

BETI TALES FROM
SOUTHERN CAMEROON:
THE KAISER CYCLE

The Beti with whom this study is concerned belong to the "so-called Pahouin group,"¹ which includes, besides the Beti, the Bulu and the Fang. This group occupies large parts of Gabon, Equatorial Guinea and southern Cameroon. The region where the Beti live has a quite varied relief; the vegetation is extremely luxuriant, worthy of the great tropical forest, and there are many hills and streams. The Beti population, organized along what are known as "anarchic" lines, is made up essentially of farmers and hunters, as are most of the forest populations. The flora and fauna are also quite varied; they are the same that appear in typical Beti tales and fables.

It is well known that the fable, and especially the tale, make up a genre which is very much alive in Black Africa and whose

Translated by Mary Burnet.

¹ Alexandre, P. and Binet, J. *Le Groupe dit Pahouin (Fang - Bulu - Beti)*. P.U.F., Paris, 1958.

popularity has never ceased to increase in all parts of our vast continent. However, in the present study, only the Beti fable and tale will be considered, and specifically the Kaiser cycle.

In the form of tales, the Beti transmit to one another stories, accounts of fictitious events which they call *Minlan*. This word is the plural of *Nlan*, which comes from the same root as the verb *laé* (recount, narrate). The verb *lan* (to count, enumerate) may also be derived from the same root. This would seem to indicate that the Beti is conscious not only of the parts that make up his *Nlan* but also of its internal rhythms, of the number that is essential to all poetic organization. Besides *Nlan*, there is also another word that designates a tale: *Nkana*. But the truth is that this latter word is incorrectly used when it is applied to the genre with which we are presently concerned: among the Beti, strictly speaking, it denotes a riddle, a proverb, an anecdote, or, finally, a *chantefable*. In this last case a determinative is added to the substantive *Nkana*, and one speaks of a *Nkana meyebé* in the singular and of *Minkana meyebé* in the plural; the *chantefable* includes a refrain, often taken up by the audience in chorus, and a part recited by the narrator. The *Mkana* (from the verb *kat*: recite, pronounce) is a series of meaningful words, a form of discourse having a special artistic connotation, a recital. The refrain which is added, and which is the hallmark of the genre, is a sort of response expressing critical agreement with what the narrator says; it constitutes audience participation in this collective creation.

For African oral literature, whether profane or religious, whether intended as a game, as entertainment, or as a means of education, always has a theatrical quality that demands a stage-setting. Hence it is easy to understand the importance of the actors, of whom the principal one is the narrator or reciter. The priest who recites a sacred formula during an initiation, the healer who exorcises a patient, the narrator who recites a fable or a tale, the musician who plays a tune on his *Mvet*,² the old man or adult who adorns his speech with numerous proverbs—all use much gesture and mimicry. This gesture and mimicry, answered by the other actors—the audience—contribute as much as the

² The *Mvet* is a musical instrument used by the Fang, Bulu and Beti.

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language itself to giving its full meaning to the sacred formula, the tale, the song, the proverb, and so on.

The real African story-teller is the one who best masters this art of setting the stage for a drama (in the broadest sense of the term)—a drama in which the audience takes part. The audience are actors but also critical spectators; they “exercise close supervision over the artist.” While collecting tales and fables, the present writer has often seen a spectator intervene to correct a phrase or a word, or to add a detail to the narrator’s recital, as a critic of the classics will add a gloss. As Thomas Melone says, “Traditional oral literature is first of all a theatrical performance. An evening performance in the village is a total artistic phenomenon, which integrates into the same structure all the elements of stage geometry, of linguistic and recreational resources, with the collective participation of the whole community.”³

Let us come back to the classification of the Beti tales. In addition to the classification already mentioned, which is based only on language, the Beti have another classification which is based on the central character of the tale, the fable or the *chantefable*. They thus distinguish:

1. The *Minlān mi kulu*—the tales of the tortoise
2. The *Minlān mi bemé*—the tales of the wart-hog
3. The *Minlān mi man nui*—the tales of the orphan
4. The *Minlān mi omomodo*—the tales of the ogre
5. The *Minlān mi Kaiser*—the tales of the Kaiser

This enumeration is far from being exhaustive, but it is sufficient in the present context. What is interesting is that this classification coincides with the one adopted by all the “so-called Pahouin group” (that is, Beti, Bulu and Fang); only the appellations are different in the various vernacular languages of the group. The Bulu, for example, will speak of:

1. The *Minkana mi ngugu*—the tales of the ogre
2. The *Minkana mi bekon*—the tales of genii and spirits

³ Melone, Thomas. *La vie africaine et le langage théâtral*. Paper presented to the University of Abidjan, 1970.

3. The *Minkana mi mbibian*—the tales of sorcerers
4. The *Minkana mi zameyo mebe'e*—tales dealing with mythology and the supernatural
5. The *Minkana mi Kaiser*—the tales of the Kaiser.⁴

The Bulu thus use the word *Nkana* where the Beti use the word *Nlān*. The well-known title of *Minkana mi Bulu* given by Dr. Good to his collection of Bulu tales may also serve as evidence of what has just been said.

This classification made by the Beti, Bulu and Fang has been translated by the term *cycle* by authors like Herskovits, Pierre Alexandre and Eno-Belinga. The word seems to me well adapted to our literature, since it permits a given collection of tales to be grouped under a single heading. For in most cases, within each cycle, everything revolves about a single character who provides the unity of both the tale and the cycle in question. It is the high stature of this hero-character which fires the imagination of the narrator and his audience.

Since the various cycles have been recognized by Beti society itself and by various authors, it seemed to me important to choose one of them in order to show its originality or lack of originality with relation to Beti society, for in this vast wealth of tales there are some where the exact image of the Beti culture can be seen reflected as in a mirror. Such, for example, are the cycle of the tortoise and that of the wart-hog. The latter, in particular, is peculiar to the Pahouin populations and, so far as this writer knows, does not exist elsewhere in all of Black Africa. The tales of the tortoise and the wart-hog are pure products of the popular imagination, as are most of the other genres of our oral literature. The sources of these tales are thus strictly African, and Beti in particular. Is the same true of the Kaiser cycle?

The Kaiser cycle is essentially built around a single theme: love and adventure. The principal characters are all human beings and not symbolic animals. True, the tales are full of supernatural elements, but here the supernatural is no longer grotesque; it is subtler and more discreet. The action is explained in a long narration including numerous descriptions, in which one may

⁴ Awouma, J. M. *Littérature orale et comportements sociaux. (Etude littéraire et socio-culturelle des proverbes et contes bulu du Sud-Cameroun)*. Third-cycle thesis for the Sorbonne, Paris, 1970, page 169.

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discern an attempt at a penetrating psychological analysis of the characters. These various observations led me to suspect that the origin of the Kaiser cycle was Arab or more probably Western, rather than Cameroonian or even Negro-African.

Of course no one can deny in good faith the theory of the "polygenesis" of tales—a theory dear to Joseph Bédier and his disciples, like M. Awouma. Yes, "the tales were born, *for the most part*, at various undetermined places and times." But I reject from the start a certain body of opinion according to which the Kaiser tales arose in Cameroon or somewhere else in Black Africa. There is practically no serious evidence to corroborate such a hypothesis: the structure and especially the form of these tales are entirely different from those of the usual Beti tale. Furthermore—and this is most significant—they contain few of the characteristic traits of Beti culture, and those that are included are adaptations to the Beti or Pahouin mentality—astute adaptations, it is true—of elements that are basically foreign to the special genius of the Pahouin group.

The Orientalist theory may be defended if we concede that the transmission of the purported models could have been made orally through the contact of the Negro-African civilizations with North Africa, and in probably simplified form.⁵ But this is only a working hypothesis, and one which should be treated with many reservations. For, up to now, I have never been able to get my hands on a single tale from the Arabian Nights from which one of those in the Kaiser cycle might have been derived. Perhaps later research will permit me to consolidate this thesis, but it still seems exceedingly weak.

On the other hand, for the moment, I believe it possible to relate these Kaiser tales with a certain literature of the Medieval West. May not colonization first by the Germans, then by the French, with the assimilation policy of both, have permitted these stories to be introduced into Cameroon, after which the Beti, the Bulu and the Fang adapted them to their own culture?

Here is an example of a Kaiser tale, which I shall present only in translation. I shall try to analyze it before drawing the conclusion that seems to be called for.

⁵ This theory, advanced by Huet and Théodore Benfey, holds that all the tales in the world originated in India and reached other countries through Byzantines, the Arabs and the Jews.

“Once upon a time there was a great king named Kaiser. He married a woman and with her had a daughter whom he called Elisa-Belle.

“Elisa-Belle’s mother died, and the king consoled himself for his loss by marrying again. With his new wife, Kaiser had three daughters.

“This wife was so harsh with Elisa-Belle that you can hardly imagine such hardness of heart and such a will to persecute if not kill little by little. If you saw Elisa-Belle you felt like vomiting with disgust: every square centimeter of the skin of her head oozed with ringworm; all of her body was covered with lice, wounds and scabs, with itch; and a multitude of fleas ate away at her feet, from the soles to the ankles, hanging by tens from every toe.

“In another country, another great king had had a son; he was already a handsome young man and for some time had wanted to get married. This other Kaiser sent missives to the great kings of all countries, especially to those who had daughters of marriageable age, inviting them to his home, in order to choose from all the girls together the one who was going to be his son’s wife. When this news was announced, the whole country was excited; they had to get ready for the celebration.

“One morning, while Elisa-Belle’s father was preparing to go on a trip, Elisa-Belle came and said, ‘Father, I want to ask you for something.’ Her father said to her: ‘O my daughter! Not a single day will I show disdain for you; anything you want, come ask me, and I will give it to you.’ Then Elisa-Belle said, ‘When you leave on your journey, while you are on horseback, pick the first branch that brushes your head and bring it back to me, I beg you.’ And her father promised.

“He had hardly set on his way when a branch brushed his head. He stopped his horse, got out his knife, cut off the branch, and kept it in his bag. Then he went on his way.

“The day he got back, when he arrived in his village, Elisa-Belle’s father called her and gave her the branch she had asked for. Elisa-Belle took the branch and kept it.

“When the day came that the other Kaiser had set for the ceremony, all the great kings of that country went to attend it. Like the others, Elisa-Belle’s father told his family that his daughters, except Elisa, should go take part in the marriage con-

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test. When they had left, Elisa-Belle took the branch and went to her mother's grave. As soon as she had touched the branch to the tomb, bells began to ring at full peal from the inside, as harmoniously as at the feast of the Holy Sacrament. Her mother came out of the tomb and said to her: 'My daughter, I know all the difficulties you have (on earth). Now wash yourself first with this water I have brought you.' Elisa-Belle poured the water on her body once, and lo! her body suddenly recovered the freshness and gleam it had had on the day she was born; not a bit of itch, nor a flea, nor a ringworm; she had become beautiful again as she used to be. Her beauty was far more dazzling than that of all the girls in the country. Then her mother took clothes as shiny as gold and dressed her in them; she took a very luxurious car, of a make you have surely never yet seen since the world began, and gave it to her. Her mother spoke and said: 'Now that you are going away, don't catch the fruit that the young man will throw to each girl in turn. Let it drop.' Elisa answered: 'Yes, mother. I understand.'

"Elisa set out for the celebration. When she arrived at the place where it was being held, a great cry of unanimous admiration, '*un Wuaaa*,' burst forth, and people said: 'The Kaiser's son has found a wife; there is nothing more to say.' Beside Elisa, an angel from heaven would have been hardly worth noticing; immediately all the girls who had come formed into lines as the Cameroonian soldiers do at parade time.

"The Kaiser's son paused, and began throwing the ball to each in turn, as one throws a *Ngeg* in assegai.⁶ The young woman who would catch this ball was going to become the young prince's bride. When he came face to face with Elisa, he put the ball into her hands. Elisa dropped the ball; weeping broke out loud enough to pierce your eardrums. The young man threw himself on the ground and cried.

"During this time, Elisa's father was saying to himself: 'This girl looks very much like Elisa, my child.' Tears ran from his eyes, and he cried. All the populations who were there began to leave, each one going home. Elisa left, passed her father on the road, fast as a jet plane. When she arrived at her mother's grave she took

⁶ *Ngeg*: "Fruit of one of the tiliaceae, which can be used as a ball in assegai." Cf. Abbot Théodore Tsala. *Dictionnaire Ewondo-Français*. Emmanuel Vitte, Lyon.

her branch and struck the tomb a second time; immediately, everything she had disappeared; she remained as wretched as usual, with her itch, her fleas, her ringworm and the lice in her clothes. She returned to her father's house and took a place in the very back; one could have sworn that she had nothing in common with the beautiful girl who had outshone, and far outshone, all the other girls in the country together. And you have not forgotten that she was the slave of Madame, her father's wife.

"When the company had dispersed, the Kaiser, who was eager to marry off his son, set a new meeting date for two weeks later.

"As soon as Elisa's father got home, Elisa came and asked him, 'Papa, what happened over there at the Kaiser's house where you went?' Her father answered, 'My daughter, since I was born I have never seen a girl like the one I saw today, and that girl had a face that looked like yours.' And tears began to fall from his eyes. Imagine the hatred his wife felt! She would have liked to bury him alive when she heard him say that the most beautiful girl had some resemblance to Elisa.

"That woman was wickeder than anything you have ever been able to imagine like that up until today. Compared to her, Lucifer himself would have been bearable.

"To be brief, at the end of two weeks all the Kaisers again went to the home of their counterpart. Elisa's father went with his three daughters and his wife. Since Elisa had stayed, she cleaned the house nicely, straightened things up and prepared the meal. Then she took the branch and ran to her mother's grave. She had hardly struck the branch when the bells began to ring as if they had been waiting for her gesture. And everywhere Elisa saw flowers, each more beautiful than the last, like those in the hanging garden that is in France. Then her mother appeared and said to her, 'Now that you are leaving, catch the fruit the young man will throw, but don't stay down there; go back to your father's house.' Elisa answered her: 'Yes, and thank you very much, Mother; I'm going.'

"As soon as Elisa had poured water over her body, Oh! what a metamorphosis! She was as brilliant as the sun! Her car, her clothes, her shoes, her earrings and her necklaces—gifts of her mother—everything she had on was pure gold. Elisa left, and, on her arrival, found the courtyard full of people. When they saw Elisa, coming from the end of the village, the soldiers began

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to play music as they do when a President gets out of a plane; and the people began to clap, saying: 'It's not like the first time; this time our young man is going to get married! And they wondered: Where can this ravishing girl come from? Is she a daughter of the devil? Is she really a girl with a man for a father? Could we find out exactly whose child she is? What is her father's name? To all these speculations there was no answer. When the time had come, the girls lined up like soldiers on Independence Day.

"The young man began to throw his fruit, hard, like the *Ngeg*, toward each girl. When Elisa's turn came, he put the fruit, on purpose, into her hands. Elisa grabbed it and held it high above her head; music, applause and cries of joy resounded. Then the people dispersed, and Elisa's father also went away. Since Elisa had stayed, the young prince organized a great feast and served food and drink.

"Then Elisa said to him, 'My husband, I am not abandoning you. I'm going first to say goodbye to the village; then I'll come back.' The young man replied. 'You're joking; you're not going anywhere.' In the room, he and Elisa fought as hard as they could, making a noise like termites when they have all decided at once to go out into the light. And here is Elisa flying away like a bird, abandoning one of her shoes. She got behind the wheel of her car and went home. Like a swallow. When she reached her mother's tomb, she struck it with her branch, everything disappeared and she went back to her usual wretched appearance.

"Left at home, the Kaiser's son set out to search all over the world to find his wife. One day, he suddenly appeared in Elisa-Belle's father's village. He asked her father:

"'Have you any young ladies here in your house?'

"'I have three daughters,' Elisa-Belle's father answered.

"'Send for them; have each of them try on this shoe.'

"Elisa's father sent for those of his daughters who were the most seen and the best provided for. Having been warned, his wicked wife took one of her daughters and cut off a toe so that the shoe would fit. When she came back from the place where her toe had been cut off, the girl put on the shoe without trouble. The young prince took the girl to carry her away. On the road, when they got to the place where Elisa-Belle's mother's

grave was, a big toad came out of the tomb and began to croak over and over: 'There's blood in the shoe!' The young prince heard this and stopped his horse, took the shoe off the girl's foot and what did he see? Blood! He looked at the girl's foot and saw that she had a toe cut off. Then he went back to Elisa's father's house.

"'Haven't you another daughter?' he asked him.

"'I do have another daughter,' said Elisa-Belle's father. 'Only,' he continued, 'if she appears before you, you will think I am showing you disrespect.'

"'Never mind; send for her just the same.' And Elisa's father called her.

"When he saw Elisa the young prince said to himself: 'My wife did look like that.' Turning to Elisa-Belle:

"'Come try on this shoe.'

"She raised her foot, and the shoe jumped up all by itself and fitted itself around the outstretched foot.

"'My dear wife, why do you cause me so much anguish? Come, let us go home. Don't worry because you are in such a state.'

"Then Elisa went into the house, took her branch, and they set out.

"When she got to her mother's grave, Elisa said to her husband:

"'Wait a minute.'

"Both stopped. Elisa struck the branch on the tomb; trumpets sounded and bells began to ring out at full peal. Then Elisa's dead mother appeared and said to her daughter:

"'Now that you are going away, take care to do no evil to anybody. If your father should die, come back to get his wife and children and take care of all of them.'

"Then she made her daughter more beautiful than ever. Then the young couple went to the prince's village. On their arrival, the young prince's father organized a wedding and a feast, so grandiose that you would have thought it was the Kaiser himself who was getting married. Two years later, Elisa's father died. Elisa-Belle went to fetch her dead father's widow and daughters and took them to live with her in her home; she took care of them as her mother had told her to do.

"The wicked woman, the widow, was so ashamed she

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thought she would die when she saw Elisa-Belle. She never stopped thinking about all the harm she had done to Elisa. Elisa paid no attention and continued to take care of her stepmother and the daughters. They were all there, like Elisa's servants.

"That is why, if anyone does you evil, do not return the evil. You do not know what God is planning to do.

"If anyone does you evil, return it in good."

Let us take our tale and condense the text into an outline which will throw the essential elements into relief. What is it? A story with a supernatural element, the story of a young girl (an emperor's daughter) who has lost her mother, who was very beautiful from birth but who has been made terribly ugly by the ill-treatment inflicted daily by a stepmother jealous of the child's good looks. Fortunately, thanks to a magic branch obtained through the aid of her father (a man of weak character, we should note, who yet keeps all his affection for Elisa), she has three meetings with her dead mother. With the aid of a magic water, the latter enables her daughter to recover her original beauty and to transform herself into a sort of fairy.

This metamorphosis permits Elisa to be chosen as a wife by a Prince Charming who is also the child of an emperor; the latter has organized a kind of beauty contest so that his son, the young prince, may choose the most beautiful princess in the region as a bride. The young man chooses Elisa-Belle and marries her. The marriage, however, will not be definitive until after a series of tests imposed on the young prince: the girl will not allow herself to be easily conquered. At her first meeting with the young prince (following her dead mother's instructions), she drops the ball the young man throws to all the contestants. Then, at the second contest, she is chosen as the prince's bride, but takes flight immediately after the marriage ceremony.

Love must be strengthened through trials, and the separation of the lovers, followed by the "quest" for love, is often aimed at purifying love.

The expected ending is naturally a happy marriage. And the few lines that follow it point a moral: good should be returned

⁷ Tale recorded and transcribed in Ewondo by Stanislas Awona, researcher at the linguistic cultural center of Yaoundé (Cameroon). The French translation, which tries to stick closely to the original text, was made by the author of this article, and then translated into English.

for evil. The narrator urges us to follow the example set by Elisa, who, after her father's death, takes into her household her half-sisters and their mother, who had treated her so badly before.

Have we really here a tale of the supernatural whose basic elements reflect Beti society? This is the question we have a right to ask. One would hesitate to answer in the affirmative, especially since one of Grimm's tales is almost identical: the story of Cinderella.⁸ Cinderella, who has just lost her mother, is the daughter of a rich man (and not of a king, as in the Beti story). The man takes another wife, and the latter comes into the household with her two daughters. With the complicity of their mother, the two daughters make the orphan's life a hard one.

The episode of Cinderella's asking her father for "the first branch that brushes against his hat" when he leaves on a journey is also in Grimm's tale.

Cinderella plants this branch on her mother's tomb, and it becomes a beautiful tree: this is a variant which does not exist in our Beti story. From here on, the differences multiply: through filial duty, Cinderella goes often to weep and pray on her mother's tomb. There is also the intervention, not of the dead mother, but of a mysterious "little white bird" that always satisfies Cinderella's desires. It is this bird that throws the clothes and the gold and silver shoes to Cinderella, when, wanting to go to the ball organized by the neighboring king, she comes to the tomb and cries:

"Little tree, stir and shake! Shower gold and silver on me!"⁹

Then the Grimm story coincides again with the Beti tale; for the loss of the shoe occurs in both texts, as does the prince's search for his fiancée. Subsequently, there comes another variant of slight importance: in Grimm's tale, it is one of the half-sisters who cuts off her toe herself; she does this without her mother's advice. After that, the resemblances continue up to the end of the real story. Only the moral will be different: Grimm's tale, uninfluenced by the Christian ethic, will end with the punishment of the two sisters: They will have their eyes pecked out by two mysterious doves.

⁸ This tale was already in Perrault's collection.

⁹ *Les Contes de Grimm*, illustrated by Janusz Grabiński. Flammarion, Paris, 1962.

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Let us come back to the Beti tale which is the subject of our study. The lines that follow are in no sense an attempt to exhaust the resources of a tale whose extraordinary richness will always outstrip the most detailed commentaries.

We are faced here with an extremely complex narrative. And what is most striking, when it is first heard or first read, are the marks of the present time that the narrator has succeeded in inserting without destroying the homogeneity of the tale. Calculating his effects throughout the story, he leads us to discover, through comparisons drawn from our own day, the down-to-earth side of the Beti. The first is the reference to the "square centimeter of skin," this geometrical measure of surface which reveals the narrator's preoccupations, and those of his audience, at the time when their country had reached independence. This is the time when land had taken on crucial importance in the economic life of Cameroon. Land and real-estate speculations had become the center of interest of almost all the Cameroonians since their country had achieved national sovereignty.

Then come the other comparisons:

"like a jet plane"

"as when the President gets out of a plane"

"like the soldiers on Independence Day"

All these show the desire to emphasize what strikes the narrator and his audience, whether it is "the jet plane," which remains a real mystery for the common man, or that new type of character, the President of the Republic, surrounded with an almost divine veneration, or, finally, the sumptuous Independence Day celebration held every year. In all these comparisons, the marvellous goes along side by side with reality.

The rest of the tale has a certain homogeneity, as already pointed out—a homogeneity based on three types of cultural contributions that complement and complete each other. There is, first of all, a Western social contribution, then a Christian cultural base which goes back to the Bible for its roots. (These two types of cultural contribution may be defined as borrowings of syncretic cultural elements: borrowings from the Western world.) Finally, in the third place, comes the Beti cultural base.

The tale begins this way: "Once upon a time there was a great king who was called Kaiser." Here we are completely lost, in a universe where the Beti can no longer find his way. To Beti

society, which is a “diffused-authority society” or a society of the anarchic type, the notion of royalty is totally foreign, and that of empire, which the Germanic title of Kaiser seems to imply, is even more remote. It should not be forgotten that Cameroon was once a German protectorate. The great figure of the Kaiser was probably impressed on the Beti imagination by the German administrators and missionaries, and disproportionately magnified by their faithful auxiliaries, the scribe-interpreters and the catechism teachers.

The institution of the “Kaiserate” is forcefully reflected in this tale. There is also a horse—a reality foreign to the forest civilizations—and Elisa-Belle’s father, who has a horse and rides through the forest, looks to us like a Western lord. It is also astonishing that the Kaiser who organizes the celebration “sends missives” to the other kings—for the narrator does not hesitate to use the word *kalara* (“missive”). Would it not have been simpler and more natural, in the context of the Beti tradition, for the emperor to have the drums beaten to invite his counterparts to the feast? Fortunately this Kaiser is surrounded by people who know how to read and write: thus the Beti and the Negro Africans are introduced into the civilization of writing and reading. Really this Kaiser in no way resembles a traditional chief! In fact, the word *Nkukuma*, which in this tale has the sense of king, and which is commonly used to designate a chief, took on this sense only lately, during the colonial period; it comes from the same root as *akuma* (wealth), and among the Beti it originally designated the rich man.

Another reality is the aristocratic life suggested by a setting that recalls that of a feudal lord’s court, or simply that of a European court living in luxury unknown to the Beti. The text is full of striking examples: “clothes as shiny as gold,” “a very luxurious car” and gold shoes and earrings and necklaces. One may easily imagine that Elisa-Belle is not the only girl at this celebration (this “debutantes’ ball”!) to wear such clothes and such jewelry. We should note that from economic point of view this notion of gold is foreign to traditional Beti society. The Beti had no gold; they used wrought iron, instead, in their system of trade. Trading was also done through barter, using various media like cattle, slaves and so on. As is well known, it was the arrival of the Europeans that introduced us to gold and silver.

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As for the Christian cultural base, the tale shows it in a double aspect: first a ritual aspect, then a pedagogical aspect. The first is stressed by several elements, among others the bells that "begin to ring at full peal." Wouldn't we think we were in front of a church just before the beginning of a religious service? And this signal for the service finds its justification in the image of the ceremony "of the feast of the Holy Sacrament" which comes immediately after. Even the rite of purification by water is evoked in our tale. This rite may be found in numerous religions, and here the symbolism of the water has both a Christian sense (it reminds us of the water which brings about a rebirth in Christ) and an African religious sense. Similarly, the branch which strikes the Kaiser's face, and which later makes Elisa's dead mother appear, is also full of symbolism. It recalls both the aspergillum and other religious objects which, in Africa as elsewhere, serve to sprinkle the neophyte or the unfortunate person defiled by "sin"—a defilement which may be voluntary or involuntary and which may show itself through sudden physical contamination, as it does in the story of the leper in the Bible. Often this defilement can be cured only by intervention from the Beyond. Let us take the symbolism of the branch somewhat further: the branch is an instrument which frees the individual, leads him toward a better land, like the branch given by the gods to the Cumaean Sybil which permits Aeneas and the old priestess to reach the Elysian Fields, to enter into the Kingdom of the Blest.¹⁰ The branch also signifies peace for Christians.

The use of the word "angel" also shows the influence of Christianity, and a Christianity with a pedagogical aim: that of teaching respect for life and for certain values considered sacred. This ethic fits in with the aim of most of the genres of our oral literature: to teach and educate.

But here the moral is entirely Christian: we must forgive offenses and do good to our neighbor, even if he has done ill to us; such is the precept of the Gospel. It will also be the moral lesson given by the dead mother to her daughter in the course of the story, and repeated by the narrator at the end. Now, the Beti practiced the law of the talion. Elisa's mother thus seems like a Christian saint. But the last word has not yet been said:

¹⁰ Virgil, *Aeneid*, Book VI.

it is proper, if justice is to be done, for evil to be punished and good rewarded. This too is part of Christian teaching. And while Elisa-Belle is rewarded for her conduct with happiness, the cruel stepmother will always be tortured by remorse, as is shown by the "shame" that she feels till the end of her life.

Our understanding of the text would be quite incomplete if we did not try to discover the Beti cultural base in the tale. In doing so, we shall sense a return to the expression of real traditional life—transformed, however, by the narrator's skill. What a virtuoso he is, the Beti story-teller! He knows how to integrate outside contributions into his traditional mythical universe. Probably the theme of the stepmother's jealousy of the child of her husband's first marriage is common to all civilizations. (What little European child doesn't know the story of Snow-White?) But it is so current in our traditional oral literature that some authors have quite justifiably spoken of the "cycle of the orphan."¹¹ Here the literary theme gets its sources from traditional social reality. Beti society, which is generally polygamous (like most of the Bantu societies of southern Cameroon), permits the motherless child to be brought up fairly well by a maternal uncle, an aunt, or one of the wives of the head of the family.

But it often happens that the orphan, in spite of the maternal care given him by his father's wives, suffers from great emotional frustration because he is often the butt of the jealousy of the very women who feed him. This jealousy turns to persecution when the father dares show more attachment to the orphan than to the other children.

The intervention of the dead mother, in our text, is not unreal either, in the context of the religious world of the Bassa, the Beti, the Bulu and the Fang. It is even quite frequent; "the appearance of the dead parent often corresponds to a real rebirth of the orphan," Mr. Eno-Belinga notes.¹² This observation fully applies here, since it is the meeting between Elisa and her mother that permits the daughter to get back her original beauty and thus attain happiness.

The theme of the voyage to the other world is suggested:

¹¹ This cycle has been studied by Eno-Belinga and Awouma—by the former in *Découverte des Chantefables Beti-Bulu-Fang du Sud-Cameroun* (Klincksieck, Paris, 1970, p. 36) and by the latter in the thesis already cited (pp. 351-359).

¹² Eno-Belinga, *op. cit.* p. 36.

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this is often one of the deeper senses of these Beti tales of the supernatural. It should also be pointed out that in this case the supernatural is very subtle, and unaccompanied by any luxury of detail. The narrator wants to leave free rein to his audience's imagination; he merely suggests, without going further. So it is quite enough to speak of a branch and of certain magic water near a tomb. There is no need for fantastic beings or objects, outside of certain real norms: for example, the possession of a magic object, or of a fetish which protects the individual, is far from being unreal.¹³

It becomes a "myth" to the extent to which these objects are, in the eyes of the Beti and Negro Africans in general, something more than concrete symbols representing a truth that has been empirically noted. These creations replace objective truth. Here we see a subjectivism which marks a falling back on oneself, a refusal of the outside world from the moment it is felt by the possessor of a protective fetish to be hostile or simply too uninteresting.

In the physical portrait of the young orphan made ugly after the death of her mother, the narrator gives us a number of concrete details which together form as repulsive a picture as possible. These are borrowings from Beti society. We see the ringworm, the lice, the fleas—little pests that attack children in the unhealthy environment of our countryside and in certain neighborhoods in the towns where the rudiments of hygiene are unknown. This realism, which may seem to be carried to an extreme, is often found in Beti oral literature. It creates a special atmosphere for the audience; it permits them to see beings and objects from a clearly determined angle; it orients and enriches their vision. The image of Elisa-Belle thus appears to us like that of an innocent victim, a girl who deserves pity from us all. On the other hand, the image of the stepmother makes her repugnant to us throughout the narration.

To close this analysis, we should note a comparison that has probably not escaped the reader:

¹³ The possession of a magic object by the hero or heroine is found in numerous mythologies; we may recall the famous ring of Cligès and the one given to Yvain b' Lunette in "*Yvain ou le chevalier du lion*," by Chrétien de Troyes. But, for the Negro African, the literary theme parallels social reality.

“Elisa and he fought... making a noise like termites when they have all decided at once to go out into the light.”

This is a highly picturesque comparison taken from the daily life of the narrator and the Beti peasants in general.¹⁴

The African atmosphere of the tale is also shown in the relationships among the various characters. Let us look first at mothers and their children. We find a parallelism between Elisa's relations with her dead mother, on the one hand, and the relations between the stepmother and her daughters on the other. There is certainly an emotional complicity between the mothers and children—a complicity all the greater because the children are of the same sex as their mothers. It is well known that in our traditional societies the boys were more attached to their father, while the girls stayed with their mother until they were of marriageable age. It was the mother who took charge of her daughters' education, leaving to the father the responsibility of looking after the boys. So it is hardly surprising that, in our text, Elisa's father pays little attention to his daughters in spite of the affection he has for them. Furthermore, we are told almost nothing about the relations between the Kaiser and his second wife. This too is typically African: the private feelings of a couple are never brought out into the open.

Continuing our study of the characters, we should note that the second Kaiser (the one who organizes the celebration), in spite of his aristocratic behavior (he does not conceive of any marriage except between people of the same social standing),¹⁵ has the sense of community life and the sense of democracy that are typical of the African mentality: his son's wife, the future queen, is in fact chosen with the agreement of the people.

We may end with the heroine and the hero of this tale. First, the heroine: She is called Elisa-Belle—a name as curious as it is suggestive. Might the name not be Isabelle, which often occurs in Western fairy tales and which the Beti narrator, having

¹⁴ It is well known that this farming people, like all its neighbors in southern Cameroon, divides the year into seasons. These seasons, some of which bear the names of termites, make up a sort of agricultural calendar.

¹⁵ The native chiefs set up by the colonial administration in southern Cameroon took on, through a phenomenon of acculturation, this class mentality, which did not exist among our peoples before: their sons should no longer marry anyone except the daughter of another chief.

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trouble pronouncing it, transformed in his own way? It is a name with poetic connotations; transformed into Jezabel, it takes us once more back to the Bible, to the realm of visions that Racine evoked in *Athalie's* dream, in which the heroine's dead mother, Jezabel, appears to her.¹⁶

In any case, we have here a curious character, who brings together the worlds of the living and the dead—a person both charming and touching. As a woman, Elisa-Belle is endowed with great sensitivity in personal relations, great delicacy of feeling—one would be tempted to say, with an instinct, “because the acts which are based on this quality,” as a modern critic notes, “are not rational or premeditated, but direct, and for this reason closely linked to the soul of woman.”¹⁷ She is full of solicitude for her fellows, even when they do her ill. She is, finally, African and Beti in her modesty when she receives a declaration of love, and in her submission to her parents. For Beti society is of the patriarchal type—which means that the woman is dependent on the man. This situation appears in the fact that the girl, the woman, does not have the right to choose her husband, and, before her marriage, is dependent on her “fathers” and brothers, or a guardian.

As for the hero, the young prince, he too is African in more than one respect. He puts his fiancée to the test before choosing her as a wife (the test of the *Ngeg* thrown to the candidates); he is proud and faithful, with discretion, in his love. Yet he makes less of an impression on the audience or the reader than does Elisa-Belle.

Elisa's father and her half-sisters seem mere silhouettes, shadows that disappear almost as soon as they have come; their role is only slight.

This brief analysis should not be ended without saying something about the narrative technique of the Beti story-teller: it is this that gives grave and liveliness to our stories. Here we are in the field of oral literature, which is “essentially a collective art,” an art “whose performance requires an audience, a receptive and attentive public,”¹⁸ and one which participates in this

¹⁶ Racine, *Athalie*, Act II, lines 490 ff.

¹⁷ Te Riele, G.J.M.J. *Les Femmes chez Eschyle*. J.B. Wolters, Groningen 1955, p. 24.

¹⁸ Awouma, J. M. *op. cit.*, p. 38.

community creation. Hence, in oral literature, stylistic processes will be used otherwise than in written literature. "A gifted narrator will put more life into his recital, will develop the dialogues, will lay stress on repetitions intended to produce a certain effect."¹⁹ This effect is double, for like all other arts this literature is a source of sensual as well as intellectual enjoyment—of pleasure for the eye and ear as much as for the mind. The eye of the spectator-auditor is attracted by the narrator's *gestures*, which are an indispensable accompaniment, and complement, to his words. There are words which are not pronounced without a comment made by the hand, the eyes and the face. The *Beti* text we are studying here gives us telling examples of this. For instance, in the scene in which Elisa is going to try on the shoe, the young prince calls her: "Come try on this shoe!" And when Elisa and her husband reach the grave of her dead mother, she says, "Wait a minute!" These imperatives—"Come! Wait!"—are surely emphasized with a gesture of the narrator's hand.

The story-teller makes great use of dialogue, and this dialogue is often rendered with the aid of alternate gestures expressing the feelings of the various speakers. An object is indicated by pointing a finger or darting the eyes; at certain points, the voice is raised, so that the audience's ears are caught by the play of sounds. The use of the demonstrative pronouns *nyo* (this one) and *nyoli* (that one) gives eloquent accents to these processes.

The second characteristic of this narrative technique is repetition. It may seem conducive to monotony, but it is useful to the audience: it sustains attention. For certain formulas are repeated simply to prevent the spectators from getting lost, or to put them back on the right track if they have been inattentive for a moment or have not understood.

The style is recitative, direct; its aim, above all, is to make the story come alive. The sentences that indicate successive episodes are short. The story is both seen and told. Images, metaphors and hyperbole all contribute to give vivacity to the narration.

These tales should be listened to in the vernacular; to read

¹⁹ Calame-Griaule, G. *Ethnologie et Langage*. Paris, Gallimard, p. 495.

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them, particularly in translation, is unfortunately to miss part of their charm.

* * *

The comparative study of this Beti tale and the Western text has shown us that Beti story-tellers use, with only slight alteration, themes that reach them from an outside source.

In spite of divergences, the Western and Beti tales follow the same pattern. But Westerners and the Beti have different preoccupations; their worlds are different, and their vision of the universe as well. Their narrative techniques follow different laws.

The Beti tales—the ones which interest us in this study—take on the values of others and integrate them into their own universe. This shows, on the part of the Negro African in general and the Beti in particular, a receptiveness to others which is not assimilation; for the African understands that “to refuse the possibility of a compromise,” as a modern author says, “amounts to refusing all relations with one’s fellows; life in society then becomes impossible.”²⁰

The Beti narrator is a realist, that is, a man who tries to present the problems of his time in the particular light in which they appear in the society where he lives. He tries to *re-create*, and therein lies his originality. He mingles old and new wonders, and this gives meaning and flavor to the story. The real gives the breath of life to the supernatural, but, used by a creative genius, the supernatural in turn takes on the truth of the real—the truth which, for the poet, has its seeds in the real. And what he offers us is not a means of escape to imaginary worlds, nor yet a simple reflection of what is; he offers us the image and the prefiguration of a reality still to be created, of a world where there would reign that “civilization of the universal” which alone can make man happy in the midst of his fellows. Although the Beti story-teller and his audience get real intellectual as well as sensual enjoyment from imagining that they lead this arrogantly luxurious life of the Western aristocracy, they nevertheless know full well that it is closed to them. And this fact causes them neither rancor nor bitterness.

²⁰ Paulme, Denise. *Sur trois textes africains (Bété, Dogon, Kikuyu)*, *Cahiers d'Etudes africaines*. Mouton et Cie, Paris, 1963 p. 198.

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