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VIII

**RURAL COMMUNITIES
IN THE CENTRAL AFRICAN CONTEXT:
THE NKOYA OF CENTRAL WESTERN ZAMBIA**

by

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I

INTRODUCTION

For the purpose of the 1976 Warsaw International Congress on the Comparative History of Rural Communities the rural community has been defined as: 'a group of men living together, or near to each other, in a restricted territorial field through the exploitation in common of the whole or part of the land' (Société Jean Bodin, 1975). In the present paper I shall, on the basis of my ongoing research since 1972, discuss the Nkoya from this viewpoint. After introducing the Nkoya in their wider political and historical context, I shall discuss the valley as the effective rural community, then focus on villages as the main constituent social units within the valley, and finally indicate the place of Nkoya society within the context of Central Africa as a whole. Meanwhile I am afraid that the limitations of length allow only the most superficial treatment; for which I apologize.

II THE NKOYA

Nkoya is an ethnic and linguistic label applying to about 50,000 people inhabiting the wooded plateau of Central Western Zambia (Van Binsbergen 1977, 1979, 1981a, 1981b; Clay 1945; McCulloch 1951; Anonymous, in press). In addition to migrant labour, the economy hinges on shifting horticulture and hunting, with a fringe of animal husbandry wherever the fly-infested environment allows this.

Oral-historical research reveals as the essential and persistent feature of the Nkoya political system the open competition for major and minor chiefly titles, most of which would exist for only a few generations between their emergence (as the proper name of a 'big man', leader of a powerful following) and their sinking into disuse.

From the 18th century onwards, the penetration of militant immigrants and new political concepts mainly from the North, and the related expansion of regional and long-distance trade, intensified this general process and modified it by causing a marked increase in political scale. Chiefs attempted to control larger areas, assuming a more exalted status and developing a royal cult complex focussing on chiefly paraphernalia, medicines and graves. This happened among the Nkoya as well as among neighbouring groups: Ila, Kaonde, Kwangwa, and particularly among the Lozi (Barotse) (Mainga 1972). Much of the Nkoya area came under Lozi political influence during the last century. Due to Lozi expansion and to a lesser extent to raids from the Ila and Kaonde and from the more distant Yeke and Ndebele, the development of Nkoya chieftainship was checked. The Nkoya came to be considered one of the Lozi subject tribes, and it is as such that they entered colonial rule (1900). The white administration favoured the development of a system where Lozi representatives (*indunas*) would take up residence with the major Nkoya chiefs and share in their political and judicial functions (Stokes 1966). Lozi

and colonial rule supplanted the shifting and competitive Nkoya political system by a theoretically clear-cut hierarchy of village headmen, minor chiefs, *indunas*, and senior Nkoya chiefs, under the ultimate authority of the Lozi 'Paramount Chief'. The senior chiefs and *indunas* were entrusted with Local Courts of law. Cases beyond their jurisdiction were handled by the colonial administration or the Paramount Chief's Court. As Barotseland became effectively incorporated into the Republic of Zambia (independent 1964), all formal executive and judicial functions of chiefs and headmen were taken over by governmental and party agencies. However, major chiefs are still officially recognized in a 'symbolic' capacity, whereas at the local level much influence and respect is still attached to titles, even those of minor village headmen.

III THE VALLEY AS A RURAL COMMUNITY

Ignoring such supralocal organizational, economic and political arrangements as have been superimposed by the Lozi (Barotse) and British colonization of the Nkoya area, and subsequently by the Zambian administration, Nkoya society has few effective organizational levels above the village level. The main named territorial unit besides the village is the valley, which takes its name from the river flowing through it. Rivers yield great quantities of fish in the wet season. Near the river, the wet gardens of the valley's villages lie close to each other; they are rich in yield but cannot be expanded, and therefore are heavily contested. The less fertile, dry gardens are situated around the villages and further uphill, as clearings in the forest which separates valleys from each other. Villages are located halfway the gentle slopes. They are connected by paths along and across the river. Day-to-day interaction of an economic, ritual or recreational nature, and most marital ties, of a given village involve, in addition to this village's members, almost exclusively members of other villages in the same valley. While a chief is appointed over a number of adjacent

valleys, each valley has a sub-chief (appointed by the chief in consultation with local village headmen); the subchief's main function is the regulation of such conflicts (including occasional referral to the distant Local Court) as could not be settled within the village. A valley shrine cult exists which has primarily reference to the valley's ecology. The cult focusses on the grave of the most recently deceased, most senior headman or chief of the valley. In years when the first rains are delayed or stop too soon, the subchief and two or three other senior headmen of the valley visit the shrine and ask the deceased and the High God (Nyambi) for rain.

Thus the valley is the largest effective ecological (predominantly agricultural), social and religious unit in Nkoya society; moreover it is an important judicial unit. The valley is the Nkoya rural community *par excellence*.

While the ecological and geomorphological delimitation of the valley is clear, in social terms, however, the valley is more a statistical, interactional aggregate than a corporate body supported by special institutions. The density of local interaction and local mutual interests sets off the valley's individual inhabitants, as a cluster, against those of adjacent valleys, but there are few institutions catering for the valley as a whole. Rights in cultivated land and in fishing are ideally vested in the chiefs and headmen but in practice are attached to individuals; by virtue of the latter conditions, they can be inherited, disputed in court etc. Agriculture and other economic activities take place on an individual (and, rarely, on a village) basis, never on a valley basis. The valley shrine ritual is extremely infrequent, inconspicuous, and involves only a few headmen, instead of all inhabitants of the valley; it is not referred to as a focus of common identity among the participants. The main operative institutions at the valley level concern conflict regulation (valley court, subchief).

It is therefore at the lower level, of the village, that we have to look in order to get a deeper understanding of the dynamics of Nkoya society.

IV THE VILLAGE

Nkoya villages are small: up to a hundred inhabitants, but usually a score or less. A valley often contains several dozens of villages. A village is a residential unit, but in fact it is much more than that: it is the central institution regulating social life in the rural context. As a social group, the village is not wholly confined to the actual members now living in it: urban migrants and others who have moved away but still keep a stake in the village membership, as well as all deceased former members, are also considered members of the village; in addition there is a large pool of potential members: people now attached to another village and dwelling elsewhere, but acceptable as co-residents if they should wish to change their village affiliation.

Villages continually emerge, mature and decline in response to ecological, demographic and social vicissitudes. The rural male career model stipulates the competition for village leadership and glorious titles. This causes senior men belonging to different villages (located in the same or different valleys) to compete for patrilineal, matrilineal and affinal junior kin, no matter how remotely related, as co-residing followers. The Nkoya are explicitly bilateral, which amounts to children having equal claims concerning support, residence and land vis-à-vis a rather large pool of geographically scattered bilateral kindred, including remote and putative kinsmen (*bathukulu*, 'grandfathers'). Marriage is unstable, many marriages end in divorce, and successive marriages are common practice. Therefore both women and junior men (up to their forties) tend to live in a number of villages successively, staying on for a number of years as long as they are effectively attached to senior men, and moving on (after divorce, death, disruption of good relationships with their patrons) when local support is failing or when better opportunities arise elsewhere. Adults rarely live and even more rarely die in the place where they were born. The cultural and ecological similarity throughout the wider area, and a clan system providing means of identification

beyond traceable or putative genealogical ties, frequently allow individual geographical mobility (in the pursuit of marriage and clientship) to cut across ethnic and linguistic boundaries, over several hundred kilometers.

With only moderate exaggeration the Nkoya village could be characterized as a small, ephemeral conglomerate of strangers, who have not grown up together, are genealogically heterogeneous, and are ready to leave as soon as misfortune befalls them locally and/or they can get better opportunities elsewhere. At the same time, people thrown together in a village share vital interests: in land, the production and distribution of food, a measure of harmony in day-to-day interaction, assistance in individual life crises, conflict regulation to mitigate internal strife and to prevent sorcery, and finally the maintenance (through food exchanges, mutually visited ceremonies, and marital ties) of good relationships with other villages in order to create a pool out of which material support and personnel can be drawn in case village survival is in danger.

How are these vital interests served? First, the senior membership (headman, elders, elder women) spend, in exchange for economic and prestige benefits, much of their time organizing the social process, coaxing it in the desired direction. In this process, emphasis is on informal procedures of admonition and conflict regulation. Secondly, an ideological construction counteracts the heterogeneity and opportunism of individual village membership. In terms of this ideology, all members of the village are close kinsmen. Precise genealogical details, and other historical facts such as historical slave status of part of the membership, are suppressed. The ideology has elaborate religious aspects. Nkoya belief that in addition to the actual living membership, a village's affairs are the concern of all deceased former members both of this village and of all villages from which ever members were drawn. Whatever their names and wherever buried, these ancestors (*bapashi*) are held to keep the affairs of the living in constant scrutiny, and to dish out success and health, res-

pectively failure and illness, commensurate to the living people's performance. The main material focus for rituals directed at ancestors is the village shrine, an inconspicuous shrub or forked pole situated in the centre of the village, located near the men's shelter which is the organizational headquarters of the village.

Any restoration or enlargement of the village's strength and unity forms occasion for a small ritual at the shrine: childbirth, return after long absence, the tracing of a distant kinsman and potential co-resident of whose existence one was not aware, the settlement of internal conflict, recovery from illness that was diagnosed as caused by the ancestors, success in hunting, etc. Ancestors are prayed to at the shrine in cases of illness.

Name-inheriting rituals represent the most elaborate collective rituals in which the Nkoya village shrine plays a part. On all other occasions only current members of the village (and migrants on visit) take part in the ritual. No outsider is under obligation to visit the village shrine and make an offering. But in the name-inheriting rituals, for which a beer party and nocturnal dance are staged, members of surrounding villages in the same and adjacent valleys participate in great numbers (up to several hundred, if the title of a chief or senior headman is to be inherited). In the area, the only other occasions bringing together this number of people, are girl's puberty ceremonies, and funerals. In name-inheriting ceremonies, geographically distant members of the extended bilateral kindred of the deceased come and participate in the ritual; many of these have never belonged to the village concerned but have a latent claim of membership there, whilst others may once have belonged to the village but moved away — often because they were in conflict with the deceased headman whose title they might now inherit. After long deliberations a heir is appointed by the elders so assembled, and inaugurated at the shrine.

The village shrine forms the main focus of village identity and autonomy; it legitimates village authority, and is the material focus

of a device to enforce conformity and loyalty by reference to supernatural sanctions. No village can do without a shrine. The ritual of planting a shrine by the headman makes the selection of a site for a new village definitive. (New village sites are occupied on three occasions: when after the death of a headman the whole village moves away; as a result of fission, usually followed by the attraction of geographically distant followers from other villages than the one that has split; and for an agricultural reason: in order to move away from exhausted gardens.)

It is at the level of the village, usually comprising only a few households, that the vital economic, social, religious and local-political processes take place that make Nkoya society tick.

V

THE NKOYA IN THE CENTRAL AFRICAN CONTEXT

At the village level, Nkoya society shows much of the familiar Central African pattern. The small villages, the high geographical mobility, the competition for political and residential following along kinship lines, the competition for titles carrying high prestige, the predominance of achieved over ascribed status, the continuous re-alignment and fission reflecting the conflicts engendered in this process, the prominence of sorcery and sorcery accusations, the shifting agriculture with hunting and some animal husbandry as providing an additional, ecological basis for village dynamics — these are all recurrent themes in the anthropology of Central African villages (Barnes 1954; Colson 1958, 1960, 1962; Cunnison 1959; Marwick 1965; Mitchell 1956; Richards 1939; Turner 1957; Van Velsen 1964; Watson 1957; Gluckman 1967, 1941; Stefaniszyn 1964). Alternately, on the highest level of national and international politics and political economy, most contemporary Nkoya, along with the overwhelming majority of rural Central Africans since the early decades of

colonial rule, fall within the class of peripheral peasantry. In this respect also their situation is far from unique. Determined by central conditions way beyond the control of the villagers, this situation is generally characterized by a paucity of local cash opportunities, dependence on urban-rural relations, and an increasingly direct influence of central power agencies in the rural area. The impact of this macro set-up upon the contemporary rural social processes and institutions can hardly be overestimated.

Yet we should not overlook the fact that in several respects there is variation between the societies of Central Africa. One aspect concerns the kinship pattern. While I would maintain that bilateral tendencies can be observed in most Central African societies referred to above, the Nkoya are, with the Lozi, the only examples in the area where these tendencies find expression in an explicitly bilateral participants' view of their social structure: the other groups are ideally matrilineal (cf. Richards 1950; Gluckman 1950; with exception of the patrilineal Ngoni and Mambwe: Watson 1958; Barnes 1954). Types of agriculture, and the extent to which animal husbandry occurs, form another basis for differentiation. The main other aspects concern the intermediate social-structural level: the domain of political organization above the village level, but under the uppermost national and international level. The Nkoya situation of local chieftaincies checked in their expansion by the influence of remote, more developed states (like that of the Lozi) is a common one in Central Africa (Vansina 1967). However, a different situation obtained in the cores of the few states that did in fact greatly expand and reach considerable internal complexity in the few centuries prior to European colonization: Lozi, Kazembe, Ngoni, Bemba, Undi, Mutapa, Rozwi, Mwaat Yaav. Here rural communities found themselves effectively embedded in a complex larger organization, involving elaborate ascriptive status systems, dense economic and political networks of trade and tribute, more elaborate systems of land holding, and a nation-wide administrative, judicial and religious system, extending across linguistic and ethnic boundaries. How in these sta-

tes rural communities were affected by their effective wider incorporation, and how they responded, subsequently, to incorporation in the colonial and post-colonial state, falls however outside the scope of this paper; it is, moreover, a field where very much research still remains to be done.

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