medicines are taken voluntarily and lose their power at their owner's death, the lineage medicines are acquired because of necessity and, once obtained, can never be given up by the lineage. The reason for taking a lineage medicine is always associated with some transgression against such a medicine held by some other lineage. For example, a member of the lineage steals some object that has been put under the protection of a lineage medicine by its owners; or a person, accused of some misdemeanor, falsely swears over a medicine that he is innocent. In such cases, the medicine is believed to "enter the blood" of the guilty person; since all members of a lineage share their blood, it also "enters the blood" of the lineage as a whole, with the result that any member of the lineage, and not necessarily the culprit himself, may fall sick.

The explanation for the sickness is sought from a diviner, who will indicate its cause. Once the medicine has entered the lineage, it can never be disposed of again; all that can be done is to "calm" it, that is, to prevent it from generating more disease. This is accomplished by a ceremonial in which the medicine is formally taken by the lineage. One of its members is initiated into it in a ceremony in which animals are sacrificed and their blood is "fed" to the medicine in place of the lineage blood that it would otherwise take; the initiate learns the taboos associated with it and the ways in which it must be kept quiet, and he becomes its guardian for the lineage, maintaining the paraphernalia (which usually include a carved statue) in his house or in a special little hut. The initiation is done for a fee by the guardian of a similar medicine from some other lineage. But once the medicine is taken by the lineage, its misuse, loss, lack of proper attention and treatment, the breaking of its taboos, or illicit sexual relations by its guardian—all these cause the medicine to break out again, causing disease in the lineage and requiring a new ceremony to "calm" it.

As conceived by the Suku, these medicines cause illness and death in an entirely mechanistic way. They have no volition of their own and they are not animated by anything like a spirit; they act automatically under precisely given conditions, and affect not simply the transgressor but anyone in his lineage. Thus they are not ethical agents in themselves. Nevertheless, their existence does support, although indirectly, the Suku ethical code. For example, an object put under the protection of a medicine is dangerous to anyone who touches it inadvertently; by this very fact, it is dangerous to a potential thief and, as a result, indiscriminate stealing is discouraged.

witchcraft. The other major source of illness and death in Suku belief is kidoki (witchcraft). The Suku say that a witch is a person who has been fed human flesh shortly after birth by another witch and who, from adolescence on, must "eat" human flesh to survive and for this purpose periodically kills others by magical means. Witches are believed to control various kinds of secret knowledge and to possess numerous and wondrous magical medicines of their own that they buy from other witches by giving them the lives of junior members of their lineage. It is said that witches can become invisible, fly through the air, and, while going about their nefarious business, disguise themselves as leopards, jackals, mosquitoes, and owls. Witches are believed to be in contact with each other; when one of them procures a victim, others will share in consuming it and thereby will contract a flesh-debt to be repaid in kind at some future date.

One important point must be kept in mind: a witch is not a being living and operating in some nether world separated from everyday life. Witches are, above all, living people and witchcraft is simply an attribute of persons who simultaneously play normal social roles and have their own unique personalities. Although witchcraft is itself by definition evil, a person who has it is not necessarily and entirely so. To a Suku, a witch may also be a friend, a father, a sister, or a respected and liked head of the lineage who has fulfilled well his obligations to it and has worked hard for its interests.

That witchcraft is viewed with some ambivalence can be understood from the fact that it is dangerous for a lineage to be without any witches; such a lineage would be immediately exposed to the depredations by witches from other lineages. On the other hand, an elder who is himself a witch but who, like any other elder, defends the interests of the lineage against outsiders, is an asset, for he is capable of knowing what other witches are doing and of insisting that some reciprocity be maintained, as it should be in any relations between different lineages. Since the world of witches exists, this means that it is best to have someone who can operate in it, and that someone must, of necessity, be a witch himself. For this protection, to be sure, a price must be paid. When deaths in the lineage are few, some of them will be attributed to a suspected member, but little is said about it if the suspect is regarded in other respects as a good person. But if deaths become numerous, this in itself soon becomes proof that the witches of the lineage, by their excesses, show that they are indifferent to lineage interests; hence an ordeal by poison is justified. This test for witchcraft involves the administration of a specially prepared drink to the suspected witch; death from the poison establishes guilt and survival indicates innocence.

Within the lineage, belief in witchcraft tends to maintain a balance between the authority of the elders and the natural resentment of it by the junior members. The latter often fear that disobedience of an elder, who may be a witch, may result in his avenging himself by witchcraft (generally, it is
the elders who are thought to be witches because they have outlived others). At the same time, the elders are also careful not to tyrannize the young, for misuse of their authority leads to suspicions that may culminate, at someone's death, in outright accusations and a demand for an ordeal by poison. Although poison is believed to act only on witches, unpopular elders have at times been killed under the guise of such a test.

POWERS OF ELDERSHIP. There is for the Suku a third possible explanation of misfortune, and it is related to the conception of supernatural powers inherent in lineage eldership. There is a belief that lineage membership offers supernatural protection against misfortune and that this protection may be withdrawn. Thus, disobedience or refusal to meet one's obligations as a lineage member may be punished by a curse, formal or secret, of the elders; this "opens the road" to misfortune, failure, poverty, and disease.

For an individual, the class of elders includes all those who are in the generations above his or who are considerably older than he is—living as well as dead. Thus when he is sick or when he is preparing for an important hunt, a young man will ask his living elders for assurances of their goodwill. Old men, on the other hand, to ensure the benevolence of their lineage, must go to their elders, and these are dead. They therefore visit the lineage cemetery and at the graves of the dead ask for prosperity for themselves and their lineage. Although this accords with what is usually called the "ancestral cult," it must be stressed that this cult is but a part of a wider and more fundamental idea about the powers of eldership.

DIVINATION. Medicines, witchcraft, withdrawal of protection by the elders—these three conceptions are the key points in the traditional belief system that, to the Suku, gives meaning to those events in life men everywhere have sought to understand—misfortune, illness, and death. Each of these, by itself, may be a cause of sickness. They are further integrated into a wider system of multiple causation, in which two or even three of them may be simultaneously active. Thus when a medicine is the initial cause of sickness, it is believed that witches often attempt to "hide behind" medicines, contributing their power to make a sick person worse and hoping that they may thus obtain a victim whose death the people will blame on the medicine. In the same way, witches may attempt to "hide behind" an elder's curse. In short, the entire causative system is such that varied factors may converge to produce one and the same visible result, which is sickness. One is never sure, however, which causes and in what combination are relevant in any specific case. The causative system is a closed one, but the Suku demand from it more than the satisfaction of the need for explanation. It must also be a guide to countering the illness and it must indicate which specific factors are responsible so that they may be eliminated.

It is at this point that the role of the diviner is crucial. A diviner is a person, male or female, who possesses his own special medicines that allow him to see what is hidden from others. In a sense, his is the capacity to enter inside the system of causation, to sort out the specific causes of an illness or death, and to indicate them to his clients. Consequently, the viability of the belief system as a guide to empirical action rests squarely on the success of the diviner.

When a person falls ill, the Suku will not immediately resort to divination. It is accepted that illness may be "natural," and the patient will at first be given the ordinary herbal medicines. If he recovers, nothing more is thought of it, and whatever latent suspicions of witchcraft there may have been are abandoned. But if the patient grows worse, suspicions that other causes are at play come to the surface. A public warning may be given to unnamed witches to desist, and people begin to speculate about the possible taboos that may have been broken, inducing a medicine to react. The goodwill of living elders is secured for the patient by having them express it publicly. Should all these steps fail, divination becomes necessary. A professional diviner is selected and his diagnosis is acted on; for example, a new medicine may be taken by the lineage, or witches are told once again to desist and are threatened with a poison ordeal, or a specified ancestor is placated through a sacrifice. If all these attempts fail, another diviner may be tried, and sometimes a third. If in the end the patient dies, it is said that the cause is beyond the ken of anyone, and it is referred to the unknowable Nzambi as the ultimate source of all things.

In Western culture the belief in the fundamental validity of the scientific method does not preclude the acceptance of failure in specific cases; so with the Suku the total belief system is viewed only as an overall guide to understanding and action. The failure of a diviner to reveal the truth may be attributed to his relative lack of ability or even to his lying. Hence the system contains within itself the explanation for its failures and it is not expected to be successful in every single case.

CHANGE

Occasional explorers aside, the first impact of European activity in the Suku area dates back to the first decade of this century, when one or two representatives of rubber companies collected a rather inferior latex produced from ground vines (the soil is too poor for ordinary rubber trees). These rubber operations were, however, peripheral to the more intensive and notorious ones in other parts of the Congo, and they steadily declined in importance, disappearing by the early 1930s, to be revived again for a short time during World War II. These periods of rubber collection were the only ones when the Suku had any cash crops to sell. At
present, the region is both too poor and too far from the centers to export a commercially feasible product of any kind.

It was only by the late 1920s that an effective colonial administration began to be installed in most of the Suku region. It was also at this time that Catholic and Protestant missions commenced their work in earnest, with the attendant introduction of more than sporadic schooling and of a modicum of medical facilities. One result of their activities is that nearly all Suku under the age of forty are nominally Christian.

In the absence of cash crops, whatever money flows into the Suku economic system from the outside does so primarily through the various employees of the administration (clerks, policemen, and workers) and through migrant laborers. To the north and east of the Suku, where the soil is richer, a few commercial plantations are established, and these employ a certain number of Suku workers. Some Suku also periodically leave to work in Léopoldville and a few other smaller towns. These migrant laborers retain their ties with the village, those in Léopoldville return for visits at least every few years, and those working on the plantations far more often. Many do not spend more than a few years away and all of them, on return, are immediately reintegrated into their villages and lineages. Thus, although at times half or even more of the youths and the younger males have been absent from their villages, this has not had the kind of disruptive effects on the society and culture as may be imagined a priori. It must be remembered that cultivation has always traditionally been in the hands of women and, in the absence of cash crops and the decline in the importance of hunting, the removal of a part of the male labor force has not had any significant effect on the internal economic balance. At the same time, the products of traditional craftsmanship, where males predominated, have been to a considerable extent replaced by more durable goods now bought in the stores for money.

It may be noted that the traditional Suku family was never very stable. There is no indication that the number of divorces at present is greater than in precolonial times. The lineage remains the main point of orientation for each spouse and the traditional independence of the wife has certainly contributed to the elasticity of the response to those situations when the husband is absent at work elsewhere.

One of the consequences of the introduction of larger amounts of money has been the strengthening of the matrilineage. Now that there is more wealth to be had and more situations in which it is important, the lineage is more jealously on guard to maintain its rights over the property of its members. The stringent application of traditional rules of lineage ownership in a variety of new situations is supported by the customary tribunals, which, in contrast to those in precolonial times, have effective means with which to enforce their decisions. (See page 466.)

Some of the most important social changes have taken place since World War II, with the consistent expansion of educational and medical facilities. By the late 1950s, almost every male child was enrolled in a three-year elementary village school, a somewhat smaller number going on to the end of elementary education. On the other hand, only a few Suku have had the opportunity to go to secondary or trade schools, and, with the exception of several priests, none has had the equivalent of a university training. It is difficult to determine the literacy for the entire population; for youths and adult males up to the age of thirty, it may be roughly estimated to be over 50 percent. Among women, on the other hand, it is much lower.

The introduction of Western medicine has had a great demographic effect. In the 1930s and 1940s, the population was either stable or even, in some years, declining, but at present it is increasing at a rate that should double it in some twenty-five or thirty years. After an initial lack of interest, the Suku have taken with great enthusiasm to the two hospitals and the numerous dispensaries scattered through the area. It will be remembered that traditional Suku religion was focused to a large extent on disease and its cure. The wide acceptance of modern medicine did not undermine significantly the traditional conceptions; rather, the two have been integrated into a wider system. It is the successful treatment of disease viewed as symptom that the imported medicine is readily credited with, just as traditional herbs are regarded as a somewhat less efficient way of accomplishing the same end. But neither is seen as removing the underlying causes (such as witchcraft or the curse of elders) and with these only traditional methods can cope.

Anti-acculturative feeling and conscious generalized reaction against the colonial authorities (as opposed to particularistic resentment of its various features or its individual representatives) began among the Suku after the first independence riots in Léopoldville in January 1959. These were expressed in local political activity among the literate administrative employees and, among the villagers, in a spontaneous movement of sullen noncooperation with the colonial administration. As a group, the Suku are too small in numbers and occupy too unimportant and peripheral a region to have figured significantly in the political evolution of the Congo or even of their own province in which there are more powerful ethnic groups. Yet, unexpectedly, with little political articulation and with the larger goal but dimly perceived, the Suku have nevertheless effectively added to the spontaneous movement that rapidly swept the Congo into independence.

Notes

(1) I did fieldwork among the Suku during 1958 and the first half of 1959. The research was supported by a fellowship grant from the Ford Foundation and was conducted under the auspices of the Program of African Studies, North-