

## Chapter 6

# *Likota Iya Bankoya* as cosmology and as history: Aspects of Nkoya symbolism and its transformations

Can we make history out of *Likota Iya Bankoya*'s rich account of state formation and the attending transformation of gender relations? In attempting to do so, can we benefit from the structuralist inspiration yet preserve our historiographic sophistication? Or must we resign ourselves to the fact that the vision which Shimunika put before us, however attractive and revealing, could never be anchored in such reality as academic historiographers could take seriously?

Without answering these questions, the preceding two chapters would be nothing but speculation. This final chapter seeks to formulate a method by which an answer might be given.

### 6.1. Theoretical and methodological orientation

Some years ago, Luc de Heusch's *Rois nés d'un coeur de vache* (1982) stimulated Jan Vansina to a masterly critique (1983),<sup>431</sup> which while concentrating on de Heusch's approach at the same time provided an

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<sup>431</sup> Cf. de Heusch's angry — but in its lack of specificity little convincing — rejoinder (1986), which essentially restates his well-known earlier position.

impressive theoretical and methodological statement on African history and structuralism. In Vansina's words:

'All history as reconstruction of the past is of course mythical.<sup>432</sup> Myths are held to be "true." De Heusch is to be faulted for not using *all*<sup>433</sup> 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.*<sup>434</sup> 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.' (Vansina 1983: 342)

In this arduous undertaking, Vansina sees no role whatsoever for de Heusch's brand of structuralism:

'...there never can be a successful structuralist approach to historical reconstruction.' (Vansina 1983: 343)

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 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 latter-day transmitters of that content (informants and narrators) 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 as academic historians on the basis of both (1) and (2)?

*Likota Iya Bankoya* is a first extensive and more or less coherent statement of 'Nkoya' history, as a necessary element in the building of

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<sup>432</sup> Original footnote deleted.

<sup>433</sup> Emphasis original.

<sup>434</sup> Emphasis added.

a 'Nkoya' ethnic consciousness in recent decades. Shimunika's discourse 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.

We have seen how on the basis of the text a coherent account can be constructed of these alleged developments, in unexpected detail. A superficial inspection of the symbolic structures as found in the book suggests at first that this somewhat hidden message on state formation and the transformation of gender relations has all the characteristics of a myth. It could almost serve as a textbook example of the theses developed by Engels in *The origin of the family, private property and the state* (1976, originally published 1884), yet does not 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 can we disentangle the mythical elements involved on the three levels as distinguished above, those 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*<sup>435</sup> of the gender opposition:

'wet/dry = female/male',

etc. On this level statements on gender relations can only be considered as a-historical restatements of cosmology, and not as reflections of

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<sup>435</sup> Cf. de Mahieu 1985; van Binsbergen & Schoffeleers 1985b; and references cited there.

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 transformation can be detected in the text of *Likota lya Bankoya*, 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 lya Bankoya* text, from contemporary Nkoya cultural practice;
- (b) inconsistencies, in the *Likota lya Bankoya* 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 which obviously escapes conscious intentions and perceptions of Shimunika, with which chapter 3 has made us familiar. 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)

**paired opposition**

**domain**<sup>436</sup>

ascription	achievement	c/p/s
bird	game animal	c/e
container (gourd, basket, pot)	weapon	c/e/p/s
cosmological legitimization	power politics	c/p
drum (female)	drum (male)	p
fish, fishing	<i>ncima</i>	c/e
female puberty rites <sup>437</sup>	male puberty rites	c/p/s
life	death	c
lizard	python	c
menstruation	blood from wounds	c/p/s
moon	mpande	c/p
mother	son	s
<i>Mwene</i>	<i>Mukwetunga</i>	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>ncima</i>	e
<i>wulozi</i> (sorcery)	<i>malele</i> (magic)	c/p/s

Table 2. Main symbolic oppositions in *Likota Iya Bankoya*

kinship), but the effects of actual historical processes, they would be examples of homeostasis<sup>438</sup> 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 century as discussed above,<sup>439</sup> these mutative transformations, more than anything else, indicate that the hidden message in *Likota Iya 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 of state formation in central western Zambia, relegating women to inferiority in the political, ritual, economic and kinship domains.

<sup>436</sup> Key: c = cosmology; e = economy; p = politics; s = social organization.

<sup>437</sup> Not explicitly mentioned in *Likota Iya Bankoya*.

<sup>438</sup> Cf. Vansina 1985: 120f, which also entails Vansina's assessment of my earlier attempts at historical myth interpretation in a totally different setting, that of North African popular Islam (van Binsbergen 1985b).

<sup>439</sup> Cf. 5.3: 'Lady Myene of a later period'.

Having extracted the central historical message of *Likota Iya Bankoya*, I shall apply the insights thus gained in the final section of this chapter 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, a decade ago, I wrote *Religious change in Zambia* (van Binsbergen 1981a).

## **6.2. Identifying *Likota Iya Bankoya* '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 pairs of oppositions as in *table 2*.

All pairs of oppositions as stated in *table 2* can be backed by such literal quotations from the text of *Likota Iya Bankoya* as have supported my argument so far.

As indicated in the right-hand column of *table 2*, these oppositions can be classified as belonging to four partly overlapping domains of symbolic reference: cosmology, economy, politics and social organization. In *table 3*, 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 3* goes beyond that in *table 2* 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 Iya Bankoya*; no doubt a much more penetrating semantic analysis could be made on this point, but for our present argument *table 3* will suffice. Even in its present form the cosmological entries in *table 3*, 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, historical and mythical data recorded anywhere in the subcontinent.

Table 3. Symbolic oppositions in *Likota Iya Bankoya*, organized into four symbolic domains, and arranged thematically

§ = opposition not harmonious with gender opposition

<b>1. cosmological oppositions</b>			
(natural phenomena:)		cosmological	power politics
sky	earth	legitimation	
moon	<i>mpande</i>	ascription	achievement
rain	fire	vertical	horizontal
rain	drought	(below/above	(surface of the
water	fire	the earth)	earth)
(natural species:)		cold	hot
bird	game animal	wet	dry
§fish, fishing	<i>ncima</i>	container	weapon
§wild fruits	<i>ncima</i>	order	disruption
lizard	python	peace	violence
(pollution, evil and purification:)		life	death
menstruation	blood from wounds	natural death	violent death
female rites	male rites	openness, and	marked definition
§ <i>wulozi</i>	<i>malele</i>	action involving	in space, and swift
(abstractions and generalities, partly made explicit by analyst:)		smooth contact	pointed action (snap-
non-human	human culture	over extensive	ping, breaking, cutting,
Nature		surface (pour,	stabbing, spearing;
supernatural	human life	pour, fill,	cf. penis)
		hold; cf. vulva)	
<b>2. economic oppositions</b>			
(implements:)		(products:)	
container	weapon	§fish, fishing	<i>ncima</i>
(environmental conditions:)		§wild fruits	<i>ncima</i>
rain	fire (cf. bushfires)	(social processes:)	
rain	drought (cf. begin planting season)	redistribution	monopoly, hoarding
<b>3. political oppositions</b>			
(status, power base:)		(social processes:)	
<i>Mwene</i>	<i>Mukwetunga</i>	natural death	violent death
cosmological	power politics	order	disruption
legitimation		peace	violence
ascription	achievement	redistribution	monopoly, hoarding
female rites	male rites	§ <i>wulozi</i>	<i>malele</i>
(insignia etc.):			
container	weapon		
menstruation	blood from wounds		
drum (female)	drum (male)		
moon	<i>mpande</i>		

#### **4. social oppositions**

(demarcation of principal social categories:)		(status, the social process, the handling of conflicts:)	
female rites	male rites	<i>Mwene</i>	<i>Mukwetunga</i>
menstruation	blood from wounds	ascription	achievement
(kin categories:)		redistribution	monopoly, hoarding
mother	son	peace	violence
sister	brother	container	weapon
sister	sister's son	order	disruption
		natural death	violent death
		<i>šwulozi</i>	<i>malele</i>

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### 6.3. Identifying transformations in *Likota Iya Bankoya*

The second new feature of table 3 is crucial to our present argument on the evolution of gender relations in the context of state formation. It turns out that, in all four domains, nearly all specific pairs of opposition are used, in *Likota Iya Bankoya*, to highlight another fundamental opposition: gender. *The male/female opposition is the central axis on which the symbolic universe of the book hinges*, no matter whether we look at symbolical representations of the cosmological domain, the economy, politics or social organization.<sup>440</sup>

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<sup>440</sup> This does not mean that, under the hegemony of the gender opposition, the Nkoya symbolic system as mediated through *Likota Iya Bankoya* is anything near consistent. E.g. the species in table 2 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 the same could not be said for the reptiles involved, lizards (although appearing in the female column) favouring a drier environment than pythons. No doubt, further research could bring up plausible missing links in the symbolic argument, but these ought to be treated with great caution: as Vansina rightly observes (1983: 310f; cf. van Binsbergen & Schoffeleers 1985b) the extreme flexibility and absence of methodological rigour in this sort of structural analysis creates an ideal setting for interpretational artifacts.

*from contemporary Nkoya culture to Likota Iya Bankoya: examples of transformations*

The evidence is so overwhelming that it was easy to indicate in table 3, by a ‘§’ sign, those few entries that appear to form exceptions:

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

In *Likota Iya 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 Iya 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 Iya Bankoya* suggests that women (contrary to Shimunika’s portrayal of Lady Mwene Likambi Mange, the Wizardess), are more closely associated with sorcery than men.

A similar argument holds for the two entries which have to do with the extracting of food stuffs from the natural environment, and their processing. In *Likota Iya Bankoya*, female *Wene* is said to precede the time of *ncima* (meal porridge), whereas male *Myene* are credited with the introduction of food crops, the basis for *ncima*. Thus the book presents the ‘wild fruits/*ncima*’ opposition as harmonious with a gender opposition, but this does not reflect current cultural practice. In Nkoya society today, *ncima* 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 *ncima*. Also, the collection of wild forest products that may have preceded *ncima* as a staple and that is still reverted to in famine periods, is exclusively in the hands of women.<sup>441</sup> Other, gender-indifferent symbolic oppositions (e.g. ‘nature/culture’, ‘forest/village’) seem to underlie the opposition ‘wild fruits/*ncima*’; its presentation, in *Likota Iya Bankoya*, as gender-related again appears to constitute a transformation.

A similar opposition is posited, in the book, between fish and *ncima*. As one of the three standard relishes to accompany a dish of *ncima* (the

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<sup>441</sup> However, the nineteenth-century male slaves, who were engaged in the cultivation of food crops at the *zinkena*, are said to have had to feed themselves with these wild tubers etc.: the consumption of their master’s crops was allegedly denied to them; oral source [22].

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 around 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 clear-cut 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,<sup>442</sup> sexual activity, etc.) occur across that boundary.

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 1981a) I have interpreted 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 chapter.

Incidentally, the symbolism of liminality affects also the other oppositions as discussed. 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 Cooking-Pot of Kingship' was seething) 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 Nkoya 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 enhancing both their male partner's pleasure and his difficulty at penetration. Against this background, dryness is no longer an unequivocally male attribute, but — precisely in the anatomical locus where male and female meet most emphatically — a liminal symbol of boundary transgression between the genders. A further example from *Likota Iya Bankoya* is a *Mwene's* building a long ladder to pick the moon from the sky (both moon and sky having female connotations) — as a royal ornament for his child Kapeshi; the undertaking (a male

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<sup>442</sup> The anthropological concept of life crisis ritual applies to rituals which mark a person's dramatic change of status as associated with biological development, e.g. birth, puberty, death.

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.

*equivalent transformations leading to a self-validating timeless structure*

In principle, transformations performed upon current Nkoya cultural practice and leading to the world-view offered in *Likota Iya Bankoya*, are not in themselves incompatible with the contention 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 the economy to social organization. As such a statement, *Likota Iya Bankoya* 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 implications and symbolism (for instance, those hinging on gender) 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, at this level (that of equivalent transformations under the hegemony of gender symbolism) *Likota Iya Bankoya* would seem to be a circular and self-validating statement of a timeless and unchanging culture and symbolism, having nothing to do 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 3 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 lya Bankoya* is.

*looking for mutative transformations*

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.<sup>443</sup> Such contradictions we may then take to be 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/*ncima*’, ‘wild fruits/*ncima*’ and ‘*wulozi/malele*.’

On closer analysis the text of *Likota lya 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 in the process of state formation. Reiterating, once again, the pairs of oppositions that we have considered in tables 2 and 3, the essential data are presented in the right-hand column of *table 4* on the next few pages.

Table 4. Symbolic transformations in *Likota lya Bankoya*

paired opposition		transformation of this opposition in the context of <i>Likota lya Bankoya</i>
female pole	male pole	
ascription	achievement	early male <i>Myene</i> legitimate their position by reference to female predecessors, but later male <i>Myene</i> are de facto legitimated by association with outside powers: Lozi king, colonial state, mission
bird	game animal	no conspicuous transformation in <i>Likota lya Bankoya</i> ; however, see fish, fishing/ <i>ncima</i>
cold	hot	see: rain/fire

<sup>443</sup> 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 1981a; van Binsbergen & Geschiere 1985b: 270-278).

## *Tears of Rain: Likota Iya Bankoya as cosmology and as history*

container	weapon	no conspicuous transformation in <i>Likota Iya Bankoya</i>
cosmological legitimation	power politics	see: ascription/achievement
drum (female)	drum (male)	the story of the impeachment of the female Mwene 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>ncima</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
female rites	male rites	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 Iya Bankoya's</i> 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 Iya Bankoya</i>
menstruation	blood from wounds	no conspicuous transformation in <i>Likota Iya Bankoya</i> <sup>444</sup>
moon	<i>mpande</i>	the female Mwene 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>Likota Iya Bankoya</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>Likota Iya Bankoya</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

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<sup>444</sup> In fact, this opposition is emphatically reinforced in the narrative material of *Likota 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 *Likota Iya Bankoya*, 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 is no longer the women's ally it (She?) was in mythical times...

Wim van Binsbergen

rain	fire	no conspicuous transformation in <i>Likota Iya Bankoya</i> <sup>445</sup>
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>Likota Iya Bankoya</i> this incestuous transformation only appears in the most oblique form: Lady Mwene 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	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 <sup>446</sup>

445 In fact, the opposition is strongly reinforced in *Likota Iya Bankoya*, 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 *Likota Iya Bankoya* 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 1910's 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 1981a: chs 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 *Likota Iya Bankoya* 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 the holder of the Nkumbula title in Njonjolo in the 1970s. 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.

446 Not a transformation, but an application of this opposition might be read in the male *Mwene* Shihoka's migration from the well-watered Maniinga 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

*Tears of Rain: Likota Iya Bankoya as cosmology and as history*

wild fruits	<i>ncima</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>malele</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

Thus, on second analysis, many symbolic pairs in *Likota Iya Bankoya*, that at first glance could be read as a timeless cosmological statement on the human condition, turn out to be involved in significant transformations, which all revolve around the change that institutions, organizational 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 Shimunika as the author or compiler 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 overwhelmingly clear now that the text of *Likota Iya Bankoya* is in no way a simple statement presenting, as projected into the past, Nkoya society and symbolism as they exist 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, geographically, linguistically, ethnically and economically) is a complex social formation composed of a number of mutually linked (articulated) modes of production, including not only a domestic mode centring on the rural household, but also the remnants of the *Wene*-centred tributary mode of production whose historical forms *Likota Iya Bankoya* helps us to unravel, and dominated from a distance, finally, by industrial capitalism as mediated by the modern state.<sup>447</sup> Modes of

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amount of evidence is there to show that these moves were far from mythical, not a cliché of oral tradition; they actually took place.

<sup>447</sup> Cf. van Binsbergen 1981a, 1985a; van Binsbergen & Geschiere 1985a, 1985b.



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 presentday 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 lya Bankoya* must itself be seen as the result of a highly selective mutative transformation performed by the Nkoya author and his informants — upon contemporary Nkoya society as they know it. And that applies *a fortiori* to the central theme of our argument: the emphasis on female *Myene* whereas today all *Myene* are male.

#### 6.4. From transformations to history

Having thus identified one main type of mutative transformation in *Likota lya Bankoya* (from twentieth-century cultural practice to the body of the text), the material in table 4 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 book's message 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 be writing history — the inconsistencies are, already at the folk level, implicitly if not explicitly explained as historical transformations: what sort of history would it be if everything would remain consistent and unchanging over time!

Neither does this complete our picture of various types of transformations. Diagram 10 may clarify the complexity of the situation in the case of *Likota lya Bankoya* — which, however, in no way appears to be atypical in the field of historical traditions and literate ethno-history. 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 dynastic groups among the contemporary Nkoya on the Upper Zambezi and further north, across the Zambezi/Congo watershed, sometime in the sixteenth and seventeenth century;
- (2) contemporary Nkoya society.

And somewhere between these planes hovers, of uncertain shape and historical location:

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

Both historical societies (1) and (2), as well as *Likota Iya Bankoya* (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 the book's narrative we have explored above. In diagram 10 they are rendered as D (the transformations performed on contemporary symbolic material, so that *Likota Iya Bankoya's* symbolic contents do not match presentday 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, 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 diagram 10.

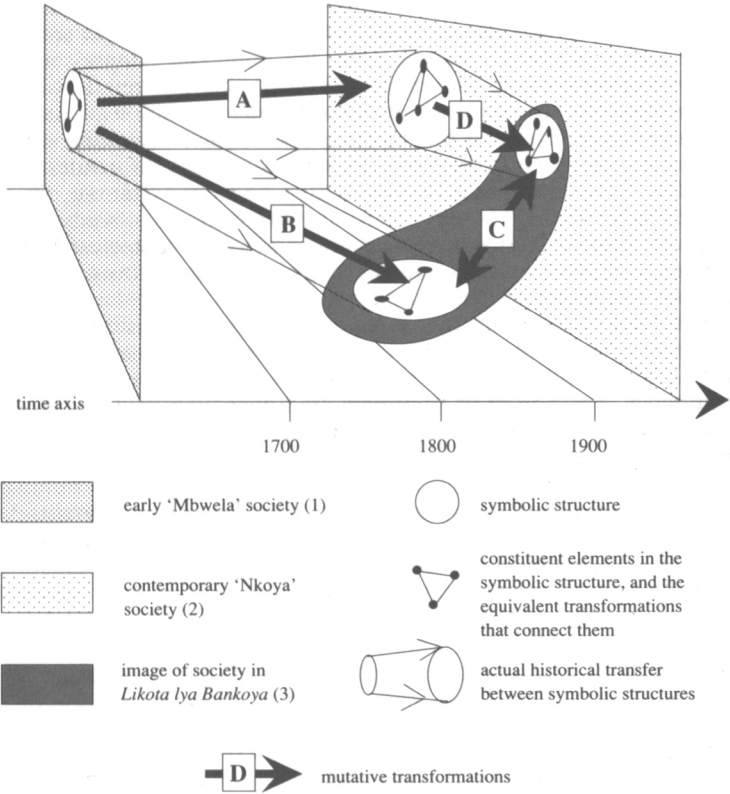


Diagram 10. Historical transfer of symbolic structures, and possible transformations, between early 'Mbwela' society, contemporary 'Nkoya' society, and the image of society in *Likota Iya Bankoya*

Finally, it is most likely that the symbolic system of *Likota Iya Bankoya* 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; let us also assume that this input has been subject to transformations (B).

With the aid of diagram 10 we can now reformulate the methodological difficulties of making history out of *Likota Iya Bankoya*, and of using it as a source for the historical evolution of state formation and 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 should interpret these dialectics primarily as the result of the confrontation between two sets of mutative transformations, D and B: the former a projection from the present, the latter 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; in fact, we have brought such sources (in the form of unprocessed oral-historical data) to bear upon *Likota Iya Bankoya* in the latter part of chapter 3 above. But I believe that even without recourse to such sources we have already come close to cracking *Likota Iya Bankoya*'s historical code. It is no accident that diagram 10 looks remarkably like a classic feedback set-up, and even more like an optics drawing. Just as 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, sub-microscopic phenomena), the emphatic contradiction (C) between a dominant and an underlying pattern of symbolism in *Likota Iya Bankoya* (3) offers 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) allows us to trace earlier forms of contemporary institutions and their gender aspect. In these mutative transformations the real historical message of the book is encoded — safe from conscious manipulation and personal biases of the Nkoya compiler and his informants, waiting to be deciphered. It is on this level that *Likota Iya Bankoya*, although compiled and written in a way rather 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.

*remaining problems: periodization, and the sifting of myth and history*

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

First the problem of periodization — the assigning of relative or absolute dates to such periods and to such phases in historical processes as we have distinguished on qualitative analytical grounds. We clearly perceive a number of layers: the pre-state 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, we have surveyed the various options and seen how they are facilitated 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.<sup>448</sup> The fact that certain Lozi rulers feature in Nkoya traditions as from the mythical times of Mwanambinyi, and that apparent 'Mbwela' elements (certain dynastic titles, and toponyms) from Lunda, Luvale, Kaonde and Ila traditions could be matched with those of the Nkoya — as we have seen above — 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 David Livingstone; archaeological information is still very limited; and the professional linguistic analysis that will enable us to define the place of the Nkoya-speaking people amidst the people of western and central Zambia, still has to be undertaken. Moreover, these three possible methods (documents, archaeology and linguistics) by means of which we can submit the oral traditions to an external test remain far too general to verify and periodicize the very 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 of amazingly real people whose historical gender relations and the gradual shift therein may not have differed too much from what the book tells us about them; and on the other hand a mythical period, in which gender relations are defined against some absolute base-line ('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

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<sup>448</sup> Cf. Derricourt & Papstein 1977; Miller 1972, 1976; Papstein 1978.

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.

*an alternative explanation: perpetual kinship on the Upper Zambezi?*

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 Iya Bankoya*? The institution of perpetual kinship allows us to interpret the early Lady *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 kilometres) why the Lunda and Luvale, who<sup>449</sup> played such a dramatic role in Mbwela/Nkoya history, yet are virtually absent in *Likota Iya Bankoya*. It would clear up the puzzling role of the Humbu: the book 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 (McCulloch 1951). Perhaps the *Bakwetunga*, providing a slight suggestion of perpetual kinship in *Likota Iya Bankoya*, 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 have no choice but to 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 that the incorporated Mbwela elements which have remained on the Upper Zambezi, still have gender-articulated ties of perpetual kinship (as ‘wives’) with Lunda and Luvale dynastic titles. It is then certainly not

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449 According to traditional accounts hailing from those ethnic groups; cf. Papstein 1978; Schechter 1980a; White 1949, 1962.

from association with the latter at the Upper Zambezi that the incidental, and invariably vague Nkoya references (not just in *Likota lya Bankoya*) 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 become 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 lya Bankoya* 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 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) have been 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)? The few alternative gender interpretations, in the oral sources, of Shikanda and Shakalongo as male, Mutondo and Kahare as female, would then no longer be apocryphal (as they are in the structuralist perspective pursued above), but on the contrary could be cited as cases in point for the 'perpetual kinship' hypothesis.

Occam's razor, however, would suffer several major dents. An explanation in terms of perpetual kinship may have the advantage of reducing the number of assumptions that the alternative explanation in terms of actual female leadership would require. However, how can one have perpetual kinship if only one component in this political relationship has been identified (notably, the Nkoya *Myene* with their female connotations), while the other component, presumably male and of Lunda/Humbu/Luvale affiliation, has consistently remained obscure or absent? In a socio-political argument on structural opposition both components have to feature explicitly and side by side. Just as one never encounters only one totem as a symbol of just one group, but totems can only function as mutually opposed 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 identified political elements systematically corresponding with male and female connotations — and that not just between one historical period and the next, but also within one historical period in itself. When any one historical period has only women to show, as seems to be the case in the early history of *Wene* among the Nkoya, a symbolic explanation in terms of perpetual kinship does not greatly help us. 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 Iya Bankoya*. Nor why this tallies with the ethnographic and historical evidence on nineteenth-century female political leadership elsewhere in the region.

*the vindication of ethno-history*

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 re-interpretations 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 Iya Bankoya* 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 4 — against the background of contemporary Nkoya ethnography and comparative evidence throughout the region — appear to me to constitute convincing evidence. This would mean that, for the more recent past, *Likota Iya Bankoya's* narrative, from female-headed clans to male-headed states, would cease to be just a myth, and may become a form of historiography as we academicians know it.

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 Shimunika's argument refer not to the present-day Land of Nkoya in and around Kaoma district, but to economic and political structures centuries ago at the Upper Zambezi or perhaps still further afield, north of the Zambezi/Congo watershed. It is equally clear that these reconstructions do not really deal with 'the Nkoya' but with small 'Mbwela/proto-Nkoya' proto-dynastic groups... 'Nkoya' as a political identity only emerged in the middle of the nineteenth century, as the name of the leaders and subjects involved in the state structure centring on the Mutondo kingship; and it is only far into the twentieth century that 'Nkoya' became an ethnic label of a much wider scope. The use 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 after all — or are we just dealing



here (as the tantalizing Musumban transformations of the Kapeshe myth suggest; Schecter 1980a: 41) with coded references to the much more recent shared past in southern Zaïre less than 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 lya Bankoya* 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 the genre of literate ethno-history at face value, but by processing its statements methodically to a point where they surrender their rich surface content and underlying deep structure.

Vansina entitled the methodological study with which this chapter opened: *Is elegance proof?* His conclusion, as far as de Heusch's analyses were concerned, was emphatically negative. While my own argument may have been 'elegant' (it would have been more so if the various types of transformations as distinguished 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 African history. Meanwhile, the real proof of the pudding is in the eating, and I shall conclude this chapter by demonstrating how the tentative insights gained in the history of state formation and gender relations in central western Zambia as gleaned from *Likota lya Bankoya* in their turn illuminate a very different set of data: those on twentieth-century cults of affliction.

### **6.5. Beyond *Religious change in Zambia*: The religious transformation of women's political power**

Amoral, 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 passing we note that these cults' very absence from Shimunika's account constitutes another mutative transformation between contemporary Nkoya society and *Likota lya Bankoya* — but that is not my point here. In *Religious change in Zambia* 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 to great lengths 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 for the transfer of 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. Despite the lengthy theoretical sections of the book (particularly in chs. 1, 7 and 8) I did not fully spell out my then emerging theory of 'layered' structure (with each layer corresponding to a mode of production) and transformation, linking ideological and material processes, confrontations and struggles.<sup>450</sup> 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:<sup>451</sup> 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 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 healer's appropriating [chiefs' symbols of ritual authority, but of the chiefs appropriating the]<sup>452</sup> healers' symbols of ritual authority. Such

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<sup>450</sup> Meanwhile, see van Binsbergen 1984; van Binsbergen & Geschiere 1985b: 270-278. But much more work is needed on this point.

<sup>451</sup> I am indebted to my colleagues R. Buijtenhuijs and J.M. Schoffeleers for stressing this point in various discussions we had on the subject.

<sup>452</sup> The text between brackets corrects a printing error in the original.

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competition (...) <sup>453</sup> is a recurrent theme in Central African religious history.' (van Binsbergen 1981a: 363, n. 79)

My argument was far too general, and paid far too little systematic attention to the inherent qualities of symbolic structures. Therefore I was unable 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 result 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 more than ten years ago; Ranger 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 had been 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 idealist, '*verstehende*' <sup>454</sup> notion of new entrepreneurs

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<sup>453</sup> See van Binsbergen 1981a: ch. 3.

<sup>454</sup> In the social sciences, the Weberian intellectual operation called *Verstehen* ('understanding') stands for an analytical exploration of the meanings as attributed by actors or participants in a social field, on the basis of an assumption of a universal human (and therefore, of the analyst's) potential of intersubjective empathy and logic across boundaries of a class, gender, cultural, linguistic, spatio-temporal, etc. nature; cf. Weber 1969, and there also Parsons's introduction, p. 8f. As Fernandez (1978) rightly observed, the limited type of 'understanding' I pursued in the studies collected in *Religious change of Zambia* (within a tradition formed by Weberians like Horton and Peel as much as by neo-marxism) was too abstract, and too devoid of specific content of symbolism and imagery, to convince. In fact, in part of the book I was concerned with a type of explanation that could hardly be called *verstehend* at all — a materialist examination of the ideological effects of political and economic changes which in their turn were seen as shifts in the patterns of articulation of modes of production within the social formation. By comparison, the forms of understanding pursued in the present volume lay much more emphasis on cultural specificity, historical accident, and method — and far less on external and abstractly theoretical discourse; my present argument seeks to encounter African symbolic producers and to engage in exchange with them, rather than to analytically appropriate and dominate their creations, forcing them to the alien straight-jacket of a deterministic interpretational scheme. But in the process, the ambition to generalize over vast regions and periods had to

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 raised in childhood) in terms of sorcery eradication movements — with its moral and communal overtones a very different religious idiom than the new cults of affliction. Even if my idealist 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 a probably more extensive regional trade in local products in the hands of local people, of production at chiefs' *zinkena* 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,<sup>455</sup> my argument in the present study 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

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be sacrificed, and the genuinely illuminating perspective of the class struggle as motor of history has perhaps been somewhat underplayed here.

<sup>455</sup> 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 nineteenth- and twentieth-century female cults.

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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'<sup>456</sup> 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 political plane, even though the extensive discussion of what could be gleaned from *Likota Iya Bankoya* with regard to the ideological processes involved (cf. above, chapter 5) makes it very clear that the men never effectively captured the ideology. 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 for political renewal remains stored in these cults, in the hands of women.

## 6.6. Conclusion: history out of myth

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<sup>457</sup> has continued to inspire historians and anthropologists working on oral-historical materials from Central and South Central Africa. This inspiration does not spring from de Heusch's handling of history itself (which remains defective), but from the fact that he claims access to an essentially static, a-historical baseline — an 'archaeology of Bantu thought' which, he asserts, 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 ahistorical assumptions as to the unadulterated, unchanging continuity of primordial symbolic and cosmological arrangements; in this way, de Heusch's archaeology of fossilized African thought has to be traded in

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<sup>456</sup> For striking East African parallels, cf. Berger 1981; Alpers 1984.

<sup>457</sup> If only as a persuasive literary genre, beyond the canons of empirical scholarship; cf. Vansina 1983: 329f.

for something far more alive and dynamic: a history of ideas and ideologies — something scholarship has hitherto not dared to expect from oral traditions or literate ethno-history, yet appears to sum up precisely what we have produced in the preceding chapters.

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 might 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 transformations inherent in these materials. This is particularly useful when we seek to penetrate the peculiar modes of historical practice (cf. Sahlins 1983) involved in the genre of literate ethno-history, different from academic canons of historiography, and — as the case of *Likota Iya Bankoya* demonstrates — far from conterminous with the narrator's contemporary culture. Without systematically clearing this ground in the first chapters of the present study, the structuralist-inspired analysis in the later chapters would have been impossible.

It might appear as if thus we are beginning to fulfil what Sahlins (1983: 534) sees as an urgent if slightly destructive task:

‘...to explode the concept of history by the anthropological experience of culture’.

Yet, there are more urgent and meaningful tasks, which the present volume helps us to identify.

In the course of its argument we have, as many researchers before us, come to realize that culture remains a lifeless and alien construct if its historical dimension — where it is made and remade — is not stressed above all other considerations; and we have explored some of the possibilities of writing social and ideological history on the basis of data that initially would seem to defy such an attempt.

The study of culture merges with that of history and may ultimately be subsumed under the latter. Then we may see Sahlins's ‘anthropological experience of culture’ (which of course is an immensely mystifying construct — as if professionalism guarantees rather than obscures authenticity) extend beyond the extreme limitations (in terms of space, time, and personal projections and frustrations) of participant observation, and of synchronicity in general.

Perhaps our project has ceased to be specifically ‘anthropological’, although throughout our argument we have found that we can benefit from the precise conceptual and theoretical instruments anthropology has to offer. Meanwhile our real inspiration lies admittedly in history, as lived by the participants, as created by them, and — in the process of their ethnicization — as shared with, and recreated by, the researcher who has recognized his own hopes and defeats in theirs.

*Wim van Binsbergen*

And so my most extensive anthropological statement on the Nkoya so far — the fruits of research spanning two decades — had to be organized as mere prolegomena, stepping-stones, footnotes, to a historical discourse which, I hope, has remained as much that of my Nkoya companions as it has become mine.