

RITUAL, CLASS AND URBAN-RURAL RELATIONS : ELEMENTS FOR A ZAMBIAN CASE STUDY ¹

To the memory of Max Gluckman (1911-1975)

1. - At the end of the 12th International Africa Seminar on « Town and Country in East and Central Africa », Lusaka 1972 - a meeting which had brought out the inadequacy of existing models of urban-rural relations in Africa much more than advancing new alternative models - Max Gluckman was kind enough to discuss with me the first paper ² coming out of my present research : a preliminary description of the *Bituma* possession healing cult as practised in Lusaka by urban immigrants hailing from « Mulenga » ³ district, some 200 km. from where Gluckman conducted his famous Barotse research in the 1940s. Naturally, Victor Turner was mentioned : he studied the Ndembu Lunda who are, in language, social organization ⁴ and ritual, closely akin to the Nkoya I was studying,

¹ This paper has grown out of an oral presentation at a seminar of the Anthropological Sociological Centre, University of Amsterdam, and my contribution to the Royal Tropical Institute's International Course on Health Development, both in April 1975. In addition to my most stimulating audience on both occasions, I am indebted to the following persons and institutions : to my informants and the Zambian authorities for their warm co-operation ; to the University of Zambia for permission to carry out extensive research while I was a lecturer, for a generous research grant that started off the project, and for ample research facilities provided by the University's Institute for African Studies ; to my wife, Henny E. van Rijn ; to D.K. Shiyowe for excellent research assistance ; to those mentioned in the first section of the text, and in addition A.J.F. Köbben, R.P. Werbner and D.G. Jongmans, for encouragement and advice ; to S. van der Geest, S. Simonse, W. Koot, M.-L. Creighton and R.P. Werbner for comments on an earlier draft of this paper ; and finally to the Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research (WOTRO) for supporting the writing of this paper.

² W.M.J. VAN BINSBERGEN, *Bituma : Preliminary Notes on a Healing Movement among the Nkoya*, Paper read at the Conference on the History of Central-African Religious Systems, Lusaka, 1972 ; an entirely rewritten version is incorporated in W.M.J. VAN BINSBERGEN, *Explorations into the Religion of Zambia*, to appear 1976 or 1977.

³ A pseudonym.

⁴ One important difference is however that the explicit societal ideology (if not the practice) of the Ndembu is matrilineal, that of the Nkoya bilateral.

some 250 km. away from the Ndembu. Turner has given us one of the best modern studies of a Central-African rural society,⁵ and against that background has proceeded to map out and interpret Ndembu ritual in a truly masterly way.⁶ Gluckman emphasized how Turner, as early as 1958,⁷ had propounded a coherent and systematic theory of ritual symbolism; I was challenged to see whether this theory could or could not be applied to urban ritual - which both Gluckman and I doubted.

In the subsequent three years this challenge has formed the persistent background for my field research (both in Lusaka and in Mulenga district) and my analyses. Close association with Jaap van Velsen drew my attention to the role of manipulation and economic factors in the emerging picture. Specialists in Central-African religious history (primarily Terence Ranger and Matthew Schoffeleers) opened my eyes to the historical dimension of the phenomena I was studying. Meanwhile I derived considerable inspiration from the non-dogmatic marxist approach of another colleague at the University of Zambia: H. Jack Simons.

In the present paper I offer a tentative formulation of some of the central themes around which my analysis now begins to take shape. As the argument develops it will become clear that its main purpose is not to provide a thorough summary and evaluation of Turner's exceptional work. At any rate, a short paper like the present one could not hope to do justice to the dazzling complexity and inspiring sophistication of Turner's work, nor to the unmistakable development in his theoretical position over his 25 years of Ndembu studies. Instead, I shall consider only one limited portion of his work, use it to introduce some of the major theoretical problems which both his and my own work are facing, then move away from Turner's work and proceed to indicate the direction from which a part solution may be expected in future - particularly if we manage to bring into play, in addition, such profound insights into symbolism and the socio-ritual process as Turner's work obviously has to offer.

⁵ V.W. TURNER, *Schism and Continuity in an African Society*, Manchester, 1957

⁶ V.W. TURNER, *The Forest of Symbols*, Ithaca, 1967 (a collection of earlier writings); *The Drums of Affliction*, Oxford, 1968; *The Ritual Process*, London, 1969

⁷ Belatedly published as: V.W. TURNER, *Symbols in Ndembu Ritual*, in: GLUCKMAN, M., (ed.), *Closed Systems and Open Minds*, Edinburgh, 1964; reprinted in: *Forest*, p. 19 f.

2. - Now why would Turner's approach to ritual, even in its most generalized and systematic form, not be applicable to the kind of ritual phenomena I was investigating among people whose rural society was so similar to that of the Ndembu? For this, let us consider his 1958 argument.

Turner sees Ndembu ritual as mainly revolving around dominant symbols, which have at the same time two series of referents: an « ideological, normative pole, » and a « sensory pole. » For instance, a tree secreting white fluid is the central symbol in the girls' puberty ritual (*Nkang'a* among the Ndembu; among the Nkoya this ritual has the same name and essentially the same form). On the one hand this symbol is claimed to signify social referents (nurturation, mother/daughter relationship, solidarity of women, the Ndembu ideal of motherhood, all members of Ndembu society, these people's dependence on the normative system of their society, etc.); on the other it is claimed to have the purely physiological referents of breast-milk, breast-feeding and the female breast itself. The symbol couples a physiological life-necessity (a possible source of the emotions the symbol inspires, Turner suggests) to the structural principles, ideologies, values and norms which constitute society.

This suffices to indicate one main line along which Turner develops his approach. I take the above example as an illustration indicating that on the social side (as opposed to the physiological) Turner is working within a tradition which is very well established in religious anthropology. This is the framework set by Fustel de Coulanges, Robertson Smith, Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown.⁸ The central idea is that ritual expresses, under the disguise of symbols, dominant themes of the social order in general, and makes this order appear so eminently meaningful, absolute, overwhelming, and beyond challenge (« sacred »), that individuals are confirmed as loyal members of their society. Society, ritual, the meaning of life, the internalization of values and norms, isomorphism between ritual and social

⁸ It is within the same theoretical tradition that I, for one, have previously studied the religion of the highlands of N.W. Tunisia; cf. W.M.J. VAN BINSBERGEN, *Durkheim's begrippenpaar « sacré/profane »*, *Kula*, 8, 1968, 4, p. 14-21; *Religie en samenleving. Een studie over het Bergland van N.W. Tunesië*, « doctoraal » thesis, University of Amsterdam, 1971; *Savits of the Atlas: Ernest Gellner*, in: *Cahiers des arts et traditions populaires*, 4 (1971), p. 203-11; *Shrine Cult and Society in North and Central Africa. A Comparative Analysis*, paper read at the Annual Conference, Association of Social Anthropologists, Manchester, 1976.

structures, etc., have all found a place within the numerous theoretical versions of this basic approach.

A minimal condition for this approach, to make sense sociologically, is that we have adequate definitions of both ritual and society, which enable us to isolate the two (overlapping) parts of empirical reality whose interrelations we want to analyse.

For Turner, the ultimate social referent of Ndembu ritual symbols is *Ndembu society*.⁹ This is the society of all Ndembu, who participate in local social and ritual life, speak the Ndembu language, and know and subscribe to Ndembu custom. Like most studies originating in the Manchester School and the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute,¹⁰ Turner's work tends to stick to the model of the relatively self-contained, whole, integrated tribal society.

But is this a viable unit of analysis? Turner's own work, and that of so many other anthropologists who have analysed contemporary African rural societies in a skillful and dedicated manner, certainly shows that along the lines of the tribal model one does arrive at revealing and fascinating results. These results are however based on the simplification, so often exposed,¹¹ of the tribal society as a more or less isolated unit whose internal functioning, including ritual, can be understood on the basis mainly of internal principles and dynamics of the human groups and individuals out of which this unit consists. Such isolated units do not exist anymore in Africa, and the wealth of historical information now becoming available (on trade, migration, spread of technological innovations, language, political expansion) makes it very clear that the period when such societies may have been typical for the continent lies many centuries back in the past.

When Turner did fieldwork among the Ndembu in the early 1950s, they were, as the rest of Central Africa since 1900, deeply involved in a much wider society which comprised other rural areas with a slightly different social and ritual organization; rural administrative

⁹ *Schism*, p. 301; *Closed Systems*, p. 50; and throughout his work.

¹⁰ Cf. 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; revised version forthcoming in *African Social Research*.

¹¹ E.g. E. COLSON, *Contemporary Tribes and the Development of Nationalism*, in: J. HELM, (ed.), *The Problem of Tribe*, New York, 1968, p. 201-6; P.C.W. GURKIND, (ed.), *The Passing of Tribal Man in Africa*, Leiden, 1970; C.S. LANCASTER, *Ethnic Identity, History and «Tribe» in the Middle Zambezi Valley*, *American Ethnologist*, 1 (1974), 4, p. 707-30; my *Ethnicity*.

centres from where central policy reached into the lives of all villagers; and rapidly growing towns where central government, migrancy-based industry, and other modern formal organizations were located. The Ndembu were heavily involved in circulatory labour migration: in 1962 their area is reported to have rates of absenteeism of taxable males ranging from under 40% to over 60%.¹² I am not at all saying that Turner deliberately tried to conceal these modern, wider involvements in his work. He has been clearly aware of them ever since his earliest Ndembu publications, whereas they constitute a recurrent theme in his later work.¹³ But it is one thing to acknowledge the social reality beyond Ndembu society, and to incidentally bring it in for a specific argument; it is another thing to make from this wider social reality, or if you like from the tension between the latter and the local, tribal society under study, the pivotal element in one's analysis. And however impressive Turner's work is, however justifiable his choice of theoretical and thematic priorities - he certainly does not do the latter.

The point I am making is that Turner's explanation of Ndembu ritual mainly (at times: exclusively) in terms of Ndembu society must leave us dissatisfied, once we realize that this so-called Ndembu society is in fact only a portion, a part society, of a much wider social unit (not necessarily confined to the then Northern Rhodesia, Central Africa, or Africa as a whole). If the social *sub*-system that we can conveniently describe as Ndembu society, is only a part of the total society within which Ndembu life takes shape, then it is arbitrary and short-sighted to except from reference to just this sub-system the major clue for an understanding of contemporary Ndembu ritual. We must at least explain not only the positive and systematic relation between Ndembu ritual and Ndembu society, but also how and to what extent Ndembu «society» and ritual are shielded off from the wider society of which they form part. This wider society involves in particular, urban, industrial, formal-organizational elements which can hardly be invoked to explain Ndembu ritual. Or can they?

3. - Undoubtedly, the rural part-society where Turner was working more than a decade before Zambia became independent (1964), was shielded from the wider society to at least such an extent as to

¹² G. KAY, *A Social Geography of Zambia*, London, 1967, p. 78 f.

¹³ *Schism*, p. 17; *Drums*, pp. 59, 101, 104 f, 118 f, 128, 152, 194.

make a ritual analysis in terms of this part-society alone, appear acceptable, inspiring, and revealing, within the established anthropological framework. In the afore-mentioned case of the Nkoya *Bituma* cult in both village and town the same problem becomes much more acute. The study of urban-rural dynamics represents an arduous test of the theory of religion and culture - at least of my theory. Here we have people operating, within short time intervals, in two or three structurally different and geographically segregated segments of the same, overall society: the village; the network contacts with relatives, neighbours and friends in the urban compound; and the formal urban organizations where they work, go for shopping, medical treatment, education, administrative documents, etc. None of these three sub-systems can be reasonably considered to be self-contained in any way. In all of them large-scale political and economic structures and processes penetrate deeply and tie them to what is essentially a world-wide social system. Now if Nkoya perform a ritual in town (e.g. *Bituma*), must this be interpreted in terms of either of these three part-societies, and which, and why, or must we look at it as reflecting the total social order (Zambia? Central Africa? the modern world?), and how? Pointing to a diffusion of cultural elements between these three part-societies is hardly relevant: we are looking not for raw materials and their supply lines, but how these materials are worked upon, and function, within a particular structural context.

The case of the *Bituma* cult may illustrate the complexity of the situation at the descriptive level.¹⁴ This cult is a recent innovation: it was created in the early 1930s by the prophet Simbinga, a returning labour migrant and ex-evangelist with the evangelical South Africa General Mission (the earliest mission in Mulenga district, at 100 km. from my rural research site). Simbinga combined elements of pre-existing cults of affliction which in themselves were also of rather recent origin locally (late 19th century), and rendered to these a theistic flavour. Subsequently however the *Bituma* cult, forced to admit into its ranks established local doctors and diviners of earlier cults, lost these prophetic and theistic elements again and it now lives on as merely one of the many cults of affliction which circulate in Western Zambia and surrounding areas. Moreover, *Bituma* has taken on, and transformed, elements of an older cult

¹⁴ My *Bituma*; *Explorations*.

complex revolving around fertility, ecology and shrines.¹⁵ The cult is practised in town and in the village. Leaders and adepts frequently travel up and down between the village and the town, for both ritual and other purposes, over a distance of up to 400 km. The cult presents a setting for the mobilization of people (in such roles as patient, officiant, sponsor, adept, musician, choir member, onlooker) as well as material resources (cash, beer, firewood, instruments, other paraphernalia) and transactions involving these. The ritual allows hidden conflicts and resentments to be voiced in private therapeutic conversations, and partly remedies certain types of ancestral and sorcery afflictions. In this way, each particular cult session clearly relates to specific, identifiable social-structural issues within the immediate social network of the participants. The session is just another phase in the ongoing social process, and far from revolving around mere imponderabilia, provides a major setting for such transactions as also dominate non-ritual social life in this group.¹⁶ But does the cult also, beyond this and on a more general and abstract level, relate to « ultimate social values, » « the culture core, » « the social order »? What is it (if anything) the adepts communicate with, when the drumming and the medicinal vapours they inhale, lead them (though rarely) to paroxysms of ecstatic transport?

4. - At this juncture I wish to make two observations concerning the « state of the art. »

The first is that Central-African studies of urbanization have not yet yielded a coherent and specific approach to the cultural dimension of urban-rural relations. I have elaborated on this point elsewhere.¹⁷ So the anthropologist tackling ritual or other cultural data in the urban-rural context, has nothing to fall back upon - at least not for this part of the world. Gluckman's reason to consider Turner's approach inapplicable to urban situations, has apparently much to do with this. Gluckman's published work on urbanization¹⁸

¹⁵ *Explorations*.

¹⁶ The same point is made in Werbner's stimulating re-interpretation of Turner's analyses of similar Ndembu cults of affliction, as compared to Kalanga data from Southern Africa; cf. R.P. WERBNER, *Symbolic Dialogue and Personal Transactions*, *Ethnology*, 1971.

¹⁷ *Ethnicity*.

¹⁸ Cf. M. GLUCKMAN, *Seven-year Research Plan of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute of Social Studies in British Central Africa*, *Rhodes-Livingstone Journal*:

implies the following argument : Turner's theory of symbolism starts with the model of the one, tribal society ; the structure of Central-African urban society is entirely different from the tribal societies in the same area, and must primarily be understood by reference to the dominant complex of colonial (c.q. post-colonial) and industrial power relations ; in this urban structure, rural, tribal elements have no place nor function except when, through a process of transformation whose precise characteristics have so far not yet been identified, they have been disengaged from their rural function and have become « urban » ;¹⁹ with the underlying structures entirely different, African urban ritual, however much reminiscent of the village, cannot be explained by reference to the rural, tribal structure, even if we still lack the theoretical tools to interpret such urban ritual in terms of the urban colonial-industrial structure.

In other words, not only did Turner not *systematically*²⁰ include in his analysis the wider society of which Ndembu « society » was only a segment - but even if he had wished to do so, the kind of interpretational analysis of Ndembu ritual he was pursuing, would have revealed apparent incompatibility and incongruence between the village ritual and the non-ritual structure of that wider society. How can we meaningfully and systematically relate the macro-structure of the colonial society of Northern Rhodesia, to a performance of *Nkang'a* at the village level ? How can we relate both the micro-structure of the rural village and kin network, and the macro-structure of post-colonial Zambian society, to a performance of *Bituma* both in a Lusaka suburb and in a village in Mulenga district ? The latter phrase sums up my own present research problems, and where (as far as I can see) theoretical tools are lacking to interpret cultural continuity in a structurally diverse plural society, no easy solution presents itself.

5. - For the second observation, we shall leave behind Turner and other Central-African studies, and turn to nothing less than the whole theoretical orientation towards the analysis of religion.

on Human Problems in British Central Africa, 4, 1945, p. 1-32 ; *Tribalism in Modern British Central Africa*, *Cahiers d'études africaines*, 1, 1960, 1, p. 55-70 ; *Anthropological Problems arising from the African Industrial Revolution*, in : A. SOUTHWALL, (ed.), *Social Change in Modern Africa*, London, 1961, p. 67-82.

¹⁹ Cf. J.C. MITCHELL's discussion of joking relations and apparently tribal dances in town in : *The Kalela Dance*, Manchester (1956), 1968.

²⁰ Despite occasional observations, cf. note 13.

Dominant previous analyses,²¹ from Durkheim, *via* Parsons, Geertz, Berger and Luckmann, etc., up to Turner, have emphasized how religion renders social life meaningful and unescapable in what is, for simplicity's sake, represented as a one, close society. But there have always been rival approaches, which may have lacked the prestige and the ambition of the established anthropological tradition, but may be more capable of coping with the problems of religious thought and action in *part*-societies. Having been rather entrenched in the dominant, idealistic tradition of the anthropology of religion, I have no clear-cut solutions here, in fact am desperately looking for alternative models to cope with my research problems. But I suspect that a way-out may be found along the following lines.

When we retain the view of culture as a repository of social meanings, of religion as a device to elevate these meanings (and the associated values and norms) to a plane where they can no longer be critically discussed and manipulated by the participants but instead are imposed upon them ; and of social action as an enaction of meanings, norms and values firmly established in this way ; - then we need a unified, integrated society as our theoretical model. In a part-society there is, by definition, the existence of alternatives which are, however distorted, known to at least a portion of the participants (by virtue of the interaction between this part and other segments of the wider society - without such interaction the part-society would be a whole society). Either these alternatives hollow out the absolute character of dominant, religiously-underpinned symbols - and then the latter can no longer perform the allegedly crucial functions of absolute legitimation (although in specific ritual contexts something similar, but much less absolute and overwhelming, might yet be seen to work) ; - or, religion works altogether in a different way from what the established theory claims.

Is it really from religion that social and individual life receives an ultimate meaning and anchorage ? And is it necessary for life to have an ultimate, societal meaning, for the participants (consciously, or in the idiom of the ritual and of altered states of consciousness),

²¹ E.G. E. DURKHEIM, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, Paris, 1912 ; PARSONS, T., *The Structure of Social Action*, New York, 1937, and *The Social System*, Glencoe, 1951 ; C. GEERTZ, *Religion as a Cultural System*, in : M. BANTON, (ed.), *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, London, 1966, p. 1-46 ; P. BERGER & T. LUCKMANN, *Sociology of Religion and Sociology of Knowledge*, in : *Sociology and Social Research*, 47, 1963, p. 417-27.

in order to be lived? Can the, undeniable, emotions participants betray in the course of ritual, not be explained otherwise than in terms of ultimate societal meaning and communication with the eminently social? One begins to suspect that the dominant tradition in the anthropology of religion is upholding a rationalistic, volitional philosophy of religion which the mainstream of Western thought has largely rejected since the times of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Rather than starting on another exercise to turn an observed religious system inside out, in order to fit into the strait-jacket of an interpretational model that for more than one reason seems untenable, one would wish to adopt a fresh theoretical position altogether.

One obvious way to overcome the problems of interpretation which the established anthropological theory of religion offers in confrontation with contemporary Central-African society and urban-rural relations, is to move religion from the core to the periphery, in our theory of society. If religion is considered a secondary reflexion, an expression, comment, adornment, etc. of whatever other more fundamental and central aspects of society, then we require no longer one « tribal » society to act as societal referent for ritual symbols, but instead we could mobilize as possible referents, amongst other ones, the whole variety of social groupings at various levels and with various structural characteristics as may exist in a given social context.

If we could thus rid ourselves from the burden of an unworkable conception of religion, we might as well include « culture » in this reassessment. Bohannan²² argues rightly that the anthropological concept of culture as it is commonly used by professionals today covers the same ground as Durkheim's notions « conscience collective » and « représentation collective », which were so fundamental in the development of the approach to religion criticised here. The researcher trying to apply the concept of culture to urban-rural relations in Central Africa faces similar problems as I discuss here for, more specifically, religion. Is social behaviour the enaction of values? Or are values (as abstract statements concerning behaviour, explicitly phrased by either the participants themselves or - as is equally often the case - by the researcher when the latter tries to identify the general principle implicit in the participants' behav-

²² P. BOHANNAN, « Conscience collective » and Culture, in KH. WOLFF, (ed.), *Essays on Sociology and Philosophy by Emile Durkheim et al.*, New York, 1960, p. 77-96

our) - are such values only a secondary device engendered by factors outside the sphere of values?

I suspect that there are several recent theoretical and descriptive anthropological studies which have pursued these themes in full, both for religion and for other aspects of « culture, » but I do not know them. It is however reassuring to find at least a few inspiring examples of anthropologists who have tackled similar problems in a field where norms and values (which many anthropologists conceive of as ultimately sanctioned by religion) have for so long formed the standard fundamental explanation: kinship studies. Worsley (whose critical studies of religion²³ show him another dissident vis-à-vis the Durkheimian tradition of religious anthropology) has argued²⁴ how it is the economic and micro-political structure of the Tallensi homestead, instead of the religiously-underpinned super-structure of overall kinship values so emphasized by Fortes,²⁵ which makes Tallensi society tick. And of course the most seminal study along this line is Van Velsen's *Politics of Kinship*²⁶ where it is a manipulatory and creative, prolonged social process at the local level, instead of unassailable, absolute kinship values, which is shown to provide the fundamental structure of Lake-side Tonga society.

Worsley is an outspoken representative of a social-scientific tradition, elder yet than the line of Fustel de Coulanges, etc., which has explored the alternative perspective: of religion as secondary, even peripheral, to society. Major early representatives of this tradition are, of course, Marx and Engels.

With little intention to be fashionable, and with very little specific background in marxist studies, I will explore, in the remainder of this paper, to what extent the theoretical difficulties presented by my data might be overcome by an approach which considers the differential distribution of economic power (class) a dominant structural principle.

²³ P. M. WORSLEY, *Emile Durkheim's Theory of Knowledge*, in *Sociological Review*, 4, 1956, p. 47-62, *Groote Eylandt Totemism and « le totémisme aujourd'hui »*, in E. LEACH, (ed.), *The Structural Study of Myth and Totemism*, London, 1967, p. 141-159

²⁴ P. M. WORSLEY, *The Kinship System of the Tallensi. A Reevaluation*, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 86, (1956), p. 36-75

²⁵ M. FORTES, *The Dynamics of Clanship among the Tallensi*, London, 1945, *The Web of Kinship among the Tallensi*, London, 1949, *Oedipoes and Job in West African Religion*, London, 1959

²⁶ J. VAN VELSEN, *The Politics of Kinship*, Manchester, 1964

6. - What does a distinctive culture (including ritual) do for people who find themselves as a numerical minority in a social setting dominated by cultural and structural diversity - such as modern Central-African towns?

There is, to my mind, a strong case for the view that the majority of urban migrants who have a Nkoya rural background continue to adhere to the Nkoya ethnic label in town and to pursue Nkoya values and ritual, not so much for the sake of any birth-determined, deeply internalized, once-for-all commitment to Nkoya culture, but primarily because, under trying economic conditions, their self-interest leaves them no choice.²⁷

As a low-class ethnic minority, these people have (because of a lack of formal education and other opportunities, and the fact that others before them have occupied strategic openings to the labour market) usually very small chances of a stable job and individual social climbing within the wider society. Apart from the small minority that has acquired fixed, permanent jobs in the middle and upper ranks of urban formal organisations, they can only cope with the insecurities and vicissitudes of urban life if they have other people to make effective claims upon whenever necessary. Nkoya « culture » provides an idiom of kinship, the notion of the indispensibility of kin assistance in life-crises, and hideous negative sanctions in the sphere of sorcery, ancestral revenge, ridicule, attack, as well as positive sanctions in the sphere of status advancement within a particularistic system (i.e. among fellow-Nkoya), and financial benefits (for ritual specialists, as well as in the case of dyadic exchanges within the framework of the kinship idiom). This cultural system is capable of regulating satisfactorily the necessary economic transactions between most urban people with a rural Nkoya background (in addition some townsmen with a non-Nkoya background are assimilated). It renders transactions within this network well-defined, predictable, reduces the risks involved (particularly the risk of a breach of reciprocity: whoever is to show himself generous today - while he has work, e.g. - has to be sure of assistance to-morrow - when he will be out of the job) and provides a standard for evaluation.²⁸ But however convenient to most, a minority opt out of this system. These are the people who, accidentally, manage to im-

²⁷ Cf. my *Ethnicity*.

²⁸ For a general discussion along the same lines, cf. A. COHEN, *Introduction. The Lesson of Ethnicity*, in: A. COHEN, (ed), *Urban Ethnicity*, London, 1974

prove their economic and social status and then cut the links not only with their immediate relatives but also with the Nkoya group as a whole, ignoring the very values, rituals and relationships which previously seemed so deeply internalized and sacred.

If this description makes sense, it suggests that the main function Nkoya ritual performs in an urban, class-determined context, is: to provide organizational elements (notably: situational settings, sanctions, statuses) to pool and share out scarce and fluctuating individual resources. One is reminded of the « shared-poverty system » which Geertz and Wertheim have identified for overcrowded and economically declining Java, and in which kinship values play a similar role.²⁹

In view of the theoretical problems discussed in this paper, such an approach has a few marked advantages. It provides, at least in the urban setting, one clear proposal (though of course not the complete and final solution) of the problem, how to relate ritual to a social sub-system in a wider (« plural ») society. It goes some way to explain how the ritual system under study, once in existence, persists over time. For by participating in the ritual and verbally supporting it (even if this means, at one level of consciousness or another, merely paying lip-service to it - I mean, irrespective of whether the participants « believe » or not), one asserts oneself as a member of an effective sub-community, publicly presents oneself as subscribing to the organizational terms of this community, and therefore the costs (materially, and in terms of effort, time, care, etc.) one puts in now, can be expected to be repaid by the benefits one will, on this very basis, be able to claim in the future. In other words, the necessity to build up effective claims for assistance, in the sure expectation of future need (unemployment, disease, bereavement, conflict), appears the primary motor behind ritual participation among urban Nkoya. The sanctions underpinning such ritual, as well as the sanctions stemming from this ritual and operating in non-ritual settings, seem to derive, not primarily from the normative or conceptual system by which, in some Durkheimian fashion, the total society imposes both meaning and conformity upon its individual members; nor primarily from sub-conscious mental structures referring to early childhood and socialization; but mainly from

²⁹ C. GEERTZ, *Religious Beliefs and Economic Behaviour in a Central Javanese Town, Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 4, 1956, p 141; W.F. WERTHEIM, *East - West Parallels*, The Hague, 1964, p 3 f

the economic need to mobilize fellow-members of the group in future.³⁰ Ritual is one occasion to build up, or lose, such social credit as is necessary for survival. And, finally, *any* ritual seems in principle capable of providing organizational devices for this purpose, irrespective of whether the form and content of such ritual betrays profound structural relations (symmetry, reversal, compensation, etc.) with non-ritual structural aspects. This may come as a surprise to the modern anthropologist of religion, who habitually looks for such isomorphism : e.g. a notion of glory after death to compensate for deprivation during life ; the symmetry between intra-familial authority patterns on the one hand and notions concerning divine power and its worldly intervention, on the other. But in fact, and rather ironically, the arbitrary nature of the sacred, its being superimposed upon sacred things instead of being an innate quality of them, has been one of the guiding principles of Durkheim's theory of religion.³¹ For such rituals as *Bituma*, which, after originating in a village setting, have been introduced into town and there frequently bring together a fair proportion of the urban Nkoya population, this is a very important point. It helps to explain both the effective urban functioning of village-bred ritual action and imagery (with frequent references, e.g., to the ecological complex of hunting which has so little to do with the urban economic structure), and the proliferation, both in the village and in town, of new cults (with new elements of ritual action and symbolic imagery which are very hard to explain in terms of social-structural conditions and ditto change, but instead seem to constitute an element of creative mental association and experiment reminiscent of poetry).

Yet I realize that I am grossly overstating my point here. The observable data of ritual behaviour and of the participants' statements about ritual may be far removed from theoretical constructs in terms of the social order, etc., but (as everyone knows who has done fieldwork on religion) they are also, though in a different direction, removed from non-ritual interaction. Settings, recruitment of personnel, distribution of roles and statuses, group dynamics, trans-

³⁰ The distinction is, of course, mainly a matter of emphasis. As I will admit below, economic determinism alone cannot build an acceptable theory of religion and ritual ; once the economic, and kinship-political, aspect is fully acknowledged, indispensable further insights can be gained from the idealist-Durkheimian, the psycho-analytic and other major ultimate explanations of religion.

³¹ DURKHEIM, *o.c.*, p. 327 f ; PARSONS, *Structure*, *passim*.

actions and social-structural issues in general may show very much in common between the ritual and the non-ritual life - as is very often the case in Central and Southern Africa. Yet symbolism and ritual sanctions do have subjective reality in that they function, often with great directness, at the participants' level - and then precisely because the participant is unaware of the economic background of urban ritual participation suggested above. In fact, ritual tends to impede the participants' awareness of the non-ritual, economic infrastructure ; in the minds of the participants, ritual substitutes, in lieu of a more or less objective understanding of the overall social process, the « false consciousness » (Marx) of a religious symbolic system, consisting of (in Geertz's words)³² « conceptions of a general order of existence, [clothed] with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations [inspired by them] seem uniquely realistic. » The analyst, however much inclined towards reductionism, can simply not afford to ignore this capability of religious elements to function, not just as symbols of identifiable non-religious referents (as they clearly do at times), but also, in other contexts, as more or less autonomous foci of social life where the derived, symbolizing aspect has little relevance. A spirit and the ritual surrounding it, may from one point of view, reflect structural aspects of the participants' kinship and economic relations - but from the participants' perspective it is primarily an interaction partner, much comparable to human partners, and leading a life on its own. Similarly, it is not difficult to see how the idiom of sorcery fits in with the socio-economic explanation attempted here. Sorcery supports and regulates power relations, at the same time curbing excessive accumulation of resources in the hands of a few successful individuals.³³ But the truth is that in many situations fear of death through sorcery attacks (i.e. the participants' subjective interpretation of a social crisis) functions as a powerful sanction - much more so than the fear of death through starvation or abandonment, which would be the objective consequence of such a crisis provided the social processes involved were allowed to develop unchecked by a specific cultural idiom of sanctions and associated concepts, including sorcery.

On the one hand the presumably ultimate referents of ritual (e.g. effective claims for assistance in future need) become disguised in

³² *Religion as a Cultural System*, p. 4 and *passim*.

³³ Cf. my *Explorations*.

the ritual process ; on the other hand these disguises, symbols, become a subjective reality for the participants, which more or less in its own right begins to pattern their behaviour. We shall have to account for this intermediate, relatively autonomous level of functioning of ritual symbolism and sanctions, even if « ultimately » it all boils down to an idiom to discuss, anticipate and ensure future non-ritual transactions. If the analyst ignores this issue, there is little to prefer his theory over those in the line of the established tradition. So even the most determinist and materialist theory of religion will need a sophisticated theory of symbolism, not because the researcher has to believe in symbols as a final explanatory category, but in order to systematically account for the relations between the ritual superstructure and the economic infra-structure. To my knowledge, marxism or neo-marxism have but the rudiments of such a theory yet - but in this respect the more traditional anthropology and sociology of religion are hardly in a better position, despite people like Geertz and Turner. Meanwhile I have to admit that the present paper goes only halfway in meeting the challenge of assessing whether Turner's symbol theory can be applied to an urban-rural context ; before the journey will be completed, we shall yet have a lot to learn from those aspects of his, and similar, work that transcend the limitations of the tribal model.

So I merely emphasize what numerous other studies have brought out : that ritual is used instrumentally to shape social relations. However, I am tempted to claim that this aspect of religion is, at least in the Nkoya case, not a secondary application of an institution which has mainly other, more fundamental functions - but that it is the crucial issue itself. If so, and if this statement has some validity for other societies, one could conceive of societies where the function of organizing interaction (a function which ritual seems to perform among the urban Nkoya), is met by institutions which are altogether of a non-religious nature. Whereas the established, Durkheimian approach would consider a society without religion inconceivable. Whether such societies « without religion » exist is mainly a question of definition. However, North-Atlantic urban, industrial society, where the dubious blessings of the welfare state are reducing to a minimum the need to mobilize individual fellow-members for future economic need and where at the same time the decline of organized religion is obvious, offers interesting fields for further exploration along this line.

7. - It will be argued that the uncoupling of ritual, values and meaning, even if observable and understandable in the case of urban *Bituma*, is essentially an aberration, the result of urbanization, « de-tribalization, » « anomie. » *Bituma* will be called a bad example since it is a recent innovation, presumably not in line with « traditional, » « tribal » institutions. In the village, one will claim, a very different picture may obtain : the beautiful alignment of ritual symbolism and non-ritual norms and values, interlinked in the process of legitimizing and sacralizing the social order, everything one would expect on the basis of the dominant theoretical tradition...

Ritual does flourish in the village, and, while modern possession healing cults such as *Bituma* dominate the scene, there is a wealth of ancestral, ecological and life-crisis ritual, some of which seems centuries old. Like in town, this ritual is frequently performed and brings together a considerable number of rural neighbours and kinsmen. Due to the frequent traffic between Lusaka and the distant villages, and the low rate of urban stabilization, we encounter partly the same participants in the village as in the urban rituals.

I am more and more convinced that the emerging picture of Nkoya urban ritual as mainly related to non-ritual transactions of a micro-political and economic nature, is equally applicable to the rural setting.

Three quarters of a century of exposure to the colonial-industrial complex and its post-colonial counter-part, preceded by a century of political encroachment due to Lozi (Barotse) expansion, and a rapid escalation of military raiding and slave-trade by both Lozi and non-Lozi groups in the same pre-colonial period, have left the country-side of Mulenga district in a state of destitute stagnation.³⁴ The scarcity and fluctuations of economic resources are even more severe here than among Nkoya in town, and the overall standard of living is lower. If urban Nkoya can be said to constitute, along with townsmen from other areas but in similar social positions, a class, the same is true for the majority of Nkoya villagers : they are representatives of the largest class in Central-African society, the peasant farmers. Their land and game have been repeatedly encroached upon by government policy and private enterprise ; labour migra-

³⁴ Cf my *Ethnicity*, and *Labour Migration and the Generation Conflict An Essay on Social Change in Central Western Zambia*, paper read at the 34th Annual Meeting, Society for Applied Anthropology, Amsterdam, 1975, forthcoming in *Cultures et Développement*, 1976

tion has continually absorbed a very substantial portion of the rural labour force without in any way contributing towards its reproduction; and while politicians have been keen to solicit rural support, they have not brought rural development. In terms of standard of living; access to labour markets, consumer markets and cash; effective political power; rates of mortality and morbidity; education, etc., these peasants (at least in Mulenga district) are at the bottom of Zambian society. A usual way to escape from this situation has been migration to the urban, industrial centres of Central and Southern Africa; this opportunity is now largely closed due to the prohibition on migration to the South, and the tightening of the urban Zambian market for other than highly qualified labour. People still migrate to the Zambian towns, but chances of securing a job there, and keeping it, are extremely slim. Meanwhile very little indeed can be seen in the way of rural development.

Thus the relevant structural ingredients of the Nkoya urban situation are present in the village in an even more pronounced form. And much of what I have said about urban ritual, seems to apply to the rural situation.

In the village, a large proportion of the adults older than 40 are ritual specialists in one matter or another relating to the sphere of illness and death. This makes it possible that non-ritual power relations are constantly expressed, and (since usually several people will strive for power over the same individual) contested, in a ritual idiom. Alignments and conflicts such as continually arise out of everyday social life are constantly commented upon by, and partly take shape in the course of, connected series of rituals. Illness and death provide the major occasion for such ritual, and it is here that senior kinsmen, and members of the senior generation in general, seize upon patients and their close kinsmen, either to assert their claims over the latter (in the prospect of political and material support in future) or to exact very heavy fees straight-away. The central issues in present-day ritual are not so much abstract, impersonal beliefs and values, but power and competition over social relationships which provide access to rare resources: co-residing junior kinsmen, clients, money earned in town. Ritual interpretations and actions are constantly shifted, new ones are invented and improvised, and the rules of the ritual game are largely determined not by immutable custom, but by the individual specialist and the day-to-day vicissitudes of the small-scale socio-political process.

How little of an explanation beliefs and values offer when considered in isolation is particularly clear in the confrontation between ritual (medical) specialists and modern, « western » medical services, both in the village and in town. In our rural research site, a small and understocked rural health centre was available at a distance of 30 km., in addition to three hospitals, each at a distance of about 100 km.; in town private practitioners, clinics and a regular University hospital were available within walking distance. In independent Zambia, all « western » medical agents except private practitioners provide services entirely free of charge. Major costs involved in the use of these « western » medical services therefore mainly concern the following items: transportation; loss of productivity through absence of patient and escort; food for the latter; the social costs involved in appealing to kinsmen for assistance as escorts and domestic helping-out; and finally, most important, the social cost of challenging the strong informal social control exercised by senior kinsmen who, in rivalry with modern medical services, are eager to treat their diseased kinsman in order to enhance their own power and income. With regard to the majority of ailments, including those for which modern possession cults claim to provide a treatment, present-day Nkoya tend to acknowledge the theoretical superiority of « western » medical services over treatment by senior kinsmen and other local specialists. Incidental experience with modern medicine within the rural area and in the course of circulatory labour migration, has broken down whatever effective barriers Nkoya may ever have had, in the way of internalized values, against such medical alternatives as are offered outside the Nkoya local, ritual idiom; psychological costs springing from negative attitudes vis-à-vis « western » medicine scarcely play a role in this context. Yet in the great majority of cases, in town hardly less than in the village, treatment is sought not from « western » medical agents but from Nkoya specialists, particularly senior kinsmen, even if the latter charge fees in the order of magnitude of an average monthly income amongst these people. One key towards an understanding of this paradoxical situation seems to lie in the fact that modern medicine means an escape from the ritual power complex that ties junior kinsmen to their seniors, and urban migrants to their fellow-tribesmen both in town and in the distant village. Senior kinsmen and senior tribesmen in general constantly militate against this loss of what little access to power and resources is left them; they explicitly persuade patients to refrain

from seeking « western » medical assistance, or to give up a course of « western » treatment already started, and to pursue such local alternatives as they themselves can provide (even, should specific knowledge and experience lack them, in the form of impromptu improvisations). Thus in the sphere of illness and death senior Nkoya not only compete with each other for the control of junior people as political followers and providers - they also compete with the outside world. The confrontation between Nkoya specialists/senior kinsmen on the one hand, and the « western » medical services on the other, is all the more interesting since, on the rural side, the class aspect is obvious: high morbidity and mortality (due, in addition to the low standard of living and environmental infestation, to the remoteness and inefficiency of rural medical institutions) is a major component of the peasants' class situation in the wider sense.³⁵ The choice between local treatment or hospital is partly a choice between honouring the demands of people in the same class situation (to whom one is tied by the expectation of future need), or ignoring these claims and enjoying a first instalment of the benefits of upward mobility in the wider society. By consequence, mainly two categories of present-day Nkoya can afford to utilize the « western » medical sphere to a considerable extent: the elderly; and those who are already on their way up, socio-economically - at the same time breaking out of the confines of their kin-group and ethnic group. Only those younger people who feel they can (or, due to disrupted kin relations, must) build up economic and status security in the wider society, dare ignore the social and religious sanctions the elders may direct towards them, risk a crisis which may well cost them their foothold in the village (where the majority of even long-term urban migrants tend to retire because of their economic insecurity in town), and pursue healing outside Nkoya ritual.

I do realize that these assertions, like the ones concerning the Nkoya urban situation, in order to be taken seriously, require the detailed presentation of both extended case material and systematic, quantitative data. Such information was collected in abundance

³⁵ « We may speak of a 'class' when 1) a number of people have in common a specific causal component of their life chances, in so far as 2) this component is represented exclusively by economic interests in the possession of goods and opportunities for income, and 3) is represented under the conditions of the commodity or labour markets », Max WEBER, *Class, Status and Party*, in: R. BENDIX & S.M. LIPSET, (eds.), *Class, Status and Power*, London, (2) 1968; my italics.

during over two years of fieldwork among this group; however the scope of the present article, as well as the amount of detail that would have been necessary for a truly convincing argument, preclude its inclusion here. All I can do here is refer to the book for which this article is a preparatory study.³⁶

8. - Nowadays, manipulation of ritual concerning illness and death seems to provide a major basis for power in the social structure of the village, particularly between members of different generations. Among urban Nkoya, who particularly through ritual are tied both to the village and to their fellow-tribesmen in town, the same situation obtains.

There are indications that, on the rural side, this is largely a modern development. In the period preceding Lozi expansion and colonial rule, non-ritual power of chiefs and headmen was very considerable, both in extent and in number of followers; but this political power had only limited ritual implications which could not compare, in most cases, with e.g. the model of the Sudanic or medieval European kingship.³⁷ From the late nineteenth century on we witness on the one hand a decline of the effective non-ritual, economic and political power of the chiefs, headmen, and the senior generation in general (due to political incorporation, labour migration, and the development of urban alternatives), on the other hand (and typically from outside the sphere of chieftainship) the emergence of religious innovators who create, or introduce from elsewhere, new cults primarily concerned with healing. Why these cults emerged and had a general appeal is a problem I have considered elsewhere;³⁸ there I make plausible that the emphasis on individual suffering (which in the present context is highlighted as an opportunity to manipulate ritual for power) has greatly increased, in this area, under influence of structural changes during the last century or so. Whatever the origin and older history of contemporary ritual, when recently the directly economic and political power basis of the

³⁶ *Ritual, Class and Urban-Rural Relations: The Nkoya of Zambia*, in preparation; meanwhile, extensive description of one case relevant in this context is given in my paper *The Infancy of Edward Shelonga: An Extended Case*, Royal Tropical Institute, working paper 5129, Amsterdam, 1975

³⁷ R. J. APHORPE, *Mythical African Political Structures in Northern Rhodesia*, in: A. DUBB, (ed.), *Myth in Modern Africa*, Lusaka, 1960, p. 18-37; my *Explorations*.

³⁸ *Explorations*

elders' control was taken away, new bases for power came to be explored. With junior kinsmen increasingly embarking upon an independent career as labour migrants, instead of staying in the village and working as junior clients and prospective sons-in-law, senior kinsmen were anxious to explore new claims to effectively divert these migrants' resources back into the village economy. Payment of bride-wealth (which before the spread of labour migration applied only to female slaves but which now has become a condition for any regular marriage) provided a partial solution; but it was counteracted by such enduring sexual unions as migrants entered into with women elsewhere.³⁹ The new cults, and whatever other, older ritual could be employed for this purpose, provide an additional solution. At present this ritual device seems the most important and effective way to assert and maintain economic and kinship-political claims across the urban-rural gap, in addition to structuring the social process within the rural area itself. Noteworthy in this respect is the role of women. Like the elderly men, they were and are less involved in migration than younger men; the modern possession cults, whose patients, adepts and leaders are mainly (though not exclusively) female, and which are very popular both in town and in the village, now constitute a device to siphon the resources to which men as migrants and urban worker have greater (if still very limited) access, over onto women, in the context of cult sessions where husbands and male consanguineal relatives act as sponsors for their womenfolk, provide beer and firewood and pay high fees to specialists who are predominantly female.

9. - The situation I describe seems peculiar to one particular Central-African ethnic group, at one particular moment of time. While my tentative analysis may have some heuristic and theoretical value, it is yet far from providing anything like an adequate basis for an alternative theory of religion. However, the Nkoya data do demonstrate weak spots in the existing body of established theory, and suggest an alternative approach.

³⁹ Cf. W.M.J. VAN BINSBERGEN, *Law in the Context of Nkoya Society*, in: S.A. ROBERTS, (ed), *New Directions in African Family Law*, The Hague, etc. 1976; for a more extensive discussion precisely on this point, see the original draft: *Kinship, Marriage and Urban-Rural Relations*, paper read at the seminar *New Directions in African Family Law*, Afrika Studie Centrum, Conference Paper Series, Leiden, 1975, p. 11-17, 23 f.

It might appear as if I bluntly suggest that contemporary Nkoya ritual is just a trick of cunning elderly people, and of women irrespective of age, to make money at the expense of hard-working and credulous young men. I would like to take away this naïve impression, but this would necessitate presenting not only a somewhat unusual view of the relation between ritual and social structure, but also a fully-fledged theory of symbolism - i.e. of the internal structure and subjective yet almost inescapable reality of ritual at the intermediate level of how the participants look at it and live with it. I do not have such a theory ready; let alone that I could present it in this short article. Meanwhile there are a few points which I must emphasize.

I may set out to debunk an established theoretical tradition - but certainly not to denounce the authenticity of the ideas and actions of my informants. There is, without the slightest doubt, much of profound human experience, tragedy, beauty, in any ritual. The stranger who is given the opportunity to share in this experience, however imperfectly and at whatever costs, receives much to be grateful for. He is admitted into a great intimacy, and this imposes obligations upon him as a professional, and a fellow-man. Professionally, the main obligation is: to strive passionately for understanding. All I am claiming, perhaps, is that for such an understanding it is unnecessary, in the Nkoya case at least, to reach for those exalted, abstract constructs that feature in the current, dominant theories of religion. Ordinary, trivial everyday life and death are sufficiently dramatic, moving, overwhelming to serve as the ultimate referents *par excellence* of ritual. For the poor man without many options or hopeful perspectives (and this is not only the typical Nkoya but also the typical subject of anthropological research throughout), the struggle for survival (which primarily means, a struggle for close relationships implying effective claims on other people) assumes an absolute reality and relevance which not only (painfully and embarrassingly) contrast with the complacent, abstract rhetorics of modern religious theory, but which also (in my conviction, at least) are wholly capable of accounting for such existential profundity, intensity and occasional redemption as religion and ritual may entail.

On the general, human side the main point appears to be application. Frankly, when returning from the field my main obsession was not to understand Nkoya ritual, but to do something about their

society. In this respect my present analysis has a strategic element which may well make critics suspicious. Social engineering will be difficult anyway, but if we can point, as the crucial issue in the social and ritual process, to economic and kinship-political power relations which locally reflect traceable economic and political conditions in the wider society, this promises a lot more for controlled planned change, than if we concentrate on impersonal values, etc. The anthropologist who points over the heads of the participants to timeless, impersonal values, norms and societal meaning as ultimate referents of ritual and as cornerstones of the existing social order, is likely to reinforce the status-quo. Popularized, his well-meant analysis can be used to discourage interference, or to legitimize active policies inimical to the interests of his informants (as the South-African manipulations of the concept of « traditional culture » in the political context of apartheid and bantustans, clearly shows). In cases like that of the contemporary Nkoya, where ritual is so much a matter of life and death in more than one sense, an optimal understanding of the non-ritual basis of ritual may well provide the necessary lever for positive change.

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