

Excerpted from *African Reflections: Art from Northeastern Zaire*, Schildkrout and Keim, Chapter 1, AMNH and University of Washington Press, 1990.

Regions, Languages, and Tribes in Northeastern Congo

Northeastern Congo is an ecologically rich area that includes the northern edge of the Ituri forest and the savanna grasslands extending northward into the Sudan. This geographical and biological diversity, with fauna and flora from several different microenvironments, explains its attraction for early twentieth-century naturalists like Lang and Chapin. Around the turn of the century several unique species of animals were known to inhabit this region, most notably the okapi (first described in the scientific literature in 1902), a rare prize for museum dioramas.

This ecological diversity has also attracted immigrants from a wide geographical area as far back as history takes us. Very little archeological work has been done in this region, but historical linguistics suggests that for at least two millennia people from three major linguistic families have been entering the area and sharing their languages and cultures. Today the region includes people speaking Bantu, Central Sudanic, and Ubangian languages. In a 1977 study of the languages of Africa by David Dalby this region is referred to as part of a fragmentation zone, because of the interpenetration of many language groups. The Bantu-speaking peoples include the Bua in the west, the Budu and Bali in the south, the Angba (Mongelima) in the southwest, and the Lese in the southeast. The (Eastern) Central Sudanic speakers include the Mamvu, the Madi, and the Mangbetu. Mangbetu speakers include the Meje, Makere, Malele, Mapopoi, and the Mangbele (former Bantu speakers). The Ubangian-speaking peoples include the Azande, the Bangba, and the Barambo.

The concept of region, unlike the simpler concept of tribe, does not inherently imply clear geographical or cultural boundaries. The problem is compounded in northeastern Congo by the fact that linguistic, cultural, and political boundaries, let alone the later boundaries imposed by colonial authorities, are not congruent. The Azande and Mangbetu, for example, speak quite unrelated languages but share some features of culture and political organization. The Asua (called Akka by the Mangbetu), Mbuti, Efe, and other Pygmies, still culturally distinct in some respects, now largely share the languages of their Bantu and Central Sudanic neighbors. The Mangbele have for the most part adopted the Mangbetu language and political culture while retaining some features of their original culture. Some groups, such as the Meje, Madi, and Mangbele, have subgroups both inside and outside the Mangbetu kingdoms.

Dalby, David. 1977. *Language Map of Africa and the Adjacent Islands*. Limited provisional edition. London; International Institute.

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