

“Kuomboka”: “Coming Out Of The Water”

The Barotse Floodplain in western Zambia is home to some 250,000 people calling themselves the ‘Balozis’. These plains, also known as the Zambezi floodplains cover some 5,500 square kilometers and each year is subjected to a flood which virtually doubles this area for a few months of the year.



The Lozi people who lives in this area and the rest of ‘Barotse’¹ regard themselves as a separate nation in many respects from the mainline Zambian politics and even have their own flag. Their language is mainly a form of Sesotho; a remnant from the early 1800’s when they were invaded and conquered by marauding Sotho warriors displaced by the great Mfecane of Shaka.



¹ ‘Barotse’ is the written tribal name for the ‘Balozis’ in Zambia. The name ‘Balozis’ or ‘Lozi’ was coined by German missionaries that first worked there.

Once a year, when the flooding waters are rising and threatening men and livestock, the Litunga (King of the Balozzi) calls out the Kuamboka ceremony which instigates the migration to higher grounds. This is one of Africa's great and colorful traditional ceremonies and one few westerners have witnessed in all its glory.



The ceremony starts at the floodplain palace of the Litunga at the town Lealui to higher grounds at Limulunga where the King also has a palace.

Traditionally, the Litunga's barge (the Nalikwanda) has a large elephant on top and is loaded with all necessary provisions for the long stay until he can return again to the fertile plains when the water recedes. There also is a barge for the Litungas wife and important ladies, called the 'Mbolitanga' and has a huge egret on top.





Both the Kuomboka and return dates are decided by the Litunga, and is sometimes only announced a few days in advance.

This year, the Litunga announced the Kuomboka a full three weeks in advance which gave a few journalists, photographers and a film crew time to plan and head for Mongu, the capital of the Zambia's Western Province to attend the colourful tradition.

The king and queen's barges are followed by some other barges and boats with important people on board and they are surrounded by hundreds of Mokokoros with people following the king, cheering him along on the beat of drums emanating from the Nalikwanda and watching smoke from the Nalikwanda that signifies that the king is alive and well.



These proceedings take up a whole day until the Litunga finally disembarks at Limulunga, smartly dressed in an old English Admiral's uniform to great appreciation of thousands of spectators for which this is the absolute highlight of their year.