

THE SHUNGWE DIADEM OF THE VIRA CHIEF

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The Vira (also called Benialenge, after their ruling clan) traditionally were constituted as a state (*). The chief (*mwami*) ruled with a council of eight title-holding dignitaries (called *bazyoga*, *bazingi*, or *balumvi* according to their functions as ritual experts in charge of many affairs concerning the chief). One of these dignitaries, Muhinga, in fact was the supreme religious leader. The positions of dignitaries were hereditary within certain clans (that had accompanied the first chief at the time of the migration) and patrilineally transmitted, generally by right of primogeniture. Succession to chieftainship was less clearly defined. The chief had a ritual wife whose son could become chief, or he could select one of his other sons as his successor. The chief-elect, however, had to be accepted by the college of eight dignitaries who formally selected, initiated, and enthroned him. That is why Vira dignitaries say the chief is chosen and not designated automatically because of his kinship position. Many other title-holding dignitaries surrounded the chief (e.g., Weza, the war chief; Shemwami, an elder, mainly in charge of assembling the royal tribute; and the college of about ten titled advisors).

Like other Central African chiefs, the position of the Vira king is linked with the possession of and control over a number of royal insignia that express his power and legitimate authority. The insignia comprise the following items: the double iron gong (*lubembo*); the royal drum (*kalinga*) and other secondary drums; a staff in the form of a spear (*kanyolera*; with iron foot, wooden shaft, and a superposition of three bulb-shaped copper knobs); a spearlike iron staff with square diameter and a wooden top (*musholo*); a forked iron staff (*bukale* or *mubehe*); a billhook (*muholo*); a knife (*kahamba*); a pipe (*kesho*); a necklace of oblong white and yellowish beads; a leopard hide; and foremost among them the (*i*)shungwe diadem. The *ndebe* stools on which the chief and other dignitaries sit (e.g., at the coming-out ceremony) are not listed

among the royal treasure by the spokesmen. Among the Furiiru, however, the *ndebe* chief's stool was included with the paraphernalia.

Some of the items (the leopard hide, the diadem, the necklace) are worn daily by the chief. He may regularly carry certain objects (e.g., the *kanyolera* staff). Others are planted in the ground near him at the enthronement rites (the forked *bukale* staff) or when offerings are made to the ancestors of the chief's wives (the *musholo* staff). Still other insignia are handled by specific status holders: Nabaganda (one of the college of eight counselors-initiators) beats the double gong (e.g., at sacrifices made to the ancestors); and Muramusa (often the first son of Nabaganda) beats *kalinga*, the royal drum (e.g., at cock's crow and to call the council together). When not in use, the royal paraphernalia normally stand or hang in a shrine house (*ngolo*) built close to the chief's dwelling. The circular shrine house with two opposing doors is in the custody of Nabaganda.

The *shungwe* diadem is the single most important symbol of royal power and authority. It is known among chiefs of the Batembo, the Bahunde, the Bashi, the Bahavu, the Bafuliru, and the Bainya-indu; some Lega subgroups (e.g., the Basimwenda of Alenga) and fishing groups (with origins in the kingdom of Nalwindi) on Lake Tanganyika possess it as well. The diadem is worn by fully initiated supreme chiefs (whether they rule over a large state or over a cluster of villages). Occasionally a high dignitary has the position of «mock-chief» and wears a diadem called *ishungwe*. Among the Bainya-indu, for example, the dignitary Nakalambi received a «mock» diadem (called *ishungwe lya shangawe*) composed of three stones as the result of a dispute with the king. The exact form and composition of the diadem, however, seem to differ among these groups. For the rulers descending from Nalwindi (the ancient king emerging in the Itombwe mountains as the founder of many dynasties), the chief's *ishungwe* is made of a copper ring, a leopard tooth, and small pieces of trees from each dominant mountain over which the chief rules; all were wrapped in lizard hide and attached to a bonnet (*kidasa*) of hide (Moeller, 1936, p. 490). The *ishungwe* bundle of Chief Nakaziba comprises two pieces of iron and two leopard bones tied together with *nshuli* vines and wrapped in bark cloth. Three cowries are attached to the bundle (*ibid.*, p. 495).

The Vira diadem is a relatively simple object (see photos). Traditionally it consists of a leather strap (made of wild pig's hide) that is fixed as a band over the head. In front of the strap is a cubic-

(*) The notes on which this short essay is based are among the first field data I ever recorded. Shortly after I had arrived in Zaïre (November 1949), I worked for some time among the fishermen (called Bazyoba) established in several villages and hamlets along Lake Tanganyika between the administrative center Uvira and the village Makobola. Since the northern Bazyoba were in close contact with the Bavira, I also did some field research among the latter. The present data was obtained from Chief Makumika and his dignitaries. The working conditions were difficult because of the atmosphere of suspicion and strife that surrounded the deposition of Chief Makumika by the colonial government. Information on Furiiru, Nyindu, and Lega is based on my field research and on the literature mentioned.

shaped piece of raffia network (*singa*) to which are attached fifty small cowries (*simbi*), four eagle claws (*nyunu*), and some copper nails (*marundu*). Secret medicines are placed inside the network. Except for the inclusion of certain roots, the exact composition of these medicines was not revealed to me. Comparative data from the Havu and the populations of Ijwi Island suggests that small portions of exuviae of the dead kings might be included. In Ijwi, the fingerlong case attached with a strap to the forehead of the ruler contains parts of two upper incisors, a piece of forehead bone, parts of the right index finger and the big toe, and the mummified prepuce of the dead king. Among the Havu, the lizard skin case adorned with two shells holds similar exuviae packed together with resin (Schumacher, 1949, pp. 262, 290). Among the Bashi of Kabare, the diadem incorporates parts of the body of the chief's predecessor (Colle, 1921, p. 663). Among the Vira, a large *lushembe* shell (? *Cypraea tigris*) resembling a cowrie sits before this frame. When the diadem is in place, the head is cushioned by a thick woven band (made with fibers of the *kirondo* tree). The chief traditionally wore the diadem every day from morning (after he had been awakened by the royal drum beaten by Muramusa) until evening. Each day Nalukanga oiled the chief and then crowned him with the diadem, always standing behind the chief to prevent his seeing the object.

Among the Fuliru the diadem was entrusted to Nalutongo, a member of the college of ritual leaders, and was placed on the chief's head by another dignitary, Musegerezya. For the Nyindu, the daily task of oiling the chief and placing the diadem on his head befell his first wife. A member of the Nyindu college called Nyamishungwe, however, was the guardian of the diadem. Nyamishungwe also made the *kikumbu* (cow's hat), the woven (oiled and reddened) *kalemba* hat, the *kidasa* (fur hat), and the *ishungwe* diadem. As the chief matured, one hat gradually replaced another until the chief finally received the *ishungwe* diadem under which he always wore the *kidasa* fur hat.

The basic symbolism of the diadem's components is fairly simple. According to Vira spokesmen, the wild pig's hide refers to the durability of the reign; the claws of the eagle (king of birds) stand for the chief's power; the small cowries are the guardians of the large *lushembe* shell (just as the chief's subjects are the guardians of the chief); the *lushembe* is the chief, but its intrinsic symbolism (? the bisexual nature of the chief who consolidates in his person the male and female principles of filiation and social life) was not explained clearly. In an unpublished study, Bragard (a former colonial administrator among the Vira) points out that after his coronation the chief was called Namwami (lit., mother of the chief) by his own mother and Mwami-kazi (lit., chief-female) by his wives. If these interesting notes are correct, they would strengthen the

view that the chief's person represented the double male and female powers linked with his office as well as the male and female principles of descent. Vira spokesmen said nothing about the meaning of the medicines in the piece of wickerwork. Assuming they were composed of only vegetal materials, it may be inferred that the medicines functioned as protectors of the chief's well-being. If, as has been noted for other diadems, the plants used came from different dominant mountains situated within the state limits, the medicines may also have signified the ritual power the chief exercised over the fertility of the lands. If they included exuviae of the chief's predecessors as well, then the concepts of eternal kingship and the identity of the living chief with ancestral rulers may have been emphasized.

The origin of the diadem is traced back to the Vira's homeland, the Lwindi region in the high mountains of Itombwe (the dividing line for the Bainyindu, the Babembe, and the eastern Balega-Basimwenda). According to several oral traditions, many groups originated in this part of eastern Zaïre and now are scattered in different sections among eastern Balega, Babembe, Bavira, Bafuliru, and Bashi, and even in Ruanda. The plaited part of the Vira *shungwe* is made by Nakasinga, lord of the Kasinga mountain and priest of the spirit that dwells there. This spirit is consulted for all important affairs affecting chieftainship. The secret medicines, however, are placed in the diadem by the college of eight. The complete assemblage of the pieces is done by the expert Makangira (of the Banakalanda clan), who is not a member of the college of eight. The Fuliru's diadem is transmitted from chief to chief. Among the Shi, a new diadem is made as soon as the chief has been buried (Colle, 1921, p. 669). For the Vira, some royal paraphernalia are not renewed for the new chief (e.g., the leopard hide



Photo 1. — Chief Makumika dressed in a leopard hide and wearing the *shungwe* diadem. He holds the *kanyolera* spear; left of him stands the *musholo* spear.

worn by the chiefs is not transferred to the successor but guarded by the college of eight ritual officers). It is said that at the chief's death the existing diadem can be destroyed and replaced by a new one. Chief Makumika had not inherited his father's diadem «because it was not well preserved», and so a new one had to be made. This may have resulted from internal dissensions that arose early in the colonial period. It is also a Vira custom not to hand over the diadem to the new king at the initiation ceremonies. Instead the diadem is kept indefinitely by Nabaganda until the trial period is over and the oracles have provided favorable endorsement of the new chief.

In this respect it is relevant to summarize briefly the ritual procedures coinciding with the death of a chief and the enthronement of his successor. As soon as the chief was seriously sick or weakened by age, he came under the exclusive supervision of the college of eight ritual experts. They transported the moribund chief to a small shrine house (*luhelo*) near his homestead; in the evening two members of the college secretly suffocated him (by means of two sticks that were pressed against his throat). That same night the naked corpse, wrapped in the fresh hide of the sacred *lugongo* steer, was transported to Mount Rugongo. Inside a shrine house (*lutanda*) the body was placed on a high table (*kitala*) under which a slow-burning fire was maintained. After four days, the body was decapitated; the head was placed in a tree to decompose, then was treated and placed in the shrine house. The drying body was closely attended to by the college of eight until a large larva was released. This was then nourished by the supreme ritual leader (Muhinga) «until it would metamorphose into a leopard» — leopards being the reincarnations of chiefs. According to one version, after «the leopard had disappeared into the bush», the corpse was abandoned in the shrine house. It is probably also on this occasion that parts of the dried body were removed for inclusion in the *shungwe* bundle.



Photo 2. — Chief Makumika wearing the *shungwe* diadem.

The college of eight would return annually to the sacred burial ground to placate the dead chiefs, who would appear there as leopards to signify their pleasure. After the lifting of the two months' general mourning period, often a year later, Muhinga would schedule the initiation of the new chief. One evening, the college of eight would approach the house of the chief-designate; when he appeared, Nakabaka and Naziba (two dignitaries of the college) would seize him and immediately transport him to a house (specially built with an enclosure in a single day) on Mount Rugongo, after the candidate had stepped through the blood of a sacrificed slave. Constantly and exclusively guarded by the eight, the chief-designate would live there for not less than two months to learn the customs and the duties pertinent to his rank. Nakima (the chief's new ritual wife specially selected from among his mother's brothers' daughters) would come to live there with him. Regularly during this period Muhinga would visit the chiefs' burial grounds and call upon their ancestral spirits to show themselves. It is said that eventually leopards would arrive. Muhinga thus would come to know the name of the ancestor manifesting himself through the first leopard; this name would later be given to the new chief.

On the day of the new chief's coming-out, all notables without exception had to be present in the royal village to bring cattle, goats, and beer for the large celebrations. The new chief was washed, oiled, shaved, and dressed by Nakabamba, Nakaziba, and Nalukanga. Muhinga brought out the chief, who wore the leopard hide and the *shungwe* diadem and carried the ceremonial spear. He was publicly proclaimed chief by Muhinga, who bestowed upon him the ancestral name (obtained from the leopards), and was installed on a stool in front of his house. The ritual wife, the mother of the chief, and the eight initiators also sat beside him on stools.

The ultimate symbolic significance attached to a single object preeminent among the royal paraphernalia is not limited to the Vira. Similar importance is attached to distinctive material objects such as the *rukan* bracelet of the Mwantayaav of the Lunda, or the *wenge* bracelets among many chiefs in southwestern Zaïre. The object signifies the authenticity of the office held by a particular person and his rightful claims to it. It vitally links its owner with the power of the ancestral chiefs (represented by the exuviae). By being allowed to legitimately possess their exuviae, the chief literally is thought to have these ancestors in his power. He benefits from their power but in addition effectively neutralizes any injurious influences they might have over him. The large *Cypraea tigris* shell in front of the diadem is used as a feminine symbol (as it is for cowries in the *bwami* association of the Lega). The Vira chief thus incorporates in himself not merely the agnatic principle of descent but also the

female concepts of fertility and filiation (eliminating any claims by the group of mother's or sisters' children, as is also done by Nyanga chiefs).

In its double male and female aspect, the diadem represents total cohesion and equilibrium. Without the diadem, the chief does not rule. Possession, however, is secured through initiation by the college of eight (represented by Nabaganda) as the guardians of the diadem. The chief owes his office to these ritual experts and not simply to hereditary principles. The initiators make and unmake the chief; he learns about their ritual killing of the chief during the initiations. The chief thus cannot rule arbitrarily; he must conform to the prescriptions formulated during the initiations (e.g., among the Bashi the chief must follow the path of moderation and be a benevolent donor). The initiatory teachings to which the chief is submitted and the special names he receives all emphasize his character as a peacemaker in the land, « one who brings whiteness to the land, one who binds people together », one who governs in such a manner as to make the land « become big ». Possession of the diadem then legitimates the chief's office, but it does not sanction absolute rule. The guardians of the diadem check the chief's power; if he is considered to be harming the land, he must be removed. This is a simple task since the college of eight are the trustees of the diadem. As long as there is no dissension among them, there is no problem. The hierarchically ranked and functionally differentiated but strictly complementary offices of the eight guarantee a certain *esprit de corps* among them. There are, however, confirmed indications of differences that have occurred, followed by prolonged internal strife in the



Photo 3. — Chief Makumika in ordinary dress serving banana beer to some high dignitaries.

kingdom and secession leading to the emergence of new diadems. Even if there is scission, the legitimacy of chieftainship ultimately is sanctioned by autonomous ownership of *shungwe*.

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SAMENVATTING

De shungwe hoofdband van de Vira hoofdman.

Onder de verschillende statussymbolen die de waardigheid en het politiek gezag van de hoofdman bij de Vira (streek van Uvira, Zaïre) naar buiten uit onderlijnen, zoals bvb. de ijzeren dubbele bel, de trom, de staf, o.a.; lijkt de *shungwe* wel het meest belangrijk symbool van koningsmacht en gezag.

Deze tamelijk eenvoudige hoofdband bestaat uit een lederen strook gesneden uit de huid van een wild varken, in het midden is een soort vierkant mandje aange-

bracht waarop een vijftigtal kleine cauris, vier arendsklauen en enkele koperen spijkers zijn bevestigd.

Het korfje bevat binnenin ook magische krachstoffen waarvan de samenstelling onbekend bleef.

Soms wordt het korfje vervangen door een grote *Cypraea tigris* schelp, vrouwelijk symbool bij uitstek.

Dergelijke hoofdband komt ook voor, zij het dan ook onder verschillende varianten bij de Tembo, Hunde, Shi, Havu, Fuliru en ook bij sommige Lega.

RESUME

Le diadème shungwe des chefs Vira.

Parmi les symboles sacrés de la royauté tels que la double cloche en fer, le tambour, la canne-sceptre entre autres, le diadème *shungwe* occupe une place de première importance chez les Vira (région d'Uvira, Zaïre).

Ce diadème, d'apparence assez simple, consiste en un bandeau en cuir, taillé dans la peau du cochon sauvage. Un élément décoratif en raphia tressé, de forme cubique est fixé au centre du diadème. A ce petit panier,

sont fixés cinquante cauris, quatre griffes d'aigle et quelques clous en cuivre; à l'intérieur, se trouve en outre des matières magiques dont la composition est restée inconnue. Comme ornement central, les Vira fixent parfois aussi sur le *shungwe* une grande *Cypraea tigris*, symbole féminin par excellence.

Des diadèmes analogues sont connus, bien que sous des formes différentes, chez les Tembo, Hunde, Shi, Havu, Fuliru et quelques groupes Lega.