

COMMUNITY AND DESCENT IN UFIPA:

A PROBLEM OF PATTERN.

by

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This is a first tentative attempt at formulating a theoretical framework for Fipa society: that is, for Fipa traditional society, as it would seem to have been before the European advent.

I have been doing fieldwork in Ufipa for six months and for most of that time I have been learning the language and trying to reconstruct a picture of Fipa society as it was in the immediate pre-European period. I conceive such a reconstruction to be a necessary preliminary to the consideration of problems of social change in Ufipa; after all, one needs to have some idea what we now observe has changed from.

Much of what I am going to describe may still be observed or directly apprehended in Fipa society; but much also has disappeared; where this is so, I use the past tense.

Firstly, just a few background facts. The people with whom this paper is concerned are called Wafipa, or Fipa. Their language is Bantu, and considered by at least one eminent authority (Doke) to belong to the Bemba group. But in fact little is known about Kifipa -- there is no dictionary, and the nearest thing to a grammar is a 40-page article published by Bernhard Struck in the early years of this century.

Most of the Fipa inhabit a high plateau, 140 miles long and between 30 and 50 miles across, between lakes Tanganyika and Rukwa in south-western Tanganyika, near the Rhodesian border. The rest of the tribe live along the shores of the two lakes. There are about 75,000 Fipa and they are mostly agriculturalists; cattle, sheep and goats are also kept. There is a ruling line of immigrant aristocrats who are probably of Tutsi origin.

The problem with which this paper is concerned is that of recognizing, describing and interpreting pattern in social relationships. I am going to suggest that Fipa society may be considered in terms of a pattern which becomes gradually evident on examination of the ethnographic facts. Of course my conception of this pattern will doubtless be modified as further investigation discloses new facts, or reveals new facets of facts already known in part. What I am going to put forward is no more than a provisional theory of Fipa society, useful perhaps in suggesting further lines of inquiry, and to be cast aside as soon as new knowledge demonstrates its inadequacy. It is little more, in fact, than a methodological tool, which I use to organize the facts already discovered in such a way that they may be compared in a possibly fruitful manner. What is perhaps unexpected is that what I shall call the basic pattern appears, according to this hypothesis, in both the communal, non-familial organization of the Fipa, and in their system of descent. This is something which first occurred to me only when I was writing this paper.

I am going to begin the argument by describing, and analysing the symbolic meaning of, a single and quite simple custom of the Fipa -- the erection of the main gate of a village. I have chosen this particular custom because it illustrates concisely the points I want to make in discussing the practice and belief of Fipa in community and descent. It is not an indispensable part of my argument (though it provides obvious reinforcement for the general theme); the argument could be developed without using the gate-building ceremony as evidence, or in using other customs as

examples; but I find it convenient to use the ceremony of gate-building as an introduction.

Before going further, I ought to explain that a Fipa village was nothing like the amorphous, rambling affair we see, for instance, in Buganda and many other parts of East Africa. Instead it was a roughly circular collection of closely packed huts, surrounded by a high fence (ilinga) and a defensive ditch (unkumbwa). There were rudimentary draw-bridges and the fence was provided with slits called ifipeko, through which arrows could be discharged at an attacking force. There was even a town crier, or herald, called chumambila.

From time to time it became necessary, or desirable, to found a new village. Sometimes a potentially dissident faction in a village would go off and found a new community of their own, but more often it was the whole village which moved en masse to a new site. Such a move could follow an unusual number of deaths in the village, construed as signifying the displeasure of the spirits of the place, the imiao nkandawa; or it could be made merely for sanitary reasons. Villagers seldom moved far; such items as doorframes were transported from the old site to the new (according to Mr. D.D. Yonge, a former district commissioner of Ufipa).

The first act in building the new village was the erection of the main gate, the amakoka. This consisted of two uprights and a crossbeam, like a Soccer goal without the net. Before it was put up, a young boy and a young girl of the village each dug one of the two holes which were to take the gateposts; the girl dug the hole on the left, facing towards the village-to-be, and the boy dug the hole on the right.

When the gate had been erected all the villagers marched through it. My principal informant on this matter, an old man with a mind unwarped by the study of sociological works, told me that this business of the boy and girl digging the holes and the people walking through the gate, symbolized the desire for unity and amity of the villagers.

This simple and rather heart-warming ceremony of the boy and girl symbolically laying the foundations of the village is one I would like you to keep in mind as I go on to outline Fipa kinship and communal organization. Because I am going to suggest that this gate-building custom exemplifies the basic pattern which I hope you will also perceive in the broader picture of Fipa life.

But before continuing, I want very briefly to analyse this symbolic act, so that we know what to look for elsewhere. Like all good symbols, this gate business is a compound of several concepts. I think three may here be discerned: Opposition; Equality; and Unity.

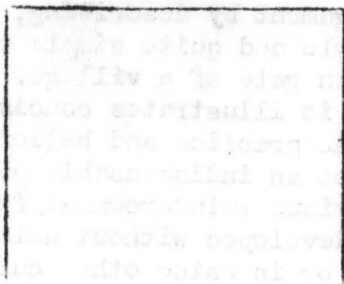
Opposition, symbolized in the two posts, the boy and girl facing each other;

Equality, in that they each share one-half of the basic work of gate-building, are associated with two posts of equal height and thickness;

Unity, in the joining of the uprights by the crossbeam, in the procession of the villagers through the completed gate.

UNITY

OPPOSITION



EQUALITY

We can also note that the three concepts -- Opposition, Equality and Unity -- are inter-dependent. There could be no lasting opposition without equality between the opposed factors, nor any unity in this sense without two equal elements to unite.

There were three kinds of village in traditional Ufipa. Most important was the royal village, or isachi, the residence of the king, or umwene. Next in importance were the frontier stations, each the headquarters of a general, or undasi, whose task it was to protect the kingdom from invasion. Thirdly, and considerably more numerous, were the ordinary villages of Ufipa, what might be called commoner villages.

These commoner villages were largely self-governing entities; they might be thought of as embryonic city-states; each elected its own headman, or umwene nsi. Commoner villages acknowledged the de jure authority of the king and his henchman, the district chief or umwene nkandawa. The latter, however, spent most of his time at the royal court and did not have a district or county headquarters like the Ganda ssaza chief, for example. In comparison with the centralized, authoritarian states of the Interlacustrine region, for example, the kingdoms of Buganda, Bunyoro-Kitara or Ruanda, Ufipa appears as a decentralized league or commonwealth of practically self-governing village communities. It is consistent with this relative decentralization of authority that there appears to have been little or no forcible exaction of tribute by the king or his officers in pre-European Ufipa; the royal court was maintained partly on a share of fines levied from offenders by the villages' own magistrates, and partly through gifts given out of respect for the king's person. Here again the contrast with the Interlacustrine kingdom-states, with their elaborate machinery for exacting revenue from the populace, is very striking.

I have said that the commoner villages chose their own chief or headman. He in his turn appointed an assistant or deputy, called unyampala.

The headman next appointed, from among the elder women of the village, an official called Wakwifatila.

Wakwifatila was responsible for the preservation of public order. Any villager, man or woman, accused of causing a breach of the peace by abusive language or brawling, was likely to be seized by the agents of Wakwifatila. The defendant was then tried and sentenced by Wakwifatila, who was usually assisted by several elder women.

These offences against public order were known by the generic name of ipaka. They were punished severely, a measure of the store the Fipa set by communal solidarity. The standard fine for intusi, abusive or obscene language, was six imali, hoes or other iron implements. Offenders were also liable to have their food reserves confiscated.

Wafusy'intusi, yankulem'ipaka;  
ukulipa ifintu fyako n'imbusi swe!  
yatole fyako untanta malesi;  
aanako yakusyala yalufwa n'insala.

(You have used abusive language and been arrested and charged with ipaka; you will have to pay up and give all your goats as well; they may even take the millet from your granary; in consequence your children will starve).

Probably an exaggeration or at least an extreme case; but the saying indicates how strong were the feelings of the people on this matter; it also gives an idea of the power wielded by Wakwifatila.

It is said that people sentenced by Wakwifatila had the right of appeal to the headman, but that it was extremely rare for him to alter a verdict or sentence imposed by her. He could presumably dismiss her and appoint another Wakwifatila if she consistently abused her powers, but I have not heard of this being done.

Incidentally the office of Wakwifatila survives in present-day Ufipa. There is one living near me in "my" village, of course with much eroded powers, but I am told that her permission is still sought before any wedding is celebrated in the village, and that she has to be given a calabash of beer from the ceremony, in common with the village headman, who also survives in many villages despite administrative exorcism.

In traditional Ufipa, village headman and Wakwifatila were of course not equals, but were nominally superior and subordinate. But their powers balanced each other in the sense that they were complementary: the umwene nsi represented the village to the external world, the king and his henchman, the umwene nkandawa, he organized forays for hunting and war. But it was Wakwifatila who oversaw the internal security of the village; and so they depended upon each other. I don't think it would be too far-fetched to see in the duality headman/Wakwifatila a parallel with the male/female symbolism of the gate-building ceremony. The single fact that the magistrate Wakwifatila was always a woman, just as the umwene nsi was always a man, suggests the comparison. Incidentally, to say that the umwene nsi was always a man is not the obvious statement it would be in many societies. In Ufipa, many positions of authority were and are filled by a woman. For instance, the head of the family, the umwenekasi, may be either a man or a woman, the choice being made according to criteria of seniority, personality, etc. There is at this moment a female umwene (queen) in the southern kingdom of Ufipa, Lyangalile.

So what I have called a basic pattern is at least suggested or sketched out in the village administration. I now want to consider the villagers as divided into opposed male/female categories, conscious of a corporate identity.

To begin with, the male elders, called intambikwa, who provided the umwene nsi, the headman, were counterbalanced by the amalombwe, the elder women from whose ranks came Wakwifatila. Just as the former were the guardians of law and custom (imbele), so were the latter the jealous custodians of the secrets of birth and pregnancy, imbusa.

The younger men were of course used to act together as hunters and as warriors. Their feminine coevals were called inchembela. These were the mature women, the mother of at least one child. Their badge of rank was the small hoe, impalanga, and also a rather beautiful hatchet called akasewe, both of which they bore and flourished on festive or ritual occasions, such as weddings. Both implements they carried always over the left shoulder. Unmarried women, and married women who had not yet produced a child, were called asungu and were inferior to the inchembela.

The sense of corporate identity of all the women of the village was demonstrated in rather startling manner on two occasions in particular: on the death of a pregnant woman and on the birth of twins.

I am told that both these events were the signal for the women of the village to run wild. In my informant's words, "it was as though war had broken out". Brandishing their hoes and axes, women plundered the fields and seized and killed livestock, goats and even cows. On the birth of twins the women habitually tore off their clothes and went around naked. Any man they caught was sexually abused. If an owner of fields or livestock ventured to protest

against the loss of his property the women were likely to invade his house and seize everything they could lay hands on. It seems that the men of the village were powerless in face of this wholesale and licensed feminine violence.

The sense of sexual identity was learnt early. At about the age of five or so children ceased to live in their parents' huts and slept in communal huts called intuli or insalo, one for boys and one for girls. They slept in these communal huts until marriage.

There is another custom of the Fipa which expresses, in a surprising way, the concept of division into equal and opposite social categories. It is surprising in that the division imposed by it, though couched in the familiar male/female terminology, cuts across the actual division of the population into men and women to impose a new and arbitrary classification.

The basis of this classification is the sex of one's first-born child. The husband and wife whose first-born is an addition to the male ranks are each known henceforth as a "friend of men" (umwali wa yosi). Similarly if the first-born is a girl, husband and wife are known as "friend of women", umwali wa yanachi. "Friends" have a kind of joking relationship with one another, which extends to the right to help themselves to each other's food and firewood, and to indulge in mutual chaffing and ribaldry. This institution of the "friends" would seem to have a socially unifying effect, since it tends to blur the sharp division into masculine and feminine and rather emphasise what men and women may have in common -- more exactly, what half the men and women of the village may have in common with each other.

This ends my brief sketch of the Fipa village community. I now want to consider another dimension of society, the family, and specifically to ask whether the system of descent contains any trace of the pattern Opposition/Equality/Unity which, starting from the custom of the main gate, I have thought to find underlying communal organization.

I should say now that I am far from having thought out all the implications of the Fipa descent system, which is a complex one. There are many aspects of it which I have certainly not yet understood. But in broad outline it is something like this:

There is a patriclan, membership of which is transmitted agnatically from father to son. There are four of these patriclans in Ufipa, called Unsi, Mwichisi, Udenje and Unkwai. They are not exogamous: one can marry into one's own patriclan. There seems to be no strong feeling either for or against this practice; if anything, it seems to be thought rather a good idea.

Father's side and mother's side of the family -- any family (I am talking now of the corporate group, the body of people who have father-son, brother-sister-cousin relationships with one another) Fipa represent to themselves by two symbols: the paternal side of the family is the head, untwe or katwe; the maternal side is the loin, unsana.

The patriclan, of course, belongs to the head or untwe side of the family; it comes from the father. On the loin or unsana side, the mother's side, is the maternal clan, to which Ego also belongs.

The maternal clan or matriclan then, is of course not one of the four patriclans -- it cannot be, since membership of these four clans is transmitted only through males. It is another descent category altogether, to which I have provisionally given the alternative name of "spirit clan", for a reason which I shall explain. I say "alternative name" because, for Ego, the matriclan is not the "spirit clan", though it is the spirit clan of Ego's mother and also of Ego's children. For Ego, the spirit clan is his father's matriclan and also the spirit clan of his father's mother.

There are twenty of these descent categories in Ufipa; according to one's position in the family, as I have indicated, this category may be either "matriclan" or "spirit clan". Like the patriclan, the matriclan or spirit clan is not exogamous: one can, and does, marry into one's own matriclan and spirit clan. Each of these twenty "clans" is associated with a totemic animal or bird; the members of one's own totem-species (umwiko) are believed to be one's "brothers". Thus the Chipeta clan has as its totem the white-necked crow, ikungwa, who is said to be a "Mwana Chipeta". The Sumpi clan has the chicken (inkoko) as its totem, and the knees of the members of this clan are supposed to project backwards, like a chicken's. Two of the patriclans, Unkwai and Udenje, also have totems -- the cow and the dog, respectively; the other two patriclans seem not to have them, according to my present information; Unsi means "country" and Mwichisi is the name of a certain hill in Ufipa. There are no clan heads and no sub-divisions of clans.

Before going any further, I had better explain why I use this term 'spirit clan'. Fipa believe, in common with many other Bantu peoples, that the soul (unsimu) of a man or woman (or child) goes on death to an underground world or paradise which Fipa call insi ya umya. Here it enjoys the company of other imisi or souls for a certain time. After the lapse of a couple of generations or so the soul is supposed to tire of the life underground and to wish to be reincarnated on earth. He then selects a suitable woman of his family and is reborn from her. Frequently the soul intimates his or her intention to the woman through a dream in which he appears in the form of a snake, entering her hut.

Having been reborn, the soul must now be recognized by his parents and called his correct name. This is not always easy. There may be a large number of ancestors who belong to the same spirit clan as Ego's children, the more so if there has been inter-marriage between members of the same clan. So a succession of names is trotted out. The baby is supposed to signal when the parents have hit on the right name by ceasing to cry and accepting his mother's breast. But if he is not called by his right name he will become ill and eventually die; a shocking calamity, because he will then turn into an evil spirit, an ichiswa, and revenge himself on his obtuse parents. The difficulty is often solved by calling in a diviner, who may be able to uncover the name of some obscure forebear. Once known, the name is a secret shared only by the parents and the child and not revealed to anyone else.

For Fipa, the "spirit clan" is simply called uluko, a word which may be translated "clan" or "family". But they also have an expression when they are asking someone about this descent category, Unsimu wako we wini? (who (or what) is your spirit?) So I feel that in coining the expression "spirit clan" I am not straying unforgivably far from the usage of Fipa themselves. At the same time it is also an unsatisfactory term because it suggests a clear analytic distinction of categories in a situation where Fipa, I am pretty sure, feel only, or essentially, an awareness of process, of combination.

Asked to give his genealogy, an Mfipa may respond:

Unsimu wane ne Mwan'Insia;  
imbwa Mwichisi;  
uluko fyala yamwana Chipeta.

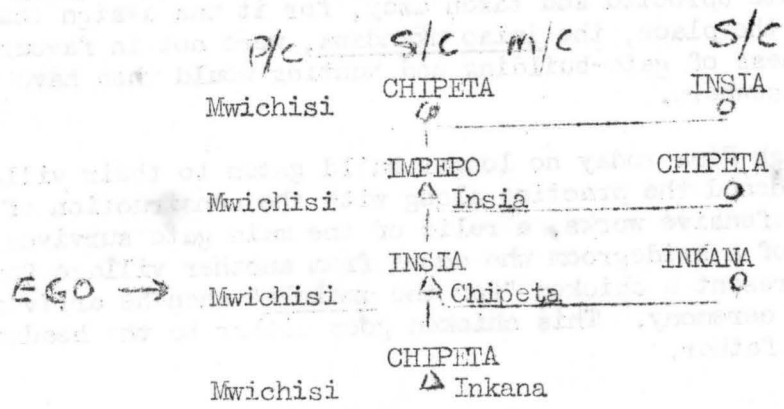
(My spirit or soul is Mwana Insia; I am created a Mwichisi; I bring forth the children of Chipeta.)

Another way of putting it is:

Inene Mwana Sumpi, imbwa Unkwai;  
nu luko neng untu wa Chipeta;  
infyala Isurpi syane.

(I am Mwana Sumpi; I am created an Unkwai; my family is Chipeta; I bring forth Sumpi of my own.)

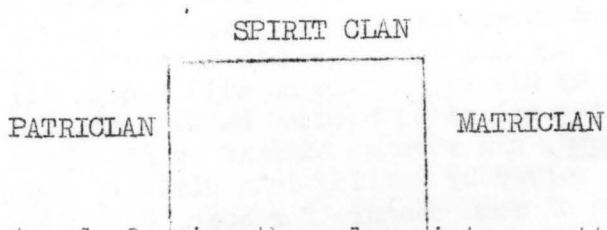
Here the matriline is mentioned first, instead of the spirit clan as in the first example; then the patriline (Unkwai); then the spirit clan (Chipeta); finally the (spirit) clan of Ego's children, Isumpi.



The diagram above represents the genealogy of one Ivor Intili, who belongs to the Insia spirit clan, in common with his paternal grandmother.

Every Fipa thus belongs to three descent categories: one paternal (or untwe) clan; one maternal (unsana) clan; and one intermediate or spirit clan which combines elements of both untwe and unsana sides of the family, since it is transmitted through Ego's father from his father's mother.

Fipa themselves explain this transmission of spirit clan membership by saying it represents a combination or uniting of the two sides untwe/unsana.



Three strands forming themselves into a pattern. A pattern which, I think, we ought to be finding familiar: the pattern of Opposition, Equality, Unity which we first noticed in the ceremony of the main gate, went on to discover in the organization of the village community and now find, I suggest, underlying the descent system.

As a theory this seems almost too neat and tidy. Well, there are one or two loose ends lying about. One of them is the method of inheritance of property and wives, which is traditionally from mother's brother to sister's eldest son. This cuts right across the lines of descent, or rather across two of them. Ego, as mother's brother, has only his spirit clan in common with his umwipwa, his sister's son -- and for him this is not a spirit clan but a matriline, the spirit clan of his children, to whom however the law of inheritance bars him from transmitting his property. In its cutting across the grain of the system, as it were, one is reminded of the custom of the "friends of men" and "friends of women", mentioned earlier.

Finally, just to make things a bit symmetrical, to return to our starting point: the main gate of the village, called amakoka. After the gate had been erected and the villagers had marched through it, there followed another significant custom. All the men of the village went out together hunting for game in the surrounding bush. They were out to catch two animals. It was essential that

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these two animals should be of opposite sex. What species they were was immaterial, simply that one should be male and the other female. One suspects that the matter was not altogether left to chance. But if through mismanagement or ill luck the hunters came back with two animals of the same sex, the village site was abandoned immediately, the main gate uprooted and taken away, for it was a sign that the spirits of the place, the imiao nkandawa, were not in favour. The whole business of gate-building and hunting would then have to be repeated elsewhere.

Although Fipa today no longer build gates to their villages, having abandoned the practice along with the construction of fences and other defensive works, a relic of the main gate survives in the obligation of a bridegroom who comes from another village for his bride, to present a chicken "for the amakoka" when he arrives for the wedding ceremony. This chicken goes either to the headman or the bride's father.