TRANSLOCAL ‘KINSHIP’ RELATIONS IN CENTRAL AFRICAN POLITICS OF THE 19TH CENTURY*

Beatrix Heintze
Frobenius Institute, Frankfurt

Introduction

Kin-based groups are amongst the oldest informal and formal mutual protection associations known to man. Ties based on kinship provide relative security in the face of external enemies and other dangers, as well as solidarity with the weaker members of the community in the event of illness, natural disaster and in other times of crisis. If one happened to meet relatives while travelling far from home, no matter how distantly related they might be, one could count on their support, at least for the time being. Groups that were bound to each other through kinship were able to secure political, economic and other opportunities which put them at an advantage vis-à-vis groups joined by association along other lines.

However, kinship may be defined in various ways. The circle of those who may be included differ from society to society, and range from narrow to very broad groups. The links between relatives, and indeed relationship systems as such are—contrary to what has been assumed for long—no perpetual law but, like all expressions of culture, subject to manifold processes of change. Relationships have not only regulated regional relations between people in a significant manner, but also played an outstanding role in ordering relationships at supraregional and political levels, and they continue to be important in some areas.

* I am grateful to Katja Rieck for rendering this text from the original German. All Portuguese citations were translated into English. This paper is the quintessence of a larger work, see Beatrix Heintze, “Luéji, Quinguri, Tembo & Co.: Politik und Verwandtschaft im vorkolonialen Zentralafrika,” (manuscript 2006). I have added in parentheses the Lunda rendering of the most important Lunda names and terms occurring in the Luso-African versions of the sources (according to James Jeffrey Hoover, The Seduction of Ruwej: Reconstructing Ruund History (the Nuclear Lunda; Zaire, Angola, Zambia) (PhD thesis Yale University, Ann Arbor, 1978).
even today. Marriage politics were particularly significant, especially in
monarchies. But beyond such rather mundane strategies, the category
‘kinship’ could at the state level constitute a rather complex network
of real and fictive kinship ties that could shape political life.

This article focuses on the kinship networks operating at the state
level in the great Lunda Commonwealth\(^1\) in Central Africa of the nine-
teenth century. I draw on an unusual source, namely the manuscripts
and publications of Henrique Augusto Dias de Carvalho. They cover
several thousand pages\(^2\) and provide extensive and detailed reports
covering a four-year Portuguese expedition into this region in the
mid-1880s. Carvalho’s work not only gives insight into the principles
of Central African politics at the time but also demonstrates their spe-
cific applications in day-to-day political affairs. Moreover, the political
climate at the time was crisis-ridden and the reports paint a gloomy
picture of the Lunda Commonwealth just before the dawn of the colo-
nial age as being eroded by Chokwe migrations and internal dynastic
conflicts.

The Historical Context

The extensive and later famous Lunda Commonwealth had its origins
in the small kingdom of the Rund, the heartland of Lunda, and its
residence Musumba\(^3\) on the Kalanyi river. Their aggressive expansive
policy was closely linked to the Atlantic slave trade and began around
the middle of the seventeenth century. The warriors of the Rund kings,

\(^1\) A term introduced by Jan Vansina, “Government in Kasai before the Lunda,”

\(^2\) See Henrique Augusto Dias de Carvalho, O Lubuco: Algumas oberservações sobre
o livro do Sr. Latrobe Bateman intitulado The First Ascent of the Kasai (Lisbon, 1889);
Ethnographia e História Tradicional dos Povos da Lunda (Lisbon, 1890); A Lunda ou
os Estados do Muatiânvua, dominios da soberania de Portugal (Lisbon, 1890); Metodo
pratico para fallar a lingua da Lunda contendo narrações histori cas dos diversos povos
(Lisbon, 1890); Descrição da Viagem à Mussumba do Muatiânvua, 4 vols. (Lisbon,
1890–1894); O Jagado de Cassange na Província de Angola. Memoria (Lisbon, 1898)
and manuscripts in the Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino in Lisbon (hereafter AHU).

\(^3\) Mussumba (luso-african) resp. musumb (Rund) connotes every fenced camp or
settlement of a mwant yav (title of the Rund and Lunda kings) or an honorary mwant
yav (Carvalho, Descrição da Viagem à Mussumba do Muatiânvua, II, fn. 613). Mean-
while, this term has become the proper name of a number of residential towns of the
mwant yav on the river Kalanyi. When this meaning is intended, the term will be spelt
with a capital M and without italics.