



Strange Folk, These Ovimbundu

By John A. Menaugh

IN THE central highlands of Angola, a Portuguese possession on the west coast of Africa, dwell strange Negroes called Ovimbundu (People of the Fog), whose kings have as many as eleven wives each and whose commoners possess as many as four wives each; who until quite recently made domestic slaves, or pawns, of children whose maternal uncles had fallen into debt; who breed cattle to some extent for the purpose of paying fines and buying wives, but who rarely eat beef and never utilize cow's milk for food; who surround themselves with a veritable wall of taboos; who place their individual fates entirely in the hands of medicine men; who consider the meat of pythons and rats as highly edible and the insides of caterpillars as delicious for soup; and whose mouths fairly water at the mention of fried locusts.

Not an attractive people, at least from the social standpoint of civilized countries, but interesting to a marked degree to ethnologists. That is why Wilfred D. Hambly, assistant curator of African ethnology of the Field Museum of Natural History of Chicago, passed a year in the remote country of Angola, studying their tribal life, language, religion, and customs. It was from Mr. Hambly's recently issued volume, "The Ovimbundu of Angola," edited by the late Dr. Berthold Laufer, curator of anthropology of the museum, that the information contained in this article was taken.

Migrated from Southwest Congo

These People of the Fog, who, it is possible, get their name from the heavy morning mists that hang over the Benguela highlands in which they dwell, are believed to have originated in the southwest Congo and to have migrated to the Angola highlands some time before the Portuguese first entered West Africa in the latter part of the fifteenth century. Establishing their tribal villages in the highlands, which provided them with natural defenses, the Ovimbundu in early days were not entirely unlike the feudal lords of Europe of the middle ages. They were a warlike people, raiding far and wide for the purpose of seizing loot. Most highly prized of all spoils of war were the enemies they captured and enslaved, the foundation of their system of human bondage, which existed until a very recent date. The Ovimbundu penetrated far into the interior of the continent in their quest for slaves; sent expeditions, both warlike and in search of trade, far into the cattle country to the south, and, through hostile and peaceful contacts with other tribes, assimilated a wide variety of cultural traits. Thus it is today that the People of the Fog are similar in many respects to the Vakwanyama, who occupy the territory to the south; the Vachokue,

who dwell to the east; the Mussorongo, who live to the north, and other peoples even farther from the Benguela highlands.

The Ovimbundu, who are Bantu Negroes possibly resulting from a cross of Hamites and true Negroes, a hypothesis which, writes Mr. Hambly, would account for the two general types of these people, the light-colored, slim type, and the darker, more sturdy type, build their villages on the hillsides, the foot of a cliff often being a favorite site. Houses are made of poles with crosspieces lashed to them, the entire framework, except the roof, covered with clay to make fairly firm walls. For the roof a thatch of grass is employed to keep out the rain. Sometimes the walls are white-washed and ornamented with crude designs. The house of a king or chief is larger than that of a commoner. Some villages are surrounded by stout pales, ten feet or more in height, set in a roughly circular plan. Kings' households are protected by separate compounds, which usually contain, besides the private royal dwelling

Odd Customs of People of the Fog Revealed

provided with a separate sleeping room, a house and kitchen for each of the wives, a tomb for the burial of kings and their wives; a house for bows, mats, and tobacco pipes of dead kings; a house into which the king retires for meditation, and pens for pigs and chickens. In the village is the communal house where boys over four years of age and men gather to eat their food, which is prepared and sent by the women of the village. This communal house is called the *onjanjo* and is the place of assembly for the discussion of village affairs. There is no communal house for women, but in some villages there are common kraals for cattle.

Houses of the Ovimbundu are built by the men, every one of whom has knowledge of house construction. Women and children often carry the clay which is used in plastering the walls, but take no part in the actual building. As was the custom in the pioneer days in America, when frontier neighbors gathered from miles about to assist in a house-raising, the men of the Ovimbundu frequently help one another in the erection of homes, a generous reward of food and beer being passed about among the toilers at the completion of the task.

A Curious Custom of Changing Names

Family life within the house erected by the reciprocal methods described above is curious from the viewpoint of a citizen of a civilized land and certainly as full of complexities as the average of family life in America. Children are numerous in the Ovimbundu villages. Being relatively poor people, the Ovimbundu naturally have many children. The head of the family who is wealthy enough in cattle to purchase his full quota of wives generally is more abundantly blessed with offspring than his poorer neighbors, though even in the dingiest one-wife household laughter and wails of little black babies can be heard. The father and mother change their names when the first child is born, but there is no name-changing with subsequent births. If the firstborn dies the parents revert to their original names. Children may change their names when they reach the age of sixteen. There are numbers of other instances when this curious changing of names is resorted to by the Ovimbundu.

Parents share mutual responsibility for their children, who are instructed within the home in the simple village tasks. Girls are taught by their mothers the art of cookery, basket weaving, and the molding of clay into small images and pieces of pottery. Boys are allowed to shift for themselves somewhat, though at a very early age they begin aping their fathers, most of their games being based on the importance of shooting with the bow and arrow and hunting the game with which their region abounds. Both boys and girls, upon reaching a certain age which varies with their rapidity of development, are initiated into tribal life as evidence of their having reached the adult stage. The initiation ceremonies for the boys include a period of seclusion in camps, considerable harsh treatment on the part of their elders, and much feasting and dancing at the conclusion. Circumcision, which is prohibited by

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