

# Place of Women in Traditional African Societies: Case of Koongo Woman

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## Abstract

At the root of the social construction of nations, there are almost always founding mythologies supposed to explain the advent of this or that fact and/or phenomenon. The Koongo nation is no exception. It has a mythology that relates how the muuntu, the primordial being, in its primitive uniqueness, split into two individual entities, each retaining its specificity, and, at the same time, the trace of this ontological split. From this ontological split in primordial being came man and woman. The aim of this paper is to show how, from this ontological split, the symbolism of the woman, who has become the most prominent social figure in Koongo civilization, has imposed itself to the point of structuring the entire Koongo imaginary, so that the man is reduced to the role of stooge, charged with magnifying and dignifying the image of the woman.

**Keywords:** Muuntu, Koongo, Culture, Women's symbolism, Identity, Ancestor.

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## INTRODUCTION

In his paper for the Mayidi colloquium on "Actualité et inactualité des "Études Bakongo" du Père Joseph Van Wing", Lwangu Lewo (1980, p. 179) writes: "It is neither exaggerated nor out of place to assert that man is first and foremost an ethical being. In many situations in which they find themselves involved, human beings are always questioning the ultimate reason for their actions. This search for the foundation of all his activity leads man, at all times and in all latitudes, to set an ideal on the horizon of his actions, on which he is bound to regulate his conduct towards his fellow man and the community. This is how moral systems come into being in all human societies".

From Lwangu Lewo's analysis, it is clear that in all societies, people have always drawn up a code of ethics to regulate sociability, structure cohabitation and make living together sustainable. Like all societies, Koongo society has also enacted a code of moral laws. From generation to generation, this code has proved its worth: each generation finds its place in it and respects the place assigned to it. However, far from being a spontaneous generation, this code is an inheritance bequeathed by the "Bakulu" or ancestors. In other words,

the Bakoongo moral universe is based on a worldview whose founders and/or creators are none other than the ancestors. Given that the ancestors codified almost everything, the question is: what image of women have they bequeathed to us, and what role do they play alongside men in Koongo society? Does this vision of the Koongo world, whose craftsmen are the ancestors, echo the original Muuntu myth? Reflection on the place of women in Koongo tradition is based on two methodological approaches: the genealogical approach and the genetic approach. The genealogical approach enables us to trace the very origins of Koongo moral ideas. It therefore refers precisely to the foundation of a phenomenon. As for the genetic approach, it shows how the ideas that emerge from the Koongo moral universe have been transmitted from generation to generation without suffering the wear and tear of time. The aim of our study is to show that the figure of the feminine plays a central role in Koongo tradition, unlike in other African cultural universes.

Our study focuses on three areas. The first is to study the mythology at work in the koongo mental space. It shows how koongo/Mukoongo, a variant of muuntu, was able to emerge from the depths of creation. The second axis examines both the emergence of female

symbolism and the reasons for its perpetuation. And the third seeks to understand whether, in a highly globalized world, women's symbolism will hold up, and whether, moreover, as a structuring value, it is not that background to which the koongo have to resort in order to "re-make" their lost identity.

### THE ORIGIN MYTH OF MUUNTU

In Koongo mythology, there is a myth that explains the creation of man known as Muuntu. According to this myth, the first man created by God was called Maguungu or Mahuungu. He was an androgynous "male-female" being enjoying all his fullness and living in bliss. God loved him so much that he placed him next to a tree known in Koongo as Muti eMpuungu, "God's tree", also known as Ba dia Nzambi, which translates as "God's palm tree". For God, this tree was a sacred tree whose secret only he knew. God had forbidden him to "go around the sacred tree". In time, the man could not bear the prohibition. So he resolved to walk around the sacred Ba dia Nzambi tree to find out what God might be hiding there. In God's eyes, this gesture was considered a crime, an abomination. Why was this? Because nothing could justify such an abomination, given that Maguungu was, so to speak, a complete being living in bliss. This transgression was followed by a punishment, for this was the last straw! God had thus split the one-man into two human entities: one was the man and the other would be designated the woman. Since then, the "animal" androgynous man has lost his original fullness, so to speak. And it was from this Maguungu split that evil, suffering and even death made their appearance in the world.

That said, Maguungu, who was the first Man, lost his fullness and became *Luumbu* (the man) on one side and *Muzita* (the woman) on the other. And so, since time immemorial, these two entities or halves have sought to regain their lost unity through a series of asceticisms.

### SPLINTERED MAN IN SEARCH OF LOST UNITY [1]

In any case, in Koongo mythology, *Luumbu* and *Muzita*, two halves that have become distinct individualities, remember their initial state and embark on a process of reconfiguring their lost unity. This process of recomposition will take place in three ascetic modalities: the asceticism around the sacred tree, the asceticism of the marriage rite and the asceticism of the restoration of wholeness by the *Leemba*.

#### First modality: asceticism around the sacred tree

In the Koongo imaginary, there's a saying that sums up the state of the being-become of the ontological

tear: *Boole baantu bukaka m'soongo*. What does it mean? It means that "Two people are better than one, solitude is a calamity". In other words, the beauty of life is best appreciated when you live with a companion; solitude is synonymous with suffering. Having lost their unity following the transgression of the ban imposed on them, the woman and the man decide to go back around the tree in the opposite direction in order to regain their primordial unity. Despite the gesture, this asceticism around the sacred tree proves unsuccessful, as the two entities (the man and the woman) fail to regain their former wholeness. They are therefore condemned to use another subterfuge. The subterfuge chosen is that of the asceticism of the marriage rite.

#### Second modality: the asceticism of the marriage rite

After the failure of the reverse movement around the sacred tree, *Luumbu* (the man) and *Muzita* (the woman) agree on a *makuela* project: marriage. *Makuela* comes from the verb *kuelana* and means to harmonize, to be in balance with one another. *Makuela* is therefore a marriage rite during which the man and woman seek to unite in a home to live together. For *Makuela* to take place, *Luumbu* (the man) must pay the *nziende / ngiende* or *loongo*, i.e. offerings to the in-laws. This rite is a pledge of alliance, sealing the very foundation of marriage.

However, a man's search for a woman is part of the *Mu-dumaa-ngo* myth. This myth is well known in the Koongo imagination. As part of the initiation process for children, and especially teenagers, the elders tell them this myth around a fire, the "*Bongui*", to prepare them for life. But what does the myth say? The *Mu-dumaa-ngo* myth explains the very genealogy of Koongo marriage. In the Koongo universe, *Mu-dumaa-ngo* is the god of the underworld, the god of fire, the god of ecology, forests and waterfalls. *Mu-dumaa-ngo* had many beautiful young girls in his palace, which served as a paradise. Everyone, men and animals alike, went to his palace in search of a bride. After the reception and all the customs to which they were bound, each received from *Mu-dumaa-ngo* a *muzita*, a package tied up in a leafy envelope. It was strictly forbidden to untie it on the way home.

But three times the man couldn't suppress his curiosity to open the package: three times he challenged the package, and each time a woman came out and went back to her father. When *Mu-dumaa-ngo* saw that his daughters, whom he had given in marriage, had returned to the fold, or more precisely to the palace, he was incensed. He ruthlessly decided to punish *Luumbu* (the man). In a stern tone, he said: "Even beasts can suppress desire, but you, man, are incapable of keeping the

<sup>1</sup> I'd like to thank Augustin Miabéto, whose talk opened my eyes to many aspects of Koongo culture that I didn't know existed.

package intact. From now on, you'll have to collect a certain number of objects before a woman is given to you. With this verdict, *Mu-dumaa-ngo* had thus instituted the covenant pledge, condemning the man (*Luumbu*) to toil in order to acquire a wife with whom to cohabit. This was how *Mu-dumaa-ngo* instituted the covenant pledge. Since then, man has been looking for his lost part.

In short, despite the effort made to attach himself to a woman by performing the *Loongo* rite, marriage as *Mu-dumaa-ngo* had instituted it, the hope of rediscovering original unity remains in vain, fullness forever lost. But man does not admit defeat. That's how he came up with another artifice, the *Leemba*. Like all other unsuccessful devices, it too is designed to ward off the curse of not being able to find the woman, the half he had lost.

### Third modality: the ascetic restoration of wholeness through *Leemba*

The first two attempts to restore primitive unity ended in failure. *Luumbu* and *Muzita* (the man and the woman), strengthened in their will, make a third attempt to restore the original unity. This third attempt to restore the original unity takes place in the *Leemba*. The *Leemba* is a rite of celebration of man's creation. In fact, *Leemba* was once a rite of ontological restoration of *Muuntu*.

As the Koongo know, the *Mukoongo* won't give up the fight until death has taken its toll on our finitude. He'll keep on fighting until he finds the solution he's looking for. However, the case of *Luumbu* and *Muzita* is as complicated as it gets. *Luumbu* has devised another stratagem to ward off his fate and, at the same time, find a solution to his problem. In fact, he finds what he calls a "new alliance". The establishment of a new covenant reflects his inability to achieve what he has always sought, namely the reconquest of original harmony, or what amounts to the same thing, wholeness. Since he has not been able to regain it through many experiences, he resigns himself to the idea that wholeness is God's. To man, it is reserved. Excellence is reserved for man. "It is therefore excellence that man will henceforth seek to attain, for plenitude is an identity forever lost". (A. Miabeto, p. 4). However, the means of manifesting his excellence is to enter a rather risky field: the political field.

### Conquering power

The political arena is so complex that you can never be sure of every step you take. Why is this? Because it takes a great deal of wisdom to succeed, as adversaries are on the lookout for every false step to "take you down". To succeed in politics and increase their charisma, the two halves, *Luumbu* and *Muzita*, decide to join a brotherhood that is at once a religion, a mystical order and also a political order. Paradoxical as it may seem, this brotherhood bears a woman's name:

*Leemba*. *Leemba* in Koongo means "peace". By joining this religion, the fallen couple will seek initiation. The man, *Luumbu*, was given the name *Kitomi*, meaning husband. The wife, *Muzita*, will be called *Mubaanda*. After their initiation, they enter into an alliance pact. Clearly, this covenant is a reprise, a kind of repetition of the original mysteries. It is therefore precisely a memorial rehearsal to celebrate the initial moment of the birth of *Maguungu/Mahungu* (the first man or the One-man). In the Koongo tradition, you can't give political responsibility to someone who doesn't have a wife. Precisely because a man cannot fully assume a political office if he doesn't have a wife. In the Koongo imaginary, a great chief, to demonstrate his greatness, must work in collusion with his wife who, as we now know, is a part of the man himself. The wife is the man's first advisor. The presence of the woman at *Maguungu's* (the man's) side makes him a *m'kuku-niungu*, a better man with all his potential. This is why, in the Koongo imaginary, man is almost nothing without woman. Woman alone enables man to reach his full potential. In other words, as much as woman ennobles man, man also ennobles woman (A. Miabeto, p. 7).

Having thus understood the interpenetration of energies between the two entities, namely *Luumbu* and *Muzita*, the Koongo have in a way legislated more to protect women against all the violence that men often constantly inflict on them in their lives. Indeed, the Koongo's relationship with life is absolutely sacred. Is this their greatest weakness?

### THE KOONGO AND LIFE

Let's just say that the Bakoongo attach great importance to life. It is all the more important in that human life is considered fundamentally sacred. This is why, once again, fertility and fecundity are of paramount importance to them. Indeed, for the *Mukoongo*, "One's entire existence is organized around the struggle against all that is detrimental to life. All the so-called magical practices to guard against the harmful forces of nature and all the *Mukongo's* aspirations for a better existence bear witness to this attachment to life". (Lwangu Lewo, 1980, p. 180).

In his social universe, the *Mukoongo* has a burning desire to have lots of children. To have many children, he believes, is to have a lot of money (*mbongo muuntu*). In the Koongo imagination, children are life's capital. But children are not the only assets. In addition to the plethora of children, there are also a large number of fruit trees. Beyond the idea of having a large number of offspring and many fruit trees, the *Mukoongo* is also driven by the idea of helping the clan (*kanda*) to which he belongs. This help translates into an increase in the life of his clan. The Koongo notion of clan has a different connotation. In the Koongo social universe, the clan refers, as J. Van Wing (1927, p. 237) to "the living, organic, mystical whole of all people who are descended

by free women, from the mother-souche of the clan and who bear the name of the clan". *Mukoongo's* life only makes sense within this organic, living space. In fact, the koongo moral universe immerses the *Mukoongo* in a composite order of relationships that he is forbidden to contravene.

Elucidating the organic and living universe of the Koongo, Lwangu Lewo (1980, p. 181) points out: "Thus, within the clan, the individual, man or woman, lives at the center of a knot of very intimate relationships that he or she maintains with the members of both the visible and invisible face of the clan. For the Bakongo clan is made up of deceased members (*Bakulu*) and the living, who are all descendants of these *Bakulu* or ancestors. This symbiosis between the family of the living and that of the ancestors situates the Mukongo individual in his bitter struggle against death and all that diminishes this life, the gift of the Supreme Being (*Nzambi Mpungu*).

It is from this natural order that Mukongo's moral ideal is conceived. In his moral life, he will therefore take into account the Supreme Being (*Nzambi*), the ancestors (*Bakulu*) and the chiefs (*Mfumumu*) who represent the ancestral will".

As we can see, *Koongo* society is highly hierarchical, with individuals of all ages assigned specific roles and positions. The place and role of each individual within Koongo society is determined not by the living, but by the deceased ancestors, whom the living must obey. In other words, the order bequeathed by the ancestors cannot be altered by the living. If the Koongo moral universe is to be understood as the place where *Mukoongo* (man or woman) blossoms and evolves, the hierarchical structure of Koongo society is such that the place of women is strongly marked. Indeed, all the roles a *Mukoongo* may be called upon to play within the social body are given feminine names. We can cite a few examples drawn from kinship, insofar as it "determines the links between individuals and the rules for the transmission of offices and powers. Since the Kongo society is based on a matrilineal system, the "blood" that defines kinship is transmitted only by the woman. Consequently, the child belongs to its mother's lineage" (Dianzinga, S. 2013: p. 329).

As we have already pointed out, the *Leemba*, as a place of initiation into the mysteries of life, and of political training for the proper conduct of public affairs, is a great school in the Koongo mental space. This school bears the name of a woman, so to speak. *Leemba* is a name attributed only to women. In his contribution quoted above, Auguste Miabéto, thematizing the specificity of *Leemba* among the Koongo, points out that: "The school of political training bears a woman's name, *Leemba*, "religion of Peace". The *Leemba* rite is a kind of incarnation of women's power. She thus becomes

the symbol of peace. [...]. The administration of power is the administration of Peace and Reason. Reason is Life" (A. Miabéto, p. 7).

In any case, the Koongo civilizational universe is strongly imbued with *Leemba* symbolism. And among the representations of *Leemba* are names or expressions related to, among others:

- Secrecy: *Mie ku Leemba ka miteo ko* (What's in *Leemba*, you can't talk about),
- Symbolic self-giving: *Wa gaanda Leemba teekela na ntinu* (To seek the power of *Leemba*, you must first have the strength to run faster),
- Peace: *Yendeno ku Leemba* (Go to *Leemba*).

We could multiply examples ad infinitum, but what's the point !

The fact remains that kinship is, so to speak, the absolute norm among the Koongo. Everything is marked by sacredness and/or kinship. Kinship is a very powerful sociological marker. Power is marked by the terms of kinship. They constitute the symbolism of power. The term designating the category of mothers is the emblematic symbol of power. A large part of the titulary of power is symbolized by the mother. The king-mother is at the heart of the network of kinship relations, like the spider at the center of its web. Cultural objects are classified according to the terms of kinship: as in organology, where *Muana* and *Ngudi* child and mother are distinguished; in culinary art, where *Ngudi Yaka*, "the mother of manioc" (A. Miabéto: p. 4), is distinguished.

To show the extent to which kinship structures the entire koongo social sphere, when *ne koongo* meet, they each place their right hand over their heart in greeting and begin to introduce their *Mvila* to their interlocutor in these terms:

- *Meno Mwisi Kwimba (Nsundi)*, descent from his mother's clan ;
- *Muana Mpandzou*, related to his father's clan ;
- *Ntekolo bisi Tiunga* (affiliation to his grandmother's clan) ;
- *Ntekolo bisi Mbeembe* (lineage to grandfather's clan).

Once the presentation is over, the two interlocutors can exchange views on other subjects. In *La vie quotidienne au royaume de kongo*, G. Balandier (1965: pp. 11-12) observes that: "For all *Mukongo*, even in the outlying provinces, *kongo dia Ntotila* (the former capital) remains a sumptuous city where everyone can find relatives who will welcome them and shower them with gifts. The vanished kingdom thus becomes the one that everyone builds with their dreams".

In his paper for the colloquium on Valeurs kongo. Spécificité et universalité, Scolastique Dianzinga used a well-known Koongo saying in the introduction to

his paper: "*Bawonso batûka mu Nzinga*". Translated, this means that "*Nzinga* [a great queen who ruled the brilliant Koongo kingdom] is the ancestress of all Kongo". Explaining her catchphrase, she adds that Koongo society is a milieu where the kinship system is characterized by a strong matrilineal inflection. This founding myth reinforces the central role of women, through their functions as producers and reproducers. As such, they are the guardians of the values on which the society is based, which make up the "*kimuntu*" of the *Mukongo* and ensure their preservation as well as their transmission to new generations" (S. Dianzinga, 2013: p. 326).

In short, in the Koongo mental space, tradition has codified an ethic of sociability that expresses respect or recognition for women. In short, it pays homage to the prominence of the Koongo woman. The question is: does the image of the woman conveyed by the Koongo imaginary, with all its attendant values, continue to exist, or has it been altered by contact with Europeans, or what amounts to the same thing, with globalization?

### THE SYMBOLISM OF WOMEN AND WHAT REMAINS OF THEM IN A HIGHLY "GLOBALIZED" SOCIETY

As we know, contact with the first European explorers led to terrible situations for the Koongo civilization, which had a profound impact on the Koongo imagination. Indeed, the first factor to have had a considerable impact on the status of Koongo women was colonization. The introduction of schooling had a devastating effect on the status of women, precisely because it introduced so-called Western values that emancipated Koongo women from the traditional or ancestral values to which they had been subjected. With the exception of women who became involved in politics, some of whom became queens, Koongo women were devoted to agricultural work.

With the construction of churches, under pressure from Catholic priests and Protestant pastors, Koongo women were enrolled in school to learn the values of modernity, and therefore white values. The school taught her her rights, since she already knew her duties. She had access to training that led her to understand that nature had not destined her to do only farm work and/or procreate. On the contrary, her training enabled her to enter a number of professions to which she had no right, due to the selfishness of men. From school, company or health director, the Koongo woman has become a lawyer, a soldier or an officer, professions often reserved for men. In any case, she has shown what she is capable of.

However, with neoliberal globalization, the prominent figure of the Koongo woman has been severely eroded. And with good reason! With today's mentality caught up in the unbridled pursuit of money

and the promotion of anti-values, women are no longer seen as the guardians of the values of progress and good society. Whereas in the past, almost all education relied on the housewife, today's *Mukoongo* is more educated by the street and the social networks. It's as if the power once vested in women no longer holds sway. We've come to no longer consider women as a reference point. Scholastique Dianzinga clearly illustrates this shift in women's power in favor of men when she laments that, while the power of reproduction confers respect on women in the home, it above all confirms their place within the lineage. (...) But, in reality, it is hijacked by the man (the brother or uncle) to acquire authority, in his capacity as custodian of ancestral customs. (p. 333).

### CONCLUSION

We have tried to show through this reflection on the Koongo woman that she enjoyed an unparalleled capital of trust. Evolving in a matrilineal society that has never ceased to elevate women to the pinnacle, the Koongo woman is the most prominent figure in the entire Koongo civilization. No civilization in living memory has sublimated the role of women in society to the extent that the Koongo civilization has done. For centuries, the valorization of women has brought stability, sociability, understanding and progress. Whatever great achievements men have made in *Koongo* society, it is women who bear the crowns. It's the nobles who exchange news, but it's the woman who bears the name: *Mpolo*, meaning news. The man is the blacksmith, but it's the woman who bears the name: *Ngangula*, "blacksmith". The uncle rules, but he's a castrated man, emasculated by the woman (A. Miabéto, p. 8).

However, with the formatting of consciousness undergone by the Koongo as a result of colonization and neo-colonialism, naming (the tendency to give names to things and people) no longer has the same meaning among the Koongo, or at least has lost its former significance. As modernity has washed away their consciences, the Koongo are no longer inclined to give these names to their daughters, as it seems archaic.

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