Information sheet on the village of Chitungulu, Zambia  
(revised text 2018)

Location

The village of Chitungulu is situated in the central parts of the Luangwa Valley in eastern Zambia, a few kilometres off the east banks of the Luangwa river.

The village is part of Chitungulu Chiefdom (named after the chief village headman, Chief Chitungulu), which is bordered in the south by the (Chewa) Mwanya Chiefdom, in the north by the (Chewa) Kazembe Chiefdom, stretching along the North Luangwa NP, and in the west, across the river, by the (Bisa) Nabwalya Chiefdom. In the south and east, Chitungulu also borders the relatively small Luambe National Park (247 sq km), which almost forms a corridor between the much larger, and well-known, South and North Luangwa NPs.

The GPS coordinates of Chitungulu are: S12°26′18″, E32°21′33″.

Chitungulu is seen as one of the most isolated parts of Lundazi district, to which it belongs administratively. The nearest town of economic importance, Lundazi, is approx. 120 kms east of Chitungulu and takes, in the dry season, four to five hours to reach. Lundazi's District Hospital, as well as its busy local market and the presence of various shops, offering many
goods from nearby Malawi, draw people from all over the district. Chitungulu is difficult to reach during the rainy season due to neglected road infrastructure and the heavy clay soils (black cotton soils), and is even, at the height of the rainy season, effectively cut off from the rest of the district for a couple of months.

The isolated location of Chitungulu is furthermore illustrated by the fact that households are not connected to the national power grid. To meet their basic demand for power, the residents of Chitungulu buy cheap solar panels at the Lundazi market which allow them to charge their mobile phones, torches and radios. Since a couple of years, mobile telephone reception is possible in Chitungulu, though only in specific areas and reception, generally, is poor. Internet access, therefore, remains out of reach for the population in this area.

A short history

The isolated position of many villages in the Luangwa Valley can to a large extent be attributed to the valley’s topographic features, particularly the steep escarpments which flank the valley both in the east and west. Yet, for humans the valley’s natural topographic barriers never precluded contacts with the outer world. As a matter of fact, in pre-colonial times the Luangwa Valley constituted an important link between the trading centres on the southern-central African plateau and the Swahili traders along Africa’s east coast. Since early history the valley has been attracting many immigrants, most of them trying to evade quarrels with rivaling clans or violence caused by the slave trade or expansionist raiding bands of Kunda/Lala (from present-day Congo) and Ngoni peoples (the latter themselves
seeking refuge from Zulu expansion further southwards on the continent). In the valley, these refugees and immigrants could capitalize on fertile soils, abundant natural resources, and, in time, were able to establish important trading monopolies.

The great variety of identities which the immigrants brought with them has effectively been absorbed by the, predominantly, matrilineal clan structure of the valley. Today, clan and lineage still form the social foundation of the valley’s inhabitants, determining one’s social rights and obligations towards others.

Chitungulu’s history is a perfect illustration of the age-long migration and assimilation processes within the valley. Today’s inhabitants of Chitungulu are descendants of migrants from all corners of the region who settled into the area between the 16th and 17th centuries. The main language spoken today in the village is Bisa, referring to the origins of various Bisa migrant groups who, in Zambia’s Eastern Province, belong to a small minority ethnic grouping. The Bisa are closely related to the Bemba, Zambia’s largest population group having their core area in the Northern Province and the Copperbelt. Along with the Bemba and other peoples, the Bisa arrived in their present-day lands from the Luba and Lunda states of south-central Congo during the great Bantu migrations of the 16th and 17th centuries. Some Bisa settled along the Luapula river and on the plateau, near the northern town of Mpika in present-day Muchinga Province, whilst others descended into the valley floor to become the Valley Bisa. Many settled on Luangwa’s west banks (notably Nabwalya), but some groups also crossed the river and settled in the Kazembe, Mwanya and Chitungulu areas. Here they found various Tumbuka and Chewa speaking peoples, the latter dispatched to the valley by the Chewa king Mwase Kasungu from present-day Malawi in order to expand his empire based on ivory trade with Kilwa and other Swahili coast city-states in present-day Tanzania and Mozambique. This part of the Luangwa east bank appears to have been ruled by both Bisa and Chewa Chiefs, until the 20th century consolidation of a ruling political elite of a Bisa speaking Chewa minority who no longer practices important Chewa traditions, such as the Nyau initiation rites.

The history of the Valley Bisa seems steeped in a culture of hunting and trading. Due to their strategic position along the Luangwa river, in an area rife with wildlife, both Chewa and Bisa Chiefs were able to dominate the pre-colonial, long-distance trade with the Arabs and Swahili, and later the Portuguese, through trading ivory and skins for cloth and other items. Hunting formed an integral part of Bisa society’s politics and culture, and hunters commanded respect by supplying the community with meat, taking care that the distribution of meat took place according to culturally defined norms and regulations. However, with the creation of Luambe and South and North Luangwa National Parks, the Valley Bisa lost their principal means of sustaining a livelihood and, in the absence of meaningful alternatives, they have since eked out a living based on subsistence farming.

Everyday life

Contemporary Chitungulu numbers about 11,000 residents, living in clusters of ‘villages’ which are, essentially, extended family units. Most of Chitungulu’s residents practise subsistence farming for food and bartering. Crops being cultivated include maize (which is pounded to become the staple food nshima), cassava, sorghum, groundnuts, sweet potatoes, millet and rice, as well as cash crops such as cotton and (since 2016) hot chili
peppers. Apart from that, ‘traditional’ vegetables are grown such as tomatoes, onions and leafy greens (notably rape, *Brassica napus*), supplemented by ‘new’ vegetables such as sweet peppers, carrots and beetroots. Due to the presence of the tsetse fly, which transmits a disease lethal to cattle and other livestock species, animal husbandry (including animal draught) is not possible, restricting the community’s animal-based protein intake to chicken and other domesticated fowls, or fish from the river (expensive), and produce from the bush, including (mostly illegally acquired) game meat. Consequently, malnutrition, particularly protein energy malnutrition, is widespread, affecting infants especially.

In the past, droughts and famines alternating with severe floods were a regular occurrence in the valley. Today, food security in this area remains precarious. Apart from erratic weather patterns, raiding animals pose a substantial threat to the fields. Elephants, buffaloes, various antelope species and wild pigs limit the range and choice of cultivated areas. Elephants in particular are able to finish off a family’s annual crop in a matter of hours – which is also why extensive banana (or other fruit) cultivation does not occur. (However, starting 2018 we are experimenting with elephant-proof, small-scale fruit cultivation).

Apart from subsistence farming, residents also specialize in various jobs and skills to supplement their income. Across the village, shop owners sell basic commodities such as soap and salt, and owners of hammer mills meet the daily demand for grinding cereals such as maize and sorghum. Carpenters, or specialists in roof thatching, brick-making or weaving baskets, manage to earn a bit of money during the dry season. However, in order to accumulate capital for further investments, most men aged between 20 and 40 leave Chitungulu for jobs in the cities (as far away as the capital Lusaka or on the Copperbelt), where the majority of them, for lack of professional training, engage in unskilled labour. Ever since colonial times, this male labour migration has linked Chitungulu to the rest of the country’s economy.

To meet their daily energy demands, the residents of Chitungulu rely heavily on fossil fuels, notably firewood that is harvested from the woods around the village. Meals are prepared on open fires, and the use of locally-made fuel economic stoves needs to be further promoted to avert the dangers of deforestation.
The local Rural Health Centre offers basic health care, and patients requiring specialist treatment need to be referred to the Lundazi District Hospital, which is, in the dry season, a 4-5 hours’ drive from Chitungulu. Malaria is rampant in Chitungulu, occurring year-round. Other common diseases include bilharzia, tuberculosis, intestinal parasite infections, diarrhoea, HIV/AIDS, anaemia, respiratory tract infections, high blood pressure, and complications during childbirth (especially in teenage pregnancies). Since a couple of years, an ambulance has been stationed at the rural clinic. Since 2016, several high-quality boreholes have been drilled annually by both Luambe Camp (the only tourist lodge in Luambe National Park) and the Chitungulu Foundation, which has improved people’s access to clean and safe water considerably.

Educational facilities are also quite basic. There are four government primary schools and two community schools in Chitungulu, the latter two built and run by the people of the Chocha and Chilubezi neighborhoods. There is a glaring lack of resources in all schools. In this part of the valley, conservative attitudes with regard to girls’ education persist, and many girls leave school prematurely. An additional complicating factor in Chitungulu’s educational setting is the language issue: whilst children speak Bisa at home, Chinyanja is the only local language they learn at school whereas English is only taught in the higher grades of primary school.

Secondary education is offered just outside Chitungulu, where the Lumimba mission post supports Lumimba secondary school. However, as many families have difficulties paying school fees (even if those at Lumimba are moderate compared to other secondary schools), most children in a family will be deprived of secondary schooling. Vocational training needs to be pursued outside Chitungulu – which is even less affordable for the young in Chitungulu.

Despite the harsh life in rural Chitungulu, its residents, like so many fellow-Zambians in similar conditions, are remarkable for their positive attitude, their friendliness, and their determination to lead a purposeful life. Their optimism is evidenced in the many initiatives which community members develop: almost all of our social community projects stem from local ideas and practical suggestions. Central in all these local initiatives is the high value placed on education and the acquisition of skills and knowledge. A visitor to Chitungulu will immediately notice that the houses are tidy, well-kept and often skillfully decorated with symmetric patterns in various colours. Visitors are received warmly, and are curiously questioned about their backgrounds and stories. The Chitungulu residents are a brave people with a proud historic background, who even in the face of rather people-unfriendly conditions, never lose their sense of humanity. Their aspirations to a more hopeful future deserve our full support.

With thanks to:
Stuart A. Marks: Large Mammals and a Brave People. Subsistence Hunters in Zambia (1976; 2005). In this book, Marks makes the case for a more human-oriented approach in dealing with the complex issues of nature conservation in areas where people are firmly connected to their lands.