

Introduction

THE NYANGA¹

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 ethnohistorical 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

1. For further general information on the Nyanga see the following studies by D. Biebuyck: "De mumbo-instelling by de Banyanga (Kivu)," *Kongo Overzee*, XXI (1955), 441-448; *De Hond by de Nyanga: Ritueel en Sociologie* (Brussels: Académie royale des Sciences d'Outre-Mer, 1956), 168 pp.; "L'organisation politique des Nyanga: La chefferie Ihana," *Kongo Overzee*, XXII (1956), 301-341; XXIII (1957), 59-98; "Mwéndo de Zwoeger: Een heldedicht van de Banyanga," *Zuiderkruis*, I (1956), 77-80; III (1958), 35-45; "Les divisions du jour et de la nuit chez les Nyanga," *Aequatoria*, XXI (1958), 134-138; "Six Nyanga Texts," in W. H. Whiteley, ed., *A Selection of African Prose* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), I, 55-61; "Prières des chasseurs Nyanga," in G. Dieterlen, ed., *Textes sacrés d'Afrique noire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), pp. 135-143; *Rights in Land and Its Resources among the Nyanga* (Brussels: Académie royale des Sciences d'Outre-Mer, 1966). A broad selection of Nyanga texts is ready now and will be published in 1967 under the title *Anthologie de la littérature orale nyanga* by the Académie royale des Sciences d'Outre-Mer, Brussels.

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 origin; Mpamba of Lega affiliation. Smaller remnants of Pygmies and Lega, and larger groups of Tiro-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 *mwămítwá*, 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, Měshémútwá (Meshe 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 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 (*mwāmi*). 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 (*barúsi*), counselors (*bakungú*), and ritual officeholders (*bandrabitambo*), 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 Muisa, Kiana, Hángi, Měshé, Nkángó, Kahómbó, are said to live together with the dead in the Underworld (*kwirúngá*, 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 Nyamurajrj, god of fire.

Some other divinities which are actively worshiped, such as Kéntsé (Sun), Nkúbá (Lightning), Iyúhu (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 *bashumbú*. 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 cultural 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-dwelling dragon Kirímu, the forest

specter Mpacá, and the Binyanyasị (restless spirits of those Nyanga who committed suicide or died, stigmatized as sorcerers, as the result of a *kabj*-ordeal), and by the water-dwelling, rather friendly monster Mukjti. The Nyanga formulate several ideas about Ongo, God, who is said *inter alia* to be the “heart of the earth,” to have created everything, 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 semisecret associations (membership in which is mostly restricted 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, pottery, and carving are simple. Wooden dishes and pots are decorated with incised designs. Plastic art is practically unknown in world collections, although the Nyanga make decorative masks of antelope hide, a rare type of anthropo-zoomorphic wooden statue used in the *mumbirá*-initiations and very rare bone and ivory carvings for the *mbúntsú* 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, 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*, *mukíntsa*, *kandúndú*, beaten with two hands, two drumsticks, one drumstick, respectively); the percussion stick (*nkwángátiro*); the antelope horn (*kahanda*); the small reed or bamboo flute (*kafééré*); the calabash or wickerwork rattle (*jšhengo*); the music bow (*kimpúrengé*); the two-stringed zither (*ntsentse*); the three types of zanzas (*kantsambi*, *ikímbi*, and *kasáj*, the last of recent introduction); the anklet bells (*ntsumbo*) 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 literature² 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.

mushúmo. 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 (*rwimbo*) 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 (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.

ĩnondo. 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

2. To be published in 1968 in the *Collections* of the Académie royale des Sciences d'Outre-Mer, Brussels.

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.”

mubíkíro. 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 *ae* (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 implorations 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 officeholders—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.

musínjo. 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 *ae* or *um*. The content is monotonous and consists mainly of names, but the ethnohistorical knowledge 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.

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

rwímbo. 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 circumstances, 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 *mushíngá*. The first is a tale in general, the second a tale where the supernatural element, produced by the intervention 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 summarize 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 pangolin, 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., Shébuhányá, the Calamitous; Shéburongú, the Generous; Shébushú, the Man-of-Hatred). There are also extraordinary awe-inspiring beings like Kirjmu, the Dragon; Mpacá the Forest Specter; Mukítj, 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.

nganuriro. 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:

mwanikiro. 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.

kishámbaro. Discourses on or systematic coherent treatments of the problems of the country or state uttered by the elders, headmen, and chiefs.

ihano. 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 (*mwangiro*; *kihunda*) and of taboos, prohibitions, and injunctions (*mutándo*) would also fall under this category of teachings and counsels.

kárĩjĩ. 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 *Kábútwa-kénda* (the Little-one-just-born-he-walked) and *Mboru* (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