

"comets importing change of Times and States": ephemerae and process among the Tabwa of Zaire

ALLEN F. ROBERTS—*University of Michigan and Albion College*

Ephemeral phenomena, especially irregular ones like comets, are often neglected by anthropologists, since their brevity would appear to reduce their relevance to and impact on society as long-term process. The study of ephemerae, with that of anomalies and monsters, has been deemed a "bootless sort of wisdom" by many over the centuries.¹ Yet, in the apparition of comets as viewed and understood by the Tabwa of Zaire, an opportunity exists to reflect upon how elements of thought available from explanations of more usual and regular events may be assembled to describe a startlingly different phenomenon. Several issues of theoretical and philosophical importance may be raised as a consequence.

The Tabwa of southeastern Zaire live along the shores and upon the plateaus southwest of Lake Tanganyika. The vegetation of their area, in most places the distanced trees and high grass of *Brachystegia* woodland, does not obscure their view of the heavens (as might the canopy of denser forest). Yet Tabwa, like most other Central Africans, seem to have paid little attention to the stars (although cf. Roberts 1981). The swathes of comets, by contrast, intrigued many Tabwa as they have mankind everywhere over the years (see Lagercrantz 1964). Several turn-of-the-century accounts of comets as perceived by Tabwa exist in

The study of spectacular 19th-century comets, as perceived by the Tabwa of Zaire, provides an opportunity to consider the process of symbolization. Firsthand written accounts discovered in archives are complemented by present-day informants' exegeses. The comet was felt to augur—perhaps to cause—great misfortune. Its symbolism is one of transition and transformation; the propopoeic comet was made the subject of allegory, a story form in which multiplicity of interpretive levels allows narrators and audience to reflect upon social analogies of the "pristine volatility and freedom" and the "pure possibility" the apparition was taken to represent. The discussion leads to an understanding of why, as one very old man had it, the comet was Jesus bringing Europeans the astounding technology and other powers that allowed them to conquer and dominate the Tabwa with such ease. No single interpretation of great changes of Times and States suffices to capture them for the apprehension of all people at all times; so must the symbols marking the advent of transition and transformation be multireferential as the creative impulse is given play. [non-Western astronomy, symbolic analysis, religious change, cosmology, Tabwa, southeastern Zaire]

Copyright © 1982 by the American Ethnological Society
0094-0496/82/040712-18\$2.30/1

missionary literature; more material was gleaned during four years of fieldwork among Lakeside Tabwa.

Some of the most spectacular comets known were visible to 19th-century Tabwa. The Sungrazer of 1843 (I) extended a third of the way across the sky and had two pronounced tails; Donati's Comet of 1858 had a bright nucleus and a scimitar tail; that of 1861 (II) stretched across two-thirds of the sky; Coggia's Comet of 1874 (III) was seen even in full moonlight; the Sungrazers of 1880 (I), 1882 (II), and 1887 (I) were especially brilliant.² These years also saw successive invasion of Tabwa lands by Ngoni raiders at mid-century, Swahili slaver/traders, Nyamwezi elephant hunters, and others who would vie for politico-economic advantage with resident Tabwa chiefs. First European travelers visited in the late 1860s (Livingstone) and 1870s (Cameron, Thomson, Stanley); and in the 1880s an outpost of the International African Association, soon ceded to Missionaries of Our Lady of Africa (White Fathers), was established among Tabwa at Mpala. Tabwa associated these epochal events with comets of the same years. The brilliance of the comets, to follow an image apt to both Tabwa and our own thinking, became that of the events so imported. Perhaps the opposite was also true and the "charged atmosphere" of the historical moment intensified the "brilliance" of the comets (Cassirer 1953:72; Daniel Moerman 1981:personal communication).

A problem of methodology arises as one seeks logical links between information that is scores of years old and that currently known to informants. Perils await he who may propose meanings for symbols without sufficient attention to "temporal embeddedness," or he who may assume symbolic association to be synonymous with "meaning"—a conundrum of no mean measure! The subject of comets as perceived by Tabwa is one of archaeoastronomy. Whereas the richness of the data leads the anthropologist to wish this were an all-too-rare opportunity to trace the transformations of a symbol over the course of the century that Tabwa have been in contact with literate observers (see Ohnuki-Tierney 1981:462), no truly spectacular comets have appeared since just after the turn of the century. Kohoutek let us down!³ "Songs and snatches" are all that are available for analysis, leaving conclusions drawn to be somewhat speculative. This not-so-very-distant past can be reconstituted through data from missionary diaries, letters, and reports; oral traditions as offered and explained by Tabwa today must be exploited as well, to gain a more complete understanding of what comets may have meant to earlier Tabwa.

Contemporary accounts of 19th-century comets discovered in Zairian archives were discussed with key Tabwa informants, several of whom offered exegetical detail of their own.⁴ Most people did not recognize the term "comet" in their own language, or if they did, could give no more detailed explanation of what one is than one might expect of, say, Americans, if asked a similar question. No one contacted was able to provide a coherent account known to or accepted by all other Tabwa listening or later exposed to the thoughts. As a subject of archaeoastronomy, they were obliged to reconstruct what might have been meant, according to a logic *they* believe consistent with that of their ancestors. Their inability to reconstruct the "right" explanation with which everyone would agree is in part a function of being divorced from the actual events by nearly a century or more, in part one of a tendency among Tabwa loath to agree among themselves in conversation concerning *any* topic, so great is their enjoyment of controversy and debate. But if lack of consensus exists at one level, there is another level where ambiguity and paradox themselves have a place and where "edification by puzzlement" (Fernandez 1965:912; 1980; Stromberg 1981:544-545) is a vital part of the dynamic logic.

It is at this second level that ideas and associations stated by Tabwa informants (those of early writers and my own), while retaining their integrity through the course of our analysis,

must be incorporated into a structure consonant with, but generally independent of and unavailable to, Tabwa thinkers (Lévi-Strauss 1963:217–218). This Tabwa cosmological structure has a high degree of coherency and is closely related to the cosmological structures of neighboring peoples (see Roberts 1980, 1981, in press a on the Tabwa; Heusch 1972 on the Luba; Willis 1972, 1981 on the Fipa).

Tabwa called 19th-century comets Kang'inaleza ("the little mother of God") or Kang'inalolo ("the little mother of chiefs"). The comet's name bears an obvious paradox: mothers are for Tabwa what they are for everyone—the essence of love and nurturance; yet *this* "little mother" portends death and disaster. In particular, when a comet appears it is felt that a great chief will perish. But with the death of one chief, another is "born" as a successor begins his own reign. The "little mother," I would suggest, foretells *transition* and *transformation*. It is associated with the period *between* states, rather than with the states themselves. It signals not the "child born" (the new chief, the new state of affairs), but the *bearing*.

Tabwa call an interregnum *kisama*. It is a time of elaborate confusion. My oxymoron is deliberate, for in *kisama*, even as those burying the chief kill, break, or seize for ransom all in their path, in their seeming chaos a "pregnant" moment" is created in which "whole series of occurrences are epitomized and phases of reality that are temporally widely separated . . . connected and linked for historical conception and understanding" (Cassirer 1953:27–28). Turner's (1970:98) discussions of liminality prove apposite to its context, as *kisama* is, truly, a period of "primitive hypothesis," one of "pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise," after which a new reign begins. The comet announces through its references to the unbounded the impending, sanctioned confusion of the interregnum. The comet as a symbol of separation and an agent of transformation shares features with what Hermann Usener has called a "momentary deity" (in Cassirer 1953:19).⁵

Usener's momentary deity is the first phase of an evolution of religious thought. The triggering is of "stark uniqueness and singleness" that "exists only here and now, in one indivisible moment of experience." It "overcomes a man in sheer immediacy, with emotions of fear or hope, terror or wish fulfillment: then the spark jumps somehow across, the tension finds release, as the subjective excitement becomes objectified, and confronts the mind as a god or a daemon." Yet there is a retention of the "pristine volatility and freedom" of the phenomenon (Cassirer 1953:33); made a symbol, its "paradoxical form expresses the inexpressible without betraying it" (Heinz Politzer cited in Crossan 1976:250).

In most anthropological circles, it is unfashionable to consider the origin and evolution of religious concepts (although the same is done in the guise of studying "the symbolization process"). Following Durkheim (1966), 19th-century theories of animism and naturism propounded by Usener, Max Müller, and others have been dismissed from our discourse and indeed, from our knowledge. What for Usener might be a "momentary deity" is for Durkheim (1966:103) merely a "momentary variation" of the "regularity which approaches monotony" synonymous with nature. Producing only "equally momentary impressions," such "variations" could not "serve as a basis for these stable and permanent systems of ideas and practices which constitute religions." Certainly, most would agree with Durkheim (1966:103) that "we misunderstand what the religious sentiment really is, if we confound it with every impression of admiration and surprise"; few would be so naive as to assume that in speaking of comets or other ephemerae, we are assuming for them "a veritable creation *ex nihilo*" (1966:106). Yet, just as Durkheim (1966:42) finds that "the new is a part of nature just as well as its contrary," so can an examination of Tabwa perceptions

of comets—which, by their accounts, burst upon the senses—hint at the nature and direction of *noticing* or “pointing,” which must precede the function of denoting or naming (Cassirer 1953:29; Ohnuki-Tierney 1981:457).

While many (Westerners included) have been surprised by the apparition of unexpected comets (Brown 1974:81), comets do not “shoot” or otherwise move rapidly (as do meteors and bolides). Indeed, some comets have been seen for extended periods (e.g., Comet 1811 [I], visible in the Southern Hemisphere to the naked eye for about ten months; Chambers 1910:140). A comet’s apparition, then, may be a singular and startling event, but it lingers; and in the 19th century, a series of spectacular comets must have allowed beliefs concerning them to be routinized.

To the double meaning of “the little mother” mentioned above is added another, since other events, although important, were *not* so presaged. While for Cassirer and Usener a momentary deity evolves into a generality (a special god, *Sondergötter*) associated with “some rustic activity” (Cassirer 1953:19; cf. Weber 1963 [1922]:10–19), comets are not common or predictable and so cannot invariably herald change, except, perhaps, in distant afterthought as time and event are collapsed. The very unpredictability of the comet in the natural realm is what makes it such a useful vehicle for contemplation through its ready analogy to events in the social one. Death is the predictably unpredictable foil of order, a surprise, yet one that happens to us all. The continuity of kinship is predicated upon the discontinuity of particular lives. The unpredictability of the comet leads to an easy analogy with the nature but also to the cause of death—often sorcery perpetrated by close kinsmen or neighbors with whom one has had lifelong relations of positive intimacy. If not one of Usener’s “special gods,” repeated (although astronomically different) comets *did* come to symbolize such capriciousness in social life, unexpected but inevitable.

Some of Usener’s insight, however outmoded in its overall sweep, proves useful to our apprehension of the “sudden perception of an objective relation” that is metaphor (Herbert Read cited in Empson 1966:2), as the mind moves from noticing to denoting to connoting to assuming that the phenomenon in question imports some likely condition or outcome. This progression is similar to that most recently discussed by Ohnuki-Tierney (1981) as the “phases of symbolization” and is reminiscent of the much earlier distinction drawn by Mill (1956 [1843]) and Spencer 1976 [1866] between denotation (Ohnuki-Tierney’s phases A-C) and connotation (phases D-F). Attempting to dissect the process of symbolization into its constituent parts (roughly following the progression of the subheadings of this paper) presents difficulties, given the historical nature of the data. Rather, the phases are condensed as presented in written sources or as known now, and the sense of wonder is mixed with these later, complex phases of symbolization, including causation. These texts might be considered analogous to the icons Ohnuki-Tierney discusses as the last phase of symbolization.

The following exegetical material captures the excitement of the event of apparition. It also allows an understanding of how useful the phenomenon was to prove to Tabwa—like us all—trying to understand through its analogy the nature of their own existence in a world of social as well as cosmic surprises.

the sanguine comet’s baleful glare (Virgil)

At first glance, the various accounts seem confused, a jumble of images. “They saw with stupefaction something in the east which shone like the moon, but which was not the moon. The thing had a sort of head, luminous like the Morning Star, but much larger than

this latter, for it was fat (*grosse*) like the moon, and [yet] it was not the moon" (Colle 1935:466).⁶ One has the impression of a narrator groping for a proper image.

This head scintillated and whirled, "one would have said [it was like] a 'pande' shell," (that is, a spiral). Firey flames were emitted all around it. She was round, had numerous, diversely-colored, parallel lines, one would say like the sun's rays. Her light was almost as bright as that of the sun, and on moonless nights, one could see as one can with a full moon. . . . Those who saw her compared her to the rainbow, but a rainbow white and red only, altogether unique in the sky, long and curved like the bow of a hunter; for under the spiral of fire, there descended a long curved tail. . . . On one side it had a little wing, and on the other side too, long like those of the nightjar, white on all sides [and] enveloped in mist (*fumée*) like the rain clouds. The plumes of fire resembled two trails of stars, which consumed themselves by burning like the sun (Colle 1935:466-467).⁷

The familiar phenomena—moon, sun, fire, and rain—are conjured, yet none quite suffices to capture the brilliance of the great comet. As a Tabwa friend told me, "It was like a bullet, people didn't know what it was"; that is, it "exploded" upon their senses. Rather than being a function of contradiction, "indecision, linguistic incompetence, or critical misapprehension," however, this account may be seen as an "obedient reflection of the multiplicity imaged in and by" the comet (Crossan 1976:274).

Such wealth of detail deserves scrutiny. The comet is like the moon and its "whirling" is evocative of the spiral of the conus shell disks, called "*pande*" or *mpande*. The two, moon and shell, are of a paradigm, as is most clearly shown in a set of Tabwa myths about the construction of a tower to reach the heavens, in which they are interchanged without altering the story structure (Roberts 1980:416-430). The *mpande* shell is a particularly important symbol, since, as I have suggested elsewhere (Roberts 1980:96-101), its flat spiral or concentric circles are a representation of the chief's descent, expanding outward from the emergence of the primal ancestor from a deep pool or hole in the ground (the center of the shell disk, often where a hole is practiced) to the limits of time and space imposed upon the Tabwa-centric universe (cf. Shorter 1972:104). There are other dimensions to the symbol as well.

At birth, every Tabwa is given a "belt," which is kept throughout life and inherited. The object may change and need not be a belt, although figuratively called that. To succeed someone is "to wear the belt" of that person. Life is eternal in that the "belt" is always inherited (except in the case of executed sorcerers; see Roberts in press a), but finite in that each individual is born and dies. Descent is a succession of "belts" over time, each generation encompassing that of all those preceding. The image that results, reproduced by the *mpande* shell disk as discerned by Tabwa observers, is of an expanding set of concentric circles ("belts") or a flat spiral.

With this in mind, it is not difficult to understand why there was equivocation in the comparison between the "head" of the comet and the conus disk by Colle's Tabwa informant. The shell is used to celebrate the continuity of a line of chiefs; in earlier days, only chiefs could possess or display them. As a lunar symbol and one evoking kinship and descent, it must be opposed to the comet that brings death and destruction and is called "the devourer of chiefs" (Colle 1935:466). Although a celebration of continuity, the shell is also a metonymic recognition of the discrete units of its composition: the lives of succeeding chiefs represented by the turn of its spiral. Paradoxically, for there to be continuation, there must be discontinuity. Life is posited upon the assumption of death. The comet, like an *mpande* shell, celebrates both succession (discontinuity) and kinship (continuity).

The comet was *like* these lunar referents, but was not limited to them. It was also sunlike in its brilliance and in the constancy with which it reappeared in the same place, night after night (Colle 1935:467; Kaoze 1909:43), a feature like the sun's own unchanging, repetitive nature (and opposed to the moon's varying phases and positions in the sky at nightfall).⁸ Colle (1935:467) notes that many dared not look at the comet, as "it entered into their eyes, as does the sun he who stares at it." A praise for the Supreme Being known to Tabwa and

neighboring Luba peoples, and equating God with sun, is "the sun at which one cannot stare" (Van Caeneghem 1956:53). The comet, then, would be of a set with both God and the sun.

An implicit relation, verbalized by a Tabwa informant, is that "a sorcerer is the sun, and the sun is God," an equation based on the belief that a sorcerer seeks God-like transcendence of cultural and natural laws, with effects on the community as devastating as those of an overstrong or uncontrolled sun on growing crops. The comet's apparition spells death (like a sorcerer's actions) and in some of its attributes it appears "solar," a refraction of an otiose deity that itself might be seen as "a unification of infinite diversities" (Deng 1973:50).

The comet is also compared to the rainbow. Both comets and the rainbow, for my informants, are red, and everything they fall upon is reddened, withers, and dies. Red is the color of shed blood, hence frequently metonymic for the transitions of violence and death. The rainbow both signals and "causes" the end of the rainy season; its power to dessicate makes it of a set with the sun, the advent of whose moment (the dry season) the rainbow ensures.

Colle's informants said the rainbow is red and white. These two colors are most often opposed, as are war and peace, death and life, famine and bounty; and so they do not appear together in many contexts. Where they do, one may expect this coexistence of itself to be significant. As Turner (1970:99) notes, the "coincidence of opposite processes and notions in a single representation characterizes the peculiar unity of the liminal: that which is neither this nor that, and yet is both." One context where both colors are found is on *mwamba* shrine objects, clay representations of the rainbow made as offerings to the afflicting spirit of that name. This dichromatism reflects the Tabwa perception of the rainbow as possessing both qualities, both members of the opposed pair: being both destructive and necessary to life, the rainbow is the two-way transformer between the states. As a symbol, the comet likewise foreshadows the impending liminality of interregnum or other transitions.

Such multiplicity of meanings for a single phenomenon is consonant with Kaoze's (1909:43) insistence that the great comets appear for seven days, or Colle's (1913, II:718) that the Sungrazer of 1843 (I) appeared for nine days every month for two successive years. A song about the comet ends in the refrain, "Ohee! She is invisible!" (Colle 1913, II:718). A body must be *present* to be invisible, a paradox recognized by Tabwa. If it may be assumed that "seven days" or "nine" are spans accurate in terms of meaning, if not necessarily in absolute chronology, then one may speculate that at issue here is the visibility of the comet, conditioned by concurrent phenomena. Specifically, all but the most spectacularly bright comets are invisible in competition with moonlight. Before moonrise, after moonset, and as moonlight wanes and ceases at the new moon, the comet "appears." In the last case it does so for a few days (perhaps "seven"), to disappear again until the next month's darkest nights. This suggests an opposition between the comet's and the moon's light.

Sun and moon may be opposed in Tabwa cosmological thought, as they are in that of neighboring people. The sun is continuity, lack of restraint, heat, dryness and the dry season, sterility, famine, and disease; the moon, by contrast, is periodic, measured, cool, wet and the rainy season, fertility, bounty, and health. Lunar heroes struggle with and often vanquish solar ones in myths, bringing to the universe order, cycles of succession, and, for neighboring Luba whose precolonial political organization was more complex than that of the Tabwa, the state (Heusch 1972; Reefe 1981). The essence of chiefship is grasped by Tabwa through a lunar metaphor. As sun and moon may be opposed in the cosmos, so may comet and chiefship.

Outside activities and travels are conducted in full moonlight, and in general, lunar

phenomena are “beneficent” according to Tabwa thought. As the neighboring Luba have it, moonlight “illuminates” the Earth, the verb *kutokezya* being employed. This carries the sense “to whiten, to render clear, clean, cloudless, calm; to purify or make happy” (Theuws 1954:50). Lest one assume the symbolism to be univocal, a Tabwa proverb has it that “someone has been fooled by the moonlight” (Kaoze and Nagant 1973:756), reminding us of midsummer nights’ dreams when the marvelous reigns. In general, though, a primary distinction is drawn between auspicious moonlight and the inauspiciousness of its lack.

Ndubilubi, the tenebrous two or three nights of the new moon, is a time of fear and wonder for Tabwa, when large numbers of fish and game may be seen that always seem to elude their stalkers. The prosopopoeic moon is an *ndozi* or sorcerer then, it is said, preventing man’s success in the chase. Even as the moon is itself invisible during *ndubilubi* to all save those with the singular ken of the practitioner (hence another name for these days, *kamwonanganga* [the one seen by the practitioner]), it tantalizes Tabwa fishermen and hunters. Ferocious beasts and pernicious serpents, by contrast, pose a very tangible threat as they “wander about excessively” during *ndubilubi*. For those few days, the ophidian manifestations of Earth spirits—immense snakes that “sparkle like the stars”—descend from the mountain lairs where they have lain in peaceful repose, to afflict all imprudent passersby. That is, what “should” be seen (the moon itself and the sources of danger its light illuminates) is not; while that which “should not” (e.g., lions and serpents that can be avoided if seen under normal circumstances) is. The transitional quality—the liminality of the moment between light and darkness—is one of a set with other cultural and natural phenomena “betwixt and between,” sorcery in the social setting being a prominent member. The striking brilliance of a comet at such an *ordinarily* inauspicious time of reversals must be a doubly baneful portent. Its disappearance as auspicious moonlight again illuminates the Earth proves an especially alarming analogy with sorcerers who may inhabit a same or adjacent household and whose nefarious side is masked by one of ordinary congeniality.

A descriptive association from Colle and other primary sources is between the streaming tail of the comet and the feathers of the nightjar. Old Kizumina sang for us in KITabwa about the comets of the past: *kang’inalolo wa kamwene pa kapili, kavwele mintetenga* (“You have seen Kang’inalolo on the hill, it is wearing streaming feathers”).

Such feathers, it was explained, are like those of pennant-winged nightjars (*Macrodipterix vexillarius*), crepuscular birds that migrate southward to Central Africa, to breed there from September to November (Williams 1964:159; Reynolds 1980:26). This time, in turn, is marked by *kansensebwa*, a wind blowing from the north only then, which brings the first rains. It may be said that the arrival of the nightjars, their breeding, and their being most evident at twilight (the limen between light and dark), coincides with or “brings” the transition to the rains of October. That the comet’s “feathers” should be “enveloped in mist like the rain clouds” bespeaks this relationship. Yet, in the sentence following, the same are called “plumes of fire . . . which consumed themselves by burning like the sun.” Is this mixed imagery of rain and sun as confused as it may appear?

A return to Tabwa ideas concerning the rainbow provides an answer. It is said that the rainbow dries or “burns” the rains of late spring and thus ushers in the dry season. Tabwa believe the rainbow to be the breath of an immense serpent emitted from the ground, through holes in parched forest clearings or those of termitaries. The serpent is mentioned in another context: the bushfires set late in the dry season to clear the land of debris and to aid in hunting in vacant fields and mountains. Medicines are put in the woods at a place thus destined to become the center of the holocaust; fires are set that, once caught by the four cardinal winds, are brought to a center—that of the medicines. Animals are forced to

congregate there as the pyrrhic circle closes. As they perish, the swirling column of smoke is Nfwimina (the great serpent) standing on its tail. The smoke of such fires is deemed to bring the first rains. In other words, Nfwimina terminates the rains with its multicolored breath (the rainbow) and then ensures their return at the end of the opposite term (the dry season). Again, the rainbow is a transformative agent of dual "valence."

A final point reinforces the comet's association with the rainbow. At dawn, the comet "vanished" (*s'évanouir*) like a wisp (*fumée*)" (Colle 1935:467). In this, it is like the rainbow, said to be ethereal, like *funta* (the fog of the rainy season) or *lunsilila* (the haze of the dry). With such phenomena, if one sees them before himself and then goes to that place, he will find nothing there; so it is with the rainbow. Many told us of having tried to reach the place where they saw the rainbow descending, only to find it forever before them, as if in retreat. The comet was an intangible; yet it, like the rainbow, was a sign of transition that could not be ignored.

brandish your crystal tresses to the sky (Shakespeare): the comet personified

There is a second set of images in these same accounts. Not only did the comet have a "head," as above; it "undoubtedly had eyes and ears, but because of the distance, we didn't see them." Furthermore, it had

the appearance of a human, a body, a chest [and] arms, all which scintillated. She had no legs, for she seemed to emerge from a hole twisting about from the waist, and was the size of a child. . . . In the middle of her chest she was whiter than the whitest cloth. . . . Our fathers called this brilliant thing "little mother, girl," for she did not vary, every day she was the same, without *aging*, always beautiful, always radiant (*plein d'éclat*), surpassing the splendor of all the stars (Colle 1935:466-467).

In this last regard, Schmitz (1903:316) wrote that a longer name for the comet is Kang'in-aleza Kansimwonamitenge. He translated the second word as "the one who has not been inside the house of men," offered that this refers to the belief that the comet is a "virgin," and compared "her" to Mary. Kaoze (1909:41), too, noted that the comet is "like a youngster, because it was truly beautiful."

That the "virgin" is not a whole person, but one visible from the waist up, may be explained by the tail of the comet extending below the horizon, "into the Earth." This division (or transition) is more significant a trait than such a matter-of-fact explanation might denote, however. In two myths dealing with the origin of death, the opposition of states is contained in or made manifest by the same person (Colle 1913, II:522-523, 519). In both, an aged woman, the senior wife of Kyomba (the first named man), seeks rejuvenation. In strict seclusion, she begins to remove her old skin to reveal a new one, "fresh as that of a baby," as one account has it; in the other, she became "a beautiful, totally-white girl, *toute fraîche*, one would say she had just been born" (Colle 1913, II:523, 519). The comparison with the lovely, never-aging childlike Kang'inalolo, whose "chest . . . was whiter than the whitest cloth," is unmistakable. The metamorphosis of the old woman is interrupted, however, by bumptious second wives. In the one story, the old woman has yet to remove the skin from her head and is thus divided between old and new; her demise results from this incompleteness. Both the woman seeking transformation and the one interrupting the process are stricken, and death is introduced to the human condition thereafter.

The comparison between the aged woman seeking rejuvenation through the removal of her skin, and the manner in which snakes are thought to do this, is made manifest by other

Tabwa myths in which a serpent receives immortality from God (*Institut Apostolique* 1882:27). Immortality, in turn, is one trait of a set with other linear, uncontained, unrestrained members personified by the rainbow-breathing solar serpent, Nfwimina.

The *kizimba* (activating agent; Richards 1969) of Nfwimina may be employed in potent medicines by Tabwa practitioners and specifically in "stopping the sun" (*kusimika jua*). This is effected to prevent rain and bring the sun to remain stationary at its zenith, that it may cause an enemy's fields to wither. Such is blatant sorcery. Given the difficulty of obtaining such a rare substance through combat with Nfwimina itself, a transformation is sought. One possible source is in the execution of a *musala*: an amenorrheal woman, referred to as a "woman-man" because of this. Luba-ized Tabwa describe the rainbow as the union of two opposite-sexed serpents (Colle 1913, I:353), which, as both male and female, is neither one nor the other, but oddly both. So is the *musala*, and it is she who makes the strongest *nkula*, the crimson powder of *Pterocarpus* bark used to signify violent intent (Roberts 1980:233-257).⁹ The *musala* and the old woman seeking immortality are closely linked. Furthermore, the contradictions that each embodies are like those of the comet, half-emerged from a "hole," whose exposed head and torso are opposed to her unavailable loins.

This opposition, in turn, allows consideration of an issue raised in Willis's (1972; 1981:189-191) studies of the Fipa. The Fipa live directly across Lake Tanganyika from the Tabwa, and my Tabwa informants agree with Willis's Fipa ones that Fipa commoners are Tabwa immigrants (Willis 1964:342), long separated. In discussing Fipa notions of sovereignty and descent, Willis has discerned an important pair of opposed, "dominant symbols," which he terms "head" and "loins" respectively.¹⁰ Of a paradigm with "head," he finds the Twa lineage of chiefs (who do *not* trace their ancestry to Tabwa), authority, seniority, masculinity, intellect, patrilineal kin; and at the most abstract level, becoming, contingency, and change. "Loins" is of a set with the Milansi commoners (the distant Tabwa relatives), submission, "juniority," femininity, sexuality, reproduction, maternity, matriline; and abstractly, being, transcendence, and continuity (Willis 1972:316, 318). This structure is common to Fipa and Tabwa thought and is closely related to that of Luba as well (see Heusch 1972:53-56 on the personified rainbow's severed head). "The little mother of chiefs," the comet, is only the first member of this opposition, however, hence quintessential "head." Just as the division of the old woman seeking rejuvenation spelled her doom, so must any occasion when only half of the head/loins opposition is present (and particularly only the former, with its references to hunting, warfare, and authority without subjects, among other things).

That this imbalance should be so fraught with danger is even clearer from other ethnographic detail. Schmitz (1903) wrote that the "beautiful child" (the comet) was a "virgin." The name he cites contains more information than Schmitz reveals. In typical Bantu fashion, Kansimwonamitenge is a collection of word particles (*ka-* [little], *-si-* [not], *-mw-* [third person personal pronoun], *-ona-* [to see]). The final *-mitenge* may refer to "roofs" (Van Acker 1907:67), but probably refers more specifically to the temple of the same name of the defunct Butwa society, an organization once widespread throughout Tabwa and societies adjacent to the south. Some authors have reported that within the dark, windowless recesses of the *lutenge*, all manner of sexual excess took place. Others qualify this, noting that "the essential goal of Butwa is the initiation to puberty" and "teaching and accustoming the young to their relations with the opposite sex" (Brelsford 1974:30; Colle 1912:195; Gouldsbury and Sheane 1911:260). I have suggested elsewhere (Roberts 1980) that the design of the secret hut of the myth mentioned above, to which the old woman repairs seeking rejuvenation, is of a paradigm with the *lutenge*. Death originates at the center of the former, replaced by sexual license in the latter. Kang'inalolo, the pro-

sopopoetic comet, “has not seen the [inside of] Butwa temples,” and so Schmitz might conclude “she” is a virgin. But in her second name there is implicit reference to sex and violence.

This recognition is important to understanding a taunt in which the comet is evoked. “Unmarried girl so spruced up and proud, have you seen Kang’inaleza? We have seen her on the hill, surrounded by her friends.” Colle explains that the “friends” (*masimba*) are the rays or tail of the comet. Alphonse Kiwele, an early Tabwa cleric, explained to Father Colle that when a young person who had dressed for a dance swaggered or sashayed (*dandiner*) through the village, the elders would call this out. Colle (1935:466) adds (as if this were a conclusion) that “Kang’inaleza is all that is the most beautiful” (see also Van Acker 1907:49).¹¹ Such is true, and the older people are making a comparison between the young person and one more attractive still. But the comet presages great misfortune, and their irony is directed at the less salubrious consequences of pride, vanity, and egotism. The Tabwa myth of the chief who would seize the moon by building a tower to the heavens is a more explicit tale (although one of opposite sexual symbolism, some might say) in which these qualities are given physical representation; the tower crumbles, bringing death to the hubristic.

Kang’inalolo has a divided self. The exposed portion of her body is so “white,” so beautiful, that she is called a “virgin”—one nubile, one desired. Her loins are hidden, though, and so such emotions are fatuous. Instead, through her relation to the rainbow, the immediate message she brings is one of sterility and impending disaster.

some say that thou dost never fail to bring some mischief in thy tail (Lattey)

This explains something of what Kang’inalolo is. We may now examine what Tabwa say or have said “she” imports and what measures man may take in response.

Above all, 19th-century (and earlier?) comets are remembered for the chiefs said to have died soon after their appearances. The comet is called Kang’inalolo, “the little mother of chiefs.” *Kilolo* (chief)¹² is probably derived from the verb *-lola* (to be awake, to see, to lead to, to mean; Van Acker 1907:45; White Fathers 1954:354). Sight, perception, and meaning, then, are personified in the chief, *kilolo*. There may be a pun in this name for the comet, however, for a derivative verb, *-lolesha*, means “to covet” (or look at something overintently, with envy or unseemly attention), and *lolo*, a noun, is “a confirmed thief” (White Fathers 1954:355)—that is, one who not only covets, but *takes*. The comet, Kang’inalolo, may be the “little mother of chiefs” or the “little mother/thief,” one who “steals” lives. This adds to the pregnancy of the paradox and is similar to the chief’s own dual nature as “father of his people” and the greatest sorcerer in the land.

According to Colle (1935:467), another name for the comet is Kapata Makolo, which he translated as “the destroyer of chiefs.” His gloss is inadequate. *Makolo* are indeed “chiefs,” a term derived from the sense of the verb *-kola* as “a scraping together” of subjects. *-kola* also refers to intoxication, poisoning, or severe coughing (“scraping out” the throat) and provides the root for the name of the rainbow, *mukola mvula*. This latter not only “scrapes away the rain” (*mvula*; White Fathers 1954:263), and thus causes it to cease according to Tabwa, but is associated with all manner of disease and disaster, as above (cf. Heusch 1972). This, like Kang’in’alolo, is a multidimensional name, then.

The other word in the same name, *kapata*, is only figuratively “to destroy,” as Colle would have it. *Kupata*, the verb, is “to stick in the throat,” as may a bone or food, a meaning it has in Kiluba and CiBemba as well. In the latter languages, it can be “to have bad luck” (as one does who chokes!), but also “to have difficulty in talking due to a thick

tongue" (from stroke?), hence "to be muddled" as well as "to be susceptible to all kinds of disease" (Van Acker 1907:52; Van Avermaet and Mbuya 1954:502-504; White Fathers 1954:593). The pun inherent in the word *makolo* is thus reinforced: coughing on the one hand, choking on the other. The data allow no clear explanation of this name as a whole, although some speculation is possible.

Tabwa and Luba preserved relics—generally the skulls—of their antecedents. Verbeke (1937) has written that for Luba, only the crania of chiefs dying violently would be kept in this way; if the man died peacefully, his skull would be replaced by the skull of one of his brothers ritually executed for the purpose. Red *nkula* powder would be employed to stuff the nose and throat of the victim, that he might suffocate (Verbeke 1937:54; cf. Verhulpen 1936:94). Heusch (1972:42-46) is correct in suggesting that the use of *nkula* here evokes Nkongolo Mwamba, the primal Luba monarch and personified rainbow. The same relation exists in Tabwa thought between the substance and Nfwimina, the rainbow-breathing serpent, as mediated by the *musala* (woman-man) who grinds the bark into powder. Here it is as though the sacrificial victim, associated with the moon and rains through his chiefship (in ways outlined by Heusch), were being forced to ingest the rainbow itself, in its surrogate substance. The "rainbow" ends the "rains" as the chief's substitute succumbs. Might not the verb *kupata* in KiLuba refer to this? That the *dipata* is the seat of Luba chiefship (at least for the Luba Samba), where the baskets containing these same relics are kept (Van Avermaet and Mbuya 1954:501), would suggest such an important association. By this reasoning, the comet's name or praise, Kapata Makolo, might be better translated as "the stifler of chiefs."

To be stifled is ultimately to perish; but to a less extreme degree, it is to be *silenced*. The chief was "speechless" before the apparition of the comet and would hide in his house at night to avoid looking at its brilliant, perilous light (Colle 1935:467). The play between speech and light is one of great importance to Tabwa thinking, for it is believed that at death one's speech *becomes* light.

Consider two Tabwa proverbs. "The chief is his people" (*sultani ni watu*) is a commonly made statement of the leader's identification with those dependent upon him. "The chief is the belt which preserves the people of the public place" (Kaoze and Nagant 1973:757) requires more explanation. *Nsaka* (the public place) is derived from the verb *kusaka* in KiTabwa, meaning to surround a cultivated field or other place with a thorn hedge or ditching, to protect it from animals or other intruders. *Nsaka* (or *lusako*) itself may refer to the hedge or other device, or more figuratively to the space enclosed (Van Acker 1907:56-57; White Fathers 1954:547). *Nsaka* may also be the meeting ground before the chief's residence. In explaining the term, informants pointed to the place's use in the evenings, when young people assemble to hear stories told by the elders, the chief predominant among them. A fire is lit and all sit within its glow. *Kizingo* (belt), in the same proverb, has among its meanings "circle," and in this case one may guess it to be that of light thrown by the fire lit for the event. The meeting ground is bounded, as one would expect an *nsaka* to be, given its other meanings, only by the firelight. Definition is from the center to the periphery, as opposed to other *nsakas* that are surrounded.

Those who congregate in the *nsaka* do so for the transmission of knowledge. The center of attention is the speaker, the chief who "is" the heritage he conveys, just as he "is" his people. Speech and light combine in the *nsaka*. Kaoze does not translate *kizingo* as "circle," however, but chooses the more specific referent "belt." Earlier, the "belt" was discussed in terms of Tabwa descent; it is metonymic for a human lifetime, encompassing an individual's time on Earth from birth, when it is received, until death, when given to an heir. Here the "belt" refers to the firelight before the chief's residence. A chief's "belt" encircles not only his own life, but those of his subjects with whom he is identified. The stories

told around the fire are the wisdom of his time. The chief's "belt" is his reign: it is those who lived when he did, and what they knew and did.

Kaoze (1909:93) offers an unexplained, tantalizing datum: when the comet appeared, a fire would be lit in the *nsaka*. As an omen (or "cause") of the chief's demise, the comet must be opposed in some manner, that its baneful nature be held in check. The terrestrial and wordly light of the chief is to counteract that of the heavens, that the chief's words not become light through his death. Reference to quintessential "loins" (the "belt," continuity, kinship, life, and fertility) is made to oppose the "severed head" of the comet. In saving the chief, the people save themselves, as they conceive of their social life in his person.

The above is of accord with the notion that the comet is like a rainbow. The redness and transformative power of the one is as lethal as that of the other. Tabwa chiefship, like Luba, is endowed with and understood through lunar symbolism and is opposed to the rainbow and the solar serpent producing it. The death and burial of Tabwa chiefs was, in earlier days, performed in an idiom of the seasons; the wet-season hero, the chief who has protected and ensured the fecundity and well-being of his people, was buried by "grandchildren" acting as heroes of the dry season. The skull of the chief would be preserved while the rest of the corpse was buried in a grave under or beside a water body or course. This division, head/body, was, at least sometimes, augured by and in the comet's disjointed appearance, as was the momentary victory of solar principles over lunar ones.

The lethal breath of the solar serpent Nfwimina is displayed as the rainbow, and it redens, dries, and exterminates all upon which it falls. The time most associated with the rainbow, when rains are still heavy but on the wane, is one of *kimina* or pestilence, smallpox, and malaria. Should a woman carelessly leave her cooking pots upside-down on the ground then, Nfwimina's breath will contaminate them and her family will suddenly die. Measles and coughs may afflict youngsters, again as products of Nfwimina's breath. Given the relation drawn between the rainbow and the comet (one of whose names contains references to severe coughing, choking, strokes [?], and susceptibility to disease), little wonder is it that the appearance of the comet, too, is said to have heralded epidemics of smallpox and cholera (cf. Langercrantz 1964:322). Again, the relation posited between rainbow (that "dries" so severely) and comet is consonant with the Tabwa observation that the comet announced (or "brought") famine. More figuratively, referring to the Tabwa song of Kang'in-alolo sung to a vain young woman, a further verse ironically asks the "little mother" what one will eat at her home and concludes "I weep, I weep like a slave, as at their home, if one says 'we eat well here,' they will laugh" (Colle 1913, II:718; my translation from the KiTabwa). Vanity may be associated with sterility, as above, and is of a set with the disregard of household responsibilities devised to ensure the maintenance of a family and to avoid starvation (especially of nurslings).

Finally, having said something of the transformative nature of the rainbow (stopping and returning the rains), we can make sense of Schmitz's assertion that people believed the comet to bring both grief and riches. Nfwimina is also called "the mother of wealth" by Tabwa and is associated with the gold and other resources the colonists exploited in Tabwa territory. The inverse is the comet's own attractiveness, at once captivating and perilous. A derivative noun, *makola*, from the same root as are names for the rainbow (*mukola mvula*) and the comet (*kapata makolo*), can mean "beauty" in KiTabwa (Van Acker 1907:37), underscoring this relationship. Life is not, and never has been, easy for Tabwa. Those too weak to farm, fish, and otherwise "keep their end up," may perish. Those who prove remarkably successful, who become "wealthy" and above, hence outside, the norm, are strongly suspected of sorcery.

If for the Tabwa, speech (viz., verbal communication) becomes light at an individual's death, then *this* great light, the comet, is communication inverted, muffled, or muddled.

Rather than uniting men, it divides them through the discontinuity of death. Death is not absolute separation for Tabwa, but a change of state. A new sort of communication is possible and necessary between the spirit and its survivors, initiated by the former through affliction, recognized and made comprehensible by the latter through dreams, possession ceremonies, and divination (see Davis-Roberts 1980; Nagant 1976). While announcing the *discontinuity* of death, then, the comet presages the continuity to be established with the new spirit.

farewell, dear comet, rainbow of my soul (Mollère)

Our discussion of Tabwa cometary lore is not quite complete. Kapata makolo, “the stifler of chiefs,” was a name for a comet as above. It is also a term for “pistol,” according to the KiTabwa/French dictionary of Van Acker (1907:52). My own informants used a related image, comet as “bullet,” but there are important historical dimensions outstanding. More than any other “technogen,” the pistol or gun must symbolize the momentous change in Tabwa life and culture effected by 19th-century intrusives, both African and European (see Headrick 1981). Specifically, a particularly well known tale concerns the establishment of European presence and power with the collision of two great egos, those of Tabwa chief Lusinga and the International African Association expedition leader Emile Storms, who created an outpost at Mpala in 1883 (very shortly after the spectacular Sungrazer Comet of 1882 [1], a “truly remarkable event for all the niggers of Tanganyika”; Vyncke 1887). Lusinga was intrigued by Storms’s brace of pistols and wished to obtain these and other firearms to pursue his slaving. Storms reacted to his belligerent demands by having him assassinated and decapitated. This latter act (with Lusinga’s skull sent to Belgium for study by anthropologists!) ironically recapitulated the ordinary division of head and body practiced at a Tabwa chief’s death. Rather than the skull being preserved and venerated by a successor, however, thus underscoring the perpetuity of the line, the skull was lost to the conqueror, the ascendant power.

Kizumina, whose elder brother witnessed the above drama, offered another story about the comet. This—our last here—demonstrates the manner in which a symbol of discontinuity, one that foretells separation, is especially apt as the vehicle for allegorical parable.

Kang’inalolo appeared before he was born, Kizumina told us, but the elders (*wakubwa*) explained that it fell in Europe and was Bwana Yesu, Jesus Christ. They in Africa had seen it climbing skyward and had called it Kang’inalolo; but in Europe people said it was Jesus arisen from the dead and going to Heaven (*alifufuka, alikwenda binguni*). Jesus did not come to where the Tabwa live. Had he done so, he would have brought them knowledge of Europeaness (*maarifa ya kizungu*). He did not, though, and so the Tabwa have been overlooked, left behind (*tumechelewa*).

Kizumina, dead in 1978 at about 100 years of age, had a long history as an irascible opponent of the missionaries and their alteration and/or destruction of Tabwa culture as he understood it. In other words, this is a tale of a believer, not of Christianity as a devout church-goer (he was never baptised), but as one who knew the oppressive profundity of change occasioned by those implementing Christian/colonial beliefs in the various arenas of social life, economic and political as well as religious (see Roberts 1979, 1982, in press b). Kizumina knew the “change of Times and States” as intimately as any (his lineage being denied the chiefship since colonial times). The comet was the vehicle by which this transformation was imported and, in a sense, caused. The possibility for syncretism between the great star at Christ’s birth, Biblical images of Christ’s resurrection and ascension, and the comet are obvious enough; but the comet is not just what it might appear objec-

tively: it is Kapata Makolo, "the stifler of chiefs." Kizumina's tale, I would suggest, is an "allegorical parable" and retains paradox at its heart, multiplicity of meaning as its message (Crossan 1976:277).

Kizumina's tale is a pointedly political one, given our knowledge of the radical reduction of prerogative suffered by indigenous chiefs during the years of colonization (and more specifically that experienced by Chief Mpala, Kizumina's own close kinsman) and our understanding of the symbolism ascribed to the comet. Chiefship itself, as it had evolved and was known before the European occupation, was stifled by the new power, in the present case wielded by the White Fathers. From their fortified mission at Mpala, they would dominate all overt aspects of social life from 1885 until around 1970, when expatriot priests withdrew and many church-related activities were suspended (see Roberts 1982).

The idiom of the comet, informed by implicit reference to the rainbow, Nfwimina, the *musala*, and the other transformative agents discussed here, contains much more information than Kizumina's brief tale would seem to yield. This great transition from traditional to colonial society, and its attendant reformulation of culture, is placed in a set of comprehensible members. The twist is that whereas comets for Tabwa were portentous and followed by all manner of disaster, here the comet is not, or is not only, Kang'inaleza, it is Jesus Christ, bearer of "the knowledge of Europeanness" (the economic and political status recognized as superior by Tabwa) to those among whom he "fell." Nonetheless negative to Tabwa, the comet is supremely *positive* for colonizing Europeans. Judging from other stories of the sort,¹³ this is a relation of indirect proportion in a world in which all forces are in some ultimate balance: that is, as Tabwa fortunes and independence have declined, so have European ones risen. This, then, would be the greatest "change of Time and State" of the century known to Kizumina.

conclusion

Nineteenth-century comets as perceived by Tabwa provide us with an opportunity to reflect on the symbolization process more generally, with the caveat that the paucity and condensation of available accounts make the choice of data for "earlier" phases ("noticing" the "momentary deity"), as opposed to "later" ones (the connotation of comet as portentous), somewhat arbitrary. More useful is the recognition that ambiguity—"a phenomenon of compression" (Empson 1966:31)—is inherent to the event of a comet's apparition, as first understood and then considered an agent of transformation.

The comet has proven useful to Tabwa as they reflect upon the epochal years before and just after the turn of the century. Just as no single interpretation, no single sweeping statement, is sufficient to sum up the effects of an event such as the death of a great chief or the advent of the Europeans, so must the omens and symbols heralding and marking the moment be multireferential in nature. The apparition of a comet, marked by the "sheer immediacy," "pristine volatility and freedom" of a "momentary deity," by its liminal nature allows for, indeed demands, a recognition of the "pure possibility" of many levels of interpretation, from psychological to sociological to philosophical to theological, all of which make sense unto themselves and each of which adds to the sense of all others. The momentary deity then becomes an apt subject or vehicle for allegory, a form "whose plurality of interpretive levels indicates that the original is itself a metaphor for that multiplicity" (Crossan 1976:273–277). The paradox of the comet captured the fact that the surprising, the unclear, the inchoate in *social* life can be grasped by reference to a singular, if ephemeral, phenomenon in nature.

notes

Acknowledgments. Anthropological fieldwork conducted in southeastern Zaire from late 1973 until late 1977 was funded by the National Institute of Mental Health (# 1-F01-MH-55251-01-CUAN), the Committee on African Studies and the Edson-Keith Fund of the University of Chicago, and the Society of the Sigma Xi. Sincere thanks are extended to Jane Bachnik, John Comaroff, Lawrence Fisher, Keith Hart, Kalunga Mwela-Ubi, Don Merten, Daniel Moerman, Genevieve Nagant, Randall Packard, Jonathan Post, Christopher Davis Roberts, and Roy Willis for helpful comments as this paper has developed; and to Tabwa friends "Nzwiba," Mumba, "Mumbioto," and the late Kizumina Kabulo for their insight and information. I am indebted to Professor Emeritus Freeman Miller for lively discussions of the aspects and visibility of 19th-century comets in southeastern Zaire; to Dr. Tobin Siebers for reminding me of Cassirer's discussion of Usener's "momentary deity"; and to Dr. Donald Pitkin for introducing Cassirer's discussion to me years ago. All responsibility for the present work remains my own, despite such generosity. In memory of Clarissa and Allen Parrette.

¹ The reference is from the Platonic dialogue *Phaedrus*, in which Socrates tells a young admirer that as the Delphic precept has it, he must know himself and not concern himself with such "extraneous matters" as "gorgons, pegasuses and countless other strange monsters" (in Cassirer 1953:1). The quotation in this paper's title is from Shakespeare's *Henry VI*, part 1.

² Among the many works devoted to comets, Chambers's (1910) and Brown's (1973) are useful for the novice, while Vsekhv'yatskii's (1964) monumental study remains the specialist's "bible."

³ As Dan Moerman (1981: private communication) has noted, Comet Kohoutek of late 1973 did nothing of the sort: "What let us down was a philosophy of nature based on mechanism and extrapolation which went seriously awry, or, perhaps, is always seriously awry." Even had Kohoutek been as spectacular as expected, younger Tabwa separated by generations from past comets might have postulated different sorts of associations with its apparition than did their ancestors; one is reminded of Gombrich's examples of locusts or lions "drawn from life" by artists centuries ago, having forms radically different from the way Western artists would represent them nowadays (cited and discussed in Ohnuki-Tierney 1981:456-457). It is likely that people would have consulted the same established sages that I did, and general conclusions might have been consonant with older ideas as exposed here.

⁴ Three men and a woman with whom C. D. Roberts and I worked closely for several years provided greatest input concerning comets. True intellectuals interested in the world around them and in their cultural heritage, three of the four are renowned diviner-healers, the other (now deceased) a traditional political leader and "man of memory," as Reefe (1981) would say.

⁵ Cassirer develops these ideas from Usener's (1896) *Divine Names: An Essay Toward a Science of Religious Conception*, as he discusses the relation between myth and language.

⁶ Colle (1913) is most famous for his writings on the eastern Luba-zide Tabwa, whom he calls "Baluba"; here he presents exegesis from the central lakeside Tabwa, gathered around Baudouinville (Moba) at the turn of the century. Colle's and Kaoze's accounts share many phrases, suggesting a common inspiration.

⁷ The gender of the pronouns here is feminine in Colle's French, because the comet is called "little mother"; pronouns show no gender in Swahili or in KiTabwa.

⁸ The appearance of the comet must change in time and aspect, as it follows its orbit and the Earth its own. That a comet is often first seen as it begins to rise at dusk or set at dawn, its tail extending "upwards" from where the sun has gone or will reappear, further underscores the comet's solar associations.

⁹ *Pterocarpus* wood is burned on moonless nights, since its resins make an especially bright fire. In this, it is like the comet which allows one "to see as one can with a full moon" (as in Colle 1935:467). It might be said that the *nkula* powder the *musala* amenorrheal woman grinds from *Pterocarpus* bark replaces the menses (called "the little dry season" by Tabwa) she never sees.

¹⁰ "Loins" is an ambiguous word in English, referring to the area between ribs and pelvis, "the region of the thighs and groin," or "the reproductive organs" (Morris 1969:767). *Unnsana* (loins) in KiFipa is "the lower abdomen and lower back in both men and women" and includes the genitalia of both sexes (Willis 1972:316; 1981: personal communication); it is, then, as ambiguous as our own word "loins." Rather than a reference to the sexual organs, however, from the Tabwa case it is suggested that the "loins" in question is the area of the waist (lower abdomen and lower back) encircled by one's *belt*. The descent reference, then, would be that of the navel/umbilicus and not the sexual organs. The Fipa used a belt (*unnkowa*—a word one would suspect to be related to the KiTabwa *mukowa* for "clan") trimmed with lion skin—"a symbol of kingship"—"metonymically to represent achieved rank in the indigenous administrative structure" (Willis 1981: personal communication), which would seem to underscore this association.

¹¹ In his earlier work, Colle (1913, II:717-718) recorded a Tabwa song, the three verses of which include both this line and the one Kizumina sang for us in 1976, cited above.

¹² This term once may have referred more specifically to a chief's subordinate or replacement (see Van Acker 1907:45; cf. White Fathers 1954:102 and Van Avermaet and Mbuya 1954:360). KiTabwa shares a "basic language correspondence" of 90 percent with CiBemba and one of 71 percent with KiLuba (Werner 1971:10; Reefer 1981:73-78), allowing some confidence in this sort of etymological speculation.

¹³ A paper in preparation, tentatively entitled "'Sinister Caricatures': The Anthropophagic Other for Europeans and Africans in the Belgian Congo," addresses issues of the kind. The strength of one group, be it European or African, was felt to be sapped, literally consumed, by the other.

references cited

- Brelsford, Vernon
1974 African Dances of Northern Rhodesia. In *The Occasional Papers of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute*, 1-16. No. 2. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Brown, Lancaster
1974 *Comets, Meteorites and Men*. New York: Taplinger.
- Cassirer, Ernst
1953 *Language and Myth*. Suzanne Langer, transl. New York: Dover.
- Chambers, George
1910 *Story of the Comets Simply Told for General Readers*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Colle, Pierre
1912 *Le Butwa (Société Secrète Nègre)*. *La Revue Congolaise* 3:195-199.
1913 *Les Baluba*. 2 vols. Brussels: Albert Dewit.
1935 *Apropos d'Apparitions*. *Grands Lacs* 51(10):466-468.
- Crossan, John
1976 *Parable, Allegory and Paradox*. In *Semiology and Parables: Explorations of the Possibilities Offered by Structuralism for Exegesis*. Daniel Patte, ed. pp. 247-281. Pittsburgh: Pickwick.
- Davis-Roberts, Christopher
1980 *Mungu na Mitishamba: Illness and Medicine among the BaTabwa of Zaire*. Ph.D. dissertation. Department of Anthropology. University of Chicago.
- Deng, Francis
1973 *The Dinka and Their Songs*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Durkheim, Emile
1966 *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. New York: Free Press.
- Empson, William
1966 *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. New York: New Directions.
- Fernandez, James
1965 *Symbolic Consensus in a Fang Reformatory Cult*. *American Anthropologist* 67:902-929.
1980 *Edification by Puzzlement*. In *Explorations in African Systems of Thought*. Ivan Karp and Charles Bird, eds. pp. 44-59. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Gouldsbury, C., and H. Sheane
1911 *The Great Plateau of Northern Rhodesia*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Headrick, Daniel
1981 *The Tools of Empire: Technology and European Imperialism in the 19th Century*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Heusch, Luc de
1972 *Le Roi Ivre, ou l'Origine de l'Etat*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Institut Apostolique Africain des Pères Blancs
1882 *Près du Tanganika par les Missionnaires de Son Eminence le Cardinal Lavigerie*. Anvers: H. Majoor.
- Kaoze, Stefano
1909 *Manuel Kitabwa à l'Usage des Missionnaires*. Algiers: Maison Carrée.
- Kaoze, Stefano, and Genevieve Nagant
1973 *Proverbs Tabwa*. *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines* 52, XIII (4):744-768.
- Lagercrantz, Sture
1964 *Traditional Beliefs in Africa Concerning Meteors, Comets and Shooting Stars*. In *Festschrift für Ad. E. Jensen*. Tome 1, pp. 319-329. Munich: Klans Renner Verlag.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude
1963 *Structural Anthropology*. New York: Basic Books.
- Mill, John Stuart
1956[1843] *A System of Logic*. London: Longmans, Green.
- Morris, William, ed.
1969 *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

- Nagant, Genevieve
1976 *Famille, Histoire, Religion Chez les Tumbwe du Zaïre*. Thèse du Troisième Cycle. Department of Anthropology, Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes.
- Ohnuki-Tierney, Emiko
1980 Phases of Human Perception/Conception/Symbolization Processes: Cognitive Anthropology and Symbolic Classification. *American Ethnologist* 8:451-467.
- Richards, Audrey
1969 *Land, Labour and Diet in Northern Rhodesia*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Reefe, Thomas
1981 *The Rainbow and the Kings: A History of the Luba Empire to 1891*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Reynolds, John
1980 Nightjars, Experts at Camouflage. *Swara* 3(1):25-27.
- Roberts, Allen F.
1979 "The Ransom of Ill-Starred Zaïre": Plunder, Politics and Poverty in the OTRAG Concession. In *Zaïre: The Political Economy of Underdevelopment*. Guy Gran, ed. pp. 211-236. New York: Praeger.
1980 *Heroic Beasts, Bestly Heroes: Principles of Cosmology and Chiefship among the Lakeside BaTabwa of Zaïre*. Ph.D. Dissertation. Department of Anthropology, University of Chicago.
1981 Passage Stellified: Speculation upon Archaeoastronomy in Southeastern Zaïre. *Archaeoastronomy* 4(4):27-37.
1982 *Enclave of Order, Seat of Dissent: The Establishment of a "Christian Kingdom" in Central Africa, 1885-95*. Ms. Files of the author.
in press a *Anarchy, Abjection and Absurdity: A Case of Metaphoric Medicine among the Tabwa of Zaïre*. In *The Anthropology of Medicine*. Lola Romanucci-Ross, Daniel Moerman, and Lawrence Tancredi, eds. Amherst: Bergin.
in press b "Insidious Conquests": War-time Politics along the Southwestern Shore of Lake Tanganyika. In *Black Men in a Whiteman's War*. Melvin Page, ed.
- Schmitz, Bruno
1903 *Une Dame Céleste*. *Missions d'Afrique (Pères Blancs)*. pp. 315-320.
- Shorter, Aylward
1972 *Chiefship in Western Tanzania*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Spencer, Herbert
1976[1866] *First Principles of a New System of Philosophy*. New York: Appleton.
- Stromberg, Peter
1981 Consensus and Variation in the Interpretation of Religious Symbolism: A Swedish Example. *American Ethnologist* 8:544-559.
- Theuvs, Theodore
1954 *Textes Luba*. *Bulletin du Centre d'Etudes des Problèmes Sociaux Indigènes* 27.
- Turner, Victor
1970 *The Forest of Symbols*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Usener, Herman
1896 *Götternamen, Versuch einer Lehre von der religiösen Begriffsbildung*. Bonn: F. Cohen.
- Van Acker, Auguste
1907 *Dictionnaire Kitabwa/Français/Kitabwa*. Musée Royal du Congo Belge, Annales, Serie V, Ethnographie-Linguistique. Tervuren.
- Van Avermaet, E., and Benoit Mbuya
1954 *Dictionnaire Kiluba-Français*. Musée Royal du Congo Belge, Annales, Sciences de l'Homme, Linguistique 7. Tervuren.
- Van Caeneghem, P.
1956 *La Notion de Dieu Chez Les Baluba du Kasai*. Academie Royale des Sciences Coloniales, Sciences Morales et Politiques, Mémoire N.S. IX, 2.
- Verbeke, F.
1937 *Le Bulopwe et le Kutomboka par le Sang Humain Chez les Baluba-Shankaji*. *Bulletin des Juridictions Indigènes et du Droit Coutumier Congolais* 5(2):52-61.
- Verhulpen, E.
1936 *Baluba et Balubaisés du Katanga*. Anvers: Eds. de l'Avenir Belge.
- Vsekhvatskii, Sergei
1964 *Physical Characteristics of Comets*. Jerusalem: The Program for Scientific Translations. (Also available from the Office of Technical Services, U.S. Department of Commerce, Washington, DC.)
- Vyncke, Amaat
1887 *Correspondence to Cardinal Lavigerie from Kibanga, 15 August 1887*. General Archives of the White Fathers, C. 19-396. Rome.
- Weber, Max
1963[1922] *The Sociology of Religion*. Boston: Beacon.

Werner, Douglas

1971 Some Developments in Bemba Religious History. *Religion in Africa* 4(1):1-24.

White Fathers

1954 Bemba English Dictionary. Cape Town: Longman.

Williams, John

1964 A Field Guide to the Birds of East and Central Africa. London: Collins.

Willis, Roy

1964 Traditional History and Social Structure in Ufipa. *Africa* 34:340-352.

1972 The Head and the Loins: Lévi-Strauss and Beyond. *In Reader in Comparative Religion*. William Lessa and Evon Vogt, eds. pp. 313-322. New York: Harper & Row.

1981 A State in the Making: Myth, History and Social Transformation in Pre-Colonial Ufipa. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Submitted 4 December 1981

Revised version received 5 March 1982

Accepted 14 March 1982