

Angela



Angela came from Ndongo, a country in West Central Africa. She may have lived in a small village of several hundred people, surrounded by a palisade. Or she may have lived in a large town with thousands of inhabitants. She probably lived in a one-room house, round or rectangular, built of wattle and daub. The roof of her house was made with palm leaves or other natural coverings. A central hearth provided light and heat. Doors and ceilings were so low and one had to bend to enter them. In Angela's culture, people ate pounded millet grain, sorghum, yams, beans and peas which the women grew. Women also grew tobacco. Goats, cattle and sheep were raised by the men and provided meat. Men also hunted game and fished. Palm trees provided cooking oil, and the sap was used to make palm wine.

Angela probably wore a simple garment around her waist that fell to her knees, made of cloth produced from bark fibers. This cloth was made by pounding the bark from certain trees to produce thin threads which were woven into cloth. Angela may have worn jewelry made of copper or silver. She may also have worn beads around her neck, wrists and ankles. Women sometimes decorated their hair with feathers.

In addition to being farmers, many of Angela's people were excellent craftsmen. They made tools and weapons of fine steel, and smelted and worked copper, lead and other metals. They also mined tar and rock salt. In addition to bark cloth, cotton cloth was also manufactured. Weaving and woodcarving crafts provided ways for artistic expression. Finely woven mats hung on the walls of most houses. The people used nzimbu shells and copper bracelets called manillas as money at local markets.

In Ndongo, local leaders called "sobas" were very powerful and governed along with powerful local family heads. Villages were self-governing, following rules that had become custom. Christianity, brought to Ndongo by the Portuguese, was practiced along with local religions, and Christian shrines were often placed alongside traditional local religious shrines. Religious practices often combined traditional ways with Christian worship. Religious objects were elaborately carved and decorated. Angela received religious instruction in the Catholic faith, and she took the Christian name Angela at her baptism.

Angela came from a culture where a person's status came from their role in society. Political and military elites were considered to be most important. Next came religious leaders, and then commoners. Servants or slaves were at the lowest end of society. Elites wore more elaborate clothing, had better housing and carried symbols of authority such as staffs.

Angela's people played a variety of musical instruments such as drums, tambourines, flutes and fifes, trumpets, bells, horns, guitars and lutes. People danced for recreation and at festivals. Weddings were celebrated with great public festivals and a man could have more than one wife. Children were highly valued.

In 1619 Angela was captured and enslaved by a Portuguese army making war on her native land. She was placed on a ship sailing for the Spanish colony of Mexico. Angela was at sea many days while the ship sailed across the ocean. The ship was captured by privateers, and she was brought to Virginia. Angela was sold to a tobacco farmer. Her status of slave versus servant is not known. After her arrival, the English incorrectly recorded her name as "Angelo".

Angela came to Virginia against her will, taken from the land and culture she knew. Arriving in a strange land with no personal possessions and only her memories of home, Virginia probably seemed a very strange place. Even her name was changed. By 1625 Angela belonged to a prominent Virginia planter named William Peirce who also owned the services of several English indentured servants. It is not known if Angela ever became a free person in Virginia.

Historical background materials made possible by Archibald Andrews Marks.