Family and Religion in Luba Life: Centrality, Pervasiveness, Change and Continuity

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Abstract

The Luba people who are the focus of this article live the eastern Kasai Province of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The Luba established one of the great pre-colonial empires of the central Congo savannah. It stretched from the eastern Congo River to Lake Tanzania and northwest to the convergence of the Lulua and Kasai Rivers.1 The family occupies a central place in the personal life of each Luba man or woman and in the social, economic, and political organization of Luba society. Anthropological studies from as early as the 1950s have stressed the central position of the family in the social organization of African societies (Radcliffe-Brown and Forde 1953). The purpose of this article is to review the principal elements of the organizational structure of Luba society that convey power and importance to the Luba family. Luba people's conception of the purpose and role of the family, of values and norms that inspire and regulate their behaviors as family members, as well as the actual changing forms of their familial behaviors across the time can inform us on these elements (Van Caeneghem 1956; Mukenge 1967; 2002). Calling on the author's previous fieldwork among the Luba and other early studies, this article examines, in anthropological and historical contexts, religion and worldview as pivotal in defining relationships between family and other social institutions. A list of selected references is included.

The Centrality of the Family Institution

The Family and the Individual

Achievement requires strength, hard work and supernatural blessings. The family plays a key role in the Luba philosophy of achievement. The family assumes the responsibility to instill the respect and the desire for these values into its members. The family is the principal agent of socialization. It provides the nurturing through childcare, protection against disease and evil doers, and care for the dying, all of which are necessary for building strength. Hard work occupies an important place in the Luba system of socialization. Luba parents teach their children the spirit of achievement by involving them in achieving activities of adults, insistently exhorting them to achieve, and rewarding those who do achieve with praise. Through a religion based in ancestral veneration, the family provides the potential achiever with supernatural assurance that encourages sustained action, and supernatural explanations that help them cope with failures.

The importance of the family in the life of an individual also manifests itself in other ways. For example, the family confers legitimacy, social recognition, status, and acceptability. For instance, a child born outside of marriage did not have a welcome place in the family of either parent unless the child was legitimized by marriage after the birth. For this reason, a girl's virginity before marriage was mandatory. If she became pregnant before marriage, both families exerted pressure on the boy to marry her. This marriage act would save her family from disgrace, but more importantly, it would give the unborn child a chance to be fully accepted into his corporate family group.

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Marriage stability is also emphasized in Luba society. With legitimacy, it explains the importance placed on the faithfulness of the married woman. In traditional Luba society, the unfaithful wife could be beaten to death, not only by her husband but also by his brothers and sisters. When her life was spared, she was either repudiated or forced to pay considerable fines to her in-laws for reinstatement and make a sacrificial offering to the husband's ancestors. A man caught in adulterous action with a married woman could also be justifiably put to death.

The family provides the individual with his identity and determines his rights and privileges in society. To identify himself to others, a Luba person would give his name, his father's name, and his grandfather's name. He would also outline the lineages to which he belongs through his father. Family membership entitles him to free use of the land that belongs to the lineage. Although the importance of love in marriage is acknowledged, a Luba person does not marry for love alone. He marries to establish a family with many children. And the children are not desired for selfish reasons, but as a contribution to the perpetuation and expansion of the patrilineage. Marriage, the act by which families are formed, requires an agreement between the groom's family and the bride's family. When concluded, a marriage is not a contract between the two spouses but an alliance between their two families, expected to last even beyond the lives of the spouses.

For most young men, marriage would be impossible without the family. Marriage requires that the groom's family pay a dowry (bridewealth) to the bride's family. In Luba villages, the amount of wealth required for marriage is generally too high for a young man to accumulate it by his own efforts. In most cases, he has to rely on the wealth of his father, other close relatives, or the bridewealth that his sisters and female cousins will bring in when they marry. Because of this practice, young boys are spared the anxiety of growing up wondering how they will obtain the necessary bridewealth for their marriages. Because of established rules of assigning the bridewealth from the marriages of female relatives, each boy knows, long before the age of majority, which female relative will bring in, through marriage, the bridewealth that will enable him to marry a wife.

The traditional family took care of its members through marriage in two additional ways: the *levirate* and the *sororate*. In *levirate*, a man marries the widow of a deceased brother. In sororate, a man marries the sister of his deceased wife. Through these practices, the marriage is preserved with a substitute wife or husband. In either case, the children of the deceased continue to have two parents. In addition to the fact that in *levirate* or *sororate* one of the biological parents continues to live with them, Luba children are raised in such a way that the loss of a parent does not become a major disruption in their lives. Indeed, during their parents' lifetime, children are raised as sons and daughters of many fathers and mothers. In Luba villages, daily meals are shared with children and adults from other families, mutual visits are frequent among relatives who live in distant locations, and fostering is practiced without formalities or protocol.

Family, Religion and Ecology

The Luba are patrilineal, that is, they trace descent, inherit property, and obtain citizenship through the father's line. They practice patrilocality as well. Generally, when a man marries, he and his wife settle among the members of his paternal lineage. Be-

cause of patrilineal descent and patrilocal residence, the Luba family venerates the ancestors of the husband. Three spirits venerated are those of a man's paternal grandfather, his paternal grandmother, and his father. The shrines that house the two male spirits are placed on the east side of the senior wife's house. The tree that symbolizes the dwelling of the female spirit is situated on the west side of her house. The presence of these spiritual forces transforms the senior wife's house into a powerful location. Where tradition is maintained in Luba society, the senior wife's house faces south. The major rivers in the area run south to north. As rivers are reputed to carry scourges, the upstream orientation of this spiritually powerful house constitutes a strategic placement for protection of the community's welfare.

Family, Economy and Religion

The Luba are primarily agriculturalists. Production is organized through the nuclear family household, whether monogamous or polygamous. Husbands, wives, and children have their own fields. The products of their fields belong to them collectively under the supervision of the husband-father. Unlike production, consumption always involves the larger community. Consumers include members of the extended family, particularly the man's patrilineal family because of the rules of patrilineal descent and patrilocal residence. A Luba expression describing this practice can be translated as, "Food is cultivated by one, but consumed by many."

Corn (maize) is the main food crop in Lubaland. The first corn harvest of the season is offered to the ancestral spirits and everyone present shares a meal. Corn represents the subsistence phase of agricultural production. But the Luba do not work in their fields for subsistence alone. They also work to accumulate wealth. They invest proceeds from produce sales to buy livestock, usually chickens and goats. They use some profits from produce and livestock sales to pay dowries for themselves and their relatives. At each step in the wealth accumulation process, the individual is expected to offer his first earnings to the elder who represents the ancestors. In the case of acquiring a first wife, this offering is symbolic. The representative of the ancestral spirits receives the wife as a present, performs a ritual blessing and returns her to the husband. Through this practice, the representative of the ancestors metaphorically carries out his duty as the elder to acquire a wife for his junior relatives.

The Family and the Political System

Given the importance attached to the family, all the founders of Luba chiefdoms are typically portrayed as family men who immigrated to the area with their wives, children, and a few followers, mostly close relatives. Even the evolution of the chiefdoms after the arrival of the immigrants is simply a collection of family histories.

Luba chiefdoms are subdivided into political segments that oral tradition traces to conflicts between the founders' children over their fathers' power and wealth. The various political segments comprising the chiefdom are assigned political functions based on whether the members of the segment descended from the founder's senior wife or from his other wives. For example, only members of the segment descending from the senior wife are traditionally allowed to contend for the office of paramount chief. And when they do, they must receive investiture from authorized descendants of the founder's other wives to be accepted as legitimate leaders.

Segments of the chiefdom are subdivided along family lines into smaller units

that are populated by individual families descended from the founders. Their members have free access to the land by virtue of their family membership. Even among those who are eligible for the office of paramount chief by their descent, only family men can become chiefs. The Luba cannot conceive of a chief without a family. Only a strong man can compete for political office. A strong man is a family man first and a wealthy man second. Moreover, the resources necessary to obtain the chief's position is much more than one individual, however wealthy, can take on alone. The cooperation and material support of other family members is indispensable. Thus, access to the chieftaincy is also a family strategy.

The Triple Role of Religion

Enabling

Religion plays three major roles in the life of practitioners: enabling, integrating, and sublimating. The domain of religion includes beliefs in the existence of invisible supernatural forces whose powers make things happen within the human communities. The universe and all that exists in it were created and sustained by the Supreme Being (Mvidi Mukulu), who is the ultimate source of all blessings that human beings enjoy on earth, including health, family, wealth, and power. At creation, God placed a bit of His divine essence in every individual, the principle of life. At death, the principle of life becomes a pure spirit, freed from the limitations of the human body. Thereafter, the principle of life recovers a stronger level of the vital force placed in it by God at creation. Pure spirits therefore occupy an intermediate position between the Supreme God who possesses the highest level of divine power and human beings who possess the lowest level of divine power.

One special category of pure spirits is that of ancestors. Given the greater portions of God's power invested in them, ancestors are closer to God than their living descendants are. Also, as family members and past human beings, the ancestors continue to be involved in the daily life of their earthly relatives. Because of this privileged position of being closer to God yet still involved in the affairs of the living, the ancestors are the immediate providers of blessings for the members of their terrestrial family. The ancestors expect to be recognized by the recipients of these blessings, and they punish the disobedient and greedy ones who refuse to share with relatives.

The Luba value legitimate children and wealth acquired through one's own hard work. The greatest blessings they attribute to the ancestral spirits are the capacity to procreate and to work. Having many children, acquiring wealth through one's own efforts or the work of a son, and the marriage of a daughter are major occasions for sacrificing to the ancestral spirits. Failure to do so can be punished by the ancestral spirits with sterility, miscarriages, unsuccessful harvests and hunts, illness, and inability to work or to find a job.

Integrating

Luba religious beliefs and ancestral veneration rituals foster cohesion among the members of the extended family. In Luba worldview, human life begins as an act of solidarity among several past, present, and future generations of the extended family. For example, a baby's conception may have been enabled by offerings made by the grandfather to the spirit of his own grandfather. Many other acts of solidarity are exhib-

ited in the handling of wealth and the sharing of sacrificial meals.

Handling Wealth. The ancestors obligate those who become prosperous to share their possessions with them through the elders who represent them among the living. Each time a person brings in a present, the recipient elder welcomes him and accepts the gift. He introduces the donor to the ancestral spirits and offers sacrifices for the blessing of the donor's family and all his undertakings. Encouraged by these acts, the donor will pursue his productive activities, confident in the future and determined to succeed. The ancestors have also provided mechanisms for some obligations to be fulfilled symbolically, as in the case of the obligation to transfer the first wife to the elder representing the ancestors. Instead of an actual marriage, the elder symbolically accepts the wife, offers sacrifices to the ancestral spirits, and returns her to her husband.

To prevent exploitative accumulation of wealth by the beneficiary of bridewealth tributes by ancestral right, the ancestors obligate him to transfer wealth from his own work to another, and becoming the beneficiary of a bridewealth creates an obligation to reciprocate. The normal use of bridewealth is to obtain a wife for a family member. The ancestral norm obligates a man whose bridewealth is paid by anyone other than his own father to reciprocate with the bridewealth that comes to him from his first daughter's marriage.

Sharing Sacred Meals. Whenever a sacrifice is made to a particular spirit, it is assumed that the spirit will share the feast with other spirits of his kind, say other male spirits or the spirits of other paternal grandmothers. The Luba believe that these spirits actually partake of the meal mystically. Similarly, the person who offers sacrifices to the ancestral spirits will always invite his others to participate in the meal. Actually, sacred meals are occasions for communion by members of a group even larger than the extended family. In terms of ancestral rights and obligations, a man's extended family includes his paternal grandfather and all his descendants all way down to the man's own grandchildren and those of his siblings and cousins. However, when a man makes sacrifices of roosters to his ancestors, he invites to the feast not only those present from among the members of his extended family, but also representatives from certain families with which he shares common ancestry at a higher level. When he sacrifices a goat, he invites representatives from families with which he is united in a broader context. Women and children consume sacrificial meals prepared in honor of the spirit of the paternal grandmother. In some lineages, all wives and children are authorized to take part in the feast. In others, only the senior wives and their children are.

Ranking

As in other religions, ancestral veneration is a reflection of society in many respects. The Luba society is organized based on descent. The extended family supersedes the nuclear family. Seniority is the major criterion for ordering relationships among relatives. The ancestral spirits occupy a position of preeminence as senior members of the extended family. Ancestral veneration is an extension of the respect that every Luba person owes his or her elders. In other words, ancestral veneration is the elevation of family eldership to a supernatural, divine, rank.

The Luba value procreation. Desirable procreation takes place in marriage. Only through marriage can procreation contribute to the expansion and perpetuation of the lineage. Luba ancestors protect marriage and legitimate procreation by prohibiting

the infidelity of the wife, by forbidding the man to house his legitimate wife, especially the senior wife, in a home he has reviled with extra-marital relations, or to return to her wife the same day he has had sexual intercourse with another woman.

The Luba practice polygamy. Because of the rule of seniority, the first wife occupies a position of preeminence in respect to her co-wives. Ancestral veneration reinforces the preeminence of the senior wife by making her house their headquarters. The shrines for the male ancestors and the tree symbolizing the principal female ancestor are located in her courtyard. She is the only one whose children replace the father in receiving the tributes owed him by his children for their power to work and to procreate.

Marriage stability is a high value among the Luba. When there are serious disputes between spouses, relatives of both sides intervene as counselors in order to prevent divorce. Divorce is only easily accepted in case of adultery (of the wife) and witchcraft. Luba ancestors do not prohibit divorce, repudiation, or abandonment of wife or husband. A man who wants to bring back a repudiated wife must first verbally express his apologies to the ancestral spirits in front of the shrines and pay fines by sacrificing a rooster to them. Likewise, a woman who disrupts the marriage bond by running away cannot reenter the conjugal house without primarily apologizing to the principal female ancestor for her misconduct and paying appropriate fines.

From the preceding discussion, we observe that Luba religion is above all a family religion. The spirits (ancestors), the ministers (elders, senior wives), and the congregation (junior relatives, junior wives, children) are all members of the same family community, notably, the paternal extended family. The matters of faith (belief in the ancestral spirits' power to grant life or to take life from their descendants) and morality (obligation to share one's wealth with one's relatives) are family virtues and good family relations. So are the notions of divine blessing (having many successful relatives, many faithful and fertile wives, and many healthy and prosperous children) and eternal life (going to live with the ancestors in the world of spirits).

The sanctions for violating religious precepts (sterility, miscarriages, and infant mortality) and the reparations required (reconciliation) are also embedded in family life. The occasions for offering sacrifices to the spirits (marriage of the first wife, birth of a child, the release of a relative from prison, the presentation of wives and children to the guardian spirit), are familial events. It thus appears that ancestral veneration is a sublimation of, as well as an instrument for the preservation ad integration of the extended family.

Change and Continuity

Luba culture is not what most Luba people would like it to be. The social fabric of Luba society has been disrupted in many ways by the colonial administration (1885-1960), the South Kasai Government (1960-1965), the Mobutu Regime (1965-1997), and the ongoing political anarchy (1997-present). Other changes came about gradually as people adapted their behaviors to the changing situations and several customs became obsolete. Nevertheless, the Luba still hold on to old ways in many respects.

Structural Disruptions

Changes in the social fabric are among the most disruptive. Before colonization, Luba country was divided into autonomous chiefdoms of various sizes. Colonization put an end to their autonomy by subjecting the customary chief to the authority of

colonial agents, by setting new rules for gaining access to and staying in the position of chief, and by superimposing new administrative structures on those already in place.

To various degrees, the chiefdoms lost part of their major sources of power, that is, control over the land. The colonial administration expropriated indigenous lands for the benefit of European companies, Christian missionary organizations, and the colonial administration itself. In connivance with colonial companies, the colonial administration also imposed new land uses designed to benefit the European colonizers at the expense of the indigenous populations. This was the case with the cultivation of certain crops, particularly cotton, and a new land tenure system called *paysannat*.

The end of the colonial rule in the Congo (1960) is perhaps most remembered for the bloody conflicts in many regions of the country. The Luba were victims of these conflicts in parts of the Kasai Province and in the Katanga Province. Forced to seek refuge in their own homeland, but refusing to give up their leadership status, some Luba leaders from the troubled areas established autonomous villages, thereby undermining even further the authority of some customary chiefs. Going even further, Kalonji Albert, the architect of the Autonomous South Kasai State (1960-1963), proclaimed himself *Mulopwe*, Chief of Chiefs, an imposition the Luba people of Kasai had never experienced. His attempts to legitimize himself by arranging a post-factum investiture by customary chiefs still violated the traditional rules and procedures of power transfer. In the traditional system, the authority to hand over power to any candidate was the prerogative of certain notables, particularly the *Ntite*, rather than chiefs. Kalonji appointed customary chiefs to head his newly created administrative entities, *arrondissements* and *communes*, thereby creating inequality among the chiefs by assigning some chiefs to higher functions than others. This policy also impinged upon the preexisting hierarchies by elevating some sub-chiefs to functions similar to those assigned to their paramount chief.

The advent of the Mobutu Regime in 1965 undermined the traditional structures further. Mobutu's regime was so centralized that even customary chiefdoms came to be controlled from the central government in Kinshasa, the capital. Locally, customary chiefdoms were administered by appointed officials. Some chiefdoms were organized into administrative entities headed by customary chiefs who were recognized and installed by government officials. Others were regrouped into territorial units headed by elected officials also recognized and invested by government representatives. Today, chiefdoms constitute administrative entities called *groupements* and headed by customary chiefs without any particular administrative function. Their position is primarily ceremonial.

Gradual Change

As time went on, the Luba adopted new behavior patterns in response to new situations. Highly motivated to achieve but confronted by resource limitations in their homeland, the Luba learned very early to migrate to other lands in search of better opportunities. Agriculture is everyone's pursuit in Lubaland, but arable land is limited. As the population increased and the prospects for achieving higher status through farming decreased, many people moved farther away onto the lands of neighboring ethnic groups, notably, the Kanyok, the Kete, the Luntu, and the Lulua. Thus, Luba villages were established in these lands far before the era of colonial exploration in Kasai, the

1870s. Further Luba migrations to other territories occurred in response to the demands of the colonial administration. Luba territory was an important reservoir of manpower for colonial recruiters. Through this recruitment, the Luba participated in the opening of administrative stations, missions, and military camps. They contributed to the building of the Irebu-Katanga-Dilolo railroad. When colonial mining companies needed miners in Katanga *(Union Minière)*, in Lubaland itself *(Minière de Bakwanga)*, and in other parts of Kasai *(Forminière, Cikapa)*, Luba workers were brought in along with recruits from other regions.

The Luba unreservedly embraced these colonial innovations. Before long, they voluntarily migrated to other colonial towns, as the Luba perceived in them opportunities for social mobility through wage labor and education. In Luba villages, the populations welcomed the new methods of cultivation introduced by the colonial administration when these methods proved more profitable than the traditional ones.

The Luba spirit of achievement includes the ambition to exercise political power. The colonial regime was an obstruction to this ambition. Its interference with traditional rules for ascending to the position of chief forced some candidates, previously powerful, into exile where they had to accept reduced power. When the idea of the Congo becoming politically independent came about, the Luba embraced it enthusiastically. At the dawn of independence, faced with rejection by their fellow countrymen almost everywhere, the Luba created their own state from the ground up. When the Congo reunited from the splits of the early 1960s, the Luba fought to gain the status of province for their former state. When the new province was enlarged to include neighboring regions belonging to different ethnic groups, the Luba fought to keep the provincial capital in their own territory.

Cultural Obsolescence

Some Luba customs have phased out with the passage of time. In the betrothal system, parents no longer give their daughters to grooms before at least a substantial part of the bridewealth has been paid. The nature of the goods used in the bridewealth has changed as well. The necklaces and the cowrie shells (once used as currency) had already disappeared by the 1950s. Today, even the goats are rarely used for payment. Likewise, the belief that the achiever should pay his elder his first returns from chicken and goat farming is now subject to reinterpretation. A gift from one's work suffices to meet the obligation. Nowadays, husbands separate from their wives away and bring them back in reconciliation without paying any fines to the ancestors. Likewise, wives return to husbands they have deserted without paying fines to the family guardian spirit for having disrupted the conjugal bond.

Cultural Continuity

The Luba culture has changed in many respects but it has also remained the same in many others. *Bukola*, the ability to realize great things throughout one's life through hard work, continues to dominate in the Luba conception healthy living. Today, as in the past, the Luba separate possessions from achievement. For instance, wealth from inheritance or from a gift brings glory to the benefactor who created it rather than to the beneficiary who exhibits it. At the consecration of an achiever the sources of his accomplishments are meticulously examined to make sure that he actually owes his success to his own hard work rather than somebody else's. The Luba have embraced

wage labor wherever they have had a chance to do so. However, agriculture remains in high esteem in Luba villages where yields are judged high enough to justify the effort. Extension agents are amazed by the enthusiasm among Luba farmers for successful experiments with new crop varieties. The ancestral lands are still the object of emotional attachment. Individuals claim membership in their villages of origin even if they have never lived there. Family and lineage building still stand out as the most culturally valued contribution one can make to the community. For a Luba man, marrying a Luba woman and having many children remains the ideal. Since they came to the Kasai in the latter part of the 19th century, Christian missionaries have fought to impose monogamy. For the Luba, polygamy is still a morally normal form of marriage, although no longer widely practiced as before. Missionaries introduced Christian marriage; the colonial administration authorized the official (civil) marriage; but the Luba, baptized or not, still hold on to traditional marriages that involve the payment of the bridewealth by the groom's family to the bride's family. Actually, traditional marriage is a prerequisite for Christian or civil marriage. One has to prove that the bridewealth has been taken care of in order to obtain permission to proceed with the Christian or civil marriage.

In spite encroachments by the colonial administration and the post-colonial governments of the Congo, the Luba continue to fight for the position of the customary chiefdoms. Many still evoke the traditional criteria as the only legitimate form of access to the chieftaincy. Among other things, only members of lineages that descend from the chiefdom founder and his senior wife can legitimately compete for the chief's position. The birth order of the founder's sons, through whom descent is traced, is still used to establish rights to rule.

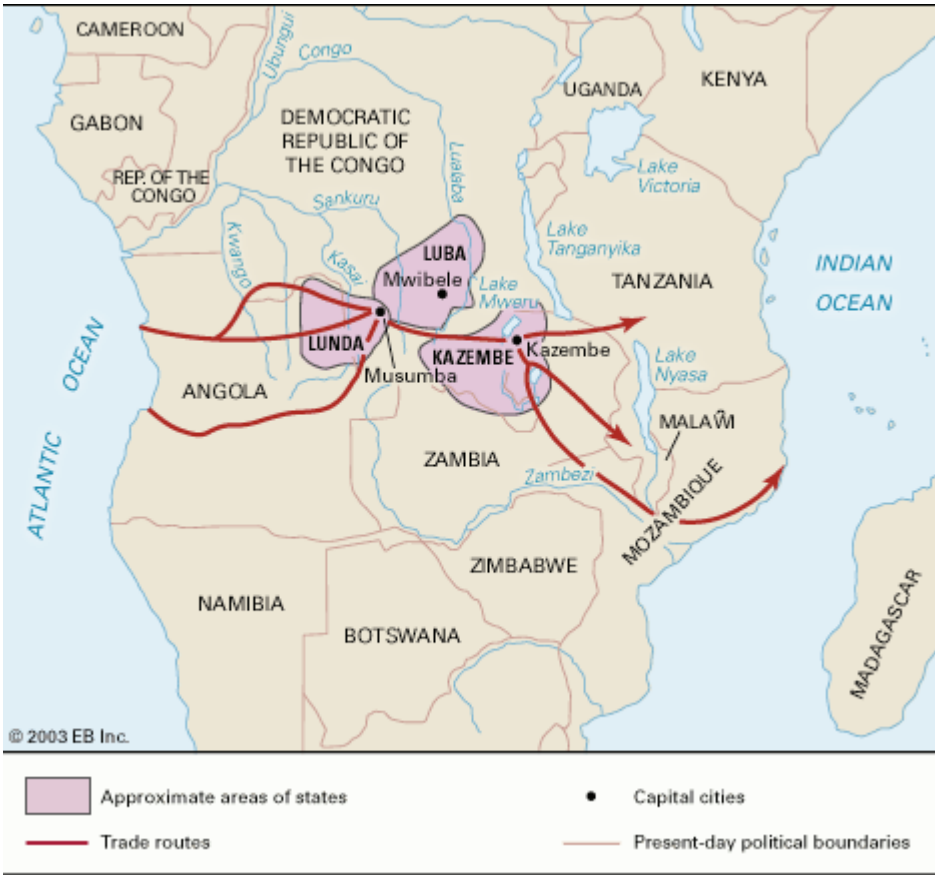
Old forms of supernatural beliefs persist as well. Chickens and goats are still the only animals acceptable in rituals. Herbalists and shamans continue to be called upon to heal the sick, especially those suffering from diseases for which modern medicine has no cure. Diviners, sometimes called by honorific modern professional titles such as "Doctor," are regularly consulted by for help with their personal problems or those of their loved ones.

Double Allegiance

When given a chance or when forced to, and depending on the circumstances, people have combined new ways of doing things with old ones. For instance, today in the Congo, people marry by the payment of the bridewealth, the performance of Christian ceremonies, and including the spouse's name on official documents as required by law. Sometimes they have moved between the two realms to various degrees. Some have striven to excel in agriculture in the countryside, moved to the city seeking to excel in paid jobs, and returned to agriculture in the village when success in urban centers appeared problematic. They have venerated the ancestral spirits secretly, while attending a Catholic mass, a Protestant service, or a community prayer group, which is the most recent novelty. When they could afford it, they have sought the services of herbalists or shamans as well as those of trained medical professionals. The belief in witchcraft seems to have increased. The evangelical pastor is now the seer who discovers the witch during trance and removes the witchcraft from the victim by performing exorcism. More people than before pursue opportunities for social mobility in entrepreneurship, professions and in all fields and at all levels of labor market, but have not given up on com-

peting for political office in the traditional system. Today, as in the past, stories are still being told about bloody fights for the position among rival chiefdom segments. And, as a relatively recent case suggests, ambitions for the office of traditional chief is not confined to people who lived all their lives in their native homeland or those without any other avenue for socio-economic mobility. A case in point is that of a university professor and lawyer who gave up his professions and abandoned his wife and children to go back to his village for a lengthy competition for the position of chief of his home chiefdom. These incidents speak to the nature of culture in human history.

The Luba Empire*



*Retrieved June 12, 2011 from http://media-2.web.britannica.com/eb-media/85/77385-004-D9B3790E.gif.

End Note

1. The Lubilanji (Sankuru) is the largest of four major rivers crossing Luba territory, hence their designation Luba Lubilanji, which distinguishes them from other Luba groups who live in Kasai (Luba Kanyok, Luba Songye, Luba Luntu, and Luba Luluwa) and in Katanga (Luba Hemba, Luba Lolo and Luba Kalundwe or Luba of Mutombo Mukulu). All these groups claim descent from the Luba Empire of the 16th to the 19th centuries. See the map at the end of the article.

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