

Summary of Text 32: *Bapuka, the Goddess of Love*

1. Foreword

Attilio Gatti (1896–1969) was an Italian explorer, author, and filmmaker who led thirteen expeditions to Africa between 1922 and 1948. As a member of the Royal Italian Society for Geography and Anthropology, he gathered valuable documentation, film footage, and over 53,000 photographs of continental cultures, including the Pygmies, Watussi, and Masai. He traveled with his wife Ellen, among others, and recorded his observations of indigenous peoples, rituals, and natural phenomena with a critical yet empathetic eye.

The book *Bapuka* deals with a remarkable experience during an expedition in 1928–1929. Although written in the U.S., it was never published there—presumably due to its strong paranormal and mystical elements, which did not align with the rather materialistic mindset of Americans. However, the book was published in German and, to our knowledge, was never translated in full.

2. *Bapuka, the Goddess of Love*

2.1. *The Journey on the Congo River and the Meeting with Skaimunga*

In November 1928, Colonel Gatti is aboard the *Kigoma*, an ancient paddle-wheel steamboat navigating the Congo River. Commotion erupts on the lower deck (third class). A hot-tempered old Frenchman screams and rants at his two indigenous workers (boys) after several crates of beer bottles fall over due to the boat's rocking. The Frenchman grabs a whip and mercilessly lashes one of the boys, shouting: “Parle, sale cochon!”

When the ship's captain intervenes and orders the Frenchman to his cabin, the old man strikes once more. The severely abused, bleeding boy jumps overboard in desperation into the crocodile-infested water. Gatti hesitates for a second: he grabs his rifle, fires at two approaching crocodiles, and raises the alarm. Fellow passengers dive into the water and rescue the boy.

The rescued boy introduces himself as Skaimunga. He is immensely grateful to his savior and declares that his life now belongs to Gatti. Skaimunga explains that he was treated like a slave by the Frenchman, received no wages, and was constantly abused and interrogated about alleged tribal riches (gold, diamonds, and silver). Skaimunga does not know where he was born, who his parents were, or what his striking body tattoos mean. The

only thing he remembers is a raid on his village by men in long white clothes, the killing of his mother, and the name of a protective deity: Bapuka.

Gatti decides to pay off Skaimunga's so-called 'debt' to the Frenchman (one dollar). The Frenchman furiously tears up the money, but Skaimunga is freed and gratefully enters Gatti's service.

2.2. The Journey South and the Mysterious Goddess

Gatti continues his journey with his expedition team and vehicle caravan via Leopoldville, Chitadi, Bukama, and Elisabethville towards the border of Northern Rhodesia (present-day Zambia). The journey over unpaved and often nonexistent roads demands the utmost from man and machine. Skaimunga proves to be an indispensable asset: he helps build temporary bridges, frees stuck vehicles, and effortlessly provides the camp with fresh game in places where no one else can hunt anything.

When Skaimunga returns one day, exhausted but proud, with guinea fowl for his master, he speaks again of Bapuka's blessing. Gatti suggests that Skaimunga might belong to the Baila or Mashukolumbwe tribes, who worship a goddess named Bapugha. Skaimunga refutes this: his Bapuka is different, and she speaks to him in his dreams. According to his dreams, their paths must cross for a while longer.

Spurred by these events and the desire to explore an unknown 'blank spot' on the map, Gatti changes the route. The caravan heads toward the swampy Barotseland to meet King Yeta III in Lealui.

2.3. The Prohibition and Hardships in the Swamps

In Lealui, the expedition is hospitably received by King Yeta III. However, when Gatti asks for canoes to explore the dangerous swamps around the Zambezi and Lutembwe, the king secretly sends messengers to Mongu. Shortly after, the British Provincial Commissioner arrives. He declares the area off-limits: over the past two years, seven white men entered the swamps, and all died of a mysterious, incurable fever.

After negotiations, they reach a compromise: Gatti is granted permission to travel by canoe as far as the village of Semusha, but absolutely no further.

On February 1, three canoes depart with Gatti, Skaimunga, the camp doctor, a representative of the commissioner, and 38 indigenous paddlers. The trip turns into a nightmare:

- Continuous tropical rain drenches everyone.
- Attacks by hippos capsize canoes.
- A deadly swamp fever breaks out. This fever follows a devastating cycle: three days of high delirium, three days of exhausting decline, and three relatively calm days, after which the process repeats.

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Upon arrival in Semusha on February 14, 22 of the 38 paddlers have died. Both Gatti and the doctor are gravely ill and frequently fall into comas. Only Skaimunga appears entirely immune to the disease.

2.4. A Vision and an Archaeological Discovery

On March 13, the doctor awakens from his feverish coma with strange determination. He tells Gatti that in a dream he saw a nearby hill with ancient Bushman rock paintings.

The village chief of Semusha is astonished when asked about this: the site with large granite rocks indeed exists, but the tribe avoids it out of fear of evil spirits. Convinced that the white doctor's ancestors offer protection, the entire group travels along. Beneath moss and soil, they discover beautiful, realistically painted rock drawings of hunters, horned antelopes, and a species of palm tree extinct for millennia. These are the very first rock paintings documented in Northern Rhodesia.

2.5. The Call of Bapuka and the Secret Journey

After this discovery, the condition of Gatti and the doctor deteriorates again. On March 19, Skaimunga enters Gatti's tent. He explains that Bapuka spoke to him in a dream: to save the lives of Gatti, the doctor, and the paddlers, Gatti and Skaimunga must travel together, unarmed and in one small canoe, heading west for two days.

Although the plan seems insane given Gatti's weakened state, he decides to trust his loyal boy. He also learns via the drums that the British commissioner in Mongu has died of swamp fever, meaning Gatti no longer feels bound by his promise not to travel beyond Semusha.

Skaimunga equips the canoe with a rain shelter, a folding chair, and a small clay fire pot. He deliberately leaves weapons behind, saying: "He who looks forward to life cannot carry the weapons of death." After two days of navigating treacherous swamps, they reach a piece of dry land where smoke rises from huts.

2.6. The Reunion and the Secret of Bapuka

Upon arrival, they are greeted by a venerable old man wearing a crown of scarlet feathers. He introduces himself as the highest servant of Bapuka and welcomes them. The man declares that Gatti has healed Bapuka's wounds and promises a medicine that will cure them and the other sick travelers from swamp fever forever.

He leads them to a secret cave. In the center stands an impressive 3.5-meter-tall wooden statue: the goddess Bapuka. Skaimunga instantly recognizes the statue from his dreams.

The priest tells the tragic story of his tribe: three hundred moons (about 24–25 years) ago, Arab slave traders raided the village. His father was killed, and his wife and six-month-old son were abducted. The priest swore that the tribe would kill any foreigner from then on. However, Bapuka healed his wounds and promised that his son would one day be brought back by a white man.

The priest points to Skaimunga's tattoos: they are identical to the carvings on the wooden statue of the goddess. Skaimunga is none other than the long-lost son of the priest! His real name is Ingulu ("he who is reborn").

2.7. The Medicine and the Farewell

The priest hands Gatti a basket containing rare, light-green dried leaves that smell like sage. By chewing on these for nine days, the sick will recover fully and become permanently immune to swamp fever.

As a gesture of deep gratitude, the chief gifts Gatti an exact 35 cm tall wooden replica of the statue of Bapuka. It is the only secondary figurine ever made. Gatti swears never to reveal the location of the secret village to the outside world.

The farewell between Gatti and Skaimunga (Ingulu) is emotional. As the canoe carries Gatti away, Skaimunga calls out to him: "Musungu, may the peace and love of Bapuka always accompany you!"

Thanks to the miracle leaves, Gatti, the doctor, and all surviving paddlers in Semusha recover completely. The expedition is successfully completed.

3. Later Life and the Mystery of the Statue

Years later, Attilio Gatti moves to Lugano (Switzerland) with his wife Ellen. The wooden figurine of Bapuka is given a place of honor in a niche in their home, mounted on a heavy wooden base.

In September 1962, Ellen passes away after a 36-hour coma. At the exact moment she breathes her last and Gatti gives her a final kiss, a loud crash is heard: the heavy figurine of Bapuka has fallen over without any apparent cause and broken into pieces. Gatti could never explain this strange 'coincidence' and wondered if it was a final greeting from the goddess of love.

4. Afterword

The afterword reflects on the paranormal and spiritual dimension of the story. Where modern, desacralized Western culture dismisses such occurrences as mere coincidence, esoteric interpretations view them as the workings of a nature spirit.

Bapuka is described by experts as an ethically 'good' nature spirit who devoted all her life force to protecting her people, Skaimunga, Gatti, and Ellen. The shattering of the statue at Ellen's death coincides with the end of Bapuka's protective task. The 'deity' fulfilled her duty to the very end of her strength.