

## ***Chapter 3. Case study II. The puzzling clan system of the Nkoya people of South Central Africa: A triadic, catalytic transformation cycle of elements in disguise?***

### **3.1. Nkoya clans**

In South Central Africa, the Nkoya people are among the inhabitants of the wooded plateau of western central Zambia on the Zambezi / Kafue watershed. Their history, socio-political organisation and religious forms have constituted major topics of my work ever since the early 1970s. The people who today, after an intensive ethnicisation process in the course of the 20th century, ethnically identify as Nkoya, and who speak dialects of what they recognise as the Nkoya language, had been organised in fragmentary small states, under more or less powerful rulers (*Myene*, sing. *Mwene*), for several centuries at least before they became tributary to the Luyana / Lozi / Barotse kingdom in the Zambezi Flood Plain to the west. Thus, with their recent Lozi overlords, they became incorporated (1900) into the colonial state of Northern (initially North-western) Rhodesia, which in 1964 gave way to the postcolonial state of the Republic of Zambia. Ever since political incorporation, Nkoya *Myene* have acted as members of the Lozi ruling aristocracy, which however did not prevent them from constant and serious friction, throughout the 20th century, with the Lozi Paramount Chief and with aristocrats of more unambiguously Lozi extraction. Nkoya formal political organisation has retained the remnants of an elaborate ceremonial court culture even after incorporation in the political system of the Lozi, who historically have much in common with the Nkoya anyway.

Nkoya clans are named sub-national groupings, of which less than two dozen can be identified in contemporary social life and in Rev. J. Shimunika's compilation of Nkoya oral traditions, entitled *Likota lya Bankoya*. Clan membership is ambilineally inherited. Clans are not necessarily exogamous. There are indications that clans used to be rather localised, subdividing the extended Nkoya territory among them and managing its natural resources both economically and ritually. Each clan has a hereditary ruler whose title is now integrated, as that of a (usually junior) *Mwene*, into the overall Nkoya political organisation.

In the pre-colonial, especially the pre-statal, period, clan leaders were ritual rather than political authorities, and often were women. Plausibly clan leadership was transformed into the institution of kingship, *Wene*, under influence of external conditions such as the rise of long-distance trade, the violent encroachment of neighbouring states, and the arrival of new, presumably 'Sunda'-influenced, models of political culture.

Nkoya traditions situate the origins of clans (*mikoka*, plur.; *mukoka*, sing.) at the very origin of society; their myth of the origin of kinship is in fact a story of a contest between clans (*Likota lya Bankoya* 3 and 4). The restricted number of only six clans being mentioned in the cosmogony of Chapter 3 of *Likota* differs strikingly from the nearly two dozen that appear in the rest of that Chapter and in contemporary Nkoya social life. Apparently this inconsistency is accounted for by considering each of the six cosmogonic clan names to be triple in that each clan has two 'nick-names' (*myahi*) in addition to its real name, and this is certainly how contemporary Nkoya interpret the situation; however, below we will come to a different and obviously better interpretation. There are other inconsistencies. Whereas the informants of Table 3.1 distinguished between Shungu and Kale as different clans (possibly paired if Shungu is 'Barbel Fish' and Kale is understood as 'Fish Spear'), the tradition reflected in *Likota lya Bankoya* considers Shungu and Kale as identical. Moreover, of the ten clans that are associated each with a royal title (van Binsbergen 1992: 195), only six feature in *Likota's* cosmogony. Two of the most prominent kingships of the twentieth-century Nkoya scene are owned by clans not featuring in the cosmogony. This is for instance the case for the kingship of Mutondo. However, the central myth of the origin of kingship, as related in *Likota*, is in fact an aetiology of Mutondo's

associated clan name, *Sheta* i.e. ‘Turner’, paired with the *Nkonze*, ‘Lickers’, who likewise do not feature in the cosmology. Neither does the kingship of Kabulwebulwe feature in the clan list – however, from extensive archival sources dating from c. 1900<sup>50</sup> it is clear that the Kabulwebulwe title, although considered senior once incorporated into the colonial state (and surviving because it was too far East to be under the suffocating Lozi influence), was at the time that of a mere Big Man seeking to establish himself as royal – an outsider to the time-honoured traditional system, in other words. The identity of Kale and Kahare which is stressed by many informants and also by Smith & Dale (1920), is not borne out by my specific informants of Table 3.1, who see the Kale clan as associated with Mwene Yuvwenu, but the Nyembo clan with Mwene Kahare. An interview I had with the present Mwene Yuvwenu in Kaoma, Zambia, in July 2011 could not throw light on the matter.

The clan name Kale is a particularly puzzling element. In accordance with Manchester School<sup>51</sup> conventions, and duly acknowledged in my edition of *Likota*, I have omitted the plural personal prefixes *Ba-* in the English rendering of the names of social groups. Clans are also social groups, but their names – in true totemic fashion – tend to be composed of a lexical root designating an animal species (or other items in the natural world), prefixed by *Ka-*, the singular personal prefix. The list of Table 3.1 reads ‘KaLavwe, KaMbunze, etc.’ in the original Nkoya. By the same token, the proper name Kale as an alternative name for the KaShungu clan came to be interpreted as composed of *Ka+Le*, where *Ka-* is the common personal singular prefix, and *-Le* might be interpreted either as deriving from *ku-le-nga*, ‘to create’ (*-nga* as iterative suffix), or from *mu-li-nga*, ‘spear’: some interpret the Nkoya clan name *Kale* as ‘fish spear’. In actual fact, however, the name Kale does not follow the syntactic productivities of Nkoya as a Central Bantu language, but is a

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<sup>50</sup> Especially: reports of the Gielgud-Anderson expedition to the Hook of the Kafue, 1900, Zambia National Archives: files *BS1/93* and *KTJ 1/1 outletters Mumbwa*.

<sup>51</sup> The Manchester School was a movement within social anthropology, initiated and for decades led by the Oxford / Manchester anthropologist Max Gluckman, and particularly dominant in the field of South Central African studies (present-day Zambia, Zimbabwe and Malawi); in this connection many standards and conventions of research methodology and ethnographic reporting were established. In the first quarter century of my career I worked mainly within the Manchester paradigm, which earned me a Simon Professorship at Manchester. Cf. van Binsbergen 2007a.

totally foreign element, with not a Bantu but presumably an Indo-European, Afroasiatic or Austric etymology. Meaning ‘Black One’, the name Kale is frequently found all over the extensive Old World distribution area of Gypsies; this area does extend to Africa, where iron-working Gypsy groups have been studied *e.g.* by Bernhard Streck (1995) in Sudan, predictably in the domain of the scrap iron industry. In the Nkoya context, as well as among their eastern neighbours the Ila the name Kale occurs as an alias for Kahare / Kahale, one of the principal royal titles of the Nkoya (and, not by accident, the one closest, in culture and geographical association, to the Ila region). The oral traditions associated with the Kahale title stress the original Kahale’s association with a foreign origin, iron working, *Conus* shell ornaments, and the introduction of a new type of xylophone-centred royal music – enough to suggest that the Kahare title may ultimately derive from some transoceanic offshoot of a South Asian itinerant trading and metal-working group with special interest in music – the general Gypsy pattern. The fact that the Kale clan does not feature among the cosmogonic clans is another indication of the foreignness of the Kale name. Karst (1931a: 533f) was among the first to reconstruct a considerable influx of Bantuids from South Asia, partly in the form of peoples broadly associated with the Gypsy stock; my ongoing research into African-Asian continuities in pre- and protohistory adduces empirical evidence to the same effect. Meanwhile, iron working and royal orchestra also attend the other South Central African ‘kings of the savannah’ (Vansina 1966), and I think that also in those cases the Gypsy / South Asia link must be seriously considered.

How to interpret the dazzling complexity of this Nkoya array of clans? I will present two interpretative models, one in standard theoretical terms of the anthropology of complementary opposition, the other in terms of an element cycle of transformations consisting of triads.

name (Nkoya)	name (English)	name (Nkoya)	name (English)
Kale	fish spear?	Nyembo	sparkler (honeycomb? drone?)
Langu <sup>52</sup>	bell	Nzovu	elephant
Lavwe, Shihondo	goat	Sheta	turner, dizzy one, bull roarer, tether, peg, fire-

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<sup>52</sup> The actual clan name as recorded is Langu-Nkwehe, ‘bell-hawk’.

			bore
Makanga	guinea fowl	Shihombo	tinderbox
Mbunze	buzzard, fish eagle	Shikumba	beehive
Mukuni	firewood	Shilombe	<i>milombe</i> tree: wood suitable for carving especially of royal drums
Mvula	rain	Shimuziko	kindling (out of mushroom)
Nkomba	mushroom	Shungu	barbel fish
Nkonze	antbear?, 'licker'	Tumbwa	vulture
Nkwehe	hawk	Wische	smoke
Ntabi	spear-hunter	Nyembo	sparkler (honeycomb? drone?)
Nyembo	bee, drone	Nzovu	elephant

The arrangement in two columns is only for economy of space and does not imply, here, any pairing of specific clans appearing on the same line. A sparkler is a small metal thong within a tinder-box, which when scraped against a piece of flint produces the spark that sets linted mushroom kindling afire. It is fitting that the Nyambo clan is also called *Kamanisha*, 'the finisher', in implied recognition of its catalytic function.

*Table 3.1. Nkoya clans.*<sup>53</sup>

### 3.2. Interpreting the array of Nkoya clans: (1) in terms of complementary opposition

In *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* Émile Durkheim (1912) argued (on the basis of early ethnographic data on Aboriginal Australian societies he himself had never visited) that strong links exist between any one social group, conceived as a religious congregation, and its objects of worship. These objects (in the Australian case designated 'totems' by the ethnographers and analysts) are claimed, by Durkheim, to be arbitrarily chosen and to ultimately symbolise 'the social' as such. Durkheim's analysis (like Freud's struggle with similar questions round about the same time in *Totem und Tabu*; Freud 1915) was limited to just *one* theoretically conceived social group, and did not involve the social and political interaction between several groups, each with their own objects of

<sup>53</sup> According to a Group Interview with Mwene Mutondo Royal Council, Shikombwe Royal Establishment, Kaoma District, October 18, 1977, continued October 19 and 20, 1977; most senior headmen were present but not the king himself, Mwene Mutondo Kalapukila, who on October 20, 1977 granted me a formal audience in the presence of all senior headmen, *cf.* van Binsbergen 1992: 195, 478; for a comprehensive study of precolonial Nkoya society with emphasis on the economy, see van Binsbergen 2012b.

veneration. These two authors exemplify an intense industry of totemism studies around 1900. The decisive step towards a consideration of totemism as involving the interplay *between* several groups was set by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1962a and especially 1962b). His illuminating re-analysis of totemism showed how the juxtaposition of social groups in a traditional context takes the form of the juxtaposition of the respective group's object of veneration. Each totemic group is identified with a particular vegetal or animal species from the natural world, and observes special taboos vis-à-vis that species which do not apply to the other sections of society. This special relationship, Lévi-Strauss argues, is based not on some irrational, animistic propensity towards nature worship including the belief that animals are truly Man's ancestors; neither on the fact that these species (as Malinowski would have it; *cf.* Worsley 1967) represent individual Man's selective interest in nature, in other words are 'good to eat'; neither on the fact that they mark, with an overload of anxiety, the situations which are particularly crucial for the perpetuation of society as a whole – as in Radcliffe-Brown's view (Malinowski 1954; Radcliffe-Brown 1952; *cf.* Homans 1941). Lévi-Strauss claims instead that the species are selected for simple rational economy: because pairs of such species are the most ready expressions of both the opposition and the complementarity which exist simultaneously between the two groups thus identified, in other words, because these particular species are eminently 'good to think about'. The two groups involved are not only contrasted (by names and symbolism), and thus presented as *in opposition* to one another; they also *complement* each other, uniting by reference to a shared underlying *aetiological principle* which explains the pairing up of the two natural species.

species		aetiological principle
clan A	clan B	
<i>Nkomba</i> , 'Mushroom'	<i>Wische</i> , 'Smoke'	smoke is a sign of consumption of the mushroom wick in the tinderbox
<i>Shimunziko</i> , 'Kindling'	<i>Wische</i> , 'Smoke'	smoke is a sign of consumption of the kindling
<i>Mukuni</i> <sup>54</sup> <i>ba Shilombe</i> , 'Wood of the <i>Shilombe</i> tree' (of which royal drums are made)	<i>Wische</i> , 'Smoke'	smoke is a sign of consumption of the wood when the tree is hollowed out in preparation of the drum

<sup>54</sup> The idea of a (probably indirect) East Asian borrowing, of this conception of Wood

Nyembo, 'Bee, Drone'	Wishe, 'Smoke'	smoke chases the bees so that their honey can be collected
Nyembo, 'Sparkler'	Shihombo, 'Tinderbox'	the sparkler ignites the tinderbox

Table 3.2. *Complementary opposition in the nomenclature of two joking clans in Western Zambia, nineteenth and twentieth century CE.*<sup>55</sup>

Now the Nkoya clans are *all* linked in pairs of complementary opposition. The situation is rendered complicated since each clan is said to have a number of nicknames in addition to its official name; this results in a kaleidoscopic optionality in naming clans and adds extra fun to the joking process. Table 3.2 makes the complex underlying structure of clan names, nicknames and reasons for punning transparent for a number of interlocking clans, most of them arranged around the 'smoke' theme. It is the aetiological principle (*i.e.* a specific reference to a concrete domain of social, productive or reproductive local practice) which explains the meaning behind a particular pair of nicknames, and which sets the tune for the jokes to be improvised between the members of the two clans involved.

The clans see each other as having intermarried in the distant past, in the context, or at the conclusion, of violent conflicts which have been reconciled but remain encoded in the 'joking relationship' expressing both inter-clan conflict and sociable complementarity between the paired clans (*cf.* Radcliffe-Brown 1940, 1949; Wilson 1957). It is the nicknames which bring out the special relationship between two clans and thus provide a never-ending source of inspiration for jokes between joking clan partners.

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and Fire, into Nkoyaland comes up when we realise that in Giles' Chinese biographical dictionary (1898: 210, entry 525) we find that the Chinese Fire god 重黎 Ch'ung Li (lit.: 'Heavy Black') is often represented as two separate personages (brothers), ruling over the elements Wood and Fire, and entrusted with the administration of Heaven and Earth, respectively. However, wood has been humankind's most obvious fuel throughout history from the Lower Palaeolithic onwards, so this particular similarity between China and Nkoyaland may be purely accidental. However, below we will encounter many more such similarities, to an extent that we will eventually propose a relatively recent (1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> mill. CE) East Asian cultural intrusion into South Central Africa, possibly via South Asia.

<sup>55</sup> Modified after: van Binsbergen 1992. The clans mentioned under A tend to be regarded as royal.

Naming and ritual (*i.e.* tabooed) practices serve to identify specific social groups and to articulate special relationships of complementary opposition such as exist between specific groups without pervading the entire society. They constitute a formal structural scheme. The members of the culture in question may themselves be conscious of the aetiological principle (they clearly are in the case of Nkoya clan joking, which largely consists of citing, and punningly varying, the very contents of the aetiological principle): bee and smoke in the practical context of bee-keeping; smoke and mushroom in the practical context of fire-making, etc. However, the aetiological principle linking two clan names may also go lost under the free play of jocular, linguistic and mythological free variation, and in the context of new socio-cultural conditions which over the years have replaced those which originally informed the specific articulation of complementary opposition encoded in a myth, rite etc. If clan names like the Nkoya ones would survive in contexts (like twentieth-century Zambian capital cities) where firewood and honey are no longer freely collected and have been largely replaced by purchased charcoal and manufactured sugar, a researcher of the twenty-second century CE might still be able to trace the oppositions involved but she or he would need a lot of additional historical information before hitting on the practical aetiological principle that would make sense of both the names and their pairing. The structuralist method in the anthropological analysis of formal cultural products such as myths, rites, ceremonies, arts, decoration patterns, although not the universal paradigm it was once claimed to be, accords us at least a theoretical perspective on these situations; occasionally this method even allows us to tentatively reconstruct such underlying aetiological principles as have gone lost to consciousness.

The argument in this subsection stresses, in classic structuralist fashion, that Nkoya clan nomenclature might be understood as a collection of *binary* oppositions – manifesting what below we will call a recursive structure. There is however evidence of a more complex and more dynamic structure of *threesomes* that transcends recursive repetition. This we will now explore, since it offers an insight clearly superior to, more illuminating and more convincing than, that in terms of binary oppositions, and provides, at long last, the real stepping-stone towards our transcontinental argument on element cosmologies.



### **3.3. Interpreting the array of Nkoya clans: (2) As evidence of a cycle of transformations consisting of triads**

During my forty years of research among the Nkoya, I have often been struck by inconsistencies in the twentieth-century treatment of clans by otherwise highly knowledgeable Nkoya informants. There is a constant tension between two modalities: bundles consisting of two, three or more clan names are frequently cited, but whereas for one informant these multiple names are just synonyms for one and the same clan, for others they are opposites reminiscent of complementary oppositions and therefore refer to different clans. Moreover, if all clans can be paired to most other clans, through a pair of meaningful opposites (in the manner set out in the preceding section) inviting joking and punning, the result is kaleidoscopic but conducive, not to cohesive social structure, but to socio-political fragmentation and incoherence. Finally, it appears as if there is often, or always, an implied third party when two clans are in complementary opposition: Smoke chases the Bees when honey is collected, but this is predicated on the presence of a third party, Fire; and the same argument may be made for other binary aetiologies applied to Nkoya clan names.

Yet there must be some more definite structure, for joking ties between clans regulate important aspects of socio-ritual life such as defining a set of people who are a person's institutionalised burial agents, whereas in life the same set of people features as a last but unfailing resort in the, far from rare, situation that the appeal to matrilineal and patrilineal kinsmen (for food, shelter, protection against witchcraft, support, contributions to bride wealth to be paid) has all been in vain.

Clearly, much depends on the meaning of the obscure word *myahi*, which occurs only once in the text of *Likota*, and which is not a common word in contemporary spoken Nkoya either. The interpretation as 'nickname' suggest that in the threesome 'Nyembo or Shihombo – Shimunziko – Wishe' we are really dealing with one clan 'Bee / Drone / Sparkler (alias Tinderbox)' which also has two other names: 'Kindling' and 'Smoke'. Social practice among contemporary Nkoya however shows that this is a total misreading. In a given situation one may find two people jokingly insulting each other:

‘You, you are nothing, you are mere Kindling, and we are the Tinderbox that puts you afire and annihilates you’.

Or alternatively:

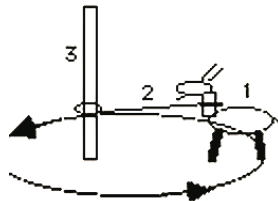
‘You may be the Sparkler, but the only test of your force lies in us, Smoke’.

In reality, behind the formula ‘Nyembo or Shihombo: Shimunziko and Wishe’ three very different clans are implied, which stand in a relationship of *causation, destruction, or catalytic action*. That this is the correct interpretation is clear from the otherwise enigmatic statement in *Likota* Ch. 3:

‘The *mwahi* Shimunziko has the following meaning. When these people wanted to get honey they had to make a fire to scare away the bees; because of burning their hands every time and having smoke in their eyes they were called Kindling and Smoke.’

By the same token, the alternative name of the Nyembo (Bee, Sparkler) clan as Kamanisha, ‘The Finisher’, also suggests that this clan plays (a) the destructor role in a threesome with (b) a destroyed and (c) a catalytic element.

Let us take a closer look at one particular clan triad: Lavwe, Shihondo, Sheta, and Shikumba[wuyuvu]. This triad is more difficult to interpret because it involves a semantic twist (Fig. 3.1):



not explicitly stated by my informants, this schema is based on my own interpretation, cf. the Louvain School methodology (van Binsbergen 2003: 516, 2011g)

Fig. 3.1. *The clan triad: Lavwe, Sheta, and Shikumba[wuyuvu] illustrated.*

Here we find the clan:

- as the passive element, the destroyed, the goat (Lavwe) tethered to a pole;
- as the active restrainer (= destructor) a string of bark rope (Shikumba) serving as tether;

- and finally as catalyst ('finisher' / Kamanisha / 'Sparkler' / Shihondo) remaining passive but providing anchorage for the tether, the pole, which is the Turner (Sheta).

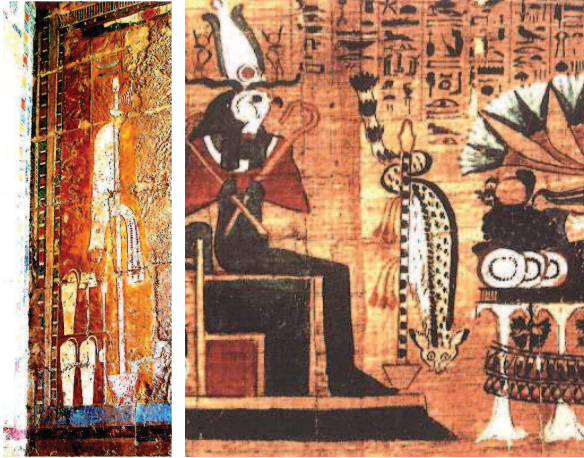
Although domestic goats have become rare in the Nkoya villages in Kaoma district they once were part of Nkoya life. Bark rope makes up the usual binding material for a great variety of purposes, from house building (walls are formed in that the loam or *dagga* remains suspended in coils of bark rope twisted between a row of vertical poles, hence 'pole and dagga' for traditional village architecture in this part of the world) to packaging elephant meat for bicycle dispatch from the bush to the village. Implicitly the vertical pole<sup>56</sup> that serves as the Turner around which destructor and destroyed turn around is a cosmological image of the celestial axis throughout the Old World and the New World, going back to a common fount of Upper Palaeolithic hunters' astronomy (*cf.* Rap-penglück 1999).

The phenomenon of diurnal rotation of visible stars around the celestial pole is manifest to the naked-eye for anyone caring to gaze up to heaven more than once within the time span of a night. Given the generally high

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<sup>56</sup> There is an interesting parallel to the formal structure of the Nkoya goat-centred triad, and the Ancient Egyptian portable shrine of the *imi-wt* / *imiut* associated with Anubis, the ancestral cult, sexual reproduction, and at the same time offering a condensed image of the world (Stricker 1963-1989: 493 *f.*, 502 *f.*; Köhler 1975). The shrine consists of a bowl containing a fluid (often sacrificial blood of domestic animals), a pole (most probably a conscious evocation of the celestial axis, whose function corresponds with the Ancient Egyptian god Šw / Shu standing in that bowl, and an animal skin (preferably speckled or variegated, *e.g.* a leopard's) hanging from the top of the pole. The skin stands both for a churn and for the star-spangled vault of heaven – especially the region around the northern celestial pole – revolving on the celestial axis (the vertical pole). Säve-Söderbergh 1945, in another version of the Ancient Egyptian story of *The Two Brothers*, mentions an *imiut* involving a black-and-white (*i.e.* – by an almost globally distributed symbolism – shamanic, divinatory, liminal) cow-hide dripping with blood. Recent interpretations of early dynastic representations of the *imiut* (T. Wilkinson 2001) believe to see evidence of human sacrifice. Under that assumption the bowl would have been filled with *human* blood. One might even read a rudimentary three-element doctrine in this liturgical arrangement. There are very ancient shamanic resonances here: a widespread shamanic belief is that, on behalf of the community or the individual client, the shaman moves, along the celestial axis, up to Heaven and down to the Underworld for information and medicine; in Northern Eurasia and elsewhere, shaman's mantles and aprons tend to be adorned with representations of the stars and luminaries; also *cf.* Fig. 8.5., below.

development of Nkoya astronomy which allows the expert Nkoya hunters to orientate by night, and the veneration of white, debarked vertical poles in the region's prophetic movement of Mupumani (1914-1915) and, to this day, in the Bituma cult (for both, *cf.* van Binsbergen 1981), I have little doubt that also for the Nkoya the vertical pole once evoked the celestial axis, but I have made no specific enquiries on this point.



(a, left) portable shrine, Deir el Bahari, New Kingdom; source: Anonymous, n.d. [2005]; (b, right) from *The Book of the Dead of Lady Cheritwebeshet* (here the feline is a serval)

*Fig. 3.2. Ancient Egyptian representation of the imi-wt.*

The semantic twist in the interpretation of the Lavwe, Sheta, and Shikumba[wuyuvu] triad now comes in, when the destructor is called, not Shikumba (bark), but Shikumbawuyuvu, 'Bark Do You Hear?' This goes back to a story involving Luhamba and Katete, a mythical twin of opposite sex, whose male component, Luhamba, is remembered as the first, legendary, male king of the Nkoya people, the first Nkoya *Mwene* to turn royal power to a military use in order to ward off the war threat from the side of the Humbu people (myth acknowledges the initial preponderance of female kings, and there are strong indications that male kingship could be seen as usurpation of a female prerogative by men engaging in warfare and long-distance trade; van Binsbergen 1992).

‘ABOUT THE SHIKUMBAWUYUVU CLAN – ‘THE PEOPLE  
OF THE BARK CONTAINER WHICH COULD HEAR’

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1 When Luhamba and Katete were being hidden by the Mbuze – Luhamba in a bark container, Katete in a mat – 2 the Humbu came to the village of Lyovu Iya Mbuwa and asked:

‘Tell us if there is any Sheta here?’

The Mbuze answered:

‘There are no Sheta left alive. 3 This is what we are saying and if the bark container had been a person it would have heard. “Do you hear, Bark Container?” Also, if the reed mat had been a person it would have heard. “Do you hear, Reed?”’

The Humbu heard these words of Lyovu Iya Mbuwa. 4 They left and camped on the Miluzi, a tributary of the Lalafuta, and then went along the Lushimba, a tributary of the Lufupa. Thus the Humbu war came to an end.’ (*Likota*, Ch. 7).

Luhamba is here addressed by the name of the container that protects him, and Katete by her own name. The name Katete however consists of the stem *-tete* (‘reed’), preceded by the personal singular prefix: ‘Mr or Mrs Reed’. A similar play on Luhamba’s name was not possible in English translation: it is derived from a lexical root *-hamba*, ‘to travel’, with a prefix *lu-*, for royal things, singular. Incidentally, many hydronyms in South Central Africa also begin on the element *lu-*. This would lead to ‘Royal Travelling Thing’ as the puzzling meaning of Luhamba’s name, or possibly ‘Water course for Travelling’. Some more light is cast on this name by comparative evidence from the Mwinilunga region on the Congo-Zambezi watershed, which is the ancestral home of many of today’s inhabitants of the Nkoya region, going back only a few centuries. Here Victor Turner (!) described<sup>57</sup> the Chihamba cult, with the same ‘travelling’ lexical element, which then becomes very clear, for in this context Chihamba, the White Spirit, in close similarity with the Bituma cult among the Nkoya,<sup>58</sup> is the god of a foreign food crop (known to the outside world to be originally American), killed but venerated so that the cult’s adherents may consume it safely. Symbolically there is continuity, over a very vast area extending from the Ancient Near East and the Mediterranean to West and South Central Africa and across the Atlantic to Meso America, and even Japan and Indonesia, of such intimately inter-

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<sup>57</sup> Turner 1962. Incidentally, that author’s name translates a Nkoya clan name.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. van Binsbergen 1981. The Malawian M’bona cult is another case in point; cf. Schoffeleers 1992; van Binsbergen 2011g.


twined themes as the dying vegetation god, God's Child, food crops as God's greatest gift to humankind,<sup>59</sup> and the Celestial / Paradisiacal Twins, often but not invariably of opposite gender. The Paradisiacal Twins evoke a Flood theme (van Binsbergen with Isaak 2008), and it is no accident that in many Flood stories the gift of crops is a standard post-Flood occurrence (e.g. *Genesis* 8:21 *f.*).

Whether (a) a historical fact of the second half of the second millennium CE in South Central Africa, or (as we suspect) (b) merely a symbolic theme stressing gender complementarity in the face of such male dominance as trade and warfare would generate, in both cases male usurpation of kingship, like kingship itself (which in itself is much older, in Africa, than half a millennium), is a symbolic innovation that relates perpendicularly to the traditional clan-based cosmology and symbolism. It therefore appears as if the reconstructed 'original' clan triad Lavwe, Shihondo, Sheta, and Shikumba as illustrated in Fig. 3.1, was transformed into a statement mythically legitimating male kingship. The bark rope Shikumba tethering the Lawve clan becomes a bark container concealing the prospective male royal incumbent Luhamba 'Royal Travelling Thing'.

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<sup>59</sup> The field of comparative mythology shows transcontinental continuities relating to Neolithic conditions of food production. All over the world we find the myth of the *dying junior god or goddess whose body turns into food crops*. This mytheme is attested (Mackenzie 1923; Bierhorst 1988) in Meso and North America (whence many of the world's present-day food crops derive). Also sub-Saharan Africa has several cases interpretable in these terms, as mentioned above. Relevant for Africa in this connection are also the phytogeographical studies by Jeffreys, especially 1971, which claims direct trans-Atlantic transmission of maize from the New World to West Africa. Another cluster of such myths is found in the Ancient Mediterranean: Jesus of Nazareth, Thammuz / Dumuzi, Attis, the child Dionysus torn apart by the Titans, Osiris killed by Seth (Plutarch, *De Iside et Osiride*; Frazer 1914 (with Ancient sources); Jacobsen 1970 (with Mesopotamian sources). Further attestations of this mytheme are from Japan (保食神 Ukemochi-na-kami / Ogetsu; Anesaki 1964; Willis 1994: 114) and South East Asia (Dewi Sri, Hainuwele; Willis 1994: 117). This global distribution pattern is suggestive of a multicentred, multidirectional global maritime network of which I believe to see many other empirical traces (van Binsbergen 2012c, and especially – with an extensive theoretical discussion – 2012f; *cf.* this book, Fig. 2.17). Given the fact that the origin of the African food crops in question is in the Americas, one is tempted to hypothesise that not only the food crops but also their attending myths crossed over from the New World into Africa, and not necessarily (as claimed by Dick-Read 2005) via the Pacific / Indian Ocean detour, but directly across the Atlantic.

And by this association, the link with the goat and the pole symbolism is eclipsed by other symbolic complexes similar to the clan triads but not in themselves part of the original, pre-statal clan structure:


1. Katete, 'Reed Person', Royal Princes, the Twin Sister who legitimates the male exercise of kingship by her brother Luhamba 'Royal Travelling Thing'; one might be tempted – even though our Pelasgian 'cross-model' would suggest that much wider connectivities are involved here than just Egyptian ones – to make an Egyptological connection at this point, and stress the similarity between the Nkoya mythical royal twins Katete and Luhamba, on the one hand, and two central royal pairs (constituting two of the five principal Ancient Egyptian royal titles from the First Dynasty onward:
2. 'She of the Reed and the Bee' (*nswt-bit*, in hieroglyphic writing ,<sup>60</sup> where the reed ('Earth') element is very clear in Katete, whereas the Bee<sup>61</sup> ('Air' / 'Heaven') – although more conspicuous in the Nyembo clan title – could well be accommodated with the name of Luhamba 'Royal Travelling Thing'. The connotations of long-distance displacement inherent in Luhamba's name, and in the extreme geographical expanse of the symbolic

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<sup>60</sup> Both *nswt-bit* and *nbtj* have been extensively attested in the First Dynasty texts as compiled by Kaplony 1966.

<sup>61</sup> In the Ancient Egyptian context, the bee is most prominently associated with the kingship of Lower Egypt, with the temple of the goddess Neith at Saïs (*pr bit*, 'House of the Bee'), and with the legendary birth place and hiding place of Horus at Chemmis *ꜥꜥ bit*, 'Horizon of the Bee' in the Delta swamps. Ray (2003) reminds us that also the Sky god Nun is associated with the bee, but Egyptian gods tend to merge both in name and in associated characteristics. As a Bronze Age form of the Mother of the Waters, Neith in principle controls both the Waters Above (Heaven, in a later cosmology), and the Waters Below (the Ocean, and the Chaotic Abyss); in the myth of Horus' trial Neith appears emphatically as holding sway over the Sky – threatening to let it fall down if the verdict is not in favour of Horus (Gardiner 1932: 43a, 5.10a). Meanwhile the Egyptian cosmological symbolism helps us to understand an otherwise enigmatic third character mentioned in the same *Likota* passage, Lipepo, 'Royal Person Wind': he seems to be the Air / Św / Shu, which connects Heaven and Earth, thus completing the triad. In the Nkoya context, the standard image of a viable human group (e.g. in wedding songs, in regard of the bride-takers) is that of a bees' swarm or hive, and Mwene Lipupe, the first royal ancestress, is conceived as a Queen Bee.

complex indicated in footnote 61, makes a connection with Ancient Egypt not totally preposterous – especially against the extensive converging evidence of Egyptian survivals in sub-Saharan Africa already referred to above.

3. ‘The Two Ladies’, *nbtj*, , *i.e.* the Ancient Egyptian goddesses W3dt / Wadjet / Uto and Nḥbt / Nekhbet, the king’s protector goddesses in cobra and vulture shape respectively, often interpreted as signifying Upper and Lower Egypt. It is not only the twin and twinned nature of these goddesses, nor the occurrence of the vulture among Nkoya clan names (as well as the prominence of Mwene Shihoka, ‘Snake’, in *Likota*’s mythical accounts!), but particularly the fact that in the conventional iconography as shown here, both goddesses are depicted in baskets that may have been the prototypes of the reed wrapping (so closely reminiscent of the Ancient Egyptian royal titles) and bark hive in which Katete and Luhamba were said to hide.<sup>62</sup>
4. The bark hive in which Luhamba (as if he were a bee, *i.e.* Nyembo) took refuge, has its own story of a triad to tell, as becomes clear from Fig. 3.3 – and it is here that the triadic structure of Nkoya clan names comes particularly to the fore.

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<sup>62</sup> Reed wrapping (again with an Ancient Egyptian parallel, *cf.* Goneim 1956: Plate 8, between pp. 80 and 81, burial of a Libyan lady) also appears to have been a traditional royal burial custom among the Nkoya. When chased, a few centuries ago, from the Zambezi Flood Plain by the Lozi, the Nkoya allegedly carried ‘their reed mats on their backs’ – probably containing royal relics; the image is so intimately connected with Nkoya identity that when King Kahare Kabambi posed for a state photograph in 1977, he insisted on holding a rolled-up reed mat in his hand. In this connection it is relevant to remind ourselves that reminiscences of the *nbtj* name in sub-Saharan Africa are not limited to the Nkoya. The kingdom of Mpororo, South West Uganda has a clan structure similar to that of the Nkoya, *cf.* Denoon 1972; Uzoigwe 1975. This kingdom was reputedly ruled by two queens, high priestesses of the god Niawingi; they were carried about in baskets (*cf.* Delme-Radcliffe 1905), and these were in the most literal sense living illustrations of the *nbtj* hieroglyphic sign . My attention was drawn to this information by van der Sluijs 2005.



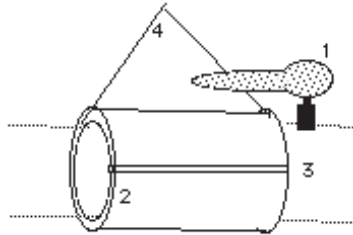


Fig. 3.3. The bark hive as a potentially triadic icon.

In order to produce the kind of bark hive that one frequently finds in the vicinity of Nkoya villages, one makes two horizontal incisions and one vertical one in the bark of a thick tree trunk, then peels off the bark (2) from the trunk. A bark string (4) is attached to it, and it is suspended in the top of a tree. While here the bark hive is clearly the destroyed, one could argue whether the destructor is the axe (1) or the bark rope (4), and whether the catalyst is the original tree trunk (3) from which the bark is taken, the bark string, or again, the tree in which the hive is finally suspended. These points are only of secondary importance for the image of the bark hive is not actually used to produce the triadic logic of clan symbolism – it only emulates that logic.

Table 3.3 demonstrates that nearly the entire nomenclature of Nkoya clan can be easily and convincingly cast in terms of such causally linked three-somes. The table follows the order of ‘clans’ as given in the cosmogonic passage in *Likota* Ch. 3. Since 20th-century CE Nkoya actors have lost all awareness that in Nkoya clan nomenclature we are dealing with a transformation of an implied six-element system, the identification of the various cosmological elements involved (Table 3.3, right-hand column) is merely a reconstruction and wrought with uncertainty and ambiguity in some cases; yet the overall pattern is strikingly convincing, in my opinion.

no.	destructor	destroyed	controls the process (catalyst)	proposed aetiology	proposed element
1	Shikumba [-wuyuvu]	Lavwe, Shihondo <sup>63</sup>	Sheta	the bark rope constrains the goat but the pole reaches into the sky	Aether or Wood
	bark rope [bark hive, see text]	Goat (tethered on a bark rope);	Turner		

<sup>63</sup> However, the word *shihondo* is generally considered to be obscure.

2	Langu	Nkwehe	Mbunze	the bell chases the hawk but it is owned by the royal buzzard	Air
	Bell	Hawk	Buzzard		
3	Tumbwa	Shungu / Kale	Makanga	The fish eagle snatches the barbel fish but leaves the guinea fowl alone	Water
	Vulture, Fish Eagle	Barbel Fish	Guinea Fowl		
4	Ntabi	Nzovu	Mulinga	the elephant is the king of the earth yet the bottom-dwelling human kills it with his spear	Earth
	Spear Hunter	Elephant	Spear		
5	Nkomba	Mukuni	Shilombe	the fire consumes the dried mushroom in the tinderbox, but not the wood from which royal drums are made	Wood or Fire
	Mushroom, Snuffbox	Firewood	Mulombe Wood From Which Royal Drums Are Made, so that they are immune to lightning		
6	Wishe	Shimunziko	Nyembo / Shihombo	the kindling is transformed into smoke, but not the metal sparkler in the tinderbox	Fire or Metal
	Smoke	Kindling	Sparkler Or Tinderbox		

Table 3.3. *Nkoya clan nomenclature as evocative of a triadic element cycle of transformations.*

With Table 3.4, we inspect two clan names that have not been accommodated in Table 3.3: Nkonze and Mvula. These could be incorporated in the same overall schedule by adding a seventh element, even though the residual, secondary, and late nature of this seventh element is underlined by the latter's hybrid and superfluously repetitive nature:

no.	destructor	destroyed	catalyst	proposed aetiology	proposed element
7	Nkonze	Mvula	Sheta	The junior kings get their share of Rain, but the senior kings who are the connection between Heaven and Earth control the process	Aether, Sky, Rain
	Licker	Rain	Turner		

Table 3.4. *Nkoya clan nomenclature as evocative of a triadic cycle of transformations, with Nkonze and Mvula accommodated.*

In the Nkoya myth of the Cauldron of Kingship (*Likota*, 4; with close Eurasian reminiscences especially in the Celtic and Mongolian domain; cf. van Binsbergen 2010a) the Turners obtain the kingship by going around the boiling Cauldron containing the Game Meat of Kingship, but the Lickers get their share by licking the plates after the Turners' meal, and the entire operation is concluded with the falling of beneficial Rain – Mvula, the demiurge from heaven, child of the High God, and the pronounced origin of Kingship.

Admittedly, this royal extension requires us to use the Sheta / 'Turner' element twice, for it already features in the first element: Lavwe / Sheta / Shikumba[wuyuvu] in Table 3.3. This is certainly an irregularity that should not pass without comment, for it is (just like the inclusion of the linguistically and conceptually foreign onomastic element Kale) another indication that, although the clan structure can be taken to have been the basis out of which the royal structure has been largely shaped, the domain of kingship is yet essentially discontinuous with that of clanship. In other words, kingship encompasses alien elements that do not systematically spring from the Nkoya pre-statal symbolic system such as enshrined in the clan nomenclature. Such a conclusion should not surprise us: in an earlier study (van Binsbergen 1993 / 2003b) I demonstrated in a comprehensive itemised analysis the same fundamental discontinuity between

- the values and practices of Nkoya village life in the 19th and 20th century CE, on the one hand,
- and those of Nkoya royal courts in the same period, on the other.

Whereas the village communities are pacifist, based on reciprocity, productive, and publicly (!) abhor sorcery – the royal courts are violent, more or less openly engage in sorcery, reject reciprocity, and tend to be not productive but usurpatory. This means that the seventh clan triad I have added by means of Table 3.4 cannot be taken as the recovery of an initially lost or overlooked integral part of the original traditional clan structure. It must be seen as a specific aberration testifying to the attempt to account for an essentially alien conception of kingship yet in terms of a pre-existing model of six clan triads. The story of the Cauldron of Kingship (*Likota* Ch. 4, as cited above) restates the same seventh clan triad in narrative, mythical form.

We have three more steps to go, before we have brought the Nkoya clan system within the transcontinental orbit of the transformation cycle of elements.

In the first place, it is now clear that the term *myahi*, which at the lexical level we have already identified as ‘clans that are associated with one another as joking partners’, at the cosmological level means as much as ‘systematic transformations in a logic of cyclic causation’.

Secondly, what the cosmogonic section of *Likota* (Ch. 3) appears to call the six original ‘clans’ (*mikoka*), are in fact *elements* of *phases*, in the sense these terms are used to describe the 五行 *wǔ xíng*, ‘five phases’ or ‘five primal units’ in the Taoist five-element system (see below, next Chapter), or the primal units in Presocratic (‘roots’, ῥιζώματα in Empedocles *Fragments* 6, later a similar idea re-occurred as στοιχείον *stoicheion*, ‘irreducible element’ – especially (according to Burkert 1959) in the mathematical and linguistic sense, but by implication also in reference to the composition of matter.<sup>64</sup> *The Nkoya system of triadic clan nomenclature is in fact a system of the cyclic transformation of six elements, each of which may take three characteristic shapes or values.* The difference however with the Taoist and Presocratic views is that the Nkoya system is no longer understood by the local actors at the conscious level, but instead has exploded into aberrant multiplicity. In the Taoist system the same five elements always play, in turn, the role of destructor, destroyed, and catalyst, but in the Nkoya system these roles have become disconnected hence the number of elements, or clans, has multiplied from six to eighteen. This also suggests (and we shall come back to this point towards the end of this book) that the Nkoya system of clan nomenclature is not anything near the historical origin of what we may postulate, as a Working Hypothesis, to be an underlying Old World transformation cycle of elements: what the Nkoya have is a peripheral local elaboration, no longer governed by its initially informing logic, hence gone berserk.

Thirdly, despite the apparent erosion of the Nkoya system, we must realise that it is far from unique, but in fact presents very striking resem-

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<sup>64</sup> Cf. Cook & Rosemont Jr 1984: 68, n. 7, where it is argued that the expression ‘five phases’ is much to be preferred to ‘five elements’ to render the Taoist conception.

blances with the cycle of transformations that is at the heart of classic Chinese Taoism. We are here in the presence of an immanentist logic of transformation that seems to have informed quadruple pairs of cosmogonic beings in Egyptian cosmology, many other similar applications of an element system in Africa, North America, India and Japan, and even four-element theories in early Greek philosophy. All these cosmologies will be discussed in greater or lesser detail below. Time for us to leave the Nkoya and South Central Africa behind for a while, and to embark on our long-range exploration, in space and time, of element cosmological systems.

