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# Ntangu-Tandu-Kolo: The Bantu-Kongo Concept of Time

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This chapter discusses the indigenous time concepts of the Kongo of West Central Africa. “Kongo” refers to a cultural, linguistic, and historical group of people that is descended from a larger body of Bantu-speaking communities who migrated south from the Benue-Cross river region of present-day Nigeria into the equatorial forest of West Central Africa and beyond. Dating back to the second millennium B.C., waves of migratory Bantu communities slowly pressed south, a process by which the majority of Africans living in the entire region south of the equator came to speak one or another of the 400 related Bantu languages. Within a few centuries, early Iron Age settlements of Bantu speakers were established throughout the region. It was this shared past of common origins and history and millennia of interrelationship that gave rise to the affinity in cultural traditions, belief systems, and time concepts among the Kongo and other Bantu groups.

The modern era of Kongo history dates to the thirteenth century, when new settlers began to fortify their ethnic-based political institutions in the southern Congo river basin (in present-day Angola) under the collective leadership of chiefs (*mfumu*) who were elected from the ranks of the wise elders (*bakulu*). From these small chiefdoms, larger and more powerful centralized state systems with well-established political institutions (*sikudukusulu*) were established. One of the largest and most powerful of these states was Kongo, which expanded from its Angolan base to the

area of modern Zaire and the Congo Republic. Other Bantu kingdoms that were created in the Congo river region included Bemba, Lunda, Lulua, and Kuba.

By far, the most successful of the Bantu states of West Central Africa was Kongo, which developed a highly advanced iron technology, agrarian culture, complex trade systems, and elaborate political institutions well before the arrival of the first Europeans in the region in the late fifteenth century. The high level of material culture attained by the Kongo state by the sixteenth century has been commented upon in both oral chronicles and documentary evidence. In the view of one commentator, "in terms of natural resources [Western Europe was] poorer and in terms of its economic development at the time, in many respects more backward than advanced" (Baran 1961, p. 138).

However, the glory of the Kongo state did not last long after the European arrival, which signalled the beginning of its decline and ultimate demise. With the European entry almost simultaneously into the Americas and the establishment there of slave-based plantation systems, the fate of Kongo and that of the "New World" became intertwined for the next several centuries. Kongo, along with the other states of West Central Africa, became the region in all of Africa where Europeans obtained the most slaves that were transported across the Atlantic to labor on American plantations during the 3.5 centuries of slave trading from the sixteenth to the mid-nineteenth century. Also, it was Portuguese slave raiding activities that, more than any single factor, accounted for the destabilization and eventual fall of Kongo, politically and economically.

At the same time, European missionary activities, under the guise of civilizing the Kongo people, were slowly increasing European penetration of the region. Ultimately, by the late nineteenth century, European desire to obtain the riches of the Congo basin (for example, gold, ivory, rubber) to serve the needs of their industrial expansion, the potential of the river as a commercial highway, and the victimization of the region (as, indeed, the rest of the continent) as a pawn in European power politics all culminated in the colonization of the Kongo basin. Out of the territory once covered by the old Kongo state, three colonial states were carved out and controlled by the Portuguese, Belgians, and French from the 1880s until independence in the 1960s and 1970s, when the colonial territories became the modern nations of Angola, Zaire, and the Congo Republic, respectively.

Even though the Kongo people (Bakongo, sing. Mukongo) are now split by three different national boundaries, they share common social,

artistic, economic, and spiritual traditions as descendants of the historic state and speak a common Kikongo language.<sup>1</sup> Kongo culture, history, and politics have been the subject of innumerable works by writers both inside and outside Africa, but very few have been concerned with the subject of time, and those that have done so have focused on time in what I would describe as the everyday, “mundane” sense of the word, that is, the concepts of time generally known to the uninitiated, the *biyinga*. This is the comprehension of time that is shared at mealtimes, the market place, a wedding, and a dance. It is also the genre of time that is embodied in conceptualizations of events of the recent and colonial past or in the planning of future activities (in terms of days, weeks, or years).

In this respect, several works come to mind. One is Jan Vansina’s *Paths in the Rainforests: Toward a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa* (1990), in which he discusses time concept awareness (or the lack of it) in Western literature dealing with the history of Africa. “To evaluate the position of the data, as pre-colonial or colonial,” writes the author, “one needs to know the local date of colonial conquest and the time collapse since then” (Vansina 1990, p. 21). Unfortunately, although this concept of time has some utility, it could also be a wall in terms of evaluating certain events or developments on the time line of African history. If a colonial or precolonial document written in, let us say, 1600 mentions the existence of the *Lèmba Institution* for the first time, should we conclude that this institution popped out of nowhere at the date the document was written, even if that particular institution may have existed for hundreds of years before? Such approaches to conceptions of the African past have obvious limitations unless there is corroborating evidence from other sources.

Earlier, in *The Children of Woot: A History of the Kuba Peoples* (1978), Vansina introduced a brief, two-page exploration into Kuba conceptions of time. He mentioned that the Kuba of Zaire could date events with regard to abandoned village sites and referred to market days for the week but concluded that they had limited time concepts: “it seems unlikely that a count of days was often outside the market context” (p. 20). In any case, it will be apparent in this chapter that my concern with time is from a completely different perspective.

Two other studies on time are worthy of note: John Mbiti’s *African Religions and Philosophy* (1990 [1969]) and A. Kagame’s “The Empirical Apperception of Time and the Time Consciousness of History in Bantu Thought” (1976). However, both are general studies on Bantu concepts of time rather than Kongo specific and moreover, like Vansina’s, adopt an approach different from mine.

In contrast to the “mundane” aspects of time mentioned above, the concern of this chapter is the realms of time that come from the “esoteric” world of the Kongo, the world of the *bangânga*, the masters, the initiated ones. The vehicles through which such knowledge was disseminated were the initiation schools, the centers of higher learning, which were forbidden to outsiders. Thus, knowledge of their teachings was inaccessible to Europeans and all foreigners. Because of their nature, these institutions of higher learning were ultimately suppressed by the colonial powers, and their teachings went underground. Fortunately, I was privileged to have been initiated into one of them, and at the feet of the masters, I learned, in a period of ten years, what is expressed in this essay about the Kongo concept of time. Other references are based on my personal work and experience with Kongo culture, of which I am a member by blood as well as academic interest.

The Kongo concept of time described here is deeply rooted in our worldview, our cosmology, which was the core base of the curricula of all institutions of higher learning. Its centrality in our knowledge system stems from the fact that time lies at the core of our understanding of not only the universe and its processes (*dingo-dingo*) of creation, transformation, and functioning, but also of life itself and its functioning. It is through time that both nature and man become comprehensible to us. Time validates and provides truths to our existence.

This chapter discusses cosmic, natural, vital, and social time among the Bakongo. It will also examine the Kongo concept of the past, the present, and the future. It will be demonstrated that first, time is cyclical, and all creations, institutions, and systems undergo a four-stage cyclical process, and that second, this four-step process of time has social relevance for the Bakongo.

## THE BANTU-KONGO CONCEPT OF TIME

Time, for the Kongo, is a cyclical “thing.” It has no beginning and no end. Thanks to *dunga* (events), the concept of time is understood and can be understandable. These *dunga*, be they natural or artificial, biological or ideological, material or immaterial, constitute what is known as *n’kama mia ntangu* in Kikongo, that is, the “dams of time.”<sup>2</sup> It is these dams of time that make possible both the concept and the divisions of time among the Bantu-Kongo. Thus, time is both abstract and concrete. At the abstract level, time has no beginning or end. It exists on its own and flows by itself, on its own accord. Yet, at the concrete level, it is *dunga* (events) that make time perceptible, providing the unending flow of time

with specific “dams,” events, or periods of time.

It is virtually impossible to grasp the Bantu-Kongo concept of time discussed here without understanding certain key words that express and embody terminologies of time in Kongo culture, the base of this work. Each of these words must be clearly understood in order to understand the concept they describe.

There are three key words in the Kikongo language that translate the term “time.” The first and most commonly used is *ntangu*. The term *ntangu* finds its root in the word *tanga* — to count, put in order, accumulate, go into steps, go back and forth. This same verb translates as to read or to dance, as with one’s own *ntanga* (feet/legs). It is from this root that the term *matanga* (sing. *tanga*), an exuberant dance ceremony accompanied by many musical instruments, is derived. This ceremony is held in connection with the final funeral rites of a community leader. It is interesting to note that the names of the Latin American dance the tango and the Cuban dance the *matanza* are directly derived from the Kongo festival dance of *matanga*. “Tango,” in fact, is a derivative of the singular form, *tanga*, while *matanza* is the plural form of *matanga*.

The second key word used by the Kongo people to translate “time” is *tandu*, from the root verb *tanda*, to mark or to set on line, to cast. The third key word used to translate time is *Kolo*. This last term is linked to the verb *kola*, which expresses a state of being, a level of strength at a given period of time. The concept of “hour” is expressed by the words *lo*, *lokula*, and *ndo*. The following examples will help illustrate the various contexts in which terminologies referring to time are used in Kikongo:

<i>Nkia ntangu kizidi?</i>	What time did s/he come?
<i>Ntangu ka yazayakana ko</i>	The time was not known.
<i>Ntangu yampasi</i>	Hard (difficult) time.
<i>Tekila tandu kieto</i>	Before our time.
<i>Mu tandu kina</i>	In that time (period).
<i>Mu kolo kiaki</i>	In this time (era).
<i>Kukondolo nkama miantangu, kweni kolo ka ko</i>	Where there are no “dams of time,” there is no time.

Although it is apparent that some of the terminologies are interchangeable, each one has its own specific, expressive, and semantic meaning to the Kikongo speaker, because such meanings are grounded in Bantu culture. This grounding needs to be understood in order to grasp the time concept among the people of this specific Bantu cultural

area. It must be understood if one is to have a proper comprehension of the ways the Bakongo conceptualize time, for all too often African cultural, religious, and philosophical systems are poorly understood in the Western literature on Africa because of a lack of understanding of key linguistic concepts.

The Bakongo recognize four realms of time: cosmic, natural, vital, and social time.

### Cosmic Time (*Tandu Kiayalangana*)

In their worldview, the Bantu-Kongo call *tandu kiayalangana* or *tandu kia luyalungunu* “cosmic time,” the unlimited and ongoing formation process of *dunga* (events) throughout the universe (*luyalungunu*) through the power and energy of Kalunga, the supreme force (Fu-Kiau, 1969; 1991). In other words, cosmic time represents the actual, ongoing, active time line of *kalunga* energy and its “dams” (*n’kama*) or new creations throughout the universe through the instrumentality of Kalunga’s power, the agent of change and creation:

After the appearance of the *Muntu* (human being), on the planet Earth, *Kalunga* energy achieved its highest plan for Earth to continue elsewhere, beyond the *M’bangu a zulu* (ceiling of sky), to set fire (*Lunga tiya*) in the emptiness of *Mbungu a luyalungunu* (the universe cavity) and overrun it for the formation of new worlds.<sup>3</sup>

To become fully alive, these new worlds, too, will be subject to the four cardinal stages of the Kongo cosmogram, as will be shown below.

Each body (world, planet) in the universe has its own cosmic time, its own formation process. However, the Bantu-Kongo ancient school of initiation taught that every cosmic time process encompasses four great steps, to which everything in life is subject, systems included. The Bantu cosmology teaches that to complete its formation process or *dingo-dingo*, a planet must go through these four stages or “dams of times” (*n’kama mia ntangu*), namely, *musoni* time, *kala* time, *tukula* time, and *luvemba* time.

### Musoni Time (*Tandu kia musoni*)

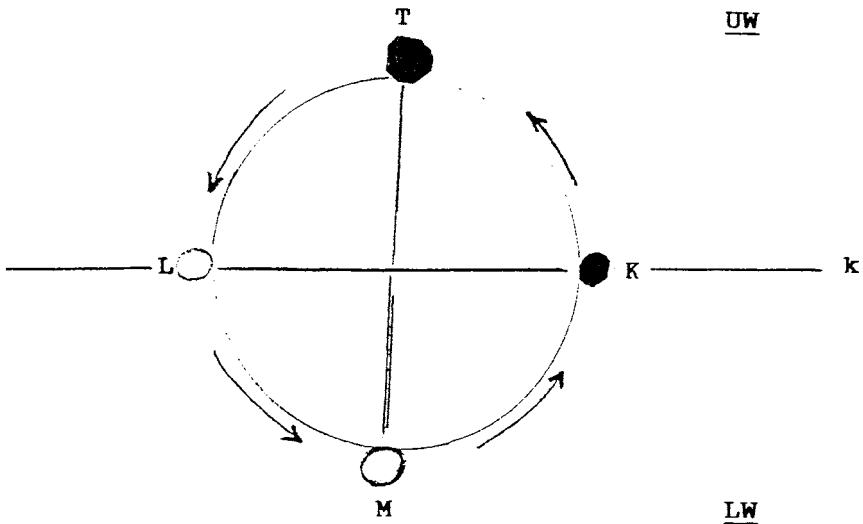
*Musoni* time is the beginning of all time. Kongo mythological tradition refers to this period as *Tandu kia Luku Lwalamba Kalunga* (literally, “the period of *Kalunga’s* cooking”), the boiling era of magmatic matter (Fu-Kiau 1969, pp. 17–27). This is the period during which the void (*luyalungunu*) was filled with matters in fusion. This was the beginning

of *kele-kele dia dingo-dingo dia ntangu ye moyo*, “the sparkle of the ongoing process of time and life” throughout the universe; it is the collision of collisions (the big bang). This stage of *Musoni* time became the symbol of all beginnings and the first step in all Kongo teaching of higher learning (Figure 2.1). It occupies the first position in the Kongo cosmogram (*dikenga dia Kongo*). During this period, after its complete cooling process, the earth, our planet, became a physical reality. *Musoni*, yellow, is the symbolic color of this era, the first great dam of time (*n’kama wantete wangudi wa ntangu*).

Recognition is given to the importance of *Musoni* time not only as the cornerstone of the Kongo cosmogram but also as the seed, the beginning

FIGURE 2.1

Cosmological Time: The Formation and Transformation of the Planet Earth



M: *Musoni* Time (first stage, corresponding to the “big bang” era).

K: *Kala* Time (second stage, era when biological life in its microscopic form became a reality).

T: *Tukula* Time (third stage, era when animals occurred on planet earth).

L: *Luvemba* Time (fourth stage, era when *Maghûngu*, ancestor of the human race, occurred on planet earth).

UW: Upper World, the physical world.

LW: Lower World, the spiritual world, abode of the ancestors.

k: *Kalunga*, the balancing plan-line of all energies.

point of all development in Kongo society. The Mukongo would say, for example, that when a seed is put in the ground, the action is being rooted in the *Musoni* position. Similarly, when an idea is being formed or developed in somebody's mind or when a Mukongo couple plans for a family, they begin at the *Musoni* stage. This is the hour of *n'dingu-a-nsi* (the depth of night, midnight). It is the position at which the universal living "energies" (male and female) unite inside the womb and become "*ma*" (matter).

#### *Kala Time* (Tandu kia Kala)

*Kala* time is the second stage in the formation process of planets and their transformation (Figure 2.1). After the completion of Earth's "cooling" came the *Kala* time stage (*Tandu kia Kala*). During this era the Earth witnessed great changes. Life in its lowest form — microscopic "beings" (*zio*), algae — began to exist/be (*kala*) during this period. The soil was moist, and water could be found everywhere. Black is the symbolic color of this era, the second great dam of time (*n'kama wanzole wangudi wa ntangu*). At this *kala* stage, the world saw the sun rising from the depth of the universe, the spiritual world or ancestors' world (the lower world), to the physical world (the upper world), bringing not only light but also hope, joy, and creative energy into the world.

Again, the conceptualization of the *Kala* cosmic time has direct social relevance. The *Kala* position is seen as the position at which all biological beings come into being (*mu kala*). It is the position of all births. It is for this reason that the birth of child (*mwana*) in Bantu-Kongo society is conceived of in the same way one sees the sun rising in the upper world: "the birth of a child is perceived as the rising of a living sun in the upper world (*ku nseke*), the physical world or the world of the living community" (Fu-Kiau 1991, p. 8).

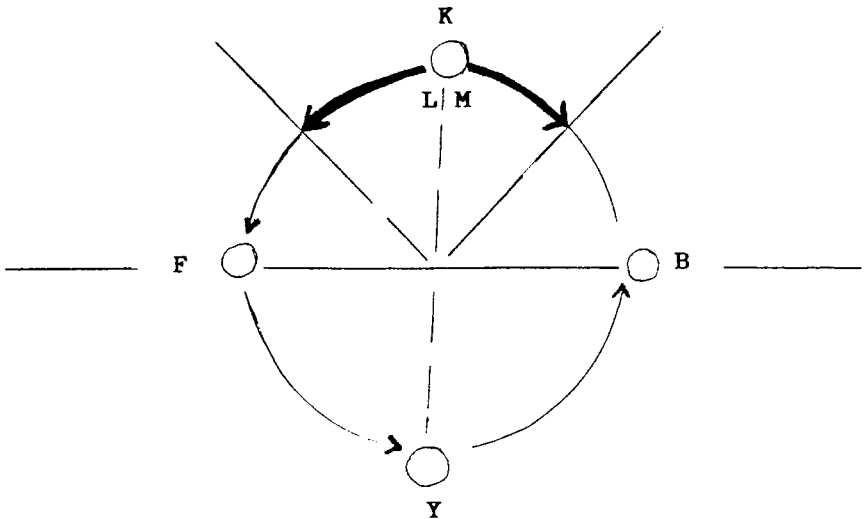
#### *Tukula Time* (Tandu kia Tukula)

*Tukula* time is the third stage in the formation process of planets (worlds) and their transformation that followed the *Kala* era. During this period of cosmic time, our planet matured (*Kula*). Life that occurred under the previous *Kala* era has now matured and prospered. Animals also occurred at one point during this *tukula* era. This stage occupies the third position in the Kongo cosmogram, *dikenga* (Figure 2.1). The symbolic color of this era, the third great dam of time, is red, which symbolizes growth/maturity (*tukula* literally means "let us grow/mature").

*Tukula* incorporates the "V" zone (Figure 2.2), the most critical zone in the success of all biological beings, especially human beings. It



**FIGURE 2.2**  
**Main Stages of Vital Time**



- Y: *Yakwa*: Conception stage (corresponds to *musoni* position of cosmic time).  
 B: *Butwa*: Birth stage (corresponds to *kala* position of cosmic time).  
 K: *Kula*: Growth, maturity, and power stage.  
 F: *Fwa*: Death stage, point of transformation and change.  
 LM: *Lubata lwa Mpângulu*: zone of highest level of creativity, symbolized by “V.”

represents the point of the highest level of creativity. Nations whose leadership is unaware of the kind of role the “V” plays in human creative power are doomed to fail politically, economically, and socially. Inside this zone, people, nations, organizations, systems, and institutions should learn to stand tall and face the challenges that confront them. One reason many people, especially in their prime, are failing today is their inability to recognize and utilize the creative force of the “V” zone.

#### Luvemba Time (Tandu kia Luvemba)

This is the fourth stage and last period or era that a planet undergoes to complete its formation process and transformation, and it follows *tukula* time. According to the Bantu-Kongo school of higher learning,

during this era, *Maghûngu*<sup>4</sup> occurred on the planet. *Maghûngu* was an androgynous being, complete by “x-self.” This mythological being was “two-in-one,” male and female. Through continuous search for rituals, *Maghûngu* was split into two separated beings: *Lumbu* and *Muzita* (female and male). At this point the planet earth became a living whole, complete by itself. *Lumbu* and *Muzita*, to maintain their oneness as they were in *Maghûngu*, decided to remain together in life (married). They became wife and husband (*n’kento ye bakala*) (Fu-Kiau 1969, pp. 17–27). With this new beginning of life of togetherness, the circle of cosmic time was completed (Figure 2.1) and a new stage of time began — vital time.

However, before entering into a discussion of vital time, a point of clarification needs to be made concerning the way Kongo cosmological teachings explain the barrenness of some celestial bodies. As explained above, the planet Earth became fully alive only because it timely completed its cycle of going through all four cosmological stages outlined in Figure 2.1. Thus, the explanation given for the celestial bodies that are barren today, such as the moon and Mars, is twofold: they did not complete the four great stages of the cosmological wheel that would have concluded their formation and transformation process and, therefore, remain in the “cooling stage”; or they were targets of a catastrophic outer “big bang” collision that destroyed completely or aborted their creation and transformation processes while Kalunga, the creative energy, continues in outer space with its work of setting the universe afire, expanding it, and creating new worlds (planets).

### Vital Time (*Ntangu a zingu/moyo*)

Like cosmic time, the vital time of life, *ntangu a moyo*, is cyclical. It begins at a point and ends at that same point to close the cycle, and then, by undergoing transformation, a new cycle begins. The length or span of this time period depends on the particular nature and living power of the “being,” concept, or system involved (Fu-Kiau 1991, p. 45). All living things, concepts, and systems undergo this temporal cycle. Thus, vital time can be seen as biological time when it relates to life and its creative energy (reproduction). Its beginning point, that is, its *musoni*, is called *kenko dia ngyakulu*, the point of conception.

According to Kongo teaching, nothing exists that does not follow the steps of the cyclical Kongo cosmogram. People, animals, inventions, social systems, and so on are conceived (*yakwalyindulwa*) and live

through a kind of pregnancy (Stage 1), are born (*butwa*) (Stage 2), mature (*kula*) (Stage 3), and die (*fwa*) at the collision stage in order to undergo change (Stage 4).

The span of vital time depends on the amount of energy generated by the “subject” involved. It is vital time (*ntangu anzingila*) and its living energy that determine in human beings, animals, insects, snakes, fish, plants, fungus, and so on their longevity. When the living energy of this time is diminished, living “things” weaken, their death velocity increases, and their life span shortens. They perish in order to change and begin a new cycle.

The Bantu-Kongo concept of death is very clear. Dying is not the end: “*tufwanga mu soba*” — we die in order to undergo change (Fu-Kiau 1969). Dying is not only a process but also a “dam of time.” As a dam of time, it has its own landmark on the time line path, and as a process, it permits life to flow and regenerate (*dikitisa*) its power/energy (*ngolo*) to create a new state of being or undergo transformation capable of rejoining the body of the universal “body-energy.” The living energy that existed before becoming a living matter at conception is then freed again.

### Natural Time (*Ntangu yasemuka*)

Natural time, *ntangu yasemuka*, also called *ntangu yamena*, is the time that controls earthly things, their movement, growth, blooming, mating, and nesting. It is the time that determines seasonal changes and brings rejuvenation or dullness to life. Through its motion, natural time brings the four natural seasons to life:

1. *Nsungu a mvula*, the rainy season, is fundamentally a season of cleansing, vitality, and growth. It is the season in which the sky looks down while the earth raises its arms. In the colder parts of the world, it corresponds to the winter season.
2. *Nsungu a sivu*, the cold season, is a time when nature reduces its heavy breathing, a process that reduces not only its temperature but also its high, ascending power so as to feed the vegetable realm.
3. *Nsungu a lakumuka* is a period corresponding to the fall season in the West, a time when trees lose their foliage, hence, its name *lakumuka* (fall). In some parts of the world, this season is almost unnoticed because few trees undergo the “fall” process (*dingo-dingo dia lakumunalkula*). It is the time for nature to

renew the nutrients in the ground and prepare itself for a new cycle.

4. *Nsungi a mbangala* is a season that corresponds to summer (*nsungi a mbangala*), a period of great movements and activities everywhere. It is the time when the vegetable realm rediscovers its green blanket; in other words, it is the time when nature's green cover or bush dries up, that is, dies to yield to new cover.

Like the others, natural time is also subject to the living principle behind the Kongo cosmogram. Each of its seasons corresponds to a specific stage on the cosmogram.

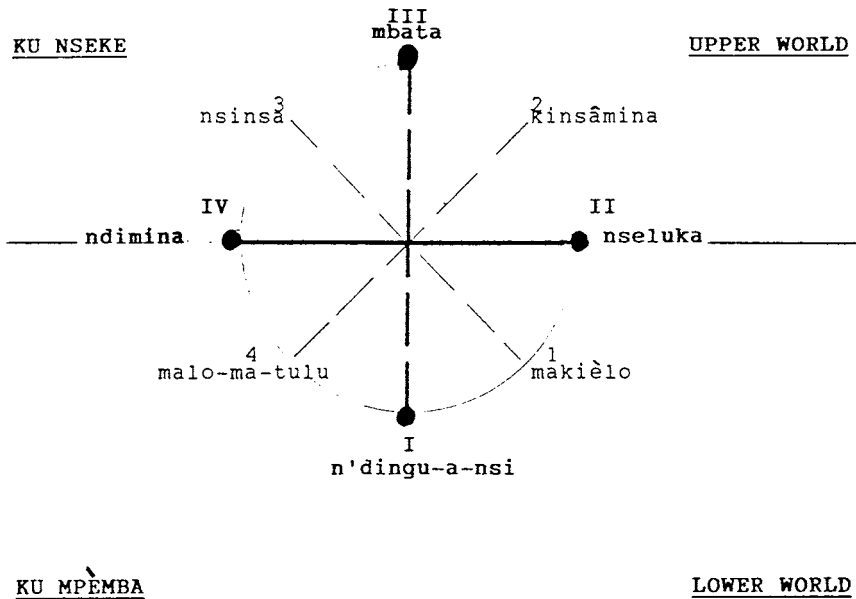
### Social Time (*Ntangu amvukanana*)

Social time is the time devoted to all activities of living beings. The application of social time here, however, will be limited to human beings and Bantu people, in particular, the Bakongo. It is the time when a *Muntu* (human being) is involved in a particular activity, whether it is purely social (talking, marrying a community sister, dancing), economical (working, trading), political (enstooling a leader, conflict resolution), educational (initiating new leaders), philosophical (telling proverbs, palavering), or historical (listening to a *masamuna*, the griot).

## SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF TEMPORAL CONCEPTS

As with all other arenas of time, social time, in all its divisions, is itself subject to *dikenga*, the cosmogramic altar, and to its main steps of life, namely, *musoni* (step 1), the *kala* (step 2), the *tukula* (step 3), and the *luvemba* (step 4). Thus, the Kongo week was traditionally only four weekdays corresponding to the four Kongo markets of *Bukonso/Konzo*, *Mpika*, *Nkoyi*, and *Nkenge/Nsona*. Similarly, the day is divided into four principal hours/time periods (*lo bianene/biangudi*) — *n'dingu-a-nsi* (midnight), *nseluca* (sunrise, that is, about 6:00 A.M.), *mbata* (noon), and *ndimina* (sunset) — and four “in-between” hours (*lo biandwèlo*)— *makièlo* (“the opening of the morning,” that is, 3–4 A.M.), *kinsâmina* (between sunrise and noon), *nsinsa* (between noon and sunset), and *malo-ma-tulu* (between sunset and midnight).<sup>5</sup> Each hour or time period is itself subject to the ruling principle of the Kongo cosmogram, as shown in Figure 2.3.

FIGURE 2.3  
Kongo Hourly Time Segmentation System



- I, II, III, IV: *Lo biangudi* (principal hours)  
 1, 2, 3, 4: *Lo binadwèlo* (in-between or "small" hours)

Further, in response to the cosmological ruling principle, a typical Kongo village usually has four entrances (*mafula*), with the residences of the following four key individuals or groups located near those entrances: *Nganga* (initiated masters), *mfumu* (generally political leaders), *ngwa-nkazi* (uncle, the tier of both positive and negative knots in the community),<sup>6</sup> and *Mase* (fathers, protective power). Likewise, learning processes typically are performed at four levels, each one taking place under the specific name of its corresponding stage on the *dikenga* (the cosmogramic wheel) as well as under the color representing that stage (yellow, black, red, or white).

## TIME IN KONGO THOUGHT

“Dams of time” represent temporal demarcations that vary from minutes to hours and days, depending on the context. Thus, when a Mukongo says, “We had funerals last month,” he is talking about days, not hours. If he says, “I will stop at my grandmother’s house,” it is clear he is talking about hours (for example, of chatting, laughing, learning), not days or minutes.

The question may be asked at this point of what it means to live with time. Among the Bakongo, as with all Bantu people, to speak of time is to speak of its *n’kama* or dams (births, wars, marriages, funerals, hunting, food gathering, and so on). It is to talk, discuss, and relate events biologically, ideologically, politically, socially, culturally, philosophically, and economically. Time is sensed, felt, conceived, and understood only through these *n’kama ye dunga bia ntangu* (dams and events of time) occurring on the path of a time line that is sequentially visible only in our mind (*ntona*). Working with “dams of time” and not controlling them is, therefore, life and time. These dams come and go because they are in the cyclical *dingo-dingo* of time.

Where there is no *mambu* (issues, conflicts, problems), time is not moving: there is no *moyo* (life) as such. Only when events (*dunga*) take place can “things” move and the time line path clear itself. A new cycle of time goes in motion until another collision stops it for a new beginning, a new motion of time to start. This begins in time and witnesses the marking of its dams and events, a process that can also decrease or increase our own healing power.<sup>7</sup>

Being in time and with time, that is, responding to the occurrence of its dams, is at once an energy-regenerating process and a healing one, a mental walk on the cosmic path of *dikenga*. It also means marking (*tanda*) and experiencing the dams of time on the perpetual time line, especially when “standing vertically” (*telama lwimba-nganga*) on its four main demarcation points: *musoni*, *kala*, *tukula*, and *luvemba*. These are the points of great collisions, not only in the planetary transformation process, but also in the biological life of individuals, a process that is necessary for change (*nsobolo*) to occur.

Many studies on Africa have attempted to label the African world as inactive, nonchalant, that is, a world without an awareness of time. However, I know no one can survive in Africa without an awareness of time. Time, as shown here in the four-stage temporal process, orders virtually every aspect of Kongo life. To fish and succeed, one must know the right time. To till the land and seed it for excellent harvest, one must

know when to start the work. One must know when to venture inside forests and avoid mosquitoes and snake bites. All this would be impossible without the knowledge and understanding of the concept of time.

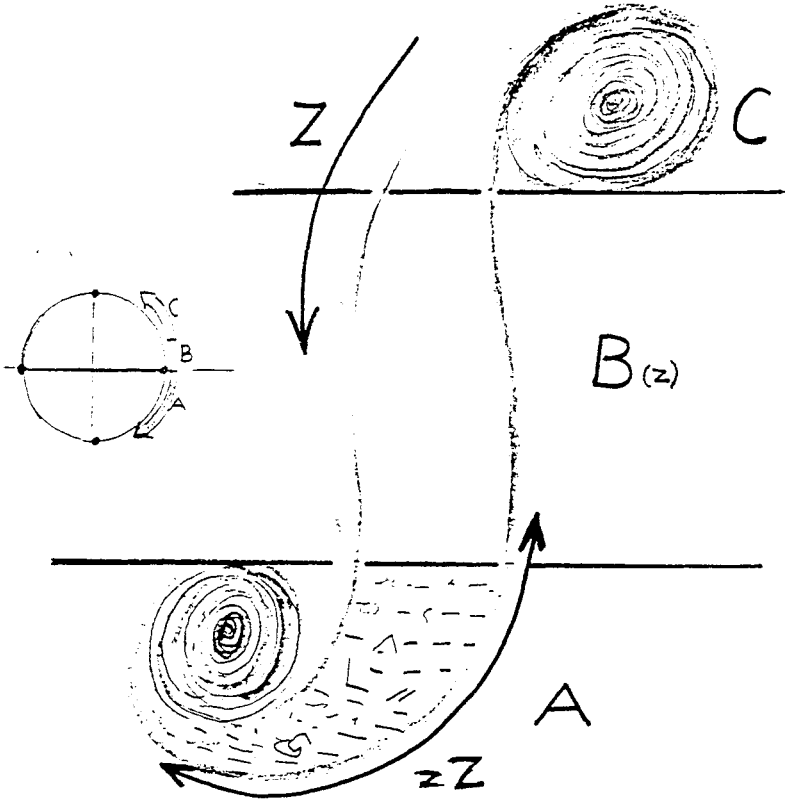
For the Bantu people, there is no such thing as being “late” (unless they happen to have been educated outside Africa). One must learn to be patient. “*Mvula kasukina mu matuti, n’kaku*” — “If the rain does not reach the ground (earth),” say the Kongo, “there must be a barrier.” An understanding of these barriers (*n’kaku*) is central to the very understanding of the concept of time and its function among the Bantu people, because time itself is worthless, but its dams are not (*Ka ntangu kibeni ko kansi n’kama miandi mivwidi lukumu*). “Being late” is only a way of responding to other aspects of *n’kama mia ntangu* that were not foreseen at the time a “fixed” point in time on the conventional time line was decided. One can flow with time from one dam of time (fixed duty) to another only if there is no unforeseen collision (event/*dunga*) between the two, such as a child hanging over a bridge by his stuck foot. Otherwise, one has to deal *first* with this new “in-between” dam (*nkambakani*) or collision.

Living in time is being able to deal at once with the known and unknown dams of time as they occur throughout *dingo-dingo dia ntangu* (process of time). It also involves comprehending the interrelation between the past, the present, and the future. It is being able to *zinga ye zingumuna luzingu lwa ntangu*, roll and unroll the scroll of time, that is, to understand and interpret the present (time zone B) by unrolling and reviewing the historical part of the scroll that contains the accumulated experience of learning (time zone A) and to position oneself to predict the future (*the past of tomorrow*) by rolling or revealing the hidden part of the scroll upon which *n’kama miampa mia ntangu* (new dams of time) are to be imprinted by man or nature (time zone C), as shown in Figure 2.4.

This figure embodies the Bantu concept of the past, the present, and the future of time. Time is conceived as a scroll (*luzingu*) that requires double actions by the individual, who says “I am in the present time” (*Mono ngiena mu tandu kiaki*) in order to understand it: *zinga ye zingumuna luzingu lwa ntangu* (roll and unroll the scroll of time). Through *zinga ye zingumuna* (rolling and unrolling), the past goes and returns to us in the present time; by *zingumuna* (unrolling) we discover the future, the past of tomorrow. We say by *zingumuna* (Z), the scroll of time, the future comes to us. By *zinga ye zingumuna* (Zz), which are daily processes of life, man can bring to himself, in the present time, the best and the worst of both the past and the future. In other words, to live

FIGURE 2.4

*Luzingu: Time Scroll — “Time, Like Life, Is a Scroll”*



- A: Scroll time zone that contains past dams of time, accessible to *mũntu* (man) through *Zinga* (*z*) and *zingumuna* (*Z*), the rolling and unrolling process that unfolds the past.
- B: Scroll time zone in the making, that is, today’s time, the present. This is the *bèto* (us) or *tându kieto* (our time) phase.
- C: Scroll time zone to be unfolded (naturally or artificially) by time, that is, the future that comes to us through the *zingumuna* (unrolling) process.

(*zinga*) and be (*kala*) in time is to be able to move freely back and forth on the scroll of time, that is, living constantly in the past (segment A), in the present, the future past (segment B), while unfolding the hidden unknown (segment C), the future present.



Time is the moving of the conscious energy (*ngolo zasikama*) within the biological matter/body (*malnitu*) on the path of both self and the universal cosmic wheel of life and social systems (*dikenga dia zingul moyo ye fu*). Therefore, to be in time is not only to go through but also to experience life by stepping on *n'kama mia ntangu* (dams of time). It is to be in tune with the flow of living energy, sharing its melody.

<i>N' zungi</i>	Traveler
<i>N' zungi [a] nzila</i>	Merely a traveler on the [cosmic] path
<i>N' zungi</i>	Traveler
<i>N' zungi [a] nzila</i>	Merely a traveler on the [cosmic] path
<i>Banganga ban'e</i>	And the initiated ones
<i>E-e-e.</i> <sup>8</sup>	They are the same.

The above song of the initiatory school of Lèmba, one of the four main schools of higher learning that existed in the Kongo kingdom, is philosophically captured in a sophisticated way in the Kikongo aphorism, *Ma'kwenda! Ma'kwiza* — “what goes on (now), will come back (later)” — what flows in a cyclical motion will remain in the motion. Time is cyclical, and so is life and all its ramifications that make change possible through the process of marking “the dams of time.”

## CONCLUSION

The Bantu-Kongo time concept discussed here may appear to be a completely new “thing,” not only to lay readers of African thought and philosophy but also to those who labor for life and in those fields. The reason could be, among others, to paraphrase what a U.S. scholar pointed out, lack of understanding of African cosmologies. Time, for the Bakongo, can be discussed from all aspects of life because each one is an event-creating agent on the time line.

The following conclusions may be drawn about the Bantu-Kongo concept of time:

1. Time is an ongoing cosmological “thing,” and as such, cosmologically speaking, time is the duration between the completion of the formation process of the first planet and its transformations and the completion of the formation process of the last planet and its transformations into the four great steps of the Kongo cosmogram. A planet will remain “naked” without life until these stages are completed.

2. Time is an ongoing biological “thing,” and as such, biologically speaking, time is the life span between the conception of the first pregnancy (of *Lumbu* and *Muzita*, the first couple in Kongo mythology) and the conception of the last pregnancy to occur on the “biological rope” of the human race. Each living species has its own biological life span on the time line path.
3. Time is an ongoing social “thing,” and as such, socially speaking, time is the duration between the point of occurrence of the first social event (*dunga*) on our planet and the point of its last occurrence.
4. Time is an ongoing natural “thing,” and as such, naturally speaking, time is the duration between the point at which nature (*m' belo*, *nsemokono*) became fully alive and able to sustain biological life and the point at which it will be unable to perform such a function. This will be the greatest collision in the history of the planet Earth on its time line path. Time is in and around us because we, as parts of the universe, are parts of time. We are time because we are *n'kama mia ntangu*, the dams of time.

## NOTES

1. A good discussion of Kikongo language literature can be found in “Mbelolo ya Mpiku, Introduction à la littérature Kikongo,” *Research in African Literatures* 3 (1972): 117–61.

2. For a further discussion, see K. K. B. Fu-Kiau, “Makuku Matatu: Les Fondements Culturels Kôngo,” unpublished manuscript, p. 400.

3. K. K. B. Fu-Kiau, *Africa: The Upside-Down Sailing Ship* (New York: Carlton Press, in press), p. 35.

4. Also know variously as Mahûngu, Malûngu, and Mavûngu.

5. The subject is discussed at length in K. K. B. Fu-Kiau, “Makuku Matatu,” pp. 83–91.

6. The *ngwa-nkazi* (uncle) is the agent of both positive and negative forces in the society. He has access to power and leadership and can bless people; on the other hand, he has the “energy” to curse, punish, and cause death.

7. For further discussion, see K. K. Bunseki Fu-Kiau, *Self-Healing Power and Therapy* (New York: Vantage Press, 1991), pp. 93–99.

8. This poetic song of the Lëmba initiation school is composed in the highly sophisticated language of the masters and cannot be rendered literally in the English language. The translation provided conveys the essence of the song. A further discussion can be found in K. K. Bunseki Fu-Kiau, *N'kongo ye Nza Yakun 'zungidilal/Le Mukongo et le Monde qui l'Entourait* (Kinshasa: ONRD, 1969), pp. 26–30.