

## Mangbetu Tales of Leopard and Azapane: Trickster as Resistance Hero

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### ABSTRACT

In analyzing a sub-type of Mangbetu (northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo) tale as expressing vengeful cultural resistance to oppressive foreign authority, the paper is concerned with both storytelling as politics and trickster as a kind of resistance hero. Its three main sections present (1) relevant description of the Mangbetu peoples' sociopolitical situation from the mid-nineteenth century, (2) an introduction to both Leopard and the trickster-culture hero Azapane in Mangbetu culture and tales, and (3) a summary-analysis of a typical Leopard-and-Azapane tale—viz., it is an African trickster tale in terms of its basic motifemic sequence, but different in that Azapane is not a negative example or anti-hero, but rather a resistance hero for the society's oppressed subjects. Two appendices present much of the core Leopard-and-Azapane tale data on which the paper's analysis is based. The conclusion, in part, questions the wisdom of a people continuing to tell vengeful resistance tales of the paper's Leopard-and-Azapane sort in a context where former victims of oppression might too easily become killers.

**Five index words:** Mangbetu, trickster tales, politics, resistance, Azapane.

### Introduction

As evidenced from antiquity, storytelling can be concerned with politics, and politics with resistance to oppressive authority.<sup>1</sup> For African storytelling, with reference to so-called Euro-African literature, Eileen Julien has said that “the consensus has always been that literature in Africa is deeply political,” and that “indeed, many African texts are explicitly political” (1995:303). She also refers to the existence of “a vast production of African-language literature and oral traditions, which is largely unknown and ignored by those outside the continent” (ibid:295); and she notes that “the critique of abusive power...was never absent from African literatures” (ibid:299). The point of the present paper,<sup>2</sup> then, is to illustrate this often “deeply political” nature of African storytelling, including its critique of abusive power; and the paper does so by analyzing a sub-type of Mangbetu tale as expressing vengeful resistance to oppressive foreign authority. By analysis, the sub-type in question begins with the Mangbetu trickster-culture hero Azapane<sup>3</sup> in “false friendship” with Leopard, with the latter representing an oppressive foreign chief and the tale's intended audience identifying with Azapane; and it ends with Azapane having killed or seriously harmed Leopard by cruel treachery, and with the tale thus expressing resistance to Leopard's rule. Interestingly for the Mangbetu case, as perhaps for other Congolese and equatorial-African cases generally, foreign rule and resistance to it have been a matter of perspective. For Mangbetu, this has meant that oppressive ethnic-Mangbetu chiefs employed in indirect rule from the 1890s have been able to identify with Azapane vis-à-vis oppressive, higher-level colonial-state authorities, even as these chiefs' oppressed Meegye and other subjects have been able to do likewise concerning them.

The paper has three main sections. These present (1) some relevant background concerning the Mangbetu sociopolitical situation from the mid-nineteenth century, (2) an introduction to Leopard and Azapane in Mangbetu culture and tales, and (3) a summary-analysis of what I take to be the typical Leopard-and-Azapane tale. In conclusion, I suggest, in relation to a major argument of Vansina's Paths in the Rainforest (1990), that the paper's Mangbetu case may be one of a wider, equatorial-African type that reflects the struggle of politically-decentralized, more-or-less egalitarian societies with movement toward greater centralization. But then I also question the wisdom of vengeful resistance tales of the Leopard-and-Azapane sort in a context where former victims of oppression might too easily become killers.

## The Mangbetu Sociopolitical Situation from the Mid-Nineteenth Century

The 'Mangbetu' are an amalgam of linguistically- and culturally-related peoples of northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo. More traditionally, prior to the Mangbetu proper achieving political prominence among them under their nineteenth-century kingdom builder Nbiangbale, regional politics appears to have been primarily a function of marriage and other types of alliance, with chieftainship an essentially alien institution.<sup>4</sup> Thus, a united Mangbetu kingdom proved short-lived, and the maintenance of Mangbetu rule over its fragments a challenge at best (after Nbiangbale's death), in large part because the non-Mangbetu subject-allies concerned owed no traditional allegiance to the Mangbetu proper. Nevertheless, from the 1890s, colonial-state rule imposed a number of hereditary chiefdoms in which Mangbetu proper have since ruled non-Mangbetu majorities. The arrangement has lent itself, on one level, to colonial-state oppression of Congo's peoples generally, including the Mangbetu as an amalgam; on a lower level, to Mangbetu chiefly oppression of non-Mangbetu subjects; and on both levels, to resistance from the oppressed.<sup>5</sup> The following quote illustrates part of the core reality of this situation as it obtained after a certain point of the Congo Free State period: "The Mangbetu were the first colonizers of the other neighboring tribes of the Uele before the arrival of the whites. That is why they suffered poorly the domination of another people" (Abule-Abuotubodio 1994:30, my translation).

One example of colonial oppression that I find especially interesting is in view of a tale plot I summarize toward the end of this paper's analysis section. It dates to the early years of the twentieth century, before about 1912, when there was forced rubber collection. In Mangbetu-ruled areas south of the Bomokandi River, the colonial administration evidently gave chiefs the responsibility for rubber collection "so Belgian officials could claim that they themselves had not committed atrocities in order to extract the product from an unwilling population" (Keim 1979: 306). Imprisonment and severe lashing were among the punishments chiefs could use to try and force people to meet their regular rubber quotas. Concerning this same period, though in relation to a different part of Congo and with no mention of chiefs, Hochschild says, "When villagers, in a desperate attempt to meet the weight quota, turned in rubber mixed with dirt or pebbles to the agent Albéric Detiège, he made them eat it" (1998:166).

## Leopard and Azapane in Mangbetu Culture and Tales

Both Leopard and Azapane are well-known characters in Mangbetu tales.<sup>6</sup> According to Denis, in a sample of about three hundred tales, Leopard ranked a close second behind Tortoise in frequency of appearance; and, in three of the twenty tales summarized in the same study, Azapane and Leopard are opposed main characters.<sup>7</sup> In this section, as a preliminary to analyzing what I see as the typical Leopard-and-Azapane tale, I look first at something of the range of cultural understandings available to inform the tale characters of these two, then at the tale characters themselves.

With regard to cultural understandings available to inform the tale character of Leopard, I see but two relevant facts: (1) that leopards as animals are well-known to Mangbetu as deadly predators; and (2) that they are associated in Mangbetu culture with chiefs.<sup>8</sup> And while the same might be said for at least much of equatorial Africa,<sup>9</sup> it is yet worth noting a bit of the evidence for Mangbetu.

With regard to Mangbetu knowing leopards as deadly predators, briefly, there is evidence from the tale in which a hunter orphans a leopard cub and decides to keep it as a pet. Back in the village, people warn him to kill it, saying that, otherwise, it will surely grow up to kill. The hunter refuses to listen, and the cub does indeed grow up to kill. In both tellings of this tale that I recorded,<sup>10</sup> there was a Christian moral offered—to wit, that little sin in the believer's life, unless dealt with, grows into big sin, and big sin kills. Left implicit in each telling was the obvious comparison "as surely as a grown leopard kills."

With regard to Mangbetu culture associating leopards with chiefs, the evidence is of a variety of kinds. Concerning the symbols, etc., developed during the nineteenth century to legitimize the power of Mangbetu chiefs, Keim writes, "The *nekinyi* ['chief'] was considered to be a leopard[,] and leopard skins, tails, teeth, and claws were sacred to him" (1979:86). The word for 'leopard' in Mangbetu—singular noun stem *ookondó*, absolutive singular *nóokondó*—has been used as a personal name by Mangbetu chiefs, e.g., the "Chief Okondo" encountered by the American Museum of Natural History's Congo Expedition of

1909–15,<sup>11</sup> and the more recent Chief *Teingu nÓokondo* of Mongomasi Collectivity.<sup>12</sup> Also, when Leopard appears as a tale character, the narrator sometimes introduces him explicitly as the chief of the animals.<sup>13</sup>

With regard to cultural understandings available to inform the tale character of Azapane, there is far more to consider than with Leopard. Linguistically, as evident from the lexicon entry “Azapane” of Vekens, there is not just the personal name *Azapane*, there is also the formally-identical common noun stem *azapane*. Vekens’ lexicon entry<sup>14</sup> has in fact four senses as follows: (1) “prototype de l’humanité, héros des légendes”; (2) “l’ainé ; celui qui est au courant des questions de famille, et de toutes questions”; (3) “espèce de ver qui se construit une carapace de poussière de bois”; and (4) “toile d’araignée” (1928:123). And in a separate, tale-related note,<sup>15</sup> Vekens expands as follows concerning the first two: (1) “*Azapane*: ancêtre, prototype de l’humanité. La science que les hommes tiennent de lui, lui-même l’a reçue de Dieu [*Angéli*] qu’il consulte en toute circonstance . . .”; and (2) “Dans beaucoup de clans Medje on qualifie souvent de ce nom d’*Azapane* l’ainé du clan. Par plaisanterie on donne aussi ce nom à celui qui se pose en homme averti” (ibid.:93, note 7).

Vekens’ first sense is clearly one for the personal name *Azapane*, and the second likewise, albeit derivatively. Concerning this name, by all the available data, the range of possible referents in Mangbetu culture is literally as wide as from ‘God’ to ‘Satan’. Thus, at the one extreme, *Azapane* is what some Mangbetu say they called a creator god before they adopted the current name *Angéle*;<sup>16</sup> while at the other extreme, *Azapane* is identified by some modern Christians with the biblical Satan. In between, there is the *Azapane* of Vekens’ first lexicon sense (see again above), who, in the words of Schildkrout and Keim, “appears prominently in Mangbetu oral literature as an ancestor, a civilizing hero, and a trickster” (1990:174). As first ancestor, *Azapane* has been identified by some modern Christians with the biblical Adam (and thus his wife also with Eve). And also in between is the *Azapane* of Vekens’ second, derivative lexicon sense (see again above).<sup>17</sup>

Vekens’ third and fourth senses, by contrast (see again above), are clearly ones for the common noun stem *azapane*. My own data include a common sense close to Vekens’ third—viz., *azapane* as the term for the larva of a kind of bagworm moth. This larva builds a cocoon of small lengths of stick, and is said to fool people—thus resembling the trickster Azapane—by then not in fact turning into a moth. I was told that this larva hides in its “house” (i.e., its cocoon), from which it may stick its head out as does a tortoise from its shell. Interestingly in this regard, given that Tortoise is another Mangbetu trickster (see below), I once heard a common Mangbetu roof type compared to the shell of a tortoise, which suggests a logical analogy by which (1) the moth larva *azapane* in its cocoon, is like (2) a tortoise in its shell, is like (3) a Mangbetu in his house, under his roof—with Azapane (the trickster) his culture hero.<sup>18</sup>

From all of the above concerning *Azapane* and *azapane*, what should be clear, in any case, is that there appears a fair amount of scope for how to analyze Azapane’s tale character in any given tale. This includes from the one general extreme of hero-to-be-admired-and-emulated to the other of negative-example-to-be-condemned (i.e., of anti-hero). And this should serve as a caution against anything short of a careful, ethnographically-informed, not-overly-general analysis of his tale character for whichever tale or tale (sub-)type.

As for Leopard’s tale character, Denis said that Leopard played “un rôle de terroriste”: “Sa physionomie est dominée par un trait qui lui est permanent, la malfaisance. Tous les massacres lui sont réservés; devant sa colère tous les animaux fuient” (1952:163). In the next sentence, Denis referred to him simply as “le méchant” (ibid.:164). He wrote of his especial hatred and hostility toward Dog, which he saw as taking on “un caractère d’extermination” (ibid.:166); but he later added that, “Si le chien demeure l’ennemi principal du léopard, il faut reconnaître que celui-ci possède une collection singulièrement riche d’inimitiés et d’antipathies” (ibid.:168).<sup>19</sup> He included that, while Leopard was not beneath cunning trickery,<sup>20</sup> neither was he insensitive to certain charms;<sup>21</sup> but he also portrayed him as naïve to the point of stupidity, such that he could be regularly duped by certain of his would-be victims. Indeed, Denis saw Leopard as himself at least something of a victim, for the fact that ones with whom he (was presented as

having) started a tale in friendship would regularly trick him. (From my own data, the only important point Denis missed I have already noted—viz., that Leopard is identified explicitly in certain tales as chief of the animals; and this could conceivably be because he did not in fact encounter this in his colonial-period tale sample.)

With regard to Azapane's tale character,<sup>22</sup> the picture is more complex than for Leopard's even as the cultural understandings available to inform it are more numerous and varied. As already noted in the quote from Schildkrout and Keim, Azapane is prominent in Mangbetu oral literature as ancestor,<sup>23</sup> civilizing hero,<sup>24</sup> and trickster; while also, as noted in Vekens' lexicon entry, he was more generally "héros des légendes." To focus quickly, as needed here, on his trickster role—I see two things of special importance. First, Azapane is by no means the only Mangbetu tale character to play the trickster. According to Denis, of animal characters generally when they appear opposite Leopard, "Leur unique salut est la ruse, et la tortue qui simule une pierre ou persuade le méchant que sa jambe à elle est un morceau de bois se distingue parmi les faibles auxquels sourit la victoire" (1952:163–64). Thus, opposite powerful Leopard, there are a number of small, relatively-weak animals—perhaps especially Tortoise, Dog, and Giant Rat,<sup>25</sup> but certain others as well—who can be trickster. Azapane stands apart from this group as the only human, as the Mangbetu's first ancestor and civilizing hero—and thus also, I would guess, as the one with whom Mangbetu might most readily identify as trickster, and through whose trickster exploits they might understandably derive the greatest vicarious satisfaction.

Second (with regard to Azapane's trickster role), by the range of the published data plus my own, Azapane is by no means always the same kind of trickster. At times, he is merely a comic trickster, a harmless buffoon, as in the tale in which he goes daily to gather edible caterpillars, only to then dump them into the stream and sing about how their wriggling reminds him of his wife during sex. (She winds up following him one day, discovers what he has been doing, and beats him soundly.)<sup>26</sup> At other times, his trickery is to the definite physical harm of one or more others, but still comically so, as in the tale in which he is first himself victimized in a ludicrous manner, and then turns and leads his fellow villagers into the same. (The harm of this tale has the victims turned upside down and dancing on their heads, knocking them against the ground and skinning them completely.)<sup>27</sup> At yet other times—and it is with the sub-type that includes these that the present paper is primarily concerned—there is no hint of Azapane as either harmless or a buffoon, his trickery is nothing less than cruel, sometimes-deadly treachery (see in the paper's next section), and yet he remains the hero whom Mangbetu audiences laughingly applaud.

Thus, Azapane's role as trickster is not as simple as that portrayed by Schildkrout and Keim, since he is sometimes guilty of far more than what they characterize as "ribald excesses that illustrate a certain ambivalence on the part of the Mangbetu toward a life that is too precisely ordered" (1990:174). Nor is it adequately treated by the "negative example" analysis of *Spirits of Defiance* (1989), which does not begin to account for the kind of positive Mangbetu reaction to Azapane's role in what I believe the typical Leopard-and-Azapane tale. What is missing from these other analyses is what I think Denis captured so well when he wrote of the tale character of Tortoise, "D'une tournure inhabituelle, on déduit la présence d'un esprit rusé, hors de la norme, l'esprit des désavantagés, experts en vengeance" (1952:155). Here is the needed recognition of a positive Mangbetu valorization of expert trickery and vengeance on the part of the 'disadvantaged' vis-à-vis whichever oppressive party would make and keep them such.<sup>28</sup>

## Summary-Analysis of the Typical Leopard-and-Azapane Tale

The following is a summary-analysis of what I believe to be the typical Leopard-and-Azapane tale. It is based on the four such tales for which I have at least summary data at present—three of them originally in French, from Denis (see Appendix 1), the other a Meegye-dialect tale that I recorded myself (see in Appendix 2 a number of excerpted lines). Structurally, it is an African trickster tale as analyzed by Haring (1972, hereafter called 'the trickster tale'), with a basic motifemic sequence of (1) false friendship, (2) contract, (3) violation, (4) trickery, (5) deception, and (6) escape. With regard to its primary cultural function, I would suggest that it serves as a vehicle for the expression of resistance against oppressive chiefly power. In this regard, the role of Leopard in the typical tale is that of an oppressive chief, while that of the trickster-culture hero Azapane is of a resistance hero for the oppressed subjects. This makes the

typical tale notably different, in my view, from the wider literature's paradigmatic trickster tale, given that Azapane's role is definitely not that of a negative example.<sup>29</sup>

(1) False friendship: The typical tale starts with Leopard and Azapane becoming or already friends. This is explicit in each tale of my sample; it is never assumed. Their friendship, however, is not genuine from either side; rather, it is a variant of the "false friendship" that Haring (among others) has identified as the trickster tale's initial morphological element. From Azapane's side, the typical tale portrays him clearly as feigning friendship with Leopard—by the fact it is he who violates their contract, by his trickery, etc.; while from Leopard's side, it need not be spelled out for a Mangbetu audience that his murderous, predatory nature rules out genuine friendship with anyone. In any case, given Leopard and Azapane as a tale's two main characters, the probability is extremely high—it may even be certain—that one is dealing with a trickster tale in which any friendship between them will prove false.

(2) Contract: With Leopard and Azapane in false friendship, the two agree to some project or plan. This is the case in each of the sample's tales. In the taped tale, the plan has Leopard going into the forest to look for food for them, after Azapane has come to Leopard's place to visit him. Azapane, in the meantime, is to stay there with Leopard's wife. The plan as such is simply announced by Leopard, with Azapane's silence evidently taken as assent. In Denis's three tales, Azapane proposes the plan twice and Leopard once, and the other assents explicitly in each case. To the extent that the typical tale's contract represents an aspect of a binding sociopolitical relationship (see below), and from the perspective of the oppressed subjects concerned, the relationship is binding not by time-honored tradition or mutual agreement, but rather because imposed from above by seemingly insuperable colonial-state power.

(3) Violation: With the contract made and Leopard apparently pursuing it in good faith, Azapane violates it. His violation either happens by or precedes trickery. In the taped tale, with Leopard barely gone off to look for food for them, Azapane digs and covers a deep pit-trap in which to catch and kill Leopard's wife and children. Importantly, a Mangbetu audience would assume numerous prior violations on the part of murderous Leopard, and thus justify Azapane's without problem as a vengeful return. There is evidence for this at the end of Denis's first tale, where the other animals fail to come to the dying Leopard's rescue "because the leopard had [throughout the history of their acquaintance] killed many of them" (1952:170, my translation).

(4) Trickery: True to cultural form, Azapane acts to deceive Leopard, and he does so in each of the sample's tales. In the first and second of Denis's tales, this is stated explicitly by the verb *trompa* (meaning 'duped, tricked, deceived'). In the taped tale, he first tricks Leopard's wife and children in one way, then Leopard in another. With Leopard's wife and children, he feigns illness, says that he needs a medicinal leaf from a certain place, tells Leopard's wife to give him one of their children to accompany him there to fetch it, and guides the unwitting child into the pit-trap. He then repeats the trick with each of the rest of the children, and finishes by tricking the wife likewise. With Leopard, in order to escape being killed himself later in the tale, he convinces Leopard to untie him so that he can put spots on Leopard's body, like those of some guinea fowl feathers they have come upon, claiming that this is his specialty.

(5) Deception: Leopard, for his part, is clearly deceived by Azapane's trickery. Moreover, in the taped tale, Leopard is definitely a dupe for the fact that he unties Azapane, accepts to fetch for him a kind of hammer and stakes from the forest, then lets him stake him firmly to the ground—at which point Azapane does not in fact put spots on him, but kills him by driving one of the stakes through his head.

(6) Escape: The typical tale ends after Azapane, having deceived Leopard, escapes. In each of Denis's tales, escape happens just this once, at the end, where it is explicitly stated that Azapane *s'enfuit* (meaning 'runs away, flees, escapes'). In the taped tale, he escapes a first time mid-tale, after killing Leopard's wife and children; then he must do so a second time toward the end, after Leopard discovers his initial trickery, and so trails, stalks, seizes and binds him, then starts back with him to his own place to kill him there. In each tale of the sample, escape is either preceded or in part achieved by the infliction of serious cruel harm—e.g., in Denis's third tale, by the killing and eating of Leopard's eldest son; and in the taped tale, by the killing, butchering, and eating of Leopard's children, his wife, and finally Leopard himself. The seriousness and cruelty of such harm reflect not only the extent and intensity, whether past

or continuing, of subjects' resentment of chiefly oppression, but also a certain cultural valorization of vengeance in spades.<sup>30</sup> What is more, when Azapane goes so far as to kill and eat Leopard, it is, symbolically, nothing less than an assertion of independence.<sup>31</sup> As part of Azapane's escape, then, there is punishment for Leopard by the harm Azapane does him, even as there is reward for Azapane—first by the vengeance he exacts, but sometimes also by the independence he asserts.

Thus, the typical tale has Leopard and Azapane ending as enemies, sometimes with Azapane killing and eating Leopard; it does not end with Azapane doing a kind of tricky favor for Leopard (viz., tricking and delivering to a leopard a rat who has smashed the leopard's teeth), as portrayed in the subtitled-summary tale of Spirits of Defiance.

Concerning the wider literature's paradigmatic trickster tale, Haring has said that, "insofar as trickster embodies the antisocial tendency and the contract is a binding social relationship, the tale is a fantasied escape from social necessity, while at the same time reinforcing the unity of society by dismissing the threat posed by trickster" (1972:178). In a similar vein, concerning the Zande trickster Ture, Evans-Pritchard wondered if his more outrageous acts were not "pointers to dark desires" (1967:29), and he said, "What Ture does is the opposite of all that is moral; and it is all of us who are Ture. He is really ourselves. Behind the image [that] convention bids us present, in desire, in feeling, in imagination, and beneath the layer of consciousness we act as Ture does" (ibid.:30). And in essentially the same vein are the Mangbetu trickster analyses of Schildkrout and Keim and Spirits of Defiance to which I have already referred.

In contrast, by the present paper's analysis of the typical Leopard-and-Azapane tale, Azapane does not so much embody any antisocial tendency as he champions a popular sentiment—against oppressive chiefly rule. In the Mangbetu situation, subjects at whichever level recognize no social necessity to oppressive chiefly power, and there is nothing dark, incomprehensibly immoral, or needfully subconscious about an oppressed people's desire for independence from, and even vengeance against, a rapacious, despotic oppressor. Thus, the threat posed by Azapane to society's unity is in fact what makes the typical tale's "bad ending"<sup>32</sup> so satisfying—to the oppressed subjects, for the fact that oppressive chiefly power has too often made their society grossly unjust.

Azapane's role in the typical tale, then, is that of a resistance hero to be admired and applauded; it is not that of a negative example. It is this that best explains something once told me about the Mangbetu chief *Misa*, from a period when he was at Egbita during the mid-1930s, according to which he would first play the zealous convert at Sunday service before the local Protestant missionaries, then return to his village, get drunk, and declare triumphantly, « *Ímá Azapane !* » 'I [am] Azapane!'.<sup>33</sup> (According to Abule-Abuotubodio, Mangbetu distinguished the early missionaries from their other white oppressors mainly by their differing strategies of oppression (1994:29).) This analysis is consistent as well with a tale plot I see dripping with historical irony (see again the example of colonial oppression at the end of the paper's second section), in which Giant Rat tricks Leopard into eating cooked rubber extract. Leopard has suggested that they eat their mothers. Giant Rat agrees, but lets Leopard kill and cook his mother first, and feed her to him. Later, when Giant Rat's turn comes, he does not kill his mother; instead, he gathers some raw rubber, cooks it, and passes it off to Leopard as his mother. When Leopard complains at the texture, Giant Rat says it is because his mother was very old. Giant Rat then escapes, taunting Leopard with what he has actually done.

Finally, if Azapane's role in the typical tale is indeed that of a resistance hero to be admired and applauded, then I believe the typical tale fits quite well the trickster tale characterization of Street (my additions in square brackets):

Fundamentally trickster tales represent the way a society defines its boundaries ['I am Azapane; Leopard is a foreigner'], states its rules and conventions (by showing what happens when the rules are broken) ['Leopard is a rapacious predator; I am Azapane, unsurpassed in cunning and expert at vengeance in spades'], extracts order out of chaos and reflects on the nature of its own

identity, its differentiation from the rest of the universe ['I am Azapane—or Tortoise, or another of the cunning small animals; Leopard is the other']. (103-104)

## Conclusion

In Paths in the Rainforest, against the notion that equatorial Africa has no pre-colonial sociopolitical history to speak of, Vansina has argued that it does in fact have such, reconstructible in broad outline at least, and having resulted in a wide variety of “decentralized, yet large-scale, social and political institutions [that] strongly contrast to those of the great lakes to its east and the savanna to its south” (5). According to Vansina’s reconstruction, equatorial Africa shared a common tradition from about AD 1000 in which three interrelated social groups—viz., the House (i.e., the large household establishment of a “big man”), the village, and the district—formed the framework of the ancestral society. The tradition’s sociopolitical system was extremely decentralized and essentially egalitarian (73, 96–97, among many others). From this tradition, through competition among big men, selective pressure for centralization, and other factors, there developed a variety of systems different enough to make one question whether or not it makes sense to talk about the legacy of such a tradition. Vansina argues that it does indeed, because of both (1) the persistence of House, village, and district as basic social groups, and (2) persistent high values on decentralization and equality among social units, albeit in constant tension with competition among big men and movement toward centralization.

On the basis of the present paper’s Mangbetu case, I would suggest one means of evaluating Vansina’s argument to be studies throughout equatorial Africa of tales involving Leopard opposite one or another main character. Of interest for each society and culture concerned would be the relationship between the nature, number, salience, etc., of such tales and the particular sociopolitical history alongside which they developed. From other parts of Congo, I see evidence of Mongo and Yansi cases quite similar to that of Mangbetu (Hulstaert 1970 and Thiel 1968, respectively),<sup>34</sup> but of a Zande case much less so (Evans-Pritchard 1967). For Yansi, Thiel describes an oppressive chief-subject relationship among the Mbim, a Yansi sub-group, with the chiefs concerned both hereditary and associated culturally with leopards, and with animal tales considered a relatively safe means by which to criticize a chief’s regime (1968:67). For Zande, Leopard is a title character in only three of Evans-Pritchard’s 70 tales, and, although these three share some basic plot elements with various Mongo and Mangbetu tales, Leopard is not killed in any of them, and I do not see them to contain any other evidence of any deep-seated, culturally-significant enmity between Leopard and the Zande trickster Ture. The longer history of centralized authority among the Azande, including its eventual acceptance by Zande subjects (Evans-Pritchard 1967:2–3), probably helps explain the contrast. My hunch is that such further tale studies will support Vansina’s argument by and large, including by the recognition of something like a resistance tale type of which the Mangbetu Leopard-and-Azapane sub-type is but a token.

But whether or not such a resistance tale type exists for equatorial Africa, I am not convinced that such murderously vengeful tales should continue to be told in a region beset in recent years by politically-motivated slaughter. Such tales, in certain contexts, might indeed be just another “weapon of the weak”—an “everyday form of peasant resistance,” and as such “unlikely to do more than marginally affect the various forms of exploitation that peasants confront” (Scott 1985:29–30).<sup>35</sup> But they might also, in the kind of “settler/[foreigner/alien]-native” context by which Mamdani seeks to render thinkable the Rwandan genocide, be made part of what Hatzfeld has called a “propitious climate for killings on a grand scale” (2005:56). In the mid-1960s, during what Nzongola-Ntalaja lauds as “militarily the more successful [eastern] front of [Congo’s] second independence movement” (2002:131), Simba rebels sought to kill traditional chiefs (among many others) as hated representatives of the neocolonialist government. These included the Mangbetu chief *Kábongo nyé así* of Mongomasi, whom they brutally speared to death at Isiro after he had surrendered himself from hiding in the forest. Nzongola-Ntalaja appears to draw much inspiration from Fanon, who for his part wrote that, “The [colonized] native’s work is to imagine all possible methods for destroying the [colonial] settler. . . . For the native, life can only spring up again out of the rotting corpse of the settler” (1967:73). If, as Mamdani maintains for Rwanda, “The agenda imposed from above became a gruesome reality to the extent it resonated with perspectives from below” (2001:7), then some kinds of tales, in certain contexts and climates, might best be left untold, or be told only with due caution.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Aesop's "The Eagle and the Beetle," an example from antiquity, ends with a moral that might aptly preface the present paper: "No matter how powerful one's position may be, there is nothing that can protect the oppressor in the end from the vengeance of the oppressed" (Zipes 1996:188–89).

<sup>2</sup> See McKee (1995:470, note 9), in the third paragraph, for the germ of the present paper's argument. The field research on which the paper is based was concentrated in the southern part of what I define in the same source as the Meegye-Mangbetu area. It was done in relation to a SIL-assisted Bible translation project located at Egbita (sixteen miles west-southwest of Isiro, in Mongomasi Collectivity) and sponsored by the CECCA/16 church of the Church of Christ in the Congo. My special thanks to the numerous Congolese friends and colleagues who provided data or other help concerning the paper, the names of only some of whom I am able to mention (see at various points in the paper). My thanks also to Fathers Elio Farronato and Michel Dinoia, then of the Roman Catholic mission at Nangazizi, for June 1991 interview data concerning Azapane. Finally, I thank my SIL colleague MaryAnne Augustin for proofreading and commenting on the conference form of the paper.

Very importantly, the paper is not intended as criticism of any particular Mangbetu chief, of the Mangbetu proper as a group, or even of hereditary Mangbetu chieftainship as an area institution; and nothing in the paper should be taken as justification for vengeance by any party against any Mangbetu.

<sup>3</sup> Phonetically, [àzàpànè]; orthographically, according to a provisional Mangbetu orthography and italicized to stand out from its context, *Azapane*. All other Mangbetu language data appearing in the paper, except for place names or unless otherwise obvious, are written according to the same provisional orthography and italicized. Some personal names contain more than one grammatical word, in which case only the first begins with a capital.

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly in this regard, alliances are the theme of Allovio's *La foresta di alleanze* (1999), which is the literature's first anthropological monograph on the Mangbetu; and the literature's first anthropology dissertation, McKee (1995), analyzes Meegye-Mangbetu area death compensations as a means to perpetual alliance, in relationship to a marriage system that was evidently the heart of the more traditional political system.

<sup>5</sup> For the understanding reflected in this paragraph, see in Keim (1979, esp. ch. 5 and the conclusion), Vansina's "Reconstructing the Past" (1990), and McKee (1995, esp. chs. 1, 2, and 8); cf. the highly similar situation of Middleton (1965:2–6); and see also Hochschild (1998), Wrong (2000), and Nzongola-Ntalaja (2002). The last pointedly summarizes the history of Congo's democracy movement as one of resistance against both external and internal oppression (2002:4).

<sup>6</sup> The Mangbetu term for 'tale' and 'story' is *nátámá*, of which the plural is *átamba*.

<sup>7</sup> Denis's article-length treatment of Mangbetu tales, in spite of definite weaknesses, I deem invaluable in two respects: (1) it is the only such study to be published to date for Mangbetu; and (2) I believe it shows real insight into the Mangbetu tale characters of Tortoise and Leopard.

<sup>8</sup> Mangbetu also know the lion, but apparently they associate it to a far lesser extent with chiefs. Interestingly in this regard, Haltenorth and Diller show the leopard with a far wider distribution and with many more kinds of animals, birds, and other kinds of creatures as part of its regular food—including tortoises, and with domestic dogs a favorite (1980:221–23).

<sup>9</sup> In *Paths in the Rainforest*, with regard to the leopard and political power throughout equatorial Africa, Vansina has said, "Among all peoples of the [equatorial African] rainforests without exception, the leopard was a major emblem of political power and apparently always had been" (1990:104).

<sup>10</sup> The one recording was by Pastor *Abhule Kabwɛ nótɛ bha ɔdhyɔ* (Abule-Abuotubodio) Victor Colin, a *Mapumé Meíkɛ* man of Meiku in Ndei Collectivity, 23 Apr. 1986; the other was by the late *Ndéke*, a *Meégyé Meika Ogbó* man of Egbita village, 19 Nov. 1987.

<sup>11</sup> See the many references to and photographs of or concerning this chief in Schildkrout and Keim, including the reference that begins, “The chief is often compared with a leopard, called *nokondo*. Chief Okondo probably owed his name to this comparison” (1990:206).

<sup>12</sup> This is the Mangbetu chief whose photograph appears in the March 1973 issue of National Geographic.

<sup>13</sup> Thus, there is the tale in which Leopard feigns death in order to try and kill some of the animals come to mourn him. In one of my three recorded tellings of this tale, the initial line is *Ookondó, ín'abwñ nékínyí í érígyándré anye ndúbhu* ‘Leopard, he was the chief of all the animals’. This telling was by the late Pastor *Ka nádí bhó Epá sí to*, a *Mapumé Kpóngbó* man of Lisala village in Ndei, 14 Jun. 1986.

<sup>14</sup> Although Larochette, by contrast, has no lexicon entry for either *azapane* or *Azapane*, he does have one tale featuring Azapane (1958:151–53).

<sup>15</sup> Vekens has a section with six “légendes,” of which one is a tale featuring Azapane (1928:93–95).

<sup>16</sup> This view—that *Azapane* was ‘God’ for the Mangbetu before *Angéle*—merits detailed critical treatment elsewhere. Suffice it to say here that I heard it expressed myself on one occasion, in May-June 1991, from some Egbita village elders.

<sup>17</sup> My own data include at least one further common noun sense that appears to me to relate to both of Vekens’ first two—viz., *azapane* as a kind of general term for things concerned with one’s ancestors. Thus, e.g., I heard it used to refer to a tale-like explanation of the origin of the Mangbetu custom of mother-in-law avoidance, as recorded with Pastor *Árá bhó ne* Nicolas, a *Meégyé Meika* man of Mongomasi, October 2001.

<sup>18</sup> With regard to another Congolese people, the Nkundo-Mongo, Tortoise is a main trickster of their tales (see esp. the introduction and sixty-three tales of “Le cycle de la tortue” in Hulstaert 1970), and Biebuyck says that “the traditional roof type is in the form of a turtle carapace” (1980:25).

<sup>19</sup> In these regards, (1) see again Haltenorth and Diller’s long list of the leopard’s food (1980:223); and (2) my initial guess, in light of the present paper’s analysis, would be that Leopard’s especial hatred and hostility toward Dog is best explained by the latter’s domestic status, his consequent close association with (native-subject) villagers, maybe also his use in hunting, and the probability that Mangbetu have long known their dogs to fall prey to leopards.

<sup>20</sup> In stating this, Denis referred to the tale mentioned in a note above in which Leopard feigns death in order to try and kill from among the animals come to mourn him (1952:157).

<sup>21</sup> In stating this, Denis referred to a tale in which Leopard spares Squirrel for the fact that Squirrel has danced so well before him (1952:157–58)—with excellence at dance a traditionally high value for Mangbetu chiefs (see, e.g., Demolin 1990:205).

<sup>22</sup> Unfortunately, there is not yet any large published collection of Mangbetu tales that might serve as a standard basis for a study of Azapane’s tale character. At present, the only published tales I know that feature Azapane as either a or the main character are in Vekens (1928, one), Lelong (1946, one), Denis (1952, three), Larochette (1958, one), and Di Gennaro (1980, two).

<sup>23</sup> See, e.g., the tales of Lelong (1946) and Di Gennaro (1980), which refer to Azapane explicitly as ancestor.

<sup>24</sup> E.g., at Egbita, on 15 Nov. 2002, after the evening meal with a number of language project colleagues, I heard them tell a series of Azapane tales in which he made such civilizing discoveries as sugar cane, peanut butter, and sex—though in classic trickster fashion, he had this last with his wife’s mother as well as his wife.

<sup>25</sup> With regard to Giant Rat, Denis, having identified Dog as Leopard’s principal enemy but recognizing that he also possessed many others, asked, “Pourquoi le rat mérite-t-il sa rancune tenace?”

(1952:168). In addition, my own data include a tale in which it is Giant Rat who plays the trickster opposite Leopard—to which tale I refer toward the end of the paper's analysis section.

<sup>26</sup> I have recorded just one telling of this tale, by *Misa Amúbwɔ nɛ mɔmbé* Réginard, a *Méégyé* *Mangbó* man of Mongomasi, 17 Feb. 2000.

<sup>27</sup> This is the one tale of Larochette (1958) that features Azapane.

<sup>28</sup> For the fact that he wrote of him as he did, I believe Hulstaert must have seen something very similar in Tortoise in Nkundo-Mongo tales (1970:317).

<sup>29</sup> I cannot, in the present paper, more than note the possibility of a non-typical Leopard-and-Azapane tale sub-type. The subtitles of *Spirits of Defiance* (1989) include a brief summary tale that would appear to qualify as such, but with no supporting mention of Azapane in any of the film's Meegyé-dialect tale speech that they pretend to translate.

<sup>30</sup> Thus, there is a tale of two neighbors in which, given that one has insisted that the other's chickens be killed for a relatively minor offense, the other is allowed to insist that the first's children be killed for an equally minor offense. The one telling I recorded was by *Anyéeké pá*, a *Mapumé Meíkɛ* man of Meiku village in Ndei, ca. Feb. 1989.

<sup>31</sup> See Vansina's *Paths* where he writes, for equatorial Africa generally, that "the disposition of the spoils of the leopard, from hunter to highest authority, is the best indicator of the political structure. To keep its spoils was to proclaim one's independence. To hand them over was to recognize a superior authority" (1990:104).

<sup>32</sup> Brewer notes that, "Certainly a number of stories from oral traditions have "bad" endings from the point of view of a Western reader" (1985:183). In this regard, see also, very importantly, Mamdani (2001:1-14), including the references to Fanon.

<sup>33</sup> My source for this account was an Egbita village elder, *Basíné of émava Kólú*, who provided it in a June 1991 informal interview.

<sup>34</sup> In Hulstaert (1970), I see much evidence within the cycles of both Tortoise and Antelope, especially in light of Vansina's *Paths*' statement that the best data for his argument for Congo's inner basin are from part of the Mongo area (1990:103).

<sup>35</sup> I thank Richard Bauman for referring me to Scott (1985) in his helpful question/comment during the discussion time when I presented an earlier form of the paper at the International Conference on Storytelling and Cultural Identity (29 June 2005, Terceira, Azores, Portugal).

## Appendix 1

### The Three Leopard-and-Azapane Summary Tales of Denis's Mangbetu Tale Study

At that time Azapane was joined in a friendship with the leopard. Azapane said to the leopard, "Plant some eleusine [a kind of millet], and the one whose eleusine matures first will eat the other." The leopard accepted and they planted some eleusine. Soon the eleusine of the leopard grew up; the leopard said to his wife to winnow it and to grind it well. The wife did so and the leopard sent his brother to Azapane's home. But Azapane killed the brother and ate him completely. The leopard went himself to Azapane's home, but Azapane deceived him. He told him to wait for him on the path that the animals always used. The leopard did this, and Azapane went off into the forest. He cut a solid stick, came back armed with it, and plunged it violently into the body of the leopard, who struggled in vain. Azapane fled and the animals who were hunting found the leopard struggling with death. However, none of them helped him because the leopard had killed many of them. Formerly, they used to join in friendship; but the friendship of the leopard and Azapane ended thus. Such was the beginning of the disputes. (1952:170–71, my translation).

At that time, Azapane was joined in a friendship with the leopard. Azapane said to the leopard, "Let's go into the forest." The leopard accepted; they went into the forest and caught lots of mice. They started back to the village; they arrived, cut leaves, and lit a fire. The leopard cooked his mice for Azapane, but Azapane deceived the leopard. Did he cook his mice for the leopard? Not at all. He cooked some copal [a kind of resin] at the same time he was cooking the mice, and they sat down. The leopard began to eat Azapane's mice to the finish. Azapane pretended to eat the copal; the leopard didn't know that that would stick so strongly and would burn his eyes. The leopard fell to the ground; his eyes were burned with deep wounds. Azapane fled post-haste into the forest. That is why when two men are friends, they don't take their food at the same time. That began thus. (ibid.:171, my translation).

At that time, Azapane was joined with the leopard in a deep friendship. One day the leopard said to Azapane, "Let's kill our wives and let's eat them." Azapane accepted right away. The leopard killed his wife and they ate her immediately. The leopard said then to Azapane, "Kill your wife and let's eat her." Azapane responded to him, "She's not quite ready yet." The leopard was suffering in his heart. Then he said to his eldest son, "Go to Azapane's home, let him give me his wife so that we may eat her." When Azapane saw the son arrive, he said to him, "Go into the forest, cut a creeper; you will tie my wife by the neck and we will go together to your home." The son went off into the forest and fell into a pit that Azapane had dug. Azapane killed him and ate him completely. The leopard said to himself, "What will I do about this matter?" The leopard went to Azapane's home and said to him, "My friend, where is my child?" The leopard's heart was in a fury and he said to Azapane, "I will wage war against you from now on." But Azapane fled, because he was a cunning man. (ibid.:171, my translation).

## Appendix 2

### Interlinear free translation and outline analysis of selected lines of a Meegye-dialect Leopard-and-Azapane tale

For the tale of this appendix, the one telling I recorded was by *Abɔhi bhu ne*, a *Meégyé Maangó* man of Mongomasi, 19 Nov. 1987. The superscript number preceding each Meegye text line is the line number from a draft of the entire tale. In the analysis lines, an apostrophe ( ' ) after the number in parentheses goes with the tale's second cycle of trickery, deceit, and escape. Some text lines have been edited minimally. The translations are my own, as checked with one or more native speakers.

(1) False friendship:

<sup>2</sup> *A dru kéítia nye né, néítéiti i bhánye né, ín'abwɛ ká pá amébalí.*

When [Leopard and Azapane] had become acquainted, their acquaintance, it was at first good.

<sup>4</sup> *E kéipírá nádhinga tyatyeee átɔɔmɛ i bhánye né ándrehɔ.*

And [Leopard and Azapane] continued a long while in their friendship.

(2) Contract:

<sup>15</sup> *Bh'engá, ɔdhya bhó « Anyéeké bhu andrándrɔ drí, bhó máángɔɔ ká pá némovhyayé ; égye ɔmɔvhyá, bhó ku mánda mala dhu i, eegwá sí amányɔ né. »*

Then [Leopard] got up, and he said, "Stay with my wife right here, I'm first making a trip to the forest; yonder into the forest, to look for something we might eat."

(3) Violation:

<sup>20</sup> *Obhua sí a n'ɔ́á égye né, bh'Azapane ɔbyá némugélu, ɔtɔbha i Ookondó bha né ándrabé, átéipwɔ́yé.*

While [Leopard] was yet on his way off yonder, Azapane dug a hole, to the one side of Leopard's village, on the way to the cultivated fields.

4) Trickery:

<sup>25-26</sup> *ɔdhya bhó « Ookondó ándrandrɔ gwa ! Bhó Kúdhá mú tɔgyáandré hé ! »*

[Azapane] said, "You, Leopard's wife! Send someone for me [i.e., to accompany and help me] from among those children [of yours]!"

5) Deception:

<sup>29</sup> *Hee, bh'Ookondó ándrandrɔ, bh'ɔdhá ándrengwá akíné.*

Well, so Leopard's wife, she sent one of her children.

6) Escape:

<sup>80</sup> *Bh'Azapane odría, bh'eíbia Ookondó ánandra ; bhu táo, bh'éíngá bhu Ookondó ándrandrɔ, bh'ɔpwá ! bh'odría bh'ɔnyá he éda !*

Then Azapane sat down, and he finished Leopard's children; then also, he took Leopard's wife as well, and he killed her and he sat down and he ate them completely!

<sup>81</sup> *Bh'engá táo, bh'ɔrá táo ú bhándre.*

Then [Azapane] got up, and he fled back to his home.

(4') Trickery:

<sup>137</sup> *ɔdhya bhó « Hee kúɔ ku múfɔ mú émbémbé, ékíré kpákpára, bhó nyéku nó ! »*

[Azapane] said, "Go cut stakes for me—hard sticks—and come with them!"

(5') Deception:

<sup>138</sup> *Ookondó ɔ́á, bh'ofá ékíré kpákpára ámémbémbékí hé, bh'ekúa nó.*

Leopard went, and he cut hard sticks [for] those stakes, and he came with them.

(6') Escape:

<sup>160</sup> *Bh'éíngá táo néngbéngbélu né, bh'opyá nó Ookondó ándredru, névhó ! vho ! vho ! vho ! bh'Ookondó etúa.*

Then [Azapane] took that club, and he struck Leopard's head with it—*bam! bam! bam! bam!*—and Leopard expired.

<sup>161</sup> *Bh'éíngá Ookondó ándrabwu, bh'ɔkúá, bh'angónyɔ.*

Then he took Leopard's dead body, and he went back home, and he ate it.

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