

## MYTHS AND THE CONVULSIONS OF HISTORY

*Some original forms of state emerge from the clan structures in central Africa in the 16th and 17th centuries, beyond the reach of any European influence. The oral epic traditions which echo these events draw from the founts of Bantu mythic thought. The Luba national epic recounts the dramatic origin of its sacred royalty and describes the passage from a primitive culture to a refined civilization, from an uneventful history to one full of movement; but above all it abandons itself to a singular meditation on the ritual usage of fire, on family and death, on time and space, on the rainbow and lightning. If we take the fantastic seriously, symbolic patterns appear which filter the historical tradition and transform it into metaphysics. The reeling King Woot seems to play in reverse the Luba role, on the royal scene of Kuba mythology, where almost Biblical figures could be recognized: the tower of Babel throws its shadow on the adventures of an African Noah who first abandons himself to drunkenness, then to incest, delivering society to the diversity of languages and plunging the universe into primordial chaos. A transition between the myth and the tale, the founding epic of the Lunda state is bathed three times in blood: the blood of the warriors, of the women, and of the beasts who fall prey to a marvelously seductive hunter. Looking closely, we see that this Prince-stranger, initiator of a line of anointed royalty, carries on his shoulders, as does his Luba counterpart, a part of the universe. The cosmogony is veiled in the myth but transparent in the ritual, in the actions and mysterious words of the initiates into mungonge religious society: men with eyes of light are the counterpart of animals with eyes of darkness, as the star of day is opposed*

Translated by Robert Blohm.

to the sinister hyena-moon. The founding epic of the Bemba state tells, like the Kuba myth, of the fascination of the principle of pleasure among a migrating aristocracy, somewhat decadent in comparison with the rude warrior or hunter heroes in the Luba and Lunda epics. But all these narratives, in the final analysis, form one sole myth, which develops its autonomous structures under the turbulence of an historical adventure each time different. More than unfolding the particular story of each kingdom, these legendary chronicles of Zaïre, Zambia and Angola reveal that the powerful political organisations set up by the Bantu to the south of the great forest are not isolated from each other: they administrate in common an intellectual patrimony which breaks loose from the ideological role that the kings, whether drunk on palm wine or on military ambition, try to make them play for their own glory: myths and rites obey their own codes, recognize no master but one, which they give themselves in their own kingdom: the Imaginary.

The text which follows here is concerned in particular with the epic of the Bemba people, whose dominating aristocracy imposed an anointed royalty on some 100,000 people formerly grouped in matrilinear clans.

The epic of the creation of the Lunda Empire is completely laid out in a symbolic system which is, in certain respects, the transformation of the founding-epic of the Luba. The second account distinguishes itself from the first by a change of style: what was an heroic account for the Luba becomes a love story. Yet, in both cases the function remains the same: it is to be shown how an ancient civilization, in certain respects lacking and crude, welcomed anointed royalty from afar. Despite reservations in principle called for by the ethno-historical use of similar accounts, we cannot remain insensitive to what so obviously comes out in a tale: the arrival of Cibinda Ilunga indicates very probably the somewhat peaceful invasion of the land of the Lunda by a group of emigrant Lubas, bearers of new political institutions. There is no reason to reject the historical interpretation put forth by Vansina: "A little before 1600 a girl, Rweej (Lueji), became ruler and married Kibinda (Cibinda) Itunga, a Luba-Katangese who was the son of Kalala Ilunga, the founder of the second Luba Empire. The installation of him and his vast retinue into office had its effects. Several bands of Lunga left their homeland and founded the kingdoms of Imbangala, Lwena, and Chokwe. Some of the retinue of Cibinda Ilunga, dissatisfied at not having been appointed to higher positions, departed; they set up the Bemba state."<sup>1</sup> The

<sup>1</sup> J. Vansina, *Introduction à l'ethnographie du Congo*, Brussels, Editions universitaires du Congo, 1966, p. 175.

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first events concern the exile of Chinguli and Chiniama; this episode is the subject of an historical controversy which we shall briefly recall. One of the successors of Chinguli founds the kingdom of Kasanji on the western bank of the Kwango River and comes into contact with the first Portuguese traders; the governor of Loanda receives a Lunda chief by the name of Jaga, and gives him fire-arms. Carvalho considers Chinguli to be the sole protagonist in this long adventure.<sup>2</sup> Vansina, on the other hand, considers, with more likelihood, that two waves of emigrants followed one another in the north of Angola. The first, led by Chinguli, then by Kasanji, settles on the plateau where the Kasai and Kwango Rivers have their source; the residents are soon to be displaced by new Lunda emigrants who create the Chokwe and Songo Kingdoms. Kasanji, the nephew of Chinguli, continues the long westward journey, reaching the sea. In 1610 he makes a pact of allegiance with the Portuguese in Loanda, and subsequently participates, with his Imbangala partisans, in the wars being waged by the Portuguese against Ngola, king of Ndongo.<sup>3</sup> Birmingham moves back the whole Lunda chronology, establishing 1575 as the approximate date of the first contacts between the Imbangala chiefs and the Portuguese. From this he concludes that the establishment, by Luba chief Cibinda Ilunga, of the Lunda state should be placed during the first thirty years of the 16th century, not at the beginning of the 17th.<sup>4</sup>

The invasion by Cibinda gives rise to another event of central importance in a completely different direction: the creation of the Bemba state in Zambia. From the founding-epic of the Bemba it can easily be inferred that a group of Luba aristocracy, residing at the Lunda court when Cibinda assumed power, decided, following several abrasive incidents, to seek their fortunes elsewhere. These emigrants set out eastward. The account of their adventures provides a new myth which takes its place among the others dealing with the origins

<sup>2</sup> H. A. Dias de Carvalho, *Etnografia e historia tradicional dos povos da Lunda*, Lisbon, 1890, pp. 76-83.

<sup>3</sup> J. Vansina, *Les anciens royaumes de la savane*, Université Lovanium, Institut de recherches économiques et sociales, Kinshasa, 1965, pp. 189-193.

<sup>4</sup> D. Birmingham, "The Date and Significance of the Imbangala Invasion of Angola," *Journal of African History*, VI, 2, 1965, pp. 143-152.

of kingdoms in the Congolese basin; once more history is moulded in the categories of symbolic thought.

*Bemba: The origins of the Bemba Kingdom (Labrecque)*<sup>5</sup>

In Lunda country there reigned a queen-mother, Mumbi Mukasa, the niece of God. She had fallen from the sky with ears as large as an elephant's. She married Mukulumpe and by him had four off-spring among whom was Chiti Mukutwe. This person is none other than the future Bemba king, Chiti Mukulu. By an early marriage Mukulumpe had two off-spring, the elder of whom became heir to the throne. The sons of Mumbi Mukasa conceived a fantastic plan to build a high tower with the help of all the man-power in the capital. The project, after having attained a certain height, collapsed, killing many people. Mukulumpe then fell into a great rage. He resolved to put to death the three sons responsible: Katongo, Nkole, and Chiti. He pierced the eyes of the first, while the other two had barely enough time to flee. The king had a trap dug along the escape route. It was a pit lined with spears, hidden from view. The now blind Katongo, informed of the danger awaiting his two brothers, sent messengers who uttered cries into the four winds. The father, too, sent messengers, assuring his sons of his pardon if they would return home in the middle of the night. But the fugitive sons had heard the warning sent by Katongo's men. They made use of an alternate path and arrived, safely and soundly, in the capital late that night. They woke their father who ordered them to appear before him the following morning. As humiliation, he condemned them to sweeping the courtyard of the royal village. The anger of Mukulumpe was appeased. A few months later, however, the young princes committed other offences including, perhaps, adultery with their father's young wife. They were condemned, this time, to sweeping the royal cemetery. Chiti and Nkole refused to comply and took flight with a band of partisans. They were pursued by courtiers armed with sticks. The fugitives resisted the attack and killed those sent by the king, charged with dispensing punishment. Weary, Mukulumpe returned his wife, Mumbi Mukasa, to the sky. Having barely arrived, she died. Crushed by so much sorrow, the king decided to reunite his rebellious sons. He showered them with gifts and gave them notice to seek their fortunes elsewhere.

Chiti, Nkole, and their step-brother Kasembe, a son from the

<sup>5</sup> E. Labrecque, "La tribu des Babemba, I. Les origines des Babemba," *Anthropos*, XVIII, 5-6, 1933, pp. 633-648.

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the first marriage, accompanied by a large group of aristocrats (belonging to the same totemic clan of the crocodile) and slaves, directed their steps eastward. A white man (or a Portuguese metis), accompanied by a dog, guided them; this stranger, named Lutshele, was a well-known divine who left his footprints on many a rock throughout the countryside. Chiti led the migration. Nkole's head was filled with various kinds of grain. They crossed the Lwapula River and set up a large village, which they named "the spread of the race," where they lingered on. It was then that Chiti regretted not having his sister Chilufya-Mulenga with him to insure royal succession according to maternal filiation. But Mukulumpe kept his daughter enclosed in a hut with no doors or windows. This prison was surrounded by a string of small bells (intended to serve as an alarm). The young girl had just reached the marriageable age. Tshiti chose five men of royal blood and gave them orders to rescue his sister by night. One dark night, after many days of walking, they reached the village of the father. The prison of the princess rose a few feet from the royal lodgings. They succeeded in removing the alarming device without attracting attention; lifting the roof they slipped a ladder into the hut. They then quietly woke the princess who agreed to go with them. Along the escape route, on the banks of the Luapala, they rested for a few days. Prince Kapasa sent two of his companions to notify Chiti of the success of their mission. That night, Kapasa slept with Chilufya-Mulenga who was his sister by classification. Six months later, the princess, with child, revealed the name of her seducer. Chiti fell into a rage; he expelled Kapasa from the royal clan and assigned him a degrading totem (the genitals of a woman). Kapasa, who was filled with shame, left the group, together with his kin. Before continuing the eastward migration Lutshele conferred with the oracle in order to find out whether the unfamiliar territory toward which they were headed was fertile. The reply of the ancestors was favourable and the Bemba people set out under the guidance of Chiti, while Kasemble went on to establish a small kingdom along the Luapala. After many long months they reached Nsenga, the country of Chief Mwase. Chiti concluded a pact of friendship with him. One day Chilimbulu, the wife of Mwase, determined to seduce the noble stranger by sending a message in no uncertain terms. She imprinted the beautiful tattoos of her chest onto a ball of red powder from the crushed bark of the *nkula* tree and sent this declaration of love to Chiti who exclaimed: "What a beautiful woman she must be." Chilimbulu's messengers confirmed this opinion. She met Chiti in great secrecy near a small river where they lived together for three days in the absence of

the husband. The latter became suspicious and set out for the encampment of his friend. Having caught him in the very act, he mortally wounded Chiti with a poisoned arrow which thrust deep into his arm. Nkole succeeded Chiti. He had the body of his brother mummified amidst lenses<sup>6</sup> which captured the rays of the sun. This ritual lasted for many months. Nkole then ordered his people to turn back (westward). He established two more villages and, then, decided to avenge the death of his brother; he organized a military campaign and massacred the people of the murderer of the king. The corpse of Chilimbulu was cut into many pieces. But the skin covering her chest, which was adorned with tattoos, was dried and carefully preserved as a fertility charm. Thenceforth the king's first wife would cover her loins with it whenever she began planting the sorghum. The carved remains of Chilimbulu and her spouse were placed in enormous water-filled urns which were kept in the village of Nkole. The caravan moved on westward. Meanwhile the funeral ceremonies for Chiti required tending to. In order to obtain the cow-hide needed to wrap the mummy of his brother, Nkole waged war with the Fipa shepherds. Then Lutshele Nganga, the white divine, reappeared. He built a circular hut and placed therein, by way of the roof, a framework of iron bars which he covered with grass. Chiti's mummy lay for some time in this sanctuary. A sorcerer was charged with burning what remained of Chilimbulu on a massive block of stone. The smoke was so thick that it suffocated Nkole. He fell deathly ill. On the day of the solemn funeral ceremonies for Chiti he sensed his own end approaching. He had a second grave dug, commanding that the tomb of Chiti be "at the bottom of the termitarium" and his, "at the top," since he was the elder. In this way the second king was buried beside the first "in an all-white termitarium." Their uterine nephew, scarcely six years of age, succeeded them. He was the son of Chilufya-Mulenga, the incestuous sister. He continued the westward migration until two dignitaries discovered, by chance, the spot where the caravan would at last settle. The first (named "little dog") was a mute but had the ability to perceive the odors of animals. One night he led the hunters along the trail of a boar which they swiftly killed. The second dignitary sensed a strong putrid odor; he found it coming from the body of a crocodile lying on a rock. This animal, it is remembered, is the totem of the royal clan. The spot was judged favourable for the construction of the royal village.

<sup>6</sup> Labrecque speaks of "burning lenses." They were, perhaps, mirrors provided by the expedition's 'white' guide.

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The story continues with a history of the first twenty Bemba kings without any solution to the problem of the continuity between myth and history. But the tone of fantasy softens.

An enigmatic synthesis of complicated historical traditions and mythical frameworks, this text presents many difficulties in interpretation. Let us, first of all, unravel from this hank some threads already identified elsewhere.

At the start of play, the cosmogonic code is found to be closely tied to the familial one. A celestial mother marries an earthly prince. The Bemba epic reflects, as if in a mirror, the Luba-Lunda hierogamy of the celestial prince and the terrestrial princess by inverting the image. The elephant-like ears of the princess call to mind the quality of the hunter in her male partner, such as it appears in the Luba-Lunda context; however, this time it is the woman (the object of the hunt insofar as she is a metaphor for fertility), and not the hunter, who is conspicuous of this point of view. Mumbi-Mukasa takes on, at least partially, the form of an animal. Also, we were led previously to compare Lueji, the heroine of the Lunda epic, to wounded game. The thematic inversion continues along other lines. Mumbi Mukasa, a girl from above, is well formed, while Lueji, a chthonian princess, is rather plain. In both cases the hierogamy of sky and earth is the source of misfortune; it provokes, at somewhat short date, a massive exodus. But they are the sons of the princess who exile themselves, in the Bemba epic, and their brothers, in the Lunda epic. The symbolic numerology nevertheless remains unchanged. To the two brothers, Chiniama and Chinguli, leaders of the *westward* migration, correspond two brothers, Chiti and Nkole, the first Bemba kings, who venture into unknown country *to the east*; the other two sons of Mumbi Mukasa are, to be truthful, but confederates, and the historical fate of Kasembe, the step-brother, is unknown.

The separation of Lueji from her brothers has its equivalent in the Bemba myth: Chiti and Nkole find themselves separated at once from their mother (who is sent to the sky) and their sister Chilufya-Mulenga. But the Bemba princes abduct her in order to establish matrilineage, while the Lunda epic restores patrilineage. It is not astonishing to find in the Bemba epic

the familial code of Kuba mythology: the social union of brother and sister is restored by way of incest.

It is in an analogous play of mirrors that one can make clear the passage from Kuba to Bemba mythology. Chiti dispatches Prince Kapasa after his sister, while Mweel sends several emissaries to his brother Woot, the hero of Kuba culture, to attempt to bring him back. One of them, the wood-worm Bombo, finds Woot asleep (M<sub>10</sub>); likewise, in the story with which we are concerned, Chilufya-Mulenga is drowsy when Kapasa and his companions, having taken great precautions, succeed in reaching her. But they must watch very carefully not to make a sound, whereas Bombo taps the rock separating him from Woot to make himself known.

Let us compare more carefully the two myths. Woot leaves his sister after having engaged in incest, plunging the village which he has abandoned into darkness. Now the sister of Chiti, after the departure of her brother, lives in perpetual darkness artificially produced by her father who keeps her in a hut with no egress. But just opposite to that which transpires in the Kuba myth is the incest which takes place not before, but after, this miniature eclipse. The Bemba myth is careful to specify throughout that Kapasa and his men arrive in the village of Chilufya-Mulenga during a very dark night.

We find again, in our epic, the theme of excessive coition between mother and son, which is the core of another Kuba myth (M<sub>11</sub>). In effect the ascent to the sky planned by Chiti and his brothers when they have the tower built can be interpreted as an oedipal search for the celestial mother, inciting, as in M<sub>11</sub>, the wrath of the father so ridiculed. Darkness is connected in two different ways to this abortive attempt at maternal incest; after the collapse of the tower the father inflicts upon one of his sons the very punishment which Oedipus inflicts upon himself: he pierces his eyes; elsewhere he demands of his sons to return to him *in the middle of the night*.

The problems raised in the family context also find expression in the theme of the matrilineal Luba-Hemba (M<sub>8</sub>), in which the sons come into conflict with the primordial father. But this time it is the father (Mukulumpe) who fondles the morose scheme to assassinate his sons. Despite this reversal, the Bemba myth, as well as the Luba-Hemba (M<sub>8</sub>) and the Kuba (M<sub>9</sub>) myths,



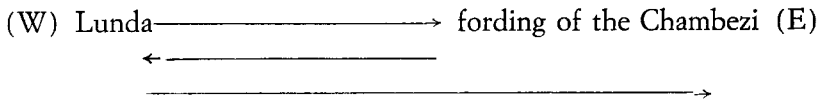
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justifies by reason of the severance of father from sons, the transition from the patrilineal system to the matrilineal one. We have seen that the connection between father and daughter is the corresponding mythical theme of this critical situation. We find again in the Bemba epic: the sister of Chiti is jealously kept prisoner by an abusive father. But we have also seen how this sterile relationship can open the way to the matrilineal system only on condition of being, in turn, denied in favour of moderate coition between brother and sister. The Bemba epic confirms this analysis in the most clear cut way since, in order to guarantee matrilineal dynastic continuity, Chiti is required to abduct Chilufya-Mulenga from their common father. We know, finally, that a second obstacle stands in the way of the realization of matrilineal succession: excessive coition (incestuous) between brother and sister. Indeed, the Bemba scenario is exemplary. Prince Kapasa, charged with abducting Chilufya-Mulenga, seduces her. Chiti then falls into a rage. In banishing the guilty one from the royal clan he clearly proclaims the fundamental law of matrilineal societies, according to which brother and sister are joined in socio-economic union divested of any erotic ambiguity.

This familial crisis invites other modes of interpretation. The violent conflict of father against son is expressed in the construction of a tower whose mythical profile is by now familiar to us. The loss of this project signals the future exodus, being at the same time the immediate cause of many deaths. The scattering of men and the cultural diversity which result are once again associated with the separation of the sky from the earth, or rather, the introduction of discontinuity into the cosmos. The union of the sky and the earth, on the other hand, connotes incest, for the rebellious elements, in building the tower, draw nearer to the maternal domain. This initial crisis is resolved by the return of the mother to the sky. On the cosmogonic level, this mythical theme would be interpreted as a more radical formulation of the disjunction of the high from the low, connoted in the preceding by the collapse of the tower. This time the mother herself dies, the sons leave the father, and the people scatter.

From this point onward the myth shifts to a newly oriented space; the vertical axis in the account disappears. To be more precise, the quest for heaven (and the mother) which marked the

first episode is substituted by a search for a new land to the east. The man who guides this migration is the white magician called Lutshele. Far from being a Portuguese metis, as alleged by Labrecque, he is purely and simply a sun hero. In fact, according to Doke the name *Lutshele*, which is applied sometimes to God by the Lamba, would be closely related to the term designating the dawn.<sup>7</sup> The quality of whiteness which the myth ascribes to Lutshele is then explained without the necessity of introducing an external historical element. This character appears repeatedly in the Bemba epic. He comes on the scene at the beginning of the exodus, and in the course of migration whenever it is to be known whether to venture further eastward. He leaves the Bemba when they ford the great River Chambezi, and retraces his steps. He later finds his companions when they themselves pursue a westward course, but eventually disappears toward the east, promising to return. Lutshele performed a three-fold movement which may be schematized in the following way:



The general movement, directed from west to east, immediately brings to mind the flight of the sun hero Woot. Like Woot moreover (M<sub>10</sub>) Lutshele has left his footprints on the rocks; in the end both disappear toward the east. In going toward the unknown land of the sunrise the ancestors of the Bemba engage in a solar quest similar to that undertaken by the ancestors of the Kuba. The episode in which Lutshele retraces his steps is analogous to the symbolic return of Woot who sends to Mweel the birds of light to put an end to the great night. This westward return, which connotes the apparent movement of the sun, is but very briefly brought up in the Bemba epic; the story precisely states, however, that Lutshele is accompanied by other members of the royal family when he reappears. By virtue of this Lutshele is clearly the guide to the land of good fortune to the east. A characteristic feature casts aside remaining doubt that

<sup>7</sup> C. M. Doke, *The Lamba of Northern Rhodesia*, London, 1931, p. 226; mentioned by E. Bourgeois, "La promotion d'un pays en voie de développement, problème délicat et difficile," *Mémoires du CEPSSI*, Elisabethville, 1965, p. 24.

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Lutshela shares the solar nature of Woot. A dog is connected with the solar figure in the Kuba myth as well as in the Bemba one. The animal is the emissary of Mweel in the service of Woot, in M<sub>10</sub>, while it is the faithful companion of Lutshela, in the Bemba myth. At the end of the story, when Lutshela has disappeared for good toward the east and the Bemba resume their movement in the opposite direction, his dog reappears under a curious disguise. A mute, called, interestingly enough, *little dog* because he has an especially subtle sense of smell, leads a group of hunters to a boar; this successful hunt augurs an end to the long trek, first eastward, then westward. Finally, the Lala furnish a decisive confirmation to our line of argument. They have a myth which explicitly presents Lutshela as the figure who brings sunlight to mankind, thereby arousing the jealousy of his elder brother.<sup>8</sup>

Other indications suggest that the topography of the Bemba epic is a mythical cosmography as well. The first migratory phase is completed at a spot to the extreme east where the Bemba mummify the body of their first king by harnessing the rays of the sun. They thus achieve, in symbolic fashion, that union of sky and earth which Chiti tried in vain to accomplish during his lifetime in Lunda country when he attempted to build a tower. It is clear henceforth that the east is analogous to the sky by virtue of a 90-degree rotation of the cosmogonic axis from an initial vertical position. It is significant, moreover, that Chiti's sister, Chilufya-Mulenga, who is imprisoned in a hut having no doors or windows, must first scale a ladder passed through the roof by her brother's men in order to rejoin her brother in the east; she does it in order to ascend to the sky, so to speak.



This transformation provides the key to interpreting the Lunda (region of Kazembe) variant of the myth of the cosmic tower,

<sup>8</sup> J. T. Munday, "The Creation Myth amongst the Lala of Northern Rhodesia," *African Studies*, I, 1, 47/53, 1962, p. 50.

in which the king, out of ridicule, compels a certain Lubunda to erect an enormous structure for the purpose of capturing the sun. This character deserves, on two counts, to be compared to the solar Lutshele in the Bemba epic. Like Lutshele, he leaves the court of the Lunda king after the collapse of the tower; he is an accomplished blacksmith, like Lutshele who covers, with an iron roof, the funeral hut housing the mummy of Chiti. The anthropo-cosmogonic code analysed above is proven since, at the remotest point of the eastward trek (i.e. in the direction of the sun), the founder of Bemba royalty actually becomes immortal as a result of the beneficent effects of the rays. The incorruptible mummy is nothing but the place where the union of earth and sun is brought about. This contrasts neatly with the decomposing carcass of a crocodile which marks the terrestrial site of the royal capital. The myth also opposes the dismembered corpse of Chilimbulu to the royal mummy. Reduced to multiplicity, the body of Chilimbulu rots in the water while the body of her lover, whose unity is left intact, is placed in contact with the celestial fire and promised a kind of eternity comparable to that which the funeral rites assure that other solar ruler, the king of the Lunda.

The gruesome funeral rite to which the mutilated body of Chilimbulu is submitted leads us to examine the cosmogonic significance of the contrasting intervention of fire and water. The deadly smoke emitted from the pyre on which lie the burning, rotting remains of Chilimbulu and her spouse calls to mind the formidable smoke from Nkongolo which threatens the rainy season in Luba country. One wonders if the massive urns containing the macerating remains of Chilimbulu the seductress, prior to cremation, do not specifically connote the rainy season which was brought in, as in the Holoholo myth (*M<sub>7</sub>*), by a military expedition.

Two 'dry' episodes frame the dramatic scene of the placing of the remains into the urns: the solar mummification of Chiti, which precedes it, and the cremation of the decomposed remains of Chilimbulu, which follows it. The murder of Chiti manifestly corresponds to the beginning of the dry season. The myth makes clear that the mummification will last for many months. It would be difficult to see how this operation could possibly take place in the rain. As the celestial fire to which the corpse of Chiti is

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subjected ushers in the drought, so the water in the urns, in which the remains of Chilimbulu and her spouse rot, indicates the presence of rain. The terrestrial fire and the smoke from the funeral-pyre in turn bring an end to the rainy season. The three successive deaths which punctuate the story correspond to three cosmogonic instances in a cyclic structure whose last term turns on the first.

death of Chiti (mummification) : beginning of the dry season  
death of Chilimbulu (placing of : beginning of the rainy season  
the remains into urns)  
death of Nkole (asphyxiation) : end of the rainy season

The poisoned smoke of the funeral-pyre, which brings about the death of Nkole, has then the same cosmogonic function as the deadly smoke belching forth from the termitarium enclosing Nkongolo, the rainbow, in Luba mythology: both combat the rain. But the originality of the Bemba epic in comparison to that of the Luba ( $M_1$ ) lies in the fact that the heroes of the first, who are very lack-lustre during their lifetimes, assume their cosmogonic functions only after death. Chiti's Luba counterpart, Kalala Ilunga, is associated with rain, so the Bemba myth uses the negative of this image by making the sun-drenched corpse of Chiti the very sign of drought. By the same token Chilimbulu, in death, connotes the rainy season.

mummified corpse of Chiti : dry season  
dismembered and decomposed  
corpse of Chilimbulu : rainy season

Each of these two cosmogonic figures, who are associated with fire and water respectively, has his counterpart. If Nkole, choked by the smoke rising from the funeral-pyre, is the obvious replica of Chiti (whom he succeeds), then the crocodile, which is the totemic symbol of the royal clan, readily brings to mind Chilimbulu. The latter is a terrestrial creature whose body, contrary to all expectation, is immersed in water, while the crocodile, being an aquatic animal, perishes outside of its natural habitat.

These counterparts are by no means redundant. Chiti and Nkole complement each other while being opposed in many respects. The first drives the caravan to the east, the other—to the west. Chiti is not noted for any splendid achievements. He is a jurist. He establishes matrilineal filiation and banishes Kapasa for incest. He is a poor moralist however, never hesitating to commit adultery at the expense of kin. Nkole, by contrast, is a warrior. He savagely avenges the death of his brother by the massacre of Chilimbulu's people. He is the hero of agriculture, having a head which is a kind of granary containing the seeds of cultivated plants.

After death Chiti and Nkole occupy different sectors of the space symbolized by their final resting place, the termitarium. Nkole, as the elder, is housed at the top, while Chiti, the younger, is given the lower portion. This dry, mythical place of prominence (whose white colour attests to its being associated with the sun) signifies the universe in more complex a manner than in the Luba system where this natural tomb shelters only the head of their first king, Nkongolo. Chiti, having been mummified by *celestial fire* (the sun), occupies a lowly position in the cosmic termitarium, while Nkole, having been asphyxiated by *terrestrial fire* from the dreadful funeral-pyre, occupies its highest part. To be truthful, the distribution of fire between the two heroes is more complicated. Celestial fire, which is concentrated in lenses, is used for the same purpose as terrestrial fire. Conversely, in cooking rotten human flesh, a meat doubly unsuited to consumption, Nkole is refraining from the culinary use of terrestrial fire. To the beneficent use of the sun to 'roast' a man in order to keep him intact we contrast the harmful use of terrestrial fire to destroy the rotting remains of a mutilated woman. The former fire preserves while the latter destroys. To make sense of this symbolism it must be realized that fire used for cooking is, paradoxically, a constant source of danger, in the eyes of the Bemba. The family hearth, a special symbol for social order, is incompatible with sexual life. Anyone who was not ritually washed after having made love and who came close to the fire would contaminate the food being cooked; children who partook of the meal would be in peril.<sup>9</sup> The polluting force of adultery,

<sup>9</sup> M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution*

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the mortal sin of Chiti, is an especially serious menace when fire is involved. One can see how the dismembered body of the adulteress, when placed in direct contact with fire, gives off smoke which is especially injurious. It is probably in order to escape this evil result, and even to reverse the effects, that the corpse of Chiti, who was both a party to, and victim of, adultery, is burned by the rays of the sun, the purifying celestial fire. This solar cooking-at-a-distance is the inverse equivalent of the monstrous cooking to which Nkole delivers the corpse of the seductress.

Chiti and Nole, when placed together in the same termitarium, complement one another in the heart of a mausoleum which is the natural counterpart of the cosmic tower which they strove together in vain to construct in order to become immortal like the sun. The sky and the earth are united in the bodies of the first two kings. The one resting below (close to the earth) was brought into contact with the beneficent sun while the one above (near the sky) was subjected to harmful terrestrial fire.

*corpse of Chiti*

the younger

lower part of the termitarium

beneficent celestial fire

*corpse of Nkole*

the elder

upper part of the termitarium

harmful terrestrial fire

If we take into consideration all of the opposing pairs together we see that the cosmogonic correspondences written into the epic of the founding of the Bemba state make up a long funeral hymn devoted to the life of the cosmos.

dry season { corpse of Chiti : celestial fire (sun)  
(fire) { corpse of Nkole : terrestrial fire (funeral-pyre)

rainy season { corpse of Chilimbulu : celestial water (urn)  
(water) { corpse of the crocodile : terrestrial water (river)

*and Taboo*, London, 1969, p. 154-156, after A. Richards, *Chisunqu, Girl's Initiation Ceremony among the Bemba of Northern Rhodesia*, London, 1956.

But what has become of the Luba figure of the rainbow, the master of the dry season? It has undergone, in our myth, the same transformation as in the founding-epic of the Lunda (M<sup>20</sup>). Nkongolo has adopted the traits of Chilimbulu, the seductress. The fatal passion which she inspires in Chiti is the immediate cause of the dry season; her own death brings the return of the rainy season. There is an especially significant feature which reveals that the Bemba seductress is the transformation of Nkongolo; namely, their respective bodies are mutilated and cut in half or in several pieces precisely in order to allow for the introduction of the dialectic of the seasons. In this respect, then, as the *dried-up* skin from the abdomen of Chilimbulu is equivalent to the head of Nkongolo which is buried in the *dry earth* of the termitarium, so the headless body of the first, which is sunk beneath a river, is equivalent to the remains of the second, which are thrown into an urn of water. It will also be noted that the Bemba seductress stamps the impression of her tattoos on a ball of red paint, whose very colour refers to Nkongolo.

If Chilimbulu is indeed the female counterpart of Nkongolo, it would be necessary to verify a whole series of symbolic equivalence between her and Lueji, the heroine of the Lunda epic. In fact both take the initiative in seducing a foreign hero. Lueji, like Chilimbulu, bears no child; the erotic function eclipses the procreative function. This last parallel clarifies the mysterious circumstances surrounding the death of Chiti. Mwese, the deceived husband, finds him with his wife late one night; not taking the time to draw his bow he thrusts a poisoned arrow into the left arm of Chiti who quickly succumbs to the effects of his wound. The hero who thus dies tragically is treated like *game*, while his counterpart in the Lunda epic is made out to be a *hunter*.

<i>Lupa epic</i> (M <sub>1</sub> )	<i>Lunda epic</i> (M <sub>20</sub> )	<i>Bemba epic</i>
hunter hero	hunter hero	hero as game
fertile seductress	sterile seductress	seductress who is a source of death

The adulterine seductress who brings on the death of the Bemba hero systematically inverts the qualities of the beneficent



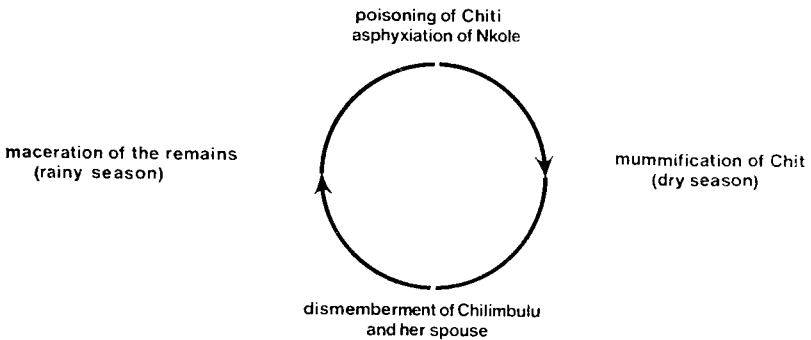
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seductress of M<sub>1</sub>. The latter, a legitimate spouse and source of life, shares in the rainy season, while Chilibulu, a childless mistress, shares in the drought.

The peculiar circumstances surrounding the deaths of Chiti and Nkole pose a new semantical problem. If it is pointed out that the noxious smoke rising from the funeral-pyre ignited by Nkole may be considered a particular form of poison, then it is shown undeniably that the two kings die in the same way and for the same cosmogonic reasons:

death of Chiti: poison (from an arrow)	} commencement of the dry season
death of Nkole: smoke (poisoned by decaying skin)	

The slight difference nevertheless existing between these two signifiers corresponds to a difference between what is signified. It invites us to set down the cosmogonic code of the myth in a circular configuration identical to that of cyclic time. The death of King Chiti marks the beginning of the dry season; the poisoned smoke given off by the funeral-pyre which was burned at the order of King Nkole marks the end of the rainy season.



In the structural interval separating the deaths of Nkole and Chiti the totemic symbol, with its full meaning, must be placed before the circle can close upon itself. The crocodile, who lives in the water, its natural habitat, to die on a rock, a dry and elevated place, thus fixing the spot where the first permanent capital of the kingdom will arise, provides a connexion between

the two kings, insuring, at the same time, the dialectical transition from the wet to the dry.

It should not be surprising to be unable to find within the rainy season a small, well-defined, dry period as in the Holoholo myth; the wet season is practically continuous for the Bemba. A temporary interruption at the end of January is sometimes pointed out, but the rain immediately resumes in abundance until March-April. The harvest takes place during the first months of the dry season.<sup>10</sup> "Bemba agriculture," remarks Mrs. Richards, "depends entirely upon this type of rain distribution which permits but one yearly harvest."

We can now resolve the philosophical puzzle presented by the complementary duality of Chiti and Nkole, who are joined forever in the cosmic termitarium, to the same degree of clarity as that achieved in dealing with the rainy and the dry seasons. The mummification of the body of Chiti is a victory over decay which is connoted by the macerating remains of Chilimbulu. The Bemba apparently value, as do the Lunda, the beneficent effects of the sun which is the instrument of, and evidence for, the immortality of kings. In draining the royal corpse men, as we have seen, bring together the sun and the earth. Now the myths of neighboring peoples inform us, in effect, that, while ending a short life, this operation at the same time suspends cosmic time. If the union of earth and burning sky insures the mystical survival of the king, then it carries with it a serious cosmogonic risk. It threatens the universe with permanent drought. In addition, the dismemberment of the corpse of Chilimbulu must be interpreted as a rite of exorcism, falling under the signs of *discontinuity* and *wetness*. This apparently barbaric act inverts the principles put into practice in the mummification of Chiti. The latter is presented under the peculiar form of a long and *continuous cooking* which preserves the unity and permanence of the body. On the other hand, the brutal dismemberment of the corpse of Chilimbulu and the subsequent grim decomposition of the remains reintroduces into the universe the principle of discontinuity under the two-fold form of decay and

<sup>10</sup> A. Richards, *Land, Labour and Diet in Northern Rhodesia. An Economic Survey of the Bemba Tribe*, Oxford University Press (2nd Edition), 1951, pp. 32-33.

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the succession of the seasons. Rain puts an end to the dangerous eternity of drought. If Nkole inverts in every respect the funeral rite used to keep intact the body of Chiti, it is because he actively assumes the dialectic of time in his capacity as hero of agriculture.

The two-fold role of poison in this philosophical tragedy is quite significant. The poisoning of Chiti has two opposite consequences (the mummification of the victim, on the one hand, and the dismemberment of the seductress, on the other) which bring into play the principles of continuity and discontinuity respectively. The asphyxiation of Nkole, for its part, causes the master of the rainy season, the hero of discontinuity, to pass on to dry eternity. His corpse joins the mummy of Chiti in the termitarium. The prominent position which he occupies in this mausoleum-microcosm indicates that he is, in death, in direct contact with the sun.

Now the problems raised by poison, in which continuity and discontinuity play a part, have curious affinities with the Amerindic theory. Let us recall the terms: "...in the natives' conception of poison of vegetable origin," wrote Levi-Strauss, "the interval between nature and culture, although present as it is in all other contexts, is reduced to a minimum. Consequently poison, whether used for fishing or hunting, can be defined as *a maximum continuity which brings about a maximum discontinuity* (my italics)..."<sup>11</sup> Undoubtedly the Bemba, whose mythical thought is dominated by historical anxieties, are apparently little concerned with the passage from nature to culture. The problems raised by continuity and discontinuity completely surround the cosmogonic core of the myth. But Amerindic thought itself inserts a bridge between poison and the cosmic spectacle, since the power of primitive *continuity*, which is expressed in the first term, is also found in the rainbow.<sup>12</sup> Now, as we have seen, the seductress of the Bemba epic, whose adulterine passion invites the poison of the spouse, is but a transformation of this natural phenomenon which must literally be torn to pieces to permit the introduction of a discontinuous time-space. Paraphras-

<sup>11</sup> C. Levi-Strauss, *Le Cru et le Cuit, Mythologiques I*, Paris, 1964, p. 285; English trans., New York, 1969, p. 279.

<sup>12</sup> *Idem*, p. 286.

ing Levi-Strauss, it could be said that Chilimbulu is an Isolde who is 'poisonous' to the social order. Now the fatal desire which she shamelessly arouses in Chiti is indispensable to cosmic order and to fertility. Her abdominal skin, whose tattoos provide erotic enticement, has become one of the major symbols of the sowing ritual. Love poison, the philtre of death, is supreme governor of the universe.

The origin of poison, which is called 'the destroyer of the world,' is one of the principle themes of the creation myth of the Lala, a population neighbouring the Bemba.<sup>13</sup> This story (M<sub>33</sub>) relates so well to our purposes that we see therein a familiar figure, namely, Lutshele, the solar guide of the Bemba. In the Lala myth Lutshele, the youngest son of God, brings sunlight to mankind. Out of spite, his elder brother, Kashindika, asks their father to entrust him with poison. God refuses and Kashindika decides to get hold of it by force. He does away with, one after the other, his brother's wife and his own spouse. It was in the wake of these events that Lutshele decided to migrate eastward. The interest of this myth lies in its opposing, very clearly, the sun, the source of life, and poison, the source of death. It is by virtue of the same logic evidently, that the poisoned body of Chiti is exposed to the rays of the sun which is, in some sense, a structural antidote.

As do a good number of other myths, but with exemplary clarity, the Bemba epic establishes a necessary homology between the fate of man, who has been doomed to finitude, and cosmic harmony. The cyclic rhythm of the universe stands tragically in the way of man's dream of eternity which, in Central Africa, is expressed, in a poignant way, in the phantasm of the tower of Babel. This contradiction undergoes only illusory resolution of a religious character, namely, the insuring, artificially, through a symbolic union of the royal corpse with the sun, of the survival of the life-force which guarantees the permanence of the whole society beyond the effects of poison, the master of personal death. The ancient Egyptians arrived at the same result by purely and simply identifying the life-force of the ruler with the radiance of the sun, on the one hand, and by mummifying his mortal remains, on the other.

<sup>13</sup> J. T. Munday, *op. cit.*, pp. 50-51.

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The ultimate union of sky and earth, which Nkole achieves by concentrating the rays of the sun upon the body of his brother to render it safe from destruction, corresponds to the beginning episode of the cosmic tower which has the same meaning, namely, the re-creation of a continuous universe in which man would be immortal, and human society—unified. The majority of the peoples who claim Luba-Lunda origins explain their migration and resulting ethnic diversity by the collapse of a tower which the sons of the great chief undertook to construct. This is how it comes about that the crocodile clan goes the way of Bemba country while the goat clan seizes power in Lamba and Aushi country.<sup>14</sup> The Bemba epic confirms that the ancestors of the neighboring peoples quietly broke away from the caravan led by Chiti. The linguistic diversity, then, corresponds, on the cultural plane, to cosmogonic discontinuity, as Kuba mythology has already informed us. The spatial display of cultural diversity is the direct result of dialectical time. The disposition of our universe entails not only the condemnation of incest and the checking of incestuous union between the sky and the earth, but also the renunciation of immortality. However, in drawing together the sun and the corpse of Chiti, Nkole rekindles, in the heart of royalty, this derisory hope necessary for the survival of his people. There is cause to believe that the royal ritual fire, which burns continuously in the capital and which a ritual protects from any pollution,<sup>15</sup> has a relation to this grandiose chimera to the same extent as the fire of Venus which stands watch day and night in the encampment of the young Lunda circumcised.

The Bemba symbolic system partakes of three intellectual worlds which we have explored in the preceding: that of the Lunda and that of the Kuba. Like the latter it gives an account of the fascination with the principle of pleasure of a migrating king who is somewhat decadent in comparison with the rough warrior or hunter heroes who occupy the center of the Luba-Lunda mythical stage where a morality play, which proposes to explain the acquisition of a superior civilization, is being enacted.

<sup>14</sup> J. T. Munday, "Kankomba," *Rhodes-Livingstone Communications*, 22, XIII/XX and 1-46, 1961, p. 8.

<sup>15</sup> W. Witheley, *Bemba and Related Peoples of Northern Rhodesia with a "Contribution on the Ambo" by B. Stefaniszyn*, Ethnographic Survey of Africa, International African Institute, London, 1951, p. 26.

These structural affinities are, at least partially, historical. The genealogy of the heroes leaves this clearly understood. The Bemba aristocrat breaks away from the Luba retinue accompanying Prince Cibinda Ilunga to the Lunda court. More mysterious is the Kuba role in this mythological fresco whose secret unity has already been uncovered. It is not to be disregarded, however, that the Kuba maintained, until the beginning of this century, a veritable international commerce by means of a network of intertribal exchange, of which Vansina has drawn a map. Before European colonization Katanga furnished salt and copper to the Kuba who, in turn, provided Katanga with ivory, varnished wood, fish, mats, *Raphia* grass and embroideries.<sup>16</sup> Of course these trade relations with the Luba world could not have occurred previous to the formation of the kingdom. The Bushong and other tribes of the central-Kuba group left the Atlantic coast in the 16th century, probably after having fought the Portuguese.<sup>17</sup> The migratory period culminates at the beginning of the following century but a central power is not formed before the middle of the 17th century. It is certain that some very important cultural exchanges took place between the Kuba Kingdom and the Lunda who, at that time, were openly expanding to the west. This is difficult to account for, save that a royal myth as important as *M<sub>9</sub>* is perfectly identical to the first part of the epic of the creation of the Lunda Kingdom (*M<sub>20</sub>*). It is easier to show that the Pende, who themselves brought to the Lunda the *mungonge* ritual, could have served as intermediaries, than to suppose that a Kuba tradition assembled by Torday takes account of direct contact. King Shama Bolongongo (Shyaam according to Vansina) would have introduced weaving to his people after having observed the technique among the Pende.<sup>18</sup> Whatever the caution taken in gathering information in this form, the above shows, at least, that during the period when Kuba royalty came into being they were as susceptible to ideas as they were to goods from abroad. Vansina, moreover, does not hesitate to assert that

<sup>16</sup> J. Vansina, *Le Royaume Kuba*, Annales du Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale, Tervuren, 1964, p. 23.

<sup>17</sup> J. Vansina, *Geschiedens van de Kuba van ongeveer 1500 tot 1904*, Annales du Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale, Tervuren, 1963, p. 365.

<sup>18</sup> E. Torday & M. A. Joyce, *Notes ethnographiques sur les peuples communément appelés Bakuba ainsi que sur les peuplades apparentées—Les Bushongo*, Annales du Musée du Congo belge, Tervuren, 1911, p. 26.

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before seizing power Shyaam, the great reformer (who was also a usurper), lived on the Kwango and from there brought back many cultural elements. He is even inclined to believe that the ideology of sacred royalty which he imposed could be of Lunda or Kongo origin.<sup>19</sup> Some Lunda emigrants indeed formed some small kingdoms in the region of the Kwango in the 17th century.

It is probably during this period that a mythological system common to the whole Congolese savanna is developed. An osmosis between different traditions is so much more easily established than membership in a common ideological heritage left by proto-Bantu society. Far from repudiating history, structural analysis is sometimes capable of showing a vital coincidence. It reveals that widely differing societies share a common conception of man and the universe at the heart of one civilization which blots the area south of the great forest. Sustained by strong political forces this civilization shone upon Katanga, Zambia, and part of Angola. She established for herself trade routes with the civilizations of the Atlantic coast, the political centre of which was, until the 15th century, the Kongo Kingdom. The latter had the misfortune of becoming at that time the bridge-head of Portuguese colonization. The cultural disintegration of Kongo society, which set in as a tragic result of secular contact with merchant and missionary Europe, leaves scarcely a hope to reconstruct traditional symbolic thought in its totality. The only myth from this region which we have used (M<sub>3</sub>) nevertheless fits easily into the system of transformation whose general appearance we have outlined. Other aspects, more difficult to reduce to this whole, will delay the next stage of this journey.

Congolese myths are exchanged like merchandise; but they have, properly speaking, no value. They are the product of no human labour and they frustrate all attempts, private or collective, to lay hold of them. To their use, repetition, or transformation attach no royalties. They escape even the ideological role which kings strove to make them fill. They follow the listless ebb and flow of history, but they dance with the rays of the sun and laugh at the rain. They know no master but themselves.

<sup>19</sup> J. Vansina, "South of the Congo," in *The Dawn of African History*, ed. R. Oliver, London, 1961, pp. 86-87.