

✓ Book review

B.J Soko, *Zwangendaba ou L'Epopée Ngoni*. Limbe: Montfort Press, 1994. 74pp, paperback.

In view of the fact that Soko's book was published in 1994, this is a belated review. The reasons for this are first that French, the language in which it is written, is not commonly spoken or read in Malawi and second, that owing to the inadequate publicity given by the author and the publisher, this writer did not get a review copy in good time. Nevertheless, the book is worth publicising, if only as an indication of the stage that has been reached in research into oral literature in Malawi.

The complexity of the task that Boston Soko has set himself is evident from the details included on the book cover. While its principal title is *Zwangendaba or the Ngoni Epic*, the book is also described as an ethnolinguistic study of Nguni praises in the Malawian context. As if this were not challenging enough, a third dimension is brought in by the further sub-title *Izibongo Zesingoni* (Ngoni praise poetry). The student of Southern African oral literature is thus invited to see parallels between the Malawian material and its Zulu, Swazi, Xhosa, Ndebele, Shona or Tswana equivalents. The question that arises right from the beginning then is whether we are talking about the epic, the clan praise or the panegyric or all of these forms together. It is a matter of terminological exactitude which the author has to resolve sooner or later.

Soko states in his brief introduction that the book is not a history of the Ngoni but rather a study of Ngoni praises in the state in which they are found today. It is claimed that in the absence of a linguist, the analysis is not as thorough as the author might have wanted it to be. This certainly must be an instance of false modesty, as Soko himself is an established linguist, judging from his authoritative study of the spirit possession dance, *Vimbuza*. To this reviewer whatever gaps there are in the research could be filled by, for example, the judicious use of the Ngoni-English dictionary, copies of which are available in the north of Malawi.

The first chapter of the study deals with the so called Ngoni epic and its history. For his purposes, the author defines the term epic as the totality of oral texts related to praises or to *izithokozo* in Ngoni. He then proceeds to classify the genre into five sub-categories. These are *vibongo*, praises of a clan often linked to a totem; *isigiyo*, self praises; *vihayo*, praises of other people; *imihubo*, praises of a community, and *imida-*

buko, praises of the nation. Under the sub-category *imidabuko* there is mention of the strenuous training undergone by the *imbongi* or praise singer. The emphasis seems to be on personal initiative, as is the case with the poet focussed on in the book, Berama Jele. However, this reviewer feels that a whole chapter could have been devoted to the provisions the Zwangendaba Ngoni themselves make for the training of praise singers. A parallel can be drawn with the Maseko Ngoni, among whom the Magagula clan is entrusted with the teaching of prospective praise poets. In this connection, the other two praise poets who are mentioned in the first chapter should have been interviewed extensively in order to provide more information on their backgrounds and to determine what constitutes the secret of their art. Turning to the *imidabuko* themselves, it is this reviewer's considered opinion that the versions by the praise singers Chauluma Jele and Mafa Chipeta should have been included if not in the text itself then in an appendix, instead of being reduced to schematic form, as has been done in this chapter.

As performance poetry, praise poetry depends a great deal on the interaction between poet and audience. From the account given in the first chapter, it seems an important opportunity to observe such an interaction was passed up in the recordings of Berama Jele's performances. A separate section on the role of the audience is required here. This is largely because, where the audience is familiar with the material the poet is handling, it might significantly influence what is included or what is left out. This is in fact hinted at in the book when Soko observes that the audience reacted negatively to the poet's inclusion of his own father's name in a version of the Ngoni epic poem. Needless to add, the reasons for that reaction have to be investigated thoroughly.

By the very nature of its orality, the praise poem will have a number of variants. It's pertinent to note, in this connection, that the version reproduced in this book is considered 'final' by the researcher (p.8). It would have been helpful, for the purpose of comparison, to present the other variants in an appendix. In that way the reader/listener would be made aware of the manner in which the poet manipulates his material, that is, he would acquire some insights into the process of composition itself. There is, in fact, a tantalising reference in the text to norms governing composition; unfortunately, however, they are not listed.

The two sections towards the end of the first chapter strike the reader as an unnecessary digression. They deal with the Shona and Swazi components of the Zwangendaba Ngoni. The historical material belongs properly to a revised introduction, including details of the *Mfecane*, while the information on clan names and praises has its

rightful place among the *vibongo* described at the beginning of the opening chapter. The fact that the supposedly Rozvi texts presented in the closing part of the chapter appear without translations underscores the on-going nature of the research Boston Soko is undertaking. His hope, presumably, is that someone somewhere might have the key with which to unlock the secrets of these clan praises. There are substantial gaps to be filled not only here but also in the remainder of the book. What is encouraging is the increasingly interdisciplinary character of the work, involving anthropologists, historians, linguists and literary critics.

In the second chapter of his book, Soko argues that during the Twentieth Century there was more change than continuity in the development of Ngoni oral traditions. The factors behind this process include colonialism, Christianity, the interaction between the Ngoni and neighbouring ethnic groups, western education and the post-colonial state's policies on national language and culture. The writer identifies five areas in which there is evidence of innovation and adaptation. The first is in the naming of villages. Here he observes that the names of the principal villages are still those that were brought by Zwangedaba from Zululand. Secondly, it is noted that Ngoni personal names, which often reflect individuals' places of origin in such countries as South Africa, Swaziland and Mozambique, survive. Similarly, although some sub-categories of the Ingoma dance have been forgotten, certain aspects have been retained by Christianity. A good example of this are the tunes incorporated into the hymnal *Izingoma zo Bukristu*

Soko takes as his third illustration the Ngoni possession dance *Vyanusi*. He points out that nowadays the majority of the songs are not in Ngoni but Tumbuka. Occasionally too one finds a composition which is half Ngoni, half Tumbuka. Thus Ngoni has largely been lost as a vehicle of communication.

The writer returns to Ingoma for his fourth example, pointing out that it is a generic term which comprises several Ngoni dances. These fall into two broad categories: religious Ingoma and secular Ingoma. The first celebrates the nation's prosperity and is associated with ritual, as, for example, in the first fruits ceremony, *Incwala*. The second is an ordinary dance intended to entertain both the dancers and the spectators. It is this latter which is performed on public occasions in Malawi today. Soko regrets the fact that the Ingoma songs, now predominantly in Tumbuka, no longer have the original import of traditional praises. Instead, they serve to exalt political leaders of the day and to describe the socio-economic development the country has undergone since independence.

Finally, the author notes that there have been equally significant changes relating to both composition and content in the praises known as *Izithokozo*. A pertinent instance is the way the Ngoni's crossing of the Zambezi in Berama Jele's epic poem is likened to the Israelites' passage across the Red Sea in the course of their exodus from Egypt. It is claimed that, like Moses in the biblical story, Zwangendaba used a staff to part the waters.

The third chapter of Soko's book records several encounters with the praise poet, Berama Jele. The author explains that the poet comes from a part of Mzimba District, the Mphelembe chiefdom, where Ngoni is still spoken by the majority of the adults. A large part of the chapter is given over to an interview which Berama Jele granted the researcher at his home in 1987. Described here are such points as the poet's family background, how he embraced the art of praise singing, his experiences with various chiefs on so many occasions and his clear superiority over other praise singers. The poet ends up by expressing the worry that young people have not come forward to learn the art from him for the sake of posterity.

Following logically from the interview is the fourth chapter where the text of Berama Jele's version of the Ngoni epic is given. The subtitle of the chapter promises not only a translation but also annotations and commentaries. However, the last two items are only provided in notes towards the end of the book. A more useful exercise is to be found in the next chapter, which examines the style of the Ngoni epic. Soko here places the composition within the epic tradition of Africa as defined by S Belinga. He surveys the various criteria given and shows how the Ngoni *imidabuko* correspond to them. He then looks at such stylistic features as repetition, parallelism, metaphors, onomatopoeia, ideophones and gestures. All the details he unearths lead him to the conclusion that Berama Jele's praises constitute a true African epic. However, the careful reader may wonder whether the composition is not, in fact, an extended panegyric, a form more familiar in Southern Africa and which has been discussed at some length in Ruth Finnegan's *Oral Literature in Africa* (1970). Indeed it can be argued that one of the major weaknesses of Soko's account is that it ignores Finnegan's work completely.

Presented in the final chapter is the installation of Inkosi ya Makosi M'belwa IV in 1984 as an illustration of the historical and socio-political context of the Ngoni epic or praise song. Soko begins by observing that the installation of a Ngoni king always attracts almost the whole population which is keen to witness the crowning of its new sovereign. The event is considered a guarantee of the cultural values of Ngoni society. This observation is followed by a summary of Zwangendaba Ngoni history in so far as

the succession to Zwangendaba Jele is concerned. Soko then turns to the crowning ceremony proper, detailing the rituals, both traditional and modern, that constituted it. Towards the end of the ceremony two praise singers recited their praises. These were Mafa Chipeta and Berama Jele. Chipeta's text is given while the one by Jele has already been presented in a preceding chapter. If anything is missing here, it is a detailed stylistic analysis of Chipeta's version as well as an attempt to compare and contrast it with Berama Jele's. An explanation needs to be given why there are such striking divergences in length, context and style. Such an explanation would be an extension of the schematic analysis of texts undertaken in part in the first chapter.

Zwangendaba ou l'épopée Ngoni closes with some useful end of chapter notes and a select bibliography. These are important in several ways. In addition to giving Soko's sources, they provide linguistic and historical information on the raw material that is discussed in the book. They also give some indication of the direction Soko's future research is going to take.

This reviewer has no hesitation in recommending Soko's book for use in secondary schools and universities, especially in the Southern Africa region. The author may wish to translate it into English so that it can reach a wider readership. Should he make that decision, he might wish to take into account the suggestions for improvement made throughout this review.

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