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THE NYANGA

The 27,000 Bantu-speaking Nyanga live in the mountainous rain forest area of Walikale territory in the former Kivu Province, in the eastern part of Zaire, Kinshasa. The ethno-historical traditions are weakly developed and are primarily concerned with the establishment and distribution of the Nyanga in their present habitat. All these traditions, however, point to origins in East Africa and more particularly in Bunyoro and Toro (Uganda). Migrating from East Africa, the Nyanga settled for some time in the grasslands and on the mountain slopes on the Zaire side of the Lake Edward region, where several remnant groups of this migration are found today. Moving southwestward from there, the Nyanga gradually infiltrated the rain forest. Nyanga oral traditions explicitly state that in the rain forest their forefathers met with small, scattered groups of at least three different ethnic units: Pygmies, called Twa or more specifically Remba; Tiro-Asa of Kumu ori-
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gin; Mpamba of Lega affiliation. Smaller remnants of Pygmies and Lega, and larger groups of Tiri-Asa (Kumu), are still found in Nyanga country. All are culturally closely interwoven with the Nyanga. Among them, the biologically miscegenated groups identified as Pygmies play a most significant role. They are attached by strong political and ritual bonds to the Nyanga sacred chiefs: they are the chief's hunters, they hold various ritual offices connected with the chief's enthronement, they provide the chief with one of his ritual wives (whose firstborn son holds the ritual position of mwāmitwā, lit., chief Pygmy), and they are traditionally the chief's bards, experts in narrating and singing the longer epic tales. To the entire Nyanga population, they stand in some sort of joking relationship in that, for example, they are allowed to freely harvest plantains in all banana groves.

The impact of Pygmy culture on the Nyanga has been very strong. This is visible, for example, in some of the techniques and beliefs associated with hunting and food-gathering, and in the cult system, where the Nyanga worship, among other divinities, Mēshēmutwā (Messe the Pygmy). The Nyanga assertion that their great epic texts, like the one presented here, originally flourished with those Nyanga groups that were most intimately associated with the Pygmies, contains an important culture-historical reference and points to the possibility that these epics or at least their basic themes originated with the Pygmies. I did not, however, find any special awareness of this fact among the so-called Pygmies whom I met in this region between 1956 and 1958.

Above all, the Nyanga are trappers, food-gatherers, and cultivators, but they also hunt and fish. Nyanga economy and diet are based on the complementary relationship among these various activities, which may receive different degrees of emphasis owing to limited local specialization. Dive-fishing, for example, or big-game hunting by highly esoteric corporations of hunters is found only in certain select Nyanga villages. As is revealed in rituals, taboos, legal principles of distribution and sharing, principles of land tenure, and as is also clear from the events and values suggested in hundreds of tales, trapping is the single most significant economic activity in Nyanga society. Agriculture is centered on the growing of the plantain banana. The
system of cultivation is very extensive and informal and is based on the “slash without burning technique.” Over the years, new banana groves are added to the existing ones in a cyclic shifting pattern; the banana groves, nevertheless, yield for many years, the duration of productivity depending upon the degree of maintenance. The Nyanga also traditionally cultivate a variety of grain and root crops, which are planted either in or on the edge of the banana grove. The sowing or planting of some subsidiary crops requires the partial burning of grasses and branches accumulated in patches of the banana grove.

The ideology of descent, inheritance, and succession is patrilineal. The descent groups themselves are thought to be patrilineal and are built around a nucleus of de facto or de jure agnatically related kinsmen. But membership in these patrilineally focused descent groups is not determined merely by unilineal male kinship bonds. In order to understand this feature of the Nyanga social structure, it is necessary to distinguish between two basic types of marriage. First is the more classic form of marriage based on the transfer in stages from the man’s group to the wife’s group of a fixed number of matrimonial goods which establishes for the husband and father the right to affiliate children born of that marriage with his own descent group. Second are the marriages between women and spirits, which are decided upon by the agnatic relatives of the women as a result of dreams, oracles, and so on. These spirit wives are permitted to live in what are usually prolonged, stable unions with married or unmarried “lovers” of either their own or their agnates’ choice. These “lovers” have sexual rights to and various domestic and economic claims on the women, but cannot legally affiliate with their own descent groups the children born of these unions. In other words, spirit wives—who are found in large numbers throughout Nyanga society, in all descent groups—procreate children in the name of the agnatic descent groups of their fathers, brothers, and paternal uncles. In the course of time these uterine relatives are identified in genealogical recitations, as well as in the actual kinship nomenclature, with the male agnatic nucleus of the descent groups of their mothers; that is, they are treated as descendants of their unmarried mother’s brothers.

Some descent groups are named after a male eponymous
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founder, others are known by nicknames and epithets. The known genealogical charts are shallow in depth and subject to considerable manipulation. The descent groups themselves are dispersed units consisting of several small localized corporate units composed of one or several agnatically related extended families. Each of the descent groups has a core area or a cradle area with which, before the colonial policy of resettlement was introduced, at least one of its localized family units is associated as miné (owner, lord, legally and mystically linked with . . .).

Politically the Nyanga are organized into autonomous petty states, each ruled by a sacred chief (mwâmi). The chiefs are recruited in only a limited number of descent groups, some of which are considered to be agnatically related to one another, a practice that makes provision for special bonds of cooperation or at least of friendship among several autonomous chiefs. The sacred chiefs, surrounded by nobles (barûsi), counselors (bakungû), and ritual officeholders (bandirabitambo), have directly under their control the different village headmen whose villages lie within the limits of the state. In other words, each petty state is territorially subdivided into a number of villages and hamlets; there exists no other intermediate territorial grouping.

Ancestral cult is little developed among the Nyanga: people occasionally pray to a dead agnatic relative (father, paternal grandfather, or paternal aunt) but there are no shrines nor is there an intensive worship of the ancestors. The entire cult system is built around a number of divinities, most of whom, like Muïsa, Kiana, Hángî, Mëshé, Nkângo, Kahómbó, are said to live together with the dead in the Underworld (kwirungâ, a place identified with the craters of the active and extinct volcanoes that are found east of Nyanga country, on the boundaries of Zaire and Rwanda) under the leadership of Nyamurajî, god of fire.

Some other divinities which are actively worshiped, such as Këntsë (Sun), Nkûbâ (Lightning), Iyûhu (Wind), Kibira (Leopard), Musóka (Water Serpent), are said to have left the Underworld to live in the sky, on earth, or in the water. All these divinities, together with the ancestors, are known under the generic term bashumbû. Shrines are made and plantains are grown for them, women are dedicated and married to them,
sheep and hunting dogs are consecrated to them, prayers are
said to them, and distinctive cultual paraphernalia for each
of them are kept by their adepts. They manifest themselves in
dreams and oracles and are responsible for good and evil in
Nyanga life. The earth is further peopled with the land-dwell-
ing dragon Kirímu, the forest specter Mpacá, and the Binyan-
yasi (restless spirits of those Nyanga who committed suicide or
died, stigmatized as sorcerers, as the result of a kabi-ordeal), and
by the water-dwelling, rather friendly monster Mukiti. The
Nyanga formulate several ideas about Ongo, God, who is said
inter alia to be the “heart of the earth,” to have created every-
thing, to be the giver of life (buingo), to have given man the
knowledge that he possesses. Finally, the Nyanga have elaborate
boys’ circumcision rites. They also possess a wide variety of
seem secret associations (membership in which is mostly re-
stricted to certain descent groups) none of which has a tribe-
wide adherence or distribution.

The profusion of Nyanga oral literature stands in contrast
to the fairly limited, though highly efficient, technology. The
Nyanga possess an impressive variety of fishing, trapping, and
hunting devices, but the wickerwork, plaiting, ironwork, pot-
tery, and carving are simple. Wooden dishes and pots are dec-
orated with incised designs. Plastic art is practically unknown
in world collections, although the Nyanga make decorative
masks of antelope hide, a rare type of anthropozoomorphic
wooden statue used in the mumbirá-initiations and very rare
bone and ivory carvings for the mbuntsù association.

NYANGA ORAL LITERATURE

The small Nyanga tribe possesses a highly diversified oral
literature, rich in content and style. There are innumerable
situations and occurrences that occasion the recitation, singing,
or narration of the traditional texts. The Nyanga live in an
isolated and largely undisturbed environment where social
relationships among individuals, families, and larger groups of
kinsmen are intensive and intimate. Daily, after returning
from work in the forest, small groups of men—agnates, affines,
friends—sit together in the men’s meeting place to eat, drink,
smoke, discuss the day’s events, assign the next day's tasks,
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analyze patterns of behavior and action, scrutinize personal and familial problems, instruct the children in the social mores, criticize misconduct. These routine gatherings, which often extend long into the night, are a major occasion for narrating tales, quoting proverbs, solving riddles, not merely as a form of entertainment and fun, but also as a means of clarification of ideas, of interpretation of events, and of enhancement of existing values.

In their own domestic sphere, the women of the village also gather, in small groups of three or four in the company of their younger children, to eat, chat, and instruct. Like the men, they narrate stories, recite proverbs, and solve riddles, which, though similar in content and theme to those of the men, are commonly different in conclusion or explanation. Adolescents, too, males and females living in their own spheres, daily participate in dances for sheer entertainment or in games, an intrinsic part of which are traditional songs, riddles, proverbs. In addition to these regular daily activities, there are the hundreds of special occasions—rites, initiations, statewide councils, specialized dances—which are inconceivable without narrated, sung, recited texts, oral texts that either belong to the common patrimony or are the possessions of specialized groups and specific categories of people.

All Nyanga know a certain number of texts; some are able to narrate, sing, or recite them coherently and completely, others are confused narrators, able only to communicate the essence of their content. The expert narrators or singers do not make a profession of or derive a special social status from their skill. They may be in demand and thus receive much food, banana beer, and small presents. They may be famed and praised for their art, but they are not looked upon as a group of specialists, nor can they make a living of it. The expert narrators and singers may know a fairly large number of texts, but rarely does their knowledge approach the unusually high level and competence of that of Mr. Sherungu Muriro, one of the great Nyanga informants, who gave me 21 very long tales, 82 “true” stories, 43 interpretations of dreams, 268 riddles, 327 songs (some mere proverbs, others long and complex concatenations of aphorisms and personal reflections and remembrances).
The Nyanga musical instruments, inseparable from the dances, initiations, and gatherings of which the oral literature is an integral part, cover the following range. There are three types of funnel-shaped drums of different sizes (ioma, mukintsua, kandundu, beaten with two hands, two drumsticks, one drumstick, respectively); the percussion stick (nkwangatiro); the antelope horn (kahanda); the small reed or bamboo flute (kaferere); the calabash or wickerwork rattle (ishengo); the music bow (kimbyurenge); the two-stringed zither (ntsente); the three types of zanzas (kantsambi, ikimbi, and kasai, the last of recent introduction); the anklet bells (ntumbo) made from nutshells or iron.

Any type of text, except prayers, can be narrated, recited, and/or sung with the accompaniment of some of these musical instruments or of simple handclapping, but certain dances, initiations, or narratives require specific instruments or combinations of instruments. Praise songs for chiefs, headmen, and mountains, for example, may be accompanied by only two rattles, two drums, and the small flute.

We have prepared for publication an anthology of Nyanga oral literature in which selected samples of the various forms of this literature are given. A brief description of these forms as they are classified by the Nyanga follows.

mushyamo. This category comprises proverbs, maxims, and other terse statements that represent part of the Nyanga code of values. Almost all teachings and precepts given in the course of initiations are presented in the form of proverbs that are sung or recited. Most of the so-called songs (ruimbo) consist of nothing but concatenations of proverbs intermingled with reflections improvised by the singer. In legal contexts and in a very wide range of discussions and arguments, proverbs are currently quoted. All Nyanga proverbs are to be thought of as a form of poetry. The majority of them are composed of two verses, separated by a caesura. Quite often, the Nyanga reciter formulates only the first verse, leaving the task of either thinking or actually phrasing the second one to his audience. The structure of these verses follows definite quantitative patterns

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2 To be published in 1968 in the Collections of the Académie royale des Sciences d'Outre-Mer, Brussels.
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(e.g., number of words and syllables) as well as qualitative patterns (e.g., rhyme, alliteration, assonance, reduplication). Frequently, the normal tone pattern is changed to enhance the qualities of rhythm. Both men and women know proverbs, but men make the most extensive use of them.

inondo. These are riddles that are most commonly used by adolescents and women. More restricted in their range of applicability, the riddles are less rich in content than the proverbs. They are sung or recited and accompanied by handclapping, gestures, rhythmic movements. Like the proverbs, most Nyanga riddles are a form of poetry consisting of two verses. The first verse contains a statement, a proposition, a compound personal name, rarely a purely onomatopoeic form, and may or may not be introduced by a verbal expression meaning “Tell me,” “Teach me,” “May I know,” or “Beware.” The second verse provides the answer, which may be a single word, but usually is a sentence containing the justification of the answer or a partial repetition of the proposition. It is often introduced by a verbal expression meaning “It does not surpass,” “It is not difficult.”

mubikiriro. Prayers, which again are a form of poetry, are recited slowly and distinctly, the reciter pausing after each verse to permit the other celebrants to answer aë (yes) or to mumble um. Prayers are composed of many repetitious statements, which identify the names and epithets of the divinity or divinities invoked, give praise to the spirits, contain im- plorations for help, strength, good luck, good health, and success in hunting, and they make promises. They are recited by men—generally elders, headmen or other offic holders—without musical accompaniment, on various occasions, for example, before and after the hunt, at the blessing of departing relatives and of hunting dogs, during the dedication of persons or animals to divinities, on state occasions, and throughout the course of offerings and libations.

musinjo. Eulogistic recitations for chiefs, headmen, and mountains are given on state occasions by elders who are prominent in the political structure as headmen and officeholders and who are leading adepts of certain cults. The recitation, without musical accompaniment, is made in a staccato manner (words are split by the reciter into syllables or groups of two
or three syllables) after which there is a short pause to permit
participants to murmur ade or um. The content is monotonous
and consists mainly of names, but the ethnohistorical knowl-
edge and data about land and territorial divisions to be gained
from them are very rewarding. The most impressive aspects of
the eulogistic recitations, however, are to be found in the
rhythm, the gestures, and the intense solidarity or esprit de
corps manifested by the members of different groups.

ihamuiri. Stereotyped formulas, used in divination and
medicinal practices, with highly esoteric overtones, are enun-
ciated extremely quickly by specialists (diviners and medicine
men) while interpreting oracles or preparing and applying
medicine.

runinbo. These are songs; all Nyanga songs are a form of
poetry. As formerly mentioned and as revealed by those that
occur in the Mwindo epic, the songs are basically concatenations
of proverbs, improvised, terse statements made by the
singer about his personal experiences, remembrances, as well as
abstracts of tales. According to the social or ceremonial cir-
cumstances, highly different interpretations may be given for
identical songs and only twin songs are among the more
specialized ones. Both short and long songs are interspersed in
the tales.

uano and mushinga. The first is a tale in general, the second
a tale where the supernatural element, produced by the inter-
vention of divinities, celestial bodies, monsters, and forest
specters, stands in the foreground. Countless minor and major
variants of the same tales are known, and everybody from
adolescence on is able adequately to narrate or at least to sum-
marize some of these tales. The dramatis personae in the tales
are animals—all kinds of animals, but particularly the Duiker
antelope, the turtle, the hunting dog, and the leopard. It is
striking, however, that the most sacred animals, like the pangol-
in, the hornbill, the flying squirrel, the dendrohyrax, the bongo
antelope, and the potto, are never included in these stories. In
the tales there are human beings (particularly individuals who
stand in a kinship or friendship relationship to one another, or
chiefs and Pygmies). There are personified abstract characters
(e.g., Shebuhanyá, the Calamitous; Shébrongú, the Generous;
Shébushú, the Man-of-Hatred). There are also extraordinary
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awe-inspiring beings like Kirímu, the Dragon; Mpacá the Forest Specter; Mukíti, the Water Serpent. Much more rarely are divinities or ancestors mentioned in these texts. Semideified celestial bodies and the elements (e.g., Moon, Star, Rain, Hail, Cloud) occasionally appear as principal or secondary actors in the tales. Tales are narrated, partly sung, mimed, and partly dramatized on a great variety of domestic, legal, ritual occasions to entertain, to instruct, to explain, to moralize. It would be inexact to isolate for any given tale a single one of these functions. Most, if not all, Nyanga tales simultaneously perform recreational, pedagogical, etiological, and moralizing roles, but specific situations may demand special emphasis on a single function.

nganuviro. These are “true stories” about partly imaginary, partly real events. Men, particularly trappers and hunters, are the experts in telling this type of story. In a terse style and a somewhat laconic tone, always speaking in the first person (singular or plural), men tell about things that happened to them or to their close relatives (the stories invariably begin with either “I (we) have seen...” or “I (we) have heard...” or “We were astonished...”). The occurrence of unusual events, the apparition of strange beings, the development of abnormal situations, or the ascription of extraordinary powers and skills to known persons are all depicted as real happenings. In this kind of “true stories” which are told in the men’s meeting place, the embryos of new tales are found in the reports on long hunting or trapping expeditions or on a prolonged journey to a distant kinsman.

There are many other texts, which are generally not classified as literature, but which, as far as the Nyanga are concerned, fall into well-established categories according to content and style. They are the following:

mwani kiro. These are meditations, reflections expressed in a concise style. Many traces of these well-stated personal thoughts which are given in men’s discussions are found in the songs. As already stated, Nyanga songs are essentially concatenations of proverbs and of such concisely formulated personal reflections.

kishámbáro. Discourses on or systematic coherent treatments of the problems of the country or state uttered by the elders, headmen, and chiefs.
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*jhano*. Instructions; teachings made to the youth about customs, skills, techniques, patterns of behavior. The texts are short, conceived in an easy, informal conversational style, and are generally introduced by the formula “we are accustomed to do...”. The stereotyped description and analysis of good and bad omens (*mwangiriro*; *kihunda*) and of taboos, prohibitions, and injunctions (*mutándo*) would also fall under this category of teachings and counsels.

*kārīṣi*. These epic texts are few in number and are known to only a small number of men. The central hero in the Nyanga epics, as in the text presented here, is Mwindo. Mwindo is currently given as a personal name, in the family unit, to a male who is born after a number of girls. The Nyanga also see a relationship between the name and the verb *uindo*, to fell trees, thus emphasizing physical strength. Mwindo has several epithets, such as *Kābūtwa-kénda* (the Little-one-just-born-he-walked) and *Mborù* (etymology unknown to the Nyanga). He is considered to be a small being, as is indicated by the diminutive prefix *ka-* by which he is designated throughout the epic. He is human, although he is not conceived and born as a normal human being (in some versions, he is a product of parthenogenesis; in other versions, he is born from sexual intercourse, but through his mother’s medius). He is the son of a chief, rejected in some versions by his father, but ultimately he becomes chief; accepted by his father in other versions, he becomes chief after a partition of the state. He has fabulous gifts (he can move on land, in water, underground; he has the gift of premonition); he has powerful human, animal, and supernatural allies (paternal aunt, spiders, bats, lightning); he possesses by birth powerful magic objects (e.g., a *conga* flyswatter made from antelope or buffalo tail) which permit him to escape the worst difficulties. He is the destroyer of evil forces, the savior of people, a generous leader.

*Kārīṣi* is the generic term for the long epic narratives that celebrate Mwindo’s feats, but, Interestingly, in one version of the epic, Kārīṣi is also the name of a chief, who is married to the divinity of good fortune (Kahómbó) and whose son, born of parthenogenesis, is Mwindo. For a small group of individuals, those who participate in the performance, transmission,
and preservation of the epic form of literary tradition, Kárişī is a male spirit. When asked why he learned the epic, a Nyanga bard replies that he did so as the result of a compulsory message received in dreams from Kárişī. This can be easily understood in the following terms. The patterns of transmission of epics are, of course, determined by kinship and friendship. Young men who are agnatic relatives, affines, and/or blood friends of the accomplished bard learn the epic in an informal way by accompanying him as helpers whenever he goes to recite. They are usually about three in number, but not all these young men will ultimately be expert in narrating the epic. It is likely that only one of them—the more energetic, intelligent, assiduous, better-liked one—will be fully instructed by the bard in the performance of the epic in all its complexity. If one of the bard’s companions falls sick or suffers other frustrations (ill-fated hunting parties, death of near relatives, personal injuries), the oracles will surely ascribe his misfortune to Kárişī’s anger and dissatisfaction about the slowness and negligence with which he has been learning the epic. The cause of this evil fate can be removed only by appropriate devotions to Kárişī. These devotions are accomplished in two ways: first, the accelerated learning of the epic text and its subsequent performance; second, the erection, behind the house, of a small table-like shrine (busuni) on which offerings and libations of banana beer are made. The bard and his colleagues and friends ceremonially drink banana beer, through an otherwise rarely used reed tube, from a gourd placed on the shrine.

The main emblems of the cult are an iron bell and a butenge-spear with copper rings fixed around the shaft. These objects are said to be carried by the spirit Kárişī when, dressed in royal paraphernalia, he reveals himself in dreams. During offerings, the spear is planted near the shrine and the bell is attached to the gourd. During narration, the spear stands near the bard, while the bell may be fixed to his ankle. The bards themselves are called Kárişī, which indicates, as is clear from other similar cultural practices, that they are devotees of the spirit Kárişī or Shé-kárişī, a name constructed like any tennonym, signifying that he is the “father of . . . ,” “possessor of . . . ,” “in control of . . . ,” or “maker of . . . ” an epic story.

As shown by the translated text, the epic is said to be
cárwίmbo, the song par excellence. Episode by episode, the epic is first sung, then narrated. While singing and narrating, the bard dances, mimes, and dramatically represents the main peripeties of the story. In this dramatic representation, the bard takes the role of the hero. The normal musical accompaniment consists of a percussion stick (*nkwángátiro*) which, resting on a few little sticks so as to have better resonance, is beaten with drumsticks by three young men (*bashénkwángátiro*). These men regularly accompany the bard when he performs; they are recruited among the members of the bard’s own descent groups and/or his close affines (e.g., sororal nephew) or blood friends. They know large fragments of the epic, and, whenever necessary, help the bard to remember and to find the thread of his story. Eventually, one of them will acquire full knowledge and mastery of the text and be the bard’s successor. The narrator himself shakes the calabash rattle (containing little seeds or pebbles) and carries anklet bells (*ntsymbbo*). The percussionists and members of the audience sing the refrains of the songs or repeat a whole sentence during each short pause made by the bard. In this capacity, they are called *barisíľa* (those who agree with . . . ; those who say yes). Members of the audience also encourage the reciter with short exclamations (including onomatopoeia) and handclapping or whooping.

The Nyanga epic is not a text performed only at certain times or on highly esoteric ceremonial occasions. There is nothing secret about it; it is to be heard and enjoyed by all the people. Normally a chief or headman or simply the senior of a local descent group, in order to entertain his people and guests, would invite the bard to perform a few episodes of the epic in the evening, around the men’s hut in the middle of the village. Large crowds of people, male and female, young and old, would come to listen or rather to be participant auditors. The bard and his collaborators would receive food and beer. During the performance, they would receive, not only from the host, but also from many auditors, masabo-gifts consisting mainly of small amounts of *butéá*-money, beads, and armlets. They would also receive, like any good musician or dancer or singer, the praises of the crowd, praises expressed in words and in gestures (symbolic drying of sweat, adjusting of the clothing,
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pulling of the fingers, and straightening of the back of the dancing narrator). There would not be any special fees paid to them at the end of the performance, although the bard might receive, like any other respected guest, a special farewell gift (ikósórwa). If excitement ran high and beer and food were plentiful, the narrator would be invited to continue parts of the narration on the following evening. The interesting point is that the narrator would never recite the entire story in immediate sequence, but would intermittently perform various select passages of it. Mr. Rureke, whose epic is presented here, repeatedly asserted that never before had he performed the whole story within a continuous span of days.

The epic incorporates most literary forms known to the Nyanga, in both poetry and prose: rigidly stereotyped enunciations and improvised remarks, songs consisting of proverbs, improvised reflections, riddles and abstracts of tales, songs that have the characteristics of praises, prayers, and blessings. The protagonist is a human hero (murai), but he is surrounded by almost all categories of dramatis personae found in the tales: human beings (chiefs and officeholders, Pygmies, kinsmen, friends, and followers); animals (insects, fishes, birds, mammals), some of them his allies (spiders, bats, hawk) and some his enemies (fishes, crabs, aardvark); fabulous beings (the Water Serpent Mukíti and the Dragon Kirímu); deities (Kahómbó, Muisa, Nkúbá); personified, and sometimes semi-deified, celestial bodies and the elements (Moon, Star, Rain, Hail, Cloud). The content of the epic is a rich survey of customs, institutions, activities, behavior patterns, values, material objects that are of main significance to the Nyanga. It is, in fact, a synopsis of Nyanga culture. Functionally the epic is many things: entertainment, moralization, an explanation of causes, and an interpretation of existing customs; it is a paideia.

Finally, what is presented here as a piece of oral literature is much more than that. It is music, rhythm, song, dance, movement, dramatic entertainment. It is feasting and gift-giving (those who present the gifts dance and gesticulate). It is group solidarity and mass participation. For the bard himself, the act of narrating the story has religious significance. He believes that Kárisi, deified, wanted him to learn the epic; to perform the drama adequately makes the narrator “strong,” protects
him against disease and death. The narrator believes he will find in his songs the force that Mwindo himself, the hero of the epic, derives from them.

THE NARRATOR, MR. SHÉ-KÁRÍŚI CANDI RUREKE

I met Mr. Rureke, narrator of the Mwindo epic, in Bese. Extremely isolated, far away from roads, located in a dense forest area that is infested with big game and intersected by numerous rivers, Bese is famous for its hunters, trappers, and fishermen, and for its great tradition of blacksmithing. Composed of sixty-four huts and nine outlying hamlets, the village is fairly large in size. Male representatives of not less than sixteen different descent groups live in the village which is traditionally placed under the headmanship of a member of the Bacira descent group. Bese is part of a small traditional state called Rare or cūo cáBana-Kabákì, which, as is common among the Nyanga, consists of only a couple of villages and their outlying hamlets. The state is ruled by one of the few surviving sacred chiefs, Mwanankuyu. As a result of repeated and systematic regrouping and resettling of people by the Belgian administration, this and other petty states in the northwestern part of Nyanga country were merged into a single administrative unit, known as groupement Kisimba. A region of exceptionally dense rain forest called Ihimbí cuts across the boundaries of the Rare and other states. This region, which ecologically is but a southeastward extension of the huge rain forest that covers the adjoining territories of Lubutu, Bafwasende, Mambasa, and part of Lubero, was originally occupied by Pygmies, few of whom remained in the area because of emigration or absorption into Nyanga ranks. According to Nyanga traditions, the first peoples to encounter the Pygmies in these areas were collectively known as Bahimbí. These Bahimbí are part of a cluster of peoples living in areas adjoining Nyanga country and are known in ethnographical records as Bapiri, Bame, Batiri. Nyanga groups, immigrating from the east (Rutshuru territory), later settled in this area and established political control over it. As a result of this contact, the Bahimbí, who were already strongly influenced by the Pygmies, were culturally assimilated by the Nyanga. Nyanga culture predominates among the few
groups still known as Bahímbi, but they differ from most other Nyanga in that they are heavily specialized in big-game hunting. Mr. Rureke, by his kinship origins, belongs to such a group.

As shown in the first lines of this epic, the region of Ihímbí forms the setting within which the action takes place. In his last song, the narrator even praises Ihímbí: MwiHimbí kwítů nongóbo/in Ihimbi, in our country it is fine. The fact, then, is that Rureke possessed a house in the village of Bese and that he resided there, but Bese was not his home village. A member of the Bana-nkurí descent group, Rureke was born in the village of Koutu which was located in the heart of Ihímbí before it was abandoned in about 1931, both as the result of boundary disputes and of administrative resettlement of scattered groups. Before the colonial era, Koutu had been the center of a petty state called cúo cáBana-Koumbo. The male members of Rureke’s descent group were classified as the perpetual maternal uncles of the local ruling line of Baruko chiefs. The abandonment of Koutu resulted in the dispersal of its descent groups. Rureke, his two uterine junior brothers, Butler and Muihirwa, and two members of the Baruko group settled in Bese.

It would be incorrect to think of Rureke as a “stranger” in Bese village, for he was linked by various ties to many of its inhabitants. First, there had always been close political ties rooted in kinship between the rulers of Kouto and Rare. Second, Rureke’s maternal uncles (the Baherí) and his in-laws (the Bafúyá or Babúyá) were established in Bese. Third, Rureke had personal relationships, founded in distant kinship and in friendship, with two men of considerable influence in the village. Both men, Risaki Kangakora (the senior son of the village headman) and Butler (a son of the headman’s senior brother) of the Bacira group, were classificatory sororal nephews of the Baruko. Rureke, as a member of a group that stood in a perpetual relationship of maternal uncles to the Baruko, was automatically considered to be a classificatory grandfather of both men. This relationship was enhanced by some special form of esprit de corps arising from the fact that all three men had been working for European concerns, located not too far from Nyanga country.
Rureke, a youthful-looking man about fifty years old, was not wealthy, nor did he hold any political or ritual office. In contrast with his junior brothers, he had only one wife; she was sick and resided with her two children in the hamlet of Bese, which was occupied by members of her own descent group, the Bafúýá or Babúýá. Rureke depended for his food on the wives of his junior brothers and of his two friends. In his youth, Rureke had been a skillful maker of mats and baskets and that is how he got his name (which literally means basket). Then he had become a helper of Kanyangara of Bese, who was an expert narrator of the Mwindo epic. Kanyangara, who belonged to the Bafúýá or Babúýá descent group, had blood brotherhood relationships with Rureke’s father; Rureke’s father also selected a wife for his son from this group. On several occasions, Rureke refers in the songs to the fact that he has learned his story from the Babúýá (his pronunciation of Bafúýá), thus paying tribute to his teacher:

_Twanánge múano_
We are telling (from) the story
_Rwánángá Babúýá_
That the Babuya have told (long ago).

and

_Tuané kwaruano_
Let us recite from the story
_Runaámá Babúýá_
That the Babuya are used to reciting.

Rureke knew only that Kanyangara had learned the epic from a certain Bishusha whom he could not further identify.

From Rureke’s social background it is clear that the epic he knew had its roots in a region where three cultural traditions (Pygmies, Bahímbí, Nyanga) had been intimately integrated with one another. The Nyanga insist that the Pygmies were at one time great bards who performed káriši-like stories for their chiefs. They do not, however, say that these stories originated with the Pygmies. On the other hand, it is interesting to note that Rureke, the only great performer of the Mwindo epic alive in Nyanga country in the mid-fifties, had, through his kinship origins, very deep roots in an area that all Nyanga agree was once occupied by Pygmies. It is also significant that