Tshiota rituals among the Luba people of Kasai Central in the Democratic Republic of Congo

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ABSTRACT

Among the Luba people, the tshiota is one of the powerful types of indigenous manga (charms) used by the community. Tshiota is a traditional fire of power used for rituals, where invocations are made to the departed ancestors, spirits, and angels. It is a place of purification, cleansing, blessings, and making sacrifices. The study employed qualitative research that was rooted in phenomenology. The concentration of the study was on the Kasai Central Province for two main reasons: one, the region has one of the major ethnic groups in the country and thus adequate evidence exists of the use of manga in the area. 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 findings of the research established tshiota is used to perform rituals and invocations to call upon the ancestors for help when there is a problem in the community. This help includes the protection of community members before they go out to perform an activity on behalf of the community. This includes activities such as fighting during the war. Tshiota fire was used also by the militia including Kamwina Nsapu who were fighting the government. They were initiated through fires of tshiota and drinking a powerful potion called tshizaba. Manga made the militia to be very powerful and strong in their fight for justice and good governance in Kasai. Through these abilities, they were able to fight and win against the modern-day government in their effort to bring change and accountability in modern political leadership. Manga was used to deal with corruption and other malpractices, hence bringing forth justice and good governance in Kasai Central Province, in DRC.

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Introduction

The Luba Kingdom emerged around 1500 AD as a single unified state on the grasslands of Upemba Depression in the region of what is now called Katanga in the southern part of the DRC. Today, this region is divided into four provinces, namely; Haut Lumami, Haut Katanga, Lualaba and Tanganyika. To the North East of Katanga Region is Kasai Region. This has been further split into five provinces. This entire region is occupied by the Baluba, who are the subject of this research. The Luba Kingdom thrived on trade in the Indian Ocean, concentrating on commodities such as palm oil, salt, fish, cassava and maize. The booming economy led to the proliferation of *Kilolo*, that is, sub-kingdoms or chiefdoms. Luba traders linked the Congo Forest with the Copper Belt (Zambia) to connect to the Atlantic and Indian oceans (Nooter, 2017). 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 Hema. 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. Even though colonialism suppressed the indigenous political systems (Barret, 2013) and Christianity seems to have overshadowed public worship, the use of *manga* persists. The colonialists painted the indigenous political system as being patriarchal and undemocratic because it was hereditary (Middleton,

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2015). However, the Luba people believed that *manga* would protect them from their enemies, provide healing, bring prosperity, establish social justice, and ensure good 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).

Manga are rituals that evoke the life-long spiritual powers which could either be positive or negative (Nooter, 2017). The *manga* institution is inherited according to the family tree. Mediums (priestesses or priests) are professionals who communicate with spirits in tongues when they go into a trance. Through these experiences, they carry out divination and give *manga*. Among the Luba people, the *tshiota* is one of the powerful types of indigenous *manga* used by the community. *Tshiota* is a traditional fire of power used for rituals, where invocations are made to the departed ancestors, spirits, and angels. It is a place of purification, cleansing, blessings, and making sacrifices. Evidence of use of *manga* among the Luba exist. The Luba people used *manga* in the Kamwina Nsapu conflict in Kasai Central Province for the restoration of justice in 2016. It is alleged that the charms protected them from government guns and bullets while they killed several government securities forces for imposing a traditional leader on them (Global Security, 2019). The phenomenon of Kamwina Nsapu spread as people from afar got wind of the power of *manga* and travelled great distances to obtain it. The use of these fetishes became a powerful vector for resistance by the people against the Congolese state (Congo Research Group, 2018). This gaining of fame and relevance is a particular interest of this study as it resonates with political power in modern society and modern politicians, as many influential leaders still use *manga* for protection and acquiring power.

The disintegration of the Luba political system, DRC portrays a country marred with conflict, corruption, lack of rule of law, amidst other political governance vices. While previously, charms played a significant role in regulating bad governance, DRC appears to have little if any replacement of these guides. This study seeks to explore this void, with an aim of finding out how indigenous African political leadership used *manga* to influence the community and how the related rituals could impact on modern political leadership for sustainable social transformation. Further, traditional African values found in indigenous leadership have deteriorated largely due to the effects of slavery, colonization, and globalization. The use of charms as a guiding tool on what to do is no longer prevalent largely due to the new modern political system. As a result, a leadership crisis has emerged where some rulers in the DRC have no respect for the rule of law or principles of good governance (Koenane, 2017).

This paper aims to evaluate the Relevance and use of *Tshiota Manga* by the Luba People of Kasai Province in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Literature Review

Africans, in general, have used mystical and spiritual powers in an attempt to understand the spirit world. Traditional specialists, among them charm givers, have been at the forefront in administering powers, among them *manga*, in an attempt to communicate with and understand the spirit world. The acquisition of power for the African is directly linked to the wishes of the spirit world. With these, therefore, ceremonies and rituals are used as ways of conciliating, attempting to control and acquire these spiritual and mystical forces (Bruce, 1997), as a way to reaching out to political power and leadership.

Before linking *manga* to power an elucidation of the African understanding of power is given. In Africa, extrinsic and intrinsic power is acquired using different methods. Luck and heredity are some of the ways in which power is acquired. With this, a significant population is left out, thus resorting to other ways of getting power (Majawa, 2017b). These include the use of human senses such as sight, touch, smell, taste, and hearing. For the Africans, these powers complement each other to bring order, meaning, life and progress in society. Power can also be received through ancestors and charm givers, who play a significant role in the search for mystical and spiritual powers. Africans have a deep belief in maintaining a good relationship with their ancestors to ensure the continuity of life and increase their potency and vigour (Nyamiti, 2017). This link is best done through charm givers, through whom powers of healing, leadership, and prosperity, are acquired (Majawa, 2017a).

Majawa (2017a) adds that power can also be acquired in the African traditional set up through certain paraphernalia. These are unique objects, chosen by among others, charm givers, and possess life-force with mystical and spiritual powers. They include parts of animals or people, animal cords, sacred cords, animal claws, pieces of leather, ointment, sacred scripture texts, precious stones or salve. The objects can be carried as charms, weapons, and amulets. The charms can be used as a source of protection, or to harm others, or to create general calamities (Nyamiti, 2017). This description fits the statuettes, fetishes, symbols, which through incantations are believed to possess potency. It is this link, that *manga*, among the Luba in the Kasai Central in DRC, provides, that is of interest to the study.

Tylor's Theory of Fetishism

Tylor proposed the Theory of Fetishism in 1866. According to the theory, since spiritual beings have the power of embodied human beings and material objects, they can use their mystic energy to influence them. Such objects thus acquire and possess special powers and have personal consciousness. Fetish objects that have mystic powers, protect those carrying them from diseases, enemies, or for harming others. As Majawa (2017a) points out, the objects carried in such traditions often include teeth, horns, beads, dead insects, images of people among others. The objects are believed to possess some destructive and therapeutic mystical powers. The form or

shape of the fetish determines the person, animal or object involved. Fetishes, therefore, take the image or properties of the person or object involved. They are based on the principle of *like things attract each other*.

The term fetish (object used for supernatural powers) is explained in section 2.2 of this study. The reverence granted to it, as well as its magical powers, will be elaborated (Wallace, 2015) in the same section. In the Theory of Fetishism, MacGaffey (1977) details the practice of fetishism in the Kongo. He looks at the relationship between spirits, figures and practitioners. According to MacGaffey, fetishes have immense power which can either be bad or good. This power is found in the spirit world but some living people are at times also considered to have considerable amounts of it. In the Kongo, fetishes held power that influenced the locals and enabled them to participate actively in the community. These objects were vessels of the power of spirits that resided in the figures. The objects are also varied based on what they were used for and because they possessed mystical power, the *Congolese* revered the figures as though they were a living elder of the community.

Presence of *Tshiota* Fire

The Luba people used *manga* in the Kamwina Nsapu conflict in Kasai Central Province for the restoration of justice in 2016. It is alleged that the charms protected them from government guns and bullets while they killed several government security forces for imposing a traditional leader on them (Global Security, 2019). The phenomenon of Kamwina Nsapu spread as people from afar got wind of the power of *manga* and travelled great distances to obtain it. The use of these fetishes became a powerful vector for resistance by the people against the Congolese state (Congo Research Group, 2018). The Kamwina Nsapu conflict is comparable to the *Bundu dia Kongo* movement in Kongo-Central, or the *Raia Mutomboki* of the Kivu provinces in the DRC. In both conflicts, the use of charms was widely witnessed and both conflicts arose due to the perceived marginalization of communities by the government. All three revolts are evidence of the use of magical power and *manga* to fight political injustices and subsequent violence (Congo Research Group, 2018).

Qualitative research

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.

Contribution

The main contributions of the research established the presence of a popular *bwanga* among the Luba. This is the *tshiota* which is a type of holy fire. The *tshiota* is used to perform rituals and invocations to call upon the ancestors for help when there is a problem in the community. This help includes protection of community members before they go out to perform an activity on behalf of the community. This includes activities such as fighting during war. The study established that *tshiota* fire was used also by the Kamwina Nsapu in addition to the *nkwenbe*: "The Kamwina Nsapu used the *tshiota* ceremony to obtain power to protect themselves from the weapons of government soldiers...and it worked because their bodies became impenetrable to weapons such as bullets..." (Charm Giver, CG 10).

When the *tshiota* fire is lit, a ceremony is done where people dance around the holy fire and call upon the ancestors to send power. The traditional chief makes pronunciations around the *tshiota* and this can easily be connected with the spirits so that the *nkwenbe* can act on behalf of the village and or an individual. The *tshiota* fire and *nkwenbe* therefore act together to fulfill the wishes or

desires of the village and individuals: "...Kamwina Nsapu used this in their war, the *tshiota* fire and *nkwembe* to gain power in order to fight modern day government soldiers" (Charm Givers, CG 1, 9).

The findings established that through the power of the *tshiota* the dead came back to life and acted on behalf of the living. One such power is the *mikishi*, spirits of the dead that acted on behalf of the living; they even returned to give feedback. At the end of a mission the *mikishi* are invoked to take the sent militia back to their place of residence. A ceremony follows where a chicken is cut at the *tshiota*, cooked and eaten as thanks to the ancestors

The militia that were fighting the government were initiated through fires of *tshiota* and drinking a powerful potion called *tshizaba*. These *manga* made the militia to be very powerful and strong in their fight for justice and good governance in Kasai, "We had hundreds and hundreds of *tshiota* fires in Kasai Provinces in general, and thousands and thousands of militias were formed and initiated to the *tshiota* and drinking *Tshizaba* to go and fight the government soldiers..." (Traditional Chief, TC 4).

The militia derived their power from the *tshiota* fire that was lit by traditional chiefs and charm givers using specific trees. The specific trees that are used to light the *tshiota* fire include the *mutotshi*, *lubamba*, *lukwanga*, *difudu*, and *tshikusukusu*. The *tshiota* fires was also used to purify the society. Through the *tshiota* fire, the traditional leaders are able to call upon the power of *manga* which enabled and still gives power to militia to this day. The study findings established that through the fire, the ancestors are called upon through rituals that are done including drinking and pouring traditional liquors into the *tshiota* fire. When someone is initiated into the *tshiota* with *tshizaba*, they are asked to stand and purify themselves with *kapia* meaning fire from the *tshiota*. This fire reactivates the power in the body of a person and militia were required to regularly retreat back to the *tshiota* fire in the evening in order to warm themselves and reactivate their powers, as said in the following statement:

...*kapia* of *tshiota* (fire of the *tshiota*)...we used it to bring the politicians back to their senses...used the tortoise shell for the great protection of the militia. We kept our *manga* inside the shell. We also used salamander skin to preserve our *manga* (Traditional Chief, TC 11, Militia, M 1).

One of the reasons for using the *tshiota bwanga* was to protect the Luba people against the government because the people had concluded that the government did not bring progress and development in the Kasai province.

The use of *manga* by the Kamwina Nsapu resulted in a long-protracted war between the Luba people and the modern day government. While the government used modern weapons, militia used *manga* to successfully fight and win over government soldiers. This shows the efficacy of *manga* used and the results attained. The *tshiota* and *nkwembe* are not only some of the most powerful *manga* among the Luba, but equally among the most respected, and having a high level of efficacy. The following section describes other types of *manga*.

Kamwina Nsapu Use of Tshiota

The other reason for fighting the government as established by the study was bad governance. This was riddled with high levels of corruption from the provincial to the central government. As a remedy to the situation, militias were prepared by the traditional leaders and charm givers and given powerful *manga* notably the *tshiota* fire ceremony and *nkwembe* to go and fight the modern day government:

"...surprisingly the government started paying some traditional leaders money so that they lit the *tshiota* fire in their villages so that they can initiate young people to fight the militia of Kamwina Nsapu. That type of *tshiota* was called *tshiota tshia majanyi* (the fire of betrayal), because it was used to betray the people, to betray Kamwina Nsapu so that they will be defeated by injustice, corruption, by evil doing from the provincial and central government. The ancestors and God did not allow that to happen that is why the central government was humbled despite the fact that they sent hundreds of thousands of soldiers..." (Traditional Chief, TC 4).

Militia (M3) also adds his voice in saying:

"I was one of those who were with Kamwina Nsapu...we fought the system of bad governance...we were against injustice...politicians were becoming rich overnight through looting of natural resources and corruption. Our people needed a change of leadership and we provided that to them and we have accomplished our mission..." (Militia, M3).

Tshiota Fire and Accountability among the Luba

Accountability and protection

Luba traditional leaders equally fulfill their role of accountability by protecting members of the community. The traditional leader is charged with the responsibility of safeguarding and protecting the lives of community members who hold the chief to account in case something evil happens to them. Due to the power of *diyi* which means words of power, Luba traditional leaders are able to use *lupemba* meaning words of blessing to bless and protect people even when they are far away from the community. This is done through standing in front of the *tshiota* and calling out the name and location of someone, after which words of blessings are pronounced to protect the person from calamities such as accidents, gunshots, poison, illness or even sudden death.

After the pronouncement, the *lupemba* is blown out of the hands of the chief. This description describes how Luba leaders are able to protect their community members even those who are located in far-away places, as noted in the statement by a Traditional Leader (TL 5), "...through this ceremony the traditional chief sends the ancestors to wherever they are even in a foreign country/land..."

The use of the *diyi* and the *lupemba*, demonstrates current use and influence of *manga*, accountability and protection. The power of the chief resides in *diyi dia bukokesha* meaning power of words that are spoken in front of the *tshiota* fire. Through this ceremony, traditional leaders are able to protect their community members from harm and ensure accountability to the people. They uttered the *diyi* that protects them when they leave the community until they are able to return back safely home.

Role and types of manga for accountability in traditional leadership

The researcher conducted focus group discussions to establish what role *manga* play in ensuring accountability in traditional and modern leadership. The study established presence of various types of *manga* in the Luba community that are used for accountability. A focus group with traditional chiefs, charm givers and politicians revealed various types of *manga* that are used by the Luba of Kasai in the DRC. As per the findings, the *tshiota* fire was used by militia who were fighting for justice, seeking the accountability of the government. This is because the people were reacting against oppressive taxes, poor roads, lack of clean water, and poverty and low levels of development:

We were fighting for justice...our rights and the rights of the people. Our anger made us use all our *manga*. If we did not fight, no change would have taken place because the tendency was to remain in power for life. We created different subsections of the militia, however we were under one great chief. We wanted to implement change (Traditional Leader, TL 11).

The group discussion established that various types of *manga* were used by the Luba people to ensure accountability in traditional leadership. The *bwanga bwa Nkashama* which means charm of leopard emerged as a popular type of *manga* that is used to reinforce accountability of the leader to the people. This is because this type of *manga* is not only powerful but is capable of killing whoever who is against success, prosperity, good harvest, justice and development in the community. Among the traditional law of the Luba people, there exists a law known as *kudidi ditunga majanyi* which means do not betray the people of your nation. Based on this law, a traditional chief is not expected to betray the people at all and must defend and protect them regardless of the situation at hand. If a traditional leader betrays the people he will die. This is one of the laws and customs of the Luba people where leaders are not expected to betray the people at all, "You cannot betray the *tshiota* and live. *Kupana kwa ditunga* which means you don't sell your people or town to the enemy..." (Traditional Leader, TL 1).

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.

Abuse of manga by contemporary leaders

Modern politicians were reported to misuse indigenous *manga* and this resulted in loss of some of the good values in it. Some types of *manga* were also reported to be unavailable to modern politicians completely. Charms such as the *kapia ka tshiota* were found to be totally unavailable to modern leaders because of the power it possesses. The fire that makes this particular type of charm cannot be lit in the compound of modern political leaders because it is so powerful that it will destroy any person who is unclean. A traditional leader (TL 4) observed:

In order to approach the *tshiota* one must be clean because this is where the spirits of the ancestors and the dead are invited and invoked to act on behalf of the people. At this same fire, those who have done evil can be purified only by the chief.

Implication

In addressing this part, the efficacy of *manga* re-borrowing from the Kamwina Nsapu conflict comes to play. Among the Luba, *manga* have been used to exercise traditional leadership beliefs in order to bring change, good governance and transformation in the society. The case of the Kamwina Nsapu revealed the use of *manga* to address the problem that had emerged in the Luba community. Different types of indigenous *manga* were used: trees and sticks were used as guns; slippers as telephones; and fruits as grenades. Militia were able to cut off heads of enemies from a distance and they teleported from one place to another.

These activities were made possible by use of *manga*, such as the *tshiota* fire. This agrees with literature that indicated the use of *manga* by the Kamwina Nsapu militia. According to the Congo Research Group (2018), the use of fetishes by the Kamwina Nsapu militia demonstrated the use of indigenous *manga* against the modern-day government. A report by Global Security (2019) also supports this finding where it alleged that there was use of charms by the Kamwina Nsapu militia to protect themselves from guns, bullets and weapons of the government soldiers while several soldiers were killed by the same militia.

The use of *manga* by the Kamwina Nsapu concurs with literature. According to the Congo Research Group (2018), types of *manga* used by the militia included *tshiota* fire and *tshizaba* which were used to protect the militia and to also solve problems of great

importance in the villages or communities. The findings of the study supported this by revealing that the *tshiota* fire was one of the *manga* used by traditional chiefs to equip the militia and protect them in their fight against the modern day government. Incantations and rituals were done around the *tshiota* fire to protect the militia and give them mystical powers to fight the modern day government soldiers.

This finding agrees with Majawa (2017b) that power that is produced by uttering the right words linked to spiritual powers. These words can be used to cast spells, curse, swear oaths, and make attempts at controlling people, events, nature and the spirit world. The words become more potent when uttered by a traditional healer or religious leader or diviner and such words can give confidence to people to pursue certain actions. This is precisely what happened in the Kamwina Nsapu conflict where the militia fought after traditional ceremonies had been performed by the traditional leaders together with charm givers. The militia acquired power and became confident that they were protected by *manga* from the more complex weapons of government soldiers. The militia would fly in the sky like birds, teleport from one location to another, disappear into thin air once they had been spotted, turn sticks into guns, use sandals and telephones, cut off the head of the soldiers from a distance and turn fruits into grenades and bombs once they threw them at government soldiers.

Traditional chiefs who were part of the war on government soldiers indicated that they resorted to using indigenous *manga* because they knew that it was going to work. The findings established this was indeed the case and militia who participated in the war and conflict collaborated this evidence. The use of guarded words by traditional leaders and charm givers was to protect the community from harm and danger. As Majawa (2017b) notes, words that are protective can transform into amulets or objects and used as a source of power. These words are often incantations such as the ones made by Luba traditional leaders in the presence of the holy fire known as *tshiota* to protect the militia. Bently (1977) concurs that incantations are pronounced in front of symbols and fetishes. Through the pronouncement, the two get power. In this way, the involved symbols point to things that are beyond the senses and represent expressions of deeper religious and social meaning.

Conclusion

The *tshiota* is one of the most powerful *manga* among the Luba, but equally the most respected with a high level of efficacy to achieve the intended results are demonstrated and confirmed by the interviewed charm givers. The use of indigenous *manga* by the Luba through the Kamwina Nsapu resulted in change of government as reported by the traditional leaders, charm givers, militia and modern leaders who were interviewed in the study. In the experience of Chief Kamwina Nsapu, there was effective use of strong *manga* in the war. These included lighting of the *tshiota* fire upon which rituals were done to protect the militia against the sophisticated weapons of soldiers: sticks turned into guns, slippers were used as phone, soldiers teleported and disappeared. Through this abilities, they were able to fight and win against the modern day government in their effort to bring change and accountability in modern political leadership. *Manga* were used to deal with corruption and other mal-practices, hence bring forth justice and good governance in Kasai Central Province, in DRC.

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