

A BOASTFUL MAN BORNE BY A BRAVE WOMAN: THE MUBILA EPIC OF THE LEGA (DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO)

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ABSTRACT: This paper focuses on the hero Mubila and his wife Kabungulu, protagonists of the Mubila (Mubela) epic of the Lega. The oral narration was recorded in writing by Daniel P. Biebuyck in 1953 from Kambala Mubila of the Beianangi group residing in a remote Lega hamlet. Together with his apprentice and four percussionists, Kambala Mubila recounted, sang, and dramatized the narrative over several days to a large group of interactive participants. Close examination of the text reveals that while Mubila is identified as the central hero of the epic who loudly professes his victory over adversaries, he is more often than not assisted by his wife Kabungulu. One can go so far as to say that he would not be the hero he claims to be without the help of his wife who overcomes his enemies by directly intervening on his behalf.

KEY-WORDS: Democratic Republic of the Congo, epic, Mubila, Lega

RIASSUNTO: Il saggio prende in considerazione l'eroe Mubila e sua moglie Kabungulu, protagonisti dell'epopea Mubila (Mubela) della Lega. La narrazione orale fu registrata per iscritto da Daniel P. Biebuyck nel 1953 da Kambala Mubila del gruppo Beianangi, residente in un remoto borgo della Lega. Insieme al suo apprendista e a quattro percussionisti, Kambala Mubila ha raccontato, cantato e drammatizzato la narrazione per diversi giorni a un folto gruppo di partecipanti interattivi. Un attento esame del testo rivela che, mentre Mubila è identificato come l'eroe centrale dell'epopea che professa ad alta voce la sua vittoria sugli avversari, nella maggior parte dei casi è assistito dalla moglie Kabungulu. Si può arrivare a dire che non sarebbe l'eroe che afferma di essere senza l'aiuto di sua moglie, che sconfigge i suoi nemici intervenendo direttamente al suo favore.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Repubblica Democratica del Congo, epopea, Mubila, Lega



«Women characters play various roles in African epics, including heroic roles, but audiences and scholars generally fail to note and appreciate the full extent of these roles, focusing, instead, on male characters and their actions. The experiences and actions of men get more attention than those of women. Notions such as heroism are seen and understood from a male perspective. These biases are built into research tools such as the motif indexes and the hero pattern»
Joseph L. Mbele

We owe the little information we have on bards and epic tales of the Democratic Republic of Congo to the work of a few ethnologists, linguists, and missionaries, mainly carried out between the 1930s and 1980s. In the light of these publications, we can only regret that many contemporary scholars have ignored a tradition whose scope seems to have been extremely important in societies which, while being very diverse, have a past marked by migrations, expansions, cultural assimilations, or conquests and wars.

Traditionally, in the Democratic Republic of Congo bards did not constitute a group of specialists or a caste as in certain West African communities. Here, the narration of the epic seems to have been reserved to particularly gifted men who were, all at once, dramaturges, singers, musicians, and narrators with a vast knowledge of their culture and its history as well as a profound mastery of the poetic qualities of the spoken word. Their extraordinary talent and memory were honed through many years of apprenticeship with another bard (often their father), whom they accompanied during performances. They not only mastered a wide range of oral literary genres, but were also frequently involved in social affairs as arbiters, negotiators, advisors, and oral historians.

These oral epics (collected from the male bards by anthropologists) all center on a male hero whose deeds are at the very core of the narrative, which begins by recounting the circumstances of his birth that forecast his future endeavors. Most are born of extraordinary circumstances and harness supernatural resources or extraordinary personal powers to overcome difficult situations and destroy their enemies. From the outset, these heroes are depicted as self-praising, swaggering individuals who are ready to fight at the slightest mishap or encounter. The hero Lianja (from the Mongo people, DRC), for example, raves about his prowess in the following terms:

I am Lianja of Nsombe, the one who crosses a river in one leap
Wherever I go, first there is noise, then there is weeping

If there are fighters, let us fight, bring me a battlefield, let us fight our shields to pieces
I am the liana, who knows no peace with the fish, no friendship with animals.¹

Mwindo (the central character from the epics of the Nyanga region, DRC) also shouts his praise name as he confronts an adversary:

Dragon, you are defenseless against Mwindo
For Mwindo is the little one just born he walked
Dragon, you have defied Mwindo
Dragon, you are helpless against Mwindo
For Mwindo is the little one just born he walked
Shemwendo gave birth to a hero.
Comrade, you are powerless against Mwindo.²

Entitled from the get-go, such epic male protagonists flaunt their bravery like a litany throughout their trajectory, which reads like a concatenation of power struggles composed of disputes, clashes, face-offs, contests, and brushes with danger. Close examination of the trajectory of some of these heroic male figures reveals that while they all loudly profess their abilities, they are frequently assisted by the women of their entourage. One can even go so far as to say that many would not be the heroes that they claim to be without the help of women who counsel them or directly intervene on their behalf.

This essay will focus on the telling example of the hero Mubila and his wife Kabungulu, protagonists of the as yet unpublished Mubila (Mubela) epic of the Lega.³ The oral narration was recorded in writing by Daniel P. Biebuyck in 1953 from Kambala Mubila of the Beianangi group residing in a remote Lega hamlet. Together with his apprentice and four percussionists, Kambala Mubila recounted, sang, and dramatized the narrative over several days to a large group of interactive participants [Figure 1].

¹ BOELAERT 1957: 72 (translated from Dutch by the author).

² BIEBUYCK 1969: 128.

³ The original Lega text, together with a French translation, will be published by the *Classiques Africains* in 2025, edited by Daniel P. Biebuyck in collaboration with Brunhilde Biebuyck and Germain M'Beku.

The story unfolds in the depths of a dense rainforest filled with diverse species of trees, lianas, and shrubs, and crisscrossed by numerous rivers, swamps, and dispersed hamlets or villages. The forest milieu is rich in animals (many of whom are personified) and theriomorphic beings that are neither divinities, ogres, nor specters. Bizarre, unusual, and enigmatic events or pursuits mingle with typical human occupations such as hunting with dogs, nets and spears, trapping, fishing, the felling of trees, and the gathering of food and building materials. Descriptions of activities inside and around the village are very limited: reference is made to ball games, games of dice, dancing and drumming, pottery-making, smithing, elders sitting in council, and initiation rituals. Food preparation is reduced to a minimum, as is eating and drinking.



Fig. 1: Photo of Mubila Kambara (the Bard who “sang” the Mubila epic). Photo taken by Daniel P. Biebuyck, 1953. Courtesy of Brunhilde Biebuyck

In this context, the story begins with a chief, Yombi, who builds his village and simultaneously impregnates his forty-one wives, who immediately give birth to thirty-nine boys and one daughter. After they are born, the chief and his favorite wife, the most junior of his forty-one wives, conceive Mubila who instantaneously comes into the world. From the womb, Mubila orders the midwife to his mother’s side so he can emerge. He falls to the ground with a thud, is fully grown, and likens his birth to the fall of giant trees. The midwife rushes to Yombi’s village with a message from the newborn informing his father that he is born, that his name is Mubila, and that he is robust, vigorous, and immensely virile. From the outset, Mubila presents himself as threatening and demonstrates

his insolence by selecting his own name. His appearance further underscores his bellicose nature: he is described as wearing a heavy necklace made of pods and a belt of thorny vines; his eyebrows are likened to the tail of an elephant, and his long, spiky nails are said to be capable of seizing anyone who dares to provoke him. Additionally, he is born with the very accouterments of a warrior: a spear (Quivering), a copper shield (Provoker), and a knife (Cutting-Edge). Several passages later, we learn that he also owns a magical, alluring whistle, which he claims is «in his mouth», as if it were an intrinsic part of his being, able to seduce and destroy at will. He also benefits from an invisible oracle, his Baya, an inner voice (apparently hidden under his armpit) with which he deliberates in various circumstances. As his indispensable guide, a kind of poised, rational, and reflective «alter ego», Baya advises, warns, and sometimes criticizes Mubila in all his enterprises.

Mubila leaves his birthplace and travels to his father's village with the cohort of thirty-nine brothers (and one sister) who preceded him. He orders everyone to build him a new village, which they finish in one fell swoop. When he discovers that his father has died in the meanwhile, he blames his most senior brother, Bukulu bwa Kitaba, in whose custody he had left his father. Bukulu flees to a distant land. Mubila then decides to find wives for himself and his remaining brothers. Without further ado, he captures forty women and distributes them, albeit refusing to give a wife to one of his senior brothers, Kinkutunkutu. After battling with the villagers whose women he captured, he sets out in search of his brother Bukulu against the recommendations of several diviners and his own oracle. Thus, the stage for the remainder of the epic is set.

Mubila does not tend to the needs of his village and people. Using the quest for Bukulu as an excuse, he is repeatedly drawn into new expeditions and escapades. Without using established forest trails, he travels quickly over great distances, crossing rivers and territories belonging to other groups, encountering enemies and dangerous obstacles, engaging in risky activities, transforming passersby into opponents, and ransacking villages. Relentless in his thirst for adventure, he lacks etiquette and only adheres to his own code of honor. Most of his actions are unusual, illicit, anti-social, and in flagrant contradiction with Lega rules of conduct. Nothing in what he says or does advocates generosity, moderation, temperance, verbal restraint, nonviolence, mutual aid, or customary decorum.

He is fierce, and is proud of it: «A leaf trembles and I cut it with my knife». He is blood-thirsty, and brags about it: «I, Great-knife, unsheathe suddenly!».

From the outset, Mubila defies fundamental kinship codes: since he is the most junior son of a patriarch, his departure from the paternal village directly after birth – for no apparent reason – is an act of rebellion that goes against all rules regulating intra-family and lineage relationships. As soon as his new village is built, his father dies, as if struck down by the overwhelming number of his son's behavioral breaches. Mubila is also disrespectful to his most senior brothers, Bukulu and Kinkutunkutu, accusing them of misdeeds and refusing their advice and criticism. His impulsive anger leads him to inflict injuries on both brothers. Although he later reconciles with them, their relationship is fraught with latent tensions, ill feelings, or outright hatred.

Throughout his peregrinations, Mubila reveals his character traits, many of which are encapsulated in the names he and others use to refer to him: Tireless-Traveler; Trail-Blazer; Haughty-One; Intrepid-Manly-Hero, True-Man, Brazen-One; One-Who-Is-So-Talked-About; Braggart; Hard-Hearted. Everywhere he goes, especially before or after a confrontation, he bellows his self-given praise-names, either partially or in full:

I am the only child, followed by no other
The great ax that suddenly breaks off from its handle
The scaffolding-of-light-wood that shatters very suddenly
The Mugulugulu-tree that breaks its top and lets a heap of vines crash down
The Viper of the dry season that is not threatened by a stick
This is what the elders have always told me

Flame, no one can seize me
Rabble-rouser, the super powerful
Year of famine, causing dissension in the family
Viper-of-the-dry-season, that is not threatened by a stick
Mugulugulu-tree, I break my top and a heap of vines crash down
This is what the elders called me
Male-monkey, who does not suckle puppies
Only child, followed by no other

Flame, no one can seize me
Rabble-rouser, the super powerful
Male-monkey, who does not suckle puppies
Only child, followed by no other
Scaffolding-of-Light-Wood that shatters very suddenly,
Goat in heat, I mate, bleat, and pass
Grand-parrot, fruit gatherer
Hunting-dog, whose scars cannot be counted

It is I who will fight alone
I seize whomever darkens my heart with my long, sharp nails
I cannot flee from battle; I have my iron shield, my quivering spear,
Don't you see my belt made of thorny vines, that of a truly virile man?

Mubila's personality and behavioral traits are consistent throughout the epic. He excels in exaggerated self-pride, arrogance, and braggadocio. Particularly inventive in his insolence, he uses a thesaurus of vile insults and biting sarcasm to tease or challenge other persons without good reason. He claims that simply his gaze summons war, and his bellicose temperament translates into ruthless actions and reactions. Intolerant, he never listens to the advice of elders or to the warnings given by his mother, wife, brothers, or son, claiming that «I, myself, am self-sufficient; I deliberate in my heart». All told, nothing is taboo for Mubila, not even sexual relations with his sister. He is self-centered, does as he pleases, and succeeds in his forays mainly because of his pugnacity, his magical objects, and the assistance of his entourage.

In that entourage, his senior wife Kabungulu plays a vital role. The mother of his only son Zakeuti, she is a powerful protagonist whose interventions may be even more decisive than those of Mubila himself. It is suggested that Mubila has a more intimate bond with Kabungulu than with his two other wives, who are childless and play a minor role, fetching water, tobacco, or nuts for him. Upon meeting her, he is struck by her youthful beauty. She describes herself as immaculate and without blemish. Even though she is attracted to Mubila because of his beauty and fame, she resists his advances; only his magical whistle succeeds in winning her over. While very little is said about the nature

of their relationship, it is clear that they have a solid bond. At times, Mubila even demonstrates special concern and affection for Kabungulu. When he leaves her in the custody of a senior brother, for example, he asks him to treat her well, to give her extra food, to reprimand her if necessary but never to beat her. When he and Kabungulu have not seen one another for a time, «they embrace – chest to chest, they greet each other». He actually seems quite attached to Kabungulu and sometimes bemoans her absence: «Even if my wife leaves my house to seduce someone else, even if she dies in the river, I will always look for her». Mubila calls her a «dignified young mother» and «matron who gave birth only once», and he praises the straightness of her back and the slenderness of her body. He even admires her uncommon ways and recognizes that she is a woman «whose manners are different from those of other women», «one who has the ways of men», one whose «behavior is unusual», and one who, compared to other women, is a «rebel».

The only possessions associated with Kabungulu are a small basket where she keeps shell money, magical potions, and her powerful magical loincloth. With the help of this cloth, she destroys, defeats, weakens, or neutralizes Mubila's enemies, whether they act as individuals or as a group. She achieves this on her own or when Mubila is already tackling an enemy but is unable to overcome him. At times, he actively solicits her help, but more often than not, she suddenly enters the scene and acts quickly and radically: she tears off her loincloth and flings it into the face of the opponent, who dies on the spot. She also shrewdly plays on her abilities to seduce, using her loincloth as a seductive instrument: «She caresses her loincloth like a beauty caresses herself». Her husband will sometimes dispatch her to the village of an adversary so that she can weaken him with her wile and guile. She enters his village as a «runaway woman», ready for sexual adventures; she lets herself be seduced, but then slays her target.

Kabungulu demonstrates her true colors in the very early stages of the epic when her group avenges the abduction of their women by attacking Mubila's village, Tubala. Mubila urges everyone to flee, suggesting he will fight alone and proclaiming his praise names. Kabungulu replies by declaring war: «My husband, let the battle begin!» She tears away her loincloth and announces: «I destroy all ne'er do wells with my exterminator». Although, at this juncture, she does not have the opportunity to transform her words into action, she nevertheless demonstrates the combative spirit already suggested by her

name, which means genet cat, an animal known for its agility, quick reflexes, and the price one pays for provoking it. All told, she is fierce, aggressive, and unafraid of battle or confrontation. Some liken her to a witch and others recognize her force and efficiency: «Hey! This Kabungulu is not a mere woman. Among all women, she is a rebel!». Kabungulu's loincloth is the shield with which she fights. She designates herself as undefeated, «one who cannot be knocked down first», and as an exceptional, victorious woman: «I am not just a woman; among women, I am a winner, I destroy all ne'er do wells». She regularly exalts the effectiveness of her loincloth which, as noted above, she refers to as her «exterminator». In describing her actions to her son, she explains: «You, my son, when I fight against virile men, the exterminator with which I fight is my loincloth; it is a shield that destroys all virile men». Kabungulu's supreme power is most strongly emphasized when, on two occasions, she brings her husband back to life with the help of her loincloth and magic potions.

But while Mubila lauds his wife for being like no other woman, he is clearly ambivalent about her remarkable differences. Now and then, he will call her «My mean, little trouble-maker» and accuse her of being a «source of evil». At other times, he will flatly rebuke her by reminding her to keep her place: «A wife does not hand out meat even if only a weakling is around», «A wife does not wear a tight, high belt», «A wife does not roll up the hunting net; it would kill her immediately». In a particularly telling passage, where she absolutely wants to accompany him to initiation rites, he grabs her violently by the arm and crushes her under his armpit. As she screams, he declares: «Since sunrise, I have been telling you that a wife does not set the hunting nets». She accompanies him nevertheless and contributes to unveiling the shameful secret of one of the mentors. Mubila also frequently reminds her of his own prowess: «Kabungulu, my wife, look how a virile man performs: at the foot of my spear, seven [killed] and at the point, fourteen». He never listens to her advice or objections, and if she proposes a course of action, he will retort: «My Baya is always the one who shows me the way». Even her son will fault her for going against Mubila's wishes: «Your disobedience, you, my mother, will cause problems that will lead to the death of my father!».

For her part, Kabungulu supports her husband in many of his initiatives. She accompanies him even when he tries to prevent her from doing so; she admonishes and

counsels him even if he never listens; she supports him even when he rebukes her; and she acts even when he fends her off. Although Kabungulu is a vital complement to her husband's activities and successes, he never overtly recognizes her as a victor; rather, after she succeeds in killing one of his aggressors, he merely pursues his peregrinations or, rather, shouts his praise name as if he were solely responsible for exterminating an enemy, obtaining the glory for the work his wife accomplished. In point of fact, Kabungulu disrupts established power structures and challenges gender roles. She is a force that must be controlled, and she cannot be fully recognized in her own right even if she is instrumental in solving crises.

Interestingly, whereas Mubila has recourse to multiple tools and relies on a host of beings in his battles, Kabungulu uses only one weapon, her loincloth, the Lega term used in the epic being «garment over the fire». The association of fire with the pubic area is significant since both are powerful transformative agents associated with positive and negative consequences – in this case, punishment, destruction, and death. The correlation between the woman and her destructive instrument is equally significant. The loincloth hides the gateway to the womb, symbol of a sacred space associated with birth and renewal but also with danger, contamination, and uncontrollable forces. As such, it represents a formidable metaphor for female empowerment.

The epic ends on a peaceful note after Kabungulu succeeds in killing Mubila's final enemy. Mubila and his followers return to Tubala; their village is cleaned (and cleansed) and endless dances are organized. Stability has been achieved; the people are settled. According to Daniel Biebuyck, the Mubila epic reflects a pre-Bwami society where internecine wars ultimately led to the emergence of the elaborate Bwami association, «the fruit that came from above», bringing peace, unity and a cult for those who lead by wisdom and moderation. On a symbolic level, Mubila would thus represent all the feuding leaders of the Lega migrations that took place some two to three hundred years ago, when they gradually moved from eastern Africa and the Ruwenzori Mountains region into the deep rain forests of Kivu and Maniema, occupied by pre-established groups of diverse origins (Pygmies, Luba and Lunda offshoots, and other hunting groups). Their incursion generated competition and disagreement over hunting rights, seniority in kinship groups, women, witchcraft, and sorcery. Once the Lega were settled, the Bwami association grad-

ually established a new power structure that brought order where there had been chaos and excess, a structure where women were not only admitted, but held positions of authority in the hierarchy of social grades.

In a pre-Bwami context, it is not surprising that Kabungulu is as combative as Mubila since she assists her husband in vanquishing enemies and establishing their people. With her «ways of doing like no other», she might, however, symbolically represent the beginnings of a new order, one that aspires to the fusion of gendered roles, wherein women hold a complementary position, equal to that of men. In point of fact, Kabungulu's actions forecast the egalitarian adages of the Bwami association, two of which are particularly relevant:

- A canoe is propelled by moving the paddles on each side, left (female) and right (male).⁴
- Even if one is intelligent, one finger alone cannot pick up a clod of dirt.⁵

The Bwami, which was suppressed by the Belgian colonial powers, regained popularity post-independence (1960) and played an important role in training for new forms of leadership in the DRC. Given that this particular epic text was collected in 1953, it would be interesting to compare this version with others collected in the 1970s and 1980s, or even more so, with narratives that are still performed today. The comparison might yield interesting perspectives on the evolution, if any, of heroic figures in the cycle of narratives to which the Mubila epic belongs.

In other epic traditions of the DRC, notably among the Nyanga and Mongo, while the male hero is described as ruthless and arrogant, he is also perceived as a prodigy, the originator of marvelous things, one whose capacity to overstep boundaries generates the creative force needed for fashioning a new society in which leadership is no longer defined on the battlefield. The women in these epics are likewise not simply in the background, nor do they merely represent a refuge, feeding their brothers, husbands, or sons

⁴ Among the Lega, as well as among other African cultures, left and right are gendered, with the left associated with women and the right with men.

⁵ This proverb applies specifically to the husband-wife relationship.

with advice and food. As bulwarks of physical strength and mental know-how, they not only protect, but also defend and revive. Their actions demonstrate that, when all is said and done, the «male hero» must die (physically or symbolically) since his very actions are antithetical to the new order he has founded: at the beginning of the world, we need a god; at the onset of society, we need a hero; when, however, the society is established, we need instead a form of leadership that embraces the male-female duality in a non-gendered perspective.

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