CHAPTER II

Ritual Symbolism, Morality, and Social Structure among the Ndembu *

In this paper I wish to discuss the semantic structure and properties of some of the principal symbols found in Ndembu ritual. Each kind of ritual may be regarded as a configuration of symbols, a sort of "score" in which the symbols are the notes. The symbol is the smallest unit of specific structure in Ndembu ritual. The vernacular term for it is *chinjikijilu*, from *ku-jikijila*, "to blaze a trail," by cutting marks on a tree with one's ax or by breaking and bending branches to serve as guides back from the unknown bush to known paths. A symbol, then, is a blaze or landmark, something that connects the unknown with the known. The Ndembu term comes from the vocabulary of hunting and exemplifies the high ritual value attached to this pursuit. Furthermore, in discussing their symbols with Ndembu, one finds them constantly using the term *ku-solola*, "to make visible" or "to reveal," and they associate this term with aspects of the chase. Indeed, in their ritual vocabulary derivatives of this verb are frequent. For example, the temporary shrine erected for ritual to propitiate the spirits of deceased hunter relatives very often consists of a forked branch taken from the *musoli* tree. Ndembu tell me that this tree is used as a symbol in hunters' ritual because its fruit and young shoots are much

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appreciated by duiker and other woodland animals who emerge from concealment to eat them and may be easily shot by a hidden hunter or caught in his snares. The tree, they say, makes the game "visible." Hence, portions of it are used as medicines (*yitumbu*) in rituals performed to rid hunters of misfortune. It is said that these medicines will "make animals appear quickly to the hunter" when next he goes into the bush. *Musoli* medicines are also used in rituals performed to make barren women fruitful; they will "make children visible," say Ndembu.

Another use of *musoli* is worth mentioning. Ndembu have a ritual called *Ihamba,* the main aim of which is to remove by cupping horns from a patient's body the upper central incisor (also called *ihamba*) of a dead hunter relative which has imbedded itself under the skin. The spirit, materialized as a tooth, is said to "bite" its victim because the latter has forgotten to pour out a libation of blood at its grave after making a kill, or else because there has been quarreling in the victim's village. The victim may not necessarily have been guilty himself of quarrelsome behavior, but may have been selected as a representative of the disordered kin-group. The specialist who supervises the ritual procedure usually insists on those village members who have grudges (*yitela*) against one another or against the patient (*muyeji*) coming forward and making a public confession of their hidden animosities. Only after this, he says, will the *ihamba* consent to being caught in a cupping horn. Now the principal medicine of this ritual, the one at which an invocation to the spirit is made, the one which is collected before all others, consists of the taproot of a *musoli* tree. My informants told me that the root stood for the *ihamba* tooth and that the *musoli* species was used "to make the *ihamba* tooth come out quickly," and "so that people would speak truly (*ku-hosha chalala*) and openly." Here the idea is clearly that relief is brought both to the patient and to the disturbed social group if hidden ill-feeling is brought to light.

Another derivative of *ku-solola* is *"isoli"* or *"chisoli,"* terms that designate "a place of revelation." They refer to specially consecrated sites, used only in the final phases of important rituals, where esoteric rites are performed and secret matters are revealed to the initiated.

Finally, the term *Musolu* stands for a type of ritual performed only by chiefs and senior headmen to bring on or "make visible" delayed rains.

One aspect of the process of ritual symbolization among the

Ndembu is, therefore, to make visible, audible, and tangible beliefs, ideas, values, sentiments, and psychological dispositions that cannot directly be perceived. Associated with this process of revealing the unknown, invisible, or the hidden is the process of making public what is private or making social what is personal. Anything that cannot be shown to be in conformity with the norms or in terms of the values of Ndembu society is potentially dangerous to its cohesion and continuity. Hence the importance of the public confession in the *Ihamba* ritual. By exposing their ill-feeling in a ritual context to beneficial ritual forces, individuals are purged of rebellious wishes and emotions and willingly conform once more to the public mores.

In an Ndembu ritual each symbol makes visible and accessible to purposive public action certain elements of Ndembu culture and society. It also tends to relate these elements to certain natural and physiological regularities. Thus, in various contexts *musoli* relates the value of public confession to the restoration of health and of female fertility. This brings me to another important property of many ritual symbols, their polysemy or multi-vocality. By these terms I mean that a single symbol may stand for many things. This property of individual symbols is true of ritual as a whole. For a few symbols have to represent a whole culture and its material environment. Ritual may be described, in one aspect, as quintessential custom in that it represents a distillate or condensation of many secular customs and natural regularities. Certain dominant or focal symbols conspicuously possess this property of multivocality which allows for the economic representation of key aspects of culture and belief. Each dominant symbol has a "fan" or "spectrum" of referents, which are interlinked by what is usually a simple mode of association, its very simplicity enabling it to interconnect a wide variety of *significata*. For example, the associational link provided by "whiteness" enables white clay (*mpemba*) to stand for a multiplicity of ideas and phenomena, ranging from biological referents as "semen," to abstract ideas such as "ritual purity," "innocence" from witchcraft, and "solidarity with the ancestor spirits."

When we talk about the "meaning" of a symbol, we must be careful to distinguish between at least three levels or fields of meaning. These I propose to call: (1) the level of indigenous interpretation (or, briefly, the exegetical meaning); (2) the operational meaning; and (3) the positional meaning. The exegetical meaning is obtained from questioning indigenous informants about observed ritual behavior. Here again one must distinguish between information given by

ritual specialists and information given by laymen, that is, between esoteric and exoteric interpretations. One must also be careful to ascertain whether a given explanation is truly representative of either of these categories or whether it is a uniquely personal view.

On the other hand, much light may be shed on the role of the ritual symbol by equating its meaning with its use, by observing what the Ndembu do with it, and not only what they say about it. This is what I call the operational meaning, and this level has the most bearing on problems of social dynamics. For the observer must consider not only the symbol but the structure and composition of the group that handles it or performs mimetic acts with direct reference to it. He must further note the affective qualities of these acts, whether they are aggressive, sad, penitent, joyful, derisive, and so on. He must also inquire why certain persons and groups are absent on given occasions, and if absent, whether and why they have been ritually excluded from the presence of the symbol.

The positional meaning of a symbol derives from its relationship to other symbols in a totality, a *Gestalt,* whose elements acquire their significance from the system as a whole. This level of meaning is directly related to the important property of ritual symbols mentioned earlier, their polysemy. Such symbols possess many senses, but contextually it may be necessary to stress one or a few of them only. Thus the *mukula* tree viewed in abstraction from any given ritual context may stand for "matriliny," "huntsmanship," "menstrual blood," "the meat of wild animals," and many other concepts and things. The associational link between its various senses is provided by the red gum it secretes, which Ndembu liken to blood. Now in the boys' circumcision ritual (*Mukanda*) the meaning of *mukula* is determined by its symbolic context. A log of this wood is placed near the site where the boys are circumcised. They are circumcised under a *mudyi* tree, which, as we shall see, stands *inter alia* for motherhood and the mother-child relationship. Then they are lifted over a cutting of the *muyombu* tree, which is customarily planted quickset as a shrine to the village ancestor spirits, and placed still bleeding on the *mukula* log. Here the *mukula* log stands mainly for two things. It represents the wish of the elders that the circumcision wounds will heal quickly (from the fact that *mukula* gum quickly coagulates like a scab). It also represents, I was told, masculinity (*wuyala*) and the life of an adult male, who as hunter and warrior has to shed blood. The rite represents (1) the removal of the boy from dependence on his mother (the

passage from the *mudyi* tree); (2) his ritual death and subsequent association with the ancestors (the passage over the *muyombu* tree); and (3) his incorporation into the male moral community of tribesmen (the collective setting on the *mukula* tree where the boys are ceremonially fed as though they were infants by the circumcisers and by their fathers. Each boy is given a ball of cassava mush to be eaten directly from the circumciser's knife). In this rite the position of the *mukula* symbol with reference to other symbolic objects and acts is the crucial semantic factor.

The same symbol may be reckoned to have different senses at different phases in a ritual performance, or rather, different senses become paramount at different times. Which sense shall become paramount is determined by the ostensible purpose of the phase of the ritual in which it appears. For a ritual, like a space rocket, is phased, and each phase is directed towards a limited end which itself becomes a means to the ultimate end of the total performance. Thus the act of circumcision is the aim and culmination of a symbol-loaded phase of the *Mukanda* ritual, but itself becomes a means to the final end of turning a boy into a tribesman. There is a consistent relationship between the end or aim of each phase in a ritual, the kind of symbolic configuration employed in that phase, and the senses that become paramount in multivocal symbols in that configuration.

I should now like to consider the exegetical meaning of one of the principal Ndembu ritual symbols, the *mudyi* tree. This symbol is found in more than half a dozen different kinds of ritual, but its *locus classicus* is in the girls' puberty ritual (*Nkang'a*). The novice is laid, wrapped in a blanket, at the foot of a slender young *mudyi* sapling. Ndembu say that its pliancy stands for the youth of the girl. The sapling has been previously consecrated by the novice's ritual instructress (*nkong'u*) and her mother. They have trampled down the grass in a circle around the tree, thus making it sacred—"set apart" (*chakumbadyi*) or "forbidden" (*chakujila*). The site, like that of circumcision for the boys, is called *ifwilu* or "the place of dying." Both sites are also known as *ihung'u*, "the place of suffering" or "ordeal." *Ihung'u* is also applied to a hut where a woman is in labor. It is a "place of suffering" because the novice must not move her limbs until nearly nightfall on penalty of being pinched all over by the older women; nor may she eat or speak all day. The association of the *mudyi* tree with suffering and dying should be borne in mind as an aspect of its positional meaning.

Ndembu begin the exposition of *mudyi*'s meaning by pointing out that if its bark is scratched, beads of milky latex are promptly secreted. For this reason they say that *mudyi* or "milk tree" is a symbol (*chinjikijilu*) for "breasts" and "breast milk"—both called in Chindembu *mayeli*. They go on from there to say that *mudyi* means "a mother and her child," a social relationship. They further extend this sense to signify a matrilineage (*ivumu*, literally "a womb or stomach"). A text which I collected well expresses this view:

Mudyi diku kwakaminiyi nkakulula hakumutembwisha ni ankukulula
The milk tree is the place where slept the (founding) ancestress, where they initiated her and another ancestress

mukwawu nimukwawu ni kudi nkaka ni kudi mama ninetu anyana;
and (then) another down to the grandmother and the mother and ourselves the children;

diku kumuchidi wetu kutwatachikili ni amayala nawa chochu hamu.
It is the place where our tribe (or tribal custom—literally "kind") began, and also the men in just the same way.

My informant then added the following comments: "The milk tree is the place of all mothers; it is the ancestress of men and women. *Kutembwisha*, "to initiate a girl," means to dance round and round the milk tree where the novice lies. The milk tree is the place where our ancestors slept, to be initiated there means to become ritually pure or white. An uninitiated girl, a menstruating woman, or an uncircumcised boy is called "one who lacks whiteness (*wunabulakutooka*)."

Contextually, a particular novice's milk tree may be termed "her matrilineage." At one phase of the ritual, the leaves of this tree are said to represent "the novice's children"—a sense that is concerned with a future wished-for state of affairs rather than with the past or present.

In other phases of the *Nkang'a* ritual the milk tree is said to stand for "the women" and for "womanhood." It also has the situational sense of "married womanhood."

Finally, the milk tree stands for the process of learning (*kudiza*), especially for learning "women's sense" or "wisdom" (*mana yawambanda*). An informant said that "*mudyi*" is like going to school; "the girl drinks sense as a baby drinks milk."

The semantic structure of *mudyi* may itself be likened to a tree. At the root is the primary sense of "breast milk" and from this proceeds by logical steps series of further senses. The general direction is from

the concrete to the increasingly abstract, but there are several different branches along which abstraction proceeds. One line develops as follows: breast, mother-child relationship, matriliny, the Ndembu tribe or tribal custom of which matriliny is the most representative principle. Another line runs: development of the breasts, womanhood, married womanhood, childbearing. Yet another goes from suckling to learning the tasks, rights, and duties of womanhood. As with many other Ndembu symbols, derivative senses themselves become symbols pointing to ideas and phenomena beyond themselves. Thus "matriliny," a derivative sense from "the mother-child" relationship, and "breast-milk," by the principle of *pars pro toto,* itself becomes a symbol for Ndembu culture in its totality.

However, despite this multiplicity of senses, Ndembu speak and think about the milk tree as a unity, almost as a unitary power. They can break down the concept "milk tree" cognitively into many attributes, but in ritual practice they view it as a single entity. For them it is something like Goethe's "eternal womanly," a female or maternal principle pervading society and nature. It must not be forgotten that ritual symbols are not merely signs representing known things; they are felt to possess ritual efficacy, to be charged with power from unknown sources, and to be capable of acting on persons and groups coming in contact with them in such a way as to change them for the better or in a desired direction. Symbols, in short, have an orectic as well as a cognitive function. They elicit emotion and express and mobilize desire.

Indeed, it is possible further to conceptualize the exegetic meaning of dominant symbols in polar terms. At one pole cluster a set of referents of a grossly physiological character, relating to general human experience of an emotional kind. At the other pole cluster a set of referents to moral norms and principles governing the social structure. If we call these semantic poles respectively the "orectic" and the "normative" pole, and consider Ndembu ritual symbols in terms of this model, we find that the milk tree stands at one and the same time for the physiological aspect of breast feeding with its associated affectual patterns, and for the normative order governed by matriliny. In brief, a single symbol represents both the obligatory and the desirable. Here we have an intimate union of the moral and the material. An exchange of qualities may take place in the psyches of the participants under the stimulating circumstances of the ritual performance, between orectic and normative poles; the former, through its association

with the latter, becomes purged of its infantile and regressive character, while the normative pole becomes charged with the pleasurable effect associated with the breast-feeding situation. In one aspect, the tie of milk, under matriliny, develops into the primary structural tie, but in another aspect, and here the polar model is apposite, the former stands opposed to and resists the formation of the latter.

Other important Ndembu symbols have a similar polar structure. *Mukula,* for example, in the context of *Nkula,* a ritual performed to cure menstrual disorders, represents at its orectic pole the "blood of birth," while at the normative pole, it represents matriliny and also the historical connection between the Ndembu and the empire of Mwantiyanvwa in the Congo, whose first incumbent, a female chief called Luweji Ankonde, suffered from menorrhagia. The tough *chikoli* thorn tree, which plays an important role in the boys' circumcision ritual, is said to stand for "masculinity" in the moral and social sense. It is said to stand for courage (*wulobu*), skill at hunting, and for "speaking well in legal cases," but *chikoli* also has its physiological pole. To quote one informant: "*Chikoli* is a very strong tree, its wood is very hard. One name for it is *chikang' anjamba,* from *ku-kang'anya,* to fail, and *njamba,* the elephant. The elephant fails to break it. Neither wind nor rain can break it, and white ants cannot eat it. It stands upright like the male organ or a man's strong body. That is why we say it represents strength (*wukolu*). "*Chikoli,* like *wukolu,* is derived from *ku-kola,* "to be strong or potent." I could cite many other Ndembu examples of this polarity, which I consider to be a universal feature of ritual symbols of any semantic complexity.

However, let us return to the *mudyi* tree, this time to observe what takes place near and around it on the day of the novice's ordeal, the phase of *Kwing'ija,* or "putting in," with which the girl's puberty ritual (*Nkang'a*) begins. For now we are going to consider the operational meaning of the milk tree. Immediately we are confronted with a problem. Whereas it can be argued that on the exegetic level of meaning, the structural referents of the milk tree are concerned with the harmonious and solidary aspects of groups and relationships organized by matriliny or femininity, it is immediately obvious that much of the behavior observable in connection with it represents a mimesis of conflict within those very groups and relationships.

For example, in the early hours of the morning only the senior women of the novice's own village may dance around the *mudyi* tree. Later on, only women and no men may dance there, and the women

attack the men in jeering and lampooning songs. Moreover, for a long time the girl's mother may not approach the *mudyi* tree, and when she eventually does so, she is mocked by the senior women. I might also mention an episode in which all the senior women compete to be first to snatch a spoon of cassava mush and beans, called "the porridge of *chipwampwilu*," from the ritual instructress. This porridge represents fertility and in particular, the novice's fertility. If a woman from a distant village grabs the spoon first, this is thought to mean that the novice will bear her children far away from her mother's place of residence. This episode represents competition between the principles of matriliny and virilocality. Other episodes in *Nkang'a* also signify this conflict, though most of them do not have direct reference to the milk tree.

Thus, during different episodes, the value attached to the solidarity of women is contradicted in practice by the conflict between the novice's mother and the adult women who are ritually incorporating her daughter into their married ranks and removing her from her mother's knee. It is further contradicted by the separation of the novice's village members from the other women, and by the rivalry, on a village basis, between the women for the novice's fertility, and between individual women for fertility. The unity of the tribe is contradicted by the mobilization of the women around the milk tree in jeering opposition to the men. The novice's ordeal, with the threat of punishment if she moves, represents one aspect of the conflict between senior women and girls.

What is interesting is that indigenous informants do not relate these conflicts, stereotyped though they be, to their orthodox interpretations of the symbolism of the milk tree. Yet these mimed conflicts have to take place at the *ifwilu*, the novice's "dying-place," which is located next to the milk tree. A psychoanalyst of the Kleinian school might be tempted perhaps to relate the contrast between the exegetic and operational levels of meaning, between the emphasis on harmony and the emphasis on discord, to the infant's ambivalent attitude to the mother's breast, which both soothes him and arouses hostility by its apparently capricious absences. He might regard the lack of interpretation of the conflict behavior as due to the psychological "splitting" mechanism which separates the hostile from the loving attitude to the breast and thrusts this hostility into the unconscious psyche, but it is theoretically inadmissible to explain social facts, such as ritual symbols, by the concepts of depth psychology. A sociological hypothesis to

account for the contradiction between these levels of meaning might be advanced to the effect that on the exegetic level, the principle of matriliny is abstracted from its social context and appears in its ideal purity. The conflicts within groups and relationships articulated by matriliny which are exhibited at the operational level are not due to the structural inadequacies of matriliny or to human frailty with regard to keeping rules, but rather result from other principles of social organization which constantly and consistently interfere with the harmonious working of matriliny. Age and sex differences cut across matrilineal affiliation. Virilocal marriage strikes into the cohesion of a local matrilineage. The matricentric family makes rival demands on the loyalty of members of a matrilineage. Type-conflicts of these kinds are acted out before the milk tree, the archsymbol of matrilineal continuity, and of the ultimate dependence of Ndembu society on the mother's breast. The puberty ritual asserts that though matriliny may regularly be challenged by other principles and trends, yet it persists and triumphs.

In conclusion, I would like to draw attention to the relationship between the milk tree symbolism and the symbolic principle of "whiteness" (*wutooka*) on the exegetic level of interpretation. At the apex of the total symbolic system of the Ndembu is the color triad, white—red—black. At certain esoteric episodes in the boys' circumcision ritual and in the initial ritual of the men's and women's funerary associations of *Mung'ong'i* and *Chiwila*, the meanings of these three colors are taught to young Ndembu. Whiteness is most commonly represented by powdered white clay (*mpemba* or *mpeza*), redness by powdered red clay (*mukundu, ng'ula,* or *mukung'u*), and blackness by charcoal (*makala*). These substances are not so much symbols as tokens of three vital principles, akin to the Hindu "strands of life" mentioned in the Bhagavad-Gita. I have collected many texts and made many observations of the use of these colors in ritual and may therefore state briefly that whiteness stands, *inter alia*, for "goodness (*ku-waha*), health (*ku-koleka*), ritual purity (*ku-tooka*), freedom from misfortune (*ku-bula ku-halwa*), for political authority (*wanta*), and for assembling with the spirits (*kudibomba niakishi*). To sum up, it represents the entire moral order plus the fruits of virtue; health, strength, fertility, the respect of one's fellows, and the blessing of one's ancestors. Whiteness differs from redness in that it stresses harmony, cohesion, and continuity, while redness, associated with bloodspilling as well as with blood kinship, tends to denote disconti-

nuity, strength acquired through breach of certain rules, and male aggressiveness (as in hunting, which is represented in many rituals by red clay and red symbols).

There are many symbols that Ndembu themselves class as "white things" and which they believe to be pervaded by the moral attributes of whiteness. The milk tree, representing matriliny, is one of these. For Ndembu, matriliny is what Professor Fortes has called (1949, 344), though in a rather different connection, an "irreducible principle" of social organization, through which the moral order, with all its prescription and prohibitions, is mediated to the individual. Matriliny is the framework of those aspects of Ndembu morality which the people regard as changeless and as harmoniously interrelated nodal points. It would be possible to show that the norms and values controlling those relationships derived from the tie of milk form the "matrix" of the moral order and have ideally what Ndembu would regard as a "white" quality. Matriliny gives a specific form and stamp to a morality which would otherwise be imprecise and general.

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CHAPTER III

Color Classification in Ndembu Ritual: A Problem in Primitive Classification *

THERE has recently been a marked revival of interest in what Durkheim (1963) called "primitive forms of classification," a revival in which the names of Lévi-Strauss, Leach, Needham, and Evans-Pritchard have been prominent. Much attention has been focused on dichotomous classification in kinship and religious systems or on other kinds of isometrical arrangement such as quaternary and octadic divisions. Needham's resuscitation of Robert Hertz's work (1960) and Needham (1960) and Beidelman's recent studies (1961) in the symbolism of laterality, of the opposition of right and left and its sociological implications, represent this interest. During my own investigations of Ndembu ritual symbolism I came across many instances of lateral symbolism and indeed of other forms of dual classification with which the opposition of right and left might or might not be correlated. Since one of my major lines of inquiry was into the problem of social conflict and its resolution, I was sensitive at the time to the symbolization and formalization of such conflict. Many disputes involved opposition between the principles of matriliny and virilocality, and it seemed, therefore, reasonable to suppose that the opposition between the sexes would secure ritual and symbolic representation. I found

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