“SUMMONING TOGETHER ALL THE PEOPLE”:
VARIANT TELLINGS OF THE MWINDO EPIC AS
SOCIAL AND POLITICAL DELIBERATION

Nathalia King

Other articles in this collection are written by classicists concerning topics from Greek and Roman antiquity and, in this sense, my topic must seem a little out of place. How feasible is it to construe a relation between the oral traditions of Western antiquity and the oral tradition of a small African culture in the latter half of the twentieth century? What I hope to show is that orality studies have now reached the point at which a broadly comparative approach drawing together different oral traditions can be highly illuminating. It is not only a question of using a more modern tradition to better understand a specific story-telling function that would otherwise remain obscure in an ancient tradition—as Albert Lord used his study of Serbo–Croatian epic to grasp the subtleties of the Homeric formulae. It is also a question of seeing how oral traditions from different cultures and historical times can deploy similar narrative, rhetorical and poetic strategies to different cultural ends. Perhaps the more we learn about such differences, the more readily we can argue for an oral tradition’s intrinsic capacity for the kinds of literary originality, sophistication, and transformation that we so readily ascribe to its written counterparts.

My inquiry here concerns the oral tradition of a small culture (some 25–30,000 people) called the Banyanga or Nyanga situated in Eastern Africa in an area on the borders of the Congo Republic and Rwanda. My argument is based on and indebted to the extraordinary fieldwork of Daniel Biebuyck and Kahombo Mateene—the Belgian anthropologist and his Nyanga colleague responsible for recording, transliterating and translating the oral tradition known as the Mwindo epic. They recorded this epic in four variant tellings as performed by four Banyangan bards—all in the span of a single year in 1956. The four bards in question were Candi Rureke, Sherungu, Shekarisi, and Shekwabo. They came from villages that were politically distinct from one another, but not more than fifty miles apart. Biebuyck has made these perfor-
mannances accessible to an English speaking audience in two volumes entitled *The Mwindo Epic* (1969) and *Hero and Chief* (1978).

I would like to make two kinds of arguments here: a theoretical argument and a critical one. Theoretically speaking, I will argue that the reiterations of a given epic tradition do not have to be, as some might say, the source of a fundamentally static cultural dispensation. On the contrary, epic variants can be a crucial site for cultural reflection and analysis. In some cases, and the Mwindo epic is a prime example, variant tellings are opportunities to examine the terms of a seemingly unchanging social contract. In such a case, oral variants can become one of the primary stages for social and political deliberation and can map out imaginative strategies for change.

The critical element of my paper, which focuses exclusively on the content of the Mwindo epic tradition, will demonstrate that each of the four transcribed variants of the Mwindo epic expresses a significantly different take on the political difficulties arising from a concern absolutely central to Banyangan culture. This is a problem to which Curtain, Feierman, Thompson and Vansina give elegant articulation in their *African History* when they write that the issue in succession is “to find procedures flexible enough to exclude incompetent rulers, but fixed enough to allow the new ruler to take office without fighting a civil war.”

The Mwindo epic in particular dramatizes the degree to which political succession stands at the nexus of all social and familial relations: while succession is politically determined by relations of patriarchy and primogeniture in Banyangan culture, I want to show that their epic oral tradition provides models of the alternate modes of thought and conduct needed when decisions based either on patriarchal authority or on the rule of primogeniture would result in inadequate new leadership.

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1 All further references are to these editions, for which I use the abbreviations TME and HAC. Biebuyck 1969 and Biebuyck 1978.

2 In Biebuyck’s words (1978:8), “Against a background of common thematic and stylistic elements, the four epics develop many antithetical viewpoints...”

3 Biebuyck (1978: 8–9) holds the same view and further specifically discounts “the conflict between father and son,” “the conflict between a man and his paternal aunt’s husband” and “the social and spiritual bond between a man and his paternal aunt” as common motifs in the variants.

4 In many African cultures, the Banyangan included, this problem is complicated in many ways by the practice of polygamy which potentially increases the number of possible heirs as it does the sources of political friction generated by the old chief’s wives (“preferred” and “despised”) in their rivalry to see their own children enthroned.