

# HISTORY OF THE YEYI PEOPLE

## INTRODUCTION

This presentation is intended to highlight the origin, early migration movement and settlement of the Yeyi of Namibia into the former Eastern Caprivi Strip. The paper further explores the geography, brief history of both the Yeyi of Namibia, slave trade and Yeyi leadership.

## 1. ORIGIN AND EARLY MIGRATION, MOVEMENT AND SETTLEMENT OF THE YEYI

### 1.1 Origin and Early Migration

Oral history has it that the Yeyi left Congo in about 200 AD and arrived in the Caprivi Strip and Botswana by 305 AD. The Yeyi moved from central Africa in search of living space and grazing of their cattle due to congestion that was being experienced in Congo and the surrounding regions. It must also be noted that many tribes of Africa left upper northern and central parts of Africa during human kinetics as a result of scarce water, farming, hunting, dwelling space and grazing land that were inadequate in the areas they resided; as they and their livestock increased.

The Yeyi were agricultural and pastoral people of Bechoana (Botswana) and Namibia other Bantu tribes of the north. The tribe we are to deal with now are those with a widely different race from those whose history have an independent origin from the Batwa (Bushmen or San as they are presently known) in terms of robustness and of fiercer and more warlike appearance, speaking a language altogether more different in its construction from that of the Batwa (Stow 1964:404-405).

Stow quotes Schunke who went on to divide the Bantu tribes accordingly and the directions of their distribution and the areas of occupancy as follows: the most northern tribes are the Wakuafi, Wapokomo, Wacamba, Benga, Bakeli and the Ferdinandos. The most southern were the Amamfengo, Basuto, Ovaherero and Ovambanderu. All the Bantu tribes were according to him divided as follows in terms of location: South-Eastern, Middle and Northern branch. In the northern branch, we have the Bakéli, Benga and the inhabitants of Fernando Po.

The Middle branch has:

1. The Mozambique tribes, the Makau, Ma-'syao (Mashaiyo; Mashanjo), and the Sena and the Tete on the Zambezi.

1. The Zaquebar or the Zangian tribes are Wakumba, Wanika, Waswahili, Wasambara, Wa'nyamuezi, Wajiji (of Ujiji), Warua, etc. It can be accepted that all the other tribes on the Luabula which were found by David Livingstone and Peter Cameron Scott may be this division which when they are judged

according to the nature of their names indicate their relationships to those that are listed here above under point 2.

3. The tribes of the interior were the Bayeyi or Yeyi. The Yeyi were listed as the tribe of the interior according to Schunke.

4. The Bunda (Mbunda) tribes, Ovaherero (with Avambanderu), Ovambo, Okavangari, Ovakwambi, Ovangandjera, the Vanono (of Benguela) and the tribes of Angola.

5. The Congo and the Mpongwe tribes

The Southern branch is divided into tribes such as the Kaffirs, Zulu, Bechuana with Batlapin, Basutu, and those tribes near Delagoa Bay (Stow 1964:405).

They infiltrated and were distributed in Southern Africa by 300 AD. They are some of the tribal groups that moved in the interior as referred to as the people of the interior moving through Kavango, Tanzania, Kenya, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. They started settling in the Caprivi, and later, in Botswana in the areas of Gumare, Mawu (Maun) (meaning reeds in the Yeyi language and later renamed by the Tswana as Maun), Gabamukuni, Gxwaha Hills, Kacekawe, which in Shiyeyi language literally means, a small stone (the stone is small), present Kacikau, Shakawe, (area of stones) Shurwanga (a pool of water) (present Seronga), Hankuyu, (area of fig trees) etc. In Namibia, they settled in Eastern Namibia in the formerly Eastern Caprivi (between the Zambezi and the Chobe Rivers (present Zambezi Region) and in the present Western Caprivi (captured western Zambia). They settled in Western Caprivi in the Bwabbwata areas together with the San, which the Yeyi called Bawuya or Mambuya, their friends, where the San people are presently residing and as well in Kavango, present home of the Hambukushu, and other tribes. Oral history from the ancestors states that the Yeyi (known as Tjaube (Bachawubbe) settled in Kavango and discovered the Kavango. Kavango is a Yeyi word, kavangu which means a small lath or beam. The remainders of the Bachawubbe still leave in Kavango today.

The Yeyi claim their first occupation of the Caprivi and records have it that the Yeyi were the first to cross the Kavango Delta, which they named Zibalyanja, because of its structure resembling the five fingers of a hand and moved into the Eastern Caprivi Strip [the area between the Zambezi and Chobe Rivers] (Mainga, 1973:159; Fisch 1999; Tlou & Campbell 1983:90).

The occupation of the former Eastern Caprivi by the Lozi was after the fall of the Kololo Kingdom(Empire) led by Sebitwane who came with his Kololo, the Mofokeng Tribe, people from the Transvaal areas and entered the Eastern Caprivi in 1830 after assisinating the Yeyi Chief Kuratawu. One of the purposes for the Lozi to occupy the Eastern Caprivi was the fear of the Kololo, Matebele (Ndebele), Tswanas and other tribes or nations which were regarded as threats to them and had to fend off all these threats. As a consequence of this, they determined to guard themselves against foreign invasion by those hordes who ravaged the territories such as those tribes who invaded other nations or tribes with wars to capture them and, more

particularly, to have their cattle and land or those who ran, breaking away from their tribes or clans as a result of conflicts at home, thus consequently, going in other territories in search of peace and settlement and/or slave trade. Besides those reasons, there were no further reasons for immigrating or migrating in those centuries past.

The influence of the Luyi (Luyana) or Lozi is significant in the eastern Kavango areas in that, they as well, interfered with the Kwangwali of Kavango. The Kwangwali originate from the Handa tribes of Angola and migrated to the Mashi in Zambia and later moved to the eastern parts of Kavango. Their migration route was through what is known today as Cuando-Cubango Province in Angola, more closely to the Makuzu. This migration takes various successive forms. The first group that separated from the main group were said to be the Mbukushu, then the Gciriku and lastly, the Shambyu. The Kwangwali were of the same group with the Kwanyama from whom they separated before settling in the Kavango. This can be traced through ethno-historical geographical setups and origins. In further historical accounts, the Kwangali are similarly grouped together with Owambo and possibly also with the Handa of Angola rather than with any other groups living in Kavango today (Redinha 1974 in Rudolf Haushiku).

As stated earlier, the Yeyi had influence in Kavango and were found there together with the Bushmen by other arriving tribes such as the Mbunza, Gciriku, Kwangwali and Mbukushu, etc. The Kwangali and Mbunza are from the same origin claiming their close relationship as resulting from the two sisters, Kapango (*Mbunza*) and Mate (*Kwangali*) who initially separated because of the dispute that arose between them. The end result of this dispute caused Kapango leading the Mbunza away from the area of dispute into another direction while Mate led the Kwangali into another (Redinha 1974 in Rudolf Haushiku).

It is at this point that when they came to the Kavango, they met the Yeyi and the San who migrated to the area long before.

## **1.2 BRIEF HISTORY OF THE YEYI OF NAMIBIA**

Historically, two scenarios exist regarding the dislodgement of the tribes from their places to other new places and these are: firstly, the expansion of the Luyi (Luyana) or Lozi dynasty in the Zambezi floodplains of Western Zambia, present Western Province of Zambia. Secondly, the vast distance of the long-distance trade for the western Zambezi floodplains that included the slave trade at the close of the eighteenth century was an influential factor to dislodge tribes from their territories. The reasons why some tribes were conquered were that they had no central authorities before the arrival of the Kololo of Sebitwane in 1830. The Luyi or Luyana (meaning foreigners) as they were called at the time were the offshoot of the kingdoms such as the Katanga, Luba and Lunda, which existed in the northern parts of Africa (Mainga 1973:19; 34).

The unitary or central government was only started by the Lozi ruler named Ngalama in the early eighteenth century when he ascended the Lozi throne as king of the Lozi

Dynasty. As a result of this new created central state or government, which had more power and authority, the Lozi nation began expanding their territory further east, south, north and west to conquer and subdue other tribes. In their conquests, they captured women and children by killing men and then subdued them by conjugating them to their newly created central state. This became a trend of threatening other tribes by the Lozi until the arrival of Sebitwane and the White Missionaries in Bulozhi or Ngulu in present Zambia, to stabilize the conflict situation. Less powerful tribes or ethnic groups experienced the Lozi expanding their territory into their territories, because of its centrality and organization (Langworthy, 1972:51).

The Luyi / Lozi colonization would mean that those tribes or ethnic groups who were so conquered and had to remain in their original territory now submerged by the Lozi would be allowed to remain therein and ruling themselves provided that they were continuously, without failing; pay tribute to the central Luyi / Lozi rulers.

Those who preferred to evade military and economic pressures such as continued payments of tributes were exposed to harsher treatments by the Lozi rulers. As a consequence of this, the forefathers of the Kwangali who resided in the western lower parts of the Mashi River, in its confluence with the Zambezi in Zambia; and those of the Yeyi who lived in Linyanti River in the Eastern Caprivi Strip decided to move further south inland and into the islands of Rupara and Nkasa.

According to Jalla (1959:9) this expansion of the Lozi kingdom was enforced by Ngambelas Iwake and Melende Sikwandakwanda. King Ngalama of the Lozi Dynasty, stretched the Lozi Empire towards the south and thus the beginning of the exodus that dislodged the Kwangali and the Yeyi to move from their settlements further west, in case of the Kwangali and further south, in case of the Yeyi. The Kwangali moved from western parts of Zambia into the eastern parts of Kavango while the Yeyi living in the Eastern Caprivi were further pushed southwards inland and in the islands of Rupara and Nkasa.

However, it should be noted that Paramount Chief Matsharatshara of the Yeyi organized a central authority in which he had headmen who administered small Yeyi groups and reporting to him only in those major cases.

## **2. SLAVE TRADE AND THE YEYI OF NAMIBIA**

In 1852 Sekeletu had started making a dyke where Malengalenga Combined School is erected to day with the purpose of his town to be built on a high place and in the same year; he started a plan of get water from the Zambezi and canals were dug by the Yeyi from Maunga to the Zambezi River in Katima Mulilo. These canals are still found at Maunga area as evidence of this. The next step undertaken by Sekeletu was to sell people to the half castes of Angola known as Mambar (Mambali in Yeyi). Mambali Village is at Sauzuo District here in the area under Honourable Chief Shufu as evidence of this. Many Yeyi can be mentioned by names who were captured and taken in to be sold as slaves but were returned by their relatives amid tough treatment from the Lozi and Sekeletu. King Lewanika of the Lozi Dynasty rejected the sale of people into slavery. Dr. David Livingstone and the other European

Missionaries had so much discouraged this kind of practice. The term Magororo; as they were known by the Yeyi were the Makololo [Bafokeng or Sotho] of Sebitwane who plundered the Yeyi in the early 1830's sold the Yeyi. The Yeyi had to hide their children using the terms such as: *tweera banazikamapanxu* and *tweera bananjendilyire*.

## 2. BAYEYI SETTLEMENT IN THE EASTERN CAPRIVI

In 1864 when Sipopa retaliated and conquered the Kololo, the Lozi Dynasty surfaced. The Lozi defeated the Makololo by exterminating the men and then distributed the Makololo women and children among the Malozi rulers. The situation currently is such that there are no marked recognized boundaries which are respected as jurisdictional areas in the entire Caprivi and for the purposes of resettling tribes, the recognized maps, 375 (Masubia), 376 (Mafwe) and 378 (Mayeyi) drawn by Von Frankenberg in 1912 were used for the purposes of settling those disputes as per the previous recommendations forwarded to the then Honourable Minister, Libertine Amadhila of the Ministry of Regional, Local Government & Housing in 1993 and were respected as such.

## 3. BRIEF HISTORY OF THE YEYI OF BOTSWANA

① The history of the Yeyi people living in Botswana is concurrent with those who are in Namibia since they divided themselves, some remaining in the Eastern Caprivi as early as before 305 A. D. while some proceeded to Bechuanaland.

The importance of the lives of people was regarded as nothing and people could be traded for guns, clothes or any other items that were viewed as valuable. There were instances where the Luyanas came to the Eastern Caprivi to capture people tying them on a long rope and led them to Zambia for sale to the Arabs who were the prominent members in trading people. The lives of human beings were counted as nothing, yet needless to say; economic links were all aimed at selling people for valuable goods as mentioned earlier.

② As time progressed, the Setswana language dominated all the other tribes in Botswana. The administration was now on the Tawana over the Yeyi. The Yeyi and other tribes of Botswana continued to see this administration as oppressive and then began to question it. A Yeyi committee called Kamanakawo was formed in the early 1990s to address the way how the Yeyi would regain their identity. This committee, however, had some hurdles for what it observed as a way forward to retain their identity. Calvin Kamanakawo was a leader of this committee and subsequently installed as Chief (*Shikati*) of the Yeyi. The Chairman Calvin Diye Kamanakawo who later was inaugurated as chief of the Yeyi in Botswana later passed on mysteriously in 2003 (Kamanakawo Association, 2009:20).

③ \* When Lishoelathebe, a Tawana, took over leadership of the Batawana, he put the Batawana chiefs to rule over the Yeyi, but could not remove their leaders. In this case, the Yeyi chiefs were to report or go to traditional authorities of the Batawana to

settle any matters of concern in their setting. The Batawana did not give the Yeyi a direct kind of administration. The Yeyi felt that the Tawana were visitors and were very few among them. The Tawana took advantage of this and in a way enslaving the Yeyi whom they later called Bakoba (slaves). And the fact that those Yeyi who were not willing to cooperate with the Tawana did so in revoking such kind of treatments; they decided to leave Bechuanaland to join their tribesmen who were not under other tribal domination or rule in the Eastern Caprivi. The arrival of the Makololo among the Yeyi of Namibia in 1830 was another sign of an upper arm of oppression until when they were defeated by the Lozi dynasty in 1864.

After a series of expeditions from central parts of Africa, the Yeyi now moved and fought wars with other tribes and nations they encountered along the way. They were the first to cross the Kavango Delta and settled in the land between the Zambezi, the Chobe and the Kwando Rivers (Mainga 1973:159; Tlou & Campbell 1983:90; Campbell 1980: 73-77 & Fisch 1999) in the former Eastern Caprivi

By 600 A.D., the Yeyi in Botswana were already settled in the Chobe and Thamalakane Rivers and by 850 A. D. and had covered west of the Kavango Delta at Tsodilo Hills, as observed by Tlou & Campbell (1983:90); (Campbell 1980: 73-77). Tlou & Campbell (1983:90) state as follows: *"Most history books tell us that northern Botswana was only occupied by Khoesan people until about 1750 when the Yeyi began to settle the Delta. We have already seen that the Yeyi farmers with the knowledge of metal working were living on the Chobe and Thamalakane Rivers by about AD 600 and on the west of the Delta at Tsodilo by AD 850. The pottery made by the Yeyi today has many similarities with the pottery we have excavated belonging to a thousand years ago. This strongly suggests that the people living in the Delta areas today are the descendants of the first millennium (a thousand years). The oral historians of the Yeyi give their place of origin as the middle Zambezi and Chobe areas."*

The above information is supported by Neils Parsons in his "excerpt from the History of Botswana."

The Yeyi has a history of living in the area of settlement and regarded as people of the river as stated by Tlou & Campbell (1983:93); *"probably the most important farming peoples to live in northern Botswana during early times were the Yeyi. The Yeyi people came from Central Africa and some time in the remote past made their way down the Zambezi River. They may have occupied parts of northern Botswana for a thousand years or more. The Mbukushu who also came there after them named the land as Diyeyi (meaning, the land of the Yeyi people). This was as early as before 1000 AD. Some were left in the Eastern Caprivi while some went further to the south until they discovered Lake Ngami, which is also spelt as Ncami where they settled and engaged in activities of fishing and hunting animals, which they used as food."*

The communities of the Basotho, Bakgalagadi and the Batswana started to organize themselves in the western Transvaal and Botswana in about 1200 AD. These groups grew through intermarriages between the first Bantu-speaking farmers and the San and the Khoe (Tlou and Campbell 1983:53). When the Yeyi moved to Botswana, they

lived with the Bateti, a group of the Khoe people in the 1200's AD at Boteti River. The Khoe people traded with the people who were living at Maun (the original Yeyi name for Maun is Mawu (reeds or reed thickets). Maun was named after the Mawu by the Tswana people.

In AD 1250, the Batswana were not known to be in Botswana. They were residing in the highveld of Transvaal (Tlou and Campbell 1983:62) though their eastern occupancy of Botswana may be earlier than this date. Tlou and Campbell are not so much concerned about the movements, social relations and the lifestyle of the Botswana natives such as the Yeyi, Mbukushu, and the Subiya as it is evident that more knowledge about other tribes is fully documented as compared to other tribes.

The Eastern Caprivi in Namibia was suppressed by the Kololo under Sebitwane and Sekeletu, his son, including Zambia from 1830 to 1864 and the Luyanas from 1865 until the arrival of the Germans in 1884 and South Africans in 1915 to the 21<sup>st</sup> of March 1990 when the SWAPO Party liberated Namibia.

The name Bakololo or Makololo came after the clan, Kollo, of Sebitwane's favourite wife (Tlou and Campbell 1983:106). Sebitwane fought the Bangwato, the Bangwaketse, and the Bakwena while the Bakwena only stood aside and some of them betraying their own tribe as they joined Sebitwane and helped him to conquer their own tribe (Tlou and Campbell 1983:106).

In 1829, Sebitwane fought the Bangwato again and split them. From here he moved westwards to the Boteti where he attacked the Bateti and captured their long-horned cattle. Sebitwane settled at Kedia after this war. After about three years, he moved further westwards and attacked the Batawana at the Xausa Plain. The Batawana (who are actually Bamanqwato) arrived in Bechuanaland, present Botswana in 1795, when the Yeyi had already occupied Botswana.

By the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Yeyi had explored much of the area between the Linyanti and the Okavango Delta. Small groups of the Yeyi were settled throughout the Caprivi Strip. The Yeyi were fishermen and hunters who were not troubled by tsetsefly. The main cattle herds of the Yeyi remained in the Caprivi Strip, which was likely free from tsetse fly at that time. Some of the Yeyi that moved to Ngamiland had a slow but steady exodus from the Eastern Caprivi area caused by the Lozi expansion and settled in the Okavango Delta before 1750. This steady exodus of the Yeyi of Botswana to Ngamiland is thought to have been as a result of the Lozi expansion southwards.

The Yeyi in Namibia remained there in the Caprivi until the arrival of the Kololo of Sebitwane in about 1830. The Yeyi of Botswana came by both land and water from the Kavango Delta and settled in the Caprivi while others continued to settle in Ngamiland, Botswana; some driving cattle through the eastern Mababe while others paddling canoes down the Selinda Island and fanned out eastwards and later westwards. When the Subiya of current Botswana followed in their exodus fearing the fierce battles of the Lozi in May 1879, they moved a short distance westwards occupying the areas that were vacated by the Yeyi along the Chobe River. In 1830,

the Yeyi who were left behind and living in the Eastern Caprivi, were conquered by Sebitwane and became part of the Kololo Empire (Campbell 1980:73-77).



#### **4. THE EARLY GEOGRAPHY OF THE LAND EASTERN CAPRIVI**

As early as before 300 AD, the Yeyi had already settled in the formerly known Eastern Caprivi which covered the area between the Zambezi and the Chobe Rivers, present Zambezi Region (Mainga 1973:159; Fisch 1999). During this same period, the other sections of the Yeyi led by Matsharatshara continued to live in Ngamiland, present Botswana. In about 1851, Sebitwane weary of fighting wars, retired from fighting and renamed the Eastern Caprivi to the name Dinyanti (which means reeds in Sotho). The Lozi called it Linyanti and the Yeyi called it Lyinyandi.

Before the arrival of the Yeyi, the Eastern Caprivi was a Great Lake caused by a geological fault which occurred about 60 000 000 years ago (Manie Grobler, 1980 unpublished document).

The Eastern Caprivi is a flat area of 1 164 000 ha (11,640 km<sup>2</sup>) with the Zambezi forming the boundaries with Zambia to the north east and the Kwandu-Linyati and the Chobe Rivers to the west and south forming the border with Botswana. To understand the flow of the river, we must first have a look at geomorphology, i.e. the way the Eastern Caprivi was formed ages ago.

#### **5. YEYI LEADERSHIP**

There has been wrong perception about the Yeyi that they did not have established traditional leadership. We wish to state here that the Yeyi had a term "Shikati (king). Any community where they have an original term means its existence is concurrent with the existence of that community. This means that the Yeyi had their kings (Bashikati or Mashikati) and Wushikati (Kingdom).

Before the arrival of the Kololo in Eastern Caprivi in 1830, the Yeyi had settled in the area as far back as 305 A.D.

**Xega** (The Paramount Chief of the Yeyi)

Paramount Chief Xega was the leader of the Yeyi in the earliest times after their migration from central Africa in the Congo to southern Africa in the Eastern Caprivi, Kavango and Botswana (Africa Insight). Xega's great grandson was Matsharatshara. Xega gave birth to four sons, namely: Muyeyi Matsharatshara I, Hankuzi, Qunku, and Qunkunyane. Matsharatshara I died in old age and was buried at Nkasa in Botswana and was succeeded by his blood brother, Hankuzi.

**Yei Kings / leaders / leaders (Caprivi and Bechuanaland, present Botswana)**

Xega, Shikati 1400-1450

Muyeyi Matsharatshara I, *Shikati*, 1450-1590

Muyeyi Matsharatshara II, *Shikati*, 1590-1631

Shupupa, Shikati, 1631 – 1661

Sapungu (Hapungu), Shikati, 1661-1691

Mamidi, Shikati, 1691 – 1721

Samanja (Hamanja), Shikati, 1721-1770  
 Matsharatshara III, Shikati, 1770-1850 (Met by David Livingstone)  
 Tso, Shikati, 1850-1860  
 Hankuze (Hankuzi), *Shikati*, 1860-1890  
 Qunku, Shikati, 1890-1898  
 Qunkunyane, *Shikati*, 1898-1815  
 Kuratawu 1815-1830 (intercepted by the Kololo rule)  
 Mushwena 1830-1864  
 Masuku 1864-1880  
 Matiti 1880-1910  
 Shufu I 1910-1940  
 Shinyeha 1940-1954  
 Pitorosi Shakwa Hambara 1954-1981(intercepted by the Lozi rule)  
 Shufu (II) Boniface Lutibezi *Shikati*, 1993 to date

## 6. CONJUGATION OF THE YEYI WITH THE MAFWE

The end of the Lozi Rule in the Eastern Caprivi, later Linyanti and present Zambezi Region marked the first German entry who on taking control over the Strip appointed Mamili as Chief of the Mafwe, Yeyi, Totela, Mbukushu and the San who lived south, west and north of the Caprivi Strip. When Simataa Kabende Mamili was appointed Chief by Streitwolf on 6 May 1909 and at the progression of the years, the compound name Bafwe/Bayeyi was used to address all the tribes in the south, north and west of the Strip. On 3 December 1971, the word Bayeyi was removed by the South African government under Proclamation R261 of 1971. The reason for this was that Mamili should have one tribe and not a number of tribes. They advocated that Mamili should choose only one name. To this effect, Richard Temuso Muhinda Mamili on his appointment as Chief of the tribes as mentioned above changed the name by the said Proclamation hereof, thus the beginning of the Mafwe Dynasty and a false historical representation over the Yeyi and some other tribes.

*This did not go without resistance from the Bayeyi - in the forefront was Mr Patrick Limbo*

## 7. THE YEYI DECLARE THEMSELVES AS A SEPARATE TRIBE FROM THE MAFWE

On Sunday, 2 August 1992 the Yeyi declared themselves an independent tribe as they were in all times immemorial. In August 1988 the eight (8) Yeyi *indunas* were fined sixteen (16) heads of cattle, convertible to a value of N\$ 3 200 (three thousand two hundred Namibia Dollars) and detained at Linyanti *khuta* without food, water, blankets and accommodation. This was embarrassing in the entire Yeyi community.

\* This fine was paid in full to the Mafwe Tribal Authority by these humiliated Yeyi *indunas*. This did not deter them from their determination to break away from the Mafwe Tribal Authority and its forced alliance. They were interrogated and humiliated the whole day and night without rest for two days while their interrogators taking turns to eat, rest and then continue with interrogations. The interrogations were based on the reasons why the Yeyi want to break away from the mainstream Mafwe Tribal Authority. The *indunas* remained resolute in their stance that they will proceed with the break away, because they have suffered for too long now without benefiting anything from this forced alliance and humiliation as can be seen from the Yeyi Declaration of 2 August 1992.