LANGUAGE & CULTURE

The Umbundu language was formed from different groups of people who slowly moved from the North and formed the local/regional groups there today, and have formed political units. They have developed a sophisticated agriculture, which includes the breeding of small animals and cows. In the 16th century they took advantage of the Portuguese communities being established and formed trading routes/agreements. With each of the routes (caravans), each group became even more independent than they had been. They appointed professional leaders and diviners. The trade thrived on slavery. When slavery decreased around 1904, so did the trade, and finally ended in 1910. This also had somewhat to do with the way trade was conducted. Since the major railway was also built in 1904, the caravans began to die out which meant that the leaders and diviners were not needed anymore.

Over the next few years the Ovimbundu changed to a cash crop economy, with corn as their major product. Unfortunately, the Ovimbundu slowly became a paid labor force on European plantations, because the Europeans slowly took the land. The Ovimbundu were, and still are, part of UNITA (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola), which was an anti-colonial movement against the Portuguese, and currently is an opposition political party. During the Civil War of Angola several large cities in the Umbundu/Ovimbundu territory were destroyed by UNITA, and were, for long periods, under UNITA control. Beginning in 2002, many of the Ovimbundu people have returned to Umbundu lands, however most are still scattered around Angola, living where they can.

STUDYING UMBUNDU IN THE UNITED STATES

Please contact the National African Language Resource Center, or check the NALRC website at http://www.nalrc.indiana.edu/

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WHO SPEAKS UMBUNDU

Umbundu, or South Mbundu, one of two Bantu languages of Angola called Mbundu, is the most widely spoken language in Angola. Their Speakers are known as Ovimbundu, which constitute a third of the Angolan people. Their homeland is the Central Highlands of Angola and the coastal region west of these highlands, including the cities of Benguela and Lobito. Because of recent internal migration there are now also large communities in Luanda and its surrounding province, as well as in Lubango.

Many of the Ovimbundu people depend on the land to support them. However, forest and woodland make up less than fifty percent of Angola and these areas are being destroyed over time. Deforestation is due to commercial logging, subsistence agriculture, trade in charcoal, and forced migration. Land degradation is also an issue that is being caused by unsustainable agriculture, mining, and overgrazing of rangelands. Wildlife was also widely destroyed because of the civil war in Angola and the massive amount of destruction that came along with it.

The Ovimbundu overwhelmingly follow Christianity but some also mix this belief with indigenous African religions. The Ovimbundu acknowledge the existence of one high God. They believe that this one high God is the creator of all things, all knowing, all-powerful, sustains creation, supports justice, and rules over the entire universe. However, the Ovimbundu also mix these beliefs with traditional African beliefs because they acknowledge different spirits and the impact they have on their lives.

WHY STUDY UMBUNDU

Angola is divided into regions based on the different tribes or cultures. There are more than one hundred different ethnic groups and languages in Angola. The three largest groups of Angola are the Ovimbundu, Bakongo, and Mbundu. The Ovimbundu are located in west-central Angola and are located south of the Mbundu. Bordering the Ovimbundu on the east is the Nganguela and on the south there are the Herero, Ovambo, and Nyaneka-Humbe.

In terms of number of speakers, Umbundu is the single most important language of Angola. The most striking feature of Umbundu phonology is provided by nasalized segments of both vowels and consonants. Nasalized consonants are universally infrequent, and within Bantu no other language have such segments. Nasalized vowels occur in a few North-West Bantu languages, where they are the result of lost word-final nasals, at least diachronically and maybe also synchronically. The Umbundu appears in every respect to be much more complex and interesting.