

Primary Sources: Colonialism's Effect on the Kuba Kingdom of the Congo

By William Henry Sheppard on 12.13.17

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Image 1. William Henry Sheppard with Chief Maxamalinge, son of Lukenga, king of the Bakuba, or Kuba Kingdom, in 1900.

Editor's Note: William Henry Sheppard was a missionary and explorer in Africa. Sheppard, the son of a slave in Virginia, had always dreamed of visiting Africa. He arrived in the Congo in 1890 as a minister for the Southern Presbyterian Church and stayed for 20 years. Sheppard explored Congo's Kasai River area and met some of the most remote peoples in the region.

One in particular, the Kuba Kingdom (also called the Bakuba Kingdom), Sheppard became very close to and saw their society before and during colonialism. The Kuba Kingdom was a powerful civilization located deep in Congo's interior where the Belgian colonialists had never reached. In 1892, Sheppard became the first foreigner to reach the capital of the Kuba Kingdom, which he found after three months of following an ivory caravan. Sheppard was fluent in their language and stayed for four months taking notes of everything he saw. He noted some things that challenged his Christian beliefs, such as human sacrifice — which he argued with the Kuba King about — yet Sheppard did not make major attempts to convert them to Christianity.

What follows are excerpts from his book "Presbyterian Pioneers in Congo," written in a diary-entry format and published in 1916, and some of his news articles that protested Belgium's colonization of the Kuba.

The Capital in Sight. — We could see in the distance thousands and thousands of banana and palm trees and our escort of Bakuba cried out, "Muxenge! muxenge!" (meaning capital! capital!) Just before entering the great town we were halted at a small guard post consisting of a few houses and some men who were the king's watchmen. They told me that on each of the four entrances to the capital these sentries were stationed. A man was dispatched to notify the king that we were near. In a short while the people came out of the town to meet and greet us, hundreds of them, and many little children, too. The prime minister, N'Dola, brought the greetings, mentioned that the king would see me the next day.

A Grand Affair. — Early in the morning we heard the blast of ivory horns calling the attention of the people to put on their best robes and be in readiness for the big parade. I saw there was great activity in the town, men and women hurrying to and fro. Soon two stalwart Bakuba with their red kilts on and feathers in their hats appeared before my house and announced their readiness to accompany me before King Lukenga.

I was dressed in what had once been white linen. Coat, trousers, white canvas shoes and pith helmet. The officials on either side took me by the arm; we walked a block up the broad street, turned to the right and walked three blocks till we came to the big town square. Thousands of the villagers had already taken their position and were seated on the green grass. King Lukenga, his high officials and about 300 of his wives occupied the eastern section of the square. The placers of stringed instruments and drummers were in the center, and as we appeared a great shout went up from the people. The king's servants ran and spread leopard skins along the ground leading to his majesty. I approached with some timidity. The king arose from his throne of ivory, stretched forth his hand and greeted me with these words, "Wyni" (You have come). I bowed low, clapped my hands in front of me, and answered, "Ndini, Nyimi" (I have come, king).

The Royal Dance. — As the drums beat and the harps played the king's sons entered the square and danced one after the other single-handed, brandishing their big knives in the air. The king's great chair, or throne, was made of carved tusks of ivory, and his feet rested upon lion skins. I judged him to have been a little more than six feet high and with his crown, which was made of eagle feathers, he towered over all. The king's dress consisted of a red loincloth, draped neatly about his waist in many folds. He wore a broad belt decorated with cowrie shells and beads. His armlets and anklets were made of polished cowrie shells reaching quite above the wrists and ankles. These decorations were beautifully white. His feet were painted with powdered camwood, resembling morocco boots. The king weighed about 200 pounds. He wore a pleasant smile. He looked to be eighty years old, but he was as active as a middle-aged man.



The King's Town. — The town was laid off east and west. The broad streets ran at right angles, and there were blocks just as in any town. Those in a block were always related in some way. Around each house is a court and a high fence made of

heavy matting of palm leaves, and around each block there is also a high fence, so you enter these homes by the many gates.

Each block has a chief called Mbambi, and he is responsible to King Lukenga for his block. When the king will deliver a message to the whole village or part of it, these chiefs are sent for and during the early evenings they ring their iron handbells and call out in a loud voice the message in five minutes. The king desired of his own heart to give me peanuts for my people. I heard the messengers delivering the word and the next morning we had more peanuts than we could manage. In some of the yards there were trees with blooming flowers.

They Actually Court. — The Bakuba are monogamists. A young man sees a girl whom he likes; he has met her in his own town or at some other, or perhaps at a marketplace or a dance. He sends her tokens of love, bananas, plantains, peanuts, dried fish or grasshoppers.

She in turn sends him similar presents. They often meet, sit down on the green, laugh and talk together. I have seen the girls often blush and really put on airs. He asks her to have him, if she has no one else in her heart, and tells her that he wants no one to eat the crop that is in the field but her. The girl and the parents both agree.

Industries. — Blacksmiths were busy turning out axes, hoes, knives, spears and razors. Others made mats, rugs, baskets, hats, cups, spoons and work boxes. Many made fishing seines and nets for catching animals in the chase.

Highly Civilized. — I grew very fond of the Bakuba and it was reciprocated. They were the finest looking race I had seen in Africa, dignified, graceful, courageous, honest, with an open, smiling countenance and really hospitable. Their knowledge of weaving, embroidering, wood carving and smelting was the highest in equatorial Africa.

The Origin of the Bakuba. — From all the information I can gather, they migrated from the far north, crossed rivers and settled on the high table land. And with many expeditions fought and conquered the surrounding tribes.



Tradition says their first people, man and woman, were let down from the skies by a rope, from which they untied themselves and the rope was drawn up. These people are conservative and very proud. There are about 10,000 Bakuba in the capital, and it will take many journeys before we can estimate how many there are in the whole tribe. Their language is full, highly inflected and musical.

Children of Nature. — I spent hours at King Lukenga's and other villages playing with the little folks and trying to find out what they were thinking about. The kids had a name for the sun and moon, names for very brilliant and prominent stars and ordinary ones. The sun was the father of the heavens, the moon was his wife, and the stars were their children. The sun after going down was paddled around in a very large canoe on the great water by men who were more than

human and started in the skies again. They knew that a year was divided into general seasons, the rainy (eight moons), the dry (four moons).

They knew the names of all the lakes, rivers and small streams. Roots that were good for medicine or to eat they knew. Flowers and ferns were called by name. The names of all the many varieties of trees, birds and the animals they knew.

Editor's Note: The world the Kuba lived in was about to change. King Leopold II of Belgium had taken control of the Congo and promised to develop it for philanthropic purposes to help the local people. He named it "Congo Free State," to make it seem as if it was an independent country. But, the Congo state pitted tribes against one another for profit. John Dunlop had just invented the inflatable rubber tire in 1887 and rubber suddenly became valuable.

King Leopold forced the Africans in the Congo to produce ivory and rubber, using both Belgian troops and tribes the Belgians allied with to violently enforce production. Congolese were forced into inhumane working conditions, similar to slavery, and massacres were carried out. The January 6, 1900, edition of the Los Angeles Herald newspaper details reports of massacres by the Zappo Zaps tribe, who the Belgians had paid to be their allies. The massacres were witnessed by Sheppard and another Presbyterian missionary, Mr. Vass:

Mr. Vass states that tidings of raiding by the Zappo Zaps in the Bena Kamba country having reached them and the work of the missionaries being threatened, the Reverend W.H. Sheppard was sent to make an investigation. He went to the Zappo Zaps camp and found that 14 villages have been destroyed by fire and plundered. He saw 47 bodies lying around the camp. From three bodies the flash had been carved.

The chief said that 80 or 90 have been killed and five persons eaten by his people. Mr. Sheppard saw 81 right hands cut off and trying over a slow fire, in order to be afterward taken back to the state officers. Sixty women prisoners were confined in a pen and 16 men had already been sent away as prisoners.

It is said the raid was ordered because the people could not pay the exorbitant tribute demanded by the state. The missionaries state that they reported the matter to the proper officials and demanded the withdrawal of the troops and that the chief instituted a counter persecution on account of the charges made. The missionaries further say the Zappo Zaps are a tribe kept by the state for its protection. They are sent out to collect rubber, ivory, slaves and goats as tribute from the people, and can then plunder, burn and kill for their own amusement and gain.

The missionaries say they're collecting evidence about the massacre ... Mr. Vass says:

"The whole country is pillaged and not a village left standing. The people are in the bush. In a radius of about 75 miles, there are probably over 50,000 people sleeping in the bush unsheltered, and we are in the midst of a rainy season. The state is a terror to everyone."

Editor's Note: Now, six years after Sheppard had first visited the Kuba, the Belgians had found and looted the capital. The Kuba people rose up in revolt against the rubber terror. They burned trading posts and a mission station; about 180 of them were shot dead by Congo state troops.

On January 1, 1908, the Kasai Herald, a newsletter published by the American Presbyterian Congo Mission, ran an article by Sheppard, "From the Bakuba Country." Here is a passage from his article describing the changes to the Kuba Kingdom:

These great stalwart men and women, who have from time immemorial been free, cultivating large farms of Indian corn, peas, tobacco, potatoes, trapping elephants for their ivory tusks and leopards for their skins, who have always had their own king and a government not to be despised, officers of the law established in every town of the kingdom, these magnificent people, perhaps about 400,000 in number, have entered a new chapter in the history of their tribe. Only a few years ago, travelers through this country found them living in large homes, having from one to four rooms in each house, loving and living happily with their Wives and children, one of the most prosperous and intelligent of all the African tribes.

But within these last three years how changed they are! Their farms are growing up in weeds and jungle, their king is practically a slave, their houses now are mostly only half-built single rooms and are much neglected. The streets of their towns are not clean and well-swept as they once were. Even their children cry for bread.

Why this change? You have it in a few words. There are armed sentries of chartered trading companies who force the men and women to spend most of their days and nights in the forests making rubber, and the price they receive is so meager that they cannot live upon it.

Editor's Note: After Sheppard's article came out, a British government official went to the Congo to investigate. He witnessed the horrors of the rubber trade firsthand and gave an account in front of British Parliament. This caused an international outcry and eventually led to the end of Belgium's worst abuses in the Congo. However, Belgium continued to exploit the region's gold, copper and diamonds, and Congo would not win independence until 1960.

The Kuba Kingdom never truly recovered, but the Kuba still exist. The current king, Kot-a-Mbweeky III, has been on the throne since 1969. Sheppard returned to the United States and traveled widely, speaking about the horrors of colonialism and the art of the Kuba. He served as pastor of Grace Presbyterian Church in Louisville, Kentucky, until he died in 1927.

Quiz

1 Which were the effects of colonialism in the Congo?

1. *Forced native labor harvested rubber and other resources.*
2. *The technological innovation of blacksmithing was introduced.*
3. *Native tribes were pitted against each other for the benefit of Europeans.*
4. *Tribes like the Bakuba migrated further south to escape colonialism.*

- (A) 1 and 2
- (B) 3 and 4
- (C) 2 and 3
- (D) 1 and 3

2 The author uses a reverent tone while speaking of the Bakuba.

Which selection from the article BEST reflects that tone?

- (A) Soon two stalwart Bakuba with their red kilts on and feathers in their hats appeared before my house and announced their readiness to accompany me before King Lukenga.
- (B) Around each house is a court and a high fence made of heavy matting of palm leaves, and around each block there is also a high fence, so you enter these homes by the many gates.
- (C) They were the finest looking race I had seen in Africa, dignified, graceful, courageous, honest, with an open, smiling countenance and really hospitable.
- (D) There are about 10,000 Bakuba in the capital, and it will take many journeys before we can estimate how many there are in the whole tribe.

3 How did King Leopold affect the Congo?

- (A) Belgium sustained Congo colonies by funding tribal fighting and harvesting rubber.
- (B) Belgium had help from the powerful British military to conquer the people of the Congo.
- (C) The tribes of the Congo lacked leaders and could not oppose colonization.
- (D) The concept of democracy and self-government was introduced to the Congo.

4 Read the sentence from the article.

As the drums beat and the harps played the king's sons entered the square and danced one after the other single-handed, brandishing their big knives in the air.

What does the verb "brandishing" convey in the sentence?

- (A) that the king's sons were threatening the visitors
- (B) that the king's sons were displaying their power
- (C) that the king's sons were showing their respect to the people
- (D) that the king's sons were following traditional customs

5 Why is William Henry Sheppard's account of colonialism in the Congo important to an understanding of the European conquest of Africa?

- (A) As a clerk for King Leopold II, Sheppard's account is an accurate perspective of the colonial goal of Belgium.
- (B) As a native of Kuba, Sheppard is able to describe the changes brought by colonization over his lifetime.
- (C) As a military advisor for the Kingdom of Kuba, Sheppard's account details the Bakuba people's resistance to colonization.
- (D) As a foreigner to Kuba, Sheppard's account gives an outside perspective of the kingdom before and after colonization.

6 The author mostly uses a positive tone.

In which of the following sentences from the article does the author use a more somber tone to emphasize a point?

- (A) When the king will deliver a message to the whole village or part of it, these chiefs are sent for and during the early evenings they ring their iron handbells and call out in a loud voice the message in five minutes.
- (B) The sun after going down was paddled around in a very large canoe on the great water by men who were more than human and started in the skies again.
- (C) The missionaries state that they reported the matter to the proper officials and demanded the withdrawal of the troops and that the chief instituted a counter persecution on account of the charges made.
- (D) Their farms are growing up in weeds and jungle, their king is practically a slave, their houses now are mostly only half-built single rooms and are much neglected.

7 Which excerpt from the article BEST reflects how William Henry Sheppard felt about the Bakuba people?

- (A) "The king arose from his throne of ivory, stretched forth his hand and greeted me with these words, "Wyni" (You have come). I bowed low, clapped my hands in front of me, and answered, "Ndini, Nyimi" (I have come, king)."
- (B) "They migrated from the far north, crossed rivers, and fought and conquered the surrounding tribes."
- (C) "The armed guards force the men and women to spend most of their days and nights in the forests making rubber, and the price they receive is so meager that they cannot live upon it."
- (D) "They were dignified, graceful, courageous, honest. Their knowledge of weaving, embroidering, wood carving and smelting was the highest in equatorial Africa."

8 Read the following quote from Mr. Vass.

"The whole country is pillaged and not a village left standing. The people are in the bush. In a radius of about 75 miles, there are probably over 50,000 people sleeping in the bush unsheltered, and we are in the midst of a rainy season. The state is a terror to everyone."

Why does the author include this quote in the article?

- (A) to show the contrast between the Congo in the time prior to the rubber trade and to the period after Belgian rule
- (B) to show the negative impact of Belgian colonization and the positive impact of missionary work in the Congo
- (C) to show the impact of the rubber trade on the Congo and to explain the Belgian connection to its effect on the Congo
- (D) to show the devastating impact that the Belgian government had on the Congo and to clarify how the news of these events came to light