

## Chapter 3

# Explorations in the history and sociology of territorial cults in Zambia<sup>1</sup>

### The territorial cult in the Zambian context

#### *Territorial cult and shrine cult*

In a first attempt to apply the analytical concept of the territorial cult to Central Africa, Schoffeleers has tentatively defined this concept as<sup>2</sup>

an institution of spirit veneration, proper to a land area, whose primary concern is the material and moral well-being of its population, archetypically represented by its rain-calling function, and whose immediate control is institutionally limited to an elite.

This definition identifies what in fact has been one of the main forms of religion in Central Africa. Most of the religious institutions to be discussed in this chapter comply with this definition and can conveniently be called territorial cults. However, in order to present these religious institutions, analytically and historically, in their interrelation with other institutions, I find it useful to introduce an additional analytical concept: the shrine cult.

Territorial cults as defined above are not necessarily shrine cults. The concern for the material and moral well-being of the population of a particular land area need not focus on shrines. Alternative ways in which this concern can be institutionalized are, for example, prophets who are only loosely attached, if at all, to shrines;<sup>3</sup> other specialists who claim magical control over rain and fertility and who are professionally employed by their individual or communal clientele whenever the need arises;<sup>4</sup> the concentration of power over rain, land and fertility in such movable, non-shrine-like objects as the royal bracelets of the Lunda and the Luvale.<sup>5</sup> Yet, as is borne out by Schoffeleers's recent collection

*Guardians of the Land*,<sup>6</sup> the most widespread and typical form of the territorial cult in Central Africa is that of the shrine cult.

What is a shrine? A number of characteristics seem to be relevant at the same time. First, a shrine is an observable object or part of the natural world, clearly localized and usually immobile. It is a material focus of religious activities, and perceived and respected as such by the participants. The observable features of a shrine are defined within the participants' local religious system, which entails a limited selection of material objects (man-made or not) that possibly qualify for a shrine. The material variety of shrines in the Zambian context will be discussed below. In the case of non-man-made natural shrines, particular specimens from a class of natural objects such as trees or hills are selected to become shrines in a certain community. While there is also a wide variety in man-made shrines, the most typical form here is a miniature hut-like construction. Man-made shrines in Zambia are seldom permanent; often they are short-lived, constructed for the specific occasion of placating a particular invisible entity after the latter has demonstrated his wrath.<sup>7</sup>

The religious activities focusing on the shrine need not occur in the present: in so far as the erection of a man-made shrine is in itself a concentrated religious activity, the shrine may fall into disuse and still remain a shrine. Religious activities include not only what the believers positively do (such as clearing a spot, erecting a shrine, offering prayers, libations and sacrifices, or manipulating sacred attributes) but also what they refrain from doing out of religious considerations (such as demolishing the shrine, removing objects from it, hunting, killing or making love near the shrine). The shrine will only cease to be a shrine, will lose its sacred nature altogether, when it has entirely ceased to instigate any such positive or negative religious activities in the participants.

The extent to which a certain shrine is effective and operative may vary considerably over time. And even within one historical period the sacred nature of the shrine is likely to have a strong situational aspect. Thus the local religious system may define times, situations and social roles in which the shrine's sacredness is particularly relevant and in which deep religious respect is to be man's main attitude when approaching the shrine; on the other hand, there may be room at other times and for people playing other social roles (such as children) for a more detached, pragmatic and even playful approach to the shrine without any offence being implied.

While identifiable by locally-defined observable features and by special treatment, the essence of the shrine lies in the fact that it refers

to non-observable beings or forces. In the midst of the empirical world (the land, the people, the sky) a shrine is a spot which is singled out and treated in a very special way because of its close association with events by which entities believed to exist somewhere outside the visible order can manifest themselves within this order – and where, therefore, humans can communicate with these entities. This formula suggests the enormous potential of shrines in the total field of comparative religion. Shrine religion is not just an interesting taxonomic variant – it is one of the main types of religion.

I have said that most territorial cults in Central Africa (as defined by Schoffeleers) could be regarded as shrine cults. On the other hand, not all shrines necessarily pertain to a territorial cult proper. While shrines are normally features in the landscape, this does not imply that the primary concern of the religious activities focusing on them can only be the material and moral well-being of the local population. Though concentrating on shrines in territorial cults, we shall have to discuss in this chapter several types of shrines whose basic orientation is not primarily, or not at all, ecological (shrines associated with chieftainship or Christianity), and shrines which, while ecological, reflect concern not so much for the total local population as for the individual professional success of specialists. Thus the concept of territorial cult and shrine cult intersect and indeed largely overlap, but neither is a sub-set of the other.

#### *General overview of the shrine cults in twentieth-century Zambia*

Most available data on shrine cults in Zambia derive from twentieth-century sources, particularly anthropological publications. This material is fragmentary, yet it will enable us to form a picture of the recent situation as a starting point for our historical and sociological explorations.

Vansina has emphasized the 'considerable degree of cultural homogeneity' of the peoples of the savanna south of the equatorial forest,<sup>8</sup> and while his own cursory generalizations on their religious systems<sup>9</sup> are not particularly useful, it is a fact that the forms of shrine cults, their material aspects and their rituals, are remarkably similar at least throughout Zambia. Across the territory, similar features of the landscape are selected as natural shrines, similar man-made shrine structures are erected, and the same limited range of cultic activities (assembly, prayer, offering, mediumship) can be observed. This basic similarity, however, takes various

specific forms which I shall now examine in an attempt to construct a typology.

A general feature is that in virtually every area in Zambia there exists more than one type of shrine, each type with its own features relating to the following four basic parameters: material layout and attributes; associated ideology; organization of the cult; and nature of the associated group. A good presentation of this principle can be found in Richards's description of Bemba shrine religion,<sup>10</sup> where she distinguishes as many as six different types of shrine: an individual's hut,<sup>11</sup> the village shrine, villages of deceased chiefs, natural phenomena, chiefs' burial groves and relic shrines containing the chiefly paraphernalia. These may all be of relevance simultaneously, though each in a different way, to the same localized set of people. This multiplicity of shrine forms is by no means exceptional in Zambia and cannot be explained away by any particular religious or political characteristics of the Bemba. Any sources that go into some detail on the subject reveal a similar multiplicity for other Zambian peoples, although the concrete forms may be different, and deceased chiefs' villages and burial groves, for example, do not figure everywhere as shrines.

An overall distinction can be made between shrines that are man-made and shrines that are not. The latter include trees, groves, hills, fields, pools, streams, falls and rapids. Occasionally these natural shrines may be accentuated by the erection of man-made shrines, either permanent or temporary.<sup>12</sup> A transition between natural and man-made shrines occurs when trees are purposely planted in order to provide a shrine (on graves as in many parts of Zambia, and in the case of the *muyobo* tree, which is planted in the centre of the villages of southern Lunda, Luvale, Luchazi and related peoples),<sup>13</sup> or when rudimentary constructions such as a pile of stones,<sup>14</sup> two uprooted anthills placed one against the other,<sup>15</sup> or a branch or part of a tree trunk<sup>16</sup> are used as shrines. The typical form of the man-made shrine is a construction which, though often in miniature, is identical to the normal thatched dwelling-house or to the men's shelter (a thatched construction without walls, as found in the centre of villages in many parts of Zambia). Finally, graves may be used as shrines either with or without a hut-like construction on top of them.

Concerning the set of people involved in the cult of a certain shrine (through direct participation, or through reference and implication), the following possibilities exist: the cult can be limited to one individual; limited to a small group of closely related individuals; it can be extended over a village or over a neighbourhood comprising several neighbouring

villages; a larger area which tends to be associated with a chief, a senior headman or a localized clan-segment; a localized ethnic group (tribe); or a group of neighbouring tribes.<sup>17</sup> This series represents a hierarchy of residential and political units; a quite different dimension is manifested in the cultic group, whose recruitment typically cuts across residential, kinship and political ties – as is the case with the modern cults (most of them involving shrines) which I shall discuss in the following chapters of this volume.

Ideas associated with the shrines revolve around two major issues: the goals and effects the believers hope to achieve through the activities at the shrine, and the nature of the invisible entities to whom the shrines refer.

For these goals it seems fruitful to distinguish between the domestic sphere (ranging from individual to neighbourhood) and the wider, inter-local sphere. Shrine activities in the inter-local sphere focus on two fundamentally different though frequently merging principles: concern for a land area (the territorial cult), and chieftainship. Territorial shrine cults aim at ensuring the success of the ecological activities in which the population is engaged (horticulture, fishing, hunting, animal husbandry) and hence at the material, and ultimately moral, well-being of this population. Annual planting and first-fruit ceremonies form a common (though not universal) element<sup>18</sup> throughout Zambia; they are supplemented by occasional ceremonies in times of crisis (drought, famine, pests). Shrines associated with chieftainship are either chiefly graves or relic shrines containing the paraphernalia (such as drums, gongs, bow-stands and axes) of deceased predecessors; access to them may be limited to the ruler himself. These chiefly shrines play a major role in accession to chieftainship; their main function is to be a source of legitimacy for the ruler. Chiefly shrines tend to assume ecological connotations, following a dialectical process which I shall explore below.

On the domestic level, village and neighbourhood shrines have primarily a territorial, ecological reference. In addition to this they may serve individual purposes as places where a living member of the village reports to the invisible, deceased members of the village community when departing for or coming back from a long journey;<sup>19</sup> similarly, the village shrines set the scene for rituals dealing with affliction attributed to ancestors.<sup>20</sup> The shrines which kinsmen erect on the grave of a deceased kinsman (usually after being summoned to do so at the latter's deathbed, or later, after dreams or illness have been divined as conveying messages from the deceased) do not primarily serve an

ecological purpose but rather spring from concern for individual health and ultimately refer not to the land but to the local minimal kin-group. There is also a type of individual shrine, apparently universal in Zambia, through which the individual specialist tries to enhance his professional success by reference to direct ancestors or mythical beings associated with his skill: honey-collecting, hunting, fishing, rain-calling, iron-working, dancing, divining or healing.<sup>21</sup> Many of these skills have a direct ecological orientation; however, their primary concern is the ecological success of the single individual with whom they are associated rather than the general well-being of the land and of the total community.

The participants' goals and purposes in the shrine cults refer to invisible entities associated with the shrines. There exists a remarkable variety on this point: recently deceased members of the kin group; lineage spirits in general; deceased local celebrities (diviners, dancers, doctors, hunters); deceased chiefs; a class of land spirits that, lacking historical or anthropomorphic connotations, are anonymous and are normally referred to as a collectivity (such as 'ngulu',<sup>22</sup> 'wowa',<sup>23</sup>); culture heroes;<sup>24</sup> the High God;<sup>25</sup> and the abstract, rarely personified concepts that are at the core of modern cults of affliction and that sometimes merge with the anonymous collective land spirits.<sup>26</sup>

These ideological aspects are related to the shrine cults in such a way as to suggest a systematic pattern. First, there are hardly any non-modern shrines recorded as being directly and exclusively associated with the High God; the few examples in the literature consist of: a temporary rain shrine among the Kaonde,<sup>27</sup> a cursory remark on Lozi village shrines,<sup>28</sup> and the case of the supreme Chewa medium, Makewana, who reputedly communicated directly with the High God and whose sphere of influence extended well into Zambia – even far beyond the effective sphere of political influence of Undi's kingdom.<sup>29</sup> Second, cults which the participants associate with deceased kinsmen, local celebrities and lineage spirits are largely limited to the domestic level;<sup>30</sup> whereas, for obvious reasons, the cult of deceased chiefs belongs to the inter-local level. Third, few shrine cults are reported to unite, in their effective ritual activities and in their ideological references, more than one tribe; those that do are territorial cults associated either with land spirits<sup>31</sup> or with the High God.

Let us finally turn to the organizational side of shrine cults in Zambia. Usually there is a small minority of officiants as against a majority of participants or onlookers. Participation at the inter-local level (whether with ecological or with chiefly emphasis) tends to be restricted to

holders of office, and the cult tends to have specialist control by priests, chiefs or both, in that the priests have to obtain the chief's permission to perform a ritual. Organization at the domestic level is more open and normally all members of the local community can participate, although women and children may be excluded; leadership, reflecting the general local authority structure, lies either with the village headman or with a ritual leader who may be the custodian of the village or neighbourhood shrine and who sometimes also practises other religious specialities, such as divining. Well described for the Tonga,<sup>32</sup> but probably also occurring elsewhere, is a division of labour between the secular ritual leader, responsible for the shrine and the performance of the shrine ritual, and the inspired medium who is the mouthpiece of the invisible entities with whom communication is established during the ritual. However, information on Zambian specialist mediumship other than in modern possession movements is still too scanty for this issue to be explored further.<sup>33</sup>

The same applies to the widespread Central African institution of the 'spirit wife': a woman (in some local variations represented by a male priest) who has never married or who has given up her marriage in order to engage in a close relationship with the spirit of the shrine. Scattered indications in the literature<sup>34</sup> suggest that on further research this feature may turn out to be as common in Zambia as it is in Malawi and Zimbabwe.

#### *Tentative typology and distribution*

With gross oversimplification; the above discussion leaves us with the following main types of shrine and shrine cult for twentieth-century Zambia:

- 1 Shrines (natural or man-made) associated with inter-local territorial concern and normally in the control of priests; they have an irregular yet widespread distribution in Zambia, apart from the north-west of the country.<sup>35</sup>
- 2 Shrines primarily associated with chieftainship (relic shrines, graves) and only secondarily with ecological functions; they are controlled by chiefs, priests or grave-keepers, and have a limited distribution.
- 3 Shrines primarily associated with chieftainship but having major ecological connotations at the same time; controlled by chiefs, priests or grave-keepers, they have a limited distribution.
- 4 Village and neighbourhood shrines, pertaining to a territorial cult

- and controlled by ritual leaders (in association with mediums) and elders; though varying in physical features, this type of shrine seems to have a universal distribution in Zambia.
- 5 Individual shrines, controlled by the individual concerned, and associated with a particular (primarily ecological) skill; although more data are needed, this type again seems to have universal distribution in Zambia.
  - 6 Modern shrines, controlled by either individuals or cross-cutting sections of the community, and associated with either cults of affliction or such world religions as Christianity, Islam and Hinduism; as a type, they have attained universal distribution in contemporary Zambia. They fall outside the scope of this chapter.

Despite the enormous gaps in our material, it is useful to attempt to map out the geographical distribution of those types of shrine cult that do not have universal distribution. The result of such an exercise is shown in Map 2.

The typology and map presented in this section are only starting points, suggestive of the enormous amount of research that still has to be undertaken. For the time being, they are nearly all the solid data we have; even in their very imperfect form they will have to guide us through the following sections of this chapter.

## **Shrines, ecology and the community**

### *The ecological perspective*

Shrine cults in Zambia tend to have a strong ecological emphasis: they tend to be territorial cults. Therefore, let us set a framework within which this emphasis can be understood and appreciated as being of literally vital importance to the cultivators, cattle-keepers, fishermen and gatherers that for many centuries have made up Zambia's population.

If there is one social science tradition which is, in more than one respect, down-to-earth, it is the one exemplified by such eminent researchers as Malinowski and Evans-Pritchard, who in their major works have attempted to describe non-industrial societies with emphasis on the close and complex links between social organization and environment: the ways in which man, with application of all his technical and organizational skill and intelligence, transforms his natural world so

that it becomes livable, human, and social. Studies of systems of cultivation or food preparation may not directly appeal to the student of religion, yet they deal with a primary concern from which the participants derive much of what gives their lives meaning and orienta-

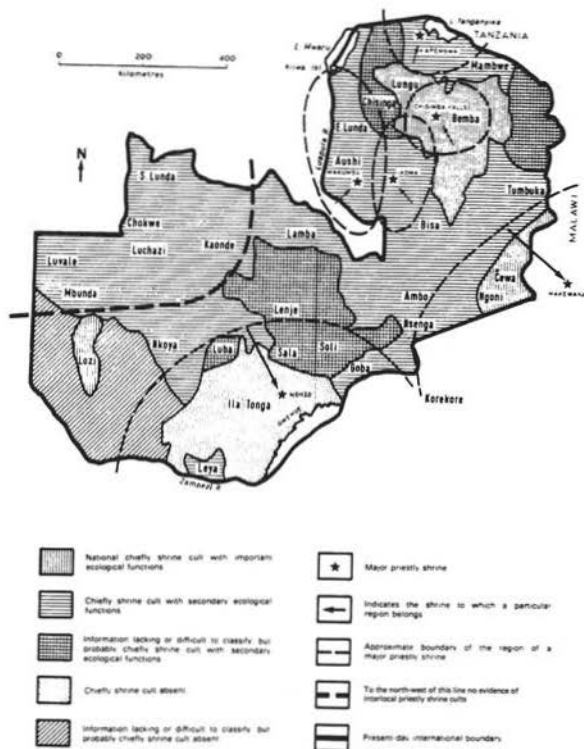
tion, much of their symbolism and ritual. The process of ecological transformation of nature forms a major element in the religious system of any society with a subsistence economy. In order to understand such a religion fully, we should perhaps accompany our informants to the fields, share their anxiety during a hunting expedition or even live through a minor famine with them.

It is not by accident that the first truly modern sociological study of a Zambian people (Audrey Richards's *Land, Labour and Diet in Northern Rhodesia*) focuses on ecology, but at the same time contains one of the most comprehensive accounts of a Zambian religious system.

*Natural and individual shrines in the ecological perspective*

The existence of natural, non-man-made shrines becomes more intelligible within the ecological perspective. In the Central African subsistence economy the landscape is never completely humanized - everywhere places remain which have never been subjected to man's ecological transformations or which, once used, have been abandoned again. These places are of great significance; they tend to represent the hidden forces on which man draws for his survival but which, on the other hand, are only too prone to harm him. 'Wild' places play a prominent part in the religions of people engaged in a subsistence economy. In order to become true foci of religious activities, all that seems necessary is that these places be localized and somehow stand out among the other natural objects in the landscape. Hills, pools, imposing trees, caves, streams, falls and rapids become associated with invisible entities, and thus become objects of veneration.

These natural objects are outside the cycle of ecological transformations and do not serve any direct utilitarian purpose for the people concerned. The opposite is true for those aspects of the ecological process that are too important and too uncertain to be left to chance. A clear example is hunting, which among several Zambian peoples<sup>36</sup> has acquired mystical characteristics, including: great social and sexual privileges; the development of numerous medicines to make the hunt successful (or meant for other purposes but derived from killed game); the veneration of mythical hunters; the frequent attribution of affliction cases to deceased hunters; ritual hunts as part of the healing of such affliction and as a divination technique in general; and the erection of hunters' shrines. Much of the same applies to such other important operations as fishing, honey-collecting, ironworking and doctoring (the



Map 2 Territorial cults in Zambia



latter is an 'ecological' operation in so far as it implies the selection and processing of raw natural material into medicine). The individual shrines commonly associated with these specialities form, in a way, the beacons that mark these essential transformations of nature.

The shrine is a spot in the landscape where a concentration takes place of activities directed to invisible entities who are supposed to be capable of influencing the visible world in one way or another. Concentrating here on shrines with strong ecological connotations, the influence of these invisible entities is associated with ecological processes, and with natural conditions necessary for such processes. Now when we arrange the everyday ecological processes (planting, hunting, fishing, collecting firewood and other forest products, building a house, etc.) and the ecological shrine activities in one schema, the result is something like Table 3.1.

Table 3.1 Shrine ritual and everyday ecological activities compared

	Type of activity	
	Activity directed to man-made ecological shrines (a)	Everyday ecological activity (b)
Type of area involved	Sharply localized small area	Much more extensive area, not so sharply bound as the shrine
The activity viewed as ecological transformation	No immediate effect visible; the activity only becomes meaningful through a local theory of causation which postulates invisible entities associated with the shrine	Effect is immediately visible, utilitarian and inherently meaningful because it satisfies physiological needs and is interpretable with everyday experience within the visible world

Like any socio-cultural complex, shrine activities (a) and the ecological process (b) have a formal, if you like, symbolic, structure of their own: the integrated configuration of concepts, objects and activities by which such a complex can be defined, recognized, understood and reproduced, either by the participants or (analytically) by the observer. Table 3.1 summarizes the bare outlines of the formal structure of (a) and (b) on the analytical level. Thus it brings out a very crucial point in the relations between shrine activities and everyday ecological activities: their respective formal structures are largely symmetrical

and complement one another as if forming one whole. Table 3.1 suggests that the ecological shrine forms a unique complement – an actional, symbolic and spatial counterpoint – to the everyday ecological activities. The ecological shrine is not a more or less accidental epiphenomenon, grown upon the utilitarian ecological process. A much more intimate bond exists between the two: one is the mirror-image of the other.

One might suggest that the unity of these two formal structures (clad with all sorts of local cultural idiosyncrasies, in matters such as the specific construction of the shrine, the specific ritual, or the specific ecological activities) contains the clue for the almost universal distribution, not just in Central Africa, but on a worldwide basis, of man-made ecological shrines in societies with subsistence economies. For such societies depend on primary ecological processes. Therefore, if it can be made plausible that ritual focusing around man-made ecological shrines forms an obvious, intrinsic counterpart to these ecological processes, then we have advanced a little towards understanding the ubiquity of such ritual. But unfortunately, the only way to arrive at some plausible explanation here is through an abstract thought experiment, far removed from the explicitly conscious notions of any participants, and along the weak methodology of 'phenomenological' interpretation.

Man's everyday ecological activities in subsistence economies have, among others, the following characteristics: they are inherently meaningful to the participant, for they relate to his immediate physiological needs; they involve a large amount of chance; and they are directed toward rather extensive parts of the landscape, such as a garden plot or a hunting area. But ritual needs a somewhat more defined and more localized focus than a plot or a hunting area. One solution is the adoption of movable ritual objects (such as amulets, medicine, or a royal bracelet), while another is the adoption of invisible entities with whom man can in principle communicate anywhere; but even so, a material focus would be convenient. Since everyday ecological activity is concentrated upon the landscape, the most obvious solution is to create a concentrated spot where ritual will have an effect upon the total ecological system involved.

The basic philosophy unconsciously underlying the ecological shrine might then perhaps be reconstructed as follows: 'If there is a high chance (i.e., uncertainty, failure) element in the extended landscape, let us isolate one small part of that very landscape, and perform some ritual operations upon this small part which – through a process of

transfer – will influence the utilitarian operations in the wider landscape so as to transform chance into fortune.’

This tentative formula sums up the very close intimacy between ecological process and shrine cult. First, the construction of the man-made shrine is a quasi-ecological process in itself. Elements are selected from nature (such as a spot, poles, grass or bark), transformed and arranged so as to meet a human purpose; the whole ‘idiom’ of the undertaking is ecological, except that the result (the finished shrine) has no immediately utilitarian reward in terms of physiological needs fulfilled. For instance, although in Zambia the most common hut-like type of shrine is a model of the ordinary human dwelling, the shrine hut does not primarily serve such utilitarian purposes as shelter and storage. The shrine derives its significance from this dialectical combination of identity and difference *vis-à-vis* its non-ritual counterparts. Furthermore, once the ecological shrine has been constructed the ritual activities there can be viewed as a formal rhyme to everyday ecological activities, in that a part of the visible world is manipulated with ultimate reference to man’s physiological needs. But again, the ritual is only pseudo-ecological: contrary to ecological activities which require material objects such as tools, the means in ritual are immaterial (words, songs) or sham tools (like the miniature wooden hoe and axe used in ritual in western and north-western Zambia), and the ritual has no perceptible, concrete, immediate result.

The ecological shrine is a model of the world-as-being-humanized, a microcosm in which essentially the same entities which move the ecological macrocosm can be approached through a ritual reminiscent of, but different from, everyday ecological activities, and thus (in ways that would not work outside the shrine situation) can be made to render the ecological conditions outside the shrine favourable to man.

This formal analysis is abstracted from actual social and historical forms. The concrete shape of the ritual around ecological shrines can add a lot more colour to our picture; a multitude of invisible entities elbow to catch our attention, and beautiful, archaic and wise rituals take our breath. If there is some general, formal structure underlying this colourful surface (and the ubiquity of ecological shrine cults strongly suggests that there is such a fairly uniform structure), then we have to try to discern its principles – even if blundering.<sup>37</sup>

#### *The village shrine and its dual nature*

The speculations developed so far may make the principle of a man-made ecological shrine plausible, but they need elaboration before they

can hope to account for entire ecological shrine cults, involving not just one individual hunter or ironworker, but an entire human community.

We may generalize that people forming a small-scale community (a village) in a subsistence economy are knit together by common interests and activities which have a primarily, though by no means exclusively, ecological reference. In the same way primarily ecological factors (in Zambia especially the level of minimal annual water supply)<sup>38</sup> seem to lead to the breaking up of such units and the subsequent founding of new units; although these factors often also manifest themselves on the social plane in local political conflict or witchcraft accusations. Dependent upon each other through the use of the same ecological field, confined by the force of distance and by the claims of surrounding communities, and through a division of labour where specialists and non-specialist members of the small community exchange the fruits of their activities in this field (such as food, tools or medicine), the villagers are primarily linked by a common concern with their environment. If, on the basis of more general principles I have attempted to gauge, ecological concern tends to express itself in the erection of ecological shrines, then the creation of ecological village shrines seems a logical step. One reason why village shrines are so widespread and prominent in Central Africa is probably that the ecological pressure is most keenly felt on the village level; again, Richards’s pioneer study offers an excellent example of this state of affairs.

But let us guard against economic or ecological determinism. The Central African village is an ‘ecological’ unit, but it is more. One of the crucial insights of the social sciences battling against various forms of reductionism<sup>39</sup> has been that ‘the social’ creates forms of interaction and of symbolism which must be studied in their own right. Specifically, the village, however ephemeral and prone to disruption, generates a sense of identity which is not just the sum of its internal economic activities and division of labour, and which seeks a charter and a symbol in the social and ritual field, rather than in the ecological. The village shrine can and does serve as such a symbol. It thus performs the dual function of being, at the same time, a focus in the ecological process and a communal rallying point (both socially and ideologically) for the village members.

From the ecological viewpoint, the obvious invisible entities to be associated with a village shrine should be such general beings as collective anonymous land spirits, culture heroes, and the High God; from the communal point of view, however, the obvious association is with

humans who have a direct and specific historical significance for the local community: the village founder,<sup>40</sup> some other deceased local celebrity, or lineage spirits in general.

This essentially dual nature of the village (or neighbourhood) shrine has not been sufficiently analysed in Colson's studies, which nevertheless provide the best material on shrine cults so far available for Zambia. Colson has presented the shrines as primarily communal, elaborating on their functions in local and inter-local social relations but largely ignoring their ecological significance. Thus she leaves us in the dark as to why precisely *rain* shrines should perform these functions in Tonga society.<sup>41</sup>

Meanwhile, it should be borne in mind that the village shrine is not the only possible way to focus communal feelings and actions at the village level. In a large part of Zambia a village is characterized by the men's shelter at its centre, where most male social and communal activities apart from economic ones are concentrated.<sup>42</sup> Often the shelter is located only a few metres from the village shrine.<sup>43</sup> Although in the unifying and rallying functions of the shelter the secular aspect dominates, it reminds us of a shrine in that access to it is restricted (women and children should not enter the shelter), and in that it is a place for libation, since beer is served here. Thus, though the communal and ecological referents of shrine and shelter merge to some extent, their double presence in a village can be viewed as a far from strict dissociation between these two aspects, the shrine being primarily ecological, the shelter primarily communal.

#### *Inter-local shrines*

On the inter-local level the shrine becomes the symbol of the effective political group, and particularly of its leadership (headman, chief). From this viewpoint, irrespective even of ecological implications, the erection of a communal shrine is a claim to autonomy as a social and political unit.<sup>44</sup> Along the same lines, displacement of a shrine is a manifestation of migration; the decline of certain shrines and the rise of other shrines within the same geographical area is a manifestation of shifts in group composition and political alignment;<sup>45</sup> maintenance of relations with a distant shrine is an admission of imperfect autonomy *vis-à-vis* the distant group associated with that shrine;<sup>46</sup> while for immigrants and invaders the destruction of pre-existing shrines is a meaningful way to destroy local religious power structures and to assert themselves as a new, socially and religiously superior group.<sup>47</sup>

If shrines perform these essentially political functions, then we expect political leaders (clan heads, headmen, chiefs) to associate themselves with shrines as visible symbols of their political autonomy and of their legitimacy. Again, this association does not necessarily imply an ecological function for these 'chiefly' shrines; the duality between communal and ecological function, so manifest at the village level, could at the higher inter-local levels very well be dissociated to such an extent that different types of shrine specialize in either the ecological or the communal-political function. Though in some Zambian cases (particularly the Bemba) royal shrines claim the monopoly of both political and ecological power, chiefly shrines without elaborate ecological functions are more the general rule (Map 2). In the latter case the chiefly shrines provide political legitimacy and the focus for royal ritual, particularly on the occasion of accession to office, since they contain royal attributes or the remains of deceased rulers. Ecological functions are then primarily fulfilled by other shrine systems: shrines associated with priests in an inter-local cult; village shrines; and shrines associated with individual specialists. Yet, if the ecological functions of chiefly shrines are usually not elaborate, few if any totally lack ecological connotations. Chiefly cults tend to supplement, as a last resort, the regular non-chiefly ecological cults in times of great crisis. Ritual control over the land (exercised directly, or through supervision of inter-local ecological priests and ritual leaders) seems to provide the most adequate legitimation of political power as exercised by chiefs. Thus the dual nature of the domestic shrine tends to have a counterpart in the communal-political and, at the same time, ecological functions of the chiefly shrine at the highest inter-local levels.

We could leave it at this, and simply view the variety of chiefly, priestly, and village shrine cults with communal, ecological or combined emphasis, as the timeless manifestations of the fundamental duality of the shrine above the individual level. There is, however, a much more attractive though ill-documented alternative on which I shall elaborate now: the interpretation of the variety of shrine cults as the outcome of a historical process, in which shrines and the ecological claims associated with them have been manipulated in a prolonged contest over power and legitimacy - a contest between secular immigrant rulers and earlier territorial priests.



## Chiefs and shrines in Zambia's history

### *Zambian societies before the Luba expansion*

Zambia's early history is still very dim. Oral traditions do not normally penetrate deeper than the sixteenth or seventeenth century; in the Tonga case they are said to reach only to the early nineteenth century. Moreover, despite its tremendous achievements in recent years, Zambian archeology is by no means capable yet of depicting in some detail the political and religious features of the Zambian societies before the Luba expansion.

Yet a speculative model can be drawn. By extrapolation of recent work on early Malawi and southern Tanzania,<sup>48</sup> we can postulate that some form of a shrine cult existed in eastern and northern Zambia at least half a millennium ago. Some traditional evidence even suggests that aspects of the Central African territorial cults have a pre-Bantu origin.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, there is some evidence<sup>50</sup> that peoples not unlike the Tonga and Ila (among whom shrine cults are still prominent) have occupied much of eastern, central and southern Zambia since the first centuries of the present millennium. Finally, there are indications that the chieftainships which, as part of the Luba expansion since about 1500, were established in Zambia, were generally imposed upon peoples who had already been settled in their areas for some time, and who had no centralized political system involving chiefs, but instead a little-developed segmentary system of mutually feuding clans or clan segments.<sup>51</sup>

This hints at a type of society consisting of small units of gatherers, husbandmen or shifting cultivators, with only an informal type of secular leadership presumably based not so much on ascription as on the skilful manipulation of immediate economic and kinship relationships as built up during one's lifetime. Such political leadership is in itself hardly capable of checking the structural tendency towards small-scale warfare over ecological resources, women and honour; on the contrary, it can be said to need violent conflict since this provides a setting in which the leader's service is most valuable.

Much of social anthropology from the 1930s to the 1950s was concerned with this type of society.<sup>52</sup> The concepts of segmentation and unilineal descent groups were primarily conceived and tested in the analysis of such societies as the Nuer, Tallensi, Alur and Somali; descriptions of these peoples have become anthropological classics. In retrospect much of this work remained too faithful to neat armchair

models and diagrams. Deeper insights into the actual complex mechanisms of feuding, complementary opposition, reconciliation, and in the acephalous political order in general, were mainly obtained from those areas where the classical segmentation model, after initial trials, turned out not to fit properly. Such areas are North Africa,<sup>53</sup> Papua New Guinea,<sup>54</sup> and particularly Central Africa, where the absence of real segmentary lineages was realized many years ago<sup>55</sup> and where some of the most brilliant work of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute researchers (even when conducted in societies with formal chieftainship) provided new models for the interpretation of this type of society.<sup>56</sup>

In the older studies the essential process of arbitration in acephalous societies was mainly presented as lying in the hands of informal secular authorities. It is only recently that North African studies have begun to yield a new, probably widely applicable, model of the way in which religious authorities within a shrine cult can become a central element of social control in an acephalous society. In rural North Africa, pacifist priestly lineages administered widely dispersed shrines amid secular groups engaged in constant feuding. By virtue of their religious status, the supernatural sanctions surrounding them, the backing they received from secular groups, and the general recognition of their indispensability to all the feuding parties involved, these shrine-keepers ('saints') could successfully operate as judges and arbiters in feuds, meanwhile accumulating impressive wealth from donations and their protection of trade.<sup>57</sup>

In the absence of concrete data I cannot suggest that shrine cults in pre-Luba Zambia have performed a similar function. Yet if the latter-day forms of the Tonga and Ila social systems can to some extent be extrapolated back into time, some very interesting patterns emerge.

The closest resemblance to the North African model is found among the Ila,<sup>58</sup> where priestly custodians of the shrines (groves) of such major land spirits as Shimunenga and Munyama are reported to receive compensation in cattle in case of murder in the local community. Moreover, these groves served as neutral meeting grounds where emissaries from other areas could solicit the local community's assistance in war.<sup>59</sup> Compensatory payments to the shrine's ritual leader existed also among the Gwembe Tonga<sup>60</sup> and remained effective up to the first decades of this century. Colson feels compelled to deny the ritual leaders all political and judicial significance, and mentions the territorial cult only once in her famous work on Tonga social control.<sup>61</sup> Yet she claims in her study of Tonga rain shrines that the cult is 'still the fundamental element in Tonga social structure'<sup>62</sup> and that it creates a small community within which the rudiments of community law can

be discerned, forcing its members to remember occasionally that they belong to a wider unit than the village or kin-group.<sup>63</sup> Similarly, mediums among the neighbouring Valley Korekore are described by Garbett<sup>64</sup> as playing a major role in the settlement of disputes, both at the domestic village level and in chiefly succession.

Thus in the recent Zambian context the territorial cult could form a major source of social control. This potential is given in the dual, dialectical nature of the shrine. It is a symbol of the local group, and as such it is charged, much in the vein of the classic analysis of Durkheim,<sup>65</sup> with the authority that the group exercises over its members as basis and source of legitimacy for the normative system. At the same time the shrine is a symbol of the ecological processes upon which depends the very life of the community and of its individual members – processes which are supposed to be negatively influenced, again, if the members misbehave with regard to the natural order (disrespectful use of natural resources), the social order (murder, incest, sorcery) or the shrine itself. An additional factor might be that the social positions (priest, medium) in which the territorial cult invests authority, often devolve on people who, through birth or way of life, tend to be outsiders (and therefore potential arbiters) to the general process of secular social life; however, evidence on this point is scanty and contradictory.<sup>66</sup>

The Tonga, Ila and Korekore territorial cults promote social control in contemporary societies that have diffuse and limited political leadership. Thus the territorial cult in general may form an alternative to highly developed chieftainship; where chieftainship is limited or incipient, it can be supplemented or antagonized by the political functions of the territorial cult. We can even postulate that the territorial cult is capable of creating a rudimentary form of social control in situations where specialized secular political organization is altogether absent.

If we accept that the Zambian societies before the Luba expansion were either acephalous or had only limited and incipient forms of chieftainship, then we can assume that priestly territorial cults played an important role in the maintenance of some social and political order beyond the village level.

From about 1500 onward, this type of society was exposed to bands of immigrants who brought different conceptions of social control: a new political culture, focusing on the exalted position of the chief or king.<sup>67</sup> Hitherto this political revolution in Zambia has been presented in two versions: as the imposition (through force, but equally through

persuasion) of a political order where previously there had been virtually none,<sup>68</sup> or as the replacement of a rudimentary secular political order by a more developed and centralized one.<sup>69</sup> Both views ignore the possibility of a pre-existing politico-religious order based on the territorial cult. A third view emerges which presents the Luba expansion as, among other aspects, a battle against the religiously-anchored political power vested in the territorial cult.

If there is some truth in this hypothesis, it should enable us to reinterpret this political expansion process in Zambia, and moreover to throw some light on evidence not yet explicitly accounted for in the literature. This will be the theme of the remainder of this chapter.

#### *The confrontation between immigrant chiefs and earlier territorial cults in Bemba history*

Let us first consider the evidence for a religious dimension to Luba expansion in the case of one Zambian kingdom: the Bemba. Some mythical evidence is contained in the tradition about the filial conflict which drove Nkole and Chiti away from their homeland to establish the Bemba kingdom:<sup>70</sup>

As a result of some project<sup>71</sup> of Chiti and Nkole, people were killed and Mukulumpe made his sons do menial punishments, such as sweeping the royal yard. When further tasks of *cleaning the shrines* were given, Chiti refused and his men killed the men his father sent to beat him. They and their people then left . . .

The mythical accounts of the brothers' further exploits contain at least two other hints at what could have been a religious dimension: their repeated encounters with the friendly white-skinned *nganga*, Luchele, on whose intervention and favourable divination their entry into Bemba land ultimately depended, and the hitting of a tree with a spear when finally taking possession of the territory.

It is important that the latter two mythical themes are not confined to Bemba tradition but have a wide distribution among the Lubaized peoples of Central Africa.<sup>72</sup> This means that if these themes can be taken as manifestations of the hypothetical conflict between immigrating chiefs and the earlier territorial cult, this conflict might be postulated among these other peoples, although of course we have to consider the possibility of myths being diffused irrespective of the historical events to which the myths originally referred.

Interpretation of the three themes in terms of my hypothesis does not seem too far-fetched. The religious content is clearest in the shrine-cleaning episode. The myth contains evidence of some religious conflict in the very beginning of Bemba expansion, although it might be argued that the myth in the version given here should be interpreted as an attempt to assert politico-religious independence by rejection of the parental groups' shrines, rather than as evidence of conflict between the royal immigrants and a local shrine cult in Bembaland. The tree, in the second theme, is the very prototype of a natural shrine in Zambia, and hitting a tree shrine with a spear is a very audacious challenge; hence this theme could be interpreted as memorizing a spectacular challenge to earlier territorial cults by the immigrants. Although the character of Luchele remains dim, as a specialist in religious matters he has unmistakably 'ecological' connotations, such as divining by producing a fish in a basket - in an area where much of the ecological ritual is in fact concerned with fishing.<sup>73</sup> He may be considered a symbol of the 'ecological' powers (and of the territorial cult that deals with them) upon whose agreement and co-operation political success depends.<sup>74</sup>

These general mythical themes therefore provide some slight evidence for my hypothesis. Fortunately the religious aspects of early Bemba history have recently been subjected to careful study by Werner.<sup>75</sup> On the basis of other evidence he arrives at conclusions rather similar to mine.

Mainly in view of the occurrence of priest-councillors from clans that otherwise have no political significance in the Bemba political structure,<sup>76</sup> Werner postulates that when the *bona ngandu* royal clan of the Bemba developed its ancestral cult into a national chiefly cult, it had to accommodate earlier chiefs within its religious structure. These chiefs, Werner claims on Roberts's authority,<sup>77</sup> did not belong to the royal clan but they largely shared the general Bemba culture. They are said to represent an immigrant majority that reached Bembaland not long before the *bona ngandu* themselves.<sup>78</sup>

The religious powers which these men exerted as the ritual leaders of their small territories were . . . incorporated into a much larger system in which the ancestral spirit of the *bona ngandu* chief became the ritual focus of the territory. . . . Religious powers of earlier chiefs were eclipsed . . . The ancestors of previous chiefs were forgotten. . . . It would appear that as earlier chiefs were assimilated by the Chitimukulu dynasty, the political leadership which preceded

*bona ngandu* rule . . . was undermined and the ritual powers held by the previous chiefs were transferred from their own group affiliations to those of the *bona ngandu*.

Werner clearly recognized that the Luba expansion had religious aspects in addition to the salient political aspects; in order to consolidate and legitimize the immigrant dynasty, a royal cult had to be developed that could compete with, encapsulate, and so accommodate earlier politico-religious authorities. Yet there are gaps in Werner's argument, particularly when it comes to identifying these earlier authorities. If the 'chiefs' who were to be caught in the *bona ngandu* political and ritual structure were essentially newcomers, still trying to consolidate themselves politically, how could they already claim the inter-local ritual control over the land that is the prerogative of 'original' inhabitants? What real evidence is there that these earlier chiefs in fact combined secular-political and religious functions? And, supposing they combined functions, why should they have entered the *bona ngandu* structure as priest-councillors, rather than as tributary secular chiefs - in other words, why should they have been deprived of their secular rather than of their ritual connotations? Werner would probably agree that the creation of a unitary ritual system controlled by the *bona ngandu* was as essential a concern of the immigrant dynasty as the creation of a unitary political system; depriving politico-religious authorities of their ritual connotations could be one way to achieve such a unitary ritual system.

It seems that Werner's argument stagnates in his use of an ill-defined and ill-analysed concept of 'chief'. We cannot blame him, since 'chief' is perhaps the most frequently used concept in African history and political sociology. Yet if we continue to apply this word to any type of historical authority without analysing in as much detail as possible the political, religious and economic components of this authority - if we continue to assume that these components, throughout Zambian history, always tend to coincide - then we cannot hope for progress in our analysis and understanding. Therefore, what is a chief?

Linguistic evidence does not help us very much here. The Bemba word *mfumu* has the following equivalents in English: political authorities ranging from 'king', via 'senior chief', 'senior headman' to the lowest level of 'village headman'; 'owners of the land' or 'land priests' with ritual rather than political connotations; and finally, invisible entities associated with shrines and territorial ritual,<sup>79</sup> entities that may be traceable in local tradition as spirits of deceased political authorities,

but that often lack such historical political connotations and then are better described as 'anonymous land spirits' or perhaps 'saints'. This only suggests that, on the participants' level, there is evidence of a general conceptual system in which little differentiation is made between spiritual authority, secular authority, and manifestations of invisible entities with ecological connotations. Such an insight is important for us, but it is not enough. We are not only interested in how the participants see their society: their views form only one of the entries through which we hope to approach the historical and sociological reality, including its more objective aspects. In the last analysis we have to forge and define our own scientific terms with greater precision than the participants need or can even afford.

It is remarkable that the only serious criticism of the indiscriminate use of the concept of 'chief' for academic and administrative purposes in relation to Zambia came as late as 1960,<sup>80</sup> and that Aporthe, with his attack on what he called 'mythical political structures', met with so little response. His own argument lacks some consistency. On the one hand he claimed (with particular reference to the Zambian chiefs outside the great dynasties of Lozi, Bemba, Ngoni, Undi and Kazembe) that<sup>81</sup>

in much of Northern Rhodesia, the present state of social anthropological knowledge suggests that perhaps there never has been a ritual spiritual life surrounding chieftainship and related institutions to the same great extent which was . . . characteristic of some other parts of Bantu-speaking Africa.

On the other hand, he largely failed to give concrete evidence as to the relative absence of a ritual role for the minor chiefs. Moreover, his own study of the Nsenga<sup>82</sup> elaborates precisely on the spiritual basis of Nsenga chieftainship: the chief's relic shrine.

Yet Aporthe points out a very weak spot in Central African studies. The variety of types of authority should not be concealed by calling them all 'chiefs', and assuming that under this general label the different types will automatically merge. I shrink from developing here all the permutations of formal authority in historical Zambian societies; and in fact, the term 'chief' is so inveterate that trying to avoid it altogether would amount to spasmodic artificiality. Let me merely suggest that we need at least three crude basic categories:

- 1 The ruler, who specializes in politics: the manipulation of power relationships in the process of the social allocation of scarce goods (land, labour, food, trade commodities and women).

- 2 The priest, who specializes in religion: the manipulation of relationships with invisible entities, as relevant to such matters as ecology and legitimation of political structures.
- 3 The ruler-priest, who more or less equally combines the above specialities and who may well be as rare, on the Zambian scene, as Aporthe suggests.

These tentative definitions do not imply the absence of secondary ritual functions for the ruler or of secondary political functions (such as arbitration) for the priest. They only claim that it is useful to distinguish between two institutional frameworks that are analytically (though perhaps not in the perception of the participants) separate and not mutually reducible. Let me finally emphasize that the definitions do not specify a level or scale for the authority that is exercised: in principle, they apply to the domestic as well as to the inter-tribal level.

We can now go back to Werner's reconstruction of early Bemba history. The crucial question is: to what type of pre-bemba *ngandu* historical authority (if any) does the institution of non-royal Bemba authorities refer? If Werner's answer is somehow unsatisfactory for the reasons outlined above, what tentative alternative can we offer?

The *bemba ngandu* came late in the process of Luba expansion. The society upon which they tried to impose their domination mainly consisted of similar groups of earlier Luba immigrants, and these had already been involved for some time in a process of religious and political accommodation *vis-à-vis* the 'original' pre-Luba population. Above I postulated that pre-Luba society did have priests, but probably lacked formal rulers; political functions may have been exerted by informal, non-ascriptive leaders on the clan or sub-clan level, or, failing even these, may have been in the hands of priestly arbitrators - without these priests being 'ruler-priests' exercising genuine political control. There is some fragmentary traditional evidence of a pre-Bemba priesthood, associated with such prominent natural shrines as the Chisimba Falls near Kasama.<sup>83</sup> The earlier Luba immigrants, preceding the *bemba ngandu*, began to build up ruler status; but they could not effectively claim ritual power over the land, and thus had no easy access, for the time being, to priestly status. Yet, in accordance with my general hypothesis, they may have started already to boost their ancestral rituals in rivalry with the pre-Luba territorial cult. Pre-Luba priests, perhaps deprived of their political functions of arbitration, would continue to act as territorial priests. Those previously eligible for the rudimentary pre-Luba secular political leadership (if it existed at all)

could now try to penetrate the Luba ranks, or alternatively could play off their status of original inhabitants and seek an outlet in the assumption of priestly functions as well.

While still in a nascent state, this Luba-izing political system was then invaded by the *bena ngandu*. What interests would the latter have had in ritually formalizing their relationship with the earlier Luba immigrants, their kinsmen, by making the latter priest-councillors? The similarity in culture and origin and the relatively short stay of the earlier immigrants in the area did not justify such a move. The interests of the *bena ngandu* were clearly with the pre-Luba priests, for these possessed the key to ultimate legitimacy: ritual control over extended land areas. If the existence of non-royal Bemba authorities is the precipitation of an early conflict in *bena ngandu* history, my argument suggests that this conflict consisted in the encapsulation of pre-Luba territorial priests into the *bena ngandu* system. Presumably the priest-councillors were not 'chiefs' (that is, rulers or at most ruler-priests) deprived of their political functions, but priests whose religious frame of reference was successfully redefined by the immigrants, and politicized.

A significant demonstration of the same, as yet hypothetical, principle is the case of Shimwalule, the most senior non-royal Bemba authority, who buries the Chitimukulu and who has important ecological functions. There are indications that the Mwalule burial grove was a territorial cult centre before the *bena ngandu* came to be buried there, and tradition claims that it was again Luchele who arranged the relationship between the *bena ngandu* and the Bisa priests of this shrine.<sup>84</sup>

What we gain from this argument is not only a modification of Werner's reconstruction, but also an insight that may have more general applicability to the Luba expansion into Zambia: the hypothesis that original owners of the land, made subservient to latterday chiefly dynasties, may not only or primarily have been defeated earlier 'chiefs', but also encapsulated earlier territorial priests.

#### *A comparative overview of the confrontation between rulers and territorial cults in Zambian history*

We can now try to generalize the insights derived from our review of early Bemba history. From the sixteenth century onward, Zambian societies were invaded by groups aspiring to establish themselves as rulers. The immigrants found themselves in a situation where they did not command legitimate authority. Their conception of politics,

however, required that their leadership, won as it might have been through small-scale conquest or opportunist submission by local people, become supported as soon as possible by a structure of political relations, and political-mythical concepts and ritual, which would have legitimacy in the eyes of their newly acquired subjects. This attempt at legitimation brought them into conflict with pre-existing foci of legitimated social control: the priestly territorial cults in their political functions of arbitration and inter-local communication.

Within the social and ecological framework explored above, the most obvious source of legitimacy must have consisted of ritual relations with the extended land territory and with the ecological process – a form of religious power newcomers could not automatically claim. So the best strategy for the immigrants was to claim ecological powers rivalling those of the priests but deriving from a new principle. One way to achieve this appears to have been the claim by the immigrants of having their own direct access to what is the principal concern of the territorial cults: rain. Descent from 'Rain', or from the High God mainly associated with rain, is claimed by, for example, the royal lineages of the Lozi, Luchazi and Nkoya.<sup>85</sup> The general solution for the immigrants was to create a type of shrine which, while associated with chieftainship (chiefly relics and graves) and effectively controlled by the chiefly group, yet could claim to have an ecological impact comparable to that of the earlier priestly cult.

It should be noted that such a strategy, whether adopted deliberately or followed unconsciously by the actors, need not have been so revolutionary as may be suggested by my presentation here. In view of the universality of village shrines in Central Africa, we can safely claim that on the domestic level all aspiring rulers were in fact associated from the very beginning with communal shrines that, by virtue of their dual nature, had ecological connotations – but on a very small geographical scale. The religious rivalry with earlier inter-local territorial cults simply required an enlargement of scale of these domestic shrine cults associated with the aspiring rulers, rather than the invention of a completely new type of inter-local ecological royal shrine. As was suggested by Werner for the *bena ngandu*, the development of royal territorial cults lay within the potential of the general domestic territorial cult.

If the confrontation between immigrant chiefs and earlier inter-local territorial cults did in fact take the course suggested above, then the typology and distribution of types of shrine cults as discussed in the first sections of this chapter must be interpretable in terms of this confrontation. I shall now attempt such an interpretation.



Further research will have to reveal to what extent chiefly shrines formed a local adaptation of the immigrants facing the challenge of an indigenous territorial cult, or rather reflected the diffusion of a trait already existing in the Luba and Lunda homelands. There is no doubt that the notion of the chief or king having supernatural powers over the land belonged to the original Lunda political culture, but these powers seem to have been invested in movable attributes (particularly the royal bracelet of human penises) rather than in shrines.<sup>86</sup>

In this light it is significant that the chiefs of the north-western part of Zambia have retained the original attributes. As we have seen, this part of Zambia is exceptional in that no evidence of a non-chiefly territorial cult above the individual and village level has been recorded.<sup>87</sup> If we extrapolate that in effect no inter-local territorial cult of the type postulated for pre-Lunda Zambian societies existed in the north-west, then the strong suggestion emerges that a chiefly territorial cult was particularly developed in those parts of Zambia where the immigrants met with a strong challenge from a pre-existing priestly cult. If pre-Lunda north-western Zambia lacked both rulers and inter-local territorial cults, there would have existed a need for an outsider arbitrating institution; and the literature emphasizes that the Lunda immigrants could establish themselves precisely because they could satisfy this need.<sup>88</sup>

Whatever the intricacies of the religious history of north-western Zambia, it is a firm fact that elsewhere in Zambia most immigrant chiefs have developed some form of a royal shrine cult with (though in general only secondary) ecological connotations. No doubt the Bemba formed the most successful case. Here the cult of royal relic shrines, deceased chiefs' capitals and chiefs' burial groves, administered by hereditary priests under control of the royal clan, attained a high complexity and effectively claimed major ecological significance.<sup>89</sup> In the Bemba case the distinction, so characteristic of Zambian pre-colonial political systems, between original owners of the land and later chiefly immigrants has been largely obliterated: the royal clan became the owner of the land. Yet the continued existence of territorial shrines outside direct chiefly control, the occurrence of non-Bemba priests (of Lungu and Bisa extraction, and including Shimwalule),<sup>90</sup> and spirit possession attributed to presumably pre-Luba culture heroes and anonymous collective land spirits – the 'people's religion' in this strongly hierarchical society – all this suggests that even among the Bemba the chiefs' hold on religious power was uneasy and likely to be shaken by severe crises like those that occurred in this century and the last.<sup>91</sup>

Considerably less monolithic was the result in two other, not dissimilar great kingdoms: Undi's and that of the Lozi. In both cases the immigrant royal lineages established themselves as the unchallenged owners of the land, and a cult of royal graves was developed which included claims of ecological power. Yet in both cases the ecological functions of the paramount were limited. Significantly, these functions were associated with royal burial and succession, i.e. situations in which chiefly shrines as foci of political legitimization are particularly relevant. And these ecological functions were actually discharged by groups which (though official ideology tended to underplay or ignore this fact) could be regarded as previous owners of the land: in the Lozi case the commoner (predominantly Mbunda?) priests, in the Chewa case the Banda clan that administered the priestly territorial cult headed by Makewana.<sup>92</sup>

The Lozi-Undi pattern is further developed to a unique form in the eastern Lunda kingdom of Kazembe. Here the relationship between pre-Lunda owners of the land and the Lunda immigrants is explicitly recognized and forms the very basis of much of the political, ecological and religious system. Cunnison describes this in terms that again fit my general hypothesis (of a confrontation between chiefs and earlier territorial priests) remarkably well:<sup>93</sup>

The ancestral ritual of the Owners of the Land is generally spoken of as having been the most important ritual in the old days. When the Lunda came, prayer to dead Kazembes was also made, not regularly but in case of drought or special hardship. In addition . . . on such occasions Kazembe would call the Owners of the Land to his capital and tell them that since the country was in a bad way it was fitting that they should all go to their homes and pray to their ancestors on a certain day. Kazembe would also order other sorts of ritual to be carried out generally, for the good of the country.

But on the latter occasions he would work through the village headmen and not rely on any supernatural power he or his ancestors themselves might claim. In addition to honouring the owners of the land, Kazembe would keep up a respectful contact with three important ecological shrines controlled by priests, one of whom, Mwepya, was recognized as an owner of the land. The most important of these shrines was the Aushi shrine, Makumba, that was originally destroyed by the Lunda invaders but later restored.<sup>94</sup> Though Kazembe could theoretically assert himself as the ultimate owner of the land since he defeated the previous 'owners', the legitimacy of his kingship derived

not from a direct ritual relationship between king and land but rather from a symbiosis between king and owners of the land, in which the latter enjoyed prestige and protection while paying tribute in recognition of the exalted political status of the king and his representatives. Kazembe's is a rich country which became the most prosperous and powerful of the Luba-Lunda empires. Management of these natural resources required a balanced, harmonious relationship between king and owners of the land. The initial conflict between Lunda invaders and local territorial cults (manifest in the Makumba tradition) dissolved into a situation where Lunda political supremacy was unchallenged, while the Lunda on their part acknowledged the religious supremacy of the older territorial cults.

On a smaller scale, outside the major kingdoms, chiefly relic shrines and graves with ecological connotations can be found in most of central Zambia (Map 2). We can agree with Apthorpe that in most cases these minor chiefs' role in ecological ritual is modest, and below I shall present a tentative historical explanation of this fact. My Nkoya material reveals an analytical difficulty in the case of these minor rulers. Among other functions, their status is that of headman of the chiefly village and neighbourhood; the village or neighbourhood shrine, possessing ecological connotations, coincides with the chiefly relic shrine or chiefly graves. When officiating at this chiefly village shrine, does the minor ruler engage in religious activities that are merely a slightly glorified territorial cult at the domestic level, or must we interpret them as a chiefly ecological cult? Much will depend on the degree of participation of representatives from other parts of the minor ruler's territory, but even so the distinction seems artificial.

In general, the relations between priestly inter-local cults and rulers outside the few great royal dynasties remain a point for further study. Detailed information on this topic is available only for the extreme north<sup>95</sup> and for the Lake Bangweulu area.<sup>96</sup> It is perhaps significant that in both cases an inter-tribal priestly territorial cult was revealed, which maintained a relative independence *vis-à-vis* the local political leadership.

#### *The no-man's-land situation and the Tonga-Ila case*

Vansina has identified a factor that might be of primary significance for our understanding of the central Zambian territorial cults. 'Kingdoms of the savanna' were not bureaucratically centralized, but each imposed upon an extended geographical area a network of ideological identification with the rulers, as well as a flow of people, goods and services.

Tribute relationships, trade, emissaries and military operations became less and less dense towards the periphery, so that between adjacent kingdoms large areas of relative no-man's-land would remain.<sup>97</sup> In these marches, successful large kingdoms could only rise if the distance, both geographically and interactionally, to any already existing kingdom was sufficiently large (the case of Kazembe of the Lualaba),<sup>98</sup> or if any existing kingdom collapsed so that its place could be taken. In the centuries immediately preceding the colonial era most of central Zambia, with extensions towards the north-west, south and north, exhibited this ambivalent state of affairs: being too far away to be firmly controlled by the great kingdoms (Lozi, Mwaat Yaav, Kazembe, Bemba, Undi, Mutapa, Rozwi), but lying too near to produce locally another kingdom of similar dimensions out of the exploits of a large number of immigrant minor rulers. The external check on these minor rulers' powers must have had repercussions upon their dealings with the territorial cult complex wherever it existed. While unable to expand maximally on the political plane, these rulers tended to adopt, or at least further develop, a religious consolidation (on the lines of a chiefly shrine cult), but they were never able to claim such ritual power over the land as did the great kings, particularly in the Bemba case. Brelsford's statement on the Bemba chiefs seems to be more generally applicable:<sup>99</sup>

Association [between rulers and ecological powers] was only permanent when it was backed by political control of the land.

Though illuminating, the notion of the relative no-man's-land is insufficient to explain the complex case of territorial cults, chieftainship and absence of Luba-ization among the Ila and Tonga. One element in our predicament here is the almost complete lack of data on the western Tonga groups that have of old belonged to the Lozi kingdom. Another element is the nature of the writings of the main student of Tonga society, Elizabeth Colson, whose a-historical emphasis on contemporary social structure has so far failed to present a convincing picture of Tonga chieftainship – beyond the hardly substantiated assertion that in the past the Tonga had no chiefs.<sup>100</sup> A thorough historical study of Tonga society is urgently needed. In view of the large amount of research into Tonga history currently being undertaken by a number of scholars, it can be expected that before long we shall be able to base a discussion of pre-colonial Tonga history on sound data. Meanwhile we have to limit ourselves to speculation based on very fragmentary evidence.

In the last century Tonga society was decimated and brought to political collapse by the effects of Ndebele and Kololo raids, which even seem to have wiped out much of the oral tradition of the area. Absence of Tonga rulers at this stage would not prove anything about previous periods. But is it at all true that Tonga rulers did not exist in the nineteenth century? The evidence of David Livingstone on Monze and other Tonga (or Toka) chiefs,<sup>101</sup> the impressive funerary customs reserved for those whom early twentieth-century writers chose to call chiefs,<sup>102</sup> and the fact that Tonga use the term 'chief' for many of the land spirits associated with their territorial shrines,<sup>103</sup> strongly suggest that Colson's view of Tonga chieftainship as a colonial creation is untenable. She herself reports, for the Upper River Tonga, modern chiefly families that are known by the ancient term of *bana kokalia* ('nobles' or 'people of the shrine'), which could hardly be a colonial innovation.<sup>104</sup>

Tonga colonial chieftainship appears, therefore, a restoration and partial re-interpretation of a much earlier pattern. That yet the Tonga as described by Colson display a normative system that, with its emphasis on diffuse leadership and achieved status, seems particularly appropriate for a chief-less society, need not surprise us. Rather than assuming that this normative system is of entirely modern origin (which Colson does not suggest), we could link it meaningfully to a particular type of historical political system: one where the ruler, though exercising political functions, is considered a *primus inter pares*, not ritually separated from his subjects, and recruited not according to fixed kinship rules (which could safeguard the political monopoly of a particular lineage, clan or estate) but instead collectively chosen from a rather large pool of candidates. This is exactly the kind of political leadership described for the neighbouring Ila,<sup>105</sup> who are very similar to the Tonga in language, economy, and general cultural orientation, including religion. The presumably recent difference in political organization between Ila and Tonga seems then to be due mainly to differences in local experiences, precipitating different responses in a basically similar political system during the upheaval in the nineteenth century.

I shall now explore the implications of such a view for the theme of this section: the confrontation between immigrant rulers and territorial cults in the process of Luba expansion. Luba influence did not successfully penetrate into the Tonga-Ila area. The chieftaincies in southern Zambia have no recorded tradition of immigration from the north and also lack the material attributes (ceremonial ironware: gongs, axes, bow-stands) generally associated with northern chiefly origins.<sup>106</sup>

The particular type of chieftainship postulated here for the entire Tonga-Ila group was very different from the Luba political culture, since it denied the ruler a socially and ritually exalted position. Moreover, among the Ila and the Tonga, inter-local territorial cults under priestly control have been very prominent and have fulfilled major functions of social control and inter-local interaction; we have identified these functions as an alternative to well-developed chieftainship along Luba lines. While southern Zambia has been overtaken by most other parts of the territory as far as material culture is concerned (pottery, iron technology),<sup>107</sup> it has a relatively high agricultural potential.<sup>108</sup> The area has remained occupied by the same civilization since the beginning of the present millennium.<sup>109</sup> It was the first part of Zambia to develop long-distance trade;<sup>110</sup> and this trade, not monopolized by chiefs as was the case in many other parts of Zambia, was of remarkable dimensions even in the turbulent nineteenth century.<sup>111</sup>

The obvious question is: what kept the northern immigrants out of this attractive area? Distance cannot have been a factor, since some effectively Luba-ized parts of Zambia, such as the lands of the Nkoya, Lenje and Soli, are hardly less distant from the northern homelands. In fact, one Luba ruler managed to establish himself at the southern periphery of the area: Mukuni of the Leya, east of the town of Livingstone.<sup>112</sup> Doubtless there have been many other immigrant groups, but they were either assimilated without retaining their own identity let alone assuming hereditary ruler status,<sup>113</sup> or they were violently repelled, as tradition has it for one branch of the Kaonde venturing south of the Kafue.<sup>114</sup>

Traditions surrounding the origins of the major land spirits of the Ila may give us the key to an answer.<sup>115</sup> Among the Ila each chief's area has its sacred grove, where a major land spirit is venerated. There is some hierarchy of these major land spirits: those at the bottom being only venerated in one particular area, whereas those at the very top of the scale (Shimunenga, Munyama and especially Malumbe) are each venerated in the groves of a number of neighbouring areas. In fact, the three spirits named here are the main powers in the Ila pantheon after the High God and the Earth Spirit, Bulongo. Tradition presents these three land spirits as historical human beings who arrived in Iiland as great chiefs and magicians. Munyama is explicitly remembered as leading a Lunda expedition into the area, whereas Malumbe is said to have come from the distant east. Although these immigrant rulers may have made some impact on the Ila political structure (Smith and Dale<sup>116</sup> suggest that the areas they conquered coincide with the

areas in which they are now venerated), they were not able to found chiefly dynasties alien to the flexible, open and non-ascriptive nature of Ila chieftainship. In other words, though impressive enough in their time, they failed to Luba-ize the Ila but instead were Ila-ized: they were accommodated within the already existing politico-religious structure which encapsulated them and turned them into major local divinities.

Here we find the exact opposite of what happened in the Bemba case; among the Ila the struggle between, on the one hand, the immigrant rulers and, on the other, the priests in association with non-ascriptive rulers without religious connotations, ended in an absolute victory on the home side. The immigrants were redefined in a way that was harmless for the earlier political system and that could only boost the earlier religious system. The ironical fate of the immigrant chiefs in Ilaland is rather reminiscent of the fate of the agents of formal Islam who have spread over rural North Africa since the twelfth century: going out to propagate their particular version of the true Islamic doctrine (cf. the Luba political culture), they rapidly became encapsulated in the earlier rural religious system and ended up as local saints, the very cornerstones of the peasants' popular religion which they had tried to alter.<sup>117</sup>

Thus one is brought to assume that northern rulers, so successful in most of Zambia, failed to establish themselves in the southern part largely because the political and religious organization of some Ila-Tonga groups before the nineteenth century was in certain aspects superior to, and had a greater survival power than, that found elsewhere in the territory. With our present data it can only be speculated what these superior aspects were: a more developed yet flexible system of non-ascriptive secular rulers, supported not only by small-scale warfare (which may have been general throughout pre-Lunda Zambia) but also by long-distance trade and by the specific nature of a cattle economy (which offers the unique possibility of accumulating wealth in a subsistence economy), and a balanced relationship between these rulers and an inter-local territorial cult system that, while providing additional political integration and arbitration, was perhaps more highly developed than anywhere else in Zambia because of the uncommonly unpredictable nature of the southern Zambian climate.<sup>118</sup>

## Conclusion

I have suggested that the Luba-Lunda revolution represents one major theme in the historical study of territorial cults in Zambia. Certainly another such theme concerns the changes territorial cults have undergone in the general process of rapid social change that has characterized Central Africa since the first half of the last century; aspects of this theme I shall pursue in the chapters that follow.

The main purpose of this chapter has been to develop a number of hypotheses, which, though as yet untested, seem to meet the fragmentary and shallow factual data that we have on the sociology and history of territorial cults in Zambia, and to collate these hypotheses tentatively into a plausible but conjectural historical process. It could be argued that a similar methodology is followed in most, if not all, sociological and historical interpretation; however, in the present case the imbalance between speculation and data is exceptionally great.

The only justification I can offer derives from an observation which I share with many of my colleagues in the field of African anthropology and history. Generally there is no dearth of empirical data, and ever more is being collected by African universities and international research institutions. In view of the enormous expansion of our historical knowledge of Central Africa during the last fifteen years I am confident that within a few years the major factual gaps in this study of territorial cults in Zambia can be filled. However, in order to achieve this it is absolutely necessary that we formulate our research priorities, in the form of testable hypotheses which clearly bring out what we presently take to be crucial aspects of our subject matter, and which can be substantiated or refuted in the light of subsequent data collection precisely guided by these hypotheses. The point is that, against the abundance of data, there is a lack of sophisticated interpretative hypotheses in much of the study of African society and history.

I believe that a greater insight into the history and sociology of territorial cults in Zambia can be gained by further testing, expansion or refutation of the main hypotheses employed in the present chapter: the hypothesis of the shrine cult as a systematic, formal complement of the process of everyday ecological transformations in societies with a subsistence economy; the hypothesis of pre-Luba Zambian societies as composed of feuding clan segments with little-developed secular leadership, and with priestly territorial cults maintaining a minimum of inter-local social and political order; and finally, the hypothesis of Luba and Lunda expansion as, among other aspects, a struggle for legitimacy and

power between immigrating chiefs and pre-existing priestly cults - the latterday varieties of the Zambian shrine cults being interpretable as the differential outcome of this struggle.