In the following article we look at a series of varied stories from the Luba people (Baluba) from Zaire, myths that describe, in copious and contradictory detail, the origins of human death. These texts help to show how an African people views human existence by stating that ultimately human life is defined by its extinguishment. In addition, the Luba myths point to the ultimacy of a supreme being and the ameliorative efficacy of human ancestors whose existence derives directly from the fact of human mortality. Finally, we try to demonstrate how the Luba bring themselves into contact with their ancestors through artistic creation and ritual.

The Luba are members of the Central Bantu language group inhabiting Zaire. They possess a varied subracial mixture, having shown throughout their known history an ability to intermarry with other peoples, Bantu and otherwise. Their culture, including their oral traditions, demonstrates their practice of synthesizing, or allowing to exist side by side, foreign and native elements, ignoring therein the incorporated contradictions.

We have chosen the Luba because relatively substantial collections of their oral traditions exist in publication, including a variety of myths concerning the origin of death. Research on Central African myth is limited. Twenty years ago only thirty-five of the more than three hundred Congo-area tribes had collections of their folklore published. Even the Musée Royal du Congo Belge (now the Musée Royal de l’Afrique Centrale) in Tervuren, which has published important studies of Bantu and other Congo peoples, has no folklore archive or folklore publication. The recent decade of interest in African oral tradition, both within and without Africa, may change this situation, but just two decades ago it was said that "the former Belgian Congo is virtually terra incognita for the scien-
The Luba people are exceptions to this rule in that a large bulk of their oral traditions has been collected and published by conscientious researchers.

Of this bulk we shall concentrate on two categories: its stories and its proverbs. As among other Bantu groups, the Luba have no word to categorize myths as a separate genre of folklore apart from legends or tales. In view of this fact, it seems inappropriate to limit the discussion to "myths," an alien category to the people under study; consequently, we have examined all forms of oral narration and shall refer to them as "stories." In examining these stories, we have discovered their extensions in proverbial sayings that are often used by the Luba to summarize their narratives in brief, frequently cryptic, utterances. Proverbs do exist as a distinct verbal category in Luba folklore, and they provide insight to the stories we wish to study.

The Luba have specially designated raconteurs who tell stories and recite proverbs; however, anyone can and does tell stories and proverbs. People use them in law cases, education, general speech, and in recitations. Many old Luba used to converse almost exclusively in proverbial ejaculations. Both stories and proverbs have great antiquity and respect among the people who tell and listen to them. Studying the proverbs and stories in conjunction with one another is especially helpful in that the proverbs often state very clearly and simply the meaning of a complicated story, and the stories often illustrate the source and meaning of mysterious proverbs. Together they have the potential of revealing to a cultural outsider the conceptions of the people who possess them and use them in daily life. In this article we shall use them in order to understand the Luba conceptions regarding the most crucial of human issues: death.

Before one can understand the Luba conception of death, we must understand their conception of human life. Associated with a person's intelligence, perception, and wisdom is the vital force—sometimes called the shadow of life, or soul—which supports the body through its functioning. Each person has his or her own unique vital force. It can diminish or increase, although in general a person increases in vital force with age. The Luba set forth an ontological hierarchy based on age; the older the person, the higher the position in the age-grade hierarchy. If one realizes that animals and other forms of life do not possess vital force, one