

Tears of Rain

Monographs from the African Studies Centre,
Leiden

Tears of Rain

Ethnicity and history
in central western Zambia

Wim van Binsbergen



Kegan Paul International
London and New York

INTERNET VERSION, 2004

the pagination in this version differs from that of the original printed
version of 1992; the indexes have *not* been adjusted accordingly

To Patricia

First published in 1990 by Kegan Paul International Limited

PO Box 256, London WC1B 3SW

Distributed by
International Thomson Publishing Services Ltd
North Way, Andover, Hants SP10 5BE
England

Routledge, Chapman and Hall Inc.
29 West 35th Street
New York, NY 10001
USA

The Canterbury Press Pty Ltd
Unit 2, 71 Rushdale Street
Scoresby, Victoria 3179
Australia

Produced by W. Goar Klein

Set in Times
by W. Goar Klein/Z-Work
Gouda, The Netherlands
and printed in Great Britain
by T J Press (Padstow) Ltd
Cornwall

© Afrika-Studiecentrum 1992

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Binsbergen, Wim M.J. van
Tears of Rain: ethnicity and history in central western Zambia. –
(Monographs from the African Studies Centre, Leiden)
Title II. Series
305.86894

ISBN 071030434X

US Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
Binsbergen, Wim M.J. van.
Tears of Rain: ethnicity and history in central western Zambia / Wim van Binsbergen
xxii + 495 p. 21.6 cm. – (Monographs from the African Studies Centre, Leiden)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-7103-0434-X

Likota Iya Bankoya–Criticism. Textual. 2. Nkoya (African people)–History–Sources.
3. Ethnicity–Zambia. 4. Ethnohistory–Zambia. 5. Zambia–History–Sources. I. Title. II.
Series.

DT3058.N56B56 1991
398.22'08996393–dc20

91-21009
CIP

Table of contents

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	xiii
Acknowledgments	xviii
PART I. TEARS OF RAIN: ETHNICITY AND HISTORY IN CENTRAL WESTERN ZAMBIA	1
Chapter 1. The contemporary point of departure: The Nkoya-speaking people and their chiefs	3
1.1. The Nkoya	3
1.2. Nkoya subgroups and the recent process of their ethnic convergence	8
<i>the proliferation of Nkoya subgroups</i>	8
<i>pan-Nkoya convergence and its implications for the study of history</i>	13
1.3. The major Nkoya chiefs and their political environment today	16
<i>the distant Lunda association</i>	17
<i>chiefs, royal kin, and headmen: the internal structure of the neo-traditional Nkoya polities</i>	18
<i>the indigenous Barotse administration and the colonial state</i>	24
<i>the post-colonial state</i>	41
<i>Mutondo and Kahare: moiety-like structure and the struggle for seniority</i>	46
Chapter 2. The <i>Likota Iya Bankoya</i> manuscript	51
2.1 History of the <i>Likota Iya Bankoya</i> manuscript	51
2.2 <i>Likota Iya Bankoya</i> as belonging to a genre of historiographic production	57
<i>characteristics of the genre and methodological implications</i>	58
<i>between colonialism, missionary influence and ethnic</i>	

<i>concerns</i>	62
<i>narrative structure and style</i>	67
<i>the uses of a religious education</i>	69
2.3. Reconstructing the original manuscript	71
2.4. Editing the reconstructed manuscript	75
<i>Nkoya as a written language</i>	76
<i>editorial conventions</i>	78
2.5. Problems of translation	83
<i>the identification of gender</i>	83
<i>gender and death from natural causes: an example</i>	88
<i>Shakalongo as female: another example</i>	90
<i>the handling of kinship terms and terms for social groups</i>	93
<i>genealogies</i>	95
<i>genealogical over-interpretation: the case of</i>	
<i>Mwene Kayambila Shishopa</i>	97
<i>terms for court offices</i>	99
<i>toponyms</i>	101
<i>more specifically literary problems of translation</i>	102

Chapter 3. Historical criticism of *Likota lya Bankoya* 105

3.1. The apologetic intention of <i>Likota lya Bankoya</i>	105
3.2. The quest for authority	107
<i>identification of sources</i>	107
<i>dates</i>	108
<i>anachronisms</i>	110
<i>recycling of published historical texts</i>	110
<i>dynastic numbers and the nature of the Nkoya royal titles:</i>	
<i>between ascription and achievement</i>	113
<i>authoritative lists and biblical elements</i>	121
<i>the spurious insertion of a mainstream event</i>	122
3.3. Shimunika's possible biases	123
<i>Nkoya nationalism?</i>	124
<i>Nkoya as a toponym</i>	126
<i>Nkoya as the name of a dynastic group centring on</i>	
<i>the Mutondo kingship, and its emergence as</i>	
<i>an ethnonym</i>	127
<i>Christian bias?</i>	130
<i>bias in favour of the Mutondo kingship and the aristocratic</i>	
<i>perspective, and against earlier occupancy by other</i>	
<i>ethnic groups</i>	131
<i>bias in the treatment of slavery</i>	135
<i>bias in the treatment of firearms?</i>	142
<i>Shimunika as a laudator temporis (colonialis) acti</i>	149
<i>male sexist bias?</i>	149
3.4. The ultimate test: the confrontation of <i>Likota lya Bankoya</i> with unprocessed oral data from central western Zambia	151
3.5. <i>Likota lya Bankoya</i> as literature and as myth	161

Tears of Rain

<i>Kapeshi ka Munungampana</i>	161
<i>symbolism and history: the case of gender relations</i>	165

Chapter 4. State formation in central western Zambia as depicted in *Likota lya Bankoya* 169

4.1. The pre-state situation	170
<i>the High God, Rain, and the Land</i>	170
<i>clans</i>	177
4.2. The emergence of the institution of <i>Wene</i>	184
4.3. The emergence of states	190
<i>the beginning of violence</i>	190
<i>the first royal courts</i>	192
<i>court officials</i>	197
<i>a new style of kingship</i>	200
4.4. Male usurpation of <i>Wene</i>	201
4.5. Changes in local branches of production under male initiative	208

Chapter 5. State and society in nineteenth-century central

western Zambia:

Regalia, legal aspects, ideology and gender 219

5.1. Regalia: A male prerogative?	220
5.2. Some legal aspects of Nkoya states	224
<i>royal succession</i>	225
<i>delegation and democracy</i>	227
<i>the extent of interstate rule of law and the geographical extent of Nkoya-ness</i>	228
5.3. Towards a male ideological perspective	235
<i>limits to male ascendancy: the ladder into the sky</i>	236
<i>male circumcision and the Mbwela connexion</i>	239
<i>shattering the female cosmos</i>	243
<i>Lady Myene of a later period</i>	249
5.4. The changing kinship roles of women	251
5.5. Contested patrilineal succession of the Kahare kingship around 1900: Shamamano, Kambotwe and Timuna	257
5.6. Another look at the seniority contest between the Kahare and Mutondo titles	262

Chapter 6. *Likota lya Bankoya* as cosmology and as history:

Aspects of Nkoya symbolism and its transformations 269

6.1. Theoretical and methodological orientation	270
6.2. Identifying <i>Likota lya Bankoya's</i> symbolic structure	274
6.3. Identifying transformations in <i>Likota lya Bankoya</i>	277

Table of contents

<i>from contemporary Nkoya culture to Likota Iya Bankoya: examples of transformations</i>	278
<i>equivalent transformations leading to a self-validating timeless structure</i>	280
<i>looking for mutative transformations</i>	281
6.4. From transformations to history	287
<i>remaining problems: periodization, and the sifting of myth and history</i>	290
<i>an alternative explanation: perpetual kinship on the Upper Zambezi?</i>	292
<i>the vindication of ethno-history</i>	294
6.5. Beyond <i>Religious Change in Zambia</i> : The religious transformation of women's political power	296
6.6. Conclusion: history out of myth	301
PART II. LIKOTA LYA BANKOYA: EDITED NKOYA TEXT	303
Ku tontolola [<i>Preface</i>]: Iya tikitiwile na ba [by] Hamba H. Mwene	305
Likota Iya Bankoya: Iya tikitiwile na ba [by] Rev. Johasaphat Malasha Shimunika, Iya manishiwile na ba (editor) Wim van Binsbergen	307
Mitwe ya byambo bya mu Likota [<i>original detailed table of contents</i>]	309
[Main text, chapters 1-56]	315
Bizino bya Bamyene ba Bankoya [<i>The burial sites of the Myene of the Nkoya</i>]: Iya tikitiwile na ba [by] Hamba H. Mwene	389
PART III. THE HISTORY OF THE NKOYA PEOPLE ENGLISH TRANSLATION	397
Preface: by Hamba H. Mwene	399
The history of the Nkoya people: by Rev. Johasaphat Malasha Shimunika, translated by Wim van Binsbergen and Masuku Malapa	401
Chapters of the stories in 'Likota' [translated original table of contents]	403
[Translated main text, chapters 1-56]	407

PART IV. REFERENCE MATERIAL	479
Appendix 1. A description of the constituent parts of the <i>Likota lya Bankoya</i> manuscript	481
Appendix 2. Variants of the <i>Likota lya Bankoya</i> manuscript	485
Appendix 3. Genealogies constructed on the basis of the text of <i>Likota lya Bankoya</i>	493
Appendix 4. List of published texts in the Nkoya language	505
Appendix 5. List of oral sources	509
Appendix 6. List of archival sources and district files consulted	515
Appendix 7. <i>Zinkena</i> in western Zambia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries	517
References cited	523
Author index	541
Subject index	554

List of diagrams

<i>Diagram 1.</i> Ethnic groups in twentieth-century central western Zambia	5
<i>Diagram 2.</i> Nkoya facial scarification in males	7
<i>Diagram 3.</i> Ethnic groups and subgroups in Mankoya district in 1933	11
<i>Diagram 4.</i> Nkoya kinship terminology	86
<i>Diagram 5.</i> Approximate trade routes in central western Zambia, second half of the nineteenth century	146
<i>Diagram 6.</i> One oral source's genealogy of Nkoya <i>Myene</i>	155
<i>Diagram 7.</i> Official royal genealogy of the Nkoya <i>Myene</i>	156
<i>Diagram 8.</i> Nkoya royal genealogy according to elders in Lusaka	157
<i>Diagram 9.</i> Reconstruction of the genealogical relationship between Shamamano and Kambotwe	260
<i>Diagram 10.</i> Historical transfer of symbolic structures, and possible transformations, between early 'Mbwela' society, contemporary 'Nkoya' society, and the image of society in <i>Likota Iya Bankoya</i>	289
<i>Diagram 11a-b.</i> Genealogy 1 — from Mwene Libupe to Mwene Manenga	494-5
<i>Diagram 12a-b.</i> Genealogy 2 — from Mwene Manenga to Mwene Munangisha	498-9
<i>Diagram 13.</i> Genealogy 3 — from Katete to Mwene Shakalongo	501
<i>Diagram 14.</i> Genealogy 4 — from Mwene Shihoka to Mwene Shamamano	502
<i>Diagram 15a.</i> The location of Nkoya <i>zinkena</i> in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries according to <i>Likota Iya Bankoya</i> — overview of western Zambia	520
<i>Diagram 15b.</i> The location of Nkoya <i>zinkena</i> in the eighteenth	

and nineteenth centuries according to *Likota Iya*
Bankoya —
the Land of Nkoya

521

List of tables

<i>Table 1.</i> Clans and <i>Myene</i> among the Nkoya	189
<i>Table 2.</i> Main symbolic oppositions in <i>Likota lya Bankoya</i>	274
<i>Table 3.</i> Symbolic oppositions in <i>Likota lya Bankoya</i> , organized into four symbolic domains, and arranged thematically	275
<i>Table 4.</i> Symbolic transformations in <i>Likota lya Bankoya</i>	282
<i>Table 5.</i> <i>Zinkena</i> in western Zambia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries	517

Preface and acknowledgments

This is a book about ethnicity among the Nkoya people in central western Zambia, and about the historical stuff out of which that ethnicity is made. It studies in detail the fascinating ways in which ethnicity both creates, and feeds upon, ethno-history. At the same time it assesses the possibility of reconstructing objective historical processes, in that region since the sixteenth century, on the basis primarily of one very extensive source, Rev. Johasaphat Malasha Shimunika's *Likota lya Bankoya*, whose production (as a compilation and processing of local oral traditions) is intimately related to contemporary ethnicity.

But most of all this is a book about that fundamental, and humble, condition of scholarship: *reading*. The main message I have to impart in my argument is what it means to read a text like *Likota lya Bankoya* (and by implication — since that text belongs to the genre of literate ethno-history — an entire category of sources of modern African historiography). In order to be able to scrape off layer after layer of the text, and to begin to understand its meanings, workings and preconceptions, we need the linguistics, the symbolism, the documentary and oral sources; we need also such insight in the local socio-cultural process as derives from prolonged participatory research, and an appreciation of contemporary political and ethnic structures in the region. And beyond even these academic tools of method, skill and knowledge, as I hope to develop in the course of my argument, such reading appeals to existential categories: patience, empathy, the excitement of discovery, sense of literary beauty, power of imagination, and love.

This volume consists of the following parts:

- Part I* An analytical study of the *Likota lya Bankoya* manuscript, sketching its political, ethnic and ideological background and the problems of editing and translation which it poses, and

proceeding to extract — in confrontation with other oral and documentary sources, and gradually perfecting our methodology — whatever information that text has to offer on the precolonial history of the region and, in that region, on the process of Nkoya ethnicization in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries;

Part II A critical edition of the Nkoya text of *Likota Iya Bankoya*, upon which the argument in Part I is largely based;

Part III An English translation of *Likota Iya Bankoya*, through which the materials of Part II will become available to non-Nkoya-speaking audiences;

Part IV Reference material, including genealogies, a bibliography, and indexes.

With all the care with which the Nkoya text has been prepared and embedded in a critical apparatus, I certainly do not claim to make an original, professional contribution to African linguistics. The conventions of editing and orthography as followed in this book reflect the concerns of contemporary Nkoya speakers and of an anthropologist-cum-historian, and these are not necessarily those of the international community of Bantuist scholars. If this edition will manage to kindle an interest in Nkoya among students of Bantu languages, inviting them to correct such linguistic errors as the present edition no doubt contains, I shall consider that part of my task to have been fulfilled successfully.

The Nkoya speakers who have contributed to the present edition, and I myself, take pride in the fact that — along with its companion volume, a popular edition for a local Zambian audience — this is the first publication of a major Nkoya text since the appearance of a Nkoya translation of the New Testament and Psalms in the early 1950s — which was also largely Rev. Shimunika's work.

Despite an early attempt such as Gervase Clay's *History of the Mankoya district* (1945), the history of central western Zambia which forms the main topic of the present book has long constituted a relative blind-spot in the study of South Central Africa. As Schecter wrote in his assessment of Lunda southward expansion:

'And somebody must ask the people of the Nkoya-Mbwela group, who now live south of the area of Lunda expansion, for their view of the whole process.' (Schecter 1980a: 320)

This is precisely what I have done in the research which led to the present book.

Similarly, a decade ago Gwyn Prins, making up the balance sheet of his Lozi oral-historical research, was so generous as to express the hope that my work in progress on the eastern Lozi periphery, among the Nkoya, would yield new insights into Lozi history (Prins 1978:

220). On this point this volume may be disappointing. Although prominent Lozi royal figures like Sipopa and Lewanika feature in *Likota lya Bankoya* with unexpected vividness and detail, the accepted picture of Lozi-Nkoya relations — in the sense of ‘Lozi’ domination over ‘the Nkoya’ since c. 1860 — is not going to be greatly altered by the present material and my analysis. Unless in the following sense: now that the precolonial history of state formation among the Nkoya has entered scholarly debate, it will help us to discern overall patterns and comparative models of state formation in western Zambia; in the light of these patterns the Lozi state, however much it has captured public imagination and scholarly attention, will lose some of its uniqueness and glory. Up to the beginning of the nineteenth century, processes of state formation throughout western Zambia, including the ancestors of the people whom we call today the Lozi and the Nkoya, appear to have displayed many parallels. The striking differences that were to develop in the nineteenth century were due, partly to historical accident (such as the invigoration of the Lozi state with the Kololo impulse), partly to ecological differences, partly to such internal ideological, social and political developments as the present analysis helps us to pinpoint.

Throughout Africa, state formation entails the imposition, upon a local social formation, of a more or less centralized socio-political structure representing a *total departure from*, or a *total transformation of*, the social organization and ideology prevailing in earlier, pre-state times. In the specific context of the expansion of the Lunda political culture in South Central Africa, the typical form of statehood emerging from that transformation had two salient features as identified by Schechter (1980a): *perpetual kinship* and *positional succession*. Together these made for the powerful organizational and mobilizational structure of the Lunda-ized states. Perpetual kinship expresses the political relationships between rulers and between aristocrats in terms of fictive kinship, so that the incumbent of position A is always identified as e.g. the younger brother of the incumbent of position B; political alliance and seniority are implied in this idiom. Positional succession, as the complementary device, stipulates a fixed order of incumbence and promotion encompassing all the senior political positions within a state, by virtue of which all incumbents move one place up when one incumbent in a more senior position dies or otherwise has to be replaced. The literature on the Lunda realm shows how these organizational formulae have strengthened state organizations; and while these states have seldom been examined from the point of view of a total transformation of the pre-state order, dynastic myths of origin at least bring out the element of a historic break, a rupture represented by the advent of statehood. Particularly among the Nkoya’s western neighbours, the Lozi, all these elements are very manifest, and brought out by the works by Gluckman, Mutumba Mainga, Muuka and Prins as listed in the bibliography.

Let us look at the following anecdote which was told by the hunter F.C. Selous about Sipopa, the Lozi king (1864-1876) who restored the Luyana dynasty after a quarter of a century of occupation by the Kololo from South Africa:

‘In Sepopo’s [Sipopa’s] time many people were executed for witchcraft and other offences, and their bodies thrown to the crocodiles. (...) One day, as he [Mr T., a trader, and friend of Selous] was drinking beer with Sepopo, a very old man crept up and begged for food. The king, turning to some of his men, asked who he was, and learned that he belonged to one of the slave tribes. He then said, “He’s a very old man; can he do any work?” and was informed that the old man was quite past work, and depending upon charity — a very, very scarce article in the interior of Africa. Then said the king, “Take him down to the river and hold his head under water,” and the old man was forthwith led down to the river. Presently the executioner returned. “Is the old man dead?” said Sepopo. “Dead he is,” they answered. “Then give him to the crocodiles,” said the king, and went on drinking beer and chatting to my friend T.’ (Selous 1893: 249f).

This is more than a simple tale of royal cruelty, although Sipopa’s reputation as a tyrant is well-established (Holub 1879). We see the Lozi king negotiating between three different social spheres:

- (a) the state, defining relations between the king, his court officers, an animal species (the crocodile) as a royal emblem, and his subjects including ‘slave tribes’;
- (b) peripheral mercantile capitalism whose penetration brings the king in contact with European traders, in the pursuit of mutual benefits;
- (c) and the kinship-based social order at the village level, where commensality rules and where the elderly (to whom all juniors are linked by ties of real, putative or fictive kinship) are to be supported and honoured, but at the same time are feared for their obvious powers of sorcery (also considered a form of ‘work’) without which they could never have attained their advanced age.

Seeking to entertain and impress the representative of mercantile capitalism, Sipopa’s action celebrates the absolute supremacy of his state over the village order, and the absolute rejection of the latter’s principles of seniority and commensality. The specifics of the episode are decidedly ironic: as we shall see in the present book, it was with a ‘slave tribe’, the Nkoya, that Sipopa had found refuge during Kololo rule, and it was among them that, through ties of fictive kinship, he had received his early training as a hunter. The king’s action amounts to a rejection of all this, confronting the kinship etiquette, sorcery connotations and Sipopa’s personal obligations of reciprocity vis-à-vis

a subjugated ethnic group, with the physical and symbolic power invested in the Lozi state: a power not only manifestly superior to the old man's but deriving, as it were, from a different universe — the state — and implying yet a third universe — peripheral capitalism and European penetration in general. As such, the anecdote is similar to standard tales of Lozi arrogance circulating among contemporary Nkoya; if told before a twentieth-century Nkoya audience it would immediately summon the resentment that Nkoya have built up in over a century of domination by the Lozi state under conditions of outside, European support. Patterns of Nkoya ethnicization are to be understood in the light of this resentment. However, the principal point I wish to make at this initial stage is that such total departure from the social and symbolic order of village society was never attained by the states which, in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the Nkoya sought to establish for themselves.

Nkoya states failed to exploit to the full extent the Lunda heritage of perpetual kinship and positional succession; and they equally failed to build, out of the social and symbolic material available, a state that not only deviated from, but radically transformed that material, making such a transformation the basis for a viable new domain of exploitation hinging on the political structure. The Nkoya myth of state origin, which we shall examine in detail in this book, hints at transformation of the pre-state society but at the same time stresses considerable continuity with the past. Nkoya states did erode, but did not fundamentally surpass, the female-centred cosmological framework and the kinship structure that informed it, and hence remained *inchoate* states, always subject to the internal dynamics of the dynastic group, and to the vicissitudes of tribute and external pressure. It was therefore, probably, that the Nkoya states were no match, not for the Kololo, the Lozi or the Yeke, nor indeed for the colonial state.

It is to the growth of scholarship on this systematic, abstract level that this book seeks to contribute, more than to the detailed description of specific events in the Nkoya past.

Historians of South Central Africa may be persuaded, by this volume, that *Likota lya Bankoya* is indeed the goldmine I believed it to be when I set out to devote an irresponsibly large number of years to its editing, translation and analysis. Casting some surprising light on historical processes and evolving political, social and ideological structures in central western Zambia, Shimunika's text is particularly fascinating for the exercises in historical method and criticism to which it invites and which form the core of my argument. I have sought (in such fields as state formation, ethnicization, modes of production, gender relations, symbolic analysis — and the ideological implications of colonialism, Christianity and literacy) to formulate new problems and new solutions, whose applicability seem to extend beyond the parochial confines of Nkoya culture and central western Zambia. It is in this sense that I hope to contribute to the study of African history and ethnicity in general.

The precolonial history of central western Zambia, and the text of *Likota lya Bankoya*, confront us with a great many puzzles, some of which I have sought to solve in this volume. In order not to add another puzzle let me explain the volume's unusually poetic (or is it tear-jerking?) title *Tears of Rain* at this early stage. As my argument will make clear, Rev. Shimunika's text has the apologetic intention of asserting Nkoya ethnic identity in the face of twentieth-century political subjugation and arrogance to which the Nkoya were treated on the part the Lozi ethnic group, the dominant one in western Zambia. In this respect *Likota lya Bankoya* is very much an expression of ethnic conflict such as arose and intensified within regional and local-level arenas created by the colonial state. The Lozi challenge is met by Shimunika's evoking a glorious precolonial past of Nkoya kingship, revolving on the proud adage that resounds though *Likota lya Bankoya*:

'Our Kingship comes from the Raindrop.'

From raindrop to tear is only one step, — in fact the adage could be translated as 'Our Kingship consists of the Tears of Rain', where Rain is the personified demiurge Mvula who mediates between the Land (the visible world) and the Sky (the abode of the High God, Nyambi). Thus the adage conveys both cosmic legitimation, divine ancestry, and expanse — to the extent of fragmentation — in terms of number of royal titles (cf. *Appendix 7*) and numbers of subjects. In fact the contemporary Nkoya firmly believe that most of western and central Zambia would, in the last analysis, qualify as belonging to the Nkoya realm.

Tears, however, have a sorrowful connotation in most cultures and the Nkoya are no exception. Rev. Shimunika's argument is profoundly tragic. For while attempting to glorify the Nkoya past and to state the case for Nkoya political independence from the Lozi, his very data make abundantly clear that as from c. 1860, nearly half a century before the imposition of colonial rule, Nkoya states were losing their economic and political independence first to the immigrant Kololo, and subsequently to the Lozi as soon as the latter had managed to reclaim their state after a quarter of a century of Kololo rule.

This remarkable historiographic integrity on Rev. Shimunika's part indicates the status of *Likota lya Bankoya* as a contribution to history. As a student of and a participant in Nkoya life since 1972, I should add that this ironic twist in the constitution of their ethnic awareness appears to me to have in itself an eminently Nkoya flavour. The tension between pride and humiliation, submission and individual assertiveness may be a universal trait of human society, but it is particularly noticeable as a constant of Nkoya social and political life, where it often tends to be resolved by the studied adoption of the underdog's role. Those who today identify as Nkoya derive pride and hope from the fact that finally their vulnerable identity has managed to establish itself in the world of books, political participation and development

schemes — even if this does not alter the material hardship of life in central western Zambia today, and meant bringing out the somewhat humiliating truth, probing for its deeper meaning instead of hiding in antiquated myths.

It is to this process of illumination that I have committed myself in this book, and I am deeply grateful to all those who have enabled me to bring my contribution to completion.

Acknowledgments

This volume forms the outcome of a long editorial and analytical process, in which the concerns of those in contemporary Zambia who identify as Nkoya have been combined with what I hope to be the international standards of scholarship. In the course of this process, which has enjoyed the patient support of the people from Zambia's Kaoma district (Western Province), their traditional leaders Mwene Mutondo and Mwene Kahare, and the district's modern officeholders, the following people have contributed specific essential services:

- Mr Denis Kawangu Shiyowe, of Shumbanyama village, Kaoma district, who was the first to attract and stimulate scholarly interest in the Nkoya language and culture in the early 1970s; he taught me the language and was my research assistant in the years 1972-1974. Without his brotherly dedication, humour and love this book could not have been written, and the research on which it is based could never have been undertaken.
- Mr Hamba H. Mwene, of Lusaka, who preserved the manuscript of *Likota lya Bankoya* and passed it on to me in 1975 with the purpose of having it published; Mr Mwene has been most helpful throughout the various stages leading towards the editing and publication of the manuscript. To acknowledge this contribution, a preface and kings' lists by Mr Mwene have been included in the present edition — duly italicized in order to distinguish these writings from Rev. Shimunika's text itself.
- Mr Masuku Malapa, of Lusaka, who by making draft translations of the manuscript into English enabled me to penetrate the Nkoya text more fully and to create a scholarly context within which, as a by-product, a popular Nkoya version could be published as a separate volume: *Likota lya Bankoya: Nkoya edition*, Research Report No. 31 B, Leiden: African Studies Centre, 1988, 97 pp. That popular edition, without analytical study, English translation, footnotes or other reference material, but printed from the same computer files as the Nkoya text included in the present volume, made the *Likota lya Bankoya* text available to its immediate users in a simple and accessible form.

- Mr Davison Kawanga, of Kaoma, whose companionship and guidance as from 1977 has enabled me to broaden and deepen my approach to the Nkoya language and the people speaking it, and who has made specific contributions to the editorial process.
- Mr Jackson Shimunika, of Luampa, who especially after his father's death in 1981 assisted the editorial process in various ways.
- The Institute of African Studies, University of Zambia, Lusaka, which has inspired, supported and facilitated my research on western Zambia ever since 1972.
- The African Studies Centre, Leiden, which as from 1977 made the most generous contributions conceivable towards this volume and towards my research on western Zambia in general: in terms of technical facilities and publication funds, my working time, and field trips in 1977 (three months), 1978 (one month), 1988 (one week) and 1989 (two weeks) — adding to my original field-work among the Nkoya from March 1972 to April 1974. Without the enthusiastic support and trusting patience of this institution's former General Secretary Mr G. Grootenhuis, its Bursar Mr J. Nijssen, its computer specialists Messrs R. Niemeijer, W. Veerman and M. Leopold, and its publication officer Mr D. Stelpstra, the present volume could never have been produced, nor its companion volume. I am indebted to the Editorial Board of the African Studies Centre for its wisdom to agree to the inclusion, however costly, of the Nkoya text of *Likota Iya Bankoya* in this volume — a requisite for the kind of meticulous editing and close reading on which my historiographic method depends. Without the stimulating intellectual environment which my colleagues in the Department of Political and Historical Studies helped to create, the final product would have taken even longer to materialize, and its treatment of issues of state formation and ethnicity would have been even more defective. Rob Buijtenhuijs, specifically, read the manuscript and made useful comments.
- In the editorial process, a decisive point was reached in 1985, when proofs of the Nkoya text and of an earlier draft of the English translation became available for circulation. Then Mr M. Malapa and Mr H.H. Mwene contributed their own full sets of corrections and queries. At the same time, in Kaoma, Mr D. Kawanga organized an editorial committee which submitted its own set of corrected proofs; the members of this committee were: Mr David Kapungu, Ms Ruth M. Kashompa, Mr Davison Kawanga, Mr Enock Mulando, Mr Powell Munengo, Mr Dominic D. Mupishi, Mr M.S. Mutupa, Ms Mary Nalishuwa, Mr Amon N. Njenjema, and Mr Moffat R. Tumbila. Similarly, Mr Jackson Shimunika organized, in Luampa, an editorial committee consisting of Rev. Shimunika's sometime associates in Bible translating: Mr H. Katete, Mr M. Kayoya, Mr H.M. Kazekula,

along with Mr Jackson Shimunika himself; this committee jointly contributed a set of corrected proofs, too.

- While expressing my thanks to all those mentioned here, I wish to include those who, in my personal life since 1972, in The Netherlands, in Zambia and elsewhere, have lived with me through the various phases of my research on western Zambia, sharing its delights and its burdens, and contributing to its final outcomes in more extensive and profound ways than could be spelled out in this scholarly context. The foundation for this book was laid in 1972-74 with the loyal support of Henny van Rijn, ‘Mandanèshima’, my first wife. My understanding of Nkoya politics and history made decisive progress through field-work in 1977 and 1978, when between Mukunkike and Nkeyema I found a fulfilment to which this book is perhaps a belated tribute, among other commitments. This book is dedicated, however, to my wife Patricia, ‘Mandashikanda’, not because the burdens of Nkoya-ness were so excessive in her case, but because she largely created the conditions which allowed me to finish what, ten years ago, or again in 1989 when the manuscript of this book was stolen during field-work in Botswana, appeared to me a hopelessly impossible task.
- Clearing up the dazzling complexity of names and places in *Likotlya Bankoya*, and doing justice to that complexity in the index, would have been nearly impossible if my brother, Peter Broers, had not taught me how to write the required computer programmes, even doing essential parts of the writing himself.
- Finally I wish to express my gratitude to Mr Marc Schoen and especially to the publisher’s copy editor for their work in the proofreading phase of the production of this book.

Earlier versions of my argument (particularly sections of chapters 4 and 5, and chapter 6) were presented to the international scholarly community on the following occasions:

- (1) The ‘Netherlands Early States Club’ ’s Workshop on the Position of Women in the Early State, Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, 14 June 1985; I am indebted to Hans Claessen, Martin Doornbos, Dick Papoeseck and Héleen Sancisi for useful comments made on that occasion;
- (2) A Dutch translation of that earlier version has been published as ‘De vrouwelijke kant van staatsvorming in prekoloniaal centraal westelijk Zambia’, in: H.J.M. Claessen (ed.), *Machtige moeders: Over de positie van de vrouw in vroege staten*, Leiden: Institute for Cultural Anthropology and Development Studies, University of Leiden, 1986, pp. 157-216; and benefited from the editor’s constructive remarks.

Wim van Binsbergen

- (3) 'Female dimensions of state formation in central western Zambia, c. 1500-1900: And the religious transformation of women's political power in the nineteenth and twentieth century', paper presented at the Conference on Culture and Consciousness in Southern Africa, University of Manchester, Manchester, 25 September 1986. I am indebted to Terence Ranger, Matthew Schoffeleers, Wyatt MacGaffey, Shula Marks, Ned Alpers, Marjorie Mbilinyi and John Peel for stimulating comments made on that occasion.
- (4) Chapter 6 was presented at the conference 'Mémoires, histoires, sociétés,' Department of History, Université Laval, Québec, October 1987, and appeared in essentially the same form as 'Likota Iya Bankoya: Memory, myth and history', in: *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, (1987) 27, 3-4: 359-392, special issue on popular modes of history in Africa; in this connexion the editorial suggestions made by Bogumil Jewsiewiecki and Henri Moniot are gratefully acknowledged.