THE AFRICAN HEROIC EPIC

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THE DOCUMENTATION

Detailed syntheses of African heroic epics are not yet available.[1] In her pioneering study on African oral literature, Finnegan pays almost no attention to the African epic, and she dismisses it with the assertion that "all in all epic poetry does not seem to be a typical African form."[2] Surely, in contrast to the wide-ranging information that we possess about other literary genres, our published documentation on the African heroic epic is very limited and sometimes sketchy. This fact is not entirely astonishing. Epics are long, orally transmitted poetic narratives presented in an episodic manner and intermittently. They occur in many versions and are built around central thematic cores and plans by many, frequently unrelated, and independently working, bards. These individuals, and the "schools" or "systems of tradition" that they represent, perform, create, and recreate the specific epic tradition in their own manner. Therefore performance and content may vary according to the occasion or the particular audience. Epic narratives are formulated in a rich, highly poetic, difficult African language. They are also sung, which makes the performance even more complex. Parts of the epic themes, characters, episodes and events are sometimes known, in a more or less fragmentary manner, to common storytellers who construct short tales around such fragments. In the light of these and other facts it is easy to understand why such long and difficult texts may escape the attention of the foreign researcher or surpass his linguistic and ethnographical capabilities. It is also easy to understand how such texts may sometimes be abstracted and

summarized by the outsider, or only more or less coherent fragments may be recorded. Epics *per se* are not secret in the ethnic groups where they occur; many are publicly sung before a large and diverse audience, and the themes are known to the general public. Yet, it is my experience that such huge texts, which contain an extraordinary amount of information about institutions, values, modes of thinking, behavior, and history, are not easily given away to foreign researchers. It is also possible that the lack of information for large parts of Africa is partially due to the fact that heroic epics are less widely distributed than one might be inclined to think.

DISTRIBUTION

The present evidence points to a strong occurrence of heroic epics in two major areas: the Mande-speakers (Mandeka, Bambara, Soninke) and groups closely interrelated with them (Fulani) in West Africa; several Bantu-speaking ethnic groups ranging from the Gabon Republic (Fang) to the Zaïre Republic (Mongo, Lega, Nyanga, Mbole and Tetela clusters). But, outside this general area of concentration, epics were also recorded among the Bantu-speaking Sotho of South Africa, the Swahili of East Africa, the Benamukuni of Zambia, the Ijaw of Southern Nigeria, and among the Adangme of Ghana. Beyong this immediate evidence, it is difficult to assess from published sources the degree to which texts known to us as myths or tales might be fragments of larger unrecorded epic wholes.[3]

The presently known heroic epics occur in societies that exhibit a wide range of social structures, political and religious systems, and historical backgrounds. Although no easy explanations for the phenomena can be found, nor any fully significant correlations can as yet be constructed, it is worth stressing the following points. The two major traditions of heroic epics seem to occur, respectively, among Mande-speaking peoples in West Africa and some Bantu-speaking groups of Central Africa. In both areas of occurrence a common epic patrimony exists, at the transtribal level, among a number of more or less related ethnic groups. The heroic epics are found among peoples like the Bambara, the Fang, the Mongo, the Lega, the Nyanga, where hunting traditions are ideologically and sociologically very significant. In several of these areas the cultural impact of Pygmies is explicit and deep. Except for the Nyanga, who represent a unique case, all epic-producing ethnic groups have elaborate traditions of migration, expansion and cultural assimilation, or well-established traditions of conquest and warfare. Some of these societies are politically integrated into kingdoms and chiefdoms, some belong to ancient traditions of political systems of great amplitude, but

others have, as far as ethnohistory can be retraced, never had any centralized political structure with kings, chiefs or rulers of great power. Two other points are worth remembering. Among most of the ethnic groups involved there exist extremely elaborate initiation systems connected with puberty ceremonies, and membership in voluntary associations. Such ethnic groups as the Bambara, Fang, and Lega have some of the most outstanding artistic traditions of the African continent. Of all these observations, the most fascinating is probably that great heroic epic traditions do also occur among people who have no traditions of conquest nor a centralized political system. The Lega of the Zaïre Republic are probably the best example of such a social context.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

In the following pages, I wish to present a short summary of the contents of some of the better known heroic epics. In this brief survey I am not concerned with the vast amount of praises and heroic poems that have been aptly analyzed for several East and South African populations in a number of recent works.[4] These heroic poems have a particularly strong distribution among various clusters of Bantu-speaking peoples of South Africa. The panegyrics celebrate persons (chiefs, warriors, common people) as well as animals, plants, natural features, and objects. Some are very short, others include hundreds of verse stanzas or "paragraphs."[5] Similar praises addressed to divinities or chiefs, or evoking the names of social groups and the deeds of persons, form part of the oral literature of many other ethnic groups. The heroic war poetry of Rwanda, the *ijala* salutes of the Oyo Yoruba, the heroic hunters' songs of the Mande, the *kasala* songs of the Luba-Kasai are cases in point.[6] The abundant animal epic cycles, of which we possess many more or less comprehensive examples for various parts of Africa, also fall outside the scope of this study.[7]

Epic-like narratives and recitations centered around ancestors, kings, genealogies, migrations, places, battles, group histories, are not covered in this survey. Prominent examples of these epic-like narratives are: the royal *nshoong atoot* recitations of the Kuba (Zaïre Republic), the dispersal of the Kusa of the Soninke (Mali Republic), the story of Wagadu of the Soninke, the story of Wamara and his descendants among the Haya (Tanzania).[8] Finally, I exclude from consideration the written epics of the Swahili of East Africa, and some other epics more recently written by African creative writers.[9]

In this study, I will limit myself to the discussion of a number of well-established, adequately documented, and orally transmitted heroic epics,

mostly from Mande-speaking peoples in West Africa and from Bantu-speakers in Central Africa. The major focus is on the Sunjata, Monzon, and Silamaka epic traditions from the Mandeka, Bambara, and Fulani in West Africa; on the *mvet* traditions of the Fang in Cameroun; on the Mubila, Mwindo, Lianja, Lofokefoke, and Kudukese epics from the Lega, Nyanga, Mongo, Hamba, and Mbole in the Zaïre Republic. Some other epic traditions from Nigeria, Ghana, East and South Africa are briefly mentioned as well.

EPICS FROM WEST AFRICA

The Monzon Cycle of the Bambara

The Monzon epic cycle of the Bambara (Mali Republic) centers around Monzon and his son, Da Monzon, two historically known kings who ruled over Ségu (Mali Republic) from 1787 to 1827. Three fairly long episodes of this cycle have been published.[10] Scores of similar episodes are known to the bards, and many different versions of the epic are sung.[11] No complete text or advanced analysis are available. Thus the relationships between episodes, their place in the total epic, and the full content of the epic are as yet undocumented.

In the episode of *Monzon and Duga*, the bard evokes the causes of the conflict between Monzon and Duga, the king of Kore; the role played by Monzon's son in the subsequent battles; the death of both Monzon and Duga; and the enthronement of Da, the son of Monzon.[12] The principal events narrated in this passage are as follows. The son of one of Monzon's greatest bards visits Duga and decides to remain with him. Monzon, deeply affected by this insult, asks his son, Tiéfolo, to capture Duga. He refuses and is, therefore, killed. But Monzon's other son, Da, accepts the challenge and musters a large army. Soon Da sets up camp around the city of Kore, but the beleaguered Duga refuses to take the matter seriously. He invites Da for a hydromel party. Duga's first wife has heard many things about Da, and out of love for him, she manages during the night to join Da who has gone back to his troops. Da asks for her help and promises to marry her after Duga's defeat. So Duga's wife secretly overhears a divination ceremony between her husband and the great interpreter and sacrificer of the caiman god. She secretly transmits all instructions and details to Da. Duga is defeated and captured. Transforming himself into an eagle, then into a lion by means of powerful amulets, Duga warns about the imminent death of Monzon, Da's father. Duga kills himself with a gunshot. Da's intentions to marry Duga's wife are opposed by his father's counsellors, and they secretly kill her. Soon

after, Monzon dies as predicted from a sudden sickness. Da is installed as the new king.

The episode *Da Monzon of Ségu* is a panegyric for the king, Da Monzon, who ruled for about forty years over the kingdom of Ségu.[13] The praises center around Ségu, his sages and seers, his warriors, his subjects, its king and his powerful magical devices. The king is glorified as "he who does not share power with anybody," and "the most glorious master on earth."

The passage *Da Monzon and Karta Thiéma* celebrates one of the many conflicts in which Da Monzon was involved against his vassals.[14] Thiéma, the ruler of Karta (a province depending on the kingdom of Ségu), tired of being a subordinate, revolts against Da Monzon, and explains his intentions during a splendid feast, the circumstances and discussions of which are evoked in detail by the bard. A female master-singer warns him against Ségu, but he rejects her advice. An old woman, known for her impudence, helps Thiéma invent a way to send a major insult to Da Monzon. The bard describes in great detail the preparations, the arrival of the messengers, the actual insults, and the subsequent dialogues and speeches. For three months Da Monzon and his people are involved in preparations. Outside the walls of Karta, several encounters between horsemen take place. In each battle Thiéma's warriors are easily decimated. Thiéma himself takes up the fight. He is equipped with various magical devices and is invulnerable (because his body is washed with twenty-two different concoctions). In various individual engagements against some of Da Monzon's finest warriors, Thiéma is completely successful. The battle scene climaxes with an encounter between Thiéma and the Fulani Chief, Hambodédio Paté. Hambodédio is the stronger. Karta is set afire and Thiéma is captured and taken back to Ségu. People await in vain his public punishment. No one ever knew exactly what happened to him. Only the Niger River, it is said, knows the full story. Hambodédio, on the other hand, becomes Da Monzon's son-in-law.

The poetic verse or lines, in which these published fragments of the Da Monzon Cycle are formulated, abound with beautiful passages. There are long, lofty speeches interspersed with succinct aphoristic statements; lively dialogues; descriptions of scenes of festivity, of battle, of divination; praises and imprecations; evocations of great deeds and suggestions of extraordinary magical possessions; secret councils and public statements.

The Silamaka Epic of the Fulani

A long and magnificent passage of this epic was narrated by the Fulani bard, Marabal Samburu, in the Macina area (Mali Republic).[15] The epic is

also known in other regions inhabited by the Fulani.[16] Silamaka, the central hero of the epic, is a historical figure. As a leader (*ardo*) of the Fulani, he lived under the previously mentioned Da Monzon, the king of Ségu, and rebelled against him. The epic narrates the following events. Hammadi, a leader of the Fulani and a vassal of Da Monzon, has a son, Silamaka. Silamaka's closest friend and companion is Puluru, the son of Hammadi's house slave, Baba. Forty days after his birth, Silamaka gives signs of his exceptional qualities. While Da Monzon's messengers are collecting tribute in his father's homestead, Silamaka, seated on a mat, is not even bothered by a horsefly sucking blood from his forehead. The messengers take the extraordinary news back to Da Monzon. Seers and sages are consulted. They announce the birth of "a terrible child" that can be killed only by powerful magic. But no magic can destroy Silamaka and his friend, Puluru. Silamaka and Puluru grow up. A young woman, courted by many men, challenges him to give proof of his much lauded bravery against Da Monzon. Silamaka consults a geomancer. To become invulnerable he must capture alive the sacred serpent of the *galamani* woods, mark it with signs, cover it with leather, and wear it as a belt. Hundreds of his warriors fail to achieve this deed, but riding his white horse, Soperekagne, the hero himself captures the serpent and makes it into a belt. There follows a long passage in which three bards from the West arrive consecutively in the villages of the four foremost Fulani leaders. Everywhere Silamaka is quoted as the bravest of them all. The next passage celebrates a conflict between the two heroes, Silamaka and Hambodédio, because of an insult made by the latter against Silamaka's friend. Silamaka, on the winning side, shows mercy for Hambodédio, who asks for forgiveness. The following year we are back in Silamaka's village where Da Monzon's messengers have come to collect tribute. But Silamaka hides the gold and insults Da Monzon. There follow a number of unsuccessful attempts by Da Monzon's messengers and horsemen to capture Silamaka. He defeats successive waves of attackers. But in a battle that opposes him to a Fularadio, he must flee back to his village. He is helped by his sister and consoled by his friend, Puluru. In a renewed battle against Fularadio and five hundred horsemen, Silamaka kills Fularadio. Larger and larger waves of horsemen sent out by Da Monzon attack in vain Silamaka, his friend, and a small number of horsemen. Silamaka, in doubt about the death of so many people and the consequences of his acts, consults a diviner. His coming glorious death is predicted. In the meantime Da Monzon, with the help of many sages and seers, has prepared a powerful magical device that will destroy Silamaka. Before embarking on his last battle, Silamaka sends his friend, Puluru, off with a secret message for Hambodédio. In it he announces

his coming death and the supreme leadership of Hambodédio. During the ensuing battle, Silamaka is killed by an uncircumcised young albino with an arrow dipped in the pounded bones of a black steer. The horse of the dying hero carries him back to the village where the returning Puluru can only weep for his friend's death. Da Monzon sends many horsemen against Silamaka's village, but Puluru flees on horseback with his and Silamaka's sons. Carrying Silamaka's enchanted spear, he splits the attacking horsemen into two groups: one group which he pursues, one group by which he is pursued. Night falls, all disappear. Nobody knows where they really went, but legend has it that they all went to heaven. Hambodédio finally obtains from Da Monzon the promise that the Macina area, over which Silamaka ruled, will not be reduced to a state of captivity. In the beautiful poetic verse or lines of this epic, the bard harmoniously intermingles the narrative of events and deeds with praises, aphoristic expressions, conversations, and challenges.

The Sunjata Epic of the Mandeka

The epic of this thirteenth-century king of the Mali Empire is well known through various sources.[17] It is still widely sung in many areas that at one time formed part of the Mali Empire,[18] and is part of a common, central tradition that links many Mande-speaking peoples across several West African countries, such as Guinea, Mali, Senegal, the Gambia, Ivory Coast, Upper Volta, and Ghana. The thematic material of the epic obviously varies from performer to performer, from performance to performance, and probably also from region to region. Bird, however, has clearly delineated the central core of the epic which, in the various known versions, centers around a triple set of data: the events leading to the birth of Sunjata, his youth and exile from the Mande, his return to reconquer the Mande from the impostor, Sumanguru.[19] The thematic outline is as follows. Faraku Magan Cenyi, father of the future hero, Sunjata, receives the prophecy that he will beget a son who will become a great king. For the prophecy to come true, Magan must marry a woman brought to him by a hunter. The story then shifts to two hunters traveling through the bush in pursuit of an enormous buffalo, which has decimated many subjects of a local king. They meet with an old woman, whom they befriend, and who is none other than the buffalo (the woman, in other words, has the power of metamorphosis). She explains to the hunters the secrets for killing the buffalo on the condition that the hunters ask the local king for the ugliest woman as a prize for their efforts. Having achieved their task, the hunters claim and receive the ugliest woman, called Sogolon. The senior of the two hunters does not want to take her as a wife because, as

is stated in one of the versions, he saw a column of light rising from her body. The hunters arrive in Magan's village and present him with Sogolon. Magan's first wife, Sasuma Berete, and his second wife, Sogolon, become pregnant the same day. They simultaneously give birth to two sons, respectively called Dankarantuma and Sunjata. Magan proclaims Sunjata as his heir, but the jealous Sasuma places a curse on him. For seven (or nine) years Sunjata is unable to walk. When he finally stands up, leaning on a gigantic iron staff, it is to revenge the honor of his mother. Growing up as a youth in his village, Sunjata accumulates extraordinary hunting and magical skills, and establishes alliances with the spirits of the bush. An intense conflict develops between him and his half-brother, Dankarantuma. Feeling that the existence of his mother, brother, and sister are threatened, Sunjata takes his mother and brother into exile to Mema, in Mossi country. Here he lives by hunting. His skills are much appreciated by the local king and he stays for many years. In the meantime Dankarantuma is chased from his kingdom by Sumanguru, the blacksmith-king of Sosso. Terror reigns everywhere and all the oracles point to Sunjata as the possible savior of his people. Messengers, sent out to find him, convince Sunjata to return. His mother, Sogolon, dies on the way home. Sunjata sets up alliances with various kings and builds an army to reconquer Mande from Sumanguru. Sumanguru has an immense power; in one version it is said that he has sixty-nine ways of metamorphosis. In the first two encounters, Sunjata is defeated. Finally, with the help of his sister and of Fakoli, Sumanguru's nephew, Sunjata learns about Sumanguru's secrets. He achieves a complete victory on the Niger plain at Kirina Sumanguru, fleeing northward, is trapped but manages to transform himself into stone. The open-ended epic glorifies the further expansion and stabilization of the empire up to Sunjata's death. In one version Sunjata, having broken an ancestral pact with the Fulani, drowns and is changed into an hippopotamus. Some versions may include an account of Sunjata's descendants and the history of the empire up to the present day.

Other Epics from West Africa

The Ozidi epic of the Ijaw of Southern Nigeria is only partially known to me.[20] In the city-state of Orua there are many warlords, but Ozidi is the most prominent of them all. King after king dies and finally, Temugedege, Ozidi's idiotic brother, is made king. Ozidi, angered over his brother's behavior, abuses the town. Several warlords conspire against him and kill him in ambush. Ozidi's wife and her mother fly back to their home town, and there the wife becomes posthumously pregnant. After a normal pregnancy,

she delivers a son, the younger Ozidi, at the end of a seven day long labor coinciding with a great storm. The remaining part of the epic deals with the extraordinary events of his youth, his apprenticeships with his grandmother, the great witch, Oreami. The hero goes through many battles and adventures to regain the lost glory of his lineage. In the words of Clark: "In this process, he oversteps the natural bounds set to his quest, and it is not until he has received divine visitation from the Small-Pox King that he emerges purged and vindicated."[21]

Various sources mention other epics from West Africa, such as *Klama* of the Adangme (Ghana) and *Gassire* of the Soninke.[22] The published documentation, however, does not allow further discussion of them.

EPICS OF THE BANTU-SPEAKING PEOPLES

The Mwindo Cycle of the Banyanga

Biebuyck has recorded five epics and several epic fragments among the Nyanga (Zaïre Republic). The epics center around the hero, Mwindo, also called in some versions Mwindo Mboru, Kabutwakenda, and Kaboru ka Mwindo.[23] In one published version of the Mwindo epic from the Banyanga (Zaïre Republic) the central hero, Mwindo, is the miraculously born son of Chief Shemwindo and his preferred wife.[24] Rejected by his father, who did not want any of his wives to bear sons, the newly born Mwindo successfully escapes his father's attempts to kill him. Locked up in a drum by his father's counsellors, he travels in a river in search of his father's sister, who is married to Water-Serpent. Liberated from the drum by his paternal aunt, Iyangura, he returns with her to his village in search of his father. Mwindo could walk and talk from birth. He had the gift of premonition and was born with a magical scepter and shoulderbag. Thus on the journey home he performs extraordinary deeds until he reaches his village from which his father has escaped. He destroys the village and sets out, in subterranean travels, in search of his father. In the realm of subterranean beings and divinities he successfully performs many Herculean tasks, until his father is turned over to him. He carries his father home, revivifying on his way the many enemies whom he had overcome. A great council is convened in which all parties express opinions. The kingdom is divided into two parts, one ruled by the hero, one ruled by his father. But the troubles are not finished. Mwindo's Pygmies, on a hunting party, are swallowed by the dragon, Kirimu. Mwindo himself goes to defeat the dragon and to liberate his Pygmies. But the destruction of the dragon disturbs Lightning, a friend and ally of both Mwindo and Kirimu.

Lightning comes to seize the hero, and rambles with him in the celestial realms of Moon, Sun, Star, and others for one full year. Here the powerless here undergoes, in pure passivity, his final purification. He is returned to earth with plenty of warnings and prescriptions. Mwindo now rules as a glorious chief, prescribing for his people a set of rules for harmonious interrelationships.

The Lianja Epic Cycle of the Mongo

Several versions of the Lianja epic of the Mongo (Zaïre Republic) have been published by Boelaert and his collaborators.[25] The thematic core of these epics has been synthesized by De Rop.[26] I present his synthesis in summary. The different versions generally begin with a longer or shorter introduction in which the creation of the world or the ancestors of the hero (beginning with his great-grandfather) are depicted. The world of Lianja's ancestors is already filled with extraordinary events. Mbombe, the mother of the hero to be born, eats only a rare *losau* fruit during her pregnancy. Her husband, Ilele, compelled to search for it has initial successes, but finally dies in his many battles with animals and birds around the mysterious tree. When the news of her husband's death reaches the village, Mbombe begins to give birth to various animals and humans. Finally her twin children, Lianja and his sister, Nsongo, are born. According to some versions, the birth is miraculous. Lianja comes out of his mother's tibia with all the weapons and insignia of his father. Nsongo, carrying various objects, is born fully adult and beautiful. Right after birth, Lianja sets out to revenge his father. In one version he is accompanied by an army that includes Pygmoids, members of different Mongo tribes, and insects (ants, bees, wasps). Having destroyed his father's murderer, Lianja now leads his people to a promised land near the river. He conquers several forest tribes and, at the request of his sister, incorporates them into his army. He also fights with ogres. As they progress towards the river, various groups stay behind and settle the land. Arriving near the river, Lianja establishes his people, then assembles them around a tall palm tree. Carrying his sister on the hip, his senior brother on the knees, his mother on the shoulders, he disappears into the sky. One version deals with the descendants of Lianja, his son and his grandson, who continue their battles against enemy tribes, and his daughter, who gives birth to the ancestors of the whites.

The Mubila Epic of the Balega (Zaïre Republic)

This is one of a cycle of epics that revolve around various heroes.[27] The

epic begins with the circumstances that lead to the hero's birth. His father, Yombi, has forty-one wives. Thirty-nine sons and one daughter are born of his first forty wives in rapid succession. Thereafter, his most junior and beloved wife gives birth to the hero, Mubila. Before and after birth, Mubila has many properties and characteristics. He speaks in the womb, uses magical formulae, and selects his own name. The hero is born holding a spear, a knife, a shield, a belt, and a necklace. Mubila has a shoulderbag in which he can hide all his followers, and he possesses a love whistle. He has very long nails and eyebrows like an elephant tail. Within himself, he has an immaterial substance which he consults and which advises him in all difficulties. Mubila has the gift of prognosis, great physical strength, and he can fly through the air. He is vulnerable but possesses the power of resuscitation. Right after birth, Mubila is ready for exceptional action which he himself elicits. The hero acts as the senior of all the brothers. He decides to build his own village, leaves his father behind with one of his brothers, and settles with the others in the new village. Soon after, he hears the news of his father's death. He accuses his brother, Youthful-Greatness, of his father's death, compelling him to flee to a remote village. This event gives rise to a first set of episodes. Mubila, in search of his brother, is faced with events that rapidly develop into a consecutive chain of difficulties, confrontations, and successes. For example, he seduces and marries his first wife, Kabungulu, who becomes his most powerful ally. He enters into conflict with several diviners. He seduces and marries his second wife and pursues those who eloped with his sister. He has encounters with the Maiden-with-the-half-closed-eyes, with Fish and Water-Serpent, with Snail-shell-collector, and so on. One event leads to another, each apparently resolved conflict develops into a new one. And, particularly, Mubila is incessantly faced by new dilemmas at the Junction-of-the-one-hundred-forty-trails. In one of his violent encounters, Mubila is speared and apparently dies. In the meantime his newborn son, Ashes, sets out to recover his father's body. Faced by his son and wife, Mubila's body revivifies. A new set of episodes develop in search of Shrieking-Song, who had killed him, and of Bungoe, who had given hospitality to Shrieking-Song. In the course of this action Mubila, with the help of his wives and brothers, engages in many battles and other activities. He fights with heroes and personified animals. He marries his third wife. He is involved in hunting, honey gathering, felling trees, trapping, dice and ball games. He is partially initiated into the *bwami* association and undergoes a second circumcision. He dies and resuscitates again. An endless series of events and feats build up around each action. The constant flow of these extraordinary situations is regularly interrupted by the hero's return to his village and by his return to the Junction-of-one-hundred-forty-trails, where new dilemmas pose themselves. The long epic ends, rather

abruptly, *in medias res*, in Mubila's home village, which he has cleared from an intruder, and where people engage in drumming and dancing.

The Kudukese and Lofokefoke Epics

Shorter epics from the Mongo-related Mbole and Hamba (Zaïre Republic) have been published by Jacobs.[28] The heroes in these epics (Kudukese, among the Hamba, and Lofokefoke, among the Mbole) are different from the central characters in the other already discussed epics in that they combine both human and animal traits. *The Kudukese epic* opens with the history of two beings, Mbodyetonga and Ehanjola, and the magical tricks they play on each other. This leads to a wonderful forest world and the fantastic hunting adventures of Cetakolo and Ngengu (two personified animals). Attracted by the voices of women, these two hunters travel for hundreds of miles through the forest to find a giant tree loaded with young women. The hunters, and many other animals, try in vain to reach the women. There finally emerges Kudukese, dressed as a great initiate and carrying his divination calabash. With the help of magical means he reaches the women, takes one for himself and distributes the others among the animals. Kudukese now travels through the land, destroying his many enemies who try to seize his wife. In these encounters he dies and resuscitates two times. His third death, however, is fatal. Ofunga, a sorcerer who killed Kudukese, seizes the latter's wife. Kudukese is buried, and soon thereafter his wife is expecting a child. Ofunga is killed by Kudukese's followers, and when she hears about his death, his wife gives birth to various things: rivers, a giant spider, and to the hero, Okangate. Okangate is miraculously born. He speaks in the womb. He is fully adult from birth and extremely tall. His mother dies after his birth. Okangate performs many wonderful deeds, but children scorn him as an orphan. So he brings his mother back to life, and engages in a series of feats to find out where and by whom his father was killed. He returns from each of these expeditions without his father, but loaded with many things for his mother (baskets, sheep, pigs, elephants, blacksmiths, even the sun and the moon). In each crisis his major help comes from the giant spider. The open-ended epic finishes abruptly. The narrator simply states that Okangate, his mother, and the giant spider died of hunger, and that Okangate was buried in a cave.

In the Lofokefoke epic of the Mbole (Bambuli), the central hero, Lofokefoke, presents himself under a semi-animal (rodent) and semi-human form. A hunter encounters a large tree filled with women. He and some of his people, however, are unable to get at them. So they send for Bakese

Bonyonga, who lives in a remote area, past the region of the spirits of the dead. Bakese succeeds in his efforts. With his wife, whom he has taught a magical incantation and given a powerful amulet, Bakese successfully defeats many animal foes. He arrives in the village of Bosunga. After a good reception, the conflicts begin. Bakese (standing on the roofs of the houses and intercepting spears thrown at him) kills Bosunga's people, but finally Bosunga kills him and takes his wife. Soon, thereafter, the woman is pregnant. She desires to eat only certain fruits which Bosunga must collect. Bosunga is killed by the spirits of the dead. For a full year the woman continues to weep for her deceased first husband. As she goes on, all persons killed by Bakese are resuscitated. She gives birth to seven children, the last of whom is Lofokefoke. The miraculously born Lofokefoke immediately inquires about the place where his father has died. Relentlessly, he performs many amazing deeds that prove his invulnerability. For seven years Lofokefoke and his brothers pursue an elephant, which he had killed before and which had magically escaped him. The elephant is finally found dead in his village. Lofokefoke plays ball with the elephants, batting with a whole tree and throwing the ball as high as the sun. He captures the discouraged elephant and returns home. On his homebound journey, he decimates the people of many villages with his knives, Longombo and Lolakanga. He crosses the Lomami River, whose waters separate for him. He then arrives in the villages of several brothers, always in a destructive mood, but he does not succeed in killing them. After his return, he fights for seven years against his senior brother, Basele, without results. He kills his sister Mangana and he resumes the fight against Basele without success. He engages in many other fights, hunts, killings, and extraordinary feats. The epic ends with a number of exploits, which Lofokefoke performs to convince his son of his force. During his last effort to kill all the hippopotami of the Lomami River, Lofokefoke is killed. All his children are killed in trying to destroy the hippopotami.

The Akoma Mba Cycle

An elaborate epic cycle centers around the hero, Akoma Mba, a ruler of Engong, among the Fang and some other groups in a wide area of the Gabon, the Cameroun Republic, and the Rio Muni.[29] Akoma Mba, conceived out of incestuous relationships between a brother and a sister, is miraculously born after his mother had carried him for one hundred and fifty years. He terrorizes his entourage and is, therefore, given to a certain Mba of the Ekang tribe who marries his mother. His father calls him "Wrinkle of Elephant, son

of Mba," but since he becomes fiercer and fiercer, people call him Akoma Mba, the creator of Mba (as if he had brought forth his own father). During his entire youth, Akoma Mba engages in many extraordinary exploits to become the ruler of all the Ekang. Having taken power, he goes to establish himself with his people, the Ekang, at Engong. Akoma Mba rules as absolute monarch among a strong people, for all Ekang are invulnerable, invincible, and immortal.[30]

One long text celebrates the conflict between Akoma Mba and Abo Mama. Dissatisfied with the choice of a certain Otungu Mba as territorial chief, Abo Mama removes Otungu Mba far in the forest away from his people. In the meantime two cousins are born the same day that they were conceived. It is their mission to find and to revenge Otungu Mba. Before embarking on his task, however, one of the cousins, Mengana Mba, crosses the universe in search of "that to which nothing can be compared." After many peripeties, he finally arrives in the land of King Mfim Ekie and is transformed into a woman. Akoma Mba gets the news; he assembles his people, and engages in a war against Mfim. Akoma Mba locks the entire country of Mfim up in a rock which he transports home. Mfim becomes Akoma Mba's subject, and he and his people must do all the agricultural work for the Ekang. In a following passage Akoma Mba is involved in a war against Mbo Mama, which he finally wins after many initial difficulties.[31]

The Mvet of Zwe Nguema

The action centers around the humans of the land of Oku who try to steal immortality from the immortal beings of Engong Country.[32] The prologue of the epic gives an elaborate introduction to the immortal beings of Engong (their origins, their genealogy, their leaders, the events in which they were involved) and how the people of Oku separated from them. Soon a conflict develops between the two groups. Zong Midzi, of the land of Oku, sends a challenge to the land of Engong, because a certain Angone Endong over there does not let him breathe freely. Informed about the arrival of messengers, the people of Engong, under the command of Akoma Mba assemble to hear the announcement of the coming battle. On the point of leaving to confront Zong Midzi alone, Angone Endong deposits his weapons at the request of Nkudang. She is a girl who had remained indifferent before thousands of suitors and who now desires Zong Midzi, whom she has never seen but whose name she likes. Unable to find messengers, she convinces her mother to accompany her to her maternal uncle's in the land of Oku. During the journey she learns that, for Zong Midzi, no one counts more than his

wife, the beautiful Esone Abeng. Arriving at her maternal uncle's, Nkudang asks him to go and fetch Zong Midzi. In the meantime many suitors visit her, but only Nsure Afane, the incomparable boy, enjoys her favors. Zong Midzi receives the message of her arrival. Irritated and intrigued, he arms himself and goes, accompanied by his wife Esone Abeng. They spend the night on the road. That night, Nsure Afane feels that disaster is coming. He alerts the village and returns with Nkudang and her mother to the land of Engong. Zong Midzi and his wife pursue them and meet with them at the crossroads of eight trails. Soon a conflict develops. Zong Midzi beheads Nkudang. Nsure Afane beheads Zong Midzi's wife and flies on a magic ball back to Engong, carrying the two heads. The ill fate is already known in Engong, for Akoma Mba has seen all events in his mirror. It is decided that Nsure Afane must die, but he manages to escape on the magic ball. Zong Midzi is now ravaging the village of Nsure. In the meantime the best warriors of Engong, flying with iron wings, are in his pursuit. Nsure Afane, returned to his village, engages in a fantastic combat with Zong Midzi. The battle continues when one of the Engong warriors takes over. Zong Midzi is immobilized for a moment, but manages to disappear under the ground where his ancestors protect him. He returns after four days, equipped with magic weapons. The warriors of Engong get seriously hurt. But they use new devices and they blind Zong Midzi with a tuft of feathers. One Engong warrior captures him, and flies back with him to Engong, while the others continue to ravage the land of Oku. Badly guarded in the place of the secret council, Zong Midzi escapes and returns to his ancestors in Oku. They decide to make him immortal like the people of Engong. But their work is interrupted by Scorpion, who was sent out by the Engong people to track him. Akoma Mba and his magician in Engong see at a distance everything that happens. Foreseeing the dangers involved in Zong Midzi's immortality, they request the ancestors of Engong to halt the transformation of Zong Midzi. He returns to his normal state, but receives from his ancestors a magical gun whose bullets follow their aim wherever he goes. Entrenched in his cavern, Zong Midzi must come out of it to avoid being asphyxiated by the warriors of Engong. The bullets work relentlessly, but one of the Engong warriors manages to stick a magnetized shield to Zong Midzi's back and propel him to Engong by means of a magic ball. Zong Midzi is now back in Engong in the place of the Secret Council. His charms are removed. Akoma Mba makes his belly explode and Zong Midzi dies.

Kapepe

Among the Benamukuni (Lenje) of Zambia, an epic text that shows

many similarities with the Nyanga epics glorifies Kapepe.[33] Born against his father's will, but aided by his mother, some cousins and an old woman, Kapepe must marry the daughter of the supreme god, Lesa. On his journey, the hero receives from an old woman a magical feather which counsels him in all circumstances. Many obstacles notwithstanding (elephants, buffaloes, serpents, lions, large rivers, mountains), the hero arrives in the city of God. Here he overcomes all tricks and successfully passes through all the ordeals that are imposed upon him. Having received God's daughter, he clears all the new obstacles and dilemmas that confront him on his journey home. Soon, however, the divine wife, bored with terrestrial life, returns home, followed by Kapepe, who also decides to remain in God's realm.[34]

THE BARDS

The various bards who actually sang, recited, and narrated the epic texts discussed in this study are obviously known by name.[35] Many interesting data are available about the general social background and position of these bards and their methods of performance. But more work needs to be done on their personality, their methods of learning, and their individual creative talents.

Among the Mande-speaking populations, these bards, called *griot* in the literature, constitute distinctive groups of specialists in a caste-like structure. Among the Bambara, the epic-singing bards (*jeli*) form one of several artisan castes. They hold the exclusive patrimony of the great epics, such as Sunjata and Da Monzon. The female bards of this caste specialize in praise songs.[36] The bards in this culture are many things: musicians; arbiters and negotiators; counsellors of headmen, chiefs, and kings; historians. Of course, not every one in such a caste is a musician or bard. Young individuals are carefully selected because of their talents. They specialize in the playing of different musical instruments. An apprenticeship lasts from five to ten years, and combines manual and intellectual work. The *mvet* performers of the Gabon and Cameroun area fall into two categories: those who sing and play the *mvet* instrument, those who sing and are accompanied by another musician. A good performer always has several apprentices, sometimes from different villages. When an apprentice is well instructed, he passes through a formal initiation that may last several days. During the secret part of the initiation, he receives the magic objects that will stimulate his imagination and instruct him in the various prescriptions linked with his function. During the public part of the initiation, he drinks and eats prescribed concoctions, undergoes a test of cleverness, and gives a night performance.[37]

The bards of the Nyanga do not belong to any kind of specialized or exclusive lineages or clans. However, the epic-singing bards of the Nyanga, whom I have studied, have close connections through their ascendancy, or in the line of bards whose traditions they perpetuate, with the Pygmies. From many points of view, their social position is not different from that of other narrators or musicians; only their fame is greater.

The published literature does not yet allow us to fully assess the degree to which and the manner in which the individual creative art of each bard is reflected in his performance, and how this individual creativity may be at work from performance to performance. The element of individual variability is undoubtedly strong, because the bard is, as Albert Lord has pointed out for other epic traditions, not just a performing, but also a creative artist. He creates while he performs. He selects, adjusts, and modifies episodes, sometimes in response to the actual composition of his audience or in response to the social position of his hosts and sponsors. On the other hand, he acts and performs in an ethnic world where principles of conformity and tradition are very strong. Moreover, he consciously represents and follows certain "schools" of tradition, since he is a member of a certain family of bards or a certain lineage, and since he learned his art from particular masters. Among the Fang, for example, the great bards give genealogies of the specific narrators (as many as eleven in some cases) whose traditions they perpetuate. Among the Nyanga, each bard clearly indicates a line of three to four narrators whose tradition he represents. In other words, in judging individual creativity we must realize that there exist within any given ethnic group many parallel traditions developing within the overall stylistic and thematic tradition. A comparison of five epics of the Mwindo cycle indicates considerable differences in actual wording, poetic imagery, number and arrangement of episodes, elaboration of heroic themes and characters, and value emphasis. But all this is worked into a stable core of epic themes, structure and plan. No one knows exactly how many epic texts (full texts, independent episodes, and fragments) a single bard may know, and how extensive his knowledge of the other genres is, but there are definitely great differences from narrator to narrator. Among the Bambara, a single *griot* may know as many as twelve episodes of ten thousand verses each.[38] A narrator like Sherungu among the Nyanga knows only one fairly complete, but short, epic though his knowledge of songs, proverbs, riddles, prayers, formulae and tales includes several hundreds of texts. In some areas, like Nyanga or Hamba, the number of bards knowing more or less complete versions of an epic had dwindled to a few individuals during the fifties and sixties. Elsewhere, as among the Bambara or Mongo, their numbers are much larger.

THE PERFORMANCES

The performances of epics are highly complex events which must be viewed as total social and artistic phenomena. Besides the actual bard and his aides (eventually including the apprentices), there is a diverse, and sometimes large, actively participating audience. There is a constant interplay between these three categories of participants. The actual presentation of the epic narrative is enhanced with musical performance (one or more musical instruments, eventually of different type); appropriate costumes and adornments, singing, chanting, praising, dialoguing, dancing, gesticulating, hand-clapping; dramatic re-enactments, and gift exchanges.

In most areas, the bards are specially dressed or adorned for the occasion. Among the Nyanga the paraphernalia are minimal; the bard holds a calabash rattle and a small scepter (made of a roughly carved wooden handle that is adorned with some feathers) in his hands. The Mongo bards, wearing a feather hat, adorn their bodies and face with various geometrical designs, and carry a ceremonial knife or spear. Among the Fang, the bards wear a feather hat, a mane-like coiffure, a fiber skirt, a multitude of wild animal skins that hang from their arms and waist, and anklet bells.[39] Some of these simple paraphernalia seem to have very special meanings. For one, the bards strongly identify with the principal hero of the epic; they may suggest his physical presence by means of some of the objects and accoutrements. The scepter carried by the Nyanga bard, Rureke, suggests the magical *conga*-scepter of the hero, Mwindo. The spear or knife held by the Mongo bards evoke the same objects with which the hero, Lianja, was born. Certain Mongo bards assert that they could not sing and recite the epic without holding these objects, which they receive from their teachers as a sign of their full-fledged status as bards.

During the narration the bards can be seated, but they also engage in acting, miming, gesticulating and dancing. The Nyanga bard interrupts the narration to enact certain activities or events in which the hero is involved. This acting is also the reason why some bards, among the Fang, prefer to leave the handling of musical instruments to their aides.

Musical instruments, played by the bard and/or his aides, are an essential part of the performance. In some areas the type and number of musical instruments used are strictly determined. Among the Nyanga, the bard accompanies himself with a calabash-rattle, while three aides do the percussion on a dry housebeam or bamboo. The Mongo bard is accompanied by a small *lokole*-drum which may be replaced by two blocks of wood, each beaten in a different rhythm by a percussionist. The Fang bard can

accompany himself with an elaborate chordophone called *mvet*. One or two of these instruments can be played by his helpers, while other aides do the percussion on a dry bamboo, a piece of banana stipe, or on a rolled-up hide. Other Fang bards may be accompanied by slit-drums and membranophones. In the Mande area of West Africa, the twenty-one string lute-harp (*Kora*) is mostly used, but other instruments, such as xylophones, drums, or a four-stringed banjo-like instrument may be preferred.[40] The audience itself invariably responds to the songs, and among the Hamba one of the listeners provides the rhythm by beating two sticks together. The aides, only male in some areas, both male and female in other areas, may include apprentices and kinsfolk. Among the Fang, one such group comprises the wives and children of the bard.[41]

In several regions the entire epic is sung or chanted. Among the Mongo and related groups, certain portions of the epic are sung and others are narrated. The Nyanga bards sing the entire text, short episode after episode. After each sung episode, they pause and re-narrate the text with appropriate acting.

Each performance has its own flavor of originality. The bard is not bound by a rigid text that he must follow with precision. He can introduce into the narrative certain episodes or characters, and leave others out. He inserts personal reflections, proverbs, statements. He digresses to speak about himself, his ancestors, his experiences, his clan or caste, his artistry, his musical instrument, his teachers and predecessors, or about certain members of the audience. The narrative may be interspersed with longer pauses, to eat or drink, for dance performances, for dramatic action, for musical interludes, for praises.

On the whole, the performances are not linked with specific, narrowly defined ceremonies, rites, or periods of time. Bards perform at their own initiative, or at the request of a patron or host. For their rewards they largely depend on the generosity of the audience and the hosts. Most epics belong, so to speak, to the entire community, to all the people. A large, mixed, nonexclusive audience listens to and participates in the performance. The audience responds with dialogue and praises, refrain singing and dances, handclapping and percussion. The performance of an epic is an outstanding example of collective rejoicing and of entertainment that enriches and enlightens.

Performances take place in the open air, in the setting of a village or a compound. The bard and his aides may also sit under a hangar or in a communal house, as is the case among the Fang. In most instances no specific time is prescribed, but bards, like other narrators, seem generally to prefer the

evening and the night. The actual length of the performance is variable. This is understandable; the performance can easily be restricted to one or more self-contained episodes, and there is also the factor of fatigue. Episodes narrated among the Hamba lasted about two and one-half hours. The *Mvet* of Zwe Nguema among the Fang was performed in one nightly session and without interruption for ten hours. Mongo bards also prefer one long continuous performance of the entire epic. The Nyanga and Lega performances, that I attended, unrolled episode after episode for several hours a day, and for several days.

CONTENT AND STRUCTURE

It is clear from the foregoing summaries that the contents of these epics vary widely from ethnic group to ethnic group. It is also certain that within any of the epic-producing ethnic groups there exist a great number of parallel epic traditions, clustering about different, related or unrelated, central heroic figures. There exist also within the ethnic group numerous parallel traditions of the same epic, because of the occurrence of independently working bards of different families, lineages, and clans, trained in different "schools" of tradition. Individual variability and creativity are at work, marking off one performer from another, and one performance from the other. On the other hand, similar epic traditions may be distributed at the multiethnic level among closely and more remotely related peoples. The Lianja epic, for example, is found among such Mongo-speaking, closely related tribes as Nkundo, Boyela, Ekota, Ekonda, Mongo of Basankusu. Epics very closely akin in themes and structure to Lianja occur among more remotely related groups as Hamba, Mbole (Bambuli), Langa, Basiamba.[42] The epic traditions are pretty much open-ended. One performer may start with a great number of preludes and introductions, tracing the origins of the heroes and the antecedents of the events and actions, and introducing elaborate genealogies and cosmologies. Another performer may begin, so to speak, *in medias res*, with a vital event or activity that leads right into the main action, without bothering about preliminaries and other explanatory materials. One performer may focus in great detail on certain episodes and heroes, omitting or barely suggesting other events and characters. Another performer may indulge in numerous digressions of all sorts, praising his hosts or himself, alluding to personal experiences, and introducing anecdotes, explanations, philosophical and moral reflections. Some bards delight in detailed descriptions of councils, divination and healing scenes, speeches, conversations, and verbal challenges. Others pass rapidly over such points, to ensure a steady flow of action. Some

bards finish the epic with the death or glorification of the main hero, others pursue the story of his heroic descendants.

Regardless of these many differences, however, for each epic tradition there seems to be a central core. In the various known versions of the Sunjata epic, Bird perceives a clear-cut central core of thematic material. It includes events leading to the birth of the hero; the hero's youth and exile from the Mande; the hero's return to reconquer the Mande from Sumanguru. Each major set includes a recurring number of episodes.[43] De Rop has also shown the recurrence, in the various versions of the Lianja epic, of a central core constructed around: the ancestors of the hero; the hero's parents, and his father's death; the extraordinary birth of the hero; the hero's revenge of his father's death; the exodus to the promised land.[44] In a forthcoming work on the different versions of the Mwindo epic from the Nyanga, I have also analyzed the core materials. More importantly perhaps, I have shown how these Nyanga epics explicitly and implicitly follow a common spatial plan, in which the main hero acts in the four cosmic spheres and their subdivisions as the Nyanga recognize them.[45] Such a common thematic plan may even underly epics from different, but related/or contiguous, ethnic groups. Jacobs has indicated how epics collected by him among the Hamba, Mbole, Langa, Nkutshu, Kuni, Jonga, and Basiamba are constituted around the following essential parts: the discovery of a tree with women; the pregnancy of the hero's mother, and her desire for a certain type of fruit; the death of the hero's father; the miraculous birth of the hero; the hero's adventures and journeys in search of revenge of his father's death; the death of the hero (often presented as three consecutive deaths of the same hero).[46]

Underlying the various epics are, of course, many of the quasi-universal epic patterns with many variations from culture to culture, and within the same culture. To give a few examples, the epics illustrate many different cases of a miraculous conception and birth. One hero is born the same day that he was conceived; another is born after a one hundred-fifty year long pregnancy of his mother; still another is born through parthenogenesis. Some of the heroes are active and can talk while they are still in their mother's womb. They leave and reenter the womb freely and also decide autonomously the manner and the moment of birth. One is born through the palm of his mother's hand, another through his mother's medius, and still another by ripping open his mother's belly. The heroes are born possessing certain gifts (the capacity to walk and talk, the gift of prognosis and invulnerability) and holding certain objects (knives, scepters, spears, shoulderbags, and so on). Most heroes are ready for great action right after birth, but Sunjata is weak and cannot walk for many years after his birth. There are numerous other common patterns:

Herculean deeds, extraterrestrial journeys, fierce individual battles with heroes, divinities, animals, dragons, and monsters; possession of extraordinary magical devices; tests of strength and intelligence; games. Some of the heroes are quasi-invulnerable and invincible; others have the capacity to resuscitate themselves and to revivify others, to make themselves invisible, and so on. Whereas most of the main heroes are fierce warriors and ruthless fighters possessing superhuman strength, there are exceptions to this pattern. Mwindo, the hero of the Nyanga, is a small being; he is not a great killer or fighter; he pays great attention to revivifying his defeated enemies, and becomes, through purification in the celestial sphere, a poised, peace-minded, and balanced leader of his people.[47]

Whatever the character of the heroes and the development and elaboration of the epic patterns may be, all epics obviously provide rich, unsolicited information on the cultures and societies in which they occur. There are references to customs, institutions, patterns of behavior, techniques, beliefs, and values throughout the epic, particularly at certain stages through catalogues, genealogies, and descriptions. The ways in which and the extent to which the cultural patterns are directly or indirectly reflected, distorted, or omitted from these epics, need further detailed study. The analysis of the Mwindo epics from the Nyanga shows, on the one hand, an immense amount of accurate detail on various aspects of culture, and on the other hand, a lack of such precision, a more or less deliberate distortion and a conscious omission of other cultural features. This is not the result of the relative knowledge of individual narrators, nor a random situation, but a reflection of deep values and thought patterns in Nyanga.[48] The West African epics of Sunjata, Monzon, and Silamaka offer considerable insight into the history of the Mandeka, Bambara, and Fulani peoples. The central heroes of these epics are known historical figures. But even here, there is obviously much manipulation of objective history for purposes of glorification, extravagance, factionalism, and regionalism.[49] The extent to which history is reflected in the epics of the Fang, the Mongo, the Nyanga or the Lega is difficult to perceive. The central heroes are not immediately known historical figures. These epics more or less explicitly refer to historical migrations, conflicts, feuds, and wars in which such large, politically uncentralized ethnic groups as the Fang and Mongo have been involved. The Mubila epic of the Lega largely bears on an early historical period when the Lega, divided by internecine war, had not yet found the unifying bond of the *bwami* association.[50] The Mwindo epics of the Nyanga, on the other hand, provide very little historical evidence—so little that even in casual statements, in vocabulary and description, very few indications point to the fact that the Nyanga migrated

into the forest regions from East Africa, and that they are in contact with not only other African peoples, but also Europeans.

African epics present extremely significant testimonies about the value systems and patterns of thought of African peoples. Several authors have pointed out that in the Sunjata epic the main hero is depicted as a good leader whose destiny it is to make immortal the name of the Mali Empire. He is a good leader because by going into exile he avoids bringing the intense rivalry between himself and his father's son to a climax. He returns only after the throne has been left vacant and has been usurped by a foreigner.[51] Bird sees a political charter underlying the Sunjata epic: it not only instructs the king in how to deal with people, but it also instructs the people about their rights and duties toward the king. The king can be harsh and severe, but not unjust; he must, for example, respect the forces of love, trust, allegiance, which keep society together. In a certain sense the hero, Sunjata, is a spiritual more than a physical force. The Mwindo epic of the Nyanga explicitly stresses the values of hospitality, generosity, kinship, clemency, reconciliation, filial piety, and so forth. For a major portion of the epic, however, the character of the hero is in flagrant contradiction with the value code of the Nyanga. Through much of the epic, Mwindo is arrogant, boisterous, agressive, verbose, irascible, quarrelsome, pugnacious, and so on. These traits make him somewhat funny and unlikely for the Nyanga. Ultimately, in a totally passive manner, he goes through a complete catharsis and transformation at the hands of the celestial elements. He returns to earth to rule in glory as a poised, peace-loving reflective chief. Mubila, the ruthless, militant, pompous hero of one of the Lega epics, is throughout the epic in flagrant opposition with the value code of moderation and temperance that prevails in the *bwami* association which dominates Lega social and moral life. He illustrates, so to speak, an earlier, archaic, unacceptable type of leader. In the Lianja epic the values of perseverance, tenacity of purpose, courage, and honor are prominently emphasized. The hero, in his pursuit of glory, must avoid all actions that are blameworthy and shameful.[52]

AGE, ORIGIN, AND AUTHORSHIP OF THE EPICS

The questions of age and origin of the orally transmitted African epics – so important for the scientific study of the epic traditions of other world literatures – are of relatively little relevance in this study. For one, it does not seem to be possible to ever find reasonable answers to these questions. Let us take the Nyanga. This small, forest-dwelling population, which possesses an extremely complex and diversified culture, has very limited

historical interests. The Nyanga are conscious of having immigrated from Uganda (East Africa) into the deep rain forest where they now live and where they encountered and assimilated Pygmies and other archaic groups. The actual processes, stages, and time periods at which all this happened are largely irrelevant to them. The Nyanga bards, who otherwise know so many things, have only a shallow recollection of the predecessors whose traditions they follow. The few indications that they provide point to the possibility that the epics, or at least the materials of which epics are made, were already known to the Pygmies before the Nyanga encountered them. Furthermore, our present knowledge of the distribution of epics among Bantu-speaking peoples points to areas where as among the Fang, the Mongo, the Mbole, the Nyanga, and the Lega, Pygmy influences are very old and very significant. Is this, at the same time, an indication of the great age of these epic materials? Yet all this offers only a relative time indication. The Sunjata epic celebrates a ruler of the thirteenth century. It is possible that the core materials of the epic texts are as old as Sunjata, or even older. For, in these areas, there also are hunters' epics, which may be much older than Sunjata and which have probably served as models for it. It is also difficult, at this stage, to establish clear connections between the epics of different ethnic groups. Let us, for example, take the epic-producing forest-dwelling populations of Central Africa. The Mbole, Hamba, Basiamba, and others have remote historical, linguistic, and cultural connections with the Mongo. Therefore, it is not surprising that certain common details in pattern, structure, heroic characters, and events occur. The Nyanga and Lega have certain rather remote cultural and historical connections and they are territorially close to each other. There is, however, a radical difference between the epic traditions of both groups, and an even greater difference between any one of them and the Mongo.

Finally, the individual creators or bards who first developed or synthesized particular epic traditions are not known by name.[53] As already explained, the living bards may only recall a few predecessors and teachers in their own line of tradition. They are not concerned with the original version or archetype, or with the first compiler-creator of the epics.

STYLE

All African epics seem to be sung, either partially or in their entirety. Shorter passages may be chanted or recited, but even these portions are performed against a background of music. The musical accompaniment is frequently made, in the first place, by the bard himself, but close aides can take over this role. There are always several other musicians who contribute

to the musical background. And, of course, members of the audience, with or without musical instruments, intervene in the recitation, as a choir to sing refrains, to engage in dialogue, and to praise. The bards of the Bambara are musicians as well as singers.[54] There is an inseparable bond between the singer, his musical instrument, his text, reflected among the Fang in the generic term *mvett* or *mver*, which bears on all three.[55] Bambara epics have their characteristic air, and each hero has his musical theme.[56] Musical interludes, formal songs with refrains, musical dialogues between the bard and his aides/or audience are of the essence in the performance of epics. Much further research is, therefore, needed on the relationships between music and epic style. Some of the African epics are quite obviously formulated in verse form or "lines." Others seem to consist of an alternation between rhythmic prose and poetic songs. But even the so-called rhythmic prose abounds with poetic formulae that range from aphorisms to epithets. Bird has concluded that the Sunjata epic consists of "lines," the rhythmic constituents of which are defined not by accents or the number of syllables, but by the musical rhythm. He finds that a high correspondence exists between the poetic line and the measure of four accented beats.[57] The bards have at their disposal a vast repertoire of literary genres, and esthetic, stylistic and linguistic devices which they harmoniously blend in their epic narratives.[58] The epic style is riddled with aphorisms and other terse statements, formulae, incantations, songs, conversations, dialogues, speeches, succinct references to tales, prayers, praises, improvised reflections and remarks. These features contribute to the enhancement of a vivid, poetic, and florid style. The bards are masters of the verb. They have an extraordinary grasp of the vocabulary and its metaphorical properties, and of the grammar and its flexibilities. They are masters in the poetic usage of various stylistic and esthetic devices: repetition; reduplication of cores, radicals and cores; onomatopoeia and other sonorous effects; exclamations; enjambments. The formulae are particularly abundant and varied: epithets; patronymics; titles; stereotyped phrases; praises; aphorisms; riddles; incantations; standard place, time, and action references; and repetitions of words and ideas. Some Nyanga bards show a particular preference for indirect discourse, sometimes mixed in the same statement with direct discourse.[59] The art of praise, glorification, amplification, and embellishment is vigorously practiced by the bards in the characterization of the heroes, their manner of speaking, their manner of interpreting events. The vivacity of the performance, its color and intensity, are also greatly enhanced by the nonverbal and nonmusical elements of the presentation. It must be kept in mind that the bard acts, gesticulates, mimics, and dances.[60] No written, or even taped, analysis of the living epic can ever capture this

atmosphere of action and reaction by the singer, the musicians, the audience.[61] The total action in which the epic evolves lends particular vigor and poetry to the performance and its content.

NOTES

[1] Good general information is available in: Amadou H. Ba and Lilyan Kesteloot, "Les épopées de l'ouest africain," *Abbia* 14-15 (1966): 165-205; Daniel Biebuyck, "The Epic as a Genre in Congo Oral Literature," in *African Folklore*, ed. Richard M. Dorson (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1972), pp. 257-273; Robert Cornevin, "Les poèmes épiques africains et la notion d'epopée vivante," *Présence Africaine* n.s. 60 (1966): 140-145; John Jacobs, "Vergelijkende studie van enkele Afrikaanse heldenepen," *Bulletin des Séances* ARSOM, n.s. 18 (1972): 486-491; Jan Knappert, "The Epic in Africa," *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 4: 2/3 (1967): 171-190.

[2] Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1970), pp. 108-109, is unnecessarily sceptical about the existence of African epics, and the unity of such great texts as the Lianja epic of the Mongo.

[3] These various epics, and the relevant bibliographical references, are mentioned below. Many texts presented as unconnected tales or myths may be part of larger structured wholes that have escaped superficial observation.

[4] See, for example, Trevor Cope, *Izibongo: Zulu Praise-Poems* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1968); Daniel P. Kunene, *Heroic Poetry of the Basotho* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1971); H. F. Morris, *The Heroic Recitations of the Bahima of Ankole* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1964); I. Schapera, *Praise-Poems of Tswana Chiefs* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1965). Jan Knappert, "The Epic in Africa," *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 4 (1967): 171-190, provides useful information on these and other heroic and epic-like genres.

[5] Kunene, *Heroic Poetry*, pp. 53-67.

[6] For discussions of these genres, see A. Coupez and Th. Kamanzi, *Récits historiques Rwanda* (Tervuren: Musée royal de l'Afrique Centrale, 1962); A. Coupez and Th. Kamanzi, *Littérature de cour au Rwanda* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1970); Alexis Kagame, *La poésie dynastique au Rwanda* (Brussels: Institut Royal Colonial Belge, 1951); S. A. Babalola, *The Content and Form of Yoruba Ijala* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1966); Charles Bird, "Heroic Songs of the Mande Hunters," in *African Folklore*, ed. Richard M. Dorson, pp. 275-293; Patrice Mufuta, *Le chant kasala des Luba* (Paris: Julliard, 1969); Pierre-Francis Lacroix, *Poésie peule de l'Adamawa*, 2 vols. (Paris: Julliard, 1965).

[7] For a discussion of the animal tales, see Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa*, pp. 343-354, and *passim*. Particularly interesting examples of

specific animal cycles are found in the following collections of tales: W. H. I. Bleek, *Reynard the Fox in South Africa* (London: Trübner and Co., 1864) [weasel]; H. Callaway, *Nursery Tales, Traditions and Histories of the Zulus* (London: Trübner and Co., 1868) [weasel]; E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Zande Trickster* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1967) [spider]; G. Hulstaert, *Contes Mongo* (Brussels: Académie royale des Sciences d'Outre-Mer, 1965) [turtle]; John Jacobs, *Tetela-Teksten* (Tervuren: Musée royal de l'Afrique Centrale, 1959) [dwarf antelope]; H. A. Junod, *Les chants et les contes des Baronga de la Baie de Delagoa* (Lausanne: George Bridel, 1897) [toad]; H. A. Junod, *The Life of a South African Tribe*. 2 vols. (London, 1927) [hard]; Gerhard Lindblom, *Kamba Folklore, I: Tales of Animals* (Uppsala: Appelbergs Bocktryckeri Aktiebolag, 1928) [hare]; R. S. Rattray, *Akan-Ashanti Folk-tales* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1930) [spider]; Leo Stappers, *Textes luba: Contes d'animaux* (Tervuren: Musée royal de l'Afrique Centrale, 1962) [dwarf antelope]; R. Van Caeneghem, *Kabundi sprookjes* (Brussels: Vromant, 1938) [a mixture of squirrel and marten].

[8] John Jacobs and Jan Vansina, "Nsong'Atoot. Het koninklijk epos der Bakuba," *Kongo Overzee* 22 (1956): 1-39; Claude Meillassoux, Lassana Doucouré and Diaowé Simagha, *Légende de la dispersion des Kusa: Epopée Soninké* (Dakar: IFAN, 1957); Vincent Monteil, "La légende de Wagadou: Texte Soninke de Malamine Tandyan," *Bulletin de l'IFAN* 29, sér. B (1967): 134-149; P. Césard, "Comment les Bahaya interprètent leurs origines," *Anthropos* 22 (1927): 441-465; P. Césard, "Histoire des rois du Kyamtwara d'après l'ensemble des traditions des familles régnantes," *Anthropos* 26 (1931): 533-543. A large number of texts center around founding ancestors, early kings and leaders; these texts contain the materials of which epics are made. I place in this category, for example, the stories about Faran Maka Bote, the ancestor of the Sorko fishermen (J. Rouch); Aura Poku, the legendary queen of the Baule (H. Himmelheber); Maso-mandala and his sons among the Duala (Fr. Ebding); Nyikang, the ancestor-culture-hero of the Shilluk (D. Westermann); Sudika-mbambi and his brother among the Mbundu (H. Chatelain); Kintu, the "great ancestor of very long ago" among the Ganda (John Roscoe), and so many others.

[9] Knappert, "The Epic in Africa," pp. 182-185, gives a succinct discussion of these epics. The texts of some Swahili epics can be found in Lyndon Harries, *Swahili Poetry* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1962), pp. 24-171; Jan Knappert, *Traditional Swahili Poetry: An Investigation into the Concepts of East African Islam as Reflected in the Utenzi Literature* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967); Edward Steere, *Swahili Tales as told by Natives of Zanzibar* (London: Bell and Daldy, 1870). Among the epics constructed by African creative writers, the following may be mentioned: Alexis Kagame, *La Divine Pastorale* (Brussels, 1952) and *La Naissance de l'Univers* (Brussels, 1955); Thomas Mofolo, *Chaka, an Historical Romance* (London: Oxford University Press, 1931).

[10] The French translations of these texts are published in Amadou H. Ba, "Monzon et le roi de Koré," *Présence Africaine* 58 (1966): 99-127, and Amadou H. Ba and Lilyan Kesteloot, "Les épopées de l'ouest africain," *Abbia* 14-15 (1966): 165-205. A shorter fragment, which I have not seen, is also available in Amadou Doucouré, "Défi de Déissé- Koro, roi du Kaarta à Da Monzon, roi de Ségou," *France-Eurafrique* 171 (1966): 43-45.

[11] Lilyan Kesteloot, "Les épopées de l'ouest africain," *Présence Africaine* 58 (1966): 206 indicates that the published fragments are but a fraction of a vast epic cycle, and that many different versions are still sung today. The figure of Da Monzon also occurs among the Fulani (see further under the Silamaka epic of the Fulani). Ba and Kesteloot, "Les épopées de l'ouest africain," p. 167 state that in the Mali Republic alone, twenty epics have been registered. Other central heroes mentioned are Sunjata, Sumanguru, Ferobe, Irlaybe, the forty kings of Gana, Deforabe, Biton of Segu, El Hadj Omar, the Nabas of the Mossi.

[12] Ba, "Monzon et le roi de Koré," pp. 99-127. The original is not provided. The translation is by Ba. No information is given about the bard, or the circumstances of the narration.

[13] Ba and Kesteloot, "Les épopées de l'ouest africain," pp. 171-178. The original text, which is not reproduced, is translated from Bambara by Mamadou Konaté.

[14] Ba and Kesteloot "Les épopées de l'ouest africain," pp. 179-209. The original is not published. The long text in verse-lines is translated by the two authors of the study. According to the authors, more than ten such epsodes are known, in which Da Monzon is involved in conflicts with his vassals.

[15] The text of this epic episode, collected around 1957, covers about fourteen hundred lines in translation. It is published by Amadou Hampaté Ba and Lilyan Kesteloot in "Une épopée peule: Silmaka," *L'Homme* 8 (1968): 9-36.

[16] According to Ba and Kesteloot, "Silamaka," p. 5, several other versions were recorded among different Fulani groups in the Niger Republic. This episode is also sung by Bambara bards.

[17] The name, Sunjata, is variously written as Sundiata, Soundjata, Sonjata. I follow the spelling proposed by Bird. One classic version of this epic was published in French translation by Djibril T. Niane, *Soundjata ou l'épopée mandingue* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1960). An English translation of this text was made by G. D. Pickett, *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali* (London: Longsmans, Green and Co., 1965). Various recorded and transcribed versions of the epic made by Charles Bird and his collaborators are available at the Indiana University Archives of Traditional Music.

[18] Charles Bird, "Some Remarks on the Sunjata Epic" (unpublished manuscript, 1974). I am indebted to Dr. Bird for allowing me to use this extremely well-documented manuscript.

[19] Bird, "Sunjata Epic," pp. 8-11.

[20] J. P. Clark, "The Ozidi Saga," *Black Orpheus* 2:2 (1968): 18-24 gives in translation the opening of the prologue to this extraordinary text, and a short summary. The entire text to be published in two volumes was narrated with music, dance and mime in seven nights by Okabu of Sama Town.

[21] The so-called Ogboingba myth of the Ijaw also has many epic elements, and might as well be an episode of a much longer text. *See*, Gabriel Okaro, "Ogboingba: The Ijaw Creation Myth," *Black Orpheus* 1 (1957): 9-17.

[22] D. A. Puplampu, "The National Epic of the Adangme," *African Affairs* 50 (1951): 236-241 gives short fragments of the Klama epic, which is said to consist of more than six thousand stanzas. Leo Frobenius, *Spielmannsgeschichten der Sahel* (Jena, 1921) provides a summary of the Gassire text.

[23] The manuscript by Daniel Biebuyck, *The Mwindo Epic: New Versions*, is now in its last stages of preparation for publication by the University of California Press.

[24] Daniel Biebuyck and Kahombo Mateene, *The Mwindo Epic from the Banyanga: Congo Republic* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 1969; paperback ed., 1971). This work gives the complete Nyanga text, in the original and in translation, together with an introduction and a large number of explanatory notes.

[25] The texts (original, and French or Dutch translations) are published in: E. Boelaert, "Nsong'a Lianja, het groote epos der Nkundo-Mongo," *Congo* 1 (1932): 43-70, 198-215; E. Boelaert, *Nsong'a Lianja, l'épopée nationale des Nkundo* (Antwerp: De Sikkel, 1949); E. Boelaert, *Lianja-Verhalan I: Ekofo-versie* (Tervuren: Musée royal du Congo Belge, 1957); E. Boelaert, *Lianja-Verhalen, II: De voorouders van Lianja* (Tervuren: Musée royal du Congo Belge, 1958). An important new work by A. De Rop, *Versions et fragments de l'épopée des Mongo*, is forthcoming.

[26] A. De Rop, "L'épopée des Nkundo. L'original et la copie," *Kongo Overzee* 24 (1958): 170-78; A. De Rop, "Lianja-Verhalen," *Band* 18 (1959): 149-150; A. De Rop, *Lianja: l'épopée des Mongo* (Brussels: Académie royale des Sciences d'Outre-Mer, 1964).

[27] Daniel Biebuyck, "Mubila, een epos der Balega," *Band* 12 (1953): 68-74; Daniel Biebuyck, "The Epic as a Genre in Congo Oral Literature," in *African Folklore*, ed. Richard M. Dorson, pp. 257-273. The full text of the Mubila epic is now being prepared by Daniel Biebuyck for publication by the University of California Press. An important dissertation on another Lega epic was produced by J. B. N'Sanda, *Épopée Kiguma: Essai d'étude d'un genre litéraire Lega* (Kinshasa: Lovanium University). Unfortunately, this text was not available to me at this time.

[28] The translations of these shorter epic texts are available in John Jacobs, "Le récit épique de Lofokefoke, le héros des Mbole (Bambuli)," *Aequatoria* 24 (1961): 81-92; John Jacobs, "Het epos van Kudukese: de 'Culture Hero' van de Hamba," *Africa Tervuren* 9 (1963): 33-36.

[29] A vast number of epic texts centering around the hero, Akoma Mba, have already been recorded, and a few of them published. Some of these texts begin with the origin of the world and of the first humans, and deal with the birth of the heroes. Others concentrate on the deeds of the central hero, Akoma Mba, in conflict with many other heroes. A text of 2,438 lines (in the original, and in French translation) can be found in Stanislas Awona, "La guerre d'Akoma Mba contre Abo Mama," *Abbia* 9-10 (1965): 180-213, and *Abbia* 12-13 (1966): 109-209. A huge text, divided into twelve songs and interludes (original and translation), is available in Herbert Pepper, *Un mvet de Zwè Nguéma: Chant épique Fang* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1972). The first part of another epic, centering around Oveng Ndumu Obame, is published in French translation by Tsira Ndoutoume Ndong, *Le Mvett* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1970).

[30] This short synthesis is given in Gaspard Towo-Atangana, "Le mvet, genre majeur de la littérature orale des populations Pahouines," *Abbia* 9-10 (1965): 171-172.

[31] Publication of this text is mentioned in Stanislas Awona, *Abbia* 12-13 (1966): 112.

[32] The complete text (original and French translation) of this epic, together with summaries and notes, is found in Herbert Pepper, *Un mvet de Zwè Nguéma* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1972).

[33] The text narrated and sung by Mwana Mbirika is reproduced in J. Torrend, *Specimens of Bantu Folk-lore from Northern Rhodesia* (London: Kegan Paul, 1921), pp. 98-144.

[34] Other epic-like texts, or summaries of such texts, from Bantu-speaking peoples can be found, for example, in Piliwe Kisala, "Lubango Nkundungulu: A Kaonde Epic," *Jewel of Africa* 2: 3-4 (n.d.): 9-16; John Roscoe, *The Baganda: an Account of their Native Customs and Beliefs* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1911), pp. 460-464; Harold Scheub, "A Xhosa Narrative," in *African Folklore*, ed. Richard M. Dorson, pp. 523-561.

[35] I have indicated some of these names in the preceding notes. In general, little information is given about the social background and the individual artistry of the bards. Biebuyck and Mateene, *The Mwindo Epic*, pp. 15-19, provide such information for the bard Shekarisi Candi Rureke. Excellent general information on the *mvet* singers and players can be found in Towo-Atangana, pp. 163-177, Philippe Ndoutoume Ndong, "Le Mvett," *Présence Africaine* 59 (1966): 57-76, and Elie Ekogamve, "La littérature orale des Fang," *African Arts* 2 (1969): 14-19, 77-78. The bards of the Mandeka and Bambara are very well discussed in Charles Bird, "Heroic Songs of the Mande Hunters," in *African Folklore*, ed. Richard M. Dorson, pp. 278-279; Mamby Sidibé, "Les gens de caste ou nyamakala au Soudan Français," *Notes Africaines* 81 (1959): 13-17; Hugo Zemp, "La légende des griots malinké," *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 6 (1966): 611-642.

[36] Bird, "Some Remarks on the Sunjata Epic," pp. 3-4.

[37] Ekogamve, "La littérature orale des Fang," pp. 77-78.

[38] Kesteloot, "Les épopées de l'ouest africain," p. 205.

[39] For the Nyanga bard, see frontispiece in Biebuyck and Kahombo, *The Mwindo Epic*. For the Mongo, see Boelaert, *Nsong'a Lianja*, p. 4, and De Rop, *Lianja: l'épopée des Mongo*, p. 18. For the way in which the *mvet* players and bards among the Fang are dressed, see plates in Awona, *Abbia* 12-13 (1966): 164-165, and 190-191, and Towo-Atangana, *Abbia* 9-10 (1965): 162, 166, 170, and 174.

[40] Information on the musical instruments is provided in the above-mentioned sources.

[41] The epics seem to be essentially a male art, but women are, in several instances, not entirely dissociated from the epic performances. Bird, "Some Remarks on the Sunjata Epic," p. 4 indicates female bards specializing in praise-songs that are associated with the epics.

[42] De Rop, "L'épopée des Nkundo," p. 170; Jacobs, "Le récit épique de Lofokefoke," p. 81. In the context of the Lianja epic of the Mongo many historically known ethnic groups, such as Ngombe, Elinga, Bafoto, Baenga, Balumbe, occur in battles led by Lianja.

[43] Bird, "Some Remarks on the Sunjata Epic," pp. 8-11.

[44] De Rop, *Lianja: l'épopée des Mongo*, pp. 71-88.

[45] Biebuyck, *The Mwindo Epic: New Versions*. See also Biebuyck and Mateene, *The Mwindo Epic*, pp. 19-32. The spatial plan situates the hero's actions on earth, in the underworld, in the sky, and in the air (or atmosphere). His terrestrial exploits take place in the village, in the fields, in the abandoned village, in the virgin forest, and in the water (river, pool, pond).

[46] Jacobs, "Het epos van Kudukese," p. 36.

[47] Biebuyck and Mateene, *The Mwindo Epic*, pp. 33-35, and 144. The theme of the revivification of slain enemies is also strongly developed in the Lianja epic.

[48] Certain ritually very important animals (such as the hornbill) or persons (such as the *kihanga* spirit-wives or circumcisors) do not occur in the various texts that I recorded among the Nyanga.

[49] See, for example, A. J. Shelton, "The Problem of Griot Interpretation and the Actual Causes of War in Sondjata," *Présence Africaine*, n.s. 66 (1968): 145-152.

[50] The *bwami* association, and its moral philosophy of goodness and beauty, are analyzed in Daniel Biebuyck, *Lega Culture: Art, Initiation, and Moral Philosophy among a Central African People* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1973).

[51] The avoidance of rivalry among the sons of the same father, as reflected in the Sunjata Epic, are discussed in Bird, "Some Remarks on the Sunjata Epic," pp. 11-13, and R. Pageard, "Soundiata Keita et la tradition orale," *Présence Africaine*, n.s. 36 (1961): 61.

[52] De Rop, *Lianja: l'épopée des Mongo*, p. 12 and *passim*.

[53] Various oral traditions about the origins of the *mvet* and certain epic

traditions occur among the Fang-Ntumu. See, Towo-Atangana, *Abbia* 9-10 (1965): 164-172.

[54] Kesteloot, "Les épopées de l'ouest africain," p. 168; Zemp, p. 611. In Mongo terminology, the bards "sing" the epic, even when they recite and narrate; the bard is called a singer (*wembi*).

[55] Ndong, "Le Mvett," p. 57.

[56] Kesteloot, "Les épopées de l'ouest africain," p. 168. This is not very different from the mask traditions in some African ethnic groups, where each masker has his own musical theme to announce him.

[57] Bird, "Some Remarks on the Sunjata Epic," pp. 5-6, has made this fundamental discovery, which may influence much future analysis.

[58] Biebuyck, "The Epic as a Genre in Congo Oral Literature," pp. 266-267, stresses this point.

[59] Biebuyck and Mateene, *The Mwindo Epic*, p. 37, and *passim*. Meillassoux, Doucouré and Simagha, *Légende de la dispersion des Kusa*, p. 7, also emphasize this point.

[60] Ekogamve, "La littérature orale des Fang," pp. 14-19; Ndong, *Le Mvett*, p. 18.

[61] Ndong (*Le Mvett*, pp. 18-19), who is himself a famed *mvet* player, asks for his readers' indulgence, because a written text cannot re-create the musical rhythm, the dance movements, the reaction of the public, the general atmosphere of the village where the recitation takes place.