Presbyterian Pioneers in Congo

William H. Sheppard

(*Events described:* 1892; c. 1917)

William Henry Sheppard was an African American born in Virginia as the Civil War was ending. He became an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS), commonly called the Southern Presbyterian Church, a majority-white denomination that had been formed in the southern states during the sectional conflict over slavery. From 1890 to 1910, Sheppard worked as a PCUS missionary in the Kasai region of the Belgian Congo. There he helped to raise international awareness of atrocities committed by the colonial administration of Belgian king Leopold II.

Below are selections from two chapters of a memoir Sheppard wrote after he returned to the United States. The first selection is about an exploratory trip that Sheppard made in 1892 from his mission station at Luebo, inhabited by Kete people, to Nsheng, capital city of the Kuba people. Nsheng was off-limits to foreigners, but Sheppard was granted entrance because the city's rulers decided that this black Westerner who spoke their language was a reincarnated ancestor. In the second selection, Sheppard touts what he and other PCUS missionaries in Congo had accomplished by the time he wrote the book (around 1917). These selections illustrate Sheppard's attitudes, as an African American missionary, toward the peoples of central Africa among whom he worked.

Notes about language: *Sheppard calls the Kuba and Kete peoples "Bakuba" and "Bakete," in keeping with their languages' grammar (in which* ba- *is a pluralizing prefix). The Kuba king at Nsheng, Sheppard calls "Lukenga," as if that were his name, but the individual was actually named Kwet aMbweky;* lukengu *is simply a word that means* king*. Sheppard calls the Belgian Congo by its French name,* Congo Belge*.*

Customs in Lukenga's Land

A Clean Village. Every morning, the "courts" and streets were swept. Men who had committed some offence were compelled to pull weeds and sweep the streets clean.

There is a rule in all Bakuba villages that every man, every day, sweep before his own door. The only littered places I observed were at the four public entrances of the town, where markets were held daily [...]

An Honest People. All the natives we have met in the Kasai are, on the whole, honest. Our private dwellings have never been locked, day or night. Your pocketbook is a sack of cowries or salt, tied at the mouth with a string. But now and then something happens that the rule may not become monotonous. N'susa, one of the boys of my caravan, misappropriated some cowries. I called him (in the presence of two witnesses) in question about the matter. He acknowledged removing the shells and innocently remarked, "You are the same as my father, and what is his is mine." [...]

The Poisonous Cup. In the native mind, no one dies an ordinary death: they have been bewitched by an enemy. The witch doctors are paid by the relatives of the deceased to hunt out the guilty one. Early in the morning, with painted bodies, feathers in their hair, leopard skins on

their bodies, big war knives in their hands, they proceed to run, leap, scream, ring iron bells up and down the streets, stopping and hooting at every door, until by some imaginary force they are held at someone's door. A great shout goes up from the chasers. The person is called out and accused. [...]

The witch doctor cuts from a certain tree poisonous bark, pounds it up and mixes it with water, and, standing before the accused and the assembled crowd, says, "If you are guilty, you will die; if not guilty, you will vomit the poison." The victim, knowing that he is innocent, willingly takes the bowl and proceeds to drink it all. [...]

If it acts as an emetic, a great shout of joy goes up from friends of the accused. The victim is allowed to be carried off to a secret place by friends, and the excruciating heaving goes on for hours. If the victim, from the effects of the poison, staggers and falls, a shout goes up from enemies, and the witch doctor leaps upon the neck of the fallen and crushes out the remainder of life. The body is then wrapped in a mat, taken far out on the plain, and burned to ashes. [...]

Love Medicine. I have had many a man come and ask to buy love medicine. They think charms and medicine can do anything. I always told them, of course, that it was a matter of the girl's heart, and charms or medicines could not help out in their "love affairs."

They Love Large Families. The Bakuba are morally a splendid people. I have asked a number of Bakuba what was their real ideal of life, and they invariably answered to have a big cornfield, marry a good wife, and have many children. [...]

A Heavy Storm. One night, there blew a heavy storm, and the rain doctor was in it all. I could hear his whistle blowing and his loud voice calling to the storm to be still. Houses were unroofed, trees blown down, and fences wrecked. The next [...]day, two messengers from King Lukenga approached hurriedly and, kneeling, slapped their hands and said, "The king calls for you." [...] I brushed my hair, put on my coat, and started with the men. [...] We approached the king's high fence, passed through a number of gates and into the king's presence. After a few preliminary remarks, he frowned and leaned forward, saying, "A heavy storm last night. [...] What caused that storm?" I told him of the present rainy season, of storms down at Luebo, and naturally he would have them here. The king grew excited, made many gestures, and said in a loud voice, "My witch doctors saw your followers at our creek yesterday stirring up the water, and that caused the storm which came down last night."

I was frightened, not knowing what would follow, so I answered (as I had often heard his own people) in a low, slow voice, "It is true, king, my people were at the creek, but they were washing my clothes, and it could not cause a storm." I continued, "They used in washing what we call in the foreign country *soap*, and it caused the whiteness and foam on the water, but it is something innocent and cannot cause a storm."

The king leaned back and was again calm and remarked in a pleasant tone of voice, "Well, don't have your clothes washed anymore."

They Had Never Heard a Gun. I had now been at Lukenga's for a month. [...] The people had

seen my gun but had never heard it. I ventured out one day to shoot some guinea fowls in the manioc fields and snipe at a stream a half mile away. I succeeded in getting the game and returning. The next day, King Lukenga sent for me, and I was not so timid as before. I went, and he told me that farmers had come and complained that their crops of corn would die if I continued to shoot over their fields. I consented at once to shoot no more, explaining to the king that I would do nothing to offend them.

Trouble at a Funeral. On the burial day of one of the villagers, I saw a number of men coming down the street with a slave woman, whom they were having trouble forcing along. I stepped out and inquired the trouble, and they explained that the owner of the slave had died, and they were going to bury her with the dead. I protested and ventured to rescue the woman; and for about ten minutes, the Bakuba, my people, and I were tied up in a scramble. We were overpowered, and on they went with their victim.

A Victim of Lightning. It was reported after a storm that a woman had been struck by lightning. I went out to see her, knowing their custom of giving the poisonous cup to find out the person who had sent the lightning. I kept a close watch on the witch doctors, but I presume because I had preached so much against the wicked custom, they did not have a public test. I fear, though, they went off secretly into the bushes or high grass and carried out their custom. [...]

Prying into the King's Customs. My interfering with the men who were dragging the woman to her death had been reported to Lukenga. He mentioned it to me, saying the burying of the living with the dead was far beyond the Bakete, who only bury goats with their dead, and "that is why we bury slaves: they serve us here and then go with us on the journey to wait on us there." I told the king in the strongest language I could command that it was wrong, without the least shadow of justification. I tried to prove to him that the poisonous cup was a very cruel and unjust practice, and there were no witches. And if they gave the poison to anyone whose stomach was not easily moved, they would die. The king thought me very foolish, saying, "If a person is innocent, they can never die."

You Grow Indignant. Seeing these awful customs practiced by these people for ages makes you indignant and depressed and also fills you with pity. Only by preaching God's word, having faith, patience, and love, will we eradicate the deep-rooted evil. Everything to them is run by chance, and there are evil spirits and witches everywhere. [...]

Enlightened but in Darkness. I was astounded to find a people in Central Africa so intelligent and yet so far from the truth. The kilt or gathered skirts worn by men and women are made from the palm fiber on their own handlooms. They all wear belts, many with beads and cowries tastefully worked in them. [...] 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, woodcarving, and smelting was the highest in equatorial Africa.

* * *

His Kingdom Coming in Congo

A Retrospective View. [...] Twenty-six years ago, two young men[a] of the Southern Presbyterian Church went to Africa as missionaries [and] landed at Luebo, Congo Belge, with tent, a few articles of clothing, and food.

They found the natives confused, with many family feuds and tribal fights. There was not a married couple (from the Christian standpoint) in all the land. They had never seen a book. Not a prayer had ever been offered or a hymn sung. The Sabbath day was not known. They had never heard the name of Jesus.

But God's word was not about to return unto Him void, and in 1895 a young boy about twelve years old, whom we called "Dick," professed his faith in Christ. Then, in quick succession, followed six other boys. There was joy in the presence of the angels [...]

The Present View. There are 51 missionaries of Jesus, zealous and optimistic in the great work for Jesus, 457 native workers, 15,674 church members, 275 schools, 15,934 students, 3 theological schools, 160 ministers in training, 338 Sunday schools, 32,775 scholars, and 938 native teachers.

The harvest of precious souls this year was 2,672, and 20,000 gather at 6 o'clock every morning for prayer.

Wherever there is a mission station, you can ask the Christians to repeat for you not only a verse but whole passages of scripture perfectly. The Lord's Prayer, the ten commandments, and the shorter catechism they know by heart. They can ask and answer every question of the catechism without a single mistake. Dozens of hymns they know and sing without the book. There is scarcely a Christian family without the prayer altar. They also have in their homes, or in the bush, a hiding place for secret prayer. Every convert is a missionary to the unsaved. They are liberal and count it a pleasure to give a tenth part to Jesus. The Sabbath is beautifully observed: no fishing, hunting, or traveling. The witch doctor's business is fast passing away; the people come to the missionaries for treatment. [...]

Girls are trained in domestic science and sewing. [...] Native Christians are running the big cylinder press, turning out hundreds of schoolbooks, hymnbooks, catechisms, and the Bible. The books are also bound by them and used by thousands who were once heathen.

The native evangelists throughout the country preach twice a day, and a new sermon every time. When the big bells at the central mission stations ring out their inviting peals, you can see hundreds of natives with their wives and children, hymnbook and Bible under their arms,

---

[a] *Sheppard arrived in the Belgian Congo along with a white missionary, Samuel Lapsley. Lapsley was supposed to supervise Sheppard, but Lapsley died of malaria two years into the mission. Back in the United States, Southern Presbyterians extolled Lapsley as a martyr.*

wending their way to the house of God. They sit quiet, without even a whisper, and are undivided in their attention. They are there on the King's business. The hymn is announced by the missionary, and quickly they turn to the number and join heartily in the singing. The head is bowed in solemn and devout prayer. The chapter is mentioned, and the people (sometimes thousands) turn to the book and chapter and read alternately.

No tongue can tell the great work that God has wrought through the Southern Presbyterian Church for these people, who only yesterday were in darkness and death.

A Prospective View. There are in this region, and they are yours, 1,810,000 souls. Thousands have never heard a word; thousands have never heard of a missionary; thousands have never seen a single ray and are begging for the full light of the gospel.

What a vast harvest field! By the sign of the cross and in His name, we shall conquer.

Source: William H. Sheppard, *Presbyterian Pioneers in Congo* (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, [1917]), 119-137, 149-153 (chaps. 9, 11), https://hdl.handle.net/2027/ia.ark:/13960/t8tb1d52f. Public domain.

Excerpts edited and annotated by John-Charles Duffy. A typographical error (missing letter) corrected. Spelling and punctuation emended in line with modern American conventions. Dashes omitted after bold subheadings for simplicity's sake. A quotation mark relocated to distinguish a paraphrase from a direct quotation. An English word presented as a foreign word italicized. The capitalizing or not of the terms *Central Africa* and *equatorial Africa* reproduces the usage of the source publication, as does the capitalizing of the unofficial name *Southern Presbyterian Church*. The use of lowercase for *ten commandments* likewise replicates the source; for a more consistently applied "down" style, *scripture* and *central mission* have been converted here to lowercase although capitalized in the source. Divine pronouns are capitalized here, as in the source publication, to ensure clarity in an instance where the pronoun lacks an explicit antecedent.

These edited excerpts from Sheppard's book are intended for ***teaching*** purposes only. For ***research*** purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.