

News BaTwa in the mist

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As a Stone Age archaeologist I rarely deal with the living as part of my research, but the lure of generating genetic-based data on the more recent prehistory of Zambia has led to an engagement with the complex reality of human relations that is largely invisible in the material record. One for which this dirt archaeologist was poorly prepared...

The background to this tale of naïveté lies in a five-year research project in the Luangwa Valley of eastern Zambia. The Luangwa Valley is an early offshoot of the East African Rift system that splits the high central African plateau as it traverses 700km from the border with Tanzania to the confluence of the Luangwa and Zambezi rivers on the border with Mozambique. The Valley forms a biogeographical corridor linking eastern

and southern Africa making it a natural focus for archaeological research aimed at documenting the ebb and flow of populations against a background of more than two millions years of climate change. The Luangwa river, so long as it flowed, would have attracted humans into the Valley, which also supports dense concentrations of large mammals and a mix of woodland savanna and riverine vegetation – an ideal locale for hunter-gatherers and for later farmers, though the endemic tsetse fly has kept pastoralists at bay. The ‘Past Peoples and Environments’ project is an interdisciplinary venture involving teams of geographers (dating and palaeoenvironment), palaeoanthropologists (fauna and hominin remains), archaeologists, historians, geneticists and a host of students.



Twa fisherman on the edge of Bangweulu swamps, Zambia

The involvement of geneticists at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology arose from an archaeological issue at the core of the project. Our work has dated the arrival of farming communities to the 4th century AD, and shown a continuing archaeological presence of hunter-gatherers until the 17th century. Anecdotal reports of hunter-gatherers (referred to as 'Akafula') being shot as recently as the early 20th century in the Valley (Winterbottom 1950) suggest an even longer interval of coexistence between foragers and farmers. It hardly needs stating that hunter-gatherers continue to live alongside and interact with a range of societies in parts of Africa today, in particular in the Kalahari and Congo basins. Zambia lies between these two populations of contemporary hunter-gatherers, raising the issue of the cultural and biological affinities of the now vanished inhabitants of the Luangwa Valley and south-central Africa more generally. Put bluntly, were they 'Pygmies' linked to forest based societies to the north or more akin to Bushmen groups in savannas to the south of the Zambesi? Maybe neither label fits, and the exercise of labelling is a misguided effort which ultimately denies local agency in the interests of finding a pigeonhole in which to place people with no contemporary voice? Perhaps, but the academic genie is long out of the bottle with questions of affinity already raised by geneticists (Cavalli-Sforza 1986; Coia et al 2002), archaeologists (Phillipson 1976; Smith 1997) and more recently by biological anthropologists (Morris & Ribot 2006). In brief, the pooled evidence from each of these lines of enquiry points to cultural and biological linkages with populations in central Africa rather than to the south. The combined archaeological and ethnohistorical evidence from Zambia and Malawi arguably supports a former extension of forest based societies across the *miombo* woodlands of the south-central plateau through which the Luangwa Valley cuts a path.

Our expectation or working hypothesis, then, is that the aboriginal inhabitants of the Valley were BaTwa, the name given by Bantu-speaking peoples to foragers and fishers from the Great Lakes southward to central Zambia. The generic meaning of BaTwa as 'people who always move' or 'the other' is little help in recognising ethnicity, but the prevalence of the term in central Africa and its general association with forager communities today suggests a once wider distribution of forest based hunter-gatherers outside the Congo basin. In Zambia, the term BaTwa has been applied to fishing

communities living on the Kafue floodplain (Smith & Dale 1920), in the Lukanga swamp near Kabwe (Shekelton 1908; Macrae 1929) and in the Bangweulu swamp of northern Zambia (Brelsford 1946). Some doubt has also remained about the status of these people as descendants of the aboriginal population, could they be just specialists in catching and selling fish drawn ultimately from the many farming and cattle keeping peoples living around these wetlands (Derricourt 1980)? Or perhaps the BaTwa were immigrants too, pushed south of the Luapula during the expansion of the Luba-Lunda empire (Gregersen 1994).

Brelsford's account of fishing communities on the islands of the Bangweulu is the most detailed with respect to material culture (an archaeologist's bias) and mentions differences in beliefs, language and burial customs between the Batwa and the immigrant Bantu-speaking Unga, as well as a history of intermarriage (but not conflict). Given the relative proximity of this body of water to the Luangwa Valley and its western escarpment, I decided to incorporate a DNA sampling of the BaTwa there into the overall project design. We had collected DNA from willing and interested volunteers among the two farming communities living in the Luangwa Valley and along the Muchinga Escarpment, the Bisa and the closely related Kunda. Their respective oral histories and other historical accounts trace their origin to the Luba-Lunda kingdom of the southeastern Congo basin (north of Bangweulu) with a spread of chiefly clans into what is now Zambia probably in the 16th c AD (Vansina 1966).

The collection of DNA from Bisa and Kunda volunteers was uncomplicated, in retrospect, with considerable support coming from local chiefs who were keen to learn more of the population history of their respective peoples. I say in retrospect, because the sampling programme competed with our limited time available for excavation in the Valley – protocols had to be followed, goodwill generated and permissions granted, a necessarily slow process in an otherwise hectic season. The results of that DNA sampling are not yet complete, who these people might have been awaits further analysis and more samples are needed, including those of the likely aboriginal inhabitants, the BaTwa. With this aim in mind, and to squeeze in the sampling before the start of the 2007 excavation season, I decided to visit the southern margin of the Bangweulu swamp at the end of December/early

January. The rainy seasons gets underway in earnest in January, but I was reassured by a local lodge owner that access by 4x4 would still be feasible and, just as important, that a message would be sent to the local community in advance of our arrival. I was promised more than enough BaTwa volunteers at the ready to make the trip a success in terms of statistical sampling. Permissions were sought in advance from relevant authorities, contact was made with the local Bisa chief responsible for the area, a vehicle was hired and the flight booked.

The rains this January turned out to be the heaviest in 30 years and the track to and from the swamp quickly became a mud river, making the journey more hazardous than expected. Had the outcome of the sampling been as promised the worry and discomfort of the trip could have just been part of a jolly good adventure story to be shared with colleagues over a beer, but it became part of the nightmare. The promised volunteers never materialised. It took several days to realise why, and the answer lies in the name BaTwa itself and its dire connotations. Mention that name to anybody living on the margins of the swamp – Bisa or Unga – and invariably a grin would spread across their face and when pressed they would describe the BaTwa in the most unflattering terms. BaTwa, they say, are untrustworthy, dangerous, thieving, stupid, small, ugly, and immoral with oblique hints made to deviant forms of promiscuity. When pressed to find something commendable to say about the BaTwa the best I heard was that ‘they are good fishermen’. Who in their right mind would respond to a call to present themselves as BaTwa in a community where they are such pariahs?

With the assistance of the chief’s retainer and the organisers of the local ‘cultural village’ – a set of huts with a well and long drop toilets built to attract tourists who might want to buy crafts and watch dances in one of the poorest parts of a poor country – a total of six volunteers turned up one morning to give saliva samples. Just as I started to explain the background to the project and our interests in the pre-farming prehistory of the region with its possible links to the BaTwa and the distinctive geometric rock art found nearby, I was whisked from the room by one of the organisers and told sternly not to use the term BaTwa in public. These were socially marginalised people I was told, who could not take pride in the name BaTwa and did not want to be identified as such. Simply say we were interested in the history of the peoples of the

swamps and name no names. I had made a great *faux pas*, but how was I to know? Nothing in my previous experience in Zambia had prepared me for such a reaction. I recalled a film on the Baka of Cameroon that I show my undergraduates every year in which the Baka are reviled by local farmers and considered to be almost sub-human, often compared to chimpanzees. I also recalled that the Baka themselves held equally disparaging beliefs about the farmers with whom they traded and on whose farms they worked. I had not expected such prejudices to exist here on the edge of Bangweulu swamp, in a country where over the past fourteen years I have only previously encountered joking relationships between old tribal rivals.

The similarity in attitudes expressed towards the Baka and the BaTwa of Bangweulu by the dominant society made me think that perhaps these swamp dwellers were in fact descendants of hunter-gatherers. A shared reality of social exclusion, political marginalisation and negative stereotyping seems to be the lot of the BaTwa across central Africa (see Jackson 2003). Archaeologists are always keen to spot patterns in their data and here, in a form of data unfamiliar to me is a social pattern that might be of relevance in making links between the present and the past. Evidence of marginalisation on its own makes a poor case for claiming primacy for BaTwa ancestry, but when added to the archaeological, genetic and skeletal data cited above then I’m inclined to think that the peoples of the Bangweulu might just be descendants of the elusive makers of microlithic tools and painters of geometric rock art found across the wooded plateau.

We did in the end collect one DNA sample from a volunteer who willingly identified him/herself as BaTwa and possibly another in the sample of six gathered that week is also BaTwa. That other individual did not claim BaTwa parentage but was identified as such by others only after he/she had left the room. It’s that name again, it comes with just too much social approbation to be proclaimed in the open. Language too was a barrier, with confusion arising on my part over the recent history of the swamp dwellers. Did I hear correctly that all the BaTwa had all been re-settled in the early 1960s, moved from the malarial islands to settlements on the swamp margins where access to schools and clinics was assured? A sociologist who worked in the area in the early 1990s for the World Wildlife Foundation had heard no such story of relocation and assured me that banana boats still traversed the dark waters delivering supplies

and mail to the BaTwa inhabitants of Mbo, and other islands to the north. Confused, *moi?* Yes, but also excited by the prospect of an ethnoarchaeological project on the islands – an elderly woman who had volunteered a DNA sample had lived on the islands most of her life and was a repository of information about fishing practices, the hunting of black lechwe (an endemic species of antelope) and relations between the BaTwa and their neighbours. No time to lose in getting a PhD student into the area, but someone with the presence of mind to cope with the complexity of contemporary concerns of poaching, over-fishing, HIV/Aids, and the natural suspicion generated towards outsiders.

I plan to persevere with the DNA sampling programme in the Bangweulu swamps, preferably in the coming dry season, with the hope that the results might just be a rare source of pride for the BaTwa. If some linkage could be found with forager communities further north that have already been identified genetically (Coia et al 2002), then the BaTwa of Bangweulu could claim some kind of ancestral connection. But, such a result would not necessarily

mean the inhabitants of the swamps were the ‘first’ peoples of Zambia; populations would have moved across this landscape many times during the later Pleistocene and Holocene in response to climate change and through internal group dynamics. Perhaps though, a combination of DNA and archaeological evidence would give the BaTwa and their neighbours a clearer picture of their separate and shared histories.

In the modern nation state of Zambia where 73 different ethnic groups coexist, and where white farmers displaced from Zimbabwe are now adding to the cultural mix, the BaTwa and social attitudes towards them speak of fundamental human reactions to those who are perceived as different or outsiders. We as archaeologists can only guess, with some limited evidence, at past interactions between populations with fundamentally divergent economies and ideologies. Dealing with the living is a sobering if not enlightening exercise, and I’m looking forward to returning to the relative intellectual freedom of pots and stone tools – though tempered by the prospect of collecting more saliva samples from the BaTwa, or whoever they claim to be.

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