

## PREFACE

This book is a sequel to *The Mwindo Epic from the Banyanga* (1969). It incorporates the translated, heavily footnoted texts of three previously unpublished epics sung by Nyanga bards, together with an extensive comparative study of Nyanga epic literature. *The Mwindo Epic from the Banyanga* was well received in diverse scholarly milieus. I am convinced that the present texts and analysis will considerably enhance our deeper understanding of the creative genius of an African people. The time when Bowra (1952) or Finnegan (1970) could question the existence of the epic genre in Africa has long ended (Biebuyck, 1976a). We have already reaped an abundant harvest of major epic texts, and the promise of an even bigger harvest is overwhelming. We may soon discover that these poetic monuments from Africa can no longer be ignored by students of comparative literature, for the comparative study of the epic can no longer be confined to certain peoples, ages, civilizations, or types of society. It transcends the boundaries of classic and Western civilizations and is found in many places, even among peoples who, like the Nyanga or the Mongo, are not city dwellers or empire builders. My purpose is, therefore, to provide accurate texts, together with their broad cultural interpretation, in order to facilitate the task of the comparatist.

During my extensive field research among the Nyanga, I had no intention of setting the detailed study of their oral literature as my major goal. Whenever the opportunity arose, I recorded in writing the tales, proverbs, riddles, prayers, memorats, praises, songs, invocations, and epics that the Nyanga sang, recited, or narrated for me. In annotating these texts I had diverse anthropological and linguistic purposes in mind. The volume of texts accumulated in this manner is so large, however, and their in-

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trinsic, literary, and cultural value is so great that I can no longer afford not to publish them. Furthermore, the saddening disregard—not to say scorn—which many students of “exotic” culture have shown for genuine texts (as opposed to anecdotic and cursory statements elicited from so-called informants) necessitates more concentration on them. Reflecting about the period when I did my field research, I now regret that I did not devote all my attention to the study of Nyanga oral literature. I could certainly have gained more insight into the personality, social identity, and training of the bards, their sources of inspiration, and the manner in which they maintain a delicate balance between general and particular tradition on the one hand, and creative originality on the other. I could have learned more about the details of performance, particularly in its musical and kinetic dimensions (although it is useful to remember that in a small-scale milieu, dominated by kinship restraints, the performances are often monotonous and repetitious). I could have acquired deeper knowledge of the interactions between bards and different categories of participant listeners. On the other hand, I do not believe I would have received more or better texts, or that I would have been capable of recording, translating, and interactions between bards and different categories of participant listeners. casualness of my approach to the oral literature helped to preserve the natural attitude of the bards toward their texts. (I discovered on other occasions that singers and narrators easily overstate their cases when pressed too hard.) The broad information obtained about Nyanga culture in general is also invaluable in placing the epics in their correct native perspective. In the appreciation of the epic genre, the text, with its massive cultural connotations and cross-references, is the really important element.

My sincere thanks go to the bards, Sherungu, Shekarisi, Shekwabo, and, for the already published Mwindo Epic I (*The Mwindo Epic from the Banyanga*, 1969), Candi Rureke. Their generous and disinterested support has helped me to preserve for posterity part of a great, but fragile, African tradition. Amato Buuni and Stephano Tubi, Sherungu and Kanyangara, Shentsimia and Shoneno, were invaluable and enlightened assistants, *hommes de confiance*, and exegetes during my research. All my field activities among the Nyanga (intermittently in 1952; full time in 1954–1956) were sponsored and financed by the l’Institut pour la recherche scientifique en Afrique Centrale, whose unfaltering encouragement is gratefully acknowledged. I deeply appreciate the research done by my former students, Georgiana Grentzenberg and Deborah Reed, and the competent and dedicated secretarial work of Susan Edwards and Beverly Flanigan. I



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### A NOTE ON THE TRANSLATION AND THE PRESENTATION

The translation of the Nyanga text is as literal and as faithful as possible. In order to maintain the Nyanga stylistic flavor, I have not hesitated to retain in the translation cumbersome expressions referring to time, place, and aspects of action. Additional words needed to clarify the meaning are added in parentheses. Furthermore, copious notes explain the more difficult passages and focus attention on points of interpretation. It is quite obvious that the Nyanga language possesses its own subtleties and idiomatic specialties which can be rendered only vaguely, if one attempts to produce a readable text. The abundant formulas for time and place are an example. In addition, the bards have an extraordinarily precise and nuanced knowledge of their language, which they manipulate with poetic skill and a refined sense for shades of meaning. Synonyms, metonyms, metaphors, other figures of speech, and fine nuances in the conjugation of the verb are characteristically used throughout the epics. The songs, in particular, excel because of the conscious search for alliteration and resonance, qualities that are enhanced by the rigid and clear system of adjectival and pronominal concords. No translation can do justice to this clever manipulation of grammatically determined sound. The sixth song in epic II, "Small bird of the road," is a masterpiece of alliterative effects in which variedly sounding pronominal prefixes beginning with *k-* (*ka-*, *ke-*, *ko-*, *ku-*, *kwe-*, *kwi-*) bear on the noun Kongo (Beautiful-one). Many lines in these songs are constructed on a pattern of seven or nine syllables or morphemes (taking into account elisions), whose rhythmic quality cannot be recaptured.

### A NOTE ON THE REFERENCES

Throughout the book I have referred to the published *Mwindo Epic from the Banyanga* as epic I; the other three epics are numbered II, III, IV as they appear in the second part of this work.

P R E F A C E

For a general introduction to the Nyanga and to Nyanga culture, see Daniel Biebuyck and Kahombo Mateene (1969, pp. 1-11).

For the sake of simplicity and economy, I have avoided using the diacritical signs for tones in quoting Nyanga words or giving excerpts from the texts. The tonal system is identical to that illustrated in epic I.