



Use of Charms in Succession Politics of Traditional Luba Leaders of Kasai Central in the Democratic Republic of Congo

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Abstract

The study focusses on the role of indigenous manga (charms) in the politics of succession in traditional leadership among the Luba people in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The Luba people possess and use various types of indigenous charms for different societal functions. They play a more salient role in how traditional leadership is practiced in the community. It is already established that, traditional leaders perform various functions within the community including providing security, regulating societal activities, administering justice, resolving disputes and so on. The objective was thus to investigate how the various types of fetishes/charms are incorporated and used in succession in traditional leadership. The study used a phenomenological approach, with data collected from various traditional leaders and charm givers, provincial members of parliament in Kasai in DRC. The findings indicate presence and use of various types of indigenous manga in traditional leadership succession. These come both in the form of symbols, rituals such as the enthroning ceremony of a traditional leader, and following the customs, laws and traditions of traditional leadership. Such traditions or customs include the requirements that a traditional leader must protect everyone in the society, ensure there is justice, accountability, good luck, prosperity and good governance in the community.

Keywords: *Succession Politics; Manga (Charms); Traditional Leadership; Luba*

1. Introduction

Traditional leadership in Africa encompasses an indigenous system used to govern communities based on cultural norms and ethics. Koeneke (2017) observes that traditional leadership in Africa is the governance system that is most known to the indigenous people. Traditional leaders governed their communities by providing security, regulating activities in society, resolving disputes, and administering justice. This system of governance was based on heredity according to a clan-based system (Rapatsa, 2015). Traditional leaders enjoyed the confidence of their communities who allowed them to direct their affairs. They derived their legitimacy from culture, historical practices, social values, and traditional institutions of the societies in which they lived (Igboin, 2016). Due to its divine nature, the traditional leadership system of governance does not go through election cycles; its succession is based on clans and

chieftaincy (Rapatsa, 2015). Ola and Tonwe (2009) give a comprehensive definition of traditional leaders as the heads of an ethnic society who have the topmost executive power in indigenous politics or who are appointed to such positions based on set traditions and customs and whose titles are recognized by the state.

Although Luba had diverse origins, a common language and culture unified the population that now extends to three main divisions, Luba Katanga, Luba Kasai and Luba Hemba. As a result of this diverse heritage, nationalists and secessionist politics are common (Maxwell, 2016). At all levels of society, the use of *manga* was an essential component of leadership. Luba kings and their aides, chiefs and ritual specialists used charms personified in wood sculptures as a receptacle of the spirits. In all forms of symbolizations as either amulets, beads, or statuettes, the purpose was to bring peace, prosperity, healing, procreation, food production, blessings, personal protection, and gaining fame and relevance in the Luba Kingdom, especially among the chiefs (Nooter, 2017). The study explores the relevance of indigenous *manga* in the Luba traditional political leadership among the Luba people of Kasai-particularly focussing on its role and use in succession politics.

2. Research Objective

- (i) To examine the use of indigenous *manga* in succession politics of traditional leadership among the Luba people of Kasai in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Elite Theory of Power

Elites play an essential role in society; this is power in itself. According to the Elite Theory of Power, elites refers to a group of individuals, parties or organizations that can manage and organize government and all political power manifestations (Wedel, 2018). The Elite Theory states that societies are led by a small and selected number of individuals who have control over a large amount of power. These few selected individuals continuously seek separation and differentiation from the rest of society. This often results in the elite being set apart from other lower strata groups in society. As a result, the elites continue to have a growing influence on how society is organized both politically and socially. Power, therefore, resides in the selected few who take a leading role in the control of politics and government in society (Wedel, 2018). This theory of power greatly borrows from Max Weber's theory of social stratification that noted that power could take various forms within a social setting. Weber proposed that besides social class, there exists other sources of power in society such as the social status of a person that is often determined by means and wealth of an individual (Weber, 1964, 1978). This theory notes that power is concentrated on elites as a law. The elite principle or law holds that elites alternate power through either peaceful or violent competition in society.

Pareto argues that elites always govern people and rejects the interpretation of elites that one ascends as the other declines. This is, however, the real scenario although it can appear under a different form (Pareto, 1968). Pareto uses Kolabinska's study "*La Circulation des Elites en France*" as a locus. According to him, elites are persons who have high levels of intelligence, behaviour, character and various types of capacities. Even when individual members of a society are graded based on their occupation of branch activity, it is found that at each level, a certain type of class exists. Individuals who are in a class that is higher than the other classes are referred to as elites (Pareto, 1935). Following this theory, it could be argued that the use of *manga* is simply a way of legitimizing or initiating one into the elite group. *Manga* could be the basis of an identity marker for leaders who justify their actions. If those in charge of mediating the invisible can set the elites apart with charms, it is difficult to control the leaders

once in power. However, *manga* was also used to test the legitimacy of the leader and to eliminate corrupt leaders. The challenge in the use of *manga* as initiating one to the elite club hinges on this fact; while the individuals seek *manga* to gain power, the community has failed to use *manga* to test their authenticity and the *manga* givers are often compromised or threatened by the elites. Consequently, the elite theory of power is useful to the current study because through it, *manga* in political systems can be examined.

3.2 Traditional Luba Leaders

In DRC, the traditional leadership system of chieftaincies is generally hereditary within the family or appointed from the political hierarchy and so helps decentralise political power (Rugarabura & Robain, 2008). In some regions, the positions are inherited; they remain in specific families and passed over from one generation to the next. Traditional leaders have significant power and influence relating to dispute resolution, maintaining law and order, religion, and guarding their power closely often through the use of *manga*. The traditional chiefs have their advisors who sit around the chief, discuss and resolve matters relating to their communities (Gaynor, 2013). Traditional leaders in DRC are exclusively male who originate from the king's (*mwami*) lineage. The traditional leaders perform the role of preserving the customs and traditions of society and keeping them alive from one generation to another. Traditional leadership is enshrined in the DRC constitution and is recognized as an institution at local levels on issues that affect local communities. They also deal with matters that relate to customary law (Rugarabura & Robain, 2008).

Among the Luba, politics played a significant role. The Luba people believe that both the physical and the spiritual worlds are permeated by a life-long force (*mooyo*). In understanding this life force, *manga* plays a significant role. *Manga* are intrinsically linked to the leadership of the Luba people. In administering power to the leaders who are believed to have immense life-long force, rituals become the media. The ritual grounds are under the control of the ritual specialists or the charm givers. These ritual specialists evoke the life-long powers using *manga* that have different functions with distinctions being made that can either be positive or negative *manga* (Nooter, 2017). People such as politicians have often given sacrifices to some deities in exchange for protection and help. The manipulation of *manga* is common among the Luba people (Macola, 2015). The head of a household leads the incantations that are directed to the deities. When mediums are in trance, spirits are believed to speak through them. Through this, they can carry out divinations (Peterson, Emma & Stephanie, 2016). By being in charge of the *manga* rituals, the charm givers found significant roles in how politics was conducted in the Luba kingdom. Specifically, the king, his court and ritual specialists used *manga* that came in the form of Luba wood sculptures that served as a receptacle for the spirits. As Nooter (2017) noted, such *manga* was personal protection and gaining fame and relevance in the Luba kingdom especially among the chiefs.

4. Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research that was rooted in phenomenology, expounded in the philosophy of Husserl (1977), and other phenomenologists to the effect that people's experience of life can be captured and interpreted. In phenomenological studies, the essence of phenomena, such as *manga* can be determined through people who live the experience. As Merriam and Tisdell (2006) explain, "the task of the phenomenologists, then, is to depict the essence or basic structure of experience" (p. 26). Thus, this research entailed capturing the use of *manga* as it was experienced by the Luba in the political leadership sphere concerned with acquiring leadership power. This research design was relevant for this topic because its purpose was not to capture specific "objective" truth, as the positivists would have it (Creswell, 2014), but rather, to understand the reality of *manga*, and how it influenced leadership from different angles, within the Luba society of DRC.

The concentration of the study was on the Kasai Central Province. The Kasai province was chosen for two main reasons: one, the region has one of the major ethnic groups in the country and thus adequate evidence exists of use of *manga* in the area. The Luba had used *manga* in their history for leadership and governance of their traditional kingdoms. The target population for the study was the Luba people who lived in Kasai Central Province. From this target population, charm givers, militia and political leaders were selected as the units of observation by the researcher. The political leaders comprised of local traditional chiefs of villages and modern leaders in Kasai Central Province in the DRC. The study used the non-probability snowball sampling technique (Ishak & Bakar, 2014). The researcher contacted local gatekeepers in the Kasai Central Province to be able to reach out to the first snows. These gatekeepers include the area local chiefs and elders who were the *indefacto* authority at the grass-roots levels. Through them, locally known charm givers were identified and contacted. In addition, the study reached out to political leaders and militia who were beneficiaries of *manga*. The first respondents then guided the researcher to other participants. For the purpose of this study, a sample size of 40 participants was adequate to enable the researcher obtain rich information and reach the saturation point. The targeted 40 participants were: 10 charm givers, 8 members of the provincial parliament, 4 provincial ministers, 13 traditional leaders, and 5 militia leaders. The study used an In-depth Interviews (IDIs), focus group discussions and observations to collect data.

5. Findings

The study findings brought to play the role of indigenous *charms* in the transfer of power in traditional leadership. Traditional leadership among the Luba is based on heredity and *manga* is part of the power acquisition. The findings establish that members from the reigning family are against corruption because of their regard to traditional leadership. To be a *bukalenge mbwetu, katwena tubusumba* is in reference to the traditional power which cannot be bought. The reigning family therefore cannot pay for what is rightfully theirs (their birth-right).

There have been efforts by contemporary government leaders to corrupt traditional leadership. However, through the use of *manga*, chieftaincy has remained alive among the Luba people (Charm Giver, CG 3). With this position, those not from the reigning family are viewed as easily corruptible and hence not trusted with traditional leadership, as noted in the following statement:

In acquisition of power, those from the reigning family are absolutely against corruption because they say *bukalenge mbwetu, katwena tubusumba*. Which means to be chief is our birth right, we will not corrupt you to get it. This refusal and rejection of corruption from the modern government comes from a long tradition of *manga* that has kept the chieftaincy. This is a very powerful influence of *manga*, rejection of corruption in order to lead. One who is not from the reigning family will readily corrupt in order to gain chieftaincy... (Member of Parliament, MP 2).

Findings indicate that contemporary government leaders have tried to influence succession of traditional leaders because of their significance and power among the Luba people. In their efforts, they have attempted to send emissaries during succession in order to influence who becomes the next traditional leader. As a result of this, some individuals have been tricked out of their positions as traditional leaders. This has come as a result of their signing documents that they do not quite understand due to illiteracy. With this, traditional leadership has, in certain occasions, been transferred to the wrong people. Such occurrences have led to loss of authentic traditional power and subsequently loss of proper use of *manga*, because the new undue leaders may not follow, or may not be properly linked to the principles of *manga*, customs and traditions of the Luba people. This point is reiterated in the following statement:

The emissaries from the government that perform the investigations of succession of power have a proverb that they give when they are confronted by rejection of corruption from the reigning family. *kakudila, kakwakwila kakwelela diyi dimpe mu tshialu* which means the one who takes good care of you, is the one you will speak good of in public. Due to the fact that some of our people are not learned, they are tricked out of their power by being asked to sign documents that they do not read or simply cannot read. The[y]...have messed things up... (Member of Parliament, MP 2).

When traditional power has been transferred to the wrong hands, challenges arise since the new leader is not obliged to rule as per the traditional precepts. This may lead to bad governance, and to increased corruption. Such leaders have little or no respect at all to *manga* and to related traditional values; they may desire to ignore significant values in their leadership.

Findings established that some reigning families have tried to remedy the situation after having been tricked out of power. This is possible through requests for investigations to establish how the succession was done and whether corruption was used. Some families even appeal through *manga*, a situation that holds the leaders accountable for wrong succession and for corruption. Through *manga* rituals, successful removal of unduly elected leaders has from time to time, resulted, and the right traditional leader enthroned. This is affirmed by Traditional Leader (TL 6), "...When corruption is done during succession, the reigning family will request for another investigation to be performed for establishment of truth of how a person became the traditional leader. Some will make an appeal through *manga*..."

The choice in recent Kamwina Nsapu (King of Bajila Kasanga people) conflicts in Kasai in DRC portrays a strong reliance in *manga* as a way to correct a corrupt deal of national interest. The study already examined the origin and form of charms like *nkwembe* (spirits); and the *tshiota manga* (charm of the holy fire of purification) among the Luba, demonstrate two *manga* largely used in the Kamwina Nsapu conflict. The perspective of the charm giver as well that of the politicians both verify the use of *manga* in leadership among the Luba. The following title sheds light on the use of *manga* by the militia and the use of *manga* in succession politics of the traditional Luba leaders.

In order to complement information in this objective, data from FGDs is also included. This is the data whose focus is on the contribution of *manga* as rituals in traditional leadership succession.

Rituals of installing a new chief: The process by which a new chief came into power emerged as a key area of discussion and respondents focused on what was done during the crowning ceremony. This was essential because how successful a traditional leader becomes entirely depends on what happens on the ceremony and the traditional leader is required to follow all the agreements and pacts made notably those concerned with good governance and good leadership of the people:

After being made chief, the chief is made to sit on *ditanda dia bukalenge* (seat of power). Additionally, they plant a tree of *Mumbu* (tree of the chief's power). The chief is carried by his *tupitas* (cabinet members) and made to seat on the seat of power. *Mukalenge wa Nkashama* (Leopard Chief) then slaughters and cooks a chicken and takes the heart of the chicken on a machete and feeds the chief... (Traditional Chief, TC 11, 13, 6, 2).

A newly installed chief is then given *mwele wa nkanza* a double edged sword and a dancing ceremony ensues in what is referred to as a dance of power. In the dance the chief sticks the double edged sword into the *tshiota* which is a fire of power and is also given *lupemba* which is the strongest *manga* that a traditional chief possess. These rituals give power and authority to the new chief and the leader is then required to lead his people and protect all his subjects. The finding indicates the meticulous manner in which traditional leaders rose to power and the demands that had to be followed as long as one sits on the throne as a traditional leader. Any chief who goes against the rituals and oaths, invites the wrath of the ancestors and gods through the *ntita lwabanya makalenga* (king maker) and therefore were kept inline on how they were supposed to lead their subjects.

These rituals also give power to the traditional chief to act on behalf of the community. All *manga* in the community given by the charm givers are under a properly installed chief and charm givers can be called by traditional leader to act:

As a traditional chief, all the *manga* (charms) that are in my villages belong to me. All the charm givers and the witches are known to me. I can call upon them to act on behalf of me or our villages at any time. It is me who renders their *manga* strong by my word as chief. By virtue of the power invested in me I have the power to render all their *manga* powerless...(Traditional Chief, TC 7,9, 13).

The study found that when a person becomes chief, there are also rituals and sacrifices that are made to the deities as for thanksgiving. The new chief is then given charms where contracts are made with *benamupongo* (witches) and charm givers, "...when a new chief arrives, charm givers recognize him and ask for sacrifices to be made...the traditional leader is then recognized in both the normal world as well as in the world of charms to have power to rule... (Traditional Chief, TC 6).

5.1 Focus Group Discussion on Use of *Manga*

The findings from the focus group discussions detailed the way through which *manga* are used to acquire leadership among the Luba people. Luba chiefs reported that they use *manga* in their day to day activities and that the *manga* guides them on how to perform their traditional leadership duties. Presence of *manga* was reported by all the chiefs who participated in the focus group discussion. The *manga* is regarded to be something good, which is inherited from the ancestors and guides the traditional chiefs. Answers by traditional chiefs supported this finding by stating that:

I still use the *manga* of my ancestors to lead my people and they are still very influential. These *manga* are not bad. They are good because they guide me as a chief (Traditional Chief, TC 6).

...*manga* is not evil. As chiefs we only use *manga* for good. Only in defense is the evil *manga* used... (Traditional Chief, TC 7).

One of the traditional chiefs reported direct use of *manga* to protect the community from external attacks. The *manga* also guided the traditional chief to be accountable and responsible to the people. This findings indicate both the respect accorded to it and the efficacy of it performing as it is required. The traditional chief in the focus group discussion stated:

I am the living testimony of the influence and power of *manga*. When my villages were attacked it is *manga* and the influence of *manga* that protected us...the *manga* also helps us to be good people and responsible people... (Traditional Chief, TC 8).

The *manga* are also sought by modern political leaders who seek it for various purposes such as protection, gaining power or staying in power. Charm givers prepare and give different types of *manga* to the people seeking them specifically politicians. The findings shows that in spite of modern day leadership, politicians are still resorting back to using traditional ways to acquire and exercise their political leadership which further concretizes the efficacy of *manga* as a powerful tool among the Luba people. A traditional chief reported that:

The political leaders are coming with money to ask for *manga* for protection and the charm givers are giving them *manga* to protect them because of their money. There is influence of *manga* on the people and money...they acquire power using our *manga* and the same power makes them rich and prominent (Traditional Chief, TC 6).

There are politicians and other people who have lots of influential and strong *manga* in our villages. Some *manga* that even the chief has never heard about (Traditional Chief, TC 10).

The discussion group found that traditional chiefs are given certain types of *manga* to make them powerful. *Bwanga bwa nsamu* enables a person to teleport from one location to another in case of danger. *Bwanga bwa njiminyi* makes a person to vanish in front of the enemies and therefore they cannot see you. *Bwanga bwa miepu* is a force field that surrounds a person and does not let anything harmful such as a bullet, stone or even an arrow come into contact with you. *Bwanga bwa ntuntu*, which allows a person to deflect harmful objects such as bullets or even a rocket propelled grenade. *Bwanga bwa lwendu*, meaning *charm of journey*, allows one to cross physical barriers without being seen by enemies. This is commonly used by business people when traveling in order to safeguard their property during journeys and militia also use this type of *manga* to cross enemy frontiers.

Evidence of the direct use of *manga* was reported by the chiefs in the focus group discussion. The *manga* are both communal as well as individual. Individual *manga* are used for protection, prosperity and success while the communal *manga* are done on behalf of the entire village by the traditional chief. In times of war, pandemics, famine, droughts and diseases, charm givers were called to prepare *manga* to handle the situation:

...when Rwandan soldiers wanted to fight at Lake Munkamba against the Congolese government, the traditional chief, witches and charm givers made the village invisible...Only the chief, witches and charm givers knew what was happening. The government even sent helicopters to bomb the villages...suspected to harbor the Rwandan army militia but none of them landed on the villages due to protection of *manga* (Traditional Chiefs, TC 8, 2, 12).

The traditional chiefs also reported acquire *bwanga bwa nyoka wa ntoka* which is *bwanga* that sends a mystical snake to kill or bite people as a way of protecting the people so that no one can act against the village. This type of charm which is often given by a strong charm giver acts as a powerful means of protection and therefore a community is required to have very powerful charm givers. An answer from the FGD supports this finding by stating, "One strong charm giver is the pride of that village...The more the charm givers in the village the stronger the village is and the more respect it earns" (Traditional Chief, TC 9).

6. Discussion

Traditional leadership among the Luba uses *manga* in order to ensure accountability. The chiefs recognize that they hold their positions because community members have agreed and accepted them as their leaders. Traditional leaders are the heads of their communities, and therefore, have to give reports to the people on what they do or intend to do. This is based on the ancestral law that they have to carefully follow in their practice. *Manga* was found to be critical to leadership and development and to increase accountability levels of traditional leaders to the people. In the practice of traditional leadership, good *manga* are indispensable because it guides the leader on what needs to be done. Use of bad *manga* is not tolerated and is regarded as a taboo among communities in the Kasai province that are under traditional systems of leadership. Such evil *manga* are regarded not to bring development in the community and those who use them are avoiding accountability to the people. Accountability to the people, requires a good leader, to use the good type of *manga*.

Luba traditional leaders become accountable to their people and the community through ensuring that they perform their duties of safeguarding, blessing, protecting, and resolving issues in their communities. The chiefs have the power of *diyi* which means the power of words from the mouths. They are also able to use *lupemba* which means words to bless and protect their communities. This is often done by standing in front of the holy fire of *tshiota* where the ceremonies are done. This type of *manga* ensures that the leader is held by the words uttered and that what is spelt as a taboo is not allowed in the society. The word of mouth of traditional leaders is held in high regard and is regarded as the most

powerful charm because of its effect over any type of *manga*. This is part of what Luba traditional leaders do as part of their accountability to the community, they cannot allow any type of evil *manga* to thrive in the villages. In any case, *charm* givers have to seek permission from the traditional leader before using it on someone or the community at large. Traditional leaders are therefore able to control any type of evil *manga* that may be in the village because of the power that is bestowed on them by virtue of their positions in the community and society. They can summon charm givers and witches and instruct them not to operate without permission or to perform different rituals on behalf of the community.

Manga values for political leadership: As established by the findings of the study, leadership among the traditional chiefs is practiced in line with the customs, laws and traditions of the land. Traditional leaders are expected to perform their duties of governing their communities and the re-instatement of the values in traditional leadership can help embolden as the values get incorporated into modern governance systems in order to promote good governance in the society. The values handle conflicts, ensure justice, bless the people and even perform ceremonies on behalf of the community and its people. This finding concurs with Rapatsa (2015), that traditional leaders in African societies have performed the duties of governance through the provision of security, resolving disputes, regulation of social activities and dispensing justice among other functions.

The study established that *manga* was a key component of power among the traditional leadership. On its part, modern political leadership recognized *manga* and used it to acquire and exercise power. Hence, *manga* and power go together in traditional leadership. Majority of political leaders equally take refuge in *manga*. These factors relate to literature. According to Ola and Tonwe (2009), traditional leaders are appointed to such positions based on traditions and customs which are recognized by the state. These customs were well described in the findings of the study where the enthroning ceremony is one of the biggest events in traditional leadership. In this ceremony, rituals and use of *manga* is part of the process. Additionally, the findings of the study established that traditional leaders are recognized by the modern government in the DRC. However, these leaders have lost some of their power and even respect from some members of the society as established in the findings of the study.

This recognition of the traditional leaders by the modern government supports Dodo (2013) arguments. According to Dodo, traditional leadership has gone through phases from the pre-colonial era to the post-colonial period. Prior to colonization traditional leaders were respected and had immense authority and power over the land. People were comfortable with traditional leadership because they were familiar with it. This is supported in the findings in which interviewed chiefs and modern politicians observed that some of the values in traditional leadership had been lost. This loss has partly been attributed to globalization, disrespect from both the people and the modern government and preference for modern political governance systems.

The findings of the study established that charms, fetishes (*manga*) are part of traditional leadership among the Luba people in Kasai Central Province. Luba traditional leaders use it to perform various duties and functions in the community. Nooter (2017) reported that rituals are used in administering power to the traditional leaders who are regarded as having life-force. The ritual grounds are controlled by ritual specialists or charm givers who invoke the life-long power using *manga*. This is done in order to equip the Luba king with personal protection and for him to gain fame and relevance. These processes assist the king perform the required duties and functions in the community.

In traditional leadership, the traditional chief cannot be insulted because traditional leadership is sacred (Koenane, 2017). The word spoken by the chief is undisputable and cannot be challenged unlike in the modern political system where the words of the leaders are not respected. Some are even disobeyed openly and disregarded despite the fact that they have acted for the sake of the benefit of the community at large. This is because of the respect that is accorded to the traditional chief as the leader and protector of the people. In the traditional leadership system among the Luba people, good deeds are rewarded by the bracelet of longevity known as *lukanu lwa bununu*. This *bwanga* serves as a gift for good work done

for the people and the community at large. This reward cannot be bought using money but rather freely given to a deserving leader.

Conclusion

Manga are an integral part of Luba traditional leadership. These *manga* come both in the form of symbols, rituals such as the enthroning ceremony of a traditional leader, and following the customs, laws and traditions of traditional leadership. Such traditions or customs include the requirement that a traditional leader must protect everyone in the society, ensure there is justice, accountability, good luck, prosperity and good governance in the community. The use of *manga* among the Luba people in Kasai province is used to legitimize and initiate one into the elite group. The initiation ceremony was established in the findings and discussed in detail and among the Luba people, one cannot become a traditional leader without going through this ceremony. The use of *manga* ensures that the leaders govern as they are supposed to and to eliminate leaders who are corrupt. Among the Luba people, traditional leaders who fail to follow the laws of indigenous *manga* commit a taboo and attract the consequences which include being removed from their positions as traditional leaders.

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