

Lega & Nyanga

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**MWINDO, A NYANGA EPIC HERO AND
MUBILA, A LEGA EPIC HERO**

A Comparison

SOME BACKGROUND DATA

The Mwindo epic of the Nyanga (Biebuyck and Mateene, 1969) extols the labors and feats of Mwindo (alias Kabutwakenda, Little-one-just-born-he-walked) the only son, miraculously conceived and born of chief Shemwindo and his preferred wife Nyamwindo in the village of Tubondo, in the terrestrial realm of Ihimbi (a historical subdivision of Nyangaland).

The Mubila epic of the Lega (Biebuyck, 1992), much longer than the Mwindo epic, glorifies the labors and feats of Mubila, one of the forty-one children (forty sons and one daughter) of Yombi. Born in the village of Itambandio, soon after his birth, he settles in his own village, Tubala, in an unspecified fantastic forest area of Legaland.

Both epics were sung, narrated and dramatically illustrated by bards who seemed to be at the peak of their power in their early fifties. The bards Candi Rureke (Nyanga) and Mubila Kambara (Lega) were farmers and hunters, living in small hamlets remote from the villages to which they belonged. Rureke had been away from his home base for a short time, working in a mine compound on the boundaries of Nyanga country. Kambara was initiated (like most Lega men) to a lower grade in the *bwami* association and had recently converted to some form of protestantism. The two bards had no special status, nor did they

belong to a specialized caste of singers and musicians. They were renowned as singers, among the very last acknowledged connoisseurs of the integral epic tradition. They had informally learned their craft over a long period of time from other established singers with whom they had no close bonds of kinship but with whom they had entertained intimate and long-lasting relationships based on early, youthful companionship, and subsequent congeniality and friendship.

During the sung and spoken performance of the epics, the Nyanga and Lega bards were accompanied by three to four percussionists, who beat a dry housebeam or bamboo and did not make use of drums or other instruments. The Nyanga bard, however, rhythmically shook a rattle during the entire performance. Both bards were also assisted by a participant listener, himself an advanced apprentice in the technique of epic narration. Some of the chanting of refrains and recurring formulaic phrases was done by the percussionists and the apprentice. Members of the large audience composed of men and women, young and old, status-holders or commoners, would encourage the bard with expressions of praise and even repeat some striking expressions. The entire narrative was sung in short episodes, then narrated and eventually acted out.

In terms of structure, form, content and style, both epics hold numerous features in common - features they share with the epics of other populations in Africa, Europe, and Asia. This is evidenced, for example, in the typical pattern of a hero's life; in the abundance of actors of different orders of being operating within a framework of tensions, oppositions, and alliances; in the extraordinary verbal mastery of the bards; in the exceptional poetic quality of the narrative; in the sophisticated rhythmic and metric system; in the abundance and diversity of formulas and formulaic expressions. These standard expressions range from the large-scale use of personal and group names to patronymic epithets and praises; from stereotyped phrases for time and place to standard phrases for movement or physical and psychological reactions.

Some striking features differentiate the form, style, and scope of the Lega and Nyanga epics. In the Mwindo epic, the narrative description is more important than the dialogue and the poetic text is interspersed with songs sung by the hero and intended to clarify his situation, to synthesize a set of actions, to express intentions, to invoke, to forewarn, to present a catalogue of objects, to manifest the hero's power. In the Mubila epic, dialogues between friends, adversaries, and kinsfolk and monologues containing warnings or praises overshadow in importance the sometimes very short descriptive passages of the narrative. There are no songs in the Mubila epic, but repeatedly the hero boasts about himself in lyrical outbursts consisting of accumulations of recurring, stylized, highly symbolic, sometimes cryptic, self-praise formulas that are conceived as drum periphrases. The forest environment is of central importance in both epics, but the world of animals and hunting is placed in greater and deeper perspective throughout the Mubila epic. A large number of animals, some of them especially typical for the Lega forest milieu, figure in the Mubila epic as active, often anthropomorphized, characters. Entire social groups, as well as individual actors, including several of Mubila's brothers, are named after animals. In fact, some of the most powerful antagonists of the hero are anthropomorphized animals, such as the Bananzogu, the Elephants, the Bananyambogo, the Buffaloes, Kampasa, the Scorpion. In addition there are hunters and hunting parties and Mubila himself sometimes acts as a hunter.

In addition to, and within the pan-epic tradition, then, both epics show overall variations and deviations from the universal patterns. These are due to cultural differences that differentiate these two central Bantu-speaking groups from other peoples in Africa and in the world. Each of the two epics also exhibits unique characteristics, particularly in the character, background, and scope of the hero which strikingly contrast with each other. These are obviously linked to overt, and less visible, differences between the Nyanga and the Lega cultural systems.

A PROFILE OF NYANGA AND LEGA CULTURE

It must be kept in mind that the geographically fairly close Nyanga and Lega cultures manifest numerous similarities and differences. These two ethnic groups are located in the forest region of eastern Zaire, but they are not in immediate contact, the Nyanga in the north being separated from the Lega in the south by fractions of diverse ethnic units that constitute buffer groups between these larger cultural units. The buffer groups facilitate transitions and contacts between distinctive socio-cultural entities.

The languages the Lega and Nyanga speak belong to the central Bantu group; they are different but nevertheless closely related in some aspects of vocabulary and grammar. Ethno-historical traditions of migration and contact point to the fact that preestablished Pygmy groups left a profound cultural impact on both ethnic entities and that, centuries ago, fragments of the Lega moving in from the north had passed through the areas where the Nyanga, migrating from East Africa (Uganda; more particularly what was later to become the Bunyoro kingdom), settled.

The members of both groups are traditionally hunters (with nets, spears and dogs; more rarely with bows and arrows) and trappers. Hunting and trapping are not merely important economic activities but of major social and ritual significance. The two peoples are also forest cultivators, numerous varieties of plantains and bananas being the staple crops.

Both groups have a patrilineal system of descent tracing, but numerous special sociological features are built into the system such as the functional importance of distinctive groups of maternal uncles and the patterned integration of nonagnatically related individuals and social units. Dominant socio-political and territorial entities among the Lega are clans and large lineages organized into classic segmentary lineage systems. The bulk of the male membership of such groups resides in a series of villages and hamlets that are territorially contiguous. Nyanga clans, on the other hand, are dispersed. There is no segmentary

lineage organization. Villages are made up of several small patrilineal core units (and their accretions) that trace various political, cognatic, affinal, and friendship bonds with each other. The core political and territorial units are small autonomous states headed by quasi-divine rulers and made up of small villages inhabited by the above-mentioned social units.

The Nyanga are divided into a number of petty autonomous states, ruled by an initiated chief with divine attributes and a small hierarchy of ritual and political authorities. The Lega have no such centralized system. Instead, they are organized into a large number of autonomous territorial communities each comprising several villages inhabited by the members of patrilineally related lineages with accretions of affinal and cognatic relatives. This Lega segmentary lineage system has been reinforced and at the same time modified in the course of historical developments by a unique type of voluntary, semi-secret association called *bwami*. To some extent, the *bwami* system is socially structured on the lineage organization, but it transcends this organization, creating new individual and collective bonds across kinship units.

In the sphere of ritual practice and religious thinking, there are major differences between the two groups. The Nyanga worship a small pantheon of interrelated divinities headed by Nyamurairi, the god of fire, in addition to practicing the cult of ancestors (remote and close ones for the chiefs, close ones for common mortals). They also hold a strong belief in specters and monsters of the forest and of water. Among the Lega, there exists no pantheon of gods: even the ancestral cult is very reduced in importance; the *bwami* graded association for men and women, based on an extremely elaborate system of initiations extending over a lifetime, is the major framework for ritual practice and transcendental beliefs of salvation and survival. In both societies there are, as elsewhere in Africa, strong conceptions about witchcraft, sorcery, divination, medicine and the magical force inherent in, or ritually placed into, animals, persons, objects, and actions.

A COMPARISON OF THE TWO HEROES : THE HEROIC PATHS

Within the well-known common epic framework (ranging from the special circumstances of the hero's conception and birth to his final glorification), there are considerable differences between the two heroes, Mwindo of the Nyanga and Mubila of the Lega. They are manifest in the social identities, the major attributes and achievements, the character and personality traits of both heroes.

Their parents

Mwindo's father, known only by his teknonymic name as Shemwindo, is a chief *mwami*, that is, in Nyanga conception, a person born of a quasi-incestuous union between a ruling chief and a close agnatic relative with the sacred signs in his hands, accepted, confirmed, and enthroned by the council of counsellors, royal initiators and ritual experts, and invested with quasi-divine powers and privileges. Before Mwindo's birth, his father is already an antagonist; he remains so for some time until, subdued by his son, he confesses his errors and reconciles.

Mubila's father called Yombi (and never referred to by his teknonym as Shemubila) is also a *mwami*. But in the context of the epic there is complete ambiguity about this title for the Lega have no paramount chief (*mwami*) but they have an association called *bwami*, a member of which is called *mwami* at any level of the initiation process. The difficulty here is that the Mubila epic drama unfolds in a world that is clearly pre-*bwami* (i.e., a world of internecine warfare and social disharmony). Thus when the bard refers to Mubila's father as *mwami*, he is either projecting a contemporaneous institution onto an ancient background or he is referring to Mubila's father as a clan chief (at one time these clan chiefs seem to have been powerful, at least among some of the northeastern Lega subgroups); in the latter case, the advent of Mubila would put an end to the extreme power

of clan heads and an incipient kingship institution among the Lega. The role played by Mubila's father is short-lived, since he dies early in the epic narrative. When the newborn son decides to build his own village, acting as the leader of his brothers, the father is apparently unable to do anything about it.

No ancestors of Mwindo and his father are mentioned in the Nyanga text. Except for his father, his mother, his paternal aunt, and his father's wives, Mwindo has no relatives (the Banashemwindo, the "group of dependants and followers" of Shemwindo, are never socially identified). Mubila, however, traces (and brags about) a line of ascent from his father Yombi, to his grandfather Idali, to his greatgrandfather Museme. Mubila has numerous patrikin frequently referred to in the text as Banayombi, "children, dependants and followers" of Yombi. He also traces real or fictive relationships with some affinal and cognatic kin of his ancestors.

Mwindo's father is married to seven wives; he has decreed that he wants no sons. All wives are pregnant at the same time; six of them give birth to girls only (they remain unnamed; his father's wives are briefly mentioned at Mwindo's enthronement: the daughters play no role in the narrative). The seventh woman who is the *kalembe* (i.e., the "preferred wife") and is known only by her teknonym as Nyamwindo, remains pregnant for an unusually long time; she gradually loses her status: her unborn son Mwindo performs certain domestic tasks for his mother; temporarily leaving the womb, he brings her water, firewood, vegetables. Although Mwindo's mother plays no role in the epic, Mwindo shows respect and tenderness towards her on a few occasions.

Mubila's father marries forty-one wives: all are pregnant in rapid succession except for his most junior wife (who is to become Mubila's mother). Forty wives give birth in rapid succession to thirty-nine sons and one daughter; whereas none of the wives is named, all forty children have individual names. Many of the names are most unusual and rarely, if ever, used in standard Lega name-giving practices. Some names are derived from birds, others designate a certain status, still others refer to a

particular activity or physical quality. In several instances, the names are made very complex because of the addition of praise and drum-message names. After the birth of these forty children, chief Yombi impregnates his most junior wife, the future mother of Mubila.

The circumstances of their birth

Mwindo's mother's pregnancy is unusually long. Having performed some chores for his desolate mother, the unborn hero ponders about how he will be born; as he ponders, he rises through his mother's medius. The midwives call him Mwindo (i.e., a male person born after several females; but in the mind of the hero and the listeners, the name also evokes a powerful feller of trees). A teacherous cricket reveals the birth of a son to Shemwindo.

In the Lega epic, the hero's mother is made pregnant by her husband after all other wives have given birth; there is no suggestion of any time lapse or hardship. The narrative shifts right away to the birth of the hero: still in the womb, he warns the midwife not to approach; he falls down with a thud; he provokes a cosmic upheaval: huge trees falling down as a message of his advent. Back in the village, the midwife reveals that the hero has called himself Mubila - "a name not to be misunderstood", he has said - and has attributed to himself the praise name of Intrepid Manly Hero.

Attributes of the heroes

At birth Mwindo holds, in the right hand, a *conga* scepter made from a buffalo tail or from the hairy tail of certain species of antelope and, in the left hand, an adze. He has a small shoulderbag, emblematic of the cult of Kahombo (divinity of good fate) which contains a long rope. The *conga* scepter (which in Nyanga culture is an important cult object) allows Mwindo to

fly through the air, to kill and destroy; it is also an advisor. The adze (which in Nyanga culture is a tool to sculpt but also an emblem carried by masked circumcisors) is used by Mwindo only casually to cut honeycombs out of a tree. The shoulderbag has magical proportions since Mwindo can hide people in it. In this instance, it is also a cult object that contains some of the paraphernalia for Kahombo. The rope inside the bag is a device by means of which he engages in long-distance communication with his paternal aunt.

The Nyanga hero is Kabutwakenda, Little-one-just-born-he-walked : he is small (Pygmy like ?); he is beautiful; he can also laugh and talk from birth on. The context of the narrative also reveals that Mwindo has the gift of premonition and clairvoyance, that he is a thaumaturg, that he knows powerful magical formulas; he is a person who can travel in the air, on and under the water, and underground. He has cosmic connections, mainly with Nkuba, the divinity Lightning. Mwindo loves song and dance, and a special power emanates from his singing and dancing. Before engaging in a real confrontation with his father, Mwindo is forged by his maternal uncles. In the final instance, he is invulnerable and immortal.

Mubila is born with powerful objects : his spear *makilundu*, his knife *kalukebe*, his shield *nyakitetezio*. He wears a belt of strong vines and a necklace of pods. His physique is awesome, inhuman, spectre-like : he has very long nails and eyebrows long as an elephant tail; the context of the narrative reveals that he has a beard and a fiercesome look in his eyes.

It is also revealed in due course that Mubila possesses a feather hat (with magical properties), a hat studded with pangolin scales, a copper anklet, a magical eye filter, a magical calabash that can contain endless amounts of banana beer, an alluring and seducing whistle, various medicines and magical dice. He can hide in his shoulderbag his entire comitatus. Most importantly, Mubila has, apparently from birth on, a powerful inner voice, personified as a sort of daimonion, *Baya*, that informs, advises, and warns him throughout the epic action.

He is *kalema*, a great restless traveler; he can travel and run extremely fast; he hears things at great distances; he has foreknowledge of things to come; he is invulnerable and immortal.

The earliest life experience of the heroes

Since Mwindo's father had decreed that he wanted no sons, the life of the newborn hero is threatened at once: the father attacks the newborn in the house, but the newborn wills away the spears and they strike the housepole rather than hitting him or his mother. Next, the father has Mwindo buried alive but at night he arises from the grave in a glow of light. The father then has Mwindo locked up in a drum that is thrown into a whirlpool; the drum rises to the surface and when Mwindo perceives young women drawing water in the river, he sings stating that he is joining his paternal aunt, Iyangura, who is married to Mukiti, a water serpent living somewhere upstream in an unnamed river adjacent to Tubondo village. These early feats are all performed by the sheer volition of the hero.

As soon as he is born, Mubila, arriving in his father's village, instructs his brothers to build a new village for him. The village is Tubala. As soon as the village is finished, they hear the drums announcing that Mubila's father is sick, then that he has died. Mubila accuses his most senior brother, Bukulu Bwakitaba, of having caused their father's death, threatening whosoever would criticize him. Back in his father's village, Bukulu flees to his maternal uncles in Byongobitengia. Following his father's burial, Mubila abruptly decides to go and court Kabungulu, the daughter of Mputi.

The two women, Iyangura, the paternal aunt of Mwindo, and Kabungulu, the wife of Mubila, become an essential part of the hero's comitatus and play a vital role in the decision-making process. Iyangura liberates Mwindo from the drum after he has confronted and defeated several individuals who attempted to keep him away from her in a series of events in which Iyangura

shows great wisdom, generosity, and power of conviction. She acts as a respectable advisor. Mubila, on the other hand, courts Kabungulu and without anyone's permission abducts her and forty other women from her village, causing a fierce battle with her people, a battle in which Kabungulu demonstrates total indifference: like her spouse, she is merciless and bellicose, a person who - as Mubila repeatedly says - "has manners no other woman has".

The comitatus of Mwindo is in fact very much restricted: on his expeditions, he is sometimes accompanied by his paternal aunt Iyangura, his aunt's servants, his maternal uncles the Baniyana (the "Bats"). Mostly, however, the hero is alone on his travels, but he finds a steady helper in Nkuba, the divinity Lightning: he also receives help from hedgehog, spider, hawk and sparrow. Through most of the narrative, however, Mwindo remains in contact with his paternal aunt by means of the magical rope he was born with. At the moment of glory, when he is reconciled with his father and enthroned as a chief, Mwindo is also in the company of his mother and of his father's six other wives.

Mubila's comitatus is extensive. Most of the time, he is accompanied by his three wives, all very powerful, most of his brothers, and his son Zakeuti ("Ashes") as soon as the latter is born. He sends some brothers on special missions. Mubila relies on the help of his wives (mainly his senior wife Kabungulu), his son Zakeuti, and, in specific circumstances, he calls upon his brothers, such as Kyandembelembe, to destroy by fire, or Kansinsi, to scout and check out a certain situation. He does not depend on the help of supernatural beings, but relies heavily on information given by *Baya*, the inner, personified voice. Occasionally, there are other rather mysterious personages in his company, such as the woman Nyakaseke, with whom he claims to trace rather unusual kinship bonds through the grandmothers.

The range of feats of the heroes

The range of feats accomplished by Mwindo is limited, but they take place in a variety of environments : at the surface of the water, underwater or underground, and on earth. After his paternal aunt has freed him from the drum and he has been forged by his maternal uncles, he returns with them to his home village to confront his father. Mwindo's friend and ally Nkuba wipes out the village of Tubondo; the father escapes underground. Mwindo brings his uncles back to life. Alone, Mwindo travels underground in search of his father. He journeys successively in the realms of Muisa (one of the Nyanga divinities who is said to live in a desolate subterranean place), Ntumba (Aardvark), and Sheburungu (one of the names under which Nyamurairi, god of fire, is known). Muisa's daughter Kahindo gives him magical formulas that will permit Mwindo to cope with her father's trickeries. He defeats Muisa in power games; Nkuba smashes Ntumba's cave on behalf of Mwindo; the hero defeats Sheburungu in a game of dice.

When Mwindo finds his father, he does not criticize him, but takes him back to the home village, passing through the realm of the three supernatural beings who tried to help Mwindo's father, revivifying those whom he had killed, and repairing whatever damage he had inflicted.

Following a solemn council in Tubondo, it is decided to split the state into two halves : one to be ruled by Mwindo and the other by Mwindo's father. Mwindo is enthroned; he receives the regalia and four wives.

Barely settled in his village, Mwindo must free his Pygmies who, on a hunt, have been devoured by Kirimu, a forest-dwelling, seven-headed dragon monster, who like Mwindo is also the friend of Nkuba. He kills the monster and frees his people.

But Nkuba is displeased with Mwindo's uncautious and uninformed act against his friend. He abducts Mwindo into the celestial realm where, powerless, he suffers great hardships. This is a *véritable rite de passage*, a katharsis for the boisterous hero who was already a chief but not a perfect one. Purified

through this experience, Mwindo is returned to earth where he explains his experiences and henceforth rules in glory, promulgating wise laws for his people.

The number of challenges, confrontations, trickeries, brawls, fights, and real large-scale battles in which Mubila and his comitatus are involved seems endless in comparison to Mwindo's adventures. All the action takes place in the forest, on earth; relentlessly, Mubila travels across rivers and forest domains - in territories depending on other clan groups - in search of new adventures. Some actions revolve in and around rivers and some occur in a terrestrial sphere "where none but the dead ever venture to go". The large number of individual and collective opponents, male and female, some identified by animal names, others by fictive, descriptive names, confronted by Mubila cannot be enumerated here.

The main line of narrative development is as follows : as soon as Kabungulu's kin are defeated, Mubila decides to go in search of his most senior brother Bukulu Bwakitaba who - it will be remembered - had fled to his maternal uncles in Byongobitengia, to Kabambe of the Bouse group. Before reaching this final destination late in the epic narrative, the hero is constantly sidetracked on his journeys by dilemmas caused by the puzzle of enormous crossroads, unexpected meetings with persons engaged in diverse activities, sounds and noises he hears in the distance, and by other problems he inflicts upon himself. In this process, one person after another, one group after another is destroyed without redemption. The hero himself suffers great hardships : he is injured but heals; he "dies" twice and resurrects. These tragic circumstances never change his aggressive mood nor his desire for retaliation. Several times, the hero returns to his home village Tubala, but barely arrived, he decides to leave again. In the end, following the total defeat of all his opponents (declared enemies or not), Mubila and his comitatus are back in the home village Tubala, which is cleaned and where dances are held. In the entire epic, there is no intervention of divine beings nor of other helpers such as the insects, animals, and birds that serve Mwindo. Throughout,

Mubila relies on his own weapons, his medicines, his magic, his trickeries, and on the total help of his son Zakeuti, his wife Kabungulu, and some of his brothers.

The character and personality of the heroes

There is a fundamental difference between Mwindo and Mubila as far as their character and personality structure go. Mwindo is neither a warrior nor a conqueror. He is not born with weapons and he never seems to use any real weapon. When others cause him any trouble, he can defend himself and, with the help of his magical wand and his supernatural friend Nkuba, he can inflict death and devastation. But he is much more a restorer of life and of order; he listens to advice; he is forgiving towards the father who wronged him; he is merciful and generous towards former enemies; he is tender towards his mother and filled with solicitude for his paternal aunt. He loves the fine arts and excels in singing and dancing. He has, in other words, the makings of a true Nyanga chief. Ultimately, these potentialities of genuine leadership are enhanced through initiation, through passively undergoing trials. In the end, Mwindo is a fully enthroned, a fully wise chief who provides his people with a decalogue of universally valid commandments.

Mubila is extremely warlike, an obsessive, belligerent, lurid, unforgiving, haughty, full of hybris, irascible and ruthless troublemaker, restless in his pursuit of vengeance. Some learned Lega listeners characterized Mubila as a *kizimbanga*, a person who loves to fight, and as an *idali*, one whose actions perplex people. The term *idali* is also used as the name for one of Mubila's forefathers. At birth, Mubila carries powerful weapons which he can use effectively; he has molded his brothers into a bellicose horde. Ironically, this great warrior sometimes seems powerless without the advice and information of his *Baya* (inner voice or daimonion) or without having recourse to his wife or other members of the *comitatus*. In fact, he had captured (or eloped with) his senior wife, Kabungulu, because he knew she

possessed a powerfully lethal weapon. He is always threatening, vindictive, and sanguine. He is a boisterous braggart (as is noticeable from his numerous self-imposed praise names, which are as many illustrations of his self-centered personality cult). He even makes a mockery of an initiation that might have been cathartic for him. Yet, at the end of all his peregrinations and battles, Mubila is back in a peaceful village where people dance and are happy: he is not even depicted as a victor or a ruler. Having gone through a vast cycle of hardships and trials before reaching his final goals (namely, the punishment of those in Byongobitengia who gave hospitality to his most senior brother, Bukulu Bwakitaba, and of those who allied themselves with these people), Mubila seems to have reached inner purification; back in his village, he seems ready for greater things. The village is cleaned at his command; it is "blank" as the narrator says, purified, ready for greater things. But the epic does not further specify: it ends precisely at a point where new, perhaps more positive, achievements of the hero might be narrated.

CAUSES AND MEANINGS OF THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE TWO HEROES AND THE TWO EPICS: AN INTERPRETATION

As we have pointed out earlier, there are striking differences in the socio-cultural systems of the Nyanga and Lega, and, to some extent, some essential features of these distinctions are reflected in the content and scope of the epics and the character of the heroes.

The Nyanga have centralized political institutions, albeit operating at the petty state level (an autonomous state comprises only a few villages and a few hundred or mostly a couple of thousand of individuals). At the head of a petty state is the *mwami*, the chief-designate (because of his special social and ritual background) who, after some trial years and formal initiation rites, becomes *mubake*, a fully enthroned chief with

divine attributes. He is surrounded by a college of ritual experts, counsellors, and some specially titled agnatic kin and wives. The Mwindo epic deals with this socio-political and ritual milieu : Mwindo, a person of extraordinary background (a world of magico-realism), becomes a poised, enthroned and sanctified chief after undergoing a series of trials in which his ardor and arrogance gradually give way to positively-oriented rulership. The kinship horizon of Mwindo is extremely limited; apart from his father and mother and father's sister, there are no other forebears or other close kin. This feature is completely in line with Nyanga thinking about the chief : the chief does not belong to an *uanda*; that is, a chief has no real close kin that could exercise any real influences over him.

Moreover, the *comitatus* of the hero-chief Mwindo is extremely reduced : the principal persons are his paternal aunt Iyangura, and, to a lesser extent, his maternal uncles the Baniyana and his Pygmies. This fits into the Nyanga ideological and kinship pattern. A chief, the Nyanga say, has no (does not belong to) a kinship group; as far as public interpretation is concerned, he has a mysterious origin, being the son of the ruling chief and his sister-wife. In other words, a chief has no immediate maternal uncles since his father is also his maternal uncle, being the husband of the mother of the person who is his successor-designate, for the mother is the real or fictive sister of the ruling chief. The chief only recognizes remote maternal uncles, a group of people who, in a very distant past, were the male kin of the first chief's mother. For a chief, his mother is also his paternal aunt since she is considered to be the sister of his father. The intense longing of Mwindo for his paternal aunt Iyangura and their companionship are reflections of a double ideology; for a Nyanga commoner, the father's sister is socially an extremely important person who wields great authority over her nephew (whom she calls child); for a chief like Mwindo, his paternal aunt could and should have been his mother (as the sister of Mwindo's father), but the rules had been broken by Mwindo's father and his people who had married her out to the stranger Mukiti. A true Nyanga chief without his Pygmies is

inconceivable; they hunt for him, are his troubadours, but also fulfill extremely important ritual functions in the chief's enthronement rites.

In Nyanga cosmological conception, the universe is conceived as consisting of four parts: *butu*, *mwanya*, *oto*, *kwirunga*; there are beings in each of these four realms. In his peregrinations, Mwindo travels in these four spheres and meets with specific beings there. Furthermore, he operates in all the subdivisions of *oto* (the terrestrial sphere, divided into earth, water, underground, village, hamlet, deep forest, fields, fallow land, abandoned village) with their distinctive beings.

The religious thinking and ritual system of the Nyanga revolves around a small pantheon of divinities and ancestors and, to a lesser extent, some additional nature spirits. Among these various supernatural beings, Mwindo has allies - like Nkuba - and enemies - like Muisa - with whom he enters in close interaction. He has also linkages from birth on with Kahombo, the divinity of good fate.

In other words, the Mwindo epic follows closely some of the key institutions and basic philosophical conceptions of the Nyanga, as they had evolved in modern times. The character of the hero itself evolves from the unacceptable norms and behavior patterns he adheres to in the early stages of the narrative to the cultivation of values of generosity, piety and enlightenment that are cherished in Nyanga society, and are considered to be essential attributes for chiefs.

The materials presented in the Mubila epic are much more complex. The Lega have no centralized political system; there are no petty states or political hierarchies. However, among the northeastern Lega (where this epic was not recorded) in particular but, to a lesser extent, everywhere else in Legaland, there is a strong and ancient tradition of powerful clan leadership, special statuses and powers being assigned to the most senior representative of the senior agnatic descent line or lineage in the clan. The autonomous, territorially compact clans, sometimes also some allied smaller clans, had such clan leaders

who, from many points of view, held the position of *primus inter pares* in a council composed of the heads of various lineage groupings constituting the clan entity. Mubila can be seen as such a clan leader who wields authority over the Banayombi, the agnatic clan group into which Mubila was born and which was formerly headed by his father Yombi. However, although he uses some of his brothers, Mubila does not recognize a true clan council. Among the autonomous patri-clans and their accretions, there developed in time, a couple of centuries ago, a unique, graded voluntary association that, in principle, is accessible to all Lega men and women, but only through a process of increasingly more complex initiations. The initiations express and enhance corporate values and simultaneously confer special statuses on different individuals. Although one of the *bwami* initiations has been projected onto the narrative, the epic reflects a pre-*bwami* situation and the hero Mubila is a character out of the pre-*bwami* world.

The thrust of the Lega epic then is about a clan leader, Mubila, and the members of this clan, the Banayombi, confronting other autonomous clan groups and their leaders in a quest for power but also in a spirit of challenge, retaliation and sheer adventure. The large size of Mubila's *comitatus* reflects the corporate spirit of the extensive agnatic kinship units as they exist among the Lega. In the end, Mubila and his group are apparently the sole winners - although there remains the antagonist Bungoe whom Mubila is never able to defeat and who has escaped to unspecified places. However, Mubila returns with his people to his home village where he enjoys a new life of joy and dance. He has defeated enemies but not subdued them or politically conquered them. At close scrutiny, it looks as if Mubila is responsible for a new world order among the Lega where internecine strife and feud are no longer possible because all potential contenders for exclusive power have been neutralized or eliminated. It seems that Mubila has set the stage for the onset of a stabilizing and peace-making institution with universal appeal. Through many hardships and trials, Mubila has achieved a kind of peace. The stage seems set for others to

bring law and order to the country through the advent of the peace-making, all-encompassing, overriding *bwami* institution.

The major contrast between the two epics, given the underlying cultural differences between the Lega and the Nyanga, is correlated with the traditional function of the epic in the two societies. Differently from other societies, in West Africa and elsewhere in the world, there are no professional bards who, for reward and fame, travel from one high-placed benefactor to another or are attached as court singers to a particular ruler. The Lega and Nyanga epics are folk epics; persons from any social milieu (not members of privileged castes or clans) may acquire the knowledge of the epic from an established singer (who is not necessarily a close kinsman) through long association, perseverance, and informal learning. People who learn to sing and recite such formidable texts obviously are not ordinary persons; they are extremely gifted verbal and musical, even choreographic and dramatic, geniuses and so their numbers are small. Their numbers had dwindled in the fifties when I recorded these texts. Because of economic and socio-political changes starting in the nineteenth century with the slave-raiding campaigns of Arabs and their mercenaries, continuing with anti-slavery campaigns, the Tetela uprisings and the establishment of Belgian socio-political, ideological and economic control, the real purpose of the epics was gradually lost. Where they had existed, genuinely traditional chiefs were most often replaced by puppet chiefs favorable to the colonial power : where traditionally no chiefs had existed, chiefs were appointed by the colonial government on the basis of false criteria. Among the Lega, the *bwami* association itself was branded as subversive by the colonial regime and the missions; it was officially dissolved by decree, and its leading active members were banished, imprisoned, or simply persecuted. There were radical disruptions in the social and religious systems, all unfavorable to the continuation of the intricate epic traditions.

In the tradition-based society, the Nyanga epics were sung by bards who traced the origins of their traditions back to local

Pygmy groups. These traditions were an integral part of the *mahano*, the teachings that enthroned chiefs underwent for months in relative isolation, teachings in which they learned to understand the moral, spiritual, social, and legal implications of their offices and not merely the more pragmatic aspects. The Mwindo epic was intended to show how the true chief should behave in contrast with the would-be ruler. Hence the gradual transformation of the hero as pseudo-leader to that of the *mwami-mubake*, a true shepherd of people.

Among the Lega, the epic did not fulfill an initiatory function: it was an historical document intended to contrast the remote, objectionable Lega past (one of internecine strife and disorder) with the contemporary situation in which the Lega lived (divided into many autonomous segmentary clan and lineage groups), in relative peace and prosperity because of the integrative effect of the *bwami* association. All Lega thinkers repeatedly stressed the fact that following a long period of warfare, lawlessness and insecurity, *bwami* came to them (from where no one knows, "like a fruit fallen from a tree"). *Bwami* soon spread to all autonomous kinship groups introducing a philosophy of nonviolence and search of the good and beautiful. This philosophy was achieved through the uniform practice of initiatory experience. Sociologically, *bwami* was structured in such a manner as to create bonds transcending the more tenuous social linkages based on agnatic, affinal, and cognatic kinship, yet maintaining the autonomy and distinctiveness of each group. The Mubila epic vividly depicts the early violent history of the Lega and ends precisely at a moment when peace without conquest has come to the land.

The Mubila epic of the Lega is a very special historical document. Unlike other epics with strong historical overtones, it is not intended to glorify the greatness of a past age, of a past dynasty of rulers, of a group of conquerors. Instead, it depicts a past history that is rejected by the Lega as a period of senseless warfare, social instability, and injustice. Apart from all the fictive personages, and the phantasmagorical encounters and

events that occur in the Mubila epic, there are a number of basic institutional patterns and ways of doing that are distinctively non-Lega or pre-Lega or that point to an earlier stage in the development of Lega culture. The most salient cases in point are: marriage by elopement in contrast to marriage by consensus between parties and transfer of predetermined types and amounts of valuables by the groom to the wife's family; large-scale polygyny as practiced by Yombi in contrast to small scale polygyny as practiced even by the highest and most powerful initiates; construction by a son of an independent village while his father is alive; incessant disdain by a junior for his senior brother's blunt, and unfounded accusations of witchcraft or sorcery against close kinsfolk; rash decisions by diviners; disrespect for blacksmiths.

The episodes of Mubila's failed *bwami* initiation and his disastrous double circumcision are interpolations by the bard Kambara who, of course, knew about these institutions as intrinsic parts of historical Lega culture and sang his epic narrative for an audience that was packed with initiates at all levels of the *bwami* association. These institutions, that came into being after the heroic world depicted in the Mubila epic, are projected against the older culture to give an even more vivid account of the crudity of the hero's behavior. Like an ignorant imposter, Mubila has launched himself, in reverse order, upon both forms of initiation; the results are disastrous for him (and this pleases the audience for these institutions cannot be taken lightly, as Mubila does, without the gravest consequences for the individual, and even for his group).

I learned about the existence of the Mubila epic from a group of high initiates. When, after a long intensive study of the *bwami* association,, I informed these initiates that I was soon leaving, I was scolded by them on the grounds that there were too many things I did not yet know. When I asked for an explanation, they referred to the Mubila epic so I would better understand the social and ideological impact the advent of *bwami* had had on Lega society. For these high initiates, the hero Mubila was

isabulumbu, one filled with hate or inner blindness, one who has not received the *kalenganio*, the moral teachings that lead to wise action. He was criticized as a *kitandala*, a rambler, a *kizonga*, a reckless and meddlesome talker, a person with *nduma*, callousness, one who pays no attention to decorum, procedure, etiquette. Thus, Mubila stood in the sharpest contrast possible with the true *nenekisi*, the initiated master of the land who, it is said during the initiations, is: *katandala* or *mutondo*, the ridgepole of the house, the beam on which the roof rests; *musanganano*, the central meeting place and focus of all people; *mutendezi*, spokesman for the land and its people and settler of their problems.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Whatever their similarities and differences, the two epics ultimately deal with the nature of leadership, the acquisition and exercise of power and authority in society. They depict the destinies of two extraordinary beings who, in dire situations and through a series of distinctive experiences, achieve power and authority - Mwindo by consensus, Mubila by sheer imposition.

Following a brief heroic career Mwindo undergoes an effective katharsis through initiation and purification. Progressively, in the course of his adventurous experiences, his heroic callousness gives way to milder attitudes of mercy, reconciliation and generosity, preparing him for the ultimate recognition of his true leadership capabilities. To shield his people, he promulgates a set of universally valid laws.

Mubila's heroic career has no end. From beginning to end, he remains an extremely violent, deceptive, authoritarian warrior-chief. He is victorious in his numerous warlike encounters, but causes too much destruction and apparently does not attempt nor is able to organize the vanquished social fragments into a new socio-political entity. In fact, from the onset of his heroic career, Mubila has, because of arrogance and implacable pride, caused individuals of an otherwise coherent social group (the Banayombi, i.e. kin and followers of his father Yombi) to split apart and search for new antagonistic alliances. At the end of the epic, Mubila is back in the village from where

he came, giving orders and indulging in festivities but without having created a new and broader community. Contrary to the Mwindo epic, the Mubila epic is set in a time predating modern Lega society, a time when normative institutions, like *bwami*, had not yet established the principles on which the peaceful exercise and transmission of power and authority were to be based.

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