



Small village shop on the lower course of the Luangwa

PEOPLE

IN THE LUANGWA VALLEY

Various ethnic groups have settled in the Luangwa Valley and the adjacent mountain regions for centuries. Most of them belong to the Bantu group, who, depending on which historical source you use, migrated south from the Congo Basin, crossed the Muchinga escarpment and settled in the Luangwa Valley at the end of the 1st millennium and in the 14th century. The people lived in a highly decentralised manner and in many places could not be clearly assigned to an ethnic group. They considered themselves part of their own blood-related clans rather than members of the chief in whose catchment area they lived. Widely scattered, mostly small settlements were typical of this traditional people who lived from hunting.

In the second half of the 19th century, there was a strong centralisation of the

communities and the construction of large, barricaded villages. Since the middle of the 19th century, the Kunda, Nsenga, Chewa and Bisa tribes have been in direct trade with the Swahili-Arabic slave and ivory traders on the east coast of Africa. Those who were not personally involved in the conspiracy were subjugated or wiped out, such as the Tumbuka. By monopolizing trade relations, the chiefs increased their power and, with the help of their trading partners' weapons, were better able to resist raids by hostile neighbouring tribes such as the Ngoni. In return, they served the Arabs as reliable suppliers of ivory. The escalating slave trade and mutual plunder only furthered the ethnic division. When the British finally took power and banned the slave and ivory trade, the settlements temporarily became somewhat fragmented again. Nevertheless, the chiefs were able to maintain their strong position because they now offered themselves as partners to the British. There were such cases as in Nyalugwe, where an insignificant trader was appointed chief under the new colonial rulers, although he had only distinguished himself by not fleeing from the

British mediators. Thus, the history of social coexistence in the Luangwa Valley, even more than in the highlands, is shaped by chance, power games, tribute obligations, rivalries, resistance to attacks and playing off against each other. What unites the peoples of the valley is a strong, traditional bond with their ancestors, an adherence to magic and secret necromancy and an unshakable belief in the power of traditional medicine.

The greatest ancestral mythology was brought with them by the **Bemba**, who migrated here from the Katanga region; they consider themselves direct descendants of the historical kingdoms of Luba and Lunda and saw this as their authority as the dominant culture. Wherever the Bemba appeared, they quickly subjugated the local population and forced them to retreat to inhospitable areas, for example in the Kilimanjaro region. The Bisa, for example, lived in swamp and valley regions. Thanks to their combative and wild demeanour, the Bemba conquered the monopoly on salt mining sites and soon became the ruling class in the country. Their language, ChiBemba, quickly became the main language due to this dominance and included numerous dialects, such as ChiWiza. The Bemba also led their subjects in religious terms; the Bemba chief Chitimukulu has since then always been the religious and secular ruler and representative of the ancestors for the entire ethnic pluralism and the numerous subgroups in the so-called 'Bemba Empire'. Subjugated peoples in the Luangwa Valley were subjected to tribute and were also subjected to regular raids. It was only with the arrival of the British that the status-conscious Bemba were forced to make a lasting peace.

We have already mentioned the **Bisa**. They counted themselves among the members of the Bemba Empire without enjoying the high social and economic status of the Bemba, who had pushed them into inhospitable areas. Today, the Bisa live mainly in the Bangweulu swamps and in the middle part of the Luangwa Valley, which is rich in game, especially in the Nabwalya corridor between the South and North Luangwa National Parks, and in the

Kambwiri-Mwanya-Chitungulu area, where they have been fighting for supremacy with the Chewa for decades. The Bisa are considered to be exceptionally talented hunters and indomitable traditionalists, but at the same time very musical, somewhat rebellious and rather resistant to education. There are countless reports from the British colonial period that describe the problematic relationship between the nature conservation authorities and Chief Nabwalya and his subjects. The Chewa, Senga and Kunda still attribute obscure abilities and uncanny powers to them. The Bisa are said to be able to send lightning bolts in revenge that can kill a person. They are also more open to Islam than their predominantly Christian neighbours. Their language is a dialect of the ChiBemba, called ChiWiza.

Like the other Bantu ethnic groups, the **Chewa** from the legendary Luba kingdom in the southern Congo Basin also penetrated into new settlement areas and successfully spread from eastern Zambia through Malawi to northern



The traders at the petrol stations in Mpika occasionally offer something very special: salt cones from the Chibwa swamp. A special type of grass grows there from which salt can be extracted. The grass is cut, dried and then burned. The ash containing the salt is then intensively moistened. The brine is then heated until the water has evaporated and a hard lump of salt remains. This technique is only practised in the Chibwa swamp in the Luitikila valley, which can be reached via the chief's palace near the village of Luchembe.



A beauty of the Bisa people

Mozambique and Zimbabwe (they founded the Great Kingdom of Maravi). Their language ChiChewa is called ChiNyanja in Zambia and is the southern counterpart to ChiBemba, as it dominates the region and is also spoken by the Kunda and Senga.

BANDA, PHIRI AND MWALE — NAMES REVEAL ETHNIC ORIGIN

Typical surnames that can be heard in eastern Zambia and the Luangwa Valley include Banda, Phiri, Mwale and Chulu. They come from the ChiChewa language group (a Zulu, on the other hand, is a member of the Ngoni). The hardworking Chewa are successful farmers, but are also characterised by a rich culture and deep religiosity with expressive rituals, mask dances and animistic secret societies. Chief Kalonga Gawa Undi, the supreme chief of all Chewa, including the members of this tribe who live in neighbouring countries such as Malawi, Zimbabwe and Mozambique, lives in the Mkaika area near Katete.

The **Kunda** group is considered an early mixture of Chewa and Nsenga (see p. 187); their roots could even go back to the Ushi from the swamps along the Chambeshi Desert. The Kunda used to live in parts of the Luangwa Valley, but were expelled by the Bisa. Since then, the river has divided the settlement areas: the west bank is inhabited by the Bisa, the east bank by the Kunda (with one exception: Mwanya, the Bisa also live on the east bank). The Kunda also consider themselves descendants of the Luba kingdom. Their genealogy goes back to Chief Mambwe, the son of a cruel Luba despot who had his own sons killed. They claim that only Mambwe survived the massacre and later led his people into exile. In the Luangwa Valley, the Kunda are said to have made a name for themselves as cunning arms and slave traders and fearless elephant hunters. They entered into trade relations with the Arabs and Portuguese at an early stage. They were also known as the largest distillers (*kachazu*) in the country. Kate Morris, whose husband was stationed at Chilongozi Camp

from 1958, wrote in her memoirs about the Kunda custom of spending full moon nights in alcohol binges for days on end. The administrator E. H. Lane-Poole, also in colonial service, compared the Kunda to foreign legionaries of the papal Swiss Guard and reported that they always offered their services as hunters, trackers, porters or soldiers to whoever paid them the best. He also says that in his time the Kunda still had a special facial tattoo with three black spots under their eyes.

Today the Kunda settlement area extends over the strip of land between Msoro Mission and Nsefu Sector, precisely those regions that are most influenced by tourism, where people can benefit most from the jobs and infrastructure measures associated with it. The friendly Kunda can be found in permanent employment in most tourist camps. They speak ChiNyanja and are under the jurisdiction of six

different Kunda chiefs in the valley: Chief Nsefu, Chief Kakumbi, Chief Malama, Chief Msoro, Chief Mnkhangya and Chief Jumbe. Chief Nsefu considers himself as the head of all Kunda.

In the south, as direct neighbours of the Kunda, are the chiefdoms of the **Nsenga**, who live between Sandwe and the mouth of the Luangwa and in the district towns of Nyimba and Petauke. In the past, the Nsenga villages were fenced in with high palisades to protect the inhabitants from the frequent invasions of the Ngoni and Bemba. For the same reason, the Pelele, a lip stake that was common among women and girls, was also widespread (see p. 189). Traditionally, the Nsenga are farmers, fishermen and hunters and they are very skilled in making raffia mats and basketry. Chief Nyalugwe, Chief Sandwe and Chief Ndake report to the High Chief Kalindawalo M'ndikula in Merwe near Petauke.

A painted Chewa house





The traditional basket fishing is women's work

The small **Ambo** group also inhabits the poorly accessible and underdeveloped region of the southern Luangwa Valley in an area between the South Luangwa National Park and the mouth of the Lunsemfwa. Only 3,000 to 4,000 members of this tribe are still under the command of the chiefs Mwape, Mboshya, Chisomo and Mboroma and the paramount chief Luwembe. They speak ChiUmba, a ChiLala-ChiWiza dialect, and maintain a matrilineal descent pattern. Today they are so closely intermingled with the Nsenga that they are often referred to as the Nsenga-Ambo tribe.

The densely populated **Tumbuka** area extends near Lundazi between Lake Malawi and the Luangwa Valley. These hardworking farmers tend to live in urban centers and are also successful cattle breeders due to their proximity to the Ngoni. The low-lying, hot Luangwa valley with its barren wetlands does not attract them; their settlements with their well-kept, often painted brick houses can therefore only be found on the higher plateaus.

It is a source of much confusion that a tribe called the **Senga** also lives in the northern

Luangwa Valley. According to historical sources, the Nsenga and the Senga have a common past; until the 18th century, part of the Nsenga migrated north along the Luangwa and settled with the Tumbuka. Over time, both groups mixed so well with their respective neighbours that they are now considered to be different ethnic groups and are also distinguished by name. The Senga are subordinate to the high chief Kambombo, whose rank is passed on in patrilineal descent from paternal uncle to nephew. Their language, ChiSenga, is a ChiNyanja dialect with strong Bisa and Tumbuka influences. Among the Senga, many young men in particular try to find work in the Copperbelt mines or in Lusaka.

The difficulty of clearly distinguishing between Nsenga, Ambo, Senga and Tumbuka illustrates how much more the people of the Luangwa Valley feel a sense of belonging to their consanguineous clans than to their chiefdoms.

The **Ngoni** are a people who did not settle in the Luangwa lowlands, but in the southern border highlands between Katete and Chipata.

Originally from South Africa, the Ngoni crossed the Zambezi in the 1830s in search of new settlement areas and crossed eastern Zambia into East Africa. Under their ruler Mpezeni, some of them returned to the fertile highlands between Luangwa and Zambezi in the 1860s and overturned the political order. Where previously peace-loving Chewa and Nsenga had lived in small farming communities, these warlike cattle breeders now made themselves at home, subjugated everyone else and carried out regular raids and hunts that spread much fear and terror. Only a few Europeans, such as Carl Wiese, dared to confront the notorious Ngoni before the BSAC destroyed their kingdom in 1898 and incorporated it into British territory.

Today, Mambwe and Chama are the most important administrative centres in the valley. The highest population density is in the buffer zones on the periphery of the national parks, in the GMAs Sandwe, Lupande, Munyamadzi, Lumimba, Musalangu, Mukungule and Chisomo.

The last census in 2000 showed 223,000 inhabitants. 75,000 people lived in the Chama district in the northern valley area; in the valley region of the Lundazi district 35,000 and in the adjacent Mambwe district (Kunda land) 47,000. A further 46,000 inhabitants were added in the Msanzala region of the Petauke district and a further 20,000 in the chiefdoms of Nyalugwe, Luwembe and Mwape together. The total population in the Luangwa Valley is now probably well over a quarter of a million.

The Luangwa Valley continues to lag behind in terms of development in Zambia. Life expectancy here is among the lowest in the country; at the same time, illiteracy and poverty rates are among the highest in Zambia.



Water carrier of the Senga people 1931, Schomburgk's Expedition (SLUB Dresden, p. 234)

THE PELELE OR CHINDANDA

THE FEMALE LIP STAKE

Decorative scars, filed teeth and piercing individual body parts are widespread traditions in Africa. In the past, women in Central Africa drilled holes through their upper lips and inserted round pieces of wood or metal plates. David Livingstone and Carl Wiese reported on this, and in 1931 Hans Schomburgk met the chief Chama in the Luangwa Valley, who told him about it. Sometimes this lip stake was described as an ornament; other times it was said that the women and girls originally stuck the stake through their upper and lower lips to look offensive and to avoid slave hunters. O. C. Rawson, for example, reported in his memoirs of the cattle treks through the Luangwa Valley in 1904 that the Nsenga drilled such holes in their daughters' lips everywhere and stretched them with increasingly larger wooden disks. Someone explained to him that the Nsenga were so often exposed to enemy raids that they hoped to spare their wives and daughters by mutilating them. Such a plug was initially only the size of a drinking straw and was gradually enlarged to the size of a coin. This type of lip piercing was probably used by the Makonde, Nsenga and Yao.

In 2007, we ourselves occasionally encountered older women with a similar plug in their upper lip in remote villages in northern Mozambique along the Lugenda River on the southern edge of the Niassa Game Reserve. None of the younger women wore such a "pelele".