

## **1. Description**

### 1.1 Name(s) of society, language, and language family:

Bwamba society, Amba language of the Bantu language family

### 1.2 ISO code (3 letter code from ethnologue.com):

rwm

### 1.3 Location (latitude/longitude):

0.69° N, 30.12°E

### 1.4 Brief history:

The Amba people live in an extremely secluded part of the Great Rift Valley. They share a similar culture with the other tribes of the Ituri Forest. They are located on the far western edge of Uganda, however, the border there with the Congo is marked by Ruwenzori Mountains, thus isolating them. The Bwamba people have often been under the direct influence of the Toro, who have often staked claim over the region, resulting in raids and tribute collections. The first Europeans to pass through this region did so in 1889 on their way from Lake Albert to the Indian Ocean. The area is relatively small, and thus the population has always been small. They have long been peasant cultivators, and in the past have enjoyed a profitable trading relationship with pygmies of the Ruwenzori.

### 1.5 Influence of missionaries/schools/governments/powerful neighbors:

The Toro consider the Amba people to be savage and inferior. Strangely, the Amba seem to express a certain degree of agreement with this Toro sentiment. They recognize their wild nature and embrace assistance from the Toro when offered. In this manner, the guardian Toro see themselves as pilots leading the Amba towards civilization. European influence has paled in comparison. Due to the remoteness of Bwamba, the difficult journey has discouraged many Europeans. Therefore, the Toro play the role of intermediary and have the ability to filter what information/behaviors get transferred.

### 1.6 Ecology (natural environment):

The Amba speakers of the Bwamba society reside in Western Uganda, on the border of the Congo. This particular region is called Bwamba. It lies at the bottom of the Great Rift Valley, which is home to the Semliki River that connects Lake Edward and Lake Albert. This portion of the Rift Valley is 25 miles wide and is very fertile during the wet seasons. A steep escarpment that rises 3,000 feet above the valley floor protects the western area. Bwamba proper ranges in elevation from 2,400-3,400 feet. Open grasslands lie to the north, while heavily forested areas can be found in the south. The entire area comprises only 164 square miles.

### 1.7 Population size, mean village size, home range size, density

40,100 total population; each village occupies a defined territory, which usually includes a section of one of the ridges that runs from the mountains to the Semliki River. Each village typically consists of a tightly packed cluster of huts, ranging from between 1-12; this generally means villages contain between 20-50 people

## **2. Economy**

### 2.1 Main carbohydrate staple(s):

Plantains provide the bulk of carbohydrates; cassava and sweet potatoes are also important; rice has begun to play a larger role lately

### 2.2 Main protein-lipid sources:

Goats and sheep form the majority of Amba livestock reserves, chickens are also commonly kept in the villages. Men will go on pig hunts, however, this is done for protection of crops more so than for consumption. The tsetse fly has prevented cattle from being raised here.

### 2.3 Weapons: Bow and arrow, blowguns?:

Spears, bow and arrow, shields in time of warfare

### 2.4 Food storage:

The Amba must trade for salt, which they use as a spice in their meals and for short-term storage of meats. In general, livestock is not butchered unless a special occasion calls for it and the entirety of the animal is consumed. Excess crops, especially rice are taken to market and sold. Each hut in a village will often have a small "pantry" area where crops can be stored after harvest.

### 2.5 Sexual division of production:

In the past, when hunting was required to adequately feed the village, men would go on long hunts while women would tend the fields. Now, men maintain their herds while battling elephant grass and clearing areas for cultivation. Women tend their crops, and are also faced with other "housekeeping" chores, such as the acquisition of firewood, simple house maintenance, and water acquisition. A man may freely help his wife with any of her tasks without fear of public humiliation or stigma.

### 2.6 Land tenure:

Due to a relatively low evaluation of land in the Amba value system and the fact that land has been plentiful and therefore not subject to scarcity, there is no great attachment to specific tracts of land. It also holds no ritual significance, as it would pertain to ancestors. The Amba people also believe that each person has the right to land, and as such, any male seeking land in his village is likely to receive some surplus from an elder relative. Rather than immediately handing land ownership over to another person, most circumstances result in a more gradual turnover from one group to another. That being said, the ability for one to claim land is legitimized by their belonging to a certain family or similar social group. The patrilineal society of the Amba usually results in a group of elder males residing in a village that "own" the land. Land is broken up into three categories: virgin land, land under cultivation, and resting land. The only land that absolutely belongs to one man is that area where his crops are located, however, even this is subject to cyclical changes, when that land needs to rest after consecutive cultivation periods. The man who clears virgin land has staked a claim to that land through his labor. He will maintain this ownership for a number of

years, even if he stops utilizing that land. However, after a decade or so that land is seen as returning to the village at large, with the original clearer's claim diminished greatly.

2.7 Ceramics:

Pots and trays are created for use in cooking or drinking water transport.

2.8 Specified (prescribed or proscribed) sharing patterns:

The patriarch of any household was supposed to divide resources equally between his wives, however, the most senior wife was to receive any gift before the junior ones.

2.9 Food taboos:

Men cannot eat elephant meat during their wife's pregnancy, as this could result in an abnormally large fetus.

2.10 Canoes/watercraft?

Fishing has historically been important, but the Amba people are now removed from direct contact with the Semliki River, and thus watercraft have essentially disappeared.

### 3. Anthropometry

3.1 Mean adult height (m and f):

Not available in literature

3.2 Mean adult weight (m and f):

Not available in literature

### 4. Life History, mating, marriage

4.1 Age at menarche (f):

Not available in literature

4.2 Age at first birth (m and f):

Not available in literature

4.3 Completed family size (m and f):

The average size of a "simple family," which consists of a man, his wife and their offspring, is around 5.

4.4 Inter-birth-interval (f):

There is a ban placed on sexual intercourse by the village between a husband and wife as long as they still have a child who is breastfed. This effectively places the interval at between 3 and 4 years minimum.

4.5 Age first marriage (m and f):

Not available in literature

4.6 Proportion of marriages ending in divorce:

31.5 per 1000; divorce is seen as a regular and necessary course of action in Amba society, usually only in cases where infertility on the part of the female is present, or impotence for men.

4.7 Percent marriages polygynous, percent males married polygynously:

67.4% of men were monogamous, 32.6% were polygynous; 12.1% of the polygynous group had 3 or more wives while 3.5% had 4 or more wives. 57.1% of women were in polygynous relationships.

4.8 Bride purchase (price), bride service, dowry?:

If the male does not pay the bride-wealth to his wife's brother, or provided him with a fertile woman of his own, the marriage can be dissolved at any point. If a couple has been legally married and the bride-wealth paid in full, then the divorce cannot become official until the bride-wealth is returned in full to the original husband. The bride-wealth is almost always a fertile female, and only recently has the use of livestock as bride-wealth become more common. The receiver of a livestock bride-wealth is often desperate and does not prefer this arrangement, because he will have difficulty turning this prize into a female down the road.

4.9 Inheritance patterns:

Patrilineal; sons maintain the possessions of their deceased father, and as long as they continue to cultivate his land, maintain it as well.

4.10 Parent-offspring interactions and conflict:

Sons are to provide labor for the family in the tradition of males. Mothers were to teach daughters the intricacies of female duties. Males would often remain in the village of their birth their entire lives, while females would be exchanged between different family groups or villages.

4.11 Homosexual activities, social attitudes towards homosexuals:

No reports of homosexual activities; it is not clear whether this information was even gathered

4.12 Pattern of exogamy (endogamy):

The Amba did not have a distinct social hierarchy, therefore marriages outside ones own social group were not possible. Due to the remoteness of the tribe, marriage always occurred between Amba people of different villages.

4.13 What is the belief of the role of males in conception; is paternity partible? Are these "other fathers" recognized?

The Amba have a traditional view of conception in that the sexual act is necessary and sufficient for reproduction. They also seem to place equal responsibility for the male and female in creating the pregnancy.

4.14 What is the belief of the mother's role in procreation exactly? (e.g., "receptacle in which fetus grows")

She is seen as the giver of life; the nurturer, and is necessary for the child's well-being through weaning.

4.15 Is conception believed to be an incremental process (i.e., semen builds up over time)?

No

- 4.16 Occurrence of sexual coercion, rape  
Relatively low; generally only occurs during village raids, whose main purpose is the capture of females as reproductive resources, as opposed to land or food. The Amba have been extremely peaceful as compared to some other East African tribes.
- 4.17 Preferential category for spouse (e.g., cross cousin)  
Must be exogamous, someone from a different clan
- 4.18 Do females enjoy sexual freedoms?  
Yes; single females are allowed to take visits from their lovers. Some women claimed to have up to 6 different lovers before their marriages.
- 4.19 Evidence of giving gifts to extramarital partners or extramarital offspring  
Extramarital offspring were common and not to be seen as burdens. This was not a preferable outcome, however, it occurred enough that the Amba devised methods to alleviate the problem of lineage. The woman was asked to reveal the father, and if she was uncertain she would submit to a diviner who would uncover the father through ritual. The family believed curses would befall them had the father not been discovered, as this would amount to the female's lineage self-replicating and somehow become a kind of incest.
- 4.20 If mother dies, whose raises children?  
One of the male's other wives. Children were seen as belonging to the father, therefore he would assume responsibility in any other instance.
- 4.21 Adult sex ratio: number of adult males divided by number of (reproductive) females  
Exact date not available, however, the females were the limiting reagent, as many older males controlled multiple wives
- 4.22 Evidence for couvades  
Sex between the parents was not to occur while breastfeeding; certain animal flesh was forbidden to each sex
- 4.23 Different distinctions for potential fathers (e.g., lesser/younger vs. major/older)  
No
- 4.24 Kin avoidance and respect?  
Sons and daughters are taught to respect and obey their fathers; while maintaining a playful relationship with their grandfathers. They follow a similar pattern with their female relatives. Brothers-in-law enjoyed the most jovial and friendly non-familial relationships. This was because of their involvement in the exchanges of bride-wealth. This was serious business; the joking served to alleviate potential disagreements.
- 4.25 Patterns of descent (e.g., bilateral, matrilineal) for certain rights, names or associations  
Patrilineal descent; In-laws would reference females by their original clan names, which were drawn from their village patriarch.
- 4.26 Incest avoidance rules  
The Amba had a strong desire to prevent any type of incest. This was observed through strict exogamy.
- 4.27 Is there a formal marriage ceremony?  
Two major ceremonies make up the marriage event. The first is the transfer of the bride-wealth from the groom to be to his wife's family. The actual marriage ceremony takes place on the fourth day after a woman has entered her husband's home. During the first four days, the bride-to-be is not to complete any housework and is to act with the utmost modesty. After the fourth day, she prepares a meal with the other woman of the clan and the village eats together. Before this meal, however, the bride must submit to a full body examination by the groom's male relatives in order to find signs of defects or disease.
- 4.28 In what way(s) does one get a name, change their name, and obtain another name?  
Name changes do not occur
- 4.29 Is marriage usually (or preferred to be) within community or outside community? (m/f difference?)  
Within Amba tribe, but outside family/village
- 4.30 Are marriages arranged? Who arranges (e.g., parents, close kin)?  
Brothers of the women often arrange marriages based on their ability to pay a bride-wealth. This often includes two brothers of different families trading their sisters.
- 4.31 Evidence for conflict of interest over who marries who:  
As long as the marriage occurs between two different villages, conflict is minimal. Bride-wealth exchanges are the most important factor

### **Warfare/homicide**

- 4.14 Percent adult (male) deaths due to warfare:  
Not available in literature; however, warfare has been almost non-existent since 1920
- 4.15 Outgroup vs ingroup cause of violent death:  
Ingroup violent death not reported; outgroup violent death occurs via spear/bow and arrow injury
- 4.16 Reported causes of in-group and out-group killing:  
Toro raids for resources/women
- 4.17 Number, diversity and relationship with neighboring societies (external relations):  
Trade relationship with pygmies; Interaction with Toro includes unilateral exchange of culture and technology
- 4.18 Cannibalism?  
None reported

### **5. Socio-Political organization and interaction**

- 5.1 Mean local residential (village) group size:  
Villages often between 20-40 strong
- 5.2 Mobility pattern: (seasonality):  
Permanent settlements; no movement during rainy or dry seasons
- 5.3 Political system: (chiefs, clans etc, wealth or status classes):  
Each village has a patriarch who is often consulted for important inter-village interactions (like marriage); his influence does not dominate daily routines and no standing council of patriarchs exists
- 5.4 Post marital residence:  
Males remain in their original homes; females can find other husbands if still able to reproduce
- 5.5 Territoriality? (defined boundaries, active defense):  
Generally very peaceful; respect for whoever is using land for agriculture prevents encroachment by others
- 5.6 Social interaction divisions? (age and sex):  
Males work with other males most of the day, while females do the same. Age does not provide much of a barrier to interaction except in the instance of a breastfed boy
- 5.7 Special friendships/joking relationships:  
Brothers-in-law are generally very close; grandfathers and grandsons often share a joking relationship
- 5.8 Village and house organization:  
One village is divided into several residential groupings which can include 4-5 huts; these range from living huts to storage
- 5.9 Specialized village structures (mens' houses):  
None reported
- 5.10 Sleep in hammocks or on ground or elsewhere?  
A sort of padded bed made of grass and covered in bark cloth
- 5.11 Social organization, clans, moieties, lineages, etc:  
Each village associates with a defined and constant lineage that comes from their ancestors
- 5.12 Trade:  
Obtain iron products and other European technologies from the Toro; trade for meats from pygmy mountain tribes
- 5.13 Indications of social hierarchies?  
Patriarch and his closest male relatives form the most powerful group through their increased influence

## **6. Ritual/Ceremony/Religion (RCR)**

- 6.0 Time allocation to RCR:  
Men perform short sacrifices before and after every hunting expedition. They also provide sacrifices regularly to their deceased ancestors. Women can be expected to direct their ritualistic behavior towards spiritual entities that have no relation to them. These types of rituals occur daily, but are flexibly performed and do not represent a large time commitment.
- 6.1 Specialization (shamans and medicine):  
The Amba refer to European doctors with the same term as their male ritual specialists. These doctors perform sacrifices and incantations to appease gods and ancestors.
- 6.2 Stimulants:  
None found in the literature
- 6.3 Passage rituals (birth, death, puberty, seasonal):  
Circumcision rites were an important ritual until 1933. The entire event took place over a period of months and caused great activity throughout the village. Each village performed their own rights at synchronized times. They are held irregularly over a period no longer than 15 years. Strangely, they wait for word from surrounding peoples to start the event.
- 6.4 Other rituals:  
Sacrifices to ancestors are of utmost importance, as an unhappy ancestor is more than capable of passing an illness along to current generations. After the brewing of beer, the first drops are set aside and poured out as libation for ancestors.
- 6.5 Myths (Creation):  
Characteristically absent from Bwamba culture. They believe in multiple planes of existence, however, they do not have a specifically articulated creation story.
- 6.6 Cultural material (art, music, games):  
Not a great amount of artistic materials in literature; most time is spent on work and social interaction
- 6.7 Sex differences in RCR:  
The male "doctors" perform the majority of rituals, however, there are great numbers of women that become priestesses for various godlike entities. Many times, when a woman leaves her village to collect firewood or water, she can be "caught" by an evil god. This will manifest as sickness in her or her husband or children. A female priestess, accompanied by two female assistants will then come to the house and perform rites similar to an exorcism. These female priestesses are generally post-menopausal and demand high fees for their services.
- 6.8 Missionary effect:  
European missionaries have not had a huge effect. A small transition to Christianity has occurred over time and the most pertinent result of this has been a decrease in the percentage of polygynous marriages.
- 6.9 RCR revival:  
Many ceremonies associated with witchcraft have been abandoned or performed more discreetly.
- 6.10 Death and afterlife beliefs:

Supernatural spirits greatly outnumber living humans. This group includes all deceased ancestors. The Amba believe that the spirits of the dead descend into the Underworld, which exists below our own world, with the earth becoming the sky of that realm. Here the spirits live similarly to the way they did on earth.

6.11 Taboo of naming dead people?

Non-existent; many children are named after ancestors; the existence of similar traits by the child is viewed as a blessing given by the ancestor.

6.12 Is there teknonymy?

No

6.13 Briefly describe religion (animism, ancestor worship, deism, magic, totems etc.)

Certain supernatural entities exist, which could be described as gods, however, the Amba people make no distinction between these beings and their deceased ancestors, referring to them both with the same term. The Amba people are most concerned with witchcraft. The failures of people to conceive, or crops to grow, or sickness are almost always attributed to witchcraft. The majority of Amba rituals are therefore aimed at preventing the spells of a witch from becoming effective. Counter-witchcraft medicines are often applied to individuals thought to be afflicted. They can also be placed around the perimeter of the village. Many Amba also wear totems or necklaces blessed by a "doctor" to prevent witchcraft.

## 7. Adornment

7.1 Body paint:

None

7.2 Piercings:

None

7.3 Haircut:

Females have characteristically short hair; even old and young females often have shorter hair than their male counterparts who keep a marine style "high and tight" cut

7.4 Scarification:

Circumcision and the filing of teeth are common

7.5 Adornment (beads, feathers, lip plates, etc.):

Simple bark cloth skirts are the only type of clothing worn; men carry their knives, which are often quite simple, and little else

7.6 Ceremonial/Ritual adornment:

The importance of the ceremony is seen as the only necessary adornment

7.7 Sex differences in adornment:

Female skirts are much longer; nothing is worn to cover the breasts. As stated above, men keep longer hair

7.8 Missionary effect:

In those villages more influenced by Christian ideology, women do cover their breasts

7.9 Cultural revival in adornment:

Not much to revive

## 8. Kinship systems

8.1 Sibling classification system:

Older brothers enjoy seniority, but the benefits are small if present at all

8.2 Sororate, levirate:

This is not prevalent, as most marriages are arranged on the basis of bride-wealth

8.3 Other notable kinship typology, especially cross-cousin (MBD/FZD) typology (Crow/Hawaiian/Omaha etc.):

For a male child: his mother's brother is an extremely important relation as he is simultaneously a member of another village while also being of the same lineage as the child; providing an important contact for potential future brides

## 9. Other interesting cultural features (list them):

The Amba are historically a very peaceful and simple people relying on subsistence agriculture and hunting. Their interaction with other tribes has been minimal, with trade making up the majority of interactions.

## Numbered references

1. Winter, E.H. Bwamba Economy, The Development of a Primitive Subsistence Economy in Uganda. Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. London, England. 1955.
2. Winter, E.H. Bwamba, A Structural-Functional Analysis of a Patrilineal Society. W. Heffer & Sons LTD. Cambridge, England. 1956.