“MULOMBE” : A KAONDE SUPERSTITION

THE following notes give details of one of the most interesting superstitions that has come to my notice; and, further, they refer to “that” which is held in the greatest awe by the tribe concerned (the *Ba-kaonde*, located in the north-west corner of Northern Rhodesia, a tribe of the *Luba* family). The details, which were acquired with difficulty, were furnished under a pledge of secrecy as to their origin; and I have tested them sufficiently to believe in their authenticity. Hints in court showing knowledge of the nature and habits of the *mulombe* have caused something approaching consternation, and references at odd times to certain items recorded here have given rise to genuine fear in the listener.

The *mulombe* is also known as *mulolo*: an archaic and probably the most correct name is *Sung-unyi*, but this last is rarely used now. It is a snake with a man’s head, made by certain wizards, that kills the people indicated to it by its owner. This is how it is made: A man wants to own a *mulombe*, probably because he wants to be rid of some enemy in a secret manner; he therefore goes to a wizard who has the reputation of being able to make one; and if the wizard agrees to oblige him he is directed to get five duiker horns. Having returned with these, the client is escorted into the bush by the wizard. The wizard then collects certain medicines, which he places on a piece of bark, and mixes with water. He then puts the five duiker horns near to the concoction; after which he proceeds to pick some spiky grass (*luwamba*) and plaits it—the plait is from 15 to 18 inches long and from $\frac{1}{2}$ to 1 inch wide. At one end of this plait he places the five duiker horns. Parings are then taken from the client’s fingernails and are placed inside the horns. Incisions are next made on the client’s forehead and chest, blood from which is put in the medicine. It is then all mixed together, and a part

of it is given to the client to drink. The plaited *luwamba* is then laid upon the ground, the horns pointing away from the wizard and towards the client. Another plait of *luwamba* is then made, which is dipped into the remaining medicine, and the medicine is thus sprinkled by means of the second plait upon the first plait, which is lying flat. At the first sprinkling the prone plait changes into a white substance (the colour of white ashes). At the second sprinkling it becomes a snake. At the third sprinkling the snake develops the head, shoulders and arms (in miniature) of the client (later the shoulders and arms disappear), the rest remaining like a snake. It has also, reproduced in miniature, any ornaments that the client may be wearing on the parts reproduced, such as a bangle, necklace, shell, etc. This is the *mulombe*. It rears itself upon its tail and addresses the wizard's client.

Mulombe: "You know me, and recognise me?"

Client: "Yes."

Mulombe: "You see that your face and mine are the same, and that your necklace and shell (or whatever the ornaments may be) are the same as mine?"

Client: "Yes."

Then the wizard chips in.

Wizard: "There is the *mulombe* that you asked me for: take it and tend it carefully. You may keep it where you will—in the reeds by the river (the usual place), in your hut, or wheresoever you wish. It will always be with you now, and so long as you treat it well, so long as it be really well looked after, you will not die—until all your relatives be dead; so tend it carefully. Farewell."

They then separate, the client taking his *mulombe* with him and the wizard departing upon his own lawless occasions.

Before long the *mulombe* says to his owner: "I want a person to 'eat.'" The owner then has to indicate a person whom it may kill. After the kill the *mulombe* comes back very happy and crawls about its owner, licking him all over; which licking makes the body very clean and the owner fat and sleek. It is not long, however, before the *mulombe* gets "hungry" again—hungry for killing, that is, for it does not really eat the victim, in fact it leaves no mark; but the expres-

sion "eat" is used—and another victim must be indicated. The owner, if he refuses to indicate a person, becomes ill, and will not be cured until he gives way to the importunities of his *mulombe*. Provided that he keeps the *mulombe* in victims as demanded he will live and wax fat until all his relatives have died.

But—and here is the fly in the ointment—it probably happens that owing to the numerous deaths that have occurred because of the insatiable appetite of the *mulombe*, the people get suspicious and call in a diviner to ascertain the cause of the trouble. The diviner, generally by bone throwing, finds out that someone has a *mulombe*, and also divines where he keeps it. No hint of this is allowed to reach the man implicated, who—all unsuspecting—remains happily in the village. Then the diviner chooses five strong men and guides them to the *mulombe's* lair—which is almost invariably near a river. Arrived there he takes some medicine, previously prepared, and sprinkles the adjacent ground with it; rumblings ensue, and water comes out of the river, rising till it reaches the thighs of the men. Then fish come out in large numbers, followed by crabs; and finally the *mulombe* itself, rearing itself upon its tail. A poisoned arrow, prepared and brought in readiness for this climax, is fired at it, and the dread thing falls writhing to the ground. Simultaneously the owner, in the village, feels as if he had been shot with an arrow, and he also falls writhing to the ground. Soon the *mulombe* dies, and at the same moment the owner dies. Thus are the victims avenged and the deaths in the village cease.

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