

## **THE MUBILA EPIC OF THE LEGA PEOPLE**

Sung by Kambara Mubila of the Banasinda

Recorded in writing, translated and annotated by Daniel P. Biebuyck with an introduction, detailed glossaries and comments and the collaboration of Laure-Marie and Brunhilde Biebuyck

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*(The raft) falls apart  
The Travellers enter the whirlpool.<sup>1</sup>*

### HOW I CAME UPON THE MUBILA EPIC

Early in 1953 I returned to Legaland, where I had conducted intensive field research since 1951. My research among the Lega continued the fieldwork I had begun in 1949 among the populations along the northwestern coast of Lake Tanganyika<sup>2</sup> and the Bembe (including the Basikasingo). Some of them inhabited villages on the lake shores, but most of whom lived in the mountainous hinterlands of Lake Tanganyika, in the Fizi and Mwenga administrative areas.

For my return trip to Legaland I had planned formal meetings with prominent members of the Bwami association in order to check data on the proceedings and structure of the Bwami association and to complete the information I had gathered during the actual Bwami initiations (1951 and 1952). The meetings took place in what was then the *secteur Beya* of Pangî territory among the western or Lega of Malinga.<sup>3</sup> Here the Bwami institution had maintained much of its vigor and glamor, notwithstanding decades of harassment and persecution by the colonial government, the “companies” (mining and cotton-growing), the missionaries and their followers, and some of the so-called Lega “chiefs” and “notables” appointed by the colonial government. The hundreds of high initiates present at these meetings came from various areas in the *secteurs* Beya and Kama, and the *chefferie* Babene in the *territoire* Pangî.

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1 This aphorism is “sung” by the sacred musical instruments (*mirlitons* and *moza* pot) at the peak of the Bwami initiations before the revelation of some of its greatest secrets. Whenever Lega initiates and elders disclosed something very special, known only to few people and carefully hidden from non-Lega, they would quote this aphorism. When the Mubila Epic was revealed to me, the Bwami initiates present at the performance also quoted this aphorism.

2 The so-called Zoba, including such more or less related populations as the Bwari, Goma/Homa, Keci, Lumona, Sanze, etc.)

3 Lega of the lowlands, as opposed to the Lega of the highlands (*ntata*).

This was a most successful trip, unforgettable because of the extraordinary enthusiasm with which I was received by hundreds of high initiates with whom I had worked during the previous months. When the time came to leave, I told the assembly of initiates that now, after three and a half years of uninterrupted research in eastern Zaire, I was returning to Belgium to write up some of my materials and obtain my Doctorate. The initiates were surprised at my impending departure since, as they said, so much was still to be learned. They formulated this thought in one of their famous aphorisms: “You know Kilega (things pertaining to Lega culture and language), but you do not yet know how/when/where my father died,” a symbolic way of saying that I was still ignorant of many aspects of Lega culture. Keenly aware of this truth, I remarked that as a fully initiated, high-ranking *kindi* in the all-pervading Bwami initiation system, I wondered which essential customs, institutions, and ideas had escaped me. Among several matters such as “therapeutics,” ideas and procedures linked with women’s affairs (such as puberty, pregnancy, childbirth, medicine, witchcraft and magic), the initiates mentioned *lugano*.

I had heard this term before, but the range of realities it covered escaped me. In further discussions, it soon became apparent that, among other things, *lugano* referred to a very long narrative that was sung, recited, and acted out. I was familiar with the publications on the Lianja Epic from the Mongo (Central Congo River Basin) by Belgian scholars such as Hulstaert and Boelaert. I had never heard of the existence of similar texts among the Lega, but the *lugano* mentioned by the initiates seemed to me to refer to something very similar. As a scholar in Classical Philology (at that time, I had a masters in Classical Philology), I was extremely eager to learn more about this kind of orally transmitted literature. Having studied social anthropology at London University, I also had long before concluded that insufficient scientific study had been devoted to the oral literature, the visual, musical, and choreographic arts of African populations. Of course, at the time that the *lugano* was revealed to me, I already had come across several other literary genres among the Lega and the related Bembe. Consequently, I decided to extend

my stay among the Lega until such time as I would have had the opportunity of listening to a *lugano*.

At the time these discussions took place, I was staying in a hamlet of Kibonge village, in the company of many high initiates and three “hommes-de-confiance:” the very intelligent and alert Bwami initiates and government appointed judges Lumbeku and Beikalentende (both members of Bwami) and the enlightened “chef de secteur” Penemisenga (member of a clan with numerous great past and present kindi initiates). These three Lega men (who knew Swahili but not French) had helped me earlier when I struggled with deciphering the aphoristic texts of the Bwami initiations. They not only had extremely keen minds, but because of their status, family traditions, and personal desire to see the Bwami initiations restored, they were also very well connected with a large number of influential initiates. Enthusiastic about my research effort, they were fully dedicated to its success. They also had developed a special understanding of my needs as a foreign field researcher, and spoke slowly and distinctly, repeating and explaining points of information, cross-checking data with the bard and his aides and other prominent persons in the entourage. For them, it was a point of honor to help me understand the depth of Lega thought.

I was told that one of the last truly great connoisseurs of an epic text was a certain Kambala Mubila who lived in a remote hamlet of the Beianangi group. I was also informed that since Mr. Kambala was a recent convert to an American form of Protestantism, he might be reluctant to sing and recite the epic, which he had come to consider as “something evil,” something reminiscent of his former “pagan” beliefs. In my previous work among the Lega, I had not met Mr. Kambala. The initiates thus decided to send a delegation of persons who knew him well to invite him to join us. This delegation included several prominent initiates representing local kinship groups.

I do not know the circumstances that led Mr. Kambala Mubila to accept the invitation. I waited for several days and remember that, when he first arrived on a late afternoon, our initial meeting was not enthusiastic at all and that Mr. Kambala was loath in accepting the

welcome gift of a goat I wanted to offer him. When the decision was finally made to have a try-out session, and when his familiar apprentice and four percussionists had arrived, Mr. Kambala provided a sample of his art. The large crowd of listeners, young and old, men and women, initiates and non-initiates, was extremely intrigued by what they heard since many of the younger generation had never witnessed such a narrative because of the general turmoil of change brought on by colonization. Stimulated by the warm encouragements of the hundreds of people present and the joy engendered by the crowd, Mr. Kambala became rapidly and completely immersed in his art and gave full expression to his artistic prowess.

The performance lasted several long days. The bard was singing, narrating, gesticulating and mimicking, then repeating fairly short coherent passages so I could write down the text both with his help and that of the above-mentioned experts (I had no recording equipment). As I wrote down the text, I orally repeated the words, so that all present could follow what I was noting down on paper, and the bard corrected me when I was wrong. This procedure created the greatest excitement. But the annotation of the text was not a simple matter; it demanded continued alertness and concentration. Even my Lega collaborators sometimes had to ask the bard to repeat a term or a phrase, so difficult and unusual some passages were!

This was an exciting but exhausting task. From many points of view, the absence of any recording materials was an advantage in my relationships with the older generations of Lega men and women who did not appreciate these strange devices, which they held in great suspicion. Since everything had to be written down by hand in the actual setting and context of the narrative performance, I was, in my own way, a full participant in the dramatic event. The bard and people present had the greatest admiration for my painstaking efforts and were flabbergasted when, as a diversion, I would read for them portions of the narrative. We worked for several hours, every day. Later in the day, mostly in the late evenings, I met with the three "hommes-de-confiance," several high initiates, and often with the

bard and his apprentices, to go over the text and receive appropriate explanations.

When the full performance was finished, the bard left hurriedly for his hamlet, without accepting money or other gifts. During the two weeks he had been with us, he had been royally feasted by the villagers with plenty of food; he had also accepted several goats from members of the audience and large quantities of plantains, salt, and oil that I had bought for him to share with his helpers. By the time he left, the bard and myself were completely exhausted. We did not feel like continuing the task. I had hoped that, on a later visit, I would be able to get information on his life, his background, his sources of learning, etc. Unfortunately, this did not happen because I had to pursue my scheduled research among the Nyanga, accomplish my obligatory, much delayed, military service at the Kamina military base in Katanga and, subsequently, assume my ex-officio appointment to the three-men Land Tenure Commission for the Congo.

### THE BARD KAMBALA MUBILA

Mr. Kambala Mubila belonged to Banasinda lineage, Banamulimba/Banakakungu segment, some of whose members were settled in a hamlet and three villages headed by the headman Magu. In the past, the Banasinda group had many kindi initiates in its ranks, but their number was completely reduced by the early fifties. They were also known for having had many great ivory carvers within their ranks. Kambala held no special status in the society. Before being a convert he had, like most other Lega men of his generation, gone through the traditional rites of passage (the circumcision rites and the *mutanga* teachings) and been initiated into the lower grade (*kongabulumbu*) of the Bwami association. For the rest, he was reticent to answer most personal questions I wanted to ask him. He told me that he had learned the basic epic text from Mr. Nsamba, a remote relative by marriage, of the Banamunwa clan, and that the latter had learned it from an unnamed person among the Beiamisisi - all three groups being established within fairly close range among the southwestern Lega .....

Living in a distant hamlet as a simple cultivator, Mr. Kambala was not used to contacts with foreigners. Although he was a recent convert to Protestantism, he knew virtually no Kingwana (a Zairian variant of Swahili), a vehicular language that was used by many Lega for dealings with Westerners and foreign Congolese workers in the mines.

The bard was a vigorous man of about fifty years of age. He was shy and introvert. As the text demonstrates convincingly, he was a grand master of the sung and spoken word, a creative genius of uncommon talent who handled the Lega language in a remarkably precise, flexible and poetic manner, a poet of vision, a person possessed by uncommon knowledge of Lega culture. Yet he was very humble and withdrawn.

The photograph shows him as I saw him: wearing an old torn Western jacket, unshaven hair (shaved hair is common for members of Bwami), a Christian medallion hanging from a chain around his neck, a stern face, a somewhat bitter mouth. All in all, according to Lega standards of that time, a rather inconspicuous person.

## THE PERFORMANCE

During the performance, the bard (*mugani wa lugano*) was helped by Kabongalwito, an adult apprentice who acted as “active listener” (*mwitabizia wa lugano*) encouraging, responding, helping with the formulas when Kambala drew a temporary blank or showed some hesitation (he, himself, knew substantive portions of the text), repeating words or sentences, or simply singing without words, to keep the rhythm flowing while the bard stopped and reflected. There were no string instruments, rattles or drums used during the recitation, but four young percussionists were present: Stefano, Saidu, Anyasi and Njoloko, who were variously related to Mubila. The four simultaneously beat a percussion beam according to prescribed

rhythmic patterns:<sup>4</sup> Three handled, each one of them, two drumsticks (*mikoko*) while the fourth worked with only one drumstick.

Each of the percussionists followed a fixed rhythm. The first rhythm is based on the tonal patterns of *kakila ka lubamba* (a seven syllable pattern); the second is structured on the *kenenkeni* pattern (a four syllable rhythm); the third follows the rhythm of *mankelegenze*, a five-syllable pattern. The fourth percussionist beat *ngo ngo ngo ngo*, a rhythm called *mulima* (bat) because it is supposed to imitate the pulse beat of bats. The above-mentioned four young percussionists and the apprentice Kabongalwito also made up the choir.

The rhythmic patterns beaten on the dry beam during the performance of the Mubila epic, is somewhat different from those produced in the Bwami rites. The pattern of the three percussion sticks used in the *kongabulumbu* rite of Bwami is the following:

- The first stick beats the same seven-syllable rhythm as in the epic: *kakila ka lubamba* (lit. thick little tail, meaning: alone I have nothing to say, I am just beginning).
- The second stick addressing itself to the third one says: *ipembele, ipembele* (speak! speak!).
- The third stick follows the nine-syllable rhythm of *mutumbi nondo ntengelelo* (the blacksmith's hammer is not deceived).

The seven-syllable, nine, eleven... patterns and various combinations thereof (taking into account contractions, elisions, reduplications, extensions, eliminations, sometimes rare and of the bard's making), are essential in the rhythmic composition of the Mubila epic, as they are in the singing and dancing of *kongabulumbu*. A few examples of recurring syllabic patterns are:

- Seven syllable types: *lukangu lwa mutima; kwa Kabamba wa Bouse; ta mukulu wa mbusa; ngabo zane za kyuma;*
- Nine syllable types: *akoloka nabo mwisula; enda kubasa kutubala; kasina ka mubuto kansanga; gabukuba bwigi nti nayama; ta kisi kya magala kino; nu mwambalo wage wa nkumbi; nw' isumo lyage makilundu;*

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<sup>4</sup> The old and very dry percussion device had served as the central beam (*nkati*) of a house roof; it could also have been one of the lateral poles of a bed (*musenga*).



- Eleven syllables: *basosu bayame na mpego nu babibu bayame tabalia (lya); kuni kukwenda nu kukutukila ; (g)akukuba kwiigi ndi kuyama. ndi gakukuba kulazi nti nkubwa; kikingo u mugombo wa mwami; nu ngabo zage za nyakitetezyo; nu gabukuba bulazi nti nkwiika; keita ngozi u kambana nako; kilebe akimina ku luzi; kazege ka kizugo kazinda;*

The bard was a very discrete man; he did not like any diversions; the experience was very intensive and he really had to concentrate because, apparently, he had not sung the epic, or parts of it, for as long time. He sang; members of the large audience sometimes encouraged him with exclamations like *so* (“go on”); he halted at his own will; sometimes he would repeat the words for my needs (a task to which he was most attentive); at other times, when asked by the three elders that sat with me, he gave a small explanation. He gesticulated and mimicked but there was no acting. He did not drink beer; he did not smoke, he received food from villagers and kinsmen, but no presents from the audience. However, as he says himself several times in the text, he received live goats and certainly other things, which I didn’t see. It must be remembered that while he performed with pride and élan, he was apprehensive, thinking it was a “sinful” act now that he was a convert. At the end of our “work,” when he was going to return to his hamlet, I offered him 500 Congolese francs (a large sum at that time), which to the surprise of many he refused to take.

## THE CONTENTS

For the Lega and related Bembe, the epic (*lugano/ngano*) represents a distinctive literary genre among numerous other genres of oral literature, such as: riddles; proverbs (*tulebi*); high thoughts (*bitondo bya kisi*);<sup>5</sup> drum and praise names (*lukumbu/nkumbu*); tales (*musumo/misumo; mikyi*), songs (*nyimbo*), many of them in aphoristic form; judicial aphoristic statements (*mukele/mikeli*);

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<sup>5</sup> Lit. “words of the land,” condensed in aphorisms and their oral and kinetic interpretations linked with the initiations.

genealogical recitations (*ilondano*); migratory recitations (called *myemo* and *mse'eleco* in some areas); formal oaths and pledges (*'elumbilo*).<sup>6</sup>

A long narrative, it is sung, recited and dramatically presented by a bard, in close cooperation with his apprentice-colleague, his percussionists-singers and an interactive group of participating listeners. The length and monumentality of this type of narrative are most impressive, for no other text in the Lega language has the faintest resemblance in size, content, number of actors and events, scope, richness of expression, structural coherence and poetic flight. In fact, the epic incorporates almost all above-mentioned literary genres and thus requires a holistic and multi-faceted approach.

The epic narrative I recorded is constructed around astounding, marvelous, mysterious, baffling, exceptional encounters, events, and actions (*bingano, mabale, nigeleko*) perpetrated by unusual actors at the center of whom Mubila is the major heroic figure. It recounts the unusual setting and circumstances of his birth, his extraordinary and extravagant physical and behavioral traits, social relations and interactions, powerful material and spiritual possessions, cosmic connections, unbridled drive to lead, and his deeds and experiences. Mubila is the dominant actor, the center of all intrigues and adventures. He interacts with male and female actors of the most diverse backgrounds and dispositions, and with animals,<sup>7</sup> anthropomorphized animals and plants, imaginary beings, but not with divinities, spirits or ancestors.<sup>8</sup>

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6 Some genres seem to have been more developed and intensively practiced by particular Lega subgroups. For example, in areas where the Bwami association has remained very powerful, the “high thoughts” (associated with objects and dramatic action and interpreted in profound and difficult exegesis) are extremely numerous and varied. As one aphorism states: “Like the knots of the *nkombe* reed [always more and bigger], so are the words of the land.”

7 Some ritually significant animals are not mentioned, such as the giant pangolin (*ikaga*), the bongo antelope (*nkengo*), the aardvark (*ntumba*).

8 Such names as Kinkungwa, Kalaga, Kyanga, which refer to the ultimate creative forces underlying Lega society and culture, are not mentioned. There is only one reference to lightning (Nkuba) and a couple of references to “beings of the forest.” Ancestors (not the regular term for ancestors, *bashumbu*, but the euphemism *bayeya*, the honored seniors) are

The epic begins “in medias res” with father Yombi building a village (no one knows from where he comes) and the birth of Mubila. It ends *in medias res*, with Mubila and his *comitatus* back in Tubala village engaging in triumphant dances. The text is formulated in a coherent and unified manner. It consists of a concatenation of a large number of episodes (some more consistent, some more logically and aesthetically integrated than others), but there is a leading theme: the hero is headed for Byongobitengia village, to Kabamba of the Bouse,<sup>9</sup> the maternal uncles of his senior brother Bukulu Bwakitaba. In his quest to reach Byongobitengia, Mubila is constantly sidetracked by new encounters and adventures, many of which he provokes himself. At every stage of his progression, he is threatened, or thinks he is threatened, by numerous antagonists he encounters or by persons he challenges and abuses, transforming them into opponents. Unanticipated encounters or challenges thus constantly delay the major purpose of his numerous trips, which is to reach the village Byongobitengia. In the end, seemingly all of Mubila’s real and imaginary enemies are defeated and the hero has reached his final goal of conquest by the demise of the enemies in Byongobitengia village and elsewhere (but the possibility for further elaborations is left wide open). At the moment of his glorious return home, Mubila must surrender to the powerful Musisi (whom he has so often met when leaving home and against whose criticisms and warnings he was never able to do anything) the drum he had brought with him, a possible allusion to the fact that the hero has not been transformed into a real leader.<sup>10</sup>

The setting in which the action evolves is fairly extensive: a huge deep primary rainforest, often without trails, intersected by numerous larger and smaller rivers, and swamps; rich in animal life and filled

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mentioned as sources of knowledge but not as objects of cult or as actors in the epic. There is only one passage near the end of the epic where an extraordinarily composite creature (human and vegetal) is evoked in the person of *Kanyombo* and his transformations.

<sup>9</sup> The Bouse had given hospitality to Bukulu bwa Kitaba after Mubila had accused this senior brother of being the cause of their common father’s death.

<sup>10</sup> This seems also to be a reflection of pre-Bwami Lega society.

with the most diverse species of giant and smaller trees, lianas and shrubs; and here and there dispersed hamlets and villages with trails linking them.<sup>11</sup> The setting is definitely not cosmic.<sup>12</sup> The forest milieu is often bizarre, unusual, enigmatic, filled with anthropomorphic and theriomorphic beings that are neither divinities nor ogres nor specters. Essential narrative markers are: the crossroad of one hundred-forty trails; the frequent crossing of the Nanga and some other rivers; the brief encounters with the giant “tree” Musisi (apparently the ultimate authority of the forest).

The major human activities and events described in this forest setting include hunting with dogs, nets and spears, trapping, fishing, gathering of building materials and food products, house construction, food preparation, felling of trees. The description of activities inside and around the village is 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. Many activities forming part of everyday life are not even touched upon: such as basketry, making of barkcloth and ornaments, plaiting, work in hide and leather, cowrie and beadwork, money-making with giant snail shells, carving. Only cursory reference is made to agricultural activities (clearing a field).

One of the most striking features of the Mubila epic, when compared to world epic literature, is the absence of cult activities; there are no sacrifices, no prayers, no grandiose ritual events. Some references are made to divination and witchcraft and great significance is attached to what could broadly be conceived as the magical sphere of life. Medicines (*lungubu*; eye philter), which Mubila claims to have obtained from different sources, have powerful effects on healing

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11 There is virtually no mention of fields or banana- and palm groves (although diverse species of bananas and plantains are mentioned); only a rare reference is made to a clearing in the forest and a patch of mushrooms and *ntolo* fruits.

12 There are, however, a couple of instances where the hero travels to an ill-defined place that is referred to as “a place where only people who are already dead arrive,” but there is no hint that this environment might be very different from other natural and inhabited places.

people and help Mubila resuscitate and defeat enemies. Mubila's magical whistle, "which is in his mouth," works wonders: he seduces women; he dries out a river; he protects his son floating toward a precipice on a felled tree. His shoulderbag allows him to stow away all the Banayombi, in addition to a huge dog (Mundi), and various other objects; on one occasion, unable to obtain the love medicine he wants from Kilimu, Mubila puts him and all his medicines into his bag. But, Mubila's power goes beyond the magical because he has cosmic connections evident at his birth and on other occasions when nature follows his dictates.

Travel and movement from place to place are among the most repeated activities of the epic. Restless traveller, Mubila is constantly travelling from village to village, crossing forest domains and rivers, forests with trails and completely virgin forests. As part of the process of travelling, there is also information gathering and scouting. And during the majority of his travels Mubila is in search of real and potential enemies; he goes to find them himself; they rarely come to challenge him. As is the case in most epics, combat, and warfare are recurrent, but in the Mubila epic, most of the adversaries are individuals, and most of the fighting and ensuing killing is between individuals; there are only a couple of instances where some form of warfare opposes Mubila and his people to other groups (the Bananzogu or the Banambogo). In conjunction with travel and combat, declarations, dialogue, and conversation are essential to the action: threats, insults, challenges, warnings, criticisms, quarrels, accusations, self-praises.

The physical and human environment that forms the background of the Mubila epic corresponds to reality from many points of view. The southwestern Lega live in a region of deep rainforest, intersected with secondary forest formations, villages, many hamlets, and banana groves. Villages inhabited by patrilineally related lineages with numerous accretions present a certain historical, socio-political, and ritual unity. Lega world view, and not merely the economy, is forest-oriented; the abundant rainforest offers so many resources in game and natural produce that most of agricultural activity traditionally was limited to banana groves; gradually, other food crops were

interspersed, and small patches of peppers and tomatoes were grown behind the houses. Hunting, trapping, and gathering of natural produce (including honey and termites), and to some extent fishing, are primary concerns that pervade the daily activities, the system of food distribution and gift-giving, the ritual and philosophical outlook. The Lega have no paramount chiefs nor chieftains nor a hierarchy of hereditary socio-political authorities. Their system is a classic segmentary lineage organization in which kinship positions determine headmanship and authority.

### STYLISTIC DEVICES

From a linguistic and prosodic point of view, The Mubila epic is a masterpiece. It reflects the bard's fundamental knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, syntax and tonal patterns. The local subdialect form of the Beianangi and Beya area of Pangi territory seems to include linguistic aspects from other variant such as Babene. From the reactions of some of the prominent listeners who sat with me, I would conclude that there were some archaic terms and *tournares* in his text, not the least in the choice of names. Only a couple of Legaized Swahili words do occur.

Formally and stylistically, the text is an extraordinary literary and poetic document that includes, as noted already, most of the other literary genres. The size and scope of the text are conceived on a grand scale (*epische Breite*) and in an elevated, lofty style sometimes culminating in outstanding poetic formulations. All in all, there is no wealth of descriptive detail or lengthy catalogs of objects; individuals are mainly described by their actions or by names that encapsulate their physical or behavioral traits. As I mentioned above, extreme emphasis is placed on travel and movement from one place to another. While formal speeches are absent, the narration abounds in conversations (*matenda*), in the form of seeking information, identifying, challenging, negating, confronting, insulting, and denigrating.

As noted, a very large number of phrases and expressions in the text are patterned on seven, nine, eleven count and some other combinations of syllables. In considering the verbal rhythms reflected in the narrative text itself, one must also take into account the numerous elisions and contractions; elongations and condensations of syllables, vowels and the rare diphthongs, which the bard freely adopts or ignores in the sung text; mergings, repetitions and insertions of monosyllabic invariables.

The epic reflects the bard's refined knowledge of the Lega language; control of an enormously rich and diversified vocabulary; precision of word use, diction, poetic manipulation of the word order, insertion of well-known aphorisms, abundant use of metaphors and a use of a vast array of formulas and formulaic expressions. Alliteration, reduplication, onomatopoeia, repetition of words and phrases, ellipsis, abundant use of invariables, sudden shifts from dialogue or statement to general description, mixing of direct and indirect discourse, sudden changes from one speaker to another and from dialogue to narrative are among the recurring stylistic features.

Alliteration is particularly important. A few examples:

- At the end of the epic: *nne **K**aseibungu **k**akulu kongo **k**awamulume **k**atenda na **k**azi; **m**amamo **m**agoma **m**asaka mekulyage basoga; nakitilwe **m**agoma **m**asaka buno me kaliloa mu **K**angongongo;*
- About Mubila: ***k**itindi **k**ikwenda **ky**asenia **ek**wendela **K**abungulu, (Proud-One goes off swaggering, he goes in search of Kabungulu);*
- About young wives giving birth for first time: ***K**eimi **ka** bukinga **ka**limembe **ka**ntendela munda;*
- Zakeuti seeing his father's corpse floating: *aloleko **ki**tumba **ki**senda **ky**akumba, **ak**elola no **ky**ombo atenda buno **ki**tumba **ky**a tatage **ky**enda **ky**enda **ky**akumba **ky**egamina ku mpombo **kw**enda nu **kw**egamina ku mugogo, **ky**agilimizie isala; (Kakungu) **k**enda, **k**enda **kw**imana **kw**isula, **ka**bula buno.....**ka** **k**akulu kenda kubisama mu **ka**ti, **ka**bisama bubu....*

The construction of the epic is based on a great diversity of formulas and formulaic expressions, some simple, some very complex. The hero is a restless traveller, moving rapidly from one encounter to another, from one adventure into another, from one activity to another, from one confrontation and challenge to another. In order to make this possible the bard disposes of a vast selection of formulaic expressions to ensure the smooth and correct transition between actions and events and to facilitate concatenations of episodes. The major types of formulas are:

**Names:** Like in other great epics, such as the *Odyssey*, the bard takes delight in the abundant use of a great variety of types of names: personal names, sometimes extended in the form of praise names, derogatory names, drum names. Throughout the epic, at specific moments, the hero shouts a series of recurring stereotypical drum- and praise-names, but the order in which the concatenations occur and the actual combination of praises differ from case to case. Other names bear on functions, and physical or mental and moral characteristics and particular habits. Still other names are unusual compound derivative terms with symbolic content. Few of these personal names are used in real life. There are numerous names of kinship groups and political units, epithets, nicknames, sobriquets, slurs, drum names, praise names and periphrastic expressions, names of objects; names of places, villages, stretches of forest, rivers;

- Indications of socio-political status;
- Kinship terms and kinship relations;
- Indications of time, especially, the advent of evening and night, and that of early morning and daytime;
- Well-known, popular aphorisms and proverbial statements;
- Expressions of movement, direction, distances, travel, crossing, traversing, going, arriving, departing, entering; the number and diversity of formulas expressing travel and movement is most impressive; long concatenations of formulas are intended only to show the hero moving from one area to another.
- Challenges and Insults.

Numerous formulas take the form of aphorisms and aphoristic expressions or stereotypical expressions, to make a general statement, to draw a conclusion, to make a threat, to express hate and



mockery, to refer to sex, to establish real or fictive kinship links, to express defeat, to give a message. Others are built on various forms of conjugation of such verbs as: to say (*tenda*), to speak (*bula*), to leave (*sigá*), to begin (*limba*), to search (*londa*), to call (*mmana*), to ask (*buzia*), to arrive (*basa*), to pass (*tinga*), to go (*enda*), to inform (*solela*), to come (*vwa*).

Onomatopoeia and ideophones are also frequently used to express certain sounds and images: the intensity of an action (brusque); the cry of an animal; the sound of an object (a whistle); the clash of objects (shields, tree falling to the ground); the nature of an action (whirling); the characteristic of a motion (fluttering of feathers); the quality of a look (anger). Some examples are:

- *Krirriiii, priiii*: to indicate the circling around in a fight;
- *Nubupo, nubupooooo*: the sound of a knife entering a body;
- *Ndondondooooo*: the sound of a swamp that crests and overflows because a leopard or other animal entered the swamp to drink;
- *Ngwongwongwo*: sound of bark pounder;
- *Tantitalanta*: the noise of a loose tooth;
- *Upeeeee*: drawing a pipe noisily
- *Kimbalambala*: walking without following a precise path, through a trail-less forest
- *Busolololooooo*: much sweat dripping when Mubila returns from the Bagoma
- *Bubibubi*: evil

### **MUBILA: THE CENTRAL HERO OF THE EPIC<sup>13</sup>**

Born at his own volition, Mubila is the very last of forty children conceived by Yombi. There is virtually no time lapse between his conception (no emphasis is placed on the mother's long pregnancy), birth, and full manhood. Things move very quickly. Mubila speaks

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<sup>13</sup> It should be noted that the hero of the epic narrative and the bard who produced it are called Mubila.

even before his birth, which is accompanied by astounding events: huge forest trees come crashing down. He walks as soon as he is born and is ready for action. At birth, he gives himself the name of Mubila (lit. a call; also, a sieve for beer), saying that he is not “a sieve for beer” (*mubila wa maku*), but an “intrepid, big virile man” (*kimandamanda kyawamulume*), one who is afraid of nothing, even where others are scared or recalcitrant. In the opinion of Mubila, the hero: like a sieve filters the residues, so he fends off all evil “enemies” and puts an end to all warfare.

### Ascendants

The hero is conceived and born under peculiar circumstances: his father (Yombi), a lineage head (*mwami*) of undetermined social origins, seems to be a recent settler in a vast forest area. His mother (known only by the teknonymic name of Nyamubila), whose social identity is ignored, is the most junior of the forty-one wives of Yombi (an unusually large polygamous family in Lega terms). She is the preferred spouse (*kalembe*) of Yombi and quickly conceives a child after regular intercourse with her husband, but brings him into the world only after all forty co-wives have already given birth.

In an enumeration of his ascendants, Mubila claims that he is the son of the headman Yombi, who dies shortly after Mubila is born. His grandfather is Idali and his great-grandfather is Museme, the arch father of all the heroes. In the *Museme w'Idali* epic of the Lega (Nsanda Wamenka, 1992, v. II: 9 sq), Mubila is mentioned as Idali's third child. The brother of Idali's widow (Idali was killed by his senior brother) took her to another village he had built for her. Here, she suffered from a very long pregnancy; at times, the child was speaking to her from the womb. Finally, she was blown into an eagle's nest by a violent storm. There she gave birth, first to Museme w'Idali Kizimbanza, then to a daughter called Binzali, then to Mubila, and, subsequently, to a daughter Nyaluligi, a son Ndindi, a daughter Ngalia, a son Kikula, and a daughter Nyatindigolo. In the epic, Museme refers to the men as, “expert fighters in handling the shield and spear” (*kizimbanza*); in turn, he refers to each woman as “young woman who is familiar with the wars of the shields of men” (*kakinga kizi bibuka bya ngabo za balume*). Museme himself is described as

one who does not listen to advice (*kitungwe-nsungu*) - a trait that is also characteristic of the central hero of the Mubila epic. It is noteworthy that Museme refers to himself as follows: "Small in size, I Museme, son of Idali, am a virile man" (*kamukege kabili une Museme w'Idali ni wamulume*). Mubila also bestows upon himself the title *wamulume* and *kyawamulume*.

Sometimes Mubila identifies himself as the grandson of Muliku. In the course of the narrative, he establishes several other real or fictive kinship relations with male and female protagonists, mostly indicating that their respective grandmothers "came from one and the same womb." In this way, he calls himself the grandson of the woman Nyakambalamba (the same linkage is noted by the antagonist Mukiti) and of Nyakaseke. Kagelia refers to him as sororal nephew, and Kabamba of the Bouse is referred to as a grandfather of Mubila. He is identified as the great-grandchild of Iyuka Kabikampala, an antagonist and the child of Kikalampala (a character absent from the narrative). Another antagonist addresses him as maternal uncle (*mwizio*); toward the end of the epic, Musisi (lit. a giant tree who seems to represent the ultimate power of the forest) greets Mubila as grandchild.

### **Immediate entourage**

Mubila's entourage includes an elaborate *comitatus* whose full composition is never specified, but it mainly comprises: some of his father's children (referred to collectively as the Children of Yombi, Bana ba Yombi and Banayombi); his three wives, sometimes his mother; and his heroic son Zakeuti (born during Mubila's temporary death).

#### *His mother*

Mubila's mother, Nyamubila, is depicted as a dignified person who stays out of trouble. Mubila is never nasty to her, even when she acts irritated by his bragging; early on she warns him "reckless impertinence will cause your ruin." On most expeditions, she is a part of the *comitatus*, although no special role is assigned to her. When he leaves his mother behind, Mubila places her in the custody of a senior brother urging him to treat her well. She has

unquestionable authority: for example, when Mubila is injured, she asks the help his brooding senior brother, *Kinkutu/Kinkutunkutu*; the latter obeys reluctantly.

*The Banayombi*

In the group of Yombi's children, we find some powerful helpers of Mubila, who faithfully execute his commands: Flaming Log (Kisingu Kyandembelembe), who sets villages ablaze; Mr. Works (Sabikamba), a strong man and most powerful worker; Bergeronette (Kansinsi) and his twin Moineau (*Muntoli*) who act as scouts; occasionally, Kansinsi defeats some enemies of Mubila; Mender-of-Fences (Bigingi) carries axes to build the village of Mubila; the guardian of Tubala village (Lingungu); Slit-drummer (Katuta); Great Hunter (Mbundi; Mundi) is apparently transformed into a powerful dog and is captured by Mubila to serve him. Some like Kinkutunkutu and Bukulu bwa kitaba play ambiguous roles. Diviner (Kyanga) loses his status for refusing to give the oracle to Mubila.

The children who play no explicit roles in the epic, are symbols of Mubila's attributes; they seem to be his refractions. Some of the names could even be surnames, praise names, nicknames of the hero Mubila. In this category we find: Restless Traveller (Kasalala); Rapids (Lunsasa); Refuser (Bawandana); Who-knows-about-death (Wizilukwo); Gale (Muyumbia), expressing the stormy character of the hero; Protector of Orphans (Muzombo), a role that Mubila assumes as the self-imposed head of the Banayombi; Shaker (Mulindia). Other sons of the patriarch, who play no explicit role in the epic, are headmen of villages (Isala; Kyeyungu) where great enemies of the hero seek refuge. While they don't seem to be in direct conflict with their brother, they do provide hospitality for major enemies.

His relationship to his half-sister, Mbila, the only daughter of Yombi, is most ambiguous. She is captured, apparently on behalf of Elephant (Nzogu), the headman of Idimu village and, before Mubila meets her again, she has become the mother of Wabulela, a secondary character who witnesses the secret relations between Mubila and his sister Mbila. She is liberated by Mubila who travels to Elephant's

village with the intent of freeing her; he shamelessly enters her house and has sex with her against the protests of her so-called husband. Subsequently, she acts like a crazy woman, irritates Mubila's senior brother, Bukulu bwa Kitaba, to whom she had brought an oral message from Mubila, and is killed by him. Later on, Mubila injures his brother for having acted unwisely.

### *His Wives*

Mubila does not marry his wives according to Lega matrimonial rules, which require prolonged agreements between the parties concerned and the exchange of marriage payments and gifts between the families.<sup>14</sup> Instead, he easily seduces and captures all three women; in two cases, these rapt result in feud and warfare.

Mubila is never mean to his wives; he may criticize, rebuke, or chastise them, but he is never fiercely implacable as he is with some other women. He relies on them for his well-being and his salvation – mainly on his senior wife, Kabungulu, who possesses extraordinary powers and whose interventions may be even more decisive than those of Mubila himself. Except for Kabungulu, the wives play a limited role. Mubila may instruct them to prepare some nuts, to grill some tobacco, or to draw water for him; occasionally, he may leave his major weapons with them.

Kabungulu, his senior wife, is the mother of his only son Zakeuti. Even before meeting him, Kabungulu had heard about Mubila's

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14 Lega marriage is contracted in several stages: at one stage of the procedures, the young man, after a certain number of marriage valuables have been transferred to the woman's family and after he has received their consent, elopes to his village with his bride and "possesses" the woman. She is then taken back to her village by her father and other male relatives, following receipt by the in-laws, in two stages, of payments (*isigi* and *kasala* : iron objects, goats, a dog). Later, after a token payment of a duiker antelope is given to the woman's mother, the bride is ceremonially led to the husband's group by her grandmother, a junior sister, a brother's and paternal uncle's wife, never her mother. A young female relative (her father's or brother's young daughter, *mulongo*) accompanies her and stays with her for some time.

The term for the elopement stage (*kukunda*) is used by Kabungulu when, on several occasions, she decides to go to the enemy's village by pretending to be a "runaway."

beauty and fame, and is captivated by it. Upon meeting her, he is struck by her own youthful beauty. She describes herself to Mubila as an immaculate, blameless woman who came from Mputi's village. At their first encounter, Mubila abruptly asks her to enter the house so they can have sex; she resists; only his magical whistle does the trick.

It is suggested that Mubila has a more intimate bond with Kabungulu than with his other wives. At times, he even demonstrates special concern and affection for her: when leaving her behind in the custody of a senior brother, for example, he asks him to treat his wife (and his mother) well, to provide her with a little extra food; he tells him that he can reprimand but never beat her. Now and then, Mubila rebukes her, reminding her to keep her place, but he respects her, even loves her and yet, he never listens to her advice or objections<sup>15</sup>. But Kabungulu knows how to tease him, as when she expresses her admiration for Mubila's enemy Sakamungongo whom she calls "a beautiful bat (*Iusia*, a play on words involving sexual innuendo).

Mubila calls her "young woman" (*mukinga*), "dignified young mother" (*kagunza*), or "matron who gave birth only once" (*kalubuta lumoz*), and he praises the straightness of her back and the slenderness of her body. But he also calls her: "My Little Trouble-Maker" (*Kane kalabula*), "Source of Evil" (*Katuka bubibubi*), and recognizes that she is a powerful "woman who has manners different from others" or "one who has the ways of men" (*misako za wamulume*). And indeed, as is suggested by her name, which means Genet cat<sup>16</sup>, she is fierce and aggressive: "Kabungulu is not just a

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15 In some instances Kabungulu urges Mubila not to leave right away for a new adventure. He pays no attention because he feels he has an important task to accomplish. This attitude is in line with an interesting question and answer statement made in the Bwami initiations. One asks: "Where the land is dying and where your wife is ailing: to which place do you go?" The answer is: "I go to the place where the land is dying because the land is 'the good thing'. A woman: I can always marry another one."

16 There are two species of genet cat in the Lega forests: the *genetta tigrina*, with a greyish-brownish hide and the *genetta maculate*, with a light brown hide and large black or brown spots. The animal of the deep forest is a nocturnal predator, mainly terrestrial but climbs easily. In one rite, the Bwami initiates dance holding genet skins in their mouth to symbolize their

woman among women; she is a striker” and “one who in this restless running away has experienced unrest and bitterness”<sup>17</sup>.

The only possessions associated with her are her powerful magical pubic cloth (*nsulu za kukeya*, lit. “cloth from the fire”) and her small *kakumba* basket that contains shell money (*musanga*). With the help of her cloth, she destroys, defeats, weakens, or neutralizes Mubila’s enemies, whether they act as groups (e.g., the Banambogo and the Banamilemba) or individuals (Koba, Kwimma, Walikenge, Sasembe, Kamombo, Ntabazane, Idunga, Nyamagugulu, Buwalinga, Nyaluluba). She achieves this on her own or when Mubila is already holding an enemy he is unable to defeat. Her supreme magical power is most strongly emphasized when, on two occasions, she brings her husband back to life with the help of an eye-philter he had given her.

But, Kabungulu also shrewdly plays on her seductive ability. In order to overcome one or another of her husband’s enemies (Bungoe, Kyugukige, Kamembe), she enters his village as a “runaway woman” ready for sexual adventures; she lets herself be seduced but then annihilates him.

The functional importance of Kabungulu as a vital complement to her husband, his activities and successes, is in line with Lega principles where, as the following adages attest, complementary filiation is of great social and ritual significance:

- “On each side, female and male (left and right), the *Lwindi* river is pulled (a canoe is propelled by moving the paddles left and right);
- “One finger alone cannot pick up a clod of dirt, not at all, even if one is very smart.”

In the philosophy of Bwami, a high *kindi* initiate is not a complete initiate until at least one of his wives has been initiated to the

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awesome power.

<sup>17</sup> There is a Bwami aphorism stating that a certain *Kabungulu* died in Mputi (Pygmy area) because of rambling around (*kutanda*).

complementary *bunyanwa* grade. She is his steady companion; she cannot be divorced or, after her husband's death, be "inherited" by one of his close relatives.

The two other wives, Kababili and Lusagila, are childless. Although they perform some tasks for their husband, they do not have any major powers. Mubila captures his second wife, Kababili (Of-two), together with other women in Milemba village. She too succumbed to his "alluring whistle." Occasionally Mubila asks her to do something for him (to grill some tobacco or provide some unprepared nuts (*tubala*) or to clean his egg). She is engaged in several brawls, from which Kabungulu generally saves her. Lusagila (Water Lily), the third wife, was floating in the river engaged with other girls in water drumming, when she was attracted by Mubila's whistle. She confesses to have had a dream in which a beautiful youth was coming for her.

#### *His Son*

Zakeuti (Ashes) is born while his father, Mubila, is temporarily "dead." He speaks and threatens at birth and imposes his own complex name, Dream of the Ashes of Mubila (Ndozi Zakeuti). He has fore-knowledge of things to come and cosmic powers: for example, in search of his father, he stretches out his leg to separate the waters of a large river so the Banayombi can pass. He also possesses healing powers and heals, for example, the eye of a senior uncle whom Mubila had injured. His mother Kabungulu says that she and her son are of the same age group (which seems to imply that Kabungulu was very young when she was captured and became a mother. Mubila calls him Lone-Born One (Sawabutoa-ngomo).

Bellicose and rash, Zakeuti jumps up at Musisi; he approaches his father's corpse although his mother warns him against it; he threatens his paternal uncle Bukulu Bwakitaba, without even knowing who he is. There are other occasions where he wants to pursue someone and his father has to stop him.

The social position of Mubila is such that he has no in-laws, because he captured his wives. Hence his son Zakeuti has no maternal uncles,



but Mubila also has no maternal uncles because no brothers or other kin of his mother are mentioned. Both sets of kinship connections - affinal and cognatic - are of extreme importance in Lega society, particularly the maternal uncles of which the Lega recognize seven distinctive categories. Their importance is well summarized in the aphorism: "Maternal uncles are the rhizomes from which the banana shoots sprout." On his father's or his mother's side, he also has no kinsfolk who would constitute powerful allies; he also has no affines through his half-brothers' marriages, since he captured their wives for them.

### **Physical traits**

At birth, Mubila is already fully grown and walks from the forest to his village. He also has unusual physical features: long nails, eyebrows like elephant tails. In one passage he is said to have a beard and very long hair. It is not clear whether he is tall or short, slender or fat (although one antagonist mockingly calls him Fat-buttocks). Although his appearance seems frightening, women, who are charmed by his "alluring whistle," are captivated by his beauty!

The hero has no manifest animal features (as some other actors in the epic have), nor can he be considered a mythical figure. He has no divine, demonic or supernatural antecedents. He is simply a human with incredible physical features, unbelievably lethal weapons, fierce allies, ruthlessly aggressive and destructive manners, and unusual ways of behaving. He is a strange blend and manifestation of the usual and unusual, the common and uncommon, the familiar and unfamiliar, the powerful and the weak, the cruel and the gentle, the civilized and uncivilized.

### **Paraphernalia and Powers**

Mubila is born with some essential power objects, predispositions and gifts, but acquires more powers and power objects in the course of his peregrinations. He claims to have inherited some, but he obtains others by using ruse or by defeating an enemy.

At birth, Mubila wears an unusual necklace made of *nkumbi* pods and a belt of *Iwamba* vines. These objects, he says, are signs of his

manhood. It should be noted that he has a belt of vines, not of raffia or hide, thereby denoting the toughness of his character.<sup>18</sup> He also has several objects that possess great powers. Explicitly mentioned are a spear, copper shield, and knife,<sup>19</sup> each carrying a personal name that refers to Mubila's bellicose nature and to the inherent power of the weapon concerned. Other exclusive objects in his possession are mentioned in various episodes of the epic:

- Huge shoulderbag in which he can hide his entire *comitatus*;
- Magical, alluring whistle,<sup>20</sup> which he sometimes says "is in his mouth," as if it were an intrinsic part of his being; besides its seductive capacities, the whistle also has destructive powers.
- Feather hat;<sup>21</sup>
- White dice (*mbale za kakeli*) he inherited from his father, and over which he has verbal power;
- Egg;
- Harpoon and hunting nets also left by his father;
- Drums he takes from the "land of the dead;"
- Ivory bark beater, which he takes from Nyakambalambala;
- Headdresses and insignia typical of high-level Bwami initiates (an anachronism since we are in pre-Bwami epic times);
- Two magically destructive dogs he takes from hunters

Among his special gifts and predispositions, the hero exercises cosmic control; he commands natural forces and controls the shift from night to day; he can travel far and fast and has the power of hearing distant conversations and drum sounds; he is also able to make himself heard at great distances. He has the power of premonition and deep insight. In the course of epic action, he also demonstrates his power of transformation: for example, he grows a

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18 This marks an opposition between the suppleness (*tambatamba*) of raphia (*bveku*) and the non-pliability (*tintilinti*) of the vine (*lukusa*).

19 Common weapons among the Lega.

20 Whistles are commonly used by the Lega in hunting, divination and warfare activities. It is to be noted that male *ngandi* sorcerers are said to attract their victims by imitating the call of parrots on a whistle; whistles are also said to have the power of luring enemies in times of war.

21 The central part (called the heart), consisting of a parrot's red tail feathers, is commonly worn by men and women in some Bwami rituals, and in divination and hunting dances.

bushy crop of hair and a hunchback to make Nyakambalambala believe that he is an old man (*kakungu*); he makes himself small so he can be transported in a small basket or hidden in a house pole.

Most importantly, Mubila has an invisible (apparently hidden under his armpit), physically unidentified, yet quasi-personified, inner voice-counselor (Baya) with which he dialogues in various circumstances: to be instructed, to get advice and warnings, to receive criticism. This Baya is an indispensable guide, a kind of poised, rational and reflective “alter ego.” Differently from *nkankwale* in the Kiguma epic of the Lega (N’sanda Wamenka, 1992), the mysterious voice of Baya cannot be identified as just an amulet. Sometimes Baya is personified: on one occasion, for example, Baya grabs Mubila by the arm to keep him from jumping into a river in pursuit of an enemy (the crocodile Kimena).

Mubila often refers to his *lungubu*, a magical medicine that ensures success in war and other enterprises.<sup>22</sup> This powerful medicine apparently allows him to perform wonders, such as hiding in a house-pole when attacked or suddenly transposing himself to another place when he is about to be attacked.

Apart from his brother Katuta, who is an expert message-giver on the slit-drum, Mubila has “inherited” from his father a great drummer Kibazonga whom he calls upon in some circumstances.

### Epithets, Praise and Drum Names

Mubila is known by several praise names, some of which are used in a derogatory or ironical manner by friends and antagonists:

- Tireless Traveller (*Lungenda*): Mubila says that he is on a trip that is much longer than he thought it would be because he experiences many delays (*lugulagula*)
- Traveller (*Mugenzi*)
- Trail-Blazer (*Kalema*): He has the capacity to move fast (*kusasia*) over great distances and through forests without trails

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<sup>22</sup> In contrast to other types of therapeutic medicines, such as *idanga* herbs, or magical medicines, such as *kazemba*, to cope with ritual pollution.

- (*kimbambala*);
- Haughty-one (*Kitindi*): because of his proud gait, the feathers on his hat quiver;
  - Intrepid Manly Hero, a reckless person who is never afraid even if others find certain situations and circumstances impossible to face (*Kimungumungu*, *Kimandamanda*, *Kyawamulume*), a trait he is constantly reminded of and warned about.
  - Evil Spirit (*Lukoga*): mentioned only once in the narrative.
  - Talker (*Kilaliko*; *Kilaluka*): by *Kwimma* and the hunter *Idunga*
  - Talkative Fellow (*Kupeluma*): by the angler *Lulyumba* who mocks him;
  - Little Penis small child of Sperm (*Kasuka kana ka Malume*): insult by *Nsombi*;
  - Person filled with reckless impertinence (*bumandamanda*);
  - Brazen-One (*Kimangumangu*);
  - Mubila who is (so) talked about;
  - Hard-hearted one whom not a finger is shown or he cuts the top from it (*Wakasungu*);
  - Poor devil (*Kilema*);
  - True Man (*Wamulume*);
  - Braggart (*Kinyiginyigi*);
  - Haughty (*Kitindi*): by *Kyugukige*, one of his enemies;
  - Uncircumcised one (*Mumbumbu*): by his brother *Bukulu Bwakitaba*.

He is often referred to by patronymic or toponymic designations or kinship terms such as:

- Child left behind by *Yombi* (*mwana wasigile Yombi*);
- Beloved-one, Great Traveller whom *Yombi* left behind (*Ngoli Kikwenda zasigile Yombi*);
- The son of *Yombi* (*mwana wa yombi*);
- Father or Leader of the children of *Yombi* (*Sabanayombi*);
- Master of *Tubala* (his village) (*inene ku Tubala*);
- My maternal uncle (*Mwizio*): by *Wabulela*, the husband of *Mubila*'s so-called sister;
- My junior (*muto wane*): by his brother *Bukulu Bwakitaba*;
- My junior (*Mukanda*): by *Bungoe* (another heroic figure against whom *Mubila* is powerless).

Mubila will also give himself names or epithets that provide a condensed image of what he wants to convey, either praise or self-deprecation:

- In a single instance facing Sawaminzele, the collector of snail shells, Mubila says: “I come from my village Tubala; You find yourself in the presence of the *bayuyu* (ancestral spirits), the elders of the forest are (inspire) fear;”
- In dialogue with the hunter Kabalindi, he refers to himself as Weak Big Man (Kizinzo Kyawamulume);
- In the same dialogue, he also calls himself: troublesome big man (Kinkonge kyawamulume);
- Zumbi “He who looks at the eyebrow of Zumbi looks at/faces war;”
- Speaking to Kampasa, he refers to himself as “(one to) whom not a finger is shown” (*Kazamba ka Yombi wakasungu*);
- He also occasionally refers to himself as Billy Goat who ruts and passes (Kilimba);
- Fated-one (Mulindu).

At various stages of the epic action, mostly when he is about to perform some heroic deed, Mubila shouts several variations of his self-given, imposing drum names (*lukumbu*),<sup>23</sup> which resemble self-

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23 Lega adult males have a drum name (*lukumbu*), a conventionalized periphrastic, often aphoristic expression, the tonal pattern of which can be reproduced on the slit-drum. Most often, they have received this name from their agnates or from their maternal uncles. In order to avoid possible confusion because two men from different communities may have one and the same drum-name, the exact identity is established by adding the drum name of a person’s father and even of his grandfather, simply by binding the two or three formulas together with the expression “he who was left by” (*wasigile*) or “son of.” Women also can be called on the slit-drums, but the system is simpler. Generally the message for a woman starts with the term Musikasika, Young, young woman, or Mugunza, Mtrone, or Mukikulu, wife followed by the drum name of her husband, or of her father, or by the name of her village or lineage. The patterns of low and high tones on which these periphrastic phrases are based can also be beaten by means of a rubber-wrapped beater on large trapezoid slit-drums. These drums attached by means of a rope fixed over the shoulder are held diagonally against the belly. Only men can beat them. In ritual procedures, men are invited to shout out (*eibuzija*) their drum name. Although there are great experts in this matter, most mature men can transmit at least a limited range of messages. The drum names often do not have a clearly explainable content. It

praises and do not include the usual referral to one's father's and grandfather's drum names. Generally introduced by the phrase "he shouts his drum name" (*eibuzia lukumbu*) or, simply, "he shouts" (*eibuzia*), they consist of various longer and shorter combinations of recurring formulas and highly succinct periphrastic statements. He shouts his first drum name when he fights the members of the Mputi group, where he has captured his first wife Kabungulu and forty other women:

Nne Ngili za Kimoko	I, only child, fearless loner
kunsi kwane takwabule ungo	No one came after me
Kimungu Isaga	Big Ax
ekukukaga mumwini	Flies loose from its handle
Lukwika lwa menze	Light wood scaffolding
Nakabika yiliyili	I break quickly, quickly.
Mugulugulu nakabika ntongoa	Mugulugulu (tree), I break my crown
Mamba kululuka	The jumble of lianas tumbles down.
U wambulaga bayeya bubo	This is what the elders told me.

Through his drum names, Mubila evokes his destructive power, his irascibility, impetuosity, arrogance, ruthlessness, self-sufficiency, but also his flair, the cohesive force he exercises on his group, his smartness and cunning in dealing with people. On several occasions, he notes that the habits, manners and character traits reflected in these names were given and taught him by the seniors, the elders. The names include references that equate Mubila with Flame, Viper, Scaffolding of Softwood, Large Ax, Year of Famine (destroyer of kinship bonds), Dense Foliage, Male Nsabila Monkey, Billy Goat (rutting and passing), Covered Cooking Pot, Only Child, Fearless Loner, Causer of wide ranging problems, Tall *Mugulugulu* Tree (when the crown breaks all the intertwined lianas fall down), Expert Hunting Dog, Large Parrot, Big Turtle, A Piece of Drum that cannot be submerged.

- He is fierce, and he is proud of it: "A leaf trembles and I cut it with my knife;"

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is the symbolic association between a person and a certain conventional phrase that is of significance.

- “I am a Wakasungu (Hard-hearted, Callous) to whom no finger is shown.”
- At the point of destroying Kanga’s traps, he calls himself “Kingenge bird, I call the dry season, I also call the wet season.”
- He says to his wives: “When I am together with young women, (I am) a *musoke* tree bumping against banana trees” to say that no woman can resist when he talks to them.

### Behavioral traits

From the outset, Mubila is threatening and demonstrates his insolence by selecting his own name. In all ways, he is an anti-hero in terms of the values of Lega culture, as it existed in the fifties. He ignores many of the grand and profound moral, philosophical, socio-political ideas and values introduced among the Lega by the all-pervasive Bwami association, which advocates generosity, moderation, temperance, verbal restraint, nonviolence, mutual aid, social solidarity and etiquette. In Lega doctrine, deep insight, profound knowledge of human affairs (*kizio*), results not merely from systematic learning but from careful listening to the elders interpreting “the words of the land,” which Mubila is incapable of doing.

His personality and behavioral traits are consistent throughout the epic and are best characterized by the two ancient Greek concepts of *hubris* and *atē*. He excels in exaggerated self-pride and is driven by impulses he cannot control, by forces within himself that are beyond his command. He is arrogant, intolerant, and a braggart. His bellicose temperament translates into ruthless, rough and tough actions and reactions. He himself says that he has war-filled eyes (*kibezi u kyalusanania bita*, lit. the stare that resembles war). He lacks etiquette and decorum and does not adhere to a code of honor, except his own. Most of his actions are unusual, uncommon, illicit, illegal, anti-social, asocial, immoral, and in flagrant contradiction with Lega value code.

From the very beginning, Mubila ignores the code of kinship. He is the most junior son of a patriarch, but right after birth he decides to build his own village and he mobilizes his brothers to help him. His

decision to break away from the paternal village, without any apparent reason, is an act of rebellion; it goes against all codes regulating intra-family and lineage relationships. Even more, it is a sacrilegious act with grave consequences, for as soon as this new village is built, his father dies, as if struck down by the overwhelming number of his son's behavioral breaches. But the rash and shameless Mubila sees things in a different light. Having left his father in the custody of his most senior brother, Bukulu Bwakitaba, he accuses the latter of sorcery and witchcraft, which he claims were instrumental in their father's death. He is also disrespectful to his other most senior brother, Kinkutunkutu, accusing him of misdeeds and refusing his advice or criticisms. His impulsiveness and quick anger lead him to inflict injuries on both brothers. Although he reconciles with them, there remains latent tension, ill feelings; their relationship is fraught with hatred (*nduma*) and meanness.

On the other hand, Mubila demonstrates a certain degree of solidarity with most of his other siblings, but he always remains authoritarian; everything is fine when his kin do what he asks them to do. He is exceptionally respectful toward his mother, Nyamubila, and he can be very tender toward his wife Kabungulu; after some initial misgivings, he is friendly toward his son, Zakeuti, concerned about him and full of praise.

Mubila does not indulge in much eating or drinking; he is sober and satisfied with just a few *mbala* nuts. He is not a big eater (*kulyagalyaga*), or a glutton (*kisabulunda*). In general, he does not have much interest in sex; sexual matters are reduced to a minimum throughout the epic, and when mentioned, they are expressed in highly symbolic language.

In the course of the epic narrative Mubila encounters several women protagonists. His attitudes are nuanced. With some, he is in outright conflict; he or his wife, Kabungulu, destroy them. All of them leave him sexually indifferent. For example, on one occasion a woman, Zalunonge, helps him cross a large river and cooks much food for him. Mubila does not want her food (he only wants some nuts); when she insists on accompanying him, he simply gets rid of her. On



another occasion, he wins a woman in a gambling contest, but rather than taking her, he gives her to his senior brother Kinkutu (to whom he had previously refused to give a woman from among those he had captured). He is merciful toward the woman Gonda whose child he saved from a sorceress and he is lenient toward the old woman Nyakaseke who gave him the ivory bark beater he wanted to have.

In Lega terms, Mubila is not a leader but a rambler (*kitandala*), a restless traveller (*kalema; lungenda*). He is a vagrant running around in countries that are not his (*kitandala; kisapupa*). Right after his birth, he travels fast over great distances without using the established trails. As a vagrant and adventurer, he does not tend to the needs of his village and people; rather, he is constantly drawn into new expeditions and escapades. In other words, Mubila is not a master of the land (*nenekisi*), a guide and leader of people, a person with clear insight and profound knowledge<sup>24</sup>; he is the very opposite.

His traits can be summarized as follows:

- He is someone with no good intelligence or behavior (*munguba*), the opposite of a *ngoli*, one who is favored in everything because of his conduct and manners. He is the opposite of the elders (*bakulu*), whose manners of operating are slow and cautious (*kantanta*).
- He suffers from reckless foolishness (*buzonga*); making abrupt, arbitrary, uninformed decisions and taking rash and unexpected initiatives: For example, hearing drums in the far distance, he

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24 In the great precepts of the Bwami association, the following is said about the *nenekisi*: “The *nenekisi* may be small (in physical stature), like the *kabuyi* antelope, but (like this antelope) he is master of the forest domain (*nenebanda*). The *nenekisi* is a spokesman, an advocate, one who is able to defend the interests of his people, one who can make mature judgments (*mutendezi*); every land is in need of such a person. The *nenekisi* is a *musanganano*, the center of reunion, a refuge for all; people feel protected by his presence; even when he is asleep, people can dance and enjoy themselves without worries. He is a good and beautiful person (*musoga*), the beam on which the rafters of the roof, indeed the entire roof, rest (*katandala*), the central ridgepole (*mutondo*) that prevents the house from collapsing. Without a *nenekisi*, the group falls apart. He is comparable to the giant *ibulungu* tree: “In him is the beginning and the end of the forest domain (*mutandi*),” the one with which a cohesive social group with strong inner solidarity is identified.

learns that people there whom he does not know are engaged in the *ngandu* level of initiations in Bwami. Uninvited, he goes to that place and demands that he also be initiated. Everything goes wrong. First, because one must not be initiated in an unknown place. Second, because he does not have tutor who has prepared him for the initiation requirements and can help him to understand the teachings. Moreover, in his ignorance about procedures and because of his impetuous megalomania, he wants to be initiated right away to the highest grade for which he himself has brought the paraphernalia. The bard narrates these passages with a special kind of irony, and the listeners are especially amused, because Mubila represents a pre-Bwami man, one who has not acquired the great qualities of *busoga*, goodness-beauty, expressed in temperance, wisdom, generosity, solidarity. Rather, he is filled with inner blindness (*isabulumbu*) and does not possess the great moral and socio-philosophical knowledge on which the fabric of Lega society rests (*kalenganio*). What the Bwami initiates say about non-initiates applies to Mubila: “he has a heart of feathers.”

- Filled with callousness, tough heartedness (*nduma*), he is ruthless, choleric, trouble-seeking, cantankerous, and fickle, causing causes trouble (*idambadamba*) wherever he goes, even when his initial intentions seem friendly.
- He is aggressive, ruthless, hot-blooded, implacable, vindictive. As a man whose heart does not want to please or to love (*isabuku*), he is filled with rancor (*musona*), ill feelings, grudges and a spirit of vengeance (*musubo*). As he says, he resembles one of the spirit-elders of the forest who inspire fear (*bayuyu*). He is a destroyer, a killer, acting directly, killing with his knife, his spear, throwing someone into a fire, or engaging in hand to hand combat.
- He is a relentless fighter (*kwitanagaitanaga*), capable of enduring hunger and cold. He often brags about this aptitude: “I have slept with hunger and cold.”
- He has the ability to recover from death yet he is vulnerable: he is speared in his forearm; he is bitten by a mongoose; he is speared and sits stuck “dead” on the spear; he is circumcised a

second time and “dies,” but on each occasion he is “awakened” by his senior wife Kabungulu who handles a magical eye filter.

- He is meddlesome and consequently loses track of the right directions that lead to achieving his goals. Even the cutting of a tree, which is none of his business, becomes cause for argument.<sup>25</sup>
- He is filled with hubris (*mwenegana*) and does not listen to the advice of elders, warnings (even given by his mother), or advice, except when it is given by Baya. He does not like to be asked questions.
- He says that he “ate bad luck (*bwenia*) with his ripe banana paste,” somewhat ironically, commiserating about himself.
- He is a talkative fellow, a nasty critic of others, using a thesaurus of vile insults simply to tease or to challenge other persons, without any good reason for it: He ridicules Potto saying that he suffers from leprosy and tells Genet that he stinks. He mocks the Elephants saying that their village is filled with puddles. He is particularly inventive in his insolence and his biting sarcasm is sometimes witty. For example, he tells Chimpanzee that he cannot taste the beer because his lip is so long that it would break the pot; he informs Leopard that he cannot taste because his nails are so long they would break the scoop; when he goads Elephant, he claims that his ears are large enough to serve as a door for the village fence, that his back is bent like a fallen tree crown, that his big feet resemble those of a leper, and that his big body is filled with bloodsucking insects.
- He is foolish in his display of extravagant manners (*kalema*), boastful, and conceited (*munyemo*). He is a boaster, a braggart (*kitumbilwa*). Like the hornbill bird “he counts the villages, but does not know what sticks out above his beak” (he thinks he knows, but in reality does not).
- He is obsessed with his own death.
- Nothing is taboo (*kitampo*) for Mubila, not even his sister with whom he has sexual relations; he observes no prohibitions.

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25 “The *lukundu* tree of the village is not felled by a passer-by:” a passer-by has no right to fell such a tree (*piptadena Africana*), a tall tree from which, among other things, poison for the poison ordeal is extracted.

- He is self-sufficient, telling his brother Kyanga who refuses to give him an oracle that “I myself am self-sufficient. I deliberate in my heart.”

But it would be erroneous to consider Mubila as merely the prototype of the anti-hero. In the thinking of the bard and the auditors, he belongs to the pre-Bwami generation (even though the bard has inserted a couple of funny passages as if Bwami existed in Mubila’s time, probably to please the numerous bami present).

Throughout his existence, he witnesses stultifying and wonderful things (*tubalu*), but he remains very much of a terrestrial being: unlike other heroes, he does not travel in the celestial or subterranean spheres. In the end, he has no fame or domination over the land (*mulumbu wa kisi*); the hero who defeats so many does not become a supreme chief; he returns to his village where implicitly he is only another village headman. Indeed, the Lega themselves had no overall leadership, they had no supreme chief; they were, as oral traditions state, divided into numerous units some allied and some of them inimical to one another.

The epic ends on a peaceful note: Mubila and his followers are back in their village Tubala; the village is cleaned (and cleansed) and endless dances are organized. Stability has been achieved; the Lega are settled. The elaborate Bwami institution “that fruit that came from above” is going to emerge and spread among the Lega bringing unity and peace and a cult for the good and beautiful. The oppositions (*bikugi*) ‘that destroy a village’ seem to have subsided and at the end of the epic a certain atmosphere of reconciliation (*malonga*), has been attained.

## CONCLUSION

From the point of view of the epic genre, the Mubila epic and its production include numerous of the hallmarks of world epics (as noted for example in the concatenation of episodes, the numerous types of names and other formulas; the *in medias res* beginnings and

endings), yet it deviates and varies from some often mentioned epic criteria: Mubila is normally conceived, but his birth and immediate subsequent action are in line with the epic criteria of heroic birth. Mubila is not the all-overwhelming heroic figure; he depends on the help of his senior wife and some other kin for his success.

The society described in the Mubila epic is that of the migratory period, a time of movement of groups, encounters between unrelated and foreign entities, feuds, warfare, absorption. Mubila is a kind of symbol for all the feuding leaders of these groups, a symbol of the terrible internecine conflicts that marked the Lega at the time of their establishment in their present country, a time before the all-embracing, peace-making Bwami association was invented.

On a symbolic level, Mubila is representative of the leader(s) of the Lega migrations that took place two to three hundred years ago when the Lega gradually moved from eastern Africa and the Ruwenzori Mountains region into the deep rain forests of Kivu and Maniema. Here they found widely scattered pre-established groups of diverse origins (Pygmies, Luba and Lunda offshoots, other hunting groups). At least two of these entities are directly mentioned: Kabungulu is a daughter of Mputi; that is, of a Pygmy (note that Lega tradition begins with Lega who married a daughter of the Pygmies) and the Bouse, who are still represented in small units among the Lega. The Lega split into at least two migratory routes. Some of the two migrant groups fought for a long time a certain "Kimbimbi" in an area around the Lwalaba River, south of the present Kisangani. Some of them evolved in the eastern Kivu mountains and were influenced by chiefly traditions they found among pre-established groups such as the Basim'minje, now incorporated among the Bembe and Nyindu. The immigrant Lega fought these groups, assimilated them, incorporated them, decimated them, and chased them. In various movements, quarrels and battles, the bard alludes to these encounters with pre-established groups and their leaders/protagonists in eastern Congo, mainly in the forest areas they now occupy.

To a large extent, the epic is a reflection of this pre-Bwami Lega society, a society made up of closely or remotely related chief-less

clans and lineages, torn apart by internecine feuds and warfare, caused by competition and disagreement over hunting rights, seniority in kinship groups, women, witchcraft, sorcery. Accordingly, the major driving forces behind the hero's actions and sentiments are: hatred and vengeance (*nduma* and *musubo*); battle and war (*mbanza* and *izombo*); deception and argumentation (*bukago* and *myango*); restless travel and inherent hardships (*lugendo* and *tumbimbi*); acts of sorcery and witchcraft (*buganga*); use of power objects (Mubila's whistle; Kabungulu's apron) and medicines (*lungubu*); acts of fictive seduction and love-making (*idimbia*) always elliptically expressed; rapt of women, disastrous initiations and fake initiation-like events (*mpala* and *killi*). However, some attitudes reflect, at least to a certain extent, the values dear to Bami initiates, such as respect (*bunyemi*) for one's mother and a senior wife, expected cooperation within the kinship group, acceptance of ultimate authority, respect for elders.