LANGUAGE & CULTURE

Chokwe is the Bantu language spoken by the Chokwe people of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola and Zambia. It is recognized as a national language of Angola, where about 456,000 people spoke it as of 1991. Another half a million speakers lived in the Congo in 1990, and some 44,200 in Zambia as of 1986. Angola’s Instituto de Línguas Nacionais (National Languages Institute) has established spelling rules for Chokwe with a view to facilitate and promote its use. It is used as a lingua franca in eastern Angola.

The Chokwe are well known for art objects produced to celebrate and validate the royal court. These objects include ornately carved stools and chairs used as thrones. Most of the sculptures are portraits, which represent the royal lineage. Staffs, scepters, and spears are among other implements sculpted to celebrate the court.

The Chokwe grow manioc, cassava, yams, and peanuts. Tobacco and hemp are also grown for snuff, while maize is grown for beer. Domesticated livestock is also kept, and includes sheep, goats, pigs, and chickens. More protein is added through hunting. There is an exclusive association of big game hunters known as Yanga, but everyone contributes to the capture of small game animals. The farming and processing of agricultural products is done almost exclusively by women among the Chokwe. Slash and burn techniques and crop rotation are practiced to conserve the land naturally.

STUDYING CHOKWE IN THE UNITED STATES

Please contact the National African Language Resource Center, or check the NALRC web site at http://www.nalrc.indiana.edu/
The Chokwe were once one of the twelve clans of the great Lunda Empire of 17th- and 18th-century Angola. They eventually became independent when they refused to continue paying tribute to the Lunda emperor. Their successful trading and abundant resources caused them to be one of the wealthiest groups in Angola. By 1900 the Chokwe had dismantled the Lunda kingdom altogether, using guns they had received in trade from the Ovimbundu. Chokwe language and influence then began to dominate northeastern Angola and spread among the Lunda peoples.

The Chokwe recognize Kalunga, the god of creation and supreme power, and a series of nature and ancestral spirits (mahamba). These spirits may belong to the individual, family, or the community, and neglecting them is sure to result in personal or collective misfortune. Evil spirits may also be activated by sorcerers (wanga) to cause illness, which must be counteracted to regain health. In order to accomplish this individuals normally consult with a diviner (nganga), who attempts to uncover the source of the patient’s problem.