

Reflections on social memory in South Central Africa: A possible contribution

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Identitary social formations (nations, ethnic groups, religious denominations, cults, social and religious movements, etc.) construct themselves, and are being constructed by outside forces, through a number of factors, an important one of which is the selective conscious articulation of a collective memory. This collective memory is not history (in the sense of a detached, reliable and valid account of past events, woven into a coherent narrative and selected on the basis of significance attributed to these events in a light of criteria to be defined by the narrator and/or by the historical actors involved). Yet the main justification of such a narrative is that it poses as history. Social memory is an important source for history, although it needs to be subjected – like all sources – to historical criticism. Hence the constant writing and rewriting of history in interplay with the continual emergence of new conditions under which social memories arise and are defined. Meanwhile the tension must be acknowledged between

- the aggregation and streamlining process leading to history and social memory, both with a high degree of more or less systematic constructedness, on the one hand, and on the other hand
- individual recollections, which (due to the much-studied mechanisms that shape, select and distort the temporal, autobiographical dimension of social actor's self-definition) may be as far from history (in the above sense) as collective memory is, but which lack the aggregate, social element of collective construction, through which individual recollections may be negotiated to become part of collective memory

Having studied oral and written traditions of the Nkoya people of western central Zambia since the early 1970s, I believe to discern a number of distinct complexes in their social memory:

- A mythical dimension of dislocated images, in which a repertoire of Old World myths percolates that may be thousands of years old and have parallels in contexts (such as Ancient Egypt, the Ancient Aegean, South and South East Asia) thousands of kilometres away
- A regional dimension of ethnic and cultural self-definition, in which the dislocated images of the previous category are artificially (although, of course, unconsciously) situated with the processes of state formation of the last few centuries before colonial rule (1900-1964) as the exploits of rulers and their followers; here memory construction focuses particularly on
 - images of distant origin from, and overlordship as exercised by, the Mwaat Yaamv, the great Lundu ruler in Southern Zaire, from c. 1700 CE onwards
 - images of nearby encroachment and humiliation on the part of the Lozi (Luyi/ Luyana/ Barotse, since the early 19th century with a strong Sotho element from Southern Africa) along the Zambezi flood plain
 - against the background of ethnic, cultural, linguistic and cultic continuity as perceived in regard of the many other regional players political, ethnic and cultural processes in the last few centuries

- images of royal grandeur, military prowess and ethnic equivalence built around the Nkoya identity, which although projected back into the past is a recent, colonial appearance
- A national dimension of self-definition vis-à-vis the centralised modern state that was established with the advent of British colonial rule, and towards which the Nkoya attitude developed over time (1900-2006) from initial acquiescence, to defiance when the state (both colonial and early postcolonial) was seen as reinforcing Lozi domination and blocking the road to circulatory labour migration in Southern Africa, to re-accommodation when the Nkoya proved postcolonial state's ally against Lozi secessionism, to finally the fragmentation and disorientation characteristic of the period since the late 1980s

Do people (especially retired urban migrants with the kind of skills, experience and aspiration levels that come with long-term urban residence) identifying as Nkoya still engage in the construction of social memory along these lines around the turn of the 21st century? The emergence of the Kazanga Cultural Society in the early 1980s, and its continued survival especially through an annual festival that presents a commoditised showcase of 'Nkoya expressive culture', suggests a much, and so does the clamouring for the independent recognition of Nkoya chiefs, for primary school education in the Nkoya tongue, for publication of the Nkoya Old Testament translation now completed etc. At the same time the lack of tangible success on these points, and the encroachment of foreign (including South African) farmers on land that only a generation ago was still virgin wooded savannah, suggest that the construction of Nkoya social memory along ethno historical lines is in crisis. What globalising alternatives are presenting themselves?

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