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960(035.6) *Likota Iya Bankoya:*
Memory, Myth and History*

Some years ago, Luc De Heusch's *Rois nés d'un cœur de vache* (1982) stimulated J. Vansina to a masterly critique (1983),¹ which, while concentrating on De Heusch's approach, at the same time provided an impressive theoretical and methodological statement on African history and structuralism. In Vansina's words (1983: 342):

'All history as reconstruction of the past is of course mythical. Myths are held to be "true". De Heusch is to be faulted for not using *all*² the traditions about the past, however recent that past, and considering them myth. But, conversely, historical accounts reflect the past. *The well-known problem is to find exactly how a set of data reflects the past as well as how it expresses the present.*³ The succeeding problem, then, is how to reconstruct the past most objectively, and in doing so create a new myth. Not because the account is not true, but because it will be held to be true'.

In this arduous undertaking, Vansina (*ibid.*: 343) sees no role whatsoever for De Heusch's brand of structuralism: '... there never can be a successful structuralist approach to historical reconstruction'.

Given the many types of structuralism and the unpredictable future developments of African history, this statement (or Vansina's 1983 argument as a whole) does not seem to preclude that, within the framework of a sophisticated theory and method, some degree of structuralist *inspiration* could yet benefit African history.

De Heusch claims that the substance of our common oral-historical

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1. Cf. DE HEUSCH's angry rejoinder (1986)—but in its lack of specificity little convincing—which essentially restates his well-known earlier position.
2. Emphasis original.
3. Emphasis added.

data is not necessarily a residue of historical events but may be largely a restatement of perennial myths and cosmologies. How to answer, in the face of that challenge, the central question as phrased by Vansina? How to negotiate between

(1) a traditional mythical content as shared throughout a culture or even an extended cultural region,

(2) the myths (in the way of idiosyncratic restructuring) that latterday transmitters of that content (informants impose upon (1) on the basis of their own particular intellectual, artistic, moral and political interests and pursuits, and

(3) the scholarly myths which we create on the basis of both (1) and (2)?

My argument will concentrate on a collection of oral-historical data from central Western Zambia: J. Shimunika's *Likota lya Bankoya* (Van Binsbergen 1988). It is a first statement of 'Nkoya' history, as a necessary element in the building of a 'Nkoya' ethnic consciousness in recent decades. Its explicit aim is to evoke a glorious 'Nkoya' past—including such times when the ancestors of today's Nkoya were mainly known as 'Mbwela'—as against the bleak contemporary reality, people identifying under a Nkoya ethnic label having suffered humiliation by the dominant Lozi ethnic group ever since the late nineteenth century.⁴ Shimunika's discourse, then, is predominantly nationalist and apologetic. However, a more careful reading, involving a minute assessment of text references to gender both implicit and explicit, reveals also a very different statement: one that traces the historical development, in the social history of central Western Zambia, from

(a) a peaceful stateless situation when—against the background of an integrated symbolico-cosmological system—women were politically and ritually dominant, to

(b) male-headed states in which violence predominated, the old symbolico-cosmological system had been shattered, and women had been relegated to a position of social, political and ideological inferiority.

On the basis of the text a very coherent account can be constructed of these alleged developments, in unexpected detail, with regard to such topics as the pre-state situation; the emergence of the institution of *Wene* (sacred kingship); the emergence of states; the male usurpation of *Wene*; concomitant changes in local branches of production under male

4. On the Nkoya, cf. BRELSFORD 1965; CLAY 1945; DERRICOURT & PAPSTEIN 1976; McCULLOCH 1951; VAN BINSBERGEN 1981: ch. 4-7; 1985a, 1986a, and references cited there.

initiative; the increasing emphasis on regalia as a male prerogative; the process through which men attempted to capture the dominant societal ideology and to relegate women to a state of symbolic pollution and incompetence; and finally the changing kinship roles of women.⁵ A superficial inspection of the symbolic structure in the book suggests at first that this somewhat hidden message has all the characteristics of a myth. It could almost serve as a textbook example of Engels's thesis (1976), yet does not seem to spring from my reading of Engels or other similar products of our North Atlantic tradition (by such authors as Bachofen, Robert Graves, and Sierksma). If it is a myth, it is primarily one created, subconsciously, by Shimunika. How to disentangle the mythical elements involved on the levels of tradition, narrator and analyst?

A structuralist-inspired approach will enable us, first, to reconstruct the more or less static infrastructure of a symbolico-cosmological system whose familiar central oppositions ('wet/dry', 'rain/drought', 'earth/sky', etc.) can all be subsumed under the dominant opposition between 'female/male'—in other words, where all other oppositions can be seen as simple, equivalent transformations of the gender opposition⁶: 'wet/dry = female/male', etc. On this level, statements on gender relations can only be seen as a-historical restatements of cosmology, and not as reflections of historical events involving real men and women in the past; their information content on actual relations between the sexes is zero.

However, a *second* type of transformations can be detected in the text, in those cases where gender oppositions deviate from, transcend and deny the mutually supporting layers of symbolic analogy that make up the symbolico-cosmological system. Here transformations no longer produce equivalents but *mutants*: an equation like 'wet/dry = female/male' no longer holds and, if anything, is inverted. These mutative transformations mark at least two types of discontinuity:

(a) deviations, in the *Likota* text, from contemporary Nkoya cultural practice;

(b) inconsistencies, in the *Likota* text, within the pattern of oppositions by which a particular past episode is evoked. These mutative transformations can be shown to converge to the same pattern of *changes in gender relations* in the process of state formation, but they do so in a way

5 Cf. VAN BINSBERGEN 1986b, 1987a. Also, cf. BUTTERMAN (1985), who, by concentrating on the colonial and postcolonial phases, nicely complements my argument, with this qualification that her view of precolonial gender relations remains altogether too general: it overlooks women's possible dominance and subsequently changing roles in what could be called the tributary mode of production.

6 Cf. DE MAHIEU 1985; VAN BINSBERGEN & SCHOFFELEERS 1985, and references cited there.

which obviously escapes all conscious intentions of Shimunika as a neo-traditionalist nationalist (and, incidentally, a male chauvinist). Formally, it might be possible to look at these mutative transformations as instances of what linguists call *free variation*, a reflection of the narrator's artistic working upon an infrastructure whose logic he does not consciously perceive or manipulate. However, from a point of view of historical analysis it is much more attractive to interpret these quantum leaps in the symbolic structure as evidence of actual qualitative changes in the relations between the sexes in central Western Zambia and adjacent areas. In other words, I claim that their information content is well above zero. Admittedly, such an approach to the principle of transformation is unorthodox in so far as it defies the structuralist assumption of an integrated and essentially stable set of relationships (*deep structure*); if the mutative transformations are claimed to reveal not an underlying, timeless *Ur-myth* (e.g. of sacred kingship), but the effects of actual historical processes, they would be examples of *homeostasis* (Vansina 1985: 120 sq.) rather than of transformations in the stricter structuralist sense.

In conjunction with the contemporary ethnographic evidence on Nkoya society, and against the background of some limited comparative evidence on women's political and ritual dominance and decline in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries,⁷ these mutative transformations, more than anything else, indicate that the 'feminist' message in *Likota lya Bankoya* is not a gratuitous, historically irrelevant statement concerning a static cosmological order projected back into the Golden Age, but a reflection of an actual (if difficult to periodicize) historical process relegating women in central Western Zambia to inferiority in the political, ritual, economic and kinship domains.

Having thus extracted the historical message of *Likota lya Bankoya*, and familiarized ourselves with the historical changes and symbolic transformations of gender relations in that context, I shall apply these insights to the form and structure of women's cults that constitute the dominant religious expression in central Western Zambia, suddenly throwing light on issues that I failed to clarify when, almost a decade ago, I wrote *Religious Change in Zambia* (1981).

« Likota lya Bankoya »

This relatively long text (100 000 characters) forms the *pièce de résistance* in my oral-historical data on the Nkoya. The first Nkoya Christian

7. Such comparative evidence includes the female rulers Naumba and Longo on the Mwembeshi river, Central Zambia (BRELSFORD 1935); female Luvale rulers, foremost the trading queen Nyakatolo (PAPSTEIN 1978); the Lozi queen of the South (MUTUMBA MAINGA 1973); Angolan female rulers (MILLER 1976).

pastor and principal Bible translator, Reverend J. Shimunika (c. 1898-1981), compiled these traditions and committed them to writing in the 1950s-1960s. The text came into my possession in 1977. Reading, translating and editing that text on the basis of my participatory anthropological research among the Nkoya people since 1972 (Van Binsbergen 1988) I was for a long time unaware of the fact it had a wealth of information to offer on precisely the female dimensions of Nkoya state formation. True, it depicted some early rulers as female; but since latterday Nkoya 'chiefs' (as the colonial and postcolonial heirs of precolonial rulers are commonly called in anglophone Africa) are invariably male, I read the historical accounts of precolonial rulers in the way any Nkoya reader would: assuming that also those rulers whose gender was not emphatically stated would of course be male, just like their modern heirs, who still carry their dynastic titles and are still called by the same generic name: *Mwene* (pl. *Myene*), incumbents of the institution of *Wene*. It was only when I prepared for a conference on the Position of Women in the Early State, rereading the text in order merely to glean a few apt illustrations from it, that this tissue of contemporary male bias was suddenly rended and the text began to yield its full 'feminist' message as summarized above. After more or less solving the more obvious problems of translation,⁸ I then had to devise some sort of a method to control the exploratory process. I regret that limitations of space force me to condense here to a few lines the methodological considerations that allowed me to *read* the text properly in the first place; but thus the space is saved to elaborate on the methodology of *interpreting* that text.

First I had to place the text against such contemporary data on political leadership, ethnic identity and male/female relations as I derived from my ongoing anthropological research.⁹ It turned out that female royal kin today play only a limited and informal role in the Nkoya royal courts (*lukena*) as subsidized by the colonial state. Thus the Nkoya situation today is rather at variance with the prominence of female royal kin as described for other parts of Zambia and Africa in general.¹⁰

8. Apart from the New Testament and Psalms (Testamenta... 1952), a short historical pamphlet anonymously published by Reverend Shimunika in the late 1950s (it was largely incorporated into *Likota*), one or two Primers as formerly used in local mission schools, and a small number of very short pious pamphlets, nothing has ever been published in the Nkoya language; nor has the language ever been studied professionally. So there were obvious problems of orthography, lexicon, syntax etc.

9. Fieldwork was carried out from March 1972 to April 1974, in September-November 1977 and August 1978, alternately in Kaoma district and among Nkoya migrants in Lusaka. For a description of a contemporary Nkoya royal court, cf. VAN BINSBERGEN & GESCHIERE 1985: 261-270 and VAN BINSBERGEN 1986a; for a general analysis of chiefs in independent Zambia, cf. VAN BINSBERGEN 1987b.

10. The special ritual and political roles of female royal kin constitute a recurrent

Partly on that contemporary basis, I could subject the document to the usual historical criticism, trying to identify the purposes and biases of its author and the function of the document in the context in which it had been generated. Specifically: was the document intended as a feminist pamphlet or had the myth as stated above inadvertently crept into a text whose manifest goals and functions were quite different? As it turned out, the compiler's biases as a Nkoya nationalist, a Christian, a reader of published accounts of Zambian history, a member of a Nkoya royal family¹¹ and as a member of the male gender, can all be detected in his book (e.g. in his omission of discussions of slavery, female puberty rites, and wars between the 'Nkoya'-Mbwela' and the 'Luvale' on the Upper Zambezi); but these very biases make it impossible to view *Likota* as a conscious feminist statement. *Likota Iya Bankoya* was intended as a powerful declaration of Nkoya identity and history in the face of arrogant Lozi attitudes vis-à-vis the Nkoya in recent decades. Whatever vision of gender relations crept in must be attributed to unconscious mechanisms stemming from the author's sharing in the Nkoya culture and collective historical experience.

A further step involved the operationalization of the procedures and indicators (linguistic, contextual and symbolic) through which I could detect gender in the predominantly gender-unspecific Nkoya usage. In this I rely on such limited gender specificity as kinship terminology and the terms for royal office contain. For instance, whoever is presented as the marriage partner of a *Mukwetunga* (= royal escort; pl. *Bakwetunga*) is intended, by the Nkoya author and his informants, as female; but whoever is married with a *Lihano* (= royal wife; pl. *Mahano*) is intended as male. On the basis of such close-reading a specific gender could be assigned to the majority of names and titles mentioned in *Likota*.

This raised a further question: gender symbolism is likely to have led to all sorts of *spurious projections of present-day gender connotations into the past onto real or fictitious actors*. In other words, far from taking *Likota* at face value, we must decode it in the light of the sophisticated approaches scholarship has developed for the handling of traditional oral sources. For *Likota's* message as regards changing gender relations (a development from pre-state female leadership to male-dominated statehood) might just amount to a timeless statement of a cosmology or world view, in which a Golden Age of peace and harmony with Nature

feature in African 'Early States', cf. CLAESSEN 1984; for a Zambian example, cf. MUNTEMBA 1970; Chief Siloka II Mukuni 'A short history of the Baleya people of Kalomo district', University of Zambia Library, special collection on Zambia, n° (q) DT 967 Muk, both on the Mukuni Leya of Livingstone District, incidentally close neighbours of the southernmost Nkoya, those of *Mwene Momba*.

11. The one that owns the royal title of *Mwene Mutondo*. The main other royal title is that of *Mwene Kahare*.

happens to have female connotations (and therefore is presented in terms of a spuriously projected female leadership), while the Iron Age (in Ovidian, not archaeological terms) with all the nastiness of the human condition takes on male connotations.

The specific context of Central African political structures and their history offers us yet a second possibility of symbolically interpreting gender relations. Often the political relations (in terms of hierarchy and seniority, political versus ritual supremacy, autochthonous versus immigrant status) between certain hereditary dynastic titles are expressed in a kinship idiom ('perpetual kinship', cf. Schecter 1980a). This idiom can be one of consanguinity (where title X is called the 'younger brother' of title Y), but it may also be one of marital relations, where title A is the 'wife' of title B. A sacred form of the latter is that the secular title B has as its complement the priestly title A: his 'spirit wife'. In such cases one could expect—especially with reference to a distant, mythical past—the incumbents of title A to be represented as women, and those of title B as men, regardless of their actual biological gender. Towards the end of my argument I shall consider whether this offers a revealing perspective upon historical gender relations among the Nkoya.

Limitations of space do not allow us to dwell on the specific surface content of *Likota's* message. The summary as given above will have to convince the reader that *Likota* does offer a remarkably detailed picture, step by step, of the alleged change from pre-state clans, via female-centred sacred kingship (*Wene*), to male-headed states. We shall proceed directly to the analysis of its deep structure, and such mutative transformations as appear to have been effected upon it.

« *Likota Iya Bankoya* » as Cosmology and as History: Aspects of Nkoya Symbolism and its Transformations

Can we make history out of *Likota's* detailed account of a transition from female-headed clans to male-headed states? In attempting to do so, can we benefit from the structuralist inspiration yet preserve our historiographic sophistication?

Identifying *Likota's* Symbolic Structure

In *Likota Iya Bankoya*, as in similar accounts, we can detect a detailed symbolic structure that amounts to a total world view. The immediate surface manifestations of this structure consist of such pairs of oppositions as listed in the first and second column of Table I; all can be backed by literal quotations from the text, for which however space is lacking here (cf. Van Binsbergen 1986b; 1988).

TABLE I. — MAIN SYMBOLIC OPPOSITIONS IN « LIKOTA LYA BANKOYA »

Paired Opposition		Domain*
ascription	achievement	c/p/s
bird	game animal	c/e
container (gourd, basket, pot)	weapon	c/e/p/s
cosmological legitimation	power politics	c/p
drum (female)	drum (male)	p
fish, fishing	<i>nshima</i> (meal porridge)	c/e
<i>kutembwisha hankanga</i> ** (female puberty rites)	<i>mukanda</i> (male puberty rites)	c/p/s
life	death	c
lizard	python	c
menstruation	blood from wounds	c/p/s
moon	<i>mpande</i> (chief's ornament)	c/p
mother	son	s
<i>Mwene</i> (ruler)	<i>Mukwetunga</i> (royal escort)	p/s
natural death	violent death, murder	c/p/s
order	disruption	c/p/s
peace	violence	c/p/s
rain	fire	c/e
rain	drought	c/e
redistribution	monopoly, hoarding	e/p/s
sister	brother	s
sister	sister's son	s
sky	earth	c
water	fire	c
wild fruits	<i>nshima</i> (meal porridge)	e
<i>wulozi</i> (sorcery)	<i>malele</i> (magic)	c/p/s

* c = cosmology; e = economy; p = politics; s = social organization.

** Not explicitly mentioned in *Likota lya Bankoya*.

As indicated in the right-hand column of Table I, these oppositions belong to four partly overlapping domains of symbolic reference: cosmology, economy, politics and social organization. In Table I, therefore, the oppositions are presented per domain rather than alphabetically, while for each domain they are loosely grouped around common themes such as natural phenomena, natural species, etc.:

Apart from the grouping of the material around fairly self-evident themes, the information in Table II goes beyond that in Table I on two points.

Under the heading 'abstractions and generalities' I have taken the liberty to spell out some of the obvious distinctions (such as 'horizontal/vertical'; 'cold/hot' etc.) underlying the surface oppositions appearing in *Likota*; no doubt a much more penetrating semantic analysis could be

TABLE II. — SYMBOLIC OPPOSITIONS IN « LIKOYA LYA BANKOYA » ORGANIZED INTO FOUR SYMBOLIC DOMAINS, AND ARRANGED THEMATICALLY.

Cosmological Oppositions	
(natural phenomena:)	
sky	earth
moon	<i>mpande</i>
rain	fire
rain	drought
water	fire
(natural species:)	
bird	game animal
*fish, fishing	<i>nshima</i>
*wild fruits	<i>nshima</i>
lizard	python
(pollution, evil and purification:)	
menstruation	blood from wounds
<i>kutembwisha hankanga</i> (female rites)	<i>mukanda</i> (male rites)
* <i>wulozi</i>	<i>malele</i>
(abstractions and generalities, partly made explicit by analyst:)	
non-human nature	human culture
supernatural	human life
vertical (below/above the earth)	horizontal (surface of the earth)
cold	hot
wet	dry
container (gourd, basket; pot?)	weapon
order	disruption
peace	violence
life	death
natural death	violent death
openness, and action involving	marked definition in space, and
smooth contact over extensive	swift, pointed action (snapping,
surface (pour, pound, fill, hold;	breaking, cutting, stabbing,
cf. vulva)	spearing; cf. penis)
cosmological legitimation	power politics
ascription	achievement
Economic Oppositions	
(implements:)	
container (gourd, basket; pot?)	weapon
(environmental conditions:)	
rain	fire (cf. bushfires)
rain	drought (cf. begin planting season)
(products:)	
*fish, fishing	<i>nshima</i>
*wild fruits	<i>nshima</i>
(social processes:)	
redistribution	monopoly, hoarding

Political Oppositions

(status, power base:)

<i>Mwene</i>	<i>Mukwetunga</i>
cosmological legitimation	power politics
ascription	achievement
<i>kutembwisha hankanga</i> (female rites)	<i>mukanda</i> (males rites)
	(insignia etc.):
container	weapon
menstruation	blood from wounds
drum (female)	drum (male)
moon	<i>mpande</i>
	(social processes:)
natural death	violent death
order	disruption
peace	violence
redistribution	monopoly, hoarding
* <i>wulozi</i>	<i>malele</i>

Social Oppositions

(demarcation of principal social categories:)

<i>kutembwisha hankanga</i> (female rites)	<i>mukanda</i> (male rites)
menstruation	blood from wounds
	(kin categories:)
mother	son
sister	brother
sister	sister's son

(status, the social process, the handling of conflicts:)

<i>Mwene</i>	<i>Mukwetunga</i>
ascription	achievement
redistribution	monopoly, hoarding
peace	violence
container	weapon
order	disruption
natural death	violent death
* <i>wulozi</i>	<i>malele</i>

* Opposition not harmonious with gender opposition.

made on this point, but for our present argument Table II will suffice. Even in its present form the cosmological entries in Table II, while *grosso modo* reflecting Nkoya culture, clearly pertain to a symbolic system which has a very wide distribution throughout South Central Africa; fragments and/or equivalent transformations of this system may be gleaned from almost any set of ethnographic and mythical data recorded anywhere in the subcontinent.

Identifying Transformations in *Likota lya Bankoya*

The second new feature of Table II is crucial to our present argument on the evolution of gender relations. It turns out that, in all four domains, nearly all specific pairs of opposition are used, in *Likota*, to highlight another fundamental opposition: *gender*. The male/female opposition is the central axis on which the symbolic universe of *Likota* hinges, no matter whether we look at symbolical representations of the cosmological domain, the economy, politics or social organization.¹²

The evidence is so overwhelming that it was easy to indicate in Table II, by an asterisk, those few entries that appear to form exceptions:

fish, fishing	<i>nshima</i>
wild fruits	<i>nshima</i>
<i>wulozi</i>	<i>malele</i>

In *Likota lya Bankoya*, these entries are presented in association with a gender dichotomy, but such a gender association is not borne out by contemporary Nkoya cultural practice; therefore these entries appear to be the result of specific transformations which the author of *Likota lya Bankoya*, or his informants, have performed upon the Nkoya cultural material.

For while *malele* is a category of neutral magic almost exclusively associated with *Myene*, nothing in the rest of Nkoya culture outside *Likota* suggests that women are more closely associated with sorcery (*wulozi*) than men.

A similar argument holds for the two entries having to do with the extracting of food stuffs from the natural environment, and their pro-

12. This does not mean that, under the hegemony of the gender opposition, the Nkoya symbolic system as mediated through *Likota lya Bankoya* is anything near consistent. E.g. the species in Table II feature a confusing number of extremities:

female	male
bird (biped)	game animal (quadruped)
lizard (quadruped)	python (legless)

The underlying logic, if any, is not readily spotted: the 'bird/game animal' opposition could be relegated to the more fundamental one between the male dry land and the female sky/water, but it is hard to define the distinctive ecological niches of the two classes of reptiles—or it should be that pythons are rather less appreciated around places of human habitation. No doubt, further research could bring up plausible missing links, but these ought to be treated with great caution: as VANSINA rightly observes (1983: 310 *sq.*; cf. VAN BINSBERGEN & SCHOFFELEERS 1985) the extreme flexibility and absence of methodological rigour in this sort of structural analysis creates an ideal setting for interpretational artifacts.

cessing. In *Likota*, female *Wene* is said to precede the time of *nshima* (meal porridge), whereas male *Myene* are credited with the introduction of food crops, the basis for *nshima*. Thus *Likota* presents the 'wild fruits/*nshima*' opposition as harmonious with a gender opposition, but this does not reflect current cultural practice. In Nkoya society today, *nshima* certainly has female connotations: the cultivation of food crops (millet, kaffircorn, bullrush millet, maize and cassava), their processing into meal and finally the preparation of porridge out of the latter are largely female tasks. Only the initial clearing of the field, a limited amount of hoeing, and the construction of the granary constitute men's work. Under normal conditions of village life it is virtually impossible for a man to cook his own *nshima*. Also the collection of wild forest products that may have preceded *nshima* as a staple and that are still reverted to in famine periods is exclusively in the hands of women.¹³ Other, gender-indifferent symbolic oppositions (e.g. 'nature/culture', 'forest/village') seem to underlie the opposition 'wild fruits/*nshima*'; its presentation in *Likota*, as gender-related again appears to form a transformation.

A similar opposition is posited, in *Likota*, between fish and *nshima*. As one of the three standard relishes to accompany a dish of *nshima* (the others are meat and vegetables), and therefore a likely male complement of that female food, fish is yet gender-ambiguous. The symbolic role of fish in contemporary Nkoya society is most articulate in the field of female puberty ritual: virtually all food taboos to which the female novice is subjected during the time of her seclusion revolve on various species of fish; likewise, women are not allowed to descend into the water when fishing, but have to remain on the bank of the pool—which prevents them from catching anything but the smallest fry. Fish is not a clearcut male symbol, just as the female novice after *menarche* is herself not a fully-fledged woman: she has to come to terms with the liminal ambiguity of her status—which Nkoya culture expresses in terms of her being possessed by the anti-social blood spirit Nkang'a, to be brought under control by the puberty rites (cf. Turner 1967; Van Binsbergen 1987a). Rather than being a symbol of either femininity or masculinity, fish seems to represent a symbol of gender definition *per se*—both evoking the gender boundary, and suggesting the crossings, exchanges and transgressions that (at life crisis ritual, sexual activity, etc.) occur across that boundary.¹⁴

13. However, for the nineteenth century male slaves, who were themselves engaged in the cultivation of food crops at the *lukena*, are said to have had to feed on these wild tubers: the consumption of their master's crops was allegedly denied to them.

14. Such symbolic elements that refer to the properties of the entire socio-ideological structure itself rather than to its component parts are a common aspect of symbolic systems. Elsewhere (VAN BINSBERGEN 1981) I have interpreted

These examples of transformations, performed upon current Nkoya cultural practice and leading to the world view offered in *Likota lya Bankoya*, are not in themselves incompatible with the view that, at one level of symbolic analysis at least, the book could be regarded as an extensive evocation of a rather consistent system of gender symbolism, ranging from cosmology to politics, from economy to social organization. As such a statement, *Likota* is both tautological and kaleidoscopic: the oppositions are superimposed, and reinforce one another without offering new conceptual clues—they all belong to the same pattern of equivalent transformation. In a fashion argued and documented for numerous instances of non-analytical, 'folk' discourse from many human societies including the North Atlantic one, the symbolic through-connexions between the major domains enable the speaker to discuss one aspect of society and/or history in terms of crucial oppositions which, because they apply to more than one domain, thus carry over gender implications and gender symbolism between domains. E.g. discussions of the economy or the political structure may—must—pose as factual or historical, yet are inevitably clad in the same overall idiom that has already assigned fixed and standard gender connotations to specific parts of the natural environment, to a mythical past versus a remembered nineteenth century, to order versus disruption, to cosmological legitimation of office versus military and commercial achievements in the nineteenth-century turmoil. In other words, on this level of equivalent transformations under the hegemony of gender symbolism, *Likota lya Bankoya* would seem to be a circular and self-validating statement of a timeless and unchanging culture and symbolism, having nothing to do

cults of affliction in a similar vein: reflecting not distinct modes of production but the structure of their articulation as emerged in the course of the last two centuries; I shall however qualify this statement towards the end of the present argument. Incidentally, the symbolism of liminality affects also other oppositions discussed in the present argument. Thus the gender element in the 'wet/dry' opposition appears to be well-established: the first, allegedly female, *Mwene* had to secure her *Wene* from the fire (on which 'the pot with the game meat of *Wene*' was cooking) through the use of water (by which she extinguished the fire), and when she succeeded in doing so, the achievement was heavenly sanctioned by a most significant downpour of rain. Yet one of the principal teachings of female puberty training concerns techniques and herbal medicines by means of which a woman can keep her vagina dry for sexual intercourse; and women take great pride in such dryness, which they ambivalently interpret as both enhancing their male partner's pleasure and his difficulty at penetration. Against this background, dryness is no longer an unequivocal male attribute, but—precisely—a liminal symbol of boundary transgression between the genders. A further example from *Likota* is where an early incumbent of the Kahare title is said to have built a long ladder to pick the moon from the sky (both moon and sky having female connotations)—as a chief's ornament for his child Kapeshi; the undertaking (a male ruler's assault on female symbols of power) is said to have failed, but meanwhile liminal symbolism was invoked through the ladder, negotiating between earth and sky, supernatural and human, male and female.

with history as we define it academically. Whatever it presents as male or female is so presented primarily for cosmological and symbolic reasons, regardless of historical accuracy.

Does this mean that we end up with nothing but a generalized and timeless statement on human society in general and the Nkoya condition in particular, presented in a static and unalterable idiom of gender relations—merely because that is what Nkoya symbolism hinges on, and with just as little specific relation to the actual evolution of gender relations in Nkoya society as any literary work has vis-à-vis the society in which it was created?

It is on this point that we shall leave De Heusch behind us. At the surface level the symbolic structure of *Likota Iya Bankoya* keeps reverting to the same, and partly universal, oppositions, but it does not do so in a static, timeless pattern that is repeated throughout the argument, regardless of the historical period we are referring to. In this respect, Table II is slightly misleading: we have yet to explore the dynamics of mutative transformation through which these pairs are connected to one another, gather tension and direction, and thus may generate meaning, emotion, truth and history—in a work of art as much as in a culture, and presumably also in a contribution to ethno-history such as *Likota* is.

If we aspire to crack some historical code that we hope lies hidden in this ethno-historical statement, we must look for contradictions that, on closer scrutiny, upset and disrupt its tautological unity.¹⁵ Such contradictions we may then take for the sediment of historical processes, of which contemporary actors and informants are so unaware that they have failed to process these manifestations and bring them in line with the overall symbolic structure that shapes their conscious argument. Above we have already encountered some possible instances of such contradictions or mutative transformations: the oppositions 'fish, fishing/*nshima*', 'wild fruits/*nshima*' and 'wulozi/*malele*'.

On closer analysis the text of *Likota Iya Bankoya* turns out to offer many more such instances, in a way that is particularly conducive to an academically historical reconstruction of the evolution of gender relationships. Reiterating, once again, the pairs of oppositions that we have considered in Tables I and II, the essential data are presented in the right-hand column of Table III.

Thus, on second analysis, the majority of symbolic pairs in *Likota Iya Bankoya*, that at first glance could be read as a timeless cosmological statement on the human condition, turns out to be involved in significant transformations, which all are about the changes that institutions, organiza-

15. Much in the same way as I took the internal contradictions, the lack of systematic unity, in the contemporary religious scene in central Western Zambia as a manifestation of historically articulated socio-ideological subsystems (VAN BINSBERGEN 1981; VAN BINSBERGEN & GESCHIERE 1985: 270-278).

TABLE III. — SYMBOLIC TRANSFORMATIONS IN « LIKOTA IYA BANKOYA »

Paired Opposition		Transformation of this Opposition in the Context of « Likota Iya Bankoya »
ascription	achievement	early male <i>Myene</i> legitimate their position by reference to female predecessors, but later male <i>Myene</i> are <i>de facto</i> legitimated by association with outside powers: Lozi king, colonial state, mission
bird	game animal	no conspicuous transformation in <i>Likota</i> ; however, see fish, fishing/ <i>nshima</i>
cold	hot	see: rain/fire
container	weapon	no conspicuous transformation in <i>Likota</i>
cosmological legitimation	power politics	see: ascription/achievement
drum (female)	drum (male)	the story of the impeachment of the female <i>Mwene</i> Kahare II (people are said not to have accepted that the drums remained silent when she was in menstrual seclusion) presents royal drums as exclusively male
fish, fishing	<i>nshima</i>	a problematic opposition, virtually a reversion of current Nkoya practice; a historically revealing transformation is however suggested by the fact that later (male) <i>Myene</i> are depicted as exercising royal rights over both fishing pools and game
<i>kuembwisha kankanga</i>	<i>mukanda</i>	the omission of female puberty rites, which constitute one of the most central features of Nkoya culture today, is in itself a significant transformation on the part of <i>Likota</i> 's author; the repeated rejection of <i>mukanda</i> by the Nkoya people constitutes another underlying transformation
life	death	see: natural death/violent death, murder
lizard	python	no conspicuous transformation in <i>Likota</i>
menstruation	blood from wounds	no conspicuous transformation in <i>Likota</i> *
moon	<i>mpande</i>	the female <i>Mwene</i> Komoka's praise-name stresses the <i>mpande</i> ; the story of Kapeshi, stressing the separation between heavenly and earthly power, and evoking the limitations of male political leadership, constitutes an attempted but abortive transformation

mother	son	the emphasis on nineteenth-century father/daughter relationships in <i>Lihota</i>
<i>Mwene</i>	<i>Mukwetunga</i>	this opposition in fact stands for two oppositions: (a) female <i>Mwene</i> / male <i>Mukwetunga</i> , and (b) the two ways in which a man can relate to the highest political office, either as incumbent (<i>Mwene</i>) himself, or as husband (<i>Mukwetunga</i>) of a female incumbent. <i>Lihota</i> presents transformations of both oppositions in a nineteenth-century context: the result is 'male <i>Mwene</i> / female <i>Lihano</i> '
natural death	violent death, murder	Likambi as responsible for the death of her brother Shihoka I; also, women becoming bones of contention between men in the nineteenth century
order	disruption	see: natural death/violent death, murder
peace	violence	see: natural death/violent death, murder
rain	fire	no conspicuous transformation in <i>Lihota</i> **
rain	drought	see: rain/fire
redistribution	monopoly, hoarding	insistence on exclusive royal rights is mainly discussed by reference to male <i>Myene</i> , yet the latter are in other contexts depicted as sharing out their tribute; not a very convincing case of transformation
sister	brother	the obvious transformation in gender terms would have been that from 'sister/brother' to 'wife/husband'; although a central theme in royal mythology and ritual among the neighbouring Lozi, in <i>Lihota</i> this incestuous transformation only appears in the most oblique form: female <i>Mwene</i> Likambi lets herself be represented by a magical doll; the latter marries male <i>Mwene</i> Shihoka I and causes his death
sister	sister's son	perhaps the fact that gradually sisters give way to sister's sons as <i>Mwene</i> 's companions can be seen as a historically revealing transformation
sky	earth	in the story of Kapeshe, the ladder, and its downfall, constitutes an attempted but abortive transformation
vertical	horizontal	see: sky/earth
water	fire	see: rain/fire
wet	dry	see: rain/fire***

wild fruits	<i>nshima</i>	this opposition seems in itself the result of a transformation which (under the influence of increasing male dominance in both the economy and the ideology) presents two predominantly female products as reflecting a gender opposition
<i>wulozi</i>	<i>matele</i>	this opposition seems in itself the result of a transformation which (under the influence of an increasingly dominant male ideology) presents two inherent aspects of <i>Wene</i> as reflecting a gender opposition

* In fact, this opposition is emphatically reinforced in the narrative material of *Lihota Iya Bankoya*: both in the story of the male *Mwene* Liyoka and his mother (the former sacrificing to his drums, the latter silently observing that act), and in the story of the impeachment of the female *Mwene* Kahare II on the grounds of menstruating. Outside *Lihota*, in current Nkoya cultural practice, there is a link with other central gender-related oppositions: 'cold/hot', 'wet/dry', 'water/fire': as elsewhere in South Central Africa, menstruating women can continue to fetch water but are not supposed to handle fire nor to cook. On the other hand, nothing is dreaded more than rain (Rain?) during a girl's final coming-out festival: it means that she will be barren—as if Rain were no longer the women's ally it was in mythical times. . .

** In fact, the opposition is strongly reinforced in *Lihota*, especially in the myth of origin of *Wene*, and also in lesser details such as the symbolic name of the male *Mwene* Shihoka I's father: *Linanga*, Drought. However, current cultural practice among the Nkoya suggests the imagery as presented in *Lihota* to be a transformation in itself. As an institution, rain ritual directed at the High God has been extinct in central Western Zambia for what I estimate to be at least a century or more. In the 1910s the great prophet Mupumani, from Ilaland but (as a non-cattle-owning non-Ila in the western periphery of Ilaland) most probably sharing in the same cultural tradition to which also today's Nkoya belong, for only a short time revived this ritual (cf. VAN BINSBERGEN 1981: ch. 3, 4). Today remnants of it are only found in women's cults of affliction, notably the Bituma cult. Instead of the rain-centred High God cult, which *Lihota* depicts as the major source of *Wene*, two other institutional complexes have occupied themselves with rain-calling. There are first the cults of the royal graves invoking deceased *Myene* rather than the High God as bringers of rain. Besides there is a complex of more magical, technical rain-making administered by individual specialists; the only case I know well is that of a Lozi representative *induna* residing in *Mwene* Kahare's area. The latter rain cult, in the hands of a despised but feared stranger, takes us even further away from ecological cults based on a unique link with the local land (on Lozi rain magic, cf. REYNOLDS 1963). Apart from the ecstasy and bliss with which the entire village population rushes out to the fields upon the first rains in October, little in Nkoya culture today would lead one to suspect that rain occupies a pivotal role in its cosmology.

*** Not a transformation, but an application of this opposition might be read in the male *Mwene* Shihoka's migration from the well watered Manyinga (the Manyinga is a tributary of the Kabompo) area to the Kafue/Zambezi watershed (the area of today's Kasempa Boma), which is known, among the Nkoya, as the Dry Land. More in general, in some subconscious mental geography the entire migratory movement from the Upper Zambezi to central Western Zambia could be described as a transition from wet to dry; however, an overwhelming amount of evidence is there to show that these moves were far from mythical, not a cliché of oral tradition; they actually took place.

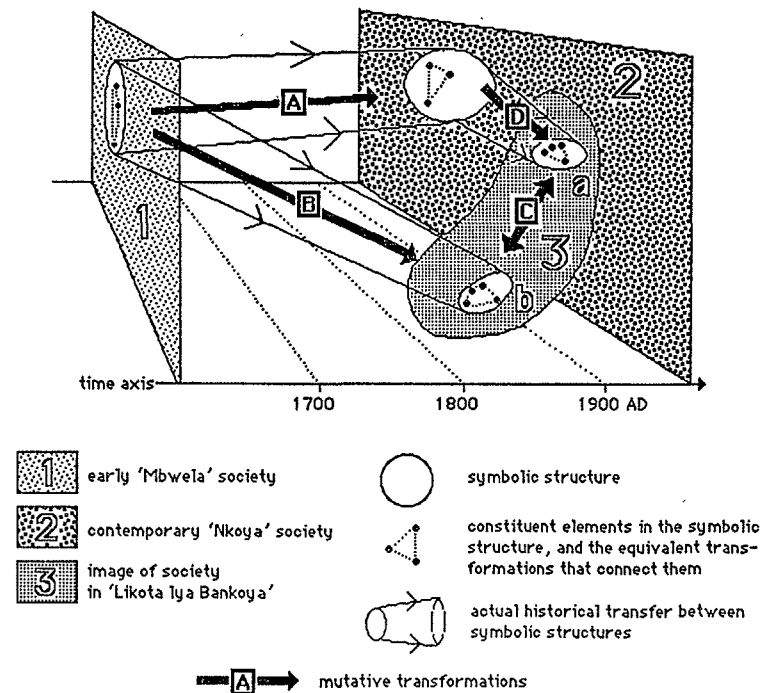
tional forms and ideologies undergo, and which all converge systematically to the same two themes of state formation and increasing (though ultimately checked) male domination. Of course the compiler of *Likota* was free to select and reshape the contents of the actual stories he included. But as to their underlying symbolic structure, he had little choice (since that part of his job escaped his own conscious deliberations) but to copy the tensions and transformations to which he was programmed as a member of his society and as one sharing in the collective Nkoya historical experience. For it is clear now that the text of *Likota* is in no way a simple statement emulating Nkoya society and symbolism as it exists today.

One could disagree as to the extent to which the contemporary situation revolves on the gender opposition. This is partly a matter of secondary, academic interpretation. We are dealing here—Vansina (1983) made this very clear—with a realm of anthropological enquiry where intuition, persuasiveness, artfulness and cunning, more than reliable, valid and intersubjective method, form the anthropologist's stock-in-trade—the analysts themselves, foremost De Heusch and Lévi-Strauss, often posing, or imposing, as culture heroes. However, a symbolic system is not unrelated to the economic and political structures of the society in which it is found. Contemporary Nkoya society (if one could at all discuss it as a distinct entity—which it is only in a very relative sense, both geographically, linguistically and ethnically—) is a complex social formation composed of a number of mutually linked (articulated) modes of production, including a domestic mode centring on the rural household, but also the remnants of the *Wene*-centred tributary mode of production whose historical forms *Likota* helps us to unravel, and dominated by industrial capitalism as mediated by the modern state. Modes of production revolve on their central relation of exploitation, and in only one of the constituent modes, the domestic one, can that central relation be properly represented in terms of gender (the exploitation of women's labour by male elders). Classical anthropology might perhaps be tempted to treat even the present-day symbolic system of Nkoya society as solidly unitary, and emphasize aspects of domestic symbolism; but a more sophisticated approach would have to incorporate that domestic, gender-centred component in a much wider framework also encompassing the imagery (including its distortions and transformations) of indigenous statehood, of modern political and economic incorporation, of the national state, urban life and capitalism. Against this background, the gender-centred universe of *Likota* must itself be seen as a transformation performed by the Nkoya author and his informants. And that applies *a fortiori* to the central theme of our argument: the emphasis, in *Likota*, on female *Myene* whereas today all *Myene* are male.

From Transformations to History

Having thus identified one main type of mutative transformation in *Likota* (from twentieth-century cultural practice to the body of the text—presenting all *Myene* as male in accordance with contemporary cultural practice—), within that text the material in Table III allows us to trace yet another type of mutative transformation: from the dominant imagery in the text, to exceptions where that imagery is inverted or ignored. Read as a timeless symbolic statement on gender relations, the message of *Likota lya Bankoya* is very far from consistent: its fundamental orientation is, time and again, denied and contradicted, precisely on the crucial issue of gender, and the author is allowed such inconsistency because, after all, he is supposed to write history—the inconsistencies are, already at the folk level, implicitly if not explicitly explained as historical transformations.

Neither does this complete our picture of various types of transformations. A diagram may clarify the complexity of the situation—which, however, in no way appears to be atypical in the field of oral history.



Historical transfer between symbolic structures, and possible transformations, between early 'Mbwela' society, contemporary 'Nkoya' society, and the image of society in *Likota lya Bankoya*.

The diagram presents the historical argument as an exchange between two parallel planes separated in time:

(1) early Mbwela society—the society of the ancestors of contemporary Nkoya on the Upper Zambezi and further across the Congo-Zambezi watershed, sometime in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries;¹⁶

(2) contemporary Nkoya society. Somewhere between these planes hovers—of uncertain shape and historical location—

(3) the image of society as presented in *Likota lya Bankoya*.

Both historical societies (1) and (2), as well as *Likota* (3), have a symbolic structure. For simplicity's sake, let us decide to ignore any internal dialectics within the symbolic structure of early Mbwela society and contemporary Nkoya society. The symbolic dialectics within *Likota* we have explored above. In the diagram they are rendered as D (the transformations performed on contemporary symbolic material, so that *Likota's* symbolic contents do not match present-day Nkoya cultural practice), whereas the transformations which internally provide alternatives to the dominant symbolic structure of the book are represented as C. Within the framework of an overall historical continuity involving social change on all aspects of society (not displayed in the diagram), the contemporary symbolic system of the Nkoya can be said to be the product of historical transfer from early Mbwela society; most likely, this transfer involved significant transformations, shown as A in the diagram. Finally, it is likely that the symbolic system of *Likota* is not entirely a transformational product from contemporary Nkoya society (along the lines of D), but also has received some more direct input from the past; however, to avoid jumping to conclusions let us also assume that this input has been subject to transformations (B).

With the aid of the diagram we can now reformulate the methodological difficulties of making history out of *Likota*, and of using it as a source for the historical evolution of gender relations. What we really seek to know is the past: (1); however, we have no direct evidence of it, but only transformed transfers or projections: (2) and (3). We perceive a dialectical structure in (3). Although some allowance will have to be made for any dialectics present in both (1) and (2), I submit that we

16. Space is lacking to describe this formative, 'Mbwela' period of 'Nkoya' society; its relation with Musumban military, political and population expansion emanating from the centre of Mwaat Yaamv's state and represented, on the Upper Zambezi, by such ethnic labels as Lunda, Luvale and (the only one to be mentioned by *Likota*) Humbu; and the imposition and rejection of the *mukanda* male circumcision complex as an important element in the 'Mbwela'/Musumba confrontation; cf. McCULLOCH 1951; PAPSTEIN 1978; SCHECTER 1980a. Incidentally, both *Likota* and oral evidence collected corroborate VANSINA's criticism (1983: 332 sq.) of DE HEUSCH's view (1982: 464 sq.) as to the alleged Kololo origin of *mukanda* on the Upper Zambezi.

should interpret these dialectics primarily as the result of the confrontation between two sets of mutative transformations, D and B: one a projection from the present, the other a more direct transfer from the past we wish to penetrate. Admittedly, we still lack a method that would allow us to distinguish, in (3), between the effects of D and those of B.

It is doubtful whether such distinction is possible without additional information on the past from other sources. But I believe that even without such a method we have already come close to cracking *Likota's* historical code. It is no accident that the diagram looks remarkably like a classic *feedback* set-up, and even more like an optics drawing. Just like an optical grid magnifies the effects of light waves bumping onto each other so as to allow us the macroscopic vision of interference patterns (and thus to measure otherwise unmeasurable, microscopic phenomena), the emphatic contradictions (C) between a dominant and an underlying pattern of symbolism in *Likota* (3) offer us more than a hint as to the nature of the essential transformation (A) that connects contemporary Nkoya society to early Mbwela society, and (since we do have ample ethnographic evidence on the former) allow us to trace earlier forms of contemporary institutions and their gender aspect. In these mutative transformations the real historical message of *Likota* is encoded—safe from conscious manipulation and personal biases of the Nkoya compiler and his informants—, waiting to be decyphered. It is on this level that *Likota lya Bankoya*, although compiled and written in a way very different from academic historiography, is yet a statement on history that can be taken seriously and even literally—not, of course, in its details, but in the broad patterns of mutative transformation it offers. We only need the obstetrics of a historical and anthropological method to bring these patterns to the surface.

While this may go some way to convince the reader of the presence of a coded yet partially discernable past in *Likota*, the possibilities of making history out of this pattern remain limited.

First the problem of periodization. We clearly perceive a number of layers: the pre-statal layer, the rise of *Wene* in the hands of women, the rise of states led by men, the consolidation of such states; and we have detected the transitions between these layers, in the way of gender-articulated transformations in the narrative material. But we cannot simply assign a date to each of these layers! All the common chronological distortions that have been noted for other oral traditions are also found in *Likota lya Bankoya*. It is impossible to draw a sharp boundary between mythical and historical time. As regards genealogical positions, the well-known telescoping effect occurs, and in the Nkoya case it is enhanced by the institution of name inheritance between generations. When we count the generations between the first female *Mwene* Libupe, and her twentieth-century successors, the limited number of intervening generations would suggest her reign to have been in the eighteenth

century. However, this appears to be a far too recent date in the light of archaeological evidence and of tentative periodizations of state formation in nearby parts of South Central Africa (cf. Derricourt & Papstein 1976; Miller 1972, 1976; Papstein 1978). The fact that certain Lozi rulers feature in Nkoya traditions as from the mythical times of Mwanambinji, and that 'Mbwela' elements (certain dynastic titles, and toponyms) from Lunda, Luvale, Kaonde and Ila traditions could be matched with those of the Nkoya, offers limited cross-references which might lead on to a relative periodization; but the chronology of these adjacent areas is not very definite either. Documentary sources only become available as from the late eighteenth century, and they only grow abundant as from Livingstone; archaeological information is still very limited; and the professional linguistic analysis that will enable us to define the place of the Nkoya amidst the people of Western Zambia still has to be undertaken. Moreover, these three possible ways (documents, archaeology and linguistics) to submit the oral traditions to an external test remain far too general to verify and periodicize the specific changes in the political, kinship and ideological domain such as I believed could be traced in *Likota lya Bankoya*.

Then, what is myth and what is history? It remains extremely difficult to assess the correct admixture. The surface pattern, with its very detailed story of the transition from female-headed clans to male-headed states, is situated somewhere between two extremes: on the one hand the suggestion of a historical period (roughly the nineteenth century), with descriptions, in *Likota*, of amazingly real people whose historical gender relations and the gradual shift therein may not have differed too much from what *Likota* tells us about them; and on the other hand a mythical period, in which gender relations are defined against some absolute baseline ('in the beginning, all leaders were women'), and for which we have neither a date, nor a clear insight in the historical implications of what the book is telling us. Suppose *Mwene* Libupe—claimed to have been the first *Mwene*, and to have been female—and her immediate successors were actually, historically, women, why should that have been the case? How can we accept that in that early age (preceding the economic, political, ideological and kinship changes in gender relations we are now beginning to reconstruct for the subsequent periods) gender relations had already crystallized to such an extent as to lead to a rigid gender definition of ecologico-ritual leadership—reserving the latter entirely to women? The problem is far from limited to the Nkoya: for the basic story of Ruwej and Chibinda Ilunga, and thus the theme of male usurpation of female leadership, is found in many parts of South Central Africa.

Is this not a reason to close the subject of early female leadership, and attempt a totally different explanation of the relevant accounts in *Likota*? The institution of perpetual kinship allows us to interpret the

early female *Myene* simply as the one, symbolically female, half of a pair that has been distorted in the process of tradition: the 'female', relatively autochthonous Mbwela element which (did not, as some other Mbwela, pursue the option of partial local assimilation to the Lunda and Luvale immigrants but) moved away to Kaoma district, while the 'male', invading, dominant element remained on the Upper Zambezi in the form of dynastic titles among the contemporary Lunda and Luvale.

This surely is an attractive way of looking at the complex evidence. It would help to explain (in terms of both a traumatic repression from memory, and geographical displacement over hundreds of kilometers) why the Lunda and Luvale, who¹⁷ played such a dramatic role in Mbwela-Nkoya history, yet are virtually absent in *Likota*. It would clear up the puzzling role of the Humbu: *Likota* claims them to have been the main Musumban antagonists of the early *Myene*, yet among the ethnic subgroups on the Upper Zambezi today the Humbu have the strongest Mbwela-Nkoya connotations of all. Perhaps the *Bakwetunga* (royal escorts), providing the only, slight suggestion of perpetual kinship in the whole of *Likota*,¹⁸ in fact form the missing links between the Nkoya flying to the south-east and the invading Lunda and Luvale. Perhaps Nkoya traditions from Kaoma district must present the earliest *Myene* as women, because these leaders were politico-structurally the 'female' components in chains of perpetual kinship where the 'male' part was occupied by rulers in the Musumban system; perhaps the Nkoya *Myene* could only become 'male' after they had, through out-migration, asserted or regained their independence vis-à-vis that system. If this reasoning is historically sound, one would expect the incorporated Mbwela elements which have remained on the Upper Zambezi to still have gender-articulated ties of perpetual kinship (as 'wives') with Lunda and Luvale dynastic titles. It is then certainly not from association with the latter at the Upper Zambezi that the incidental, and invariably vague Nkoya references (not just in *Likota*) to Mwaat Yaamv originate; they either refer to a pre-Upper Zambezi phase in Mbwela history; or (after the notion of Nkoya/Musumba antagonism has gone lost to contemporary Nkoya informants) they merely form a twentieth-century concession to the immense prestige the Mwaat Yaamv title has in much of Zambia.

The elegance of the perpetual kinship argument would be that it allows us a way around the tantalizing questions that the structuralist analysis of the data in *Likota* raises: for it would simply mean that the Nkoya *Myene* at no point in their history have been biological women. With this argument, the rejection of and separation from the Lunda

17. According to traditional accounts hailing from those ethnic groups; cf. PAPSTEIN 1978; SCHECTER 1980a; WHITE 1949, 1962.

18. Their recruitment from generation to generation is described, in *Likota*, in ways suggesting that the office of royal escort forms part of an enduring political structure of clans and factions.

heritage becomes even more emphasized, and we have found additional reasons to understand why—much to their later detriment—the main features of Lunda political organization (positional succession and perpetual kinship) are virtually absent in Nkoya states. The argument would perhaps also take care of those *Myene* who, long after the departure from the Upper Zambezi, are still represented as female: Shikanda, Shakalongo. Were these also politico-structurally female (but biologically male), in a set of perpetual kinship comprising, on the male side, the Mutondo title (for Shikanda's case) and the Kahare title (for Shakalongo's)?

Occam's razor, however, would suffer several major dents. Just as one never encounters only one totem but totems can only function as group symbols in a structure of several mutually opposed groups (cf. Lévi-Strauss 1962), gender projection in the case of perpetual kinship is only meaningful if there is a clear dichotomy between male and female titles—and that not just between one historical period and the next, but within one historical period. When any one historical period has only women to show, as is the case in the early history of *Wene* among the Nkoya, a symbolic explanation in terms of perpetual kinship does not take us very far. Also, the argument in terms of disrupted perpetual kinship entirely fails to explain why, in passages referring to the periods *after* the departure from the Upper Zambezi, the female element in *Wene* continues to be stressed to the extent it is in *Likota*. And why this tallies with the ethnographic and historical evidence on nineteenth-century female political leadership elsewhere in the region.

For the time being, I would consider the politico-structural explanation of the female dimension of Nkoya states as an interesting idea, with some heuristic potential for future reinterpretations of Upper Zambezi history, for which probably new data will have to be collected. Once formulated, however, it does no longer allow us to take *Likota* literally on the point of women as early *Myene*. At the baseline of Nkoya history, we now have a case both for and against female leadership, and so far the competition is undecided. But this does not seem to invalidate the symbolic argument I have put forward, as long as we limit its scope to the reconstruction of more recent changes in gender relations: the last few centuries prior to the imposition of the colonial state. *For that recent past*, the transformations listed in Table III—against the background of contemporary Nkoya ethnography and comparative evidence throughout the region—appear to me to constitute convincing evidence. This would mean that *Likota's* narrative, from female-headed clans to male-headed states, would cease to be just a myth, and may become a form of history as we know it, for the more recent past.

The processes we are trying to reconstruct here are hard to locate not only in time but also in space, and according to socio-cultural group. It is clear that the first, more clearly mythical phases of *Likota's* argument

refer not to the present-day Nkoya homeland in and around Kaoma district, but to economic and political structures prevailing centuries ago at the Upper Zambezi or perhaps still further afield: north of the Zambezi-Kongo watershed. It is equally clear that these reconstructions do not really deal with 'the Nkoya' but with the 'Mbwela/proto-Nkoya'. Of course 'Nkoya' is a political identity which only articulated itself in the middle of the nineteenth century, as the name of the leaders and subjects involved in the state structure centring on the *lukena* (royal court) of *Mwene* Mutondo; and it is only in the second half of the twentieth century that 'Nkoya' became an ethnic label of a much wider scope. The use, in *Likota*, of mythical material (such as the ladder into heaven, and the menstruating female ruler being deprived of her regalia) that has a wide distribution all over South Central Africa, suggests that here layers are touched which may be older than the later ethnic articulation of social groups such as found today in the subcontinent. One wonders to what extent a deep, millennia-old layer of common Bantu symbolic heritage '*à la De Heusch*' could be involved here—or are we just dealing with coded references to the much more recent shared past of a Southern Zaire half a millennium ago?

Although many questions remain, it is my contention that 'ethno-history', in this case, has survived remarkably well the confrontation with academic canons of historiography. I believe that the *Likota* text does allow us to perceive the process of state formation in Western Zambia during the second half of the present millennium as entailing, *inter alia*, specific changes in gender relations—and that, at least for the nineteenth century, we can pinpoint those changes, not of course by taking oral traditions like those of *Likota lya Bankoya* at face value, but by processing them methodically to a point where they surrender their rich surface content and underlying deep structure.

While my argument may have been 'elegant' (it would have been more so if the various types of transformations had been subjected to further theorizing), and while it does seek to derive inspiration from De Heusch's work, it also employs forms of refutation and 'proof' not uncommon in the evolving methodology of oral history. Meanwhile, the real proof of the pudding is in the eating, and I shall conclude by demonstrating how the tentative insights gained in the history of gender relations in central Western Zambia on their turn illuminate a different set of data: those on twentieth-century cults of affliction.

Beyond « Religious Change in Zambia »: The Religious Transformation of Women's Political Power

A-moral, non-communal cults of affliction, such as Bituma, Mowa and Bindele, constitute a religious complex which is conspicuously absent

from *Likota lya Bankoya*, yet can be said to dominate as a religious expression among the Nkoya today, and particularly among Nkoya women. In *Religious Change in Zambia* (1981), I presented descriptions of these cults both in their rural and their urban forms, traced their recent history, and argued that these cults expressed the process through which, in the social formation of Western Zambia, the domestic mode of production became articulated to a tributary mode hinging on exploiting chief's courts, and to the capitalist mode of production locally penetrating in the form of peripheral mercantilism, in the hands of Umbundu and Swahili traders. I went at great length to argue that this class of cults should not be seen as the expression of any one of the modes of production involved, but (on a more abstract level) as an expression of the articulation process itself. Not only was this supposed to explain the rise of such cults in the first place, but also their continued dominance: largely in the hands of women (as both cult leaders and adepts), and straddling both rural and urban sections of contemporary Nkoya life, these cults were claimed to constitute a major instrument to transfer men's earnings in the modern capitalist sector, to women who are largely debarred from participation in the capitalist mode of production.

While the analytical power of such an interpretation is discussed in *Religious Change in Zambia*, the argument was far from conclusive—nor did it pretend to be so. Despite the lengthy theoretical sections of the book (particularly in ch. 1, 7 and 8) a considerable part of my then emerging theory of 'layered' structure (with each layer corresponding with a mode of production) and transformation, linking ideological and material processes, confrontations and struggles, remained implicit.¹⁹ Taking the domestic mode of production as my base line, the interrelation between the tributary and the capitalist mode of production, emerging at about the same time, remained admittedly vague. I could not account for the female preponderance in these cults:²⁰ was there anything in the articulation process that particularly affected the relations between the sexes? And although I had long been puzzled by the symbolic and formal correspondence between those cults (such as Bituma) and royal institutions in Western Zambia, the articulation perspective did not seem to offer explanations here:

'There are some interesting parallels between chiefs and healers which however are too imperfectly documented to be discussed in greater detail. Various musical instruments (the *njimba* xylophone and the *mukupele* hourglass drum), and other paraphernalia (like the *hefu* eland-tail fly-switch and the *mpande* conus-shell disc) were associated with the new dynasties coming from the north and establishing Lunda-style chieftainship. Possession of these items was prohibited among

19. Meanwhile, see VAN BINSBERGEN 1984; VAN BINSBERGEN & GESCHIERE 1985: 270-278. But much more work is needed on this point.

20. I am indebted to my colleagues R. Buijtenhuijs and J. M. Schoffeleers for stressing this point in various discussions we had on the subject.

commoners, yet these items were appropriated by cult leaders [...], without the chiefs taking offence. Likewise, the formal respect paid to chiefs (*ku bombela*) is similar to the attitudes towards the cult leaders during sessions [...]. This seems to corroborate the association between the cults and the linking of the domestic and the tributary mode of production, although there remains room for other explanations, such as: competition between chiefs and cult leaders, in which it was not a matter of the healers' appropriating [the chiefs' symbols of ritual authority, but of the chiefs appropriating the]²¹ healers' symbols of ritual authority. Such competition, as I have attempted to demonstrate elsewhere [...] is a recurrent theme in Central African religious history' (Van Binsbergen 1981: 363, n. 79).

My argument was much too general, and paid far too little systematic attention to the inherent qualities of symbolic structures so as to allow me to pinpoint the transformational rules which, on the basis of the organizational and symbolic material present in that society at an earlier stage, would, as a consequence of such articulation, result in the specific new organizational and symbolic forms that made up the new cults of affliction. The context may have been sketched, but the motor, the mechanism, the underlying system remained somewhat vague—and the results of the transformational processes therefore appeared as much more accidental than in fact they were. After all, my approach to the process may have been somehow too mechanical, too little historical (as Ranger already pointed out in 1979). I lacked the data to interpret the process of religious change leading to these new cults in terms of a struggle between interests both symbolic and material; with regard to other topics in Zambian religious history (particularly the emergence of royal cults, and the rise of such twentieth-century prophets as Mupumani and Lenshina) data were more abundant, and the protagonists in the struggle, as well as their ideological, political and economic positions more easily identified. Theoretically I knew, of course, that articulation of modes of production must have amounted to class formation and class struggle; but with regard to the rise of the new cults of affliction all I came up with was a rather idealistic, '*verstehende*' notion of new entrepreneurs in a mercantilist context trying to formulate or to adopt a new ideology that would exonerate them from the connotations of sorcery and illicit appropriation that their activities would otherwise have in the dominant, domestic ideology of redistribution and reciprocity. Such an interpretation was essentially a projection, back into the past, of rather extensive ethnographic and historical evidence I had on returning labour migrants in the colonial era. They expressed a similar predicament (the clash between the ideology of an industrial capitalism in which they had participated as adults, and a domestic mode of production in which they had been reared) in terms of sorcery eradication movements—with its moral and communal overtones a very different religious idiom than the

21. The text between brackets corrects a printing error in the original.

new cults of affliction. Even if my idealistic interpretation of the latter's emergence still sounds somehow convincing, it could only be one side of the story. For what ideological pressures were at work on the other side: that of the non-entrepreneurs, the non-participants in the new modes of production which have invaded the domestic community from perhaps the eighteenth century? And what actual flow of goods and services, what actual processes of appropriation, attended the ensuing ideological struggles between entrepreneurs and others? There are some indications, both in oral and in written sources relating to the nineteenth century, of what did go on, e.g. accounts of the caravan trade, of production at chief's *lukena* being largely realized by slaves, and of how elders trapped youth (their children and grandchildren, but particularly their sister's sons) into a pawnship that rapidly deteriorated into commercial slavery. But these data did not throw much light on the position of women, and how alterations therein might have called forth the specific ideological response of the new cults of affliction.

Although most of the theoretical loose ends remain, and while I shrink from spelling out, and mapping out, the specific symbolic transformations involved,²² my argument in the present paper is a step forward as far as the interpretation of the specific historical and ethnographic evidence is concerned. It sets the context of the political, economic, kinship-structural and ideological discrediting of women in central Western Zambia. While we cannot claim exclusive female political leadership for the early periods of Nkoya state formation, our transformational analysis (and the way it has vindicated the ethno-historical account) allows us to conclude that in the course of the nineteenth century women further declined in status and were more and more debarred from political high office, ultimately even entirely so. When then, in the twentieth century, we see female cults featuring regalia and royal symbolism in general, the following conclusion presents itself: *under the rise of male dominance, the political idiom of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has been transformed into a religious idiom of the twentieth century.* The losers strike back in a new way: 'from queens to cult leaders'.²³ The struggle and the politics of the process are clear. This would mean that the new cults are not so much in themselves abstract expressions of articulation; their adepts were primarily not people engaging in relations of production beyond the domestic community, but women who fought back as their men (as traders, rulers, etc.) were engaging in such tributary and especially mercantile-capitalist relations of production. Already in the nineteenth century the women had definitely lost this struggle on the material and

22. This remains to be done particularly for all oppositions that do not have conspicuous transformations within the body of *Likota Iya Bankoya*: we should assess whether perhaps they have transformations in 19th-20th century female cults.

23. For striking East African parallels, cf. BERGER 1981; ALPERS 1984.

political plane.²⁴ Now, through the new cults, the women were soon to regain some of their terrain. Little wonder that these cults came to provide a lever to bring the spoils of men's operation in a wider capitalist sphere within women's reach. Meanwhile, with the increasing incapsulation of the (male) remnants of *Wene* on the political plane as dominated by the modern state (Van Binsbergen 1986a, 1987b), one can only wonder what potential at political renewal remains stored in these cults, in the hands of women.

*

With all the faults that Vansina—on the basis of a sound academic conception of history—has exposed so convincingly and appropriately, De Heusch's work has continued to inspire²⁵ historians and anthropologists working on oral-historical materials from Central and South Central Africa.²⁶ This inspiration does not spring from De Heusch's handling of history itself, but from the fact that he claims access to an essentially static, a-historical base line—an 'archaeology of Bantu thought' which seeks to break through in all sorts of transformations and permutations over vast geographical areas and historical periods.

On the one hand the historian is challenged to *refute* De Heusch's a-historical assumptions as to the unadulterated continuity of primordial symbolic and cosmological arrangements; in this way, De Heusch's archaeology of *fossilized African thought* can become a *history of ideas and ideologies—something scholarship has hitherto not dared to expect from oral history.*

On the other hand De Heusch has managed to sensitize us for underlying symbolic oppositions and transformations in the oral-historical materials we are handling, thus opening up fields of reconstruction and historical criticism that may otherwise have remained closed. A structuralist inspiration offers combs with ever more delicate teeth with which to work upon the deeper symbolic implications, contradictions and

24. Although an extensive discussion of what could be gleaned from *Likota* with regard to the ideological processes involved makes it very clear that the men never effectively captured the ideology; cf. VAN BINSBERGEN 1986b, 1988.

25. If only as a persuasive *literary* genre, beyond the canons of empirical scholarship; cf. VANSINA 1983: 329 sq.

26. Recent attempts to salvage, with the aid of a complex and explicit methodology, what little remnants of history the traditions might yet contain, while acknowledging the amount of a-historical cosmological projections therein, include MILLER 1980; SCHOFFELEERS 1985. Much of recent precolonial historiography of Zambia and neighbouring areas can be seen to struggle with this problem: e.g. HOOVER 1980; PAPSTEIN 1978, 1980, 1985; PRINS 1978, 1979, 1980; REEFE 1981; ROBERTS 1973; SCHECTER 1980a, 1980b. In my own work, similar attempts to thresh history out of data which initially would appear to be a-historical or synchronic reflections of structure, and to confront the methodological problems inherent to such a task, include VAN BINSBERGEN 1981, 1985b (cf. VANSINA 1985: 103 sq., 122; VAN BINSBERGEN & SCHOFFELEERS 1985).

transformations inherent in these materials. This is particularly useful when we seek to penetrate the peculiar modes of historical practice (cf. Sahlins 1983), different from academic canons of historiography, and (especially in the case of purposeful creation of a neo-traditional corpus, such as *Likota*) far from entirely conterminous with the narrator's contemporary culture. Thus we may begin to fulfil what Sahlins (*ibid.*: 534) sees as an urgent task: '... to explode the concept of history by the anthropological experience of culture'.

For both reasons the history we may end up with, even if not at all in line with De Heusch's approaches and conclusions, owes a considerable debt to him, through a fascinating academic dialectic not dissimilar to the very processes of intellectual production we seek to unravel ourselves as oral historians.

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NOTES ET DOCUMENTS

Roland Marchal

(635)
222.27
325.284Production sociale
et recomposition politique
dans l'exil : le cas érythréen

Déplacements de population et migrations forcées sont des phénomènes inhérents aux guerres civiles ou aux conflits entre États. Ils ne sont donc pas propres à notre époque. Néanmoins, depuis la fin de la Seconde Guerre mondiale, avec les affrontements de toute nature (guerres de libération nationale, guerres civiles, décomposition des États, rivalités Est-Ouest), ces phénomènes ont pris des proportions telles que la communauté internationale a dû tenter, sinon d'en éliminer les causes, du moins d'en gérer les conséquences. Ainsi, par exemple, a été défini au niveau du droit international un statut du réfugié. Pour mieux coller aux réalités concrètes, certaines organisations régionales ont quelquefois adapté en l'élargissant, ce statut¹. Ainsi a-t-on créé divers organismes chargés de résoudre au jour le jour les problèmes les plus criants, notamment le Haut Commissariat des Nations unies pour les réfugiés (HCR) en 1951.

En 1985, le rapport mondial du HCR estimait le nombre de réfugiés et de personnes déplacées à plus de 10 millions : 3 millions en Afrique, 1,9 million au Moyen-Orient, 3,8 millions en Asie, 1,8 en Europe et 362 000 en Amérique Latine². Ces chiffres sont souvent revus à la hausse par d'autres organismes. Près de la moitié des réfugiés se trouvent en Afrique, avec la plus forte concentration au nord-est,

1. Les deux textes fondamentaux sont la convention de 1951 et le protocole de Bellagio de 1967. Ces deux textes ont été paraphés par quatre-vingt-sept États. Deux n'ont signé que le texte de 1951, et le Swaziland et les États-Unis que le protocole. Ces deux textes fournissent la définition du réfugié : « toute personne qui, craignant avec raison d'être persécutée du fait de sa race, de sa religion, de sa nationalité, de son appartenance à un groupe social donné, ou de ses opinions politiques, se trouve hors du pays dont elle a la nationalité et qui ne peut ou, en raison de cette crainte, ne veut réclamer la protection de ce pays ; ou qui, si elle n'a pas de nationalité et se trouve hors du pays dans lequel elle avait sa résidence habituelle, ne peut ou, en raison de ladite crainte, ne veut y retourner ».

En 1969 l'Organisation de l'unité africaine (OUA) a élargi le statut : « toute personne qui, du fait d'une agression, d'une occupation extérieure, d'une domination étrangère ou d'événements troublant gravement l'ordre public dans une partie ou dans la totalité de son pays d'origine ou du pays dont elle a la nationalité, est obligée de quitter sa résidence habituelle pour chercher refuge ailleurs, à l'extérieur de son pays d'origine ou du pays dont elle a la nationalité ».

2. *Refugees* (revue du HCR), décembre 1985.