

# 'Fortunately he had stepped aside just in time': Mythical time, historical time and transcontinental echoes in the mythology of the Nkoya people of Zambia, South Central Africa

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Although by its Greek and Ancient Egyptian etymology the concept of 'myth' would seem to be primarily predicated on the *narrative* dimension, its use in modern (post-Enlightenment) contexts, worldwide, hinges on an interplay of *truth* and its proverbial mother, *time*. A myth may be taken as the paroxysm of truth (*e.g.* a cosmogony or eschatology in the eyes of believers) or as an untruth (*e.g.* such cosmogony or eschatology in the eyes of non-believers), but it often derives its peculiar status of hovering away from the plane of everyday reality from its dissociation *vis-à-vis* the here and the now – in other words, from a play on virtualities of space and time. Could we say (*cf.* Cassirer) that in our modern specialist usage as comparative mythologists, every myth is by its very nature in the first place a statement about the enigmatically oscillating nature of time?

In my paper, I propose to pursue these pointers on the basis of one particular myth whose variations and ramifications I have explored since the early 1970s: the regional form which the widespread myth of the Tower into Heaven takes in South Central Africa. Recorded in the literature in dozens of attestations, and lived among the Nkoya people of Zambia as one of a handful of constitutive myths of kingship, this solar or rather lunar myth features a royal child's craving to wear that round white object up in the sky as a regalia (*mpande*, elsewhere in S.C. Africa also known as *ndoro*). The entire nation is, disgruntledly, made to build a high tower out of forked poles (hence the name of the royal parent: *Kapesh Kamununga Mpanda*: 'the *Kapesh* – without Bantu etymology who joins the forked poles'), so as to pluck the coveted object out of the sky – but before it can be reached, the brittle tower collapses under the weight of the people it carries, and we see another widespread mytheme come into effect: the fragmentation or confusion of early humankind into a plurality of dispersed languages and ethnic identities.

I have discussed this myth several times before, also in the IACM context (2nd Annual Meeting, 2008, proceedings 2010). Without wishing to specifically explore the symbolism of the forked poles (a time symbol?), I propose to take the analysis a few steps further on this occasion:

1. reviewing the Nkoya myth within its comparative regional, continental and transcontinental comparative context (highlighting not only the obvious parallels with the Ancient Near East including the Bible World (e.g. *Genesis 11:1-9*), but also with cultural initiatory and funerary) practices of ritual tower building in East Africa and South East Asia in historical times)
2. confronting the mythical narrative with an historic parallel from South Asia (Sigiriya, Sri Lanka), where Kashyapa, a possible name-sake / etymon of Kapesh, established an unassailable mountain fortress only to meet his doom when lured into the plain to give battle (all this against the background of considerable evidence concerning South Asian, specifically Buddhist, Hindu, and Chola influence upon S.C. Africa in the 1st and early 2nd mill. CE)
3. to the Nkoya people of the late 20th and early 21st c. CE, the Kapesh myth turns out to constitute a tangible, literal, timeless or presentist reality. Incumbents of royal titles are supposed to form an unbroken chain of successors sharing and transmitting emphatically the same undivided identity; thus an incumbent uses the first person singular, 'I', when narrating any event situated during the reign of any of her or his named predecessors). This made it possible, in July 1989, for me to travel some 40 km NW from the royal capital of Mwene (King) Kahare in eastern Kaoma District, to the village of Mwene Kapesh, a nonagenarian who was supposed by the local people to tell me all about the tower and its collapse, and how he had managed to survive this primal disaster: *'Fortunately he had stepped aside just in time'*.

The point is not that our proposed royal informant turned out to be too senile for coherent interviewing. The point is that a myth which is clearly thousands of years old and distributed over at least three continents, yet managed to be brought to life in a specific, present-day backwater of the world, under the spell of the local people's peculiar, mythical conception of time. The case reveals, as a feature of Nkoya culture (and perhaps as a feature of 'savage thought' in general, *i.e.* – Lévi-Strauss – Anatomically Modern Humans' spontaneous, untutored, non-specialist thought wherever and whenever, but especially in effectively illiterate contexts) the self-evident interpenetration of mythical and real time. It does not stand on its own in a culture like that of the Nkoya, where (another transcontinental echo?) reincarnation beliefs and name-inheritance ritual practices constantly both affirm, and deny, the reality and inescapability of death, and of time.

Could not our amazement at such naïve handling of time simply reflect the extent to which our own thinking (scholarly, specialised and logocentric as it has been disciplined to be), has been weaned away from widespread *standard* modes of going about time? Could it not just be an artefact of text-based scholarship? A sign of the constructed, artificial, alienated stance on which even the reborn comparative mythology of the last decades is predicated?