

A unique Nkoya statuette associated with cults of affliction (Western Zambia)

by Wim van Binsbergen

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ABSTRACT. During my recent visit to Zambia (July 2011), where I have conducted historical and ethnographic fieldwork among the Nkoya people since 1972, I obtained a unique cult statuette that played a role in the diagnosis and treatment of cults of affliction – the latter, allegedly new and alien forms of possession considered to have entered the Zambian countryside from an eastern direction from the late 19th-century onward. In this paper I describe the artefact in detail, and seek to define its regional and long-range connectivity in space and time. The artefact, and its attending local exegesis, although apparently isolated in terms of style and technique, turns out to represent a cosmology and cosmogony which, far from being totally alien, appear to underlie much of social and ritual life in this part of South Central Africa before this worldview came to be almost completely eclipsed, first by the ascendancy of the ancestral and royal cults in precolonial times, then by the advent of the colonial state, capitalism, and Christianity. This insight leads to a revision of my earlier approach to cults of affliction particularly my book *Religious change in Zambia* (1981).

1. Introduction

During my recent visit to Zambia (July 2011), where I have conducted historical and ethnographic fieldwork among the Nkoya people since 1972, I obtained a unique cult statuette that played a role in the diagnosis and treatment of *cults of affliction* (see Section 8 below) – the latter, allegedly new and alien forms of possession considered to have entered the Zambian countryside from an eastern direction from the late 19th-century onward. In this paper I describe the artefact in detail, and seek to define its regional and long-range connectivity in space and time. The artefact, and its attending local exegesis, although apparently isolated in terms of style and technique, turns out to represent a cosmology and cosmogony which, far from being totally alien, appear to underlie much of social and ritual life in this part of South Central Africa before this worldview came to be almost completely eclipsed, first by the ascendancy of the ancestral and royal cults in precolonial times, then by the advent of the colonial state, capitalism, and Christianity. This insight leads to a revision of my earlier approach to cults of affliction particularly my book *Religious change in Zambia* (1981).¹

¹ Historical and ethnographic fieldwork among the Nkoya people of Western Zambia and of Lusaka was carried out between 1972 and 2011, first continuously from early 1972 to April 1974, then regularly during shorter spells throughout the period indicated. I wish to express my thanks to the following persons and institutions: to the Nkoya people for welcoming me in their midst and making me one of them; to Msrs D. Shiyowe, D. Kawanga and M.M. Malapa for excellent research assistance during the 1970s-80s; to Mr Mushakabantu for bringing me in touch with the artefact described here and illuminating its background; to the University of Zambia and its Institute of African Studies, Lusaka, for generously accommodating my research over the decades; to the African Studies Centre, Leiden, for supporting my fieldwork and writing from 1977 on; and to Patricia Saegerman for comments on African art. The argument is also informed, in part, by my ongoing research into the nature and transregional / transcontinental connections of the Southern African four-tablet oracle, cf. van Binsbergen 2003b: ch. 5-8 and the present paper's bibliography – I have moreover been a certified and practising diviner-healer in the Southern African *sangoma* tradition since 1990.

2. Description



IV-I



I-II



I-II



II-III



II-III-IV



III-IV

Fig. 1. Photographs of all four sides of the statuette.

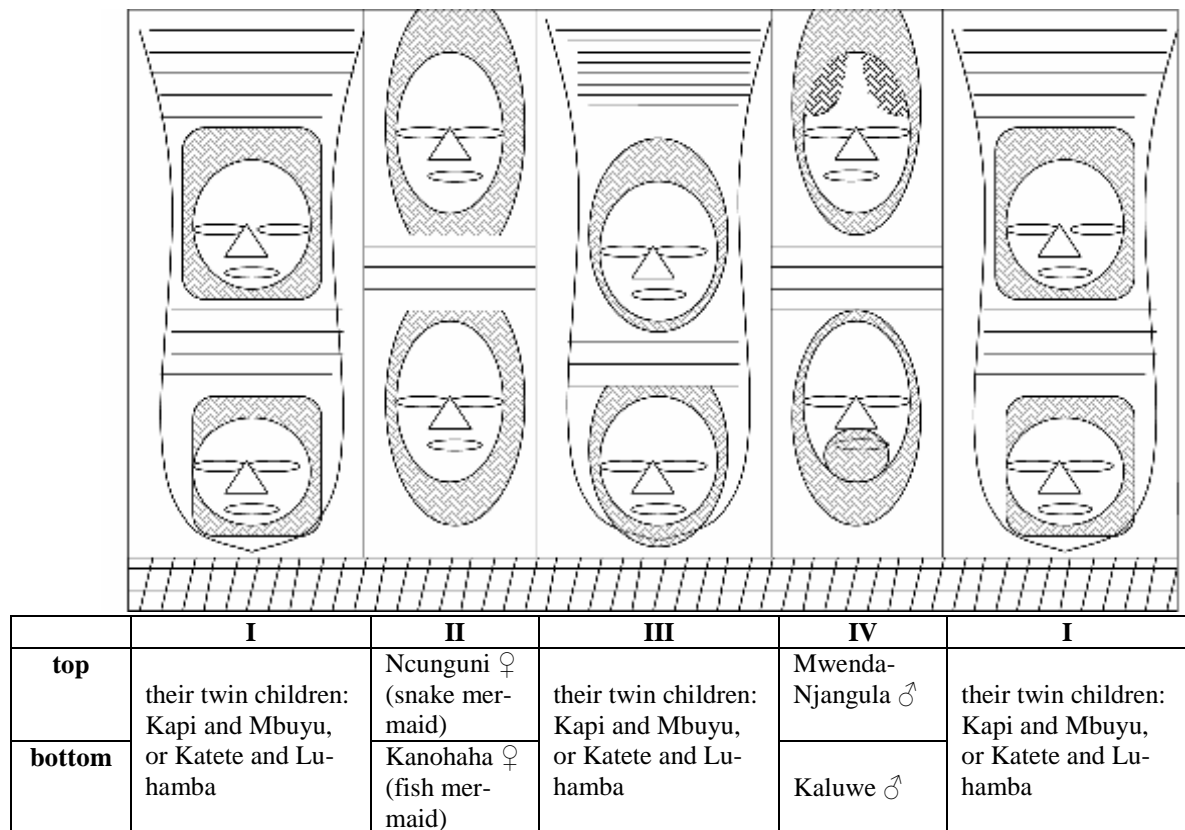


Fig. 2. Schematic rendering and basic exegesis of the sculpture.

This is a unique cultic wooden statue made out of a branch of the *mundale* shrub,² out of which also village shrines (sing. *shihanda*, pl. *bihanda*) tend to be made among the Nkoya people.³ Height: 35.1 to 35.5 cm; the basic material has an oval diameter from 7.2 to 9.2 cm at the base.

The top end is slightly smaller and shows a perfectly circular indenture in the middle, as if the original branch had first been turned on a lathe prior to being sculpted. The top indenture has a diameter of only 0.6 cm and is very shallow (0.3 cm), so it cannot be used for storage of medicines. Against the use of a lathe pleads that no such indenture can be found at the bottom – but the trunk may have been shortened when the decorative lower rim was sculpted. Moreover, use of a lathe would have resulted in an overall circular diameter instead of the present, oval diameter of the piece. Perhaps the indenture was made when the original wood log was fixed with a manufactured clamp so as to facilitate the carving. If this was the case, it suggests a far more recent date than the one reconstructed below on culture-historical grounds (1930).

² I have not yet been able to ascertain the scientific name of this tree. According to Jalla's (1937: s.v.) Lozi dictionary, *mundale* is the Luyana word for 'maize', which is scarcely helpful – although Luyana, the traditional Lozi court language, is considered to be very close to Nkoya (Fortune 1963; Givon 1971), the common Nkoya word for maize is *shingombe*. Possibly, Symon's (1959) notes on traditional medicine, or Gilges' book on African poison plants, may give some clues but these publications were not at hand at the time of writing.

³ On arboreal village shrine in South Central Africa, cf. van Binsbergen 1981.

The sculpturing style is careful, the eight facial ovals distributed along the surface are smoothly polished although surrounded by a rounded cameo section that is indented with the same effect that produces the impression of hair in the two male faces of side IV. Because of the oval base and round form, the sculpture has two broader sides (I and III) and two narrower sides (II and IV). All sides are dominated by the depictions of schematised human faces, two on each side, one above the other; these depictions we will discuss below under the heading 'Mythology' At the base of the statuette is a slightly protruding rim of 2 cm high, adorned with two horizontal grooves, and with a series of diagonal grooves c. 8 mm apart. The surfaces not decorated with faces or rough indentations display series of horizontal grooves:

- 5 (top) and 4 (middle) on Side I
- 3 (middle) on Side II
- 8 (top) and 3 (middle) on Side III
- 4 (middle) on Side IV

According to the exegesis given by the latest owner, Mr Yandama⁴ from Lusaka, to Mr Mushakabantu, likewise from Lusaka and intermediary in the purchase of this item,⁵ these grooves are explained to indicate the number of afflicting spirits a patient / prospective cult adept is ascertained to be possessed by, in a process of divination for which the statuette is apparently used but in an undisclosed manner.

Stylistically, the compact format with low relief and the self-contained rounded shape with no detail protruding from the overall surface more than a few millimetres, suggests that the material imposed severe limitations upon the sculptor. Perhaps this is because the *mundale* is not a fully-fledged tree but a shrub, whose branches seldom grow beyond the diameter of the present artefact. Choice of this sacred tree, which is not usually employed for woodworking, already shows the sculptor's intention to produce a maximum of meaning and sacred reference within the context of the local cultural cosmology. Meanwhile the piece appears to be unique in the sense that its regional comparative stylistic context is difficult to define – with the exception of the Lusaka-bought curios from the early 1970s to which reference will be made towards the end of this argument. Also in other respects does the pedestrian sculpting style suggest the globalising, commoditified world of curio trade and airport art, rather than a long-standing regional tradition – on the other hand, the lofty, non-commercial, spiritual intentions of the sculptor will become manifest in the course of my argument. The highly economic, somewhat cluttered use of the available rounded surface, and the resulting *horror vacui* effect, may have some affinity with regional traditions of ivory carving, e.g. the well-known Loango ivory carvings under recognised Portuguese influence throughout the Early Modern period (cf. Fig. 17, below) – of course, in ivory carving the natural size of the elephant tusk invites a rounded form of relatively small diameter.

⁴ Mr Yandama is a grandson and heir of the penultimate owner; the latter was a Nkoya traditional healer who died c. 1980.

⁵ Mr Mushakabantu, aged c. 67, retired photo journalist with great international experience, and presently practising traditional healer, member of the Kahare family which has held the Kahare kingship since the late 19th century. The present writer himself, as adopted son of Mwene Kahare Kabambi (†1993), is likewise a member of that royal family.

About halfway the height of the statuette, four strands of black glass beads and three strands of discoloured, now greyish white glass beads are tied around the statue. The frayed, somewhat decayed dark cotton thread on which the black beads are strung, differs markedly from the apparently more recent and solid beige-coloured cotton on which the light beads are strung, with the application of many more strands of beige cotton than are used of the dark cotton for the black beads. Beads play a role in many cults in South Central Africa and the surrounding areas. Here their principal function is to publicly record a major ritual sacrifice (usually a bloody animal sacrifice) which the bearer of the beads has made in the name of his main shrine and/or possessing spirit. In the Nkoya cults of affliction (van Binsbergen 1981) for which this statuette is reported to have been used specifically, cult leaders and adepts don beaded necklaces in a specific colour, notably white for the *bituma* cult. In the *bituma* cult, white beaded strings also adorn the forked top the cult's typical shrine: a debarked forked pole of over 2 m. height, at the base of which offerings of white meal, beer and white cloth are made.



Fig. 3. The *bituma* local cult leader Mrs Mayatiro (c. 1925-1989) of Shumbanyama village, Kazo valley, Kaoma district, Zambia, with an infant acolyte, posing next to her *bituma* cult shrine, moving her cultic fly switch in adoration (Shumbanyama village, 1973); cover photograph of: van Binsbergen 1981.

3. Ritual use

The accompanying exegesis mentions the following cults of affliction for which this statuette is used: *bincancale*, *kayongo*, *bituma*, *byalumenia* (*baselu-ncunguni*, *kanchaka*, *kalume*) *mambaluki*, *muba*, *bishongo*, and *maimbwe*. Half of this number also featured in my extensive studies of the cults of affliction among the Nkoya in the early 1970s, notably *bituma*, *kayongo*, *muba*, *maimbwe*, and several not specifically mentioned here, e.g. *mwendapanzi*, and the Christian syncretistic cult *moya*. In the cults I studied, the identification of the specific spirits by which a patient was possessed, was made not on the basis of a reading of pathological symptoms or by considering the patient's own verbal anamnesis, but by ascertaining whether the patient responded, by an uncontrollable urge to dance, to a succession of possession songs and rhythms

played before her or him during nocturnal cult sessions – where short therapeutic conversations between the cult leader and the patient, and the intoxicating effects of narcotic leaves burned in the fire, and perhaps local beer, may further have helped to bring the desired effect along.

The four-tablet oracle so well described for other parts of Southern and South Central Africa (van Binsbergen 1995, 1996 and extensive references there) has also been attested for Western Zambia (Garbutt 1909). The latter author gives pictures of four tablets from Barotseland (today's Western Province), largely continuous with those from further south in South Central and Southern Africa, but with a typical ring-shaped appendage on top. In Western Zambia, the four-tablet oracle seems to be a fairly recent (after 1800 CE) innovation. It may have been brought as part of the Nguni tradition brought to Western Zambia with the Kololo invasion in the 1820s, which played a major role in the 19th-c. political and ethnic transformation of Barotseland and the emergence of Nkoya ethnicity under Barotse overlordship. However, the same type of four-tablet oracle is also found among the various Zambian Tonga groups,⁶ where it is continuous with the Hakata form of divination well described for the Shona, today the dominant ethnic cluster in Zimbabwe. The oldest certain archaeological attestation of the four-tablet oracle in South Central Africa dates from only the 17th c. CE (Robinson 1959); the oldest documentary evidence is older by one century (dos Santos 1901), which still agrees with my claim of a relatively recent introduction into Western Zambia. Although expert in its use in Southern Africa since 1990, I have never (except in my own hands) encountered the four-tablet oracle during my fieldwork among the Nkoya, although a century ago it was reported to exist in Western Zambia.

In my ongoing research into the African geomancies in their transcontinental environment from 1990 onward, I have tended to see the emergence of the four-tablet oracle in South Central and Southern Africa as a translation, into a new type of random generator (no longer the chance hitting of the ground with a stick, as in the Islamic form; nor the throwing of sticks or coins, as in the East Asian form; or the throwing of special geomantic dice, as in the relatively recent and derived South Asian form; nor the throwing of cowries or divining chain as in the West African forms including Ifa; but by a random generator consisting of four ivory or wooden tablets, each marked to be distinguished from the other three, and moreover marked so as to distinguish between front and back. Such tablets allow for $2^4 = 16$ different names configurations when thrown together, and the divination process consists in the production and interpretation, in close collaboration with the client, of a specific series of these configurations, by reference to a written or oral interpretative catalogue listing all possible configurations. Against the background of the other random generators listed, and of the proved convergence of the interpretative catalogues underlying all these forms of divinations listed (van Binsbergen 1996), this is certainly a plausible historical reconstruction of the place of the four-tablet oracle amidst the other geomantic forms. Prototypes and adulterated versions of such foursomes may be found dispersed over Central, East and Southern Africa. One intriguing comparative ethnographic fact however is that the four tablets making up the African four-tablet oracle, are strikingly similar to sets of four tablets or sticks used in Native American games and forms of divination in North America, which most probably follow a pre-Columbian tradition (Culin 1975 / 1902-1903; cf. Fig. 9 below). Under the Back-into-Africa hypothesis (a recent genetic finding that, long after the Out-of-Africa Exodus of 80-60 ka BP – millennia Before Present –, M and R mtDNA types have migrated back into sub-Saharan Africa from Asia; cf. Hammer 1998; van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011 with additional references) *this may be seen as much more than a coincidence* – notably, as a sign that a four-

⁶ There are at least five, scarcely related, ethnic groups called 'Tonga' dispersed over Southern Africa. The Zambian Tonga, in many ways continuous with the Zimbabweans living close to Lake Kariba, are to be distinguished from the Thonga of Mozambique and South Africa, whose social, ritual and divinatory life has been the subject of famous ethnography by Junod in the early 20th c.

based cosmological system was already available in Central Eurasia in the Upper Palaeolithic, and from there was transmitted (just like the linguistic macrophyla of Niger-Congo, Khoi-San and Amerind under Starostin's and Fleming's *Borean hypothesis; again see van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011 for an introductory discussion and references) to *both* sub-Saharan Africa, and North America. This general thesis on the historical kinship between speakers of Niger-Congo and Amerind is now well supported by linguistic and comparative ethnographic data: female puberty rites, mythology, basketry, etc. In the specific field of divination, there is some slight archaeological support for the postulated, Upper Palaeolithic link between sub-Saharan Africa and North America in that a pair (not four, alas) of extensively bone artefacts, rather resembling the North American divination and gaming tablets as well as Southern African divination tablets, have been unearthed in Upper Palaeolithic Western Europe (Dewez 1974; van Binsbergen, in press; see Fig. 9 below). All this then constitutes further support for the claim (van Binsbergen 2010f) that a four-based cosmology probably revolving on the idea of elements existed in Upper Palaeolithic Old World, more than 10,000 years before Empedocles.

Geomantic divination's basis in 2^n configurations would tally well with the formal structure of our artefact, which – as we shall further explore below – also displays recursive⁷ systems of 2^n ($n \geq 1$) in several ways:

- at the formal level: the facial images are repeated on all four sides, in pairs of twosomes
- in interpretation: the same male and female principal gods appear in twosomes but appear to be two aspects of the same character
- the emphasis on twins.

The divination methods which I encountered during my own Nkoya fieldwork so far, were:

- dancing in diagnostic response to ritual singing and dancing
- the common friction oracle in which an axe handle is shifted over the ground, with sudden friction being interpreted as significant
- water-gazing by divinatory specialists, or under their direction
- divinatory hunt: success means agreement of the ancestors on a specific, named matter, failure the opposite
- trance divination by healers
- and a number of prophetic Christian methods to be used in African Independent churches as a sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit (e.g. trance, flatulence, belching).

It is possible that our artefact, which in itself does not at all look like the kind of random generator amenable for material divinatory use, was used in combination with any of these methods, but further research is required on this point. So far it has not been disclosed how a patient's number of grooves, corresponding with a number of

⁷ I have elsewhere defined *recursion* as:

‘...the situation in which a class of objects or methods [is] defined by a simple basic case and where specific rules derive from, and reduce to, this basic case all other cases. In iconography, repetitive patterns of ornamentation as in Fig. 6.4, below, [showing accumulations or concatenations of twosomes] constitute examples of recursion. In social organisation, segmentation, the segmentary lineage, and the genealogy represented as a dendrogram also amount to recursion.’ (van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011: 147n)

possessing spirits, was determined. We note that only the numbers 3, 4, 5 and 8 are inscribed onto the statuette – the numbers 1, 2, 6 and 7 are missing, and of these only 6 and 7 may be produced by a combination (for 6 a duplication, two times 3) of the available numbers. Yet in my experience most patients in the early 1970s were claimed to be afflicted by only one or two spirits. Perhaps fine meal or ground white kaolin (*mpemba*) was dusted onto the statuette so that the grooves retaining most of the residue revealed the desired number of spirits.

Apart from the cult leader's beaded necklaces, her ceremonial axe and fly switch, and forked pole, no other cultic objects featured in the many cult sessions I attended in 1972-1974 – let alone any cult object similar to the present statuette. However, my research concentrated on the Eastern, Mashasha, division of the Nkoya people under the rule of Chief Kahare, and was dominated by the Nkoya affinal relatives of the founder of the *bituma* cult, Mr Shimbinga – the latter of Luvale background and possibly from Angola. The water lily ('lotus', with significant South Asian, Buddhist, but also Ancient Egyptian resonances), the Moon, and the colour white for ceremonial clothes, beads and the debarked arboreal shrines, were major symbols in his cult. It is conceivable that other cults of affliction, in other parts of Kaoma district and surrounding areas, observed a different pattern, including statuettes like the present one – but given my extensive exposure to Nkoya life over four decades, it does not seem likely.

That during my main fieldwork on cults of affliction in the Nkoya area (1972-74) I did not encounter any statuettes like the present one, is hardly surprising in the light of the succession of very extensive and very thorough witchcraft eradication movements that had hit the Nkoya area from the late 1920s to the late 1950s.⁸ In fact, prior to my 1989 visit to the royal capital of Mwene Mutondo⁹ (which however I had repeatedly visited before, in 1977, 1978, and 1988) I had, despite years of fieldwork among the Nkoya, never consciously witnessed *any* piece of Nkoya ritual sculpture, and I had come to believe that all such sculptural expressions had been sacrificed in the witchcraft eradication movements' quest for security and purity.¹⁰ Thus, while the death of the penultimate owner c. 1980 provides a firm *terminus ante quem*, the cultural and ritual history of Western Zambia in the course of the 20th century suggest that our artefact is unlikely to have been made after 1930. The cults of affliction which constitute the frame of reference for the diagnostic use of the artefact, have generally been considered to be relative newcomers to Western Zambia: there is considerable agreement that they constitute ritual innovations, which came to supplant a then obsolescent, local and inward-looking therapeutic system based on the notion of volition and transgression (of taboos, ancestral injunctions, kin obligations, moral codes), by an alien therapeutic system based on the a-moral notion of contagion of foreign spirits in

⁸ Van Binsbergen 1981; Fields 1985; Reynolds 1963; Ranger 1972.

⁹ Within the Kaoma district of Western Zambia, Mwene Mutondo and Mwene Kahare are the two royal chiefs – precolonial kingships incorporated in the colonial and postcolonial state.

¹⁰ The witchcraft movements of the 1950s (cf. Reynolds 1963) led to the accumulation of numerous cult objects in the hands of colonial government officials. Some of these are supposed to be still held at the Livingstone Museum, Zambia. I was only able to visit the museum in 1972, when my interest in Nkoya artefacts had not yet been aroused. Further research is required to ascertain whether here clues as to Nkoya artistic styles can be found.

the context of long-distance trade and slave-raiding.¹¹ Most cults of affliction active in Western Zambia in the early 1970s, when I studied them in the field, were, at any rate, locally considered to have arrived in the area coming from the East (from the Nkoya's eastern neighbours the Lenje – some spirits expressed themselves in the Lenje language) within living memory, around or even well after 1900 CE. In fact, subsequent transcontinental explorations, in the context of research now in progress, has convinced me that these cults (which are generally considered to have swept South Central Africa coming from the Indian Ocean seaboard) are to some extent transformations of South Asian and South East Asian healing cults from the popular fringes of Buddhism (van Binsbergen 2010e, 2011b). Allowing a few decades for these cults to penetrate Western Zambia sufficiently so as to produce specific therapeutic artefacts to serve them, would give us a *terminus post quem* of, again, c. 1930. I therefore propose that our artefact can be provisionally dated to 1930. Meanwhile the art historical comparative context suggests a date that is a few decades more recent.

The sculptured artefacts I found at the Mutondo capital in 1989 then played a central role in the annual Kazanga Ceremony, which had only been revived in 1988, after more than a century of disuse (van Binsbergen 1994, 1999). It is quite likely that the regained self-confidence of Nkoya traditionalists, in that connection, also allowed existing ancestral and therapeutic sculptured artefacts to be put on display again, for the first time, after decades of hiding. At the royal capital, the artefacts were placed in the *kara* shrine of royal ancestors (Fig. 5), which was moreover associated with

- *metallurgy* (Nkoya royals having been credited, by tradition, with the introduction of ironworking – pieces of rough iron ore are kept inside the royal shrine)
- *Mukanda* i.e. male genital mutilation (a custom which the Mutondo kings and their courtiers had continued to observed, even though according to Nkoya tradition Nkoya royals had broken away from the overlordship of the Lunda emperor Mwaat Yaamv in a conflict over *Mukanda*, wishing to reject that custom (van Binsbergen 1992, 1993).

A shrine similar to the *kara* is not found at the royal capital of Mwenne Kahare in Eastern Nkoyaland; there, instead, we find a *shihanda* pole (continuous with the Kaonde and Luba custom, cf. Jaeger 1974; Nicholls 1906) in honour of the royal ancestors (during Mwenne Kahare Kabambi's rule – 1955-1993 – crowned with buffalo trophies which were removed by his successors), as well as a thatched shelter in which the instruments of the royal orchestra were kept (various types of drums, and a portable xylophone).

Since the revival of the Kazanga festival, the festival grounds have known several successive locations inside Kaoma district, sometimes close to the Mutondo capital, sometimes near the Kaoma district centre but still on Mutondo land, and sometimes near the Kaoma district centre but on Kahare land. However, invariably a copy of the

¹¹ White 1949; van Binsbergen 1981; Alpers 1984; Bourguignon 1968a, 1968b, 1973, 1976; Baumann & Westermann 1940: 194. In the course of the present argument we will see that there may have been much more continuity between ancient local cosmologies of Western Zambia, and the modern cults of affliction.

Mutondo royal shrine (including the sculptured artefacts) was temporarily erected in the festival grounds to serve as the ritual centre of festivities. Fig. 4 gives an impression of the situation in 2011, when the present writer was nominated sub-chief Mwene Tatashikanda in charge of the Kazanga festival grounds.



Fig. 4. The Mutondo kara shrine and its attending statuettes at the Kazanga festival, Kaoma, July 2011; (a) overview: Mwene Mutondo (centre, with headdress), flanked by the shrine priestess who ceremonially figures as the royal sister, and followed by his orchestra and courtiers, passes by the shrine on his way to the royal pavilion – it is also at this shrine that ceremonial beer is offered to the royal ancestors, and that one of the Myene, ‘kings’, present invokes the ancestors’ blessing over the year’s new crops ; (b) three ancestral poles (apparently typical of the entire Niger-Congo speaking region at large)¹², the larger one in the middle developed into a male human bust and head – special

¹² I studied such ancestral poles in the extreme Western end of the Niger-Congo speaking region, among the Manjacos of Guinea Bissau; the Manjaco ones have similar counterparts in the New World, among the Ndjukas of Surinam (Thompson 1993), many of whose ancestors appeared to hail from the Upper Guinesa coast. A nicely decorated specimen from Ghana is in my possession. Throughout the Old World, and even in North America, sticks vertically stuck in the ground serve as ancestral memory points, or shrines; Middleton (1994) reports them for Madagascar, too, and Anati (1999: 92) shows what could have been an Upper Palaeolithic prototype from Siberia. The markings on such stick may be a device to remember specific ancestors – as is specifically the case among the Manjacos. Implied in

sacrificial beer is libated at the enamel discs, and drunk by the king while prostrate in front of the statuette; (c) overview of the other side of the kara shrine; (d), (e) close up of a female statuette shown in situ in (c); (f), (g) close-ups of ancestral poles. Note the many striking differences in sculpturing style between these artefacts, and the one whose description and analysis are offered in the present paper.



Fig. 5. The kara shrine at the royal capital of Mwene Mutondo in 1992 (a) photographer facing the royal fence – the latter’s pointed pole constitute a royal privilege; (b) close-up, photographer with back to royal fence – note the one pole with a human face.



Fig. 6. Mr and Mrs Mushakabantu-Kahare photographed at Protea Arcades Hotel, Lusaka, July 2011. Mr Mushakabantu has been instrumental in purveying the artefact described here, and its exegesis, from the previous owner, Mr Yandama. Mrs Mushakabantu-Kahare is here in the act of trance divination.

their symbolism is the Tree of Life (a very old mythem, which I have reconstructed to have been already part of Anatomically Modern Humans’ mythological common heritage before the Out-of-Africa Exodus c. 80-60 ka BP), the celestial axis around which the constellations revolve, and the mytheme of the re-connection of Heaven and Earth (through mountains, trees, altars, smoke, pillars etc.) in order to compensate for, or undo, the traumatic, cosmogonic event of the separation of Heaven and Earth. The once leading Egyptologist Petrie (1914) listed ‘poles over graves’ as one of a few dozens correspondences between sub-Saharan Africa and Ancient Egypt.

4. Exegesis

According to the exegesis accompanying the artefact, the overall name of this sculpture is ‘Manja Bambuya [Mother of Twins] and Manja Lupashi [Mother of Royal Ancestors]. The only faces specifically marked and explicitly identified in the accompanying exegesis, however, are those of two male deities,


1. Mwendanjangula, male, marked by a bald head, and
2. Kaluwe, marked by a beard

These are both one on Side IV, (1) over (2). They are claimed to be accompanied by their wives,

3. Ncunguni (a mermaid with the lower body of a snake) as the wife of Mwendanjangula, and
4. Kanohaha (a mermaid with a fishtail) as the wife of Kaluwe.

It stands to reason to identify these two female deities with the ones that give their name to the sculpture, Manja Bambuya [Mother of Twins] and Manja Lupashi [Mother of Royal Ancestors]. Historical traditions among the Nkoya accord a prominent place to female rulers, relegating males in early dynastic history to the status of *Mukwetunga*, Royal Escorts, who also have access to royal power by virtue of their being married to the Queen (van Binsbergen 1992). Against this background, the prominence that these female characters occupy in the naming of the sculpture, strongly suggests that they are placed in registers similar to those of their husbands, i.e. on Side II. This leaves the virtually identical sides I and III to depict ‘their twin children’.

Whereas so far the names of these two sets of twins have not yet been disclosed, against the background of Nkoya culture and traditions it is possible to guess them. If the statuette is called ‘Mother of Twins and Mother of Royal Ancestors’, the names of the children of the ‘Mother of Twins’ / *Manjambuyu* are implied by the Nkoya custom to name any set of twins Kapi and Mbuyu. These then, presumably, are the names of the twin children of Mwendanjangula and Ncunguni. The one set of royal twins which is highlighted in Nkoya oral traditions is that of royal children Katete and Luhamba, the female ‘Reed Person’ and the male ‘Royal Travelling Person’ (van Binsbergen 1992, 2010a), who are reminiscent

- of the Ancient Egyptian royal title ‘She of the Reed and the Bee’, *nswt-bꜥ*,

- of the primal twins who, as first humans or as sole surviving humans after the Flood, populated or repopulated the earth through brother-sister incest (van Binsbergen with Isaak 2008; van Binsbergen 2010b);¹³

¹³ Today’s leading comparative mythologist, Michael Witzel, places (Witzel 2010a, 2010b) flood myths in Pandora’s Box for reasons of their near-global distribution. He has a strong point. However, in view of their apparent association with the mitochondrial Type C cluster which emerged in Central Eurasia c. 30 ka BP and subsequently spread East and South (Forster 2004) I have been rather inclined to situate the emergence of Flood myths in the Upper Palaeolithic (van Binsbergen 2006a, 2006b). Anyway, in either view, Flood myths constitute the near-worldwide, well attested and well studied (Dundes 1988; Isaak 2006; van Binsbergen with Isaak 2008) context in which a cosmogonic Mother of

- an implied combination of both themes may be found in the myth that, according to Herodotus (*Historiae*, II, 91) ‘Apollo’ and ‘Artemis’ were born at Chemmis (ḫ-bît, in the Egyptian Western Delta). The male twin can be identified as Ḥr / Horus but no female counterpart can be identified in the Egyptian (Blackman & Fairman 1935, 1944) and Greek (Plutarch 1934-1935) versions of the myth of the latter’s conflict with his uncle Swṯḫ / Seth who had killed W̄sr / Osiris. According to Helck (1979), however:

‘Eine ältere Sage von den ‘beiden Kindern des unteräg[ptischen] Königs’ [one of whose standard title is bît, ‘Bee’, and who is closely associated with the goddess Neith and her temple ḫt-bît – WvB] läßt diese als Sonne und Mond (später als Schu und Tefnut = Apollon und Artemis erklärt) im Papyrusumpf von Buto geboren werden.’

The first divine creatures emerging from Atwm, the twins of opposite gender Šw and Tfnt thus identified by Helck, incestuously produced the other gods of the Heliopolitan Ennead, and thus are typical of the primal twin at creation or, in Flood stories, at Second Creation after the Flood.

Since the two sets of human faces on Sides I and III are identical, it is not possible to determine, at this moment, which set of twins on the statuettes answers to which set of names.

Before we proceed we should stop a while to appreciate the links between our artefact and the Southern African four-tablet oracle. A basic form is shown in Fig. 7: four tablets, all marked to be different from each other and to distinguish between front and back, so that in total $2^4 = 16$ different configurations of four tablets may be obtained at random. The tablets are considered to differ in gender and in generation: senior woman (Kwami), senior men (Chilume), junior woman (Ntakwala) and junior man (Lumwe).



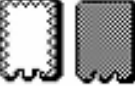

	gender	
age	female	male
senior	 <i>Kwami</i>	 <i>Chilume</i>
junior	 <i>Ntakwale</i>	 <i>Lumwe</i>

Fig. 7. Standard four-tablet system from Francistown, Botswana (van Binsbergen 1996; also cf. Fig. 9, below)

Throughout Southern and South Central Africa where the four-tablet system is being

the Waters may emerge and give rise, ultimately, to mythical characters such as Ncunguni and Kanhaha. When they have a marked African distribution, that, again, does not mean that they are African inventions or should go back to Pandora’s Box, but rather that in these respects, as in many others in the field of comparative mythology, comparative ethnography and comparative linguistics, and genetics, sub-Saharan Africa is merely an integral part of the global cultural history of Anatomically Modern Humans.

used, the names given to the four tablets differs substantially (van Binsbergen 1996: 8 offers a table of over a Southern African dozen variants, with bibliographic references), but none of the names corresponds even remotely from the nomenclature we have reconstructed above for the eight faces shown on our artefact. Nonetheless the correspondence between our artefact and the four-tablet system is close; cf. Fig. 8:





world region (implying hierarchy)	gender	
	female	male
celestial	 <i>Ncunguni ♀ (snake mermaid)</i>	 <i>Mwendanjangula</i>
terrestrial	 <i>Kanohaha ♀ (fish mermaid)</i>	 <i>Kaluwe</i>

Fig. 8. The divisions of the senior divinities depicted on our artefact

Here we assume that the two sets of twins are merely attributes of the four deities, and are not really invoked as deities.

It is important to note that the formal correspondence between our artefact and the four-tablet oracle is not accompanied by any stylistic correspondence. The decorative iconography of Southern African divination sets is well documented in a large number of studies, most of them from the first half of the 20th c., and has been subjected to expert art-historical research by Nettleton (1984). None of the patterns obtaining in the marking and decoration of the four tablets (chevrons, zigzags, log band, knots, spirals, images of frogs, lizards, etc.; fcf. Fig. 9 below) are to be seen on our artefact, and the typical deeply-cut angular style of sculptural decoration (reminiscent of Indian Ocean styles) is very different from the smoothed, shallow relief employed in our artefact.

Although only demonstrable at the formal, structural level, yet the parallels we find between the four-tablet oracle and our artefact may have important implications. In the first place, they help us determine in which direction to look for the stylistic background of our artefact – apparently not only to the East, but particularly to the South: Zimbabwe, Botswana, and South Africa, and in the general context of long-standing divination systems of a geomantic nature. Secondly, our artefact and its nomenclature suggests how to further interpret the variety of names given, in South Central and Southern Africa, to the four tablets. Clearly, these are not merely empty names needed

to handle the random operator which the four tablets constitute together, to distinguish between the sixteen configuration and look up their very specific possible meanings in a mental or written interpretative catalogue. Our artefact suggests that, also in the four-tablet oracle which is obviously related, the names refer to the most exalted cosmological and cosmogonic divinities in the regional worldview. Despite my emphasis on transregional and even transcontinental connections, even the four-tablet oracle is thus relegated to the heart of the local cosmology – however concealed under layers of later cultural accretions and eroded by later globalising influences.

5. Glimpses of Nkoya mythology

Despite the differentiation in names, male physical appearance, and attributed female physical appearance, between the two named male deities and the two female name deities, there is some reason to suggest that, in certain respects, only one divine couple is involved. Both males seem to be versions of (van Binsbergen 2010: 167f) Aarne-Thompson's categories A128 ('the mutilated god') and F512.1 ('One-eyed person, Cyclops', etc.). Mwandanjangula is a unilateral mythical character with only one side to his body, belief in which is widespread, all over African and other continents. Both females seem to be specimens of serpentine or fishlike mythical characters found elsewhere in Africa and throughout the Old World. The following excerpts from my recent, extensive study of Nkoya mythology in its African and transcontinental connections (van Binsbergen 2010a) brings out these themes at length.

'5.17. SERPENT, CHILD [OR MOTHER] OF DROUGHT

Nkoya: In Nkoya mythology, a prominent character is king Shihoka Nalinanga: 'Snake, Child [or Mother] of Drought', known as a cattle raider and locked in deadly rivalry with his royal sister. Here we may perceive a link between Nkoya mythology and that of neighbouring Eastern Angola, whose cultures and languages are continuous with those of Western Zambia. One of the major Angolan tales (Chatelain 1894) deals with the descent of the male Sudika-Mbambi into the underworld. Sudika is in love with the daughter of the underworld king Kalunga-Ngombe ['Grave-Cattle'], but she has been kidnapped by Kinioka kia Tumba ['Snake of Tumba / Skin'? – worldwide, the association of skin and dryness is a common one], apparently a cognate character to Shihoka Nalinanga. In the underworld, Sudika is swallowed by a monster, Kimbiji ['Two-Persons' ?] kia Malenda a Ngandu ['With Crocodile Scales']; however, Sudika's brother Kabundungulu catches the monster and cuts it open, after which he magically restores his brother to life from the bones, in shamanic fashion. A great water serpent is also very conspicuous in the stories which Jacottet collected in Western Zambia at the end of the 19th century (e.g. Jacottet 1899-1901: III, 71f, 136f narrative XXV and LVII.); under the Luyi name Lingongole, this mythical character is reminiscent of the Rainbow Snake. It should be distinguished from the Great Forest Snake (Jacottet 1899-1901: iii, 138), who in the modern Nkoya consciousness has become indistinguishable from *Mwenda-Njangula*.

Comparative: The snake / serpent is a feature of mythology everywhere and of all times. I felt justified to claim the presence of a snake Narrative Complex already in the very oldest mythology, that is, included in Pandora's Box.¹⁴ The primordial snake often appears in the form of the Rainbow Serpent (in Australia and archaic Africa; Buchler & Maddock 1978), but this celestial form often has a complement in a terrestrial or aquatic serpent; the celestial and terrestrial / aquatic forms may also coincide, which stands to reason since in many archaic cosmologies there is considerable equivalence between 'the Waters Above' (the sky), 'the Waters Below' (the underworld, Apsu *etc.*), and the Waters 'Aside' of the ordinary life-world, the seas and rivers. The rainbow appears when rain is over (*cf.* *Genesis* 9: 13, after Nūah's Flood) and therefore is the adversary of rain, the harbinger of drought. *Cf.* the Australian

(continued after Fig. 9)

¹⁴ Cf. van Binsbergen 2006a, 2006b.

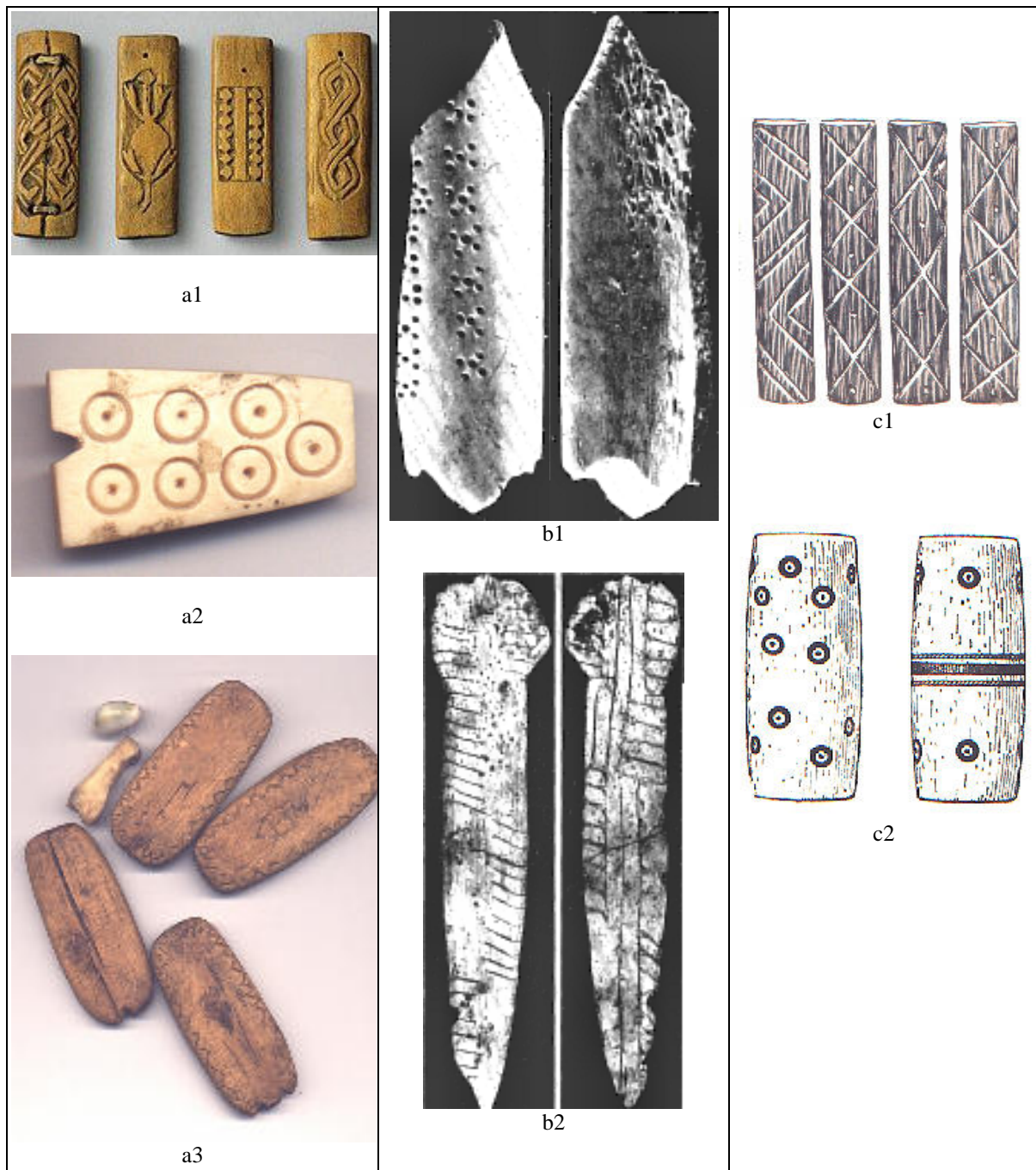


Figure 9. (a) Recent southern African divination tablets, author's collection (a1, commercially acquired wooden set, Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, 1989; a2 item from a commercially acquired set of four, ivory, bought in Limpopo Province, South Africa, 1994, courtesy Dr. Gina Buys); a3, set of a four wooden tablets (with one cowry and one goat's foot bone as peripherals), cut in a sangoma lodge, Francistown, Botswana, 1989 (b) possible divination tablets from Remouchamps Cave, Belgium, Upper Palaeolithic: b1 excavated in 1902 (68.8 mm); b2 excavated in 1970 (72 mm) (both after Dewez 1974); (c) c1, c2 19th century gaming / divining tablets from North America (Culin 1902 / 1975).

notion of drought as the son of Rain, the former seeking to prevent the latter, his father, from falling (Andrews 2000). However, Rain, as Demiurge, in Nkoya cosmology and myth appears, not in a paternal but in a filial role, as bird-like child of a bird-like High God which in recent centuries has been known under the name of Nyambi. I prefer to interpret Shihoka's mythical character not by reference to Pandora's Box, but to much more recent mythical connotations. Shihoka's symbolism is somewhat reminiscent of the West Asian snake symbolism informing such biblical passages as *Genesis* 3 (temptation by and cursing of the snake, causing humans to be evicted from Paradise into the wilderness which by implication is drought-stricken) and *Numbers* 21: 8 (the raising of the brazen snake in the desert). The association of the underworld with cattle is common-place in European mythology (*cf.* Hercules with the cattle of Geryon and of Cacus, but also Pluto's / Hades' association with cattle as the most obvious form of wealth in Indo-European contexts; the association also surfaces in several of Grimm's *Hausmärchen*; Grimm & Grimm 1812-1815 / 1996) – and Shihoka is, among other things, a cattle raider (also see Unilateral being, below). Not only as a conflict between royal siblings of opposite gender, but also in terms of the dry / wet opposition, this conflict is reminiscent of that of Arthur and Morgan. Morgan's name means 'sea-born' (Rhys 1891: 22f, *cf.* 324f), and she, again, is an epiphany of the Mother of the Waters¹⁵ – hence the rightful Lady of Avalon (Rhys 1891: 348), whose position is usurped by male ascendance. According to one version Morgan, too, resorts to the production of an artificial human being to inflict fatal harm upon Arthur. In Shihoka Nalinanga, a specific parallel with Ancient Egypt may be pointed out: the fact that there we have the First-Dynasty King Snake (*W3d*) whose name may also be translated as Green. Moreover Shu [Šw], the ancient Egyptian air-god whose name means Emptiness or Dryness, has a son Geb [Gb], the earth god, – the latter is not himself represented as a snake but displays the chthonic connotations of the snake which are virtually universal; for the Geb motif in sub-Saharan Africa *cf.* Ndigi 1996. Also *cf.* Zmey Gorynych, the dragon of the Slavic mythology; its name is translated as 'Snake son-of-mountain', *cf.* earth / drought; and in Indian mythology: Vṛtra, the drought-causing serpent (Mackenzie 1913). In many mythologies, the opposition wet / dry creates a central dynamism. It is this opposition, in fact, that informs the old Cosmogony of the Separation of Water and Land. Here the senior position is accorded to the aquatic side, 'the Mother of the Waters', who gives birth to the land as the junior component of reality, and who had to do this from a virginal state because there was no other being to impregnate her. In the Nkoya narrative the dry / wet opposition is applied in several ways. 'Snake Child or Parent of Drought', although producing boats, lives in the forest, while his counterpart lives in the flood plain, as the structural exponent of the Mother of the Waters, who in vain claims her privilege of supremacy, after her position has already been redefined from intergeneration (Virgin Mother and Only Child, who becomes her lover) to Elder Sister / Younger Brother – with further humiliation in stock for the Elder Sister. The opposition between Rain and Drought is, however, not just a binary cosmological opposition, but may be interpreted as part of a transformational cycle involving not only fire and water, but also earth, air, metal, and possibly other elements such as aether (*cf.* van Binsbergen 2009 and 2011, where the implied presence of this cycle among the Nkoya is discussed). The suggestion of cyclical transformation around Shihoka Nalinanga has a parallel in Nordic mythology: the rain god Freyr on the day of Ragnarok (the Nordic Apocalypse) will battle without weapons (for he gave his sword away to Skirnir), and will be the first to be killed by the fire giant Surt [a Fire Giant] – again enacting the same scheme of Water being destroyed by Fire. (...) Nick Allen (2010) treats the same essentially cyclical and elemental opposition for Hephaestus (Fire) versus Scamander (Water), and Vṛtra (Drought Serpent) versus Indra (Rain). So at one level the conflict between the siblings is to be explained as the antagonistic interaction between elements within a transformative cycle: 'Water destroys Fire', 'Fire destroys Wood', etc.

5.22. THE UNILATERAL MYTHICAL BEING

Nkoya: Among the Nkoya, Mwenda-Njangula ('Walker of the Height') is a mythical being

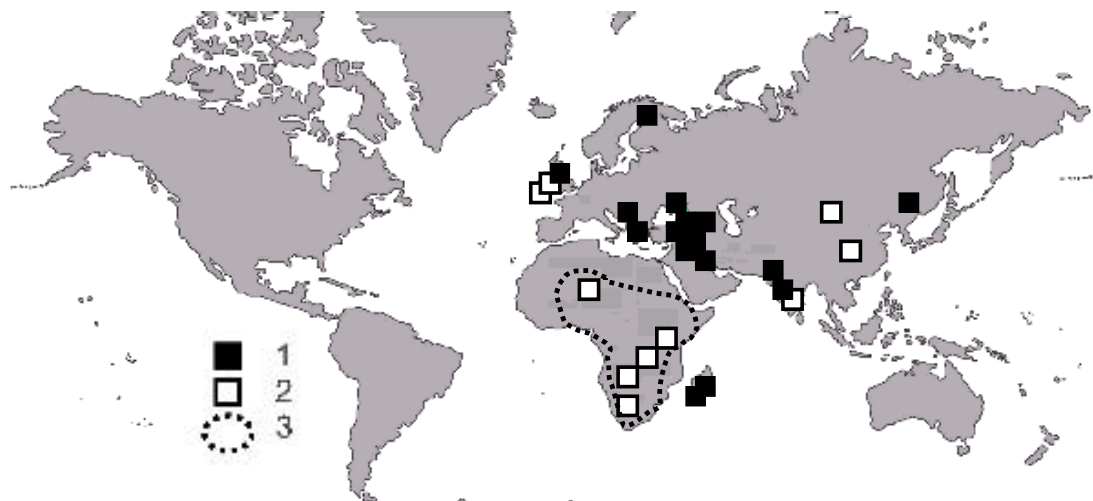
¹⁵ My reconstructions of the prehistory of global mythology (van Binsbergen 2006a, 2006b, 2010; van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011; van Binsbergen with Isaak 2008) postulate, for the Upper Palaeolithic, the succession of two rival cosmogonies: that of the Separation of Water and Land (dominated by the virgin Mother of the Waters who gives birth to the Land as her only son, then makes him her lover), followed after a handful of millennia by that of the Separation of Heaven and Earth.

with only one side to his / her body. One meets Mwenda-Njangula in the forest, and if one is the first to extend a greeting, one will gain great knowledge and riches, but in the alternative case, misfortune, even death. In the narratives which the missionary Jacottet (1899-1901: III, *passim*, and II, 122f) collected in Barotseland by the end of the 19th century, Mwenda-Njangula (and various alternative names), appears as a cattle herder who, every morning, crosses a boundary consisting of a river, where his mother makes a fordable passage.

Comparative: Werner (1933: ch. XIII) has recognised the prominence of this motif in the mythology of Bantu speaking peoples and devotes nearly an entire chapter to it. The mytheme of the unilateral mythical being, whose standard discussion is in von Sicard (1968-1969), has a global distribution of typical Pelasgian shape (cf. van Binsbergen, 2010b, 2010c).

Jacottet (1899-1901) suspected direct Judaeo-Christian influence in Mwenda-Njangula's daily river crossing (cf. Moses' Red Sea crossing, *Exodus* 14: 16) but a more convincing reading of this story is to consider the boundary the one between the underworld and the upper world – such as is also found in Japanese mythology regarding Izanagi's return from the underworld (the Land of Yomi) where, with relief and relish, he leaves his wretched sister-wife Izanami.¹⁶ Throughout the Old World, rivers constitute the abode of the ancestors, in other words, the underworld.

This motif is akin to that of Mwene Manenga testing generosity (...) [van Binsbergen 2010: 182; this is a mytheme from Western Zambia] , and of Jacob wrestling with an unspecified being at the ford of the Jabbok (*Genesis* 32:24); without satisfactory etymology in Afroasiatic including Semitic, this hydronym has a transparent etymology in proto-Bantu *-jàbok-* (Guthrie no. 916), 'to cross river', and is one of the indications of a Niger-Congo presence in the Bronze Age Mediterranean (van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen (...) [2011]). We are in the presence of [a] transformation of the postulated 'Mother of the Waters' here, who especially appears in her capacity of ruler of the underworld – the stream, among other mythical references, marks the boundary between life and death.



1. von Sicard's (1968-1969) attestations of the unilateral figure outside Africa; 2. attestation of the unilateral figure from other sources than von Sicard; 3. generalised extent of von Sicard's numerous African attestations of the unilateral figure; from: van Binsbergen 2010b, with full references.'

Fig. 10. Global distribution of the mytheme of the unilateral mythical being (van Binsbergen 2010b)

When Harald von Sicard, in his world-wide analysis of the unilateral mythical being, notes that it most prominently appears under the name 'Luwe', we have a specific clue to the identity of Kaluwe (Nkoya: 'Luwe Person', *ka-* being a personal singular prefix) and Mwendanjangula. Although the latter name does not follow the syntactic

¹⁶ As told in the Japanese classic *Kojiki*; cf. van Binsbergen 2009.

rules of the Nkoya language, it could be understood in Nkoya as ‘Who Walks on High’ (Nkoya: *kuyenda*, ‘to go’, *ngula*, ‘top’). The unilateral features generally attribute to Mwendanjangula in South Central Africa including Nkoyaland, also attach to the widespread Luwe name. This also implies near-identities between the female deities Ncungani and Kanohaha – indistinguishable in the sculpture, but according to the accompanying exegesis marked by different extremities, a serpentine lower body versus a fishtail.

‘5.7. A FLOOD AND TOWER COMPLEX; 1. THE TOWER INTO HEAVEN

Nkoya: The Nkoya, Mbwela, Ila, and Kaonde, of Western Zambia, have the myth that a royal Kapesh¹⁷ Kamunungampanda (‘The *Kapesh* – understood to be a vertical structure – Joining Forked Branches’, or ‘Joining with a Sibling ‘ let the people build a tower to bring the moon down from heaven, so that it could serve as a royal pendant for the royal child; the tower collapsed and the nations were dispersed.¹⁸ Almost the same story was recorded for Barotseland, Mbunda, Bena-Lulua, Kiokwe, Kanioka and Rozwe of Zimbabwe (*cf.* Rotse of Zambia?) by Frobenius (1931: 166f – in the Zimbabwe case the emphasis is on immortality through the royal pendant, *cf.* Frazer 1918 as mentioned above; Jensen 1932: 76). This myth is also told for the Bemba of Zambia (Roberts 1973) and for Mozambique (Feldman 1963); Willis (1994: 273) perceives a belt of tower myths in Africa from Angola via Zimbabwe to Mozambique (*e.g.* the Tonga or Tsonga, Frobenius 1954: *Märchentext* 1). Among the Nkoya’s northern neighbours the Luba, the tower was allegedly built by the Rainbow Serpent, waging war on the sky king (Reefe 1981). This is almost identical to the Pare version from Tanzania (van der Sluijs n.d.). It also comes close to the story told among the Nkoya’s close Western neighbours (Luyi / Lozi, Subiya; Jacottet 1899-1901; Jalla 1903), where Nyambi and his wife Nasilele flee from their original dwelling on earth along a spider’s web, pursued by humans whom they fear; the humans build a tower to continue their pursuit, trying to kill Nyambi, but in vain because the tower collapsed, followed by the confusion of nations and tongues. Among the Boni or Sania, near Lamu, Kenya, Indian Ocean coast, such confusion is attributed, not to the flood, but to a famine (van der Sluijs n.d.). Among the Chokwe (originally a few hundred kms North-West of the Nkoya, now also in their near vicinity) mention is made of a Kaposhi clan, with owl and nightjar as their totem (both highly speckled birds; see the footnote below on Heracles and Hera), and reputed to have been one of the oldest clans, and one that enslaved others for their ritual building projects (Matthe 2003).

Comparative: Like the stairs and the bridge, the tower is also among the common symbols of shamanism, with its imagery of the shaman travelling between upper world, ordinary life world and underworld (Eliade 1968). In order to perceive the relation between the Tower myth and the Flood myth (see next mytheme), it is useful to define the widespread model of the Standard Elaborate Flood Myth (*cf.* Smith 1873 (first decipherment of Babylonian flood text); Frazer 1916, 1918; Dundes 1988; Isaak 2006 (hundred of flood stories summarised, with bibliography); Dang Nghiem Van 1993; Lewis 2006; Walker 1976; Marler & Dexter 2003; van Dijk 1983; Witzel 2010; van Binsbergen with Isaak 2008):

1. The cosmic order is provisionally established, including humans, but Heaven and Earth still merge, or are at least still connected through a tower, ladder, pole, thongs, ropes, *etc.*
2. humans commit a transgression (sorcery, murder, eating from forbidding fruit, dis-

¹⁷ Kapesh has no convincing etymology in Nkoya or other Bantu languages. Considering that the best known flood stories are from the Ancient Near East and especially the *Tanach*, it is relevant that קפֿש *qpš* occurs in Biblical Hebrew as the capering movement of a fleeing deer – semantically unconvincing although a swaggering gait has been associated with kingship (Graves 1988). Semantically and phonologically a perfect fit offers the Indo-Aryan form **-gabhasti-*, ‘forked carriage pole, hand’ (Starostin & Starostin 1998-2008, ‘Indo-European etymology’; de Vries 1958 *s.v.* ‘gaffel’), which also reminds us of chariot technology as the main mechanism of spread of the Pelasgian package from the Middle to Late Bronze Age on.

¹⁸ Gender is not expressed by syntactic means; by projection of today’s conditions Kapesh’s gender is assumed to have been male, perhaps doing violence to the original story (*cf.* van Binsbergen 1992).

- covery of sexuality in general, more specifically incest, *etc.*)
3. the connection between Heaven and Earth is severed, and humankind is destroyed by a flood
 4. usually by the intercession of a (or the) divine being, there are one or more flood survivors, whose main task is to repopulate the earth; a typical mytheme here is that of the twin siblings who survive the flood and repopulate the world incestuously (*cf.* Katete and Luhamba; *cf.* Egyptian Shu and Tefnut, Greek Apollo and Artemis, and Dogon Nommo among the West African Dogon) – note the parallel with the discovery of sexuality, murder and incest (2)
 5. renewed humankind attempts to reconnect to Heaven with the various natural, personal and ritual devices listed above – especially a tower
 6. in the process the confusion of nations occurs – a multitude of ethnic and language groups emerge.

However, among the twentieth-century Nkoya, the Flood motif appears to be absent and the very central tower mytheme is completely divorced from the Flood motif. In the Nkoya version the defiance of the sky king is strictly speaking absent (although it is also a form of *hubris* to try and bring the moon down), but such defiance is central to the Luba version. The latter is very close to the Nimrod myth (*Genesis* 12). Greek mythology knew the Aloadae, Giant twin brothers who tried to overthrow Zeus, seeking access to heaven by stacking major mountains on top of one another (*Ilias* V, 385, *Odyssea* XI 305; Pindarus, *Pythian Ode* IV, 89; Apollodorus *Bibliotheca* I, 7. § 4; Atsma 2000-2010). In Phoenicia, Astarte / Astaroth, was known as ‘Lady Tower’, town goddess of Sidon, Tyre, and Byblos – she wears a tower as a crown (*cf.* Greek / Phrygian / Arabian / Egyptian Rhea, Tyche, Cybele, Allat, Hathor); she is a Mother of the Waters (Athirat). In South China the Flood-associated tower takes the form of a ladder (Willis 1994: 93f); the ladder is also conspicuous in Egyptian (Seth) and Hebrew (Jacob) myth, but without clear Flood connotations. The making of a rope of arrows for going from earth to heaven is called a characteristic [Native] American motif by Fontenrose (1980: 513 n. 40).

5.8. A FLOOD AND TOWER COMPLEX 2. THE FLOOD

Nkoya: Again, among the twentieth-century Nkoya, the Flood motif appears to be totally absent and the Tower motif is no longer understood as connected with the Flood. We do not need to accept this lacuna as definitive. Namafe (2006) and Kamuwang[a] (2007), hailing from Western Zambia themselves, claim that there is a Lozi flood myth – which stands to reason, because the annual transhumance of the royal household in response to the annual Zambezi flooding is a central theme in Lozi society – whose musical and ceremonial life is largely in the hands of Nkoya specialists. Having demonstrably merged with Lozi mythology on other motifs (*e.g.* Mulambwa; the unilateral being), against the background of a shared court language and court culture, one can hardly assume Nkoya mythology to have been impervious to Lozi flood myths, if the Nkoya did not yet have them in the first place. But it is thinkable that the Flood motif was deliberately rejected by the Nkoya in the course of the last hundred years because it was recognised to be associated, no longer with the remotest past, but with the hated Lozi as dwellers of the Zambezi flood plain. Geographically, culturally and linguistically close to the Nkoya, are also the Luvale and Chokwe; and Mwene (Ruler) Manenga features extensively in Nkoya traditions as in those of Luvale and Chokwe. Among the latter the following localised Flood myth was recorded: ‘A Queen named Mwene Manenga sought food and shelter in a village. She was refused, and when she reproached the villagers for their selfishness, they said, in effect, “What can you do about it”? So she began a slow incantation, and on the last long note, the whole village sank into the ground, and water flowed into the depression, forming what is now Lake Dilolo.’ When the village’s headman returned from the hunt and saw what had happened to his family, he drowned himself in the lake (Vitaliano 1973: 164-165; Kelsen 1988: 136; Isaak 2006 no. 47). Meanwhile, in Jalla’s versions collected in Western Zambia at the end of the 19th century (Jalla 1903: Appendix, pp. 319f; 1909; 1921; *cf.* Bouchet 1922; Rooke 1980) selected elements of the Standard Elaborate Flood Myth are included, still in such a way that at first glance one is not aware that a flood myth is involved.¹⁹ Nyambi and his first human creatures (especially the male Kamunu) live in each

¹⁹ In Feldman 1963 this myth is erroneously attributed to Mozambique.

others' proximity, Kamunu engages in a series of transgressions for which relatively mild punishment is meted out by Nyambi, until the latter finally, after crossing a great river, withdraws to Heaven along a spider's thread, after which humankind each morning humbly greets the rising sun in an attempt at a ritual re-connection of Heaven and Earth.²⁰ Deeply implied in the Lozi story seems to be a reference to the discovery of sexuality as a central transgression – in line with the Standard Elaborate Flood Myth, whose other elements we also detect: initial merging, later separation and partial re-connection of Heaven and Earth, the flood (here reduced to a great river, and no longer explicitly destructive, but what could be worse than God's withdrawal from Earth?). Significant other elements however are left out: destruction by flood, and the confusion of nations – which however surfaces in other local accounts. (...)'

6. Discussion

Much of the comparative context of Mwendanjangula, Kaluwe, and their serpentine and fishtail wives Ncunguni and Kanohaha – the Mother of Twins and the Mother of Royal Ancestors – has already been given above.

Ultimately, the snake connotations of the two senior male divinities (who, once more, may be two aspects of the same unilateral being) go back to the Middle Palaeolithic, pre-Out-of-Africa Exodus (i.e. in 'Pandora's Box' – humankind's common cultural heritage from pre-Exodus Africa). To these must be added, in a feedback movement, the transformations which this primal mytheme from Pandora's Box has undergone inside Asia prior to re-transmission of the results of these transformation back into Africa in the course of the Back-into-Africa Migration from c. 15 ka BP. One aspect of this Back-into-Africa Migration is the Pelasgian expansion from the Late Bronze Age, along the cross-model, into the Mediterranean and Western Europe; into Northern Europe; across the Eurasian Steppe into South Asia, South East Asia, East Asia, and even Oceania; and – most important in the present context – into sub-Saharan Africa. Despite the preponderance of sub-Saharan attestations of the Mwendanjangula / Luwe character, it is my contention (for the supportive argument see van Binsbergen 2010b) that the unilateral being is in origin West Asian from the Neolithic or Bronze Age, and only secondarily arrived in sub-Saharan Africa on the wings of the Pelasgian expansion.

A similar argument applies to the serpentine and fishtail goddesses Ncunguni and Kanohaha. Mythical characters with both aquatic and serpentine aspects are numerous in world mythology, and it would be ludicrous to try and link them all in one overarching scheme. However, those with a human head and torso but with serpentine ex-

²⁰ Nyambi is attended not only by a spider but also by a wagtail bird (*Motacilla capensis*), which opens up an interesting comparative angle. In the main Japanese creation myth virtually the same bird (*Motacilla grandis*) showed the first creatures Izanami and Izanagi how to engage in sexual intercourse by the suggestive, incessant up and down movements of its tail, after which it is named in several linguistic contexts, e.g. in English and Dutch (*Kojiki*, cf. Philippi 1977; van Binsbergen 2009b). It is as if the wagtail in the Western Zambian story signals that, implicitly, we are in the presence of a Flood caused by the invention of sexuality. *We hit here upon a controversial but logical and crucial implication of the idea of transcontinental continuities: if the latter can be taken for a fact, then in principle well-attested, studied and understood symbolic relationships in one location may be used to illuminate less explicit similar relationships in another location belonging to the same complex, even though in another continent – not just on the basis of a formal typological similarity and an appeal to inherent convergent properties of the mind of Anatomically Modern Humans, but on the basis of real historical cognateship between cultural forms with a common origin.* This methodological claim is basic to my work in the field of comparative mythology, geomantic divination, transformative cycles of elements, astronomical nomenclature etc.

tremities are rather more specific, and seem to constitute a genetic historical cluster. The serpentine extremities have counterparts in Pelasgian-associated contexts of Ancient Greece (Cecrops, Erichthonios, at Athens) and China (the culture heroes and flood heroes Fu Xi 伏羲 and Nu Wa 女媧). The latter were apparently only paired to constitute a couple in the late first millennium CE under the Han dynasty. Elsewhere (van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011) I have suggested that Fu Xi and Nu Wa each have a counterpart in Western Eurasia – the Greek sea god Posei[dōn] and the Biblical flood hero Nuaḥ, respectively. The names of both these mythical figures can be interpreted by reference to etymologies that go back at least 10,000 years to macrophyla level; there are indications of cognates to the name and character Nuaḥ all over the Old and perhaps even the New World. According to the controversial Assyriologist Temple (1976)²¹ the connection between Erichthonius and Fu Xi, in space and time, is, quite plausibly, the Sumerian mythical figure Oannes (cf. Cory 1832; Smith 1873), likewise alleged to combine an aquatic nature with the status of culture hero. Also the Mesopotamian water god Ea / Enki is depicted with serpentine feet. In Europe there is the widespread mythical character of Melusine, who may have either a fishtail or serpentine legs.²² In the Ancient Near East, Apsu, Tiāmat, Yam, Leviathān, Apep, are aquatic, usually female, and often serpentine evocations of primordial chaos, which has to be conquered by a male celestial or solar god (Marduk, Ba^cal, Jhwh etc.) before, cosmogonically, order is established.²³

All this suggests the existence of a substrate belief in a combined aquatic and serpentine primal being with cosmogonic connotations, traces of which are to be found all over the Old World including sub-Saharan Africa, and going back to the Upper Pa-

²¹ Temple (1976) invoked the intervention of extraterrestrial civilisation to account for the myth of Oannes at the onset of the Sumerian civilisation, and for the alleged superior knowledge of the Dogon concerning the composite nature of the star Orion – probably nothing but a red herring, based on Gri-aule & Dieterlen’s mishandling of Dogon ethnography and mythology (van Beek 1992; Clifford 1988), and its subsequent New Age misappropriation, in combination with the fact that knowledge of the composite nature of Orion goes back to Bessel and his contemporaries towards the middle of the 19th century, and that Dogon awareness on this point could easily be attributed to a terrestrial European civilisation, given the existence, between 1850 and 1930, of astronomical expeditions into West Africa, and the general circulation of astronomical knowledge among educated Europeans visiting that part of the world. A strong argument for this view is the number of satellites that, in the same kind of argument, is spuriously attributed to the prodigal astronomical knowledge of West Africans: nearly a dozen, which does not reflect the actual number (of several dozens) now upheld by state-of-the art astronomy, but merely the consensus among North Atlantic professional astronomers around 1900.

²² Skeat 1866; Ashliman 1998-2011.

²³ Largely on the basis of a passage in Apollonius Rhodius’ *Argonauts* (Seaton 1912), and moreover by an extrapolation of Orphic themes, Graves (1964) in his controversial though influential collection of Greek myths, gives a rendering of what he terms ‘the Pelasgian creation myth’, involving the Mother of the Waters and the Snake, Ophion – in which long-range comparative mythologists may see the celestial Rainbow Serpent which apparently goes back to Pandora’s Box. Although it is considered good manners among classicists to ostracise Graves for his amateur etymologies and his many inaccuracies, I have found many of his long-range suggestions pertinent and helpful. My own Pelasgian model, somewhat inspired by Graves, sees the emergence of an extensive package of cultural traits in West Asia in the Neolithic or Early Bronze Age, its further development and expansion towards the Mediterranean in the course of the Bronze Age, and its spread in all four directions according to the ‘cross model’, into Western and Northern Europe; into East, South and South East Asia with extensions into Oceania; and into sub-Saharan Africa. What links the Ancient Mesopotamian, Ancient Egyptian, Ancient Greek, Chinese and sub-Saharan African serpentine and fish-tailed divinities, is in fact this Pelasgian heritage.

laeolithic. In the Ancient Near East, Ancient Greece and Western Europe, serpentine and fish-like characteristics appear to be interchangeable, and so may be the gender attributed to this category of beings, so that the substrate belief may also take the form of anthropomorphic beings with a fish tail, often female (giving rise to mermaid beliefs all over the Old World including sub-Saharan Africa), but also male (Oannes, Dagon, Arvite Ba'al, Ketos, Matsya, Dea Syria, etc.).

Particular mention should be made of a series of female goddesses extending from West Africa into West Asia, and comprising such names as: Neith, Anahita, Athena, Anit, Anath, Anatu, Antinea, Inanna, Uttu. Whereas the goddesses corresponding with these names, in historical times have been described in terms of virginal virtuousness, domesticity and female arts such as weaving, they often combined these traits with martial virtues. In my analysis, they are late transformations of the Mother of the Primal Waters, deprived of their cosmogonic powers and of their control over the waters by later, male gods, and relegated to the women's chamber. Some have spider connotations (e.g. Athena, Uttu, Anahita), and it is here that we may see a link with the West African and Nkoya high god Nyambi – whose name assonates with that of the other goddesses in this category.

Among the Nkoya of Kabompo district, near the major rivers Zambezi and Kabompo, an aquatic dimension to their mythology is highlighted in the person of Likambi Shihoka's sister and adversary, situated in the Zambezi flood plain, while Shihoka himself was claimed to possess not only many heads of cattle but also many boats. The Nkoya of Kaoma, however, live at the Zambezi / Kafue watershed, where surface waters still dominate mythical and social topography, but where major bodies of water are absent. For most present-day Nkoya this aquatic quality of their major goddesses is no longer consciously realised. By contrast, among the neighbouring Tonga there is still a vivid awareness of the river god Nyami Nyami, though to be of serpentine or dragon shape.



Fig. 11. Serpentine Cecrops, the 'autochthonous' (presumably 'Pelasgian') king of Athens, as depicted on an Athenian vase of the type called red-figure kylix, 5th B.C., Antikensammlung, Berlin

Against this background, the serpentine / fishtail connotations of the Nkoya goddesses Ncunguni and Kanohaha take on transcontinental dimensions. This background also

supports the idea that Ncunguni and Kanohaha have much in common and may be interchangeable. South Central Africa, even Southern Africa²⁴ turns out to share in an extensive cultural substrate cosmology revolving on primal aquatic and serpentine gods, with roots at least in the Eurasian Upper Palaeolithic, and probably largely mediated to sub-Saharan Africa in the course of the southward expansion of the Pelasgian cultural package from West Asia and the Mediterranean, from the Late Bronze Age onward (van Binsbergen 2010a, 2010c, 2011c; van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011).

Bernard (2009: 224 f) pays ample attention to Mwendanjangula, and in addition to her own present-day fieldwork brings up a treasure of information from the older literature on Southern African ethnography: Callaway 1884 / 1970; Berglund 1989, etc. In Southern Africa the link between aquatic divinities and the treatment of spirit possession is far more explicit than among the Nkoya. In the former region many diviners claim to spend weeks or months under water at the end of their training period; Bernard (2009) takes these claims seriously, and literally – which is one of our points of disagreement. In the less aquatic context of the Nkoya of Kaoma, a long, solitary stay in the deep forest seems to be the equivalent. *Mashawe* as a major cult of affliction has spread not only in Zimbabwe but also in Western Zambia, but the association with the mermaid (*njuzu*) which Bernard notes (2009: 216) has never been made explicit to me in the Nkoya context, except recently in connection with our artefact. These and similar correspondences suggest that our artefact, and perhaps the attending cults of affliction, owe much to Southern Africa, so that any stylistic parallels to our artefact should also be primarily sought there. From the late 19th c. CE onward, labour migration to capitalist workplaces (mines, farms) in Southern Africa constituted a major innovative influence on life in Western Zambia, also in the religious sphere: most witchcraft-eradication movements, of stronger or lesser Christian signature, and including the Citawala / Watchtower movement, were mainly transmitted north from Southern Africa by returning migrations.

Meanwhile a further comparative perspective is invited by the theonym Kaluwe, ‘Luwe-Person’. Against the dazzling, African and transcontinental comparative perspective opened by von Sicard (1968-1969) we are justified to interpret this name in terms of the unilateral Luwe character, whom he shows to be an ancient ‘hunting / cattle / weather / metallurgical god’ distributed all over the Old World. The very complexity of these four associations, referring to modes of production (hunting-gathering, animal husbandry, perhaps agriculture, and metallurgical petty commodity production) that are very different from each other and that, with one exception (hunting-gathering) have relatively recent, Neolithic or even Bronze Age, connotations. This is one of the reasons why I consider the unilateral being, despite its extensive sub-Saharan African distribution, yet of extra-African, West Asian origin, spreading into sub-Saharan Africa from the Late Bronze Age onward.

On closer scrutiny the complementarity of Mwendanjangula and Kaluwe on our artefact may mean more than just an instance of recursive interchangeability. My exten-

²⁴ Cf. Bernard 2009. I had the honour and pleasure of being the external examiner of Mrs Bernard’s PhD thesis at Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa; although we were initially radically opposed on matters of field method and ethics, I have greatly welcomed the opportunity to come in touch with her impressive erudition concerning Southern African traditional cosmologies and cults.

sive global comparison of leopard-skin symbolism (van Binsbergen 2003, 2004) led me to postulate, for various parts of the Old World in the Bronze Age, what I have called ‘the cosmology of the lion and the leopard’; its main features are set out in Fig. 12.

	features	species	
		lion	leopard
empirical details	(skin) pattern	homogenous	patterned, variegated
	(skin) colour	sandy	black, red, white
	social life	social	solitary
	hunting technique	group attacks by females for the benefit of ruling male	solitary
	hierarchy	marked within lions pride	individual freedom
	mating pattern	polygynous	single-partner or polyandrous
	lexical designation	*-lw-	*prg / *prd
	gender	female / male	male / female
	anatomy	right? side of the body	left? side of the body
	ecological aspect	Master of Animals, herder	
	paraphernalia (cf. utensils, weapons)	lion skin	leopard skin
	specific animal associations	cattle; goat; boar; ram; antelope, deer, bull	
	overall symbolic connotations	Sacred Outsider / Exalted Insider	Exalted Insider / Sacred Outsider
	religious manifestation	Luwe, Lund, etc.	Mwali, etc.
symbolic connotations	spirituality	transcendentalist	immanentalist
	number	five	four
	power	senior	junior
	utensils, weapons	club, spear, axe, double axe, boat, suspending bridge, rope ladder, black-smithing utensils (thongs, hammer, bellows, furnace)	
	social strategies	overt force	covert cunning, stealth
	hemerology	day	night
	rhythm of life	continuous, everyday	concentrated moments of trance, divination, ecstasy
	cosmology	heaven, the atmosphere, the weather	earth, underworld
	astronomical manifestation (1)	meridian, zenith, and noon celestial axis and pole	N. circumpolar region, the revolting sky, nadir.
	astronomical manifestations (2)	daylight, sky at noon, sun	midnight, night-sky, stars
astronomical manifestations (3)	sun	moon	

After leopard symbolism had become binary and had subsequently shifted from a ungulate complement to the lion as complement, the lion/leopard pair was symbolically elaborated into a fully-fledged cosmology encompassing most aspects of the human experience, as tabulated here. The point is merely to render plausible the claim that, together, this pair constitutes a world view whose structure has enabled Neolithic and Bronze Age communities in Asia, Africa and Europe to articulate fundamental concepts of production, power and identity in the form of a dialogue of natural symbols. If the ancient cosmology looked more or less like this, it constituted a coherent pattern of meaning and action that could capture human minds and offer them enduring symbols.

Fig. 12. The Old World Bronze Age ‘cosmology of the lion and the leopard’ (van Binsbergen 2004: 127).

On this basis we may surmise that the complementarity between Kaluwe and Mwendanjangula as in our artefact and in the ritual complex of cults of afflictions in which it used to be applied, is not one of horizontal equality, but one between a senior divinity with ‘lion’ connotations as listed in Fig. 12 (e.g. heaven, daylight, transcendence, overt exercise of power) and a junior divinity with ‘leopard’ connotations, i.e. earth, darkness, immanence, stealth. In line with In many Bantu languages, although not in Nkoya, the lexical root *-lw* is in fact reserved for the lion, in transcontinental lexical continuity (van Binsbergen 2003) with other linguistic macrophyla such as Eurasiatic – also known as Nostratic, the macrophylum that comprises most language phyla of Eurasia including Indo-European, Altaic, Uralic, Dravidian, Kartvelian, Dravidian, Chukchee-Kamchatkan and Eskimo, and with which specialists like Kaiser and Sheveroshkin (1988) see African macrophyla like Niger-Congo constitute ‘super-Nostratic’. Admittedly, Kammerzell (1994) has identified the complementary lexical root with ‘speckled/leopard’ connotations as **prd/*prg*. While **-lw* clearly underlies the name Kaluwe, some of the nomenclatural equivalents extensively listed by von Sicard (1968-1969) do display the complementary root **prd/*prg*, e.g. the well-known Southern African High God name *Mwali* < **m-l-[]* < **prg*. In this light the common Nkoya interpretation of the name Mwendanjangula as ‘You Walk on High’ is likely to be a mere popular etymology, underneath of which another variant of the ‘speckled/leopard’ semantics may hide: *njangula* < **m-g-l* < **m-l-g* < **prg*.

However, we must not overlook an essential reversion in the application of these ideas in the present case. Whatever the possible leopard symbolism implied highly in this conjectural etymology, the Mwendanjangula of our artefact has celestial connotations and for good reasons occupies the top register of Side IV of our artefact, whereas Kaluwe, whatever his the possible lion connotations, occupies the lower, presumably terrestrial register. Kaluwe is apparently the junior male god, the demiurge comparable (perhaps identical) with Mvula – the Rain God, who with his life-bringing fluid mediates between Heaven and humans. Since we are dealing with the vestiges of what is no longer a living transcendental worldview, and both male deities have been demonised and largely merged today, such a reversion should not surprise us. But admittedly, it mars the systematics of my analysis.



*Fig. 13. An ivory plaque (restored) from the Mal'ta site, Central Asian Upper Palaeolithic: one of the likely contexts where we may situate the early phases of the disintegration of *Borean. Note how the (presumably dry-land) serpentine depictions on the verso side (right) complement the, presumably, watery symbols on the recto side – apparently, to the considerable extent to which Niger-Congo (> Bantu>Nkoya) belongs to the *Borean realm (cf. van Binsbergen 2011a; van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011), the themes we are dealing with in the present paper are transcontinental and of great antiquity.*



Fig. 14. A modern African depiction of the Mami Wata aquatic fishtailed goddess

7. Inchoate, largely implicit, local ritual process, or a coherent, submerged ancient cosmology?

Our artefact invites us to apply specific insights in long-range continuities in space and time which earlier, comparative research has helped us to formulate.

For someone like myself, who for forty years has studied, and intensively participated in, Nkoya society and religion, our artefact and its interpretation come as a great surprise.

In the second half of the 20th century CE, the Nkoya displayed in many respects the traits which Victor Turner described for the Ndembu Lunda (Turner 1957, 1967, 1968, 1969), culturally and linguistically closely related to the Nkoya, and situated at only a few hundred kilometres' distance from Kaoma district: a society where pre-conquest social, political and religious structures to a considerable can still be found to be in place, but (given effective incorporation in the colonial and postcolonial state) in a rather eroded, virtualised and folklorised form. Moreover, along with most significant ethnographers of Zambia in the 1940s-70s, Turner belonged to Max Gluckman's Manchester School of social anthropology (cf. van Binsbergen 2008). It was one of the tenets of this school that social structure does not exist *sui generis*, as a complete and ready script to be merely enacted by the social actors, but arises transactionally from the interactions and political struggles of the actors in the minutiae of the local social process. In the Manchester concept of South Central African society one does not expect time-honoured explicit cosmologies, pantheons and institutionalised modes of ritual behaviour, but inchoate rival improvisations about the forms and meanings of actual, varied and shifting, ritual practices. The meaning of central ritual themes such as the *muyombo* tree which features in female puberty rites, is largely implied, underground, rhizomatic, and can only be brought to light by a personal intellectual struggle of the ethnographer, a forms of symbolic detective work in which the analyst's own powers of imagination and of symbolisation have to fertilise what little explicit meaning can be gather from the rare verbalisations²⁵ of the local actors

²⁵ Also in my study of the Nkoya, I struck on the hermetic, multi-layered, archaic nature of song texts, ritual formulae and praise names, for which there was usually no exegesis, no metatext, and which usu-

themselves. Hence ritual – if it is at all considered within the Manchester discourse – is seen as the very *production* of inchoate and ephemeral symbols, meanings and sociability, not as the mere *enactment* of pre-existing, fixed meanings and symbols by a group already fully shaped in institutionalised form.

As a result the geographical and temporal horizon could be maintained in analysis in almost the same narrow local form (dictated by the fieldwork requirements of intensive face-to-face contact over a longer period) as it was constructed during intensive participatory fieldwork: the ethnographer could make some allowance for some local influence of the state, the modern economy, world religions, labour migrations etc., but, against this ethnographic paradigm, *it was literally unthinkable that transregional, let alone transcontinental connections might have decisively influenced the local ritual scene*. Thus by the 1960s, when I started my career as an Africanist fieldworker, we had the situation that French and Belgian anthropologists, working in West Africa, Rwanda and Congo, and missionaries writing on Southern Africa, for their own respective regions of research reported African mythologies and cosmologies which in the Manchester-dominated ethnography of South Central Africa, even though genetically, demographically and linguistically close to Congo and Southern Africa, never captured the anthropologists' attention, were never allowed to surface, and apparently did not even exist.

Studying Nkoya cults of affliction in the early 1970s against this theoretical and methodological paradigm, and in close collaboration with members of the Manchester School into whose fold I was soon to be received as Simon Professor at the University of Manchester (1979-1980), I found what I had been made to expect: a fragmented ritual system, where the time-honoured ancestral cult with its strong moral overtones had no longer the grip on the village community it might have had in the recent past (19th century), and where instead an alien idiom of cults of affliction had come to dominate the ritual scene – eclipsing older notions such as transgression, sin, taboo and kinship obligation, and largely supplanting them by an a-moral worldview where misfortune was attributed not to personal transgression but to anonymous contagion brought by chance from remote areas, especially from the East (Central Zambia, beyond which perhaps the Indian Ocean coast was vaguely perceived) – in a reflection of the anonymous process of political and economic transformation marked by the advent of long-distance trade and slave raiding (soon to be replaced by capitalism, world religions, and the modern bureaucratic state). Since the cults I was studying apparently came from far and thus could be held to be devoid from local meaning and anchorage, as an ethnographer I did not expect to find persistent local traits in these cults. The furtive, flimsy concepts of contagious, diagnosis and healing which I found among the cult leaders and their patients, were largely self-referential: they did not appeal to a pantheon or a pre-existing world view that had also informed social organisation and political life, but instead referred to an endless, recursive reproduction

ally eluded even native speakers of Nkoya and born members of Nkoya society (van Binsbergen 1992). By contrast, artefacts and shrines have a concrete, given material physical form, they invite socially observable practices, and such practices inevitably give rise to social control and verbalisation. Thus – as I was already to learn during my first historico-ethnographic fieldwork on religion, in Tunisia in the late 1960s – these material ritual objects at least somewhat limit the flight of individual interpretation and invention. Material objects thus have a powerful focussing and retention effect on such religious concepts and ideas as would otherwise, being in themselves outside the world of the senses, leave enormous room for individual bricolage.

of the initial cultic moment: the patient whom an initiated diviner-healer can bring to dance to the song and melody of one particular affliction spirit, is initiated as an adept of that spirit, and on that basis has all she or he needs to bring other patients to the same diagnosis and healing – the *cult of affliction* is essentially organised, and expands, along the same line as the Tupperware party or pyramid investment games. Occasionally, and in isolated, disconnected fragments, I heard about the unilateral mythical being Mwendanjangula, whom one might encounter in the deep forest in an encounter that would spell riches and success, or death and doom for the human involved. Especially healers were reported to have had such encounters. However, in the 1910s Kaoma district had come under the influence of Christian missions, and half a century later the deep forest (still highly frequented by Nkoya hunters – today hunting has become a thing of the past) was considered the realm, not primarily of Mwendanjangula but of Nyambi, the High God, *Nyambi balengile bitondo na bantu* ‘who made the trees and the human beings’, but for whom there was no longer any detectable cult except in the socially highly regarded context of Christianity. The forest that, apparently, was once Mwendanjangula’s is now Nyambi’s. The parallelism between Nyambi and Mwendanjangula goes to the extent that for Nkoya Christians *Nyambi ya Ngula*, ‘God the most High’ is a common expression. Decades later I began to realise (e.g. Wastiau 1997) that Nyambi had been involved in a process of constant expansion across West Africa during the past few centuries, and that, like American food crops such as maize and cassava, she or he (the Nkoya language has no gender distinctions) was decidedly a newcomer on the Nkoya scene. I had scarcely an inkling as to what had preceded Nyambi, and although I made an intensive study of Nkoya oral traditions, these had by that time already been so filtered by Christian orthodoxy that their pre-Christian local religious and mythical content was very scanty and had to be reconstructed with great care, against the background of scanty missionary and governmental records of the late 19th and early 20th century CE. Here the virtual absence of local religious and artistic artefacts proved an enormous handicap – the iconoclasm of witchcraft eradication movements of the early to middle 20th century had virtually denuded the countryside of meaningful artefacts that could have served as concrete, visible and tangible foci of memory, meaning and tradition.

Thus, although the inspiration for my work on comparative mythology came largely from my decades of Nkoya fieldwork, I could only begin to interpret the scanty Nkoya data once I had gained additional access to very extensive African and transcontinental comparative data from very different provenances than Nkoyaland. And it was only my increased access (as a member of the Study Group on Religion and Magic in the Ancient Near East, Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study, 1994-1995) to the transcontinental comparative data from the Ancient Near East and Ancient Egypt, that allowed me to steer away from the localism and presentism of my initial approach to Nkoya ethnohistory (of which van Binsbergen 1992 is the most extensive statement), and to see Nkoya myth no longer as coded statements on Early Modern local history, but as distorted mythical echoes from provenances extremely remote from Nkoyaland in both space and time (van Binsbergen 2010).

Against this background our present artefact is a real eye-opener. It forces me to question, once more (cf. van Binsbergen 2003), the validity of anthropological fieldwork as a strategy of transcultural knowledge formation. It now looks as if my specific paradigmatic position in the early 1970s (coupled to my initially, inevitably, very limited knowledge of Nkoya culture and language) prevented me from entering pro-

foundly and existentially into the world of *bituma* and other such cults. Yet I am convinced that, in daily contact with and as an adoptive member of, a family of gifted healers highly active in these cults, and as personal sponsor of cult sessions in my own right, my knowledge of these cults was no less than that of other non-specialists who were born Nkoya.

Having accepted the prevailing local view (which was in accordance with White 1949) that these cults of affliction were foreign, I probed insufficiently into the conceptual and cosmological ways in which they were accommodated within Nkoya society. I assumed, at the time, that their local adoption was merely based on the principle that local people now started to do new ritual things in order to cope with new conceptions of power and community, based on new political and economic conditions. No doubt, my Marxist orientation at the time persuaded me to rush for the analytical, *etic*, distancing, structural, political economy explanation (van Binsbergen 1981; for early criticism of this approach, cf. Fernandez 1978), and thus to fall victim to theoretically-inspired reductionism, before I had the full and profound local picture at the *emic* level.

If the exegesis of our present artefact is anything to go by, the cults of affliction were not so alien as all that, and the conceptual and ritual apparatus with which they were accommodated within Nkoya society was far from being totally alien, novel and fragmentary. On the contrary, it consisted of the mobilisation of a very ancient substrate layer of beliefs and practices, predicated on a genuine, elaborate cosmology and cosmogony which far from being merely implied and inchoate, had been a vital source of sacred existential meaning, not only locally and recently, but throughout the Old World, and already for millennia. The one-sided emphasis on the novelty and alienness of cults of affliction in Zambia (van Binsbergen 1981) risked to obscure fundamental regional continuity: undoubtedly new cults were coming in from the east, undoubtedly prototypes of such cult can be found across the Indian Ocean especially in popular Buddhism, yet the earlier cults of affliction they supplanted may not have been totally ancestral and without reference to a High God, or else the appeal to a exalted divinities in the context of the modern cults of affliction, as our artefact indicates, cannot be understood.

Moreover, as our artefact with its associated meanings now drives home, divination in context of the Western Zambian cults of affliction (or, for that matter, divination with the four-tablet oracle in adjacent Southern Africa), despite justified attention for the therapists' market strategies, was not a superficial affair, not a placebo to lure and acquiesce ignorant patients alienated from their historic cultural background. It was, on the contrary, communication with the deepest and most ancient source of meaning the local cosmological tradition had to offer – in continuity with the cultural history of the entire Old World. Although, towards the late 1990s, I had begun to detect and interpret fragments of this cosmology in the course of my long-range explorations into kingship, leopard-skin symbolism and comparative mythology, I had never realised that in recent times that cosmology had ever been more than a distant, vague echo of principles no longer consciously known, and not longer potent. However, if the diagnosis and treatment of the dominant idiom of misfortune during most of the 20th century throughout Nkoyaland (for that is what the cults of affliction were) is by reference to a symbolic structure called 'Mother of Twins and Mother of Royal Ancestors', and revolves on Serpentine and Fishtailed Goddesses, and male gods with

lion and leopard connotations, all four in commission endowed with the powers to create, perpetuate, diagnose and heal suffering human life and by extension the world at large, this is an ancient worldview which once seems to have governed ritual and social life and Western Zambia, and which ever since has been supplanted by a succession of ancestral cults, royal cults, Christianity, and modern secular knowledge. In the process, Mwendanjangula and Kaluwe seem to have been dethroned as celestial god and terrestrial demiurge, respectively, and to have been demonised as well as folklorised – tucked away, as a last resort for time-honoured knowledge, in the cults of affliction, which today have lost the vigour they still had in the 1970s and have been reduced to mere fragmented and powerless vestiges of a once dominant idiom.

The only Celestial God now recognised in Nkoyaland is the Christian Nyambi. Yet from West Africa (the Nasin Batsi / Sky Lord, of the Manjacos; author's fieldnotes 1983) to Southern Africa (where the Sky Lord also has a prominent daughter, the Heavenly Princes: Inkosazana / Nomkhubulwana) an indigenous concept of a celestial god can be encountered, *grosso modo* in line with my postulated 'Cosmology of the Lion and the Leopard'. Remarkably, like her presumable distant northern counterparts the aquatic goddesses Neith and Anahita (and Artemis, not to leave out Athena who, although primarily an aquatic deity, is famous for her martial skills although not exactly as an archer), Inkosazana / Nomkhubulwana wields a heavenly bow – the Rainbow, a mythical character which from an apparent earlier independent mythical status already detectable in Pandora's Box, has been made subservient to a later cosmological dispensation.²⁶ So centrally constitutive is the Inkosazana / Nomkhubulwana concept still in South Africa that in certain traditionalistic milieus the tribulations which have visited that country in the course of the 20th c. CE are blamed on the neglect of her cult (Bernard 2009). Already in the early 20th c. the missionary Brown (1926) published a fascinating study of the Tswana in which they were claimed to have a pantheon comparable in composition to that of the Yoruba, Ancient Egyptians or Ancient Greeks, but it has been customary among fieldwork-oriented anthropologists to disdain missionary knowledge even if accumulated over decades on the basis of complete language mastery (a position few anthropologists have attained), and the book did not make much of an impact on subsequent Southern African religious ethnography. Among the Nkoya the concept of a celestial ruler seems to be implied in the Mwendanjangula figure, but has been largely eclipsed by Christian notions. In the 19th century, a morning ritual to the morning sun, and dedication of newborn children to this luminary, was still observed in Western Zambia (cf. Mainga 1972; van Binsbergen 1992: Mwene Kayambila dedicating his newborn son). Twins, heroes and otherwise exceptional people are said to 'have come from heaven' (*bakufuma ku yilu*). Celestial strands in the religion appear to have been usurped by the rise of royal cults – symbolically, the king is equated with the sun, and therefore can only be venerated during the day.

While these male gods seem to have sought refuge in the, now barely surviving, cults of affliction, the fact of their aquatic / serpentine spouses is even more elusive. If they survive at all on the Nkoya ritual scene, it may be

- in the hidden corners of female puberty initiation cults (where implicit homage may be paid to the female powers of Ncunguni and Kanohaha, but again without any material expression in artefacts, and without any oral reference to these goddesses ever coming to my attention) or
- in some local cult of twins whose existence I can only surmise on the basis of

²⁶ Remarkably, Callaway (1884 / 1970: 253), and in his footsteps Bernard (2009: 227, where also other authorities are cited) describe Inkosazana / Nomkhubulwana also in terms somewhat reminiscent of the Ancient Egyptian gods Tfnt, Ws̄r (as vegetation god), and of the unilateral being:

'a very little animal, as large as a polecat, and is marked with white and black stripes; one side there grows a bed of reeds, a forest, and grass, the other side is that of a man'

comparative evidence but which locally I have never seen in operation during my forty years of research on Nkoyaland.

From a High God Mwendanjangula seems to have degraded into a whimsical and sinister trickster figure – a process of demonisation which we have seen for many ancient, supplanted gods all over the world.

A Google Internet search with the search term ‘Mwendanjangula’, especially when undertaken from a Netherlands IP address, returns in the first place many dozens of references to a 2000 book on AIDS in Zambia, by the same name (van Kesteren & van Amerongen 2000). Apparently the continued process of demonisation of the ancient god Mwendanjangula has now made him into a spirit associated with the modern scourge of HIV. Also in Southern Africa there are indications of a progressive demonisation of the figure of Mwendanjangula, e.g. in the shape of the **hideous** *tokolosh* tricksters (Bernard 2009: 373 n. 13), whom Hunter 1936/1961: 175-176 describes in the following terms:

‘The penis of the male is so long that he carries it over his shoulder, and he has only one buttock’ (again the association with the unilateral being who has only one side to his body. – WvB)

Images of Mwendanjangula as a prominent African divinity have hardly reached Internet search machines, and even my own frequent mentions of that character have so far remained without illustration. Representations of the Mwendanjangula character seem to be very rare, possibly because of the demonic nature now attributed to that divinity – perhaps also, along the lines of the Pelasgian hypothesis, as a very distant, transcontinental echo of the ancient West Asian injunction against making graven images of the sky god. Fig. 15 depicts a statuette of Mwendanjangula, collected in Angola in 1998 – a photograph was kindly sent to me by an American visitor of my website, but regrettably, a computer crash removed his name from my records.



Fig. 15. Wooden statuette of Mwendanjangula, largest dimension ca. 20 cm, collected in Angola 1998 – note the female breast, although the unilateral being Mwendanjangula, with only one side to his body, is usually considered male in modern discourse.

8. A unique piece?

I would have preferred to indicate wider stylistic parallels to our artefact in African art and transcontinentally. Here however my knowledge utterly falls short. The spatially compact, highly composite, highly abstracted, and repetitive characteristics of the piece appear to be without very obvious parallels in the immediate Zambian environment in recent centuries – but any specialist may easily put me wrong on this point.

I suggest that our artefact is a unique piece, made by, or at the instigation of, a 20th-c. diviner looking – without any close association with established West Zambian art styles – for an expression of the ancient worldview by which he or she was divining and healing the afflicted. Such originality should not surprise us: competition in the South Central and Southern African market of divination and healing is extremely tough, has been so for as long as we have records, and many specialists operating in that market have been known to come up – usually under the sanction of a claim of divine inspiration – with unique innovations by which to captivate new clients.

However, one wider context can be indicated. In the early 1970s the YMCA office in Woodlands, Lusaka played an important part in mediating between rural producers of handicrafts, and urban (mostly expatriate) buyers. Here I occasionally bought cheap contemporary, apparently decorative pieces, consisting of slightly curved narrow and thin, but long pieces of polished wood, in which one or two faces were cut, much like one of the sides of our artefact. Meaning and provenance were not my concern at the time, but I suppose these curios hailed from Central or Western Province, Zambia.



Fig. 16. Fu Xi and Nu Wa in a Chinese depiction



Fig. 17. Female porters depicted on a Loango ivory carving (courtesy National Museum of African Art, Washington, <http://www.nmafa.si.edu/exhibits/loango/f27.htm>)



Fig.18. That the worldview attributed, in this paper, to Nkoyaland has a wider distribution in Niger-Congo speaking Africa is, among many other signs, indicated by this image of the Primal Mother, seated on a stool with spider ornaments (cf. the spider connotations of Nyambi, Athena etc.), nursing twins in a Bamileke statuette from the Western Grassfield, Cameroon; © Klaus Paysan, courtesy Galerie Hermann, Berlin, Germany, see: <http://galerie-herrmann.com/arts/art3/>

9. Conclusion

Trying to penetrate as deeply as possible into the meaning and implied worldview associated with a unique Nkoya ritual statuette, we begin to see how in the compact three-dimensional shape of its four sides and two superimposed registers per side, it is in fact an eloquent statement on cosmology and cosmogony, visualising Heaven (the

top register) and Earth (the bottom register), supernatural power and its demiurgical mediation toward humans and the world through twins and through the kingship. Thus despite its regional African formal expression, it reminds us of basic elements in shamanism: the layered worldview arranged along the world axis, and the task of the shaman as moving, on behalf of the community, up and down between Heaven, Earth and Underworld, and mediating the powers of these realms into human society. Our artefact thus succinctly expresses a worldview that, once vital and full of transcontinental resonances, today has found a refuge in cults of affliction which in themselves are barely surviving under the continuing assault of Christianity and globalised post-modern life.

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