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Long-distance Caravans and Communication beyond the Kwango (c. 1850-1890)*

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Much like other forms of travel the long journeys undertaken by caravans into the African interior served not just the immediate purpose to which they owed the legitimacy of their existence: to carry on trade and to explore strange lands and their peoples. Rather, such journeys involved a more or less intended mutual exchange, not just of goods, but of many other things, skills and knowledge as well. These acted as catalysts for manifold processes of appropriation and cultural innovation.

Beyond the Kwango this exchange of cultural "extras" included primarily language (particularly Kimbundu and Portuguese), cultivated plants (such as rice, tomatoes, onions), crafts and other skills (for instance tailoring, reading and writing), profane as well as religious objects, or rather the spread of their basic forms (such as jackets, shoes, armchairs, crucifixes, drums and magic remedies). However, it also included less pleasant extras such as disease (smallpox), parasites (sand fleas), possession spirits and much more. Such local and translocal exchange networks that both directly and indirectly catalysed cultural and other forms of change have existed since time immemorial, as archaeological finds in Central Africa have shown. However, in the 19th century the increased intensity of such caravan trade accelerated and intensified such processes over ever greater distances.

Less tangible are the other types of exchange goods: information, news and rumours, the importance of which up until now has been greatly underestimated. News and information regarding what had previously been unknown now travelled much more quickly, were available in more detailed form and were transmitted across cultural boundaries. Along with the local and translocal "traditional" means of communication (via messenger, emissary, markets, visits to relatives, etc.), the increased density and reach of these new modes of intercourse enabled a swifter and more reliable evaluation of information previously received and facilitated the gathering of further details or even the unmasking of a particular report as false. This in turn allowed the recipients to adjust effectively and flexibly to changed or changing conditions far away, giving them an advantage over others. Particularly when it came to matters of trade or foreign policy, reacting in the right way at the right time was a matter of survival, or at least offered the opportunity to implement "damage control" measures.

Nevertheless differentiating between news and rumour continued to be difficult. Even information that was initially accurate and reliable was often exaggerated or distorted in the course of its long journey via lengthy chains of transmission over great

* I would like to thank Katja Rieck for translating this text into English. On this article see also Heintze 2002, 2003a,b.

distances and ultimately arrived as little more than a rumour.[1] This is why specific strategies and techniques designed to evaluate such reports became so important.

The sudden and drastic expansion in informational reach, which resulted from developments in long-distance caravan trade, increased the awareness that defensive strategies, such as the selective transmission of information, the spread of rumours or the strategic "planting" of false reports, were urgently needed. Political power centres such as Mussumba, the Lunda courts of Kaungula on the Lóvua, the designated Mwant Yav Kibuinza Yanvo, the Mwata Kumbana, or the important Mbangala and Chokwe chiefs, which also became loci of information gathering and centres of informational politics, played a key role in the struggle to secure their own interests. However, the caravans passing through these political centres regarded them with a certain amount of ambivalence. As a centre for the exchange of all sorts of news and for the establishment of important long-term trade relations these places were well-liked. Yet the particularly high tributes[2] and the unpredictable amount of time that a stay at such centres of information and power entailed – for it was not uncommon that caravans were "held hostage" until they agreed to comply with the demands of their hosts – also led caravans to avoid these places. Circumventing them, however, was not always possible, since those in power made every effort to prevent this.

The primary actors in this ever more tightly woven communication network were the trade caravans of the so-called Ambakists, the Mbangala and the Chokwe, with the political and commercial missions of the Lunda periodically entering the scene as well. A greater awareness of these processes only came about in the second half of the 19th century, once letters and publications written by European explorers, pushing ever further into the continent's interior, reached Portuguese Angola and the European mainland.[3]

Content and Reach

The information and experiences of returning trade caravans were the basis on which was decided whether a new enterprise should be launched, and if so, when and to where. En route, caravans were particularly interested in the conditions along the way: the easiest passage, obstacles best avoided (such as impassable rivers due to political tensions or other unfavourable conditions), alternative routes, costs (tolls and other forms of tribute), security issues, food supply and political conditions, but also signs indicative of potentially attractive markets and commercial opportunities. Furthermore, the information gathered provided constant reassurance that the chosen destination was indeed appropriate. At each village passed these caravans updated their data, which were refined even further by details and fresh reports passed along by caravans met travelling in the opposite direction. The caravan leaders exchanged with each other and with the headmen and chiefs of the villages they visited news, geographical information and travel experience. In the same manner, European explorers tentatively made their way into the interior. Local power elites benefited from these long-distance travellers, listening to reports of distant lands, that enabled them to shape their policies accordingly, perhaps even sending off caravans of their own.

1 On inner African rumours in a completely different context see White 2000, especially Part I.

2 See for example Carvalho 1890-1894, II: 558. Basically this involved a form of exchange in which caravans gave gifts in the form of goods in return for adequate and secure accommodation. On this see Heywood 1984: 91: "All these exchanges of gifts were as much a recognition of status as simply market type exchange, the most valuable gift that a *soba* would offer would be his good will. He would insure that the traveller would not be robbed, that he could obtain porters or render other assistance." However, in exceptional cases there were instances of rather crass one-sidedness.

3 See Heintze 1999a, 2002.

So, in this fashion, news and a plethora of information spread across hundreds of kilometres. Particularly striking examples of the extent of the spread of information are the trade caravans of Saturnino de Sousa Machado and António Lopes de Carvalho, as well as Hermann von Wissmann's expedition to the Lulua, whose activities and their effects were related in surprisingly frequent and detailed reports collected on the way to Lunda by Henrique Dias de Carvalho, primarily from Mbangala caravans he encountered as they were returning home, as well as from the chiefs who had sheltered them. Thus, from reports that reached him over great distances he learned that Saturnino and António had gone their separate ways, even learning of their respective destinations, and that the Njinga porters had left Saturnino and were now working for the *ingueresses* (the "English", referring here to the Germans and the Belgians) at the station in Luebo. Dias de Carvalho also heard that Saturnino had already sold all his goods to the Germans and was now merely waiting for porters from Malanje so that he could have the large quantities of ivory he purchased transported back to Angola. Later, it was also reported that Saturnino's dealings had gone so poorly that he had been forced to sell the rubber he was storing for the Mbangala in order to cover his living expenses, and that he was now only waiting for fresh porters from Malanje so that he could break up camp and head back home. He also heard about the small and large boats docked at Luebo Station, the vessels travelling down the Lulua and other rivers, in addition to the ship "that ran by fire", which had opened a new trade network across the Zaïre to the ocean, and even that the woodcutters, who had provided the aforementioned ship with firewood, were paid in pearls.

Above all, Carvalho heard that Mukenge had, with German assistance, risen to become the most powerful of the Luluwa chiefs. According to these reports, more and more chiefdoms were being forced to pay tribute to Mukenge or were opting to submit to him "voluntarily" out of fear of the Germans. The foreigners were supposedly clearing large fields, on which they planted manioc, rice and maize, as well as seeds brought from the land of the white man. The latter ostensibly owned large herds of cattle, small livestock, chickens, ducks and pigeons, and they were arming Mukenge's people, teaching them how to use firearms. This was allowing them to begin raiding villages and selling the inhabitants as slaves either to the North, where they received ivory in return, or to the Malanje porters or giving them as gifts at the Lulua to provide the whites with free passage. Mukenge's settlement was said to have come to resemble Malanje, only better, with long, wide streets, beautiful houses and flourishing trading ventures. In Mukenge's area of rule, Ambakists had come to settle, working as tailors and instructing the children of the elite in the Portuguese language. The reports, however, also related that the flood of pearls and cloth from the north ruined business for the Ambakists, Mbangala and Chokwe, whose goods coming from Portuguese Angola could compete neither in price nor in quality. Ivory had already become rare and had to be brought to Mukenge from great distances, making it so expensive that only the rubber trade continued to be worthwhile for the Mbangala and Chokwe. A Bié caravan was reported to have been impelled to move on into "Bateque territory" (i.e. the region of the Kete), if it was to get any business at all. However, new opportunities were said to await the Mbangala as a result of the import of salt and cattle from Angola into Lubuku, although a proposal to pay for these with British cloth was from their point of view entirely out of the question.[4]

Long-distance trading caravans thus created new communicative spaces and expanded those already in existence by linking local with translocal ones. However, this system of transmission was not stable, since it continued to rely on specific routes and caravans, meaning that every change affected the reach and structure of the

[4] See Carvalho 1890-1894, II: 192, 260-261, 277, 281-282, 297, 626, 646; III: 498-499, 830; IV: 507, 529.

communication network. Furthermore, the caravans were only partially successful in establishing one large communicative space that encompassed all the adjoining areas. In fact, this space tended to become fragmented, forming numerous autonomous spaces that pursued their own interests and were organised according to their own hierarchies, a situation leading to the formation of insurmountable impenetrable barriers to communication along the borders of these areas.

And so it was that the Mbangala, for example, came for decades to enjoy something close to a monopoly over the flow of information along the main trading routes and succeeded at making their homeland, Kasanje, the most important centre of news pertaining to both east-west and west-east travel. The Mbangala came to occupy this privileged position by virtue of their strategic location on the Kwango, between Portuguese Angola and the African interior, as well as their strong position in the caravan trade at first with Mussumba, the capital and residence of the Lunda kings, the Mwant Yav, and then on the routes to Lubuku and the Mwata Kumbana. It was entirely up to them what portion of the in-coming information and news would be allowed to pass on and in what form or with what ideological tilt it would do so. Hence, the Mbangala, like the Ambakists, acted as a kind of news filter that was effective in all directions. It was here on the Kwango that some enterprises were ended prematurely or were subjected to frustrating and rather costly delays.[5] The Kwango, firmly under Mbangala control, thus time and again constituted an effective barrier between east and west, that affected not only trade relations, but also impacted the flow of news. Although we still know very little about such cases, similar barriers did exist further in the interior – a case in point being the successful isolation of the Kaniok region by Lunda rulers that kept at bay all caravans travelling from the west.

The Evaluation of in-coming Information and News

The increased inflow of all sorts of reports made the need to find effective means of dealing with and evaluating them all the more important. At the most prominent courts in the interior the political position of the recipient was particularly decisive in determining the extent and the quality of the information to which he would be granted access. The dispersion of such information in public audiences generally tended to be a cleverly staged production with vague allusions, selected fragments or even fabrications specifically designed for the general public. It was either before or after these public productions that serious matters of *realpolitik* were dealt with, in secret, and on the basis of detailed reports that had been evaluated for their reliability. In public, the people were told that which they were supposed to believe, while the exchange of information that corresponded to what was actually known took place behind closed doors. However, since general opinion and expectations were either intentionally or coincidentally shaped by these public announcements, the public arena and the confidential sphere of serious power politics often influenced each other. Along these lines, Carvalho fittingly remarked that those in power deem it appropriate to deceive their people even in the most important matters, but in this respect it is they who deceive themselves and who are deceived by those who surround them. Since the general populace on occasion managed to catch some snippet or the other not publicly announced, rumours abounded. Yet this was part of the plan: a certain amount of fear and apprehension, spawned by the circulation of rumours, helped keep the subjects obedient, just as the aura of "really being in the know" bolstered the image of those in power. Furthermore, the latter's competitive advantage with respect to knowledge enabled them to act to their advantage and secure their own interests. Their well-

[5] See, for example, Carvalho 1890-1894, I: 222-224; Gierow 1881-1883: 102. On the Mbangala in their capacity as transmitters of news and information see also 1890-1894, II: 652, 784; III: 88; IV: 528-529, 558.

founded knowledge was also the source of the equanimity and composure with which they made their decisions. This ruthlessness was one of the prerequisites for attaining the highest office in the state or the chiefdom and stood in stark contrast, as it was intended to do, to the excitement and apprehension with which the countless rumours that whirred about were received and discussed by the general populace.[6]

It was particularly difficult to determine whether or not those reports tinged with fear, which arrived after having been transmitted over great distances, were actually true. Thus, reports regarding violent disputes, maraudery or slave raids were often highly exaggerated or were distorted in the course of transmission. And so it was that a half-dozen marauding Chokwe were sometimes reported to be a menacing, hostile Chokwe advance.[7] Particularly when it came to gauging the secret intentions of large and somehow anomalous caravans, rumours spread like wildfire. These commonly corresponded to the people's own fears stemming from negative past experiences or to their own sense of guilt.

The few caravans headed by whites were understandably a particular source of interest. For this reason when Carvalho was in Malanje making preparations for his expedition, news spread quickly and his activities soon became a "hot" topic, especially amongst the Mbangala. Their experiences with the Portuguese, namely their war against the Jaga Ambumba, led them to fear the worst. The soldiers in particular were regarded with suspicion. Rumours, intentionally disseminated, gave the impression that the Mbangala would try to hinder them by force and kill any porter who so much as breathed the wrong way and were so effective in discouraging anyone from entering into Carvalho's service that no one in fact did so. For a long time the Mbangala suspected that the latter intended to ally himself with the Mwant Yav and the Lunda in order to drive them from their territory. It was only thanks to the more prudent elders that no attempts were made to block the expedition, a plan that may have ended in a good deal of bloodshed. As the expedition turned north, it was suspected for a time that "the Kongo" might be the final destination. It was only once reports that Carvalho and his people were in fact treating the population quite well, that public opinion shifted. Now, the Mbangala came to see in him a man who would open up new trading opportunities, a view that spread as quickly as the previous one.[8]

Defensive Strategies

Intimidation served not only to heighten the fears amongst one's own populace, but also served to keep others in check via the strategic dispersion of rumours. In this particular defensive strategy the Mbangala were experts. Their geographic position as guardians of the most important Kwango passages and their predominance in the northern slave and rubber trades put them in a key position to do so. Irrespective of their own concerns regarding the "real" destination of the Carvalho expedition, they were far more preoccupied with preserving their effective trade monopoly. To do so they used to their own advantage the general fear of those holding the Mwant Yav title – initially directed against the holders of the Mwant Yav title in Mussumba on the Kalanyi, which followed one another in quick succession and then aimed against the elected Mwant Yav Kibuinza Yanvo in exile. This served to rouse apprehensions among the general population as well as the chiefs vis-à-vis the expedition so that, for example, none would volunteer to serve as porters. Such attempts were successful thanks to the dispersion of a rumour that Carvalho was planning to sell to the Lunda as slaves any

6 On this section see, for example, Carvalho 1890-1894, II: 361, 719, 797; 1890a: 88 Fn. 1, 678; see also 1890b: 116; Buchner in Heintze 1999b: 411, cf. also. 139.
7 Carvalho 1890b: 116.
8 Carvalho 1890-1894, I: 332, 435; II: 286, 316; IV: 597.

man he had happened to hire as a porter in Malanje and en route or any woman he might encounter in the villages through which he passed. The plan worked, and the local population opted to hide in the bush from the Portuguese or chose to submit themselves to the "protection" of the Mbangala, who despite their penchant for raiding caravans, were judged to be far less a threat than the Mwant Yav. Yet another rumour, spread by the Mbangala, claimed that Carvalho intended to conquer the Lunda region and make the Mwant Yav a puppet king under Portuguese control.[9] In a similar fashion the Mbangala tried to instrumentalise the Chokwe for their own purposes: they spread the rumour that Carvalho was planning to attack the Chokwe. This, so the Mbangala hoped, would goad the Chokwe into doing some of the dirty work for them and impede the Portuguese in their journey, preventing them from becoming a dangerous trade rival.[10] For their part, the Mbangala prevented Lunda caravans from crossing the Kwango whenever possible in an effort to prevent the latter from establishing direct trade relations with the Portuguese. The reason for doing so cited by the Mbangala was "sincere concern" that once they reached the coast the Lunda would be sold into slavery. As for their fear of the Lunda, this stemmed from the concern that the caravans and diplomatic emissaries sent by the Mwant Yav were on orders to obtain soldiers from the Portuguese with which they would be able to drive the Mbangala from their home – a suspicion that was a direct inversion of the supposed aims of Portuguese enterprises.[11]

However rumours helped not just the Mbangala protect their own commercial interests. Kaungula hindered Buchner on his way north by citing an argument originally put forth by the Mbangala that Portuguese rule in Malanje had come to an end. Prior to this, a similar attempt on the part of Buchner was foiled when the Tukongo on the Kasai managed to turn their population on him, forcing him to head back, by propagating accusations that he had been sent by the Mwant Yav in order to conquer them and extort slaves and ivory from him. Rumours were also spread that Schütt intended to erect a fort on the other side of the Kwango River and that he was planning to secretly supply the Mai Munene with weapons in order to arm him against the Mwant Yav. Others spread rumours of the mortal dangers posed by the local population that awaited the travellers or dropped hints regarding the enormous distances and great stretches of uninhabited territory that promised nothing but hunger and starvation.[12]

Fear and curiosity shaped the manner in which Africans came to regard whites. The Atlantic slave trade and the various military campaigns launched by whites were ever-present, so Africans tended to expect the worst from Europeans. The Portuguese for their part did their best to cultivate this image amongst Africans by deploying threats that ranged from the realistic to the "supernatural" (such as punishment through Zambi), a strategy that reified the African inferiority complex, which found its expression in numerous stories.

However, Portuguese trading companies, whose employees and agents operating in the interior were often Ambakists and were visited, among others, by all of the more prominent Mbangala chiefs, exerted considerable power of attraction. Yet here too, the order of the day was to keep bothersome competitors at bay. Thus, wherever they went – which in the mid-19th century was all the way to the Kololo on the Zambezi – the Ambakists propagated the rumour that the Portuguese lived in the water and that they produced their goods on the ocean floor. They themselves ostensibly dared only engage in silent trade with them on the coast. With this they implied that only they had

9 Carvalho 1890-1894, I: 365; II: 75, 390, 429, 459, 517, 782; III: 290.
10 Carvalho 1890-1894, II: 317, 339.
11 Carvalho 1890-1894, III: 168, 512.
12 Buchner in Heintze 1999b: 152, 362, 368; Lux 1880: 129; Gierow 1881-1883: 102, 118; Wissmann et al. 1891: 283-284.

sufficient experience in order to deal successfully with these strange creatures and that the most prudent course was to leave to them any further commercial activities with the Portuguese. They claimed to deposit the ivory on the beach in the evening and in turn found there the next morning a number of goods that the white water men had placed there for them. "'Now', added they to my men, 'how can you Makololo trade with these 'Mermen?' Can you enter into the sea, and tell them to come ashore?'"[13]

The most effective defence against unwanted competition was the dissemination of horror stories,[14] a strategy which was deployed particularly when it came to European explorers, whose motives were not understood and whose intentions were regarded with suspicion.

Interests also collided when long-distance trading caravans, attempting to gain access to cheaper or better markets beyond their customary routes, encountered local power holders, who did not wish to relinquish their competitive advantage in production or intermediary trade. Monopolies were thus fiercely defended. Without walls, a standing army or an extensive road network this was best accomplished through intimidation. Horror stories relating all manner of atrocities thus proved to be an extraordinarily well-tried and effective remedy. Accordingly, in the mid-18th century the Jaga of Kasanje used to threaten the Portuguese "that he would eat them cooked and having people carry pots, wood, and water in front of them to bully them even faster".[15]

For many peoples of the interior, particularly for the Lunda whose rulers laid claim to a monopoly in the ivory trade, cannibalism represented the greatest horror. So did it not make sense to stir this general fear of cannibalism and use it to one's own advantage?[16]

Since the caravan leaders were not to be dissuaded from their plans with mere arguments, and since violence entailed unpredictable consequences that made it an option best avoided, the most effective way of preventing them from continuing on was to influence their porters. A combination of well-known legends, a pre-existing fear of unknown lands and the very real dangers of long-distance travel within Africa, as well as the scare-tactics on the part of the local population and its political leaders was quite effective in fulfilling this purpose. The fact that Portuguese long-distance traders like Saturnino de Sousa Machado also spread these tales of cannibalism[17] made such stories all the more credible. Yet contrary to what is commonly assumed, explorers were generally nonplussed by such scare tactics. They saw through these strategies and poked fun at the cowardice of their employees.

The African strategy proved to be highly effective. Buchner failed and was forced to turn back. A similar fate awaited Paul Güßfeldt in Loango, Alexander von Mechow on the Kwango, Hans Müller amongst the Pende, as well as others. Güßfeldt realised that the Vili had a vested interest in making the expedition impossible:

> [...] wir waren für sie eine respectable Macht, die keinen Handel trieb; wenn wir ins Innere gingen, so konnte es nur zum Schaden der Eingeborenen sein. Sie hatten daher nichts Eiligeres zu thun, als die Leute, wo sie ihrer habhaft werden konnten, durch falsche Vorspiegelungen zur Flucht zu verleiten, oder ihnen durch die grauenhaften Schilderungen der hinter dem Walde wohnenden Menschenfresser

[13] Livingstone 1858: 293, 311, 416; 1963, I: 32. See also Carvalho 1890-1894, I: 435; Schütt 1881: 68; Wolff 1889: 215. On "silent trade" generally see Farias 1974. On African notions and attitudes vis-à-vis whites, see, for example, Carvalho 1890-1894, I: 448; II: 97-98, 339, 390; III: 48; Monteiro 1875, I: 89-90; Pechuël-Loesche 1879: 276; Schütt 1881: 68; Wissmann et al. 1891: 96, 150.

[14] On the relationship between trade and horror stories generally see Vajda 1999.

[15] In Sebestyén and Vansina 1999: 338; see also 314, 315, 319, 325, 336, 342, 343, 349. Although in this case the Jaga's threats were "merely" intended to extort alcoholic beverages and cloth from the traders, it basically fits the wider context addressed here.

[16] On this see also Heintze 2002: Chap. III.5; 2003a,b.

[17] Lux 1880: 102-103.

> eine solche Furcht einzujagen, dass ich sicher sein durfte, bei einem wirklich erfolgenden Aufbruch mich von allen meinen Leuten verlassen zu sehen.[18]
>
> […] we were for them a formidable force, which did not engage in trade; when we made our way into the interior, it could only be to the detriment of the natives. They thus had nothing more urgent to do than use false pretences to induce people to flight, wherever they happened upon them, or to give them such a fright with their atrocious tales of man-eaters living just beyond the woods that I may be quite certain should a real departure come to pass, I would find myself abandoned by all my people.

Mputo Kasongo, the head of the Yaka on the Kwango, desired to keep von Mechow under his influence for as long as possible to ensure continued access to his tempting selection of goods. He therefore requested:

> ich möchte [...] bei ihm bleiben, wenigstens einige Zeit, oder bis zu meiner Rückkehr einen Weißen bei ihm lassen. Unterhalb an seinem Zaidi Kuango gäbe es keinen Muata Jamvo mehr, auch würde meine weitere Stromfahrt ein Wasserfall hindern, der höher als sein Haus sei; unterhalb dieses Falles bis zum Meere hin wohnen Menschenfresser, die uns todt schlagen würden, auch würden wir, ehe wir dort hinkämen, Hungers sterben, da die Majakalla aus Furcht vor mir keine Lebensmittel an uns verkaufen, sondern vor uns fliehen würden.[19]
>
> I should [...] remain with him, at least for a while, or to leave a white man with him until I return. Below on his *Zaidi Kuango* there reportedly is no other Muata Jamvo, and my continued journey downriver would supposedly be hindered by a waterfall that is higher than his house; below these falls up to the sea allegedly live cannibals, who would beat us to death, yet we would also die of hunger before ever getting there, since the Majakalla fear me and will not sell us any provisions, but would instead flea from us.

The Lunda chief in the Pende region, Mwata Kumbana, told Müller that the Kete

> alle Leichen der von ihm Hingerichteten, die in den Luschiko geworfen würden, auffischten, um sie zu essen. Ebenso würden Fremde, die sie besuchten, ohne weiteres getödtet und verzehrt; deshalb könne er mir auch nicht Leute und Kanoes geben, um die Tukette zu besuchen, da sonst, wenn mir etwas zustieße, niemals ein Weißer ihn wieder besuchen würde.[20]
>
> would in order to eat them fish out all the corpses of those he had executed and thrown into the Lushiko. Likewise, strangers who visit them are evidently killed and eaten without further ado; that is why he supposedly cannot provide me with men and canoes to visit the Tukette, since if something should happen to me, no white man would ever come visit him again.

Other explorers too had to struggle against such attempts to influence their people and, like Pogge and Wissmann, could only continue on their planned route with the greatest of difficulty.[21] Willy Wolff was faced with similar challenges on his arduous journey to Mputo Kasongo on the Kwango.[22]

These stories and rumours had such a considerable impact on the porters, because they corresponded with their expectations. Everyone had already heard them back home and thus considered their worst fears confirmed when stories like these were re-told – in the appropriate amount of detail – by those they encountered on their journey.[23] In such accounts the mortal dangers that a journey into the African interior entailed, became manifest to the porters. In the caravans lead by European explorers fear took on incredible proportions, because here porters, unlike those working for African trade ventures, were often forced to commit for an undetermined period of time and only had a vague idea as to what the final destination would be. This was the primary reason that explorers were initially confronted time and again with an intractable wall of opposition that made it difficult for them to find porters willing to work for them.[24]

[18] Güßfeldt 1875: 216.
[19] von Mechow 1882: 484. See also Büttner 1890: 176.
[20] In Wissmann et al. 1891: 98.
[21] Pogge 1883-1885: 56; Wissmann 1892: 124-125; see also 128, 132.
[22] Wolff 1889: 165.
[23] See for instance Carvalho 1890-1894, I: 87; Wolff 1889: 159. See also Büttner 1890: 159, 162, 170; Capello and Ivens 1881, I: 5, 180, 225-226; Wissmann et al. 1891: 28, 111, cf. also. 215; 1892: 84, 109, 128.
[24] On this see Heintze 1999a: Einführung: Ch. 7.

The instrumentalisation of pre-existing hostilities and their cultivation via strategically dispersed rumours played an important part in strategies of self-defence. However, where such tactics proved insufficient or failed altogether, the only option that remained was the total blockade of any and all public dissemination of information. Thus, the Kwango in particular not only presented an insurmountable barrier to the expansion of trade relations, but also appears to have been just as important as a barrier to communication, across which news regarding the interior reached the Portuguese either only rarely or only after an extended delay or only in the form of highly distorted tales of terror, if at all. And so the commonly held notion that the Portuguese knew little of the world beyond the borders of their district held some grain of truth.[25] For example, it is quite remarkable how late Carvalho learned of the existence of the recently elected legitimate pretender to the title of Mwant Yav, who was living in exile, Kibuinza Yanvo, namely only once he had travelled a considerable distance beyond the Wamba.[26]

Creating a Sense of Trust

Parallel to the rapid expansion and consolidation of the communication network in the second half of the 19th century a general sense of anxiety gripped the population across large parts of Central Africa, an anxiety caused in part by the Chokwe migrations, the increase in slave raids, the various far-reaching economic shifts and the political erosion of the Lunda "Commonwealth". The rapid increase in the speed and reach of transmission as well as the expansion of the information network brought the "big wide world" into closer contact with the daily lives of individuals, often making it seem more threatening than previously. However at the same time, these developments gave them with greater agency.

The increased contacts across ethnic boundaries and over great distances exacerbated the credibility problem. However, the endless succession of caravans, particularly during the rubber boom, repeatedly brought the same leaders to the same places. People knew each other, had heard of each other, and thus learned how better to assess those they encountered. This made it much easier to evaluate and gauge reports, a matter which became especially important when vital personal interests were at stake. Stable relations of trust were the key to candour. Since such relations also served as a basis for longer term political and economic strategies and tended to last longer if they corresponded to kinship ties, the marriage strategies of political leaders took on a new importance.

Although the desire of many chiefs in the interior to have Ambakists settle amongst them might seem to have stemmed primarily from commercial considerations and to have served to increase their own prestige, their role was much more extensive. They enjoyed a high level of trust, which was useful in their function as transcultural "interpreters", amongst other things. They helped clear up misunderstandings, and through their interethnic competence were able to contribute to the well-being of both sides. Unlike in Europe, where kings married their daughters off to other states in the interests of alliance politics, men from other ethnic groups and states were brought to the court so that they could marry a daughter or other close female relative. In addition, or alternatively, these highly welcomed strangers were placed in politically prominent positions in government. And so it was that Mukenge's most powerful minister and son-in-law was a Mbangala, and of the twenty counsellors at the court of Mwata Kumbana one was Mbangala and the other a Chokwe.[27] Since Europeans neither understood such

[25] Soyaux 1879, II: 12.
[26] Carvalho 1890-1894, II: 58.
[27] Wissmann et al. 1891: 91, 150; 1892: 84.

actions, nor were they willing to go along with them,[28] they were shut out from these networks of relations. Europeans were thus regarded as useful inasmuch as they were important factors when it came to economic matters or prestige and insofar as they might serve the respective African ruler as a protective political authority or as a feared military power. But since they communicated with Africans on a completely different wavelength, in other words in a completely different socio-political idiom, they were not only unable to "understand", but were also largely unable to participate in the intra-African news and communication networks at all.

The category of kinship, so important to all the peoples of Central Africa, determined not only social relationships, but was also relevant at the political level.[29] This found expression in the forms of address used amongst power holders of equal rank, who called each other "brother" (as the Kongo King or the Mwant Yav called the King of Portugal and the King of Kongo and the Mwant Yav called the Mbangala chief Kinguri)[30] and in the classification of persons unequal in rank as "father" and "son", or more precisely, the practice of addressing the political leader as "father" and his subjects as "children".[31] However, the importance of kinship is particularly apparent in the cases of perpetual kinship and positional succession. This involved linking political offices to each other via appropriate kinship categories, which supposedly reflected and perpetuated the position of the first holder of that particular office and was not at all affected by the actual kinship relations of the current office holder, which were often non-existent.

In a society, in which categories of kinship are so central, it is not surprising that kinship was instrumentalised in yet another respect: as a historical relationship between different and sometimes even conflicting ethnic groups. Many oral traditions in this region (such as those of the Lunda, Mbangala, Songo and Chokwe) make reference to siblings or close relations who long ago went their separate ways or emigrated and founded their own states or ethnic groups. For a long time the migrations related in these narratives were taken more or less literally. Recently, however, it has been suggested that these are either mostly or entirely the product of long-distance trade, or trade in general.[32] This hypothesis is, in my opinion, quite convincing, particularly when one takes into account that the early Mbundu traditions recorded by Cavazzi did not as yet make any mention of such extensive "founding" migrations.[33]

The dissemination of these "oral traditions" was achieved via the common practice that visitors, such as caravan leaders, emissaries and messengers, first related an extensive historical narrative, before finally getting down to the business that had occasioned their visit. According to Carvalho the Mbundu, Mbangala and Shinje called this lengthy account, which could take more than an hour to recite, *maézu*, while the Lunda called it *lussango*.[34] It was by these means that information and various histories

[28] See, for example, the advances to which Pogge and Buchner were subject in Musumba.

[29] On this see especially the works of Miller; regarding the slaves integrated into Mbangala society see Miller 1977. Generally with respect to Africa and particularly with regards to politics see Kopytoff 1987: 36-48; cf. also Pritchett 2001: 11: "Kin, even if they are fictive, can be more easily controlled. […] The conversion of strangers into kin, even across ethnic boundaries, is thus a dominant feature of the Central African ecumene."

[30] Numerous examples regarding the Kongo king can be found in the documents published by António Brásio et al. On the Mwant Yav see, for example, Carvalho 1890-1894, II: 295, 638, 723; III: 220, 383.

[31] See, for example, Carvalho 1890-1894, II: 625; III: 44, 217, 569, 783, 907; IV: 254.

[32] Vansina 1998a also in particular "Oral Tradition and Ethnicity: The case of the Pende" (manuscript, 1998b); MacGaffey 2000: 11, Ch. 4, esp. pp. 69, 72-77, 205. On this see also Pritchett 2001: 24-26. Decades ago Vajda (1973/74) already pointed out the tropes in stories relating population movements, without these findings ever meeting with any significant acknowledgement. Currently Vansina is continuing his convincing attempts – backed by Robertson und Bradley (2000) – to ban the long-standing trope of a "Bantu migration" to the realm of fairy tales (see for example 1995).

[33] Heintze 1987 and 1996: Ch. 1.

[34] Carvalho 1890a: 390. On *maézu* cf. Matta (1893: 88), Kimbundu: "*maèzu*", see pl. Parabens. Conclusão. Os ambakistas costumam concluir as suas palestras com a seguinte locução: *maêz'omo!* Ao que os circunstantes

spread across great distances, whereby it was not uncommon for them to be embellished or changed along the way.[35] A common past, even if it was a distant one, carried an extraordinary amount of political weight. For one, it allowed one to partake of the prestige of the more renowned states.[36] For another, these claims of kinship could prove quite useful in the context of increasing contact through trade (as was the case with Mbangala and Lunda) or violent conflict (the clash between the Chokwe and the Lunda). While they could not prevent violence, they could help to patch things up in the context of a *rapprochement*. So it was that in the 1880s, when Musumba and many Lunda chiefdoms either were threatened or felt threatened by the Chokwe, it became particularly important for the Lunda that they emphasise the shared genealogical origins of their respective rulers.[37] The appeal to genealogical ties with the visitors that extended back to former times was thus deployed as a strategy to quell the conflict. By means of frequent repetition as the caravan networks became increasingly close-knit certain versions, told at public audiences held in the power centres, spread over great distances, finally becoming common knowledge.[38]

Conclusion

Trade, exploration and communication are the most important factors that shaped western Central Africa in the 19th century. The caravans with their African, Luso-African and European leaders played a prominent role in these processes that went far beyond the economic and commercial aspects. They created a tightly woven communication network that brought into contact distant regions, at least insofar as they lay along the caravan routes. In order to access the growing volume of news and information, as well as be able to assess these, there were certain criteria that needed to be fulfilled, which were dependent on such factors as geographic location, status, respecting existing conventions and sharing a common basis of trust. Those who did not fulfil (recall Buchner and other German explorers), were debarred and had to reckon with serious drawbacks or even injury. With the abandonment of certain routes, the corresponding branches of the communication network either broke off entirely or were weakened, so that one cannot say that in the second half of the 19th century an information and communication network continually and consistently spanned the entire stretch of space crossed by the caravans, despite the significant increase in the possibilities by which one could communicate across great distances. The constitution of these new transregional communicative spaces was nonetheless of great political and economic significance.

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35 Carvalho 1890a: 390. See also 1890-1894, II: 580, 766-767; IV: 55, 81, 564.

36 See the case of the ancient King of Ndongo, the *ngola a kilunaje*, who, the southerly kingdom of Wambu (amongst others) claimed as its founder, citing the "migration trope" to make its case. See Heintze 1987: 276 and 1996: 23.

37 See examples in Carvalho 1890b: 123; 1890-1894, II: 723; cf. also. Capello and Ivens 1881, I: 173; Wissmann et al. 1891: 101.

38 For more details on this section see Heintze 2003c.

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