# The Mwindo Epic: Crash Course World Mythology #29

Crash Course: World Mythology
https://youtube.com/watch?v=Kcfww2-y2K8
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Hi, I'm Mike Rugnetta, this is Crash Course Mythology, and today we're talking about a hero myth from Africa. It's got everything: water serpents, a braggy baby, banana beer, a murder-scepter, and the worst dad in the world. Even worse than Saturn, who ate his children.

Join Thoth and I for a look a the Epic of Mwindo.

[Opening music]

The Mwindo story comes from the Nyanga people of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Like all myths, the story has changed from telling to telling. But in every version, Mwindo rises from an auspicious birth to become chief of his people, facing danger and defeating villains along the way.

The version we'll discuss comes from a storytelling of the oral tradition named Candi Rureke.

Before we get too far, a quick note on our favorite meta-topic: pronunciation. I briefly want to confront not only the difficulty that I'm gonna have nailing some of these pronunciations, but what might be indicated by the relative absence, on the internet at least, of pronunciation guides for stories from this part of the world.

We asked you, our audience, to help with pronunciation for this episode and others yet to come, and it was a huge help, but still, if I stay something that sounds wrong, please write a comment, but also go to forvo.com and record the correct pronunciation so it's out there, in the world, for everyone.

Okay, enough talk-talk, on with the show.

Mwindo's story begins before he's even born. His father, Shemwindo, the chief of Tubondo has seven wives and swears that he will kill any woman who bears him a son. He wants daughters who will bring dowry money.

This is bad news for Mwindo's mom, because he's a boy.

Luckily, they have some help. Since Nyanga children receive guidance and protection from their aunts, and Mwindo's Aunt Iyangura is pretty rad.  Iyangura isn't only strong, beautiful, and clever, she's also married to Mukiti, the water serpent, who also has special influence over bats and spiders.

You might remember the tale of baby Hermes, who could walk and talk and make mischief the moment he was born. Well, Mwindo one-ups him. He helps his mother collect firewood and food while he's still in the womb. He's born by leaping out of his mother's middle, making all the midwives and obstetricians yell, "What kind of child is that?!"

Mwindo is born holding an axe, a magical bag, a magic rope, and, most importantly, a magic conga scepter (it's kind of like a fly swatter), made of an antelope tail.

Shemwindo isn't happy that Mwindo is a boy. First, he goes to Mwindo's house and throws spear after spear into the walls, trying to kill his only son. When Mwindo emerges unscathed, Shemwindo grabs him and buries him alive. But Mwindo, who can speak even though he's a baby, curses his father the whole way down and then just claws his way out of the grave.

Finally, Shemwindo grabs Mwindo and sews him into a drum, which he then throws into a lake. The sky rumbles, it rains for seven days, and the whole village suffers a famine. Methinks this does not bode well for Shemwindo.

Sitting underwater, still sewn into a drum and definitely not drowning, Mwindo decides it's time to beat a hasty retreat. He starts to roll the drum upriver to find Aunt Iyangura, remember she lives with the water serpent.

Along the way, he beats a bunch of water creatures by singing to them, and spends his time boasting, calling himself "Little One, just born, he walked". When he reaches his aunt, she slices him out of the drum.

Iyangura serves many roles in Mwindo's story. She's a strong mother figure and advice-giving goddess, a role you're remember from Joseph Campbell's *Theory of the Hero's Journey,* featured in episode 25.

Iyangura also sets Mwindo on his quest. She tells him that even though Shemwindo is the worst dad in the world, Mwindo can't get revenge on his own. "The lonely path is never a pleasant one to travel", she tells him.

That's why I'm glad that we're in this together, Thoth! Huh? Oh... oh yeah, and also you guys are cool.

Mwindo listens to Iyangura, but can't help himself but messing with his dad. So he begins singing a long, magical song that calls all of his father's possessions in Tubondo to come and be his. Mwindo might have felt clever for stealing his dad's stuff, but it doesn't work out that well because Mwindo's followers are gluttons who gorge themselves on newly arrived food and get sick. Mwindo can't believe this - he's about to lead all of these greedy guts into battle.

So he calls on Nkuba, the god of lightning, to help him. Nkuba destroys Tubondo with seven lightning flashes, turning the village and its residents to dust. Which is maybe a bit drastic, but Shemwindo finally gets the message: messing with Mwindo is a bad idea. So he flees to an underground lair.

But Mwindo doesn't let his dad get away that easy. First, he brings all of his uncles who died in Tubondo back to life and commands them to forge him baby-armor. Mwindo sets out and follows his father's trail to the Underworld.

We're going to follow with him in the Thought Bubble.

Underground, Mwindo meets Kahindo. She's a goddess of good fortune, but her dad is Muisa, god of the underworld. Kahindo tells Mwindow that Muisa is protecting Shemwindo. But luckily she hates her dad so much, she agrees to tell Mwindo - step by step - what he has to do to defeat Muisa and find his pops.

"First", she says, "My dad's gonna offer you banana beer, but don't drink that banana beer because it's actually pee. Gross. Second, my dad's gonna offer you banana paste. But don't eat that banana paste because it's actually poop. Even grosser. Then, after you don't eat his snacks, he'll ask you to pass his tests, and at that point, you're on your own."

Mwindo tracks down Muisa and it's exactly as Kahindo said and Muisa gives him a test, "Cultivate a new, actual banana grove in the underworld."

Mwindo uses a magic bill hook that tills the field, plants the seeds, and harvests the bananas, all by itself. Muisa unwinds his magical cowrie belt and gives it an order, "Fly and kill Mwindo." The belt zips off, finds Mwindo, and kills him. End of story, thanks for watching.

Thanks Thought Bubble!

Usual for lunch, Thoth? Do you like... shrimp? Maybe crab cakes?

Okay, just kidding, back to the Thought Bubble!

As soon as Mwindo falls, his magic scepter brings him back to life. I told you that thing was important. Mwindo grabs the scepter and sends it to go kill Muisa. The scepter flies to Muisa and kills the god of the underworld. And then...brings him back to life. That magical autonomous murder-and-rebirth scepter really has a mind of its own.

Thanks for real, Thought Bubble.

After the battle of enchanted accessories, Mwindo completes more of Muisa's tests. Muisa makes some more assassination attempts. Eventually Mwindo gets fed up with all the testing and the belt attacking and confronts Muisa directly, "Give me my dad. I know you're hiding him!"

Muisa refuses and Mwindo kills him once and for all. Shemwindo tracks eventually end in the home of Sheburungu, the god of all creation.

Mwindo demands to know where his dad is, but Sheburungusays that if Mwindo wants his help, he'll have to best him in a game of wiki. In this game, players take turns editing the entries for celebrities to include funny false details and the edit that lasts the long - okay, I'm just kidding. But I mean, I kind of had to, alright?

Seriously though, in this case, a game of wiki means guessing the number of black seeds held in your opponent's hand. Mwindo agrees and the baby and the god start to play.

At first, Sheburungu beats Mwindo over and over again, winning everything Mwindo owns except his magic scepter. With his back against the wall, Mwindo bets his scepter and begins to win.

Wager after wager, guess after guess, Mwindo cleans Sheburungu's clock until he wins all of Sheburungu's possessions, including, probably, his newly cleaned clock.

But Mwindo tells Sheburungu, "I don't want your things. I don't want creation. I just want you to hand over my dad."

Sheburungu has to agree, and so Mwindo returns to Tubondo with a captured Shemwindo. This is Mwindo's turning point, when the boastful baby gets the chance to face his father. Instead of killing him, Mwindo is magnanimous and pardons Shemwindo for his past mistakes.

Flush with mercy, he even brings Muisa back to life, who offers his daughter Kahindo's hand in marriage. Mwindo refuses, saying that he wants to marry in Tubondo, and this is gonna be a little tough because Nkuba lightning zapped everyone in Tubondo.

So Mwindo revives them too, bringing the whole village back to life. Finally, Shemwindo admits to the village that he was wrong to try to kill Mwindo, and that he's sorry about the whole drowning in the drum thing.

"So may the male offspring be spared," he says, "For he has shown me the way in which the sky becomes daylight and has given me the joy of witnessing again the warmth of the people and of all the things here in Tubondo."

Mwindo replies, "I will not hold a grudge against my father. What my father did against me and what I did against my father, all that is already over."

Mwindo's story doesn't end here though! In his subsequent adventures, he learns, often the hard way, how to be a compassionate and respectful ruler.

Mwindo thus returns to his people, wiser and fit to rule. He pronounces a blessing that establishes rules by which to live: "May you grow many foods and many crops. May you live in good houses. May you moreover live in a beautiful village. Don't quarrel with one another. Don't pursue another's space. Don't mock the invalid passing in the village. And he who seduces another's wife will be killed.

"Accept the chief. Fear him. May he also fear you. May you agree with one another, all together, no enmity in the land nor too much hate. May you bring forth tall and short children - in so doing you will bring them forth for the chief."

So Mwindo has really grown up. His hero's journey took him from braggy baby to a just ruler, fairly governing his people. At its heart, the Mwindo story is a Freudian style conflict of a boy maturing to take his father's place.

Take out the magical murder scepter and the other supernatural parts and maybe some of the more draconian rules, and it's also a model for an individual's journey from boastful child to wise ruler. And it teaches us why we should never ever take banana paste from a stranger.

Mwindo shows us how an individual must mature to become truly heroic and also fulfills an etiological role for the Nyanga people. He reestablishes their village, he provides the model of forgiveness, and shows how a chief must be powerful and also favored by the gods. He demonstrates that even with auspicious beginnings and divine help, heroes are flawed and only achieve success if they learn and grow.

Thanks for watching, see you next time.

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Thanks for watching, and here's hoping all the braggy babies out there can evolve and mature into reasonable leaders.