5 Traditions, Migrations and Cannibalism

This paper was originally presented to a university seminar in Dar-es-Salaam in August 1971. It was firmly sub-titled ‘an entertainment on the problems of historical evidence’. Unsubstantiated oral tradition would have some historians believe that a variant of it was later read in absentia to a conference of the African Studies Association of the United Kingdom. There is no written record of either variant ever having been published. It is offered here as a quixotic and fossilised example of the historiography of the era.

It should be a well-known fact that oral traditions relate to the order of things as they ought to be rather than to historical processes as they actually occurred. In many cases, of course, the historical process provides the most convincing rationale for the status quo and so the requirements of current politics and of historical research coincide. In other cases, unfortunately, there may be discrepancies between the historical growth of institutions and the rationalization of them. An early contrast between rationalised tradition, and historical evidence, concerns the origins of man where the Book of Genesis gives the rationalisation of the oral traditionalist, while the historian tends to favour the evolutionist theories of Leakey and company.¹

Although the problems of interpreting oral traditions are now fairly clearly understood, there are still well-known cases where historians have accepted tradition unquestioningly at its face value, and then proceeded to construct theories and models around it. This has often led them to accord exaggerated importance to migrations. In these accounts of traditional migrations there is often a perfunctory reference to the fact that perhaps not all the people came from a distant land, only the majority or the most influential, or the most devout, or the strongest, but the important question of continuity in the society is usually not discussed in detail.

Theories of migration have commonly been succeeded, among the more analytically courageous historians, by theories of political diffusion associated with conquest-states and the spread of cults, shrines, military methods and royal paraphernalia. Clearly we should
not despise and reject all traditions of migration, and all diffusionist theories relating to aspects of political culture, but for myself I think it might be useful to revisit some early research ground with a more sceptical and questioning attitude of mind.

The traditions of origin of the Kongo kingdom are exceptional in that they were encapsulated in documentary fossils some 300 years ago and have not developed new rationalised explanations since the mid-seventeenth century. This has caused historians – Ihle, Van Wing, Cuvelier, Birmingham, Vansina, Balandier et al. – to accord them a special reverence which has distorted our vision. At the time they were recorded, the Kongo traditions related to a large, centralised, kingdom with a highly visible ruling class which had developed economically and culturally through its contacts with the trading nations of the Atlantic. The traditions of origin referred to past history nearly 200 years old. These traditions should, therefore, be accorded the circumspection one would give today to traditions relating to the mid-eighteenth century. They should not be accepted as almost words from the horses mouth because of the antiquity of their recording. These traditions had in fact undergone 200 years of evolution just as the institutions to which they related had undergone 200 years of evolution.

What Kongo traditions said, at a dateline of about 1623, was that the Kongo kingdom had been created, about five generations before the 1483 arrival of the Portuguese, by immigrants from the kingdom of Bungu. The twentieth-century gloss of more recent traditional interpretation, then goes on to explain how this intrusive ruling elite spread out to govern the whole area from the Atlantic to the Kwango, 300 miles inland. The interpretive historian has then moved in and seen these ‘foreign “Bakongo” migrants’ as imposing a state-building model – variously described as Sudanic, Luba, Mongo-Bolia, or other – and setting up a fifteenth-century state capable of receiving European cultural influences without structural alteration. The political system, it was implied, merely adapted to the occasional stresses until a new ‘migratory invasion’, fundamentally that of the Jaga, altered the situation 100 years later.

The implication that Kongo was similar in size, and structure, in the fifteenth century, to what it had become in the seventeenth century, is clearly unsound. But the evidence relating to the early history of Kongo is unfortunately sparse. We know that it had a capital city, Mbanza Kongo, of some significance since reports of it reached early Portuguese traders 100 miles away on the coast.