

THE USE OF ARABIC AS A WRITTEN  
LANGUAGE IN CENTRAL AFRICA  
THE CASE OF THE UELE BASIN (NORTHERN  
CONGO) IN THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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When the Europeans arrived in what would become the Congo Free State (Etat Indépendant du Congo, EIC), now the Democratic Republic of Congo, in the last decades of the nineteenth century, the Islamic influence was present in two different areas: the eastern part of Congo, and the northern part. Some studies have already underlined the influence of the Arab and Swahili culture on the society of Eastern Congo. But few studies are concerned with the influence of Arab culture in Northern Congo. This article intends to show this impact through a phenomenon which is of particular importance: the use of Arabic as a written language in what was then called the ‘Azande Sultanates’, in the Uele Basin at the edge of the Congo Free State, between Sudan and the French colonial territories.

The letters which are analysed here brings a new light on this area at various levels: the nature of the relations between the European officers and the Azande<sup>1</sup> sultans, their means of intercommunication, direct references to some historical facts—such as trade, slavery and the presence of the Arabs—and finally the linguistic situation at this period.<sup>2</sup>

1 *Azande* is the plural form of *Zande*.

2 I am grateful to Jessica Alampay, who kindly and carefully corrected the English version of this text, and to Ismael Taha, who helped me to understand some Sudanese colloquial expressions.

### *Historical Background*

#### *The Azande land, especially the Uele-Bomu area*

The documents presented in this article are related to the History of the Azande sultanates, mainly located in what is now the Uele province, in the north-east of the DRC, as well as in parts of southern Sudan and the Central African Republic. The term Azande includes the Azande proper, as well as other populations, such as the Abandiya, the Amadi, the Avungara, all of whom became culturally and linguistically dominated by the Azande.

Most scholars who have written about Azande culture and history have described in detail the relations between the Azande and neighbouring peoples, such as the Avukaya, the Amadi or the Baka. On the other hand, these scholars often consider the cultural relations between the Arabs and the Muslim Africans before the arrival of the Europeans as almost irrelevant, due to the relatively recent nature of these contacts. Baxter and Butt, for instance, state that ‘Arab influence on Zande has been only indirect’.<sup>3</sup> Ceulemans, too, considers that ‘[in the Northern Congo] the Sudanese and the Mahdist influence was non-existent’.<sup>4</sup> The general reference works on the history of Congo often ignore the Arab-Islamic presence in the area.<sup>5</sup>

However, other authors have underlined the existence of relationships between Azande and Arabs. In the nineteenth century, Schweinfurth, Casati and Landeroin presented many interesting details on this topic. Lotar and Muller, who describe the first contacts between the Azande sultans and

3 P.T.W. Baxter, & A. Butt, *The Azande and Related Peoples of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan and Belgian Congo*, London 1953, 23.

4 R.P.P. Ceulemans, ‘L’introduction de l’influence de l’Islam au Congo’, in I.M. Lewis (ed.), *Islam in Tropical Africa*, London 1966, 176.

5 R. Cornevin, *Histoire du Congo-Léopoldville*, Paris 1966, and I. Ndaywel è Nziem, *Histoire générale du Congo. De l’héritage ancien à la République démocratique*, Paris-Brussels 1998, 202f.

the Congo Free State, often quote the presence of Arabs in the area, or the use of Arabic among the Azande. Unfortunately, their books concentrate on the historical events and not on the cultural background of the people living in Northern Congo. In the postcolonial period, Evans-Pritchard often gives information about this topic, as do de Dampierre as well as Thuriaux-Hennebert, who published detailed research on the political relations between Zande and Arabs.<sup>6</sup>

*The arrival of the 'Arabs' in the area*

It seems that the Arabs had not established meaningful contacts in the Azande territories long before 1860.<sup>7</sup> At this time, some traders came from the Sudan, mainly to buy slaves and ivory. It seems that many of these traders were Nubians—and the Western sources often use the term *Nubian* or *Nubian traders* to describe them. The nature of the relationship between the Azande chiefs and those traders varied from one chief to another. Some of them, like Ngange, decided to have open commercial relations with the Sudanese traders. His brother Surūr, who had been brought up by ‘Abd al-Şamad, a Sudanese trader, worked under the orders of this merchant.<sup>8</sup> Bazingbi, a Zande chief, even married his daughter to Idrīs, an Arab trader,<sup>9</sup> and so did Tikima, who married one of his daughters to Zubayr, a Ja°ālī Arab educated in Khartoum.<sup>10</sup> But others like Ndoruma or Wando fought them fiercely, so that the traders had to

6 E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Azande. History and Political Institutions*, Oxford 1971; E. de Dampierre, *Un ancien royaume Bandia du Haut-Oubangui*, Paris 1967; and A. Thuriaux-Hennebert, *Les Zande dans l'Histoire du Bahr el Ghazal et de l'Equatoria*, Brussels 1964.

7 Evans-Pritchard, *Azande*, 70.

8 Thuriaux-Hennebert, *Zande*, 34.

9 Evans-Pritchard, *Azande*, 1971, 290f.

10 R. Gray, *A History of the Southern Sudan. 1839-1889*, Oxford 1961, 69.

establish small fortified villages, the *zarā'ib* (the singular, *zarība* is often used in Western sources).<sup>11</sup>

In the 1870s, the Egyptian government decided to gain real control of the Baḥr al-Ghazāl and of the activities of the slave and ivory traders. It sent its representatives to this province. Some of the Azande chiefs, like Tikima, Sasa, Zemio, Wando, became the allies—or vassals—of the traders. Around the year 1880, many Azande chiefs, like Ndoruma, Sasa, Zemio and Rafay, agreed to be at the service of the Egyptian government—represented by European officers like Lupton Bey and Gessi—partly in order to fight the slave raiders.

In 1881, the Mahdi rose up against the Egyptian government in Sudan. This event had a significant impact in the area since the Sudan was divided into two camps: the Mahdists and the Egyptian government. This opposition occurred in the Baḥr al-Ghazāl and in the Uele Basin as well. The Arab presence did not cease but it did become weaker, so that most of the Azande sultans became independent of both the Egyptian government and the Mahdists.

*The relations between the Azande chiefs and the  
representatives of the Congo Free State*

It seems that King Leopold II first thought of occupying the Uele area in 1886, fearing that the political instability in the Baḥr al-Ghazāl may have an influence on the Congo Free State and that the Sudanese slave-traders, coming from the north, would go deeper into the country and join the Arab and Swahili traders based at the Stanley Falls, now Kisangani.<sup>12</sup> In January 1888, Vangèle explored the Bomu and a part of the Uele rivers. The same year, King Leopold

11 Thuriaux-Hennebert, *Zande*, 36.

12 R.P.L. Lotar, *La grande chronique de l'Uele*, Brussels 1946, 5.

II decided to create a new district in the Congo Free State: the Aruwimi-Uele. In December 1889, the Belgian officer J. Becker met the Sultan Jabir at Basoko. He proposed to lead him to the Uele River, and in January 1890 Becker arrived in Jabir's sultanate. In April 1890, the first Belgian post was founded at Jābir<sup>13</sup> by Roget, Milz and Duvivier. Step by step, the Azande sultans made contacts with the representatives of the Congo Free State. Some of them, like Jabir himself, as well as Rafay, Bangaso and Zemio, directly cooperated with them; while others, like Mopoi, were hostile to the newcomers. Zemio even assisted the Belgian officers in their expeditions to Baḥr al-Ghazāl in 1892 and 1894.<sup>14</sup> After 1894, as the Belgian occupation became more and more effective, the reactions of some of the Azande sultans changed. Among them, some sultans like Engwetra in 1896, led a rebellion against the Congo Free State. In the same time, the problem of the border with the French and the British territories in the area modified the Belgian presence. A treaty signed between Leopold II and France in 1894, gave up Bangaso and Rafay sultanates, as well as a part of Zemio's.<sup>15</sup> Other Azande sultanates were occupied by the British. In 1909, Zemio decided to settle down in the French territories, and so did Mopoi in 1911.<sup>16</sup>

*The Arab Islamic influence in this area at the arrival of the Europeans.*

It seems that most of the Azande kept their own cultural features, like language, architecture or religion, etc. However, according to the testimonies of the Western officers in the Uele area, the Sudanese influence on this region was

13 Many local towns and villages are named after their chief's names.

14 Lotar, *Grande chronique de l'Uele*, and M. Coosemans, *Bibliographie coloniale belge*, I, Brussels 1948, 843.

15 Thuriaux-Hennebert, *Zande*, 253.

16 Thuriaux-Hennebert, *Zande*, 287.

obvious:

- some local chiefs became Muslims. Therefore, some of them adopted a Muslim name as well as some customs like circumcision, the way of greeting visitors. Some of those conversions were probably superficial (for instance, the local alcohol was still popular with most of them)<sup>17</sup> though others were very sincere: de la Kethulle describes Zemio, Jabir and Rafay as sincere Muslims who were, for instance, fasting during Ramaḍān and praying,<sup>18</sup> and Mopoi is said by another source to be a ‘fanatic Muslim’ (actually, the expression is ‘*pourri d’islamisme*’, in French).<sup>19</sup>
- many chiefs—like Rafay, Zemio, Mopoi, Engwetra and Jabir—and their subjects adopted the Arabic style of dress.<sup>20</sup>
- some houses, like in Engwetra, were made of ‘pisé’, with arabesque-like decorations on the walls.<sup>21</sup>
- some Arabic loanwords are found in the Zande language.<sup>22</sup>

But the most striking influence was the use of Arabic as a sort of both oral and written ‘diplomatic language’.

17 P. Salmon, ‘Les carnets de campagne de G. Bricusse’, *Cemubac* – LXXVI, Brussels 1966, 47f.

18 Ch. de la Kethulle, ‘Deux années de résidence chez le sultan Rafai’, *Bulletin de la Société Royale Belge de Géographie*, xix, 1895, 407.

19 Tombeur, in P. Salmon, *La dernière insurrection de Mopoi Bangezegino (1916)*, Brussels, 16.

20 *Congo illustré*, iii, 116-21.

21 Lotar, *Grande chronique de l’Uele*, 64.

22 See Block & al, *Vocabulaire français-azande et azande-français*, Brussels 1912 and C.R. Lagae, *La langue des Azande*, Ghent 1921. An Italian missionary, A. Colombaroli, had already written a short description of the Zande language as soon as 1895. The booklet seems to contain many Arabic loanwords, but it had been done on information collected in Cairo, with the help of Azande who had been brought there as slaves or soldiers; Lagae, *Langue des Azande*, 5.

*The use of Arabic in the area*

Several European observers mention that some chiefs communicated in Arabic when they met foreigners. Schweinfurth says that when he met the king of the Azande, an interpreter translated what the king said from Zande to Arabic.<sup>23</sup> Later, from around 1890, Belgian and French travellers and officers, like De Bauw or Landeroin, report that they met Azande chiefs who were able to speak Arabic. Some of them, like Yapati, had a basic knowledge of the language, others like Zemio or Rafay were fluent, while Tambura or Kana had interpreters who knew Arabic.<sup>24</sup> The most interesting testimony is that of Charles de la Kethulle. This Belgian officer spent two years in Rafay, a Zande town. He reports that the sultan, the chiefs, the soldiers and almost all the inhabitants of Rafay could speak Arabic.<sup>25</sup>

How did the Azande learn Arabic? Of course, they were in contact with various Arabic speakers in the area for some decades, these included: representatives of the Egyptian government, traders, soldiers, 'faqīhs'... Some Azande also became *bazingar*, Africans who were victims of the razzias and who were brought up in Arabic in the *zarība*, becoming then soldiers or interpreters for the Sudanese merchants.<sup>26</sup> But some of them even went to Sudan. According to De Bauw, when Jabir was 14 years old, he wanted to travel and he asked an Arab caravan if he could follow them. They accepted and he accompanied them and even stayed three months in Khartoum.<sup>27</sup> Schweinfurth says that some Azande who had been sold as slaves in Khartoum or elsewhere in Sudan then came back to their villages after being freed.<sup>28</sup>

23 G. Schweinfurth, *The Heart of Africa*, London 1873, II, 8.

24 M. Landeroin, *Mission Congo-Nil (Mission Marchand. Carnets de route)*, Paris 1996, 58, 62, 68, 70 & 74.

25 Ch. de la Kethulle, 'Le sultanat de Rafai', *Le Congo illustré*, iv, 1895, 149.

26 W. Junker, *Reisen in Afrika 1875-1886*, Vienna 1889, 459.

27 De Bauw, Notebook, 4.

28 Schweinfurth, in A. Ricard (ed.), *Voyages de découvertes en Afrique*.

We also know that many Azande voluntarily joined the troops of the Sudanese traders based in the Baḥr al-Ghazāl.<sup>29</sup> We can imagine that all those men had at least learnt colloquial Arabic and were then able to communicate with Arabs.

But some Azande were not only able to speak in Arabic, they were also able to read and to write it: According to de la Kethulle and others, Qurʾānic verses were used to make amulets.<sup>30</sup> Rafay possessed a Qurʾān, and when he swore faithfulness to the Congo Free State, he placed his right hand on the Holy Book.<sup>31</sup>

But the most interesting use of Arabic is correspondence. Many sources say that the European officers visiting the area often received messages in Arabic, sent by Azande sultans, and that they replied to them in the same language, since they were accompanied by interpreters.<sup>32</sup>

In fact, some of these documents written by Azande chiefs or by their secretaries have been brought to Belgium by officers of the Congo Free State. In 1954, the Professor Armand Abel published the translation of eleven of those letters, belonging to the Historical Archives of the 'Académie Royale des Sciences coloniales'. Unfortunately, we have not been able to locate where this set of documents is today. Recently, we have found eight other letters which are now in the Library of the Museum of Tervuren, Historical section, and which are translated and analysed below.<sup>33</sup>

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*Anthologie 1790-1890*, Paris 2000, 833 & 845.

29 P.M. Holt & M.W. Daly, *A History of the Sudan*, London 1988, 71.

30 de la Kethulle, 'Deux années de résidence', 417, and Chaltin, in Salmon, *Dernière insurrection*, 12.

31 Thuriaux-Hennebert, *Zande*, 224.

32 Landeroin, *Mission Congo-Nil*, 77-8.

33 It seems that other documents of this kind are to be found in other sets of archives: D.H. Johnson kindly informed me that some British Intelligence Reports contain the translation of other letters written by Zemio or sent to him in the years 1890 Intelligence Report, Egypt, 8, November 1892; 50, August-December 1896). D.D. Cordell quotes a

*The situation after 1912*

Though the influence of Arabic culture in the Azande sultanates in the late nineteenth century was obvious, we hardly find any information concerning Islam and Arabic in this area after 1905: Roome, who visited Congo in 1916 coming from the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, states that from the Sudanese-Congolese border up to Stanleyville, he did not see any trace of Muslim influence.<sup>34</sup> None of the other books or documents dealing with the Uele area after this period mention anything concerning Muslim communities.<sup>35</sup> Anciaux simply quotes that some Muslim preachers were entering North-Eastern Congo illegally from Sudan, without giving any details about the nature of their activities.<sup>36</sup>

Concerning the language itself, van Bulck led a linguistic survey in the Northern and the Eastern parts of Congo in the years 1949-1951, producing a detailed list of the langu-

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letter written in Arabic and sent by Sultan Al-Sanusi to Bangaso in May 1902, which is kept today in the Archives nationales de France – Section d’Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence; D.D. Cordell, *Dar al-Kuti and the Last Years of the Trans-Saharan Slave Trade*, Madison 1985, 238, n. 64.

- 34 W.J.W. Roome, ‘Islam on the Congo’, *The Moslem World*, 1916, 283.
- 35 See for instance A. Scohy, *L’Uele secret*, Brussels 1955 and J.C. Willame, ‘Province de l’Uele’, in *Collection d’Etudes Politiques*, II, Leopoldville 1964. However, the position of the Belgian historians and academics toward Islam during the colonial times must be underlined here: though the scientific literature concerning Congo was extremely prolific during this period – from linguistics, ‘ethnography’ and history to botanic and mineralogy – only six monographies were written about Islam in Congo – and most of those books presented an openly negative image of Islam in Africa; X. Luffin, ‘Historiographie coloniale. La présence arabo-musulmane au Congo’, *La Revue Nouvelle*, December 2002, 70f. So, the absence of any information concerning Islam in Northern Congo does not mean that it totally disappeared. Perhaps an enquiry in Northern Congo could clarify this point.
- 36 L. Anciaux, *Le problème musulman dans l’Afrique belge*, Paris 1949, 53.

ages in use in those areas, including the Uele province, but he does not mention Arabic at all.<sup>37</sup>

Various factors must be analysed to understand this situation. First of all, the stabilisation of the presence of three colonial powers, France, Great Britain and Belgium, created real boundaries in the area—although we know that those boundaries were not completely firm—and it did really break the movement of populations between Sudan and Congo Free State. Some of the Azande sultans now lived outside the Congo Free State: Rafay was in the French territory since 1894, Zemio since 1909... Inside the Congo itself, one of the first aims of the colonial presence in the Uele and Aruwimi areas was to hinder the ‘junction’ between the Swahili traders in the East and the Sudanese in the North.<sup>38</sup>

In addition to this, after the ‘Arab campaign’ (1892-94) which opposed the Belgians to the Muslim traders in the Eastern part of Congo Free State, everything was done to undermine the presence of Islam in the country. During the entire colonial period, this religion was tolerated, but the relations with the other Muslim communities abroad were made difficult, as was the introduction of books in Arabic or the building of new schools and so on.<sup>39</sup> This policy was of course reinforced, if not guided, by the monopoly of the Christian missionaries on the educational system. The presence of Islam in Northern Congo being very recent and in many cases quite superficial, obscuring it was easier than in the eastern part of the colony.

Concerning the use of Arabic itself, it was above all a kind of diplomatic lingua franca in the region. Now, if during the first years of the Belgian presence in Northern

37 S.J. van Bulck, *Mission linguistique 1949-1951*, Brussels 1954.

38 Lotar, *Grande chronique de l’Uele*, 10.

39 A. Abel, ‘Documents concernant le Bahr al Ghazal (1893/4)’, in *B.A.R.S.C.*, Brussels 1959, 32, n. 2, and C. Young, ‘L’Islam au Congo’, *Etudes congolaises*, 5, 1967, 22.

Congo, the local sultans kept their power, the colonial administration took their functions step by step, and replaced the sultans. In 1912, the last important Zande sultan, Sasa, was captured and deported to Boma, in the Bas-Congo province.<sup>40</sup> At this time, the use of Arabic as a ‘diplomatic language’ had become completely useless.

### *The documents*

Most of the documents have no date, but all of them were probably written between October 1897 and November 1899, since they were all brought back to Belgium by Guillaume De Bauw,<sup>41</sup> who was responsible for the Uere-Bomu area (Uele) at the same period. They deal mainly with local politics and trade.

The authors of those letters were Azande chiefs or, more likely, their Arab secretaries—Zemio, for instance, had a *kātib*<sup>42</sup> or *faqīh*<sup>43</sup>—and the interpreters of the Belgian representatives of King Leopold, who were Near Eastern Arabs, like Doctor Sabbāgh, the Egyptian Ya<sup>c</sup>qūb Sulaymān or the Iraqi Izikiāl Ma<sup>c</sup>tūq.<sup>44</sup> The letters were put in an envelope

40 Thuriaux-Hennebert, *Zande*, 287f.

41 Guillaume De Bauw (1865-1914) was a Belgian officer. He started his military formation at the age of twelve. He has been at the service of the Congo Free State, in the Uele area from 1897 to 1900 – where he became captain and then captain-commandant, 2nd and then 1st class – and in the province of Equatoria from 1901 to 1904, where he led several explorations (Momboyo, Salonga and Lomela rivers) and created stations (Itoko, Mondombe). Then, he came back to Belgium where he continued his career in the army, where he became captain-commandant and then major. De Bauw has written three articles about his African experience in *La Belgique coloniale*; Engels, *Bibliographie coloniale belge*, II, Bruxelles 1951, 46-7.

42 Lotar, *Grande chronique de l’Uele*, and Coosemans, *Bibliographie coloniale belge*, 844.

43 Landeroin, *Mission Congo-Nil*, 63.

44 Coosemans, *Bibliographie coloniale belge*, I, 857, and Lotar, *Grande chronique de l’Uele*, 319 & 327.

and sent to the addressee with a *mursal*—or a *boro waraga* in Zande<sup>45</sup>—a messenger.

### *The structure of the documents*

The letters follow more or less the same structure, though all the following elements do not always appear:

- a formal religious sentence (like *wa-bi-hi al-<sup>ʿ</sup>awn wa'l-tawfiq*),
- the name of the sender and the name of the addressee,
- formal salutations (like *al-salām <sup>ʿ</sup>alayka wa'l-rahma wa'l-bāraka min Allāh ta<sup>ʿ</sup>āla*),
- the message itself,
- a final formal salutation (like *wa-dumtum sālimīn fī khayr wa-<sup>ʿ</sup>āfiya*),
- an expression indicating that the letter ended (like *khitām*),
- the date,
- the signature.

### *The translation of the documents*

Here follows the translation of those letters, with comments. The words between brackets are added by us in order to clarify the sentence, the dots between brackets [...] stand for illegible words, due to the bad conservation of the documents or to the writing, which is, in many cases, awkward.

#### *Letter 1:*

In the Name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful,

To the dear Sir, peace on you, the mercy and the blessing of God on you.

Don't you want to buy my ivory tusks now? At first, I made it forbidden to trade with you. [...]. I have thousands

45 Block, *Vocabulaire français-azande*, 176.

of ivory [tusks], don't destroy our commercial relations, my friend. I only want good things for you. If you do not want to buy my [tusks], just let me know. I have so many of them to sell.

Sasa.

[...] If our Lord lets you come to my country, you will see them with your own eyes.

Thousand greetings. Sāsa Zābīr.

*Comment:*


This document is accompanied with a letter in French written by Doctor Sabbāgh—the EIC translator—to Captain De Bauw, on 26 November 1897. We did not find any information about Dr Sabbāgh, but he was most probably one of the translator-interpreters working for the Congo Free State. His letter contains the translation of Sasa's letter, and a short commentary where he states that the translation took him a very long time since he had to decipher Sasa's 'hieroglyphic characters'. Here is the translation made by Dr Sabbāgh, which is actually a free abstract of the letter:

In the name of God, Powerful and Good. Greetings and blessings upon our friend.

As you want a good relation between us, you are welcome. Until now, I had forbidden to bring you ivory. But now my ivory is at your disposal and nothing will be able to disrupt the harmony of our trade. Especially that I have a treasury of ivory. Anyway, you will notice that on your own, if Gods allows you to stay in my territory. Sasa Jabir.

Sasa was the brother of Tikima, and the uncle of Zemio. It is said that he submitted to the EIC in 1893. But this submission does not seem to be complete, since this letter, written in 1897, shows that he had forbidden, for a short period of time, trade with the Belgians. Sasa was deported to eastern Congo by the Belgians in 1911.<sup>46</sup>

46 Coosemans, *Bibliographie coloniale belge*, I, 835f.


  
 الى الامير شيميو  
 قبل ترك جبه الويري لنوهرنا الي بلدنا اريد اقول  
 لكم مزيه شكري وشكواتي  
 مراتنا لغايه الان كانه رايا طريق المحبه بل  
 فعله بشير مپوي الذي خلق لنا رايا صعوبت  
 اقولم حيننا فقد بشير مپوي ك جرحه الحين  
 بومو اليمننا وان نجلكم اقولو يملكه محل جبهنا  
 الكشيدلا يبقى ما سويينكم وبيدك حلو الكشغو  
 جيره حشنة - ليريد ايفار اتقابل مع  
 نجلكم اقولو قبل توهره نزلتم تريده تتواجدوا  
 شخيا في مركز الويري

*Letter 2*

To Prince Zemio.

Before we leave the Uere [river] bank and go back to our country, I want to send you my sincere salutations.

Until now, our correspondence has always been very sincere, but Bashir Mopoi created many difficulties. I ask you to transfer Bashir Mopoi to the right bank of Bomu [river], your nephew Afulu has a residence there. The relationship between you and the government of Congo remains that of good neighbours. I would also like to meet your nephew Afulu before I leave. If you want, you can come personally to the Uere post.

*Comment:*

Neither the sender of the letter, nor the date, are mentioned, but the author must be De Bauw's secretary. If so, the letter was probably written in 1899, the last year of De Bauw in the area, since he says 'before we go back to our country'. The writing is clear, the language and the style are closer to Classical Arabic. It must have been written by one of De Bauw's translators.

Zemio, son of Tikima, was one of the best allies the Belgians had in Northern Congo. He submitted to the EIC in 1890, and he helped and even participated in the expeditions of 1892 and 1894 in Southern Sudan.<sup>47</sup> Mopoi, chief of a territory north of the Bomu river, had had trade relations with the Arabs since the 1860s, and was a rival to Tikima and his son Zemio. It seems that his relations with the colonial authorities have always been conflictual.<sup>48</sup> However, we did not find any trace of his capture in this period, so the plan explained in this letter had either failed, or had been renounced.

*Letter 3*

God is the one who gives help and success.

From the Sultan Zemio Tikima to the estimated and important chief who rules the *zarība* of Ango. Peace be on you, may the Mercy and the Blessing of God Most High be on you.

We inform you that one of the merchants—his name is *al-ḥājj* Ibrāhīm—arrived to the Sultan Sasa with cows and a lot of merchandise, accompanied by his brothers. They want to go back to their country. His brother *al-ḥājj* Ṭāhir will come to you and inform you about his case. Ask Sasa that this man come to you with his merchandise, and after his visit to you, he will trade the same way his brothers do. He

47 Lotar, *Grande chronique de l'Uele*, 346, and Coosemans, *Bibliographie coloniale belge*, 843.

48 Salmon, *Dernière insurrection*, 10f.

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 وفي القون والتوفيق  
 من السيد السلطان زهير الكرم الرخيد السيد العجائب الكبير الذي  
 جاكم زينة انقوا السهم عليك والبركة والبركة عزاله  
 تقابل يدك نعلمك واحد من النجا راه سمه الحاج ابر  
 هيم وطلعت السلطان زهير بيقره او استيايه كثير  
 واخوانه مراد هم السهم التي بلادهم ها هو اخوه  
 الحاج طاهر واطالك يعرفك يا صديقي وانت  
 اكلية مرعند ساسر بخضره عندك مع استيايه  
 وبعد حضوره عندك مثلها اخوانه بيتنزا  
 هو بيتنزا لله بخضره اخوانه بسا فرو الي  
 التي بلادهم وان كان المشيخ الذي خلفه ساسر  
 شراله هيب بخضره عندك بشقه وان كان حاشرو ال  
 شخه كذا بخضرك باستيايه وان جعله ال  
 شياخ الذين انا طلبتهم عندك في الاسبوع  
 والشراء من السهم وجعله فاق وصلتنا لهذا  
 لان ارسله لنا سريعا سر بجا والسبح سبحان

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will come with his brothers, then they will travel back to  
 their country. If Sasa sells him what he has at a good price,  
 he will come to you with trust, but if they don't sell anything  
 to Sasa, he [the trader] will come to you with his goods. If  
 the things I have ordered to you for commercial purpose—  
 the arms and all that things for us—reached [you], send  
 them to us as quickly as possible. Greetings. End.

*Comment:*

We have not been able to identify *al-ḥājj* Ṭāhir and *al-ḥājj* Ibrāhīm, but they certainly were Sudanese traders. Ango (Camp Uere) was the main camp of the EIC, on the Uele river.

*Letter 4:*

Two cows, Remington cartridges,  
 twenty [...] to sell, alcohol, black fabric, plates, hat, and  
 stew-pans  
 ivory to buy gunpowder and capsules,  
 forty *rungiyya* (unit) of rice to sell, nice clothes  
 twenty [measures] of coffee to sell, clothes and salt  
 thread and buttons and needle  
 fifteen [measures] of onion to sell like coffee  
 and a gun.

Send this to us because the fire destroyed [what I had].

I do not have sandals, either. [I need] four pairs like the one of the commandant [...].

Greetings of Zemio, son of Tikima, and Ramaḍān. End.

and on the *verso*:

‘Send us back the [...] quickly. Ramaḍān. End.’

*Comment:*

This document was written by Zemio, son of Tikima, and Ramaḍān, who is probably a merchant. These are the goods that were needed at Zemio’s sultanate. We may imagine that this list was sent to De Bauw or another representative of the Congo Free State, in the context of their commercial exchanges.

*Letter 5:**On the envelope:*

This has been sent to the Commandant who rules the *zarība*

of Ango, may [this letter] find him in good health, if God wishes. Amen. End. 13 Jumāda Awwal 1316 [which is August 28, 1898].

*The letter:*

God is the master of help and success.

From the dear and generous Sultan Zemio Tikima to the dear and generous commandant who rules the *zarība* of Ango—we do not know your name—Peace on you, may the Mercy and the Blessing of God the Very High be on you.

I inform you about what we did concerning the child that you have sent us, accompanied by Johnny and Baker: they brought him to us. I bless you and I thank you, may God bless you a thousand times. Really, you are among the best rulers, the rulers who know the good way to govern, without changes. Thank to God, I saw this and I was very happy. I have also done what you asked. Concerning the affair of Bangir people, how can they talk so rudely about you? If somebody wants to talk about chiefs, he has to say the truth since the beginning.

First, one of the slaves of Ambatara left from there and went to Zay. From Zay he went to the sultans and eventually came to me and told me lies: he was not sent by Ambatara, he told me lies. After this, another of Ambatara's slaves, who's name is Fakarafatuh, was really sent by Ambatara and he arrived at Zay, who advised him in this matter. Concerning the sultans of Bangir, all of them accepted his request to come to me, so that we stay together. They told him OK and he came to me. After this, came another of Ambatara's slaves, called Zemio, who was one of Ambatara's messengers as well.

The Bangir people, who told you that I travelled to Ambatara, told you lies. First, one of my men, whose name is Kabas, has travelled because of the Bangir matter. They said: after that Ambatara's messenger came to you, send him with one of your men. So, I told Kabas to accompany them.

After Kabas's journey to Ambatara, they came with one of Ambatara's sons, called Wuza and with [the slave called] Zemio. You can ask the people of Bangir. Ambatara's son crossed the Makwi [river] with a boat, and then he arrived at Zay.

I allow you [the control of] the whole Bangir area, from Makwi to Zay and from Zay to our country. He [Ambatara's son?] travelled in their country until he arrived to us. Why did they accept that he travels there? If they were not betrayers, they should never have accepted this.

The Bangir falsely complain to you. They caught Karakara because of the war against him. First, one of my brothers died there, actually he was drowned. So my uncles went there, and because they [the Bangir] didn't catch one of them, they caught Karakara. They are betrayers. When Ambatara fought against you, his son came to them. Why did not they catch him and bring him to you? [...]. And when the child of Ambatara arrived to me, the Bangir said that [...] and that I gathered my men. They said it was not true, it is not Zemio who travels, but this child, I mean Karakara, travels with him because of [...].

I have many problems with them, if you ask me to send one of my men to Ango, he will tell you many things. If the Bangir respect you and accept your authority, why don't they act the way I do it? Really, I don't know. When I knew that you were going to Ndoruma's camp to fight him, Ndoruma asked that I sent him a Remington and a pistol. When I heard this, I refused to send the weapons to Ndoruma because he is your enemy.

If the Bangir tell you the truth, that they caught the child of Ambatara, let them first inform you about how is he. Don't listen to their lies. Myself, I am not with them or in their country, and Ndoruma's weapon is in my hands until now. Anyway, it is useless to hide things. I have talked too much. If the commandant and someone who knows Arabic are at the *zariba* of Ango, maybe that my people and

Bangir's people could meet there, so that the affair could be judged at your camp. Stay in peace and good health,  
12 Jumāda al-Awwal 1316 (or 1319).

*Comment:*

Since most of the facts, places and persons which are mentioned in this letter—Ambatara, Karakara, Zay, Bangir—are unknown, the meaning of many sentences remains obscure. However, we notice that Zemio tries to convince De Bauw that, unless other sultans, he is his faithful ally and that other chiefs like Ndoruma and Bangir try to compromise their good relations. He also asks the Belgian officer to judge a local dispute between himself and another sultan, Bangir.

*Letter 6:*

Address: Commandant of Ango (Camp Uere)

Text: There is no war to expect. The Sultan Zemio, the big Zande chief, informs the Commandant of Ango (Camp Uere) that when a man does something bad, it is allowed to punish him or to kill him. It is also allowed to kill him if he steals.

You will find us like you have left us and nobody will do something bad during your absence. You have always been good to us. We do not know if your successor will do the same. We do not now for how long you will be gone. If you stay alive we will have the happiness to see you again. We will perhaps meet again in the future (when our beards will be so long that they'll touch the ground).

When you will go to Europe, please tell us who will be your successor. We know you well now and we regret your departure, because we do not know the intentions of your successors. We hope that you will not be absent for longer than two months.

A messenger of the Dervishes, who had an argument with them, is in my place since a couple of days. His name is Taïbo Hamed. If you want it, he will come and see you, just

send him a message if you want it. He has no goods with him, he just came to see you. He has heard a lot about you and he would like to meet you. He would like to come with his people and to settle down in the territories of the [Congo Free] State.

If you leave, write to me a letter in Arabic in order to let me know for how long you will be gone. Please bring me a game gun and a revolver, it will be the nicest present you could offer to me. Furthermore, I will buy, with my ivory, perfume (*marash*), jackets, music-box and all the other items that you will be kind to send to me.

You are an important chief, so come back with many goods, our people will be pleased to exchange it with ivory. I would like a clock, too.

If you talk with your big chief in Europe, tell him that there is, here, one of his slaves who would like to receive a present from him. You are leaving us, we are all in good health, men, women and children. Nobody is at war now, we are well, we speak the same language, we have the same feelings about you.

Read my letter carefully and do not think that these words are vain. Please answer me.

My son died just after he was born. All my people, men, women, children, and ministers of Allāh (Muslims) know of our relationship, I hope that you will give a positive answer to all my requests.

My heart is good; if a white man behaves in a bad way with me, it means that he does not know me. In this case, I don't move. You will understand this when you will come back, I will tell you then.

Greetings.

*Comment:*

This document is from the French translation of a letter that Zemio sent to the Belgian officer, De Bauw. The original letter, supposedly in Arabic, is lost.

*Letter 7*

This is De Bauw's answer to Zemio's letter above. The document is accompanied by a translation in French, which reads:

Answer: from the Commandant De Bauw, Uere Camp, to Sultan Zemio.

Text: I have received your letter, I will try to provide the things you ask: game gun, revolver, music box, costumes, perfumes and so on.

I will present your greetings to my King in Europe.

My successor is the lieutenant de Ira. After two months you will have a new commandant who will be very good with you.

The one called Taïbo-Hamed can ask my successor for his dwelling.

I will not be back very soon, because I have things to accomplish elsewhere. However, I will not forget you or your people. I hope that one day, I will come back to your territories, and I hope to see you again in good health.

I will never forget the good relations we have had during two years.

Many greetings.

De Bauw.'

*Comment:*

Either this letter has never been sent to the addressee, or it is a copy which was kept as a kind of archive by De Bauw. Anyway, the language used in it is very strange, since it mixes colloquial Arabic and Swahili. We may imagine that the Belgian officer, in urgent need of a translator, asked one of his Zanzibari soldiers to write the letter, and that this person, who had a very basic knowledge of Arabic, mixed the languages.

*Analysis of the documents**The historical importance of the documents*

These letters are related to specific events which often remain obscure to us, since we were not able to identify all the places and persons quoted, especially in letter 6. They do not deal with important events related to the Belgian conquest of the area. However, they provide us useful general information about the nature of the contacts between the Azande sultans, especially Zemio, and the EIC at the end of the nineteenth century. First of all, the formal terms used by both sides seem to show that, at this period, they considered each other as equal partners. It also shows the way the EIC was trying to use its good relations with some chiefs in order to submit the others, asking for instance Zemio's help to transfer Mopoi to Afulu's territory. In letter 6, Zemio also asked the EIC to decide upon a dispute between him and another local chief. But the most striking point is that Sasa and Zemio see in the Belgian presence an important commercial opportunity: they propose to buy many goods—guns, but also fabrics, clothes, food—with their ivory tusks, which was their primary mean of exchange. Beside this, we also see that the commercial exchanges with the Arabs, like *al-ḥājj* Ibrāhīm, did not cease.

*A linguistic analysis of the documents*

The linguistic information provided by these documents are as important as—if not more important than—the historical elements, because it brings a new light not only about the use of Arabic in the area but also about the nature of this language.

Normally, Arabic has—at least—two levels: colloquial or dialectal Arabic is used in everyday conversation, while classical Arabic is reserved for formal situations and writing.

This diglossic situation makes it difficult to identify the origin of a writer if no other information than the text itself is given. However, in many cases the writer is influenced by colloquial Arabic, especially in the correspondence. In our documents, the use of the Sudanese Dialectal Arabic (SDA) is obvious. Some documents show only a slight influence of dialectal Arabic, but most of them are very close to the oral style, as if the author had written down sentences the way he would have spoken them.

Let us now summarize some of the dialectal features observed in these letters:

*a. Phonology*

At least two problems occur when we look for information about the phonology in these letters:

- Since the Arabic alphabet does not mark the short vowels, most of the vowel changes cannot be observed in the relevant documents.
- Since writers are influenced by SDA but try to write in classical Arabic, we cannot determine the way some phonemes were intended to be pronounced.

However, with respect to the consonants, some ‘errors’ in the letters give us information about the way certain phonemes were pronounced. For instance:

- [q] > [g]: we can infer this transformation when the Arabic letter *qāf* is used to render the [g] of some African names or some colloquial words, like ‘Ango’,
- [dh] > [z]: *idha kān* > *iza kān*, ‘if’,
- [th] > [t]: *kathīr* > *katīr*, ‘very’,
- [th] > [s]: *ḥaddathūnī* > *haddasūnī*, ‘tell me’,
- [ʾ] > [c]: *al-shirāʾ* > *al-shirā<sup>c</sup>*, ‘selling’,
- [m] > [b]: *makān* > *bakān*, ‘place’.

*b. Morphology:*

- The pronoun *hum* ‘they’ becomes *humā*,
- the loss of the suffix *-an* of the adjective, as marker of the accusative or the adverbial form: *khāfū kathīr* (instead of *kathīran*), ‘they were very afraid’,
- the suffix *-īn* tends to replace *-ūn* at the nominative: *naḥnu ṭayyibīn wa ʿāfiyīn* (instead of *naḥnu ṭayyibūn wa ʿāfiyūn*), ‘we are well’,
- the analytical genitive is sometimes used: *al-bunduqiyya mtāʿ al-ṭīr* (instead of *bunduqiyyat al-ṭīr*), ‘game weapon’,
- the final *-na* of the plural forms of the verb often disappear: *ikhwānuhu yusāfirū ilā bilādihim* (and not *yusāfirūna*), ‘his brothers go back to their country’,
- the imperfect verb at the first person singular begins with *n*: *nʿallimuka wāḥid min at-tujjār waṣal* (instead of *uʿallimuka*), ‘I inform you that one of the traders arrived’,
- the verbal suffix *-tum* which marks the 2nd person plural for the perfect becomes *-tū*: *katabtū lanā* (instead of *katabtum lanā*), ‘you wrote to us’,
- the normal use of the verbal form is often replaced by the structure: subject + present participle: *humā rāḍīn safarahu*, ‘they accept that he goes’,
- beside the use of the classical *alladhī*, the definite article *al* is often used as a relative pronoun: *kumundān al-ḥākim zarībat Ango*, ‘the commandant who is in charge of Ango Camp’,
- the use of *mā*, ‘not’ instead of *lā* with an imperfect verb: *āna mā nʿaluhu abadan*, ‘I will never do this’,
- the use of *lisa* as a negation with the sense of ‘not yet’: *walakin ismuhu lisa ʿarafnāhu*, ‘but we don’t know his name yet’.

*c. Syntax*

- The sentence order is often SVO instead of VSO:

*ikhwānuhu yusāfirū ilā bilādihim*, ‘his brothers go back to their country’.

- The subordinate is not introduced by a grammatical element: *n<sup>c</sup>allimuka wāḥid min al-tujjār waṣal*, ‘I inform you that one of the traders arrived’ (instead of *u<sup>c</sup>allimuka bi-anna wāḥid min al-tujjār waṣala*).

*d. Lexicon:*

- Many words would not be used in written language and are typically colloquial: *ḥattēt* ‘I placed’, *tashūfū* ‘you see’, *mush* ‘not’, *fī shān* ‘for’, ‘*āwiz* ‘want’.
- Sometimes, they are even typically Sudanese: *azōl*, ‘man’, *kalām al-<sup>c</sup>arab*, ‘Arabic’, literally ‘the speech of the Arabs’, *lisān at-turk*, ‘Arabic’, literally ‘the speech of the Turks’.
- Other words belong to the vocabulary of classical, but are especially used in SDA: *zarība*, ‘station, camp’, *bā<sup>c</sup>*, *yabī<sup>c</sup>*, with the sense of ‘to buy’ instead of ‘to sell’.

As demonstrated, the analysis of the documents shows a strong influence of colloquial Arabic. This point is relevant because it gives us information about the kind of dialects which were spoken in the area, but also about the characteristics of the colloquial Arabic of Sudan in use in the late nineteenth century. In fact, several Arabic dialects are spoken in Sudan, which can roughly be divided in four groups:<sup>49</sup>

- Northern Dialect,
- Central Dialect (Umm Durmān, Jazīra, East of the Blue Nile),
- Western Dialect (White Nile, Kordofan, Darfur, Chad),
- Juba Arabic, a Creole spoken in the Southern part of the country.

It is quite difficult to determine which of the first three

49 A.S. Kaye, ‘Bilād al-Sūdān: Les langues dans l’ensemble géographique du Sudan’, in *EI* (2), IX, 793b

groups the dialectal forms used in these letters belong, for at least two reasons:

— The letters are not really written in SDA, but are influenced by SDA. So we do not have a complete quotation in colloquial.

— Most of the features we have described above are common to all those groups, and the difference between them has not yet been fully studied. For instance, the verb *shāf*, *ishūf* ‘to see’ or the structure pronoun + participle is common to all these dialects, and even to many other dialects outside of the Sudanese area.

However, some features seem to be more specifically related to particular areas. For instance, ‘*awiz* ‘to want’ and *zol* ‘man’ are words used in the central and northern parts of Sudan. But most of the *regional* features belong to the western Sudanese dialects:

- /ʔ/ and /ʕ/ are interchangeable,
- the use of *n-* for the verb at the first person singular
- the use of *humā* instead of *hum* as the pronoun of the third person plural
- the words and expressions like, *fī shān* ‘because’, *dār* with the meaning of ‘country’ (like in Dār Kūti, Dār Fūr, Dār Fartīt), *kalām al-ʕarab* ‘Arabic’.

Some historical sources point in the same direction: the Azande sultans had contacts with Arabs coming from various parts of Sudan, as well as from other Arab countries. For instance, until 1911 Sultan Mopoie had two counsellors, the one coming from Aswān, Egypt and the other from Berber, north of Khartoum.<sup>50</sup> We also stated before that some Azande stayed in Khartoum, as freemen or as slaves. But it seems that they had more relations with Arabs or Arab-speakers coming from Western Sudan—especially Darfur—and Chad. The Belgian officer of the Congo Free

50 Salmon, *Dernière insurrection*, 25.

State, Charles de la Kethulle, considers that the Arabic spoken in northern Congo was clearly the same dialect as in Waday and Darfur, but he does not give any clue or example which could confirm this assertion. He also mentions that Muslims coming from Waday, Darfur and Kordofan were at Rafay's Court, and that some of them could read and write Arabic. He also mentions that Zemio, Jabir and Rafay had relations with Arab traders from Waday, Dar Runga and Bornu.<sup>51</sup> Landeroin says that he met several merchants coming from Waday when he was at Bangaso, and he also states that Tambura's secretary originated from Waday.<sup>52</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Arabic has been used as a commercial and diplomatic language or a *lingua franca* among the Azande sultanates of northern Congo from the 1890s until the beginning of the twentieth century. Though very few documents have survived, their analysis, completed by the historical sources, can lead to some interesting observations. First, the use of the correspondence was not an isolated phenomenon among the Azande sultans, but rather a well-organized system: some chiefs had their own secretaries—*kātib*—and most of the letters follow a specific canvas. The correspondence was used between the sultans themselves, between the sultans and the Sudanese, whether traders, Mahdists, or other, but also between the sultans and the European newcomers. Some of the camps established by the Belgians had their own Arab translators, who were translating the sultan's letters to the Belgian officers as well as replying to them.

The few letters that survived show a very polite style, between persons treating each other as equals, which do not really correspond with the tone used by most—not all—the

51 de la Kethulle, 'Deux années de résidence', 406-7.

52 Landeroin, *Mission Congo-Nil*, 56 & 74.

Europeans describing the African populations at this time. This illustrates well the meaning of the word 'diplomacy'.

Finally, these letters are very informative in a linguistic point of view, because the language is strongly influenced by the colloquial Arabic, more precisely the western Sudanese dialect. It is important because it confirms that the Azande were especially in contact with the provinces like Darfur, Kordofan and Waday, but also because it gives an idea of what the colloquial Arabic of this area was more than hundred years ago.

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