Märta Salokoski

HOW KINGS ARE MADE – HOW KINGSHIP CHANGES

A study of rituals and ritual change
in pre-colonial and colonial Owamboland,
Namibia

ACADEMIC DISSERTATION
to be publicly discussed,
by due permission of the Faculty of Social Sciences
at the University of Helsinki,
in Auditorium XII, Main Building
on the 4th of March 2006 at 10
Märta Salokoski

HOW KINGS ARE MADE – HOW KINGSHIP CHANGES

A study of rituals and ritual change in pre-colonial and colonial Owamboland, Namibia

RESEARCH SERIES IN ANTHROPOLOGY
University of Helsinki
This study presents a view of Owambo kingship, its constitution and development in pre-colonial and German colonial times. It offers a contribution to our understanding of the symbolic world of the Owambo of old, and to the discussion on how political power was constituted in Africa and more widely. The voice of local Owambo, most of them men born around the turn of the last century, is heard throughout these pages. Their witness is complemented with other voices that broaden the perspective – those of early foreign travellers before 1870 and of missionaries, who, from the 1870s onward, lived with, commented on and intervened in the power politics of Owambo kings. The voices of modern scholars of foreign and Namibian origin are also heard offering their contributions to and interpretations of the nature of political power in Northern Namibia in olden times.

During colonial times, which in Namibia lasted exceptionally long – until Independence in 1990 – the history of this particular part of the African continent was practically denied existence. Local contemporary historians have made it their task to bring it out into the open, and to make Namibians aware of their own past and to feel proud of it. This is a necessary stage in the history-writing of every recently independent country in Africa and elsewhere. With time, however, there must be room for a reassessment of the hegemonic truths expressed in local oral tradition. Aspects of the past that have been forgotten and neglected will, of necessity, resurface and claim their place in remembered tradition. All history writing tends to become myth-making if only one accepted view of the past is recognised and alternative perspectives are not brought out.

This study provides an alternative perspective on Owambo kingship in the past. The aim was to study the religious aspect, formulated as sacredness, of the power of Owambo kings and to understand the link between the political power and the religious authority vested in them. It represents and attempt to place Owambo kings in the context
of the spiritual realm and in relation to human and other agents of spiri-
tual power that were active in this world, according to local belief. This
has never been done before. I believe it offers a valuable contribution in
terms of building up a comprehensive picture of the nature of Owambo
kingship as it existed in pre-colonial and colonial times.

I shed light on the institution of kingship by analysing myths and
king lists and by describing ritual regicide and kingly burial and instal-
lation rituals all of which were part of the making and unmaking of an
individual king. I also show how the consolidation of kingly power took
place through the appropriation of rituals related to fertility. I address
the paradox of sacred kings who were simultaneously the keepers of fer-
tility and prosperity and dangerous holders of power. I discuss the “devo-
lution of kingship”, by which I mean the tendency for power, once held
for the common good, to change into power for power’s sake, to be kept
in the hands of the ruling group. This kind of development was visible in
Owambo kingship towards the end of the 1800s, and I investigate the re-
lation between the dangerous other-worldly aspect of kingly power and
external political and economic change. The way power was consolidated
and changed in northern Namibia has relevance for the study of African
kingships of the past, as well as for the analysis of politics in present-day
Namibia. It is also illustrative of how political power is constituted more
generally, for even if sacred kingships are no longer common political
currency, many of the mechanisms of their rise and development are to
be observed in modern political arenas.

This work draws on a number of studies of political power, using the
framework of symbol analysis and building on classical studies of sacred
kingship in Africa. In homage to James Frazer, the study addresses ques-
tions posed by him and his follower Luc de Heusch about the nature of
sacred kingship. It considers the critique levelled against de Heusch by
Kajsa Ekholm and, indirectly in the work of Michael Rowlands according
to which the devolution of kingship in Africa, which they equate with
sacred kingship, was a consequence of the colonial encounter. I suggest
a new formulation of the creation of sacred kingship based on the Owa-
mbo case, in recognition of Frazer and de Heusch who held that sacred
kingship sprung from deeper sources.

A glimpse into the origin of sacred Owambo kingship is provided
through Joseph Miller’s analysis of the role of political titles, fetishes
and rituals in the constitution of Umbundu kingdoms in Angola, not far
from the Owambo. As Miller shows, and as de Heusch claims for Sub-Saharan Africa more widely, the use of authority of a religious kind emerged locally as the first means of establishing political hegemony over larger populations beyond the kin group. In the light of these studies, it is clear that the nature of sacred kingship is as yet insufficiently understood.

I challenge de Heusch’s view that being a “sacred monster” is the most important aspect of a sacred king, and I suggest on the basis of the Owambo material that the “paradox” of sacred kingship as it appears in real life is more complicated, and relates both to the constitution of kingship and to its subsequent development. De Heusch, I claim, over-emphasised the monstrous aspect of sacred kings in Africa and neglected the non-violent aspects that he nonetheless presents in his own studies. In my view de Heusch failed to give sufficient attention to fertility power vested in “ancestors of the land”, or to the benevolent powers of “nature spirits”, as part of the sacredness of kings. I thus present a re-formulation of the constitution of sacred kingship. On the basis of rich and detailed narratives by local informants on king-related myths and rituals, I interpret the symbolic meanings of the kingly institution and I show how it changed over time and through deliberate political manoeuvring. These symbolic interpretations are my contribution to the understanding of Owambo kingship. If the study succeeds in triggering an interest among Namibia scholars to follow up my conclusions and to take them further, it has fulfilled one of its aims.
I would like to express my thanks to the following people and institutions for support and encouragement in the process of writing. The Institute of Development Studies at Helsinki University provided work facilities, a stimulating environment and collegial support for most of the time this study was in process. My thanks go to The Academy of Finland, The University of Helsinki, The University of Tampere, Ella och Georg Ehrnrooths stipendiefond, Svenska vetenskapliga Centralrådet and Nordiska Afrika-Institutet for financial support received during various phases of the work. The BAAB Foundation in Basel, Switzerland, provided access to their collections, and for that I thank, in particular, Dag Henrichsen.

I am grateful for the critical comments, encouragement, collegial and moral support received in particular from Jukka Siikala, Karen Armstrong, Peter Katjavivi, Meredith McKittrick, Patricia Hayes, Juhani Koponen, Harri Englund, the late Michael Cowen, Holger Weiss, Risto Marjomaa and Henning Melber. My colleagues at Joensuu University; the late Seppo Rytkönen, Harri Siiskonen, and Martti Eirola of Oulu University, supported me during the early stages of the process.

Seppo Kalliokoski and Hannu Shipena ushered me into the vast plains of contemporary northern Namibia and helped me in many ways. I thank all the persons interviewed during field visits and in Finland for sharing with me their knowledge and insights on aspects of Owambo kingship and society. I also thank Frieda Williams for letting me use part of her field notes. I am further indebted to Maria Kaakunga who translated some of the interview material collected in Namibia, and to Märtta von Schantz who helped me translate certain key sources in the Afrikaans language and to Dora Shivute who checked my Oshiwambo terminology. My thanks also go to Joan Nordlund for help with checking the English language of the manuscript.

For his unswerving belief and patience during the various phases of the project, and for his encouraging comments and moral support I am
more than grateful to my husband Juuso Salokoski. Finally, for providing music and drama, in short, life, to divert and entertain me in the wake of long hours of writing I give my thanks to Anton, Emma and Lauri, our children, who grew up in the process.
CONTENTS

ILLUSTRATIONS ................................................. 12
ABBREVIATIONS ................................................. 13
A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY AND SPELLING ................. 14

PART I · INTRODUCTION

1 Research questions, theoretical framework, sources and methodology ................................................. 16
   The magic of the termite hills ................................................. 16
   The aim of the study and the central concepts ...................... 17
   King making, kingship making and the devolution of kingship .... 22
   Ritual as the focus of study ..................................................... 25
   Anthropology and history in northern Namibia ....................... 28
   Beginning with Frazer’s model of divine kingship ................. 35
   The ritual origin of kingship
      – the views of Miller and de Heusch ................................. 41
   My sources as the framework of the study ............................ 47
      Early written and archival sources ..................................... 48
      The Liljeblad Collection ....................................................... 51
      Other archival sources ......................................................... 54
   How I study king making and kingship making ....................... 55

PART II · SETTING THE STAGE

2 Owanbo pre-colonial societies .................................. 58
   The remote past ................................................................. 58
   Early European activity ....................................................... 60
   How Owanbo societies were formed ...................................... 61
   Social structure, ecology and economy ................................. 68
      Structure and space .......................................................... 68
      The agricultural calendar .................................................. 70
      Hunting, foraging, raids and other expeditions .................... 71
      The cattle economy .......................................................... 73
3 Kingship as portrayed in myth and king lists

The witness of myth

Tales about the origin of man and society

Migration tales

The foundation of Ondonga and Ongandjera

The settlement of Ongandjera

Stories about the beginning of kingship

Traditions of kingship in Ongandjera

The Louw tradition

The sacrifice to the spirits of the saltpan

The role of king lists in conveying a view of the Owa mbo past

King lists in Ombandja Minor

Ongandjera kingly genealogies

Ondonga king lists

4 On the nature of Owa mbo kingship

Prerogatives and rules of kingship

Who could become king?

Okupangela and okuangala – two aspects of kingly power

The ambivalent sacredness of kings

The king’s power over nature

The king as a sacrifice

Early and colonial perspectives on kings

Modern views

Clans and kings

The tributary system in a religious perspective

The religious dimension of the administrative organisation

5 Placing the kings in a religious context

Spiritual concepts

The Universe, Kalunga, and the land of the dead

The multiple meanings of Kalunga

Spirits of the living and the dead

Spirits in the body

The causes and consequences of death

The burial of a Household Head

Ancestor and non-ancestor spirits

Other spirits

On diviners and kings

Sorcerers, witches and circumcised men
PART III · HOW KINGS ARE MADE

6 The un-making of the old king ........................................... 166
   The death of a king through regicide ............................. 166
   Königlich burial ....................................................... 169
   Coping with the liminal period .................................... 171
   Königlich burials in three Owambo kingdoms ................. 172
      Ombandja – the manipulation of the kingly corpse ....... 172
      Ongandjera kingly burial and the iimbungu ................. 176
      Ondonga – changing times and old concerns ............... 178
   The significance of blood sacrifice .............................. 180
   What kingly funerals tell .......................................... 181

7 The ritual creation of a king ............................................... 183
   Installation rituals as a process ................................... 183
   The installation of kings in Ondonga ............................ 185
   King makers and kingly emblems .................................. 186
   The king’s new head wife ............................................ 189
   Four journeys to the palm field ................................... 190
      The first journey .................................................. 191
      The second journey ............................................... 196
      The third journey .................................................. 199
      The fourth journey ................................................ 204
   Appropriating kingship through holding the regalia ........... 208
   Installing a king from abroad ...................................... 209
   Uupule’s Esinga connection ......................................... 213

PART IV · HOW KINGSHIP CHANGES

8 Rainmaking, female initiation and male circumcision – augmenting the sacredness of kings .......................... 218
   Rain rituals and the king ............................................. 219
      What made rain fall? .............................................. 219
      Rain from the north and by other means ..................... 224
      Rain rituals at kingly graves ..................................... 227
      Omathila and the “Osipepa of rain” ............................ 230
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The rainmakers</td>
<td>233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A summary of rainmaking</td>
<td>234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kings and female initiation</td>
<td>236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female initiation – when, where and why?</td>
<td>236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The hegemonic view contested</td>
<td>238</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female initiation without kings</td>
<td>240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The king plays a minor role in ohango</td>
<td>244</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The mysterious Head of the Log</td>
<td>245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohango of the kings</td>
<td>246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How kings augmented their impact on female initiation – Conclusion</td>
<td>249</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kings and circumcision</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Big Birds of circumcision</td>
<td>253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Etanda before ohango was practiced</td>
<td>256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When kings have a say</td>
<td>258</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Nangolo changed circumcision practices</td>
<td>261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The abolishment of circumcision</td>
<td>262</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 The devolution of sacred kingship</td>
<td>265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes in succession practices</td>
<td>265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The permutation of ritual regicide in Ombandja</td>
<td>267</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes in the kingly rule in Ongandjera</td>
<td>270</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early changes in the manner of ruling in Ondonga</td>
<td>277</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PART V · CONCLUSIONS</td>
<td>284</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Summary and conclusions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of the research process</td>
<td>284</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central themes</td>
<td>291</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing kingship through myths and king lists</td>
<td>291</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kings and spirits</td>
<td>292</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The spirits in the king</td>
<td>295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death, regicide and the un-making of kings</td>
<td>296</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pooling spiritual power in the installation ritual</td>
<td>298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriating fertility powers</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The devolution of kingship</td>
<td>302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INDEX</td>
<td>325</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ILLUSTRATIONS

FIGURES

Figure 1 Map of Namibia with Owamboland .......................... 29
Figure 2 Map of Owanbo kingdoms on both sides
of Angolan border .................................................. 62
Figure 3 Williams’ representation of the administrative structure
of Owanbo kingdoms .............................................. 124
Figure 4 Aarni’s hierarchy of the Owanbo cosmos ................. 135
Figure 5 Ondonga kingly ohija ........................................ 207
Figure 6 The grave monument of King Nangolo dhAmutenya
in 1988 ................................................................. 227

TABLES

Table 1 Rulers in Ombandja Minor according to Iituku, Williams
and Shikongo ..................................................... 96
Table 2 Ongandjela kings up to Tshaanika Tsha Natshilongo
according to Williams, Louw, Iitenge and Iijego ................. 97
Table 3 Ondonga king-list according to Williams, Uugwanga,
Henok and Amweelo ............................................. 101
Table 4 Kingly clans in the different Owanbo kingdoms ........ 119
Table 5 The elements contributing to the sacredness of
an Ondonga king .................................................. 299
ABBREVIATIONS

ELC  Emil Liljeblad Collection  
       (placed at Helsinki University Library)
FMSC Finnish Mission Society Collection  
       (placed at NAF and HUL)
FMS  Finnish Mission Society
FWC  Frieda Williams Collection
HUL  Helsinki University Library
MSC  Märta Salokoski Collection
NAF  National Archives of Finland
NAW  National Archives, Windhoek
VEM  Vereinigte Evangelische Mission
A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY AND SPELLING

The spelling of local words in the documents used displays great variety. The local languages were written down first by Finnish Missionaries, and this has influenced spelling until present times. The tendency to write out long vowels remains although often replaced by a spelling that corresponds more closely to the English language. The word *uupule woshaanda*, formerly spelled *uupule uosaanda*, may serve to illustrate both these points. The intermittent use of terminology from the different Owambo languages or dialects like Oshindonga, Oshikwanyama and Oshikwambi gives even more variety to the spelling of local terms. The king lists provided by different informants vividly displays that also among local people the spelling was not unambiguous or settled at the time of writing; this was in the early 1930s for Emil Liljeblad’s informants. I have sought to provide the modern Oshindonga spelling for a word when that seemed appropriate, but have not tidied the old spelling systematically, letting the terms stand in the form they have been put down in the narratives. Instead of providing a glossary I have listed local terms in the index. The interested reader can browse through the text to find explanation and context for the local terms given in the index.
Part I

INTRODUCTION
Part I

Research questions, theoretical framework, sources and methodology

The magic of the termite hills

When the vast plains of the Northern Namibian high plateau are approached from the south, the landscape gradually changes from grassland into savannah, occasionally interspersed by palm groves, omusati forests and other dense thickets. A conspicuous feature of the open landscape is the cone-like termite mounds rising up from the ground, man-high or taller. There is something aggressive about these ant-made formations with their peaks piercing the skyline. It comes as no surprise that in local tradition they are associated with both danger and potency. One of the very secret culminating kingly inaugural rituals in Ondonga, the southernmost of the Owanbo historical kingdoms, a rite called the uu-pule woshaanda (gu’osaanda), or “the magic¹ of the termite hills”, used to take place by a mound out in the open spaces of the kingdom. This rite was an introductory part of uu-pule woshi lo ngo (gu’oshi lo ngo), (“the magic of the kingdom”), and was followed by a sequence of rituals by which the king gradually took possession of the land and was declared sacred.

In the afternoon the king goes with his diviner to the termite hill where the diviner lights a fire and burns some iimbondi herbs on it in a pot and inhales the smoke uttering simultaneously a prayer for the success of what the two are about to undertake presently. He makes the king repeat the prayer twice and then covers his face with a soft sheepskin and rubs the powder of the burnt herbs into his face. Now they are ready to go to the termite hill.

The diviner gives the king two white mushrooms in each hand and urges him to go through the termite hill. The king thrusts himself, head first, through the termite hill and really goes through it, as if he

¹. The term “magic” is used here as an approximate term, which does not encompass all the local meanings of the word uu-pule. It rather singles out the nature of the force at work in the uu-pule ritual as one that has supernatural origin.
had made a hole in it with his head while he holds the mushrooms in his hand. (Eelu, ELC 278: 674, 675)

What did the king do at the termite mound? If we are to believe a local riddle, he did "the impossible" (Kuusi 1974: 81). Installation rituals made Owambo kings sacred and able to use powers of a supernatural nature. This study investigates into the nature of that supernatural connection and describes how sacredness is installed in kings.

The aim of the study and the central concepts

A number of rituals are analysed in this study: kingly installation, ritual regicide and burial practices, initiation rituals and rainmaking rituals, as well as myths and king lists, in order to show how kingly power was constituted and consolidated and how its nature changed in Owambo societies in pre-colonial and German colonial times. My intention is to go beyond the two dominant explanations of the rise of political power (cf. Service 1962) as either government by force or government by social contract, and to show that there is more to kingship: it also had a spiritual dimension. In Owambo societies rituals infused in the king a political-cum-religious status as provider of (the good) life, fertility and prosperity. This aspect of power was emphasised by early comparative anthropologists such as James Frazer (1911–1913) and A.-M. Hocart (1936). Contemporary ethnographies of specific societies have augmented the evidence that such a process was prevalent not only in pre-colonial Africa but also more generally. To study how “rituals make kings” does not rule

2. A certain doubt is expressed here as to whether the king really made the hole with his head. From other narratives we know that the diviner made the hollow in advance.

3. E.V. Walter (1969) also addressed the violent aspect of kingly power in Africa and made some useful conceptual distinctions between different forms of political power. In dialogue with classical power analysts he explains the impact of invisible powers hosted by secret societies in Africa as an element that kept centralised kingly power in check or, alternatively, became co-opted by kingship. This study did not influence the formulation of my research questions, but it may be quite useful in further studies probing more deeply into the relations between Owambo kings and elders called ekandjo.

4. The terms Owambo and Owamboland are used in this text synonymously, to depict the area in question. Owamboland was the term commonly used in colonial times, while it has been substituted by Owambo in contemporary texts.
out awareness of the economic, military and political processes at play in creating centralised polities. It rather represents a complementary approach that is necessary if we are to understand African political systems of the past more fully.

The focus in this study is on the overt and covert political functions of kingly installation rituals, myths, king lists and fertility rituals, and on the symbolic systems that these perpetuate and re-formulate. I am looking, in particular, for hidden agendas in order to trace dimensions of kingly power that are not evident in hegemonic discourse on kingship. I seek to understand why kings appropriated ritual that formerly belonged to the repertoire of a kin group or local power-holding groups. Finally, I discuss the changes in kingly power that took place towards the end of the 1800s from a religious perspective, and show why taking account of the religious aspect is necessary in order to understand the institution of kingship more fully.

A study of the rituals and myths of rulers of the African past is not an excursus into the exotic and has relevance to the understanding of politics anywhere. There has been an upsurge of interest in political ritual in historical as well as modern secular society in the last two decades. The study of state rituals of past societies has also proved to be relevant in analyses of modern secular power-making (cf. Abélès 1988). Kelly and Kaplan (1990: 139) pointed out that “a theory of ritual is part of history-making in all societies”. The theme of ritual change has recently taken centre stage in studies on ritual in colonial societies. Themes such as agency, the colonial impact on ritual, and ritual as a manifestation of the oppressed and as an avenue for change, have increasingly been in focus (cf. Sahlins 1981a, 1981b, 1985, 1988, Kapferer 1976, 1997, Cannadine and Price 1985, Comaroff & Comaroff 1991, 1992, 1997). Revealing hidden agendas and muted categories in ritual have also been part of the current discourse. Scholars have studied how “important issues and options are kept off the agenda of public discourse”, and how rituals “seek to present what is in fact only one particular way of ordering and organising society as authoritative and God-given” (Cannadine 1982: 2). Maurice Bloch’s analysis of Merina kingship ritual in Madagascar (1986) has become the classical work in this field. African rituals and myths commonly reveal two muted categories, early power-holder groups and women. These themes also come up when Ovambo kingship and fertility rituals are studied more closely.
A great deal has been said and written about the nature of Owambo kingship by early travellers and traders, missionaries, colonial officers, and by Namibian and other scholars in the modern era. Colonial and more recent observers have focussed on the ways kings exercised their powers over their subjects generally conveying the picture of inherently omnipotent and oppressive monarchs ruling in a cruel and arbitrary way. Modern scholars have listed the prerogatives of kings without showing colonial bias, some have classified Owambo kingship as a tributary system or as kingship on the brink of state formation (Clarence-Smith & Moorsom 1977, Mbuende 1986), and others have described the administrative structures at the apex of which Owambo kings were situated (Williams 1991). It has generally been recognised that there was more to the power of kings than met the eye – they were also actors in the religious sphere, to the extent that everything a king did or was also had a religious aspect (cf. Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1979 [1940]). Aarni’s study (1982) of the Kalunga concept goes deeper than other studies in this respect by suggesting a place for the king in the Owambo view of the cosmos. Some observers from the colonial time, including Vedder (1935) and Loeb (1962) put the fair measure of omnipotence they observed in Owambo kings down, in part, to their sacred position. This was a stance that went counter to early observations on Owambo kingship, and which therefore needs to be problematised.

The colonial view of Owambo kingship has been challenged by contemporary scholars for its portrayal of an oppressive regime merely for the purpose of legitimating harsh colonial rule (Lau 1995). It was already a matter of debate in the mid-1900s. Loeb (1948b, 1950) proposed that Owambo kings were sacred and that their rule was feudal (1954), but he was challenged by Lehmann (1955) who claimed that there was no such thing as sacred kingship in colonial times, and particularly that there was no regicide. Borkowsky, in a later study (1975), also challenged the idea of sacred kingship. I was able to confirm, in an earlier study (Salokoski 1992) that, contrary to what has been claimed, there was a tradition of ritual regicide in Owambo history, that Owambo kings were held to be sacred and that they were understood as being vested with the responsibility for fertility and well-being. Indirectly, through their involvement in seasonal ritual and the standstill of activities that set in at their death, I concluded that they were also held to be linked to the regeneration of the cosmos. They were also surrounded by taboos. All these were traits
previously identified by Frazer (1911–1915, 1950) and Seligman (1934) as aspects of divine kingship.

In my former study I used data that was unavailable to Loeb, Lehmann and Borkowsky in the form of local narratives on kingship collected by the Finnish missionary Emil Liljeblad and a number of diverse writings in Finnish by Finnish missionaries active in the area from 1870 onwards. I also used contemporary material collected in fieldwork by Frieda Williams and myself. These data cast a new light on Owambo kingship. They make it possible to study in more detail how the religious aspect developed and what it constituted of, and to reveal something about the political significance of this aspect of kingly power.

Owambo myths about the creation of the cosmos, man and society, and about the birth of kingship, inform us of how the Owambo thought the world was constituted and how they preferred to present their early history to a contemporary audience. They also provide symbolic vocabulary that recurs in ritual contexts. The Owambo conceptualisations of death and personhood help us to understand local ideas about the power of kings, and I therefore describe them at some length. I also analyse kingly burial rituals for what they tell us about the ritual de-construction of a king. I define sacredness initially as the conceived capacity to reach over to the realm of the spiritual world and the capability to use powers emanating from that realm. With de Heusch (1985: 5) I stand aloof from Mary Douglas’ (1966) split of sacredness and pollution into two separate categories. It adds nothing to our understanding of the sacredness of kings, which entails an assumed capacity to grant well-being through their links to the world of the beyond and the responsibility to influence nature’s course. It is in this capacity that a sacred king uses powers from the beyond: he is a religious actor. However, a king’s sacredness also encompasses identification with the land or with the kingdom in the Durkheimian sense. This aspect is part of the powers that build up this sacred status. It is relevant to know how such powers were appropriated and from what sources they were derived in order to understand the nature of the sacredness of Owambo kings.

Three typical aspects of sacred kingship were present in Owambo

---

5. These data are referred to by the initials FWC standing for The Frieda Williams Collection and MSC for The Märta Salokoski Collection.
kingship: ritual regicide, taboos surrounding the king, and fertility as a responsibility. A fourth characteristic, the transgression of norms, was identified by Luc de Heusch as an essential element. According to Owa mbo belief, regicide, just as Frazer understood it, safeguarded the perpetuation of the sacred-kingship principle when the person in whose human abode the kingship rested neared the end of his life. Taboos, again, encompassed and protected the dangerous sacredness of living kings. Taboos are not focused on in this study because they bring less that is new to the discussion on sacred kingship than the other aspects discussed. The function of the transgression of norms in the Owa mbo context was more complicated than de Heusch suggests, and I challenge him on this point. I am nevertheless deeply indebted to his analysis of kingship, which inspired the formulation of my own research questions. A substantial part of this study deals with ways in which kings constructed their responsibility over fertility. Owa mbo kings were held to be responsible for the fertility and well-being of human beings, cattle and the land. Even before they were installed, they had a certain measure of sacredness in their capacity of being part of the kingly clan. This was not a sufficient basis for ruling, however, and it was therefore enhanced in different ways. This study is about how sacredness was infused in individual kings in installation rituals, how it was augmented through the symbolic linkage of particular ritual actors with kings, and how it was constructed through association with ancestors and early heroes in myths and kingly genealogies. It is also about how kings permanently gained influence over rituals related to fertility that did not previously fall within their control and thus brought still more sacredness to the kingly institution.

My analysis of Owa mbo kingship rituals has been influenced by several scholarly discourses. James Frazer’s analysis of divine kingship and the discussions on his work gave me the inspiration to probe more deeply into the institution so clearly manifested in the Owa mbo oral tradition. Metcalf and Huntington (1991) provided a general framework for the analysis of Owa mbo kingly burials and the process of making them kingly ancestors. De Heusch, who conducted a neo-structural symbolic analysis of kingship in Africa (1982a, 1982b, 1984, 1985, 1987, 1997, 2000), again, gave fuel to my analysis of the rituals related to installation, regicide and the violence that was inherent in the king making process. My interpretation of the change that I call the “devolution of sacred kingship” was influenced by Kajsa Ekholm’s (1985, 1991, 1994) and by Michael Rowlands’
(1993) analyses of similar processes in the Kongo and Benin. This study comprises a discussion with the above-mentioned scholars and a critique or an elaboration on their theories based on the Owanbo case.

Even major historical works on the Owanbo kingdoms, such as those by Frieda Williams (1988, 1991), Patricia Hayes (1992) and Meredith McKittrick (1995), do not offer a deep enough analysis of the religious aspect of kingship. Loeb’s (1962) anthropological study on Kwanyama kings provides a great deal of useful insights but like the otherwise excellent ethnography of Carlos Estermann (1976), fails to integrate Owanbo kings into the Owanbo religious world. Neither of them seeks to illuminate the interplay of religious and political aspects in the position of Owanbo rulers, which would explain how divine kingship “works”. Older narratives from colonial times discuss the sacred nature of kings only from a narrow angle, as one aspect of autarchy. Even local traditions largely refrain from explaining the king’s role in religion as a whole, and its linkage to his political performance. This study addresses this theme in order to give a fuller view of Owanbo kingship.

This was a difficult and sensitive task for many reasons. For one thing, the ideas about spiritual matters are fluid: Owanbo religious beliefs were never quite codified into a theology and in local belief different spirits and forces merged. Secondly, these matters were secret knowledge, not to be exposed to outsiders (Usko Shivute MSc). Thirdly, revealing the king’s position in the spiritual field may not have been what those who were close to kingship wanted because it exposed a discrepancy between the official ideology manifested in hegemonic oral tradition and the real position of the king in the spiritual field. It also showed a darker aspect of the king’s power. A study like this runs the risk of upsetting people’s conceptualisation of their own history, only recently re-claimed and painstakingly recovered from overbearing colonial patronage. However, the alternative perspective on kingship that I provide is based on local autochthonous witnesses and seeks a perspective beyond both colonial denigration and post-colonial glorification of the Owanbo past.

King making, kingship making and the devolution of kingship

From an all-African perspective the Owanbo kings were latecomers. They developed their own brand of kingship but had a lot in common with kings in neighbouring societies in Africa both near and far. This indi-
cates the existence of a symbolic kingship tradition common to African agro-pastoralist societies more generally, just as Luc de Heusch suggests (1982: 2). In the oral tradition Ongandjera features as the provider of the “root of kingship”, the mythical queen called Niilwa, and reached the height of its power in the early decades of the 1800s. It had a certain influence on its neighbours, reflected in its myths and ritual traditions. Its position among the other Owambo societies declined over time as Ondonga and Uukwanyama rose in importance. During the time between 1840 and 1860, when the first observations of Owambo societies appeared in written form, Ondonga and Uukwanyama were only weakly consolidated and some of them had no central rule. Trade with the Europeans profoundly influenced the authority structures of the Owambo kingdoms at this time, first strengthening the consolidation of kingship then precipitating its demise as it was weakened under the increased power of the warlord advisors. When the military aspect of power became more important, the nurturing aspect was the first to disappear. This change is visible in changes in succession practices for example, whereby principles of sacred kingship were altered. By this time kingship was consolidated in many Owambo societies but in some of them it was still on shaky ground. In fact, power was never centralised in Dombondola, Eunda and Uukolonkadhi. The leaders of various kin-groups in Ombalantu ruled parts of the country in pre-colonial times (McKittrick 1995: 52) and a similar situation might also have prevailed in the other “kingless” societies.

I identify four processes in this study: The first is the “un-making” of a king through ritual regicide and kingly burial. Narratives from three Owambo kingdoms, Ondonga, Ongandjera and Ombandja, were my sources here. The accounts of these local witnesses are complemented by those of missionary observers who reported on the deaths and burials of identifiable historical kings, a process that took place on the “micro” level within a time-span of days or weeks. The second process, the sacralisation of a king-elect through inaugural ritual, was also a “micro-process” that took place during the installation of one particular Owambo king, and for this purpose I analysed the kingly inaugural ritual in Ondonga. The third process is the strengthening of kingship through the appropriation of rituals, broadly related to fertility and here the examples are taken from a number of Owambo kingdoms. Finally I considered the devolution of sacred kingship, which was identifiable in colonial times and was characterised by a proliferation of political violence and a decline in ritual.
regicide practices. Increased political violence altered the manifestations of sacred kingship and its ideological content.

For the purposes of analysis I make a distinction between “kingship making” and “king making”. Kingship making describes a wider range of measures through which non-worldly powers of various kinds are pooled into the institution of kingship. It also entails manipulating or counter-acting powers that compete with those of kingship. It is the individual king that is in focus in king making, and the process by which the king is made fit for his office. In practice, however, these processes merge into one another. The process of devolution of sacred kingship changes both the practical implementation and the ideological basis of kingship. The sacred status was used for increasing the individual king's economic and political power at the expense of his subjects, and as a consequence his function of nurturing the realm declined. The gap between the symbolic function of the king as a granter of prosperity and fertility and his seeking of power for himself widened and violence began to dominate the relation between the king and his subjects.

I observe kingship making through changes in initiation and rain rituals that took place by the mid-1800s, thereby showing how kings augmented the sacred aspect of their position by gaining power over rituals that were thought to influence fertility. By identifying such a process I show that political, military and economic might were not enough to guarantee the assumption of kingly power; it was mandatory for a king to legitimise such power by propping up his image as a provider of fertility and well-being. He could do this by portraying himself as having power over rain and human fertility.

The process of king making is revealed through an analysis of kingly installation rituals. I show how an individual king was ritually produced and how the inaugural ritual transformed a king-elect into a sacred king. This was a process of “religious transformation” but it cannot be separated in its practical consequences from the appropriation of the political and economic powers that belonged to a king; it was through these rituals that the king could legitimately take over such powers. Any “inauguration to office” (cf. Fortes 1967) entails the ritual transformation of the office-holder-to-be. In secular leadership there is usually no explicit ideology formulating what happens to the person to be inaugurated beyond the appropriation of worldly power, and beyond him being made a symbol for society. When a leader is overtly made sacred through
It is my claim that the powers installed in a sacred king include powers from many “otherworldly” sources including deities, spirits and ancestors. In pre-modern African societies such powers were often formulated as “ancestors or spirits” that influenced fertility and well-being. In the history of Europe too, political leaders have been associated with health and well-being and have been assigned miraculous curative properties phrased in religious terms. Even modern political leaders have, through ritual, been made to associate with important symbols and historical heroes of society and have, often implicitly, been made part of a religious discourse (cf. Abélès 1988, Figgis 1970 [1896], Marc Bloch 1973 and Kantorowicz 1957), although this fact has not always been recognised.

Ritual as the focus of study

W. R. Robertson-Smith (1894) provides the classic anthropological definition of ritual, much debated on but also well supported by many later anthropologists. He understood ritual in the context of religion, and held it to be at its core, more important than belief, since in a preliterate society it was the main way through which belief was expressed. Recognition of the religious element is crucial in the Owa mbo context. What is more, analysis of ritual reveals a great deal about religious categories and conceptualisations that is not revealed in hegemonised views of the spiritual world. A more recent definition of ritual given by Marja-Liisa Swantz presents ritual as “a symbolic and communicative action that is part of a social custom of a group of people” and which “expresses the society’s symbolic understanding of life and conveys it to succeeding generations” (Swantz 1995: 59). This definition is useful because it focuses on the link with religion while emphasising the communicative aspect of ritual and its social grounding. Analysis of Owa mbo king-related ritual will enable us to understand a little more about how the Owa mbo of old understood their world and their kings.

The link between ritual and social realities is strong. Victor Turner emphasised the fact that ritual symbols “are essentially involved in the social process” (1967: 20). Rituals contain meaning for the people taking part, depending on their position in the ritual and in society. A different meaning may be discerned by the uninvolved observer or analyst who takes an interest in understanding the totality of the structure of the
ritual and all of its multivalent significances. Rituals express both hegemonic and idealised interpretations of reality, and such which are suppressed and barely reach the surface. Like the sub-conscious in the human psyche, the latter are only occasionally caught sight of and require close scrutiny in order to be discovered. Thus the paradoxical nature of rituals is that although they are established collective representations of social structures, they also provide information about alternative and conflicting ones, albeit in a veiled and disguised form (Turner 1967, 20–41). Certain rituals could be seen as journeys between different positions in the social setting (cf. van Gennep 1960). These two aspects are fundamental in my analysis of Owambo ritual.

Rituals cannot always be separated from everyday routines in the Owambo historical context, although some rituals were more spectacular than others. Everyday life was thoroughly ritualised in the sense that all activities in which human beings wanted to succeed needed the benevolence of cooperating spirits or forces, and/or had to be protected against malevolent forces. Rituals were deeply impregnated with religious meaning and they sought to regulate the relation between human beings and “the world beyond”. Some were set apart from every-day activity, however, and structured the annual flow of activities, the life cycle of human beings and the cycle of political power-holding.

The kingly installation rituals and the initiation rituals analysed in this study were rites of this kind. They were all “passage rituals” in van Gennep’s sense, and could be expected to follow the pattern of separation, liminality and realignment that van Gennep postulated (1960). A transformation of the ritual and social status of the person(s) involved was the desired outcome. On the other hand, no real personality transformation was sought in rain rituals. The goal was to get rain by pleading for the benevolent assistance of spiritual powers. The desired transformation was that drought would cease and rain would fall. The sacrificial remained the same after having performed the ritual.

Much of current research on ritual has the underlying agenda of deconstructing set categories imposed by anthropology. As part of this trend, the search for the ‘meaning’ of a ritual has been substituted by a quest for multiple meanings, overt and stated as well as muted and vaguely indicated. This is the stance I take in this study. The question of power has also become a central issue in studies on ritual. Bruce Kapferer’s study of sorcery in Sri Lanka (1997) shows how the local understanding
of “power”, both humanly and superhumanly attained is activated in new situations. His conceptualisation of the power at play in sorcery; as “the raw power of nature” is also interesting here because it helps us to understand some of the more sinister aspects of kingly power appropriated in the installation rituals of Owambo kings, and it encourages the restructuring of Owambo categories beyond conventional distinctions.

A difficult question in studies on ritual is that of intentionality. If rituals have a purpose, whose purpose do they serve? Whose is the will behind the act? Are they willed by spiritual forces revealed to selected individuals in trance, vision and dreams, and what is the role of human agency in their making? One way of understanding the “willed act” of a ritual is to see it as representing hegemonic powers in society, a tool for strengthening the authority of those in power and legitimating existing power structures. This is how Maurice Bloch sees its function. His interest is in how “ideology” is created and expressed in ritual. He considered the purpose of kingship ritual to be to imprint on its audience, through the manipulation of symbols and ideas, a view of reality that contradicted and glossed over realities on the ground. This mechanism is discernible in the rituals discussed in this study. Kapferer (1997), among others, stresses the fact that rituals also express un-hegemonic ideas and are capable of breaking up existing power structures. Like Bell (1992: 218) and Kapferer, I see the political significance of ritual not only in its potential as a control mechanism but also as being a means for and an expression of change in that control, and of non-hegemonic ideas of society. This study is partly about how Owambo political change took place through ritual. It will also identify recurrent non-hegemonic ideas of power holding that are expressed in ritual.

Metcalf and Huntington (1991) reject Bloch’s view of ritual “as simply a device of social regulation”. With Hocart, they emphasise the religious aspect; the fact that ritual originally emerged as a “technique for the control of life”. This religious aspect fades out in the course of history: the state takes over the ritual institutions and gives them a new function, that of administration, although they retain their sacred character for a long time (1991: 7). Metcalf and Huntington thus formulated a theory of how the power of the world of spirits expressed in ritual is transposed into political and administrative power (cf. de Heusch 1982, Miller 1976). How this process took place in the Owambo kingdoms in the pre-colonial and early colonial eras is one of the themes of this study.
Anthropology and history in northern Namibia

Anthropology as a medium through which to study the Namibian past has for long been politically stigmatised. The crisis in African anthropology after the independence of the new states from the late 1950s onwards was particularly prominent in apartheid South Africa, with which Namibia was associated. In colonial times, as is well known, it was heavily associated with colonial practice, and the questions it raised sprung from the administrative needs of the colonial powers. This period was particularly long drawn-out in Namibia. For almost thirty years after most African states had become independent Namibia was still occupied by South Africa, which implemented its apartheid policy there and created in Ovamboland, its northern part, a labour reserve for the mines and farms of whites further south. Anthropological research was conducted in South Africa prior to the concrete formulation of apartheid policies. During the decades of the struggle for independence in Namibia serious social analysis was political and part of the struggle against the regime. Namibian historiography emerged as a vocal and theoretically pioneering enterprise preoccupied with colonial relations. Figure 1 places Namibia on the map of Africa and shows the Ovambo area in the north of the country.

Earlier academic studies on the Ovambo within the disciplines of anthropology or ethnography were seldom part of the political struggle of pre-independence times. A number of authors; Louw, Lehmann, Delachaux, Lebzelter have been associated with the colonial power in one way or another. Some of the studies arose from experience as a missionary (Estermann, Tuupainen/Hiltunen) or from a background in Ovamboland as a missionary’s child (Aarni). Despite the problematic scientific and political agendas of some of these studies, they provide useful information that needs to be taken seriously. Of the early contemporary anthropological studies the Catholic missionary Carlos Estermann’s work (1976) stands out in terms of depth and scope. Before the 1980s, the American anthropologist Edwin Loeb had achieved almost hegemonic status as a researcher on Ovambo kingship. He conducted fieldwork in the 1940s among the Kwanyama and wrote two articles on Uukwanyama society (1948b, 1950), articles on transition rites (1948a), witchcraft (1955a), traditional medicine (1955b), and “magic” (1955c) and a dissertation (1962) on the Kwanyama kingship institution. He produced a rich description of kingship and made many contestable interpretations. His view on Owa-
mbo kings as divine was challenged by Rudolf Lehmann (1954). Christoph Borkowsky (1987), among others, criticised him for adhering to the “Hamitic theory” in accordance to which he saw the main cultural manifestations of the Owa mbo as stemming from the Mediterranean region, thence not having sprung up “on the African soil”. Borkowsky also criticised Loeb for characterising Owa mbo kingship as “feudal”, a term ill-suited to Sub-Saharan African realities. The theoretical stance and the feudal formulations of Loeb are indeed questionable. Nevertheless, his point about Owa mbo kings being sacred was accurate and is supported by ample evidence from local sources, and his work contains many ethnographic observations of value.

The former missionary Maija Tuupainen presented a doctoral thesis on Ondo nga marriage customs in 1972. The merits of this study lie in the rich descriptions of customs, which had not previously been compiled in this form. This was followed by two books written by her under the name

Figure 1  Map of Namibia with Owamboland (cartography: Wolfgang Zeller)
Maija Hiltunen on “Witchcraft and Sorcery” (1986) and “Good Magic” (1993). In both of them she made extensive use of Finnish sources. Tiia-riitta Hjort (1986) also used this material in an analysis of the initiation ritual Efundula for girls in Uukwanyama. Her study is contemporary with but independent of Gwyneth Davies’ study (1986) on the same topic. Davies drew mainly on unpublished eye-witness accounts, interviews and material collected by the British Powell-Cotton sisters in 1937 from the Angolan side of Uukwanyama, the Finnish material being unavailable to her. Her study contains more ritual detail than Hjort’s study, which again is theoretically more advanced and contextualises Efundula within the economic and social structure of Owmbo societies. In terms of ethnographic detail, these two studies are surprisingly similar. A study conducted by Teddy Aarni, a son of a Finnish missionary entitled “The Kalunga Concept” (1982) falls broadly within the category of ethnographic studies. Beidelmann criticised this study for its narrow scope and for failing to take into account ethnographic data from closely related neighbouring societies (1984, Ethnos 1–2: 130). Although this critique is valid, Aarni’s study is nevertheless valuable for it attempts to position the king in the Owmbo spiritual universe. The missionaries Albin Savola (1889, 1916, 1924) and Alpo Hukka (1954) also contributed to the analysis of Owmbo ideas on the spiritual powers that reside in human beings.

Among the academic studies on northern Namibia emerging from South African universities in the Afrikaans language, only W. Louw’s Master’s Thesis “Die sosio-politieke stelsel van die Ngandjera van Owa- mboland” and Kotze’s “Die Kuanyama van Ovamboland,” (1968) were accessible to the present author. With the exception of Rudolf Lehmann’s critique of Loeb (1956), and the subsequent critique by Borkowsky (1987) on the nature of Owmbo kingship and on the existence of ritual regicide, there has been little academic discussion among ethnographers on Owmbo kingship. Interesting contemporary work on the Owmbo has mainly fallen within the discipline of history. Before independence in 1990 these studies were pursued outside of Owamboland. The discussion to follow seeks to place studies on the Owmbo past in a broader historical and political perspective.

Patricia Hayes (see Ranger in Woods 1988) made a useful distinction between three stages of historical research in Southern Africa into colonialist history, confrontationist history and post-confrontationist history. Namibian colonialist history was dominated by the German mission-
ary Heinrich Vedder’s “Das Alte Südwestafrika” (1934), a description of South West Africa “in the olden days”, and for a long time the hegemonic source on autochthonous groups in colonial South West Africa. Brigitte Lau challenged Vedder (1995: 2, 3, 4) and saw a political agenda in his writings: to prove the benevolent influence of the colonial intervention, of missionaries and of the colonial presence, and systematically to repre-
sent local autochthonous politics as bloodthirsty, chaotic and evil. With very meagre grounding in facts, Vedder also coined lasting conceptions of different Namibian “ethnicities”. He was not trained as a historian and his book lacked referencing. In the light of other available sources, Lau judged some of Vedder’s descriptions of the atrocities of local chiefs as sheer invention.

From Vedder on, the official colonial view was that Namibian chiefs and kings were cruel and despotic. Vedder’s description of Owamboland (1995: 66–77) is quite brief and contains neither a history of the area nor any specification of the different Owambo societies. The north of Namibia is pictured as a pristine, unchanging rural area. Nevertheless, he chose to describe violent aspects of society such as cattle raids, witch-
hunts and human sacrifice in detail. He presented Owambo kingship as autarchic by nature, a notion that I choose to challenge, as did Lau. Lau’s general critique of Vedder holds for what he wrote on Owamboland: it contains both a tendentious selection of the information and unverifi-
able descriptions of cruelty. Vedder’s shadow and apartheid practices have created a fair amount of scepticism towards ethnography among contemporary Namibia-researchers against ethnography and sensitiv-
ity to sweeping generalisations about distinct clusters of populations, to indulging in gory details of “pagan” customs and to a concentration on violent aspects of pre-colonial life. It is therefore not entirely unhazard-
ous to embark on an ethnographic study in which ritual and other forms of violence are as much in focus as they are in this study, even though the intention is to understand local ritual in its symbolic context on the basis of local autochthonous witnesses.

Confrontationist history was basically anti-colonial. Shula Marks spoke of a “historiographic revolution”, which meant a greater concern with global and political processes of domination (Marks 1989: 225–231) in the understanding of local history. The vigorous debates going on among historians on South Africa from the 1960s onwards also encompassed Namibia, then South West Africa, whose contemporary history
until Independence in 1990 was a politically hot issue on the global scene. In opposition to the colonial view, an anti-colonial interest surfaced among researchers, particularly after 1960 and with the resumption of Swapo’s armed struggle for an independent Namibia. A considerable number of the studies on Namibia and its history published abroad in the years 1960–1990 by Namibians and non-Namibians alike display a political stance of solidarity with the struggle for independence.

Historical research by Namibians in exile usually focussed on the nature of South West African colonial society, the struggle for independence and scenarios for the future. The works by Zedekia Ngavirue (1972), Kaire Mbuende (1986), Peter Katjavivi (1988) and Elia Kaakunga (1990) fall into this category. Many German researchers re-considered the colonial past of their own country in Namibia. Heinrich Loth wrote a critique of German missionary activity in South West Africa (1963) that challenged Vedder’s view of local rule. Horst Dreschsler contributed with a critical history of German Colonialism in South West Africa (1966) from an East German and Marxist perspective, and Helmut Bley analysed German rule in South West Africa (1971). Loth brought up the theme of “state-formation” which was to become one of the main themes of subsequent analyses of 19th-century Namibian history. The studies by the Briton Gervase Clarence-Smith (1975 and 1979), and by him and Richard Moorsom (1975, 1977) address this theme, too. Gerhard Tötemeyer’s study (1978) on Owa-mbo elites falls within the genre of confrontationist historical analysis. Among the unpublished works written in German before independence are Lothar Berger’s Master’s thesis on the impact on the Owa-mbo of the boundary-drawing between Angola and South West Africa (1980), and Christoph Borkowsky’s ethnographic study on the ownership of means of production in pre-colonial Owa-mbo societies (1975).

The main points of criticism by confrontationist historians of colonial history were summarised by Terence Ranger in 1988. Colonial history made the history of Namibia invisible: the focus was only on the history of the colonial power. Through the assumption of a basically unchanged heathen past there was, allegedly, no history to talk of except the colonial one. There was a great need to correct distorted colonial concepts of race, ethnicity and tribe, which froze reality into colonially constructed categories. The term “ethnic conflict” was coined to gloss over gross colonial atrocities in the wars in central Namibia in the early 1900s. Confrontationist history also challenged given assumptions about the benevolence
of missionary input and colonial education, the latter termed by Henning Melber “cultural genocide”, which resulted in “cultural silence”, or the inability to formulate an independent cultural heritage of one’s own (cf. Ranger in Wood 1988: 42). Not much was published on Owmbo history within Namibia before independence, a fact that supports Melber’s claim. The chronicles of individual Ondonga kings written in Oshindonga (the local language spoken in Ondonga) by Hans Namuhuya (1983, 1986), a historian from Oniipa in Ondonga, are an exception. The History of the Church in Namibia written by Rev. Shekutaamba Nambala was also the work of a Namibian intellectual within the country but it was published after independence in 1994.

Before the end of the armed struggle in Namibia, internal criticism arose from the ranks of radical researchers. A new more reflective phase replaced the confrontationist zeal to clear away colonial distortions. In the post-confrontationist stage, attention was directed from the re-vision of colonial constructions of history to the reassessment of “internal contradictions and complexities of societies”, and to the encounter between local society and external intervention (Wood 1988, 42). The new challenges formulated by Ranger in 1988 had already been taken up by Brigitte Lau, Richard Moorsom and Gervaise Clarence-Smith. These challenges were, in brief, to counter the tendency to idealise local heroes, to consider the impact of missionaries and analyse the basis of their appeal, to re-evaluate concepts such as culture, identity and consciousness and to study the local people as agents of their own history. This new approach to the colonial past had been vanguard by the Comaroffs in South African anthropology, and resulted in a new focus within the discipline on change, agency, power and identity formation.

A number of studies on Owmbo history were published in Finland in the early 1990s. Tuula Varis addressed missionary work (1986) from a Foucaultian perspective, studying the mechanisms of what she called “pastoral power”. Harri Siiskonen wrote on the influence of long-distance trade with Europeans on socio-economic change in Owamboland (1990). Martti Eirola studied how the policies towards the German colonial powers of two Ondonga kings, Kambonde and Nehale, were intermediated by Finnish missionaries (1992). My own study on Owambo kingship (1992) analysed the symbolic power of the king and described the Owambo variant of sacred kingship. All of these studies link up in some way with the post-confrontationist challenges.
Frieda Williams, a Namibian researcher, presented her doctoral thesis on the history of Owa mbo kingship at the University of Joensuu in Finland in 1991, and before that, in 1988 she had produced a Master’s thesis focusing on pre-colonial Owa mbo migration. Williams’ doctoral thesis was the first coherent and all-encompassing internationally accessible history of Owa mbo kingship published in a non-local language – the first official Namibian history of Owa mbo kingships. It juggles the expectations of both confrontationist and post-confrontationist historians by being a history of local elites. It was of decisive importance in the formulation of both questions and answers in this study. It has provided a long-awaited political structure, a backbone to the scattered stories available in the oral heritage of Emil Liljeblad’s collection and elsewhere. Many of my contributions were conceived of in dialogue with Williams’ texts. They build on her assumptions, challenge them or oppose them.

“Namibia under South Africa Rule” (Hayes and Silvester 1998) goes beyond the scope of this study in terms of time but has been inspiring in terms of addressing important current issues. Robert Gordon’s critique of Bushman studies (1992) and Tomas Widlok’s study on the Hai//om⁶ Bushmen’s contemporary economy (1999) support the view that the Bushmen had a more prominent role in the history of the Owa mbo societies than is generally acknowledged. Two important historical studies were published on the Owa mbo in the early 1990s by Patricia Hayes (1992) and Meredith McKittrick (1995). Both fall between the confrontationist and post-confrontationist genres. They broke new ground by leaning on newly collected data in individual Owa mbo societies, Uukwan yama (Hayes) and Ombalantu (McKittrick). Hayes investigated “production, the organisation of labour, differentiation according to class, age and gender, and the ideological mechanisms of control by dominant groups” (Hayes 1992: 8, 9), with a focus on reassessing colonial and missionary conceptions of king Mandume in Uukwanyama. McKittrick (1994), like Hayes, addressed colonial distortions of Owa mbo history. She focussed on Ombalantu, the so-called “republican” society in the west of Owa mboland, in which kingship was re-imposed by the colonial power. She analysed oppressive structures along age and gender lines, and studied history from the common peoples’ perspective, identifying strategies by

6. This spelling is used by Thomas Widlock (1999), and the slashes recognise the Bushman click-sound in the name. Robert Gordon (1992) uses the spelling Heikom.
which they sought to cope with oppressive treatment by local rulers and colonialists alike (McKittrick 1995).

Both Hayes’ and McKittrick’s studies have been valuable for the present research by providing new perspectives on colonial times, as well as for showing local variations in the history of Owanbo kingship. McKittrick’s Ombalantu perspective brings the long neglected special features of the smaller western Owanbo societies into focus. Both studies touch upon the religious dimension of kingship and the function of rituals in social change and political consolidation. Here their otherwise sharp analyses lose their edge. In order to link the religious aspects of power in any sensible way to other aspects of political power, one needs a thorough grounding in ethnographic data, and one also needs to analyse the symbolic mechanisms of ritual and the meaning-making senses of myth and beliefs. Indebted to the findings that Hayes and McKittrick make available in their research, I will leap into this breach and illustrate some of the ways in which kingly ritual power fed into the political and economic power of Owanbo kings, and show how that ritual power was constituted.

The material available is not conducive to a systematic longitudinal study of king-related rituals, although the time-perspective has been brought out whenever possible. The strength of the material is its richness of ritual description. As such it lends itself to an analysis of the creation of sacred kingship through ritual, and to the re-evaluation of the Owanbo institution of kingship and changes in it.

Beginning with Frazer’s model of divine kingship

I will now turn to some aspects of earlier debate on divine kingship that have informed my thinking. The anthropological discussion began with James Frazer in the late 1800s and his interest in the ancient myth about the king at the sacred grove at Nemi outside Rome. According to the myth, the king stood under a tree, sword in hand, day and night waiting for his successor who was to come and kill him. Frazer’s analysis of this myth was the starting point for his magnum opus ‘The Golden Bough’ (1911–1915, 1922, 1959), for which he gathered literary evidence from the entire globe to shed light on the fertility rituals and the institution of divine or sacred kingship. In its wake came long debates over ritual regicide and divine kingship. Frazer explained the regicide aspect as related to the king’s role in promoting fertility.
Despite the criticism of Frazer by the next generation of anthropologists for his evolutionary stance and for his unsystematic use of sources, his understanding of divine kingship is still valid. Many anthropologists have reconsidered his ideas on divine kingship and have concluded that they are worth taking seriously (cf. Feeley-Harnik 1985). The discussion has been going on for nearly a century now and Frazer’s mantle has been picked up by structuralist-inclined symbolic anthropologists such as J.C. Muller, Alfred Adler and particularly Luc de Heusch.

Clarification of the concepts is necessary at this point. The use of the terms divine kingship and sacred kingship has not been quite consistent. A misunderstanding of what is meant by divine kingship has also caused many unnecessary scholarly schisms. Muller (1981) distinguished between divine kings and sacred kings, the former being ritually killed, the latter not. In the common anthropological usage of these terms this distinction is usually not upheld. Divine kings have also sometimes been understood to be “kings that were considered gods”, which is not altogether correct in the African context. Among the divine kingships Frazer discussed, only some were headed by “God-kings” and such kings were not common in Sub-Saharan Africa. In the Owa mbo context I will use the terms sacred king and divine king as synonyms for the following reason: the Owa mbo held their kings as sacred and the way the Owa mbo kingly institution was constituted comes quite close to the theoretical definition of divine kingship as presented by Frazer and Seligman. Seligman’s definition has usually been held to describe Frazer’s ideas of divine kingship most accurately. In his view:

[Divine kings are ones] upon whose correct behaviour depends the fertility of the soil, the abundance of the crops, as well as the vigorous reproduction of mankind (1934: 48) […] and being held responsible for the right ordering and especially the fertility of the earth and domestic animals, ends their lives by being killed or killing themselves with greater or lesser ceremony often at fixed periods (as the oncoming of senescence), or ceremonially expose themselves to the change of death or else feign to die. (Seligman 1934:5–6)

7. For instance the misunderstanding between Loeb (1962) and Lehmann (1955) on the nature of Owa mbo kingship, and Frieda Williams’ claim that Owa mbo kings were not divine but sacred (1991).
The king’s dependence on “nature” is captured in the myth about the priest-king of Nemi. He was also a “King of the Woods”, a priest devoted to the cult of Diana, the Goddess of the forest and fertility, symbolised by the tree that he guarded, and from which the usurper needed to break a branch in order to qualify for “challenging and killing the hapless king in battle” (Frazer 1949: 8). In this myth the ritual of “breaking the bow” symbolised the dependence of kingship on the fertility goddess. In order to be able to rule successfully the king’s needed to be in contact with her. The myth brings out the necessity for a presumptive king for co-operate with a female force who reigned over virgin lands and fertility. This part of Frazer’s analysis was challenged by J.Z. Smith (1973) who considered it ill-grounded in antique myth. However, even if that is so, Frazer’s interpretation serves to illustrate the core power relation of sacred kingship as it emerges in African heritage: the king needs the co-operation of spirits belonging to local belief in the territory he governs. These spirits were often conveyed as female.

In Frazer’s view, the sacred king was often a cosmic pivotal figure and therefore he was surrounded by a number of taboos and restrictions. There was often a perceived direct analogy between the well-being and vitality of the king as a human bodily person and the fertility and well-being of society. Because the king was a guarantor of health, prosperity, fertility and well-being, his bodily self had to display these characteristics. He could not be impotent, blind, crippled, grey-haired or exhibit any other signs of weakness or old age (Frazer 1922: 22, 225, 349). Senescence was manipulated, or the kings were ritually killed for real or by proxy in order to preserve the symbol of kingship unstained and to transfer the spirit to a new and vigorous king who was capable of upholding the sacred principle.

The Danish anthropologist Finn Kudsk (1982) identified two forms of regicide in Frazer’s account: ritual regicide, and regicide for revenge. Ritual regicide addressed the paradoxical dual nature of the king as both a man and a spirit, simultaneously secular and sacred. He had to be killed when his bodily self was no longer compatible with his role as a symbol of life and fertility. Regicide for revenge followed a different logic: it took place when a break in the king’s capacity to guarantee well-being was an established political fact. This analytic distinction sheds light on the phenomenon even though it was not always upheld “on the ground”.

Fertility is at the centre of a great number of ancient religions, in
most of which there is a link between nature and the supernatural. Tam-biah (1990: 6), writing from a South Asian perspective places the theme of “nature” in religion in the global context. He suggests that the link between God and nature is not as prominent a feature in Western religions as it is in the East. In Christianity, he says; “nature did not share in any of God’s substance or body” whereas in non-Western religions it did. When a divine king is thought to have power over nature, a bond between nature and the spirits is implied.

The Finnish anthropologist Arne Runeberg (1952: 79, 94, 95) referred to the same phenomenon as Tambiah, but used different terminology. He distinguished between a pre-dualistic era in which the properties of spiritual entities were not divided into good and bad, and a dualistic era in which the “devil” took over negative aspects of deity, a constellation that characterises Christianity. Ritual and sacrifice have different functions in these two types of religion. In the former, annual sacrifices were mandatory in order to restore the world and nature to its proper pure state and to guarantee the continuation of life. With Christianity the sacrifice of Christ provided the cleansing once and for all and rituals were, in principle, detached from the cycles of nature.

In many parts of Africa the fertility of the land was, and still is, strongly conditional upon the falling of the annual rains. In the past, the power of making rain was often a capacity ascribed to chiefs. From this Frazer drew the conclusion that rainmaking in Africa “may have been the origin of chieftainship” (Frazer, 1949: 86). He was not altogether wrong. Many studies, including Joseph Miller’s on the Umbundu (1986) and Eileen Krige’s on the Lovedu (1949), reveal a close relationship between political leadership and power over rain. Assigning political leaders powers of a supernatural nature is not unique to Africa. It is a feature that also emerges in Christianity, as Marc Bloch (1973 [1924]), E. Kantorowicz (1957) and J. N. Figgis (1970 [1896]) showed in the context of historical kingship in Europe.

In his well known essay from 1948, E. E. Evans-Pritchard reformulated the notion of divine kingship among the Shilluk of Southern Sudan, a group that had provided Frazer with his prime example of divine kingship in Africa through the studies of C. G. Seligman. This article solved the problem of divine kingship for many social anthropologists, says Michael Young, for “Divine kingship in Africa was rather an embarrassment because the central tenet of its doctrine – that the king must
be killed when he fell sick or grew senile – was usually beyond empirical verification” (1966: 135). Evans-Pritchard emphasised its political function and proposed that it emerged in a situation in which segments of society were not yet quite united under a common ruler. However, in his view, ritual regicide among the Shilluk only existed on the level of ideology, and not in practice. He argued, instead, that Shilluk kings were rather killed in the battle for succession. This issue has been hotly debated since.

For many decades Evans-Pritchard played a significant role in influencing the way African leadership was understood in anthropology. His article about the Shilluk kings served to discredit Frazer and the armchair anthropology he represented in the eyes of a whole generation of anthropologists carrying out field-work in the colonies. From this time on, the questions British anthropologists asked about African politics were pragmatic and were linked to the colonial endeavour. There was little interest in the ritual dimension of kingship as a religious phenomenon.

The de-religionisation of African politics with Evans-Pritchard was also noted by Gillian Feeley-Harnik (1985: 276). However, francophone anthropology never lost interest in the symbolic aspects of divine kingship and the most interesting contemporary elaborations of the institution stem from these quarters. An article by Michael Young (1966) on the Jukun of northern Nigeria became a significant ground-breaker in the re-evaluation of the Frazerian concept of divine kingship. This re-evaluation was further developed by Muller (1981), Adler (1982) and de Heusch (1982, 1985a, 1997, 2000, 2002), all writing in French. What is common to these studies is that they grapple with the inner meanings of rituals and with the symbolism of kingship. They analyse ritual regicide and killing related to succession as part of religious belief but simultaneously as an aspect of political power.

The Jukun kings studied by Meek (1931) and analysed by Young (1966) provide the ultimate example of a king sacrificed while alive. Jukun kings were symbolically sacrificed, they were not killed concretely. Young returned to the Frazerian notion of kings as being intimately connected with the forces of nature, an idea that Evans-Pritchard had found devoid of sense and that Audrey Richards had failed to distinguish in her studies among the Bemba (1961). In Jukun society the king was a symbol of grain and was addressed by this symbol; he “was the grain”. His main
task was to adhere to taboos and to conduct sacrifices. When he drank beer or ate of the grain he conducted self-sacrifice, according to Young, for he ate and drank of “himself”. Indeed there “remains the very prevalent belief that African kings are mystically associated with the fertility of the land, the state of crops and the well-being of the people”. That the king should not be let to die a natural death is a corollary to this belief. Young suggested that ritual regicide could be better understood if it was recognised as a religious and ritual act. It needed to be interpreted on both a symbolic and a behavioural level, because it sometimes took place for real (Young 1966: 136). With Young, regicide as sacrifice re-entered the debate on divine kingship.

Young showed that Evans Pritchard’s case against ritual regicide among the Shilluk could not be generalised, as it had been through the influence of the article that appeared in 1948. In fact Evans Pritchard had been far less categorical with regard to ritual regicide in his other writings. Earlier (1932), he had published a text on the kingly institution among the Dar Fung, a group neighbourng the Shilluk. He had noted that “local rulers were killed with such regularity and in such a traditional manner that regicide must have been something more than dynastic intrigue”. Consequently, he distinguished two distinct forms of succession in Dar Fung which he called institutionalised ceremonial regicide and socially sanctioned assassination. Another way of expressing this distinction is to refer to ritual regicide and political regicide, as Kudsk (1986) does and I will do so in the present study.

The idea that divine kingship was typical of a certain phase of development of society towards centralisation was not originally Evans-Pritchard’s. Frazer had posited it already, as part of his much-criticised evolutionary scheme. Hocart (1970 [1936]) also made a similar proposition by insisting that modern bureaucratic government began in a ritual organisation and only later assumed an administrative function. De Heusch developed this theme at length in his major opus “The Drunken King, or, the Origin of the State” (1982b [1972]). The historian Joseph Miller (1976) arrives at a similar conclusion in his study of historical Mbundu kingship. His findings are of particular relevance to this study of Owa mbo kingship for several reasons. I will discuss the ideas of Miller and de Heusch at some length below.
The ritual origin of kingship – the views of Miller and de Heusch

Joseph Miller traced, little by little, variations in the ways in which Umbundu kingships was established over two hundred years. The new leaders legitimated their rule through the appropriation of rituals and the charms and titles associated with them. His study has wider relevance in that it identifies mechanisms of appropriating esoteric power that are observable elsewhere in Africa, not least among the Owmambo who are southern neighbours of the Mbundu. Miller suggests that the possession of powerful assets such as rituals and power objects, fetishes or charms that represented a powerful spirit, was once the prerogative of the kin group. In Umbundu these assets gradually became attached to political titles, and over time titles led to the elevation of a kin group and legitimated political hegemony over other groups living in the same area. The groups with the most powerful rituals or fetishes competed for political power, and as they extended their power beyond their own kin, their titles, fetishes and rituals became transformed into tokens of kingship. Miller associated the names of rulers, such as Kinguri, which Jan Vansina (1975: 78–94) thought referred to a real historical person, with titles of a particular kind of rulership to which a specific fetish and the concomitant rituals belonged.

Through what Miller calls institutional and ideological innovation, fetishes, rituals and titles were appropriated and changed to become part of incipient kingship. The development among the Imbangala of the kilombo, the circumcision camp, which was originally a purely ritual event belonging to the kin group, into a cross-lineage military unit with great striking force was one such institutional innovation. There was also ideological innovation here: the use of war magic, part of the kilombo, became a means of fostering political competition between presumptive leaders. Innovativeness in the sphere of magic paid out in political prestige through success in war. Potent rain-charms attached to a title were also among the powers of an esoteric kind that “made kings” in the formation of Umbundu kingdoms.

There were risks involved in the usage of new powerful “magic”, however, either “imported” from other societies or created at a specific historic juncture. The ritual maji a samba of the Umbundu Imbangala was of the latter kind. It was created by a female ruler Temba Andumba, known as “a brave warrior queen”. She set an example to her sub-chiefs by killing
her own infant child and preparing a concoction of its flesh and blood to be used as unction for protection in war. She demanded that her subchiefs do the same. This custom was adhered to for some time having, as Miller portrays it, the intended function of installing awe and fear in the subjects. It was later rejected for being too inhuman (Miller 1976 165–170). Miller concludes that, to become accepted, the esoteric basis of kingship needed to be grounded to a sufficient degree in local belief. The maji a samba example also illustrates the tension between the benevolent role of a sacred ruler and the means applied to acquire such a status. This tension has been discussed in detail by Luc de Heusch.

The most significant contemporary contribution to the discussion on sacred kingship comes from Luc de Heusch. Like Frazer, de Heusch digested a large amount of ethnographic data but he stayed within Sub-Saharan African Bantu-speaker traditions. He published a comparative study, which in the words of Willis has “completely transformed our understanding of the thought-world of a vast aggregate of Central African peoples” (in de Heusch 1982: viii). De Heusch applied Claude Levi-Strauss’ neo-structural technique for analysing myths and ritual to his African material. Frazer’s emphasis was on the beneficial and fertility-promoting aspects of sacred kingship. De Heusch, on the other hand, suggests that in order to attain such beneficial powers the king had to transcend societal norms and literally or symbolically be made a monster in the course of the installation rituals. Only thus was he able to appropriate the power needed to guarantee fertility. I will suggest, on the basis of the Owa mbo material, that this is not the whole picture.

De Heusch analysed African myths of origin and saw them as providing the blueprint for governing institutions: they were the model on which ideas of kings were formed. He used myth and ritual as a gateway to a different kind of history of Africa, which in his own words “may replace a history writing that focuses on tribal migration and conquest”. He has shown the most interest in the “mental history” of Africa and its relation to material and political history. In “The Drunken King” subtitled “or, The Origin of the State” (1982 [1972],) de Heusch’s analyses symbolic matter in thirty-three Central African myths drawn from the traditions of the Luba and Lunda and related societies, and from the Kuba of Kongo, the Ndembu, the Bemba and the Chokwe. He proposes that different kingship traditions were permutations of a basic symbolic pattern that is common to all Bantu-speaking societies in Central Africa. He
suggests that there was a polar concept of kingship in the local political ideologies, expressed in stories about heroes of a mythic era. On the one hand, the society-building hero or first king in African myths of origin is often presented as a person outside normal society, as a hunter from abroad, a twin or, less often, an albino. Such figures represent “nature” and its disordered propensity to multiply (the hunter, the twin) or they suggest an anomalous nature (the albino) (de Heusch 1982a, 1985). The other aspect of kingship is represented by an autochthonous leader or king whom the hero outwits, marrying his daughter. This local leader is often uncivilised, but nevertheless represents a certain social order. The hero “from abroad” or “from the wild” introduces new and more civilised customs into society.

According to de Heusch, the dual nature of power symbolised in early mythical personages was connected with the need to integrate both the violent, belligerent and aggressive aspects and the civilised, integrative and nurturing aspects of political power. It also has something to do with the need to reconcile social order and natural force, the latter being necessary for the upkeep of the former. Couched in the personages of mythology these paradoxes form an indigenous statement on the ambivalent nature of power. In his magnum opus “The Drunken King”, de Heusch’s major proposition is that leadership above the kin-group level in Africa demanded legitimisation of a supernatural kind and only religious authority could effectively compete with the power of kin-group leaders. This was the historical juncture at which sacred kingship emerged. Divine kingship was thus a precondition for the consolidation of the centralisation of political power. De Heusch like Miller proposes that kingly legitimacy was built on power of a non-worldly kind, but he suggests a different mechanism. While Miller understood the transfer of kin fetishes and titles to a higher political level as a means by which power was centralised, de Heusch emphasised the fact that kings rose above others through the transgression of the norms of the kin-group. These were often norms that were related to the right ordering of fertility and respect for human life. Transgressions of the order of nature were written into myths of kingship in which kings were anomalies of fertility – twins or the offspring of incestuous couples. Such transgressions could also be produced in ritual through human sacrifice, homicide, anthropophagy, incest or the breaking of kin taboos.

Like Frazer, de Heusch grappled with the idea that the king repre-
sented “nature”. In Frazer’s formulation he was a nature spirit. De Heusch understood the king in this capacity as a “sacred monster”. The powers of nature became dangerous and anomalous in the social domain, but they constituted one source of the sacred power of kings. De Heusch thus defines a king’s sacred power as emanating from transgression and as producing, in this very process, fertility and prosperity in the land. Although he also deals with other aspects, his emphasis is on transgression. De Heusch’s book of 1972 launched the notion of sacred-making as the way in which kingship was “produced” although he recognised that it was not only kings who obtained their power this way. Even in this book and more pronouncedly in his later writings (1987, 1997, 2000, 2002) de Heusch acknowledged that there was also a “sacralisation of power” at a lower level of political aggregation. In societies without kingship, chiefs or clan leaders could be held sacred and such institutions had much in common with “divine kingship”. He clarified his ideas on the relation between the state and kingship some twenty years after “The Drunken King” was first published. Divine kingship was not the same as statehood, but was a necessary condition for it:

[...] it is apparent that the state is possible only when this ideological revolution has occurred – a revolution that consists in bestowing on a single man, detached from the symbolical order of family or lineage, extraordinary powers over nature. (de Heusch in de Maret 1993: 292)

In a later study (1997) he also took pains to underline this difference. He recognised that violence and abuse of kingly power on the ground could constitute an abuse of the powers inherent in the institution of sacred kingship. De Heusch also elaborated on the theme of divine kingship in a study from 1985 entitled “Sacrifice in Africa”. He condensed his analysis of a number of cases in Africa from which he drew theoretical conclusions. The Kuba and the Lele of the Kasai in the Kongo are among his prime examples of the paradox of kingship as expressed in nature metaphors. In these societies the understanding of the king was expressed by associating him with two animals of the wilderness, the pangolin and the leopard. The pangolin is a peaceful animal of the forest, “a benevolent animal spirit and guarantor of fertility”, while the leopard is aggressive and dangerous, “a polluted animal, a sorcerer’s familial” (1985: 292).
By associating their kings with such animals the Kuba and the Lele expressed their view of the dual nature of kingship. Their liminality was aptly symbolised by the pangolin, a mammal with fins which climbed trees: fish, bird and earth-dweller in one. This harmless and peaceful animal was associated with fertility.

The Kuba kings acquired the power of sorcery during the installation rituals through a ritually committed act of incest. This act severed the bond between the king and his kinsfolk for he had thus trespassed against the rules of kinship. After this he was considered polluted and sacred (de Heusch 1985: 99, my italics). He was killed when his strength failed him, and after his death he was considered a spirit of nature (de Heusch 1985: 98). De Heusch does not elaborate on the pangolin's peaceful and fertility-promoting aspects, however. In his theoretical conclusions he also chooses to emphasise fertility as arising out of transgression. Here he fails to comment on an important aspect of his own symbolic material, and one that would have allowed him to develop a richer picture of the powers behind the king's fertility-enhancing nature.

The other examples de Heusch uses in his 1985 study and elsewhere offer variation in the manifestations of sacred rulership. Ritual regicide took place by proxy among the Rukuba societies in Nigeria while for the Lere of Moundang in Tschad, the ritual killing of the king and the taboos that framed his life constituted his sacredness. Swazi royal customs, again, emphasised the sacred king's double association with a domesticated animal, the bull, and with a dangerous animal of the wild, the lion. A variation of this symbolic constellation was also present in the institution of kingship in Rwanda. All of these are different manifestations of a pattern of symbolic thought common to a large part of Central and Southern Africa’s agro-pastoralist societies. De Heusch sums up his view of the symbolic structure of sacred kingship in Africa, in which the paradox of kings belonging both to society and to nature comes to the fore, and in which he juxtaposes the fertility-promoting aspect with the harmful aspect that requires restrictions and sacrifice:

Sacred royalty is a symbolic structure which has broken from the domestic family and lineage order. It is a topological machination which must be interpreted as a meshing of the human space and the realm of the bush or forest where the mysterious forces of fertility live; it

8. See also Mary Douglas' discussion on the pangolin among the Lele (1957).
could also be the locus where the sky meets the earth. The king’s body, identified with inhabited and cultivated territory, and with its wealth, is also symbolically outside its laws [...] the sacred king is a multipli-
cative mechanism of productive and reproductive forces on the one hand, and a dangerous being surrounded by ritual interdictions, con-
demned to a premature death on the other. (de Heusch 1985: 102)

In the end, the king is, in the Latin etymological sense, a “sacred mon-
ster” (1985: 101). Thus, as Frazer saw it, there had to be ritual regicide in order to resolve the discrepancy surrounding the king’s carnal body, which could not symbolise health and wholesomeness when he was old and sick: regicide was performed before he died a natural death in order to safeguard the transfer of his spirit into a new king. De Heusch, again, emphasises the fact that the king had to be killed because he was a sa-
cred monster, and in that capacity a nature spirit. He became monstrous through transcending the laws of human society. Deviation, monstrosity and sacredness go hand in hand, but it is the final sacrifice that makes kings sacred in their lifetime. In other words, this illustrates the reciprocal nature of sacred kingship, implemented through the ritual killing of the king. Here de Heusch’s argumentation is not quite lucid. He seems to say that the monstrosity and the sacrifice of the king together made him sacred, while at the same time holding on to Frazer’s tenet, according to which regicide was performed for the perpetuation of the institution of kingship. He shows in his comparative studies that ritual regicide was incorporated into a number of African traditions, but that substitutional sacrifice was equally common. The sacrifice of the king could take place by proxy, either right away at enthronement or at some point during his reign so that the physical king live on.

When de Heusch refers to regicide not only as the ultimate sacrifi-
cence but also as the ultimate taboo, he obscures more than he clarifies. It seems more logical that the natural death of a king was the ultimate taboo, like Frazer understood it, not his ritual killing. More importantly, however, de Heusch presents data according to which the sacredness of kings could be understood in terms of recognised access to important spirits influencing fertility, which is something more than monstrosity, but he does not bring this out clearly in his theoretical argumentation. This aspect was strongly present in the Owa mbó kingly institution, which I intend to show in this study. I will use the framework of Frazer’s, Miller’s and de Heusch’s ideas on kingly power to graft a profile of Owa mbó
sacred kings, and to illustrate how our understanding of sacred kingship could be broadened.

**My sources as the framework of the study**

This study falls under the category of historical anthropology. The conclusions are largely dependent on the nature of the source material used. I draw heavily on information provided by Finnish missionaries, who were working in Owamboland from the 1870s onwards and reported and reflected on the society and its institutions as a by-product of their missionary work. Some of them wrote about folklore and oral tradition and collected accounts by individual Owanbo on matters to do with the past. Contemporary historical and anthropological research on the Owanbo, however scarce, has been of great value in giving a general picture of the societies in which the kingly rituals were performed. As a supplement to the written data I used interviews conducted in Namibia and Finland in the years 1988, 1989 and 2000 here coded as MSC (Märta Salokoski Collection). I was also given permission to use some of the field data collected by Frieda Williams in 1999 referred to as FWC (Frieda Williams Collection). My field data was intended to serve mainly as a check on the validity of the data in the Liljeblad collection that I used extensively. It was collected at the end of August and the beginning of September in 1988 with the help of Hannu Shipena, who was my assistant and interpreter. Bishop Kleopas Dumeni and the Church officials in Oniipa helped me to trace and interview a few of the surviving Liljeblad informants. The other informants were old or otherwise resourceful people from Ondonga, Uukwanyama, Uukwambi and Ongandjera (see the list in the bibliography). For security reasons I was not allowed to interview informants living closer to the Angolan border with the exception of a few in Uukwanyama. At that time the full-scale war was going on, with night curfews and South African tanks thundering along the roads. There was great apprehension among the local church officers regarding people’s willingness to answer any questions in those hard times, particularly questions on controversial subjects or political matters. Taking the situation into consideration, I chose to put the emphasis on issues that were as neutral as possible from the contemporary perspective. The interviews succeeded beyond my expectations and people seemed quite interested in sharing their views with me. My interpreter Hannu Shipena proved to
be a key figure: he was the son of a respected deacon of the Church and a member of the Akuusinda clan, and had just married a woman from the Ondonga kingly clan. He opened doors for me and briefed me on what was appropriate behaviour in the presence of elders of the land. The fieldwork also gave me a visual idea of the land and the lifestyle of the Owambos: at that time people mostly survived on subsistence farming and were cut off from the developments taking place elsewhere in the country. Travelling along the vast plains and squatting with elders in their egumbo (homesteads) in Owamboland gave context and colour to the accounts on kingship going back a hundred years. My second and shorter field visit to a well-established independent Namibia gave additional complementing information; notably the encounters with Jason Amakutuwa and Natanael Shinana were illuminative. What the contemporary elders remembered turned out not to be contradictory to the written accounts of the Liljeblad informants, and thus the field expeditions fulfilled their purpose. In addition, quite a number of facts that I collected proved useful in terms of complementing the written data and confirming the interpretations arising out of the Liljeblad pages. Below I briefly describe other available sources that were relevant to the study.

**Early written and archival sources**

We have rather little written information from the early period of Owambo kingship. There are written documents from the 1840s onwards, when Owamboland and the neighbouring areas entered “historical time” with the founding of Mossamedes by the Portuguese in Southern Angola. The first descriptions of Owamboland were written by European traders moving in the area; Ladislaus Magyar (1857), James Chapman (1971) (diaries from travels in the years 1849–1863), Francois Galton (1853), Frederick Green (1872), T. G. Een (1872), Charles John Anderson (1875), Peter August Möller (1971 [1899]) and Gerald McKiernan (1954). They were all traders and adventurers who described their interactions with local people and commented in passing on the political system of the societies they visited. In particular the traders Een, Galton and Anderson were valuable sources on early Owambo society, providing a glimpse into kingly rule as it was manifested before Europeans introduced firearms, and before trading with Owambo kings was established.

Father Duparquet of the Catholic Church, which sought to expand
its influence in the area, began visiting “all the principal Owambo kings” in 1879 and by 1884 he had founded a Catholic mission in Uukwanyama. Documents published by the Catholic missionaries were used here only to a limited extent because most of them were written in Portuguese. The exception was Father Carlos Estermann’s ethnographies, which have been translated into English (1976, 1979, 1981). No unpublished material emanating from Catholic mission activities posited with the White Fathers in Paris or elsewhere was consulted. The perspective presented is therefore largely that of local resource persons chosen to recall the “olden days”, and loosely or tightly associated with the Finnish Lutheran Mission activities in Owambo. In view of the over-riding influence of the Finnish mission in the area, the study draws on a pool of knowledge vested in key persons in the majority of Owambo societies south of the Angolan border.

After the Finnish missionaries entered Owamboland in 1870 rich accounts about daily life and local society began to appear in the Finnish language. The Finns wrote a great deal about Ondonga, which was the stronghold of Finnish missionary activities from the beginning, but also about Uukwambi, Ongandjera and Uukwanyama, societies into which the missionaries expanded their activities in the first decades of their presence in Owamboland (cf. Peltola 1958: 48). Since the permission of the king was a condition for any missionary presence, the Finns wrote a lot about them in their diaries and in correspondence with the Mission Director back home in Finland. They did not always specify in their published work on “land and people” whether their writings pertained to one single kingdom or to the whole of Owamboland. Their views were coloured by their own position in relation to the kings and by their own missionary objectives, which in principle were hostile to anything “pagan”. However, through daily interaction over the years and decades, friendships were formed between missionaries and kings out of which, in a number of cases, the understanding of and respect for local ways grew. Martti Rautanen, who himself came from a modest background, was particularly skilful in mediating between local mores and missionary ambitions. Through him, and others like him, the Finnish missionary endeavour provided the first ethnographic observations of the Owambo available in print.

The very first accounts of Owambo life and kingship in the early missionary years were written by Pietari Kurvinen, (1877, 1878, 1879, and
Quite a few other early Finnish missionaries also published accounts of local life for a Finnish audience. Among them were Albin Savola (1899, 1916, 1924), Karl Björklund (1891), Hannu Haahti (1913), Kalle Koivu (1925), Jalmari Hopeasalmi (1946) and Tuure Vapaavuori (1948). Several of these accounts contained descriptions of kings that the missionaries or mission people had encountered and worked with (for instance Jooseppi Mustakallio 1900 and 1901, and Pettinen 1911). Some dealt with specific topics relevant to this study; Rautanen, for instance, described local religion in an essay from 1904.

Unpublished records of Finnish mission activities in the Finnish Mission Society Collection (FMSC) provided a less heavily censored picture of the missionaries’ confrontation with local life than the published data. They contain many keen observations and descriptions of the day-to-day politics of the kings the missionaries served. The diaries of Martti Rautanen (1870–1926) and August Pettinen (1887–1902) were particularly rich sources in this respect as were the early letters to the mission director C. G. Tötterman from Frans Hannula and Martti Rautanen, and Rautanen’s letters to Tötterman’s successor Jooseppi Mustakallio. The private collections of Jooseppi Mustakallio and Nestori Väänänen also gave valuable information on religious and political matters. The minutes of meetings of missionary brethren in the early years and early Annual Reports from the individual mission stations to the Mission Director in Finland often addressed issues related to kings. I have also used other private collections in the FMSC, including correspondence, essays and manuscripts that gave information on ritual customs and religious beliefs as the missionaries observed them.

Despite their obvious missionary bias, these sources were valuable as an addition to the local informants’ witness, sometimes adding eye-witness descriptions, sometimes condensing and summarising local ideas and practices. Contributions of the latter kind were also found in published and unpublished scholarly work by missionaries or their offspring on topics relating to local religion or folklore (cf. Hukka 1954, Väänänen FMSC, Aarni 1982). Collections of folklore and myths published in the name of the missionary concerned (Rautanen 1893, Pettinen 1927/28) or by other authors (Kuusi 1970, 1974, 1976, Knappert 1981), provided an additional dimension to the narratives of locals on such topics, and gave depth to the symbolism revealed in ritual.
The early Finnish accounts from the end of the nineteenth century were followed by those of the German Protestant missionaries Herman Tönjes (1911) and Heinrich Vedder (1934), and of C. H. Hahn (1928), the Regional Commissioner of Owamboland in the South African colonial government. The missionary Karl Sckär from the Lutheran Vereinigte Evangelische Mission (VEM) wrote an unpublished ethnographic description of Uukwanyama customs in the early 1930s. The ethnographic studies of the Catholic missionary Carlos Estermann mentioned above are better known. His works display a profound knowledge of local customs and are still among the most informed sources on Owambo ethnography available. They were valuable to this study for throwing light on the whole area, drawing on experience from Ombandja, Ondombondola and Uukwanyama.

The older Finnish written and archival sources are biased towards describing Owambo societies that had more contact with missionaries. There is an abundance of descriptions of ritual in the larger kingdoms of Ondonga and Uukwanyama where Finnish and German Lutheran missionaries settled early on, a fair amount from Ongandjera and Uukwambí, but less from the smaller societies of Uukwaluudhi, Uukolonkadhi and Ombalantu to the east and north, which resisted missionaries the longest. Estermann provided fairly detailed descriptions of rituals in Ondombondola and Ombandja, thus filling a major gap in the information provided by the Finns. Some minor studies undertaken in Southern Angola added to the overall coverage of Owambo tradition: Theodore Delachaux (1936) published ecologically and ethnographically informed reports from scientific expeditions into Owamboland in French and Alwin W. Urquhart’s (1963) account of settlement and subsistence in Southwestern Angola provides comparative ethnographic data on the northern Owambo, who are otherwise rarely described in the English language.

**The Liljeblad Collection**

The “magic of the termite mounds” described in the introductory section was narrated by Asipembe Eelu, a local informant from Ondonga, in the early 1930s as part of a longer description of Owambo kingly installation ritual. He wrote down this account in his native language Oshindonga, at the request of the Finnish missionary Emil Liljeblad. Asipembe Eelu was married to a woman belonging to the Ondonga kingly clan. Unlike many
of Liljeblads’ informants, Eelu was not schooled by the missionaries and there is no information to suggest he was ever converted. His voice is one of the many local voices telling the story of Owambo kingship that is pursued on these pages.

This study relies heavily on narratives provided by the informants of Emil Liljeblad’s ethnographic collection (ELC). The collection is part of the Finnish Mission Society Collection (FMSC) at the Finnish National Archives (NAF), but it also has its own place in the Helsinki University Library, where the original Oshiwambo narratives are housed alongside the Finnish translations of them. Liljeblad served as a missionary in the early 1900s in Owamboland. In the early years he was engaged in many struggles with reluctant Owambo kings, particularly King Shaanika in Ongandjera, in an effort to expand the missionary influence. Later he headed the first teacher’s seminar in which Owambo men were schooled for work in the church. He returned in 1930–1932 as a grantee of the Finnish Academy of Science for the purpose of collecting Owambo folklore at the request of the Finnish folklorist Kaarle Krohn (Kuusi 1970: 7, 1974: 13–15, Peltola 1956: 262). He collected 1430 items on various aspects of Owambo life of “the old days”, tracing his informants over the whole of Owamboland and persuading them to write texts on different aspects of Owambo life. In some cases he personally wrote down oral accounts of traditions given by elder Owambo. He also provided a few eye-witness accounts of ritual and he added his own commentary to some of the informant narratives. Unfortunately, he died in 1937 before he was able to write up the material he had collected. Some of it was destroyed in a fire. With the help of a local man, Gabriel Taapopi, Liljeblad’s daughter Aune Liljeblad and the missionary Anna Glad translated the Oshiwambo texts into Finnish and they were deposited at the Helsinki University Library along with the original booklets in the Oshiwambo languages. This study draws on the unfinished work of Emil Liljeblad, whose material has previously been used rather scarcely, mainly in unpublished academic works (Huttunen 1969, Hjort 1986, Salokoski 1992), and in published works by Marja-Liisa Hiltunen (1986, 1993) and Frieda Williams (1988, 1992).

Many of Liljeblad’s informants were his former students at the teacher’s seminar that was established in Oniipa in 1913 and that he headed (Peltola 1958: 191–192). They included “Owambo teachers, pastors, school children, missionaries, assistants and laymen, among whom were also members of magicians’ families and members of the royal family” (Kuusi
Of the 110 informants, 99 were men and 11 women. The majority were literate and more than half (68) had received formal or informal schooling from Finnish or German missionaries. Many of them also had a background as key figures in local society: they had been rainmakers, diviners or holders of key ritual offices, or they were close relatives of kings (ELC 1, E). This gives their accounts both depth and expertise. To a fair degree the Liljeblad collection thus represents the view of an elite of the Owa mbo, both the “traditional” and the new Christian elite rising from old privileged positions. It is therefore not surprising that there is an abundance of items on kingship.

The material is unique in that it also gives ample accounts of the secret aspects of kingly inauguration ritual, some of which provide by far the most coherent, detailed and illuminating descriptions of ritual in colonial and pre-colonial Owamboland. The collection also contains myths, migration tales and tales of the origin of kingship, which complement and give depth to the information found in other sources. It includes king lists, proverbs, riddles, and descriptions of the rule of individual kings. Most of Liljeblad’s informants were men, and this could be expected to have influenced their witness in matters dealing with women. Whether or not this was the case, the studies by Tiiariitta Hjort (1987) based on the Liljeblad narratives and other Finnish sources, and the one written by Gwyneth Davies based on material collected among local women in Angola, arrive at surprisingly similar conclusions.

The overall choice of topics in the Emil Liljeblad Collection, however, reflects the fact that Liljeblad was a man and that most of his informants were men. Descriptions of the female aspects of Owambo life and rituals – pot-making, agricultural activity, foraging and healing – are clearly underrepresented. While male endeavours such as cattle-tending, hunting, iron making and war are amply described, the female aspect of kingship is given little attention. We are told rather little about the political position and ritual significance of female members of the kingly family, and almost nothing about the mothers of kings, although these women were of major ritual and political importance. It is evident that if the majority of the Liljeblad informants had been women they would have produced an altogether different story about kingship and ritual.

The fact that so many of Liljeblad’s informants had converted to Christianity and were deeply involved in Church activities might well have coloured their accounts. However, there is a surprising lack of dis-
tance from the subject matter discussed in the narratives. The bias towards old customs to be expected from a converted informant must be weighed against the mandatory protection of society’s most guarded secrets that restrains an informant who “believes in the old ways”. Converted informants were able to describe “old customs” quite liberally, and this was beneficial in terms of understanding the secret kingly rituals. The Christian influence on the informants must have coloured their reporting on concepts that had been taken into Christian terminology, in particular how they presented Kalunga. The term Kalunga was taken by the missionaries to depict the Christian God and there was a tendency to describe the Kalunga of local tradition in compatible terms. In very few cases did Liljeblad’s informants explicitly voice a criticism of a custom described and then mainly in connection with diviner or witchcraft practices that overtly clashed with the Christian world view.

Given the fact that the Finnish missions were unevenly spread over the Owmbo orbit, one needs to consider the extent to which the Liljeblad collection is representative of the whole of Owamboland. The big societies Ondonga and Uukwanyama, where the missionaries were most active, are quantitatively over-represented in that more than two thirds (1008 of 1430) of the items are from them. Nevertheless, the smaller societies are well represented through individual and very rich accounts of ritual, and this evens out some of the quantitative imbalance. The collection contains no items on Uukwambi kingly ritual, but it seems unlikely that no such narratives were collected. Material on Uukwambi kingship was probably among the narratives that were destroyed by fire before they were translated.

Other archival sources

The archival sources used in the study stem mostly from the Finnish Mission Society Collection (FMSC) placed in the National Archives of Finland (NAF). Materials from the expeditions of Diana and Antoinette Powell-Cotton in the late 1930s at the Powell Cotton Museum in Kent were only accessible through Gwyneth Davies’ study on the female initiation ritual efundula mentioned above, her study of the ‘Medical Culture’ of the Owmbo (1987, 1993), and through films viewed at the museum. The Powell-Cotton sisters made two field trips to Angola in 1936 and 1937, during which they conducted research following the guidelines of the British
Museum. In southern Angola they photographed, filmed, collected material objects, annotated botanical specimens and collected vernacular vocabularies, made field notes and diaries as well as conducted interviews with the help of a local Ovimbundu interpreter. Their collection illustrates Owambo life and society from the Angolan side of the border. Even though the sisters were not trained anthropologists, and therefore their collections contain little interpretation or explanation, except what was given by their informants, the material is valuable for its uniqueness (cf. Davies 1993: 9, 10). Among the more recent archival collections are those of Frieda Williams (FWC) from Owambo in 1999, and my own (MSC) collected in 1988, 1989. The selection of informants in both cases both followed the same principles: finding old knowledgeable people able to speak about old Owambo times, and in particular about the kingship institution. MSC also contains a few interviews with younger local key persons.

**How I study king making and kingship making**

The Liljeblad collection contains detailed descriptions of the whole cycle of kingly inauguration ritual in Ondonga, Ongandjera and Ombadja, starting with regicide and kingly burials. In Chapter six I discuss this process from an “all Owambo” perspective. In Chapter seven I analyse the kingly installation ritual, with a focus on the Ondonga version that is richly described in the Emil Liljeblad collection. Information from kingly installations in Ombadja, Ongandjera and Uukwanyama is used when it is relevant to the themes discussed here. I give attention to the symbols involved, to the sequence of ritual procedures, the objects and paraphernalia handed over to the king, the cleansing and anointments, the sacrifices and the commensal meals, the persons involved and the location in which the rituals took place, including movements in space. I also reflect on the connection between the sacrifices performed and the king. These details are observed in order to get some idea about where the sacred power installed in the king was thought to come from and how it was appropriated and manipulated. Chapters six and seven thus highlight the ritual “construction” of an individual king or what I call king making.

Chapters three and eight describe aspects of kingship making. I used ritual descriptions from different Owambo societies to identify differ-
ences and changes over time. Kingship making also takes place on the verbal level in the myths that have survived and in the king lists memorised. These aspects are discussed in Chapter three. Chapter eight shows how Owambo kings appropriated, manipulated or abolished certain rituals related to fertility in order to strengthen kingship the focus being on rain rituals, female initiation, ohango or efundula, and male circumcision, etanda. These are not the only rituals that could be analysed from this angle, but they were instrumental in terms of the king’s role as guarantor of fertility. Chapter nine describes the devolution of sacred kingship. Here I used information from several Owambo kingdoms. The chapter picks up themes that relate to changes in the way in which Owambo kings executed their power, changes in the customs of regicide, and the new ways in which kings related to their subjects and kinsmen, which included the increasing use of violence.
Part II

SETTING THE STAGE
2

Owambo pre-colonial societies

The remote past

Like de Heusch, I will begin from the premise that the Owambo rituals described here have their roots deep in pre-colonial society, and that when they changed in pre-colonial and colonial times they still displayed elements of older belief structures and symbolism and reflected historical events addressed through ritual. For this reason it is important to know something about the earlier history of these societies. This chapter gives a brief outline of Owambo prehistory, the migration of the Bantu-speakers into the area, and early European activity in and around it. It concerns the area commonly called Owamboland and describes the Owambo society of the mid-1800s before the repercussions of the exposure to merchant capitalism and colonial powers set in.

Our knowledge of the Owambo area in the remote past rests mainly on the evidence of archaeology, oral tradition and the witness of a few early travellers and traders. The earliest inhabitants were hunter-gatherers and they dominated the scene for a very long time. Their descendants, the San/Bushman/Aakwankala\(^9\) groups, some of which retained a degree of the hunter-gatherer lifestyle, have become the object of intense scholarly attention. Their relations with their agro-pastoralist Bantu-speaking neighbours, commonly called the Owambo, have been studied only very little. An exception is the recent study conducted by Thomas Widlock (2000), which shows that there were extensive early contacts between the Owambo and some of the Hai//om Bushmen groups whose descendants have lived in the fringes of Owamboland for some time.

Judging from archaeological findings at *Kapaku* by the *Okavango River*, Bantu-speaking populations had trickled into northern Namibia from the north before the tenth century AD (Sandelowsky 1971: 4). Not

---

9. I will use the controversial term Bushmen here, because the more recent alternatives, San and Aakwankala, have proved equally inadequate in neutrally picturing the entire number of hunter-gatherer groups in Northern Namibia (see Gordon 1992).
very much is known of the early development of cattle herding and crop growing in northern Namibia. Archaeological evidence from Central Namibia shows that goats and sheep were the first to be domesticated (Sandelowsky 1983: 609). The fact that sheepskins play a prominent role in the ritual activities described in the narratives collected by Emil Liljeblad in the 1930s may be a reminder of that past history. Bovine cattle had taken over the role of sheep before colonial times, however. As early as in 1875 Charles John Anderson noted that sheep did not thrive in Owamboland and had succumbed to a disease called “blood sickness” (Anderson 1875: 229). Thus when sheep are mentioned as part of ritual, the practice dates back to a time before 1875. There are vivid recollections of the use of sheepskins in rituals in the early 1930s. This suggests that the informants also spoke more generally about customs as they were practiced before the 1870s and before the arrival of the first Europeans.

Twentieth-century anthropologists and the South African colonial administration have emphasised the differences between agro-pastoral groups and hunter-gatherers in the area. In the traditions of the agro-pastoralist Owa mbo there is also a tendency to underline the differences between them and the hunting and gathering Bushmen. Early evidence (Sandelowsky 1983: 609) points towards contact between these groups, however, and indicates that these populations also mixed with one another. Frieda Williams’ study (1991) brings out this aspect of the past very clearly. A careful reading of mythic tradition and ritual practice reveals the pivotal role of Bushmen in the creation of Owa mbo kingship.

There were many ways in which the early Owa mbo agro-pastoralists and the Bushmen interacted. The Owa mbo groups acquired knowledge about copper and salt excavation from Bushman groups in the area (Gordon 1992: 25–27). They also learned hunting techniques and hunting organization from them. A system of barter between the agro-pastoralist and the Bushmen was well developed in the mid-1800s. To what extent the groups also influenced each other in matters concerning religion and symbolism has not been thoroughly investigated. Reverence of the sun and of the “sacred fire” was part of Owa mbo traditions and those of the Bushmen. The cult of the eland-antilope among the early Bushmen (Vinnicombe 1974) may have some connection with the Owa mbo sacrifice of the Roan Antelope, commonly called ombambi, which plays a role both in kingly inauguration and in fertility ritual.
A common assumption is that Bantu-speaking agro-pastoralists trickled down from the north and east to the area called Owamboland over a long period of time, and that they conquered, absorbed or assimilated hunter-gatherers and pastoralists on their way (cf. Marks 1980: 8–10). However, the reverse also occurred. Hunter-gathering clans came to rule over immigrant agro-pastoralist clans or intermarried with them, but such constellations are often played down in oral history. Myths of migration and of the origin of kingship shed some light on the early history of the ancestors of the Owambo, but the historical and the mythical merge in these accounts.

Early European activity

The historically documented movements of Europeans in and around the area help place the Owambo in the context of African pre-colonial developments, and are therefore briefly described here, drawing on Harri Siiskonen’s study (1990). For a long time Owamboland\(^{10}\) remained unknown to European traders, who entered the area only after the 1840s. Local Owambo tradition and colonial records indicate that there were few Europeans in Owamboland until the 1850s. By that time trade contacts with Europeans had been established, towards the north with Portuguese traders and towards the south with traders of English and Swedish origin, who approached the area from Walvis Bay in the south.

Portuguese explorers had visited the coast of South West Africa on their way to India already in the late fifteenth century. About a hundred years later, in 1576 and 1617, the harbours of Luanda and Benguela were established on the Angolan coast. It took many centuries before the interior of this part of Africa became known to Europeans, however. Portugal ceased its protectionist trade policy and its state monopoly of ivory in Angola in the early 1800s, and the slave trade was abolished in 1834. These measures opened up European trade in the area. As a consequence, the harbour town of Mossamedes was founded in 1840. Bernardino Brochado established the first trading posts up-country in southern Angola in 1844. The Portuguese in Angola knew about the abundant resources in

\(^{10}\) This term which was coined in colonial times is used parallel to “Owambo” to depict the area in question. I use the terms “the Owambo “or Aajamba, a Bushman term for their Owambo neighbours, when I refer to the Bantu-speaking people of the area.
cattle and ivory in the south, but as long as these goods could be obtained more easily in the area around Mossamedes “there was no rush into Owa-
mboland”. For a long time European traders active further south were not interested in exploring the interiors of Owamboland. It was only at the end of the 1700s that they showed some interest in the local assets: rhinoceros, elephants, ostriches and giraffes. Copper finds in the middle part of present Namibia also awakened a certain interest, but due to heavy transportation costs it soon fizzled out (Siiskonen 1991: 90, 91).

The first European traders from the south arrived in Owamboland in 1851 together with a group of Oorlam-Nama from central Namibia. Under Jaeger Afrikaner and later under Jonker Afrikaner, in the 1840s and 1850s, the Oorlam-Nama gained control over large parts of the lands of central Namibia, including the lands of the Herero, who were the southern neighbours of the Owa mbo. The Oorlam-Nama jealously controlled foreign traders’ access to the northern parts of Namibia. As Jonker’s hold began to weaken, two European traders, Francis Galton and Charles John Anderson, were able to trade arms with the Herero in 1849 without Jonker’s permission. One year later, in 1850, they negotiated with Jonker for permission to make an expedition to the north. They left the following year and arrived in Ondonga, the southernmost of the Owambo societies in June 1851 (Siiskonen 1991: 93, 95, 96). This visit marked the beginning of interaction between Owambo kings and European traders. From this time on the area was marked by the rivalry between northern and the southern agents of European influence – first the traders and then the missionaries and the colonial powers. Kings played out this tension for their own benefit when they could, for trade and for the local power games that they engaged in among themselves (cf. Eirola 1992).

How Owambo societies were formed

The early Owambo were agro-pastoralist Bantu speakers who migrated to the country from the north and north-east. They settled along the annually flooded riverbeds, the oshana, of the Kuvelai flood plains between the Kunene River in the West and the Kavango River in the east¹¹. Between the oshana lay areas of omusati forest and savanna or grass thickets

¹¹. Edwin Loeb traced various waves of settlement on the basis of oral tradition (1962), and his work should be consulted on details of this process.
Figure 2 Map of Owambo kingdoms on both sides of Angolan border (source: Map of Owamboland by Manning and Schwartz 1918. Map Collection H 38214, NAW. Map Collection H. 3841. NAW: Angola. Reichs-Kolonialamt: Map of Middle Africa. FMSA: Mayo 1882. supplement map)

(Williams 1988: 33). For a long time vast forest lands separated the individual settlements and societies from each other. Figure 2 showing the different Owambo societies as they featured in the early 1900s shows the vast open spaces between the different Owambo kingdoms on both sides of the Angolan border.
Gwyn Prins (1980) presented three concepts borrowed from the Lozi of Zambia, the “the time of myth”, “the time of tradition” and “historical time” by which to distinguish between three eras in the history of Africa. There is qualitatively quite different historical evidence from these eras and they should not be confused. The period of Owambo migration, which historians suggest would have begun about 1550–1600, falls within both “mythical time” and “the time of tradition” in which, according to Prins, (1980: 27) “the sequencing is related to structural concerns and does not mirror “chronological distances” – unlike “historical times” from which we have documentation of events. We know that there was an accelerated migration within Angola in the 1500s. The Imbangala expanded into Southern Angola and put pressure on the Owimbundu to move further south. As a consequence, local groups moved out and these included the groups that moved into Owamboland and gradually formed the Bantu-speaker settlements there. These dispersed groups merged and realigned under various leaders. The sources convey the contrary notions that at the time of the migrations there were already “kings”, and that local groups were not yet united under common leadership. Still they spoke of heroes who founded distinct Owambo societies.

Owambo societies were created through the merging of distinct migratory Bantu groups with local populations over a long span of time. According to Estermann (1976: 177), the aggregation of members of different clans into a common “society” took place through endogamy among people occupying a certain area. Gradually, too, linguistic cohesion developed, distinguishing one group from another. A method of indicating the common lifestyle of a group also emerged: the prefix oshi- was added to the name of the group – the same prefix that signified its dialect. Oshi-ndonga thus signified not only the Ondonga language but also “the Ondonga way” of living. There is an abundance of myths but very little historical evidence of the birth of Owambo kingship. It is possible that the pattern through which it emerged, among the Mbundu, by means of titles that were associated with powerful symbols representing a spirit, also pertained to Owamboland, but there is very little data showing that this was so (cf. Miller 1976, Williams 1991).

The area historically inhabited by the Owambo is situated nowadays in part in the north of Namibia and in part in Southern Angola. The Namibian part of the Owambo area comprises a little less than a tenth of the country’s total surface area, 823,144 km² (Siiskonen 1990: 35). There is no
agreement on the origin of the name “Owambo”\textsuperscript{12}. T.H. Een, a Swedish trader travelling in the area in the 1860s, held that the name was originally given by the Herero cattle-keeping neighbours living further south to indicate the area in the north inhabited by agriculturists (Een, 1872: 28). Owamboland was a term that Europeans used for the area.

In colonial times the majority of the Owambo south of the Angolan border lived in seven separate societies, Ondonga, Uukwambi, Uukwanyama, Ongandjera, Ombalantu, Uukwaluudhi and Uukolonkadhi. Ongandjera was the most powerful one in the early 1800s but by the mid-1800s Ondonga and Uukwanyama took that position. Most of these societies were kingdoms, but relatively recently consolidated. Several of them, Uukwambi, Ombandja and Ondonga, had split in two and were reunited at some point in time. Uukolonkadhi and Ombalantu had no central power in the mid-1800s and have been described as “kingless” or “republican” societies in contemporary commentary\textsuperscript{13}.

Although our sources usually portray “Owamboland” of colonial times as comprising the seven societies of German South West Africa, culturally the Owambo extended into southern Angola in the north. Although some small non-centralised societies by the border and close to the Kunene River, Ndongwena, Ondombondola, Ehinga, Kwamatwi and KwanKwa, are seldom mentioned in descriptions of Owamboland by observers from the south, they were also part of the Owambo cluster. Evale and Ehanda on the Kuvelai River lying north of Uukwanyama, and Kafima situated to the north-east, are also sometimes counted as Owambo societies\textsuperscript{14}. These societies have historical ties with the Owambo of the South West from the time of migration and there are also discernible ties between the Owambo and the Kwangali-speaking groups on the Okavango River.

Oral tradition in the form of cosmogonic and migrational tales portrays the “Owambo past” as being one. It also links the Owambo with the Herero as co-travellers on their migrational journeys. There are rich variations on the theme of how Owambo societies were created. Migra-

\textsuperscript{12} For a discussion on the origin of the term Owambo, see Eirola (1988) and Williams (1991).

\textsuperscript{13} Uukolonkadhi had never been centrally governed and Ombalantu had no common chief for all of the colonial era (Tötemeyer 1978: 12).

\textsuperscript{14} Väänänen further includes Nkumbi and Ombuenge in the list of Owambo societies north of the Angolan border (FMSC Hp 64. 1. 1924).
tion tales list Oshamba in Ondonga as the geographical site from which “all other Owambo societies” spread out. Ondonga is also held to be the mother of other societies, proliferating from this original home. This image of the past is a simplification of historical realities. Oral witness speaks of a more complicated pattern of migration, of merging and re-grouping among the people who travelled into Owamboland and settled there over a long period of time. Many of the Owambo societies that were formed later are reported to have taken in their population through different routes. The small societies in the west do not feature in the common tales of migration in which the Ondo nga, the Uukwanyama the Uukwambi and the Ongandjera take centre stage.

The years of Owambo rule are remembered down to the mid-1800s or, at most, to the second decade of the century. Oral tradition describes earlier times and provides long lists of kings but the reigns of most of them are undated. Although it is not always possible to judge the historical accuracy of the oral accounts and although the length of the lists varies, the narratives do give some insight into the history and development of the individual kingdoms, and show how hegemonic oral tradition chose to picture the society’s past. It is generally agreed that Owamboland was dominated by the Ongandjera in the early 1800s, but exactly what form this domination took beyond extensive cattle raiding we do not know. Owambo kings and the kingly were called Aakwaniilwa after the first mythical Ongandjera queen, Niilwa. She also appears in tales about the birth of society in other Owambo traditions. Thus Ongandjera provided the symbolic prototype of kingship among the Owambo over a wide area, and dominated other Owambo societies before the mid-1800s. Ondonga provided the symbolic geographical origin of settled Owambo society.

Oral tradition explains the power of Ongandjera kingship over other Owambo as accomplished through superior military technology acquired from the Bushmen (cf. Msc Shinana). The Ongandjera Queen Nangombe and her consort Iileka had, with the help of the Bushmen and their poisoned arrows, “defeated”¹⁵ most Owambo kingdoms (Williams 1991: 133). Of all the consulted Owambo kingly genealogies that of Ongandjera is the longest. Seven rulers are listed between Queen Nangombe

¹⁵. This is how Williams expressed the power of Ongandjera (1991), although the expression does not seem to signify armed conquest but rather referred to power of a different kind.

2 · Owambo pre-colonial societies  65
and the first king, whose ruling years are documented (Amunyela gwa Tshaningwa 1858–1862). Given the fact that the average rule of an Owa-mbo king was 15 years\(^{16}\), Nangombe and Iileka are thus likely to have ruled some time in the second half of the 18th century. A closer look at the sources reveals that Nangombe and Iileka were brought to power not only by superior war technology but also by ritual superiority. Potent war charms were held to influence their success at war. It was the intervention of power charms, not the military skills of the combatants, that was thought to determine the outcome in battle (Williams 1991: 133).

Ongandjera’s grip on the rest of Owamboland was gradually loosening. We do not know exactly what caused it. Ondonga and Uukwanyama rose to become the largest and most populous of the Owa-mbo societies by the mid-nineteenth century and the kings had now consolidated their power within their realms. King Nangolo dh’Amutenya (1820–1857) gained the upper hand over local headmen of the kingly clan in Ondonga, and in Uukwanyama King Haimbili yaHaufiku (1811–1858) asserted his independence in relation to the Humbe kings (cf. Williams 1991). Given the fact that kingship was not consolidated in Ondonga or independent in Uukwanyama until the early and mid-1800s, and the fact that Ongandjera dominated a large part of Owamboland at this time, the “kings” which were listed by Williams (1991) and others (Namuhuya 1999) for Ondonga and Uukwanyama before this time could not have had complete political control. This was probably also the case for other Owa-mbo societies in the mid-1800s.

When referring to the past, local narratives featured the terms for a king, omukwaniilwa (Ondonga), ohamba (Uukwanyama), for leaders with varying degrees of political power. It seems that the ideology of kingship was there in a rudimentary form before the political and military consolidation of kingship took place. Referring to Uukwanyama, Ondonga, Ongandjera and Uukwambi, Williams asserts that “the religious element and ritual practices were the most important elements which formed the ideological basis of these kingdoms” (1991: 98). In the mid-1800s the king was at the apex of the hierarchy in the majority of Owa-mbo societies. Kings were also called omwene gu’oshi lo ngo, which comes close to an

---

\(^{16}\) This figure was arrived at by counting the years of reign of all kings in Williams’ king lists that are given ruling years and dividing them by the number of kings in question.
“honorary title” and translates as “the lord of the land”. The other terms were more abstract terms for kingship, often extended to encompass the entire kingly clan.

The borders between the Owa mbo kingdoms were seldom contested. Natanael Shinana (MSC Shinana) explained that borders were sanctified and marked by diviners and they did not change despite the raiding that sometimes extended across them. With the increasing population they expanded, however, towards the unsettled bush-land or forests between the societies. This development is revealed when comparing maps of Owa mbo societies from different years; the “wilderness” between kingdoms tends to diminish over time. As in many other pre-colonial African societies, the ruler’s domain was, in the first instance, his following, and only secondarily the land he lived on. Warfare for the purpose of expanding a king’s land was unheard of, and territorial expansion was never a reason for war (MSC Namuhuya). However, neighbouring kings often involved themselves in the succession contests of a kingdom and this sometimes involved military intervention. When wars were waged between these societies it was, as a rule, for cattle and later also for slaves. Borders were revised sometimes, however, such as when a powerful kingdom attached a peripheral ward of a neighbouring society to its realm, or when a king sought to bring a group without a central power under his rule. At one time Ongandjera expanded into the cattle-grazing areas of its neighbours to provide grazing for its increased herds. Sometimes too, a kingdom split in two after disagreement over succession. This happened in Ondonga in 1885.

Thus before merchant capitalism took hold in the mid-1800s, many of the Owa mbo polities were consolidating a relatively novel and vulnerable centralised rule by kings. Kingly lineages had risen above others and were able to display wealth and redistributive capacities of a superior kind. Rulers were under constant pressure to display their power in relation to lineage heads and wealthy men and they manifested it in a system of client relationships ranging from the household level to the kingly level. The powers emanating from the sphere of spirits was part of this structure.

An Owa mbo king was thus not only under the obligation to exhibit political and economic power, manifested in a large following, a big herd, and many wives tilling a large field. He also had to show that he mastered the fertility of the land, which meant that he needed access to rituals
that put him in touch with the spirits and deities of the ancestors of the land. These were apparently in the hands of specific clans and lineages at one time, just like among the Merina in Madagascar (cf. Bloch 1989). The kings were traditionally understood to be the locus of well-being and prosperity. According to an Owambo saying “The king is like a pot of porridge, it feeds the people”. This once seems to have been a reality on the ground judging from the early observations of European travellers.

**Social structure, ecology and economy**

*Structure and space*

The Owambo societies were basically similar in their core social dimensions: the descent system, the economic basis, the political structure and the religion. In all of them descent was counted matrilineally, although the paternal clan did have some significance. The basic agricultural production unit was the homestead, *egumbo*¹⁷, ruled by the head, *omwene gu’egumbo*. Dwelling was patrilocal. Above the homesteads were wards, *omikunda* (sing. *omukunda*), consisting of clusters of ten to twelve neighbouring homesteads under a ward head, *omwene guomukunda*. There was another administrative level in colonial times, the *oshikandjo* or district but it is unclear whether this existed in pre-colonial times. It was introduced by the colonial masters at least in Ondo nga, Uukwambi and Uukwanyama (*MSC Kaulinge, MSC Kandongo, MSC Liedker*). On the other hand it seems to have existed in earlier times in some form, judging from the information we have from Uukwanyama concerning an annual ekandjo council that decided on important matters of society in the absence of the king (Loeb 1962). The term ekandjo was also the name used for possessive Big Bird spirits which were an essential element in the male circumcision ritual in Uukwanyama. This suggests that in pre-kingship times there was a common religious authority above the kin groups encompassing smaller geographic entities¹⁸ than the kingdoms.

According to tradition as remembered, in olden times kings were at the apex of society surrounded by a council of advisors called *aagandji-*

¹⁷. The Oshindonga version of local terms are used as a rule, and when necessary the oshikwanyama variation of a word is added.

¹⁸. For identifying the local dimension of ekandjo I am indebted to Meredith McKittrick (pers. comm. 2003).
mayele in Ondonga (MSC Shindondola). The members of the kingly clan, aakwaniilwa, were also in a position of power; often being headmen of wards. The sons of kings, called aana yokombanda in Ondonga (ibid.) had special privileges. Clan headmen were important in the kingly administration because they were able to link members of their kin to kingship. They were also able to adopt spiritual powers that the clans mastered in the form of charms and rituals¹⁹.

Where there were no kings, headmen from different parts of the country competed for power. The clans they represented have never been the object of systematic study. When there was no central political authority ritual heads, which took precedence over ritual, could exert power over the whole country, as was the case in Ombalantu after King Kampaku (Kamhaku) was ousted and the country became “kingless”. The ritual head became a successful warlord over time (cf. ELC, McKittrick 1995, Williams 1992). This fact illuminates the strong anchorage of society in authority of a religious kind, as Williams noted. In the case of Ombalantu, spiritual leadership re-aligned the country devoid of a formal political head.

Ideas about spirits of the land and of the wilderness permeated the Owa mbo conceptualisation of ecological space. The trader Frederick Green, who travelled in the area in 1866²⁰, noted that there was a great contrast between the landscapes of the kingdom, oshilongo, or the inhabited part of the country, and the surrounding wilderness. The inhabited lands were separated by a vast belt of forest or savanna. The missionary Albin Savola estimated that the distance between kingdoms could be up to 60 km in the 1860s (Savola FMSA EAC: 22). This was the space occupied by the hunting and gathering groups of Bushmen, called Aakwankala²¹ in Owa mbo vocabulary (Williams 1988: 41). The Owa mbo feared this land because it was seen to belong to the wild animals. There were ritual precautions taken when one left the oshilongo. The rules of society ceased to apply in the “wilderness”, and therefore ritual leaders were chosen to

¹⁹. The kings needed headmen of other clans because “The people form other clans may have eyes to see”, for instance they know if the king’s beer has been “poisoned” (MSC Usko Shivute: 1). Shivute alludes here to an inward seeing power, a spiritual prerogative of clan leaders.


²¹. The Ondo nga called only the Hei//om by this name.
head expeditions beyond the oshilongo. These leaders performed protective rituals and supervised the keeping of specific taboos and rules of behaviour during the soujourn in the wild. The dangers of “wild animals” were certainly a real threat in the forest. It seems, however, that the spirits of these wild animals were dangerous for the Owa mbo not only in themselves but also because they were controlled by the Bushmen and not by the Owa mbo²². Such spirits belong to a grey zone of knowledge on which this study attempts to throw some light.

Agriculture, cattle tending, trade and cattle raids were the cornerstones of the traditional Owa mbo economy. The different kingdoms displayed a basic structural similarity but they varied with regard to the ecological conditions provided by the environment. Each had its own distinct historical background expressed in myths of origin and in stories about old times. All were agro-pastoralist but there were more cattle in the northern ones, Uukwanyama and Ombadja, which had better pastures.

The agricultural calendar

Agriculture was the basis of the Owa mbo economy and agricultural activities structured the seasonal calendar. Differentiation between Owa mbo societies in economic activities was reflected in the annual ritual cycle, which was slightly different in each one. In years of regular rainfall, the Small Rains fell from September to November. This was when the first seeding commenced “one evening when the clouds pile up very black as a portent of thunderstorm” (Estermann 1976: 133). When the seeds sprouted the sprouts were separated and re-planted in small mounds on heaps of dry land in order to protect them from the flooding rivers. (Borkowsky 1975: 40). Weeding was done in the summer, othinge, lasting from November to February (Williams 1991: 40). The Big Rains came from December to February and the harvesting season lasted until the beginning of May. Each economic activity of the calendar year was regulated by taboos and ritual prescription with regard to when it could begin and by what intervention it was set off. Many new activities were an-

²². In the eyes of old Owa mbo the distinction between animals and Bushmen was not always made clear; “the latter were looked upon as animals” (MSC Namuhuya, Ondonga).
nounced by elders, some by kings. Permission to taste of the new crop had to be granted by the king. He regularly opened the harvest season by being the first to taste all the new crops, and in so doing he opened the season for his subjects. Similar rules pertained to the spoils of various activities, salt fetching, hoe-making, raids and trade. The ripening of each crop called for first-fruit rituals, *osipe*, which regulated the consumption of the harvest. Such occasions were called New Year, because the sacrifice of the tasting of the new crop opened a new cycle of production. These were important ritual cross-overs. When such rituals were regulated by a king it meant that the king had power over the fruit of the earth and over human labour.

The time of planting, however, was decided individually in each household. Tilling the soil was women’s work. The major crops, *omahangu* (millet, *poenissetum galucum*) and *iilyalyaaka* (sorghum) provided the staple foods, porridge, *oshimbombo*, and beer, *ontaku*. The first crop available was the fruit of the wild Marula tree, of which an intoxicating drink, *omaongo* was made. The time of drinking omaongo in February and March was a quiet time work-wise, between the Big Rains and the harvest. Drinking went on for several weeks and during this time carrying weapons was prohibited. Harvest time from March until May was followed by the dry winter season, *okufu*, lasting from May until August, a time for other activities. Now the fields were cleared and the stubble was cut for making roofs for houses. Cattle were allowed to graze on what remained. Expeditions that could not be undertaken during busy times in the agricultural cycle or that were hindered by rains in the Owa mbo summer took place in wintertime: salt fetching, *ekango*, iron-excavating expeditions, *oshimanya* and trade. This was also the high season for cattle raiding.

*Hunting, foraging, raids and other expeditions*

As a means of livelihood foraging, hunting and fishing complemented agriculture. An abundance of fruit, roots, and nuts were collected in the bush by the women. In the colonial era these fruits of the wild were called *veldkos*. In years of good rain when the rivers flooded, fish and frogs formed an important addition to the diet. The boys hunted small game around the homesteads and the men big game in the forest. Raiding the cattle of neighbouring groups was an established practice all over Owamboland. This was originally on a small scale and involved
little bloodshed. When the Owanbo spoke of “war” they mostly meant raids for cattle and later for slaves. Some borders were “sanctified”, after which trespassing ceased, which was the case with the border between Uukwambi and Ondonga after 1868. Raided cattle augmented the local herds and served to strengthen the stock. A man could barter such cattle with his neighbours. This was not the case with cattle inherited, which belonged to the clan (MSC Shinana, Uukwanyama). People captured in raids were either exchanged for ransom or integrated into the local society without being stigmatised. There were some ritual restrictions, but “slaves”²³ taken in raids could, over time, rise to positions of considerable influence. Wars and raids did not prevent trading between belligerent kingdoms. “Even in wars traders were never attacked” (MSC Kaulinge).

Products bartered locally included salt, iron hoes, axes and weapons, pottery and ritual paraphernalia. In Uukwanyama iron excavation and forging was an important economic activity. The Kwanyama lived close to the iron fields in Angola, which were called oshimanya, and they went there each year on iron-fetching trips. They forged the iron into hoes, omatemo, axes, omakuwa, spearheads, omaonga, knives oimbele and other implements (MSC Haiduwa) and bartered these items with their neighbours. Salt from the Etosha pan played a similar role in the economy of southern Owanbo, including Ongandjera, Ondonga, Uukwambi, and Ukwaludhi. It was collected on annual expeditions and formed into cones that were used as the main item of exchange with neighbours.

The Uukwambi women made pottery from soft clay found in their region and bartered the pots with neighbouring groups. All of these extractive and productive activities were accompanied by ritual, which was held to be decisive for any success. The meat of sacrificial animals was the food of festive occasions. This was when bovine cattle were consumed. These and other domesticated animals only were used as sacrificial animals, with the exception of the small antelope (Silvicapria gramma), the ombambi.

²³. I use this term in inverted commas to distinguish war captives from slaves later taken captive for exchange with European traders. The fate of the latter was invariably gruesome, which was not the case with the former.
The cattle economy

Cattle were the visible and prominent feature of every household. They were a measure of the wealth of the homestead and of the status of its owner and cattle constituted the “social” and “ritual” capital that kept the society functioning. They were the pride and joy of the Owa mbo. The milk of cows was consumed but the meat was only eaten as part of ritual sacrifices. Cattle were rather a measure of wealth and prestige, and served as a link to the spiritual world. According to Frieda Williams, Owa mbo cattle were used for “breeding, sacrifice, inheritance, bride-wealth, for refund or ransom and for barter”. It is not insignificant that she mentions barter last (1991: 42). As Ferguson noted in the context of Lesotho, the cattle economy of the Owa mbo was, in colonial times, part of “a cultural order, which is invisible to utilitarian theory”. In Owa mbo societies too, “cattle transcend(ed) the economical in their cultural significance” (Ferguson 1994: 137). There was a reluctance to barter cattle, even in times of drought, before trade with the Portuguese commenced in the 1860s.

Cattle created relations between master and client and were a potential avenue for wealth for the client (Jeremia Ekandjo Ongandjera, ELC 1093: 522–1523). Gifts of cattle created prestige for the receiver if the giver was of high rank (Kotze 1968: 113). Cattle influenced society by regulating human relations. They were also important in the ritual economy of the Owa mbo by serving as links to ancestors and the spiritual world in at least two ways: some were killed for sacrifice and some were kept alive in the herd and elevated to a special position. The most important sacrifice to an ancestor spirit was a cattle sacrifice. In some cases this substituted human sacrifice which was held to have been more common in earlier times. Sacrificial cattle thus equalled human beings in status: their slaughter opened the channels to the spiritual world. Sacred cattle opened the way to the spirit world when alive. There were “name bulls” that hosted the soul of their owner or served as the owner’s “alter ego” and these could not be killed during the owner’s lifetime. A name bull had an extraordinary “seer capacity” in that it served as a medium for messages from the spiritual world.

A cow or a bull could be “sacred” because of its origin, or it could be ritually elevated to “sacredness”. In many ways the role of cattle in society resembled that of the king: like the king, some cattle transcended the divide between this world and the beyond. As with kings too, the social
and religious aspects were intertwined: they both symbolised wealth and they carried spiritual power.

This chapter has briefly sketched the early history and formation, the structure, ecology and economy of pre-colonial Owanbo societies. The chapter to follow elaborates on aspects that tied kingship to this cultural background. It deals with local presentations of society and kingship in myths and tales of origins. It presents the images of kingship conveyed through king lists. Comparing different king lists from the same society reveals aspects of kingship that are generally overlooked or deliberately ignored.
Kingship as portrayed in myth and king lists

The witness of myth

Oral tradition and king lists provide a means through which the ideology of kingship is constructed and perpetuated. Myth, tradition and history tend to merge in Owa mbo oral tradition and king lists. Myths and tales are a rich source of information on how a people understands the universe, society and its own past. Beyond presenting a view of history, a king list can be read as a political statement about the past and as a mirror of the self-image of a society. I discuss both in this chapter in order to illustrate how my twentieth-century informants transmitted the image of their society and kings handed down through tradition. Owa mbo myths manifest a preoccupation with kingship and refer to many of the essential symbols that feature in the rituals of kingship. They give clues to aspects that otherwise would go unnoticed and bring up issues that reveal hidden aspects of the powers of sacred kings. Below I introduce some Owa mbo cosmogonic myths, migration stories and tales about the beginning of kingship and discuss what they convey of the overt ideology of Owa mbo kingship and what they reveal of some of the covert aspects.

I see surviving Owa mbo myths and narratives of the past as part of a large body of oral heritage selected according to the political and social agendas of the time in which they were told (cf. Miller 1976, Prins 1988). In the Owa mbo heritage, cosmogonic myths and stories about early migration heroes and stories about the origin of kingship merge. These narratives serve many purposes: they provide a theory of how the world was created, they describe how Owamboland was populated and how kingship was formed, and they suggest how these processes were related. Inadvertently they also reveal muted aspects of negotiation for hegemony with the very first inhabitants of the land. Contradictions and discrepancies between the different stories are significant in that they indicate aspects of the past that tend to be forgotten.
Owambo cosmogonic myths are placed in mythical or primordial time but they also link up with verifiable historical events and the historical movement of population groups. According to two cosmogonic myths, transmitted by the missionary Otto Närhi, the world and man were created by Kalunga, the “Great Spirit” or “God” of the Owambo. The first story goes like this:

There were two great waters which brought to bear the dry land. Meja gaali manene ga vala ekukutu. These two waters were explained to be of opposite sexes [...]. Kalunga, or God created man at the shore of some big river from the marrow of a bulrush. According to common belief, in those bulrushes the traces of Kalunga can still be seen. (Närhi 1929: 14, 15)

Another tale, also told by Närhi, gives the place where the creation of man took place and also gives the names of the human beings first created:

Kalunga created man in a Makuku tree between Ondonga and Tsumeb²⁴. He created man by hand from the marrow of a reed right close to the joint, where according to the Owambo the finest part of the marrow is situated. Kalunga put his mouth to the mouth of the human being and blew, he pressed his chest and the man began to breathe. Kalunga created the man first and called him Mangundu, which means ”many men”. Then he created woman, whose name we do not know [...]. (Närhi 1929: 14, 15)

The woman, it appears, is not important in this version of the story as she has no name. In the next section of the story we are told that Magundu’s wife brought forth two sons Kavi and Nangombe²⁵. These two people feature as the forefathers of the Owambo and the Herero. Humankind began to multiply when Kavi and Nangombe married their sisters. This was “sacred time”: people lived long and ate of the fruits of the trees

²⁴. Tsumeb lies south of Owamboland in the area that was populated in colonial times by white settlers and where copper mines were situated from pre-colonial times onward.
²⁵. Kavi is called Kazi or Kanzi in other tales. Some of these refer to Nangombe and Kavi as women.
and the game of the forest and drank milk, there were no ailments, and people multiplied rapidly. Then a third group emerged, the Bushmen (Närhi 1929: 14, 15).

In the two cosmogonic tales related above, a riverbed and the trunk of a Makuku (Omukuku) tree (Combretum imberbe) feature as the site at which human beings emerged (Rautanen 1903: 328), or they were emerging out of a termite mound. Abraham Amweelo told the termitary version as follows:

God created Amagundu and his wife. God struck with a stick onto a termite mound and it became “Ombalulu”\(^1\). God said “Get out of there”. And out came two human beings, a man and a woman. The name of the man was Amagundu [...]. (Amweelo ELC 193: 427)\(^2\)

When the Ondonga king went through the uu pule ritual for his inauguration at the termite mound he was, according to Amweelo’s tale above, at a site abounding with spirit and the utmost fertile potency; the power to bring forth mankind. This creation story provides more information on the very first people that God created. The life of Kavi and Nangombe that feature in Närhi’s story is described in more detail. They are called Kanzi and Nangombe here:

Amagundu sired two children, Kanzi and Nangombe, both boys, and then two girls. When these children grew, the boys went out hunting, the girls foraging. They were out for a very long time, long enough for them to forget what their siblings looked like. One day, when Kanzi was moving about in the forest, far away from his parent’s home, he saw someone who looked like a human being. It was a girl. He captured her and wanted to make her his wife. The girl resisted and wanted to go home to her parents, but after wandering for many days and resting in the forest for many nights, the boy said, we are lost, why don’t we make a house here and you become my wife. The girl was reluctant, but finally conceded. “What else can I do now?”, she said. Much later they found the house of her parents. To their surprise it turned out also to be the house of his parents. They were siblings! Now they consulted their parents on what to do. The parents concluded that

---

\(^{1}\) Ombalulu means “spirits”, according to Tirronen (1986: 209) “exclusively ill-tempered ones”.

\(^{2}\) A version of this tale of Amagundu and his wife emerging out of a termite mound was presented by Pettinen in 1926 (Band XVII Heft 1).
since they have already lived together, the situation must be accepted, and brother and sister may stay a couple. Later Nangombe wanted to marry the other sister. He, too, got permission to do this from the parents. Nangombe stayed with his parents, Kanzi moved to Hereroland. (Amweelo ELC 193: 427–433)

Thus in the Owa mbo story of the creation, human society originated from an incestuous relationship between two siblings, the children of the first human couple. Herero traditions show an affinity with these Owa mbo ideas. On the role of the Bushmen, however, there are a number of different views and there is no consensus about the identity of “the first people”. In another story, also told by Abraham Amweelo, it was from the Makuku tree that human beings emerged. The creation of man took place, as it were, “one generation later”, with Nangombe and Kanzi. The Bushman was already there before God created man:

Kalunga split the Makuku-tree in two and out came four people, Kanzi and Nangombe and their two wives. They met a little reddish man with big buttocks dwelling by the tree. God ordered the people to work. Nangombe and Kanzi grabbed the cattle and tools that Kalunga had spread out for them. The little red man took the digging stick that the others had left. Then God ordered them to leave, and the little red man went to the forest, Kanzi went south and Nangombe went to Ondonga with his wife. (Abraham Amweelo ELC 192: 426–7)

In this story the Bushmen are allowed space in primordial times but they are not part of the creation story as Kanzi and Nangombe are: they are part of nature. They appeared either before or after God created the first people. The “little reddish man”, who was there before God’s intervention, had no name in Amweelo’s story. He “went to the forest”. This reflects real historical development. Bantu speakers ousted the autoch-

28. In one version conveyed by Vedder (1934: 160) the first couple are called Noni and Janoni. In a less common variation of the cosmogonic story the first couple are called Nulua and Namba (Rautanen 1903: 328).
29. Luttig, who wrote about the Herero (1933), mentions a creation myth according to which God (here Mukuru) created the first people from inside a tree (Luttig 1933: 47–48). Brauer (1925) recognised as Herero myths of origin both the tale of man emerging from a reed and that of man emerging from a tree.
30. It appears that one generation, that of Mangundu, is skipped in this version of the tale.
thonous people from the inhabited land and chased them to the forest. However, current research shows that the Bushmen did not always live on hunting and foraging. Placing them “in the forest” has a symbolical aspect to it, signalling that the Bushman’s place was outside society and strengthening the belief that this always was so. Both of Amweelo’s accounts play down and marginalise the Bushman element in Owambo history, a tendency identified and criticised by Robert Gordon (1992) and Thomas Widlok (1999). In reality, Bushmen often featured in the creation of Owambo societies, as was recognised by Williams (1991).

The role of women is also obscure in the tales that have survived. In most but not all of the myths of origin the heroes are depicted as men, although a few present the founders of society as women. In one version, Kanzi and Nangombe are women and in another the first human beings, called Noni and Janoni, are likewise women. In most of them, however, the first female ancestors, just like the Bushmen, tend to be forgotten, with the exception of Niilwa, the root of kingship. Of the multitude of creation stories some deviate from the common pattern of obliterating Bushmen as part of Owambo history. In one cosmogonic tale from Uukwanyama the Bushmen feature as equals to the Owambo, in fact as their brothers. There are two versions of this tale, one retold by Heinrich Vedder (1985 [1934]) and the other by Edwin Loeb (1962). In Vedder’s story Kalunga created the first human couple from the earth. The woman bore three sons and one daughter. The two older sons were called “cattle man”, Omukuanangombe, and “earth man”, Omukuaneidi. The third son, “the man of fire”, had to “keep the fire going”, and had to “guard the sheep” (Vedder 1934: 160), tasks that are seemingly rather menial, but only superficially so. This third son was called Omukuanhalanga in Loeb’s version of the story, but “his name was not explained”. He was responsible for “the sacred sheep, the sacred fire and the sacred water” (Loeb 1962: 365), all essential symbols of society. Who was Omukuanhalanga? For some reason the third son of Amangundu is given very little attention in most versions.

Judging by Uukwanyama and Ongandjera customs the third son was apparently a Bushman: the kingly fire was guarded by Bushmen. One migration myth about Ongandjera gives Bushmen a role in the perpetuation of the fire of kingship, and they also seem to have been tenders of the sacred kingly fire in Uukwanyama, judging from the fact that the guardianship of the sacred fire, water and sheep was vested with in Roan...
Antelope clan (Loeb 1962: 47). This clan does not appear on any list of Bantu-speaking Owa mbo clans (cf. Williams 1987, 1991, Tuupainen 1962). The lack of reference to the Roan Antelope clan and to the third son of the first human couple seems to reflect the tendency in oral tradition to tone down the contribution of Bushmen in the early development of Owa mbo society.

Migration tales

Owa mbo migration tales, half myth, half history, portray the movement of various Owa mbo groups from Angola. They indicate where groups settled, how they split and continued their journeys, and how eventually certain leaders with their following came to settle in the areas that later became kingdoms. The local populations of the places where the Owa mbo groups moved to are toned down in the memory of the past whereas the links with various groups in Angola and the Herero are emphasised.

There are different views on how the Owa mbo moved into their present area. According to Williams, most Owa mbo believe they have come from the east (1991: 60). One of her sources, Jason Amakutuwa (FWC), indicated, however, that some settlers arrived from Evale in the north. According to Tötemeyer (1978: 3, 4), the forefathers of the Owa mbo travelled together with the Kavango peoples “southwards and thereafter westwards past the head waters of the Zambezi to the banks of the Okavango River”. While the Kavango stayed on, the Owa mbo moved further west “to the grassy plains where they were to establish themselves as tillers of the soil and cattle farmers.” Tötemeyer held that the leaders of these two groups “evidently were two sisters”. If this is a historical fact, the versions of early migration myths that feature female leaders were closer to the truth than those in which the early heroes were men.

Oral tradition indicates that the Owa mbo groups had contact with both Herero and Kavango groups and travelled through areas of their Nyaneka-Nkhumbi neighbours in the north. Similarities in customs and religious ideas witness to an early contact with these neighbouring peoples. According to most Owa mbo traditions, Sitehnu (Sitenu, Shitenue), who established a kingdom in Humbe, is held to be the first leader of the migrating Owa mbo groups. Some of his followers moved under the leadership of Kambungu from Oshimolo in the north-east, not far from the Okavango river, to Hakafia further south (Loeb 1962: 5, Tötemeyer 1978: 3, 4).
This group again split in two, one half moving under the leadership of Kambungu to Oshamba in what later was to become the territory of the Ondonga kingdom, and which is held to be the cradle of “all” Owambo societies. From here the different Owambo groups are thought to have dispersed, eventually forming the kingdoms and societies that existed in colonial times.

According to Loeb, both Kanene (Kahnene) and Kambungu were founders of Uukwanyama. Another member of that family, Hamugandjera, travelled west and founded the Ongandjera society. A third member of this group, Hamukuambi, seceded and settled in Uukwambi, and Uukualudhi separated from it later. Omundongo, a fourth member of the family, stayed in Oshamba and became the leader of the Ondongos, later called the Ondonga. Omundongo, Hamugandjera, Hamukwambi and Hamangundu founded four Owambo societies from which the other societies emerged.

The relationship between the different Owambo societies is pictured as one of kinship: the leaders all came from the same family. In one story told by Abraham Amweelo (ELC 188: 420–421), the dispersion from Oshamba in Ondonga is also described in terms of genealogical relations. Ondonga is the mother or grandmother of other societies created by groups moving out of Oshamba. However, the Ondonga forefathers arrived in Oshamba only after the other groups had moved out (Tötemeyer, 1978: 4). In that case, Ondonga may have been the geographical origin of other Owambo settlements, but the Ondonga population cannot be considered the root of the population of the other societies.

The foundation of Ondonga and Ongandjera · In addition to migration tales about the population of Owamboland in general we also have stories related specifically to the settlement of the individual kingdoms. These tales occur in several versions and they, too, straddle the divide between myth, tradition and historical evidence. The early times of Ondonga are described in a number of heroic tales in which the identity of the “first settler” or “first king” varies: there are stories about Omundongo, Ondonga, Aandonga31, and about Mbwenge (Mbuenge). Omundongo as the founder of Ondonga has a rival in the hero Aandonga or Ondonga32

31. The term Aandonga also signifies “people of Ondonga”.
32. The story about the hunter “Ondonga” was documented and translated by
(apparently the same person), a kind of proto-Ndonga man, the first of the Aandonga. Aandonga has the flavour of a mythical hero and, as in a great number of African legends about founding heroes, he was a “hunter from abroad”. Williams describes Aandonga as a “prince-hunter, who belonged to the Hyena clan of Ombwenge” (1991: 90), who came to hunt in Oshamba, found the place pleasant and unpopulated, and convinced his people from Ombwenge to come and settle there. He did not found a kingdom but he was of the Hyena clan. We do not know what clan Omundongo came from.

The stories about the early settler chief Mbwenge links up with tangible historical realities. Mbwenge came by boat on the flooded riverbed from Okavango and settled with his followers in a spot close to Oshigambo in Ondonga, called Ombala Mbwenge after him. The remnants of Mbwenge’s court are still to be seen (MS eyewitness and MSC Petrus Kamenye). Mbwenge carried a stone from Okavango on which to sharpen his axe and the stone was thought to have magic properties (MSC Kamenye). Thus he brought with him a powerful fetish. It was placed under a fig tree in the shade of which Mbwenge liked to sit, and the spot was later called Omukwiyu Gwemanya, which means “stone under fig tree” (MSC Kamenye: 2). Mbwenge ruled the area north of Omukwiyu Gwemanya. Gradually he enlarged his sphere of influence towards the south. This the local chiefs resented. They beat him up and after this he became weak and eventually died (MSC Kamenye).

Nembulungo, the son of Ngweda of the Snake clan, ruled Ondonga before Mbwenge. Williams identifies him as “the last king from this clan” (1991: 116). According to Erastus Shilongo, Nangombe, the son of Mvula, also called Kayone Mulindi and of the Hyena clan, fought against Mbwenge, killed him and then became king. When Nangombe had defeated Mbwenge, the succession to kingship now was with his clan, that of the Hyena. After Nangombe all subsequent Ondonga kings were from this clan (cf. FWC Shilongo). According to Williams, although he did not rule over all of Ondonga, Mbwenge, was “recognised as a ruler” (1991: 116). We have no stories about the rulers of the Snake clan who preceded

Pettinen (1971: 60–62) and follows a common pattern: a hunter finds fine hunting grounds, and shoots a lot of game with which he impresses his people. He praises the land he has visited as pristine and its game as abundant, and eventually his people follow him to settle on the new land. The story about the Uukwanyama follows the same pattern, with slight variations (see Pettinen 1927: 63–65).
Nangombe, nor of its last king Nembulungo, nor of how the Snake clan rulers were related to the Mbwenge line. In her Master’s Thesis (1988) Frieda Williams refers to the last ruler of the Snake clan as Nambulunga and depicts her as female. There is thus a gap between myth and historical knowledge of the early kings of the Snake clan.

The settlement of Ongandjera · The tales about the origin of Ongandjera (Ongandjela) are at least as varied as those about Ondonga. One tale written down and translated by Pettinen (1971: 66–68) is frequently reiterated and conveys a hegemonic view. It is a story about two herders who quarrelled over a tortoise, and it was from this incident that the creation of Ongandjera derives. This is a summary of Pettinen’s story:

The two men found a tortoise. The one who saw it first did nothing, but the other raised his spear and caught the animal. He was called Ngandjela. The other claimed it, however, on the basis that he had seen it first. Now after this disagreement the men parted. The one who had speared the tortoise was a good herder and he had lots of cattle. He found many wells on the sand desert to the west and he herded his cattle diligently. He moved further to the west and finally reached the seasonal river Tamanzi. He settled there and people from Uukwambi later joined him.”This is how the country finally was founded and it was called Ongandjera after its founder”. (Pettinen 1971: 67, 68)

There is another fuller version of the story. It captures the process of common travel, disagreement and splitting, and the cattle-herding identity of the men becomes irrelevant. What is more, this version brings out the identity of the founder of Ongandjera: he was a Bushman. It was told by Natanael Iitenge who was born in 1856 in Ongandjera. He was one of Liljeblad’s more unusual informants: he had not enrolled for Christian schooling and he was close to 80 years old when he narrated the story. On this basis I suggest that Iitenge’s story witnesses a tradition that was still unaffected by external influences:

The birth of the country of Ongandjera took place in the following way. When the present Ongandjera tribe was still in the forest, a man named Ngandjela Nangombe arrived with his men and cattle from the east into the thicket of Ongandjera. To begin with there had been two families travelling, but when they came over the plains to the edge of
the Ongandjera forest, to the spot where now the wells of Omutekua are situated and they found a tortoise, a fight started between the heads of these two families over the ownership of the tortoise. Angered, the head of the other family had gone back to Ondonga from where he came. Ngandjela continued his journey and when he came to the river Tamanzi and from there to Omusitu he settled down and built a house and cleared a field. Then he and members of his family went back to their former tribe and told them about the good place they had found and in this way they managed to get other relatives a.s.o. to migrate to Ongandjera. This is how Ongandjera society was founded. Ngandjela belonged to the Bushmen family, to the Bushmen race [my italics]. For this reason there are still Bushmen huts in connection with the kingly court. Some Bushmen live at court and are kind of bodyguards (of the king) and they supervise religious customs. Because Ngandjela was a Bushman he and his kinsfolk became the lords of the land. That is why the Bushmen are called the lords of Ongandjera. Likewise they are said to guard over the sacred objects of Ongandjera, although they do not possess them in their own midst. They are the guardian dogs of the court and they are used, among other things, for killing the king, because an ordinary Owambo does not kill kings. The members of the kingly clan came later to Ongandjera, but we do not know how they became rulers. People think that when Ngandjela went to Ondonga to visit, he possibly told his Ondonga hosts, and the host told the king a people cannot be without a king and asked, simultaneously for a kingly person to become ruler. (Iitenge ELC 1332: 1865, 1866)

Other narratives give their version of how kingship came to be in Ongandjera, and not all of them recognise the role of the Bushmen presented here. Iitenge’s account traces their transition from being the lords of the land to the “guardian dogs” at the kingly court. Behind this narrative, however, may be a different reality, the ritual importance of Bushmen, which puts their tasks at court in a different light.

*Stories about the beginning of kingship*

Tales about the beginning of kingship in Ondonga and Ongandjera often merge into migration stories. They attribute its origin to a hero/heroine of kingly descent arriving from the north and laying the foundation for an ordered society. No myths about the first ruling kings in Ondonga have survived. This might not be sheer coincidence because had there
been any they would not have been about a king of the Hyena clan. The stories from Ondonga about the beginning of kingship are more in the genre of migration myths, which suggests that, although the early migration heroes were not chosen kings proper, they might have carried the traditions of kingship with them. Omundongo and Aandonga are not given equal treatment. Omundongo fades out in Ondonga tradition: There are no stories about him and we do not know what clan he belonged to, while we know that Aandonga was of the Hyena clan. He features in the myth as both a society builder and as the first kingly person. As mentioned above, Aandonga found “that the area was unpopulated”, and that there was an abundance of water, fish, fruit trees and fertile land, so he brought his people to Oshamba (Williams 1991: 90).

Kingship was thus pictured as coming from abroad to a virgin land in the form of a “kingly” person, the “prince” Aandonga of the Hyena clan (cf. de Heusch 1985), but kingly rule was not implemented at first (Williams 1991: 90). Was the notion of Aandonga as a prince from abroad real, or was he merely a symbolic construct, created afterwards by mythical tradition? We do not know. In an earlier work (1988) Williams identified Aandonga as a title occurring in neighbouring societies of Angola, possibly travelling with early migrants towards the south. If kingship had travelled with migratory leaders to Owamboland this would explain the elaborate traditions that were adhered to in the mid-1800s, and which could hardly have developed on their own within a short time span after the consolidation of kingship on Owambo soil. Another kingship myth cast as an animal tale supports up the idea that the Hyena were the first kings. A story from Ondonga called “The beginning of kingship” posits the Hyena as the very first rulers. It has been re-told in a number of sources (cf. Williams 1991, Pettinen 1926/1927). It reveals local ideas on what was needed for a king to take power. It also conveys the prerequisite for kingship, the killing of the previous ruler, which was one of the central tenets of the Owambo rules of kingly succession conveyed by local informants. The tale goes as follows:

The animals of the forest had gathered to choose a leader among them because they were tired of quarrelling constantly among one another. They considered a great many animals as a leader but found fault with

33. I have shortened Pettinen’s story considerably and only the sentence in inverted commas is translated verbatim.
all of them. The giraffe had too long a neck to fit into a kingly hut; the lion was too frightful and so on. They settled for the magpie, but he did not have the guts to take the challenge. Then they remembered the hyena. The hyena is quite suitable, all agreed. He is cunning and runs fast. Someone needed to go and ask the hyena. One of those gathered was given the task and he went swiftly to visit the hyena in his den to deliver the message. The hyena, however, was in a bad mood and attacked the messenger. In self-defence the messenger killed the hyena. Coming back to the other animals he was cast down, because of his failure and the accident that occurred. But, lo, the other animals did not carry a grudge. ‘You killed the hyena, now you become the hyena and we make you king instead’, they said, and all since then the hyena have been rulers. (Pettinen 1926/1927: 68, 71)

Ondonga had had an unbroken succession of ten kings\(^{34}\) of the Hyena clan, the Aakwanekamba, spanning nearly a hundred years before Martin Kadhikiwa (Kadhakia), the last king of the German colonial era, was enthroned in 1912 and it still provides the kings of Ondonga. The first leader of this clan was Nangombe followed by Nembungu. Nembungu’s follower, Nangolo dh’Amutenya, ruling in 1820–1857, centralised power in his own hands by subduing local headmen of the kingly clan. However, as mentioned above, before the Hyena clan took power, Nembulungo lya Ngwedha (or Nembulunga) of the Snake or Python clan, Aakuusinda ruled. The Snake or Python clan was the first clan to move from Ombwenge to Ondonga (FWC Shi longo). Together with the Aakwankala or Bushmen, it is still today considered to be “the owners of the land” (Williams 1991: 116).

The Hyena clan as the first king-bearing clan of the Ondonga, conveyed in both the animal tale and in the story of Prince Aandonga, was thus a fictive construct. The Snake clan must have ruled for some time, because Nembulungo is presented as the “last king” from his own clan (Williams 1991: 116). No specific information on the other kings of this clan has survived, but according to the Ondonga historian Hans Namuhuya, Ondonga kings in the 1800s “came from another clan”, and he refers to Nembulungu, Yangutha and Mbwenge (MSC Namuhuya). This suggests that all of them would have been of the Snake clan.

How did the switch of dynasty from the Snake clan to the Hyena clan take place? Liljeblad’s informants do not mention this matter. Mis-

\(^{34}\) The Ondonga kingly genealogies are explained at the end of this chapter.
sionary Martti Rautanen recalls the traditional notion that the Hyena became rulers because of their superior rainmaking skills (Rautanen XXVIII: 2 July 11, 1889: 568). In the local understanding, then, it was not superior military power or political skill that determined which clan took over kingship, but rather the possession of potent charms that could influence nature’s course. This is in accordance with Miller’s thesis (1976) that the religious legitimisation of early kingship in Umbundu in Angola was based on the ownership of potent fetishes attached to political titles.

It also supports Frazer’s theory that rainmaking was important in making kingship in Africa and it is well in tune with de Heusch’s idea that African sacred kings were considered to have power over nature.

By neglecting the kings of the Snake clan and putting Aandonga forward as the first ancestor, Williams presented a history of the Hyena kings in Ondo nga but not of Ondo nga kingship as such. I suggest that the primacy of the Snake clan as rulers shows later on in the build up of Hyena kingship in Ondo nga. The head wives of the kings were taken from the Snake clan well into the 1950s (MSC Namuhuya) and kingly women were also preferably married off with members of the Snake clan. In both cases the marriage of a kingly person to one of the Snake clan was of ritual importance. When a woman of the Snake clan was an Ondo nga king’s head wife, it meant that the Snake clan partook in and, I would argue, contributed to the king’s sacredness by providing a link to the spirits of the early owners of the land. The children a kingly woman of the Hyena clan bore with a husband of the Snake clan were eligible to take the throne. They were also the descendants of a person from the Snake clan in the paternal line. When such a person became king he carried the link to the Snake clan ancestors in his genes. It is not far-fetched to think that the Hyena clan women used intermarriage with members of the Snake clan to ensure the legitimacy of their sons as kings. According to the Ondo nga historian Namuhuya, “Aakuusinda were very powerful” (MSC Namuhuya). I propose that some of their power was of a non-worldly kind, and derived from the position of their ancestors as “early owners of the land”.

Traditions of kingship in Ongandjera · The Ongandjera oral heritage contains a number of stories about the foundation of kingship by a woman called Niilwa (Niilua, Oniilua). These stories carry a certain resemblance to the creation story of the Makukuku tree referred to above. Here, too,
God divided the assets among the people. This, and the fact that kingly persons in other Owambo societies were called *Aakwaniliwa (Aakwanii-lua)*, indicates that Niilwa was an Owambo proto-kingly figure. One of the Ongandjera stories about the birth of kingship told by Hango Nameja (Nameya) incorporates a theory of what it took to become a king, and of how that power was retained. It also describes the economic specialisations of different groups at the time of early Owambo migration:

When Kalunga gave kingship to the people, he went about it as follows. He gathered together all the good things, which are called riches and happiness. He appeared before the people and said to them: “Here are the things, help yourself. Each person may take one object for himself, no one shall take two”. All of them ran to grab and get hold of something. One got a head of cattle, another got a goat, a third some grain. All did likewise. But there was one quite heavy old woman, who could not run to get anything. When she saw that everything had gone, she sat down on the earth, took some soil between her fingers, and showed it to the people, saying, “The earth is mine, take away your things from it”. Now when the people looked towards the sky they realised that it was far away and that they could not go there with their things. But the earth belonged to the old woman. They now returned part of their things [to her]. The one who had grain gave some of it; another who had a cow gave a calf. They all did likewise. The name of the old woman was Oniilua. She is the origin of the people called aakwaniilua, or the kingly, to this very day. (Hango Nameja, Ongandjera ELC 444: 903)

There are similarities between this story about kings and Amweelo’s cosmogonic myth. The characters in Nameja’s story who took cattle became pastoralists, those who took grain became tillers of the soil and poorer people took goats. Bushmen play no part in it. The old woman was cunning, a necessary skill for leadership. She was not appointed king by God but she was not stopped either³⁵. She was slow and clumsy, but because she had chosen a handful of soil, a seemingly insignificant entity, it nevertheless was the prerequisite for the existence of everything else. By her foresight she had made all others dependent on her. Being in possession of the earth she could demand tribute from the others. This sustained kingship for ever after.

³⁵ A proverb (Kuusi 1970: 80, No. 510) affirms, however, that Kalunga gave the people for the king to rule over.
Another group of Ongandjera stories about Niilwa and the beginning of kingship comprised tales about early migration and settlement. They are interesting for their internal inconsistency with regard to how the role of the Bushmen in the creation of Ongandjera is pictured. According to one, the first occupants of Ongandjera were pastoralists originating from Ondonga. They settled near the Tamanzi seasonal river to graze their cattle under Ngandjera (Williams, 1991: 92, basing herself on Pettilinen 1927/28: 66–68, Amweelo Mic. No. 6 ELC, Amunyela Mic. No. 7a, Ititenge Mic. No. 36 ELC and Laurmaa 1949: 35–6). Ngandjera encountered Aakwankala or Bushmen at the Tamanzi River. After first having agreed to live peacefully together, they later “turned against the Aakwankala, fought them and drove them out of the country” (Williams 1991: 132 referring to Ititenge Mic. 36 ELC). After the death of Ngandjera, Mangundu, the son of Ndjalo, “became the leader of all the clans”. This already indicates the beginning of centralised government. During this time a princess from Nkhumbi came with people who possessed hoes and they began to cultivate a large field (iilua) and people gave the princess the name Niilwa, after the field. Impressed by the new way of providing food, Mangundu asked her to marry him. When she accepted his proposal “she became the first queen of Ongandjera” (Williams 1991: 92).

According to this story, Ongandjera kingship emerged when Mangundu assumed power over “all the clans”, and when a woman, Niilwa, carrying a kingly title, moved into the area and joined Mangundu in marriage. Simultaneously, a new way of producing food was introduced, the cultivation of grain with the aid of hoes³⁶. Niilwa could be understood here as a mythical person who conveyed messages about historical development. She personifies the historical event of the introduction of grain cultivation and the use of iron tools in cultivation. She is also presented as the embodiment of a tradition of kingship brought from Nkhumbi (or Sitehnus’ kingdom in Humbe) into Ongandjera. Aakwaniilwa, according to Williams, became the “political title” of the royalty in Ongandjera (1991: 93). There is no suggestion that she brought with her any powerful fetish from Nkhumbi, but she carried the secret of making the soil bear grain.

It is obvious that the Bushmen were erased from this story of the beginning of Ongandjera kingship. The idea that the Aakwankala were com-

---

³⁶. The introduction of iron technology is also hinted here as the hoes, etemo, used in Owmbo agriculture have an iron blade.
pletely chased away is in total contradiction to a number of other versions of the story. One version transforms the relations between the Nga-
djera and the Bushmen into a story about two men, *Magundu ya Ndjalo* and *Indjana*. Magundu was of Herero origin and Indjana was his hunting companion of Bushman origin. The descendants of Indjana, or the Bush-
men, were not chased away but married into the Bantu-speaking groups and took up their way of living. They were called *Aayamba-aakwankala* or “Owambo-Bushmen”, and integrated into the other population save for certain rituals from which they were excluded (Liljeblad ELC 1394: 1950–1951 and Iijego, Nameja ELC 1395: 1951–1952).

*The Louw tradition* · From the information given by a few key informants – Daniel Nameja and the Ongandjera kingly councillors Johannes Am-
kongo and Amunyela Kadhidhi – in the mid-1960s, possibly also the rul-
ing king Ushona Shiimi, W. Louw (1967) gave a story that complements the traditions discussed above. Some details are in harmony with the information given in other versions, others contradict it. The identity of the early heroes in the migration tales is presented quite differently. Louw explains the role of the Bushmen in Ongandjera history as follows:

According to oral tradition, the area known as Ongandjera once be-
longed to the Hei/om Bushmen. The Bushmen left the area before the Owambo settled there. Among the Owambo there was a certain Magundu37 who lived on the other side. No one remembers the name of the place anymore. The Bushmen were said to have informed Mangundu that they had a good place with plenty of game, fruit trees and fertile soil. They urged Mangundu to come and join them in the place called Onandjo. (Louw 1967: 18, translation from Afrikaans by this author with help from M. von Schantz)

The relations between the Bushmen and the *Aayamba (Aajamba)*, as the Bushmen called their Bantu-speaking neighbours, were friendly to start with (Louw 1967: 18).

When the Bushmen were away searching for Mangundu, a beautiful fat woman from Nkhumbi came from Angola. Her name was Niilua. As the name indicates, she knew how to hoe a field, a skill that was not known by the Bushmen. The Bushmen asked her to become their

37. Here Magundu and Mangundu refer to the same person.
leader, on condition that she would also keep the holy fire in her homestead. She was willing because she wanted to discover the secret of the salt in their food and the poison in their arrows. (Louw 1967: 19)

By the time Mangundu came back from hunting Niilwa was already a recognised leader, having produced an abundant harvest of beans and groundnuts that were much tastier than those of the Bushmen. Mangundu then married Niilwa and they had three children together, called Nangombe Mangundu, Kavi Mangundu and Maambo Mangundu (Louw 1967: 19). Kavi and Nangombe were girls but Maambo’s gender is not given. The relations between the Bushmen and Niilwa were severed because of Niilwa’s treachery.

Niilwa would not be satisfied until she had found out the secret of the tasty food and the deadly arrows. The Bushmen in her homestead had multiplied. They later told her that the salt came from somewhere south of the kingdom. The secret of the poisoned arrows was also revealed to Niilwa. This meant that she was now freed from the power of the Bushmen. She sent out an expedition to find the secret site of the saltpan. When the men came back, they told the Bushmen that they had found the pan. This made the Bushmen very angry. A battle was fought between the two groups and the Bushmen were defeated, because by now the Ngandjera also knew the secret of the poisoned arrows. The Bushmen fled to the south. They came back every once in a while to exchange beans with the Ngandjera. They had taken the holy fire into their possession. Mangundu’s nephew, who had come with him, now took over the country. (Louw 1967: 20)

The roles are reversed here. The society was founded by a Herero and a woman from Nkumbi. Nangombe, the mythical root of the Owambo was the daughter born to the Herero man and this foreign woman. The Bushmen were not pushed to the fringes of history but an alliance was made between them and Niilwa, and certain agreements were made between them even before the Ngandjera, under the leadership of Mangundu, entered the scene. Niilwa possessed the art of agriculture, while the Bushmen knew the secrets of salt and poisoned arrows. Their liaison was built on mutual interest in the assets that the other party had access to. There was no hierarchy as yet and both parties were equal.

The assumed male identity of the founding heroes of the Owambo and the Herero is thus challenged by this account. This supports the informa-
tion provided by Tötemeyer to the effect that the first migration leaders were two women. For some reason, female ancestors and builders of society were erased from the memory or became transformed into men. The conflicting stories that the Bushmen were driven out from Ongandjera, and alternatively that they remained and became part of Ongandjera society, seem less incompatible in light of the Louw version, which gives a reason for the conflict between the Ngandjera and the Bushmen. Niilwa, the ruler, lost the confidence of her Bushman subjects by appropriating their salt assets without their consent. The result was that they rose to contest Niilwa’s power, lost the battle and moved out. Williams implies some demographic logic here: the Ngandjera multiplied, implying that population pressure played a role. The tradition Louw presents, again, indicates a political reason for the departure of the Bushmen: their loss of confidence in their ruler.

Louw’s narrative pictures the birth of kingship as a contest over assets, some of them secret ones. In his version of the story Mangundu played a minor part, and it was an affair between the Bushmen and Niilwa. As in Nameya’s story, Niilwa was getting on top by cunning. She was given a hint about the secret of salt and decided to find out more on her own, and this enraged the Bushmen. It is obvious that they had envisaged a different kind of co-operation. They might also have had other grounds for their anger. We do not know what taboos or rituals were associated with the salt-fetching spirits that the Bushmen venerated. The Bushmen had originally agreed to be ruled by Niilwa on condition that she hosted the holy fire in her homestead. The veneration of the holy fire was to become an essential element in the kingly traditions of Ongandjera. Louw’s narrative reveals that this token of kingship had been in the hands of the Bushmen from the very beginning. It also shows that, after separation, there was still co-operation between the Bushmen who left and the Aayamba who remained in Ongandjera. The Bushmen came to barter for grain and beans. The narrative does not emphasise the fact, but nevertheless it reveals that the Ngandjera were dependent on the Bushmen: the fire that came to symbolise kingship was now in their hands.

The holy fire belonging to the “visible world” stood above the king and his clan in the Owanbo hierarchy of spiritual agents and powers, as Aarni (1985) saw it. In that light it was indeed a potent symbol that was taken over by the Bushmen in Ongandjera. When an Ongandjera kingly court needed to be removed, it was a Bushman woman who ignited the
first fire in the new court (Louw 1967: 31). Bushmen court firemakers are virtually ignored in the oral tradition, but they provide an explanation of how fire was retrieved after their separation from the Owambo, and they seem to witness the fact that the Bushmen once had an important role in the creation of kingship.

The sacrifice to the spirits of the saltpan · There was another custom that could be understood as an extension of the drama between Niilwa and the Bushmen; a strange and anachronistic sacrificial ritual called the okakulukadhi or offering to the spirits of the saltpan that had to be performed each year before the saltpan could be opened for salt excavation. When the Owambo went out on salt fetching expeditions, they called it “going to Bushmanship”. Each new season opened only with the permission of the king. This had not always been the case, but when the expeditions were initiated by the king they were strictly regulated by taboos. The first expedition to bring back salt in the name of the king stopped at the edge of the saltpan by a small mound called okakulukadhi (uukakulukadhi), which means “little woman”. Here the Owambo offered grain in a small basket or grain storage okangandhi to ooyene yekango the spirits of the pan (MSC Liedker). At one point in time they also offered tobacco to them, an item that the Owambo frequently bartered with the Bushmen. This accords well with the idea that the spirits of the salt field were “owned” by the Bushmen. Okakulukadhi mounds were not unique to salt flats, and are frequently mentioned as spots between kingdoms that commemorated a peace treaty. Originally, however, they “had to do with respecting the Bushmen’s ownership of the wilderness” (Shilongo FWC: 41).

The grain sacrifice at Okakulukadhi was presented in the form of two double ears of iilyayaaka and omahangu, the two staple corn crops of the Owambo. These were tied together and put in a tiny basket that served as a “hut”. The basket was placed at the uukakulukadhi which represented an old woman, the spirit of the saltpan. This was thus a female spirit belonging to the Bushmen, and the words uttered at the ritual illustrate its peace-making function: “Grandmother, take our offerings, do not bear a grudge against us, we, your children have come to take salt” (Hopeasalmi,

38. In the Uukwanyama court the fire was guarded by the Roan Antelope clan, and the fact that the Ongandjera fire guardian was a Bushman supports my thesis that the Roan Antelope clan might have been a Bushman clan.
The recognised purpose of this offering was to promote a good harvest for the year, and the basket had to be full as an indication of plenty of grain for the year. It was also a “first fruit offering” of the year’s grain harvest (MSC Miriam Shimbu Ondonga). When the salt-fetching expedition returned, people could eat of the new grain harvest (MSC Namuhuya). Before 1880 it was rather the king’s mother and not the king himself who had to be given the first fruit of the salt expedition (MSC Liedker). Thus, women were involved in the salt rituals in two ways. It is not unreasonable to suppose that the king’s mother symbolised Niilwa, the first female ruler who excavated salt.

Why was grain involved in the ritual? Niilwa introduced its cultivation among the Owa mbo, according to oral tradition. The Bushmen did not cultivate, they were dependent on the Owa mbo for agricultural produce as the story about them and Niilwa conveys. The sacrifice of grain seems to have been atonement by Niilwa’s descendants to the spirits of the saltpan that was once owned by the Bushmen for the treason Niilwa committed when she discovered the secret of salt on her own. I suggest that aakwaniilwa, the kingly descendants of Niilwa, in whose name the annual salt expeditions were undertaken gave the Bushman spirits an offering of the grain that symbolised their wealth and which was first introduced by Niilwa. In return, the aakwaniilwa were allowed to replenish their resources of salt, over which the Bushman spirits of the saltpan ruled. It is clear from the above that surviving myths about kingship eschew the picture of certain key elements in its development: Bushmen, women and early kingly clans. These groups, I claim, are important for they contributed to the spiritual powers of kings, or their sacredness as I have chosen to formulate that power.

The role of king lists in conveying a view of the Owanbo past

The extension of king lists into mythical time is a typical feature of Owanbo tradition. Beyond historically dated kings we do not know where the line is to be drawn between myth and history. Many of the Owanbo kingly genealogies that have survived in oral tradition reiterate the idea, also conveyed in myths of origin, that kingship was there from the very beginning of society, and that the present kings were descended from the mythical heroes and “culture builders” of a remote past. Thus they are not always reliable as historical evidence but they are of great value.
in providing insights into how oral tradition has portrayed kingship and its inception. When there are several king lists from the same society, the discrepancies between them reveal what aspects of kingship tended to be forgotten. I will now look more closely at some of these aspects.

Heinige (1971) Prins (1988) and Miller (1972) discussed king lists as sources of information and identified ways in which they were commonly manipulated in oral tradition. A common tendency was to extend them into the mythical past, in other words to write up kingship as founded at “the beginning of time” which made it look more impressive. This tendency is universal, and it was especially common in Africa in colonial times when long lists served to augment the esteem of the colonisers. Sometimes, however, the lists tended to shorten history, “telescoping” whole eras into one rule. They also tended to omit unpopular kings and usurpers of power and to leave out information on changes in dynasty. The common denominator here is the aim to present the past in the most favourable light. All of these traits are evident in the surviving Owambo king list. The genealogies in Ombandja, Ongandjera and Ondonga discussed below illustrate in what ways king lists contributed to the creation of an image of Owambo kingship.

King lists in Ombandja Minor

It was difficult to obtain proper king lists from Ombandja. In their absence I turned to three presentations of Ombandja kings – the first by Liljeblad’s informant Sakeus Ituku, the second by Frieda Williams and the third by her informant Daniel Shikongo, the son of King Shikongo – in my endeavour to reconstruct Ombandja kingly genealogy. I present these (tentative) king lists in Table 1.

As the table reveals, these king lists are not identical. Some of the discrepancy could be attributed to the nature of the sources: oral tradition tends to distort. Who were the kings best remembered in these lists? Kalipi was known to have been the founder of Ombandja Minor. Even in his time Ombandja was struck by severe famine. He consolidated his rule and fought two successive wars against the Ongandjera (Iituku ELC 274: 644), the traditional enemy of Ombandja (Williams 1991: 138). He features in all three lists but his successor, Nande, does not appear on Shikongo’s list (He is called “Laude” in Iituku’s list). Shikongo also left out the next king, Shihepe. Neither Nande nor Shihepe go down as very
successful rulers and apparently did not enjoy success in war as Kalipi did. This may be why these kings who did not add to the glory of kingship tended to be overlooked. The king who came after Nambinga, the sixth ruler in all of the lists, was Haikela (Iikela). He does not feature in Shikongo’s list, according to which Nuuyoma was the seventh Ombandja king. However, Nuuyoma was no Ombandja king, but was the Uukwambi king who helped Haikela rise to power. Shikongo was making a political statement by including him to the effect that in Haikela’s time it was really Nuuyoma who was the ruler.

**Ongandjera kingly genealogies**

There are also different lists from Ongandjera. Together they illustrate interesting distortions in the collective memory. The lists drawn up by Williams (1991), Louw (1967), Natael Iitenge ELC (1930–32) and Abraham Iyego ELC (1930–32) are presented in Table 2: analysis of the omis-

---

**Table 1** Rulers in Ombandja Minor according to Iituku, Williams and Shikongo

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Iituku (ELC 274: 644, 645)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Naikuluta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Kalipi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Sipepe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Mongela, the son of Neipuluta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Nuunjangu, the son of Neipuluta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Haikela</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Nambinga, the son of Shihua</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Sheguza, the son of Amagunde (1900–1901)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Shahula, the son of Amazila (1901–1908)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Mongela, the son of Ndjembe (1914–1915)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Williams (1991: 139, 140)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Kalipi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Nande</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Sipepe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Mongela, the son of Naikuluta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Naunyango, the son of Naikuluta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Nambinga, the son of Shihwa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Haikela (–1900)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Sheguza, the son of Amagunde (1900–1901)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Shahula</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Mongela, the son of Ndjembe (1914–1915)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Shikongo (FWC: Shikongo: 2–4)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Naikuluta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Kalipi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Mongela</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Naunyango, the son of Naikuluta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Nambinga</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Haikela (–1900)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Sheguza, the son of Amagunde (1900–1901)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Shahula</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Mongela, the son of Ndjembe (1914–1915)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

---
Table 2  Ongandjela kings up to Tshaanika Tsha Natshilongo according to Williams, Louw, Iitenge and Iijego

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Niilwa*</td>
<td>1. Niilwa*</td>
<td>1. Niilua*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Amatundu ga Nima</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Nkandi kAmwaama</td>
<td>5. a. Nkandi j’Amualua</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Namatsi*</td>
<td>c. Namantsi g Amualua</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Nalukale*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Namutenya*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Female rulers are marked *
sions and inclusions illustrates the tendency to distort or ignore the female identity of a number of rulers. Williams’ list is the most extensive and was drawn up from a number of sources. It includes twenty rulers or twenty-two if the three female rulers (4a, 4b and 4c) who are reported as ruling together are counted separately. Nine of them are indicated as female and, in addition one who is referred to as male, Nangombe yaMangundu, is defined as female by both Iiyego and Louw. Thus ten of the twenty-two rulers were probably female.

The majority of rulers who are included in Williams’ list and omitted in the others were female; Nandingo (4b) was omitted by both Louw and Iitenge while Iiyego presents both Niita and Nuunyango (Nuunjango) as male, Niita becoming Iita in the process. Nangombe, the sixth ruler on Williams’ list was female according to her and Iiyego and is missing from Louw’s list and Iitenge’s. The female ruler Nalukale, numbered 13 on Williams’ list, does not appear on the other three, and Namutenya, also female and numbered 14, is mentioned only in one of them; in Louw’s list. Iiyego further ignores the female identity of Nakasua Shivute, which is recognised by both Louw and Williams, and Iitenge leaves out Nakasua altogether. Of the seven rulers listed by Williams but not by Louw five are women. The missing ones are Nandingo uitula, Nkandi kAmwaama, Nangombe, Namatsi, Nalukale and Namutenya. There is a tendency to leave out female rulers in the other lists too. Although Ongandjera traditions on the whole gave much more room for female rulers than those of other Ovamboland kingdoms, the tendency not to adopt them is clearly discernible. Despite a strong matrilineal tradition and the general recognition of Niilwa as the female first mythical ruler and society builder, rulership was preferably writ male.

There is more information to be gleaned from these king lists. Among the rulers that Williams mentions but are missing in Louw’s and Iitenge’s lists is Nkandi kAmwaama (mentioned in Iiyego’s list as Nkandi j’Amualua). Nkandi’s way of ruling deviated from the ideal of a ruler and his demise was unusual. He was a cruel king, and for this reason people avoided him. As a consequence of his unpopularity he decided to denounce kingship and to go abroad (Williams 1991: 132), which was hardly a glorious fate for a king. He seems to have been omitted from the lists because he was untypical and a bad representative of the kingship institution. Thus one unpopular king does not feature at all in two of the four lists, and the tendency to tone down the strong female ele-
ment in Ongandjera kingly history is evident in three. Other Owambo genealogies, which are not analysed here, show similar tendencies. Unpopular rulers and women are forgotten, as are rulers who reigned for a very brief period, thereby creating the image of Owambo kings as male and as successful.

**Ondonga king lists**

Ondonga kingly genealogies are presented by Frieda Williams and others including Jairus Uugwanga (ELC 948), Abisai jaHenok (ELC 1139) and Abraham Amweelo (ELC 64: 140). Williams’ list varies a great deal from the others, however (see Table 3). The discrepancies are to do with how far back in mythical history they go, and more importantly with the rulers of the Snake clan which seems to have been systematically “forgotten”. The tendency of playing down female rulership is also present here. Williams’ genealogy of Ondonga kings was compiled from a number of sources (1991: 112). As far as the ruling kings were concerned it is identical to that given by Hans Namuhuya (1983: 19) differences in spelling notwithstanding.

Henok includes Kazu (Kanzi, Kazi) in the history of Owambo kingship, which is interesting, for Kazu is usually described as the mythical proto-leader of the Herero who migrated with the Owambo from the north. The Herero never took to kingship, but were rather governed by a number of chiefs. There are certain aspects of Frieda Williams’ list that are also worthy a comment. It omits many early kings and starts straight with Nembulungo, whom Williams elsewhere defines as “the last of the Ondonga kings of the Snake clan” (Williams 1991: 116). In her study of 1988, she identified Nembulungo (called Nembulunga here) as a female ruler (1988: 122), but this information is not given in the list of 1991. It appears that she had little interest in the obscure discrepancies in the information about the kings of the Snake clan. Her list does not extend far into the remote past, even though the material was available to her. It does not spell out, as her text does, the fact that Nembulungo (Nembulunga) was of the Snake clan, *Ekuusinda* and it omits all of its previous rulers. All of the other kings were of the Hyena clan, *Ekwanekamba*, which exists to this day. Williams’ list seems to be more of a document of the long and glorious reign of the Hyena clan in Ondonga than a comprehensive list of Ondonga kings. There is no jumping into mythical time here.
That exercise was carried out by Jairus Uugwanga and Abisai jaHenok. Uugwanga’s list is part of his narrative on “Ondonga chiefs” \( (ELC \text{ 948: 1372–1373}) \), and includes migratory heroes starting with Kanene ka Hanzi. According to Loeb \( (1962: 367) \), Kanene was one of the five early migratory leaders, all members of the family of King Sitehnu of Humbe who travelled together to Oshamba, the mythical original home of “all the Owambo”. Kanene is more commonly held to have been one of the two founders of Uukwanyama. In Loeb’s version it is rather Kanene’s kinsman Omundongo who is credited with the feat of founding Ondonga. Williams links Kanene to the foundation of Uukwanyama rather than Ondonga \( (1991: 63) \). We can only speculate about the reason why Uugwanga included Kanene in his list of Ondonga chiefs. The history of the Ondonga kingdom and the origin of the different groups migrating to Oshamba seem to merge here, Kanene being one of the leaders settling in Oshamba and moving out from there. The tradition that Uugwanga transmits ties Ondonga kingship to the very early period of Owambo migration to which Kanene belonged.

Uugwanga does not mention Nembulungo, the first ruler on Williams’ list. Would he have included Kanene from “way back” to cover up the omission of Nembulungo lya Ngwedha of the Snake clan? We cannot know. He condenses the Ondonga list and jumps from the migratory hero Kanene straight to the present Hyena king-bearing clan, and in so doing omits the essential information about the history of kingship in Ondonga that the early rulers were of the Snake clan.

Abisai jaHenok provides us with the third version of the Ondonga king list. He goes further back into the mythical heritage than Uugwanga, to the myth of the creation and ends with Nangolo dh’Amutenya, who consolidated kingship in Ondonga. He mentions Kazu, the son of Sizila, as ruling together with his brother Nangombe, and the fact that the name of their “tribe” was derived from a cluster of villages in the eastern part of Ondonga. Kazu’s and Nangombe’s group moved several times and eventually split. Although Henok clearly shows that Kazu and Nangombe were migratory leaders with their own following and that neither of them was master over “the whole of Owamboland”, he nevertheless speaks of them as “the first kings of Ondonga”, in other words he includes in kingship the leadership of disparate migratory groups.

After the split one group settled in Onasikokaja, the eastern part of Ondonga. According to Henok the chief of this group was called Kandu-
Table 3  Ondonga king-list according to Williams, Uugwanga, Henok and Amweelo

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Kanene ka Hanzi</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1. Kanene ka Hanzi (first chief)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1. Kazu and Nangombe sons of Shishila</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2. Kandundulu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Nembulungo lya Ngwedha</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2. Mbuenge ua Uule, Uule ua Nakateta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Mumbwenge Guule wa Nakateta</td>
<td></td>
<td>3. Nangombe ya Mvula (Kayone Mulindi)</td>
<td>3. Nangombe ya Mvula (Kayone Mulindi)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(possibly some other chief in between)</td>
<td></td>
<td>2. Kajone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Kajone</td>
<td></td>
<td>(other rulers, perhaps)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Naanda, Amutati's son</td>
<td></td>
<td>5. Iluia, Namukuaja's son and</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The group moved on until it settled in Oshamba. Two subsequent chiefs, Kajone (Kayone) and Naanda were buried there. Kajone and Naanda are conspicuous by their absence from the lists of Williams and Uugwanga. The fact that their graves were oompampa, burial mounds erected only for the kingly, suggests that these chiefs already had the ritual status of king. The sceptre of Naanda Amutati that was presented to an Ondonga king at installation also suggests the kingly status of Naanda. What do we know of the clan affiliation of Naanda and Kajone? They were not of the Hyena clan, or at least there is no explicit information to that effect. It is quite possible that this is why they are “forgotten” by Williams and Uugwanga.

Henok’s narrative gives two alternative interpretations of who succeeded Naanda and Kajone. First he says that:

They were succeeded by other chiefs and these in turn were succeeded by others who were again chased by others who took the tribe. Perhaps they were Iilua, the son of Namukuaja, and Mbuenge, the son of Angula. The tribe was divided in two. (Henok elc 1189: 1697)

Then, in his next sentence Henok says:

Naanda was succeeded in office by Nembungu the son of Amutundu who was succeeded by Nangolo, the son of Amutenya a.s.o. (ELC Henok 1189: 1697)

Why did Henok annul his statement about Iilua and Mbwenge as successors of Naanda and Kajone, and why did he not mention Nembulungo Iya Ngwedha of the Snake clan at all? There was something about Iilula and Mbwenge that precluded them from a story about the first kings, perhaps some rivalry or battle over power. We do not know, but Iilula could have been a chief or ruler of the Snake clan. If this was so, the power struggle that Henok alluded to was that between the rulers of the Snake clan and Mbwenge of the Hyena clan. Even if this were not the case, omission of Nembulungo suggests that no ruler of the Snake clan belonged on his king list. Henok, like Williams and Uugwanga, avoids mentioning the role of the Snake clan in the history of Ondonga. If Naanda and Kajone were of this clan it is of great relevance to any analysis of Ondonga kingly inaugural rituals. A sceptre made of omupanda wood handed down by Naanda Mutati played a central role in the installation rituals of subsequent Ondonga. If Naanda Mutati was an early ruler of the Snake clan,
this kingly regalia would link the Hyena rulers with the early owners of its land. It would convey, so to say, the consent of the spirits of the Snake Ancestors to the installation of the new king.

The informant Abraham Amweelo gave yet another list of Ondonga kings (ELC 64: 140–152). He told of a tradition passed on to him by two persons very close to King Nangolo dh’Amutenya: Niinane Nekuaya (Nekwaya), who was married to Nangolo’s son Ambambi Nangolo, and her cousin Paulus Iitope, who was a young man of between 20–30 years when Nangolo took power. This list, just like those of Henok and Uugwanga, omits any mention of a king belonging to the Snake clan. It even glosses over Mbuenge. Naanda Mutati and Kajone are there, however, although there is no mention of their clan affiliation. Amweelo does not give much information on these two early kings, but what he does give is highly significant because it indicates a qualitative change in the kingship institution. During the reigns of Naanda and Kajone the rules were different from those that were in effect after Nangolo dh’Amutenya. The difference was that Nangolo broke the taboo of manslaughter that was in force during time of Naanda and Kajone. This is not an isolated observation, but is backed up by other remarks from local informants to the effect that there had been a law against killing human beings. This is in sharp contrast with “the power of kings over life and limb” that was reported by outside observers in early colonial times.

In conclusion, Ombandja, Ongandjera and Ondonga king lists show a tendency to draw a veil over certain categories of actors that are part of the history of kingship. This also applies to the myths. In both cases the effect is to enhance the image of kingship. Unsuccessful or unpopular kings are omitted and the role of Bushmen and early kingly clans, defined elsewhere as “owners of the land” are played down. Female rulers tend to be forgotten or presented as male. Kingship is portrayed as a story of success, power and prestige, and the lists play their part in eulogising the rulers of the clan in power.
This chapter begins with a description of the sacred aspects of Owambo kings and how they are manifested in qualifications for kingship, in the taboos, in the king’s relationship with nature and in the rules of ritual regicide. I will convey the impressions of Owambo kingship transmitted by early travellers and colonial observers. Contemporary approaches are represented by the views of two Namibian scholars, Frieda Williams and Kaire Mbuende who bring forth the sacred and the tributary aspects of kingship respectively. I will then discuss the tributary relations between kings and their subjects as aspects of the institution of sacred kingship. The chapter ends with an analysis of the religious mandates of the various officers in the political hierarchy that have to be taken into account in order to paint a full picture of the administrative hierarchy.

Prerogatives and rules of kingship

At the height of their power Owambo kings had a stake in most activities going on in the country. The king’s permission had to be obtained before activities and rituals, especially those of a seasonal nature, could commence (MSC: Kaulinge). These activities included hunting big game, salt fetching, iron excavation, female and male initiation, the eating of various first fruits of the year, and even the lighting of shrub fires before rain. The king also gave permission to trade. Owambo society was structured along tributary principles and the kings were at the apex of this system. They were a token of the well-being of the realm and it was therefore necessary that they were prosperous and wealthy. It was unheard of for any headman to possess more cattle than the king (cf. MSC Usko Shivute).

The rules pertaining to the conduct of a subject when in contact with the king resemble the rules of reverence anywhere when a subordinate person confronts a superior one. The demands arising from the fact that the king was thought to possess supernatural powers were added to the
normal rules of courtesy. The king lived in a court that did not look much different from the homesteads of wealthy commoners. The court was called *ombala* in Uukwanyama and *uuwa* in Ondonga. There were certain restrictions on behaviour that indicated that the proprietor of this dwelling was a person of the highest dignity. Anyone who paid a call to the kingly court had to ask a headman to present his case to the king. People were usually kept waiting for hours or days before they were given an audience.

In Ondonga those who approached the king at his court had to crawl on their knees, and they had to face the king all the time. This custom was retained well into modern times, as a sign of reverence in the face of the mysterious power vested in the king. In Uukwanyama when kings ruled, anyone who spoke to the king at court bent his left knee and stood in this position until the audience was over. On leaving the king he had to walk backwards, facing the king all the time. Those who brought a gift had to fall down on both knees and touch the ground between their knees in front of them and then draw with their hands over their face and chest as if in prayer. No one was allowed to touch the king because it was thought that they would immediately be struck dead. If the king chose to touch someone, however, it was a great honour and was understood as a sign of kingly grace (Sckär: Animismus/Varia: 25, 26). Such beliefs illustrate the idea that the king's person was considered simultaneously dangerous and blessed. In Ongandjera (Louw 1967: 64), even in the 1960s, if a king called on a subject, the subject had to take off his hat and shoes and sit down on the ground. Quietly, and with his hands crossed in his lap, he had to wait until the king addressed him. If the king offered him food he had to eat it very quickly acknowledgement of the fact that the king had many mouths to feed. Similar customs were observed in other Owaambo kingdoms.

There were also specific rules or taboos regarding the king's own behaviour. Such rules have commonly been interpreted as indicative of the sacred nature of the king. One of the restrictions placed on Owaambo kings was a taboo on leaving the land they ruled over. Williams chose to interpret such rules from a political perspective, claiming that they were there to make kings respect other kingdoms and not to be tempted to conquer other lands (1991: 100). Polemising against Siiskonen she denied any association with ideas of the "divinity" of Owaambo kings. In my view Williams' political interpretation is insufficient, and her interpre-
The prohibition on leaving the kingdom included taking part in raids directed at neighbouring societies. There was an additional reason for this: the blood of kings could not be shed. Inflicting injury on the body of the king, which was sacred and inviolable, was strictly taboo. We know from a number of sources that an Owa mbo king could not be shot, stabbed or otherwise killed in a manner involving bloodshed. This rule was also frequently broken in the latter half of the 1800s. The Owa mbo kings did not live in seclusion like some other African sacred kings, but there was a measure of isolation. One local informant said of the Uukwanyama king Mandume, “people never came close to kings. He did not like to be seen” (MSC Haiduwa). There was another manifestation of the ritual necessity of isolating a king in Ombandja: kings ate their food alone and the food had to be tasted by his head wife (Sakeus Iituku, ELC 269: 635).

Who could become king?
The first prerequisite for being king in Owa mbo societies was that to be of the kingly clan in power. We know that the clan in power had changed in the course of history, but such events are not usually referred to in oral tradition. Thus we know little about what ritual measures accompanied the changes or how they came about. Even if there was no ambiguity as to the clan adherence of the king, there was still an element of uncertainty in the succession. According to Jan Vansina, succession rules in a great number of African kingdoms allowed for a choice among a number of eligible heirs within the kingly family (Vansina 1975), and this was
also the case in Owambo. The living king’s brothers and sisters, and his maternal uncles, aunts and cousins were all potential heirs to kingship. There were other conditions, some pertaining to political suitability and others to ritual purity. In Ongandjera the naming of a successor was preceded by a discussion among certain people of influence in which the qualities of several candidates were carefully weighed up. The capability to rule, skill at keeping internal peace, ritual purity and physical wholesomeness were considered mandatory qualifications. The social skills of the king’s mother also weighed heavily in the choice of a new king (Nameja, ELC 1100: 1537).

The criterion of physical wholesomeness excluded a blind or crippled person from becoming king and no man whose wife or mother had given birth to twins could be considered either. According to Frazer and de Heusch, the former rule was a ritual requirement pertaining to the symbolic role of the sacred king as possessor of life power: he had to manifest that power in his own physical body. The latter one, again, reflected the need to show that the king was a proper symbol of regular and socially approved fertility power. The choice of an Owambo king thus had a religious dimension in that his bodily appearance, his conduct and his background needed to be fit to serve as symbols of wholesomeness and purity.

Twinship was an anachronism that disturbed the normal order of human procreation. There was both a taboo against twinship for kings and a tradition that linked twins with kings in the Owambo heritage: twins were called “kings”. This was a recurring pattern in several African traditions (cf. de Heusch 1985), and it indicates the paradox of kingship: a king was a representative of both ordered fertility and of its transgression. Twinship was part of the secret symbolic aspect of kingship, if you will, part of a concealed anomaly of kingship. Although the institution of Queen Mother was by no means as strongly developed in Owambo traditions as in some West African kingdoms, like the Akan of Ghana, the mothers of Owambo kings had a great deal of power, both ritual and political. This does not come out very clearly in the oral tradition, but it appears “between the lines”. The mothers of Kwanyama kings had their own “courts”, situated not far from the king’s court, and they were consulted on important matters. When a king was enthroned as a minor it gave his mother the opportunity to seize power until he came of age. This was the case in Ondonga when Mutaleni, the mother of King Martin Nambala ya Kadzikwa (1912–1942) reigned until her son was of age.
Okupangela and okuangala – two aspects of kingly power

Owambo vocabulary suggests that there were two aspects of kingly power. Two local words depict rulership: **okuanangala uoshilongo** and **okupangela** (I use the terms as they are spelled in the Kwanyama language, according to Loeb). When a king had taken over the country it was called **okuana-ngala uoshilongo**; to “lie down on the land”. It brings to mind the kind of possession a man takes of his wife. This metaphor I interpret as expressing the king’s responsibility for the fertility of the country. Ruling, with its order-creating and violent aspects, was expressed in the term **okupangela** (Loeb 1962: 42). **Pangela** in Oshindonga means to govern, rule, control, administer and dominate (Tirronen 1886: 332). Both aspects of kingly power were strengthened in the installation ritual, but by different means and in a particular order. I consider what the structure of the kingly installation ritual reveals about the relation between these two aspects of power in Chapter seven. What I interpret as the fertility aspect of kingship, okuanangala, which was further strengthened in his involvement in rain rituals, seasonal rituals and the initiation rituals for young men and women, is discussed in Chapter eight.

A king’s head wife also played a role in the fertility-promoting aspect of her husband’s sacred power. According to custom, a new ruler took a woman from a particular clan to become his head wife. She assumed part of the secret power of kings through special rituals and, according to oral tradition, in the “olden days” she was killed when the king died. The Head Councillor of the king, and also other officiates at the kingly court may have been made part of the king through ritual, and earlier they had to die with him just like his head wife. In view of the function of ritual regicide, the conclusion could be drawn that these people had been made part of his sacredness. He was sacred and elevated above others, but he was not alone at the top: others shared with him the ritual responsibility of being sacred, including the responsibility of being sacrificed.

The ambivalent sacredness of kings

The ritual of killing an old and feeble king was part of the institution of sacred kingship in very many traditions in Africa and elsewhere, as Frazer (1911–1915, 1949) observed and as de Heusch documented in his comparative studies involving a number of African traditions. A great number
of ethnographies of African kingdoms acknowledge the tradition of regicide. Ritual regicide was also an established tradition in the Owa mbo kingdoms, according to many local informants. As already mentioned, the Owa mbo had an institution of sacred or divine kingship understood in both emic and etic terms: kings were sacred according to local understanding, and the kingship institution fell under the category of “divine kingship”, as this phenomenon has been defined from Frazer onward. Lehmann and Borkowsky, however, failed to recognize this institution on the basis of the sources they used. The Owa mbo considered their kings sacred (Dumeni MSC), but to a certain extent they also encompassed the entire kingly clan in this sacred status. This was manifested, for instance, in the rule that the blood of the king or of kingly people could not be shed; the whole royal clan was inviolable (Savola 1916: 85).

As de Heusch claims with regard to kingship traditions in Central and Southern Africa, the idea of sacredness in an Owa mbo ruler implied a highly ambivalent quality in his sacred power. On the one hand, he was related to the land as the agent of its fertility, and on the other, kingship was violent and transcended the rules of society. As mentioned above, de Heusch suggests that the fertility-promoting role of sacred kings was a function of the violent boundary-transgressing role. I suggest that there was more than transgression in the build-up of the sacredness of Owa-mbo kings. According to an Owa mbo proverb, “The king is like a pot of food, it keeps the people together”. This metaphor captures the ideological basis of Owa-mbo kingship, although it was contradicted by the realities on the ground at the end of the 1800s. It would be too easy to discard the metaphor as having no grounding in reality. The principle of kings as providers, the ultimate source of good things, was not only an aspect of sacred kingship; it was also a concrete reality, as Rautanen noted. The kingly grain storage, pooling grain from the entire kingdom for seeding in times of want, and the idea that the king would provide for his subjects, suggest that he was once a provider, at least before the changes in the mid-1800s. Kaulinge asserts that the provider aspect of kings was

40. For a more detailed discussion see Salokoski 1992.
real: “If there is no food in someone’s house, he comes to the king and is given food” (MSC Kaulinge). This is the essence of a reciprocal tributary system.

The king’s power over nature

Kings were not only seen to influence the fertility of the land for cultivation, there was also a special relation between them and the wild forest animals. The king was thought to have control over the wild animals to the extent that they never disturbed his people when moving around in the forest (FWC Shilongo: 50, 54). This belief brings us back to the Bushmen and the fact that they were indispensable to the kings: they mastered the spirits of the forest. Owambo kings were also associated with powers of wild animals in a different sense: they were thought to be able to change themselves into dangerous animals of the forest such as lions and panthers. This was a common notion in many other African agro-pastoralist traditions.

“Nature” did not refer only to forest and animals but also meant seasons and cosmic forces. The activities of the productive year were regulated by climatic and other realities on the ground, but it was the king who often announced their commencement. This was not to say that kings had a real say in agricultural matters, but rather that they appropriated the right to announce seasonal activities. Kaulinge notes that the decisions on the right time to do things “has been decided of old, the king just announces it” (MSC Kaulinge), and other informants support this view. In making these announcements the kings appeared to be in control of nature, an image that corresponded with the idea of sacred kingship. Thus by involving themselves in seasonal rituals they gave the impression of being responsible for the fertility of the land and the success of seasonal occupations.

The king as a sacrifice

The tradition of ritual regicide was lucidly described and well remembered by Liljeblend’s informants in the 1930s. We have clear and ample evidence of this custom from several Owambo kingdoms. What commonly happened was that when the king was old or weakened by illness he was suffocated by a “soft sheepskin” or by other means through which his
breathing was made to stop. Two narratives, one from Ombandja and the other from Ongandjera, give a detailed description of the ritual killing of an old king who was close to dying. Considering the utmost secrecy by which this practice was surrounded, it is extraordinary that these informants chose to reveal the details. We know that ritual regicide was also practised in Uukwambi (MSC Amakutuwa), but we have no accounts of how it was carried out. It was practised as late as in the mid-1870s in Ondonga, as witnessed by the missionary Pietari Kurvinen. When King Shikongo sha Kalulu died in 1874, Kurvinen’s neighbour, a man who belonged to the kingly family, informed Kurvinen personally that Shikongo had been ritually smothered by his successor. Although information on ritual regicide from Owmombo societies other than Ondonga, Ongandjera, Uukwambi and Ombandja is scarce, it is fair to assume that the practice, or the ideology that demanded it, was once inherent in the culture of the area more generally.

**Early and colonial perspectives on kings**

How did early travellers, colonialists and missionaries perceive Owmombo kingship in the 1800s? There is a striking difference between the accounts from the 1850s and those from one or more decades later. The earliest written descriptions of Owmombo societies are those of Charles John Anderson, his fellow traveller Francis Galton and the Swedish traveller T.-G. Een. Galton and Anderson arrived together in Ondo nga for the first time in May 1851. In their travel accounts from this journey they praised the beauty and peacefulness of the country and the well-being of its population. They noted that firearms were unheard of in these parts of South West Africa at that time (Galton 1853: 201, 205, 208). T.-G. Een, travelling in the area sixteen years later in 1867, also portrays a peaceful and prosperous country, but one that was changing rapidly. He (1872) described Owmombo kings as just and benevolent rulers. Even if he defined the power of the Ondo nga king as “practically boundless”, he hastened to add that he used it with great moderation and wisdom. He seldom or never confiscated the property of his subjects, and if he did, there were good reasons for it. However, Een noted that Owmombo customs of succession were violent, and that murder played a part. He compared these practices with those of Europe under Papal rule and held that the succession murders in Owmombo were much less spectacular. This remark shows
that he had no intention of portraying Owambo rulers in an unfavourable light, or of claiming European supremacy.

However, Een did note that the trade transactions between the Portuguese traders from the north and the Owambo had a great impact on kingship. The Owambo kings showed great interest in the goods that the Portuguese provided; rifles, knives and nails, European clothing and liquor. The Uukwambi king, “wanted to buy everything he saw”, and to pay for the goods he was ready to tax his subjects for cattle (Een 1872: 91–109). Changes were very rapid. At the end of the 1860s Charles John Anderson came back to Ondonga for a second time and was shocked at the way the country had changed since his first visit in 1851:

Owampoland or rather Ondonga as that part of the country is commonly called had undergone many changes. Bloody civil wars have swept like a hurricane over its quiet rural beauties, immolating and dispersing one half of its industrial gay-hearted and inoffensive population, and leaving but the frame of vast herds of cattle that once gave additional charms and importance to the country. (Anderson 1875: 213)

The first Finnish missionaries arrived in Ondonga in 1870 to settle under the aegis of king Shikongo sha Kalulu. Sha Kalulu is a qualifying addition to the name of the king and stands for ‘bitter’ or ‘mean’ (Kurvinen 1877: 44). Gone was the blissful state that was conveyed during the visits of Green and Anderson in the 1850s. The first succession strife that was resolved by the use of firearms and horses was a recent memory. King Shikongo had ousted his uncle Shipanga from the throne, aided by “aakwena”, or Oorlam Nama, under Jonker Afrikaner, who had brought firearms and horses to Owamboland for the first time⁴¹. The local informant Abraham Amweelo spoke of the changes in even stronger language than Anderson. Describing the attacks by horse-riding and gun-carrying Nama, during which Aandonga⁴² fled to Uukwanyama and Uukwambi, he concluded; “In this manner the whole kingdom was destroyed” (ELC 64: 152 Amweelo).

The character of “Owambo kingship” for the next hundred years was formed at this time, and the picture was harsh. This negative view was

---

⁴¹ On the role of Jonker Afrikaner in pre-colonial Namibian politics, see Lau 1987.
⁴² Aandonga signifies here the plural for a Ndonga person.
perpetuated through several different channels and it influenced colonial opinions for almost a century. The German scholar Nitsche dismissed Owambo kings as despot in 1913. The king, he said, “is master of the entire land, over his subjects and their property, without showing any trace of feeling a need to fulfil any duties as reciprocation for this impressive right” (1913: 128). Carl Hugo Hahn, the grandson of the Herero missionary C. H. Hahn and himself a District Commissioner for Owamboland, was no less critical. In 1928 he wrote: “In former days Owambo chiefs appear to have taken the fullest advantage of their powers and to have ruled their subjects in the most tyrannical manner” (C. H. Hahn, 1928: 8). In 1933, the German missionary Heinrich Vedder concluded that the Owambo king was a despot in the most extensive sense of the term (1933: 71). As Lau noted, this conformed to a common pattern according to which local rulers were presented in a grim light in order to justify the harsh treatment of colonial subjects by the colonial rulers (Lau 1981).

The Finns were slightly more nuanced in their statements about Owambo kingship. They based their observations on a long presence in the area and were able to discern traces of change in the actions of the rulers; they did not categorically picture the Owambo kings as autarchic. Martti Rautanen acknowledged that they were “despotic”, but he qualified this statement by referring to their powerful headmen, the “omalenga”, who interfered with kingly power (Rautanen 1903: 336). He thus indicated the emergence of a rising class of military advisors and councillors to the king, described by Moorsom and Clarence-Smith (1977: 104, 108). At the time the omalenga were more feared than the kings because they harassed the local population in the name of the king and went raiding on their own account without him being able to control them. The missionary August Pettinen, another old-timer who served in Owamboland from 1887 until 1914, observed that cattle raids had increased in terms of number and violence during his time. In an article on Owambo life he wrote for the Finnish newspaper “Suomalainen” in 1895 he concluded:

Local rulers following the example of their predecessors, have often, conducted raids – they have raided when a trader has entered the kingdom – but never before have these raids been executed to such an extent and with such cruelty as is done now. Now one head of cattle does not suffice but everything that is there, is taken [...]. (Pettinen in Suomalainen 16. 10. 1895, translation by the present author)
There were also changes in the way the kings executed their power. Following the introduction of firearms and European goods, the kings treated their subjects in a harsher way. Conditions in the late 1800s thus did not reflect the pre-colonial kingly institution, and was rather an altered version of it, and part of what Moorsom and Clarence-Smith called “the time of informal colonialism”. This change was not recognised in descriptions of Owamboland from the colonial period.

**Modern views**

Local contemporary scholars emphasise different aspects of the Owambo kingship institution. Kaire Mbuende (1986) suggested that the Owambo kingdoms had a “tributary mode of production” in the sense indicated by Samir Amin: a type of society that was conducive to the development of centralised power through emergent class formation. He portrayed the role of Owambo chiefs in the late 1800s until the end of the German era in a way that emphasised the extractive and dominating aspects of the Owambo tributary system:

> The chiefs had strong control over the rhythm of activities in their territories [...] The chief was the initiator of seasonal occupations and ceremonies. He had to perform the necessary rituals prior to hunting and fishing, and after harvesting. He was entitled to a portion of the booty obtained in war, the game caught in hunting and fishing. No one was allowed to make use of the crop after harvest before the chief had eaten of it. Thus, a yearly tribute of sorghum was brought to him so that he could be the first consumer [...]. The chief also controlled long-distance trade and accumulated the surplus emanating therefrom. Appropriation of surplus labour also occurred in the form of corvée duties to be performed for the chiefs and nobles [...] during planting and harvesting seasons the women of the whole territory were called upon for their labour. (Mbuende 1986: 25, 26)

Frieda Williams, also a Namibian scholar and with roots in Owamboland, brought up another aspect of Owambo kingship – its sacred dimension. As she saw it, sacredness had to do with the mastery of fertility of the country and with access to the spiritual world:

43. Mbuende draws on Loeb (1962), Hahn (1928), Nitsche (1913) and Clarence-Smith and Moorsom (1977) here.
The king was expected to play a role in increasing fertility, in providing rain, and above all as a symbol of life for his people. He was seen as a link between the living and the dead, whose sacred duty was to carry out sacrificial rites through which he could secure blessings for his people and country. (Williams 1991: 99)

Mbuende’s and Williams’ descriptions complement each other by illuminating the position of the Owa mbo kings from different angles. While most observers have recognised the sacred aspect, very few have tried to elaborate on what it actually meant and how it related to other aspects of ruling. In the following subchapters I will address three aspects of the Owa mbo social structure. I will briefly present an outline of the clan structure and analyse the tributary arrangements from a religious perspective. I will then discuss aspects of the kingly administration as parts of sacred kingship with a view to exposing the religious dimension that once permeated the entire administrative structure of Owa mbo kingship.

Clans and kings

The clans were an important unit of affiliation in times gone by. Owa mbo clans were matrilineal and exogamous, but dwelling was patrilocal. No study has so far systematically exposed the pattern of clan affiliation as a part of traditional Owa mbo power structures, and in the absence of such knowledge anything that can be said on the topic is fragmentary. Still, the fragments give us some information.

Tuupainen (1970) discussed the kinship system in her study on Owa mbo marriage, and concluded that “(I)n ancient times the social, political and religious function of the clan must have been to a noticeable extent more obvious than it is now” (1970: 27). She also addressed the issue that often arose when matrilineal inheritance rules were put into practice: the widow lost hearth and home to her in-laws and became dependent on members of her own kin. She, like others, also noted the tendency to strengthen the bonds with patrilineal kin in early colonial times. The practice of a father giving gifts of cattle to a new-born son, well documented by the Liljeblad informants, indicates that there was a strong element of bi-linealism in the way Owa mbo kinship worked in practice.

Early missionaries tended to speak about two kinds of people, “nobility and commoners”, thereby distinguishing kingly clansfolk from mem-
bers of other clans. They did not always make it clear that the offspring of a king, the aana yokombanda, who belonged to their mother’s clan and not their fathers’, also enjoyed royal privileges. What is more, the exact role of members of the clans of former kings is uncertain, save that it often involved important ritual duties. Tuupainen speaks of “totemic clans” but not all clan names can be traced back to animals and many were derived from a particular act or event related to their origin: the Uukwanyama kingly “mourning clan” and the clan called “carvers” (Williams 1991:186) are examples of this. Members of one clan counted their numbers beyond individual kingship borders. Not all societies had the same range of clans and some clans extended over large areas. Williams listed the Owa mbo, Kwangari/Mbundja and Nyaneka/Nkumbi variations in clan names (1991:186), indicating affinity between the members of clans with the same name over an area that extended into Southern Angola and the Kavango.

If the clans once owned titles with adjacent fetishes representing spirits, as the Umbundu clans did, and if the power politics of kingship arose from the competition between clans who possessed powerful fetishes, that part of Owa mbo history is still to be discovered. It seems, however, that the clans were once masters of specific spirits, which the kings could not control, judging from the fact that the headmen were in charge of specific spirits on behalf of the king (MSC Usko Shivute). If this was so, the power of clan-owned spirits was integrated into the kingly hierarchy through headmen belonging to clans other than the kingly one.

We have scanty information about the kind of spirits that clans controlled. Some clans had rainmaking skills. The Elephant clan was given the privilege by the Ondonga king Nembungu of conducting the rituals at the deceased kings’ graves (Uugwanga, ELC 415: 843, see also Iteua, ELC 1110: 1556), for the reason that “they mastered the rain” (Ondonga, Uusiku, ELC 203: 446). Uukwanyama had one major and two minor rainmaking clans (Loeb, 1962: 100, Siantapo, ELC 391: 811–814).

Former kingly clans with specific ritual duties are legion. The Snake clan in Ondonga presided over female initiation, and this task was performed in Ongandjera by the Dwarf Mongoose clan. The buriers of kings, iimbunju, in Ongandjera were also of a former kingly clan, which was thought to have stemmed from Niilwa (Iijego, ELC 1381: 1928). In Ondonga, the man assigned to fetch the king’s regalia after his death was from a former kingly clan (ELC Asipembe Eelu, 278: 660). The involvement
of these formerly powerful clans in female initiation, kingly burial and accession indicates that the spirits of “old owners of the land” were still venerated and that their contribution to the king’s power was substantial. The Aakwankala or Dwarf Mongoose clan deserves special mention because it was a clan that was descended from Bushmen who had become integrated into the agro-pastoralist Owa mbo society. The question of the clan affiliation of diviners is a disputed issue. Hans Schinz claimed in 1891 that all Owa mbo diviners were of the Lion clan. Aakwananime/Ekuananime, but the facts do not support his theory. Lower-grade diviners joined the ranks through a very personal calling that was mediated through illness. It seems illogical that spirit possession would only strike members of certain clans. However, diviners of higher rank could be “produced” through ritual, but it is not known how the selection of such diviner candidates took place.

Owa mbo kings did not come from the same clan in the Owa mbo kingdoms. Their common epithet, aakwaniilwa (ekwanililwa), was an honorary name that had nothing to do with their clan affiliation. Within one kingdom the kingly dynasty often changed over time. The common tendency in oral tradition was not to remember former royal clans. Table 4 lists the kingly clans in eight Owa mbo societies. The information is mainly taken from Williams’s two studies (1988, 1991). The local name of some clans is given in translation in the sources, but not of others which are thus referred to only by their local name.

The tributary system in a religious perspective

Wealth was a platform from which political power radiated in Owa mbo society. The kings were prima inter pares, the wealthiest of the wealthy, and their wealth was counted in cattle. Until the 1860s, wealth in cattle mainly meant wealth in “social” and “ritual capital”, given the major role of cattle to negotiate relations with the spirits. It was thus in everyone’s interest that the king was rich in cattle, for his wealth gave his subjects reflected glory.

Tributary relations characterised the Owa mbo social structure above

---

44. I discuss diviners in Chapter five and address Schinz’s theory in that context.
45. The name of the Ombalantu kingly clan the Aakwampweyo (Aakwamheyo) (Williams 1991: 136, 139) is not translated in any of the sources used here.
the household, omikunda (sing. omukunda). They linked people to headmen at the local ward level, to those at the oshikandjo or district level, and above them to the king. Power relations in this system were hierarchical and resourceful persons protected the less resourceful. The latter recognised his protection by presenting tributes in the form of gifts or labour on a more or less regular basis. The resourceful were thus able to draw on the manpower of their protégés for war and hunting expeditions, and for various jobs such as house building and the maintenance of agricultural fields. They reciprocated by providing help in the form of grain for sowing if drought or famine threatened, by offering gifts of cattle to successful herders, by donating the spoils of jointly organised raids and, not the least, by providing sacrificial animals – cows or bulls – for important ritual occasions. Quite a lot of economic activity took place as collective pursuits through co-operation between neighbours and kinsfolk, as Borkowsky (1975) has reported. The spoils of collective pursuits such as hunting, iron excavation, salt fetching and trade were mainly divided among those participating, even in cases in which the expeditions were undertaken in the name of the king and when token tributes were given to kings and local headmen (Salokoski 1992).

The tributary system was a way of creating a grid of transactions that tied households to larger administrative structures. Leadership of various activities usually involved a spiritual dimension: rituals and sacrifices addressed to spirits were part of most endeavours. Heads of households, kin-group leaders, diviners and kings were all leaders with a “double mandate”. They were responsible for managing the activity, and also for securing the benevolence of the spirits. Just as kings were thought to be the initiators of most collective activities, they were also entitled to part of the “spoils”. This applied to hunting, raiding, salt-fetching, rain-making and initiation. In many of the “kingly” or “king-initiated” activities, the kingly involvement was superimposed on an older way of doing things on the homestead or local level. The tribute to which the kings were entitled was not usually strictly measured, and people gave of what they had (cf. Salokoski 1992). The nature of the transaction has never been strictly defined and apparently changed over time from being more of a voluntary gift or a sacrifice to becoming more of a tribute proper. The economic value was fairly marginal, with the exception of the cattle tribute that kings developed towards the end of the 1800s.

What made it possible to impose kingly protection on a number of
activities that had previously been managed on a lower level of aggregation? Beyond the material benefits of being attached to a resourceful man, there was an even more important dimension to this exchange between the powerful men and the less powerful, the spiritual one. Beyond the obvious utilitarian concerns was a non-visible exchange of power. Spiritual power radiated from the powerful man to the less powerful one who was his client. When a tribute was given, something of the king’s sacredness was transferred to the provider. As Mauss (1980 [1924]) put it, the giver, by giving his gift became part of the receiver. For instance, when a prosperous man allowed his cattle to be taken care of by local herders, he became part of everyman’s household and the household became part of kingship. A subject could likewise be included in the orbit of protective kingship when he provided gifts or tribute to the king.

An essential element of the Ovambo tributary system was cattle: they were a source of wealth, and wealth was a token of the benevolence of the spirits. They were also important for the “ritual economy” of the Ovambo. Sacrificed cattle fostered relations with ancestors and spirits, and “name bulls” or “seer cows” could “hold the soul” of their owner. It was difficult to estimate the size of anyone’s herd because the animals

---

**Table 4** Kingly clans in the different Ovambo kingdoms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ONDONGA</th>
<th>UUKWAMBI</th>
<th>ONGANDJELA</th>
<th>UUKWANYAMA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Snake clan</td>
<td>Zebra clan</td>
<td>Zebra clan</td>
<td>Corn clan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Ekusinda/</em></td>
<td><em>Etundu</em></td>
<td><em>Etundu</em></td>
<td><em>Ekwaimbe/</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Ekwaanyoka</em></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>Ekwaluwala</em></td>
<td><em>Ekwaneidi,</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hyena clan</td>
<td>Hyena clan</td>
<td></td>
<td>Cattle clan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Ekwanekamba</em></td>
<td><em>Ekwanekamba</em></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>Ekwanangomb</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>UUKWALUDHI</th>
<th>OMBALANTU MAJOR</th>
<th>OMBANDJA MAJOR</th>
<th>OMBANDJA MINOR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dog clan</td>
<td>‘To feather arrows’ clan</td>
<td>‘Converse after dining’ clan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Ekwanambwa</em></td>
<td><em>Aakwamheyo</em></td>
<td><em>Ovakwane</em>lumbi</td>
<td><em>Ovakwanaphung</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: compiled from various sources
were distributed among several different cattle posts, *ohambo*, with their herders. There are some figures that give an idea of the extent of kingly cattle ownership in late pre-colonial and early colonial times. In 1857, Magyar estimated the number of cattle owned by the Uukwanyama King Haimbili at twenty thousand (1857: 196), and August Pettinen suggested that the Ondonga king, Nangolo dh’Amutenya, who ruled before the mid-1850s, had up to two thousand (in Suomalainen 22. 9. 1890: 76). According to Edwin Loeb, the last king of Uukwanyama, Mandume, who died in 1917, owned 7000–8000 head of cattle (1962: 46).

Not only did kings and other big cattle owners place their cattle with others to be herded, they also gave away gifts of cattle to be slaughtered for sacrifice at the collective initiation of Owa Mbo girls into womanhood, at male initiation rituals, at rainmaking and on many other occasions. By offering these gifts they signalled their involvement, and it was apparently one way in which rituals that formerly belonged to the local or homestead sphere were drawn into the sphere of kingship. A cattle sacrifice by the king enhanced the good relations with spirits for all parties involved. Paradoxically, then, it was not only the hoarding of cattle but also giving them for sacrifice that served to increase the political and symbolic power of kings.

The king could also demand cattle from his subjects as tribute, ransom or atonement. He was symbolically the owner of all cattle in the land, although most were collectively owned by the kin groups and some were owned individually. After the 1860s, when cattle became the main item for exchange for European goods, the kings’ thirst reached unprecedented proportions. Old rules about kingly rights of appropriation were stretched and new forms of cattle raiding among subjects were invented. The tribute system was forged into an exploitative system of cattle appropriation. This also changed the meaning of kingly sacredness, which had been connected more to the ideology of kingship as a provider of fertility and prosperity but now became associated with violence.

The king’s mastery of the land was another aspect of his tributary power. His right to redistribute cultivated fields after the harvest season gave him considerable power over his subjects because their livelihood was dependent on the field they cultivated, as the myth of Niilwa and the land conveys. The system was vulnerable to abuse because kings could choose to redistribute fields to the household heads who had remembered him best with gifts of cattle. This kind of abuse seems not to have
been widespread in the 1850s and 1860s, judging from Een’s account, but it became common towards the end of the 1800s. Kingly tribute often took the form of ‘first fruit’ prestations as Mbuende noted. Kings were entitled to receive a tribute of the grain produced each year by each household. They received the “first fruit” of omahangu and iilyalyaaka the two staple crops from which porridge and beer were prepared. The size of the gift was not regulated and households gave what they could spare. By giving a lot, a household established its status as prosperous, and its relations with the spiritual world as good. Thus wealth, generosity and spiritual power went hand in hand. The gifts of grain were stored within the king’s court and were used as a communal reserve to be distributed for seeding in times of drought: they were not used for the king’s own consumption or for exchange. The grain deposited with the king furthered his image as responsible for the well-being of the land, the people and the cattle. By donating grain for sowing he enhanced his image as the benevolent provider, the guarantor of the prosperity and fertility of the land.

Kings were also entitled to the first fruits of other kinds of crops, booty and produce, and this was connected with the seasonal taboos. The king had to be the first to taste the intoxicating drink of omagongo produced from the fruits of the Marula tree. He also had to be given the first new salt from the annual salt expeditions to the Etosha saltpans in societies that practised salt excavation. In Uu kwan yama those joining the annual expeditions to the iron fields in the north had, on their return, to give two iron hoes to the king in tribute. The booty from normal hunting activity, not intended for exchange with Europeans, was divided among the hunters, the king being given a token contribution. These “first fruit” regulations were mandatory but, as I have shown elsewhere (Salokoski 1992), of negligible economic importance. The benefits of these activities remained largely with the people undertaking them. The king’s power in the agricultural sphere did not allow him to hoard riches to any great extent. At harvest time, the women of the realm were obliged to help out in the king’s field. His court was bigger than that of other households as was his field, but they were, by and large, similar to the homesteads of wealthy commoners. The men of the realm were obliged to contribute to the maintenance of the court, and when it was moved every four or five years, they provided the wooden posts for the walls and the thatch for roofing, and helped in building the new court.

The king also had the right to take out men to engage in cattle raids,
Part II: Setting the Stage

Part II: Setting the Stage

warfare and ritual hunts that he initiated. Participation in other collective expeditions and activities outside the realm, such as salt fetching and iron excavation was decided at the local level. Even if the king enjoyed some of the spoils of such expeditions, which were conducted in his name, participation also benefited the individual households. These expeditions did not increase the wealth of the king to any great extent (cf. Salokoski 1992). The various tributes given to the king were thus not big enough to ensure his prosperity. The first-fruit tribute was important in other ways in that it signalled the necessity of kingly involvement in economic activities and in the transition from one agricultural season to another. It re-created, symbolically, the king’s power over society and his appropriation of nature for society’s ends. The nature of the tributary system changed when kings began to trade with Europeans in the mid-1800s: before this time the kings’ right to tribute had not been an economic burden on his subjects (cf. Salokoski 1992). Although he regulated trade, the tradesmen were by no means heavily taxed by their tributary obligations. With the onset of trade with Europeans and especially when ostrich feathers and ivory were substituted for cattle, the kings’ rights to tribute were expanded and the reciprocal aspect of kingly power was drastically weakened.

The arrival of migrant labour from Owamboland in colonial times, first in trickles to Hereroland in the south and to Angola in the north, and later increasingly to the copper mines of Otavi and Tsumeb and to white farms in the settled parts of German South West Africa, also strengthened the trend away from reciprocity. For a start, the kings recruited and sent out men as migrant labourers and willingly co-operated with the colonial powers in these transactions. They looked at this kind of extractive activity as yet another expedition comparable to salt and iron fetching, hunting and raiding, and they also wanted part of the spoils. The autobiography of Bishop Leonard Auala (1972) describes how little a man returning home from half a year’s labour might be left with after the king and the headmen had taken their share. Thus, over time, the king’s right to tribute from expeditions outside the realm developed into an unbalanced relationship in which the principle of reciprocity was turned on its head. The administrative structure of Owambo kingdoms is described in the following subchapter and it is shown that most of the kingly offices involved both political and religious responsibilities that were intimately intertwined.
The religious dimension of the administrative organisation

Frieda Williams drew a chart of Owambo kingly administration that resembles that of a secular state with neatly divided tasks in a top-down hierarchy on three or four levels (1991: 112 and Figure 3). I will take a more detailed look at this chart and at some of the office-holders in it, with a focus on their religious or ritual roles. The ritual officers who visited the court on special occasions, and who are not included in Williams’ chart, are also mentioned because of what they reveal about the totality of the kingly power structure. Williams presented her chart as an outline of Owambo kingly administration in general. It is of necessity highly schematic. It does not list all of the officers, and includes some that did not feature in certain of the kingdoms (notably the masters of the salt pan)⁴⁶. Closer scrutiny reveals that the chart is based mainly on the Ondonga reality although it also uses Uukwanyama terminology. At the apex of this pyramid stands the king. Under him is a person William calls the “Chief Minister” Elenga Ekuluntu: she uses the term Head Councillor elsewhere, which I use here. Under the Head Councillor stands a ‘Council of Senior Counsellors’, Omutumba gomalenga omakuluntu, who were often individually called the omalenga or elenga of the king. Below this level the kingly officers were divided into four categories of specialisation related to territorial administration, warfare, court administration and “priestly” activities. Territorially the kingdom was divided into districts, Oshikandjo, headed by District Headmen called Omwene goshikandjo (sing. mwene). Below the district level were the wards, omukunda, headed by ward heads Mwene gomukunda. The War Commander, Ondayi yiita, headed the warfare sector and the court administration was headed by a Butler, Omumbalakuluntu who had various officers in charge of different tasks at court. The High Priest, Omujambikuluntu, headed the “Clergy”, Aayambi, divided into the domains of four ritual officers: the Custodian of the Sacred Fire, Omuthigululi gomulilo goshi longo, the Master of Initiation, Namunga nga/Omupitifi, the Head of the Salt-pan Excursion, Nashishidhiga, and the Chief Herdsman Omusitagoongombe (Williams 1991: 112).

The Head Councillor had a great deal of power at the end of the 1880s as Pettinen reported: “In the government the Head Councillor is the clos-

⁴⁶. I have retained Williams’ spelling in my discussion of the different offices.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Council of Senior Counsellors</td>
<td>Omukwimengala</td>
<td>Chief Minister</td>
<td>Elenga Ekuluntu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Priest</td>
<td>Omujambikuluntu</td>
<td>Butler</td>
<td>Omumbakuluntu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clergy</td>
<td>Aayambi</td>
<td>Master of Initiation</td>
<td>Omumu-Pindililungo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master of Initiation</td>
<td>Omumu-Pindililungo</td>
<td>Cup Bearer</td>
<td>Omumulungo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Custodian of the Sacred Fire</td>
<td>Omumulungo</td>
<td>Butler</td>
<td>Omumakuluntu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Head of the Salt Pan Excursion</td>
<td>Omumakuluntu</td>
<td>Butler</td>
<td>Omumakuluntu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District Headman</td>
<td>Mwene gomukunda</td>
<td>War Commander</td>
<td>Ondayi yita</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ward Headman</td>
<td>Mwene gimukunda</td>
<td>Warriors</td>
<td>Aakwita</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Householder</td>
<td>Mwene gwemungo</td>
<td>Buter</td>
<td>Omumakuluntu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Custodian of the Sacred Fire</td>
<td>Omumakuluntu</td>
<td>Butler</td>
<td>Omumakuluntu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master of Initiation</td>
<td>Omumu-Pindililungo</td>
<td>Cup Bearer</td>
<td>Omumulungo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Custodian of the Sacred Fire</td>
<td>Omumulungo</td>
<td>Butler</td>
<td>Omumakuluntu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Custodian of the Sacred Fire</td>
<td>Omumulungo</td>
<td>Butler</td>
<td>Omumakuluntu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Custodian of the Sacred Fire</td>
<td>Omumulungo</td>
<td>Butler</td>
<td>Omumakuluntu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Custodian of the Sacred Fire</td>
<td>Omumulungo</td>
<td>Butler</td>
<td>Omumakuluntu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Custodian of the Sacred Fire</td>
<td>Omumulungo</td>
<td>Butler</td>
<td>Omumakuluntu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Custodian of the Sacred Fire</td>
<td>Omumulungo</td>
<td>Butler</td>
<td>Omumakuluntu</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 3**  Williams' representation of the administrative structure of Ovaombo kingdoms (Williams 1991: 112; redrawn by Wolfgang Zeller)
est one to the king. He has almost as much power as the ruler himself has” (Suomalainen 15.8.1890). According to an older tradition, he was also vulnerable and subject to ritual death when his master died: he was buried along with the king at the kingly funeral. The Ondonga kingly installation included the sequence called uupule guoshi lo ngo (woshi lo-ngo) during which the Head Councillor was made the king’s ritual double through the creation of a secret bond between the two. The same effect was achieved in Uukwanyama through a “blood sharing” ritual. On the ground the Head Councillor executed some of the judicial and executive powers of the king: “He executes verdicts, he conducts raids and he punishes crimes, puts death sentences into practice [...]” (Pettinen in Suomalainen 15.9.1890). However, it is important to note that the judicial aspect of power was tied to the skill to divine. Verdicts against witchcraft or sorcery were pronounced on the basis of divining, and for that the councillor had to have the skills of the highest priest or diviner, onganga, he could deal with omutikululi, or sorcery, he could lift the spell of ontiko/etikilo. (Itenge Ongandjera ELC 963: 1388) This illustrates that the Head Councillor’s mandate was both religious and secular.

How were kingly councillors recruited? The presiding council had considerable power in selecting new members (MSC Kaulinge). Some were chosen from the king’s age mates – people with whom he had grown up and whom he therefore knew well and could trust. The king inherited some councillors from his predecessors while others were nephews of former councillors to whom the offices of their uncles were transferred. Some were young men who had been sent to court at a young age to be taught how to serve the king. “Every clan had the right to have their members elected to the offices of the kingdom” (Williams 1991: 106, cf. MSC Shindondola: 2). However, it mostly comprised the sons of wealthy and influential men who sent their offspring to court (Tönjes 1996: 107 [1911]). We do not know from what clans the councillors were recruited, but we do know that there was continuity from one king to another and from one kingly councillor to another. There was also a certain amount of schooling involved. After the introduction of firearms the emphasis was put on military schooling at court, a process that gradually gave young men with military prowess power as kingly councillors, or omalenga. The Senior Council had a great deal of power. According to Williams:
The council serves as the judicial, advisory and legislative body in the kingdom; it meets under the chairmanship of the king, at set times and also in emergency cases like during a war situation. All decisions of the council are kept secret. (1991: 106)

The councillors were more than mere bureaucrats and politicians, however, at least before the 1870s. There was a special ritual criterion for selecting kingly councillors. This is revealed in the use of the stem -kuluntu in most terms that refer to kingly officers. Both the officers at court and those of the clergy had to be circumcised men, omukuluntu who at one time were the only men in Uukwanyama who deserved to be considered adults. All others were called “boys”, even those who had long been married. With the abolition of circumcision the term mukuluntu seems to have been watered down to signify “elder”, “wise man” or “honoured person” (cf. Tirronen 1980: 28). When kings were still circumcised in Uukwambi, circumcised men were needed to head the country’s rituals at seasonal festivities. It was through the “magic power” acquired through circumcision that these people could approach the dead kings’ spirits and sacrifice to them (Kalle Koivu FMSC 371.2. A:1). Circumcised men were both an asset and a threat to the king, who tried to acquire ritual supremacy in the country: they were also potential competitors in the sense that they, too, had access to spiritual power. In the old days they came into contact with powerful spirits through their initiation, and because of this they were thought to have unusual powers to face danger and death. They were once the backbone of most Owa mbo ritual practice.

Missionary witnesses indicate that the basis of recruitment for the council and for posts as territorial headmen changed drastically in early colonial times. In 1890 Pettinen described the Ondo nga kingly council as a body of four or five men, formerly consisting of the oldest, most intelligent and most skilful men in the kingdom. At the end of the 1800s, young Ondo nga rulers tended to choose their favourites for the council. Pettinen doubted the merits of these men: “These positions nowadays [...] are held by the biggest scoundrels, the favourites of the king, and those who know how to flatter” (Pettinen 1890: 74). Loeb (1962: 30) also told how the recruitment of the council in Uukwanyama changed in the time of King Weyulu, who ruled in 1884–1904. The new omalenga, much written about in missionary sources, harassed the population in the name of the king.
Williams’ administrative chart obscures the fact that a religious aspect was part of all office holding. Officers who were not under the leadership of the High Priest, such as the War Commander, the Chief Butler and a number of courtiers under his command, also carried out priestly functions. What is more, many office-holders among the clergy were heads of important economic endeavours. Below are some examples of the religious influence on administrative offices that are not listed under “clergy” in Williams’ chart.

**Onday wiita** was the head of the king’s warriors. He was a war leader who communicated with spirits. In Uukwanyama he was a medicine man of high rank who was also a war leader (Loeb 1962: 84). He had special ritual paraphernalia: a dagger similar to the ones diviners used when treating illness and three potent sticks, *omipundi*, that had their own magical significance in battle. These objects contained great power of a supernatural kind. One indicated the proper route in war and called upon the enemy’s cattle, a second made it possible for warriors to penetrate narrow passages, a third symbolised the capacity to pierce the enemy ranks (Loeb 1962: 84). The outcome of war expeditions was commonly thought to depend not so much on the actual fight, but on a “spiritual fight” evoked by the leaders of the war and taking place in the forest on the night before the battle.

The administration of the kingly court was headed by a “Butler”, called *Omubalakuluntu* in Williams’ chart. This officer was called *omuene guegumbo* in Ombanda (ELC: 634–635). Most of the court tasks were not only “this-worldly”, they also involved aspects in which supernatural protection and support were evoked; the officers therefore had to have special skills of a religious kind. The courtiers Williams lists, the chief bodyguard, the chief attendant, the chief messenger, the chief cook and the cup-bearer, all had names incorporating the stem *-kuluntu*, which means that they had to be circumcised. The bodyguards were responsible for protecting the king physically from any attempts at violence. They were also expected to forewarn of an attack by reading signs in the king’s cattle. Along with other officers at court, they had responsibility for the king’s safety, ease and nourishment. They protected his food and drink

47. The war leaders were called *omukili wiita* in Ondonga, and they also carried objects that, in a secret way, safeguarded the success of the war party. The sticks they carried were called *omusindilo* and they were thought to make their carrier invisible to the enemy (Hahn VHKA Manuscript: 39).
and his person against sorcery, *etikiluo*, (etikilwo) and witches, *uulodhi*. According to Närhi these guardians were esteemed diviners, *omupulile* (1927: 79), or “those who could see far”. Anyone close to the king could practise sorcery with the king’s footprints in the sand, with his spittle or with his body mucus. Such substances could be taken to a brother or nephew of the king who aspired to overthrow him. There was an Ombandja rite called “eating oshikangua (oshikangwa)”, a kind of sorcery which could be performed with such substances for the purpose of gaining power over the king (Iituku, ELC 271: 639), thus kings had special people to protect them against this. King Nehale in Ondonga, who appropriated half of the kingdom from his brother Kambonde, was thought to have gained power in this way.

Williams uses the words “priest” and “clergy” for a group of officers that are more commonly called “diviners”. The local term was *oonganga* in Oshindonga (sing. *onganga*), and *oondudu* or *kiimbanda* in Oshikwanyama. The four members of the clergy included in Williams’ chart were the Custodian of the Sacred Fire (*Omuthigululi gomulilo goshi lo ngo*), the Master of Initiation Ceremonies, the Head of the Salt pan excursions and the Chief Herdsman. Of these, the latter two were in charge of activities that were also economically important. Salt expeditions provided valuable items for barter in Ondonga and other kingdoms that excavated it. Salt was the item for which hoes, axes and spearheads were exchanged, all important objects of the subsistence activities of the Owa mbo. The officers in charge of the king’s salt expeditions in Ondonga were members of the kingly clan. The Chief Herdsman had an administrative section all to himself, guarding the kingly herd. The herd was large and cattle were the outward token of the king’s prosperity; the Chief Herdsman was in charge of augmenting these riches. There was more to this task than tending cattle, however. Cattle were important links to the spiritual world, and placing the chief herder among the clergy is indicative of the fact that the spiritual role of cattle counted for more than their economic role. The two other priestly functionaries – the Master of Initiation Ceremonies, *Namunganga*, and the Custodian of the Sacred Fire – held unambiguously ritual offices. In their capacity of representing different population groups they were a link in establishing the political legitimacy of the king.

The person in charge of female initiation in Ondonga could be a man
or a woman\(^48\) (Iitula, ELC 970: 1399, Ihuhua, ELC 137: 328). He or she had to belong to the Python or Snake clan (Liljeblad, ELC 1326: 1842), however, which means that the one in charge of the initiation of girls in Ondonga was from the clan that had provided kings in earlier times. Although the timing of the initiation rite had to be sanctioned by the king, the procedures were still the responsibility of a person of the Snake clan who represented the early “owners of the land”. In Ongandjera, the Master of Initiation Ceremonies (namunganga, pl. oonamunganga) was a woman from the Dwarf Mongoose clan, Ekwankala or Ekwanafudhi, a clan of Bushmen who had been integrated into Bantu-speaker society. Here, too, the descendants of the first “owners of the land” were the leaders of the initiation. A pattern begins to emerge: the successful and ordered fertility of people living on the land required the co-operation of those who had access to its spirits. This pattern is clearly visible in West African traditions, according to which earth chiefs were assigned to maintain relations with the spirits of the land in the name of the political chief.

The importance of oonamunganga was reflected in the way in which they were initiated. In Ongandjera a female namunganga was appointed after a decision had been reached between the king and the High Priest. Her initiation to office took place on the spot at which the first king had his court. It was very secret and it signified, according to Liljeblad, being sacralised into the office in the manner of a king (ELC 1353: 1911). Oonamunganga were thus, in a sense, the peers of kings. The ritual of inaugurating a namunganga thus elevated a female member from the clan to which the land originally belonged to a position that was symbolically important to kingship: it put her in charge of the transition ritual whereby the socially appropriated fertility of young girls was produced. A namunganga in Ongandjera was in the possession of omazila, or Big Birds, the very dangerous and secret bird spirits that figured as possessive spirits in male and female initiation, and which also featured

\(^48\) The term namunganga/oonamunganga is close to the general term for diviner onganga/oonganga. The namunganga for female initiation was a man in Uukwanyama (Sikeva, ELC 1131a: 1605) but a woman in several other societies including Ombandja (Hepeni, ELC 6), Ombalantu (Shiimi, ELC 147), and Ongandjera (Salomon ELC: 931). He was probably a man in Uukwaluudhi, judging from the fact that he was given a place to stay in the oshoto of war, which was part of the men’s quarters (See Timoteus Kazila ELC 980: 1416). There seem to have been both male and female leaders involved in the female initiation in Uukwambi (EL, ELC 1318: 1815–1827) and this was the case also in Uukolonkadhi (ELC Ihuhua 1117).
in Uukwuluudhi rain rituals. The Birds hosted a power that kings did not control. The reasoning behind the choice and initiation of an ekwankala or aakuusinda woman to become namunganya may be understood as follows: it signified homage to the original inhabitants, the Bushmen in Ongandjera and to the first kings of the Snake clan in Ondonga: it was a recognition of the fact that without the co-operation of the spirits of the original inhabitants, the king could not perform his duty as the guardian of fertility.

Williams’ chart ignores the existence of several of the king’s servants who had key roles in the rituals of kingship, not all of whom resided at court. These hidden kingly officers were nevertheless significant. Among those dwelling at court, or who had separate courts of their own, were the king’s mother, sister, and head wife, the king’s mother and head wife being politically important. According to Loeb the King’s head wife was in charge of all ceremonial duties in Uukwanyama (Loeb 1962: 59). Even if that seems an exaggeration, local informants do emphasise the ritual role of the king’s head wife. Thus the chart leaves out an important female aspect of kingship. The Ombandja kingly court hosted two minor officers who were appointed at the king’s inauguration to office, the king’s “Spirit Boy” and his “Spirit Girl”. Young officers such as these were also found in other kingly courts (FWC: Kaulinge 25). They were pre-pubescent youngsters when they began their service at court, the girl being eight to ten years of age, and both were present at secret kingly rituals. The girl handled the strappings of power and the king’s poison container (Iituku ELC 269: 622). The ointment from this container was regularly rubbed into his skin to give immunity from snake bites⁴⁹. It is evident that these youngsters represented the youthfulness and vigour of kingly power, and that their pre-pubertal age made them suitable to take part in a number of important ritual activities in which sexual maturity would have constituted a danger. Just like the Head Councillor, the spirit boy and the spirit girl could be understood as ritual extensions of the king’s person in his sacred role as ruler. They were, to some extent, comparable with the Tinsila of the Swazi king, two young men of his age chosen at his inauguration and serving him as his doubles charged with the task of protecting him from dangers (H. Kuper 1947: 79).

⁴⁹. Asipembe Eelu from Ondonga described different ways of making snake poison to protect the king (ELC 1420: 2007–2008).
Certain other important ritual officers are also missing from Williams’ chart. It takes no account of those who did not reside permanently at court, including diviners who were called in for specific rituals at kingly burials and installations. In Ongandjera the buriers of kings, iimbunju (iimbunyu), came from a former kingly clan no longer in power. Thus, although previous kingly clans tend to be forgotten in the oral tradition, their importance surfaces through their role in the ritual. A man who was assigned to fetch the kingly regalia in Ondonga after the death of the king was an important ritual officer and he could at times turn into a kingmaker (Eelu ELC 278: 660). The Ongandjera court had a special hut for an old Bushman woman as a token of the times when Bushmen were in power, and there was an old “slave woman” at court in Ombandja who guarded the king’s body after his death and manipulated his remains to be used in power objects for the new king (Ituku, ELC 269: 623). Neither of these was acknowledged by Williams in her chart.

The buriers of kings of the Snake clan and the fetchers of the regalia from the same clan in Ondonga, the slave woman of Bushman decent in Ongandjera and the old slave woman at the kingly court in Ombandja, were ritual officers who seem to have been neglected in the collective memory. If the latter was a Bushman, all the forgotten officials above represented early owners of the land. Time erased the memory of early groups involved in kingship which no longer had power. This was one way of “writing kingship” which expanded the territory of the ruling clan at the expense of other groups.
5

Placing the kings in a religious context

Spiritual concepts

The Owambo king is usually given no space in descriptions of Owambo religion. Neither is his role in relation to other agents and actors in the spiritual world elaborated on in oral tradition. My aim in this chapter is to link the spiritual aspect of kingship with other aspects of Owambo religion, and to place the king in relation to other powers and agents in the spiritual field. Let me first clarify how I use some concepts. “Spirit or god” is how Owambo supernatural forces, including fetishes, were often translated collectively into other languages. In my discussion I distinguish analytically between spirits, spiritual powers and spiritual agents but this does not necessarily mean that there is such a distinction in the Owambo language.

I use the terms spirits and spiritual powers to encompass “The Great Spirit”, Kalunga, and other spirits and named powers of the beyond. The terms spiritual agents and actors in the spiritual field refer to holders of spiritual power in this world including diviners, called oonganga, kiimbanda or oondudu, witches, aalodhi, sorcerers, omutikili, and other human beings such as kings and circumcised men, who were all thought to be able to act upon, influence or use spiritual forces. Each adult human being potentially had a certain capacity to act in this way, or could use rituals or fetishes to that end. By spiritual power I mean a particular capacity to influence human life that was assigned to spirits of the beyond, and which was also thought to reside in power objects or fetishes, and which could be used by human beings for the purpose of gaining access to spirits. Gaining such power was important in every aspect of human life. Power in the local idiom always seems to have incorporated power of a spiritual kind. Power in African historical societies was not understood in the Weberian sense of the ability to “force ones will” but rather meant “spiritual power”. This meant that political power could not exist without the support of spirits.

The Finnish missionary Albin Savola (1916: 168–192), and others
with him pictured Owa mbo religion as basically constituting of four elements: Kalunga the “High God”, ancestor spirits, witches and diviners. These four elements were identified by Monica Wilson (1971: 37) as typical of the traditional religion of south and east African peoples. Owa mbo ideas about spiritual powers was more complicated than that, and it did not form a coherent cosmology. Owa mbo religion seems to have consisted of a number of floating notions about powers and spirits. Human agents were influenced by them and were, to some extent, able to use their powers at will for various ends. Kapferer, discussing sorcery in Sri Lanka (1997), shows how imposed anthropological categories related to spiritual-power could restrict our understanding of the social phenomena under study. This observation also holds for the Owa mbo.

In this chapter I will first present Owa mbo ideas of how the world is structured and discuss how the term Kalunga has been used. I will then discuss how they see the spirit aspect of the person, and what happened to the spirit after death. The following subchapter describes commoner burial rituals in order to provide a context in which kingly deaths, regicide and burials can be analysed. I then discuss the Owa mbo term for ancestor spirits, aathithi, and suggest that it needs to be interpreted a little more broadly: the locals did not always draw the line between ancestors and other spirits very clearly. The two subsequent subchapters deal with diviners, sorcerers and witches as spiritual agents suggesting that the boundaries between them were fluid. The remainder of the chapter addresses important themes related to kings: the religious role of cattle and fire as a symbol of society. The chapter ends with a discussion of how the king can be positioned in relation to other spiritual agents in the totality of Owa mbo religion.

The Universe, Kalunga, and the land of the dead

Owa mbo tradition contains several ideas on how the universe is structured. These ideas seem to reflect different traditions that have survived in the local consciousness. In one, the cosmos was conceived of as two halves of a gourd posited against each other and upheld by pillars made of termite mounds. In another, the world was seen as consisting of two round grain baskets placed on top of each other (cf. Kuusi 1974: 24, riddle 28). According to a third conceptualisation, the world was a three-layered entity in which the sky, the earth and the netherworld lay on top.
of each other, human life taking place ‘in the middle’. There are different views on who could gain access to these realms. According to one (Sckär Manuscript: 41), the sky was the realm of Kalunga, the God or the ‘Great Spirit’, and the earth was for the living. The spirits of the dead lived in the netherworld in the place in which they were buried. The souls of ordinary people dwelled under the homesteads while those of the kingly lay under the court. Dead people were assigned their role in the land of the dead according to the status they had when they were living. People who were ritually impure in life were not buried at all but thrown into the bush for wild animals to devour and their souls had no resting place. Among kings, only the circumcised could be sure to join the spirits of kingly ancestors under the court, and only those who had not transgressed in their lifetime could become ancestors.

According to another version of the tripartite view of the cosmos, Kalunga was not alone in the sky, but was joined by the spirits of the kingly who lived in wealth and abundance while the common people pined in the netherworld (Vedder 1934: 74). Yet another version places Kalunga’s realm under the earth: when wells were dug down deep they revealed Kalunga’s kingdom with pastures, fields and cattle (Knappert 1982: 157). There was still another idea of the world of the beyond: the dead went to the land of the spirits that was situated in “two fires in the sky, visible at the horizon after sunset”. After death commoners went to the place where the big “fire” was, and the small fire was for the kingly (Tuomas Uukunde, Uukwanyama elc 36: 85). Teddy Aarni (1982) elaborated on the idea of the world as consisting of two grain baskets. He drew a chart of this cosmological image. He called the upper basket the visible world and the lower one the unseen world, corresponding to the worlds of men and that of spirits. The hierarchies of men in this world and spirits in the unseen world are matched, and the king and kingly ancestors are integrated into both a worldly and an otherworldly system (see Figure 4).

Aarni suggests that the sacred qualities of the king were connected to the spirits of old kings. In his view, the political power that a king possessed was intertwined with the position of his ancestors in the religious hierarchy. His special relationship with his ancestors both supported his position and prevented his misuse of power. Kingly ancestors, then, not only sanctioned the actions of living kings, they were also the ultimate authority in government. Hilja Aho (1941: 16) conceived of this ancestral influence as a conservative force that opposed changes in “the old ways”
Figure 4  Aarni’s hierarchy of the Owambo cosmos (Aarni 1985: 84; redrawn by Wolfgang Zeller)
and threatened “the revenge of the spirits” if customs were changed.

Aarni’s concentric circles represent Owa Mbo ideas of how this world and the beyond related to each other. At the centre is the “ego” or “the self”. The ego is matched in the spiritual world with the “dream-soul” of a person, and is surrounded by “family”. The family, again, is matched by “the living dead” the remembered ancestors called oohe nooyina in the world of the beyond. The circle beyond this orbit takes in, in this world, a more extended group of kinsfolk, which Aarni calls “elders” and “kin”. In the other world it hosts “aathithi”, the spirits of ancestors. The diviners in this world follow, matched by witches, “aalodhi”, in the world beyond. Above the diviners in the worldly hierarchy stand the sacred king and the royal family, matched in the other world by the “royal aathithi”, the spirits of dead kings and other royal people. On the top of the worldly hierarchy are “the sacred fire” and taboos, oshithila (oshidhila), matched in the other world by the “first ancestor”, “spirits” and “powers”. As Aarni portrays it, fire and taboos stand above kings in the hierarchy of this world and in the unseen world the king’s ancestors come second to the “first ancestor” and an undefined category of “spirits and powers” (Aarni 1982: 28). This cosmological image thus subordinates kings and kingly ancestors to other powers in both realms. It is quite a different picture from the one colonial observers painted of politically omnipotent kings.

Aarni’s chart could be criticised on a number of points. He focuses on the individual and makes the “ego” the centre rather than looking at the collective aspect of identity formation, which would correspond better to local ideas of personhood. This theme was been taken up, for example, by Marilyn Strathern (1988) in her critique of Western projections of ideas of personhood upon other cultures. The concept ‘dream-soul’ that Aarni uses also fits badly in the Owambo context, and seems to have been borrowed from some other anthropological reality. What is more questionable is that Aarni places witches in the realm of the beyond and matches them with diviners in this world, which does not sit well with other presentations of these phenomena in Owambo traditions (cf. Hiltunen 1986, 1993). In his review of Aarni’s study, Beidelmann (1984) criticised its methodology and the scope of the sources used. Regardless of the weaknesses, however, it is important in the present context in that it integrates the king into a hierarchy of spirits, which is “good to think with”. Certain aspects of his scheme reflect certain findings of this study: kings were once seen to be subordinated to more powerful entities, and
above kingly ancestors stood other spirits and powers of a vague kind. It conveys that kings in this world were subordinated to the rules of society in the form of taboos, and to the symbol of the sacred fire.

Although kings were understood to be very powerful, there were several constraints on kingship posited by tradition. Ethnographic evidence provided by local informants supports the idea that taboos stood above kings. Oral tradition usually described the fire as a core symbol of kingship but Aarni’s scheme suggests the reverse: fire stood above the king. The myth of Niilwa and the Bushmen provides one explanation for why this was so. Kings appropriated the holy fire at some point of time and made it a token of kingship. Whether in Ongandjera it was brought from Sitehnu’s kingdom in Humbe in Angola, or appropriated locally from the Bushmen, we do not know. If it came from Sitehnu, it means that the Owmbo kings were dependent on the ritual appropriation of a foreign kingly symbol in order to rule. If it came from the Bushmen, the original “owners of the land”, it shows that the Bushmen had a central role in the creation of the symbolism of Owmbo kingship. Either way, for ever after fire stood above kings in the hierarchy of this world.

The multiple meanings of Kalunga

I will now describe the ways in which the Owmbo have elaborated on and used the term Kalunga. Kalunga has mostly been depicted as a personified High God, an absent and non-interfering Deus Otiosus or creator God, and this is how he features in Aarni’s scheme. The Owmbo also called him “The Great Spirit”. He had not only created man, he also divided the “good things” among human beings and allowed the kingly to master the land. The myth in which Kalunga allowed Oniilua (Niilwa) to take the land depicted the rule of kings as divinely sanctioned. Qualifiers were used in referring to Kalunga, most commonly Kalunga ka Nangombe, the God of the Ancestors, or Kalunga Kiimbamba, the God of the Baskets (Närhi 1929: 10, 11). These epithets emphasised Kalunga’s nearness to ancestors and his influence on agriculture and rain (cf. NAF Väänänen: 4). Although he was thought to “be everywhere”, his abode was also said to be close to the spirits: in the trees, in termite mounds, in the wind, in sacred groves, in short wherever spirits dwelled. No clear distinction was made between Kalunga and spirits. “Kalunga and ancestor spirits were close”. When the spirits were evoked in sacrifice Kalunga was also ad-
dressed. Phenomena of an unexplainable nature were attributed to Kalunga, and so were certain incurable illnesses. He was addressed by prayer and sacrifice if someone was ill (Usko Shivute MSC). Kalunga was sometimes given anthropomorphic traits, as an old man with a beard. However, the sun was also addressed as “Kalunga”, and charcoal was said to be “a great Kalunga”. There was thus a range of meanings associated with Kalunga as a *spiritual force* from an anthropomorphic god to a power-laden substance.

Missionaries chose the name Kalunga to depict the Christian God in the local languages. Among converted Owmbo the distinction between Kalunga in the local tradition and the Kalunga of Christianity gradually disappeared. Aarni objected to the Christian interpretation of Owmbo religion. He argued that there was a certain vagueness in the way his contemporary locals explained Kalunga that the missionaries did not quite understand (Aarni 1982: 92, 96). Aarni described a number of ways in which the name Kalunga was used among Owmbo neighbours. It was recurrent as a god in the religious vocabulary of Bantu-speakers in Africa “between Zambezi and the Atlantic Ocean”. In Angola he was often seen as the ruler of the underworld, associated with death, eternity, the ocean and with the underworld itself. Among the Chokwe of Angola, and among the Lunda and the Mbundu certain kings used the word Kalunga in their kingly titles. Among the southern Chokwe the term Kalunga was also used as a common greeting (Aarni 1982: 103, 105).

The -lunga stem of the word Kalunga in Bantu languages is often related to spiritual entities and in the Owmbo context the term was associated with palm trees (*omilunga*, sing. *omulunga*, *Hyphaena ventricosa*) (Tirronen 1986: 197). Palms are associated with both migratory sites of the Owmbo origin (Oshamba and Oshimolo FWC: Kaulinge: 30) and with the fertility of women: a young woman was alluded to by the term oKalunga, little palm tree. Charcoal as “a great Kalunga” is interesting in the context of this study in that it was said to be stronger than kings (see Shituuwa, ELC 1409: 1973). Charcoal taken from trees struck by lightning was particularly potent and when people went to see the king they put a piece of charcoal in their mouth for protection against harsh or violent treatment. In this sense charcoal was powerful against the king and stood above him. When used to depict the power of charcoal, Kalunga was reduced to a powerful protective fetish. The sun, another “force
of nature”, was also addressed as “Kalunga” and was venerated by kings each morning and night. There may well be a link between the veneration of the sun and the use of charcoal as a power fetish and the use of ashes in cattle ritual, as explained by Miriam Shimbu: During the eulogy the backs of the cattle were sprinkled with ashes. This was to substitute for the sun (Shimbu MSC).

Kalunga could influence the fate of the living and had the capacity to withhold rain, and he was addressed in sacrifices to the spirits. It is therefore not correct to say that he was a remote and passive god who did not influence human life. Both Kalunga and the spirits were thought to influence rainfall and agriculture, and both caused illness and death. If the above ideas are incorporated into Aarni’s chart, the following conclusions can be drawn: the forces of nature were closely associated with the “sphere of Kalunga”, which stood above the kings, first ancestors and the “spirits and powers”. Thus Kalunga was a diffuse force associated with nature.

There is more to be said about the use of the term Kalunga in Owmbo tradition, however. It was used as a polite greeting, and this gives it a political aspect. Given its use in Angola, there are some surprising dimensions. It occurred as a title of respect given to a chief “um titolo de respeito dado a um chefe [...]” in Angolan folklore of the late 1800s (Chatelain 1894: 274, 294 as referred to by Aarni 1982: 165). In the light of Miller’s work (1972) on the Mbundu in Angola, this would appear to signify more than a token of reverence. In effect, Kalunga was a political title among the Lunda, the Chokwe and the Umbundu (Miller 1972) and in some parts of Angola kings used titles that incorporated the term: Kalunga Tembo Muhene, Kalunga Kasongo and Huambo-Kalunga, respectively (Aarni 1982: 103). The concept was thus quite different in Angola, and does not seem to have had an exclusively religious interpretation: or did it? If Kalunga stood for a political title in Miller's terms, accompanied by a strong fetish or ritual used in the struggle for political power, it might explain the occurrence of the term both as a kingly title and as a name for a Great Spirit.

Frieda Williams also elaborated on Kalunga as a political title in her study of 1988. She suggested that the Owmbo inherited it from their neighbours in the north, and claimed that the roots of the Owmbo term Kalunga were in the Luba kingdom. The title Ilunga spread from Luba to...
Lunda with the mythical hunter hero Chibinda Ilunga⁵⁰. Provided with the prefix ka-, this title seems to have spread among power-holders in Angola. The Imbangala ruler at Wambu (Huambo) used the title Wambu Kalunga, and the fifth ruler of Viye kingdom (Ovimbundu) at the end of the sixteenth century was called, Kalunga ka Nangombe (Williams 1988: 61, 62). This suggests an alternative explanation for the expression Kalunga ka Nangombe: it may have been derived from this Owimbundu king. Kalunga had thus been a royal title in Angola in the times of the Owambo migrations. Williams did not follow up this lead in her study of 1991, and it is still unclear how it came about that this kingly title changed to become a name for a High God. The usage of the term for both god, spiritual force, and for kings and titles, indicates a strong link between political and supernatural power, however.

There is a narrative tradition that illustrates the link between spiritual power and political success, namely the stories about the hero Mpamba, Mpambaisita or Mambaisita, who became king. Various versions of this story are part of the Owambo oral tradition. Mpambaisita was a man born from an egg. He thus stood above the paternal kin-relationship, but he had a symbolic filial relationship to Kalunga, whom he challenged. This hero, half-human, half-god, was bestowed with extraordinary capacities. In some versions of the tales when he was still young, he was protected by a Big Bird instead of having parents. Later he became king. The bird was associated with supernatural strength, but also with the nurturing protection that normally would be bestowed on a child by its parents. These stories could be read as an illustration of the necessity for kingship to free itself from the bonds of kin. Mpambaisita did it, and he, in the end, acquired superhuman powers and became king. He drew strength both from the protective spirit-bird and from the fact that he was born out of the egg “without a father”. This made him stand above normal human beings. He also drew strength from his good relations with the wild animals of the forest which gave him some supernatural power. He ended up being a king, and challenged Kalunga, who admitted that he faced an equal. Mpambaisita had both supernatural powers and a loyal following both of which epitomise the ideology of Owambo kingship.

⁵⁰. This hero plays a prominent role in Luc de Heusch’s analysis (1982) of the kingship institution in Central Africa. Miller (1976), again, discusses Ilunga as a political title.
The tale about Mpambaisita, on the surface an ordinary heroic tale with many variations, could be read as a statement on the emergence of Owambo kingship and centralised rule. It suggests how the spiritual power of the king evolved, and it reveals a “spiritual competition” between the hero and Kalunga. Mpambaisita asserts that he is a “peer” of Kalunga and thus he is capable of becoming king. Kalunga, or “the father” of Mpambaisita, uses a fetish in the form of a pouch attached to a string around his neck when he tries to assert his power over Mpambaisita. Interpreted in the light of Miller’s discussion on the role of fetishes in Umbundu kingship, the story about Mpambaisita and Kalunga could be understood as a story about the struggle for hegemony between masters of potent fetishes carrying spiritual power.

**Spirits of the living and the dead**

*Spirits in the body*

In order to understand the spiritual aspect of Owambo kingship one should know how the Owambo traditionally understood the spiritual aspect of the human being and how they conceptualised death. The entire spectrum of beliefs is not easily conveyed to outsiders, but available sources give some clue. The vocabulary and significance of this spiritual aspect has been analysed by several missionaries, including Albin Savola, Alpo Hukka and Jalmari Hopeasalmi. In the absence of studies conducted by local scholars, these interpretations provide a useful introduction to the topic. The Ondonga vocabulary distinguishes between spirits inside the human being and those outside it. Spirits “in the body” are part of the constitution of personhood. Even so, it seems that a large proportion of an Owambo person’s identity was collective, encompassing his or her kin from ancestors to the still unborn. As Jacobsson-Widding noted for a number of African cultures, “the notion of personal identity is conceived in collective terms” (1989: 23). What is more, various spirits outside the body were thought to transcend the boundary of a person’s self on particular occasions. In some pre-literate societies this personal boundary was thus fluid, as Marilyn Strather (1988) noted of the Hagen of New Guinea.

According to the missionary Albin Savola, the Ondonga used to believe that a person’s “spiritual self” was made up of different parts, called
**ombepo, omutima and omujeno (omuyeno).** Ombepo was “the part of the soul that can move outside the body in the shape of thoughts, fantasy, dreams and observations”: it was the outer manifestation of life in a person. Originally the word ombepo meant breath or wind. Omutima was the heart, which hosted feelings and wishes, both good and bad. Omujeno, again, was the “soul”, the inner life of a person, the centre of bodily life that influenced outer behaviour. Savola interpreted the relation between these three aspects in the following way: “[…] omujeno is the source, omutima the medium and ombepo the acting part of the spiritual life of an Ondonga person” (Savola 1927: 70, 71 my translation from the Finnish).

Alpo Hukka, who analysed Owambo ideas on the human spirit in 1954, found that by that time omutima had lost its symbolic significance in this respect and now only referred to the physical heart. Another concept, omuzizimba, or shadow, had now been introduced. This concept encompassed the outer manifestations of a person, eha, “the place” or temporary location of the person, ethano, the picture or image, and edhina, the name (Hukka 1954: 103). The person's close and cherished belongings – his pipe, his walking stick or a beloved animal – were understood to be part of his/her ethano, the spiritual image: cattle were particularly close to a man. Part of the spirit was extractable from parts of the body such as nail pairings, hair and spittle (Aarni 1982: 68, 69). It was through any of these, and also through the sand under a person's footsteps, that a malevolent person could put a curse on someone – in other words conduct sorcery. A person's power was believed to come from amulets or directly from the spirits. Particular body parts had more of this power than others, and children had almost none of it. The association of ombepo with the breath and omutimo with the heart has already been mentioned. The liver was understood as the locus of the strength or power of a human being. The blood was very strong, too, and if it was smeared on weapons it gave the strength to kill. The power or “soul” of an animal was concentrated in certain parts, including the skin, the heart, the liver and kidneys and the blood. There was great power in the bones of a dead person or animal “because the soul is still attached to them, which is why they do not decay right away” (Hopeasalmi 1945: 26, 27).
The causes and consequences of death

The Owambo had many ideas about death, which were not necessarily compatible. They believed in its finality, but they also thought that the “recognised dead”, those who became “ancestors”⁵¹, were active agents in the life of the living. Ideas about what caused death also varied. Incurable illnesses were thought to be caused by Kalungua, and the consequent deaths “could not be explained”. However, it was equally common to explain death as the consequence of witchcraft or sorcery, uulodhi or etikilo, a willed act by a human being in co-operation with a malevolent spirit. Witchcraft was thought to gain its power from the spirits of dead persons who had not been made ancestors, or from ancestors who carried a grudge against the living. Sorcery, again, used the indirect power of spirits residing in charms, and was acted out in rituals. In both, one person was “eating” the other, although using different means. Death was the ultimate outcome. It would be wrong to say that it was commonly thought to be caused by witchcraft according to older Owambo belief. Oral tradition reveals quite a different stance: death was the fate of every man. The story about the snake and the chameleon, as told by Natanael Nakanjala from Uukwanyama explains the waning and waxing of the moon, as well as the death of human beings as follows:

The snake and chameleon were frying liver over the fire, the snake fried the liver of the moon and the chameleon that of the human being. They stirred well but after a while there was a smell of burning and, lo, the liver had got burned. The snake ran to look and found that the pieces were charred but only on one side. He took his piece and soaked it in water and it was still edible. The chameleon’s piece had burned to cinder by the time he reached the hearth. This is the reason why the moon dies and comes back as if rising from the dead, and why human beings die and do not come back as the moon does. (Natanael the son of Nakanjala ELC 75: 185–186)⁵²

51. I use inverted commas here to indicate that those who were considered ancestors were not necessarily kin. The Owambo were familiar with positional succession, ancestorhood in terms of title or skill, without a kinship bond.
52. I have shortened the story to give only the elements that are relevant in this context.
What happened to the different parts of a person’s spirit after death? Unfortunately we have no information about omujeno, omutima and omuzizimba, but we do know that ombepo, the moving part of the spirit residing in the breath, was thought to remain after death. It dissolved into a number of uncounted and dispersing spirits. There was also the notion that “death eats the living person” (Uukwanyama, Unknown informant U. ELC 807: 1220), which refers to the period after physical death has occurred. At this time the spirits of the dead person were particularly prone to disturbing the affairs of the living. The liminal and ambivalent stage after death was thus expressed as a period in which the borders between the spirits and the living had temporarily blurred. The dividing line between life and death was not confined to the moment of death, judging from the fact that a very sick person was no longer considered a human being (Uukwaluudhi, Namuiha ELC 1108:1561). Thus the liminal phase between life and death began when signs of mortal illness became apparent. This helps to explain why a sacred king had to be killed when he got old and ill.

In older times there was a taboo on manslaughter. Taking another person’s life, either through the physical act of killing or through spiritual intervention, was considered a serious transgression. This even applied to killing a man in war, and ritual intervention was required before the transgressor could enter into interaction with other people in a normal way. A special ritual of cleansing, utotoni, washed away the stain of death from a homecoming warrior who had killed an enemy. The life of members of the kingly clan was particularly valuable and the blood of the kingly could not flow, at least not by the hand of a commoner. These norms, expressed in the narratives of local informants, stood in stark contrast with the daily realities observed in the late 1800s.

What happened after death to the person was explained in different ways. In Ondo nga it was thought that “the soul was in darkness” after the body died. (Shuuja ELC 241: 548). This was not a permanent state, however, judging by the fact that the afterlife was pictured as taking place in a land of bounty, and that rituals of burial integrated the dead among their ancestors, which made them influential and revered. “Darkness”, I sug-

53. The wording of Shuuja’s statement associates with the vocabulary of Christianity; we cannot be entirely sure of how much this view reflects pure traditional belief, how much it is filtered through the new idiom of the Christian faith.
gest, does not necessarily signify “moral despair”, but should rather be understood as a concept that visualises the liminality of the moment of physical death. Death in the sense of the end of life was associated with darkness and the direction in which the sun set while the east, where the sun rose, was associated with life. As already mentioned, there is ambivalence in terms of where the land of the dead was situated, under the earth, up in the sky, or among the “fires” of the night horizon.

**The burial of a Household Head**

In reaching its destination as an ancestor the spiritual side of the human being had to be helped along through burial rituals. The burial of commoner household heads, *omwene gu’egumbo* (*gwegumbo*), followed a basic ritual structure, which was also reiterated in the burial of kings⁵⁴. First the corpse was carried to the place of burial, the cattle byre inside the homestead. Walls were pierced to make new entrances through which the dead person was carried: he could not be taken in through the entrances used by the living. His sleeping hut was destroyed, and the entrance to his home was blocked. The corpse was swept into the hide of a bull, preferably a black one, folded in a squatting position and put into a grave dug for the purpose. All bodily ornaments were taken off and the body was cleansed and then adorned again with strings of beads or shells before it was put in the ground.

In Uukwanyama the graves of commoners were adorned with a pestle placed in the hand of the dead man to mark the burial spot (Loeb 1948a: 79). A pestle was also used to mark a kingly grave. Only after the corpse had been buried could mourning, *oosa*, begin, which included holding a vigil around the grave and wailing. The family and household members were marked at this point in different ways to manifest their state of mourning⁵⁵. The homestead was declared polluted, *osuuumbo* (*osiumbo*) and the cooking quarters were considered nullified (Ja Kaluvi ELC 365: 79).

---

54. For the outline of commoner funerals the following sources are used; for Ondo- nga Johannes Kaukungua (ELC 411: 841), for Ongandjera Hango Nameja (ELC 1086: 1499) for Uukwualudhi Paulus Namuiha (ELC 1108: 1561) and for Uukwanyama JaKaluvi (ELC 384: 798).

Osumbo was more than a polluted state of being: it was a state of inverted fertility. For the widow it curtailed the capacity to conceive: “Osumbo does not give pregnancy”. A widow’s reproductive capacity was polluted because her man had passed away. It had to be ritually cleansed before she could bear children that were allowed to survive. In order to do this and end the curtailing influence of her dead husband on her womb, she had to go through real or symbolic coitus with a circumcised man (ELC Ondonga Henok 1196: 1701). If that union produced a child, it was not allowed to live and only the next child was considered free from the polluting influence of the dead father. This practice shows how the spirit of a dead man was seen to influence the state of his widow’s womb.

The funeral of a head of household included the sacrifice of his personal name bull and the preparation of a commensal meal from its meat. The spirit of the man was thought to reside in his name-bull. The liver of the animal was given to his children and kinsfolk. In this way, through the sacrifice of the name-bull and the meal prepared from it, the dead man’s spirit was perpetuated in his kinsfolk. When the corpse had been removed from the homestead and the mourners cleansed of its polluting effect by the application of a cooked ointment made of red olukula powder, butter, ginger, omunkunzi, and porridge, the spirit of the dead person was asked to “go away” and “not to come here anymore” (Hango Nameja Ongandjera ELC 1086: 1501, Ondonga, Shuuja ELC 241: 549). The bull sacrifice, the spatial arrangements and the cleansing of the mourners were all part of the restructuring of the relations between the living and the dead person. Within a year of the death the homestead was moved and the grave in the former cattle byre became a place outside, part of the “field” of the house. This was not a second burial as in Merina and Chagga, but it served a similar purpose. The burial site, the abode of the corpse, was separated from the house and became a “place of sacrifice” (Uukwanyama Loeb 1948a: 79). All these procedures, with slight alterations, were also adhered to when a king died (see Chapter six). Thus the customs adhered to at kingly burials were structured along a pattern of commoner practices.

Ancestor and non-ancestor spirits

It is not an easy task to clarify the range of “spirits” existing in Owmambo belief, not to mention the relation between different kinds of spirits out-
side the human body. The terms aathithi and aakwampungu (aakuampungu) were used both for spirits in general and for spirits of kin ancestors. These spirits were thought to live close to the homes of the dead, in fields, mole holes, termite mounds, trees and forests, everywhere where someone had died, and particularly where there were holy objects or places, iimenka. At night the aathithi were thought to move westwards of human dwellings, in the direction of the setting sun (Hopeasalmi 1945: 23). They were attached to objects and places and were often related to people who belonged to the history of a place. For instance, the spirit of a well was thought to be the spirit of the person who had dug it, although the human origin of such a spirit was obscured in the course of history. In their narratives the locals used the term aathithi indiscriminately for both ancestor spirits and spirits that were not attached to a human being. Of the latter kind were the spirits of floodwater, which merited the epithet “nature spirits”. This floating terminology conveys the fact that no clear line was drawn between the spirits of dead human beings and those associated with a natural phenomenon. Nevertheless, Aarni distinguishes ancestor spirits proper from undefined “spirits and powers”. He gives three categories of ancestor spirits; normal ancestor spirits aathithi (aasisi), royal aathithi, and the spirits of the first ancestors.

The power of ancestor spirits was ambivalent: they caused both good and bad things for the living. People generally feared them, for they punished those who broke taboos. They thus served as an invisible authority guarding the rules of society, and the sanctions they delivered were of a supernatural kind. Like human beings driven by vanity, the aathithi hungered for attention and were appeased by sacrifice, most efficiently by ohula, or blood sacrifice, but also by eesagelo or oshipo (osipe), a “bloodless” and less potent form of sacrifice of beer, grain, porridge, grass, or a handful of soil. It seems that in the times of great social changes in the mid- and late 1800s, the ancestors had more reason to be angry and to ask for blood sacrifices because the taboos and customs that they guarded were more commonly broken than earlier.

The royal aathithi stood above other personified spirits and were sacrificed to at the graveside in the hope of producing rain. Specific information on first ancestors is hard to come by in oral tradition – possibly because they were spoken about merely as “ancestors” without qualification, but it may also have been a significant omission. Aarni mentions yet another category of spirits, the iiluli/iilulu “evil spirits” (Aarni 1982:...
17), but he does not place them in his chart. Tirronen (1986:194) translates this term as “spook” or “ghost”. Hiltunen mentions iiluli in her exposé over “witchcraft and sorcery” (1986: 29) but the term occurs only rarely in narratives by Emil Liljeblad’s informants. Both aathithi and iiluli threatened to enter a person or to influence a person’s life. The aathithi were not necessarily malevolent, but the iiluli were. Iiluli were spirits of people that in their lifetime had been unaccepted by society. Hiltunen describes them as the “souls of dead witches” or as spirits of those who had been killed by witchcraft (1986: 29). Such people were not buried but were thrown to wild animals in the bush. This meant that they never became ancestors. According to Loeb this treatment was also accorded the earthly remains of persons who had been injured in battle or who had died from drowning, suicide or murder and to those of unwanted children (Loeb 1962: 259–260). The iiluli category caught the outcasts of society, the ones who in their lifetime could not stay within the bounds of taboos, or who for other reasons were judged as impure. I suggest that iiluli was a category of spirits that locals spoke of only with reluctance, and that they became more prominent over time. Given the increased infringement of customs once European influences had set in, it would be logical that the number of people denied access to ancestorhood and cast into the category of iiluli was on the increase in colonial times. This interpretation is supported by the fact that many colonial observers spoke of the Owa mbo as not burying their dead, and as just throwing them in the bush, although we know that there were elaborate burial procedures for commoners as well as kings.

Other spirits

I will now turn to the aathithi who were not identifiable as ancestors of kin. They were of two kinds: those which could be traced back to human beings and those belonging to the category of nature spirits. The spirits of geographical sites – sacred groves, valleys and flood-plains were of the latter kind. Offerings had to be made every year to the flood spirits before water could be taken from the riverbeds or fishing could resume (Väänänen: NAF 6–7). In the old days it needed human sacrifice to keep them benevolent and stave off dangerous flooding. The spirit residing in the charcoal of a tree struck by lightning (sometimes depicted as Kalunga as mentioned previously) was another powerful “nature spirit” and, as
mentioned above, it was considered more powerful than the spirit of a
king. The spirit of okakulukadhi has also been portrayed as representing
“powers of the wild”, although Erastus Shilongo associated these spirits
to Bushmen (FWC 41).

The spirits of the saltpan, ekango, to which offerings had to be made
before any salt could be excavated, were mastered by them. We do not
know whether the spirits of ukakolokadhi and of ekango were antropo-
morphised and considered the spirits of ancient Bushmen, or whether
they were seen as nature spirits mastered by the Bushmen. The spirits
of the oshimanja, the annual iron-fetching expeditions did belong to old
master smiths, however, whose power was evoked in ritual at the exca-
vation site. The spirits of wells, which had to be remembered before wa-
ter was drawn, again were the spirits of the person who built the well
(Väänänen: NAF.16) and thus belonged to the first category.

Thus the aathithi could have been a number of things beyond ances-
tors of kin. They could have been the spirits of someone who had initi-
ated an activity – a sort of “functional ancestor” – or of someone who
had once mastered a special skill in a system of perpetual succession.
They could also have represented powerful forces of nature. There were a
number of spirits whose history is not traceable, those of the horn, the
axe, the stick, the knife and the ashes used in trials to reveal the culprit
of some offence (cf. Väänänen: NAF 8). A special power object, the ohiya-
horn (ohija) of a king or a commoner, was also thought to contain “a
spirit”. Power objects were venerated not in themselves, but rather for
their capacity to mediate the power of “the beyond”. According to Hilja
Aho, the spirit in an object was, in a vague way, related to Kalungu (1941:
30, 39). All this illustrates that a neat division of agents and powers in the
supernatural field does not do justice to the way in which the Owa mbo
saw matters. Aarni’s scheme separates the different spirits in the other-
worldly hierarchy, but this does not quite correspond to the way in which
the Owambo of old experienced the spiritual world, judging by their use
of terminology and their oral tradition. Kalungu, ancestors, spirits and
fetishes were all linked. “Eating the soul” of another person, or the drain-
ing of power from a living person, was what witches and sorcerers were
thought to excel in. The machinations of diviners were not always dis-
tinguishable from such practices when they attempted to protect clients
from the menacing power of others, or when they sought to augment the
The Spirits of the Big Birds were in a category of their own in Owmambo belief. These birds were an intriguing and obscured aspect of Owmambo ritual procedure. They were spiritual agents featuring on certain ritual occasions, and it was usually forbidden for human beings to lay their eyes on them. Old circumcised men acted as birds in male initiation rituals. The men travelled secretly in the night and whirled a piece of string in the air onto which was attached a piece of wood, thereby making a humming sound like a bird. Alternatively, they blew horns to make bird sounds. Väänänen (NAF: 11) suggested that the Big Birds represented the spirits of dead kings of foreign tribes to the north, who were related to the present rulers, and that they had an annual secret procession in order to strengthen kingship. Big Birds, circumcision and female initiation, were once brought by kings from the north to the Owmambo societies in Namibia.

Information from Ongandjera points to a different explanation. It suggests that the Big Birds represented spirits governed by local clans. Processions of different clans took place in different months, and each had its own name. What is more, information from Uukwanyama suggests that the secret Big Birds actually represented a political governing body, the ekandjo, which decided on matters in times before kings had fully assured power (Salokoski 1992). The name for the district level of kingly administration, oshikandjo, could thus have echoed the past power of the congregation of Big Birds, in other words the spirits turned into a political body.

So far I have discussed Owmambo ideas about Kalunga, ancestors, and “spirits” and “powers”. I will now turn to people who had a special skill in utilising and manipulating such spirits and powers, who were called diviners, oonganga, kiimbanda or oondudu⁵⁶, sorcerers, omutikili, witches, omulodhi, and aakuluntu, circumcised men. Kings, uukwaniilwa, also exercised spiritual power, as did ordinary human beings to a lesser extent. Mapping how these agents acquired their power and determining how they were thought to execute it will help in placing the king in a religious context.

⁵⁶ The terms kiimbanda and oondudu were used in Uukwanyama and Ombandja while oonganga was an oshindonga term. For sorcerers and witches I here use the oshindonga terms used by the Ondonga.
On diviners and kings

Diviners in pre-colonial and colonial times formed a profession of their own, although they lived and worked like other agro-pastoralists. They were involved in the invocation of the spirits of the beyond in an effort to make them benevolent. In order to fully understand the power of sacred kings it would be useful to know how diviners acquired their power and how it was conceived of.

The training of a master diviner took many years. One of the outcomes was that he became the master of the powers of uu pule. These powers, according to Hilja Aho, were not understood as “magic” but rather as coming from “the Spirit God” or Kalunga (1941, 30, 31). In the process of diviner initiation neophytes learned to transfer the power emanating from the spirit god into amulets that they would use later in healing and divining. A contemporary local Christian leader, the Lutheran Church Bishop Kleopas Dumeni, described the work of diviners in the following way:

Some people had special knowledge or wisdom attained through medicines. They knew “what was going on” and they could distinguish right from wrong. Diviners, oonganga, were approached by commoners as well as kings if there was an illness. If there was no rain, people went to onganga with cattle [for sacrifice]. If they had done wrong, they went to onganga to be cleansed. Onganga is like a hospital. (MSC Dumeni, Interview in Helsinki, 20.7.1987)

This statement reveals that illness and the absence of rain were analogous states of being that could be rectified by the diviner, and that trespassing or “doing wrong”, was seen as a state of pollution for which diviners could also find a remedy. The normal procedure they used for these pursuits was to sacrifice to the spirits. The relation between diviners and kings seems to have been ambivalent. On the one hand, diviners were part of the kingly administration and were subordinate, but on the other they were independent actors and could be called upon by commoners and kings alike. In both cases they were in a key position in relation to kings and their subjects and played a central role in rituals of kingship and in those of common people. They were not bound to one country and could cross borders to perform particularly difficult ritual tasks when called upon. When diviners were not subordinate to kings, they would
logically be their rivals in spiritual matters, since they were the masters of ritual secrets conveyed to them in initiation. Those of higher level became, in one way or the other, possessed by spirits, after which time they could use their powers. They, like the king, were intermediaries between this world and the spirits. On the ground, master diviners ushered the kings-to-be in their initiation and were responsible for their elevated status, introducing them to the secrets of esoteric knowledge. They headed all important rituals carried out in the king’s name. Common people approached diviners when they wanted to know the cause of an illness or death, or to ask them to conduct a sacrifice of particular urgency.

The Swiss botanist Hans Schinz (1891), who stayed with Martti Rautanen in Ondonga for half a year in the late 1880s, claimed that Owa mbo diviners had formerly all been of a particular clan, the Aakwananime or Lion clan. He held that this clan had been chased to Evale and Ehanda from Owamboland in the 1870s by the kings of the Hyena clan because they were felt to be a threat to that clan’s power. After this, only pitiful remnants of the Lion clan could be found in the north beyond the Angolan border, and some of them were invited to Owamboland from time to time to conduct rituals (Schinz 1891: 304–305). This testimony is problematic for many reasons. For one thing, missionaries in the 1870s and beyond told of great powers of diviners, and for another, there is little evidence to back up Schinz’ claim that all diviners were recruited from a particular clan. They were commonly chosen on the basis of spirit possession, and there is no evidence that only people of particular clans were possessed. Furthermore, Schinz’ thesis cannot hold for “all of Owamboland” for the hyena were in power only in Uukwambi and Ondonga. On the other hand, the process that he describes cannot be discarded out of hand. When kings consolidated their power they took pains to augment their position in the ritual hierarchy. What is more, diviners were often sought from beyond the Angolan border. If these were the ousted members of the lion clan, oral tradition has completely forgotten about their history.

Owa mbo diviners were placed in a hierarchy according to what sacrifice they were capable of performing. Maija Hiltunen (1986, 1993) discusses different kinds of divining practices extensively. Ordinary people could approach the powers of the beyond by making a common “bloodless” sacrifice in which an offering of porridge, grain, beans, beer, grass, or just leaves was given to the spirits (Estermann 1976: 190, Väänänen:
5). Diviners of a lower level of excellence could also perform such sacrifices. Women healers and transvestite healers, *eshenge*, were situated low on the hierarchy. They had gone through no diviner initiation, but had been chosen to become healers by virtue of spirit possession, often manifesting itself in severe illness. Eshenge were thought to have been possessed by a female spirit in their childhood. An initiated diviner of high rank was needed for blood sacrifices, which were often called for in the case of severe illness. Diviners of a higher rank not only cleansed people of bad deeds and conducted rain rituals. Blood sacrifices formed a hierarchy ranging from chicken, goat, dog to the bull, in which the bull sacrifice was the most powerful one (Estermann 1976: 192 and Savola 1924: 179).

Diviners of the highest order, those who could teach other diviners were called *omutikululi* in Ondo nga and they could break the spell of sorcery (Iitenge ELC 962: 1388). In Uukwanyama the highest grade of diviners were called *ovapuliki* (sing. *omupuliki*). They taught other diviners, and were allowed to make amulets and to be the supreme authority in matters of religion, medicine and ceremony. Diviners who were to lead war were chosen from this group (Loeb 1962: 123). One of the master diviner's special skills was the performance of a particular ox sacrifice, *ohula*, in order to withdraw the curse of a witch (Väänänen NAF). The master diviners thus had power over witchcraft through the mediation of cattle sacrifice.

Not all master diviners were called to their profession by virtue of spirit possession. Some were “produced” through an initiatory ritual also called *ohula* and after such an initiation the diviner was capable of conducting blood sacrifices on his own. The spirit of the instructor-diviner was attached to a neophyte diviner at this initiation evidenced by the words the instructor uttered at the end of the ceremony: “My spirit, go into this child so that he will know how to heal men” (Hiltunen 1993: 39). When a king-elect was being prepared for office, a similar transfer of power from the diviner to the neophyte took place. Thus in Ondo nga a master diviner took power both from the slaughtered bull and from the instructing diviner. We do not know much about where the diviner’s power came from. It was assumed in Ongandjera initiation of master diviners, however, and in the ritual of diviner initiation the master diviner sang the following words while the *omakola* instruments were being played: “I have eaten of the healing power (*uunganga*), I ate *uupulile*,

5·Placing the kings in a religious context  153
that is the magic power of spirits in Esinga” (Tuomas Uukunde: ELC 438: 884).

The initiation of diviners of different levels in Ondonga had a great deal in common with those of kings. Part of the procedure took place at a termitary, just like the uupule uosaanda in kingly initiation. A diviner who was inaugurated at a termitary received uupule just as a king did. In a lengthy account Jairus J’Uugwanga describes the installation of a dog sacrifice diviner (ELC 400: 824) who was often a woman. The preparations at the termitary followed a certain procedure described below in brief:

After a sequence of initiation rituals involving the sacrifice of a dog, inflicting wounds on the neophyte’s body and presenting her with a diviner strap with a dog’s spinal bones on it, the old diviners take the neophyte to the savanna and look for a small termite mound, about thirty centimetres high and made of black clay. This termite mound is called okambumbukua. The master diviner speaks to the termite mound, as if it was a spirit, and asks it to receive the neophyte and to give her the skills of a diviner to know, heal and save people from death. The diviner brings out two arms-lengths of ostrich-shell-beads and puts these on the termitary as an offering. They dig a small mound at the top of the termitary and go back the next morning to find it moistened by the termites. This is a sign that the okambumbukua has accepted the offering. They pour some beer into the mound and make the neophyte drink of it, swallowing some of the termites that have gathered there. (Jairus Uugwanga, Ondonga ELC 400: 825, 826)

Aini Aarni (HUL 371.1. Folder 12: 11) also describes a diviner initiation of this kind. Another narrative by Ananias Uukunde describes the termitary aspect of the initiation of an uupulile, a master diviner in Ondonga. No sacrifice was involved. The reverence of the termitary or its spirits, manifested in the initiation of a dog-sacrifice diviner, is no longer evident. This neophyte diviner, it seems, got the better of the termitary spirit:

The diviner goes in secret in the darkness of the night to a termite hill and digs a hole right through it and chops up a pole to be used by the neophyte. The diviner wakes him up, and leads him to the termite hill and orders him to thrust the pole through the hill to pierce it and have it come out on the other side. He does so and is then anointed with butter. Now he has been “fed uupule”, which is a very valuable magic power. Certain taboos are now put on the person, so that the power of uupule will remain with him. (Uukunde ELC 399: 923, 924)
The master diviner received from the termite hill a power that was strong and that henceforth needed to be protected by taboos. In this he resembled a king. A king, however, was able to go right through the termitary, which a diviner could not do. This, I suggest, shows that not only did the king master the termitary spirits after uupule uosaanda, he also appropriated them to an extent that diviners could not. Thus, with regard to the spirits of the termitary, kings were above diviners. This corresponds with the hierarchy that Aarni proposed: there was a certain measure of secret power in the king that made him stand above diviners.

Critical comments were raised in the late 1800s about the great powers of diviners in conducting witch-hunting activities called eankelo. Diviners were known to manipulate witch-hunting techniques and to pronounce a judgement on people, at their own discretion, for witchcraft in the name of kings, thereby ruining the life of the accused person and getting rich by acquiring property in cattle for themselves and for the kings. The activity of diviners seemed to have become more violent towards the end of the 1800s, and this also reflects the way the power of kings changed.

The ways in which kings and diviners were prepared for their tasks were similar in certain respects. When master diviners and oonamunganga were initiated, the spirit of the instructing diviner was passed on to the neophyte and he or she was further strengthened: power from various sources was infused. This was also the pattern in the installation of spiritual powers in kings. The initiation of oonamunganga took place at the king’s court, and the procedure “resembled those of kingly installation rituals”. The similar methods of infusing esoteric powers in kings and diviners suggest that, to some extent, they had similar powers.

Sorcerers, witches and circumcised men

There is a great deal of conceptual confusion regarding the Owambo spiritual agents commonly called sorcerers, omutikili, and witches, uu-lodhi. Neither is it easy to draw a clear line between diviners, healers and sorcerers. Outside observers did not always distinguish clearly between these categories of spiritual agents. Finnish missionaries, for instance, often called a diviner “noita”, the Finnish word for a witch (cf. Väänänen: NAF 8). This confusion was not entirely of their own making because the
local terminology was also unclear (cf. Väänänen FMSC Hp.64 1924: 15). Owanbo terminology used in relation to spiritual agents illustrates my point.

Ouwanga (Iigwanga/uugwanga) signified an inherent “psychophysical power” used by witches, but the term ouwanga was also used to signify sorcery (Hiltunen 1986: 27, see also Kuusi 1969: 95 proverb 632). The Owanbo thus understood the term ouwanga generally as power of a negative nature that was used by witches and put into play by sorcery. Estermann spoke of ouwanga as “eating the person’s life” (1976: 201). Hiltunen chose to make a distinction between a witch and a sorcerer on the basis of how their power worked (Hiltunen 1986: 25, 43). According to Hiltunen, a witch, uulodhi, used ouwanga by means of either uulodhi, the general exercise of witchcraft, or by okuloga (okulya), “eating” the victim’s soul or breaking him down by shooting invisible arrows, okuyona po aantu by using invisible poison or putting lumps into his body that then caused illness or death (ibid.: 1986: 27). All these measures were invisible and their detection was at the discretion of the diviner. We do not know whether witches were thought to use ouwanga unwittingly or on purpose. A sorcerer, omutikili⁵⁷, was a person who “uses material, medicines, rites, spells, etc, for illegal ends” (Hiltunen 1986: 105, 106). However, sorcerers also worked in order to rectify a wrong by punishing the wrong-doer by invisible means (ibid.: 106). He would often be helped by a diviner, who provided the necessary substances. Thus the action of a sorcerer was not necessarily driven by malevolence: it was a way of making subjective justice by spiritual means. A sorcerer could destroy or harm his victim by okutikila, which signified sending a curse, ontiko. A “destructive spirit” was sent to “eat” the other person (Hiltunen 1986: 27, 28). Thus both sorcerers, omutikili, and witches, uulodhi (in Ukwanyama uunganga), “ate” the person or soul of the victim, albeit by using different methods: the consequences of these activities did not differ much from one another.

It is also difficult to draw a clear distinction between diviners and sorcerers. As mentioned above, certain master diviners had the power to nullify the effect of witchcraft, and the methods they used resembled sorcery. Their activities encompassed both beneficial and destructive aspects because their actions harmed the person from whom protection

---

⁵⁷. Rautanen uses the terms ontikilo, ontiso and omuzizimba for sorcery (NAF MRC HpXXVII: 1–3 Diaries no 10: 123).
was given. Kings did not use ouwanga, okuloga or ontiko. The uupule they came to possess was a power that diviners also had access to, although in certain connections it worked like ontiko, as will be made clear in Chapter seven. When augmenting a new king’s power in the installation ritual diviners used measures that paralleled those of sorcerers: they used a potsherd, oshikangwa, for offering. In local understanding kings were understood as “great sorcerers” or omutikili. This is an indication that the sacred power that Owa mbo kings possessed indeed made them resemble the sacred monster that de Heusch spoke of but the label does not cover all aspects of this sacred power.

There was a special category of people, circumcised men, who, like sacred kings, are usually not discussed in the context of religion or spiritual agents. Such people had the prerogative of leading rituals on the homestead, local and kingship levels. Circumcision had been mandatory for men in important positions in the kingly administration and it was also required of people who aspired to become kings. The circumcised men formed their own power grid, superimposed over other hierarchies, the configuration of which has never been thoroughly mapped. It is unclear in what relation diviners stood to other circumcised men. It is obvious, however, that there was more to circumcision than a formal ceremony that signified adulthood and the capacity to lead rituals. It was thought to give protection in armed battles by providing invisibility. It also protected people against the accusations of trespass, even in cases in which the accusations were well-founded. Circumcised men, therefore, were thought to have a measure of supernatural skill. Supernatural protection and judicial immunity acquired from spirits also characterised the sacred kings, who nevertheless seemed to have received protection and immunity of an even a higher level than diviners.

Cattle as links to the spirits

Cattle were another link through which kings as well as commoners could gain access to the spiritual realm. They were economically and socially important and provided links to the spirits in two different ways: some were sacrificed and others provided the link while alive. The latter included the name bulls, sacred cattle and so called seer-cattle, known as omanya (omanja), onangula and ondilika, and what they had in common was that they were held to have extra-sensory capabilities and in some way served
as their owner’s alter ego or as a keeper of his “spirit” or “soul”. Cattle sacrifice was the most potent form of sacrifices, next to human sacrifices and was the most commonly described of all the blood sacrifices that diviners performed. Human sacrifices are mentioned, but rather seldom, and usually as a practice of the remote past. Sacrificial cattle were normally taken from the regular herd. Sacred or seer cattle were never used for sacrifice, and a name bull or cow was slaughtered only on the death of its owner. A speckless black bull or cow was the most valued as a sacrificial beast, and fell victim to commoners and kings on important occasions. They were always part of inauguration and funerals rituals (Aarni 1985: 82) and thus served, I suggest, to re-establish the link between the world of spirits and that of the living. The sacrifice of black cattle was very powerful and could cure diseases that diviners could not cure (Mateus Shehama ELC 643: 1092). Some rituals required the sacrifice of a head of cattle of a different colour. This reflected the elaborate colour symbolism that was part of the Owa mbo belief system: for peace-making purposes, for instance, the sacrificed cattle had to be white or partially white. Cattle sacrifices also had a role in curing illnesses. Illnesses were connected to trespasses of social norms, and trespasses created a rupture in the social fabric. Understood in this way, the curing function of cattle was close to their role as atonement for quarrels and belligerence.

Not all cattle were suitable for sacrifices. Both kings and commoners had special beasts that served as an extension of their person in their lifetime. The Kwanyama king had a special herd of sacred cattle which was called onangula. This herd came into the king’s possession in three ways: He inherited some from the previous king, took others from his father at enthronement, and acquired others in a raid conducted in the first years of his reign. Sacred cattle were never sent out to posts with the common herd, but provided the king and his family with milk and butter at court. When these animals died of old age, the king and his family ate of the head and the liver, and the horns were hung on a branched tree in the central yard of the court. After some time these horns grew moss, and the moss “was said to have supernatural power to strengthen the vitality of the king” (Loeb 1962: 47). Thus in Uukwanyama the horns of a dead sacred bull in conjunction with the decaying powers of nature, had a vitalising effect on the king. Other Owa mbo kings acquired sacred cattle in a similar way and used them in an analogous manner. Given the former owners, the onangula cattle of the Kwanyama king transferred
three kinds of ancestoral power to him: that of the old king, that of his father, and that of the foreigner who once had owned the raided cattle. When the king and his family ate the liver of such a bull they also appropriated the powers of the spirit of its previous owner. The moss on the horns can be understood as representing a link to the ultimate powers of nature.

Within the king’s sacred herd there were particular cows or bulls with a special relation to their owner. The Ondonga king had a special bull with “seer” capacity, called ondilika (onzilika) (Konsa Nnilungu, Ondonga ELC 1358: 1915). “Seer capacity” in this connection meant the capacity to foresee the unforeseeable, in other words esoteric knowledge, and was possessed by a cow in some kingdoms. Seer cattle were treated with extraordinary reverence. There was a taboo, oshidhila (osizila), against beating them, and infringement required ritual purification and prayer. In Ondonga a commoner could make a cow into a sacred object, oshimenka (pl. iimenka) in a ceremony headed by a diviner. Such a cow was also called ondilika. Petrus Igwelegwele (ELC 125) described the procedure of making an ondilika cow. Some blood was tapped from it and was mixed with blood taken from the owner and his wife. The diviner made all three drink of the mixture. Through this act the souls of the man and wife were joined with that of the cow, and all became possessed by a spirit, omuthithi (omusisi), that the diviner had brought with him. The cow thereby became the link between its owner and the spiritual world. It entered into a special relationship with the owner and became a “seer”, ondilika, an alter ego:

For the person who has had a cow made ondilika this head of cattle has become a kind of god, in which he keeps his soul. (Ondonga, Igwelegwele, ELC 125: 284)

Igwelegwele’s witness makes it very clear that cattle were important in the Owambo belief system. The sacred object, the oshimenka, became a repository for the owner’s spirit or soul. It also tells us something about the relation between a king and his sacred cattle: the ondilika cow was a repository of (one of the) spiritual aspect(s) of kingship.

The sacred fire

The sacred fire of the country, *omulilo gu’oshilongo*, was another strong symbol in the Owa mbo belief system, which Aarni placed above kings in his this-worldly hierarchy. Hopeasalmi associated it with the kingly: “The sacred fire, the king and the prosperity of the realm go together” (1945: 53). The fire in question was kindled on a log of *omulongo* wood and was associated with the life of a particular king, and beyond that with the well-being of his subjects. If cattle served as a link to the supernatural realm, so did the sacred fire of the country.

There were several ways in which fire was linked to the supernatural realm, some of which did not involve the king at all. It is interesting to note that the sacred fire was a central societal symbol among the Herero, who travelled with the Owa mbo in the early days before settlement, but for them it symbolised the lineage *oruzo* (Luttig 1933: 27): the Herero never had kings. Attaching sacred fire to a ruling dynasty was common in kingly traditions elsewhere in Africa. The fire of Karagwe in Tanganjika for instance, was associated with the Bahinda dynasty and was thought to have been brought to Karagwe by the mythic founder of the society, Ruhinda from Bunyoro. Particular clans were vested with the task of maintaining the fire and keeping it burning (Katoke 1975: 34). In Owa mbo societies, too, fire was attached to kingship but was maintained by non-kingly clans.

The fire of the homestead was also held to be sacred in Owa mbo heritage, but only for those who lived there. On the homestead level it symbolised “good luck”. It was associated with the life of the head of the household and was extinguished at his death. It was originally struck by the first wife in her cooking stove, *or epata* (*elugo*), a place strongly associated with procreation. It was then passed on to other wives (cf. FWC Shikongo: 16). Fire was strongly associated with the power of sexual heat and fertility. It also had protective qualities. Its power of protection, even when it was extinguished, was reflected in the custom of throwing ashes at the back of cattle at the annual cattle display *eengombe tadidana*. This was a way of thanking the fire for protecting the cattle while they were out on pasture in the forest (MSC Rakel Hamutumua)

The function of the kingly sacred fire was very similar to that of the sacred fire of homesteads: its luck-bringing capacity, its protective power
and its association with fertility. Superimposed on these common functions was the function of “symbolising the king”. Fetching the fire from a kingdom that was related to the society’s past, and attaching it symbolically to the life of the king in power, created a bridge between the remote ancestors and the ruling king. Williams (1991: 104) describes the widespread custom of fetching sacred fire from some other kingdom when a new king was enthroned. According to Lebzelter (1934: 239) Ondonga sacred fire was “in former days” brought from Angola⁶⁰, and it was taken from Ondonga to other “daughter tribes” in Owamboland. Uukwanyama obtained it from *linenge* in Ondonga, where king Nembungu of Ondonga had held his court (Williams 1991: 117), and in Uukwambi, it was brought from Nkumbi (FWC Amakutuwa). The kingly Zebra clan was once ousted by the Hyena clan from Nkhumbi: the fetching of fire from Nkumbi illustrates this historical link, but we do not know who tended the fire in Uukwambi.

The sacred fire of the country symbolised the life of the king as well as the life of the country. The myth about Niilwa and the Bushmen described in Chapter three suggests, however, that the king and the sacred fire were once unconnected. The condition for kingly rule in Ongandjera in the early days was that Niilwa guarded the sacred fire at her court, but when she cheated on the Bushmen they took it away. The link between the king and the fire was manifested in the rule that the fire was extinguished when the king died. The reverse was also true: if the fire went out at the king’s court, it foreboded his death (Ombalantu, Sigueza sh_ALweendo ELC 1337: 1880). The guardians of the kingly fire therefore had a very important task. When the king died, the keepers of the fire were changed but their clan adherence remained the same (Hahn 1928: 18). This clan affiliation reveals muted aspects of the symbolism of the fire: those who tended to it were not of the kingly clan. In Uukwanyama it was a job for a young girl from the Roan Antelope clan or a daughter of the clan of the king’s first wife (Loeb 1962: 47). If the rules by which the king took a head wife were the same in Uukwanyama as they were in Ondonga, this girl also represented the “original owners of the land”, being either of Bushman origin or descended from an early kingly clan: the tending of

---

⁶⁰. We may assume that “Angola” here means Humbe, the site of King Sitehnu of Humbe, one of the early migrating heroes in the Owambo migration tales.
the kingly fire belonged to the first owners of the land, who in Ondonga most often was of Snake clan, the clan of the first kings.

When fire was conceptualised as part of kingship, the link between the life of the king and society was ingrained in people’s minds in a number of ways. For instance, the extinction of all household fires in the kingdom of Ombandja when an old king died and before a new one had ascended the throne was understood as a temporary draining of life from society (Shilongo FWC). Every household had to get new fire from the new king’s court at a later date, and this was another way of underlining the link between the king and society’s well-being through ritual.

The fires of the land were regularly strengthened by fire from the kingly court. “Every day people bring holy fire in glowing embers to different parts of the kingdom” (Hopeasalmi 1945: 53). As fire was essential to every human being and household, receiving it from the king articulated and made visible the link between him and life in the society. The fire of “the realm” also served as a substitute for a physical king at times. When the Ombalantu abolished kingship the sacred fire took its place as a factor unifying the realm after King Kampaku had been overthrown. The kingly clan lost its political power but tended to kingship rituals as before; each year the kingly fire was brought from Ombandja to Ombalantu (ELC Liljeblad 1429: 2015).

**Owambo kings in the religious sphere**

What conclusions can be drawn from the above on the place of the Owambo kings in the religious sphere? The significance of the term Ka Lunga and its relation to kings in the Owambo tradition are ambivalent. On the one hand, Aarni’s scheme suggests a cosmos in which Ka Lunga had nothing to do with kings or their ancestors, but hovered on the plane of an all-encompassing spiritual being. The kingly ancestors were thus subordinated to Ka Lunga, to the first ancestors on the land, and to a vague category of “spirits and powers”. Those matched in this world with the sacred fire were the spirits of the Humbe kings, of the Bushmen, or of nature, or a combination of some or all of these. Other Owambo notions of Ka Lunga, such as Ka Lunga kaNangombe and Ka Lunga Kimbanda also linked Ka Lunga with first ancestors and with the two main economic activities of the Owambo, cattle keeping and agriculture. Apart from this, the name Ka Lunga kaNangombe also associated Kalung with an histori-
cal Angolan king Kalunga Nangombe of Ovimbundu. This, the fact that Kalunga was used as a title of respect, and the fact that an Imbangala king was called Kalunga, bring in a different political dimension. Thus there might have been two distinct reasons why the Owa mbo addressed their kings with the word Kalunga. The term may have been applied as a token of awe, linking their king to the religious figure in Aarni’s chart. It could also have echoed the hegemony of an ancient royal title used by the Ovimbundu and Imbangala neighbours of the Owa mbo.

The fact that the kingly ancestors were placed differently in different Owa mbo presentations of the cosmic structure suggests that the position of kings in the netherworld was negotiated as part of the consolidation of kingly power. This hierarchisation of the netherworld was evident in the belief about the “two fires in the sky”, one meant for commoner spirits and the other for kings, and in the idea put forward by Vedder that only the kingly had access to Kalunga’s realm in the sky.

The idea that kings who had transgressed would not qualify to become ancestors exemplifies the power of ritual prohibitions: they stood above kings. This rule seems to go against de Heusch’s interpretation that kings became sacred explicitly through breaking society’s norms, or at least it signals that, to some extent or at some point in time, kings could not be transgressors. If they did transgress, they broke the chain of kingship. The fact that the vocabulary used for various categories of spiritual agents – diviners, sorcerers and witches – was sometimes blurred, and the fact that the methods used by diviners and sorcerers were, to some extent, analogous, suggests that there was not a very distinct separation of these three kinds of actors in the spiritual arena. The aspects of the diviner installation ritual that were analogous to parts of the installation of kings facilitated comparison between the ritual status of diviners and of kings. Although kings were dependent on diviners in their installation rituals, their inauguration elevated them to a higher level.

Cattle were not a muted aspect of Owa mbo religion, but their role has not been fully understood. They served as an ancestral link when used as sacrifice, and sacred herds linked both king and commoner to their original owners. Special cattle, ondilik a, onangula and omanya became an extension of the owner’s person. The king’s seer cow, “ondilik a”, was an element of sacred kingship, an extension of the kingly spirit, which enabled the king to know dangers in advance.

The next chapter describes the procedures of ritual regicide and
kingly burial as a prelude to the installation of a new king. The burials reveal aspects of the spiritual side of kingship through the way in which the king’s body and spirit(s) were de-constructed after his death and re-constructed as an ancestor in the service of kingship.
Part III

HOW KINGS ARE MADE
The un-making of the old king

The death of a king through regicide

Narratives about kingly inauguration usually begin with the ritual killing of the old king. This reflects the fact that the power transfer from the old king at the moment of ritual regicide was considered an essential aspect in making the new king. The death of an Owa mbo king meant something more than the loss of a person. When he died, society was thrust into a state of limbo that lasted until the new king was enthroned. The orderly rhythm of seasons and the balance of cosmic forces were threatened. Regicide was performed when an ailing king showed signs of mortal illness. One motive for it seems to have been to minimise the dangerous state of affairs that then set in. Before it took place a new king had to be chosen. Only then could the transfer of the spirit of kingship from the old king to the newly appointed one take place. This was the essence of ritual regicide performed to guarantee the perpetuation of kingship as Frazer saw it. In a twelve-page-long narrative entitled “The coming of a tribal king after the death of the previous one”, Hango Nameja described the “right way” to go about succession in Ongandjera. It happened in the time “when those of the kingly kin did not murder each other” (Nameja, ELC 1100: 1537). Once the old king showed signs of fatal weakness, his ritually and politically suitable successor had to be chosen from the kingly clan:

When the real chief fell ill and others noticed that he would not recover, four or three circumcised elders convened together with the head wife of the chief. They discussed who would be chosen from the clan to become ruler. They neither wanted someone who would not be capable of ruling, nor someone who would cause unrest in the tribe. They chose someone who did not have bad habits, who had not made girls pregnant, who was not left-handed and whose mother could listen to people [...]. Someone mentions one or two [suitable persons] that he knows of. The others ask about the houses that these persons come from. The person tells what he knows. After they have stopped
and finished the discussion on which person they would choose, they ask the opinion of the head wife. She tells the elders what she has observed [about the people suggested], but supports the candidate that the elders have praised”. (Nameja, ELC 1100: 1537)

If the king’s illness was getting worse and there was no hope of recovery, the elders summoned the chosen person. They spoke of having chosen him for “curing the illness” of the king (ibid.: 1537), but this was symbolic speech that the candidate knew how to decipher. His task was really to smother the king and to take over the kingship. This is how the message was conveyed to him when he was summoned:

The old man is ill. We called you to cure the illness. Tell us, will you take on the task or shall we call on someone else? (ibid.: 1537)

In this very phrase we hear the echo of the anthropological discussion on the dual nature of the king’s person and kingship. The illness was in the king and he was beyond recovery, but kingship would recover if a healthy and able person was given the kingly office. The chosen man hesitated, for he did not know whether he was going to be deceived or not (ibid.: 1537). Against the background of a habit of sudden assassination of people invited to court, this fear of the king candidate was not unfounded. Now the elders took him to see the ailing king. After this, he was returned to the spot from which the messengers had fetched him. Life went on as usual at court: messengers were sent out for tobacco, quarrels were settled, beer was brewed until the very moment when death was imminent. The heir-elect now received the message from the elders, repeating the plea for him to come and take over the kingship:

There is your old man. He now wants to leave us. Will you unite us as he did?

If the chosen man agreed, he uttered the following words:

If you lean on me, let us fight the hyenas. As you were with the old man, so will you be with me. I will look after everyone who does not hate me.

To this they answered:

Leave it. Strangle the old man before he stops breathing.
The narrative continues:

He strangles the ailing man until he has no breath anymore, in order for the breath to enter him [-self] after having let go of the dying man. (Nameja, ELC 1100: 1537, 1538. The reference pertains to all four quotes above)

There is no way to circumvent the testimony of this narrative. It shows that the tradition of ritual regicide existed in Ongandjera, even if we have no direct historical cases to refer to. The purpose of the act was spelled out clearly: it was to let the spirit residing in the breath, ombepo, of the old king enter the king elect. This is a perfect exemplification of the core process in ritual regicide as understood by Frazer. The purpose was to transfer the spirit of kingship from the dying body of the old king to the healthy body of the new one. In Ongandjera the “spirit of kingship” was held to reside in the breath of the king. According to the narrative from Ombandja, the spirit of kingship was located both in the old king’s breath and in his body. Sakeus Ii tuku explained the purpose of ritual regicide in Ombandja as follows:

According to custom, the ruling king may not die by himself, that is without being suffocated, because if he dies by himself, at peace, he will take the kingdom and its rule with him, because if the king bends his fingers when he dies, the kingdom and its rule remain with him. (Ii tuku ELC 269: 621)

In Ombandja, then, two measures had to be taken: the king had to be suffocated and his fingers had to be straightened in order to separate his spirit from his dying body:

The suffocating is done by hand in the following way; the face is covered with a soft skin, one hand clenching the neck the other pressing the mouth and nose. Or, instead, a sitting cub is pressed at the throat. It is usually a slave who performs the strangling. A freeborn does not do it for fear of punishment [...]. (Ii tuku, ELC 269: 622)

In Ombandja as in Ongandjera, the motive for killing the old and sick king was not to seize power but rather to safeguard the perpetuation of kingship. The transfer of the old king’s spirit into the new king is not spelled out, but it is implied: the spirit of the old king could not go to the grave with him. Apart from being a ritual precaution intended to
safeguard the transfer of the spirit from the body of the king, ritual regicide was an act of transferring political power. The kingdom and its rule would remain with the dead king if these precautions were not taken: kingship was understood to reside in the spirit of the king. In Ombandja it was not the king-elect but a “slave” who did the smothering, but the slave was not alone: the old king’s head wife was always present (Iituku, ELC 269: 622). This indicates the ritual nature of the occasion: it was quite different from political assassination. As in Ongandjera, the killing had been planned in advance, and the heir had been chosen by a few important people close to the old king, who was aware of what was coming to him. Ritual regicide was effected when the time was right according to the custom. In the late stages of his life the king was sacrificed to his own power, and the purpose was to perpetuate kingship, which was conceived of as a spiritual matter that in the lifetime of the king resided in his body. Manipulations of the dead king’s body in burial rituals reveal more of how that spiritual essence of kingship was conceived of, according to Owambo belief.

**Kingly burial**

When a king had been ritually suffocated in the manner prescribed by custom in order to secure the transfer of the spirit residing in his breath into his successor, as described above, his body remained to be taken care of. Aspects of his spirit remained in his body. It had to be manipulated for at least two reasons: to ensure the smooth transfer of the old king into ancestorhood, and to appropriate part of the spirit still residing there for the strengthening of the new king. Sacrifices performed at kingly burials also inform us about the ways in which the king’s identity was extended to people close to him and to his name bull. What happened to the fire at his death shows the close association not only between kingship and the perpetuation of society, but also between the king and the right ordering of the cosmos.

Analysing kingly burials throws light on the significance the Owambo assigned to the liminal period after the death of a king, and how this state of limbo was handled. I will now describe kingly burial in Ongandjera, Ombandja and Ondonga, and focus on the transformation of the body and the people involved in it. I will also discuss the significance of sacrifices performed in the course of the kingly burial. The process of
unmaking the old king has not been in focus in the debate on divine kingship, being part of another scholarly discussion on the significance of death and the mortuary ritual. I will first highlight aspects of this debate that are relevant to the Owa mbo case, and then describe kingly burial practices in Ondonga, Ongandjera and Ombandja and the ways in which the identity of the dead king was subsequently de-constructed and partly re-constructed in the new king.

The classic works on funerary ritual in anthropology are those by R. Hertz (1960 [1909]) and Arnold van Gennep (1960 [1909]). Van Gennep is known for identifying a common structure of passage rituals in three stages: detachment, liminality and re-alignment. With Bornean and Malagasy funeral customs as their topic of study, these scholars “brought the understanding of the transcultural significance or their death rites to early heights” (Metcalf and Huntington 1991: xiii). Maurice Bloch also contributed significantly to the study of funerary rituals, his case being the Merina in Madagascar (1986). He showed how Merina secondary mortuary rituals produced a particular kind of ancestor, and how the conceptualisation of ancestors thus produced served the Merina ideology of kingship. A study on Chagga mortuary rituals in Tanzania conducted by Päivi Hasu (1999) picked up the theme of secondary burial and showed how burial ritual restructured Chagga relations between the living and the dead, and how ancestor identities were manipulated.

Burial rituals could be seen as an initiation and rebirth into ancestorhood. Secondary burials often entailed a separation of different parts of the corpse. If the individual self in life was seen to be composed of several parts, formulated as “spirits”, each of these components had a different fate after death (Hasu 1999: 99–103). This section describes the deconstruction of the old Owa mbo king in the light of Metcalf and Huntington’s, Bloch’s and Hasu’s findings. The aim is to identify linkages similar to those Hasu found among the Chagga in the Owa mbo beliefs about a person’s spirits after death. By studying the ritual deconstruction of the spirits (“powers”) of an Owa mbo king after death I expected to learn something about their nature and origin, and thereby about the spiritual aspect of kingship.

In Borneo the liminal period after death consisted of the time it took for the decomposition of the soft part of the dead person. The bones remained and joined the ancestors (Metcalf and Huntington 1991: 56, 57). In Merina tradition Bloch found similar symbolic opposites: the hard dry
bones represented *unity, the tomb, maleness, eternity and hardness*, and the soft flesh again represented the opposing concepts of *divisiveness, kin-groups, houses, femaleness, fertile vitality and decay*. All of these structured the Merina understanding of life, society, the family and identity. Hasu found a similar dichotomization among the Chagga. The parts of a dead man’s body were separated in two different funerals, the first one taking place in the homestead (a female sphere) and the second in the banana garden (a masculine space). The soft parts remained in the first grave and the bones were removed, after a number of years, to the banana garden, through which procedure the dead person joined his agnatic kinsfolk and became, in their midst, an ancestor himself, and exclusively male (Hasu 1999: 99–110). In Owa mbo kingly funerals too, the manipulation of the remains of the dead king restructured his identity. Before that, however, regicide had infused into the new king the aspect of the king’s spirit that resides in the breath and body of the old king.

**Coping with the liminal period**

The liminal state into which a society was plunged upon the death of its king was called *ongodji*. The period before the appointment of the new king bore the marks of cosmic disorder. Such a formulation of the state of interregnum was by no means exclusive to the Owa mbo. Among the Kuba of Zaire the period was understood as a return to a past state of existence, a middle period in Kuba history between primordial collective existence and structured society characterised by female domination, birth, death, creation, destruction and individualism: in short it was a period of “chaos” (Bazin 1988). This interregnum period was formulated in the Owa mbo kingdoms as a state of ritual pollution caused by the absence of the sacred king and was matched by a political vacuum – there was no king in power. People feared political chaos until a new king had been reinstalled.

This dangerous period, ongodji, had repercussions on the whole kingdom. All fires were extinguished and there was a general prohibition on working in the fields. These practices linked the king-less state with the state of non-production in agriculture. Ongodji for kings, like oshuumbo for commoners, meant non-productivity, which was the opposite of fertility. The kingly burial ceremonies were part of the transfer back to normality, and they prepared for the transfer of power to the new king. The
funerary rituals and the manipulation of the dead king's body reveal the process in which the old king's sacred power was deconstructed. Kingship, in substance and essence, which, in rather vague ways temporarily resided in the breath and in the body of the ruling king, could not be abstracted from it, as Evans-Pritchard suggested on the subject of the Shilluk kings. It could only be separated through specific rituals. I will now describe how this process took place in Ombandja, Ongandjera and Ondonga.

**Kingly burials in three Owambo kingdoms**

Kingly burials in Ombandja, Ongandjera and Ondonga had many traits in common. As for commoner household heads, the graves of kings were dug in the cattle byre of the homestead. The corpse was placed in a squatting position in a black bull's hide (Ondonga, Kaukungua ELC 411: 841, Uukwanyama, Hamutenya, ELC 510: 992) with a pestle upright on the grave (Hamutenya, ELC 508: 991). KINGLYGRAVES IN OMBANDJA AND UUKWAMBI were adorned with wooden poles formed into a cone-shaped structure called *ompampa*. What the burials of kings in Ombandja and Ongandjera revealed about the institution of sacred kingship is discussed below, the focus being on the manipulation of their remains. The chapter ends with a few remarks on changes in Ondonga kingly burials as witnessed by the missionary Martti Rautanen.

**Ombandja – the manipulation of the kingly corpse**

Ombandja funerary procedures revealed how the kings' spiritual assets were ritually manipulated through the ordering of his carnal remains. The burial procedures commenced immediately after his death. His corpse was wrapped in a black bull’s hide and carried into a special hut or shelter, and a fire was lit close by. At that point a rather peculiar and quick separation of bones from flesh took place. It resembled the separation of the bones and flesh of the deceased in Chagga secondary burial, only it happened much more quickly.

[...] an old slave woman guards the fire day and night. Her task is also, over four days, to push back under the roofing any maggots crawling out from the body of the king or from the bull’s hide in which he is
wrapped. During this time it is presumed that the meat of the hide as well as of the body is eaten up entirely by the maggots. (Ituku ELC 269: 623)

Maggots had to strip both the bones of the dead king and the bull’s skin clean of meat. The sacrificial bull in question was the king’s name-bull which hosted part of his spirit. Why did the maggots not escape? Carlos Estermann gave the following description of maggot watching at a kingly burial:

According to the belief of these people61, among the worms that came from the body in putrefaction there was one bigger than the rest in which the spirit of the deceased had taken refuge. It was therefore understood to be of highest importance not to let this animal go away before the burial. For this an adult slave woman was assigned to keep watch. On the day of the burial the worm in question was put into the same ox-hide in which the body was wrapped, so that it could be lowered into the grave together with the body to which it belonged. (Estermann, 1976: 119, my italics)

Here is a third locus of the spirit of the dead king. Not only did it reside in his breath and in his palms as the customs of ritual regicide convey, it was also transferred through his flesh and his bull to the biggest one of the maggots that were stripping his bones clean. This idea that maggots were associates of the king’s spirit was not unique to the Owmambo: they played a major role in the burial and succession rites of Karagwe kings in north-western Tanzania. The corpse of King Ndagara, who ruled in 1820–1855, was put in a cow’s hide to decompose and to produce maggots that were considered particularly powerful. The maggots were taken away and put in a special place where they grew and finally are said to have turned into lions which “became the protectors of Karagwe from its invaders”, according to one tradition. According to another, “three maggots were taken out and given to the heir-apparent [...]” (Katoke 1975: 67).

In Ombandja the power of the maggots apparently came from the flesh of the king and his name-bull that they had devoured. This trans-

61. Estermann, who knew Ombandja, Ondombondola and Uukwanyama well, spoke of the custom as being common in several kingdoms.
formation was formulated as the “spirit of the king going into the maggot”. The spirit of the Ombandja king was thus conceived of as residing in his breath, in his palms and in his flesh. These different parts of his “spiritual entity” needed to be divided after death. The spirit of kingship residing in his breath, ombepo, and that which he kept in his hands, had to leave the body, whereas the part that resided in his “flesh” had to remain in the grave even though the flesh had been devoured by maggots. Exactly where the spirit of kingship that he clutched in his hands went the sources do not reveal. From the context we might assume that it was somehow considered analogous to the spirit in his breath.

There was yet another part of the king’s body that carried his spirit – the part that resided in his bones and his sinews. These were extracted after the flesh had been devoured by the maggots and it was used in fetishes and unction appropriated in order to strengthen the new king. When the new king was inaugurated he was anointed with an unguent in which marrow from the bones of the old king was mixed. He now shared the “essence” or “kernel” of the old king quite concretely. The sinews taken from the old king’s corpse were put around his neck as an omuja (omuya) string to carry the ohija (ohiya) and other amulets that he received in the installation process, and some of the protective unguent was stored in these amulets. This is how these power-laden substances were extracted from the king’s corpse:

On the fifth day two old men who have been assigned the task of burying the kings arrive by the corpse. They lift off the roofing from above the king, and ask the slave woman to break up and split the bones of the arms and legs of the dead king and then to take out the marrow which is then used for anointing the new king, [she also takes out] the sinews of the left thigh, of the left leg and of the left shoulder as well as of the left side of the back. These are made into string and used as a string for beads, which are put on the new king as he is inaugurated. (Iituku ELC 269: 624)

Thus all of the flesh of the soft parts of the old king remained with the maggots in the grave. The spirit residing in his breath entered his successor at the moment of death and the part of his spirit that resided in his sinews and bones was transferred to the new king in the shape of amulets and potent unction. Why was the separation undertaken? Was the spirit remaining in the grave a spirit of his private person as opposed
to the spirit of kingship in “the breath” and in the marrow and sinews? Did local belief divide the king as a person from the king as a holder of office as Evans Pritchard proposed?

I suggest that this was not so, and that the spirit that remained in the grave was also part of kingship. Kingly ancestors, in other words dead and buried kings, were in possession of a certain measure of sacredness. This part of the spirit, residing in the kingly corpse and returned to the earth, had a dangerous aspect to it: it was not appropriated for protection as it was in Karagwe. The remains of dead kings in the grave were also sacred in a Durkheimian sense: they served as symbols of society, encompassing its past, present and future. The graves were a suitable site for remembering past kings and it was through rituals at the graveside that society’s sense of continuity and the power of the past were strengthened.

How does the symbolism revealed in Chagga, Merina and Borneo funeral rituals illustrate the Owa mbo manipulation of the kingly corpse? If we consider the idea that flesh was feminine and bones were masculine in the context of the Ombandja funeral procedures, the part remaining in the grave was feminine and “close to nature” and the earth. It was thus dangerous to society and needed to be kept apart in the grave. The kingly bones and the bone-marrow potion contained in the ohija would symbolise the hard and strong male essence of kingly power being transmitted to the new Ombandja king through his amulets. Indeed, the amulet gave the king power in war and power against people. Similarly sinews used as emuja (emuya), would, I suggest, transmit power of a female kind, the “keeper” of the amulets.

I suggest the following reading of the symbolism of Ombandja kingly emuja and ohija. The female secret power of the omuja carried the ohija horn, a masculine symbol. The sinew was a prerequisite for the use of the amulet. The female ritual object needed to be appropriated before the appropriation of the male one. This structural configuration was recurrent in the material and also featured in the inaugural ritual of the Ondo nga, which is discussed in Chapter seven. But let us now go back to the sequences of the burial of the Ombandja king: After his remains had been buried, the slave woman who had guarded and manipulated his corpse up to this point appropriated the “kernel” of the king, the marrow of his bones, which she later used to anoint the new king for strength. She carried the unguent in “a small clay pot in a basket made of palm leaf
threads” (Iituku, ELc 269: 625). Palm leaves, as noted, were a strong symbol associated with the origin of kingship. They were also associated with the Great Spirit, Kalunga and with female fertility power. A young girl was often referred to in ritual connections and riddles with the word oKalunga, a little palm tree. The association with the origin of kingship originated in the palm grove of the country, considered the cradle of society.

The spirit of an Ombandja king thus took a plural form after death, and therefore the proper ritual manipulation of his body, in which parts of his spirit resided, was important for the protection of society and for the strengthening of kingship. The “kernel” of the king, was, I suggest, a masculine kingly spirit and the basket into which it was swept was a female one, associated with female fertility and the origin of kingship. While the general flow of the kingly funeral was “separative”, in this case the effect was the opposite: diverse aspects of kingship were merged, namely masculine power, female fertility power, the Great Spirit, and the origin of kingship. The soft parts remained in the grave, later to be venerated as a kingly ancestor with a feminine connotation. The bones, the hard parts, were used to bring luck to the new king in war and in his ruling; both of which were masculine endeavours while the emuja string made of the sinews of the old king, a soft and uniting feminine aspect, symbolised the holding and use of all the masculine powers of the new king. This structural configuration recurred in kingly installation rituals, as is illustrated in Chapter seven.

**Ongandjera kingly burial and the iimbungu**

The death of a king in Ongandjera was kept a secret until the new king had been chosen. As discussed in Chapter five, it was not self-evident that a king became an ancestor: to qualify he had to have led a ritually pure life. The burial preparations began immediately after death and while negotiations were still going on about the future administrative cadres of the new king. There was no general disclosure of his death at this point (Nameja, ELc 1100: 1539, 1540). Keeping the death of the king a secret was the custom not only in Ongandjera but also in many Owa-mbo kingdoms.

Hertz suggested a psychological explanation for the perceived danger in the liminal phase after a death had occurred: it takes time for society to adjust to the death of one of its members. This is illustrated in the idea
that there is a dangerous period when the departed soul is potentially malevolent and socially uncontrolled. The acute chaotic situation at the liminal stage after the Ongandjera king died was suppressed through a kind of ritual denial: people acted “as if nothing had happened”. This denial also had a political aspect: there was a power vacuum before the new king was enthroned, and this state of affairs had to be concealed from the public. During the burial period people sang songs in praise of cattle, *iipumbu*, night after night as if to underline the fact that everything was normal. Everyone drank beer and made a lot of noise. No one was to feel fear at this time (Nameja, ELC 1100: 1540). The danger was nevertheless expressed in beliefs about the state of the unburied corpse: it was thought to be dangerous before the spirit(s) of the deceased had settled in their proper places through ritual manipulation. Political fears were expressed in beliefs that enemies might use sorcery to harm the newly chosen king.

Three women and four men from a former kingly clan that no longer ruled were summoned from beyond the borders of Ongandjera to conduct the burial proceedings. They were called *iimbunyu* (*iimbungu*). Their clan stemmed from Niilwa (Iijego, ELC 1381: 1928), the mythical first queen of Ongandjera. They arrived in secret and, in order not to be seen, they came into the kingly homestead by the women’s entrance (Nameja ELC 1100: 1539). The female *iimbungu* headed the proceedings. A black speckless bull was brought in and was suffocated by hand. The taboo on killing by causing bloodshed was thus extended to this sacrificial bull, and it shows that the bull was considered a kind of “alter ego” of the king. It was skinned, and after one of the female *iimbungu* had taken away the dead king’s amulet strings, the hide was put around his body. The grave was dug before sunrise and the four *iimbungu* men carried the corpse to the grave, followed by the women (Nameja, ELC 1100: 1540, 1541). The identity of the *iimbungu* signalled that the first ruler, Niilwa, had a stake in securing that the Ongandjera king was made into a proper ancestor. Through their descent *iimbungu* created continuity between the dead king and the very first mythical kingly ancestor, Niilwa.

A dead Ongandjera king was put in the grave and seated on a wooden

62. When a king died in Uukwanyama, a man from the Cattle clan dug his grave (Loeb 1962: 62). According to the oral tradition, this clan had developed kingship in Uukwanyama before the Mourning clan came to power. In both cases early kingly clans contributed to the burial by ushering the remains of the king in the process of becoming an ancestor.
stool of kingship, provided that he had been ritually pure in his lifetime. If he had seduced a girl before ohango, or if one of his wives had borne twins, he could not be stooled after death. Twin birth was considered unstructured and animal reproductive behaviour that confused the normal hierarchies of kinship, and it was incompatible with it. Paradoxically, as already mentioned, kings were also considered twins and twins were called kings. A king, then, had to make sure that while he was in power he did not, in his lifetime, break rules that had to do with the appropriation of women’s fertility. This was so despite the fact that he was seen as a master of human fertility of the land and in principle had a right to all women. This part of the Ongandjera kingly funerary ritual suggests that the king’s connection to human fertility was once not a matter of rights, but rather one of responsibility.

Ondonga – changing times and old concerns

Emil Liljeblad’s local informants did not describe Ondonga kingly funerary rituals. Martti Rautanen provides a general description of the funerals, and eye-witness accounts of two kingly burials that took place in the first decade of the twentieth century: by this time the practice was already strongly influenced by the missionary presence. Rautanen’s accounts show a rapid change of customs during this period. The descriptions are not nearly as rich as those of local informants, but they do illustrate the interplay between Christian and local influences. They demonstrate certain beliefs about the role of cattle in kingly burials, and witness the transformative process that was taking place. This is how Rautanen described an Ondonga kingly burial in 1903.

As soon as the king has died he is separated from everything he is wearing and swept into the hide of a black bull, tied up and put into the grave in the cattle corral in a squatting position with his face to the east. The mourning drum is struck and now guns are also fired. On the following day the whole kingdom gathers for mourning = k’oasa, and for five days the king is mourned. The entrances of his court are destroyed and new entrances are opened. Now the heir appropriates everything that his predecessor owned. After a certain time the news of the death of the king is taken to the neighbouring tribes and new peace treaties are made. (Rautanen, 1903: 339, translation from the German by the present author)
The description shows common traits with both commoner funerals and with the funeral ritual of Ongandjera kings. With increasing missionary influence, this funerary procedure gradually changed. Rautanen described the individual funerals of two subsequent Ondonga kings; Kambonde KaMpingana in October 1909 and Kambonde K’Angula in 1912. Certain core ideas of kingly succession were retained, but the old pattern of funerals had been broken. The descriptions reveal the strong position of the missionaries, and describe the manipulation of the corpse of the king at the moment of death and the significance of cattle.

At the death of King Kambonde Ka’Mpingana in October 1909 Martti Rautanen and his son Reinhold visited the bereaved mother, Mutaleni, in order to express their condolences. Rautanen spoke of succession and gave his opinion that Mutaleni’s son Kambonde K’Angula was the next in line and was therefore suitable to be king. Mutaleni was greatly relieved and happy at hearing him say this. At court the corpse of Kambonde Ka’Mpingana was stretched out in his reception room. Around a fire the king’s widows and the men of power were seated to keep vigil over the dead king. The next morning funerary procedures resumed. A sacrificial black ox was slaughtered and sinews from it had been made into strings on which onyoka shells were threaded. In this case the sinews were not extracted in order to adorn the new king as in Ombandja and Ongandjera, but they were used to thread shells on to adorn the king’s corpse. (Rautanen Diaries 9. October 1909: 108–114)

Missionary intervention was more prominent in the burial and baptism of Kambonde K’Angula on July 12, 1912 than in that of KaMpingana. Old customs were dying out when Christian burials replaced them. Kambonde K’Angula was baptised Eino Johannes on his deathbed and this marked the transition of Ondonga from a “traditional” kingdom into one in which Christian beliefs were officially adhered to by those in power. This transition was not an easy one. Symbolic aspects of the old funeral practices had to go and cattle were a particular bone of contention. The new form of funeral allowed no space for the king’s sacred cattle, and this became a matter of grave concern, judging from the comment Martti Rautanen made in his diary. He remarked that the “conservative heathens” had been very upset by the fact that the king had not been buried in his cattle byre, and that his sacred cattle would not spend the nights standing and lying on the grave of the dead king (Rautanen Diaries 10. 1912). This remark shows that the bond between cattle and king was still
very strong. Loeb explained the custom in Uukwanyama of letting a cow with calf walk over the grave of a recently buried king as having the purpose of supplying the dead king with milk in perpetuity (Loeb 1962: 62).

The significance of blood sacrifice

In Ombandja, Ongandjera and Ondonga alike, a black bull was sacrificed at the death of a king. The king was bundled in the hide of this bull, and buried in it. In the Ombandja tradition a link was created between the body of the dead king and the flesh of the bull’s hide when maggots stripped both clean and when the biggest maggot then came to symbolise the “spirit” of the king. In Ongandjera the analogy between the king and the black bull sacrificed for his burial was obvious: both were suffocated with a soft skin. The sacrificed ox in Ondonga provided sinews on which to thread the onyoka shells, with which the dead king was decked in his grave.

The sacrificial bull eased the transfer of the dead king to an ancestor both physically and symbolically. In Uukwanyama the hide that covered the king in his grave was from the slaughtered “chief bull” of the kingly sacred herd (Sckär Manuscript: 38), which was a kind of alter ego of the king.

There is ample witness to the effect that human sacrifices was also once part of kingly burial: it was said in Ondonga in former days that “the king cannot die alone” (MSC Dumeni, MSC Shivute). The most clearly described tradition of human sacrifice in relation to kingly burial is from Uukwanyama. According to Loeb, upon the death of a king “[a] former king’s head advisor was always shot or stabbed to death” (1962: 30). Sckär mentions the sacrifice of three human beings who, at a Kwan-yama king’s burial, were put in the grave with him. One was a “richly ornamented slave girl” in whose lap the king was placed, another the king’s head wife who was suffocated to death, was richly adorned and placed in the grave beside the king, and the third was his personal servant, a man with whom the king had engaged in blood-brotherhood (Sckär, Manuscript: 38)⁶³. The inaugural practices to be discussed in Chapter seven

⁶³ This kind of bond was ritually made between the king and his Head Councillor in Ondonga, and here the councillor was said to have been buried with the king in times past.

180 PART III · HOW KINGS ARE MADE
were witness to a ritually created bond between the king and his head wife as well as between him and some of his staff. These persons could be considered as extensions of the king’s person and they shared his secret power. I suggest this is why they had to be killed with him in old times.

**What kingly funerals tell**

The way the kingly body was manipulated at burial indicates two things: he was sacrificed for the purpose of securing and strengthening the perpetuation of kingship, and the “spirit of the king” did not exit his corpse entirely when his breath left it so that it could enter the new king at ritual regicide. In the Omba ndja tradition the spirit of the king took a plural form after his death, and it was not possible to separate the spirit of an individual king from that of kingship: his soul was entirely absorbed into the office. The king’s funeral also showed the ritual closeness between the king and the bull in whose skin he was buried. It further identified one aspect of the kingly spirit, which had to remain in the earth, and which, I suggest, had a female quality. I also suggest that the parts of the king’s bones extracted from the corpse that were applied as protective power fetishes carried male aspects of power, which is analogous to the examples from Borneo, Chagga and Merina. Sinews and flesh, again, carried female powers. Human sacrifice at kingly burials, witnessed in several Owanmo societies, was not substitutional sacrifice, as it was in some sacred kingdoms in Africa – with the exception of the *ombambi* sacrifice in Ombandja. They were rather part of ritual regicide, and conveyed the fact that kingship extended to persons close to the king and that these persons had been ritually made part of it in their lifetime: Head Councillors, the head wife and the “Spirit Boy” and “Spirit Girl” who spent their lives looking after the king’s secret paraphernalia.

Ongandjera kingly burials were evidence of the potential conflict between the king’s behaviour in life and his attainment of proper purity, which was mandatory for the achievement of the status of ancestorhood after death. They were directed by female descendents of Niilwa, the mythical first queen. I interpret this as a form of homage to the first kingly ancestors, and as a way in which Ongandjera kings were associated with early kingship after their death. It appears from the accounts of the funerals of Ondonga kings in the early 1900s that peace making with neighbouring kings was a major concern after a kingly death. The
custom of appropriating the sinews followed as part of King Kambonde kaMpingana’s funeral, but the sinews were from the bull and not from the old king. Moreover, they were used for adorning the dead king and not for strengthening the new one. By this time the king had already been in contact with another source of spiritual power, the missionaries. The burial of his successor, Kambonde K’Angula, reflected this new power. K’Angula was baptised on his deathbed, and the funeral was a Christian one. The fact that locals showed great concern at the new burial practices, which severed the bond between the dead king and his cattle, reveals how strongly the king was identified with his cattle in 1912. The king’s sacred cattle were, I suggest, traditionally a mark of his spiritual being, of sacred kingship.
Installation rituals as a process

Installation rituals elevate the king into a state of being in which he is suited to assume office. In the case of sacred kings the installation is also a step in his transformation into sacredness. After the installation he was ritually above all others and embodied the entity of the realm. He assumes the responsibility for the well-being and the fertility of the land and the people. Installation rituals reformulate the good life of the people as emanating from the kings (cf. Bloch 1986). Both overt and hidden agendas are incorporated into the grammar and the text. The hidden ones are most interesting because they reflect the symbolic components of the king’s sacred status that hegemonic tradition tends to forget. They thus give a more complete picture of the elements that comprised the king’s sacredness and power.

Fortes discussed kingly installation rituals from a global perspective and identified certain regularities that were to be found everywhere. He described them as passage rituals in the van Gennep sense, but focused on the “legal” aspects and structural regularities of the bureaucratic procedures involved in taking office. Fortes saw the different phases in “filling, emptying, suspending and refilling” an office as a cycle of alternative phases of orderliness and structure (Fortes 1967: 7). Bloch identified the dialectic movement of orderliness and chaos as a prerequisite for re-establishing the social order at regular intervals. He developed the idea, already present in Fortes’s study, that the disruption that death created, carried a creative aspect in that it provided an opportunity to “dramatically” recreate society (Bloch in Bloch and Parry 1982: 218). The creative power of chaos was also addressed by Victor Turner, and has been further developed by phenomenological anthropologists.

Fortes identified three main steps in the installation process. The first was accession, by which the office was given to the incumbent, but the assumption of responsibilities and power does not yet take place. Then followed the investiture, which signified that the office was formally
entrusted to the incumbent and could take place at the same time as the accession. The installation proper came next, and this gave him “full legal capacities” and the means to rule; “the capacities and appurtenances that pertain to the office”. The installation rituals comprised both private, secret parts and parts that were addressed to a wider public. At some stage the community had to be part of the ceremony, recognising and endorsing the installation. The reality and continuity of the office was often expressed through material tokens, “relics and insignia”. Without the full installation the incumbent king could not take office, but when it was completed “his former lay self” was put aside (Fortes 1967: 8). Fortes’ model served as a theoretical guide in my analysis of the structure of Owambo kingly installation, applicable in part but not in its entirety.

Fortes’ sequentialisation of installation rituals was based on Hocart (1927), and recognised the different phases in the process. Before an incumbent could be installed, certain general qualities in him had to be identified: he had to be recognised as legitimate. He could not “install himself”. The office was given to him in the name of society, “commonly in the name of superior or supreme politico-jural or moral and religious authority [...]”, and in the case of a kingly office by the king makers, who as a rule were not eligible for office (Fortes, 1967: 8). In the Owambo case, the kingly “office” was “emptied” through ritual regicide and kingly burial in which the body and spirit(s) of the king were ritually separated from the sphere of the living and given new identities. Kingship was suspended during the four or five days of burial and mourning, and during the subsequent liminal ongodji period. The “refilling” process merged into the suspension period because rituals that prepared the new king for office were already in process during the period of kingly burial.

The orderliness of human society is broken by the death of its leader. This chaotic state of affairs is symbolically expressed in different ways. The Owambo of old believed that the death of the king influenced the regular course of the cosmos and the capacity for proliferation and fertility in the land. To mark this “broken” state, all fires in the land were dampened, later to be reignited by a new fire from the new king’s hearth. In Uukwambimbi the liminal phase was articulated in the prohibition on tilling the land during ongodji, and in Uukolonkadhi it was in the prohibition on travelling beyond the borders before the atonement sacrifice for the death of the king had taken place. There was also a rule according to which it was prohibited for anyone to be buried in the land within a year
of the death of a king unless another kingly person died. What was at stake was the transfer of the dead person into socially accepted ancestorhood: it could not take place before another royal death had created a distance between society and the death of the king. The prohibition served two purposes: kings were distanced from commoners even after death, and ancestor-making was made dependent on kingship.

The installation of kings in Ondonga

My discussion focuses on the Ondonga kingly installation ritual and is based mainly on several rich accounts by Liljeblad’s informant Asipembe Eelu. Eelu was not one of Liljeblad’s pupils in his teacher’s seminar. He was married to the sister of a ruling king and his account could therefore be assumed to mirror a hegemonic view of kingship. He gave a number of very secret details of Ondonga kingly inauguration. Many of the aspects of the Ondonga ritual that he described also featured in other Owambo societies, notably Ongandjera, Ombandja and Uukwanyama, which suggests a common Owambo pattern of kingly installation. However, the Ondonga ritual also had unique traits, which seem to relate to the special position of Ondonga as the geographical site of the first Owambo settlers. The installation was structured around a number of expeditions to “the palm-field of the country”. This, I suggest, is identifiable as Oshambamba, the first settlement site of the Owambo migratory groups.

I will concentrate on the religious aspect of the kingly installation and consider the entire ritual as a sequence that, step by step, transformed the king and made him sacred. This elevation to a sacred position – which made him fit to rule – began at the death of the old king and ended when the incumbent king had the capacity of “seeing the kingdom” with his inner eye, having acquired a sufficient amount of supernatural skills at the end of the installation ritual. I have sought for answers to the following questions. To what extent was the process of kingly inauguration geared to make the king a monster whereby he acquired sacredness, as de Heusch put it, and were there other aspects of his sacredness that did not need the paradox of monstrosity? Was the fertility-promoting aspect of his sacred power also produced in other ways, which de Heusch may have recognised in his discussion on kingship but did not pay attention to in his own argumentation? I have broadly defined sacredness in kings as the capacity to reach over into the realm of the spirits, and the power
ensuing therefrom. Now I will describe types and sources of power installed in the king in the course of the installation ritual, with a view to finding a more precise definition of Ovambo kings’ sacredness.

An Ondonga king already possessed a certain measure of sacredness by being a member of the kingly clan, and this was built up in various ways in the initiation rituals. The overt components included (1) the insignia of office or objects that served as power-laden symbols and were given to him to keep; (2) his marriage to a new head wife to be his match in the symbolic representation of the fertility of the country; (3) the king candidate’s successful performance of tasks related to “finding” and “seeing” in a miraculous way, which manifested his budding spiritual powers and his linkage to important sources of such power; (4) the infusion of power from the diviner into the king and; (5) the performance of other transgressive acts that augmented his ruling power. By studying these aspects of the inaugural ritual, analysing the structural configurations of the sequences and probing into the identity of the persons who were involved, I have sought to reveal more of the process of making the king sacred, and of the powers involved.

**King makers and kingly emblems**

The formal role of king makers, according to Fortes “the supreme politico-jural or moral and religious authority”, was normally vested in a small group of people close to the king. These “king makers” were his Head Councillor, his head wife and three or four of his Councillors, sometimes called “elders” or “powerful men”\(^\text{64}\). Some of these people had a special bond to the old king through the ritual of “blood-brotherhood” (Loeb 1962: 62), or had gone through other secret rites together with him (cf. Eelu ELC 276: 654, 655). Where such rites had united these members of the king making body with the king, they could be seen as a symbolic extension of the king’s person. Thus when succession took place “in the proper way”, the part of the king that was vested in the king making body decided on a successor. It also decided that he must die. In this sense the king participated in the decision about his own death.

There were cases in which this body of king makers was by-passed both in Ombandja and Ongandjera. If someone was in possession of in-
signia of office he could become his own king maker and install a new king of his own choice, through the power of the insignia. This shows the crucial role of the kingly insignia, and indicates that the Mbundu idea of kingship, in terms of being dependent on the possession of important fetishes, was not very far from Owambo realities. The Ondonga kings had many tokens of kingship, all of which played a part in the succession. The very first thing that happened after the king had died was to safeguard certain of them:

When the king dies, a circumcised powerful member of society [...] hastens to court to fetch the kingly insignia of office⁶⁵: the kingly bow, the kingly arrows, the kingly stave or sceptre, all made of iron, the “strap of the country” (the omuja g’uosilongo) and the kingly ohija made of iron, a stave of the country made of omupanda-wood⁶⁶. This wooden stave has been preserved ever since (the first king) Naanda Mutati. (Eelu, ELC 278: 660)

Eelu mentioned a sceptre made of iron and a stave made of omupanda wood. When these insignia of office were handed over to the new king, the “whole kingdom” had to be present. This served to manifest publicly the transfer of power to the new king. The stave of the country once belonged to the Naanda Mutati, who symbolised both the mythical time of early settlement and early kingship. When Naanda’s stave was handed over to the new king, mythical times and early kings were made ritually present in the installation procedures. Abisai Henok identified Naanda as one of the first kingly settlers in Oshamba, and presented him as ruling right before Nembungu (ELC 1189: 1697), but he is not included in Williams’ king list (see Williams 1991: 189). I suggest that the wooden stave preserved from his time transferred the consent of early migrant settlers and kings to the new king. It is possible, but not ascertained, that Naanda was an early king of the Snake clan.

According to a migration story transmitted by the missionary Sckär

⁶⁵. I use the term insignia of office for the Ondonga objects mentioned in this quotation. Other powerful objects given to the king at installation will be called “regalia”, “sacred objects of the king” or “kingly objects”.
⁶⁶. Omupanda = Lonchocarpus nelsii (Davies 1993: 309). The narrative is ambiguously formulated but I chose to interpret it, on the basis of information on the ohija in other narratives of locals to mean that the sceptre and the ohija were two different things.
part iii · how kings are made

(Loeb 1962: 366–372), the kingly iron sceptre and the iron laden bow and arrows in Ondonga originated from the early immigration leader Sitehnu; which means that they came from Humbe. Sitehnu was “the last king of the united Owambo migratory groups”. He eventually moved with some of his people to the Kunene River and founded Oshiteve. The southern part of this county of Sitehnu’s was later called Humbe and was “even now acknowledged as the mother country of all the Owambo”. According to Loeb, it was the Humbe king who “provided the regalia” to all the kingdoms that had sprung up from the migrating groups that had moved away from Oshiteve. “On the day of the combined coronation and marriage ceremony of each of Sithenu’s successors in the various Owambo tribes, the Humbe king sent ambassadors to give the new ruler a magic staff and a bow with three arrows” (Loeb 1962: 49).

Asipembe Eelu from Ondo nga, on the other hand, said that the sceptre, the bow and the arrows were concealed in the court of the old king. As soon as the king had died, a circumcised man of esteem, the husband of the king’s sister or someone else, hastened to take hold of these insignia (Eelu ELC 278: 666). How should the discrepancy between these accounts be understood? I suggest that Sckär and Eelu were speaking of different time periods, and that the emblems from Sitehnu, even if once handed over by the Humbe king himself, were later appropriated and kept in a secret storage place at the Ondo nga court. It would be logical for this to have happened at the time when Ondonga freed itself from the power of the Humbe kings. No matter where the objects were situated, however, it was through Sitehnu’s iron sceptre, bow and arrows that certain power was transferred from the Humbe king to the newly installed Ondonga king.

What was the strap of kingship, the omuya gwoshilongo (omuja gu’oshilongo), which carried the ohiya yoshilongo (ohija gu’oshilongo)? An omuja could have been made out of the sinews of bovine cattle, a small antelope or a sacrificed human being, or from the sinews of ritually killed kings. Kings, diviners and commoners alike carried an omuja, or several of them, around the neck. Its function was to hold powerful amulets, often an ohija, for protection (cf. Eelu ELC 278: 661) or to carry beads. An ohija was usually made of the tip of the horn of an antelope. Sithenu’s ohija was made of iron. An ohija horn was used by kings, diviners and commoners alike, either for keeping a powerful unguent in or for blowing into on ritual occasions. As mentioned previously, this was used
in some societies to produce the sound of Big Birds. An ohija of a different kind was also used to produce the sound of “Big Birds” in rituals of female and male initiation, and in a particular Uukwaluudhi rain ritual.

The oohija (pl. of ohija) of diviners and kings were the most powerful ones and were seen to contain a “spirit”, or the uupule power. The omuja gu’oshilongo with the ohija was only given to the king to carry around his neck when most of the installation procedures had taken place. The uupule power or spirit in the kingly ohija was thus one of the powers that were ritually transferred to the new king at his inauguration. Who could hand over this power to the king? One criterion was that only the circumcised could take possession of the kingly insignia. The person with the insignia might be an esteemed man or a poor man without influence and the insignia gave him considerable power: he could by-pass the council that normally chose the king. It was the duty of this person to hide the objects until the group of king makers had convened in secret at court to discuss and decide about the succession at the funeral of the old king (Eelu ELC 278: 662). However, the kingly insignia could be appropriated by the father of a kingly person or by the husband of the sister of a king. Such a person could have been of the Snake clan, which meant that it was likely that he represented the first kingly clan in Ondonga.

The king’s new head wife

As part of the installation to kingship the king-elect was given a new head wife, who assumed an important ritual position. Her relation to the king was particularly close after they had gone through secret parts of the inauguration rituals together. There was a rule that the king’s former head wife could not remain his wife after the succession, and she was married off to some important headman who was not allowed to divorce her⁶⁷. As in other kingdoms, the Ondonga king had to have a new head wife from a particular clan, usually the Snake clan (MSC Namuhuya). Her clan background thus provided a link from the king to the original owners of the land. This could be seen as a way of integrating the spirits of these kings of the Snake clan into kingship.

The other aspects of the king’s sacredness were assumed in the in-

---

⁶⁷. A narrative on Ongandjera kingly inauguration gives a rich description of the marriage to the new head wife.
installation ritual. He acquired “seer” power, was infused with the power to divine, and performed transgressive acts. All of this took place in the course of the installation procedures, structured as a sequence of journeys to the “palm field of the country”.

Four journeys to the palm field

The installation of a new king began on the second day of mourning for the old king. Secret rituals, purification, anointing, public acknowledgement, sacrifice and commensal meals alternated on the new king’s road through accession and investiture to installation proper. One concrete consequence of the installation was that the king gained access to the insignia of office. Before the old king died, when the elders of Ondonga had summoned the king elect and he had agreed to take power and when they had assured him of their loyalty, they announced who would hand over the insignia of office – without yet giving them to the king, only declaring what was to follow:

Here is the person into whose care the objects of the country are entrusted. We give you the kingly necklace of the country, the kingly strap of your forefathers’ omuja guoshiuongo. You are to sit above others of your kind. We are the subjects, the weeds, we give you the kingdom. We have given you the power to rule over all people. This person has the kingly insignia, do not forsake him but go with him. Do not part from these objects. May this man show you the pot of the country! May he take you to the stone of the country. (Eelu, ELC 278: 663)⁶⁸

This statement of the elders reiterated by Eelu was an announcement of what was to come. The king-elect was still far from gaining access to the objects of kingship. This would take place only after a long and laborious ritual procedure structured around four consecutive journeys to the palm field, or “the palm of the country”.

₆₈ In many Owambo kingly traditions, most prominently that of Uukwanyama, a stone was one of the core symbols of kingship. It is mentioned only in passing in descriptions of Ondonga kingly initiation, but is described here as being situated by the road close to the palm of the country and as being used by people to sharpen their weapons on (Eelu ELC 278: 663). This kingly object featured in the film “The Power Stone” by Andrew Botelle in 1998.
The first journey

No time was wasted in preparing the new king for office. The first trip to the palm field took place in secret during the night after the first day of mourning, (Eelu, ELC 278: 669). Four men, the Head Diviner, “the Keeper of the Insignia”, “the Owner of the Palm Field”, and the Head Councillor of the king were present at this stage. Together with these men the king went through a series of secret ceremonies at “the Palm Tree of the Country” (Eelu, ELC 278–280: 660–680). At this point the owner of the palm field led the proceeding. Upon arrival at the Palm of the Country the king squatted down on the ground. The owner of the field asked him to sit down well, to approach the fire and to “rise up in his kingdom”; this signified climbing the palm tree of the country (Eelu, ELC 278: 663, 664)⁶⁹.

I should perhaps interpret the symbolism of the palm tree and climbing it at this point. Rising up in the palm tree was a multivocal symbolic act in Turner’s sense (Turner 1967, 1969). The palm tree was the abode of spirits and of Kalunga. It represented the kingly kin as well as female fertility. Rising up in the palm tree of the country, I suggest, signified approaching the spirits, but first the king had to crouch on the ground. Going up and coming down was the first motion the new king went through on his path to kingship. Having gone up, he also had to get down. He also, I suggest, had to relate to the land and the spirits dwelling in it. The earth provided him with the necessary objects for ruling. These were the first regalia he appropriated and he needed to find them on his own. By finding them he revealed that he had already acquired a certain skill in seeing the unseeable, in other words a measure of esoteric power.

Several objects were buried in the ground at the foot of the palm tree. The task of the king was to know what they were and where they were hidden. First the owner of the field asked him what was concealed underground. The king was able to give him the right answers, with a little help from the person who had hidden the objects. One by one he found and identified the following: the kingly iron pot, the clay pot and the mug of the country made of iron, all of which had been concealed in the earth at the foot of “the palm of the country”. When the cooking-stove supports of the kingdom and the log to carry the fire had been unearthed a fire was

⁶⁹. Eelu’s narrative uses “the palm field of the country” and the “palm of the country” alternatively to indicate the site in which the rituals were conducted.
The king then conducted a ritual thanksgiving to the sun. He crouched over the fire so that the smoke came over his face, held his hands tight against his face and said “Ptuh”\textsuperscript{70}. Then he drew both hands along his face and chest and along his ribs and said “My eyes have been opened. I have taken possession of my kingdom. \textit{I have taken hold of this land of mine}”. (Eelu, ELC 284: 664, my italics)

The sentence “I have taken hold of this land of mine”, which the king uttered after having unearthed the objects from the ground, brings to mind the myth of origin of kingship, in which the fat woman who became the root of the kingly clan in Ongandjera took the earth and made it her own, thereby making everybody throughout the land dependent on her. Once the king had had “his eyes opened”, it became possible for him to “take hold of his land”. The spiritual aspect of rulership thus preceded the actual acquisition of power over the land.

I will now analyse this part of the ritual a little more closely. I suggest that when the chosen king moved down the vertical axis from the palm tree to the ground he assumed a certain measure of spiritual power. The power of vision that he acquired at this point enabled him to see the objects in the ground. Now he was given another aspect of ruling symbolised by these objects, that which demanded the consent of the spiritual forces of the earth. These forces gave him the capacity to appropriate the earth, to rule it. In possession of the insignia stemming from the earth he could then “go up” again, and proceed with the preparations for kingship.

The fire was lit after the king had found the objects in the field and unearthed them. The appropriation of these objects, I suggest, signalled that the consent of the spirits of the earth had been obtained. The fire, a symbol of the land, could now be lit for the king: he was now at one with the fire. After this, thanks were given to the sun with smoke from the fire. Crouching over the fire and drawing his hands over his face and chest the king not only addressed the sun in thanksgiving sacrifice. He manifested the unity established between the king and the fire of the country. He would repeat his prayer to the sun and Kalungu every morn-

\textsuperscript{70}. This onomatopoetic expression is frequently used in Liljeblad’s texts for a sound made when spitting. Spitting sacrifices were common in daily life, and what the king did at this point may be understood as a minor thanksgiving sacrifice.
ing before sunrise and every night at sunset during his reign, thus acknowledging that he was dependent on the spirits (like Kalunga) and the forces of nature.

The king had now succeeded in “seeing” what was hidden in the earth. This new “seeing” ability was a matter of esoteric knowledge. The origin of the objects in the ground is obscure: they are not listed among the kingly regalia from the king of Humbe. They were placed in the ground, and this suggests that a relation was created between the land, its hidden powers and the new king. They were all related to the fire of the hearth, the female sphere of providing food and drink and of cooking. The shape of all of them, with the exception of the log, reflected femininity. The jug and the pots were containers and they were all round. The *omasiga*, to be kept under the pot, was essential for cooking, which was the work of women. Its shape was different but nonetheless it was a strong feminine symbol – in local symbolism it was associated with the vulva. The objects concealed in the ground thus indicated a feminine dimension of power. The ritual suggests that this was as important as the male dimension, but it was power concealed.

What about the fire log? This could be seen as a symbol of masculinity because of its shape. The log was also associated with the act of procreation because of its function of hosting the fire. What was the significance of placing the log under the earth by the palm field of the country? I suggest that it was a symbol of a primordial fire log that early migratory groups brought with them from Angola. The ritual of unearthing it conformed with an old belief that the Ondonga brought the sacred fire with them from Angola when they arrived in the land. This fire was then distributed among the “daughter tribes of the west” (cf. Lebzelter 1934). By appropriating the log at his inauguration, the king symbolically appropriated the old fire of the proto-Owambo. Concealed in the ground, I suggest, it had in the meantime appropriated the power over fertility that the early ancestors hosted. When the master of the palm field made the fire for the king on the unearthed log, I suggest that he was enacting the ritual consent of these two kinds of ancestors, those of the early forefathers in Angola who had brought the fire and those of the Bushmen on the land who had appropriated it. These ancestors agreed to make the king responsible, henceforth, for maintaining the “fertility” that was symbolised in the fire. The mythical prototype of this compact was the agreement between the mythical Queen Niilwa and the early Ongandjera.
Bushman inhabitants (see Chapter 3). Lighting the fire served as a token of the recognition of the rule of a particular king. The fire-maker said:

Ptuh, we made our new fire, the old one went out. The old fire went out and went with its owner. This fire belongs to the new king, Kambonde. The fire is Kambonde’s. (ELC Eelu, 286: 664)⁷¹

When the sacred fire burned in every homestead it represented the life of the king in power and also the life of the tribe (Lebzelter 1934, vol. 2: 239). It was thought that the king exercised his power over the life of his subjects both symbolically and concretely: without the king the people had no fire in their hearths. When the fire was distributed in the name of the king from the unearthed log of ancestors from long ago, it conveyed the idea that fertility, which had been in their hands, now became the responsibility of the king.

I suggest that the power over fertility was transferred from the ancestors of the land and those in Angola to the king through the fire log, and was manifested in the fire lit upon it. Before this could happen the king had to be firmly attached to the earth and its early inhabitants through the objects dug out from the ground. The fire he was given had not only symbolic connotations and procreative consequences, it was also of great political importance. It was a step on the road to the normalisation of life and a token of the transfer of political power to the new king. Re-igniting the kingly fire signified that the accession to kingship had now taken place. The king elect was recognised as the new king. The formal entrustment of the office, in Fortes scheme the investiture, took place step by step in the subsequent phases of the ritual, in parallel with the augmentation of the king’s esoteric power. His political and ritual status changed gradually in the course of the installation process. Now he was half way. The commensual meal to follow symbolised the contribution of and homage to both kinds of ancestors, those of Angola and those of the land.

When the kingly fire had been handed over, a ritual meal of iilya porridge, made from grain cultivated in the fields, and wild spinach, omboga, followed. This meal was shared by the king, his Head Councillor and the

⁷¹ It is obvious that Eelu had the inauguration of King Kambonde in mind in this description but he did not identify which of the three Kambonde in the Ondonga king list (see Williams 1992: 189) it was.
Owner of the Palm Field and the meal consisted of food grown on the earth, both wild and cultivated, all made accessible by women’s labour. Only when the feminine insignia had been given to the king did he receive any of the masculine insignia of office. The owner of the palm field now adorned the king with the bow and the arrows and the spear of the country and the stave of the country, all made of iron. After this he said: “I have finished. I have given you the kingdom. Now go and break it for yourself” (Eelu 278: 665, 666).

Although this seems to be playful talk, there was great seriousness in it. The objects now given to the king were associates with male spheres of activity – hunting, raiding, and ruling, in short, okupangela. All of the objects were oblong in shape like the lingam. Many of them were “made out of iron”, although their use does not seem to demand it. The iron parts of these objects apparently symbolised masculine power. Up to this point the king had received feminine nourishing objects from the earth and powerful masculine objects from the diviner. The latter stemmed from Humbe and Sithenu, and were associated with ruling power. However, the omuja with the ohija were still not given to the king to keep. He was, as yet, only allowed to “try them on”; to keep the omuja around his neck, but he still had to hand them back. When he went home the omuja was taken off and he could only carry it in a pouch in his left hand (Eelu ELC 278: 667).

For four days after his first trip to the palm field, and once he had received the insignia of office, the king was in a liminal state of untouchability. He was forbidden to give anything to anyone “by hand” but had to put any object he wanted to give on the ground from where the receiver picked it up. This was a ritual precaution. It was thought that if the king gave something by hand the spirit that was in him might leave him and harm the other person (Eelu, ELC 278: 668, my italics). This was a dangerous phase for the new king. The mourning for the old king was not yet over and the “spirit of kingship” was not yet firmly attached to him: it was prone to running loose at this stage. The process of attaching the spirit of kingship to the body of the new king was only just beginning.

I suggest that the prohibition preventing kings from handing objects to others directly had to do with the fact the king was not yet settled in his role. It was as if the earth, and in it the ancestors of the land, served as an intermediating element between the king and his people. Society still belonged to the ancestors at this liminal stage, and when something
emanated from the king, it had to touch the ground to be ritually safe to handle. The prohibition was lifted during the second journey to the palm field, and the insignia that the king had received during his first journey were “empowered”.

*The second journey*

The second trip to the palm tree culminated in the recognition of the king, his investiture in Fortes’ terminology. The procedure is, in short, the following: Early in the morning, before sunrise, on the fourth day after the declaration of the death of the king [after the four official days of mourning], the owner of the palm field came to the king in order to take him there once again. Then followed the re-lighting of fires in the country from the new king’s fire; it was a symbolic rebirth of the kingdom. (Eelu ELC 278: 670)

Now began what Fortes called the installation proper, which gave the new king full legal authority and the means to rule: “the capacities and appurtenances that pertain to the office”. This phase continued through the three subsequent trips to the palm field. The “capacities” to rule, and the “appurtenances that pertain to the office” were acquired in different ways. The insignia were prepared so as to carry supernatural powers and the king’s body and those of his closest people were worked on.

The kingly insignia, the king and his wife were now anointed with a potent unction. This all happened at the palm tree of the country, first early in the morning and, on the night of the same day, a second time. The unction was first smeared on the kingly insignia. It was made out of uncooked butter, into which the powder ground from various potent herbs had been mixed. The insignia, so prepared, were put on the king. The king maker [here the owner of the palm field] said, “Now the procedure is completed. I have given you the kingdom. Go and break it and kill people (playful talk). Rule well and do not create disasters for people”. (Eelu ELC 278: 667)

By these measures the king gained an inner capacity for power and he was given the right to rule. The fact that the insignia, the king and his head wife were anointed with the same unguent indicates that all of them together were now part of “kingship”. A few words about the symbolism in the anointment: the unction used was called “the ointment
of the country” and it included elements symbolising natural as well as societal powers. The name signals that it was used only in relation to kingship. According to the pattern suggested by Lévi-Strauss (1970), the degree and manner of preparing the unction indicates the distance from or proximity to ordered society. The inaugural ritual represented a step towards a complete attachment of the king to kingship.

The composition of the butter on which the unction was based reflects this step, as cooked butter replaced the uncooked butter used in earlier stages. However, mixed into this “domesticated” fat were other fats that came from dangerous animals of the wild, lion, panther and snake. olukula-powder⁷², and powder from wild herbs⁷³ were also mixed into it. The grease contained a mixture of elements symbolising both ordered society (cooked butter) and the powers of the wild (the animal fats and herbs). It mirrored the dual nature of the power of kingship, both order-creating and wild, just as de Heusch suggested. The unction was very potent and could only be handled by a young girl who had not yet reached puberty. After the girl had anointed the king, the head wife anointed herself (cf. Eelu, ELC 278: 667, 668).

When the head wife anointed herself she showed that she was now part of kingship. The fact that she did it on her own signals that she was close to the powers in the unction and needed no intermediary. Following the anointment at the palm of the country, the people were summoned to the court to hear the public announcement. One of the elders announced to the gathered crowd at court that a new king had been found and encouraged everyone to come forth and recognise him:

Listen, all of you subjects, the country has found a ruler. Tomorrow is his luck when you should gather here and bring your recognition to him [...] in his lap, before the king. Let anyone who does not want to do it come forth so that we may see him and so that the king may also see him. (Eelu, ELC 278: 668, 669)

All the elders, members of the kingly clan and officers, now struck

---

⁷² Olukula was a mixture of fat and a red powder from the marrow of the lukula plant, which was used on a number of ritual occasions, for instance at female initiation ceremonies.

⁷³ The herbs were; imbondi, olukaka, onzimbuluki and omuguizo. We have something like an explanation only for olukaka. It was the name for an affliction of trembling or awe that a king could instil into his subjects.
their poles on the ground as a token of accepting the king. On the next
day one of the elders presented him to all those who had gathered at
court. The liminal state that the king was still in was manifested by his
physical position at this juncture: he sat by the ash heap at the entrance
of the court. This was an ambivalent and strongly power-laden place as-
associated with ancestor spirits and fertility, dirty and sacred at the same
time. I suggest that it represented the cooled-down state of a heat (fire),
and was laden with fertile potential.

[...] As the king sits by the ash heap by the entrance of the passage
to the court, those who are present, primarily the kingly nobles, the
elders of the country, the officers and so on, all strike their poles on
the ground as a token of their subservience, recognising him as a king.
(Eelu, ELC 278: 669)

At this point the loyalty of the powerful men of the land was ritually
challenged and confirmed. There was a great deal of mocked aggression
in the Ongandjera and Ombandja kingly inaugurations at this point of
the ritual, but in Ondonga the joy at having a new king was more promi-
nent. The recognition of the king was nevertheless loud and aggressive:

On the following morning, or on the fifth day [after the burial of the
previous king], people gather in the house of the dead king. The men
strike their poles before the (new) king, who sits on a stool outside
the homestead. Old women dance, swagger their bodies, shouting for
joy. All the people, the men striking their poles, the old women re-
joicing, shout and say; “There is no one who will bring bad luck to
our country, we have our king.” Bulls are slaughtered on all of the five
days. The grain is eaten and the poles of the walls are set alight on the
bonfires and in the fire-places. All the kingly men run up in front of
the king and strike their poles on the ground in recognition that he is
their chief too [...]. (Eelu, ELC 278: 669)

The association between the king and the well-being of the country
was expressed in the utterances of the old women: the king protected the
country from “bad luck”. This was the moment of recognition of the king,
and now “everyone” was expected to be present. Being absent was a po-
itical statement, an expression of disloyalty. Usually those who carried
a grudge against the king, or were biding their time to supersede him,
would at this point have gone into hiding or have moved out of the king-
dom. The size of the crowd present on this occasion thus measured the
degree to which society supported the new king. He could expect trouble
from those staying away or remaining in neighbouring countries. When
all the fires in the country had been re-lighted from the new king’s fire,
life could go on as usual. The temporary break in the cosmic order after
the death of the old king was now over, and rituals that further strength-
ened the power and sacredness of the new king followed.

The third journey

The third trip to the palm field took place a month after the death of the
old king. At this point secret proceedings were needed to augment the
new king’s power and to make him ready to assume full responsibility
of kingship. Only the Owner of the Palm Field, the Head Diviner and
the Head Councillor were present. The purpose was to appropriate dan-
gerous powers for the king. The king, his diviner and the owner of the
palm field arrived at the palm of the country and the diviner lit a fire. He
placed a potsherd, oshikangwa, on it and prayed to Kalunga, asking for
good things and for the capacity to see the elephant, onkolomoki: “May
it come before us and bless us, and may it give us the great power by
giving us the elamo strap, which carries the great power” (Eelu 278: 671).
Potsherds were commonly used in power-strengthening practices, for
kings in particular (cf. Hiltunen 1993, 120–121,126–128). Here they were
used in the ritual of mixing blood in which the king’s “magic” powers
were augmented (Eelu 268: 654, 655). Hiltunen suggests that the most
important aspect of oshikangwa was “the eating of human blood” (1993:
127). The oshikangua was used in the Ondo nga kingly inauguration to
strengthen the capacity of the participants to “see”: this was not normal
seeing, but was rather the capacity to see what others did not, just as to
go through the termite hill was to “do the impossible” as was described
in the introductory chapter.

The oshikangua ritual included a prayer, the inhalation of smoke from
the fire and the slashing of the skin of the king, his Head Diviner and the
Owner of the Palm Field. Herbal powder was applied to all of the wounds.
A meal consisting of the meat from a sacrificed black cow followed. The
meat was mixed with the blood from the wounds in the bodies of those
present. When the king partook of this meal, and when the other men
present also “ate of the king’s blood”, a special relation ensued. The king
could not kill anyone whose blood he had eaten “because their souls have become united through this meal” (Eelu ELC 276: 653, 654). This ritual gave the participants supernatural powers similar to those of sorcery, and it also sealed their life with that of the king. They were now part of kingship and would have to die when the king died.

The ritual called uupule woshilongo (gu’oshilongo) then followed. This prepared the king for another ritual, the uupule woshaanda (gu’o-shaanda) at the termitary mounds out in the wild, mentioned in the introduction of this study. A newly chosen Ondonga king needed the cooperation of three persons, his head wife, his Head Councillor and his Chief Diviner in the rituals he now had to go through. The uupule woshilongo, or the uupule of the country, consisted of a series of ritual coituses that the Chief Diviner first performed with the king and then with the Head Councillor, and which they in turn performed with their own head wives in utmost secret (cf. Eelu, ELC 280: 674).

The diviner sleeps with the king in order for the king to be strengthened in his power and wealth and for his people to multiply and so that he may get many cattle and much grain and so that he may remain on his throne and in his kingdom. (Asipembe Eelu, ELC 278: 674)

The purpose of these acts of ritual coitus was thus made explicit by Eelu. The ritual coitus with the diviner promoted the king’s capacity to approach the termitary and the spirits in it. I will now suggest an interpretation of how his capacity was created: First, the blood of these men and the sacrificed cow was mixed and ingested, creating one kind of bond between the king, the other participants and the cow. Then something powerful was symbolically transmitted from the semen of the diviner to the king and his councillor. The two of them transmitted some of this power in the secondary coitus taking place shortly afterwards with their respective wives. This ritual act had to take place at the esinzi, the open space by the great grain bin by the court. It, too, had the function of making the king prosper: This sleeping by the grain bin was done in order for the king to get plenty of grain. (Eelu ELC 280: 674)

Grain bins kept famine at bay. They guaranteed food to eat and seeds for sowing for the year to come. Producing the grain was the task of women, and full grain bins were the token of prosperity and well-being “through women”. This part of the ritual, I suggest, transmitted a power that caused fertility and prosperity from the diviner, through the king,
to “real women”, symbolically embodied in the head wife of the king and the wife of the Head Councillor. This part of the ritual seems to have been a symbolic expression of the king “lying down on the land”, the wives and the grain they fertilised symbolising “the land”. In order to be able to carry out this part of the ritual, the king needed power from the diviner. The power transmitted in coitus with the diviner was both concrete and symbolic: the diviner’s semen became a symbol of fertility pooled in the king. No wonder early Finnish missionaries noted that “diviners were very powerful” although such statements were commonly related to their power of witch-finding. I suggest that an earlier and more significant power was their capacity in ritual to augment the king’s ability to influence fertility.

At this point the king moved a step further towards assuming kingship, together with his double, the Head Councillor. His head wife assumed an important role: she became ritually tied to her husband and his kingship when the powers that he had received from the diviner in coitus were transmitted to her in the secondary ritual coitus. The acts of coitus before uupule woshaanda thus produced a secret power bond between the king, his head wife and his Head Councillor.

The uupule woshilongo was one way in which the king’s power over the re-production of the land was symbolically created. A fertility-creating power, in practice the semen of the diviner, travelled through the king and his Head Councillor and further into their wives, and released their feminine potential to make the earth bear grain for the king. This part of the sacredness of Ondo nga kings emanated from the Head Diviner. As mentioned, the mastery of fertility and power over the well-being of people, land and cattle were at the core of the Owambo conception of sacred kingship. In this respect, the Owambo idea of their king was close to Frazer’s idea of the divine king as a nature spirit. The prayer to Kalunga to make visible the elephant, which preceded the oshikangwa ceremony, deserves comment. It pre-empted the culmination of the Ondo nga kingly inauguration. After the king was gradually made fit to “see” the elephant, and he was finally allowed to thread the emuja, the strap

74. There were other ways, too, in which kingship was thus “extended” to persons close to the king at the inauguration. In Uukwanyama the head wife of a new king went through a ritual of blood mixing with the king, after this the two were considered “blood relatives”, and as a consequence, the queen had to die when the king died. (Loeb 1962: 55)
of kingship, around his neck whereby his installation to office was completed. The prayer was intended to conjure the elephant, even though seeing it meant death to the king: “Whenever elephants come, the king will die” (MSC Namuhuya). It seems that the possession of kingship was tied up with the acquisition not only of an extraordinary “seer” capacity, but also of the insight, through seeing the elephant, that kingship would eventually also kill him.

This is how the uu pule woshaanda proceeded: Having acquired and further distributed powers of fertility in the uu pule woshilongo, the king was ready to go through the ritual at the termite hill, a feat that “was impossible” for normal human beings. The termite hills were strongly power-laden places and, as already mentioned, were associated with female heat, male potency, agents of spiritual power and the initiation of diviners. When a king went through the termitary ritual it put him on a par with diviners, or even a trifle above them.

When the ritual coitus had been performed the king went with the diviner to the termity, the diviner lit a fire and burned iimbondi herbs on it in, inhaled the smoke and prayed for the success of what the two were about to do, at the same time covering his face with a soft sheepskin and rubbing the powder of the burnt herbs into his face. Then they went to the termite hill where the diviner gave the king two white mushrooms in each hand and urged him to go through the termite hill. This he did, he pushed himself, forehead first, through the termitary and came out on the other side mushrooms intact (Eelu ELC 278: 674, 675).

Going through the termitary in this way was, I suggest, a ritual manifestation of the esoteric powers of the king, his increased uu pule. The feat placed him in the intermediary sphere “between heaven and earth”. Compared with the two diviner initiations at the termite hill, that of the dog-sacrifice diviner, in which a hole was made at the top of the termity and that of the master diviner, in which the neophyte diviner thrust his pole through the mound, the king’s treatment of the termite hill was more comprehensive: he went right through it. The difference indicates, I suggest, that the powers of a king were stronger than those of diviners with regard to the termitories.

Further preparations for the third trip to the palm tree were then made. The diviner anointed the king at court with uu pule-ointment, a potion consisting of fat and the maroon-coloured powder of olukula. He now shata-ed the king, in other words he made small slits on different
parts of his body from head to heal. He then rubbed powdered iimbondi herb into the wounds. The scars were thought to create a passage by which spirits could enter. He also brushed the king’s penis with iimbondi (Eelu, ELC 280: 676).

Then followed a meal of “food” with “magic herbs” taken with omboga-spinach and ontaku-beer. When the meal was finished, the king anointed himself again with the uu pule-ointment. The diviner repeated the anal coitus with the king and the head councillor on the next night, and then he departed (Eelu ELC 278: 676). After two days a black bull was killed and sinews from its back were fashioned into a string for the ohija amulet. The amulet was in the shape of a horn, and was filled with an ointment made of fresh butter, herbs and charred parts of the slaughtered bull. New slits in the king’s body were made in order for the potent content in the anointment to enter the king’s body (ibid.: 677). The making of wounds on the king’s body in the shata-process seemed to be another way of infusing him with secret power. His body, like that of common people, was “penetrable” through these wounds; external spiritual powers could take up their abode in it. The shata procedures ensured that whatever spirit took up its abode in the olukula ointment entered the king’s body. What was the purpose? I would like to venture one interpretation.

The olukula ointment was kept in a small pot in a special hut. It was strictly guarded by a small pre-pubertal girl who had not yet reached sexual maturity (Eelu ELC 278: 677). This suggests that the power contained in the ointment was incompatible with the powers of procreation. It actually destroyed them, judging from the consequences if the girl had reached puberty: she suffered a severe disorder of her reproductive organs. The powers of the ohija and the unguent in it thus belonged to dangerous and destructive aspects of kingly sacred power, which were incompatible with human reproduction. Thus a picture begins to emerge: the king’s sacredness consisted of a number of forces incompatible among themselves.

A month later it was time for the king to go on his third trip to the palm field. Again the Head Diviner and the Head Councillor accompanied him. He was now heavily adorned with kingly regalia that carried masculine power: “the kingly bow of iron, the two iron arrows, omuvi and ondjindo, the iron stave, the two-pronged iron spear and the ohija of the country, as well as a lion skin onto which is fastened the horn of an antelope, oholongo, as a whistle” (Eelu ELC 281: 681 annex to p. 677).
This time, too, the king went to the palm tree in order to climb it (Eelu ELC 278: 670).

A month after the king has received the country, he goes to the palm of the country for a third time and climbs up into the tree [...] in order to look at his kingdom, and to see how big it is, and in order to see the elephant, which, if it shows up, signifies the strengthening of the king’s power. “The elephant appeared through uupule”. (Eelu ELC 278: 670)⁷⁵

As yet, the king had seen no elephant. This happened on the third trip to the palm field.

The diviner orders the king to climb up the palm tree all the way up to the leaves at the top, and tells him to look around at the landscape surrounding him. The diviner asks him; “What do you see?” The king: “I see nothing”. The diviner: “Do you really see nothing?” The king: “I see Ukwanyama.” The diviner points with his hand in another direction: “And there?” The king: “I see Ukwambi”. The diviner: “And there?” The king: “I see nothing”. Then the diviner says: “Come down”. Now they go to the homestead and the diviner applies more herbal ointment to the king’s body. (Eelu, ELC 280: 678)

The fourth journey

The king then went once more up in the palm tree. His fourth journey was the culmination of the kingly inauguration in Ondo nga. Having arrived at the field the ritual proceeded as follows:

[...] the king again climbs up the palm tree. The diviner asks, as he did the previous time, “What do you see?” The answers are the same as before. The diviner asks again: “What do you see there to the east?” At first, the king does not notice anything. But when the diviner asks again, he notices the ondjamba = the elephant [here a male elephant]. It signifies that he has got the kingdom. If he does not see the elephant, he does not get the kingdom. After this, the king comes down to the ground and the diviner lights a fire close to the omulunga [the

⁷⁵. When the king came “from abroad”, the elephant was not only “seen” through uupule: when it was traced it was killed (Eelu, ELC 1360: 1917). Alternatively, its bodily fluids were collected to be used in ointments for the protection of the king.
small palm bush]. He puts a small pot on the fire and first cooks a thin gravy of omboga [spinach] and pours it onto the ground. Then he cooks porridge and pours it onto the ground too. After this they eat. The diviner first takes some porridge, dips it into the omboga and eats. The king follows him in turn and eats. Then it is the head councillor’s turn, and they go on like this eating in turn, but in the end the king finishes the food. Now the king has taken possession of the kingdom by eating from its nourishment. (Eelu, ELC 280: 678)

I will now analyse these proceedings and offer an interpretation. The elephant was a male. I have suggested that seeing it meant being aware of the esoteric dimension of kinghood, including ritual death. Through this inner metamorphosis the king established okupangela (Loeb 1962: 42), the forceful and violent aspect of kingship, which he now could add to the okuanangala, the “lying down on the country”. The porridge poured onto the ground, I suggest, was a sacrifice to the spirits of the land, which partook in the meal. In order for the king to appropriate okupangela, violent ruling power, he had to link up with the spirits of the land. The food he ate during the ritual had grown on the land, part if it had been cultivated (grain), part had grown wild (spinach). Quite literally the king had now eaten from the land. The structural configuration was the same as with unearthing the pots and cup before acquiring the masculine insignia of office.

The meal was followed by another fumigation ritual in order to strengthen the king and the head councillor in their task of guarding the kingdom. Now the elephant was circled. There was apparently a real elephant that the king had been able to conjure up, judging from the fact that the men took faeces and urine from it. They mixed them into the cooked butter “in which the fat of lion, panther, ongwe (ongue) and snake, ontoka had been mixed”. The ointment was preserved in the tortoiseshell container of the diviner. Powerful ingredients from the animal kingdom were used: the fat of the lion, the panther and the snake. The ointment had the function of scaring and upsetting people: “When the king appears and has anointed himself with that grease, the people are moved, regardless of whether they are people from the kingdom or from elsewhere” (Eelu, ELC 280: 678, 679). This unction was later transferred from the diviner to the king’s ointment container, which was made out of the peel of a gourd. It was used for anointing the king and his head wife on important ritual occasions.
If seeing the elephant was a symbol of acquiring extra-human powers, and its faeces and urine were used for potent unction, what of the lion, panther, and snake fat used with the elephant ingredients in the ointment? The Snake clan, as we know, was the first kingly clan in Ondo- nga, but there were no lion or panther clans in Ondonga⁷⁶. Elsewhere in Africa lion, panther and leopard were often associated with kingship because of their power and their dangerous nature. Such symbolism is found also in the Owambo orbit: the Uukwayama king wore strips of the hides of leopard, lion and elephant hanging from his belt at his coronation, along with the skins of other dangerous animals of the wild (Loeb 1962: 53).

The snake fat in the king’s unction in Ondo nga was apparently associated with early kingship in Ondo nga, and the panther fat with the powers of nature. If this was so, the ointment symbolised both the power of forgotten early kings and “the raw power of nature”. I suggest that is was not only the powers of nature, which in de Heusch’s view were required in order to rule, that were represented in the unguent. The “early kingship” of the Snake clan was also there, although it had largely been forgotten in oral tradition. With all these powers at his command, the Ondo nga king was now ready for kingship. The words he uttered after circling the elephant showed that the inaugural rituals had produced in him a state of sacredness:

> When the king has left the elephant, and he walks past the men who have accompanied him and who have remained sitting by the palm tree, he says, when passing them; “Let us go to the house, you go before me. Do not look into it. Tell your wives and let them tell their friends that something has been done to the chief with a sacralising effect, that is, he has been made sacred”. (Eelu, ELC 270: 679, my italics)

Some of the details in this extract are worth a comment. I suggest that the “house” that the new king referred to was not just any house. It could well have been the secret hut in which kingly objects were kept, the one that was called “the little ompampa” in Ondo nga and was situated by the grave of old kings. No one other than the king was allowed to look into this hut and appropriate the emuja, the power strap carrying the

⁷⁶. Williams lists the Lion clan as royal in Ombandja, and as mentioned previously, Schinz claimed it was a diviner clan that was ousted from Owamboland in the 1880s.
ohija (ohiya) (illustrated in Figure 5) that he had not yet been allowed to carry around his neck. Although the king at this point announced to the people that he had become sacred, the ritual was not finished yet. The sacrifice of another black speckless bulls followed in order to complete the kingly dress with a belt, a strap and sandals made from it. The bull also provided meat for yet another commensual meal (Eelu, ELC 270: 679, 680). The installation ceremonies were now almost completed and the diviner prepared to go back home after having strengthened the king and his Head Councillor once more:

Figure 5 Ondonga kingly ohija (Varjola 1983: 83)
The diviner takes farewell at night-time. Only the king and his chief councillor are present. Before leaving, just as on the first night, the diviner sleeps with the king first and then with the head councillor, having anal coitus with both of them. (Eelu, ELC 280: 679, 680)

The repetition of the ritual coitus with the diviner at the end of inauguration underlined the importance of this act in the totality of the installation ritual. This was how Ondonga kings were normally installed, according to the witness of Asipembe Eelu. He tells us of two other ways in which an Ondonga king could assume power: one was by appropriating the regalia without having been chosen king, and the other was through a form of uu pule put in practice if a king “came from abroad”.

**Appropriating kingship through holding the regalia**

The insignia of office were very powerful, for they were the potential means by which normal succession procedures could be overruled in Ondonga. A king not chosen by the council could be made king through the power of the insignia. In such a case the father of one of the eligible heirs from the kingly clan could become king maker. This is the gist of how Eelu describes this alternative way of succession:

Right after the old king had died the father of the presumptive heir would hasten to get hold of the kingly insignia of office, keep them and use them to put his own son in power; if he retained the insignia and another man was made king on the basis of age and right to succession, he could use them to oust the chosen king (Eelu, ELC 278: 661, 662). There was a secret power of uu pule in the kingly ohija, formulated as “the spirit of the king” which made this possible. This power could be used for taking kingship by different methods that resembled those of sorcery. Firstly, the holder of the insignia could “blow away the king” by opening the ohija and “letting the ruling king’s spirit out”. If this did not work, he could have “magic powder” spread along the paths of the courts, into the king’s cooking pots and in his sleeping chamber. If this measure did not kill the king, the usurper could use the ohija in mounting an armed campaign to overthrow him (Eelu, ELC 278: 661, 662). Eelu spoke of the power in the ohija as “the spirit of the king”, but here it is not clear whether or not he meant “the spirit of kingship” or the individual spirit(s) of the person. In some Owambo traditions the ohija unguent contained parts of the old
king’s body, and this suggests that what spirit Eelu was referring to was the spirit of kingship. Either way, this type of uupule in which substances from the dead king’s body that were thought to host part of his spirit were used cleared a ruling king out of the way.

In what ways was uupule thought to be effective in these cases? In the first place, when the ohija was opened the “king’s spirit” became home-less. It was not attached to the chosen successor. Eelu did not specify this, but presumably the chosen king would die of “loss of spirit”. The second way in which the uupule of the ohija was put to work resembled sorcery. “Magic powder” and parts of the old king’s body were used to establish power over him. Thirdly, the use of the ohija to influence the outcome of an armed attack on the king was analogous to the common belief that spirits were able to influence battles. Here, however, the spirit of kingship in the ohija was turned against the individual king. Thus the uupule “in the wrong hands”, was the driving force in the successful violent overthrow of the king.

It seems, however, that the usurper used more powers than those immanent in the regalia and in the ohija. The father of a presumptive king had a certain relation to kingly power by virtue of his own clan identity. The spouses of kingly women in Ondo nga were, as mentioned previously, taken from one of three clans, the Python Snake clan, Aakuusinda, which was the first kingly clan, the Dwarf Mongoose clan, Aakwankala, a clan of Bushman origin and the Aakwambahu, or Locust clan. In Ondo nga the father of a man with a kingly mother often belonged to the Snake clan or the Dwarf Mongoose clan. When he handed over the insignia of office to his son, he was linked to the early inhabitants or the first ruling clan. Thus when someone became king through the appropriation of regalia it manifested that the original clans had some say in the succession. Their representative was able to overrule the collective decision of the powerful men of society, although this was exceptional.

**Installing a king from abroad**

Abisai Eelu also provides us with a description of the kingly installation of a king who “came from abroad” in Ondo nga. He does not give any further details, but these were special cases, in which the old taboo against moving beyond the borders of the realm had been broken. This taboo had apparently been abandoned by many before the German colonial period;
narratives about kingly succession often tell of kings who took power after having resided for some time in a neighbouring king’s country. One reason for not staying at home was the risk of being killed on the command of the ruling king as way of influencing succession.

The installation of a king from abroad was structured largely in the same way as normal succession. The king-to-be was scarred and anointed, and bull sacrifices were made. He climbed up the palm tree and went through the termite mound and eventually he saw the elephant. There was one significant difference, however: the *uupule woshilongo* ritual did not take place. It was substituted by a different and more violent version of uupule. A king coming from abroad had lost contact with the “land” and it seems that this made it necessary to perform a particularly powerful sacrifice as part of the installation. Uupule in this case incorporated incestuous coitus, which took place by the grain bins, between the king and a female or male person of the kingly clan, someone closely related to the new king-to-be. This act was assumed eventually to lead to the death of that person because the very act violated the laws of kinship. If, for some reason, the coitus did not lead to death, the aspirant had to have the person in question killed, otherwise he would be killed himself (Eelu ELC 1360: 1919). For a king from abroad, then, uupule was a massive transgression of core values in society, but it also signified the use of very dangerous forces in the quest for kingship.

When the victim had died, parts of his/her body were extracted to be part of the king’s protective amulets, and other parts were burned to a cinder, mixed with fat and put into the ohija (Eelu ELC 1360: 1919). These secret proceedings include several forbidden acts: incest and human sacrifice. The uupule here performed does not included copulation between the diviner and the king, but rather required deadly coitus between him and a female member of his clan (cf. Eelu, ELC 1360). Both kinds of uupule had the same function, to enhance the super-human powers of the king.

The *uupule gu’oshilongo* released powers to enhance fertility and prosperity, also of the land, and only the king and his Head Councillor were involved. On the other hand, *uupule of the king from abroad* focused on strengthening the individual king. It was an act of violence against a third party. The motivation of the king from abroad for going through it was is openly stated in that he affirmed his intention beforehand:
[...] I want absolutely to have the man or woman killed in order to acquire that secret uupule magic power, so that even I could sit still in the forest when I see a predatory animal, and it would not see us, but walk right past [...]. (Eelu, ELC 1360: 1917)

He thus declared that he wanted the supernatural power in order to “to become invisible” and not like in the uupule gu’oshilongo to give him esoteric insight – “to see what others see not”. He had committed a grave transgression against his own kin group, violated a member of his own kin and caused that person’s death. It was a high price to pay for uupule. In all seriousness it came close to the sacrifice performed by the Mbundu queen Temba Andumba in the ritual maji a samba. The uupule of a king from abroad corresponds with de Heusch’s notion of making the king a monster as a prerequisite for sacred kingship. Temba Andumba did not get away with her monstrous ceremony, and this kind of violent uupule was not part of normal kingly inauguration in Ondo nga. It could not, therefore, be understood as a constitutive aspect of kingship. It only took place in the “special case”; when the king comes from abroad. However, judging from the accounts, the special case apparently became a normal occurrence towards the end of the 1800s.

It is easy to see that uupule could have been abused in a situation of normative decay. The acquisition of “power” by killing a person (here a relative) could have become more widespread in times of shifting power, as happened in Kongo according to Ekholm (1985), and in Benin according to Rowlands (1993). Ritual sacrifice for the benefit of society turned into human sacrifice for the benefit of rulers: the institution of kingship turned “against society”. This was the process that Rowland traced in the kingly institution in Benin. A more modest form was apparent in the Ondo nga installation of a king from abroad. I have chosen to call this process the “devolution of sacred kingship”.

It would be a mistake, however, to think that committing ritual incest with a member of one’s own clan was a particularly royal way of getting power. Uupule in the form of incestuous ritual copulation between a man and a female of his own kin was also in the traditional Owambo repertoire of common people seeking the same end – “power”. It was reflected in proverbs as a means of acquiring wealth. Liljeblad’s informants described this process in several narratives in which there was no asso-
ciation with kingship. Uupule through sleeping with a tabooed relative in order to acquire riches was part of a common esoteric tradition. Sorcery and related means to power in Africa in general are reported to have increased in the era of confrontation with European influence. Such trends were also discernible in Owa mbo societies (cf. Salokoski 1992).

The political aim of the kingly inaugural ritual was to establish a relation between the king and the land. I suggest that the violence involved in the uupule sacrifice perpetrated by the king from abroad can be understood as a strong measure that was needed when relations between the ruler and the ancestors of the land had become problematic. It seemed that a ruler who came “from abroad”, just like a ruler who took over the land illegally, had to pay a higher price for power than kings who had grown up in the country or who were properly chosen for the task. When the Ondo nga king did not come “from abroad”, the emuja and the substances placed in its ohija were acquired from a sacrificed bull. Human and cattle sacrifices were thus, in a sense, interchangeable: both were used for the same purpose of strengthening the king.

A common view in Africa and among the Owa mbo was that cattle sacrifice substituted the “earlier” custom of human sacrifice. The uupule custom for a king from abroad rather suggests, instead, that human sacrifice was resorted to later in Ondo nga, in extreme circumstances when cattle sacrifice was not strong enough. This interpretation would be in accord with Rowlands’ observation from Benin that human sacrifice at succession was more prevalent after the colonial overtake and was a manifestation of the submission of the king’s power under the colonial authorities.

The sacrifice that the king from abroad had to make deserves a few more comments. By offering one of his own kin or offspring to the spirits of the ancestors of the land, he created a new and necessary relation between himself and the land but severed his bond with his own kin group. This corresponds with de Heusch’s view of how sacred kingship came about: a break with the kingly kin was essential so that the interests of the kingdom would stand above any commitment that the king had to his kinsmen. There is a parallel logic in the analysis of Hawaiian kingly installation presented by Valerio Valeri (1985) and the Ondo nga practice when the king came from abroad. In Hawaii the sacred king symbolically and concretely came “from abroad”, and the inaugural ritual always in-
volved human sacrifice. The sacrifice was a way of re-enacting the original myth and the original violent deed by which Hawaiian society was created, according to local tradition. It was a necessary condition for a foreign ruler to take power.

**Uupule’s Esinga connection**

Uupule, in the sense of appropriated power, made the king able to fulfil his duty as a sacred king. It was also a substantial part of his sacredness. As mentioned previously, the first phase in the Ondonga installation ritual, called the “uupule uosaanda” or uupule at the termite hills, had its equivalent in the initiation of diviners of different levels. I suggest that in both cases the purpose was to appropriate or appease the spirits that had taken up abode there. These were powerful spirits of the wilderness, of unregulated sexuality and unregulated spiritual force executed through witches and sorcerers. They were the powers to which diviners returned after death.

There is one narrative by Natanael Itenge from Ongandjera called “Uupulile in Ongandjera” (ELC 1331: 1862) that links the uupule of kings to historical kingdoms along the migratory route and to the wild forces of nature. Eshinga in Angola was one of the places through which early Ovambo migrants had passed, and which was inhabited by related Bantu-speaking people. The story is about Uukongo, a mythical hero and king of Eshinga, and his successor Amupunda. It is half-myth and half-history, and it presents kingly uupule power in Eshinga as emanating from “the wilderness”. The story in short, goes like this:

Uupule was acquired by a man of Eshinga named Uukongo Kamanja. He got it from a mysterious spirit in the wilderness that had lured him into a hollow and where he stayed long to acquire the power of ‘wisdom’ or uupule along with a great number of riches. This man became the king of Eshinga when he returned from the forest. All the people rallied around him because of his power to acquire riches, they noticed that he had the skill to get prosperous. (Itenge, ELC 1331: 1863)

The next part of the narrative illustrates the supernatural nature of the Eshinga king’s power, and shows how it reflected on people close to him. It also describes additional ways of acquiring kingly power, not
unlike the way an Ondonga king from abroad went about it:

Once King Uukongo went fishing by the Kunene River. He grabbed onto his chief attendant Amupunda and threw him into the water, where there were many crocodiles. The man vanished and was no longer to be seen. Uukongo rose and went home calmly and several years went by. Then, one day while Uukongo was eating, a loud bang was heard from his churning hut and Amupunda appeared, soaking wet. He went quietly to eat with the others. Then he remained at court and eventually he became Uukongo’s successor. (Iitenge ELC 1331: 1864)

Amupunda, who became king had, like Uukongo, been mysteriously vanished and was gone for some time. He seems to have had supernatural powers too: perhaps he acquired them in the water when he was with the crocodiles – the narrative is not explicit about this. Nevertheless, later when he was king his skills were tested. He waged a war against the Uukwambi King Nuujoma II, who was known to have been a great uupulile, a person with uupule power. The battle between Amupanda and Nuujoma was a battle of spirits of the air, and it turned out that Nuujoma’s spirit was stronger because Amupunda fell ill and had to be carried home. He now admitted that he had become a “powerful sorcerer” after having been told to “eat his mother”, in other words to kill her.

Amupunda, the servant of Uukongo, became king after showing that he had extraordinary powers following his mysterious sojourn in the river. He was then able to fight and conquer strong spirits, a feat that would not have been possible if he only had the uupule powers he had acquired in the water. It was only after transgressing and thereby receiving additional uupule that he was able to contest Nuuyoma in battle. According to this tale of Uukongo and Amupanda, a mysterious spirit from the wilderness gave Uukongo “the wisdom-kind” of uupule. Amupanda also received such power from the wilderness during his long stay with the crocodiles, but it was not enough: in order to become king he had to commit the transgression of “eating” his mother. This feat made him “a powerful sorcerer”. He was not powerful enough, in the face of the Uukwambi king Nuujoma however, the “great uupulile” whose uupule powers were stronger. As in Umbundu, the rulers of Eshinga in the Owanbo orbit competed with each other through the spiritual powers they possessed. These powers were called uupule and were acquired from Eshinga. They emanated from the wilderness.
In the following chapter I will elaborate on the further ways in which Owambo kings augmented their powers beyond uupule. If the violent aspects of rulership came to the fore in uupule, the other side of it, the one related to fertility and prosperity came out through the practice of further ritual that did not originally belonging to kingship.
Part IV

HOW KINGSHIP CHANGES
Rainmaking, female initiation and male circumcision – augmenting the sacredness of kings

This chapter analyses some of the ways in which the sacredness of kings was constituted beyond the installation ritual proper. I will show how kings in office expanded their ritual influence on fertility, and thereby their status as sacred kings with responsibility for fertility. Three kinds of ritual, rainmaking, male circumcision and female initiation, are discussed in terms of kingly involvement. I consider all three as fertility-related rituals or as fertility rituals. There are a number of narratives about the same ritual in some Owa mbo kingdoms in which the involvement of kings varied. By comparing them it is possible to identify the mechanisms by which kings expanded their influence, and to show how kingly involvement changed their context and significance. Homesteads, kin groups and local groups were once responsible for male circumcision and female initiation rituals. Kings became involved only in the course of time. Rain rituals, again, were in the Owa mbo past conducted in many contexts and by a number of actors on different levels in the social hierarchy.

How did kings go about appropriating rituals? Simon Harrison suggested different ways in which ritual prerogatives could be transferred. Among the North American Kwakiutl, leaders killed those who presided over important ceremonies in order to appropriate them for themselves. In the Roman Empire, conquered groups gave up not only their land their goods and their populations, but also their gods and temples: the spiritual heritage was considered part of the “assets”. Finally, “ceremonial interdependence” united clans among the Tallensi in West Africa (Harrison 1993: 228, 229, 241).

With regard to rain rituals, the Owa mbo had a degree of ceremonial dependence on the population groups living along their past migratory routes. This reflected former political dependence on kingdoms through which the ancestors had migrated: Humbe, Evale and Eshinga. An incipient Owa mbo kingdom would logically wish to augment the role of the
local king in ritual and eliminate out the involvement of foreign kingdoms belonging to their own history.

Harrison compared the appropriation of ritual control by which chiefs legitimated their power through the control of more tangible assets such as regalia and tribute. He considered it useful to study how “property rights” in religious symbolism were established (Harrison 1992: 236). Rituals could be appropriated and incorporated through the use of sheer force, as happened among the Kwakiutl. The same process took place among the Tiv of West Africa through barter: magical rites and religious titles or offices were “circulated in the prestige sphere of the Tiv economy against cloth, metal rods and other high-status goods” (Harrison 1993: 240). Miller did not describe how titles, fetishes and rituals were transferred in Umbundu, but he showed that they were, and that these transactions gave rise to kingdoms and rivalries between them (Miller 1976).

There were different ways in which a king could augment his power over rituals in the Owa mbo societies. He could provide cattle for sacrifice and thereby make his role visible, or he could introduce an innovation, such as the veneration of kingly ancestors. He could mark his authority by introducing ritual paraphernalia. He could also appropriate the right to decide when the ritual was to be held, and he could alter or cancel one that infringed his image as the promoter of fertility and prosperity. He could oust competing spiritual agents, or abolish the ritual altogether. In what follows I will describe processes of this kind that took place with regard to Owa mbo rainmaking rituals, female initiation rituals and male circumcision.

### Rain rituals and the king

*What made rain fall?*

The dependence on rain for human survival and the well-being of crops and cattle was a prominent aspect of pre-colonial Owa mbo realities. Heaven is scolding earth, *egulu lya nyenyeta nevi*, was an Ondonga proverb that was used when rain was reluctant to fall (Kuusi 1970: 29). In the precarious ecological conditions of the Kuvelai flood plain on which the Owa mbo societies were situated, where no permanent river watered the land, rainfall was a matter of life or death. The abundance of rain-
making rituals reflects the fact that rain was crucial for prosperity, and in fact most rituals contained a “prayer for rain”. Rain was also a symbol for good things in general, including life, fertility, prosperity and well-being. The words in initiation songs show that it was also used as a euphemism for semen and a symbol for the act of coitus.

Control over rain was an important aspect of power. For a king to live up to the ideal that he mastered fertility he needed to be in command of the major rituals through which rain was ‘released’. In reality, kings were up against a number of forces, natural, social and supernatural that were thought to influence rain. We could therefore assume that they would have tried to increase their powers in this area. Before discussing what evidence there was of such a process, I will describe the forces that were considered to be behind drought and rainfall, and the “agents” and “powers” that were thought to be able to influence rain.

The old Owa mbo traditions recognised both meteorological realities and the influence of supernatural agents on rainfall. Rainmakers were known to have been experienced meteorologists, and they often chose to promise rain after the change of the moon or when the clouds had already gathered in the sky and thunder could be heard from afar. Meteorological observations were described in a way that made rain appear as the outcome of an act of coitus between natural forces: “When the western wind goes to sleep with the eastern wind, out of this union rain is born” (Iitula, Onda nga, ELC 101: 235). People also observed nature and drew their conclusions about rainfall accordingly. The kaimbi bird, a species of hawk, was often seen when prolonged drought was threatening. People thought that the bird kept the rain from falling, and were quick to chop down the tree on which it nested and to destroy its eggs in order to avert the danger (Loeb 1962: 65).

Different types of supernatural “agents” and “powers” were held to influence rain. These included the mysterious Big Birds, which were called omadhila or omazila, and sometimes also ekandjo, Kalunga, the spirits of ancestors, the spirits of dead kings at home and abroad, living kings (Rautanen 1904: 18). The rain could also be withheld by means of sorcery and witchcraft according to local belief (Sijagaja ELC 392: 814–815, Hopeasalmi 1945: 70). Diviners performed sacrifices for rain if ancestors with-

77. The association between rain and human procreation is manifested in proverbs (See for instance proverb 139c Kuusi 1970: 35).
held it to punish the living. If rain did not fall, it was commonly held to be a punishment by ancestor spirits who objected to having been forgotten or who were punishing the living for breaking a taboo. Human beings who refrained from adhering to taboos were often held to be the direct cause of drought because they angered the spirits. Many Owa mbo kings were thought to have rainmaking capacities, one of whom was King Nembungu in Ondonga. According to local opinion, Nembungu could keep the rain from falling at will (Närhi 1929: 61). Other kings, too, were thought to be able to withhold rain and during the famine year of 1888 in Oniipa, a visit by King Kambonde kaMpingana raised great expectations among the people (FMC Hannula, Letter to Mustakallio 5.12.1888). According to Rautanen, a rainmaker king was thought to be able to influence rain even after his death. He was offered sacrifices and pleas for rain at the site of his grave (1904: 19).

The most common way of explaining drought, however, was to assume that the spirits of the former masters of the land were angry and therefore kept the rain from falling (Iitula, Ondonga, ELC 101: 234). In a number of African kingdoms there were special ritual officers whose task was to keep the “masters of the land” or “owners of the land” happy. These spirits represented “the first inhabitants”, early local groups or former groups in power. This division was not as distinct in South and Central African societies as in West Africa, where power was often divided between ritual chiefs, who were masters of the land⁷⁸ and who provided the link to the spirits of the original owners, and political chiefs who had often come “from elsewhere”. However, the principle that the early inhabitants were to be revered in important rituals was a generally held belief in Sub-Saharan African traditions as well as in other parts of the world.

I suggest that this is how Owa mbo “masters of the land” should be understood. We do not know much about them, except that they were recognised in Ongandjera as having been Bushmen, and that in Ondonga they were Bushmen and members of the Aakuusinda or Snake clan. One rainmaker’s prayer written down at the turn of the nineteenth century indicates that the ancestors that were called upon for rain were looked upon as being female. The prayer for rain began like this: “Oh you grandmother of strangers, oh mother of the traveller, you who tell the brooks

78. ‘Chefs de Terre’ in Francophone Africa.
The Shona of Zambia provide an example of how the ancestors of the land had to be revered in the rainmaking ritual even if the majority of sacrifices were made to kingly ancestors. Tavana, a king-bearing group of the Shona, ruled over another group, the Korekore. Rainfall was believed to be dependent on the first ancestors of the autochthonous Korekore, and their spirits needed to be duly propitiated in the rainmaking ritual. They were remembered at the very end of the ceremony after sacrifices had been made to all the ancestors of the kings of the ruling group (David Lan 1985: 74–81). There was a deep reverence to the spirits of the ancestors of the kingly clan in the Shona society, but reverence to the spirits of earlier autochthonous people was a prerequisite for rainfall. There was a similar underlying and half-concealed role for the early masters of the land in Ovambo tradition.

Rainmaker kings or queens were quite common in pre-colonial Africa, and among the northern neighbours of the Ovambo. The idea of kings as masters of rain was very much a reality among the peoples that the Ovambo were related to north of the border with Angola and along the Kavango River. The kings of Evale in Angola were famous rainmakers (Loeb 1962: 64) and rainmaking kings were also common among the Kavango neighbours to the north-east. The kings of the Kwangali, called Mbwenge by the Ovambo and closely associated with the migratory past of the Ondonga, kept “medicines for rain”. If they were not rainmakers themselves, someone in their clan carried this responsibility. Among other Kavango societies, the Mbundzu kings were responsible for rain, the king in Gciriku was held to be a “rain god” and there were two clans in Mbuksuhu from which kings and their head wives were alternately taken, the Lion clan and the Rainmaker clan. Such an arrangement meant that rainmaking was always part of the kingly office (Gibson et al., 1981: 69, 92, 204, 231–257).

Rainmaking and the possession of powerful rain charms was an important avenue to power among Mbundu groups in Angola as Joseph Miller (1972) showed. Rautanen’s remark about how the Hyena clan took over power from the Snake clan in Ondonga reveals that rainmaking was one way of achieving kingly power among the Ovambo. He did not describe how the Hyena acquired rainmaking skills, but among the Umbundu they came with certain potent fetishes that kin groups appro-
It is possible that the Hyena clan in Ondonga also obtained its power from a charm of this kind, but if so, it was carefully concealed from outsiders: our sources do not reveal it. There were many ways of rainmaking in the Owmbo heritage in which kings had no say. Mainga explained that there were many different rainmaking traditions among the Lozi of Zambia (in Ranger and Kimambo 1997: 99) including Nyambe cults, sacrifices at kingly graves and the tradition of “rain-doctors”, that bore witness of a past in which different population groups had merged. There were similar traditions in the Owmbo heritage, as I showed in an earlier study (Salokoski 1992).

Owmbo sacrifices to the spirits who controlled rain often took the form of a black sheep, a black speckless bull, an ox, or a cow that had just borne a calf and whose udders were dripping with milk. These kinds of practices were also found among their Kavango neighbours (cf. Gibson et al. 1981). Sometimes the sacrifice consisted of a small antelope, ombambi, or a small pre-pubescent girl. Big Birds called omazila also featured. Prayers to Kalunga and to ancestors usually went together. As was mentioned earlier, Hans Schinz claimed that rain would have been in the hands of diviners of the Lion clan in the whole of Owamboland in the 1870s, and that this clan was ousted by the ruling Hyena clan. This theory remains unverified by oral tradition, and its weaknesses were noted earlier. Moorsom and Clarence-Smith held that there was a belief to the effect that “the king’s greatest power was the magical one of making the rains fall” (1977: 98). This goes contrary to Schinz’ view according to which rainmaking was in the hands of certain rainmaker clans.

All these scholars simplified realities: In actual fact the agency of rainmaking was contested ground. When kings conducted rain rites they did not operate on their own nor did they “monopolise” rainmaking even though, as I will show presently, they tried to do so, and although some kings had the reputation of being “great rainmakers”. Who could perform rain rituals? In daily life, everyone, it seems. Casual prayers for rain to Kalunga or to “spirits” involved bloodless sacrifices called esaa-ghelo (esaagelo). Grass or earth was thrown to the spirits in passing as part of everyday life. The more elaborate rain rituals had clear officiates such as household heads, diviners, elders or kingly persons. As a rule, such people were circumcised men. In the Owmbo calendar, collective rain rituals merged into regular seasonal rituals. They were an essential aspect of sowing, success being entirely dependent on timely and
predictable rains. Sowing usually began at the onset of the first Small Rains which were needed for the seeds to start sprouting. Then everyone waited for the Big Rains after which the seedlings were replanted. The big rains were essential for making the seedlings grow properly. Rain rituals were performed in both of these phases. Sowing was one of the few seasonal activities that commonly commenced without kingly intervention. The two most commonly described Owambo rain rituals were the expeditions initiated by kings for rain to Evale in the north, and those performed at kingly graves in the home country. In addition, any seasonal ritual related to crops had an element of rain propitiation in it. In fact, since “rain” was used as a general symbol for fertility it was not always possible to distinguish prayers for rain from those that pleaded for fertility in a more general sense.

Rain from the north and by other means

The ritual of fetching rain from Angola in the north is described in many sources. The water in the temporary rivers, *oshana*, in Owamboland came from the north where the landscape was greener and the rains were more abundant. The kings in Angola were thought to have been powerful rainmakers. According to Reverend Shinana of Uukwanyama, “All tribes went to Evale for rain” (MSC: Shinana). As far back as can be remembered, expeditions to Angola for rain were undertaken when there was a drought and all other measures had failed. The rain rituals at kingly graves in Ondonga seem at some point in time to have substituted the custom of fetching rain from the king of Evale in Angola: old people complained that once sacrifices to the old rainmaking kings abroad had ceased, rainfall had become scarce (Jairus Uugwanga ELC, 415: 844).

When rain was sought from Evale the sacrifice of cattle, and earlier also of human beings, was part of the procedure. Evale kings made rain in different ways. One way was to put a fish from the river in a bucket, and when it jumped in the bucket, sprinkling water all around, it predicted rainfall (cf. Shinana MSC). The king also sometimes gave the rain expedition a sealed calabash containing rain to take home (Paulus Sijagaja, Ondonga ELC, 392: 814). When the expedition arrived home the calabash was opened, and then the rain fell. Sometimes the container was described as a basket made of palm leaves (Rautanen 1904: 24, Väänänen FMSC Hp 64.2.1924: 24), which was thought to contain a small
bird. The basket was opened in Ondonga and the “bird” was put in a small *ompampa*, similar to the burial *oompapa* of Ondonga kings. The ompampa could not be looked into, lest the spirits of the dead kings stopped bringing rain. If someone opened the basket and looked into it he would become blind (Schinz 1891: 305, 306). Thus no one could see the bird. Loeb gave a description of how rain was sought from Evale by the Kwanyama abbreviated below:

When there was a prolonged drought in the country, the king and his circumcised elders at court sent an expedition to the king of Evale for rain. As counter-gifts for the rain the men took with them 8–10 head of cattle and a black cow newly deprived of its calf, along with a young girl from the Roan Antelope clan, duly ornated and rubbed shiny with butter. The girl and the cow were sacrificed at the grave of an old Evale rainmaker king. The remaining cattle and the ornaments were given to the living rainmaking king. (Loeb 1962: 64)

Loeb indicated that both the living and the dead kings of Evale had to be approached, and that rainmaking expeditions from other Owambo kingdoms also involved the sacrifice of a cow and a “slave girl”. What might have been the role of the slave girl, and why was she from this particular clan? I suggested earlier that the Roan Antelope clan was a Bushman clan. If that interpretation is correct, the sacrificed girl was a Bushman slave. If this was so, the Evale king’s rainmaking ancestor received sacrifices that symbolised the known fertile capacity of the domesticated cow (it had a calf), and the prospective fertile capacity of the pre-pubescent girl, who represented “the wilderness”, the realm of the Bushmen. Both aspects of fertility, that of domesticated life and that of the wilderness, recur in ideas of kingly power in Africa as discussed by Luc de Heusch: both were needed for kingship.

The Ndonga also sought rain from Mbukushu in the Kavango. These rain-fetching expeditions were similar to those undertaken to Evale. An elder and a group of men took bulls and red beads and a slave girl as gifts and sacrifices to the rainmaking king. Before the journey the leader was smeared with butter and sent into the hot sun where the fat dripped down from his body like falling rain (Närhi 1929: 61, 62). It was not only the northern neighbours outside the Owambo cluster who were approached for rain, any powerful rainmakers closer to home were also consulted. A great rainmaker who lived in Uukwanyama and who kept rain...
in a sealed hut was sometimes approached when there was a drought in Ondonga. The procedure was similar: an expedition was sent to Uukwanyama, and received rain from the rainmaker in a calabash that was then taken home to Ondonga (Närhi 1929: 62, 63).

Sometimes when the need was great no expeditions for rain were undertaken, and instead a rainmaker or his wife was invited from another kingdom to come and conduct rain rituals. In Ondonga such rituals, conducted by a rainmaker from Evale, were usually performed at a sacred grove inenge, close to the kingly graves. If it was not successful, the rainmaker first tried to find out if someone had withheld the rain by witchcraft. If the culprit was found, he or she was killed. If the rain still did not fall, the rainmaker went back home to fetch potent herbs and failing that, he went back a second time to fetch his ohija of rain, a whistle made out of the horn of the ombambi antilope (Sijagaja, ELC 392: 814–816). Using the ombambi-horn ohija was thus the last resort following the failure of a number of consecutive measures, including sacrificing a head of cattle at inenge, trying to break the presumed withholding of rain by killing a witch, and finally, bringing potent herbs from Evale.

The Ongandjera kings did not make rain (FWC Amupala interview with Kalenga: 13) but experimented with different ways of obtaining it. It was fetched from Evale to Ongandjera every year until 1895. In that year, however, a powerful Herero rainmaker, Namupueja j’Ekandjo from Angola, was appointed by the Ongandjera king Tshaanika Natsilongo and rain-fetching from Evale ceased. Namupueja was not as powerful a rainmaker as the king had hoped, and after some rainless years the expeditions to Evale resumed. They were now addressed to the niece of Mbinga j’Ilonga, the Evale rainmaking king, who could not be approached in person because he had fled to Uukwanyama (Nameja ELC 1384: 1930–1934). Another rainmaker from abroad was also consulted in Ongandjera. He was called Shiwenge, and came from Onkumbi (Nkumbi). The year he came to Ongandjera was called ‘the year of Shiwenge’, which indicated that his rain making activities had made a difference. He conjured up rain with churned butter that he melted in his lap so as to create the illusion of dripping water. We do not know when Shivenge resumed rainmaking in Ongandjera, but bringing him there appeared to be further evidence of the Ongandjera kings’ efforts to cast themselves free from dependence on Evale kings.
Rain rituals at kingly graves

Kingly graves called *oompampa* (*sing. ompampa*) in Ondonga and *onku-lumbala* in Uukwambi (MSC Kandongo), were cone-shaped constructions made of poles of mopane wood propped up by stakes. “It was a shelter, rather like a pyramid two or three meters high” (Aarni 1985: 82). Figure 6 shows King Nangolo’s grave-ompampa, as it was in 1988, erect but somewhat tilted. The ground around a kingly grave was a sacred grove. It was called iinenge, a holy place, and it served as an asylum for trespassers (cf. FWC, Shilongo). Aarni suggested that it became a meeting place between the living and the dead (Aarni, ibid.).

The sources are not unanimous about which powers actually were venerated for rain at the kingly oompampa, however, and there were other spirits that were approached. The missionary Jalmari Hopeasalmi, for one, was inclined to think that kingly ancestor spirits were mediators rather than the object of prayers for rain at the kingly graves (Hopeasalmi 1945: 71). The rain charms concealed in small oompampa close to the kingly oompampa were also the real object for rain prayers according to the Ondonga historian Hans Namuhuya (MSC Namuhuya).

*Figure 6* The grave monument of King Nangolo dhAmutenya in 1988 (picture: Märtä Salokoski)
Rain sacrifices at the kingly graves at iinenge were introduced in Ondo-
nga by King Nembungu (Uusiku ELc, 202: 446) who ruled in the early
1800s. He was the king who unified the ward heads in Ondonga under his
rule (Williams 1991). Nembungu’s rainmaking innovation seems to have
been part of an effort to concentrate power in his hands. He may have
perceived the ritual prerogatives of Evale kings as threatening when he
was building up his own hegemony. The new rain sacrifices at the kingly
graves in Ondo nga seem to have been a measure whereby Nembungu
tried to cast off his dependence on the Evale kings: he changed the focus
of the rain rites from Evale to a place in Ondonga that he had chosen.

The connection between Kwanyama kings and rainmaking were a
variation on the same theme. Uukwanyama was once subordinated to
the Humbe kings (Loeb 1962: 267), who were known to be great rainmak-
ers. That function was taken up by Haimbili, the Kwanyama king who
freed himself from the power of Humbe. When he became an ancestor
Haimbili was assigned the power to influence rain. The site at which he
was buried was declared a sacred grove and was used for rainmaking,
even after cessation of kingship (Loeb 1962: 23). According to Vilho Kau-
linge, “The king had a house close to ombala with ‘things’ in it, and a
woman was put to live in it” (MSC Kaulinge). The statement is rather
secretive, but it suggests that Uukwanyama kings, too, had rain fetishes
kept in a secret hut, possibly also as a measure to curtail their depend-
ency on Evale.

Accounts by Martti Rautanen and Hans Schinz (Rautanen, Diaries
1885–1886 Folder 7: 62–63, Schinz 1891: 305, 306) suggest that even
though the kingly graves were made the site of rain rituals, it was ac-
 Actually not the dead kings who were venerated. Local witnesses support
their view: according to Erastus Shilongo (FWC Shilongo) it was actually
a small hut erected by Nembungu close to the place where his grave was
later made that was venerated for rain. Rautanen and Schinz visited the
spot in the 1880s and reported that rain charms were kept in two small
huts at iinenge (Rautanen, Diaries 1885–1886, Folder 7: 62–63).

According to Namuhuya, the rain rituals at the kingly graves were di-
rected to the bird spirit in the small oompampa, and not to the king (MSC
Namuhuya). The bird originated from the north. When an expedition
went up to Evale, rain in the form of a small bird in a palm-leaf basket was
carried to Ondonga and put into the little oompampa at iinenge. These
little oompampa were conically formed constructions of wooden poles
erected near the olukulumbala, the old court of Nembungu. The kingly oompampa were similar constructions but bigger. The habit of burying a kingly person there was not very old and was introduced in Ondonga by Nembungu. A similar hut was also erected close to the king’s ompampa in Uukwambi (MSC Kandongo). Judging from the fact that Williams conveys the picture that Nembungu created the structure of Owambo kingship and his successor Nangolo Dh’Amutenya was the one who finally unified the country (1992: 117), the kingly oompampa were an important aspect in the making of kingship.

In Ondonga the kingly grave-oompampa were thus erected only subsequently, after Nembungu had died, and those for the little bird were put there first. Rautanen and Schinz observed that there were two sacred stones close to the oompampa, a big one and a small one (Rautanen Diaries 1885–1886 Folder 7: 62–63) and these stones were also connected to rainmaking. The unhappy occasion on which Schinz took a piece of the smaller sacred stone is documented in different sources: it was an incident that almost cost him his life. The Uukwanyama king had “rain-stones” and the Uukwambi king was also known to own rain fetishes in the form of two big round stones. They called these stones rain eggs or “rain thunderbolts, the eggs of Nuutoni” (FWC Amakutuwa). Their origin is obscure. Although according to most sources the rain offerings at the graves of kings took the form of sacrifices directed to their spirits, in the light of the above, this was not always the case. Rain prayers were first directed to the spirits residing in the power objects situated close to the graves of old kings.

According to Filippus Uusiku, Nembungu gave the Elephant clan the privilege of rainmaking for the reason that “they mastered the rain” (Uusiku, ELC 202: 446). The involvement of the Elephant clan and the stones at iinenge j’omvula indicate that several kinds of powers, not only the Evale Rain Bird, were used by kings in Ondonga for establishing mastery over rain. When Nembungu assigned the privilege of heading the rainmaking rituals to the Elephant clan, local rainmaking skills were combined with the rain bird in the ompampa brought from Evale, both under the aegis of the king. His decision to make a grave for himself at the spot where the rain ompampa was situated made him, when dead and elevated to an ancestor, appear as an object of rain sacrifices.

Thus there was a change in the significance of rain rituals at iinenge. Over time, the sacrifices offered for rain at Nembungu’s grave influenced
local understanding to the effect that the dead king’s spirit was seen to be capable of “withholding the rain”. It took a local historian to identify the real object of the veneration, the Bird spirit in the little ompampa. Mastery of these rain fetishes was obviously transferred to Nembungu’s successor, Nangolo dh’Amutenya. “Nangolo was also renowned for his art in rainmaking, which he inherited from his uncle Nembungu [...]” (Williams 1991: 118). Thus when Nangolo’s grave ompampa was approached for rain it was the Rain Bird in the little ompampa and the rain stones, not the spirit of the dead king that were addressed, although the oral tradition rarely brought this out. The idea of “rainmaking at the kingly graves” becomes another element in building up the image of the king as a guarantor of fertility.

**Omathila and the “Osipepa of rain”**

C. H. Hahn described a Uukwaluudhi rain ritual in 1928 that was related to sowing initiated by the king. The ritual was called **omathila**, a term that translates as *the Big Birds*, which were understood to be spirits. The omathila rain ritual was conspicuously different from other rain rituals. There was no sacrifice, and the performers moved about in the dark in a secret procession over the land. They played the role of the Big Birds that were thought to fly over the country making frightening noises and thereby inspiring fear and awe in people. The roles of the Rain Birds were acted out by old men, **ekanjo** (*ekandjo*), summoned by the king:

[...] there are four or five older men, known as ekanjo or men who call the clouds for rain, who are appointed by the chief to keep the custom alive. Each year he summons them to his kraal and instructs them to make the necessary preparations. After a few days they march towards the east in the early morning in order to greet the rising sun, each carrying an instrument made in the shape of a whip [...] as they pass among the kraals they whirl the instruments above their heads, thus creating a sharp whirring sound to represent the noise made by the wings of huge flying birds. No one is allowed to address them or even to set eyes upon them as this will bring bad luck to such persons and their crops. The ceremony is kept up for four days. Any small stock encountered during its progress is driven off and according to tribal custom becomes the property of the ekanjo. On the final day the stock is taken to the **oshimbo** and sacrificed to the omathila or spirit of the birds [...] The
omathila is terminated by a short feast called *egomboto* at the Chief’s kraal to which old and young are invited [...]. (C. H. Hahn 1928: 4)

By oshimbo, which he does not explain further, Hahn seemed to refer to the circumcision site, *oshombo*. If this was so, the Uukwaluudhi omathila rain ritual was somehow connected with circumcision. There were two annual processions of the Big Rain Birds in Uukwaluudhi. The first ran in September or October, the time of “The Small Rains” and for sowing, and the second one took place “when crops are well established” and when “The Big Rains” were anticipated (cf. Williams, 1991: 40 fig. 2). The first procession was directed to the “Spirit of the Birds”, and at this point in the ritual the Birds were greatly feared. The king’s involvement was marked by the egomboto celebration at his court. The second procession of the Big Birds was more relaxed and people no longer feared them. The likelihood of rain was greater then, when the Big Rains were expected. The ekandjo men carried big sticks with ostrich feathers fastened onto them. They sang and waved the sticks whenever they met people. The Bird Men were greeted with cries of joy, “Rain, rain”. People in the fields looked up, rejoicing, and then stuck their hoes harder into the ground as if the rain had already fallen (Hahn, 1928:4). The Big Bird ritual in the name of the king and for the purpose of rain was an anachronism. In many narratives on female and male initiation ceremonies, the Big Birds played a key role. Apart from Hahn’s description, no other available source mentions a rain ritual of this kind. It is therefore possible only to make guesses as to what was its function and what the reasons for its adaptation might have been. It is possible that it had something to do with the abolition of circumcision, that the Big Birds of circumcision were co-opted by kings, and that Uukwaluudhi kings sought to expand their influence over seasonal rituals to include sowing, through a ritual innovation.

There was still another ritual, *the Osipepa of Rain*, that was associated with rain, although it was not a rain ritual proper. Like the Big Bird ritual in Uukwaluudhi it deviated from the common rain ritual and placed the king and his queen at the centre. The Osipepa of Rain in Ondo nga opened the season for drinking the year’s marula wine. A season of festivities commenced in February – March after the big rains had fallen and the first crop, consisting of the fruits of the *omaongo* or marula tree had ripened. An intoxicating omaongo drink was made by ferment-
ing the ripe marula fruits, omaongo. These fruit trees were considered the property of kings, and when the omaongo ripened, people picked them and brought them to court where they were used for wine making. When the wine was ready the king threw an enormous party that all members of society were entitled to attend. Omaongo was consumed by everyone in the land in February and March, before the grain harvest began. Carrying weapons was prohibited during this season because people were often quite intoxicated from the wine, which was provided for in abundance (Kaluvi, ELC 1180: 1667, Kaukungua, ELC 517: 1002). Sakeus Ihuhua from Ondonga spoke more of the symbolic functions of the marula festivity and its opening ceremony, called “the osipepa of rain” (ELC 146: 354). Tasting the first marula at “the osipepa of rain” meant opening the harvesting season or the “New Year” and the ceremony meant that “the old year was broken” and was described by Ihuhua as follows.

The head wife’s hearth, omasiga, played a central part in the ritual. The term omasiga was used both for hearth and for the three stones used as stove supports made of termite clay. It was also associated with the lineage stemming from the woman in charge of the hearth. The omasiga that supported the boiling pot also symbolised the vulva. Renewing the stove supports could thus be understood as a symbolic annual renewal of female procreative power. The purpose of the “osipepa of rain” was to “sacralise” and announce the New Year or the harvest through a ritual in which the king and his head wife played the key parts. The sacralising of the New Year in Ondonga began when a pre-pubescent female servant of the court picked some omaongo from a tree that had been chosen for the purpose. After this, the “queen” or the head wife of the king, moulded new cooking-stove supports, omasiga, for herself. She took a pot filled with water and put on this new stove. The king and the queen bit into omaongo and squeezed some of the juice of it into the pot. This procedure was called “the esisino of the king”. It signified that the New Year had been sacralised through a brew of omaongo (Ihuhua ELC 146: 354–356, my italics).

This ritual had very little to do with rain proper, in fact. Its name is bewildering unless we read fertility into it. Uukwanyama practices give us a clue: the term osipepa was used in two different connections – it signified a harvest ceremony held by the king (Loeb 1962: 217), but it was also used for a concluding festivity of the oijuo, a leaf-hut camp for young pre-initiation girls and boys (Kaukungua ELC 429: 860, ja Noa ELC 575: 1046, Shikeva ELC 1129, 1130: 1601–1604). Using the name “osipepa
of rain” for the marula festivity conceptually merged the fertility of the land with that of human beings: rain came to symbolise fertility in a general sense. This festival was the first one of a series of first-fruit rituals that opened up the yield of the land for human consumption. On a symbolic level it represented the renewal of female fertility in the kingdom through the renewal of the omasiga of the king’s head wife. If the head wife was from the Snake clan, which she most often was, the early ruling Snake clan was committed to securing fertility of a land ruled by a king from the Hyena clan.

The rainmakers

The art of rainmaking was transferred within the Ondonga kingly family from Nembungu to Na ngolo dh’Amutenya. Any member of the kingly clan could also transfer it to another member or could take it with him when moving elsewhere. Siuantapo gives an example this. Rainmaking in Uukwanyama was the prerogative of circumcised elders at court who belonged to the kingly clan (Paavo ja Siuantapo (ELC 391: 811–814), and they acquired the skills in the following way. Shimbilinga, a nephew of the Ondonga king Nembungu, was chosen king in Uukwanyama some time in the late 1700s or early 1800s. He was known for having learnt “the skill of rainmaking” from his uncle Nembungu. We do not know in what form the skill was transferred, but it is probable that Nembungu provided Shimbilinga with some fetish from the little ompampa at iiinenge. From this time onwards, members of the Uukwanyama kingly clan conducted rain rites at the kingly graves.

Rainmaking was also sometimes transferred from one person to another through positional succession. In Ongandjera a person occupying “the rainmaker’s field” was entitled to head rain rituals. This prerogative was transferred from father to son until it was handed to Hango Nameja, one of Liljeblad’s informants. After him the rainmakers belonged to the old Dwarf Mongoose clan, Aakwanafuizi (Nameja, ELC 1384: 1934), which was known to have been originally a Bushman clan. In Ongandjera, then, the original inhabitants of the land, represented by the Dwarf Mongoose clan, played a prominent role in rainmaking after Hango Nameja⁷⁹. We do

⁷⁹. Hango Nameja enrolled at the FMS teacher’s seminar in 1912 but we do not know when he was born (ELC E, List of informants: 7).

8 · Rainmaking, female initiation and male circumcision  233
not know whether this was a deliberate change brought about by kings in order to tie the ancestors of the land to kingship. If so, this measure too, could be read as an effort to pool the esoteric resources of rainmaking.

A summary of rainmaking

Kings were renowned for being rainmakers, but in reality rain rituals were conducted on multiple levels in society. Ancestors and kings, both foreign and local, were approached with sacrifices for rain, and former “masters of the land” were held to be able to withhold it as were certain kings. The role of the early masters of the land in securing rain is not emphasised in the oral traditions, which tend to concentrate on kings.

Sacrifices for rain had formerly included sheep, bovine cattle, the small ombambi antilope and human beings in the form of a pre-puberty girl. Rainmaking was considered in some sources to have belonged to particular clans, a claim that cannot be verified. Rain charms were potent for making rain fall, and it seems probable that such charms were, at some point in history, in the hands of clans that gained power through them. For instance, Ondonga clans were given power because of their rainmaking skills. Kings used different measures to pool their powers in their hands appropriating rituals and charms for rainmaking purposes.

In Uukwaluudhi the spirits of Big Birds featured as “Rain Birds” in rituals initiated by the king. Elsewhere these possessive spirits were at the very centre of male and female initiation ceremonies. The secret and dangerous nightly travels of the Bird Spirits in the initiation rituals were apparently transformed into a procession for rain in Uukwaluudhi, which at the same time became part of the ritual in the sowing season staged by the king and terminating the grand feast at the kingly court.

The osipepa of rain, headed in Ondonga by the king and his head wife, celebrated the renewal of the fecundity of the earth, symbolised by the season’s first crop. The “rain” in the name of the festivity seems here to have played only a symbolic role, for this was a season after the rains. The queen’s hearth and its renewed omasiga supports, symbols of female sexuality, were at the centre of the ritual. This put the king at centre stage in matters of fertility. Neither the Big Bird ritual nor the Osipepa of Rain were rain rituals proper, but rather indicated arrangements whereby kings acquired a more central position in the seasonal ritual repertoire.

A closer scrutiny of the details of the rituals at the kingly graves in
Ondonga reveals that the two forms of rainmaking were related, and that this may have been so in other Owmbo kingdoms too. Abandoning rain excursions to Angola moved the focus from Evale to the kingly graves in Ondonga. This was apparently part of an effort to establish independence, both ritual and political, from the Evale king, although the spirits influencing the rain at the grave of king Nembungu were once appropriated from Evale. These spirits were originally venerated at the small bird oompampa and not at the graves of the kings. The emphasis in the rain rituals apparently gradually shifted to the spirit of Nangolo in the big oompampa: his spirit seemed to take over as the object of sacrifices for rain.

Uukwanyama sacrifices to the rainmaking king of Evale, similar to those given by the Ondonga to the Mbukushu kings, lend themselves to an analysis of the type of reverence needed to appease that king. I interpret the “cow with calf” as symbolising domesticated fertility, and the pre-puberty girl of the Roan Antelope clan as representing the potential fertility belonging to “nature” and to the “first inhabitants of the land”. Both in Ondonga and Uukwanyama dependence for rainmaking on northern kings of Evale and Humbe was broken by two kings famous for pooling their power, Nembungu and Hambilili. Establishing the custom of conducting rain rituals at a site close to the kingly graves could be seen as part of the pooling of political power. Rain charms at kingly graves in Ondonga were controlled by the “rain maker” Elephant clan. This could be understood to signify that the esoteric powers of this clan were pooled into kingship. The rainmaking prerogatives of kings could also be transferred within the kingly family. Shimbilingua, the nephew of the Ondonga King Nembungu, was chosen king in Uukwanyama and inherited the art of rainmaking together with the rain charms, presumably from his maternal uncle. The veneration of Uukwanyama kingly graves for rain commenced with Shimbilingua. A tendency to pool the local “spiritual capital” in kingly rainmaking was also evident in Ongadji in that a clan of previous Bushmen, held to be the owners of the land, presided over the “rainmaker’s field”.

The next two subchapters deal with female and male initiation, and the king’s role in them. It is only by considering these initiation rituals that the Uukwaluudhi rain ritual with the Big Birds can be seen from a fuller perspective. Kings also tended to influence circumcision and female initiation, ohango, just as they influenced the rain making rituals.
The rich source materials on circumcision and ohango make it possible to trace the processes by which kings sought to intervene and, as a consequence, to profile themselves as having a say over fertility.

**Kings and female initiation**

*Female initiation – when, where and why?*

In the Owambo past, female initiation – ohango or *efundula*, did not coincide with the neophyte’s physical maturity, but took place a few years after a girl had had her first menses. In the meantime, her mother had taken precautions to protect the girl’s new reproductive capability. As Hjort (1986: 62) observed, she took some of her daughter’s first menstrual blood, and sealed it into the kernel of an omaongo-fruit and hid it until the girl was ready to undergo initiation. By this deed she sealed the reproductive capacity of the girl until the initiation ritual during which she gave it back. Either the girl would be served the menstrual blood, unwittingly, in her beer, or it would be mixed in the olukula ointment that she was to be adorned with during the initiation (Ondonga; Liljeblad, ELC 1353:1912 Uukwanyama; Shehama, ELC 749: 1170, Hamutumua ELC 1183: 1673 and Kaukungua, ELC 1321: 1830, Ongandjera; Liljeblad ELC 1353: 1921).

Female initiation was a collective affair arranged simultaneously for a number of girls that had come of age. The beginning and end of ohango always coincided with the new moon (Tuupainen 1970: 46). Both the frequency of the ritual and the time of year when it was held varied from one society to another. Female initiation practices in Uukwambi were quite differentiated. Five consecutive ohango a year were performed and when the last one was finished, cattle were allowed to graze on the stubble in the fields (MSC Abed Kandongo). Each one was held at a different location. Three of them were only for the daughters of non-kingly people, another was held for daughters of both commoners and kings, and a fifth was only for girls from the kingly clan. A different clan hosted each of these rites, in the sense that they “owned” the place in which it was held. All except one were officiated by an onamunganga, a female initiation diviner who belonged to the *Etundu* or Zebra clan, the exception was one for commoners that was headed by an onamunganga of the *Aakuananzi* or Sheep clan (Liljeblad ELC 1318: 1815). The Zebra clan pro-
vided the three first Kwambi rulers when the Bushmen lost control over their kings (Williams 1988: 126). The ushering of young girls to socially regulated fecundity was thus headed by a representative of the earliest kingly clan in four of the five Uukwambi oohango.

Hjort (1986) and Davies (1987) described the Uukwanyama efundula at length in two separate studies. They depicted the liminal stage of initiation, oihanangolo, which took one to two months (cf. Hamutumua ELC 1183: 1674). The girls were painted white and dressed in skirts made of reeds, and they roamed about the country like dangerous spirits, using abusive language and stealing from people without anybody stopping them. They were allowed to transgress normal codes of behaviour and acted in a threatening manner just like the Big Birds pictured in the Uukwaluuudhi rain ritual. The sound of the kingly drums marked the king’s involvement in the ceremony (FWC Kaulinge: 25).

Sometimes the initiation took place in a neighbouring kingdom. Uukwaluuudhi girls seem to have been taken to Ombalantu for oohango (Shii-mi, ELC 147, 148). Two or three different general oohango were performed in Ombalantu, and three weeks after they were finished followed another ceremony for the Ombalantu girls at court. (Shii-mi, ELC 147 and 148). In most Owa mbo societies oohango was followed fairly soon by a modest marriage ceremony for the girls who had found a fiancé. Uukolonkadhi girls, for example, could marry almost immediately, two months after initiation (Obadja Ihuhua, ELC 1117: 1577), but in Ombalantu they could not marry until two years after oohango (Sakeus Ihuhua, ELC 139: 338).

Why was the female initiation performed? The overt purpose was to make young girls marriageable, ritually to mark a point in time after which procreation was legitimate. Tuupainen formulates this sociological point of view as follows:

Only women who have been through the ceremony are considered to give birth to their children in a socially approved way; their children have legitimate status in the society regardless of whether they are born within wedlock or outside it; they are “legitimate” in the Owa-mbo sense of the word. (Tuupainen 1970: 51)

The ordeals involved in the ritual have usually been explained as ways of detecting pre-initiation pregnancy, which was abhorred. Local narratives reveal, however, that these rituals had a different function: they prepared the girls for spirit possession, which was the esoteric essence
of the ritual. A girl was held to be possessed by a spirit, which opened up her virginity, lifted the *oshipue* (taboo) and made her ready for marriage. To attain this, she went through a number of ordeals in the process; fasting, lying in the baking hot sun, pounding corn and dancing for several days. She was possessed by the “Spirit or God” of the ohango which was most often featured as a Big Bird. The king’s involvement in the girls’ initiation ceremonies contributed in various ways to the desired outcome, which was a batch of marriageable fertile young women. In terms of the ritual, however, these interventions were quite peripheral. I will argue in the following that kingly participation changed the significance that was given to the ordeals of the ohango.

*The hegemonic view contested*

The accounts of missionaries and the narratives of locals close to the ruling kings, all emphasised the function of the ohango as a test of pregnancy and the involvement of the king. This was also brought out by Hjort and Davies in their descriptions of the Uukwanyama efundula. Rautanen’s accounts of the Ondo nga female initiations in 1888 and 1903, too, emphasised the tendency to centre on the ritual as a test for pregnancy:

Dem Ceremoniemeister steht eine bestimmte ältere Frau zur Seite, welche die herbeigebrachten Bräute untersucht, ob sie wirklich jungfräulich sind, zu welchem Behufe ihnen ein fruchtabtreibendes Getränk eingegeben wird [...]. (Rautanen 1903: 331)

The Master of Ceremonies is assisted by a particular elderly woman who checks the brides who have come for initiation to see whether they really are virgins, and this is done by giving them a drink that has abortive consequences. (My translation)

Many sources reiterate this view. They describe the physically exhausting ordeals that were part of the ritual as being intended to screen out the girls who had come into it in a state of pregnancy. Rautanen emphasised kingly involvement in ohango. For one thing, the king received “part of the spoils” – at least two brides from each batch of girls initiated (Rautanen 1903: 332). Here the participation of living and dead kings was prominent. Many sources reiterate this king-centred view of female initiation, but the narratives of local informants also reveal that,
at some point in time, the rituals had taken place without the involvement of kings or kingly ancestors. Before tuning to these narratives I will dwell a while on the kinds of consequences that were thought to ensue if a girl did not go through the female initiation ceremonies. If she became pregnant before initiation it was thought that she would have difficulties in finding a husband. The family would be shamed and the girl would constitute a danger for the fertility of the other initiates. Such a trespass would also be extremely dangerous for kings: it would cause his death (Loeb 1962: 243) or lead to misfortune among the kingly clan (Rautanen Diaries Folder 9: 51). This information was given to Rautanen by Alugondo, the wife of the Ondonga King Kambonde.

The three primary consequences of pre-initiation pregnancy – difficulty in finding a husband, and bringing shame on the family and endangering the initiates, were concerns on the individual level of a society in which the regulation of female fertility was in the hands of the clan and the local community. The fourth and fifth consequences signalled the strong involvement of kings, indicating that the proper regulation of a girl's fertility was a matter of life and death to the kingly. Hjort understood the repercussions of pre-initiation pregnancy on kingship from the perspective of social order and cohesion (Hjort 1987), the king being the symbol of society. I suggest that the alleged consequences reflected the idea that the mastery of human fertility was a core aspect of kingship. If there was disorder in the social regulation of female fertility, it signified a break in the sacred capacities of kings.

Descriptions by local informants of female initiation varied a great deal in terms of the involvement of kings. At one extreme the initiation was an entirely “family” affair, with no kingly input. Explanations of the significance of the ordeals varied too, as did the action taken if girls were found to have become pregnant before the initiation. The involvement of kings seemed to make a difference in terms of how pre-initiation pregnancy was viewed. There was also apparent competition between kings and Big Birds as shown below. In the following I will discuss female initiation without kingly intervention in Ombandja, Uukolonkadhi, Ombalantu and Ondonga. I will then introduce a narrative on ohango from Ongandjera involving kingly intervention, but of a rather modest kind. Finally I will describe a form of ohango in which the involvement of the king was marked.
Female initiation without kings

Martin Hepeni gave a description of female initiation in Ombanda in which the king played no part. This ritual followed the general pattern common to female initiation in many other Owambo societies. The following summary of the first part of this 16-page account describes the beginning of the ceremony:

When collective female initiation was to take place, special leaf huts, called *oijuo* in Ondonga, were erected for the occasion, and the girls’ mothers played an important part in guiding them through the initiation. The girl was given a temporary hairdo, *elende* before initiation, and in the course of it *elende* was substituted by a different hair arrangement, to be changed again at the end. Beer was brewed, firewood was fetched and a cooking-stove support, *omasiga*, was erected. The girls to be initiated moved in a procession lead by “an old woman”, they pounded grain and bulls were slaughtered. After all this, the girls were stripped of their previous ornaments and new ornaments were given. (Hepeni ELC 6: 14–30)

The esoteric part of the Ombanda female initiation was very prominent. The core of the ritual took place on the second day when the namunganga, the female diviner who was heading the ceremony and another old woman, who was her helper, “awakened” the girls and sacralised them by heralding their *ezila* or Big Bird. The ezila was the “god” of the *oha ngo*. It was made from the horn of an antelope big as a horse and gave off a deep crying sound. Only the namunganga and her helpers could cast their eye on it. It was believed to be a living creature that moved from place to place and “awakened the brides”. When the procession of girls had passed the cattle entrance they stopped and kneeled down and the ezila were sounded. After this they moved in a procession first through the cattle pens and then they passed through the churning place and went to the entrance of the sleeping chamber. Only now the ezila stopped crying and was subsequently concealed near the main sleeping chamber (Hepeni, ELC 6: 22–23). The cattle pen was an area of the house that women could not enter in normal circumstances – apparently because it was heavily laden with the symbolism of male procreative power. The churning place, analogously, symbolised female fertility. The procession through these places and the taking of the ezila to the sleeping chamber
apparently symbolised the potential power of procreation in the girls.

What does it mean that the ezila not only “awakened” the girls to their fertile capacity, but also sacralised them? I understand it to mean that the girls were given their capacity to conceive in a manner approved by society – through the ezila, which was considered a mysterious secret power. In the words of Tiiraitta Hjort, the girls were thereby given mythical knowledge that made them fully-fledged members of society (1989: 69). This was a “sacralisation” that was analogous to what was done to the king in his installation ritual. In one form or another, the ezila featured in almost all of the accounts of female initiation. Its role tended to be toned down when the kingly involvement was more prominent.

Another account of female initiation, also from Ombandja, given by Estermann (1976: 73–74) conveys essentially the same picture as that presented by Hepeni, but provides some additional information. This ritual was called olufuko. When the ceremony started, the girl “is supposed to be unaware of what is in store for her”. She was captured by surprise by a woman in charge of the ritual and her male assistant. The head of the ritual drew lines of chalk on her shoulders and shouted to her Wafukala; “You become nubile!” and the girl struggled to get free. Then she goes through different ceremonies during five days. No involvement of kings is mentioned and a bull sacrifice was provided by the girl’s father, not by the king.

Another description of female initiation without the involvement of kings came from Uukolonkadhi, a society that never had them. The informant was Obadja Ihuhua, the son of a namunganga, a leader of female initiation, thus the account is probably reliable. Ihuhua described female initiation in Uukolonkadhi as a ‘family-centred’ ceremony. The decision to conduct the ceremony was taken by the mother and father of the girl together with two namunganga, one male and the other female (Ihuhua, ELC 1117: 1572–1578). The two namunganga jointly conducted the initiation ceremony, but the female one took the lead. This was also the case in Ondonga initiation as described by Filemon Shuuja (ELC 1239: 1733). Both brought along a burning log when the ceremony began. The man put out the flames on his log and then asked for fire from the woman’s log and went to find out whether the woman has accepted him as a co-leader. Fire and leadership, then, was in the hands of women in the Ondonga ohango.

The role of the ezila or Big Bird, here also called omangololi, and the
two diviners is quite prominent in Uukolonkadhi female initiation. The parents’ involvement was manifest, in a number of ways. They negotiated with the namunganga on when the ritual should commence and the father provided sacrifices of bulls or sheep. The mother presented the namunganga with a gift of flour, and she brewed beer on a number of days during the course of the ritual. She also blew the ezila horns, which constituted the esoteric climax of the ritual (Ihuhua, EL 1117: 153–1576). The namunganga, for her part, conducted a beer ritual symbolising the acquisition of fertility. At the end of the ceremony she gave the horn to the girls to blow. The intervention of the omangololi was prominent all through the seclusion phase of the ritual:

[... ] the girls are stripped naked and shut in huts and shelters. No one sees them. Important women guard the entrances to ensure that the girls do not get a chance to flee from hunger or thirst, because they are kept there without food and without drink for three days. While the “brides” are inside, their mothers blow the horns each afternoon. The horns give off a sound “vugu, vugu, vugu”. These horns are called omangololi (the empty shell of a gourd in which something rattles), or Big Birds. If a man sees the women when they blow these horns he is “eaten”, in other words he becomes incurably insane. When the girls are closed in they are said to be by the river. (Ihuhua, EL 1117: 1576)

By this time the girls were exhausted by dancing and pounding grain. They could neither eat nor drink. The elements of fasting and ordeal were present, but they were not explained as a test of pregnancy. The purpose was apparently simply to produce the state of trance needed to receive the spirit. The day of seclusion was followed by a day in which relatives slaughtered bulls or sheep in sacrifice. Early the next morning all of the girls went together in secret to the forest “to fetch firewood”, and they could not be seen by anyone. They were now in a liminal state, possessed by the birds. At the end of the ceremonial sequence, the male namunganga gave each girl the horn of an antelope. The girls could not blow into these horns during the daytime, only at night, and away from the dwellings of people. When using the horns they smeared their faces with flour or ashes (Ihuhua, EL 1117: 1576–1577). This part of the ritual was a simplified version of the oihanangolo liminal stage in the Uukwan-yama girls’ initiation described by Hjort (1986) and Davies (1987). At that stage the whitewashed girls were considered to be “possessed by a
spirit” and roamed about the country for a month. They were free to steal from people, to boast, and to hit people who did not obey them as true liminals to whom the rules of society did not apply.

When the Uukolonkadhi girls had undergone seclusion and had been called for by the birds and had gone into the forest “for firewood”, I suggest that they had taken the spirit into their own possession. Their new power was expressed in the fact that they were now allowed to blow the horns themselves. This ritual pattern was also present in the male initiation, which is discussed in the next section. Loeb (1962: 248) and Hjort (1986: 93) observed the element of gender reversal at the liminal oihanangolo stage and suggested the girls were behaving like boys. There is more to be read into from this liminal stage, however. The Uukolonkadhi narrative by Ihuhua gives the key to the esoteric significance of the female initiation and of the role of the Big Bird in it. It links the liminal stage to a spirit in the form of a Big Bird, called the “God of Ohango”, or the “Goddess of Ohango”, which “takes away the virginity” or oshipue (taboo) from the girls and made them aafuko or marriageable⁸⁰. In other words, the birds unleashed their fertile powers. I suggest that the Big Bird, ezila, was a spirit of female procreation in this context. An indication of this is that in Ondo nga it was carried to the spot by its master in a pouch normally used for carrying children.

Johannes Shiimi’s narrative about ohango in Ombalantu gives an additional dimension to the nature of the Big Bird used in female initiation. The Ombalantu defined the kudu horn, used as an ezila, as oshimenka, the term for a holy object or place (ELC 147: 362). Iimenka were most often associated with kingly graves and insignia of office. Omazila, the oshimenka of female initiation, did not get their power from kings or kingly ancestors and it may have emanated from other sources. They were fertility spirits of a different kind mastered by women.

An account by Gideon Iitula (ELC 970: 1399–1402) describes an Ondo nga collective female initiation in which there was no kingly involvement. It was the relatives of the bride who provided the sacrificial bull, not the king. The ceremony was headed by a woman who brought a basket of powerful objects, including the horn of a big antelope (elsewhere identified as ezila). Pregnant girls were not taken for initiation, but they were

not severely punished if they slipped through. Instead, their dangerous state was ameliorated by ritual means; they were “hit with coals” on their way to the initiation site (Litula, ELC 970: 1400). According to Liljeblad (ELC 1326: 1852) the danger of pre-initiation pregnancy was averted if the girl in question chewed on a piece of charcoal. Charcoal was a very strong protective agent, as mentioned previously: it was conveyed as “a powerful Kalunga” – and using it was an alternative to excluding the girl from society. For “normal” girls a bull was slaughtered.

The king plays a minor role in ohango

The king was involved in the Ongandjera ohango traditions described by Emil Liljeblad (ELC 1353:1911) and Johannes Salomon (ELC 930: 1334), but he played a minor role. He did not initiate the ceremony, he provided no gifts, nor did he announce his involvement by displaying kingly insignia. This ohango took place outside the kingdom, in Ombalantu. There was a test of endurance in the afternoon of the second day of the ceremony in the form of dancing and playing in the blazing sunshine without food or drink. The girls were not supposed to fall down when dancing and pounding grain and if they did, it was a bad sign: such girls “bachelors do not want for a wife” (ibid.: 1355). This explanation suggests that the shame of pre-initiation pregnancy was a private matter and involved the king in no way.

The king contributed to the Ongandjera ohango by choosing a namunganga from the Dwarf Mongoose clan to head the rituals. This person had considerable status. Liljeblad remarks that in her initiation to office she was “sacralised like a king” (ELC 1353: 1911, my italics) at the kingly court. The Dwarf Mongoose clan was the clan of former Bushmen (Williams 1991: 85), and Bushmen, as mentioned above, were overtly recognised in Ongandjera as the first owners of the land. Thus the responsibility for female initiation in which kings played a role lay in the hands of the Bushmen, by appointment of the king. Thus, when kings interfered in female initiation they paid homage to the early owners of the land by appropriating a member of the Dwarf Mongoose clan to become the head of the proceedings. In this way, they co-opted the esoteric power of the first owners of the land.

The omazila of the Ongandjera female initiation, in which kings
had some say, aroused fear and were referred to in negative terms (cf. Väänänen FMSC Hp 64.1. 1924: 26). Johannes Salomo described them as “witches who had covered themselves with skins and who moved like “ghosts”, and who could not be approached or seen (ELC 930: 1357). This re-labelling of the omazila in the ritual in which the king played a part suggests that the informant distanced himself from the forces that the ezila represented; they were “demonised”. This distancing could have had something to do with the informant’s new Christian identity at the time of telling the story, but I suggest another interpretation. It is more probable that it mirrored a tendency to label powers that were competing with kings over fertility as maleficent. Openly recognising the significance of the ezila would have clashed with the king’s aspiration to be seen as the one who provided the human fertility power in the land.

The mysterious Head of the Log

There was a female officiant called the Head of the Log in the Ondonga initiation ceremonies. She seems to have had as much importance as the namunganga herself, because she was celebrated with abundant gifts before the ceremony could proceed. When the Head of the Log arrived with the aafuko, or initiates, all fires had been put out. The namunganga presented her with sacrifices of tobacco, a basket of grain and some omihanga, the strings of beads of ostrich egg shells that women wear. The parents of the girls to be initiated also presented similar gifts, and when enough gifts had been handed over, the ohango proceeded (Uugwanga ELC 68: 165, 166).

The Head of the Log in Ondonga was of the Python Snake clan, known to have ruled in Ondonga before the kingly Hyena clan took over. Thus, as in Ongandjera, a representative of a group of “owners of the land” was present at the initiation ceremony. When the Head of the Log arrived “all fires” were extinguished. This, I suggest, was a sign of the recognition of the former ruling Snake clan and its power over fertility. If the Head of the Log was the same person as the “Head of the Ezila”, as Uugwanga’s narrative vaguely indicates, then the Snake clan fully controlled the female initiation in Ondonga. Either way, it had a substantial power in this ritual.
Narratives provided by Akitofel Amupembe (ELC 578: 1049) and Paulus Nuujoma (ELC 995: 1431), as well as that of Liljeblad himself (ELC 1318: 1815) tell of a form of ohango in Uukwambi in which the involvement of the king was prominent. He gave the order for it to take place. All of the homesteads involved sent beer to the king at the planning stage, and one of the principal sacrifices, that of a small antelope, *ombambi*, took place at the site of former King Nuujoma’s court. What is more, the ruling king sent one piece of his regalia, a double-headed spear, to the house in which the ceremonies were to take place. This spear was used for digging the holes for pounding grain in the test of endurance that the aafuko were to go through.

This sacred spear made the symbolic presence of the king visible, and the way it was used made it an essential part of the ohango procedures. A spear could be seen as a token of military power: it underlined the potential violence of the king. There is another interpretation, one related to fertility: when the spear opened up the hole for grain pounding, it became a symbolic “opener” of the girls’ fertility capacity, representing their defloration. The king sent a new spear to the ohango on each of the three consecutive days, its prominent role making it difficult to forget his involvement in the ritual.

Punishment for pre-initiation pregnancy was severe in Uukwambi. The purpose of the initiation and the ordeals was to detect whether the girls had come to ohango in a state of pregnancy. They were forced to stay still in the midday sun without food for many hours, just as in the Ongandjera ohango. In Uukwambi too, if a girl fell, it was taken as an indication of pregnancy but here it was understood as a public matter: public investigation and punishment followed. The girl was examined by a Bushman woman, and if she was found pregnant she and her mother were beaten severely, their hut was burnt down and their belongings were confiscated. All those living in the girl’s homestead had to leave the kingdom and flee to another one. The boy who had caused the pregnancy had to pay a fine of a bull to the leader of the ohango (Liljeblad ELC 1318: 1826).

What about the Big Bird, ezila? It did feature in the Uukwambi ohango, but here it was called the *ekola* (the crow) of the namunganganga and it cried on the fourth day of the ceremony (Liljeblad ELC 1318: 1825).
presence of a spirit in the Uukwambi ohango was conveyed only indirectly in the name of the fourth day of the ritual, which was called ombepo (Amupembe, ELC 578: 1049). Ombepo, as mentioned above means spirit, wind or breath. Amupembe did not speak out about spirits, but merely said that the girls were dangerous for men after the third day (ibid.). The informant Nuujoma evaded the spirit association by mentioning that the aafuko could not be seen if there was a wind (Nuujoma ELC, 996: 1432). Liljeblad, a foreign observer with no need to reiterate official truths, recognised that the Uukwambi girls were obsessed by a spirit on the second day of the ohango, which was called the big fire log, ekuni enene (Liljeblad, ELC 1318: 1819), and for this reason they were considered dangerous to others. Thus, in the narratives from Uukwambi a strong kingly involvement coincided with heavy sanctions against pre-initiation pregnancy, and a lack of reference to the Bird spirits or their effect on the initiates.

Abraham Amweelo described a female initiation ritual in Ondonga in which kings were strongly involved, and which he had been told about by Niinane Nekuja and Paulus Iitope. Niiname was the daughter-in-law of the Ondonga king Nangolo dh’Amutenya, and Iitope was Amweelo’s cousin, thus these informants probably gave a version of female initiation that was close to the kingly view. This narrative stresses the links between the king’s house and the ohango, with the result that the whole ritual has a kingly flavour:

The ohango of the women was begun in times way back, at the time of the beginning of kingship, in the reign of King Naanda Mutati. (Amweelo, ELC 66: 154)

The role of the namunganga, her origin, and the power objects she used were ignored in this narrative, and the leaders of the ceremony were only mentioned as “two old women”. The narrator took pains to deny any spiritual aspect: the girls “are not taken to mingle with spirits”, which contradicts other narratives of ohango both in Ondonga and elsewhere. The description of the ritual itself focuses on its function as a test for pregnancy.

When the girls arrive on the first day, the onamunganga places them on the ground on their stomachs in the blazing sun. They spend a long time lying like this at midday. If any of them get dizzy, they are identified as being pregnant. (Amweelo, ELC 66: 155)
There is no acknowledgment here that the aafuko received the capacity to conceive from the ezila. Mention is only made of the site where the blessing took place, the “big houses” of the kingly and the houses of kingly councillors (Amweelo, ELC 66: 155–156). There are no details about the involvement of parents or about how namunganga, or the Head of the Log contributed to the future fertility power of the new bride.

This kind of female initiation was apparently a new and curtailed ritual in which esoteric aspects were toned down and the role of the king was brought to the fore. We do not know to what time this description pertains. As the narrators were close relatives of king Nangolo dh’Amutenya it is likely that this form of female initiation took place in Nangolo’s time or later. A note by Frans Hannula in 1887 about the king’s pompous performance at oha ngo in Ondo nga that year supports the idea that, over the years, the king’s role had increased (Hannula, Letter to Tötterman 21.11.1887 FMS EAC 11–23 Hp.8.). J. Mustakallio’s description of oha ngo sixteen years later, in 1903, suggests that the main role of kings was to provide the cattle sacrifice, and that the purpose of the rite was to check for un-wanted pregnancy (Mustakallio 1903: 84, 85).

There was thus a change in Ondo nga female initiation after Nangolo, or at least in the way it was described. The role of the king became more prominent, the core esoteric significance of the ritual diminished, and the purpose was changed. Now the focus was on the detection and punishment for pre-initiation pregnancy, which was interpreted as being deadly dangerous to the king. Belief in these fatal consequences could be read as an expression of the “responsibility for ordered fertility” that the king took upon himself. Disordered fertility in the form of pre-initiation pregnancy would strike him dead if it went unpunished.

The Ondo nga king also marked his importance in the oha ngo by contributing to the sacrifices and gifts given to the diviners and sharing their spoils, and he provided sacrificial sheep (Ihuhua ELC 137: 328–334). He received some of the gifts that were presented to the namunganga – grain, cattle, seashell beads and other prestige objects. This kind of arrangement gave the ritual a kingly flavour and it tied it more closely to kingship. When King Nangolo died the female initiation procedures that were going on in the kingdom were interrupted, told Andreas Shilongo whose mother had participated in the initiation in that year (Shilongo FWC). This, too, showed that female initiation was closely ritually dependent on the king.
How kings augmented their impact on female initiation – Conclusion

A distinct pattern emerges when the female initiation rituals from different Owa mbo societies are put together: when the role of the king was more prominent, that of the namunganga and other ritual officials diminished. The endurance and pregnancy tests varied in significance and the role of the Big Birds changed.

Owa mbo kings had a stake in female initiation in that it reflected the sacred nature of the kingly institution, which implied kingly responsibility for human fertility. However, kings were up against many other stakeholders. There were many “agents” who, through ritual means, provided the girls with the capacity to appropriate their reproductive powers in a socially approved way. Their mothers had encapsulated their fertility in the form of their first menstrual blood which they kept in an omaongo kernel only to be released at the initiation. The spirits, conveyed as Big Birds finalised the release of their reproductive capacity. In Ondo nga these Birds were controlled by the namunganga, but we do not know from which clan she was. Another important officiant was the Head of the Log, who was a woman from the Snake clan in Ondonga, and from the Dwarf Mongoose clan in Ongandjera. These ritual officers represented early owners of the land.

Kings contributed in different ways to the female initiation as illustrated above, but quite a few narratives do not refer to kingly involvement. Comparison of the initiations with and without kingly intervention reveals a distinct pattern. When the king was not involved, pre-initiation pregnancy was not severely sanctioned and did not concern the king; it was shameful for the girl but it could be lived with. When there was strong kingly intervention, on the other hand, the consequences of breaking this taboo hit the king hard and sanctions were severe. There was also a pattern in the role of the Big Birds; these spirits were prominent in rituals in which the king’s intervention was negligible, but were completely ignored when he was strongly involved.

These differences suggest that, over time, kings tried to gain influence over female initiation rituals, the main stakeholders in which had been parents and kin. One way in which they could increase their influence was by changing the ritual so as to eliminate the notion of a fertility spirit, ezila. Other options included infiltrating the rituals by presenting sheep and bulls for sacrifice, claiming some of the spoils, ordering the
ritual to take place close to the kingly court or at kingly graves, delivering a power object to be present at the ritual in order to keep the power of kingship in evidence, resuming the right to appoint officiates, (albeit those who fulfilled the traditional criteria) and sending bulls or a spear to mark the end of the ritual.

The fact that the rituals in which the Big Bird played a role were still well remembered in the 1930s indicates that the kings were not very successful in erasing this element from the tradition. Kingly involvement was imposed on a tradition that shone through despite efforts to dominate it.

**Kings and circumcision**

Male initiation rituals, *etanda*, or circumcision belonged to the recognised tradition of all Owmbo societies of Northern Namibia and it is only from Ongandjera that we have no descriptions of it. At some point in time there does seem to have been circumcision there too, judging from the name of the month of July, *mupita omulumentu*, which translates as "the coming out of men" (ELC Nameja, 1385: 1934). This was the time of year when circumcision camps were held in other Owmbo societies. Whether or not there was circumcision in Ombandja our sources do not reveal. Many of the neighbours of the Owmbo in the north did practice it; the Nyaneka-Nkhumbi, the pastoralist groups of the Herero, the Chokwe, the Zimba, the Hakavona, the Kwanyoka, the Himba and the Kuvale (Estermann, 1981: 32 and 1979: 50). These neighbours were historically linked to Owmbo. The Nyaneka-Nkhumbi are held to be "the progenitors" of certain Owmbo kingdoms, including Uukwambi, Ombalantu and Ongandjera (Williams, 1991: 30, 31). The Chokwe are held to have influenced the Uukwanyakama and Ombandja culture.

Victor Walter (1969) wrote about secret societies in Africa as arising from brotherhoods created at male initiation ceremonies. They were a powerful political force, counterbalancing chiefly power and serving as a check on tendencies towards autarchy. According to Walter, their power was based on their capacity to arouse fear in people. This dimension does come through in descriptions of Owmbo circumcision, but there is very scanty information on this aspect of power, and therefore in-depth study has not been possible with the sources available. My emphasis is rather on the religious symbolism of the "spirits" of initiation. The secret-so-
society aspect does give another possible explanation for the abolition of circumcision, but that topic deserves a separate study.

In 1949 Seppo Teinonen, a Finnish theologian, compiled the available information on circumcision among the Owa mbo. His résumé, presented below, shows that there had been a great deal of variation in the custom. Male initiation was called *oha ngo jaalumentu*. According to Tönjes it was abolished in Uukwanyama in the years 1885–1890 and earlier than that in Ondonga. Hans Schinz, who travelled in the area in 1884–1887, said that circumcision was in practice in Ondonga “earlier” (Teinonen 1949).

For several reasons Teinonen found it difficult to give an exact description of the ritual:

Very little has been written on it, most information is secondary and, the traditions vary very much from one society to another (Teinonen 1949: 24). In some societies the ritual was performed at home, in others it was the custom to send the boys to a neighbouring society. Sometimes the fire for the ritual was brought from abroad. The ritual lasted from four days to two months. The age of the boys varied too. Schintz (1891) reported that the boys were 10–12 years, Hahn (1928) that they were a little older, 16–20 years: Närhi, again said they were 25–30 years (Närhi 1929). According to some sources these rituals were for all boys, and to others that they were only for the nobility, in other words, the kingly clan and the sons of kingly.

The procedures went as follows; the boys were taken away to a remote place where a camp was erected. No women or uncircumcised men could come close to it. In most societies there was dancing, drumming, magic or other more or less religious ceremonies. The boys learned the songs of men, they heard of the brave deeds of the heroes of old and they learned about marriage. There were many tests of endurance; for instance the boys had to lie naked in the sun. The operation itself varied from one society to another. In some societies the head of the ceremony, who was called *omupitici*, or *ombitsi* conducted the operation, *etanda* or circumcision, on a small stone with a dagger made for the occasion. In others the foreskin was not taken away, only a small wound was slit into it. Some died of their wounds but the knowledge that they were dying in a sacred place consoled them. Most boys returned home in good health and when they arrived home a big festival awaited

81. Here Teinonen uses Ondonga terminology. The word *ohango* was more commonly used for female initiation. The term *etanda* also signifies the concrete act of circumcision as does the word *etanda*. 

---

8 · Rainmaking, female initiation and male circumcision 251
them. A circumcised man was held in great esteem, he was given many tasks of honour and he was allowed to join the men’s meetings. He could also marry, for he was no longer a boy. (Teinonen, 1949: 24–25)

In 1929 Otto Närhi gave another description of Owa mbo male circumcision, highlighting its function in making an elite of those who went through it:

The Owa mbo boys became adults in former times through the ritual of circumcision. In Ondonga and Uukwanyama it has, however, been prohibited for a long time, but in Ombalantu it is still practised. It is a secret ritual, which cannot be spoken about with anyone. If you really take pains at finding out something, you get some information. It was a big festivity that lasted many weeks. Many bulls were slaughtered then. The circumcision was made on boys aged 25–30 years. In connection with it the boys underwent many tests of courage and abstention, they had to go through many tests of physical strength and they had to endure punishment. They had to lie in the blazing sun stark naked and they had to bear the cold of the night too. The circumcision was done very quickly with the splinter of a stone on a bloody piece of hide. The boys had to endure the bleeding afterwards without complaining. Someone always died of it but he died in a sacred place. During the time in which the boys were recovering, they received food and care. Women could not come near that place. Small boys were given sacred water and with this ceremony the circumcised boys were elevated to a caste of their own. They were far above ordinary people. After this they could marry. (Närhi, 1929: 33–34)

Local informants’ descriptions of male initiation rituals do not contradict the details presented by Närhi, nor the variety of ways of conducting the ritual that was brought out in Teinonen’s description: they rather complement the information given by the two Finns and give it depth. Circumcision as a mechanism of creating exclusiveness was referred to by many informants (MSC Liedker: on Ondonga, MSC Kandongo, on Uukwambii, Kaulinge MSC on Uukwanyama). Many also bore witness to the need for a king to be circumcised in the early days of kingship: “Early kings were circumcised. It gave strength to society”, as Vilho Kaulinge said (MSC: Kaulinge). Many described the limitations in the ritual power of kings who were not circumcised, and no ompampa was erected on their graves.

The general picture conveyed in the literature from colonial times and
in the narratives collected in the twentieth century, as well as in oral tradition is, that circumcision was abandoned before the arrival of the missionaries. Rautanen reported this for Ondonga (1903: 335). In Uukwanyama, it was no more practised after Haimbili (Loeb 1962: 24), who died in 1858. It was abolished in Uukwambi fairly late. According to the missionary Kalle Koivu (FMS 371.2.A:2) by King Iipumbu, who ruled in the years 1907–1932. The ritual survived in Western Owambo societies well into the 1920s (Närhi 1929: 33, 34, Liljeblad, ELC 1344: 1898, Vapaavuori, 1948: 24). Several decades later it was performed among the neighbours of the Owambo north of the Angolan border, both as a regular practice of these peoples and for Owambo boys from further south (Estermann 1981:32, Skär, manuscript: 48, Loeb 1962: 236, Väänänen, FMS collection Hpxxxix.1 v.k. 1933–1935: 614).

Circumcision was once thought to give supernatural skills to men going out to war – the ability to localise the enemy cattle and to move unseen. Vilho Kaulinge suggested that it was no longer necessary in this context after the coming of firearms. While it had been circumcised men who went out to war, now it was the men with guns (MSC Kaulinge). This statement is significant, for it offers one explanation for the abolition of circumcision. The advanced weapons technology meant that the power of the spirits that circumcised men were thought to embody was no longer needed: it was substituted by the power of firearms traded with Europeans.

The narratives of Liljeblad’s informants elaborate substantially on the spiritual aspect of circumcision, staged in the form of the possessive intervention of Big Birds, omazila (or omadhila sing. eedhila, eethila). This aspect is missing in both Närhi’s and Teinonen’s accounts. The Big Birds were called the “spirits” or the “Gods” of circumcision, and the narratives describe their function in great detail. The behaviour of those called upon in male initiation was conspicuously similar to that of the Big Birds in the Uukwaluudhi rain ritual: their sound was produced by a bullroarer whirled in the air at the end of a strong rope, or by blowing into an instrument made from the tip of an antelope horn.

The Big Birds of circumcision

The anthropologist Edwin Loeb describes the role of Big Birds in the Uukwanyama circumcision ritual in a way that harmonises well with local
informants’ accounts. The practice was symbolically envisaged as a ritual in which neophytes were eaten by a Big Bird and then defecated from its anus. Being “eaten by” was a common metaphor for spirit possession in Owambo tradition. “The Birds” were dangerous spirits, and it was through them that adulthood was achieved. Loeb described circumcision in Uukwanyama as a secret ritual officiated by men carrying bird masks (Loeb, 1962: 237–8).

These Big Birds initially focused their frightful power “inwards”, upon the neophytes who were to be circumcised. According to Loeb, (1962, 236–239) the act of circumcision took place in secret. The boys had to observe silence and taboos on food and drink. Women of fertile age were banished altogether from the proceedings. The symbolic act of being swallowed by the Big Bird was carried out simultaneously with the circumcision: it signified ritual death and possession by the Bird spirit. The Bird-men sounded their bullroarers to drown the cries of the boys as they were cut. The men acting as Birds helped in holding the boys down during the operation, so that they would not struggle to free themselves. After the circumcision proper a ritual chase followed, which resembled the struggle of the Ombanda girls in Ohango when they fought to free themselves from the officiants of olufuko:

[...] each boy struggled to free himself from the masked birds who held him and began to run. The birds followed with their switches making an outcry as if they were chasing cattle [...]. (Loeb 1962: 238)

On the following day a sheep was sacrificed and, from its hide, belts were made to provide supernatural protection. When the wounds had healed and after spending some time in the circumcision camp, the boys were summoned and sent to walk about in the country for a number of days. After this the attention of the Birds turned “outward”. This part of the ritual was identical to the procession of the Big Birds in the rain rite described by Hahn. Both took place in July before the sowing season. The circumcision birds made noisy sounds, and, like the Rain Birds and those in the female initiation, they could not be seen. The sound was produced by blowing into “bark whistles” to warn people to keep out of the way. During this period, before the final purification, the boys were regarded as supernatural beings. (Loeb, 1962: 238)

Loeb was suggesting that the neophytes had entered a sacral and liminal state after having been possessed by the Big Birds at circumci-
sion. The Big Birds feature in most circumcision narratives by local informants, or they are hinted at if not explicitly mentioned. When initiated, the boys, in turn, performed the role of the Big Birds, blowing the whistles and using their newly acquired spiritual power. They travelled across the country acting like Big Birds, painted with white ashes, and they were called *iihanangolo*, (sing. *oihanangolo*), a name more commonly used for girl initiates in the liminal period of their initiation ritual.

Birds represent spirits in a number of traditions the world over. The use of bullroarers to represent spirit intervention in circumcision rituals has also been found far away from the Owa mbo orbit. Godelier (1999) reports of a surprisingly similar phenomenon in Barua, New Guinea. According to a number of narratives from Ondonga, Uukwambi and Ombalantu, the sound of Big Birds was produced by elders officiating at the ritual before, during and after the actual cutting into the boys’ penises. The Uukolonkadhi word for big bird, ezila, was not spelled out but the onomatopoetic term *omangololi* (rattlers) (Uukolonkahdi, Ihuhua, ELC 1118: 1580) was used. The same term for the Bird was used in the female initiation ritual in Uukwanyama mentioned above. Birds were not mentioned in the descriptions from Uukwaluudhi, but the boys were told “you are eaten”, indicting that spirit possession had taken place. In Ombalantu and Uukolonkadhi the boys took over the bull-roarers and played them at a later stage of the initiation process. As in Uukwanyama, they stayed at an initiation camp and when they had recovered from their operation they travelled across the country.

---

83. The Baruya bullroarer is a slender piece of polished black palm some 20–25 cm in length, with a hole at one end that is threaded with a length of bark string. These bullroarers were shown to young Barua initiates in utmost secrecy when they went through the second stage of the initiation ceremonies. They were told never, on the pain of death, to reveal to the women that the bullroarers were worked by men, who whirled them over their heads, producing a loud roaring sound. This sound, unlike any other, represented the voice of the spirits with whom the men conversed and communicated during the initiations. In Barua they represented “forest spirits”, *yimaka*, that had been appropriated by an ancestor “from the beginning of time” (Godelier 1999:113, 114).
Although male initiation was no longer practiced in Ondonga at the turn of the last century, there are many descriptions of how it was done earlier. It took place at a spot called *omwandī gwaalemetryu* under a special tree close to the grave of King Nangolo dh’Amutenya. Circumcised men were called *aakuluntu* (sing. *omakuluntu*) or “adults”. They stood above other men in society and decided about customs. It was from their ranks that judges (*aatokolihapu*) and Head Diviners, *omupulile* were chosen (MSC Liedker: 1). As is obvious from the above, circumcised men were a power category on their own, with capabilities related to the spiritual realm. To what extent they formed a secret society would be a topic for further investigation. There are several narratives on circumcision in Ongonga that, together, give a picture of the variations in the ritual over time, and show the relation between kings and circumcision.

One type of male initiation was said to have been practised “before collective initiation was performed for girls” (Uugwanga, ELC 67: 157). This, I suggest, means that male initiation was practised before kings became involved in female initiation. These early rituals for boys were performed for a number of boys together. The ceremony started with the recognition within the family that the boy was ready to marry. He was urged by his parents to take his future bride through a certain initiation process. We have very few details of what actually happened in this process, except that the girl was given a special herbal powder that was mixed in her food and drink. After this the boy married the girl and only then, in the married state, was he initiated into adulthood. The parents collected presents to give to a circumcised man who was asked to head the ritual. Many cuts were made on the body of the neophyte, the incision in the foreskin of the penis, commonly termed “circumcision”, being only one of them. The act was called *efukiko* and this is how Jaurus Uugwanga described it:

The young man arrives early in the morning to meet the person who will conduct the fukiko. When the sun rises, this person makes a small slit in his forehead. When it draws blood he puts herbal powder into the wound. Now the boy’s paternal uncle, who is called “the carrier”, gives gifts – he is a man who carried the boy on his back when the boy was small. When the herbs have been pounded to flour in the mortar they are called *ongundo*, a powder to strew. In the evening the boys
to be initiated are taken to an iimenka, or holy place, such as certain fields, trees, valleys or periodic lakes.

When they are in such a place, the person heading the ceremony takes off the clothes of the initiates and makes a small wound (shata) on their foreheads, their tongues, wrists and anuses and he cuts into the foreskin of their penises. The magic herb powder is then rubbed onto the wound on the penis and on all the other wounds. This powder enters the wounds and gives strength for the whole life of the man. Because of this powder he will succeed in anything he endeavours. If he wants to bewitch a person so that that person dies or if he has the misfortune of killing another person or [wants to] cause something else unfortunate to happen to the other man, it will happen. The boy who has been shata-ed cannot be held guilty for anything [...]. When their penises are slit into, they get the power to counter the misfortune [of causing someone’s death], no matter whether the dead one is a man or a woman [...]

[...] The person who will conduct the efukiko now takes the neophyte through the trunk of a tree, so that he passes through the tree like a bullet. [Afterwards] if he goes into a house and scolds the fire, it will go out. If someone walks behind him with water and does not greet him, the water pot will break. If someone speaks foul to you with a tongue that has been shata-ed you will be in big trouble. A person who is circumcised as a grown up is to be feared. After all this the boy is taken to the big rivers in the [foreign] countries and he is thrown into the water. A hippo eats him up, swallows him whole, and after some time the hippo comes back up on land and defecates him on the shore of the river. When they return home all the clothes are taken away from the boy and a bull is slaughtered and he is dressed in new straps and a new apron, because he has become a new person. All of the old one has remained in the stomach of the hippo. (Uugwanga, ELC 67: 157–160)

The fate of Amupunda, the servant of King Uukongo related in Chapter seven comes to mind here. In the light of the Ondonga initiation practice described above, throwing Amupunda into the water for the crocodiles and having him reappear years later alive could be likened to a prolonged initiation. In the above version of the Ondonga male initiation the source of power that gave the boys their supernatural capacity was the herbal powder rubbed into their wounds. The spirit possession that preceded the transfer of the boy into a state of an adult man took
the form of being thrown into the river and “eaten up” by a hippo. In other versions the Big Birds, or a crocodile, performed the role of the possessing spirit.

It is clear from the above that a man initiated by such measures was thought to be very powerful and the power could be given without the intervention of kings. Uugwanga emphasised the dangerous aspect of such power, noting that a circumcised man’s powers were comparable to the powers of witchcraft. Other sources convey a similar picture. Väänänen, for instance, said that the powers ascribed to young men through circumcision resembled the powers that ovatikili, or sorcerers were acknowledged to have acquired through secret proceedings (cf. Väänänen FMSC Hp 64.1.1924). However, circumcised men were highly esteemed and they were not held to be witches. Circumcision gave protection and curing power. The young men had gained access to the spiritual world, and this gave them a position of power in society. All kings had to be circumcised in Uukwanyama, and this rule seems to have applied elsewhere, even after the abolition of circumcision in the common people. Nevertheless, circumcised young men seemed to pose a threat to a king who needed to pool substantial esoteric resources in his own hands in order to feature as a keeper of the well being of society.

When kings have a say

At some point, circumcision became a collective endeavour in the name of the kings in Ondonga. Some traits of the old initiation practice were retained, others were abolished. Filemon Shuuja (ELC 242: 550–555) described one such ritual initiated by the king in great detail. There were elements of spirit possession of the kind described by Uugwanga, but it is also clear that the king was given prominence. This circumcision ritual was considerably shorter than the others of which we have descriptions. The proceedings took place in “a small grove”. They lasted for four to six days, and the ritual was led by older circumcised men. It included ordeals, excessive dancing and feasting, singing, beer drinking, and sacrifices of cattle performed by both kingly people and relatives. Shuuja did not mention any cutting proper, neither shata nor circumcision, but his lengthy account vividly illustrates other sequences. He also described the omazila that accompanied the procedures each day. The following were the main features of the ritual that Shuuja described:
This circumcision camp was erected in the *oshiheke* forest, and the spot was identified as lying within the ‘kingdom’ of the kingly children. The procedure was headed by old circumcised men. They brought with them small pre-puberty girls who provided food for the camp. To begin with, the boys could not speak to each other. They had to stand for a while over an almost extinguished but still smoking ash heap, whereby the smoke rose up to cover all of their bodies. Then an old distinguished elder arrived with a double-edged spear with which he struck the initiates on the forehead. This was the king’s spear, one of the sacred regalia of the king. The elder also carried a beer jug with a small stone in it and sprinkled beer from this jug over the initiates to make them strong in their belief in the power of circumcision. After this, the prohibition to speak was lifted. The elder threw some dregs of the beer onto the leaf huts. (Shuuja, ELC 242: 551)

At this point of the ritual the smoke and the contact with the kingly regalia made the neophytes ready for the culmination of the ritual. Now followed their symbolic death. A big pit was dug in the grove in which the circumcision camp was held. Herbs were put in the pit first and then the boys lined up in it and were covered with earth so that only their heads showed. Beer was poured over them to cleanse them, and ashes were thrown over them. The boys then jumped out of the pit two by two on the western side: the west was a direction that was associated with death. When they had all come out they had appropriated the Big Birds, which gave them extraordinary powers:

When all of them had jumped out of the pit, they blew omazila (ohango-circumcision Gods) in order to announce that they had come out of the grave and had conquered death [...]. (Shuuja 242: 552)

When the boys had finished their meal, the elders now sounded the omazila and war songs were sung. The “big elder” (the master of the ceremonies), dressed in a new “apron” made from the stomach lining of a big bull, stood up with his legs apart and made the initiates pass between his legs from back to front, hitting them on their foreheads with the apron. When they had passed through, the boys sat down one by one on a stone as big as a beer calabash. Then the girls chased the boys into the forest and the elders went after them to play the ezila. This part of the ritual seemed to transfer the reproduction potential from the older generation to the younger one. It was followed by a cattle sacrifice.
At midday the big elder calls the boys to the leaf huts by blowing a horn of the oholongo-antelope (kudu-antilope), which is called ezila, the god of circumcision, or its master, in order to call upon the young men to come to the leaf huts. The young men arrive. The small girls bring them baskets of porridge. Then all dance a lot and shout for joy [...]. (ibid.: 552)

[...] On the next morning at daybreak the big elder slaughters the bull of the king’s boys or the bull of the kingly clan, and brings the sacrifice to the big elder. A day later bulls from commoners are slaughtered and all of the circumcised boys are given “straps”. Each gets a strap prepared from the hide of his own bull, and these are prepared on this day and cut on the next day [...]. (ibid.: 554)

Preparations for departure from circumcision camp started the next day. The big elder took manure from the sacrificial bulls and smeared it on the heads of the neophytes, while those who had died were buried. All the meat and porridge were collected and cooked and given to the neophytes. The big elders threw porridge into which herbs had been mixed on the boys, ordering them to collect their things. Then he took them behind the leaf huts and anointed them with blood into which the stomach contents of the first sacrificial bull had been mixed. Then the omazila were heard. The big elder set fire to the leaf huts, and threw out all that was in them. He put on a sheep’s hide and copper beads, and the fat from the sheep’s hide dripped onto the ground [this symbolised the falling of rain and fertility]. He sang and shouted for joy (Shuuja ELC 242: 554-555).

This ends the circumcision and bulls are slaughtered for those who have gone through it, they have conquered death, they die no more, because they have passed the circumcision ritual. (Shuuja ELC 242: 555, my italics)

It is interesting to note that both kings and kinsmen provided cattle sacrifices, but those of the kinsmen outnumbered those of the king. This was one way in which the kings sought to influence the male circumcision ritual and the double-edged spear he provided was another. The role of the Birds was much less prominent than suggested in Loeb’s account from Uukwanyama but they were strongly present at the culmination of the ritual process in which the boys conquered death. They were then
completely ousted from the ritual after King Nangolo had introduced changes in it.

**How Nangolo changed circumcision practices**

Paulus Iitope and Niinane Nekuaja, both close relatives of King Nangolo dh’Amutenja, described, through Abraham Amweelo, an essentially different male initiation in Ondonga. Compared with the earlier accounts, this ritual was rather pale and cryptic. These informants claimed that male circumcision was introduced by King Nangolo allegedly for the first time in Ondonga. Ondonga circumcision practices are presented here as having taken place only during the reign of King Nangolo dhAmutenya:

Male circumcision began in Ondonga during the reign of Nangolo Amutenya, when it also ceased. Male children were also circumcised. The ritual was conducted in each ward, omukunda, and was prepared by an esteemed elder. Leaf huts were erected at the site of circumcision. A wound was cut into the penis of the Ondonga men, with an *ositezi* [a crooked needle] but no skin was taken off. The ritual lasted for four days. There was no dancing, and the men only hit the drums and shouted war cries. There were no heavy rules at all. The boys were dressed in leather skins. Their bodies were not maltreated, nor were they taught the ways of the spirits, since they knew them already. When they were allowed to go home, the leaf huts were burned and so was the whole circumcision site. Two esteemed elders who were already circumcised supervised the initiates. (Paulus Iitope and Niinane Nekuaja through Abraham Amweelo ELC 65: 153)

This was a much more restrained ceremony than those described in the other accounts from Ondonga. Associations with spirits were minimal. The role of the rite as a passage to adulthood and marriage was also watered down, since circumcision was carried out on small boys as well. The rite was now done “in each ward”, thereby giving it the flavour of an administrative measure. It was reported to be of shorter duration than those that were the subject of other descriptions. The narrative explicitly emphasised the fact that this circumcision introduced by dhAmutenya had nothing to do with learning about the “ways of the spirit”, and that activities such as dancing leading into trance played no part. There were no Big Birds present.

Nangolo dh’Amutenya reigned in 1820–1857. According to Amweelo,
he both introduced and abolished circumcision. In view of the information given by other informants, it seems more likely that Nangolo, rather than introducing it, changed existing practices which had a clear and profound supernatural dimension. It seems that he restricted the practice in order to be able to control the process and its outcome. It thus became more secular and shorter, and more tightly regulated by the king. All boys, including small ones, in all wards were to be part of the ceremony. Circumcision lost its function of making men fit for marriage and capable of performing important ritual tasks. No ordeals or sufferings that alluded to a spiritual change took place.

The powers gained through male circumcision performed before Nangolo gave a man the right to marry and the capacity to head initiation rituals, kingly installation rituals, salt-fetching trips, and rainmaking and many other rituals. At one time all those qualifying as elders, diviners and kings had to be circumcised. Non-circumcised men were at a disadvantage: they could not be ritual leaders and they were never considered completely adult or properly married. The kings in Uukwanyama had to abandon their old courts once they were no longer circumcised. Society was also at loss without circumcised men: their absence made it impossible to conduct certain rituals without foreign officiates. Circumcision and the conceived supernatural powers that ensued from it emerged as a major hierarchy-creating factor in Owambo societies of old.

The abolishment of circumcision

Circumcision was abolished in Uukwanyama by King Haimbili, and in Ondonga shortly after King Nangolo’s reign. What might have been the reason for this? Hayes suggested that in Uukwanyama it was related to military concerns, but not the ones Kaulinge mentioned. Hayes connected it with the influence of European trade and suggested that it was done for military reasons: to release young able-bodied men from lengthy isolation in initiation camps in the bush so that they could be used for military endeavours. It “realigned the polity on more centralised and military lines” and given that the procedure had been controlled by lineage elders, its abolition weakened their power to the advantage of the king (Hayes, 1992: 52).

Kaulinge’s statement to the effect that guns substituted the power formerly received from spirits for warfare suggests a similar conclusion, but
based on a different argument. Kaulinge took account of the belief system in his analysis of the military and political realities of Kwanyama kingship. An additional aspect that influenced the process of first introducing and then abolishing circumcision, I suggest, was the need for kings to appropriate ritual power in order to enhance their authority as kings.

The cessation of circumcision seems to have played a role in establishing a new kind of hierarchy in the Owmambo kingdoms of the mid-1800s, as Hayes suggests. During the nineteenth century there was a gradual shift of political-cum-religious power from elders, whose eligibility for leadership basically depended upon whether they were circumcised or not, to advisers whose main asset was related to their military skills. The abolition thus constituted a major change in the power structure of kingship, just as Kaulinge understood it. However, not only did it release young men from a time-consuming camp life, it also, and more significantly, constituted a break in the way of structuring society. The “new” advisers to the kings, called omalenga, who were also often headmen of local wards, omikunda, were no longer elders or holders of spiritual powers as they had been before. If we are to believe Kaulinge, holders of such spiritual power were no longer needed for warfare.

However, circumcised men were invested with more powers than those useful in battle, as has become clear in the course of this text. I suggest that circumcision was abolished because these men became a threat to kings in their capacity of hosting the supernatural powers that they had received from the Big Birds in their initiation. The two kings who were known to have consolidated kingship in Ondo nga and Uukwanyama, Nangolo and Haimbili, were the ones to abolish circumcision.

Nangolo dh’Amutenya in Ondo nga acted forcefully against the esoteric powers of circumcised men. He introduced a shorter and more cryptic kind procedure in which no Big Birds were mentioned, and in particular that featured neither ordeals nor the presence of spirits. This innovation curbed the power of circumcised men, and with that also the power of the spirits of the Big Birds that had possessed the initiates and had given them their supernatural power. It is possible that Nangolo wanted to give the circumcision procedures a role as camps preparing young men for military endeavours, which was what happened in the case of local circumcision rituals in Merina in Madagascar (Bloch 1986). If such an innovation was intended, it did not turn out to be successful. Not long after Nangolo’s reign circumcision was abolished altogether in Ondo nga. It has been shown that
Na ngolo hoarded spiritual power in other ways, too. The manipulation and abolition of circumcision revolutionised the ritual economy in Owa-mbo social life. Numerous accounts tell of the need for circumcision in terms of allocating responsibility for various tasks in society. I suggest that changing and abolishing it was part of the pooling of esoteric power in the king’s hands.

The argumentation for its abolition in Uukwambi put forward by the missionary Kalle Koivu supports such an interpretation. King Iipumbu was not circumcised despite the fact that in his time the power of a man brought home from circumcision camp was held to be so strong that it “broke the life of a non-circumcised king and of the government” (Koivu FMSC 372.2.A:2). This would explain why Haimbili yHaufiku, ruler in Uukwanyama in 1811–1858, wished to be circumcised after he had ascended the throne, which was a major break in tradition because the ceremony involved the shedding of the king’s blood. Thus before the advent of firearms, circumcision was a must for a king even at the risk of breaking important taboos. Less than two decades later, in the reign of King Mweshipandeka (1862–1882), firearms had already made one of its functions obsolete: that of protecting warriors. Ideas on what gave power changed: people “put their power in guns”, according to Kaulinge (MSC Kaulinge). From Mweshipandeka onwards, the war leaders in Uukwanyama no longer had to be circumcised. Kaulinge also suggested that missionaries made a difference: “From Nahmadi and Weyulu” [the kings that came after Mweshipandeka] onwards, “the white people’s power was added on to our power of the world” (MSC Kaulinge).
The devolution of sacred kingship

Changes in succession practices

During the period after trade commenced between Owa mbo kings and Europeans the nature of kingship changed to involve the more autarchic and unreciprocal use of power. In Ondonga and Uukwanyama the consolidation of kingship, the boom in long-distance trade and the increasing dependency of kings on traders happened within a few decades. General violence also increased with the introduction of firearms. What was the role of sacred kingship and ritual regicide in all this? How did ritual regicide relate to the increased political violence in society, by kings and against them? These are questions that Michael Rowlands (1993) and Kaisa Ekholm (1972, 1985, 1991, 1994) grappled with. They were also addressed by James Vaughan’s (1980) in his efforts to find out whether ritual regicide was just a version of politically violent assassination among the Margi, or if these institutions were to be understood as two different things.

Previous chapters have highlighted changes and permutations in ritual regicide and the sacred power of kings. Ritual regicide was an established tradition in Owa mbo kingdoms, as I have shown. It is also true that kingly succession has often been described as happening through the usurpation of power. When the ruling king in Ombandja was killed by a man from the kingly clan who “grabbed power” with his own hands, without having been chosen, the new king carried out regicide in the ritually prescribed manner by smothering the old king. This meant that the king’s spirit could be transferred from the old king to the new one, as was demanded even if the successor was an assassin. A core idea of sacred kingship was retained, even if the principle of having the king chosen by the people close to the old king had been undermined. However, this thwarted the idea of ritual regicide as a reciprocal institution taking place as a voluntary sacrifice decided on by people who were part of the king’s sacred power. The king was no longer sacrificed in the name of society. This deviation changed the nature of sacred kingship. Ritual regicide gave way to succession that depended on the individual military
power and foreign alliances of pretenders to the throne.

Another deviation from normal succession by ritual regicide was the Ondonga case when someone who held the kingly insignia of office was able to oust a ruling king and install the person he favoured. In this case there was a contest, not between living persons in the kingdom, but rather between the different forms of “spirit power” appropriated. On the one hand there was the old king’s spirit that went into the new king at the moment of ritual regicide, on the other, there was the power of the masculine kingly insignia of office. We do not know whether appropriating the insignia became more common after the mid-1800s, but if it did, the change towards more violence in the king’s use of military power was paralleled by a similar change in the hierarchy of the “spiritual powers”: the power of the masculine insignia came to overrule the power of the spirit of the dead king. When the taboos preventing kings from leaving their realm was broken, which happened extensively towards the end of the 1800s, it resulted in the coming of “kings from abroad”, who as breakers of the taboo, needed stronger powers to back up their position than those who followed the rules. In Ondonga this provoked a destructive variant of uupule involving the death of a kinsperson as a substitute for the power-strengthening and fertility-related uupule ceremonies taking place between the king, the diviner and the Head Councillor. The uupule of a king from abroad reflected the change in the nature of the spiritual aspect of kingship from dealing with fertility power to exhibiting more violent undertones. This was paralleled by the increased use of violence in ruling “in real life”.

The Ombandja usurpers may have followed the ritual regulations, but this was not necessarily the case elsewhere. There are many accounts of usurpers who killed a ruling king in battle, or otherwise shed his blood, or killed the ruling king when he was still in full vigour. Killing a physically strong king in battle and shedding his blood were transgressions against the principles, or taboos, of sacred kingship. Succession in such conditions deviated very much from regicide, and should rather be understood as political assassination. Given the taboos on manslaughter and particularly on shedding the blood of kingly persons, it seems that the custom of violently assassinating a king in a contest for power was introduced at a relatively late date, recently enough for people to remember the days when it was not practised. Two analytically distinct processes that took place in Owanbo societies at almost the same time seem to
have been accompanied by a marked increase in violence in the institution of kingship: the political consolidation of kingship, and the devolution of its sacred aspect. Both happened in the era of “informal colonialism”. The latter was triggered by the introduction of firearms and the gradual dependency of kings on traders, and its outward manifestations were aggravated by the switch from ivory and ostrich feathers to cattle and slaves in exchanges with European traders. This process was reflected in the succession practices in Ombandja, Ongandjera and Ondonga.

The permutation of ritual regicide in Ombandja

As described above, the Mbandja had a tradition of ritual regicide in which the closest people to the ruling king chose his successor, and a slave ritually smothered the old king. This was a tradition that was in the living memory up until the 1930s. Pretenders to the throne who acted on their own initiative took their chance by seizing hold of the ailing king and strangling him. This was how Haikela came to power. He used sorcery that made him win over Nambinga. Thus there were two different ways in which ritual regicide was carried out – the recognised old way and the deviant way that did not have the backing of the people around the old king. Although extra-human powers were at play, and although Nambinga was suffocated, the deviant form of regicide closely resembled political assassination.

There was a third “proper” route to succession in Ombandja which did not involve regicide but introduced an “ideological innovation”, to use Joseph Miller’s (1976) term, which took over its original function. This characterised succession after King Haikela. The king was allowed to die a natural death, but at the same time the ritual transfer of his spirit was ensured. This deviation from the old tradition demanded a change in the theory of how the king’s spirit was transferred – and ritual regicide was no longer considered necessary. It survived in the form of a punishment for bad rule, but not as a mandatory measure to safeguard the transfer of kingship. Kudsk (1986) defined this alternative version which Frazer (1922) also identified, as “regicide for revenge”. Both types differed from outright political assassination in that they were carried out in a regulated way and involved moral judgement by society or the observance of an approved ritual.

I will now attempt to put these forms of succession in a time perspec-
tive. I suggest that there was a gradual change in the institution of kingship, and that the abolition of ritual regicide was a logical consequence of these changes. I will here follow Williams’ list of Ombandja kings introduced in Chapter three, which mentions eight kings before Haikela. He was the first to be given some approximate time of rule: he died in 1900. Up until then Ombandja kings had operated under difficult circumstances. Famine struck the country in Kalipi’s time, as well as in the time of his successor Nande. It persisted for three successive generations “until Mongela, the son of Naikuluta ascended the throne”. Ongandjera, the traditional enemy attacked Ombandja in the reign of Kalipi, taking advantage of the difficult conditions. Kalipi was able to defeat the Ngandjela, however. The Ngandjera prepared another attack, during the reign of the fourth king, Mongela, who died before it materialised. It was thus the task of his successor, Naunyango, to confront the Ngandjera, who nevertheless gained the upper hand. They destroyed the capital and Naunyango had to move his court to the interior of the country now severely weakened from famine and through having been the target of successive wars and raids over the years. The next king, Hohela, ruled only briefly (Williams 1991: 140) some time in the 1860s. This was the time in which the influence of external trade with Europeans began to unsettle the relations between rulers and their subjects in the whole of Owamboland. It was also a time of frequently reported succession strife within the kingly clan. Local informants did not reveal how each of these kings died, and we have only general accounts of the accepted route to succession: ritual regicide and its deviant form, the grabbing of power by a presumptive king.

We nevertheless have some specific information on the death of the two kings Nambinga and Haikela, who followed in succession after Hohela. Nambinga, the son of Shishwa was intent on consolidating power in his own hands and he was not averse to killing his rivals even though the shedding of kingly blood was a great taboo. He was determined to fight any budding rivals chasing his cousins and nephews out of the country, and he ordered the killing of his most dangerous rival Haikela. He did not succeed in this, however. Haikela was quick enough to escape to Uukwambi before Nambinga caught him. King Nuyoma of Uukwambi kept Haikela under his protection and refused to send him back, even though Nambinga requested him to do so. Instead, he helped Haikela to prepare for a military overthrow of Nambinga. In this Haikela succeeded. In the words of Williams: “Haikela arrived with the Kwambi warriors and went
straight to Nambinga’s capital, where they found him”. Haikela killed Nambinga and took over the kingdom. This happened during Nujoma’s reign in Uukwambi, in other words some time between 1862 and 1875. We know that Haikela was king when the Swiss botanist Hans Schinz met him in 1878, and that he ruled for long; until his death in the year 1900 (cf. Williams 1991: 140). These times were difficult in Ombandja in many ways. Not only had past famines and attacks by the Ngandjela weakened the country, but a new outer threat also emerged. Even before Haikela ascended the throne the Portuguese had begun to destabilise Ombandja, and their military campaigns continued during his reign and those of his successors. The independence of the kingdom was severely threatened and within a time-span of less than a decade. Ombandja was incorporated into the colonial realm of Portuguese Angola.

The slave who suffocated the Ombandja king in customary ritual regicide was of Bushman origin. I suggest that this signified that the early owners of the land participated in and accepted the transfer of kingly rule to the new king. When this role was taken over by someone who “grabbed power”, the Bushman participation and acceptance remained unverified. The usurper further lacked the consent of other people who were close to the king. However, although the council was by-passed in this fait accompli, it still co-operated with the new king, as evidenced in Lituku’s narrative. If we only consider the political aspect of the assassination, the consent of the council is difficult to understand. Why did the elders at court not protest? And why did the head wife agree to participate in the rituals following the assassination?

The usurper may have had some backing within the close circle of the king, which made the compliance understandable. It is also possible that his military might silenced any protests. A third explanation would be that there was a ritual need to transfer the spirit of the old king into the new one, and that the cooperation of the head wife and the men at court was necessary for the sake both of the old king and society. The usurper had breached the regulation of succession and by smothering the dying king transferred the spirit of kingship to his own body. This happened just before the old king gave away his last breath, and I suggest that the involvement of the head wife had something to do with this transfer. The dying king had to be freed from the spirit of kingship in order for it to be transferred to a new king, otherwise it would have run loose without proper embodiment.
When Haikela killed Nambinga in order to succeed him, his motive was the same as that of the “pretender to the throne” described by Iituku. The situation was different, however, because Nambinga was not old or ailing and indeed was at the height of his power. This made the succession more like a political assassination. We do not know in what manner Nambinga was killed. If Haikela killed him by suffocating him there was still an element of ritual regicide, and old beliefs were respected. If he shot or stabbed him, or otherwise caused bloodshed, it meant he had abandoned ritual regicide and had violated the taboo against letting the blood of a king flow. In either case, the religious motivation for regicide was rivalled by another motivation, the thirst for power. In the first case, political and ritual regicide had merged as Vaughan showed in the case of the Margi. In the second case political assassination had succeeded ritual regicide.

When regicide was abandoned in Haikela’s case, his hands and arms were stretched instead, which at least signified that the spirit of kingship did not go to the grave with the body of the old king. Nevertheless, the idea of transferring the king’s spirit to the new king through regicide was lost – regicide was rather a punishment, performed in revenge, and Haikela did not qualify. The Ongandjera kingly institution also underwent changes some time in the mid-1800s.

Changes in the kingly rule in Ongandjera

There is powerful evidence from Ongandjera to the effect that the practice of assassinating kings in a bloody manner was once looked upon as a heavy transgression, and that there had been a time when ritual regicide was the proper route to succession. According to Hango Nameja, it had taken place in Ongandjera at the time “when the people of the king did not kill each other” (Nameja ELC 1100: 1537). Nameja and Iijego witnessed of a significant shift in the way kings ruled at the time of Iileka j Uugwanga.

Iileka was a controversial king, renowned both for his expansive politics and for his violence. He was married to Nangombe, the daughter of Amwaama. According to Williams, it was Nangombe who held power, although the couple ruled jointly. Iileka was the son of Uuguanga, and he was also from a kingly clan but we do not know which one (cf. Williams 1991: 133). Although we have no dates for Iileka’s and Nangombe’s reign,
we know that it coincided with the time of the ninth and tenth Uukwambi rulers, Nuukata and Ilonga, some time before 1860. The eleventh king of Uukwambi, Tshikesho, ruled until 1860 according to Williams (1991: 191). Wars between kingdoms were usually pictured as small-scale campaigns fought over cattle and slaves, and there was usually no struggle over land. In the case of Iileka and Nango mbe, however, some territorial expansion was involved. According to Williams, they “defeated most Owa mbo kingdoms” and, as a result, acquired so many cattle that they established new cattle posts in the kingdoms they had defeated. They were the “first to use poison in warfare”, and they also “sanctified many places”, which Williams took as one explanation of their power. “By the time of their death, their kingdom was the most powerful of all; its wealth grew and its population increased as a result of the cattle and people captured during their war campaigns against other Owambo kingdoms” (Williams 1991: 133, 134, 191).

Williams portrays Iileka and Nango mbe as being very successful rulers. Not all of the informants poured praise on them, however. Hango Nameja and Abraham Iijego were quite critical of their rule, regretting the fact that Iileka “extinguished the fire of peace”, and concluded that “Iileka j Uuganga brought the crime of bloodshed into the fire” (Nameja and Iiyego ELC 1395: 1953). This apparently referred to the fact that Iileka was a conquering king, and conquest entailed bloodshed. “The fire of peace” could be understood as a metaphor for a society that was peaceful and did not use bloodshed and violence. In the end, Iileka’s rule did not cause disaster or the extinction of Ongandjera. On the contrary, it made the country prosper, but the price was that “peace was gone”: the “crime of bloodshed” became intrinsic. As noted above, Williams suggested that Iileka’s success may have been due to ritual acts carried out by Nango mbe and Iileka, who “sanctified many places”. She does not elaborate on what this may have signified, but it seems likely that Iileka used powerful fetishes, somewhat in the manner Miller described for Umbundu kingdoms:

Iileka began to fetch diviners from several kingdoms. Many diviners who carried a number of ohjia and magic buttons around their necks undertook interrogations about witches for him. They had ears that were curled up, and broad belts around their waists that protected them from spears and arrows all the way up to their heart, and they
had a case for their omolongo, ondjindja and omuvi arrows. They conducted war against many Owambo societies as well as against Hereroland. They conquered many large kingdoms and took many slaves. (Nameja, ELC 39: 88, my italics)

Iileka thus appropriated the esoteric heritage of a larger cultural area in order to enhance his military and political power. Winning battles by supernatural means was the normal thing, as mentioned previously. The outcome of raids and wars was commonly seen to be determined not by the actual battles themselves, but by a kind of shadow fight taking place in the previous night between the spirits that were rallied in support of each side⁸⁴. Nameja’s description above has a clearly dramatic and critical tone. When he talked about “curled up ears” and heavy ritual protection he was portraying these foreign diviners as frightful. Why was he critical? It may have been because as a man who had converted to Christianity, and who was writing for his Christian teacher, he wanted to underline his objection to the use of the “magic” that belonged to a pagan life⁸⁵. Another possibility, which I find more plausible, is that his awe reflected the commonly felt unease about foreign diviners in Ongandjera.

Joseph Miller (1976: 163–165) illustrates the risk involved when a ruler created new esoteric means that did not fit the existing ideology or that stretched the boundaries of tradition, in order to increase his own political power. He used as an example the Imbangala kilombo in Angola, in which a certain female leader, Temba Andumba, “a brave warrior queen” who “conquered many lands”, gained fame and power through introducing the ritual maji a samba. In this ritual Temba killed her infant child and used substances from it to anoint herself and thereby make her invulnerable (ibid.: 165). She expected her headmen to do the same. In a figurative sense, the ritual murder of her own child was a “common symbol of the enormity of the ruler over his people”, as Miller expresses it.

84. Miller showed that the idea that spiritual rather than military strength determined the outcome of a war was also widespread among neighbours of the Owambo in the north, the Mbundu societies in Angola (1972: 274).
85. The idea that Christian informers tell horror stories to discredit their pagan past, would, if taken seriously, discredit very much of what different Liljeblad informants said about past customs. It is hard to believe that they would have made up so much of what constituted a fairly coherent symbolic universe of Owambo pre-colonial societies.
This was a method that worked for some time, but which eventually fell on its own non-humaneness. At first it “terrified their opponents into submission but then failed to retain their loyalties because of its extreme break with prevailing Mbundu cosmology” (ibid.: 273).

According to Nameja, the major task of the diviners brought into the kingdom by Iileka was witch detection. Witch-hunts in Africa seem to have been prolific in situations in which a ruler felt his power was being threatened. Rowlands (1993: 298) described how witch killings increased in Benin along with other types of killing, as kings felt threatened by the European presence. There are parallels between this phenomenon and the tendency for witchcraft accusations to flare up in situations of paradigmatic or social change. This was established in the context of the late medieval upsurge in witch persecution in Europe. However, anthropologists are far from agreeing on such social links (see for instance Bruce Kapferer 1997).

It seems clear that witchcraft accusations in Owmambo societies increased with social disintegration in the latter part of the 1800s. Kings used them to eliminate presumptive political rivals or to gain access to land and cattle. They were a symptom of the incipient weakness of kingly power, and they contributed to the disintegrative processes that were set in motion by the introduction of firearms and foreign trade. Iileka’s esoteric innovation of bringing in diviners from abroad seems to have been used to strengthen the reigning king at the expense of his subjects. The change from ritual regicide to political assassination in Ongandjera apparently took place to coincide with the general increase in violence in ruling. Moreover, slave trade became common when Portuguese slave traders began to show up in Ongandjera and introduced firearms in the area. Louw (1967: 21) gave some more concrete evidence of how the Portuguese connection changed kingly rule in Ongandjera. In Iileka’s time, the number of slaves purchased by the Portuguese was considerable. Iileka sold members of the OvaHimba group in particular, and he received liquor in exchange. In doing this he acted on his own without consulting anyone. This was also a new feature of kingship. From then on there were frequent attempts to take kingship by force and in order to avoid the danger of assassination, the identity of a new king-elect was a well guarded secret.

What do we know about kingly deaths in Ongandjera after King Iileka?
Abraham Iiyego’s list of Ongandjera kings contains eighteen rulers, and it gives information on how some of them died. Four of them, all ruling after Nangombe and Iileka – Tshapaka tsha Tshaningua, Nakasua ka Shivute, a female ruler, Ekandjo and Iijambo j’Iileka – were considered to have been violently assassinated. How were they killed? Tshapaka tsa Tshaningua died a rather unusual death for a king: he was burned. This happened around the year 1862 (Iiyego, ELC 1399: 1956, 1957). His killing seems to have been a regicide of revenge, as with Kampaku in Ombalantu, but it did not follow the pattern of “proper succession”. Burning a king was symbolically a very different matter than ritually suffocating him and having his spirit move over to the new king. It is difficult to convey how Tshapaka’s kingly spirit could have been transferred to his successor in this form of regicide. It was definitely a deviation from the ritual custom. The female ruler Nakasua ka Shivute reigned after Ekandjo in 1859–1860 with her husband Ndjene (Emil Liljeblad, ELC 1397, 1957), and she too was killed in battle. Abraham Iiyego told the story of her ascent to the throne and her death, summarised below:

Nakasua had fled from Ongandjera to Uukwambi during the reign of Ekandjo. From there she sent her husband Ndjene to the Ondonga ruler Shikongo to ask him for help to oust King Ekandjo. Ndjene convinced Shikongo to send soldiers to help Nakasua. He conquered

86. Williams spells his name Iiyego. Her spellings are used henceforth.
87. He was the twelfth on Iiyego’s list of Ongandjera rulers.
88. This king was apparently the same as the king that Williams referred to as Amunyela gwa Tshaningwa and who reigned in Onganjdelta in 1858–1862 (Williams 1991: 192).
89. Oral tradition tells of Kampaku in Ombalantu, that it was his subjects who burned him to death, after which they established a republican form of government, or as Williams expresses it, “decided to turn back to their traditional democracy” (cf. McKittrick 1995: 49–51 and Williams 1991: 136). What happened was that the royal family still lived in the court, but were no longer given any political power. The king’s nephew, Amvula j’Eposii, was brought in from Ombandja and “became a royal religious leader” (Williams 1991: 136). One of Liljeblad’s informants, Sigueza s’Alueendo, who was obviously close to the royal family, still used the term king for this leader of rituals installed after Kampaku (Sigueza s’Alueendo, ELC 1336: 1876, 1877). Whether or not “kingship” was seen to have ended with Kampaku in Ombalantu seems to have been open to interpretation, depending on the position of the informant in relation to Kampaku’s lineage.
90. Such voluntary exile often meant that the person was biding his time trying to find an occasion on which to come back and reclaim the throne.
91. She did not ask for help from the Uukwambi king.
Ongandjera with the help of Shikongo. Ekandjo fled first to Ombalantu and then to Uukwambi. The Uukwambi king, Nuujoma u Heelu, ordered him to come to Uukwambi. Meanwhile, Nakasua was installed in Ongandjera as ruler. Now to revenge Nakasua for not turning to him for help while in exile in his country, Nuujoma ordered his men to put Ekandjo back in power in Ongandjera. With the help of Nuujoma, Ekandjo in turn ousted Nakasua. He chased her to the forest south of the country where he had her killed. After this he settled in his old court. (Iiyego, ELc 1399: 1956)

We do not know whether or not Nakasua was killed in the ritually prescribed way by suffocation, but in any case killing a ruler outside the realm was contrary to the taboo that forbade rulers from leaving their country. Some erosion of the laws of the land had thus set in. Ekandjo had ruled for only a day when his successor Tsheya tsUushona⁹² killed him — in what way we do not know. His death deviated from the proper procedures for ritual regicide, which had to take place when the king had become old and showed signs of weakness or senescence: Ekandjo did not even have a chance to show his ruling skills. Even if Tsheya had had him strangled, it would not have been ritual regicide as prescribed in Ongandjera, but would have come closer to political assassination. The next ruler, Iijambo j’Iileka, was also killed by his successor, Tsaniika tsa Natsilongo, but we do not know how.

Thus, to conclude, Tsapaka, Nakasua and Ekandjo were all killed violently in ways that went against custom. Tshapaka was burned, Nakasua’s death was a political murder and the consequence of a violent struggle for power between two members of the kingly clan and Ekandjo’s death was also a politically motivated murder by a competitor and lacked the features of ritual regicide. Whether Iyambo’s death was primarily ritual or political we do not know. All this evidence of the political assassination of kings in Ongandjera stems from the time after the reign of Iileka, which indicates the beginning of a violent period. This is in line with the general development of Owambo societies after the introduction of firearms in the late 1850s. Thus, the increase in violence was not caused by Iileka alone, occurring as it did in a climate of general deterioration in kingship. It began with a period of expansion and was followed by increased economic dependence on Europeans.

The significance of sacred kingship changed with the change in succession practices. Michael Rowlands (1993) suggested two alternative ways in which sacred kingship could change. One was that the original ideology of reciprocity remained: the king would become victim and would be ritually killed as a symbol of society, even though he possessed superior esoteric power. An increasing number of human sacrifices is demanded to enhance this esoteric power. Such a transformation took place in Benin just prior to Colonial rule as a consequence of European encroachment on local kingly power (Rowlands, 1993: 294). The other alternative is that the king would free himself from the rule of reciprocity and from his role as a sacrifice. In this case ritual regicide would be abolished and kingship would lose “its magical character” but “draws its transcendence from a pre-constituted religious system”. A particular ruler would abuse kingly prerogatives and use them to increase his own power. It seems that this is what happened in Ongandjera and Ombandja.

Ritual regicide apparently changed over time into political assassination in Owanbo kingdoms. What did this mean in religious and political terms? From the religious perspective, ritual regicide was seen as the sacrifice of the king for the sake of kingship. Political assassination carried no sacrificial dimension, although new ritual rules were created to make the transfer of the spirit take place as custom demanded. The form of the ritual was retained to some extent, but the significance changed. From the political perspective, ritual regicide was a regulated form of succession, a political option in which the power to choose an heir rested with the dying king’s wife and the leading councillors he had chosen. It kept the powers in “conservative” hands, and gave less prominence to military might. Political assassination, again, bypassed the body of king makers, and succession was determined by the military might of an individual aspirant to the throne. When the king “came from abroad” his foreign allies also became involved in the game of king making.

What do the sources reveal of the development of these two “traditions” in Ombandja and Ongandjera? The obligatory reciprocity between the power holder and local population groups, which was part of a ritually created sacredness in kings, seemed to vanish after the mid-1800s, when the political currency changed. Military force and alliances determined the outcome of succession, which no longer followed set rules in the form of ritual. Because the principle of reciprocity behind sacred
kingship and regicide was lost, the ritual residue could not keep the institution of kingship from becoming more autarchic towards the end of the 1800s. A narrative from Ondonga traces such a shift in ideology to the time of Nangolo dh’Amutenya, the man who consolidated kingship there. According to this witness, the non-reciprocal form of rule was intrinsic in the consolidation of kingly power.

**Early changes in the manner of ruling in Ondonga**

According to Abraham Amweelo (ELC 64: 141, 142), a shift in the manner of ruling in Ondonga came about with Nangolo dhAmutenya, which was similar to that which took place in Ongandjera in the reign of King Iileka. Like Iileka, Nangolo was a ruler renowned for his strength and for unifying the country under his power. This is how Amweelo described how killing became part of kingship in Ondonga. The narrative carries particular weight because it was originally told by people who were dead by the time Amweelo transmitted it, and what is more, these people had lived in the time of Nangolo dh’Amutenya.

During the time of Naanda, the son of Mutati, of Kajone and of Nembungu, the son of Mutundu, neither kings nor subjects killed human beings. In the old times people died only of illness. In the old times manslaughter was held to be a great taboo; that is why in the early days there were no stories about manslaughter. The killing of human beings began in the days of King Nangolo dh’Amutenya. In his youth Nangolo was brought up in the court of King Nembungu Amutundu, who was his maternal uncle. One day when he was with his uncle, Nangolo quarrelled with a non-kingly person at court and the men ended up yelling at each other. Nangolo was angered by this. One day when he was walking about far away from court with the man with whom he had quarrelled, Nangolo killed that man of common descent. When the people heard that Nangolo had killed a man they were bewildered and asked themselves: “Where have you heard that a human being would wittingly have been killed?” All were astounded [at what had happened]. When King Nembungu heard about this he called upon the young man. (ELC 64: 141,142)

What follows is a mocking and inverted scolding by Nangolo’s uncle, the king, and a fatal exhortation:
The young man went to see his uncle and the uncle began to flatter Nangolo prising him by names: “Niindjembe’s Asimbala of Magundu, the people seem to scold you and mock you. There is also the old man Nefundja. He also mocks you. Go and kill him too”. (ELC 64: 141, 142)

The irony in Nembungu’s talk escaped Nangolo.

The young man went away in a happy mood. Before many days had passed he had killed the old man Nefundja. When the king heard that Nefundja had been killed he called upon Nangolo once more. (ELC 64: 141, 142)

Too late it dawns upon Nembungu that Nangolo had understood his message wrong. Now he was in big trouble because the source of his power had disappeared.

When Nangolo arrived at his uncle’s court, the uncle asked him “Wherever have we heard of anyone killing a man?” and he added “Now that you have killed Nefundja, with whom will you be in the kingdom? And he continued; “People are horrified to hear that you have killed Nefundja who is the root of the country. Who will now keep the country for you?” This is how the uncle scolded Nefundja and accused him, because Nefundja, who had been killed, was the root of the country. Before long Nembungu died, because his power was in Nefundja whom Nangolo had killed. When Nembungu died, Nangolo, the son of Amutenya got the kingdom. He ruled it for many years until his death. (Abraham Amweelo ELC 64: 140, 141, my italics)

There are many obscure details worth discussing in this narrative. It is presented as a true story, but it could also be a “teaching tale” that describes structural change in ruling, using Nembungu and Nangolo as fictive personages in the plot. We do not really know why Nembungu took to this inverted method to teach his nephew. It did not have the intended result. Instead, Nangolo misunderstood the lesson and killed Nefundja, and this became the bane of Nembungu’s life. Killing Nefundja broke the rules since he was the “root of the country”: he was the one who “kept the country for the king”, and in whom the power of Nembungu lay. Exactly what this meant is not revealed. Nefundja might have been Nembungu’s Head Councillor or his diviner, or someone else who
was part of his sacred status. He might also have represented the Ondonga “owners of the land”, either the Bushmen or the kings of the Snake clan. Here the configuration in the Kongo kingdom in the 1600s as described by Kajsa Ekholm comes to mind. The king’s rule in those times was dependent on the Kitomi, a religious head, representing the spirits of the land. When the Kitomi was neglected the rule of the kings became non-reciprocal and more violent, and dependent on human sacrifice and fetishes. Amweelo’s account suggests that a substantial part of Nembungu’s invisible, spiritual and sacred power came from Nefundja. Nefundja’s death became the bane of Nembungu’s life. Something in the kingship institution was destroyed in the process, but kingship in itself was not abolished; it rather changed.

Nangolo, the killer, just like King Iileka in Ongandjera, did not fare badly in the process. Nangolo took power and ruled for a long time. He is renowned for having been the one to unify the ward heads of the kingly clan under his own rule (cf. Williams 1991). I suggest that the story of Nembungu, Nangola and Nefundja is a description, realistic or symbolic, of the change of rule in Ondonga. Earlier it had been reciprocal in form, incorporating a “social contract” that retained the notion of the king as a sacrifice for kingship. Manslaughter was forbidden, and the king had a certain relation to the spirits of the land. Whatever Nefundja stood for in person, the power emanating from him that had been pooled into kingship was now lost. The killing of the common man and of Nefundja, considered as gross offences, conveyed a similar message: the king used to have to respect human life and to pay homage to the powers that his subjects represented, but that had changed.

The long and successful reign of Nangolo was indicative that new kingship rules had set in. His rule was as contradictory as that of King Iileka in Ongandjera. In both cases the introduction of violence took centre stage. The nature of kingship changed in Ondonga with Nangolo. From his reign onwards new powers sustained the king just as in Ongandjera in Iileka’s time. What were these powers in the Ondonga case? Amweelo’s narrative indicates that transgressing the taboo of manslaughter elevated Nangolo and gave him, in the eyes of the people, a position of favour with Kalunga, the Great Spirit. This is how Amweelo described the awe that people felt in front of King Nangolo and the power he was thought to possess:
But the day of his death was a day of horror. The whole world shook, all people, everyone who was there then, whether standing, sitting or lying down, all shook. Likewise all the trees and bushes shook and bent, all the trees were bowed down because of this tremble. The sky also thundered, just like a thunderstorm. Everyone was struck by fear. They were so afraid and they trembled, for such thunder from the sky and tremors in of the earth had never been seen before in the world. Not from the beginning of the world had such thunder been seen. This is how the death of King Nangolo surprised the world. Those who lived during that time spoke about it saying: Nangolo was a great man. He was respected everywhere, and he was before all other kings. His death was heard in all kingdoms, it was heard because of the thunder in the sky and the tremble of the earth. This is why the people in Ondonga and the other kingdoms respected the death of King Nangolo. They even said “King Nangolo was a man of God, he was someone God loved.” This is how they spoke, because of his death that could be heard everywhere. This is how the story about the death of King Nangolo was told, and is told still this very day. We heard it from the old ones. (Amweelo ELC 64: 143, 144)

Nangolo became a favourite of God in the eyes of the people because of the thunderstorm and the earthquake at his death, which seemed to have upset the whole of creation. He had overturned the rules of the land and committed manslaughter, and he had got away with it. He had severed the relationship with a spiritual authority, the elder Nefundja, and despite it all he stayed in power and lived to an old age. I suggest that the thunder and earthquake served to mirror the awesomeness in the powers that Nangolo now possessed: they were beyond reciprocity. The king had become a sacred monster and, as de Heusch claimed, kingship now operated on the basis of a supernatural power that was violent and ambivalent in nature. Both Nembungu and Nangolo were sacred kings, but the powers that sustained their sacredness had a different origin.

The monstrous and dangerous quality of Nangolo as a king came to the fore at a time in which society was already undergoing substantial structural change. This was paralleled by a change in the significance of the sacredness of kings. The awesomeness of a sacred king now overshadowed his nurturing aspects. The force that was assigned to Nangolo because of the drama nature played out at his death conforms with the “power of a dangerous nature spirit” that de Heusch spoke of as being an essential aspect of sacred kingship. He first committed manslaugh-
ter, and by doing so broke a central taboo. He then killed the “root of the country” thereby draining the powers of King Nembungu. Behind this manifestation of the force of nature, I suggest, lay the conditions in which Nangolo took power – a break in the relations with Nefundja. This transgression nevertheless made Nangolo into a successful but feared “sacred monster” of a king, in the way de Heusch would have it. It was sacred kingship all right, but in a new form, one that rose above mutual dependency on powers of the kind Nefundja represented.
Part V

CONCLUSIONS
Summary and conclusions

Summary of the research process

This study has illuminated aspects of the constitution of and changes in kingship in the traditions of the Owa mbo of Northern Namibia. It focussed on a hitherto unexplored dimension of kingly power in the polities in question, the sacred aspect, and sought to understand in what ways this was part of and interlinked with the ruler’s political power, and how it changed over time. Outside the Owa mbo orbit the theme of sacred kingship has been under debate for more than a hundred years, ever since Frazer’s Golden Bough brought it to the centre of anthropological discussion. The debate has meandered between the recognition and denial of the phenomenon. A similar pattern is discernible in the ways in which sacred kingship in Owa mbo societies have been dealt with; at different times its existence has been denied or affirmed by scholars. Intellectuals with an Owa mbo background such as Frieda Williams, Hans Namuhuya and Kleopas Dumeni, have never shown any doubt about the sacred aspect of Owa mbo kings.

Owa mbo kings were held to be responsible for the fertility of the “land, cattle and people”. They were surrounded by taboos that isolated them both from their subjects and from the world outside their realm. They were held to host a potent and dangerous but ambivalent power. They could not be touched, but if they chose to touch someone it was a great blessing. They were, according to tradition, to be killed ritually by being suffocated with a soft sheepskin when they showed signs of weakness and old age. This act of regicide was decided upon in a small circle of people closest to the king. In Ongandjera it was the king-elect who strangled the old king in order to let his breath or spirit enter his own body. A king would therefore know that he would be suffocated one day when he was old, and this was part of the regulated succession. These principles of Owa mbo kingship institution followed the pattern Frazer identified. These kings were also ambivalently associated with twinship. According to the myth their ancestors were the product of an incestu-
ous union and they were associated with dangerous animals of the wild. Kings from abroad in particular were forced in their installation ritual to break core taboos of society related to the respect of human life and ordered procreation. In these respects they fitted de Heusche’s model of sacred kings as transgressors of norms.

What the sacredness really consisted of and how it was produced, and what consequences it had for king and society, have not earlier been analysed systematically. One of the main themes of this study was; “how kings are made”, or the creation of a sacred king through ritual. The other main theme was “how kingship changes”, and through an analysis of ritual and succession practices two separate developments were traced. The first concerned the strengthening of kingship through the appropriation of rituals related to fertility, and the second concerned changes in the ideology of sacred kingship, and the political and economic changes that went hand in hand with this ideological change. The discussion covers the rise of sacred kingship, which strengthened and consolidated centralised power, and the relative weakening and distortion of kingship as a consequence of the arrival of European traders. These two processes took place, one after the other, within a relatively short time-span.

The ideology and manifestations of Owa mbo sacred kingship display the core traits that Frazer identified: there was a ruler whose responsibility for fertility and well-being in his realm was paramount, whose physical body was a symbol of society's well-being in the particular sense that when he became old or weak he had to die. The taboos and restrictions surrounding such kings were understood as part of his sacredness, from which society needed to be protected and for the sake of which the king too had to be protected from society. Ritual regicide was used to counter the symbolic association between the weakening of the kingly body and the weakening of kingship. It facilitated the ordered transfer of the king’s spirit to his successor. De Heusche, building largely on the Frazerian view of sacred kingship, emphasised the transgressive aspect of the sacredness in kings, although in his own work he recognised that not only were kings thought of as dangerous leopards of the wild, the peaceful pangolin that harmed no one was also a border-crossing metaphor for kingship in African traditions. He emphasised, in my view exaggerated, the notion that sacred kings acquired their power and rose above society through their violent norm-breaking actions. The rules that they broke concerned the proper regulation of human fertility and the proper ordering of na-
ture and clan relations. They also concerned the sanctity of human life and the separation of society from nature, the “wilderness”.

According to de Heusch, myths portrayed proto-rulers in sacred kingdoms as anomalous creatures, born out of incest, or twins, who killed to acquire power, and who were able to change their outer shape into that of a dangerous beast of the forest. Frazer emphasised the sacrificial nature of the sacred king: his physical body had to be sacrificed for the sake of kingship, which gave society its prosperity. De Heusch added the monstrous aspect: the king had to become a monster, if in no other way through the feats that he had to perform in his installation ritual. This liminality in the form of monstrosity gave him his power, and constituted his sacredness: it was on account of this that he had to be killed. The narratives about Owa mbo kings feature both aspects, but the monstrous one is absent from the very earliest descriptions of kingship. This triggered my interest in charting more thoroughly how sacredness was produced in kings and in analysing the differences in the way in which sacred kingship was conveyed during different time-spans.

Joseph Miller’s study on the creation of Umbundu kingship provided a third perspective on sacred kingship, one in which the ownership of power objects or fetishes takes centre stage. Although the Owa mbo narratives are rather secretive about power objects and give only glimpses of what they were and how they worked, such objects were fairly prominent in inaugural rituals and in the daily activities of the king. To a certain extent the Owa mbo kings were also dependent on them for their rule. They constituted a substantial aspect of the sacredness, even though the shortcomings in the data do not allow for conclusions resembling those Miller drew about the Umbundu: he found that the struggle for kingship had at one time been a struggle between the owners of powerful fetishes and adjacent ritual, gradually evolving into political titles such as Kinguri, Lunga and Ngola.

The ideas of Frazer, de Heusch and Miller converge regarding the emergence of kingship. Although these authors approached the theme from different perspectives, all three see kingship as having been created through the appropriation of power of a spiritual kind. In the case of Owa mbo kings this power was formulated as “sacredness”, while in the Umbundu past it was couched in “a political title” with “potent fetishes and rituals” attached to it. These concepts are closer than they might first seem. The Owa mbo kingdoms were neighbours of the Umbundu, and in
their migratory past the Owa mbo had come into contact with groups from this population cluster. This made it all the more relevant to consider influences from those quarters on Owa mbo kingship.

In an earlier study I concluded that Owa mbo kings were considered sacred, but exactly what that meant was not so clear. By analysing myths, king lists, religious beliefs, regicide, installation rituals and rituals related to fertility I have tried to come closer to an understanding of the Owa mbo view of kingly sacredness. I have addressed questions concerning the nature, emergence and “religious position” of that institution. Was Owa mbo kingship more like the reciprocal sacrificial institution that Frazer described, or did the king’s sacredness essentially rest on the inversion of norms and a monstrous appearance as de Heusch would have it? What role did fetishes play in the constitution of political power, and were they, as Miller claimed for the Umbundu, a constitutive aspect, the core of kingly power? How did they relate to the king’s sacred status? Did the ideology of sacred kingship change over time?

Another pertinent question concerned how sacred kingship was related to other aspects of Owa mbo religion. The way this religion had been conveyed in studies or described by missionaries made no allowance for sacred kings. Kings seemed, at the outset, to stand quite apart from religion: this is not unique in descriptions of Sub-Saharan African cultures. I have devoted a fair number of pages to discussing the religious context in order to find out where kings fitted in. Myths illuminate religion and cosmology, but they are useful in other ways too. Cosmological myths and myths of origin reflect society’s view of rulers and its identity as a political body. In this context they are a manifestation of how the Owa mbo traditions preferred to present their early history, and they also served in the formulations of kingship in that they contributed to the constitution of a certain totality of ideas of sacred kings. Kingly genealogies could be seen as a set of statements of how oral tradition constructed kingship, and they contributed to the creation of its image. It makes a difference which kings are left out, where the list begins, and how identities in terms of clan and gender are manipulated. Thus, although myths and king lists are presented in the context of “setting the stage” for the analysis of kingship, they also reveal a lot about how kingship was created.

Kingship was consolidated relatively late – in the early and mid-1800s in Uukwanyama and Ondonga with the kings Haimbili and Nangolo. It nevertheless existed in some form of kingship before them: Haimbili
was the eighth Uukwanyama king and Nangolo the fifth Ondonga king in Williams’ lists. Even without total territorial control or complete independence from foreign rulers, a reasonably well worked out ideology of kingship was established before Haimbili and Nangolo. I decided to study how the “sacred” or “religious” aspect was incorporated into the Owmambo kingly institution in rituals, as remembered in oral tradition and transmitted by a later generation. I wanted to trace the source of the powers of a supernatural kind that were “infused” into a king through ritual and other means. What further whetted my appetite was that there seemed to be a number of concealed dimensions in the constitution of kingly sacredness. Going beyond hegemonic explanations became one of my study aims.

It seemed logical to begin my research on how sacredness was created in kings by looking at narratives on installation rituals, which were available for Ondonga, Ongandjera and Ombandja. Those from Ongandjera and Ombandja described ritual regicide and burial as a prelude to the initiation rituals proper. In fact these different procedures partly overlapped. There were no descriptions of ritual regicide in Ondonga, but missionary witness from as late as the beginning of the 1900s suggests that it was once carried out there too. The installation ritual in Ongandjera and Ombandja followed basically the same pattern as in Ondonga, although there was emphasis in Ongandjera on the king’s re-marriage with a new head wife and on the establishment of peaceful relations with neighbouring kingdoms. Ombandja initiation again, centred a great deal around the sacrifice of an ombambi antelope, a theme that would deserve study in itself. Abisai Eelu, one of the informants, gave two separate versions of Ondonga kingly initiation, one for the “common case” and one for “kings who came from abroad”. Both are rich and detailed and, most importantly, reveal secret aspects of the installation. The narratives provide information on the purpose and end result of the ritual: it was to make the king sacred. They also reveal that there was a quite distinct spatial and sequential pattern in Ondonga case that lent itself to symbolic interpretation. It was for these reasons that I chose to focus on the Ondonga initiation ritual proper.

After reading the studies of Hertz (1960), Metcalf and Huntington (1991) and also those of Bloch (1986) and Hasu (1999), on burial and ritual re-construction, I was convinced that in order to understand the “construction” of a sacred king, one would also need to deal with his “de-
conclusion”. Narratives from Ombandja and Ongandjera provided details about kingly burial and about the de-construction of the old king. I used them for analysing how the old king was “un-made”, assuming here a broad common tradition with variations in the different kingdoms. Inspired by the above scholars I endeavoured to analyse the symbolical connotations, both explicit and implicit, the Owambo placed on different parts of the dead king’s body, and how these related to different parts of his spirit.

My greatest surprise came when I began to analyse rituals related to fertility in order to give an additional perspective on sacred kings beyond that of the installation rituals. What was meant to be a footnote in my text became one of the essential elements of my argument. This warranted a re-formulation of my objectives. I began by studying the “making of kings” in ritual, but then expanded the scope to encompass the “making of kingship” too, as exemplified in the analysis of how certain rituals were taken over by kings or, alternatively, scaled down or abolished. The earlier more benevolent and peaceful aspect of Owambo kingship seems to have receded towards the end of the 1800s, and the more transgressive and violent side became more prominent. I suggest that this process also included a change in the nature of sacred kingship and in the way succession took place.

A tricky issue throughout the analysis was to establish for what periods the rituals were valid. I have used many approaches, such as finding an association with rulers whose reigning period was known approximately, and listening to what the narratives otherwise conveyed about sequences and times. The problem derived from the sources: Liljeblad’s informants were not asked to assign times to their descriptions. The fact that they did remember the circumcision ritual so well in the 1930s even though it had been abolished about fifty years earlier, gave me the courage to suggest that other aspects of the traditions they described could also pertain to times before German colonial overtake in 1884. The variations in fertility-related rituals were therefore attributed to the different periods when the material allowed.

The relatively late consolidation of kingship again gave me the courage to suggest that kingly appropriations of ritual could be considered part of this process. Kings were at the height of their power immediately before and after European traders entered the area. Their prosperity increased through trade in ivory and ostrich feathers, but it was not long
before these goods were depleted and cattle and slaves took their place. Economic dependence on the traders ended the prosperous era of Owa-
mbo kingship. The king’s relationship with his subjects changed, becoming more predatory and less reciprocal. The short economic boom and the swift change to economic dependence had repercussions not only on the internal politics, but also on how “sacred kingship” was carried out in practice. The king was still sacred, but to an increasing degree he was no longer able to carry out his responsibilities in terms of making the land prosper and safeguarding “fertility”, understood in the broad sense of “well-being”.

Autarchic tendencies were observed in colonial times by missionaries and other “outsiders”. They tended to link sacred kingship with autarchy, despotism and a disregard for the good of the subjects. A comparison of early observations on kingship and those from the end of the 1800s suggests, however, that there was a change both in the ways in which the king ruled and in the way sacredness was understood. Under the heading the “devolution of sacred kingship” I addressed the issue of change in the kingship institution in the latter half of the 1800s. I re-considered the work of Kajsa Ekholm (1972, 1985, 1991) and Michael Rowlands (1993) on the emergence of sacred kingship and, like de Heusch (1982b) suggest that it was the result of a need to legitimise political power beyond the level of kin-group structures. To what extent fetishes originally carried the power that gave kings their sacred power, as was the case in the Umbundu kingdoms, remains an open question. Sources from Ongandjera indicate that foreign diviners with fetishes were brought in to strengthen the esoteric power the king already had through the ancestors of his kingly clan and through the kingly installation ceremonies.

Kajsa Ekholm discussed a form of sacred kingship in the Kongo that she understood as emanating from the weakening of kingly power after the encounter with Europeans, and in which fetishes played a decisive role. She also indicated, however, that there had been a double hierarchy in which the kingly political power-pyramid was matched by and dependent on a pyramid of spiritual power-holders headed by the kitomi. When kings began to disregard the fact that the spiritual locus of their power lay with the kitomi, a certain measure of reciprocity was lost, and they became more violent towards their subjects. This aspect of political change is more interesting for the Owambo case than Ekholm’s claim that “sacred kingship” and kingly sacrifice were consequences of colonialism.
Rowlands addressed the question of violence among sacred kings in Benin, who conducted massive human sacrifices in early colonial times in order to strengthen their sacred power. Like Ekholm, he argued in favour of an intimate relation between colonialism and sacred kingship. In the face of an all-powerful colonial master the Benin king retreated from his role of a political actor into the role of a sacrifice with the intent to retain the sacredness of kingship in this way. Having no power to resolve the situation by political means, he sought to restore the power of his office by adhering to ritual prescriptions and isolating himself in purity within his court. Extensive human sacrifices carried out both within and beyond ritual was part of this development. Sacredness and monstrosity went together, the one being dependent on the other. I suggest that what Rowlands described was not really the birth of sacred kingship, but was rather one way in which it may have developed in the face of the external pressure of the colonial occupation and diminishing political power. He suggested that the development of Benin kingship was one of two main alternatives for the development of kingship at the colonial overtake. The other was that the sacred king let go of his role as sacrifice but retained his political power, keeping his ritual prerogatives but using them in a new way, which in turn made it possible to hoard power in new ways. This was what happened with Owa mbo kingship towards the end of the 1800s. In the following I shall offer my conclusions regarding the different themes that emerged in my study.

Central themes

Writing kingship through myths and king lists

When the body of myth is considered as a totality, a number of contradictions emerge that reveal muted aspects of the early stages of kingship. This was especially prominent in Ongandjera oral tradition. One example related evidence that the creation of kingship was a pact between the Bushmen and Niilwa. Many narratives place Bushmen entirely outside the formation of Ongandjera society, and similarly exclude them in Ondonga. Although sources verify the existence of the Snake clan as an early kingly clan and recognised the early co-operation between Bushmen and the Ondonga, both Snake clan kings and Bushmen were not referred to in Ondonga myths and king lists.
An ambivalent relation between kings and fire also emerged. According to most sources fire emanated from the kingdoms in the north. In most oral traditions it is linked with the life of the king and with society. One Ongandjera myth, however, suggests that Bushmen appropriated the sacred fire in ancient times—a link that was almost forgotten in oral tradition. It could only be detected by reading between the lines of myth and through the practice of having Bushmen ritual officers tend the sacred fire at kingly courts. The myths also tended to “forget” female rulers. The gender of early mythical heroes is most often given as male, and only rarely as female. It was the same trend in the myths: the female identity of any early heroes was often ignored. The “early owners of the land” also tended to be forgotten in the king lists, the most obvious case being that of the Snake clan in Ondonga. One way of avoiding mention of early rulers from the Snake clan was to start “late”, with the first ruler of the clan in power. The reverse tendency also occurred sometimes in that early heroes who were identifiable as leaders of small groups but were not really kings were included in the lists, thereby giving an illusion that the history of kingship was older and more “prestigious” than was really the case. Short-lived or unpopular kings were omitted from the lists, for the same reasons.

Kings and spirits

The information available on Owa mbo beliefs does go a little way in assigning the king a place in the religious context, but there are still many unresolved enigmas. Aarni’s scheme (1982: 84) clearly assigns the king a place in the hierarchy of this world, and he also gives kingly ancestors a place in the world of the beyond. He further suggests that the identification of the king with fire was a late construct: fire stands above the king in his hierarchy of this world. “Taboos”, too, stand above kings, and this indicates that the ideology of the Owa mbo once had no room for autarchic kings—they were subordinate to spiritually sanctioned rules formulated as taboos. “Spirits and powers” are placed above the spirits of kingly ancestors in the “otherworldly” hierarchy, and this suggests that kings were subordinate to a number of powers in the spiritual hierarchy. Other sources support the interpretations of Aarni in this regard.

“Spirits”, and especially “ancestor spirits”, are not easily placed in distinct categories, and this makes it complicated to assign the sacred king
a place among them. Nevertheless, a certain pattern emerged. Ancestor spirits, aathithi, were usually spoken of in the plural, and the term included spirits of many kinds. Diverse spirits merged in a collective entity referred to as aathithi which incorporated not only clan-ancestor spirits, but also those that were related to an activity. Aathithi could also be related to a place, often a place of action, like the spirits of the salt pans. There were also nature spirits that were clearly not linked to a person; like the spirits of floodwater and spirits in trees struck by lightning. It was not always possible to draw a line between nature spirits and human spirits. For instance, the much-feared spirits of the forest, sometimes assigned to wild animals, were mastered by the Bushmen, and it is not impossible that the Owa mbo feared the spirits of the Bushmen more than those of wild animals. The source of spirits in amulets and other power-producing entities such as unguents and herbs were not usually traceable further than to the owner: they constituted a very secret part of Owa mbo traditional beliefs.

Different forms of spirit manifestation were related to each other. Kalunga, for instance, as a High God or Great Spirit, was sometimes the source of power addressed by amulets, while charcoal was understood as a “Great Kalunga”. In the former is a possible remnant of the Lunga political title of the Umbundu, the amulets belonging to the title while in the latter case the word “Kalunga” was apparently used as a general term for the “spiritual power” that charcoal was understood to possess.

The king’s “spirit” understood here as his sacredness, coexisted with all of these spiritual powers, but exactly how it related to them was never outright spelled out: it had to be deduced from the sources available. When I tried to do that, Kalunga posed the first problem. As long as the word is understood in the “missionary sense”, the relation is clear; Kalunga stood above kings, their ancestors and all spiritual agents and powers in this world and that of the beyond. When the net was cast a little wider, however, to incorporate the notions of Kalunga as a title-holder, or a way of addressing people in awe, and especially taking into account the fact that certain kings north of Owa mbo land were called Ka lunga kaNangombe, in Owa mbo a term for the God of the Ancestors, the problems began to mount. Was Kalunga a king or a God?

These scattered hints at a different sense of the term shatter the neat scheme Aarni presented, and brought Kalunga down to the level of kings. This was a world in which it was hard to enter, and more research is re-
quired. Kalunga as a title-holding king takes us to where Frieda Williams stopped her inquiry in her study of 1988. By continuing on from here subsequent research may reveal whether or not the Owa mbo Kalunga term was the remnant and distortion of the former title of a king, one that was attached to some potent fetish. More research is also needed to clarify how Kalunga later came to signify a Great Spirit with the characteristics of an absent High God.

Owa mbo religious ideas encompass in the this-worldly scene various actors who were thought to be able to influence, appropriate and “own” the spirits of the beyond. These included diviners, sorcerers, witches, circumcised men, and also ordinary people. Every human being had the elements of a spirit or a “soul”, but some had more power than others. A comparison of the installation rituals at the termitary of kings and master diviners shows that the role of the king in this power field was above that of diviners. The similarities between the two rituals also make it warranted to claim that kings used powers analogous to those of diviners. More profound consideration of the relations between diviners and kings would require a separate study, but from the material at hand it could be concluded that, even though kings were above diviners, the latter had considerable power, and the kings were dependent on them in their installation rituals and for protection. Cattle were not usually included in the list of spiritual “agents”, but they played a major, although neglected, role in the Owa mbo spiritual world. Sacred cattle, which were thought to host “the spirit” of their masters, deserve a place in Aarni’s scheme and this is another theme that deserves further study.

The hero tale of Mpambaisita, the man who was born from an egg and who “made himself”, is also indicative of how kingship emerged and of its connection with Kalunga. The story, re-told in many versions, tells of a man without a family, with no kin ties who became king. He was endowed with extra-human capacities and was protected by a Bird spirit. In this respect, the story illustrates de Heusch’s tenet (1982b) that the legitimacy of a leader from outside the kin group rested on the appropriation of supernatural powers. Mpambaisita had allies among the animals of the wild, which also indicates the king’s dependence on the spirits of nature. The story is about the power contest between Mpambaisita and his father, or Kalunga. Kalunga finally admits that Mpambaisita is his equal in power and Mpambaisita becomes king. This tale could be interpreted
in different ways depending on how Kalunga is understood. If he is considered a supreme deity or spirit, the acknowledgment of Mpambaisita as his equal signifies that the future king had spiritual capacities of a supreme kind. He was a sacred king, spiritually as powerful as the Great Spirit, Kalunga. If, again, the Mbundu connection is recognised, and the fact that previous kings among the neighbours to the north had carried titles such as Wambu Kalunga and Kalunga kaNangombe, Mpambaisita’s fight with Kalunga could be understood as a contest for kingship between the holders of two different titles. In this case too, the story conveys the primacy of spiritual power, and supports de Heusch’s idea of what legitimates kingship – assumed power of a spiritual kind.

The spirits in the king

A major argument put forward by E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1948) in his critique of Frazer’s idea of divine kings (1922) concerned the relation between the king’s office and his individual person. He claimed that the spirit of the king was separate from the spirit of the office, or kingship itself, which was not how the Owa mbo understood their sacred kings. The very body of the king, and the different parts of it, carried the power of kingship – his physical body expressed his spiritual aspects in local understanding.

The Owa mbo division of a person’s spirit into ombepo, omutima and omujeno, later also omuzizimba, did not easily fit in with what we know about the manipulation of the king’s spirit(s) after death. Only ombepo – the spirit in the breath – could be identified as the part of the old king that had to be captured and transferred into the new one. We know nothing of the part of the spirit that remained in his hands. However, the emergence of omuzizimba, a person’s shadow, as a new concept encompassing his outer manifestations including his valued belongings, could be understood as a change in the way the individual was understood. It signals greater vulnerability to outside influence, since belongings and other detachable components of a person could be used to bewitch him. Taking into consideration that accusations of witchcraft became more prominent after contact with Europeans had been established, it is likely that its emergence was related to the changes in custom that ensued from that encounter.
Death, regicide and the un-making of kings

According to observations from the time when the missionaries had entered Owamboland, witchcraft as the cause of death appears as a central tenet in Owambo religion. Local informants gave a much more comprehensive account of the causes of death, and the different conceptions were not necessarily consistent. Tradition did recognise that death was every man’s fate and that incurable diseases were the cause of death, but it could also be the result of having been “eaten”. “Eating a person” was what sorcerers could do deliberately, and what witches did to someone after having become the medium of a malevolent ancestor spirit.

Towards the end of the 1800s there was great concern that the life of the king was being threatened by sorcery and witchcraft. This is paradoxical given that kings were supposed to leave their earthly remains before they died a natural death – by being suffocated with a soft sheepskin through proper ritual regicide. What was the reason for the concern with the death of an individual king when custom had regulated it, and when it was a prerequisite for the perpetuation of kingship? One explanation could lie in the changing times: when ritual regicide was no longer the rule, the spiritual field was open for the use and abuse of power objects of different kinds. The Ondo nga usurpation of kingship through the appropriation of the kingly insignia, and the methods adopted by a king “who came from abroad” to acquire power, resembled the work of a sorcerer.

Was the Owambo sacred king a “Big Sorcerer”, as kings were portrayed in several other African traditions. How did his sorcery skills relate to the power of diviners? The use of potent fetishes suggests a close affinity between sorcerers and kings. Kings could also be likened to diviners in the sense that both gained esoteric power in their installation. The expedition to a termitary mound was part of the initiation of both king and diviner in Ondonga, thereby infusing the same mysterious termitary spirit, related to female fertility, in both. It is also relevant that the initiation of the onamunganga in Ongandjera was, in Liljeblad’s words, “equivalent” to that of the king. Nevertheless, it was the king, not the diviner, who “got on top” signalling that he mastered the termitary more effectively.

The regicide and burial of the king revealed a great deal about how his spirit was thought of. The unambiguous purpose behind ritual regicide, as described for Ombandja and Ongandjera, was to safeguard the pas-
sage of the old king’s spirit into the new one. In reality the “proper way of succession”, or ritual regicide, was not always followed by the people close to the king. One deviation from the rules in Ombandja took place when someone “grabbed power”, and suffocated the king in the ritually appropriate manner without having the endorsement of his head wife and close councillors. Another example of a break with traditional practices was when King Haikela rose to power. The succession rules were broken once more when he died: he was allowed to die a natural death in 1900 after his successor decided that he had been a reasonably peaceful king and should therefore be spared regicide. According to oral tradition Haikela had used sorcery to weaken Nembungu and take his place. There was still concern about how the spirit of the old king would be transferred into the new one. Ritual innovation in Miller’s sense solved the problem. It was part of the regicide ritual in Ombandja, apart from suffocating the old king with a soft sheepskin, to keep his palms open at the moment of death. This practice now took over the function of safeguarding the passage of the king’s spirit: it made sure he would not “take the kingdom with him” when he died. However, the ideology of the ritual also changed. Regicide became something to resort to when the king ruled violently. The logic had changed: it was no longer ritual regicide as Kudsk’s (1986) defined it but a “regicide of revenge”, a punishment for bad rule. For Haikela’s successor the overt motive for discarding ritual regicide was Haikela’s moderate use of violence in ruling. It is fully possible, however, that an underlying motive for change in succession practices and in the ideas of regicide in Ombandja was the way Haikela came to power, which deviated from the norms pertaining to succession: he had ousted his predecessor by military overthrow.

Apart from the double locus of the kingly spirit, in the king’s breath and in his hands, there was more to the spirit of kingship, the dimensions of which showed in the way the dead king’s body was treated: it involved manipulating the spiritual aspect that remained in it. It is clear from the burial rituals for kings in Ombandja that this spiritual element was not undivided. Various parts of the body were extracted and used for strengthening the new king, while other parts had to remain in the grave. These remains were offered sacrifices. It was not possible to identify the separation of the “spirit” of the kingly person and that of “ kingship” in the Owanbo heritage. Judging from the above, the king’s spirit was divided into at least three parts: the part that went with the new
king through the last breath of the old one, the part that remained in the grave to be sacrificed to later, and the part that was extracted from the body and made into a strong unction with which the ruling king was strengthened many times during his reign.

Following the model presented by Maurice Bloch (1986) and Päivi Hasu (1999) I have suggested that the soft parts of the king’s body that remained in the grave could be understood as feminine, and that the bones appropriated for the strengthening unction were masculine. The *omuja*, or string, made from the sinews on which the amulets were thread, was, I suggest, feminine in character: it was soft and it tied things together. From this perspective, it could be said that most of the female aspects of the king’s power remained in the grave in the form of the flesh that was consumed by maggots, while the bones providing the ointment that was infused into the new king was masculine power that gave him the strength to rule with violence. However, the “female” string on which the masculine amulet was threaded suggests that power of a female kind was a prerequisite for the appropriation of masculine power. Both emanated from the old king.

Given the fact that the old king had once appropriated powers from the body of his predecessor, who in turn had obtained it from his predecessor, and so on, back to the first kings in the genealogy, we could say that the bone marrow unguent that was kept in the ohija comprised the powers of all previous rulers. Part of the “power” of the sacred king thus came from every one of his kingly predecessors.

*Pooling spiritual power in the installation ritual*

I chose to consider all kinds of esoteric power assigned to the king as part of his sacred status, arguing that this status both consisted of and was accrued through his capacity to be in contact with the spirit world, a capacity acquired from a range of sources. Diviners and sorcerers used power objects – the ohija being the supreme source of potent power for both. At the culminating point of Ondo nga installation rituals, when the king was ready to “see” his country, he was given the omuja with the ohija in it to keep. Then and only then was he considered fully “sacralised”, and ready to take over the rule of the country. Before he reached that stage, he needed the assistance of two kinds of power; that which he found “in the field”, and that which was inherent in the weapons and insignia that
he subsequently acquired. These I interpreted as representing “feminine” and “masculine” power, respectively, and I linked the two with two indigenous concepts of ruling, okupangela, to “lie down on the country”, to represent the fertility aspect of power, and okunanguala, which refers to the power of ruling by force. The king needed both in order to be able to rule. Sacredness had both a feminine and a masculine aspect. When I considered all the different aspects involved in the making of a king, with the Ondo nga installation ritual as the case in point, eight different elements emerged, all of which contributed to making the king sacred. These elements are listed in Table 5.

We do not know the exact nature or use of the paraphernalia that the king received during his installation. Some of it may just have been tokens of power, while some were clearly power objects that could be used for specific purposes. Little was revealed about the omuja and ohija or about the secret and potent unction that was put into the ohija. This was at the core of a secret tradition that was not readily revealed to outsiders. Nevertheless, a certain structure in the composition of the king’s esoteric power did emerge. It came from kingly ancestors, ancestors of the land, potent spirits related to female reproduction (termitary spirits), unguents in the ohija emanating from previous kings, and from fetishes that came from kingdoms lying on the migratory route of the early Owa-mbo. It also came from the sacrifice of bovine cattle and wild animals, whose origins remain obscure.

Table 5 The elements contributing to the sacredness of an Ondonga king

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Membership of the kingly matriclan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Power transmitted from the old king through his last breath at ritual regicide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Power transmitted from the old king when he died otherwise, by opening his palms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Power from the diviner that went into the king in uupuule woshilongo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Power from the termitary acquired in uupule woshaanda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Power from the feminine objects unearthed from the palm field of the country representing the feminine power of the early owners of the land</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Power from the masculine kingly bow, arrows, staffs and spear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Power from the emuja with the ohija that was put around the king’s neck at the end of the installation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Owambo kings intervened in rain rituals, female ohango and male etanda in various ways. They had had no monopoly over rain rituals, although some of them were renowned for “being great rainmakers”. It seems rather that whatever rainmaking skills they had, the source was in the fetishes that had been handed down from kings north of the Angolan border. Two kinds of rain rituals were described for the time of the early missionaries, those conducted at kingly graves at home and those in which rain was fetched from a kingdom in the north. Closer scrutiny shows a connection between the two. Nembungu of Ondonga, the first king to establish kingship structures in the country, appropriated a “rain-bird” brought from Evale and put it in a small hut called the “little ompampa”, where it was kept from then on. King Nangolo, Nembungu’s successor, introduced rainmaking rituals at Nembungu’s grave, erected in the form of an ompampa, but was bigger than the one for the rain bird. Nangolo also introduced rain sacrifices at Nembungu’s grave but they were actually addressed to the rain bird in the little ompampa and not to the spirit of the old king. Gradually the dead king took the place of the bird in the rituals and became the main object of the rain prayers. This I understand as a way of augmenting the role of the Owambo king in the ritual, and as a way in which the king and his kingly ancestors became masters of rain.

The Uukwaluudhi rain-bird ritual seemed to be a variation of the ritual involving the Bird Spirit in male initiation rituals, and heralded a new kind of rainmaking procedure in which the sowing at the beginning of the agricultural year was also put into the hands of kings. The “osipepa of rain” performed by the king and his head wife in Ondonga at the commencement of the Marula festivities which marked the new harvest season, illustrates the semantic closeness between rain and fertility. The fact that it was connected with fertility when used in the context of male and female initiation indicates that rain rituals and human initiation rituals were symbolically merged, and that naming the Marula ritual “the osipepa of rain”, the king’s and his head wife’s influence on both rain and human fertility were emphasised. It also manifested the ritual superiority of the head wife – she had, after all, become part of sacred kingship through the uupuule uosaanda.

The female initiation ceremony, ohango, was performed in order
to appropriate female fertility – to ensure that girls bore children in a socially approved way. In the view of Hjort (1986) and Davies (1987), a major motive for performing the ritual was to test for pre-initiation pregnancy, which was heavily sanctioned because it was dangerous for kings. Different kinds of initiation practices described in the narratives of locals suggest that kings had not always been involved in female initiation. When the practices were compared, it turned out that the significance assigned to the ritual was different when the king was involved and when he was not. Female initiation had once been a family ceremony in which Big Birds were strongly involved, and in which possession by these spirits made the girls fit to become mothers. The ceremony was not primarily a test of pregnancy, which did not result in heavy sanctions in any case: it mainly brought shame on the girl and her family. Kingly involvement in female initiation was increased in various ways: the introduction of a sacrificial cow and the presentation of the king’s ritual spear both manifested his presence. Similarly, his involvement resulted in the toning down of the spirit-possession aspect, and in the disappearance of the visible and central role played by the Big Bird and the female head, namunganga. Punishment for pre-initiation pregnancy became severe – the girl was killed or chased away from the kingdom, and sometimes her whole family and the father of the child were also expelled. The transgression was interpreted as a threat to the life of the king and in this way the fertility power of young girls was tied to his very being.

Circumcision was practiced both in the Owa mbo societies and among their neighbours. As with the female initiation ritual, there was a tendency for kings to appropriate the ritual. However, while female initiation is a practice that survives to this day, male circumcision or etanda was abolished in the 1880s in most of Owamboland. Three different kinds of male initiation practices were shown to have taken place in Ondo nga at different points in time. The oldest one was performed “before collective initiation for girls had become the practice”. It did not entail circumcision proper. Incisions were made, shata-ed, in numerous parts of the bodies of the boys, who were then taken through a tree trunk and thrown into the water where they were possessed by the spirit of a hippo. No kings were involved.

Kings were involved in the second form of male initiation, and here, too, there was no mention of outright circumcision. The boys were buried up to their necks in a pit. The elders heading the ritual sounded the
bullroarers, called Big Birds or “Circumcision Gods” and when the boys came out of the pit they could appropriate the Big Birds and produce the noise they made. They had now appropriated the “Gods” and this gave them “extraordinary powers”. They passed between the legs of the Big Elder, which apparently signified the transfer of potency from the Elder to the boy. The king provided the sacrificial bull. In male initiation practices in other Owambo societies the Big Bird took centre stage – they took possession of the boys and they were the ones to conduct the circumcision proper.

A reduced form of male initiation was introduced by King Nangolo dhAmutenya. Nangolo was renowned for having consolidated power in the hands of kings in Ondonga before the mid-1800s. It is presented as the first form of male circumcision in Ondonga, which seems to be a reconstruction of the reality, or at least it ignores the existence of previous practices. The circumcision Nangolo orchestrated was a pale and cryptic ceremony at the side of earlier Ondonga rituals and those reported from other Owambo societies. The Big Birds were centre stage in all of these, but did not feature in Nangolo’s version. The new initiation procedure was very short; lasting only for four days and involving male children and young adult boys. This changed the purpose, which had been to create a cadre of ritual leaders in society. Nangolo’s circumcision ritual was performed in every village, which made it seem like an administrative measure. There were no ordeals, no “heavy rules”, and no drumming, and the neophytes explicitly “did not learn about the ways of the spirits”. This cryptic form of circumcision introduced by Nangolo represented an effort to curb the power of circumcised men in order to pool esoteric power in the king’s own hands. The lack of spiritual teaching was conspicuous. The innovation apparently did not lead to the desired outcome, as circumcision was abolished in Ondonga within three decades of Nangolo’s reign.

The devolution of kingship

The incidence of king killing as assassination proper increased in the late 1800s. Many of the descriptions of how kings died mention violent death in battle, a double taboo according to the older customs. Not only had the logic behind regicide changed, so had the motive. Ritual regicide gradually disappeared in its regulated form, and was superseded by the killing of the ruling king for the purpose of usurping power. The council and the
head wife were ignored and so were the old taboos forbidding the shedding of the king’s blood. This was the time “when the kingly killed each other”. This violent assassination of ruling kings was accompanied by the resolution of succession ambiguity by clearing rivals out of the way. Even in this situation kings were still thought to be sacred, but the principles of the institution had been violated.

The confrontation with Europeans and their firearms was, after the initial boost to the economies of the Owa mbo kingdoms, a destructive factor in the long run, and caused a rent in the fabric of social relations. Kings emerged from this process as hoarders of assets, appropriated in different ways from the people: land, cattle and people became the property of the king in a negative sense. The kings could no longer guarantee the safety or livelihood of their subjects. Cattle were taken on the pretext of old prerogatives and sold abroad. Such were the political consequences of the changes in Owa mbo kingship in the late 1800s.

Sacred kingship was not a product of colonialism in Owa mbo, rather the changes in it were concomitant with the diminishing political power of the king, who began to use his ritual prerogatives in an attempt to hang on to power. In local terminology, he focused more on okunangala, ruling by force than on okupangela, tending to fertility and well-being. The reciprocity that was manifested in the ritual killing of kings also tended to fade over time. Thus the reciprocal ideology of sacred kingship and its practical implementation drifted apart. Vilho Kaulinge, the Uukwanyama headman gives us a clue to what caused the religious change in kingship: new forms of power took the place once occupied by spiritual power, although the belief in sacred kings remained.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Written sources


University Press.
Bonner, P. (1980). Classes, the mode of Production and the State in Pre-Colonial Swaziland In: Shula Marks and Anthony Atmore (eds.) *Economy and Society in Pre-Industrial South Africa*. Hong Kong: Longman.


Englund, Harri (1996). Between God and Kamuzu: the Transition to Multiparty Politics in Central Ma-
the Soul. London: Macmillan.
Saarijärvi: Gummerus.
Hobsbawn, Eric and Ranger, Terence (eds.) (1983). The Invention of


Leach, Edmund (1985 [1970]). *Lévi-


Mission Society: Helsinki.
Närhi, Otto Emil (1930). *Afrikan kätköistä* (From the caches of Africa).
WSOY: Porvoo.


Salokoski, Märta, Eirola, Martti


Archival sources

Helsinki University Library (HUL)

Airi Aarni Collection FMSC 371:1 Folder 12:11.
Emil Liljeblad Collection 344 (ELC) (1932) “Afrikan Amboheimojen kansantietoutta” (Folkslore of the Owambo Tribes in Africa).
Kalle Koivu Collection FMSC 372.2.

National Archives of Finland (NAF) Suomen Lähetysseuran Arkisto (Finnish Missionary Society Archives, FMSC)

Anna and August Pettinen’s Collection. FMSC Hp 91. Diaries 1887–1902.

Minutes of ‘Brethren's Meeting in Oniipa; FMSC Hha 4. 23. 7. 1902, FMSC Hha 5; 16. 6. 1903, 8. 9. 1903 and FMSC Hha 6. 2. 12. 1904.
Nestori Väänänen Collection FMSC Hp 64:1 Manuscripts 1924, 1926, 1939.

Windhoek National Archives (WNA)


Field interviews and other unpublished sources

MSC (Märta Salokoski Collection). In the possession of the author.

Interviews in Helsinki 1987 and 1988
Kleopas Dumeni Jason Amakutuwa

Field interviews
In August–September 1988 with the following persons

UUKWALUDHI
Abisai Eelu
UUKWAMBI
Abed Kandongo
ONDONGA
Elifas Shindondola
Unpublished papers and dissertations


Kudsk, Finn (1986). Hvorfor skal Kongen Dø? (Why Must the King Die?) Master’s Thesis in Social Anthropology. The University of Lund, Department of Sociology.
INDEX

aafuko 243, 245, 246, 247, 248
aagandjimayele 69
Aajamba 60
Aakuananzi 236
aakuluntu 150, 256
Aakuusinda 86, 87, 209, 221
aakuusinda 130
Aakwambahu 209
Aakwampungu 147
Aakwanafuizi 233
Aakwananime 152
Aakwananime/Ekuananime 117
Aakwankala 58, 69, 86, 89, 117
aalodhi 132, 136
aana yokombanda 69, 116
Aandonga 81, 85, 86, 87, 112
Aarni 19, 28, 30, 50, 92, 134, 136, 138, 139, 142, 147, 149, 154, 155, 158, 160, 162, 292, 293, 294
aasisi 147
aathithi 133, 136, 147, 148, 149, 293
aatokolihapu 256
Aayamba 90, 92
aayamba-aakwankala 90
Abélès 18, 25
accession 183, 190, 194
Adler 36, 39, 109
Aho 134, 149, 151
Akan of Ghana 107
Akuusinda clan 48
albino 43
Alugondo 239
Amagundu 77
Amakutuwa 48, 80, 111, 229
Ambambi Nangolo 103
amulets 293, 298
Amunyela gwa Tshaningwa 274
Amunyela gwilileka 98
Amunyela Kadhidhi 90
Amupala 226
Amupembe 246, 247
Amupunda 257
Amvula j’Eposii 274
Amwaama 270
Amweelo 77, 78, 81, 88, 89, 99, 103, 112, 247, 248, 261, 277, 278, 279, 280
ancestor spirits 133, 137, 146, 147
Anderson 48, 59, 61, 111, 112
Angola 80, 85, 87, 90, 116, 122, 137, 138, 139, 140, 161, 193, 194, 213, 269, 272
Apter 109
ash heap 198
Auala 122
Aune Liljeblad 52
Barua 255
Bazin 109, 171
Bell 27
Bemba 39, 42
Benguela 60
Benin 211, 212, 273, 276, 291
Berger 32
Big Bird spirits 68
big fire log, ekuni enene 247
Big Rains 70, 71, 224, 231
Bird Men 231
Bird spirit 230, 254
Bird Spirits 234
Björklund 50
Bley 32
Bloch 18, 25, 27, 38, 68, 170, 183, 263, 288, 298
blood-brotherhood 180, 186
bloodless sacrifices 223
blood sacrifice 147, 180
Blood sacrifices 153
Borkowsky 19, 20, 29, 30, 32, 70, 109, 118
Botelle 190
Brauer 78
Brochado 60
Bushman 34, 58, 59, 60,
Bushman clan 225, 233
Bushmen 34, 58, 59, 65, 69, 70, 77, 78, 79, 84, 86, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 103, 110, 117, 129, 130, 131, 137, 149, 161, 162, 193, 221, 225, 235, 237, 244

Cannadine 18
Cattle clan 177
Cattle sacrifices 158
Chagga 146, 170, 171, 172, 175, 181
Chapman 48
charcoal 138, 148, 244
Charsley 109
chief bull 180
Chokwe 42, 138, 139, 250
circumcised men 126, 132, 150, 155, 157, 223, 253, 256, 258, 259, 262, 263
circumcision 218, 231, 235, 250, 251, 252, 253, 254, 255, 256, 258, 259, 260, 261, 262, 263, 264, 289, 301, 302
Circumcision Gods 302
Clarence-Smith 19, 32, 33, 113, 114, 223
Comaroff 18
cosmogonic myths 75, 76
Cosmological myths 287

Daniel Shikongo 95
Dar Fung 40
Davies 30, 53, 54, 187, 301
de Heusch 20, 21, 23, 36, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 58, 85, 87, 107, 108, 109, 140, 157, 163, 185, 197, 206, 211, 212, 225, 280, 285, 286, 287, 290, 294
Delachaux 28, 51
de Maret 44
devolution 21, 22, 23, 24, 56
devolution of sacred kingship 211, 265, 290
Diana and Antoinette Powell-Cotton 54
divine kingship 20, 21, 22, 35, 36, 38, 39, 40, 44
diviner initiations 202
diviners 132, 133, 136, 149, 150, 151, 152, 153, 154, 155, 156, 157, 158, 163
Dombondola 23
Douglas 20, 45
Dreschsler 32
Drucker-Brown 109
Dumeni 151, 180, 284
Duparquet 48
Dwarf Mongoose clan 116, 129, 209, 233, 244, 249
eankelo 155
“eating” 143, 156, 214
eating oshikangua 128
edhina 142
eedhila 253
Ekhuusinda 99
Eelu 17, 51, 185, 186, 187, 188, 189, 190, 191, 192, 194, 195, 196, 197, 198, 199, 200, 202, 203, 204, 205, 206, 207, 208, 209, 210, 211, 288
Een 48, 64, 111, 112, 121
Eengombe Tadidana 160
Eesagelo 147
Eethila 253
Efukiko 256, 257
Efundula 30
efundula 236, 237, 238
eggs of Nuutoni 229
egumbo 68
eha 142
Ehanda 64
Ehinga 64
Eirola 33, 61, 64
Ekandjo 274, 275
ekandjo 150, 220, 230, 231
ekandjo council 68
ekango 71, 149
ekanjo 230
Ekholm 21, 211, 265, 279, 290, 291
ekola (the crow) 246
ekwanilwa 117
Ekwankala or Ekwanafindhi 129
elamo strap 199
eland-antilope 59
elende 240
Elenga Ekuluntu 123
Elephant clan 116, 229
Emuja 175, 176, 201, 206, 212
epata 160
epitotanda 251
esagelo 223
esenghe 153
Eshinga 213, 214, 218
Esinga 154, 213
esinzi 200
essino of the king 232
Estermann 22, 28, 49, 51, 63, 70, 152, 156, 173, 241, 250, 253
Etanda 256
etanda 56, 300, 301
ethano 142
etikilo 143
etikiluo 128
Eunda 23
Evale 64, 218, 222, 224, 225, 226, 228, 229, 235, 300
Evale rainmaking
  king 226
Evans-Pritchard 19, 38, 39, 40, 172, 295
Ewakwanekamba 99
ezila 240, 241, 243, 245, 246, 248, 249, 255, 259, 260
Fanso and Chem-
  Langée 109
Feeley-Harnik 36, 39
female initiation 218, 219, 234, 235, 236, 237, 238, 239, 240, 241, 242, 243, 244, 245, 247, 248, 249, 251, 254, 256, 300, 301
fertility 17, 18, 19, 21, 23, 24, 25, 35, 36, 37, 38, 40, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 56, 59, 67
fertility rituals 18, 35, 218
fetishes 132, 141, 149, 174, 181, 271, 279, 286, 287, 290, 296, 299, 300
Figgis 25, 38
fire of peace 271
first ancestor 136
first fruit 94, 121
first inhabitants 221, 235
Fortes 19, 24, 183, 184, 186, 194, 196
Frazer 17, 20, 21, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 42, 43, 46, 87, 107, 108, 267, 284, 285, 286, 287, 295
fukiko 256
Gabriel Taapopi 52
Galton 48, 61, 111
Gciriku 222
German South West
  Africa 122
Gibson 222, 223
Godelier 255
Golden Bough 284
Gordon 34, 58, 59, 79
Great Kalunga 293
Great Spirit 76, 132, 137, 279, 293, 294, 295
Green 48, 69, 112
Haahti 50
Hahn 113, 114, 127, 161, 230, 231, 251, 254
Hai//om 34, 58
Haiduwa 106
Haikela 267, 268, 270, 297
Haimbili 287
Haimbili yHaufiku 264
Hakavona 250
Hamangundu 81
“Hamitic theory” 29
Hamugandjera 81
Hamukuambi 81
Hamutenya 172
Hamutumua 236, 237
Hango Nameja 88
Hannula 221, 248
Harrison 218, 219
Hasu 170, 171, 288, 298
Hayes 22, 30, 34, 35, 262, 263
Head Councillor 180, 186, 191, 194, 199, 200, 201, 203, 207, 210
Head Diviner 191, 199, 201, 203
Head of the Log 245, 248, 249
head wife 87, 106, 108, 130, 186, 189, 196, 197, 200, 201, 205
Hei//om 90
Heinige 95
Henok 99, 100, 102, 103, 187
Hepeni 129, 240, 241
Herero 61, 64, 160, 226, 250
Himba 250
Hjort 30, 52, 53, 236, 237, 238, 239, 241, 242, 243, 255, 301
Hocart 17, 27, 40, 184
Hohela 268
Hopeasalmi 50, 141, 142, 147, 160, 162, 220, 227
Huambo-Kalunga 139
Hukka 30, 50, 141, 142
human sacrifice 73, 210, 211, 212, 213, 279
Humbe 137, 161, 162, 188, 193, 195, 218, 228, 235
Humbe king 188
hunter from abroad 43
Huntington 21, 27, 170, 288
Hyena clan 82, 85, 86, 87, 99, 102, 152, 161, 222, 223, 233, 245
ideological innovation 41
Igwelegwele 159
Iijambo j’Iileka 274
Iijego 90, 116, 270, 271, 274
Iilikela 96
Iileka 270, 271, 272, 273, 275, 277, 279
Iilua 89, 102
iiluli/iilulu 147
iilya 194
iilyayaaka 71, 93, 121
iimbondi 16, 197, 202, 203
iimbungu 176
iimbunju 116, 131
Hereroland 78, 122
Hertz 288
hidden agendas 18
High God 293, 294
Hiltunen 28, 30, 52, 136, 148, 149, 152, 153, 156, 199
INDEX 327
iimbunyu 177
Iimenka 243
Iimenka 147, 159
lindjana 90
linenge 161
linenge j’omvula 229
lipumbu 253, 264
lipumbu 177
iita 98
itenge 83, 84, 89, 96, 98, 125, 213, 214
itituku 95, 106, 128, 130, 131, 168, 169, 173, 174, 176
ititula 220, 221, 243
iyego 98, 274
Imbangala 41, 63, 272
inauguration 185, 189, 193, 194, 199, 201, 204, 208, 211
incest 43, 45, 210, 211, 286
initiation rituals 17, 26, 218, 234, 235, 250, 252, 262
insignia 184, 186, 187, 188, 189, 190, 192, 195, 196, 205, 208, 209
insignia of office 243, 266
installation ritual 218, 241
Installation rituals 183
installation rituals 21, 27, 42, 45
institutional innovation 41
investiture 183, 190, 194, 196
Irstam 109
Ishumi 109
Iyego 96
jaalumentu 251
Jacobsson-Widding 141
Jaeger Afrikaner 61
jaHenok 99, 100, 145
jaKaluvi 145
ja Noa 159
Janoni 78, 79
Johannes Amkongo 90
Jonker Afrikaner 61, 112
Jukun 39
k’oasa 178
Kaakungu 32
Kafima 64
kaimbi bird 220
Kajone 102, 103, 277
Kalenga 226
Kalipi 95, 268
Kalunga 19, 30, 54, 132, 133, 134, 137, 138, 139, 140, 141, 143, 148, 149, 150, 151, 162, 163, 176, 191, 192, 199, 201, 220, 223, 244, 279, 293, 294
Kalunga ka Nangombe 137, 140, 293, 295
Kalunga Kasongo 139
Kalunga Kiimbamba 137
Kalunga Tembo Muhene 139
Kambonde 33, 194
Kambonde K’Angula 179, 182
Kambonde KaMpingana 179
Kambungu 80, 81
Kampaku 274
Kandongo 227, 229, 236, 252
Kandululu 102
Kanene (Kahnene) 81
Kanene ka Hanzi 100
Kantorowicz 25
Kanzi 76, 77, 78, 79
Kapaku 58
Kapferer 18, 26, 27, 133, 273
Kaplan 18
Karagwe 160, 173, 175
Katjavivi 32
Katoke 109, 160, 173
Kaulungu 145, 172
Kaulinge 104, 109, 110, 125, 130, 228, 237, 252, 253, 262, 263, 264, 303
Kavango 80, 116, 222, 223, 225
Kavango River 61
Kavi 76, 77, 91
Kayone Mulindi 82
Kazi 76
Keeper of the Insignia 191
Kelly 18
kiimbando 128, 132, 150
kilombe 272
Kimambo 223
kin fetishes 43
king’s spirit 265, 267, 270, 285, 295, 297
King Haimbili 120, 262
King Haimbili yaHau-fiku 66
King Kambonde kaMpingana 221
King Kampaku 69, 162
king lists 17, 18, 53, 56, 66, 74, 75, 94, 95, 98, 103, 287, 294, 292
kingly ancestors 21
kingly arrows 187
kingly bow 187, 203
Kingly burial 169
kingly burials 21, 55
Kingly genealogies 287
kingly graves 223, 224, 226, 227, 228, 230, 233, 234, 235, 243, 250
kingly insignia 266, 296
kingly installation 17, 18, 24, 26, 51, 55, 183, 184, 185, 209, 212
kingly ohija 187, 189, 208
kingly stave 187
kingly succession 85, 265
king maker(s) 184, 186,
INDEX 329

189, 196, 208
king making 21, 24, 55
King Martin Nambala 107
King Nangolo 227, 248, 256, 261, 262
King Nangolo dh’Amutenya 66
King Nembungu 221, 228, 235
King Nembungu Amutundu 277
King Nuujoma 246
King Nuujoma II 214
King Nuyoma 268
Kings from abroad 285
kings from abroad 266
King Shaanika 52
King Shikongo 95, 111, 112
kingship making 22, 24, 55
Kinguri 41, 286
Kitomi 279
Knappert 134
Koivu 50, 126, 253, 264
Kongo 211, 279, 290
Korekore 222
Kotze 30, 73
Krige 38, 109
Kuanyama 30
Kuba of Kongo 42
Kudsk 37, 40, 267, 297
Kunene River 61, 64, 188, 214
Kuper 109, 130
Kurvinen 49, 111, 112
Kuusi 17, 50, 52, 88, 133, 156, 219, 220
Kuvala 250
Kuvelai 61, 64, 219
Kwakiodi 218, 219
Kwamawiti 64
Kwangali 64, 222
Kwangari 116
KwanKwa 64
Lan 222
Lau 19, 31, 33
leaf huts 240, 259, 260, 261
Lebzelter 28, 161, 193, 194
Lehmann 19, 20, 28, 30, 36
Lele of the Kasai 44
leopard 44
Lévi-Strauss 197
Liedker 93, 94, 252, 256
Liljeblad 20, 34, 47, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 59, 83, 86, 90, 95, 110, 115, 129, 148, 162, 178, 185, 192, 211
liminality 286
liminal state 195, 198
Linné-Eriksson 32
Lion clan 117, 152, 206, 222, 223
little ompampa 206, 300
Lloyd 109
Locust clan 209
loss of spirit 209
Loth 32
Loup 28, 30, 90, 91, 92, 93, 96, 98, 105, 273
Lozi 223
Luanda 60
Luba 42, 139
Lunda 42, 138, 139, 140
Lunga 286, 293
“lying down on the land” 201
Maantundu ga Niima 98
Madagascar 263
maggots 172, 173, 174, 180, 298
Magundu 76, 89, 90
Magyar 48, 120
Mainga 223
maji a samba 41, 211, 272
Makuku 76, 77, 78, 87
male circumcision 218, 219, 252, 260, 261, 262
male initiation 231, 235, 243, 250, 252, 253, 256, 257, 261
Mambaisita 140
Mandume 106, 120
Mangundu 76, 78, 89, 90, 91, 92
Margi 265, 270
Marks 31, 60
Martin Kadhikiwa (Kadhakia) 86
marula 231, 233
Marula tree 121
masters of the land 221, 222, 234
Mauss 119
Mbina j’lônga 226
Mbuende 19, 32, 104, 114, 115, 121
Mbuenge 102, 103
Mbukushu 222, 225, 235
Mbundja 116
Mbundu 138, 139, 187, 211, 222
Mbundu kingship 40
Mbunduzu 222
Mbwenge 82, 86, 102, 222
Mbwenge (Mbuenge) 81
McKiernan 48
McKittrick 22, 23, 34, 35, 68, 69, 274
Meek 109
Melber 33
mental history 42
Merina 18, 68, 146, 170,
INDEX

175, 181, 263
Metcalf 21, 27, 170, 288
migration myths 85
migration stories 75, 84
migration tales 80, 81, 90
Miller 27, 38, 40, 41, 42,
43, 46, 63, 75, 87, 95,
109, 139, 140, 141, 219,
222, 267, 271, 272, 286,
287, 297
Möller 48
Mongela 268
Moorsom 19, 32, 33, 113,
114, 223
Mossamedes 48, 60
mourning, oosa 145
Mourning clan 177
Mpamba 140
Mpambaisita 140, 141,
294
mukuluntu 126
Mukuru 78
Muller 36, 39, 109
mupita omulumentu 250
mushrooms 16, 202
Mustakallio 50, 221, 248
Mutaleni 107, 179
muted categories 18
Mwene gomukunda 123
Mweshipandeka 264
myths 17, 18, 20, 21, 23,
42, 43, 50, 53, 56, 63,
70, 74, 75, 78, 79, 80,
84, 94, 103, 286, 287,
291, 292
myths of origin 287
Naanda 102, 103, 277
Naanda Mutati 102, 187,
247
Namatsi 98
Namba 78
Nambala 33
Nambinga 267, 268, 270
name bulls 73, 157
Nameja 145, 146, 166,
167, 168, 176, 177, 226,
233, 250, 270, 271, 272,
273
Namuhuya 33, 66, 67, 70,
86, 87, 94, 99, 189, 202,
227, 228, 284
Namuiha 144, 145
Namunganga 123, 128
namunganga 129, 240,
241, 242, 244, 245, 246,
247, 248, 249, 301
Namupueja j’Ekandjo 226
Namutenya 98
Nande 95
Nandingo 98
Nangolo 277, 278, 279,
280, 287, 300, 302
Nangolo
dh’Amutenya 86, 100,
103, 120, 230, 233, 247,
248, 261
Nangolo dhAmutenya
277, 302
Nangombe 76, 77, 78, 79,
82, 83, 86, 91, 98, 100,
270, 271, 274
Närhi 76, 77, 128, 221,
225, 251, 252, 253
Nashishidhiga 123
Naunyango 268
Ndembu 42
Ndjene 274
Ndonga 225
Ndongwena 64
Nefundja 278, 279, 280,
281
Nehale 33
Nembulungu 86, 99
Nembulungo 82, 86, 99,
100, 102
Nembungu 86, 102, 116,
221, 228, 229, 233, 235,
277, 278, 279, 280, 281,
297, 300
Ngandjela 83
Ngandjera 30, 89, 90, 91,
92, 268
Ngavirue 32
Ngola 286
Niilua, Oniilua 87
Niilwa 23, 65, 79, 87, 89,
91, 92, 93, 94, 98, 116,
120, 137, 161, 177, 181,
291
Niinane Nekuaya 103
Niinane Nkuja 247
Niindjembe’s Asi-
mbal 278
Niita 98
Nitsche 113, 114
Nkandi Amwaama 98
Nkhumbi 89, 90
Nkumbi 64, 161
Noni 78, 79
Northern Namibia 284
Nulua 78
Nuujoma 246, 247
Nuunyango 98
Nuuyoma 96
Nyaneka-Nkhumbi 80,
250
Nyaneka/Nkumbi 116
ohamba 66
ohambo 120
ohango 56, 178, 235, 236,
237, 238, 239, 240, 241,
243, 244, 245, 246, 247,
248, 251, 256, 259, 300
ohija 174, 175, 187, 189,
195, 203, 208, 209, 210,
212, 298, 299
ohija of rain 226
ohiya 149
ohiya yoshilongo 188
oholongo-antelope 260
ohula 147, 153
oihanangolo 237, 242,
INDEX 331

243, 255
oimbele 72
ointment of the country 197
okakulukadhi 93, 149
okangandhi 93
Okavango River 58, 64, 80
okuanangala 108, 205
okufu 71
okupangela 108, 195, 205, 299, 303
okuyona po aantu 156
olufuko 241, 254
olukula 146, 197, 202, 203
omadhila 220, 253
omakola 153
omakuluntu 256
omakuluntu 72
omalenga 263
omalenga or elenga 123
omanya 157, 163
omaonga 72
omanga 71, 231, 232, 236, 249
omasiga 193, 232, 233, 234, 240
omatemo 72
omathila 230, 231
omazila 129, 220, 223, 244, 253, 258, 259, 260
Ombadja 55, 70
ombala 105
Ombala Mbwenge 82
Ombalantu 23, 34, 35, 51, 64, 69, 117, 129, 161, 162, 237, 239, 243, 244, 250, 252, 255
Ombalulu 77
ombambi 59, 72, 223, 226, 234, 246, 288
ombambi-horn ohija 226
Ombandja 23, 51, 64, 150, 162, 168, 169, 172, 173, 175, 176, 179, 180, 181, 185, 186, 198, 206, 239, 240, 241, 250, 254
Ombandja Minor 95
ombepo 142, 144, 168, 174, 247
ombetsi 251
omboga 194, 203, 205
omboga-spinach 203
Ombuenge 64
Ombwenge 82, 86
omihanga 245
omikunda 118, 263
omilunga 138
omipundi 127
omolongo 272
omongwo 231
ompampa 172
omuja 174, 175, 298
omuja g’uosilongo 187
omuja gu’oshilongo 189
omujambikuluntu 123
omujeno 142, 144
omukili wiita 127
Omukuanangombe 79
Omukuanedii 79
Omukuanhalanga 79
Omukuku 77
omukunda 118, 123, 261
omukwaniilwa 66
Omukwiwyu Gwemanya 82
omulilo gu’oshilongo 160
omulodhi 150
omulongo 160
omulunga 138, 204
Omumbalakuluntu 123
Omundongo 81, 85, 100
omunkunzi 146
omupitici 251
Omupitifi 123
omupuliki 153
omupulile 128, 256
omusatí 16, 61
omusindilo 127
Omusitagoongombe 123
Omusitu 84
Omutekua 84
Omouthigululi gomulilo
 goshilongo 123, 128
omuthithi 159
omutikili 132, 150, 155, 156, 157
omutikululi 125
omutima 142, 144
Omutumba gomalenga
omakuluntu 123
omuvi 203, 272
omuya gwoshilongo 188
omuzizimba 142, 144, 156
omwandi gwaalumen-
tu 256
Omwene goshikandojio 123
omwene gu’egumbo 68, 145
omwene gu’oshilongo 66
omwene guomukunda 68
onamunganga 236, 247
onangula 157, 158, 163
Ondayi wiita 127
Ondayi yiita 123
ondilika 157, 159, 163
ondjamba 204
ondjindja 272
ondjindo 203
Ondombondola 51, 64
Ondonga 76, 77, 78, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 89, 94, 95, 99, 100, 102, 103, 105, 107, 111, 112, 116, 120, 123, 125, 126, 127, 128, 130, 131, 141, 144, 145, 146, 150, 152, 153, 154, 159, 161, 169, 172, 175, 178, 179, 180, 181, 185, 186, 187, 188, 189, 190, 193, 194, 198, 199, 200, 201, 204, 206, 208, 209, 211, 212, 213, 214, 219, 220, 221, 222, 224, 226, 227, 228, 229, 231, 232, 233, 234,
Sijagaja 220, 224, 226
Silvester 34
Sitehnu 137, 188
Sitehnu (Sitenu, Shitenue) 80
Siuantapo 233
Sizila 100
small ompampa 225, 228
Small Rains 70, 224, 231
Smith 37
Snake clan 82, 86, 87, 99, 100, 102, 103, 116, 129, 130, 131, 187, 189, 206, 209, 221, 222, 233, 245, 249, 279, 291, 292
sorcerer 296
sorcerers 132, 133, 149, 150, 155, 156, 163
sorcery 125, 128, 133, 142, 143, 148, 153, 156, 177
spear of the country 195
Spirit Boy 130, 181
Spirit Girl 130, 181
spirit of kingship 166, 168, 174, 175, 195, 208, 209
spirit of the king 208
Spirit or God 238
spirit possession 237, 254, 255, 257, 258
spirits and powers 292
spirits and powers 136, 137, 139, 147, 150, 162
spirits of ancestors 220
spirits of the land 205
spirits of the saltpan 93, 94
spiritual agents 132, 133, 150, 155, 157, 163, 219
spiritual capital 235
spiritual powers 132, 133, 155
Sri Lanka 133
stave of the country 187, 195
stone of the country 190
Strathern 136, 141
Swantz 25
Swazi 45
taboo 266, 268, 270, 275, 277, 279, 281, 302
taboo 19, 21, 37, 40, 43, 45, 70, 136, 137, 147, 148, 154, 155
Tallensi 218
Tamanzi 83, 84, 89
Tambiah 38
Teinonen 251, 252, 253
Temba Andumba 41, 211, 272
termitary 154, 155, 294, 296, 299
termitary spirit 296
termite hill 154, 155, 199, 202
termite hills 16
termite mound 17, 77, 154, 210
termite mounds 133, 137, 147
test of pregnancy 238, 242
“the raw power of nature” 27
Tinsila 130
Tirronen 77, 108, 126, 138, 148
titles 41, 43, 63
Tiv 219
Tönjes 125
Totemeyer 32, 64, 80, 81, 92
Totterman 248
transgression 21, 43, 44, 45, 270, 281, 301
transgression of norms 21
transgressive acts 186, 190
tributary relations 104
tributary system 19, 110, 114, 117, 118, 119, 122
tribute 219
Tshaanika Natsilongo 226
Tshapaka tsha Tshaningua 274
Tshcerkézoff 109
Tsheyas Uushona 275
Tshikesho 271
Tsumeb 76, 122
Turner 25, 183, 191
Tuupainen 28, 29, 80, 115, 116, 236, 237
twin 43
twins 286
twinship 107
Umbundu 38, 41, 87, 116, 139, 141, 219, 222, 271, 286, 287, 290, 293
Unknown informant U 144
Ushona Shiimi 90
Uguuanga 270
Ugwanga 99, 100, 102, 103, 116, 154, 224, 243, 245, 256, 257, 258
uukakuluudhi 93
Uukolonkadhi 23, 51, 64, 129, 184, 237, 239, 241, 242, 243, 255
Uukongo Kamanja 213
Ukulualudhi 81
Uukunde 134, 154
Ukwaluudhi 51, 64, 144, 145, 230, 231, 234, 235, 237, 255, 300
uukwaniilwa 150
Ukwanyama 23, 28, 30, 34, 47, 49, 51, 54, 55,
INDEX 335

64, 65, 66, 68, 70, 72,
134, 143, 144, 145, 146,
150, 153, 156, 158, 159,
161, 172, 173, 177, 180,
185, 190, 201, 206, 224,
225, 226, 228, 229, 232,
233, 235, 236, 237, 238,
242, 250, 251, 252, 253,
255, 258, 260, 262, 263,
264, 265, 267, 303

uuulodhi 128, 143, 155, 156
uunganga 153, 156
uupule 16, 77, 125, 189,
200, 201, 202, 203, 204,
208, 209, 210, 211, 212,
213, 214, 215, 266
uupule gu’oshilongo 16,
200, 202
uupule of the country 200
uupule uosaanda 200
uupule woshaanda 16,
201
uupule woshilongo 201
Uupulile 213
uupulile 153, 154
uutoni 144
uuwa 105

Väänänen 137, 148, 149,
150, 152, 153, 155, 224,
245, 253, 258
Valeri 212
Van Gennep 170
van Gennep 26, 183
Vansina 41, 106
Vapaavuori 50, 253
Vaughan 265, 270
Vedder 19, 31, 32, 51, 78,
79, 113, 134, 163
veldkos 71

Wafukala 241
Walter 17, 250
Walvis Bay 60
Wambu (Huambo) 140

Wambu Kalunga 295
war magic 41
Weyulu 126, 264
Widlok 34, 79
“wilderness” 286
Williams 19, 20, 22, 34,
36, 47, 52, 55, 59, 62,
63, 64, 65, 66, 69, 70,
73, 79, 80, 82, 85, 86,
87, 89, 95, 96, 98, 99,
100, 102, 104, 105, 114,
115, 116, 117, 123, 125,
127, 128, 130, 131, 139,
161, 187, 194, 206, 268,
270, 271, 274, 275, 279,
284, 288, 294
Willis 42, 109
witchcraft 28, 54, 143,
148, 153, 155, 156, 220,
226, 258
witches 132, 133, 136, 148,
149, 150, 155, 156, 163
wooden stool of kingship 178
Woods 30, 33, 37
writing kingship 131

Yangutha 86
yimaka 255
Young 39, 40, 109, 130
Zebra clan 161, 236
Zimba 250