

## THE EPIC AS A GENRE IN CONGO ORAL LITERATURE

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I address myself to the epic as a genre in the oral literature of some populations of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. I am concerned, in particular, with the Mwindo epic and with other epic texts from the Nyanga in the eastern Congo forest area.<sup>1</sup> Comparative data are drawn from the Lianja epic of the Mongo in the northwestern Congo, the Lofokefoke epic of the Mbole, the Kudukese epic of the Hamba, and the as yet unpublished Mubela epic of the Lega.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Daniel Biebuyck and Kahombo Mateene, *The Mwindo Epic from the Banyanga* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969) [Mwindo epic]; Daniel Biebuyck and Kahombo Mateene, *Anthologie de la littérature orale nyanga* (Brussels: Académie Royale des Sciences d'Outre-Mer, 1970), and Daniel Biebuyck and John Jacobs, *Littérature épique d'Afrique Noire* (Paris, ms. prepared for Unesco) [Nyanga epic].

<sup>2</sup> E. Boelaert, "Nsong'a Lianja," *Congo* 1 (1934): 49-71, 197-216; E. Boelaert, *Nsong'a Lianja, l'épopée nationale des Nkundo* (Antwerp: De Sikkels, 1949); E. Boelaert, *Lianja-Verhalen. I, Ekofo-versie* (Brussels: Musée Royal du Congo Belge, 1957); E. Boelaert, *Lianja-Verhalen. II, De Voorouders van Lianja* (Brussels: Musée Royal du Congo Belge, 1958); E. Boelaert, "Lianja, het nationaal epos der Mongo," *Verhandelingen K.V.H.U.* (1960): 3-58; A. de Rop, *De gesproken woordkunst van de Nkundo* (Tervuren: Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale, 1956); A. de Rop, *Lianja, l'épopée des Mongo* (Brussels: Académie Royale des Sci-

All these ethnic groups are constituted by Bantu-speaking peoples who live in forest areas that are also inhabited by Pygmies or where the Pygmy influence, in general, is markedly visible. In those sections where Pygmies no longer survive, the memory of them is remarkably vivid. The texts of these epics are available in the original language in adequate transcriptions, together with precise translations and comments.

Epic texts seem to have a wide distribution in the Congo Republic. Jacobs and Vansina have provided us with the royal epic of the Kuba.<sup>3</sup> The *kasala* epics of the Luba are well known through Van Caeneghem's works and through many other sources that were recently synthesized by Studstill.<sup>4</sup> Important unpublished fragments of epics are in the possession of Professor John Jacobs (texts from the Kusu, Nkutshu, Basiamba, Tetela, Langa, and Jonga, which are similar to the Mbole and Hamba epics) and of Professor A. de Rop (various versions of the Lianja epic of the Mongo). Several students in Lovanium University (Kinshasa) are doing research on epics from the Lega, and so on. There is also a wealth of published information on epic cycles centered around animals. In general surveys of African oral literature, little attention has been given to these epics, because many of them are unknown or inaccessible and many are available only in fragments which tend to be classified together with the myths and tales.

The discussion limits itself to what is sometimes more nar-

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ences d'Outre-Mer, 1964) [Mongo epic]; John Jacobs, "Le récit épique de Lofokefoke, le héros des Mbole (Bambuli)," *Aequatoria* 24 (1961) No. 3: 81-92 [Mbole epic]; John Jacobs, "Het epos van Kudukese, de culture hero van de Hamba (Kongo)," *Africa-Tercuren* 9 (1963) No. 2: 33-36 [Hamba epic]; Daniel Biebuyck, "Mubila, een epos der Balega," *Band 12* (1953) No. 12: 68-74; Biebuyck and Jacobs, *Littérature épique d'Afrique Noire* [Lega epic].

<sup>3</sup> John Jacobs and Jan Vansina, "Nsong' Atoot. Het koninklijk epos der Bakuba," *Kongo Overzee* 22 (1956): 1-39.

<sup>4</sup> R. Van Caeneghem, "De Kasala-Zang van den Bakwangastam," *Congo* 2 (1936): 677-715; R. Van Caeneghem, "Bakwa-Tshimini (Kasai)," *Congo* I (1937): 103-33; John Studstill, *Trois Héros Luba; Étude d'une épopée Congolaise*, ms.

rowly referred to as the heroic epic. This can be defined as a long narrative that recounts in a coherent manner the deeds of a legendary hero with human traits and with supernatural attributes that are set against a background of extraordinary events, within the framework of a certain time span and a certain stretch of space. In such epics, the central hero has, sometimes but not necessarily, certain characteristics of a culture-bringer (Tegnaeus). The clearest examples of this kind of epic are found, at this stage, in the Lianja epic of the Mongo, the Mubila epic of the Lega, and the Mwindo epic of the Nyanga.

The heroic epic can be contrasted with what is loosely called the historical epic, which deals on a more limited scale with the genealogies, the migrations, and the chiefs of a particular people. Because of its strong cultural linkages, the heroic epic obviously recalls explicitly or implicitly certain historical events in the life of a people, but this is subordinated to the extraordinary and fictional element. The historical epic also frequently requires a verbatim recitation, which is limited to special annual or other occasions. The heroic epic leaves much room for improvisation and loose elaboration of the central themes and is not restricted to a particular circumstance. The Kuba royal epic and the Bembe and Luba recitations concerning occurrences during past migrations fall into this category.

Epic cycles centering primarily around anthropomorphized animal heroes or more-or-less theriomorphic heroes are widespread in Africa. Several of them have been recorded, to a lesser or greater extent, in the Congo area. Among the principal heroes of such cycles are the duiker, Nteta, among the Nyanga; the dwarf antelopes, Mboloko among the Tetela and Kabuluku among the Luba of the Kasai (Stappers); the gazelle, Tseke, among the Yumbe (Bittremieux); the spider, Ture, among the Zande (Evans-Pritchard); Kabundi (a mixture of squirrel and marten) among the Luba (Van Caeneghem); and Moni-Mambu among the Kongo (Van Wing and Schöller, Struyf, and others).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Biebuyck and Mateene, *Anthologie de la littérature orale nyanga*



A special case seems to be presented by Lofokefoke and Kudukese, among the Mbole and Hamba. These texts seem to fall somewhere between the heroic epics and the epic cycles. In contrast to the heroic and historical epics, the epic cycles consist of a series of separate and self-contained shorter narratives that are loosely related through the central character, an exceptionally clever, shrewd, ruthless, and powerful trickster animal. The animal is preferably small and weak in the physical realm. The different episodes in which the animal hero and his feats are celebrated do not follow a fixed sequence. For a particular circumstance, the narrator can pick any one story or series of stories that form a self-contained whole within the general framework of themes and motives. The individual storyteller is allowed much improvisation. Epic recitations and praise poems from the Congo Republic are not well known and definitely not developed as in parts of East and South Africa. Some of the recorded *kasala* songs of the Luba and the praises for chiefs and mountains of the Nyanga fit the pattern as identified by Knappert.<sup>6</sup>

As a distinctive category of literary composition characterized by a particular style, form, content, function, and

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[Nyanga epic hero cycles]; John Jacobs, *Tetela-Teksten* (Tervuren: Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale, 1959) [Tetela epic hero cycles]; Leo Stappers, *Textes Luba. Contes d'animaux* (Tervuren: Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale, 1962) [Luba epic hero cycles]; Leo Bittremieux, *Mayombsche Penneschetsen* (Bruges: Sint Michiel, 1914) [Yumbe epic hero cycles]; E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Zande Trickster* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1967) [Zande epic hero cycles]; R. Van Caeneghem, *Kabundi Sprookjes* (Brussels: Vromant, 1938) [Luba epic hero cycles]; J. Van Wing and Cl. Schöller, *Légendes des Bakongo Orientaux* (Louvain: Aucam, 1940) and I. Struyf and E. Tromont, *Les Bakongo dans leurs légendes* (Brussels, 1936) [Congo epic hero cycle].

<sup>6</sup> Van Caeneghem, "De Kasala-Zang der Baluba"; Van Caeneghem, "De Kasala-Zang van den Bakwangastam"; Van Caeneghem, "Bakwa-Tshimini (Kasai)" [*Kasala songs of the Luba*]; Biebuyck and Mateene, *Anthologie de la littérature orale nyanga* [Nyanga praise poems]; Jan Knappert, "The Epic in Africa," *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 4 (1967) Nos. 2-3: 189.

meaning, the Central African epic has barely received any systematic treatment. And yet it is perhaps the most fascinating and profound literary achievement of Africa, because of the wealth of cultural information it provides, the richness of the language in which it is formulated, the complexity and loftiness of its style, its synthesizing character, and the deep thought patterns it reflects.

In the Lega and Nyanga areas, where I undertook my research, the epic is classified as a separate genre in the linguistic taxonomy of the people. The Nyanga call it *kářišĩ* to distinguish it from other, well-isolated categories of literature such as the tales with or without a mysterious content (*uano*, *mushinga*), the "true" stories (*kishambaro*), the narration of extraordinary events that happened to particular individuals (*nganuriro*), and other genres.<sup>7</sup> The Lega classify the epic as *lugano* and contrast it, as a distinctive category, to their other genres.

Unlike the other genres, samples of which are widely known to, and narrated by, vast numbers of individuals of different sex, age, and social status, the epics are known and recited only by very few individuals. It seems impossible to say exactly how many people narrate such texts in the traditional community. Indirectly, their scarcity can be measured from the fact that in the late fifties only rare individuals among the Nyanga, the Lega, the Mbole, the Hamba, and the Mongo knew a coherent epic text. Yet, in the Lega and Nyanga communities, no special social status relates to the position of epic bard. The individual narrators of the epics do not belong to any specific kinship groups, although among the Nyanga at least, the bard's group has a history of close association with the Pygmies. The bards do not hold any particular social, political, or ritual position, as bards; when they do hold such a position, it is purely coincidental. Among the Mongo, Hamba, Mbole, Lega, and Nyanga the bard is not a professional.

Fame and a widespread reputation as *shékářišĩ* (master of the epic) among the Nyanga, and *mugani wa lugano* (teller

<sup>7</sup> Biebuyck and Mateene, *The Mwindo Epic from the Banyanga*.

of the epic) among the Lega, are the only immediately perceivable personal gratifications that the individuals derive from their art. The verb *kugana*, from which the deverbative *mugani* is derived, is interpreted by the Lega to apply to "a preferred son (*ngoli*) who does not go to a place of danger." From this point of view, *mugani*, which is the term for bard among the Lega, seems to place the emphasis on his role of preserver. Interestingly, the bard is sometimes referred to by the Lega as Kyanga. Kyanga is mentioned in some ethnohistorical traditions as a junior brother of Kalaga, the Messenger (a brother of Kinkung[w]a, the Creator God) who was sent by him after the initial creation of the physical world and its beings to provide the people with their customs and taboos. In other words, to provide them with culture. Under the name Yangya (?), Kyanga is known among the Bembe (the eastern neighbors of the Lega) as one of the most powerful nature spirits. Reference to the bard as Kyanga, then, seems to emphasize the fact that, in Lega thinking, the bard obtains his knowledge directly from a divine source. This idea of the quasi-divine origin of the bard's knowledge is also found among the Mongo. Some Mongo bards pretend to have been designated by the spirits and to have received the knowledge from dead grandfathers who came to fetch them during the night after a series of traumatic experiences and taught them the epic near a graveyard.<sup>8</sup>

The mode of presentation of the epic has special features. Invariably, the narration of oral texts draws a participating crowd in the African communities. Song, recitation, and pure narration frequently alternate as part of a single performance. Musical instruments are often played in conjunction with the narration. The narration leads to much social interaction, and sometimes to dramatic action as well. The mode of presentation of the epic, the total setting in which it takes place, although leaving room for improvisation and individualized ways of doing things, follows a formalized and prescribed

<sup>8</sup> E. Boelaert, "Nog over het epos van de Mongo," *Kongo Overzee* 20 (1952) Nos. 4-5: 289-92; E. Boelaert, "Lianja, het nationaal epos der Mongo," *Verhandelingen K.V.H.U.* (1960): 3-58.



method. The epic is sung, episode by episode; then the episode is narrated and dramatically acted out. The entire epic cannot, of course, be performed in a single evening or a single day. A series of consecutive evening performances may be scheduled, but a single performance may also be limited to one evening and restricted to a couple of episodes. The bard is largely free to select whichever episode he wants, depending somewhat on his mood, inspiration, and sometimes on local social circumstances. During the singing of any episode, the bard is seated and accompanies himself with a rattle. He may also hold a representation of one of the favorite symbols of the hero, such as the *conga* scepter, which, in the Mwindo epic of the Nyanga, is the major magical device the hero possesses. The singing bard is accompanied by a percussion stick, which is placed on the ground and is beaten with small drumsticks by three to four young men. Many Nyanga and Lega men know how to beat the percussion stick and many know the particular rhythms of the epic, yet the bard prefers to work with percussionists with whom he is familiar (people of his village, or individuals selected from within the bard's own field of kinship relations). These young men, together with people in the crowd, also hum while the bard sings. They sing portions of the sentences when the bard pauses for a moment at the end of a sentence or series of sentences, or when he is for a moment in "trouble" trying to recall the exact sequence of events. At all times during the singing of an episode the percussionists keep up with the rhythm and humming and singing, enhancing the sound and sometimes speeding up the rhythm when the bard pauses. As I have seen the system at work, this is a powerful method to stimulate and inspire the bard. During the singing, another man, called *mwitabizia*, is seated in front of the bard. He is an apprentice, generally a fairly close relative of the bard (a junior brother, or a son, or preferably a grandson), who maintains a constant and close relationship with the bard and accompanies him wherever he goes. The *mwitabizia* participates very actively in the performance: he sings with the choir, repeats parts of the sentences, makes exclamations and praises; he gives encourage-

ments and most importantly, since he already knows much of the epic, he helps the bard to find the thread of the narrative whenever he is in some difficulty. This may lead to outright conversation and discussion, while the percussionists and the choir of participant spectators continue the rhythms and the humming.

When the episode is sung, the bard then proceeds to narrate it and act it out. Normally, there is no music or singing at this time, the entire focus being on the dramatic action performed by the bard. In terms of content some passages lend themselves much better for such performances than others. During the performance of the Mwindo epic, I witnessed the most beautiful pieces of dramatic action when the hero set out in quest of honey and was chased by bees or done other harm by his enemies, or when he was involved with the Herculean task of making a banana grove and growing the plants to maturity in a single day. Sometimes an episode is characterized by much dialogue or by songs in verse form. In such cases the bard, accompanied by the percussionists and the choir of spectators, may sing again. When the entire episode is finished, there may be a long break before they proceed to another episode, or no other performance may follow. During the break there is an opportunity for relaxation and further enjoyment, for the drinking of beer and general dance performances (called "evening drum" by the Nyanga) by the participants. Among the Lega and Nyanga, the bard is not specially costumed for the occasion, but among the Mongo he is dressed as an *esombi* dancer, with feathers and body painting.<sup>9</sup>

A large number of literary texts are linked with specific social contexts, and even specific periods of time, within which they are to be narrated. In some cases, stories can be told only in the evening after sunset; in other cases, texts are sung and narrated only during particular celebrations and rituals. The Nyanga have elaborate circumcision ceremonies (*mukumo*) and complex initiations that lead to membership in various types of voluntary associations (Mumbira,

<sup>9</sup> Boelaert, "Lianja, het nationaal epos der Mongo," p. 13.



Mpande, Mbuntsu) in which specific types of proverbs are used. The Lega also have an elaborate system of boys' circumcision ceremonies (*bwali*), post-circumcision youth education (*mutanga*), and extremely complex initiations leading to membership in the *bwami* association, for which large quantities of aphorisms are reserved. In none of these more esoteric forms of activity do epic narrations occur. The epic performance is something like a common "national" patrimony which belongs to all the members of the ethnic group. The hero is a "national" hero, and not the instrument of any specialized subgroup or subsystem in the culture. Therefore, there are no specially prescribed circumstances when the epics can be performed. Nobody in particular is excluded from attending the performances, and nobody is prohibited from narrating whatever section of the epic he may know.

In form, style, and content, the Mongo, Lega, and Nyanga epics have many distinguishing features. The language in which the epic is formulated is usually rich and subtly used by the bards, who are true masters of verbal art. The vocabulary is abundant and there are many refined variations in the use of grammar. The texts abound with complicated metaphorical expressions and subtle nuances in the choice of verbal expressions and their conjugation. The structure of the sentence is terse, succinct, precise, incisive. The style is lofty in the narrative and the speeches, and poetic in the songs. There is a true cult for stylistic effect. In the Nyanga epic, indirect discourse, unfamiliar reversal of word order in the sentence, epithets, and repetitive formulaic expressions are very numerous. All possible stylistic effects are drawn into the narration, and here the creative genius of the individual artist can manifest itself most strongly. Certain bards whom I have heard performing among the Nyanga had a special gift for the use of sonorous effects, obtained particularly through reduplication of words and a generous application of ideophones. Others were specialized in the extremely refined and nuanced metaphorical usage of verbs.

The mastery of the bard manifests itself most strongly in the completeness, the consistency, and the logical coherence

of the epic and of the constituent episodes. There are beginnings and ends to the Lega and Nyanga epics, and between these there are sequences of events that flow from one to the other without interruption or break in the plan, the plot, and the themes. The quality of the bard is largely judged in terms of the control that he has over all of this. Among the Nyanga, I was brought into contact with several individuals who were said to know the Mwindo or Kářišĩ epic. When they were invited to perform and demonstrate their art, they were sometimes promptly dismissed because they were unable to keep episodes and sequences of events clearly apart from each other. It is sometimes said that an epic text is without end, that it can be developed and expanded *ad infinitum*, and that the number of specific episodes is almost limitless.<sup>10</sup> This is theoretically possible if one were able to get all the episodes and fragments and variations that are known to all the narrators in the society. I conclude, however, from my experience among the Nyanga and Lega that, in practice, there is a complete text in the mind of every knowledgeable individual narrator—a text that has a beginning and an end—which follows a basic structure and constitutes a coherent and well-rounded whole. Boelaert has pointed out that, for the Mongo, as a minimum three key episodes are necessary for a complete version: the fight for the forbidden fruit, the birth of the hero Lianja and his sister Nsongo and the vengeance over the parricide, and the trip to the promised land.<sup>11</sup> Jacobs also finds an underlying pattern in the essential episodes of the epics of the Hamba, Mbole, Langa, etc.<sup>12</sup>

The epic is, so to speak, a supergenre that encompasses and harmoniously fuses together practically all genres known in a particular culture. The Mwindo epic is typical in this respect. There are prose and poetry in the epic, the narrative being constantly intersected with songs in poetic form. The

<sup>10</sup> Boelaert, "Lianja, het nationaal epos der Mongo," p. 13; De Rop, *Lianja, l'épopée des Mongo*, p. 17.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>12</sup> Jacobs, "Het epos van Kudukese, de culture hero van de Hamba (Kongo)," p. 36.

prose narrative to some extent, and the songs to a large extent, incorporate proverbs, riddles, praises, succinct aphoristic abstracts of tales, prayers, improvisations, and allusions and references to "true" stories and persons. Among the Lega and Tetela, where the techniques of message drumming are highly developed, drum names and drum formulae are an intrinsic part of the story. This mixture of prose and poetry, of song and narration, of aphorisms and improvisations is also present in the Mongo epics.

The content of the epic constitutes an encyclopedic inventory of the most diverse aspects of a people's culture. There are direct and indirect statements about the history, the social institutions and social relationships, the material culture, and the system of values and ideas. The Lianja epic provides considerable insights into the social, economic, and religious life of the Mongo. It gives information about customs related to birth, marriage, and death; about the various economic activities (agriculture, hunting, trapping, food gathering, fishing) and the arts and crafts; about God, the ancestors, magic, witchcraft, dreams, rituals. It is also a historical document that offers information about migrations, and interrelationships of different groups.<sup>13</sup> The Mwindo epic makes direct statements about such diverse features as the material culture; the economy; the technology of hunting, gathering, and cultivating; the marriage system; the kinship terminology and the code of social relationships; the political structure; the religious conceptions and the cults; and the values and sentiments. It also makes abundant reference to the physical world in which the Nyanga live. The choice of actors in the Mwindo epic provides, by itself, a wide sample of significant social personalities and beings in Nyanga social organization and thought. The hero himself has fully human, Pygmy-like characteristics, but has, in addition, supernatural gifts. He is surrounded by animals, other humans with whom he may stand in a kinship position, divinities, fabulous beings, and abstract characters (such as

<sup>13</sup> De Rop, *Lianja, l'épopée des Mongo*, pp. 47-50.



the Idiot and the Smart One). The Nyanga are not a history-minded people. Their ethnohistorical traditions contain only scanty information about their origins in Bunyoro and their migrations southwestward into the rain forest, where they now live, via the savanna areas west of Lake Edward and the volcanic region located east of their present habitat. It is the contact with the Pygmies that has been of particular relevance for the Nyanga, and this has been clearly suggested in the epic. Nyanga exposure to influences from their neighbors and from the West are barely perceptible in the epic. Contacts with the West are revealed only by the use of a few Nyangaized words of French or Swahili origin (such as *marami* for *Madame*, or *karani* for *clerc*, or scribe). Some of the explicit statements about the culture are not to be taken at their face value. There are omissions and distortions, and these are deliberately made to put the hero in a certain perspective or to cause laughter and incredulity. This is brought out very clearly in the description of the courtship procedures of Mukiti and Nyangura, which become something like a parody of the normal practices.

In addition, the sentence structure, on the one hand, and the entire plan of the epic, on the other, indirectly provide deep insight into a key feature of Nyanga thinking: their preoccupation with space and place. The sentences abound with repetitive locative expressions and place indications. The plan of the epic follows all major cosmological divisions recognized by the Nyanga. The action takes place on earth (*oto*), in the underworld (*kwirunga*), in the atmosphere (*mwanya*), and in the remote sky (*butu*). Earth itself is subdivided between the inhabited world (*mbuka*, i.e., village, hamlet, and ancient village site); the forest of immediate utility (*mundura*), with fields, fallow land, and secondary forest; the virgin forest (*busara*); and the water (*rusi*). The epic is, in other words, complete, because it is comprehensive and consistent in its ground plan with the total Nyanga view of the world. The hero becomes, so to speak, a true hero only after he has successfully completed the whole cycle of events and deeds that put him through all

the relevant spheres of the world. It is noteworthy in this respect that the conceptualization of the world includes, in the Nyanga view, only the territory inhabited by the Nyanga.

The Pygmies mentioned in the epic are an intrinsic part of Nyanga society and the Nyanga world. There are terms in Nyanga language to refer to strangers (*mweni*, a concept that includes the notion of guest) coming from within the society and from segments of neighboring groups that are largely adjusted and acculturated to Nyanga culture. There are no foreigners for the Nyanga (except for the few black and white foreigners who came into Nyanga society in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries). All immediate neighboring groups, although distinctively of different ethnic origin, are named by special terms such as Bafuna (Hunde), or Bakumbure or Batiri-Baasa (Komo), and are fully involved through marriage, hunting, and friendship bonds with Nyanga society.

The life pattern of the hero follows roughly some of the criteria isolated by De Vries.<sup>14</sup> The principal aspects of Mwindo's life cycle can here be mentioned:

- the hero is conceived under special circumstances;
- his mother is a woman of special status (preferred wife), which she loses after the birth of her unwanted son;
- the child is born miraculously;
- the child is threatened in its early youth, in this case immediately after its birth and as a matter of fact before its birth;
- the hero is removed from his home and his social context;
- the hero goes through a series of hardships and trials during which he severely suffers to a point of almost being annihilated, but he manages to overcome the difficulties, sometimes through the performance of Herculean tasks, sometimes through his magical

<sup>14</sup> Jan de Vries, *Heldenlied en heldensage* (Utrecht: Het Spectrum, 1959), pp. 194–208.

- powers, sometimes through the power of his word, sometimes through his allies;
- in this series of happenings, the hero makes subterranean and celestial journeys;
  - the hero is involved in a dragon fight;
  - the hero reaches his glory through a catharsis.

In the Lianja epic many of these patterns occur: the hero is born through his mother's tibia; the hero leaves home in quest of the parricide; he goes through a number of Herculean performances; he is involved in a fight with a giant snake, etc.<sup>15</sup> There are significant deviations from the pattern, however, in both the Mwindo and the Lianja epics. From this point of view, there are striking similarities between the epics. For example, in both epics the unborn hero speaks in his mother's womb asking himself in what manner he should be born. In both epics, the hero is born with certain implements which form his strength (Lianja is born with a spear, a knife, the stick and bell of his father, a gong and his hunting horn, his arrows and his necklace). In both texts, the hero has a quasi invulnerability: when the hero faints because of great hardship, he is awakened by his bell (Lianja) or by his scepter (Mwindo).

In the Mwindo epic, the heroic stature of the child to be born is foreshadowed by the performance of menial tasks for his mother. The child is born through its own volition and with several paraphernalia that have supernatural power and are, so to speak, an intrinsic part of its personality. The hero does not go through a process of youthful maturation. His existence is threatened right after birth (even before his birth, the father had said that he wanted no boys); his entire existence is taken up from birth to his glory, in a search, first, for his paternal aunt, and second, for his father, while fighting his enemies. In this process the hero never seems to grow or to mature. This lack of interest in chronological process is typical, again, of the Nyanga concern with space and place rather than with time. Heroes frequently have a

<sup>15</sup> De Rop, *Lianja, l'épopée des Mongo*, pp. 31-46.



faithful friend and companion who is extremely close to them. Among the Lega this person is Mubila's wife, Kabungulu; among the Mongo it is Lianja's sister, Nsongo; among the Nyanga it is the paternal aunt, Iyangura.

The close tie between Mwindo and his paternal aunt deserves some explanation. It cannot simply be explained in terms of the special (amitate) relationship between a person and his paternal aunt which is widely found in African societies. The bond here has a deep, quasi-mystic meaning. In Nyanga custom, the chief's sister is frequently not married out, but invited to raise children as a spirit wife or lineage wife, with a "lover" of her choice on behalf of her brother's group. She continues to live in her home village and generally maintains very close ties with her brother's children. The quest of Mwindo for his paternal aunt is to be interpreted as an attempt to restore a balance that was disturbed by Mukiti's unexpected claims in Iyangura. Heroic deeds are set against a background of conflict and warfare. There is inbuilt conflict in the Mwindo and Mubila epics, and there is constant talk about fighting and feuding; there is, however, no full-scale warfare. The hero himself, moreover, is not a superior fighter. Mwindo is implicitly weak (although this is never said explicitly), since he is "The Little-One" and "A child-just-born-yesterday." His strength resides in the mind (he has some gift of premonition and he has the power of the word and of the dance) and in external objects (his *conga* scepter and objects contained in his shoulder bag). Mubila, among the Lega, is not weak, but his strength lies in external attributes (his whistle, his shoulder bag) and particularly with his wife, Kabungulu, whose apron is destructive. The Nyanga hero is vulnerable (on different occasions the heavy blows to which he is exposed put him in a deep torpor that resembles death), but there is never any reference to serious physical injury. More importantly, the hero has a quasi immortality on earth; Mwindo rules in glory at the end of the epic; Lianja, with his sister and his brother Pygmy, climbs up a giant palm tree, and his annual return is celebrated in the Lianja processions among

the Mongo.<sup>16</sup> The theme of the quest for a *jungfrau* is completely absent in the Mwindo and Mubila epics.

The heroic stature and unlikelihood of the hero is not so much to be found in the extraordinary events in which he is involved and in the exceptional feats that he performs (the Nyanga like to narrate extraordinary events as if they had really happened). The special character of the Nyanga and Lega hero lies in the fact that, during the major part of the epic, he is in flagrant conflict with the basic value code of his people and gets away with it. Mwindo is boastful, morose, irascible, proud, intrepid, scornful, arrogant. He has his way for a long time, yet these personality traits put him in direct opposition to the values for which the Nyanga stand. During this critical period, however, Mwindo never becomes unacceptable, because he maintains certain qualities of tenderness toward his mother, respect toward his paternal aunt, generosity toward weak persons, and ultimate piety toward his father. These qualities help to maintain a certain balance, until the hero is completely purified from his excesses through suffering and impotence in the celestial realm. Mubila, among the Lega, is also a boaster, a restless traveler, aggressive, proud, and intrepid. These characteristics place him too much in opposition to the moral code of *busoga*, that search for temperance and moderation which is the key to Lega moral philosophy.

The Nyanga and Lega epics cannot simply be qualified as mythical, etiological, didactic, or moralizing. All these elements are implicit, and sometimes explicit in the narrative. The epic harmoniously blends these elements with historical fact and actual culture. The Mwindo epic, for example, partially revolves around the constant interaction between the supranatural and the human worlds, between the hero and various divinities, mythical beings, and semi-divine theriomorph personages. The origin of several customary practices, such as the worship of Lightning, is explicitly mentioned, and there is an implicit interpretation of how homogeneous king-

<sup>16</sup> E. Boelaert, "La procession de Lianja," *Aequatoria* 25 (1962) No. 1: 1-9.

doms came to be fragmented. The didactic nature is implicit throughout, because of the encyclopedic character of the text. The moralizing aspects are explicitly formulated at the end of the epic and here and there in dialogues or speeches; they are implicit in the direct and indirect reference to the value system. The action itself, although mostly at the heroic level, returns steadily to the familiar village context, with common people (the counselors, the princes, the commoners, the women, the little children) and Pygmies interacting with the hero. The entire epic is placed against the background of a well-known region in Nyangaland itself. In listening to the epic, the Nyanga themselves are surprised that they know and do so many things. Nowhere in their oral traditions is a more comprehensive account given of the culture in such a succinct, incisive, and poetic manner. Historically, the epic is both close and remote to them. Close because its action revolves within a cultural and environmental framework which is that of the present-day Nyanga, and remote because the Nyanga know that the tradition of the text takes them far back in time to the earliest encounters with the Pygmies, whom, they pretend, were the first narrators of these stories. In listening to the epic, the Nyanga marvel at the treasures of their culture and find pride and confidence from the epic. This is a truly "national" patrimony.