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"Dear Max": Victor Turner From the Field in 1951

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Victor Turner

FOOTNOTES FOR THE HISTORY OF ANTHROPOLOGY

"Dear Max": Victor Turner from the field in 1951

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The following letter from Victor Turner to Max Gluckman is drawn from the newly established Turner Archives at the University of Virginia. This archive was organized during the 1995-96 academic year by Peter Metcalf, Sandra Bamford, and Edie Turner. Although the letter is dated 1951, it was found among Turner's papers from his second fieldtrip to the Mwinilunga District, 1953-54, and was presumably never sent to Gluckman. Turner's early impressions here of Kamahasanyi and Ihembi should be of particular interest, since both figured prominently in such works as "A Ndembu Doctor in Practice" and The Drums of Affliction. While Turner was never afraid to describe his informants in colorful terms, this letter does add something to a picture of 'the blithering pain in the neck' and 'old pal', respectively. The letter was typed and is presented here only slightly modified to fit the format of HAN. The original letter was edited by Turner, mostly for punctuation, but also notably once for a change in pronouns. In the third paragraph, the third sentence initially read 'Next, I . . .', but was later changed to 'Next, we . . .' with a pencil mark. Turner often noted the collaborative nature of fieldwork with his wife, Edie. The spatial diagram and the kinship chart were drawn out with colored pencils, and I have tried to preserve their integrity by substituting marked lines. The letter is reproduced here with the permission of Edie Turner.

Luinga River Camp
Mwinilunga District
N.R. [Northern Rhodesia]
20th Nov. 1951

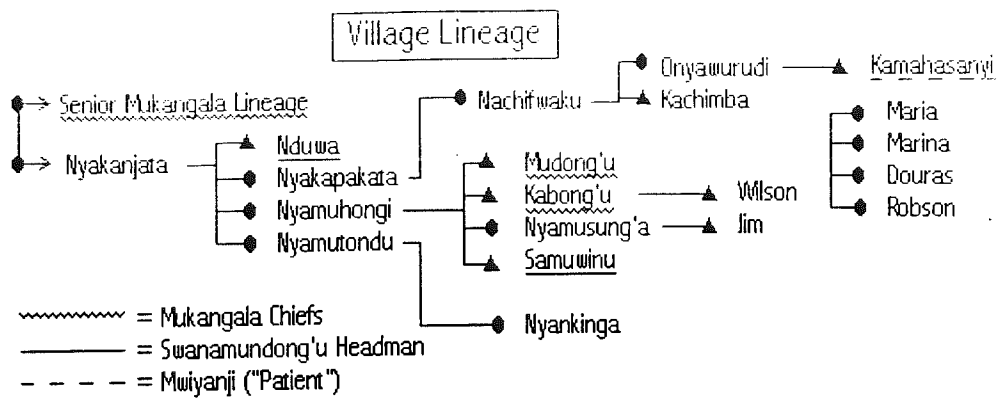
Dear Max,
[...]

I took your advice and moved away from Chief Ikelenge's capital. My relationship to this charming, unscrupulous and ambitious young man was beginning to lose me friends among the villagers. We built a pole-and-dagga [brick-like mud compound] affair in the middle of a cluster of villagers, at a point where three sub-chieftainships intersect. We have built up friendly relations with the people by dispensing medicines, taking bad cases of illness to the Mission Hospital and writing to the Game Department for guards to shoot hyenas and wild pigs that have been destroying small stock and cassava gardens.

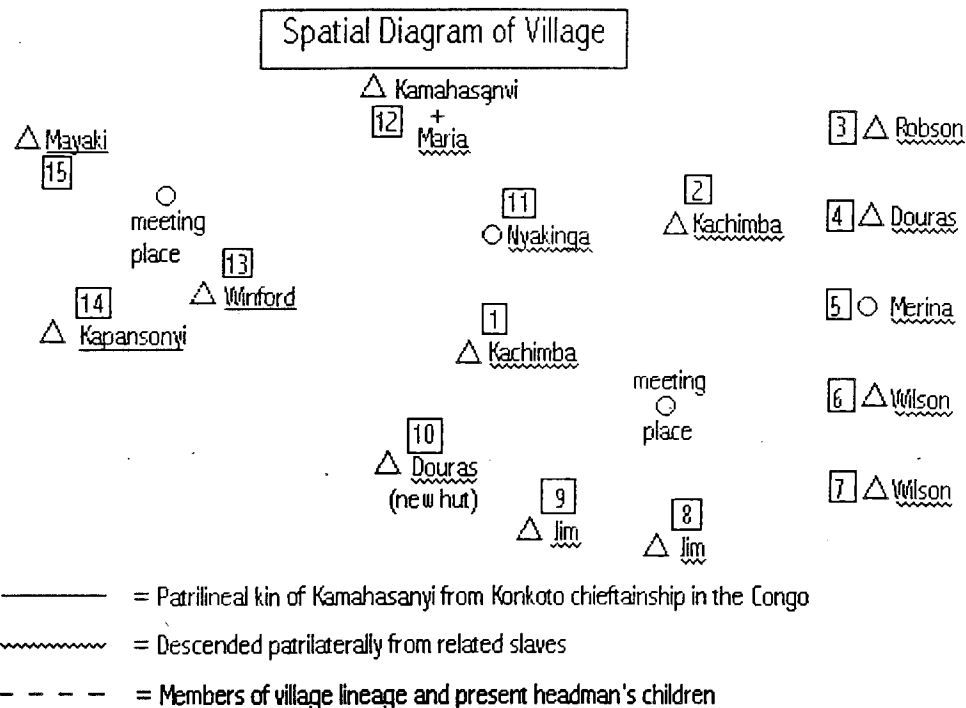
When I first entered the area I embarked on a 'naupliar or free-swimming phase', traveling fairly extensively over the two Paramount chiefdoms and collecting census and genealogical data. During this period I collected structural genealogies for 57 villages, 12 chiefly genealogies and census data of varying quality (depending on the ability of the clerks employed) on about 600 people. Next, we (Edie did the bulk of the work in this) took annual budgets for over 600 individuals, grouped into 37 families and a few odds and ends. But all this was merely scratching the surface. I resolved to dig my toes in and really get to know a small 'area of common life'. Edie and I took pains to strike up personal friendships. We frequently went to the gardens and sometimes lent a hand with a hoe or axe. After a while we began to strike into the rich rift of ritual (not with hoe or axe!). We were invited to ceremonies of all types, exorcism of spirits, rites de passage, divining (illegal) and ritual directed against sorcerers. I cultivated two old ayimbuki ('witch-doctors'[,]) but this isn't the proper term--the 'great' doctors are more like 'hierophants' or 'priests' in some mukishi ceremonies[,]) and certain ceremonies such as Chihamba and Mungoni almost amount to 'Mysteries' with degrees of initiation into knowledge of the esoteric elements) for some time (they are both wusensi 'joking partners' of mine) and they have shown me several complete mukishi ceremonies and allowed Edie to take a photograph sequence of the performance in two cases. The 'Archimedean point' of Lunda culture is the ritual system, just as among the Lozi it is the economic system. The dominant motif of Lunda ritual is the ridding of an individual by a group, led by a hierophant and consisting of an inner circle of initiated persons and

an outer circle of uninitiated (to supply 'generalized social power' perhaps you would say), by an elaborate sequence of ritual events and with the aid of numerous plant and animal medicines collected in a strict irreversible order, of a disease or affliction which has been troubling the mwiyanji (Lunda do not distinguish between a 'patient' who is physically sick or a person who has been unlucky at, say, hunting--both are afflicted by a mukishi). The disease or affliction may be caused by the spirit of a deceased relative or by the medicine of a living sorcerer or sorceress. The diviner is the diagnostician. In the case which I am going to describe, both the living and the dead contrived to make the poor chap's life miserable. But the mukishi cannot properly be termed an 'ancestor'. Akishi in every case I have recorded are the spirits of the recently dead, never going further back than the 2nd gen. asc. [2nd generation ascending]. The term for ancestor, nkakulula, never refers to a spirit but to the name of the mother or sister of the grandparent generation. Shrines (of various types which I haven't time to describe here) are only raised or planted to a deceased person if the latter has afflicted a living descendant and been exorcised. It is a symbol of reconciliation or perhaps placation. There is thus no regular ancestor cult, no regular worship or pouring out of libations. Spirits return to afflict their relative because the latter was their enemy during life or because he or she has affronted them by their recent conduct. One must also distinguish between mukishi and mufu; a mukishi is the spirit of either a matrilineal or patrilineal deceased relative and usually acts of its own volition. A mufu (lit. 'dead person') is most frequently the spirit of a dead person under the control of a sorceress, of a living person. It can be changed into any shape its possessor may desire, lion, buffalo, hyena etc. or may be made to manifest itself as a kahwehwu [or] a 'zombie' in which form it must prepare the 'meat' of a dead person for a concourse of sorceresses to devour on the morning of the interment. They eat the 'real body' of the dead, a spurious 'double' only being interred by the burying party. Only a woman may use nyifu in sorcery. They are obtained by getting a chimbuki ('witchdoctor' again; doctors work for good or evil purposes according to their financial reward) to kill a close relative such as a son or father--nyifu are always male, but they can kill other women. Incidentally, women can kill any relative by wuloji; men cannot kill their own children or their wives. Chiefs and hunters (those with a hunter-name taken after a special mukishi ceremony--one acquires ritual status through having been afflicted oneself and cleansed by the appropriate ritual) are the exception; they can kill wives but not children. It is said that sorcerers can kill non-relatives, but I recorded instances where this is said to have happened only in the case of chiefs.

I want to describe a connected series of rituals I witnessed which bring out more clearly Lunda structural and ritual principles than any general account. First of all I must give an outline of the spatial and structural situation in the village of the mwiyeji (the same person in all the rituals). Swanamundong'u Village belongs to Mukang'ala sub-chiefdom formerly important historically as it was given to the son of the first Ndembu Paramount Chief as a reward for driving out the ambuella who occupied the area before the Ndembu Lunda came from Mwantiyanywa. This meant that his descendants could no longer be considered for the Paramountcy but must succeed to the Mukangala chair only. Now, Govt. in 1947 abolished the chair on the grounds that few villages were attached to it and closed the mission out-school at the capital. Thus the area labours under a grievance and owing to the loss of their 'voice' have no one to speak for them when wild pigs etc. raid their gardens. It is a depressed and backward area. The Swanamundong'u Village lineage supplied the last two Mukangala chiefs but the present 'chief' comes from the senior house of the royal matrilineage. When he succeeded[,] Samuwinu, Headman of Swanamundong'u Village and full brother of the late chief, expected to succeed. When Govt. and the meeting of HM [headmen] appointed the present chief he fled into Ikelenge area, fearing the jealousy and sorcery of the latter. Swanamundong'u Village were thus left without a proper HM and with no one of the proper seniority (about 55 plus) to deputise. The chiefdom's and village's misfortunes, both interlocked, and the poverty of the gardens, pressed hard on the village. Further, intra-village tensions were set up recently which require diagrammatic explanation; [here Turner inserted the following figure]



N. B. The mother of Nyawurudi, mother of Kamahasanyi, was daughter of a slave husband.



The spatial diagram shows that there are two groups in the village, linked only by Kamahasanyi. K. himself is an odd character. He is sterile--married four times without issues, always changing his hair style as women do, and a v[ery] great snob (even more than most Lunda[,]) who are always mentioning even the most threadbare connection with a chief). He is nervous and self-pitying. He was previously married to his patrilineal cross-cousin in the Congo, in Kanema, the village of which his father was HM. When she died he accused her mother and sisters of procuring her death by sorcery in order 'to eat a big mpepi (payment made by a widow or widower to a spouse's relatives to finally rid themselves of the latter's spirit) and left his F[ather]'s (now dead) village for his m[other]'s village, Swanamundong'u. He brought with him Makayi and his son Winford and old Kapamsonyi, who had taken his side in Kanema. Last year he married Maria the acting HM Kachimna's daughter and his own matrilineal cross-cousin. Under the famine conditions of the village and the depression of Mukangala's fall from Govt. favour, mutual recriminations flew between the Konkoto group and the Swanamundong'u group. And Kamahasanyi was the link between them, and psychologically a weak link. He began to dream of spirits threatening him. When his traps proved always empty of duiker, he attributed this to spirits driving them away. What prevented an open breach between the two groups was the HM's need to have as big a following as he could and the fact that Kamahasanyi was both his nephew (and

therefore possible successor) and also son-in-law. After a time K. went to a diviner who told him that his 'GF' [grandfather] the late chief Kabong'u was afflicting him, not because of any personal animus but because the village did not have its 'true HM Samuwinu'. I asked K. why Kachimba the acting HM. was not himself afflicted. K. said that it would have then been considered 'personal matter' between the mukishi and Kachimba--if you want to get at a HM qua HM[,] get at his people so that they will reconsider the question of the right man for the job or else run away to less haunted territory. The diviner made ng'ombu; ie. consulted the objects in his divining basket, and prescribed that since Kabong'u was a hunter, three hunter's rituals should be performed to 'send him away', Mukala, Ntambu and Ihamba (not Chihamba, a very diff[eren]t complex ritual). Mukala is a manifestation of a spirit in which the dead drives game away from traps by whistling from the top of an anthill at them. Ntambu like a lion chases game from spear or bow. Ihamba is a much more concrete manifestation being nothing less than the middle upper incisor of the dead man deeply embedded in the sufferer's flesh! I won't describe the rich cultural content of these rituals in this letter (I'm trying to collect data for a thorough analysis of Lunda ritual and medicine from this aspect). The original diviner turned up to perform Ihamba, but it was felt he 'didn't know it properly'. So I brought my old pal Ihembi, the arch-wizard of Ikelenge area and Number One Ihamba man to Swanamundong'u by car. Half-way through the ceremony he took over, and in his genial way (he has a perfect 'bedside manner') 'extracted' the tooth by means of cupping horns from Kamahasanyi's quivering back. We photographed the rite. I brought old Samuwinu the true HM. along by popular request, for it was thought that his older brother's spirit would listen to him when he prayed on behalf of his grandson and because for a while the village 'would be as it ought to be'. There was great relief in the village afterwards, everyone shaking hands with everyone else. K. happily paid up 10s to each chimbuki. Alas, K. began to dream again, this time of his own father. He hopped off to Angola to consult a big diviner (divining is not illegal there) and this bloke really gave him his money's worth (K. is the kind of man who would spend a fortune on patent medicines in our society--he fancies all sorts of pains and headaches, yet looks thoroughly healthy). Ng'ombu said that there was yet another Ihamba in his body, that of his father, who was offended with him for leaving his village and cursing his wife's kin--deceased's own matrikin it must be remembered. But before it could be removed the malignant influence of one of the villagers, Wilson (see genealogy and diagram) must be removed by the anti-sorcery ritual Kaneng'a. Wilson had always opposed the entry of the Konkoto group into the village and disliked K. personally. Ihembi told me this privately and I confirmed it by eavesdropping. A chimbuki who could perform both Kanenga and Ihamba was wanted and who better than Ihembi? K. asked me again if I would motor the old man and his assistant to Swanamundong'u. I agreed and got Ihembi to take me into the bush to collect medicines before both rituals and show me the tricks of the trade. I have some very full notes on them I can show you sometime. The implications of each would occupy a chapter on their own. Main points are that Wilson was made to take a leading role in the purificatory aspect of Ihamba to give him a 'clean liver' before Kamahasanyi, that K. during the ritual confessed that there was a bitterness in his heart that his mother's brothers Kachimba and Jim did not offer to go to Angola and get a diviner for him, but seemed oblivious to his sufferings. I think most men in the village regard K. as a blithering pain in the neck. Ihembi looks on him as a chimbuki's dream, the perfect type of the 'sucker'. But he is in a sense the scapegoat. Animosities are drawn off through him as by a poultice. The latent aggressions in the village are manifested as hunters' teeth and hauled out of him. Once he had confessed his resentment the Ihamba 'came out'; it had previously remained in his neck; the four cupping horns had drawn an immense amount of blood out of him during the day.

Well, Max, I must catch the once-weekly post, although there's a hell of a lot I wanted to expand upon . [. . .] We're all pretty fit but I'm feeling a little stale just now after a non-stop year in the field. How's the Department this session? And how is the book on Lozi Law proceeding? My own data on law are very sketchy. Hope to catch up next tour. Edie sends best wishes to all.

Yours, Vic.