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History of the female chiefs of the Shambyu tribe (Kavangoland)

Abstract

The Bantu tribes of Kavangoland have a matrilineal system of inheritance and succession, which allows female members of the royal clan to succeed to the throne. This article deals with the exceptionally eventful history of the Shambyu, whose tribal territory lies east of Rundu. The emphasis is on the family history of the Chieftainess Mwengere, who ruled over her tribe for 47 years. Radical political and social changes occurred during her reign. Her mother's generation was confronted with considerable political unrest. Repeatedly, part of the tribe and once the whole population, had to leave their homeland. Many descendants of the refugees are still living in Botswana, Zambia and Angola. The vacuum has been filled by strange foreign groups from Angola who now make up almost half of the tribe.

Zusammenfassung

Die Bantustämme des Kavangolandes haben ein matrilineares Erb- und Nachfolgesystem, das weiblichen Angehörigen des regierenden Klans erlaubt, die Häuptlingschaft zu übernehmen. Dieser Artikel behandelt einen Ausschnitt aus der ungewöhnlich bewegten Geschichte der Shambyu, deren Stammesgebiet sich östlich von Rundu zu beiden Seiten des Kavangoflusses befindet. Im Mittelpunkt steht die Familiengeschichte von Häuptlingin Mwengere, die 47 Jahre lang regierte. Während ihrer langen Amtszeit fanden umwälzende politische und soziale Veränderungen statt. Die Generation ihrer Mutter wurde mit folgenschweren politischen Unruhen und Raubzügen konfrontiert. Wiederholt mußten Sektionen und einmal sogar der ganze Stamm die Heimat verlassen. Zahlreiche Nachkommen der Flüchtlinge wohnen noch heute in Botswana, Zambia und Angola. Das Vakuum wurde durch fremde Ethnien aus Angola gefüllt, die heute ungefähr die Hälfte aller Stammesangehörigen ausmachen.

1. The matrilineal system of succession

In order to understand the chieftainship of Kavango tribes and the existence of female chiefs, a few preliminary remarks are necessary regarding the traditional social system of the people in north-eastern Namibia.

The tribes of the Kavango region have a system of matrilineal inheritance and succession, meaning that persons who descend matrilineally from a common ancestress, are considered as

blood relations. The status and material goods of a deceased man are not inherited by his sons, but by the blood relations of his mother. A child is born into its mother's clan. However, the father is a stranger to the clan and he considers himself belonging to his own mother's clan. When a man dies, his sister's children are accordingly the main heirs. The sons of a male chief consequently have no right to succeed to the throne. Candidates are only his brothers and sisters and the children of his sisters. The important social and legal status of Kavango women is shown by the fact that women may act as heads of a kraal. They can even ascend to the dignity of a chieftain, whenever no suitable male candidate is available. The Kavango tribes adhere to this tradition, though the patrilineal system is gaining increasing influence in other respects. The tribe of the Shambyu was governed as frequently by female as by male chieftains, during their almost two hundred year old history. The reign of these female chieftains covers indeed very important sectors in their tribal history. Even today the ruling chieftain is a young lady:

2. Political events in the 19th century

The establishment of the Shambyu tribe has been attributed to a woman and her energetic daughter, whose name was Rukunde. They wanted to conquer territory of their own. After leaving their home on the upper Kwando they separated from the relatives who were under a male chieftain and settled at the southern bank of the Kavango river. This caused problems. Though the aborigines, being the Khoe-San and Yeyi-Bantu, were peaceful and politically weak, they were much more numerous than Rukunde's followers. A few uneasy decades followed, characterized by clan rivalry and fights with the residing tribes.

Then Mushinga, who was a strong personality, came to power. She managed to unite all members of her tribe within one settlement. With the help of the militarily experienced Kwangali, they overwhelmed the capital of the Yeyi, killed their chieftain and other men, while the women and children were enslaved or married. The rest of the defeated people escaped to the south.

Mushinga's husband, Mpote, an immigrant from the north, knew the art of melting ore and forging iron. With these products he could establish a bartering business. This caused jealousy among the neighbouring Mbunza, who then tried to steal iron implements. On one of these occasions they murdered Shiremo, the heir of the Shambyu.

Shortly afterwards, in the year 1858 the news reached them that a big host of the fearful Kololo (from Lesotho, South Africa) was approaching. At that stage Mushinga was very old, blind and unable to escape with the others and committed suicide. The war brought grief and poverty to the Kavango tribes. The Shambyu had only few losses, as they managed to escape to Angola. All Kavango tribes then settled on the northern banks of the Kavango, as they were frightened of further attacks.

The !Khung-San (Bushman) then took the savanna south of the Kavango into their possession again and defended it valiantly and treacherously using poisoned arrows against renewed Bantu immigration until 1909. However as a result of German Colonial Police control of the area and the establishment of several mission stations, the !Khung-San gave up their resistance and the Bantu chiefs returned to the southern banks.

Mushinga's eldest daughter, Kandimba, who took over after the Kololo war, also settled on the Angolan side of the Kavango river with her followers. She reigned for about 16 years, and



Traditional dressing of Kavango women. *Photo: Archive of the Oblate Fathers, Mainz, Germany*

peace characterised that period. After Kandimba's death, her eldest son, Shinguruve, succeeded her.

Around the turn of the century, two incidents, which had significant and far reaching effects on the history of the Shambyu tribe occurred. In the year 1893, the Tswana of Lake Ngami, equipped with modern rifles, organized a military expedition against the eastern Kavango tribes. They plundered, killed and abducted many young prisoners. This raid was primarily directed against Kanyetu, an influential sub-chieftain of the Shambyu, who lived on the Kwito Island Malyo together with his niece, Mbava; and his supporters. Kanyetu was completely independent and earned his livelihood by the sale of hunting trophies and iron articles, which he forged himself. He defended the island until his ammunition was finished. Then he committed suicide.

3. History of Mwendere's parents

Mbava, mother of the later Chieftainess Mwendere, went into captivity of the Tswana with her four children. Her husband was able to avoid the massacre, by swimming into a thicket near the riverbank and escaping through a maze of rocks near a waterfall. The two youngest children of Mbava died within a few months in exile. Their sorely afflicted, pregnant mother decided to flee and only two young, loyal servants accompanied her. Her two eldest children refused to accompany her on this dangerous venture. Together with other companions they remained abroad, even though an English administrative officer at a later stage ordered the release of all

prisoners. They decided to stay on, because they had received news from their homeland that people at home were suffering from hunger and poverty due to a severe drought. In the meantime several of the female prisoners had been married to Tswana men, while others had started to till their own fields. Mbava's eldest daughter, Kapango, married an Englishman in Maun, with whom she had two sons. According to Chieftainess Mwengere, who received several letters from her sister, Kapango became wealthy and grew very old.

After some weeks living in fear and privation, Mbava reached the residence of the Mbukushu Chieftain Dimbu, who accorded her generous hospitality since she was the highest ranking woman of the ruling clan of the Shambyu. He arranged for her to return home in his best canoe. There she was re-united with her husband Mukosho. They lived in the residence of Mbava's brothers, who had survived the Tswana war. The two children who were born there, were called Kanyetu and Mukwahepo (child of misery) - in remembrance of the Tswana war.

It is indicative of the strength of character of Mbava, that the marriage with the Kwangali Mukosho lasted a lifetime and that it was blessed with a total of twelve healthy children. In contrast to Mbava (and her daughter Mwengere), many women of the ruling Kavango clans had loose matrimonial morals and changed their consorts, who had little rights, according to their whims.

As mentioned before, there was a severe famine in Kavangoland during the years after the Tswana war. In addition, the western neighbouring tribes, who up to then had been restrained by the much feared Sub-chieftain Kanyetu, resumed their former plundering activity. They had no respect for Shinguruve, the ruling chieftain of the Shambyu, who was a peace loving, yet irresolute weakling and who occupied himself mainly with witchcraft matters.

In view of the above mentioned situation, Mbava, her brothers, sisters and many other members of the tribe decided to emigrate to Barotseland in the south-west of Zambia. They were able to rely on the support of the powerful, rich King Lewanika of Barotseland, as he had been a friend of their uncle Kanyetu. In 1884, when King Lewanika had been expelled from his country after a bloody revolution, Kanyetu had granted him asylum and had assisted him in many ways. A year later the king succeeded in re-conquering the throne. In order to show his gratitude, he overwhelmed Kanyetu with presents and conveyed to him the district Rukon in the west of Barotseland. By virtue of these honours, Kanyetu had become more influential than his ruling brother Shinguruve.

After Kanyetu's death on Malyo Island a branch of the Shambyu dynasty emigrated about 1896 with many followers and slaves to Rukona, which is a three days' journey to the west of the Barotse capital, Lealui. There Mbava gave birth to the later Chieftainess Mwengere and five other children. Death, however, took its toll. Mbava had to bury her children, Kanyetu and Mukosho, while three of her own siblings also died.

4. The flight of the Shambyu tribe to the north

We must return briefly to the events at the Kavango. In the year 1903, a serious dispute arose between the Gciruku Chieftain, Nyangana, and the German traders, Arndt and Paasch. Paasch was deadly wounded by Chief Nyangana's warriors, while Arndt and the other members of both families managed to flee but were killed in the territory of the Shambyu by Chieftain

Mbambangandu's people. (A lot of articles appeared regarding these tragic events. Though not all of them being correct, I do not go into details of this story.)

The Shambyu were now very afraid of an act of reprisal by the German Security Forces because the murder took place on German Territory and the victims were German subjects. However they remained on the northern bank. It seems that they were aware of the fact that it was forbidden for German officers to violate foreign territory. The behaviour of the Shambyu gave the impression that they considered the acts of vengeance as justified according to their own legal concepts.

The comparatively stable situation changed, when at the end of 1909 Portuguese police units advanced to the south eastern corner of Angola and established several forts on the northern banks of the Kavango River. The Shambyu now feared acute punitive measures, especially since a younger brother of the chieftain, mentally disturbed, had killed three white people on Angolan territory. Almost everybody, including the chieftain, fled to the north. The Shambyu settled at various places along the Lumuna and Luenge, right tributaries of the Luyana, which flows into the Kwando. The Nyemba, who were indigenous to the area, had no political organization and no chieftain. The Shambyu were thus free to find suitable places for settlement in the sparsely populated area. Chieftain Shinguruve died in the year 1912 at Shikambakamba on the Lumuna, a lonely man in dire poverty and deserted by his wives. His subjects and relatives were scattered over a large area and an interregnum of several years followed.

When the Shambyu, living in Barotseland, heard about the flight of the tribe, they left the apparently unhealthy Rukona and settled near their relatives, at the Luenge river. Only Mbava and her husband emigrated with their children towards the west to Marwamunga, where political refugees of the Kwangali lived. Among them were relatives of Mbava's husband. After many years, Mbava and her husband found their final resting place there.

A French missionary society settled at Rukona in the year 1908. This is where Mwengere had gone to school for almost two years. Because of the change of domicile of her parents, she had to interrupt her schooling and never had the opportunity to take it up again. When she left Rukona, she was approximately 12 years old, for she told me that her breasts had begun to „burgeon“ and that two years later she had become mature. Her date of birth can thus be estimated as 1897/98.

One day, Mbambangandu appeared at Marwamunga, his sister Mbava's village, and he was allowed to take the young Mwengere with him to the Luenge River. It has been mentioned before that a man has considerable rights over the children of his sister. Every prince endeav-



Chief Mbambangandu who ruled from 1925 to 1940. *Photo: Catholic Mission Shambyu*

oured to increase the number of people belonging to his kraal. However, as no harmonious symbiosis came about with Mbambangandu's wife, Mwengere moved to her other uncle Ndango (cousin of her mother) who lived quite close by. When the girl became mature, the engagement to the Lozi Shimwanya, which had been celebrated in Rukona, was dissolved. Mwengere was given in matrimony to her „cross cousin“ Kamunoko who was the son of her mother's cousin Ndango. This marriage lasted until Kamunoko's death in the year 1963. From that time on Mwengere lived on her own.

5. Return to the old home land. The chieftains Ndango and Mbambangandu

At the beginning of the rainy season 1915/16, Prince Ndango was one of the first Shambyu who dared return to the old homeland on the southern bank, as after the German defeat in World War I, both sides of the Kavango river were free of any white occupational force for a certain period of time. He settled at Kayengona, together with his son Kamunoko, the daughter-in-law Mwengere and a number of slaves. Slowly, but steadily, small groups of compatriots followed and his homestead soon hummed with activity.

Actually Mbambangandu and his brothers had more valid rights of succession than their cousin Ndango, but as they were still afraid to leave their exile in Angola, Ndango was recognized by the tribes-men as chieftain. The neighbouring Chieftain Nyangana sent him a young bull as a token of welcome. The bull was slaughtered at the ceremony of Ndango's ascendancy to the throne.

Mwengere's husband, Kamunoko, was good natured and hard working. He had several donkeys, with which he used to fetch Mangetti nuts and other types of fruit from the Fontein Omuramba, as supplies for the people in the residence. When the donkeys were killed by lions, he moved to the lonely, but historically important place of Kauti, which lies 20km south of Rundu, in the Omuramba. Mwengere's brother, Franz Kashasha, died there. Mwengere wished to look out for medical treatment, as she was still childless. She persuaded her husband to return to Ndango in Kayengona, where they remained for the rest of their lives.

Ndango was an affable, but weak chieftain, who loved to travel to other countries. At court proceedings, he was partial and corrupt. Although the mandatory government had ordered the release of all slaves, Ndango delayed the process, by demanding large sums of ransom money for every person released. Mr R. Dickman, the then Assistant Native Commissioner, characterized him in his monthly report of 1922 as „stupid and superstitious in the extreme“. After ten years of reign, Ndango died in 1925, most probably after an excess of dagga-smoking.

Mbambangandu followed him as chieftain of the tribe and built his residence at Gove. He stemmed from an older tribal line than Ndango and was made of harder stuff. In the beginning, the white officials were content with his pleasing appearance and the discipline which existed in his tribal region. But soon he developed despotic tendencies. He followed the example of former Kavango chieftains, e.g. he took the women and property of other men and sold his subjects as slaves. Consequently nearly half of his followers moved away.

The white officials reacted sternly to his actions and ordered all slaves to be released. With that the reign of absolutism came to an end. The wealth and power of the tribal chiefs decreased. Many of their traditional duties and tasks were taken over by white officials of the mandatory

power with whom Mbambangandu formed a good relationship. He finally became a strong and popular tribal chieftain. He encouraged decentralization and let the subjects found villages in the Fontein and other dry river beds in order to secure land for his tribe. There was a steady influx of people from Angola during his reign, as the Portuguese used to send indigenous men to other regions to do forced labour. They also imposed taxes and sometimes treated the indigenous people in quite a brutal way.

6. Mwengere's political career

On 24th August 1940, Mr H. Eedes, the long-standing Commissioner (Officer in charge of Native Affairs) in Rundu, called a tribal meeting at Gove. There Mbambangandu publicly declared his willingness to resign, as he had become blind. Only two daughters of the legendary Mbava qualified as candidates for succession. They were Mwengere and Shinganga. Shinganga, the younger of the sisters, was very popular, because of her generosity, evidenced by the size of her big kraal. Her ten children had unfortunately died at a young age. Mwengere was in contrast to her sister, of a more severe and dominating nature. Mbava's youngest daughter, Monika Runguro, was an insignificant woman. In spite of this, she later became chieftainess of the few Shambyu, who were still living on the Angolan Kavango banks.



Entrance to the kraal of Chieftainess Mwengere. In the right background part of her brick house. In front traditional huts for the relatives and servants.

The retiring chieftain proposed Mwengere as his successor. Eedes as well as the members of the tribal Council unanimously supported his proposal. The election was officially confirmed by

the Authorities in Windhoek on 17th September 1940. Mwendere established a new homestead to the south of Ndango's former residence. In 1970 the Government built right next to it the modern Tribal Centre, with a large conference hall, court room, offices, a prison and accommodation for the tribal police.

During Mwendere's long period of reign (1940-1987), the indigenous chieftains were witnesses to important changes and developments. Their traditional privileges were drastically curtailed. At every meeting the commissioners announced new laws and regulations and made the leaders of the tribes exclusively responsible for their enforcement. When these leaders hesitated or did not apply the necessary pressure, or when the subjects resisted, as they did not understand the sense or purpose of the measure, the chieftains were publicly reprimanded even sentenced to payment of cattle. Several chieftains were dismissed, accused of being „disobedient“ and sent into exile.

The white officials and some of the missionaries did not try sincerely to understand the indigenous culture. They were prejudiced by their European way of thinking and had no mind for the fact that old and well established customs could not be eradicated overnight and that the chieftains became unpopular when they obeyed blindly and had to enforce unpopular decrees. Chieftainess Mwendere was forced to dismiss a headman and to punish several men when someone had burnt old grass in the Omuramba. The burning of old grass was an annual traditional practice from time immemorial, which was prohibited at that stage. In this way, the authority of the chieftains was increasingly undermined. The following official correspondence should, in the above circumstances, be critically considered.

On the occasion of Mwendere's nomination, Commissioner Eedes wrote:

„She is an intelligent woman and will administer her tribal areas in an efficient manner“. In his inspection reports he usually expressed his satisfaction and appreciation regarding her cooperation. However, the succeeding Commissioner B.J. Morris had many complaints. He summarized them in 1948, as follows:

- a Only after a second request she ordered her people to carry out the repair of the roads.
- b She has not prevented her subjects from attending „witchcraft meetings“ in Angola.
- c She did not prevent the burning of old grass in the Omuramba. Only after having been requested thereto, she punished ten men.
- d She has admitted immigrants from Angola. These have started brewing alcohol.
- e A few foreigners returning from contract work, have settled in her territory before the land question has been officially clarified. These men have introduced venereal diseases.

It is obvious that some of the complaints are far-fetched. The people were accustomed to crossing the border without restriction. When Mwendere was confronted with the above accusations at a public meeting, she, according to Morris' report, stoically admitted her „fault“ and proudly refused to call witnesses in her defence. Headman Paulus Munango, however, appeared voluntarily and emphasized: „The chieftainess is loyal to the Administration, but her followers and headmen do not support her“. The judgment read: „The chieftainess is found guilty of generally neglecting her tribe and tribal matters“. She was sentenced to pay two cows, two oxen and one calf, to be delivered within a week.

In August 1949, the commissioner wrote in his monthly report from Rundu that „Mingeli is becoming weaker and weaker as a ruler. She lacks a mentally strong husband and councillors“. Certainly he was right in this respect. Her husband Kamunoko had little political influence and Mwendere seldom chose strong personalities to assist her as councillors. Her closest female confidante was an uneducated Nyemba woman. It appears that her autocratic, proud character shied away from strong personalities and their advice. Consequently she became narrow minded and mistrustful and could not keep pace with modern developments. Maybe she would have governed differently if she had had a closer contact with Chieftain Mbambangandu and had found a model ruler in him.

In 1952, the chieftainess was forced by the commissioner to dismiss Headman Kamenye, who was responsible for the Fontein Omuramba. People had again burned the old grass („Government property“). She was also alleged to have omitted to appoint a successor for Kamenye. Commissioner Morris suggested to the Administration that she pay a fine of four head of cattle. This fine was, however, reduced to half the number by Windhoek authorities.

The chiefs of Kavangoland had been ordered to visit all villages of their territory twice yearly. Means of transport were not supplied though some of the places were more than a day's walk away. Chieftainess Mwendere had neglected to visit her subjects in the Fontein Omuramba. She was again sentenced to pay a fine of four head of cattle.

Since the death of her husband in 1963, Mwendere obtained advice and support at court proceedings and official duties from the policeman Remigius Shindimba, a relative of her husband. This displeased some councillors, as they had better and longer experiences. Besides Remigius was not of good character.

In 1970, Chieftainess Mwendere was automatically elected to the Executive of the newly established Kavango Parliament as representative of her tribe. She was open-minded with regard to development projects and practical innovations, but, understandably, she, being more than 70 years old, had no idea of modern politics. This was the reason why she let herself be represented by well educated relatives at the end of her first term of office. Purely representative duties were often performed by her niece, Rebekka Kambundu, who was regarded as the rightful heir.

The then Commissioner D. Maree forwarded a comment on all tribal representatives of Parliament. He criticized Mwendere in a devastating way, writing: „She has assembled around her a special clique, which supports her in the corruption with which she governs her tribe. Exorbitant funds and fines are imposed. Discrimination is the order of the day. The majority of the tribe is afraid of opposing her. She is uneducated. She has no idea of present day developments“.

7. Critical review of Mwendere's career

Following this official correspondence, I shall try to give my own opinion on Mwendere's character, based on statements of missionary staff and personal experience. Generally speaking, she was an intelligent, strong willed personality, who knew how to express her thoughts clearly. She loved to talk continuously. She had the courage to impose severe penalties on criminals and to enforce the payment of fines. She especially suppressed the brewing of strong alcoholic beverages. Of course she retained part of the fines, which actually should be paid into the tribal fund,

for herself, like all the other chieftains did, because other means of income were inadequate. Several subjects in the meantime had become much richer than the tribal leaders. A poor person is seldom respected, as is well known, and the feeling of having been unjustly treated lends itself for corruption. And Mwengere was no exception.



Chieftainess Maria Mwengere three years before her death.
Photo: Information Office Rundu.

Until old age, she maintained her erect stance, her mental alertness and her strong sonorous, almost manly voice. This is why she was popularly called „Shingoma“, a name derived from the friction drum (*ngomakwita*), which produces dark, undulating tones, when the stick inside the drum is rubbed. Her enemies used the mocking name „Mudjanja“ (someone who shows his teeth), as her upper teeth were visible even in a resting position, because of her protruding upper jaw.

Chieftainess Mwengere has always vigorously supported the efforts of missionaries in their educational quests, concerning schools and ethics. After extensive preparations, she was christened in the night of Easter, on 22 April 1962, in the catholic church at Shambyu. She assumed the name of Maria. Her husband Kamunoko chose the Christian name Petrus.

8. Mwengere's death and the problems in connection with succession

Mwengere became pregnant only at great intervals. She had several miscarriages and one daughter died shortly after birth. Only three children reached adulthood. They were Nankali, Ndango and Shitunda. The eldest daughter, Marianne Nankali, died at the age of 40 of tropical haemophilia, according to her nurse. Many people, however, believed that she had been poisoned out of jealousy. A man, who was suspected of the murder, had to leave the country.

Unfortunately Mwengere's two sons became heavy drinkers. The popular and well educated Romanus Ndango, who had been designated as her successor, died at the end of 1970 as a victim of alcohol. It was a great shock for Mwengere when her last son, Franz Shitunda, also died

only one year later after a protracted illness. In her grief and embitterment, she accused her relatives of a younger line, as well as other persons of her surroundings, of having killed her children by witchcraft. She thereby lost the sympathy of many, especially of those people she had blamed, as they were able to prove their innocence by public consultation of the oracle.

Thus Mwengere survived all her children. In spite of the crushing strokes of fate, her self-assurance was unbroken and her physical strength was such, that even at an advanced age, she recovered from tuberculosis. During the independence struggle of SWAPO she was well liked by the white Authorities and also the media, because of her willingness to cooperate. Many people, above all the adolescent intelligentsia, resented that she allowed herself to be bribed in order to encourage her people on the radio to support the South African forces in their fight against terrorists/freedom fighters.



Angeline Matumbo Libebe, 1998
personal donation

Chieftainess Mwengere died on 28th February 1987 of cardiac insufficiency at the age of 89 years. She was buried in the mission cemetery. About one thousand people attended the funeral. Mwengere's eldest daughter, Nankali, had left five children. It must be mentioned, regarding Nankali's character, that she made use of the traditional right of women of the ruling clan. She sent her first husband away and forced Haininga, who was living in blissful marriage, to leave his wife and marry her. From this marriage originated Gotthardt Ndokwa, who was elected as Mwengere's successor on 12th June 1987. Only two years later, however, he died in a car accident.

Thereafter, long and politically motivated discussions followed about the succession, until the Tribal Council agreed upon one of Nankali's daughters (Mwengere's granddaughter). Thus a young woman of the ruling dynasty was nominated again as tribal head. She was enthroned on 19th May 1989. Her name is Angeline Matumbo and her father is Munika Libebe, a former police sergeant, who had a Mbukushu father and a Gciriku mother.

Most of the information for this article was collected during Mwengere's lifetime by interviews with herself and other influential persons of the Shambyu tribe. Some additional details were also given by Father B. van Roosmalen and the late sister Leopoldine Mühlbauer, both staff members of the catholic mission station Shambyu-Utokota for many years. I wish to express my sincere thanks to all informants. I am also gratefully obliged to Mr. F. von Seggern for translating the article into English.

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