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**A MAGYAR TUDOMÁNY KÜLFÖLDI BARÁTAI
AZ AFRIKA-KUTATÁS TERÜLETÉN
FRIENDS IN ABROAD OF HUNGARIAN SCHOLARSHIP
ON THE FIELD OF AFRICAN RESEARCH**

CENTRAL AFRICAN EPICS

BELCHER, Stephan

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The narrative traditions of central Africa offer a grouping united by features of content and performance style, which because of their length, their poetry, and their importance to the culture are generally termed epic. Examples would include: from the Congo (the former Zaire), the Mwindo epics of the BaNyanga, the Lega epics, and the Lianja cycle of the Mongo; other regions offer us Jeki la Nzambe of the Duala (Cameroon) and Ozidi of the Ijo (Nigeria). The *mvett* tradition of Cameroon and Gabon is also closely related in style.

These epics are the productions of specialists, often initiates into a spirit-cult; the apprenticeship-initiation serves as training (observation and imitation of the master), as protection from the occult energies which are released in any performance, and as regulation of the creative process which inspires the poet. Boyer provides the fullest study of the performer's world for the Fang *bebom-mvett*. The performances are also to be distinguished from ordinary folktales, narrated under a variety of circumstances, or from the output of specialized historical traditionists such as were found in Rwanda and other kingdoms. The epics involve a team of performers, centered upon the master-singer (male or female, although relatively few women's performances have been documented) and including musicians and other singers. Performances are typically public and festive events, although venues and occasions may vary. Among the Duala of the Cameroon, *Jeki* is now performed at wakes and funerals because it is a lengthy production that lasts most of the night and so

simplifies the task of arranging entertainment. Among the BaNyanga, Biebuyck has reported a far more sedate but intense variety of solo performance around the fires of hunting camps as a counterpart to the dramatic public spectacle recorded in a village. Performances typically mix a spoken narrative with frequent lyrical intrusions. The songs may be short onomatopoetic embellishments evoking the identity of a character or an activity such as paddling or running, or they may be extended meditations upon the poet's condition and the state of the world, only loosely related to the narrative (the *Mvet* of Zwe Nguema offers excellent examples of the latter). Other performance possibilities, not reflected in published texts and recordings, include dances in which the audience may engage, and a high degree of mimetic action by the performer. Many passages of the *Ozidi Saga*, for instance, consist of dialogue between the hero and his antagonist, while the audience reactions and comments attest to effective non-verbal actions by the performer.

The length and scope of the performances will vary. While the many adventures associated with the different heroes can be strung into a loose narrative sequence (a biographical pattern augmented with stories about the ancestors), it appears very rare for such a complete sequence to be performed--and in some cases it is explicitly claimed that the cycle has no end. A performance thus involves the selection of episodes to be presented in the time allowed. There are exceptions to this rule, such as the *Ozidi Saga*, which is presented as a complete sequence over a period of seven nights. Among the Fang, a *mvét* performance typically lasts an entire night; in this case, the performer, working without a fixed plot, develops as many threads as necessary in the course of the evening and then resolves them, sometimes abruptly, as the performance comes to a close. Generally, however, the model seems to be one of selection of appropriate and popular episodes from the cycle, according to the time allotted.

The hero is typically a precocious, often posthumous, child who springs from the womb (or sometimes the leg) ready to take on all comers and to avenge his (or his mother's) wrongs. He is usually assisted by a female relative: a sister, an aunt, a grandmother, who provides instruction and magical support. His adventures constitute a series of confrontations, tests, and ordeals, which may take him below the earth to the land of the spirits, over the waters, or into the sky. He works with magic rather than brute strength; the magic is often

embodied in a talisman such as an amulet (the *ngalo* of Jeki) or a tool/weapon (Mwindo's conga-scepter) and may be invoked through songs. The hero's accomplishments, ultimately, establish a way of life, and in many regards he might be considered a culture hero. However, he often also shows signs of being a trickster, and there is some overlap between the adventures of a Lianja or a Mwindo and other (non-epic) tricksters such as Hlakanyaka of the Zulu. Nor is the hero always considered admirable; his power is often associated with arrogance. The mythical content of these adventures is strong, and the hero appears far more a demiurge than an ancestor.

A related but distinct category of narratives is found among the Fang peoples on either side of the Cameroon/Gabon border. This genre is locally termed the *mvett*, and the word covers the instrument (a bamboo chordophone) and the genre of narrative-poetic performance. In most regards the performance style of the *mvett* seems identical to that of the other regional epics; the difference lies principally in the content. *Mvett* traditions are centered on a past, mythical world dominated by two clans: the immortals of Engong, led by the powerful Akoma Mba, and the mortals of Oku. The plots develop from frictions and conflicts between these two groups. There appear to be no established story-lines, but rather a common set of recurring characters and narrative tropes. Romantic liaisons and the adventures of a travelling couple are a staple device, as are magical duels between the men over the women. Magic of various sorts plays a central role in the genre, and may represent an artistic challenge for the performer (a competition of special effects); it also seems the mechanism for integrating modern elements into the stories. Plots will develop, over the course of a night's presentation, according to the performer's inspiration and audience interest, and tend to be abruptly resolved as morning brings the performance to a close. The powers of Akoma Mba are essential for this method of closure, as he serves as a *deus ex machina* who appears at need to end the story. An interesting extension of the medium of the *mvett* is the work of Tsira Ndong Ndoutoume, who has produced literary examples of the *mvett*.

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