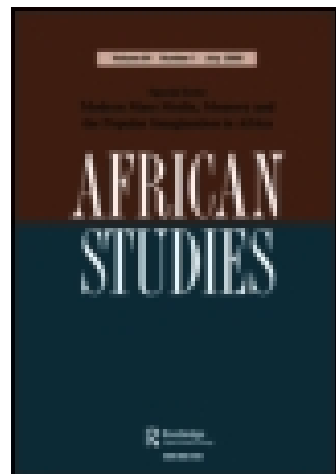


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SPIRIT NAMES AMONG THE CENTRAL BANTU

J. T. Munday

ON THE map it will be noticed how an arm of the Belgian Congo is thrust right into the heart of Northern Rhodesia from the north-west. This arm, together with that part of N. Rhodesia which nearly surrounds it, is inhabited by a group of very nearly related tribes, the Lamba, the Lala and the Aushi, and a number of lesser tribes who distinguish themselves by prefixing *Bena-* (folk) to the name of the area in which they live: such as the *Bena-Maswaka*, the *Bena-Bukanda* and others. All these peoples belong to the Central Bantu and claim to have migrated originally from the neighbourhood of the Lualaba River in the Belgian Congo. The Nsenga tribe which lives on the eastern boundary of N. Rhodesia is also very closely related and claims a common origin.

A proverb of the Aushi tribe says: "The Creator made the spirits, but Chiwa he did not make." This article is a short study of beliefs about spirits found amongst the tribes named. There are slightly different customs in the different areas, but the beliefs which lie behind them seem to be the same. Clear-cut theories which the African can put into words are, of course, not to be found.

I. THE NAME IS THE SPIRIT

Every African man, in N. Rhodesia, has to carry an identity book, known as a *Chitupa*. In this small, pale-green book is entered the owner's name, the name of his village headman, and the name of his chief. The law directs that an employer shall make certain entries in this *Chitupa* when he engages its owner: the employer also, probably, notes his new servant's name as it is written there. If the owner comes from one of the tribes with which we are concerned it soon becomes clear that he has more than one name.

Letters come to him addressed with a variety of names; his friends come to call on him and hail him loudly by these names, and yet others as well.

Investigation brings to light the fact that the Africans of these parts, whether man or woman, have two classes of names: (a) spirit-names and (b) names of manhood and womanhood. Each has one (a few have two) of the names of the first class, and one or more (some have many more) of the names of the second class. It is by these names of manhood and womanhood that they prefer to be called, some are traditional African names of these parts, some are debased European words, some are European given- or family-names, some are nick names, given owing to some peculiarity, some are names given at baptism. All of these names of manhood and womanhood (except the last) can be, and are, changed for any and no reason, and according to who is addressing the owner. The spirit-name however is never changed, once it is finally given. It is of this spirit-name that the Lala aphorism says: "The Name (*isina*, Lala; *zina*, Nsenga) is the Spirit (*umupafi*, L.; *mzimu*, N.).

Officials now prefer the African to be registered under his spirit-name, owing to its never being changed; but there are two practical disadvantages which weigh against its being used for registration purposes: an African of the tribes with which we are concerned is very shy of using it for himself or another, and, in some parts, the spirit-names are so few in number that the majority of persons in one area may share half a dozen names. However, as has been said, the spirit-name is never changed from the mother's back to the grave.

The giving of the spirit-name (*ilyākufyalwa*, "of birth", L.; *lapankombo*, "of the navel", N.) is regarded as an event of the greatest importance. Every child born is regarded as the "come back" (*icibwela*, L.; *awela*, N.) of some dead person,

either of the same or the opposite sex. The child has to be given the spirit-name of that dead person; it will be seen that the spirit-names are common to the two sexes. Before a name can be given it has to be discovered whose "come back" the baby is. It must be remembered that the mental and social horizon is small, so that the names of a great number of dead persons will not occur to those who are finding a baby's name. In one Nsenga village of fifty-five huts, seventeen spirit-names were found; one middle-aged woman shared her name with seven of her children and grandchildren. In one class of seventeen boys in a Lala school, eleven were called either Mwape, Ngosa, Chisenga or Kunda (these boys came from three chief's areas).

When the navel-cord has fallen off there comes the day for discovering whose spirit the baby has inherited. Before the recent beginning of urbanization, the naming of a baby always took place under the overwhelming influence of the mother's clan. The central Bantu are matrilineal and practise matrilocal marriage, and are exogamous from their clans; so each village was, to a very great degree, the village of one clan. Hence, human nature being what it is, it usually happened that a baby was reckoned to have inherited its spirit from one of its mother's clan; in fact a Lamba aphorism goes so far as to say: "An important thing with spirits is the clan". However it is not an uncommon thing for a baby to be given its name from its father's clan. This seems always to have been possible, but will doubtless become much more common under the new conditions of life. In towns, where the wage-earning father looks on himself as the head of his family, there are signs of a desire for patrilineality; even clan exogamy is breaking down; in the Broken Hill urban area, members of other tribes say that the Aushi men do not even trouble to ask a girl's clan before they go to bed with her.

Under the "chairmanship" of the baby's maternal grandmother (usually), a prolonged discussion took place to determine the baby's name, and agreement usually fell on the name of some "lucky" forbear of the mother's clan. Sometimes, in a joking way, one of the old folk would

ask the baby if he were so-and-so; and if the baby, from reasons of wind, smiled, the old lady would cry out: "There, I was right, he is indeed so-and-so". Amongst the Lalas (as amongst the Lambas) if, after naming, a child begins to ail, it is thought that the wrong names has been given, and divination will be used to determine the right one. Amongst the Aushis the father is often asked whom he dreamed about during his wife's pregnancy, this being thought to show which spirit has been trying to indicate that it has become incarnate in the baby. If the mother has been dreaming about the same dead person, then certainly will that person's name be given. Amongst the Aushis and the Lalas too, a name will be given one evening, and if the baby cries that night, another name will be tried the following day, and so on, perhaps half a dozen times, until the baby passes a quiet night, when the last name tried will be the one it is known by for life.

Every member of a family will hope that it is the spirit of a "lucky" person which has become incarnate in the baby, and the incarnation of an "unlucky" spirit is much dreaded. Other things being equal, a person known to have been "lucky" will have more "come-backs" than someone less lucky. In one village in Lalaland there may be a dozen children and young folk all called (e.g.) Mwape, all "come-backs" of a dead Mwape (b) who was well known to all the elderly members of the village. In the neighbourhood there may be a score of other Mwapes, all regarded as the "come-backs" of this same Mwape (b); this Mwape (b) was the "come-back" of yet another even more famous Mwape (c), as were a number of other Mwapes, some still living, some dead. Most of these latter, again, have "come-backs" in the new generation in the neighbourhood. In this way, in any one area, a large proportion of the inhabitants will bear one name.

When the baby becomes a toddler he will be given the first of his "names of manhood" (or womanhood). The spirit-name, however, remains unchanged. The names of manhood and womanhood are the ones by which a person is spoken of; many of these names are those used as spirit-names by others.

When a boy or girl begins to grow up, he begins to wish to have children in the family called inheritors of the same spirit as himself. He will tease the elders, when the time comes for a child to be named, that the child may be his namesake (*imboswa*, L.). In joking conversation, if little (e.g.) Ngosa has been misbehaving, the elder Ngosa will be rebuked: "You are a naughty child, Ngosa!" Amongst the Nsengas the elder child will give a bead necklace to his baby namesake, "to make sure the name". If a young man or woman has not persuaded the elders to give some child the same name as his, he will try to prevail on them to do so when his own first child is born. It is, therefore not uncommon for a father or mother to have their eldest child as an *imboswa*. A person and his *imboswa* are looked on as having inherited the same spirit. Amongst the Nsengas, when it has proved impossible to decide on a name which belonged to a forbear, they will get over the difficulty and say: "Let us call him by the same name as little So-and-so, he has proved to be "lucky".

At death, when the corpse has been buried, the spirit is believed to remain in the neighbourhood in an especially dangerous condition, only too willing to cause a nuisance, or worse, serious harm, by bringing disease, death or disaster, if it is not propitiated. So a day is chosen for a beer-drink, at which an offering of a little beer will be made to the spirit. The day chosen will be far enough off for all those who by custom should come, to receive long enough warning; it may be three or four months after the death. Beer is set to brew (to some degree the grain available will determine the date, which sometimes has to be put off till after harvest). Before the yeast is added, in the hut where the brewing is being done, a little of the liquid is poured on the ground, and the spirit told that it is in its honour that the brewing is taking place.

Three days later, when the beer is ready, the real offering takes place. This is done to-day sometimes in the hut, usually the offering is poured under a tree at the edge of the village, or at the grave. A hole, about a foot deep, is dug, about as wide as will take the forearm, and a small

quantity of the beer is poured into the hole, whilst the spirit is informed that the offering is for him. The spirit is asked not to harm the people, but to help them. The offerer will normally be a senior of the dead person's clan.

If the dead person has an *imboswa* present, his spirit is recognized as being in that *imboswa*, yet the propitiation ceremony is done to the same spirit which is not in the *imboswa*. The spirit which is in the *imboswa* will do no harm, but that which is not in him may do very grievous harm. Within the limited horizon of any community there is only a limited number of spirits with which to reckon. In no sense can they be regarded as being individual spirits, rather they are to be thought of as "pool-spirits", from which each person at birth is possessed by a "part"; though in a sense a part of a spirit is within him, that part is still identical with that which is without. An African of this region may have to reckon with a score of "pool-spirits", he recognizes that there are others, but for practical purposes he is not concerned with them.

Although a person's spirit-name is well known to all his relatives and fellow-villagers, he does not readily tell it to strangers, nor does he care to be called by it; he believes that a witch may entrap a spirit more easily, if he knows its name. The spirit entrapped by a witch is only that "part" which is in one person.

II. FEAR OF SPIRITS

Spirits, though for practical purposes limited in number, are always a potential source of trouble. One may enter a baby, and not be recognized, and so be angered. A spirit may wish to become incarnate and be unable to find a baby in which to be born; it is spirits which bring disaster on those who break taboos in the majority of cases, and on those who neglect customs; spirits are apt to take offence with little or no reason (a small attendance at a funeral is quite enough to cause great anger); above all else some spirit may be "unlucky" in a certain family. However, though spirits are always a potential source of trouble, those "parts" which

have lately left a body have especially to be propitiated—as the newly departed is more vivid to the minds of the survivors, so is his spirit more powerful for evil.

On the edge of a village (especially amongst the Lala who have, till lately, been more untouched by European ideas) is a number of miniature huts, usually roughly built, just rickety little roofs perched on some uprights. At various spots round a village as many as half a dozen may be found. Offerings of pinches of meal, of a few beads, or of a few grains of corn are to be found in them. These spirit-huts are built to the more important dead: to the last village-headman, to one who was well-known enough to have had a number of "come-backs" named for him, or to a recognized elder of the clan. When offerings are made many members of the clan may be present, but only one (in some districts) who has inherited the departed's name may actually make the offering. Often accompanying the offerer, and carrying the offering, will be one who is a member of another clan, a clan which is in joking and funerary relationship with the offerer's clan (*umwali*, L.; *umunungwe*, Bemba).¹

If a person loses his temper with someone he will probably call him a *cibanda*. This term is applied to a frightening person or beast, or to an enemy or bad tempered person. The fact that an African of these tribes very frequently applies the term to certain spirits, has led some observers to suppose that there is a species of evil spirit called *cibanda*. This seems not to be the case. All spirits are potentially dangerous, some are known to be inimical to certain persons or families, though the same spirits may be friendly to others. Any spirit is a *cibanda* to one to whom it is inimical. It is the usual custom amongst the Nsengas, if a name has been given to a child who soon afterwards dies, to give the same name, though perhaps with misgivings, to another new baby of the same family. If this second child dies then it is said that this spirit is "unluckily", a *cibanda*, to that family. Often the same name is

then given to another new baby, but of another family in the neighbourhood; if that child dies too there is no doubt as to that spirit's malignity in that neighbourhood, it is, there, a *cibanda*. They are not spirits of evil as such; in Aushiland, at least, there is a spirit of evil, which the creator did not make, *Chiwa*.

A Lala woman, away from home with her baby and her little boy, had no fellow-clansman with her when her baby died. She herself mixed a little meal with some water, and poured it in offering to the spirit which had been in the baby, as the little boy said: "My mother had nothing else to offer to the *cibanda*". Until the child died the spirit was just the *umupa*i of dead So-and-so now in the baby, but after death under distressing conditions it was, to the mother and little brother, a *cibanda*.

When a mother is having a difficult labour, and the diviner has given the reason not to be the infidelity of the husband, but So-and-so trying to be incarnate, she will call the spirit a *cibanda*, but once the birth is safely over, this very same spirit, now satisfied, may turn out to be a "lucky" one.

Amongst spirits which are to be feared are those which have been forgotten, and so have no "come-backs" to-day, because their very names have been lost. Some children are called after these spirits (Kaluwa is the name given amongst the Nsengas, "The Forgotten One"). The spirits which have been forgotten are supposed to wander through the world, sometimes dimly seen, in the shapes of half-people; one leg, one arm, one eye and so on. These "ghosts" are known as *cilengwa-lengwa* (N. "created but forgotten") and *luwe* (L. "forgotten"), and are thought sometimes to take possession of people, driving them mad, besides being able, sometimes, to become incarnate.

Although the most present fear may well be the fear of witchcraft, the fear of potentially dangerous spirits runs it a good second.

A propitiated spirit, propitiated either by

¹ An interesting development of this relationship is found at Broken Hill, the Bemba, and the tribes they conquered, on the one hand, and the Ngoni with the

tribes they conquered, on the other, now make a pair of nations related in this way, and perform each others funeral rites.

offerings or by becoming incarnate may prove to be a very helpful one to the person it is in. A person going on a journey will often in Lambaland and Lalaland go to his spirit-hut to say "good-bye", being sure that this will lead to his being guarded. It is to be noted that the spirit is "his" and also of the dead person. A man who is a successful hunter will be spoken of as one who is helped by "his" spirit, especially if his name is that of a great departed hunter.

It cannot be overstressed that amongst these peoples, as amongst other primitive races, everything is relative to the individual. One spirit may be generally lucky in the land, but to one man it may be a *cibanda*; any one spirit is of importance to a certain family group because for some reason or another its name is well known to the members, it is this spirit which will be supposed to be incarnate in a large number of babies in that family; one chief's spirit will be offered to as "the owner of the veldt" in an area by the majority of the folk there, because their foremothers "came into the country with him"; in the same area there may be another chief's spirit honoured in exactly the same way by a minority, and for the same reason. The mental horizon seldom stretches beyond a person's immediate family group: the rest of the world produces very little emotional reaction in the observer. The intruding European finds his actions and his customs regarded with a kindly detachment, and himself not accepted as really human, and his ideas of no importance: only his possessions are coveted. "Foreign" spirits are regarded by a family group much in the same way.

III. SECOND NAMES

As has been said, every person in this area takes other names besides his spirit-name from time to time; these are the names he is called by, but they are thought to have little importance and can be changed as often as is desired. Sometimes a child who has not got a true *imboswa* will, amongst the Nsengas call So-and-so his *imboswa* in a joking way, calling him by his own spirit-name; this is, however merely another variety of nick-name.

Spirits are believed to be able to enter into adults who become possessed dancers, and so on. "Foreign" spirits may suddenly enter a person and possess him, causing him great inconvenience, much as a European may suddenly arrive and unaccountably call a part of the forest his own; the spirits of "foreign" chiefs (presumably because they are the "foreigners" most likely to be known by name) are specially prone to enter grown-ups.

The normal way for a person to receive a second spirit is by becoming a chief. In this article "chief" will be used when these Africans themselves use the word *imfumu*. Different varieties of chieftainship are found amongst the Central Bantu, from the elaborate system of the Bembas, through the system of the "Royal Clan" as amongst the Lalas, down to the Nsengas, who name every village headman a "chief". This last may well have been the primitive form of chieftainship. The majority, at any rate, of the Central Bantu migrated from the Lualaba River from the seventeenth century onwards, and the unit of migration was the "clan village", so it was natural to call the village headman a chief.

It will be enough to describe what happens when one of these minor Nsenga chiefs obtains his "seat", the custom of "taking away" the chieftainship from the dead chief. A chief called Vwenga of the Honey-bird clan, whose name of manhood was Chibindi died, his successor was also called Vwenga, with the manhood-name of Sumaili. On Sumaili's death he was succeeded by a man whose spirit-name was Mwape (with a manhood-name of David); each of the three was sister's son to his predecessor. At the gathering which met to put Mwape (David) in his uncle's place, an elder of the clan spoke: "The uncle has come back; you will sit in the seat of Vwenga, therefore to-day we have given you the name, you are Vwenga": Beer was poured into the usual hole with the words: "Look after this man who has taken your name". During this prayer another senior clansman repeatedly called: "Moyo" (life); this calling went on for some time till drowned by the ululations of the women. The

new chief still had Mwape's spirit, but he now also had Vwenga's. I am told that when Sumaili succeeded *his* uncle the same ceremony was performed though both Sumaili and Chibindi had the same spirit-name, and indeed the younger was the *imboswa* of the elder. Finally the "arms" of the chieftainship were handed over with the words: "O come-back of Vwenga, these are his arms".

It seems then that it is impossible for these Africans to say (with the Christian European): "My spirit is that invisible part of me which is immortal" Rather must they say: "My spirit is 'part' of one of the pool-spirits, they are immortal, at my death that part will go wandering looking for re-incarnation, yet it will remain a part of the original pool-spirit, and it will try to enter into as many persons as it can, at the same time, and yet be elsewhere too; the spirit is immortal, but if the name is forgotten, so that it cannot become incarnate, it wanders through the world as a 'ghost'." The spirit is amoral, good to whom it is good, bad to whom it is bad.

An educated African was asked to try and put into words his beliefs about these spirits; he said: "They are something like kaffir-corn; the old root has many shoots around it; the owner transplants them elsewhere in his fields, and some in other fields. It is still the same kaffir-corn, but it is in many places, and through the years it spreads all over the land."

IV. THE POLITE PLURAL

In this area, as elsewhere, anyone other than a small child is addressed in the second plural, any senior is addressed in the third plural, and speaks of himself in the first plural. It is possible that such a custom originated in beliefs described here, in the identification of the one with the many, the many with the one. It is said that the great chiefs of the Bembas are addressed in the second singular, but these persons are also said to be identified so absolutely with their predecessors that it is difficult sometimes to determine whether one of them is speaking of himself or of a far distant predecessor.

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