Victor Turner’s superb ethnography, his virtuoso symbolic analysis, and innovative theoretical developments, have inspired thought-provoking perspectives in the approach to ritual action and social drama in many areas of cultural analysis, whether it be anthropology, the history of religion, literature, or theatre (cf Ashley 1990; Deflem 1991; Moore and Reynolds 1984). That we are capable of engaging in an intergenerational dialogue, or triologue—to paraphrase James Clifford (1988)—and of comparing our own field data to his own, is a tribute to Turner the ethnographer, and bears witness to the solidness of his Ndembu data.

This study deals with the Ndembu of northern Zambia, and the neighbouring Luunda and Yaka of the Kwaango in southwestern Zaire. Ndembu and Yaka peoples owe a great deal of their ritual institutions to the Luunda. About three centuries ago, Luunda groups left the Ruund nucleus in what is now the Zairean province of Shaba, and started to migrate westwards: some settled in the Upper-Kwaango, while others migrated further northwards to impose centralising political institutions onto Yaka people. The Ndembu issue from a southern migration wave out of the same Ruund core. Drawing upon our respective field research among Luunda and Yaka1, we will present a critical evaluation of Turner’s views on Ndembu ritual from a comparative perspective. We will focus on his approach to Ndembu basket divination, ngombu yakusekula (Turner 1961, 1968, 1975).

In a first part, we will discuss Turner’s cognitivist stress in his presentation of the way in which ritual, symbols, and metaphors
operate through their multidimensional meanings in social drama and, in particular, in divination. Drawing on Luunda and Yaka data on divination, we will point out some of the shortcomings and biases of Turner’s view on (divinatory) ritual, and present alternative approaches. It will be argued that a one-sided emphasis on the pragmatics of social transformation by means of symbols as arguments, combined with a cognitive reading of symbolic meaning, brings out only part of what happens in a ritual. We would argue that Turner sees the participants’ position in a ritual as somewhat similar to his own external, though tender, look as ethnographer. Although he acknowledges people’s sensory involvement and sharing of affects and values in rituals, participants mainly enact these as social role players, who thereby come to represent in social life what they reenact in the ritual. Symbols move actors, correct deflections and deviations, resolve social contradictions, and wed actors to the categories and norms of their society. By privileging the symbolic meanings that are grasped by people, and actuating appropriate social action, Turner reduces the ritual to a script or text for society; ritual becomes ‘an orchestration of many genres, styles, moods, atmospheres, tempi, and so on’ (Turner 1977:40).

Secondly, we will compare divination among Ndembu, Luunda and Yaka. With regard to basket divination, Turner’s views imply that the diviner and consultants consider the objects in the diviner’s basket as icons or mnemonic devices in their search for the what, the who and the why of the social problem at hand. Divinatory objects provide an analogical text or a script that outlines political structure and the potent force of kinship; a script that can be read, interpreted, reflexively captured and narrated by the diviner. For Turner, in other words, the hidden script of divination is the social drama, and the divinatory symbols are storage units filled with information, moods, and values that allow for the proper representation and rearrangement of, and involvement with, the interactional plot in a group.

With our comparison of Ndembu, Luunda and Yaka divination, we intend to show how much divination goes beyond the interactional setting of the consultation, the (textual representation of the) social drama, and the purpose of social engineering. Seen in its own terms, divination does not so much offer a mimetic model of a social context, but rather makes a world. We argue that Turner