II. THE PEOPLE

The people of the Republic of the Congo are subdivided into a great variety of well over 200 tribes, many of which may be grouped together into larger culture clusters. Most of the tribes speak various Bantu languages (q.v.) but in the northern Congo there are also Sudanic, Nilotic and Nilo-Hamitic speakers (see African Languages). Moreover, numerous Pygmies (up to 300,000), who live in close contact with Bantu or Sudanese, whose languages they adopted, are dispersed throughout the central Congo rain forest. The Congo tribes have widely different origins and many of them are culturally and historically linked to different groupings established in the neighbouring territories. The larger tribes include the Kongo, Luba (q.v.), Lunda, Mongo, Kakwa, Asande, Babwa, Lega, Kuba, Kuma-Bira, Ngbandi, Bwaka, Pende and Tetela. All the tribes are subdivided into many territorial and kinship groups and exhibit widely different cultural features.

Except for the greater part of the Pygmies, all Congo tribes now practise shifting hoe cultivation; more intensive agricultural systems have been introduced. The staple crops are bananas, manioc (cassava), maize (corn), millet, peanuts, yams and beans. Palm groves cover large tracts of the Congo forests. Food-gathering and hunting are still very important among the Pygmies and many central Congo tribes, which have strongly preserved the mentality of hunters. Fishing, too, is done on a considerable scale on the Congo river and its main tributaries, the great lakes and the swamps. Most economic activities are shared by men and women according to a rigid pattern of labour division. Some eastern Congo people are sedentary pastoralists. Ownership and usage of land are generally controlled by local lineage groups, but eminent domain on land may reside with divine kings. Pottery, basketry, weaving, carving and ironwork are highly developed. The use of gourds as vessels and of bark cloth and skins as clothing is widely distributed. Fine carvings in wood, ivory and bone of masks, statues, seats, headrests, ceremonial axes, doors, etc., are known from many southern tribes.

The descent systems are of the patrilateral or matrilateral type; but double-descent systems and non-unilineal descent groups occur among some tribes; relationships based on affinity, complementary filiation, friendship and various alliances are also common. Marriages are usually established by means of small or high marriage payments, but exchange marriages, elopement marriages and replacement of wives do occur. Polygyny is common and widow’s inheritance (brother’s wife; father’s wife; mother’s brother’s wife) is much practised. Preferential marriages, e.g., between cross cousins, and different forms of ritual marriages are permitted by some tribes. Formal age sets only exist in a few areas; closed associations, corporations and cult groups have a large distribution. The political structures range from elementary band organization and small autonomous kinship groups to elaborate segmentary structures, and from petty chieftaincies to large states with a feudal or military character and federative monarchies. Most Congo tribes practise ancestral cults and worship different kinds of spirits; there is also a general belief in a supreme being. In most societies special status is ascribed to twins, diviners, medicine men, rain makers and different kinds of specialized priests and shamans. Oral literature (myths, proverbs, legends, songs, tales and epic cycles) is extremely rich, as are dancing and some other dramatic representations. About 4,000,000 Congolese now live under urban and semiurban conditions, but many of them have preserved close links with the people of their tribal region. (See also Africa: Ethnography [Anthropology]; West Central Africa.)
Prior to independence there were in the Congo about 580 Roman Catholic missions with more than 3,000 European and 780 African priests; there were also about 2,600 European and 750 African nuns. The number of African Roman Catholics was estimated at 4,220,440. Protestant missionaries belonging to many denominations exceeded 2,500 (about 1,500 European and 1,000 African). The number of Protestants was estimated at more than 800,000. There were also about 100,000 Muslims. (D. P. Br.)