THE TENACITY OF INDIGENOUS CULTURE
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The following account of the elements of indigenous culture that are now functioning in the tribal life of the Ovimbundu of Angola, is based on observations made during the Frederick H. Rawson-Field Museum Expedition of 1929-30.

The Ovimbundu (People of the Fog) whose name perhaps refers to the mists of the Benguela Highlands, occupy extensive regions, where the plateau in places attains a height of 5000 feet. The heat of the tropics has therefore been modified by altitude, and since the plateau arrests moisture from the northeast winds, the rainfall of the wet season is ample in the period September to April.

Cultivation of maize, to an extent far exceeding that which is usual in forest clearings, has been made possible by the open nature of the country, most of which is also favorable for the raising of cattle. Contacts with south Angola, where the Vakuyanyama own large herds of long-horned cattle, have resulted in an extension of this pastoral culture to the Ovimbundu, in modified degree.

In addition to an agricultural system which is economically basic, and a pastoral culture that is supplementary, hunting and collecting of wild vegetable products are important activities. But the long distance caravan trade for which the Ovimbundu were once famous through the breadth of Africa has disappeared.

Following the early coastal exploration of Diogo Cão and Bartholomew Diaz,1 the Portuguese gradually established themselves on the littoral, where Paolo Diaz founded Loanda in 1576. In part by trade, but largely in connection with punitive expeditions the Portuguese penetrated the interior, where they carried on a desultory warfare with the predatory Jaggas who held Andrew Battell in captivity.2 And to Battell’s account, which was recorded by Samuel Purchase, ethnologists are indebted for a knowledge of the anthropological background of northern Angola about the year 1600.

By 1645 the Portuguese had reached Bailundu, and Caconda in

the west-central region was established in 1682. Mossamedes was founded about a century later, and from this site as a base expeditions set out to explore the Cunene. Meanwhile, Portuguese enterprise along the River Congo had resulted in the establishment of catholic missions and powerful political liaisons with native chiefs. The history of the Portuguese in Angola is intimately connected with the dominance of the Kingdom of Kongo and later the establishment of the rival Kingdom of Lunda.

European contacts, therefore, have extended over three centuries, and the object of this article is to point out the nature of the cultural traits of the Ovimbundu, that have survived the foreign impact and are still functioning. These elements of indigenous culture have persisted despite a somewhat direct form of administration, exacting labor laws, and an encouragement of European language, dress, and the use of imported articles to the detriment of native products.

The most important surviving traits of native culture may be conveniently summarized under the headings of economic life, social life, language, and religion. But such divisions, though convenient for ethnologists, have no actual counterparts in tribal life. Native thought processes, as I will endeavor to illustrate, connect the various activities so intimately that European categories are misleading.

When considering the economic life of the Ovimbundu, the main points to keep in mind are division of labor according to age, sex, and natural aptitude. The occurrence of ritual in connection with occupation, and the effects of contact between the indigenous and the European systems of trade and handicraft, are also important.

Fundamental to economic life is an extensive nature lore which has given a large vocabulary of Umbundu words describing all forms of plant and animal life in great detail. Timbers are carefully distinguished and the qualities of each are known; thus there are woods suitable for small carvings of figurines, ornamental staffs, and clubs. The woods most adapted for bow-staves are known. Certain tim-

bers make the best charcoal, and other woods are said to be resistant to termites.

Birds are particularly well known, and from early years boys shoot them with blunt wooden arrows. Three birds are of ritual significance. *Esutí* flies by night and catches spirits of the dead, so making them die a second death, after which they no longer influence the lives of the living. *Onjinbi* is also a nocturnal bird, respected because it gives warning of death by a peculiar cry. *Onduza* is not
shot unless the feathers are required for decorating a king or a medicine-man. Bird cries are translated into Umbundu in such a way as to show that the Ovimbundu regard birds as a community having the thoughts and feelings of human beings.

The occupation of hunting provides an apt example of the survival of ritual connected with the training and daily work of ukongo, the professional hunter. After a novitiate of two years under the instruction of a hunter, a candidate is inaugurated at a feast, where a series of dances is given by hunters only. During life a hunter uses a special set of cooking pots. He anoints the bows of his ancestors with maize beer and palm oil the night before setting out. He may not have relations with his wife the night before the hunt, and immediately before starting he bathes his eyes with a preparation of herbs which give keen vision. At death a hunter is buried in a rock tomb at the crest of a hill. Muzzle-loading guns may be seen, but they are not numerous since the Portuguese have a prohibition against use of powder by natives. Therefore, the bow and arrow is the chief weapon, and with the survival of these implements has persisted the ritual with which they were anciently associated. In addition to the activities of the professional hunter there is a communal hunt in which women and children may take part by burning the grass and driving game, but no ritual is associated with this occupation.

Fishing has a division of labor, since various methods are thought to be suitable for women only, while other procedures are followed by men. Women drag laskets against the current and use poison when the streams are shallow. Men fish with a baited bark line, and seek good luck by chanting, "O fish come and taste the good thing. Do not send the little fish to spoil the good thing. But come and take this good thing with all your strength." Cohabitation of the sexes the night before fishing is said to make the fish stay together at the bottom of the river.

In connection with agriculture no ritual was discovered. Women cultivate with short-handled hoes after the ground has been cleared by men, and among the chief crops are maize, beans, sweet potatoes, and several kinds of manioc. Open highland country has favored the development of large fields that supply crops, among which maize and beans are the most useful for domestic consumption, trade with Portuguese stores, and the payment of taxes.

The chief domestic animals are cattle, sheep, pigs, goats, and
poultry. But the Ovimbundu have principally a vegetable diet, as they have no system of animal husbandry which breeds animals so as to give a supply of meat and milk. In some districts cows are milked, but this is due to Portuguese influence. Cattle are not killed for food, but oxen are used as payment for fines, as a criterion of wealth, as wedding gifts, and for sacrifice at funeral feasts. Horns of beasts so sacrificed are mounted on poles over graves, and in event of a king’s death, the body is wrapped in ox-hide, while mourners wear bracelets of the same material. Cattle are herded by men, never by women, and in all important points the Ovimbundu follow the usages of a typical, southwest African, pastoral culture, except in the avoidance of milk. Some Portuguese use oxen for riding purposes, but I have seen only one Ocimbundu mounted in this way.

Decline of the long-distance caravan trade in quest of slaves and ivory has diminished the production of tobacco and beeswax. Tobacco is still cultivated by women who plant out the seedlings on mounds in cornfields, and women, as well as men, smoke tobacco. But the rolls and hanks of tobacco are now kept for personal use. Hives made from cylinders of bark are placed in trees. Honey is eaten with manioc and used in making one kind of maize beer, but the balls of wax, which used to be of standard exchange value, are now taken to traders’ stores, sold there, and pounded into large rectangular cakes for export.

With disappearance of the caravan trade has lapsed the custom of bringing out the preserved head of a king, wrapped in ox-hide, and consulting it with regard to the journey. But the figurines used by a medicine-man for divining the right path are still obtainable. A figure of this kind represents a woman wearing a tuft of black feathers on her head, and the name njève survives. Large horns of antelope were formerly filled with a mixture of fat and charcoal which gave off fumes when the horns were placed upright near camp fires. The fumes were believed to protect a caravan against depredations of thieves and lions. Horns of this kind were obtained at Bailundu, which was at one time an important starting point of caravans. Among older men who were acquainted with the caravan trade, and among present day hunters, names of many stars are well known.

In industrial life, the upright loom worked by men is rare, but cotton spinning to provide thread for repairing imported cloth may
be observed. Only men make mats, and for each type of mat specialists have to be found. Only women weave baskets, in which craft many are expert, especially in the making of dyes of soft tone from vegetable sources. But crude dyes are now imported, and even old typewriter ribbons are made to yield coloring matter.

Women are the potters, but no ritual was recorded, except an act of consecrating the clay pit with the blood of a chicken killed by a medicine-man. The surface of a rock, which is used as a base for pounding corn, is consecrated in the same way.

Only males are wood carvers, and these specialize in making domestic utensils, figurines, or drums. In house building, division of labor may be observed. Men gather the wood and trim the poles. In fact males are responsible for all stages of the work, including the digging of foundations, plastering walls, and laying the thatch; but women carry water to the clay pit where children puddle the clay with their feet.

Smelting of iron was not observed, though the ancient sites of mining were pointed out. Use of imported hoe blades and knives militates against the native industry, but many blacksmiths are still to be seen melting and forging scrap iron into spear and arrow heads, hoes, knives and even saw blades in imitation of European examples. Ancient ritual, which is still associated with the blacksmith's craft in many Negro tribes, is observed among the Ovimbundu today. After serving an apprenticeship of two years an inaugural ceremony is arranged. The candidate stands on the stone anvil. The master blacksmith, who has made a set of tools for his pupil, completes the large hammer at this ceremony. Then, while the hammer is hot it is thrust into the belly of a dog. Other animals are killed and the blood is sprinkled on the tools with which the novice must never part. The novice steps from the anvil, takes a new name, and begins work independently as a master blacksmith.

The administrative organization of the Ovimbundu consists now, as formerly, of a number of local units each ruled by an osoma, or king, who occupies the onibala, a name given to the capital village. In each of these main units is a number of villages each ruled by a village headman called sekulu, whose decisions are subject to the king's veto. But Portuguese authority is supreme, and the powers of the sekulu and the osoma are greatly curtailed. According to my interpreter men who have submitted their litigation to the village headman appeal to the king if dissatisfied with the decision of the
village chief. But if the king also makes an unfavorable decision the disappointed litigant turns to Portuguese authority. In earlier times village headmen and kings had complete jurisdiction, and the sentences passed on adulterers, murderers, and thieves were carried out by a specially appointed messenger of the king.

Courtship, marriage, and divorce proceed without interference from European authority. Premarital friendships exist between boys and girls, who meet and spend the night at the house of one of the girls. But sexual intercourse is forbidden and pregnancy is a disgrace. A girl calls her young male companion *ombiasi*, and he gives her the same name. A boy who desires a certain girl offers small presents to her parents; these gifts are tokens only, but before the marriage more valuable presents are made.

The ritual of marriage is too detailed to follow here, but one of the most important acts is the entry of three elderly women into the new home. Here they lay the hearth stones and for three days supervise the cooking; the hands of the young bride are guided even in such small operations as stirring the vegetable mush. The demand for virginity in a bride is not so insistent as it used to be, but in earlier times a husband who mistrusted his bride's virginity bored a hole in her loin cloth with a firestick and sent her back to her parents. The separation was not necessarily permanent, and the girl usually returned to her husband bringing some part of the gifts, which were returned as a compensation. The evidence indicates that the husband was well satisfied with this arrangement.

Divorce laws are more favorable to men than to women, since a man may divorce his wife for a great number of reasons, including too much scolding, bad cooking, incompetence in gardening, and barrenness. One of the grounds on which a woman may secure divorce is failure of the husband to provide necessary cloth, trinkets, and palm oil. Parents of a girl are anxious to avoid divorce, and reconciliation by family intervention is usual. But if divorce is arranged the final rite has to be performed in public in the presence of the *sekulu*. As an act of repudiation the husband slaps the back of his divorced wife, saying "It is finished."

Many prohibitions and injunctions relating to pregnancy and delivery were recorded, and the old usages pertaining to naming were found to function. Twins and posthumous children have distinguishing names. A child born after twins has a name meaning "to push," and the name of a sick child is changed to some ugly term
which is supposed to bring better health. A father changes his name at the birth of a first child, he becomes the father of so-and-so.

The Ovimbundu still preserve their kinship terms and a functioning system of relationship of the classificatory type. The term *mai* (mother) is applied to the mother's sisters who use the word *omolange* (my child) as a reciprocal. *Tate* describes a father and his brothers, who use the reciprocal *omolange*. Marriage of a man with a daughter of his mother's sister or of his father's brother is forbidden, since this would make the groom *ocinyama* (like an animal). The term *nawa* is given to all in-laws of the speakers own generation, while *udatembo* describes in-laws of the generation older and younger than the speaker. The enjoined marriage is one between children of a brother and a sister, and the most favored union for a man is marriage with the daughter of his mother's eldest brother, who is called *manu*. *Manu* not only provides daughters for marriage with his sister's sons, but he pays fines for delinquent children of his sister. In reciprocation *manu* can claim the services of his sister's children who may have to work to pay his debts. This pawning still functions.

The home is effective as an educational institution. Here children are taught not to steal, and the thieving hand is held for a moment in the steam of the cooking pot. Correct salutations are carefully taught. Spittle must be covered, and expectoration near the house of a king or headman is punishable by a fine. *Ohembi*, a liar, is despised; so also is a greedy man. *Ekandu* describes any act which is disagreeable to other people. To send a stranger on the wrong path is *ekandu*. Willfully causing pain to an animal is *ekandu*, and the same term is applied to fornication with a wife's sister. The term *ekandu*, judging from the examples given by natives, has a wide connotation.

Initiation rites are either decadent or defunct among the Ovimbundu, but a reinvasion of the circumcision ceremony with its accompanying seclusion and ritual, is taking place along a central marginal line, where the Ovimbundu are in contact with the Vanyemba, the Vangangella, and the Vachokue.

Music, games, singing, and dancing function as actively as in earlier years, though some of the songs and dances are known only to old people. But a village dance is the usual amusement, and in addition to this are ritual dances for performance at funerals. Special terms are applied to a leader of a chorus, to a principal dancer,
and to each expert player of a musical instrument. Men are the only performers on musical instruments, and a high degree of specialization is observed. Thus the player of the flat wooden drum is not a performer on the tubular drum, and possibly not more than two or three men in a village are regarded as capable performers on the well-known instrument consisting of metal keys on a sounding board.

The Umbundu language, although adulterated with Portuguese words in some localities, is remarkably well preserved, and the older
people take a pride in its preservation, for they correct linguistic errors of their children, and make careful explanations to a European who wishes to learn. Umbundu is typically Bantu in grammar and syntax, with high, middle, and low tones, and a few semantic words; these as the term implies depend on tone for meaning. Structure of a language, and not vocabulary, is a desirable basis for comparisons, but so far as vocabularies are reliable for comparative purposes, Umbundu approximates most closely to Ukuanyana. But one must remember that the Ovimbundu have, in their capacity as caravan traders, spread their vocabulary far and wide. I am not satisfied that sufficient linguistic data are available for detailed comparative study of Umbundu with all other languages of Angola, but in this connection the works of P. H. Brincker, F. and W. Jaspert. C. Meinhofer, Sir H. H. Johnston, and A. Johnson are useful.

Umbundu is rich in folklore stories with a great preponderance of the humorous type of tale describing the adventures of animals. Some of the stories are explanatory, as for example, "Why the Bat Flies at Night," and others are didactic, with an obvious moral depreciating greed, cowardice, and low cunning, while enjoining the opposites of these traits. But historical mythology plays a small part in the spoken literature and has little, if any, influence in the lives of the people.

Riddles are asked, and proverbs are frequently quoted in an opposite way. Thus, when a garrulous man continually boasts, someone says "Hot water will not burn a house," and the probable detection of crime is referred to by saying "You cannot wrap a buck's head in a cloth, the horns will stick out." Among commoners, inheritance, descent, and succession usually follow the female line, but in the royal family kingship descends to the oldest son of the principal wife. If this youth is foolish another son is elected, yet the stupid man may succeed through influence; then people say "A turtle cannot climb on a tree stump, someone has to put it there."

In religious belief Suku, Nyambe, and Kalunga are exalted be-

8Die Völkerstämme Mittel Angolas. Frankfurt, 1930.
ings and creators, but far away and otiose, not demanding homage or sacrifice. On the contrary the *olosande* (good spirits) and the *olondele* (bad spirits) are ever present, interfering with the living for good or evil, demanding sacrifice, and affecting their relatives by close daily contacts.

Examination of the divination basket of a medicine-man (*ocimbanda*) and a record of his auguries show that almost every object is symbolical of the activity of a disembodied spirit. For example sickness is said to be due to the spirit of a man who died on a journey, or the spirit of a deceased pregnant woman is mentioned as a disturbing influence. Almost invariably the explanation centers in one of the *olosande* or the *olondele*.

If a boy of nervous temperament visits an *ocimbanda* the contents of the divination basket are shaken, and the probable diagnosis is, that a spirit who used to be *ocimbanda* wishes the patient to become a medicine-man. Medicine-men are specialized, thus *ocimbanda opulía* is the medicine-man of the rain, and others devote themselves entirely to the study of herbs and their therapeutic uses. A medicine-man has many specific duties, among the most important of which are ceremonial washing of the king or village headman when epidemics of sickness occur, creating new fire under similar circumstances, and splashing the walls of new houses with the blood of sacrificed animals when a new village is built.

The old type of poison ordeal is forbidden by European law, but poison is administered to chickens supplied by two suspects, and he whose chicken dies is regarded as guilty. Another surviving test is the preparation of two potatoes, one poisoned, the other innocuous. The two suspects take these from the medicine-man, saying, "If I am guilty this potato will be poison for me, but if I am not guilty, this potato will be food for me." The poison is of a mild kind which produces internal pains and fear, so leading to a confession.

From among the institutions and beliefs that function as vitalizing forces in tribal life there is a difficulty in selecting some one trait which is preëminent. So far as a kingdom is concerned, government, law, and religion are focussed in the sacred person of the *osoma*. The death of a king is not announced, he "has a cold in the head," but after seven days the demise is publicly stated. By this time the rite of severing the king's head by friction of a rope has been accomplished; then follow the mourning rites, including
FINISHED WET POTS WITH INCISED DESIGNS
GRAVE WITH COFFIN POLE AND BASKETS
Ovimbundu, Angola
wrapping the body in ox-hide, and preservation of the head in the same material.

But so far as tribal organization is concerned the village unit is almost as important as the king himself, and within the village the council house onjango is a focal point of social life. Here village councils are held under the direction of the sekulu, and here each evening all men gather to eat the meals which are brought by their wives. In the onjango gather young boys, who sit in enforced silence listening to the conversation of their elders, and so by suggestion and unconscious absorption the juniors acquire definite mental attitudes toward Europeans, toward native law, trade, and social relations within and without the village unit.

If desiring to name some monism, which more than any other belief or institution integrates thought and practice, I would emphasize the relationship between the sacred and the profane, with the medicine-man as an intermediary. No rites, from the obsequies of a king down to the opening of a pit for potter's clay, are able to function without the services of ocimbanda. To-day some of the Ovimbundu may smile at the quaint dress and antics of the medicine-man, but for the great majority he is the pivot of social life. And even in the family, where manu, the mother's brother functions prominently, ocimbanda is the one to kill the sacrificial chicken. He fills the hollow belly of his wooden effigy with a concoction, and with plugged nostrils feigns replies in a falsetto voice, so giving the impression of answers from the image.

The border-line between the sacred and the profane is recognized in various ways. A woman's belt is an ordinary item of clothing, but it may function magically if used in a certain way. A woman who is the mother of girls changes her belt for that of a mother of boys only. Then in future the mother of female children will give birth to boys, and vice versa.

Bows, mats, and staffs, are articles of everyday use until their owners are dead. But if these articles are deposited in the house of bows they become permanently sacred, and the focus of ritual acts.

Cowrie shells were normally a medium of exchange, but if made into a charm by a medicine-man they are worn to induce conception. The flesh of the python is an article of diet, but if the vertebrae of the reptile are removed and threaded to make necklaces, they are regarded as a cure for rheumatism. A piece from a termite hill is
merely earth, but a belated traveler may prolong daylight by placing a portion of this earth in the forked branch of a tree, while saying, "O sun wait for me a little while."

The consolidating effect of magical rites, simple or complex, public or private, is the warp of the social fabric, and through this warp the weft is woven in an intricate pattern. These threads of magical belief and ritual unite the institution of kingship, the organization of village communities, and the operation of law, religious belief, and economic processes of all kinds. In this way the social life becomes an intricate plexus which has well withstood the disintegrating impact of European culture.