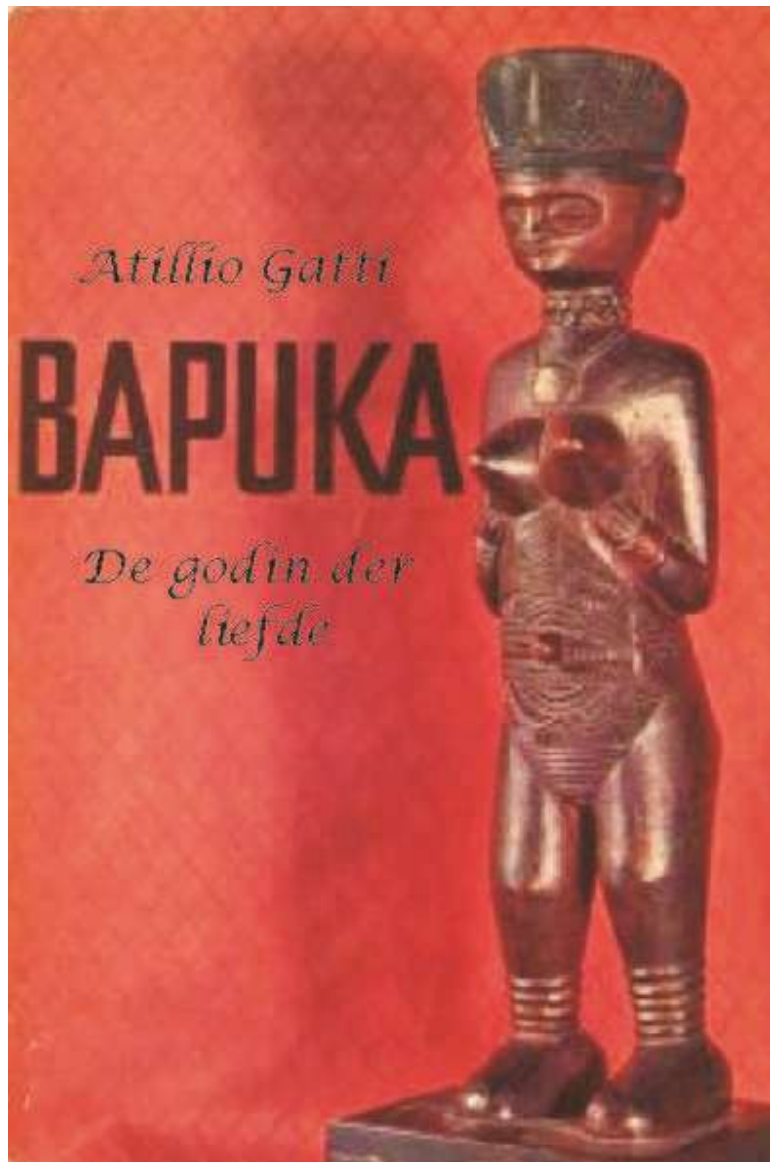


Text 32. Bapuka , the goddess of love



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GATTI, ATTILIO: - Bapuka. Sister. 6 Bde. Zurich, Orell Füssli , 1949, 32 Photos on 10 Tablets / 152 p., The book was summarized and explained below,

With thanks to publisher Orell Füssli who allowed us to publish the image from the book.

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32.1. Preface

Attilio Gatti (1896–1969) was an Italian-born explorer, author, and documentary producer who traveled extensively through Africa in the first half of the 20th century. He was a member of the Royal Italian Society of Geography and Anthropology and was one of the last great discoverers of the continent. He led thirteen expeditions to Africa from 1922 to 1948.



On YouTube, ¹one can watch some of the films he made on his travels. In the 1950s, when the small screen in living rooms was still a rarity, his films about the tribes and the rich flora and fauna of this continent could still count on great interest.

Gatti's wife Ellen accompanied him from his eighth expedition onwards. The tenth expedition (1938-1940) led him through the Belgian Congo, and the eleventh expedition (1947-1948) to the Rwenzori Mountains on the border with Uganda. It must have been an impressive sight for most of the locals, who had never seen a car, when a caravan suddenly drove into their village, consisting of a few passenger cars, large caravans, and trucks, which shortly afterwards set up camp in an open clearing.

Commander Gatti became one of the first Europeans to see the then legendary okapi and also the virtually unknown bongo, a brown lyre-horned antelope with white stripes, and was able to capture a few to donate to a zoo. He was known among the Africans as “ Bwana Makubwa ”, “great chief”, and knew the Pygmy peoples, the Watussi and the Masai tribes of Congo very well.

On his travels, he met, among others, Twadekili , a clairvoyant and magically gifted shaman , who shared her hut and her life with her partner... a giant python. Just as plant energies can heal some diseases, the same applies, and even more strongly, to animal energies, provided one knows how to control them.

The previously skeptical Gatti repeatedly witnessed magical rituals that we consider hardly possible today, and which he faithfully recorded on paper

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bvPff7Zg9Lc>

with the eye and pen of a skeptical yet trained observer. They are—still—rare and valuable testimonies of lost, yet so rich cultures that had defied the centuries until then.

Gatti wrote many articles and books about the indigenous peoples south of the equator; he often knew their languages and had very good contacts with local chiefs and sorcerers. He filmed African life and documented it in a number of films and in more than 53,000 photographs. His testimonies contain valuable scientific and anthropological material of many cultures in their original, still pristine environments. These are cultures that have virtually disappeared after contact with Western European and North American civilization.

We have translated his fascinating book, titled ' Bapuka ', from German, abridged it, retold it in our own words, and provided brief commentary here and there. Gatti, who was residing in the US at the time, wrote it in English. It is curious that it was never published in that language. Possibly, such experiences and descriptions are 'too paranormal' and too suspicious for the 'enlightened' American citizen.

32.2. Bapuka , the goddess of love.

32.2.1. The voyage with the Kigoma

November 1928, Colonel Attilio Gatti and his traveling companions were aboard the “ Kigoma ,” an old, paddle-wheel-propelled steamboat that had once sailed on the Mississippi. In 1907, it had been purchased second-hand by a Belgian company, dismantled, and shipped across the Atlantic Ocean to Matadi in the Belgian Congo. Subsequently, these parts were transported over the Crystal Mountains and reassembled at the shipyards of Leopoldville . With this, the Kigoma became the proud flagship of the Congolese fleet and provided a number of services on the Congo River.



The ship had four decks. The lowest deck was reserved for passengers traveling in Third ^{Class} ; on the deck just above, passengers traveling in Second Class enjoyed a little more comfort; and the deck above that was exclusively reserved for First Class passengers. The fourth deck was much shorter and built on the bow. There lived the Belgian captain, a broad-shouldered Fleming, with his native wife. From there, he followed the ship's course on his many charts, wrestled with an endless series of official documents, and also kept an eye on whether his native helmsman was doing his job properly.

It was still early afternoon. The tropical sun burned mercilessly. Gatti was on the deck of first class and wondered if he wouldn't be much better off taking his usual nap in his cabin, instead of walking around here with his camera hoping to take some nice photos of the many crocodiles and hippos sliding into the water from the sandbanks.

32.2.2. “ Parle , sale cochon !”

Suddenly, his attention was drawn by some commotion coming from the lowest deck, that of the third-class travelers. They were crammed into too small a space. A small, old white man seemed to be getting particularly angry with one of his two boys. Gatti remembered that this man had sailed to the Kigoma the day before in a rowboat from a tributary with a great deal of luggage, including wooden crates that were now stacked on the stern.

This small, roaring man seemed to have lost all self-control. He could be heard cursing and ranting. What had happened? A number of these crates had fallen over due to the rocking of the boat, the lids of a few had come loose, and to the general amusement of the passengers, several bottles of beer were rolling back and forth on the ship while his boys tried to prevent them from rolling into the water. The man, however, had not understood it that way. He

was boiling with rage and gave both his boys a piece of his mind: "If you drop even one bottle into the water, I will break the bones in your body."

Adding weight to his words, he drew a whip. It was heard cracking against the naked back of one of the boys, followed by a soft but repulsive groan. The merciless flogging continued for a moment. Then, hoarse with rage, he cried out: " Speak , you dirty pig !"

All the travelers were deeply shocked. The commotion had also attracted the captain's attention. He had suddenly appeared on the lower deck, immediately grabbed the old man by the collar, and told him threateningly that he had to behave himself, that he had to go to his cabin immediately and stay there until he was given permission to leave. However, that was not at all to this old Frenchman's liking. " Speak , you dirty pig !" he shouted again to one of his boys. And again the whip snapped on the boy's naked back, again a soft moan was heard. This time it had become too much for the poor boy.

32.2.3. "Captain! Man overboard!"

Completely naked and covered in sweat and blood, he walked to the edge of the boat and jumped into the river, which was teeming with crocodiles. Gatti , still holding his camera, instinctively pressed the shutter, shouted as loud as he could, "Captain! Man overboard!" and ran lightning-fast to his cabin, from which he emerged a few seconds later, his rifle ready to shoot.



He saw the poor black boy desperately fighting against the current, but also saw how two crocodiles were already swimming towards him. Without hesitation, Gatti fired twice at one animal, quickly reloaded his rifle, and then killed the other. Again he called out to the captain: "Stop the Kigoma , the current is too strong for the boy." The boat came to a halt. A native man on the lower deck suddenly gave an order, and several natives jumped into the water without hesitation and swam to the place where the boy's bald head had

last been seen. Just in time, they managed to grab him, and a moment later the semi-conscious body, bleeding from the chest and back, was hoisted aboard.

Shortly afterwards, a fierce fight broke out further out in the water. Deprived of their human prey, other crocodiles began to devour their two slain comrades in violent, thrashing, and twisting movements.

32.2.4. Gatti saves Skaimunga

The black boy recovered somewhat from his desperate jump into the water. When he saw Gatti afterwards, he greeted him respectfully. He said his name was Skaimunga, a rather unusual name for someone traveling around the Congo. His gratitude towards Gatti was particularly great. Indeed, he said that his life now belonged to his white savior, and that the latter could dispose of it at his own discretion, Skaimunga added. He even said that he would very much like to work for the white man from the moment his debt to his current boss, the Frenchman, was fully paid off.

Gatti asked Skaimunga how it was possible that he owed money to his employer; after all, he was the one working for that old man and therefore should be earning a wage. Skaimunga withheld an answer from him. He had been working for that Frenchman for years and, he explained, had never received a real wage, real money, but only some worthless junk, occasionally a bit of tobacco, now a blanket, then a cheap shirt or a pair of old shorts. Moreover, the man threatened to hand Skaimunga over to the police if he left him before all his debts were paid off. In short, it quickly became clear to everyone that the Frenchman was using and mistreating both boys as slaves.

Gatti remained particularly fascinated by the honest answers of this young boy. Who was this Skaimunga, really? Where did he come from? Why did he look so different with his shaved head from every other inhabitant of the Belgian Congo known to him? And what did those peculiar, strange tattoos on his body mean? How did such an upright boy end up as a slave with such a brutal master? When Gatti asked the boy for more explanation, he answered each time: "I don't know! I just don't know." Gatti thought he was about 25 years old. Skaimunga himself did not know, nor did he know where he was born, nor who his parents were or to which tribe he belonged. He also did not know who had applied those tattoos to his body or what they meant. He did not know when and how he entered the service of his so brutal master...

Nor did he understand why his master, who was regularly drunk, would shout at him: “ Speak , you dirty pig !” What did this man actually want to find out from him? And why did that man beat him so cruelly? “Tell me where I can find that gold, the silver, and the diamonds of your tribe. Speak, you filthy pig!” the Frenchman would roar. And while doing so, he lashed Skaimunga with the whip . But what could the young black man answer? Ivory, he knew that, but gold, silver, diamonds, emeralds? What were those? Convinced that Skaimunga belonged to one rich tribe or another but deliberately refused to say so, and fearing that other gold prospectors might suspect this as well, the Frenchman had perhaps shaved him bald for that very reason. For the distinctive way in which this boy wore his hair could betray to others where he belonged. “But,” Gatti asked Skaimunga , “can’t you at least tell me where your father’s land is? And how you left it?”

At Gatti's insistence that he finally tell something about his tribe's dwelling place, Skaimunga replied simply: “That is where I was born,” pointing to the southwest, “Far, far away from here. The only thing I still vaguely remember is the lament of many women, angry men in long white clothes who had come to our village, the rattling of chains, the taste of bitter tears. They killed my mother when I was still very small. I still remember her cold and stiff body. The rough hand that pulled me from her arms and beat me until I was unconscious. I swear that this is the truth, I swear it by the holy name of Bapuka .”

“ Bapuka .” The strange word had been spoken. That name meant nothing to Gatti , absolutely nothing. But he became increasingly fascinated by this rather peculiar boy.

32.2.5. All the blessings of Bapuka

When the captain considered handing the whole matter over to the police in Leopoldville , Gatti, in a sudden impulse, asked if he himself could take Skaimunga under his care. The captain thought for a moment and replied that the boy would have to want to do so himself, and that Gatti would then have to come to an arrangement with the Frenchman. Skaimunga could not believe his ears. Of course, that was what he wanted more than anything. Of course, he wanted to work for his rescuer. And as for the debt to his employer: it amounted to at most a single dollar. Gatti did not hesitate for a moment and placed this money in the hands of the Frenchman. As if the latter did not understand what was happening, he tore the banknote into pieces, threw them on the ground, and spat on them, without saying another word.

Gatti promised Skaimunga that he would buy blankets and decent clothes at the first opportunity, and also instructed the ship's cook to prepare a good meal for his protégé. Finally, he advised the boy to simply forget that bad man and everything he had done, and to get some good rest. "I will rest and forget," Skaimunga agreed. "Then I will become strong again and I will be happy to work for you. For you are not only my good master, but with what you have done, you have also been like a father to me, and may all the blessings of Bapuka accompany you."

"Bapuka," Gatti repeated to himself. "Bapuka." It was the second time Skaimunga had let that name slip. Perhaps it refers to a spirit or some kind of god of the forest, he thought. The siren of the Kigoma wailed three times. The ship set in motion again.

Two days later, the Kigoma docked at Leopoldville. It became a busy time for Gatti and his helpers. All his equipment had to be unloaded, the paperwork with the authorities had to be settled, and he searched for his twenty helpers, who had accompanied him on his earlier voyages and whom he hoped to recruit again here. After a few more hectic days, he had distributed clothes and blankets to each of his helpers and his boys and explained to them what their task would be during the entire expedition to Chitadi, Kanda, Bukama, Elizabethville, and finally to the Rhodan border.

The authorities had told Gatti that the road was somewhat difficult to drive on, but it soon became apparent that a number of sections of that road simply did not exist, and they had to steer their car caravan between steep mountains, through streams—there simply were no bridges—through pristine jungle and treacherous areas of sand, rocks, and mud. The suspension of the many heavily laden vehicles suffered greatly, breaking down here and there and having to be replaced; cars got stuck and had to be pulled out. Trucks sank into the mud and had to be completely unloaded before they could be pushed back onto safe ground. "When we finally reached Sakania, the border between the southernmost province of Belgian Congo and the northernmost province of Northern Rhodesia" (note: present-day Zambia), Gatti recounts, "I was a terribly exhausted wreck. His four companions and the Africans were no better off. Therefore, the moment they had smuggled all our equipment through customs, he decided to set up camp near the town of Ndola. Upon arrival, they stayed for about ten days to rest a bit before starting their new safari."

And there he had the time again to reflect on Skaimunga . The assignment Gatti had given him as soon as they left Leopoldville was to provide the entire camp with sufficient fresh meat. For someone so familiar with nature, this seemed to him a better task than putting Skaimunga to work in some tent. And he had demonstrated that he carried out his assignment with exceptional conscientiousness, complete reliability, and more than satisfactorily. Not only did he manage to provide the entire camp with sufficient meat—an antelope, a few gazelles, or a fat warthog—in places where a normal person would expect to find no game at all, but he also found time to help build bridges, push cars out of the ditches, and unload or load trucks.

32.2.6. Bapuka helps the righteous man .

One day, when Gatti had just woken from his afternoon nap, Skaimunga suddenly stood before him with three beautiful guinea fowl in each hand. “These are especially for my father and his white friends,” he said. He looked exhausted and was covered in mud, sweat, and scratches. But his eyes shone like those of a loyal dog that had just achieved something its master is proud of. Gatti estimated that he had traveled a longer distance to catch these guinea fowl than the entire convoy could cover in a full day, for in the region where they were, there was hardly any game to be seen. Skaimunga unintentionally made a particularly strong impression on Gatti . He had hardly any clothes, was primitive, poor, and apparently very alone in the world, yet repeatedly displayed an unusual, sincere, and deep appreciation for his new employer. “Nothing I can do for my father is too much,” he replied with his usual modesty, “and Bapuka always helps the righteous man who trusts in her.” There went that so mysterious name again, now for the third time.

Gatti thought for a moment; the expression “the righteous man” sounded somewhat familiar to him after all. And as if by a sudden inspiration, he said a moment later: “ Skaimunga , the tribe of the Baila and the Mashukolumbwe , near the place where the Kafue flows into the Zambezi River, are the only ones who call themselves ‘the righteous men.’ They worship a goddess whom they call Bapugha . Could it be that your Bapuka is the same? Perhaps then you are also a Baila or a Mashukolumbwe ?” Perhaps in a few days we will be in Kafue and you will finally reach where you truly belong, and we can leave you there.

Skaimunga ’s liking . He continued to stare ahead in silence for a while, as if he were investigating his deepest being. Then he said slowly and measuredly: “No, Musungu , I do not know the Bbaila , nor the Mashukolumbwe . And the goddess who speaks to me is not that of the

Bapugha or the Baila . Her name is Bapuka . I am certain of that. My mother often spoke of her when I was still a small child.” As he did so, he pointed in the direction of the setting sun and said decisively, yet with a certain longing: “There, far away, there I was born.”

Gatti wanted to help him so badly , but he didn't know how. Then he asked: “Perhaps you would rather continue alone to search for the place where you were born? If you really want that, I will give you food and money, along with a letter for all the white musungus you will meet on your way, in which I ask them to help you.” “No, Musungu ,” answered Skaimunga in a confident tone. “ Bapuka wanted your path to cross mine. She told me that we still have a long way to go together. Only when she says that our paths must separate again, only then must we leave each other.” “How does she speak to you then?” Gatti pressed . “In my dreams,” he answered somewhat hesitantly, as if he suspected some disbelief on Gatti’s part . He paused for a moment and then continued somewhat hesitantly: “It is difficult to talk about such things with white musungus .”

When Gatti returned to his staff a little later, he brought up the subject again. “ Skaimunga always points south,” he said; “but on the map, only a large white spot appears. It is an unknown area. Natives say there is nothing to be found there. There are only dangerous and impenetrable swamps that certainly extend to the border with Portuguese Angola, and perhaps even further. Everyone who ventured there had to turn back, and nothing has ever been heard of a number of others. No one knows what happened to them.”

32.2.7. A new itinerary

The whole subject continued to haunt Gatti . He pondered, lay awake at night, and discussed the matter with his staff again and again. Eventually, contrary to their earlier plans, they decided to send the entire caravan south after all, through a stretch of unknown territory, to subsequently reach Natal via Transvaal and Swaziland. It was no easy decision: how do you get through a swampy region without roads with a heavily laden car caravan and campervans, to then continue the journey across the inhospitable Kawandi and Mankoya plateaus of Barotseland , to the lowlands of the Zambezi River? There, they intended to reach the town of Lealui . It was the official residence of Yeta III, the then King of the Barotse . Gatti had already met him on a previous trip. And Gatti thought that he was the only man who might be able to help them on their further voyage of discovery.

He further hoped that Skaimunga would be very pleased with the change of travel route. But that did not seem to be the case at all. It even appeared that Skaimunga Gatti tried to avoid him. Perhaps he was afraid that he would be asked too many and too difficult questions, just as he had not understood those hated questions from the little Frenchman about emeralds and diamonds. Gatti decided to leave Skaimunga alone for a while. This boy, moreover, did his work excellently. As soon as the caravan had halted somewhere, he was seen leaving with his spear, bow, and arrows in hand. And not much later he returned, laden with game for the entire camp.

The journey continued towards Laelui , the indigenous capital of Barotseland . This was not easy. The low, more or less flat floor of the Barotse Valley was almost entirely underwater. It became an arduous task to guide the wagons along and even through the many deep puddles. Regularly, a truck would get stuck, requiring another wagon to pull it free, if the latter did not get into trouble itself in the process. During the first day on the flooded plain, the caravan had covered a distance of only 22 km in 14 hours. On the second day, they advanced a paltry 9.5 km.

Eventually, they managed to reach the village of Lealui . There, they were hospitably received by King Yeta and some of his courtiers and sorcerers. Hundreds of warriors emerged from their huts, gathered around the travelers, and raised their spears high to welcome them. Just imagine it: a number of “walking huts,” a motorcade in 1928, suddenly appearing in these desolate places before a people barely aware of the existence of a car. It must have been particularly impressive.



The cheerful welcome, however, quickly turned into astonishment and even a charged silence when Gatti asked for their help to sail down the Zambezi River with their canoes and rowers. Gatti wanted to reach the confluence of the Zambezi and the Lungwebungu to then sail up the Lutembwe through the many dangerous swamps .

He attempted to relax the atmosphere somewhat by giving a number of gifts to the king and his elders, making it clear that the king received them entirely selflessly and that he did not have to give anything in return.

Yeta responded to this with restrained gratitude. He then said that his tribe intended to honor all his visitors with a grand dance that very evening, as soon as the rain stopped. Immediately thereafter, he also gave some of his staff an order in a strange language, whereupon they departed immediately. Gatti wondered what that might mean. A moment later, he gave his staff the necessary instructions to park the vehicles neatly, set up the camp, and erect the tents. Quite by chance, he saw two large boats—they appeared to him to be state vessels—leaving the foot of the hill at top speed in a southeasterly direction. “Where are those canoes going?” he asked the king. “And why such a hurry?” Yeti, however, did not wish to answer this.

That evening, when the rain had stopped, the tribe performed the promised welcoming dance, followed by an exchange of elaborate courtesies and gifts. The king’s gifts included a few giggling young women who wanted to offer their services but were politely refused by Gatti . Furthermore, they received firewood, milk, goats, and chickens, which were gratefully accepted. As the festivities drew to a close, Gatti did not yet know why the two boats had set sail. However, this became particularly clear to him late that evening, for suddenly he heard someone approaching behind him who said in English and with a cultivated British voice: “We want you to abandon your journey through the great swamps.”

Now it was clear to Gatti where Yeta had sent the two canoes in such haste: to Mongu . The canoes had traveled a distance of 7 miles across the flooded plains to fetch the only man who could persuade him to abandon their travel plans: the provincial commissioner of Barotseland . “In the past two years,” he began, “seven white men have gone into the swamps to dig for mineral resources, to hunt, or to conclude trade agreements with the natives. A few weeks later they were back again: sick. They died one by one of a fever unknown to us. None of our doctors could cure them. Others also went in that

direction, but they never returned, and no one has ever heard of them again. That is why we decided to close this area to whites.



32.2.8. Up to Semusha , no further!

That was, of course, difficult for Gatti and his team to hear. Weren't he and his team explorers? Didn't he have the most suitable equipment and the best-trained white men for this? Wasn't there a doctor in his group? And getting the opportunity to mark a white spot on the map—surely that was an important goal of the voyage. Gatti proposed that he sign a declaration in which the provincial commissioner was relieved of all responsibility in advance and the government cleared of all blame in case anything should happen to Gatti and his team. The commissioner thought for a moment. He also felt that there was something to be said for Gatti 's arguments , but he certainly did not want to drive them to their deaths. Finally, he said: “If you promise not to go further than Semusha , I will allow you and the oarsmen you need to go that far. Then I will even give you all the help you need.”

To Gatti, that proposal seemed Better than nothing at all, and so he accepted the offer. “You have our word that we will not go further than Semusha ,” he promised. “Not as long as you hold this position,” he added softly. With this final quip, he wanted to hide his disappointment somewhat. “I will hold you to your promise,” replied the commissioner, “but know that I will hold this position for a number of years to come.” “I am sending you my helpers tonight,” he concluded, “in the same canoe that is taking me back to Mongu now .”



Gatti considered what was possible, who would go along in the canoes and who would stay in the camp. It was clear that the journey was impossible by car. The vehicles had already suffered so much over the past few days on the very difficult route that a great deal of inspection and repairs were required. He assumed that this would easily require two weeks before everything was back in proper order. Furthermore, so much material had already been collected for the trip that they did not want to run the risk of much of their already collected material being damaged by the high humidity prevailing in the swamps. There were also the many films that had captured the life of many tribes, and the more than ten thousand negatives that also had to survive the journey undamaged.

On the other hand, he estimated that the journey by canoe to Semusha could also take two weeks. So that worked out well. Gatti, Skaimunga, and twelve oarsmen designated by King Yeta would take their places in one canoe; the camp doctor and someone designated by the commissioner would take their places in a second canoe with twelve other oarsmen. Finally, a third canoe, the largest of the three, was manned by fourteen oarsmen and contained the luggage and food supplies. And the other members of the expedition could occupy themselves with inspecting and repairing the wagons. All the necessary preparations were made, and on February 1, the canoes departed for a journey of 75 miles on the Zambezi and then another 50 miles or so on the Lutembwe, towards Semusha.

32.2.9. A terrible journey

Gatti noted in his diary that he had seen nothing but water all day: the water of the river and the water from the persistent rain. They were soaking wet, right down to their skin, and were plagued by swarms of mosquitoes all day long. On February 3, 4, 5, and 6, too, that was the only thing that could be recorded about their journey. On February 7, the weather was hardly any different, but Gatti added to his diary that all his muscles seemed cramped because he had to sit in the same position in the canoe the whole time. A

hippopotamus had also swum under the canoe in which the doctor was sitting, and had capsized the small boat with everything and everyone on board. Fatigue, cold, and soaked clothes caused the doctor to become seriously ill. Gatti mentions that the man had a fever of over 41 degrees. He could not say exactly how much, because that was the maximum the thermometer could indicate.

That afternoon, at 4 p.m., they reached a small settlement called Noyo , where they could catch their breath in the village. The village chief knew of their arrival, although Gatti did not understand that he was aware of it. He had heard no drums at all along the way that could have announced their journey, and not a single native had been seen en route. The village chief made a rather large and high hut available to them, where they took up residence. Gatti, too , had begun to suffer under the fatigues of the journey. His diary mentions on February 10 that he barely remembered what had happened after their arrival in Noyo . He, too, had developed a high fever and had become delirious.

It turned out to be a special kind of swamp fever. There was a regularity to it. For three days, one suffered from insanely high delirium fever; over the next three days, this subsided, but one felt incredibly tired; then followed three days during which one felt relatively well again, after which the whole cycle began anew, with the danger of becoming weaker each time. The only one who performed many tasks tirelessly and with great dedication was Skaimunga . He proved to be immune to this peculiar fever.

When Gatti and the doctor had recovered somewhat, Skaimunga assured Gatti told them they had to continue on to Semusha . Eventually, that place was reached on February 14. It seemed to be nothing more than a small, pathetic village inhabited by unfriendly natives. Almost every traveler was exhausted and sick; they had had to defend themselves against crocodiles, hippos, leopards, and snakes. The persistent rain, for days on end, also made everyone particularly despondent. As if all that were not enough, twenty-two of the thirty-eight rowers became so feverish that they died. Most were in one stage or another of this swamp fever, while others were so exhausted they could barely do anything. "We could now completely forget about our journey on the water being completed in two weeks," Gatti thought .

"Tonight," his diary records on March 5, "the chief of Semusha came to tell me that the distant grapevine had told him that the provincial commissioner was very ill, and that everyone was worried about us and asked

us to return immediately. The chief, in turn, had made our situation known and asked for reinforcements to pick us up. He promptly received the reply that a large canoe had left a week ago, but that hippos had capsized it, devouring all those on board, and that no one dared to come and help them anymore.” The chief urged Gatti to leave the sick rowers behind with him and to set off on the return journey with only one canoe. Only a single man remained healthy and active the entire time, and, totally unexpectedly and in a very remarkable way, came to play a vital role in their existence: Skaimunga . But we are not there yet.

32.2.10. A haunting dream

For the next six days, Gatti was too ill to write even a single word in his diary. The cycles of malaria had so exhausted him and the doctor that they almost constantly slipped into a coma. When Gatti awoke on March 13, he finally felt a little better. The doctor also seemed fever-free. But there was something very strange going on with him. With an unusual look in his eyes, he looked intently at Gatti and said: “I had a dream. Let’s go.” “Let’s go where?” Gatti asked in astonishment. “To the place I saw in my dream,” he said impatiently. “It is on this hill, only four hundred meters from here. On granite stones stand beautiful centuries-old paintings of Bushmen. Let’s go there.” “Are you out of your mind?” Gatti blurted out in surprise. “You, who with incessant skepticism have never truly believed in anything, you are now suddenly mistaking your dream for reality.” “Yes, it is real,” assured the doctor, “I know it sounds strange, but what I saw in my dream really exists.”

The village chief happened to arrive there.

“You know,” said the doctor, “I’ll tell him.”

“Hey, Village Chief,” he called, “can you take us to those large granite stones on the other side of this hill, where you find very old images of people hunting animals.”



The village chief's mouth fell open in amazement. “Not a single Musungu knows about this,” he said, “and everyone in the tribe avoids this place too.

Our ancestors told us that evil spirits reside there, and no white man has ever gotten that far. How can the white man speak as if he has already seen that place? And if so, why does he need me as a guide?"

Gatti could barely conceal his astonishment at the village chief's answer. What a curious coincidence. He quickly composed himself, and to avoid the doctor confusing the village chief even more, he said: "Know, the white doctor was never really there, but the spirits of his ancestors told him all this last night in a dream."

This explanation seemed much more understandable to the village chief; he sighed with relief. "If Musungu's ancestors went to so much trouble to tell him all that," the village chief continued, "then surely they will protect him when he goes to the big stones." And he went to tell the news to his entire tribe. The effect of this was not long in coming. The initial surprise turned into general joy. Perhaps the evil spirits residing there are not as powerful as Musungu's ancestors after all, they surmised. And now the whole village wanted to go there.

32.2.11. Ancient rock paintings

"Good," Gatti decided, "let's go take a look; four hundred meters isn't that far." And everyone followed him. And indeed, the granite stones were exactly as the doctor had described, but there were no images to be seen on them at all. "I am sure they must be there," lamented the doctor, and he began to remove the grass that partially covered the stones with his bare hands. When no drawings appeared yet, he even began to remove the earth that partially covered the stones. And sure enough, in less than ten minutes the first drawings came to light, and as he continued to excavate those stones, even more revealed themselves. A horned antelope was clearly recognizable, as well as a man who had just shot an arrow from his bow. They were astonishingly realistic.

"That is exactly what I saw in my dream," said an overenthusiastic doctor. And a moment later, he found the image of seven other antelopes and three hunters. Furthermore, a palm tree was depicted, a tree that has been extinct in this area for thousands of years. Gatti took photographs of all these wondrous drawings.

In the south of Rhodesia (note: now Zimbabwe), such ancient rock paintings are not uncommon, but in the north, the outside world knew

absolutely nothing of their existence, and they are to date the first and only rock paintings uncovered in the north of Rhodesia.

Towards nightfall, when the great enthusiasm regarding this discovery had subsided somewhat, Gatti and the doctor began to feel the fatigue of the past few days' exertions returning. Skaimunga came to tell him that it was high time Gatti went to bed. The swamp fever began a new cycle that day, March 14. Shortly afterwards, Gatti fell into a nearly fatal sleep.

The sun was already high in the sky when he opened his eyes again with some difficulty. He knew he had been delirious, but had lost all sense of time. He saw Skaimunga enter the tent, go to the calendar, and tear off a page. Gatti had taught him to do this every day. To his surprise, he saw that the calendar showed March 19. He tried to think: 19, 18, 17, 16, 15, 14... So it had been five days since Skaimunga had insisted that he go to bed.

“ Sakimunga ,” asked Gatti in a weakened voice, “where is the other Musungu , the doctor?” “In his tent,” answered the boy. “But he is still so sick that his spirit still hasn’t stopped speaking through his mouth. The rowers are all very sick too.” The doctor still has delirious fevers, Gatti understood , and he wondered, tormented, whether they would survive all this and whether discovering such ancient rock paintings was worth all those hardships.

32.2.12. Bapuka speaks.

Skaimunga continued to look at Gatti somewhat hesitantly , seemed to hesitate for a moment, and then suddenly said: “ Musungu , I had a dream last night. During our entire journey to Lealui , I desperately tried to hear that distant voice. But the ears of my mind were not quiet enough. There was a great deal of work, there were too many sick people to be cared for, and that distant voice became so weak that I could no longer hear it. But yesterday, late in the evening, when it was particularly quiet throughout the camp, I heard Bapuka ’s voice again. Before I went to sleep, I thought of her very intensely, and my most fervent wish was that you would be well again. And sure enough, a short time later I heard it very clearly. She spoke about you and the other Musungu . She said that to save your own life and that of the doctor and your rowers, you must come with me, both of us, and all alone in a small canoe, for a journey of two suns. We must leave today.”

Gatti had some difficulty realizing what Skaimunga had told him. Should he really take those words seriously? In his miserable condition and on the

verge of delirium, should he really sit in a canoe for two days, leave his weakened helpers all alone for the sake of a mere dream, and therefore embark on a journey into the unknown? Any sensible person would tell him that this is a completely idiotic undertaking from which he will almost certainly not return.

On the other hand, what were the options? Everyone was sick and growing weaker by the day. It was impossible to continue the journey like this. Nor was it just anyone who came trotting up with a story that seemed so idiotic at first glance. It was Skaimunga . Could you simply ignore his advice? Even though it seemed like a desperate last chance, Gatti felt he had to act on it.

It seemed to him the best thing he could do to save his people. He further remembered his promise to the provincial commissioner not to go further than Semusha . But Skaimunga told him that he could go without breaking his word. The drums that had woken him had told him that the White Man of the government had died of swamp fever the previous evening in the small hospital in Mongu .

Gatti found this particularly difficult. The man had warned him so many times about the many dangers. On the other hand, he felt liberated from his promise, and the death of the white man also made clear what fate his helpers might well face if Gatti were to resign himself to his situation and take no further action. Suddenly, he saw the whole situation clearly, struggled to get out of bed, and began to get ready for the journey.

32.2.13. I don't know where to, Musungu .

“Where did Bapuka say we have to sail?” Gatti asked Skaimunga , “And what are we supposed to do there if I can barely stand on my legs?” “I don’t know, Musungu ,” answered Skaimunga . “But we have to go in that direction.” And he pointed to the west again.

“That is the strangest story I have ever heard!” mumbled Gatti , “but let’s go to the canoes.” “Everything is ready,” said Skaimunga , “this way, Musungu .” Gatti stepped laboriously to the river, supported by his best boy.

The canoe was small, but there was enough room for one of Gatti's folding chairs, which Skaimunga had securely fastened to the boat with ropes. He had also placed a large sail over the canoe so that they could protect themselves from that miserable rain. Furthermore, the boat was stocked with

plenty of food, and in the middle of it, a sturdy clay bowl had been placed, in which Skaimunga had lit a small fire so that they could both warm themselves up a little.

Gatti sat down on his chair and looked around for a moment. "Where is your spear and where is my rifle?" he asked. "He who looks forward to life," answered Skaimunga, "cannot simultaneously carry the weapons of death." He gave the canoe a push and stepped in carefully. The boat glided gently into the river.

Skaimunga paddled the whole time, and the boat glided gently further into the water. The monotonous splattering of raindrops on the sail, the profound fatigue, and the comforting warmth of the fire caused Gatti to sink into a deep, peaceful sleep quite quickly. When he opened his eyes again the next day, it was already late afternoon. The rain had stopped, and the sun, like a still-misty, faint ball, cautiously peeked through the misty clouds. "Musungu," Skaimunga broke the monotonous paddling, "we are close."

"Close to what?" asked Gatti

Close to the place where Bapuka leads us.

It was remarkable how Skaimunga could be so certain of his direction, Gatti wondered. Repeatedly, his boat was forced to deviate from his course to avoid crocodiles or whole piles of floating branches. Moreover, the swamp was littered with small floating islands that he had to steer around time.

"Look, Musungu!" he whispered. "Look, there, just under the sun."

Gatti saw something like a wavy horizon in the distance, who apparently indicated that there must be solid ground over there.

32.2.14. Smoke rises from many Huts

"Smoke," said Skaimunga excitedly. "Smoke is rising from many huts."

Gatti didn't immediately see the smoke, but if it really was there, it perhaps meant that people must be living there.

"Musungu," continued Skaimunga, "raise your hands to show that you are not armed."

Gatti did what his boy asked him. Skaimunga did the same. Both saw the smoke rising from behind the huts. But there was still no sign of the inhabitants.

Gatti's companion shouted as loud as he could, "I am Skaimungaaa! I am here with my Musungu, just as Bapuka wants!" No one responded. Skaimunga paddled a little further, to a place where a few canoes lay moored against the bank.

Then his call was suddenly answered: "Only those who do as they are asked can moor here safely." And there came a tall old man walking slowly. There was something solemn about him. On his head he wore a crown of scarlet feathers. He looked at the two of them searchingly. "Welcome, Musungu ," he continued. "You were expected." And he cast a thoughtful, somewhat curious, yet oh so endearing glance at Skaimunga .

"This is Skaimunga ," Gatti began when both had stepped out of the canoe. "He is a very good man and a faithful helper in whom no evil is hidden at all." With a deeply gentle smile, the man replied: "I am thoroughly convinced of that." And he continued: "Of the subjects of Bapuka , I am her highest servant." Gatti concluded from this that he must be a kind of high priest or powerful sorcerer. Now other villagers also came forward, men, women, and children. And curiously, some women had painted their faces white.



"Without knowing it," the man continued, "you, white man, have healed Bapuka's wounds." And even though Gatti had not yet spoken to him about his situation and that of his sick fellow men, the man continued nonetheless: "I will cure your illness and that of your traveling companions. As soon as you have regained your strength, you must leave again to help them. For those who have received Bapuka's antidote are thereafter cured of the swamp fever forever."

Then he gave an order to three of his subjects that Gatti did not understand. When he looked at them more closely, he noticed that they had rings in their ears, almost like the one Skaimunga wore, only they were much larger. The way they styled their hair also resembled that of Skaimunga .

The wizard asked if Gatti and Sakimunga wanted him. follow and he led them to the narrow entrance of a cave. It took a moment for their eyes to adjust to the darkness. A dim light fell through a small opening in the rocks. Gatti and Skaimunga now saw that they were in a circular space that was about 15 meters wide and high. In the center stood a statue as much as 3.5 meters tall. The three men who had received an assignment were also there. They stoked a fire that was burning softly just in front of the statue, which was now illuminated much better. Gatti and Skaimunga could behold it in all its splendor: it was a primitive but impressive piece of woodcarving. Softly, with a lump in his throat, Skaimunga whispered : “ Musungu , that is Bapuka . That is how I always saw them in my dreams.” It was as if he wanted to say more, but he could not find the words. It seemed as if, in mere seconds, he saw his entire difficult young life flash before his eyes and understood that his trials were now finally over. He fought back tears for a moment, slowly composed himself, took a few deep breaths, and continued to gaze at the statue for quite some time with an indescribable awe.

Gatti, too, was quite shaken. He could hardly believe his eyes. He had never heard that the inhabitants of this part of Africa worshipped such a goddess and that they could depict her in such a large and magnificent work of art.

It was the sorcerer who was the first to break the silence. “ Musungu ,” he began in a deep voice, “ten times ten full moons have passed three times since the day that Arab slave traders came here with the old Barotse king and claimed to be our friends. But their hearts were false, full of wickedness and cunning. They came to kill our women, to abduct our children and men and sell them as slaves. Then we swore that we would kill anyone who ever dares to approach our village again.”

32.2.15. Bapuka also sent me dreams

As if by inspiration, Gatti suddenly heard himself say: “I swear that I will never bring others here.” “That is also Bapuka’s wish,” the sorcerer affirmed. And with a voice that betrayed deep emotion, he repeated: “Ten times ten moons have passed three times. That is how long it has been since my old father was killed by the wicked men. And when I defended my only son, they almost killed me. But they did not succeed. Bapuka , the goddess of love and of life, healed me.” He paused for a moment.

Tears rolled down his cheeks. “And she promised me that my only son, who had been abducted along with my wounded wife, would be returned to

me one day. And Musungu , Bapuka also sent me dreams. The night before this day, I saw a friendly, unarmed man arrive, accompanied by an unarmed young black man. Musungu , Bapuka cannot be mistaken. You are the white man. All her blessings will protect you, for without you suspecting it, you have healed her wound, mine, and that of my son ; look, you have brought back my lost son.” He waited a short time and continued: “I must teach him the old secrets, the magical powers of Bapuka’s worship, so that he can serve her after my death. Just as my father did. And his father’s father. And a long, long line of our ancestors before him.”

Then he held his son tightly and continued: “Now he is no longer Skaimunga , but his name becomes Ingulu . Look!” And with a slightly trembling hand, he pointed to the tattoos applied to his son’s body—exactly the same tattoos that also adorned Bapuka ’s wooden statue . “I applied them myself to my son’s skin when he was six months old.”

“ Ingulu ,” Gatti repeated quietly to himself, “in their language it perhaps means he who is reborn. It is good that his tribesmen call their returned son that. But I have known him as Skaimunga for so long , and it is that name that evokes so many memories for me. To me, he remains Skaimunga .”

32.2.16. A small pile of light green dry leaves

“He missed his son for three times ten times ten moons or three hundred moons,” thought Gatti , “That adds up to about 24 or 25 years ago. Rhodesia was at that time, around the turn of the century, still a completely wild land where the law of the strongest prevailed and slaves were still traded as commodities.”

A little later, some of the chief’s servants arrived with a small basket containing a heap of light green, dry leaves that looked a bit like sage but emitted a strong, bitter smell, and delivered it to Gatti . Then the chief spoke again: “Every day at sunset, you and your sick people must chew one of these leaves; do it very slowly and chew on it until there is almost nothing left in your mouth. Do this for nine days and then continue your journey. These leaves only grow near our village, so they are very rare. I cannot give you any more of them. Here, every pregnant woman must take some daily, not only until her child is born, but also for the following nine months while she is breastfeeding. Then her child will be strengthened forever against the dangerous swamp fever.”

It was slowly drawing to a close. It had started raining again. The chieftain led him to a large, empty hut where a fire was burning and delicious food had been laid out. And after dinner, it was not long before a restful and deep sleep overcame Gatti . When he awoke the next morning, the medicine for swamp fever was the first thing on his mind. So he took a leaf from the basket and began to chew on it slowly. When he finished a little later, it seemed as if a long-lost strength returned to his body, his mind was filled with new and clear thoughts, and his heart was strengthened with hopeful feelings. Something very deep within him gave him the inner certainty that everyone would recover and that his entire expedition would be brought to a successful conclusion. Did he, too, already feel the blessings of Bapuka ?

17. There are still words that need to be said.

Gatti 's hut . "The day has only just begun," he said in a dignified tone, "but before you leave for your traveling companions in Semusha, there are still words that need to be said."

"My son," he began, "has opened his heart to me. He also told me about the misery of his past. His suffering was great and numerous. But just when he was about to die, you saved him. When he thought himself lost, you set him free. The whole time he was with you, you were his loving father. From now on, Bapuka will be a loving mother to you. If chains bind you, Bapuka will set you free. If your life is in danger, Bapuka will save you." And with a regal and tender gesture, he offered Gatti a heavy wooden figurine. Gatti looked at it, and looked again. He could hardly believe his eyes. It was an exact, 35 cm high replica of the statue of the goddess Bapuka , the statue he had seen standing in the cave.

The village chief paused for a moment. Then he continued: "This is the only statue of Bapuka that exists. She herself commanded me to give it to you. Her blessing will accompany you always and everywhere, and also all those who surround you with their love."

Gatti tried to thank him, but he could not get a word out. The emotion had become far too overwhelming for him. Fortunately, the old man immediately understood that it was the confusion of immense gratitude that prevented Gatti from speaking. "Go now to your sick friends," he decided, "they need you," and he walked majestically in the direction of the river.

Gatti had still not recovered from his surprise. Obeying the man's wish, he took his helmet and the basket of leaves and followed him to the canoe.

There he found Skaimunga busily preparing the boat for departure. He ordered one of his tribesmen to row back with Gatti . He himself would—quite understandably— stay with his father. Two other members of his tribe would follow in a second canoe. Gatti knew that the moment of parting would be difficult.

“May peace be with you forever,” Gatti said to the village chief. The latter nodded with dignity and kindness. Then he looked at Skaimunga . With tears in his eyes, Gatti held out his hand to him. Skaimunga grasped it with both hands and pressed it firmly against his heart. Neither of them could utter a single word. For a long second— Gatti would never forget that look—they looked into each other’s eyes. Then Gatti turned his head away and stepped into the canoe...

Only after the river had carried the boat a few dozen meters downstream did Gatti hear the last words Skaimunga called out to him: “ Musungu , may the peace and love of Bapuka always accompany you!” He could barely suppress his emotions, and almost weeping, his very last two words rang out: “Forever!” Gatti looked in his direction the whole time and nodded gently. Then he brought both his palms to his heart and held them there. The fast-flowing river quickly increased the distance between them. They continued to look at each other, until a bend in the river obscured them from each other's sight.

The return journey proceeded without incident. Gatti distributed the dry leaves he received from the village chief to his sick traveling companions. They all recovered. Moreover, they received an extra dose of energy with which they could resume their scientific research into the local flora and fauna. Their description of the various tribes in Semusha , Noyo , and Lealui also progressed. They likewise described the course of the Zambezi River, at that time a virtually unknown area. As promised, he never revealed the location where the worshippers of Bapuka resided. However, her role was far from over for Gatti .

23.2.18. And later?

Gattit says that during his many travels through Africa, he found himself in quite a few life-threatening situations, from which he escaped time and again in a remarkable manner. He moved to New York, where in 1931 he met Ellen, whom he married and who accompanied him on all his African travels from then on. When they both later went to live in Lugano, Switzerland, by the lake of the same name, the wooden figurine of Bapuka —which adorns the

title page of this text—was given a place of honor in their living room, in a special niche in the middle of a cabinet where all the books they had written about their travels stood, along with their translations. To ensure that the figurine would certainly not fall over, Gattit had provided it with a heavy base made of solid African wood.



The years passed. Gatti says that the marriage was particularly happy. About thirty years later, Ellen became seriously ill. In her old age, she had expressed two wishes more than once. First, she did not want to outlive Gatti, because she was convinced that a life without him would be too empty. And second, she hoped that when her time came, she would not have to suffer for long, to spare him the torment of having to watch helplessly.

Ellen's coma, which had lasted thirty-six hours, came to an end. Gatti writes: "When the last breath, like a soft sigh, detached itself from her lips, I leaned forward and gave her a final kiss on the forehead." Just at that moment, he heard a heavy thud from a falling object. He looked around and saw that the figurine of Bapuka had fallen over and lay in pieces on the ground. Gatti has never found an explanation for this curious 'coincidence'. He concludes his book with the question of whether it might have been a final word from Bapuka to both of them.

²<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bvPff7Zg9Lc>

3. Epilogue

Anyone who—even today—possesses a sound insight into that peculiar aspect of reality calls this event no coincidence at all. Such mantically gifted individuals assert that the pagan nature spirit Bapuka has invested all her strength in her protective role toward the tribe that worships her, but also toward Gatti and Ellen. Non- Trinitarian religions, they say, are characterized by a rather treacherous “harmony of opposites.” It is the followers of such religions themselves who discover that their gods are unreliable. Such beings anoint their worshippers, but also wound them, depending on their whims. Thus, the Greek supreme god Zeus dictates the laws to the Greeks, yet he deceives his wife Hera with mortal women and rapes Leda , the wife of the Spartan prince.

Such very good nature spirits as Bapuka —as competent seers clarify—are the ethically good tips of the iceberg of treacherous beings that control the primordial chaos . Bapuka completely exhausts herself of her life force in her protective role, and once disempowered, she falls into the hands of cynically powerful demons. Beings like Bapuka Biblically speaking, they are safe within the protection of the Holy Trinity. Once outside this framework, they completely exhaust themselves in their life force. This is demonstrated in the story of Bapuka by the material disintegration of her wooden statuette. So much for this viewpoint.

Our desacralized culture naturally considers such stories, and the many other testimonies of Gatti from his travels in Africa, south of the equator, to be pure nonsense. The many books he wrote, now more than sixty years ago, are hard to find today. Sometimes you still come across them, but not in the 'religion' section or the 'New Age' section, but rather somewhere among the children's literature, next to the stories of Winnetou and Arendsoog.

The webmaster

