

ESTUDOS EM HOMENAGEM A ERNESTO VEIGA DE OLIVEIRA



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THE STERILE MOTHER:
«MYTH VERSUS HISTORY» IN RUWUND ORAL TRADITIONS

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This text proposes to discuss Ruwund⁽¹⁾ oral traditions and court symbolism as an ideological continuum placing the analysis in the scene of the already long lasting controversy on the historical value of oral sources which Vansina was to set forth with the publication of his *De la tradition orale* in 1961. On this issue a lot has been written and the polemics updated and carefully reviewed in 1980 in both the volume edited by Joseph Miller and the special number of *Social Analysis* devoted to «Vansina and beyond». To submit once more the arguments put forward on this debate to a meticulous scrutiny appears thus, in the light of such vast literature, rather redundant. Hence this text merely resumes the discussion in the context of Ruwund oral sources examining the *démarche* undertaken on this material by the representatives of the ethnohistoric approach which, I believe, often hindered the full understanding of the symbolic reality and, as it were, of the Ruwund perception of history itself. Discarded from this limitative concern of searching for a historical truth, the Ruwund oral traditions, I hope to demonstrate, yield a far more enriching data granting us a full understanding of the ideological and symbolic structures of Ruwund divine kingship.

I

In the Ruwund tradition of origin of the state, Cibind Yirung, an alien Luba hunter, is the bearer of a new and sophisticated civilisation which he is to introduce in a more rudimentary kingdom ruled by the native princess, Ruwej. The narrative of Carvalho (1890: 58-76) recounts:

⁽¹⁾ Term here used as an adjective referring to «Aruwund», the Lunda people of the *Mwant Yaav* inhabiting mainly in Kapanga and Sandoa zones of SW Zaire.

The «Bungos»⁽²⁾ were organized in relatively independent groups with their respective chiefs, the *atubungu* (tubungos), whose emblem was the *rukan* (lucano), a bracelet made of human veins. Iyal-a-Mwaku (Iala Macu), the senior chief, was regarded by the others with special deference. From his first wife he had two sons, Cingud (Quinguri) and Iyal (Iala) and one daughter, Ruwej (Lueji).

Iyal-a-Mwaku's sons become drunkards, idle and troublesome. Discontented with their continuous foolishness, the chief threatens to appoint as the legitimate successor one of his nephews who deserved general esteem. Affected by these rumours Iyal and Cingud held a grudge against their father. On one occasion, when the old man was in his private courtyard weaving a mat, his sons, in their usual state of inebriety, erroneously take for palm wine the milky coloured water which Iyal-a-Mwaku kept by him in a basin to soak the fibres, accusing their father of ruining the wine thus depriving them of the drink. Misled in this way, the sons insult and cruelly thrash the chief abandoning him prostrate on the ground.

On her arrival Ruwej listens to the tragic episode in between her father's groans. Despite his daughter's care, Iyal-a-Mwaku is already moribund and his last wishes are witnessed by Ruwej herself and her eldest relatives and dignitaries whom she had hurriedly sent for: Ruwej should be declared the sole heir and mistress of the Bungo territory, *Nswan Murund* (Suana Mulunda), title which was thereafter transmitted representing the person of Ruwej, the heiress of the lands which would be called «Lunda» ou «Runda» (Ruwund), named after the friendship which united the numerous native chiefs. Iyal-a-Mwaku assigns the *rukan*, symbol of royal power, to his daughter who should, in turn, hand it over to the man she would choose to be the father of her children. After Iyal-a-Mwaku's death Ruwej, respected by her people, rules with the help of the elders and chiefs of the various Bungo states. As time went on, however, the notables start showing signs of concern as Ruwej did not seem determined to choose a husband able to secure succession. Their persuasion was in vain as no one in the surroundings seemed able to conquer her heart.

Meanwhile in the Luba state, Yirung, a great hunter, on the death of his father decides to leave his territory and, followed by his companions, sets march towards the south approaching, as it were, the Bungo lands of the *Nswan Murund*. Their arrival is watched by the servants of Ruwej who were, that evening, bathing on the opposite bank of the river Kajidij (Cajidixi), a tributary of the Nkalaany (Calanhi). Catching a glimpse of such an attractive hunter and his fellows, the girls rush out of the water to observe from a hidden vantage point. Yirung, however, on seeing them calls out and succeeds in speaking to the boldest servant who promises to announce their arrival to their mistress.

Attracted by the described beauty of Cibind and aware of his skills as a hunter, Ruwej asks him to stay a while in order to teach her people the handling of the bow and arrow as the sling, in usage among the Bungos, had proved inefficient. Yirung acquiesces willingly to her request. Some time after Yirung decides to send his

⁽²⁾ I refrain from substituting «Bungos» for the current orthography «Atubungu» as in this narrative this term appears as the name of the original Aruwund while otherwise employed to designate the senior chiefs, representatives of the local authority. We shall thus reserve the usage of «atubungu» to refer to these notables.

brother Kasong the hatchet, *cimbuuy* (chimbuia), the insignia of power which he had brought with him, this way renouncing the place of heir which his father had previously conferred upon him. Finally Ruwej lets know of her intension to marry Yirung. Aware of Cingud's attempts to steal the *rukan*, Ruwej, already pregnant, urges the senior chiefs, the *atubungu*, to fix the day on which the ceremony of the investiture with the *rukan* should be performed and during which Yirung was to be submitted to three days of the greatest humiliation before the *atubungu*. Once the sacred bracelet has been placed on his arm by the eldest among the *atubungu*, Yirung is granted powers in the name of the people to unite all the small states into a single empire, the kingdom of his future son, which he should enlarge by conquering neighbouring peoples.

The awaited child, whom they called Nawej, is finally born. Presented to the *citentam* (tetame), the great audience, Nawej is given the title of *Mwant Yaav* (Muatianvua). In this way was born the first *Mwant Yaav* and with him the Ruwund empire.

Ruwej had now entrusted the power to Cibind. She prostrates herself before her husband and persuades her close relatives to do likewise. Her brother Cingud, however, refuses to conform with such humiliating courtesies and organises a dissident faction on the pretext of Yirung being an outsider. Intrigue and internal conflicts generate within the court. Faced with the rebelliousness of her brother, Ruwej threatens to kill him. Fearing the strength of her influence among the people, Cingud, followed by the insurgents, abandon their homeland to found a new state which would become a fiery rival of the *Mwant Yaav's*.

Ruwej had five more sons from Yirung. Being always considered a stranger in the land of the Bungos Yirung was, on his death, buried on the right bank of the Kajidij in the place where he had camped on the night of his arrival.

One other variant, the narrative reported by Duysters (1985:81-6), is the most popular version in the literature and that which can be collected nowadays among the Aruwund of Kapanga zone:

The same conflict over the palm wine takes place. The sons (here Cingud and Cinyam), taking the water from soaking the fibres for palm wine, accuse the chief (Nkond, in this version) of misusing the beverage rather than sharing it. As in Carvalho's variant the father disinherits the sons in favour of his daughter Ruwej.

The arrival of the Luba hunter Cibind Yirung is, however, recounted differently:

One morning, having gone to collect palm wine, one of the *atubungu* (the Ruwund autochthonous chiefs) finds his calabash empty. Aware of the presence of footprints on the ground, the notable follows the track to find some strangers cutting up an antelope. Hidden in the bush he observes them attentively trying to pick up some words of their conversation as they spoke a foreign language. Finally he decides to question their identity. A young svelte man appearing to be their chief introduces himself in this manner: «I am a *kiluhe* [kiluwe] (hunter), my name is Tshibinda Ilunga [Cibind Yirung]» and he presents the notable with a piece of meat.

Informed of the presence of strangers in her land, the princess invites Yirung

and his people to her village. On his arrival the hunter offers the antelope he had just slaughtered. Ruwej ordered some beer but Yirung refrains from drinking it. His people hasten to explain that according to their tradition, Cibind Yirung, being the son of a chief, was prevented from drinking or eating in public. Infatuated with the young hunter, Ruwej invites him to stay for a while. They soon get married.

Order reigned for some time amongst the Aruwund. The authority of Ruwej was recognised by all. One day, however, after her menses, Ruwej convokes the notables and, before the assembly, places the sacred bracelet on the arm of Cibind Yirung. The power was henceforth entrusted in the hands of the foreign hunter. The brothers preferred exile to submission, Cingud departing with his followers towards the Kwango and Cinyam migrating with his companions in the direction of the sources of the Kasai and Zambezi.

In this version Ruwej is sterile and thus unable to ensure succession. A woman from Mukaciland, Kamong-a-Ruwaaz (Kamong Luaza), is presented to the hunter to become his second wife. Kamong bears a child, Nawej, who he would proclaim his successor. On the death of Cibind Yirung, Nawej receives the insignia of power in the presence of the *atubungu*. He then takes Ruwej as his first wife and Kamong, becoming the queen-mother, receives the title of *Rukonkiish* (Lukonkeshia). The son of the Luba hunter reveals himself an energetic chief creating the powerful military and political organisation of the Ruwund empire. He finally succumbs in combat. The bracelet is then entrusted to Nawej's son, Yaav-a-Nawej (Yavo Naweji), who proclaims himself *Mwant Yaav* (Mwata Yavo) before the assembly of notables. Not long after Ruwej dies already at a very advanced age. The high dignitaries appointed a new *Ruwei*, chosen amongst the female descendants of Nkond, who received the title of *Nswan Murund* (Swana Mulunda), «heir of the friendship». The reign of Yaav-a-Nawej was one of conquest and expansion of the territory.

The remaining versions of the tradition of origin of the state seem to be divided as concerns Ruwej's fertility: Pogge's (1880: 224-6) conforms with Carvalho's variant and the Ruwund-Kahemb narrative of Struyf (1948: 370-75) also declares the princess fertile; the barrenness of Ruwej claimed by Duysters, on the other hand, is echoed in the version of Biebuyck (1957: 797-804). In both these narratives the first *Mwant Yaav* is not the biological son of Ruwej but the son of the Luba hunter and Kamong, his second wife.

As a scholar who believes oral traditions to be «reliable» factual sources and aiming at a hypothetical reconstruction of their state history, Hoover submits the versions of the Ruwund foundation epic to the common practice of ethnohistoric analysis of selecting data on the grounds of a historical respectability. Hence, although recognising that «the earliest-recorded traditions all make Ruwej fertile» (1978: 232) thus omitting the presence of a second woman, Kamong, Hoover promptly discards these as confused and simplified versions probably told by non-Ruwund western groups taking as «true» Duysters and Biebuyck's variants which proclaim Ruwej's sterility (cf. *ibid.*: also: 212-13,

n. 4). Having thus elected one version as valid on this theme — that which he himself collected at the river Nkalaany corroborating Duysters' account — Hoover adamantly neglects all others in the name of rather hazy and precarious criteria, considering Ruwej's barrenness unquestionable despite the insistence of various authors on her fecundity.

This seems to be the unavoidable *démarche* should we seek for a «historical truth» and consider oral traditions as ultimately recording a real event as, in *our* terms, can only exist *one* truth concerning Ruwej's maternity behind these accounts: Ruwej was in the event recounted by the narrative *either* fertile *or* sterile. The same does not, however, happen in the Ruwund framework of thought where the two propositions can coexist harmoniously with equal credit. In the analysis that follows I hope to disaffirm Vansina's assertion of a correct methodology: «Should a tradition contain some internal contradiction, or go against facts established from other sources, it must be regarded as unreliable» (1965). As a matter of fact I believe to be only in the tangle of all its contradictory statements that we are able to disclose fully the contours of the Ruwund symbolic system.

The motif of the sterility of Ruwej is also in De Heusch's structural analysis of crucial importance. As the author remarks, the Ruwund foundation myth initiates with a typically Kuba theme (the conflict between father and sons over the palm wine) followed by the romance of Ruwej with the foreign hunter which De Heusch identifies, in turn, as a transformation of the Luba foundation epic. If, however, the initial disjuncture father/sons succeeds, in the Kuba mythological system, to displace patrilinearity in favour of a matrilineal system, in the Ruwund account the latter is never achieved *as Ruwej is sterile and thus unable to ensure succession*. Instead, the Luba motif of the marriage between Ruwej and Cibind Yirung takes over, the foreign hunter reinstating the patrilineal system momentarily menaced and giving rise to a new order, the Ruwund divine kingship (cf. 1972: 186/7).

The sterility of Ruwej is therefore, in De Heusch's analysis, the hinge articulating two mythical themes, recurrent in the Kuba and Luba cycles respectively, by reversing the circuit which was being undertaken from patrilinearity to matrilinearity and allowing, by means of the intervention of an errant hunter, Cibind Yirung, the return to the patrilineal order. It is this theme of the barrenness of the Ruwund autochthonous princess which I here propose to discuss further as I believe its reviewed analysis to yield a fresh insight into the Ruwund symbolic thought.

Insisting on Ruwej's fecundity (the princess was already pregnant when the marriage took place to become, later on, the mother of six children) Carvalho's narrative appears, in the light of De Heusch's analysis, as a rather «unexpected» and bewildering version by highly contrasting with other variants in which

Ruwej is, undoubtably, marked with sterility. In fact, in the narrative collected by Duysters in 1925-33: «Quelques saisons s'écoulèrent sans que l'espoir de Tshibinda d'avoir un descendant ne se réalise; Lueji était stérile et devait le rester. Elle fit venir une femme de Mukatshilande, Kamonga Luaza et la donna à Tshibinda comme sa deuxième femme» (1958: 84). Biebuyck's informants confirm this account: «Contrairement à ce que l'on a habitude de prétendre, Cibind n'avait pas d'enfants avec Rweej. Avant son départ définitif, dont personne ne connaît la destination, Cibind laissa un fils à une femme de la suite de Rweej» (1957: 803). In Labrecque's version of the Lunda-Kazembe summarized by De Heusch it is also pointed out — and in this respect following Carvalho's (1890: 65) —, albeit in a more prudent manner, Ruwej's prolonged refusal to maternity: «Elle refusa pendant de nombreuses années de se marier, de crainte que son autorité ne fût compromise» (cf. De Heusch, 1972: 186, after Labrecque). Confronted with the marked emphasis on sterility in the above versions and by the large affinities displayed by Ruwej with Nkongolo (the mannerless and licentious Luba king) who is himself associated with sterility, De Heusch — and here in agreement with Hoover — dismisses both Carvalho and Struyf's variants as unreliable: «L'on peu penser que les informateurs de Carvalho comme ceux de Struyf ont tenté de dissimuler une tare monstrueuse de l'heroine» (1972: 187).

However, and following the spirit of structural analysis, «Il n'existe pas de version 'vrai' dont toutes les autres seraient des copies ou des échos déformés. Toutes les versions appartiennent au mythe» (Lévi-Strauss, 1974 [1958]: 240-242). There are no privileged versions and therefore Carvalho and Struyf's accounts should deserve equal credit. Indeed, the emphasis displayed in Carvalho's variant on fertility (Ruwej bears six children) which both Hoover and De Heusch chose to ignore seems to me, on the contrary, to become highly significant when reinforced by Struyf's account which once more insists in overstating Ruwej's propensity to procreate: not only from the marriage between Ruwej and Yirung four children were born but these children originated «a great number of clans», all «of royal blood» (1948: 371-2), Ruwej being, in this way, responsible for a considerable population explosion. I therefore suggest that a full account of the Ruwund epic should contemplate the totality of these apparently contradictory versions.

Let us turn first to the narratives collected by Biebuyck and Duysters. Both versions claim the inability of Ruwej to bear children and the interference of a second woman, the biological mother of the first *Mwant Yaav*. Also in both accounts Ruwej was to be invested with the title of *Nswan Murund* while Yirung's second wife (Kamong in Duysters' text) would be designated *Rukonkiish* (Biebuyck, 1957: 803; Duysters, 1958: 85). Based on these accounts, De Heusch claims a structural dichotomy which opposes Ruwej, the autochthonous princess marked by sterility, to Cibind Yirung, the foreign hunter associated with fecundity (1972: 203). His analysis throughly corroborates this radical opposition (cf. *ibid.*: 226).

Carvalho's and Struyf's accounts, however, claim that Ruwej was fertile. Other less known versions seem to assume a compromising position. A Sanga tradition related by Rolands recounts that «Ruwej had children by earlier consorts». Mastak says that she was childless *with Cibind Yirung* (cf. Hoover, 1978: 79, n. 63). In fact, at the Nkalaany the Aruwund tell that Ruwej had a fertile marriage before the arrival of Cibind Yirung, the child being a court notable, the *Mutiy*.

These accounts allow a new insight into the motif of Ruwej's infertility. Against what Hoover and De Heusch's analyses presuppose, Ruwej was not always infertile, rather she *became so with Cibind Yirung*. In this way Ruwej's barrenness appears — when we consider the totality of the versions of the Ruwund myth — rather episodical, therefore dissolving the permanent nature of the sterility attributed to her in Duysters and Biebuyck's variants. It is not that Ruwej is sterile, as De Heusch proposes, rather, Ruwej *becomes* sterile. This punctual nature of Ruwej's refusal of maternity does not, however, compromise in any way the coherence of De Heusch's analysis, quite the contrary, it stresses its significance by adding to this mytheme a mark of *intentionality*. The theme «sterility of Ruwej» is thus purposely raised in opposition with Cibind Yirung, the great hunter, who is, as De Heusch so subtly argues, strongly associated with fecundity. It is not that Ruwej has a definite connotation with sterility, this «quality» only emerges in order to promote *difference*. Hence the myth, by suddenly declaring the princess' inability to procreate, would forever claim the insoluble disjunction between Ruwej and Yirung conveyed in the structural dichotomy which opposes the sterility of Ruwej to the fecundity of Yirung.

The episodical nature of Ruwej's barrenness in the Ruwund foundation myth, if leaving unchanged the structural opposition between the native princess and the hero-hunter so fully elaborated in De Heusch's analysis, confers to this motif an emphasis which would remain masked if we consider her sterility a permanent state. We should here remark that Ruwej's sterility means her refusal to give birth to the child who would become the founder of the divine kingship. Hence this mytheme only intervenes when the excessive proximity between Ruwej and Yirung (which culminates in their hiperexogamic marriage) was about to compromise the identity of Ruwej as «mistress of the *atubungu*», the senior chiefs, by opposition to Yirung who would forever remain an outsider. The conjunction between the realm of Ruwej and that of Yirung is no doubt one of total irreconcilability: Ruwej will always remain the «mother of the *atubungu*» and represent the primitive order as opposed to Yirung and the rise of a new sacred kingship.

As I pointed out elsewhere, however, if by proclaiming her sterility Ruwej would, on the one hand, declare the disjunction between the world of the *atubungu* (associated to Ruwej) and Yirung's refined order, Ruwej promotes, on the other hand, a new conjunction as she nominates a second woman (perpetuated in the title of *Rukonkiish*) who would, in her place, engage in the

building of divine kingship by conceiving Yirung's child, the first *Mwant Yaav*. This conjunction is as fundamental in the founding of divine kingship as the disjunction which Ruwej was to affirm at first. Indeed the dichotomy between the orders represented by Ruwej and Yirung can only be established on the grounds of an alliance, Ruwej herself entrusting the power insignia to the Luba hunter and creating all necessary conditions for the success of Yirung's mission and the dawning of sacred kingship (cf. *ibid.*). The moment Ruwej announces her sterility is therefore a critical turning point as it is the occasion to pursue the alliance which will lead to the institutionalisation of the divine dynasty safeguarding, however, the dual character of this new ruling which is conveyed in the dichotomy between the princess' autochthonous authority and the sacralised power introduced by Yirung. The conjunction which is to take place can only be found upon the union of two *dissimilar* worlds, differences having to be defined in order to avoid an excessive proximity (cf. *supra*). Hence, only affirming the discontinuity between the kingdoms of Ruwej and Yirung can an alliance between the two be conceptualised and, likewise, the former can only be thought of on the grounds of the latter.

It is at this point that an analysis encompassing the totality of the variants of the myth seems to reveal all its pertinence. If, as pointed out in De Heusch's analysis, Duysters and Biebuyck's variants declare pertinent the structural dichotomy fertile/sterile mother (opposing Kamong to Ruwej and stressing the *antinomy* between the Ruwund princess and Cibind Yirung), Carvalho's version dissolves this opposition as Ruwej is here a fecund woman and the biological mother of the first *Mwant Yaav*. The first divine king being here the «true» son of Ruwej and Yirung, this version of the myth succeeds better than any other in stressing the *alliance* (rather than the disjunction) between the native order and the alien sacred power, the alliance which proves fundamental in the advent of divine kingship. The motif of the *alliance* between Ruwej and Yirung is, thus, as much an invariant of the Ruwund mythological thought as that which *opposes* the princess to the Luba hunter.

The Ruwund symbolic thought does not, consequently, seem to judge fundamental to distinguish Ruwej from Kamong or to state Ruwej's barrenness *as long as the irreducibility of the pair Ruwej/Yirung is left clear* in the symbolic framework (cf. Palmeirim). Indeed in Carvalho's version in which Ruwej is fecund, the bipartition which separates the world of Ruwej from that of Yirung is still preserved by distinguishing two moments in Ruwej's life: Ruwej as representative of the ancestral order (and before the arrival of Cibind Yirung) will hold the title of *Nswan Murund*, to be entitled *Rukonkiish* after bearing the first king and now committed to his new order (cf. Carvalho, 1890)⁽³⁾. We

⁽³⁾ This seems to account for Byvang's remark that on the death of Ruwej both «title offices» were left vacant (1937:555).

should here remark that if in Duysters' version Ruwej is a «sterile mother» (here the *sociological* mother of the *Mwant Yaav*), Carvalho also announces Ruwej's sterility albeit at a later stage of her motherhood (when endowed with the title of *Rukonkiish*) hence rendering unintelligible De Heusch's presupposition that his informants would have attempted to conceal a «monstrous» derangement of the Ruwund princess (cf. *supra*).

The version of Carvalho which appeared in the light of De Heusch's analysis rather odd, regains its legitimate place in the structure. Thus, when we consider the totality of the versions what becomes pertinent is no more, as for De Heusch, the opposition between the spouses of Yirung conveyed in the dichotomy «fertile/sterile» mother but the duality of Ruwej's behaviour in the founding of divine kingship performing at one time a *disjunction* and an *alliance* with the foreign hunter and the order he represents. In this context Duysters and Biebuyck's narratives by attributing the two facets of Ruwej's behaviour to different heroines do no more than stress the dual character which characterises the birth of divine kingship, Ruwej promoting a discontinuity between two orders which Kamong was to reconcile (cf. *Palmeirim*). The conjunction of Kamong with Cibind Yirung is however — and as stressed in Carvalho's narrative — an outcome of the alliance which Ruwej took up at first with Yirung, all the more so as it is Ruwej herself who nominates Kamong to become Yirung's fecund wife.

These considerations on the mythical theme of the «sterile mother» in the Ruwund foundation epic unveil the very nature of the power to be installed. Arising from the combined effort between Ruwej, claiming the indigenous authority of the local chiefs, and the newcomer, bearer of an alien rule, the new order presided over by the *Mwant Yaav* will always comprise this irreducible dualism, the symbolic framework laying down the principles which govern the ideology of sacred kingship itself. It is the antagonistic nature of the two orders reconciled at the dawning of divine kingship which confer to the sacred power of the *Mwant Yaav* an ambivalence not unknown among the neighbouring peoples of the Zairian savanna.

As argued by De Heusch (1972:94-5), the bantu myths of the origin of the state insistently develop this dualistic understanding of sovereignty. Thus, the Luba symbolism dictates two principles which define their ideology of divine kingship: the *bufumu*, associated to the sterility of the mythical hero Nkongolo, is the uncouth and totalitarian authority of a terrestrial origin while the *bulopwe* of Mbidi the hunter, source of fecundity, is the celestial aspect of power. The correspondances between this context and the Ruwund are of an extreme clarity as we follow the outcome of De Heusch's analysis (*ibid.*: 199): Ruwej, the chthonian Ruwund princess who abstains from maternity and holds the local authority (the delicacy of which places her at a distance from the rudeness of Nkongolo's realm), is the Ruwund counterpart of Nkongolo while Cibind Yirung, this time a solar hero claiming a close kinship tie to Mbidi Kiluwe (cf.

Duysters, 1958:83), introduces, likewise, the sacralised power associated with fertility. The opposition *bufumu* / *bulopwe* which defines Luba kingship is again the dichotomy between an *autochthonous* authority (conveyed by Nkongolo) and a *foreign* ruling brought from other lands by a great hunter, the two principles which, among the Aruwund, conciliate Ruwej and Yirung in the upbringing of divine kingship. This bicephalous concept of power is to be found in the Zairian savanna, modelled to the particularities of different contexts, with a significant degree of generality, De Heusch's latter developments of this issue (1982: chs. VII, IX) announcing for bantu Africa an invariant ideology of a dual sovereignty (1972:94-5).

The dualism of which the symbolic thought endows the Ruwund ideology of divine kingship is perpetuated at the court where a triad of dignitaries presides over Ruwund political hierarchy: the sovereign, withholding the title of *Mwant Yaav* and representing the mythical hero Cibind Yirung, surrounded by two senior female dignitaries, the *Nswan Murund* and the *Rukonkiish*, who perpetuate the two wives of the Luba hunter, Ruwej and Kamong respectively.

The *Nswan Murund* and the *Rukonkiish* assume within the court the antithetical relationship which, in the myth of origin of the state, opposed Ruwej a Kamong. the *Rukonkiish*, heir of Kamong, gave birth to the first *Mwant Yaav* engaging in a *conjunction* with the Ruwund king, successor of Yirung, and the rise of the sacred kingship. We remarked how Ruwej's refusal to conceive Yirung's child, the first divine king, was meant to bring out an *opposition* with Yirung and the new order he was to introduce. The *atubungu* being the senior indigenous chiefs and the *Nswan Murund* as their representative affirm, therefore, the supremacy of the ancestral rule as opposed to the *Mwant Yaav*'s refined order. It is within this context that, I believe, we should read Byvang's reference to the *Nswan Murund* as «une sorte de personnage vivant en marge de l'autorité indigène, à qui le Conseil Uluunda ni son représentant le Mwant-Yamvo ne peut commander» (1937:429).

Hoover's writings elucidate the different nature of the participation of these two female dignitaries in the sovereignty: «The *nswan murund* reigns but does not rule. She is a co-sovereign constitutionally the equal of the king and senior even to him (...) and she can approve or reject nominated successors to the *mwant yavship*; however she has no particular lands or subchiefs of her own» — and he adds — «such mundane and parochial interests would detract from her universal role» (1978:112). «Mother of the *atubungu*» and representing thus Ruwej and the *unassimilated* ancestral order, the *Nswan Murund* and the *atubungu* are placed far beyond the jurisdiction of the power sustained by the *Mwant Yaav* himself. Representing the Ruwund ancestors, the *atubungu* are the ritual investors of the king and inhabit the lands of the Nkalaany river, site of the enthronement ritual. The *Nswan Murund*, perpetuating this original rule and being the guardian of the symbol of royalty, is therefore not involved in such «parochial interests» as the technicalities of power. These are entrusted to the

Rukonkiis', in this manner disclosing the facet of Ruwej which consented to participate in the exercise of this new ruling: the *Rukonkiish*, thus, «rules but does not reign» as she is engaged with the king in the ruling of the state being his adviser and the owner of extensive territories which she supervises autonomously (cf. *ibid.*). Her role as co-ruler is also reported by Carvalho who insists on her interference in the state affairs and on her influence over the *Mwant Yaav* who often bends under her will (see episode related in 1890:577).

The antinomy present in the myth in the opposition Ruwej / Kamong and perpetuated in the court by the two female senior titles also promotes a bipartition of the space at the royal village (*musumb*) which proceeds immediately from the symmetrical positioning of their residences in relation to the king's compound. Situated on opposite sides of the main route, the *Nswan Murund* is the «mother of the Benemukala seated on the *right* of the supreme chief»⁽⁴⁾ and the *Rukonkiish*, the «mother of the Benemukala seated on the *left* of the *Mwant Yaav*» (Biebuyck, 1957:803)⁽⁵⁾, these places being maintained whenever these females dignitaries take part in a periodic audience (*citentam*) or in any occasions of ritual importance.

This bilateral symmetry in the topography of the court is thus thoroughly intelligible when we consider the Ruwund mythological system. The bipartition of the space as defined by the two female royal dignitaries implies a whole set of structural oppositions which are pertinent in the Ruwund symbolic thought and which ultimately convey, as we stressed, the discontinuity between the primitive realm of Ruwej and the new and more sophisticated order introduced by the alien hunter, Cibind Yirung.

The dualism defined by the two royal mothers in the *musumb* is, curiously enough, unique to the *Mwant Yaav*'s court. On this matter Hoover writes: «They [these two senior titles] may not have been fully understood by distant regional courts: the lateral dualism of the two queens at the king's court is rooted in peculiar events retold in explaining its origin, and it differs from the apparently original Ruund constitutional form with a single queen-mother, the *namwaan*» (1978:113). Again following an historical approach, Hoover seems to wonder whether the presence of the *namwaan* in minor courts is a sign of unclearness on their part as to the distinction between the two female titles at the royal village. I do not, however, share his opinion. In proclaiming the *namwaan* the sole queen-mother in regional courts, the Aruwund make the symbolism at the *musumb* all the more revealing as the symbolic meaning of the two female dignitaries can only be affirmed with reference to the Ruwund king and within the network of relationships they maintain with him. I therefore see no need in considering an «original Ruwund constitutional form» to account for the presen-

⁽⁴⁾ Groups inhabiting the sides of the *musumb*.

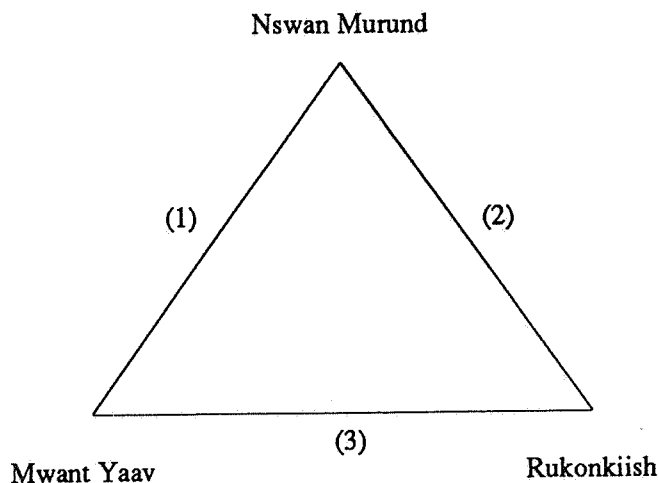
⁽⁵⁾ My emphasis.

ce of the *namwaan* in the peripheral courts as it is only at the royal village that such symbolic dualism bears significance.

Indeed the presence of three main notables at the top of Ruwund hierarchy (the king surrounded by the two woman dignitaries) does not also invalidate the duality which seems to characterise the power among the Aruwund. As in the myth of origin of the state, the autochthonous authority is, in the court, marked by *sterility* as opposed to the *fecundity* which characterises the power held by the *Mwant Yaav*. Heir of Cibind Yirung, who was in the myth associated with fertility (cf. De Heusch,), the *Mwant Yaav* is renowned by his numerous progenies (cf. Carvalho 1890:578-97), Carvalho mentioning that failure in having children condemns the sovereign to resignation from his office (*ibid.*:112).

As opposed to the fecundity of the Ruwund sovereign, the *Nswan Murund* and the *Rukonkiis'*, representing both the native order of Ruwej (the former being the «mother» of the *atubungu* and the latter being the daughter of the *Mukaciland*, a chief of Nkalaany and thus whose native origin is unquestionable), are at the court sterile women. As the Aruwund will explain, the *Rukonkiish* cannot bear offspring as all her children are destined to become *Ant Yaav* (pl.). If there is already a *Mwant Yaav* in office she cannot, thus, bear another child. A female notable in the court, the *Nakambaj*, is in charge of hiding and bringing up in secrecy any child to whom the *Rukonkiish* might have given birth inadvertently. A similar prescription is enforced upon the *Nswan Murund* as a «true» child of Ruwej would, above all candidates, have the right to the throne. This interdiction thus ensures the bipartite character of sovereignty and the autonomy of the ancestral order of Ruwej and the *atubungu* in relation to the *Mwant Yaav* and the sacred monarchy.

The kingship structure among the Aruwund could thus be represented diagrammatically by a trilateral figure, at the apex being placed the *Nswan Murund* who, subsuming the authority of the local ancestors, is raised above the new order presided over by the ruling pair (base):



Hoover makes explicit this symbolic ascendance of the *Nswan Murund* as heir of Ruwej and representative of the Ruwund ancestors, the holders of the ultimate source of power: «Among chiefs it is a greater honour to claim perpetual kinship with Ruwej than with the *mwant yavs*, greater still to be her equal as are the *kabungs* [atubungu] at the Nkalaany» (1978:71).

Observing this triangular representation we realise its multiple possibilities, each of its sides disclosing a pertinent opposition in the Ruwund symbolic framework: (1) the antagonism *Nswan Murund* / *Mwant Yaav* as representatives of the mythical heroes Ruwej and Yirung (see *supra*); (2) the opposition between the two female dignitaries at the royal court as heirs of Ruwej and Kamong (see *supra*); and finally (3) the dichotomy between the pair involved in the exercise of political power, the *Mwant Yaav* holding attributes of Yirung — and thus source of fertility — while the *Rukonkiish*, sterile, ensures Ruwej's presence in the undertaking of the new ruling (*supra*). Again, bringing together the *Nswan Murund* and the *Rukonkiish* on the same side of the triangle as opposed to the vertice occupied by the *Mwant Yaav*, this figuration accounts for the structural dichotomy between the king, successor to Yirung, and the two female dignitaries who, as the variant of Carvalho showed, are both representatives of Ruwej and thus of the indigenous power. As we remarked the *Nswan Murund* and the *Rukonkiish* stress the ambiguity of Ruwej in the rising of divine kingship, an order founded on the alliance of two antithetical elements.

II

Let us then return to the debate «myth versus history». From the previous analysis we come to realise how the affirmation of Ruwej's barrenness by Duysters' informants and Carvalho's claim of her fertility appeared absolutely coherent when fitted into a framework where the units are combined in varied *but structured* arrangements. Carvalho's account which declares Ruwej fertile, far from displaying a «confused» or «simplified» form of the foundation epic elucidates the other versions unfolding one more facet of the Ruwund symbolic thought, the motif of the *alliance* between the native order and the foreign civilisation in the dawning of sacred kingship. The understanding of the Ruwund kingship rationale could only be attained, however, by regarding these oral traditions as «myth» hence dismissing the restrictive task of searching for the «true» or «most reliable» narratives. I therefore believe that a search for a factual truth, setting ethnohistorians in a often unrewarded discussion of the details in which variants do or do not agree, risks to obscure the full understanding of the Ruwund way of thought as, in any case, it will not be «historical reality» which our analysis will succeed to extract from oral traditions but what the Aruwund themselves envisage as reality, impregnated of symbolic constructs alien to our strict conception of «history».

Should we consider the Ruwund epic of the origin of state a rather «camouflaged» narration of a historical event, we would have to come to terms with the *timeless dimension* exhibited by the Ruwund oral traditions. Inheriting with a name all the past experience of their predecessors, living dignitaries become, due to the process of «perpetual kinship» and of «positional succession», the real protagonists of the event recounted in the oral narrative. Thus *Nswan Murund*, incumbent of Ruwej, will recount the myth of the arrival of the Luba Cibind Yirung speaking in the first person as if she herself had witnessed it. She will describe the beauty of the foreigner and her love for him. As Cunnison puts it: «... the recounting of history, as it were by the very person who enacted it, takes no account of the passage of historical time» (1956:46).

Enduring names in unchanging relative positions, the device of perpetual kinship *allows the fixing of narratives at a timeless level*. In these accounts the location of events in time appears therefore not pertinent to the Aruwund as, I would propose, they refer and draw us to a reality which is, in fact, *not historical*. It is mainly of a *symbolic present* that they speak, not of a historical past, indeed they speak of a reality which encompasses *both* past and present in *one same* symbolic continuum. No doubt the mythical narratives are attributed by the Aruwund to «times gone by», to a distant past, however, which can neither be dated nor located, therefore becoming non-temporal. The analysis of the Ruwund foundation myth hoped to have shown that more than a historical content these oral traditions convey a permanent symbolic structure, the same which also largely determines the Ruwund court symbolism and the ideology of divine kingship.

These oral sources thus exhibit a rather adverse nature to the ethnohistorian aiming to reconstruct the Ruwund past, as noted in Cunnison's writings: «In these histories no idea is given of the period to which an event refers. Each history has its own time milieu, which is not set in relation to the time milieu of any wider history. A history is a string of events and there is no indication what length of time elapsed between any two events» (1959: 238). This total unconcern for diachrony in narrations which move within a timeless universe, if making us uneasy as to the usage of the term «history» in this passage, further leads us to believe that these oral traditions do not, in fact, *function* as history.

Roy Willis' work on the Fipa oral sources shows how narratives often neglect an eventual sequence of events, the characteristic of what Willis defines as the «middle stratum» — the accounts of the middle period of Fipa history — being precisely the «randomisation» of the episodes recounted (1976: 4). Here thus, as among the Aruwund, traditions display an almost ahistorical dimension denying even the chronologic nature of history as the order of occurrence of events itself appears to be arbitrary. Yet, these features fall into an intelligible frame should we recognise these oral traditions as proceeding from the symbolic structure, in a word, as «myth», not «history». Of course we are quite aware that ethnohistorians would here speak of «anachronisms» and «time telescoping» to

account for the ahistorical and «presentistic» dimension of oral sources (cf. Miller, 1980: 16-7) and, I am willing to admit, to state that an oral tradition functions as myth or does not obey to the conventional historical parameters might not necessarily mean that it cannot be, all the same, susceptible of containing data on a real past. Joseph Miller is one of the scholars who seems prepared to reconcile «myth» and «history» in oral traditions: «'History' does not stand in opposition to 'myth', nor even 'histories' to 'myths'» as «the style of presentation [mythical] in no way changes the fact that evidence, something surviving from the past, may occur in even the most highly structured narratives» (*ibid.*: 50; see also: 20).

Distinguishing «evidence» from «structure», that is, historical data from the network of perceptual and cosmological categories which the oral narrator employs in reciting a narrative — which he would call the mythical component of oral traditions — Miller reduces «myth» to a mere wrapping of the past in «magical garb» (*ibid.*: 51), to a mere «style of presentation» aiming to confer resistance to traditions against the memory fluidity of an oral setting. The oral narratives if «mythical in style» would still preserve its historical nature in origin and content (*ibid.*: 30).

This argument, however, appealing as it may seem to the historian, can easily enough be inverted, the reverse of the medal appearing equally as plausible, as Fossen shows in his critique to Vansina's approach based on the analysis of the Rouxist messianic movement in France (1980). Fossen accuses Vansina of concentrating exclusively on the oral sources of chiefdoms and early states — withdrawing from searching a historical content in the traditions of hunting-gathering and horticulturalist peoples — not so much because he was able to identify these as accurate historical sources but rather due to the fact that, focussing on succession, these narratives exhibit *the form of history* which «lends a historical flavour to many myths» (*ibid.*: 46; also: 38). As Miller, thus, Fossen also speaks of a misleading style of presentation of oral tradition, here a deceptive *historical* wrapping which conceals a *mythical* content.

If legitimate the claim of a possible historical origin of traditions in nonliterate cultures, I cannot agree with Miller when he writes that «... much history, in literate as well as oral contexts, *seems* mythical because of the style in which it is written, or spoken as the case may be»⁽⁶⁾ (1980: 21). This view apparently discards historians from looking for *meaning* in what, according to these scholars, would be the mythical shell of a narrative. However, should we recognise in «myth» a simple matter of style (cf. *ibid.*: 20), to account for such a rigid symbolic structure as that displayed by the spatial configuration in the Ruwund court — sharing with the myth its fundamental oppositions — would become a rather difficult task as we could hardly make it out to be an outcome of

⁽⁶⁾ My emphasis.

a mere stylistic form seeking to refine the memory of bygone days. If myth was no more than an alternative to the western style of recounting history (cf. Miller, 1980: 20) how — following the suggestion of Fossen (1980: 38) — would ethnohistorians propose to account for its presence in the traditions of, say, hunting and gathering peoples? Vansina, recognising these narratives as of difficult approach, would probably agree without much resistance that they exhibit a rather anti-historical feature. Then we would face a «style» without content! Or we would have to assume mythical creation to be of a diverse nature in these societies from what we observe in the southern savanna states.

Again, to talk about Ruwund court symbolism as well as of the symmetrical arrangement of the space in the royal village as a by-product of conscious and voluntary «structuring» of historical processes would surely be taking it too far. Miller thinks this to be the mechanism by which oral traditions might have acquired a mythical appearance. The oral narrator *consciously* adds to an original description of «reality» a set of cultural beliefs and perceptual categories organising the historical information in order to make it easier to remember: «They *deliberately* employ techniques based on the cliché in order to record accurately, if selectively, and to preserve a memory, if incomplete, of times gone by»⁽⁷⁾ (1980: 51). Thus, narrators would voluntarily «dramatise the past» in a mythical frame following the assumption that «a good story is also a memorable one» (*ibid.*). «Structuring» would thus function as a mnemonic aid and institutions from the present would sometimes represent «present reminders of the past» (*ibid.*: 52) to the teller of oral traditions. However, the analysis undertaken on the Ruwund court symbolism shows how, albeit sharing with the oral narratives a set of main oppositions, these may be performed at the *musumb* in ways which, rather than helping the narrator and the literate historian to reconstruct historical events in an accurate form, appear instead as true obstacles to its recollection by inverting rather than confirming the data conveyed in the oral sources (for instance Kamong is in the myth a fecund woman while in the court her representative, the *Rukonkiish*, is infertile). Indeed the correspondence between myth and ritual is not one of homology as Lévi-Strauss postulates in his *Structure et Dialectique*, the «dialectic relation» residing ultimately at the level of «structure» (1974 [1956]: 265). Finally, if «oral historians are (...) *no less conscious* of the past than are historians in literate cultures»⁽⁸⁾ (Miller, 1980: 52) the task of «unwrapping» history from its supposed mythical coating should prove itself a lot easier to the ethnohistorians than this academic controversy would often lead us to believe.

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⁽⁷⁾ My emphasis.

⁽⁸⁾ My emphasis.

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