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The Unit of Study and the Interpretation of Ethnicity

*Studying the Nkoya of Western Zambia*¹

WIM M. J. VAN BINSBERGEN

‘To get inside just one African tribe with as able and lucid a guide as Dr van Velsen is both a salutary and a pleasurable experience and one which can be confidently recommended’ – *Times Educational Supplement*²

1. *Introduction*

Not only on the ground, in the political and economic aspects of the lives of the people we study in Africa, have the 1970s been a decade of discontinuity. Academically this discontinuity has meant the discarding of much of established anthropology. A different type of anthropology is emerging: one blending with history and political economy, and one in which structural-functional one-tribe approaches hingeing on culture or custom have given way, by and large, to more comprehensive regional approaches. Historical process and dialectics are about to take the place of function. Allegedly firm and rigid cultural and ethnic boundaries turn out to be breached by economic, political and ideological processes of much wider scope than, e.g., ‘the Tallensi’, ‘the Kikuyu’, or ‘the Zulu’.

Turning to new paradigms, anthropology in Africa has shed the tribe or ethnic group as its basic unit of study. In this paper I shall argue that Zambian rural anthropology is on the decline, and that this decline is related to the reliance among anthropologists on this unit of study in the past. The problem of the tribe as a unit of study is, however, complicated by the fact that members of Central African society themselves structure their social experience partly in terms of tribes; it is hard for a researcher to tear himself

¹ I am indebted to A. van Wijngaarden and R. van Hal for typing the final draft of this paper; and to R. Buijtenhuijs, C. Bundy, R. Frankenberg, G. Hesseling, P. Konings, A. Mafeje, C. Mitchell, C. Murray, T. Ranger and P. Worsley for helpful comments on earlier drafts, which were presented at the Manchester conference in September 1980 and at the Leiden Afrika-studiecentrum Africa seminar in February 1981. For full acknowledgements concerning my research among the Nkoya, see W. M. J. van Binsbergen, *Religious Change in Zambia* (London/Boston, 1981), pp.5ff.

² Quoted on the jacket of E. Colson, *The Plateau Tonga* (Manchester, 1970 reprint). This quotation is meant to illustrate the uncritical use of the tribal model in anthropology as represented in the *Times Educational Supplement* review; it is not an adequate description of Van Velsen’s *The Politics of Kinship* (Manchester, 1964).

away from such a folk categorization. I shall discuss this problem with reference to my own research among the Nkoya of Western Zambia. I shall then argue that one way to escape from the tribal model on the analytical plane, without sacrificing the subjects' own organization of their experience, is to try and explain this experience as a form of consciousness emerging out of the dialectics of political incorporation and, even more fundamentally, the penetration of capitalism, and the articulation between capitalism and non-capitalist modes of production. This leads to a picture of complex relationships, of much greater scope and abstraction than, and extending in time and place beyond, anything that could be meaningfully defined as a unit of study. The alternative proposed here for the tribal model as a unit of study is *not* another, better unit of study (e.g. a mode of production, an expanding social formation, or a well-defined spatio-temporal portion of reality), but a growing awareness of possible problems and inter-relations, informed by insights from history and political economy. Thus this paper, much like my other recent work,³ will be an exercise in the interaction of anthropology and history in the analysis of a specific set of data. Such a form of anthropology could try and make its comeback in rural studies of Central and Southern Africa.

2. *The End of Rural Anthropology in Zambia?*

In order to understand the reliance on the tribal model among the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute researchers of rural Zambia, we should not overlook the fact that they were adopting, into their analytical frameworks, emic categories employed at the time by Zambian villagers, townsmen, and colonial administrators alike.

In addition, their academic discipline provided these researchers with at least two other reasons for upholding the tribal model. Firstly, the concept of culture at the theoretical level reinforced the notion of tribe (as the most obvious carrier of a distinct, internalized, many-faceted culture); it provided a perspective on allegedly deeply-rooted 'primordial attachments', which Shils and Geertz have stressed with regard to ethnicity.⁴ Secondly, the adoption of prolonged and intensive participatory field-work as the main method of data collection did much to strengthen, among anthropologists, the concept of tribe at a personal level. The intimate communion with the one culture that one studies as an anthropologist can be seen as both an irritating cliché of the professional sub-culture of classic anthropology, and at the same time as a genuine, existential dimension of doing fieldwork in that tradition. It suggests the adoption of one particular unit of study: that whose boundaries are

³ E.g. Van Binsbergen, *Religious Change*; 'Interpreting the Myth of Sidi Mhâmmad', in K. Brown & M. Roberts (eds.), *Using Oral Sources: Vansina and Beyond*, special issue of *Social Analysis* 4 (Adelaide 1981), pp. 51-73.

⁴ Cf. M. Doornbos, 'Some Conceptual Problems concerning Ethnicity in Integration Analysis', *Civilisations* 22, 2, 1972, pp. 263-84; and references cited there.

defined by the limits of the cognitive and language field in which the anthropologist, after a long and painful learning process, acquires a certain (always hopelessly defective) mastery. 'My people'. 'My tribe'.

The Rhodes-Livingstone Institute researchers working in rural Zambia have seldom explicitly considered the analytical status of the ethnic labels they used for their main units of study. The titles of their main publications demonstrate that they defined their units of study loosely in terms of tribes or ethnic groups.⁵ Much sophistication, admittedly, went into the assessment of the transformation these rural ethnic labels underwent when they were introduced into the urban areas.⁶ Within what was called the 'industrial-colonial complex of urban Northern Rhodesia', these labels were claimed to acquire categorical and situational overtones quite different from the 'total way of life' they were assumed to represent out in the rural areas. Not that the rural researchers claimed to analyse this way of life exhaustively. In fact, most of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute studies emphatically concentrated on only one major aspect of tribal life at the time: kinship, marriage, the judicial process, formal and particularly informal political organization, community crises, ritual.

The concept of culture so conducive to the classic tribal model was rarely used explicitly. Instead Gluckman and associates preferred the term *custom*, with its Malinowskian bird-of-paradise feathers. In contrast with American idealist culturology, the Manchester researchers were little inclined to view 'custom' as autonomously determining the course of the social process. If blame them we must, it could be for under-analysing rather than for exaggerating the cultural dimension of social life. Van Velsen and Turner presented dynamic and situational approaches to village life in Southern Central Africa that were far richer and more convincing than anything the classic structural-functionalist paradigm had ever managed.⁷ Yet, even if one

⁵ Colson, *Plateau Tonga; Marriage and the Family among the Plateau Tonga* (Manchester, 1958); *Social Organization of the Gwembe Tonga* (Manchester, 1960); W. Watson, *Tribal Cohesion in a Money Economy: A Study of the Mambwe People* (Manchester, 1958); V. W. Turner, *Schism and Continuity in an African Society: A Study of Ndembu Village Life* (Manchester, 1957); *The Drums of Affliction: A Study of Religious Processes among the Ndembu of Zambia* (London, 1968); E. Colson & M. Gluckman (eds.), *Seven Tribes of British Central Africa* (Manchester, 1951); M. Gluckman, *The Judicial Process among the Barotse* (Manchester, 1957); *The Ideas in Barotse Jurisprudence* (Manchester, 1965); I. Cunnison, *the Luapula Peoples* (Manchester, 1959); M. G. Marwick, *Sorcery in Its Social Setting: A Study of the Northern Rhodesian Ceŵa* (Manchester, 1965); T. Scudder, *The Ecology of the Gwembe Tonga* (Manchester, 1962). This selection does not include: articles and papers; studies by Rhodes-Livingstone Institute researchers conducted outside rural Zambia; or studies such as A.I. Richards' *Land, Labour and Diet* (London, 1939) not published under the aegis of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute.

⁶ J. C. Mitchell, *The Kalela Dance* (Manchester, 1956); (ed.), *Social Networks in Urban Situations* (Manchester, 1969); A. L. Epstein, *Politics in an Urban African Community* (Manchester, 1958); M. Gluckman, 'Tribalism in Modern British Central Africa', *Cahiers d'études africaines* 1, 1960, pp. 55-70; P. Harries-Jones, "'Home-boy" Ties and Political Organization in a Copperbelt Township', in Mitchell, *Social Networks*, pp. 297-347.

⁷ Van Velsen, *Politics*; 'The Extended Case Method and Situational Analysis', in A. L. Epstein (ed.), *The Craft of Social Anthropology* (Manchester, 1967), pp. 129-49; Turner, *Schism*. Strictly speaking, of course, Van Velsen's work was not a direct contribution to Zambian rural anthropology, based as it was on field-work in Malawi. Its impact on both rural and urban studies was, however, great.

had to limit one's detailed study to selected aspects of 'tribal' life, even if one studied these aspects in a masterly way, the tribe remained the basic unit of study. African village life was essentially depicted as closed in itself and following a logic of its own. 'Outside contacts' – European administrators, missions, the modern market economy, migrancy, nationalism – were tackled in introductory or concluding chapters or in scattered articles, but not in the main books.

Of course, the anthropological discipline had at the time no theoretical solution to offer to the formidable problems posed by the persistence of encapsulated neo-traditional communities in a situation of articulation of modes of production. Individual researchers could hardly be blamed for the historical limitations of their discipline, especially not when they themselves were aware of these limitations. Jaap van Velsen for example, finally realizing that the most fundamental questions concerning labour migration could not be answered from within Tongaland, at the last minute withdrew his chapters on this topic from the very galley proofs of *Politics of Kinship*.⁸

Two exceptions to the general pattern are Gluckman's *Economy of the Central Barotse Plain* and Cunnison's *Luapula Peoples*.⁹ Both take as their main unit of study not a single 'tribe', but geographical areas which they see as filled with a variety of tribes. While Gluckman takes tribes for granted, leaving the concept unanalysed,¹⁰ Cunnison engages in a painstaking assessment of the local and analytical meaning of the concept of tribe in the Luapula context.¹¹ It was the particular poly-ethnic structure of their respective rural research areas that forced Gluckman and Cunnison to discuss, with different degrees of sophistication, the interactions *between* 'tribes'. The other researchers were hardly concerned with internal organization at the tribal level, but used the tribe rather as a comprehensive setting within which the microscopic, face-to-face social process took place in which they were really interested, and which they studied with excellent results. This approach is particularly clear in Turner's *Schism and Continuity*:

'I focus the investigation upon the village, a significant local unit, and analyse it successively as an independent social system and as a unit within several wider sets of social relations included in the total field of Ndembu society'.¹²

⁸ J. van Velsen, personal communication, September 1980.

⁹ M. Gluckman, *Economy of the Central Barotse Plain*, Rhodes-Livingstone Institute Papers No. 7 (Manchester, 1968; 1st impr. 1941); Cunnison, *op. cit.*

¹⁰ Gluckman, *Economy*, p. 12; see also his 'Seven-year Research Plan of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute of Social Studies in British Central Africa', *Rhodes-Livingstone Journal (Human Problems)* 4, pp. 1–32, where the concept of tribe is used in the same fashion. One would have expected a lengthy discussion of the problem of tribe in Gluckman's (ed.) *Closed Systems and Open Minds: The Limits of Naivety in Social Anthropology* (Edinburgh/London, 1964), but apart from a cursory remark relating to Bailey's research in India, little of relevance can be found here. The book is about the uses and limitations of anthropologists' naivety *vis-à-vis* other disciplines, not *vis-à-vis* their own. Hence, I suppose, the statement by Gluckman (p. 199, n.44) that he considers himself to possess an 'expertise on tribes . . .'

¹¹ Cunnison, *op. cit.*, ch. 2.

¹² Turner, *Schism*, 1968 repr., p.xvii.

Paradoxically, the Rhodes-Livingstone study that was most concerned with the relations between a local, rural Zambian society and the wider world as dominated by the capitalist mode of production – Watson's *Tribal Cohesion in a Money Economy*¹³ – was at the same time the study that tried to make the most of the tribe, conceived in terms that were essentially those of structural-functionalist anthropology. Mambwe tribal society, far from being a loosely descriptive (and hence pardonable) category, is for Watson a living, and surviving, integrated entity; tending

'to adjust to new conditions through its existing social institutions. These institutions will survive, but with new values, in a changed social system'.¹⁴

Regrettably, Long's impressive attempt to break away from all this, in *Social Change and the Individual*,¹⁵ was at the same time virtually the swan song of Zambian rural anthropology. Long studied what might have been called 'Lala village life', not as the enacting of changing tribal institutions or of some manipulative internal social process, but rather as the 'social and religious responses to innovation in a Zambian community'.¹⁶ As a unit of study he used, at the descriptive level, a geographically defined 'Kapepa Parish'. Here he sought access, analytically, not to representative glimpses of 'Lala society', but to a structurally complex social field, accommodating both local cultural and structural elements, and economic and social-structural pressures as well as occupational and religious experiences pertaining to distant urban areas.¹⁷ In the extended-case studies of Van Velsen and Turner custom, elsewhere considered king, had been dethroned, giving way to a complex social process that was determined by the internal dynamics of local rural society; in Long's analysis, the wider world was finally allowed to step in, and it offered altered patterns of agriculture and farm management, of power and prestige, of religious experience, that drove home the fact that the single tribe is not a feasible unit of study at all.¹⁸

It is difficult to believe that Long's book, published in 1968 and dealing with the situation in 1963-64, is in fact one of the most recent full-length anthropological studies to be devoted to rural Zambia. In addition to Turner's

¹³ Watson, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

¹⁵ Manchester, 1968.

¹⁶ The sub-title of Long, *op. cit.*

¹⁷ Long, *op. cit.*, p. 6ff.

¹⁸ Perhaps the last time that, on the basis of his own field-work, a researcher discussed a contemporary social situation in rural Zambia in terms of a 'tribal community' was A. Johnson & G. C. Bond, 'Kinship, Friendship and Exchange in Two Communities', *Journal of Anthropological Research* 30, 1974, pp. 55-68. However, in his monograph, *The Politics of Change in a Zambian Community* (Chicago/London, 1976), Bond did much better than that. Meanwhile the Zambian material remains available for non-field-workers to take their pick. Thus J. S. Sharp (pp. 16-36 in this issue) discusses an Afrikaans South African M.A. thesis on ethnicity in Zambia, by J. H. Booyens, dated 1978. Based on library research, Booyens' argument is built on the notion of nineteenth-century tribes (*ethnieë*) founded in primordial attachments and insurmountable mutual hostilities. Sharp, of course, points at the close links between such a view of ethnicity and the ideology of Apartheid.

Drums of Affliction (1968),¹⁹ in which occasional references to social and political conditions surrounding Ndembu village society cannot take away the fact that Ndembu society remains the crucial unit of study just as in Turner's earlier studies, the only other examples to come to mind are Elisabeth Colson's *Consequences of Resettlement* (1971), Stuart Marks' *Large Mammals and a Brave People* (1976); and George Bond's *Politics of Change in a Zambian Community* (1976),²⁰ based on field-work in the same period as Long's. Whatever anthropology Robert Bates' *Rural Responses to Industrialization* contains is best left undiscussed here.²¹ There must be some interesting rural studies lying buried in unpublished Ph.D. theses. Lancaster's and Poewe's articles make one look forward to the full-length books they foreshadow.²² But on the whole, Zambian rural anthropology has been eloquently silent during the 1970s. There is only a faint trickle of publications, based mainly on field-work conducted before the mid-1970s: this includes articles by Bond, Colson, Scudder, Anita Spring Hansen, Marks, Robin Fielder, Holy, and myself. Today, the growth-poles for the study of Zambian society are history and political economy – and not anthropology. The anthropological study of Zambia's rural areas has hardly been a field in which the University of Zambia has excelled, and little rural anthropology has been published in the Lusaka-based journal *African Social Research*. One of the most significant studies of rural Southern Central and Southern Africa, including Zambia, to be published in the 1970s was *Roots of Rural Poverty*; this book was inspired, to a limited extent, by radical anthropology (including the recent French marxist school) as developed with reference to other parts of the Third World, but towards its argument Zambian rural anthropology did not make much of a contribution.²³ Similarly, the Centre of African Studies in Edinburgh could recently organize a full-length conference on the 'Evolving Structure of Zambian Society' (1980) without a single anthropologist among the contributors, and virtually without so much as a passing reference to Zambian rural anthropology in the footnotes to the papers.

This characterization of the present state of the art in Zambian rural

¹⁹ Turner, *op. cit.*

²⁰ Colson (Manchester, 1971); Marks (Seattle/London, 1976); Bond, *op. cit.*

²¹ New Haven/London, 1976; cf. W. M. J. van Binsbergen, 'Occam, Francis Bacon and the Transformation of Zambian Society', *Cultures et Développement* 9, 1977, pp. 489-520.

²² E.g. C. S. Lancaster, 'Ethnic identity, History and "Tribe" in the Middle Zambezi Valley', *American Ethnologist* 1, 1974, pp. 707-30; 'Reciprocity, Redistribution and the Male Life Cycle', *African Social Research* 2, 1966, pp. 139-57; 'The Zambezi Goba Ancestral Cult', *Africa* 47, 1977, pp. 229-41; 'The Economics of Social Organization in an Ethnic Border Zone', *Ethnology* 10, 4, 1900, pp. 445-65. Lancaster's book, whose title follows the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute pattern in its loosely-descriptive use of a tribal label, is to appear shortly: *The Goba of the Zambezi* (Norman, 1981). K. O. Poewe's article include: 'Matriliney in the Throes of Change', *Africa* 48, 1978, pp. 205-19 and 353-67; 'Regional and Village Economic Activities', *African Studies Review*, 22, 1979, pp. 79-93.

²³ R. Palmer & N. Parsons (eds.), *The Roots of Rural Poverty* (London, 1977). Extensive reference, however, is made to Gluckman's work on Barotseland. Gwyn Prins' dismissive review of *Roots*, 'The End of the Beginning of African History', *Social History* 4, 3, 1979, pp. 495-508, seems to imply that the book could have done with rather more anthropological inspiration.

anthropology of course relies on a particular conception of anthropology, which may well be debatable. I have elsewhere considered this question at somewhat greater length.²⁴ Here let it suffice that by anthropology I mean that body of social-scientific work that directly (i.e. in a neo-classical, often implicitly structural-functionalist form) or indirectly (i.e. in a form inspired by regional, historical and political-economic considerations) derives from the methods and problematics of the classic anthropology of the 1940s and 1950s.

It would seem as if anthropology, with its prolonged participatory fieldwork and its profound insights into family and kinship, the micro-dynamics of the political and economic processes, and the participants' construction of social and ritual meaning in terms of a local particularistic symbolic idiom, is unable to make a meaningful contribution either to the understanding of rural stagnation today, or in general to the ongoing research by historians, economists and political scientists. This is in fact an opinion found, expressly or tacitly, among many colleagues from other disciplines currently engaged in the analysis of rural Southern Central Africa. Rural anthropology in this part of the world may have been too slow, or too entrenched in its classic problematics, to address itself to the academic and social problems of today. Given its reliance, in the past, on the tribe or ethnic group as a standard unit of study, a reassessment of the unit of study may help to find a way out of this dead-end. For I am convinced that the predicament is largely a theoretical one, and cannot be explained away by such practical problems as the availability of research funds, permits, and the hardships of rural fieldwork.

3. *The Unit of Study*

For an outsider to the social sciences, and perhaps particularly for a natural scientist, it would be difficult to appreciate a situation where libraries have been filled with studies in the field of Southern Central and Southern African Studies, and specialists hold conference after conference, conversing happily without more than the usual terminological confusion, whereas no real consensus has been reached as to the solution of the problem of the unit of study in this field of enquiry.

What makes our present situation less dramatic than outsiders might view it is the fact that considerations of the unit of study tend to refer to a much higher plane of abstraction and analysis than that on which our raw data are usually collected. On the level of the life experiences of the people inhabiting the part of the world we are studying, the concrete data are fairly straightforward. Our research notes consist of interviews, documents, observations, local words and their meanings, and sometimes (for those of us who are engaged in participatory research) the subjective experience of partially sharing an initially unfamiliar variety of human social life. These elementary

²⁴ W. M. J. van Binsbergen, 'Dutch Anthropology of Sub-Saharan Africa in the 1970s', in P. Kloos & H. J. M. Claessen (eds.), *Current Issues in Anthropology: The Netherlands* (Rotterdam, 1981), pp. 45-84.

particles of social and historical research in Africa may form, in a strict methodological sense, our real units of study, but they are not the ones that concern us here. We have, I suppose, a sufficient amount of trust in each other's professional skill and integrity to accept the descriptive evidence each of us digs up from his particular academic gold-mine. The problem of the unit of study as I understand it arises only when it comes to *collating* these minute facts into meaningful patterns, into more comprehensive complexes that have a systematic extension in space and that go through an identifiable process in time. The question boils down to: what scope of vision should the blinkers allow through which we peer at reality? For, ultimately, everything social is related to everything else; so only the whole world constitutes an adequate unit of study. But such a unit is impossible to handle, and is no more interesting to read about than the tiny particles of information that constitute our raw data. An adequate unit of study should enable us to select as well as to synthesize. We might define such a *unit of study*, tentatively, as

an analytic construct which, in a manner acceptable to a specialist academic audience, allows for the meaningful and systematic integration of disconnected research data around a common focus, in such a way that the analytic construct thus arrived at is relevant for the pursuit of a specific scientific and/or societal problematic.

This sums up several crucial points. Firstly, the distinctions we impose upon the phenomena we study are essentially arbitrary man-made constructs, and do not in themselves emanate from the nature of these phenomena. Secondly, the choice of a particular construct as a meaningful unit of study is subject to a process of negotiation between colleagues.²⁵ Thirdly, a unit of study is not on the same level as our concrete research data, nor on the most abstract level of grand theory, but on some intermediate level: that on which our disconnected raw data are processed so as to bring out patterns capable of being generalized and explained in fairly general terms that are yet appropriate to the geographical area and the historical period we are concentrating on. Finally, the choice of one unit of study rather than of another may be fairly arbitrary in relation to the True Structure of Reality (which we see only in a Glass Darkly, anyway); but this choice is far from arbitrary when considered within the process of academic production, where such units of study should be selected as have the greatest potential to enlighten the problematic which informs the research that is undertaken. Such problematics, moreover, are not exclusively defined by academics, holding conferences, sitting on boards that distribute research funds between them, or deciding on the publication of each other's papers and books. The study of kinship terminology and the symbolic lay-out of homesteads would be even more of a booming field²⁶ if research problematics were exclusively defined by so-called disinterested intellectual

²⁵ On the crucial significance of the specialist audience in the process of methodological and theoretical innovation, see A. D. de Groot, *Methodologie* (The Hague/Paris, 1966), p. 27ff.

²⁶ Cf. A. Kuper, 'Structure and Variation in Seven Tswana Kinship Terminologies', in A. Kuper (ed.), *Leiden in Africa* (Leiden, 1977), pp. 29-54; 'Symbolic Dimensions of the Southern Bantu Homestead', *Africa* 50, 1, 1980, pp. 8-23. Quoted in this context, these references do not do full justice to the type of regional comparison Kuper is engaged in.

concerns alone. Fortunately, however, scholars are free to a considerable extent to turn to problematics that seem to be of particular social relevance, and that may help to explain, if not to alter, the vital predicaments that beset the people they are studying. In this respect studying the 'roots of rural poverty'²⁷ may be more relevant, as a problematic, than the kinship terminology and symbolic structures obtaining in the same part of the world. And whereas the latter problematic may lead one to distinguish between a host of different tribes or ethnic groups, each with its own total culture including kinship terminology and spatial symbolism, the former problematic would lead one to look for broad, comprehensive, regional patterns that would explain the remarkable similarities in the present-day predicament of the people of Southern Africa. Here, of course, anthropology is merging with history and political economy, and the present non-anthropological work on rural Zambia (e.g. by Muntemba, Klepper, Palmer, Vail) takes on a new significance.

Nor is it only the conscience of more or less committed scholars, and the whims of funding agencies usually located in the North Atlantic region, that suggest the adoption of one problematic rather than another. The official institutions in the areas our research concentrates on, and the very villagers and petty administrators who provide us with our data on the ground, coax us towards the adoption of particular problematics, and thus towards the adoption of particular units of study. Needless to say, their prodding is not always in a direction that coincides with the choices academics would wish to make. The crisis at the University of Zambia, early in 1976, or the state of the social and historical sciences within the Republic of South Africa, are only two examples that suggest that the adoption of a radical problematic may not make us, as researchers, more attractive in the eyes of the members of the society we study. Below I shall reflect on my personal experience with this problem at a local level, in the course of my participatory and oral-historical research in Kaoma district (Western Zambia), and among people from that area now living in Lusaka, 400 km east of Kaoma.²⁸

That definitional and methodological rigidity is necessary in the handling of one's unit of study has particularly been emphasized by scholars trying to compare the phenomena pertaining to different geographical areas or different periods. The problem of the definition of the units of cross-cultural comparison has haunted comparative studies in the social sciences ever since the end of the last century. Although there have been several attempts at cross-cultural comparison in the Southern African region,²⁹ the problem of the unit

²⁷ Palmer & Parsons, *op. cit.*

²⁸ My field-work was conducted alternately in Kaoma district, Western Zambia, and Lusaka, from February 1972 to April 1974; September to November 1977; and August 1978.

²⁹ M. Douglas, 'Matriliney and Pawnship in Central Africa', *Africa* 24, 1964, pp. 301-13; A. I. Richards, 'Some Types of Family Structure among the Central Bantu', in A. R. Radcliffe-Brown & D. Forde (eds.), *African Systems of Kinship and Marriage* (London, 1950), pp. 207-51; V. W. Turner, *The Forest of Symbols* (Ithaca, 1967); Van Binsbergen, *Religious Change*. The latter study, however, does reflect on the problem of the unit of study, see pp. 13ff, 66ff, 136ff, 216ff.

of study was hardly explicitly considered in the course of these attempts, and probably some of the data used derived from loosely-defined units ('tribes', 'ethnic groups', 'cultures', 'societies') that were essentially incomparable. The assumption was that e.g. 'the Bemba', 'the Lozi', 'the Tonga' etc. not only really existed as collective representations of participants in Zambian society, but also formed viable units of analysis.

The example of urban ethnicity may illustrate that adopting a particular unit of study enlightens a certain problematic, but at the same time forces, like all classification, an essentially volatile and dynamic reality into a strait-jacket. In their Copperbelt studies Mitchell, Epstein and Harries-Jones treated ethnic identity primarily as a logical device to classify individuals. These researchers stressed the *situational* aspects of urban ethnicity. Reliance on a particular ethnic identity is only one of many options a town-dweller has for his personal organization of urban relationships. He may temporarily drop this identity and emphasize, in different urban situations involving the same or a different set of people, a different ethnic identity. Among themselves, and vis-à-vis 'Lozi', the Lusaka migrants from Kaoma district would identify as 'Nkoya', but in many urban situations they would pose as 'Lozi', and sometimes they would try to pass for 'Bemba' or even 'Nyanja'. Alternatively the town-dweller may, situationally, stress a social identity derived from class, occupation, educational level or political or religious affiliation. The ways in which ethnicity is alternately dominant or played down can only be understood against the background of the total social process in which the participants are specifically involved.

Description implies fossilization, no matter how dynamic a reality we try to capture. The inevitable result is lack of precision. It is tedious to have to indicate all the time that the unit of study one imposes only applies to a certain aspect of the social reality, only to certain situations, and subject to the participants' own conscious and unconscious manipulation. One has to adopt short-hand formulae, and these tend to acquire a life of their own in the course of one's argument. This accounts for instance for the following paradox. In his work of the 1950s and early 1960s Mitchell was clearly aware of the situational and manipulative aspects of ethnicity. Yet he did not shrink from detailed studies of inter-tribal prestige scores and differential fertility, where tribes are neatly boxed and appear as entries in sophisticated, computerized tables – as if they formed both emic and etic categories at the same time.³⁰

This methodological problem, by the way, is not limited to the main unit of study that we adopt in our analyses. Ever since the extended-case method has made us aware of the shifting, inchoate, situational, competitive elements in the social process, persuading us to consider these elements as the real basic data out of which we have to build a picture of a 'social structure' and a 'culture', we run into the epistemological difficulty that, in order to discuss the

³⁰ Mitchell, *Kalela Dance*; 'Differential Fertility amongst Urban Africans in Zambia', *Rhodes-Livingstone Journal* 37, 1965, pp. 1–25.

data and the emerging interpretation at all, we have to lend them far greater invariability and stability than our analysis would yet show them to possess.³¹

4. Studying the Nkoya

I have already indicated how the choice of a particular unit of study can be suggested to the researcher on the basis of other than strictly academic concerns, for instance by his commitment to a problematic that is of wider social relevance, or under the pressure of members of the society he is trying to study. In so far as participants are often ideologically determined to ignore the true make-up of their own situation, there may be considerable tension between these two possible influences on one's choice of a unit of study. In the remainder of this paper, I shall bring out both the lure of the tribal model as a unit of study for rural Western Zambia, and its spuriousness in the light of a more profound analysis. In my conclusion I shall indicate the implications of this experience for the problem of the unit of study in general.

My first research contact with people from Western Zambia was in Matero, a fairly respectable residential area in the north-western part of Zambia's capital. Early in 1972 a friend took me and my family to a nocturnal healing session, staged by one of the senior leaders of a cult of affliction that had been founded by the prophet Simbinga in Kaoma district in the 1930s, and that had been introduced into Lusaka in the 1950s. The languages spoken at the session were Nkoya, Nyanja, Lenje, Luvale, and English, in that order of frequency. Most of the cult personnel, and most of the patients and onlookers, would when among themselves identify as belonging to the 'Nkoya' tribe (*mushobo wa shinkoya*), notwithstanding the fact, already indicated above, that for many social purposes within the capital they would claim to be 'Lozi', and would use, with varying success, the Lusaka *lingua franca*, Nyanja.

Hoping to penetrate the religious and social idiom acted out in that nocturnal urban session and in many others I was to witness, deeply impressed by the dramatic and aesthetic aspects of the cult, and in general comfortably unable to resist the very great attraction that the remarkably close-knit, encapsulated group of 'Nkoya' immigrants in Lusaka was exerting on us (an uprooted nuclear family of Dutch expatriate academics), I allowed the Nkoyanness of this set of ritual and social relations to dominate all other aspects of my urban research, which had started out as a sociological survey of religious organizations in Lusaka. I learned the Nkoya language (and no other) and got deeply involved in Nkoya urban network contacts and collective ceremonies, which even in town were of an amazing scope: while the number of Nkoya in Lusaka, including children, was only about 1,000 out of a total urban

³¹ Cf. W. M. J. van Binsbergen, 'The Infancy of Edward Shelonga: An Extended Case from the Zambian Nkoya', in S. van der Geest & K. W. van der Veen (eds.), *In Search of Health: Essays in Medical Anthropology* (Amsterdam, 1979), pp. 19-86, particularly pp. 31ff, for a discussion of this problem with regard to the definition of kin-groups among the Nkoya. The significance of situational aspects in the description and analysis of religious phenomena is stressed in my *Religious Change*, pp. 37ff, 84.

population of c. 350,000 (early 1970s), for girl's puberty ceremonies, healing sessions, and funerary wakes scores, even hundreds of participants were mobilized from all over the capital. We were introduced to urban members of one Nkoya royal family, and would be visited by the Chief himself in our urban home whenever his membership of the House of Chiefs would take him to Lusaka. As we acquired a working knowledge of those aspects of Nkoya culture that were still prominent in the urban relationships of our Nkoya friends and informants, my research began to concentrate on urban-rural relations between what I then labelled, provisionally, Nkoya village society, and Lusaka recent immigrants from that society. After initial, exploratory visits we settled in Chief Kahare's capital, Kaoma district, for participatory, quantitative, and oral-historical research into the rural ends of the urban-rural networks whose urban ends we had previously got to know fairly well. And while my main published academic output during those years remained focussed on more general regional concerns,³² my main Zambian field-work experience and my main emotional identification as a researcher in Zambia came to lie with the Nkoya, a small ethnic minority whose homeland was structurally peripheral to the Zambian nation-state, and whose political and economic history over the past one and a half centuries had been determined by their being peripheral even within Barotseland ((where they had been labelled a 'Lozi subject tribe' along with so many other groups).

Developing out of a context of urban ritual among migrants, I had certainly not selected my initial set of informants on the basis that they might form a tribe. It is they who told me they were a tribe, very different from the scores of other tribes which (according to a folk classification system they shared with virtually all Zambians, urban and rural) make up the population of the country. My earlier research in rural North Africa, far from preparing me for a countryside apparently parcelled up into neat tribal units, had instead pre-conditioned me to look at a cultural region or sub-continent as displaying essential cultural, structural and historical continuity, and to play down local idiosyncrasies in this regional pattern.³³ I also knew that the anthropology of sub-Saharan Africa since the late 1960s had been moving away from the tribal model; such tribes as anthropologists, administrators and Africans had distinguished were beginning to be looked at as more or less recent emic constructs, responses to increase of political scale, as the creation of new political arenas (late pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial) called for new symbolic definitions of group opposition.³⁴

³² Notably an exploration of regional patterns of religious change throughout Southern Central Africa, see Van Binsbergen, *Religious Change*.

³³ Cf. E. Gellner & C. Micaud (eds.), *Arabs and Berbers* (London, 1972).

³⁴ Cf. J. Helm (ed.), *Essays on the Problem of Tribe*, Proceedings of the 1967 Annual Spring Meeting of the American Ethnological Society (Seattle/London, 1968); P. C. W. Gutkind (ed.), *The Passing of Tribal Man in Africa* (Leiden, 1970); and M. Godelier, *Horizon, Trajets Marxistes en Anthropologie* (Paris, 1973), ch. 1.3, 'le concept du tribu', pp. 93-131. There is, however, outside modern anthropology, and particularly in political science, a considerable amount of writing that attaches primary or at least independent significance to ethnic factors (Bienen, Rotchild, LeVine).

And yet I could not resist the very strong illusion implanted by day-to-day close interaction with people who, in their dealings with me at least, emphatically identified as Nkoya. Their Nkoya-ness very soon became their main, even only characteristic in my eyes; and I myself became more or less Nkoya-ized in the process.

Rich and rewarding though the experience was, I had some reservations, and felt uneasy about them. As an anthropologist I knew that my friends, modern peasants and proletarians, were not just Nkoya and nothing more; but agreement on their Nkoya-ness had become the *raison d'être* of our frequent interactions. Although I circulated widely my early papers on the Nkoya among my Nkoya friends, I did not dare to show them a conference paper I wrote in 1975.³⁵ There I tried to demonstrate that, when all was said and done, Nkoya ethnic identity was only a dependent variable, to be explained by reference to the economic and political dynamics of relatively recent incorporation in a market economy and wider state structure, both pre-colonial and colonial; and I could trace the process of this response in some detail. A few years later, when I gave a seminar at the University of Zambia, Robert Serpell pointed out the extent to which my research had a Nkoya bias, and wondered how very different my analysis might have turned out had I not learned the Nkoya language but conducted my urban research in Nyanja. I pretended not to understand what he was aiming at: the fact that most of the social life of my Nkoya friends was determined by other principles than their claiming to be Nkoya. Yet only a few weeks earlier, during a field trip to Kaoma district, I had conducted collective interviews with chief's councils, and had consciously felt how the notables present (representing both traditional and modern rural elites) were manipulating me as a likely ally in the expression of a new, proud Nkoya identity that would provide them with a political base in a district and a province that were dominated by people adhering to other ethnic labels than Nkoya (notably Lozi, Luvale and Mbunda). But then, again, had I not in the course of the same field trip, which had brought me back to the area after three years' absence, at a collective celebration for which Chief Kahare had spontaneously made available his royal (though 100 per cent state-subsidized) orchestra, been formally declared a Nkoya (*'baji kankoya! baji kankoya!'*), by the same Chief's Prime Minister; and had not the head-man of the segment of the Chief's capital where we had lived during most of the main spell of rural field-work, on that occasion publicly called me his sister's son (*'baji ba mwipa wami!'*), offering me the most intimate relationship that can exist between men in this local society. . . ?

Already the situational use of Nkoya-ness in Lusaka, and particularly the 'passing' to more prestigious ethnic identities of certain middle-class people

³⁵ W. M. J. van Binsbergen 'Ethnicity as a Dependent Variable: The "Nkoya" Ethnic Identity and Inter-ethnic Relations in Zambia', paper read at the 34th Annual Meeting, Society for Applied Anthropology, Amsterdam, 1975. For a full list of my papers on the Nkoya, see Van Binsbergen, *Religious Change*, p. 393ff.

born as Nkoya, made me realize that primordial attachments based on a unique, total tribal heritage did not apply at all to the Nkoya situation. But there was much more.³⁶

The data I had collected, mainly by virtue of the generosity of the Nkoya, made it very clear that the Nkoya were not a 'tribe' characterized by a unique combination of language, culture, political and social organization and economy, dating back to the pre-colonial era.

Most Nkoya are effective members of the Nkoya speech community. But most are also fluent in one or more other Western-Zambian languages, or urban *linguae francae*; and due to the massive amount of rural-rural and rural-urban migration, a considerable proportion (perhaps 15 per cent) of the people who today in their homes use Nkoya as their main language were born in a different speech community or will spend their later life in yet other speech communities.

Moreover, there never was a 'traditional' Nkoya culture, with unique distinctive features or a unique combination of more widely distributed features. Asked to define Nkoya-ness in cultural terms, my respondents invariably came up with features which were far from peculiar to the Nkoya: their system of name-inheritance (*ushwana*); their collective nocturnal celebrations in which a singing and joking crowd dances around an orchestra composed of xylophones and drums (*ruhnwa*); girl's puberty ceremonies (*kutembwisha kankanga*); absence of male puberty ceremonies (*mukanda*); their skills as elephant hunters and musicians. Apart from their language which, however, closely resembles Luyana, Kwangwa and Southern Lunda, there are no features of so-called Nkoya culture that are not also found with lesser or greater prominence in other parts of Western and even Central Zambia. From girl's puberty ceremonies to the Lunda-type ceremonial culture surrounding chieftainship, from patterns of hunting and cultivation to ancestral ritual and name-inheritance: whoever knows the ethnographic literature of Zambia or, better still, has intensively participated in rural village life anywhere in Western or Central Zambia, will have strong impressions of *déjà-vu* in a Nkoya village today. Admittedly, there are specific details. Nkoya music has unmistakable qualities which have allowed it to become the court music *par excellence* throughout Western Zambia. There are specific variations in style patterns as manifested in cultivation or hunting, in food habits, girl's initiation, dancing etc. Also it is possible that the amazing cultural and structural homogeneity that characterizes present-day Western Zambia is partly a result of processes of political and economic incorporation over the past hundred years; these may have obliterated much that was uniquely local, and may have supplanted it with a neo-traditional hotchpotch of peripheral-capitalist rural culture which now prevails throughout the

³⁶ For reasons of space, I must refrain in this paper from a discussion of inter-ethnic relations at the level of inter-personal, face-to-face relationships, both in town and in the rural areas, as reflected in residence, sexual and marital relations, friendship, political and economic support. A monograph on my Nkoya research is now nearing completion.

region. There are indications in the field of chieftainship and religion that such a converging transformation was one among several inter-twined processes of cultural change affecting Western Zambia. Present-day similarities should not off-hand be taken as proof of past identities.³⁷ Yet it is difficult to conceive of so-called Nkoya culture as something else than a slightly idiosyncratic combination and permutation of productive, social-organizational and symbolic patterns widely and abundantly available throughout the region.

Some of the potentially distinguishing cultural features of Nkoya-ness underwent considerable change over the last few centuries. A case in point is male circumcision (*mukanda*) which, introduced around the middle of the 19th century by a Nkoya ruler with close Lunda connexions, became a rather widespread practice among Nkoya-speaking groups until about the 1920s,³⁸ but which over the past fifty years has entirely gone into disuse. The fact that today Nkoya ridicule *mukanda* as a distinctive feature of Luvale and Mbunda ethnic groups, with whom they have been in heavy political and ecological competition since the 1920s (when these immigrants from Angola started to arrive in Kaoma district in large numbers), suggests that the absence of male circumcision became a distinctive feature of Nkoya-ness only recently and in response to Luvale/Mbunda encroachment.

This does not mean that in the pre-colonial past there never was a group of people designated as Nkoya. Although the ethnic distinctions operating today in Central African society have been greatly influenced by inter-group processes within political arenas defined by the colonial and pre-colonial state, and therefore must be seen as essentially recent phenomena,³⁹ there can be no doubt that most of the ethnic labels and cultural symbols employed in that modern context have *nominally* a pre-colonial origin, whatever fundamental changes in form and function they have since undergone.⁴⁰

³⁷ See Van Binsbergen, *Religious Change*, p. 21, where this point is argued at greater length.

³⁸ It was reported by G. H. Nicholls, 'Notes on the Natives Inhabiting the Baluba Sub-district', 1906, enclosure in KTJ 2/1, Zambia National Archives; D. W. Stirke, *Barotseland: Eight Years among the Barotse* (London, 1922; repr. Negro Universities Press, 1969), p. 63; E. W. Smith & A. M. Dale, *The Ila-Speaking Peoples of Northern Rhodesia* (London, 1920), vol. i, p. 94; G. C. Clay, *History of the Mankoya District*, Rhodes-Livingstone Institute Communications No. 4 (Lusaka, 1945), p. 4; and J. M. Shimunika, *Likota lya Bankoya/The History of the Nkoya*, translated by M. M. Malapa and W. M. J. van Binsbergen (Leiden, in press). For a daring but historically untenable approach to male puberty ceremonies in this part of Zambia, see L. de Heusch, 'Les Camps de Circoncision en Afrique Noire', paper presented at the Conference on Iron-Working Bantu-Speaking Peoples of Southern Africa before 1800, Leiden, 1978.

³⁹ See E. Colson, 'Contemporary Tribes and the Development of Nationalism', in Helm, *op. cit.*, pp. 201-6; T. O. Ranger, 'Race and Tribe in Southern Africa: European Ideas and African Acceptance', paper presented at the Workshop on Colonialism and Racism, Leiden, Centre for the History of European Expansion, 1979.

⁴⁰ Colson, 'Contemporary Tribes'; 'African Society at the Time of the Scramble', in L. H. Gann & P. Duignan (eds.), *Colonialism in Africa, vol. i: The History and Politics of Colonialism, 1870-1914* (Cambridge, 1964), pp. 27-65. On pp. 28ff of this work she critically assesses the tribal model as applied in pre-colonial Africa. However, the greater sophistication concerning tribes in Colson's later work does not seem to affect the validity of my observations concerning the implicit, loosely descriptive use of the tribal model in much of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute work, including her own. See also Lancaster, 'Ethnic Identity', and A. Roberts, *A History of Zambia* (London, 1976), pp. 63ff.

As anywhere else in the world, people in pre-colonial Zambia saw themselves and each other as belonging to various named groups defined by any one of the following criteria, or perhaps a loose combination: language, place of residence, culture, political organization, economic speciality etc. Named social groups of wider or lesser scope are too prominently and too consistently present in oral traditions to be explained away as mere projections of colonial or post-colonial realities into a pre-colonial past. Moreover, the same names appear in written documents gathered in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, before the imposition of a colonial administration could have made a deep impact on the way people structured and named their social environment. However, it is more than likely that, like almost anywhere in the world, the various generic and proper names for groups thus distinguished by Zambians in the pre-colonial period operated at various levels of inclusiveness; that their various dimensions did not coincide (e.g. named political units did not coincide with linguistic or economic ones); that these groups were situational and often had blurred boundaries; and that they were constantly manipulated in the course of inter-group interaction. Only in this way did 'tribes' exist in pre-colonial Zambia;⁴⁰ and even so clans were more prominent forms of social organization. Distinctions and identifications at the level of 'tribe' (the word exists in every Zambian language but, of course, without any of the pejorative, primitive connotations it has acquired in modern English) may have occasionally provided a framework for political and military mobilization, but are not likely to have automatically determined actual group processes; rather they were the shifting results of such processes. A tribal model such as propounded by classic structural-functionalist anthropology, could have explained pre-colonial societies in Zambia no more than it throws light on contemporary social realities in that part of the world.

The name 'Nkoya' stems without any doubt from before the imposition of colonial rule.⁴¹ According to particularly convincing oral traditions, it is claimed to derive from a toponym denoting a forest area near the confluence of the Kabompo and the Zambezi rivers, where one of the royal clans (the one owning the Mutondo chieftainship) of the Nkoya is said to have dwelled around 1800.⁴² As the name of a social group, 'Nkoya' appears in several royal praise-names with which Nkoya rulers acceded to their respective thrones in the course of the nineteenth century. I am certain that these boastful mottoes are no recent fabrications projected back into the past. But there never was, in the pre-colonial era, an autonomous Nkoya polity encompassing the many thousands of people who today are claimed to be Nkoya. Instead

⁴¹ Cf. 'The Diaries of G. Westbeech 1885-1888', in Tabler (ed.), *Trade and Travel in Early Barotseland* (London, 1963); Nicholls, *op. cit.*; reports on the Gielgud-Anderson expedition to the Kafue Hook, BS 1/93 and KTJ 1/1, Zambia National Archives; Shimunika, *Likota*, *op. cit.*; A. W. Bailey, 'A Year on the Lalafuta River', in SAGM [South Africa General Mission] *Pioneer* 36, 1913, pp. 185-6; 'Northern Rhodesia: A Letter from Mr Bailey', *SAGM Pioneer* 37, 1914, pp. 151-2; Smith & Dale, *op. cit.*; L. Holy (ed.), *Emil Holub's Travels North of the Zambezi, 1885-6*, translated by C. Johns (Manchester, 1975).

⁴² Shimunika, *Likota*; interview, Naliele Royal Establishment, 28 October 1977.

the area has, since the end of the eighteenth century, been the scene of a number of mutually independent chiefdoms, typically with short-lived dynasties which hived off or replaced each other following a complicated pattern of fission and without recognized hierarchy among them. The group named 'Nkoya' obviously had a political dimension, but it was very small and, moreover, its boundaries certainly did not coincide with the much more extensive areas of distribution of the linguistic, cultural and economic features displayed by, among others, the set of people then designated as Nkoya. In reports dating from the 19th and 20th century, the 'Mashasha' group centring on the Kahare dynasty is at least equally prominent. Both the mutual definition of 'Nkoya' and 'Mashasha' as major constituents (along with Mbwela, Lukolwe, the Nkoya offshoots in the Zambezi plain etc.) of today's Nkoya, and the contiguous geographical areas imputed to them on tribal maps, have gone through a number of rather different versions, since David Livingstone first marked the Bamasa (= Mashasha) on the 'Detailed Map' in *Missionary Travels and Researches*.⁴³ An analysis of these versions⁴⁴ would take us too far in the present context; but it would certainly corroborate the point I am trying to make: that as an ethnic category Nkoya is fluid, and expanding.

The extension of the name Nkoya to an entire cluster encompassing several mutually independent chiefdoms throughout Western Zambia dates only from the second half of the last century, and was due largely to the incorporation, with different degrees of effectiveness, of these several shifting and unstable chiefdoms into the Kololo/Luyana state, and its heir, the Barotseland Protectorate. This ethnic labelling in the context of Lozi tributary relations was further formalized when in the first decade of the twentieth century a *boma* was established and Mankoya⁴⁵ (sub-)district was named after what was then considered the main 'tribe' inhabiting the district. Thus contained within a well-defined administrative and territorial unit, Nkoya identity could further develop within the arenas created by the colonial state and the Lozi neo-traditional government depending upon that state.

5. Ethnicity, History and the Nkoya Experience

How did the Nkoya, against so many odds, manage to convince me that they were 'a tribe'? Why was I lured into adopting this unit of study? My tentative

⁴³ D. Livingstone, *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa* (New York, 1858; repr. Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1971). In addition to the sources mentioned in note 41, and the official tribal and linguistic maps published successively by the Surveyor General, sources on this point include J. Merle *et al.*, *Modern Industry and the African* (London, 1933) (tribal map); G. Fortune, *A Preliminary Survey of the Bantu Languages of the Federation*, Rhodes-Livingstone Institute Communications No. 14 (Lusaka, 1959), pp. 26-7 and map; 'A Note on the Languages of Barotseland', in *The History of Central African Peoples*, Rhodes-Livingstone Conference Proceedings (Lusaka, 1963); and Mankoya District Notebook, Zambia National Archives, KSX 4.

⁴⁴ Adopting Lancaster's approach in 'Ethnic Identity'.

⁴⁵ The Lozi prefix *Ma-* instead of the Nkoya form *Ba-* points to the fact that the administrators' perception of the Nkoya as an ethnic group reflected Lozi views, rather than the local people's self-perception.

answer is that, although the Nkoya had never been a tribe in the sense of classic anthropology, I became involved with them at a point in their history when they were trying very hard to believe that they constituted such a tribe; when this attempt was finally beginning to pay off; when I was in a position to help the attempt succeed, because of my access to outlets for publication; and particularly when, on my part, underneath their mistaken idiom of ethnic expression I detected a sense of deprivation, protest, struggle, with which I could identify – and identification grew as I learned their language and culture, and exposed myself and my family to appalling conditions of rural life which, although commonplace to the Nkoya, seemed to epitomize their deprivation.

For there was a serious, real-life dimension which my earlier, hidden conference paper had not managed to capture. The Nkoya experience may be understandable as a product of historical circumstance, may even (as I shall argue in section 6) contain elements of one-sidedness and exaggeration – but this does not make it less real. The Nkoya ethnic pathos swept me off my feet, not so much because it provided a temporary shelter for my own uncertain identity, but particularly because it was so clearly a timely and active reaction to a collective historical experience. And I was not the first anthropologist to struggle with the experiential side of ethnicity. Whereas Mitchell's later work on urban ethnicity⁴⁶ was primarily a (successful) attempt to remedy the analytical confusion of emic and etic aspects in urban ethnic categorization, Epstein went much further in his revision. In *Ethos and Identity*⁴⁷ he elaborated on aspects which the Copperbelt studies initially had left untouched: the emotive aspects of identity as deriving from a sense of collective history, and from identification between (alternate) generations. Perhaps it is the emotional struggle to do justice to this experiential side that has tempted so many students of ethnicity to adopt such terms as identity and primordial attachments, as ultimate explanations.

Let me summarize how contemporary Nkoya look upon their history since the emergence of their own major chieftainships in the early nineteenth century. They claim to have migrated to their present territory, in the course of the last centuries, under the impact of Kaonde and Yeke pressure.⁴⁸ Their royal capitals were pillaged by the Lozi (who earlier, in Mulambwa's time in the early nineteenth century, are believed to have come and begged for chiefly medicine and chiefly instruments from the Nkoya!). Since the first decade of this century their chiefs have been supervised and humiliated by Lozi

⁴⁶ J. C. Mitchell, 'Tribe and Social Change in South Central Africa', in Gutkind, *op. cit.*, pp. 83-101; 'Perception of Ethnicity and Ethnic Behaviour', in A. Cohen (ed.), *Urban Ethnicity* (London, 1974), pp. 1-35.

⁴⁷ A. L. Epstein, *Ethos and Identity* (London/Chicago, 1978).

⁴⁸ The probably more substantial pressure from the side of Chinyama chiefs coming in from the north is not reflected in collective Nkoya memory as documented in my data; see R. M. Derricourt & R. J. Papstein, 'Lukolwe and the Mbwele of North-Western Zambia', *Azania 11*, 1977, pp. 169-75; R. J. Papstein, 'The Upper Zambezi: A History of the Luvale People, 1000-1900', Ph.D. thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 1978.

representative *indunas* and, since 1937, relegated to an inferior position altogether with the creation of the Mankoya Native Treasury and the Lozi court at Naliele (near the Kaoma district centre), occupied by a senior member of the Lozi royal family. Their lands were encroached upon by Lozi and especially by thousands of Angolan (Mbunda, Luvale, Luchazi) immigrants into the district since the 1920s. They were evicted from much of their agricultural and hunting territory at the creation of Kafue National Park in the 1930s. They were left without adequate mission-provided educational and medical facilities, which (in the Nkoya view) were concentrated near the centres of Lozi power in the district and in Barotseland as a whole.

Nor did the first ten years of Zambia's Independence do much to restore Nkoya pride. At the district's primary schools, use of Nkoya textbooks was abolished and Lozi ones substituted in the late 1960s; the predominantly non-Nkoya teachers were blamed for the very poor educational attainment of their Nkoya pupils, most of whom received their education in a language (Lozi) they could not speak at home. Secondary school entrance was very low, and access to higher educational institutions negligible. Radio broadcasting in the Nkoya language, never more than a few minutes a week anyway, was discontinued altogether. At the provincial level, Lozi, and at the district level especially Mbunda and Luvale, dominated the national party, UNIP, as well as the various elected bodies of local government; and the Nkoya mainly supported ANC until this party was integrated into UNIP on the creation of the one-party state in 1972. Like the whole of Western Zambia, the Nkoya saw their major access to capitalist labour markets cut off when labour recruitment for the South African mines was stopped shortly after UDI. But, somewhat different from the Lozi, the Nkoya, because of their different educational and mission history, and because of their lack of previously established urban footholds, could find little compensation in migratory opportunities along the Zambian line of rail. Cash-cropping opportunities were slowly rising in the district, including agricultural extension work, the erection of National Agricultural Marketing Board depots, and a massive tobacco and maize scheme of the Tobacco Board of Zambia. But again preciously few Nkoya benefited by these, except as lowly-paid agricultural workers. And people in the outlying villages negotiated in vain for tractors to come to their villages and plough their maize fields. Among the villagers, cash-crop production still tends to be limited to a few bags of maize a year; seed maize and fertilizer are difficult to get, and after marketing their crops the peasants have to wait for months until they get paid. In 1969 the name of the district was changed from Mankoya to Kaoma, wiping out the last traces of official recognition that originally the district was Nkoya land. The two main Nkoya chiefs, Kahare and Mutondo, continued to maintain a state-subsidized royal establishment, as guaranteed under the 1964 Barotse Agreement (the 1969 alternations did not affect this point). But they were denied the status of senior chiefs, and their subsidies were substantially lower than those received at Naliele.

The Nkoya keenly resent their lack of success in the wider society, which

they blame on their history of deprivation. By the mid-1970s, the Nkoya could boast only one University graduate (junior partner in a law firm). In addition, a few dozen had, through their good fortune, political credit and education, managed to occupy middle-range positions in government institutions and private enterprise in urban areas. A similar small number were established as modern farmers in Kaoma, Mumbwa and Namwala districts. Among these people, the pressure from poor relatives and the stigma of belonging to a despised ethnic group is severely felt, and some go through periods when they deny being Nkoya, and no longer honour claims to kinship support.

The majority of the Nkoya, meanwhile, are still dependent on labour migration for their family income, and have only unskilled labour to offer. They partly maintain a pattern of circulatory migration and family separation which for others in Zambia is increasingly a thing of the past. The Nkoya presence in the urban areas along the line of rail is limited and has a rapid turnover: it even seems to be declining under the effects of a shrinking market for unskilled labour, and the increasing competition from people from areas that have more established urban footholds (easterners in Lusaka, northerners on the Copperbelt).

Above I have rendered this stereotyped experience as a collective representation among a set of people⁴⁹ – recent history as most Nkoya today would see it, and not history as a detached historian with free access to all relevant sources would write it.⁵⁰ For instance, the extent and variation of nineteenth-century Lozi and Kololo control over the eastern part of what is now Western Province remains a problem which crops up again and again in Nkoya oral sources: some admit established tributary relations, others stress the common origin between Nkoya and Lozi, and still others deny any Lozi domination over the Nkoya prior to colonial rule. How, and where, to distinguish between history as self-expression, and history as a detached outsider's undertaking? The point is crucial, since Nkoya today are people

⁴⁹ A very similar case are the Luvale as studied by Robert Papstein, 'Upper Zambezi, and particularly 'The Transformation of Oral History under the Colonial State', in *Papers Presented to the International Oral History Conference, 24-26 October 1980* (Amsterdam, 1980), vol.ii, pp. 548-69. My discussions with Papstein since 1974 have greatly contributed to my understanding of Nkoya history and its crucial role in Nkoya ethnicity.

⁵⁰ For the history of Western Zambia, see G. L. Caplan, *The Elites of Barotseland, 1878-1969* (London, 1970); M. Mainga, *Bulozi under the Luyana Kings* (London, 1972) – Dr Mainga's work is particularly resented by modern and traditional Nkoya leaders today because of the way she handled the oral materials presented to her at the Nkoya chiefly capitals; E. Stokes, 'Barotseland: The Survival of an African State', in E. Stokes & R. Brown (eds.), *The Zambesian Post* (Manchester, 1966), pp. 261-301; D. C. Mulford, *Zambia: The Politics of Independence, 1957-1964* (London, 1967), ch. vi; G. Prins, *The Hidden Hippopotamus* (Cambridge, 1980); T. O. Ranger, 'Nationality and Nationalism: The Case of Barotseland', *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 2, 1968, pp. 227-46. For approaches from a Marxist point of view, see G. Clarence-Smith, 'Slaves, Commoners and Landlords in Bulozhi c. 1875 to 1906', *Journal of African History* 20, 1979, pp. 219-34; and R. Frankenberg, 'Economic Anthropology or Political Economy: The Barotse Social Formation', in J. Clammer (ed.), *The New Economic Anthropology* (London, 1978), pp. 31-60. On the Nkoya specifically: Clay, *History, op. cit.*; Shimunika, *Likota, op. cit.*; Anonymous [J. M. Shimunika], *Muhumpu wa Byambo bya Mwaka – Nkoya*, n.p., n.d.; Van Binsbergen, *Religious Change*, chs. 4, 5, 7.

united not so much by the distinguishing features of a common language, culture, or rural production system, but by a particular conception of their recent past. They define themselves mainly as the bearers of a common history, and (as came out very clearly in the course of my work sessions with the chiefs' councils at the two main Nkoya royal establishments in the district) they expect from the explicit formulation and circulation of this version of history an internal mobilization and an outside recognition which, when translated into political and economic benefits, will remedy their predicament through government appointments and development projects coming their way.

In this emic version of their history, their misery is set off against delusions of past grandeur and of immense geographical extension, comprising all speakers of Nkoya, Mashasha, Mbwela and related dialects, and their descendants, throughout Zambia's Western, Northwestern, Central and Southern Provinces. It is not so much the redefinition of history in the hands of an ethnic group, but rather the creation of history as an aspect of the contemporary emergence of an ethnic group.

The Nkoya today would thus appear to be a case of what Abner Cohen has so aptly termed *retribalization*.

'a process by which a group from one ethnic category, whose members are involved in a struggle for power and privilege with the members of a group from another ethnic category, within the framework of a *formal* political system, manipulate some customs, values, myths, symbols and ceremonials from their cultural tradition in order to articulate an *informal* political organization which is used as a weapon in that struggle'.⁵¹

During the colonial period various attempts to confront Lozi domination led to utter defeat. Chief Kahare Timuna was temporarily demoted in 1923.⁵² When in the 1930s Watchtower agitation in Mankoya district was challenging the Lozi administration, the latter banned the preachers and threatened with demotion the Nkoya chiefs siding with them.⁵³ Soon after the creation of the Naliele Court, the incumbent of the Mutondo chieftainship died under what the Nkoya consider to be suspicious circumstances; ten years later his successor Muchaila was dethroned and exiled to Kalabo for ten years.⁵⁴ Witchcraft cases in Mankoya district in the late 1950s, directed in part against the local Lozi establishment, were vigorously squashed.⁵⁵ In 1960 a Nkoya-based ANC branch was refused registration as

'it was felt that any political organization in the Nkoya area would stir up longstanding secessionist agitation among a subject tribe against the Barotse government'.⁵⁶

⁵¹ A. Cohen, *Custom and Politics in Urban Africa* (London, 1969), p. 2.

⁵² M. Gluckman, *Essays on Lozi Land and Royal Property*, Rhodes-Livingstone Papers No. 10 (repr. Manchester, 1968; 1st impr. 1943), p. 95.

⁵³ References in Van Binsbergen, *Religious Change*, pp. 344ff, n. 73, 77.

⁵⁴ Shimunika, *Likota*; Anonymous, *Muhumpu*.

⁵⁵ B. Reynolds, *Magic, Divination and Witchcraft among the Barotse of Northern Rhodesia* (London, 1963).

⁵⁶ Mulford, *Politics*, p. 223.

Attempts to organize a Nkoya tribal association along the line of rail, and a political party largely on a Nkoya ethnic basis, were also undertaken around 1960, but failed, partly due to difficulties arising from the recently enacted *Societies Ordinance*.

It was probably no coincidence that my research among the Nkoya took place in a period when the tide seemed to turn for the Nkoya, due to a number of developments at the national level in Zambia. The same move that led to the alteration of the district name from Mankoya to Kaoma implied far-reaching measures that all but dismantled the remnants of the Lozi state within the Republic of Zambia, and that marked the defeat of the strong Lozi faction within the Zambian government.⁵⁷ This diminished the extent to which non-Lozi westerners would be dependent on Lozi patronage for a political career; in fact, the former became likely allies of the state against the Lozi establishment. The integration of ANC into UNIP in 1972 relieved former ANC candidates from the stigma of disloyalty, and the one Nkoya candidate, defeated on an ANC ticket in 1968, was victorious for UNIP in the 1973 and the 1977 general elections. He became the first Nkoya MP (representing, though, only part of the area inhabited by Nkoya). Yet he might just as well have identified as Lozi: his father was Lozi, but he spent part of his childhood at one of the Nkoya chief's capitals, from which his mother originated. In addition, a few Nkoya became appointed, non-elected members of the Kaoma Rural Council, partly on the strength of their traditional offices. No Nkoya played leading roles in UNIP at the district level (Regional Office) or above.

Modern Nkoya politicians rely not only on their roots in the Nkoya royal families, but also try to instil a sense of new opportunities existing at the national and district level, now that Lozi power is so clearly on the decline. They stir up a new ethnic pride. Thus they create a local following; their action manages to pull local people, distrustful of the independent Zambian state and of UNIP, back into national political participation. One of their proudest achievements is that in the newly-established party branches, for the first time in Zambian history, well-known UNIP songs (like *Tiyende pamodzi*) are now sung in Nkoya translations. Besides their political activities, they also further the interests of traditional leadership, instigating discussions about the size of subsidies for Nkoya chiefs, the revival of chieftainships that were abolished in the colonial era, and the creation of senior chieftainships among the Nkoya. A sign of the changing tide is the re-installation in 1980 of Chief Muchaila Mutondo, decades after his demotion and exile. Besides these political activities the new leaders availed themselves of the new economic opportunities which, particularly, the Tobacco Board of Zambia is creating in the district. In this context they act as employers of agricultural wage-labour and as entrepreneurs.

In addition to active Nkoya politicians in recent times, a major builder of Nkoya ethnicity has been Rev. J. M. Shimunika. Born c. 1910 as a member of

⁵⁷ Caplan, *Elites*, pp. 219ff.

the Mutondo royal family, he is rumoured to have been a *nganga* (diviner-priest) prior to his conversion to Christianity, which came to the district in 1923 (after A. W. Bailey's abortive attempt in 1913-14). Shimunika was a teacher, an evangelist and finally a pastor with the South Africa General Mission (now the Africa Evangelical Fellowship; its missionary activities have led to the creation of the Evangelical Church of Zambia). Shimunika's translation of the New Testament and the Psalms was published in 1952;⁵⁸ his Old Testament translation was completed in the 1970s. In the 1950s he published a short pamphlet in the Nkoya language, *Muhumpu wa Byambo bya Mwaka*, which is a selection taken from his larger work, *Likota lya Bankoya (The History of the Nkoya)*, which is now ready for publication.⁵⁹ Instead of boosting Nkoya morale, *Muhumpu* created internal animosity, because of the allegations it contained as to the weak stand of a particular Nkoya royal family *vis-à-vis* the Lozi. Educated Nkoya of a younger generation than Rev. Shimunika's have invested a great deal of time and energy in order to enable me to publish *Likota* in a form that is to avoid similar animosity in future.

My research was firmly supported by both traditional office-holders and their kinsmen, the Nkoya modern politicians. Without the introductions extended by the latter, a substantial part of my data could never have been collected. But in the first year of my Nkoya research this element was still absent. The eager support the Nkoya townsmen in the compounds offered me at that stage derived from a less sophisticated perception of my possible role, but was likewise cast in ethnic terms. The following episode brings this out clearly:

By May, 1973, I had decided to add some systematic, quantifiable census data to my observational and participatory urban data acquired so far. I prepared a mimeographed one-page questionnaire, and administered it to scores of Nkoya assembled for a girl's puberty ceremony in a Lusaka compound. One elderly man showed a healthy suspicion, and wanted to know why I needed the basic information I had asked him. But before I could explain my intentions at length, he was scolded by his fellows: 'You better answer him, you stupid fool. Otherwise we are never going to have a book about ourselves, like the Lozi have and all those other tribes! . . .'

This eagerness to tell their tale, to have themselves put on the ethnographic and historical map, was even the main force behind my initial concentration on the Nkoya, during my urban research. Confronted with the very strong force with which this emerging ethnic group positively attracted me, I had no reason to resist.

6. Nkoya Ethnicity and the Dialectics of Consciousness

With the preceding two sections of this paper, we may have gained tentative insights into the nature of Nkoya ethnicity which could not have been arrived at through consistent application of the classic tribal model. The

⁵⁸ *Testamenta ya Yipya/Nyimbo* (London, 1952).

⁵⁹ Shimunika, *Likota*; Anonymous, *Muhumpu*.

contemporary Nkoya situation turns out to have many of the ingredients stressed by current interpretations of ethnicity in the Central African context. Underneath a strongly situational and manipulatory surface which is particularly apparent in urban and middle-class contexts, there is a genuine Nkoya identity, but it is based not on primordial attachment to a way of life, culture and language, but on a collective sense of deprivation in the course of a shared recent history. Expecting to extract, from the state and the party, goods and services which until recently have been denied them,⁶⁰ peasants identifying as Nkoya on the basis of this historical consciousness give voting support to politicians from their midst; the latter, linked to Nkoya royal families but likewise, through their education and careers, involved in modern economic life, explore the possibilities of ethnic identification, and actively further the building of Nkoya ethnicity, in an attempt to safeguard their own positions⁶¹ as well as to serve their people's interests at the same time. Their efforts at retribalization converge, and sometimes coincide, with those of local intellectuals. Just like everything social, Nkoya ethnicity turns out to be man-made; it is even amazingly recent. But to realize that the Nkoya are not a 'natural', primordial unit, renders social and historical meaning to Nkoyanness, instead of – as I thought in my first disappointment – depriving it of meaning.

However, showing how one particular unit of study, the tribe – already subjected to so much criticism – is inadequate in the Nkoya case as well, only goes half-way towards solving the problem of the unit of study. I shall now carry the argument further, sketching the wider sociological implications of the picture of Nkoya ethnicity presented above, and arguing that the structure of the social field which thus becomes visible solves the problem of the unit of study for us.

I have discussed Nkoya ethnicity as a form of consciousness which may lead on, situationally, to social and political mobilization, but which is primarily a process of self-definition among a set of people perceiving themselves as sharing a common history of deprivation. Now one of the major tasks confronting the social sciences today is the development of a sophisticated theory of the conditions under which particular forms of consciousness relate to particular social, political and economic processes. An idealist, culturological position of the kind adopted by those looking for primordial attachments is just as untenable as a vulgar materialist position which, against all evidence, posits a simple one-to-one relationship between economic conditions and the attending forms of consciousness. The task is fundamental, on the one hand because the social sciences in themselves are a form of consciousness; on the other hand because it is partly by the phantasms of consciousness that conditions of deprivation, injustice, exploitation persist –

⁶⁰ Cf. R. Bates, *Ethnicity in Contemporary Africa*, East African Studies No. xiv (New York, 1973).

⁶¹ R. Moltano, 'Cleavage and Conflict in Zambian Politics', in W. Tordoff (ed.), *Politics in Zambia* (Manchester, 1974), pp. 62-106.

just as they are actively challenged, and altered, as a result of an emerging, truer consciousness.

What further insights into Nkoya ethnicity can we gather if we subject this form of consciousness to a marxist-inspired contextual analysis?

In a seminal recent study on the dialectics of class and tribe in East Africa, John Saul offers three complementary approaches by which ethnicity could be drawn within the orbit of a marxist analysis. Ethnicity, he argues, could be viewed firstly as a response to imperialism at the sub-national level; secondly as an ideological aspect of the articulation of modes of production; and thirdly as a form of ideological class struggle.⁶²

Viewed as a possible response to imperialism, it is a crucial feature of the Nkoya view of their history that no distinction is made between those aspects of local decline that were due to national or global processes of the penetration of capitalism as mediated by the colonial state (and that, therefore, affected the people of the district in a way unrelated to them being, or not being, Nkoya); and those that more directly reflected intrusion by other Africans (Lozi, Angolans). Analytically, only the latter – if still only superficially – could be dealt with in ethnic terms. The colonial state served the creation of capitalist conditions, and the attuning of pre-existing non-capitalist modes of production to these conditions. However, the colonial state realized its aims partly by furthering a neo-traditional indigenous Lozi administration, sanctioning the latter's hold upon the peripheral groups in Barotseland; the state also allowed the settlement of large numbers of Angolan immigrants – not, of course, near the centres of Lozi presence, but in the same outlying areas. The Nkoya clearly perceived the Lozi and the Angolan immigrants, but failed to detect the forces of the colonial state and of capitalism behind them. Therefore the colonial state remained fairly neutral in the conscious historical perception of the Nkoya. The frequent expressions of Nkoya protest in the colonial period, if they took on political overtones at all and were not entirely clad in religious forms, were directed against Lozi domination and not against the colonial state proper. One of the most shocking aspects of my field-work in a newly-independent country was to hear peasants, as a standard turn in their everyday conversation and certainly not prompted by interviewing, praise colonial conditions and the economic and political security they had implied, in contrast with the situation after Independence. The penetration of capitalism had numerous structural effects on the local society (wage-labour, migrancy, monetization of bride-wealth, fragmentation of productive units and of settlement, partial dismantling of traditional authority by divorcing it from its exploitative economic base). But in so far as these effects were not welcomed (they often were), they were blamed on the Lozi. The negative aspects in the Nkoya collective experience came to be almost entirely perceived in terms of ethnic conflict. Even the modern national state is for the Nkoya primarily veiled under ethnic perceptions. As recently as 1973, when the

⁶² J. S. Saul, *The State and Revolution in Eastern Africa* (New York/London, 1979), ch. 14, 'The Dialectic of Tribe and Class', pp. 391-423.

district authorities staged meetings in the villages in preparation for the general elections, these meetings were boycotted or challenged because they were in the hated Lozi language; and the two opponents of the one Nkoya candidate were unattractive primarily because they were known to be Mbunda and Luvale respectively.

This ethnic fixation enables the Nkoya to look to the post-colonial state with new expectations, now that the main perceived enemy, the Lozi ethnic group, is no longer as closely allied with the state as used to be the case in the colonial era and in the first years after Independence.

It would be foolish to accept the Nkoya's one-sided view of history and to attribute their predicament entirely to the effects of Lozi domination. As a 'Lozi subject tribe', the Nkoya were exposed to both Lozi and European imperialism. Historically these followed each other in quick succession, and the two could be argued to be indirectly related also in the pre-colonial period.⁶³ After 1900, the class alliance between the Lozi aristocracy and the colonial powers led to fundamental changes in the type of economic exploitation to which the people in the eastern periphery of Barotseland were subjected. The taking of slaves and the payment of tribute, within two decades after the imposition of colonial rule, had completely given way to forms of taxation which virtually reduced the Lozi to an administrative presence, whereas the economic exploitation was achieved through the mechanisms of labour migration as furthered by the colonial state. In that period, the deprivation on the surface (in the fields of chieftainship, educational and medical facilities etc.), for which the Lozi were blamed, ultimately sprang from the logic of imperialism. From this angle, Nkoya ethnicity, even in the powerless form in which it expressed itself during the colonial period, had the effect of obscuring such class consciousness as might have emerged among the villagers in the first decades of their incorporation into capitalism. Indirectly, such ethnicity appears as an ideological effect of imperialism.

Interestingly, among the non-Nkoya inhabitants of Western Zambia the prevailing stereotype about the Nkoya is not that of people deprived under the impact of Lozi domination, but that of hunters drinking honey-beer, expertly playing on their xylophones, hiding in the forest from the responsibilities and vicissitudes of modern life, uninterested in commercial farming, and actively encouraging truancy in their children. In other words, people who can afford to shun participation in modern life because their old ways are still fairly intact – rather than people who have been denied access to modern life as a result of Lozi machinations. This would suggest, as a possibility, that it is precisely the relative viability of their non-capitalist modes of production which prevented them from successfully manipulating capitalism to their own lasting benefit. But of course, stereotypes are not enough to go by.

This leads on to the second aspect mentioned by Saul, ethnicity as a form of

⁶³ Materials for such an interpretation could be gleaned from Mainga, *Bulozi, passim*; Prins, *Hidden Hippopotamus, passim*; Roberts, *History*, pp. 115ff; E. Flint, 'Trade and Politics in Barotseland during the Koloilo Period', *Journal of African History* 11, 1, 1970, pp. 71-86.

consciousness springing from the articulation of modes of production. Also from this angle the Nkoya view of their history cannot be taken at face value. The modern French school of marxist anthropology⁶⁴ has two illuminating insights to offer for an understanding of the Nkoya situation. Firstly, capitalism penetrating the Third World has a well-defined interest in the partial survival of encapsulated, non-capitalist modes of production: for these are the niches where a new labour force is reproduced and where a discarded labour force is taken care of, at virtually no costs for the capitalist sector. Secondly, capitalism makes inroads into these non-capitalist modes of production by means of class alliances between capital, on the one hand, and the exploiting class-like groups in the non-capitalist modes of production, on the other.

From this perspective, what the Nkoya resent in their situation today would appear as common features of a labour reserve in a context of peripheral capitalism: lack of capitalist amenities that serve the reproduction of the labour force (schools, hospitals); and the limited size of local capitalist markets for labour and petty commodities (cash crops). But the reverse of this medal is that, in their area, non-capitalist modes of production have persisted throughout the colonial era and, even if made subservient to the reproduction of labour for capitalist markets, still prove economically viable. Hunting, fishing, collecting and subsistence agriculture, organized on a kinship basis, even today are still vital undertakings, especially in the eastern part of the district. Of course, these forms of non-capitalist production cannot in themselves supply the cash needed today for clothing, tools, transport etc. Moreover, none of these forms persist in a way that is unaffected by capitalism. For instance, the Nkoya hunter today is often a youth who does not own the gun and ammunition he uses, but offers his skills to the owner of the gun in exchange for a portion of the bag he brings home; and this owner is usually at the same time a senior kinsman of the hunter, a village headman and a retired labour migrant, who has purchased a gun out of the proceeds of his sale of labour in the capitalist sector, and who sells most of the meat thus procured. Relations of production in hunting combine capitalist aspects (separation between worker and means of production, and between worker and product, and sale of this product as a commodity) with forms of authority and reciprocity proper to domestic and tributary modes of production outside capitalism.

These historical relations of production can only survive, more or less, if they continue to be embedded in the social, judicial and ritual forms in which they used to be enshrined in the past; or, more accurately, in forms mimicking

⁶⁴ Especially C. Meillassoux, *Femmes, Greniers et Capitaux* (Paris, 1975); P-P. Rey, *Colonialisme, Néo-Colonialisme et Transition au Capitalisme* (Paris, 1971); (ed.), *Les Alliances de Classes* (Paris, 1973); cf. W. M. J. van Binsbergen & P. L. Geschiere (eds.), *Oude Produktieverhoudingen en Binnendringend Kapitalisme* (Maasbree, 1981); a valuable overview in English is J. S. Kahn & J. R. Llobera, 'French Marxist Anthropology', *Journal of Peasant Studies* 8, 1, 1980, pp. 81-100.

these historical ones. Although these forms do not derive from a capitalist logic, it is not in the interest of capital to destroy them. And in some cases, particularly those where capital can strike a class alliance with exploitative elements in the older modes of production, it actively supports them. For a different part of Africa, Rey⁶⁵ has argued that the monetization of bride-wealth was one way to synchronize the interests of capital and village elders: thus the latter could continue to exploit male youths through their control over marriageable women, but now in a form which forced these youths to go and sell their labour as migrants. Also among the Nkoya this process took place. But an even more striking form of class alliance formed the subsidies which the state paid to chiefs. Due to historical circumstances which we need not enter into now, in Barotseland these subsidies were higher than anywhere else in Northern Rhodesia, and the Nkoya chiefs shared in them. At Independence, this state of affairs was reinforced, and in recent years the subsidies have even been substantially increased. Paid out of state revenue, and in early years consisting of a fixed percentage of the revenue from hut tax, these subsidies amount to a sharing out of the fruits of capitalist exploitation to the remnants of a tributary mode of production. Capitalism, while reproducing still a substantial part of its labour force via an encapsulated *domestic* mode of production such as found among the Nkoya today, in its turn reproduces an encapsulated *tributary* mode, at least in its symbolic and ceremonial form of councillors, retainers, *kapasus*, royal musicians, a palace of sorts. In passing we note that Nkoya chiefs benefit from an updated form of a treaty between the colonial state and the Lozi aristocracy; so surely the Lozi's effect on the Nkoya experience was not entirely negative.

Much more important is that we now find, in the political economy of the area, a reason for the Nkoya's insistence on the existence and persistence of their tribe. As a distinct culture and society, in other words as a tribe, the Nkoya have never existed. However, to the extent that the persistence of historical forms in an encapsulated, neo-traditional version is part and parcel of the mechanisms of the reproduction of cheap labour, and to the extent that the articulation of modes of production in the expanding social formation to which the Nkoya area belongs crystallizes around a state-subsidized neo-traditional chieftainship,⁶⁶ Nkoya ethnicity can be considered a product of this articulation.

In this perspective, the view of ethnicity as primordial attachment to a tribal model dating back to pre-colonial times becomes more than bad social science: it becomes part of the ideology of capitalism itself – but I am sure that advocates of that view would have equally nasty things to say about the

⁶⁵ Rey, *Colonialisme*.

⁶⁶ This is an important point. Allegiance to a particular chief tends to form a focus for a Zambian's perspective of his or her rural home and ethnic affiliation. This is reflected and reinforced in Zambia's administrative procedures. Since independence ethnic affiliation has never been asked by census enumerators – in 'One Zambia One Nation' (one of UNIP's main slogans) ethnic affiliation does not exist officially; but a person's chief appears on a citizen's National Registration Card.

conception of ethnicity advanced here.

In the juxtaposition between non-capitalist aspects of Nkoya rural society and capitalism, the specific features of the former take on a new function: they are to be the legitimation of kin-based claims of assistance, through which people peripherally participating in a capitalist order seek shelter in non-capitalist relations of production that exist in the shadow of, and in servitude to, that capitalist order. Nkoya ethnicity is the expression of this problem at the level of consciousness: by stressing the viability, splendour and antiquity of the non-capitalist modes of production, it struggles to keep them intact, so that the individual worker in the process of peasantization and proletarianization can effectively benefit from what remnants of these non-capitalist modes still exist. Their survival has become both problematic and vital; ethnicity endows them with rather more reality and resilience than they in fact possess.

Also the role of modern politicians is thrown into relief. At the level of the state's organizational and ideological apparatus (government and the party), these leaders represent a new phase in the class alliances by means of which capitalism imposes itself on pre-existing modes of production; combining traditional elite connotations, ethnicity-building and their own capitalist enterprises, they represent resolutions of the contradictions inherent in articulation. They further capitalism at the same time as helping to buttress non-capitalist modes of production against capitalism; they further incorporation in the national state, but in a form that conceals the exploitative and manipulative elements of the political process and of their own role; and thus, as political and ideological brokers, they legitimate the state in the eyes of the Nkoya, and at the same time further Nkoya interests within national and sub-national political arenas.

Of the third dimension of ethnicity mentioned by Saul, that of ideological class struggle, the Nkoya situation does not seem to offer a clear surface manifestation. Both the incorporation in the Lozi state in the course of the 19th century, and the peripheral integration in capitalism, objectively can be taken as forms of class formation: the imposition of new forms of exploitation. It would not be altogether unjustified to attribute the depth of emotion and the vehemence of expression attending Nkoya ethnicity today ultimately to a form of class struggle seeking to break through. This, I realized much later, is probably an important reason behind my own emotional identification with the Nkoya. But however this may be, class consciousness did not succeed in actually breaking through. The trappings of ethnicity, under conditions of articulation and class alliances, prevent the Nkoya from taking anything remotely resembling a revolutionary consciousness. Considering the remarkable choice of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary ideological positions available in the district in the 1970s – from Maoist Chinese building the Lusaka-Kaoma highway, through MPLA and SWAPO guerrilla camps, to the South-Africa-sponsored adventurer Mushala – the Nkoya have not exactly shown an inclination towards left-wing radicalism, to say the least.

Nkoya ethnic consciousness is 'false consciousness' in terms of Mafeje's analysis of tribalism.⁶⁷

7. *Conclusion: Beyond the Unit of Study*

In the light of my analysis of Nkoya ethnicity, the problem of the unit of study finally turns out to be a non-problem. Seeking to protect himself against the surging flood of data, the researcher tentatively cuts out a field of study for his personal attention; and since he is studying people who themselves are constantly constructing and reconstructing their reality, he may be tempted to let his analytical distinctions coincide with folk distinctions. I have described how I was caught in this trap, and how I scrambled out of it by the adoption of analytical modes which not only belong to a different realm of discourse than that in which the Nkoya consider themselves a tribe, but that also explode the whole notion of the Nkoya or similar group as a unit of study. What remains is a complex picture of relationships, informed by marxist anthropology as well as by history and political economy, and far removed from the Nkoya experience and from the unit of study it seemed to suggest. There is no obvious, let alone natural, unit of study that is more likely than others to give insight into the sorts of relationships that I have tried to disentangle in this argument. The emerging picture, while explaining to some extent the nature of Nkoya-ness, I would hope helps to eradicate the stereotype of bounded ethnic groups which happily lend themselves to cross-cultural analysis. As the Kaoma District Governor exclaimed during a heated political meeting, in preparation for the 1973 general elections:

'This nonsense has to stop! Chief, you must control your people! There are no Nkoya! 'Nkoya' does not exist!'

Neither do the Lozi, Bemba, Tonga or Ndembu – unless as phenomena at the level of consciousness, whose dialectics we – whose academic work amounts to the production of yet another form of consciousness – should seek to trace and explain rather than to adopt. Our results may at first puzzle, disappoint or infuriate the people we are writing about; but this is only a passing phase in the continuing dialogue between the analyst and the people he or she studies. Further reflection may enable us to identify the more obvious constraints working on their consciousness, as well as on our own, and may lead to the production of a picture which is analytically more convincing and which at the same time does fuller justice to the participants' perceptions, hopes and struggles.

Although a marxist perspective can help to clarify some aspects of this research task, it is only fair to admit that the notion of bounded ethnic groups as more or less self-evident units of analysis has been uncritically adopted by the French school of marxist anthropology, featuring such famous ethnic

⁶⁷ A. Mafeje, 'The Ideology of Tribalism', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 9, 1971, pp. 253-61.

groups as the Guro and the Incas.⁶⁸ Neither does the concept of the expanding social formation provide such a viable unit of study, although this concept is obviously relevant in an analysis of Nkoya ethnicity as, among other factors, a response to the articulation of modes of production. In view of the fact that the dialectics of Nkoya ethnicity partly refer to the provincial, national and inter-continental levels the expanding social formation in this case would, Wallerstein-fashion, coincide with the whole world. As argued above, that would not be a feasible unit of study; moreover, such a unit of study would, I am afraid, display more salient and urgent topics for study than Nkoya ethnicity. A simple spatio-temporal delineation would not do either: the picture of a field of specific relationships, which emerges as the major result of my Nkoya research, is neither geographically confined (for it extends far beyond the Nkoya chief's areas of Kaoma district into urban Zambia, North Atlantic metropolises, and my own department), nor historically defined – extending as it does from the eighteenth century into the twentieth.

Instead of a clear-cut unit of study as a source of security for the field-worker and as a handy artefact to be manipulated by the cross-cultural comparativist, what remains is an awareness of interesting questions and possible sources of inspiration; an inter-disciplinary outlook; and the intention to analyse the dialectics of consciousness not only among the people selected for study, but also within the realm of scholarship and ultimately in one's private reactions as a researcher. It may not be much, but as the solution to a non-problem it may still help us along.

⁶⁸ C. Meillassoux, *L'Anthropologie Economique des Gouro* (Paris, 1964); Godelier, *Horizon*, pp. 83-92; for similar criticism see also Kahn & Llobera, *op. cit.*, p. 88: 'these writers appear to share the view that "societies" as conceived by traditional anthropology are relevant units of analysis'.