

The “Kamwina Nsapu” system

- **“Kamwina Nsapu”, the name of the power**

"*Kamwèna nsàpù*" is the name of a village and a royal line, as is often the case in the Kasai culture. Power is transmitted from father to son, but also from brother to brother, from paternal uncle to nephew or between cousins, creating an increasingly broad base of pretenders to the throne and potential conflicts. The designation of the chief must be made by consensus within the royal court, which includes the chiefs of families who are members of the chief's lineage.

Kamwina Nsapu is the customary chief of the Bajila Kasanga ethnic group found in Dibaya territory but also near Tshikapa in the new province of Kasai. The Bajila Kasanga only speak "*cilubà*". Any other language, and in particular Lingala, is considered the language of "*tunguluba*", little pigs. Rwandophones and Swahiliphones, even Congolese, are particularly disliked because they have been assimilated to the repressive State, and the security forces. It is one of the most homogeneous customary culture: an ethnic group, a language, a leader.

Kamwina Nsapu depends on a more important customary chieftom, that of the Bashinlange, which is found mainly in the territories of Kazumba, Luebo and Tshikapa. The king of the Bashinlange confided to Kamwina Nsapu the "*Nkuembe*", a totem that is supposed to be the source of his mystical power. When the court of Kamwina Nsapu was attacked and the witch doctors disappeared, it was the entire Bashinlange culture that was shaken up.

- **The “Tshiota”, the sacred fire**

The "*cyôta*" is the name given by the Lubaphones to the permanent or temporary home of the customary chief's fire. It is the privileged mode to speak with the ancestors, a meeting place where one speaks about all the important problems related to the survival of the traditional culture.

It is an old and rarely used tradition that can be found in the whole of the Kasai region. But with the insurrection launched by Kamwina Nsapu, this custom, like many others, has been revived.

The Tshiota, among the Kamwina Nsapu, is above all an initiation centre. In the case of the present conflict, it is necessary to go through a Tshiota to become a full-fledged militiaman, by taking a particular "baptism". Faced with repression, Kamwina Nsapu's witch doctors created Tshiota beyond its original group. One of the first and most active is Ngombe, about twenty kilometres from Bunkonde. It was not far from here that the bodies of the two UN experts were found on 27 March 2017.

- **"Baptism", the potion of invincibility and invulnerability**

The "baptism", within Kamwina Nsapu, is a potion supposed to make invincible the one who drinks it. Taking baptism is one of the essential steps in the initiation

process. Nobody knows what the baptism of Kamwina Nsapu contains. This can pose a health risk, as children under the age of 14 are baptized as adults.

Jean-Prince Mpandi, who was at the origin of the insurrection, was known as a traditional doctor. By becoming the 6th Kamwina Nsapu, he found himself in possession of the "*Nkuembe*", a mystical power, which increased his reputation.

The Kasai culture is Christian and above all Catholic. Each group has its parish and its school, often held by priests. It is not unusual to see religion and traditional belief mixed. But the belief system of the Kamwina Nsapu was built against the Church.

- **The “mystical” attacks**

For the Kamwina Nsapu, the attacks are "mystical". They have a not only tactical, but also metaphysical motive. Most of them take place on Thursdays and Fridays in commemoration of the betrayal and death of their leader Jean-Pierre Mpandi on Thursday 11 and Friday 12 August 2016.

The Kamwina Nsapu believe that baptism makes them invincible and attack the positions of the Congolese security forces, mostly with "mystical" weapons, that is to say, wooden weapons or brooms. They attack by singing.

The belief in this potion no doubt explains the huge amount of the victims' death toll. But over the months, some leaders have challenged it, especially in the Dibaya territory, where there are the most victims. Others retain the rites and their militias, but have given up the "mystical" attacks.

- **Members of “Kamwina Nsapu”**

The followers of Kamwina Nsapu are mostly young, often minors. According to childhood development specialists, at the beginning of the insurrection, most were under 14, which explains the images found on the videos shot by soldiers in the Dibaya territory, where the insurrection started: bodies of very young children armed with wooden weapons.

Among the Kamwina Nsapu, we find all social strata. Beyond the traditional chiefs, local leaders, teachers and nurses play a predominant role. Kasai police and soldiers can also be influential.

The key figures are the witch doctors, the "guardians of custom". In the royal court Kamwina Nsapu, Andre Kabumbu, known as "Gaddafi", and Francois Muamba, both distant relatives, are the best known. But every Tshiota has his fetish, as every group of militia has its leader. The witch doctors organize the rites of initiation and prepare baptism.

This also explains the unstructured character of the insurrection. Each Tshiota can generate several groups of militia who, since the death of Jean-Prince Mpandi, no

longer respond to a single leader. The royal family of Kamwina Nsapu retains influence, especially in the territory of Dibaya.

- **“Enemies” and “traitors”**

The Kamwina Nsapu are primarily concerned with the symbols of the State, which, in their view, represents a repressive and usurping regime. It is the state of "foreigners," in the sense of those who speak another language, and must be expelled from the sacred land. Their main targets are the security forces, the army, the police, the National Intelligence Agency (ANR) and the Directorate General for Migration (DGM). The Electoral Commission is also targeted because it is accused of manipulating the electoral process.

- "Enemies" may be decapitated after being publicly accused. A "justifying" word is needed.

The traitors are the people from Kasai, customary chiefs, or the local authorities who refuse to join the Kamwina Nsapu or those who take the side of the State. Customary conflicts largely explain the spread of the insurgency. More than a hundred chiefs accused the political-administrative power of interfering in customary affairs by creating duplicates or new chiefdoms. The former deputy prime minister of the Interior, Evariste Boshab, has even been accused by some of having poisoned three of the most important customary chiefs, the 5th Kamwina Nsapu, the King of the Kuba and the King of the Bashilange.

- "Traitors" are often the first targets. They may also be decapitated. Here too there must be a "justifying" word.

The schools and the Catholic Church are particularly targeted. Young militiamen often explain this by the fact that they themselves can go to school. This is the generation of the paying school. Since 1984, the State has paid little, or has no longer paid, teachers, forcing parents to pay exorbitant school fees in view of their standard of living. The Catholic Church, which runs half the schools in the country, is accused of "racketeering". From the point of view of the militia, the Catholic Church was the one that kept President Joseph Kabila in power by facilitating a dialogue at the end of his second and last term.

- Churches and schools can be plundered or even burnt down, their personnel abused, even if they are rarely killed.

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