THE ROLE OF FIREARMS IN THE SONGYE REGION (1869–1960)

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*Bunduki, sultani ya balabala* (The gun is the master of the road), the Arab-Swahili traders used to say.

Before colonisation, anyone who possessed a firearm was a master in areas where the people had only edged weapons such as arrows, spears, knives, etc. Tippu Tip, the Swahili Arab freebooter in the Congo, described the devastating effect of firearms in contest with the arrows of African warriors:

... He (the African chief Samu) had posted many of his warriors in ambush. Ignoring this, we went ahead; we were about twenty men, along with a dozen carriers slaves, and I myself walked ahead. When we arrived, suddenly, three arrows whistled around me; two reached me, the third only brushed against me. A young man, Said ben Sef el-Maamri, was hit; luckily the wound was not serious, but two slaves, also injured, fell dead instantly. Fortunately our guns were loaded with lead and scrap. The warriors formed compact groups and each discharge of guns mowed them like flocks of birds. When the guns fell silent, more than two hundred men lay on the ground, dead; others were kicked by being trampled on by those who fled wildly. Within an hour, there were at least a thousand deaths. On our side, we had only two slaves killed and two wounded, including myself.1

**Introduction**

In the nineteenth century, Central Africa in general, and the Songye region in particular, was located between two groups of arms traffickers. From the west, the Portuguese, through the Ovimbundu, created the Luso-African area. From the east, from the island of Zanzibar, the Arabs and the Arabised made their way into the heart of Central Africa. Both of these groups were primarily concerned with long distance trade whose products were, first and foremost, ivory and slaves. The arrival of these Portuguese and Arab-Swahili traffickers marks a decisive turning-point in the political, economic, social and cultural history of Central Africa as they led to

the fall of the old kingdoms to be replaced by new powers whose possession of firearms was the basis of their might. The new leaders – M’siri, Mukenge Kalamba, Ngongo Lueteta, Mpania Mutombo, Lumpungu, etc. – became powerful through the possession of firearms and their long-distance trade. They challenged traditional leaders and thus changed the political map of the region.

Many studies on the region have discussed the birth, the development and the decline of the slave trade, the Luba and Songye kingdoms, or the political organisation of chief Lumpungu’s kingdom, but not the role guns played in the Songye community. The objective of this paper is therefore to study the different roles that firearms played in the Songye region between 1869, the time of their introduction, and 1960, the year that the Democratic Republic of Congo became an independent internationally recognised state. On the basis of such written sources as are available and of oral material collected in Lubumbashi, in the city of Kabinda, the capital of Kabinda district, and in the urban centres of Lubao and Lubefu, this paper attempts to answer the following questions: What are the sources from which the black population got their firearms? What was the impact of the coming of firearms into the Songye region, on the political, economic, social and cultural levels? And finally, what were the strategies set up by the Belgian colonisers against the circulating of guns in the black communities?

![Map of the Songye region](image_url)