

The Lele of the Kasai

Mary Douglas: Collected Works

Volume I

ROUTLEDGE



MARY DOUGLAS

MARY DOUGLAS: COLLECTED WORKS

VOLUME I

The Lele of the Kasai

VOLUME II

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THE LELE OF THE KASAI



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PREFACE TO NEW EDITION

It will soon be thirty years since I arrived in the country of the Lele. At that time the Belgian colonial presence had been effective for about twenty years. I saw a people who were then in the midst of drastic adaptation. Meanwhile, their country has become independent and they have adapted again to new challenges. It is such a deep pleasure to see a fresh edition of my first book that I must again record my thanks to the International African Institute. For me, these pages are haunted by the memory of Daryll Forde, its director, who gave every kind of intellectual and moral support and funds for my field-work. They are also haunted by the Lele I used to know and by new unseen friends, young Lele, who have been writing to me in impeccable French. It is from their ranks that scholars, trained in modern techniques of research, will continue Lele studies. The productive side of their economy seemed to me at the time of writing a model of our own plight in Britain. Outpost then of a great European tradition, but a poor relative, less energetic, less investment-minded, we in this island seemed to parallel the case of the Lele outpost of the Kuba tradition and poorer neighbours of the then thriving, pushful Bushong. I did not guess that three decades later Britain would still be in the same state of relative economic disadvantage. But I did expect that this study would have relevance for the economics of development. There I have not been disappointed, for the Lele case is often mentioned in writings of anthropologists interested in economics. However, I am never clear as to the moral to be drawn from the comparisons. When Americans come to Britain and say how they love this quiet little place, with its uncompetitive people, compared with the harsh striving and the large-scale achievements of their own cities, I recall how the Lele admired the scale of Bushong organisation and the splendours of its court. In his *Stone Age Economics* Marshall Sahlins discusses this comparison and with many other examples besides that of the Lele. His writing often seems to criticise those who fail to exploit fully their economic potential and so, by implication, recommends the individualistic, profit-motivated wealth-accumulating economy which lies at the other pole of comparison. He seems to think it better to live and work in a society where there are rewards to strive for and a high level of incentives for individual effort. By comparison with the Lele such a society

would be the Bushong as described so clearly by Jan Vansina. In other chapters where he criticises the capitalist bias of economic theory, Sahlins would seem to have turned around in his intellectual tracks and to be siding with the less productive, less expansive economies, such as the British now, or the Lele then, inhibited by a mesh of social sensitivities and communal concerns. My book on the Lele has tried to document some of the factors that enter into that difficult choice. It was intended to contribute to the study of economic backwardness, but that problem leads to political problems of control and freedom.

I would like to present this book as a strongly systematized view of how a way of life and its dominant values are engaged together. In the ethnography of the 1950s efforts at systematization were fashionable, the proper object of research. Since then, the exercise of showing functional relationships has fallen out of favour. Consequently, this book is one of the few studies in functional anthropology devoted to a people of the Congo region. I hope it will be useful for helping those people to interpret their past.

One reviewer commented that though I had picked on the unifying theme of authority, the special interest of the Lele lay in their institutions for organising sexual life. It is true that they had most ingenious polyandrous institutions. Being a woman fieldworker I was naturally very interested in how it worked out for a woman to have as many husbands as she liked, and simultaneously. It sounds like a free and easy system of sex, especially when it is added to the right of men to have several wives. However, Lele women did not enjoy any marked freedom, rather the contrary, they were the stakes in men's political manoeuvres, and correspondingly controlled.

Once this book was written, the groundwork seemed to be cleared for reflecting on Lele culture. Everything that I have subsequently written about cultural categories and their roots in social life has grown out of that reflection. *Purity and Danger* was inspired by the Lele discrimination between edible and inedible meats and the interest of comparing their rules with the Mosaic law. *Natural Symbols* was an attempt to characterise the bias of a whole culture and so to place the Lele (or the British) in a comparative framework. My present work carries this same attempt into harder and narrower paths of research. One forced me to learn the theory of consumption, to understand from Lele precepts and example why people want goods. Full-circled now, I am trying to relate the choices which people make in dealing with each other to the formation of a bias in the culture which is self-sustaining. In the end, economic backwardness and related problems will surely have to be considered as matters of individual choices within a particular

cultural matrix, itself the result of individual choices. So I hope to stay, in all future work, with the problems initiated here.

If I could go back to the Lele I would try to learn their language more thoroughly and study more intensively the symbolic structures within which they organised their lives. This book says very little about their metaphysical system. In what I have written about it elsewhere, I am conscious of only scratching the surface. If I were a Lele now I would want to analyse my own cultural heritage. The richness and the intricate reverberations between their favourite metaphors suggest a culture in which individual talents are led towards great philosophical strengths. When I think of all the reflections on our life and times that have come to me from meditating on Lele culture, my grateful sense of debt is overwhelming.

MARY DOUGLAS

August 1977

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It is impossible for me to name all the people in Belgium and the Congo who gave me help and hospitality. I am specially grateful to the late Professor F. M. Olbrechts and also to his successor at the *Musée Royale de l'Afrique Centrale* at Tervuren, M. Louis Cahen and to M. J. P. Harroy who was then Secretary General of I.R.S.A.C. In the Congo itself I am grateful to the members of the Colonial Administration whose help was given with such courtesy and tact, particularly to M. Vandebossche, at that time Curator of the *Musée de la Vie Indigène* at Léopoldville and to M. Georges Brausch on whose good advice I originally chose the Lele for my study and who let me draw generously on his experience. The Company office of the Huileries du Congo Belge and its Research Department jointly took over all responsibility for my communications and transport; the Sisters of St. Vincent de Paul at Brabantia energetically solved all my other practical problems and I thank all three for having kept an eye on my general well-being.

Mr. A. W. Excell of the Natural History Museum helped me to identify plants, M. A. J. Jobaerts of the Bushimaie Game Reserve helped me to identify animals of the Kasai region, and Professor Meeussen of Tervuren helped me to understand Lele grammar. I was specially lucky in the presence of my old friend and colleague, Professor J. Vansina in the adjoining territory, as his study of the Bushong threw light on the special character of Lele culture. I cannot thank individually the many Lele who gave me friendship and help, but Makum Elias stands out in my memory for his strong support and for the epic quality which livened his discussion of Lele ways. All their names have, of course, been changed.

Too many years have gone by since I started this study and I fear that without a Fellowship from the Leverhulme Research Awards Committee and a year's leave of absence from University College, London, it would still not be written. I am very grateful to both bodies.

In the intervening time several articles have appeared on the Lele and I thank the publishers of *Africa, Zaïre*, and the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* for permission to draw on the same

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There are two people to whom my personal debt is greatest of all. Professor Evans Pritchard first taught me anthropology and set a standard for fieldwork of humility, patience and honesty which I can no more reach than his technical standard though both have been an inspiration. After fieldwork I came to London and so incurred my second great debt. Professor Forde knows very well that the book would never have been finished but for his constant guidance and encouragement, but it is impossible for him to know the full extent of my gratitude for his teaching, detailed criticism and friendship.

INTRODUCTION

THIS is primarily a study of authority—or rather of its failure. Those who have had anything to do with Lele must have noticed the absence of anyone who could give orders with a reasonable hope of being obeyed. They are not aggressive individualists refusing the right of others to command. On the contrary, Lele manners are humorously modest rather than self-assertive. Authority is supposed to reside with the senior person present in any situation. In practice the senior receives deference, but not power. The lack of authority goes a long way to explain their poverty. By their own standards the Lele are poorer than their neighbours. Their soil is admittedly less fertile, but a lack of enthusiasm for cultivating it is also evident. Other projects engross them more than the creation of wealth. Second, therefore, this is a study in economic backwardness.

Any society makes its own adaptation of means and ends. To appreciate the Lele way of life we should consider the kind of society they might have had. They contrast with the Lundaized Chokwe and Ndembu to the south and east. These tribes also practise hand-cultivation in a somewhat similar forest-park environment. They have small villages founded on matrilineal kinship and grouped into little chiefdoms. The headman is the focus of village unity. His office is desired and the principle of selection for it is sufficiently uncertain to divide the village between rival aspirants. Social life is strenuously competitive as candidates for headmanship strive to attract adherents. It is certainly not an old man's world. Dr. Turner,¹ commenting on why Ndembu try to keep headmanship in the older generation, says that the general run of old men are mocked mercilessly and need the support of one of themselves in office.

All this is utterly alien to the Lele way of life. They never came under Lunda domination, probably having arrived in their area after Lunda expansion to the west had subsided. Their villages were larger, averaging 170 souls and many numbering over 400; in them village-wide institutions were emphasized at the expense

¹ 1959, p. 125.

of matrilineal kinship. Overt leadership was at a minimum and competition for office practically eliminated by unequivocal selection by seniority. The principle of seniority applied throughout their social system made in one sense an old man's world. It is unthinkable that old age should be ridiculed in such a culture.

To write of a culture as dominated by a single preoccupation is grossly to simplify. Lele institutions combined an infinite range of intentions. But if any one desire seemed paramount, it would be to secure dignity and well-being for old age. Tradition, order and stability for society at large are included with this, but some other things are not compatible. Lele would have needed a different philosophy for the all-out exploitation of their country.

It is easy to enumerate the ways in which they committed themselves to greater poverty than their neighbours. Their institutions were simply not directed to maximizing material wealth. In a sense, their low standard of life was the price of their unrealistic distribution of status, for in a primitive economy everything is weighted against the old. To try to invest the weakest section of the community with authority smacks of the quixotic—it could scarcely succeed. Therefore their society was without real authority, ridden with devious, hidden controls and vulnerable to external pressures for change.

The most important social unit of the Lele was the village. It was entirely autonomous. It did not fit like Chinese nesting boxes in a series of larger and smaller units. Compared with Chokwe villages it seems large, but taking it as the biggest social unit which Lele achieved, it is small indeed.

It looked small too. The sparse population (only four to the square mile) was gathered into numerous, compact, little settlements. The oblong raffia-frond houses were closely sited, often attached back to back, around an open square. Privacy within the family was partly sacrificed to the pleasure of living at close quarters, for a conversation in one hut could easily be joined by quiet voices from the next. If two men wanted to share a secret, they repaired to the middle of the square, the farthest point from eavesdroppers. The groupings of the houses did not correspond to kinship groupings. Men of the same age built near one another and away from their parents. They did not form 'age-villages' of

the Nyakyusa type, but their age-quarters in a village had a similar role in diluting the intensity of kinship ties.

The corporate personality of the village was well to the fore in an elaborate organization of communal wives, communal children, communal sons-in-law and a communal treasury. Members of the village were recruited through the clan sections they belonged to, but the latter were important only for allocating wives and widows, and organizing blood-compensation. In village activities, individuals entered largely as individuals or as members of an age group, rather than as representatives of a clan.

Since marriage took place between villages and since women went to join their husbands, their matrilineal descendants started life dispersed through the various villages in which they had been born, but they eventually reassembled sooner or later. Everyone recognized the need to attract young men to maintain the size of the village and the balance of the generations. Though they did not talk, of course, in terms of a top-heavy age-pyramid, they were very explicit about the disadvantages of a village without enough young men. The various clan sections in a village tried to attract members from all quarters, wherever they had been born and however they were related. Not only fellow-clansmen but sons and grandchildren of the clan were warmly canvassed to stay and make their home together. This anxiety to recruit may explain why they soft-pedalled distinctions of descent within the clan. Anyone who joined was entitled to full parity of status, regardless of genealogical relationship. By his age and by nothing else a man found his correct position in his local clan section.

The deliberate playing down of specific matrilineal kinship laid up a store of difficulties, but it may have contributed to village unity, as well as to recruitment. Unilineal descent is one clear-cut way of allocating roles of authority and subordination. But, in so far as it attaches people together in groups, it detaches them from others. It is bound to import cleavages between descent groups. By not organizing their clan sections on genealogical principles, Lele obviated one cause of village fission. But, at the same time, they committed themselves to leaving roles within the clan section largely undefined. Add to this that the economy did not provide inducements with which seniors could

attach junior clansmen to themselves. Seniors offered to young men rights over women and protection from sorcery, but with only one hand, as it were. With the other, the older generation kept the wives to themselves and threatened sorcery if their considerable privileges were not honoured. In this case privilege does not go with authority.

One side-effect of the rule of parity for all-comers was to check changes of residence after a certain age. Young men could be mobile because they increased the manpower wherever they went. But older men, by their seniority, displaced too much room in the status pattern to be welcome in a new village and they were correspondingly less valued as manpower. Other institutions combined to check tendencies to split the village and form new ones. The result was a group of adult men, committed to living together permanently and yet avoiding the most obvious way of regulating their possible conflicts—discrimination between descent lines. To this I attribute the great anxiety which was expressed whenever disputes threatened to flare up.

The productive side of the economy did not at all favour the older men. The Lele redressed the balance between the generations by the way they distributed the things they valued. Entry to cults was by fee and restricted to married men. As the age of marriage was late, this automatically reserved positions of esteem to older men and lined their pockets with the fees of new entrants. Polygyny created a scarcity of marriageable girls;² marriage fees were also high. So for the first step on the social ladder, marriage, a man had to go to his wealthy seniors and solicit their aid. Often a young man, receiving financial help, never touched the goods which were transferred in his name direct from one old man to another. And the same goes for every subsequent step, since wealth was thus drawn into the control of the older married men.

One may well ask why young men allowed their bachelorhood to be prolonged to middle age and accepted inferior cult status. In practice, the various institutions combined to make a framework from which an individual could hardly have broken out. They eagerly threw it over when the missions gave them an

² The ratio of the sexes was nearly equal. The doctor at Brabanta in charge of the Medical Census for 1949 calculated that there was only an 8 per cent excess of adult women.

opportunity. Until then they accepted the compensations which the system itself reserved for them. One was a life of freedom. In the old days, before they married, they were expected to do very little agricultural work, for their clan seniors had little control over them. Another compensation was the sharing of a communal wife. Another was the excitement of war between villages. Thus the low level of political integration was closely correlated with the general bias of their social system.

Although the older men had little direct power, it does not follow that the unmarried young men had power either, except the negative power of withdrawal. They could threaten to go away if their senior clansmen or fathers were too exigent or made things unpleasant with their complaints. The threat to leave the village was the last resort, the testing point at which the system of authority failed. But long before that point was reached it was anticipated by the undemanding behaviour of the older men. They never, or rarely, commanded so they were never, or rarely, defied. This is where polygyny appears as the essential, dominant institution. Older men were not well served by their junior relatives but, by reserving the marriageable girls for themselves, they were able to head large compounds, be served by female labour in the fields, beget many daughters and get some service for specified tasks by sons-in-law. The son-in-law was explicitly subordinate to the father-in-law—the one role of authority which was precisely defined without reference to age. By virtue of the shortage of wives, which polygyny created, men could get their sons-in-law to give the necessary help which they were not certain of getting from their own clansmen. In short, the principle of seniority was able to be applied right through the society, even to the upper age groups because the most important rights were rights over women acquired by parenthood and grandparenthood. Thus the delayed maturity of young men was the corollary of the delayed retirement of old men.

A high level of efficiency is not very likely where authority is weak. The environment of the Lele was poor but they exploited it with nothing like the steady application of certain close neighbours, the Pende of Gungu on the west or the Bushong on the east. They tended to work for a shorter period, to use less equipment and to aim at shorter-term results. Their soil was poor enough in all conscience and explained some of their

poverty. But there is no denying that Lele were more interested in maintaining a certain distribution of prestige than in rewarding maximum efforts of production. Their social institutions were not consistent with the fullest possible exploitation of the environment. They were committed to hostility between generations in a village and hostility between villages, to ill-will and insecurity, enemies of sustained collaboration.

Without supposing that they consciously made these choices, I see them as falling into contradictions and conflicts in the course of attempting two difficult things. One is a large, compact, social unit—their village was larger than the needs of their type of economy would seem to warrant and larger than achieved by other tribes in similar circumstances.³ The other is to protect a class which is at once vulnerable and important, the older men. These two objectives are probably related. A very small village could hardly maintain the number of cult and age associations and other complex institutions giving prestige to older members; and its inhabitants would be less amenable to this complicated method of directing wealth into the hands of the older men.

Any community has some kind of geriatric policy, even if only a negative one. Seniority, although it favours one age group, is basically egalitarian. Everyone has an equal stake in such a system, if only they live long enough to enjoy the postponed rewards. Lele consent is given implicitly at the earliest age at which a boy demands respect from his younger brother. Their stake increases with every year of waiting. The precedence of seniors is, therefore, one of the values implicit in the culture, subscribed to by all, unquestioned, in spite of the difficulties which it entails.

Sorcery beliefs complete and confirm the same picture from another angle. Since men past middle age could not easily change their village and so were penned together, as it were, indefinitely, sorcery suspicions could have made havoc with village peace. The special bias of their sorcery beliefs actually promoted the unity of the village by deepening suspicion of outsiders and provoking action against members who were unamenable to moral pressures. The general image of a sorcerer was an old man who was a skilled diviner. Consequently, diviners had a keen personal interest in diverting or checking indiscriminate accusations.

³ See Chapter I, p. 28, for the comparative figures.

They tended to cite the dead, or unnamed enemies from other villages, thus boosting village solidarity at the expense of friendly external relations.

In spite of the restraining influence of diviners, an individual might attract such odium in his village that sorcery accusations would begin to pile up against him, each making the next more convincing. In the old days, the poison ordeal applied to the accused was the final arbiter, unlocking otherwise insoluble conflicts. Without this recourse, the Lele village could not deal with unassimilable characters: at any time they might emerge, men who threatened the harmony of the village, regularly pursuing other men's wives and falling below the approved standard of suavely controlled behaviour.

Men accused of sorcery in their own village were generally members of large clan sections where the confusingly undefined relationships were more disorganizing than in very small groups. They were often men who had pushed claims to authority too far. A number of well-aimed accusations could ruin them. Thus sorcery beliefs balanced the system of secret cults which purported to reserve power to the old men. Putting the whip into the hands of the young, sorcery beliefs gave the finishing touch to the negation of authority.

Suspicion and secrecy about their affairs made an intensive study of one single community the only course. Although I collected simple quantitative information from farther afield, the best case material comes from the village in which I lived the longest. In a culture of this kind, extensive surveys yield little that is trustworthy. Esotericism in cults, fear of attracting jealousy of neighbours, hostility against any outsider, were part of the culture. Furthermore, their central institutions had been all too recently suppressed. In 1948 the law against polyandry came into effect. In 1949, the Chief Perominenge having died, attempts to kill slaves at his funeral were checked. An anti-sorcery cult was being suppressed in 1953, at the time of my second visit, so it was clear that no dividends would come from a widening of the field of work. Fortunately each village drew much of its male population and its wives from abroad and there was frequent visiting between friendly villages. So I was able to check the general validity of my conclusions and to judge the extent to which the chosen village was typical or exceptional.

But its affairs opened such a wide window on Lele society at large that to understand what was happening in this one village we need a substantial book.

It is eight years since I last visited the Lele. This in itself would not justify departure from the usual practice of writing ethnography in the present tense. But in the last three years the Congo has changed so radically that it is very unlikely that things are still as I knew them. It is possible that the Lele villages, free from colonial restraint, have taken up their ancient antagonisms in more violent form. We know that they resorted again to the poison ordeal after Belgian administration had lapsed, and before the Congo became formally independent. It is very unlikely that the younger generation will have returned to its old straitjacket of the old society. But at present there is no means of knowing whether they have reverted direct to old customs, interrupted for only one generation—between 1933 and 1959—or whether new political interventions have changed their lives in a different direction. This is why I have preferred to use the past tense in this study.

Note on orthography

A soft Italian *c* instead of *tch* has been used in the spelling of Lele personal and clan names.

I

THE LELE ON THE MAP

Relation with other tribes

SUSPICIOUS, uncouth, warlike, the Lele struck Torday as primitive compared with the Bushong. The artistry and charm of Bushong villages contrasted with the fortified homes of the Lele.

Here too we found enclosures, but instead of the leaf-walls which are considered sufficient amongst the Bushong, the separations were palisades formed by solid stakes, driven into the ground. Such a wall surrounded the whole village, and the single entrance was so arranged that no more than one person was able to enter at a time.¹

His companion gives a similar impression of a narrow, closed-in way of life:

So little do the Bashilele wander beyond the immediate surroundings of their own homes that very few of the inhabitants of any village are acquainted with the track even to the next settlement of their own tribe: and we found that often, even when carrying our loads to another Bashilele village, the men would arm as if for war.²

In many villages they judged it wiser not to penetrate the palisades; in others Lele accepted salt and knives, but were unwilling to carry their luggage to the next halt. Once the party would have been stranded had not Torday won over the women when the men refused to help. For lack of friendly informants nearly everything that he wrote of the Lele was gleaned from Bushong sources or confined to what he could observe with his own eyes.³

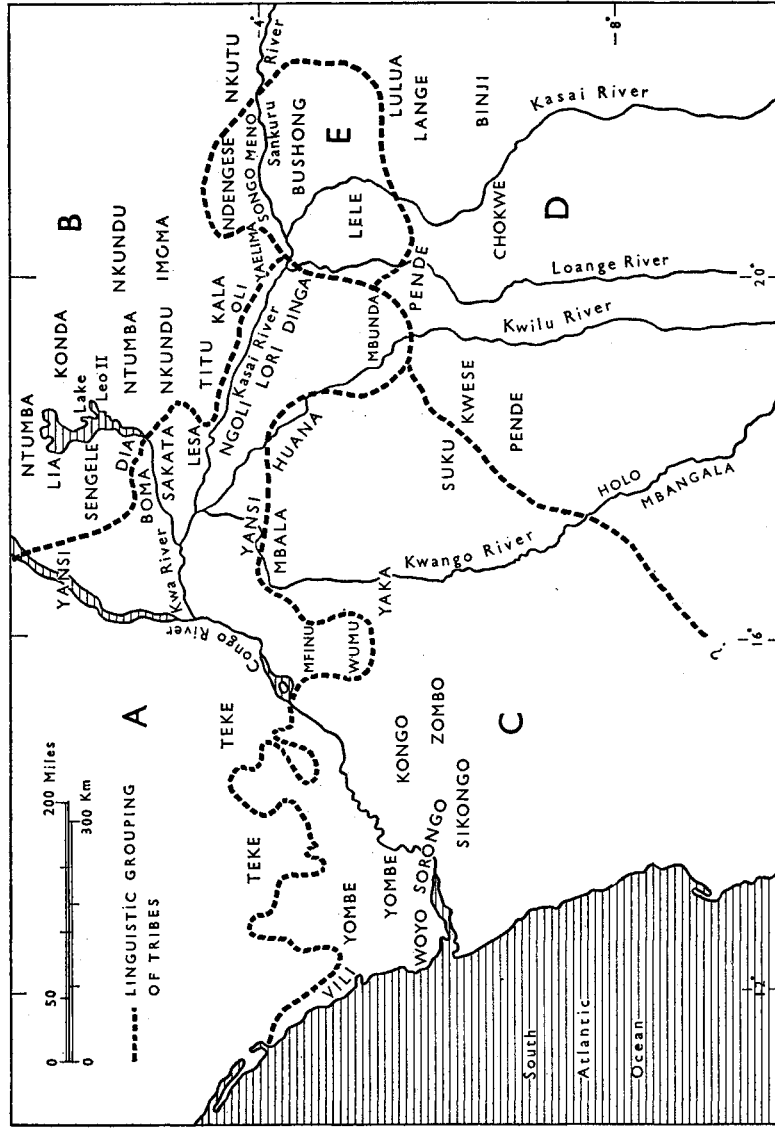
His impression of the Lele as an outpost of Bushong culture, independent and unruly, is accurate. Lele and Bushong and the other members of the group of tribes known by outsiders as Kuba reached their present territory some 250 years ago.⁴ They

¹ 1925, p. 231.

² Simpson, 1911, p. 332.

³ Torday and Joyce, 1910, pp. 16 and 46.

⁴ Vansina, *Zaire*, 1959.



Map. I. Tribal grouping of the South-West Congo

- A Tribes of Teke group to whom Lele are related by tradition which have spread south-east
- B Tribes of Mongo group which have spread south
- C Tribes of Kongo group which have spread north
- D Tribes of Lundagroup which have spread west
- E Lele, Bushong, Ndengese and Songo Mena, classed on linguistic criteria as a separate group

formed the van of a movement of peoples from the north-west (affiliated to the Teke of the République du Congo, formerly French Equatorial Africa) who thrust their way up the Kwa, Kwango, Kwilu and Kasai rivers. The Kuba are the eastern outliers of this movement, and the Lele stand on the southernmost point of their expansion.

To understand the relation of these tribes to other neighbours of the Lele we need a wider perspective of the history of this part of the Congo. Soon after the arrival of the Portuguese in Loanda in 1485, the wholesale export of slaves began to dominate the southern Congo. Petty chiefs and overlords became great emperors, with firearms and visible wealth from their commerce in ivory and slaves. Coastal tribes moved inland, pushing inland tribes farther back, and others undertook long migrations from their homes. The traditions of movement, meeting, fighting and retreating or conquering, give the impression of a vast upheaval, great distances covered and hardships endured. Pende escaping north-eastwards from Angola were met by invasions from the east, offshoots of the Lunda empire. Lunda descendants of the Mwata yamvo on the Lulua river came in the early seventeenth century to carve out new chiefdoms for themselves among the Mbangala, Pende, Holo and Suku tribes immediately south and west of the Lele territory, but they never gained suzerainty over the Kuba. If Professor Vansina is right in his historical calculations, Lele and other Kuba peoples were not in this area at the period of Lunda western expansion.

The Kuba group, to which the Lele belong, seems to have started from somewhere near Lake Tumba and Lake Leopold II, perhaps escaping slave raiders supplying the Stanley pool markets. It moved up the Kasai river, crossed it into the Sankuru-Kasai divide; fragments of the group going up the Loange. The present territory of the Lele was occupied by the descendants of one group which, after crossing the Kasai with them, quarrelled with the Bushong leaders, went south on the right bank, and then re-crossed the Kasai to the left bank, and moved northwards again between the Kasai and Loange rivers. The other members of the original migration, without making this detour, had already settled along the farther banks of the Loange, and remain to this day known as Wongo.

The reversal of direction, from southwards to northwards,

accounts for the Lele current tradition that they came from the south, and for claims of other tribes to have met them near the sources of the Loange.⁵ It is not certain what checked their southward movement. The first impetus of their migration had probably spent its force by the time they reached their present territory, which they found practically uninhabited except for a scattering of Pygmoid Chwa peoples. Lele occupation of their own territory from south to north shows the signs of a steady, peaceful expansion, not of a flight from foe or pest. It seems likely that they merely turned north because southwards they had reached the limits of hospitable territory. South of the sixth parallel forests give way to savannah, and the short dry season to one of four months. The vegetation and climate were therefore unfamiliar to people whose original home was near the equator. As Struyf⁶ says of the movement of Teke tribes:

ayant traversé la grande forêt équatoriale, en venant du Haut-Fleuve, et en remontant le Kasai, ils s'étaient installés dans les forêts, occupant surtout les rives boisées du fleuve et des rivières . . . ils se sont arrêtés là où les rivières coulent dans les plaines . . .

At the end of their migration, Lele and the other Kuba tribes, having retained some of their own traditions and mingled them with those of their neighbours, now form a distinct cultural group, hardly more to be associated with the Teke than with the Mongo or other neighbours. Their languages have to be classed as a distinct linguistic group, which has taken much from its neighbours yet is not classifiable with other languages spoken around them.⁷

Most of the Lele are contained in the area between the Loange, and the great crook formed by the Kasai as it turns from northward to west, until it meets the Loange. Its other tributaries flow northward on the same incline. Lele naturally orientate themselves by the direction of these rivers, referring always to upstream and downstream for north and south. They also base symbolic orientations on them. Since they entered the territory

⁵ According to Haveaux (1954), whose report Vansina criticizes as of doubtful validity, Mbunda and Pende met and repulsed the Lele; according to other accounts, Lele were met, but not defeated in battle: Struyf, 1931: 'Les Bashilele, cette grande race guerrière et indomptable'.

⁶ 1931, p. 668.

⁷ Bryan, 1959, p. 54.

from the south, upstream has all the prestige; downstream or north implies the relatively new inferior aspect. Just as we use an up-down scale of points for our social system, Lele use *tende*, the source of the river, in a sense divorced from the actual flow of the rivers. It can mean the headman's end of the village, the sleeping quarters of the hut, the head of the bed, the brim of a cup, the head of a man.

The Belgian Colonial Administration used the river system for the boundaries of its smaller administrative units, which it was careful to make conform as far as possible with ethnographic regions. As a result the administrative territory of Basongo contained the whole Lele tribe, with the exception of three over-spills, into the territories of Mweka, Idiofa and Oshwe. The few Lele villages in Mweka, living among the Kuba, can hardly be said to be in foreign territory, but the five villages in Oshwe, which crossed the Kasai in about 1909, suffered from frequent clashes with Basongo Meno and Nkutu there. Other Lele lived across the Loange, in the Secteur Bawongo of Idiofa district, with Dinga, Mbunda and Pende for neighbours.

Both these sizeable groups of Lele living outside Basongo territory enjoyed relative freedom from administrative control. Fugitives from justice in Basongo could find asylum there, and many old customs, such as ordeals which were suppressed in the main body of the tribe, were still practised across the rivers. Of the Lele living in Oshwe and Idiofa the Administrator in Basongo reported in 1943:

Ces quelques villages importants, quoique très peu éloignés de Basongo, échappent à son influence et jouissent d'une situation beaucoup plus indépendante par suite des distances qui les separent de l'administration territoriale dont ils dépendent. Il arrive notamment que des jeunes filles des villages du territoire de Basongo soient enlevées par un groupe des Bashilele résidant dans les villages étrangers au territoire. Une action directe n'est pas possible alors que cela se passe presque sous nos yeux. Il s'en suit nécessairement un long échange de correspondance qui s'échelonne sur de longs mois, sans qu'une décision définitive puisse être prise . . .

The Lele were in the habit of trading with their neighbours. Although they exchanged raffia cloth with Nkutu for red camwood and meat, they feared and despised them. They would say that Nkutu neither washed, nor avoided their mothers-in-law,

their women were badly dressed, and their cooking execrable. With the Dinga they traded raffia cloth, palm-rib benches and coffins, for fish. Wissman⁸ admired the Dinga as the most dexterous navigators on the Kasai, but Lele merely despised them. Their word for slave was *ninga* (plural *badinga*), because Lele used to enslave Dinga children. They relished a legend about the first encounter of their ancestor with the Dinga, whose culture they allege was at that time at such a brutal level that they did not even know how to deliver their women in childbirth, but used to cut open the mother and throw away her corpse after having taken out the baby. The Lele, skilled even then in fertility ritual and medicine, were able to teach the Dinga some of these elementary arts of living.

Pende and Mbunda the Lele respected as skilled weavers of raffia cloth and workers of iron. They traded with them too, Lele raffia cloth for iron goods.

Lele were originally known as Wongo. The name of Lele was given to them by the aristocratic clan, called Tundu, whose religious supremacy they accepted when they settled down together in their present territory.⁹ Although the ethnographic maps of Basongo sometimes show three groups, Lele to the right of the Loange, Wongo to the left, and Njembe to the south, all three are in fact branches of Lele. The term Wongo has two uses as Torday found.

Dans le village de Makasu les habitants disaient d'abord qu'ils étaient Bashilele; quand on leur demanda s'ils étaient Bakongo, ils répondirent: 'Certainement; nous sommes des Bashilele-Bakongo.' On leur demanda ensuite: 'Tous les Bakongo sont-ils des Bashilele?' et la réponse fut: 'Non,' mais à la question: 'Tous les Bashilele sont-ils des Bakongo?' ils répondirent: 'Certainement!'¹⁰

Sometimes Wongo is used with only local reference, meaning Lele on the left bank of the Loange, and at other times it has a purely social reference meaning all Lele who are not Tundu, that is, commoners as distinct from the aristocratic clan. A Tundu man will talk about 'Our Wongo' as of our subordinates.

⁸ Wissman, pp. 28-29.

⁹ Wautier, report on the Bashilele, AIMO, 1935. See chap. X, p. 199.

¹⁰ p. 47.