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V. W. Turner

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The syntax of symbolism in an African religion

BY V. W. TURNER

Cornell University, Ithaca, New York

My investigations into the symbolism of African religion, published in several monographs and papers, allow me to draw the following tentative conclusions:

(1) Symbols, which may be described as the molecules of ritual, have great semantic richness and depth and possess a specific structure.

(2) Symbols have three major dimensions of significance—(a) the exegetic, (b) the operational, and (c) the positional.

(3) *The exegetic dimension* consists of the whole corpus of explanations of a particular symbol's meaning offered by indigenous informants—the informants must of course be classified according to their social characteristics (age, sex, status, religious role, degree of esoteric knowledge, etc.).

(4) In *The operational dimension* a symbol's meaning is equated with its use—here we observe what the ritual participants do with it and not only what they say about it. Here, too, we consider not only the symbol but also the structure and composition of the group which handles it or performs mimetic acts with direct reference to it. We further note the affective qualities of these acts, whether they are aggressive, sad, joyful, penitent, derisive, and so forth, in terms of the culture's interpretations of these expressive acts. We also inquire why certain persons and groups are absent on given ritual occasions, and whether this absence represents deliberate exclusion.

(5) In *the positional dimension* we see the meaning of a symbol as deriving from its relationship to other symbols in a specific cluster or *gestalt* of symbols whose elements acquire much of their significance from their position in its structure;

(6) In the exegetic dimension the meaning of a symbol is built up by analogy and association on three semantic foundations, which we may call its (a) nominal, (b) substantial, and (c) artifactual semantic bases.

(7) *The nominal basis* consists in the name assigned to the symbol in ritual contexts, in non-ritual contexts, or in both sets of contexts.

(8) *The substantial basis*, in the case of objects used as symbols, consists in their culturally selected natural and material properties.

(9) *The artifactual basis* is represented by the symbolic object after it has been worked upon, fashioned or treated by purposive human activity; in short, when it becomes a cultural artifact.

Let us now consider a short selected sequence of ritual behaviour taken from the *Nkula* ceremony of the Ndembu tribe of Zambia in Central Africa. Essentially what happens is this: a young *mukula* tree (a species of *Pterocarpus*) is first consecrated and then cut down by a male religious practitioner or doctor. This doctor and others then cut it into short sections which they proceed to carve into crude figurines representing infants. Next they cut small round calabashes in half, sacrifice a red cock and prepare with its blood as

lubricant a glutinous paste from a number of red ingredients, each of which has symbolic value. Some of this paste they insert in a hole made in the figurine's heads. The rest is pressed into one half of each cut calabash. The figurines or dolls are then placed in the empty halves, which are then worked over the other halves to reunite the divided sections. Holes had previously been pierced in the now overlapping circumference and a piece of bark string had been threaded through them. The calabashes are then placed in closely woven baskets. Meanwhile, the subjects of the ritual, the 'patients', young married women, had been obliged to sit some fifty yards or so away with legs extended before them, hands in laps and bowed heads—the traditional posture of modesty or shame.

This bizarre segment of ritual behaviour is in reality a sequence of symbols, each of which refers to many of the concepts and values of Ndembu culture. Furthermore, these concepts and values are arrayed under and articulated by a few basic principles, the understanding of which makes the whole enigmatic rigmarole perfectly intelligible to the Western observer. Let us now examine the main symbolic components in terms of the interpretative system set forth earlier in the paper.

THE EXEGETIC DIMENSION

At the exegetic level Ndembu informants gave me texts on what they considered the *mukula* tree to mean in the *Nkula* ceremony as a whole, and specifically in the *isoli* episode. Their term for 'symbol' (*chijikijilu*) is a word which represents a land-mark or the blaze cut in a tree by a hunter to enable him to find his way back to inhabited territory from the uninhabited bush. Thus it connects the seen and known and mastered with the unseen, and unknown, and unmastered. It is for those who believe in its mystical efficacy a means of getting control over, or domesticating the unpredictable and wild. From informants' comments the following regularities emerge. I will discuss these in terms of the three semantic bases I have mentioned.

THE NOMINAL BASIS

The term *mukula* is derived by informants from the verb *ku-kula*, 'to mature, or grow old.' In fact this verb is used to signify the completion of the passage from one culturally defined stage in the individual's life-cycle to another—from childhood to manhood or womanhood, marriage, the birth of one's first child or grandchild, the state of being an elder, and so forth. But one biological index of maturity that is unequivocal is the show of blood at the onset of the menses. Another is the blood visible at parturition. These are the crucial situations of maturity in Ndembu ideas from which other steps of maturity are metaphorically derived. This leads us to consider the goals or objectives of the *Nkula* rites of which the *mukula* tree is the dominant or focal symbol.

The term *Nkula* is also derived by Ndembu informants from *ku-kula*. In a religious context it denotes a specific manifestation of an ancestral spirit or 'shade' which has, as they say, 'come out of the grave' to 'catch' one of its living kinswomen with the following 'troubles':

- (1) frigidity towards her husband;
- (2) menorrhagia—excessive menstrual flow;

- (3) dysmenorrhea—absence of monthly period;
- (4) barrenness, associated with the preceding conditions or independent of them;
- (5) miscarriage;
- (6) death of her child or a succession of children in infancy;
- (7) sick or handicapped children.

The Ndembu are a matrilineal people and the afflicting shade, according to a survey I made, is almost always that of a fairly recently deceased matrilineal kinswoman of the patient—as we may call the subject of the *Nkula* rites. In more than half the cases the shade was reckoned to be own mother's own mother, or 'true grandmother', of the patient. The *Nkula* ceremony belongs to a wider class of ceremonies performed to propitiate ancestral shades which, in various manifestations, are believed to 'tie up', as Ndembu put it, the fertility (*lusemu*) of their living descendants. Although each manifestation affects fertility, each has certain core attributes. Those of *Nkula* are particularly concerned with blood, with menses and their excess or defect, and with 'the blood of birth'. In all these ceremonies it is believed that the shade afflicts the living as a punishment either for failure to remember it or because of breaches of the norms governing behaviour between kin and affines. The actual victim may be personally innocent, but her matrilineal descent group are held to be guilty of quarreling among themselves, often over the question of who is to succeed to headmanship in the village of which they constitute the residential nucleus. In this way they are strongly motivated to go to a diviner to find out what category of mystical agency is afflicting their kinswoman and to pay for the ritual treatment considered appropriate. *Nkula* female doctors were formerly patients themselves in the ceremony; male doctors in the cult were close kin of spouses of former patients and received with them part of the treatment. Cult membership cuts across village and lineage affiliation. It is as though the widest Ndembu society, represented in one of its aspects by the cult, plays an ameliorative role in the affairs of one of its subgroups.

The *mukula* tree, then, is an abridgement of a whole set of ideas about the patterned process of maturation. In the case of the patient this orderly process has been obstructed as the result of personal or collective wrong-doing. Only the costly and lengthy procedures of rites, involving collaboration between many Ndembu and the offering of hospitality in the form of beer and food to the cult group by the patient's kin, will suffice to persuade the shade, representing the social past, to remove the obstruction and allow the social future to unfold for the victim.

THE SUBSTANTIAL BASIS

Ndembu point out the connexion between the name '*mukula*' and what for them is its crucial natural properties. Like most species of *Pterocarpus*, the *mukula* (*P. angolensis*) exudes a dusky red gum from cracks in the bark. Ndembu speak of this as 'the blood of *mukula*'. It is described as a 'symbol of the blood of menstruation or the blood of the mother' (*mashi amama*). It is with reference to maternal blood that another property is usually mentioned—the propensity of the gum to congeal rapidly. This connects *mukula* symbolism with the Ndembu theory of procreation. According to this, the father implants 'a seed of life' in the mother, whose blood 'congeals' around it to form the placenta. The semen is

described as blood 'whitened or purified by water' and a full analysis would take us into the fascinating field of Ndembu colour symbolism wherein the colours white, red and black are connected at one level of their meaning with human bodily fluids, such as semen, milk, blood, sputum, urine and faeces. Time does not permit this but we must keep in mind that the red symbolism of *Nkula* is only a sector of a wider system of ideas. This also has implications for the so-called universal religions, in their sacramental aspects, as a little reflexion will indicate.

Mukula, then, is used because it is believed that by association its specific efficacy will be communicated to the patient whose menstrual blood will no longer flow away uselessly but will coagulate around the embryo.

THE ARTIFACTUAL BASIS

When *mukula* is carved into a figurine representing an infant, it is said to be both a representation of the afflicting shade and the child it is desired that the patient will produce. If the woman bears a child, and I have recorded several cases of women bearing children within eighteen months of the performance of the *Nkula* ceremony, the child, regardless of its sex will be given the name of the afflicting shade of which it is regarded as in some sense the re-incarnation. Ndembu are not clear on this matter for the shade is at the same time regarded as acting at the patient's tutelary and helping her in her future role as an *Nkula* doctor. Quite often too the recovered patient will receive the name, in a special ceremony, of 'successor of the shade', i.e. if the shade was called Nyamuvwila, the patient will be known as 'Nswana-Nyamuvwila' with implications of identification here too. It is as though members of a descent line exposed to *Nkula* ritual are thought of as sharing a common essence, a *participation mystique*. In this way successive generations of females, through whom by matriliney group-placement is effected, are closely bonded together.

THE OPERATIONAL DIMENSION

Now let us examine what I have called the operational dimension of *mukula's* total meaning, with reference to the esoteric *isoli* episode. Here we have to consider the groups and roles oriented to *mukula* and their attitudes to it. In the first place, at *isoli* only cult-adepts are admitted to the rites, uninitiated persons are excluded. The term *isoli* is derived from *ku-solola*, to 'make visible' or 'reveal'. It is, in fact, a place where the shade is revealed under the appearance of the tree, and where, too, the members of the cult, normally scattered through many villages, 'become visible' as an organized group whose members have specific roles to perform. It is, in fact, only in such 'liminal' or 'marginal' situations—and every one of the numerous Ndembu cults has them—that symbols representing values shared universally by the tribe and transcending their everyday divisions of interest and ambition are fully and recognizantly displayed.

It is further significant that it is a group of *male* doctors who carve the figurines. For it is the males who are thought normally to give the child its identity and personality; from the mother it normally acquires its corporate affiliation in lineage and clan. A child is usually named after one of its *father's* deceased kin. *Nkula* naming is an exception to this

but, as we see, even here it is the group of male doctors who quite literally shape the child the patient is expected to bear.

The separation of the patients from the site of the carving is also meaningful. For it is not until they have truly 'matured' by bearing a real child will they gain real admission to the cult. The posture of shame in which they sit indicates that they are 'guilty' (*ku-baya*), if not for their own negligence or misconduct, at any rate for that of their lineal kin—who may only be present if they are initiated members of the *Nkula* cult.

Before the tree is cut down it is treated with great awe. It is prayed to as though it were a shade. I have been present at these rites on several occasions, and each time it was pointed out to me by doctors in solemn tones, that 'the *mukula* is the shade (*mukishi*)'. This is an exemplification of the general curative and religious theme of Ndembu ritual of *ku-solola*, 'to make visible', even 'to make sensorily perceptible'. It is felt that what is hidden and unknown is dangerous, even malignant in the case of witchcraft attacks. Divination is one means of making known, symbolization another. Here symbolization passes into trans-substantiation, for the tree 'is' the shade.

When the tree is cut, and later when it is carved into dolls and medicated with blood and other red substances, there is a dramatic change of attitude. The doctors laugh and joke, and even jest about one another's skill or lack of it at wood-carving. This behaviour exemplifies another theme of Ndembu ritual—that of '*chawahi*', from the first word of a traditional *Nkula* song, the gist of which is that 'it is good' (*chawahi*) to have offspring, numerous offspring. Awe and respect for immemorial tradition have passed into joy over producing the new generation, rather like the 'Christ is risen' theme after Lenten penitence in the Greek Orthodox Easter rites.

An examination of *mukula* in the operational dimension of its meaning indicates that into it go not only references to conjoined and harmonious aspects of culture, but also to conflict, opposition, and division between components of Ndembu society—between adepts and non-adepts, between adepts and candidates (as the patients might be termed in their religious capacity), between men and women, between old and young, between the living and the dead. A major religious symbol, in all cultures, embodies not only relations of harmony and co-operation, but also those of conflict and opposition. Furthermore, it summates and embraces processual patterns as well as interconnexions to which the category of time is not applicable. Such a symbol is not so much a specific stimulus to a particular type of behaviour as a vivid mnemonic of a state of socio-cultural unity and continuity which is built up out of the very oppositions and cleavages between its components.

THE POSITIONAL DIMENSION

A symbol like *mukula* occupies a position in a series of clusters of symbols. It has, as we have seen, a central position in the cluster of symbols contained in the basket and calabash presented to the patient after the *isoli* rites. It has a central position in the total sequence of rites performed by the *Nkula* cult. As representative of a set of values and beliefs about female reproduction and its social setting it has a prominent position in the ritual sub-system of gynaecological rites. It also has a prominent place in specific rituals of the hunters' cult and in the total system of hunters' rites. It appears, too, as a major symbol

in girls' puberty rites and in boys' circumcision rites. If we survey the total system of Ndembu rituals we find that it is one of about half a dozen symbols that may be regarded as the nuclear constellation of the entire symbolic pattern. We have no time to consider the positional meaning of *mukula* in each of these subsystems and in the total system.

I would like to consider only its central position as a doll artifact in relation to other symbolic ingredients in the calabash given to the patient. This calabash itself, known as *ilembu*, is described by informants as representing at the same time a 'womb' and a 'matrilineage'. The same term, *ivumu*, is used for both though the distinction between these referents was sharply maintained by my informants. In a matrilineal society, a fruitful woman is considered to be potentially the ancestress of a matrilineage which may attain a genealogical depth in time of four to five generations of remembered kin. In other ritual contexts, such as divination, calabashes of various species are used as symbols of a matrilineage. In the present case it might be worth stressing a point I have made elsewhere, namely that certain major symbols like *mukula* and *ilembu* have two semantic poles. At one there is a cluster of referents to physiological processes and phenomena, such as parturition, menstruation, gestation, and blood. At the other reference is made on the one hand to principles and norms of social structure, such as matriliney, motherhood, and the cohesion of members of a matrilineage, and on the other, to values and virtues related to membership in the widest Ndembu community, and in specified subgroups of that community. Certain ethical and jural ideas and precepts are intimately fused with ideas about human biology, especially with those of fluids secreted in circumstances of considerable emotional heightening. If time permitted I could make a long list of polarized symbols of this type. It is significant that the biological ideas represented refer frequently to experiences of the nuclear family—to procreation, childbirth, lactation, menstruation, nurture, and so forth. Yet the norms and principles the same symbols designate are those of the extrafamilial environment, those, in fact, which structure the widest recognized society. It is as though affectual quality is assigned to the more abstract and less personal virtues and relationships through this semantic juxtaposition, while the potentially disorderly or centrifugal biological drives or 'instincts' are controlled and ordered by being set in an ideological or cosmological frame, and subordinated to rules deriving therefrom.

This will, I think emerge more fully when we consider the ingredients with which the doll and calabash are medicated. These are:

- (1) The blood of a decapitated red cock consecrated to the *Nkula* spirit.
- (2) Powdered red clay (*mukundu*).
- (3) A red wing feather of Livingstone's lourie (*nduwa*).
- (4) Powdered *mukula* gum.
- (5) A red crest feather of the grey parrot (*kalong'a*).
- (6) Castor-oil (*imonu*), for mixing the ingredients into a stiff paste.

Each of these symbols qualifies the meaning of *mukula* and each refers to its use in other major ritual contexts.

I shall pass lightly over the indigenous exegesis of most of these symbols and focus attention upon the lourie and parrot feathers. Castor oil is used to massage the bodies of newborn infants, couples before marriage, and the corpses of the dead, and its paramount

sense is that of an index of life-crisis, in accordance here with the theme of *ku-kula*, to pass a point of maturation. Red clay and red gum represent the highly complex set of theories about blood. The decapitation of the cock and the felling of the tree at the root are compared with one another by Ndembu who say that they mark the 'end of the patient's troubling by the spirit'. Depth psychologists might make more of these acts, but they lie outside my anthropological competence which ends with the study of the interconnexions between social facts.

The red lourie feather in several Ndembu rites is worn by male shedders of blood, such as circumcisers, initiated hunters, war-chiefs, and men undergoing rites to purify them from the insuspiciousness of homicide. When the patients were being taken from the village to the *isoli* site they wore lourie feathers over their brow and it is these same feathers that are used to medicate the dolls. This is the only situation in Ndembu life where women wear these *nduwa* feathers, which further represent the *Nkula* spirit itself, for in traditional songs *Nkula* is described as a 'lourie'.

Although Ndembu do not phrase the situation explicitly in these terms it is clear from the context that the patient is being compared with a male shedder of blood and that it is desired to convert her into a fruitful wife. It is generally held, and again expressed in *Nkula* songs, that the patient, as well as having menstrual disorders, has refused her husband's advances. In short, she had been rejecting her role as a mature woman and her functions as wife and mother, shedding blood not nourishing and protecting children with it in her womb. *Nkula* may thus be regarded as a cultural device, whether consciously and deliberately designed as such or built up through countless generations as the slow product of collective experience, to rectify deviations from a life-pattern deemed appropriate for women, and to make them fully 'mature' in terms of how Ndembu classify female maturity. It would seem, too, from the context that the masculine strivings of the woman, which constitute also a refusal of the woman's lot, are not merely annulled but put at the service of her orthodox role—for the lourie feather is put into the symbolic womb, perhaps to induce her to produce, by sympathetic magic, male children.

The red parrot's feather, besides standing for blood, is connected with the myth which justifies and validates the *Nkula* cult and its rites—what Malinowski would have called its 'mythological charter'. Such crest feathers may normally be worn only by great chiefs descended from the legendary ancestress of all Lunda royalty and from whom the Ndembu chiefs reckon their descent. Ndembu informants told me that the parrot feather represented this founding ancestress. One, they said, she went into the seclusion hut reserved for women during their monthly periods—her name Luweji is etymologically connected, incidentally, with *kakweji*, 'the moon', and *mweji*, 'month'—and handed over her bracelet of royalty to her newly wed husband, a Luba hunter of royal descent, lest it should become polluted by her inauspicious condition. The hunter then appropriated this royal arch-insignium and drove out of the kingdom those relatives of his wife who opposed his claim. Later she was compensated by being given the title of Queen Mother. In punishment for her act Luweji was afflicted by her royal ancestors with menorrhagia and the first *Nkula* ceremony was performed, it is said, to cure her. From her and her husband are descended the chiefs of the famous Mwantiyanvwa dynasty with whom is connected today's redoubtable Congolese politician Moise Tshombe.

The familiar themes of the mother and the hunter, first in opposition then in conjunction, are represented here. More importantly, the guilt of the mother of the Lunda nation is replicated in the guilt of the humble village mother. Yet in both cases the fault had beneficial results, it was a *felix culpa*. To be afflicted by an ancestral shade, in Ndembu eyes, is at once to be punished and to be elected to membership in a cult, membership which confers a degree of prestige in a society with a poverty of secular roles conferring high status, especially for women. A further implication of the royal feather in the symbolic womb is that it represents the ultimate in political authority as well as the broad continuity of the Lunda nation and all its derivative tribes. It is not merely lineal continuity that is represented here, but national continuity.

I have been able to list only a few of the themes and *significata* of a handful of symbols. But it is enough to show the condensed semantic riches of apparently simple outward forms. The calabash carried in its basket container by an *Nkula* adept is by no means the amulet of superstition a casual observer would take it to be. It is in fact the religious representation of many things in one, a *multum in parvo*, a summation of ideas and of practices to which we can hardly deny the name of 'sacramental'. But the symbol here discussed is more than a cognitive system for those who believe in it; it is a union of what the Ndembu call 'powers' (*jing'ovu*). The power inherent in childbirth, the power that fills the corporate life of matrilineal kin, the power of the whole political community, are, as it were, 'gathered to a greatness' and distilled into a medicine. The patient is being cured by the concentrated essence of Ndembu culture and society. Yet in one sense she provides merely the occasion for the ritual, whose real objective is to reintegrate a conflict-riven social group. For on almost every occasion on which I have seen a 'ritual of affliction' performed, where I was sufficiently well acquainted with the local community, the performance took place during a period of crisis in social relations, when it was torn by factional struggles. In the rites ideal values and standards were brought vividly before the people in a situation when this model or blueprint of the good life was being challenged or threatened. A ritual like *Nkula* is regarded by Ndembu as having a prophylactic function—the shade afflicts the living with illness or reproductive disorder or ill luck at hunting in order to compel them to compound their quarrels before some of their number resort to witchcraft, which to them is the ultimate form of evil that strikes at the axiomatic values, on which all social living depends and is associated with notions of cannibalism, incest and necrophagy. In *Nkula* the bonds of kinship, local residence, lineage affiliation, and tribal loyalty are strikingly reaffirmed. A society is really a set of concepts, not an aggregate of people, and in *Nkula*, too, the organizing principles behind society are stated in the symbols and in their exegesis by adepts to candidates, under the stimulating circumstances of dance, song, sacrifice, the wearing of special dress and the performance of stereotyped behaviour. The abstraction 'society' is made sensorily perceptible in the ritual and its symbol sequences and clusterings, partly as disguise and the 'cloaking of discrepancies of norm and value', as in the clash between masculine and feminine connotations of red symbols, and partly as the condensed expression of harmoniously interrelated sets of *significata*, as in the sequence *childbirth-motherhood-matriliny* assigned to *mukula* in one of its operational contexts.

In all this we see that the relationship between innate human propensities and cultural mechanisms is extremely complex. The stereotyped behaviour is not the spontaneous

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outcome of instinctual tendencies but of rules of ritual procedure handed down from adept to adept or partially learned in operational situations from the remote tribal past. Yet we see, too, that the procedure is aimed at correcting biological flaws, such as frigidity, menstrual disorder, miscarriage, and barrenness. These are thought to be the result of breaking social and cultural norms, however, and not of natural causes which they have not the scientific knowledge or techniques to locate.

To conclude, this account of a small segment of the *Nkula* ceremony exemplifies many of the characteristics Sir Julian Huxley has assigned to ritualization in man. It has no genetic basis, it has symbolic and personificatory functions, as well as signalling functions, it runs according to rules and is highly formalized, it clearly involves unconscious projection mechanisms as in the masculine symbols attached to female participants, it is organized by conscious conceptual thought and forms part of an elaborate system of rituals and symbols, many of its symbols are multivalent, it appears to effect changes in the psycho-somatic condition of its subjects in that instances have been pointed out to me of former patients whose frigidity has been overcome (and I have known several women to have given birth within eighteen months of having received the treatment), and in some ways the Ndembu ritual system as a whole has proved non-adaptive in that its frequent and protracted ceremonies have withdrawn children from schooling and men from paid employment while the values they reinforce have been those of the corporate kin group at a time when the cash economy decrees that the individual wage-earner should be its viable unit.