

## BAROTSELAND: A UNIQUE AFRICAN KINGDOM By Cedric Pulford

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**It is one of Africa's most dramatic tourist attractions, but the water-borne Kuomboka ceremony of the Lozi people in western Zambia remains at the heart of their culture, says CEDRIC PULFORD in this research note**

THE LOZI were known in the days of the British Empire as the Barotse. These apparently different words are in fact one and the same, stemming from different conventions of registering sounds. Since this article is concerned about historical times, the older term Barotse is used here.

The Barotse occupy the flood plain of the River Zambezi up-river of the Victoria Falls in Zambia. The plain stretches for 120 miles and is 25 miles across at its widest. The annual flooding, between February and July, gave rise to a migratory, river culture whose symbol was the Kuomboka. The royal court led the move in the royal barge Nalikwanda to higher, drier ground at the plain edge, from the royal capital of Lealui to Limulunga.

The Kuomboka is still re-enacted each year as the essence of Barotseland, now officially the Western Province of Zambia but once a proud and unique kingdom.

A detailed account of the river culture in traditional times was given by the anthropologist Max Gluckman in *Economy of the Central Barotse Plain* (1941). The Barotse typically spent three months at the plain margin because of flooding. On the plain itself high spots of land (mounds) were preferred for settlement because they rose above the water level.

In later times, the margin became the most densely populated part of Barotseland.

All land was formally vested in the king, but his rights were limited in various ways. Pasturage was free; net fishing in deep waters, stabbing fish along the banks and killing birds and game were all permitted.

Before the British period (from the late 19th century), Barotse rule extended over an area larger than Germany, occupying 250,000 square miles at its largest. There were some 25 subject tribes.

The administrative capital of Barotseland, now as in British times, is Mongu. The town lies on a bluff overlooking the Zambezi, a dramatic location chosen by the first British resident (official adviser) of the nation.

A curious historical interlude occurred in the mid-19th century when the Barotse were conquered by the Makololo, a branch of the Sotho from southern Africa. It was the Makololo overlords with their ruler Sebituane whom the missionary Dr David Livingstone encountered on his travels. Livingstone was much impressed by Sebituane, describing him in *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa* (1857) as 'decidedly the best

specimen of a native chief I ever met'. The king was fleet of foot and led warriors into battle himself. The explorer's historic journey to the African west coast was made with the help of the Makololo.

In an illustration of the cheapness of human life (or alternatively of the value of firearms), Livingstone recorded that eight boys, the children of captive tribes, were exchanged for eight guns.

A further visit to Barotseland was described in *Narrative of an Expedition to the Zambesi and Its Tributaries* (1865), written with his brother, Charles. The Makololo, said the Livingstones, were 'by far' the most intelligent and enterprising of the tribes they had met – an observation that later observers were to apply the Barotse when they regained the ascendancy.

By now Sekeletu was the paramount chief. He and his subordinate chiefs expressed a wish for English settlers in the Batoka highlands, 'He said he would cut off a section of the country for the special use of the English; and on being told that in all probability their descendants would cause disturbance in his country, he replied, "These would be only domestic feuds, and of no importance".'

Although historically Barotseland had little in the way of a cattle culture, it is supposed to have been taught about cattle by the Makololo. An export trade to South Africa developed in the early British period. This was helped by the 1896 rinderpest epidemic in Southern Rhodesia. The trade did not prove lasting, however. It had largely disappeared by the First World War through bovine pleuro-pneumonia.

The Makololo were eventually overthrown although they left behind the legacy of their language, which then became the tongue of the Barotse.

### **Lewanika the king**

Out of this political upheaval emerged the man who was to become the most famous Litunga (king) of Barotseland, Lewanika. He wanted British protection from the nearby Matabele (originally from Zululand) under their leader Lobengula, from the Portuguese and from some of his own dissident subjects.

Frank Lochner, representing Cecil Rhodes's Chartered Company, secured a far-reaching concession from Lewanika in 1890, the same year that the Company planted the flag in Lobengula's domains at what became Salisbury (now Harare). The concession covered all Lewanika's country, allowing the Company to engage in manufacturing, mining, banking, the provision of infrastructure works and the importation of arms and ammunition.

Whatever Lewanika's fears of Lobengula, it is impossible to imagine that the Barotse king realised the full implications of such a one-sided deal. Within a few years his arch-rival was dead. The 1893 Matabele war started over a small incident when the telegraph link was cut and wire stolen. The Chartered Company seized the opportunity and treated this as a *casus belli*. Maxim guns made short work of Lobengula's impi (regiments). The king fled his capital, Gubulawayo (close to today's Bulawayo), and soon died, probably of

smallpox.

However, the process of assimilation was by now unstoppable for Lewanika. Barotseland became absorbed into Northern Rhodesia at first under the Company and, from 1924, as a British protectorate.

The Lochner concession was followed by more treaties up to 1909. The Lawley concession of 1898 reduced Lewanika's annual subsidy from £2,000 to £850 and gave the Company judicial powers in disputes between whites or whites and blacks. It was the blueprint for the Lewanika concession of 1900. This affirmed the Company's administrative authority over the king's domains. It excluded prospecting in the Barotse heartland – and yet an astonishing postscript provided that if gold in worthwhile quantities was not found outside the reserved area, it could be sought inside the reserved area!

Col Colin Harding, who was a witness to the signatures on the treaty, wrote (Far Bugles, 1933) that 'on more mature consideration [Lewanika] realised that it carried him further than he had meant to go'. In a curious addition that may have been an attempt to distance himself from the deed, Harding went on: "I would like to say here that although I was present when this Ratifying Treaty was signed and my name was appended as a witness to the other signatures, the full contents of the document were not divulged to me.'

There were more concessions to come. By a simple exchange of letters in 1904, Lewanika gave the Company farming and settlement rights throughout his kingdom except the Barotse valley and near Sesheke. The 1909 Wallace concession reiterated these farming and settlement rights except in areas where prospecting was prohibited (including the heartland). Villages and gardens were specifically allowed to be uprooted, albeit with consent and compensation. The consent need not be that of the people affected, however. It could also be given by the high commissioner of the territory – ie a Briton.

This was a massive land grab, even if the worst of it never materialised by comparison with Southern Rhodesia. Nor were these deals made solely by rapacious commercial opportunists in Rhodes's name; they involved British imperial officials. It is hard now to understand how these people could bless such unequal treaties. It is equally hard to imagine why Lewanika and his advisers gave away so much.

Two points may be made in support of Lewanika, who remains a hero to the Lozi. He kept the Barotse heartland intact and the British came to his country by treaty, not conquest. Thus Barotseland differed from Lobengula's kingdom, and merited different treatment in Lozi eyes and also to a degree in those of colonial officials.

The situation may be compared with what is now Uganda. There, Buganda reached an accommodation with the incoming British and for ever after was treated better than the rival kingdom of Bunyoro, which had to be subdued by force of arms (see Cedric Pulford, *Eating Uganda*, 1999, *Casualty of Empire*, 2007, and *Two Kingdoms of Uganda*, 2011).

In Barotseland as in much of the empire, the British style was to rule without overt displays of power. Norman Knight recounts how as a young district officer he was borne

home in state by bearers, to the anger of the provincial commissioner, who happened to see the incident. There was a good reason – Knight had been injured – but he had some explaining to do (Memories of a District Officer in Northern Rhodesia and of the War Years, 2007).

Meanwhile, the indifference of colonialism to traditional boundaries was illustrated by the King of Italy's boundary award of 1905. This sliced a huge chunk from Lewanika's domains, allocating it to Portugal. Catherine Winkworth Mackintosh claimed (Coillard of the Zambesi, 1907) that the king was probably left with as much as he had ever occupied effectively.

He lost more than a quarter of his land but still had 181,947 square miles, not greatly short of Germany's 208,947 square miles.

Another loss of territory occurred in 1941 when Balovale district, where the Lozi had long claimed overlordship, was excised from Barotseland.

Colin Harding, who travelled up the Zambezi from Victoria Falls to Lealui, gave an account (In Remotest Barotseland, 1905) of Lewanika's daily routine. He sat in the courthouse between 9am and 10am, hearing complaints, promulgating laws and attending to other government business. The indunas, or senior officials, representing the people, sat on his right. They alone had the right to criticise the king.

In Far Bugles, Harding praised Lewanika's 'charming personality', his 'loyalty and other inherent virtues'. When the Litunga visited London for the coronation of King Edward VII, with Harding in attendance, the king and his retinue were found not to touch alcohol.

'Lewanika's whole and consistent attitude was befitting a gentleman and a great native ruler,' Harding wrote.

More than sixty years later Lewanika was still winning praise. A 1968 biography by Gervas Clay, *Your Friend, Lewanika*, could not speak too highly of the Litunga. 'He died full of honour, loved and respected by his people as a great chief, leaving the heart of his country reserved to the Barotse by treaty rights and his own family secure on the throne. No African ruler of his time achieved more, and none was more regretted by all who had known him.'

## **Independence and after**

Barotseland enjoyed a large degree of autonomy under the British. However, this once leading state, afflicted by its remoteness, slipped into backwardness. Development in Northern Rhodesia became focused on the mining areas and along the line of rail from Livingstone through Lusaka to the Copperbelt.

In recent times, as Gerald L. Caplan points out in *The Elites of Barotseland 1878-1969* (1970), the country has been an underpopulated labour reserve with 1/6th of the land mass but less than 1/10th of the population of Zambia.

Barotse autonomy was at first maintained when the colony became Zambia in 1964.

Later, it was removed, leading to long-running resentments at least among the elites.

The special status of Barotseland had been reaffirmed pre-independence by the Monckton Commission in 1960. But the United National Independence Party (UNIP) of Kenneth Kaunda beat Barotse secessionists in elections at various levels in 1962, 1963 and 1964.

Kaunda and the Litunga signed the Barotseland Agreement in 1964, independence year, but Zambia's new leader evidently felt under no obligation to respect it. The following year the Local Government Act abolished the Litunga's independent powers and the Barotse National Council was replaced by five district councils.

By now the Barotse electorate were awakening to what they had signed up for. In the 1968 national elections, UNIP lost eight of the province's 11 constituencies. But it was too late. The Litunga lost his control of land, which was transferred to the state. The Barotseland Agreement was abolished in 1969, leaving all eight Zambian provinces on an equal footing for the first time but also leaving a legacy of bitterness among the Barotse that continues to this day. Barotseland now became the Western Province.

### **Coillard the missionary**

Although David Livingstone 'discovered' Barotseland, Francois Coillard was the missionary who exerted the greatest influence in the early years of European contact.

Lewanika said: 'There are three sorts of whites, those of the government, the traders and missionaries. Fear those of the government, they have power; prey on the traders, for they have come to prey on you. As for the missionaries, a missionary is one of us.' (Quoted by Clay, above.)

Coillard (1834-1904), a French Protestant of the Paris Evangelical Mission, stayed in the country for many years and was close to Lewanika. On the Threshold of Central Africa (1897, from the original in French) is his account of the experience.

The missionary had worked for 20 years among the Sotho in Basutoland (now Lesotho). When he came north his first plan was to work among the Banyai, who were under the Matabele. But Lobengula said no, and Coillard went to Barotseland instead.

At that point, 1877, the Makololo (who were Sotho) had not long been overthrown. They had treated the Barotse well, hence Coillard and his fellow evangelists were accepted by the Litunga and much of the country.

Coillard settled in Barotseland in 1880, remaining there (apart from two years' leave in Europe in the late-Nineties) until his death in 1904, aged 69. His dominance in the mission field was threatened for a time by a movement known as the Ethiopian church. It flickered out relatively soon but remained a beacon for the later emergence of indigenous African associations.

The French missionary instinctively favoured the Chartered Company as the agent of 'civilising' European influence. 'Coillard ... gave Lochner (see above) all the support he

could. Coillard viewed with distrust the whole structure of the Barotse state as it was imbued with paganism' Lewis Gann writes in *The Birth of a Plural Society* (1958).

Barotse chiefs vetoed Lewanika's conversion to Christianity for political reasons, although his son and successor, Letia, was a Christian. The king read his bible almost daily but was said (by Catherine Mackintosh in *Lewanika of the Barotse*, 1942) also to sacrifice to his ancestors.

'Read' is apparently not to be understood literally. A European pioneer, R.H. Palmer (*Reminiscences of a Pioneer*, undated), reported that Lewanika could not read or write Sekololo, nor could he speak English. Palmer added that Lewanika was nevertheless a natural ruler. This sentiment is widely shared, as we saw above.

### **The Barotse way of life**

The Barotse's elite status vis a vis subject tribes was underlined by the 1911 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, which described them as "the intellectual and physical superiors of the vast majority of the negro races of Africa'.

Barotseland in pre-colonial times had the economic characteristics of a state reaching beyond local or tribal groups. Gann, in *The Birth of a Plural Society*, says the country had some regional economic specialisation with the different parts interdependent.

The constitutional arrangements were unusual, the Litunga reigning jointly with a queen, the Mokwai, who was his eldest sister. The Mokwai had a separate capital, Nalolo, to the south of Lealui.

Barotseland's religio-social arrangements were also curious, at least to European eyes. V.W. Turner (*The Lozi Peoples of North-Western Rhodesia*, 1952) describes a religion in which the supreme god was not omnipotent. His name was Nyambe, and his wife was Nasilele. He was driven from earth into heaven by man.

D.W. Stirke, who spent eight years among the Barotse and whose book proclaimed exactly that (*Eight Years Among the Barotse*, 1922), claimed that children of similar ages started sexual relations almost as soon as they could walk. The not surprising result was that virginity was unknown.

The Mwalianza ceremony marked a girl's first menstruation, after which she was married.

There was no offence of rape. On the other hand, according to Stirke, there was no known case of a girl needing coercion – a conclusion that feminists today would certainly challenge.

Catherine Mackintosh, who was the niece of Francois Coillard, quoted her uncle (in *Coillard of the Zambesi*) on the impermanence of marriage among the Barotse. This was because of the ease of divorce. 'There are no unhappy couples here; they part,' said Coillard.

In 1906, under British encouragement, Lewanika proclaimed the abolition of slavery in his

kingdom. He had been struck on a visit to England by the sight of people working for themselves. Everybody seemed to be at work, but in his country 'people just sit about'.

Abolition must have caused much disruption in the kingdom. Both Catherine Mackintosh and a visitor, Reginald Arthur Luck, spoke of widespread slavery. Luck said (*A Visit to Lewanika, King of the Barotse*, 1902): 'Slave trading is supposed to be at an end, but as a matter of fact, all the surrounding tribes are slaves to the Barotse.'

Mackintosh, in *Lewanika of the Barotse*, said that apart from the Barotse, no-one else was free in the country; the rest were slaves. Max Gluckman said the Barotse fought to gain women and children as servants, not men as warriors. In this they contrasted with the Zulu and their kinfolk, the Ndebele.

Neither the subordinate tribes nor the Barotse themselves regret the passing of the old order, said Gluckman, writing in the 1940s. 'Almost all' Barotse consider modern times better than the old.

He was writing in the late colonial period, and found an absence of white-Barotse tensions. With post-colonial hindsight, we may wonder whether this was colour (and economic) blindness or merely an acceptance of the inevitable.

Hindsight too has its limitations. *Twilight on the Zambesi* by Eugenia W. Herbert (2002) is one of the few recent books to touch on Barotseland. She cautions us to 'resist the temptation simply to see "colonialism" and "nationalism" as so many abstractions ... [it is] much easier to divide the actors willy-nilly into good guys and bad guys and move on. Everyone acknowledges that their own lives are a lot more complicated than that, but we often fail to grant the same complexity to the past.'

She points out that the Zambian government has behaved just as stingily towards Barotseland as the colonial treasury.

It was Barotseland's misfortune to be caught up in wider imperial politics in one of its most sensitive areas, southern Africa. Cecil Rhodes dreamt of an 'all red' route from the Cape to Cairo. Gladstone's administration, according to John Marlowe's *Cecil Rhodes: The Anatomy of Empire* (1972), went along with Rhodes's Chartered Company, preferring its 'unscrupulous and insubordinate methods' to the weakness of the counterpart company in east Africa.

Rhodes's dream of all-red territory the length of Africa materialised in 1918, long after his death, when Britain obtained the United Nations mandate over the former German colony of Tanganyika. However, the 'iron spine', a railway, to connect all the territory was never built.

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