

The Seniority Principle in the Bembe  
Marriage System

Daniel P. Biebuyck

Introduction

In 1952 about sixty thousand Bembe lived in the territories of Fizi and Mwenga (Kivu Province, Eastern Congo), however large groups of Bembe, because of internal political rivalries, had been emigrating to the surrounding territories of Uvira and Albertville and to Burundi and many individuals and family groups had gone to work in urban centers all over the Congo.<sup>1</sup> Linguistically, the Bantu-speaking Bembe are closely related to the Lega, their western neighbors, particularly to those groups of Lega which are known as Basimwenda and Baliga. Most of the Bembe clans have traditions of common migration with Lega groups and place their joint origins in huge genealogies. Two very large clans, the Basim'minje and Basyalangwa, whose members call themselves Bembe, claim local origins and connections with the Bambote (Bembe rendering of the name Bambutu currently used in Kivu areas to refer to Pygmies and their descendants). Furthermore the Bembe live in the middle of a world of great cultural contrasts: to the north and east there are patrilineal pastorally-oriented populations, to the west there are the related patrilineal agricultural, hunting and food gathering Lega, and to the south there are matrilineal hunters and agriculturalists who are offshoots of the northern Luba cluster. Ecologically, too, the area forms a transition between the highland grasslands and the rain forest

and between the shores of Lake Tanganyika and the woodland plains of the south. Bembe villages are established in these various habitats. Dispersed in many villages throughout Bembeland there is a great number of larger and smaller groups of people who are not Bembe and do not call or consider themselves as Bembe although they have been in close contact with the latter over a couple of centuries. There are small dispersed Bambote-Pygmy groups (to be distinguished from other fractions of Bambote which are either completely incorporated into the Bembe clans or completely assimilated in Bembe culture) and there are many distinct groups, mostly located around the shores of Lake Tanganyika, of offshoots of the matrilineal Luba (such as Sanze, Bwari, Homa, Lumona, etc.). To a limited extent, Bembe intermarry with all these groups of "strangers" established within their territory. There are also Lega and Nyindu families and small lineages established in Bembe villages and linked to them by affinal ties. As a result of various economic policies followed by the Belgian Colonial Government, large numbers of cattle-herding Banyarwanda were for the last 35 years permitted to move into "unoccupied" grassland areas, moving in from Rwanda via the territory of Uvira. But Bembe do not intermarry with them and are in general very hostile toward them.

The Bembe are shifting agriculturalists living in villages which often move their location, but hunting, trapping, food gathering and fishing (particularly for those groups settled on the shores of the lake and along the larger rivers) are fundamental activities which rank higher than agriculture in the value system. The Bembe have no cattle, indeed despise the immigrant cattle-herders but have <sup>small</sup> sizable herds of goats, which are important in

ritual and marriage.

The ideology of descent, inheritance and succession is patrilineal; all clans, lineages and extended families are sustained by strictly agnatic genealogies. Both in kinship and residential groups, there is a considerable amount of incorporation of non-agnates. Moreover, affinal and uterine ties expressed and recognized in many ways are of extreme importance in many fields of social interaction. The Bembe patri-clans are partially dispersed, non-exogamous units, segmented into a cascade of lineages. There is no centralized political system; political autonomy in the last instance operates at the level of the local maximal clan-segment (a group inhabiting from two to six villages and hamlets) augmented by uterine and affinal relatives. There is a wealth of semi-secret and secret voluntary associations, several of which merely consolidate the existing lineage structure and some of which establish broader trans-clan and trans-lineage solidarities.

Seniority principles play an overwhelming role in interpersonal and inter-group relationships, particularly in regard to the matrimonial system. The elaboration of these principles is probably more extensive and compelling in nature than in any other known ethnic group. Seniority distinctions, in conjunction with various criteria of sex dichotomy, affinity, cognation, generation level, and sex of speaker, are extended to many groups and categories of people. The following gives a simple outline of the groups on which they bear:

1. Ibucwa: (genealogy; agnation) under this heading are subsumed all agnatic relationships at different levels ranging from those between clansfolk to those between siblings.

2. M'moka: (affinity and cognation)<sup>2</sup> this concept covers a wide range of different types of connections between individuals, families and even lineages based on marriage and descent links. The categories recognized are:

a. bu'we: relationships with one's wives' and one's senior brothers' wives' agnates, and by extension with their spouses.<sup>3</sup>

b. busongani: relationships with one's sons' wives' and one's daughters' husbands' agnates, with one's junior brothers' wives' agnates and with one's sororal nephews' (nieces') wives' (husbands') agnates.

c. bunwico: relationships with one's mother's and one's wives' mothers' agnates.

d. bushi'ulu: relationships with one's father's mother's, mother's mother's, father's father's mother's and mother's father's mother's agnates.

e. mitamba: relationships with one's sisters' husbands' agnates.

f. buninanina: relationships between persons whose mothers are married to men of different families, but who are agnatically or cognatically close to one another, i.e. whose mothers are sisters or half-sisters, close parallel cousins or cross-cousins to one another.

3. Ultimately, the seniority principle is applied to all those males who make up the land-owning lineage on whose lands one is permitted to settle.<sup>4</sup> For those Bembe lineages which have established themselves along the shores of Lake Tanganyika on lands traditionally held by offshoots of the matrilineal Luba, seniority classifications are applied to

the living males of these early settler groups.

Since a great number of Bembe marry persons to whom they are agnatically and/or affinally and cognatically related - respecting, of course, various degrees of prohibition which we shall discuss - the seniority principles which are applied to each of the above mentioned categories of relationships tend to cut across one another, to overlap and even to contradict one another. Whenever there is such an apparent conflict in the application of seniority principles, it is safe to say that the positions resulting from affinity and cognation exercise a compelling influence on the terminological categories recognized and on the associated role expectations. The general Bembe attitude in this matter is reflected in such proverbs as: "One's honor is on the side of the affines;" "affinity is seed, agnation is dispute;" "my wife is my servant and I am the servant of her people;" "of father and mother, who is the greatest? Mother who bore you."

## II. The Terminological Principles of Seniority

It is our purpose to outline here the terminological distinctions made and the criteria at work in classifying kinsmen, only insofar as they are relevant to the comprehension of the seniority system. We are not concerned here with the actual modes of address that prevail in kinship relationships - a topic for which we would have to examine both kinship terms and personal names together with many variables such as respect, closeness, avoidance, conflict, euphemism, actual age, social setting, speaker's intention, etc. Bembe seniority distinctions operate along the following lines:

1. Minimal patri-lineage (a descent and residential group

which is, according to the situations and positions of its component houses, based on four to six known generations.) The various key distinctions both for the agnatic members of this group and their respective spouses operate in the following way.

a. Siblings: four terms are used to differentiate siblings. The set m'mulu-mto (senior-junior) is used by males to distinguish biologically older from junior brothers and by women to refer to their biologically older and younger sisters. The set ndume-aci is applied to brother-sister relationships irrespective of age considerations: ndume is always used by women to designate their brothers and the reciprocal aci always by men to classify their sisters. It never occurs to Bembe to add to these two terms any age descriptions. Thus the distinctions between siblings operate along lines of sex dichotomy and relative biological age within the same sex category. The way of classifying depends, of course, also upon the relative age position which a speaker occupies in the sibling group. Thus for the third-born son in a monogamous family with five sons, there are two seniors and two juniors among his siblings.

It should be noted that Bembe men, when discussing in- and intra-group relationships, commonly speak about their junior siblings and their sisters as wetu mwana (our child), thus stressing the notion that from certain structural points of view both one's junior brothers and one's sisters are thought to belong to a lower generation level.

b. Half-siblings: the sets m'mulu-mto and ndume-aci are extended to half-sibling classification, with due regard for sex dichotomy, but not for biological age. Half-siblings of the same sex classify one another as seniors and juniors, depending on the seniority status of their respective mothers. Thus in a household with two wives all sons by the junior wife are juniors to all sons by the senior wife. The co-wives are classified by their husband into senior and junior spouses in function of the relative time sequences in which the first legally binding marriage payment was transferred to their respective groups and not according to the sequences in which they actually joined their husband's homestead.<sup>5</sup> Children born from substitute wives under the practices of sororate and wife's brother's daughter marriage take the seniority status from their sociological mother.

c. Parallel cousins: (first, second, third, and fourth degrees, patrilineally descended an equal number of steps from a common ancestor) the sets m'mulu-mto (senior-junior) and ndume-aci (brother-sister) are applied to all these relationships with due regard for sex dichotomy and generation level. First parallel cousins of the same sex are separated into seniors and juniors on the basis of the relative seniority status of their interconnected fathers (which is in turn determined by the criteria outlined in a and b). Second, third and fourth parallel cousins of the same sex are separated into seniors and juniors depending on the relative seniority

status of their grandfathers, greatgrandfathers and great-great-grandfathers. Thus two fourth parallel cousins stand in a seniority relationship which is ultimately determined by that of their respective patrilineal great-great-grandfathers who were siblings or half-siblings to one another.

d. Father's generation: three terms are used. Father and his juniors are tata (my father), father's seniors are shi'ulu ( a term also used for father's father and mother's father) and father's sisters, half-sisters and female parallel cousins are cina (female father), both from a male and female speaker's point of view. The women married to these men fall in the corresponding categories of maha (my mother) and 'u'u (a term also used for father's mother and mother's mother). The women married to father's juniors and those married to father's seniors respectively fall in the categories of maha (my mother) and 'u'u (grandmother). But a further seniority distinction is introduced with regard to one's father's wives: one's own mother and her junior co-wives are classified as maha ( my mother), but one's mother's senior co-wives are identified as 'u'u (grandmother).

The Bambe classify all women of father's generation in his patri-lineage under the sole term cina. However, among them there is eventually a linked paternal aunt with whom the relationship is particularly close. She is the person whose marriage payments were assigned to one's father, i.e. the person on whose account father married one's mother. Ideally she is a full sister of father but



in many cases she may be his half-sister or a close parallel cousin (same grandfather). Since a Bembe does not necessarily marry his wives with payments provided for close agnates of his generation, not every Bembe has this linked paternal aunt. Concerning the husbands of paternal aunts, there are two regional variants: in one these men are terminologically identified with the paternal aunt (cina), in the other they are classified with grandfather (shi'ulu). The most widespread tendency is for the husband of the linked paternal aunt to be classified as a grandfather (shi'ulu). This terminology is intimately associated with two different sets of practices. On the one hand, as a classificatory grandfather, father's sister's husband is placed in the category of the ideal marriage partner. In the practice of sororate, when his first wife dies without children, he can lay claim to his wife's linked brother's daughter. Furthermore, in any case, a man stands in a special relationship to the wife and daughter of the linked brother of his own wife: should his wife depart and <sup>no</sup> ~~the compensation be given for her marriage payments not be returned to him,~~ he can lay legal claim in his wife's linked brother's wife, or more currently in his wife's linked brother's daughter. Father's sister's husband potentially also is a real grandfather because of two kinds of preferred marriages: either between a man and his father's sister's son's daughter or, less frequently, between a man and his father's sister's daughter's daughter. *(one classifies one's wife grandfather as one's grandfather)*

a. Children's generation: men and women classify their

own sons and daughters as mwana (child). There are no specific terms for son or daughter; whenever sex indications are necessary, the appropriate adjectives for male and female are added to mwana. A male speaker's seniors' children are grouped in the category of children (mwana), but his juniors' children are identified as mkyu'ulu (term used for one's own grandchildren). Women place their brothers' (and all those identified with them under a, b, and c) children in the special category mwanesenga (a composite term in which the word mwane- stresses a certain degree of legal claim which a paternal aunt has over her brother's child).

f. Other descending generations: It is relevant to note that the Bembe possess four distinct terms to classify both lineal and collateral agnates of descending generations: mwana (child), mkyu'ulu (grandchild), 'akyo'ololo (great-grandchild), and 'a'ombamacu (great-great-grandchild). The Bembe consider that the latter two positions are basically equivalent <sup>respectively</sup> ~~to those~~ <sub>to those</sub> ~~respective~~ of children and grandchildren. Persons who are the agnatic descendants of the fifth generation of a common male ancestor, identify themselves as the bwalu'a of a common founding father (shi'uluca). This six generation group, which we call a minimal lineage and which plays a vital role in the matrimonial system, can be defined as a unit whose youngest living members conceive of themselves as being the bwalu'a of a common male ancestor, or more precisely in Bembe terms, who think of themselves as the descendants of two generations

of children and two generations of grandchildren borne by one ancestor.

2. Mother's patri-lineage

- a. Mother and the female agnates of her generation who are her juniors are classified as maha (my mother).
- b. All female agnates of mother's generation who are her seniors are classified as 'u'u (the term which is also used for mother's mother and father's mother).
- c. Mother's father and his brothers (senior and junior) are shi'ulu (grandfather) and their sisters are 'u'u (grandmother).
- d. Mother's brothers, half-brothers and male parallel cousins are all identified by the special term mwico (my male mother).<sup>6</sup> Although terminologically conceived as a unit, the Bembe clearly recognize three categories of banwico: the linked maternal uncle (who received the marriage payments given for one's mother), the full brothers of mother (i.e., bana ba maha, persons with whom she has the same mother) and the other male agnates of her generation. When, however, as is often the case, payments given for one's mother were assigned to her half-brother, or to her father's brother's son, there is a tendency to consider as close maternal uncles all males of mother's generation in her extended family, in contrast to the other members of different houses in mother's patri-lineage.<sup>7</sup>
- e. Mother's brothers' children: there exists a specific term mbyala, which is used both by males and females to classify all persons whom we would identify as first

cross-cousins. This unqualified terminology is used by young people (before reaching social maturity through initiations and marriage negotiations). But as individuals grow up, and become more responsible members of their communities, they learn from their grandparents how to make more nuanced distinctions between categories of people. In other words, seniority distinctions are introduced. From the point of view of a male speaker, the sons of the linked maternal uncle and of those who are identified with him in his family group are conceived of as seniors (m'mulu), i.e. are terminologically identified with senior siblings, while the daughters of these men are classified as sisters (aci). For women, the sons of these maternal uncles are classified with full brothers (ndume) and their daughters are treated as seniors (m'mulu, woman speaker). Sons and daughters of distant maternal uncles in mother's lineage, however, are kept in the mbyala category. Finally, when the linked maternal uncle dies, his sons and his brothers' sons take over the terminological status of mwico (male mother), but their daughters remain in the sister category; *they stay in that position as long as*

3. Father's mother's, mother's mother's, father's father's mother's, and mother's father's mother's patri-lineages: *their father's sororal nephew is alive.* The terminological principle outlined does not really apply to all agnatic members of these four groups, but in its simplest and most common expression to the agnatic descendants of the full brothers (bana ba maha) of the above mentioned women, i.e. to limited descent lines in their minimal lineages

which the Bembe call either numba (house) or 'ebangyu (fragment; potsherd). All male agnates in these lines, regardless of their generation are treated both by male and female speakers, as grandfathers (bashulu). The female members of these groups, however, are designated both by men and women in a more nuanced way, with *due* consideration for generation level. They fall into three categories depending on their respective generation level with regard to speaker: aci (sister), cina (female father) and 'u'u (grandmother). Thus one's father's female matrilateral cross-cousin is cina; mother's, father's father's and mother's father's female matrilateral cross-cousins are 'u'u; father's male matrilateral cross-cousin's daughter or father's <sup>father's</sup> male matrilateral cross-cousin's son's daughter are aci, etc. In the many cases where, because of the closely knit local matrimonial communities, regular face-to-face relationships are possible with the sons and daughters of these females, the terminologies appropriate for descendants of sisters, paternal aunts and grandmothers are used. The most significant relationship thus traced is with one's father's female matrilateral cross-cousin's daughter, who is treated as a classificatory mbyala. (*cross cousin*)

Relationships with these four categories of grandfathers are close and very practical. They play a decisive role in marriage preferences and marriage prohibitions. Because of the fact that Bembe overwhelmingly marry within limited ~~of~~ local communities (composed by members of both their own and of different clans), most cognatic relatives mentioned here live in adjoining villages, and may to some extent even

inhabit the same village. Moreover because of repetitive marriages between cognatically related persons, one or more categories of "grandfathers" may be merged together. Finally, members of these various groups are continually drawn together in matters of mutual aid, and in ceremonial affairs particularly those connected with birth, marriage and death. When, e.g. a woman is married, two goats are to be provided by her close agnates and to be shared by representatives of the group of that woman's maternal uncles and grandfathers.

4. The wife's extended family: The relevant seniority principles can be briefly stated as follows: the term m'maci (wife) is extended to her junior sisters, although the latter are also designated as mto'aci (which means junior of my wife, rather than little wife); the term for mother-in-law (maha bu'we) is extended to one's wife's senior sisters. All persons classified by one's wife as brother (ndume) are one's m'we (this is a reciprocal term used by men for their wives' brothers and their sisters' husbands). As pointed out already one's wife's brothers' children are placed, according to regions, either in the mwepasenga (term used by women to designate her brothers' children) or mkyu'ulu (granddaughter) categories.

Seniority distinctions are also applied to the husbands of one's wife's sisters: wife's senior sisters' husbands are classified as m'mulu (senior) and wife's junior sisters' husbands as mto (junior).

5. Senior and junior brothers' wives' extended families:

- a. One's senior brother's wife is referred to by a descriptive term, but the implication currently stated is that she is one's wife.

- b. One's junior brother's wife is referred to by the term used for one's own son's wife (mwale'aci).
  - c. One's senior brother's wife's senior sisters are classified as "mother-in-law," her junior sisters as "wife."
  - d. One's junior brother's wife's senior sisters are classified as msonganinane (a reciprocal term used for one another, e.g. by the parents and maternal uncles of a married couple).
  - e. One's senior brother's wife's parents are treated as father- and mother-in-law, but one's junior brother's wife's parents fall in the msonganinane category (see d).
  - f. One's senior brother's wife's brothers are ma (brother-in-law) but one's junior brother's wife's brothers again are msonganinane (the literal meaning of this deverbative is: he/she who makes a marriage arrangement with me).
6. Members of one's sister's husband's family fall into the following categories: his brothers are m'we, his sisters m'mokya (special designation for this category of in-laws), his parents msonganinane. One's sister's husband's children are mwihwa (sororal nephew, reciprocal term for mwico, male mother), while the children of her husband's brothers and sisters are mwana (child).
7. Father's sister's husband's family: We have noted already that father's sister is designated as cina and that her husband tends to be identified with a grandfather (shi'ulu). Her husband's brothers are classified with him in the grandfather category. One's father's sisters' children are, as was already explained, mbyala (specific term for cross-cousins),

with the implication that from a male speaker's point of view they are junior brothers and sisters, and that from a female speaker's standpoint they are junior sisters and brothers. Seniority distinctions are not normally extended to the children by other wives of father's sisters' husbands or to the children of the brothers of these men, unless a second marriage between the two families complicates the situation. The relationship with father's sister's husband's linked sister and her daughter is particularly relevant: they are respectively classified as cina and mbyala.

8. Seniority relationships also apply to persons - agnatically related or not - who are sororal nephews of different members of the same extended family. Thus if A's real maternal uncle is a senior of B's real maternal uncle, then in cognatic relationships A is senior (m'mulu) to B.

It is clear that these involved, but coherent, seniority distinctions among the Bembe play an important role in their marriage system. At this point it seems already clear that they are a means to divide the various worlds of kinship interaction into categories of possible and preferred and of prohibited marriage partners. Their fullest functional importance, however, can be understood only if we still look at the seniority principles in operation within the patri-clans.

### III. Seniority Principles in Clan and Lineage Segmentation

In the preceding discussion of seniority classification in the minimal patri-lineage, the application of the seniority principles was examined on the basis of small scale relationships between members of a closely knit residential kinship group. It was indicated that in the minimal lineage seniority distinctions



were based on sex dichotomy, biological and legal age, partial differentiation and partial merging of generation levels, partial merging of lineal and collateral relatives and that these distinctions were made both by males and females along the same general lines. The minimal lineage was defined as a descent group comprising in its optimal expression all agnatic descendants up to the fifth descending generation of a common male lineage-founder, whose male and unmarried female members made up a residential group. But these small lineages are part of a wider framework of lineage and clan divisions, and for our purpose it is necessary to examine the extent to which seniority is applied to broader agnatic relationships.

The Bembe are subdivided into sixteen patri-clans, which are named, partially dispersed, non-exogamous, non-totemic and politically non-integrated units.<sup>8</sup> Clans have fairly well-known histories of migration, conflict and alliance; they each consider to have contributed to Bembe culture a certain number of culture elements of their own. Among the sixteen clans some are linked together because of traditions about a distant common origin and migration and because of traditions of prolonged friendly interaction. Clans possess huge genealogies which may include as many as 10 to 12 known generations and which, in the case of linked clans, extend beyond this point.<sup>9</sup> The interesting points about these genealogies are that not merely all male links are well remembered, but that also the names of all female agnates at any generation level (for the more remote generations insofar as they have left any progeniture) are included. The Bembe know to which groups these women were married out and, for

women of at least the last six generations, they know the pre-marriage terminological relationships in which they stood with their husbands. They also know and mention in their genealogies the names of all wives that were brought into the groups, although for earlier generations they tend to leave out the names of all wives who did not leave any male or female offspring; they also know the clan and lineage origins of those wives and their pre-marriage terminological positions versus their husbands.

In any Bembe clan there are three recognized levels of named segments or lineages, with which particular ritual, land-owning, political and/or matrimonial functions are associated. The smallest of these segments, which in the preceding pages we have identified as a minimal lineage of a maximum span of six generations, is the normal exogamous unit (although later some qualifications will be added to this statement). As an example, the Bungwe clan, at the highest level of subdivision, is segmented into seven named largest segments, the founders of which are said to be sons by two different wives of Bungwe. The agnatic core of these seven groups is found in four different areas of Bembeland and for each group the local membership inhabits from two to six adjoining village areas (village plus outlying hamlets). Each of the largest segments, in turn, is known to be subdivided into n smaller segments, whose founders, as the genealogies always demonstrate, are ranked as grandsons or great-grandsons, rarely as sons, of the founder of the largest segment of which they are part. Thus the Basi'ekombe are one of the seven largest segments in the Bungwe clan. It is subdivided into ten named smaller segments, all of which are said to have been founded by grandsons or great-grandsons of the ancestor 'Ekombe. The agnatic core that makes up any

of these ten groups inhabits either a single village or a village and one or two outlying hamlets, or in exceptional cases where the group has an unusual numerical strength, two villages plus some outlying hamlets. Within each such smaller segment, a number of smallest segments - which we are calling minimal lineages - are recognized. Thus in the example under review the Basimlinjwa are one of the ten smaller segments in the Basi'ekombe. The majority of its male and unmarried female members, and a few of its married female members, live in a single village. The group is segmented into five named minimal lineages, all based on not more than six known generations. The founders of these groups are all grandchildren of Mlinjwa. These minimal lineages are exogamous; they each have a recognized elder ('ula) and the elder of the most senior of the five minimal lineages is headman of the village (mwenembuka).

This leads us to the formulation of the seniority principles in inter-lineage relationships. The relevant features are following:

1. In all clans we find a large number of exogamous minimal lineages as defined. Detailed seniority classifications, as outlined above in II, 1, operate between members of these groups.
2. All minimal lineages within the clan are ranked, insofar as the male members of these groups are concerned, into junior and senior segments, depending on the well-known genealogical position which their founders occupy versus one another. Thus the men in lineage A are junior to the men in lineages B and C because the respective founders of these lineages are thought of as siblings or half-siblings who stood in an identical

seniority relationships. Furthermore the men in lineages A, B, C are all junior to the men in lineages D, E, F, because the founder of the larger segment of which the latter *are* part is known to have stood in that seniority relationship versus the founder of the other larger segment which comprises A, B, C, etc.

3. The resulting terminological situation is based on the following principles:

a. All men, irrespective of their generation, in a senior lineage are referred to by men of a junior lineage as betu ba'ulu (plural of wetu m'mulu, our seniors); correspondingly, all men in the latter lineage are referred to as betu bato (plural of wetu mto, our juniors) by the former.

b. Female members of the junior lineage view their relationships with the men in the senior lineage through the eyes of their male agnates in a double perspective: as putative daughters of their own male kinsmen dealing with the senior male agnates of their alleged fathers. In other words, it is as if in dealings between members of different agnatically related lineages any lineage were subdivided into two generations: a male generation and a generation of females thought to be the daughters of those males. The terminological result is that women in a junior lineage view all men in a senior lineage as bashi'ulu (grandfathers), i.e. in Bembe interpretation ba'ulu ba tata wetu (seniors of our father). Conversely, all women in a senior lineage classify men in a junior lineage as ba tata (fathers), i.e. in Bembe interpretation

as bato ba tata wetu (juniors of our father)

- c. Agnatic relationships between the female members of different minimal lineages are largely irrelevant. Seniority distinctions are definitely not extended to include this type of relationships. When asked to identify female members of another agnatically related minimal lineage, women refer to them as bětu babucwa (our kinsfolk, or rather, those with whom we have a common genealogy).
- d. These basic seniority alignments of members of different agnatically related minimal lineages are irreversible, but they are strangely complicated for specific individuals and families in these groups because of matrimonial ties that may bind members of different <sup>agnatically related</sup> lineages together. It is well to remember here, what was said in II, 2, e and II, 3 about the terminological position of a man's male matrilateral cross-cousins (identified as seniors) and the men in father's mother's, mother's mother's, father's father's mother's and mother's father's mother's families (identified as grandfathers). Thus as far as women are concerned, men in lineages senior to those of their own male kinsmen are grandfathers, but also many men in lineages junior to those of their own male kinsmen may, because of marriage links, occupy the position of grandfather. This fact is all the more important since in any lineage, which I have studied, there are always a certain number of individuals who are linked by various marriage ties to other individuals of agnatically related lineages. Thus

the agnatic code of seniority relationships is continually manipulated and modified for specific individuals because of cross-cutting affinal and uterine ties which are built into the agnatic framework.

#### IV. Seniority Principles and Marriage Rules

According to the kinship relationships existing prior to marriage, the Bembe distinguish between four types of affinity (m'moka):

1. m'moka wa bu'we: which is a marriage between persons who were previously not related to one another. Such marriages do, of course, occur and may bring together persons of any clan, although the great geographical distances that separate certain clans or clan segments from one another provide for the fact that certain geographically widely separated groups have never been matrimonially involved with one another.
2. m'moka wa 'ilume: which is a marriage between two persons who are agnatically, but not otherwise linked to one another. Such marriages are relatively frequent and genealogical records indicate quite a number of such cases. Bembe do not normally take a wife in their own minimal lineage, i.e. a female with whom they trace a common agnatic link extending over five ascending generations or less.<sup>10</sup> There are, however, exceptional circumstances (I have come across twelve such cases in Bembeland) where marriages between members of the minimal lineage, indeed between members of the extended family, were known to have occurred. Invariably, they were considered as shame-marriages, which had been permitted only as a result of long decision-making in the in-group in order,

it was always said, to cope with its numerical weakness and poverty. Whenever permitted, these marriages were concluded between two persons standing in a grandfather-granddaughter relationship. All examples indicated that this link was interpreted either as a marriage between a man and his junior half-brother's daughter, or between a man and his father's junior brother's or half-brother's son's daughter. It was always explicitly stated that, at any rate, a marriage between a man and his full brother's daughter, or between a classificatory brother and sister (e.g. patrilineal grandchildren or great-grandchildren of a common male ancestor) would have been impossible. Marriages between members of different minimal lineages in the same clan are conditioned by a number of rules analyzed below.

3. m'moka wa i'aci: which is a marriage between an affinally or cognatically, but not agnatically, related couple, e.g. a marriage with a member of one's wife's or senior brother's wife's groups (in a different clan) or with a member of one's mother's father's mother's, mother's mother's, father's father's mother's or mother's father's mother's groups (in a different clan). These marriages are relatively frequent, but involve various restrictions analyzed below.

4. marriages between persons who are simultaneously linked by agnatic and affinal and/or cognatic ties: The Bembe do not use a special terminology for this frequent type of union, which functionally they consider as the ideal form of marriage because of the double consolidation of existing kinship relationships which it produces. Structurally these marriages are thought to fall in category 3, because

of the fact that the terminological positions resulting from the affinal and/or uterine ties are decisive factors in deciding whether such a marriage is possible or not.

These various points can be illustrated by a brief examination of the situation prevailing for the above-mentioned five minimal lineages that make up the Mlinjwa segment of the Bungwa clan. When I studied this small group, the bulk of whose members lived in 'Akone village, 259 marriages in which both male and female members of the Mlinjwa segment had been involved over eight generations, were remembered and mentioned in their genealogy: 141 had been concluded with other members of the Bungwa clan and were interpreted in terms of affinity categories 2 or 4; 56 with members of the linked Basiluso'e clan (in those segments of that clan that were geographically very close) and most marriages here were interpreted in terms of category 3; 47 with members of other Bembe clans (mostly in geographically close segments of them) and these marriages were interpreted in terms of category 1 or 3; 15 with members of the Bahoma (non-Bembe group settled in villages geographically very close to that of the Mlinjwa) and these marriages were interpreted in terms of category 1 and 3.

We can now, in order to determine the importance of seniority distinctions, formulate the various rules of marriage in reference to the pre-existing relative terminological positions which the marriage partners occupy.

1. Where two persons of different minimal lineages in the same clan are purely bound by this patrilineal relationship, the sole type of union permitted is between a male of a senior lineage and a female of a junior lineage. These two



persons stand to one another in a grandfather - granddaughter relationship. Terminologically, as we already explained, this granddaughter can be in any generation of the junior group, but the actual detailed investigation of many large completely registered genealogies shows that the tendency is for a man in a senior lineage to take a wife who in her own lineage is either of a generation level lower than that occupied by him in his lineage or, much less frequently, who is of the same generation level.

2. Where two persons of different minimal lineages of the same or of different clans are cognatically related, following types of unions are possible and practised in large numbers:

a. grandfather - granddaughter marriages: this type of unions, which is of all marriages between cognatically related persons, by far the most frequent, signifies a marriage bond between a woman and a man in one of the families which are classified as grandfather groups, i.e. father's mother's, mother's mother's, father's father's mother's and mother's father's mother's families.

The actual data indicate that this type of marriage points particularly to unions between a man and his male patrilineal cross-cousin's daughter (i.e. his father's full or half-sister's son's child) or between a man and his father's father's sister's son's <sup>son's</sup> ~~daughter's~~ daughter,

The data also show that the ultimate inter-connecting male and female may be siblings, half-siblings or close parallel cousins (same grandfather) to one another, i.e. that the above-mentioned unions are concluded in the real as well as limited classificatory sense.

and rarely to unions between a man and his female patrilineal cross-cousin's daughter or between a man and his father's father's sister's son's daughter's daughter.

They also show, that within this general pattern, preference is given to a union between the descendants of linked kinsmen, i.e., for example, between a man and his father's linked sister's or half-sister's or parallel cousin's son's daughter. In Bembe conception the ideal marriage arrangement is, in other words, one whereby a man procures for his own son his linked sister's grandchild or for his own son's son his linked sister's child (i.e. her great-grandchild conceived to be a child).

b. cross-cousins: marriages between close<sup>first</sup> cross-cousins (descendants of full and half-siblings of opposite sex) are not tolerated; we pointed out before that their relationship is equated to a brother - sister link.<sup>11</sup> Yet, there is a fair number of cases where a marriage link is said to bind two people who are mbyala (cross-cousin) to one another. There are two general patterns of interpreting marriages as a cross-cousin union:

1. Infrequent cases where a man is said to have married his mbyala wa mwico, i.e. matrilateral cross-cousin. Whenever this is the case, the data show that there are two possibilities: one is married to his mother's father's full or half-brother's son's daughter; one is married to his mother's father's sister's son's daughter.
2. More frequent cases where a man is said to be married to his mbyala wa cina (patrilateral cross-cousin). The data show that the range of possibilities

is wider here. Only in very rare cases is a marriage with the daughter of a distant female parallel cousin of father involved. Most of the time the union is with one's father's female matrilateral cross-cousin's daughter or with one's father's father's mother's brother's son's daughter's daughter or with one's father's sister's husband's sister's daughter. In all these cases the Bembe are very conscious of the fact that the marriage partners are of the same generation level and that there are two intermediate female links.

c. There are also rare cases where a man is said to have married his cina (father's sister). This applies only to broad classificatory situations where a man is known to be married to a woman of a generation level higher than his own one in his father's mother's or father's father's mother's group.

In all cases where marriages are placed in the mbyala or cina type, Bembe try to emphasize the abnormal character of these unions. They underscore the fact that these marriages are the result of a certain freedom taken with the code of marriage rules. This code states that the ideal form of marriage is one between a grandfather and granddaughter, in the agnatic or cognatic sense, whereby the male belongs to a higher generation level than his wife. According to this code the normal flow of women is from junior lineages to men in senior lineages, and then in cognatic terms, from senior lineages to junior ones. As one of the applications of this

code women should be married into their grandfathers groups, but men should not take women in these groups. However, men against all expectations, take women in these groups <sup>women</sup> who are of their own or an ascending generation; this infringement of rules is made acceptable by public confession of shame and the ritual exchange of goats. Bembe ascribe their causes to bunyemu, mutual love and respect between groups of in-laws.

3. When we go back to the case of the Basimlinjwa, we find following situation in regard to the 141 marriages concluded by Mlinjwa men and women with members of their clan:

a. ~~Concerning marriages which occurred between members of the clan, 26 marriages linked members of the Mlinjwa segment itself, but they were always concluded between members of different minimal lineages. Of the thirteen Mlinjwa men who were married to Mlinjwa girls, eight men had taken girls belonging to lineages junior to their own and five had married women in lineages senior to their own. In all but two of the thirteen cases was the marriage interpreted as a union between a grandfather and a granddaughter (conceived either in agnatic or in cognatic terms); in the two other cases which both related to men marrying a wife in a lineage senior to their own the links were conceived in terms of mbyala relationships.~~

b. As for the remaining 115 marriages between Mlinjwa and members of their clan, the distribution was as follows: 49 Mlinjwa men had married girls in segments of their clan junior to their own; only 11 Mlinjwa men had married girls in segments senior to their own; 50

Mlinjwa girls were married to men in segments of their clan junior to their own and only 5 Mlinjwa girls were married to men in segments senior to their own. The overwhelming majority of all marriages was conceived in terms of grandfather - granddaughter relationships: men marrying "the daughters of our juniors," women being married to the cross-cousins of their "fathers" or the sons of their father's father's cross-cousins, etc. All other marriages were conceived in mbyala, and in some rare cases, cina terms.

One is struck by the perfect reciprocity in exchange between the senior Mlinjwa group (which gave 50 of its female kin to its juniors) and the junior lineages (which returned 49 women to the Mlinjwa). To some extent the case is typical in that it illustrates the search for balanced relationships. To some extent it is atypical in that the Mlinjwa have given many more women to junior groups than to senior groups. This is merely due to the sheer seniority position which Mlinjwa occupied in the general area within which matrimonial exchanges occurred. Of all seven lineages of the Bungwe clan which happened to be established in geographically contiguous villages, the Mlinjwa segment happened to be <sup>the most senior; all segments senior to Mlinjwa</sup> ~~geographically more or less distant.~~ <sub>happened to be geographically more or less distant.</sub> One should not conceive of this search for reciprocity in terms of narrow exchange marriages. Indeed, narrow exchange marriages of two <sup>men</sup> exchanging their sisters or daughters are totally impossible. The closest, and rare, cases of narrower exchange between two families

which we have found involve a marriage between a woman and her father's full senior brother's wife's full brother or between a man and his father's full sister's husband's full sister's daughter, and such rare cases were always conditioned by conflict over nonfulfillment of marriage requirements. In other words, the search for reciprocity essentially affects the marriage preferences of some of the children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of in-laws.

4. There are other marriage rules with which the seniority distinctions are clearly correlated.

a. Polygynous marriage: Bembe can and do marry persons who are in a junior sister (mto) relationship with their first wife; in a few cases these women are full sisters to one another, but mostly the marriage is with a junior parallel cousin (mto) of the first wife (a member of her minimal lineage or of her extended family). We have also found cases where a Bembe was married to two women standing to one another in a cross-cousin relationship, in this case again the second wife could only be selected from among the wife's patrilateral cross-cousins.

b. Bembe men can and do marry wives from among the junior sisters of their senior brothers' wives, but never from among their senior sisters; they cannot marry any of their junior brothers' wives' senior or junior sisters.

c. Bembe practice widow inheritance with due regard for the seniority code. Men inherit widows from members

of their extended family: from their seniors, never from their juniors; from their father and father's juniors, never from their father's seniors; from among father's wives who are junior to their mother (never, of course, their mother or women who are senior co-wives of their mother). In rare circumstances, when there are no close agnatic heirs available, Bembe inherit their linked mother's brother's wife, but this implies that they take up residence with their mother's brother's group.

d. Father and son can take wives from the same house but only in the sense that a son can take a wife in groups to which wives of his father who are junior to his own mother belong. These marriages are infrequent. When they occur the pattern is for a man to marry his father's junior wife's junior sister or his father's junior wife's brother's daughter.

e. A man can marry buninana, i.e. the daughter of his mother's junior sister's son, provided mother's junior sister is not married to one's father. This marriage again implies a shift in residence: it happens that an older bewidowed woman is not, or does not want to be inherited and goes to settle with one or more of her children with her junior sister's husband's people. The host group then tends to consolidate the link by the type of marriage mentioned here. This form of marriage is again of the grandfather - granddaughter type, since a man is senior to his mother's junior sister's son and for a woman father's senior is a grandfather.

## V. Concluding Remarks

Seniority distinctions, as they operate in the framework of the Bembe family, lineage and clan, in agnatic as well as in affinal and cognatic relationships, constitute a logically coherent system which allows for marriages in all directions in and outside the clan, within a limited range of choices and preferences. Their full impact can be understood only against the complex background of the internal structure of the various interconnected families and lineages (e.g. unevenness in numerical strength, in sex and age distribution, in the number of component houses; degree of residential cohesiveness of the lineage). The multiple nuances in genealogical closeness between different individuals in any given group, which is primarily caused by the large amount of polygynous marriages, is particularly relevant to the comprehension of marriage arrangements.<sup>12</sup> This is illustrated, e.g. by the marriage connections between Tengya minimal lineage (of the Mlinjwa segment) and M'minje lineage (of the junior Akyumba segment). The configuration of marriages over five generations clearly shows the interplay of genealogical proximity in the lineage and the pattern of repetitive marriages between members of the two groups. In the first generation, the lineage founder Tengya took his third wife among the M'minje; his full sister was married to the M'minje. In the second generation Tengya's daughter by his first wife was married to the M'minje and Tengya's unmarried sister's son, Sanganya, married a M'minje woman. In the third generation, two daughters of a son of <sup>Tengya</sup> M'minje by his second wife (half-siblings to one another) were married into M'minje; Sanganya's



son also married a M'minje woman. In the fourth generation, two daughters of two different grandsons of Tengya were married to M'minje and two full brothers of one of these girls took each a M'minje woman. In the fifth generation a woman was married into the M'minje (from where her own mother came) and her close parallel cousin (one grandfather) took a wife from the M'minje. The close sequence of marriages in the Sanganya line (a man, his son and his lineal grandson all taking wives in the same group, and not returning any women) is an exceptional situation which is connected with the fact that at the death of Sanganya his son had been placed under the guardianship (buleci) of his maternal uncles (M'minje) who had been trying to keep him and his children in their village by giving them several wives.

The system of seniority is intimately associated with the ntamba custom of linked marriages. The marriage goods supposed to come into the family for an out-marrying female are assigned to one of her close male agnates so that he can marry a wife with them. Theoretically, the consequence of this rule might be that there could develop an indefinite chain of ntamba linkages between males and females of many different groups (e.g. one marries a woman in group A with goods to receive for his sister married into group B to a man who is himself dependent upon his sister married into group C, etc.). This potentially unlimited chain of matrimonial interdependences between various individuals of many different groups is limited, however, because of repetitive marriages between members of closely related houses and because of the existence of what one could call limited local matrimonial communities. In both spheres the seniority distinctions have functioned as devices for classifying kinsmen into marriageable

and non-marriageable ones. Moreover, the seniority system and the repetitive marriage exchanges which it permits between the members of well-circumscribed communities, are devices which help to limit the flow of marriage goods and to replace the actual exchanges of goods by reciprocal preferential marriage claims. Thus A owes goods to B, because he married B's sister, but the debt can be cleared if B's son is allowed to marry A's son's daughter, and this principle can, of course, be expanded to include a broader range of kinsmen on both A's and B's sides. In 1951 the Bembe claimed that from 140 to 150 (regional differences according to matrimonial communities) units of marriage goods (called bitungwa, lit. things that are being tied together) were necessary in order to effect a fully legal marriage. These included goats (20 - 25), pieces of cloth (40 - 45), iron tools (30 - 45), packages of salt (40 - 45), and copper bracelets (3 - 6). In 1951, the courts and the chiefs (all introduced by the Belgian Colonial Administration) sanctioned these amounts in their various decisions and had, with the help of the administration, even devised formulae to compute the value of these units in francs. Moreover, the data provided by older administrative documents indicated that the amount of goods fixed and recognized by the courts had been steadily increasing since the First World War, when the Bembe began to be fully exposed to the monetary system. It is also clear that by 1951, wage-earners and people with cash (derived from chiefly administrative, military and police functions, from the growing of cotton, from the marketing of some cash crops and of fish, from canoe-building, or gold thefts) depended increasingly less on the mtamba provisions for their marriages, and actually transferred the number of marriage goods to their wives' families

(fixed mostly in cash, but also partially in natura). But all this did not eliminate the fact that the Bembe did not have in their villages the quantities of goats, etc., that would have been necessary for concluding every marriage. Villages where one could find more than about thirty goats (jointly herded) were certainly rare. Therefore, in traditional Bembe society the concept of marriage payments was largely a matter of theory, a system for computing and expressing the balance of credits and debits in the reciprocal relationships between groups. In Bembe tradition, one could exert a marriage claim whenever he had been publicly assigned a mtamba in his group; this mtamba served as a kind of collateral for his own marriage. In accepting a wife in another group, and in being accepted, he automatically assumed for himself and his group the obligation to make the deferred counter-exchange of a woman of his group. When I studied the Bembe, this simple system had been subject to great strain because of the money economy and the fact that more and more individuals were returning cash instead of women, a situation which considerably affected the stability of marriages and the esprit de corps of lineage groups and gave rise to an exceptional amount of litigation. The contention, however, is not that marriages did not entail a limited transfer of goods, e.g. there was a small courtship payment given by the suitor's grandfather to the wife's family and which sealed the marriage agreement; there were one or two sacrificial goats to be provided for the wife's agnates, her maternal uncles and her four categories of grandfathers; there was one goat to be given to the girl's father's linked sister; there was the death payment of one goat (asa'o) to be provided by a husband in case his wife died in his village or by a father in case his married daughter

died during a stay in her own group; there were the numerous small gift exchanges between in-laws on the occasion of births and visits.

Seniority as it operates in a closely-knit agnatic group is also a device to strengthen the sense of identity, solidarity and mutual interdependence. This is illustrated e.g. by various practices which are linked with the seniority distinctions in the in-group: juniors inherit wives from seniors, but the reverse is impossible; however, children of seniors do inherit wives from their fathers' juniors, but children of juniors cannot inherit wives from their fathers' seniors; daughters of juniors cannot be assigned as mtamba to their fathers' seniors, but daughters of seniors can be assigned as mtamba to their fathers' juniors; seniors, however, can receive their half-brothers' sisters as mtamba, but they or their sons have the obligation to return a mtamba to the house of their half-siblings, etc.

It would also seem that the seniority distinctions are a technique which has helped the Bembe to adjust to the matrilineal system of the northern Luba groups which were pre-established in their country and which *has* made possible limited marriage exchanges between both. It was pointed out before that the Bembe classify these matrilineal groups as seniors; this means that for the Bembe it is perfectly normal to give them some of their women. This allows some men in the matrilineal groups to raise children for their own matri-lineages. In return, the matrilineal groups which do not accept first cross-cousin marriages and adhere to the Crow type of terminology, accept marriages between a woman and her mother's mother's brother's son. We have seen that the Bembe classify the males in one's mother's mother's group as grandfathers,

so that the above-mentioned union fits into their ideal marriage pattern. I am all the more convinced that the Bembe seniority system is partially a response to the matrilineal systems to which they were exposed, because of the fact that seniority distinctions are present among the historically related Lega only in those groups which are in contact with offshoots of the northernmost matrilineal Luba.

In their method of placing a large number of different categories of persons into the grandfather group, and in their marked preference for classificatory grandfather-granddaughter unions, the Bembe have institutionalized to its extreme the concept of identity between grandparents and grandchildren, which is prevalent among many of the surrounding tribes. In Bembe society a grandfather stands in a very close relationship with his real grandchildren and with the children of his junior brothers: he blesses his granddaughter when she leaves for her husband's homestead; he performs several rituals when his granddaughter does not bear children; his spirit is said to appear in dreams and to induce his grandson to go through the initiations connected with membership in associations or spirit cults; he acts as suitor on behalf of his grandson; he constantly counsels his grandchildren and stands in a permanent mild joking relationship with them. The normal reciprocal term of address between a grandfather and his grandchildren is mpane, a term which means as much a friend or companion. The ideal form of marriage is one whereby a man gives his female mpane to his male mpane, i.e. whereby a man gives his son's daughter to his wife's brother's son (to whom he is a grandfather because of his marriage to the latter's paternal aunt).

Finally, genealogical method is an indispensable tool in the

study of Bembe seniority and marriage - one which is constantly used by the Bembe themselves. The accurately known, very extensive genealogies constitute a record of generation levels, of levels of segmentation, of degrees of genealogical distances, of seniority alignments of lineages, and a compendium of marriage links and mtamba assignments. They are documents which clarify the reciprocal marriage obligations, claims and preferences of different groups of people. The Bembe, as I have observed them, take delight in reciting their elaborate, well-constructed genealogies and in unravelling through them the relationships and duties between people. Such recitations invariably drew together large numbers of people, including agnates, affines and cognates, and were the object of endless comments and arguments. I was often requested by the Bembe to write down their genealogies, even if I did not want to, so that they might have a written record or simply so as to give them the pleasure of talking genealogy. The Bembe also find in their genealogies all kinds of detailed justifications and interpretations for their actions and customs, such as how and why certain descent lines were incorporated into the patri-lineages, how and why certain groups broke their residential ties, why they gave more women to certain houses than to others, etc. No Bembe, however influential, except those who under the colonial system tried to make political profit from the manipulation of genealogies in order to establish their credentials for leadership, would have even thought of making a private soliloquy of the recitation of genealogies; this was a group affair, which required the cooperation and consent of a great many people and which was in itself an aspect of group solidarity.

## NOTES

1. Field work among the Bembe was carried out from December, 1949, to June, 1952, under the auspices of l'Institut pour la Recherche scientifique en Afrique Centrale, Brussels.
2. Throughout the study "cognation" and "cognatic" are used synonymously with "uterine" to designate a descent link traced through one or more women.
3. In order to simplify this outline, we view the situation merely from a male speaker's point of view. Further in the article, we shall often be compelled to examine both the male and female viewpoints.
4. "Strangers" in Bembe villages, which are controlled by patrilineages, generally are persons who are descended <sup>from</sup> ~~of~~ female members of the local lineages and who have come to settle with their mother's people or with their grandfathers. They also include a limited number of in-laws.
5. This first payment is called 'o'o ya m'mo'o (the chicken of courtship) and is to be understood as the formal acceptance of the suitor.
6. The concept "male mother" is not clear from the form <sup>mwico</sup> ~~mwico~~ (which is the form as used in the first person singular of the possessive); it is clear, however, from the second and third person possessive forms nyoko-lume (your mother-male) and nina-lume (his mother-male).

7. Only in a few Bembe villages, and typically among some easternmost Lega, is a distinction made in mother's generation between males who are senior to one's real linked maternal uncle and those who are junior to him; the former are classified with grandfathers, the latter with the maternal uncle (male mother).

8. Besides the sixteen large clans, there are a few smaller groups which call themselves Bembe and are of Bembe culture, but which have their clan ties in Lega country.

9. The genealogies (ibucwa) which sustain the clan ('elongo) are conceived in terms of generation levels (bibuci) and sequences of lineages (bibundi). Families (extended, composite, elementary) are called numba (houses) or mbombo (packages). The sibling group is currently designated as msolo (a term which applies to any of the holes in the wooden mancala game board) or simply as bana ba maha (children of my mother).

10. The maximal unit within which widows are normally inherited is the extended family. The assignment of mtamba (matrimonially linked sisters and daughters) follows a pattern of preferences (siblings, fathers, half-siblings, parallel cousins). With these general guidelines in mind, the Bembe tolerate many nuances which are correlated with unevenness in sex and age distribution, in numerical strength, and in generation levels that mark the various component houses of the lineage.

11. In this strict proscription of marriages between close first



cross-cousins, the Bembe do not differ from several other neighboring ethnic groups, such as the Lega, the matrilineal fishermen of northern Luba origin, the Zimba or <sup>Kwame.</sup> Kwame.

12. Among the Mliniwa, e.g., which is a rather poor and numerically weak group, eighty married men - both living and dead - were included in the genealogy: three had married four wives each, seven had three wives each, twenty-three had two wives each, and forty-seven had one wife each, but the latter category included many younger males who were due to get a second or third wife.