Magic Rules African Hill People

(Field Museum photos.)

(Continued from Page One)

the Portuguese government, still is practiced secretly in some localities as a part of the initiation ceremonies. In the initiation of girls there is a seclusion period of one month, during which the novices are said to suffer no cruel rites. While undergoing their protracted initiation the girls are given sexual and domestic instruction by women especially appointed for that task. Occupational training for boys includes formal instruction in industry, such as ironworking, and in professional hunting.

When the Ovimbundu male child reaches a state of manhood he starts looking around for a wife (in this he pursues the same urge that gripes the American, the Englishman, the chimpanzee, the butterfly, and the toad), and before long he finds a girl to his liking. The man asks the girl's parents for a friendship, which may last for one or two years. After the girl has consented to marriage, the suitor

In the Ovimbundu ritual for hunters, trophies, as shown above, play an important part.

tells her parents of his intention to wed, and then the business of giving presents begins. The first gift may be no more than a ball of wax or a portion of salt. When the man starts building a house on his father's premises he makes further gifts to the parents of the girl—a bottle of Portuguese wine, two or three blankets, or a piece of cloth. He who carries the gift must be a brother of the suitor, the father, or a male cousin. Perhaps the girl's parents are a bit crafty at this stage and will insist on finer blankets or a better piece of cloth. If that is the case the matter is threshed out with a lot of palaver in the village council. There is no compulsion in marriage, though in earlier days slave girls were disposed of by their masters. In connection with the use of cattle in the outright buying of wives among these Negroes Mr. Hambly writes:

"Cattle, which are a measure of wealth, are used for paying fines, making funeral feasts, paying debts, and securing wives."

Marriage among the Ovimbundu is not a ceremony of a few minutes, as it is among civilized people, but rather a long drawn out affair. The prospective bride selects a married woman and six unmarried girls to accompany her to the house constructed by her man. Here a feast of pig and chicken is provided by the prospective bridegroom for the relatives of both families. For three nights the girl returns to the home of her parents and the man sleeps in the home of his father and mother, the married woman and the six girls occupying the new home. During the day beer is provided by the man's parents. On the fourth day the bride brings her domestic utensils to the new home and remains there herself, as evidence that at that point in the ceremony she is the truly wedded wife of the man. For the first month the wife is not allowed to cook in her own home. She prepares food in the home of her husband's parents and sends it to the communal house, where her husband takes his meals with the other men of the village. At the end of the month the mother of the husband invites three old women who are happily married to lay the hearthstones in the new home. A chicken is killed and its blood sprinkled upon the stones.

Separate Hut for Each Wife

A man with more than one wife in this land, in which polygyny is common, dwells with each wife either four or seven days. Each wife has a separate hut and kitchen. Unlike a practice formerly indulged in among some tribes of American Indians and Eskimos, there is no wife-lending among the Ovimbundu.

"Their musical instruments include drums of many descriptions . . ." (Ovimbundu drummers with long drums keeping time with their instruments to imported music as rendered on a phonograph.)

There are many grounds on which a man may obtain a divorce, though it does not follow that divorces are frequent among the People of the Fog. On the contrary, Mr. Hambly found, a majority of marital difficulties were overcome by a compromise between the relatives of the husband and those of the wife. Main causes of dissatisfaction with a wife are lack of ability in cultivating her garden, physical weakness, a habit of thieving from other women's gardens, inefficiency in cooking, bad temper, some physical defect arising from childbirth, and infidelity.

"The procedure of divorce," Mr. Hambly writes, "contains a very human element. When a man has fully decided that he would like to divorce his wife he will first of all inform his parents of his intention. The parents may advise their son to try the girl for a longer time.

"On the contrary, the parents of the man may be mischief-makers. Sometimes the parents will say to the husband: 'Do you know that your wife is doing these things? It is better you should send her away.' If the man is fond of his wife he will take her to another place where his parents cannot watch her. When a woman divorces her husband to marry another man she takes to her new home all children under three years of age. Older children go to the home of her parents."

Divorce a Back-Slapping Affair

A woman is permitted to divorce her husband if he does not treat her well. She will leave him if he beats her or refuses to give her cloth or palm oil, but if he is merely unfaithful to her she will not separate from him.

In the final ceremony of divorcing a wife the chief of the village acts as a witness, though the principals are the husband, the wife, and the wife's father. The husband accepts from the wife's father a roll of tobacco and a pig. He places leaves and palm oil on the wife's back, gives the back a resounding smack, and exclaims, "It is finished." Then the woman goes to her father or to another man.

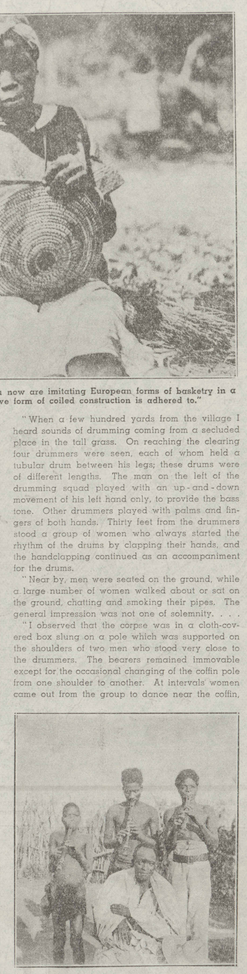
More impressive and surely in most cases noisier than wedding ceremonies and divorce actions among the Ovimbundu are the rites conducted over the dead. Describing the funeral of a 12-year-old boy which he witnessed in the village of Cilema, in the district of Elende, Mr. Hambly writes:

"Baskets are woven by women . . . Ovimbundu now are imitating European forms of basketry in a few localities, but in general the old native form of coiled construction is adhered to."

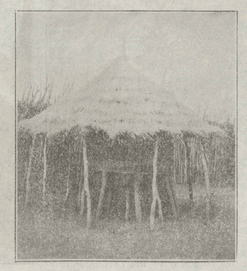
"When a few hundred yards from the village I heard sounds of drumming coming from a secluded place in the tall grass. On reaching the clearing four drummers were seen, each of whom held a tubular drum between his legs; these drums were of different lengths. The man on the left of the drumming squad played with an up-and-down movement of his left hand only, to provide the bass tone. Other drummers played with palms and fingers of both hands. Thirty feet from the drummers stood a group of women who always started the rhythm of the drums by clapping their hands, and the handclapping continued as an accompaniment for the drums.

"Near by, men were seated on the ground, while a large number of women walked about or sat on the ground, chatting and smoking their pipes. The general impression was not one of solemnity. . . .

"I observed that the corpse was in a cloth-covered box slung on a pole which was supported on the shoulders of two men who stood very close to the drummers. The bearers remained immovable except for the occasional changing of the coffin pole from one shoulder to another. At intervals women came out from the group to dance near the coffin,



A trio of Ovimbundu flautists entertaining with music from their native wooden flutes.



Maize basket under a shelter, a type of grain storage practiced by the Vakuanyama.

one, two or three at a time. One boy was particularly energetic in leaping in front of the corpse. . . .

"A woman about forty-five years of age held a plate of cornmeal in her hand while she stood close to the corpse and in line with the bier. She addressed the corpse very earnestly and paused intermittently for a reply. . . . My interpreter said that the woman addressing the corpse was the oldest sister of the father of the dead boy and that she was asking the spirit of the dead boy why he died."

The description of the funeral continues at length, dealing with the interrogation of the spirit, and points out that in case satisfactory answers to questions are not given by the spirit, recourse is made to the medicine man, who resorts to divination. The Ovimbundu bury their dead in the ground in village cemeteries, which usually are a mile or so from the homes of the deceased. For burial the body is extended in the coffin in a supine position, with palms

". . . Wilfred D. Hambly, assistant curator o African ethnology of the Field museum . . ."

of the hands together and the thumbs tied. The great toes also are tied together, and the upper arms are bound to the torso with bands of bark or cloth. The grave is about six feet deep.

Ovimbundu believe that those who have died continue to live in spirit form and that the spirit may enter the body of an animal. They also believe that beasts, such as the lion and the leopard, watch over the spirits of the dead. A man returning from a hunt with trophies in his possession may leave one on a grave. Spirits, it is the opinion held by the Ovimbundu, move only by night. The mention of the name of a dead person at night is sure to conjure up his spirit, they think. The most important spirit bears the name of *suku*, and the Ovimbundu credit it with the creation of mountains, rivers, sky, and people. A good spirit is called *esande* and a bad spirit bears the name of *ondoti*. *Ociulu* is the general name for a disembodied spirit, either good or bad. Unlike more civilized spirits, the spirits of Ovimbundu are believed to be capable of dying for a second time.

Strong Believers in Magic

Connected with all of this spirit lore of these simple Africans is the hocus-pocus of the medicine man. The tribal magician, who may be either male or female and who bears the name *ocimbundu*, is distinguish him or her from the secret worker in evil, the *onganga*, has a variety of duties to perform.

An Ovimbundu mother carrying a basket of field produce balanced upon her head.

There are charms that must be worked over the dead, healing of the ill and ailing, making of rain and divination, the last-named practice including a score or more of separate rites that are performed in an effort to answer this or that question of a worried tribesman. The rainmaker, who bears a special name, *ujuiti*, is one specifically trained in that function. The instruments of his profession are a reed whistle and a hair switch made from a cow's tail.

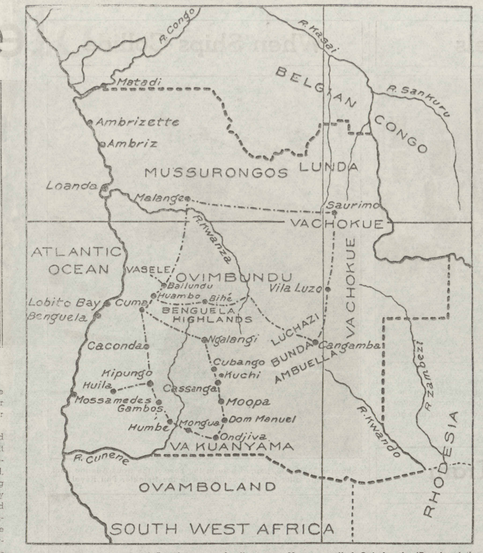
The poison ordeal as practiced among the Ovimbundu is in conformity with the usual Negro procedure. The medicine man holds out two potatoes, one of which is poisoned and one of which is innocuous. Accused and accuser face the medicine man, and each eats of the potato closest to him. If the accused is sickened by his potato he is guilty, but if the potato he eats is free from poison he is adjudged innocent. If the accuser, on the other hand, is made ill, it is held that the accusation was brought without real cause. The poisoned person does not die, but becomes so ill that, in case he is the accused, he readily confesses his guilt.

Taboos are common among the Ovimbundu. There is a prohibition against the killing of the yellow-backed duiker. In former days women were not permitted to eat eggs. The meat of sheep and goats is believed to be indigestible for children between the ages of three and six. Flesh of the lion, leopard, and hyena are forbidden as food for a king, but others may eat it. A medicine man may partake of the flesh of a dog at any time except just before a ceramony for curing the sick, but dog meat is forbidden to kings at all times. A woman must not step over the legs of a male, and a man must not step over the legs of a woman, to do so causes weakness of the knees. The Ovimbundu adhere strictly to their taboos, and place unqualified confidence in omens, which are as numerous as taboos.

Three Kinds of Beer Brewed

The word beer is mentioned twice in the foregoing paragraphs. Yes, the Ovimbundu make beer—three different kinds, in fact. *Ocisungua* is a sweet beer that even children may drink, because it is not intoxicating. This beverage is made from meal of Kafir corn, or maize, and pounded sweet potato. An intoxicating beer called *ekundi* is made from meal and a root called *ombundi*. A still more potent beer, *ocimbombo*, is made from cornmeal, to which honey sometimes is added. A man who has imbibed of this brew too heavily often will remain in deep slumber a whole day through.

Like beer, another item important to the Ovimbundu is tobacco. Its cultivation is a domestic industry, usually followed by women, but to some extent by men as well. In earlier days, when these people traded extensively throughout central Africa, they planted large fields of tobacco, but today their wants are cared for usually by small patches of the



"In the central highlands of Angola . . . dwell strange Negroes called Ovimbundu (People of the Fog) . . ." (Line of alternate dashes and dots indicates Mr. Hambly's route in Angola.)

For drilling into wood, a primitive appliance employing a whirling stick is used.

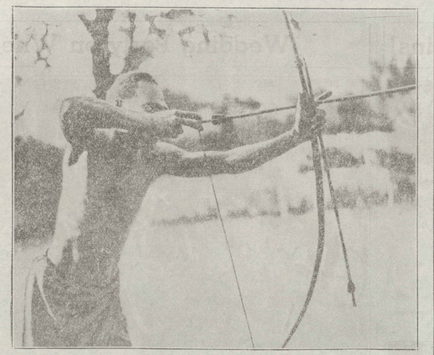
"Ovimbundu bury their dead in the ground . . ." (Grass-roofed hut over grave.)

plant in the centers of their cornfields. The Ovimbundu, both men and women, smoke tobacco in pipes and take it in the form of snuff, but are never known to chew the plant.

Occupations of primary importance among the Ovimbundu include iron working, wood carving, the making of domestic implements and hunting weapons, the weaving of mats and baskets, and the fashioning and firing of pottery.

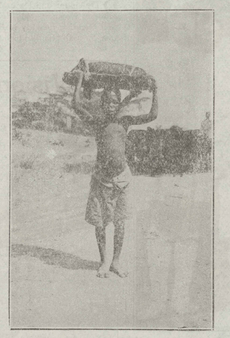
Owing to the increasing importance of hoe blades and other iron ware, together with the facilities for collecting scrap iron, the mining and smelting of iron is increasingly rare. Fragments of scrap iron are melted at the forge and worked into any form desirable by the blacksmith, who usually is a man who has been employed at his trade since his youth. Iron wire is not drawn by the Ovimbundu blacksmiths, though they know of the practice from their neighbors at the east, the Vachokue. The forge of the blacksmith is in a thatched house about twelve feet square with low eaves that almost touch the ground. In the middle of the floor of the house is a pit about ten inches deep in which charcoal is placed. By the pit are three stone seats for the workers, two of whom pump bellows to keep the pit fire burning. The third worker removes the red-hot iron from the fire, carries it outside to an anvil placed under a tree, and fashions the object desired from the glowing metal. Domestic implements and arrowheads are the principal products of the forge.

Wood carvers employ lumber from various trees for the making of furniture for huts, drums, images, stats, and the like. The Ovimbundu have specialized in the carving of small objects, for, in addition to clubs and stats, tobacco pipes and snuff boxes often are elaborately fashioned by the adze and knife of these primitive artists.



"The principal weapon is the bow, which is made of hard red wood. . . . Metal-headed arrows are used for hunting large game, and all-wooden arrows for small game, such as birds. The arrows are feathered. Spears are found rarely among the Ovimbundu . . ."

Ovimbundu man spinning cotton as it was spun before the invention of the spinning wheel.



A pig going to market trussed to a board carried on the head of a sturdy Ovimbundu boy.

Ovimbundu women pounding maize into meal. Maize is grown extensively by the Ovimbundu.

Umbundu and is widely understood throughout Angola, owing to the journeys of traders and raiders. Notwithstanding the use of Umbundu as a *lingua franca*, according to Mr. Hambly it is necessary to note that tribes surrounding the Ovimbundu have their own distinctive languages. The Umbundu language itself, he points out, has several dialects. Besides the spoken language, the Ovimbundu have a sign language which they employ to some extent in communication with one another. They are a people greatly given over to the telling of tales, having a number of old standbys in their collection of folklore stories that are very much like the ancient animal fables that each end all have a moral to put over, far-fetched though it may be in some cases.

Fond of Music and Dancing

The Ovimbundu are musical to a certain degree, usually light-hearted and happy, and fond of dancing and singing. Their musical instruments include drums of many descriptions, rattles, gongs, marimbas, wooden flutes, and musical bows.

The most imposing of the drums are usually the property of the village and are played only on occasions of ceremony. They are made of hollowed-out logs, four or more feet long and nearly half as great in diameter, with one end left open and the other covered with hide stretched taut. To the inner side of the hide is attached a long cane. The player of the drum dips his hand into a gourd of water, reaches through an opening in the side of the drum, and strokes the cane with his wet hand, the vibration thus produced being conveyed to the drum head and producing tones. Musical rattles are of several types, one of the commonest being a gourd filled with seeds.

Principal Weapon Is the Bow

The principal weapon is the bow, which is made from a hard red wood. It is considerably shorter than the long bow employed in modern archery, though it shoots with great force. Metal-headed arrows are used for hunting large game, and all-wooden arrows for small game, such as birds. The arrows are feathered. Spears are found rarely among the Ovimbundu, but knives are quite common.

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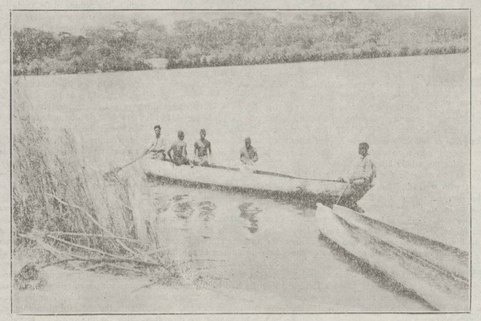
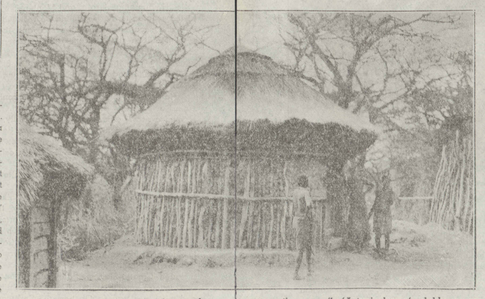
Ovimbundu women pounding maize into meal. Maize is grown extensively by the Ovimbundu.

Female types of Angola. Left: Women of Gambos. Center: A Vaheneca girl of Huila. Right: Vakuanyama woman wearing headdress of principal wife in a polygynous family.

". . . the Vakuanyama, who occupy the territory to the south . . ." (Vakuanyama men, with assagais, clubs, and bows.)



Dugout canoes are employed by the natives in transportation on the River Kwanza, which flows from the Benguela highlands and empties into the sea near Loanda. Above: Scene photographed near Malange.



"In the village is the communal house where . . . men gather . . ." (A typical men's clubhouse as found among the Ovimbundu. This particular structure, built without plastered walls, is at Bailundu.)

Mutilation of teeth as practiced in West Africa. Left: A man of Vasele. Center: A Vachokue woman. Right: A woman of Babundo.

Domestic implements include wooden mortars in which grain is pulverized; beaters for packing down the earth for the floor of the house; hoes, which are the sole tools of agriculture and are used almost exclusively by the women; and gourds, which are employed for the ladling and carrying of liquids. The gourds often are covered with designs of geometrical pattern.

Among the Ovimbundu only women are expected to make pottery, though at Elende Mr. Hambly discovered a man so occupied. Vessels of various shapes are formed from wet clay, ornamentation being added by making deep incisions with a piece of gourd while the vessels are still wet. Pots and other vessels are sun-dried, then fired several times by placing them in a kiln of dry grass. Polish is given by applying a liquid made from a tuberous root to the vessels while they are still hot from the kiln.

Women Weavers of Baskets

Baskets are woven by women, while mat making is an occupation for men. As in other lines of endeavor, however, there is specialization. Though nearly all women have a knowledge of basket weaving, most of the work in that line is done by those who specialize in it. Only about one man in ten is said to have sufficient skill to weave mats, yet men hold a monopoly in that trade. Coarse elephant grass, reeds, bark fiber, bark thread, light and delicate grasses, root fiber, and thin strips of wood are employed in making various types of mats and baskets. Ovimbundu now are imitating European forms of basketry in a few localities, but in general the old native form of coiled construction still is adhered to.

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Women of some of the tribes of Angola have curious ideas concerning bodily adornment. These Luvando girls of Kipungo, southwest Angola, are typical of the region.