

## Introduction

For the purposes of this study I am defining West Central Africa largely by the watershed of the Congo River. If the region has a hydrographic center, it is the Lunda Plateau in eastern Angola, a relatively flat region at roughly 1,000 meters elevation, origin of many of the largest effluents of the Congo. This highland continues eastward until it reaches the great range of mountains that define the Rift Valley, and separate it from the Nile system. Because human geography is not always identical to natural geography, there are additions to this defined space.

An important addition is the rivers that drain from the low mountains that define the western end of the Congo watershed that flow westward into the Atlantic Ocean which are included in the study because many political units had borders that straddled the two, such as the Kingdoms of Ndongo and Kasanje, which were regularly engaged on both sides of the Kwango watershed, or the Luyana Kingdom, which lay squarely in the Zambezi River watershed but was in substantial communication with the Lunda Empire. I have also left out the river systems that flow southward into the Congo from the Central African Republic, and the great northern bend of the Congo that they nourish, because there was very little engagement with them by areas lying south of that, or at least very little that is identified in the present historiography.

The area includes the northern two-thirds of Angola, most of the Democratic Republic of Congo, the southern half of the Republic of Congo, and a small part of Zambia's northern and western territory. It is distinctly tropical; the northern part lies almost on the Equator, its southern extension above the Tropic of Capricorn. However, this tropical climate is moderated by its elevation: aside from the very northern part of the Congo basin and the coastal lowlands along the Atlantic, the average elevation circles around 1,000 meters.

West Central Africa was, if not the origin point of humanity, close to it. From the early hominid species that preceded our own to the emergence of modern humans around 200,000 years ago, West Central Africa was part of that transformation. As the Early Stone Age developed and humans started their remarkable advances in tool making, entering new habitats, developing artistic expression, and showing signs of planning and strategizing, people in West Central Africa were in the forefront.

Those ancient people lived for millennia through foraging; essentially hunting wild animals and collecting wild plant foods. Their residential groups were small and they were nomadic, though usually within a relatively constrained area. They had much larger gatherings sporadically where neighboring groups would meet and choose mates from outside their small group, preserving some genetic diversity.<sup>1</sup> We know relatively little about their lives, but we do know that their population did not grow by very much, if at all. In fact, low or non-existent population growth is characteristic of populations following that subsistence strategy.

Of those earliest humans who occupied West Central Africa for thousands of years, however, very little trace remains. Virtually all the inhabitants of the present-day region descend from immigrants from farther north, usually called Bantu speakers, who entered the region about 1500 BCE. Originating in the border between Cameroon and Nigeria, these immigrants exploited a complex environment and cultivated tree crops as well as grains. They especially favored riverine or coastal environments, and were making pottery, though not yet producing iron tools and weapons, as they entered.

A climatic shift that took place around 2000–1500 BCE opened up new stretches of their favored environment, especially along the valley of the Sangha River, and they began to move into what had once been – for their way of life – the uninviting rain forest, which was now available. Their settlements were constructed along the banks of rivers, and they moved southward until they emerged on the southern side of the Equatorial Rainforest.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A classic study of one well-preserved archaeological site is Creighton Gabel, *Stone Age Hunters on the Kafue: The Gwisho A Site* (Boston, 1965).

<sup>2</sup> Koen Bostoen, Bernard Clist, Charles Doumenge, et al., “Middle to Late Holocene Paleoclimatic Change and the Early Bantu Expansion in the Rain Forests of Western Central Africa,” *Current Anthropology* 56 (2015): 354–367 (with commentary 367–379); Rebecca Grollemund, Simon Bradford, Koen Bostoen et al., “Bantu Expansion Shows that Habitat Alters the Route and Space of Human Dispersals,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (US)* 112 (2015): 13296–13301.

Since rivers throughout the region flow uniformly from south to north to join the Congo River, the Bantu speakers' movement was remarkably unilineal, proceeding southward up the rivers and staying close to their banks where rich aquatic, forest, and farming opportunities prevailed.<sup>3</sup> Because of this peculiarity of geography, their expansion was remarkably rapid: they moved south of the forest by 500 BCE and then began the occupation of what is today the Democratic Republic of Congo and Angola.<sup>4</sup>

Although archaeological evidence shows that there was a long-established human population in the area, their ancient subsistence strategy gave them a scattered population, which Bantu speakers replaced.<sup>5</sup> Genetic studies show this replacement, since all the currently studied populations in West Central Africa today show no trace of the genetic signature of the older population. Only in areas south of this region did the genetic characteristics of the original population survive, either as independent groups or as a component of the larger gene-pool.<sup>6</sup>

The group of Bantu speakers who came into the savannas of West Central Africa were farmers, and they brought a different economy from the one that had prevailed since the time of human origins. Farming requires more work than foraging, and to minimize the effort, farming populations have tended to have

<sup>3</sup> Cesare de Filippo, Koen Bostoen, Mark Stoneking, et al., "Bringing Together Linguistic and Genetic Evidence to Test the Bantu Expansion," *Proceedings of the Royal Society B* 279 (2012): 3256–3263.

<sup>4</sup> Much of the debate about specific routes of the larger Bantu Migration in literature concerns the timing and direction of the eastern division of the language, which does not concern us here, and so this straightforward account is justified: see models in Sen Li, Carina Schlebusch, and Mattias Jakobsson, "Genetic Variation Reveals Large Scale population Expansion and Migration during the Expansion of Bantu-Speaking Peoples," *Proceedings of the Royal Society B* 281 (2014), <https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/10.1098/rspb.2014.1448>.

<sup>5</sup> Genetic research in West Central Africa is still too limited to be definitive, but as a parallel, consider the very low impact of European foragers on the genetic signature of modern Europeans, where a similar migration took place: Mark Lipson, Anna Szécsény-Nagy et al., "Parallel Paleogenomic Transects Reveal Complex Generic History of Early European Farmers," *Nature* 551 (2017): 368–372.

<sup>6</sup> Pontus Skoglund, Jessica Thompson, Mary Prendergast, et al., "Reconstructing African Prehistoric Population Structure," *Cell* 171 (2017): 59–71. This study covers the Bantu Migration as relates to Eastern and Southern Africa, but is likely to also apply to West Central. For a study confirming these results for modern population in West Central Africa using only modern DNA, see Sandra Beleza, L. Gusmão et al., "The Genetic Legacy of Western Bantu Migrations," *Human Genetics* 117 (2005): 366–375.

populations that expand.<sup>7</sup> The work of farming is also highly productive, and therefore the potential for long-lasting and very substantial population growth to take place is given with such populations.<sup>8</sup> In fact, simulation models propose that as few as 2,000 people came into West Central Africa, and then grew rapidly.<sup>9</sup> However, even rapid population growth, by the standards of pioneering farmers, did not fill the land quickly, as they entered this region after about 500 BCE, a much shorter period than the thousands of years that farming populations had been living north of the rainforest, or in many other continents. Hence their population by 1000 CE or so was still very low by the standards of regions that had practiced agriculture for much longer periods of time. Indeed, low relative population density has been characteristic of West Central Africa throughout the period in this study.

It is difficult to estimate populations with any certainty on archaeological evidence alone, but later data support the finding of low densities. There is scattered quantitative data in the seventeenth century, mostly from the Kingdom of Kongo, which, thanks to an early conversion to Christianity, had baptismal records. Although most records are lost, those that survive suggest that rural densities of population along the coast were often as low as four or five persons per square kilometer where scarce rainfall and infertile soil made supporting larger populations difficult.<sup>10</sup> Inland, in better-watered

<sup>7</sup> Ricardo Andrés Guzman and Jacob Weisdorf, “The Neolithic Revolution from a Price-Theoretic Perspective,” *Journal of Development Economics* 96 (2011): 209–219, and the more empirical literature cited therein.

<sup>8</sup> See the example of the Indo-European expansion into Western Europe which offers a useful parallel: Jean-Pierre Bocquet-Appel et al., “Understanding the Rates of Expansion of the Farming System in Europe,” *Journal of Archaeological Science* 39 (2012): 531–546. Indeed, the time frame is too short for the “boom and bust” population expansion in Europe: Stephen Shennan, Sean Downey, et al., “Regional Population Collapse Followed Initial Agriculture Booms in Mid-Holocene Europe,” *Nature Communications* 4 (2013): 1–8.

<sup>9</sup> Li, Schlebusch and Jakobsson, “Genetic Variation.”

<sup>10</sup> John Thornton, “Demography and History in the Kingdom of Kongo, 1550–1750,” *Journal of African History* 18 (1977): 507–530. For an important critique of this work, see Igor Matonda Sakala, “Nouveau regards sur la démographie du bassin de l’Inkisi à la époque du royaume Kongo, XVI du XVIIIème siècles,” *Cahiers d’études africaines* 56 (2014) (2016): 845–873. Matonda Sakala (p. 850) mistakenly assumes that Francesco da Troyna made one voyage to Savanna and Kiowa instead of two, thus wrongly giving a much denser population for that region than I proposed. However, his critique (esp. pp. 852–860) for the Inkisi Valley, does suggest that higher densities prevailed there than my original work supposed.

environments it was probably a good deal higher, but surely rarely over ten people per square kilometer.<sup>11</sup>

Other examples come from the late eighteenth century, where village counts make it possible to estimate population in the broad highland plains west of the Kwango River, in the Kingdoms of Viye and Mbailundu where rural population densities ran around four people per square kilometer.<sup>12</sup> Low population density was just as visible in the lands of the Lunda Empire in the mid-nineteenth century. The Hungarian merchant Lázló Magyar visited the empire in the 1850s, when it was at its height, and estimated that in spite of its vast expanse, the country held scarcely a million souls, which would be a density of somewhere around three per square kilometer.<sup>13</sup>

The long-term participation in the Atlantic slave trade also restricted the capacity of countries to increase their populations where density was low even in the early years of the trade, like Kongo in the seventeenth century. The slave trade took some 7 million people, more than 4 million of whom left in the last century-and-a-half of the trade – a very large number by any standards, and, when considered along with the secondary depopulating effects of warfare, famine, and other byproducts of enslavement, this probably restricted or even reversed the natural tendency of populations to grow.<sup>14</sup> While the impact of this loss

<sup>11</sup> It is possible to make a less specific estimation of the population of Kongo using a survey of annual baptisms produced by a Jesuit missionary in about 1624, IHGB (Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Brasileiro) DL848,16, “Descrição das necessidades do reino do Congo sobre assuntos religiosos,” fol. 2. His estimates were that 40,000 people were baptized annually in six core provinces, yielding a total population of 1,140,000 if all children were baptized in the year of their birth. However, the same report notes that each large province-sized parish had only one curate, and if Capuchin activity later is a guide, no priest could visit all the areas in one year. Assuming a bi-annual visit, the population would be 655,000. This would allow an overall rural density of 6.6 people per square kilometer, probably closer to 5 on the coast and perhaps 8 in the interior.

<sup>12</sup> Linda Heywood and John Thornton, “African Fiscal Systems as Sources for Demographic History: The Case of Central Angola, 1799–1920,” *Journal of African History* 29 (1988): 213–228.

<sup>13</sup> Heywood and Thornton, “Fiscal Systems,” pp. 226–227. We are assuming that Lunda accounted for its population through a tax-collection system that was probably based on village counts (as Magyar used them for the Ovimbundu region); Joaquim Rodrigues Graça was able to construct a table of tributes during his diplomatic visit in 1847.

<sup>14</sup> Based in part on the estimate column in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database ([www.slavevoyages.org](http://www.slavevoyages.org)), but augmented by my belief that the absence of crucial records makes the period before 1700 subject to serious undercounting which has not been fully considered in the database. For the post 1701 period, Daniel Domingues da Silva, “The Atlantic Slave Trade from Angola: A Port-by-Port Estimate of Slaves Embarked, 1701–1867,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 46 (2013): 105–122.

was in some ways offset by the specifics of the demand for adult males in particular, which left a larger female population behind who preserved their fertility, the export of people nevertheless had an impact. However, given what we know of the impact in Kongo and Angola, it is fairly clear that the population in the fifteenth century was still low.<sup>15</sup>

Low population densities made the region appear practically empty. Travelers often had to camp for a night or even several nights because there were no villages on their route. Empty country in Kongo left ample space for wild animals, both potential game animals such as antelopes, but also dangerous animals like lions and leopards.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, travelers en route from Viye in Angola's central highlands to the Lunda Empire in the nineteenth century often recorded camping along the way, often for several days, between settled areas.<sup>17</sup>

These rural regions with their low densities were studded with considerably more populated areas, which were typically around political capitals. The region around São Salvador in Kongo had a density of about fifty people per square kilometer in the early seventeenth century, ten times the rural average, and resulted in nearly 100,000 people being concentrated within a 10-kilometer radius of the capital, close to 20 percent of the kingdom's total population.<sup>18</sup> Mbanza Soyo also enjoyed densities near that level at the end of the eighteenth century, allowing its capital region to house some 30,000 people.<sup>19</sup> As elsewhere, Musumba,

<sup>15</sup> On the impact on sex ratios, and its role in limiting population decline, see John Thornton, "The Slave Trade in Eighteenth-Century Angola: Effects on Demographic Structures," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 14 (1980): 417–427.

<sup>16</sup> John Thornton, *The Kingdom of Kongo: Civil War and Transition, 1641–1718* (Madison, 1983), pp. 12–14.

<sup>17</sup> For example, see the route to the Lunda capital by the Angolan pombeiros in the early nineteenth century: Pedro João Baptista, "Lembrança de partida do Muata-Yamvo para a terra do Cazembe Caquinhata . . . 1810," *Annaes Maritimos e Coloniaes* (henceforth *AMC*) 3 (1843): 427, and 437–438 (English translation in Richard Burton, *The Lands of Cazembe: Lacerda's Journey to Cazembe in 1798* [London, 1873], pp. 221–222 and 438).

<sup>18</sup> IHGB DL848, 16 "Descrição das necessidades do reino do Congo sobre assuntos religiosos," fol. 2. The number refers to the whole parish of São Salvador, 4,500 baptisms, and not just the city (on top of the mountain, Mongo dia Kongo) which held perhaps 30,000. The number 100,000 is derived by multiplying the population under age one by the multiplier established in Thornton, "Demography and History" as modified in John Thornton, "An Eighteenth Century Baptismal Register and the Demography of Manguenzo," in Christopher Fyfe and David McMaster (eds.), *African Historical Demography: Proceedings of a Seminar Held in the Centre of African Studies at the University of Edinburgh 29th and 30th April 1977* (Edinburgh, 1977), pp. 405–415.

<sup>19</sup> Thornton, "Demography and History," p. 520.

the capital region of Lunda, maintained a much higher density than the nearly empty countryside.

However that may be, the historical record does show that towns were often the destination of people enslaved in military campaigns. In a letter of 1514, Kongo's king, Afonso I, describes how people enslaved in a campaign in the Mbundu region were returned to the capital city rather than to elsewhere within the country, and one can thus imagine that repeated campaigns would swell the city considerably.<sup>20</sup> Royal estates, worked by slave labor, surrounded São Salvador, for example, and slaves worked around Mbanza Soyo as well.<sup>21</sup>

It would hardly be surprising that in an area of low overall population density, people wishing to maximize surplus production, increase the availability of personal service, and provide military forces strong enough to defend their position would do so by concentrating population. It is likely therefore that town formation throughout the region took the form of concentrating population, not so much in tightly enclosed centers, as in cities elsewhere in the world, but rather in nodes of high population density, surrounding a relatively small area of elite dwellings.

This is more or less precisely what the archaeological work at Kindoki, the site of Mbanza Nsundi in Kongo, demonstrated: a cluster of elite graves in the center of a fairly substantial region of dense settlement. Mbanza Mbata, the most important town in Kongo's eastern region, not yet located archaeologically, was described by Antonio de Teruel in around 1650 as "not very large, because only some of these lords and their servants live here, and a few fidalgos and their families."<sup>22</sup> The smaller population of this important place might have been diminished by the existence of a very substantial town, located on a trading hub and not a political center at Ngongo Mbata, which has been studied by archaeologists.<sup>23</sup> Like its political counterpart, it was more a population cluster than a densely settled center, and served as a staging area for the trade route that connected Luanda to the rich cloth-producing regions of the area south and east of the Malebo Pool.

<sup>20</sup> Afonso I to Manuel I, 5 October 1514, in António Brásio (ed.), *Monumenta Missionaria Africana*, 1st series, 15 vols. (Lisbon, 1952–1988; henceforth MMA), 1: 312–314.

<sup>21</sup> Thornton, *Kingdom of Kongo*, pp. 19–20.

<sup>22</sup> BN Madrid, MS 3533, de Teruel, "Descripcion narrativa," p. 78.

<sup>23</sup> Bernard Clist, Pierre de Maret, and Koen Bostoen (eds.), *Une archéologie des provinces septentrionales du royaume Kongo* (Oxford, 2018), pp. 71–132.

The longstanding practice of forcibly moving populations from sparsely inhabited rural regions to political centers helps to explain the capacity of West Central Africa to participate in the slave trade. The military and economic infrastructure to force people to move, and the legal distinctions to define their role in the new centers, also fit with the capacity to transfer them to foreigners for export. Afonso's letter of 1514 is prime testimony on how that process took place from the very dawn of the external slave trade. He, or generals in the field, divided captives between those given to him and taken to the capital and those that he assigned to Portuguese mercenaries in his army as payment for their service, to be exported to sugar-producing estates on the island of São Tomé.

Moving populations, especially given the general mobility of people, allowed towns to appear rapidly if the circumstances allowed. King Pedro IV of Kongo, rebuilding the abandoned São Salvador in 1705–1709, did so by gradually moving people loyal to him toward the city. While they appeared as armies under their commanders advancing on a target, in fact they constituted a steady population movement. Later kings or would-be kings followed a similar course during the long period of intermittent civil war that followed Pedro IV's reign, where victors tended to bring their supporters with them when they reoccupied São Salvador, thus continuing the tradition of population clumps around important political centers. Likewise, the losers in these struggles were not just politically displaced, but their followers were often the ones exported. If the unsuccessful were from rural areas, the depletion of the male population in war might well have prevented them from making another attempt at capturing the capital.<sup>24</sup>

At a much later date, it also probably reflects one goal in Lunda's westward expansion in the eighteenth century, in which tributaries were acquired, while also capturing slaves both to concentrate around their settlements and to sell to merchants working in the Atlantic slave trade.

West Central Africa today is a poor region, usually considered among the more underdeveloped in the world. But it is wrong to assume that it was always poor and underdeveloped; in fact, West Central Africa was as prosperous and productive as any other large region in the world during the period before 1852. Population data show that West Central Africa did not lack resources to feed, clothe, and protect

<sup>24</sup> John Thornton, "As guerras civeis no Congo e o tráfico de escravos: a história e a demografia de 1718 a 1844 revisitadas," *Estudos Afro-Asiáticos* (Rio de Janeiro) 32 (1997): 55–74.

its population from challenges of weather or disease. Precious data from a baptismal register of 1773 in Manguenzo, a Kongolese community living in the interior of Kakongo near the Atlantic coast, allow us to calculate vital rates for the region. Average life expectancy at birth of thirty years seems low, and infant mortality rates around 250 per thousand seems very high by today's expectations, higher even than contemporary Angola, and less than half that of the developed world of today. But it was comparable to other parts of the world, including Western Europe, at the time where similar apparently dismal vital rates prevailed.<sup>25</sup>

These positive demographic results were not indicative of poverty, and were achieved in a disease-heavy tropical environment. Kongo was routinely visited by major epidemics of *peste* in the mid-seventeenth century, and probably all the time.<sup>26</sup> But such deadly epidemics were common in the world as a whole in those days, and go a long way to explaining why human population growth was slow and average life expectancy low until the late nineteenth century.

This population structure challenges the frequent statements of travelers and missionaries that the country was in “miserable poverty.” Rather, their impressions were formed not by the idea that widespread adequate human health was a good measure of the wealth of a society, but rather by the absence of many of the markers of prosperity that they – and, often, modern interpreters – hold. In those days, national wealth tended to be measured by concentration of wealth in the hands of the elite, and manifested in physical structures and artistic works that they commissioned, rather than by the total capacity of a society to provide for its members.

Villages throughout the region were typically quite small, a few hundred residents at most. Low density often made it important to fence the villages around to prevent predatory animals from attacking villagers at night. They were mostly engaged in agriculture, though some villages engaged in specialized production as well, for example, in seventeenth-century Kongo, villages of salt producers, ceramic production at the village level, or metal workers blended this specialized production into an agricultural regime.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Thornton, “Eighteenth Century Baptismal Register”; Thornton, “Demography and History.”

<sup>26</sup> Thornton, “Demography and History,” p. 529; Thornton, *Kingdom of Kongo*, p. 12.

<sup>27</sup> Thornton, *Kingdom of Kongo*, pp. 12–14.

Villagers practiced long fallow cultivation (or “slash and burn”) meaning that they invested little time and energy in retaining soil fertility, but simply moved their fields when yields began to fall. When abandoned, the fields were left to go on a long fallow, perhaps several years or longer, before they were planted again, and by that time they had recovered their fertility.<sup>28</sup> Fields were cleared by burning before the start of cultivation; hoed by groups of women, and planted. Kongo dominates our knowledge, but late eighteenth-century observers in Viye in the Central Highlands region of central Angola noted more or less the same regime there as was found in the classic observers of the seventeenth century.<sup>29</sup>

Their demography suggests that they were as good as any other society of the time in feeding themselves, and the agriculture, entrusted mostly to women, provided the backbone of that livelihood. It was efficient in terms of labor input and product output when compared with other world regions of the time. Capuchin missionaries in Kongo and Ndongo believed that the agricultural labor involved little intensive work but yielded “most abundantly.”<sup>30</sup>

Long fallow agriculture meant that villages moved frequently, a product of the absence of smallholding property, and in fact of the legal principle of landholding altogether. Rare descriptions of village life present a situation in which cultivation was done in common by the women of the village, and at harvest divided up among the cultivators by families, according to the number of people in each.<sup>31</sup> Without having invested in fertilizer or other improvements, and using a long fallow

<sup>28</sup> Agricultural strategies are described in Giovanni Francesco da Roma, *Breve Relazione del successo della missione de' Frati minori Capuccini... al Regno del Congo* (Rome, 1648), pp. 68–70; Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi da Montecucolo, *Istorica Descrizione de tre regni Congo, Matamba ed Angola* (Bassano, 1687), Book 1, no. 50–53 as well as in other Capuchin sources; Cavazzi had experience in several areas, and is thus broader in his knowledge.

<sup>29</sup> IHGB DL29, 17, Nepomuceno Correia, “Customes do Bihe,” fols. 7v–8.

<sup>30</sup> John Thornton, “Precolonial African Industry and the Atlantic Trade,” *African Economic History* 19 (1990–91): 1–19; and see the replies and my own response in the rest of the journal. The impressionistic character of the observers' comments is not, of course, statistical in nature (there are no production statistics) but they do form a comparison with what they knew from their homes.

<sup>31</sup> Thornton, *Kingdom of Kongo*, p. 29. The precious primary source for this statement, virtually unique, is Dionigo Carli da Piacenza, *Viaggio nel Regno de Congo* (Venice, 1679), p. 98, and repeated in Dionigo Carli da Piacenza, *Il Moro trasportato nel inclita città di Venetia* (Bassano, 1687), p. 67.